

Carom Shot

By

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"So what's the crisis?" Duram Karr sighed as he slid into a lounge chair in the VIP Room of the Commander's Club. Across the table sat The Honorable Everal Blum, Representative Third Class to the Galactic Council. "I'm not even due back to work until tomorrow. Couldn't this have waited?"

Duram had shuttled down to Terra City, Earth's major center of galactic politics, not more than thirty minutes ago. He had not been happy to find the priority message from his boss waiting for him.

The round little man smirked at his aide, looking as pleased as if he had just inherited a pleasure satellite. "Have a drink," he said with a careless wave of his hand. "How was the ice boating?" Blum held a quark slush in his hand. From the redness of Blum's face and the slight slurring of his words, Duram decided his boss was already several drinks up on him.

"The ice-boating was great if you like temperatures that never get above minus thirty Celsius. But I assume you didn't call me here to talk about the wonders of Jarl as a vacation planet. Your message said it was urgent that I meet with you tonight. What gives?"

Blum leaned forward. "I just had to tell you the good news. I've pulled off a real coup."

Duram held back on his what-have-you-gone-and-done-now look. His boss was no more incompetent than the usual sub-representative to the High Council. Most such officials relied on their aides to keep them out of trouble. Duram was Blum's top advisor precisely because of his effectiveness at doing that. Duram didn't mind the work. He rather liked the little man, naïvely optimistic as Blum was, but every now and then, the sub-representative couldn't resist dipping his finger into the pot. Then, there was usually hell to pay until Duram could straighten things out.

"Suppose you tell me what this is all about," Duram said, making an effort to control his impatience.

"I'm to address this year's High Council of Primes!"

Duram stared at Blum dumbly.

Blum's abundance of rounded chins bobbed up and down. "It's true. The Earth Prime himself selected me for the honor."

Before Duram could respond, a short, chunky robo-waiter wheeled over to the table, its face a cartoonish facsimile of human features. Blum insisted on buying. Still stunned by Blum's unexpected news, Duram ordered a glass of house wine. He eyed his boss through narrowed eyes as Blum held up his right hand for the waiter to scan

the credit chip in his forefinger.

"Why should Cronos do you such a favor? He hasn't been exactly cordial in the past." Duram had had it on good authority that the Prime often referred to Blum as an imbecile and a bone-head.

"It's the Harkorians," Blum confided in a low conspiratorial voice. "You know the problem."

Duram was indeed familiar with the Harkorian situation. Although a member race of the High Council, the Harkorians often ignored its dictates. Recently, there had been rumors of unidentified ships in the vicinity of Epselon-2, one of the planetary systems under Earth's jurisdiction. It appeared they were checking out the systems defenses, a decidedly hostile act forbidden by interplanetary law. The Harkorians were the only logical suspects.

"What about the Harkorians?" Duram asked, frowning.

"The Prime says it's time to take them to task – make a formal protest before the Council. He asked for volunteers. None of the other sub-representatives spoke up so I saw my chance. 'There's no doubt in my mind', I said, 'that those bad-tempered boors need to have the riot act read to them.' That's what I said, right to his face. The Prime positively beamed at me. 'Would you be willing to submit Earth's protest at the next meeting of the High Council of Primes?' he asked. Of course I told him I'd be delighted."

Duram's hand came down flat on the table, making his wine glass jump. "You didn't!"

"I did," Blum said. "It's a wonderful opportunity."

"Tell me, did the Prime offer any evidence that the Harkorians entered our system?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Our sightings have been too distant to allow for a definite identification. But it's got to be them. They are the only ones who have challenged us on our holdings."

Duram took a deep breath. "Representative," he said, giving the title an ominous emphasis, "please believe me. You don't want this assignment. We should be able to get you out of it without too much political fallout. But we need to do it quickly before the media gets wind of it."

Blum's features puffed with indignation. "Get me out of it? Why should I want out? This is the first real recognition I've received from the Prime since I was appointed to the Council. Besides, I've already held a news conference. They ate it up. If you had gotten back a day earlier you'd have seen the headliner leading off the video release: 'Blum Socks it to the Harkorians!' I tell you, this will get me second-class status for certain."

"Undoubtedly," Duram said. "Only it will be awarded posthumously."

Blum stiffened in his chair, his eyes widening. "What are you talking about?"

Duram leaned back, allowing his body to go limp and his mind blank as he assumed his biologically programmed state for automatic data retrieval.

"'Prerequisites of the Harkorian Delegation'," he recited. "'Volume III, Chapter IV, Paragraph 6, High Council's Rules of Conduct for Representatives. In accordance with the treaty of 2296, and in recognition of the high value placed on personal honor by the Harkorian Confederacy, all members of their staff are granted the right to

challenge any Representatives who cast aspersions on their personal integrity or that of their government. If those challenged cannot support their accusations with hard evidence, the offended party may issue a death-duel invitation. Refusing to accept will be deemed tantamount to an admission of perjury and the offender will be prosecuted accordingly'."

Blum's mouth had fallen open during Duram's recitation. For several seconds, he stared at his aide in disbelief. "But this isn't possible. Surely, the High Council doesn't accept the legitimacy of a Harkorian death-duel."

"I'm afraid they do," Duram said. "It was the only way the Harkorians would agree to the High Council's jurisdiction. They're a pretty violent bunch, derived from predatory stock if I remember correctly. Have you ever watched a holo of their death-duels? Bloody affairs. They fight naked with whips tipped with razor-sharp blades. The point of the match is to disable your opponent and work him over at your leisure. Properly done, the duration of the kill indicates the severity of the insult."

Blum drew back as if he could hear the metallic snap of the Harkorian whips in Duram's words.

"This is disastrous," he said, his voice two octaves higher. "There's no way I can deliver the Prime's reprimand under these conditions. We'll have to notify him immediately."

"Do that and your next assignment will be a fourth-class diplomatic position on Plutarch where the main form of recreation is hunting giant sand lizards with spears."

"What choice do I have? I can't put myself in a position to receive a death-duel challenge."

Duram toyed thoughtfully with his glass. "We need some face-saving way of getting you out of this. The High Council meets in a week. Not much time. Still, let me see what I can come up with before you start packing for Plutarch." Duram rose. "Just one favor."

"Anything!"

"Try not to volunteer for any more special assignments over the next few days."

Duram entered the Tri-Dee Hall and looked for Madeen. He saw her leaning over the holo-pool game machine trying a down shot. She had a habit of twitching her rear when going for a particularly difficult combination. "Gives it a little extra English," she had claimed.

He watched appreciatively as she made the shot. The cue ball angled downward, careened off the bottom, and smacked the two ball, sending it into the front target disc. The two-ball vaporized.

"Nice," Duram said, registering appreciation for the shooter as well as the shot.

"Just warming up." Madeen glanced at him under an arched eyebrow. "You're late," she said.

"Couldn't be helped, love." Duram bent down to kiss her but she turned so his lips only grazed her cheek.

"And what was critical enough to justify my wasting a half-hour waiting for you?"

"I have a serious situation here, really serious. I've spent the whole day in the Archives, reviewing historical data on the Harkorians. I got so damned frustrated. I lost all sense of time."

Madeen cocked her head. "I don't believe I've ever seen you this flustered by an assignment. Want to talk about it?"

Duram grinned. "Yeah, I do. But I'm hoping you can provide a bit more than just a sympathetic ear."

"Looking for free legal advice again." She sighed. "And I thought it was my girlish charms that keep you coming back for more beatings at holo-pool."

Duram snorted. "Just reset the game. I'm due for a break. I sure as hell haven't had one yet today."

Madeen energized the control button to erase her current game. Duram laid his right forefinger on an opaque glass square. "This one's on me," he said. He held his breath, hoping his vacation spending hadn't completely wiped out his savings. The holo table set up for a new play, clustering the numbered balls in the center of the holo in the form of a rough sphere. It positioned the cue ball in the middle of the front side, approximately a meter from the cluster.

"Your break since you're buying," Madeen said with an evil grin.

He raised the free-floating bar and rested his cue stick on it. Lining up on the cue ball, he drew back his stick then shot it forward, driving the cue ball into the center of the cluster. Balls scattered in all directions bouncing off sides, top, and bottom. Three of them hit scoring discs and disappeared. A display at the top of the holo registered balls one, five, and eight as scored by First Player.

"Lucky shot," Madeen said, and flicked her tongue at him.

"I told you I was due." Duram adjusted the front bar for his next shot. He sent the cue ball directly into the six. It hit the rear of the holo and bounced back to the front, missing a target disc by centimeters.

Madeen took over. In rapid succession, she hit target discs with the four, two, and eleven balls. While she was shooting, Duram gave her an account of the mess Blum had created. She paused and frowned. "This sounds like a no-winner. Is there any way you can transfer out from under him before it all comes to a head?"

Duram shook his head. "Aides who bail out in a crisis are seldom well thought of. And even if I could jump clear, I probably wouldn't. The guy isn't half bad, just lacks survival genes. You don't see any fine points we could raise to avoid a head-on with the Harkorian Representative?"

Laying down her cue stick, she stiffened for a moment, eyes glazing. Speed reviewing, he assumed, the legal data she had encoded on Harkorian law. Giving an involuntary shudder, she relaxed. "Not if your boss accuses them of unlawful acts without proof. The regulations are very specific on this point."

"I still find it incredible that the High Council agreed to such terms."

"It was the only way they could persuade the Harkorians to join. They are an aggressive race, conditioned for centuries to respond to insults by committing great bodily harm. The death-duel challenge gives their representatives an alternative to immediate acts of violence. Without it, they wouldn't be able to restrain themselves. Because of it, other Representatives take great care in how they address Harkorian issues."

"Wonderful," Duram groaned. "Anyone provokes the Harkorian Prime with an unproven accusation – no matter how justified – and the Harkorian has the right to flay the skin off them."

"I'm afraid your boss's only recourse is to withdraw from the meeting."

"And be black-balled by Earth's Prime."

Madeen shrugged, picked up her cue stick, and examined the lay of the remaining balls. Giving her bottom its customary twitch, she drove the cue ball against the edge of the six. The six angled off aimlessly and Duram thought she had muffed her shot, but the cue ball caromed off the six and into the three, sending it into the target disc on the left side of the holo.

"Yes!" Madeen said, clenching her fist.

Duram grimaced at the obvious satisfaction she derived from showing him up. Then, his eyes widened. "Madeen, I love you," he announced, taking her into his arms and kissing her full on the lips. She stared at him as he released her, mouth open, arms limp at her sides, cue stick dragging on the floor.

"Gotta run," he said and dashed toward the exit.

"But we haven't finished our game...." Her voice faded behind him.

The meeting of the High Council of Primes was held in the great assembly hall at Nute-Gia, capital of the neutral planet Zorenda. The Primes sat in a semi-circle, raised up on a floating dais high above the hoards of life forms that filled the seating areas of the vast domed hall.

Duram stood to one side of the dais, two paces behind Blum, as the Representative read over his presentation – not the one given to him by Earth's Prime but a paper carefully crafted by Duram. Blum's bald head glistened and he held his arms stiffly at his side, but the sub-representative would play the role required of him. At least Duram hoped he would. Both of their careers depended on Blum's performance and, of course, the Harkorian Prime's reaction to it. These volatile types were hard to predict. Duram sought reassurance from the hard barrel of the stunner, pressed against his side under his formal diplomat's jacket.

His gaze wandered over the Prime Representatives. On his far left the Ebonite Prime perched, bird-like but without feathers, staring with solemn dignity down its long, beaked countenance. Next along the half-circle of seats, a Narton floated in a water-filled container, its tentacles moving over a control panel at the bottom of the tank. Beyond the Narton sat the Prime of the Kiliads, a weighty blue-black mass supported by stumpy appendages, its eyes and mouth half buried in its cascading folds of dark flesh. At the center sat a black, cylindrical container, covered with sensors and mechanical appendages. No more than two meters in height and one in diameter, it held the Prime of the Voorjuns. The Voorjuns' bodies lacked the supporting bone and muscle tissue to withstand the three quarters Earth-norm gravitation on Zorenda, but these flaccid creatures were the originators of the Galactic Council and presided over all High Council meetings.

Closest on Duram's right sat Mark Cronos, the Earth Prime, representing Earth and the growing complex of worlds inhabited by humans. Next to him sat the Prime of the Tineris, a small, slender creature with a bluish skin and large yellow eyes. In the last chair sat Dak-Shar, the Harkorian. To Duram, Harkorian features incorporated the worst characteristics of a tiger and a wart hog. A protective field surrounded each Prime like a giant bubble. The field could withstand the force of a high explosive from the outside but was easily penetrable from within.

Council proceedings were carried out in Galcom, the language used for all inter-species exchanges. One after another, the Representatives addressed the Council on issues of trade, cultural exchanges, research findings and galactic explorations. The Harkorian Prime, paid little attention to these presenters, and scowled down at Blum. Duram had seen to it that Blum's upcoming attack on the Harkorians had been well publicized. He wanted Dak-Shar to be aware of the verbal attack to come. If looks could kill, Blum would already be a mutilated corpse.

Duram started when a flat mechanical voice rising from the cylindrical container of the Voorjun Prime called for Blum to stand forth and address the assembly. Blum looked back at Duram once, swallowed several times, and approached the dais.

"Honored Primes and distinguished fellow Representatives," Blum began in an oratorical tone. "The origins of this august body go back unimaginable eons, to periods of history that predate the first ancestors of some of the life-forms present today. Its authority extends to the very boundaries of our galaxy. To be granted membership within this body and to participate in its functions is a great and noble privilege." He cleared his throat.

"By the same token, however, it is a vile and despicable act for a member race to ignore their pledged word and violate the just laws established by the High Council."

The audience stirred. Several of the Primes glanced toward Dak-Shar, whose features contorted into a predatory snarl.

"But respected beings," Blum continued, "when a member race performs such violations in secrecy, behind the backs of the Council, then its behavior is not only despicable, but cowardly. I stand before you to accuse a member society of a most deceitful violation of one of Earth's planetary system annexations."

The murmuring of the spectators had increased to the point where Blum had to shout his last few words to be heard. Dak-Shar rose to his feet and grasped the carved crystal railing that curved around the Primes' seating section. The Harkorian's massive body shook with anger. Blum gave a quick glance in Duram's direction and Duram nodded. It was now or never.

"With the authority vested in me by the honorable Prime of Earth's Representatives, I hereby lay an accusation of territorial violation."

Dak-Shar pointed a sausage-sized finger down at Sub-Representative Blum. "You dare accuse the Harkorians of deceit and cowardly actions and offer no proof of your claim? This may no being do in the presence of Dak-Shar and live. I to you the death-duel challenge issue. I will take great pleasure in tearing the flesh from your bones."

Blum's round face took on an expression of wounded innocence. "You are mistaken, Honorable Prime. It is the Tineris I condemn for so flagrantly violating our territorial boundaries."

Immediately, the great hall filled with multi-lingual chatter. The diminutive Tineris Prime looked alternately shocked and perplexed. Duram understood his confusion. The only Tineris violation of Earth sovereignty had been an emergency landing by one of their spacecraft on the planet Balboa for repairs. The landing had occurred several months ago and there had been no question of a violation. The incident had been largely ignored by the Earth press and all concerned.

"Insignificant fly dropping!" Dak-Shar roared in a harsh version of Galcom. "Think you I have not awareness at whom your pathetic complaints are directed? It is full well known by all where your intentions fall. Accounts have we witnessed in your corrupt media. My people are enraged by your accusations."

"No formal complaint has been lodged against the Harkorians," the flat, mechanical voice of the Voorjun Prime interjected. "The death-duel challenge is void and need not be accepted."

Duram took a deep breath. This was the moment of truth. Had he assessed the Harkorian's character correctly? Goaded him into losing any semblance of self-control? If not, the Earth Prime would be all over them for making unfounded accusations against the Tineris and their diplomatic careers would be finished.

The Harkorian Prime shook a hairy fist in the air. "This insult will not go unanswered!" he bellowed. "If my right to the death-duel is rejected, then die he shall here and now." The protective bubble surrounding Dak-Shar fizzled as he pressed through it to vault over the rail fronting the dais. He landed balanced in a crouch, ready to leap on his tormentor and tear him with tooth and claw. He never had the opportunity. Even before his feet touched the floor, Duram had his stunner out from beneath his jacket. He had practiced for this moment all week and his draw was smooth, his aim unwavering. Still in his crouch, Dak-Shar's body went suddenly rigid. Like a felled tree, the Harkorian Prime toppled to the floor.

On his return to Earth, the first thing Duram did was call Madeen to apologize for deserting her on their last date and invite her to dinner at the Commander's Club. Madeen was incredulous when, over dinner, Duram described the scene at the High Council.

"You mean you actually got away with stunning the Harkorian Prime?"

Duram shrugged. "It was, after all, a case of self defense. As an aide, I have a permit to carry a protective weapon. And he did attack Blum without provocation. Actually, the Harkorians were grateful to us for not imposing the full penalty against Dak-Shar for an unwarranted life threat. Having one of their highest officials imprisoned would have been a terrible embarrassment."

"You let them off the hook?"

Duram grinned. "In return for an admission that some of their spacecraft might have inadvertently entered planetary systems under Earth's jurisdiction. They assured Earth's Prime they are taking steps to see that no more such 'incidents' occur."

"What about the Tineris Prime?"

"He was all for us once he realized what we were up to. He thought it a great joke on the Harkorians. Apparently, they have violated Tineris systems as well."

"Pretty clever," Madeen said. "But how did you ever come up with such a tricky scheme?"

Duram flashed her a knowing grin across the table. "How about some holo-pool after dinner? I've been giving a lot of thought to that carom shot you pulled on me last time we played."