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A Call to Arms

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For Janna Silverstein, who immersed herself in the *BattleTech* universe and helped make a

good book better.

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Writing this novel came as something of a relief. It proved to me (and others) that *BattleTech* would continue. From the uncertain times when FASA first announced that it would close its doors until now there was always that fear that the novel *Endgame* would indeed be the proverbial “it.” Finis. Rest in print.

It’s so great to see that you can’t keep a good universe down. *BattleTech*’s saga will continue under the *MechWarrior* title, and it is important to me to note that this novel, *A Call To Arms*, would never have happened without contributions from the following:

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Prolog

(Two Years Before the Blackout)

Program 12: Highlake Basin ***Achernar*** ***Prefecture IV, The Republic*** ***26 October 3130***

Sporadic artillery *cr-umped* along Raul Ortega's rearward flank: twenty-pounders. They stomped large craters through the crusted, cracked-mud surface of Achernar's Highlake Basin, scuffed blackened earth and embers of burning grasses into the air, and occasionally kicked over an infantry position, forcing survivors to scurry like armored ants reforming injured lines.

Those bright, orange-tipped flashes shattered the deepening twilight and cast brief shadows forward of Raul's *Legionnaire* as he stalked the fifty-ton BattleMech into the no-man's-land separating his forces from Charal DePriest's. From three stories up, his cockpit placed as a head on the humanoid-style war machine, Raul stared out through a ferroglass shield to study the battlefield. Armored vehicles drove and dodged through the killing zone, their autocannons and machine guns stitching the air with white-hot tracers. Ruby laserfire splashed armor into molten puddles. Flights of missiles arced up on fiery plumes, falling over into hard-hitting showers that blasted into the ancient lakebed and ripped open armor and flesh where they found it.

Two gutted APV's, both of them Charal's, burned at the edge of the dry lake basin, roiling black, greasy smoke into a charcoal sky.

He felt a loose smile—the one Major Blaire called Raul's *kay-det* grin—creep over his face. Those two vehicles didn't make up for his lost Marksman, a blackened husk left at the foot of the Taibek Hills, but with a bit of luck Charal would have failed to deploy her own battlesuit infantry and that would put the other MechWarrior-cadet at a disadvantage.

After two hours in the hot seat, muscles strained and sore and his hands sweat-slick on the simulator's well-worn controls, Raul didn't mind asking for a touch of luck.

“Charlie-one through six: advance and engage,” Raul commanded his carefully hoarded infantry. The Cavalier-suited warriors leapt out of hiding from jagged-edged craters or spilled from his two Saxon transports. A few bounded up on thrusters. Most swarmed forward in short, erratic sprints. Raul could hope that one squad might actually make a battlefield capture, but if nothing else, he decided, they would draw fire away from him.

It wasn't soon enough, though. A particle projector cannon scorched the air just over his *Legionnaire's* left shoulder. Raul ducked away reflexively. He stutter-stepped his BattleMech several cautious paces to the right where a JES Tactical Missile Carrier fell under his sights, branded in enemy-red on the head's up display.

He checked his ammunition reserves in a glance—down, but not critically low—and set his crosshairs over the *Jessie's* dark outline. The *Legionnaire's* targeting computer painted a shadow-reticle to the right of the hovercraft, adjusting for relative motion. Raul corrected his aim, swinging over the BattleMech's arm to lead the JES Carrier by several meters, and then pulled into his only weapons trigger.

His rotary autocannon spit out a long tongue of fire and fifty-mil rounds tipped with depleted uranium. The slugs punched into the hovercraft's right side missile launcher, chewing through simulated armor as the vehicle slewed sideways. A weakened support arm twisted under the launcher's weight, buckled, and dropped the boxlike launcher into the full stream of hot, angry metal. Missiles ruptured, their solid fuel boosters catching fire and cooking off several warheads before the tank crew could dump the ruined ammunition, and the launcher disintegrated into a blossom of fire.

The explosion rocked the hovercraft up on its skirt and spilled away the supporting cushion of air. The *Jessie* tipped up and over, coming down on the overhead launcher, which discharged in a sympathetic detonation. Armor panels bulged on all sides, then burst apart. A gout of fire shot into the sky, thick and tall, glowing yellow-orange at the center and simply darkening to a nimbus of red wisps at the edge. It looked . . . minimal.

Fake.

Raul's smile slid away. Cheap fire effects always ruined the explosion in his opinion, reminding him that his battle wasn't exactly real. Fire should dance and cavort, cheering his temporary victory.

It was one of only a few flaws in the Mark III simulators used by Achernar's training command. Usually, he lost himself within the simulation without problem. The cockpit swayed with each step his *Legionnaire* took, hitched hard when a trio of missiles slammed into his left leg, and the simulator threw him forward against the five-point restraining harness every time the BattleMech's cockpit took a direct hit. It also dumped heat through small vents near his feet when he stressed the fusion reactor. All reinforced the illusion—the lie—that he controlled an actual BattleMech—except for the fire.

Not that he'd let simplified effects distract him from beating Charal DePriest. Charal had more formal training, raised in a family of long military traditions. Raul pushed forward with determination and a measure of raw talent detected in the academy admissions testing. They had long since left the other cadets far behind. Challenging each other for the number-one spot, academic and practical standings too close to call for several months now, their good-natured rivalry had turned serious. It was more than a game today—more than a routine training procedure in Achernar's Reserve Training Corps. This was his final exam. Graduation.

Today's simulated battle decided who picked up the vaunted billet in Achernar's militia, commanding one of The Republic's rare BattleMechs, and who finished a law enforcement degree

looking forward to commanding a desk for two years before learning how to write parking citations.

Enemy icons cluttered Raul's head's up display, laser-projected across the upper third of his cockpit's ferroglass shield. Their short tag lines of information tangled in among IFF codes for his own skirmishers. In his mind, the coded tags resolved into two forces of similar troops, spread out over the dry lake basin. Armored vehicles chewed up the ground with belted treads and knobby tires. Hovercraft glided along with deadly menace like wolves among sheep. If Raul held an edge it was in raw firepower, although Charal DePriest made up for that with superior mobility.

More than made up for it, in fact, as a green-haloed square on his HUD burst in a flare of emerald light. At a glance he read that a squad of Charal's hoverbikes had overpowered and destroyed his remaining Demon tank.

Raul cursed his luck for drawing Program 12, the Highlake Basin, and then cursed himself for not anticipating Charal's early move out of the Taibek Mountains, the jagged edge of the northwest horizon. Swallowing back the dry, metallic taste of his anger, he dialed in the frequency for his computer-controlled vehicle commanders.

"Alpha group, spread nor-nor'west. Beta, spread nor' east."

These were his two primary battle group formations of heavy armor. By cupping them around Charal's advance forces, supporting his infantry drive, Raul hoped to fold the enemy into a pincer. If nothing else, he might be able to thin out the middle of the field, allowing him to push through and finally come to grips with his opponent.

"Delta group," he called up his reserve line of armored vehicles, holding defensive positions behind him, "shake out into a skirmishing wedge."

The HUD's chaos of icons thinned, but not so much that he would get an easy push through at Charal DePriest. He'd have to fight his way through, which was exactly what Charal wanted of him. The entire confrontation so far, she'd commanded from a support position while he always stalked the forward edge of battle. She waited for him to soften up his defenses on her stinging probes—waited for him to make a mistake. The first Mech Warrior to fall wouldn't end the scenario, no matter how far ahead he (or she) might be.

It would give the other commander free reign to leisurely destroy the opposing, computer-generated force down to the last digital man.

As if summoned by that dark thought, a pair of SM1 Destroyers glided out of the enemy pack, hunting him. Raul pulled back behind the defensive line he'd set with four Joust-701s, counting on the threat of their large lasers to hold back the *Sims*. He knew better than to close with an SM1's 'Mech-killing twelve centimeter bore, and Charal knew enough not to challenge an entrenched line. The *Sim* fell back, their drive fans pushing them on toward better prey, and Raul stalked northwest to mirror the sudden movement of Charal's *Legionnaire*.

She'd make the first mistake, and he'd be there to catch her. He allowed for no other possibility.

Being a MechWarrior was all Raul had dreamed of as a teen, whether sitting with his father through their seventh screening of an *Immortal Warrior* holovid or in his school studies of The Republic's military history. It didn't matter that there were no longer any wars to fight. To him, the Word of Blake Jihad was ancient history. Devlin Stone's Reformation and the resulting birth of The Republic of the Sphere had required some fighting, but not much compared to the previous four hundred years of Succession Wars and the Clan invasion. And even Stone's last battle had been fought nearly two decades before, bringing an end to the Capellan Crusades and peace to the Inner Sphere.

The allure of being a MechWarrior, though, was one that refused to pale, and had become almost legendary with the widespread arms reduction. It spoke to Raul in the reverent way people referred to Devlin Stone's Knights of the Sphere. With the intense coverage of the gladiator 'Mechs on the game world of Solaris VII. Even in the way his classmates looked at him now; only a cadet and MechWarrior-candidate but, in their minds, a future officer, knight, legate or prefect.

Raul had promises to keep, and no one was going to stand in the way of that dream. He searched through his cockpit's ferroglass shield for a new target.

Charal DePriest found him first.

A storm of tracers skipped off Raul's cockpit shield and then drifted down over the *Legionnaire's* torso as Charal reached out from long range to walk a line of destruction from head to hip joint. Ferroglass cracked into the legs of two long spiderwebs, barely holding up under the assault. The simulator trembled violently, shaking Raul against his five-point harness—hard enough to leave deep bruises across his shoulders and abdomen. His neurohelmet slammed back against the seat's headrest, cracking one of the support posts.

The *Legionnaire's* massive gyroscopic stabilizers relied on Raul's own sense of equilibrium, linked through the pilot's neurohelmet. Shaken, Raul blinked back a wave of dizziness and the sensation of sudden vertigo as his BattleMech balanced on uncertain footing.

Recognizing the uneasy sway of his *Legionnaire*, Raul spread out both of the 'Mech's arms for balance and throttled into a slower walk to recover the stricken avatar. Icons danced over his HUD, demanding his attention. But Major Blaire had taught them that it was always better to do something immediate and constructive in a live-fire situation than debate overlong on the exact right thing to do. Raul was an attentive student.

“Alpha group, hard press.” His order might buy him some time if Charal had to deal with a sudden advance.

His own reticle tracked across the cracked shield, painted by a targeting laser, but for the distance Raul switched over to his infrared monitor and full computer imaging. Charal was on the move, but he bracketed her in a long pull of autocannon fire before ever looking at his HUD for more information. Raul spent several hundred rounds on empty air but several hundred more into the outline of Charal's *Legionnaire*. His return fire chipped away armor from its arms and upper chest, rocking it back but not doing enough damage to knock Charal off her feet.

Static whispered into Raul's ears as a transmission burst from his computer-controlled subofficers crackled over the speakers built into his neurohelmet. "Alpha group," the voice identified itself. "We're through, sir."

For a brief second Raul thought that his armor group had decided to desert him. That would be a new twist coming out of the computer's limited programming. Then, shaking off the last of his dizziness, he caught on that elements of Alpha formation had penetrated to the rearward lines on this flank.

Raul was behind her!

His head's up display painted the same picture as he spent several critical seconds in study. Charal's brief move forward, coupled with his return push of battlesuit infantry and armor, had opened up the field between them so that both *Legionnaires* faced off over open ground. Her western flank was in chaos, cut off from their commander by a narrow line of his own troops. She had two . . . looked like three armored vehicles left in the immediate area that might be able to reach her side.

"Beta group, smash forward. Tie them up. Alpha, hold your line. Delta, reinforce Alpha." Raul rattled off his commands with a confidence born of immediate need. If only he could wait for his reserve infantry in Delta to move up, he might be able to capture Charal's BattleMech—and wouldn't that be a fine cap to his RTC record?

Throttling into a forward run, Raul pushed his *Legionnaire* ahead at better than one hundred kilometers per hour. Charal was already backpedaling, realizing her exposed position, but not soon enough. Sporadic fire from her rotary autocannon pecked and pockmarked his armor, hammering away barely a ton of protection from his *Legionnaire's* lower legs and torso.

"Lance 701," he called for the quad of Jousts that had held off the SM1 Destroyers earlier, "detach from Delta." He'd need them to help put Charal down quickly. "Advance at flank speed, engage enemy *Legionnaire*."

At the Jousts' eighty-six kph top speed, Raul left the tracked vehicles behind quickly. They only needed to reach a fair distance, though, to bring their missile racks and extended-range lasers against her 'Mech, or, if need be, any of the supporting armor Charal had left to her.

As if realizing her error, and that she would never get free in time, Charal DePriest waited with two armored vehicles pulled in at her flanks. The computer tagged them as VV1 Rangers, anti-infantry vehicles—hardly the forces one would draw on to hold off a BattleMech.

Caution whispered at the back of Raul's mind and he slowed his pace, throttling down to seventy kph, buying himself crucial seconds. A MechWarrior did not push a losing position, not a MechWarrior trained under Major Isaac Blaire. 'Mechs were too rare—too expensive—to risk them with a cavalier attitude. Raul had taken hits on his evals for that, and to see Charal suddenly hold the line when everything he saw would have him screaming *run* gave him a long pause.

But there was nothing new to see. Her flanking forces had yet to break free of his two-pronged assault, and except for the VV1's she had a single Scimitar combat hovercraft and what now looked

like a squad of Purifier armored infantry.

Not enough. Not nearly enough against his quad of Jousts, and Charal knew it. She had something else in mind.

He learned what a moment later.

“Alpha group. Enemy has disengaged.”

The report sounded too good to be true, that Charal was abandoning the battlefield, especially when Beta and Delta echoed the same situation a split-second later. Then the first flight of LRMs saturated the dead *lakebed* around his position, geysering earth and blackened rock into the air. A dozen scattered missiles slammed into his BattleMech's upper body, blasting away armor. The explosions echoed into his cockpit, filling his ears with a stuttering roar.

Raul's alarms screamed from multiple targeting system locks. Other than Charal's small trio, the nearest vehicle was still nearly a half kilometer away—a JES Strategic Missile Carrier packing along its four racks of long-ranged missiles. *Big Jess* launched a second, full spread of missiles just before it exploded under the concentrated fire of what looked like Raul's entire Beta formation.

Charal's armored forces had disengaged all right. They were completely disregarding Raul's troops, falling back through his lines no matter the cost to rendezvous on her position and concentrate on one single target: Raul's *Legionnaire*.

She had pulled him right into a massive trap!

“Alpha, Beta, Delta, defend my position!” Raul's voice held a frantic edge to it, one he never would have used in command of real troops. “Lance 701, full assault on enemy *Legionnaire*.”

Their lasers were already stabbing out at the 'Mech as Charal advanced now behind a makeshift screen of the two Rangers and Scimitar. Purifier battlesuit troops leapt forward on tiny jets, and on Raul's far right one of the SM1 'Mech-killers broke free and sped into the killing ground after him as well.

Missiles churned up the lakebed again. Several rained down on his *Legionnaire*'s shoulders, causing him to stumble forward while Charal's rotary pummeled him with fifty-mil rounds. Her autocannon slugs struck all over his armor like hundreds of tiny hammers, each one tolling a death knell.

Raul ran through the storm of hot metal, blinking away the tracers' ghostly afterimage and keeping his finger down on the firing stud of his own rotary autocannon. His only salvation was to take her down first. Take her down, and then mop up her computer-controlled forces as his armored vehicles hit them point-blank from behind. His stream of non-stop autocannon fire cut through her BattleMech's right arm but failed to make it deep enough into her side to silence the rotary.

A Cavalier battlesuit trooper leapt for her, but she smashed it out of the air with a backhanded swat. One of Raul's Jousts cut a molten wound directly over the reactor shielding of Charal's *Legionnaire*, and on his thermal imaging screen her heat level blossomed to a critical level, but not enough to slow

down her rapid-cycling barrages.

A second of Charal's JES Strategics lumbered into range—on Raul's left this time—launching flight after flight of missiles, which hammered down around him until the entire planet of Achernar appeared to be shaking itself apart. Charal held up her deadly, cutting assault from the front while the Rangers split apart and, with the Scimitar, hit him on three sides simultaneously. An inferno of laser fire and the Rangers' stinging miniguns hammered into him, shaking the massive BattleMech beyond the capability of its gyroscope or its pilot to compensate.

Raul had time for one last burst of fire from his autocannon. Then he stumbled. He fell first to his knees, sliding along in a pose of subjugation, then facedown into the earth, the impact rattling his teeth together. The ferroglass shield caved in, its digital picture dropping out large shards that would—in a real battle—ricochet through the cockpit on dangerous, even deadly, paths.

He tasted blood, and his vision swam through a murky haze. Fighting for his final hold on consciousness, Raul levered one of the *Legionnaire's* arms beneath it and pushed against the planet. His shattered cockpit shield scraped free of the baked mud, he looked up over one of the speeding Rangers to see Charal also fighting her way back to her feet. His final burst had cut into her gyro housing, knocking the leviathan over but not out.

“Still . . . time . . .” Raul told himself, fighting to get his legs under him. His bitten tongue throbbed with each word.

The fury of missiles and autocannon fire had abated, the calm at the eye of a storm. He heard a light scabbling, like steel-toed mice nesting inside his *Legionnaire's* armor, and worry stabbed up from the dark memories of his training but it took an extra moment for the source to register. The Purifiers! Charal's infantry had crawled up from the ground, hooking footholds into his joints and ruined armor, searching for deep wounds to tear into or—worse—his cockpit hatch.

Raul's heads-up display blinked and stuttered, occasionally wiped itself with gray-snow static, but it looked as if two of his Jousts were now out of commission. Through his shattered ferroglass shield he saw a ruby lance slice deep into Charal's left leg. It did not keep her from pulling back to a solid stance. The simulator's speakers banged a deep, metal echo into his ears—the sound of infantry on his outer hatch. Swallowing against the taste of blood, and his own worry of failure, Raul braced himself up into a three-point crouch and drew his targeting crosshairs over the center of Charal's 'Mech. His targeting computer locked onto a bleeding-thermal wound, the reticle burning a golden bull's-eye over her reactor.

Gambling for one last shot, Raul thumbed the firing stud.

And the simulator's screens went blank.

No video image of Highlake Basin. No enemy 'Mech or vehicles. No friendlies, either. He wanted to believe that his final shot had gone off and burst through her reactor shielding, tried to talk himself into it, but as a hand slapped the simulator's outside shell and began to crank open the heavy door, he knew. His ears still ringing from the loud sound effects of battle, Raul heard the cheers and clapping

of the RTC cadet corps, saluting the victor and the newest Mech Warrior in Achernar's militia.

Charal DePriest.

The Job

San Marino Spaceport Achernar 11 February 3133

Customs Security Officer Raul Ortega glanced up from his handheld noteputer, distracted. The spaceport's underground service area bustled with a sudden burst of frenetic activity that only came with the arrival of a new DropShip to Achernar.

Dozens of tram-haulers crawled along electric tracks, flatbeds stacked high with colorful plastic crates and large, metal shipping containers stenciled from dozens of different worlds. A trio of LoaderMechs stomped along beside the haulers. The Loaders' high, hunched shoulders nearly scraped against the tunnel ceiling and the high-pitched whirr of their flywheel batteries stressed toward fingernails-on-slate with each heavy step. On the far outside of the wide corridor moved foot traffic and cargo handlers and shipping agents fought against a flood of able-bodied spacemen heading into River's End, Achernar's capital, on shore leave.

Thick air carried the warm tastes of ozone and sweat and cheap cologne.

Raul stood just outside the trunk corridor in one of many warehousing routes, waiting in the company of Lord Erik Sandoval-Groell for the industrial parade to pass. The young noble glared at the interruption, arms crossed, one hand tapping an impatient rhythm. "Everything is in order," Sandoval said loudly, trying to hurry Raul along.

Erik Sandoval wore an officer's uniform and the captain's bars of his honorary rank, both privileges granted him by his uncle, Duke Aaron Sandoval, The Republic's Lord Governor of Prefecture IV. He shaved the sides of his head for the traditional topknot of a Sandoval dynasty scion, braiding what was left back into a short, dark queue. The youngblood had eyes of heavy amber, which burned softly with an inner fire. Only three or four centimeters taller than Raul's medium one-seventy, he carried the extra height with shoulders back and proud chin thrust forward as if it conveyed some sort of extra superiority.

"I do have other business to complete today."

Apparently Sandoval had conveniently forgotten that *he* had flagged down Raul's cart, interrupting the CSO's call to Docking Pad Seven. Raul wanted to put the short attitude down to the prerogative of an off-world noble, or the frustration of an officer with bureaucracy. Erik Sandoval-Groell was both.

But Sandoval had also been on Achernar long enough to allow for some social graces, and his local command was part of the problem with any red tape delays and he damn well knew it.

Sandoval either wasn't likable, or simply wasn't trying to be.

But Raul nodded politely, returned to the noteputer he cradled in his right hand. He paged down through manifest logs, comparing his noteputer's glowing green screen to the hardcopy pages Sandoval had pressed on him. He traced a set of serial numbers to three large-class lasers stockpiled one of the spaceport's secure warehouses. And there was more. One hundred ten tons of armor composite. Fifteen tons of various munitions. A Mydron eighty-millimeter autocannon.

"It's all restricted-access." He paged back up the list of serial numbers. "Why do you need all this?"

"I need it because I have the permits which say that I can have it. I only require your local release. Reminded that he *did*, in fact, require local release, Sandoval relented somewhat. "I'm leading my people into the Tanager Testing Range on a live-fire exercise."

His people.

Nausea clutched lightly at Raul's insides, and he worked to keep his revulsion from showing inside his dark, near-black eyes. Sandoval meant the Swordsworn, one of several factions that had cropped up in the Republic since the Blackout. The Swordsworn openly swore their fealty to Erik's uncle, believing that Exarch Redburn had abandoned Prefecture IV in his worries for other sectors within The Republic of the Sphere. Erik Sandoval wore his loyalty brazenly with the small patch sewn over his uniform's left breast pocket—a longsword cleaving across planetary dawn. The thought of The Republic breaking down into "us" and "them," into *his* people and *Raul's* people, left a sour taste at the back of Raul's throat that he hadn't known since attending Charal DePriest's commissioning ceremony two years back.

A sarcastic reply would have gone a long way to clearing his palate, scoring cheap points off the visiting noble. It might also have been a solid step toward that new career his fiancée occasionally asked after.

A LoaderMech swung out of its lane, saving Raul from a heated reply by barging through a gap in pedestrian traffic in an attempt to cut the corner and move ahead of a slower-moving tram. It carried a flanged barrel in its forked pincers, swaying dangerously close to the two men as it tried to squeeze in between them and the pair of electric carts parked nearby. Raul stiff-armed Sandoval back into the wall—perhaps a bit rougher than he needed to—then yanked off his black service cap, using it to flag down the LoaderMech's driver.

The LoaderMech rocked to a halt in midstep. A look of guilt flashed over the Loader driver's face as he identified the silver badge sewn onto the right front pocket of Raul's black uniform, quite clearly a Customs Security Officer. There was no chance for conversation, not with the driver encased in ferroglass and plugged against the high-pitched whine of the Loader's flywheel-battery conversion. He offered Raul a sheepish shrug and cocky grin, the half-serious apology of a man who knew the worst Raul could do was take down the Loader's serial and generate a letter of warning.

Raul waved the man through with a frustrated slash, standing aside as the bulky Loader finally squeezed past and still made it ahead of the tram. The distraction had given him the moment he'd needed to regain his composure. He tucked his hat brim into his belt at the small of his back, combed his curly, dark hair back with long fingers, and turned again to Erik Sandoval-Groell.

“My apologies, Lord Sandoval.” Raul smoothed the words over, meaning them about as much as the LoaderMech driver had meant his guilty shrug. Perhaps a little more. Eric Sandoval wasn't the enemy. “I'll get someone on your request right away,” he said, performing some quick input into his noteputer.

The young noble straightened his uniform, glaring. “Your supervisor told me that you would handle this.” Sandoval's tone somehow carried the full weight of his authority as well as that of Raul's boss. “Personally.”

A tight smile strained at the corners of Raul's mouth. “Personally,” he agreed, resigning himself to another twelve-hour day. He fought to keep the irritation from coloring his dark brown eyes any blacker. “If you will send some men to”—he checked his screen—“warehouse alcove one-twelve, I'll meet them there as soon as I'm done with my emergency call to Docking Pad Seven. All right?”

The pinched expression on Sandoval's face didn't say it was all right. But it was hard to argue when Raul had basically conceded the point *and* had played an “emergency” trump.

“I'll send some of my people over,” Sandoval promised. “I'll also be talking to Superintendent Rossiter, you may be certain.”

Raul snagged his service cap from the small of his back and tugged it on smartly. He nodded a respectful salute to Erik Sandoval-Groell. “Sir,” he said, skimping a bit on the title but maintaining a professional manner even when his inner sense of decorum agreed that Sandoval deserved little more than flat competency.

Eric Sandoval returned to his cart and shifted it into gear, leaving Raul free to climb back into his own battery powered vehicle. Merging into the trunk corridor, Raul steered carefully around pedestrian and LoaderMech traffic and tried to set aside his frustrations. He didn't worry too much about what his boss would say. Carl Rossiter was a reasonable man stuck with an unreasonable job these days, and Raul's call to Pad Seven *was* an emergency—of sorts—in the manner that it came directly from the office of Achernar's military legate, Brion Stempres. If it came down to who deserved Raul's attention first, the CSO would bank on Achernar's ranking military officer, Stempres' friendship with the Sandovals notwithstanding.

The drive to Pad Seven wasn't so long that Raul had time to worry after Erik Sandoval or whatever critiques he might bring to his supervisor, so instead he lost himself in an old Customs game, reading the shipping stencil prefixes on large containers and trying to identify the world from which they came. Many of them were easy, shipped in from other worlds in Prefecture IV: Tikonov and Tigress, Rio, Yangtze, and Ronel. Others tested his knowledge. M3A was Mara, of The Republic's Prefecture III. Denebola, D9B8, was actually the governing capital of Prefecture VIII but a rare trading partner with Achernar. He pegged another container originating from VIII, SM8, but couldn't place it between

Syrma or Summer. He filed a mental note to look it up later.

True challenges came from outside The Republic, of course. Centered at the core of the Inner Sphere, with mankind's birthworld of Terra cradled in its middle, The Republic had long enjoyed decent trading relations with most other major powers: House Kurita's Draconis Combine, the mercantile Sea Foxes. In the few months before the Blackout, the Senate's new Free Trade Agreement had opened up a floodgate of shipping coming in from the hundreds of worlds belonging to the Lyran Commonwealth. Even now the gauntlet crest of House Steiner was not an uncommon sight in the service corridors. And here was a prefix from deep inside the balkanized Free Worlds League. And there . . .

The sword-and-sunburst crest of House Davion's Federated Suns. A device very similar to the one adopted by Aaron Sandoval and the Swordsworn.

So much for the game.

That the Swordsworn insignia borrowed so heavily from the Davion crest was not surprising. The Sandoval dynasty had deep roots in the Federated Suns, with other family lines still governing many worlds along the Davion-Kurita border. Aaron Sandoval came from a long tradition of powerful rulers, most of them jealous of their own position and ready to defend it, their worlds, and nation with armies under their complete domination.

It was because of such military-political dynasties, in fact, that the legendary Star League fell and the Inner Sphere suffered through three hundred years of Succession Wars, the Clan invasion, and the Word of Blake Jihad. Abolishing such violent nationalism was the very reason behind Devlin Stone's creation of The Republic of the Sphere. His incentives inspired large measures of the population to relocate until many Republic worlds held a mixture of races and cultures, blending them together, easing the tensions of old rivalries. His plan worked.

For two generations.

Raul swerved his cart out of traffic at Docking Pad Three, catching sight of a black Customs Security uniform and the harried face of CSO Palos Montgomery near the wide-open, and empty, bay. Officer Palos stood before a small crowd of dockhands and suits—union reps, was Raul's guess—holding back their questions and outbursts with upraised hands.

Setting the brake on his cart but leaving it idling, Raul waved Palos over. His friend's normally gaunt face looked positively drawn and haggard today, and his green eyes were bloodshot from long hours.

Palos held himself up on the cart's battery compartment cover. "Thanks, Raul. I needed a break from that."

"Shouldn't you be coming off night shift?"

His friend laughed, a weak chuckle that died prematurely. "Oh, yeah. I'm looking at sixteen hours today, but what you gonna do?"

What indeed? The Blackout caused by the crash of nearly every Hyperpulse Generator in The Republic—perhaps over the entire Inner Sphere—had left each world isolated as they had never been in the long history of Humanity’s spread among the stars. Customs was just one agency being forced to pick up the slack, and no amount of overtime was going to appease a population discovering its fear of the dark.

“What’s the problem?” Raul asked, nodding his commiseration. “Where’s the DropShip that was due on Pad Three?” By his memory, that vessel should have been down yesterday. But there was something from his morning brief . . . “Is it still having . . . drive failure?”

Palos nodded. “Yeah. That’s the problem exactly. And it’s my problem until we get that egg dropped down and opened up. The crew claims to be on top of it. They just want to be sure about not plummeting down through the atmosphere.”

Raul dismissed such problems with an airy wave. “Bah. Dropping without a drive flare isn’t the problem.”

“No?”

Raul grinned. “Huh-uh. It’s that sudden stop at the very bottom.”

Fourteen hours on the job, a touch of dark humor was just what Palos needed. He smiled, briefly. “Thanks. That just leaves hourly waves of shipping agents and longshoreman reps to deal with.”

“Tell them you heard the problem might be fixed. Tell them to give you a couple hours while you leave to go get a revised ETA. Then clock out and hand it to day shift.”

Palos smiled fully this time. “You going to cover that?” he asked.

Raul shrugged, looking forward to a sixteen-hour day himself now. Jessica would have to wait on dinner. “If I can’t, I’ll get someone to handle it. Go.”

He nodded his friend on his way, moved his cart along the corridor and filed a mental reminder to check on the wayward DropShip as soon as possible. He shrugged uncomfortably. With luck, his fiancée would be working late at the hospital. It would save them from another discussion over the problems—her viewpoint—of performance-based citizenship. As Jessica Searcy liked to put it, in medical terms, the Sandovals and the Swordsworn were only symptoms of an ailment that had begun to exhibit even before the near-total collapse of the HPG network. The loss of interstellar communications, like the loss of a social antibiotic, simply allowed the sickness to fester and spread.

She could very well be right, Raul knew. It wasn’t just the pro-Sandoval population. Achernar also had a small faction of supporters for Kal Radick and his Steel Wolves, and by all reports Ronel was dealing with independent raiders as well as a pro-Combine faction calling itself the Dragon’s Fury. Shots had already been fired between factions. And Ronel, like Achernar, *had* a working HPG. Two worlds among the twenty-five systems of Prefecture IV that did. Or, which at least were on speaking terms. How was it on a world completely cut off from everything, brought only shipboard rumor and few hardspooled communiqués with each passing JumpShip?

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