

BATTLECORPS

SHADOWS OF FAITH

Volume 5
by Loren L. Coleman

TALES OF THE JIHAD

-6-

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Tharkad
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Evergreen wreaths and bushy, cedar swags trimmed in red velvet ribbon festooned the Royal Court's ballroom, spicing the air with a winter, woodsy scent.

Potted holly trees grew out from drifts of artificial snow, bright points of light sparkling off the snow's jeweled crust.

Glowing icicles hung from branches clustered with sharp, prickly leaves and red berries. Soft lights winked off and on, off and on, from far back within the boughs.

All a sham.

With midnight approaching, Isis Marik drifted through the ballroom gracefully, cautiously. Sensed the cold, sharp points of political daggers prickling against the back of her neck. Those invisible blades hidden beneath uniform and tuxedo coats, tucked within long trains or nestled within the décolletage of formal gowns, flashing out along the edge of insincere platitudes and predatory gazes. Never certain from where the next attack would come. From whom.

Separated from Victor while he walked his sister and then Lyran Duchess Margaret Doons through long and complicated waltzes, Isis had initially sought protection on the arm of Morgan Kell be-

fore striking out on her own. One hand filled with a half-empty champagne flute. Rarely sipping at the bright, sweet nectar, instead keeping it as a shield between herself and any overly-friendly greetings. She allowed simple handclasps and only an occasional, chaste brush against her cheek when the strains of diplomacy demanded it. Always prepared against social ambush:

How wonderful you look!

I did not recognize you. How long has it been?

Thank you, and how is your family?

Conversational shields which had been well-schooled into her by the age of ten. Deftly turning inquiries back onto her companions, eliciting a few personal details to store away for later, and then easing into one of several exit strategies which almost always revolved around a promise to come find her later, after the event had calmed down and she could take time for a proper visit.

After the point, of course, when she would also have made her own quiet departure.

Amazing, how easily it all came back to her. The etiquette and the suspicion, both. Her League upbringing, never short on the political necessities, compounded by a healthy dose of paranoia after living a large part of her life dancing among the delicate political machinations of the Capellan Confederation. A dance that had been cut off so abruptly.

Expelled. Her future tossed aside as casually and callously as her engagement.

That cold, uncaring look in her fiancé's eyes. His words echoing in her memory even as weeks turned to months turned to years.

Your usefulness to my realm ended, he'd said, *the day you made it off Hustraig alive.*

Really? That's wonderful. And how have you been?

It had torn her up inside. Made a wreck of her for more months than she cared to admit or would talk about except with very few. Even now she felt the raw tenderness—recalled that feeling of standing exposed in front of all—lurking oh-so-close to the surface. A deep wound covered over by the thinnest veneer of new and tender skin.

But if the wound still pained her from time to time, it left her sensitized as well. Her perceptions heightened. And as she surveyed the room, sampling from so many conversations, she began to get a feel for the tension and high emotions and the doubts centered around this fourth Star League conference. Showing in personal agendas and insecurity. And especially in so many uneasy questions regarding the Star League's *still-missing* member state.

Maybe it was her personal pain still whispering in her ear, but she thought not. This was something else. Something...more. A feeling which left her cold and dark inside, and studying the ballroom most carefully as she lifted her glass for a bare sip of the golden champagne, her hazel eyes challenging the ghosts which lingered at the edge of her thoughts.

"Sun-Tzu Liao," she whispered around the rim of the flute. "What are you up to?"

"People who talk to themselves are often viewed with great suspicion," said a voice at her shoulder. "Be wary, sweet Columbina."

"Phelan!" Isis started, nearly sloshed champagne up over the rim of her glass. So soft had been Phelan Kell's approach, the man moved on cat's paws.

He moved into her warm embrace, as close as Isis allowed almost anyone. Though she pulled back quickly enough. "I did not think you were here," she said.

"An extremely late arrival. And an early departure as well," he admitted, glancing about the ballroom. "I'm on the ground just long enough for a word with my father, and then it is back to the *Ulric Kerensky*."

Almost by reflex, Isis called up a sympathetic tone. "Nothing too serious, I hope?"

Phelan opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. Glanced at Isis from the corners of his eyes, a mischievous glint shining in his malachite eyes. "Enough to keep me from enjoying the festivities." True, he was not dressed for a formal reception, wearing simple Wolf leathers without the usual accoutrements Clanners used in lieu of dress uniforms. Soft furs. His enameled wolf's mask.

"Besides," he added, "I'm certain your dance card is already filled with hopeful young nobles?"

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She shrugged aside his riposte. "For you I would have made room. You will return soon?" (*Just how long has it been?*)

"When I can, when I can." Waving away her concern. "And you will hardly miss me, caught up with the conference. Seated at the Free Worlds table if I am not mistaken?" (*Thank you, and how is your family?*)

Was that a twinge betraying her? She thought it likely. However long he'd been on the ground, Phelan had somehow winkled out news of her father's request that she join him in representing the Free Worlds League. No doubt shoring up relations with ComStar, from her through Victor, as Thomas Marik prepared to be elected the Star League's next First Lord.

"Oh, you're good," Isis said, conceding the match with a slow smile.

"The pack does not allow for weakness." Phelan tipped her a wink. "Besides, Inner Sphere repartee has nothing on the Clans, where saying the wrong thing, or the right thing the wrong way, can land you in a Circle of Equals. Political Darwinism at its finest."

She toasted him with her dwindling champagne. Allowed herself another light sip. The golden ambrosia sparkled on her tongue. "It's a wonder you survived it."

Again Phelan opened his mouth. And again he forced it closed. Though this time not out of wariness but in concentration as he stripped out the subtle layers of meaning in her simple acknowledgement. Several times he appeared ready to speak, but repeatedly abandoned the effort. Isis watched him wrestle with her implied (and simultaneous) critiques of his political and military capability, trying to decide which to take issue with first.

Finally, he surrendered the effort.

"A draw," he allowed. Caught up her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles, warming them. "It is good to know I leave things here in capable hands. Great Father knows, *I wouldn't trust the Star League to Victor.*"

Saying this last in a louder voice as Victor led forward Yvonne and a familiar young man in a Rasalhague-cut tuxedo to join the two.

"I hope we aren't interrupting," Yvonne Davion said with a hesitant smile.

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"Actually, I hope we are." Victor sounded as if he were only half-jesting. His eyes narrowed to see Isis' hand captured between both of Phelan's.

An uneasy heat warmed the back of Isis' neck as Phelan tucked her free hand into the crook of his elbow. "You can always take another waltz with Margaret Doons again, I am certain. Ragnar!" Never releasing Isis, Phelan reached out to trade a strong hand clasp with the younger warrior. A friendly warmth displacing his impish grin. "I didn't realize the Ghost Bears were attending the conference."

Ragnar Magnusson, his white-blonde hair grown out in a stylish mane, was junior to everyone in the small gathering save Yvonne. An age difference which had meant much more back on Outreach, when the young Inner Sphere royals had first met nearly two decades before, than it did now. Captured and adopted by Clan Wolf, and then "lost" to the Ghost Bears who saw him as a natural bridge between their Clan and the worlds conquered from the former Free Rasalhague Republic, he now carried himself with easy self-confidence.

"Technically," he said, "we are not here." Then laughed lightly at Phelan's and Isis' confused stares.

"Officially, I am present to liaison with Christian Månsdottir in his capacity as Elected Prince Regent of the Republic. Nothing to do—nothing at all—with his current position as First Lord, or the venue of the Fourth Star League conference. Officially."

"And unofficially?" Phelan asked bluntly, throwing his earlier demonstration of subtlety to the ground. "The fact that you *are* here, the Elected Prince *in absentia*?" And stomping it flat.

"That remains to be seen." Ragnar paused, thought. "Let us say that the Ghost Bears have a great deal of respect for Anastasius Focht, who promoted the idea of this visit, at this time and place."

"Retired my foot," Phelan said with a laugh. Then he sobered. Somewhat. "Makes sense, actually, promoting the Ghost Bears toward Star League membership before my abjured Wolves. It would lend greater credibility among the Clans." Shook his head. "Stravag! That man is smart."

Yvonne smiled her agreement, her gaze drifting around the room. "This kind of gathering always presents a banquet of political opportunity." But she said it almost sorrowfully, as if she

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were not part of it. "Trading favors, and maybe some subtle bullying. Tancred has already managed to insult two generals from Theodore Kurita's retinue."

"And he still has his head?" Isis asked.

"Swords checked at the door." Yvonne accepted a champagne flute from a passing server. "I made him promise to behave while I slipped away to mend fences. He'll see things my way."

Victor nodded. "You need to keep him alive at least long enough for a formal ceremony. And to produce an heir." He straightened, added primly: "Preferably in *that* order."

Isis felt the tension quiver in Phelan's arm, though she had no doubt the exiled Wolf Khan kept a straight face. She covered her own flicker of unease with a whispered laugh. Only a handful of people knew that Victor had had a child with Omi Kurita. A secret which had been revealed to him only recently, though he had yet to receive further details. He did not even know the name, or sex, of his first born.

Everyone had secrets to be kept. And while Yvonne might be told—might already know, for that matter, being Victor's sister—certainly Ragnar Magnusson had no need for such delicate information.

Yvonne accepted his brotherly advice with a smile and a peck to his cheek. "You'll be relieved to hear that we are looking to set a date late next year. Allowing plenty of time for the announcement to make the rounds, and for any furor from this year's conference and election of a new First Lord to die out."

A warm prickling sensation tipped the outside edges of Isis' ears. Like hearing her name whispered in a distant conversation. She swallowed dryly. "You believe there will be a furor?"

The word obviously missing from the end of her question was "*also*."

Yvonne's raised eyebrow was the only tell that the Davion princess had heard it. "Hasn't there been?" she asked, deftly side-stepping the direct question. "Every Star League Conference to date? In 3058 we declared war on Clan Smoke Jaguar, and Victor's vote sealed the election of Sun-Tzu Liao to First Lord."

Phelan nodded. "Katherine nearly choked over *that*, as I recall."

He said it with an air of such feigned innocence that both Isis and Ragnar glanced his direction, curious. But if Phelan meant it as a secret meaning to anyone, it was Victor, who grimaced.

"Second Conference," Isis said, "Victor unmasked himself as the new Precentor Martial. Cast the deciding vote between Theodore and Katherine." She swallowed hard. "Thwarting her ambition again," she finished quietly. Setting in motion the chain of events which sparked the Steiner-Davion civil war and eventually claimed the life of Omi Kurita.

"And who could forget our last gathering?" Ragnar asked, jumping into the conversation. "Victor's thirteenth-hour rebuttal which cost Katherine the last of her support."

That was also the exact day Katherine dropped the bombshell on Victor regarding Omi's death. All but destroying him. It had been a close battle, Isis remembered.

Phelan shrugged aside the emotional weight with seeming ease. "So I guess what we're all wondering, Victor, is what you have in store for us this time? Katherine is sold off to Vlad, and good riddance. Now Thomas Marik seems to be the heir apparent." He patted Isis' hand, still trapped against his arm, but the steel in his voice was sharp and strong. "Got some dirty laundry of the Mariks' which you hope to drag out and ruin his day? Get Yvonne named First Lord?"

Yvonne shuddered at the idea. "Not something I want. I've seen what it does to the best of us, and the worst. Have you seen Christian Månsdottir? The weight of office looks to be killing him."

True, Prince-regent Månsdottir hadn't looked particularly well when Isis had seen him earlier in the evening, but the health of the outgoing First Lord was of less importance to her than the sudden suspicion she noticed in Victor's eyes when Phelan set his barb. It was slight, and only her recent years in Victor's company allowed her to see it in the instant it was there and gone again. *Did he have something on her father, her family?*

We all have secrets. Her earlier thought, come back to haunt her now.

"Victor?" she asked in the lull. It was difficult to keep her voice from wavering.

And his smile was genuine. She knew that as well. "Not to worry," he promised. "I have a great deal of admiration...for the current

ruler of the Free Worlds League. I believe he is the right man for the position, and ComStar will vote to affirm if I have any say in the matter."

"So we're certain that Gavin Dow has nothing up his sleeve?" Yvonne asked of the group.

Phelan smiled grimly. "Or at least has Victor's gun poking him in the side?"

Had anyone else caught Victor's slight pause? Or his roundabout declaration of... Isis shook herself back to her senses. The evening's stress had her on edge, paranoid, and seeing ghosts were none existed. Better, she knew, to concentrate on the ones which were all too real.

"It isn't Gavin Dow," she said aloud, directly, before she thought better of it. Felt all eyes on her, burning through that thin outer layer of skin. She pulled away from Phelan's arm, though not completely from his side, so she could hold her own. "Haven't you all been sampling the room? Felt the same lack of ease? Do you know how often I've heard Dow's name mentioned in worried conversations? Absolutely none." She shook her head. Faced down each one of them. "Here is the question you should be asking yourselves: Where is Sun-Tzu Liao?"

"Sulking in his tent," Phelan said. "That we did not recognize the brilliance of his leadership."

Victor nodded. "He demonstrated his contempt for the League at our last conference. Let him hide, and arrive to do his barest minimum of effort, and then run back to his hidebound Confederation."

"Shall I remind you of what it has cost you to marginalize the Capellans in the past?" Isis asked. "Sun-Tzu does nothing—ever—without plan and purpose."

"It is hard to admit it," Victor said, "but you are right. Sun-Tzu *has* been a sharp thorn in our sides. Mostly because there has always been a larger threat, and he has taken good advantage of the situation."

He paused, thinking. Victor never took lightly the council of people he respected, Isis knew.

"It's hard to imagine what else he could be about except snubbing us during the formalities. A little bit of reverse grandstanding."

"If we are not taking him seriously," Phelan continued, "it is because he has marginalized himself this time. Abstaining during last conference's election. Not taking his duties seriously as a member state. Isolating himself even as he recommends allies for the Star League."

Ragnar agreed. "It reminds me of his performance on Outreach. Causing the maximum amount of chaos and then simply punching out." He gestured across the Grand Court's ballroom, where their earlier focus, First Precentor Gavin Dow, was now shaking hands with outgoing First Lord Christian Månsdottir. "Dow is a builder of alliances. This much of Inner Sphere politics even the Ghost Bears know."

Isis could only agree. Though to a point. "Dow is a rising force, yes. But his time is still not arrived. Especially with Victor as Precentor Martial."

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Ragnar considered that. Discarded it. "Victor does not cast ComStar's official vote. Gavin Dow does."

Isis drained the last of her champagne, letting the golden liquid soothe her throat. Toasted Ragnar with the empty glass. "Dow can vote any way he wants," she agreed. "But as one among nine, that means less than it once did. Other Star League member states, they will *listen* to Victor. His opinions, his promises, they will carry the real weight and sway minds and votes."

She handed her glass off to a passing server. Looked to Yvonne. "Do you think I am wrong?"

"No," Yvonne said at once. Almost too quickly. "Victor makes for a fine example to which we can all hope to aspire."

Victor shrugged, uneasy under such praise. "I don't believe that is completely—"

"You had your reasons to abdicate the throne," Yvonne interrupted, growing more forceful, and more agitated as well. "Good reasons. Perhaps you weren't the right person to sit as Archon, or First Prince. But you'd have made an exceptional First Lord, Victor."

Phelan laughed, but with good humor, not black. "You mean an exceptional Aleksandr Kerensky."

That admission nearly stunned Isis. Especially from Phelan, who enjoyed needling his distant cousin, she doubted there could be



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higher praise than to compare him to the Great Father, and the original Star League's greatest general.

It seemed to settle Yvonne's mood as well. She shrugged. "As regent, Kerensky at one point served as both. Until and unless Victor can point out a better man for the position, he would have my vote."

Having handed Victor a rare compliment, Phelan was not about to go too far beyond his normal borders. "I supposed we could do worse," he admitted, though with an air of great sufferance for the thought.

"But before his coronation, I still have to find my father for a word. There are games afoot and battles still to be won. Ladies." He nodded to Yvonne and kissed Isis on the hand, lingering there just long enough to raise a small flame in her cheeks, and drawing a glare from Victor. He traded clasps with Ragnar and tossed Victor a casual salute. "Until next time, Aleksandr. Oh, and try not to break up this Star League while I am away."

"I'll do my best," Victor promised dryly.

It was a light moment between the five friends. A good way to say goodbye, breaking off with Phelan on the prowl for Morgan Kell and Yvonne inviting Ragnar toward the dance floor. Isis drifted back toward Victor, the both of them catching sight of Galen Cox standing casually to one side with *that look* in his eyes. The one which worried Isis, that the man had news which no one wanted to hear but everyone needed to know.

"Back to work?" she asked.

Victor nodded. "Do we ever stop?"

No. Not really. When all was said and done, Isis knew, they must fall back on their duties and responsibilities. Anything else was a stolen moment. And in between, they would all do their very best.

Though one's best, Isis could not help thinking, was not always enough.

To be continued...