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BattleCorps Security Team

Destiny's Call

By Loren L. Coleman

Part III



Tharkad, 2721

Six hours into his academic review, Alek knew what a firing squad victim felt like.

The room Dean Albrecht chose was Spartan and cold, painted an olive drab that someone, at some time, thought was a good idea. It smelled of floor wax and after-shave. Tharkad's pale



sun shone through the room's single window, high on the left-hand wall so that no one could look out. Dust motes chased each other in the butterish sunbeams slanting across the floor.

Alek stood at the front of the room, behind a small metal podium on which rested a sweating pitcher of water and a single glass. His hands smoothed the edges along either side. He faced the seated board which was now down to Dean Albrecht and Professor Kleppinger. Michael Steiner sat in as Alek's advocate, keeping the long process civil. Keeping his own counsel, Michael had also brought in Colonel Baumgarten who sat in stoic silence through the entire ordeal, his falcon-sharp gaze pinning Alek to the wall, missing nothing. Behind the board his parents sat in straight-backed chairs, having delayed their travels to support Alek through his review. Dad rarely blinked, his blue eyes fastened steadfastly on his son, offering silent encouragement. Mom spent more time studying the academic board, seemingly amused by the entire process. Neither showed any doubt as to the outcome, and Alek was grateful for the strength of their belief.

"Another question," Kleppinger said, resting forward on his elbows. He looked down at Alek, a true accomplishment when seated. "Unless you need a moment to collect yourself."

"I'm ready if you are," Alek said. Kleppinger frowned.

Other instructors had arrived, asked their questions, and left satisfied. Kleppinger seemed to take this entire review personally. Alek remembered the professor's surprise—and suspicion—when told that his student would be let back into class pending a full academic review. It hadn't taken Kleppinger long to discover that

Michael Steiner had gone to bat for Alek, vouchsafing his character and demanding the board prove Alek's need to cheat.

"The boy's own noteputer clipped under the table isn't enough?" Michael had later told Alek of Kleppinger's outrage. "His own fingerprints on it, and no one else's I'm told."

Convenient that three of Alek's most serious on-campus enemies had worn gloves that day as part of their dress uniforms. He never once pointed a finger in their direction, though the broken lock discovered at his dorm room had argued part of his case for him.

"Is this question going to require another thirty minute answer?" Michael asked, glancing at the slender watch clipped to his wrist. "We do have a Spring Reception to ready ourselves for tonight."

Kleppinger drew himself up haughtily. "Perhaps we should be more interested in the ethical fiber of our student body than a social event."

"Quite right, quite right." Michael nodded. "I'm sure the Archon will excuse our tardiness." Michael did not go on at any length to remind the board members of his relation to the Archon. He didn't have to. Dean Albrecht took a long look at his watch as well, a gesture certainly not missed by Kleppinger.

"Very well," the Poli-Sci instructor conceded. "I'll keep this one short." He spread his hands over the table they all sat behind. "In the briefest answer possible, Alek, give me the founding political cause behind the last four decades of challenges from *ronin* Kurita samurai against Star League base champions."

Identifying the political foundations for current troubles was never an easy task, and would open a debate more often than ever reaching a consensus. Alek, however, was not one to shirk a challenge. "The Reunification War," he said at once. Then was quiet. He sipped from his water. Waited.

"I'll ask you to elaborate *somewhat*," Kleppinger said finally with great distaste.

Alek set the glass back on the podium. "When Michael Cameron assumed the First Lordship in 2649, one of his first challenges came from Tadeo Amaris and the Rim Worlds Republic. Amaris had begun expanding his armies at an alarming rate. This prompted First Lord Michael into signing, among other laws, Council Edict 2650, dictating the acceptable size of any non-Star League

military force. House Kurita's necessary downsizing of their army led to the *ronin*, or "masterless warriors" as they are called. Out of spite, under orders, or as a salve to their family honor, these *ronin* have been challenging Star League champions since 2681."

"And this relates to The Reunification War, of the twenty-sixth century, how?" Dean Albrecht asked.

Alek sipped again from his water glass. "The specter of another Reunification War no doubt loomed over First Lord Michael's decision to enact such military restriction in the first place."

"You propose to know the mind of the First Lord?" Kleppinger waved a hand, dismissing such a claim. "Your psychological skills aside, this would still seem a tenuous tie between events."

"The processes of cause and effect among political circumstance are often legion, and nebulous, until viewed from a historian's perspective."

The professor scoffed. "Who said that?"

"Weldon Kleppinger, doctorate thesis, 2706." Michael Steiner laughed out loud and Colonel Baumgarten dipped his head in a silent salute. Alek smiled. The academic gauntlet had been thrown down.

"And yet," Kleppinger rebounded on the attack, "you assert contemporary rationale for the *ronin*'s activities. Spite. Honor."

"And being under orders," Alek reminded him, picking up his water glass. "But I never stated that these were contemporary issues. Even orders—if there were, passed through back channels—must have an historical context. These are the children and grandchildren of those who served under Leonard Kurita, who brought the Draconis Combine to the brink of war against the Star League in 2605."

"Leonard's Folly." Kleppinger nodded. "He died of 'mysterious illness' though it seems likely that his replacement was engineered by..."

"Siriwan McAllister-Kurita, after the *seppuku* of Leonard's sister—"

"Elaine Kurita," Kleppinger interrupted. Now the professor seemed to have something to prove. "She committed ritual suicide in shame for her brother's actions. But Leonard was too far unbalanced by alcohol and drug dependence to care, and his paranoia following—"

"Following an incident that took place in the High Council, where Leonard attempted to assault the First Lord with a thrown bottle and instead struck a guard, who fired out of reflex, wounding the Coordinator." Alek replaced his glass on the podium with a tired hand. "So we might as well say that the *ronin* challenges are all for the sake of a wayward bottle."

"And that guard's name was... was..." Kleppinger trailed off helplessly, unable to say. Alek saw in his eyes, though, that he knew. Knew, and wanted to deny it.

Levering himself out of his chair with hands splayed on the table's top, Dean Albrecht rose. "I think we are at an end here, and this whole unfortunate misunderstanding can be chalked up to campus hijinks. Wouldn't you agree, Weldon?" Kleppinger nodded dumbly. "Alek, please accept the university's apology. Your scholarship stands and your record will not reflect this incident."

He shrugged. The bitter taste at the back of his throat had little to do with victory, and everything to do with the crestfallen expression on Kleppinger's face. Maybe it had been necessary to push back so hard, but Alek had taken some measure of joy in it as well, and that seemed—now—inappropriate. "And my prelims? I never did finish them."

Kleppinger shook himself back to some semblance of decorum. He rose slowly. "Full marks," he promised. He seemed a bit taken aback when Michael Steiner offered his hand and a sincere thanks on Alek's behalf, but drew some extra strength from that and left the room with salvaged dignity.

His parents came forward, offering handshakes and warm hugs, while Dean Albrecht passed a few comments with Michael and Colonel Baumgarten. "Did just fine," his father said. "What you had to do. Don't worry about the rest."

But Alek always worried about the rest. His parents knew that.

"You proved yourself a credit to the university," his mother reminded him. "That is what matters."

"Indeed." Colonel Baumgarten joined them. "A true credit." He introduced himself to Alek's parents. "I wish I could claim so much on behalf of the Star League Defense Force, but Alek is steadfast in pursuit of academia. He'd make a fine officer."

His father swelled with pride. "Told him much the same," he said, putting a large hand on Alek's shoulder. More than thirty

years out of service, he still wore the same infantryman's flattop and had a stiff military bearing. "Mother and I, both. But Alek, he is his own man. And has Tronchina's stubbornness," he quipped, glancing at Alek's mother.

His parents shared a laugh over that, and Colonel Baumgarten joined in politely. Finally, his mother made excuses for her and her husband both. "We should get ready. Dean Albrecht extended an invitation to attend tonight's reception, as chaperones, so we shall. If you do not mind, Alek."

"Not at all," Alek said. He gave both parents another strong hug and watched them go. "I should be off to get dressed as well." But he held back just a moment, sensing a question in the Star League officer.

"You took Professor Kleppinger apart fairly quickly at the end," Baumgarten said. "I saw his shoulders fall, and knew that he was finished. It made me wonder."

"What's that?" Alek asked.

"What the guard's name was who shot Leonard Kurita."

Alek paused near the door. Dean Albrecht waited off to one side to say his goodbye to the colonel. He saw no reason to drag out another history lesson just now. "Her name was Tanya," he said, then slipped out the door. The colonel could look up her last name himself. And he would, Alek knew.

He would.



For the most part Alek had gotten used to the stares and whispers, the fingers pointed his direction as he passed tight knots of students in the halls or on campus grounds. He cataloged them in the back of his mind, parsing out those he felt might be a real threat from the students who simply enjoyed the petty torments of social segregation, and those who just didn't care enough to go out of their way. It was, he'd discovered over time, a kind of status in and of itself. To whom was he important enough to be worth disliking.

Walking into the university's Spring Reception with Gabriella Bailey on his arm earned him an entirely new level of attention.

A symphony breathed light melodies over the entire ballroom. Couples waltzed across a polished floor. Drifting slowly about the hall, roaming in between the refreshment tables and the receiving line already forming in anticipation of the Archon's arrival, students and soldiers formed larger islands of conversation.

Alek had early hopes of slipping into obscurity among the crowds, but those dreams were quickly dashed. They were a match meant to attract notice, it seemed; silent, thoughtful Alek escorting the stunning debutante. Gabriella's gown did not run toward any of the usual shades of blue, a color heavily associated with House Steiner and the Lyrans Commonwealth. She had chosen a full-length emerald green with a slightly metallic sheen. A slit up the side flashed jewel-studded shoes and shapely calf. The back of the gown was strapless, entirely open down to the small of her back. Steering her toward the dance floor Alek's hand slipped across that expanse of bare skin. It left him feeling warm inside his suit of basic black.

Gabriella laughed at his blush, but not in an unpleasant way.

"Nothing like being the center of attention," Gabriella whispered half-way through a waltz, finally noticing the stares which followed them.

"It's your gown," he said. Though both of them knew it for a lie. Alek's past week, and his success at today's review board, was the hot topic of conversation in many circles.

"No." Gabriella took her hand from his shoulder for a moment, tucked a strand of hair behind one ear. "It's your dancing." Alek wasn't so certain she was talking about his waltz.

They finished their dance and one more, and then moved toward a refreshment table where crystal cups rested in a snowdrift of ice shavings. Alek found two non-alcoholic sparkling ciders. They traded stares with several other attendees over the rims of their glasses.

Women seemed to appraise them as a couple, reserving their approval or catty glances for them both, equally. Many of the young men looked in his direction with obvious envy, or elbowed a buddy and whispered an aside that caused jealous laughter. A few glowered darkly at the match. Most of these wore Star League cadet uniforms, complete with the Nagelring's blue sash tied around their waists with ends hanging down over their left leg as was allowed by tradition. Hands rested aggressively on saber hilts, and a cautioning flush warmed the nape of Alek's neck.

"You make it look so easy," Gabriella said, sipping at her drink. "I count a dozen pair of eyes boring into your skull, none of them exactly wishing you well, and you still look relaxed."

"You would like me to beat on my chest and make loud growling noises, yes?" The question made her laugh. It made a nearby Nagelring cadet frown, and Alek lowered his voice. "I can't help what they think," he told her.

"But doesn't it wear on you?"

Alek sipped from the fruity beverage, let it play over his tongue and whisper down his throat. He smiled, almost sadly. "'Not all of me is dust,'" he quoted. "'Within my song, safe from the worm, my spirit will survive.'"

"I remember you saying that. Before. Or part of it, anyway." She set her empty glass on the tray of a passing server. "You draw a great deal of strength from the words of others. How do you do that?"

"I believe." Alek shrugged. "Because 'the writer is the engineer of the human soul,' I can decide how to influence the person I *wish* to become."

Gabriella's eyes softened, sparkled. Her lips parted in a light smile, showing a hint of white teeth. She leaned forward ever so slightly, then caught herself. "Take a walk with me?" she asked, nodding toward one end of the ballroom. Large doors opened through a glass wall onto a formal courtyard, and the university's gardens beyond.

He swallowed hard. "Of course."

Hand on arm they strolled along the tables, running into Michael Steiner and Alek's mother returning from the dance floor. It was Michael's first chance to speak with Alek since ducking out after the review. He buttonholed Alek while Tronchina exchanged pleasantries with Gabriella.

"Excellent work today, Alek. Old Weldon looked as if he'd swallowed a bug."

Uncomfortable, Alek shifted his weight from one foot to the other. His father turned up and lead his mother away toward the refreshment tables. Gabriella looked over and smiled a promise to him, then withdrew to leave him a moment with Michael. "I really should thank you again," Alek said, "for sticking by me, pushing

through the academic board review." He saw a shadow flit over Michael's usually amiable face. "What?"

"Well, I didn't push for that. My family connections notwithstanding, as a faculty member I'm responsible to support Dean Albrecht's decision. It was Colonel Baumgarten who actually swung some weight behind a board review and got you the second chance."

Baumgarten? "Why did he..."

"Mostly because of your parents, and the fact that you are here on a Star League scholarship." He smiled. "The military looks after its own, Alek. Even when they don't necessarily want to be claimed."

And, Alek realized, Michael had realized well ahead of time that it might take Baumgarten to bring about a review, which answered Alek's question as to why his friend had brought in the colonel. Alek wrestled with propriety and pride. It wasn't much of a contest. "Thanks, Michael. I owe you."

"Ja, you do, *wunderkind*." He tipped a wink at Alek. "You can repay me by suffering through the formalities and allowing me to introduce you to my brother at some point."

"Give me a moment to find my parents," Alek offered. "I'm sure they would consider it a great honor to—"

"At some point," Michael said again, interrupting. He placed hands on Alek's shoulders. "Alek, never keep a lady waiting. Especially one in need of rescuing." He turned Alek to one side, pointing out Gabriella and Elias Luvon near the edge of the dance floor.

"Right," Alek agreed, trading clasps with Michael.

Elias had proffered an arm to Gabriella, holding it out for an awkward moment. She looked at him coolly. Alek walked up in time to hear him ask—not for the first time, likely—for a dance. "Alek can spare you for another two minutes, certainly."

"Not by choice, Elias." He slipped up to Gabriella's side, and her hands encircled his upper arm. It felt as if low voltage electrical currents played out of her fingertips, teasing and trembling his skin even through his jacket sleeve.

"You can't be gracious about this?" Elias glanced to one side, and Alek followed his gaze. Some of Elias's cadet cronies watched the

exchange from the dance floor, already partnered up and waiting for their friend. "Just to show there are no hard feelings?"

Which was almost humorous, considering who offered the olive branch. Alek still harbored a coal of resentment for Elias's latest tactic, attacking him through his academic standing, but he banked it, smothering the angry burn in layers of calm reasoning.

"You know what? There aren't any hard feelings. Whatever your problems have been with me, they're your problems. Not mine." Elias had obviously thought he heard capitulation in Alek's words, and began to offer his arm again. But Alek shifted Gabriella back, putting himself slightly in front of her. "But those problems have nothing to do with Gabriella, either. And since I have never shown you hard feelings, I see no reason to demonstrate a lack of them now." He nodded deeply. "Good eve, Elias."

Escorting Gabriella away, he felt her reassuring squeeze on his arm. "Thank you," she whispered after a long moment.

"My pleasure."

And it had been. Where Alek had felt worse for Professor Kleppinger's discomfort earlier this day, he could only believe that Elias Luvon had earned whatever loss of face this evening had brought him. A strong man—a future leader of men—would learn from such an experience. Alek hoped that Elias had such character in him.

Perhaps he should have known better and stayed more on his guard. But passing through the glass wall and onto the courtyard with Gabriella on his arm, it felt as if the day's entire troubles simply drained away. The crisp evening air stole their breath and gave it back frosted. Tharkad's legendary aurora borealis shimmered and wafted through the dark skies like a heavenly tide washing over a beach of black sand and brilliant diamonds. Couples stood transfixed by the stellar theater. Others strolled the brushed flagstone, and lost themselves among a spectacular collection of ice sculptures or headed out toward the university's winter gardens.

Alek and Gabriella took a slow turn around the yard, enjoying the frozen tableaux. They passed by a pair of ballroom dancers; the man wearing a frosted uniform and saber, bowing low to his lady in a formal gown and a necklace of faceted diamonds. They walked among crystalline swans and a forest of ice-captured pines. Deer stood proudly on glacier cliffs, their delicate antlers glittering like starlight.

Gabriella wore Alek's suit jacket over her shoulders for what thin warmth it offered against the night's chill. As the couple drifted further away from the lights and sounds of the reception, they also drifted closer together. Passing through a small alpine village, each building carved at one-fourth scale, Alek's arm stole around Gabriella and pulled her close.

They found themselves on a small patio, overlooking a short flight of steps leading down into the gardens. Alek wasn't sure what made him stop there. A hesitation in Gabriella's step? A squeeze of her hand on his arm? Whatever the reason, he paused and she swung around to face him. Her eyes were wide and frightened, and also warm and inviting.

"Gabriella, I—" She hushed him with a finger held up to his lips.

What had he been about to say? An apology? Her slow smile echoed his thoughts. Neither one was sure. Neither one was willing to back away. She stepped into him, chin tilting up, and Alek caught her hands in his, holding them at their waist.

Then a new pair of hands gripped him on the shoulders, yanked him back.

"Now they are your problems," Elias Luvon whispered in his ear. And the cadet chopped Alek hard on the back of his neck, sending him to the ground with a violent shove.

To be Continued...

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