



**BATTLECORPS**

# SHADOWS OF FAITH

VOLUME 2

*by Loren L. Coleman*

**TALES OF THE JIHAD**

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**Old Connaught, Arc-Royal  
Lyran Alliance  
31 October 3067**

Victor Davion waited in the company of three other costumed men—a motley quartet gathered in the private office of the Grand Duke of Arc-Royal. He adjusted the elaborate mask covering most of his face. Tightened the silk stays. Raising his heavy, lead-crystal goblet, he sampled the Upano frostwine which had been poured for him—for them all—tasting with slow, patient sips. The sweet nectar hardly wet his lips. A hint of sugary flavor; the barest scent of grape.

He stared down at his feet, at the upturned toes of his red, silk slippers.

Anastasius Focht moved up on one side. Patted him on the shoulder. “You make a poor jester, Victor.”

“Truly?” Victor raised his head and his glass. Toasted Focht, who wore the golden tunic and tall, feathered hat of *El Capitan*. Focht’s mask had been shaped in an exaggerated wink, hiding the retired warrior’s eyepatch. “And here I was just thinking that naming me your successor had to be the biggest joke of all.”

That pulled a hearty laugh out of Phelan, the Wolf-in-Exile Khan standing inside the deep bay of the office’s large, circular window. And a dry, somber smile from Morgan Kell who looked up from his simple, square-topped desk. An array of physical documents requiring Morgan’s review and counter-signature covered the desk’s polished surface. His own mask, studded with colored glass cut to resemble brilliant gemstones, rested on one corner, tying ribbons dangling down over the edge.

Morgan scrawled his signature without looking. Preferring not to wear his artificial arm, he held the document in place with a heavy paperweight—a large globe of polished amber inside which an ancient blossom of flowering heather had been forever trapped.

“I feel sorry for anyone who ever tries to make you into a punch-line, Victor.” Morgan shuffled the document side, onto a growing stack. Reached up to stroke his thick, snow-white goatee. “In fact, when you publicly renounced all ties to the Lyran or Federation thrones, I think you more than validated Anastasius’s trust.”

“Or you could say I simply made up for abandoning ComStar to begin with in order to bring down Katherine.”

That five year civil war, only recently ended, had strained both the Federated Suns and Lyran Alliance to their breaking points. And it had demanded a terrible personal cost from Victor as well. So many friends, and comrades-in-arms, dead. And Omi Kurita, killed by an assassin’s hand, lost to him forever. The woman he had thought of as his soulmate, no matter the family politics which kept them from publicly declaring their relationship. His confidant and friend and lover.

And mother to his first child.

A child he had never met—never known about until two months ago—hidden away inside the Draconis Combine. Victor did not even know if it was a son or daughter. Did not know a *name*.

Just how was he supposed to feel about that?

“Don’t,” Phelan said, shaking his head.

Even the Wolf Khan had gotten into the spirit of the evening, wearing white trousers and jacket, tailored to his well-muscled frame, with green stripes spreading across his chest and down the outside seams of his pants and sleeves. A curious cap with a rolled brim. And a long, wicked knife held scabbardless in a leather belt. His mask covered his face from brow to upper lip, and had a feral grin molded into it. The laughing snarl of *Brighella*, another of the *Commedia dell’arte* characters.

*Brighella* and *El Capitan*. Morgan in the rich robes of one of the *Vecci*. And Victor in his motley finery of red and blue patchwork. *Arlecchino*. The Harlequin.

“Don’t?” Victor asked his cousin.

“You have this tendency to obsess about things you cannot fix, Victor. Theodore found a way to inform you of the birth, however long it took him. Trust that he’ll reveal more when he can, without risking Omi’s reputation *or* your child’s safety.”

He shrugged. Shoulders rising and falling once, hard.

“A Clan Khan counseling patience.” He looked the question to Focht, ComStar’s former Precentor Martial and now a semi-retired statesman. “And a Wolf Khan at that. Isn’t that a little like—”

“A Davion prince setting aside his throne?”

The new voice, husky and warm, interrupted from the office’s open set of double doors. Isis Marik swept into the large, Spartan room, flared skirts brushing the frame to either side. Her “folly” dress and bodice were patched together from red and blue pieces similar to Victor’s motley finery but of slightly paler shades. A frilled neckline and a simple apron. Chestnut hair piled up in a tangle of curls against the back of her head with a mob cap set loosely atop.

Hers was also the most simple of masks. Fixed directly to her face, with its pale red slashing in a thin stripe across her eyes. Sequins fixed at the right corner glistened like permanent tears.

“Uh oh.” Phelan kicked himself away from the window’s well. “Our shrill *Columbina* has arrived.”

Ignoring Phelan’s exaggerated stage whisper, for the moment, Isis glided up to Victor. “I asked you to check on Phelan’s progress, not get trapped up here with him.”

Victor brought himself to stiff attention, as if ready to be inspected by an academy drill sergeant. Held his goblet carefully at his side. Kept a thin smile off his face only by force of willpower.

“And you,” Isis said, turning on Phelan just as the Wolf Khan relaxed once more against the window’s deep framework. Her scolding glare was almost comical in and of itself. “You promised to deliver your father. You also have Ranna waiting for her first dance. She and Tialet are conspiring against you down in the ballroom.”

“A tragic misuse of their more than capable skills,” Phelan said, delivering each word as if part of a brief soliloquy. “I shall charm them, appease them, render unto Ranna all that is hers to claim.” He smirked. “Besides, it’s all the fault of *El Capitan*.”

"Guilty, dear lady. Guilty." Focht stepped back into a dramatic flourish, bowing deep. "The needs of state once more are paramount to the desires of self."

Focht held his courtesan's bow. Phelan an exaggerated slouch. Victor kept himself at mute attention. All waiting. All watching.

Finally, Isis's composure cracked just enough, her smile peeking through, and then she bent forward laughing. "Oh...faith defend! The three of you should take this act on the road. Though seriously, the evening parade has started and your absence is conspicuous." Victor saw her gaze settle on Morgan Kell. "Especially that of our host."

"Almost done here," Morgan promised. He pulled forward another document. Signed it. Used his thumbprint to register the signature on the notepaper he kept handy to one side. Checked the time stamp. "We promised our new Archon we'd have it all settled before November. We'll clear it by two hours."

And no easy task it had been, Victor knew. The civil war ended and his sister given over to Vlad Ward for keeping, with three months to go before the Star League conference he'd spent the time on Arc-Royal helping Morgan and then Focht wrestle with the personalities and bureaucracies of over thirty different worlds. Realigning borders as the Arc-Royal Defense Cordon was restructured as the Lyran's Alliance's new Arc-Royal Theater. Coordinating ComStar's regional military forces to better integrate with Lyran deployment against the Jade Falcon border.

In the end, only two worlds of those being added dissented. Zhongshan, which would remain a part of the Melissia Combat Theater. And Hamilton, part of Donegal Province.

All that remained was for the duke to counter-sign all notices of investiture. A task he finished in the next moment.

"*Finis!*" Morgan levered himself up from his chair, knee joints popping. He grabbed his mask from the corner of the desk. "And in time to catch the parade."

"From here, perhaps." Phelan nodded at the window, staring down into the main avenue which divided Old Connaught into two near-even halves. "The acrobats have already passed around the corner. Torch-bearers are next."

Isis gathered up handfuls of her skirts. Hustled over toward the window with Focht and Victor right behind. "Well you could have said something," she complained.

Phelan shrugged. "I just did."

Downstairs, Victor guessed, the acrobats would now be passing by the ballroom's ferroglass wall which looked out over a wide thoroughfare and Lachan Lake on the far side. From the office's wide window, he saw a portion of the black lake glistening beneath tall street lamps at the end of the main avenue. Halloween revelers paraded along the street and walks three stories below, following along, turning the corner as the parade chased the lakeshore drive.

Phelan had called it correctly. Torch-bearers followed the acrobats, with their long, flaming brands being spun overhead and tossed back and forth between accomplished fire artists. In some cases, the flames were nothing more than a yellow-orange blur, spun about so fast and so hard. A few held the flaming heads in close, for nothing more than light to show off their grotesque masks to each other and to the crowd.

Three stories up, the small group was lucky to see a few twisted horns and the occasional flare of a long cape.

"Can't see much of the parade from up here," Isis said. Her face all but pressed to the glass as she stared down into the street.

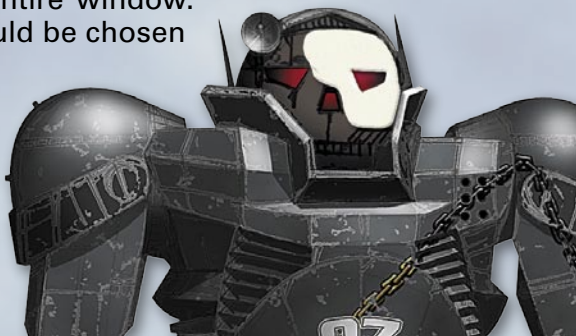
Phelan leaned to one side. "Wait for it..." he whispered.

Victor smiled. He had felt them as well. The impact tremors. Shaking their way up through the building's foundation, trembling in the floor. He took a sip from his goblet, letting the sweet wine sit on the back of his tongue a moment.

And nearly choked on it when the skeletal mask suddenly thrust itself into view, nearly eye-level with the third story window.

Isis jumped back with a start and a soft yelp, skirts crushed between Phelan and Victor, the heel of her shoe coming down hard on Victor's toes. If it wasn't for the pain, and the frostwine sticking in his throat, he would have laughed. He'd been expecting it, the BattleMech, and still it was a pleasant shock to see the *Atlas's* head suddenly filling the entire window. What other BattleMech would be chosen to lead such a parade?

But while he'd been expecting its arrival, the 'Mech's outlandish, painted "costume" completely



stole his breath away. A master at work had painted the *Atlas* into a modified tuxedo, complete with a red corsage and a bright, white button-down. Instead of a jacket, reams of scarlet cloth had been sewn into a BattleMech-scaled cape.

And the face... The *Atlas*'s usual death's head had been repainted into a half-mask, covering one eye and swooping down toward the corner of its mouth. A perfect rendition of a classic work.

The Phantom of the Opera.

The flickering torchlight from far below only made the costume more eerily complete. A hint of fire caught in the 'Mech's ferro-glass eyes. Devilish. Cunning.

"Not bad," Focht said. He stood next to Morgan, the two warrior elders looking over the shoulders of Victor and Phelan and Isis.

"A phantom 'Mech." Morgan Kell laughed beneath his breath. "Who would have thought?"

Isis rebounded quickly, stepping forward again once the *Atlas* moved past. Victor saw a touch of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. Pale red, like her mask. "Not just that," she said. "Looks like we have an Indian chief next."

They did. A *Huron Warrior*, with its "war bonnet" painted with a full spread of feathers and its dress done in buckskin beige. Large strips of brown blanket tied around its wrists and ankles gave it a bit of fringe.

And after that, two *Tarantulas*. In keeping with the spirit of the occasion. Painted in mottled browns and black. At times, shifting their weight back to raise their forward legs and wave them in the air. An impressive bit of piloting. Victor was impressed.

Also an insectoid-looking *Wraith*. And a *Black Knight* painted up as, no surprise, a black knight. The *Guillotine* was among Victor's favorites, with its shoulder-line exaggerated by a dark shroud and a giant pumpkin head tucked under one arm—a play on the classic "headless horseman." And a *No-Dachi* with a full, hooded cloak and its sword modified into a scythe. Death, come to visit.

And bringing up the rear, finally, a *Hunchback*. Draped in a sack-cloth shroud which could only have been a carnival tent at one point. The MechWarrior pilot managed a limping shuffle which very much carried the illusion of Notre Dame's infamous bell-ringer.

"That would be Galen," Victor judged. His longtime friend and confidant had been among those volunteering for the night watch parade.

"How can you know?" Isis asked.

Victor watched the *Hunchback* struggle down the street, dragging one leg as if gimped. Saw the war machine pause, raise its arms and then sag forward again as if heaving a tremendous sigh. The burdens of the world on its back. He smiled.

"Call it a hunch."

The unintended pun drew a groan from Phelan, a laugh from Focht.

Isis pursed her lips. Shook her head. Her chestnut curls bobbed and swayed. "For that," she decreed, "you come back to the party on your own."

She draped herself on Phelan's arm, who immediately threw Victor a haughty look. "Nothing would please me more, at the moment, than escorting you back to the masquerade dear *Columbina*. Now that you have cast off such threadbare baggage." He escorted Isis to the door, and through it.

"It takes quite a bit to exaggerate that swagger of his." Victor toasted the departing couple. "Though I swear he's managed it."

Focht helped Morgan Kell back into his mask, careful not to grab too much of the duke's long, snow-white hair into the knot. Morgan tilted his head one way then another, checking the fit. Grunted a thank-you to Focht.

"I'm happy enough just to see Phelan get into the spirit of the eve. The Clans are not big on civilian celebrations." He smoothed down his thick goatee. "I still am not sure what kind of magic Isis worked on him."

"Isis has a way of getting under your skin," Victor admitted. "Phelan, I imagine, was quite an easy mark for her. After all, she did get Tiaret into the costume of an Amazon warrior-princess."

The two elder men froze, no doubt locked onto that mental image. Tiaret, Victor's bodyguard, was a Clan-bred Elemental. Over two meters tall and massing at least thirty kilos over any of them, she presented the very image of intimidating.

"How did..." Morgan stopped himself. "No."



“The spear?” Victor nodded. “Very real. She’s been practicing with it all week. Doesn’t believe in blunted, ceremonial tips either. Also, Isis was very clear that Amazon women were in all ways superior to the men, and knew it.”

“Perhaps we *should* get down there,” Focht offered. Looked to Victor. To Morgan.

“Before your Halloween masque acquires a body count.”

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***Old Connaught, Arc-Royal  
Lyrn Alliance  
1 November 3067***

At midnight, by tradition, the physical masks came off. Still, Victor noticed, so many people continued to play a character.

Morgan Kell, Grand Host for this eve, presided over the early morning hours with natural ease. Bestowing rewards on the crews which had taken such care in the decoration of the parade 'Mechs, each team accepting a round of thunderous applause from the several hundred guests filling the duke's ballroom. Leading the midnight minuet with Isis Marik on his arm. Accepting no less than eight other invitations to dance, mostly from widowed matrons who likely hoped to catch his eye. Morgan left each lady with a charmed smile and no lingering jealousy—none Victor could detect—for his next partner.

And Phelan, true to form, lost little in the shift from *Brighella* to his natural, flamboyant self. He held court among Clan Wolf warriors and Kell Hound officers alike. Traded off waltzes with Ranna and Isis and Tiaret. At one point, leaping up onto one of the many round dining tables, he roused the entire room with a toast to Peter Steiner-Davion's new (and long-to-last!) reign.

Preferring to keep a low profile, Victor caught up with Isis and the two took a slow tour about the hall. Artist-carved pumpkins lined one entire wall of the grand ballroom, the orange or yellow or sometimes white gourds hollowed out and shaved down, cut and shaped and styled after so many different nightmarish characters and scenes. Goblins and ghouls, of course. Vampires. An *Atlas's* death's head. A conjoined pair shaved into the faces of Aleksandr Kerensky and Stefan Amaris, which Victor found particularly creepy. Graveyards and haunted mansions and full moons outlining *Warhammer* pro-

files. Some lit by the traditional flickering candles. Other by small battery-powered lights which simulated the flicker, or did away with it for strobes or a cascading glow. An occasional fog generator bled thin wisps of smoke out of dark eye sockets, gaping mouths.

One “performance piece” had been shaved into the outline of a *Union*-class DropShip. It would “explode,” splitting apart in three large chunks. Bright, white light spilled from the cracks as the sides pushed out and away on small telescoping arms. Held for a moment. Then slowly reassembled itself.

Isis dragged Victor in front of every one of them. Twice.

Then to the ferroglass wall, which looked out over a courtyard alive with high, blazing bonfires, each one set between the feet a parade ‘Mech. The costumed machines stood a silent and spooky vigil, shut down following the end of the actual parade.

“You can almost forget,” Isis said, staring through her reflection in the thick, crystal-clear glass. A light fog had risen on Lachan Lake, bleeding inland over the lakeshore drive and swirling around the BattleMechs’ giant feet.

Victor had been studying their reflections, the similarities in their motley costumes. His Harlequin to her Columbine. “What’s that?” he asked.

“That those are real monsters out there.” She chewed her lower lip. “We’ve just dressed them up for the night.”

But a ‘Mech was no more evil than any gun, he knew. It all depended on the warrior with his hand on the trigger. Hard to explain that to someone who had never trained for the military, though. Someone, like Isis, who had spent time beneath the feet of BattleMechs on the march. Running for her life. On the wrong side of that trigger.

He felt for her hand, gave it a reassuring squeeze. Escorted her out to the dance floor, where couples glided to a slow Allemand. Isis’ frown gave way to a sad smile at first, and had cleared completely by the time Victor passed her off to Phelan who called loudly for a second minuet and stirred interest when he led onto the floor both Ranna *and* Isis as his partners.

If Morgan Kell was the masque’s lord, commanding the evening, Phelan was certainly his star general. Keeping the troops focused. Drawing attention away from his father when Morgan needed to slip aside for a private conversation.

For one of *many* private conversations.

"He does a good job," Victor said, sensing Morgan slipping up at his side. He plucked a sweet roll from the silver tray of a passing server. Was offered a fresh glass of wine. Declined. "Very good."

"Phelan?" Morgan laughed. A father's laugh, filled with pride as well as amusement. "He is a natural lightning rod. But then you've always known that."

"Since our days overlapping at the Nagelring. He was so smug... and insufferable."

"Funny. He used to describe you using those exact same words."

Victor stole a small bite off his roll. Chewed slowly. Let the icing dance lightly on his tongue. "Did he?" That surprised him. Not that Phelan had thought it, but that he had discussed Victor to his father at all. It had seemed, then, that Phelan went out of his way to ignore Victor's existence.

"You were so serious, Victor. Determined to make your family proud. Many students hated you because of your position and privilege, and your excellence of course. You blew the curve quite often, if I remember correctly. So Phelan, contrary as he is, ran hard as he could in the other direction. Wild and unpredictable. Always pushing the boundaries of propriety."

"And getting expelled for his efforts."

Morgan nodded.

Victor remembered. How opposite the two of them had been. Each playing a role, even then. His starring performance in *I Was A Teenage General*. Phelan: *It's Not Easy Being Me*, a one-man morality play...in two parts.

"All the world's a stage," Morgan said, quoting the great bard. As if sensing Victor's thoughts.

"And all the men and women merely players." Victor continued the lines in his head. *They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts...*

And now? What was Victor's character on that grand stage? The exiled prince? The grieving, star-crossed lover? Soldier, general, hero, clown? He glanced down over his motley finery and red slippers. Certainly he was dressed for one part this night.

Victor swallowed the last small bite of his sweet roll. No longer tasting it. Wiped his sticky fingers on the small serving napkin and wadded it up for a short toss onto a nearby table. He and Morgan now walked along the narrow border which separated the dance floor from the dining area. Keeping themselves isolated in the easiest way possible in such a lively room. Through movement.

"It's going to be a tough room for all of us, these next few years," he said. "Peter and Yvonne have their hands full, claiming the Lyran Alliance and Federated Suns. Katherine's poison will linger."

"But not forever," Morgan promised. "All things considered, I believe you did right letting Vlad Ward claim Katherine for his own. Keeping her isolated on Arc-Royal—while our best plan of the moment—might have caused the old wounds to fester. But as a Clansman, her presence will fade."

Morgan accepted a small aperitif glass from a nearby server. Sipped carefully. "So, where does that leave everything?"

"Well. It leaves me facing a ComStar army suspicious of my return. And having to deal with First Precentor Gavin Dow. You, reintegrating the ARDC with a new Lyran Alliance. Uncertain political footing with Clan Wolf. And a new Star League conference in twenty-seven...no...twenty-six days, which ends three years of a lackluster First Lord—a relief, at our level, but hardly inspiring. Did I miss anything?"

"Only the latest reports of increased fighting within the Chaos March," Galen Cox said, startling both men. Having slipped up behind them unobtrusively.

One of Victor's good friends and most-loyal aides, Galen was an accomplished MechWarrior as well as Victor's intelligence chief. And dressed for it this night, in a dark, flared cape with a blood-red lining and a wide, flat-brimmed hat pulled low to cover his blonde hair. Even without the bandit's mask he'd worn earlier, Galen was in good outfit for cloak-and-dagger work.

'Hiding in plain sight' was how he had described it earlier.

Victor punched him on the arm.

"Hey, now. Don't kill the messenger. Especially one who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men." He flung one edge of his cape back in a small flourish.

"I'm going to be happy when this evening is over for another year," Victor said to no one in particular.

Morgan shrugged. Smoothed down the long, snow-white hairs of his goatee. "He has a point. It's not going to go over well that a probationary member in the Star League bullied several small worlds into joining this new alliance of theirs."

"And First Lord Mansdötter let it happen without one word of protest," Galen added.

Victor signaled a server and picked up a new goblet to replace the one he'd set down (unfinished) much earlier. Sipped at the Upano wine, letting it soothe a scratchy throat. Considered. Planned.

"Suppose," he said. Coming to a halt. "Suppose Gavin Dow makes a case to push back Word of Blake's full membership for another term. Denying them voting rights in this year's election. What happens?"

Galen shrugged. "I'd have given the edge to Thomas Marik. But I think it's obvious that Christian Mansdötter is trapped between the influence of Theodore Kurita and ComStar. He'd sway toward either of them. Theodore has been First Lord, which means if there is a challenger in the arena it can only be Gavin Dow. With Word of Blake sidelined, he'd have his opportunity."

"Gavin Dow is First Precentor," Morgan reminded Galen. "The title, and office, would fall to Primus Mori." He paused. "Wouldn't it?"

A bitter dryness crept through Victor's mouth. He swallowed more of the sweet wine. Glanced around. Saw that the trio had now picked up an escort. Tialet paced a tight patrol nearby. The large woman had flawless ebony skin, large hands, and forearms a body builder would envy. At two point three meters, towering over any would-be joiners and convincing them with a glare they were better off somewhere else, she looked the part of an Amazon warrior-princess sure enough. Complete with well-tailored pelts, a thick, gold headband worn over her brow, and her spear with its well-sharpened head.

Mori...?

"Four months ago, I'd have said yes," Victor said. "But with Dow's ascension to First Precentor, with expanded military and political duties...it is hard to say. He has become the political face of ComStar, and several members of the First Circuit are under his thumb. He might be able to force Sharilar Mori's retirement."

"So the question is," Galen looked from one to the other, "would he?"

Victor shook his head. "That is not the question. Trying to second-guess Gavin Dow is like predicting Sun-Tzu's mood. Better to ask if he does want to try, *can* he? Can he stop Word of Blake from gaining voting rights?"

"If what we're hearing off Outreach is even half true," Galen said, "and Word of Blake is behind it, then yes, he likely could. Jamie Wolf crippled—or dead. Harlech itself destroyed. Thousands of civilian casualties."

Victor nodded. "It would be such a disproportional response...I can't imagine them *not* being censured."

But there was a large "if" implied in all of that. The initial reports brought to his attention were a week old, full of confused and likely inaccurate information. Followed by...nothing. A self-imposed blackout. Then more speculation, usually by off-world sources.

"Another thing," Galen said. "The Dragoons aren't going to sit back in all this. Last time someone took this kind of poke at them, they went to war against the Draconis Combine."

That was a consideration all right.

"So perhaps he could push it," Morgan said, wrestling the conversation back on topic. "But he would not come off looking good, trying. It would appear as partisan politics of the worst kind, with ComStar going after Word of Blake. Frankly, Victor, I don't see him making that kind of choice."

He agreed. Gavin Dow worked far more subtly. Which is what made the man so effective, and so very dangerous in Victor's opinion. "So. Barring a rabbit pulled out of his cloak, we assume the conference will go mostly as planned?"

"I think so, yes."

Galen nodded.

"Then that leaves this night to get through, and tomorrow." He sighed in relief. "I will head back to the *Invisible Truth* the day after." He nodded to Morgan. "You and Phelan are certainly welcome to travel with."

The elder statesman smiled his appreciation for the invite. "I'm going to need an extra week to tie up some loose ends for the Archon. Dan pre-stationed two Kell Hound JumpShips in Alma Alta and Westerstede, allowing me a shortened inbound travel time."

"Alma Alta is where I have a ten-day recharge layover. Where I'll meet up with First Precentor Dow. Looks like we'll arrive about the same time, then."

"And I'll try to have better intel out of Outreach by then," Galen promised. His dark look promised terrible days ahead for any of his agents not able to produce results.

Victor had no doubt his friend would have news to report. Or that Gavin Dow would by then make some of his own plans known. And his brother might have a choice request or three, as he settled into his role as Archon of the Lyran state. "I just wish Anastasius wasn't so bent on avoiding Tharkad this time around."

"Leave him go to Orestes, Victor." Morgan clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "The Com Guards are in good hands. And if any man has earned a peaceful retirement..."

Smiling, Victor cocked his head to one side. "I'd have to count you near the top of any such list, Morgan. Yet here you are, ready to answer the call of Archon and Alliance once again."

"It's not always given to us, Victor, that which we would prefer. I shouldn't have to tell you that, of all people."

"You don't."

"Good." Morgan nodded once. Decisive. Reached over and plucked at the fringe dangling around the cuffs of Victor's motley costume. "Because this is no time to be playing the fool," he said. With a thin smile he turned away, leaving the two men together.

And Victor couldn't have agreed more. Fools, while valuable, never wielded much influence. When they spoke the truth, no one listened. No, this was certainly a time to be a man of many parts, setting his mark upon the stage and, by act of will, stand ready to alter the course of the play.

If only Victor knew what scripts the others were all rehearsing.

And trusted what character he was now supposed to be.

**To be continued...**