

Clan Companions: Gabriel

Chapter One

“I already told your boss no. Four years hasn’t changed my mind. How did you find me?” Gabriel scowled at the Aksukt looming over him.

“Finding people is what I do, among many other things.” Mit-noc’s ingratiating, toothless smile, though no doubt meant to placate Gabriel, had the opposite effect.

With looks like his, it’s no wonder the Aksukt usually keep to themselves. Gabriel felt bad for the unkind thought, but the fact this Mit-noc had come looking for him on behalf of a Dantovonian brothel owner—that he’d *found* Gabriel after such a long time—was disquieting.

The face hanging over Gabriel’s head, at the end of a knobby stalk of a neck, leaned closer. The stockroom’s dim environs made Mit-noc’s face skull-like, a horror mask. His eyes flickered red and orange. “My client proposes a fair and equitable contract. Your basic needs of clothes and food will be seen to. You’ll keep any gifts your patrons see fit to offer you. The clientele is quite wealthy, you know.”

Gabriel eased back a step, glancing into the well-lit shop mere feet away. Iliana stood in the middle of the store, among shelves of pre-packaged gourmet foods. She was angled to watch for customers entering their store and to keep an eye on him at the same time.

Affection warmed him. Despite being four years younger, his sister was as protective of him as he was of her.

He returned his attention to the bluish-white-skinned alien. “I refuse to work in a Dantovonian brothel. Even if it appealed to me—and it doesn’t—it’s along Earther military routes. They won’t think twice about snatching me from your employer and putting me on trial.”

As he spoke, the image of a man screaming as his genitals were sliced into erupted in Gabriel’s head. He shut down the memory as quickly as it came, a skill honed from years of devoted practice.

“They’ll never know you’re there,” Mit-noc wheedled, his slitted nostrils opening and closing faster than before. He waved node-covered hands. “Your presence and activities will be kept under the highest discretion—”

“Hold on.” Gabriel had peeked into the shop again. His heart slammed into overdrive at the sight of three huge men talking to Iliana.

His first impression had been they were steroid-fed human ground soldiers, rarely seen on the Adraf’s Zryktysk Station. But the trio was bigger than most men he’d seen, and the black uniforms weren’t Earth issue.

Kalquorians?

Without another word to Mit-noc, Gabriel plowed into the store, his head lowered like a charging bull, fists clenched. At five-feet-nine, with half the carved musculature of those accosting his sister, he was no match for Earth’s least-favorite aliens, should they prove hostile. No matter. They’d touch her over his dead body.

Three pairs of blue-purple eyes slid his direction as he neared. Cat-slitted eyes, set in dark brown faces framed with long hair as black as his. He glanced at Iliana as she looked at him.

She blinked. One, slow, deliberate blink. Their signal that she wasn’t in trouble. At least, not yet.

Gabriel assumed a slightly less confrontational posture and took his place at Iliana’s side. Her stance, with her arms crossed at her waist, was relaxed. Okay, good. No sign of danger.

Trained in taekwondo, Iliana was more capable of handing a guy his ass than Gabriel. Nevertheless, he glowered at the Kalquorians, playing his role of the man who wouldn't hesitate to guard his sister's honor. Other men always saw him as the bigger threat.

Well, I did beat the shit out of that stalker on Mercy Colony. I do okay when a baseball bat is handy.

Unfortunately, he'd left his bat in the storeroom. He'd have to run for it if the situation went south.

"Ah. You're already spoken for, Matara?"

Gabriel started at the friendly, accented voice more than the fact the brute in the blue-trimmed uniform spoke English. His gentle demeanor was as surprising.

Not really a brute. Big and muscled...and quite striking. Bearded, chiseled-jaw handsome, despite the slightly crooked nose that hinted at a past break.

"This is my brother, Captain Baknu." Iliana turned to Gabriel. "These fellows are inviting me to Kalquor. To live in luxury and freedom, as Earth won't allow."

She was apparently quoting their sales pitch. Her smirk told Gabriel what she thought of the proposition.

It was the latest bid for her affections in a long line of such. Overt or subtle, they all added up to the same thing—her execution for breaking Earth's strict morality laws. With a side of torture.

Reminding himself of that helped Gabriel ignore the Kalquorian's engaging smile. "Did you tell them what they can do with their offer?"

"I was getting to that."

Since the captain's good looks were a tad too distracting, Gabriel looked at the bigger man on the alien's left. Prophets, he was gorgeous too. Unrepentantly masculine, his red-trimmed sleeveless uniform gave Gabriel an unhampered view of carved biceps the size of tree trunks. What the formfitting outfit covered left little to the imagination. Heat filled Gabriel, and he dragged his gaze to the man's face.

No winning smile there, but he was riveting all the same. Bearded like his companion, but otherwise dissimilar to Baknu—broader features, a sense of wildness that was more aura than facial structure. Every bit as handsome as the captain. As Gabriel met his gaze, his pulse pounding in his ears, the other man's attention focused on him with laser-beam intensity.

The alien looked Gabriel over, taking in the expensive shoes, well-cut trousers, and silk blue shirt that matched his eyes. The stare swept up until it greeted Gabriel's again.

A grin appeared, dazzling against the black facial hair. A knowing leer, as if he'd discovered Gabriel's best-guarded secret.

The alien winked at him. His lips moved, forming silent words. *Pretty boy.*

Gabriel felt as if he'd been punched in the gut, without the pain. He couldn't breathe. He went strangely warm, his body almost light enough to leave the ground. He tried to speak, but his lips had numbed. He had no idea what he'd have said anyhow.

The Kalquorian's grin stretched larger. He nodded, as if to answer a question Gabriel hadn't asked.

All the while, Baknu and Iliana had been talking, a distant hum of meaningless syllables. Gabriel forced himself to break from the other man's stare, to attend to the potential threat the aliens posed to his sister.

"I had no idea you had family, Matara." Baknu's gaze assessing Gabriel was as intense as his companion's had been, though gentler. "I take it the ties are strong?"

“Very strong. Where I go, he goes. Same the other way around.” Iliana nudged Gabriel.

“Yeah. All we have is each other.” He was surprised he could speak and embarrassed he’d shared something personal.

“Commendable that you’re so dedicated.” Baknu’s regard wrapped itself around Gabriel. He could *feel* it, warm and secure.

He cleared his throat. “Totally dedicated.”

“Then I extend the invitation to you as well, young man. You would be a most welcome guest on my ship, should you desire to join us.” Baknu drew out the word *desire*, his meaning apparent to even a virgin unused to propositions.

Gabriel’s cock twitched, and the ground wobbled under his feet.

Desperate to get control over the confusion swirling his brain, he glanced at the biggest man of the trio. Black hair swept in careless waves from clean-shaven, guileless visage. Twinkling purple eyes, gentle smile, beautifully symmetrical features. The broadest shoulders he’d ever seen on an impossibly sturdy, strong frame. Kalquorians apparently held the patent on hot men.

The trio bowed to him. They actually *bowed* in a courtly manner, their gazes never shifting from him. His heart stuttered.

The captain’s voice was velvet. “I am Dramok Baknu, captain of a delivery freighter currently docked here. My clanmates, Nobek Kisk—” he of the lecherous wink “—and Imdiko Takat. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

Normally, Gabriel wouldn’t have responded, except to order those who posed a danger to his sister out of the shop. He was too off-balance to think twice. “Gabriel. Gabriel Rossi.”

“Hello, Gabriel.” The manner in which Baknu spoke his name, caressing the syllables, was like being physically touched.

Where had the air gone? He couldn’t draw a proper breath.

The broad-shouldered Takat looked him over, much as the winking Kalquorian had. His expression was openly lascivious. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes. A great pleasure.” Nobek Kisk’s growling tone shook Gabriel’s bones. His intense stare told him what was on his mind.

Iliana gave Gabriel’s sleeve a sharp tug to wake him from the hypnotic spell the aliens had cast. “He’s unavailable too, Kalqs. Are you trying to get him killed? If the wrong people saw how you’re looking at him...”

She scanned the store’s open front, past the shelves of packaged gourmet foods, along with a smattering of gift items and basic toiletries, all geared toward Earther needs and tastes. She knew as well as Gabriel that no Earther ships were currently docked at Zryktyk Station. Living in fear had made it a habit to look for fellow humans when any situation seemed dicey.

Baknu blinked at her, as if he’d forgotten she was there. “No Earth ships are in the vicinity, Matara.”

“None scheduled to dock for a month. None close enough to get here for three weeks, even at top speed,” Kisk added.

“It’s perfectly safe to discuss our offer.” Takat’s musical tenor was at odds with his brawn.

“An offer for you both.” Baknu gazed at Gabriel before addressing Iliana again. “A fine home for you, Matara, with a top-ranking government official and his clan. The liberty to pursue whatever interests you, whether it be career, hobby, or sitting around and being adored.”

“In exchange for what?” Her tone bordered on aggressive.

“Children. Our people are going extinct.” Takat’s beam faded into mournfulness.

“Really? I’d heard you’re after sex slaves.”

That reminded Gabriel of Mit-noc. Prophets save him, he couldn't look away from the Kalquorians to see how impatiently the Aksukt must be waiting for him.

"You'll be equal to any Kalquorian on our planet. The hope is that you and the clan selected for you will enjoy each other's company enough to produce a new generation and save our culture." Takat gave Iliana a smile that should have melted her socks. Was she wearing socks? Gabriel couldn't move to check that either.

"The clan selected for me? Not your clan?" Gabriel's sister wasn't melting. She never did.

Baknu tempered his words with a slight bow. "You're a most lovely woman, Matara. However, my clan—we aren't the sort of men who can properly appreciate a lady." He glanced at Gabriel briefly. Assessing. "We're here to extend our planet's deal on behalf of clans more suited to loving a woman."

"Love, huh? What if I think they're jerks? What if I hate them?"

"Then you can choose another clan. With the freedom to experience *all* they have to offer with no fear of execution." His gaze cut to Gabriel again. "Your brother has the same option."

With you and your clanmates? Gabriel's heart thundered.

Even if Baknu was interested in nothing more than a tryst, Kalquorian men were known to enjoy intimate liaisons with all sexes and many species. Gabriel had indulged in more than a few fantasies that such men might find him attractive. That he'd discover some opportunity to experience what he'd only fantasized about.

The freedom to be himself, with no fear of repercussions. Was that what this Baknu proposed? A life on Kalquor itself, out of reach of Earth's judgment? His soul cried for the sweet promise of no more lies, no more pretending, no more nightmares—and no more loneliness.

He fought off impossible hope and spoke, the words fish hooks tearing his throat. "Not possible."

"Entirely possible. You just have to take a chance." Takat's regard was gentle. The men's attention was riveted on him again, as if they'd forgotten Iliana stood there.

"Are you really going extinct?" Gabriel wasn't sure where the words came from.

"Within three hundred years, or so the rumors say." Baknu stepped closer to him, close so Gabriel caught the scent of his cologne. Sweet. Cinnamon-y. Like candy. Or pastry. *Can I have a lick?*

"Well, good luck with surviving. I'm not in the market for a husband, let alone three. Gabriel, did your visitor take off?" Iliana wandered off, dismissing the Kalquorians.

Gabriel had no answer. He was stuck in place, unable to move as the alien trio shifted nearer to him. Close enough to touch, to run his hands all over those powerful physiques. Prophets, he wanted to. So bad, it hurt.

It was impossible, though. It had to be impossible.

Kisk of the knowing wink smiled down on him. "What about you, Gabriel? Are you in the market for a clan?"

"I—I won't leave my sister. Not for anything." Fish hooks tearing at this throat again, bleeding tears to wash his aching heart.

They exchanged glances. Baknu nodded. "Then we'll have to see what we can do to sweeten the bid for her. A boy as lovely as you, so devoted and loyal, deserves a clan to keep him happy and safe."

Gabriel tried to respond. He stood there, mute and aching for what was so close but eternally out of reach.

They backed away. Bowed. “We’ll see you again soon, Gabriel.” A promise as they left the shop, their gazes lingering on him until they passed out of sight.

He resisted running to the door to watch them go, that glimmer of a paradise forever denied him. He stayed rooted to the spot instead...barely.

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As he led his clan along the shopping deck’s concourse, Dramok Baknu let his surroundings wash over him. The hum of shoppers’ hover carts, the whirl of winged aliens flying overhead, conversations in multiple tongues, the brightly flashing window vids of various stores hawking their wares...all a fuzzy background to the lasting mind’s-eye image of a lovely male face with startling blue eyes, framed by carelessly styled hair as black as his own. A young man whose mere appearance had shook him with the force of thunder.

Gabriel.

Kisk’s deep voice startled Baknu from the spell the Earther had cast. “The order is to get her by any means possible.”

“We’re not abducting the girl. We agreed, right, my Dramok?” Takat had framed it as a question, but it was a demand. Spoken through a mouthful of whatever the Imdiko snacked on.

“The Royal Council, Imperial Clan, or whoever gave the order can fuck themselves in an open airlock all the way to Trag and Bi’is before I stoop to kidnapping.” Baknu snorted at the idea.

Kisk grinned, his naturally feral features more dangerous for the expression. “My attitude towards politicians in general. That can’t be legal, according to our charter with the Galactic Council of Planets. Kidnapping Earthers. Ha! It’s a joke.”

“The boy, on the other hand...whew. I’d commit felonies for a night with him. Don’t ask me what I’d do for more than one night.” Takat licked his lips at the thought.

“Sex with other men *is* a felony, according to his world. I bet he’s never been with anyone.” A delicious shiver raced down Baknu’s spine. Gabriel had exhibited naked desire, mixed with a compelling lack of hope at their offer. The sudden vision of proving to the boy he could give in to his cravings, of holding him close, of watching him crumble as his longings were fulfilled—

“An innocent. Imagine being his first,” Takat breathed. For once, he wasn’t eyeing the food kiosks they passed like a desperate lover.

“Trust me, I’m imagining it.” Kisk barked laughter, his spicy-sweet arousal scent the strongest of the trio.

“We all are.” Baknu’s voice was quiet as he considered Gabriel. The situation with Iliana, though he refused to consider hauling her to Kalquor against her will, demanded careful musing as well.

Takat was more impatient. “We have to convince the sister it’s in her best interests to go to Kalquor. Even if it’s just to evaluate her options. If she’ll go, Gabriel will tag along.”

Baknu made a noncommittal noise. Takat knew as well as he did that if Iliana went to Kalquor, she’d be unable to leave the empire afterward. Earth wouldn’t forgive such a transgression. Her own people would hunt her like an animal.

He weighed possible scenarios that would lure the woman to accept the empire’s offer, simultaneously admiring the attributes he’d noted Gabriel possessed. Such a beautiful young man, his well-tailored clothing hinting at the trim physique they covered. The tough façade he’d confronted them with when he’d thought his sister was in danger had fallen apart quickly. In its

place had risen sweetness, vulnerability, and longing. The wistful yearning with which Gabriel had gazed at him sent a pang through Baknu's heart. He had the outrageous urge to fix all that was wrong in the Earther's life.

The sensible Dramok had never believed in love at first sight. Lust...sure, that was a given. Natural. Lust had been the sole initial drive when it had come to getting acquainted with his clanmates. Love had happened in its due course once the base urges had been satisfied, allowing him to contemplate the personalities beyond the delicious bodies he was eager to fuck.

But Gabriel...he incited more than a mere urge to bury cocks in mouth and ass. Gabriel pulled at Baknu in areas besides his groin, without benefit of more than a few minutes' conversation.

"We'll have to work them from both sides. There's a sense of two against the cosmos with that pair. They won't go to Kalquor for themselves, but they'd do it for each other." Baknu's deliberations had arrived at that simple declaration.

Kisk nodded in agreement. "He'll defend her, she'll defend him. I got that too."

"If she's convinced it's to Gabriel's benefit to go to Kalquor, Iliana will relent."

"And if he feels she'll be safer with a clan, he'll try to sway her on our behalf," Takat added with enthusiasm.

"Kisk—"

"Find out all I can about both. Learn what might convince them to come with us."

"Right."

Takat brought up a separate concern. "Earther males don't get a free ride on Kalquor as the women do. We're talking about a commitment to the boy."

Baknu had already thought about that. The soft pull in his chest suggested keeping Gabriel would be a choice he was willing to make, but reality said he might not be right for the captain's clan. "Another clan or a single man will want him if he isn't right for us. With those eyes? That face?" *Along with that desperate, hungry aura that begs men to feed him everything he's been denied.*

"And all the rest," Kisk growled softly.

"If it comes down to it, his sister could claim family hardship. She could insist she needs him close. That's a point worth making when it comes to convincing her to go, that she can require her suitors see to Gabriel's living expenses on Kalquor."

"Financial security for him as well as herself. Good bait to dangle." Takat's glance was significant.

"For her, yes. I'd prefer the boy choose us based on other things." Though Baknu's Dramok father had played the wealth game and won highly ranking clanmates he adored in the end, it wasn't the captain's practice.

"Gabriel's spectacular," Takat sighed, wistful as they reached the hectic dock where their freighter was being unloaded. "I hope he'll think the same of us."

"Let's find out." Baknu's mission to collect Iliana, distasteful at the start, had taken on a promising glow.