

Chaos' Heir 181

Chapter 181 - Favor

The four recruits remained speechless. Even George and Veronica didn't like that the Niqols would have the upper hand when it came to handling Rodney. They could ignore the matter since it involved Khan, but Doku's words had reminded them of a simple political tactic.

Selling someone to the enemy to gain personal benefits was a common practice. Khan had even done the same to gain access to the Niqols' old methods and build a promising future as an ambassador. However, he had accidentally done something similar by reporting Rodney.

Khan had improved his position by giving Rodney away. In theory, that result benefited the Global Army since it brought one of the recruits closer to the Niqols.

Even Kelly had to remain silent in front of those results. The Global Army now had an asset deeply connected to the Niqols' younger generations. The higher-ups of the alien society also relied on him when it came to important matters. Khan's actions and performance had led to a striking success in the political mission. Kelly could complain about his methods, but she had to remain silent in front of his undeniable achievements.

On the other hand, Khan felt conflicted about the matter. Rodney's issue had left a bad taste in his mouth, but he had been out of options after the boy had tried to push him inside the gorge. Still, gaining benefits from that event made him feel dirty.

That outcome had been a coincidence that Khan could connect to his performance in the plain, but it felt bad since it came right after Rodney's betrayal. He could find comfort in the fact that he was getting closer to the Niqols and to his final goal of being together with Liiza in the open, but he still found himself split between two worlds.

It seemed that Khan could grow closer to the Niqols only by distancing himself from the humans. He didn't mind that trade, but he wondered whether a better way existed. After all, he had found good people among the humans. Khan couldn't forsake Lieutenant Dyester, Martha, George, and Veronica.

Khan didn't let the conflict inside his mind appear on his face or actions. He didn't hesitate to nod at Doku before hurrying next to him. The four recruits could only remain in silence as they gazed at the two disappearing among the sea of tents.

"[Is Azni okay]?" Khan asked while the two moved among the tents.

Multiple injured Niqols filled his vision. Some nodded when they noticed his gaze, and others raised their cups while showing complicated smiles. It seemed that having Doku next to him confirmed his position as a true ally and made the aliens ignore how a member of his species had tried to kill one of their companions.

The overall situation in the camp wasn't too poor. Many had suffered injuries, but Khan couldn't see anyone in a serious condition. Still, he didn't delude himself, especially after what he had witnessed in the underground canyon. His question about Azni came from that worry.

"[She is better than me]," Doku laughed while lifting his left sleeve to show the bandages that covered his forearm. "[I had to fight a damned thing that grew tentacles on its head. I swear, these monsters try to become ugly on purpose]."

Doku was one of the few Niqols who knew how good Khan had become in the alien language, so he didn't hold back from using it. He and Azni had been part of the reason behind Khan's quick improvements, but Doku knew that there was something else. He had even gained a few ideas, but he was pretty good at halting every thought that tried to probe deeper into the matter.

"[I bet all of this is classified since she isn't here]," Khan guessed.

"[That's right]," Doku explained. "[You'll learn how we plan to move after the first intense phase. That will involve areas that the humans have yet to see]."

"[Do I need to drink another potion]?" Khan asked.

"[That won't be necessary this time]," Doku smirked while patting his shoulder, and Khan couldn't help but show a similar smile.

Doku led Khan a bit outside of the encampment. Some Niqols in bad conditions eventually appeared when the two walked near the alien medical bay, and the sight confirmed what Khan had initially thought. Casualties had happened on the first day. They were only hard to see there.

The mountain chain had many secluded areas due to the dark snow covering most of its environment and the uneven layout. Doku and Khan walked until a large cave unfolded in their vision. Four adult Niqols stood at the side of the entrance, but they didn't say anything when the two entered the dark structure. They limited themselves to fix their glowing eyes on Khan before leaving him be.

Familiar faces appeared once the white glow of Niqols' eyes made Khan able to see everything in the area. He could recognize Professor Supyan, Professor Kunta, Chief Alu, Zaliha, Mikail, and other prominent students. The cave also had some soldiers that he couldn't identify, and they all stood around a large circular table with a fuming cauldron at its side.

A glowing cube placed on the wall next to the group created Ambassador Yeza's picture with its azure light. Another device on the table depicted a map that enveloped all the areas around [The Pure Trees].

Khan had always believed to know a lot about those regions, but he noticed many strange marks on the map that described settlements or proper cities that he had never been able to see from the sky. It seemed that the Niqols had kept everything hidden due to the human presence inside the academy.

"[Are you sure this is a good idea]?" A tall man who carried the iconic features of his species and that Khan didn't recognize asked while glancing at the wall with Ambassador Yeza's image. "[Can he even understand us]?"

"[I think he can answer by himself]," Yeza replied as her sweet voice came out of the cube.

Khan saw the Niqols in the cave turning toward him and waiting for his answer. He didn't know how much Yeza could see of the area, but he felt her eyes on him too.

"[I'll keep up]," Khan calmly announced while performing a polite bow.

Khan's accent was still off, but his words were in the right place. He had even compensated for his flaws by highlighting some sounds and making sure that the meaning was correct.

Most Niqols in the cave nodded in satisfaction and moved to make room for Doku and Khan. Only the man remained unconvinced and made sure to voice a clear warning when the two approached the table.

"[I know your kind]," The man threatened. "[You might appear righteous now, but I know that you traded your friend for this spot]."

Everyone could hear that remark. The Niqols didn't even try to hide his words. Khan couldn't help but think about the xenophobic factions mentioned by Yeza, and he felt that politeness wouldn't work in that situation.

Khan had slowly transferred part of his understanding about human interactions to the Niqols' society. He still ignored a lot, but he had learnt how the chain of command wasn't too strict there, at least in terms of manners. Also, he had long since realized that expressing his real thoughts could help ease some awkwardness, especially when he had the clear support of other important figures.

"[I got this spot because I'm the best student in The Pure Trees]," Khan responded. "[Niqols don't put lives at risk to give political rewards]."

Silence immediately fell inside the cave. Khan's words had been incredibly sharp. He had praised himself and the Niqols at the same time, leaving the man completely unable to come up with an answer.

Chief Alu couldn't hold himself back anymore after a few seconds passed. He covered his mouth as faint chuckles escaped it, and his reaction made the other Niqols break their silence too. Everyone started to laugh, and the man ended up imitating them.

"[You definitely are a special brat]!" The man announced while patting Khan's shoulder and leading him to the table. "[I'm Chief Nazyr. I've handled the other human camp]."

Chief Nazyr made a grabbing motion with his hand, and Mikail didn't hesitate to fill two wooden cups with the liquid in the cauldron next to him. The student quickly handed them to Chief Nazyr, and the latter gave one to Khan before performing the iconic toast of his species.

Khan followed along and took a short sip from his cup. The strong booze almost scorched his throat, but a pleasant warm sensation filled his chest afterward. It felt so good that he drank again to check if he could go through the same experience.

"[Only good stuff for us]," Chief Nazyr laughed. "[Always bring someone who can concoct good booze with you, especially when that someone is a woman]."

The sudden inversion in Chief Nazyr's personality left Khan's speechless, but it caused similar reactions in the Niqols around the table. Chief Alu showed a gentle smile while shaking his head, the students diverted their gazes, and the other aliens voiced harsh comments, especially the women in the cave. Yeza limited herself to stare at Chief Nazyr coldly, but her gesture felt so loud that everyone soon brought their focus back on the map.

The meeting was nothing more than a briefing. The situation on Nitis wasn't stable enough to create plans right away, but the Niqols felt that those involved with the future attacks had to receive constant updates.

The first day of the crisis had been messy and impossible to contain, but everything would change in the following period. The packs of Tainted animals and monsters would settle and fight among each other to control certain areas, so the Niqols would be able to understand which lands they could seize back from those creatures.

The priority wasn't the actual control of Nitis in that period. The sunlight would continue to illuminate the planets for months and trigger other mutations even in monsters, so the Niqols wanted to focus on lowering their populations to keep them within the range of their best assets' abilities.

The Niqols didn't believe that they could clear the entirety of the planet in a matter of weeks, especially after their whole society had been forced to abandon most of its domains. Moreover, Nitis had many areas that were hard to explore or had always been under the control of Tainted animals. The aliens could only contain and reduce the power that other mutations could give to the fauna.

Khan and the other prominent students would have to create hunting teams for that exact purpose. The areas that the stronger experts had to handle were simply too many, so the younger generations had to help where they could, and that involved lairs where the population of monsters wasn't too high.

The Niqols would give themselves a week to let the situation stabilize before picking the targets of the hunts. The students would have to continue their containment during that time, and the performance on each battlefield would help decide who could be part of the teams.

Each team leader had the chance to handpick some members of their teams, which made Khan immediately think about Liiza. Still, it would be too obvious if he decided to request her presence, so he opted for another approach.

"[Doku, I have a favor to ask]," Khan whispered when the two exited the cave after the meeting ended.

"[I know exactly what you are talking about]," Doku winked at Khan before leading him toward another spot in the mountain chain.

Doku had clearly misunderstood Khan's intentions, but he followed him anyway since his sudden reaction left him curious. The two had to cross a narrow path that the melting snow made hard to overcome before reaching a smaller cave.

The area had a series of glass-like cells at its sides, the same cubicles that Khan had seen in the palace's basement, and one of them revealed Rodney after Doku tinkered with the azure symbol on its surface.

Rodney was in a poor state. Chains bound his hands and feet to the dark surface of the cave, and his face was dark as he stared at the ground. He seemed to have given up on life.

"[He can't hear nor see us]," Doku explained as a disgusted expression appeared on his face.

"[Why did you bring me here]?" Khan asked as he felt the atmosphere around him darkening.

"[You know how emotional the Niqols are]," Doku stated. "[We would have already killed him if he weren't a human, but his political value is decent. Still, the higher-ups are willing to make an exception to get on your good side]."

Khan suddenly understood what Doku was offering him, and he promptly shook his head before expressing how he felt about the matter. "[I don't want to kill him]."

Khan had already accepted that his twisted mental state would probably make him able to kill humans, especially since he struggled to consider them special compared to other aliens. However, that was an execution, and he desired no part in it. He didn't want Rodney's betrayal to gain even darker shades in his mind.

"[Are you sure? Your army might forgive him]," Doku responded while the disgust on his face intensified.

Doku felt proper hate toward Rodney, but Khan knew that his feelings didn't come from the difference between their species. He loathed the boy because he had tried to kill two of his friends after Khan had saved his life. Doku had no words to express how seriously he took that matter.

"[I'd rather not have another trauma weighing on my mind]," Khan said in the best way he could.

Doku's expression eased after he noticed how confident Khan was on the matter. The latter wasn't sparing Rodney because he deserved mercy. Khan was prioritizing his mental sanity.

"[I understand]," Doku eventually announced as a complicated smile appeared on his face. "[Let's get something else to drink now. I bet Azni is worried too]."

Khan nodded and patted Doku's back to express how he appreciated that offer. The Niqols nodded, and the two quickly exited that simple prison while forgetting about the matter.

"[Right, what did you want to ask?]" Doku wondered when he recalled about Khan's request.

Khan wore a serious expression as his eyes darted between the encampment in the distance and his friend. He checked that no one was around before whispering something that mattered a lot for him. "[Please, take Liiza in your hunting group. Someone will definitely recruit her, and I prefer her to be with you]."

Doku's eyes widened at that honest request. Khan's expression and gestures even expressed how hard it had been for him to voice it. Yet, it also showed how deeply he trusted his friend.

"[I need a lot of booze not to connect this to anything]," Doku joked.

"[I'll get you drinks until morning]," Khan promised.

"[I'm the best friend that you could find on this planet]," Doku sighed.

"[You are]," Khan confirmed, and Doku exploded into a laugh that stated his decision to help him.

Chapter 182 - Friend

A week had to pass before the Niqols felt confident in sending the students into some areas that the monsters had conquered since the beginning of the crisis.

The sunlight had never stopped filling Nitis in that period, and the students had left the encampment every day to help contain the relentless expansion of the mutated animals. The new battlefields

weren't as dangerous as the firsts since the higher-ups could study the situation beforehand, but casualties happened anyway.

Some students had been unlucky enough to witness new mutations on monsters who had fought against many packs after the initial expansion. They had accumulated enough mana to experience a new transformation due to the constant radiation that filled the surface, and the young warriors had to pay the price for that.

Khan didn't find anything out of the ordinary. The Niqols always sent him in crowded areas or on the path of violent packs, but they revised his teams depending on what they expected him to accomplish.

The Niqols didn't waste strong students on areas that they planned to lose. Khan's task there was to buy enough time for a powerful soldier to arrive or slow down the pack's advance to make it meet a different group of monsters.

Instead, the Niqols didn't hesitate to send prominent students with Khan whenever he had a chance to stop the advancing monsters. He had even been with Doku, Liiza, and other peers that could claim to be near the level of his battle prowess at times.

Khan had to vanquish a few bull-like mutated creatures capable of ignoring their huge size and cross many lands in a matter of hours. He had to slow down a pack of rats featuring many specimens that had developed unique abilities. He had even found himself in front of a swarm of bee-like insects that had turned out to be far more populated than expected.

His encounters with strange creatures didn't stop there, and those missions didn't always go as predicted. The Niqols in charge of studying each potential target or traveling pack weren't always correct, and they could even fail to gauge the actual power of some monsters.

Khan had found himself forced to retreat in areas that he had to defend, and he had defeated packs that the Niqols didn't think he could handle. Of course, that had also depended on how good his performance with the Divine Reaper was that day. Still, his groups had always managed to avoid suffering casualties. The worst he had witnessed in the week before the beginning of the hunts had been a few injured aliens.

The students had no free time in that period, but they couldn't complain since the entirety of Nitis was turning upside-down. They threw parties in the encampment every night to disperse the constant tension of the battles, and their lack of self-restraint only intensified in that period.

The encampment was silent only when all the students left to fight, but moans, laughs, and chants filled the nights. The Niqols didn't hold back to express themselves since they had constant reminders of how short life could be, and many tents remained empty as everyone preferred to sleep in someone's arms.

Khan wished to do the same, especially since his birthday had basically arrived. However, he couldn't find any opportunity to share some intimacy with Liiza without risking revealing his relationship. He couldn't justify an eventual departure with the crisis unfolding all around that safe area, and someone would notice if he and Liiza tried to hide in one of the mountains nearby.

The issue had no solution while the crisis raged and everyone remained stuck in the same encampment. Deactivating the tracker on the cube only to have a chance to sneak out would only create suspicion, so Khan had to accept that he simply couldn't see Liiza.

Azni tried to help the couple by sending messages that the two couldn't exchange through their cubes, but she found herself unable to say everything they wanted to convey to each other. Khan managed to remain vague about the most intimate parts, but Liiza suffered from the separation more than him, and Azni had to endure her explicit words.

Azni didn't even know where to begin describing Liiza's message the night before the hunts. Khan saw her blushing as soon as she tried to find words that she felt comfortable with, and the scene only made him feel worse about the whole situation. He could see Liiza's struggle from how explicit she was with Azni, but they could only suppress their urges for now.

Khan didn't depart with the other students the day of the hunts. Everyone had grown used to short hours of sleep and long time spent patrolling or defending certain areas after dealing with the effects of the sunlight for an entire week, so a few orders were more than enough to move the entirety of the camp.

Khan had the chance to inspect the empty camp that morning. Less than thirty students had remained among the tents, and all of them moved toward an open spot near the large cave to meet the two Chiefs in charge of the various missions.

Doku had respected Khan's wishes. The latter saw Liiza following Doku, Azni, and two other Niqols until they created a separate group in front of the cave. Khan and Liiza tried not to glance at each other, but their eyes inevitably met during the walk, and both of them remained in a daze for a few seconds. Luckily for them, everyone was too focused on the imminent missions to notice that short gesture.

Chief Alu and Chief Nazyr talked to each group personally to update them about the state of their target. They had already assigned them locations that had stabilized, so they only had to inform the students about eventual changes in their layout or population.

Khan had three companions, Kozh and Vakha from the second year and Ezinet from the first year. The two boys had been famous even before the crisis, while the girl from the first year had revealed exceptional battle prowess during the past week, so she became part of those teams.

Khan's group was the only one with only four members, and the Chiefs even briefed it as last. Their target was a pack of strange dog-like creatures with two heads and spikes on their backs. They were mostly Tainted animals, but they also had four monsters that had developed abilities.

The students that had slowed down that pack in the past week had identified the abilities of three monsters. One could add venomous properties to its spikes and launch them, but the last part wasn't too useful due to the peculiar position of those sharp objects. The creature couldn't really aim them at its opponents unless they stood above it.

Another monster had developed the ability to launch sound attacks through its growls. That specimen had been the main reason behind the repeated failures in stopping the pack since its blows were invisible and unstoppable. It was even hard to predict their actual trajectory.

The third known ability belonged to the smaller monster in the group. It consisted of a weak form of telekinesis that the creature could apply on itself and others. It was pretty troublesome to deal with, but the specimen's intelligence had clear limits, so it never applied it to its full potential.

The fourth monster's ability remained unknown. The students who had faced the pack had reported that they had noticed a black halo around the specimen from time to time, but they had never seen it do anything. The Chiefs hoped that the aura didn't have any effect, but they still reminded Khan's group to be careful.

The four departed after the Chiefs confirmed that the pack of two-headed dogs didn't move from their position. Khan and the three Niqols flew for less than two hours until they reached thick woods that bordered a relatively barren area. The sharp change in the environment felt quite surprising, but the reports confirmed the presence of small lakes among the trees, which explained the thriving vegetation.

Three Niqols waited for Khan's group at the edge of the woods. Some of the higher-ups had left symbols that acted as sensors among the trees, so those three could keep track of the pack's movements from their position. Still, they were from the first year of the academy, and their battle prowess was even poor, so they could only cover that role.

"The pack is still in the lake near this quadrant," One of the Niqols announced while the cube in his hands glowed.

Khan and the other members of his group could find a more detailed map of the woods in their cubes. The image even highlighted the lake mentioned by the boy and offered a deeper description of the pack.

Khan and his companions exchanged a meaningful glance that was enough to make them decide to start the hunt. They had used the two hours on their Aduns to create a vague tactic and get some sleep, so they already knew how they had to act.

"Wait!" The boy from the three Niqols stationed in the area called when he saw Khan's group approaching the woods. "Didn't the professor tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Kozh asked.

"Someone else has to join your group," The boy explained. "We heard from him just recently. He should almost be here."

The four in Khan's group showed confused expressions, but they didn't complain about that decision. It wasn't bad to have a helping hand when their opponents were four monsters with abilities.

Nevertheless, Khan ended up regretting those thoughts when a dark Aduns appeared in the clear sky and revealed its rider. The eagle landed on the surface in no time, and the tall Niqols that jumped off immediately fixed his eyes on him.

"[Ilman]," Khan announced after Ilman continued to stare at him silently.

Everyone in the academy had learnt about Khan and Ilman's fight. The Niqols had ended up blaming Ilman's dramatic character for that event, so the aliens on the scene couldn't understand why the professors had allowed him to join that team.

The silence that Ilman showed didn't help the tension that had fallen among the group either. He wore a serious expression as his glowing eyes remained fixed on Khan. Still, the latter didn't show any fear. He only appeared as confused as everyone else about that surprising presence.

"Khan!" Ilman shouted while spreading his arms.

The tension among the group intensified as Ilman fell silent right after calling Khan in a firm tone, but everyone remained speechless when the Niqols finished his line. "My friend!"

'What?' Khan thought, but he didn't have the time to study what was happening since Ilman started laughing and walking toward him while keeping his arms spread.

"Care to explain?" Khan said while taking a few steps backward, but Ilman didn't seem discouraged by his hesitation.

"Come here, my friend!" Ilman shouted again, and his broad smile eventually forced Khan to accept that hug.

"I must thank you for beating some sense into me," Ilman laughed while patting Khan's back firmly. "I've always sensed that we were meant to be lifelong friends!"

Chapter 183 - Faces

Pure awkwardness had fallen on the group. Khan's companions and the three Niqols who had kept track of the changes in the woods didn't know how to react to Ilman's dramatic behavior.

Khan had countless questions, but he blocked all of them out of fear of the answers that Ilman could give. He had already confirmed that the Niqols was crazy, so trying to understand him with a normal mindset was impossible. Only one doubt managed to survive that suppression and eventually made Khan speak.

"Did you get over Miss Liiza?" Khan asked, trying to appear as innocent as he could.

That question would have typically arisen suspicion, but the Niqols on the scene felt it to be perfectly normal since Ilman was its target. Everyone knew that Liiza had been the reason behind the fight, so it sounded legit for Khan to worry about that topic.

"Not at all!" Ilman laughed while patting Khan's back a few more times. "But you taught me how feelings alone aren't enough. I have to become a better man, both on the Niqols and human side."

Ilman let Khan go and moved his gaze on the ground. A tinge of shame appeared on his glowing eyes as calm and surprisingly reasonable words escaped his mouth. "Is my intense love the best for Liiza if it makes me hurt her? I should feel happy as long as she is happy. Thank you for teaching me that."

Ilman revealed an honest smile as his eyes returned on Khan. The latter couldn't help but nod and smile too in front of that sudden turn in his personality, but the Niqols didn't hesitate to shatter that faint satisfaction.

"I'll allow you to make Liiza happy until I become a man worthy of her love," Ilman stated in a solemn voice while grabbing Khan's shoulders. "I'll fight you for real if you hurt her."

Khan's eyes widened, but he quickly transformed his stupefied expression into a frown. He felt lucky that everyone knew about Ilman's character. The boy had been so convincing with his words

that someone unaware of the situation would truly believe in the existence of a relationship between Khan and Liiza.

"Miss Liiza and I are merely acquaintances," Khan calmly explained, "And mostly due to political reasons. Don't jump to conclusions."

"Friends can't hide anything from each other!" Ilman laughed while letting Khan go again and turning toward the trees. "Don't make me regret my growth, and show me if a human can love better than a Niqols!"

Khan moved his questioning gaze on his three companions, but they limited themselves to suppress faint laughs. The disbelief in Khan's face was too funny for them. His pretense was so perfect that none of them suspected that emotion to be fake. Khan had shown it on purpose to hide how true Ilman's seemingly unreasonable words had been.

'Is he crazy or smart?' Khan wondered before turning toward the trees. 'Is our mana really compatible?'

The Niqols on the scene didn't believe a word Ilman said, but Khan had started to feel curious about the apparent connection that the boy felt. Khan pretended to study the trees while he focused on his sensitivity to mana to check how his energy reacted to Ilman, and a curse inevitably resounded in his mind.

Khan felt at ease next to Ilman. The latter only happened to be in a troublesome position, but his character wasn't bad. It even suited Khan's almost desperate desire for truth in his life. He could always trust Ilman's words, and that was enough to make them compatible.

'Maybe he might help me once Liiza and I come out in the open,' Khan guessed, but his thoughts soon went back on the mission.

Ilman was a great addition to the hunting team. Khan had tested his power first-hand, so he knew how strong the Niqols could be. Ilman might even be able to match him if he managed to keep his cool during a battle. Moreover, his potential was great due to his peculiar position in the alien society.

"[Do you know what we have to do here]?" Khan asked, forsaking the human language now that the situation had turned serious.

"[Of course]," Ilman replied in a firm tone. "[Did you already divide the targets among yourselves]?"

"[We'll charge at the venomous specimen together and take it down quickly]," Khan explained. "[I'll take the monster with the sound abilities afterward while the others clear the area]."

"[I'll help you out with your target then]," Ilman stated. "[It's better to take it out quickly too]."

"[We have a plan then]," Khan exclaimed before exchanging a nod with Ilman and his three companions.

The five didn't hesitate to shoot inside the woods. They knew where their targets were, so everything was a matter of being silent while approaching them.

The woods were hard to cross. The terrain was relatively flat, but it featured a layer of soft black leaves that slowed down the group's advance. Its insides were also dark due to the thick black crowns connecting the various trees and creating a natural membrane that shielded the surface from the sunlight.

The large dark trunks often forced the five students to change direction and remain on the correct path. They had to reach the small lake from the right side to cut every escape path for the pack, so they often had to adjust their position by using the images in their cubes.

No one spoke, but no one felt tense either. The last week had made the students aware of their battle prowess and had forced them to grow used to fighting monsters. The two-headed dogs weren't too resilient either, so inflicting killing blows wouldn't be too problematic. Those creatures would have never survived for so long if it weren't for the abilities of the four leaders.

Khan eventually raised his arm to perform a signal that the group had decided beforehand. He had finally sensed the presence of the pack among that seemingly empty environment, but the creatures that had entered his range weren't monsters. They were only Tainted animals that the four leaders had probably appointed to patrol the area.

Khan glanced at Ilman while picking his cube, and the latter imitated him to create a mental conversation that wouldn't release any sound in the environment.

'[There are four Tainted animals ahead],' Khan explained. '[Can you sense them]?'

'[Of course],' Ilman confirmed, '[Two on the right, one straight ahead, and one hidden on the left].'

'[How fast are you]?' Khan continued.

'[Faster than the last time],' Ilman transmitted while showing a confident smile.

Khan instinctively believed in the Niqols, so he came up with a plan that relied on him. '[Take care of the two on the right. I'll handle the others].'

'[Can you reach it before it warns everyone]?' Ilman questioned, but Khan limited himself to smirk before putting his cube away.

Ilman showed an excited expression as he took his position near Khan's right side and bent forward to prepare for the imminent sprint. Khan did the same while aiming at a path on his left and turning to glance at Kozh.

Kozh immediately understood the meaning behind that silent order. He crouched between his two companions and whispered a short countdown. "[Two, one, go]!"

Both Khan and Ilman shot ahead. The thick trees tried to hinder their sprints, but they revealed the full extent of their agility in that situation.

Khan crossed ten trees before finding a one-meter-tall two-headed dog in front of him. The dark spikes growing out of its brown fur and its two heads gave it odd proportions, but Khan didn't let the faint surprise spreading in his mind affect his task.

The two-headed dog turned to its right when it heard something, but Khan landed on its spiked back before it could even understand what was happening. His steps had been so faint that those needles bent instead of piercing his soles. His feet soon managed to touch the brown fur hidden behind them.

The Tainted animal tried to look at its back to understand what had landed there, but an unstoppable force soon slammed it on the ground and turned its rib cage into a mess of blood, fur, and shattered bones. Khan had used the creature as a foothold for his second sprint, and the latter couldn't endure the power released during his acceleration.

A second two-headed dog was in the distance, behind a series of trees. The creature was slightly bigger than its three companions, which had probably awarded it its position of squad leader in that small patrol team.

The Tainted animal had noticed Khan when he stopped on its companion, and its mouths opened to launch an alarm. Yet, a kick landed between its necks before any sound could come out of them.

Khan had noticed that the creature was slightly bigger than its companions, but he didn't care about that feature. His current proficiency level with the Lightning-demon style placed him far above Tainted animals in terms of battle prowess. Those beasts had become too frail in his eyes. He couldn't even consider them threats anymore.

The kick pierced skin, muscles, and bones. The Tainted animal opened into two parts as Khan's leg dug inside its torso and killed it on the spot. He reached so deep inside its body that he had to use his hands to remove the corpse from his limb after the attack ended.

Khan turned and saw Ilman nodding at him. The Niqols had two intact corpses lying at his feet. His kills had been far cleaner, but he didn't feel superior to his companions after witnessing how fast Khan could be.

The three Niqols who had remained behind the trees soon reached their position, and Khan made the group resume their advance. They met other Tainted animals patrolling the area after a few minutes, but he and Ilman took care of them easily.

The sound of splashes eventually spread through the quiet area. The event alerted Khan and the others about their arrival to the lair. Still, they didn't need that reminder since their senses had already notified them about the four powerful presences in the distance.

The five students didn't take much to become aware of the position of the four monsters. The mutated creatures appeared utterly unaware of their presence, so Khan and the others could study them in their natural environment and guess which abilities they had.

The telekinetic monster was easy to recognize due to its small size. The creature was lying on the lake's shores, but the students couldn't understand whether it was sleeping or not.

The venomous monster came after. The creature was scratching its back on a tree, and grey smoke came out of the trunk due to the corrosive properties contained in the creature's spikes. The group actually felt lucky to sense it there since it was the closest to their position.

The other two monsters were inside the lake. They seemed to be cleaning themselves, but their features were almost identical, so the students couldn't understand which one had the troublesome sound abilities.

The students picked their cubes to rehearse their offensive tactic in silence. Ilman's addition to their team felt fortunate now since he and Khan could shoot toward the two monsters in the lake at the

same time. Still, the group's priority remained the venomous creature, and the current position of the pack clearly benefited them.

'[You go first],' Khan ordered to his three original companions. '[Ilman and I will arrive before you know it].'

Kozh, Vakha, and Ezinet nodded before shooting ahead. The layer of leaves on the ground dampened the noise released by their hurried steps, but the monsters couldn't fail to notice them once they grew too close. Loud barks resounded in the area before the students could reach the space occupied by the pack.

The venomous monster was the closest to the steps, and it didn't hesitate to leave its tree to rejoin its companions. Yet, two shadows suddenly reached the creature's sides and forced it to stop with their violent attacks.

Khan slammed his foot on the right side of its torso, and cracking noises resounded in the area. Ilman's palms fell on the left head, and a disgusting noise came out of that spot.

The two attacks slammed the dog on the ground, but they didn't manage to kill it. The monster instinctively released its spikes in that dangerous situation, but Khan and Ilman had made sure to remain outside their trajectory during their offensive.

The three students reached their companions when the monster's offensive ended. Their palms didn't hesitate to fall on the safe spots of the creature's body, and Khan and Ilman also had enough time to launch another attack.

The two-headed dog's body wasn't too powerful. It was even below average compared to other resilient monsters that Khan had fought in the past. That sudden but violent offensive killed the venomous specimen in mere seconds and turned the first part of their tactic into a success.

Barks resounded all around the students. The silent aura had turned into a loud mess in a matter of seconds, but they didn't mind it. They even showed confident expressions when they turned to gaze at their other targets.

Kozh, Vakha, and Ezinet quickly dispersed to take care of their opponents. They had to kill the telekinetic monster quickly, and one of them also had to handle the incoming Tainted animals.

Instead, Khan and Ilman shot toward the lake as their eyes darted between the two monsters. They wanted to understand which one had the dangerous sound abilities, but their opponents didn't mind revealing that secret.

A dark aura shone out of the specimen deeper into the lake and confirmed its identity. Yet, that radiance morphed before the two students could reach their targets, and multiple animal faces soon became visible among that glow.

Chapter 184 - Shadows

The faces depicted animals that Khan had seen in the reports connected to that pack. They seemed to represent the creatures that the monsters had defeated before reaching the woods, but he didn't let his mind linger on those thoughts.

Khan and Ilman had identified the monster with sound abilities, so they didn't hesitate to converge toward it. The creature was even closer to the shores, so they both decided to take care of their main target before thinking about the specimen with the mysterious skill.

All the creatures in the area were already barking. Even the Tainted animals busy patrolling the lake had started to echo their leaders' warnings. The venomous monster had died quickly, and Khan and Ilman were even insanely fast, but they didn't manage to reach their target before the activation of its ability.

Some of the barks became heavier for the duo's ears. Khan and Ilman even sensed a faint pressure on their chest as their steps pierced the lake's surface and brought them closer to their target. They prepared their attacks when they were only one second away from the monster, but an invisible force suddenly landed on their right sides and pushed them away.

Khan and Ilman slid on the muddy terrain inside the lake and failed to perform their attacks. The Niqols even risked falling, but Khan made sure to stop him.

The event had been as strange as the reports described it. The sound attacks were invisible, unstoppable, and it was almost impossible to predict their arrival. Khan and Ilman could use the faint pressure that landed on their chest to learn about the activation of that ability, but everything felt pointless since they would remain unaware of the blow's trajectory.

Luckily for the two students, the sound attacks weren't too powerful. Khan and Ilman felt that their insides were vaguely off, but they remained able to stand and move easily. They didn't suffer any troublesome injury. It simply was as if a series of punches had landed on their sides.

The two monsters fixed their angry eyes on the two students, but the latter shot backward to bait their opponents out of the lake. Khan and Ilman didn't mind the water as long as it failed to reach their knees, but they preferred to leave that unfavorable environment, especially since their fighting styles heavily relied on speed.

Something seemed to land on Khan and Ilman's previous spots as they retreated to return to the shores. They couldn't see anything there, but they heard a faint booming noise. Still, even that detail failed to tell them more about the sound ability since the previous attack didn't release anything similar.

The stable and dry ground soon reappeared under their feet. Khan and Ilman kept track of the environment with their senses as their eyes remained on the two monsters. Some Tainted animals had arrived in the area, but Ezinet was more than enough to handle them. Kozh and Vakha had also managed to land a few blows on the telekinetic creature during that time, so their battle seemed to go well.

Khan and Ilman could use the entirety of their concentration on their target in that situation. Still, the second monster soon claimed part of their attention. The ominous animal faces among its dark halo had become too strange to ignore after that short exchange.

"[Can you keep the other busy]?" Khan asked as the two monsters charged at them.

"[Can you kill the other on your own]?" Ilman asked in a serious tone.

Khan drew the first-grade knife and spun it in his hand before sealing his grip on its handle. "[I should be okay]."

Ilman limited himself to nod at that gesture. The dramatic aspects of his personality made him silent and driven during a battle. Khan was the squad leader, so the Niqols would follow his orders without voicing useless questions.

The two monsters left the lake but stopped on its shores. Khan and Ilman felt pressure accumulating on their chest again while the various animal faces on the second monster turned toward them. The two students didn't remain still, and booming noises resounded behind them as they split to approach their opponents from opposite sides.

Khan sprinted in a curved trajectory until he found himself in front of the sound monster's right head. His left arm shot ahead as an azure glow covered his knife and allowed it to open a deep hole in the creature's skull. The weapon's tip almost came out of the other side.

A blow landed at the center of Khan's torso and vanquished the faint satisfaction he had felt after the correct execution of his technique. The attack made his feet separate from the shore's muddy ground and flung him back by a few meters.

Khan didn't lose his grip on the knife. He had long since promised himself that he wouldn't commit that mistake again. The monster's attack had made his insides churn and had filled his mouth with a metallic taste, but his palm never left his weapon.

The sound monster barked in anger after Khan landed on the ground. Its right head hung lifelessly from its torso, and its sole sight was enough to make it livid.

The pressure on Khan's chest returned, and a series of blows landed on his body before he could perform another sprint. Impacts with the invisible energy happened on his belly, face, arms, knees, and thighs. The monster seemed able to attack him from multiple directions and on various spots at the same time.

The relentless offensive continued as the monster's barks kept echoing in the area. Khan's sensitivity to mana failed to sense the trajectory of the blows. Only pain could tell him where the attacks happened.

Khan felt unable to move, but he knew that he had to get out of that situation before his injuries became too severe. The pain wasn't the problem there. He simply couldn't move while that invisible force pushed him left and right.

A resolute expression appeared on Khan's face as he struggled to bend forward. Three impacts happened on his chest during the process. He spat blood, but he didn't stop.

Khan didn't need much. The [Blood Shield] moved on his left thigh before waiting for him to find the right opportunity. Invisible attacks continued to land on his body, but he remained still and endured until one blow hit the spot protected by his technique.

The left leg finally gained a window to move freely, and Khan didn't hesitate to muster the entirety of his strength to push himself forward. Booming noises resounded behind him as he left the area targeted by the monster's ability. The restrictions on his body vanished and allowed him to stomp his right foot on the ground to accelerate even further.

Khan reached the monster in an instant. Booming noises had followed his sprint and were about to catch up with him, but his rotating kick put an end to the creature's barks.

Khan's foot slammed the monster's left head on the ground. His knife glowed as he removed his leg to open a path, but a clanging noise resounded when his weapon pierced the fur and hit the skull.

The monster used that chance to raise its head and open its mouth, but Khan promptly kicked it close. His knife was still on its head, so he used it to keep the monster still as his feet landed non-stop on his opponent.

The knife dug deeper into the skull as Khan's kicks continued to fall. The innate sharpness of his magic weapon and the incredible force created by his powerful martial arts eventually made the sharp tip pierce the bone and reach the brain. Only a few more attacks had to follow before life abandoned the creature's eyes.

Khan spat the blood that had accumulated in his mouth before pulling out his knife and straightening his back. The troublesome sound monster was dead, but his body was sore everywhere. He felt as if he had just received a violent beating, and a sense of weakness even tried to spread inside his mind.

However, his senses warned him about the massive discharge of mana that was happening near him. Khan turned to his right and saw Ilman retreating as a series of shadows flew toward him.

'What the fuck?' Khan cursed in his mind.

The monsters didn't seem to have limits to the abilities that they could develop. They could go from simple physical enhancements to troublesome skills like that hypnotic power of the grasshopper.

It was generally easy to guess what each ability did after seeing it in action, but those shadows left Khan completely clueless. His confusion even intensified when he noticed the animal faces with their mouths open in front of those dark masses of energy.

Khan couldn't remain still for too long since some of the shadows stopped chasing Ilman and turned toward him. He didn't know what those things did, but he had no intention of finding out. He quickly jumped back and sprinted toward their source.

A dark halo continued to cover the monster that had released the shadows. At times, some faces managed to leave that ethereal membrane with some of its darkness. Yet, the creature seemed to suffer during the process. Its heads pointed at the ground, and its eyes were closed as the ability remained active.

Khan felt curious, but that feeling didn't make him forget his priorities. His speed brought him to the monster's side in no time, and his knife glowed as he swung it toward the left neck.

A clean cut severed the head from the rest of the body and made the monster howl in pain. The sudden injury made it retract all the shadows released in the environment, and Ilman finally gained some time to catch his breath. Yet, his eyes widened when he saw Khan standing so close to the creature.

"[Its aura absorbs mana]!" Ilman shouted in a desperate attempt to warn Khan, but his voice arrived one second too late.

Khan turned to shoot a confused glance toward Ilman, but the dark aura under him suddenly expanded and flung him away. Multiple animal faces passed through his body while bringing part of

the darkness with them. An intense sense of weakness quickly filled him and made him unable to land properly.

Khan fell on the ground before spinning on himself until a tree stopped him. He was awake and could feel the knife in his grasp, but his body didn't answer his orders.

The shadows left Khan and returned to the monster. The dark halo that covered its figure intensified as its eyes moved on him. All the animal faces in its aura also fixed their gazes on Khan as they prepared themselves to come out again.

Khan inspected his body during those seconds. The parts of his flesh that had fused with mana seemed to have dried up. They didn't lose their improvements, but they were devoid of energy now.

His focus quickly went on his nape to force his mana core to release more energy and refill his body. The organ didn't hesitate to follow his orders, but the monster charged ahead at that point.

The faces on the dark aura started to come out as the monster ran. Blood fell from the severed neck, but the creature didn't seem to care about its injury. It only wanted to kill its prey.

Ilman wanted to help Khan, but he hesitated to get near the monster. The dark aura covered the entirety of its figure, meaning that it would drain his mana as soon as he touched it. Khan had the knife, but he would need to come into contact with the dangerous halo, which would put him in the same state as his companion.

Ilman couldn't save Khan when that dangerous ability was active, but he got ready to shoot ahead once the halo dimmed. Meanwhile, Khan focused the entirety of his efforts on giving power to his body, especially his left arm.

The monster eventually got so close that it could jump on Khan. He could see the many animal faces surrounding its relatively small figure, and his arm shot ahead as soon as its sharp teeth entered his range.

The azure glow shone in the area for only a second. The creature's brain hid it after Khan stabbed the knife inside its mouth.

Chapter 185 - Failures

Blood flowed down Khan's arm and tainted his white sleeve. The shadows that enveloped the two-headed dog dispersed as life abandoned its eyes. The monster didn't have the chance to bite its prey since death arrived in a mere instant.

Khan voiced an annoyed groan as the monster fell to the ground. He supported himself on the tree behind him to sit and point a foot on the corpse. The bloodied hand and knife released an awful noise as he pulled them out of the creature's mouth, but his ears were growing used to hear that.

Weakness filled most of his body. Khan had gone through a beating before losing most of the mana inside his flesh. He felt the desperate need to sleep and meditate, but the chaos of the battlefield still raged around him and kept him awake. Still, the state of the fights turned out to be quite reassuring.

Kozh and Vakha had long since gained the upper hand on the telekinetic monster, and Ilman could join them after Khan took care of the creature with the shadows. The last mutated specimen couldn't last long against the joint assault of the three students.

Meanwhile, Ezinet had taken care of the Tainted animals converging on the lake. The pack had about thirty members busy patrolling the area, but the girl could defeat them easily. Her palms were too deadly for creatures that didn't undergo mutations, and she was even too nimble for them.

Khan didn't feel the need to recover in a hurry. His companions could take care of the remaining enemies by themselves. Also, he had killed two monsters on his own, so he deserved some rest.

The Niqols took care of the remaining animals quickly. The telekinetic monster was troublesome, but Ilman ended up being too fast for its annoying ability. The rest of the Tainted dogs stopped trying to invade the area after their leaders died.

"[You are a real warrior]!" Ilman laughed while approaching Khan after the battle ended. "[I thought I would be closer to your level. I've never been so wrong in my life]."

"[Don't shout]," Khan complained. "[Let me sleep for a bit]."

"[Nonsense]!" Ilman shouted while crouching to put his shoulder under Khan's armpit and forcing him to stand up. "[You must go back to the camp and celebrate this victory]."

Khan was too tired to shake Ilman off, and he felt no desire to argue against his dramatic mindset. He was willing to agree with everything the Niqols said as long as it made him shut up faster. Yet, a doubt appeared in his mind after hearing those words.

"[Won't you come back to the encampment]?" Khan asked as the three Niqols gathered around Ilman and him.

"[I'm afraid that I have yet to atone for what I did]," Ilman explained while shaking his head. "[The Niqols' regulations and my guilt don't allow me to come back]."

Khan didn't say anything. He let Ilman help him walk through the woods until he felt strong enough to move on his own. The atmosphere around him was pretty happy since the hunt had been successful, and he felt able to join that mood after a while.

Ilman wasn't too bad when the topic didn't involve Liiza. He was loud and unreasonable but also extremely honest and reliable. Still, Khan liked how he couldn't return to the camp just yet. His problems would only increase otherwise.

The three Niqols from the first year were still at the edges of the woods when the hunting team came out. A simple exchange of smiles and proud cries was enough to notify them about the mission's success, but they still spent time questioning each student to obtain clear reports.

Ilman and the other Niqols didn't even try to hide Khan's achievements. He actually had to correct them at times to avoid exaggerations. His fame among the aliens was already incredible, so he wanted to prioritize the accuracy of the reports to benefit future plans.

"[I will see you soon]," Ilman announced when Khan and his three initial companions prepared themselves to jump on their Aduns. "[We are some of the best warriors among the students, so the professors will honor us with the harshest hunts]."

"[Don't make me do all the work next time]," Khan joked as he jumped on Snow's back.

"[You need to stop improving then]," Ilman laughed, and the group departed quickly afterward.

The encampment was only a few hours from the woods, so Khan preferred to handle the matter about his mana during the travel. His body almost completely recovered by the time the sea of tents

appeared in his vision. He still felt sore in many spots, but the weakness that had filled him after touching the shadows had dispersed.

The encampment was relatively empty. The hunt didn't take long, and the woods had even been nearby, so Khan's group could return before lunchtime. The four couldn't even find a cauldron brewing booze at that hour, so they decided to get some food and rest until everyone returned.

Khan had slept in a tent picked randomly in the last week. He didn't want to be among the ostracized recruits, especially since Kelly would only annoy him, but he also preferred to avoid being at the exact center of the encampment.

The Niqols partied too hard for someone who couldn't even spend time with his girlfriend. Khan would only risk losing control of his actions if he spent night after night listening to the happy couples around him. The situation didn't improve too much in his current tent, but he could avoid random Niqols ending up inside it by mistake.

'I guess I'll be seventeen tomorrow,' Khan thought as the screen of his phone lit up and allowed him to check the date.

Khan and the other recruits had left the chargers provided by the Global Army in the academy when the crisis started, but the arrival of the daylight had made them superfluous. Their phones would never turn off since Nitis always had light now.

Memories of the last year crossed Khan's mind as he removed the dirty robe and wore one of the new ones that the Niqols left in each tent. A lot had changed in that short period. He almost couldn't believe how he was living in the Slums only a while ago.

The first year in the Global Army had made Khan experience a lot. He had learnt how to wield the magical energy called mana, but he had also gone through terrible events. Istrone alone could make kids of his age abandon the battlefield forever, but he was still there, fighting in the frontlines as if it were the most normal thing to do.

A smile eventually appeared on his face. Khan had believed that happiness would have forever been out of his reach after coming back from Istrone, but Nitis had proven him wrong. That cold planet could make him feel warm even in its darkest moments. He felt intense love and affection even as everything around him turned upside-down.

Khan couldn't see his girlfriend, but she was fine and shared the same intense love. He felt annoyed about that separation and their situation, but she was usually there, mere tents away from him. That was enough for now.

Rodney had tried to kill him, and some of the recruits even hated his behavior. However, Khan had found true friends among them and the Niqols. Even Ilman had turned out to be relatively okay in the end.

The duality of his life was almost hilarious, but that was fine as long as he remained able to experience that happiness. Khan felt to understand Lieutenant Dyester's teachings very well now. He was in the middle of a global crisis, and a lot tried to go against his situation, but those struggles didn't make him unable to appreciate everything he had.

Even the Global Army didn't feel too bad when Khan considered everything he had gained from that despicable organization. He had seen alien worlds, obtained friends, a loving girlfriend, and he had become strong.

Everything Khan had learnt had helped him shape his feelings. He had gained the chance to vent some of his desperation and pain. He had managed to exploit it to grow stronger than his peers, but it was clear that his current level wasn't nearly enough in that dangerous universe.

The Niqols had soldiers who could vanquish entire packs made of monsters with abilities, but they still feared the daylight and its consequences. Meanwhile, Khan barely had enough power to join specific hunts.

Khan felt the need to be stronger to protect what made him happy. The Nak would probably require even more from him, so he couldn't settle for a few kicks and some knife attacks. He needed proper magic.

'I need to make it work,' Khan thought as he finished dressing up and sat at the center of his small tent.

The final lesson of the training for his element was perfectly clear in his mind. Khan had committed the execution of the Wave spell to memory in the last period. He knew how the expert in the program unleashed that incredible power, but he had always failed to replicate it even after practicing hard.

Khan stretched his hand forward and activated the mental barrier. His mind grew cold before the mana inside it moved according to the flow used by the expert in the training program.

The Wave spell expressed destruction, so Khan thought about the vivid memories of the Second Impact to imagine that meaning. He wanted his mana to express the same power that the fall of the Nak spaceship had discharged in the Slums.

Mana gathered on his right palm as Khan focused on the vague theory behind the Wave spell. He knew that the chaos element required a personal approach, but that was hard to find when he lacked basics. Imitation was his only path for now.

Azure energy covered his hand before its shades changed. The mana gained a pale red-purple color as it started to tremble, and Khan's eyes sharpened as he forced himself to intensify those effects. The air in front of his palm seemed to twist at some point, but everything suddenly dispersed.

His palm stopped glowing for no apparent reason. Khan lost control of his mana even if he didn't commit any mistake. The failure didn't hurt nor inflict damage to his flesh, but he failed to perform the spell anyway.

No curse resounded in Khan's mind. He had experienced that failure countless times already, and he had grown used to feeling lost in front of that event by then. In theory, his execution was perfect, but he remained unable to perform the Wave spell. He didn't even come close to creating the destructive energy described in the training program.

Khan had already considered fusing what he had learnt about manipulating mana with that training, but the two approaches appeared opposite at their core.

The training program stated how Khan had to cut away his feelings to control the chaos element, while the Niqols' teachings required emotions to manipulate the nature of the mana. Those paths stood on completely opposite fields, so he preferred to rely on the human ways since he had more experience there.

Moreover, the Niqols had a strange approach to spells. Liiza's ice didn't only come from the mana inside her mind. She needed to apply a special influence on the environment to make sure that it replicated the effects that she set.

Khan lost track of the passage of time as he continued to practice. He didn't have anything to do for the rest of the day, so he immersed himself in his training. The tests with the Wave spell only used his mana even, so he never reached his limits since his mana core continued to refill his brain with energy.

His training went on for hours until steps resounded outside his tent. Khan initially ignored that event, but he quickly stopped his practice when he sensed three familiar presences walking directly toward the entrance of his habitation.

It didn't take much before Azni, Doku, and Liiza entered the tent. Khan's eyes widened when he saw their bloodied robes and stern expressions, but he relaxed a little since the Niqols didn't seem injured.

Still, the Niqols didn't let his confusion end there. Doku threw a series of flasks full of good booze in front of Khan as Azni sat in front of him. Her boyfriend made sure that the tent's entrance was sealed correctly before taking his place next to the girl and opening one of the bottles.

"[I'm really drunk today]!" Doku shouted after taking a single sip from the flask. "[I can't trust my eyes anymore]."

Khan frowned, but his eyes widened when Liiza crossed the two Niqols and jumped on his lap. Khan shot a confused gaze toward her, but his mind went blank when her cold lips fell on his mouth.

"[Such good booze]," Doku continued to shout in an obvious forced tone.

"[Why is he shouting]?" Khan whispered when Liiza raised her face.

"[It's better like this, trust me]," Azni commented while patting Doku's shoulder. "[This idiot needs to convince himself that everything is happening inside his mind to lie to our superiors. Don't worry. He had to do something similar with me when we got together]."

"[When you tempted me until I ignored my position as squad leader]," Doku complained before taking another long sip from the flask as soon as his eyes ended on Khan and Liiza.

"[I didn't know I made you so unhappy]," Azni pouted.

"[Azni]," Doku pleaded when he realized that he had misspoken, and the couple started bickering under Khan and Liiza's surprised gaze.

"[What are you doing here]?" Khan eventually asked while turning to look at his girlfriend.

Liiza's hands were on his cheek, but she slowly moved them on his back as she wrapped her arms around his neck. They slowly slipped inside his robe and caressed his bare skin while she bent her head forward and showed her brightest smile.

"[Did you really think that I would have ignored your birthday]?" Liiza responded in a loving tone. "[I asked Azni for her help as soon as I found a chance]."

"[My birthday is tomorrow]," Khan teased, but Liiza promptly tapped his forehead.

"[Don't be picky now]," Liiza said in a pleading tone. "[Hold me tightly. We don't have much time, and I have been cold for an entire week]."

Chapter 186 - Announcement

The few hours that Khan managed to spend with Liiza felt terrific. The couple had to experience that separation after almost cohabitating for months. One week wasn't long at all, but it had hurt nonetheless. Their attachment wasn't completely natural in the end.

Khan and Liiza exchanged tight hugs, sweet words whispered in each other's ears, and long kisses that often ended in meaningful stares. They couldn't go any further with Azni and Doku in the tent, but they couldn't remain alone either since the two Niqols were their alibi. Still, their eyes told everything they needed to say.

Doku never fully got over the issue. He had managed to suppress his thoughts for a long time, and Liiza's boyfriend wasn't an important matter either, but his identity could cause serious issues. The Niqols were investing a lot of trust in Khan, but his relationship with the daughter of their main ambassador could create reasonable doubts about his actual motives.

Now, Khan was a human who had approached the Niqols' ways honestly, but his relationship with Liiza could make him appear as a soldier hungry for political merits. The situation was simply too coincidental not to raise suspicion.

Those who saw Liiza and Khan together would never think that they were faking their feelings. Still, appearances could affect politics a lot, especially when it came to two different species that already failed to trust each other. It was very likely that the higher-ups from both sides would force the couple to separate to prevent the eventual leak of information or similar events if they were to uncover that relationship.

Azni, Doku, and Liiza eventually had to leave. The encampment grew too crowded as the various hunting teams and students returned, and the absence of a few famous members of the usual parties wouldn't go unnoticed.

Khan had to join the parties too. He had to celebrate the successful hunt with Kozh and the others, and he wanted to see how the others had fared in those important missions. After all, most of those Niqols were good acquaintances with whom he had often exchanged laughs in the last period. Khan cared about their well-being.

It turned out that all the hunts had gone well. The Niqols had studied everything carefully before assigning those important tasks to the students. Some had suffered injuries, and a few monsters had managed to escape once the situation had become too harsh. Still, the missions had remained a success.

The Niqols had finally taken the first step toward Nitis' retrieval, and everyone knew that the higher-ups had also been busy. They didn't say anything to the students, but it felt obvious how the aliens didn't deploy only their weaker troops that day.

The party progressed nicely and continued to be loud even as morning approached. The voices that filled the encampment changed nature. They went from happy shouts and chaotic chants to whispers, moans, angry arguments, and slow songs more fitting for the tired atmosphere.

Khan checked his phone and heaved a tired sigh when he calculated how little time had left before the usual morning gathering. He wouldn't be able to sleep for long, but that was fine. The forceful separation from Liiza was allowing him to rest more than usual. His days were simply busier.

Khan reached his tent and lifted the entrance's fabric, but he shook his head when he found two naked Niqols on the bed. The couple didn't even bother to use the simple lock of the habitation. The smell of booze filled its insides and explained how the two aliens could forget something like that.

Khan quickly went looking for a new tent, but a familiar figure appeared in his vision during his search. He found Doku sitting on the ground, near a cauldron that still released some sweet smoke.

"[Is everything okay]?" Khan asked while nearing Doku and picking one of the seemingly clean cups near the cauldron.

"[I made Azni blush tonight]," Doku revealed before taking a sip from his cup.

"[It feels strangely good, right]?" Khan laughed while bending inside the almost empty cauldron to get his drink.

"[I've never seen her sleeping so peacefully]," Doku scoffed while Khan sat next to him. "[She didn't even wake up when I left the tent]."

"[I found Zaur and Zezag in my tent]," Khan commented while changing the topic. "[She finally got over me]."

"[It's surprising that she stuck with you for so long]," Doku replied while raising his cup. "[She isn't exactly known for her patience with men]."

"[I know. Liiza told me about that]," Khan sighed before performing the usual Niqols' toast.

The two drank as their empty eyes stared at the encampment. Everything was peaceful, but the bright sky shining above them made them unable to relax completely. The sun had yet to appear, but they couldn't forget about the crisis anyway.

"[How long have you two been together]?" Doku eventually asked.

"[Since I stepped on Nitis basically]," Khan replied.

"[How did it even happen]?" Doku chuckled.

"[I don't really know]," Khan sighed. "[I stared, she stared. She kissed me, and I kissed her]."

"[Did you learn about her position before or after the kisses]?" Doku continued.

"[Don't insult my love]," Khan warned while shooting a cold glance at Doku.

Khan almost didn't control that reaction. It had been an instinctive gesture caused by the sole idea that someone could question his feelings.

Doku remained surprised, but he quickly lowered his gaze and shook his head. A helpless sigh escaped his mouth before he explained himself. "[Sorry, I didn't mean to. I can't stop worrying about my species with everything happening around us]."

"[I know]," Khan uttered while lightly poking his forehead to relax. "[I'm also sorry. My mind gets messy when Liiza is involved]."

"[Every Niqols on the planet would be proud of you]," Doku joked. "[Well, maybe Yeza and Ilman might have something to say on the matter]."

"[Ilman is strangely fine about that]," Khan reveled, and Doku's shot an astonished glance at him.

"[Did you tell him]?" Doku asked.

"[Please]," Khan sneered. "[That guy is making everything up in his mind. He just happens to be right]."

"[He has crazy instincts]," Doku said in disbelief.

"[Indeed]," Khan laughed. "[I took longer to realize what I felt]."

Doku laughed with him, but the two eventually sighed again. They felt tired after such a busy day, but talking like that felt nice. The only issue was the light that shone on the planet.

"[Is the stuff about mana true]?" Doku asked. "[Azni couldn't stop talking about that after we left]."

"[How do you expect me to explain that]?" Khan responded. "[I didn't even know that mana could affect feelings before coming to Nitis]."

"[Isn't that obvious]?" Doku frowned. "[What did you think would have happened after putting mana in your brain]?"

"[Humans are dumb]," Khan admitted.

"[I know one who isn't]," Doku announced while patting Khan's shoulder.

Khan groaned before taking a long sip from his cup. He felt a bit annoyed that he couldn't just jump in Liiza's bed and sleep with her, but it felt good to talk about the situation with Doku.

"[It hit us suddenly]," Khan explained. "[I wasn't in a good place when I arrived here, but my eyes kept falling on her. I wanted to feel bad about it, but everything just vanished whenever I saw her. Then, she kissed me, and I gave up]."

"[It must feel good since you share those emotions]," Doku guessed.

"[It's the best thing in the world when everything is going well]," Khan replied, "[But it's awful when something happens]."

"[I bet that the life in the camp is killing you]," Doku mocked.

"[I'm keeping myself busy]," Khan whined before showing an awkward smile. "[I guess I'm sleeping more than usual at least]."

"[No wonder]," Doku laughed while showing a proud expression. "[I now know what you had to do to keep that blush on her face]."

"[I think it's easier for us]," Khan stated as a hand reached his chin. "[It's almost craving for us. I don't see it as effort]."

"[I saw the craving today]," Doku winked. "[I should feel lucky that you didn't start doing it right in front of us]."

"[Oh, trust me, I considered doing that more than once]," Khan joked.

The two laughed before falling silent and losing themselves in their thoughts. The morning gathering continued to draw close, but they had silently decided to remain up until their cups became empty.

Doku and Khan eventually turned toward one of the tents near them when they sensed a presence approaching its entrance. Azni peeked out of the opening while making sure that the fabric covered the rest of her body, and her sleepy voice soon reached the duo. "[Hi, Khan. Doku, come back to bed]."

Khan couldn't help but smile when he saw Azni's blushing cheeks. The girl appeared a bit shy about that, and Doku didn't hesitate to stand up to reach her.

Doku and Khan didn't exchange salutes. They had gone through that scene many times already. It felt almost normal for Khan to see Doku disappearing with Azni somewhere. The couple only waved at him before sealing the entrance of the tent.

Khan didn't immediately stand up to resume his search for a tent. His cup still had some booze, and the camp had finally gone silent. All the students were trying to sleep for a couple of hours before going back to the mess. That peace felt almost magical when he thought about how deeply Nitis had transformed.

It almost felt like a waste to use the few hours left before his return into the mess to sleep. The peace that Khan was experiencing now was the reward that everyone was fighting so hard to obtain. He wanted to enjoy it, even if his mind would curse him later on.

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The following days didn't involve any special hunt, but more special meetings happened throughout the entire week. The Chiefs and the other higher-ups kept Khan and the prominent students updated on how the crisis was evolving, so everyone felt prepared when another mission arrived.

Ilman turned out to be correct. The boy joined Khan's group in the hunts that followed, and the two seized success after success even if their teammates changed from time to time.

The chaotic swarms of Tainted animals and monsters that had spread on Nitis slowly showed signs of losing power. Khan could see the crisis relaxing its grip on the planet on a daily basis. His battles never became easier since the Niqols kept assigning him to challenging missions, but he could study how his friends began to appear happier during the usual parties.

The special role that the Niqols had given to Khan didn't even bother him. He actually liked how he always had the chance to give his best during the hunts.

His expertise with the Divine Reaper improved at high speed due to the various challenging situations he faced. No training area could force Khan to experience the same amount of danger. He grew used to blood, battles, and struggles, and his new abilities became somewhat reliable.

Still, a major player had yet to step into the battlefield. Khan and the other recruits knew that the Global Army was doing something during the crisis. They weren't aware of its actual tasks, but it felt obvious that the humans were actively cooperating with the Niqols. The students simply couldn't learn anything since they couldn't contact anyone from the camp.

That confusion transformed into surprise when an announcement hit the camp. The students had fared relatively well during the last period. Deaths didn't happen anymore, and it almost felt as if everything could go back to normal in no time, but the two Chiefs made sure to remind them how serious the situation still was.

"[A formal meeting with the human troops stationed on Nitis will happen at the end of the week]," Chief Alu announced to the horde of students that had gathered right outside the encampment.

"[Everyone will have to fly there that day]," Chief Nazyr continued. "[We will abandon this camp, enjoy the meeting, and move toward another secure location ready to face the new surge in the monsters' power. You have my compliments for surviving the first part of the crisis]."

Chapter 187 - Smile

The announcement took everyone by surprise. Khan was standing among the crowd of students gathered in front of the Chiefs, but everyone turned to look at him nonetheless. He had become the representative of the human species in those months, at least for the younger generations, so hearing about the Global Army made the Niqols inspect him.

Khan shook his head to express his ignorance about the whole matter. Many knew that he had no contact with the Global Army, but some needed that reminder. Also, the students wanted to see if he had information to share later on at the party, but he had to disappoint them.

Khan glanced at George, who was nearby. The boy was holding hands with Havaa, but his gaze was far from relaxed. Khan could actually read awkwardness in his eyes. His mind wasn't thinking about the political meaning behind that meeting. George felt conflicted at the idea of seeing Natalie again.

'He is hopeless,' Khan sneered in his mind before searching the other recruits with his eyes.

Helen was somewhere among the crowd, surrounded by other Niqols girls, and she shook her head when she met Khan's gaze. Brandon and the others were near the group's edges, and they also gestured their ignorance about the whole situation.

None of the humans seemed to know what the Global Army had in mind, but that felt normal after the long period without communication. Khan was merely hoping that one of the recruits could guess something due to eventual knowledge of the protocols, but his companions disappointed him.

Rodney sounded like a recruit who could know something about the topic, but Khan couldn't even begin to imagine where an eventual interrogation would even lead to. The boy was smart enough to trade information with his freedom, and that decision wasn't up to Khan. He had chosen to leave everything in the hands of the Niqols, and he preferred it that way.

"[The human troops have probably taken care of a different quadrant]," Doku explained when he noticed Khan's confusion. "[They must have protected the teleport and the areas nearby]."

The Niqols had turned after confirming that Khan didn't know anything about the matter, but Doku and Azni had continued to pay attention to him. They were even next to him in that gathering, so they didn't hesitate to start a conversation.

"[Some Niqols must have been with them to check everything passing through the teleport]," Khan commented.

"[I bet they forced them to deactivate the device]," Doku announced.

"[Can we even do that]?" Azni asked.

"[The humans would have probably refused during normal times]," Doku uttered, "[But everything has been pretty tense after the solar wind. I bet our superiors are making use of that event to ignore part of the Padlyn's deal]."

"[Some deals might even not apply during wartime]," Khan added.

"[Exactly]," Doku agreed. "[We would have never let you stay on Nitis if we weren't confident in our ability to suppress you. No offense, of course]."

"[None taken]," Khan smiled.

The sunlight had gone on for more than three weeks by then. Everyone knew that the second spike in the crisis' dangerousness was close, so the timing of the meeting sounded too perfect to be a coincidence.

The Niqols were probably trying to gather their forces and prepare for the imminent worsening of the crisis, which included adding humans to the fray. Khan didn't mind that development, but he inevitably considered how facing Paul and the Captain would affect his life.

Khan almost forgot how he wasn't a Niqols at times, but the meeting would surely require him to behave as a human. The sole idea of meeting his superiors made him feel as if everything he was experiencing was nothing more than the dream of a delusional kid.

Khan's face didn't reveal his profound mental state, but his mask shook when Liiza appeared in his eyes. Everyone had started to leave, so he had managed to find her among the crowd. She was alone as usual, but she turned toward him when she felt his gaze on her.

Liiza was wearing the usual cold expression that she showed in public, but her eyes quickly inspected her surroundings to make sure that no one was looking at her. She lowered her head at that point, and a warm smile appeared behind the white hair that had fallen on her face.

Khan felt warm when he saw Liiza going through all that trouble just to show that simple gesture. The crowd of students moving back to the tents eventually blocked his vision, and she wasn't in her previous spot anymore when he managed to gaze in that direction again. Still, the warmth remained and made him stand still to focus on appreciating that feeling.

"[Is everything okay]?" Doku asked when he noticed that Khan had yet to start moving back to the encampment.

"[Are you going to start right away]?" Khan asked after snapping back to reality.

"[I think we'll join the party later than usual today]," Azni commented while wrapping her arms around Doku's torso and shooting a meaningful glance at him.

Doku initially frowned in confusion, but everything became clear in his mind when he looked at this girlfriend. He almost fell in a daze before recalling that his friend still needed an answer. "[What she said]."

Khan smiled while shaking his head. He directly turned and waved his hand to salute the couple, and the two Niqols imitated him without diverting their gazes from each other.

Khan took one of the first empty tents that he found and sealed its entrance. The warmth in his chest was almost about to vanish, and he couldn't do anything about that. Yet, he could train until his power allowed him to keep that feeling close.

The Niqols began to set the cauldron and prepare the materials needed to concoct the booze. Groups started to chant and test instruments. Everyone was getting ready for the usual celebrations that would last until morning, but Khan didn't want to join them right away. He felt the need to train a bit more that day. He almost feared that he would lose chances to see that smile otherwise.

Khan drew his first-grade knife and scrutinized it. He had picked up the habit to check its edges and surface carefully every night to make sure that his failures in the techniques of the Divine Reaper didn't affect its structure.

The weapon turned out to be fine. Marks had yet to appear on its dark surfaces. It was as perfect as the day Khan received it.

The next step in his training saw him performing a few tests with the Wave spell. He had yet to succeed in getting close to something that resembled a decent execution. Still, he slowly understood what the training program meant when it explained the chaos element's need for a personal approach.

Some of the things described in the training program didn't work for Khan. Instead, a few parts that the lessons advised against helped his execution of the spell. He had continued to fail without producing any effect, but the red-purple color of his mana had intensified as he kept testing the procedure.

That day wasn't any different. Khan sat, stretched his hand, thought about the Second Impact, and failed to achieve anything close to decent. A few curses ended up leaving his mouth when he stopped, but he quickly went back to the other part of his training afterward.

His meditation began as usual. Khan forced his mana to spread through his unwilling flesh. His body didn't want to change and sent waves of pain to express that feeling, but Khan barely felt them anymore. He pushed everything into spots that the energy had yet to touch, and everything proceeded as usual. However, something different happened after he spent a few hours immersed in that partial trance.

Khan's mana suddenly failed to cover the same amount of flesh as before. It stopped halfway through before the areas affected by the mana became slightly brighter.

The azure halo generated by that new radiance expanded throughout the rest of his body. It filled every corner of his insides and applied to his flesh a weaker version of what Khan usually did during the meditations.

'What is happening?' Khan wondered before understanding what that glow would cause.

The glow generated by the mana inside his body carried weaker effects of the actual energy, but it still affected everything it illuminated.

The parts of the body that Khan had yet to reach during his regular meditations suddenly experienced the influence of mana and began to improve. The event generated painful sensations everywhere, and they piled up until he felt forced to lay on the ground.

Khan tried to stretch his limbs as if he were dealing with normal cramps, but that couldn't solve his problem when the source of his pain came from inside him. He even stopped the flow of energy from his mana core, but that also didn't help. The glow was already in place, and nothing appeared able to stop it.

Sweat covered Khan's skin as he wriggled on the ground and waited for the process to end. He had slowly understood what was happening, so he knew that everything would be over once his flesh adapted to the new state that the glow was enforcing.

The flesh that Khan's mana had yet to affect improved without developing sharp changes in its structure. That energy didn't fuse with his tissues, but it elevated their nature to a state close to what mixing with actual mana would create.

The painful sensations filling Khan's mind slowly quieted down until they completely disappeared. The sweat that had accumulated on his face, hands, ankles, and opening of his robe evaporated to leave a cold sensation on his bare skin. He felt comfort in that coldness, but a lot more reached his mind after he calmed down completely.

A wave of power filled his body as the halo became unable to affect his flesh any further. Khan felt that his base power had increased after that unexpected event. He had initially thought that something had gone wrong with his meditation due to the sudden interruption of his growth, but he understood what had happened afterward.

'Did my attunement with mana reach fifty percent?' Khan shouted in his mind as he straightened his back to sit on the ground and check his body.

There didn't seem to be anything different in him. His muscles had remained identical, and the same went for everything else outside his skin. However, his insides had changed in ways that he couldn't completely describe.

Khan promptly stood up with the idea of testing his techniques, but he almost lost his balance during the process. He had felt too light. The force released by his legs had also made him jump.

Khan immediately accepted that he would require some time to grow used to his status as a first-level warrior.

Chapter 188 - Intense

Khan didn't feel in his own body. Everything he had learnt to do in seventeen years of life had become useless in the span of a meditation. He used to know how much strength to apply to walk.

He had learnt to ignore the many sensations that spread through his skin, ears, nostrils, mouth, and ears. He never once noticed the weight of his body, but that was over.

The years spent honing reflexes and developing instincts that took into consideration the limits of his body had become useless. Khan was different on a primordial level now. He almost felt overwhelmed by how much had changed in mere hours.

His body felt light. The tent was only three meters tall, but Khan felt able to jump over it without requiring mana. That lightness didn't even affect his strength. He had never believed that his muscles could hold so much power.

All that power mixed with his sudden lightness made his posture unstable. Khan had to think about balancing his strength to remain on his feet. His equilibrium was off, and he ended up swaying whenever he failed to control his power.

Those issues weren't too relevant compared to all the sensations that were assaulting his mind. Khan could feel the cold air inside his tent from the bare spots on his skin. The rays of light that passed in the fabric's holes were a bit too bright for his sensitive eyes. His ears picked sounds that went as far as the faint whispers in the tents around him. The scents of his habitation were different when they entered his nostrils. Even his own saliva had changed taste.

The changes weren't necessarily bad. Khan could understand what was happening rather quickly. He was experiencing the same intense sensations that Liiza could generate inside him by simply existing, with the only difference that they involved every aspect of his life now.

His mana had started to affect the entirety of himself, which naturally involved how he perceived the world in general. Khan was sensing and experiencing everything through organs enhanced by that magical energy. Those stark changes were only normal. They only felt overwhelming when they all happened at the same time.

Khan gave himself time to grow used to those changes. He couldn't test his new power with his senses all over the place anyway, so he stood still while waiting for everything to lose some intensity.

That time allowed Khan to focus again on his insides. He could vaguely calculate how only half of his flesh had fused with the mana. Everything else had only improved due to the influence that the energy spread.

That other half had yet to reach the proper fusion, but it had also grown immune to the lingering influence. Khan entered the meditative state to see how his training had changed after reaching that checkpoint, and he felt disappointed to notice that he couldn't spread his mana as before.

Khan could still accelerate the flow of mana, but it didn't directly affect his flesh anymore. Instead, meditating intensified the influence that lingered in the part that had yet to fuse with that energy.

The more intense version of that influence forced his non-fused flesh to improve, but it didn't allow him to focus on specific areas. Khan could only enhance himself as a whole now, which inevitably slowed down his overall growth. Still, that felt inevitable at his current level.

'No wonder it's harder to reach the higher levels,' Khan commented in his mind as he interrupted his meditation and dispersed the intense pain that had spread throughout his body.

His growth wasn't only slower now that he had to rely only on the influence of the mana that had already fused with his flesh. The process was also far more painful since it affected half of his body at the same time. Khan had raised the bar of the minimum suffering that he had to endure to improve.

Still, the breakthrough didn't only bring bad news. Khan's growth had suddenly become far slower and excruciating, but moving his mana inside his body had become far easier. The energy flow had become smoother since the entirety of his flesh had gained a basic attunement level now.

His mind slowly adapted to his new sensitivity. Khan felt that it would take him a few days to turn those intense sensations into his new normality, but he didn't feel worried about the next battles. Mere minutes in that condition had already made everything somewhat bearable. A night of sleep should be able to turn him battle-ready.

Khan waited a little more before deciding to move. At first, he jumped on his spot. It was strange to feel the actual tremors released during the impact of his feet with the ground, but that became easy to accept after a few minutes. He started to test his steps at that point, and finding the right balance took less and less as attempts piled on.

Khan alternated jumps, steps, sharp turns, and basic physical training to gain confidence in his new body. He had to persevere for an entire hour before feeling ready to test his martial arts, but he continued with the simple exercises even at that point.

His ignorance scared him. Khan didn't know anything about first-level warriors or above, and he had already tasted the fear of his own power when he was in Ylaco's training camp.

Khan wouldn't dare to go into battles that could potentially lead to casualties while wielding a power that could hurt his companions and himself. He could take risks in a safe environment, but everything on Nitis was about life and death right now.

Another hour had to pass before Khan grew almost used to his new state. His senses were finally starting to click with his instincts, and he didn't feel inside a foreign body anymore, not entirely at least.

Khan drew the first-grade knife from the sheath that never left his side and made his mana gather on its surface. His eyebrows arched when he saw how quickly he could send his energy to the weapon, but his new state didn't improve his control and manipulation. His sensitivity to mana had improved, but the breakthrough didn't affect the other two fields.

A deep breath escaped Khan's mouth after he placed the knife back in its sheath. The tent didn't give him much freedom, but he could stretch his legs without reaching the fabric on the other side.

Khan started with the simplest techniques of the Lightning-demon style as if he were trying to learn it from scratch. His legs moved slowly as he made sure that his mana followed at the correct speed.

His careful approach turned out to be unnecessary due to how much he had waited before approaching the martial art. Khan had already regained a good control over his body, and he had even learnt how quickly he could move mana now. His proficiency with those moves had reached the competent level, so it only took him a few slow attempts before growing used to his new features.

Khan felt almost whole after performing all the techniques of the Lightning-demon style. He wasn't perfect yet, but he was getting there. His mind only had to adapt to that new state.

The party had long since started by the time Khan felt in control of himself. It was even about to reach its final phases, but he didn't leave his tent yet. He wanted to see how his new body reacted to the booze, but a heavy doubt pressed on his thoughts and made him unable to join the event until he made up his mind about it.

'Should I tell the Global Army during the meeting?' Khan wondered as he sat on his bed and went over the many consequences that revealing his breakthrough could cause.

Khan had been in the Global Army for a little less than eleven months. The soldiers would definitely see his early breakthrough as proof of his talent. However, he knew that the [Blood Vortex] had something to do with the matter.

The Niqols' technique had made Khan save entire weeks of training even if he had used it only a handful of times. That alone proved how valuable the [Blood Vortex] had been, but it also created a troublesome possibility. The Global Army might connect his quick growth to his favorable position among the aliens and investigate him thoroughly.

Khan didn't know if he could hide his growth behind his mutations, but even that was clearly a risk. The safest option would be to remain silent, but he wanted the Global Army to learn about his talent. That didn't only involve a possible future with Liiza either. He needed merits to climb the ranks and learn more about the Nak.

The matter was quite annoying, and Khan couldn't find a solution on his own. Yet, he knew someone who knew a lot about life as a wealthy recruit. George had also earned his complete trust, so a serious conversation appeared necessary.

Khan had to interrupt his reasoning when he sensed three familiar presences approaching his tent. His sensitivity to mana didn't only allow him to identify the three Niqols. It also gave him the chance to notice them when they were still a few tents away from his habitation.

The trio moved directly toward his tent, and Khan didn't hesitate to jump out of his bed to unlock the entrance. Doku's surprised face unfolded in his vision when he lifted the fabric, but those raised eyebrows transformed into a relaxed smile in no time.

Khan moved to the side to let the three Niqols inside. Doku appeared quite drunk already, but a proud smile never abandoned his face. Instead, it only widened when he dropped a series of flasks to the ground and jumped on the bed.

Azni was blushing, and she continued to appear shy about that, but she hid her feelings behind her full cup. The girl limited herself to smile at Khan before hurrying on the bed and lying inside Doku's arms.

Liiza was the last to enter the tent. She was still wearing the cold expression that she showed in front of the others, but Khan quickly allowed her to relax by sealing the entrance.

Liiza jumped on Khan as soon as he straightened his back. He found his girlfriend in his arms, clinging with legs and arms on his waist and neck. Her lips found his mouth in no time, and the two soon found themselves on the ground.

"[I'm not in the best mental state today]," Khan whispered to Liiza's ear when he managed to lift his mouth from her lips or neck. "[I'm struggling to hold back]."

Liiza wanted to question Khan, but she had to cover her mouth to suppress the faint moan that the soft bite on her ear had generated. Her free hand instinctively reached the back of Khan's head to cling on his hair. He could sense her sensual pull, and everything felt far better with his new body.

Khan wasn't lying about his poor self-control. His body still felt too much right now, and he couldn't completely hold back, especially when those moments together had become rare.

Feeling Liiza clinging on his hair made Khan gave in to his feelings for a few seconds. Her pull only became stronger as his mouth descended through her neck and reached the opening of her robe on her chest.

Khan wasn't thinking straight, so he continued. Liiza ended up voicing a sweet moan when she took his head in his hands and brought him face to face with her.

Khan revealed a playful smile, and Liiza couldn't help but smile too even if she wanted to scold him. Neither of them didn't bother to glance at the bed even after Liiza's moan, but snores eventually reached their ears and made them turn toward the couple.

Doku and Azni had fallen asleep in each other's arms, and both of them snored pretty loudly. Khan snapped his fingers a few times to see if they woke up, but they appeared too drunk, tired, or both to bother about that gesture.

"[Khan, why are you so pushy tonight]?" Liiza asked without moving her gaze away from the couple.

"[I've become a first-level warrior]," Khan explained while imitating her and keeping his eyes on the couple. "[Everything is a bit too intense now]."

Khan had to turn toward Liiza when he sensed her hands clinging on the chest opening on his robe. Her eyes were wide, but a beaming smile had appeared on her face. She almost felt on the verge of crying due to how happy she felt about that achievement.

"[Maybe it's better to cuddle tonight]," Khan teased while caressing her cheek.

Liiza bit her lower lip as struggle appeared on her face, but the couple snored again and attracted her attention. She then fixed her eyes on Khan again while wearing a meaningful expression.

Khan widened his eyes in surprise, but another snore reached his ears. The couple appeared in a coma. They didn't react to any external stimulus, which made him give up on even trying to hold back.

"[Remember, slow]," Liiza whispered when she managed to find his ear in that storm of kisses. "[Everyone is drunk, but I still can't scream]."

"[You don't like slow]," Khan teased, but Liiza promptly bit his ear and made him laugh.

The two exchanged another meaningful glance at that point before immersing themselves in the silent pleasure that the previous weeks didn't give them the chance to enjoy.

Chapter 189 - Gathering

Finding a moment when to talk with George in private turned out to be quite hard. All the students had to join separate hunts or patrols every day, and the parties at night often involved partners. Khan was the only one who didn't have the chance to be with his girlfriend.

Khan could have some intimacy with Liiza when Doku and Azni decided to sacrifice their time alone or noticed a slightly messier party, but that happened rarely. Khan didn't even want to ask the couple favors after everything they were doing for him already, so his situation remained quite lonely as the day of the formal meeting approached.

The talk with George happened the night before the relocation. The boy was too conflicted about seeing Natalie after spending more than three months among Niqols. He had drunk on his own during most of the party, and Khan used the chance when he left the encampment to pee to question him about the average level of the recruits.

George had changed a lot, even if his character had remained the same. His growth had been more a matter of acceptance rather than general maturity. Living as a Niqols had helped him in ways that he didn't believe possible, and that gratitude had ended up condensing in the form of feelings for Havaa.

The boy was already drunk when Khan managed to have his conversation, but he described everything perfectly. Still, Khan had to spend most of what remained of the party listening to his rants about Natalie's coldness and Havaa's sweetness.

Khan didn't mind helping George in those moments. He would have preferred that conversation to happen in a better situation, but everyone seemed to lack time in that period, so he didn't complain.

George knew a bunch of data when it came to achievements among recruits. Apparently, it was challenging for someone to become a first-level warrior in the first year at the Global Army due to multiple factors that often didn't involve talent.

The recruits in the first year were always pretty young. They were still growing, which made raising their attunement with mana more challenging. Many of them had access to synthetic mana, but they couldn't abuse that resource since it could create impurities in their energy in the long run.

The second year usually was the time when the Global Army could identify the talented recruits. Becoming first-level warriors in the first six months of the year would show their talent and prove that they were worthy of special attention.

Khan didn't reveal his state to George. He trusted the boy, but he didn't want to take even more risks. Moreover, George's explanation confirmed Khan's fears. He had advanced too quickly, so he had to wait before telling everything to the Global Army.

Truth be told, Khan didn't know if he could keep his level hidden from the stronger soldiers, but he had reasonable justifications if they discovered it before his notification. His ignorance was a shield that would serve him perfectly in that situation.

The talk about Natalie and Havaa didn't interest him too much, mainly because George couldn't make up his mind about women. Khan would have already chosen to remain with Havaa if he were in his situation. The decision felt even obvious since Natalie didn't have any interest in relationships.

Also, George had basically relied on Havaa's feelings in that period to improve his recovery, so it didn't sound right to abandon her. He even felt something for her.

The only hindrance in that relationship was the difference between their species since George's status was quite peculiar. He wasn't a noble, but his family was wealthy. Meanwhile, Havaa was an ordinary student, so their potential union couldn't have political interests.

Khan couldn't say much there. He gave his honest opinion, which George only half-listened since he was too drunk to remain serious for too long. Khan wanted him to follow his feelings and ignore the complicated issues connected to politics. Still, he wasn't sure whether the boy had truly understood his point even after they separated.

The conversation had ended up lasting so long that George left only one hour before the departure. The students didn't have anything truly important in the encampment, so they didn't need to prepare for the event. Yet, Khan laughed internally when he thought about how hungover the Niqols would be during the travel.

In the end, Khan decided to spend that remaining hour roaming among the tents while enjoying the remaining booze. His endurance had reached insane levels after becoming a first-level warrior, and the same applied to his alcohol resistance. Remaining awake wasn't an issue, especially since he had gotten many chances to sleep in those weeks.

It didn't take much before an alarm resounded from cubes placed at the corners of the encampment. That noise wasn't too loud, but it remained annoying enough to wake up even the Niqols who were still drunk. The aliens knew their kind so well that they had developed special countermeasures for those occasions.

Groans and curses resounded in the camp as all the students left their tents and gathered in empty spots to summon their Aduns. Most of them had already planned to deal with the rest of the hangover during the flight, even if they didn't know how long it would take them to reach the location of the meeting.

Chief Alu and Chief Nazyr were in an empty spot right outside the encampment, and they shook their heads when they saw the zombie-like walks of the students. Still, neither of them said anything about that issue. They wouldn't dare to scold younglings who had spent almost four weeks fighting on the frontlines.

Aduns filled the sky when everyone in the camp set off. The two Chiefs led the group across the sky in a straight line toward the location that would hold the meeting with the Global Army.

Khan didn't meditate nor sleep. He wanted to commit that path to memory. The Chiefs seemed to fly in the general direction of the human camp, and the familiar mountain chain that expanded behind the glowing city eventually appeared under the group.

The Chiefs didn't stop there. They flew deeper into the mountain chain until those tall structures opened to create a large valley that had a dark gorge in its middle.

The scenery appeared marvelous, and the sunlight revealed all its details. The valley had a vaguely rectangular shape, and the gorge connected its short sides. Flat areas filled with dark-grey grass and sparse spots with multicolored flowers expanded from the long sides of the crack. At the same time,

the short edges connected the mountain chain to a marvelous palace far different from the structure where the recruits had met Ambassador Yeza.

The palace had three main buildings connected by shorter structures that featured bridge-like passages at their top. The buildings at the sides had square shapes that ended up in flat roofs encircled in short black fences. Instead, the central construction was rectangular and featured two long balconies at its sides, with one opening on the valley and the other toward the mountain chain.

The entire palace was dark-grey, but its surfaces were darker when it came to the structures that connected the three buildings. Multiple black spots also filled each side of the structure and marked the presence of windows.

It was clear that the palace didn't have battle purposes. It felt like an expression of the Niqols' artistic sense rather than a structure with deeper meanings. Khan could quickly guess that the aliens mainly used it for political reasons, which suited the event perfectly.

The Chiefs made the group circle the area a few times before leading everyone on one of the mountains nearby. The students left their rides there before reaching the valley on foot, and a surprisingly calm aura enveloped them as soon as they stepped on the dark-grey grass.

That atmosphere resembled the calm aura of [The Pure Trees], but it felt more intense. A faint smile appeared on Khan's face when he sensed the vague tiredness of the travel disappearing in a few seconds under the positive properties of that influence.

Similar smiles appeared on the students. Some still had headaches even if the flight had lasted for almost half a day. The aura washed over their hangover and allowed them to appear as lively as possible.

"[Clean yourselves up and wear decent clothes]," Chief Alu ordered while wearing his usual gentle smile. "[The humans will arrive at night, so hurry up]."

"[Go in the habitations behind the palace and don't waste time]," Chief Nazyr added. "[You had enough fun already. You can be serious for one night]."

A few laughs resounded among the group of students while the Chiefs led everyone across the long valley. The palace appeared immense when they had the chance to inspect it from its base, but no doors appeared in their view. It seemed that the structure featured hidden entrances.

"[I bet you can't wait to see your superiors]," Doku mocked when he approached Khan from the side.

"[Shouldn't you bow to some higher-up inside the palace or something]?" Khan laughed.

"[I believe this is outside of my reach]," Doku explained while pointing at one of the small structures that appeared once they crossed the palace. "[Only Liiza and some members of important tribes can go there]."

"[Maybe it's better like this]," Khan exclaimed before sensing a familiar presence and turning his head toward his source.

"[My friend]!" Ilman shouted when he saw Khan's eyes falling on him. "[You are sharp as always]."

Ilman had just come out of one of the structures behind the palace. His hair was still wet, and he had yet to close his robe. His slender figure and underwear were in the open, and some girls couldn't help but gasp at that sight.

Ilman ignored those attentions while waving his hand toward Khan, but his face turned serious when he noticed that Liiza was looking at him. He immediately closed his robe and performed a deep bow toward her, but a sigh escaped his mouth after he raised his head and found her walking toward the palace.

Everyone could see that scene. Khan could follow Liiza's departing figure with his eyes without worrying that his gesture could arise suspicion. The girl approached the smooth dark-grey surface of the palace, and a few metal layers slid open to reveal an entrance after she placed her hand on it.

'She must be so pissed today,' Khan thought as a sweet smile appeared on his face when the layers of the palace closed behind her figure.

"[Maybe that's for the best]," Doku whispered. "[I've seen how poorly you hold back]."

"[You didn't see anything]," Khan sneered. "[You and Azni were both dead drunk. It's not my fault if your nose could smell the aftermath]."

"[These human friends won't hesitate to exploit your kindness]," Doku joked.

"[You were literally sleeping on my bed that night]," Khan complained.

"[Who was sleeping where]?" Ilman asked after he arrived next to the duo and heard the end of that conversation.

"[Life in the encampment]," Khan lied shortly. "[Doku here likes to enjoy it to the fullest]."

"[Because he is a true Niqols]," Ilman laughed while patting Doku's shoulder.

"[Why aren't you inside the palace]?" Doku asked.

"[I asked to be among the students]," Ilman explained as he escorted the duo toward one of the structures. "[I don't have the best character when it comes to political matters]."

Both Doku and Khan nodded to agree with those words, and Ilman laughed again. The three exchanged a few more jokes during the walk as the students flowed into the different structures to clean themselves up and wear new robes.

Khan and Doku cleaned themselves quickly, and Ilman led them back into the valley once they came out. Azni and other Niqols joined them as they took their place among the dark-grey grass, and the same went for the recruits.

Servants eventually came out of the palace to place multiple cauldrons among the valley. Khan and the others could watch them concocting the special booze meant for that event while they waited for the meeting to start.

Then, the familiar noise of the Aduns' wings spread through the area, and the group could witness the arrival of the human troops in the valley when they raised their eyes toward the bright sky.

Chapter 190 - Punch

The dark-blue uniforms worn by the humans almost made them look like Niqols, but the sunlight revealed their true nature. Khan couldn't see much from his spot, but he didn't fail to sense the immediate tension that had fallen around him.

The change didn't really apply to Khan due to how close he had become with the Niqols. George and Helen could also partially ignore that new atmosphere since they had relationships to state their honest approach to their alien companions, but the others felt awkward.

The arrival of the human troops turned that relaxed gathering on the grass into a political meeting. The Niqols had to work for the greater good of their species now, so they couldn't treat the recruits among them as simple companions anymore.

"[We should greet them]," Doku announced before standing up.

Khan, Azni, and the others imitated him and crossed the valley to approach the palace again. The Niqols that led the humans to the area had made the group land in one of the mountains near the structure, and the students weren't the only ones who moved to wait for them.

The students almost stopped moving when they saw the dark-grey walls of the palace sliding open to reveal an entrance. The sight didn't surprise them, but the Niqols that came out of it left all of them stunned.

Ambassador Yeza was wearing one of her usual revealing dresses. She was so stunning that even the Niqols behind her struggled to keep their gazes straight. Only Liiza, who stood by her side, and Khan, who was captivated by his girlfriend's gown, managed to look elsewhere.

Azni snapped back to reality before her companions, and she poked both Doku and Khan with her elbows. The two stopped staring at Yeza and her daughter and performed a bow, and the other students soon imitated them.

"Let's greet our guests properly, shall we?" Yeza asked while wearing a bright smile, and the students didn't hesitate to walk behind her group to create a proper greeting party.

The humans soon descended from the mountain. Khan saw Captain Erbair, Lieutenant Kintea, Paul, the other Lieutenant and squad captains, various soldiers, and all the recruits stationed on Nitis. He didn't recognize many faces, especially those from Brandon's camp, but he noticed how their auras had changed.

Khan mostly noticed the difference in the recruits from his camp, especially those he had learnt to know better than the others. Harris, Natalie, and Sonia appeared more mature but in a sad way. Their uncaring eyes almost described how the crisis had affected their livelihood heavily.

The human group was relatively small, smaller than Khan expected. They had suffered losses in those weeks, which wasn't surprising considering their situation. Also, the Global Army was willing to send its most promising recruit among the Niqols. Khan couldn't imagine what the others had to do to ensure the survival of the teleport.

The changes weren't too unexpected, but Khan still felt strange in front of the humans. He performed a military salute, but he didn't sense any belonging in that gesture. Bowing felt more natural now.

"[Greetings, Ambassador Yeza]," Captain Erbair bowed before showing a stern smile.

"We finally have the chance to meet again," Yeza exclaimed in an enchanting tone. "It's a pity this meeting had to happen during such awful circumstances."

"I hope my envoys have served you well," Captain Erbair uttered.

"They have completed their tasks perfectly," Ambassador Yeza announced before waving a hand in Khan's direction. "We would be lost without Khan."

The unexpected mention made Khan frown, but his expression instantly turned into a respectful smile that he didn't hesitate to hide with a bow toward Yeza. Everyone had turned toward him after that announcement, and most of them shared his surprise.

'She is really holding up her end of the deal,' Khan thought as he straightened his back and revealed his respectful smile to everyone who was still looking at him.

The past deal with Yeza involved Khan's political career, and mentioning him in front of his superiors would significantly improve his value. The event had been unexpected, but he accepted it happily. The ambassador in charge of handling the relationship between the two species had actually vouched for him.

Paul kept his eyes on Khan for a bit longer than the others, but he eventually joined the exchange of polite salutation with the other Niqols. The meeting had officially started, and the group split since only the higher-ups or notable figures could enter the palace.

Only Captain Erbair, the two Lieutenants, and the older soldiers followed Yeza, Liiza, and the other higher-ups of the Niqols inside the palace. The other remained outside and waited for the wall to hide the entrance before moving toward the valley again.

"[I should probably greet the others]," Khan sighed when he saw Brandon and the others hurrying toward the squad leaders and the other recruits.

"[Don't forget to bring the other to drink]," Doku commented.

"[They must celebrate in the Niqols' way]," Ilman added, and his words almost sounded like an order.

"[Don't make any of them fall into the gorge]," Azni reminded them, and the three boys instinctively looked at the crack a dozen of meters from their position.

The valley was vast, and the same went for the crack. The sunlight illuminated its upper parts and revealed the details of those rocky surfaces. Still, the bottom of the gorge remained dark due to how deep it was.

"[I won't get my hopes up with the squad leaders here]," Khan explained.

"[Maybe we can pretend to get offended to get you out of a boring situation]," Doku proposed. "[A signal might work]."

"[Doku, you took weeks to learn how to wink properly],"

"[Months]," Khan corrected her while pretending to cough.

"[Do not worry]," Ilman announced. "[I will understand when Khan is bored with a single glance]."

"[That will be hard since I'm already bored]," Khan laughed before nodding at the three Niqols and turning toward the group of humans.

His actions didn't go unnoticed. All the recruits and squad leaders glanced at Khan when they saw him splitting from his Niqols friend. Yeza's announcement from before had made him the most interesting figure among the envoys.

"How the fuck did you even do that?" Paul asked as soon as Khan approached the humans.

"I must be good with women," Khan laughed while glancing at George.

"Humans and Niqols can confirm that!" George shouted before mustering his courage to approach Natalie.

'Why is he even scared?' Khan commented in his mind before disregarding the issue to focus on Paul.

"How are things out there?" Khan asked.

"They are as messy as they can be," Paul sighed. "We lost a bunch of recruits in the first week, and the situation didn't improve too much afterward. So many survived only because we abandoned the camps and hid near the teleport since Captain Erbair was in charge of defending it."

"Did the Niqols send reinforcements?" Khan continued while pointing at one of the cauldrons in the distance.

"As if," Paul snorted. "We were about to obtain clearance to send some weapons here, but Rodney happened."

Khan fell silent and continued to stare in front of him even if Paul were trying to study his reactions. He wouldn't reveal anything on the matter until he understood where Paul stood regarding the topic.

"No one is holding a grudge against you," Paul reassured when he understood the reason behind Khan's silence. "Well, Rodney's family will definitely hate you, but we are keeping your name outside of the official reports for now. Everyone is mostly happy that one of you managed to get close to the Niqols."

"Is he rich?" Khan asked without turning.

"Pretty wealthy, but not too influential," Paul explained. "Don't worry. You are quite untouchable for now."

Khan nodded, and his thoughts immediately went toward another topic when silence fell again. Yeza's announcement had made it difficult for him to inspect his peers properly, but he believed that none of them had noticed his breakthrough. Even Paul didn't seem to realize that he was walking side by side with another first-level warrior.

"So, did you have fun before the arrival of the sunlight?" Paul teased, clearly hinting at what George had said before.

"I have restrictions," Khan joked while pointing at the side of his neck. "I'm afraid everything has to remain a secret."

"You are enjoying this, aren't you?" Paul asked.

"How untouchable am I exactly?" Khan smile.

"Move on, soldier," Paul snorted. "Don't forget that I'm your superior."

"I wonder if I can ruin my image fast enough to affect your promotion," Khan wondered while bringing a hand to his chin.

"Name your price, scoundrel," Paul gave up.

Khan glanced behind him. Everyone was busy catching up, and the azure symbols on the six envoys' necks often lit up since they risked revealing something connected to the academy. Still, no one was looking in his direction anymore. Even George and Veronica were too busy with the other humans to pay attention to him.

His eyes eventually fell on Kelly. She was with Brandon next to a short woman whose presence appeared as strong as Paul. She probably was one of the squad leaders of the other camp, and Khan couldn't help but notice how close Kelly seemed to her.

"I'm close to beating Kelly up," Khan whispered. "The restrictions don't allow me to tell you why, but she has tried to get in my way many times already."

"I should have gotten a drink first," Paul sighed while massaging the spot between his eyebrows. "Whose fault is it?"

"Neither," Khan responded. "She is strict while I'm free, but she gets mad since she can't control me."

"Oh, that's easy," Paul exclaimed. "You have yet to realize it, but you are already a few steps above the other recruits on Nitis. You might even be above me in terms of sheer political value. The higher-ups would directly throw away complaints filed by recruits if they were to involve you."

"That's reassuring," Khan commented.

"You should check your position on the lists once all of this is over," Paul suggested. "You should be able to fit in some positions as a squad leader in alien planets after what you have achieved here."

"You still don't know what I did," Khan frowned.

"And you have no idea what I would do to make Ambassador Yeza compliment me," Paul scoffed. "That alone will become part of your profile."

"I can ask her to see you if you want," Khan proposed.

"Can you?" Paul gasped as his eyes lit up in pure joy.

"No," Khan laughed before hurrying toward the first fuming cauldron that he found.

Paul silently cursed him, but a smile eventually appeared on his face. Khan had basically ensured his promotion to Lieutenant. He couldn't say anything to that recruit.

The servants from the palace had continued to handle the preparations for the event. The valley had less than two hundred people, but those Niqols prepared thirty cauldrons in different spots of the area.

The valley was a few kilometers long, so those cauldrons never overlapped. The various groups that formed during the event could also have the chance to decide between a crowded area or some privacy.

Many Niqols had sat around the fuming cauldron approached by Khan, and they didn't hesitate to hand him a cup. Doku, Azni, and Ilman were there, and the girl promptly pointed at the edge of the group with her eyes. Havaa was in that area, and she was staring at the incoming humans.

Khan had been the first human to approach the cauldrons, so he could turn and watch the awaited scene unfold with his three friends. Havaa took a deep breath before standing up and walking toward the incoming recruit. George was doing his best to catch up with Natalie, and the girl was even showing rare smiles at his jokes.

The crisis had been hard for Natalie. Still, that reunion had reminded her of how easy it had always been to talk with George. Seeing that he didn't change at all during those months was even heartwarming, but Havaa's arrival made her frown. Her surprised expression only intensified when she saw Havaa punching George on his nose.