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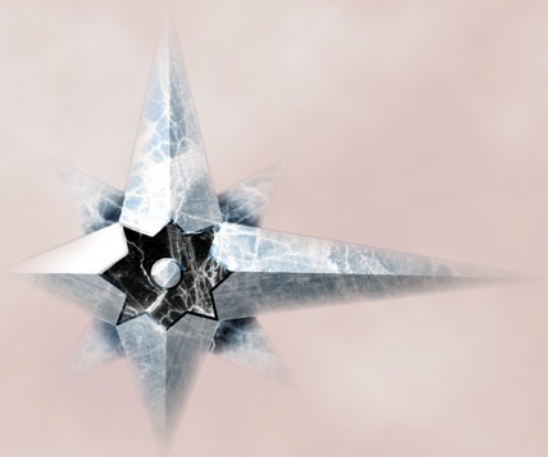
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BattleCorps Security Team

Destiny's Call

By Loren L. Coleman

Part II



Tharkad, 2721

Alek sat on the frozen ground, his winter gear safeguarding him from snowmelt, and leaned back against a massive cedar. A plasticized poster calling students to a pro-Skye rally protected his uncovered head from the tree's scaly bark. It was one of his favorite spots. Camped on the



university commons right out in front of the main administration building, few bothered him here. Right now that was what he needed.

His breath frosted in front of his face, and he blew out a long, misty cloud of exasperation. Tension knotted behind his shoulders. His left ear still burned from being slammed hard with a lacrosse stick and his knuckles bled where he'd skinned them against the door on his way out of the dorms.

Served him right for letting the torments get to him.

He expected the hostile behavior from Elias Luvon and his cadet cronies, but what shocked Alek was how fast other students joined in after learning that he'd turned down a post at the Nagelring.

"Too good for a non-Terran academy," Elias spun it.

Patently absurd. Alek attended a non-Terran university after all. But still the feet thrust into his way and snowballs with rocks in them increased. Students took to kicking his dorm room door as they passed, making it hard to study for the preliminary exams being given this week. It finally drove him outside, hauling along his notes and data wafers, with a few hours in which to relax.

With his 'corder tucked safely away inside his carry-all pack, Alek untangled the wires and stuck plugs into each ear. Musical strains filled his head with deep viola and soft, whimsical flute, then the melodies faded into the background and Professor Kleppinger's monotone filtered in to explain the latest political fallout on Terra. A compilation of his own design: the soothing melodies helped

him focus, allowing him to replay his Political Science lectures over and over.

This month's political dialog centered around two JumpShips which had been interdicted and destroyed by the Terran Hegemony's new Space Defense System. A problem with their IFF codes, by all reports. This was Alek's third time listening to the recording, but he couldn't help the way his heart pounded at the news. His parents had been outbound from Terra around the same dates, planning an early visit to Tharkad. The SDS wasn't supposed to challenge outgoing vessels, but the new technology was obviously unreliable.

Several of the House Lords were already positioning themselves politically following the disaster. Liao and Davion complained—loudly—that the defense system was unsafe and that its early deployment violated common sense as well as long-standing restrictions. Takiro Kurita took a longer view, and simply wanted to know when the technology would be shared with militaries of the Great Houses. All three were stirring a strong public outcry.

"Of course," Kleppinger droned on, "it is unlikely that even such a tragedy as this will do more than spur local debate inside the separate Houses. Such is the absolute power enjoyed by First Lord Cameron."

"No power is absolute," Alek whispered to himself, closing his eyes. "Only corruption."

Though paraphrasing the nineteenth century Lord Acton, he decided it was original enough to lead a paper on the subject and began to order his thoughts into a rough mental outline. Michael would give him a spot of grief over the non-Russian source, but the simple truth followed that Alek also studied in English, en Français, and was quickly learning Deutsch.

The musical composition had run into its third variation and Alek into his second page of mental notes. He couldn't say how he detected the presence: A shadow against the back of his eyelids or a heavy footfall crunching down through the icy snow crust. All he could say for certain was that he suddenly knew that someone stood over him, and he startled to full alertness.

Gabriella Bailey stood there in parka, draped pants and snow boots. Her hazel eyes reflected back a measure of uncertainty. "I didn't mean to scare you," she said.

Kleppinger warned the class against accepting the media's analysis. Alek straightened up into a better posture, finger-combed blonde hair back from his forehead. "No," he said. "I mean, it's okay."

Nodding, Gabriella sank down into the snow next to him, resting on her knees and the toes of her boots, settling back onto her calves. She wore her hair down around her ears today, and neoleather gloves protected her hands. "Quite the spot you've picked out. Needed a break from studying?"

"What makes you think I'm not studying?"

She grinned. "You had a relaxed smile on your face. I don't know anyone who smiles like that when plugged into a lecture. Not even you, Alek."

It was the most she'd ever said to him in one sitting. Alek certainly did not want to argue with her. But... "Here," he offered, pulling out his right ear plug. He passed it over, stretching the wire out of his pack. "Take a listen."

More for the sake of politeness than any real desire it seemed, Gabriella cupped the plug to her ear. Her eyes widened into doe-like pools. "Kepplinger...and Wolfgang?"

"Ulysses Rozz. Twenty-sixth century composer. He based his work off Mozart, yes. I mixed this myself."

She laughed, handed him back the plug. "That is so wrong."

Alek shrugged, pulled out his left ear plug with great care and a sharp intake of breath, and tucked both into the pack. "I can listen to it dozens of times, though. It makes it easier to...what?"

She cocked her head to one side, looking at him. "Your ear."

"My...? Oh. Yeah. Is it purpling up yet?" She nodded, glanced around uneasily. He tried to keep his tone easy, though the memory of the lacrosse stick lashing out at him in the corridor, driving him into the wall, was kind of hard to make light of. "It's not so bad."

Gabriella mimicked his lighthearted approach. "Don't you ever win a fight, Alek?"

"No one wins a fight."

"Is that another of your dead Russians?" Even she knew of his penchant for quotations, though Alek would have bet she hardly knew anything about him.

"A live one. Me."

That brought the smile back to her face. "You're very...complicated. For being such a straight-forward person, I mean."

He shrugged. "Blame my father," he said, and she glanced askance at him. "I was very young, and...not always in good health. He would take me to the museums in Moscow. Russia had a very," he reached for the right word, "fractious history. There were purges. Massive oppression. And there were rebellions. But the strongest traits came from when the people endured. Seven hundred years later, you can still see it. *That* is a heritage."

Gabriella nodded. "He sounds like a man who would be interesting to meet."

"He will be here," Alek said. "He—and my mother—are traveling to Tharkad. They will vacation on some nearby worlds, and then return in time for my graduation. Perhaps you will meet him then."

"Perhaps I will."

Neither of them seemed to know what to say after that. The silence stretched between them, and then snapped like cold taffy. "Well," Gabriella said, "I just wanted to say that I'm glad you're all right. After your collapse in class last week." Rising to her feet in graceful motion, she brushed away snow caked to the knees of her pants. Almost as an afterthought, she asked, "Are you going to the spring reception?"

A university tradition, hosting the Nagelring cadets in a large ballroom event. Archon Steiner would make an appearance. It was the largest social event of every year. "I don't know." Dark thoughts flitted through Alek's mind, knowing that Elias Luvon and his friends would be there in force. "You?"

"I was thinking about it."

Alek blinked his surprise. "You mean no one has asked you yet?"

She laughed. "Well of course he asked. But I said...it doesn't matter what I said. I simply thought..." Gabriella laughed again,

more quietly, at herself. "Oh, hell. Alek, I was hoping you'd like to go. Together. With me."

A flush crawled over the back of his scalp, and Alek climbed up onto his feet. He didn't notice how his left ear burned anymore. He worried more about his dry mouth and a suddenly thick tongue. "I would—very much—like to escort you to the reception," he said formally.

"That won't create too much trouble for you?" she asked.

"No. Why should it?"

"Never mind." She shook her head—but her hazel eyes, they still worried. "I forget you're not part of the gossip underground. It should be fine." She shrugged. "So, it's a date. I'll leave you to your studies, and we'll talk later."

Alek might have left it at that. His brain was already working the problem, after all. He could have checked it out quietly. But the thought was only half-formed when he caught Gabriella turning away to leave, and he blurted out the question: "Who else asked you?" But he knew, he knew.

Gabriella flashed a glance at the ground. "Elias Luvon."

And then she shrugged it off, leaving him standing in the snow beneath the tall evergreen, reminding himself over and over again the value of enduring.



Michael Steiner was far less sanguine, especially after hearing about it through staff gossip and not from Alek directly. The summons came as an invite to join Michael for lunch—not an order, but with Alek it carried the same weight.

He did not have so many friends on Tharkad that he could afford to refuse them casually.

So he sat on a stool in Michael's research library, feet tucked back, watching his friend pace the narrow aisle running between bookshelves and workstation. A forgotten manual lay open on Michael's glass-topped desk, its pages weighed down by a unique assortment of data crystals developed by the university in cooperation with a Lyran Commonwealth corporation—going to replace disk wafers across the entire Inner Sphere, Michael

claimed. The crystals were lined up on both pages by color and, presumably, content.

All forgotten now, as the Archon's brother speared Alek with an unblinking stare.

"Do you like drinking your food through a straw?" he asked, a flush showing through his meticulous beard.

Alek rubbed at his jaw, massaging the dark yellow bruise he'd picked up this morning. He had seen the cyclist coming, but not the elbow. "I was careless."

"Ja. I would say you were." Michael plucked at his starched cuffs, tugging them out of his suit jacket sleeves. "Careless even to talk with Gabriella Bailey."

"I don't think this is so bad."

"Worse, Alek. Elias Luvon asked her to the reception, and she spurned him. If you think this will sit well with any Nagelring cadet once Luvon is through, you are sadly mistaken. For a history and PoliSci student, you can be remarkably short-sighted. Have you ever noticed that?"

"How is it that little children are so intelligent and men so stupid?" Alek asked back. He looked at the studying professor, grinned. "It must be education that does it."

Michael froze, his face tightening down until his gray eyes disappeared behind narrow slits. Then he could not contain it anymore. A smile split through his beard, and a tight chuckle rolled out into a real laugh. "English lords and now French authors. Alek, you will mar your reputation if you keep this up."

"Do not worry. I'm not finished with dead Russians."

Stepping over to Alek, Michael placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just see that you do not become one. All right?" Alek nodded, and Michael took that as a guarantee. "So, your parents make planet-fall yet?"

He smiled. "Tomorrow. And I have three more prelims to get through before they arrive." Alek checked his watch. "Including the third part of Kleppinger's four-day miniseries. I should go."

"It's forty minutes until Gerald starts his...ah. All right. *Liebeskrank, ja?* You hope to find an empty seat next to your date for the reception." He exhaled a short, sharp sigh. "Very well. Go on with you."

Just remember to duck now and then, and if Gabriella is wearing anything nice today, don't forget to say something about her shoes."

"Her shoes?"

With a shove, Michael propelled him from the stool and toward the door. "I'm beginning to side with Colonel Baumgarten. Maybe we are teaching you the wrong things. Or at least, not enough of the right things."

Alek shuffled toward the door, grabbing up his carry-all pack from a small end table. "There's nothing for me to learn from Baumgarten."

"If you really believe that, then you are most certainly right. 'A closed mind never errs, nor learns.' Tracial Steiner."

"Family's not fair," Alek called back, then pushed out into the corridor. He let Michael have that one. The prerogative of being part of a ruling House, you did get to win once in awhile.

And the truth was always hard to refute.

The thought hung at the back of Alek's mind for his brisk walk over to the social sciences wing, haunting him, dredging up the ghosts of Colonel Baumgarten's offer and his father's commentaries, which had been delivered while the two of them explored Terra's violent past at museums and battlefield memorials. Was he being close-minded with regard to Baumgarten's offer? Perhaps. But then he had never been one to put muscle (or metal) over mind.

Those most capable of wielding power were those least likely to desire it. To Alek, this was a self-evident truth. An article of faith. And faith was the force by which people lived.

At the same time, also according to Tolstoi, the sole meaning of life was to serve humanity. Did that mean Alek had to serve it in the most self-sacrificing method available? Or simply that he should always hold in mind his debt to the greater good? He sighed. The mills of philosophy could grind exceedingly fine.

"But safe from the worm, my spirit will survive."

At least through Kepplinger's Political Science class. Or so Alek thought at the time.

The lecture hall was only half-full, with most early arrivals doing some last minute cramming from books, noteputers, or 'corders. The room smelled of flavored coffees, mulled cider, and nervous sweat. Styluses danced over paper, over screens, as timelines and tables were practiced again, and again, and again. This kind of frantic energy would not be seen again until final exams, though prelims were no easy slouch as here students set a baseline for their finals grade. One could not improve better than a full letter grade over prelims, and the weighted average made it hard—but not impossible—to fail if one pulled an average grade now.

Gabriella Bailey already had a seat halfway up the stair-step risers, right on the aisle as she normally preferred. Elias Luvon sat next to her, straddling the chair backward with large hands gripping the backrest posts as if they were control yokes. Elias wore full dress uniform for today's occasion, including gloves and saber. A bit prissy, but he wasn't the only cadet who thought a strong show of military devotion might win points from an instructor. Gabriella saw Alek's approach and nodded to Elias, who stepped back up from the chair without so much as looking around. Alek stepped to one side, giving Elias room to pass.

Elias stopped in the aisle next to him, smiled when he saw the bruise darkening Alek's jaw. "I'd wish you luck, but you won't have any problems with a Commonwealth-level exam, will you?" Elias asked the question loudly, sharing it with the rest of the class.

His jaw ached for the first time since leaving Michael's office. "Commonwealth or Star League, I'd expect to have no trouble taking an exam for which I studied."

"Right. Studying. I forgot, thinking is beyond us dumb grunts, right?"

"I never said that." Alek saw several faces turn their way. Some curious. Some hostile. All right. A debate he could handle. "I appreciate your sacrifices, made for State and for Star League. Why do you feel my choices lessen yours?"

"Nothing you say or do lessens our honor!" Elias dropped one hand to the hilt of his saber, as if he might draw it to avenge his honor. Alek's carry-all was heavy on his shoulder. If he swung it hard enough... "The Inner Sphere does not revolve around Terra, you know." He stormed off, stomping up the risers to his usual seat near the top of the hall.

All a pose, Alek realized, never a threat. And Elias had got in the last word. He dropped heavily into the seat next to Gabriella. "I never said that," he complained softly.

"Why do you continue to fight with him?" Gabriella asked, never taking her eyes off the amber screen of her noteputer.

"It's a dialog. Maybe some day he will actually hear it."

"I'm not so certain. But while you're waiting, you can quiz me." She shoved over her noteputer. "Political ramifications of the Periphery Unilateral Freedoms Act, as jointly proposed by the Capellan Confederation and Free Worlds League."

Which ate up the rest of their free time before Kleppinger closed the hall doors as his assistants paced the two main aisles handing out SAT-panels. The large green-screen display would be their only interface with the professor's testing program. Answers were shot wireless into the mainframe, to be analyzed and graded later. Alek tore through page after page of questions, providing dates and names and, when called for, a political analysis of the situation.

So engrossed in the process was he, that at the first ringing tones he slapped his stylus down on the table thinking time was up. Then he realized it couldn't be. He was only half done with the test.

Another series of tinny rings. Like a pager. A kind of warning tone. Alek looked at Gabriella who stared back at him. Students at nearby tables were also staring his direction.

"What is this interruption?" Kleppinger shuffled up from the stage, his droning monotone actually holding a touch of irritation. He smoothed back a thinning spray of white hair. "Alek. Turn off your wireless. No pagers, no comms. You know the rules."

"Professor. I don't have a wireless."

Three electronic bleats argued, and Kleppinger frowned. "I'd like to think I hear the truth ringing in your words, Alek, but I doubt that very much. Stand up from your chair please." The professor checked Alek's seat, bending down on one knee. Another betraying chirrup. Kleppinger glanced beneath the table, reached under and pulled a slender noteputer free of its magnetic clamp.

Alek's stomach hardened into a fist of cold lead when he recognized the small device. His. The low-power light flashed in time with the next ringing alarm.

"I see," Kleppinger nodded. His pate flushed a dangerous scarlet beneath his thinning hair. "Can you explain this?" Alek opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He had no breath to form the words. "No matter. Let us save it for Dean Albrecht, shall we?" He caught Alek's slender arm in a grip that was strong for an aging academic, turned him away from the table and marched him up the risers.

Elias Luvon glowered from his seat near the door. "Studying, huh?" His voice was a little too loud. A little too pleased. "'Bout time someone found you out."

Alek had never felt an urge to physically hurt another person until now. His hands clenched into fists so tight that his nails dug painfully into the soft bed of flesh in each palm. He considered launching himself across the table at Elias, sure that righteousness would prevail over academy training. Before he could decide, Professor Kleppinger was dragging him toward the door, through it.

The elder man paused in the threshold. "The rest of you still have fifty minutes. SAT-panels will be collected on the hour by my assistants." Then he stepped into the corridor and gestured. "After you," he said coldly.

The door to the lecture hall closed with a heavy weight while Alek was only a few meters away.

The sound of finality.

To be Continued...

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