

BATTLECORPS

CALLIE'S CALL

by Victor Milán

**Aguardiente State
Galisteo
Free Worlds League
3039**

“Comanches, ma’am,” said the black Galisteo Ranger with the lordly paunch pooching his khaki and olive camouflage blouse well out over his web belt. He had a boot up on one of the mesquite-piling planters that fringed the farmhouse porch and was gazing out across the meadow toward a blue-white sun setting into rolling scrubland. Dry, warm breeze from the west brushed Callie’s cheek like a feather. It smelled of sweet flowering bluedabs and white *trébol* just closing up shop for the night, arid soil and tangy brush.

Callie’s little sister Ellie, nine years old and as petite and redhead-ed as Callie was rawboned-tall and blonde, gasped at the words. She huddled against her sister; the patrol’s arrival had brought them away from their online studies in their bedroom at the back of the foamed-concrete farmhouse. The Rangers’ armored scout car pinged as it cooled, out in the bare dirt yard around the flank of the house next to the barn.

Ma’s broad handsome face creased in a frown. “I thought the Comanche Nation was friendly to Aguardiente State,” she said. Her English had the somewhat clipped nasality of Santa Fe, the Southwestern Worlds’ capital on Sierra.

The four-man detachment’s commander turned a blue-turbaned head toward her. “The Nation is, yes, Miz MacDougall,” he said. “These are renegades. Outlaws of the worst sort.”

“The Nation elders’ll hear from us about drivin’ ‘em into our range,” the black sergeant said, “come next Gathering.”

The tall Sikh, lean as a Liao swordblade, nodded toward Callie. Though just fifteen she stood almost as tall as he.

“I see your daughters aren’t armed, ma’am,” he told her mother. “Best see to that while the emergency lasts.”

Ma’s expression set beneath her bangs, strawberry-blonde beginning to silver, dried by actinic sun and ceaseless chaparral wind. “We don’t hold with children carrying weapons, Captain Singh.”

The militia officer's face went rigid behind his neat beard. His dark blue eyes were scandalized, Callie saw. But he was too formal-polite to speak out.

"Big Jim thought different," the noncom said, chewing a bit more determinedly on the end of his grass-shoot, "back when he was alive."

"I'm the man here," said a tall, lean, sharp-featured man with black hair blowing on and off his forehead, who stood barefoot in the doorway in a sleeveless white shirt and baggy trousers. "I am. And she's Mrs. Mason now."

"You say so, Rance," the sergeant said.

"That's enough, Sergeant Quivira," the captain said without turning his head.

"Yessir."

"Perhaps you should consider evacuating for the duration," Singh said. "The marauders are reported to be riding motor vehicles and horses, but it's possible they have a light BattleMech."

Ma cast a worried look at her husband. "This is our home," he said, all haughty. "We won't be pushed off our land by a bunch of outlaws."

"I expect the Sheriff to do her duty," Ma said, raising up her head. Sheriff Catlin Cates commanded the county Ranger detachment when it turned from lawmen to militia during emergencies. Such as now, Callie reckoned. "She'll protect us."

Singh raised an eyebrow at his sergeant. Quivira sighed.

"No daughter of mine is going to tote a gun," Mason said. "Any more than I'll have her driving a 'Mech."

Singh said nothing about the neglected beanfield back of the house, or the AgroMech rusting near it. Not aloud. But –

"Don't you rag on him, Frank," Ma said. "He injured his poor back."

Singh glanced at Mason. "No doubt." He turned to Callie's mother and touched his brow in salute. "Good evening to you, ma'am. If you see or hear any sign of the marauders, radio us at once."

"I will," she said, looking down at her hands as she scrubbed them together in her apron.



"So that's what became of you, little one," Callie said through the cracked windscreen of her AgroMech. The Sperry-Browning .50-caliber machinegun mounted in the *Ranchhand* 'Mech's left arm was tipped skyward for safety. She kept the other arm level and ready for action. It was tipped with an electric prod designed to get the attention of a beast weighing up to five metric tons with a hide like several centimeters of Kevlar. If anything sprang at her she reckoned it would at least buy her time to get the big MG into action.

The six-month old Ranger bull calf couldn't have heard her, even laying aside the Diesel engine's blating idle. She judged it had been no more than twelve hours since the *lobo plumado* pack had pulled the stray down and ripped her half-tonne body open.

It had been an expensive meal. Near the dead calf lay what Callie reckoned as three of the feathered pack predators. They had been so well gored, tossed, and trampled it was impossible to tell sure. The scene was prominently overmarked by the serving-tray hoofprints of the herd bull, Diablo Rojo, four thousand kilograms of muscle and mean with a four-meter spread of horn.

Though just thirteen summers old Callista MacDougall knew about death and loss. You didn't come up in the wildlands of Galisteo without seeing plenty of it up close. Sometimes it came quick, like the death of One-Ear, her beloved Aussie sheepdog, killed protecting her from an enraged adolescent Ranger bull.

Sometimes it came slow. Like the three months it took her father to die, wasted to a shadow of his former robust self, from liver cancer two years ago.

She let the AgroMech stretch its legs some on the way home, a pounding run up and down the knife-back ridges that slanted across the MacDougall spread, swerving around outcrops of granite and ancient lava, bounding joyously through evergreen shrubs gnarled by the endless steppe wind into shapes like stooping giants. A few Ranger cows loped away from the snorting, rampaging 'Mech with their horse-sized calves racing frantically behind.

Her father would not have beaten her for the sin of running valuable meat off the stock. He'd never raise a hand to any female

unless she were an enemy soldier in battle, much less his own flesh and blood. But he would give her that *look*, and shake his head. And that, to Callie's mind, was probably worse.

When Callie got back Ma stood on the farmhouse porch with a hand raised to shield her eyes from the slanting late afternoon sun. Ellie stood at her hip with both arms around her mother's waist, looking at the 'Mech with huge green eyes. She had taken James MacDougall's death harder than either her sister or her mother, at least visibly. She had retreated into herself, spoke seldom, acted as if she always expected to be saddened or scared and was seldom disappointed.

Something about her mother's manner made Callie bring the machine to a teetering stop five meters from the porch instead of heading on back by the shed to park the *Ranchhand*.

"Ma," she called out the open side of the cockpit. "What's the matter?"

Her mother smiled, looking for a moment again like the image in the hologram she had posed for with her husband shortly after Callie was born, that sat on the end table by the living room sofa. She even wore the same blue gingham dress, Callie realized. "Nothing's the matter," she said, and to Callie's astonishment sounded a bit breathless. "Come on down from there and meet your new father."

"New – " The next word caught in Callie's throat as if barbed.

A tall thin man stepped out on the porch. "Yes, come on down from there, Callista," Rance Mason said. "No daughter of mine is going to labor like a hired hand."



"Didn't I tell you I didn't want you driving that old AgroMech any more?" a voice asked from behind her.

She let go of the bale of alfalfa hay from which she'd been peeling a flake to feed the horses and stood upright. "Yes, sir," she answered, keeping her voice level and her hands before her where the man couldn't see them ball into fists. Six months had done little to reconcile Callie to her mother's marrying the charming

ne'er-do-well of Abiquiu County. But then, she hadn't seen much of his alleged charm.

"Then why were you out in it?" he demanded, coming forward. Afternoon sunlight crowded in through the door behind him. Blue-white dazzle made him hard to make out in the barn's relatively cool gloom. The warm smells of hay and horses, normally comforting, now seemed somehow muted, sterilized.

"Rounding up strays from the herd," she said, turning. "What's left of it. Seems like nothing gets done around here anymore. You don't want Ma or me doing any work. But you're all the time in town on your business, and you won't hire on any hands."

"Times are tight in the Trinity," he said. "Money's tight. My business is all that keeps this family going."

"Keeps the money going, more like," she said. "All that ever happens is the money Ma got from Daddy gets spent, but none ever comes in."

He was close to her now, closer than she was comfortable with. With no more warning than a lightning strike his right hand lashed out.

Even then she was tall for a girl, and strong from slinging twenty-kilogram bales and hefting heavy equipment day in and out, though her mother always told her she'd never have looks, with her plain, somewhat round face and all. She learned then just how much stronger a man was than even a strong woman in the upper body. His backhand struck red sparks off her cheekbone into her brain like flint on steel, made her eyes water and her head reel. She found herself lying on her back among busted bales without any sense of having fallen there.

"You got a mouth on you, girl," he said, a shadow standing over her. "You got to learn to obey. You got to learn to respect your elders."

Her eyes darted left and right. For some reason her heart thrilled with fear. But the bales rose like ramparts left and right, trapping her with the foamed-cement wall behind.

"You don't know what it does to a man," he said. His voice had changed. Dropped low in tone and low in the throat. He was doing something with his hands she couldn't see for the sun glare and the sweat and tears that burned in her eyes. "Watching a girl come up like you are. Blossom before his eyes. You – "

The weight that came down on her was crushing and abrupt. Half robbed of breath she tried to fight. But he was heavy as sorrow, and his arms as strong as grief.



“Callie!”

She jumped as her sister grabbed her arm. The younger girl's seldom-heard voice was not loud but pitched to penetrate the electronic music pulsing through Callie's sound-damping headphones.

Outside the window the day had dwindled to nothing but purple and indigo and stars, and a touch of grey brushing the tips of the highest peaks of the Dolores mountains to the east. It was full dark in the room they shared, but for the glow of the desktop monitor where Callie was studying about the Fourth Succession War, which Hanse Davion had started as a wedding present to his Steiner bride, for her Modern History class, and for the wistful tiny gleam of the handheld game unit Ellie had left abandoned on her bed, where she had been playing a game about little girls and city parks and flowers that seemed as remote from their life out here on the verge between mountain and desert as the yellow backside of El Dorado, the system's biggest ringed gas giant.

“It's Tyco,” Ellie said, now low and urgent. “He's barking fit to bust.”

Having peeled off her headphones Callie could hear the Collie-Chow cross going off outside, low and angry. He was Ellie's special pet; Callie got along well enough with him, but had never been much for dogs since One-Ear died.

A snarl of automatic gunfire, muted by the walls but unmistakable to a Galisteo frontier girl. A yip, brief.

Ellie's face crumpled. “Tyco!”

Callie grabbed her arm. “Come on.”



Clutching her ragged teddy bear Don Fernando to her chest, Ellie MacDougall stared at her stepfather with wide green eyes. She stood beside the shed, its boards sun-greyled and buckled, in white and gold wildflowers up to her hips. A stiff spring wind whipped her smock around her bare legs and sent bits of grass seed prickling at Callie's cheek. Bees hummed around them, and the flowers smelled sweet as rock candy.

"You run along now, honey," Rance Mason said in the phony country-boy accent he liked to put on to try to fit in. He was smiling that lopsided smile of his. Certain other women of the county tended to go all fluttery at it. It turned Callie's soul to ice. "Go on in the house now."

The girl hugged Callie. Then turned and fled. Callie felt a stab of hope that her sister would bring their mother.

The hope died like hope. Ma never came. She never listened, where Rance Mason was concerned.

The man turned to Callie. "Weren't expecting me back so soon, huh?"

"You usually don't come back till after dark," she said. "Maybe not then."

He laughed. "Come give your daddy a kiss. A big old kiss."

He took a step toward her. She brought up her right hand.

He laughed again. "A wrench, huh. You been trying to get that old thing running again?"

He nodded to the *Ranchhand* AgroMech which stood beside the tumbledown shed. Trumpet vines had grown up its legs and nodded orange flowers to the wind. A Western scrub lark had built a nest at the top of the cab. A piece of straw stuck out all any which way.

"It runs just fine," she said. "Just wants tuning. You stay away from me!"

He had taken another step forward. She brandished the heavy eighty-centimeter tool at him.

"Huh." He shrugged, fingered his long chin. "So you think you're through, huh? Well. Well, I tell you, you gotten kind of rangy and homely for me anyway. Two years, a man starts to think about a little change in pace."

He fingered his sharp chin, feigning thought. "Maybe it's time to break in that younger sister of yours. She's mighty sweet. She wants raising up right."

"Touch her," Callie said, "and I'll kill you."

He stood there and looked at her with his head tipped to one side.

She dropped the wrench into the flowers. Then waited, head up and arms slack by her sides.



In the front room Rance had the closet door open. He was struggling with the unwieldy length and weight of James MacDougall's old Zeus rifle. He had the weapon halfway out of its snallygaster-hide case. Callie's mother stood to one side twining her hands in her apron and looking sick.

The man saw Callie come in and thrust the weapon at her. He couldn't hold it up for long; its still-cased butt thumped on the hardwood floor Jim MacDougall had laid by hand when Callie was four, before Ma was even pregnant with Ellie.

"Here," he said, fumbling with a box of cartridges the size of a big man's fingers. "You do this. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Oh, Rance," Callie's mother said. "Maybe we should go."

"Too late!" Sweat streamed down his face despite the artificial cool of the climate control. As if to confirm his desperate assessment a series of high-pitched yips rang from near outside. They might have been coyotes – the totem animal of the three Southwestern Worlds, loved and hated both. But Callie knew they weren't, even before a motorcycle engine snarled from right outside the house.

"They're here, dammit. You take this, girl. Make your damn self useful. Other people done for you all your life. Now you give back."

For a moment she stared at him. His eyes were wide and had gone so dark they were almost black.

"You're good at hitting," she said. "But not somebody who hits back, huh?"

"Now, Callie," her mother said, "I know you and your father have had your differences – "

"He's not my father!" Holding tight to Ellie's wrist she turned and ran for the back of the house.

"Damn you, you little bitch!" Froth flew from Rance Mason's mouth. "You're nothing but a little coward."

Ellie hung back, terrified.

"You leave us here, missy," her mother said, "don't ever come back."

A heave of Callie's hips and shoulder overcame her little sister's inertia. She towed the younger child rapidly toward the back door.

"You're no daughter of mine, Callie MacDougall!" Her mother's voice rang like a bell as she burst out the back screen and into the night.



"Liar!"

The slap rocked Callie's head back so hard a flying pigtail stung where it struck the fresh red palmprint. Callie's mother was still reckoned a mighty handsome woman by the men around Deadman's Mesa – though quietly, when her husband was in earshot, since he was known for his temper a lot more than his self control. She had filled out some, though, over the years, spread out through the hips a bit. And the labor of trying to keep the ranch from crumbling back into the alkali high desert soil despite her husband's proscription, done in intense bursts during his frequent and lengthy trips into the county seat at Abiquiu, had strengthened her already-large frame.

Callie touched her cheek. She tasted the iron tang of blood. "Ma! I'm telling the truth. I swear!"

"Don't lie to me!" Ma screamed at her.

Callie drew in three gasping, despairing breaths. She felt – lost. Helpless. Her cheeks burned from more than the slap. It was as if she was talking to a stranger.

"Ma, I'm not. I'm telling you, he – "

She faltered as rage flared in her mother's eyes. They were green like Ellie's, not cornflower blue like hers.

"You've always been jealous of Rance."

"*Jealous?*" she shouted back through tears.

Her mother nodded. Her mouth was a line, "You wanted all your mother's attention for yourself. Well, for you and Ellie. And that's natural, a little girl without her daddy. But it's gone too far now."

"Gone too far?" Callie gasped as if she'd just plunged into a snowmelt stream in springtime. It *had* gone too far. Way beyond too far. . . .

"I won't let you break up this family, missy," Ma said. "I've fought too long and hard to keep it together. You hear me?"

"I don't see much fighting," Callie flung back, "but there's sure hitting. Only it all goes one way. I've heard you crying by yourself in the pantry when you thought Ellie and I were outside. You're nursing a shiner right this minute!"

Her mother shook her head. The anger seemed to have drained from her. Now she was a long-suffering parent, struggling to understand and be understood by her wayward teenage daughter.

"You don't understand. He loves me. He loves us. You don't know how hard it is on him, you're so ungrateful."

Callie just stared. Her breath seemed to have congealed in her throat.

You were strong, she thought. You held us together after Daddy died. And you must've been strong before. Daddy would never marry a weakling, no how.

But she didn't say these things. Because her heart could not harbor the feelings she got when her mother struck her.



"Quick, now!" Callie's voice hissed like a startled road snake as she chivvied her sister up the handmade wood ladder to the loft

of the darkened barn. "Hide in the hay and don't come out for anything."

At the top of the ladder the girl stopped and looked down at her sister. Then she vanished. In his stall to Callie's right the ten-year-old chestnut gelding, Tony, stamped his foot in agitation. He whickered a challenge to the horses he sensed moving around outside.

She'll be safe here, Callie told herself. At least as anywhere. The renegades wouldn't set fire to the barn before they stole the two horses, Tony and his cranky sister Chica. And maybe not then. There was a door at the back of the loft for Ellie to escape out of if the raiders did torch the place. It was a half-cylinder of stressed cement anyway, although the wooden interior structure and stored hay would go up pretty fast.

From the field behind the house Callie heard screams. It was time to go.



The Comanche sentry sat on the ground beside the derelict AgroMech with a long hunting rifle cradled in his arms. Though he was mostly a shadow mound with little more definition than a barrel cactus, something in his posture told Callie he felt aggrieved at having to watch a lousy old *Ranchhand*, which any fool could plainly see wasn't going anywhere, while his buddies had all the fun. She let herself momentarily hear again the shouts and hoofbeats – and the screams – from the bean field around behind the house, confirming that some of the raiders were still busy amusing themselves.

Then she shut the noise off again. She could risk neither pity nor fear. There was nothing within her but a white-hot chill. She needed to keep it that way, she knew. Or she and Ellie would die.

Of more immediate concern, she reminded herself, was the twenty-ton *Locust* crouched out in front of the house. Fortunately it faced west, across the scrub toward the county road. Assistance from neighbors or the Rangers would most likely arrive that way.

But the local militia had nothing that could survive tangling with a BattleMech, even one as puny as a beat-up outlaw *Locust*. Callie

knew a lot about BattleMechs. The striding metal giants with their enormous power fascinated her. She studied them religiously on-line, every night after her schoolwork.

A meter and a half long chunk of native Galisteo ash, ten centimeters by ten, lay in the weeds and trash at the foot of the shed. Slipping forward silently – not that she needed to be *that* quiet – she picked it up. She cocked it over her shoulder.

Tears streaming down her face she took a running start. The man heard her at last. It was bad for him; he straightened slightly and raised his head as if to listen. It gave her a clear shot.

The impact ran through the heels of her hands all the way up her arms. It seemed to do so something funny to her stomach so she almost puked.

She hit him again in the side of the head. The bones of her arms vibrated painfully as if ringing from the shock. The man fell over clutching at himself in silent agony and rolling on the ground. He had heavy dark hair braided into a long ponytail.

She raised the makeshift club again. By the fourth or fifth time she struck, she felt hardly anything at all.

The *Ranchhand* started first try. She knew it would. She turned the big Diesel over every day that her stepfather went into town to do his mysterious business. As for the vines that twined around it, they would no more hold it than her mother's final words had held her inside the house to die helpless and afraid.

Working the clutch with practiced thrusts of her leg she engaged the leg actuators. She had to move, now, because the renegade Comanche raiders had *definitely* heard the engine fire up.



Rex Kicking Bird was also pretty pissed at being stuck in the cockpit of this lousy 'Mech while the party went on. He just hoped they saved some for him. It stank of oil and fermented sweat in here, and only some of it was his. He was the dude driving the baddest machine around. Why didn't he get first crack at the good stuff?

The jackhammer clamor of a spray of .50-caliber bullets against the *Locust's* left hip actuator housing and the port side of his cock-

pit made him almost jump out of his skin. The three-sixty vision strip mounted above the windscreen didn't work, like a lot of systems in the old and ill-maintained BattleMech. But just turning his head he didn't have a lot of trouble seeing the muzzle flare, big as a Range bull, the machine gun made as it fired another burst.

He stared in wordless amazement. It was a crapheel *AgroMech* firing him up.

The *Locust* couldn't swivel its torso. Kicking Bird had to get the thing walking before he could bring his own weapons to bear. By the time he lined up the sights on the 'Mech which had shot at his ride it was a quarter-klick off, bouncing away at a pretty respectable clip up the side of a low scrub-dotted hill.

He punched the firing stud for his centrally-mounted medium laser. A brilliant green flash lit the night, the side of the house, the underside of the windbreak Russian olive southwest of it, an ancient shed, and the hillside.

A three-meter tall evergreen scrub fifteen meters left of the fleeing *Ranchhand* flared white, briefly incandescent like a light bulb filament, as if struck by lightning. The glare died, leaving the scrub tree, too green to burn properly, sending up tendrils of greasy grey smoke.

"Whoa!" Kicking Bird exclaimed as his heat indicator shot way up. Coolant wasn't circulating any too well, here, either. Snarling a curse he triggered twin bursts from his own arm-mounted machineguns. Big clouds of alkali dust puffed up either side of the *AgroMech* as it crested the rise, pale in the light of stars. He might have tagged the machine but it didn't slow down. It dove straightway out of sight.

Screaming in fury he triggered another burst. He heard angry shouts from the porch. Some of his buddies wanted to know what the *hell* he thought he was doing.

That made him smile. He took a breath. Got hold of himself.

His smile broadened, showing where he'd been missing a tooth for a few weeks since Scab knocked it out in a fight over loot. Well, he'd get it replaced sooner than Scab would replace the guts Kicking Bird let out of him with his big Bowie. . . .

He was gonna get to have him some fresh hot fun after all. The dirt-grubber 'Mech was wads slower than his own fusion-driven war machine, run down and out of tune as it was. He reckoned the *Ranchhand* had enough lead on him now to make it a chase.

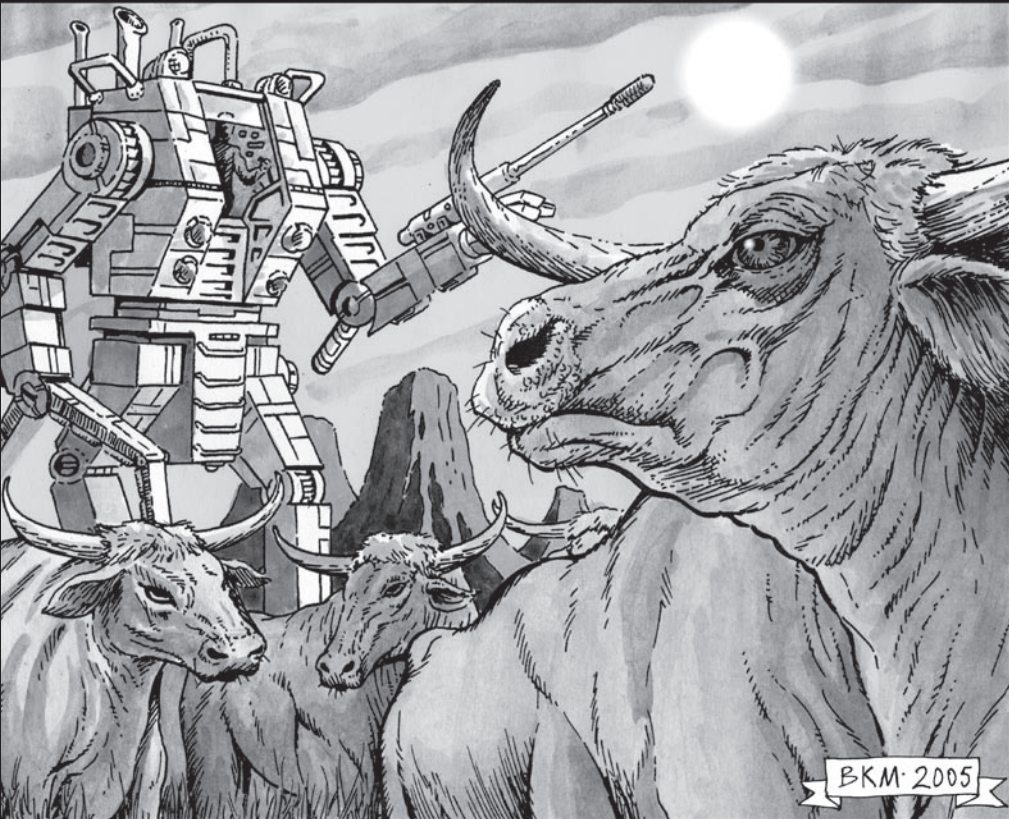
At least a little bit of one. He put his machine into a springing, rattling run at the hill.



Very little natural terrain on a habitable planet is actually flat. The chaparral of the Deadman's Mesa district wasn't hardly flat at all. And Callie MacDougall knew every fold of ground as well as she knew her own front yard. The marauder BattleMech might have been faster than hers, not to mention armored so well she could barely hope to scratch it with her single Sperry-Browning, and packing a laser that would flash-fry her in the cockpit at a single hit, charring her to charcoal and welding her carbonized tissues to metal briefly liquid.

But she didn't have far to go, as the red-tailed hawk flew. And the two more shots the *Locust* took at her with that nasty green laser as it chased her over the hills went wider than the first one had.

The Ranger bull herd had settled in for the night along a trickle of stream running down a shallow-sloped draw not six hundred meters from the house. The rhino-sized cattle, gene-manipulated



reconstructions of the ancient Terran *Aurochs* but even bigger, smarter, and probably meaner, needed to eat the daylight hours away to fuel their vast and powerful bodies. But the UV-rich light of Galisteo's sun pumped the local flora, sparse as it was, full of energy. They could settle down each night for a proper sleep.

Which they *hated* to have disturbed. Some of them raised their big wide-horned heads in annoyance at the familiar hated blat of the *Ranchhand's* Diesel. If Callie ran around long enough they'd get mad enough to get up and attack her in spite of the fact they feared the AgroMech well. That .50-caliber wasn't only for Galisteo's very formidable predators. . . .

But Callie had no time to wait. And she wanted something very particular from her herd of just over a hundred surly beasts. Fortunately, she had the tool for the job.

She dialed up the gain on the ultra-prod mounted on the *Ranchhand's* left arm. Zapping one of the adolescent bulls, much less Big Red his own bad self, would be disaster: he'd go rage-blind and charge the 'Mech, Sperry-Browning or not. Instead she found a two-year old heifer with half a meter busted off her right horn, whom she knew to have an excitable disposition.

The prod, a hyped-up version of a stunstick, shot a bright blue spark across half a meter of air to strike the reclining cow in her left haunch. She shot up to her feet squalling – and smelling – as if she'd been branded.

Callie touched her up again. The girl didn't have to be too careful with the juice; once she got the herd up and moving she could keep them going by shooting behind the rearmost. Bawling in fear and outrage the heifer fled her tormentor, up the grassy bank of the skinny little streambed. Herd reflex made the others jump up and follow. To help them along Callie triggered a shattering blast into the night.

Up at the head of the draw, the small but infinitely deadly *Locust* loomed suddenly black against the starry sky.



The first thing Kicking Bird saw was a crapload of cows. Big cows, like the white-eyes ranchers ran out here. A seethe of flesh a hundred meters down the arroyo from him.

He didn't care. On the herd's far side he saw the AgroMech, dancing around as if it had kicked open a scarlet-wasp mound. He triggered his laser and was gratified to see yellow glowing globules of glass that had a second before been dirt fountain up the left-hand side of the machine. A half dozen gobbets clung to the *Ranchhand's* leg like self-luminous fruit.

"Gotcha," Kicking Bird cried.

Then he realized the herd, muscle and bone and wide, wide horns collectively massing at much as several *Atlas* BattleMechs, was running right toward *him*.

Heedless that the heat-needle was already in the red he fired the laser again. The beam struck a cow at juncture of neck and churning auburn shoulder and split the huge beast apart like a strike from a *Hatchetman's* axe.

The thermal override kicked in. The *Locust's* systems powered down with a dying whine.

He could still fire his machine guns. Fortunately they had locked aiming more or less at the onrushing herd. He saw one great beast, eyes rolling and foam flying from its mouth in streamers, go down. Then another, and another.

Then the first of the stampeding monsters crashed into the locked-up right grasshopper leg of his 'Mech.

The *Locust* tottered. An undifferentiated wave of Ranger bull meat slammed against it. It toppled to the side.

Rex Kicking Bird screamed as his right shoulder popped out of joint when he struck the left-hand side of the cockpit. The machine bounced a little, then began to rock wildly as frantic Range cattle continued to run into it. Their frightened, angry bellowing filled his head.

Powerful as they were the monstrous cattle were unlikely to make much impression on the armored cockpit of even a light BattleMech. But pain and the sheer unexpectedness of *events* had tumbled Kicking Bird's gyros as sure as getting knocked off its feet had done to his *Locust*.

Screaming in wordless panic he scrambled to his feet on the port side-window. He pushed open the starboard hatch, now overhead. Then he jumped up, caught the frame with his good arm, and kick-

ing wildly boosted himself up and out into air that stank of churned up dust and dung and sweat-wet cowhide.

In the dark with his hefty harem jostling him from all sides, *El Diablo Rojo* missed his aim. The hook of his mighty rack of horns failed to impale the impertinent two-legs which had appeared out of its metal carapace like a fire-cicada shedding its husk. But the shaft of his right horn caught the human in the belly, doubled him up, and swept him off his machine.

Into the middle of a maelstrom of hooves. Bellowing triumph, *Diablo Rojo* began to jostle his way through the cows. It was *his* prize, damn it; and he meant to get himself a piece before there was nothing left.

The herd bull's eyes weren't anything to write home about, even in the light of the full blue sun. But ululating high-pitched cries told him right where to go.



"Died hard for a city boy," Staff Sergeant Hector "Teco" Quivira said, shaking his head over what remained of Rance Mason. He clicked off his big flashlight.

"*Muerta de las lanzadas,*" remarked Yvonne Gutiérrez, the Galisteo Ranger platoon scout. Middle height, spare badlands build with a face like wind-eroded rock and a brush of broom-stiff black hair, she was half-Comanche herself and just a bit tougher than she looked. "Horseman speared him to the ground from behind, through the shoulder, see? Facedown in the beans. Then they kind of took turns riding past jabbing him with their spears. Takes a while if the boys don't get impatient."

She looked around. "What I don't get is what happened to the dudes who *did* this," she said, gesturing at the bodies and parts of men and horses strewn around the little well-trampled field behind the MacDougall house. "Looks like they got hit by a giant weed-whacker."

Teco Quivira nodded toward the AgroMech, parked out in front of the house in a semi-crouch, as if it had hunkered down to peer inside curiously and frozen that way.

"I'd say that's about right," he said.



Captain Narayan "Frank" Singh of the Galisteo Rangers felt his cheeks tighten behind his well kept beard as he stepped into the open front doorway of the MacDougall holding. One of his men coming behind started to raise a flashlight. The captain waved him off. The headlights of the scout car parked in the yard facing the house cast plenty light inside.

More than enough.

Singh glanced only briefly at what lay in the open doorway. Apparently the man had been so engrossed watching and listening to what was going on in the living room that he never noticed the AgroMech's approach. Until it touched him from behind with the Ranger bull prod. Now he was half charred and half blown open like a frank held too long in a mesquite campfire.

The inner partition walls of the house were wood and synthetic paneling. Head-sized holes gaping in them showed how the 'Mech jock had stuck the machine's .50-caliber through the door and hosed raiders off the former Ms. MacDougall – Singh had never been able to think of her as Mrs. Rance Mason, and it was pretty academic now.

Just how many raiders . . . well, that would have to wait on the coroner's techs sorting through the wreckage. Singh reckoned they had a job of work cut out for them.

In the center of the floor James MacDougall's widow lay on her back in a graceless sprawl. Somebody had thrown a sheet over her. The younger daughter, the redhead, lay sobbing across the motionless body.

The older knelt by her mother's head. She was a blonde, Singh recalled. But in the light from outside he saw her hair, now, was mostly red, too.

"Sir." He jumped. One of his deputies, now Private for the duration of the emergency, had materialized by his elbow.

"What is it, Watkins?" he asked.

"We accounted for all of 'em, sir," the young man said. "Or, I guess, *she* did."

Singh raised a brow. "All of them?"

"Yessir. Near as we can reckon, none of the owl-hoot bastards got away. Hoo-ee, you should see what them Ranger bulls left of that *Locust* driver after they'd been stepping on him and tossing him a while."

Singh held up a strong, slender hand. "Please, Private." Even a Southwestern World Sikh had his limits.



Rocking ever so slightly, Callie stared down into eyes she knew would never see her again. She stroked faded strawberry blonde hair from her mother's cool forehead. The hair felt lifeless to her hand, even though she knew full well it was no deader than her own.

"I'm sorry, mother," she said. "I wish I could have saved you. But I had my call."

She leaned forward to kiss her mother's brow. "And I made it."

"Perhaps you should come out, now, miss," Captain Singh called from the doorway. "Your mother said your name was – Kali?"

Her senses bright with the adrenaline still sizzling in her veins like bacon in the pan, she caught the way he replaced the sharp "a" of her name with a broad one.

She knew the name he called her by from her schooling. She was a good student, quick-minded, with an imagination that ranged far beyond the ranch and even the endless steppe and desert of Galisteo.

"Yes," she said, rising. "Kali. That's me."

Gently she raised up her sister from their mother's prostrate form. Taking her by the hand, she led her out the door into the dawn.

The strong, grim men of the Galisteo Rangers stepped back to give her space to go.