

Clan and Conviction

Chapter One

Investigator Dramok Gelan stood in his superior's office, a sense of disquiet filling him. Head Investigator Utta's office hadn't altered during Gelan's week-long leave. Their home planet Kalquor hadn't either. The Southwest Mountain Territory Police Headquarters remained the same. Even so, everything was different.

I'm different. I've changed. I suppose you don't watch your partner die a violent death and not suffer some sort of radical transformation.

The department psychologist had said Gelan's anger and second-guessing was normal and the young Dramok would gradually get past the acute phase of the trauma. Gelan didn't give a damn for shrinks and their "acute phases." What he cared about was hunting down those who'd ambushed him and Enforcer Nobek Amik, forcing them into a deadly shootout. He wanted to catch those responsible for his partner dying under a hail of percussion blaster fire. Someone had to pay.

Head Investigator Utta was Gelan's last obstacle to going after the gang destroying lives left and right in the territory. His supervisor studied the vid report from the psychologist in charge of Gelan's treatment.

Utta turned it off after a quick perusal. "You've been cleared for return to work."

"Great. The leave was driving me insane. Tell me I'm still on the case."

Utta raised a bushy eyebrow. The Dramok supervisor had been on the force longer than Gelan had been alive. He had a face craggy enough to look at least thirty years older, yet he was in his prime. Getting on his bad side would be a mistake.

Gelan pulled a deep breath, let it loose, and tried again. "Please, sir. I'm eager to find the men behind Amik's death, those he and I didn't kill."

"The Delir gang." Utta grimaced. "You have to have a new enforcer partner. No investigator works without one. There's also the matter of you being close to the latest victim."

Gelan's temper flared. "You can say his name. It was Nobek Amik."

Utta glare was stern. "I'm aware of your deceased partner's name, Investigator Gelan."

The younger man drew another breath. If Utta yanked him off the case, he'd probably tear his supervisor's office apart. He imagined destroying the room and its vid commendations on the wall, the photos of Utta accepting awards from important people, the floating desk surface on which his computer and office com were the only objects. Gelan was fully capable of such carnage. Although average height, his well-muscled build intimidated suspects. He'd done a lot of damage in the past for far less reason than he had now. Some said he was as brutal as a Nobek, a comment he accepted as a compliment.

He felt like dealing some carnage. Gelan hadn't been this angry since he was a teenager. Back then, it had been a matter of hormones and elders who put what felt like too many restrictions on him. This Delir shit had gotten personal, and he wanted someone to pay.

Gelan kept his voice controlled and steady with herculean effort. "You need me on this."

Utta's other eyebrow rose.

Gelan threw his hands in the air. The violent action swept his long, cornrow-braided hair behind his beefy shoulders. "Fine, sir. *I* need to be on this. People are dying, and when they start killing our officers, you can't spare anyone. It doesn't matter how personal it may be to me. I'm needed on Delir."

Utta finally allowed a hint of a smile to warm his rough features. “Which is why I found you a new partner.”

Gelan blinked, shocked. “After only a week?”

“He applied to come here, and we had the opening. He comes highly recommended and has been awarded several commendations. His record is exemplary. He’s certified ready to move from the regular enforcement team to partner an investigator.”

“Okay. That’s good.” Gelan was stunned to have a partner already in place, particularly an enforcer from outside the precinct. He was also relieved. Enforcers going from a team situation to a partnership involved a long certification process. He’d already checked on the men available in the precinct. None had gotten closer than halfway through the process. It had worried Gelan as to his chances to continue the Delir case as its lead investigator.

Utta switched on his desk com and spoke. “You can come in now, Enforcer.”

Gelan recovered from his surprise and asked, “Where’s he from?”

“Northwest Mountain Territory.”

Gelan was newly startled. “I got my start in law enforcement there.”

Utta’s door opened, and Gelan’s new partner walked in. His shock tripled.

Half a dozen years hadn’t changed the Nobek whom Gelan stood up to face. The warrior’s eyes were sharp, the jaw strong, the face somehow both wild and stern. His handsome features were broader and less refined than Gelan’s aristocratic, almost haughty appearance. His sudden smile was as predatory as ever. Something slammed hard in Gelan’s gut. Only the hair had changed, the sides shaved to leave a long mohawk strip trailing down his new partner’s back.

“Nobek Wynhod.”

Wynhod looked him over. “Dramok Gelan. It’s good to see you again.”

Utta glanced between them, his expression suspicious. Gelan was certain his supervisor had to detect the intimate familiarity between them.

The elder Dramok addressed Wynhod. “You didn’t tell me you two know each other.”

Wynhod shrugged, his gaze releasing Gelan to offer a respectful bow to Utta. “You never mentioned his clan parentage or where he hailed from. Gelan is a common name. I couldn’t assume it was someone I’d worked with.”

Gelan had to restrain a snort. Wynhod knew he worked in the territory. He must have guessed whom Investigator Gelan was. He’d just wanted to witness Gelan’s shock.

They’d done a lot more than work together once upon a time, which Utta didn’t have to know. Gelan had no doubt he’d think twice about allowing former lovers to work as partners.

Wynhod looked incredible. He seemed bigger and stronger in his red-trimmed armored gray formsuit than when Gelan had last seen him. The Nobek stood a few inches taller, and he had at least twenty-five pounds on Gelan, who was no lightweight. Wynhod’s sleeveless formsuit, perfect for the summer months now upon them, showed off his broad shoulders and swelling biceps to advantage. Gelan thought of nights when those arms had clutched him and swallowed. He wondered if Wynhod had clanned.

Concentrating to keep his tone steady, he asked, “What has it been, six years?”

“Seven.” Wynhod’s feral smile reappeared. It said he remembered everything besides how many years had elapsed.

Utta interrupted their reunion with business. “Enforcer Wynhod has already been briefed on the case, but he’ll wish to hear your take on it, Gelan. You’re hereby off leave.”

Gelan wondered what made him happier: being free to pursue the Delir case or encountering his former lover in the flesh once more. Utta had partnered them, no less.

He bowed deeper than usual. "Thank you, Head Investigator." Trying not to sound overly eager, he asked Wynhod, "Shall we discuss this over breakfast?"

"Since I've only had one meal so far this morning, absolutely." Wynhod's voice possessed the pleasing rumble Gelan remembered so well.

Gelan chuckled. He used to tease the Nobek nothing standing still was safe from his stomach. Obviously, his prodigious appetite hadn't changed.

They left Utta's office, Gelan suddenly nervous and excited. He couldn't wait to get Wynhod alone and discover how he's ended up in this territory. His fury in the wake of Amik's death lessened to a need to find and incarcerate rather than mindlessly destroy.

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The restaurant Gelan brought Wynhod to had a nice balcony cut into the side of the mountain housing it. It overlooked the same valley his apartment did, though the restaurant resided several levels higher. Because it was summer, the peaks were densely forested, offering a silvery-lavender carpet to the scenery. It was early enough in the day that the heat hadn't become a factor in enjoying the outdoors.

The balcony had been hewn from the mountain's rock and polished to a high sheen. It wasn't heavily populated at the moment, the workday having begun for most. Gelan and Wynhod had the corner area next to the railing to themselves.

Gelan attempted to concentrate on the menu vid in front of him. He suddenly felt awkward in Wynhod's presence. Seven years had passed. There'd been no communication despite the fact they'd been inseparable when he'd lived in the Northwest Mountain Territory. They'd cut off the relationship when he'd transferred. The distance had made it too troublesome to maintain. It had been a clean, amicable breakup.

Gelan had missed his former lover, the man he'd once considered clanning. He hadn't dwelled on Wynhod, however, certainly not to the point of making his life miserable. Nonetheless, the absence had been there, like a missing tooth he'd gotten used to not having anymore.

Wynhod had reappeared, as his partner, no less. He sat cross-legged on a thick cushion across the low table from Gelan, bigger than life.

Gelan forced himself to choose food, unsure he really wanted the vina meat and stemmed sprouts on fresh-baked bread. The dish simply fell under where his finger poked. Wynhod chose the same and finalized the order. The menu winked out.

They were left with nothing to do but eye each other. Seven years. What did former lovers discuss after a lengthy absence?

The Nobek forced a smile. It appeared painful. "So. Besides the obvious issue of your partner's death, how are you?"

"Good." After uttering the single word, Gelan's verbal skills abandoned him. Ancestors, what was he supposed to say to this man? Ask after Wynhod's parents? Question him about the work he'd done after Gelan had gone? Discuss his hobby of mountain climbing? Seven years was a lot of ground to cover, a stretch that might as well have been eons.

Gelan decided he wouldn't bother with such an awkward dance. It wasn't his style, and it hadn't been Wynhod's. Neither of them had ever been big on finesse.

Baldly, he asked, "Are you clanned?"

Wynhod seemed relieved by the abrupt honest inquiry. "No. You?"

“No.” He grinned to show his appreciation, both past and present. “I’m surprised no one grabbed you.”

Wynhod grinned back. “They tried. They weren’t you.”

Gelan started. He believed in brutal openness, but he hadn’t expected Wynhod to go there.

“It’s true.” His new partner shrugged and examined Gelan in frank evaluation. “You look better than ever, but who knows? Maybe I built you up to more than what you were.”

“We were very young. I suppose I idealized our relationship, because no other Nobek came close.” Gelan was glad they were on the same page. But then, they always had been. He pushed aside the ease of falling into the old patterns and the idea he knew what Wynhod was thinking just by his expression. It had been seven years. Surely it couldn’t be as before.

Wynhod tried to scuttle his assessment by speaking what had been in Gelan’s head. “It’ll be interesting to learn if it’s like what we remember. Of course, time changes men. It could be we’ll end up despising each other.”

Gelan snickered and shook his braids back. “I hope not, since you’re my enforcer.” It offered a less uncomfortable dialogue to pursue. “What’s your kill rate?”

“Ninety-seven percent.”

Wynhod’s tone was matter-of-fact, not boastful. Gelan whistled, giving him his due. “Damn. Why aren’t you a sniper?”

“I’ve thought about it, but the killing is too clean. I prefer getting in people’s faces and giving them a chance to shoot back.”

Gelan laughed. Some things you couldn’t expect to change, especially when it came to a Nobek. Wynhod had always appreciated a tough fight and odds to overcome.

Their food arrived via a hover cart, which wove its way through the tables. They grabbed their plates and cups of curdled ronka milk. Gelan was amused to see Wynhod still put his full concentration on eating, showing interest in nothing else until his plate and drink were almost empty.

When he came up for air, Wynhod gave him a considering stare, which in the old days would have meant his next comments were going to lead up to something he wanted. Gelan cocked an eyebrow and waited.

The Nobek’s question sounded innocent enough. “Do you still hunt?”

“I went to Sarkoz last year and caught the third biggest ongribert on record. They found someone’s leg in the thing’s gut and the rest of him in its nest. It had grabbed a villager the night before.”

“Only the third largest?”

Gelan grimaced. “It was an off day.”

“I wouldn’t mind a hunt. You’ll have to tell me where the best places are.”

It was on the tip of Gelan’s tongue to offer to take him hunting. Instead, he switched topics. “No doubt you haven’t quit mountain climbing. Is that why you came? The peaks of this territory compare favorably to our old one.”

“You don’t think I transferred to be near you, do you?” The challenge rang loud, Wynhod knowing full well Gelan would meet it head on.

“Did you?” He met his former lover’s eyes. “Wynhod, we haven’t spoken since I left seven years ago. Why would I think you came here for me?”

The Nobek considered him for a few seconds. “Neither of us is a sentimentalist. Trying to maintain a relationship over long distances wasn’t going to happen.”

“Which is why we agreed we wouldn’t try.”

“I’ve missed you though. Like I said, no other Dramok compared.”

Gelan had missed Wynhod too. Despite a nice selection of unclanned Nobeks to choose from, he hadn’t thought of clanning any for a single moment.

Wynhod gave him a roguish smirk. “I can’t flatter you by saying you were the reason I pushed for the transfer. I’ve followed the Delir case for the past year. I wanted a piece of the action and put in for this precinct several months ago.”

Gelan snorted. “My ego’s been shot down in flames. At least Delir has done me one decent turn by bringing you here.”

“Working together again is a nice side effect. I’m sorry it took your partner’s death to make me your enforcer.”

Gelan’s good mood evaporated. He stared at the dregs of milk in his cup. “Amik was an excellent enforcer. He mowed down three of the bastards before they killed him.”

He didn’t go into detail. Knowing Wynhod, his new partner had read the reports on the attack ending in Amik’s murder. Gelan had been pinned behind cover by a hail of explosive percussion blaster shots, but his partner had been caught out in the open. Even as half a dozen gang members fired on him, Amik hadn’t flinched until an extremely unlucky blast blew through his head where his armored formsuit couldn’t protect him.

Remembering it made Gelan mad again. He needed to find the leaders of the gang that had caused so many problems throughout the territory. Find and kill them.

“You’re growling.”

Wynhod’s quiet voice brought Gelan to his senses. His chest and throat vibrated in barely suppressed fury. His face flushed warmth.

“If you knew what we’re up against with Delir—” Gelan started, and the growl returned. He drew a deep breath and met Wynhod’s gaze. “We can’t pin down the leaders. The gang members kill themselves before they can be questioned, and the witnesses are too intimidated to talk.”

“So I’ve been told.” Wynhod popped a final bite of his breakfast in his mouth and spoke around his chewing. “It’s a shame we can’t truth-drug victims.”

“I doubt they know anything of worth. The gang leadership keeps itself off the streets and out of sight. Meanwhile, Delir keeps showing up and innocent people keep dying.”

“Better medicine for a better empire.”

Gelan snorted. “Benor Pharmaceuticals wouldn’t appreciate their slogan being used in connection to Delir. Especially coming from someone in our precinct.”

“Why?”

“The owner, Dramok Benor himself, donated a dozen new shuttles to us last year. He’s involved in military-grade weapons manufacture, along with drugs. Everyone who wasn’t on duty was required to report to the event, which was a big, fancy to-do. The man does a lot of good for the community, but he’s always ready to receive his accolades.”

“A bit of an egotist, huh?”

“Utta says Benor wants a parade for every blaster and shuttle he puts in our hands. I heard the food and booze was topnotch at the latest self-congratulatory shindig, but the speeches went on forever.”

Wynhod smirked. “Let me guess. You requested overtime to avoid it.”

“Damned straight. Given the choice between dressing up and hobnobbing with politicians and business leaders or ramming your skull against the impenetrable wall that is Delir, which would you have chosen?”

“I’d rather drown myself in Delir.”

Drown, indeed. Delir was a raging tidal wave threatening to sweep the entire territory under. Gelan shook his head. "It's stolen enough lives. There has to be a way to eradicate it. I devote every second I can toward doing so."

The hallucinogenic drug Delir had become Gelan's personal nightmare. Even prior to Amik's death, it had been driving law enforcement crazy in the Southwest Mountain Territory.

It wasn't taking Delir that made users a problem. It was what happened after they'd become addicted and couldn't score their next fix.

Delir had been derived from a fungus, which grew in most of the forests of Kalquor. The fungus was renowned for its numerous medicinal applications. Someone in the local gang had chemically enhanced its properties, distilling it in such a way to make users feel on top of the world. At first glance, Delir seemed to be a wonder drug. People who'd tried it were able to think the clearest they ever had. Their mental states were of extreme peace and tranquility. Amazing insights into mechanics and engineering had been linked to the effects of Delir usage.

However, the evil twin of Delir showed up when addiction took hold. Withdrawal symptoms included hallucinations, conversations involving imaginary people, and murderous psychotic episodes. A man had slaughtered his entire clan and their parent clans when he could no longer recognize himself in the mirror. He'd been convinced those around him had somehow removed his consciousness and placed it in a body they could control. The addict currently resided in a mental facility. He had no prognosis of ever returning to his right mind.

Delir use had exploded in Gelan's territory, and there was no end to the epidemic in sight. Murders had doubled in two years, and this year was on track to triple the average rate. Try as they might, the precincts of the Southwest Mountain Territory had made little progress in stopping the drug's rampage. It now crept into the surrounding territories as well, slowly gaining a foothold Gelan had no doubt would spread like wildfire.

Wynhod's expression verged on gentle and sat badly on his fierce visage. "You kept up on the investigation while you were on leave."

"I have a direct link from headquarters to my computer at home. The lead investigator reprimanded me a couple days ago for spending too much time going over the interviews after Amik's death."

"You're the lead investigator on the case. What did he expect?"

"He wanted me to get some distance and clear my mind. I tried to for all of two hours. Then I gave up."

Wynhod chuckled. "Same Gelan, unable to let a problem go until you've worried it to death. You're ready to jump in?"

"Absolutely. I want to re-interview the witnesses to Amik's death. Maybe we'll find a brave soul who'll remember a small detail and tell us about it."

Wynhod stretched and stood while Gelan punched in his account number to pay for their meal. "Fun, fun, fun. You always were a million laughs."

Gelan smiled but his heart wasn't in the expression. He was ready to work and pushed personal issues aside. Delir and the gang manufacturing and distributing it needed to be caught. Later was soon enough to wonder what the future held for him and the Nobek he could never forget.