

Chaos' Heir 151

Chapter 151 - Ploy

Khan weakly nodded before accepting what had just happened. A professor had given him a communicator meant only for him. That decision was probably something that only the higher-ups of the Niqols' species could make, but they had considered him worthy of that reward.

"Why now?" Khan asked while studying the cube and thinking about different Niqols.

Khan could quickly find the connection with Azni's device, and the same went for Asyat and Zeliha. Khan could even sense Liiza lost cube in the distance. Still, something strange happened when he thought about the professors. There seemed to be a barrier that the knowledge inherited when he touched the item didn't hesitate to describe.

The cube had multiple functions. It could work as a communicator, a tracking device, and a notebook. It could even connect to the menus in the various alien buildings and enhance their functions. Moreover, it only needed mana to work, and Khan could refill it easily.

The item gave Khan the chance to contact the professors, but they had to accept his call. It wasn't the same immediate connection experienced with Doku. The same went for some of the important figures met during his stay on Nitis. The link with Chief Alu felt weak and restricted, but the same didn't apply to Bula and the other Niqols encountered during past hunts.

The only Niqols that Khan seemed unable to contact at all was Ambassador Yeza. He couldn't find the connection with her device even if he knew her face and name, which were the only requirement for those types of communications.

Khan couldn't help but feel marveled at the flexibility of the cube. Phones could perform similar functions and even surpass what those alien devices did in some fields. Still, everything appeared miraculous when he considered the almost complete absence of technology.

The cubes only needed mana to work. They were nothing more than items built with a special alloy. The azure symbols on their surfaces dictated the functions they could perform, while the core of the network handled the various permissions.

The superiority of the humans felt slim in front of such a pure dedication toward mana. Khan couldn't help but think that his species had only learnt how to use that magic. Instead, the Niqols were magical at their core. There was a qualitative difference that only centuries of research could fill.

Moreover, technology was easier to learn since the Niqols only had to gain access to the latest discovery to be almost on par with the humans. The opposite couldn't happen since it would require a thorough transformation of society and training methods.

Khan had dreamt about the vastness of the universe multiple times, but that often happened due to his desperation. Those feelings had even intensified after Zalpa had granted him access to the entirety of his nightmares. However, he only felt pure wonder now. All his pain and problems almost disappeared when he considered how spectacular each different species could be.

"It takes a while to make a good impression on our higher-ups," Doku laughed. "It's even harder for you due to your species. Still, it was about time they accepted you."

"Why would they accept me?" Khan asked while turning toward Doku.

Azni and Doku were smiling at him. The girl still had tears running down her face, but her sadness didn't suppress the happiness that she felt for her friend. Khan noticed that Asyat was showing a similar expression, and Liiza was also wearing a proud face while she looked at him.

The four Niqols seemed to know something that Khan ignored, and he managed to hold back his curiosity only because he realized how positive that news was. His companions kept him waiting for a few seconds, but they eventually stopped teasing him.

"I have given a report of the mission while we were flying back here," Doku explained. "I'm not surprised they gave you a communicator."

"Did you tell them everything?" Khan asked again.

"I even praised how you have thrown yourself in a horde of monsters to retrieve one of the backpacks," Doku continued.

"I don't remember the horde," Khan complained.

"The professors don't know that," Doku winked again, "And there was ground all around us. The horde was completely possible."

Khan didn't know what to say. He knew that his relationship with Doku and Azni was good, but they had known each other for less than two weeks. They had hunted together for an entire night and had shared some time inside the academy, but nothing more.

However, Doku was already willing to inflate Khan's feats, and the other Nigols didn't oppose that decision. They actually seemed to agree with him and play along so that Khan could get more benefits.

That behavior left Khan speechless. He didn't expect that unanimous and warm decision in his favor after such a short time.

"Everything is a plan to force you to do an entire party without running away," Doku joked. "Don't think too much about it."

"You really are...," Khan whispered before closing his grasp on the cube and performing a polite bow toward Doku.

"It's fine, Khan," Doku added. "You deserve it. You are the first human to accept our ways so openly. It would bring dishonor to our entire species not to reward such behavior."

"Though Professor Zakhira will have her eyes on you from now on," Azni chuckled while sniffing to clear her nose. "You have earned the right to experience her cane now."

"How hard can it even hit?" Khan asked when he thought about the seemingly frail professor.

The Niqols' expressions immediately darkened at those words. Only Liiza remained relatively fine, but she still diverted her gaze and resumed staring at the forest.

"She is a master in the manipulation field," Doku explained after clearing his throat. "Have you ever tasted a wooden cane carrying the same texture as a fiery metal?"

"Is that even possible?" Khan asked as his eyes lit up both in curiosity and worry.

"Mana can make everything possible," Doku continued before taking Azni's hand and standing up. "Humans use it as a fuel, but it has always been more than that."

"We have so much to learn," Khan sighed while approaching the couple and picking one of the backpacks.

Doku and Azni did the same, and Asyat joined them as they started to move back to the academy. The latter even made sure to walk around the couple to be next to Khan as they approached the trees.

Khan decided to turn toward Liiza since the situation would give him many reasonable excuses if someone were to question his actions. The girl had remained on her tree, and she limited herself to glance at Khan before walking toward her Aduns. Most of the eagles were still resting in the empty spot, so she flew away in no time.

"Don't mind her," Asyat commented. "She is always liked that."

"She isn't bad," Azni replied, "And she promised to attend the party tonight."

"Do you think it's proper to celebrate and have fun tonight?" Khan asked, clearly hinting at the two boys' death.

"That's how we handle things," Doku revealed. "We suffer, we fight, we die, but we never forsake our feelings. It doesn't matter how much it hurts."

Doku wrapped an arm around Azni and held her close. It was clear that he could handle the loss of the two Niqols better than her, and he didn't hesitate to give his emotional support.

On the other hand, Asyat swayed her body left and right, ending up touching Khan's bare shoulder whenever she went toward him. Khan initially thought that to be a case, but the reoccurring nature of her gesture eventually forced him to accept that she was doing that on purpose.

'Don't tell me that she wants a hug too?' Khan wondered, and the couple at his side confirmed his thoughts.

Doku wore a knowing smile when he noticed the scene and Khan's confusion. He even nodded while trying to hide the gesture from the girl in his arms. Instead, Azni's eyes were wide in surprise, but they soon become part of an admonishing gaze.

'Don't look at me like this!' Khan cursed in his mind while showing a cool smile and shaking his head. 'Help me out instead of judging me!'

Azni wasn't aware of Khan's exceptional lying skills. She had started to suspect them after learning about his secret relationship with Liiza, but she didn't know how deeply his ability stretched. She didn't understand Khan's call for help in that situation. His reaction almost made her think that he enjoyed those attentions.

Azni wouldn't believe that Khan wanted to cheat on Liiza, not after she had seen how intense their feelings were. They had become an ideal couple in her mind. Still, her idea of men wasn't great, especially after seeing many of her friends cared more about their urges than their emotions. She knew that anyone could fall prey to temptations, but she didn't want that to happen for Khan and Liiza after witnessing how cute they were together.

"Don't you have to report back to the other humans, Khan?" Azni suddenly asked while Asyat's request became more evident. "I bet they are worried about you."

"How could they?" Doku scoffed. "I bet the professors have yet to inform them about today's missio-."

Azni stepped on Doku's foot and forced him to interrupt his line. The girl then shot an admonishing gaze toward her boyfriend, and the latter completely misunderstood the meaning behind that gesture. Yet, he could vaguely guess her intentions, so he decided to play along.

"That's right!" Doku exclaimed without showing the slightest awkwardness about the sudden inversion in his opinion. "Khan should reunite with the other humans and prepare for the party. I bet he even needs a nap after his hard work."

Asyat frowned and shot a confused glance toward the couple, but Khan acted before she could say anything. He made up a few quick excuses and goodbyes while handing his backpack to the girl and sprinting deeper into the forest. He had been incredibly fast, but a few words spoken in the Niqols' language still managed to reach his ears.

"[Why did you stop me]?" Asyat asked while shooting an angry glance toward Azni. "[I thought you had accepted him]!"

"[You should still take it slowly]," Azni suggested. "[He has a good mind, but he remains a human]."

"[Maybe you are right]," Asyat heaved a disappointed sigh. "[I'll try to know him better at the party]."

Only faint words managed to reach Khan after that, but he felt to have listened enough. His steps quickened as another issue appeared in his mind. The party had just turned into a dangerous event.

'Getting so much attention from girls surely boosts my self-esteem,' Khan thought as many trees crossed his vision.

The events in the underground area had been awful, but everything that had followed it had been incredible. The Niqols had officially accepted him as part of their society, and he had even confirmed that his good looks ignored the differences between the species.

Azni had also become a helper that Khan and Liiza could use to protect their relationship. Everything seemed to turn for the best. He only had to check something before letting his mind bathe in the satisfaction obtained through his achievements.

'It works!' Khan exclaimed in his mind while he held the cube.

Khan had almost reached the underground habitations, but he had to test something crucial to the survival of his secret relationship before relaxing.

The cube could work as a tracker, meaning that the Niqols had the chance to learn about his secret relationship. However, Liiza had sneaked out of her home and academy for many years already. There had to be a way around that function.

The knowledge inherited by Professor Zakhira didn't say anything about turning off the tracker, but Khan could vaguely guess how the cube worked. Thinking about stopping transmitting his position was enough to halt that function without affecting the others.

'Did the professors keep this hidden on purpose?' Khan wondered while he waited for a call to reach his mind.

Nothing arrived. No Niqols tried to question him about his actions. Khan didn't know if the superiors had yet to notice his actions or didn't care about the matter, but he remained suspicious.

'I guess I can't avoid political ploys even after being accepted,' Khan sighed in his mind as he reactivated the tracker and stored the cube in the rubber band of his underwear. 'Maybe the Niqols have someone like Lieutenant Kintea. Ambassador Yeza is willing to ruin her family to improve the relationship with the humans. I bet some of the students are the same.'

A wave of sadness fell on his happiness and swept it away. Khan found himself unable to enjoy some peace. There was always something capable of affecting his mindset and revert him to the cynical man who had survived the Second Impact and Istrone's crisis.

'I can only trust four people on Nitis now,' Khan reminded himself. 'George can't betray me after we went through together, Doku and Azni are good friends, and Liiza is Liiza. I can't let anyone else too close before confirming their character. I bet that Veronica isn't too bad, but Liiza would find other ways to mark me if I get too close to her.'

Those complicated and messy thoughts filled Khan's mind as he reached his habitation and descended the staircase. The recruits were meditating on their beds, but they all opened their eyes to stare at their companion. Needless to say, their mouths opened when they saw his condition.

Khan was almost naked, with rags instead of shoes, covered with soil from head to toe, slightly injured, and with two devices stretching the rubber band of his underwear. Helen and the other girls would have directly attacked him if they didn't recognize his azure eyes.

"The mission has been a partial success," Khan explained while moving directly toward the bathrooms without bothering to inspect his companions. "Doku will probably kick you out of the academy himself if you don't come tonight. I'll tell you the rest once I clean myself up a bit."

"What has even happened out there?" Kelly shouted while standing up and using an angry tone. "Your priority is to report everything to us."

Khan rolled his eyes. He had almost reached the bathrooms, but Kelly didn't seem able to accept his character. Luckily for him, he had a deadly blow with him that day.

"Right," Khan announced while taking the cube out of his underwear and turning to show it to the other recruits. "I told you that I would have gotten a communicator."

Chapter 152 – Visit

Kelly had no words left in her throat, mouth, or mind, and the same went for the other recruits. They could only watch as Khan entered one of the bathrooms at the bottom of the underground habitation and sealed the sliding door behind him.

The recruits spent the minutes that Khan took to remove the dirt accumulated during his adventure with the Niqols in silence. Only George decided to move to put clean clothes right outside the bathroom before returning to his bed.

Khan's achievements had forced them to realize how a half-assed approach wouldn't lead anywhere. He was strong, stronger than most of the recruits on Nitis even, but that alone wasn't the reason behind his gains. Pure power couldn't make soldiers advance through the Global Army's ranks so quickly, and the same went for the Niqols' society. He was doing something that his companions had yet to accept. He was forsaking his human status to turn himself into an alien.

The human professors advised against that approach due to many reasons. An ambassador, or even a simple envoy, had to embody the human pride without letting that image scare away or worry the aliens. Building a relationship and blending in their society was the priority of those roles with every intelligent species. Still, the soldiers had to achieve that without forsaking their identity as humans.

Khan was doing the exact opposite. He wasn't throwing away his human traditions, but he wasn't prioritizing them either. His uncaring and unrestrained behavior was bringing him closer to the aliens while creating a barrier between the other recruits.

That approach was dangerous. The Global Army would struggle to put its trust into a soldier who could forsake the human heritage so easily. An ambassador couldn't be a formless chameleon capable of adapting to every environment.

Still, Khan was only a recruit. His approach could be enough for now as long as he kept seizing benefits. After all, he wasn't an ambassador yet, so his behavior wasn't exactly off-role. Khan was simply getting what the higher-up had told him to achieve in his own way.

The recruits found themselves reevaluating their approach to the task while they waited for Khan to come out of the bathroom and update them about the mission. Their beliefs had remained firm when Khan only gained friends and a bit of recognition, but the communicator set a vast difference between them.

It was one thing for the Global Army to appoint Khan as the main envoy due to his lucky chance with the Aduns and his brave feats during the hunts. The recruits knew how their organization worked, and they didn't have to face insurmountable barriers. They would eventually get similar benefits, tasks, and recognition as long as they did their job correctly.

However, the Niqols' seemingly official recognition added a far deeper value to Khan's figure. He would have the priority and trust of the aliens in every social and political matter from now on, and the other recruits could only chase after him in those fields without ever getting the chance to surpass him unless something major happened.

Khan would remain the spokesperson in charge of the bridge between the young generations of both species unless other recruits did something spectacular or he messed up. That single advantage over his companions had transformed into an immense gap that forced the other humans to reconsider how they had approached the political mission.

Their situation didn't give them many chances to do more. The recruits had been polite, had joined parties, and had done their best to be part of the Niqols society. There wasn't much that they could improve to catch up with Khan.

Professor Supyan's lessons and their knowledge of the alien language could do something, but that felt too little too late now that the Niqols had accepted Khan fully.

Some time had to pass before the Niqols would allow another human to become part of their society. The recruits could understand how they didn't have great options at hand. The best they could do was wait until a chance appeared. Yet, most of them still decided to work a bit harder, at least regarding the two fields that they could affect.

Khan eventually left the bathroom. Drops fell from his wet hair, and trails of the strange water used by the Niqols ran down his body. He had worn his dirty pants to cover himself since he had forgotten to take clean clothes, but a smile appeared on his face when he saw that someone had taken care of the matter.

Khan returned inside the bathroom and changed. He now appeared completely different from the brutish cavemen who had come back from the mission. His wet hair and untidy robe gave him a messy aura, but his clean state allowed the recruits to appreciate the confidence radiated by his gestures.

The recruits remained silent, and Khan didn't make them wait. He approached the beds and stood in a spot where all his companions could see him clearly before explaining everything that had happened in the mission.

Khan didn't hide much, especially when it came to how the Niqols avoided mentioning the arrival of the daylight, and he even warned the recruits about Doku's exaggerations. Still, he didn't play it humble, and the accurate version of his charge toward the last backpack remained quite heroic even when told without lies.

Justifying Doku's version of the story ended up being relatively easy when Khan described the whole situation. The Niqols were on their Aduns when he shot toward the backpack, so the recruits could understand the misunderstanding. Most humans even appreciated how Khan avoided claiming undeserved achievements for himself, but some of them only started to resent him with more intensity.

Khan could have decided to elevate his image to heroic levels, but that could create expectations that he didn't want to face, especially since the recruits would report everything back to the Global Army at some point. He wanted to appear important but not blended enough to become part of a loathsome ploy. He didn't want his superiors to turn him into a spy since his priorities were on Liiza right now.

"In short," Khan eventually concluded, "You have to come to tonight's party and do your best not to get wasted while the other Niqols face their grief in their own way. Actually, collapsing near a tree might get you closer to them, so the choice is yours."

George, Veronica, and Brandon laughed. Helen shook her head while hiding a chuckle with her hand. Rodney smirked, and Gabriela decided to smile after seeing how her companions reacted. Only Kelly's expression remained serious at that joke, but she eventually sighed when she realized that Khan's words weren't entirely wrong. They made enough sense to be annoying.

"How can they be so strong when they spend their time throwing parties?" Kelly commented when she reviewed the issue.

"I find them really similar to humans," Rodney contradicted her while putting a hand under his chin. "They are only unrestrained, but that's their approach to emotions and life in general. Maybe that's also the secret behind their deep understanding of mana."

Khan suppressed his reactions, but he felt surprised about Rodney's realization. Humans generally didn't think that mana and behavior had connections, but the boy came close to that conclusion.

"They believe that mana affects emotions as if they were muscles and flesh," Khan explained to make sure that the merit for that discovery went to him.

"That doesn't say much about their character if mana makes them throw parties all the time," Helen scoffed before laughing and causing similar reactions in her companions. "It sounds as if they are using mana to justify their attachment to primitive behaviors. I bet they'll abandon this belief in a few decades."

"My thoughts exactly," Brandon added. "Their current understanding of mana might be far deeper than humans, but our methods are a natural evolution connected to our superior society."

George and the others had initially laughed at Helen's joke, but her second comment generated conflicting reactions. Brandon's statements ultimately divided their group into two sides, even if they all felt those words to be a bit racist. Still, Kelly, Helen, and Gabriela ended up partially agreeing with them due to their firm attachment to their species.

The other recruits were able to acknowledge the benefits that the Niqols' methods provided, but part of them remained convinced that the humans were still one step above. They saw those different habits as a chance to learn and improve, but they remained somewhat inferiors in their minds.

Only Khan had a completely different view about the matter. His faint smile remained on his face, but a sad realization filled his mind. He suddenly understood that those recruits would never fully accept the Niqols. They would remain aliens in their vision forever.

"When is the party?" George eventually asked when the awkward silence created by Brandon's statement became deafening.

Khan didn't know the answer to that question, but his eyes lit up when he recalled about his cube. Conflicting expressions appeared on the recruits' faces when Khan pulled the item from inside his robe and silently contacted Doku.

"The party will start in an hour or so," Khan revealed after storing the cube. "It will happen earlier than usual since it's the end of the week and due to what happened this morning."

The recruits remained marveled at how Khan had contacted the Niqols without uttering a word. He had explained how the cube worked before, but seeing it in action was a completely different thing, especially when handled by a human.

A tinge of envy inevitably spread among the group, but everyone suppressed it to get to work. They had spent the whole day training, so they had to take turns for the bathrooms and prepare. Meanwhile, Khan used that chance to meditate a bit and enjoy that he had understood Doku's directions. The boy had used the strange words meant to describe the various quadrants of the forest, but Khan didn't need further explanations.

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A peculiar but familiar scene unfolded in front of the recruits when Khan led them into an empty spot near one of the mountains. They found three fuming cauldrons at the center of the area and far more Niqols than usual around them. Moreover, those aliens were busy with different activities at that time. They didn't limit themselves to drink.

The Niqols had naturally divided themselves into multiple groups, and all of them featured many half-empty wooden cups. Still, some had brought strange instruments that played sad tones meant to set the party's mood. Khan saw violin-like devices and long flutes, and a few aliens even chanted simple lines in the Niqols' language to accompany their music.

Khan couldn't help but notice how some Niqols near the trees were smoking. Others even deeper in the forest were crying or punching the thick trunks to vent their feelings. The scenery was quite incredible due to its diversity, but Khan inevitably fell in a daze when a familiar dress appeared in his vision.

Liiza was standing alone, with her back lying on a tree. She wasn't even facing the empty area filled with Niqols. She was staring at the dark depths of the forest, but her eyes moved toward Khan for a brief second when she sensed his gaze on her figure.

'Damn you,' Khan cursed in his mind when he confirmed that Liiza was wearing the same dress used during the formal celebration from a few weeks ago. 'She has definitely done that on purpose.'

The reason behind Liiza's behavior quickly became clear in Khan's mind. Almost all the Niqols turned toward the recruits when they noticed their arrival, and Khan saw many girls showing attractive smiles when his gaze met theirs.

'Don't tell me that she has predicted this outcome,' Khan wondered as a series of Niqols met during the previous parties reached the recruits and started dragging them toward the cauldrons.

Azni reached Khan before anyone else could, and she directly hugged him instead of limiting herself to a formal bow. The scene surprised the recruits, especially when they saw Khan wrapping his arms around the girl's back, but the other Niqols soon forced them to move their gazes away from the two.

"I'm sure Ilman will be here at any moment," Azni whispered in Khan's ear before breaking the hug. "You might want to seize this chance now that she is alone."

"You know I can't," Khan sighed while showing a sad smile.

"Don't be so paranoid," Azni almost shouted before recalling to keep her voice down. "You just went through a deadly situation together. You'll appear as the trustworthy friend who won't let her be alone in this sad moment."

Khan felt that Azni's words made sense, but he didn't know whether his desire to approach Liiza was playing tricks with his mind. Yet, he eventually accepted that he couldn't think straight in front of her stunning dress.

Khan was almost about to ignore Azni's words, but she added something that changed everything. "Doku is also set on finding you a girl tonight, and I have no power over that."

Khan glanced behind Azni's shoulder at that point and noticed Doku looking at him from the other side of the empty spot. The Niqols wore a broad smile, and he winked a few times when he caught Khan's gaze.

'I need to teach him how to wink properly,' Khan took note in his mind before heaving a sigh and taking Azni's full cup from her hands.

Azni limited herself to laugh at that gesture, and she pretended not to watch Khan walking toward Liiza while she went toward one cauldron. Doku frowned, and his eyes darted between his girlfriend and Khan. He couldn't miss that suspicious interaction. Something was clearly up, but Azni's admonishing gaze soon fell on him and forced him to stop thinking too much about the matter.

"You shouldn't be here," Liiza whispered when she heard familiar steps resounding behind her and stopping at her side.

Khan reached the tree right next to her before laying his back on its trunk. He didn't even peek at Liiza while his eyes moved toward the depths of the forest.

"What was I supposed to do?" Khan replied while taking a sip from his cup and making sure that his voice couldn't spread too far. "You wore the dress."

"That barely counts as an excuse," Liiza scoffed, but her cheeks inevitably paled due to her faint blush. "Also, you have become too popular lately. I needed a distraction."

"You did it on purpose then," Khan chuckled. "You have gotten quite possessive."

"And yet you are the one barely holding yourself back," Liiza commented while raising her cup to drink.

Khan chuckled again, but he didn't say anything. Liiza was right. Her dress was too much for him.

Silent minutes passed. Khan and Liiza continued to stare at the darkness of the forest while the party continued behind them. The music even grew happier at times, but they didn't move from their spot. It was as if they were waiting for one of them to empty their cups.

"Won't you join the party?" Liiza asked. "It's proper, and I bet many girls are dying to meet you."

"I'm exactly where I want to be," Khan replied. "Almost exactly."

"Me too," Liiza added. "Almost exactly."

Another wave of silence fell among the two, but they eventually started to talk about random stuff. Doku, Azni, and Asyat even brought them refills of their cups every once in a while before exchanging a few jokes and leaving them alone again. Azni used the times when she visited the couple on her own to explain how the other two didn't suspect anything. They were simply happy that Liiza wasn't alone.

The couple ended up remaining alone for most of the party, even with those occasional visits, and their unique position didn't allow them to notice Ilman's arrival. No one actually saw him since he never fully stepped into the empty spot.

Ilman had every intention to join the party due to Liiza's presence, but he changed his mind when he noticed the girl wearing expressions that he had never seen on her face.

Ilman had been in love with Liiza for so long that he found it easy to notice the slight differences in her face. The girl smiled and chuckled from time to time, but that wasn't the most surprising aspect of the matter. Her eyes carried happiness that he couldn't generate even before the events of the arranged marriage.

The Nigols limited himself to find in Khan the source of Liiza's strange behavior before leaving the area. He had never left the darkness among the trees, so no one became aware of his short visit.

Chapter 153 - Love

The party ended late, at less than two hours from the beginning of Professor Supyan's lesson. The recruits hurried back to their habitation once the event ended, but Khan remained a bit longer in the empty spot even after Liiza left.

Khan had already decided that sleeping was pointless since the first lesson would happen soon. He preferred to spend an hour meditating and covering the time needed by his deal with Liiza that night. Very few things could match sex, and resting with his girlfriend in his arms was one of them. He only had to go through the day to reach that point.

The beginning of his second week in [The Pure Trees] looked messy. Khan left his spot only to find Niqols sleeping around the cauldrons and in many isolated areas nearby. The party had created new couples, had broken old ones, had caused laughs and cries, and had allowed the aliens to accept the death of their companions.

The scene was incredibly silent. It felt almost unreal that those sleeping aliens could cause the previous night's mess, and Khan only smiled at that thought.

His second month on Nitis had basically just begun. Less than five months separated Khan from the end of his first year inside the Global Army, and he couldn't even begin to describe how much his life had changed in that short period.

Khan had gone from being a two-faced kid to his current vaguely mature appearance. His faces had almost fused in that period, but his number of masks had increased. The different political and social necessities had forced him to hone his lying skills and push them into a superior realm.

His secrets had also increased, and that only led to a complicated mental state. His relationship with Liiza made him unable to remain completely loyal to the humans, and the hidden scenes in his nightmares had ruined his initial beliefs. Nitis had forced Khan to shed away most of his previous self and find a character free from his previous values.

The conflicting emotions inside his mind didn't stop him from having a clear vision of his path ahead. Khan wasn't a mass of desperation unaware of his place in the world anymore. He was still an ignorant kid, but he knew what he wanted and how to approach it. He had even discovered many talents in the period that went from his first day on Onia to now.

Moreover, his growth had confirmed something that he had started to accept since his meeting with Zalpa. Khan had developed more in the almost three months spent in foreign planets than on Earth, and the matter didn't only involve his battle prowess. His character had matured in ways that would have been impossible inside Ylaco's training camp.

The idea of staying away from Earth until his character and knowledge grew enough to face Bret without falling for his lies sounded reasonable now. The ideal scenario saw Khan learning about the truth behind his tragedy before meeting his father, but that would most likely require years, and he didn't know if he could remain on alien planets for so long. He wasn't even sure whether his doubts would remain bearable throughout that period.

Khan realized that he couldn't follow all his desires without sacrificing something. His packed schedule had already taught him that. Returning to Earth to face his father would separate him from Liiza, but remaining on Nitis wouldn't give him the chance to learn about core pieces of his past.

Those heavy thoughts vanished when Khan noticed a familiar figure partially hidden behind a tree. A smile appeared on his face as he approached it, and his expression struggled to show only one emotion after he saw the entirety of the scene.

George didn't go back to the underground habitation, but the other recruits didn't mind that too much since he usually attended Professor Supyan's lesson. Khan didn't bother to keep his companions in check since he was busy with Liiza and his heavy mind, so finding George sleeping on the tree felt a bit surprising. Yet, the funniest aspect of that scene was the Niqols resting with her head over his shoulder.

'Her name should be Havaa if I'm not wrong,' Khan thought while inspecting the girl sleeping with George.

Havaa belonged to the first year. She featured the usual Niqols' beauty, and her body didn't fall behind in that field. Her only peculiarity was her hairstyle since she shaved the left side of her head.

The other side had long white hair combed into braids, but it was hard to focus on it when her shaved part featured a white tattoo that stretched behind her ear and until the base of her neck.

Khan's smile only broadened when he inspected the duo's clothes. George's chest was bare, and his robe hung from his waist. Instead, Havaa was still wearing her tracksuit, but it was partially open to create a cleavage.

Khan decided to kick George's foot lightly a few times when he felt the urge to explode into a laugh. It took a while to wake up the boy, but his eyes eventually opened, and his eyebrows quickly furrowed to create a frown.

George began to ask something, but his hoarse voice didn't manage to go too far once he noticed the girl sleeping on his shoulder. His eyes widened, and his frown relaxed at that point. His hangover vanished in an instant as he slowly crawled out of that position, laid Havaa on the tree, and got on his feet to leave the area.

Khan was on the verge of exploding during that scene, and his urge even intensified when George turned to shoot an admonishing glance at him. The recruit wanted to leave the area as soon as possible, but Khan didn't seem willing to move until he had enjoyed himself long enough.

Khan decided to move when George started to beg him through his eyes. The two boys had to cross a large part of the forest before George felt confident enough to stop silencing his breath. The scene made Khan laugh loudly, which triggered the excuses that his friend had prepared during the walk.

"I didn't do anything!" George explained. "I wasn't feeling well, so I sat there to recover a bit. Havaa just threw herself at me when she found me."

"Havaa," Khan sneered. "You remember her name."

"That's my job as an envoy of the human species," George stated.
"Everything I do is for the greater good of the Global Ar-."

George had to interrupt his line since something escaped from his stomach and climbed his throat to appear in his mouth. Khan laughed when he saw the boy hurrying behind the nearest tree and vomiting what he had yet to digest.

"Didn't you like Natalie?" Khan asked when George left the tree and started to walk with him again.

"I didn't do anything with Havaa," George repeated. "We might have kissed a few times, but what's a kiss for the Niqols? I bet it has the same value as a handshake. Besides, we were both fairly... We had both enjoyed the party, so we decided to sleep."

"You'd be surprised by how much these small gestures mean for the Niqols," Khan laughed. "The point isn't in the kiss, but in the fact that she has decided to kiss you."

George's eyes widened, and a tinge of worry even appeared inside them. Khan was right, but he couldn't give up so easily. He would have to admit that he had flirted with Havaa through the whole party otherwise.

"How come you know so much about the Niqols now?" George asked. "Also, you can't really speak. We all saw you spending the entire night with Miss Liiza. I decided to get drunk rather than listen to Kelly's complaints."

"That girl should try to face what we have gone through," Khan sighed. "I'm so close to snapping at her."

"You lose if you do," George commented.

"I know," Khan replied. "The world is proving me right anyway. I only hope she cares more about the mission than her petty pride."

The comment made the two boys fall silent for a while. They continued to walk through the forest, but the topic about Liiza remained inside George's mind. After all, he was the only one among the recruits who knew a bit more about the matter.

"So," George eventually said when his curiosity and worry had the better over him, "Did you enjoy the party with her?"

"George, I'm not dumb," Khan lied. "I won't do anything stupid. Azni and the others didn't want Miss Liiza to be alone after everything that has happened, and she can't be too rude toward a human due to her role."

"You sure looked committed," George teased before retches surged through his throat and forced him to hide behind a tree again.

The boys planned to meditate once they reached the spot that would hold Professor Supyan's lesson, but a strange scene unfolded in their visions after they crossed the membrane.

The path taken by Khan and George led them directly into the central empty area of the academy. It was easier to reach their destination from there since they wouldn't have to keep track of their position inside the forest.

Ilman was sitting on his knees right at the center of the empty square. His stance seemed to be part of a martial art, and the scene inevitably worried the two boys. The Niqols opened his eyes when he heard them, and his stern voice soon resounded in the area.

"I was waiting for you, Khan," Ilman exclaimed.

"Is something the matter?" Khan asked in a plain voice.

"I saw you and Liiza yesterday," Ilman continued.

"Azni told me that you would have come," Khan quickly declared as wild thoughts ran through his mind. "I must have missed you among the crowd."

Khan pretended not to understand the meaning carried by Ilman's words, and the act turned out to be relatively easy. He didn't do much with Liiza last night. The two had even been on their respective trees throughout the whole party.

'Is he so jealous?' Khan wondered while glancing at George.

The boy had gone full battle mode when he sensed that faint threat. George completely forgot about his hangover and prepared himself to fight. His hand even instinctively went looking for his sword at his side, but it eventually stopped when he recalled that he was unarmed.

"George, we are inside the academy ground," Khan scolded, and the recruit quickly did his best to relax his tense posture.

The academy didn't allow fights inside the entire valley, so Khan felt at ease even in that situation. He didn't believe that Ilman would attack him right in the middle of the central square. Also, he didn't do anything that could cause such a reaction.

"You didn't miss me," Ilman announced while straightening his position and performing a polite bow. "I decided to leave before someone could notice me."

"Why?" Khan asked as his expression remained friendly.

"I couldn't ruin a party that my peers needed to overcome their grief," Ilman explained. "I wanted to handle this matter privately when we wouldn't have casualties."

"What matter?" Khan continued with his questions.

Khan wanted Ilman to be clear about his reasons. He honestly struggled to believe that such intense jealousy could exist in the world, but he was against a dramatic Niqols who had tried to date the same girl for years. That special situation could prove him wrong.

"I want to fight you for the right of making Liiza happy!" Ilman shouted. "I have always believed to be the one fated to make her smile, but life has put a contender on my path! I appreciate your past advice, but love comes before everything! We must decide who is better among us now to make it easier for her!"

The statement left the two speechless. Khan and George even exchanged a glance to make sure that they had heard Ilman correctly.

"I'm not sure I understand," Khan eventually responded.

"She will have to decide between us at some point!" Ilman shouted. "I can't let her go through that struggle. It's better to settle this now when the loss of one of us won't cause her too much pain!"

George frowned, and Khan remained utterly speechless. That interaction confirmed that Ilman was crazy, but it didn't tell him how to get out of that situation.

"There has been a misunderstanding," Khan tried to explain. "Miss Liiza and I are barely friends. I just made sure that she didn't remain alone with her grief after what we have been through last morning."

"My eyes don't lie," Ilman continued while bending his legs and raising his arms to prepare his palms. "You made her enjoy herself. You are a candidate for her happiness, so we must fight!"

"Can't she be happy with more than one person?" Khan questioned. "Isn't that what friends do for each other?"

"You don't know her as I do," Ilman shook his head. "She won't accept more than one person, so I can't let her end up in front of a painful choice!"

"Khan?" George asked as doubts filled his mind.

"We are still inside the academy," Khan reassured George. "Don't worry."

Khan had to interrupt his line since a shadow darted next to him and forced him to sidestep its attack. Ilman had been incredibly fast, almost as fast as him, and he had delivered a palm strike that had discharged a wave of violent mana in the air.

George went battle-ready again. He stretched his fingers to create a blade with his right hand and tried to run around Khan to reach Ilman, but a kick suddenly landed on his abdomen and made him fly away. The attack didn't hurt too much. It was a thrust rather than an actual blow, and the recruit understood the meaning behind that gesture only after he landed on the ground a few meters from his friend.

Ilman didn't touch George. Khan had been the one to push him away. George could even see his friend glaring at him for an instant before turning toward his opponent.

"Won't they expel you for this?" Khan asked as he sidestepped an incoming palm strike.

The palm released its mana when it passed next to Khan's chest. He could sense his insides tremble at the faint contact with that force. He could immediately understand that a direct hit would cause serious internal injuries.

"Love stands above the academy!" Ilman shouted as he twisted his body and turned his palm toward Khan's chest.

Khan could sense mana accumulating in Ilman's hand, so he jumped backward. The Niqols released his energy at that point, and part of it ended up touching Khan before he managed to retreat.

A faint weight had appeared at the base of Khan's chest after he landed on the ground. Blood had even accumulated on the corners of his mouth. Ilman's palm didn't even touch him, but the mana released in the attack had been enough to hurt him.

Chapter 154 - Delusions

Calculations quickly happened inside Khan's mind. His first instinct was to dodge Ilman's attacks until a professor arrived. The Niqols was fast, but Khan was faster, and his stamina was incredible. His mana capacity seemed even above that, so that approach was theoretically doable.

Yet, that tactic could only work if the professors decided to rule in his favor. Moreover, Khan would still need to dodge attacks for a bit more than an hour. He could probably do that with his speed and battle experience, but he wouldn't be able to avoid ending up in poor condition.

The Lightning-demon style gave Khan exceptional speed, but it was also an aggressive martial art. It expressed its true potential only when attacking. Relying on it only to dodge and run away would force him to ignore more than half of his techniques.

Ilman wasn't even weak either. The Niqols was a student in the second year driven by a burning passion that ruled most aspects of his life. Khan could guess that his opponent had trained with mana since an early age, and his unique position also gave him an annoying advantage.

The Niqols' martial arts were relatively simple and focused on the manipulation of the mana's nature rather than on actual moves. However, Ilman's tribe handled the development of new applications of mana, and most of them came from their study of human methods.

Khan didn't need to think too much about that topic to realize how Ilman's speed didn't come from the iconic martial arts of his species. His forms and stances felt familiar. His tribe probably had developed them by fusing the Niqols' traditional methods to the human styles.

Ilman's speed and deadly attacks put Khan in a tough position. His confidence in his abilities was high, but that situation could be too challenging even for him. Also, he didn't like the idea of suffering injuries during such an important part of his training. He would hate to stop attending the lessons because of eventual wounds.

'Do I really have to fight him?' Khan wondered as Ilman turned toward him, raised his palms, and bent his legs forward.

Khan's expertise with pretenses and lies was almost useless when his opponent was crazy. He wasn't even guilty of anything as far as Ilman knew. The Niqols had simply snapped due to his own paranoia.

Worries connected to the mission and Nitis' political situation surged in his mind as he saw Ilman charging ahead with both his arms stretched forward. It felt easier to follow his movements when staring directly at him, but that didn't ease the conflicting thoughts fighting inside Khan.

Part of Khan believed that he didn't have to touch Ilman at all. Hurting such a promising, wealthy, and famous Niqols could turn to ashes everything that he had obtained in the past weeks. The Global Army might even send him back to Ylaco if his presence on Nitis became a problem for the relationship between the two species.

On the other hand, the Niqols would probably justify Khan if he defeated Ilman without hurting him deeply. Those aliens didn't mind ranks and statuses too much. They might even compensate him for the issues connected to their unstable emotions.

Khan slipped under the double palm strike that was about to land on his chest. Mana exploded above his head as he slid under Ilman and grabbed his right ankle.

The world in Ilman's vision turned upside-down as Khan stood up and pulled his ankle. The Niqols slammed his face on the ground and tensed his body to prepare for a blow, but nothing arrived.

Khan's martial art focused on his legs, so he instinctively knew how to counter similar moves. Ilman's weakness was in his heavy reliance on palm strikes, which often left him defenseless after releasing the accumulated mana.

It was enough to aim at Ilman's legs to put him on the ground and gain the upper hand in the battle. Khan had only needed to see his attacks three times to understand that fatal weakness. Part of that came from his battle experience, but he couldn't deny that the Niqols' moves had flaws. Khan could imagine an eventual fusion with those fast moves and the palm strikes, but Ilman appeared unable to mix the two styles correctly.

Ilman's style felt like a high-risk, high-reward martial art similar to the Divine Reaper. A single attack could take out or kill an opponent since the speed gained with the sprints enhanced the palm strikes. However, it also left the Niqols exposed if the move failed to hit the target.

"Can we talk about this?" Khan almost begged Ilman while letting go of his ankle. "I know we have different values when it comes to this stuff, but fighting isn't the solution."

"This isn't about us!" Ilman shouted while rotating on his back to stand up and shoot toward Khan.

The Niqols was trying to attack Khan without establishing a proper foothold. The latter only had to sweep his legs to interrupt the move and make him fall on his back.

Khan wanted to say something else, but Ilman didn't remain still for even a second. The Niqols curled toward him and tried to grab his legs, but Khan promptly jumped backward.

Ilman didn't try to stand up at that time, so his range was far from great. Retreating by mere thirty centimeters put Khan outside of his reach and the area his mana could cover. Yet, Ilman managed to surprise him.

Khan had used the previous attacks to evaluate what Ilman's palm strikes could do. Still, it turned out that he had underestimated the Niqols' ability in the manipulation field.

The mana that shot out of Ilman's palms when he stretched his arms and sat on the ground didn't take the shape of violent clouds. Instead, it transformed into two beam-like attacks that took Khan by surprise and hit both his shins.

Khan almost fell on his knees. His legs felt weak even if no injuries appeared on his skin. The beams of mana had torn his robe, but the outsides of his shins seemed to be intact. Still, the sense of weakness that filled those spots almost cut his connection with his ankles and warned him that something inside had broken.

Khan promptly jumped backward again before forcefully slamming his feet on the ground. He performed a technique that made mana flow downward and created a deep hole among the short dark grass during the impact.

Pain arrived at that point. The mana that flowed through his legs and came out of his soles described his injuries' nature. His shinbones were fine, but his muscles weren't as reactive as he wished. They also felt sore and weak.

It seemed that Ilman's last attack had lost a lot of destructiveness to obtain its ranged properties. The azure beams had been enough to hurt Khan, but they didn't inflict much damage. He felt able to express most of his power even after that blow, but he firmly believed that fighting before suppressing the internal injuries would only worsen his condition.

It became evident that Khan couldn't continue dodging. It turned out that he didn't know enough about Ilman's power to make that approach doable, but he still hesitated to fight back properly. Luckily for him, he had finally started to gain an idea of how the Niqols' crazy mind worked.

"Is your idea of Miss Liiza so poor?" Khan asked in a chilling voice as he wore a disappointed expression.

Ilman was using those seconds to get back on his feet, but the sudden comment made him stop his tracks. His beliefs had always been firm due to the intense love that backed them. However, something in Khan's statement made him hesitate.

"Don't you dare to offend her!" Ilman eventually shouted as anger filled his mind.

The Niqols charged forward again, but the world in his vision began to rotate before he could reach his target. Ilman couldn't understand what had happened, but he found himself staring at the dark sky when his eyes managed to focus.

A faint pressure appeared on his chest. Ilman suddenly saw that Khan had disappeared from the spot on his initial path and had reappeared next to him. Khan was pressing the Niqols on the ground with his foot, but he didn't apply too much strength. He preferred to talk now.

"You are offending her," Khan continued in his chilling voice. "I don't know Miss Liiza at all, but yesterday's matters have proven that she isn't weak. You are the only one who thinks that she needs protection."

Lies fused with truths during Khan's statements, but Ilman's found his tone heavier to endure than his words. The Niqols generally were quite sensitive to feelings, and Ilman could almost see past the masks that Khan was wearing to hide his real intentions.

Khan was choosing his words carefully, but he wasn't using only lies. His disappointment was fake, but the coldness in his voice was real. He pretended not to know Liiza, but everything he said about her was true.

"I'm doing this for her!" Ilman complained while lifting his palms to attack the leg pressed on his chest.

Khan's leg disappeared before the arrival of the palm strikes, and a force suddenly landed on Ilman's side. The Niqols slid over the ground and rotated in on himself until he managed to stop his body. He even tried to stand up to attack, but Khan's sharp words arrived before he could muster his strength.

"Did she ask for it?" Khan asked. "I thought Niqols strived for freedom, but your feelings try to remove it. Is that your idea of love?"

Ilman's eyes widened, and the mana that he had accumulated in his hands dispersed as his concentration crumbled. His idea of love was immature, but he had always believed that such intense feelings couldn't be wrong, especially since his peers seemed to admire them.

Khan showed him a different perspective, a point of view that the Niqols around Ilman wouldn't describe even if they could consider it. Ilman's social network it impossible for him to doubt his beliefs, but Khan took care of the matter that day.

"How can you know how Niqols feel?" Ilman responded, but his question only made Khan's voice grow colder.

"I've learnt a bit about Miss Liiza's situation during my stay here," Khan revealed. "I've also learnt a bit about you. Did you think that you could win her over through perseverance? Also, how can you think that the Niqols' methods would work on her after what she went through?"

Ilman was mostly trying to reject Khan's words, but the last comment ended up making a lot of sense. Even a foreigner could understand Liiza's detachment from the Niqols' species. It was only normal for her to hate potentially toxic behaviors connected to the iconic intense emotions.

"My peers appreciate them!" Ilman shouted in a desperate attempt to remain on the right side of the argument. "I embody what a Niqols should be!"

"But you don't want the others, right?" Khan asked as his voice gained some warmth. "I understand that Niqols and humans are different, but we have limits to how insistent we can be, especially after clear refusals. Maybe you should work a bit on yourself or give up on Miss Liiza."

"Do humans give up so easily?" Ilman asked while wearing a stupefied expression.

"I wouldn't say easily," Khan pretended to think about the topic for a bit before continuing. "I guess we respect boundaries better than Niqols. Your feelings seem incredible when everything goes well, but they can turn into something pretty awful when it doesn't."

Khan decided to inflict the deadly blow at that point. He cleared his throat while removing all the coldness from his voice and trying to appear as if he wanted to teach something to the Niqols. "Look at where your love led you. You have decided to attack someone who has only done his best to ease Miss Liiza's grief. You didn't only break the academy's rules and made things incredibly difficult for me. You have actually tried to reduce the potential happiness of your loved one."

Ilman felt as if his world was falling apart. Everything Khan had said was correct. He only had to look at the matter from outside his delusions to understand that.

The Niqols turned toward George, and the latter nodded when he saw Khan glaring at him in the distance. Ilman didn't know what to think anymore after that last confirmation. He felt as if he had wasted the last years of his life.

"Look, I understand jealousy," Khan eventually said in a relaxed tone, "But I was only talking to her after spending an entire morning fighting leeches under the surface. Isn't that normal? Also, did you plan to lock Miss Liiza up in a cave if she ever accepted dating you? You can't just avoid others from interacting with her."

The destruction of Ilman's beliefs only quickened as Khan continued to throw words at him. The Niqols often considered humans cynical, but they could make reasonable points during a conversation, and Ilman tasted that first-hand. Still, that new perspective gave him something that he had slowly started to recover during the last years. It showed him that hope existed.

"Thank you, Khan," Ilman said after standing up and performing a bow. "I thought I had hit a wall with Liiza, but you showed me that I could do much more. Your friends aren't wrong about you. You are really good with women."

Khan suppressed the desire to glare at George. The whole problem was his fault, and the boy seemed to understand that since he diverted his gaze and pretended to be ignorant about the situation.

"I don't know exactly how it works here," Khan responded after performing a bow, "But we can forget about this matter if you want. I don't want problems with the professors, and being the reason behind messes can ruin my position on Nitis. Let's pretend that nothing has happened, okay?"

"Nonsense!" Ilman shouted, leaving both Khan and George speechless. "We must follow the rules! I'll see the professors immediately and report everything!"

Khan wanted to say something, but Ilman quickly turned and shot toward the forest. His speed had increased now that anger didn't cloud his mind anymore. He seemed able to express his real power with his newfound calm.

Khan saw that he would struggle to catch up with him. Nevertheless, he tried to shoot after Ilman anyway, but a sharp wave of pain spread from his shins when he bent his legs. The Niqols had disappeared among the trees by the time Khan managed to focus on his surroundings again.

Chapter 155 - Feelings

"You are the master of love," George mocked while approaching Khan.

"I will say that everything is your fault if they try to put some blame on me," Khan sighed as he straightened his position and checked his legs.

Khan was overall fine. His mana was already fixing the faint damage suffered during the battle, but dealing with internal injuries appeared quite bothersome. His body seemed to require more care, and only the meditations could give it that.

"That sounds fair," George laughed before showing a tinge of regret. "I honestly didn't expect things to reach this point."

"I know," Khan said while patting George's shoulder. "It's just my bad luck."

"Says the guy who has human and Niqols girls trying to get under his robe," George scoffed.

"I feel the sudden urge to contact Natalie," Khan joked, and George promptly shot a worried glance toward him.

"C'mon, man," George pleaded. "We are friends, right? We don't do this to each other."

"I should even ask Azni to bring Havaa along more often," Khan continued while walking toward the square where they usually waited for Professor Supyan.

"Spare me from your anger," George almost begged Khan as he followed behind him. "I like Natalie."

"How did you even end up with Havaa then?" Khan asked as honest confusion filled his face.

"A man has urges!" George proudly announced.

"You need to take lessons from Ilman," Khan laughed.

"Khan, we are young and talented recruits in the Global Army," George explained while wrapping an arm around Khan's shoulder and waving a hand toward the distance. "We should enjoy our popularity before a girl manages to lock us up in a marriage."

"What are you doing?" Khan asked while pointing at the hand waving in the distance.

"I'm showing you the vast number of girls that we can have before settling," George replied while making broader gestures.

"Is Natalie in the settling plan or the hand part?" Khan asked without lowering his fingers.

"I don't know," George responded before giving up on involving Khan in his jokes. "She is beautiful, and her family would be a perfect match for mine, but she is way too cold. I must say that the Niqols' straightforward character is far better. I even find it enticing."

"As long as it doesn't get to Ilman's levels," Khan added.

"As long as it doesn't get to Ilman's levels," George repeated before wearing a serious expression.

George saw that Khan wasn't saying anything about the issue on purpose, but he didn't feel good about ignoring the topic completely. Ilman's matters were partially his fault. He wasn't in control of the Niqols' craziness, but that didn't remove his share of guilt.

"I will take the blame if they try to do something to you," George announced after remaining silent for a few seconds.

Khan glanced at his companion and studied his regretful expression. Part of him wished to reveal everything about Liiza and talk about her openly, but he suppressed that urge. Khan limited himself to appreciate how his lascivious friend had an honorable character at his core.

"You don't have to," Khan forced himself to say.

"Of course I have," George declared. "Losing Nitis won't do much to my career. I will still be a wealthy soldier if they send me back to Earth. Besides, I owe you."

"You need to get out of that forest," Khan scolded. "The daylight is approaching, and you can't face it in this condition."

"Isn't it better to remain like this until the crisis is over?" George asked. "I feel I can be more efficient."

"We are already at our second crisis, George," Khan sighed. "I'm starting to believe that there will always be more problems, even if you decide to remain on Earth. You never know. An alien spaceship might fall in front of you and create a living hell."

"I have no idea how you manage to keep going and make it seem so easy," George exclaimed.

"I have many talents," Khan laughed before wearing his serious expression. "Make sure to focus on Professor Supyan's lessons. They might really help you."

"Did they help you?" George questioned.

"I have other methods to handle everything," Khan announced as Liiza's face appeared in his vision.

The duo fell silent as their square appeared in front of them. Both Khan and George needed to rest, so they didn't hesitate to sit on the active azure symbols on the ground and fall deep into their meditations.

The azure symbols among the dark grass improved their sensitivity to mana and forced their minds to notice the slight differences in that energy. The squares were open to everyone, so the two boys had picked the habit to improve their perception when they had some time to kill. Their meditations didn't require the entirety of their concentration anyway, so they could multitask during those moments.

An empty figure eventually entered their range and moved through the mana to reach them. Khan and George opened their eyes and stood up to perform a polite bow toward Professor Supyan. An awkward silence fell among the group after the Niqols replied to the gesture with a similar salute.

Professor Supyan appeared slightly annoyed and sleepy, even if it were hard to notice anything from his cold expression. His mana couldn't help in the matter either because the Niqols knew how to keep it hidden inside his body. The two boys only had that vague impression by the few strands of messy hair that stood out on his head.

"Did Ilman wake you up, [Guru]?" Khan asked after deciding that showing initiative was the best thing to do in that situation.

"He did," Professor Supyan confirmed. "He told me a funny story."

Professor Supyan reached for Khan's head at that point, and the latter instinctively bent back to avoid it. Yet, the Niqols nodded to express that he had no ill intentions, so Khan eventually let him lay a hand on his forehead.

The same white membrane that Khan had seen enveloping Zeliha covered his skin in a few seconds. He could sense its light releasing a glow that forced his flesh to inform the technique about its state. It didn't take Professor Supyan much to find the injuries on Khan's chests and shins, and his ability soon acted to heal them.

Khan felt foreign energy seeping through his skin and reaching the injured spots before attracting other brims of mana inside his body. It seemed that the technique didn't rely only on Professor Supyan's energy. It also used Khan's mana to originate a healing process that suited his body almost perfectly.

Khan couldn't help but close his eyes while a peaceful feeling spread inside him. It was strange to have someone else's energy flowing through his insides, but that process didn't cause any discomfort. Actually, it triggered sensations very similar to those felt while he was with Liiza.

"Only a few humans have experienced our [Harmony Technique]," Professor Supyan exclaimed as the membrane broke and he retracted his hand. "How was it?"

"I felt at peace, I think," Khan honestly replied while touching his injured areas and jumping on his spot.

A slight soreness still existed in his shins, but everything else appeared completely fine. The meditation had already appeased his injuries, but the healing technique had almost put an end to them. The weight on his chest had vanished, and no pain afflicted his legs now.

"The technique can only provide energy," Professor Supyan explained. "Your body does the healing. The emotions that we have to use to trigger that process often remind us about our peaceful moments. You have probably thought about something that makes you truly happy."

Khan nodded, but he couldn't suppress the appearance of a warm smile. He didn't even sense it coming. Thoughts about Liiza reappeared in his mind at Professor Supyan's words, and Khan realized once again how important that girl had become in his life.

"How is Ilman?" Khan asked when he snapped back to reality.

"He is fine," Professor Supyan snorted as his voice gained an angry tone. "We are lucky that you were his target. He might have really killed weaker students. The professors have decided to suspend him from the lessons. He won't bother you anymore."

Khan and George bowed, but Professor Supyan promptly stopped them. "Don't. It's our fault for misjudging how dangerous he could be. Hopefully your teachings will help him."

Khan's eyebrows arched when he saw Professor Supyan shooting one of his rare smiles toward him. It seemed that Ilman's report didn't stop at his action. It also involved the words that Khan had spoken during his scolding.

"Enough wasting time," Professor Supyan eventually ordered as his expression returned completely stern. "Get back on the ground and repeat the rotation of emotions. Start with the positive to reach the negative. You have yet to show me decent results in the manipulation of mana."

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The long day eventually went by. The lessons brought Khan and George to their limits, and even the other recruits didn't handle them too well. The latter tried their best during them, but their minds never managed to become fully involved with that type of teaching. Only the sensitivity class felt useful, but the others were too detached from the human methods for their tastes.

Khan returned inside the underground habitation with everyone, but he did that only to pick his null-grade blunt knife and a change of clothes. Kelly tried to approach him while he walked toward the staircase, but he only needed to show the cube to make her abandon any idea of starting another discussion.

Khan didn't forget to deactivate his cube's tracker before moving toward the edges of the forest and leaving with Snow. He eventually decided to sleep during the travel to add almost three hours to the four requested by Liiza.

It didn't take much before Khan entered the usual cave in the marsh and saw the familiar white eyes lightning up at its end. Liiza had just woken up, but she didn't hesitate to shoot out of her blanket to reach her boyfriend.

"I heard about Ilman," Liiza announced while locking her hands on his shoulders and checking his body.

"I'm fine," Khan laughed. "Ilman never landed a clean blow on me, and Professor Supyan has used the [Harmony Technique] even."

"I didn't think he would react like that," Liiza explained in a regretful tone. "I would have tried to stop you from helping him."

"It's fine," Khan continued to laugh, but his voice gained a teasing tone. "Aren't you going to ask me more about the [Harmony Technique]? Don't you want to know what appeared in my mind?"

Liiza blushed and lowered her gaze. She released Khan's shoulders and let him wrap his hands around her waist. Her eyes went on him, and they ended up staring at each other for a while before Khan decided to speak again.

"How bad is it if I thought about you during the technique?" Khan whispered while slowly leading Liiza back on the wall at the bottom of the cave.

"Pretty bad," Liiza revealed without trying to oppose Khan's actions. "You must be desperate to see your happiness in someone known for a bit more than a month."

"I have as much desperation as you want," Khan grinned.

"Don't joke about it," Liiza pouted. "I'd rather have you face that seriously when we are together."

Liiza's back hit the wall a few seconds after her reply. The couple continued to get closer as Khan made their foreheads touch, but Liiza lowered her face to avoid falling prey to intense kisses already.

"I don't," Khan said while letting his feelings sweep away his tiredness.

The couple spent entire minutes in that position without doing much. Liiza even wrapped her arms around Khan's neck at some point, but she didn't raise her head.

"Did you accumulate four hours of sleep?" Liiza eventually asked in a sweet voice.

"Almost three," Khan announced. "I plan to do the last afterward."

Liiza's blush intensified. Khan didn't need to explain what he meant with his words, and she found herself biting her lower lip when she thought about it.

"Did you really think about me during the [Harmony Technique]?" Liiza questioned in an even sweeter voice.

"I felt the same sensations that I'm experiencing now," Khan stated.

"Khan, it has only been one month," Liiza whimpered while finally raising her face.

Khan frowned when he noticed her watery eyes. Liiza seemed on the verge of crying, but she didn't appear sad. He even tried to rely on his sensitivity to mana to understand her feelings, but the outcome of his inspection was confusing. Khan sensed that Liiza was overflowing with happiness.

"What is it?" Khan asked as he raised one hand to caress her cheek. "Talk to me."

"I'm afraid," Liiza sniffed. "I want to say it, but I think that it's too soon. I don't want to ruin everything either, and our situation is so bad. I don't know wha-."

Liiza couldn't finish her line since Khan hugged her. He could understand her completely. He had gone through a long talk about love that same morning. Revealing their feelings now would only make it harder to keep their relationship a secret. Both of them knew that, but Liiza needed him to reassure her.

"It will happen," Khan whispered while leaving a kiss on her hair. "Don't treat your feelings like a curse, especially if they are for me."

Liiza clung to Khan's head and made sure to seep her fingers into his hair. That deep and instinctive understanding felt incredibly reassuring. She almost couldn't believe that they had reached that state in such a short time.

"You can ignore the hours tonight," Liiza eventually whispered. "But only tonight."

Chapter 156 - Terror

Life in [The Pure Trees] was mostly peaceful and busy. Everyone knew about the arrival of the daylight, but no one dared to ruin the relaxed aura that filled the forest at the center of the seven mountains.

Kelly and the other skeptical recruits eventually had to accept that the new environment brought clear advantages. Their training felt smoother, their improving sensitivity to mana increased their overall awareness, and their constant efforts to control that energy benefited their martial arts in ways that they didn't expect.

Only the manipulation field remained too complicated for most recruits since it belonged to a type of training that was too distant from what the humans believed to be useful.

Of course, that realization didn't arrive in a matter of days. The recruits had to spend two more weeks immersed in that alien environment to notice and accept that their level was increasing in ways that the human training camps had never managed to provide. That realization didn't even come on its own. Brandon, Kelly, and George had to reach the competent proficiency level with their martial arts to make the clear advantages of the alien academy impossible to deny.

The three recruits weren't poor like Khan or lazy like Luke. They were Martha's rich version. Their families had given them martial arts before their enrollment to the Global Army. That had only allowed them to memorize most of the techniques before their attunement level granted them access to mana, but it was a significant advantage nonetheless.

Khan had managed to match that advantage through sheer willpower and discipline in his training, but his early access and talent to mana had played an essential part in his achievement. Still, his talent didn't refute the importance of what his three companions had accomplished. Stepping into the competent proficiency level only eight months after their enrollment remained an amazing feat.

George was the first to accomplish the important feat, but his companions used Istrone's crisis to justify the event. Kelly's advancement arrived only a few days later, but the other recruits viewed her stern approach to her training as the reason for her achievement. It took Brandon's breakthrough to make them accept that the academy had something to do with their sudden growth.

Some took the events as a natural consequence of the increased workload. The recruits had to spend nine hours a day immersed in exercises meant to improve their sensitivity, control, and manipulation of mana. Adding their normal training to those lessons had basically doubled the amount of time they spent on the physical subjects.

Nevertheless, others didn't completely disregard how the Niqols' training methods and the peaceful atmosphere of the academy had affected their growth. They all could feel their approach to mana changing after that prolonged stay among the aliens. The recruits inevitably stopped taking it as a simple fuel and started viewing it as a core part of themselves.

The recruits didn't have actual conversations about that realization, not general talks at least. They vaguely mentioned the topic every once in a while, but no one wanted to go too deeply in that field. Cracks appeared in their confidence about the superiority of their species, but that was the best it could happen in only three weeks.

The faint and silent changes experienced by the recruits were far more evident when it came to Khan, and some recruits failed to see them only due to his almost constant absence.

The two weeks after the events with the leeches didn't feature any mission or unexpected crisis. Khan could immerse himself in his new life and become a core member of the academy's social network.

Rumors about his battle against Ilman had inevitably spread, and George was partially to blame for that. The boy had no ill intention when he bragged about his friend during parties or lunch breaks, and his ignorance about the secret relationship didn't make him realize how troublesome his actions were for Khan.

Ilman had a great image among most Niqols due to his dedication to his innate emotions. Learning that Khan had fought and won against him made many aliens reevaluate the human boy and his companions as a whole. Khan started to build deeper relationships with Niqols outside of Azni and Doku, and most of them featured girls interested in more than a simple friendship.

George took that development as an absolute victory, but Khan could only see problems piling on in front of his eyes. The parties became battles that required his best performances to remain polite and admirable without offending or openly rejecting those attentions. Leaving them also became a problem when he had to handle interested girls, friendly Niqols, and happy drunkards. Luckily for him, he had a helper during those loud events.

Khan didn't know how he would have managed to continue seeing Liiza if Azni didn't help him come up with excuses to remain alone long enough to escape the parties. The girl turned out to be an expert in gossips and parties, and her support helped Khan avoid creating misunderstandings.

A few problems followed Azni's blatant help. Doku started to suspect that something was up, but his girlfriend's behavior never made his thoughts think about an affair. Moreover, Khan's mysterious disappearances only improved his image in the Niqols' eyes. He became Ilman's opposite. Both good-looking and talented, but one was openly intense, while the other appeared full of secrets.

Khan limited himself to look at the positive side of that matter. The Niqols didn't even begin to suspect something about his secret relationship. They all had seen him the night before his battle with Ilman, and everyone agreed that the alien had fallen prey to unreasonable jealousy. Khan had even been kind enough not to take the matter to heart and teach him how different perspectives existed.

Other problems involved the recruits. The group of humans created two different factions, and Khan appeared to be outside of both. Kelly's team tried to maintain a distance from the aliens, while George's side did its best to blend in.

Khan couldn't belong to either of them because he didn't exist. He didn't sleep in the underground habitation, he always escaped from the parties, and he spent most of his free time inside the academy training.

His companions began to take his disappearances as a needed search for privacy, and even Kelly started to accept that after seeing how popular he was among the Niqols. They couldn't imagine that Khan's problem stretched even outside of the academy.

"That Zezag bitch!" Liiza shouted as she stomped her feet while walking up and down the cave in the marsh. "She always clings to boys to make sure that they notice her big chest! How would anyone miss it when you keep your robe open all the time?!"

"Even Kheda joined her!" Liiza cursed without stopping her steps. "Why are girls with a big chest so bold? How is Ilman even causing more problems now that he can't enter the academy? Why are you even smiling?!"

Liiza's last comment only broadened Khan's smile. He was watching his jealous girlfriend while sitting at the bottom of the cave. The tiredness accumulated in the previous two weeks was trying to fill his head, but he didn't feel anything when he saw how angry Liiza was about his situation.

"It's funny to see you like this," Khan chuckled. "I don't even need to tease you to get these reactions."

"Shut up!" Liiza snorted. "You are just happy that I'm too jealous to care about my initial deal."

"I'm still respecting it," Khan responded before diverting his gaze, "Most of the time."

The couple was approaching their second month together. Only a bit more than a week separated the two from that celebration. The happy event had initially put Liiza in a good mood, but the attentions that Khan had received in the last two weeks had made her jealous beyond reason.

The fact that Liiza had held back words that she was desperate to say for two entire weeks only worsened the situation. Luckily for her, Khan had been perfect in reassuring her. He often reminded her how it was enough for them to know about their feelings.

Liiza even felt bad about being unable to remain completely focused on Khan during the time that he managed to find for them in his packed schedule. It was the second day of his fourth week in the academy. He had gone through twelve hours of lessons, a party, and a long flight to have a few moments with her, but she found herself unable to ignore how popular he had become.

"You are draining yourself for me," Liiza whispered as her eyes went on the ground. "Sometimes, I think you'd be better off without me. You would be able to sleep properly, train all you want, and have sex with many big-chested girls."

Khan knew that he had to console her, but her third remark on the chest issue made him explode into a laugh. Liiza had ended up gaining that inferiority complex due to the comparison with her mother's beauty, and she couldn't help but reveal it when her boyfriend received the attention of girls with similar curves.

"Don't laugh!" Liiza complained while glaring at him. "This is serious. I'm one step away from rushing to the next party and kissing you in front of everyone. You have no idea how hard it is to stay here alone knowing that hordes of girls are trying to get inside your pants."

"I wouldn't call them hordes," Khan laughed.

"Please," Liiza snorted. "I might have been an outcast for years, but I know how Niqols girls think. Damn you. You made me unable to enjoy my time alone in less than two months."

Liiza crossed her arms and moved her eyes back to the ground. She hated her comments. She knew that Khan wouldn't take her words seriously, but she didn't want to talk badly about their relationship, even when joking or angry.

"[Liiza]," Khan said in the best Niqols' accent he could muster, "[Come here]."

Khan's knowledge of the alien language had continued to improve, and Liiza was the main reason behind that. Yet, the couple had started to use it as a trigger for their intimate moments.

Liiza pretended to struggle, but she soon glanced at Khan. He had broken his cross-legged position and had stretched his legs to create a comfortable seat above him. Liiza wanted to make him wait a few seconds, but his lap appeared too appealing that day. She didn't manage to resist it for even a second.

"[I didn't forget about the four hours that you owe me]," Liiza whispered while spreading her legs to sit on Khan.

Her arms went around his neck as the two exchanged a long kiss, but Liiza retracted her face and showed a warm smile when she sensed Khan's hands going under her robe and sliding on her thighs. The warmth spreading on her bare skin made her bite her lower lip, but she shook her head anyway.

"[I just wanted to feel your]-," Khan said before diverting his eyes as he tried to recall the word that he was looking for.

"[Butt or legs]," Liiza giggled. "[Pick one]."

"[Both]," Khan smirked, and Liiza's smile broadened before she left another kiss on his lips.

"[Let me show you something]," Khan announced before pointing his feet on the ground and standing up while lifting Liiza with him.

Liiza laughed as she wrapped her legs around his waist and let Khan carry her outside the cave. She immersed her hands in his hair and left light kisses on his head, but she focused on her surroundings when drops of water started falling on her.

Khan had stopped before the waterfall right in front of the cave. The ground there was mostly muddy. However, he had learnt to recognize the stable spots in the area after flying there for weeks.

"[I thought we could take baths together only early in the night due to Doku's nose]," Liiza whispered to Khan's ear. "[Getting me naked won't make you skip your hours either]."

Khan showed a smile and kissed her cheek before whispering to her ear.
"[Get down]."

Liiza bit her lower lip again as she made her legs slide over his body slowly until they reached the ground. She waited for Khan to turn and dive on her like he often did, but a surprised expression appeared on her face when she saw him drawing the knife sheathed at his left side.

Liiza's curiosity intensified when she felt Khan holding her tightly. Their heads touched as he raised the knife in front of her eyes and used his mana to cover its dark-grey blade.

The membrane of mana appeared completely stable. Khan showed how he could wave the knife almost freely without creating ripples on that glowing cover.

The demonstration didn't end there. The membrane became thinner and sharper when Khan kept the knife still. Liiza noticed how his grip on her lower back relaxed as he focused on the technique. She even felt a faint sharp feeling when she inspected the weapon.

Khan stopped when he reached the limits of his concentration. He neared the knife covered by the sharp membrane to the waterfall and showed how a hole appeared among the water even before the weapon touched it.

"[My training is going well]," Khan suddenly announced as the membrane broke and a white mark appeared on the blunt edge.

Khan still couldn't use the Divine Reaper in a battle, but he was getting there quickly. His progress almost scared him. Yet, he knew that his growth came from his efforts in the lessons about the manipulation of mana.

His manipulation was immature and unstable, but it was improving quickly. The changes that Khan managed to apply weren't intense either, but he wasn't in a hurry. Achieving so much in less than two months without sacrificing the important aspects of his life was already an incredible achievement.

Liiza understood that Khan didn't bring her there to try to get past her restrictions about sex. He was trying to improve her mood, and that realization made her snuggle closer.

Khan stored the knife and turned toward Liiza. The girl was staring at him with loving eyes. She appeared in a daze as she studied all the features she had memorized in the last period.

"[I don't care about the other girls either]," Khan whispered. "[I only want you]."

"[Even if their chest is bigger]?" Liiza asked in a pleading tone.

"[Even if their chest is bigger]," Khan confirmed while showing a loving smile.

The two slowly drew close until they exchanged a long and affectionate kiss. The couple separated only to end up in a tight hug that made the two almost unable to breathe.

"[How long do you have]?" Liiza eventually asked without moving her face from his neck.

"[Less than one hour]," Khan revealed through a sigh. "[Let's spend it like this]."

"[I wish we could be like this forever]," Liiza whimpered in a cute voice.

Khan chuckled, but a smile appeared on Liiza's face when she felt him nodding. The two immersed themselves in the sensations that their hug generated and let themselves forget about the problems that surrounded them.

"[What is it]?" Liiza asked when she sensed Khan had suddenly tensed up.

"Liiza," Khan said without adding anything else, and Liiza understood that something was up since he had stopped using the Niqols' accent.

Liiza's head left the embrace and noticed that Khan was staring at a point in the distance. His eyes were wide, so she quickly followed his gaze.

Liiza didn't immediately understand what was happening. The waterfall filled her vision with its flowing water, but a strange multicolored glow eventually attracted her attention. She had never seen that liquid generating that reaction. The sight was clearly odd, but she didn't understand the reason behind Khan's astonishment.

Khan's hand reached for the waterfall at that point. His fingers pierced the flowing water before he used his palm to create an opening in that thin structure.

The rest of the marsh expanded past that opening. Liiza could see the sparse vegetation becoming thicker in the distance, the dense water covered in mud and small leaves, and the dark sky farther away. However, her expression froze when she noticed that an area appeared brighter than usual.

Khan and Liiza took slow steps forward and crossed the waterfall to gain a broader view of the areas past the cliff, and their gazes slowly went upward after converging on the brighter spot. Their astonishment transformed into terror when they noticed that the usual dark sky had gained pale-azure shades as it spread a faint light in the environment.

Chapter 157 - Ugly

Liiza had never seen a similar scene. The sky had never turned azure. She instinctively thought about the mana due to the similarities of their shades, but she knew that the event meant something entirely different.

At her side, Khan realized how strange it felt to see the sky change color. He had been among Nitis' darkness for so long that he had almost forgotten how beautiful the dawn could be. However, no happiness could accompany that moment. The unexpected event only hinted at the arrival of a crisis.

Khan wanted to question his girlfriend about the matter, but the surprise revealed by her expression stated that she didn't expect the daylight to arrive so soon. The event didn't even seem to affect the whole planet. The pale-azure shades darkened in the distance and brightened past the cliff. The marsh didn't even appear to be the center of that clear patch either.

A cold sensation filled Khan and Liiza's robes, and an azure glow seeped out of their fabric. The two picked their cubes and saw that their symbols were radiating an intense light due to the Niqols trying to contact them.

'How far are you from the academy?' Doku's voice resounded inside Khan's mind once he established the mental communication.

'Three hours,' Khan replied honestly.

'How far are you from this location?' Doku asked as a vague image appeared in his mind.

Khan had turned off the cube's tracker before flying to the marsh. The image sent by Doku depicted a map of the areas around the academy, but it didn't show Khan's current location. One of those regions had a striking glowing spot that marked the site meant by the Niqols.

Khan would have had to activate the tracker if he didn't manage to find himself on that map without the help of the cube. Yet, he had studied the area thoroughly in the last weeks, so calculating the distance from that bright spot wasn't an issue. It ended up being in his direction, at only one hour from the marsh.

'A bit more than an hour,' Khan gave another honest answer.

Khan and Liiza had decided how to handle a similar situation when he received his cube. Similar answers to questions concerning their location when they were together would inevitably create suspicions, so they had to come up with a simple tactic that they could apply all the time.

Liiza would always add one or two hours to her actual location, while Khan would be honest. Being available was more critical to Khan due to his political mission, so Liiza didn't mind risking being late even when it came to important events. Still, Khan didn't know how she would feel about the tactic in that situation.

'Go there right away,' Doku ordered before his tone gained a worried tone. 'We need all the help we can get.'

Doku cut off the communication at that point, and Khan checked the map once more to make sure that he had understood where he had to go. His gaze moved on Liiza as he put the cube back inside his robe, and she showed a worried expression as she stored her device too.

"Khan," Liiza whispered in a trembling voice, "No one expected this to happen."

"It's definitely strange," Khan announced while pulling her closer.

Khan didn't know how the daylight on Nitis would work, but it felt odd for only a small patch of the sky to brighten. He didn't know anything about astronomy and the connected subjects, but that event didn't sound like the apocalyptic event that everyone was waiting for.

"It's not happening only here," Liiza explained as she pointed her palms on Khan's chest to stop his hug and make their eyes meet. "The sky is getting clearer everywhere on the planet, but our calculations gave us at least two more months before the first light."

"What do you mean?" Khan asked as he started to understand the nature of Liiza's worry.

"We aren't ready!" Liiza shouted. "There is a village under this bright patch, and we aren't ready!"

Khan had felt worried about the light. He had immediately imagined the arrival of a long period spent hunting, but the situation had gained a completely different meaning now. The presence of a village under the bright patch hinted at Niqos with no control over their mana.

"I need to go," Khan stated. "How long did you say it will take you to go there?"

Liiza didn't immediately answer. She picked her cube again and made it touch the waterfall. Confused images appeared on the flowing water, but Khan managed to recognize the same map that Doku had sent to him.

"Where did they tell you to go?" Liiza asked.

The nature of the waterfall made the edges of the picture unclear. It wasn't the ideal surface for that function, but Liiza couldn't use the cube with Khan because the network would record their conversation.

"Around here," Khan said while pointing at the glowing spot highlighted by his map.

"That's the village," Liiza sighed as she raised her hand to grab the corners of Khan's robe. "They sent me to the surrounding areas to take care of the monsters there."

Khan would have taken longer to realize the entirety of the situation if he didn't have Liiza's conflicted expression in front of him. Yet, she struggled to speak, and she avoided looking at him in the eyes after learning about his target.

The Niqols knew how strong Khan was. He had even defeated Ilman, even if anger was controlling the alien back then. Still, Khan remained the perfect candidate for the hunts, but they had decided to send him inside the village and Liiza in the wilds. It seemed that they preferred to make a human experience the effects of the sunlight on the members of their species.

"I'll be fine," Khan reassured her. "I've probably seen worse."

"I really hope that," Liiza whispered while continuing to avoid Khan's gaze.

Liiza felt ashamed about that decision. Their superiors had sent a human to handle the mutated Niqols to save their students from that sight. She knew that she had nothing to do with that tactic, but that didn't matter when her boyfriend would be the one to suffer due to that choice.

The noise of Snow's wings soon echoed in the area and made Khan turned toward his flying companion. The Aduns landed in a stable spot near him, but it made sure not to let its feathers touch the mud nearby.

"Won't you say goodbye?" Khan asked while revealing a faint smile.

Liiza couldn't help but turn when she heard the exact words that she had spoken in the past. She could read in Khan's expression that he was doing his best not to make her worry, but his efforts became pointless when she thought about what he would see in the village.

"Don't hate us after today," Liiza pleaded before leaving a short kiss on his lips.

"Don't get hurt out there," Khan responded while caressing her cheek and wearing a frown until he saw her nodding.

Khan smiled at that point and decided to kiss her again, but the two separated afterward. He had been honest about his distance from the village, so he had to leave now.

Liiza followed Snow's white figure as it shot through the sky and flew toward the brighter areas. Her expression darkened whenever she thought about what the village could hold. Even imagining those scenes seemed too much for her.

Khan couldn't meditate during that short hour. He had to adjust Snow's direction according to the map in the cube, so resting was also out of the question.

The region highlighted by the map eventually unfolded in his vision. It featured a vast lake filled with dark water, a forest expanding from one side, and a plain with some hills on the others. Yet, Khan couldn't see any trace of a village from his position.

It felt strange to inspect Nitis' environment with that faint light illuminating the scene. It wasn't exactly morning, but there wasn't the usual almost complete darkness either.

Khan made Snow hover above the area until he noticed a group of Niqols coming out of the edges of the forest. He didn't hesitate to dive toward them, and an ugly feeling soon spread inside him when he became able to inspect those aliens properly.

Snow set off again as soon as it dropped Khan on the ground. The latter

hurried toward the six adult Niqols standing and sitting next to the trees. Their bloodied white robes became impossible to ignore at that point, but the aliens didn't seem to have injuries on them.

All the Niqols were wearing ugly or lost expressions. Some were even smoking an alien version of the human cigarettes. None of them seemed willing to talk with Khan, but a short woman among them eventually decided to approach him.

"Go there," The woman ordered in a flawed human accent while pointing at a seemingly empty spot near the lake's shores. "Kill everything that lives."

"There?" Khan asked as his brows furrowed.

"A barrier hides the area," The woman explained. "The academy built it for the humans. It didn't protect from the light."

Khan didn't need to ask anything else. He bowed and proceeded toward the spot pointed by the woman. He only had to walk for two hundred meters before finding the barrier.

The scenery in Khan's eyes changed when he crossed the barrier. Many houses built from dark wood mixed with the iconic azure symbols of the Niqols expanded for almost a quarter of the shores. Some structures even occupied the shallow waters. The whole village could probably contain a bit more than five hundred aliens.

A few troops who wore blank expressions sat in a circle at the edges of the village. Blood covered their robes too, but they didn't have a single injury on their bodies. Some still clung on their weapons, while others drank from metal flasks that released a strong scent that reminded Khan of the pink booze.

The Niqols almost didn't notice Khan's arrival. They turned only when his steps became impossible to ignore, and their expression became even uglier when they realized how young he was. Some even covered their eyes in shame as a few tears ran down their faces.

"Are you alone?" One of the older Niqols among the group asked, and Khan limited himself to nod.

The male alien sighed before glancing at the flask in his hands and shaking his head. The Niqols went through some of the backpacks amassed among the circle and took out an identical bottle before handing it toward Khan.

Khan tried to refuse the offer, but the Niqols only needed to say a few words to make him accept it. "You will need it."

The mission was clear, even if no one had the strength to go over its details. Khan had to clear the village from the mutated creatures inside it, which would probably be Niqols. The effort had brought the aliens to their mental limits, so someone else had to take care of the matter, and letting a human handle it sounded proper.

Khan gulped as he approached the village. He partially knew what to expect, but he decided not to think about it.

The short houses at the edges of the village's main street were open, and Khan couldn't sense anything with his sensitivity to mana. He tried to inspect some of them, but they were empty. None of them featured creatures that could remain hidden in front of his senses.

Awful scenes unfolded in his vision as he went deeper into the village. Patches of blood and corpses belonging to Niqols of different ages filled the streets that divided the various houses. Most of those aliens appeared young, younger than any student in the academy, but pieces of their bodies carried strange features.

Some corpses had scales, and others had spikes that created a gruesome spectacle. A few had even started to grow additional limbs or organs in strange places. The scene was horrific, and Khan couldn't help but feel lucky that those aliens were already dead.

The scenes didn't improve as Khan went deeper into the village. They actually became sadder. A few older Niqols had hung themselves, others had died next to bottles that radiated an awful smell, and a few had directly killed themselves with blades or other weapons.

Khan couldn't even imagine the chaos that had spread when the sunlight arrived. None of those Niqols expected the event, and everything had fallen into madness. It even appeared crazier than the Second Impact.

Something faint eventually appeared in Khan's senses. He turned toward the source of the presence and noticed a house with a dead couple hanging from a rope. That scene didn't hint at anything good, but Khan decided to cross its entrance anyway.

Khan walked slowly as he approached the presence in his range. He was ready to fight, but the appearance of a wooden crib when he entered a room made him freeze. He felt unable to move forward, but a strange wail soon reached his ears.

The wail wasn't human. It didn't seem to belong to a Niqols either. It had something monstrous inside him, which made Khan hope in the power of the mutations. He didn't desire much. He only wanted the appearance of the creature inside the crib to be as far from Niqols as possible.

Khan took hesitant steps forward, and the insides of the crib soon unfolded in his eyes. The scene was quite gruesome. The mutation had made a mess of that thing, but it was still alive. Its structure simply prevented it from moving. To make it worse, the creature still had some features that reminded him about the Niqols. Its glowing white eyes focused on him and showed how azure shades had appeared inside them.

The wails slowly transformed into hungry growls, and Khan instinctively looked at the flask inside his robe before heaving a deep sigh. Booze wouldn't help him now. His legs wouldn't move no matter how drunk he was.

A familiar cold sensation spread inside his mind as the mental barrier fended his emotions away. The technique had improved after all his training. Khan felt empty and devoid of feelings. His mind could only think about the mission, and his legs finally moved.

Chapter 158 - Kick

At that moment, the humans realized how lucky they were to have George among them. The boy had never behaved as the most reliable recruits on Nitis. His scene in the human camp and his dedication to the parties had given him the fame of an immature, careless, and uncaring soldier. However, his companions understood how all of that was fake when they saw him stepping forward while they remained frozen on their spot.

The village on the lake's shores wasn't far away from [The Pure Trees], but it wasn't close either. The Niqols had tasked the recruits to travel there and take care of the mutated creatures, but the latter would need at least two and a half hours of flight to reach their destination. Khan would remain alone for more than one hour, and that time was enough to inspect most of the small houses in the area.

Kelly and the others didn't lie to themselves when the order from the Niqols arrived. They had received many details about the situation since the aliens could use the menus inside their habitation to convey them. They set off knowing that their job was to take care of the mutated creatures that the Niqols couldn't muster the courage to attack, but they didn't object nor complain.

The recruits didn't need maps or cubes. Their Aduns received the details about their destination from the Niqols' eagles, so they could depart right away.

The lake's shores had become more populated in the time that they took to arrive. The radiation had affected only the younger Niqols living in the village, and they didn't create powerful monsters, so most of the older aliens could handle the threat. Casualties had happened only when the Niqols found themselves unable to raise their weapons against the mutated creatures. The rate of suicides had also been relatively high due to the overwhelming emotions experienced during the event. Still, a fair share of members of the older generations had survived nonetheless.

Most of those Niqols had been in the forest when Khan arrived, but they had started to gather on the lake's shores afterward. The seven recruits could basically see all the survivors of the crisis once their Aduns landed on those muddy areas. That sight made the faint determination that they had managed to muster during the flight crumble.

The Niqols put their younger generations face to face with death quite early. Students who were fifteen or sixteen years old would already join hunts that could lead to casualties. It was a normal part of their culture which inevitably led to more experienced soldiers.

However, the older Niqols camping next to the lake were far from fine. The recruits saw how even aliens who radiated the aura of experienced soldiers were in tears. Some didn't manage to raise their heads at all when the humans arrived. Blank gazes, sobs, and the intense smell of booze filled the area. The scene depicted pure desperation, and that feeling overwhelmed Kelly's group.

"Doku said that Khan is already inside," George announced after turning to show a cold expression to his companions. "We can't waste time here."

George's usual cheerfulness and relaxed attitude had disappeared once his mind switched to its war mode. The boy went back to Istrone, and his companions noticed that. Failing to see the sudden change in his behavior was impossible.

Many professors said that experience mattered more than training on the battlefield, and those recruits couldn't help but agree with those words at that scene. George was the only one among them who had seen the ugly side of war. He moved without shaking and walked toward what could become the worst experience of his entire life without hesitating.

Veronica had seen that side of George's character only during his drunk outburst, but the feelings that he radiated at that moment were completely different. He appeared in total control of his actions and thoughts. George seemed born for those situations.

George's steadiness made the recruits rely on him. They didn't exchange words as they instinctively followed the boy moving among the groups of Niqols sitting on the muddy ground.

The recruits' young age made the Niqols' mood worsen. Many failed to notice them due to their poor mental state, but those who could ended up feeling profound shame. It didn't matter if they belonged to a different species. No one should be cruel enough to make kids handle those matters.

Still, the Nigols couldn't raise their weapons or palms against mutated creatures who had once been their children, grandchildren, and nephews. Most of those who had managed to muster enough courage to kill them had ended up overwhelmed by emotions that led to their suicide. The order to let the humans handle them came from their higher-ups, and many aliens accepted that as a necessary action to ensure their survival. Their intense feelings were a curse in that situation, and they didn't want to activate it.

The recruits received the same treatment as Khan. The soldiers patrolling the village past the membrane handed them flasks with strong booze before resuming their sad gathering. The action increased the humans' worry, but George didn't hesitate to move forward.

Veronica and the others promptly followed George, and their grips on the flask tightened when they saw that he took a sip of the strong booze before storing it and drawing his short sword. The recruits hesitated when they looked at their bottles, but they decided not to follow his example.

The village appeared empty. Its peripheral areas didn't have any corpses, and only the creaking noise of the wooden tiles moved by the light wind resounded in the environment. The scene carried a faint chilling feeling, but that wasn't enough to scare away the recruits.

The problems began when the first corpses started to appear. The recruits gained a general idea of how severe the crisis had been when they saw the signs of suicides around them. The dead mutated Nigols on the ground also confirmed their worries, but everything was still fine for now.

The scene was sad and nauseating, but it wasn't impossible to bear. Those recruits weren't even strangers to the sight of blood and insides due to the past hunts, so they could move forward without lingering on those images. The only real problem was the stench that filled the area, but the group couldn't do much about it.

The only positive aspect of that situation was the apparent absence of living beings. None of the recruits' sensitivity to mana was on par with Khan, but they could still rely on it to confirm that everything around them was dead.

A peculiar scene unfolded in their vision when they reached a large square in the village. Many suicides had happened there. Hanged corpses and dead bodies that featured self-inflicted wounds filled the houses and streets in the area, but the recruits' focus quickly went on a familiar figure sitting on the short wooden staircase that led inside one of the houses.

Khan appeared relatively fine, at least on the outside. Red spots had tainted his white robe, with most of them filling the lower part of his clothes. The recruits noticed how he wasn't wearing shoes. His trousers even left most of his legs uncovered since they had lost a huge chunk of their fabric.

Khan noticed the arrival of the recruits, but he didn't turn. His eyes were blank as he stared at the two hanged corpses on the opposite side of the house. The image was ugly beyond reason, but he found some comfort by looking at it.

The flask containing the strong booze was in his grasp, but he had barely touched it. Khan had taken a sip after sitting on those steps, but he didn't find any reason to keep drinking. Clouding his senses wasn't a solution. Still, he didn't store it either, so it remained among his hands laid on his knees.

The missing shoes and torn trousers were his fault. He didn't want to keep the most tainted parts of his clothes on him, so he had thrown them away before reaching his current spot.

Khan had taken care of every presence inside the village. Most Niqols had died naturally due to the mutations, so he didn't find many living beings during his inspection. Yet, the issue wasn't with the number of kills.

'Was it mercy?' Khan wondered as he stared at the inflated dead faces a few meters from his position.

It took an intense love to generate pain capable of leading to such a final act. Khan didn't kill the creature inside that house. Those two Niqols had probably taken care of it, but it was clear that the effort had required a price too great for them to bear.

Khan had found similar scenes during his inspection. The mental barrier had removed every trace of hesitation from his actions and had prevented him from stopping to really think about what he was seeing. Yet, his emotions had returned now, and he couldn't help but feel profound respect for that couple and all the Niqols who had ended up killing themselves due to their pain.

Accepting the nature of his actions had turned out to be easier at that time. Khan felt empty, devoid of every emotion. He even felt the urge to cry. However, those feelings weren't as bad as during his first kill.

Khan didn't know if his current relatively okay state was only temporary. He couldn't even be sure about the reasons behind his different reactions. That apparent acceptance might come from his increasing experience as a murderer or the development of his character. It could even be the result of his rationalization. It had always been too late for those mutated Niqols anyway.

The situation would have been different if the crisis had happened near one of Earth's cities. The humans' knowledge of mutations and their technology would have probably been able to save some lives, but that wasn't certain either.

Instead, on Nitis, developing mutations was akin to dying. The cynical part of Khan's mind could view his victims as nothing more than monsters and disregard their origin. Of course, the same didn't happen for his emotional side, but having such evoking displays of the Niqols' intense affection all around the village helped him accept his actions.

Khan had saved lives that day. He had prevented Niqols from having to deal with the matter themselves. Some of those aliens would have probably fallen apart if they had to kill such young members of their species.

Liiza's words resounded in his mind as he kept staring at the dead couple. She had asked Khan not to hate the Niqols, but his feelings couldn't even come close to that emotion. He despised that he had to go through such tragic scenes, but he couldn't blame the Niqols after seeing how hard it was for them.

Khan only felt emptiness, doubts, and a lingering sadness that made him unable to move, but that was nothing compared to what the Niqols had experienced. That sorrow was better inside his mind. He could endure it and spare useless suffering to the species that was giving him so much. He felt almost glad to pay that price in their place.

The recruits remained in a daze for a few minutes, but George eventually decided to step forward, and his companions followed him. The group reached Khan and gathered around the short staircase. Brandon risked hiding the hanged corpses due to his size, but Veronica made sure to stop him before he could reach that position.

"The mission is over," Khan revealed while straightening his position. "You can leave."

Khan didn't look at his companions for even a second, and they opened a path when he descended the steps to return to the square. His eyes appeared lost on the scene, and they never reflected the recruits' faces as he moved through the environment.

"Will you join the hunts?" George asked while turning toward Khan's departing figure.

"No," Khan revealed without turning. "See you at tonight's party."

Kelly frowned. She didn't want to disrespect Khan's efforts, but he was leaving them on their own. He was the only one who had a communicator, so it was his responsibility to remain close. Moreover, it was still morning. The missions were far from over.

Kelly stepped forward and opened her mouth to speak, but a shadow appeared in front of her before she could say anything. The recent breakthrough in her martial art's proficiency level couldn't help her during that unexpected event. An unstoppable force suddenly landed at the center of her chest and made her fly away.

The girl flew past the recruits and slammed on the house's wooden walls, piercing them due to the immense momentum that the attack had generated. She stopped only after her back hit on a second wall, and pure anger appeared on her face when she fell on the floor.

Kelly couldn't fail to recognize her assailant. Khan had actually decided to attack her. His actions could lead to countless troublesome issues due to the army's regulations, and she couldn't wait to report the event after jumping after him to have a fair fight.

Yet, something was clearly off. Kelly didn't feel any pain coming from her chest. She had seen how destructive Khan's kick could be, so her lack of injuries left her confused. It was as if Khan had chosen to push her inside the house on purpose.

Kelly stood up as doubts mixed with her thoughts, but her mind went blank when she saw a small bed appearing in the corner of her vision. She turned, and retches tried to rise through her throat as she studied what the Niqols' couple had killed.

Every desire Kelly had to fight Khan vanished. She didn't even dare to imagine what he had to kill while they were still flying on their Aduns, but she felt glad that he had taken care of that on his own. Gratefulness even replaced the intense annoyance that she felt toward him.

As for Khan, he resumed his march toward the village's exit. He didn't care about what anybody said. His mission was over, and no Niqols would dare to say something after what he had done there. His recent attack didn't even worry him. Kicking Kelly had been incredibly easy after everything he had seen that morning.

Chapter 159 - Similarities

The Niqols camping outside the village turned toward Khan when he walked among them to reach an isolated spot on the shores. None of them tried to talk to him. None dared to question him about the situation in the settlement either. Noticing the spots of blood on his robes already explained enough.

Khan flew back to the marsh after turning off his tracker. Liiza would probably be busy all day, but he didn't mind that too much. He felt the need to remain alone for a while to sort his feelings out.

The bright patch in the sky started to darken when Snow was about to reach the marsh. That sight highlighted the strangeness of the event. It became evident that the proper dawn had yet to arrive, but Khan wasn't in the right mood to think about that.

The Global Army had probably already found an explanation, but Khan didn't care. He needed some time alone, outside from the chaos that the world continued to throw at him. Everything else could return after he dealt with his heavy mind.

Snow left Khan alone after it dropped him near the cave. He only needed to walk for a few minutes to see the familiar blankets and pillows left in the warm nest that the couple had created.

Khan reached the end of the cave and wrapped himself in the blankets before laying his head on a pillow. That cover felt too hot without Liiza cooling him down, but he didn't remove the fabric. Everything there carried his girlfriend's scent, and he wanted to enjoy it before the marsh swept it away.

Two conflicting views of his actions fought inside his mind and mixed at times. Khan's thoughts moved from the disgusting nature of the mission to the massive pain that the Niqols wouldn't face thanks to his actions. His cynical and emotional side held a grand battle that couldn't generate winners.

Both sides were true and wrong at the same time. The nature of his actions was undeniable, but they were also mandatory. Someone had to do it, and the humans suited the task better. Making differences between young and old soldiers was meaningless at that point. Experience couldn't do much when it came to the emotional burden connected to that task.

Someone had to take that pain. Khan had only been unlucky enough to be close to the actual village at that time. The other companions would have taken part in the executions otherwise.

Khan knew that disregarding the negative aspects of the event and consider it as necessary action would be easy. Viewing the mutated Niqols as simple monsters would be harder, but he could probably do that too.

However, forcing the event to lose value in his mind would also make him forget what he had experienced while sitting on the steps. The deep respect felt for the Niqols was something that Khan wanted to hold close. He almost envied the intense emotions that the aliens could experience, and the images in his memories could work as a constant reminder of his desire to learn from them.

The nature of the whole matter would change as soon as Khan used another perspective. He could choose how to feel quite freely due to the peculiarity of the event. He had the chance to forget and ignore, but that didn't fit Lieutenant Dyester's teachings. Zalpa's words about the Niqols' feelings also resounded inside his mind. The aliens wouldn't run away from their emotions, so he shouldn't either.

The admiration for the Niqols wasn't enough to make Khan make that decision. He wanted to experience those feelings because he knew that the world had far better to offer. The happiness that Liiza could generate inside him made that sorrow worth it.

Khan would risk losing his ability to accept the beauty of the world if he rejected its ugly sides. Happiness had such an appealing value because he knew pain and suffering. He had the faint desire to shut everything and turn into a mindless robot that only strived to understand the reason behind his nightmares. Still, Khan couldn't follow through when the scent carried by the blankets and pillows managed to make him feel at peace.

The tiredness accumulated in the past days eventually filled his mind, but he struggled to fall asleep since gruesome images appeared in his vision whenever he closed his eyes. It took Khan a while to accept that he couldn't get rid of them. They were another memory that would forever be part of himself.

The acceptance slowly allowed Khan to rest. The nightmare returned and gave him the chance to compare what he had experienced that morning with the Second Impact. He couldn't decide which was worse, but he didn't want to think about those events in that sense.

The world felt so ugly when Khan inspected it through his nightmare or his most tragic memories, but most people ignored those parts. Many would even be lucky enough to avoid those tragedies throughout their lives.

The sound of faint steps alerted Khan's senses while he was still in the middle of his nightmare. He woke up only to see Liiza standing at the cave's entrance. Dirt and blood covered her torn robe and hair. She had clearly gone through harsh battles, but she disregarded her condition when Khan appeared in her vision.

Liiza gulped as she hurried toward Khan. She managed to crouch toward him before he could sit, and her hands pressed on his side to make sure that he continued to lie down.

"How are you?" Liiza asked in a trembling voice.

The couple had spent many nights together. Khan believed to know almost every expression that Liiza could wear, but her current deep and unmistakable worry left him speechless. That was different from her annoyance or concern toward his sleeping schedule. She was anxious beyond reason, and he was the reason behind that feeling.

"I'm fine," Khan revealed while diverting his gaze. "They weren't strong."

A sob reached Khan's ears and made him glance at Liiza again, but she took his head into his arms before he could look at her face. Her hands were shaking, but she did her best to caress his hair to show her emotional support.

'Am I already too used to this?' Khan wondered while he experienced Liiza's reactions.

Khan didn't even need to question Liiza to understand that she knew about his actions. She was feeling deeply concerned about him, but his apparent indifference made her suffering intensify. She could barely accept that the Niqols had made him go through even more traumatic events.

"Doku and Azni were worried about you since you disappeared so quickly," Liiza explained as she sniffed to clear her nose. "Are you really okay?"

"I think I am," Khan confirmed. "It was necessary, right? Someone had to do it."

A strong tremor ran through Liiza before she took a deep breath and mustered her determination. She pulled Khan away from her chest and tilted his head so that their eyes could meet. Khan saw two wet lines on her cheeks that reflected her natural white glow, but he also noticed her resolve.

"Tell me what happened then," Liiza ordered.

"You don't need to do this," Khan said while showing a faint smile and trying to reach her arm.

Liiza pushed his arm away with her elbow while making sure to keep his head still. Khan understood that she wouldn't let go of the matter until she made sure that he was fine. However, he didn't want to describe the gruesome events that happened in the morning.

"Didn't you hear a repor-?" Khan tried to ask, but Liiza promptly covered his mouth.

"I heard it," Liiza explained, "But I want you to say it. You'd try to face it on your own otherwise."

Liiza slowly freed Khan's mouth and allowed him to reply. "I did face it. It's fine. The world is bad, but I have you. Isn't that enough?"

"Did you understand who you killed?" Liiza asked, and Khan felt unable to reply properly.

Khan diverted his gaze and reviewed his past thoughts. He had accepted what he had done, but something felt off. He had missed something that made him gulp.

Khan had grown so used to the nightmares that sleeping wasn't too much of a problem even if gruesome scenes appeared in his vision whenever he closed his eyes. He had initially thought that his mind needed some time as it did after Istrone. Yet, something else became evident now, and Liiza didn't hesitate to make one of her hands slide through his body until it reached his chest. It stopped right on his azure scar to explain what she meant with her words.

The young Niqols in the village were the victims of mutations caused by a force that they couldn't stop. Khan didn't think about his similarities with those creatures until now. They were an unlucky version of his condition.

"I killed me," Khan whispered. "I killed me many times."

"You have been lucky enough to stabilize your mutations," Liiza added while caressing his cheek. "They have been lucky enough to have you."

"Is that even luck?" Khan asked as his tone grew angrier. "How is it that everyone keeps worshipping mana when all of this happens?"

Liiza remained silent as she took Khan's head back into her arms. She had managed to make him vent. She only had to endure until the outburst was over now.

"Why can't I even get a break?" Khan shouted angrily. "I was fine yesterday night, but the world just won't stop. It's one mess after another, and I always happen to be right in the middle of it. It's the same with you. Why can't I even enjoy the only good thing in my life openly?"

Khan knew that his words were useless. Their only purpose was to rant about all the injustices that he had suffered. He could barely believe how he had gone from the Second Impact to killing mutated kids in less than twelve years.

Truth be told, Khan started to feel slightly angry about Liiza too. He had managed to accept his actions before realizing his similarities with the mutated Niqols.

Khan retracted his head and escaped Liiza's embrace. His angry eyes went on her face, but his raging feelings vanished when he saw her furrowed brows, sealed mouth, and closed eyes. She was doing her best not to make any sound while Khan vented. Tears had also started to flow again, but she didn't interrupt him at all.

"Liiza," Khan said in a worried tone while he tried to sit, but she pushed him down again.

"No!" Liiza cried. "Let me do this. I don't want you to grow used to dealing with all of that on your own."

Liiza was suffering on multiple levels. Her species had experienced great losses that day, which mainly affected the younger generations. The whole world was mourning, and she wasn't a stranger to that sorrow.

Her boyfriend had performed one of the morally harder tasks during the crisis, but he was too used to tragedies to share his feelings. Liiza felt useless, so she preferred to endure Khan's anger than leave him on his own. That pain didn't scare her as long as she managed to lift part of his burden.

Khan felt his love bursting, but the gruesome images became more vivid as that feeling intensified. It seemed that a tight connection linked his happiness to his pain. His mind wouldn't let him have one without the other, but he didn't hesitate to abandon himself to those unreasonable emotions.

Khan reached for Liiza's hand, and the girl voiced a surprised gasp when she felt his warm touch. He felt warmer than usual, almost scorching even. She opened her teary eyes to check him before noticing that he had also started to cry.

"Can't we just sleep?" Khan asked while doing his best to avoid the breaking of his voice.

Liiza didn't hesitate to nod. She snuck under the blanket and dived on his chest while he wrapped his arms around her. Khan heard a few sobs, but he could only hug her closer as he lost himself in her hair.

Tears still fell from his eyes, but he felt unable to stop them. It seemed that everything that Khan had experienced until now came back stronger than ever. The closer he felt to Liiza, the more intense his negative feelings would be.

His life truly appeared as a mess when he reviewed it with his intense feelings. Khan didn't even know how broken someone had to be to survive through everything he had experienced. That didn't say much about his mental state, but he didn't care. He had seen enough to forsake the world as long as he could keep what made him happy.

"I think I might kill to protect what we have," Khan revealed.

Liiza's sobs stopped when she heard those words. Humans would probably run away in front of those signs of psychosis, but everything was different for the Niqols.

"Khan," Liiza whispered while her face remained on his chest. "[I love you]."

"I love you too," Khan sighed as his embrace tightened.

The two remained in that position after they voiced the words that they had promised not to say. It didn't take much for both of them to fall asleep at that point, and tears stopped flowing before drying up completely. Their mental stress had been heavy to endure, but they were dealing with it through their feelings. They had no other method to handle their situations.

Chapter 160 - Warmth

Cold sensations followed by an azure glow forced the couple to wake up. Khan and Liiza didn't dare to separate as they reached inside their robes and picked their respective cubes to answer the incoming communications.

'Are you okay?' Doku's worried voice resounded in Khan's sleepy mind after he picked the cube.

'I'm good,' Khan replied. 'How is the situation on Nitis?'

'The previous crisis had triggered many mutations already,' Doku explained. 'Fewer animals had transformed into monsters this time. The hunts have been easy.'

Doku didn't mention the casualties suffered by his species, and Khan didn't question him about the matter either. Both of them had silently agreed not to say anything about that terrible aspect of the crisis.

'Azni is worried about you,' Doku added after a few silent seconds.

'I'm not secretly dating your girl,' Khan groaned.

'Don't play dumb,' Doku scoffed before his thoughts gained a sad tone. 'I believe we are past that.'

'I'm fine,' Khan repeated while caressing the girl dealing with a different mental conversation in his arms. 'I have the best medicine in the world.'

'You are lucky I respect your secrets,' Doku chuckled.

'I'm lucky to have a good friend,' Khan corrected him, and Doku fell silent at that sudden burst of honesty.

'When is the party?' Khan asked while smiling when Liiza rolled her eyes and hid in his chest without interrupting her mental conversation.

The Niqols had already hosted a party last night, but Khan understood their customs well enough to know that they would repeat the event. The sadness caused by the crisis made that almost mandatory.

'Less than one hour,' Doku explained. 'I'll allow you to be late today, but make sure to come. Everyone wants to see you.'

'I'll be there,' Khan promised before cutting the communication and storing his cube.

Liiza was still busy with her mental conversation, and her expressions revealed how pissed she was about it. Khan didn't waste that chance to tease her through soft kisses that started on her head and slowly descended to reach her shoulder's bare skin.

Liiza glared at Khan and pulled his hair, but her attempts to stop him from disturbing her conversation were pointless. Khan dug his face under her torn robe and continued to kiss her bare skin without avoiding the sensitive spots he had found during their time together.

The grip on his hair transformed from a pull to sensual caresses as Khan opened Liiza's robe and kissed her waist. She spread her legs to make him more comfortable, and her foot instinctively started to rub his thigh.

Khan skipped the pants on purpose and crouched to free her legs from the dirty and torn trousers that covered them. Liiza glared at him again, but he couldn't look at her eyes when the captivating dark-blue skin of her thighs appeared in his vision.

Liiza's expressions began to change during Khan's teasing. She was showing an annoyed face before, but his actions made her bite her lower lip and take deep breaths. Her eyes closed as the corners of her mouth curved upward and a blush filled her cheeks.

The situation escalated until Liiza moaned. She and Khan exchanged a worried glance at that point, and they silently agreed to stop for a few seconds. Liiza did her best to cut that mental conversation short, and Khan inspected her without relaxing his grip on her thighs.

"That was close!" Liiza scolded after storing her cube. "My mother almost heard me!"

Khan completely ignored that comment and started to kiss her thighs again. Liiza wanted to say something, but another moan came out of her mouth when warmth spread from one of her sensitive spots. Her back arched, and she bent her head backward when she felt his soft bites teasing her.

"Stop," Liiza weakly moaned. "I'm still dirty from the hunt."

"Let's hit the waterfall then," Khan whispered without stopping his teasing. "I've slept enough for the whole week today."

"What about Doku?" Liiza complained while breathing deeply and clenching her fingers on the blanket. "My mother wants me to attend the party tonight."

"Let's not care about that tonight," Khan replied. "Also, the longer you keep me here, the less I'll have to spend with the other girls."

Liiza's eyes widened as she remembered the attention that Khan had received in the last period. She could already imagine how everything would be worse that night due to what had happened. Khan saw her leaving his grasp and standing up in an instant. A laugh inevitably escaped from his mouth when she pulled his robe and started dragging him toward the waterfalls.

Khan ended up reaching the party incredibly late. It was already past three am when Snow dropped him on the mountain near the empty spot mentioned by Doku.

The Niqols were drunker than usual, which meant almost completely wasted at that hour. Khan waved at the various couples hidden in isolated spots that he had to cross to reach the cauldrons, and those aliens waved back before going back to their intimacy. Other Niqols had collapsed fainted, and a few were even puking since their stomachs were at their limits.

The poor condition of the Niqols didn't prevent them from shouting Khan's name when they saw him crossing the trees and arrive in the empty spot that held the party. The aliens completely disregarded his torn wet clothes and jumped on him to envelop him in drunk hugs.

Khan didn't have the time to change, so he had let the waterfalls remove the blood that had stained his torn robe. The long flight on Snow's back had managed to dry his hair while giving it a messy shape, but it couldn't do much for his clothes, especially with Nitis' generally low temperatures. Wet patches remained on his back and arms, but none of those aliens seemed to care.

"Let me get a drink first!" Khan complained before laughing together with the Niqols that had gathered around him.

Everyone appeared happy, but Khan could see a few grateful faces among those who still retained some awareness of the situation. Khan limited himself to nod at them, and those Niqols couldn't hold back from replying with affectionate and tight hugs.

The Niqols in the village near the lake had given an accurate report. They didn't even fail to understand that Khan had taken care of the matter on his own since the other recruits left the settlement after completing a simple inspection.

The students were aware of what Khan had done, and they all felt grateful toward him. Their intense emotions and drunken state made them express their feelings with even more affection, which was the reason behind the gathering around him.

Khan felt overwhelmed by that behavior. He expected something similar to happen, but he didn't predict that the aliens could affect him so deeply. His recent interaction with Liiza had made his mind dive deeper into the Niqols' way of experiencing emotions. The warmth that those affectionate gestures generated filled him and washed away the heaviness that his lingering sadness spread.

'That's why they throw so many parties,' Khan thought as honest laughs escaped his mouth every time someone around him cracked a joke or was too drunk to complete a line.

Khan almost couldn't believe how a species as cold as the Niqols could generate so much warmth. He had experienced that with Liiza, but he thought that his feelings were to blame for those reactions. However, the party proved him wrong. Most of the aliens around him were simple acquaintances, but they managed to make him feel better anyway. A simple hug, a joke, or a pat on his shoulders were enough to improve his mood.

It took Khan a while to walk past that crowd of Niqols and grab one of the wooden cups lying around the cauldrons to get a drink. Doku and Azni appeared in his vision at that point. They were sitting on a fallen trunk that acted as a bench, and they showed peeved expressions as they stared at him.

"[What's up with you two]?" Khan laughed while nearing the couple.

"[Khan has started to ignore us after becoming popular]," Doku commented while turning his head dramatically.

"[Fame has gotten to his head]," Azni snorted before fixing her cold gaze on him.

The two held their position for a while before laughs broke out of their mouths. Khan smirked as the two Niqols stood up, and he spread his arms to welcome them in his embrace.

"You bathed in the wilds again," Doku stated after sniffing his hair.

"Aren't you drunk?" Khan frowned.

"We waited for you," Azni pouted. "You took a while."

Azni and Khan exchanged a meaningful glance, but Doku promptly cleared his throat. "Can you not be so obvious? It's not easy to hold my curiosity back."

"You are the best precisely because you hold back anyway," Azni announced while wrapping her arms around Doku's torso. "Can we drink now?"

"Definitely!" Doku shouted before moving toward the cauldrons and making sure that Azni didn't leave his side.

"Isn't it too late?" Khan asked while walking with the couple.

"No lessons tomorrow," Doku explained as his voice turned serious. "The elders have ordered a full stop of all activities on Nitis to give everyone time to mourn."

Khan didn't say anything. That decision was understandable, and his eyes fell on his cup as his thoughts reviewed the planet had experienced that morning.

"The professors actually have orders for you and the other humans," Doku continued after turning to raise his cup and stare straight into Khan's eyes. "They want you to fly back to your camp and check what the army has understood about his event."

"Is something the matter?" Khan frowned while performing the Niqols' traditional toast and repeating the action with Azni.

"Our higher-ups think that something is up," Doku explained while showing a complicated expression. "The humans didn't send many reinforcements this morning. It took a while to make your captain leave the camp even."

Khan's eyes widened before he lowered his gaze again. Many thoughts ran through his mind as he considered everything that could have happened in the human camp. He didn't have the chance to contact the Global Army during the almost four weeks spent in the academy due to the poor signal of its network. Khan had even immersed himself in the Niqols' lifestyle so deeply that he had almost forgotten about his origins.

"What are you asking me to do?" Khan whispered as his voice became grave.

A lack of cooperation on the human side wasn't exactly against the Padlyn's deal, but it would definitely worsen the relationship between the two species. It could even bring it back by a few decades since the crisis had affected the Niqols deeply.

Khan couldn't act freely in that situation. He liked the Niqols. He probably appreciated them more than the humans, but his position didn't change. Those matters were heavily political and forced him to respect the chain of command.

"Khan, I'm not asking you to do anything," Doku explained in an honest tone. "The professors have ordered me to tell you this. Simple as that. I wish we didn't have to deal with politics either."

"They had to arrive, eventually," Khan sighed while looking around the empty area around the cauldrons. "Did the others go away already?"

Both Doku and Azni laughed at that question, but the girl quickly took care of explaining what had happened to the recruits. "George is somewhere with Havaa. I saw them leaving a few hours ago."

"How good are you at this?" Khan asked. "Do you keep track of all of us?"

"She had created seven different scenarios depending on your time of arrival," Doku responded. "The second wasn't bad at all. You would have had Kheda, Zezag, Asyat, and Zeliha fighting to drag you among the trees."

'I would have also been dead,' Khan thought as Azni elbowed Doku's side before glaring at him.

"The others are in a funny state," Azni continued after scolding Doku with her eyes. "Do you want to see them?"

Khan nodded, and the couple led Khan among the trees until he managed to see six figures sitting on the ground.

Kelly and the other recruits weren't awake, and the flasks obtained from the Niqols patrolling the village were next to them or in their grasps. Cups also lay around them. It seemed that they had fallen asleep after drinking too much.

Khan didn't fail to notice the faint reflection that the Niqols' eyes caused on some of the recruits' cheeks. Veronica and Gabriela had cried before falling asleep, and their tears didn't have enough time to dry up. It seemed that it wasn't too long since they lost their senses.

"They had the good drinks," Doku sighed while shaking his head in envy.

Khan felt surprised. He didn't expect that even his most diligent companions would allow themselves to take a break that night. It seemed that the scenes witnessed in the village had affected them deeply, and he couldn't blame them for that.

"I'll go to the human camp on my own in the morning," Khan said while browsing through his robe and taking out his almost full flask. "Let them rest."

Doku seized the flask as soon as Khan handed it to him. A broad smile appeared on his face as he patted Khan's shoulder. He didn't hesitate to take a sip of that strong booze before voicing a satisfied cry.

"You should rest too," Azni advised while taking the flask and mixing some of that stronger booze with her pink drink. "You don't have to go right away. Everyone would understand if you took some time for yourself."

"It's fine," Khan replied as Azni handed the flask back to him. "Also, it's better to understand if something like this can happen again. Maybe our species can even stop pretending that the daylight isn't coming."

Doku and Azni didn't add anything. In theory, the matter about the sunlight was still a secret, even if the last crisis had made it obvious. The topic had never been completely classified. Khan had even learnt about it from careless Niqols seen after the formal event. The higher-ups of the alien species had tried to hide it after the first outburst of monsters, but everything appeared pointless now.

The awkward silence that had fallen among the three didn't last long since a familiar figure appeared among the trees nearby. Liiza had landed on the mountain only a few minutes ago. She showed her clean and intact robe as she walked toward the cauldrons and filled one of her cups before returning at the edges of the forest.

Everyone noticed that there was something off with Liiza. Her cheeks were slightly pale. She was still blushing even if hours had passed since the shower with Khan. The flight on her Aduns didn't calm her down either.

"Who would have thought!" Doku exclaimed.

"Why is she like that?" Khan asked while pretending not to care about the issue.

"Love, Khan," Doku explained. "Liiza is in love, and she is also fulfilling that feeling. The paleness on her cheeks describes how her emotions are still raging in her mind."

"It's also a sign of sexual gratification," Azni commented. "I wish to feel it one day."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Doku snorted and diverted his gaze. "That's just a rumor anyway."

Khan laughed at that interaction, and Azni showed a proud smile toward him. She nodded in approval before correcting her boyfriend. "Only men say that it's only a rumor."