

## Chaos' Heir 341

### Chapter 341 - Future

"So, that's the sign language from the Ipina convention," Luke exclaimed. "I found something about it before enlisting, but my father advised against learning it. He said that it was quite pointless in our current age."

Khan couldn't object to that point. Technology was widespread among the species engaging in interplanetary travel, so translators and similar tools were easier to use. Their accuracy also surpassed the sign language, making them perfect for political matters.

However, Khan had never relied much on technology, and he had also been in situations where his phone was useless. He wanted to have a method that could work when everything else failed, and the low standards of the sign language quickly convinced him to learn it.

"You did it correctly," Master Ivor stated when the conversation quieted down. "Some signs were a bit odd, but the Cek should have understood them anyway."

"Do you know the Ipina convention's sign language?" Khan asked.

"I think my version needs an update," Master Ivor humbly joked, "And I'm also quite rusty at it, but it was nice to see someone so young displaying it well. Your fame doesn't do you justice."

"You are too kind," Khan replied.

"He really isn't," Bruce commented. "When did you even find the time to learn all this stuff? I thought you would have been quite busy with Cora, your lessons, and everything else."

"I'm am a true master of packed schedules," Khan laughed.

"I was quite confident in my preparations," Monica admitted. "I might have to rethink my position. I can't wait to see what else you have in store."

Khan smiled without adding anything, and the conversation died afterward. The group and the guides resumed their walk toward the hangar's exit, but the atmosphere among them experienced another change.

Now that the flight was over, Luke's handpicked companions actively initiated conversations, and Khan's performance put him at the center of the attention. Even Amanda began to warm up with him when she understood the respect that Luke and Bruce felt toward him.

Khan kept the conversations casual and never opened up properly. He was never impolite, but he wanted to understand his companions' characters before choosing who deserved his trust. Moreover, his surroundings distracted him from the many questions flying at him.

The hangar wasn't only big. It also featured a vastly diverse ethnicity that took control of Khan's gaze. His head turned left and right as he connected everything he had studied in the last period with the interesting aspects of the scenery.

"That's a group of Enos!" Khan exclaimed when he noticed a series of short, humanoid pink aliens.

Except for the pink color, the Enos didn't particularly stand out as aliens. They were thirty to fifty centimeters shorter than humans on average, but they featured the same number of limbs and fingers.

The Enos' faces were a bit odd from a human perspective. They didn't have noses or ears, but only two big round eyes and a wide mouth.

'What's an Aphre doing here?!' Khan gasped when he saw a solitary, dirty, humanoid giant in the distance.

The Aphre were slightly shorter than the Stal, but they were nowhere near stupid. Their bodies were always completely covered in dirt and slime, and their shy character conflicted with their huge size.

The reports about the Aphre were vague and scattered. Khan couldn't learn much about them. He only knew that their actual appearance was still a mystery since those aliens handled most of their political negotiations through the network.

Khan found himself gasping and reviewing his knowledge multiple times during the walk. Milia 222 was a popular destination, and the first asteroid could feature the strangest creatures since everyone had to land there. That hangar was a paradise for those who wanted to see different aliens.

Leaving the hangar didn't change the busy atmosphere. Thanks to Luke, the group could skip many check-outs, and their eyes widened in surprise when they stepped inside the actual dome.

A bright environment unfolded right outside the hangar. Noises of every kind, multicolored signs, and crowds assaulted the group's senses and forced them to halt their steps in order to adjust to the messy scenery.

Khan had grown used to Earth's bustling cities, but Milia 222 managed to startle him. A constant pale-blue light shone from the curved ceiling of the dome and blended with the flashing signs of the shops that filled both sides of the street.

Vendors of multiple species shouted offers in different languages, but most people ignored them as they went on their way. The few who decided to purchase something fell prey to loud bargains that aimed to lower the prices.

The street didn't stand on any ground. In the spots without shops, Khan saw barriers and handrails that prevented the people from falling. Those structures stretched through the whole path, which ended in a cylindrical building connected to the ceiling.

A few ships also flew around the cylindrical building. Some even came out from under the street and surprised the unlucky groups too close to the handrails.

Khan had studied that layout on Earth, so the scene didn't surprise him too much. The first asteroid had a central pillar that ran through its entire body and acted as a central point for the various streets and floors.

The hangar had led the group to the first floor, which was nothing more than a colossal mall where anyone could purchase a spot and set up shop. The actual city started in the lower levels, which featured immense platforms that acted as the surface for various buildings.

'Books and holograms can't beat reality,' Khan thought. 'This place is a beautiful mess.'

The first asteroid was the mandatory landing area, so most of its structures, shops, and activities aimed to attract tourists. No species could take that place as their home, but they shared the area relatively peacefully.

Instead, the other asteroids had different percentages of certain species. The humans were the majority in the second, but their presence there didn't prevent the existence of crowded groups belonging to the other aliens.

"Be wary from now on," Master Ivor warned while the group was still busy inspecting the scene.

The reason behind that warning was quite obvious. The crowds on the street were far from peaceful. Many were drunk or wasted, and a fight had even started somewhere in the distance.

Moreover, dark-red aliens moved among the most crowded areas and pickpocketed any distracted traveler they found. Khan even managed to see thefts happening only a few meters from his position.

'They must be the Orlats,' Khan thought while watching the thief running toward the nearest shop belonging to a member of its species.

The Orlats were one of the species that inhabited Milia 222. They were humanoid but shorter than the humans, with the tallest recorded member reaching only one meter and forty centimeters.

The Orlats had two legs and arms but only four fingers on each limb. They shared the human's facial features, but their ears and noses were long and pointy, and their heads were slightly bigger.

Those aliens had no hair, but they usually donned piercings right above their eyes. They could learn languages easily, but they were far from trustworthy. They were famous for being scammers, petty thieves, and disloyal, even among their kind.

The Global Army had established a peaceful relationship with the Orlats, but it always put limits on trades and joint missions due to their famous disloyalty. Still, those aliens were one of the few species weaker than humans even before the evolution, so they never attempted to turn humankind into enemies.

"I've never seen half of the things on display here," Monica stated as the group moved through the street without nearing any stand or shop.

"An expert might be able to find treasures here, especially from the shops owned by Orlats," Master Ivor exclaimed. "However, most people would only end up with stolen, broken, or fake goods. I suggest you avoid buying anything on the first asteroid."

"My mother used the same words," Monica revealed.

"She must be a wise woman," Master Ivor politely replied.

Khan ignored the conversations again to inspect everything he could. The shops on that main street didn't belong only to the inhabitants of the asteroids, so he took the chance to set his eyes on as many aliens as he could. As for the items on display, he didn't know enough to consider a purchase.

The lights, the noise, and the crowds were a bearable issue, but Khan needed time to get used to the waves of mana in the area. The dome was an immense machine containing countless buildings and vehicles, but that wasn't the main problem.

The main problem came from the different aliens in the area. None of them was too strong, but their mana radiated sensations that Khan had never experienced. The symphony that resounded in his mind had gained new sounds that temporarily destabilized his precise senses.

The situation improved as the group followed the guides. Khan even helped himself through his eyes, ears, and nose. Connecting the unfamiliar waves of mana to certain species, events, or machines quickened the dispersion of his uneasiness and brought him closer to his peak.

"Do you wish to visit the shops?" The tall guide eventually asked while turning toward Luke.

"No, we'll go directly to the city," Luke declared.

"Let's take this elevator then," The guide ordered while pointing at a small, rectangular building at the side of the vast street.

The group followed the guides inside the building without asking many questions. The area felt a bit cramped with both teams stuffed in that small area, but no one complained.

"Is any of you afraid of heights?" The tall guide asked while browsing through the interactive menus on the wall next to the entrance.

Luke exchanged glances with everyone in his group, but he only saw shaking heads, so he reassured the guide. "We are fine."

"Lower level 1, right?" The guide continued.

"That's correct," Luke responded.

The guide pressed the corresponding label on the wall, and transparent doors slid to close the building. Then, the whole room shook before falling at high speed.

Khan saw the vast street raising far above him as most of the dome unfolded in his view. The room had transparent walls and ceiling, which allowed him to inspect the scenery as it descended along the four rails that stood at its corners.

The true face of the first asteroid finally became clear. The central pillar stretched past the main streets and descended toward a vast, circular platform filled with buildings. Those structures weren't too tall, but they shone with the same colors as the shops found above.

There was an actual city standing far under the previous street. According to the reports, its width and population didn't match Reebfell or the other important settlements on Earth. Yet, its ethnic variety and diversity in activities were unmatched.

"Why did no one ever give this city a name?" Khan asked as he lost himself in the lights radiated by the many buildings growing closer in his vision.

"Because it doesn't belong to anyone," The tall guide exclaimed. "Well, the other explanation also works. It can't have a single name when it belongs to so many species."

Khan had been curious about that detail since he learnt that the cities in the asteroids had no names. The reports didn't seem to care about the matter, but he had finally obtained an explanation now, and it sounded beautiful in his ears.

'A city belonging to everyone,' Khan sneered in his mind. 'That sounds unreal. I can't wait to explore it.'

The elevator reached the surface in no time, and its landing was surprisingly gentle. The group left the room to find themselves in another vast and bustling street that separated the sidewalk from the vehicles' path.

That street also had multiple shops since it followed the path of the various elevators on the structure above, but the area wasn't as messy. The tourists didn't accumulate on a single road anymore, so the group could finally enjoy the vast open spaces of the first asteroid.

"The cabs area is nearby," The tall guide revealed. "One of us will come with you, but you can kick him out when you are about to reach your destination if you want to keep your movement private."

"We have nothing to hide," Luke smiled, and the tall guide nodded before resuming the march.

The group crossed the street and took a few turns before reaching a parking lot with multiple terrestrial vehicles and a few long lines stretching from transparent rooms standing at the corners of the sidewalk. The purpose of those areas was unmistakable due to the people smoking inside them.

"Is our cab here?" Bruce asked.

"It will be here in a few minutes," The tall guide replied after he checked his phone. "The streets were jammed, so it's running a bit late."

"Luke, do you mind?" Bruce whispered.

"Don't even ask," Luke laughed, and Bruce left the group to get in line for the nearest smoking area.

"Let's take a look around while we are waiting," Luke announced before turning toward the tall guide. "Can you leave someone here for Bruce?"

"Of course," The tall guide said before glancing at one of his companions, who didn't hesitate to walk toward Bruce.

The streets that the group had crossed had a few activities, but none of them had attracted their attention. However, the guides knew what most tourists wanted to see during their first visit to Milia 222.

The tall guide led everyone on the opposite street before turning a few corners. A few minutes later, the group found themselves before a small stand that occupied a tiny spot between two tall buildings.

The stand wasn't flashy. Purple light shone from its sign and illuminated the few items on display. They were nothing more than necklaces, bracelets, and ampoules, but they weren't the shop's main attraction.

"That's a Nele!" Khan thought when he noticed the beautiful alien behind the small desk.

The Nele were one of the species that lived on Milia 222. They were basically humans with pale-green skin and hair of similar shades. Their eyes could have many odd colors, but their peculiarities didn't involve their appearance.

The Nele had a sad history caused by their innate gifts. Their skin carried pheromones that charmed anyone in their surroundings. They were beyond alluring, and that feature had been their doom in the past.

The Global Army didn't know everything about the Nele's history, but it was common knowledge that they had lost their planet against another species in the past. The latter had no use for prisoners, so they had turned the Nele into sex slaves due to their innate features.

Years of suffering had gone by until the Nele managed to rebel against their enslavers and reunite their species. However, they lacked the numbers to reclaim their planet, so they established many small settlements in different locations, with Milia 222 being one of the largest.

That tragic past had transformed the Nele from gentle and wise experts of mana into a prideful and deadly race. Khan had read that they killed anyone who dared to touch them without their consent. Also, they had developed the habit of having only one partner during their lives.

"The Nele are beautiful, aren't they?" The tall guide exclaimed without hiding his pride. "Milia 222 is one of the few locations where you can find them."

"Are their pheromones as strong as the stories say?" One of the first-level warriors in Luke's group asked.

"Yes," The guide stated while pointing at the stand. "Do you see how the light of the shop doesn't match its surroundings? You can see it from the other side of the street. It's a warning for distracted tourists and citizens."

"I know that they have developed ointments to suppress their pheromones," Martha pointed out.

"But they won't use them here, in their home," The tall guide explained. "The Nele's pride is quite scary. They won't stop anyone who tries to touch them, but they will kill without hesitation afterward. They decided that they weren't to blame for their beauty. It's up to everyone else to develop self-control in their presence."

"I remember that they were famous for more than beauty," Luke uttered.

"Indeed," The tall guide agreed. "Their beauty is second only to their knowledge of mana. They can study it to predict future events, or so they claim. Still, many tourists believe that, which makes the Nele fortune-teller business thrive."

Whispers flew among the group, but everything went silent when Khan stepped forward and crossed the street to arrive in front of the purple shop. His companions called him, but he almost didn't hear them.

"Sir, he is already too close," The tall guide warned as panic seeped inside his tone.

"I'm not worried about him," Luke declared, "But I don't want to leave him alone. That Nele is a woman, so women should have a higher resistance to her pheromones."

"Unless they are into women," The tall guide coughed.

Martha snorted and stepped forward, but she wasn't alone. Monica followed her, and she almost didn't notice that Master Ivor was at her side.

"You have yet to look at my item," The Nele said in a perfect human accent as she curled her long green hair. "You must be new here. You know, people used to pay a fortune only to take a look at my ancestors."

Khan took a good look at the Nele. She was taller than him, and her eyes matched the purple light coming from the sign. She was wearing a loose dress covered in leaves and flowers, and she kept her slender arms crossed behind her back.

'I can sense her mana but no pheromones,' Khan thought. 'How was it? I hope to pronounce it right.'

"[I offer myself with nothing but respect]," Khan slowly said in a rough voice, paying particular attention to the accents that he had to highlight.

The Nele's eyes flickered, and surprise melted her cold face. Her arms relaxed and went on her sides, revealing a sharp root firmly held in her right hand.

"[You know our ways]," The Nele whispered. "[Come then]."

Martha, Monica, and Master Ivor had reached Khan by then. The two women frowned when they stepped in the purple light. They instinctively gulped as their eyes moved on the Nele. The urge to feel her skin filled their minds, but they both resisted it.

Meanwhile, Master Ivor appeared completely fine, and he didn't do anything when Khan took another step forward to approach the stand. Monica instinctively raised her hand to reach for him, but Master Ivor interrupted her by grabbing her shoulder.

"Miss Solodrey, don't worry," Master Ivor reassured. "Lieutenant Khan is in control of his actions."

Monica could only give up on stopping Khan, and Martha imitated her after hearing Master Ivor's words. The three remained behind Khan as they watched him reaching the stand.

Khan stretched an arm past the stand. His hand moved dangerously close to the Nele's chest, but his fingers never touched her dress. Instead, they plucked a petal from one of the flowers before bringing it to his mouth.

"As expected from Lieutenant Khan," Master Ivor sighed in relief when Khan ate the petal. "He knows how to request for her services. His resolve is also commendable. Even I would have problems at that distance without mana."

"It's not resolve," The Nele corrected. "Lieutenant Khan, I suppose. You don't feel the attraction, right?"

"I already had to go through a similar test," Khan responded.

"That's not it," The Nele declared as she pointed her free hand at Khan's chest. "You have already found it, the one. Our gifts won't work toward you."

Khan initially didn't understand what she meant, but the Nele slowly reached his chest and placed her whole palm on it. She made sure to feel his beating heart, and Khan finally got his answer. Liiza had done the same thing during their first meeting.

"[Am I lying]?" The Nele teased while wearing a gentle smile.

"Will you read my future now?" Khan asked, pretending not to understand the alien, but she didn't appear fooled by his behavior.

"I do not read the future," The Nele explained. "I study your mana and simulate its interaction with an environment, Milia 222 in this case."

"And what do you see?" Khan questioned.

The Nele closed her eyes, and Khan saw all the mana inside her body flow toward her mind. She was only a second-level warrior, so the process didn't take long.

The Nele suddenly retracted her hand and dropped her smile as her eyes snapped open. She inspected Khan from head to toe while wearing an aloof face, but some wariness had appeared on it.

"What did you see?" Khan repeated.

"Chaos," The Nele revealed. "Imminent chaos."

## Chapter 342 - Bed

A tense silence followed the revelation. Martha and Monica felt a bit skeptical toward the Nele's prediction, but Khan and Master Ivor considered it seriously.

Khan had studied Milia 222's species thoroughly, and he had used Luke's connections to get his hands on books that Reebfell's market offered only to its premium clients. He had learnt a lot in the months before the mission, and the Nele had stood out.

As a species, the Nele weren't too special. Their innate gifts, customs, and tragic history made them famous, but they were relatively weak. They lacked a proper home, and their population was small.

However, Khan couldn't help but find similarities between the Nele and the Niqols. They were both knowledgeable in the ways of mana and relied on methods that the Global Army found obsolete or too complicated.

The supposed ability to predict the future and those general features had made Khan very interested in the Nele. That's why he didn't hesitate to approach the stand as soon as he found the chance to interact with that species, and he had to admit that his initial idea wasn't wrong.

'They are different from the Niqols,' Khan thought as he reviewed the Nele's words. 'They are warm, warmer than humans, but their touch is the same.'

Khan instinctively passed his hand over the spot touched by the Nele. It was different, but he felt familiar vibes. Moreover, the alien had seen right through him easily. That couldn't be the case.

'Maybe I can really expand my alternative methods by getting closer to the Nele,' Khan concluded.

Khan felt no affection toward the Nele. Their similarities with the Niqols made him respect them, and he even pitied their history, but that was it. Yet, when he studied them, he ended up thinking that they could grant him what Earth couldn't in terms of alternative approaches to mana.

The Nele stored the sharp root somewhere in the back of her dress to hold the hand that had touched Khan. Meanwhile, she kept her purple eyes on Khan, and he didn't move his gaze away either.

Martha and Monica felt that something strange was happening. It was as if Khan and the Nele had a connection that they couldn't see. They moved at the same rhythm as if they belonged to the same species.

"You are a strange human, Lieutenant Khan," The Nele said in a faint voice, revealing that she was as confused as Martha and Monica.

"[Just Khan]," Khan exclaimed while trying to adjust his accent according to the Nele's words. "[You are]?"

The Nele hesitated for a few seconds before stretching her hand and pointing her palm upward. Khan had read about that gesture, so he placed his hand above hers without applying any pressure.

The Nele's skin felt as smooth as silk. Her palm was soft and could make anyone desire to squeeze it, but Khan's hand remained firm. The two remained in that position for an instant before she voiced a single word. "[Jenna]."



Khan revealed a faint smile before retracting his hand. Jenna reached behind her back and drew her sharp root, but her eyes continued to follow Khan. She appeared slightly wary but also curious.

"There you are!" Bruce's voice resounded from the corner of the street. "Our ride is waiting for us."

"I have to go," Khan stated. "It was a pleasure."

"Do you plan on going on the third asteroid?" Jenna asked.

"Would I be welcome there?" Khan questioned.

"Do you have ill intentions?" Jenna wondered.

"Don't you know that already?" Khan continued.

Jenna went silent before letting go of her wariness and giving an honest answer. "Anyone is welcome as long as they welcome us."

"I'll probably take a look if I have time then," Khan uttered as he turned to walk back to the rest of his companions.

Master Ivor turned immediately while Martha and Monica moved their eyes between Jenna and Khan before following their companions. They noticed how Jenna had yet to stop looking at Khan, but they let their doubts remain silent.

"So, that's a Nele," Bruce announced when the group reunited. "What were you doing there?"

"Lieutenant Khan wanted to check his future," Master Ivor explained before Khan could come up with a half-lie. "The Nele sees imminent danger."

"I read that their predictions are far from accurate," Luke stated. "Don't think too much about it, Khan. I'm sure it's nothing."

"I'm not worried," Khan reassured while wearing a smile. "I only wanted to talk a bit with her now that I have the chance to practice my accent."

"And flirt," Monica teased.

"Remember that the Nele's customs are quite strict in that field," Bruce warned. "You'd have to marry her if something happens."

"I wasn't flirting," Khan laughed. "I was only being polite."

"Make sure to be as polite with me during our drink," Monica flirted.

"I was confident in my game before reuniting with you," Bruce uttered. "Now I feel that I still have a lot to learn."

"Well, it's Khan," Luke happily exclaimed. "Of course, he is amazing at that too."

Khan limited himself to laugh to make that conversation end. He liked that none of his companions had taken the omen seriously and were still easygoing. That would give him more freedom if he wanted to pursue personal matters.

Yet, Khan noted down Master Ivor's behavior in his mind. The soldier had reported everything almost immediately, which reminded Khan of the nature of their relationship. Master Ivor was on Luke's side. Khan couldn't trust him completely.

Martha was the only one who didn't join those laughs and joyful conversations. Jenna's words had left a mark that she couldn't shake off, and that interaction had also made her feel strange.

The premonition wasn't an issue since Martha was somewhat skeptical about it. Still, the talk about Khan's one and his apparent comfort in those odd behaviors gave her strange doubts. Was that really the Khan that she knew? How could an alien draw out his honest self so easily?

Those doubts never found a voice, and Martha soon ended up involved in some of the casual conversations of her group. She still searched for Khan's gaze from time to time in the hope of finding common ground outside of that pretense, but he often failed to give her time due to how much attention he received.

A comfortable ride led the group before a tall modern building that reeked luxury. That structure turned out to be part of the Cobsend family's assets, and it had so many rooms that Khan and the others could have entire floors for themselves.

A series of domestics had also prepared the building for Luke's arrival. The group could enjoy Earth's cuisine for dinner, even if it were costly on Milia 222. Still, the Cobsend family paid for everything, so no one mentioned the matter.

The long travel had not been tiring due to the comfortable ship, but the group still had to get used to Milia 222's time. The domes never went dark, but it was custom to make the days last thirty hours to please all the species living there.

The busy work would begin right away, so Luke decided to let that night pass and move to his family matters the next day. He had yet to reveal the contents of the mission. Still, Khan guessed that some of his companions already knew about it.

Khan was nowhere near sleepy, especially with all the excitement inside him. He felt the urge to go out and explore the city, but he couldn't act as a simple traveler for now due to the imminent mission.

The building had almost everything a proper house would need, but it lacked training areas. It had reinforced rooms, but they couldn't endure too many spells, so Khan had to give up on tiring himself out.

Luckily for Khan, he had many options at his disposal. Using the [Blood Vortex] there was impossible due to all the synthetic mana in the environment, but his busy schedule could resume anyway. Yet, he felt the need to check on someone before diving into his training.

"It's me," Khan announced while knocking at a door near his room.

The entrance slid open and revealed Martha sitting cross-legged on her large bed. She was wearing a comfortable and loose grey pajama, and the light of the interactive menus on the walls enveloped her in an azure halo.

"Why didn't you change yet?" Martha asked when she noticed that Khan was still wearing his military uniform. "I thought the domestics left a few sets of clothes in your room."

"I wasn't sure whether I would sweat," Khan explained. "I have so many exercises, but I also want to study a bit more. Today went well, but I still feel unprepared."

Martha wanted to scold Khan for being a perfectionist, but she lost her voice while inspecting him. His performance that day had been outstanding. He wasn't anything like the curious boy who didn't even know about ambassadors. He had taken an impressive step on that path, but he still wanted more.

"Why did you come here?" Martha asked when she thought about Jenna. "You should rest."

"I wanted to check on you," Khan revealed as he entered the room and let the door close behind him. "The real deal starts tomorrow. I need to confirm that you are ready."

"You checked me a few hours ago on the ship," Martha complained.

"Come on now," Khan seriously voiced as he approached the bed and sat on it. "Give me your hands. Let me see."

Martha pouted, but she placed her hands in Khan's palm before summoning her mana. She created a few tiny spheres of energy above her skin and made them move in various directions while ensuring that their shape remained stable.

"Good," Khan commented. "You aren't wasting any mana doing this. I think you are close to regaining complete control of your power."

"I still can't get your senses," Martha whined while retracting her hands.

"I think my talent there comes from the mutations," Khan sighed as he laid his back on the bed and crossed his arms on his forehead. "You are already above human standards there. You'll be fine."

"There is still the manipulation field," Martha stated. "And where do you think you are? This is my bed."

Martha stretched her legs and placed her feet on Khan's side to push him slightly. Khan laughed and let her do as she wished while voicing an answer. "I'll teach you the manipulation field if you want, but that's not necessary in your case. Your family already has many spells, and you can also use your grandfather's notes."

"True," Martha agreed as she stopped pushing Khan. "I'll think about it once I get up to speed. I can't invest time into things that I don't need right now."

"Do you plan on getting your feet off me now?" Khan asked since Martha's feet were still on his side.

"Do you plan on getting off my bed?" Martha asked.

"Just five more minutes," Khan whined in a silly tone.

"Then my feet will stay there," Martha declared.

A silent second passed before both of them exploded into a short laugh. Martha placed her hands behind her to make her position more comfortable, while Khan moved his arms under his nape to stare at the ceiling.

"Hey, thank you," Martha eventually whispered while glancing at one of the menus on the wall.

"For what?" Khan asked, but Martha kicked his side softly and made him laugh.

"You know for what," Martha continued before lowering her voice. "Thank you for all the help in these months. I would have never recovered so quickly without you."

"I was only keeping a promise," Khan replied while glancing at Martha. "Besides, I've always enjoyed spending time with you. You know that."

"I know," Martha sighed, "But you had a lot on your plate. Cora, the job, your whole life. You have put a lot at risk for me, so, really, thank you."

Khan revealed an honest smile. He could express how happy he was to have recovered that relationship. Martha was important in his life, and helping her had been incredibly fulfilling.

"How are you feeling?" Martha expressed her concern.

"I'm good," Khan stated. "I'll never find another woman like Cora, but that's probably for the best. I am too messed up for someone so kind."

"You definitely are," Martha exclaimed.

"Hey, you should comfort me," Khan complained.

"Go to Monica for that," Martha uttered.

"Are you jealous now?" Khan teased while trying to turn toward Martha.

"Stay down," Martha giggled while putting strength in her legs. "But, seriously, that woman has her eyes on you."

"I can't understand what she wants," Khan admitted. "I'm willing to talk about it if it's about politics, but nothing else. I'm done with relationships."

"Says the one who flirted brazenly with the beautiful Jenna," Martha scoffed.

"I was only being polite," Khan corrected, and the two ended up laughing again.

Silence fell in the room, but Martha eventually fixed her eyes on Khan and voiced one of her doubts. "Say, what was that stuff about the one?"

"Ah, that stuff," Khan sighed as his gaze went on the ceiling. "It's probably a Nele thing."

Martha kicked Khan again before complaining. "I know when you lie."

"I'm not lying," Khan declared. "At least, I think I'm not. The Nele have only one partner for their entire life, so their idea of love is different from ours. We can move on."

"Can we?" Martha asked.

"Sometimes we must," Khan sighed as one of his hands left his nape and touched the spot where Jenna had placed her palm.

Martha obviously connected that gesture to what had happened with Jenna, so another question left her mouth. "Was Cora the one?"

"No," Khan answered right away, and Martha didn't need to ask anything else to solve her doubt.

"Khan, you should leave now," Martha said as she retracted her legs to cross them.

Khan glanced at Martha and noticed the faint bitterness in her expression. He wasn't an idiot. He knew where that feeling came from, so he left the bed and crossed the entrance while voicing a faint "goodnight".

'It's still too early for her,' Khan thought as he walked back to his room.

Martha's situation was troublesome. Her interest in Khan was evident before falling into a coma, but she found him all grown up and with a girlfriend when she woke up. However, they still spent a long time together due to the problems with her body.

Martha never had the chance to move on, and Khan's growth didn't help in the matter. The parts of him that she liked the most had improved a lot while she was asleep. Khan had surpassed her expectations, and now he was there, at his side, and free.

Khan's situation was troublesome too. He had just broken up with Cora, so jumping into another relationship was out of the question. However, he liked spending time with Martha, but treating her only as a friend wasn't always good enough for her.

Khan could only give Martha space whenever she asked for it and hope that she would feel completely comfortable one day. As for what would happen afterward, he honestly had no idea. He barely knew where he would be at that point.

A door slid open, and Khan began to throw his clothes around as he entered his room. The vast windows that acted as a wall were dark to fend off the constant pale-blue light of the dome, but he tinkered with the menus to remove that cover.

The room lit up in an instant, and Khan stood in his underwear before the windows to inspect the scenery. The city was still awake. People roamed its streets, and vehicles moved everywhere, but no sound reached Khan.

The spectacle was incredible and gave Khan an idea of life in the big cities. He wasn't sure whether he liked it or not, but he was inclined toward the latter for now. He enjoyed seeing such diversity, but the synthetic mana added a bad smell to everything.

'That guy is still there,' Khan thought when he glanced at the street under him.

An Orlats sat on a relatively hidden spot on the sidewalk right in front of the building. It resembled a beggar, but its eyes were lively and attentive. It also appeared quite interested in the entrance of the Cobsend family's structure.

'Is it spying on us?' Khan wondered. 'Am I being too paranoid?'

Khan couldn't find answers to his questions, and a knocking noise eventually resounded from his door and forced him to divert his attention from the windows.

'What is Monica doing here?' Khan thought after recognizing the presence behind the door.

Khan quickly darkened the room and wore a pair of clean trousers. He wanted to cover his torso too, but the knocking became louder. Monica sounded in a hurry, so he opened the door right away.

"What is i-?" Khan didn't have the chance to finish his line since Monica stumbled through the entrance before planting her feet on the floor and taking a few seconds to restore her balance.

The scent of booze filled the room in an instant, but Khan only needed to shoot a glance at Monica's face to understand that she was completely drunk. It was actually surprising that she had managed to get so wasted in the short time after dinner.

"Khaan!" Monica shouted before rushing toward Khan.

Monica stumbled and forced Khan to jump forward to catch her. She raised her head and giggled, and a comment inevitably left her mouth when his muscles entered her vision. "Wow, no wonder you are popular with women."

"Monica, what are you doing in my room?" Khan asked as he helped her straighten her position.

"I wanted us to have our drink," Monica said without stuttering even once.

"I think you already had enough for tonight," Khan declared. "Let's go. I'll bring you to your room."

"Noo!" Monica whined while locking her arms around Khan's torso. "I want to sleep here."

"That's quite improper," Khan responded.

"So, this is the scar," Monica voiced while placing her head on Khan's chest. "It's not uncomfortable."

"I don't see any connection there," Khan frowned.

No answer came from Monica. She even stopped struggling, which made Khan call her a few times. However, he had to hear a snore before understanding what had happened.

'Did she just fall asleep in my arms?!' Khan cursed.

Another curse resounded in Khan's mind when he thought about the situation. He didn't know where Monica's room was, and asking his companions would only create misunderstandings. The domestics were also out of the question.

'I should introduce her to George,' Khan sighed in his mind as he looked at his bed. It seemed that he wouldn't get to try it that night.

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Jenna was still behind her stand when the night arrived. The dome didn't go dark, but she knew that her time to sleep had almost come.

As Jenna expected, a slender male Nele came out from one of the buildings next to the stand and approached her without saying much. He had just woken up for his shift, so he wasn't in the mood for words.

"[Uther, is the boss awake]?" Jenna asked without leaving the stand.

"[He is getting ready to sleep]," Uther revealed. "[A big shipment is coming tomorrow, and he wants to be in perfect form. Why is that]?"

"[I need him to contact the leaders]," Jenna explained.

"[Was it one of your predictions]?" Uther asked.

"[Something will happen on Milia 222]," Jenna stated. "[Our kind has to stash supplies to prepare for the worst]."

### Chapter 343 - Short-distance

Khan ended up spending the whole night with Monica snoring in his bed. He obviously gave up on sleeping to opt for a long meditative session alternated by mental exercises and quick inspections at the Orlats on the sidewalk.

The Orlats never went to sleep either, but Khan didn't know if it had taken short naps while he was busy training. Still, that behavior convinced Khan to mention the issue to his companions once the morning arrived.

Khan had to use the menus on the walls to keep track of the passage of time. The environment outside the window couldn't tell him how long he spent in the meditative state, and he was kind enough not to use alarms to let Monica rest properly.

A faint tremor ran through the synthetic mana in the room and pulled out Khan from his meditative state. He opened his eyes in time to hear a weak groan coming from his bed. Monica had awakened.

Monica raised her head and inspected the room, but her sleepy eyes widened when they fell on Khan sitting next to the window. She remained silent as she scoured her mind to search for the previous night's memories, and she lowered her gaze after finding them.

"So, yesterday wasn't a dream," Monica whispered while sitting on the bed and wrapping her arms around her knees.

"No, it wasn't," Khan calmly replied as he stood up and reached the bathroom.

A few seconds later, Monica saw Khan entering the bedroom with a glass of water in his hand. That unexpected kindness left her surprised, and she remained silent as Khan reached her and waited for her to finish drinking.

"Thank you," Monica said before clearing her throat and taking another sip.

"How are you feeling?" Khan asked while remaining at the side of the bed.

"Just a slight headache," Monica revealed in a faint voice. "I'll be fine in a few minutes."

"Do you want me to pick breakfast for you?" Khan questioned.

"No need," Monica responded while diverting her gaze from the cup and playing with her curls.

"I've already bothered you enough."

"It's fine," Khan reassured. "I've dealt with much more on Nitis. I was only a bit surprised to see you so wasted. I didn't expect it from you."

"It's that idiot Francis' fault," Monica explained. "He always uses special booze to get me drunk quickly."

Francis Alstair was the second second-level warrior recruited by Luke. He was tall, with a skinny build, slightly long golden hair, and dark eyes. He never spoke too much. He limited himself to laugh at the jokes. Still, on the ship, Khan had noticed that Francis became more talkative when Monica was around.

Khan had yet to get an idea about Francis. He was as polite as the others, but Khan couldn't say anything else about him. Yet, Monica's revelation added a feature that Khan didn't like to his figure.

"That doesn't sound like something he should do," Khan stated, making sure not to be too explicit or harsh with his words. He didn't know how Monica would take them, and Francis remained a member of a wealthy family close to Luke. It was better to tread that conversation carefully.

"Don't tell me!" Monica cursed. "I would have stopped talking to that bastard long ago if our families weren't so close. We are childhood friends, and we basically grew together, but I hate the guy."

"Not drinking with him is a good start," Khan suggested.

"It's not so simple," Monica uttered while turning to look at Khan. "Francis is an important member of the Alstair family, which is almost as famous as the Cobsend family. Being nice to him is almost a duty for me."

"What if...," Khan began to ask before shutting his mouth and gazing at an empty spot of the bed.

"He doesn't have the balls to take advantage of me," Monica responded. "My mother would eat him alive if he tries. She wouldn't care that my father wants us to marry to strengthen the friendship between our families."

Khan knew that the life of the wealthy descendants wasn't as easy as it looked, but he had only heard something about Martha's situation before. Monica added a new perspective to that window into their life, and it looked far from good.

"Thank you for worrying about me," Monica continued while wearing an honest smile that brought Khan's eyes back on her.

"It's nothing," Khan replied.

Monica and Khan stared at each other for a few seconds, and the silence slowly grew awkward. However, Monica eventually lowered her eyes to inspect the black cardigan that Khan had worn. It didn't take long before a comment left her mouth. "You wore some clothes."

"Of course, I did," Khan sneered.

"What a pity," Monica whispered while bringing the glass to her mouth.

Khan couldn't help but shake his head, and a chuckle also escaped his mouth. Monica spat the water back inside the glass since his reaction made her laugh, and Khan ended up exploding into a giggle at that scene.

"Don't!" Monica complained as laughs made her fail to muster a serious tone. "I'm trying to drink."

"I'm sorry," Khan uttered as he suppressed his laugh and pointed at the glass. "Do you want me to change it?"

The two exchanged a glance before exploding into a laugh again. The faint barrier that separated them seemed to vanish at that point. The politics became unable to poison their thoughts anymore.

"Please, don't be so worried around me," Monica requested once she stopped laughing. "I promise I won't use anything you say to make problems for you."



"I need to watch my back among these wealthy soldiers," Khan said in a joking tone.

"Come on!" Monica giggled while reaching for Khan's arm. "Sit with me, at least. This is your bed."

"Fine, but no hugs," Khan declared as he sat on an empty spot of the bed.

Khan was only joking, but Monica went silent when she heard his words. Her eyes darted back and forth between Khan and the windows in something that looked like embarrassment.

"You didn't need to be so explicit," Monica whined.

Khan frowned before relaxing his expression. Monica was behaving differently in the privacy of his room. Her elegance was still there, but her complete confidence seemed to waver, and she had also shown quite the foul mouth.

"Stop staring and say something," Monica complained in a cute tone.

"You are different," Khan revealed.

"I'm not different," Monica explained while looking at her glass. "I have an image to maintain in public. I need to be the refined and confident descendant of the Solodrey family, but the rude, whiny, and demanding me is the real me."

"Why did you show it to me?" Khan asked.

"I don't know either," Monica sighed. "You have been so kind, even after everything I did. I felt safe, so I just stopped restraining my behavior."

"I've only given you some water," Khan joked.

"And your bed, and you chose not to change room even if that could lead to problems," Monica added. "You either are a creep, or you did that to make sure that nothing happened to me."

Khan felt cornered. The building had so many rooms that moving into a new one would have been extremely easy. He didn't even have much, so the luggage wasn't a problem either. Still, Monica was right. Khan wanted to make sure that she woke up safely.

"I didn't leave because this is my room," Khan lied. "You can't break the bond between a man and his room."

Monica exploded into a laugh that continued until she felt forced to leave her glass on the bedside table. She managed to stop only after coughing a few times, but she didn't forget to reply. "I've never heard something so stupid."

"You don't know what it's like to grow up in the Slums," Khan declared in a serious tone. "Having a house was a privilege. I grew attached to them even now that money isn't an issue."

Monica felt terrible for having mocked Khan so openly. She stretched forward and placed a hand on his shoulder while doing her best to convey her regret. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"I was joking," Khan exclaimed before winking at Monica.

Monica initially didn't understand what had happened, but an angry "you!" left her mouth when she realized that Khan had tricked her. She couldn't help but attempt to push him out of bed, but he grabbed her wrists and started to laugh.

"Why did you trick me?" Monica complained as the two continued to fight. "I was complimenting you."

Khan did nothing but laugh while playing along. Monica seemed to forget about her situation, and a proud expression appeared on her face when she managed to lock Khan's arms above his head.

"I got you!" Monica exclaimed, but Khan wore a knowing smirk that made her realize where she was. She had ended up sitting on Khan's chest during the fight.

"Ah, I didn't mean to!" Monica shouted before jumping off Khan's chest and retreating toward the pillows.

"So, you can drop your refined manner when you want," Khan commented.

"I'm not talking to you," Monica said as she grabbed a pillow to hug it.

"You do realize that you are still in my room, right?" Khan teased.

"It's my room now," Monica declared.

Khan laughed and left the bed. He approached the wall to play a bit with the menus, and he didn't hold back from reassuring Monica. "I have already taken a bath. You can use the bathroom if you want."

"Did you take a bath while I was sleeping?" Monica asked.

"A certain drunk woman drooled over my chest while I put her to bed," Khan reminded her. "I had to."

Monica fixed her eyes on the end of the bed and went silent. She couldn't complain at all. Meanwhile, Khan deactivated the cover from the last window and went to take a peek at the street. The Orlats was still there.

"I'll go find Master Ivor and eat something along the way," Khan announced. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Why Master Ivor?" Monica asked.

"An Orlats has been in front of the building for the entire night," Khan revealed. "I think it's checking on us."

"Oh, you shouldn't bother," Monica exclaimed.

"How so?" Khan frowned. The Orlats had their hands in all sorts of shady businesses. Warning Master Ivor was the least he could do.

"We expected someone to keep track of our movements," Monica explained. "We couldn't keep our arrival a secret, so we just accepted that some interested parties would spy on us. I wouldn't have chosen an Orlats for the job, to be honest."

"Is this because of the mission?" Khan asked.

"Partially," Monica replied. "Khan, we are all valuable members of important families. Having people spying on us is almost normal. The opposite would have felt odd."

"But the spy is there," Khan uttered. "Shouldn't we scare him away or something?"

"It's better to show this than something potentially problematic," Monica explained. "Besides, the interested parties would just send a better spy the next time, maybe someone that we won't notice. This one is an Orlats. I wouldn't be surprised if it spread lies to get a better reward."

Monica's explanation had no flaws, and Khan immediately accepted to be inferior to her in that field. It was clear that she was used to dealing with those issues.

"Your life sure sounds troublesome," Khan commented.

"That's nothing," Monica snorted. "Imagine pretending to like Francis all day long."

Khan and Monica laughed, but they separated in the end. Khan left his room and found a domestic that led him to the room where breakfast would be served. He was alone, but the food arrived as soon as he sat, and he didn't hold back.

Master Ivor was the first to arrive, and Khan used that chance to mention the Orlats outside the building. Master Ivor repeated Monica's answer, so Khan decided to disregard the matter.

Everyone eventually gathered for breakfast. Monica ended up being the last to arrive, and her appearance showed no trace of the previous night. She had taken a bath and had changed into comfortable clothes meant for the bust work waiting for them that day.

Monica's behavior had gone back to the refined and slightly playful manners that she used in public. However, she glared at Khan whenever she found him smirking at her.

Of course, Khan never let the others notice his smirks. Even Martha remained unaware of those silent interactions, but she made it easy for Khan since she was in a pensive mood.

The group finished their breakfast and separated to prepare for the imminent trip. Luke had yet to reveal the details of the mission, but no one raised questions, so Khan also chose to remain silent.

An hour later, the group gathered before the entrance of the building. It was still early, but the streets already had people. Most stores on Milia 222 never closed, so that lively scene wasn't surprising.

"Our ride is here," Luke exclaimed when a long and luxurious floating car stopped in front of the building. "I hope you have taken everything you need. We might remain there for a while."

"There where?" Khan couldn't help but ask.

"You'll see," Luke smiled as he hopped inside the car.

The ride lasted for a while. The car crossed the entire city and stopped before the last elevator available. The tall guide from the previous day was waiting for the group there, and he quickly led everyone on the main street above them.

Khan began to understand where they were going. The elevator had led the group on the opposite side of the hangar, where a similar structure grew. Yet, no interplanetary travel set off from there, which left only a destination available.

The group entered the hangar-like structure and found dozens of bright, rectangular doors that seemed made of pure mana. The amount of synthetic energy in the area was so massive that Khan

almost gasped loudly. He had read about those machines but seeing them created a completely different image in his mind.

"You should cover your head with mana, or your hair will go crazy," The tall guide warned as the group got in line to reach one of the bright doors.

The area was crowded, but the lines moved swiftly. Each person who crossed the doors completely disappeared, and Khan even sensed their mana vanishing into thin air.

"It feels incredible that they can keep these teleports active all the time," Khan found himself exclaiming during the wait.

"It's a technology possible only in specific locations," Luke explained. "It's still expensive, but the short distance makes it somewhat bearable."

"There are also six or seven species working together to keep Milia 222 mana reserves always full," Bruce added. "They divide the expenses for these short-distance teleports, so they aren't too heavy on the economy of this place."

Khan had studied all of that, but the matter still felt incredible. Milia 222 had short-distance teleports that connected each asteroid to the next, and, according to the rumors, they had never gone down in years.

"The Cobsend family has an industry on the second asteroid," Monica whispered to Khan when the others began to converse among each other.

"Do you know what we have to do?" Khan asked, but Monica shook her head.

"Well," Khan decided to tease Monica since the moment allowed it, "Make sure to cover your hair with mana. We don't want you to waste the efforts of my bathroom."

Monica didn't reply, and her companions' conversations soon captured her. Still, she found herself glancing at Khan's curious expression often. He appeared utterly mesmerized by that environment, and she thanked her dark skin for hiding her blush.

#### Chapter 344 - Reinforced Fabric

"What happened to you?" Bruce exclaimed, forcing the entire group to look at Khan.

Khan was wearing an aloof expression, and his clothes were a bit messy, but they were nothing compared to the state of his hair. He didn't cut it during the past month, and the passage through the short-distance teleport had made it stand up.

"That's what happens when you don't protect your hair with mana," The tall guide explained.

"I was afraid that my element could cause issues," Khan revealed while trying and failing to put down his hair.

"These important machines are obviously resistant to your element," Luke stated, making sure not to say the word "chaos" in front of the guide. "I thought you knew."

"It's better to be safe," Khan replied while messing up his hair even more in the hope it could solve something. It didn't.

Khan knew that his element wouldn't affect the short-distance teleports, but he had no explanation for the color of his energy. People would think that he was casting spells, so he sacrificed his hair and masked his behavior with reasonable concern.

Martha and Monica were at their limit. Monica had covered her mouth through a casual gesture to suppress her laugh, but Martha directly snickered. Khan's appearance was too funny to remain serious.

"I look as good as ever," Khan claimed before darting forward to follow the guide, uncaring of the suppressed laughs of the two women.

'So, this is the second asteroid,' Khan thought as he tried to find differences in the environment. 'The symphony of the mana is slightly different, but I wouldn't have noticed the change if I didn't know that I crossed a teleport.'

Crossing the bright door had been oddly uneventful. Regular teleports always applied some pressure on Khan's senses, but that didn't happen there. He had taken a simple step forward, and the world changed.

The short-distance teleport had led to another hangar-like building where people moved quickly. Outside it, a dome similar to the one seen in the first asteroid unfolded in the group's eyes. A vast street stretched from their position until the central pillar, and a city grew under all of that.

The general internal layout of the asteroids was always almost identical since the domes shared the same technology. The only noticeable changes happened in the cities, the other platforms below them, and the overall vendors.

Khan didn't notice any significant difference on the main street of the second asteroid. Various shops owned mainly by Orlats filled the sides of the path, and the general noise was also the same. There were fewer people, but not enough to hint at a change in the environment.

"You look disappointed," Martha said while the guide led everyone toward the nearest elevator.

"And you finally smiled," Khan responded. "Is it about yesterday?"

"You aren't at the center of my world," Martha scoffed before wearing her serious expression. "It's just my first real mission after Istrone. I know I'm ready, but still."

"Hey," Khan called while placing a hand on her head, "You'll be fine. Also, I'm here. I'll jump in if you freeze."

Martha nodded and decided to enjoy how Khan caressed her hair for a few seconds. Yet, she eventually noticed that her companions were shooting glances at the two of them, so she hit Khan's side with her elbow and proceeded to reach the teleport.

Khan smiled and shook his head as he followed her. Luckily for him, Luke and the others respected Martha's past enough to hold back jokes, but he still noticed how Monica was glaring at him.

'Don't tell me that she likes me for real,' Khan sighed in his mind. 'Why do I always get myself in these situations?'

The first distinct change in the environment became clear when the elevator started to go down. The second asteroid had a large share of humans, and the architecture of the city in "Lower level 1" showed that.

Many tall skyscrapers made out of dark metal separated by large obscured windows filled a large part of the city. The overall platform where the various structures grew also appeared smaller than the one on the first asteroid.

Moreover, a few larger buildings became impossible to miss during the elevator's descent. They didn't look like houses or blocks of flats. They resembled some of Reebfell's shops, the ones that required some post-production activities to happen directly in the city.

Khan held back from asking questions in the presence of the guide, and his companions did the same. The group kept themselves busy with casual conversation as a ride picked them up from the elevator and brought them deep into the city.

"You can stop here," Luke eventually exclaimed while tapping on the metal barrier that separated the driver's seat from the rest of the car.

The driver parked the car next to the sidewalk, and the group jumped off it. Still, when the tall guide tried to follow them, Luke raised a hand to stop him. "We'll be on our own from now on."

The tall guide was slightly startled, but he remained polite in his answer. "Sure, sir. Feel free to contact me when you need something."

Luke waited for the car to disappear before inspecting his surroundings while comparing them to the images on his phone. After a few seconds, his eyes lit up, and he began to lead the group across the sidewalks.

"The industrial area begins there," Luke explained while pointing at a series of large buildings stretching in the distance. "My family has multiple activities there. Voices will inevitably spread once we reach our actual destination, but it doesn't hurt to buy us some time. We might gain a whole day if we are lucky."

Luke was talking about eventual spies and similar problems. It became clear that his mission involved only one of his family's activities and his careful approach aimed at leaving the interested parties without answers as long as possible.

"Won't the industrial area have spies?" Amanda asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Luke stated, and the explanation arrived once the group arrived at the borders of the industrial areas.

The vast buildings prevented the presence of many streets. The whole industrial area only had a few of them, which made it easy for guards to control the access.

Khan saw humans wearing military uniforms standing in front of the closest entrance to the industrial area, and he noticed that the same happened in the next one.

"The Orlats are too messy," Luke explained. "The Nele have their own businesses on the third asteroid. The Bise don't like to have other species around, and the Tors are too secretive to risk revealing their arts. Only the humans and the Fuveall occupy this industrial area."

Luke was revealing information that even the special reports that Khan had studied contained. It seemed that the industrial area was unique even among Milia 222's environment, and the presence of the Fuveall there made a lot of sense.

'I have only managed to catch glimpses of the Fuveall since my arrival,' Khan thought as Luke approached the guards and showed them something on his phone. 'I hope to see them properly today.'

The guards performed military salutes as soon as they looked at the screen. Luke's group could enter the industrial area without meeting any hindrance, but the scenery appeared strangely silent from the streets. There was simply no one there.

"Is everyone inside?" One of the first-level warriors in the group asked.

"This area handles the production of many valuable items," Luke revealed. "The shifts are long and hard, and the workers inside don't have much freedom in the city due to privacy reasons. Still, these areas are immense inside. They are like small districts."

"Do the workers live here?" Martha asked.

"Yes, most of them, at least," Luke continued. "It is my understanding that the various leaders of the factories leave every once in a while. Yet, I'm only repeating my father's words. I've never actually been inside."

"Are you finally going to show us why our families are paying so much for this partnership?" Monica teased through her elegant manners, but she didn't hold back from glancing at Khan.

'Did she just do me a favor?' Khan gasped without showing any reaction on the outside.

Khan was holding back many questions out of fear of barging into the classified territory. Those factories involved wealthy families, and Khan wouldn't feel surprised to learn that the noble families were also a part of it.

Learning secrets came at a cost, which could be steep depending on the parties involved. Khan was curious, but he refrained from asking directly. Yet, Monica took care of that issue for him.

"I must," Luke laughed. "You need to know about it to be part of the mission."

Luke had to use his phone to find the appointed building. The group had to walk for a while to reach it, and Khan saw his wish fulfilled when they were about to approach the tall entrance to a structure.

A tall figure stood at the end of the street, many meters away from Khan's position. However, the pale-blue light reflected by the alloys on its body made him sure that he had found a Fuveall.

The Fuveall were humanoid, generally taller than humans, and very muscular. Their faces were almost human, except for shorter noses and ample foreheads. Their hair was usually dark, and their skin was blue-grey, but their eyes could carry odd colors like golden and red.

Nevertheless, the Fuveall's most striking quality came from the modification that they applied to their bodies. They were a species heavily oriented toward technology, and, according to what Khan had read, they were the only ones who could fuse bionic implants and mana perfectly.

The Fuveall in the distance was a two-meter-tall woman whose right arm appeared completely bionic. She had silver metal plates going from the base of her shoulder to the tip of her fingers, and the implants didn't hinder her movements at all as she brought her cigarette to her mouth.

Khan cursed himself for being so far away. He wanted to sense the mana coming out of the Fuveall's bionic arm, but his duties came first. The building's entrance opened when Luke put his phone before a scanner.

The metal door opened outward but remained half-closed. Only a one-meter-wide gap had appeared and forced the group to enter the building one by one.

Khan was the last to enter since he wanted to inspect the Fuveall a bit longer, but the thoughts about the alien vanished when he saw the building's insides. A storm of noises and mana also assaulted his senses as workers moved left and right to handle their different tasks.

The group had entered into something similar to a central hall divided into two areas. The left zone had a huge cauldron that hovered above a blue flame, while the right had a giant container filled with an azure liquid.

A track with multiple mechanical arms ran above the cauldron, and the robotic arms attached to it completed different functions. They either carried, picked up, or dropped materials into the item while making sure not to make anything splash.

Meanwhile, many consoles with specialists wearing white medical coats encircled the cauldron to check on the process. None of those men and women turned when Luke and the others entered. They appeared wholly focused on their job.

As for the giant, cylindrical container, everyone could understand its purpose. The item had a massive amount of synthetic mana in its insides, and the tubes connected to its base spread to the walls to enter them and expand somewhere in the structure.

Khan saw consoles and specialists around the container too. It was clear that the building was producing something, but he couldn't understand what from that quick inspection.

"It's time to remind you that everything you see here is classified, even for the Global Army," Luke declared. "This is a private business, and parts of it are secret. I need them to remain like this."

Luke didn't mention anyone, but Khan and Martha knew that those words were for them. They were the only ones in the group without any share of the factory. They were the only ones who wouldn't suffer in the case of a leak.

"Good, let's go," Luke eventually announced as he stepped forward and followed the instructions on his phone to reach the destination.

The group crossed both cauldron and container to arrive in a corridor that seemed to lead to the next area. However, they never discovered what lay ahead.

Luke activated a function on his phone that made it radiate a yellow light from the screen. He then inspected the corridor's walls with that glow until he found a mark that the naked eye and even Khan's senses couldn't notice.

Part of the wall opened when Luke pressed on the mark. A new elevator unfolded in the group's vision, and they didn't hesitate to jump on it.



"The lower levels after the first mostly have shady businesses," Luke revealed as the elevator began to descend through the metal passage. "They are like undercities where the soldiers prefer not to go. They are probably like the Slums, but with mana and aliens."

Khan's eyes lit up in curiosity. He wanted to see those undercities, but the elevator turned out to lead somewhere far different. When its doors opened, Khan and the others could see more workers, consoles, and peculiar machines.

"Let's get straight to the point," Luke ordered before leading the group toward a specific area of the underground structure.

The new area featured workers that used a special spray to cover with synthetic mana specific tissues. Khan counted more than twenty stands, and they all had different materials.

A short man separated from the console when he noticed Luke's group to approach them. The soldier was bald and slightly overweight, but his face was beyond excited.

"Master Luke, Master Luke," The man called as he reached the group. "You have arrived. I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

"Do you have a prototype ready?" Luke quickly asked.

"Of course," The man announced. "We left it in a reinforced room just like you asked."

"Can we break it?" Luke questioned.

"Obviously," The man replied. "We already have the formula. Recreating it isn't an issue, but I must warn you. It won't be easy to break it."

"I'm counting on that," Luke laughed before letting the man lead everyone in a separate room that was almost entirely empty. Only a table with a human-sized chunk of what seemed leather standing on it occupied the area.

"You can leave now," Luke exclaimed, and the man left the room.

When the door closed, Luke pointed at the piece of leather hanging from two metal arms and glanced at Bruce. The latter already knew what Luke wanted, so he stepped forward until the table entered his range.

Bruce stretched his hand as his mana moved toward his palm. Five lumps of fire came out of his fingers before shooting forward and turning into fiery projectiles.

To everyone's surprise, the bullets hit the chunk of leather but left no trace of their passage. They didn't even burn anything. They just slammed on the item and dispersed when their fuel ran out.

'It blocked the spell of a first-level mage,' Khan stated in his mind. 'Interesting.'

"This is a reinforced fabric," Luke explained. "My family will perfect it, turn it into uniforms, and sell them to the Global Army. This plan is failproof."

"How can you be so sure of that?" A first-level warrior among the group asked.

"Because Istrone happened," Luke declared. "Because the families will invest into something capable of protecting their descendants. Ladies and Gentlemen, we are standing before a monopoly that has yet to join the market."

'Reinforced uniforms,' Khan thought as he tried to understand how something like that could be illegal.

The others felt excited to learn that news, but Luke made everyone focus on him again with his next line. "Some of these prototypes have gone missing in the last period.. There is a spy inside the factory, and we need to find it."

Chapter 345 - List

The word "spy" seemed to echo longer than the others. That's how Khan and the others experienced the revelation in their minds.

Silence ensued afterward. Everyone inside the reinforced room fell deep into their thoughts as they reviewed the revelation and tried to connect it to what they knew about the situation.

Sneaking inside the industrial area, entering the factory, stealing a prototype, and escaping without leaving any trace sounded impossible, even when spells were involved. There were too many obstacles to cross, starting from learning about the actual existence of the prototypes.

Luke had explained how the workers basically lived inside the factories. Only their leaders could go out every once in a while to enjoy the city, and their privileged position immediately turned them into suspects.

However, the leader appointed inside that specific factory had to be someone extremely trusted. Khan also felt sure that the Cobsend family had already investigated them deeply, but Luke had still brought his team there.

'The Cobsend family must have already proven the leader innocent and investigated all the workers,' Khan concluded.

"Are there cameras in the factory?" Francis asked while the others were still busy reviewing the situation.

"There are cameras on the various entrances to the industrial area, but nothing after those points," Luke stated. "Before you ask, yes, my family has investigated everyone inside the factory thoroughly and found nothing."

"But that's-," Francis began to say.

"Impossible," Luke interrupted Francis. "I know, but some prototypes have still gone missing, and my family can't send official forces to scour the city. That's where you come into play."

"Do you want us to explore the city looking for clues about your missing prototypes?" Monica questioned.

"Our missing prototypes," Luke corrected. "As I've already said, the whole point of this business is in its nature as a monopoly. All the Credits invested in the research for the reinforced fabric will be wasted if a competitor appears. We would probably still manage to break even, but I bet none of us wants that."

'It's impossible for everyone inside the factory to be innocent,' Khan thought. 'Even these wealthy descendants knew nothing about the reinforced fabric. Unless, of course, someone inside Luke's family has leaked the information.'

That still wasn't enough to find answers. The Cobsend family would have noticed if someone important enough to know about the factory were to travel to Milia 222. They would have immediately turned into suspects, which brought the target back on the workers.

'It has to be a worker, or the leader, or both,' Khan stated in his mind, 'But they would have never been able to create believable alibis on their own. Someone powerful enough to fool the Cobsend family must have helped them, someone who already knew that something was going on here.'

A realization suddenly dawned upon Khan's mind. Only a wealthy family with influence equal or slightly inferior to the Cobsend family could find ways to turn workers into spies and provide them with what they needed to appear innocent.

However, only a family involved in the project could know that the factory had something worth stealing. Monica and the others came from families that had invested in the reinforced fabric, which turned them into suspects.

Khan understood that Luke's invitations had a hidden purpose. He didn't only want to create a team that could pass unnoticed inside the city. He also needed all the potential culprits to be on Milia 222.

'It's more complicated than that,' Khan thought as he dived deeper into the matter. 'Those in this team might know nothing about the thefts even if members of their families were involved.'

Khan also saw the second hidden purpose behind Luke's invitation. The latter probably knew that Monica and the others were unaware of the shady plans run by their families, but bringing them on Milia 222 would make the real culprits nervous. That could lead to mistakes that could lead to the truth.

'Everyone except for Martha and I is a suspect,' Khan concluded. 'Maybe Bruce and Amanda are to exclude due to their tight relationship with Luke, and the same goes for Master Ivor.'

Everything fell apart when Khan began to doubt his companions. Monica's behavior turned from interesting to worrisome. Khan didn't know if she was only pretending to be attracted to him. Her story about Francis might have been a lie to bring Khan on her side and hinder the investigation.

'I can't trust anyone,' Khan exclaimed in his mind as he summarized everything he had learnt and guessed.

Only someone inside the factory could know about the prototypes, but only someone from wealthy families could make the actual theft possible. Also, Luke would have probably learnt if his reinforced fabrics had hit the market, which meant that they were still hidden somewhere, probably on Milia 222.

Khan soon understood what he had to do. The Cobsend family had already come back empty-handed from its investigations, so he had to start from the places that it couldn't reach. He had to find clues about the prototypes inside the city and connect them to the actual theft.

"What do you know about the criminal organizations on the asteroids?" Khan eventually asked.

"I will send you a report written by a trusted figure in my family," Luke stated. "It will list many locations known for their illegal activities. Other than that, I'll support you as much as I can. I only regret being unable to join the search since I would stand out too much."

"Isn't the same with them?" Khan questioned while glancing at Bruce and the others.

"No one knows about their shares in the factory," Luke revealed. "As far as the workers know, the Cobsend family is the sole owner, so eventual leaks would have spread that lie."

'How can something so secretive even get robbed?' Khan wondered as he tried to imagine if the invisible man met in Reebfell's Slums could pull that theft off. He surely would have an advantage in front of cameras and similar tools, but the factory's doors would be enough to keep him outside.

The first-level warriors voiced questions that Khan had already answered on his own, and Luke's replies eventually made everyone understand that he suspected them. Luke never said anything specific about that, but their involvement was almost evident. Only an idiot wouldn't make that connection.

"Can I?" Khan asked while pointing at the reinforced fabric in the distance.

"Sure, go ahead," Luke announced.

Khan reached the reinforced fabric and walked around the table to study every inch of the item. The material didn't seem to have anything special at first sight, but Khan observed with more than his eyes.

The mana inside the fabric was odd, to say the least. Khan sensed the heavy presence of synthetic mana with different natures fused with something that felt natural.

His first guess was that the scientists had added effects to an item that already carried favorable features. Still, Khan didn't linger too long on his hypotheses and focused on memorizing the peculiar signature of the fabric.

Khan actually had it easy there since he had never sensed a similar item during his life. The mana on it was too diverse, which created a unique signature that he would never fail to recognize.

The inspection didn't stop there. Khan's methods went beyond human standards, and he had applied them to items far more disgusting.

Khan approached the table and neared his head to the reinforced fabric. Initially, he limited himself to touching it and growing used to the sensations it caused on his fingers. Yet, he soon proceeded to sniff it and rub his face on its long sides.

That behavior left the group in the distance surprised, but their mouths opened when they saw Khan licking the fabric. He made sure to experience the chemical taste lingering on the unique leather before ending the inspection.

Khan kept his eyes on the reinforced fabric as he retreated toward the group. The uniqueness of the mana signature carried by the item allowed him to sense it clearly even when he wasn't too close to it. A casket or any random container could probably cover that detail, but he still wanted to be ready.

"Luke, what's the illegal aspect of the item?" Khan asked once he returned to the group. "There might be a connection between that and the theft."

"I'm afraid I can't reveal that," Luke exclaimed. "I do trust you, Khan, but these restrictions come from above me. These secrets might tarnish my family's reputation."

"No problem," Khan reassured. "Yet, can you confirm that the illegal aspect has nothing to do with the theft?"

"There can't be a connection," Luke vaguely explained. "Different aspects of this business would have suffered otherwise. The culprits wouldn't stop at a simple theft in that case."

Khan discarded that option and went back to the initial hypothesis. Investigating his companions wouldn't lead anywhere, so he had to find the stolen leather and trace the culprit. He believed that everything would become clear afterward.

"When do we start?" Khan questioned while picking up his phone. "Why don't you send the report since you are at it?"

"This reinforced room prevents access to the network," Luke revealed. "Many areas inside the factory do the same. I'll send it as soon as we go out."

"Is it possible to have the results of your family's investigations too?" Khan wondered. "I'd also like to know more about the workers and the leader of the factory."

"Everything about the workers is classified," Luke declared. "However, I can give you the reports of the investigations without the actual names. If you find something odd, you can just point it out, and I'll ask my family to check again."

"That works," Khan nodded.

"Well then," Luke exclaimed, "Do any of you have other questions that are better to ask in this private area? Mind you. I expect the mission to start as soon as we leave."

"What," Amanda said with evident hesitation in her voice, "What do we do if we find out that our family is involved in the theft?"

Bruce glared at Amanda, and the others also shot meaningful glances at her. The woman had expressed her worry since she feared that her family could ruin her chances with Luke, but she didn't realize that everyone had kept the topic silent on purpose. Luckily for her, Luke had a silver tongue.

"I'm sure none of your families are involved," Luke reassured. "It would make little to no sense to betray this economic alliance. My money is on the Fuveall since their factories are so close."

Khan rolled his eyes after making sure that no one was looking at him. The Fuveall generally had straightforward and honest characters. Moreover, they were a species that specialized in technology. They would rather create a better reinforced fabric than steal it.

Luke had clearly lied, but his words still carried some truth. There had to be a reason behind that potential betrayal, and Khan didn't see it. He didn't know enough about that field to understand how stealing prototypes could benefit someone inside the same financial alliance.

'There has to be something that makes the theft worth it,' Khan thought. 'Unless I'm wrong about the involvement of my companions' families, which would leave me without any clear hypothesis.'

Truth be told, the hypothesis didn't matter too much. Khan only had to find the stolen leather. Everything else would be clearer afterward.

The group decided to ignore the topic brought up by Amanda to ask a few questions connected to the nature of the investigation. It turned out that Luke didn't care what they did as long as they achieved results. They had complete freedom on the approach, and he would take care of all eventual problems.

The group left the factory as quickly as they entered. The insides of the industrial area soon reappeared in their vision, and Luke didn't hesitate to send the reports at that point.

The reports listed many famous locations dealing with stolen merch and similar businesses. They even featured a few names and descriptions, which stated how they came from someone who deeply knew Milia 222's environment.

A second message reached Khan's phone while he was busy studying the list. A frown tried to appear on his face when he noticed that the text came from Luke, but he quickly suppressed that reaction, and no one noticed the event since they had their heads on their screens.

'It's not the Eerly family,' Khan read on the message. Luke was basically clearing Bruce and Amanda from the possible suspects while confirming Khan's initial guess.

"I don't know how you want to divide yourselves," Luke exclaimed. "I suggest you make teams of two or three to have someone watching your back. I'll be here or in another house on the second asteroid. Just send me a message if you need anything."

Exchanges of glances immediately happened among the group. The soldiers already had preferences, so forming teams wouldn't take long. Only Khan found himself hesitant when he found Martha and Monica looking at him.

Khan disregarded Monica and focused on Martha. He wanted to look after her, but he also knew that he would be better off on his own. His senses and Milia 222's peculiar environment gave him an innate advantage that could become null if he was with someone who didn't know how to blend in.

"I think I'll clear these places faster if I go alone," Khan eventually spoke the truth, "But I won't stop you if you want to come with me."

Martha understood Khan's abilities better than anyone else on the team, so she took no offense in his statement. After all, they were working. They couldn't put the mission at risk because they preferred to be together.

Yet, Martha was an outsider among that group of wealthy descendants. She wasn't sure she could find someone to team up with, and part of her was still hesitant about remaining alone.

"Don't worry about us," Monica exclaimed before stepping next to Martha. "We will be fine. Go and do what made you famous."

Martha couldn't help but shoot a surprised glance at Monica. She had basically teamed up with her without asking anyone's permission, but that ended up solving the issue.

Khan wanted to keep his barriers against Monica high, but he couldn't stop the faint gratitude that appeared in his mind. Even if Monica ended up being the spy, he liked to know that Martha wouldn't remain alone.

"Though, give me your contact so I can call you if something happens," Monica continued while wearing a teasing smile that told everyone about her real intentions.

"I think you can find it on my profile," Khan complained while approaching Monica with his phone in his grasp.

"But I prefer you to give it to me," Monica stated without blinking.

Khan didn't reply and proceeded to exchange numbers with Monica before separating from the group. He already had a target in mind. He had to interrogate the most untrustworthy but knowledgeable species on Milia 222. Khan had to look for Orlats, and the list mentioned a nightclub on the second asteroid that suited his needs.

A message reached Khan's phone while he was about to leave the industrial area, and he felt no surprise when he read Monica's name on it. Yet, its contents managed to increase his confusion.

'The illegal aspect must be the material used in the project. I'll tell you more if I find something,' Khan read on his phone before putting it away.. He didn't want to trust Monica, but his instincts were telling him that she was being honest with him.

#### Chapter 346 - Nightclub

Khan put everything connected to the spy in the back of his mind to focus on the mission. He wouldn't get anywhere by overthinking the issue. It was better to prioritize goals that could lead to actual answers.

More messages reached Khan's phone while he left the industrial area and began to roam through the city's streets. Luke sent him everything he had on the investigations performed by his families and Milia 222 as a whole.

Khan found himself with relatively detailed maps and a lot to read, but he left the last part for when he had more time. Right now, he wanted to reach the nightclub as soon as possible.

The city on the second asteroid was smaller than what Khan had seen on the first, but it was still too big to explore on foot. He could sprint through its streets, but the random use of martial arts and mana in general wasn't appreciated in that environment.

Khan felt forced to reach the nearest taxi area to get a car that could bring him to his destination. He decided to go for something high-class since Luke would refund those expenses, but his human driver didn't hold back from expressing his curiosity.

"Aren't you too young for [The Loophole]?" The driver asked from behind the glass that separated him from the passengers' seats.

The driver had sounded kind, which probably hinted at honest worry. After all, Khan was only eighteen, and he looked like it, even if his mature gaze carried traces of his harsh life.

"What can you tell me about it?" Khan asked.

"I've never been there," The driver responded through a faint laugh. "My wife would kill me if I spent my days in a nightclub instead of working. I've only heard bad rumors."

"Like?" Khan pressed.

"Well, all the bad rumors connected to the Orlats," The driver continued to laugh. "A lot of nasty stuff happens in [The Loophole]. It's not a place for respectable people."

"I heard that the nasty stuff only happens in the lower level," Khan questioned, using some information read on the report.

"You shouldn't speak about it so easily," The driver warned. "Are you new on Milia 222?"

"Is it that obvious?" Khan wondered.

"Most of Milia 222's underground activities aren't a secret," The driver explained, "But no one speaks about them. Even asking questions can be dangerous."

"Will you rat me out?" Khan joked, pretending to have a naive approach to the topic.

"I want nothing to do with that world," The driver revealed. "Minding my business keeps my family safe, so that's what I do. I only wanted to warn you since you look like a good kid."

"I'll be more careful," Khan promised before diving back into his screen.

Reading the details of the investigation was pointless for now, so Khan focused on the other reports. Sadly, Luke's trusted figure didn't write much about [The Loophole]. The list identified it as the center of multiple illegal activities, but it didn't say how to approach them.

The ride took a while to reach its destination. It was already past lunchtime by then. Khan paid the cab through his phone and noted down the amount spent before jumping on the sidewalk and inspecting the area.

That part of the city was filled with tall buildings that probably contained multiple residential areas, but one stood out due to its shorter size. The shining sign on its front also made its purpose pretty obvious.

Khan couldn't read all those bright symbols, but they matched the images in the report. Moreover, the sign had bright images depicting half-naked Orlats, which told him that he was in the right place.

The building had no windows or guards. It would resemble an immense slab of dark-azure metal if it weren't for its tall door and big sign. Khan approached the entrance to see how he could get inside, and he found an interactive menu waiting for him.

'Language: human,' Khan read on the menu as he tapped on preset answers. 'Level of service: VIP; Type of entertainment: Drinks and spectacle; Table for one.'

An exorbitant price appeared on the interactive door after Khan finished selecting the various options. Even his second-grade knife didn't cost so much, but he didn't hesitate to pay it.

A hole opened on the entrance afterward, and Khan inserted his hand inside it as per the menu's instruction. Something gently tapped its back, and Khan found that a simple triangular black mark had appeared on it.

'Show ticket,' Khan continued to read on the menu before placing the back of his hand on the intended spot. The door scanned the triangular mark, and the entrance finally opened.



An empty, dark corridor unfolded in Khan's vision, but faint red lights lit up when he stepped forward and the entrance closed behind him. The metal walls blocked his senses and prevented him from inspecting anything past them, so he focused on the mark while he advanced.

The mark wasn't mana-related, but it had tiny symbols at its edges that Khan guessed revealed the nature of his ticket. The corridor even forced him to show it again when he reached its end, and the true face of [The Loophole] showed itself afterward.

The loud music was the first thing that hit Khan's senses. The flashing lights came next, followed by hundreds of different types of mana. The scene was so different from the silent and empty corridor that he almost felt to have crossed a teleport.

Khan found himself on a long passage that encircled an immense dancing hall standing a whole floor under him. People of different species stood next to the handrails that prevented them from falling below as they exchanged conversations and held various drinks.

A few tables even appeared in the distance, but the unstable illumination prevented Khan from seeing them clearly. The constant noise of the loud music also made it impossible to overhear conversations. Only his sensitivity to mana remained somewhat reliable, even if the area did its best to disturb it.

'This is messier than a battlefield!' Khan shouted in his mind as he tried to inspect his surroundings.

The people standing next to the handrails had glanced at Khan, but they quickly lost interest in him. Some even decided to head for the staircases that led to the dancing hall or the two counters selling drinks. Actual bartenders worked behind them, and they mostly were women donning revealing clothes.

The extravagance that Khan had seen only inside Reebfell reappeared there. Many inside the nightclub had dyed their hair with bright substances that changed color every few seconds. Others had shining tattoos that made them visible even when the lights went dark.

The same went for a few clothes or other accessories. A world that Khan knew nothing about had just appeared in his eyes, and the surprise that he experienced made him forget about the mission for a few seconds.

'Do normal people really spend their time like this?' Khan wondered as the smell of booze, sweat, and puke reached his nostrils.

Khan quickly realized that he had been a bit optimistic. He didn't even know where to begin to search for illegal activities among that mess, but the day was still early. He could focus on inspecting the area for now.

A tinge of confusion appeared in Khan's mind when he began to think about his first steps, but a human waitress donning the same revealing clothes of the bartenders approached him before he could leave the door.

"Sir, would you like me to accompany you to your table?" The waitress shouted while making sure to bend toward Khan to expose her cleavage as much as possible.

Khan nodded and began to follow the waitress. She led him to the other side of the area, where the deafening music strangely lost some volume. Khan couldn't explain how that happened, but he guessed that some technology was involved.

"Would you like one of the private rooms, sir?" The waitress asked while trying to add cute tones to her voice now that she didn't have to shout anymore.

"I'll take one near the handrail," Khan replied as his eyes continued to wander through the area.

"This way then," The waitress stated while pointing at a corridor covered by red curtains that led deeper into the building.

It turned out that the dancing hall was only the first part of [The Loophole]. Its internal areas had other activities, and one of them was the spectacle that Khan had purchased.

The overall structure of the second part of the building was almost identical to the first. However, instead of the dancing hall, the lower floor had a series of cubes with half-naked strippers dancing on them.

The strippers belonged only to three species. Most of them were Orlats, but Khan also saw humans and Fuveall. The lower floor also had a series of tables around the cubes where people drank, shouted, and tried to steal a touch from the strippers, only to find sizzling barriers blocking their way.

The waitress brought Khan to a table with a perfect vision over the whole lower floor. Its surface was also interactive, which allowed him to order food, drinks, or leave tips to the strippers. It even let him choose to whom give his Credits.

The table also had other not so respectable options. The pornography didn't surprise Khan, but he remained a bit speechless when he saw that he could purchase actual sexual services from a list of strippers.

That wasn't even the end of it. Khan found a whole section dedicated to drugs, and he felt lucky that they had descriptions. He wouldn't have understood what they were otherwise.

'I know for a fact that half of this is illegal!' Khan shouted in his mind as he browsed through the various options. 'How can this place even remain open?'

The answer was pretty obvious. No one checked those places because they knew they would find something illegal. Khan guessed that the Orlats in charge had sealed deals with the authorities of the second asteroid to keep the soldiers outside the area.

The waitress had left Khan alone as soon as he sat at the table, giving him the chance to inspect the area freely. Only half of the seats around him were full, but the people on them didn't pay attention to him. Everyone minded their own business, which told Khan to do the same.

Khan ordered a drink and some food before moving his eyes on the spectacle downstairs. Meanwhile, he relied on his senses to inspect what would be too problematic to look at.

The number of people inside the nightclub was surprising due to the early hour, but Khan guessed that life on Milia 222 worked according to different schedules. Telling the difference between day and night was impossible there, so its inhabitants had developed an odd lifestyle.

The list had told Khan that the nightclub had an underground area where the real shady businesses happened, but he didn't know how to enter it. The menus didn't show any related option either, and asking openly about the topic didn't sound smart.

That left Khan with no option but to continue his silent inspection. He ate, drank, and kept his senses ready as he watched the spectacle and waited for something odd to pop up.

No one disturbed Khan, but he began to hope for someone to pick a fight with him as the minutes passed. He wanted to see a change in that messy but stale environment, but his wishes remained unanswered.

'Should I spend more?' Khan wondered during those silent minutes. 'Should I try to order some special service?'

The lack of experience in that field left Khan hesitant. He had no idea how to approach the businesses that could be related to the stolen leather. He had overestimated his ability to blend in.

'What's the thing that would attract the least amount of attention?' Khan wondered as he watched new strippers taking over the cubical platforms.

Khan found his answer but continued to wait. He didn't want to make a mistake right away, but the situation never changed. He didn't even see secret passages or similar paths from his favorable position.

'I have to expose myself, at least a bit,' Khan eventually decided and pressed on the option to summon a waiter to his table.

A different but equally beautiful human waitress reached the table and bent forward to express as much sensuality as possible. Yet, Khan remained serious as he voiced a vague but meaningful question. "I'm looking to purchase something that's not on the menu. I heard this was the right place."

"Our menus offer all sorts of goods, sir," The waitress gently replied while showing a wide smile. "Are you sure that you can't find something you like?"

"Everything is perfect," Khan said in the politest tone he could muster. "I'm just looking for something more specific."

The statement seemed to trouble the waitress. Her smile remained wide, but she hesitated for a few seconds before giving an answer. "I'll ask my superiors and see what we can do."

Khan hid his excitement as he performed a faint nod and ordered another drink from the table. Another waitress soon brought a glass full of a dark-yellow liquid, but she left without saying anything.

Khan drank as he waited for something to happen, but an entire hour passed uneventfully. He felt the urge to contact someone again, but he held back to avoid looking desperate. He knew that his act was almost perfect, but his young age might betray something that he wanted to keep hidden.

After two hours passed, the same waitress from before approached Khan's table. She didn't perform any sensual gestures at that time. She only voiced a simple request that Khan didn't hesitate to follow. "Please, follow me, sir."

The waitress led Khan back into the first area before descending from the staircase connected to the dancing floor. The two had to slip through the sweaty crowd and reach a spot that stood right below the entrance.

"This way, sir," The waitress shouted while reaching a hidden corner next to the dancing floor and knocking on the dark wall.

A sizzling noise tried to make its way among the loud music, but Khan only noticed how the wall retreated to create a secret entrance. The excitement almost became too hard to contain at that point, but he retained his stern face as he followed the waitress inside the area.

The secret area was dark, but Khan sensed a few presences near its bottom. The smell of cigarettes also reached him, but the waitress accelerated and forced him to follow her closely.

Then, the waitress sprinted forward, and Khan failed to follow her since the whole area lit up. Yellow light filled the secret passage, and Khan could finally add faces to the presences felt along the way.

Six Orlats sat at the end of the passage and shot cold glances at Khan while the waitress continued to run toward them. When she reached the aliens, she hid behind them and placed her back on the metal wall.

"[Don't worry, sweetie]," One of the Orlats said to the waitress. "[Stay put and let us handle this guy. You won't get any extra if you get hurt]."

The Orlats then turned toward Khan and shook its head. It clearly wanted to appear menacing, and Khan played along by pretending to take a step back out of fear.

"Curious young human," The Orlats spoke in an imperfect human accent.. "Who told you about this place? Give us a name, and we'll let you go without hurting you too much."

#### Chapter 347 - Mess

Khan found it quite hard to appear scared. Two of the six Orlats were second-level warriors, while the others were first-level warriors. In theory, they were enough to inspire fear, but Khan was different.

The Orlats were one of the few species weaker than humans before and after the evolution. Moreover, the six aliens at the end of the passage didn't have the aspect of warriors.

The six were all overweight male Orlats wearing fancy suits. Three of them had fuming cigarettes in their mouths, and the piercings hanging from their eyebrows had pendants or jewels attached to them that hindered their vision.

The mana inside their bodies could appear scary for an ordinary soldier, but Khan had fought in wars. He could barely feel any threat there, and the relatively narrow passage also gave him an advantage due to his powerful spells.

"Don't be shy," The Orlats acting as the group's leader spoke again while throwing his cigarette on the ashtray placed at the table at his side. "Remaining silent won't help you here."

"I, I only wanted to purchase some merch," Khan replied while doing his best to stop his cold face from coming out.

"Why did you think that we would have what you are looking for?" The leader asked before raising his voice. "Who told you about this place?!"

Khan pretended to shake under the shout, and the Orlats appeared pleased by his reaction. He then muttered a few unclear words before mustering a weak voice. "I read about it in a report."

"[He is lying]," One of the Orlats snorted. "[No one outside Milia 222 knows these details]."

"[We have been too lenient on travelers lately]," The leader replied.

"[They can only spread rumors]," Another Orlats added. "[They shouldn't be enough to bring a kid here unless he is an idiot]."

"[Should we interrogate him properly]?" A third Orlats asked.

"What merch did you hope to find here?" The leader questioned in his rough voice.

"I wanted body armor," Khan responded.

"There are shops for that," The leader pointed out.

"But they have bad and overpriced stuff," Khan complained. "I thought you could offer a better deal."

"Why?" The Orlats continued.

"Because everyone knows that the Orlats are the most resourceful species in the universe," Khan said in his scared tone.

The faint praise seemed to please the six Orlats. Khan had studied the flaws in their character. They were weak against flattery since every other species insulted and underestimated them, but the leader didn't appear convinced.

"[Stop smiling like idiots]," The leader ordered as a proud expression appeared on his face. "[The kid has a good mouth, but the boss' orders area clear. We can't let someone speak so openly about our businesses]."

"[What if he is someone important]?" The weaker Orlats among the group asked.

"[Are you dumb]?" The leader cursed. "[Did you forget how much trouble we had to go through when the humans came to question us about the illegal skin? It's better to silence everyone right away]."

'Illegal skin?' Khan translated in his mind. 'Is that the material that Monica mentioned?'

The four first-level Orlats nodded and left their chairs to approach Khan. The corridor could only allow the passage of three of them at the same time, so one of the aliens walked in front of his companions.

"We'll go easy on you," The first Orlats said after stopping in front of Khan and cracking his knuckles. "Don't make it hard for us."

The Orlats pulled his arm back to prepare a punch, but his whole world suddenly began to spin. He couldn't see what had happened, and his senses stabilized when his back hit the short ceiling.

Khan took a step to his side, and the Orlats fell in his previous spot. He had gone easy on the alien, but the latter still shook and puked due to the heavy blow that had landed on his fat belly.

"[You mentioned an illegal skin]," Khan said in the best accent he could muster. "[I'd like to hear more about it]."

The sharp change in Khan's behavior left the Orlats speechless. One of the second-level warriors in the back was still smoking, but his cigarette fell as his mouth drooped open in surprise.

"[Take him]!" The leader shouted when he recovered from the surprise, but a body flew above his head when his line ended.

The waitress voiced a scared cry as she saw the fainted Orlats sliding on the wall to fall on the floor. Khan had kicked him toward the bottom of the passage, and the remaining two aliens before him didn't even notice his attack.

The Orlats' cowardly nature took over the remaining two first-level warriors before Khan. They turned to escape from his range, but they found a knife and a leg blocking their path.

"[Stay put while I speak with your boss]," Khan threatened.

The two weak Orlats felt as if their bodies had turned into blocks of ice. They didn't even see Khan jumping in front of them, and the same went for his knife. They noticed the sheath hidden under the cardigan only now that it was too late.

"[Afsar, kill him]," The leader coldly ordered, and the second-level warrior at his side raised his hand to point two fingers at Khan.

Khan sensed mana moving through the Orlats' body and gathering on his dark fingernails. A bright white light came out of them and suppressed the artificial illumination in the passage before shooting forward.

The attack moved quickly, and Khan's odd position prevented him from dodging it through a sprint. The advancing light also filled most of the passage, which blocked every escape path.

The leader didn't seem to care that his underlings were on the spell's path, and Khan also disregarded them as he raised his free hand. A wave of purple-red light expanded from his palm and clashed with the incoming white radiance, creating an explosion that filled the passage with violent gales.

The two first-level warriors still standing ended up losing their balance and falling due to the winds. The waitress voiced another terrified cry as she crouched under one of the two tables and hid her head between her arms.

Only Khan and the two second-level warriors remained focused on the scene, but the two Orlats didn't hide their surprise. They didn't expect Khan to defend so well against the attack, and the passage also stated that his spell had won the clash.

Khan couldn't possibly know that, but the group of Orlats used that location for its specific layout. The relatively narrow passage gave an advantage to the second-level warrior since his spell could cover most of it. The various surfaces were also mana resistant, so the team could take care of troublesome characters without holding back.

However, Khan's Wave spell had opened cracks on those dark walls. Some artificial lights had also fried under the effects of the chaos element, which created a dark area around him.

The scene that formed after the clash left the two Orlats significantly scared. Khan stood among the darkness, with their companions lying around him and cracks spreading from his position.

The knife in his left hand also added an ominous detail to his figure. Khan resembled a proper assassin, and his cold expression only intensified the fear that the two aliens experienced.

"[I want to know about the illegal skin]," Khan declared while dropping any form of pretense.

The leader fell from his chair and began to slam his fists on the wall behind him. Khan took a step forward, but the end of the passage suddenly opened and revealed a new team of Orlats.

The newcomers inspected the situation for a single second before launching an alarm in their language. Similar cries resounded from the new opening, revealing the presence of multiple aliens.

Khan didn't sense any menacing presence, but the retreat appeared mandatory when he saw that the Orlats left the new opening to approach him. They were far from scary, but the passage's structure made everything troublesome.

Khan didn't want to kill anyone, but remaining inside the passage would force his hand. The death of an Orlat would also put a permanent end to his investigation, so he turned to shoot toward the entrance of that secret corridor.

A kick slammed on the wall, but the entrance didn't budge. Khan could understand with a single attack that he wouldn't be able to get out through his martial art, so he made his mana flow toward his free hand.

"[Get him! Get him]!" The leader shouted from the back of the passage, but the reinforcements halted their steps when they saw that a purple-red short sword had grown out of Khan's fingers.

Khan didn't even look at his enemies. He stabbed his right hand in the wall, and cracks immediately opened around the hole he dug. Those fissures expanded as his spell remained active, and an explosion eventually resounded through the passage.

The people on the dancing floor didn't hear anything about the mess, and the loud music wasn't to blame. [The Loophole]'s walls blocked sound, senses, and scanners due to the illegal businesses that happened inside it, so the events inside the secret passage remained isolated.

Nevertheless, the people on the dancing floor couldn't ignore the explosion that resounded in the hidden corner of the area. The whole hall trembled slightly as metal debris shot forward and invaded that open area.

Some curious dancers peeked past the corner to see what was happening, but they only saw a shadow running past them. After their stupor vanished, they noticed the large hole that led to the secret passage and the many angry Orlats inside it.

The presence of a secret passage didn't surprise the dancers, and even the Orlats inside it weren't enough to cause a violent reaction. However, the aliens' angry behavior and rushed movements made someone panic, triggering an unexpected chain reaction.

Khan heard cries and screams while he shot toward the staircase. The crowd on the dancing floor tried to escape, which blocked the passage to the upper floor. Some even relied on martial arts to advance, which only intensified the panic.

When Khan reached the staircase, he jumped and began to step on heads and shoulders to advance. Curses flew in his direction, and someone even swung a punch filled with mana, but he was too fast to care about that.

Reaching the upper floor only showed Khan that the panic had already spread there. He saw the path toward the entrance filled with people, but the mechanism of the metal door didn't allow the crowd to cross it at the same time.

Khan could still jump on everyone and launch a spell at the door, but he would risk hurting someone like that. He had to find another path, but Orlats began to come out of the corridors and point at his figure.

Chaos unfolded in every direction. Khan couldn't move freely due to the general panic, but the Orlats were in the same situation. Everyone felt trapped as they tried to leave the building or find alternative paths, which only left them stuck in even more crowded conditions.

Khan moved left and right only to end up in his previous positions. He wasn't in danger, but making his way among the crowd was impossible, and the lack of a clear exit didn't give him the chance to create an escape plan.

People tried to slam on Khan as the minutes passed, but he swiftly dodged everything coming in his direction. He felt forced to store his knife out of fear of hurting someone, but the situation remained troublesome.

Khan eventually decided that breaking a wall or two was better than remaining in that situation. He knew where the surface was, so he approached one of the spots without people and prepared his mana for a spell. Yet, an explosion resounded before he could start his plan.

Cries and screams overcame the music as the pale-blue light of the outside world entered the building and fused with the flashing glows. Khan peeked past his corner and noticed that a giant hole had replaced the entrance.

Soldiers donning green uniforms and wielding small guns filled the hole and shouted orders that Khan couldn't hear due to the music and screams. Yet, the loud songs finally went silent, and a few orders made their way among the crying crowd.

"[What is this mess]?" The Fuveall soldier in front of the group from outside shouted in the Orlats' language. "[Do you realize how troublesome is it for us to come here? That's it. All of you come with us]!"

The people standing right in front of the soldiers tried to complain, but the latter didn't care. The Fuveall lowered his gun and nodded at the Orlats woman behind him, who raised a conical device and spoke inside it. "[The building is surrounded. Do not try to escape, or we will use force to capture you]."

The Orlats went on to repeat the speech in other languages, leaving Khan conflicted. He didn't want to get captured on his first day of investigation. Still, that was his way out of the building.. He was even sure that Luke could get him out of any trouble if the situation required it.

Chapter 348 - Cell



Milia 222 had a special police force due to its unique environment. That organization didn't have an official power in the universe and could apply its authority only on the seven asteroids. It also had limitations when it came to private areas owned by influential families or similar groups.

The authority of the police force came from the governments of the main species on Milia 222. The Orlats, the Nele, the Fuveall, the Bise, the Tors, and the humans managed that organization through intricate interplanetary regulations that made sure to respect everyone.

Of course, Milia 222's unique environment had opened the way for corruption and similar issues, but every government turned a blind eye to them. Everything was fine as long as it didn't involve big political problems that could affect the alliance among the species.

Milia 222's police force had green uniforms that didn't feature stars to describe the soldiers' power. Moreover, most members belonged only to four species since the Tors and the Bise preferred to remain on their own.

Khan kept his alertness raised high as he followed the soldiers' orders and got into messy lines that led outside the building. He noticed how those attending the spectacle and the strippers were nowhere to be seen, but the police didn't seem to care about the deeper parts of [The Loophole].

'This is probably an act,' Khan thought as the lines moved forward.

The Fuveall in charge of the force didn't bother to send any soldier inside the building. He even pretended to ignore the people who sneaked past the curtains that divided the two areas. Annoyance and trace of worry even appeared on his face whenever an Orlats launched cold glances in his direction.

Khan only wanted to get out of that situation, so he didn't resort to any trick. The prisons were safer than [The Loophole], so he behaved as he continued to gather information through his senses.

It turned out that the Fuveall policeman didn't lie. Large floating trucks and multiple soldiers with their guns raised had surrounded [The Loophole] and had prepared for a massive arrest.

The police didn't handcuff Khan, but it still led him on one of the trucks. He found himself stuffed among a crowd of drunk and sweaty people who didn't seem to care too much about their situation, and the vehicle set off once it became full.

The metal surfaces of the truck didn't allow Khan to inspect the outside world. They were mana resistant, but he could make holes inside them if he wanted. Yet, he remained still since he knew where the vehicle was going.

The trip didn't last long. The back of the truck soon opened in front of a vast hangar dug inside the central structure of the second asteroid. Most organizations that involved the various species on Milia 222 worked there, and the same went for the prisons.

The police made the prisoners pass through scanners to divide them according to their level. Khan noticed the surprised expressions of the soldiers reading his results, but he ignored those details as he inspected the pillar's insides.

The central structure wasn't any different from the space stations. It featured grey corridors, white lights, and narrow corridors meant to make the best out of the limited space.

The density of synthetic mana was even higher inside the pillar due to the different functions and structures it contained. Khan perceived it as a stench that attacked his nostrils relentlessly. The environment was definitely interesting, but he instinctively hated it.

The prisons stood at the center of the cylindrical structure due to security reasons. Milia 222 never experienced actual jailbreaks since each government eventually took over eventual investigations of serious crimes, but it didn't hurt to at least pretend to have working cages.

It took a while, but the soldiers eventually led Khan to a vast cell that featured nothing more than a long metal bench. The prison didn't have metal bars. It separated its insides from the rest of the area through three black pillars that created two barriers made of sizzling energy.

Khan couldn't help but find similarities between that cell and what he had witnessed on Ecoruta. The barriers weren't as seamless as those found in the underground structure, but they did their job decently without depleting too much synthetic mana.

"Sir, remove your clothes," The human soldier that had escorted Khan to the area announced before they could enter the room with the cell.

Khan followed the order and ignored the surprised gaze that fell on his scar. The soldier couldn't help but become more polite after seeing that detail, but his expression changed again when he noticed the sheath tied to Khan's torso.

"Nice knife," The soldier exclaimed as he took the sheath and inspected the weapon inside it.

"Take good care of it," Khan ordered. "I don't want to see a single dent on it when I retrieve it."

The soldier didn't seem able to hear Khan's words while he continued to inspect the skull-shaped handle and the other fine details. That probably was his first time getting his hands on a second-grade weapon, and Khan didn't think too much about it as he proceeded toward the cell.

The barrier of mana opened after the soldier gave a few orders through his phone and closed as soon as Khan crossed its edges. He had nothing but his phone and underwear, but he didn't mind it as he sat on the bench and sent a message to Luke.

The area was silent, and the metal surfaces pressing on Khan's bottom and back were cold, but he found some nostalgic comfort in all of that. Yet, his peace didn't last long since complaints in various languages soon echoed in the area.

Khan didn't need to wait long to find the source of those complaints. More soldiers approached the area with different aliens that were entertaining themselves in [The Loophole]. They were all second-level warriors, but only a few of them ended up sharing Khan's cell.

The police did their best to split the prisoners belonging to the same species to add another layer of security. The few humans brought in the area ended up in the cells in the other three corners, while a wasted Fuveall was the first to join Khan.

"[How's going]?" The Fuveall weakly voiced in his language before stumbling on the smooth floor and falling. A metallic noise resounded in the cell, but loud snores soon replaced them.

Khan shook his head while a smile appeared on his face. He couldn't help but think about his father and his first period inside Ylaco's camp as he inspected the collapsed Fuveall.

The alien's naked state allowed Khan to inspect almost everything. The Fuveall had metallic implants throughout his back, which culminated in silver protections standing all around his nape. His fingers also had metallic structures on their joints, and the sound of gears eventually accompanied the loud snores.

'I'm surprised the humans didn't end up like this,' Khan thought as his father became a predominant image inside his mind. 'Dad can probably point out why their technology is so good.'

A sigh inevitably escaped Khan's mouth. He missed his father, but he still felt hesitant in front of the idea of a reunion. He had too many questions, and a lingering fear accompanied most of them.

'How many lies did you tell me, dad?' Khan wondered as he closed his eyes and laid his nape on the metal wall.

Khan felt forced to open his eyes when familiar presences approached his cell. The soldiers seemed to make an exception when they brought the two strong Orlats from the secret passage directly past the barrier.

"[The troublemaker is here]," Afsar snorted while glaring at Khan as soon as the soldiers left the area.

"[Shut up, idiot]," The leader scolded. "[He can speak our language]."

"[Boss, look at his chest]," Afsar exclaimed as traces of surprise seeped into his voice.

"[I've seen it]," The leader sneered. "[The mutations must have reached his head. Only a crazy Tainted could make such a mess]."

"[Come on]," Khan teased. "[I went easy on you]."

"[Watch your mouth]!" Afsar shouted while pointing his fingers at Khan. "[You won't get the chance to defend against me in this small cell]."

Khan revealed a cold smirk as he brought his hand closer to the barrier to his right. Faint traces of purple-red mana came out of his fingers and made the synthetic energy sizzle louder. It almost seemed that a hole would form if he touched it.

"[Chaos wielder]," The leader whispered.

"[You don't look surprised]," Khan commented.

"[Your kind always causes troubles]," The leader revealed, "[And I don't know other second-level warriors who can break The Loophole's walls so easily]."

"[I must say that I liked the place]," Khan admitted. "[I know that your species doesn't have a good reputation, but I find it unfair. You are worthy of praises]."

Both Orlats snorted, but their proud smiles revealed that they liked that compliment. Khan didn't miss that detail, and the entirety of his knowledge flowed through his mind as he searched for a way to get information.

"[It's a pity you won't get to see our greatness anymore]," Afsar declared. "[Just wait for us to come out. No Orlats will ever accept you inside our clubs]."

"[It wasn't my intention to cause a mess]," Khan revealed. "[I apologize. I really wanted to buy merch]."

"[Shut up]!" The leader ordered while lowering his voice. "[Don't talk about that stuff so openly. I swear. I hate foreigners]."

"[Money is not the problem]," Khan continued without caring about the leader's words.

"[I told you to shut up]!" The leader shouted before turning toward the area's entrance.

The soldiers brought more prisoners inside the area, but the leader shook his head when gazes fell on him. The police ended up moving the convicts toward other cells after that silent order, leaving Khan enough privacy to keep investigating.

"[You even have influence over the police]," Khan commented. "[The other species are really underestimating you]."

"[Our species has the potential to stand at the peak of the known universe]!" Afsar claimed.

"[Why do you accept the bad rumors about your kind then]?" Khan asked. "[They can't be all false]."

"[Why would we tell you]?" The leader chuckled.

"[You are right]," Khan sighed. "[You are masters when it comes to transactions. Do you want to make one with me]?"

"[An Orlats never backs out of a good deal]," The leader announced, "[But you can't offer anything]."

"[Maybe you shouldn't care about what I can offer]," Khan exclaimed. "[You should care about what I can prevent]."

Afsar opened his mouth in anger, but the leader raised a hand to interrupt him. Khan's words had attracted his interest, but he didn't say anything to make him speak again.

Khan understood the meaning behind that silent interest and explained his position. "[My employers won't stop until they get what they want. I can tell them that the clues lead to your species. It wouldn't even be a lie]."

"[Careful]," The leader threatened. "[Words can kill on Milia 222]."

"[I've fought on Ecoruta]," Khan revealed. "[I've seen more death than I can count. I respect your species and authority, but you can't scare me]."

Khan made sure to add faint praises whenever he could, and his tactic seemed to work. The Orlats' respect toward him increased after every answer, and his demonstration inside the secret passage only proved that he could back up those statements with actual power.

"[Let them look as much as they want]," The leader challenged. "[The Orlats' businesses are completely in line with Milia 222's regulations]."

Khan glanced at the wasted Fuveall on the floor, but the leader quickly justified that scene. "[We are not to blame for what customers take before getting inside our activities]."

"[I didn't think I could find someone better than me at lies]," Khan stated. "[I owe your whole species an apology]."

"[I've never told a single lie during my entire life]," The leader declared without wavering at all.

"[Still, you misunderstood me]," Khan continued. "[My employers will stop at nothing to find what he needs. They will cause problems for you even if you hide all the evidence. I believe you prefer to preserve your income]."

The leader's face finally went through a slight change, but he remained silent. His smirk also continued to fill his expression to prevent Khan from finding other clues.

"[I'll start with something simple]," Khan eventually exclaimed. "[I'm Lieutenant Khan, and the light wielder behind you is Afsar. What's your name]?"

The leader seemed to think about the question for a while before voicing a simple word. "[Sher]."

"[Nice to meet you, Sher]," Khan smiled, but Sher snorted.

"[Next question]," Khan continued. "[You are really powerful, especially on Milia 222. However, humans are also quite influential. It's safe to assume that they can create real problems for you in the right conditions]."

Sher hesitated to answer again, but a weak "[yes]" eventually left his mouth.

"[I swear on my scar that I won't tell anything to my employers]," Khan declared. "[I will say that my investigation led nowhere, but I need something from you]."

"[I don't know what you are talking about]," Sher responded.

"[The illegal skin]," Khan whispered. "[I want to know what you didn't say to the humans who came to question you]."

Sher chuckled before sitting on the bench and crossing his legs. Afsar also smiled as he remained at his boss' side. Khan noticed traces of mockery in their expressions, but his face remained serious.

"[Young, young human]," Sher shook his head. "[The Orlats are cursed by deep mistrust, especially inside our species, but our behavior is innate. Instead, you humans do it out of greed]."

"[What do you mean]?" Khan asked.

"[We didn't hold anything back from the humans who came to question us]," Sher explained.. "[If you want answers, you should ask your species]."

## Chapter 349 - Thief

'Is he lying?' Khan wondered as his first instinct compelled him to refute that statement.

Still, Khan quickly realized that the Orlats' only reason to lie would involve their partaking in the theft. The two aliens would probably remain silent even in front of proper threats in that case, which forced Khan to consider other options.

Sher's revelation sounded far from misleading. Khan had a clear idea of the human's greed and cruelty, and everything he had learnt about the investigation hinted at the presence of spies.

However, Khan also felt pretty sure that Luke's family had sent its best investigators to gather information about the theft. There probably wasn't any spy among them, which put Khan in a pickle.

The Orlats could be lying, and the humans might have hindered the investigation. Both options had reasonable arguments, leaving Khan unable to find the truth.

However, it was clear that Sher wouldn't reveal anything else now that he had come up with a reasonable explanation. Khan could continue to insist, but that would only make him look desperate. More questions couldn't lead anywhere, which forced him to prioritize a different issue.

"[Thank you for your honesty]," Khan declared in the politest tone he could muster. "[I'll make sure to leave your name out of my report]."

Khan's sharp change in behavior left the Orlats surprised. The two aliens didn't expect that complete lack of surprise or shock, but the polite words that flew in their direction pleased them.

Sher snorted, and Afsar joined him on the bench. They both considered the conversation to be over, but Khan rekindled it with another question. "[I hope we can both put tonight's matters behind us once we get out]."

"[You sure like to talk]," Afsar complained.

"[As long as you don't cause more troubles for our activities]," Sher commented, and Khan showed a meaningful smile. The Orlats didn't say anything specific, but Khan knew that he didn't ruin his relationship with that species.

The cell tried to fall silent at that point, but the snoring Fuveall continued to disturb that peace. The metallic noises that accompanied the sleeping alien's voice also grew louder as time passed, and the Orlats didn't hold back from kicking him from time to time.

Khan pretended to chuckle whenever the Orlats kicked the Fuveall in their rude attempts to stop the snoring. He didn't like what they were doing, but the latter seemed to appreciate his complicity.

That phase ended when the Fuveall stopped snoring and raised his sleepy face to inspect the cell. At first, he glanced at Khan, but a smile widened on his face when he noticed the two Orlats.

"[Great party]!" The Fuveall announced in his language before falling asleep again.

Khan and the Orlats stared at the alien for a few seconds, but they exchanged meaningful smirks when they confirmed that the snores weren't coming back. Khan even gave them the thumbs-up, which they received as a pleasant compliment.

Khan's efforts in pretending to be part of the gang rewarded him with a peaceful time inside the cell. The Orlats didn't even show the same mistrust they had before the conversation. It seemed that they had accepted Khan, but he knew that their understanding was only superficial.

The two Orlats eventually decided to take a nap, and Khan used that chance to study what Luke had sent about the investigation. If the aliens had spoken the truth, there had to be something odd inside the various reports.

A few hours had to pass before a change happened in that peaceful area. Khan heard a familiar voice echoing past the corridor connected to the hall containing his cell, and his senses soon became able to identify the whole group.

The Fuveall soldier who had led the operation in [The Loophole] walked next to Luke and repeatedly nodded as the latter complained loudly. Meanwhile, Martha and Monica followed behind the duo and inspected the area with their curious eyes.

The four cells only had males, and most of them were still pretty drunk, so whistles and cheers resounded as soon as Martha and Monica became visible. The Fuveall soldier scolded the prisoners and slammed his reinforced arms on the black pillars in his range, but that did little to appease the crowd.

"Where was I?" The Fuveall cleared his throat when he rejoined Luke. "I'm sorry for the trouble, Mister Cobsend. The situation was pretty chaotic. We had to bring everyone in to avoid worse troubles. I promise that we'll do our best to avoid committing similar mistakes in the future."

"That's the least you can do!" Luke angrily shouted. "I'll think about what to report back to my father after seeing how you behave in the next period. I hope you'll show the respect that my family deserves."

"Most certainly," The Fuveall soldier promised as he approached Khan's cell and deactivated one of the barriers by pressing specific spots on the black pillar. "Lieutenant Khan, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I take full responsibility."

"And what would that even mean?" Luke voiced another angry remark.

"It's fine, Luke," Khan reassured while jumping off the bench and leaving the cell. "He was only doing his job."

The Fuveall soldier shot a grateful glance toward Khan, and that emotion only intensified when he noticed that Luke seemed to drop the matter. The latter remained pissed, but he stopped berating the poor alien.

Martha and Monica didn't hold back from inspecting Khan from head to toe. He was still in his underwear, which covered almost nothing. Both of them ended up blushing when their eyes fell on his crotch.

"Is that my stuff?" Khan asked when the Fuveall handed him a simple bag.

The question didn't need answers since Khan noticed his good clothes when he opened the bag. They were even clean, meaning that the police had washed them before giving them back. Yet, that sight didn't make Khan ignore that something was missing.

"Where is my knife?" Khan asked while raising his face to stare at the Fuveall.

"Knife?" The Fuveall wondered. "I'm afraid the bag contains all the items stored under your name."

"My knife was a custom-made second-grade weapon," Khan stated. "You can't have missed it."

Luke glared at the soldier, who understood that he had to say something about the situation. "It's not rare for items to go missing during captures. Our inventory is quite messy, but do not worry. We are willing to refund the value of the lost weapon and even add an extra for the trouble."

Luke seemed satisfied with that conclusion, but Khan felt unable to let it go. "I don't want money. I want my knife."

"I'm deeply sorry," The Fuveall announced. "I can send my soldiers to search for it, but this is Milia 222. Lost items rarely reappear."

"[Lost]!" Sher snickered from inside the cell. "[I wonder why it's always the good items that get lost]."

Khan inevitably thought about the human soldier who had praised the knife when he undressed. Anger started to fill his mind. Khan didn't want to overreact, but he felt unable to stop his emotions.

It would have been slightly better if Khan could suspect one of the alien species on Milia 222, but the human soldier's comment continued to resound in his mind. He felt sure that he was the culprit, and that made him livid.

Khan had fought wars for the Global Army. He had done unspeakable things for humankind's sake, and he had mostly received bitterness as a reward.

The Credits obtained through his service were one of the few positive aspects of those tragic events. Khan didn't care about them, but they had some spiritual value in his mind. They described what the Global Army thought his efforts and struggles were worth.

Khan had bought his second-grade knife with those Credits, which naturally passed that spiritual value to the weapon. Yet, he felt sure that a human had decided to steal it.

The soldier wasn't even a simple human. He was someone that had to enforce Milia 222's regulations. He wasn't a criminal or anything similar, which only worsened how Khan felt about the whole matter.

"Where is the soldier who escorted me to the cell?" Khan asked as his face grew cold.

"I don't know who escorted you," The Fuveall admitted.

"Find that out," Khan ordered.

"I-," The Fuveall tried to speak in an apologetic tone, but Khan interrupted him before hearing that justification. "Luke."

"You heard Lieutenant Khan," Luke promptly played along. "We want a name, and we want it now."

The Fuveall didn't know what to say, but it was clear that remaining silent would only put a target on his head. His eyes darted left and right as he thought about the matter, and they lit up when he found something worth saying. "The shift is about to change. You can probably find your soldier in the locker area."

"Lead us there," Luke ordered, and the Fuveall immediately turned to lead the way.

Martha and Monica remained silent as Khan forgot about the bag in his hands and began to follow the Fuveall. He stopped only once to turn toward the two Orlats and perform a faint nod.

No one addressed Khan during the walk. He was still in his underwear, but something told Luke and the others that it was better to leave him alone for now. The soldiers along the path glanced curiously at him, but they also felt that remaining silent was for the best.

The Fuveall led the group into the outer areas of the central structure until he reached a damp space connected by a series of showers and locker rooms. Soldiers roamed among those rooms and felt embarrassed at the sight of women in the corridor, but Khan didn't bother about those reactions.



"Ah!" The Fuveall tried to call when Khan darted forward, but Luke glared at him and interrupted any attempt to stop his companion.

Only five rooms stretched from the corridor, and Khan checked all of them. Peeking past the entrances was enough for him since he recalled his target's aura, and he found it when he reached the second-last hall.

A series of metal lockers filled the sides of the room, and soldiers of various species happily joked or made comments about the end of their shift. They were ready to go home, but Khan's arrival filled the area with a tense mood.

"What are you doing here?" One of the soldiers close to the entrance shouted as he raised an arm to stop Khan. However, his hand ended up grasping mere air when he tried to close it on Khan's shoulder.

Khan reached the end of the locker room instantly and found himself in front of his target. The soldier gasped when his eyes focused on Khan's figure, and a question tried to leave his mouth, but he didn't get the chance to speak.

"Where is my knife?" Khan asked in an aloof tone.

"W-, what?" The soldier exclaimed, but something in his expression told Khan that his guess had been on point.

"My knife," Khan repeated. "Give it back."

"I don't know what you are talking about!" The soldier announced in a more credible manner now that his surprise had dispersed. "You aren't even supposed to be here. This is a crime."

The anger boiling inside Khan's mind only intensified. He couldn't help but connect his struggles on different planets and battlefields to the man in front of him. Khan had fought for him, but the latter didn't even bother to respect his efforts.

The soldier snorted and tried to ignore Khan, but a kick suddenly landed at the center of his torso. The man was a mere first-level warrior, so the attack flung him on the only wall without lockers.

A series of angry voices resounded behind Khan. All the soldiers in the room cursed and tried to approach him, but a series of purple-red tendrils of energy suddenly came out of his figure and made the group stop.

Khan turned to glance at the angry soldiers. There were a few second-level warriors among them, but they weren't real fighters. The mana inside their bodies moved slowly, and the fear caused by the chaos element hindered its flow even further.

"Come on," Khan challenged as mana continued to come out of his figure and mess with the room's artificial illumination. "Take another step."

Khan brought his attention back on his target without even bothering to look at the soldiers behind him. The man was coughing on the floor, and some blood mixed with the saliva leaving his mouth. He had clearly felt the blow, but Khan felt no pity.

"My knife, now," Khan ordered.

"Why would I have it?" The soldier said among his coughs.

His performance was even better than before. It could trick most people, but Khan knew what he had seen during his first question, so he delivered another kick at the center of his chest.

The soldier lost his breath for a whole second as he slammed on the wall again before falling back to the floor. He felt the urge to say something, but Khan suddenly placed a foot on the side of his head and began to apply some pressure.

"My knife," Khan said slowly. "I won't ask again."

The pressure on the soldier's head intensified, and terror filled his mind when he saw that no one was coming to help him. Even the Fuveall remained behind.

"It., it's in my locker!" The soldier eventually admitted as he pointed his hand toward one of the walls. "The third locker from the right. The code is-."

"Keep your code," Khan snorted as he shot toward the designed locker and slammed a kick on its upper side.

The locker bent and created an opening where Khan could insert his hand. He quickly took out his knife before placing his palm on the broken entrance.. Then, purple-red energy shot out, and the whole item shattered.

#### Chapter 350 - Hurt

Khan had contained the range of the Wave spell, but the attack expanded to the nearby lockers anyway. A vast hole formed among the line of grey items, and the destruction also spread on the wall behind them.

The artificial lights in the locker room flickered as the chaos element expressed its power. Some directly broke, creating a dim illumination that added a threatening vibe to Khan's actions.

Most soldiers wanted to complain, especially those who had lost their belongings during Khan's attack, but no one dared to speak. They didn't want to end up like their companion, and they definitely didn't want to become the next target of that destructive spell.

Khan didn't feel any better after venting on the lockers, but he let the matter go. He turned to walk toward the exit, and the soldiers on the way moved to make room for him.

Martha, Monica, Luke, and the Fuveall didn't speak when Khan crossed them, but he felt able to read most of their thoughts from their expressions.

The Fuveall did his best to appear apologetic, even if a tinge of fear had seeped into his expression. Meanwhile, Luke wore a cold and noble face to express how he was entirely on board with everything Khan had done.

Instead, Martha seemed quite shocked and confused. She knew that Khan had changed, but that was different. His actions had been cold, resolute, and scary. Even she believed that he would have killed the soldier if he didn't obtain what he wanted.

As for Monica, her expression was the only one that Khan couldn't completely read. She didn't seem to care about the soldier at all. She actually appeared curious about the depths of Khan's character, and her eyes never stopped studying his almost-naked figure.

Khan realized that he was still in his underwear only when he stepped into the corridor connected to the showers and locker rooms. The bag with his clothes was still on his shoulder, so he quickly dressed up.

"I need a sheath," Khan stated after handing the empty bag at the Fuveall and showing his palms to prove that he couldn't store his knife anywhere.

"I'll make my soldiers bring one right away," The Fuveall reassured while picking up his phone.

"A good sheath," Luke reminded, "Something that can make us forget about your mess."

"Of course, of course!" The Fuveall added, and the group resumed their walk as soon as he put his phone away.

The walk toward the central structure's exit was silent. No one was in the mood to talk, at least not when others could hear them. Martha, Luke, and Monica all wanted to have private conversations with Khan, while the latter had various thoughts afflicting his mind.

'Can I even find anything in the reports about the investigation?' Khan wondered as he played with the knife in his left hand.

Khan had given a quick read to the reports during the peaceful hours inside the cell. They didn't feature names or pictures, but they also lacked interesting information.

The issue came from the very nature of the reports. They involved investigations about the workers inside the factory. Still, they didn't play any part in the inquires that Sher had mentioned.

'Can I even investigate the investigators?' Khan wondered. 'That's impossible, right? Also, what would happen if I found something? I can't question the loyalty of the Cobsend family's trusted members. That's far above my status and pay.'

If Sher had spoken the truth, the investigators were to blame for failing to find clues about the missing reinforced fabric. Khan could only see two explanations for that hypothesis. The soldiers appointed by the Cobsend family had either made a mistake or had lied about what they found.

Both explanations sounded troublesome in Khan's mind. He would accuse soldiers with great status if he brought the issue to Luke. At that point, the problem wouldn't only involve Luke anymore. It would force the higher-ups of his family to step in, which would remove Khan's favorable status.

'I can't remain silent,' Khan concluded in his mind, 'But I can't put the blame on someone without proof. I need to continue the investigation on my own until I find something worth mentioning.'

"Luke, I'll need the reports of the initial investigation," Khan said once the Fuveall left the group to get the sheath.

"I've already sent you those," Luke pointed out.

"I don't mean the reports about the workers," Khan explained. "I want everything involving the investigation outside the factory, even if it looks useless."

Luke wasn't dumb. Actually, he was far smarter than Khan when it came to social and political problems. He could understand the meaning that Khan had tried to hide under his vague request, but he didn't say anything specific and limited himself to agreeing.

The Fuveall returned to the group in no time. Khan soon found a luxurious black sheath in his hands. The item's texture was soft and elastic but also quite resilient. It almost felt like a first-grade item due to the mana used to enhance its overall structure, and the golden designs on its surface only increased its value.

"This won't do," Khan objected when he studied the actual storage space meant for the knife. "This cover takes too long to open. I want something meant for battles, not just for show."

"I'll find a suitable sheath immediately," The Fuveall excused himself as he took the black sheath and left the group again.

"Are you enjoying giving him a hard time?" Luke joked while looking at the Fuveall disappearing behind a corner in the distance.

"I meant what I said," Khan claimed. "What's the point of a sheath if it stops me from drawing my knife?"

Luke limited himself to chuckle, but Martha didn't find anything funny in that. Khan's explanation confirmed how much he had changed. It seemed that his whole mindset was battle-related now.

The Fuveall came back with a new sheath that satisfied Khan's requests. The item was brown, mana resistant, and comfortable. He barely felt it when he tied it around his waist, and its cover didn't hinder the knife at all.

The group left the central structure a few minutes after Khan obtained his new sheath. The Fuveall escorted them until the beginning of one of the vast streets above the city, and Luke refused his offer to get a police squad to accompany them back home.

The areas around the central pillar had many parking lots due to their unique location, so Luke and the others found a cab in no time. Even if the dome still illuminated the city with its pale-blue light, it was deep into the night, so the group planned to return home and rest.

Luke had obviously chosen one of the most luxurious cabs in the parking lot, and the privacy that it offered removed the faint traces of uneasiness that still lingered among the group. Khan had also dropped his cold mood, which eventually gave Martha the chance to voice her doubts.

"What happened out there?" Martha asked while Khan browsed through the reports on his phone.

Luke stopped tinkering with the interactive bar inside the cab, and Monica also disregarded her phone to focus on Khan. It was clear that they were both interested in the matter.

"I went in [The Loophole] and got caught in a mess," Khan half-lied as he summarized his first day of investigation. "I didn't get the chance to ask many questions, but I might have an idea of where to find a lead."

"A lead?!" Luke exclaimed.

"An idea of where to find it," Khan repeated. "I still don't know anything. I'm not even sure I can trust what I found."

"Well, that makes sense," Luke sighed.

"How were things on your end?" Khan asked.

"We have taken a long tour of the shops on the first floor," Monica explained. "I think we found a lot of stolen merch, but nothing similar to what we were looking for."

"Something like that wouldn't be in the open," Khan stated while making sure to remain vague to prevent the driver from overhearing something important. "I guess it was worth a try."

"We already have a few targets in mind for tomorrow," Monica revealed. "Do you want to come with us? Your presence would help a lot."

"I'll remain in my room tomorrow," Khan declared. "I have quite a bit of studying to do."

"Our drink will have to wait then," Monica teased, but she felt slightly disappointed when Khan didn't give her any playful smirk or friendly reaction.

"What happened with the soldier?" Martha continued before the conversation died. "I get that you were angry, but don't you think to have gone too far? That's still Milia 222's official police force."

The three had different ideas about Khan's previous actions, but only Martha had the courage to address them. She would have wanted to remain silent until she and Khan were alone, but her doubts were too loud to suppress.

"Too far?" Khan asked while showing honest confusion. "I've killed for people like him. I won't stay put when they steal my stuff."

The calmness shown by Khan didn't reflect the depths of the topic. The three almost underestimated his words before understanding how serious they were.

Contradicting Khan became impossible after that understanding seeped into the trio's minds. Luke even lowered his gaze to hide his dark face. He had learnt what it meant to kill on Istrone, so he could guess what kind of anger Khan had felt when a soldier had tried to rob him.

Khan's words made the group fall silent, and the situation didn't change until they reached their home. The building on the second asteroid was even better than the previous, but Khan didn't pay too much attention to that luxury as he chose a random room and isolated himself inside it.

Sleep struggled to take control of Khan's mind, and he didn't even bother to try to rest. He connected his phone to the room and spread the various reports on the walls to continue his study.

The second inspection didn't reveal anything new, but Khan still tried to sort out those reports in different groups. He used the alibis to create various folders and divide the workers to have an easier time studying them in the future.

Luke sent what Khan had requested as the morning approached. The sheer number of pages to read left Khan slightly stunned, but he understood the reason behind that quantity when he started to inspect them.

Those new reports involved the investigations outside the factory, and they turned out to be extremely detailed. They had proper names and locations since they didn't need to preserve the workers' privacy, and they also had personal impressions added to each question.

'They are specialists,' Khan concluded when browsing through the reports. 'I expected nothing less from the Cobsend family.'

The reports were so detailed that Khan could almost imagine the faces of the aliens questioned during the investigation. The soldiers appointed for the process even connected their impression to the unique features of each species, so Khan struggled to find flaws.

Khan forgot to have breakfast due to how immersed he was in that pile of information. He organized the reports multiple times in the hope of finding a connection or a flaw that the investigators had missed, but everything seemed perfect. He even realized how he would have failed to obtain so many answers in those situations.

The study eventually focused on the only vague lead Khan had found. He knew that the Orlats had said something, but he couldn't limit his research to the reports coming from [The Loophole].

A familiar presence approached the room's entrance while Khan was immersed in his study. He opened the door through the wall's menus, and Monica's figure became visible. She was wearing casual clothes, but Khan's attention fell on the tray in her hands.

"You skipped breakfast and lunch," Monica stated. "I thought you might be hungry."

Khan realized how long had passed at that point, and his stomach even growled when he smelled the excellent food on the tray. He didn't hesitate to jump on his feet and reach Monica before allowing her into his room.

"You sure worked hard," Monica commented while inspecting the various reports on the wall.

Khan sat on his bed and began to eat, but his eyes never left Monica. He wanted to see if she revealed something when looking at the reports, but she appeared completely normal.

"Why aren't you outside with Martha?" Khan asked as he wolfed down the food.

"We had an appointment with a broker," Monica explained without taking her eyes away from the reports. "We wanted to see if we could go undercover in some illegal operation, but the guy didn't show up."

"We do look suspicious," Khan admitted. "Anyone can see that we are outsiders."

"I thought I could cheat my way in with my beauty," Monica joked as she turned and pulled the corners of her t-shirt while performing a half-bow.

Khan inspected Monica from head to toe before bringing his attention back to the food. Monica frowned at that reaction. She expected a joke or something similar, but Khan directly ignored her.

"Did something happen?" Monica asked as she took a step toward Khan.

"What do you mean?" Khan asked in a casual manner.

Monica understood that something was off and crouched in front of Khan. She felt a bit shy in that position, but she still placed a hand on Khan's arm before voicing another question. "Did I do something wrong?"

"What makes you think that?" Khan chuckled as he put away the tray. "Nothing could have happened in a day."

Monica didn't seem convinced. Her eyes went left and right as she tried to find an explanation, and she left Khan as soon as she realized what was happening.

"You," Monica whispered as she retreated toward the wall and sadness filled her expression, "You think that I might be a spy."

Khan didn't think that Monica would have gotten there so quickly, but his face remained calm as he came up with a lie. "I never said that."

"No, it would make sense," Monica continued as she crossed her arms. "The refined descendant of a wealthy family suddenly shows rude behavior in front of the famous soldier with a poor background. It feels too coincidental when everything about the investigation points toward a traitor."

"Monica, I've never-," Khan tried to stop that speech.

"No, no, I understand," Monica interrupted. "You can't trust me so easily. It makes perfect sense. I guess I deluded myself when I thought that we had a connection."

"Monica," Khan called.

"Don't," Monica interrupted again. "I don't want to hear lies, not from you. I like you because you don't care about my status and only look at the real me. I want to keep that memory intact until I prove that you can trust me."

A tear began to leave Monica's right eye, but she hid it behind her hair as she turned to approach the entrance. That realization had clearly shocked her, but Khan wanted to respect her wish.

"I won't lie to you," Khan sighed as Monica opened the door. "I can't trust you right away, but my instincts tell me that you are a good person."

Monica stooped for a second before darting past the entrance. The door closed, and Khan heaved a deep sigh as silence returned in his room.

'I've hurt her,' Khan cursed in his mind before focusing on the wall.. He had found something vaguely interesting which pointed at the Nele on the third asteroid.