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BattleCorps Security Team

Destiny's Call

By Loren L. Coleman

Part IV



Tharkad, 2721

His neck on fire with pain Alek stumbled forward, heading for a tumble down the short flight of snow-swept stairs. Behind him, Gabriella called out a short, sharp, "Alek!"

Elias Luvon laughed.

Dragging his right foot Alek pitched himself to one side. He lost one of his dress shoes, but managed to catch the stone obelisk that began the courtyard wall at the top of the steps. One edge sliced skin off his right temple, scraped down the side of his face with a dry, sandpaper rasp, and chipped against his collarbone. Alek exhaled sharply.



Rough hands grabbed at him again, a pair to each arm, and yanked him away from the obelisk. Two cadets, among Elias's best friends and the ones who had been waiting on the ballroom floor as Elias asked Gabriella for a dance. They hauled him around to face Elias. A fourth cadet held Gabriella from behind, one hand clasped around either arm. Alek recognized him as well, from earlier at the refreshment table.

Gabriella's soft brown eyes were wide and her arms puckered into gooseflesh from the evening cold. She had lost Alek's coat, which lay at her feet in a dark rumple. A lock of hair had pulled loose from her coif and lay down across her face. "Alek?"

He'd be all right. Probably. He felt the soft trickle of blood oozing down his face, dripping from his jaw. Bright red teardrops splashed down the right breast of his tux shirt, spreading into a stain.

"You're done, Alek." Elias's eyes were dark, and cold as any of the ice sculptures Alek and Gabriella had looked upon. "You couldn't even be a gracious winner this evening. Well, we're all tired of your Terran-elitist attitude. Your lack of respect."

"I can't understand it either." Alek shrugged one shoulder up to his jaw to blot the blood from it. "I mean, given my warm reception and—"

Elias skipped forward, saber jangling at his side as he brought a knee up to plant squarely into Alek's midsection. Breath rushed out in a violent exhale and Alek sagged toward the ground. Only strong hands kept him off his knees, holding him above the frozen courtyard. A second blow was not as well-aimed, and Alek felt a rib snap with a bright thunderbolt of pain. He gasped for air, barely able to breathe.

"Hobnobbing with the Archon's brother." Elias paced back to his original spot. "Insulting the Nagelring. Insulting the Commonwealth." His list of Alek's wrongs, real or imagined, had obviously condemned Alek already in his eyes. "Thinking that you were even worth her time," he said, staring at Gabriella.

"Worth my time?" Gabriella's tears were angry, not frightened. She struggled in the grip of Elias's crony. The dark-haired cadet glanced about warily, but held her fast. "I'd take Alek over some puffed-shirt 'Mech-head any day of the week, Elias Luvon."

Glancing back over his shoulder, Elias nodded sharply to the two holding Alek. One of them put a foot out in front of Alek, who struggled to regain his feet, and they both gave him a brutal shove. Alek sprawled forward over the courtyard flagstone, barely catching himself, grinding frozen gravel and ice into his hands. His left side spasmed as ends of his broken rib grated together.

"But he's so *clumsy*," Elias whined in mock incredulity. To his friends, he said, "Help him up."

They did so, one with a knee into his kidney and the other wrenching an arm behind his back until his shoulder screamed. Alek grunted, refusing to shout in pain. Through clenched teeth he managed, "Can't imagine...what's come over me." *Faith is the force by which we live*, Alek reminded himself. And not all of him was dust.

"If he's so clumsy," Gabriella tossed back, all but shouting, "so undesirable, why did your commander offer him a position in the Nagelring?"

He felt a slight hesitation in the loose grips of Elias's friends. The cadet holding onto Gabriella also looked taken aback, doubt clouding his green, malachite eyes. Alek gasped for more breath. The cold air burned harshly against his raw throat. "Didn't mention that to your friends?" he wheezed.

Elias spun on him. "Shut up."

"No snappy comeback?" Alek stood under his own strength. His right foot burned with cold as the ice underfoot melted and soaked into his sock, but he ignored the needle-stabbing sensation. Breathing shallow, trying not to aggravate his broken rib, he asked, "No grand debate?"

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say, Terran."

Alek nodded. "Well, after all, 'a closed mind never errs, nor learns,'" he quoted.

"Another one of your dead Russians?" Elias scoffed.

"Not this time," Alek said, thanking Michael silently for the words. "Tracial Steiner. One of yours."

With Gabreilla's help he had gotten through to one of them. The dark-haired cadet holding onto Gabriella let her go. "Come on, Elias," he said, glancing about nervously. "That's enough."

Elias speared the other cadet with a severe look. "I'll say when it's enough, Patrick." Then he slowly drew his saber, letting the sword rasp free of its hilt in one long pull. "I decide."

Gabriella drew in a sharp breath, fear finally showing in her eyes. The two cadets holding Alek let him go. They hadn't signed on for murder, apparently. But then, neither had Elias Luvon. No one else saw it in Elias's eyes. The desperation. The fear. Alek knew that Elias wasn't about to use the saber. He was abusive and insecure, but he had not lost control of his senses. He was posturing, pure and simple. Elias Luvon had a need to be respected. To be in charge. Alek found that sad, and not a little pitiful.

He was also very tired of being Elias's plaything, used as a means to the cadet's end. Shrugging away from the two cadets standing right behind him, he limped up to Elias. "You aren't going to use that, Elias." His voice was steadfast and certain.

Elias had a dead look in his eyes. He had backed himself into a corner, and knew it. "You don't know what I'd do."

Alek nodded. "You're going to be a soldier, Elias. A MechWarrior. You won't risk that here and now just to save face. Not with witnesses," he nodded to Gabriella.

"Who'd believe her?" Elias smiled cruelly. "Distraught and angry, found by four Nagelring cadets with her dress 'slipping' off and a Terran pawing her. Maybe her 'no's' were real...maybe they weren't. How were we to know, Alek? How were we to know?"

He meant to do it. Nothing with the sword—Elias seemed to have all but forgotten that as he crafted his latest piece of scandal and slander—but he could recover some poise by thrashing Alek further through university gossip. The feet thrust into his way, the thrown books and rude shoulders on the stairwells, they would never cease. Any “accidents” that befell him would be seen as deserving, to be covered up right away before any hint of the scandal made it into official records. If it ruined Gabriella Bailey’s reputation alongside his, that didn’t seem to bother Elias at all.

But it bothered Alek. More than anything else.

Bruises faded over time. Bones mended. But to hurt an innocent person for no other reason than the fact that she liked Alek seemed unconscionable.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh, yeah.” Elias flipped the end of his saber up, tapped Alek lightly on the shoulder with it as if knighting him. “And you know,” he whispered, “the more adamantly she denies it, the more people will believe it has to be true.”

“No!”

Alek flailed out with his left arm, knocking the saber away from his shoulder with such violence that it turned Elias halfway around from him. No one, especially Elias, had expected mild-mannered Alek to strike back. Not ever. Alek could have taken that moment to escape, so clean was the surprise. Grab Gabriella and run. Back across the courtyard patio, anywhere where others saw them, and could bear witness.

But instead Alek took a full step across the line he had toed for so many years. The line which had grown thicker, more severe, in the eighteen months spent on Tharkad.

He grabbed Elias Luvon, taking thick handfuls of fabric in each fist, and *heaved*. Elias staggered toward the steps which led into the university’s winter gardens. Alek stumbled, lost his footing. Pain lit up his left side as he slammed his knees against the cold patio flagstone. Through tear-filled eyes he watched as Elias wavered dangerously at the top edge, sword slashing the air in front of him as if trying to fend off gravity’s clutches.

Then Elias fell.

Alek's breathing stammered, dredging in painful breaths and then exhaling small clouds of frost. He sensed someone drop down beside him, adding what warmth she could with an arm around his shoulders. "Oh, Alek." The words echoed in his mind, but Alek drew no support from them. They were lost among a sea of chaotic thoughts and one dark, visceral image.

That of Elias Luvon. Sprawled over the lower patio.

A broken piece of his saber impaled through the right side of his chest.



The apartment, taken by Alek's parents so that they could be on hand for the inquiry, smelled of coffee and his mother's home-made black bread. The radiator rattled in the mornings and there was never enough hot water to satisfy anyone, but for now it was home.

It gave him a place to rest over the weekend, nursing his broken rib and a deeply-bruised kidney. Retreating into his books, he memorized three new poems by Pushkin and long passages by Dumas and Shakespeare as well. None of them could scrub the image from of his memory. No matter how hard he tried.

He limped from his room only twice that weekend. The second time he met Gabriella Bailey at the apartment's door. She had tracked him down via Michael Steiner, Alek's first visitor after the incident. Gabriella stood in the hall and bit on her lower lip, trying to decide what to say after declining an invitation into the apartment. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "You?" A shrug. "Gabriella. I never meant for—"

"I know." She cut him off with a quick shake of her head. Auburn hair whispered across her shoulders. The silence lengthened. She hugged herself around her middle. Awkward. Closed.

"Elias will be fine," she finally said.

Michael had already told him as much. Elias was in the critical care facility of the local hospital, in stable condition after the staff took care of some internal bleeding and reinflated his right lung. He'd be there for several days, under observation. He wouldn't be coming back for classes.

Gabriella had heard the same thing. "Looks like you won," she said.

It didn't feel that way to Alek. "No. I lost."

She looked down at the carpeted hall. "I can't get the picture out of my head. Everything changed so quickly." She looked up, her soft doe eyes full of uncertainty. "I wanted it to be different."

"Circumstance and accident often conspire against what we want."

She forced the ghost of a smile. "Who said that?"

"Me." Alek didn't smile. He had nearly killed Elias Luvon. Accident or no, it weighed heavily. "Gabriella. I—"

"Alek, I just wanted to see you. Tell you I wish it were different. Everything had been going so well. I want...wanted...but now..."

"I know," he offered, feeling very tired. "Me too."

"Thank you." She stepped into him, arms still between them as she leaned in close. Her breath was warm and sweet, and her eyes sad as she brushed dry lips over Alek's cheek.

It was his first kiss from Gabriella Bailey.

To say good-bye.



Alek spent most of his days in a virtual bubble of isolation. Mostly of his own doing. The Nagelring cadets pretended he did not exist, except for one who made a point of staking out the PoliSci hall and offering a formal apology first to Gabriella, and then Alek. Other students also forwarded tentative apologies for their previous hassling, or else wanted to hear more details about the night of the Formal and thought that Alek would be into the gossip. He ignored both equally.

Lunches were still taken with Michael Steiner, and it was through Michael that Alek forwarded his request for a meeting with Colonel Baumgarten. Michael had the impeccable manners not to say a thing at the time, though he invited himself along the following evening, showing up at the apartment with the colonel and a bottle of good Lyran wine as a gift to Alek's parents.

His mother played hostess, seating everyone in the small living room, passing out warm bread slathered with honey and pouring the wine. Alek's father stood behind his son's chair, hands on the backrest, encouraging but silent as Alek first asked after Elias Luvon.

"Recovering," Baumgarten said. The officer still looked more of an accountant than a warrior, and ran through the report as if he were checking off a list. "Good prognosis for a full recovery. Very quiet about what happened that night. Refusing to meet with any other students or cadets. And expelled from the Nagelring."

"Expelled?" Alek blinked twice. After all the cover-ups and dismissed investigations, he had not expected that. Had not even wished for it, in fact.

Baumgarten leaned forward. "We put a great deal of stock in personal conduct at the Nagelring, Alek. Accidents and a few minor transgressions we might overlook. But a pattern of abuse?" He shook his head. "I would hope you thought better of us than that."

Alek took a small bite of the heavy bread, letting the honey sit on his tongue a moment before swallowing. "I think very highly of the Nagelring *and* the Star League Defense Force, Colonel. But who..." He glanced at Michael Steiner.

Michael smiled serenely, very much at peace with himself. "Not a word from me, Alek, until Colonel Baumgarten asked directly. He already knew at that point. Apparently one of the cadets present that night came clean."

The dark haired one who had held Gabriella back. The one who had formally apologized to both of them. He asked, and Baumgarten nodded.

"Patrick Ward. *Ja*. On his testimony the Cadet Honor Board also expelled the other two, who attempted to bluff their way out of trouble. Patrick is on probation." He set aside his untouched wine. "But you really didn't ask me here to go over Nagelring protocols, did you?"

"In a way, sir. Yes." Alek stood, glanced at his mother and father who both smiled thin encouragement. They excused themselves from the room, leaving Alek alone with the two men. "I wish to formally apply to the Nagelring, per your earlier invitation."

Baumgarten did not appear surprised. "Lord Steiner suggested you might ask after that," he admitted. "I have to say, I thought it unlikely. I thought you did your fighting with words? 'Education is a weapon.' Isn't that what you said?"

That and more. Alek winced. "There is only a small difference between believing that, Colonel, and living by it. That difference nearly cost someone his life. When it truly mattered, I failed."

Michael shook his head. "You defended yourself, Alek. Don't beat yourself up over that."

"If I'm going to defend myself physically at all, I should learn how." That was the realization Alek had come to during his self-enforced isolation; that he had been fighting back against Elias Luvon for months without knowing it. Every verbal jab. His entire self-righteous attitude toward confrontation. And then, in a moment of frustration and anger, he had lashed out unconditionally. No thought or decision to it.

And that frightened Alek more than anything else.

Not all of him was dust, but he was not necessarily safe from the worm.

He tried to explain that to Colonel Baumgarten, who at least nodded as if he understood. "Still, you should think this over. Take some time, Alek."

"I hurt Elias Luvon without taking time to think. Colonel, I've made my decision. If the Nagelring will still have me."

Baumgarten stood, paced a tight box around the room while wrestling with the proposal. He came to a stop opposite Alek. "Technically, I cannot refuse you," he admitted. Though he certainly looked as if he wanted to. "I looked up her name."

"Who?" Alek asked, but he knew.

"The guard. Tanya. The one who wounded Leonard Kurita."

He sighed. "Yes. I thought you might. And I obviously know the story, Colonel. Kurita pulled a dagger from his robes and stabbed her to death before fleeing. Her family was later awarded the title Defender of the First Lord and the right to attend any academy or university."

Baumgarten spread his hands. "You see my dilemma."

"Colonel. If you tell me here, in private, that I am not welcome at the Nagelring nor would I be of use to the Star League, I will accept that. I will not pursue it, even though it is important to me."

"Why, Alek?" The colonel pressed forward, eyes intent. "Why is it so important that you do this? As a politician or historian you could effect such greater change."

Michael laughed softly. "Ah, Colonel. 'Everyone thinks of changing the world...' " he began.

And if Michael Steiner could learn Tolstoi, perhaps this effort by Alek wasn't so futile after all. "'No one thinks of changing himself,'" he finished the quote.

Baumgarten nodded slowly, digesting the words and never once breaking eye contact with Alek. He reached for the noteputer clipped to his belt, powered it up and pulled up a file. He showed it to Alek. The amber words glowed on the dark screen.

A formal contract, enlisting Alek into the Star League Defense Force, pursuant to his completion of training at the Nagelring military academy. It was all prepared, along with his identification number and full legal name, waiting for his thumbprint to seal the agreement. Alek reached out and thumbed the pad, letting the small device take a full scan and DNA sample, turning it into an unforgeable verigraph document.

Alek watched as Baumgarten confirmed it with his print, and Michael witnessed with his. As simple as that. He had not expected fanfare or ceremony. There wasn't any. Just the mantle of the huge commitment he had just made settling over his shoulders with great significance.

"Not all of me is dust," Alek whispered, bearing up beneath the weight.

Colonel Baumgarten was the first to offer his hand. "Welcome to the Nagelring," he said, "Aleksandr Kerensky."

• ***FIN*** •

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