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BattleCorps Security Team

Destiny's Call

By Loren L. Coleman

Part I



Tharkad, 2721

Alek heard Michael Steiner arguing with the nurse, swung his legs over the side of the cot and steadied himself against the nearby wall. The room tilted back and forth, sickeningly. He fought his rising gorge and held himself upright. He didn't want



his friend to see him laid out like an invalid. Pity was one thing he had never seen in Michael's eyes, and never wanted to.

The university infirmary smelled of disinfectant and blood. The disinfectant was normal. The blood was his. Nurse Dragon had cleaned it up pretty well except for some dried stains on the front of his chambray button-up and the blood-clotted gauze packed up inside each nostril. A wonder he could smell anything at all, really.

Footsteps in the outer hallway as they came toward the door of his room. Michael's pensive voice drifted in. "If he won't point a finger, there isn't much any of us can do."

"Scared?" the nurse asked.

A gentle laugh. "You don't know Alek. I wish we could scare him. Next time those boys might do permanent damage."

It was the work of a few seconds to pull back the white curtain that screened his cot from the rest of the room. Carefully he pushed up onto unsteady legs, drawing in a sharp breath as his bruised ribs protested. Rolling his right sleeve down over the bandage wrap, he fastened the button at his cuff. It took three tries. Alek brushed down some of his blond hair, covering the livid bruise swelling at his temple. There wasn't much he could do about his limp, or his face.

"So, what have we got in here?" Michael asked, stepping through the doorway. One hand smoothed his well-trimmed fringe of beard. A few gray hairs peaked through, but not many for a man of forty-five. Steiners aged well when they weren't sitting on the throne of the Lyran Commonwealth. With luck, Michael Steiner II would never bear that kind of weight. His older brother Jonathan was Archon, which allowed Michael to return to Tharkad University as a research assistant and, soon, the eccentric life of a celebrity professor.

An odd friend for twenty-year-old Alek to have made, but a friend nevertheless.

"Thank you for coming, Michael." Alek limped forward, trying to cover for his swollen right knee. "Let us get out of here, yes?"

"Hold it, *wunderkind*."

Alek hated it when Michael called him kid. Their age difference rarely mattered except when Michael wanted to make a point.

"I had to sign you out of here, since you won't take yourself to the hospital and the university is worried about liability. Which means you go nowhere until I'm satisfied." He leaned forward, inspecting the younger man's face. "*Ja*. Those will darken up nicely I expect."

Alek didn't care what his eyes looked like. He'd received blackened eyes before. Would do so again, most likely.

He looked past Michael at Nurse Dragon. Cynthia Durgen, the wonderful, old battleaxe, had the same look of distaste she slapped on every time students carried him in from another hazing. Alek knew the look wasn't for him, but for the "don't ask" policy Tharkad University generally took toward such happenings. It didn't help that he pretended not to know who had come after him.

"Michael signed me out?" he asked, cutting to the bottom line. Lyrans understood bottom lines. She nodded reluctantly. "Then I'm leaving. Thank you for your attentions."

Michael fell into step with Alek as he limped down the hall and into a crisp Tharkad morning. Winter still had a stranglehold on

late-arriving spring. The sky was a calm, anemic blue, but a rime of icy snow clung to the campus's park-like grounds. Alek stumbled as sunshine stabbed golden daggers behind his eyes. His temple throbbed.

"You look awful," Michael said, helping him down the non-skid steps. "Why do you let them do this to you?"

"Not all of me is dust," Alek quoted. He shivered, missing the parka they had taken from him. "Within my song, safe from the worm, my spirit will survive."

"Always back to Pushkin. Was he beat a lot as a young man too?"

Hero worship through masochism? Hardly. "That's not what this is about, Michael."

"I know what this is about," Michael said, stopping Alek with a hand on his arm. "You're young and brilliant, and they hate you for it." He let go of Alek's arm. "They hate you, Alek. And they're spoiled mama's boys who think they can get away with anything. Or that daddy will buy it off when they don't."

Staring out over the campus grounds, Alek refused to meet Michael's eye. Other late arrivals slushed their way to class, hands thrust in pockets and breath frosting. One of them paused long enough to staple a plasticized handbill to a magnificent pine. "Aren't they right?" he asked. "It's your world, Michael. I'm just a guest here."

Michael shook his head. "Well, some of our Lyran students have a strange way of showing their hospitality."

"They're Star League cadets. They belong to the entire Inner Sphere now." Which was as close as he would come to naming them. Alek figured Michael knew who they were, of course, but Alek wouldn't put his friend in the position of having that knowledge confirmed. His choice. His bruises.

"They're supposed to be professionals. You would be doing the Star League, and the Commonwealth, a great service by forcing them to deal with the consequences of their choices. 'Some sense of duty, something of a faith, some reverence to the laws

ourselves have made.’ Lord Tennyson speaks as true as any dead Russian poet.”

Alek had classes this morning. He should get going. “Everyone thinks of changing the world,” he drew upon Tolstoi. He offered Michael a short wave as he headed off. “No one thinks of changing himself.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Michael called after him.

Alek raised a victorious fist into the air without looking back.

But if he thought to escape on a position of strength, those desires went unanswered. Grabbing his ‘corder and spare coat from the dorms and shuffling to class, his nausea increased. The final flight of stairs leading to the lecture hall swam before his eyes, and he nearly collapsed.

He felt bone-weary, but if he missed the entire Poli-Science lecture, they would know they’d gotten to him. He hadn’t stood up under two years of their “special attention” to lay down now with graduation so close. Elias Luvon and his friends would respect Alek’s determination, someday. Maybe they would become better soldiers for it.

Elias was nearest the door when Alek slipped in at the back of the sloping hall, and his smirk faltered when he saw no hint of surrender in Alek’s stoic gaze. Elias Luvon had strong, handsome features and an over-inflated sense of his own position at Tharkad University. He might very well be the Nagelring’s top MechWarrior cadet this year, allowed to use Star League billets purchased at the university, but he barely held his own in academics. On merit alone he was likely failing Poli-Sci, but the class was considered a must for sons of noble families and his father’s latest endowment to the university guaranteed him a passing grade.

Alek moved by deliberately, barely avoiding the foot stuck out into his path. He rested against the side of a table two tiers down, vision narrowing into a long tunnel at the end of which he saw an open chair next to Gabriella Bailey. She was only two more tiers away but it seemed awfully far.

“Hey. Alek.” One of his classmates. Another senior. Brian? Alek rested against his table. Were they friends? “You okay?”

"Not all of me is dust," he said. Shaking his head clear, he shoved himself away and managed to descend the next two tier steps with great difficulty. He stood next to Gabriella's table, swaying, trying to blink his vision into focus. On the stage below, Professor Kleppinger droned on about the Davion succession problem being considered by First Lord Cameron. Would House Kurita be given claim to the Davion throne? No one knew.

But not all of Alek was dust. He knew that. Within his song, safe from...from the worm...

"Did you want to sit here?" Gabriella asked, motioning to the seat at her side. She glanced up at Alek and her eyes widened. They were hazel with green flecks, quite stunning—funny how he'd never noticed before. Brown hair, ironed straight. Voice like song.

"Within my song," he whispered.

Gabriella looked worried. She started to get up, and that was the last Alek saw. He clenched his eyes shut as the room spun on its axis, and he clutched at one last coherent thought as if it were a lifeline.

"Michael...?" he whispered.

Then he collapsed into dust.



Three days in the hospital under observation, they ran a dozen "routine" tests on Alek, including a CAT scan and an advanced EEG. It also allowed time enough for two different doctors, Michael Steiner, and the Dean of Tharkad University to pay him a visit to let him know what was wrong with him.

"Subarachnoid hemorrhage," the doctor told him before being called out of the room.

Alek had resigned himself to looking it up when Michael showed to explain he had a cranial bleed putting pressure on his brain, but that he'd be fine. Later, Dean Caravel Albrecht nervously promised much the same thing, seemingly trying to convince himself as well. He'd also asked after who had done this to one of his students. Alek shrugged.

"Does it matter?" He spooned up some crushed ice to wash the taste of medicine from his mouth.

"Of course," Dean Albrecht told him. "This is illegal."

"Only by a matter of degree," Alek said, still wielding his spoon. "If the law condemns and punishes only actions within certain definite and narrow limits, doesn't it justify, in a way, all similar actions that lie outside those limits?" Even paraphrased, the administrator of Tharkad University should recognize Tolstoi.

He didn't. "Commonwealth law would never condone such an attack."

"And a new medical library would never purchase a C- in Political-Science," Alek agreed with false *bonhomie*.

The Dean made his excuses and left not long after, no doubt wondering to whom Alek had been talking. Just as well he wasn't there when Michael came back, smuggling in a thick book of free verse and some spicy Skye-style pizza—although it did not require much smuggling. Who was going to refuse the Archon's brother?

"Not to worry, Pushkin," Michael told him. "They decided not to drill into your head. The bleed will reabsorb naturally, and you'll be out of here. That's all there is to it."

If that was all, then why run more tests? Psych profile. Reflex response. What more were they looking for?

He found out the next day when Michael came back accompanied by a Star League colonel and First-Cadet Luvon. The colonel wore an olive drab dress uniform complete with Nagelring sash and a ceremonial sword. Elias Luvon wore cadet fatigues and a look of distaste. Alek's guard came up at once.

Michael introduced Colonel Baumgarten as part of the Eleventh Royal BattleMech Division, currently serving as commanding officer of the Star League's Nagelring Academy.

"You're in fine physical shape," Colonel Baumgarten said, glancing closely at a noteputer screen. The small device looked fragile in his large hands.

"That's reassuring," Alek said with a grim smile.

"It says here that you've had heart surgery. Fully recovered?"

He looked to Michael, but found no help. The pale scar across his chest might have alerted the doctors. More likely someone had dug into his records back on Terra. "When I was three," he finally admitted. "It took some time, I am told. I'm fine now."

"Good. Good. We have strict demands on potential cadets, after all. The Nagelring more so than many training academies. I have to say, your academic scores and Martial Aptitude Test results place you in high standing."

Which was when it dawned on Alek that Colonel Baumgarten—and Elias Luvon—were here to extend an offer into the prestigious Nagelring military academy.

Him! A Star League Defense Force military cadet?

"This is a joke, yes?"

Michael shook his head, but it was the colonel who answered. "No, son. No joke. When the local staff checked you over for cerebral damage following your fall, their examination recorded extremely well-developed motor-reflexes. They reported your results to us, as they are required to do, and we ordered additional tests while you've been laid up. Your nervous system is highly responsive. Perfect for a MechWarrior candidate."

MechWarrior! Alek sagged back in his bed. The offer rolled over him so hard it took a moment to realize that the Colonel had mentioned his "fall." The latest university euphemism for being soundly beaten, courtesy of Dean Albrecht and maybe even another donation by Lord Luvon, Elias's father.

"No," Alek said sharply.

Elias was all smiles and bright eyes. The colonel might have been sucker-punched, a feeling Alek knew very well. "You...you don't want to think this through, son? We don't roll out the red carpet every day."

The last red carpet Alek had seen was the one he'd bled on. Now they wanted him to become one of them? "I understand the offer,

Colonel Baumgarten. I have nothing but admiration for the Star League Defense Force as an entity.” Elias glowered, no doubt feeling the verbal sting implied in Alek’s careful compliment. “I do not believe I would make a good addition to the roll.”

“According to our data, that wouldn’t appear to be the case. It says here that your parents are both SLDF veterans. A trooper, your dad. Fine record. Your mother rose to Sergeant Major in military administration. I’d think they’d be honored to see their son follow in their footsteps.”

“Ah, but Colonel,” Alek’s voice grew tight, “my parents would have accepted my original decision. I’m here to study history and poli-sci on a Star League scholarship, and glad for it. Education is also a weapon, sir. ‘Its effects depend on who holds it in their hands, and at whom it is aimed.’ Stalin.”

Baumgarten reddened. “I’ll have you know, ‘that a sound military practice—’” he began before Michael leaped in to cut him off.

“Look, look, look, Colonel, you don’t want to get into this. Once Alek pulls out dead Russians, you’re fighting his battle.” Even against a Star League officer, the Archon’s brother could throw some weight. He steered the flustered man toward the door of Alek’s room. “Let the boy think about it. He’s had a hard week, after all—” his voice was lost outside in the passage.

The boy. Alek silently thanked Michael for the nice diminutive. He relaxed back into his thin hospital pillow for all of three seconds before realizing that Cadet Luvon hadn’t followed the others out.

“Now you think you’re too good for us?” Elias sneered.

Alek sat back up, reached for his glass of melting ice chips. He sloshed around the icy water. “I hope you aren’t going to pretend you actually wanted me to accept,” Alek said, then sipped around the spoon. “I’d be very disappointed.”

“Why should I care what you think, *Terran*? Just because your “Royal” divisions think they run the Star League?”

The noble scion was picking a fight no matter what. Alek didn’t need to provide more ammunition. “It’s not what I want, all right, Elias? Let’s leave it at that.”

"You think we have nothing to offer a guy like you?"

Alek should have let it go. "Of course not." And, before he thought better of it, "After all, look what the military is making of you."

A pettiness buried deep within Alek took some pleasure at Elias Luvon's expression of outrage. He'd scored deeply with that remark, but it could hardly be called a fair fight. Elias studied to fight with weapons. Alek with words.

With exact military bearing, Elias toed himself about-face and stiff-marched from the room to catch up with his commanding officer. Michael passed him just outside the door. "Do I want to know what passed between you two while I escorted our good friend Colonel Baumgarten back to the waiting room?" he asked Alek as he entered the room.

"Just a difference of opinion." Michael winced, and Alek remembered describing his first set of bruises last year, shortly after his transfer, as a difference of opinion. "It's nothing."

"The last 'nothing' put you in the hospital," Michael reminded him.

"You think I didn't consider their offer."

Michael Steiner rubbed one hand along his beard, as if checking for exact edges. "I know you considered it, Alek. I'm just wondering if you gave them their fair due."

"If you can't beat them, join them?"

"Pushkin," Michael said, as if Alek had been quoting again. The two men grinned, and the somber mood evaporated. "Truly, Alek, there would be advantages, to the Star League as well as to you. Not the least of which is the more stringent rules inside a military organization that protect its own."

Everything you needed to know could, sooner or later, be found in Tolstoi. "The two most powerful warriors are patience and time," Michael." Alek rested back, exhaustion threatening to overwhelm him. "I already have them on my side."

But remembering Elias's expression, and the cadet's suddenly cold demeanor, Alek wondered if that was actually the case anymore.

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