

Chaos' Heir 121

Chapter 121 - Days

Khan couldn't understand what had just happened. He could get that Liiza needed to leave and warn everyone quickly, but her last words left him speechless.

'Why would she say that?' Khan wondered as he played the time spent with her in his mind.

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Khan felt quite sure that he didn't make Liiza angry. He had always been honest, and he wasn't treating her like a powerless girl either. The events with Zalpa had even made their relationship take a step forward since they were sharing each other's burdens now.

Still, Liiza's sudden reaction made Khan feel that something was off. She was usually easy to understand since she never held back from showing her true intentions. Yet, the last interaction had featured the exact opposite of what Khan had learnt to see in his girlfriend.

The confusion caused worries, and the worries led to paranoia. Khan had recently gone through multiple difficult moments, and Liiza had become one of the few things he could appreciate wholeheartedly. She was a trustworthy beacon in his life who helped him go on even if his beliefs had fallen apart.

Liiza's last line sorted the effects that it described. Khan couldn't help but consider his relationship with her, and he even ended up comparing the Niqols to the only other girl who had come close to become his girlfriend.

Two weeks of relationship didn't sound like a long time when Khan thought about it. However, they had arrived while he was lost in the emptiness caused by Istrone's events. Moreover, they had been intense and wonderful in fields that went way beyond simple lust.

Khan couldn't deny the intense attraction the two had experienced since they first lay their eyes on each other. Yet, those days together had proven how their mana wasn't wrong. They had a similar mindset and situation. The differences between their species didn't even manage to create unsolvable misunderstandings.

It was evident that their relationship could work. Khan and Liiza were still at the beginning of their romance, but they could feel how they never stopped getting closer to each other. Their feelings never stopped intensifying as they discovered new aspects of their partner. They also grew used to their gestures and behavior at a surprising pace.

Martha and Liiza were so different that Khan struggled to understand how he could like both of them.

Martha was a gentle friend who didn't care about Khan's background. She liked to fight, to prevail over her peers, and she didn't mind helping Khan whenever he couldn't understand some aspects of the Global Army.

Khan and Martha shared a similar position in the army, but that only created a natural alliance since they were on the opposite side of the wealthy recruits. Their background wasn't the reason why their relationship had slowly evolved.

Martha was mature, and she felt naturally attracted by Khan's driven character. She also liked the side of him that made her laugh. The same went for his shamelessness toward some aspects of their life in the Global Army.

She had initially tried to suppress her feelings due to the packed schedule caused by the training camp, but Onia had made her hesitation crumble. Martha had felt slightly shy about that, but she had finally decided to give her romantic life a chance.

Liiza was almost her opposite. She and Khan simply couldn't be friends. Their attraction was instinctive, and a power that they couldn't control drove it. Their minds had decided that they were good for each other, and that had been enough to make everything else happen.

Liiza's status as a Niqols made her self-restraint quite loose. She didn't hesitate to kiss him as soon as she confirmed her attraction. She often initiated their intimate sessions, and her confidence was something that Khan admired about her character.

Moreover, Liiza could feel his pain in ways that humans who didn't endure the same experiences struggled to do. She could look into his mind by studying his gaze and staring at his expressions. Her perception was almost magical and probably came from her deep understanding of mana.

'What should I even consider about us?' Khan sighed as he softly bumped the back of his head to the cold, rocky surface behind him. 'I like her, and she likes me. Isn't this the whole point of a relationship?'

The differences between their species didn't matter in Khan's mind. He could barely force himself to see humans and Niqols as separate creatures. He couldn't find issues when he struggled to understand what everyone saw as problematic.

His confused state eventually led to a conclusion that left him both sad and warm. Khan slowly accepted that Liiza would have probably captured the entirety of his mind even if Martha were awake. He couldn't even describe the reasons behind his deduction. There was something between the Niqols and him that went beyond thoughts and words.

The evolution of his relationship with Martha had been natural and smooth, but he could describe it clearly. Khan could see every tiny step that they had taken together to reach their apex in Onia.

Instead, everything felt unclear and unavoidable with Liiza. She existed, so Khan felt attracted by her. His eyes wanted to remain on her as long as she was in their range.

Khan could guess that his feelings came from his young age. He didn't lie to himself when he considered his inexperience in relationships and potentially naïve emotions.

However, Khan couldn't find a proper reason to disrespect his emotions. They might come from his young and naïve mind, but so what? They still existed, and he could feel them growing stronger with each passing day.

'Niqols' love is stronger than humans,' Khan repeated Zalpa's words in his mind. 'I wonder if we should all learn to love like the Niqols. Isn't this what Lieutenant Dyester tried to teach to me? Shouldn't I avoid having regrets?'

The mental conversation felt too one-sided at some point and made Khan suppress his worries to go back to his training. The third day of his third week on Nitis passed quickly, and he returned to the camp the following afternoon to fill his stomach and see if the professors had gone back to work.

The recruits welcomed him back to the camp with open arms. They even took that chance to study his riding position again, and Khan didn't mind repeating his explanations while adding a few descriptions of his test.

One of the professors had yet to return to work, but Khan could attend two lessons before the arrival of the night. His companions tried to drag him outside of the camp at that point, but his thoughts about Liiza made it impossible for him to accept that offer.

Khan ate again before going inside his room and taking care of his training with the Divine Reaper. He even tested whether the mental barrier helped with the exercises related to mana, but the results ended up being quite obvious. His ability to cut away his emotions improved his results, but he was still far away from creating the membrane of sharp energy described in the martial art.

His training with the Divine Reaper ended around midnight. Khan had the chance to sleep and flew to the mountains after he woke up, but Snow notified him about its arrival before he could even consider remaining inside the camp.

The Aduns didn't come to the camp due to Khan's orders. It had simply sensed his longing toward Liiza, and it had connected that feeling to the flat area among the mountains.

Khan didn't need to make up his mind anymore at that point. He exited his room, jumped on Snow, and let the eagle fly him to the mountain chain with its most reckless flight yet. Snow allowed him to experience surges of adrenaline that even the battles couldn't provide. Still, everything went silent when the duo approached the flat area and noticed a dark figure wrapped in a white blanket sitting in the corner of the rocky wall.

Liiza opened her eyes and unfolded the blanket when she saw Khan landing at the edges of the flat area. She appeared sleepy, but her expression quickly grew aloof after staring at her boyfriend for a few seconds.

Khan could see that something was bothering her. She used the blanket to create a spot next to her where he could sit. She wanted to talk instead of diving into intimate actions.

Khan didn't let that scene scare him away. He actually felt glad that he was finally about to obtain his answers. He didn't want to experience that day of doubts and worries ever again.

"Can you tell me what's wrong now?" Khan asked once he sat cross-legged on the blanket and fixed his eyes on Liiza.

"Did you think about what I said?" Liiza went straight to the point without showing any reaction in her expression.

"I didn't manage to think about anything else," Khan honestly revealed without moving his eyes from hers. "I thought and thought, considered every day spent together. My mind even compared you to the girl I told you about."

"What did you discover?" Liiza asked, but her voice seemed to tremble near the end of her line.

Khan ignored that detail and decided to go along with her questions. "What's there to discover? You already know how I feel. I can't understand what's changed."

"You put yourself at risk to help my species," Liiza replied. "That happened."

"I can't see the differences between humans and Niqols," Khan explained while shrugging his shoulders. "I don't want the relationships of our species to improve on the blood of children. I just don't."

"You didn't decide that because of me, right?" Liiza continued.

"I had the chance to warn the Niqols with you," Khan sighed as his expression darkened. "I still need to follow orders and wait to help if that's what my superiors want, but I didn't want to keep you in the dark over something so important. I don't care if the army ends up losing benefits over my actions."

"Khan, isn't that treason?" Liiza asked as her voice gained a pleading tone.

"Isn't the opposite genocide?" Khan replied without showing any hesitation in his face.

A tremor ran through Liiza, but she suppressed it and remained still. Her eyes moved toward the ground before returning on Khan.

"Niqols don't feel like humans, Khan," Liiza whispered.

"I know," Khan scoffed. "Zalpa has been clear about that. Still, I'm not completely human, am I?"

"Khan," Liiza exclaimed in her previous begging tone while her cold face broke to reveal her hesitation. "You have just put yourself at high risk to help my species. My superiors are already trying to confirm what you said. You might have saved thousands of lives."

"Well," Khan cleared his throat at that sudden praise, "I was only trying to do the righ-."

Khan didn't have the chance to finish his line since Liiza slowly bent toward him until her forehead touched his. Khan soon felt her crawling on his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"What is it?" Khan whispered as the sensation caused by Liiza's cold body filled his mind.

She was standing on her knees while on his lap. Liiza clung to his hair and forced his head to tilt upward to look at her face. Her forehead was still on him, and her half-closed eyes seemed lost in the sensations that his warmth caused.

"I want to be clear," Liiza gave voice to faint words that caused cold puffs to land on his lips. "I will turn you into a block of ice if you betray my feelings."

Khan's eyes lit up, but the nature of the situation didn't allow him to think straight. He simply nodded, and Liiza's head moved together with his face.

"What is happening?" Khan eventually asked after Liiza has remained in that position for a few minutes.

"Shut up," Liiza pleaded in a sweet voice. "It's my first time. I want to be sure."

Khan wanted to speak again, but Liiza's lips suddenly fell on his mouth, and the two remained entangled in a passionate kiss that quickly made them lie on the ground.

Liiza appeared more passionate than usual. Her hand quickly went inside Khan's robe and uncovered his torso. Khan couldn't help but do the same, and the two soon remained naked while lying on each other.

Liiza showed a faint hesitation as her hand slid down Khan's torso, but a hateful thought suddenly filled his mind and made him stop her gesture. Liiza left his lips and revealed a confused expression. Some sadness even appeared in her eyes when she saw the conflict in her boyfriend's face.

"I thought you also wanted it," Liiza whispered in a voice so sad that Khan's heart almost shattered when he heard those words.

"I don't have condoms," Khan quickly explained himself as a tinge of shame appeared on his face.

He didn't have the time to search for them inside the camp, and he didn't trust anyone enough to talk about the issue. George could know something, but Khan didn't want to risk anything yet.

"Oh," Liiza exclaimed in surprise.

The Niqols turned and twisted her body to reach her tracksuit on the ground. She browsed through its insides until she took out a small oval disk that contained something that looked like a condom.

"I had to go through dad's old stuff to find it," Liiza revealed in a shy voice. "It has even been hard to keep it hidden during these days."

"Days?" Khan asked as warmth spread inside his mind.

"I knew it was going to happen soon and that you couldn't move freely in the camp," Liiza said while showing a timid smile that broadened as soon as she saw her boyfriend abandoning his last brim of self-restraint and rising to make their lips meet again.

Chapter 122 - Cold

Nitis' dark sky appeared brighter than usual when Khan opened his eyes, but that feature didn't come from the nearing of the sunlight. The cold air felt sweeter when it entered his nostrils, and the small chunks of snow that had fallen on him during the night almost spread warmth through his body.

Those symptoms would usually grant anyone a visit to a doctor or a shrink, but Khan knew that he wasn't ill. His strange situation was the exact opposite of a disease. Those strange sensations came from what had happened during the night.

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Khan found himself lying on the ground with a white blanket covering his naked body. A cold sensation spread from his left side, but he felt only happy to recognize it. Liiza had fallen asleep after snuggling onto his shoulder and laying her head on his chest.

'I've become a man!' Khan childishly shouted in his mind before ugly thoughts attempted to taint his happiness.

The soldiers used their first kill to mark the passage from kid to a man. Thinking about that made Khan relieve the events on Istrone when a ten-year-old Kred had died under his blows.

Khan didn't let that memory ruin his moment, but another thought inevitably made its way across his mind and worsened his mood even more. He had finally experienced his first time, and he had even used condoms, but the event reminded him about his father and his last words before their separation.

'I listened to him even if you probably are a liar,' Khan thought as he imagined a mental conversation with Bret. 'I really hope you had good reasons, dad.'

"Hey, look at me," Liiza groaned in a cute sleepy voice while adjusting her position on Khan's chest. 'It ruins your warmth if you have unhappy thoughts.'

Khan turned toward the beauty at his side. The blanket covered her naked body, her long white hair tried to hide her face, and her closed eyes blocked the glow of her stunning gaze, but she remained the most captivating view that he had ever experienced in his entire life.

Liiza gave voice to a sweet moan when Kahn wrapped his arm around her shoulder to bring her closer. His free hand reached her forehead to remove the strands of hair that had fallen on her face before adjusting the blanket to make sure that she remained covered.

A slight smile appeared on Liiza's sleeping expression. Looking at her had restored Khan's peace of mind and regulated his mana to a state that she could appreciate. Her sensitivity to that energy was almost scary, but Khan knew that it was so accurate with him due to the feelings that they shared.

"Did you develop an addiction to my sleeping face already?" Liiza teased without opening her eyes.

"Did you develop an addiction to my warmth?" Khan chuckled before leaving a kiss on her forehead.

"Just a bit," Liiza moaned while snuggling closer.

"You are doomed," Khan teased. "This evil human made you abandon your Niqols' roots."

"My species is missing out so much," Liiza whispered in her sweet voice. "I didn't think I could feel so hot."

"Someone liked it then," Khan whispered while nearing his mouth to her forehead to make her feel his warm breath.

"I wonder if it feels as good with a Niqols," Liiza said before giggling when she sensed Khan's body tensing up.

Liiza opened her eyes while revealing a broad smile and climbing on Khan's body. She lay on his chest and pointed her elbows on his shoulders to support her head and laugh at her boyfriend's frown.

"Is this the time when you go possessive on me?" Liiza giggled while bending her legs up and down to express her playful and happy mood.

The blanket fell off from her back and left both of them exposed. A faint wind also blew it for a few meters. Khan felt overwhelmed by that sight, and he failed to play along as his true feelings escaped his mouth.

"Your freedom led to where we are now," Khan revealed as he fell in a daze. "That's also how I imagine you in my mind. How could I even try to suppress it?"

Liiza's legs stopped moving and fell back on Khan. Their feet touched as her playful smile vanished, and she bent to kiss him.

"Hey," Liiza said when their lips separated, and Khan couldn't help but sense hesitation in her voice.

"What is it?" Khan asked as his hand reached her naked back to caress it.

"All humans are warm, right?" Liiza responded while diverting her gaze. "My body is cold. Was it a problem?"

Khan frowned again, but understanding eventually dawned upon his mind. His eyes widened when he managed to uncover the real meaning behind Liiza's words, and his arms inevitably reached her shoulders to push her on his chest.

Liiza kept her face turned toward the ground while she let Khan's embrace envelop her. The warmth coming out of his chest and spreading through her didn't help her doubts. It only made her more aware of the vast difference between their temperatures.

The warmth felt really good for a Niqols, but the opposite wasn't true for humans. Liiza was worried that her cold body could be a turn off for Khan.

Truth be told, that feature didn't cause any problem to Khan. He had felt overwhelmed by emotions and sensations during their first time. Mana also empowered his body, so it was more resilient toward things that would bother a normal human.

Moreover, Khan couldn't compare what he had felt last night with similar events. He didn't know how sex with a human was, and he didn't care about it with Liiza in his arm. She had given him the best experience of his life again. The problem was making sure that she understood that.

"The snow felt warm when I woke up," Khan whispered while diving into Liiza's hair and finding her nape with his lips. "You have no idea how warm you feel."

A tremor ran through Liiza when she felt Khan's warm lips on her nape. She didn't turn, but her grip on his shoulders tightened. Her black fingernails threatened to stab his skin, but he could sense the worry behind that gesture, so he didn't complain. Instead, his hug intensified as if trying to make her fuse with his chest.

"Are you sure?" Liiza hesitant voice resounded again. "I don't want you to endure everything by yourself."

"Enduring?" Khan laughed without moving his lips from her nape. "I'm probably the unluckiest sixteen-year-old in the world, but you still make me feel blessed. You can feel it, right?"

"I do," Liiza replied as she relaxed her grip on one shoulder to reach Khan's face and caress it softly. "I'm just worried."

"About?" Khan asked.

"Niqols feel more than humans," Liiza explained. "I'm afraid that everything will become too much for you one day."

Zalpa's words resounded inside Khan's mind again. He had already learnt that the Niqols experienced feelings differently from humans, but he didn't worry about that at all. He was actually looking forward to seeing how intense Liiza could become.

"Luckily I'm not completely a human," Khan sighed. "I'll learn to love like a Niqols."

Those words made Liiza shake again when they vibrated on her nape. She couldn't remain in that position anymore. She bent her back and turned to stare at Khan directly into his eyes. She was blushing, and her white glow had even intensified.

"Is someth-?" Khan started to ask when he noticed that something was off, but Liiza dived toward his lips before he could finish his line.

The kiss felt different than usual. Liiza wasn't showing the same lustful intensity as last night. Her search for Khan's lips appeared desperate as if her body demanded a dose of him.

"I'll teach you how to love like a Niqols," Liiza whispered when the two separated. "Make sure to keep up."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Khan laughed before noticing that Liiza was biting her lower lip while moving sensually over his low waist.

Khan slowly straightened his position to sit on the ground. Liiza remained on his lap, with her legs spread and her waist pressing on his manhood.

"We can't," Khan expressed his frustration through his pleading voice.

"What are you saying?" Liiza teased him while moving even more. "You have been in this state since we woke up."

"Not that," Khan corrected her while trying to ignore his arousal. "We are out of condoms."

Liiza frowned before moving her face away from his forehead and searching for her tracksuit around her. Her frown intensified when she found it tied to a rock on the wall.

"Didn't you put it back into the item?" Liiza asked while turning to look at Khan again. "The item is in the robe."

"So?" Khan asked in a confused voice. "We used it already."

"Do the humans make disposable condoms?" Liiza questioned him before nodding when she saw Khan's eyes widening.

"Don't tell me," Khan gasped. "Can we use it again?"

Liiza only needed to continue to nod to make Khan abandon his self-restraint. Her happy giggle resounded when he pointed his feet on the ground and straightened his position while lifting her to reach the tracksuit.

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'I love Niqols,' Khan thought as the wind blew on his face.

Snow dived, accelerated, and rotated on itself, but Khan didn't react to those events. His mind was busy playing the events that had filled the night and morning shared with Liiza. Each memory made him return to those incredible moments. He couldn't even begin to express how lucky he felt.

Neither of them had wanted to separate, but the nature of their relationship forced them to respect some compromises. Khan and Liiza had decided to return to their respective homes right before lunchtime to keep up appearances. The two had even chosen not to fly through the same path among the mountain chain for fear that their self-restraint would crumble.

'Do I love Liiza?' Khan wondered as he bent backward and lay on Snow's feathered back.

Khan was unclear about that topic. His insecurity didn't come from his feeling. He knew that there was something far deeper than the simple attraction between Liiza and him. However, his inexperience in the matter didn't allow him to realize if what he felt was the so-called love.

'Though, it's hilarious,' Khan thought as Snow dived and made his back leave the feathers. 'I can add my first time to the things that make me less human. Khan, no last name, sixteen years old, had his first time with a Niqols. Who can even refuse such a profile?'

Khan noticed the arrival of the ground from the corner of his eyes and bent forward to make his chest adhere to Snow's neck. The Aduns unfolded its wings to perform an abrupt stop mere meters from the terrain, but he barely felt that sudden event.

'She is so damned cute!' Khan cursed in his mind, and his thoughts never moved away from Liiza as he flew back to the training camp.

Khan remained immersed in his thoughts even after Snow dropped him on the ground and pecked his head a few times before setting off. The Aduns left the area, and Khan instinctively moved toward the camp's entrance. The first of the free days had basically just started, but he wanted to spend it training now that he was free of Liiza's constant temptation.

Still, a peculiar sight startled him awake once he reached the camps' entrance. Khan saw George sitting next to the fence with a metal cup held tightly in his hand. He initially believed the boy to be asleep, but a loud burp that came out of his mouth when he neared him proved otherwise.

"Khan!" George shouted when he raised his head and noticed the boy nearing the gate. "You are the damned besht of the besht!"

George then tried to stand up, but he swayed so intensely that he fell on his butt as soon as he tried to straighten his legs.

"I guessh mana doesn't make ush immune to booze," George announced as he raised his cup to drink, but the pink liquid in its insides fell on his uniform since his head kept swaying left and right.

Chapter 123 - Drunk

'What has even happened here?' Khan wondered, but his thoughts transformed into a curse when he recalled his conversation with Doku.

"Did the Niqols bring the booze?" Khan gave voice to a rhetorical question to check how far gone George was.

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"They gave us everything freely!" George shouted. "We had to celebrate!"

Khan had seen his good share of drunk behaviors after spending eleven years in the Slums. Every narrow street or corner hid someone who preferred a bottle of the cheapest liquor available on the market over a good meal. His father had also shown and taught him a lot about booze.

George seemed to belong to the happy drunk category. He shouted and felt the need to drink more to stretch the feelings experienced in that state. He didn't appear problematic, but leaving him there didn't seem proper, especially since it was still the middle of the day.

The first of the three days had basically just begun, but lying drunk around the camp wasn't a behavior worthy of a recruit who had earned the honor of serving on Nitis. Everyone there still had to be an elite inside the Global Army, and George was far from that in his current condition.

Khan inspected his surroundings, but he didn't find anyone. The camp felt empty, and only the faint cries of the moles near the holes containing worms resounded in the area.

That sight wasn't completely unusual. The week had entered in the free days right after a major crisis that had forced every soldier to fight. Moreover, it was lunch hour. Everyone probably was in the canteen or inside their respective rooms.

"You are one lucky guy," Khan commented while showing a faint smile.

"Of course!" George laughed. "I'm one of Ishtro's survivors! No one is luckier than me!"

"Let's not talk about that," Khan sighed as his expression grew cold. "Don't ruin your mood."

"Yesh, sir!" George shouted before exploding into another loud laugh.

Khan bent toward George and helped him stand up. He had done the same with his father at times, and he had been only a kid back then. Doing the same after obtaining the mana felt like child's play.

George didn't struggle against Khan. He seemed to trust him completely, even if he didn't understand why the two were walking back into the camp.

Khan supported George from his shoulder. He had even wrapped a hand around his waist to make sure that he didn't fall. Directly carrying him would have been faster, but the recruit risked puking on him if he ended up upside-down.

The duo quickly reached the building with the many flats, and Khan didn't hesitate to bring the boy inside. Still, the scene that unfolded in his vision left him a bit surprised.

A few barrels filled the corridors, and the dense pink liquid seen during the official celebration came out from some of them. Multiple cups also lay on the floor and at the entrances of the open flats. It seemed that a proper party had happened there.

"It was sooo fun!" George shouted.

Khan revealed a faint smile as he shook his head. He had seen similar scenes too often to criticize the recruits, especially after what they had been through. Also, his mood was too good that day to feel bothered about those minor issues.

George's voice alerted some recruits who didn't hesitate to come out of their flats to see what was happening in the corridor. Khan saw Natalie, Veronica, and a few boys of whom he vaguely recalled

the names. They all showed frowns caused by headaches connected to the booze, but they appeared completely sober.

"Khan, you are back," Veronica announced in a voice that sounded like a groan. "You also found George."

"I see that you had fun," Khan laughed while helping George moving forward.

"The Lieutenant and the Captain had to go to the city to handle some political matters," Veronica explained. "They left Paul in charge of the camp since the other class and its squad captain had to help capture Ugu, but a group of Niqols brought these as soon as he returned inside his quarters."

"They know the importance of secrecy," Natalie commented before groaning since speaking caused waves of pain to spread through her head.

"They told us to thank you for this," Veronica continued while patting a barrel next to her. "You are full of surprises."

Khan limited himself to smile while he continued to drag George across the corridor. Yet, he stopped when he realized that he didn't know where his room was.

"Sixth to the left," Veronica solved his doubt when she noticed how lost he appeared.

The girl even stepped forward and bent under George's free shoulder to help Khan with the process. The two led the boy inside his flat in a few seconds, and they threw him on his bed right after crossing the entrance.

"How did you even end up in this condition?" Khan asked as those who had stepped out of their flats gathered in George's room. "I thought you had more self-control."

"It wasn't our fault," Natalie explained before moving her gaze to the ground. "We have only been slightly careless."

"The Niqols warned us about this batch," Veronica added. "Apparently, it has come out stronger than usual. We didn't realize that we were getting drunk until it was too late."

Khan shook his head again, but his faint smile never left his face. He instinctively took away George's shoes as vague nostalgia rose inside his mind.

"You are good with drunks," Veronica commented after inspecting that scene.

"I come from the Slums," Khan limited himself to explain, and Veronica waited for him to wear a different expression, but that change never happened.

Veronica would never dare to claim to know Khan well, but she had observed him in the past days. That was a normal action since every recruit looked up to him, but she had a keen perception on her side. She could almost sense that something had changed inside him.

Khan often appeared cold and resolute, but a kind aura surrounded him now. Veronica couldn't explain what that vibe meant. If she had to guess, she would say that Khan had found some peace.

"I'll hit the canteen now," Khan informed the others who nodded and opened a path for him, but their expression froze when they saw a stern figure on the other side of the corridor.

Khan noticed that reaction and peeked at the corridor from the flat's entrance. He could see that Paul was inspecting the chaotic scene with a cold expression that grew angrier with each passing second.

"Do I need to ask?" Paul asked in a cold voice.

"We'll clean everything up," Khan promptly announced while coming out of George's room and performing a military salute. "We only wanted to tighten our relationship with the Niqols' classes and prepare for the imminent mission in the academies, but we underestimated the alien booze."

The recruits shot admiring gazes toward Khan, and they quickly imitated him by performing military salutes toward Paul. The boys and girls couldn't help but feel safer now that Khan had taken the situation into his own hands. That mess wasn't even his fault, but he had decided to step forward to help them.

Paul wanted to remain angry, but he couldn't continue to keep a stern face in front of a recruit who showed so much potential. Khan appeared as a natural-born leader in that situation. He didn't only show loyalty toward his companions. He was even facing his problems head-on.

"Clean up," Paul eventually ordered. "I will personally send you all back to Earth if I smell the faintest scent of booze when I come to check on you again."

"Thank you, sir!" Khan shouted, and the recruits imitated him.

The scene made Paul nod in approval. He even turned to leave the building, but a rude shout suddenly resounded from George's room and made him stop his tracks.

"We totally tricked him!" George laughed from inside his flat. "I'm telling you. Khan ish born for this. He ish the besht fucking bet during a crishsh!"

The clear drunken and rude voice made Paul cross the corridor and reach George's room in an instant. Khan didn't even try to stop him. He could see from the soldier's expression that words couldn't help anymore.

"On your feet!" Paul ordered when his eyes landed on George's sorry figure.

"I'm shorry, shir," George laughed as he stretched both arms and legs. "Everything ish shpinning. Permisshion to resht, shir."

"Permission denied," Paul snorted. "Get up now before I write a formal report to Lieutenant Kintea."

George began to laugh. He lightly slapped his cheeks as he straightened his position and sat on the bed. It took him a few seconds to make sure that his stomach felt stable enough to remain in that position, but his laugh returned once he confirmed that.

"What's so funny?" Paul shouted.

"You won't write anything about today," George laughed. "They will never make you Lieutenant if they find out that your underlings can get drunk right under your nose."

The recruits peeking at that scene widened their eyes in surprise. George seemed to have recovered after sitting, and the words that came out of his mouth were clearly meant to mock his direct superior.

"You are out of line," Paul growled while gritting his teeth.

Paul hated to admit that George was right. He could easily hide the incident from his superiors, but everything would become far more complicated with an official report. He couldn't send recruits back on Earth without reason, and every nasty event would inevitably reflect poorly on him.

"Out of line?" George suddenly stopped laughing to wear a cold expression. "Fuck you, Paul. The army wants us to commit a genocide. Why can't I have the chance to get drunk?"

George then turned toward the other recruits and showed a disgusted expression before continuing. "What are you looking at? You have no idea what's coming for you."

George's face relaxed when his eyes fell on Khan. The boy even suppressed a sob when he saw the only person in the room that he couldn't insult.

The boy lay on the bed again and turned to face the wall. His body shook a few times as he suppressed his tears. It seemed that the booze had forced everything that George had bottled inside his mind to come out, and Khan knew that the experience was far from nice.

"Khan?" George eventually said in a pleading voice.

"What is it?" Khan asked as his cold eyes fell on the floor.

"I'm still there," George revealed. "I'm still in the forest, and I can't get out."

"I'm there too," Khan said. "I'm there with you."

George sniffed before continuing. "We cut her hand, Khan. All those corpses, so many corpses."

George fell asleep on those words, and Paul felt on the verge of exploding into a burst of anger. However, a hand landed on his shoulder and made him turn toward his owner.

Khan shook his head when Paul looked at him, and the latter slowly calmed down when he saw his cold azure eyes. Some feelings didn't need words to reach others, and Paul was experiencing that while reading the emotions on Khan's face.

"You and me. Outside," Paul limited himself to say before hurrying outside of the flat.

Khan glanced at George, and sadness filled his expression. The boy had always been joyous during the last days, but it seemed that he had yet to accept Istorne's events. His behavior was probably a mask meant to hide his actual mental state.

Natalie and the other recruits stared at Khan while he left the flat and moved toward the building's exit, but he didn't even glance at them. He couldn't pretend now. He felt unable to muster enough strength to lie, so he decided to ignore his companions.

Paul was waiting for him right outside the building. The soldier walked up and down the large street while stomping his feet. He was livid, but a tinge of regret had also appeared on his expression.

"The reports never express the true cruelty of a battlefield," Paul exclaimed when he heard the building's sliding doors closing behind Khan.

"Istrone wasn't a battlefield," Khan explained. "It was a slaughter that the Kred failed to complete."

Paul snorted, but he stomped his feet right afterward. His eyes eventually fell on Khan when he stopped, and an honest question finally came out of his mouth.

"Be honest," Paul uttered. "Should I send him back on Earth?"

"No," Khan limited himself to reply.

"He is unstable!" Paul complained.

"He was drunk," Khan defended George.

"Give me a reason to keep him here then!" Paul shouted. "He disrespected a direct superior."

"He is still here after facing hell," Khan replied without showing the slightest hesitation. "He's the kind of soldier that you want to have on the battlefield once the sunlight arrives."

Paul wanted to complain, but he couldn't say anything against that. He voiced a loud curse before turning toward his quarters and leaving the area without bothering to give additional orders.

Chapter 124 - Worse

The free days inside the camp were usually a happy period, even if missions popped up. Yet, George's outburst ruined the mood of all the recruits who had been unlucky enough to witness the event.

Khan struggled to see the positive side of the situation. He knew that his previous words had managed to change Paul's mind, but George had still reminded him of everything that had happened on Istrone. Moreover, the boy had shown that his usual happy behavior was only a mask that covered his real feelings.

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George had managed to fool Khan too. The latter knew that his friend wasn't completely fine, but he didn't expect the problems to be so profound.

'I was so happy about Liiza just a few minutes ago,' Khan cursed in his mind. 'Come one, world! Let me enjoy my first time for at least one week!'

Recalling about the time spent with his girlfriend cheered him up a little. After all, Khan had already faced his memories of Istrone. He had yet to accept them completely, but he was in a relatively good position now, especially since he had Liiza in his life.

Still, the issue remained. George was in a bad place, and Khan couldn't do much to help him. He was the only one inside the camp who could talk with the traumatized recruit since they shared the same tragic memories, but pain was a strange emotion to face. What worked for Khan probably wouldn't work for George.

"You have been great," Veronica's voice resounded from behind Khan after he heard the noise caused by the sliding metal doors. "George is lucky to have a friend like you."

"You have seen him," Khan turned and showed a helpless expression toward the girl. "Would you call that lucky?"

Veronica's smile transformed into a complicated expression when she heard Khan's words. She had no idea George carried so much sorrow. The topics mentioned during his outburst with Paul had even managed to worry her.

Khan felt the need to fly back to the mountains right away, but he forced himself to walk inside the building. Veronica silently followed him, and the gazes of all the recruits soon converged on the two.

"Let's clean up," Khan ordered in a plain voice before bending to pick a cup from the floor.

"You don't need to do it," Natalie announced from the back of the corridor. "We caused this mess. It's our job to clean it."

"It will be faster if everyone helps," Khan replied before bending again to pick another cup lying on the floor.

"Stop," Veronica said while quickly moving in front of him and grabbing his wrist. "We insist, right?"

Khan noticed the resolve in Veronica's face before seeing how the other recruits nodded and began to clean the corridor. A sigh soon escaped his mouth when he understood that the group wouldn't let him help. Khan limited himself to hand the cups to the girl and stand up.

"George only needs to sleep," Khan explained. "I bet he'll be up in an hour or two. I believe he will also remember everything that has happened, so reassure him."

Khan turned to walk toward his room at that point, but Veronica made him stop his tracks with a question whispered in a hesitant tone. "Is it true?"

Khan turned to glance at the girl and her complicated expression, but he quickly noticed that the other recruits were wearing similar faces. It was clear that George's words had forced them to reconsider their orders.

It didn't matter how hard they tried to suppress their thoughts. The recruits had eventually realized that the Global Army was asking them to let children and kids die, and George's outburst had forced them to face that plan in its entirety. They felt unable to ignore their doubts after seeing how they could end up.

"What is?" Khan asked.

"Will we have to go through the same pain that George is facing now?" Veronica continued as the hesitation in her eyes intensified.

"How honest do I have to be?" Khan asked as he lowered his gaze.

"As honest as you can," Veronica pleaded. "Don't make it easy for us. We want to know what to expect."

The events on Istrone had been relatively simple. The Kred had rebelled, and many recruits had died. The revolt had been a pure and cruel vengeance that aimed to ruin the future of the Global Army.

Instead, Nitis' situation was complicated. The Global Army knew about the mutations, but it couldn't predict how they would evolve the planet's fauna. The very nature of those transformations made them casual events that often led to unstable forms.

It was impossible to predict the actual consequences of that worldwide crisis. The entire planet had multiple strong warriors, but the monsters would definitely be more of them. The Niqols would remain outnumbered even with the help of the humans.

Khan knew that the Niqols would take care of their younger generations since he had passed the information to Liiza. However, he couldn't reassure the recruits due to the secrecy of his relationship and his action. He had to give them a convincing lie, but that came easy to him, especially since it would have actual experiences as a foundation.

"It will probably be worse than Istrone," Khan revealed. "The entirety of Nitis will go through a massive change. We might need weeks spent hunting to bring everything back to normal. The battles alone will cause many casualties."

The recruits remained speechless at how easily Khan could describe those events. Death sounded almost normal to him when he told them about the imminent crisis.

Khan's emotionless face wasn't the only reason behind their dumbfounded state. The recruits actually felt scared when they thought about Nitis in its entirety. The planet accommodated only a hundred or so humans, but they would probably need to help with as many hunts as possible.

The idea of spending entire weeks fighting made the recruits lose every desire to stick around. The dangerousness and probably gory state of the incoming battlefields also made them experience some doubts toward the mission.

The problem wasn't even the actual danger to some of them. A few recruits were confident enough in their abilities not to fear monsters. Yet, they were worried about their minds. Ending up with heavy traumas like George wasn't a nice prospect.

"Wh-," Veronica uttered before hesitating for a bit and deciding to complete her question. "What should we do in your opinion?"

The question surprised Khan. He couldn't decide what was better for those recruits, but he didn't want to leave them hanging either, so he opted for the truth.

"You won't be the same after the crisis," Khan explained. "Running away from this one isn't too bad, but you'll eventually find a battle that you can't escape. I suggest you don't be in the army at all if you don't want to see this stuff."

Khan turned at that point. His previous words had confused all the recruits, but that was fine. They would have to think about their actual character and how far they were willing to go to follow orders.

Browsing through the few menus allowed Khan to seal his room in a matter of seconds. He couldn't even hear the noises happening outside thanks to its settings.

Khan ended up waiting to get his food. He could order it from his room, but the recruits were still cleaning the corridor, and he didn't want a random soldier to learn about the party.

Hours spent meditating, practicing the eleventh mental exercise, and reviewing the moves of the Divine Reaper went by. The memories awakened by George never resurfaced during those moments, but he still felt off.

It was strange to be treated as a leader after lying so much. Khan had helped his companions a few times already, but he had always worn his mask during those moments.

Khan also had to lie to George due to the issues connected to Liiza. The two of them weren't even close to being best friends, but they had developed a tight connection after Istrone. They had built that bond through blood and death, but their relationship couldn't go past that due to their packed schedule and the secrets that Khan had to keep to preserve his happiness.

Luckily for Khan, training always made the hours flow quickly, and the nighttime arrived in a blink while he remained isolated in his room. He stopped his many exercises only to order some food before the canteen closed, but they resumed once he filled his stomach.

His favorite part of the day soon arrived. His phone rang when the clock hit midnight, and he didn't hesitate to leave his room at that point.

The clean corridor unfolded in Khan's vision after he left his quarters. He could see how the barriers, the cups, and the pink liquid had disappeared from the area, and he inevitably nodded in satisfaction.

The camp felt empty when he left the building, but that silence wasn't enough for him. Khan crossed the site's edges and walked under Nitis' black sky for a while to clear his thoughts until a white figure landed next to him.

Snow could sense that Khan's mood was off, so it didn't play around with him too much. The Aduns still performed sudden dives and sharp rotations in the air, but its pace was relatively slow and allowed Khan to avoid clinging to its neck during the flight.

The eagle brought Khan to the flat spot in no time, and the sight of a familiar sleeping figure there made him smile in ways that the recruits had never seen.

Chapter 125 - Ride

The free days of Khan's third week on Nitis felt like a dream, one of the good ones that he never had the chance to experience during his sleep. Except for George's outburst, that period unfolded beautifully since he did nothing but train and spend valuable time with Liiza.

George and Khan didn't talk. Still, neither of them felt the need to speak about what had happened due to the pink liquor. The two didn't even see each other often since Khan spent most of his time inside his room when he was in the camp.

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The same happened with Paul and the other recruits. Awkward glances, respectful nods, and snorts reached Khan's eyes and ears whenever he was outside his room. It was clear most recruits and Paul had yet to put the messy event in the back of their minds, but Khan didn't really care about it.

The situation didn't cause any problem to him. Actually, Khan experienced the exact opposite. The recruits and Paul saw him as the most stable and experienced soldier in the fourth team, so they simply let him do as he wished.

His help would also be vital in the incoming period. The fourth week would finally see other humans approaching the mountain chain to tame the Aduns, and Khan was necessary for that task. Captain Erbair had even already confirmed his position for the training program in the alien academies, so no one dared to bother him or question his habits.

Khan's training went smoothly. He didn't manage to achieve anything astonishing during his free days, but he took steady steps forward in every aspect of his abilities.

The Lightning-demon style only needed constant repetition of its techniques to improve the proficiency level, and Khan never failed to attend those exercises. He performed a few rounds of all the moves every day, and his executions continued to be perfect. His successful streak continued throughout the entire free period.

Khan had yet to complete the eleventh mental exercise, but he grew closer to that achievement after each attempt. He would eventually cross it and get one step closer to the Wave spell, and his anticipation only made him work harder.

His meditations had never encountered bottlenecks. His flesh hurt whenever mana tried to invade its fabric, but he didn't run away from pain. Instead, Khan started to see that detail as evidence that his attunement level was increasing.

His training with the Divine Reaper proceeded slowly, but Khan didn't mind that. He had just approached the new martial art, and he didn't even rely on the entirety of his concentration during the exercises. He still gave his best, but his main focus remained on the other programs since they set the very foundation of his power.

The time to focus entirely on the Divine Reaper would come, but Khan preferred to stabilize and improve what he deemed necessary for his situation. A martial art that he wouldn't be able to deploy for months clearly didn't meet his standards.

The calm respect inside the camp and the steady improvement made Khan happy, but nothing could match the feelings that he experienced when he was with Liiza. It was simply unreal how intense the attraction between them was, and that emotion even grew stronger as time passed.

Khan felt honestly surprised to see that Liiza's self-restraint almost vanished whenever they were alone. The girl would often jump on him to start intimate moments that always ended in a state that the couple had learnt to feel as normal.

The duo always ended up lying next to or on each other. Liiza often slept or rested on Khan's chest after reaching the end of their intimate sessions, and the satisfied expression that never left her face made Khan feel confident in his ability to please her. Moreover, they didn't hide anything from each other, even the specific talks that involved awkward topics, so the two constantly learnt more about each other.

Their feelings intensified as they grew closer. Khan had no idea how to explain that event. He only knew that he couldn't think straight whenever Liiza was around. His mind could only focus on her, and it took him the entirety of his mental strength to separate from her. It seemed that their relationship was turning into an addiction, but that was the Niqols' way of love.

"It's tomorrow, right?" Liiza asked in a slightly annoyed voice while she adjusted her position on Khan's chest.

"Today, actually," Khan smirked as his arms tightened on Liiza's naked body. "We'll need to find a new place where to be together. Everything will become too risky once the others gain access to the Aduns."

Khan's fourth week on Nitis had begun. He and Liiza had seen each other around midnight, and they had already spent five hours together in the flat area in the mountain. The duo would normally remain in that position, with Liiza sleeping over him, until lunchtime arrived, but Khan had to return to the camp far sooner that day. The recruits required someone to guide them during the taming test.

"I'm losing track of time lately," Liiza revealed in a sweet voice. "I'm starting to use our meetings to understand what day it is."

"This human is making you go crazy," Khan teased.

"You chose to have a Niqols as a girlfriend," Liiza whispered while tilting her head to place her mouth on Khan's neck. "You have to deal with the consequences now."

Khan couldn't help but make his hand dive into Liiza's hair. He accompanied the movements of her head and immersed himself in the cold sensations that spread through his neck, and a faint laugh escaped his mouth when he sensed a tinge of pain reaching his mind.

"Don't bite," Khan laughed. "It will leave a mark."

"The other humans need a reminder that you are taken," Liiza snorted while raising her head to stare at Khan straight in the eyes. "That Veronica clearly has set her gaze on you."

"Do you want to go possessive on me already?" Khan mocked while turning Liiza and gently placing her on the ground before lying on her. "Someone is jealous."

"You have no idea," Liiza complained in a pleading voice as she wrapped her legs around Khan's waist to pull him closer. "I hate how I can't openly call you mine."

"One day, maybe," Khan whispered before descending toward her lips.

Soft and loud moans resounded through the flat area as the couple dived back into their intimate moments. Some of those voices even echoed through the mountain chain. They forced the Aduns in the area to answer with screeches that both Khan and Liiza failed to hear.

The world disappeared when the two looked into each other's eyes. Their attraction reached new peaks whenever they added an intimate moment to their relationship. Those emotions didn't seem to have limits, and they fused with their sensations to improve their experiences together.

An alarm resounded from Khan's phone after a bit more than an hour went by. The couple was still immersed in their intimate moment by then, and both Khan and Liiza gave voice to loud curses when they heard it.

Khan had set the first alarm a bit before his deadline to make sure that he could give a proper goodbye to his girlfriend once his time was up, so he ignored the noise as he remained focused on Liiza. Still, both of them understood that they had to accelerate. Twenty minutes later, both of them had returned inside their clothes.

"I already have somewhere in mind for a new place," Liiza explained as she pulled Khan closer to her face from his uniform. "I'll let you know through Snow."

"We'll talk about the academies next time," Khan announced after giving a quick kiss. "I really need to run now."

"Go, go," Liiza giggled. "Remember to pay attention to Veronica. That girl is only waiting for a chance to jump on you."

"I can barely keep up with one Niqols doing that," Khan teased.

"That's how it should be," Liiza smirked before pulling Khan again to leave a long kiss on his lips. "Leave now before I jump on you again."

Khan laughed, but he followed her order. His girlfriend would really jump on him again. That wouldn't be her first time delaying their separation either.

Khan jumped on Snow that was waiting for him at the edges of the flat area and hurried back to the camp. He arrived twenty minutes before the official meeting, but the recruits from the two classes had already gathered near the center of the site.

"I hope you don't take his habits once you get your Aduns," Paul shouted while looking at Snow unfolding its wings and landing right behind the rows of recruits.

"Khan has been kind enough to share his knowledge with us," Paul continued. "Remember what he taught you, and go fetch the Ugu. We'll depart as soon as the envoy of the Niqols arrives."

The recruits dispersed and moved toward the other side of the camp without forgetting to shoot glances at the boy who had never dismounted from his Aduns.

"George," Khan sighed when he saw his friend passing next to him.

"What is it?" George asked while showing a broad smile. "Are you worried about me?"

"Not at all," Khan honestly explained. "You have the highest chance to get an Aduns. Everyone else should fail if you don't get it."

"I can still die during my first flight," George laughed. "You make it look quite simple, but I know that it has taken you a while to get used to it."

"Flight experience, you say," Khan thought while many recruits heard that conversation and stopped to inspect it.

Khan wanted to turn toward the recruits, but a black figure suddenly appeared in the sky and gave voice to a loud screech. The envoy had arrived, and Khan took that chance to offer his help to his friend.

"Hop on," Khan ordered. "I'll show you how to fly."

George and the other recruits remained speechless at that offer, but Khan had been completely serious. Snow had enough room for the both of them.

"That's unfair!"

"You shouldn't have favorites among recruits!"

"Paul, he is trying to give private lessons to his friend!"

A group of recruits from the other class complained, but Khan completely ignored them. He didn't even look at the squad captain to see if something was wrong with his behavior.

Of course, giving privileges to a friend didn't create a good scene, but Khan wasn't doing anything wrong or illegal. It would also help the most promising recruit in the process and do something positive for his poor mental state.

"Don't pity me," George explained as he stretched a hand toward Khan's arm.

"This isn't even close to pity," Khan replied before giving a few instructions.

George was almost ready to fly.

Chapter 126 - Survivors

"Shouldn't I have the wings right under my knee?" George complained as he tried to find a stable grip on Snow's back.

"That will arrive once you get your Aduns," Khan laughed while taking George's arms and wrapping them around his waist. "I only want to make sure that you won't panic once one of these goes crazy."

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"How are you supposed to do that?" George shouted as worry filled his voice.

"By making you experience the crazy!" Khan announced before patting Snow's neck. "Get me to the envoy."

"I'm not sure this is a goo-," George wanted to complain again, but Snow suddenly flapped its wings and rose into the air.

George instinctively tightened his grip on Khan's waist. He did the same with his legs, but both Snow and his friend turned to glare at him.

"Aduns are pretty sensitive," Khan explained while knocking on George's right knee. "I know it feels unstable, but you must relax there. Snow might decide to make you fall otherwise."

George's eyes widened in worry, but he trusted Khan enough to put his life in danger if necessary. His legs relaxed and stopped squeezing Snow's back. His grip on the eagle became unstable, but he found some comfort in how firm Khan felt.

Snow resumed its climb and soon reached the black figure hovering in the sky. Khan revealed a broad smile when he recognized the rider of the black Aduns, and he promptly joined his hands in front of his chest to perform the polite bow used by the Niqols.

"I hope you enjoyed our gift," Doku laughed before performing a polite bow to match Khan's gesture.

"He had a lot of fun with it," Khan mocked while pointing at George, who was too busy clinging to him to pay attention to that conversation.

"I'm glad!" Doku laughed before moving his eyes on George. "Are you preparing him for the test?"

"He won't have problems climbing," Khan explained. "I only want to get him used to the experience."

"Flying is the best feeling in the world," Doku laughed before turning toward George again. "Make sure to hold on tightly."

"Hey, Doku," Khan probed in a slightly more serious tone, "Can you give me the location of the nest in advance? I want to take a different route and make him experience the wind."

"No problem," Doku exclaimed before bending forward and whispering a few words in the Niqols' language to his Aduns.

The black Aduns released a short screech before flapping its wings to get close to Snow. The latter understood the eagle's intentions and imitated them.

The two Aduns didn't speak, but they fixed their gaze on each other, and their three eyes even remained still for a few seconds. Khan could feel that Snow had fallen into a daze, but the process didn't make it stop flapping its wings, and it didn't last long enough to give him a clear view of that mental conversation.

Doku's Aduns soon diverted its gaze, and Snow confirmed through the mental connection that it knew where to go. Khan didn't hesitate to perform another bow toward the Niqols at that point, and the latter imitated him to express his respect.

"I'll see you on the nest then," Doku announced before descending toward the pack of Ugu that had gathered on the ground.

Khan glanced at Paul and the recruits from the two classes before turning to look at George. The boy still clung firmly to his waist, but he had started to grow used to Snow's faint movements.

"It will be scary at first," Khan described, "But having the wind blowing on your face feels nice, and it helps with the bad memories. Try to focus on having fun. That worked for me."

George's eyes widened at those words. His respect for Khan had always been incredibly high after Istrone's crisis, but that feeling only increased now.

Khan could speak openly about his traumas without abandoning his relaxed expression. He appeared at peace, and George couldn't help but desire to reach the same state.

"Thank yoahhhh-!" George began to express his gratitude, but Snow suddenly folded its wings and dived toward the surface.

George's legs inevitably left the feathered back and ended up in the air. The boy tightened his grip on Khan's waist while Snow dived at high speed toward the ground, but an ecstatic cry managed to seep past the howling winds and reach his ears.

The ground grew dangerously close in George's vision and made him close his eyes, but his body suddenly slammed on Snow's back as a strange sensation hit his stomach. George mustered his courage to inspect the environment, and wonder filled his face when he found himself immersed in Nitis' black sky.

"Wonderful, right?" Khan shouted as a laugh escaped his mouth.

Pure terror filled George's face when he saw Khan releasing his grip from Snow's neck and letting his arms flutter in the wind. George felt his grip growing unstable, but everything worsened when the Aduns spun on itself before diving toward the ground again.

"Does it ever stop?!" George shouted as his body went airborne again.

Khan limited himself to laugh while checking that George's grip remained firm. Meanwhile, Snow went all-out and had as much fun as it could as it moved toward the destination learnt from Doku's Aduns. The eagle even enjoyed that George felt so scared about the whole matter, so it did its best to give him a memorable ride.

George mostly screamed in fear. His voice grew hoarse as the flight continued, but Khan continued to laugh, and his behavior eventually affected the boy. The sudden accelerations slowly didn't feel too scary anymore. The dives continued to make George close his eyes, but he started to enjoy the funny feeling they caused in his stomach. The sharp turns and spins also gained additional senses as he began to look past his worries.

Snow eventually reached an area filled with tall mountains surrounded by a faint fog. Screeches resounded through the sky from time to time and echoed among the tall, dark structures, but everything became quieter once the Aduns descended toward the ground.

"You can leave me now," Khan joked when he saw that George remained clung to his waist even after Snow had landed on the grey snow that covered the ground.

"Won't it set off again?" George asked in a worried tone.

"It won't," Khan laughed while ruffling the feathers on Snow's neck. "It has a playful character, but it's quite reliable."

"Are you sure?" George asked again.

"Completely sure," Khan confirmed, and George timidly let go of his waist.

Snow didn't miss that chance. It rolled on its back as soon as George let go of Khan's chest, and the boy found itself on the ground when the Aduns straightened its position.

Khan found himself covered in snow, and his admonishing gaze inevitably fell on his Aduns. Yet, the eagle raised its head toward the sky and wore a proud expression. It even announced its success through a short screech.

"As I said," Khan commented while turning toward George. "Playful character."

George remained silent as his eyes continued to stare at the dark sky, but a laugh escaped his mouth when he saw Khan's state. Snow covered his hair and shoulder as his helpless gaze had gone back to his Aduns. George found the whole scene incredibly hilarious, especially since he had seen how cold Khan could appear during crises.

Both Khan and Snow turned toward the boy when they heard his laugh. Khan felt slightly relieved at that scene, and a complicated smile even appeared on his face.

"Thank you, Khan," George exclaimed once he managed to suppress his laugh. "Not only for this. Thank you for everything you have done since Istrone."

"I can't tell you how to handle your sorrow," Khan commented as he lay on Snow's back and fixed his eyes toward the dark sky. "I barely manage to keep myself in one piece. I can't help you more than this."

"You don't need to," George replied in a firm tone. "Defending me after what I said to Paul has already been more than I deserved."

"George, we are survivors," Khan sighed. "We need to stick together. No one else will do that for us otherwise."

"Unless someone has your otherworldly charm," George snorted. "For real, how did you even get Veronica in your pocket?"

"Why does everyone think that she likes me?" Khan complained.

"Who are the others?" George asked as a curious expression fell on his face. "I believed to be the first to notice it."

Khan suddenly recalled that his comment came from Liiza's warnings. The two talked about their daily lives during their calm moments, and Liiza had ended up reaching the same conclusions after hearing how Veronica behaved around Khan.

"Rumors," Khan quickly switched the topic. "I also have eyes, you know? I can see that she is gentler around me, but I thought she was up to something."

"Veronica isn't like that," George explained. "She is like a big sister to everyone. It's only normal for her to like the only guy who doesn't need her help."

Khan didn't answer, but George pressed on as he turned on his side to stare at him. "You would have noticed it if you didn't spend all your days outside the camp."

"Still, you understand why I do it, right?" Khan asked. "The adrenaline helps with the bad thoughts."

"That's only a form of suppression," George scolded as his expression darkened. "They will return stronger than before at some point."

"It's not only that," Khan scoffed. "Did you feel it? Did you sense the freedom?"

George fell silent at those questions. He didn't want to lie to Khan. He had definitely experienced a faint peace once he had started putting away his fears. Still, he couldn't be sure that flying around with an Aduns would solve his problems.

"What if that doesn't work?" George asked as his gaze fell on the grey snow. "What if I'm stuck with these nightmares forever?"

Those words managed to worsen Khan's mood, but he endured the blow to focus on George. The boy's issue was different. His nightmares weren't an endless curse that seemed to hide deep secrets.

"You might," Khan replied without trying to tone down the issue. "I don't think we'll ever forget what happened on Istrone."

"So, what?" George cursed. "Are we doomed?"

"You can't simply forget that you have taken a life," Khan sighed. "I don't think you should either. The fact that the act affects you proves that you are human and can still experience happiness."

"Are you implying that this pain is a good thing?" George asked.

"Would you prefer to become completely immune to that stuff?" Khan asked. "Would you rather become unable to feel at all? I don't know what would be the point of remaining alive then."

"What's the point of our lives now?" George asked. "We are just traumatized kids in an alien world. I don't see what meaning we can even find."

"George, the other recruits are about to go through the worst experience of their life," Khan reminded. "Who do you think can help them go through that? Paul? Lieutenant Kintea? Those soldiers have no value in their eyes. However, you are their friend, and they will experience your pain."

Chapter 127 - Urge

George couldn't help but fall silent at the last statement. Khan wasn't only right. His words went beyond the inevitable struggle that was waiting for them to obtain a deeper meaning. He successfully gave a reason for the pain that they had suffered on Istrone.

Khan didn't really believe in his words. He agreed with them, and he knew that they were sound, but his intentions lay elsewhere. He only wanted to help George through his struggle. As for his pain, the deep meaning mentioned before didn't even cross his mind. After all, his traumas were older than Istrone.

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The two boys remained in silence for a few minutes before they resumed chitchatting about superficial topics. George ended up describing his situation with Natalie, and Khan limited himself to be a good listener.

Life appeared easier when the problems only involved girls. Everything was nothing more than a game when the political agenda of the Global Army didn't affect their youth.

Khan ended up liking that conversation a lot. He didn't expect that talking about something so superficial would remind him of something he had lost after Martha fell in a coma. It felt good to have real friends again.

"Are you really remaining silent about Veronica?" George asked. "I just told you everything about Natalie, but you keep acting all wise and experienced."

"What's there to say about Veronica?" Khan sighed. "Humanity's hope to move the relationship with the Niqols forward lies on my shoulders. How can I even bother such a young girl with my problems?"

"She is one year older than you," George commented.

"Mental age," Khan corrected himself.

"I'm pretty sure she is older than you outside of a battlefield," George replied. "You earn a draw just because you are good at fighting."

"She is ugly!" Khan announced.

"She is one of the hottest girls in our camp," George contradicted him, "And she trains a lot. I bet her body is nice."

"See?" Khan proposed. "You should hit on her."

"But I like Natalie!" George promptly shouted. "Why are you so against getting a girlfriend? Does it have something to do with your friend in a coma?"

George had started to worry that his words could reopen some of Khan's old wounds. After all, he knew about Martha. Khan might not feel ready to move on.

"No, I just don't know Veronica enough," Khan vaguely answered. "I talked with her only a few times. I can't say if I like her."

"Maybe you should stop flying away with your Aduns every day," George snorted. "At least you have a chance to get something done."

"Don't grow all depressed on me now," Khan ordered. "I had to listen to your screams for thirty minutes just to lift your morale."

"I didn't scream for so long," George complained before correcting himself. "I don't scream at all."

"Sure, sure," Khan laughed. "What do you even mean with getting something done anyway?"

George frowned before making a circle with his right hand and inserting his free forefinger inside it.

"We aren't even eighteen," Khan scoffed. "Girls will never allow us to get that far. Also, my father always said that unprotected sex is bad. Where would you even find condoms on Nitis?"

Khan's pretense was perfect, but he didn't forget to mask his questions with confident exclamations that would make everyone desire to correct them. He didn't feel good about lying to George, but Liiza had the priority in his mind, and the boy would understand if he knew about his secret relationship.

"You shouldn't underestimate the women in the army," George explained. "They literally learn to kill. They are pushier than you imagine."

"You sound as if you have experienced that first-hand," Khan argued in a curious tone.

"Not to brag," George announced while giving voice to short laughs, "But I was fairly popular in my training camp. Also, your father is right, but every medical bay has condoms. You only have to ask the nurses. They don't take note of who requests them since every family prefers to remain unaware of what their descendants do in that field."

The issue that had afflicted Khan for so long ended up being a minor problem. He didn't know how to feel about that revelation. All his plans and paranoia vanished when he understood how easy it was to get condoms in the Global Army.

The atmosphere among the two boys grew grimmer after George's lines. Neither of them had mentioned that. Still, they knew why George had used the past tense when talking about his popularity in the training camp. That status belonged to the time before Istrone when most recruits in the first year were still alive.

A bit of awkwardness also appeared between them since neither wanted to switch the topic so suddenly. Still, familiar cries soon resounded in the distance and saved the two boys from themselves.

Snow had fallen asleep while Khan and George conversed, but the arrival of Doku's Aduns awakened it. The black creature landed on the ground near the two boys, and the group of Ugu soon gathered around them.

Everything moved rather quickly. Doku jumped off his Aduns and explained how the recruits had to approach the test. He also gave many details that Liiza didn't mention back then, and Khan made sure to take note of them to tease his girlfriend when he met her again.

The mountain with the Niqols' nest had a path similar to what Khan had to climb. The passage circled the structure and led toward its higher parts. Its initial portion was large enough to accommodate multiple recruits. Still, Doku stressed multiple times how sending only one human every half an hour would drastically improve the chances of getting Aduns.

George went on the path before the other recruits, and others followed once enough time passed. Paul also had to approach the test to get his Aduns, but he decided to be the last in the line.

A single day usually wouldn't be enough to test both classes, but the Niqols had chosen a mountain with a closer nest on purpose, and Paul ended up sending more than a single recruit every half an hour on the passage. His decision didn't come from his disrespect toward Doku's warning. Spots simply opened whenever one of the kids gave up and climbed down the path.

Khan didn't need to do much. The Ugu had provisions, and Doku had already explained the most important stuff. He could meditate and approach his mental exercises while Snow slept or ate. Only occasional questions flew toward him, but Doku often took care of answering them before he could interrupt his training.

Hours continued to pass in that cold environment. Paul grew anxious since he had yet to see recruits successfully taming Aduns, but Doku reassured him. The nest was a six hour climb from the mountain's base, and that math didn't involve the difficulties that the eagles created on the path.

Doku's words didn't manage to reassure Paul since recruits continued to give up on the test. Most of them descended from the path with large cuts on their back, hands, legs, and heads. They didn't have Khan's desperate determination to get an Aduns, so they didn't dare to continue the climb after suffering relatively severe injuries.

That approach didn't please Paul. The recruits on Nitis had to be among the best recruits in the entire Global Army, and that lack of determination hinted at evident flaws in their character. Still, he couldn't say anything since getting an Aduns wasn't mandatory for now.

Clear joy eventually appeared in Paul's eyes when a dark figure descended from the sky and performed a messy landing on the grey snow. An Aduns with an evident belly and completely black feathers unfolded in everyone's vision, and the group could see that George was riding the creature.

Paul couldn't help but shoot a glance toward Khan at that sight. He still didn't like that George had exploded in that disrespectful speech, but the boy's value was undeniable. His body even featured

more injuries of the recruits that had descended from the mountain. His power and determination were perfect for the imminent crisis.

Other flying figures descended from the mountain in the next hours. Harris, Natalie, Veronica, and other recruits from both classes landed on the ground and showed their Aduns. Each eagle had a personal shade and unique characters, but Paul didn't even notice them. He only cared that the humans were achieving some success in that task.

Khan used that chance to send Snow away. The eagle had been with him for almost half a day already by then, so it required some free time to hunt and enjoy itself. Also, Khan wanted it to talk with Liiza's Aduns and learn about the new meeting spot.

Doku continued to give explanations and details to the recruits who had successfully tamed the Aduns. He taught them how to establish mental connections and gave tips on how to take care of them.

"I thought you would have shown us how to fly," George announced while controlling his Aduns to walk toward Khan.

"You should focus on yourself for now," Khan laughed as lies came out of his mouth. "Snow was too bored to stay."

"You can't escape anymore now," George announced while patting his Aduns. "You won't be able to avoid your social life."

"Is that a challenge?" Khan laughed again, and George showed a smile before his Aduns shot in the sky, and the other creatures in the area followed it.

Khan wore a complicated smile when he saw those figures disappearing in the dark sky. His situation had worsened, but he felt happy for George's success. Those conflicting emotions filled his mind and left him unclear about the path ahead.

The human species had finally taken a consistent step forward on Nitis, but Khan's situation had worsened because of that. The connection between the two events felt hilarious and helpless when he thought about it.

'Will I have to hide behind a mask forever?' Khan wondered as he sat on the grey snow and resumed his training.

The cold snow reminded him about Liiza. Seeing her would be far more difficult now since the other recruits would try to follow him around. He would also go to an alien academy in a mere week, and his situation could only worsen there.

Sacrifices appeared inevitable. Improving his position among the Niqols would grant him more friends with Aduns capable of following him. The achievements of the human troops on Nitis caused the same effects. Everything seemed to indicate that the relationship with Liiza had been a mistake to begin with, but Khan couldn't even think about giving her up. His current peace came from her.

'What can I even cut away to make room for everything?' Khan wondered.

His sleep immediately appeared at the top of the list, but Khan didn't even need to consider it. That was his most disposable resource, and he wouldn't hesitate to forsake it to spend more time with Liiza.

Slowing down his training and avoiding creating a social environment around him were unthinkable approaches. His personal power was the only key that could put an end to his nightmares, and he required friends to become an ambassador. He even needed more than normal people, especially on an alien planet.

Khan then had to add the alien lessons to his math. He didn't know how much of his time they would occupy, but his situation appeared grim nonetheless. He was in front of the same issues that had delayed his relationship with Martha. Nitis' days were too short.

'I need to find a planet where the days last fifty hours,' Khan sighed, but a sensation coming from a foreign mind suddenly spread among his thoughts.

The smile that appeared on his face had been impossible to suppress. Khan couldn't help but feel happy that Snow had learnt the new secret location that he and Liiza would use to spend time together.

The event confirmed how important his girlfriend was in his life, and Snow's return created an urge that almost split his mind into two parts.

One part wanted to hop on Snow and fly away to wait for his secret girlfriend, while the other knew that he couldn't leave the area yet. He was the only experienced rider in the human species, so he had to make sure that everything progressed smoothly.

'I guess Liiza did it,' Khan concluded in his mind. 'She taught me how to love like a Niqols.'

Chapter 128 - Marsh

Doku had tried to smooth things out, but the recruits in the two classes still required a bit more than an entire day to go through the test, and Khan had to oversee the situation for the whole time. The group could draw its conclusions only by lunchtime of the following day, and the two squad leaders on the scene inevitably showed disappointed expressions when they studied those results.

Both classes had less than twenty recruits each, but only eight of them had managed to tame Aduns. That number represented only a fifth of the group, so the squad leaders' disappointment felt somewhat justified, especially when they considered that every Niqols on Nitis could clear that same test at a much younger age.

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It was evident that the human definition of elite fell short in front of the alien species. The Niqols weren't necessarily stronger, but they carried a determination that the boys and girls of the other species didn't have, and that drive was everything during the test.

Climbing the mountain wasn't hard. The Aduns tried to make the test harder, but they never interfered directly with the recruits. A few avalanches and strong winds weren't enough to kill them unless they committed mistakes. Still, they could scare away those that didn't consider the task connected to the eagles necessary, and that alone could make them fail.

Paul and Felicia, the squad leader of the third class on Nitis, approached the test once all the recruits had gone through their attempts. Khan ended up taking care of overseeing the injured and tired boys and girls who had failed the climb while the two soldiers were away, but his task didn't require much effort. He could continue to eat and train in silence since everyone felt too ashamed or depressed to complain.

The two squad leaders weren't only first-level warriors and mages. They also carried a determination that most of their underlings lacked, so they soon descended from the mountain on the back of majestic Aduns. Their climbs had lasted less than five hours, and that feat brought even more shame on the recruits who had failed the test.

George and the others had also returned during those hours, so they could join Doku in his compliments to the two squad captains. The group soon departed after a short exchange of polite words. Khan, Paul, Felicia, and those who had tamed Aduns flew close to the ground as they followed the Niqols and led the Ugu across the regions.

Khan obviously felt tired after the group reached the camp and separated from Doku. The same went for the other recruits and soldiers who had successfully tamed Aduns since the ability to fly made them too excited to cut that new experience short and rest. Still, everyone let their new companions go after returning home.

The squad leaders called a mandatory meeting with all the recruits who had failed the test. Paul and Felicia couldn't let them remain without Aduns since they would only slow down their respective classes. The soldiers quickly created mandatory training courses meant to prepare those kids for the next test. Those who couldn't pass it after a second attempt would simply have to leave Nitis.

The step forward in the relationship between the two species had created new requirements for the humans on Nitis. The Global Army had yet to express itself on the matter, but everyone knew that no soldier could continue to rely on the Ugu to travel anymore. Those mole-like creatures couldn't match the Aduns in terms of speed, and the aliens would even show more respect toward those who could successfully tame the eagles.

Meanwhile, Khan, George, and the other seven recruits who had successfully tamed Aduns could have the rest of the day free if they wished, but all of them decided to attend the afternoon lessons. The end of the week would make the relationship with the Niqols take another step forward. Some would gain the chance to move to one of the alien academies, leaving them less than six days to gather merits.

Of course, Khan didn't have to worry since Captain Erbair had already chosen him as one of the recruits who would move to an alien academy. Yet, it was in his interest to learn, especially when it came to the Niqols' language and their customs. He had an advantage on the matter due to his secret relationship, but he still had a lot to study since that was only his fourth week on Nitis.

"You are lucky we are tired today!" George announced once the group of nine left the building and moved toward their respective flats. "We won't let you off the hook so easily tomorrow. You will spend these last days with us!"

George directed those lines at Khan, and the latter found his resolute words heartwarming. However, everything felt too extreme when he considered that George would probably be part of the recruits sent to the alien academy. After all, the boy was almost a war hero after Istrone.

"I'll do my best to run away only when you won't notice it," Khan promised while showing a faint smile and turning toward the exit of the camp.

George wanted to complain, but a yawn came out of his mouth before he could say anything. The other recruits were in a similar condition, so they let Khan go without cracking other jokes.

"You have a tough one to catch, Veronica," George commented when Khan was too far away to hear him.

"What do you even mean?" Veronica dismissed his words with a gentle laugh. "Khan is the best in the camp exactly because he works so hard. We should all learn from him."

"She even defends him so openly," Natalie sighed. "Feelings can sway even the most mature soldiers."

Veronica glanced at George after Natalie's statement, but the boy pretended not to hear those words. Still, the recruits from the other class showed evident interest in those gossips, and a series of teases soon resounded among them.

Khan exited the camp as he let his mind wander through his conflicting emotions. He felt excited to move to an alien academy, and George's improved mood removed part of the bitterness that his drunk outburst had created. Yet, his worries about Liiza and their relationship remained, but only she could appease them.

A white figure landed next to Khan while he walked through the plain right past the camp. Snow was tired, but it didn't shrink back from being Khan's mount, especially after sensing his mood.

Snow flew through lands that Khan didn't recognize. It initially went toward the familiar mountain chain, but it quickly performed sharp turns that made the two cross vast plains and a few lakes connected to small rivers.

The Aduns followed the rivers filled with a pale-grey liquid that resembled water until it reached a cliff that ended into a vast swamp. A few black trees and short thick vegetation expanded throughout the marsh, creating a still and eerie scene. Khan could sense that some Tainted animals occupied the lands under him, but it felt hard to pinpoint their exact location while Snow dived toward the muddy surface.

Liiza's Aduns had given a specific location to Snow, so the eagle led Khan to the base of the tall and steep cliff. The rivers falling from its edges had created thin waterfalls that connected the marsh with the plain above, and a few stable areas seemed to occupy the surroundings of the rocky walls behind them.

Snow didn't want to follow Khan across the waterfalls, but he didn't mind that. He sent the eagle away and proceeded to explore the areas at the base of the cliff. Many were identical to the marsh and featured short dark vegetation growing on muddy terrain, but other parts had relatively stable and dry ground. Khan even found a path there as his exploration continued.

Khan kept the base of the cliff next to him as he walked forward. His feet would seep into the terrain whenever he encountered a muddy area. Still, the techniques involving quick steps of the Lightning-demon style allowed him to return to stable ground easily.

The path quickly led to a natural cave that expanded inside the base of the rocky cliff. Khan noticed a few blankets as he entered the cavity, and his mind soon sensed the presence of a familiar figure near its dark depths. A pair of white lights lit up as he proceeded forward, and their radiance allowed him to see the captivating features of Liiza's face.

"I wasn't sure you would have come," Liiza announced in a sleepy voice as the light radiated by her eyes vanished and reappeared while she scratched them.

"I didn't sleep," Khan revealed.

"Of course you didn't," Liiza scoffed. "Well, do you like the new place? It's wet and sticky. Aduns can't reach it easily due to the waterfalls covering the path at the base of the cliff, and the marsh is never fully silent."

Khan gave voice to a short laugh before sitting next to Liiza and laying his head on her shoulder. The Niqols had a few blankets and some simple pillows to make the rocky wall behind her more comfortable, but Khan didn't give her the chance to share them.

"You don't get scared away so easily," Liiza whispered in her sweet voice as a hand left the blanket and started to caress Khan's cheek.

"I grew up in a far louder place," Khan groaned. "You have to do better if you want me even to consider giving up on my girlfriend."

"I will," Liiza announced before laughing when she saw that Khan frowned without opening his eyes. "I won't try too hard."

Liiza kissed Khan's forehead, and the latter opened his eyes. The couple exchanged one of their usual meaningful stares before giving in to their desire for intimacy.

Khan had reached the cliff in a few hours, so the couple had the entire night and the following morning for themselves. Khan didn't even have to worry about Paul since the soldier would focus on the recruits who had failed to tame the Aduns in the next period. He only had to return to the camp to attend the lessons, but that was it.

"I know which academy will take you and the other humans," Liiza announced when she saw Khan coming out of his meditative state.

The two were lying on the cold ground, with only a thin blanket dividing them from the wet layer covering almost everything inside the marsh. A blanket hid their naked bodies, and a few pillows prevented Khan's head from touching the ground.

Liiza had taken a nap on Khan's chest, and the latter had used that chance to start his training. The Niqols didn't disturb him after she woke up. Instead, she waited until he exited the meditative state on his own while letting his concentrated expression fill her vision.

"Is it good?" Khan asked while making sure to bring Liiza closer to his chest.

Khan knew that Liiza often waited for him to finish his exercises. She mostly used the moments when they exhausted their conversations or after the cuddles to sleep, but she happened to wake up while he was immersed in his training from time to time.

Liiza never complained about that, but Khan still wanted her to understand how much he appreciated her behavior. The hugs and kisses on the back of her neck that came every time he noticed her efforts not to disturb him were the only rewards he could give.

"It's one of the most famous on the planet," Liiza explained while moving her fingers over the arms wrapped around her waist. "Still, it accepted you mostly to benefit the Niqols there. Having humans will diversify its environment and improve its social courses."

"That's fine as long as we learn something," Khan replied. "I hope the professors won't hold back from teaching the real Niqols' methods to us."

"Niqols' academies are quite serious about their members," Liiza reassured. "Your species won't matter once you enter them."

"Great," Khan exclaimed in a tired voice before moving to the topic that worried him. "How bad is it for us then?"

"Pretty bad," Liiza sighed.

"How many days do we have to spend apart?" Khan continued with his questions as his mood started to worsen.

"That's the issue," Liiza growled. "We won't be apart at all."

Chapter 129 - Ex

Liiza was the daughter of the ambassador managing the relationship with the human species. She has always been vague about her father, and Khan didn't probe further due to the obvious internal problems in her family. Still, she clearly was a privileged figure in the Niqols' society.

Paul didn't tell Khan to consider her as a princess by chance. His statement had reasons that involved her social importance for both species. Liiza was an untouchable figure for the human species and a coveted political partner for the Niqols.

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Khan didn't feel strange to learn that Liiza was part of one of the most famous academies on Nitis. Still, he remained speechless when she confirmed that her school had been the one accepting the humans. The couple would have to attend lessons in the same structure, even if they were different since she was already in the second year.

"[The Pure Trees] is exceptional," Liiza explained after the couple silently decided not to talk about the obvious issues connected to their situation. "Niqols usually start to learn about mana early, so the first year can't offer us much. However, those lessons might be pretty important for humans. They can even transform how you consider mana."

"I can't wait," Khan honestly announced before thinking about something. "They won't teach us Zalpa's methods, right?"

"The Niqols removed them from the mandatory courses many years ago," Liiza explained. "Even the optional courses only allow you to study those old ways. No one really teaches them anymore."

"Isn't that a waste?" Khan replied. "Aren't they a core part of your history?"

Khan didn't need to mention it, but Liiza knew that he was hinting at the fact that Zalpa had been right about the sunlight. She could sense the doubts in his voice, so she didn't hesitate to reassure him.

"Khan, the old ways were barbaric," Liiza explained. "We would use our blood to conduct mana and empower its effects. Most of our spells required a cost usually paid through flesh. We even used the animals as core materials for specific abilities."

Everything sounded as barbaric as Liiza described it in Khan's mind, but he didn't see the problem with that. That didn't seem strange after learning that the Kred had organized a rebellion to appease their planet's pain.

"The old ways were powerful but unstable," Liiza continued when she understood that Khan wasn't convinced. "Dealing with humans has taught us about the existence of stabler paths. They didn't even involve a significant loss in power since hard work and experience could make up for it."

"Our techniques aren't completely stable either," Khan revealed. "We still have cases of soldiers getting hurt by their own spells."

"That's just the result of a failed execution," Liiza complained before turning to face Khan without making him break his embrace. "You have seen [Zaza]. Why do you think her hair is red? The old methods have tainted her mana until it caused natural mutations. I'm not even sure of how she is suppressing them."

"She looked fine," Khan revealed a warm smile when Liiza's eyes pointed at his face.

"Really?" Liiza asked as her eyebrows arched. "Should I stop taking baths then?"

"That won't scare me away either," Khan laughed. "And I didn't mean it in that sense."

"I know how you meant it, stupid," Liiza sighed while making their foreheads touch. "[Zaza] said that you have to get stronger to discover more about your nightmares, so you want to go all reckless. I'm worried about how easily you accept pain."

"Everyone does that," Khan responded. "Spreading the mana inside our bodies hurts, but we all do that."

"Remember where you are," Liiza scolded while pulling back her head and showing her cold expression. "Stop pretending with me."

Khan's eyes widened. Liiza was only scolding him, but he could sense that his previous words had hurt her since he had tried to wear his usual mask with her.

"I'm sorry," Khan sighed as real regret appeared in his eyes. "Pretending is a habit by now, and I even have to do it all day."

"I know you didn't do it on purpose," Liiza stated while snuggling closer to Khan. "I don't even want you to fix that behavior since you need it. I just hate it when you use it with me."

Khan could only heave another sigh and caress Liiza's back to reassure her. Their time together was already at risk, and he didn't want the cold part of his life to affect his happy moments.

"I might be too used to pain," Khan timidly revealed.

"That's an understatement," Liiza snorted. "It honestly doesn't surprise me after what you went through. Still, I like how you do your best to get over your bad habits for me."

"I wanted to leave my post after Snow learnt about this place," Khan scoffed. "I think you should tell me what to expect in [The Pure Trees]. I'm getting better at feeling like a Niqols, but that's not always good in my position."

"About that," Liiza cleared her throat and diverted her gaze as her voice gained a playful tone. "Can we cuddle for a bit more first? You might not be in the perfect state for that afterward."

Khan frowned and pulled Liiza closed before questioning her. "How bad is it?"

"Well...", Liiza uttered, and Khan's expression froze when her explanation arrived.

'Of course her ex had to be in the academy!' Khan cursed as he lay on Snow while the creature flew across the sky to bring him back to the camp.

Khan had always known that he wasn't Liiza's first boyfriend. Her previous relationships had never been long, and she had never felt anything for her partners. The Niqols' lack of self-restraint had made her exchange kisses with a couple of attractive boys in her species, but she had always ended up breaking up with them quickly.

However, one of her exes had turned out to be a pretty important figure inside the Niqols' society. His name was Ilman, and he belonged to one of the largest tribes in charge of developing new techniques and methods involving mana.

The Niqols had changed their approach to mana after meeting the humans, so those subjects were relatively new. The tribes that could improve and innovate them had an immense value in the alien society in that specific historical period, and Ilman ended up belonging to one of them.

The Niqols had to make up for thousands of years of evolution through barbaric methods. The organizations that could develop new and valuable paths basically had the most important role in the entire alien society since they carried the hopes of a whole species. The future of the Niqols was in their hands.

The quickest way to develop new methods was to have direct access to human technology, and the ambassadors filled that role. It was clear that a union between tribes that dealt with those fields would bring immense benefits to both of them and the Niqols' species as a whole. Needless to say, Liiza and Ilman's tribes had attempted to do that.

According to Liiza, Ilman was pretty good-looking, and his character wasn't even bad. Many tribes had already tried to hook him up with their descendants since his looks, wealth, and political relevance were incredible. He was the closest a Niqols could be to perfection at his age.

Ilman and Liiza's tribes had agreed to arrange the relationship when they were still young, but Liiza's rebellious character had eventually made the agreement fail. The event was the main reason behind her current situation. The Niqols felt that she had betrayed her species by not making such suitable organizations fuse.

The angriest about the whole matter had been Yeza. She was an ambassador with a daughter who couldn't sacrifice herself for the greater good of her species.

Being with Ilman wasn't even a sacrifice. The boy actually liked Liiza, and he wasn't bad in any aspect. Even Liiza had admitted that she had refused him only to go against the obligations imposed by her mother.

Khan's issue was that Ilman also attended the second year in [The Pure Trees], and his feelings for Liiza had only increased after her refusal. The Niqols was still pursuing her, and Khan would have to watch those scenes in silence once he arrived in the academy.

'Dealing with a secret relationship without forsaking my training wasn't enough,' Khan cursed in his mind. 'Now I have to endure the handsome, rich, and important guy going after my girlfriend too. What did I ever do to you, world? Can you let me have one good thing?'

Khan didn't let his mental state affect his time with Liiza, but she had understood that it was better not to mention the topic with him at all. The main issue was that the couple couldn't find a proper solution. They could only endure and make sure that their problems didn't hurt the happiness that they managed to experience when they were together.

Khan's ability to hide his real emotions was so good that only George got the feeling that something was off with him. However, his hunches were too vague to lead to actual questions. Also, Khan often didn't sleep for entire days, so forcing him to go out during the remaining days inside the camp was hard.

Khan still had to go out with the eight recruits who had successfully tamed Aduns a few times. His moments with Liiza inevitably shrunk due to those events, and his sleeping schedule ended up suffering the most from his behavior.

Training, studying, going out with George and the others, and flying to Liiza filled Khan's schedule in ways that the training camp on Earth had never done. He couldn't even sleep on Snow at times since he needed those few hours to complete his daily training.

Luckily for him, George and the others lacked his resilience, so they didn't stay up late even when the Niqols smuggled other batches of the pink liquid in the camp. As for Liiza, she directly forced him to sleep whenever she saw that he was about to reach his limits.

The couple didn't talk about Ilman anymore after Liiza's explanation. Khan even forgot about him at times since the feelings shared by the two continued to intensify with each night spent together. Khan found it hard to worry about the ex-boyfriend when Liiza slept naked in arms.

Khan's fourth week on Nitis eventually went by, and the day that everyone was waiting for arrived. Captain Erbair made one of her rare appearances inside the camp to announce the names of the recruits who would go to [The Pure Trees].

The Captain's decision came from various factors. She had considered the recruits' battle prowess, their knowledge of the Niqols' customs and language, their achievements in the Global Army, and their character to come up with her list. Still, some inevitably remained disappointed.

[The Pure Trees] had only opened eight spots to the humans. Khan obviously occupied one of them, and George and Veronica ended up filling two more. Yet, Captain Erbair disregarded Natalie and Harris since their character didn't suit such a delicate mission. The girl was simply too cold, and the boy was way too attached to his human customs to be in an environment full of Niqols.

Gabriela, a girl from the third class, ended up filling the fourth spot, and Captain Erbair decided to assign the remaining four to recruits from the first and second classes. Her decision didn't want to aim to a precise and fair division of that task. She had only picked the best candidates since the mission came before the political repercussions that her decision could have.

Paul couldn't help but feel ecstatic to see that three members of his class had gained the chance to go to an alien academy. His value as a squad captain would inevitably increase after that achievement, but the seriousness of the situation didn't make him forget to make a list of what the trio didn't have to do once outside the camp.

Each squad captain did the same with the respective recruits. Khan spent the last night of his fourth week inside the camp since Paul would kill him if he dared to risk being late. Moreover, envoys leading a pack of Ugu had to approach the area to transport the group's clothes and weapons to the academy beforehand, and everyone had to help.

The departure happened early the next morning when an Aduns wearing fabric enhanced by the Niqols' azure symbols landed in front of the camp.

Chapter 130 - Lake

The travel to [The Pure Trees] happened on the back of the Aduns. The pack of Ugu had already moved the eight recruits' clothes and belongings to the academy the previous night, so everyone could directly hop on their eagles and set off once the Niqols envoy arrived.

Khan didn't recognize the envoy, but the Niqols didn't waste time introducing himself. Khan only made sure to memorize the alien's clothes and the fabric that covered his Aduns since they featured the same glowing azure symbols.

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The departure was quick but tense. Captain Erbair, Lieutenant Kintea, Paul, and Felicia made sure to send them off even if it were early in the morning due to the importance of their task.

The previous night, Khan and the others had learnt how complicated the situation truly was from their squad captains. They had been already aware of the benefits that their task could bring to the human species, but it took that briefing to instruct them about matters that would be classified otherwise.

It turned out that the Padlyn's deal wasn't as open as every recruit thought. The agreement had terms and heavy restrictions, especially when it came to the knowledge involving Nitis' layout.

The Niqols weren't willing to reveal the location of [The Pure Trees]. The enrolled recruits would even need to swear magic oaths once they actually entered the academy to make sure that they couldn't spread classified information.

Moreover, the network of the Global Army didn't reach the academy, so the recruits would be completely cut away from the human settlements. They could send messages and communicate with their superiors through specific Niqols assigned to that task, but the aliens would check everything to make sure that the humans didn't learn anything outside of the deal.

The tight restrictions obviously worried the recruits since they put their lives in the hands of an alien species. However, Khan couldn't help but feel slightly relieved when he learnt how hard it was

to communicate with the camps. It sounded strange, but he actually had more freedom without his superiors watching his moves.

The main difference between the two species was their approach to discipline. The humans wanted severe and dignified soldiers who believed in the chain of command and were ready to act as pawns if the situation required it. Instead, the Niqols acknowledged and respected eccentric behaviors as long as their soldiers carried the resolve necessary to serve their kind.

The Niqols were also more relaxed when it came to their habits. The recruits had seen how easily the aliens decided to indulge in booze or smoke. Their self-restraint was even quite bad, so their emotions often drove their actions.

Khan couldn't help but look forward to that new environment, and his excitement prevented him from training during the flight on Snow's back. He wanted to memorize the path toward the academy even if the road looked from the surface would feature completely different sceneries.

The phone in his pocket allowed him to keep the passage of time in check. The Global Army had even provided chargers that the Ugu from the previous night had already sent to the academy. Khan didn't have to worry about the battery of his device.

Many hours passed, and Khan couldn't help but notice how the group often performed sharp turns that made them fly over the same regions multiple times. It was clear that the envoy felt worried about possible trackers of pursuers, and that inevitably delayed their arrival to the academy.

Khan had the chance to study a bit more of Nitis' layout during the flight. The environment was generally cold, so snow often appeared in his vision. Yet, he also saw large lakes, rivers, plains, short mountains devoid of ice, and more. He didn't have the chance to set his eyes on a proper sea, but he believed that the planet had one or two of them.

The detail that surprised Khan the most was the complete absence of cities under him. The poor technological advancements of the Niqols didn't justify that scarcity of artificial structures, and Liiza had also mentioned multiple times how her species controlled the whole planet. Khan quickly became certain that the envoy was avoiding the settlements on purpose, and he could only find his caution reasonable.

Five dark figures eventually appeared in the distance. Khan and the others could see a Niqols leading four recruits across the sky and making sure that the two groups met.

The appearance of the second group made the envoy of Khan's group perform a sharp dive toward one of the plains nearby. The second team did the same, and the Aduns soon landed on a relatively barren area that only featured a few short bushes every once in a while.

"We aren't there," The envoy in Khan's group announced before the recruits could ask anything. "We only need to perform a preliminary test to understand which courses you have to attend."

The eight recruits exchanged confused gazes while remaining on their Aduns. The briefing from the previous night didn't mention any test. Still, there didn't seem to be a way out of the situation. The boys and girls there could only accept that they had to go with the flow from now on. Their complaints would have to wait for when they had the chance to return to the camp.

The two Niqols didn't give the recruits the chance to introduce themselves. Khan, George, and Veronica barely knew Gabriela since their different classes had never given them the opportunity to properly bond, even if they lived in the same camp.

The recruits limited themselves to exchange glances for the time being before imitating the Niqols. They jumped off their Aduns and followed the aliens toward a seemingly random spot in that barren plain where the envoys told them to stop.

The two Niqols studied the empty area in front of them and walked in a circle to leave marks on the frail ground. That behavior left the recruits confused, but an azure glow began to come out of the footprints on the terrain once they connected to create a large ring.

The azure glow slowly seeped past the footprints and converged at the center of the circle, where it created one of the symbols that often illuminated the tall buildings in the city. A tremor ran through the ground at that point, and the area marked by the light started to slide to reveal a trapdoor connected to a staircase that led underground.

All the recruits there had seen far more spectacular scenes on Earth. The teleports alone were enough to surpass the complexity of that simple hidden trapdoor. Yet, it felt strange to witness such a unique use of the mana. After all, the Niqols didn't use any technology to activate those effects. It seemed that the ground itself carried commands that they could trigger with simple steps.

The two envoys didn't hesitate to climb down the staircase, and the recruits promptly followed them. Still, some awkward scenes unfolded when the group approached the narrow passage.

Khan was in the lead of the group because his curiosity had won over his hesitation almost immediately. Still, a tall, muscular boy from the other group quickened his steps to surpass him and become the first in the line.

His actions made the other recruits accelerate to take the spots right behind him, and only Khan remained clueless about the whole situation. He could vaguely understand the reason behind that behavior, but everything felt pointless when he inspected it the second time.

'What's the point of fighting for merits already?' Khan wondered, but part of him understood that his position was rather special, even among the Niqols.

Both the Global Army and the Niqols had learnt Khan's name after his performance on Nitis. He had been on the planet only four weeks, but he had already accomplished incredible feats.

Being the first human to tame an Aduns was only a minor feat that many could connect to luck. Yet, his victory against the lightning monster and his selfless performance during the crisis had sealed his position as one of the best recruits on Nitis.

The fact that he had even survived Istorne's crisis a bit more than a month ago and his help in the matter only increased his overall value. Khan didn't need to fight to receive the acknowledgment of his peers and superiors. He had already solidified his position.

Khan silently decided to completely disregard the event and let his companions enter the passage before him. The staircase was old and seemed made of the same frail terrain of the surface, but clanging noises resounded from the steps as the group descended deeper underground.

Khan even touched the walls at his sides to confirm the overall stability of the structure. His eyes could only see the same frail terrain of the surface there, but his fingers revealed other features. He could sense the firmness and coldness of metal in what should be nothing more than sand. It was clear that mana was enhancing that material.

The passage descended for a few meters before opening into an immense underground area with a clear lake at its end. Khan felt surprised to see that such clear water existed on Nitis. Almost everything on the planet had dark shades, but that liquid was basically transparent.

A few azure symbols shone on the smooth walls and filled the area with a faint glow that allowed everyone to inspect almost every corner of the structure. The place was obviously artificial due to its rectangular shape, and only the part with the lake featured uneven surfaces that didn't go through a polishing process.

The group wasn't alone in the hall. The two envoys suddenly performed a polite bow toward the end of the area and forced the recruits to focus on the slightly darker corners on the other side of the lake. They quickly realized a hooded figure standing right next to the wall with its feet immersed in the lake, and Khan felt astonished when he failed to sense anything coming out of it.

That discovery felt quite strange. Khan's sensitivity to mana had improved a lot as his attunement increased and his mental exercises continued. He even believed that part of his understanding of the Niqols' feelings came from how good he had become with that ability.

Yet, the hooded figure didn't reveal anything. It was a blank spot in an environment full of mana. Khan could sense that energy filling the walls, the ground, the ceiling, and the lake, but nothing came out of that foreign presence.

"Welcome, young humans," The hooded figure greeted in a melodious male voice as he stepped forward and uncovered his head.

Long white hair, a pair of shining white eyes, and a handsome face came out from under the hood. The girls couldn't help but open their mouths in surprise and blush in front of such a perfect expression of beauty. The Niqols was tall, his face released a captivating resolve, and his overall figure carried a harmony that made him seem part of the lake.

'Please, don't be Iلمان,' Khan almost begged in his mind, and his expression relaxed after the Niqols continued to speak.

"I'm one of your future professors," The Niqols continued. "You can address me as Professor Supyan or [Guru]. I handle the courses connected to some of the shades that mana can obtain."

Khan and the others quickly performed a polite bow as per the Niqols' customs, and Professor Supyan limited himself to nod before continuing his explanation.

"My species doesn't use many structures connected to the old methods anymore," Professor Supyan explained. "This lake is an exception. Form a line and remove your clothes before entering the lake one by one. The waters will reveal the shades of your mana, and it will give me the chance to choose courses that suit your nature."