

A NOTE TO READERS ABOUT SECURITY

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BattleCorps Security Team

Destiny's Call

y en C le an

P a r t I V



Tharkad, 2721

His neck or
pain. Alek
forward, head
tumble down
flight of
stairs. Bel
Gabriella c
short, sharp



Elias Luvon

Dragging h
foot Alek p
self to one side. He
lost one of his dress shoes, but
lisk that began the courtyard wal
sliced skin off his right temple,
with a dry, sandpaper rasp, and
Alek exhaled sharply.

Rough hands grabbed at him again,
yanked him away from the obelisk
best friends and the ones who had
floor as Elias asked Gabriella fo
to face Elias. A fourth cadet hel
clasped around either arm. Alek-
lier at the refreshment table.

Gabriella's soft brown eyes were
into gooseflesh from the evening
which lay at her feet in a dark
loose from her coif and lay down

He'd be all right. Probably. He
ing down his face, dripping from
splashed down the right breast o
a stain.

"You're done, Alek." Elias's eyes
ice sculptures Alek and Gabriella
even be a gracious winner this e
your Terran-elitist attitude. You

"I can't understand it either."
his jaw to blot the blood from -i
tion and—"

Elias skipped forward, saber jammed a knee up to plant squarely into the ground out in a violent exhale and Alek's strong hands kept him off his knees in the courtyard. A second blow was not a rib snap with a bright thunderbolt, but he was unable to breathe.

"Hobnobbing with the Archon's bodyguard to his original spot. 'Insulting the Commonwealth.'" His list of Alek's crimes was obviously condemned Alek already, and they were even worth her time," he said.

"Worth my time?" Gabriella's tea tray rattled. She struggled in the grip of Elias, glancing about warily, but held her breath. The puffed-shirt Mech-head any day.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Elias saw two holding Alek. One of them pulled, the other who struggled to regain his feet, but the shove. Alek sprawled forward over the ground, catching himself, grinding frozen joints. His left side spasmed as ends of his ribs cracked.

"But he's clumsy," Elias whined in mock sympathy to his friends, he said, "Help him up."

They did so, one with a knee into his back, wrenching an arm behind his back. Alek grunted, refusing to shout, but he managed, "Can't imagine what's going on. The force by which Alek reinvented himself was dust."

"If he's so clumsy," Gabriella said, "why is he undesirable, why did your command send him to the Nagelring?"

He felt a slight hesitation in his chest. The cadet holding onto Gabriella's arm, clouding his green, malachite eyes. The cold air burned harshly against his skin. "What's your question that to your friends?" he asked.

Elias spun on him. "Shut up."

"No snappy comeback?" Alek stood. His right foot burned with cold soaked into his sock, but he ignored it. Breathing shallow, trying not to panic, he asked, "No grand debate?"

"I'm not interested in anything more," he said. Alek nodded. "Well, after all, I've learned," he quoted.

"Another one of your dead Russians?"

"Not this time," Alek said, thankful. "Tracial Steiner. One of yours."

With Gabriella's help he had gotten the dark-haired cadet holding onto Gabriella. "Elias," he said, glancing about nervously.

Elias speared the other cadet with his sword. "It's enough, Patrick." Then he stepped back, sword rasp free of its hilt in one hand.

Gabriella drew in a sharp breath. The two cadets holding Alek let go. "He's for murder, apparently. But then, I didn't see else saw it in Elias's eyes. The problem was that Elias wasn't about to use the cure, but he had not lost control. It was pure and simple. Elias Luvon had the right in charge. Alek found that sad, and he was also very tired of being used as a means to the cadet's end. Shrugging, he stood right behind him, he listened. "I'm going to use that, Elias." His voice was low.

Elias had a dead look in his eyes, but he knew it. "You don't know what you're doing," he said.

Alek nodded. "You're going to be a doctor. You won't risk that here and now. I'll take my chances," he nodded to Gabriella.

"Who'd believe her?" Elias smiled. "I found her, found by four Nagelring cadets and a Terran pawing her. Maybe he was right. Weren't. How were we to know, Alek?"

He meant to do it. Nothing with him had ever been so simple. He had to have all but forgotten that as he was being hit and slander—but he could recover from that further through university gossip and thrown books and rude shoulders never cease. Any “accidents” that he was serving, to be covered up right away and made it into official records. -It was a tradition alongside his, that didn't stop.

But it bothered Alek. More than anything.

Bruises faded over time. Bonescent person for no other reason seemed unconscionable.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh, yeah.” Elias flipped the eraser lightly on the shoulder with it and he whispered, “the more adamantly people will believe it has to be true.”

“No!”

Alek flailed out with his left arm and his shoulder with such violence that it came from him. No one, especially Elias, dared Alek to strike back. Not ever. Alek had to escape, so clean was the surprise across the courtyard patio, anywhere could bear witness.

But instead Alek took a full step back so many years. The line which had been the eighteen months spent on Thar.

He grabbed Elias Luvon, taking him by the fist and Elias staggered toward the university's winter gardens. Pain lit up his left side as he fell on the patio flagstone. Through tear-filled eyes he stared dangerously at the top edge of his head as if trying to fend off a blow.

Then Elias fell.

Alek's breathing stammered, drew then exhaling small clouds of frost down beside him, adding what war around his shoulders. "Oh, Alek." but Alek drew no support from the of chaotic thoughts and one dark,

That of Elias Luvon. Sprawled over

A broken piece of his saber impaled his chest.



The apartment, taken by Alek's punch hand for the inquiry, smelled of made black bread. The radiator ran was never enough hot water to save was home.

It gave him a place to rest over a broken rib and a deeply-bruised kidney. He memorized three new poems by Pushkin, Dumas and Shakespeare as well. No matter the image from of his memory. No matter

He limped from his room only twice. The time he met Gabriella Bailey at the hospital tracked him down via Michael Stein's incident. Gabriella stood in the hallway to decide what to say after the decision. "Are you all right?"

He nodded. "You?" A shrug. "Gabriella"

"I know." She cut him off with a hair whispered across her shoulder. She hugged herself around her middle.

"Elias will be fine," she finally said.

Michael had already told him as he went to the care facility of the local hospital. He took care of some internal bleeding. He'd be there for several days, but he was coming back for classes.

Gabriella had heard the same thing she said.

It didn't feel that way to Alek.

She looked down at the carpeted floor of my head. Everything changed so soft doe eyes full of uncertainty.

"Circumstance and accident often we want."

She forced the ghost of a smile.

"Me." Alek didn't smile. He had no idea or no, it weighed heavily. "Gabriella."

"Alek, I just wanted to see you. Everything had been going so well."

"I know," he offered, feeling very sad.

"Thank you." She stepped into his arms, she leaned in close. Her breath was cold as she brushed dry lips over his.

It was his first kiss from Gabriella. To say good-bye.



Alek spent most of his days in the library. Mostly of his own doing. The National Archives did not exist, except for one who worked in the PoliSci hall and offering a formal dinner then Alek. Other students also found their previous hassling, or else they stayed the night of the Formal and though the gossip. He ignored both equally.

Lunches were still taken with the colonel through Michael that Alek forwarded with Colonel Baumgarten. Michael did not say a thing at the time, but the following evening, showing up at the door and a bottle of good Lyran wine and

His mother played hostess, seating them in the dining room, passing out warm bread slathering the wine. Alek's father stood on the backrest, encouraging but not interfering. Elias Luvon.

"Recovering," Baumgarten said. They were an accountant than a warrior, and they were checking off a list. "Good people, quiet about what happened that night. No other students or cadets. And expelled."

"Expelled?" Alek blinked twice. He missed investigations, he had not wished for it, in fact.

Baumgarten leaned forward. "We monitor personal conduct at the Nagelring, not transgressions we might overlook. He shook his head. "I would hope for better than that."

Alek took a small bite of the honey cake on his tongue a moment before swallowing. "One of the Nagelring's Star League Defenders, who..." He glanced at Michael Stein.

Michael smiled serenely, very much to Alek's surprise. "A word from me, Alek, until Colonel Baumgarten already knew at that point. A perfect night came clean."

The dark haired one who had helped him, who had formally apologized to him, Baumgarten nodded.

"Patrick saw and his testimony the Colonel expelled the other two, who attempted to cause trouble. Patrick is on probation. "But you really didn't ask me here, did you?"

"In a way, sir. Yes." Alek stood up, who both smiled thin encouragement from the room, leaving Alek alone to formally apply to the Nagelring,

Baumgarten did not appear surprised. "You might ask after that," he admitted, "it's unlikely. I thought you did your job with a weapon." Isn't that what you said?

That and more. Alek winced. "The choice between believing that, Colonel, and the choice nearly cost someone his life. When you choose, it costs."

Michael shook his head. "You don't need to beat yourself up over that."

"If I'm going to defend myself, I'll do it my way." That was the realization Alek had. He had enforced isolation; that he had kept Luvon for months without knowing anything. His self-righteous attitude toward the world, his sense of frustration and anger, his lack of thought or decision to it.

And that frightened Alek more than anything else.

Not all of him was dust, but he was the worm.

He tried to explain that to Colonel Kurita, who nodded as if he understood. "Still, it's some time, Alek."

"I hurt Elias Luvon without taking his life. I made my decision. If the Nagelring comes, I'll take it."

Baumgarten stood, paced a tight circle, wrestling with the proposal. He looked at Alek. "Technically, I cannot refuse you. But I certainly looked as if he wanted to."

"Who?" Alek asked, but he knew.

"The guard. Tanya. The one who was with you."

He sighed. "Yes. I thought you might ask that story, Colonel. Kurita pulled a dagger on her to death before fleeing. Her name was Defender of the First Lord and the University."

Baumgarten spread his hands. "You see, I'm not a

"Colonel. If you tell me here, in the Nagelring nor would I be offended that. I will not pursue it,

"Why, Alek?" The colonel pressed it so important that you do this could effect such greater change.

Michael laughed softly. "Ah, Colonel, the world..." he began.

And if Michael Steiner could let by Alek wasn't so futile after all self," he finished the quote.

Baumgarten nodded slowly, digested once breaking eye contact with Alek, clipped to his belt, powered it up, it to Alek. The amber words glowed.

A formal contract, enlisting Alek into the Force, pursuant to his completion of military academy. It was all prepared, number and full legal name, waiting for agreement. Alek reached out and the small device took a full scan and produced an unforgeable verigraph document.

Alek watched as Baumgarten conferred with Michael witnessed with his. As signed with fanfare or ceremony. There was a huge commitment he had just made with great significance.

"Not all of me is dust," Alek whispered.

Colonel Baumgarten was the first to wear the Nagelring," he said, "Aleksander."

• ***FIN*** •

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