

Chaos' Heir 171

Chapter 171 - Gains

Days passed without anything major happening. Khan went by lessons, parties, and enchanting nights with Liiza as his connection with the Niqols' society deepened.

An almost imperceptible pressure began to fall on the academy as the arrival of the daylight drew near. The parties lasted longer, the professors applied harsher exercises in their lessons, and more couples appeared. Even Doku and Azni spent more time together since they didn't know how Nitis would be once its long and safe night ended.

Those changes were gradual. They were even almost impossible to notice for the recruits who had never dived too deeply into the Niqols' social environment. Still, Khan saw everything clearly due to his three different lives. His almost complete pretense with the humans, his vague lies with the aliens, and his absolute honesty with Liiza gave him three different perspectives that allowed him to analyze every transformation in the world around him.

Khan felt actually surprised that the Niqols continued to behave so calmly. They were an emotional species, but the news of the impending apocalypse only reaffirmed their determination to keep control of their planet. They stretched their parties to vent their stress, but they were pretty peaceful otherwise.

The event that both Khan and Liiza were waiting for eventually arrived. Two weeks had to pass since Khan's first meeting with the hooded Niqols before seeing it again. The interaction happened in the same circumstances when he had entered the forest to reach one of the mountains and fly toward the marsh.

Khan couldn't feel anything coming out of the hooded figure in front of him. It seemed a black spot in a world otherwise filled with mana. His senses could still notice its arrival and departure if he paid enough attention, but it was easy to miss during a moment of distraction.

The Niqols didn't waste time. It took out two small books and a tiny casket from its robe and placed them to the ground before raising its head. It seemed to wait for Khan to show an opening, but he didn't move his gaze at all. His eyes remained fixed on the alien. He wanted to see where it went at that time.

The alien's glowing eyes remained on Khan for a few seconds before losing their focus. The hooded Niqols simply turned and walked among the trees until its figure became impossible to see.

Khan tried to keep track of that empty spot, but his senses soon lost it. His range allowed him to inspect areas farther away, but that didn't help with the Niqols' peculiar cloaking technique. It was too hard to notice that dead zone in the distance.

The books and the casket entered his vision at that point. Khan hurried toward the items and stored them inside his robe before resuming his march toward the mountain. The arrival of the techniques should have made him happy, but he couldn't dispel the worry for his girlfriend. He knew that the procedure had more chances to hurt him, but he couldn't care about himself when Liiza was willing to spill blood to help him.

It didn't take Khan much to reach the marsh. He had ended up relying on his Aduns more than many Niqols during those months. Snow grew faster after the frequent full-speed flights, so it slowly shortened the time required to bring Khan in each location.

Reaching the marsh used to take almost three hours, but Snow could save half an hour now. That gave Khan more time with Liiza, and it also helped him attend his training without taking multiple breaks.

"This is actually pretty hard," Liiza revealed while reading the book that described the [Blood Vortex]. "You need to adapt the mana to your surroundings and your body to make sure that they can build a connection. The marks act as vortexes and determine the position where the mana would eventually accumulate."

Liiza was sitting at the center of the bed, and Khan was glancing at the book from behind her shoulder. He was hugging her in one of their usual affectionate positions, but their attention was on the translated words on those yellowish pages.

"It's not a problem if you can't do it," Khan said in an emotionless tone.

"You won't get away so easily," Liiza laughed before leaving a kiss on his cheek. "I can do it. I only need to prepare a few things beforehand. Also, we can't do this when you have the lessons. You need to disperse the mana throughout your body once you exhaust the blood, and I believe you'll end up drained."

"I can't drink before the technique either," Khan read from the book. "I can ask Azni to help me skip the party in four days and add that time to the break from the lessons."

"Do you really want to spend less time with Doku and Azni?" Liiza asked while showing the affectionate smile that she had started to wear often in the last period. "They are already going among the trees earlier than usual."

"You are right," Khan sighed helplessly. "George is also spending a lot of time with Havaa, and I think I've seen Helen sneaking out to meet the guy from the meeting. You Niqols sure are something."

"The poor humans couldn't resist these exotic beauties," Liiza teased. "It would have been fun to drag you among the trees in front of everyone at least once."

"I wish we could have that," Khan said in a loving voice before tightening his embrace.

"I don't know if my mind could take so much happiness," Liiza whispered before snuggling closer.

The two remained in that position for a few seconds before moving to the next book. Their clothes would vanish in an instant if they lingered in that romantic moment any longer, and Liiza wanted to prioritize Khan's training.

The [Blood Shield] technique turned out to be easier than they had initially thought, and least when it came to the manipulation of mana since it always needed the same nature. Khan wouldn't need to adapt it to different environments or materials. The problem came from the other ingredients.

Khan needed to prepare materials that his body could digest so that their nutrients could reach his bloodstream. In theory, every substance could work. Some had an easier path to the circulatory system, especially when they went through enhancements with mana.

The first ingestion would unlock the ability to clot blood, which would require mana like every other technique. Meanwhile, the method's actual power came from how much the user nurtured it since the body would eventually expel the foreign substances.

The ability wouldn't disappear completely once those substances left the bloodstream. The technique had checkpoints that worked like levels. The ability's power couldn't go under the checkpoint after reaching it.

Curiosity filled Khan and Liiza when they read that the first level only needed the activation of the ability. Their eyes instinctively moved toward the tiny casket, and Khan didn't hesitate to pick it from the ground.

A bloody chunk of flesh appeared in the two's vision when Khan lifted the lid. The tiny piece of meat had a series of black lines running through its red structure. It seemed pretty fresh, but a strange smell came out of it.

"Do you think I can cook it?" Khan asked.

"I think you might incur the wrath of my ancestors if you did," Liiza replied.

Both of them had an acute sensitivity to mana. Khan and Liiza could quickly sense the modifications that the energy had applied to the chunk of flesh. They could even confirm that its nature matched the requirements described in the book.

"Your mother is so nice. She has even prepared the material for the first level," Khan commented.

"You are incurring my wrath now," Liiza scoffed.

"So," Khan exclaimed while picking the tiny chunk of flesh and taking it out of the casket, "Do I get a new ability if I eat this?"

"That's what the technique says," Liiza responded.

"I've eaten worse," Khan sighed before throwing the piece of meat in his mouth.

The flesh felt disgusting and squishy. There seemed to be something solid at its center, but Khan threw his head back and gulped before more sensations could spread from his mouth.

"How is it?" Liiza asked when she saw Khan showing a disgusted expression. "Do you feel anything?"

"I don't feel anything at all," Khan explained. "I bet this taste will remain in my mouth for an entire day."

Liiza giggled before laying her head on his shoulder. "That won't stop me from kissing you."

The two exchanged a loving gaze, but Khan suddenly felt unable to breathe. Pain spread from his belly and forced him to crouch, and a heavy sensation landed at the center of his chest.

Liiza called Khan's name, but she didn't dare to move him around. Backlashes could happen with the old methods, and painful sensations usually appeared during the most invasive procedures. Khan was trying to unlock a completely different technique, so it felt almost normal for him to have that reaction.

Air eventually managed to flow inside his lungs, but his belly and chest continued to hurt. Khan felt as if he had something dense clogging his blood vessels and organs. A foreign substance was invading him. He wanted to puke, but his stomach appeared sealed.

It took a few minutes, but his muscles slowly began to relax. His pain waned, and the heaviness that afflicted his chest grew lighter. He started to feel better, but he felt something off in his abdomen even after he managed to straighten his torso.

Liiza remained silent at his side while wearing a worried expression. She relaxed only when Khan took her hand, but she didn't dare to smile yet. Meanwhile, Khan closed his eyes to enter his meditative state and check what had happened to his insides.

Mana flowed normally. The recent procedure didn't change anything. Still, he found something off under his abdomen. He sensed a mass made of strange energy that was slowly adapting to his body.

Khan continued to meditate until the mass attuned to his body completely. It didn't feel solid, but it was dense enough to appear like that. Also, Khan found out that he could move it if he made mana flow inside it.

A tremor ran through Liiza when she saw Khan opening his eyes. She wanted to smile, but a frown appeared on her face before she could express her relief. Khan opened his robe and uncovered his chest without even glancing at her, and the sudden action made her wonder whether something was affecting his mind.

However, her frown transformed into a surprised expression when the blood vessels on the right side of Khan's chest became more visible and created a red spiderweb over his clear skin.

Khan touched that spot and remained surprised at its firmness. Those blood vessels appeared sturdier than his rib cage and activating that protection had taken nothing more than a thought. It wasn't hard at all to use the [Blood Shield].

"Why did you even abandon the old methods?" Khan couldn't help but ask while glancing at Liiza.

Liiza wore a condescending expression before raising her arm. Ice spread on her skin and created a beautiful, almost transparent shield that covered her forearm. She even showed how she could stretch or shrink that defense at will.

The [Blood Shield] felt obsolete in front of that flawless display of Liiza's manipulation ability. Her spell only required training and mana. It didn't involve any strange rituals and additional material. Moreover, it was safe, and her body accepted it easily since it matched her element.

Khan revealed a bright smile at that scene. He had understood what Liiza wanted to show him, but that almost lost meaning when he noticed that her manipulation ability had improved. She had managed to create that defense with basically no preparation.

"You have improved!" Khan shouted happily.

"Even faster than I expected," Liiza revealed while inspecting her shield shattering into a series of shards. "I think you are to blame for that. My mind has never been clearer."

"This poor Niqols couldn't resist my exotic beauty," Khan joked while taking a deep breath to inflate his chest.

"[I didn't even try]," Liiza said, and Khan stopped joking when he saw her biting her lower lip.

Chapter 172 - Blood Vortex

Khan spent the following days getting accustomed to the [Blood Shield], but it turned out that it didn't need much work. The technique already existed inside him. He only had to move it in the intended spots to make it manifest its effects.

The branches of the Niqols' old ways carried drawbacks, gory rituals, and steep requirements, but they felt terrific once mastered. Khan had basically obtained a spell that didn't require concentration, practice, or unique movements. Committing mistakes was even impossible since the ability technically was already active.

Khan could understand that Ambassador Yeza had given him the chance to activate the [Blood Shield] right away on purpose. She seemed to care about his performance in the crisis, which only revealed how scary that event could be.

Khan could also guess why Yeza had decided to increase his power before the crisis. He knew how strong he was, and she was aware of his Niqols girlfriend. She couldn't possibly imagine her true identity, but the determination that Khan had shown during the meeting proved how deeply he cared about her and the aliens as a whole.

His decision to betray the Global Army was another proof of his lax attachment to his species. Khan could become a valuable asset during the crisis. His actions could save Niqols' lives, and Yeza didn't hesitate to invest in him.

Khan never brought the books back to the academy, and he never tested his limits with the [Blood Shield] there either. His collaboration with Ambassador Yeza had to remain a secret that only Liiza could know. Azni and Doku would probably remain silent if they learnt about it, but Khan didn't want to leave loose ends.

The cave in the marsh was the perfect hiding spot for the books. Moreover, Liiza and Khan could use their time there to memorize their contents and prepare for the [Blood Vortex]. As for the [Blood Shield], Khan didn't need practice, but he wanted to understand how strong the technique actually was before using it in battle. Also, he had to see how much his skin could handle in that reinforced state.

The tests led to surprisingly good outcomes. The [Blood Shield] was slightly stronger than human spells, so it could defend Khan from powerful impacts and sharp objects. He struggled to dig his knife past that tough array of blood vessels even when he relied on the Divine Reaper's teachings.

The gap between the [Blood Shield] and the Divine Reaper shrunk when Khan tried to hurt himself seriously, but he linked that feature to the uniqueness of his martial art. The Divine Reaper's piercing power was near the peak of the human fighting styles. It would be surprising if it couldn't do anything to the dense blood vessels.

Khan started to consider perfect executions the times when the Divine Reaper managed to pierce the [Blood Shield]. The flexibility of the Niqols' technique allowed him to test the sharpness of his membrane on safe spots like the side of his forearm, so he didn't hold back during those days.

The absence of training halls on Nitis prevented Khan from evaluating his execution of the Divine Reaper. The [Blood Shield] became his gauge, but Liiza eventually forced him to stop by replacing the defensive technique with her ice. Khan was only suffering superficial cuts that healed in a matter of hours, but she didn't like how easy it was for him to hurt himself.

Khan and Liiza had to wait until the arrival of the free days to work on the [Blood Vortex]. Nothing unusual happened, so they could meet in the cave after the party meant to celebrate the end of the lessons and approach everything calmly.

The rest of the night went by sweating the booze drank in the party, and the two had become pretty good at it. They woke up near lunch hour with clear minds, satisfied expressions, and a lingering warmth that filled their hearts, but the mood quickly turned serious after a few kisses.

"You aren't going to bleed yourself out, right?" Khan asked while inspecting Liiza.

The girl had brought a small cauldron and a simple knife to the cave during the previous days. She was ready to open a deep cut on her palm, and Khan obviously hated that situation.

"Everything will be fine," Liiza repeated for the hundredth time. "You should be worried about eventual backlashes. Are you sure that the mana in the environment won't kill you?"

Khan had told Liiza about the warnings that Doctor Parket had given him. His body might reject synthetic mana, but that shouldn't apply to the energy in the environment.

The two had decided that they would interrupt the [Blood Vortex] as soon as Khan noticed that something was off, but he felt pretty confident that everything would go well. The [Blood Shield]'s success had proven how his body didn't reject the Niqols' old methods, so he believed that the same would happen for the other technique.

"Are you sure you have enough potion?" Khan asked.

"[Zaza] has been more than happy to help me after learning that we were going to use the old methods," Liiza repeated.

"What about your stomach?" Khan continued. "We didn't eat a lot."

"I ate the usual," Liiza commented. "I even left out part of what you brought in the hope of making me sleepy."

"I'm feeling a little dizzy," Khan announced in a dramatic tone.

"I will make you feel dizzy if you don't stop disturbing me," Liiza threatened. "We are doing this. Deal with it. And, no, I won't stop even if you disturb me."

Liiza didn't need to raise her gaze from the knife to know that Khan had started to plan ways to disturb her. He could only give up on making her stop the procedure. Khan loved her even more when he saw how deeply she knew him, but the requirements of the technique still annoyed him.

Khan wanted to add a few jokes, but his mind went blank when he saw the level of concentration that Liiza reached during those short silent seconds. She had worn the usual aloof expression that she showed to the others, but it contained a deeper meaning now. She looked as if the procedure could kill her, but Khan knew that she wasn't worried about herself.

The knife eventually dug into her palm and opened a deep wound. Pale-red blood began to fall in the small cauldron, and Liiza enlarged her injury once she felt that the process was too slow.

Liiza made sure not to reveal any emotion to reassure Khan. She had cut out everything useless from her vision and senses, but she could still feel his worried gaze on her. That was something that no amount of concentration could make her ignore. Her mana wanted her to know that he was there.

Liiza eventually dropped her knife on the ground and placed her palm on the cauldron. An azure glow slowly spread on the item, and its shades darkened as Liiza changed the nature of her mana. She had to create an energy that could connect Khan's body to the environment and bathe the blood in it.

Creating something that matched Khan's unique aura wasn't a problem for her since she had spent almost three months sleeping in his arms. Liiza had committed his warmth, scent, and reactions to memory. She knew exactly how to modify her mana to suit him.

Doing the same for the cave turned out to be a bit harder. Liiza had grown familiar with that environment, but no special feeling enhanced her perception. A slight difference in the temperature or staleness of the air forced her to adjust the idea in her mind.

Adding two different natures to the mana and blending them without destabilizing the energy was challenging. Khan could add sharpness to his mana, but he was nowhere near the smoothness revealed by Liiza now. The transformation appeared natural when she performed it, and he remained speechless in front of her ability.

Liiza waited until her blood filled half of the cauldron before opening her eyes and picking a flask that she had left behind her. The murky liquid inside it was a potion that Zalpa had made in the past days after Liiza told her about the [Blood Vortex]. The old Niqols was the perfect secret helper for the couple since she had cut ties with the rest of her species, and her affection toward Khan's girlfriend made her even more willing to help.

Blood quickly stopped falling from the cut on Liiza's palm after she took a sip from the flask. The injury didn't close, but that improvement had already reassured Khan. Moreover, the effects of the potion didn't alter her control over mana. The energy that covered the cauldron remained stable and didn't experience any shift in its shades.

Liiza had to remain in that position for a while. The blood had to absorb the mana naturally, so she could only let it bathe in her energy until it gained new features. Almost one hour had to pass before she removed her hand from the item and nodded in satisfaction.

"Come here," Liiza ordered. "It's time to draw the marks."

Khan left the bed and lay on the ground next to the cauldron. He was still naked from the previous night, while Liiza had donned her robe before starting the process to avoid altering his mindset. She needed him to be entirely focused on the technique since they had to act quickly if something went wrong.

"Your ancestors were quite kinky," Khan joked.

"We have also been kinky," Liiza whispered while crouching to leave a kiss on his lips.

The teasing ended there. Khan closed his eyes to focus on the insides of his body, and Liiza brought the cauldron closer to her side before dipping two fingers into the blood.

"I'm going to start," Liiza stated. "Make sure to warn me as soo-.

"[Liiza, I trust you]," Khan murmured without opening his eyes.

Liiza revealed a loving smile and caressed Khan's hair before freeing his forehead from his black strands. Her other hand came out of the cauldron at that point, and she let a few drops fall from her fingers before approaching his face.

The blood was slightly cold, but Khan focused only on Liiza's firm movement. He had memorized the marks that the [Blood Vortex] required. They were simple drawings that went from his forehead to his toes, so he could follow her with his mind.

Liiza never hesitated nor committed mistakes. She was perfect. She always dipped her fingers inside the blood after drawing three lines, and Khan eventually started to feel something building up above him.

His sensitivity to mana allowed him to notice how the blood began to activate as more lines joined the drawing. The technique wanted to create an electrical circuit meant for mana, and its power built up until Khan started to feel uncomfortable.

Nothing affected Khan's skin, but he felt that something was about to happen. He understood the reason behind that sensation when Liiza hesitated for the first time since the beginning of the process.

"Complete it," Khan exclaimed to reassure Liiza, and she left another kiss on his lips before drawing the last line required by the technique.

Liiza quickly took a step back while dragging the cauldron with her. The lines began to shine in those seconds, and a pale-red glow filled the dark cave. A faint wind also blew from behind her as mana started to converge toward Khan.

Khan didn't speak. His complete focus was on the marks that Liiza had drawn, and faint surprise spread in his mind when he studied the nature of the [Blood Vortex].

Mana flowed naturally toward the glowing lines after they established a connection with the environment, but that energy didn't immediately enter Khan's body. It gathered inside the blood and slowly seeped into the skin below.

The mana didn't disperse inside Khan's body either. It remained under the blood and continued to accumulate until it created a copy of the lines inside his skin. The process caused discomfort and even some lingering pain since his flesh couldn't contain so much energy in the same spot. Yet, Khan endured worse during the meditations, so remaining still wasn't a problem.

The issues started when Khan began to feel hot. The mana flowing through the blood created some friction with his skin. The burning sensation was initially milder than what the Lightning-demon style had trained him to endure, but it continued to intensify as the process went on.

"Is everything okay?" Liiza asked when she saw a frown appearing on Khan's face.

"It burns a little," Khan grumbled. "I can still endure for now."

Liiza wanted to add something, but she forced herself to remain silent. She suppressed her words even when a faint sizzling noise started to come out of Khan's figure.

The noise and burning sensation intensified until Khan remained unable to hide most of his expression. Everything started to hurt properly, but he had faced worse during his fastest sprints, so he endured that pain. He wanted to get the best out of that process, and stopping too early would make him feel like he was wasting Liiza's blood.

"I'm stopping the technique," Liiza declared when trails of smoke started to come out of Khan's skin.

"I can still go on!" Khan complained.

"I don't care," Liiza commented while crouching next to Khan and reaching one of the lines on his abdomen to interrupt the technique.

Liiza voiced a painful gasp when she touched the glowing line. The drawing was so hot that she had retracted her hand instinctively. However, mana quickly covered her fingers when she realized that Khan was keeping those scorching marks on his entire front.

The marks stopped absorbing mana when Liiza wiped part of the blood away. The scorching sensations filling Khan's mind faded, but he could only inspect Liiza when he opened his eyes.

Khan could quickly notice the burn on Liiza's fingers, and he didn't hesitate to sit to take her hand. However, she didn't react to his gesture. Her eyes remained fixed on the chunk of skin that she had uncovered to interrupt the [Blood Vortex].

Khan's eyes also went there. A red mark had appeared on that spot since the blood had burnt the superficial layers of his skin. It wasn't hard to guess that the rest of the lines hid flesh in a similar state, but Khan didn't care too much since he had almost two days to heal. Instead, he felt happy to feel the mana accumulated right under those injuries.

"It worked!" Khan exclaimed while turning to show his excited smile to Liiza, but she slapped him before he could look at her face.

Khan had to hear her sniff to realize what had happened. He tried to turn toward Liiza again, but she jumped to her feet and hurried outside the cave. She even kicked the cauldron angrily, causing the remaining blood to spill on the ground.

'I fucked up,' Khan immediately realized.

A deep sigh came out of his mouth before he jumped to his feet too. Khan straightened the cauldron up and walked out of the cave slowly. He was still naked, but he didn't care. He knew that the area was empty.

His sensitivity to mana led him to the familiar presence sitting in a muddy corner on the cliff's base, where he found Liiza wearing the most pissed expression he had ever seen on her face.

Chapter 173 - Slap

"Wash yourself," Liiza ordered before Khan could get too close.

"[Liiza]," Khan pleaded, but Liiza's expression grew even angrier as she pointed at the waterfall a few meters in front of her.

Khan could only sigh and approach the falling water. He didn't need to ask what Liiza wanted to gain an idea of her intentions. She was experiencing the same annoyance that he had felt when she cut her palm open.

The waterfall washed Khan clean. Removing all the marks with simple water was difficult, but he made sure to scrub everything away. The entirety of his injuries slowly appeared in the open, and Liiza could see his state when he turned toward her.

Deep red marks covered Khan's front. They created a simple tribal-like tattoo engraved in his skin that went from his forehead and reached his toes. Each line that Liiza had drawn had transformed into injuries that could burn for days if left untreated, but Khan didn't seem to care about them at all.

Liiza's annoyance intensified when she saw Khan waiting for her angry outburst. He cared more about the incoming rebuke than his injuries, and she couldn't endure that sight for too long. She lowered her gaze, but her wounded palm appeared in her vision at that point.

An exasperated sigh came out of her mouth as she crouched to hide her head between her knees. Liiza felt incredibly angry about Khan's carelessness, but she couldn't blame him too much when she had done the same.

"[Liiza]," Khan whispered while coming out of the waterfall and nearing his girlfriend.

His wet feet mixed with the mud and became dirty again, but he barely noticed that. Liiza appeared really angry, angrier than she had ever been. It felt scary to know that he could make her like that.

"Is my mother right?" Liiza asked without raising her head. "Is our love toxic?"

"I have no idea," Khan sighed while diverting his gaze. "Does love have a general meaning? Would our species even share that meaning?"

"Did you wonder if we are good for each other?" Liiza asked while peeking past the white hair that had fallen above her face. "Look at you. My blood did that. I basically forced you to pick the [Blood Vortex]."

Khan reached Liiza and crouched before her. She hid her face behind her knees again, but her glowing eyes peeked at him when she heard his question.

"Do you think I would be better off without you?" Khan asked while wearing a loving smile.

Liiza froze as she reviewed Khan's life. He had nothing, and he couldn't even trust anyone. He had a few friends and a Master, but Martha was still in a coma as far as he knew, George was venting his trauma through booze and sex, and Lieutenant Dyester was in the same messed-up state.

Khan's best relationships existed among the Niqols, and that after being on Nitis for a bit less than three months. It was sad to consider his situation from that perspective. Still, it also felt quite lucky. Liiza couldn't even imagine what he would be willing to do without anyone relieving him from his darkest thoughts.

"I think you would be better without me after a while," Khan honestly revealed while moving her hair away from her half-hidden face. "I can imagine you mending your relationship with the Niqols through me and finding someone who isn't so broken."

Liiza had deep problems, especially among such a sentimental species, but she wasn't hopeless. Her quest toward mental peace didn't require a journey through the universe looking for the Nak. Ironically, she had started to experience traumas similar to those that afflicted Khan's mind only after his arrival on Nitis.

The speech made sense, at least in Khan's mind, but Liiza didn't hesitate to slap him again.

"Is that what you think of my feelings?" Liiza angrily shouted. "Do you think that my mana wants me to use you as a sort of potion?"

Liiza wanted to slap Khan again, but he grabbed her wrist before she could complete the attack. Liiza tried with her other hand, but Khan blocked her again. He had never stopped smiling since the beginning of their conversation, and his expression only radiated more affection now.

"If I'm better without you, you are better without me," Khan stated. "We have both been attracted to each other right away, so our reasons should be similar. Also, you have said that before me. Why am I the one getting slapped?"

"You let my blood hurt you," Liiza rebuked. "You deserve them."

"You hurt yourself for me first," Khan complained.

"You stabbed your own leg to resist my mother," Liiza added.

"You kissed me first," Khan announced proudly, "Which makes everything your fault."

"Paul would have a different opinion," Liiza smirked.

"I won't get to slap you then," Khan voiced a fake disappointed sigh, and Liiza couldn't suppress her laugh.

"You are an idiot," Liiza giggled.

"And you chose to be with me anyway," Khan shook his head. "I'm starting to doubt whether you are as smart as you think."

Liiza continued to laugh before wearing a warm smile when she saw Khan's eyes lingering on the cut on her palm. She couldn't remain angry at him when he was so concerned about her.

"We are a mess," Liiza sighed before pointing at Khan's hands with her eyes.

Khan understood the meaning behind her gesture and let her wrists go. Liiza carefully took his head in her hands, making sure to avoid the injuries that ran across his cheeks, before pulling him between her legs. She helped him turn so that he could sit in front of her without letting anything touch his wounds.

"Is being a mess bad?" Khan asked.

"I don't know," Liiza sighed before leaving a kiss on the back of his head. "I'm just a young girl in love."

"That makes me a younger boy in love," Khan replied.

"When do you become seventeen anyway?" Liiza asked one of the questions that had never come up in the past months.

Khan calculated in his mind before answering and wearing an awkward smile. "My birthday is a bit more than a month. It should match the beginning of the crisis. When's yours?"

"The month after yours," Liiza revealed, "Right in the middle of the crisis."

The two remained silent for a few seconds before exploding into a loud laugh. They weren't even sure about the reason behind that reaction, but they couldn't stop themselves.

"[I'm so glad we found each other]," Liiza whispered as she immersed her face in Khan's hair. "[I didn't believe I could be so happy]."

"[Thank you for saving me]," Khan said in a sweet tone while making himself comfortable between Liiza's leg. "[I love you]."

The two reacted almost instinctively to the Niqols language. Their eyes soon met, and their lips touched. Khan even began to turn, but Liiza suddenly stopped him by pushing on some of the spots on his chest that didn't have injuries.

"What am I doing?" Liiza scoffed. "No sex until you are healed. You even need to meditate to absorb the mana gathered with the [Blood Vortex]!"

"But we were so in the mood," Khan groaned.

"What mood?" Liiza scolded while making Khan turn and forcing him to sit between her legs again. "Mediate again before I slap you again!"

"The current generations also are quite kinky," Khan sighed dramatically.

Liiza laughed before nearing Khan's ear to whisper teasing words. "Finish quickly so that we can move to the kinky stuff."

Khan found himself inside the meditative state as soon as he heard those words. He began to move his mana as usual, making sure to expand it in areas of his body that remained unaffected by that energy.

Mana flowed out of his nape and generated painful sensations when Khan's flesh tried to oppose its expansion. Still, something peculiar happened when it touched the energy gathered through the [Blood Vortex].

Khan inspected that energy mixing with his mana and dispersing through his body without causing any backlash. His mana didn't even lose intensity. It seemed to condense the foreign energy before accepting it in his insides, but the training was smooth except for that.

The meditations mainly had two limits to how quickly they raised the attunement with mana. They caused pain that a soldier might be unable to endure, and they could only use the mana that the mana core released.

Khan had grown used to the pain rather quickly, but he still had to face the second limit. The other recruits and soldiers had access to the synthetic mana to quicken the process, but Doctor Parket had

made him lose interest in that training method. However, the [Blood Vortex] could have the same effects and provide normal mana at the same time.

The higher amount of mana inside his body made him increase his attunement with mana faster than usual. Khan was unaware of his current level, but he knew that he had crossed the forty percent mark. He even believed it to be quite close to fifty percent but confirming it was troublesome without scanners or doctors.

The meditation right after the [Blood Vortex] went so well that the injuries caused by the Niqols' old method almost healed completely in a single session. Moreover, he remained astonished when he studied how much his mana had advanced and compared it to his regular training. He had obtained effects that were five to six times better than usual.

'I might become a first-level warrior during the crisis at this pace,' Khan thought as determination filled his mind.

Liiza had fallen asleep while Khan meditated. He found her lying on his back, with her head on his shoulder and her arms on his side. She had held back from hugging him out of fear of touching his injuries even if she clearly wanted cuddles.

'I went through so much,' Khan sighed in his mind as he inspected Liiza's sleeping face. 'How can I even feel so lucky?'

Khan moved silently, making sure not to wake up Liiza. He turned and pointed his feet on the ground before sliding his arms behind her back and thighs.

Liiza didn't wake up when Khan lifted her softly. His warmth enveloped her, so she felt as if they were in their usual bed. He could bring her inside the cave and lay her on the blankets before reaching his robe nearby.

Liiza whined when she felt the warmth leaving her, and her eyes started to open, but Khan promptly caressed her cheek and left a kiss on her forehead.

"[I'll come back soon]," Khan promised.

"[You never do]," Liiza complained while showing a loving smile. "[Give me a kiss and try to hurry. It's cold without you]."

Khan smiled and kissed her before Liiza turned to the side to make it easier for him to leave her there. He moved to the waterfall while wearing his trousers, and the dull knife soon appeared in his grasp.

The weapon had many marks on its edges and center, but they didn't appear as often as before. Khan was getting better at the Divine Reaper. The perfect executions even caused far less damage to the null-grade knife, but it would eventually break anyway.

The Global Army had given Khan another null-grade knife, but he would use the first-grade once the daylight arrived. It was pointless to hide his power during a worldwide crisis, and fighting with a better weapon would allow him to avoid injuries when committing mistakes.

The main problem with the Divine Reaper was that Khan had never gotten the chance to blend it with the Lightning-demon style properly. He had found and learnt a few moves during his training,

but he didn't perfect them in an actual battle. His instincts still relied mainly on his legs. He had to think to recall the knife, and that was a problem in a deadly situation.

The innately sharp first-grade knife would help while Khan developed a fighting style that relied on both his martial arts. Still, he had to make sure to approach the daylight with a decent proficiency level. He didn't dream about reaching the competent level so soon, but having a success rate in the perfect executions above eighty percent didn't sound bad. The problem was arriving at that level of expertise with only a bit more than a month left to train.

'Mastery beats unstable performances,' Khan repeated Lieutenant Dyester's words in his mind often while swinging his knife at the waterfall.

Khan completed his exercises for the Divine Reaper before moving to the Lightning-demon style. He didn't forget his foundation, and the competent proficiency level was nowhere close to the peak on the path to complete mastery, so he had to continue practicing.

The moves that fused the two martial arts came afterward. Khan repeated everything methodically before calling it a day. He had someone to warm up for the rest of the night, and he didn't know for how long he would be able to enjoy those moments.

Chapter 174 - Daylight

Time passed no matter how the students and the recruits tried not to keep track of it. A complicated smile, the anxious rebuke from a professor, the parties that lasted long enough to coincide with the lessons, and the general carelessness toward the already slight decorum hinted at the arrival of the daylight.

Even the most serious recruits started to fall prey to their anxiety and resort to the Niqols' habits to handle it. Khan once even saw Brandon and Kelly kissing during his usual march toward the mountains.

The Niqols had a planet to defend, but the eight recruits simply happened to be there. Some humans had developed affection toward Nitis and established meaningful relationships, but that wasn't their home. The Niqols were only a mission, but the Global Army had left them in the frontlines anyway.

The recruits would have to put their lives on the line for an alien planet and a different species. In their minds, the mission felt noble, even rightful when considering what they recalled the village near the lake. Still, a different version of the story saw them as nothing more than pawns who had to be there for political reasons. George and the others simply decided not to focus on the second view.

Khan was the only recruit who shared the same determination as the Niqols. Nitis had brought him a peace that seemed impossible to achieve after Istrone. That cold and dark planet had given him love, new friends, power, and overall happiness. He would go all-out to defend it. His twisted mental state even made him more driven than some aliens.

Everyone's days were so packed with lessons, parties, and intimate relationships that they almost failed to connect the azure shades that began to spread in the sky to the crisis when they first noticed them. Recruits and Niqols had given so much importance to that event that it almost felt unreal when it actually started.

The students had started to imagine the arrival of the daylight as a loud apocalyptic event, but it turned out to be a silent and dazzling moment. Lunch hour had yet to arrive, and the week before

the estimated beginning of the crisis had just begun, but calculations couldn't be perfect when the humans had no scanners or tools in the actual solar system.

The Global Army's math came from data gathered through a telescope outside of Nitis' solar system, so those calculations involved delays and errors. Moreover, its conclusions had never been precise. They had always involved a relatively short period, including that week.

Khan was attending the usual lesson with Professor Bikatu, the professor in charge of improving the recruits' sensitivity to mana, when he noticed that some of the Niqols in the squares around him were gazing at the sky.

The trees in the academy had a large empty spot that the professors had used to set up squares that had specific purposes. Seeing the area from the sky was impossible due to the membranes that hid the academy, but the students' view had no obstruction from the ground. Khan eventually saw the azure shades piercing the darkness, and his reaction made his companions notice the event.

"Prepare for battle!" Professor Bikatu shouted, and her words made everyone in the square snap back to reality.

Similar cries resounded throughout the academy ground. Professors and students echoed that alarm and made everyone aware that the time had come. The daylight had arrived.

Khan expected panic to spread, but the Niqols left him pleasantly surprised. No one spoke for more than a few seconds. The professors had come up with a plan and had forced the students to memorize it, so everyone knew what role to play. They only delayed their march toward their positions to exchange a few goodbyes, kisses, and promises.

"Don't you dare to die on me," George announced while poking Khan's chest with the side of his fist.

George's mindset had improved a lot after abandoning himself to the Niqols' lifestyle. Professor Supyan's lessons had also helped him accept his trauma and fuse it with his character. He was wearing a resolute smile when he saluted Khan, and that was his real face even if his mind was ready for war.

"Don't let me do all the work again," Khan mocked by imitating his friend and jabbing at his chest softly.

"Good luck to everyone," Kelly stated before turning to leave a quick kiss on Brandon's lips and hurrying toward her position.

The gesture left every recruit except Khan speechless. Brandon and Kelly had been quite secretive about their relationship. Khan had noticed them out of sheer luck.

"Let's show everyone what humans are capable of," Brandon announced before turning to reach his position too.

"Khan, our areas are pretty close," Rodney reminded while winking at Khan. "Come to help once you clean everything up."

"Khan has to oversee a crowded area," Veronica complained as her bright smile lifted everyone's morale. "Don't be lazy."

"And you don't defend him too much," Gabriela teased.

"Khan, did you send that message for me?" Helen asked in a hesitant tone.

Helen had started to date the Niqols met during the meeting with Ambassador Yeza, but she couldn't communicate with him. She had eventually asked Khan to act as the middleman, and he couldn't reject her request since her situation reminded him about his relationship.

Khan had ended up conveying awkward and overly-sweet messages, but the situation had never been too troublesome since his packed schedule had allowed him to help the couple only once or twice a day.

"He said that he will tell you those words face to face," Khan said while revealing a genuine happy smile.

Helen gasped happily, and she couldn't hold back from hugging Khan. The latter laughed while patting her back. She had been the recruit to change the most inside the academy. She had initially been part of the faction believing in human superiority, but a few months had been enough to change her mind, and Khan could only marvel at how much the Niqols had been able to do in such a short time.

Helen eventually left Khan and nodded at him before departing to reach her position. Gabriela did the same, and Khan wished the remaining recruits good luck once more before leaving.

The Niqols had divided the surrounding areas into quadrants and had assigned different teams to all of them. The higher-ups had tried to balance each group, and they had even split the recruits for various reasons, so Khan had ended up with weak companions.

Khan felt stronger than ever after training with the [Blood Vortex] for a bit more than a month. His body appeared near a turning point that he obviously connected to the checkpoint that divided first-level warriors from other soldiers. He didn't know what that achievement would involve, but he knew it was happening.

His sprint across the forest was flawless. His feet barely released noises when they hit the ground, leaves, or roots on his path, and his vision was clearer than ever during his acceleration.

The entrance of the underground habitation soon appeared in his eyes. The daylight had surprised everyone, so Khan only had his null-grade sharp knife with him. The dull one had broken in the last month, so he had replaced it, but the crisis required his most valuable asset.

His locker opened and allowed Khan to wear his first-grade knife in no time. His sensitivity to mana made him aware of the faint pressure that had appeared on his side. He could feel the magic item hidden inside the sheath, and even caressing that leather gave him an idea of its power.

Khan didn't store the null-grade knife inside the locker. He moved its sheath to his right side before leaving the underground habitation in a hurry. It didn't hurt to have an additional weapon at hand in case something happened to his magic item. Also, he didn't know if the crisis could affect the academy, so it felt pointless to leave anything valuable there.

Khan had to group up with his teammates in an area past one of the mountains. His team was one of the only ones without Niqols in the second year, which stated how much the aliens trusted his battle prowess. No one dared to say it out loud, but many believed him to be one of the stronger students in the academy, if not the strongest.

Messages flowed from both sides of the mental connection as Khan crossed the familiar forest and reached the mountain in no time. He had already contacted Snow, and the two were exchanging emotions to understand how close they were to each other.

'Luckily Aduns resist the radiation quite well,' Khan found himself thinking while speeding toward his destination. 'Maybe that's the reason why the ancestors of the Niqols had originally taken them as sacred animals.'

The screeches of the Aduns filled the sky. The students and professors of the academy were moving outside the forest and past the mountains to reach landing areas large enough to contain many eagles.

Khan was one of the first to cross the mountain. The sky had cleared even more during the short hour he had required to reach one of the plains that expanded past the academy ground. Dark shades still tried to hide the nature of the event, but any human would understand that a star was about to rise on the horizon.

Nitis' unique atmosphere wouldn't even have dark areas once the star shone directly on the planet. The sky would spread its light everywhere and fill the surface with its radiation.

Snow landed next to Khan a few minutes after his arrival in the plain. The eagle laid its head on top of him as he ruffled the feathers on its neck. They had to wait for the other Niqols in their team to arrive before departing, and the situation was too serious to play around. Even the Aduns understood that the world was going through something strange.

Multiple Niqols arrived in the plain and took similar positions. Khan exchanged nods or friendly salutes with all of them before fixing his gaze on the mountain again. He had learnt to know almost everyone in the academy during that period. They were all acquaintances or friends who had been part of drunken jokes, chants, or group laughs during the parties. Yet, they were wearing serious expressions now that the apocalypse had come.

Niqols eventually started to gather near Khan. His group had two boys named Edil and Kakhir and a girl called Elita. They all featured the iconic beauty of their species. Their figures were slender, and their hair long. Still, their tense expressions didn't allow them to show those qualities.

"I'll rely on you, Khan," Edil announced after bowing when he arrived in the plain.

"I already feel better," Elita smiled when she arrived and saw Khan's confident gaze.

"We can move right away," Kakhir stated when he arrived in the plain since his Aduns was already waiting in the sky.

The four didn't waste time and set off to reach their destination. They had to take care of a relatively large area at the beginning of a mountain chain famous for a species of Tainted animals called Talelos, which Khan had started to consider as strange bears after receiving the task and going through a simple briefing.

The mountain chain was quite far away from the academy, and it even expanded in unknown areas of Nitis. Khan's group had to fly for almost five hours to reach it, and the four didn't hesitate to land once they saw the dark-grey peaks stretching in the distance.

The sky had almost reached a color that Khan knew far too well. Nitis seemed to fight against the dawn and delay its arrival, but the sky was about to become completely azure. A proper morning was about to arrive, even if it were already afternoon.

The group's task was to take care of the monsters that came out of the mountain chain and tried to expand into the plain that bordered it. The first part of the Niqols' plan was to contain and isolate the effects of the sunlight before proper cleaning operations could start.

Khan inspected his surroundings while patting Snow's neck to send it away. The area was quite large, but the mountain chain didn't offer many comfortable paths. It had two narrow canyons that could act as entrances, but they were relatively close, so the group could take care of both if they went slightly deeper into the plain.

The three Niqols imitated Khan's movements among those tense moments. The academic year didn't say anything about their battle prowess, but Khan's companions were weak. Liiza had confirmed that after the professors conveyed the plan to everyone.

The Niqols had high standards, so their weak students weren't as bad as the weak recruits. Still, that knowledge didn't reassure Khan too much, especially after seeing the size of the mountain chain with his own eyes. There could be thousands of Tainted animals there. They could overwhelm him even if only one percent of them managed to mutate correctly and leave the canyons.

"[Keep your Aduns close]," Khan ordered.

Everything could potentially go well. The monsters could fight each other before leaving the mountain chain. That would ease the group's work and even eliminate it if they were lucky. However, Khan wanted to prepare for the worse, including abandoning the plain if the situation became too dangerous.

The three Niqols didn't hesitate to nod. They didn't even notice how Khan's accent was quite good for someone who had been on Nitis for only four months. They were too tense to consider others when the two canyons in the rocky barrier in the distance released an ominous feeling.

Khan had made sure to bring the group two kilometers from the mountain chain so that they would have enough time to evaluate the nature of the threat and come up with a plan. The two canyons were only a few hundred meters from each other, so it didn't matter which exit the monsters chose to take.

Khan's eyes flickered when he sensed something off in the area in front of him. A vague solitary figure peeked out of the left canyon and started to drool when it saw the four students in the distance.

The figure shot out of the canyon and charged at full speed toward Khan's group. Exiting the narrow entrance allowed the four students to inspect its features. The creature had long dark-red fur, the massive body of a four meters tall bear, and a skull-like cover on its head.

Khan used the last feature to recognize it as a mutated Talelos. Its body appeared stable. The creature had transformed into a monster. Yet, there seemed to be something off with its aggression and the drool overflowing from its mouth.

"[Do me a favor]," Khan announced while stepping forward. "[Let me fight it alone]."

Khan didn't hesitate to draw his first-grade knife and rotate it in his hand. He appeared quite skilled with that weapon, but his experience didn't go beyond his solitary training.

"[We should fight together]!" Kakhir complained before repeating the same phrase in the human language out of fear that Khan might have misunderstood him.

"[I'm the main asset in this group]," Khan explained calmly while gazing at his three companions. "[I can't fight properly if I don't know how strong I am]."

Chapter 175 - Sadistic

The confidence that Khan radiated left the three Niqols speechless. The monster was drawing near at high speed. They could almost feel the ground under them tremble due to its heavy body slamming on the plain while it charged forward, but Khan appeared completely at ease with his back toward the creature.

The three Niqols were only in the first year, and their battle prowess wasn't great, but they could understand Khan's reasons. The period after the solar wind didn't feature any hunt since the creatures that could mutate had already mutated. Other parts of Nitis had seen monsters in the past months, but that didn't apply to the area under the control of the academy.

Khan didn't have the chance to test the skills developed during that time due to the absence of opponents, and the Niqols didn't usually rely on sparring sessions to improve, which left him basically out of options.

However, a single monster had come out of the mountain chain now. It was the perfect chance for Khan, and it would also benefit the three Niqols since they would get an idea of the creature's power without fighting it themselves. The other mutated Talelos would probably develop different abilities, but their enhanced physical strength should remain a constant, so it wasn't wrong to study it.

"Be careful," Elita said when it became clear that none of them would oppose Khan.

Khan limited himself to nod before turning to shoot ahead. His figure transformed into a shadow that approached the monster at high speed. The creature had covered almost half of the path that divided it from the students, and it didn't slow down at all when it noticed the incoming opponent.

The two drew closer until their clash became imminent, but Khan darted on the left before the skull-like cover could slam on his chest. His body spun as he gathered the entirety of his momentum on his right foot before delivering a strong blow that hit on the monster's neck.

The monster was immense. It was a mass of muscles and fur that was taller than Khan even when standing on its four legs. The Niqols almost believed that the creature would have pushed him away due to the sheer might that its charge carried, but their mouths opened in astonishment when they saw it flying to the right.

The mutated Talelos was as surprised as the Niqols. Khan's timing had been perfect. His kick had landed on the monster when its four legs didn't touch the ground, and the lack of a foothold had made pushing it away easier. However, he still had to release enough power to move that heavy mass of muscles.

The monster continued to shoot forward as it moved to the side. Khan had kicked it away, but it retained the momentum accumulated during its charge, so it flew diagonally before crashing on the

ground and rotating to create a long hole. The beast took a while to stop, but Khan was already in front of it by then.

The new position allowed Khan to notice a few details that he had missed from a distance. The skull-like cover resembled a mask made of bones that grew from the creature's forehead and ended past its chin. Those animals probably had issues eating with that tough shield in front of the mouth. The monster also had long curved claws coming out of its four legs, and its fur carried the faint smell of blood.

The creature tried to stand up, but Khan shot toward its neck while raising the first-grade knife to his side. That situation appeared perfect to test the Divine Reaper, so he didn't hesitate to seize it.

Khan deployed a technique that fused his martial arts. He accelerated before stopping right in front of the monster's neck. His ankles rotated, and his whole body followed as he stretched his left arm forward.

Mana gathered on his knife and enveloped it in an azure membrane that carried sharp properties. The speed of the blow was incredible, and the power of Khan's energy fused with the innate features of the weapon to create what seemed to be an unstoppable attack, but the impact with the dark-red fur brought only disappointment.

The knife managed to pierce the monster's thick skin, but only half of the blade seeped into its body. Khan frowned while looking at the scene, but an angry growl soon reached his ears and forced him to focus on the battle.

The monster turned its head and fixed its angry gaze on Khan. He could see its bloodshot eyes from behind the holes in the skull-like cover. The creature seemed in a frenzy, but it still spent one second in that exchange of glances before roaring and swinging its left paw toward him.

'The membrane must have broken before touching its skin,' Khan concluded in his mind before jumping back to dodge the incoming attack.

A trail of blood came out of the monster's neck when the knife left the wound. The weapon had managed to reach decent depths due to its natural enhancements, which only made the creature angrier.

Khan looked at the bloodied knife while he continued to retreat. No mark had appeared on its edges or surface. The failed execution from before didn't damage it at all, and he heaved in relief at that sight.

The magic weapon appeared far more resilient than the null-grade knives, making Khan desire to test his techniques again. His execution had been almost perfect. Now, he only needed to practice until his new abilities became reliable.

The failure in performing his last technique correctly showed him the reason for the sixty-five points assigned to the Divine Reaper when using it alone. The monster would have been able to hit Khan if it weren't for the quick moves of the Lightning-demon style, which would have probably left him badly injured. A single mistake had almost doomed him.

The weakness of the Divine Reaper was evident. It was impossible to use its techniques before reaching the competent proficiency level because a single failed execution could lead to a deadly

response. Still, that level of expertise didn't change that an opponent could dodge an attack and seize the same openings.

'It feels so weak on its own, but the army still gave it sixty-five points,' Khan thought as he stopped retreating and inspected the monster standing up. 'Maybe my perception is completely off since I started training with a good martial art right away.'

The monster charged ahead, but Khan reached its side before it could pick up speed. A single kick managed to make it crash on the ground again, which made him prepare the knife in no time.

Khan approached the creature's rear legs at that time. He performed a sprint to reach his target quickly and accumulate momentum, and his whole body rotated to give power to his swinging motion.

The complete absence of obstructions felt during the technique made Khan sure about its perfect execution. His knife had gone smoothly through the monster's leg, but its flesh had yet to show the effects of his attack.

The monster roared in anger again when it noticed Khan standing behind it. The creature quickly tried to straighten its body to turn and squash him, but it fell to the side when its weight moved on the damaged leg.

Khan saw the creature's fur opening into a gory mess and bending in an odd shape. It turned out that he had cut hair, skin, muscles, and femur in a single attack. The monster actually started falling on him since that limb gave up on trying to support its weight.

Khan had to retreat again, but a smile inevitably appeared on his face. He had always known that the Divine Reaper's offensive power was great, but he didn't believe it could reach such insane levels. After all, his opponent was a monster that could endure his kicks, but its innate defenses couldn't do anything against his knife.

'Ninety-five points,' Khan thought while looking at his knife. 'This is simply too great!'

His greatest weakness had disappeared. Khan could finally disregard the stronger bodies that the monsters had. He could even kill them in one blow if he hit the right spot. The only problem was how much he could rely on those abilities.

The scenes that followed left the three Niqols inspecting the scene speechless. The monster couldn't do much now that it couldn't use one of its legs. It crawled as its aggression tried to make it reach its targets, but it wasn't a proper threat anymore, not for Khan at least.

Khan attacked the monsters in different spots. He focused on the other legs first to make sure that the creature couldn't move at all before unleashing a flurry of techniques meant to improve his ability with the Divine Reaper.

The scene appeared quite sadistic. Khan made sure to avoid vital organs with his attacks as he continued to test the Divine Reaper's techniques, and the monster soon ended up in a gory state. Only its incredible resilience managed to keep it alive throughout that treatment, but it directly lay down at some point. The creature only wanted Khan to deliver the final blow, but he never satisfied its desires.

Khan's actions carried no cruelty. The monster had become nothing more than a training dummy in his eyes. He could use it to see how often his techniques failed before a proper opponent and how deeply he could cut it. The [Blood Shield] and Liiza's ice had never given him a proper understanding of the Divine Reaper's power, but he filled those gaps in his knowledge in no time.

"Just kill it!" Edil eventually shouted. "Save your mana!"

Edil's scolding forced Khan to remember about the crisis. He had been too caught in his training that he had almost forgotten about his situation. The canyons on the rocky wall in the distance could release monsters at any time, and he wasn't with his teammates.

'Well, you have stopped being useful for a while already,' Khan thought while looking at the gory figure at his side.

The bear had deep cuts on its four legs. One of them was even on the verge of separating from its base since it hung from a small patch of skin. Similar wounds filled the entirety of the creature's body. Khan had gone all-out with his tests, making sure to understand his current level and in which fields he needed to improve.

'I'm not as precise as I wished,' Khan summarized in his mind, 'And I fail to perform the techniques correctly far too often.'

The membrane covered the knife again as Khan approached the monster's head. The creature didn't even oppose the weapon piercing its skull. It only wanted to die after the awful treatment that Khan had reserved it.

"[Sorry, I've been too caught in it]," Khan shouted while drawing the knife and cleaning the blood on the monster's fur.

"We noticed!" Khakhir mocked, and his comment made everyone laugh.

Khan began to walk back to his companions, but he suddenly sensed multiple presences gathering near the canyons. Many skull-like covers soon peeked out of the exits as his eyes remained fixed on those spots. There seemed to be ten monsters ready to get out of the mountains, and some of them even showed signs of special abilities.

Khan didn't hesitate to shoot back to his companions before turning to face the mountain chain. His knife stood in front of him as he bent his legs and prepared for the imminent battle.

The three Niqols did the same, but Khan almost sensed their hesitation. Still, that feeling didn't come from their inexperience or weak battle prowess. He couldn't blame them when he was experiencing similar feelings.

The new monsters appeared far calmer than the first. The ten creatures were all mutated versions of the Talelos, but the transformations had affected them differently. Their furs carried various colors, and their skull-like masks also had different shapes. However, two of them stood out among the group.

Those two monsters were bigger than their companions. One of them had flames burning on its pale-red fur while the other released a dark gas from under its mask. It was clear that they had developed abilities.

Ten monsters weren't a force that regular students could face in an open field and without any plan. Khan had seen a group of more than twenty Niqols almost losing against one creature with abilities, so the sight of that pack made him hesitate.

The situation wasn't exactly terrible. The monsters mutated from the Talelos seemed to retain the same physical weaknesses. They were massive and resilient, but they could only charge forward and swing their paws. Those simple offensive patterns were easy to handle when facing only one specimen.

Fighting ten of them at the same time was a big problem, but Khan could imagine a group of Niqols with exceptional battle prowess winning that fight. It would take them some preparations and a slow approach, but the battle was feasible.

Khan would have even felt confident in dealing with ten monsters on his own if his proficiency with the Divine Reaper had reached the competent level. His attacks with the knife were deadly and ignored every protection, but that happened only when he managed to perform them correctly.

The speed and flexibility of the Lightning-demon style, the deadly power coming from the Divine Reaper, and the [Blood Shield] gave Khan a complete set of abilities that turned him almost unbeatable against those types of opponents. The issue was that his foundation had deep flaws. He lacked experience with his new techniques, and they were far from perfect.

Those hypothetical plans were almost pointless in front of the two big monsters. The ominous feeling radiated by the pale-red flames and the dark gas declared how the pack wouldn't only rely on mere physical attacks and simple charges. Those creatures could probably express the same deadliness that Khan had just started to feel proud of.

Khan inspected the situation from every angle and perspective, but nothing changed. His battle prowess was unreliable, and his companions were useless. They could probably launch the iconic palm strikes of their species, but they would die as soon as the pack touched them.

An ideal world where Khan managed to sprint through the monsters and perform ten perfect executions in a row existed, but he didn't believe to be there. The previous tests had shown him that only two out of three attacks came out fine and that when the monster was already powerless. The tension of an actual battle would make his number of failures increase.

"[Summon the Aduns]," Khan eventually ordered. "[We can't fight this]."

Edil wanted to give voice to a heroic comment that could inspire the group to remain in the area and fight, but he didn't lie to himself. He was willing to give his life for his planet, but his sacrifice would be pointless there.

The Niqols silently agreed to Khan's order and summoned the Aduns. The academy had prepared strategies for similar situations, so they didn't mind abandoning their position so soon.

A professor or other higher-ups would occupy strategic areas that could make them able to come in the student's aid relatively quickly. The closest soldier to Khan's position would take three hours to arrive in the plain, and the monsters couldn't do too much damage in that period.

The monsters didn't charge toward the four students. They approached them slowly as if they were studying the scene. Still, Snow and the three dark Aduns' descent forced the two ability users to react.

The monster with flames coming out of its fur roared before its hair pointed forward and launched a few large fireballs toward the descending eagles. The attacks were oddly fast for their size, but they destabilized before reaching their targets. Yet, their explosion filled the sky near the students with an expanding heatwave and fiery trails that reached the ground.

The heatwave forced the Aduns to halt their descent and spread their wings to shoot outside its range. The Niqols showed ugly expressions at that sight, but Khan promptly turned to retreat.

"[Let's get out of their range]!" Khan ordered, and the Niqols understood his simple tactic, but the same went for the monsters.

The eight normal monsters charged ahead after the fiery specimen growled. The ground trembled for real now that those heavy creatures stomped it repeatedly, but Khan didn't fear them. They had started to run too late. The Aduns would have enough time to pick the students up and escape in the sky.

Yet, even that seemed to be within the monsters' calculations. The creature that was releasing black gas pointed its mouth on one of the holes in its mask and blew while unleashing the full power of its lungs.

Khan was holding back his speed on purpose to remain near the Niqols, and the latter weren't too slow. They still met the superior standards that the aliens tried to create, so even their weak battle prowess was decent according to human criteria. The Aduns in the sky moved freely and without obstruction, so they were only waiting for the students to put enough distance from the monsters before descending again.

Nevertheless, the black gas that the monster blew from behind its mask moved faster than students and Aduns. The rare light that had started to fill Nitis disappeared as the dark gas engulfed the area within four kilometers.

Khan immediately noticed that his sensitivity to mana couldn't help him in that environment. His senses couldn't pierce that thin gas. He couldn't even notice the three students behind him. He could see almost decently, but that was too little when eight monsters were running in that direction.

Breathing became difficult, but Khan didn't experience any violent reaction. Instead, the Niqols had it slightly worse since they stopped moving to crouch and cough. Their attunement with mana didn't make them adapt to the new air quickly enough to avoid ending up in that condition.

Khan found himself in a troublesome situation. He didn't know how large the cloud was, but nothing could catch him if he continued to sprint at full speed. He could save himself, but the three Niqols would die.

On the other hand, the monsters couldn't have the best teamwork. The two leaders with abilities probably were the only specimens smart enough to come up with simple hunting tactics. Those creatures had mutated less than seven hours ago. They couldn't possibly know the full extent of their new powers.

'The two strong ones probably can't sense me here either,' Khan thought as he did his best to imagine the creatures' simple mindset.

The ten monsters had decided to create that group in less than seven hours. They had to belong to the same pack already, which would explain their instinctive teamwork. Khan could even guess that they had an innate talent toward the hunts due to their nature, but their intelligence couldn't go too far.

Khan could imagine only one tactic if he decided to consider the creatures intelligent enough to fuse their newly developed abilities with their usual hunting patterns. The eight normal monsters had shot ahead before the arrival of the cloud, which meant that they had to set their direction beforehand. They were probably still running even if the gas was suppressing their senses.

'If it's just the eight without abilities....' Khan thought as determination appeared on his face.

"[Focus on leaving the cloud]," Khan ordered as the Niqols started to straighten their backs. "[I'll buy some time]."

"No!" Kakhir shouted as a cough tried to interrupt his explanation. "You are more valuable than us during the crisis. Leave us here."

Khan felt deep shame for having considered leaving the three students behind. His eyes widened in front of their timid determination. They were weak, scared, and useless in that situation, but they were already willing to sacrifice themselves for Nitis' greater good.

Kakhir revealed a weak smile when he thought that his words had managed to convince his companion, but stupor filled his face when Khan grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back on his feet.

"[Run in that direction and leave]" Khan ordered while pointing at their previous direction.

"[Nitis has the priority]!" Kakhir shouted while dropping any intention to use the human language.

"[I'm a human]," Khan smirked. "[I only care about battle merits]."

Edil and Elita had recovered enough to hear the entirety of that conversation. The three Niqols weren't too close to Khan, but they had learnt to know his character. They saw through that blatant lie right away, and complaints immediately tried to come out of their mouths.

"[They can't catch me]," Khan interrupted them. "[Just go. I can't fight with you slowing me down]."

Khan continued to smile, which allowed the Niqols to see right through his intentionally rude words. He was trying his best to make them leave, even if that meant offending them, and their desire to live eventually made them accept his intentions.

"[We'll call the professor as soon as we exit this thing]," Elita promised as Kakhir helped her standing up.

Edil nodded at Khan before the three resumed their march. Khan had kept track of the passage of time during that interaction. Almost a minute had passed, so the monsters had to be almost on him. However, the Niqols were still too close, so he sprinted in the direction where he hoped to find opponents.

Khan felt angry at himself. He hated the fact that he had considered sacrificing the three Niqols when they were able to show such an intense determination. Khan felt the need to pay them back

for teaching him how those pure feelings could survive even in an awful situation. He also needed to vent. Luckily for him, he could do both things at the same time.

It felt strange to rely only on his vision after spending months using his sensitivity to mana as his first form of perception, but he didn't forget how to use them. Khan could see clearly even while sprinting among the dark gas, and a huge figure eventually appeared in front of him.

Khan didn't even give time to the figure to become clearer. He accelerated until his skin started to hurt and calculated the arrival of the clash perfectly.

The normal monster continued its mad, blind charge through the cloud, but a vague figure suddenly appeared in the darkness before it. The shadow rotated on itself and dug the ground due to the amount of momentum accumulated in the sprint to throw a rotating kick.

Khan's sole slammed on the side of the monster's head before the latter could realize what was happening. He had successfully hit the uncovered part right behind the mask, and the creature ended up changing direction due to the violence released in the impact.

Khan saw the monster sliding by his side, but he chased after it while rotating the knife in his hand. He stretched his arm until the tip of his weapon was right above its skull, and he performed a simple stabbing gesture once an azure glow shone.

The knife didn't release any sound when it pierced the monster's head and dug deep into its brain. Khan didn't even look at the creature after he retracted his weapon. He had performed the technique correctly, so his opponent was dead. That was the way of the Divine Reaper.

Chapter 177 - Darkness

More tall figures appeared around Khan as the monsters continued to charge forward. The dark gas had made them unable to notice the death of their companion, but they wouldn't have cared anyway. They had precise but simple orders, and they didn't dare to ignore them.

Khan shot after the nearest monster. His sprint made him reach his opponent in no time, and his left arm stretched before the creature could notice him. However, the knife didn't manage to pierce the beast's skull when it stabbed its head.

The monster noticed Khan at that point. It roared angrily as it turned toward while interrupting its charge. Three of its legs slid on the ground and created long holes as it tried to stop and swing its paw toward its opponent.

Khan only needed to run around the creature to dodge the incoming attack. He stabbed his opponent's head again when he reached its side, but he ended up failing to execute the technique correctly again.

The monster was livid. It tried to put strength in its rear legs and jump at Khan, but a kick slammed its head on the ground. The knife tried to pierce its skull again, but its bones managed to stop the weapon.

'Dammit!' Khan cursed in his mind while interrupting the monster's attempt to stand up with another kick.

The creature growled to no end, but Khan's kicks always managed to bring its head back to the ground. Swinging its paws didn't help either because Khan could jump on the other side of its body

before resuming his offensive. The monster felt powerless in front of the flawless execution of the Lightning-demon style.

A cracking noise eventually followed the thudding sounds generated by Khan's relentless offensive. The monster died, but he only felt pissed at his incompetence.

The other monsters had long since run past Khan while he was busy dealing with his opponent, but the darkness of the cloud didn't allow him to find them. He could only sprint toward the students in the hope of finding something among that annoying gas.

Khan had to reach the end of the cloud to find the other monsters. They were about to leave the gas and approach the students who had just stopped to call their Aduns, but he ran among them while throwing kicks left and right to attract their attention.

The six monsters crashed on the ground, rolled on themselves, or ended clashing with each other. Khan had only needed a few kicks to interrupt their charge, but he found six pairs of fierce eyes pointing at him afterward. His only consolation was that he had finally left that annoying cloud.

The three Niqols hesitated when they fixed their gaze on Khan's back. He appeared incredibly small with those huge figures surrounding him. The monsters stood up as angry growls came out of their mouths. They had completely forgotten about their targets after receiving those kicks. They only wanted to pounce at the human now.

Khan tightened the grip on the knife. He felt no fear in front of those threatening monsters. His figure radiated pure confidence.

The monsters seemed able to sense Khan's power. They were angry and even rather stupid, but their instincts told them that their opponent was strong. Their sensitivity to mana was working now that they had left the cloud, and they couldn't help but hesitate in front of that clear confidence.

The Aduns screeched when they landed on the ground and let the Niqols climb on their backs, but the monsters didn't react to that event. They remained still and left their eyes on Khan. They feared what would happen if they dared to lose their concentration.

One of the monsters began to bend forward, and that slight movement marked the beginning of the battle. Khan shot ahead and thrust his knife forward once the skull-like mask filled his view. His weapon pierced those bones and dug the flesh behind them before creating a hole in the creature's head.

A faint satisfaction spread inside Khan when he saw life abandoning the monster's eyes, but pain took its place as an unstoppable force landed on his side. He lost his grip on the knife as he flew above the monster to his right and blood accumulated in his mouth.

The monster stood on two feet and swung its paw toward Khan. He couldn't dodge the incoming sharp claws while airborne, so he moved the [Blood Shield] on his right forearm while crossing his arms in front of his chest.

The paw hit the forearm and flung Khan further away. He slammed on the ground and rolled on himself as the massive force generated by that simple attack vanished. Still, he soon managed to plant his feet on the terrain and stop himself.

His right sleeve was in pieces, and part of it hung on his hand. Khan tore it apart as he unsheathed the null-grade knife and threw it in his left palm. The gesture revealed how four bloody cuts had appeared on his right forearm, but they seemed pretty superficial.

The monsters had charged ahead as soon as Khan had slammed on the ground, and one of them was even about to fall on him after he drew the knife, but the creature ended up hitting nothing. Khan sprinted among his opponents and reached the other side of the group before jumping toward one of the enemies.

Khan performed an airborne spin before slamming his heel on the monster's mask. Cracks opened on those bones as the creature's head crashed on the ground and dug a deep hole.

The sudden stop made the monster's back rise, but it was too heavy to perform a complete flip. Khan could stab his knife downward, and the azure glow covering its surface stopped shining on the dark fur when it dug the creature's nape.

Khan immediately jumped backward while taking out the knife from the deadly wound. A monster immediately fell on his previous position and turned the corpse's head into a gory pulp of fur and blood. Nothing would have been able to save Khan if that attack had hit him, but he had learnt from his previous mistake.

A monster approached Khan from behind, but it didn't escape his senses. Khan turned before sprinting to the creature's side and stabbing his glowing knife on the spot right next to its mask, but only the tip pierced the tough skin.

The creature's head performed a sharp movement as it turned toward Khan, and the knife ended up snapping in half when the mask hit its side. A swinging paw followed that gesture, but it found no one once the monster completed the attack.

Khan cursed in his mind while running toward the corpse with the first-grade knife stabbed in its mask. He threw away his broken weapon once reaching his destination, but a pale-red glow spread in the area when he crouched.

A dense sphere of mana suddenly entered the range on Khan's senses. He didn't need to raise his head to understand what was about to arrive, so he quickly pulled out the knife from the mask and ran away. The sound of an explosion reached his ears while he ran away, and a heatwave eventually engulfed him.

Khan felt hot, but the heatwave didn't hurt him. He continued to sprint for a few seconds before stopping and turning to gain a clear idea of his situation.

The four normal monsters had stopped attacking now that their leaders had stepped into the battlefield. A trail of dark smoke came out of Khan's previous position. The monster's corpse wasn't burning, but its charred skin continued to release an ominous gas that tried to hide the two huge figures that had come out from the cloud.

The two leaders had run through the cloud to hide their arrival, but Khan had been fast enough to dodge their attack. The two monsters had their hungry eyes on him now, and their underlings imitated them as growls resounded from behind their masks.

Khan replied with his cold gaze. The battle had changed completely after the arrival of the two leaders, and he didn't know how smart it was to be part of it. He had managed to kill four monsters, but the previous exchanges had highlighted how unreliable his prowess was.

The first-grade knife returned inside the sheath as Khan began to run away. Angry roars followed that gesture, and the same pale-red light from before shone around him, but he didn't care. The battle was over for him.

Khan ran on the plain until Snow had enough room to pick him up without entering the range of the fiery specimen. It didn't take long before he was high in the sky, far away from the monsters.

The three Niqols soon reached him, and the group remained above the monsters to keep track of their movements. They had to stay there until a stronger soldier showed up and cleared the area before resuming their task there.

The monsters didn't do much after losing their targets. They advanced for a while, but more creatures eventually came out of the mountain chain and started fighting them for control of the plain.

A messy battle unfolded, and its size increased as its noises attracted more packs living in the mountain chain. The group could confirm the existence of almost fifty monsters, and many of them turned out to be different abilities.

Khan and the others never had a chance to defend the area, but that was fine. The Niqols had actually expected something like that to happen once the sunlight started to shine on the surface. The students' role was to delay those creatures once stronger assets arrived to clear the area.

Of course, the situation wasn't so desperate elsewhere. The mountain chain was one of the crowded areas on Nitis, so the Niqols already expected Khan and the others to be unable to defend it. They had actually predicted that they would lose control of most of the planet in the initial days of the crisis.

Edil updated the Niqols in charge of handling the various stronger assets on the changes that the plain experienced. He kept count of the number of monsters and described their abilities accurately so that the experts nearby could decide if their powers were up to the task.

Kakhir had to separate from the rest of the group to follow a few monsters that decided to run away from the bloody battle unfolding on the plain. The specimens with abilities were trying to enlarge their packs by subduing their opponents, but it took almost an hour before a clear hierarchy formed.

The monsters had to wait and recover at that point. They ate their dead companions and slept. Khan and the others could start to relax and focus on something else, and he even decided to meditate during those hours.

His body had been able to endure a direct hit from a monster, but his insides felt off. A vast bruise had even appeared on his side due to that attack, but he couldn't deny his slight satisfaction.

Khan had struggled against a single monster on his first hunt on Nitis, but he had just killed four of them in little more than a few exchanges. He had grown incredibly strong in mere months, and he had yet to perfect his abilities too. It felt unreal how much had changed.

The screech of an Aduns awakened Khan from his meditation. An eagle with peculiar dark-red feathers flew in the area while carrying a middle-aged woman who wore a serious expression.

Khan didn't know that Niqols, but she didn't waste time announcing herself. She appeared in a hurry while she descended toward the resting pack and pointing at the various monsters.

A dark sphere came out of her fingers and expanded as it descended toward the pack. Some monsters noticed the event and alerted everyone with their roars, but the attack moved too quickly. It only took a few seconds to transform into a black halo that enveloped all the specimens.

Cries of pain resounded, but Khan couldn't study what was happening since the halo hindered his vision. The technique remained active until everything went silent and made the woman decide to disperse her darkness.

The scene that the dispersion of the technique revealed left Khan speechless. The pack had disappeared. Patches of blood stained the ground, but he couldn't see anything else there. The darkness had also devoured the short grass in that area.

Chapter 178 - Grasshoppers

The woman didn't even look at the ground after retracting her technique. She shot in the distance to go after Kakhir and handle the monsters that had separated from the main pack. Khan, Edil, and Elita limited themselves to follow her departing figure with their astonished gazes.

It was rare to see strong soldiers in action. Khan had seen something similar on Istrone when Captain Foxnor had taken out many Kred with his lightning, but that event didn't make him grow used to that power. He had surpassed the human limits long ago, but that was a completely different realm. He couldn't find words to describe it.

Edil and Elita felt a similar surprise. They had remained amazed at Khan's battle prowess, but the woman had shown them what levels mana could make them reach. It was inspiring and scary learning that a single person could wield so much power.

Their amazement didn't make them forget about the crisis. The light filling the environment was a constant reminder that Nitis was turning upside-down. Its rich fauna was transforming and expanding, stretching into areas that had typically been safe.

Khan, Edil, and Elita returned to the ground and waited for other monsters to come out of the mountain chain. Kakhir soon returned while wearing an amazed expression that made his companions realize how stunning it had been for him to see the woman in action. The group could continue their task, but nothing interesting happened even after hours passed.

A few solitary monsters came out of the canyons at random intervals, but the group took care of them easily. Those creatures had probably remained hidden while the large pack had gone to the plain, which said a lot about their power. One of them ended up having a strange ability that gave it a pinkish halo, but Khan killed it before learning what it did.

The three Niqols didn't let Khan fight on his own anymore, but those solitary opponents couldn't make them sweat, especially with him in the frontlines. The three aliens wanted to improve, but the knife would eventually pierce the creatures' heads and put an end to that training.

The situation had stabilized to a level that the four students could handle, and the same happened in many other areas as the stronger soldiers completed their first round of help.

The Niqols seemed to handle the crisis well, but the truth was far different. The aliens left a large part of Nitis on its own to focus on regions featuring habitations or other structures. They didn't have enough forces to inspect those places either since all the strong soldiers had to help with the various battlefields.

"Khan, they are asking about you," Edil said at some point while the cube glowed in his hand.

Khan had sat on the ground to meditate since monsters had stopped coming, and a frown appeared on his face when he heard Edil. It didn't make any sense for someone to want to talk with him directly.

Khan picked his cube and contacted Edil to join the connection that he had set, and the unfamiliar male voice of a Niqols resounded in his mind as soon as the alien boy put his device away. 'There has been a problem with Rodney. Your area has calmed down, so we need you to reach his group.'

'What happened?' Khan asked.

'It's better if you go there yourself,' The Niqols said before sending a map with precise instructions on how to reach the current position of Rodney's group.

Those words were basically orders, so Khan didn't hesitate to stand up and summon his Aduns. A quick exchange of salutes happened before he jumped on Snow and left the plain.

Rodney's group was only an hour away. They handled a relatively barren area that featured small animals, but Khan didn't know too much about them since each briefing had happened separately. What he knew came from his friend's complaints and Asyat, who happened to be with him.

The sky had become completely clear by then. The night had arrived according to his phone, but the sun seemed on the verge of rising. Khan actually didn't know if he would see it, but his thoughts didn't linger on that topic for too long.

The faint secrecy of the Niqols handling the communication had made Khan curious and worried. Rodney had always been quite easygoing about everything, but he was by no means stupid. Khan even believed that his companion understood the politics behind their situation better than everyone else.

Asyat was also a good friend. She had continued to hit on Khan even after Liiza had started to join the parties, but she wasn't as clingy as the other girls who flirted with him. He respected that part of her.

A rocky, barren area unfolded in Khan's vision as he reached the spot marked by the map in the cube. Hills and short mountains created an uneven terrain filled with cavities, narrow caves, and a few valleys. It had the potential to generate many lairs, but it was too poor for big animals.

Khan found a Niqols sitting on the ground, and Snow didn't hesitate to dive toward him. The boy's name was Mikail. He revealed a broad smile when Khan landed next to him, but his expression returned sad when he recalled what had happened to his group.

"[Where are the others]?" Khan immediately asked.

Mikail pointed at a descending path a few hundred meters in the distance. Two hills with odd shapes created a tunnel that led under the surface, but Khan couldn't see anything from his position.

"[We were doing fine]," Mikail explained, "[But a monster with hypnotic abilities appeared, and everything fell apart. The skill isn't even too strong, but it's hard to break out of it once it takes control of your actions]."

"[Couldn't you help the others]?" Khan questioned.

"[I regained control of my body only after they left]," Mikail responded. "[I think the monster can't control four of us at the same time, so I remained here and became able to move again only when I exited its range. The higher-ups told me to let you handle the situation when I notified them]."

"[Why is that]?" Khan asked in a confused tone.

"[I'm not sure]," Mikail answered. "[Maybe they are scared of political repercussions. We are still talking about a hypnotized human. Who knows what the monster is making him do]?"

Khan suddenly realized how things could get complicated in that situation. The monster couldn't have good intentions, so Rodney and the others probably were up to something terrible. That could lead to troublesome political issues if the Niqols were to handle everything poorly.

Instead, the responsibility would fall on the humans if Khan were to mess things up. That was a simple political game that had to happen between the two species. Khan simply hated it because it involved lives.

"[How can I even protect myself from hypnotic abilities]?" Khan questioned.

Mikail was talking about the hypnotic ability as nothing irrelevant, but that was Khan's main concern since he had no idea how to handle it.

"[Right]," Mikail exclaimed when he recalled that Khan's training probably had never touched those topics. "[You need to create a barrier around your head, something similar to a shield. Can you do it]?"

Khan limited himself to nod. The mental barrier activated, but it didn't push away his emotion. It created a protective membrane around his brain that hindered his sensitivity to mana but also blocked external influences.

"[Good luck, Khan]," Mikail announced when he saw that Khan turned toward the tunnel. "[I wish our species weren't so wary of each other]."

"[It's fine]," Khan revealed a comforting smile after turning toward the boy. "[I'll come back in no time]."

Mikail wore a smile too, but Khan only looked at it for a second before moving toward the tunnel. The light in the environment managed to illuminate the passage since the two rocky structures that made the ceiling left multiple openings. Still, he couldn't see much anyway due to the various turns and narrow spots.

Khan checked his cube before entering the tunnel. A simple call to Mikail revealed the nature of the species that lived in the area. The monster resembled a grasshopper, but it didn't look too threatening. Its hypnotic ability was its only problematic feature, but that wouldn't be an issue for Khan since he had prepared the barrier beforehand.

Khan didn't draw his knife. The biggest animal confirmed in that area resembled a small rat, so his kicks would be more than enough to handle every threat. The many narrow corners and turns of the tunnels didn't suit the Lightning-demon style, but he didn't want to risk committing mistakes in that situation.

The mental shield reduced the range of Khan's sensitivity to mana, but he could still check his surroundings with it. He even approached every corner carefully to avoid falling prey to an ambush in areas that hindered his kicks. Still, nothing seemed to live in the initial parts of the tunnel.

Khan advanced slowly but steadily. His careful steps would make rocks roll at times, and the echo of their noises made him understand how deep that underground structure actually was.

Describing it as underground felt incorrect after Khan saw the tunnel opening into a relatively large area. The sunlight shone from above him and highlighted the spots where the two hills failed to meet. He felt inside a long and intricate hole rather than in an actual cave, but the path kept descending, and some darkness eventually appeared in his vision.

'How far did they go?' Khan wondered after he spent more than twenty minutes descending through that structure.

Khan crossed tunnels, narrow cracks, and relatively large rooms. The areas where the sunlight managed to arrive grew scarcer as he continued to descend, but he felt worried when he saw the complete lack of lifeforms. A few tracks and footsteps appeared on his path, but they only confirmed that he was heading on the correct way.

A worrying thought filled Khan's mind, and he felt pretty sure that Mikail shared it. The two didn't speak about that matter in detail, but they knew that the Tainted animals weren't too intelligent, especially those as small as grasshoppers.

The monster's orders would mainly involve food, which only gave an ominous aura to the matter in such a barren area. Khan didn't want to think about the situation, but ideas inevitably appeared in his mind, and fears built up.

A buzzing noise eventually began to fill the underground areas that Khan was crossing. That intense sound seemed able to make the rocky walls tremble and the terrain shake. It intensified as Khan moved forward, and it almost gained deafening properties when the structure opened into a dark gorge.

Khan found himself on a narrow path that bordered a deep gorge. The area was relatively ample, and he could even notice a few holes connected to the surface on the ceiling about one hundred meters above him.

The buzzing noise came from the darkness of the crack, but Khan couldn't inspect it properly with his restrained sensitivity. He had to take his cube out and activate one of its functions to study the area properly.

The azure symbols on the cube lit up and transformed into a torch that Khan didn't hesitate to point at the crack. The buzzing noise suddenly went silent when that light shone on the rocky walls, and Khan couldn't help but gulp when he saw the many black grasshoppers hanging there. They basically filled the entire canyon, but they were nothing more than Tainted animals.

'Where is the monster?' Khan questioned himself before moving deeper along the narrow path.

The grasshoppers stopped releasing their noises as soon as the azure glow of the cube shone on them, but none of them dared to attack. Khan had plenty of room to perform his kicks there, so he didn't feel any fear. He only worried about his companions.

A thudding noise eventually reached his ears. That sound spread from the depths of the area, which seemed to mark the end of the underground structure. A cavity appeared on his left as he pressed forward, and he didn't hesitate to inspect it since the thuds came from there.

The cavity wasn't big. It barely stretched for eight meters, but Khan froze when the azure glow of the cube illuminated its contents. Multiple grasshoppers filled the walls and the ceiling of the small cave, but different figures occupied its floor.

Something had crushed those figures. They were nothing more than bloody pulps that of fur, flesh, and bones. Khan struggled to recognize them, especially since some grasshoppers were feasting on the floor. Yet, he couldn't fail to notice Rodney sitting on one of the largest corpses.

The thudding noise had stopped, but Khan quickly connected it to the bloody rock that Rodney wielded between his hands. He had clearly it to squash the various victims of the monster's hypnotic ability. His last one was a headless corpse who had already lost most of its features, but its white hair and dark-blue skin remained impossible to ignore even in that state.

Chapter 179 - Panic

Everything was still. The grasshoppers had stopped moving. Rodney didn't look at Khan, but his arms were in the air as he continued to wield the rock firmly. The cave was the embodiment of death and gore.

Khan didn't move. He preferred everything to remain still to hold on to the faint hope that he had imagined those scenes. Yet, a third humanoid figure suddenly entered his vision and forced him to think about his next move.

Asyat was sitting on the ground. Her eyes didn't move, which confirmed how she was under the effects of hypnosis. The monster was probably waiting for Rodney to finish with the other Niqols before moving to her.

Khan's eyes darted through the cavity. The grasshoppers barely showed differences among each other, but one of them was slightly bigger than the others. Moreover, a faint pressure came out of it and tried to reach his mind, but the mental shield prepared beforehand blocked it.

The monster was at the bottom of the cave, on the other side of the corpses. Khan could reach it in less than two seconds. He even had enough room to kill it with a single blow, but he needed a little longer to accept the scene completely.

Khan's figure slowly bent forward, but that slight movement made the entire room come back to life. The monster showed its wings and released the buzzing sound before every other grasshopper in the underground canyon did the same. The rocky surfaces started to tremble as the noise became deafening, and every insect in the cavity shot toward the exit.

A series of black figures filled Khan's vision. They weren't trying to attack him, but their escape made him lose track of the monster. Of course, that only involved his eyes. His sensitivity to mana didn't manage to reach the end of the cave in its current state, but it could fill the entirety of the exit.

Khan let the grasshoppers fly past him until a slightly different figure entered the range of his senses. His leg shot upward at that point, and rocks fell from the wall when his foot slammed on that surface.

The grasshopper grew more chaotic. Their flight became messy and panicked, and the same went for their buzzing noise. Their cry lost the synchrony shown before and turned into a loud but and chaotic series of sounds.

Khan's leg remained on the wall until all the grasshoppers had left the cavity. His foot slowly left those rocks once everything was clear, and the squashed corpse of the monster appeared under his sole. A single kick had been enough to kill it.

The pressure on his mental shield was no more, and his two companions inside the cavity also started to regain control over their movements. Asyat bent to her side before voicing a series of deep breaths while Rodney threw the rock behind him before jumping off the corpse and planting his back on the wall.

Khan didn't need to question Mikail to understand that the hypnosis didn't make you forget what you did. The boy recalled everything that had happened while he was under the monster's control, so Khan felt sure that the same had happened to his companions.

"[Eset]," Asyat sobbed while covering her mouth.

Her exclamation made Khan aware of the corpse's identity. Eset was a girl in the second year of the academy. She even had a boyfriend among the Niqols, but Rodney had transformed her head into a bloody pulp. Khan would have never recognized her if it weren't for Asyat.

"Khan," Asyat whimpered, and Khan checked the state of the underground gorge before walking toward the girl.

The grasshoppers had lost their cool after the monster died. They were flying up and down the canyon without an apparent destination, and their buzzing noise filled the area. Still, they were virtually harmless, so Khan could ignore them.

Khan crouched in front of Asyat, and the girl jumped in his arms. Her hands clutched his robe as she dug her face on his chest and started sobbing loudly. She had seen ugly stuff against the [Silent Groundsuckers], but the latest event had been too much for her.

"Rodney," Khan whispered while caressing Asyat's hair in the hope that it could help her calm down.

The boy was trying to retreat even if his back had long since hit the wall. Rodney continued to push himself backward as his eyes remained fixed on Eset's corpse.

Rodney remained in that condition until retches climbed his throat. The boy turned to his right to puke, and Khan heaved a helpless sigh. He couldn't even imagine what the two had to experience under the control of the monster. Rodney had seen his hands killing his own companion. He had to hear and feel the sounds and sensations that crushing a head with a rock caused. That event could break even the most stable minds.

"It wasn't your fault," Khan stated while Rodney wiped his mouth clean with his sleeve. "No one has trained against mental abilities."

Rodney didn't answer nor turn, but he seemed calmer after those words. Khan could turn toward Asyat. She was still sobbing on his chest, but she had also started to breathe regularly after his caresses.

"[We have to leave this place]," Khan whispered while reaching the side of Asyat's head and lifting it toward him.

Asyat's teary glowing eyes soon shone on Khan's face. He could see her transparent tears running down her cheeks. The girl had even left a wet patch on his robe, but he didn't care. He only wanted to return to the surface and make sure to handle the situation correctly.

The Niqols nodded weakly, and Khan helped her standing up. Asyat continued to cling to his robe, and he couldn't find any reason to make her leave him. Even Liiza would understand her behavior in that situation.

"Rodney?" Khan called while moving toward the exit.

Asyat hid her face on his chest again when they walked over Eset's corpse. Instead, Rodney remained crouched toward his puke. He appeared unable to look away from that disgusting spot on the ground.

"Rodney!" Khan shouted while grabbing the boy's shoulder, and the latter finally straightened his back to move his eyes on him.

Rodney appeared in a daze. Complicated thoughts filled his mind, and Khan didn't even try to guess them. He didn't have time to give him emotional support now. His hands were literally full with Asyat already.

"Let's go," Rodney eventually said in a weak voice. "We must report this."

Khan could only nod before exiting the cavity. Asyat voiced a high-pitched cry when she found herself in the middle of the swarm of grasshoppers. She directly hugged Khan and let him lead her.

Rodney followed closely behind. He appeared fine among the grasshoppers, but the same lost expression filled his face while he reached his two companions.

Khan led the two through the passage, ignoring how Rodney got closer to his shoulder after each step. Asyat, the grasshoppers, and the vivid images of the previous scene made him fail to consider what the boy could think or try to do.

Everything happened quickly. Rodney suddenly jumped in front of Khan and pushed Asyat. The girl was basically lying on Khan, so she didn't oppose the attack at all. She flew backward, and her feet went past the passage's edges in no time. She started to fall inside the canyon, but her hands were still clinging to Khan's robe, so she dragged him with her.

Khan saw the darkness of the canyon becoming dangerously close. He almost lost the grip on his cube as Asyat's weight threatened to make him fall inside that deep hole.

"What are you even doing?!" Khan angrily shouted while grabbing Asyat's forearm and making sure that she didn't fall.

The mental barrier still covered his brain, but he couldn't fail to sense Rodney getting closer again. The boy seemed willing to push him too now, but he didn't plan to stay still.

The Lightning-demon style had turned Khan's legs into proper weapons capable of discharging inhuman strength. The Niqols were also generally light, and Asyat wasn't an exception. He could put everything he had on jumping backward and pulling both of them out of that dangerous situation.

Rodney almost fell from the cliff when Khan's figure disappeared from its edges. The grasshoppers tried to make him lose his balance, but he remained on the passage. However, a kick landed on his side as soon as he managed to turn.

The attack flung Rodney on the right and made him crash on the rocky ground. The boy rolled on himself before slamming on the wall. He tried to stand up, but a shadow reached him and made him stop.

"What the fuck did you try to do?" Khan asked angrily while planting his foot at the center of Rodney's chest.

Asyat had crouched next to the wall behind Khan. She was hugging her knees as pure disbelief filled her expression. She had gone from watching Eset dying to almost falling inside the canyon, and Rodney had been significant in both events. Also, the grasshoppers were still flying around her, which only made her mental situation worse.

"I'm protecting my position on Nitis!" Rodney explained while trying to straighten his back, but Khan only intensified his pressure and made him hit the ground again.

"Protecting what?" Khan scolded. "You were under the effects of a monster. What's there to protect?"

"You are so na?ve," Rodney scoffed. "Do you think the army will let me stay here after learning what I did?"

"So, you thought that killing her was the right call?" Khan shouted while applying even more pressure on his chest. "Why did you try to push me too then? Was that about your position too?"

"I panicked," Rodney justified himself while diverting his gaze, but Khan suddenly kicked his face and made him faint.

Blood came out of Rodney's nose, but Khan didn't care. He felt angry beyond reason. He was in the middle of a worldwide crisis, he had just added another gruesome scene to his memories, and his companion had even tried to kill him.

'Why do they try so hard to make me hate humans?' Khan cursed in his mind before turning to reach Asyat.

The girl was traumatized, but Khan wasn't in the right mindset to show compassion. He put an arm under her armpit and forced her to stand up. Asyat instinctively clung to his neck and hugged him tightly.

Khan could sense her cold tears wetting his neck, but he ignored them. He wrapped his arm around her back and partially lifted her to lead her toward the tunnel. Rodney began to regain his senses when Khan reached him, but a second kick aimed at his face put him to sleep again.

Khan then crouched to grab the boy's collar and drag him through the hole. He had his hands full with Asyat and Rodney, but he barely felt their weight. He could march through the underground structure and cross every narrow area without facing great problems.

Asyat even helped Khan with the fainted Rodney when one of the narrow areas appeared, but she immediately returned into his arms once they reached a larger path. That would probably make Liiza reach her limits, but Khan couldn't do much about that. He would gladly let her freeze him as long as he could get out of that structure.

Light eventually shone on his face. Khan exited the tunnel while holding Asyat in his right arm and dragging Rodney with his left. Mikail couldn't help but show a confused expression at that scene, but he refrained from asking questions when he noticed how pissed Khan appeared.

"[You have to leave me now]," Khan whispered in Asyat's ear once they reached Mikail.

The girl glanced at Mikail before moving her eyes back on Khan. She nodded and hugged him tightly again. He even felt her dry lips leaving a kiss on his neck before she left him to sit next to the Niqols.

"[Tie him up or something]," Khan vaguely ordered while taking out his cube. "[I have to report something]."

Chapter 180 - Camp

Khan reported everything that had happened in the underground structure accurately. His report included Rodney's unforgivable behavior, and Asyat's cube soon lit up since the higher-ups of her species wanted her to confirm Khan's version.

The girl wasn't in a good state, but she mustered her strength to complete the task. Mikail couldn't help but shoot disgusted glances at Rodney after orders arrived in his cube. He almost couldn't believe that he had considered that human his companion just a few hours ago.

"[They were right to be wary of us]," Khan commented when he saw Mikail standing up to drag Rodney to his Aduns.

The Niqols had tied Rodney up with his own clothes. That couldn't do much to keep someone capable of wielding mana still, but Mikail wouldn't hold back from hitting the boy until he fainted if he happened to do something funny.

The higher-ups had given Mikail orders to bring Rodney to one of the safe locations since he had become unreliable on the battlefield. Khan didn't know what would happen to him, but he didn't really care. Rodney had tried to kill him. Khan wouldn't feel any pity for his situation.

Mikail left the area, and Khan waited for new orders, but nothing arrived. The lack of communications confirmed how he and Asyat had to continue overseeing that area. Everything there had been relatively calm before the arrival of the monster, so no threats appeared now that Khan had killed that creature.

Khan didn't like that situation too much. He still felt pissed that Rodney could have resorted to such an extreme action only to save his position on Nitis. Attacking Asyat was one thing that Khan hated but understood. However, he couldn't even begin to accept how Rodney had been willing to turn on him afterward.

Khan and Rodney didn't have a great relationship, but they had slept in the same room multiple times. They were also members of the elite team sent on a political mission. That alone set specific rules for their behavior, but Rodney didn't seem to think like him. He didn't hesitate to try to push Khan down once he started defending Asyat.

The absence of threats in the area worsened Khan's situation. Asyat didn't even try to hold back now that they had remained alone. She took his arm in her grasp and rested on his shoulder while he studied the land or meditated.

The girl had managed to calm down, but she still used Khan as moral support. She even tried to kiss him a few times, but he always stopped her or directly dodged her attempts.

It almost seemed that Asyat was doing that on purpose. An ignorant eye would see her attempts to kiss Khan as a form of manipulation that exploited her recent experience. However, he knew the Niqols enough to understand that she was simply trying to vent the awfulness that she was feeling. He was the perfect alternative to a party in her situation.

"[Why are you so hard to get]?" Asyat complained after Khan dodged another kiss and made her lips end on his cheek. "[I know that you have no interest in me, but can't you make an exception today]?"

"[We are in the middle of a worldwide crisis]," Khan tried to change the topic.

"[One more reason to stop holding back]," Asyat responded while diverting her gaze. "[We might die full of regrets tomorrow]."

Khan inspected the girl lying on his shoulder. Her feelings appeared serious, so he felt the need to address them adequately, especially after what she had gone through. "[I like you, but I already have someone. I'm sorry]."

"[Everyone knows about your mysterious girlfriend]," Asyat announced before making sure that his arm could feel her breasts, "[But can't you make an exception]?"

'Liiza will kill me for sure,' Khan sighed in his mind before pulling his arm out of that tempting situation.

"[I can't. I don't want to]," Khan replied in a serious tone. "[You probably wouldn't want it like this either. Take your time to accept what has happened]."

Asyat remained speechless in front of Khan's honest words. She sniffed as a tear ran down her cheek. Her sad voice followed as she bent to lay on Khan's lap. "[Let me rest for a bit then]."

Khan couldn't do much there. He hoped for the arrival of monsters, but the rocky region betrayed him. He could only remain in that position as Asyat did her best not to fall asleep to forget about everything that had happened.

'This is only the first day,' Khan commented in his mind as minutes passed.

The first day with the daylight was bound to be harsh due to the sudden increase in the monsters' population. The initial wave of packs expanding into lands that they had always avoided would create many battlefields, and the Niqols didn't have enough strong assets to handle all of them. They could salvage their important areas by letting the students buy some time, but they had already accepted that they would lose control of most of the planet.

Easier days would follow the initial outburst. The monsters would settle in new environments, which would give the Niqols the chance to create specific hunts. The students would have to handle the creatures within the range of their abilities while the stronger assets would take care of the nearby areas that featured too many threats.

Still, the situation would worsen afterward. The sunlight would continue to fill Nitis for two months, according to the calculations of the Global Army. That time was enough to trigger new mutations on monsters that had already stabilized.

That would give birth to stronger monsters which the students couldn't even hope to approach. The Niqols considered that the worst moment of the crisis since it would require their best assets to work together to clear multiple areas.

The situation would stabilize again after that due to the overall fall in the Tainted animals' population. The monsters wouldn't have anything with mana to eat, which would stop further mutations and force them to rely on fights inside their packs.

Everything was about surviving the first day and the dangerous phase, but Khan couldn't feel too good about that after seeing what a single unique monster had managed to cause. One student was dead, and another had betrayed him for political reasons. The Niqols would have to abandon more areas if other battlefields ended up facing the same losses.

Mikail never returned to the barren area. The Niqols sent him to help Khan's previous group. Instead, he and Asyat eventually had to stand up to fight a strange rat that had developed the ability to spit poison.

The battle against that creature didn't last long since Khan killed it in three kicks, but the event finally made Asyat leave his lap and arm. She had calmed down completely. She only wanted to attend the party meant to mourn the losses of the first day now.

Hours had to pass before the Niqols in charge of the various communications summoned the students back to one of the safe areas established after studying the expansion of the different mutated animals. It was enough for them to send a map through the cubes to notify everyone of the temporary headquarters created after a whole day of reports, and Khan remained stupefied by how quickly the aliens had managed to act after he and Asyat reached their destination.

The Niqols had established an encampment in a cold area hidden among a mountain chain. That region was relatively close to the academy. It actually was in the most external defensive layer decided before the arrival of the daylight, which proved how successful the first day had been.

A few short structures that had specific purposes stood in the middle of a sea of tents. Only experts who could concoct potions, provide medical care, or help in the disposition of the troops could enter those buildings. Every other habitation was for the students, and the aliens didn't even bother to assign names to them.

Khan didn't know how the Niqols had managed to create something like that in a mere day. He guessed that they had used some of the underground tunnels, but he remained stupefied nonetheless.

The actual state of the camp made his amazement vanish quickly. Khan noticed multiple groups of Niqols gathered in empty spots with drinks in their hands or instruments playing sad chants. Many of them featured bandages or new injuries, and their dark mood revealed how the first day didn't go too well for them.

Khan moved among the tents until a familiar pair of eyes landed on his side. He turned and saw Liiza staring at him while laying her back on one of the metal sticks that kept the tent open. Her gaze immediately went on his right sleeve to check the injury created by the mutated Talelos, but she quickly stopped inspecting him after confirming that he was fine.

Khan did something similar. He confirmed that Liiza was fine before diverting his gaze and proceeding on his way. Liiza entered her tent at that point. She had seen her boyfriend, so she could sleep easily now.

Many Niqols greeted Khan with warm salutes, but some seemed to feel some hesitation when their eyes fell on him. Something was holding them back from showing their usual affection toward him.

Khan didn't initially understand the reason behind that odd behavior, but everything became clear when he found the recruits living on their own in tents at the edges of the encampment. He could recognize ostracism when he saw it.

George, Veronica, Kelly, and Brandon were standing outside of their tents when Khan approached them. His arrival made them stop their conversation and hurry toward him, but their reactions differed greatly.

Veronica appeared worried, George ran while eyeing the couple, Kelly was angry, and Brandon was confused. Only one event could make them react so differently. Khan could confirm that they knew about Rodney with a simple glance.

"What have you done?" Kelly asked while trying to keep her voice down.

"Fought against many monsters mainly," Khan shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't play dumb," Brandon continued. "We know that you sold Rodney to the Niqols. You should have let the humans handle him!"

"Do you know what he has done?" Khan asked as a displeased expression appeared on his face. "He didn't only try to kill a Niqols. He even tried to push me down a cliff when I tried to help her. Did you want me to leave such a dangerous character around while we still can't contact the Global Army?"

The four fell silent when they heard those words. They didn't expect the situation to be so serious. Their knowledge came from the rumors that had already filled the camp, but they were obviously incomplete.

"Don't listen to them," Veronica announced. "You did the right thing. I wouldn't feel safe with someone like him fighting with us."

"She is right," George added. "I understand the political issues connected to your actions, but we are risking our lives here. I'm not dying because of him."

"What if he has ruined everything that we have accomplished until now?" Kelly complained. "Wouldn't that make our efforts useless?"

"Useless but alive," George repeated. "I would have reported Rodney myself if I were in his situation. The guy actually tried to kill him!"

"He could have handled it better!" Kelly continued. "The political repercussions that this-."

"Kelly, I don't care," Khan interrupted her before turning to walk toward the tents more in the center of the encampment.

Some Niqols might resent the humans after what had happened, but Khan knew that many wouldn't care, and he preferred to spend time with them. He had yet to check on Doku and Azni even. Also, he wanted to find a drink and vent the annoying feeling that Rodney's actions had generated.

The four recruits didn't initially let him go. That matter wasn't as simple as his nights spent in the wild. Khan had reported one of them to the Niqols authorities.

Yet, Doku suddenly appeared in their path. Bandages came out from his sleeve, but he seemed to be fine otherwise. His expression was quite serious, but he didn't hesitate to smile when he and Khan exchanged a glance.

"Khan, I was looking for you," Doku quickly explained. "The higher-ups are planning the clearing operations, and they want you to lead one of them."