

## Chaos' Heir 141

### Chapter 141 - Flowers

Khan's coldness had scared Kelly, but she had never once believed herself to be wrong about her ideas. However, Doku's words dealt a blow to that belief and made her realize how deeply Khan had actually bonded with the Niqols.

When it came to actual time spent with the Niqols, Khan and the other recruits were almost on the same level. The aliens were more at ease around him, but he always ran away during the parties, so the number of hours was in the other humans' favor.

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However, Khan didn't put any wall between him and the Niqols, and they could feel it. He treated the aliens as if they belonged to his species, without biases nor care for the political environments that stood behind them.

The Niqols couldn't help but appreciate his behavior, those willing to accept humans so openly at least. Their poor self-restraint made them like how Khan appeared so free around them. They didn't see a member of a different species when they talked to him.

Khan's behavior was only the last of the features that made the Niqols appreciate his character, and that mostly involved the students' perception. It wasn't a major aspect for the professors, but it fused well with other parts of Khan's reputation.

"Mission?" Khan asked.

"It's something that we do a few times every year," Doku explained while moving his eyes between Khan and Kelly. "Do you want to talk about it outside?"

"No, it's fine," Khan exclaimed while walking toward his bed and sitting cross-legged over it. "I believe it doesn't involve classified stuff."

"That's correct," Doku announced before stepping into the room and sitting next to Khan.

Khan's words dealt another blow to Kelly's belief. He had the chance to keep the contents of the mission for himself and gain leverage over the other recruits, but he decided to inform everyone right away. His actions clearly showed that he prioritized the mission over petty squabbles with his companions.

Kelly couldn't help but return to her bed at that point. She didn't like to have such an unrestrained companion in her group, especially on an important mission. However, Khan seemed to be in complete control of his actions and behavior.

Doku picked a smooth square rock from the insides of his robe and threw it at the center of the room. Azure symbols lit up on the small item once it touched the floor, and the room seemed to react to that event. The menus on the walls transformed into images that depicted a sea of flowers covering a plain interrupted by a few short hills.

That scene appeared on each surface of the room, but most recruits inspected it while looking at the floor. The images even moved as the perspective flew over the environment and revealed its vastness.

Doku remained silent while the perspective moved to the interesting part of the environment, but a peculiar scent reached his nostrils during the wait. The Niqols sniffed the air a few times before discovering that Khan was the source of that unique odor.

"Are you bathing in the wild?" Doku asked.

"Your nose is frighteningly accurate!" Khan laughed.

Khan's packed schedule didn't give him the chance to take showers inside the underground habitation, but he didn't want to stink. Liiza didn't care about that part too much, but she had limits that Khan didn't want to discover.

Luckily for Khan, the cave in the marsh stood behind waterfalls. He had often used them to clean himself, and Liiza had even joined him at times. Still, the scent of the wild had inevitably become part of him.

"I'm always outside doing missions," Doku explained in a proud tone while scratching the tip of his nose. "I just developed it throughout the years."

Khan chuckled and shook his head, but his mind grew cold. He immediately decided to address that issue with Liiza. He couldn't leave such clues of his relationship lingering around him.

"That's it!" Doku declared when the images focused on a specific hill covered in pinkish flowers. "We have to collect them. That's the mission."

"Don't tell me that they are a core material for the [booze]," Khan commented when he noticed the similar shades of the flowers.

"That's just one of their uses," Doku laughed. "We only need the leftovers of the flowers to make the drink. The other parts are useful materials in many medical fields. The Niqols have started to reevaluate them after gaining access to part of your knowledge."

"Can you even reveal this?" Khan asked. "This sounds like something that should be classified information."

"These flowers are cheap and grow every few months in multiple locations on the planet," Doku reassured. "You don't know these locations, and we would know who to blame if they started disappearing from the place that you'll see tomorrow."

Khan didn't answer. He limited himself to nod in understanding. Doku's plan was failproof since humans didn't have anything in Nitis' orbit with the ability to scan the surface accurately.

"So, do we just fly there and collect them?" Khan asked. "Why even sending someone from the second year for something like this?"

"These flowers attract predators," Doku explained. "It's usually enough to send only a few of us to collect them, but everyone is scared after the last outburst of monsters."

The arrival of the daylight was something that the Niqols still tried to keep a secret. They knew that the humans probably had already learnt about that event with their tech. Yet, the aliens didn't want to give them too many details for fear that they could use them to their advantage.

The Niqols had even recently accepted that the arrival of the daylight would affect their younger generations, so they wanted to remain in control of the situation. They couldn't imagine that the

humans had already learnt about that danger and had developed a cruel plan to maximize their number of benefits.

"Didn't you clear the entire planet from the monsters the last time?" Khan continued. "What are the chances for a new monster to appearing again?"

Doku hesitated before answering. In his mind, he didn't see any problem revealing everything about the daylight and speaking openly about the issue. However, he had orders to remain silent about it. Luckily for him, his mission had another real explanation that he could use without mentioning the imminent crisis.

"We didn't clear these areas during the last crisis," Doku revealed. "Our presence in the area might have ruined the natural environment necessary for the appearance of the flowers. We only used non-invasive methods to keep track of the flora, but that's it."

"I bet your methods didn't find anything strange," Khan guessed.

"Which is even stranger," Doku concluded before heaving a helpless sigh. "I'll lead the team. There won't be many of us since we want to keep our impact to the minimum, but we'll still bring more students than usual. You are already here, so the professors thought to add a trustworthy human to the team."

"I will never believe that they used the word trustworthy," Khan laughed.

"They didn't," Doku laughed too, "But you were the obvious pick anyway, so just accept it."

The Niqols had chosen Khan for his feats during the previous hunts, and the recruits knew that. Yet, it still felt bad to learn that the aliens didn't even consider them.

"The briefing will happen early in the morning," Doku announced while standing up and storing his square rock. "Someone will pick you up. Everything should go smoothly, so prepare yourself for the usual end-of-the-week party. It's mandatory."

Doku then turned toward the other recruits before continuing. "You must also come."

George and the others nodded and showed smiles, but they all cursed internally. Their heads had just stopped hurting after a good day of rest, but Doku didn't intend to let them rest for too long.

"New weapon?" Doku asked after he turned back toward Khan and noticed the sheathed knife tied to the side of his robe.

"I'm just practicing," Khan smirked. "You'll only see kicks tomorrow."

"Hopefully I won't," Doku laughed before reaching the entrance and performing a polite bow toward the recruits.

Doku left after that gesture, and the awkwardness created during Khan and Kelly's squabble returned. No one knew what to say in that situation, so silence reigned for a few minutes until Kelly decided to speak.

"You might have lost this chance if you were outside," Kelly commented before lying in her bed.

"I'll ask them to give me a communicator," Khan laughed before lying down too.

Khan had returned to the academy because Liiza had to see her mother. The couple wouldn't have had the chance to meet that night anyway, so Khan could rest properly. Of course, he decided to return to his nightmare only after his meditation and mental training ended.

A Niqols from the first year reached the humans' underground habitation at seven am, but he found Khan sitting cross-legged next to the entrance to the staircase. The two didn't need to say much to each other, so they quickly moved across the forest to reach the gathering point of the team.

A surprising scene unfolded in Khan's eyes when the Niqols led him toward an empty spot near one of the mountains. The alien then left and left him to inspect the situation with hesitant eyes.

Khan quickly noticed Doku and Azni arguing over something trivial, but it seemed that the girl was only teasing the boy. Yet, Khan's surprise didn't come from the two Niqols. His eyes inevitably widened when he saw Liiza sitting on the other side of the empty area.

Liiza was reading one of her books, but her eyes rose toward Khan when she felt his gaze on her. Surprise also filled her expression, but she quickly suppressed that feeling when she noticed one of the Niqols turning toward her.

Everyone noticed Khan once he stepped past the trees, and a series of bows happened. It turned out that Khan had met all of them in the parties during that week, and he heaved a sigh of relief in his mind when he confirmed that their names existed in his memory.

The group wasn't big. It featured only eight students equally picked from each year. Four of them came from the first year, while the other belonged to the second.

'They must really fear the daylight for Liiza to be here,' Khan thought as he exchanged salutes with everyone and summoned Snow through the mental connection with the creature.

Khan had learnt a lot during his first week inside the academy. Azni had already confirmed that Liiza was one of the geniuses there, but the latter had to explain her specific field privately to make him understand everything.

Liiza could cast complicated spells. Her expertise in manipulating mana had yet to reach an exceptional level, but the delay required by her abilities didn't manage to lower her value as a warrior. She could turn an impossible battle into an easy hunt with the proper preparations, so many considered her a necessary asset during troublesome situations.

Her presence in the team stated how afraid of the monsters the professors were. After all, convincing Liiza to perform those missions always was quite annoying due to her character, but they had decided to make her mother handle the matter.

Liiza had initially felt annoyed that Yeza had ruined her chance to spend another entire day with Khan. Still, those feelings dispersed when she saw him exchanging bows with the other Niqols and trying to use simple words in their language to communicate.

It felt nice to see Khan doing so well among the Niqols. The scene almost made Liiza forget all the problems that their different species could cause. She dreamt of a time when she and Khan could hold themselves in the open without worrying about what their superiors would say.

The group departed as soon as the Aduns arrived. Khan limited himself to follow Doku, and the same environment seen in the underground habitation unfolded in his vision after a few hours.

However, it became immediately evident that something was off with that scene since holes filled all the regions outside of the area kept in check by the Niqols.

#### Chapter 142 - Hesitation

The scene almost seemed to hide an elaborate ploy, but the randomness of the holes gave off a different vibe. It felt strange how only the regions that the Niqols didn't keep in check by their methods had been affected by that strange phenomenon. Still, those cavities and cracks didn't reveal any specific pattern or shape.

Khan didn't feel confident enough in his knowledge of the Niqols' species to come up with a failproof conclusion. He let his mind remain open to every possibility as he tried his best to memorize the scenes witnessed from high in the sky.

Doku picked the cubical item meant to communicate with his companions and gave precise orders. Khan didn't have one of those, but he was in the backlines of the group, so Snow could simply follow along.

The Aduns descended until they could hover above their destination and inspect the area from a safe position. The flowers shown by Doku's items were still there, and the same went for the pinkish ones, but the Niqols in the lead brought the group outside of that region instead of landing.

Doku made the group perform a complete inspection of the surrounding regions to see how far the strange phenomenon stretched. Khan didn't need a communicator to confirm that the presence of the holes was unexpected. The Niqols even corroborated his guess once the team landed outside the areas affected by that strange damage.

"It clearly is the result of animals that live underground," Doku announced once everyone landed in the uneven plain covered by short grass that stood before one of the damaged lands around the target.

Doku was quite easygoing inside the academy. He even organized most of the parties and took care of producing the pink drinks, but no one would ever describe him as unreliable. The Niqols was able to retain his noble aura even when he was sleeping drunk on the ground.

That feature only intensified during a mission. Doku could appear serious without causing any tension in his underlings. He had a peculiar character, but he was suitable for his role as a squad leader.

"Monsters?" Khan asked as everyone stared at the holes in the distance.

"That's unclear," Doku stated before turning toward Khan. "Do you mind taking care of the frontlines?"

"No problem," Khan announced while performing a few squats to warm up his legs.

"Zeliha, how is your sensitivity to mana today?" Doku continued while glancing at a short female Niqols at his side.

The girl appeared younger than her peers. She was short, her figure was thin, and her body had yet to develop fully. Her white hair was longer than her companions and almost reached her knees. It managed to stay away from her seemingly distracted gaze only because she combed it into multiple braids and tied some of them into a ponytail.

"[Best in The Pure Trees]," Zeliha proudly exclaimed as her gaze continued to wander.

Khan inspected the skinny girl before shooting a curious gaze toward Doku. He had understood her words. He only wanted to confirm that she was telling the truth.

"She is a genius when it comes to sensitivity to mana," Doku quickly explained. "She is so good that the professors threw her into the second year even if her control had yet to touch the proper requirements. Though she is good there too now."

"[Isn't the human going to slow me down]?" Zaliha asked without ever focusing on her companions.

"[That's a funny choice of words]," Doku laughed before realizing that Khan didn't get those last words. "She is honored to work with you."

Doku wasn't even trying to hide his lie, but Khan limited himself to reveal a reassuring smile. He knew that his presence there could appear strange for some Niqols, especially in a mission so connected to their culture. The possible dangers ahead only intensified their worries, and the rumors about Khan's feats weren't enough to quell them.

Khan could feel relatively certain that the professors had sent only noteworthy figures in the mission after learning about Zeliha. That decision sounded reasonable with the daylight getting closer, but the team remained small.

Doku didn't need to give the exact order, but Khan and Zeliha understood their task right away. The two of them would make the perfect scouting pair if they managed to work together. Khan's speed and Zeliha's sensitivity to mana would allow them to take care and sense threats before eventual encirclements happened.

Liiza didn't like that Doku had assigned that dangerous role to Khan again. She trusted his prowess and battle experience, but he would still be the first to face eventual threats. Nevertheless, her feelings didn't appear on her face, and she directly took her position in the backlines without needing orders.

Liiza's ice was the deadliest weapon among the students of the academy, but she needed to prepare to cast it. She already knew that Doku would put her in the backlines to make sure that the others would have the chance to buy time for her if the situation required it.

The other Niqols created a line that connected Khan and Zeliha to Liiza. Doku and the last student in the second year took their place right behind the frontlines. The boy's name was Bashir. He was tall and slender, his face featured caved in cheeks and sharp edges, and his hands were on a sheathed short sword at his side.

Azni and the other two students in the first year were right in front of Liiza. They would be the last line of defense in case the group ended up requiring her ice. Khan knew the other two Niqols as Elbek and Asyat, and he felt pleasantly surprised to see that calm and concentration filled their eyes in that situation.

Khan had known Elbek and Asyat during one of Doku's parties, and their condition during the event wouldn't normally make him trust them when it came to a battle. Yet, they appeared confident in their abilities, and their presence confirmed that their feeling wasn't a pretense.

The distribution between the years in the academy didn't describe the actual battle prowess of the students. It only defined their level of expertise in the three major fields connected to mana, which was the very reason behind those mixed teams.

The group advanced until they reached the ground started featuring those cavities, cracks, and holes. Most of them were too narrow for Khan and the others, and a quick inspection revealed that they led deep underground. Their actual depth was impossible to understand from the surface, but Doku kept his companions focused on a simple study of the area for now.

"[The Ugu didn't cause this]," Asyat whispered. "[I can think of a few species that live underground, but some tunnels too narrow for most of them. I bet we are against worms or creatures with a similar size]."

"[Why did they avoid the flowery plain]?" Doku asked. "[It doesn't make sense to ignore that spot. It should be their target even]."

"[Maybe they don't like the numbing properties of the flowers]," Asyat replied.

"[Why did they even set their lair here then]?" Doku responded. "[They can easily dig a home somewhere else]."

"[How should I even know]?" Asyat complained.

"[Your tribe studies the fauna for a living]!" Doku exclaimed.

"[We have yet to learn how to talk with animals]!" Asyat snorted. "[We don't even know which mutations have affected this species. How am I supposed to come up with a general overview of its behavior]?"

Khan paid attention to the conversation between the boy and the girl, but he only managed to gain a vague understanding of the discussed topics. The Niqols found it hard to talk about the various species through human words, so they preferred to use their language and translate for Khan once they reached a conclusion.

"[I only want you to tell me if the path ahead is safe]," Doku explained. "[We are strong enough to face a monster or two, but I don't want to send us into a place without escape routes]."

Asyat hesitated to give an answer. Her tribe had instructed her about the general behavior of the various species on Nitis, but that knowledge became unreliable when the mutation came into play. Everything about a Tainted animal could change once it developed new features and abilities.

"[We should be safe on the surface]," Asyat eventually stated. "[This species didn't eat the flowers, which probably means that it's using them. I can't guess anything more than this]."

Doku didn't appear satisfied about that vague answer, and Khan understood why after Bashir gave him a brief summary of the conversation.

The issue was with the unclear behavior of the species that had dug those tunnels. The group couldn't understand the purpose behind that lair when the most valuable resource in the area was still intact. When they thought about it, Khan and the others couldn't even determine whether the Tainted animals were still in those lands.

The mission would have been easier to approach if the target weren't in such a troublesome position. Yet, the pinkish flowers were right at the center of the only intact area, and regions filled

with holes and tunnels occupied its surroundings. That strange layout could end up being a trap that would leave the group with no way out.

Doku had the last word on the matter. It was his role to decide if the mission appeared too dangerous for his group. Asyat's lines continued to resound in his mind as he thought about the situation, and a conclusion eventually became clear.

"Let's be quick about it," Doku ordered in the human language. "We'll leave the roots underground and collect only the flowers before leaving the area as fast as we can."

"The roots are the most valuable part of the flowers," Bashir complained.

"I know that, okay?" Doku scoffed. "But I won't put us at risk. Our lives are more important than a single batch."

Khan could almost hear the words that the Niqols decided not to say. Normally, the presence of an unknown danger would force the group to reconsider the mission and contact their superiors to determine how to handle the situation.

However, time was short due to the incoming daylight. Khan could guess that the Niqols were trying to accumulate materials useful in medical fields before the unavoidable crisis, and that forced them to be more reckless.

The incoming daylight was the only reason why Doku had even considered continuing the mission. He didn't want to charge blindly toward the flowery plain, but the settlements near the academy might suffer from a shortage of meds during the crisis if his group didn't seize that batch now.

Picking only the flowers and leaving the roots behind wasn't an ideal solution, but it could cover part of the required materials while reducing the dangers connected to the mission. After all, the underground world might not notice their actions until it was too late if they only seized half of each plant.

The Niqols quickly understood Doku's reasons, but none of them could find the right words for Khan. They found themselves unable to justify their decision without talking about the daylight. Luckily for them, Khan played along.

"It's better if we hurry, isn't it?" Khan chuckled, showing a smile that revealed no flaws.

Relief filled his companions when they saw that he didn't need other explanations. Still, Doku and Azni felt bad about keeping Khan in the dark. As for Liiza, she felt as if daggers were stabbing her heart when she saw how perfect Khan's pretense was. She couldn't help but suffer when she realized how used her boyfriend was to lying.

Of course, Liiza, Doku, and Azni didn't reveal anything, and the same went for their expressions. The group could soon proceed forward and pick up their pace as they ran through the uneven and cracked plain while paying attention to their surroundings.

The regions featuring holes and tunnels were deadly silent. The noise created by the group's faint steps resembled thunder that disrupted the silence, but nothing reacted to those sounds.

The group could sprint through those areas in less than an hour and reach the flowery plain safely. Khan and the others had silently decided not to speak to limit their noise to the minimum, and they

had all seen the area at least once, so they could move toward their pink targets without uttering words.

The tension that had fallen among the group intensified when they reached the pinkish flowers, and that feeling only grew stronger when they started to rip them in half. Khan and the others expected something to happen whenever their actions generated rustling noises, but everything continued to remain still.

Bashir, Elbek, and Azni had large backpacks behind their backs that their companions didn't hesitate to fill with the torn pistils. There were only eight of them on the scene, and the hill was quite big, but they managed to gather everything in no time.

The hill appeared barren after the students completed their work. Torn stems continued to come out of the dark ground, and the absence of the pink color filled the area with a depressing feeling.

The group didn't waste time on that scene. They turned toward their landing spot and started sprinting as soon as they collected everything.

The tension that had accumulated in their minds started to fade as they left the intact area and returned among the holes, cracks, and cavities. It was only a matter of minutes before they could reach safe areas again and return to the academy. Some of them even started thinking about the party that would come that night.

However, something began to move under them, and Zaliha didn't hesitate to warn everyone about that. Multiple faint presences had suddenly appeared in the range of her senses, but they felt strangely weak.

Doku gave the order to keep running. He didn't care how weak that potential threat was. It was better to face it outside its lair. Still, the group didn't have the chance to get too far before an earthquake started filling those areas.

The ground shook violently and made some of the Niqols falter. Zaliha even risked falling as her foothold grew unstable, but Khan promptly grabbed her arm and helped her regaining some balance.

Similar scenes happened behind Khan. The Niqols were helping each other to get far away from the holes that the earthquake was expanding, but everything became pointless when fissures reached their position.

The surface remained in one piece for less than a second before it completely shattered and revealed multiple tunnels of various sizes and shapes. Most of them were too narrow for Khan and the Niqols, but they also crumbled once the group landed on them.

## Chapter 143 - Fall

Khan struggled to understand for how long he fell. His proficiency with the Lightning-demon style had stepped on the competent level, granting him incredible agility and ability to preserve balance. However, he couldn't deploy those skills when the ground shattered as soon as his feet touched it.

The underground world of the regions filled with tunnels was incredibly frail. It turned out that only the surface had retained a stable structure, but everything under it had the same texture as thin glass. A simple impact was enough to make large patches shatter into countless pieces.

Khan failed to find a stable foothold multiple times as everything around him crumbled. Waterfalls made of dirt and ground fell together with him and clouded his vision. His eyes burnt, but he forced himself not to close them. He was worried about his situation, but he also hated how he couldn't get to his girlfriend falling only a few meters from him.

Liiza's glowing eyes also ended on Khan as the waves of frail ground submerged them and brought them deeper into the region. Worry and confusion filled her face, but the currents of terrain eventually led her far away. The same happened to Khan and the other Niqols. The dark soil creates proper rivers that flowed into different directions and divided the group.

It didn't take much before Khan felt unable to see anything. Complete darkness filled his burning eyes. The dirt had forced him to close them at some point, but they still hurt as they tried to disperse the soil that had tainted them.

His body continued to move with the river of ground, but he changed direction from time to time. Khan wasn't sure what could cause that massive amount of soil to twist, but the impact with a firm surface made him gain a vague idea of his situation.

The flowing ground tried to squash Khan on the firm surface, but his body was strong enough to oppose that intense force. The prolonged contact allowed him to understand the nature of that tough wall. He could sense sharp rocks tearing open holes in his robe and cutting his back. It became clear that he had hit one of the solid parts of that chaotic underground structure.

His physical strength didn't allow him to break free of that suppression. The ground gained the same texture as steel as it continued to press him on the rocky wall. Khan spent entire minutes in that position, and breathing grew harder as time passed.

Thoughts on the layout of the underground structure appeared in his mind as he struggled to dig space where his nose could breathe. It seemed that the Tainted animals that had ravaged the area had left a few parts intact. Khan wondered whether those parts were too tough to pierce, but he didn't linger too long on those ideas.

Cuts continued to open on his back as his body bent back and forth in a desperate attempt to clear the path for his mouth or nose. Khan breathed, but that air was never enough to satisfy his lungs. He soon felt lightheaded, but everything around him resumed to move at that point.

The river of terrain flowed again and dragged Khan deeper into the underground world until he slammed on another solid surface. The ground falling above his head and on his injured back tried to squash him, but everything stopped moving before the situation could become too dangerous.

Khan remained still until he confirmed that everything around him had stabilized. He didn't feel any unstoppable force pressing him down, so he did his best to dig his way through the ground that had accumulated above him and straighten his position.

His movements generated loud noises that made him freeze. Khan didn't know how stable his situation was, so he wanted to approach the digging slowly. However, he couldn't avoid causing a mess whenever he moved the ground above him.

His hands eventually reached a spot where stale air could flow over them. Khan rejoiced at that sensation and hurried to make the rest of his body escape that pile of terrain. His dirty head eventually came out, but his muddy eyes didn't give him the chance to see much.

Khan pulled his entire body out of the ground and found a stable foothold before straightening his position. He had yet to clean his eyes, but he preferred to prioritize his footing. He was useless without it.

The ground under his soles was far from stable, but it was enough for his martial art, and Khan didn't need anything else. He could finally focus on his eyes, but nothing about him was clean enough to clean them after the journey underground.

The back of Khan's robe was already in pieces, and blood had even tainted it in multiple spots. Tearing it apart and patting it to remove the soil lingering on its surfaces didn't take much. He soon obtained a relatively clean fabric that could clean his eyes.

His vision slowly returned as he wiped his eyes clean. Khan found himself inside a tall and large tunnel made of smooth and cold rocks. Multiple holes appeared on the ground, walls, and ceiling, and he even found a relatively large opening right above him.

Khan was standing on a three meters tall pile of terrain that had fallen with him through the large opening. The ceiling was at ten more meters above him, which basically made it unreachable, and the rest of the tunnel didn't feature enough handholds that could make him reach that hole.

'I can't go back from there,' Khan quickly concluded as he lowered his head to check that the pile of soil didn't betray his feet.

Nevertheless, a few black figures entered his vision when he glanced at his uncovered waist. Khan didn't notice them before because he had regained his vision only when his eyes were already on the environment, but it became impossible to miss them now.

Khan saw a series of worm-like creatures attached at the lower side of his waist. His hands shot before he could even consider his situation, and sharp pain spread through his body when he forced them to separate from his skin.

Each worm left behind a circular bleeding wound. Those creatures turned out to be leeches, and Khan didn't hesitate to remove all of them. They felt rough and dry when he touched their soft bodies, and a simple squeeze was enough to squash them to death.

Many circular bleeding wounds appeared on Khan's waist after the process was over, but he didn't feel satisfied yet. His hand went on his back, where he found a few more leeches attached to its lower part. His shoulders and upper part seemed clear, but he still checked them multiple times since his eyes couldn't reach those spots.

His search didn't end there. Khan checked his face, neck, and armpits, but he found other leeches only when he went over his legs. Multiple leeches were sucking his blood there, and he crushed them in an instant.

Khan felt dizzy after he confirmed to have killed all the leeches on him. The circular wounds continued to release blood that accumulated on the pile of ground under him and worsen his condition. Still, a peculiar scene appeared in his vision before he could take care of himself.

Multiple leeches came out of the terrain under him and started to suck the blood that had tainted it. Khan immediately understood how those creatures had managed to enter his clothes so easily. He had found their natural habitat.

Khan suppressed the urge to jump out of the pile of soil and took careful steps to reach the rocky floor under him. That surface appeared stable and firm. It even felt able to endure his kicks, but he didn't test that idea.

More leeches continued to come out of the pile of terrain and surround the wet patches created by Khan's blood. They appeared hungry but also weak. Moreover, their movements were slow once they came out of the ground.

Those weak creatures couldn't be the reason behind that messy underground structure. Yet, Khan could guess that a mutated specimen might be strong enough to pierce the terrain if the transformation went in the right direction. The only issue to that idea was the sheer size of the damage suffered by the underground world. He didn't know if a single monster had enough time to dig so much.

'Is there more than one monster?' Khan wondered as vague ideas appeared in his mind.

Khan's calculation used the worldwide crisis to determine the eventual appearance of the leech monster. Those few weeks didn't seem enough to create that deep underground structure, but he didn't dare to make too many assumptions. He knew how the mutations worked, but Nitis' fauna wasn't part of his expertise.

His mind suddenly spun as his dizziness intensified. Khan had to support himself to the rocky wall until his condition forced him to sit down. He didn't like to be so close to the pile of soil and the leeches, but he needed to meditate quite desperately.

Khan closed his eyes and led his mana flow throughout his body. Something strange immediately appeared while he kept track of the movements of that energy. He saw a foreign substance filling his circular wounds and forcing them to remain open.

Khan had to wash those spots with his mana a few times before his body expelled the foreign substance. His wounds could finally start to close at that point, and his condition immediately started to improve.

A chilling scene unfolded in his vision when he opened his eyes. Khan looked at the pile of terrain as soon as he came out of his meditative state, but the rocky ground attracted his attention. The leeches were crawling toward him, and some had even almost reached his knee.

Khan immediately stood up and started to stomp on those creatures. He killed all of them, and a faint annoyance filled his mind once he was done. Squashing the leeches didn't help him at all. He was still stuck inside that dark tunnel.

'These things are troublesome,' Khan cursed in his mind.

The leeches were weak, but they seemed able to hide from Khan's senses. His sensitivity to mana was useless against those opponents, and his agility also appeared unable to bring him out.

The memories of his fall reappeared in his vision as Khan thought about his situation. A large chunk of the region had shattered. Snow could surely fly down the hole and pick him up. Yet, he had to reach a spot where the Aduns could find him.

Moreover, Khan had another issue to handle. He didn't fall on his own. The desire to find Liiza was already filling his mind, but he managed to spare some thoughts for Doku, Azni, and the other

Niqols. Except for Zaliha, they had all treated him as one of them. That alone said a lot about their character.

Khan tried to recall the direction of his fall before picking a path. The tunnel stretched on two sides, but he couldn't forget where the river of soil had brought Liiza. He quickly turned to his left and advanced slowly, making sure to check the stability of the ground in front of him and dodge holes.

The area was completely silent. Only the faint noise of ground falling somewhere that Khan couldn't see reached his ears.

Khan moved forward, paying extra attention to every unstable spot that he found. Everything appeared lifeless around him, but the tunnel didn't hesitate to prove him wrong.

A piece of frail ground at his side burst to release multiple leeches while he walked past it. Khan had already noticed that spot, but that sudden event took him by surprise. Luckily for him, he wasn't the type to freeze in those situations.

A kick reached the leeches before they could reach his face, and a loud noise followed the perfect execution of the technique. His sole was big enough to touch all of those creatures, but only some of them suffered a direct hit. However, the energy released during the ability made all of them explode.

That was Khan's first real attack against a living being after the improvement of his proficiency level. The effects of his kick ended up being incredible. The blow wasn't only faster and smoother. It even carried a power that he had never managed to express before.

The tremors generated by his perfect execution had been enough to squash the leeches, and Khan could only rejoice at that sight. He had been initially worried that his martial art might not suit those creatures, but those thoughts disappeared now.

That strange event happened two more times before the tunnel enlarged into a vast underground area that featured an actual river that flowed near a rocky wall. Dark waters filled its violent currents, but something else quickly attracted Khan's attention.

Khan saw patches of blood on the ground on the opposite side of the river. Bloody marks with the shape of a hand also tainted the rocky wall next to them. Those traces were even fresh, and Khan didn't hesitate to follow them.

The marks led Khan in front of a cavity connected to that large area. A pair of white lights appeared at the bottom of the cave when he crossed its entrance, but disappointment filled his mind at that point. He could immediately understand that those eyes didn't belong to his girlfriend.

"Khan!" Azni exclaimed as she suppressed a faint lament. "Help me out. I can't reach all of them."

Azni's condition became clear when Khan reached her. The girl had forsaken her robe. She was in her pants and sports bra, and many bleeding circular injuries filled her dark-blue skin. Still, she wasn't flexible enough to reach three leeches that had attached themselves to the center of her back.

Khan held Azni from her shoulder and ripped the leeches while squashing them in his grasp. The girl groaned and made sure to adjust her bra since the creatures had pulled away part of it, but she quickly thanked Khan afterward.

"Let me check your back now," Azni exclaimed as she grabbed Khan's shoulder.

"It should be fine," Khan explained while turning to show his back. "I checked many times before."

"But it's full of cuts!" Azni shouted.

"The fall wasn't gentle for me," Khan voiced a faint laugh, but a third presence suddenly appeared in the range of his senses.

Khan turned his head toward the entrance while Azni continued to check his back. Liiza's figure soon appeared in front of the cave, but her complexion appeared far from fine. She was pale, and her torn robe had turned dark-red after the fall and the blood loss.

"Liiza!" Azni exclaimed in a worried tone when she noticed her condition, but Khan's eyes widened when he saw the intense emotions running through Liiza's confused gaze.

Anger flashed on Liiza's face. Everything felt vague in her vision, but she could recognize Azni clung to Khan's bare back. She was almost naked too, and a misunderstanding formed in her confused mind.

That emotion made her focus long enough to point her hand at Azni and gather her mana, but Khan didn't let that sudden event surprise him. He had already understood that something was off, so he shot forward and bent her arm upward.

A shard of ice shot out of Liiza's fingers and stabbed the ceiling. The rocks couldn't even try to stop that attack. The areas around the pierced spot even started to freeze.

Azni's eyes widened in fear before anger filled her expression and her loud voice filled the cave. "[What are you even doing?! You could have killed me]!"

However, confusion soon made its way among her anger as Azni continued to inspect that scene. She didn't initially find anything wrong with Khan's rapid reaction, but something started to fall off.

Liiza didn't say anything when Khan grabbed her forearm and bent it toward the ceiling. Her anger even vanished from her face after Khan started explaining the situation through words whispered softly.

Khan sounded as if he were justifying the previous scene, and Liiza kept bending her head toward his chest before retracting it whenever she managed to focus.

Azni couldn't help but notice how they appeared completely at ease in that situation. A strange idea slowly appeared in her mind when she thought about her two companions, and disbelief slowly appeared on her face.

Azni didn't know Liiza's habits, but she had been at the center of the incident that had granted an Adun to a human for the first time in history. That human ended up sneaking out of the parties early even, and Doku had told her how he had found the other recruits complaining about Khan's constant absence at night.

"No way," Azni whispered as she jumped happily toward the two and started inspecting their faces.

Azni appeared as the happiest Niqols in the world, and giggles even escaped her mouth when she saw the couple diverting their gazes at the same time.

"Doku did tell me about the hickey," Azni exclaimed in a playful tone. "I remember thinking about it yesterday when he spoke about your fight."

A slight tremor ran through Liiza, and Khan sensed it from the hand gripping her forearm. They had diverted their gazes. Khan looked at the ground behind her shoulder, and Liiza focused on the rocky wall to his right side, but both of them felt unable to separate in that tense situation.

"I mean, I would have known if you were dating a Niqols," Azni continued as she jumped around the couple to try to enter in their visions. "That's why I was certain you were with a human. I just chose not to think too much about yesterday's stuff because of the mission, but I definitely felt that something was off!"

Khan's thoughts ran at full speed to find a way out of that situation. The entirety of his experience regarding pretenses and lies flowed into his mind and created multiple possible solutions. Still, they were nothing more than gambles, and those with the highest chance to succeed required Liiza's help.

Liiza's condition was completely off. She was pale, and pale-red blood had tainted her torn robe. She had suffered a lot during the fall, and the urge to take care of her grew stronger in Khan's mind as her ragged breath continued to resound through the cave.

Waiting hurt Khan. He could sense his girlfriend begging for his help whenever her focus wavered. She instinctively bent toward him when her confusion made her unable to think clearly, but she always managed to straighten her head before her gestures became too blatant.

For the first time in his life, Khan found himself reflecting on how far he was willing to go to keep his relationship safe, and dark thoughts inevitably filled his mind. His feelings for Liiza were intense and irrational. He wanted to stay with her even if it hurt. He desired to hold her in his arms even if he had to spill blood.

Of course, those were only general thoughts created by Khan's cracked personality. He could imagine himself killing someone to protect Liiza, but that didn't involve proper executions, and it surely didn't include the current situation.

Azni was a cheerful person who could look at Khan without minding the differences between their species. She had always treated him properly, and even her current realization didn't trigger any negative emotion inside her. She appeared pretty happy about the whole matter.

"Azni," Khan eventually uttered in a tone that didn't reveal the slightest emotion. "We are friends, right?"

"What are you even saying?" Azni laughed.

The girl had failed to understand how serious Khan was about the matter, but he made sure to clarify his position with his next statement. "I need you to answer honestly. Please."

Khan sounded as if he were begging her, and Liiza couldn't help but move her gaze back on his serious face. Their eyes didn't meet, but she remained in a daze at the sight of his expression. He was suppressing his emotions almost flawlessly, but he couldn't hide his intense resolve, not from her at least.

Liiza raised her free arm to reach for Khan's face, but she retracted her stretched fingers when she recalled where they were. Her mind felt dizzy, and her vision went dark from time to time, but the familiar warmth spreading from her forearm was keeping her awake.

It felt unfair to be unable to touch her boyfriend. Liiza only wanted to ease Khan's tense face with soft caresses. Her desire was innocent and pure, but the world added complexity to that emotion that she couldn't completely endure in her condition.

Liiza's tired eyes eventually turned toward Azni before a weak whisper came out of her mouth. "Please."

Liiza didn't care about Azni's answer, or, rather, she wasn't in the condition to mind the entirety of that situation. She only wanted to understand whether she could let go of her self-restraint or not.

Azni didn't initially understand how serious the matter was, but she began to think about the entirety of the situation when the couple's stern gazes fell on her. However, she couldn't consider the intricacy of the politics behind her two companions during her reasoning.

"I don't get it," Azni confessed as her smile disappeared and she took a step back. "What's the matter? You are scaring me."

Liiza had just tried to stab her with an ice-shard, and Khan had only emotionless eyes for her in that situation. Azni started to feel scared. Two of the strongest members of her group were in front of her, and they didn't show nice expressions.

Azni's honest reaction made Khan regret his previous coldness. That scene allowed him to understand her true nature, and that thought left a disgusting feeling inside his mouth. The Niqols was only a young girl excited to learn about juicy gossips.

'What am I even doing?' Khan cursed in his mind as Lieutenant Dyester's teachings resounded in his mind.

Azni was a friend, and she was even one of the Niqols who openly admitted that they had been too hard on Liiza. She was cheerful, open about her feelings, and a good companion in battle, but Khan's first instinct was to consider her as a potential enemy.

That wasn't a reaction caused by his intense feelings for Liiza. His thoughts came from the dark sides of his personality that his mind harbored. Khan knew that he couldn't get rid of those dark aspects of his character, and he didn't even want to due to their evident utility. Yet, Azni didn't deserve them.

Khan abandoned his paranoia and focused on what was truly important. He pulled Liiza closer and wrapped his arm around her waist while laying the forearm in his grasp on his neck.

Liiza's eyes widened at that sudden action, and she even tried to push Khan back, but he kissed her forehead and whispered sweet words that made her melt in his arms. Liiza gave up trying to control that situation and left everything to her boyfriend while she bathed in his warmth.

"I'm sorry," Khan announced while accompanying Liiza next to the rocky wall and helping her sit between his legs. "Please, help me out. I'll explain everything once she is stable."

Azni noticed the stark change of tone of the conversation. Khan only seemed worried about Liiza now. Even his eyes appeared devoid of any hidden intent when he fixed them on his friend.

Azni didn't think twice to crouch toward Liiza and help Khan removing her clothes to check her injuries. She had a few deep bleeding wounds on her right side and lower back, and a few leeches even hid in the insides of her sports bra.

Azni almost didn't have to do anything. She limited herself to keep Liiza still whenever Khan acted. He always moved before her and without showing any hesitation.

Khan tore the lower part of his robe apart whenever he needed to cover Liiza's bleeding injuries. He didn't even show any discomfort or awkwardness in inspecting the insides of her sports bra and pants. Azni never had the chance to complain about his actions either because the deep affection revealed by his eyes made her speechless.

Azni had only suspected something before, but those scenes confirmed her ideas. Khan and Liiza were close, and their relationship had even gone quite far since he didn't feel awkward in checking her intimate parts while she was unconscious.

The scene even made Azni blush at times. She couldn't help but find the sleepy Liiza snuggling closer on Khan's chest extremely cute. The affection he showed with his soft caresses that didn't hinder his inspection also intensified the romantic vibe radiated by that couple. Azni found it so lovely that she started to envy them.

"Doku never treats me like that," Azni complained before covering her mouth in surprise.

Azni didn't want to say those words. They had come out of her mouth on their own after the romantic aura radiated by the couple affected her. Khan and Liiza appeared completely harmless and at peace when they were in each other's arms, and those feelings had spread to Azni.

"What else can I do?" Khan asked while wrapping his arms around Liiza.

Liiza had fallen asleep on his chest after the inspection ended. Patches of his robe covered her injuries, and she didn't have leeches attached to her body anymore. Khan believed that she only needed to rest now, but he didn't know if Azni could reveal something that he still ignored about the Niqols.

"She only has to rest," Azni explained as a warm smile appeared on her face. "We don't need to meditate like the humans. Mana flows naturally inside our bodies, and it grows together with us. She'll be fine after a few hours of sleep."

Khan nodded as his worried gaze fell on the beauty lying on his chest. He did his best to bend his back and adjust his sitting position to make Liiza comfortable, and Azni didn't miss all the faint careful moves he performed to avoid waking her up.

"You must really care about her," Azni announced without covering his mouth afterward.

The Niqols followed her line with a cute giggle, and Khan couldn't help but sigh. Shame spread through his mind when he recalled his previous thoughts. He hated himself for even considering such an innocent girl as a potential threat.

"I do," Khan revealed while caressing the side of Liiza's head and making her voice a cute groan. "She saved me."

Azni would normally take similar words like an exaggeration caused by intense emotions, but that didn't seem to be the case with Khan. The azure scar on his chest was a constant reminder of his pain, and the loving gaze toward his girlfriend showed how serious he was about his words.

Azni felt the need to giggle again, but she made sure to suppress that reaction to focus on her priorities. She had to learn everything about that couple before being overwhelmed by their cuteness.

"So," Azni smirked as her playful tone returned and she sat next to Khan, "Someone promised that he would explain everything."

"That someone must be the best liar on Nitis," Khan sighed and shook his head, but a laugh escaped his mouth when he saw Azni's frown.

"Sorry, it feels too nice to stop pretending," Khan laughed. "You have no idea for how long I wished to be like this in the open."

Khan heaved a relaxed sigh as he abandoned every pretense. It felt intoxicating to be himself. A calm smile appeared on his face as he adjusted Liiza on his chest and thought about what he could reveal to Azni. He had to avoid most of the intimate parts, and an initial statement also felt necessary before his story began.

"Look, you seem nice," Khan declared without turning toward Azni, "But Liiza comes before anyone else in my mind, and I can't risk having people knowing about us. Are we clear?"

A tinge of his coldness seeped inside his voice at the end of the line. Khan was threatening Azni, but the girl didn't care about it when he put it into those words. His seriousness and worry about Liiza even made him more attractive in her eyes.

"Not even Doku?" Azni asked.

"I trust Doku," Khan explained, "But I can't add variables. You got lucky enough to deserve to hear our story, but no one else can know. Please, make it easy for me."

Azni pouted, but Khan's seriousness had the best of her again. Moreover, she was too curious to give up on that chance. The juiciest gossip in the entire academy was right in front of her, and she couldn't hold back but promise to keep everything for herself.

"Good," Khan exclaimed before shooting a warm smile toward the beauty sleeping in his arms. "I guess I should start from the beginning when the Ugu attacked me due to my similarities with the Nak...."

## Chapter 145 - Exploration

Liiza woke up with the sound of faint laughs and teases ringing in her ears. The warmth coming from Khan's embrace made her feel confused in front of the images that appeared in her vision when she opened her eyes. His bare chest suited those sensations, but Azni's smiling face made her tense up and try to snap back on her feet.

"It's fine!" Khan promptly shouted while tightening his embrace to keep her on him.

The fear coming from others learning about her relationship made Liiza struggle to escape Khan's embrace, but she started to calm down when one of his hands ended up on the back of her head.

Liiza kept her palms pointed on Khan's chest as her breathing slowed down, but her confusion didn't vanish. She could still see herself in her boyfriend's embrace while someone else stared at them.

"She had understood about us on her own," Khan continued through whispers alternated with kisses at the top of her head. "I explained everything while you were resting."

"Resting?" Liiza asked in a sleepy voice before recalling her condition.

Liiza noticed how she was wearing only her pants and sports bra. A few pieces of Khan's robe acted as bandages for her deepest injuries, and some circular marks still appeared on her dark-blue skin due to the troublesome effects of the leeches' bite.

"Did you go through my underwear?" Liiza asked while adjusting her sports bra.

"You had leeches in strange places," Khan explained as a warm smile appeared on his face.

Liiza was clearly better. Her face had regained its usual dark shades, and she appeared focused on her surroundings. The confusion that had afflicted her before had vanished after her short one-hour nap.

"So," Liiza uttered while shooting a glance toward Azni, "Does she know?"

"I know about you two," Azni replied while covering her mouth to suppress her giggles.

"Does she know that we are together?" Liiza repeated while turning toward Khan

"I left out many details," Khan revealed, "But she knows."

"Great!" Liiza exclaimed before turning inside Khan's embrace to face him.

Liiza spread her legs before sitting on Khan's lap and taking his neck into her arms. An eager smile had appeared on her face, and Khan didn't hesitate to satisfy her desire.

Azni's eyes widened when she saw Khan and Liiza kissing right in front of her. She even gave voice to a high-pitched gasp, but she quickly suppressed it to let that scene continue.

Khan and Liiza entered a world of their own when their gazes met. Everything around them disappeared now that they could enjoy each other's company. They had both felt worried about their partner during the fall, so they used that chance to replace those heavy emotions with better ones.

Azni slowly fell into a daze. She didn't want to stare too much about those intimate moments, but the unusual expressions that the couple revealed left her astonished.

Khan showed a liveliness that he had never revealed among the other Niqols. Azni had never seen him so relaxed and happy. His chuckles and whispers were sweet sounds that made his partner blush and smile whenever they reached her ears.

Liiza's behavior was even more astonishing. Azni had basically never seen the girl smile inside the academy, and her status as an outcast made it even harder to see her wear something different than a cold face.

However, that cold and detached Niqols didn't exist when Khan hugged her. Liiza shot captivating smiles and meaningful glances as her hands caressed Khan's face and bare chest. She even bit her lower lip when the kisses became too intense.

"She is still staring," Liiza whispered before diving into Khan's neck and chuckling.

"Can you blame her?" Khan teased. "I must look great."

"I'll make sure to aim at you the next time," Liiza threatened while biting the base of Khan's neck.

"You'll leave a sign again," Khan complained. "Though you were so cute before. Were you worried that I was cheating on you?"

"Shut up," Liiza said through her bite. "I need to brand you to keep the other girls away."

"How am I even going to justify a hickey here?" Khan scoffed without stopping her partner from playing with his neck.

"Just blame the leeches," Liiza groaned.

"The leeches' bites go deeper," Khan laughed before immersing his face in Liiza's hair to reach her ear, "And they definitely don't look like this."

Liiza left Khan's neck and fixed her gaze on her partner's eyes. She appeared ready to jump on him, but she managed to hold back due to the troublesome situation.

Azni had initially thought that Khan and Liiza were only a passionate couple, but those intense stares and gestures made her change her mind. She obviously knew about the rare compatibility between two different mana, but the Niqols taught it as if it were one of those unreasonable love stories with fated partners. Yet, she felt that the couple in front of her fit that state.

"Couldn't this happen during a formal event?" Liiza complained through an exasperated sigh. "We actually have to do important things now."

"Eight of us have fallen in the underground world," Azni announced now that the conversation had reached topics that she could join. "We must find the others and a way out of here."

"We really must," Liiza repeated in an annoyed tone before leaving a deep kiss on Khan's lips.

Liiza stood up at that point, and she took Khan's hand to make him imitate her. Azni also went back on her feet, and the romantic atmosphere slowly vanished as everyone focused on their situation.

The main issue there was the lack of a way out. Azni and the others would leave the matter in the hands of their superiors otherwise. The unknown nature of the leeches made the eight members of the group not enough to face that threat. Still, they were stuck in the underground world now, so gathering everyone sounded like the best option.

"Remember, not a word with the others," Khan reminded Azni before taking Liiza into his arms and kissing her again.

Azni giggled and nodded, but her expression showed disappointment when she saw how Khan and Liiza behaved outside of the cave. Both wore cold faces and stopped exchanging gazes as they inspected the large area with the river.

The sudden change in their behavior made Azni feel as if the previous scenes had been nothing more than a dream. She struggled to imagine Liiza and Khan as happy as before when she inspected their current expressions.

Azni kept her disappointment for herself since the mission came before her desire for gossips. The three even had to find the backpacks since she had lost hers during the fall.

The travel through the underground structure resumed in silence. Only a few whispers resounded among Khan and the two girls when branches that led in different parts of the lair appeared in their vision.

Azni, Khan, and Liiza decided to remain inside the large areas since they gave them an advantage over the leeches hiding inside the soft spots. Having some space allowed them to dodge sudden attacks without risking hitting the walls.

The group didn't bother speaking about the situation because it was impossible to gain a clear idea of the threat even after they fell inside the lair. Only a study of the actual cause behind that underground structure could reveal something, but the tunnels continued to offer them nothing more than leeches.

The dull and slow march gained some meaning once the group found footsteps stretching toward one of the narrow cavities to their right. The river had long since disappeared, and only rocky walls filled with holes and soft spots surrounded them. Dangers would surely accompany those tracks, but the trio didn't hesitate to proceed ahead.

Khan could see perfectly with the two Niqols a few steps behind him. Their glowing eyes were like electric torches in that almost complete darkness. The narrow cavity unfolded in his vision in its entirety after the group took a single step inside it, and he could immediately see an unusual pile of dirt accumulated in the distant corner.

That cave was small, and its entrance allowed only two grown-up men to pass at the same time. Khan had to glare at Liiza a few times before she stopped fighting him for the spot in front of the group, but the inspection proceeded smoothly afterward.

Khan could study the small area and confirm that it didn't have threats that he could sense. That didn't say anything about the leeches, but he didn't fear them too much. His speed and his new proficiency level made him quite good against those frail opponents, and his companions were there to help if the situation even became dangerous.

Multiple black spots jumped out of the pile of dirt once Khan entered its range, but he almost expected that to happen after witnessing the same event multiple times throughout the exploration. Many leeches tried to reach him with their threatening mouths, but his kicks arrived before them.

The leeches exploded mid-air as Khan delivered three fast kicks and took another step toward the pile of dirt. More of those creatures came out, but he killed them quickly before repeating the process until he was in front of the actual terrain.

The tracks led there, so Khan didn't hesitate to kick away part of the soil to dig through the insides of the pile, and a Niqols' foot eventually appeared in his vision. Liiza and Azni couldn't miss that detail, and their expressions inevitably darkened, but Khan didn't let that scene stop his actions.

Khan carefully bent forward and stopped multiple times to make sure that no leeches jumped at him. Still, the soil seemed safe now, so he could grab the Niqols' foot and pull that body from the pile. The figure that unfolded in his eyes immediately made him think about Elbek, but a peculiar detail made him forget about the alien altogether.

Khan had only managed to pull half of the Niqols' body out of the dirt before a disgusting scene filled his vision. He saw the familiar rough skin of the leeches covering the alien's waist, but that feature didn't belong to multiple Tainted animals. Instead, it came from a single creature that was trying to eat Elbek.

The biggest leech that Khan had ever seen was sucking Elbek's body inside its sharp mouth. The creature was almost two meters long and thirty centimeters large, but its figure stretched to let the Niqols pass through its cavity.

The Tainted animal ignored Khan and focused on sucking the boy deeper inside its body, and that process continued even after he kicked the lower part of its rough figure. He was trying to make the creature let go of Elbek, and the attack seemed to work since the boy's body slowly came out of the sharp mouth.

Khan continued to stomp his foot on the creature until the entirety of Elbek's body left the sharp mouth. He understood that nothing could help the boy at that point. The giant leech had made the skin of the corpse's upper part melt.

#### Chapter 146 - Deeper

The giant leech didn't do anything after Elbek's corpse left its mouth. It tried to crawl toward its prey, but it seemed to have problems moving its body in its stretched state.

Khan inspected the leech for a few seconds and confirmed that it wouldn't attack before moving his attention to the corpse. He had known Elbek for a mere week, so his death didn't affect him too much. Yet, the event still swept his mind with a wave of sadness that he couldn't suppress.

The two girls experienced stronger feelings at that scene. Liiza was relatively better off since she didn't have close relationships with her peers. However, she had known most of the students in the academy for years due to her mother's unique role in the Niqols' society, and she couldn't help but take Khan's hand while her eyes remained on the corpse.

Instead, Azni's world turned upside-down. She had shared countless parties with Elbek, and the boy had even attended many lessons with her.

The Niqols' way of life often put students in front of dangers since the elders made them handle monsters and similar threats. However, the death of a friend remained a tough event to endure. Azni had it even worse since Elbek was her first companion lost in a mission.

The leech screeched as its mouth started to shrink, but Khan promptly slammed his foot at the center of its body. The creature voiced a high-pitched painful cry, but it didn't turn its attention away from its prey. It even tried to rely on its elastic body to reach it, but Khan kept it still.

The cave was so silent that Khan didn't miss Liiza's gulp. He allowed himself to ignore his pretense at that point. He pulled his girlfriend close and wrapped his free arm around her while making sure to caress her back.

Khan wasn't a stranger to death. He had accepted it during the Second Impact, and Istrone's crisis had made him grow used to it. Elbek's corpse only managed to generate sadness inside him, but it didn't stop his mind from gathering information.

Elbek's corpse didn't show any visible deadly injury except for the melted skin. Some strands of white hair and a few patches of skin were still in place and revealed his identity, but Khan didn't manage to find anything that could have caused his death before the arrival of the big leech. Turning the body on the other side with his free leg only confirmed that the creature had killed him.

'We have been lucky,' Khan concluded in his mind after his inspection.

Elbek couldn't be weak since he had earned a spot in that mission. He was still in the first year, but the Niqols didn't use that to describe a student's battle prowess.

The lack of evident injuries confirmed that the fall didn't kill Elbek. The big leech had probably taken the Niqols by surprise while the rivers of ground submerged him. Even Khan would have died in those conditions, so he couldn't help but consider himself lucky to have met only the small versions.

His embrace tightened when those conclusions reached his mind. Liiza had also been lucky, and he couldn't help but feel grateful about that. The girl had continued to stare at the corpse even after Khan had taken her into her arms. Still, she turned her worried gaze toward him when she felt his reaction.

Khan limited himself to move his hand on the back of Liiza's head and pull her even closer. He immersed his face in her long white hair and bathed in her scent. Feeling happy about that outcome wasn't good, but he didn't care. He felt glad that the big leech found Elbek instead of her.

A sob forced the couple to turn toward Azni. Tears had started to fall from the girl's eyes as they remained fixed on the corpse. The scene generated another wave of sadness inside Khan, but he didn't know what to do to console her.

Surprisingly, Liiza made the first move. She left a kiss on Khan's bare shoulder before gently pushing him away and taking Azni's hands into hers. The latter sobbed again when their fingers touched, and she felt unable to oppose Liiza pulling her into her chest.

Liiza was an outcast, but she still knew how to behave in those situations. Also, she could understand Azni's pain, even if it weren't as intense for her.

Khan sighed and placed a hand on Azni's shoulder to express his emotional support. His other hand went on Liiza's head, and she turned to show a complicated expression to him.

Azni continued to cry while Liiza held her. Meanwhile, the latter continued to stare at Khan. No one knew what to do in that situation, but Khan had more experience, so he eventually decided to divert his attention from that sad moment.

The big leech had almost regained its original form during those minutes. It had even shown some agility while stretching its elastic body toward the partially melted Elbek. Its abilities were coming back, but Khan wouldn't let it live that long.

Khan left the two Niqols and pointed the entirety of his weight on the foot keeping the leech still. His other leg bent until his knee touched his chest before unleashing the accumulated power downward.

His attack created a foot-shaped hole that pierced both sides of the leech's mouth. Khan didn't know how tough a creature of that size was, but he saw that it continued to move, so he didn't hesitate to repeat his technique.

The leech stopped moving when Khan removed a quarter of its body. Azni trembled every time an attack landed on the ground, but she didn't say anything. Liiza only held her tightly to make her forget about that event.

Khan's attention moved toward the pile of soil at that point. He checked the hole in the ceiling standing right above it to make sure that no big leech tried to ambush him and moved forward after confirming the absence of threats.

Using his hands to dig through the soil was too dangerous, so Khan performed light kicks that dismembered the pile little by little. A few small leeches reappeared when he reached its deepest parts, but taking care of them while his leg was already in the air was far too easy.

His action wasn't meaningless, and his eyes lit up when he found what he was looking for. A torn backpack full of leeches appeared in his eyes when he reached the other side of the pile, and he didn't hesitate to grab it while killing all the creatures he found.

'Hopefully we can retrieve another one,' Khan thought while emptying the backpack's contents to take care of the remaining leeches.

Azni ended up in that part of the underground structure without her backpack, so it had probably remained above the rocky ceiling that prevented the group from using their Aduns to leave. The trio could only hope to find another one while looking for the other Niqols.

A few leeches came out when Khan emptied the backpack. They ate the pinkish flowers even if their properties made them sleepy and slow. Those simple creatures didn't seem to care about the nature of their food as long as it contained mana.

Khan squashed the leeches quickly and fixed the backpack as best as he could. The creatures had filled it with holes, but Khan had lived in the Slums. He knew how to patch it up through special knots that inevitably diminished its capacity.

Khan proceeded to put the flowers back into the backpack after checking that the knots held strong, and two pairs of hands suddenly joined him. Liiza showed a sad smile when he gazed at her, but Azni kept her eyes fixed on the ground to focus on the task. A few tears still fell from her face, but she was able to suppress her sobs now.

Khan wanted to give the backpack to Liiza after the group finished filling it, but Azni took it without giving any explanation. Her determined face prevented her companions from complaining, so the three left the cave without glancing at the corpse again. The ceiling was even too high there, so none of them dared to suggest climbing out of that hole.

The march through the underground area resumed, but the atmosphere among the group was far heavier than before. Elbek's death had completely changed their mood, and no one dared to speak even if they had discovered a crucial detail of that lair.

The big leech was a monster, and Khan had no doubts about it. The creature was identical to its smaller version. The mutation had only affected its size.

That discovery led to positive and negative conclusions. Khan could confirm that the mutations weren't too scary. A mere change in size was something that he could handle without help. He had even confirmed that his kicks could pierce the leech from side to side.

Still, that weakness led to his negative conclusions. After all, the big leech was too small to cause that mess in the underground world. It didn't make sense for only one of them to create such an intricate and deep structure. There had to be more monsters, and that hinted at the presence of different mutations.

It was almost impossible for mana to cause identical mutations on two different beings. The pack of leeches had probably fed on the same animals and plants, but they remained separated beings. Khan couldn't use the big leech to predict what abilities the other monsters had developed, but he felt relatively sure that all of them would feature increased size.

The mutations had to be different, but they could share similar effects at their base, especially in a pack that had lived in the same environment and fed on the same things. Moreover, the width of the underground structure forced Khan to think that the other monsters had to be big enough to dig something so vast. It almost felt necessary when he thought about it.

The short meetings with small leeches resumed. Those creatures seemed to occupy every soft spot of the underground structure, and the group learnt to recognize them as their walk continued. It felt strange that they failed to encounter other students on their path, but everything became clear when the ceiling above them stopped featuring holes.

Khan had kept track of his movements, and the two Niqols also had a great sense of direction. They could calculate that they had long since circled the areas beneath the flowery regions. The disappearance of holes in the ceiling showed that the leeches didn't dig those parts.

"Maybe they ended up on the other side," Liiza suggested after Khan stopped for the fifth time to inspect the area.

"I don't know how smart it is to continue on this path," Khan revealed. "We know that most of the previous region has crumbled, but we don't know anything about the others. I'd avoid testing their stability."

The group didn't know how much of the land had crumbled after the earthquake. Khan didn't want to go on the regions on the other side of the flowery area only to cause another mess with his noise. He would rather find a way toward the surface in zones that had already stabilized after falling apart.

However, the previous tunnel didn't show any viable way toward the surface. Khan's group didn't explore many cavities, and they had even avoided reaching the end of the path in the opposite direction, but they hesitated to take one of those ways.

The opposite direction led toward the regions that didn't feature cracks on their surface. Khan had avoided them because he wanted to find Liiza, but they also had fewer chances of featuring paths that could lead outside of the underground area.

Also, finding tunnels that went upward didn't necessarily mean a connection to the surface since those areas could lead to the intact regions. The highest chances of the group were on the already crumbled lands, but that meant venturing through the narrow cracks or directly picking paths that went downward.

"We should go back," Azni broke her silence while Khan and Liiza thought about their issue. "The others would have left signs of their passage on the walls. They must be inside one of the passages that we ignored or...."

Azni didn't need to say that last word. The others' death could explain the lack of tracks or signals left by the others, but she wasn't ready to say that yet, not so soon after confirming Elbek's death.

Khan made a few calculations in his mind again. The underground currents might have led the students far away, but not that far. His group had covered a reasonable distance, so it made sense for the other Niqols to be at their sides rather than forward. A few hours had passed since the fall even. Someone was bound to be awake as long as the leeches didn't kill all of them.

A tedious and slow search started after the group decided to turn. Azni used some petals to leave pink marks on the dark walls whenever Khan explored the caves and passages next to them. Most of them were nothing more than small cavities, but some stretched for a few hundreds of meters before ending into rocky barriers.

Still, the group eventually found a tunnel that led somewhere. The only problem was that it did that through a hole on the floor. Khan wanted to avoid going even deeper but catching a glimpse of a faint figure made him change his mind.

Khan saw a dead big leech on the floor past the floor. The creature seemed almost identical to the monster that had killed Elbek. The only difference was in the black hair growing out of the edges of its mouth.

#### Chapter 147 - Reunion

The sight of the different mutations didn't surprise Khan. His focus remained on the fact that the big leech was dead and didn't show external injuries. Its murky dark blood had flowed out of its mouth, which hinted at the presence of internal damage.

Those signs made Khan almost certain that a Niqols had killed the monster. The absence of external injuries matched the aliens' fighting style, and he couldn't find other explanations for its death in that unique environment. Of course, stronger predators could exist, but that felt unlikely due to how crowded the underground area was with leeches.

Descending through the hole felt inevitable now, but Khan didn't want to get down without ensuring a path back to the previous area. The current tunnel had yet to show passages to the surface, but the group didn't explore all of it. Moreover, keeping an escape path open was never a bad option.

Khan showed a complicated expression when he turned toward the two girls. They were already wearing only their underwear, and he wasn't better off. The group lacked the materials needed to build a rope, and the backpack alone could only cover one or two meters of the five that separated the hole from the floor under it.

Khan could get creative to stretch the length covered by the backpack once he tore it apart to create a rope, but that would affect its durability. That weakness wasn't ideal when he had to jump to reach it, but he could only add his torn clothes now.

"Stay here for a bit," Khan ordered while diverting his gaze. "I'm going to get something to make a rope."

Khan left before the girls could understand or complain about his decision. He literally sprinted toward the entrance of the passage and ran toward the narrow cavity that contained Elbek's corpse.

It took Khan less than ten minutes to reach that area. A few leeches were sucking the stale blood from the Niqols' corpse, but he didn't disturb them. Elbek had lost most of his robe after the fall and the monster's melting saliva, but its lower part was still relatively intact. His underwear was also in a good state, and Khan cursed in his mind when he seized them.

It was time for Liiza to see one of Khan's ugly sides. His life in the Slums and Istrone's crisis had made him unable to forsake resources that could help him survive. Yet, he didn't know if his girlfriend could see past his unpleasant act and evaluate it with a cynical mind.

Khan sprinted back to the path where he had left the two Niqols, but he struggled to continue at his fastest pace when the rocky entrance drew near. His mind even allowed him to sense the two girls, and that only slowed down his steps.

The hesitation eventually lost to the gravity of the situation. Khan forced himself to step inside the cave while carrying Elbek's torn clothes in his hands.

The two Niqols had prepared themselves to fight when they heard the faint steps resounding in the tunnel, but they relaxed when they saw Khan crossing the entrance. Yet, their expressions quickly darkened when they noticed the clothes in his hands. Their reaction only worsened at the sight of the black underwear on top of the white fabric.

Khan didn't stay still under their unclear gazes. He reached the two girls and crouched before starting to work with Elbek's clothes. He even removed the few rags that still covered his underwear during the process, and a seemingly firm rope eventually took form.

Khan's hands moved quickly but precisely. He didn't want to remain under the girls' judging eyes longer than necessary, but he couldn't fail to build a decent rope either. Still, a cold sensation suddenly spread from his bare shoulder, and Khan almost jumped back on his feet due to that unexpected event.

His surprise transformed into warmth when he noticed that Liiza had crouched and had placed her hand on his shoulder. She was even wearing an understanding smile to express her support.

"You are good at this," Liiza exclaimed in a desperate attempt to lighten the mood and make Khan feel better.

Khan couldn't express how intense his affection toward Liiza became. She had vanquished his fears in a mere instant. His situation was awful, and he had just pillaged his companion's corpse, but he felt that moment to be the happiest in his life. Even his first time couldn't compare to the complete acceptance that Liiza showed toward his ugly sides.

"You can find many fainted drunkards in the Slums every Sunday morning," Khan revealed while his gaze returned on the torn clothes and a faint smile appeared on his face. "Food was a priority

back then, but clothes were pretty useful too. They served as blankets, pillows, curtains, and covers for the cold tiles, but I always had to cut and patch something up after stealing them from the drunkard. I also had to handle my father, so I became good quickly."

"No wonder you run so fast," Liiza chuckled while laying her head on his shoulder and watching him work.

"Please," Khan scoffed. "I hid in corners or roofs and let the other kids go first to study the situation. I shouted something to scare them off if everything looked good."

"Oh my," Liiza giggled. "My boyfriend is a scoundrel."

"A lucky one," Khan added while shooting an intense glance toward Liiza.

The couple almost fell in a daze when their eyes met. They forgot that Khan was working with their dead friend's clothes and that Azni was standing next to them. Still, the latter cleared her throat to remind the two of her presence.

Khan snapped back to reality and finished that part of the rope. His gaze went toward Azni at that point, and his hand also stretched toward her. The girl initially frowned when she thought that he wanted her sports bra, but he promptly pointed at her backpack.

"No Niqols would hold a grudge against you for this," Azni sighed while sitting in front of Khan and handing him the backpack. "Well, others might see you as a cynical human, but I know that you don't care about our differences."

Azni glanced at Liiza before nodding to show her sincere support, and the latter's smile brightened at that gesture. She instinctively took Azni's hand. Liiza felt strange after being alone for so long, but it seemed that a friend had eventually appeared in her life.

Khan was the reason behind that sudden friendship, so her feelings for him intensified during those moments. Liiza started caressing his back while he emptied the backpack and undid the knots to rip it apart. Both girls wanted to help him, but they didn't say anything in front of his evident superiority in the task.

"I'm sorry for Elbek," Khan whispered. "He-."

"Not now," Azni interrupted him while suppressing a sob. "We'll talk about it once we get out."

The conversation ended there, and no one dared to mention the topic anymore.

The complete rope took a few more minutes to appear. Khan pulled both sides of each important knot a few times to make sure that everything held strong and that the overall item was stable enough to endure a person's weight. The Niqols were a bit lighter than humans, so he didn't have to worry about the tallest in the group that he hoped to find.

The rocky surfaces in the passage didn't have viable handholds near the hole's edges, so the group had to get creative. Liiza had great control over her mana, so she hit the ground a few times to destabilize its insides. Khan could break it with a simple kick at that point, and a suitable spot for their rope eventually appeared.

After a few tests, the group decided to throw the rope inside the hole. Khan jumped inside it first since he was the only one who could reach the girls' stretched arms with a jump if the tool ended up

not working, but his tests went well. They had a way back to the passage, so everyone got to the new area.

A large underground hall unfolded in the group's eyes. Khan checked the big leech's corpse once he made sure that nothing came after them, and his inspection confirmed his initial guess. The creature had clearly died due to internal injuries, so some Niqols had to be on that floor.

Two passages opened from that large area, but the group recognized pink marks on both of them. Azni and Liiza could easily translate them into actual messages and understand where their companions had gone.

The three moved quickly. Azni and Liiza even found more marks on the various cavities and passages that appeared on their way, but they became useless once the sounds of heavy steps and grunts echoed through the area.

Khan glanced at Liiza, and the latter didn't hesitate to nod. He bent forward and accelerated after that gesture. The path ahead transformed into a circular scenery surrounded by faint images as his speed reached inhuman levels, and a battle eventually unfolded in his vision.

Doku and Asyat were against a wall, fighting against four big leeches that had encircled them. Zeliha was behind them, but her condition appeared poor. Her left shoulder and arm featured ugly patches of melted skin, and her eyes struggled to remain open even when her two companions were doing their best to protect her.

Khan's thoughts ran quickly. He had seen Doku's battle prowess, so the four leeches clearly had special abilities that made them tough opponents for that strong Niqols. Asyat couldn't be bad either since the professors had picked her for the mission.

Nevertheless, Khan arrived behind the first big leech before his reasoning could end, and his leg instinctively rose to deliver a powerful kick. He had already gained a clear understanding of the monsters' texture, so he knew exactly how much strength he required to cleave them in half.

Khan's rotating kick resembled an ax that swung at the center of the leech's straightened body. The monster was standing on a small part of its lower figure as it prepared to throw itself at its prey, but it suddenly fell to the ground. Its limited mind didn't allow it to notice that its mouth and tail didn't have flesh connecting them anymore.

The event had been so sudden that both Niqols and leeches failed to notice Khan's arrival. One of the monsters even completed its offensive while its companions died. It leapt toward Asyat, but its head exploded into a gory mess of flesh and dark blood.

The girl required an entire second to realize that someone had killed the leech before it could reach her, but she still failed to focus on her savior since Khan shot directly toward the other monsters.

Doku fended off one of the leeches with a precise rising palm strike that made the creature spit a mouthful of blood and saliva. The exchange forced him to take a step back to dodge the incoming corrosive fluid. The last monster was even flying toward the almost-fainted Zeliha, so he hoped to push it off track with a messy shoulder-bash.

Still, a shadow hit the flying leech before Doku could reach it. The Niqols saw the monster losing half of its body and interrupting its charge. It could only fall on the ground after it became nothing more than a scaled mouth attached to a small chunk of bleeding flesh.

Doku became aware of his helper when the third leech's fall suddenly accelerated. The creature's head exploded when it crashed on the ground, and his eyes finally became used to the sudden change in the images in front of him. Doku saw Khan flicking his left leg to remove the corrosive saliva that had fallen on his shoe, and he also heard the silent curse escaping his mouth when his foot remained bare.

"Khan!" Doku happily exclaimed, and his voice attracted the attention of the two girls with him.

Asyat showed pure happiness when she saw Khan. She didn't know him too much, but his feats in the battle were enough to make her ecstatic. Zeliha also opened her tired eyes, and a faint smile appeared on her face when she inspected the outcome of the fight.

Doku wanted to add something, but the sound of loud steps attracted his attention and made him glance at the path that his group had just crossed. His smile broadened when he saw Liiza, and his figure shot ahead when Azni's face peeked past the entrance.

Azni showed a happy smile too. She jumped in Doku's arms, and the two exchanged an intense hug before kissing. Liiza walked past them and ignored Khan while inspecting the four dead monsters and the two Niqols near the wall.

"What happened to her?" Khan asked while crouching next to Zeliha and inspecting her injured shoulder.

"One of the monsters almost ate her," Asyat explained. "These things can hide from our senses. She can't use her talent here."

"I noticed," Khan sighed while avoiding touching her injuries.

Zeliha's arm was quite bad, but Khan couldn't do anything for her. The pink shades around her mouth told him that she had already tried to quell her pain, but her condition appeared unable to improve without proper medications.

Khan's expression darkened when he noticed the familiar short sword hung on Zeliha's back. His voice softened as he questioned Asyat about something that felt quite obvious at that scene. "Did you find Bashir?"

"We did," Asyat revealed while lowering her gaze. "What remained of him at least."

"Elbek is also dead," Liiza announced to join the conversation. "Did you find a way back to the surface?"

"We cleared the other path," Doku explained after separating from Azni. "We checked every corner and cave behind us, but nothing useful came out. Where did you even come from?"

"We used a hole in the ground," Azni whispered as she held Doku's face and turned it toward her. "We didn't explore the entire upper floor, but the situation didn't look great. Also, we wanted to find you all."

Doku ended up leaving a kiss on Azni's lips again, and she laid her head on his chest when they separated. Yet, a wave of sadness filled her eyes when she saw how Liiza and Khan had resumed

ignoring themselves. She couldn't even imagine how hard it was to keep their relationship a secret in such a dire situation, especially when she could enjoy her man's embrace so easily.

## Chapter 148 - Resuming

The group made a point of the situation after regrouping, and Zeliha even mustered the strength to give her professional opinion on the fauna.

It turned out that the situation of Doku's group had been similar to Khan and the others. The fall had brought the four Niqols into the underground structure's lower floor, and they had found themselves after exploring the area for a while.

Bashir had been unlucky enough to meet a big leech while he was inside the rivers of terrain, and the other aliens had found him when a monster had already devoured most of his body. His short sword had remained intact during the process, so the Niqols didn't have doubts about the consumed corpse's identity.

Doku's approach to the exploration had been thorough, and the two Niqols had followed his example after regrouping. They inspected every cave and cavity, marked each hole, and even reached the end of the path that seemed to lead right under the intact regions.

Their exploration had featured far more dangers. It seemed that the big leeches liked the deeper areas of the structure, so Doku and the others had ended up facing many of them. Zeliha's injuries came from a surprise attack suffered when she had yet to confirm the efficiency of her sensitivity to mana. Luckily for her, her companions had been quick enough to save her shoulder and arm.

Zeliha's explanation provided Khan, Azni, and Liiza with a greater understanding of their opponents. She had actually recognized that species after inspecting it during those hours. The Niqols knew the leeches as "[Silent Groundsuckers]", words that they could translate only partially. Still, their meaning sounded fairly obvious when the aliens tried to explain it.

According to Zeliha, the main issue in that environment was that the simplicity of the leeches had favored stable mutations and had granted a high survival rate. A similar diet had even led the transformations toward similar fields.

The size, the corrosive saliva, and the overall sturdiness were common aspects that the transformations affected. The amount of energy diverted to those features changed from monster to monster, but Zeliha was almost certain that each big leech would have those three enhanced abilities.

The changes between monster to monster were in the additional features that they gained due to the mutations. Most of them were simple aesthetic transformations. Some developed hair, other scales, a few would even obtain simple teeth, but none showed abilities with power that could match spells. Doku spoke of a specimen capable of generating strong noises, but that was it.

It seemed that their simplicity went against developing powerful abilities. Their species could only go so far unless more mana came into play, which was almost impossible for creatures that spent their lives eating ground, plants, and rare worms.

Those features put the [Silent Groundsuckers] above normal Tainted animals due to how easily they could mutate. Still, they also placed them under average monsters since their transformations weren't too threatening. The major issue with that species was the number of its specimens, which

didn't seem troublesome in front of Khan's destructive power. Yet, Zeliha ended up contradicting him on that point.

The leeches' soft bodies were troublesome to handle for the Niqols since their martial arts focused on inflicting internal injuries. The aliens in the second year could switch to a more brutish fighting style, but they would lose a significant amount of efficiency, which made their normal attacks better.

The problem was with their manipulation of mana. The students could make their energy work for punches rather than palm strikes, but they wouldn't be able to express its true power, and their attacks would suffer from heavy delays.

Liiza turned out to be the only one among the group with proficiency in manipulating mana high enough to change the nature of her energy without suffering heavy delays. Yet, she had always used palm strikes throughout her life, so her battle prowess would inevitably fall when switching style so abruptly.

Moreover, most of her proficiency in the manipulation field went toward her ice. That spell was a powerful ability that could kill tens of big leeches in a single attack at the price of a short preparation, so the group felt that they had gained a trump card after the reunion.

Of course, Khan's gained a lot of attention after his previous feat. He had killed four monsters in mere seconds since his martial art was ideal for those creatures. He risked touching the corrosive saliva only when his feet pierced the leeches' skin, which made him perfect for the frontlines there.

Khan and his group didn't hesitate to share their experiences of the superior floor, but their story didn't have much except for Elbek's death. The trio had gone through many tunnels and small leeches without ever getting closer to an exit. The rope left behind could work as an escape route and second path if everything down there failed, but that was as much as they could tell.

Doku had forced Asyat to throw her backpack away when he saw that four monsters were chasing them, but the group retrieved it quickly. Learning that Khan and the others had left a pile of flowers on the higher floor didn't tempt him at all. Finding a way back to the surface had the priority. Doku felt terrible that his decision to proceed with the mission had led to the death of his companions, so he didn't want to take risks anymore.

The march eventually resumed, and Khan's group could experience how thorough Doku was when he was in charge. He even made them peek through every hole they could reach when exploring small cavities and similar structures.

The lower floor really ended up having many monsters, but the students only met them in groups of two at best, and Khan was more than enough to take care of them. His kicks were deadly weapons against those creatures. The only problem was with his shoes and what the corrosive saliva did to them, but his companion gave him theirs whenever he needed a new pair.

Khan ended up running out of available shoes after fighting his twentieth monster, so he relied on pieces of fabric from their companions' robes. Those were bound to vanish too, but he could only hope for the exploration to end before he had to fight barefooted.

The hours passed, but the group continued to find nothing useful. The faint thought that a path that could bring them back to the surface didn't exist at all tried to make its way inside their minds, but everyone suppressed it. Their situation was already awful. Worsening it with negative ideas wouldn't help at all.

Still, that idea became incredibly loud as more time passed and the group continued to fail to find anything that they could use to climb out of that empty place. It felt even reasonable for those paths not to exist in the underground structure since the leeches didn't dig while following human or Niqols' standards.

Those creatures didn't need to build something that led to the surface since they could crawl toward it while digging more tunnels. A landslide had even happened, so the group even had to be a bit lucky to find something remotely useful for their needs.

Most of the paths led downward, but the trend described by Zeliha worried the group about diving deeper into the underground area. A single difference in floors had increased the number of monsters exponentially, and the students didn't want to imagine what the depths contained.

However, the group ended up not needing their imagination at all since something finally appeared. They had ended up moving toward the intact regions again by then, and a peculiar structure that the student saw as the most beautiful scenery in the world eventually unfolded in their eyes.

Khan and the others found themselves in front of a diagonal wall that featured rivers of ground and protruding rocks. Still, the structure's inclination worked in their favor, and it went past the ceiling even if it didn't seem to reach the surface.

The group didn't care about going directly to the surface. It was enough for their Aduns to have a clear path, and the rescue mission would be a success. Crossing the ceiling and jumping on the first stable area that gave them a clear view of the outside world was everything they had ever needed.

Finding that diagonal wall brought immense happiness to the group, but the hard part came right afterward. They had to prepare for the actual climb, and that meant taking care of two issues.

The pink flowers left by Khan's group were still on the other end of the rope attached to the hole used to descend to the lower floor. Technically, they were in a safe area, so leaving them there felt like a waste, especially since two of their companions had died in the mission that involved them.

Moreover, Zeliha couldn't do the climb. Doku and Azni had alternated themselves during the exploration to carry her, but they couldn't cross that steep wall with her on their back. The ground that covered the many rocks made everything too slippery.

The group didn't need words, and Khan didn't oppose the suggestion that came out of Doku's mouth either. He would take care of climbing the wall with Zeliha on his back.

As for the flowers, Doku, Liiza, and Asyat could take care of them. Khan had to remain near the wall to defend their escape route, and Doku wanted to leave Azni in the safest position he knew.

Everyone could understand that Doku was giving unfair advantages to his girlfriend, but no one bothered to complain. Azni was the only one who tried to say something, but she quickly had to give up on it since her companions didn't support her complaints. After all, Doku wasn't

endangering the success of the mission with his decision. He had just picked one Niqols over another.

Khan didn't like that Liiza traveled with students who couldn't do much in the fights, but he had to suppress those emotions and go along with everything that Doku said. Azni noticed his behavior, and she couldn't help but sigh when she saw that he kept his mask on even when the only stranger was a half-fainted Niqols sitting on the ground.

The second team didn't take much to come back. Doku had memorized every path in the area by then, so reaching the rope, retrieving the flowers, and coming up with a simple basket turned out to be rather quick since no monsters appeared on his path. His group had even left the cord in its place since an escape path could still end up being necessary.

Khan helped modify the basket so that it could become a simple backpack, and everyone prepared for the imminent climb. Khan made a few tests on his own before confirming the stability of the rocks and bending forward to make his companions put Zeliha on his back.

Seeing the closeness of the girl to his back, her legs wrapped around his waist, and his hands holding her thighs almost made Liiza's snap. Witnessing her companions watching such an intimate scene without batting an eye made her furious about her situation. Luckily for Liiza, Azni had expected something like that to happen after experiencing her deadly reaction.

"[Let's do our best]," Azni suddenly announced while taking Liiza's hands. "[Mind you. Skipping today's party isn't an option, not even for you]."

Azni's surprising words left the group speechless, but it wasn't hard to guess that the two girls had grown close after spending the first part of the crisis together. They didn't expect Azni to invite Liiza to the parties right away, but they didn't hesitate to show their support through nods and smiles.

Holding grudges after experiencing such a tragic event felt pointless. Some still thought that the benefits for the whole species connected to her marriage with Ilman were too incredible to ignore. Still, that wasn't the time to talk about that. The mission had turned Liiza into nothing more than a companion, and she could remain that for the entire day and longer if she felt like it.

"Can we leave this place now?" Khan coldly commented as the Niqols continued to show their approval to Liiza.

Khan had performed a few squats and had jumped on his spot to grow used to Zeliha's weight, but the matter had been relatively quick since the girl was incredibly light, even lighter than Liiza. Her undeveloped body was actually working to his advantage in that situation.

The group could only focus on the mission at that remark. Doku was the first to stretch his legs before jumping on the wall and leaping among the various rocks to go even higher. The difficulties began when he had to cross the area where the ceiling almost touched the inclined surface, but he had found a decent passage already, and crawling for a few meters wasn't a problem.

Liiza was the second, and Asyat followed right after. Azni jumped on the wall after the girl, and Khan imitated her after she crossed the narrow passage.

Khan struggled a bit to find the proper position that could suit the task. Yet, the passage was too narrow, so his chest ended up sliding on some sharp rocks before actually moving to the other side of the ceiling.

#### Chapter 149 - Saved

Khan ignored the pain and let the sharp rocks cut his chest as he crawled in the narrow passage between the wall and the ceiling. Something inevitably touched Zeliha, but those contacts happened so softly that her skin remained intact. A few white marks appeared, but nothing more.

A different environment unfolded in Khan's eyes when he crawled for a few meters. The ceiling ended at that point, and he could see piles of soil filling the uneven area above it. The upper side of the tunnels had many tall protruding rocks that managed to peek out of the sea of ground that covered most of the area. It resembled a sandy plain with dunes and hills, but Khan disregarded everything when he saw the dark sky standing high above him.

His legs quickly kicked the wall and pushed him toward the relatively flat area. His feet sank in the layers of terrain, but he managed to grow used to the soft ground quickly. A deep breath and a few steps allowed him to jump back on the actual surface and keep him there without seeing his legs submerged by that dark soil.

Khan instinctively called Snow before inspecting the area a second time. His companions were nearby, all struggling with the unstable surface, but smiles filled their faces. They knew that their Aduns would soon come to pick them up. That nightmare was about to end.

Still, an environment filled with terrain in that special lair was bound to have threats, and Khan understood that far too well. The others were also aware that the dark sea could hide many leeches and monsters, so they didn't let their happiness ruin their concentration.

The Niqols remained still as they waited for something to appear, but Khan sprinted toward them without caring about his surroundings. He was too fast for any eventual threat, so he could focus on getting Zeliha off his back.

Doku and the others couldn't help but stare in surprise at Khan's movements. He wasn't sinking in the ground even while moving so fast and with the girl on his back. He seemed to float above that frail surface, and the terrain barely moved when he abruptly stopped in front of them.

The group had already prepared for that situation. It wasn't hard to guess what to expect on the other side of the ceiling since that area featured only rocks and soft ground. Liiza immediately closed her eyes and focused on her mana while Asyat took care of picking up Zeliha and putting her on her back with the help of her companions.

Khan had vanished from his position when the Niqols turned to look at him. They found him on top of one of the protruding rocks nearby. He stood on his toes, with his back and knees slightly bent to be ready for any eventual threat that dared to come out of the ground before Liiza completed her spell.

The Niqols had a tight connection with Nitis' fauna, but their relationship wasn't in the same realm as the Kred with Istrone's vegetation. They simply knew most animals fairly well, and they also felt a deep respect for those powerful creatures.

Khan resembled a predator in his hunting ground in the Niqols' eyes. He barely released traces of his presence, and his body looked like a spring ready to unleash its power forward. Doku and the others had seen him fight in the past hours, so everyone had learnt how strong he was, and they felt able to rely on him after witnessing that scene.

Khan's appealing state ended up distracting most Niqols. Only Doku remained aware of his surroundings and noticed two monsters and a few leeches leaping out of the ground near them. Their mouths were already pointing at various members of the group, with the big creatures aiming at Zeliha and Doku.

"[Fight!]" Doku shouted, and a shadow flew past him while he turned to face his opponent.

Asyat struggled to dodge the incoming monster since her legs had sunk into the ground and Zeliha was on her back. Her best option was to jump to her side and throw herself on the soft surface, but her mind didn't think so quickly. Luckily for her, a shadow made the big leech's head explode while she still realized the nature of the threat.

A few footprints materialized on the soft surface when Khan landed. Stopping completely with that momentum would only make him sink into the ground, so he took a few steps forward before curving and continuing to sprint until he faced his group again.

The situation had already changed at that point. Azni had killed some small leeches flying toward her, Doku had managed to hit his monster with a palm strike and move his body away from its trajectory, and Liiza had remained still while creatures had landed on her shoulder and side.

Khan hated himself like never before while sprinting ahead and circling the group until he reached Doku's position. His monster had fallen and was about to hide back into the ground, but Khan stomped on that spot, and a familiar wet sensation spread from his almost bare foot.

Khan used his momentum to rotate on himself and stomp with his other foot. The ground around his legs flew away and revealed the maimed monster squashed on the rocks below. The second attack had successfully killed the creature, so Khan could finally jump toward his girlfriend.

His hands were enough to remove the leeches that had attached themselves to Liiza's skin. The injuries that they left behind continued to bleed, but Khan couldn't do much about it. He could only appreciate how his girlfriend didn't lose her concentration during that painful interaction.

Khan could return to his protruded rock at that point, and the familiar noise caused by the flapping of wings soon reached his ears. The other Niqols didn't miss that sound either, and their gazes instinctively went toward the sky.

The upper side of the ceiling basically was the bottom of a large canyon. The earthquake had created huge cracks in the area that had turned a plain featuring small hills into a series of gorges that led to a hellish environment.

The large area toward the surface that opened above the upper side of the tunnels' ceiling was perfect for the Aduns. Those creatures had even remained nearby during those hours since they had sensed their riders' anxiety and danger, so it only took them a few minutes to reach the right canyon and dive toward the desperate Niqols.

Snow's white feathers seemed to shine among the darkness, and Khan could only smile at the sight of his Aduns descending with the other creatures. Still, he couldn't help but notice how Elbek and Bashir's eagles were absent.

That detail didn't matter too much in that situation. Khan moved his eyes back on the group and shot forward when he saw the ground creating a long trail that led toward his companions.

Faint footprints appeared on the ground as Khan sprinted toward that long trail and leaped to go airborne. His body rotated to move the entirety of the accumulated momentum on his left leg. The ground moved before his foot even touched it. A hole opened and revealed the monster crawling toward his companions before the attack squashed half of its body.

The hole created among the soft terrain revealed many small leeches that were following the monsters. They immediately turned toward Khan when they noticed his arrival, but a series of kicks took care of them. Some managed to bite his legs since he had landed among them, but he quickly ended the slaughter with his hands.

"Jump!" Liiza suddenly ordered while opening her eyes, and everyone followed her instructions.

Her orders weren't actually for everyone, but even Asyat followed them. She barely managed to bring her feet outside of the surface, but the ground didn't start freezing until right past Doku.

Khan landed on a smooth layer of ice after completing his jump. The surface felt slippery, but it wasn't too bad, especially when he used mana to improve his foothold. Liiza's spell had a few flaws, and she had explained to the group while they prepared the plan for the return.

The ice covered a large chunk of the upper part of the ceiling. Doku, Azni, and Asyat even stepped on that bluish layer to let Liiza complete her work. She froze the area where they were previously standing at that point, creating a big zone where the group could feel safe from sudden attacks.

The crisis felt at its end now. The ice protected the group from sudden attacks, and the Aduns were diving toward them. The students were only seconds away from leaving those lands, and Khan even allowed himself to walk toward them at a normal pace.

However, Khan suddenly noticed a familiar item from the corner of his eyes. His previous positions, the many protruding rocks, and the dunes had made it impossible for him to see it before, but it appeared clear as he approached the Aduns' landing spot.

Khan saw a backpack with only a few leeches in the areas past the layer of ice. It was impossible to miss it. The item hung from a handhold on the side of a protruded rock. It was mostly intact even.

The situation didn't give Khan the time to warn his companions, and they wouldn't be able to help in the task either. He only needed to send a message through his mental connection before turning toward the backpack and shooting forward.

The Niqols were too focused on their Aduns to hear his faint steps. Even Liiza couldn't notice that Khan had decided to delay his return to a safe area. They understood what had happened only when Snow separated from the group of eagles.

The Aduns landed, and the Niqols started to jump on them while turning toward Snow. Noticing Khan in the same direction on the ground wasn't an issue, even if he were running as fast as ever. He was a shadow that barely caused ripples on the surface, and that was enough to identify him.

Nothing could notice Khan. The leeches and monsters on his path would react to the appearance of his footprints, but he was already far away by that time.

A jump allowed Khan to cover the few meters that separated him from the backpack. When he grabbed the item, the force he applied tore apart one of its shoulder straps, but he landed safely on the ground with the loot in his grasp.

Khan didn't sink into the ground, but he inevitably slowed down when he performed his sharp turn. A monster came out from the terrain and tried to block his path at that point. The few sharp teeth that the mutations had caused in that creature gave its mouth a threatening appearance, but he smiled at that sight.

Khan didn't slow down in front of that tall creature. Instead, he accelerated, making sure to take a deep breath and securing the backpack on his chest. He didn't care that it had a few leeches as long as he kept its contents safe.

The monster continued to screech, but it suddenly noticed that Khan disappeared from its senses. A faint sensation had appeared on its head instead, but it vanished in the next instant.

Khan used the monster as a foothold to jump higher in the sky, and white feathers welcomed him. Snow promptly unfolded its wings to stop mid-air and give its rider the chance to take the correct position.

Khan put his legs under the Aduns' wings and made sure to keep the backpack away from its feathers. The eagle immediately resumed its flight higher toward the sky, and Khan could take care of removing the leeches on the item in the meantime.

Snow rejoined the other Aduns at that point, and Khan happily noticed that he had completely secured the item. The eagles left the canyon at that point, but the Niqols' eyes inevitably shot toward Khan.

Khan finished squeezing leeches and removed the creatures that had started to afflict his body afterward. He turned toward his companions at that point, and he happily showed the third backpack. He had saved most of the mission on his own, so the Niqols only laughed or shook their heads when they saw how lively he appeared.

## Chapter 150 - Winking

The group didn't even consider stopping for a break. They had been inside the underground structure for hours, and they had experienced awful experiences. The sadness and grief caused by the loss of two of their companions were intensifying in their minds, and they didn't want them to burst out in a random spot in the wilds. Zeliha's condition was also awful, so they prioritized getting back inside the academy.

The few hours that divided the team from [The Pure Trees] helped the students realize what they had just experienced. It wasn't too rare for the Niqols to lose assets during hunts or missions. It sounded like a cruel and cynical process, but it also was a core part of their society.

The Niqols considered themselves Nitis' overlords, but their approach to the matter wasn't intrinsic to their intelligence or current position. They didn't see their status as an obvious consequence of their power like the humans. They believed that they had to earn it constantly, even if they had to put their younger generations through a tough skimming process.

Khan found it hard to understand that part. It wasn't a matter of similarities to the Nak or distance from the humans. He had the innate idea that nurturing the young so that they could become strong enough to protect the species was generally better than uncovering talent among the new generations through tough challenges.

Still, Khan could also see why the Niqols could apply those skimming methods relatively easily. The aliens had fewer specialized fields compared to humans. They grouped the use of mana into three major areas and judged their students according to their proficiency in them.

Instead, humans could find talent in a soldier who struggled to learn a single martial art. Khan found himself thinking about the skinny boy from his entrance test when considering that issue. Jay had a mana core, but his balance was awful. Yet, his understanding of technology could turn him into a valuable asset inside the Global Army. It might even bring him higher than those who could only fight.

The Niqols didn't have that. They used general fields and demanding challenges to evaluate their younger generations. That led to a sturdier foundation, but it also removed from the political and social scene characters that could have an incredible talent in uncommon areas.

The forest surrounded by the seven mountains eventually unfolded in the group's vision. Happy smiles immediately appeared on the Niqols' faces, but that comfortable sight also broke their self-control. Some students saw their emotions bursting out and filling their eyes with tears. Khan could see Azni and Asyat bending on their Aduns to hide their sadness.

Doku led the group toward one of the empty spots near the mountains. Professor Supyan and Professor Zakhira were already waiting for them on the ground since he had alerted the academy about their return. Khan felt surprised that the two Niqols didn't seem to have any special potion or tool at hand to help the students, but everything became clear after the landing.

Zeliha had been too weak to jump on her Aduns on her own. Asyat had kept her on her back during the flight. The professors didn't hesitate to reach her when she jumped off her eagle.

Professor Supyan and Professor Zakhira handled the injured girl carefully. They lay her on the ground and crouched at her sides before stretching their palms forward. Mana came out of their hands and created a dim white membrane above her skin that sent power to her wounded flesh.

Khan's sensitivity to mana was quite remarkable, even for Niqols' standards. His similarities to the Nak and mental training had brought his ability to levels already suitable for the second year when it came to its sheer range. He only had to improve on differentiating the various purpose of that energy to meet the aliens' standards.

Still, the purpose of the professors' mana was evident. Their energy was a warm force incapable of evil. It was similar to the aura released by Veronica's tree during the test inside the underground lake, and the power that it carried was simply miraculous.

Khan saw the patches of melted skin on Zeliha's shoulder and arm healing at an unfathomable speed. Flesh grew right under his stunned eyes. The Global Army had medicines and technologies

capable of fixing severe injuries in mere days or weeks. Still, they felt obsolete compared to the short minutes necessary to bring the girl back to a decent condition.

The professors retracted their energy and checked Zeliha before taking out one of the black cubes featuring azure symbols. Professor Supyan lifted the girl with Professor Zakhira's help before throwing the item under her.

The cube started releasing a faint force that made Zeliha float mid-air. The item worked as a stretcher made of azure light that followed Professor Supyan when he hurried back into the forest.

Khan barely had the time to inspect the new skin before Zeliha disappeared among the trees. It felt obvious that the flesh that had just grown couldn't perform all its functions correctly. The girls' arm and shoulder now featured multiple pale-blue patches that created a stark contrast with her normal shades, but that seemed enough to stabilize her condition. She had stopped shaking and groaning in pain as soon as the white membrane broke.

Only five students and Professor Zakhira remained in the empty spot. Azni had sat on the ground while her gaze remained fixed on a patch of black grass. Doku soon crouched next to her and wrapped his arms around her figure. The girl didn't hesitate to abandon herself in that embrace, and faint sobs resounded after she hid her face in his chest.

Asyat played with her hair. Two wet lines still connected her eyes to her chin, but she had stopped crying. She only felt sad about the situation, and her gaze remained lowered as her mind showed her memories of Elbek and Bashir.

Liiza mostly ignored the group. She stood at the edges of the empty area, with her back on a black trunk while she stared at the forest's depths. It was impossible to understand what thoughts ran through her mind due to her cold expression.

Khan was in an awkward position. He had felt marveled at the Niqols' methods, but he still experienced the sadness of the whole situation. His pain didn't match the intense feelings of his companions, and his experience with those events almost made him appear uncaring.

The sadness in his mind didn't stop him from studying everything he could. The professors' healing methods were only one of the details that Khan committed to memory. He also noticed how Professor Zakhira's hunched back didn't affect her agility. She was incredibly nimble once she stored her cane in a specific pocket at the side of her robe.

Khan took out his phone since Professor Zakhira limited herself to play with a black cube in her hands. He had used the rubber band of his underwear to store his phone and save it from his robe's destruction. Its screen quickly lit up to confirm that the afternoon had already arrived.

The faint thought of leaving his phone behind from now on hit Khan's mind, but that device could be useful even without a connection to the Global Army's network. He had a raw map of Nitis and many lessons saved there, so it could show its utility during a mission. Yet, it was clear that he needed a better way to store it since his clothes kept falling apart.

Khan noticed how his companions suffered from the same issue. Liiza had lost her cube, and Azni had stored hers inside her sports bra. Doku and Asyat still had pieces of their robes covering them, so coming up with a pocket wasn't an issue for them.

Doku was the first to recall that he was still carrying a backpack. He slowly took it off while making sure not to ruin the various knots that kept the many rags together and placed it on the ground.

The Niqols did the same with Azni's backpack at that point. The girl was still too focused on her sorrow to mind the item on her back, but Doku took care of it while making sure to add sweet caresses to the process.

Khan recalled the backpack on his back when he noticed those actions. He quickly took it off and dropped it next to the other two. Doku nodded toward him when he saw the scene, and Khan revealed a complicated smile when the Niqols focused on his girlfriend again.

The urge to jump toward Liiza filled his mind, but he limited himself to glance at his phone again. Khan didn't even search for a specific menu or image. He simply tapped on the screen while pretending to be busy writing something down.

"Khan!" Professor Zakhira eventually shouted and forced him to snap out of his pretense.

The professor's hoarse and loud voice made everyone on the scene turn toward her. It was strange to see Professor Zakhira try her best to use a human accent, so even Azni and Asyat forced themselves to lift their gazes and stare at the old Niqols.

Professor Zakhira didn't immediately continue her phrase. She inspected Khan with her bright eyes and focused on the azure scar on his chest often. A few cuts had appeared around it after crawling out of the underground structure, but they had long since stopped bleeding.

Khan didn't understand what was happening, so he limited himself to remain silent. Still, his confused gaze went on Doku when the professor didn't speak for a whole minute. He wanted to confirm that he had heard his name correctly, but the boy didn't reply to his glance.

"[Can you understand me]?" Professor Zakhira eventually continued while tapping her cane on the ground.

"[Vaguely]," Khan replied with the best accent that he could muster.

"[Vaguely]!" Professor Zakhira snorted. "[Make sure to do better! Catch]!"

Professor Zakhira threw the cube in her hand at that point, and Khan promptly bent forward to catch it. Foreign energy seeped inside his hands as soon as his fingers touched the cold metal, but those sensations vanished in a few seconds.

A strange understanding filled Khan after that sudden event. He sensed that foreign information had entered his mind. He realized that he knew how to use the cube even if that were his first time holding one of them.

"[Bring back the flowers to the academy ground]!" Professor Zakhira ordered while turning and moving toward the trees.

Khan remained confused. He played with the cube in his hands while inspecting each azure symbol. Those signs didn't mean anything to him, but he still understood how to activate them.

'She added you to our network,' A familiar voice suddenly resounded inside Khan's mind and made him turn toward Doku.

The Niqols smiled while he held his cube and looked at him. His mouth remained fixed in that position, but words continued to resound inside Khan's mind.

'Mind you,' Doku continued to explain, 'The communicator is only for you. The other humans won't be able to use it. Also, the network registers every message, so pay attention to everything you say.'

Khan's eyes sharpened as he tried to use the information in his mind to send a message toward Doku. 'Won't they record this too?'

It was enough to think about Doku to establish a connection with his communicator. Khan felt the link forming in his mind and transmitting his thoughts toward the boy's device.

'They are probably already checking it,' Doku sent, and Khan could even hear his laugh inside his mind. 'So you'd better not talk to my girlfriend anymore!'

Khan frowned, but Doku winked while putting his cube away. His finger pointed at his eyes at that point, and his laughing voice finally came out of his mouth. "Did I do it correctly? I've read about the winking that humans do, but I never had the chance to use it."