

The Fox's Honor

L. D. Alford

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The Fox's Honor BOOK TWO

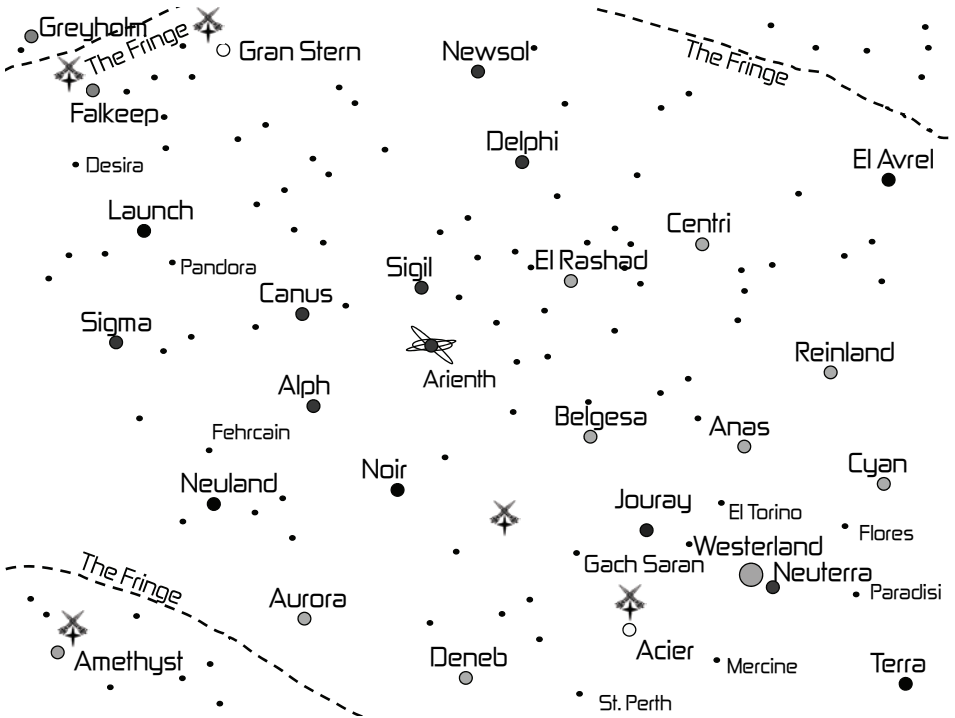
It was a time of treachery and vengeance...
of Nobility and redemption...all because of love.
But the ultimate price could be Devon Rathenberg's life.

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Baron Shawn du Locke must choose between
honor and desire...with the fragile peace of the
Human Galactic Empire hanging in the balance.



THE HUMAN GALACTIC EMPIRE





One

All the young maids, and the old ones as well, discreetly watched the young men announced to the ballroom. The same was true of Duke Falkeep's three daughters. The two oldest, though already wed, spent a delightful evening weighing the rank, title, and characteristics of each nobleman who entered the ballroom. They justified their occupation in the interest of their youngest and unwed sister, Tamar. Tamar didn't necessarily agree with their assessments.

Of particular, disdainful interest were the less choice of the young gentlemen—those who, through valor and accomplishment, attained noble standing, yet whose manner pointed irrevocably to their previous unpolished beginnings. One such gentleman aroused even the looks of the Duke, and a quaint unsettled quiver of his eyebrows left no doubt of his thoughts.

This young man was arrayed in colloquial finery. An officer's uniform, yes, but the style and the natural materials left little doubt that it and its owner obviously came from a culturally deprived planet. The gentleman's boots were real leather; they creaked. His pants bloused over his boot tops, and as he walked they swaggered like a Cossack dance.

The seneschal announced the young officer: "Sir Devon de Tieg, Knight of the Red Cross." A small number of the Duke's less cautious guests let loose a traveling titter that lost its momentum in a few muffled guffaws.

The knight said nothing. Those who recognized the order of

Knight of the Red Cross instantly sobered, and the Duke made a second appraisal of the man.

The knight's eye glinted with his bold smile, and he strode across the broad floor of the ballroom. His ceremonial dagger clinked against his left leg, balanced by an oddly shaped cylinder on his right, and his knight's spurs jingled with each step. He stopped with a flourish and a low bow before the Duke. "My lord Falkeep, will you grant me the privilege of a dance with your daughter, the Lady Tamar?"

Strange knights did not dance with a duke's daughter; it just wasn't done.

The Duke raised his eyebrow, and a smile tripped across his lips. "You may, young knight. That is, if she will dance with you."

"My lord." Sir Devon bowed again and turned toward the ladies. In a few solid steps, he stood directly before the Lady Tamar.

Tamar Falkeep was a beautiful young woman. Her face was formed in the most classic shape of an Imperial Princess. Her eyes, shaded by long, dark lashes were large, a smoky gray that could display fire or ice. Her nose was slight, curved gracefully from her eyebrows, and matched the gentle oval of her face. Her heart-shaped lips were full and seemingly touched by a permanent knowing smile. Her silky, blond hair billowed over her bare shoulders and shined like satin as she tilted her head.

Tamar's figure reflected the perfection of her features: a dancer's frame, graceful and yet full. In her stance, however, was the firm hauteur of a true princess. Not the simple pose of pride or icy frigidity, but a glance of power and purity that stopped most men cold. Her femininity beckoned; the princess spurned. It was unfortunate she was only a lesser duke's daughter and not a true princess.

"My lady, would you give me the honor of this dance?" Sir Devon's eyes glimmered with humor.

The women beside Tamar, including her sisters, turned their faces from the knight and flipped their noses upward. With their faces primly averted from Devon, Tamar's sisters chattered their advice in both her ears. Tamar looked to either side, then stared piercingly at the knight. Her flaxen curls laughed at him. Her gray eyes flashed with rebuke.

The knight's smile lost its flavor. Under her hard appraisal, the shine stole from his eyes. The princess that embodied the spirit of Tamar Falkeep daunted even this knight.

I could disgrace him now, Tamar thought. *He's a fool to try a trick like this, but he has a style. He risks his honor to dance with me, and he is not hard to look at.* In fact, Sir Devon was very handsome—in a military sort of way. His burnt blond hair was clipped short on the sides but left slightly long on top and parted across his forehead. His jaw was firm, yet his lips turned up humorously, and slight crinkles showed that was their normal position. He was not tall, but Tamar had to look up to meet his gray eyes. Her smile softened, and she held out her hand to him. “Yes, sir knight, I will dance with you.”

Gently for all his bravado, he took her hand and placed his arm around her waist. With a flourish of noble gown and leather shirt, he swung Tamar into the dance.

Tamar stepped with a practiced grace cultured by the best dancing instructors of the finest young lady's finishing schools on the Imperial planet Arienth, yet the knight matched her with a strength and surety that led her into steps she never knew before.

After they made a couple of circuits about the dance floor, Tamar cocked her head, smirked, and coquettishly remarked, “You know, I promised this dance to Peter Vigin, the son of Count Vigin.”

Concern crossed the knight's features. “He is not particularly a man of honor, my lady. Pardon my forwardness, but I believe you should seek a more honorable companion. I, on the other hand, promised this dance specifically for the Lady Tamar, and your honor is renowned.”

Her retort stuck in her throat. She could only blush and agree with his reply.

A twirl brought them close to Count Vigin's party.

“You know, my lady, I confess I came to your father's ball for two reasons.”

“I know you didn't come to impress the Nobility with your wardrobe,” she returned.

With a light step, the knight gracefully twirled her, sent her reeling, and brought her breathless back into his arms. His laugh

covered her frown, and the mischief in his eyes made Tamar again swallow her angry retort.

“I would like to claim that I came all the way from Arienth just to dance with you, but, alas, that isn’t exactly true. I also have business with one of your father’s holders. The man and I could not meet respectably by any other means.”

“Did this person know you were coming?”

“As much as you did, my lady.” His tone was ominous. “But, for now, please believe I came for only one reason—to dance with you.”

After a few moments, Tamar started, “I am curious, Sir...”

“Sir Devon.”

“Yes, I am curious, Sir Devon. Is your family’s estate on Arienth?”

“No. I hail from Greyholm.”

Tamar’s face fell a little. She didn’t expect the knight to come from a Duchy, yet she hadn’t expected the fringe either.

Devon evidently noted her look. “And how do I rank?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Your pardon, I believe you thought it.”

Tamar blushed again.

He continued, “I am simply the son of a good family who was in the right place at the wrong time.”

She looked at him inquiringly.

“You see, where I was, the beams and bullets weren’t, and so I am here now. Many men are more worthy than I to wear these knight’s spurs, but most of them are dead. Don’t feel badly for me. Many more are truly unworthy of the nobles’ crown they wear.”

Tamar really didn’t want to, but she discovered herself in agreement with this saucy knight. Until she caught herself, her head even bobbed an affirmative. She enjoyed the banter with the knight. *Here is a real man*, she thought. He spoke his mind and didn’t care who heard. He was so unlike the common gentlemen of her acquaintance—so unlike Peter Vigin. Peter was preoccupied with events within the Empire but had no effect on them.

“Have you ever been wounded?” she asked.

“Many times.” His smile drooped. “Yes many times, but none permanently affected me.” He smiled again.

“You are a Captain in the attack forces?”

“I, my lady, am a Field Major in His Majesty’s Huscarls.”

Tamar was impressed, and she tried not to let it show.

Sir Devon was an animated and intelligent speaker. As they stepped in dance after dance, before she knew it, Tamar became engrossed in his conversation. This oddly dressed knight intrigued her. In the middle of a step, as they were talking about the upcoming wedding of the Imperial Prince John-Mark and the Lady Lyral, she asked, “Did you dress this way just so you would have an opportunity to dance with me?”

“My lady, I already told you, the reason I came to Falkeep was to dance with you. You were right when you said I didn’t dress this way to win a fashion contest.”

They both laughed.

“You just came from Arienth. Have you met the Prince John-Mark?” asked Tamar.

Sir Devon’s face took on a guarded look, then he smiled. “Yes, I have seen His Royal Highness. After all, he is the Marshall of the Huscarls.”

His answer left a lot unsaid, and when he didn’t continue, Tamar prodded him. “So, what is he like? I know Lyral. She is so sweet, a beautiful person, and my best friend. Don’t you think John-Mark would make a great Emperor?” She breathed the last quietly and conspiratorially.

He looked intensely at her. So intensely, she blanched under his stare. “I’m sorry, my Lady.” He gazed more gently at her. “Such thoughts are seriously contemplated, but out of diffidence to His Royal Majesty Perod-Mark, the rightful firstborn son of the Emperor Maricus, and especially considering the current security of the Empire, I believe such thoughts are best left unsaid.”

Sir Devon pronounced this so gravely that Tamar thought for a moment she’d insulted him. But he continued, “John-Mark is indeed a favorite with the people and the Nobility, and I fear for his safety from his brother’s jealousy. But we speak of things too serious for your father’s ball. Falkeep is beautiful this time of year, don’t you think?”

In quiet conversation and graceful dance, the hours passed like

moments. Tamar, a brilliant woman, discovered a challenge to her knowledge and thinking few men ever delved. She described her life to the knight. She talked about her experiences in school on Arienth, the beautiful estate of her father, Duke Falkeep, the society on Arienth, and in every subject, she found kinship and agreement with this man.

They danced toward the garden and then out on the terrace. Here the music was muted. The night was cold and dark, only partially illuminated by Falkeep's small moon. The night was still and the garden deserted. Led by this pleasant knight, Tamar's steps were sure. She felt as if her feet barely touched the flagstones. She found herself looking intently into his face. His features seemed almost familiar, but she realized how foolish that thought could be. When they neared the edge of the terrace, the knight stopped suddenly and caught her in his arms. In a passionate kiss, his lips pressed against hers. The kiss caught Tamar unawares, but she instantly realized this was just what she wanted. She returned his intimacy and gently melted in his arms.

The kiss lasted a long time. Then Sir Devon lifted his face and stepped back. His movements were unusually stiff. He nervously cleared his throat and looked away from her into the garden. Then his lips took on their accustomed smile, and he almost seemed as if he were about to turn and leave.

Tamar caught his arm. "Wait, don't go."

"I'm sorry, my lady, but my business requires it."

Her hand stole to her lips. "You kissed me."

"Yes, I couldn't resist, and if I had more time and no responsibility, I would have taken more of you."

Tamar punched him straight across his jaw. The blow hurt her hand, but he didn't move at all. Tamar stood, on the verge of tears, and nursed her hand. She wasn't going to give him the opportunity to know how much he'd wounded her.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I deserved that." He smiled disconcertingly. "But I meant it, and this is the time for honesty. You are beautiful—so beautiful—and from the first moment I saw you, I loved you. I'm afraid I will never see you again, nor you me." With that, he turned and walked back into the ballroom.

Shaken and confused, Tamar stood alone on the cold terrace. Tears

of anger and remorse filled her eyes. No man ever kissed her like that. She was a reserved person. She spent most of her school years at Lady Pembroke's finishing school on Arient, and she was to return there at the end of Falkeep's summer to complete her last year. At Lady Pembroke's, she was generally secluded from the society of men. And though she was twenty years old, as the third daughter of the least of the Imperial Duchies, she had few suitors. The Lady Lyril was her best friend at school, and Lyril always said Tamar acted too much like a Princess. That characteristic, according to Lyril, scared off the gentlemen. Perhaps Lyril was right, but no man Tamar met was like this young knight. Not one of the true gentlemen she knew would dare to make such a claim on her body and her love. And she knew, if he asked, she would have given herself to him. Was she in love? She hardly knew this man, yet she thought she might love him. Tamar trembled at that revelation and thought fearfully what his loss suddenly meant to her.

She wanted to chase him into the ballroom and demand why they would never see each other again, but she shuddered, afraid to let herself be drawn to him, afraid to recognize the unexpected power he held over her. She did rush to the French doors, to peer through them. Sir Devon was not in sight.

Shaking with emotion, Tamar reentered the ballroom. The room was huge. Her father, the Duke of Falkeep entertained often. His formals were the main social events of each season. Every noble in this sector was represented. Even His Majesty, the Emperor Maricus, sent his emissary, Duke Rathenberg. Tamar caught her sisters' eyes as they waved at her. She avoided the sight of Sir Peter Vigin and walked toward them. She didn't care to dance again tonight—not with anyone else...maybe never again.

When Tamar reached her sisters, they kidded her about the amount of time she spent with the unknown knight, and she dutifully accepted their thinly veiled criticism in silence. While they spoke, her eyes scanned the crowd. She fearfully sought the answer to her heart's question in a single face. Inside her turbulent thoughts, Tamar tried to understand what magic transpired there or to determine if anything, outside her imagination, had really happened at all.



Two

Sir Devon slipped through the French doors and into the crowded ballroom. *There*, he thought, *I accomplished my first goal for the evening*. He speculated sadly, for a moment, on the circumstances that would not allow him to see the Lady Tamar again. Then, with a sigh, he headed into the throng of people.

Now, thought Devon, *to find that traitor Count Yedric, and keep out of sight of the few who might recognize me*.

Yedric was not difficult to locate. He and his retainers skulked around the vicinity of Duke Falkeep. Yedric patently tried to drum up support for his views among the Duke's distinguished guests. However, Yedric was not a popular man among these people. The chief strike against him was he did not support the current dynasty. He claimed the more ancient Rathenberg family belonged on the Imperial throne. That thought reminded Devon to keep out of sight of Duke Rathenberg.

Devon should know: five generations displaced the House Rathenberg from the direct line of Imperial descent, and as a House, Rathenberg did not claim the throne. Count Yedric, however, used this dispute as an excuse to confront and conflict with the Haupenberg Emperor, Maricus.

Duke Rathenberg was the chancellor of the Empire. He held the traditional position of steward for Emperor Maricus and was himself the master of only a small estate on the Imperial planet Arienth. His cousin, the Count Frederic Rathenberg, was a close relation to the Emperor. He controlled a wealthy system in the Kingdom of Nior, and

with Yedric's support, Count Frederic Rathenberg claimed to be the rightful head of the Empire.

So far, no actions backed the claims of the Counts, Yedric and Rathenberg, and they had little support in the Landsritters, the official parliament of the Nobility. But the military might these men were massing concerned the Emperor. Right now, the Empire had enough problems keeping the frontier under control; it could not cope with a powerful internal rebellion at the same time. That was why Devon was here. His mission was to start a premature rebellion.

Count Yedric held fealty in this sector. He wanted to maintain good relations with his lord, Duke Falkeep, and he wanted to reassure the other nobles of his honorable intentions. He was doing an outstanding job. Few, other than Devon's Imperial Intelligence, realized the extraordinary growth of Yedric's ground and space forces. In fact, Yedric already laid the keels of at least five Capital class starships—a privilege reserved only for Ducal rank. But Count Yedric wasn't quite ready to strike. He needed another three to five years to consolidate his gains and develop his political power. This was the time for the Emperor to force the count's hand.

Devon determined a sequence of two events that would pressure Yedric into action: first, a direct and undisputed line of ascendancy for Count Frederic Rathenberg to the Empire's Iron Throne, and second, undeniable proof of Yedric's treason against the Emperor. Devon hoped to achieve both these events tonight—both in one fell swoop.

With practiced insolence, Devon swaggered toward the party of Nobility around Yedric. Contemptuously, Devon shouldered a baron to one side and stood directly before the Count. The baron stumbled forward and dropped his drink. His glass clattered noisily to the floor. When the man regained his balance, he turned angrily toward Devon and was about to issue a challenge, but Yedric, his eyes registering shock and surprise for only a moment, cut the baron off with a gesture. Even in his frontier garb, Count Yedric recognized Devon.

Devon smiled haughtily at the Count.

Count Yedric was no small man. He stood a full ten centimeters above Devon. He was thin and wiry, built like a greyhound, with a musculature developed on the weapon practice floor. Yedric's eyes

blazed out of deeply recessed eye sockets. The skin, parchment tight, stretched bare and pallid from the broad dome of his forehead to the solid point of his chin. A grim and wrinkled smile split his face, while a gentle salting of pockmarks accentuated the eggshell appearance of his white, partly bald head.

Devon, intimidated, tried not to show it. The Duke cut an awesome figure, fully calculated to bring fear to the peasantry and demand the respect of his peers. He was a man of nearly indecipherable expression that fronted a brain of genius proportions.

The Count coolly returned Devon's smile. "Good evening, my lord. I scarcely recognized you in that colloquial costume."

"I, on the other hand, my dear Count Yedric, recognized your traitorous murmuring the instant I entered my lord Duke Falkeep's ball."

Yedric's views on the Emperor's legitimacy were well known but patiently ignored by most of the Nobility. A quiet descended on the men and women within earshot. The Count simply smiled more broadly and nodded slightly.

"I am interested, for the Emperor's sake, in what conspiratorial devilry you have been up to lately," continued Devon.

"You are premature in your accusations. Let's not quarrel on the eve of Duke Falkeep's party." Yedric gestured toward the Duke, who was well out of hearing.

"I know exactly what you want, Count Yedric. I can propose how you think you will achieve your goals. But, I warn you; all true nobles of my House serve the Empire and the Emperor. We will gladly lay our lives down in the service of our sovereign." With that remark, Devon inclined his head, snapped about, and walked quickly away.

"You may be given that opportunity, my friend. Indeed, you will," whispered Count Yedric under his breath.



Most of the crowd didn't recognize Devon, but they knew his name. That's why he gave the seneschal a false one. He was the commander of

the Imperial Intelligence Service; so, although a noble, he was not often seen in the company of nobles. He was a fighter, a soldier, and an officer, not yet ready to give that up for politics and flattery. Candidly, he speculated, he wasn't destined to live long enough to give it up, either.

Devon wandered to a dark, tapestried corner of the room. Along the way he gathered sweet meats and pastries. Though Duke Falkeep was well known for his cellars, Devon didn't touch the wine; he needed a clear head tonight. The knight hadn't eaten before he arrived at the ball, so he might as well stock up now. *A sort of last meal*, he reflected. Anyway, he had over an hour to wait.

Devon knew, tonight, Count Yedric planned to meet clandestinely with a few unscrupulous nobles. They were influential men and sympathetic to Yedric's cause. Yedric desired for them to join his rebellion. Tonight Devon would push them over the brink. He hoped to embroil them in a conspiracy that would weld them together in guilt. He would force them to insurrection, to become the heralds of Yedric's treachery...God help their souls.

As Devon silently watched the events of the evening unfold, one of Yedric's knights approached him. Devon recognized the knight and realized he should know the man's name, but couldn't remember it.

"My lord," the knight began with a slight bow, "Count Yedric sends his regards." He paused to discern Devon's response. When Devon said nothing, he continued, "Count Yedric requests a truce—that, tonight, you desist your attempts to discredit him." Encouraged by Devon's silence, he went on, "The Count prays you would recognize your responsibility toward the Crown as he recognizes his..."

"And that I join him," finished Devon for him.

"Yes, and that you join him."

"I will do nothing to discredit my Emperor," Devon stated. He smiled inwardly, for here was the real reason for this visit—the bait.

"This evening, my lord, Count Yedric will speak with certain supporters of his viewpoint. He cordially requests you join him..."

"And listen to him spout his traitorous remarks?" Devon finished blandly.

"My lord, he begs you to consider your responsibility to the

Empire as a whole.”

“Where will he present his imprudent theory?” Devon continued in the same tone.

“In the far garden at midnight.”

“The witching hour. That is appropriate.”

“Simply consider the invitation, my lord.”

“That I will,” and Devon reinforced the answer in his thoughts.

That I certainly will.

With a bow, the knight turned and walked away.

Good, thought Devon. My agents correctly ascertained all the pertinent details.

So far, Devon’s planning was perfect. Now, if everything else worked out correctly, he would give Yedric the surprise of his life.

Devon sighed as he considered the events of the night and the Lady Tamar’s sweet kiss. The girl almost caught him off guard with the crack about Prince John-Mark making a better Emperor, and that was another cause of tension in the court. He almost laughed; if the Prince John-Mark succeeded, much of the Empire would soon be under his control.

But the Crown Prince Perod-Mark was a man to be reckoned with. He craved power without responsibility. Devon wished the betrothed John-Mark and Lady Lyril well. He thought with regret of the circumstance that would not allow him the same happiness with the Lady Tamar.



As time for the illicit meeting drew near, Devon worked his way through the thinning crowd to the terrace side of the ballroom. He walked along the French doors until he reached the last pair, then slipped through them onto the terrace and into the garden.



All evening, Tamar faced her sisters' questions and ribbing. Who was that young knight? Why did she dance so long with him? What did he say? She answered them carefully and didn't give a full account. She told them only enough to stifle their curiosity.

Tamar asked herself precisely the same questions. She didn't know exactly who he was. She couldn't be sure what he said that so affected her, only that she felt a strong attraction to him. She felt comfortable with him, and as much as she could, she discretely tried to find him again. Sir Devon didn't leave the party: she had inquired of the seneschal.

Why had he said he would never see her again? She wanted him to explain everything to her. Where had he first seen her to fall in love with her? How did he know she was here now? She was supposed to be at school on Arienth for another month. Tamar was confused and a little frightened, and although she knew nothing about such things, she was curious and intrigued with the very thought of his unsolicited love.

Tamar almost gave up her search, when at half past eleven, she noticed Sir Devon steal through the last set of French doors. He disappeared onto the terrace. Tamar took a close look around to see if anyone else noticed the knight's departure, then made some excuse and followed Sir Devon through the doors.

Because the weather was still cool, no one stood on the terrace, but Tamar caught the glimpse of a shadow that cut into the garden along one of the walkways. She followed the shadowy figure. Now she was not as interested in catching up with the knight as she was in finding out where he was going. Tamar almost called her father's guard, but decided quickly that the gardens were not forbidden to the guests. Her precaution would only look foolish.

She wouldn't dare let herself think Devon's words on the terrace meant nothing to him. She wouldn't let herself believe he stole off to a rendezvous with someone else. Tamar tried to convince herself the feelings of her heart were nothing, and whatever was going on couldn't involve the knight romantically. Again, she almost called the guard but stopped. She convinced herself once more her suspicions were the product of her overwrought imagination. What accusation could she make against the knight? That he took a late-night walk in the gardens?

The moment her feet touched the path, the garden seemed to rise up around her. With the night, the garden engulfed her and filled her senses with thick, heady fragrance. Even the breath of the still air on her cheek felt heavy, laden with moisture, pregnant with the early spring of the garden. Tamar turned slightly to catch a last glimpse of the brightly lit ballroom as it slid in flashes behind the foliage. Almost as quickly, the lighted windows of the house disappeared and left her straining ahead to see the path.

Tamar wondered where the knight was bound. At first, she thought, he headed toward the house. All around the building the garden turned into private alcoves and smaller partially surrounded nooks. These alcoves furnished the individual suites with private retreats and made perfect sites for a secret meeting. But he turned away from the house.

More than a thousand square kilometers of gardens and forest bordered the manor, and deeper in the garden lay guesthouses and private pavilions. He headed into the depths of the garden. Perhaps one of these was his destination.

Tamar kept the dark figure just at the edge of her vision and tailed him as quietly as she could. Her slippers barely made a sound, but neither did the flitting ghost she followed. Like a hunt or the wild and frenzied dreams clasped deliciously at the edge of sleep, the chase exhilarated her. Oddly, she didn't fear for herself. The security of the gardens and her own inexperience gave her a false sense of invulnerability.

Tamar had walked quite far into the huge garden when she suddenly lost sight of the knight. She was certain he disappeared into the foliage, and she ran silently to the last spot she saw him. In the thick darkness, she paced up and down the path and strained to see him among the trees.

Just ahead lay one of the larger pavilions. It was probably still sealed for the winter. She focused her eyes further down the trail and glimpsed lights through the trees. Now Tamar was really curious. She wondered if her father knew about this private party in his garden.

Tamar decided the pavilion must be the goal of her mischievous friend, Sir Devon. Incautiously, she walked up the path toward the

lights. Tamar began to hear voices. Just as she was about to step within sight of the pavilion, someone grasped her around the waist, and before she could scream, a hand clasped roughly over her mouth.

The intruder dragged Tamar into the thick undergrowth. Whipping branches stung her arms and legs. Her assailant stopped in a crouch and held her tightly and as easily as a child. She felt a sigh beside her ear, then a loud whisper. "You little fool. You shouldn't have followed me." There was a pause. "If I let you go, do you promise, on your life, not to make a sound?"

Tamar was frightened. The voice sounded like Sir Devon's. She nodded.

"Very good," the whisper continued, and though the pressure slowly released from her face, the hand still hovered about an inch before her lips. Tamar tried to turn her head to look at him, but he grasped her jaw and held her face firmly forward.

The voice whispered menacingly, "You don't know why those men are meeting over there, do you?"

Tamar licked her lips and was about to respond, but he must have felt her breath change on his hand because he cut her off. "No, just nod."

Tamar vigorously shook her head. She suddenly became very frightened, and her lips started to quiver. He must have perceived this movement because he whispered, "Not a sound. Unless you have something to do with those men, you have nothing to fear from me. Tell me, you didn't know they were meeting here? Tonight? Did you?"

She again shook her head in the negative.

"Good. Now listen to me very carefully. I can't take any chance of your being seen. If you value your life, you will sit here quietly. No matter what you see or hear, don't make a sound, and don't let yourself be seen. What I do, I must do for the Empire and the Emperor. I don't ask you to believe just my words." His hand left her line of sight and returned with a plain gold ring. Its only decoration was the Imperial seal: crossed needle-shaped ships below a star. She stared wide-eyed at this rare token from the Emperor's hand.

"Do you recognize this?" he whispered.

She gave a vigorous nod.

“Good.” He placed the ring in her hand and curled her fingers around it. “You must hold it for me. Don’t give it to anyone. Don’t let anyone know you’ve seen it. I would have left it here, lost in this garden, but you will be a better surety.”

Tamar knew the importance of such a ring. It was an Imperial seal. The Emperor only entrusted his closest advisors with it—only three or four nobles in the entire Empire. Tamar knew that the ring must not fall into the wrong hands, and she wondered anew who this knight could be.

“Don’t move until you no longer see lights or hear voices. If you do, I guarantee it will be your death. Do you understand?”

Holding back tears, Tamar nodded.

“Do you swear?”

She nodded again.

The arms encircling her suddenly took on a different quality. They held her gently, and she thought, almost lovingly. Then they fell from her, and she watched Devon steal silently to the edge of the trees and disappear into the brush....

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The End of Honor

BOOK ONE



An intragalactic war
threatens to tear apart
the Human Galactic Empire...

The death-knell of the Human Galactic Empire has sounded—it is the crash of an axe against the virgin white marble of the Hall of Accords. It is the bitten-off cry of the Lady Lyral Neuterra, whose head lies sundered from her smooth shoulders. It is the death of the Emperor at the hand of his own son. It is the whirlwind of a thousand ships sent to enforce the new Emperor's will. And only Prince John-Mark, the Emperor's youngest son, can bring the Empire back from the edge—back to peace and honor.

Prince John-Mark had intended to wed the Lady Lyral—now he can only mourn her. Revenge is his great desire, but he cannot be revenged without tearing apart the civilization and people he loves....

For more information about L.D. Alford and *The End of Honor*:

www.LDAlford.com

www.TheEndofHonor.com

A Season of Honor

BOOK THREE



Baron Shawn du Locke must choose between honor and desire...with the fragile peace of the Human Galactic Empire hanging in the balance.

Shorn of his lands, regency, title, father, lady, and name, the only thing left to the Baron Shawn du Locke is his honor. Nothing in the past has shaken it and nothing would cause him to compromise it—until he meets the Lady Elina Acier.

Elina Acier is the last hope of the Noble Houses of the Human Galactic Empire. To protect the planet Acier from the Emperor, she must marry a Duke's son.

Before Shawn meets Elina, he vows to convey her to the Imperial Capital to marry Duke Nior's son. But Elina is a startling lookalike for her cousin, Shawn's long-dead love, the Lady Lyral Neuterra. Shawn once loved Lyral enough to grant her his House and fight a war in her name. Now he is honor-bound to deliver Elina, Lyral's "twin," to marry another man.

Shawn must safely deliver Elina to the Imperial Capital before the Emperor discovers and kills Elina, and before her presence drives him insane...or he falls in love.

For more information about L.D. Alford and *A Season of Honor*:
www.LDAlford.com
www.ASeasonofHonor.com

Also by L.D. Alford



CENTURION

A longing heart.
An unlikely friendship.
Love...and the bitterest of betrayals.

The son of a Galilean concubine—a Jewess—and a Roman ambassador: Abenadar suffered disapproving stares in the village of Natzeret, but so did the boy Yeshua, son of Yosef and Miryam. Perhaps it wasn't unusual the two became fast friends.

As Abenadar rises through the ranks of the Roman Legion to assume the rank of Centurion, he finds love with Ruth, a woman he rescues from the streets of Jerusalem. She believes the prophet Jesus is the One—the Messiah—everyone has been waiting for. Abenadar is dubious. He's seen too many messiahs...and they all died on Roman crosses. But what if Jesus is telling the truth? As advisor to Procurator Pontius Pilate and a Roman, Abenadar has a duty to uphold....but it may cause him to lose everything.

Hauntingly compelling, Centurion will transform every life it touches.

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www.CenturionNovel.com

Aegypt

L. D. Alford

*An unspeakable evil
and an unbelievable power
is about to be released into the world...*

Lieutenant Paul Bolang, stationed at Fort Saint in Tunisia in the 1920s, discovers a hieroglyph. Suspecting that the fort might have been built beside an ancient Egyptian foundation, he summons an archaeological party. When a tomb is discovered and opened, death strikes immediately...and reveals a grisly secret.

Lt. Bolang soon uncovers two other tombs: the tombs of the Goddess of Light and the Goddess of Darkness. As the first tomb is opened, a being escapes into the desert...and is pursued by Bolang. What will the next tomb hold? Will opening it unleash a great evil and suffering on mankind, as many believe? Or is all that simply a myth?

A fascinating tale of technology, cultures, and ancient magic

For more information about L.D. Alford and *Aegypt*:

www.LDAlford.com

www.AegyptNovel.com

About the Author



“The finest escape in literature is an escape into a real and inviting culture,” asserts novelist **L.D. ALFORD**. He enjoys exploring with originality and intimacy those cultures and societies we think we already know. He builds compelling tales that make ancient and future worlds real to his readers. His stories uniquely explore the connections between events close and familiar and those that are possible—all woven together with threads of reality and fascinating technology that bring

the future alive.

L.D. Alford is familiar with both technology and cultures. He is an experimental test pilot with over 6000 hours in more than 60 different kinds of aircraft. He also served in worldwide military operations as a member of three different operational combat squadrons. L.D. earned a B.S. in Chemistry from Pacific Lutheran University, an M.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Boston University, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Aerospace Engineering at the University of Dayton. He is a graduate of Air War College, Air Command and Staff College, and the US Air Force Test Pilot School. He is widely traveled and has spent long periods in Europe and Central America. He is a featured writer for **www.WingoverKansas.com** and the author of the acclaimed novels *Centurion*, *Aegypt*, and *The Second Mission*, as well as Book One, *The End of Honor*, and Book Three, *A Season of Honor*, in The Chronicles of the Dragon and the Fox series. He has also written and published over 40 technical articles.

L.D. Alford is currently working on the sequels to *Aegypt: The Goddess of Light*, *The Goddess of Darkness*, *The Shadows of Darkness*, and *The Shadows of Light*.

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