

## Chapter One

Dramok Bacoj sat at the bar. He stared into his drink, unmindful of what was going on around him. Not that much happened at a place like Duras's Tavern. It was a lowkey neighborhood spot where the locals came in after their shifts to either unwind or get quietly drunk. Bacoj fit neither description, but since he wasn't in the mood for a rowdy club, Duras's was as good a place to mope as any.

He contemplated his glass of amber kloq, vaguely aware of the background clink of glasses, hum of conversation, and occasional laughter. The bar itself was an old wooden slab, showing the scars of glass rings from decades—maybe centuries—of service.

His com sat next to his sweating glass, probably too close, despite its moisture-protective casing. No one was on the line. The holographic vid screen was off, and it would remain so as long as he could stand it. He'd made the dumb move of switching the com off with the text message program enabled. The instant he turned it on again, he'd see the two messages queued up, the messages that had come in within minutes of each other. He'd read the first over and over, memorizing it. Though he'd not done the same with the second, it was burned in his mind as well.

*My life is shit.*

His pity party was abruptly interrupted by a tray of small finger foods, carefully shoved between his com and glass. Startled, Bacoj jerked his head up. His eyes met those of a young man with a gentle smile.

"You've been here long enough to have missed your evening meal. Put something besides kloq in your stomach," the bartender said.

"I haven't drunk that much." Bacoj sized him up. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, close to Bacoj's age. That soft, compassionate expression could only belong to a member of the nurturing Imdiko breed. Ancestors, what a sweet face. Handsome too.

"I noticed you've been nursing that glass for the last hour. An impressive feat, since your expression tells me you'd love to drink yourself into oblivion."

"The trouble with kloq-induced oblivion is that you have to return from it at some point." Despite his depression, Bacoj couldn't help but smile at the other man. The Imdiko had a face to turn heads. Maybe his jaw was a tad too chiseled and his lips too thin to claim perfection, but he'd missed it by just an inch. Were his soft waves of black hair as soft as they appeared? The urge to find out was close to irresistible.

"Are things really that bad?" Cutie Imdiko tilted his head, regarding Bacoj as if no one else in the world mattered.

"Bad enough." He had no appetite despite how tasty the plate of nibbles smelled. Yet when the bartender pointed at a meat-wrapped pastry, Bacoj dutifully popped it into his mouth.

It wasn't the tasteless, greasy experience he'd have expected from bar food. Bacoj stared at the Imdiko as savory flavors exploded on his tongue. As soon as he swallowed, he declared, "Your cook deserves a raise."

The bartender called to a second server at the other end. "Hear that, Deras?"

The Dramok with the barrel-shaped torso and arms the size of trees lumbered a couple steps closer and shook a warning finger at Bacoj. "Shut it, kid. I upped his wage last week."

Bacoj gaped at the Imdiko. "You cooked this? Your talents are wasted here." Hurriedly, he added for Deras's benefit, "No offense."

“None taken. Vax is head chef at Nepor Resort, so yeah, he’s slumming it behind this bar. Hold the fort a few minutes, kid?”

“Sure.” Vax’s grin was bright in the dark room.

Deras plodded through the door several feet behind the bar that opened to a small kitchen space. Bacoj heard another door out of his sightline hiss open and closed again. Deras was probably taking a bathroom break.

Bacoj ate another morsel. Herbed grul, tender and spicy. It was divine. He moaned his enjoyment, and Vax’s smile widened.

“I have to ask. What’s a nice chef like you doing in a bar like this? A place as exclusive as Nepor should pay well enough to keep you from taking a second job.”

“It does, but I needed the bartending experience. I hope to open my own place someday.”

“You want to own a bar? Or a resort?”

“Neither. I’m planning on a nice restaurant, but the clientele won’t be as snooty as Nepor’s.”

“You need to know how to run a bar for that?”

“My plan is to understand every detail of the restaurant business, from top to bottom. I hate companies where the boss orders his workers around without having the first clue of what he’s talking about.”

It made sense. Vax spoke with a confidence that belied his youth. “Smart guy.”

The Imdiko grinned. Before Bacoj could ask him more in hope of keeping the cutie talking to him, a customer at the end of the bar signaled for Vax’s attention.

As the bartender-slash-chef walked off, Bacoj watched with admiration. The Imdiko was trim, his vee-neck shirt and black trousers cut so that his toned body could be properly admired. He was a hot dish himself, from head to toe.

Bacoj sighed, his mood darkening again. An Imdiko of Vax’s age, possessing that level of intelligence, ambition, and looks, was undoubtedly off the market. Even if he weren’t already clanned, he must be promised to some Dramok with decent rank.

*Not to a guy like me.* Bacoj came from a notable family, but he had nothing to offer prospective clanmates. Not that he was seriously looking to form a clan at such a young age, but if the right men came along, why not?

*Why not? Try lack of rank.* Despite his best efforts, even the ability to climb the ladder of success had eluded him, except for a few precious minutes when it seemed all his dreams might finally be coming true. Otherwise, Bacoj had spent the last few years stuck in a respectable but insignificant job.

Thanks to the war with Earth, that trend would continue for the foreseeable future. He glanced at his com again and sucked down a mouthful of kloq. Maybe he should get drunk after all.

Vax finished waiting on the other patron and checking on others. He strolled back to Bacoj. “Finish the food, or I’ll think you were lying about how good it is.”

In an instant, the worst of the darkness lifted again. Vax’s warm presence chased off the shadows of regret. Bacoj chuckled and had another bite. Whoever Vax was promised to, the food alone would make them lucky bastards. The personality was another level of wonderful. *They’d better appreciate their luck.*

He said as much. Vax leaned toward him, settling his elbow on the bar. “Thanks. To be honest, I don’t—”

He froze. Vax straightened, his attention riveted on the bar’s entrance. Bacoj glanced over his shoulder to see what had chased the Imdiko’s cheerful mood away.

A man who unmistakably belonged to the warrior Nobek breed glared at Vax from the door. His demeanor was as fierce as any of his kind, but Bacoj immediately discerned there were a few unusual details about him.

He was as muscled as most Kalquorians, maybe even a touch more. Perhaps twenty years older than Bacoj, he was still a young man. Yet there was something debilitated about the Nobek. His face was gaunt, with deep shadows under his eyes. His hair, black as most of their kind, was thin and lusterless. There was a sense of great desperation that clung to him. The sort of desperation that had turned into a nasty disposition.

At that moment, that ugly nature was focused on Vax. Bacoj bristled at the unspoken threat. "Who's the asshole who wants a punch?" he asked.

Deras chose that moment to stomp into the bar area. He noticed the newcomer immediately, and his rough voice rose to a thunderous shout, silencing everyone. "Hey! I told you to stop coming in here, Karil. Move your ass before I com enforcement."

Karil didn't bother to look at the Dramok bartender. His stare remained locked on Vax. His upper lip pulled into a snarl, displaying stained teeth. Without a word, he turned and walked out of the bar.

Deras uttered a rude sound and followed it with a ruder gesture at the door. "Stupid junkie Nobek. You okay, Vax?"

Vax looked far from okay. His dark skin had paled noticeably, and a slight tremor ran through his body. He noticed Bacoj watching him and visibly gathered his nerve.

"I'm fine. He only wants to intimidate me."

Deras snorted. "Maybe. And maybe I'm escorting you home again to make sure he keeps it at intimidation."

Deras thudded to the other end of the bar. Bacoj continued to gaze at the now blushing Vax, who remained close but wouldn't look at him. He fussed with glasses and bottles of liquor, appearing to tidy but not really doing anything.

Whatever had happened was none of Bacoj's business, but he couldn't keep himself from probing. "Why would Dramok Deras walk you home? You must have your own Nobek who can come pick you up."

"I don't have a Nobek. Or a Dramok." Noting Bacoj's disbelieving stare, Vax shrugged. "Career before clan. No distractions. I'll open that restaurant before I'm thirty-five."

"Oh." Bacoj ignored how his heart leapt. "Surely you're promised to someone, for when you're ready."

"No distractions. No commitment, no steady lovers, no nonsense." Vax eyed Bacoj, assessing him. A sly grin pulled at his lips. "That's the plan, anyway. I'll admit to having wavered on that pledge from time to time, depending on the company I've kept."

*I don't have a chance with this guy.* Nonetheless, Bacoj dared to flirt. Why not? He had nothing to lose. "If they weren't shipping me out in a few weeks, I might have attempted to give you reason to waver."

"You would, huh? Handsome guy such as yourself, it would be a decent temptation." Vax smirked.

"I'm in it strictly for the food." Bacoj teased. He couldn't let the Imdiko get too full of himself—though Vax had to realize what an enticing package he was on all levels.

"Ah, the food. Glad I have a card to play in the game of love when I'm ready for it. Heading off to war?"

Bacoj's spirits fell again, all the way to the bottom. "Right."

“Is that why you’re sitting here, trying to decide whether to get drunk or not?”

“Part of it.”

Vax leaned close, both elbows on the bar. “What will it take to hear the whole story?”

Bacoj didn’t hesitate. “The tale of why that Nobek came in to give you a death stare.”

Vax winced, and Bacoj readied himself for a refusal.

Vax kept his gaze on the bar. On what was left of Bacoj’s kloq, actually, as if he wished he could gulp it down. He spoke, and the words were as shocking as the fact he admitted them.

“I killed his Imdiko. My cousin.”

Bacoj stared, barely able to breath. This sweet-faced man had murdered someone? Vax?

“Accident?” he managed to ask.

“Self-defense.” Vax coughed out what Bacoj supposed was meant to be a laugh. “If you’d seen Huk, you’d have insisted no one could have called him a threat. And you’d be right. Years of drug addiction left his body withered. His bones were as brittle as glass.”

He continued to stare at the glass of liquor, though his distant expression suggested he wasn’t seeing it. He was somewhere in an awful past.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, don’t.” Bacoj brushed his arm, wishing he could offer better comfort.

“It’s a hard thing, ending someone’s life. Especially over a stupid disagreement. We’d both shown up at a family getaway spot in the mountains. I was taking a few days to enjoy the quiet. He was—I have no idea what he was doing there. Probably looking to hole up and get wasted until the drugs ran out. He wasn’t too happy when I arrived.”

“You had an argument?”

“I came in too fast for the landing when I got there. Wasn’t paying attention as I should have, I guess. My shuttle bumped his, which was already docked, and put a ding in it. I’d no sooner got out, ready to apologize and offer him money to fix it, when he came at me.”

“He threatened you?”

“He said he’d kill me and started throwing punches. Pretty pathetic punches, to be honest. I pushed him and warned him to back off. He wouldn’t. He kept attacking me.”

“It sounds as if you had cause to defend yourself.”

Vax sighed and rubbed his face. “I guess. He could have picked up a branch or a rock or any number of things to pound me with. No doubt it would have eventually occurred to him to do so.”

“So how’d it end up going so badly?”

“I finally decided it would take a show of strength to convince him to quit messing with me. I scooped him up and slammed him to the ground. It shattered half his ribs, his collarbone, arm—and caused a lot of internal injuries.”

“Damn. Seriously?” Bacoj gaped in shock. He wouldn’t have suspected the smaller man could commit such damage by merely throwing someone to the ground.

“As I mentioned, his bones were like glass by then. Believe it or not, he was so high that he didn’t realize how hurt he was. He stood up, told me he’d be back with Karil to kill me, staggered into his shuttle, and left. It was hours later when his clanmates figured out he needed a doctor and took him to the hospital. By then, it was too late.”

Bacoj blew out a breath. “That’s awful, Vax. It sounds like the kind of thing you don’t shake off easily, even if he was asking for it. I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through.”

Before Vax could answer, a large group entered the bar, chattering loudly and swarming the grouping of tables against the far wall.

“I’d better get to work.” Vax started away. “Thanks for listening.”

Once more, Bacoj had to watch the handsome Imdiko walk off. By the time Vax reached the newly arrived customers, he had recovered his pleasant disposition. He took their orders with an easy, friendly manner.

Bad history with a member of his family or not, Vax seemed worth getting to know better. If he’d been able to, Bacoj would have become a regular at the bar to do so.

*Stop thinking about that. He said he’s not interested in a relationship.*

Not to mention that matter of Bacoj possessing no rank for such an ambitious Imdiko. Besides, he was on the verge of going to war, with his whole future put on hold.

That future, Bacoj’s big dream, had finally been within reach only minutes before the com message arrived to tell him he’d been drafted. The future he’d worked so hard for had been lost before it could be born. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Then along came Vax. Meeting an Imdiko worth pursuing and not being able to do so was the shit icing on that day’s crap cake.

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Though he was a stickler for excellent customer service, Vax chafed as the bar grew busier over the next hour. It was only Thirdday, and people would have to go to work in the morning. Yet they flooded in for drinks and conversation, as if a holiday had just begun.

*It figures. A gorgeous Dramok with a story I want to hear sits at the bar, and everyone decides they need a drink.*

He was kept running between the bar and the tables, but Vax managed to keep an eye on Bacoj. He stopped by to check on him as often as he could. Vax grabbed every opportunity to tease the enticing Dramok out of the morose mood that seemed determined to bring him down. Bacoj’s smile was worth the effort. It lit his chiseled features in a way that sent thrills up Vax’s spine.

*His smile, huh? More like those pouty lips.*

The thought of how it would feel to kiss those lips wouldn’t leave Vax alone. He bet Bacoj was a hell of a kisser. How could he not be, with those delicious lips?

He’d been joking when he’d inferred Bacoj might make him re-think his commitment to building a career before joining a clan, but Vax had no inhibitions about a one-night stand. Or a few-night stands, if the Dramok’s nicely muscled physique delivered on the promise it made. Ancestors help him, did it ever promise enjoyment.

Vax’s frequent check-ins with Bacoj allowed him to discover they lived in the same cavern complex. That was all he needed to suggest the Dramok escort him home. After all, it made more sense for Bacoj to do so than for Deras to go out of his way to be sure Karil wasn’t waiting to ambush him.

At Vax’s request for an escort, Bacoj’s eyes widened. The grin curling those perfect lips told the Imdiko that if he wished, he’d have company to stay up late with. Maybe all night.

Vax was ready to grab his new friend and sprint from Duras’s the instant the next shift arrived. “Ready?” Vax asked as he came around the bar. His heart thumped as Bacoj stood, giving him a better view than before. He couldn’t help but rake him with his gaze.

Taller than Vax, more muscled, Bacoj was all a lusty young fellow who’d not gotten laid in a couple of weeks could hope for. The Dramok was perfectly proportioned, his loose shirt doing

nothing to hide his broad shoulders. Vax did appreciate nice shoulders. And wide chests. And strong thighs. And—

“I hope you like what you see.”

Vax flushed, realizing he’d stopped and stared for a little too long. He shrugged, grinning sheepishly. “I do. I wonder if you taste as good as you look?”

“Ancestors, save me.” It was Bacoj’s turn to be awkward. He headed toward the door, walking a little too fast, delighting Vax with overt eagerness. The Dramok hurried so much that he was forced to wait for Vax to join him. It was his turn to blush.

Before they stepped out of the bar, Bacoj playfully warned, “Don’t make statements you’re not prepared to back up, Imdiko.”

Or maybe the warning wasn’t playful. Despite his pleasant expression, there was an undercurrent of demanding Dramok in his tone. Vax suppressed a shiver of excitement.

He decided to keep the teasing to a minimum, at least for the moment. Though his libido was clamoring for him to crawl all over Bacoj as soon as possible, Vax wasn’t entirely focused on the other man’s impressive physical attributes. He wanted to find out what had Bacoj in such a down mood. Instinct told him that while being called to war was a hefty piece of the problem, it failed to account for its entirety. A sorrowful disposition could prove to be a detriment for a fun romp. Or two. Vax hoped to hear what really troubled his new friend so they could get past it and indulge in carnal delights without obstacles.

The pair left the underground caverns where the bar had its home, reaching the outdoors for a short jaunt to the next cavern complex, where the two men had apartments on different levels. Soon they were making their way down a path through the woods, marked by reflective signs.

During the day, the tall trees they traveled among would be eye-catching with their rainbow-hued leaves of sapphire, ruby, and emerald. Under the light of three of the five moons that orbited the planet Kalquor, the trees were muted gray-toned versions of themselves. Yet Vax enjoyed walking at night as much as the day. When darkness descended, the reptilian forest drils chirped in a lovely chorus. Calls from unseen animals added a dash of spooky mystery. A breeze whispered secrets as it rustled through the leaves overhead. The air held the perfect amount of autumn coolness for comfortable walking.

Best of all, Vax was in the company of a stunning young man who’d shown interest in him. Had even offered to punch Karil on his behalf. When Bacoj glanced at him with that lovely smile, it was all Vax could do to not kiss him on the spot.

*Story first. Molest later.* With that sage bit of advice to himself, he indulged his curiosity. “It’s your turn. You have a story to tell in exchange for mine.”

“Mine’s not nearly as dramatic, so it’s hardly a fair trade. Just a disappointing turn of events. As I mentioned before, I was called up today for the war against Earth. I leave in a few weeks.”

“It’s a bad sign we’re to that point. Last I heard, the military was only asking for volunteers where Dramoks and Imdikos were concerned.”

“Your breed might be exempt for a little while longer, but I’m to report and get my orders next week.”

“What’s your part in it? Do you know yet?”

“Piloting. I’ll be working a shuttle off a supply transport.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Which meant Bacoj was losing out on something potentially amazing. “What’s the war taking you from?”

The Dramok's fists clenched for a moment, confirming Vax's suspicions. "The chance to attend the best engineering school on Kalquor. I've been applying for the last seven years, and I was finally accepted...barely five minutes before I found out I'd been drafted."

Bacoj had allowed only the slightest bitterness in his tone, but his expression told Vax the truth. He was shattered over the disappointment.

"Stupid war," the Imdiko sympathized. "Can the school defer your entrance until after the war?"

"I'll have to ask and hope. The prospects aren't good, however."

"A lot of others will be sent off. You might not lose your place."

"Unlikely. Younger Kalquorians still in basic study, within two or three years of fighting age, will be drafted to double up and pursue the essential fields such as engineering. Even if the war ends in a couple of months, they'll have first choice to stay in the engineering program."

"Really? That hardly seems fair."

"Fair or not, that's how it's done. My Nobek father says that's what happened before, when we were embroiled in conflicts with Trag and Bi'is."

"Maybe the kids won't opt to remain in the program, clearing the way for you to jump back in."

Bacoj shook his head. "Doubtful. My Dramok father was drafted to fight Trag way back in the day. He had to wait two years after he left the military to resume the classes he'd started before being sent off."

"And you've already waited seven." Vax winced for his predicament. Poor Bacoj.

"Everyone with any engineering talent is desperate to get into that school. It's been my dream since I can remember." Bacoj was nearly stomping down the path in frustration. "Stupid war is right. And stupid Earth for declaring it."

"I'm sorry, Bacoj. That's a huge shame."

The Dramok was silent for a full minute. At last he sighed and drew himself up. His attitude still held a note of tragedy, but his jaw was set. "There's no use whining over something I can't control. Besides, you're the one with real problems."

Vax waved his hand in dismissal. "Only when Karil isn't too stoned to stand up straight."

"What about his Dramok? What's his deal? Does he want revenge too?"

"Dramok Respel is the least of my worries. As long as nothing I do disrupts his business, he could care less. I doubt he misses Huk." Vax grimaced, jabbed by pity for his late cousin. Huk had created the awful situation he'd ended up in, but... "Isn't that awful? To die and not be mourned by your clanmate?"

"This Respel, he's not into drugs too?"

"He stays off the junk, but he's a dealer. He only cares about the money and keeping the authorities from taking any interest in his activities. In fact, Respel warned Karil to leave me alone so nobody would snoop in his business. Respel told him he'd be fine without a Nobek as well as an Imdiko if it came down to it."

"Nice guy," Bacoj snorted. "Nothing like death threats between lifemates."

"He's afraid I'll report Karil to the authorities and draw attention to what they do." Vax swallowed. "I don't think Respel meant he'd actually kill him, but he might make Karil sorry for disobeying."

"Tonight proved Karil's not listening. Something should be done."

"I'll com Respel tomorrow and tell him I'll file a complaint against Karil if he doesn't back off."

“That Nobek must have cared greatly for your cousin. Losing him could make him crazy, I suppose.”

Vax grimaced. “I get the idea that love never entered the picture between those two. It’s Karil’s Nobek pride that makes him belligerent over losing a clanmate he should have kept safe. If he continues ignoring his Dramok, it’s not a good situation for me.”

Bacoj frowned. “Why don’t you just go to the authorities? Skip the nonsense with Karil’s Dramok?”

“He hasn’t made any overt threats. He just shows up and glares.”

“That should be more than enough.”

“Not according to the law. And I’d hate to make an enemy out of Respel. Huk used to gloat about all the people that got beat up when they made his Dramok mad.”

Actually, Huk had intimidated Respel’s bodyguards and Karil had done a lot worse than beat up others. Vax had chalked it up to empty boasting. Huk had possessed little to brag about, so being clanned to supposedly dangerous men became his sole claim to achieving any sort of status.

Bacoj scowled. He clearly had more thoughts on the matter of Karil and Respel, but they’d reached the small metal housing of an elevator that would take them underground to the caverns. They stepped in, leaving the tree-lined path behind.

Tension fled from Vax’s shoulders the moment the shining doors closed out the forest. Despite his surface nonchalance, he’d half-expected Karil to spring out at them during their walk. Guilt pricked him for exposing Bacoj to the risk of a beatdown.

“Fourth level,” he ordered the conveyance, noting how his companion’s brow rose. Fourth-level apartments weren’t opulent by any means, but few single men of Vax’s age could afford them.

He smiled, the worries of the evening falling behind him. He hoped he had plenty to look forward to in the hours ahead. Vax was safe in the cavern complex. He was in the company of a handsome Dramok who seemed more than willing to join him for sensual entertainment. The night was shaping up to be a good one.