

Imdiko Egilka peered through heavy drapes that concealed his presence in the brothel's dimly lit playroom. He watched as a six-limbed Isetacian female crouched over the naked body of the Crown Prince of Kalquor.

Egilka reminded himself of how furious he was with Prince Clajak. It wasn't easy to stay angry. Clajak lay relaxed and enraptured, helpless under the Isetacian's hypnotic song.

Egilka licked his lips, primal lust surging. Even without the royal pedigree, Clajak would never beg for intimate companionship. He was too delicious. All Kalquorians, including their few women, were predisposed to muscularity. Clajak had worked on his natural endowments, making himself a physically stunning specimen. The Dramok prince couldn't be more chiseled, everything proportioned in a gorgeous flow of tendons, sinew, and strength. Egilka felt an unwelcome yearning to go to Clajak and trace every single line that separated one muscle from another. Preferably with his tongue.

Damn the man. Of all the situations for Egilka to recognize the assets of his Dramok-to-be, this was the worst. The kid who'd been a little brother to him had grown up. When the hell had that happened?

The prince's long hair spread under his head, gossamer strands begging to be stroked. It wasn't the typical black of the Kalquorian race. Clajak's hair possessed the sheen of tempered steel, as if the strands had been dipped in metal.

Egilka ached to walk over and stroke that hair. It was the first time he'd wished to do so. Before, it had merely been a mutation shared by Clajak's Nobek father Emperor Yuder. Instead of aging Clajak, it underscored the youthfulness of his handsome, strong-jawed face, a face turned soft with dreamy pleasure.

He wore a smile for good reason as he gazed at his companion. The Isetacian female sang to him. The tune coming from her toothless mouth was hypnotic to most within hearing distance. Despite her appearance...gray skin broken up by the hard ridge of bone down the middle of her back, a bulbous head circled by two rows of tiny eyes...Clajak's expression couldn't have been more rapturous. He drowned in the trill of her voice, his senses consumed by her song. His nervous system had been snared in the lovely trap of her tune. It was how Isetacians caught prey for their meals on their home world. Knowing the deadly reason for the adaptation didn't erase the sweetness of the floating notes, however. In the brothels, it made Isetacian prostitutes popular with clients.

Egilka would have been caught up in it as well, if not for the plugs in his ears. He wasn't on Dantovon to enjoy the hundreds of thousands of prostitutes it boasted. He wasn't there for the voyeuristic thrill of watching someone get laid. He was there to haul Prince Clajak home to Kalquor, as ordered by the Imperial Clan itself. Once the two were home, they were to be clanned...as they should have been a week ago.

Egilka and Clajak weren't as close as most Kalquorian men who would become life companions. Their union had been arranged years before, when Clajak was only ten years old and Egilka twenty-seven. As the Imdiko trained for his eventual role as one of the three emperors of Kalquor, he'd watched his Dramok-to-be grow into manhood. The feeling of a sibling bond had remained strong until recently.

Their relationship was tumultuous. The closer the time came to be clanned, the more Clajak avoided Egilka. His behavior, reckless and brash since his teens, became more irresponsible. Even the empress of Kalquor had lost all patience with her only child and heir. The young man performed his duties as crown prince, excelled at them even. However, he made it a point to

enjoy himself to distraction with lovers, drinking, and parties. His reputation throughout the empire was fodder for gossip and rumor.

He'd run off on the eve of clanship to Egilka. The unexplained abandonment stung, because Egilka had thought Clajak liked him, despite them often being at odds.

"He's afraid of being unable to live up to his responsibilities. As for your union, it's just cold feet, Egilka," Empress Irdis had told him. "Clajak looks up to you. He respects you. You can't take it personally."

Why wouldn't he? It was no secret Clajak found him stuffy and boring. Egilka was a research scientist, and he was the first to admit he'd let his passion turn into an obsession. Between training for eventual rulership and his work on solving Kalquorian women's infertility, he was more business than pleasure...a stark contrast to Clajak.

There was nothing to suggest the pair were each other's type as far as romance was concerned. Clajak had never invited Egilka to his bed. That had been a relief. It was hard to imagine the boy he'd watched grow up as a lover.

Until this moment. Until Egilka had seen that strong, sturdy body lying there, ready for love. All at once, he saw Clajak as an adult instead of the boy he'd often been babysitter and guide to.

Egilka swallowed. His cocks had swollen. His traitorous gaze caressed Clajak's muscled physique with hunger. Twin tapered shafts stood up straight from his reclining body, wet with natural lubrication. Egilka bit his lip. It had been ages since he'd enjoyed a lover, male or female. He'd been too busy with work and getting ready for the clanning ceremony.

The clanning ceremony. Egilka shook himself, dragging his brain back to his priorities.

He shifted his attention to Clajak's handsome face. The Dramok was glassy-eyed from the Isetacian's song, his mind sunk under her spell. He wouldn't notice a herd of Tragooms thundering through the room at that moment.

Egilka eased from behind the heavy velvet draperies and approached the sleeping mat on which Clajak lay. He nodded to the prostitute, and she gave him a toothless smile as she sang on. He'd paid her handsomely to help him capture his wayward intended...an entire day's wages.

The Imperial Clan would reimburse him. Emperor Yuder had offered to finance Egilka's research team for an entire year if he brought Clajak home. The Nobek monarch was irate over his son's absence and the wild speculation surrounding it. Even Emperor Tidro, as mild an Imdiko as could be imagined, was beside himself with fury over Clajak's humiliating treatment of Egilka.

Ignoring a throb of surprising hurt, Egilka set to work. While the Isetacian sang, he bound Clajak's ankles and wrists to the sturdy pillars at each corner of the billowy mat. He double-checked the soft ties to make sure they were secure, but in no danger of compromising Clajak's circulation. His prey's heavy-lidded eyes never blinked as Egilka made him helpless.

With him secured, Egilka interrupted the Isetacian's song. "He's incapacitated. You may go."

She nodded and rose from her crouch. As she exited the small, drapery-festooned room, Clajak's eyes fluttered. His blue-purple gaze sharpened, and he stared at Egilka in surprise.

Egilka pulled out the ear plugs that had protected him from the Isetacian's song. The sounds of soft music playing over the brothel's system drifted in the air. Lovely music to listen to while exacting payment from a lovely but selfish man who left Egilka more amorous than angry. Damn him.

He couldn't divert from his purpose, no matter how good Clajak looked. "Hello, my prince."

Clajak bit off a curse. Where the hell had his intended Imdiko come from? Where was the Isetacian with the wondrous voice? He jerked and discovered he'd been tied securely. Fuck and damnation.

Though his ever-present temper wanted to take hold, Clajak's better sense prevailed. He unleashed his trademark grin on his captor. "Hello, Egilka."

Egilka scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, good. You remember the Imdiko you were supposed to clan a week ago."

Clajak kept his charm in place, though his gut withered at the other man's tone. Egilka had every right to be upset. Clajak thought he also detected a thread of hurt, but that was wishful fancy. He was nothing but a child to his promised clanmate.

Putting up the devil-may-care front he'd perfected, Clajak gave Egilka his most innocent expression. "Was that last week? I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure you are." The dry tone said Egilka didn't buy it. When had Clajak ever been able to fool him? For such an aloof person, he missed nothing.

*Ah, you delicious, duty-driven creature. Just once I wish you'd look at me the way you do your chemistry set. Come down from your intellectual cloud and play in the dirt with me.*

Like most Kalquorians, Egilka was muscled, but without bulk. His was a lithe, wiry build that had put pleasurable thoughts in Clajak's head since puberty. His features were stark with sharp planes, but their symmetry was perfect. When he smiled, which happened far too seldom, Clajak's heart never failed to quicken. The mustache and goatee Egilka had grown a couple of years before was bushy, taking the edge off. Clajak had thought more than once about how soft it would feel as he kissed Egilka.

When Egilka glared, as he did now, he had a dangerous quality. His purple eyes snapped with anger. The dark features, left bare by Egilka's long black hair pulled back in a tail, promised threat.

As a child, Clajak and his playmates had often pretended to be ocean pirates. When the prince grew into an adolescent, his fantasies of freedom and pillage aboard a ship had continued, but with a more mature edge. He'd envisioned standing on a rocking deck with Egilka at his side, the Imdiko wearing that very glare, though aimed at their trembling prey. Together Clajak and Egilka would plunder pleasure cruisers foolish enough to chance their territory, then celebrate their exploits with wild sex in their shared cabin.

Stupid kid stuff. Childish fancies in which Clajak had imagined Egilka saw him as a grown man. An equal. A lover instead of a duty.

Running away hadn't elevated Clajak in Egilka's opinion. He fought against squirming in humiliation...and for entirely different reasons.

Dreams of being a pirate had been outgrown. However, being tied up and under Egilka's stern gaze was prime material for newer, more adult fantasies.

Perhaps that was why an invitation Clajak hadn't intended to speak burst out. "I'd love to atone for my oversight in the best way possible." He glanced at his still avid cocks to make sure Egilka got the message.

For an instant, his betrothed bit his lips together. Was that lust? Clajak could hardly breathe for hoping.

Egilka's typical composed and distant expression masked his face once more. "Save it, Clajak. You can play with all the Nobeks you desire once you get home and clan me as you're supposed to."

Clanning with Egilka would take all other Imdikos off the menu. He had no idea Clajak had yet to touch any of the caregiver breed. The only Imdiko the prince had ever craved was his intended.

The instant of unguarded craving he'd caught from his soon-to-be clanmate offered hope he might realize that wish.

*Maybe he wants me too, now that he's had a peek. Come on, Egilka. For once see me as I am instead of the kid you agreed to clan.*

Clajak pretended his heart wasn't drumming fit to jump out of his chest. He gave the Imdiko a self-assured, cocky grin. "Look at me. *Look*. Do I look as if I'm pretending to crave you?"

Egilka's gaze shot to Clajak's gleaming wet cocks. He jerked it away, as if he'd glanced before he could stop himself. His scowl deepened.

The spicy scent of Kalquorian male arousal drifted from him. The front of his gray trousers bumped out. Clajak licked his lips. Egilka *did* desire him, at least for sex. It was a start.

"Why don't you untie me, my Imdiko? I won't go anywhere. It's past due we were better acquainted, don't you think?"

Egilka took in Clajak from head to toe and back. The aroma of arousal grew heavier. A slow, calculating smile spread his lips.

Clajak's breath caught. Egilka's expression softened the stark cheekbones and chin, and his white teeth gleamed behind the mustache. It was a dangerous smile, sexy as hell. Pirate sexy. Lustful, beautiful, and fucking scary.

A thrill of fear slammed Clajak's gut, and he yanked at his unrelenting bonds. He craved Egilka, but he wasn't sure he wanted this version. Especially with him helpless.

Egilka said, "Getting better acquainted, as you put it, might be a good idea. However, I prefer the position you're in."

Bottoming was for other men, not the Crown Prince of Kalquor. Clajak's fangs unfolded from the roof of his mouth to display behind his flat set of teeth. "I'm a Dramok. I don't submit."

Egilka's slit-pupiled eyes glimmered with amusement. "You don't have to. The ties will do the surrendering for you." He turned from Clajak and contemplated the fabric-draped walls. "Let's see what goodies are in this room."

Clajak knew the manner of toys and tools available in the brothel's playroom. The inventory hanging on the walls behind the wine-colored fabrics was vast and varied. If Egilka was pissed at him for postponing their clanning, Clajak feared those items in the Imdiko's hands. He jerked at his bonds and cursed at flash of pain as they dug into his flesh.

"Damn it, Egilka! Let me go."

"You owe me, my prince. You took me from my research at a most inopportune time."

Research. In Clajak's opinion, Egilka spent far too much of his life buried in experiments. Duty was fine, but life demanded pleasure too. It was his true downfall. He was probably more pissed off that he'd had to leave his work than that Clajak had stood him up.

"You didn't have to chase after me. I would have come home sooner or later. I have no problem clanning you." *I doubt you feel the same about being clanned to me.*

He didn't dare speak it for fear of discovering it was the truth.

His back to Clajak, Egilka shoved at the drapes, searching among the diversions hidden there. "Your fathers and mother aren't as patient as I am. You've embarrassed them."

Clajak stilled his efforts to escape. He could handle his fathers and mother being angry with him. What he couldn't countenance was their disappointment or being the source of their humiliation.

“How bad is it?”

“Even Tidro and Irdis are inclined to have you restricted to your apartments for a year. They talked about handing you over to your aide’s Nobek for discipline.”

Clajak’s hair stood up at the threat. Nobek Raxstad was a behemoth. His muscles had muscles. Dramok Korkla’s clanmate was easygoing for his breed, but a brute when the situation called for it.

Still, Raxstad would be better than his father Yuder. No doubt the Nobek emperor was ready to flay Clajak alive.

Managing to keep his tone light, Clajak said, “If Mother and Tidro are that upset, I can only imagine how Zarl and Yuder feel.”

“They’re thinking of lining up several disciplinarians for the honor of beating your hide off. I was assured I’d be the first in the queue. Yuder offered me lessons on how to use a whip for the occasion.”

Clajak winced. “Shit.”

“Mm-hm,” Egilka agreed. “We failed to get to that instruction. However, I have some experience with this.”

He turned from the wall to show Clajak the thin flex-reed switch he’d found. Though it was called a reed, it was man-made. Used improperly, it could slice flesh to ribbons.

Clajak swallowed hard as Egilka approached. “You don’t want to discipline me with that, do you?”

Egilka smiled. The happy expression would have made Clajak’s heart turn over if not for the reason he wore it. “You can’t imagine how pissed off I am.”

*Among other things.* Clajak glanced at the Imdiko’s swollen crotch. “It’ll hurt like hell.”

“Exactly.” Egilka looked him over with an air of ownership.

The expression made Clajak bristle. “Remember who the leader of the clan is, Imdiko.”

“We aren’t clanned yet. Zarl and Yuder gave their full permission for me to exact payment for what you put us all through.”

Hating his superior tone, Clajak snarled, “Fine. Beat me if it makes you happy. I never would have picked you for a sadist though.”

Egilka grinned. “You have no idea what I’m capable of, my prince.”

Clajak had long wanted to find out, but in a different manner altogether.