

“Let me cut in line.”

Nobek Raxstad gazed at Nobek Magral with a bland expression. He didn't glare. He also didn't blink.

The problem with being bigger than...well, basically, everyone else...was it made him a target. Especially among his fellow Nobeks, the Kalquorian Empire's warrior breed. Nobeks were forever looking for a challenge, and as targets went, Raxstad couldn't be missed.

He'd been forced during his two-year stint in the military to find the right balance between force and compromise. Otherwise, he'd have spent all his waking non-duty hours fighting his comrades. With arms as large as many men's legs, many saw him as a sort of proving ground to be overcome. Multiple defeats, such as those Magral had suffered at Raxstad's hands, was an encouragement rather than deterrent to Nobeks to come back for more.

Raxstad loved a fight as much as the next warrior, and he particularly loved pounding Magral, who was too much a buddy to be an enemy, but too much of an asshole to be a real friend. However, Raxstad was home on Kalquor after two years. He was moments from that which he loved more than stomping the hell out of some jerk.

The hatch of the troop transport shuttle opened, and the line of soldiers began to file off. Raxstad ignored the air of anticipation that hung over the young Nobeks to deal with Magral's jumping at the last chance to antagonize him.

“Is your family here to greet you?” Raxstad's tone was flat, as unimpressed as his expression.

“Yeah, they are. It would be nice to toss your ugly carcass in front of them as a trophy if you don't move out of my way.” Magral flexed his fingers, and his joints popped.

“Or they could watch you be stretchered to the base's brig, where you'd be stuck for six months. Six extra months, pal, for starting a fight on the transport when we're two minutes from finishing our tour. And a disorderly discharge. Not to mention having to suck your food through a straw for the rest of your miserable life. Still want to cut in front of me?”

The line was moving, but Raxstad remained in place. He watched Magral, whose ugly smirk was transforming into a glare.

Two seconds passed. Three. Then Magral's broad features, dainty compared to Raxstad's, broke into a grin. He slapped the bigger man's shoulder. “I'm going to miss messing with you, you oversized ronka.”

Raxstad shook his head, but he returned the grin. “Fuck you. Take care of yourself since I won't be around to do it, Magral.”

“I don't need you, asshole. Have fun and kick ass in Global Security.”

Raxstad moved on, leaving Magral and his stint in the ground troops behind. Within seconds, he stepped off the shuttle and into a large bay full of docked military spacecraft. He bowed to his commanding officer, was told what a pleasure it had been to have had him in the company, and was dismissed.

With that, Raxstad was officially a civilian. He hadn't been sure if the change in status would result in excitement to be on to the next phase of his life, or if he'd experience regret. Funny enough, neither reaction occurred to him. He gazed at the gathered families and clans welcoming their loved ones home, faces wreathed in smiles and glad cries ringing in the vast, echoing space. He searched. For a moment, his heart lurched in his wide chest when he thought no one was there for him.

Then a hand waved over the dark heads of gathered Kalquorians. A figure, familiar despite the many months since he'd last seen it, edged its way through the crowd. Raxstad laughed and hurried forward.

Korkla didn't merely hasten to greet him. He ran. When the younger man reached him, he flung his arms around Raxstad's thick neck. Still laughing, Raxstad enveloped his intended in a hug and lifted him off the ground.

Korkla, uninhibited in public when it came to affection, pressed a kiss to Raxstad's lips. "You're finally home! By the ancestors, did you get bigger since I last saw you?"

Instead of putting him down, Raxstad carried his future clanmate to the line of duty bags being tossed out of the transport's baggage compartment. "Want to see what's really enormous? Wait until I'm naked."

"Calm down, big man. We have to go straight to your parents' home. Your mother made me promise, and you know I keep my promises."

Raxstad sighed. He'd missed his parents, but he was a grown man, twenty-six years old, not a homesick child. An adult who'd been without the lover he was pledged to...the lover who felt damned good in his arms after far too long.

He gazed at Korkla to drink in that adored visage. As a member of the Dramok breed, the men who were Kalquor's natural leaders, Korkla possessed a commanding aura. His features, framed by frizzy shoulder-length hair, were a tad sharp to be called handsome. Nonetheless, when he beamed as he did at the moment, he was a striking sight.

"Put me down, you lug. Being carried around like a child isn't dignified." Korkla's eyes twinkled, but there was no mistaking the authority he wore.

"Illusions of domination?" Raxstad couldn't help teasing, but he set his intended on his feet.

"Illusions? Do we really want to have that debate?"

Raxstad chuckled. "All right, we'll save the battle for control for later." He looked forward to that, though Korkla was likely to win. Then again, there were no losers in contests of love.

He held onto his betrothed's hand as he searched the baggage and found his duty bag. He slung it over his shoulder. "Take me home, my Dramok-to-be."

"To your parent clan," Korkla reiterated as they set off for the military complex's visitor's bay. "I was warned in great detail what would happen if I postponed our arrival."

"Parents. Aren't they the ones who were constantly nattering about learning patience?" Raxstad rolled his eyes.

"And your grandparents. And various uncles, aunts, cousins, and their clans. My parent clan is there too, so you have dozens of people waiting to see you."

"Mother of All," Raxstad groaned. "A surprise party?"

"They missed you." Korkla smiled up at him, and Raxstad's heart quickened at the open affection in his purple eyes. "As did I. Welcome home, my Nobek."

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Raxstad settled in the cockpit's passenger seat and tried to keep his twitching to a minimum. Korkla's shuttle was a hand-me-down from one of his fathers, but he'd only had it a couple of weeks, and it was in perfect condition. With proprietary greed, he refused to let Raxstad pilot.

Four years Raxstad's junior, Korkla was more self-possessed than some men twice his age. He'd always behaved older than his years, at least since Raxstad had first met him. Korkla had been thirteen and Raxstad seventeen when their parents, who'd arranged their eventual clanship, had introduced them.

Raxstad swallowed a chuckle when he recalled how unimpressed he'd been when presented with his future clanmate. Skinny and intellectual, young Korkla had been awed at the already behemoth Nobek.

He filled out nicely. Raxstad studied his lover as the Dramok piloted the shuttle out of the bay. If there was a more perfect male body in the empire, gorgeously proportioned and symmetrical, Raxstad hadn't seen it. Korkla had been a late bloomer, but his physique now matched his personality and mind. He was without flaw. His casual shirt, tucked into well-cut trousers, swelled across the breadth of chiseled pectorals. His torso tapered to a trim waist. Delicious.

Raxstad had the urge to thank his parents the moment he saw them for arranging such a wonderful clanship.

His inspection had lingered too long on Korkla, and warning heat filled Raxstad's groin. He pulled his gaze aside with difficulty.

"How's work? Tired of the stuffy royals yet?"

Korkla chuckled as they winged over the pink sand beach of Kalquor's seashore capital. "They're far from stuffy, even with protocols to observe. Prince Clajak is usually up to some mischief that sends us all scrambling."

"How old is the crown prince now?"

"Fifteen, and every inch a rebellious teenager."

"You say that with more amusement than resentment."

"I've gotten to know him a little since becoming a household page. We're not so far apart in age, so he feels he can talk to me. There's a lot of good under the misbehavior. His pranks have hurt a few feelings...and caused a few injuries, I suppose. But there's no real malice in him."

Raxstad mused about his own youth and snickered. "That's a tough age. I remember being hellbent on proving how grownup I was when I was fifteen. I was determined to have my own way, and damn the consequences."

"Imagine going through that on top of having the responsibility of training as the future leader of an entire empire. I often feel Clajak acts out simply because he has to blow off some steam. Poor kid."

"Glad it isn't me."

"Yeah." Korkla was quiet as they veered from the shoreline and assumed a new course over the emerald sea. His gaze went distant. He switched to autopilot and sat back, allowing Traffic Control to assume responsibility for the flight.

Raxstad's gaze narrowed. "What's wrong? I swear, if you tell me you've met another Nobek—"

Korkla laughed at Raxstad's mock fury. He reached for his hand. "Not a chance. Especially if I have to face your family."

"That's the only reason?" Pretend anger gave way to pretend hurt. Raxstad sniffled.

It took almost a minute for Korkla to recover from the hilarity. "A brute like you can't pull off a pout. Sorry, no heartstrings tugged here."

Raxstad grinned. "I can pull on other stuff. Come sit on my lap."

“With less than two minutes until we land? Save it.”

“I appreciate how you’ve managed to get us off the subject. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I got us off the subject? You were the one who—”

“Korkla.”

“Okay, okay. It’s nothing, really. Certainly nothing to do with us. Funny situations are going on at the Imperial home, that’s all.”

Raxstad’s interest piqued. “Funny? How?”

“For starters, the door to Clajak’s suite wasn’t working yesterday. It wouldn’t unlock, and we had to bring in a technician to let the poor kid out of his rooms. It looked like a mechanical failure, but the Royal Guards are treating it as if someone tried to break in.”

“They’re paid to be suspicious.”

“I know, but the empress and the prince have reported items going missing. Little stuff, no terribly valuable pieces. Maybe they were mislaid, but it seems to be happening more often lately.”

“But no sign of threat to the people themselves?”

“No. It could be someone on staff is helping themselves to what they shouldn’t. We’ve been warned daily that if we’re caught in an area where we don’t belong or in possession of items we shouldn’t have, there’ll be hell to pay.”

Raxstad relaxed. Petty theft wasn’t a big deal. Certainly, Korkla was in no danger. Especially with hardass Royal Guards around, the epitome of Nobek loyalty and strength.

Like many Nobeks, Raxstad wondered if he would have made the grade as a Royal Guard. Only unclanned Nobeks could aspire to that duty, however, and he wouldn’t have given up Korkla for all the honor in the empire.

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Korkla watched Raxstad disappear into the flood of family as he was welcomed back into the fold after his long tour of duty. Clan Amnegu’s sumptuous greeting room rang with joyous reception. Korkla thought it was a good thing the space was vast, due to Dramok Amnegu’s work as a diplomat who had to entertain various dignitaries regularly. Raxstad’s extended family filled it. Some of the furniture had been moved out to accommodate the number of people eager to hail their returning relative.

Korkla tried not to be jealous as he stood back and let others enjoy Raxstad’s presence. Two years of coms and vids hadn’t been enough to cure the emptiness of his life with Raxstad gone to fight the occasional Tragoom incursions on Kalquor’s borders. Korkla had the urge to shove through his intended’s family and plaster himself to the Nobek’s side.

It helped that Raxstad glanced in his direction often while greeting the others. His future clanmate was just as eager to be reassured they weren’t pulled far apart in the enormous greeting room of his parents’ home.

We’ll be alone soon. Korkla consoled himself with the plans he’d concocted for later that night. He’d laid in a supply of bohut and stim tabs and had every intention of being exhausted when he showed up at the Imperial House the next day.

Probably bruised too, but in the best possible fashion. Korkla swallowed as he took in Raxstad’s colossal muscles, piled on an already impressive frame. He had put on more mass, what with the strength competitions he’d entered during his stint with the military.

A lot of Nobek. A lot of man. Korkla almost licked his lips but reminded himself to stop in time.

He aimed his gaze at Raxstad's face to avoid undressing him in his imagination. What he saw made him smile. The Nobek's broad features, strong-boned enough to make him appear brutish at first, second, and third glance, thrilled Korkla. Maybe it was a stretch to call Raxstad handsome, but he was certainly riveting. When that face filled with lust, Korkla was seized with an exotic swirl of excitement and fear.

I get to clan him.

At twenty-two, the Dramok was still too young to do so without parental permission. A funny situation, having to wait when his parents had arranged the match nine years prior, after Raxstad's mother and fathers approached them. However, it had been agreed they needed to concentrate on their careers first.

As if he'd summoned them by his ruminations, Korkla's parent clan separated from the throng to join him. Dramok Lejo grinned and squeezed his son's shoulder. "I'm glad to see that young fellow home from the border in one piece."

"I never had a doubt. He's smart, and he's tough." Korkla's heart swelled until his chest hurt.

"Next stop, Global Security. Ah, I wish I could have convinced him to play." Nobek Rima, more famous than his Royal Councilman clanmate by virtue of being the coach to the empire's world champion kurble team for five years running, gazed with wistful appreciation at Raxstad. "With him as a defender, I wouldn't have to worry so much about my star hurler retiring after next season."

"Maybe it's time to let another team win for a change." Matara Jothsa gave Korkla a playful wink as she spoke.

"Woman, your tongue is a dagger." Rima clutched his chest in pretended horror. Or maybe it wasn't pretended. A man couldn't become a star kurble player, and later a storied head coach, unless he took the game seriously.

Indiko Nedety chuckled with the rest of them. As the other three traded remarks on Raxstad's apparent health, he spoke confidentially to Korkla. "We won't see you home tonight? I had the camp cleaned."

Korkla smiled at his father with gratitude. "Thank you. It didn't occur to me to do that, what with work and anticipating Raxstad coming home."

"You had a great deal on your mind, and when it comes to working in the royal household, a lot on your plate. I hate to tell you, but it only gets worse as you grow older. Especially if you take your Dramok father's route."

Korkla wasn't sure being on the Royal Council appealed to him. He leaned more towards an ambassadorship. Or maybe governing one of the empire's colonies. It would still be tremendous responsibility, so Nedety was, as usual, correct. "I'm gifted and cursed by having a parent who's on top of things. With you around, I've never had to worry about the details slipping through the cracks."

His father's features, an older version of his own, creased in a smile. "Well, you know, I have to earn my keep."

It was Nedety's favorite joke. As a tutor of basic academic studies, he seldom in the public eye, unlike his well-known clanmates. He preferred it that way, the fourth member in the shadow of a royal councilman, famous coach, and celebrated youth psychologist. He was the guide and organizer, keeping everyone else on their chosen paths. Clan Lejo was quick to claim

their Imdiko was the glue that held them together. Despite his commitment to his own work, Nedety found time and great pleasure in assisting his clan and son.

“Our lives would fall apart without you,” Korkla said with all seriousness.

“Oh, I hardly think that.”

“At the very least, you’ve saved Raxstad from sneezing himself to death from an attack of dust tonight.”

“All right, all right, everyone to the dining room. Find your seats. We have an announcement to add to this joyous occasion.” Matara Janpes’ voice rose over the hubbub of voice. Raxstad’s mother’s call quieted everyone, and they drifted to the attached room and sat at the scattering of small tables that had replaced the formal dining table in Clan Amnegu’s home.

“Come on, we’re seated with your betrothed and his parent clan.” Jothsa took Korkla’s hand and pulled him to the front of the dining room, where the largest table waited.

Korkla’s gaze narrowed at how his mother had flushed and the significant glances his fathers exchanged. As he sat next to Raxstad, he muttered, “What’s going on?”

“No idea, but my parents are more nervous than my return calls for. They’re up to something where we’re concerned.”

Maybe they were planning on the young men to go ahead and clan? Korkla was fine with that, except with their lack of substantial income, it meant moving to government housing or living in a parent clan’s home. Neither appealed to Korkla. Nor did the potential of their parents buying them a home...when Korkla moved out, he planned to do so under his own financial power.

He sighed and hoped there wasn’t an argument in the offing. His parents meant well, but he felt he’d proven himself able to make his own decisions where his future was concerned.

When everyone had settled and looked to the front table expectantly, Dramok Amnegu, who’d remained standing, smiled at the gathered. “Obviously, we’re first and foremost delighted to welcome my son home from his military service. Raxstad was successful in his duties, as expected, with twelve commendations from superior officers. We’re very proud.”

Korkla joined in the loud salutations. Raxstad, never one to blush or offer false humility, beamed at him. He accepted his due...and repeated accolades.

After several minutes of detailing the highlights of his son’s short but impressive career as a soldier, Amnegu nodded to Lejo. “We have more than Raxstad’s return to celebrate.”

Korkla’s father rose from his seat and grinned at the promised clanmates. “Indeed, we do. Our young men have accomplished a great deal in their short lives, and they’re well on their way to achieving more. I have no doubt their clan will rise in rank quickly. Though they’d no doubt attract attention from the few Imdikos available—”

“And the far fewer Mataras,” Amnegu broke in. The diplomat winced, the first sour note of the evening.

“Indeed. With that in mind, we felt it wouldn’t hurt to help the future along. To that end, my clan and Clan Amnegu have secured this pair a worthy Imdiko through an arrangement with his parent clan. Some of you may recognize the name Gerhu, whose clan owns Gerhu Transport Company. It’s his son Imdiko Govi, a promising psychologist, who will join with Clan Korkla once my son is of age.”

Korkla heard the delighted surprise of Raxstad’s extended family and their applause, but it was faint, as if from miles away. He looked at Raxstad, and the Nobek returned his stunned gaze.

Another arranged clanmate? A promised Imdiko?