

Chaos' Heir 211

Chapter 211 - Sadness

The Niqols generally had simple relationships. Mutual attraction led to dating, which would transform into proper love if feelings were to bloom.

Those relationships were deep, intense, and strong, but they were based on how open the Niqols were toward their feelings. The aliens rarely went against their emotions, which made the interactions between partners straightforward. It was easy to understand whether their bonds only had physical attraction or had something more.

Even Khan, George, and Helen had found good partners relatively easily. The Niqols' straightforward approach to emotions and their lack of self-restraint had helped those humans get over the differences between their species. Things had been slightly different for Khan, but he knew that everything would have been harder with Liiza if she didn't reveal her attraction right away.

Yeza didn't fall in that category. She had always been aware of the problems that her character could cause, especially among such an emotional species, but she didn't give up on it. Instead, she had decided to isolate herself and focus on politics to avoid ending up in relationships that couldn't have a future.

Deni had made her hope that she could have something similar to her peers. His intense love had made Yeza take a chance. He had allowed her to believe that she could fulfill her feelings. Yet, her character had turned out to be too much in the end.

The words that Captain Erbair had spoken just yesterday resounded inside Khan's mind. Yeza was the living proof that feelings weren't always enough. Her situation was unique, but she had still proved how a relationship featuring mutual love could end for various reasons.

Khan had learnt to evaluate and recognize different characters due to the social paranoia developed in Ylaco's slums. However, he had to admit that his approach to relationships was still naive.

Khan couldn't blame himself there. His young age and poor experience in that field made him innocent and pure, so he couldn't evaluate Yeza's situation accurately. Part of him continued to believe that she was at fault due to her affairs, but could he really blame her? According to her words, she had done everything she could to warn Deni about her character.

Khan believed that Yeza's relationship was too complicated to study with his inexperienced mind. He obviously couldn't evaluate it according to human canons, but he could start to understand her when he relied on his broad mindset.

Understanding Yeza felt depressing. It actually hurt Khan to try to relate to her situation. Something even brought his mind to the Nak and his nightmares. He could find similarities between his desperation and Yeza's character when it came to the problems that they could cause in a relationship.

"[Don't think too hard about my words]," Yeza continued when she saw that Khan lowered his gaze. "[I only wanted to broaden your perspective. You have power over my daughter's happiness, so I can't let you remain a naive kid. Your mind is in the right place, but you need to be more than that to be with her. You need to become a man who can help her face her political responsibilities]."

Khan couldn't help but raise his gaze. Yeza was taking that relationship seriously, so she wanted to prepare him for the problems that Liiza's status could cause. She was acting as a concerned mother who wanted her daughter's path to be smooth and happy.

"[I want to do my best]," Khan honestly revealed. "[I don't know much about politics, but I'm learning. Still, I hope you can understand that I don't care about them. I only wish Liiza's happiness]."

Yeza's eyes widened in surprise. Khan had the gall to voice such an honest revelation before her, the main ambassador in the relationship between the two species. She didn't know whether to see that as brave or dumb. His honesty left her shocked, but a warm smile eventually broadened on her serious face.

"[You should never say such words in the open if you want to get the approval of my tribe]," Yeza chuckled while covering her mouth.

"[I have just been honest to my girlfriend's mother]," Khan said as a timid smile appeared on his face.

Yeza inspected Khan, and she soon heaved a helpless sigh. She focused on her drink and traced the cup's edge with her fingers as a comment escaped her mouth. "[Look at me. I'm getting so emotional in front of my daughter's first serious man. My age is making me lose ground against a kid. I wonder if I'll start desiring grandchildren in a few years]."

Khan's expression froze as soon as he considered the idea of having a child with Liiza, and Yeza laughed when she saw that scene. She voiced another comment, but her tone gained a chilling aura near the end of the line. "[I was joking. I hope you won't get my daughter pregnant anytime soon]."

"[We are extremely careful about that]!" Khan promptly reassured, but his quick reaction only made Yeza laugh again.

"[At least you know how to keep her satisfied]," Yeza teased. "[I might forget what my daughter's natural shades are if you two continue like this]."

Khan directly diverted his gaze as an awkward laugh escaped his mouth. He didn't want to talk about sex with his girlfriend's mother.

"[Well]," Yeza sighed before standing up, [I hope you won't forget my words. You shouldn't if you like having that thing between your legs. I'm an emotional woman when it comes to my daughter. I don't know what I might do to those who hurt her]."

Khan's expression went blank. Those words finally revealed a stark similarity between Yeza and her daughter. It seemed a common trait of Liiza's family to threaten his manhood.

"[You can remain in this room if you want to avoid those curious glances]," Yeza said while moving toward the door. "[We'll probably plan things out for a few more days, maybe even a week, so this meeting isn't crucial]."

Khan's expression turned serious as he inspected Yeza's departing figure. He had another important question that he couldn't suppress.

"[Ambassador Yeza]," Khan called as he stood up, "[Is the toxicity of our relationship really a bad thing]?"

Yeza had almost reached the door, but she stopped her tracks and turned to inspect Khan. The intense resolve in his eyes saddened her, but she wanted to respect that feeling.

"[You two are nothing more than kids]," Yeza explained in a calm voice, "[Even worse than kids. I don't know much about you, but it's clear that your life wasn't easy. Liiza is the same, so you two have developed a deep need for each other]."

"[Isn't that what Niqols strive to obtain]?" Khan asked.

"[Yes, but that between two normal partners]," Yeza responded. "[You found each other when you had nothing else. Developing such an intense love is almost normal in your situation, but it leaves it with a frail foundation. I'm not sure it can survive in the open, once you'll have to face the real world]."

"[I'm no stranger to the true nature of the world]," Khan commented.

"[I wasn't speaking about that]," Yeza corrected. "[I wish you had found each other after experiencing some good aspects of life. You simply don't know any better right now]."

Khan opened his mouth to speak, but he found himself unable to say anything. He had to sort his thoughts before managing to voice a simple question. "[Isn't it better to get this love sooner]?"

"[Is it]?" Yeza wondered. "[If your feelings are as strong as you two say, you would have eventually found each other anyway, maybe without being so broken. Right now, you both need those emotions, so you aren't completely selfless about them. I'm not questioning your love. I'm just saying that you are both using part of it to heal your sadness]."

Khan diverted his gaze as those words echoed in his mind. Yeza heaved another sigh before crossing the door to leave him alone with his thoughts. She knew that her revelation might have been too profound for such a young boy, but she couldn't hold back since her daughter was involved.

Khan didn't even hear the door closing in front of him. He tried to dissect Yeza's words to inspect them from different perspectives, but it soon became clear that she was right. Both Khan and Liiza even knew about that. They didn't only love each other. They were also relying on their feelings to keep moving.

"[Come out, Liiza]," Khan said, and a wall on the other side of the room slid open.

"[How could you sense me]?" Liiza asked while stepping out of the secret passage. The wall behind her closed as soon as she entered the room.

"[I didn't]," Khan revealed while turning toward Liiza to show a teasing smile. "[I just know that you would have never left me alone with your mother if you had the chance to spy on us]."

Liiza pouted, but her face soon broke into a warm smile when Khan reached her to wrap his arms around her waist. She wanted to kiss him right away, but a tinge of sadness appeared in her expression when she saw him hiding in her neck. She could only imitate him at that point, and the two remained in that position for a few minutes.

"[Did you hear everything]?" Khan asked when he raised his head.

"[Yes]," Liiza revealed after leaving his neck and keeping her gaze lowered. "[I didn't expect my parents to have these problems. No wonder I am a mess]."

"[You are a beautiful mess]," Khan stated while taking Liiza's face in his hands and lifting it to make their eyes meet.

"[I'm your beautiful mess]," Liiza pouted, "[So don't get strange ideas over what my mother said. I don't care if we are instinctively using each other. We'll deal with that together if problems appear]."

Liiza's earnest answer made Khan's doubts melt. He didn't care about anything when those glowing eyes illuminated his face and filled him with feelings that allowed him to find beauty in his dark life.

The two kissed, but they quickly separated. Khan and Liiza were in the middle of the palace, next to a hall full of superiors and friends. Their mental state was even far from ideal, so continuing to be so intimate was risky. Still, their eyes spoke words that they both knew far too well.

"[You should take your time to think about your parents]," Khan suggested, trying to defuse that reckless situation, but Liiza didn't help him.

Liiza took his hand and led him toward the door. She tinkered with the azure symbol there to seal the entrance before turning to push Khan toward the table gently.

"[Liiza]," Khan attempted to stop her with the last brim of self-restraint in his brain, but everything fell apart when he sensed her cold hands slipping under his robe to caress his bare torso.

"[My parents' stuff is too much to take right now]," Liiza explained before showing her pleading expression. "[Help me silence my thoughts]."

Khan and Liiza could have left the area. They had the chance to use the secret passages or the main corridor. No one forbid them from returning to Khan's room, but they remained there. The sole idea of delaying their intimate moment for even a second sounded like torture.

Chapter 212 - Anger

The days that followed the meeting were awkward.

Liiza had a hard time accepting that her mother wasn't completely to blame for what had happened to her family. Liiza had hated her for too long, but she couldn't ignore what she had overheard. Yeza was a hard woman to love, but she had been fair with Deni. It actually seemed that he had taken advantage of a moment of weakness only to betray her trust later on.

Khan wasn't completely fine either. Captain Erbair, Liiza, and Yeza's words never stopped resounding inside his mind. He worried about the political environment, his power, and his relationship, but no real solutions appeared in sight.

Captain Erbair was right. Feelings weren't always enough in relationships, and Khan and Liiza might have to face that truth. Yeza's story had even proved how the problems didn't have to be strictly political. Some features in the partners' characters could lead to a division, and Khan feared that his desperate goal to find the Nak might fall in that category..

The revelations about the chaos element also filled his mind with doubts. Liiza believed that the human approach to the Wave spell was dumb, but she couldn't help him develop a new method

either. She even felt that Khan shouldn't test his luck right away due to how he had treated his mana until then. After all, a single failed attempt might really make him explode.

Khan found himself stuck among issues that he couldn't solve. He couldn't do anything to fix the toxicity of his relationship, the political environment was basically on hold during the crisis, and his power couldn't gain any immediate benefit. Moreover, he had to deal with Liiza's poor mental state without forgetting his friends, superiors, and the higher-ups of the other species.

Needless to say, Khan felt overwhelmed during those days, but he was far from alone. He was doing his best to help Liiza, but everyone could see that she did the same.

The palace wasn't too different from the academy. The students soon understood that they could use some of its areas to have parties, and the few recruits left on Nitis didn't hesitate to join them. Khan and Liiza weren't an exception, but they limited themselves to a few hours of celebrations before going to his room or the first isolated place that they found.

Those celebrations mostly started in the late afternoon and continued until deep into the night. Instead, meetings with the higher-ups occupied the hours before lunchtime. Yeza never failed to summon everyone to inspect their target inside the muddy valley at the base of the two mountains.

It turned out that the palace inside the valley was only one of the important locations that the rebels had captured with the help of the sunlight. Multiple structures that had served the Niqols for centuries had fallen into their hands, but Yeza's group only had to take care of what was near them.

The absence of Aduns was an issue that the Niqols didn't expect and couldn't fix. The Lysixi had also become unreliable due to the sunlight, so crossing long distances and gathering information had become impossible for now.

Yeza could only make her group focus on one target due to those issues, and she even had to approach the fight carefully. The siege was only the last of her problems. Her team would have to cross multiple regions potentially occupied by monsters that had gone through the second round of mutations before reaching the muddy valley.

Tension built up as the days passed. Both humans and Niqols knew that each meeting drew their departure closer. Yeza even planned to deploy most of the troops inside the palace for the mission, so it was clear that she had no intention to retreat or fail to capture the muddy valley.

The group was looking at a one-way journey, and the humans among them couldn't say anything. The soldiers didn't establish any friendly relationship with the Niqols, so they didn't feel the need to help them. Yet, their mission forced them to deploy as much manpower as possible in the battles, and Yeza knew that. She never held back from counting them as part of her force.

The growing tension only added worries to Khan, but he barely had the time to think about that with everything going on inside his mind. It seemed that his life had gone back to the peaceful times in the academy, with the only difference that he didn't have to keep his relationship hidden.

The students and recruits enjoyed six entire days of break inside the palace, but Yeza wanted to put an end to that peaceful period, and Khan and Liiza were the first to learn about that.

A surprising message appeared in Khan's room on the night of his sixth day inside the palace. The azure symbols on the walls brightened and woke him up as they transformed into orders that carried Yeza's name at their end.

"[Is it mine or yours]?" Liiza complained in a sleepy voice as she used the bed's blanket to cover her face.

Liiza and Khan had never held back from sleeping together after the silent acceptance of their respective superiors. She was currently on Khan's chest, but the light of the orders was annoying her.

"[It's from your mother for both of us]," Khan revealed, and Liiza immediately uncovered her head to inspect the walls with her sleepy eyes.

'[Khan, Liiza, use your young and cute aura to convince the old hag],' Khan and Liiza read on the walls.

The message didn't say anything else. It didn't add any detail, and it didn't even mention Zalpa, but the couple knew that Yeza was talking about her.

"[Is she spying on us]? Liiza scoffed.

"[We didn't exactly play it low recently]," Khan joked while reaching the back of Liiza's head to caress her.

Liiza voiced an annoyed curse before lying on Khan and hide her head in his neck. She left a few kisses there, but Khan straightened his back and made her sit on his lap.

"[I think she means now]," Khan chuckled when Liiza's annoyed face appeared in his vision.

"[Of course she means now]," Liiza whined, "[Which means that we have to depart soon. Don't you want to make the best out of our safe time left]?"

Khan's eyes widened before lowering at his side. Liiza was right. Yeza must have asked them to gain Zalpa's favor since the battle was close. The time to assault the castle inside the muddy valley had finally arrived.

"[Zalpa will have to wait a bit]," Khan commented when his eyes returned on Liiza.

Liiza caressed his cheek before wrapping her arms around his neck and whispering in her cute voice. "[More than a bit]."

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Zalpa had never come out of the second basement during those days. No one had ever mentioned her either. Yet, everyone could guess that some Niqols had interacted with her to question her about the crisis.

The palace's corridors were almost empty at night. The only areas that still had someone were the large halls with the parties, but Khan and Liiza didn't have to cross them to reach the first floor. They could arrive in front of the drape that hid the basement's entrance without meeting anyone.

Liiza didn't take much to make the walls move and uncover the narrow staircase that led to the lower levels of the palace. A prison almost identical to that seen during the meeting with Yeza unfolded in the couple's eyes after they descended from the steps.

Liiza quickly found the entrance to the second underground floor and unlocked it. The couple soon arrived in a familiar environment illuminated by dark-red light. They saw a couple of cauldrons, red symbols, and Tainted animals hanging from the ceiling.

'How did she even bring Tainted animals here?' Khan wondered as his eyes focused on a dirty figure sleeping on a simple bed on the other side of the basement.

"[Are you Yeza's last resort]?" Zalpa shouted while straightening her position to sit on the bed.

"[Zaza, you know that helping us is the right thing]," Liiza promptly responded.

"[Is it though]?" Zalpa asked before jumping to her feet and approaching one of the cauldrons to check its insides. "[Niqols who believe in the old ways are finally showing themselves. Why should I help stop them]?"

"[Because I am on the other side]," Liiza replied as she and Khan approached the old Niqols.

"[You can still change your mind]," Zalpa sighed when the couple arrived in front of her. "[I wish you would, Lii]."

Zalpa glanced at Khan after her comment, but her eyes quickly went back to Liiza. She had basically asked Liiza to go back to the old ways while her boyfriend was holding her hand, and she didn't appear too proud about it.

Khan had reached the basement with the intention of remaining silent. He didn't delude himself. Zalpa's past comment about him wasn't a complete acknowledgment since she still hated the humans. She only liked that he was treating Liiza properly.

Khan wanted to let Liiza handle the talk, but his annoyance reached its limits after the last comment. He was giving his everything to Liiza, the Niqols, and Nitis as a whole. Khan had done his best since his first day on that alien planet. He had approached every teaching in the academy with utmost seriousness, and he had even learnt techniques from the old ways.

The last days in the castle had been tense, but the situation for Khan had been even worse. His head was full of problems that he couldn't solve, but he still did his best. He took care of Liiza and his friends, trained like a madman, and helped in every meeting. He couldn't remain silent when Zalpa spat on his effort.

"[What else do I need to do]?" Khan voiced an angry complaint that surprised both Liiza and Zalpa. "[Do you want me to paint my skin and stare at the sun until my eyes turn white? I understand that you have a problem with humans, but why can't you put them aside for me? I'm more Niqols than most of the students in the academy! I abide by the old ways more than most of Liiza's superiors]!"

Liiza tightened her grasp on Khan's hand, but she held back from hugging him. She was the only one on the entire planet who knew how much Khan did every day. She actually felt surprised that his patience had lasted for so long.

Zalpa had also remained speechless in front of that angry outburst, but she couldn't remain silent. Everything Khan had said was true. He had earned enough respect to deserve an answer.

"[Your kind is cruel, cynical, and weak]," Zalpa explained. "[You throw away lives only to gain mere political benefits, and you show no respect toward your power. You take everything you can without paying any price. You feed on a few exceptional individuals and claim their merits as your own. You are no better than worms]."

Zalpa revealed how her hatred toward the human wasn't mere xenophobia. Her disgust had a solid foundation that Khan couldn't contradict. Everything she had said was true, at least when it came to a general view of humankind.

"[Don't treat me as a human then]," Khan declared. "[I don't care how you see me. I'll even let you take me as a Nak if that makes it better for you]."

Khan partially hated himself for saying those words, but the cold sensation spreading from his hand appeased that feeling. Everything was worth it as long as it was for Liiza.

"[That's not better at all]," Zalpa's snorted, but her expression seemed to relax. She had seen what Khan went through every time he slept. She knew that his statement must have taken everything he had.

"[Then find another method to trust me]," Khan continued while pointing at the cauldron next to him. "[You are a shaman, right? Do some shaman stuff to test me or something. I'll let you do whatever you want as long as you start trusting me]."

"[Are you willing to go this far just to get my help against the rebels]?" Zalpa chuckled in disappointment while shaking her head.

"[I don't care about that at all]," Khan announced. "[I'm doing this to make Liiza happy. She cares a lot about you]."

Zalpa felt a tinge of shame spreading inside her mind. Her expression froze as she raised her eyes toward Khan to inspect him. His resolve was honest and intense. Even the Niqols would struggle to match his determination.

"[I can arrange that]," Zalpa didn't give up. "[I can test you, but the process can hurt you badly. It will even leave a lasting mark on you. Do you really want to gain my approval]?"

"[Khan]," Liiza called, and her action made the cold smirk on Zalpa's face widen. She believed that Liiza would make Khan give up on that matter, but the rest of the phrase left her speechless once again. "[Don't overdo it. She is still an old woman]."

"[Don't worry]," Khan smiled while pulling Liiza closer. "[She has finally given me a chance. Nothing else matters]."

Chapter 213 - Tattoo

Liiza didn't like to see Khan hurting himself for her sake. She didn't want him to put so much effort into getting accepted by Zalpa and the Niqols society as a whole. She would gladly take his place and shoulder that burden, but opposing his resolve would only go against what made him so exceptional.

Khan's selfless determination was unstoppable when it came to a few topics. Liiza would only risk offending him if she tried to oppose that resolve, and she would even fail to make him give up on the matter. The best path was to show him her support and take care of him properly once he succeeded in his plan. In Liiza's mind, Khan couldn't fail when he put his whole self into something.

Zalpa didn't expect that turn of events. Liiza and Khan were extreme characters, but she believed that they could suppress each other's radical features when they were together. Still, they actually ended up condoning and supporting them if the situation required it.

Zalpa could see that Liiza wasn't happy about the situation, but she also noticed her earnest desire to support Khan. The girl couldn't stop him, so she would do everything in her power to make his path easier..

Both Liiza and Khan were willing to give their everything to their partner. That sight partially reassured Zalpa, but it also hinted at the dysfunctional aspects of their relationship. Their determination was in the right place, but their minds didn't abide by the spectrum that ordinary people should have.

'[They are influencing each other],' Zalpa concluded in her mind.

The old Niqols inspected the couple to try to understand whether their situation was healthy. She knew that the crisis was highlighting the extreme aspects of both personalities, but she didn't mind that too much. Her focus was on Liiza's well-being. Zalpa wouldn't hesitate to drive Khan away if she felt that his presence was hurting her.

However, Zalpa could only end her inspection with a curse that never managed to leave her mouth. She felt ashamed of herself in front of Khan's intense resolve and Liiza's effort to suppress her worries. She would go against everything she preached if she didn't show any respect for those feelings.

"[Where do you want the mark]?" Zalpa asked before turning to reach one of the monsters hanging from the ceiling.

"[Maybe I should know more about it before deciding]," Khan suggested while inspecting Zalpa cutting open the odd bear with her bare fingers.

"[I'm going to draw a mark on you]," Zalpa explained as she seized bloody organs from the monster and put them in the insides of her robe. "[If your feelings are honest and pure, the mark won't hurt you. Otherwise, it will burn like crazy for a few weeks. It might even require an invasive removal depending on how bad your emotions are]."

Khan's eyebrows arched in surprise, but no fear appeared in his mind. The explanation ended up reassuring Liiza too. The two did not doubt the feelings that they shared.

Zalpa returned to the couple while carrying a bunch of gory materials in her dirty robe. A patch of dark blood expanded on her clothes, but she didn't mind it and promptly picked those organs in a specific order to throw them into the cauldron.

"[Blood]," Zalpa ordered, and Khan quickly left Liiza to stretch his hand.

Zalpa drew a knife from the insides of her robe and cut Khan's palm open. She did her best to pierce his skin without using her mana since she didn't want to spoil that material, and blood eventually started to fall inside the cauldron.

"[The mark will become a lifelong testimony of your feelings if everything goes well]," Zalpa continued before removing Khan's hand and proceeding to send mana into the cauldron to make everything in its insides melt. "[Choose the spot carefully]."

Khan and Liiza exchanged a glance, and they ended up showing a warm smile when he uncovered his torso. He showed his back to his girlfriend before pointing at his shoulder and asking for her advice. "[Left or right]?"

"[We might have to fight soon, so pick the right]," Liiza responded.

"[You heard her]," Khan laughed while turning to show his back to Zalpa.

"[Sit]," Zalpa ordered, and Khan didn't hesitate to execute those orders. He crossed his legs and sat on the ground before shooting a confident smile toward Liiza.

Zalpa took a few minutes to prepare the liquid inside the cauldron. She requested Liiza's blood at some point, and she dipped two fingers inside her potion once everything was ready. The old Niqols then pulled Khan's hair and made him show her his face since she needed to draw a few marks there.

"[You'll fall into a trance]," Zalpa explained while drawing complicated marks on Khan's forehead, nose, and cheeks. "[Your feelings will fight while I draw the mark. The ink will seep into your skin, and your body will accept it only if your emotions are worthy]."

Khan nodded once Zalpa let go of his head. He started to feel dizzy as soon as she placed her fingers on the back of his right shoulder, and confused images slowly replaced the basement.

Khan found himself among complete blackness. He could stand, but he couldn't see the ground under him. His sensations also were nothing more than a mere echo. It was clear that his body wasn't there.

Lights slowly appeared in front of Khan. That glow slowly took Liiza's features. It transformed into a white silhouette of the girl, and he didn't hesitate to approach her.

A second light appeared on Khan's path before he could reach Liiza's figure. The familiar azure shades revealed the nature of that glow even before it took a detailed shape. Khan coldly inspected the radiance growing and transforming into the Nak from his memories in a few seconds.

The two figures remained still and expressionless. Liiza radiated a cozy coldness, while the Nak had a chilling warmth around its ethereal shape. They represented how Khan felt about them. Liiza reminded him of all the lovely nights spent in their home in the marsh, while the Nak carried the scorching memories of the Second Impact.

'Is the test asking me to choose between them?' Khan wondered as he inspected the two figures.

The choice felt obvious. Khan quickly approached Liiza's glowing figure and tried to touch her, but his hand seeped past them. He felt as if her white light didn't want him to touch her.

'Is it rejecting my feelings?' Khan wondered before correcting himself. 'No. It won't accept them unless I'm certain about my position.'

Khan felt able to understand what the test wanted from him. He couldn't explain that sensation, but he went along with it without lingering on pointless thoughts. He had encountered a problem, but solving it would require something that he wasn't willing to do.

"I can't abandon my goals," Khan stated, and his muffled voice echoed throughout the dark area before dispersing in the distance.

A hideous smirk appeared on the Nak's face after that statement. Its light intensified while the opposite happened to Liiza's figure. It seemed that the test was moving in the wrong direction, but Khan didn't panic. He couldn't fall prey to his fears after spending the last days thinking about his problems.

"This test would make me lose all my respect for the Niqols' old ways if it didn't understand the true nature of my situation," Khan mocked before glancing at Liiza's dimming figure to show a complicated smile. "How can I let her continue sleeping on my chest when I shake every time I close my eyes?"

Khan turned toward the smirking Nak to heave a helpless sigh. He raised his hand, and a scorching sensation spread on his palm when he touched the center of the alien's torso.

"You forced me to hate you for reasons that I still can't understand," Khan said, "But I won't let you affect her. My desperation isn't alone anymore."

The smirk on the alien slowly disappeared, and its face morphed to gain Khan's features. He could see deep into his desperation when he looked at those ethereal eyes. The sorrow accumulated throughout twelve years on nightmare was right in front of him. He had long since decided to fix it, and Nitis had added a reason to his goal. Khan wanted to get better so that Liiza wouldn't suffer by looking at his pain.

The Nak and Liiza vanished, and the blackness around Khan shattered as the basement slowly filled his vision. The test was over, but an uncomfortable stinging sensation spread from his shoulder and made him unable to focus on his surroundings.

Khan turned to look at his right shoulder. He couldn't see much from there, but he still noticed a few azure lines spreading down his back. Their color was almost identical to his scar and mutated strands of hair.

"[Your resolve is stunning]," Zalpa sighed before covering her palm with mana and manipulating it until it transformed into a mirror-like surface.

Khan could inspect his shoulder when he looked at his reflection. An azure cross that featured S-shaped lines at its center had appeared on the back of his right shoulder. The mark glowed for a few seconds before darkening and transforming into a proper tattoo.

"[You won't be able to remove it through normal methods]," Zalpa explained. "[This mark is part of you now. No Niqols would ever dare to question your feelings now]."

"[What does this mark mean]?" Khan asked, but a sniff suddenly reached his ears and made him turn toward Liiza.

Liiza was covering her mouth as a single tear fell from her eyes. She took timid steps toward Khan before crouching to sit on his lap. Her hands moved among his hair before going around his neck to pull him closer and make their foreheads touch.

"[You need to stop doing this]," Liiza whined. "[A single mind is too little for all this happiness]."

Khan didn't hesitate to hold Liiza tightly. She instinctively hid her face on his neck and gave him the chance to question Zalpa with his gaze. The old Niqols stared at him for a few seconds before heaving a deep sigh and voicing an answer.

"[That symbol means love or union]," Zalpa revealed while diverting her eyes, "[And it has a vague eternal sense added to it]."

"[Thank you, Zaza]," Khan smiled.

Zalpa voiced an annoyed snort. "[Don't get carried away. I still hate humans. You might have gained my approval, but I'll help you only because of Liiza]."

"[Help with what]?" Khan asked in confusion, and even Liiza raised her head to show a confused frown to Zalpa.

"[You are about to jump into a battle with warriors far stronger than you]," Zalpa replied. "[You won't be able to affect its outcome, but you might need to protect Liiza with your body. Improving your Blood Shield is the least I can do for her]."

Chapter 214 - Teachings

Zalpa's statement inevitably made the couple excited. Khan stood up without letting go of Liiza, and the girl had to wrap her legs around his waist to cling to him.

"[I'm already regretting this]," Zalpa snorted when she saw the two young faces brimming with gratitude.

"[She would be far easier to like if she weren't so grumpy]," Khan commented as Liiza put strength in the arms around his neck to make her legs reach the floor slowly.

"[It's part of her charm]," Liiza giggled while fixing her intense gaze on him.

Liiza partially let go of Khan's neck to move a hand on his right shoulder. Her fingers carefully reached the tattoo and traced its edges when she confirmed that Khan wasn't hurting.

"[Can you stop lusting after each other for a bit]?" Zalpa scolded before turning to walk toward the bear-like monster with the open belly. "[I'm trying to teach you something important, you damned horny kids]."

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Liiza would have normally called Zalpa's name to complain about her words, but she only voiced a happy laugh now. Khan also smiled while nodding at his girlfriend. It was hard to contain their emotions after the test, but they did their best to focus on the old Niqols since her teachings had the priority.

"[It can be dangerous to reach the superior checkpoint of the Blood Shield when your body isn't ready to endure its drawbacks]," Zalpa explained while gesturing to the couple to follow her. "[Still, I bet that you don't care about the risks]."

"[Everything should be fine]," Khan said in a confident tone.

Khan had been able to use the [Blood Shield] before becoming a first-level warrior. His body had improved, so the next checkpoint of the technique shouldn't cause any problem.

"[You shouldn't underestimate its power]," Zalpa continued as she proceeded to cut a thumb-sized lump of flesh from the monster with her bare fingers. "[The old ways always carry risks, but their requirements protect you. You would normally have to wait for your manipulation ability to reach the right level before approaching the next checkpoint, which would give you time to improve your body. Your situation is different, so you can't realize how much power you are ingesting]."

Zalpa knew that Yeza had unlocked the [Blood Shield] for Khan, and she was about to do the same with the next checkpoint. That would give an immense boost to his defensive power, but it would also leave him clueless about the actual cost and requirements of the technique.

"[Make sure to watch carefully]," Zalpa announced. "[The procedure never changes. You only have to apply more power and find better materials to reach higher checkpoints]."

Zalpa used her bare foot to clean a spot on the floor from the dust before placing the lump of flesh there. Then, she sat and stretched her hands to let her palms hover right above the gory item.

Mana accumulated on her palms and created an azure radiance that illuminated the lump of flesh. The blood still flowing out of the material reversed its course and started gathering in its center.

"[You must be gentle]," Zalpa described. "[Use your mana to teach the blood how to clot without breaking the flesh. Part of your energy will naturally become part of the material and empower its structure, but you need to make sure that nothing breaks during the procedure. You might ingest a flawed version of the Blood Shield otherwise]."

The flesh's edges eventually dried up, and Zalpa reached for the maimed corpse of the monster and squeezed some of its insides to make blood flow out of them. She gathered that dark liquid with her hands before slowly pouring it on the material.

"[Yeza has probably used the flesh from a Tainted animal to unlock the Blood Shield inside you]," Zalpa explained. "[Yet, the second checkpoint requires more energy, and only a stronger material would be able to contain it. I used a monster's flesh now for that exact reason, but I still need to refill it with blood and repeat the procedure until enough mana fuses with its structure]."

Zalpa did exactly as she explained. She poured blood on the chunk of flesh before gently clotting it in its center. She repeated that process methodically, without ever falling prey to hurry or impatience. Her movements were slow but firm. Liiza and Khan couldn't help but remain in a daze when they inspected her.

"[It's ready]," Zalpa eventually exclaimed. "[Come to inspect it. I don't want you to be completely clueless about its current power]."

Khan nodded before crouching in front of Zalpa. He carefully stretched his arm forward and let his sensitivity to mana gather as much information as possible while he hovered his palm above the flesh.

The chunk of flesh felt strong. Khan guessed that it was slightly above his first-grade knife in terms of mana accumulated in its insides. Zalpa had created an organic magical item in a matter of minutes, and he had been lucky enough to inspect the whole process.

"[Don't limit yourself to sense it]," Zalpa snorted. "[Touch it, savor its texture, smell, and noises. You have mixed your life with mana, so all of your senses can help you study it. Abandon your human bias]."

Khan gulped before nodding again. He began to lower his hand, but Zalpa voiced a simple reminder before he could touch the flesh. "[Be gentle, gentler than you are when you touch Lii]."

Khan mustered the entirety of his self-restraint to keep a straight face, but Liiza needed to divert her eyes to avoid showing something. Both of them had been everything but gentle during their last passionate intercourses.

The flesh's wet surface released a squelching noise when Khan's forefinger touched it. He only needed a few seconds to get used to the material's texture and gain enough confidence to place the rest of his hand there.

No blood came out of the flesh even when Khan applied some pressure. He could sense a solid core at the center of the material, and he made sure to commit its features to memory. Then, he bent forward to smell it, and the intense scent of blood filled his nostrils. Something felt different compared to the typical odor that raw meat usually had, but Khan couldn't find the exact reason behind that sensation.

Zalpa nodded in approval when she saw how serious Khan was. He even licked the chunk of flesh near the end of his inspection to add more data to his mind.

"[So, do I only need to replicate the same effects next time]?" Khan asked when he straightened his back.

"[You'll need a better core material and far more power]," Zalpa explained, "[But yes, you'll be fine as long as you create something similar to this. It doesn't matter if you fall short in terms of power and fail to reach the next checkpoint in one go. You can still stack up weaker items until you hit your goal]."

"[Though I bet you don't advise that since it would mean that my manipulation ability has yet to reach the right level]," Khan guessed.

"[That's correct]," Zalpa replied. "[Remember, you should prioritize the perfection of the clotted blood over its power. It's pointless to make a stronger material that doesn't express the Blood Shield properly. You might end up ruining everything you have built inside you with a single reckless mistake]."

Khan took those teaching to heart as he picked the lump of flesh and brought it close to his mouth. He glanced at Zalpa to check whether he could proceed, and he didn't hesitate to gulp it after she nodded.

His chest immediately felt heavy. Khan could sense the chunk of flesh reaching his belly and dispersing its nutrients in no time before the [Blood Shield] activated on its own.

The blood vessels at the center of Khan's chest clotted to create a head-sized red array. The effect expanded until it almost covered the entirety of his torso and made him sweat.

Khan felt as if his body was about to halt its functions. He couldn't force himself to remain without so much blood for too long, so he focused on his mana to suppress the technique.

The intricate array of blood vessels slowly waned as they went back to their normal functions. Khan's back arched as he took a deep breath, but he eventually bent forward to crouch on the floor. Drops of sweat fell from his forehead as his body dealt with the aftermath of [Blood Shield], but his mind soon went on the lump of foreign materials inside his chest.

Khan moved those materials across his body and confirmed that the technique didn't become harder to use after improving. Moreover, he now had enough of them to activate the [Blood Shield] in two different spots. He didn't even need to use all of them at the same time, so the drawbacks wouldn't be a problem as long as he was careful.

"[Get out of here now]," Zalda ordered in her hoarse voice. "[I've been too long with you already. I have things to prepare]."

"[Will you join the attack then?]" Liiza asked before bending toward Khan to help him stand up.

"[I will come, but I won't join the battle]," Zalda announced. "[I still can't force myself to kill Niqols who share my beliefs]."

"[I think that will be enough for my mother]," Liiza declared. "[Thank you, Zalda, for the battle and us]."

Liiza wore a bright smile that made Zalda heave a helpless sigh. Khan had an arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her closer when he saw that happy face. The couple exchanged a meaningful gaze, and Zalda felt the need to smile at that scene.

"[Zalda, can I ask you one last thing?]" Liiza said while diverting her gaze from Khan to look at the old Niqols.

"[What is it?]" Zalda asked.

Liiza lowered her head and tightened her embrace before speaking with a timid voice. "[Can you give us one more day? I don't want to give up on this peace just yet]."

Khan chuckled and began to caress Liiza's hair. The girl moved her attention back on him, but Zalda angry curses soon resounded in the basement. "[As if I would lie to Yeza just to let her horny daughter fuck a human for one more day]!"

Khan and Liiza began to laugh as they hurried toward the staircase that led to the upper floors, and their voice grew louder when another course reached their ears. "[Yes, run away before I make you spit the Blood Shield! Damned brats! I'm the best shaman of my generation. I won't let two kids use me like this]!"

Zalda continued to curse, but her voice stopped reaching Khan and Liiza when the wall that divided the two basements closed. The two exchanged a glance before exploding into another laugh and hurrying toward the first floor.

The morning was about to arrive, but the humans had adapted to the Niqols schedule in those days. The castle would be empty until a few hours before lunchtime, so the couple could run and have fun freely while hurrying back to Khan's room.

Liiza and Khan held hands as they crossed halls, corridors, and staircases. They ended up stopping many times to exchange intense kisses that led to giggles or intense gazes. Every corner of the palace felt cozy enough for an intimate break, but they grew shorter once they risked removing each other's clothes in the open.

It felt hard to keep track of what happened when they reached the room. Khan and Liiza's minds were full of fierce feelings that neither of them could suppress. The sight of the tattoo even rekindled that passion whenever the couple was about to stop.

Liiza and Khan ended up skipping a meeting for the first time that day. They didn't even eat, but neither of them cared about that. Their mad passion calmed down in the middle of the afternoon when the Niqols started preparing the usual parties, but a message reached everyone's rooms and cubes before that.

Khan and Liiza couldn't help but explode into a loud laugh when they read the message on the room's walls. Yeza had sent a general update throughout the palace where she stated that the attack would start in two days. Zalpa had listened to Liiza's request.

Chapter 215 - One Year

The atmosphere inside the palace grew even tenser after Yeza's announcement, but the Niqols knew how to deal with it. They threw a massive party the day before the departure that saw the presence of adult aliens and some soldiers. Their participation initially made things awkward, but the booze vanquished that feeling rather quickly.

Khan and Liiza didn't waste a single second of the time that Zalpa had given them. Massive problems that they couldn't solve filled their minds, but they made sure to appease them through their overflowing feelings. They didn't show their faces often, and the other couples imitated that behavior. Everyone made sure to spend a few hours together before taking care of their loved ones.

The day of the departure saw a large group amassing in the large area in front of the palace. A small army made of a hundred Niqols and few humans gathered inside the mountain and followed their superiors' orders to take their spot in the simple battle formation planned in the previous days.

The muddy valley wasn't nearby. The group would take a bit more than two weeks of constant travel to reach it on foot. They would even need to spend that time in the wild without proper knowledge of the fauna since no one had the chance to perform thorough inspections without the Aduns..

The students and recruits who had traveled with Zalpa didn't worry too much about the monsters. They had seen how easily the old Niqols had ensured that no danger ever appeared on their path, and they even had many powerful assets leading them at that time.

However, some doubts still existed in their minds, mostly due to the timing of the travel. The sunlight had theoretically entered its last phase. According to the soldiers' math, Nitis would regain its iconic constant night soon. They had calculated that it would take between two and four weeks for the sky to return dark.

The group might even witness the event during their travel. The crisis was about to end, but that didn't manage to raise morale. The issue with the Aduns had halted most hunts, meaning that Nitis was full of monsters that had been free to thrive under the sunlight for entire weeks. Some of them had probably also gone through the second round of mutations.

Khan and the others might avoid meeting monsters during the travel, but those creatures were a problem that they would eventually have to face. The battle inside the muddy valley might even attract some packs due to the massive discharge of mana that it would inevitably feature.

Nitis might require entire years to return to its past stability, especially since the rebels had decided to make their move. Many battles would follow the end of the crisis, but the soldiers couldn't wait for them to arrive. The planet's chaos would work in their favor once they regained access to the teleport.

Khan could easily understand those political matters, and he could even guess that his superiors were betting a lot on him to gain more freedom on Nitis. Still, those motives barely managed to make their way inside his mind. He would give his everything in each battle but for very different reasons.

Zalpa revealed the full extent of her expertise by shielding the army with countless potions that she had prepared in a matter of days. The group departed after that process ended. They abandoned the safety of the mountain to step into the wild.

Long and silent days followed the departure. Khan was among his friends, but none of them dared to speak for too long. The army was already quite loud on its own, so they didn't want to add noises that could waste the effects of Zalpa's potions.

The higher-ups led their underlings across the regions fearlessly. The army had a series of scouts that inspected the areas and updated Yeza constantly, so she could always find a path that would limit the number of breaks or battles.

The army's size didn't allow it to avoid monsters altogether, but those meetings led to one-sided slaughters. Even packs with more than thirty specimens were nothing more than ants in front of all the powerful soldiers in the group.

Breaks still happened, but they were rare, and they never left room for intimacy. Yeza's knowledge of Nitis' layout had allowed her to pick resting areas even before the travel, which mostly featured empty zones that offered a complete view of their surroundings. Everyone slept in the open and near their companions to ensure that no one got lost or worse.

The group crossed the environments seen during the meetings. The forest led to a small plain connected to a series of dark rivers. The vegetation began to thrive again afterward and forced the army to tread among thick woods. Mountains eventually followed before the path transformed into a plain.

The army had to change its pace and approach depending on the environment it was crossing, but the leaders took care of every decision, so the underlings only needed to imitate them. Random battles and issues with the breaks affected the schedule planned in the palace, but the two mountains containing the muddy valley appeared in the distance only a day later than expected.

The travel had taken a total of two and a half weeks. Khan needed George's reminder to recall that their first academic year was over, but neither of them had the time to think about the topic. The

sunlight illuminated Nitis even as the group settled in a spot near the two mountains. The crisis was still ongoing, so the matters concerning the Global Army felt too distant from their current situation.

"The rebels have probably already learnt about our arrival," Yeza announced when she made the army stop next to the river that led into the muddy valley. "Let's set up a camp quickly and rest. We'll take one day to remove the fatigue accumulated during the travel. The battle will follow."

The announcement made most underlings gulp, but none of them fell prey to fear. The crisis had trained them for those situations, so they quickly began to work on the encampment.

The Niqols had prepared provisions and portable tents that revealed how mana could replace technology for the most part. One of the aliens carried a backpack filled with glowing cards that made the ground raise once they touched it. A series of short triangular structures soon grew on the relatively barren shores and created an encampment capable of containing the entire army.

That scene would normally surprise the humans and many students, but everyone was too tense to pay attention to those valuable tools. Their entire focus was on the imminent battle and making the best out of the time before that.

"[I never expected us to be our greatest enemy during the crisis]," Ilman announced before gulping the booze in his cup.

"[I never expected to share drinks with you]," Azni joked. "[Nitis must have really gone crazy]."

Everyone laughed at that comment. The Niqols had obviously thrown a party after they completed their tasks, and Khan and his friends had sat in a circle to enjoy those short hours together.

The army had orders to sleep early the next day, so the students and recruits planned to enjoy that event to its fullest. Some soldiers and adult Niqols also shared that mindset and decided to get drunk or join the chants echoing among the camp.

"[I can't believe that we have been here for six months]," George chuckled as Havaa laid her head on his shoulder.

"[Right, you use years to divide the level of your instruction]," Doku commented. "[That still feels stupid]."

"[We are so different]," Helen sighed, but a warm smile appeared on her face when Vait placed a hand on her back.

"[We have all changed a lot]," Azni announced, "[Especially you and those two over there]."

Helen blushed, but she imitated the others in the circle by glancing at the couple on her left. Liiza was sitting on Khan's lap, and the two often exchanged whispers that led to cute laughs or intense stares.

Khan and Liiza noticed that the attention had moved on them, but they still exchanged a series of teases that only they could hear before turning toward their friends. Different expressions that mostly showed affection or approval unfolded in their vision and made them smile warmly.

"[I didn't change at all]," Khan stated, but his words transformed most affectionate expressions into glares. Liiza even had to cover her mouth to suppress her laugh.

"[Don't laugh]," Azni mocked. "[You are no different from him. No wonder you two get along so well]."

"[She is just jealous]," Khan joked while wrapping his arms around Liiza's waist.

"[I want you two to remember that I had to babysit your relationship when you still acted as edgy kids]," Azni sneered, and everyone laughed again, Khan and Liiza included.

"[Though they fooled all of us]," George admitted, "[Except Ilman, I guess]."

"[My intuition is unmatched on Nitis]," Ilman proudly announced.

"[I wouldn't put it like that]," Khan rolled his eyes.

"[And I was lucky enough to witness everything]," George cleared his throat before emptying his cup.

Laughs resounded among the group again. Teases, jokes, and stories about their memories on Nitis followed as the group tried to make the best out of that last party. Other Niqols and humans joined and left as the hours passed, but the celebrations eventually started to end.

"[Well]," Ilman exclaimed before standing up and spreading his arms, "[I'll try to end the celebrations like a true Niqols. Wish me good luck]!"

Everyone saluted Ilman, but Helen and Veronica turned toward the boys to shoot questioning glances as soon as the Niqols left.

"[He will try to find a girl tonight]," Khan explained.

"[Did he finally get over Liiza]?" Azni asked as curiosity filled her eyes.

"[Not really]," Doku revealed. "[He is only trying to experience a normal life to find his true self]."

"[And he doesn't want to die as a virgi-]," George began to say, but Havaa slapped the back of his head before he could finish his line.

"[How come you three know so much about him]?" Azni asked. "[We have barely spent time together in the past days]."

"[Men only need a gesture to convey entire speech-]," George exclaimed, but Havaa slapped the back of his head again to interrupt him.

"[What was this for]?!" George asked in surprise.

"[I don't need a reason to slap you]," Havaa proudly declared before continuing to speak in a softer tone, "[And it's getting late]."

George revealed a blank expression in front of Havaa's meaningful gaze, but he quickly snapped back to reality. He threw away his cup and wrapped an arm around the girl's waist to lift her as he jumped to his feet.

Havaa giggled as she wrapped her arms around George's neck and stretched her legs to make him put an arm under her knees. He rotated on himself to tease his girlfriend before stopping to face his companions and voice odd salutes. "[I have to take care of my woman's needs]!"

Havaa slapped the back of George's head again, but the latter didn't care. He started to laugh as he turned and carried her back to his tent.

"[I'm surprised Havaa lets him talk at all]," Azni commented when the couple disappeared among the tents.

"[He is an idiot]," Doku chuckled.

"[He is a good idiot]," Khan corrected before laughing with his friend.

"[We'll also take our leave]," Helen announced as she and Vait stood up elegantly. "[I don't know if you'll see us tomorrow, but we will be at your side during the battle]."

A round of salutes resounded again, and others soon imitated the couple. It didn't take long before the circle only had Khan, Azni, Doku, and Liiza left.

"[I won't even ask if you'll come out of your tent tomorrow]," Azni said in a helpless tone, and Khan and Liiza shook their heads to confirm her guess.

"[We won't get out either]," Doku announced. "[I bet that the entire encampment will remain empty tomorrow. The battle is worrying everyone]."

The comment made a sad aura fall among the four, but they fought it by relying on their partners. Both couples silently stood up and exchanged simple waves of their hands before separating to reach their respective tents. They didn't need to say anything since their friendship was already beyond those things.

The following day went as Doku had predicted. The camp was almost empty, and no one celebrated or roamed among the tents. Everyone dealt with their anxiety by training, sleeping, or focusing on intimate intercourses. The only interruption in that free time was a message that appeared inside each habitation and described the battle plan.

"[Your mother is definitely spying on us]," Khan groaned as he straightened his back to sit cross-legged on the ground and study the battle plan.

"[At least she is choosing to interrupt our sleep instead of the other stuff]," Liiza joked in a sleepy voice before adjusting her position to lay her head on Khan's lap.

Khan only needed to place his cube on the ground to take control of the battle plan and inspect it from different points of view. He could even read the names that would make each platoon. He was on the sidelines while Liiza would remain behind to focus on her spell.

"[Don't you dare to get caught]," Liiza stated after studying the battle plan. "[I won't hesitate to leave my position otherwise]."

"[Are you trying to encourage me by using your safety in a threat]?" Khan asked as he tinkered with the azure drawing on the ground.

"[I know how your brain works]," Liiza proudly declared, and Khan couldn't help but divert his gaze from the battle plan to focus on her.

Khan caressed Liiza hair, and she wore a smile as she took one of his crossed legs in her arms as if it were a pillow. She was the epitome of cuteness in that position, and Khan couldn't help but express his feelings.

"[Did I already tell you that I love you]?" Khan whispered.

Liiza opened her eyes and turned to glance at Khan. His loving azure eyes appeared in her vision and made her emotions burst.

"[Yes, but never stop saying it]," Liiza responded before placing a hand on his abdomen. "[Get down so that I can also tell you how I feel]."

The couple enjoyed that loving moment as long as possible, but the morning eventually arrived. Humans and Niqols left their tents and saluted those who would remain in the camp before starting their march toward the two mountains nearby.

Zalpa did her best to hide the army's presence, but her help ended there. She only made sure to nod at Khan and Liiza before returning to the camp and preparing a medical bay. She knew that many would need it.

Chapter 216 - Traps

The two mountains stood in the middle of a plain featuring many barren spots, especially near the shores of its small rivers. A thriving flora would normally fill that area, but the constant sunlight in the past two months had killed many of those plants. Dark-green grass still grew, but its appearance was far from healthy. The vegetation there couldn't survive the massive change.

Only the areas shielded by the huge mountains still had flourishing plants. Those tall and large structures were barren in the zones exposed to the sunlight and full of life in the others. The valley had barely gone through any changes during the crisis since only a few sunrays managed to reach its depths.

The army only needed one hour to reach the mountains, but they slowed down their pace on purpose to make sure that the scouts could arrive in their positions. Yeza made the group stop whenever she received an update on the valley, but her face didn't show any satisfaction in those moments.

The entrance of the valley was vast. The two mountains grew closer on the other side, which made it the harsher path to tread. The ground grew muddy as the group stepped on the shadows created by the two tall structures and began their slow advance into the enemy territory..

Utter silence disrupted only by the noises of the river and the faint winds filled the area. The march of the army added squelching noises due to the many feet digging into the mud. Only Khan, Ilman, and a few experts who practiced fitting techniques could avoid causing those disturbances, but their efforts were useless among their loud companions.

The army wasn't trying to sneak up on the rebels. Yeza had announced how they had probably already learnt of their arrival. That had even become a certainty now that her group had entered the valley. The careful approach had the sole purpose of avoiding eventual traps on the path.

Rare trees began to appear on the shores of the rivers as the army reached deeper parts of the valley. Annoying bushes also began to grow as the air dampened. The temperature fell, but it didn't stop the weaker underlings from sweating. Anxiety built up, but everyone showed firm resolve during the march.

The army had yet to assemble in a battle formation. The higher-ups led the underlings across the valley while keeping their senses alert. Yeza and other experts in the sensitivity field could read the

mana in the environment like a book and uncover every secret that it hid. Their sole presence helped the young humans and Niqols endure their tension and filled their minds with confidence.

The river narrowed together with the valley, but the area remained quite vast. The annoying mud was the only issue capable of hindering the army, but that applied only to the younger troops. The higher-ups had ways to deal with that challenging terrain.

Multiple azure lights suddenly flashed among the army, and everyone immediately stopped. That was one of the signals planned before departing from the encampment. Yeza would use the cubes in the Niqols robes to convey orders through a simple code. The devices had blinked twice, which meant that Yeza had ordered a complete halt of the march.

Khan peeked past the higher-ups in front of him to inspect the situation. Liiza and his friends were near him, and they didn't hesitate to fall prey to the same curiosity.

Yeza and a few Niqols took careful steps as they separated from the rest of the army. They advanced for twenty meters before stopping and stretching their arms forward. Long seconds filled with deafening silence followed that gesture, but a series of rumbling noises soon resounded throughout the valley.

The ground shook for a few seconds before a series of explosions unfolded at some distance from Yeza's group. Mud and dirt flew in every direction as a long patch of the valley's floor detonated and left behind a line of red flames that hindered the army's path.

The explosions didn't manage to hurt Yeza's group, and the experts could soon move forward to deal with the flames. That fire seemed to have magical properties since it continued to burn on the wet ground without any fuel, but the Niqols dealt with it through similar methods. They tinkered with the mana along the fiery line until they deactivated the trap.

The fire quickly vanished, and Yeza's group could reunite with the army. The cubes flashed a single time, and the march resumed.

Khan and the other underlings couldn't help but stare at the large patch of charred ground when they crossed it. The area affected by the trap stretched until the other side of the valley and was six meters large. It would have killed many rows of troops if they were to activate it with their feet.

The trap announced the arrival into the area affected by the rebels, and the army didn't have to wait long before meeting more traces of their presence. Yeza ended up stopping the march multiple times since she found more defensive mechanisms that required her attention.

The army could witness more explosions, rows of arrows covered in venom shooting out of the rocky walls in the distance, deep holes filled with spears, and a strange patch of mud that acted like quicksand. Those traps appeared simple, but all of them could kill many experienced warriors if caught by surprise. They were deadly and placed in intelligent locations, but nothing seemed able to escape Yeza's senses.

The situation didn't improve when the castle finally appeared on the path. Its form was almost identical to the safe structure that the army had used before the travel, but moss covered a vast part of its surfaces. Moreover, the red symbols glowing on its black metal announced how the rebels had already altered some functions.

Yeza forced the group to stop again. A deep frown appeared on her face as her eyes darted among the environment. Khan and those with decent sensitivity to mana could immediately understand the nature of the issue. The mana in the area all around the castle was a mess that featured different behaviors and dark spots.

Even Yeza struggled to understand how many traps the area had. The rebels couldn't take control of all those defenses, so they had placed new ones on top of them to create a messy and chaotic array that even the best experts would find hard to decipher.

Yeza could open a path, but the time required by the task was immense. She would need an entire week only to gain a general idea of the array of traps before even starting its removal.

The cubes among the army blinked four times and made those who had those devices pick them to hear the mental message. Yeza's voice resounded in their minds and compelled them to retreat by a few meters.

Khan and the other Niqols conveyed those others to the recruits before the army began the partial retreat. Only Yeza and Captain Erbair remained behind, but the soldier joined the group after a short conversation with the Niqols.

"Crouch and cover your eyes!" Captain Erbair shouted after the army stopped and glanced at Yeza in the distance. "She is about to trigger all traps at once!"

The explanation made the group search for a better spot. They approached one of the sides of the valley and created a line alongside its rocky wall before crouching. Khan and Liiza were using a small corner to hide their figures, but they both peeked at Yeza to inspect her actions.

Yeza checked that the entire army had reached a safe spot before turning toward the palace. She closed her eyes and stretched her arm forward as mana flowed toward the tip of her fingers. She seemed about to cast a spell, but the azure shades of her energy soon vanished.

"[My mother's element deals with feelings]," Liiza whispered. "[She can give them form and alter them. Most Niqols consider her a rare genius since her element gives her a natural advantage in our techniques]."

"[Is her element to blame for her lasciviousness]?" Khan asked.

"[Khan, we are our element]," Liiza explained without moving her eyes from her mother. "[Our mana takes the shape of our character and enhances its features. You are one of the few exceptions to this truth, but that won't last. Your element will eventually become a core part of your personality]."

The silence that followed those words worried Liiza since she knew how delicate the topic was with Khan. She wanted to turn to inspect him, but he promptly placed a hand on her head to reassure her. The couple could continue to focus on Yeza, but that didn't last long.

A tremor ran throughout the air around the castle. The event had been too evident to miss, but it had also been relatively invisible. The area had blurred for a mere second before returning to its normal state.

Nothing seemed to happen, but Yeza jumped back before continuing to retreat without moving her gaze away from the castle. An earthquake soon arrived as the ground around the structure lit up to show its azure and red shades. Multiple traps activated at the same time and made it impossible to keep track of the scene.

Explosions destroyed a large chunk of the muddy area and set it aflame, but an acid liquid soon came out of the ground and put an end to the fire. Spears and arrows shot from different spots of the rocky walls, but they also melted when they hit the toxic swamp that now surrounded the castle.

The temperature then rose and evaporated the toxic liquid, transforming it into a green cloud that started to spread in the valley. Yeza didn't hesitate to glance at some adult Niqols, and they immediately left their safe spot to face the incoming threat.

The three Niqols who had left their position stepped forward before pulling their arms back. Their palms opened as they started to push an invisible wall that made the veins on their foreheads bulge.

The scene felt strange. The Niqols were clearly struggling to push something forward, but they weren't touching anything. However, winds suddenly blew from behind the army and made the toxic cloud flow toward the other end of the valley. It turned out that the three experts had taken control of the air in the environment.

More traps detonated while the Niqols dealt with the toxic cloud. Boulders fell and rolled around the castle, holes opened to reveal sharp weapons, and the water in the river even surged to transform into a snake-like shape that slammed its head on the area.

Each trap made the walls or the ground shake. Many Niqols and humans had to glance above them to make sure that no boulder fell on their heads. Luckily for them, their area seemed stable enough to survive that mess.

The valley took a whole minute to return silent and even more to disperse the dirt and smoke accumulated around the castle. The area never became completely clear, but Yeza made the cubes flash once when only a thin fog separated the army from their target.

Liiza and Khan exchanged a long kiss before separating. The battle plan saw them taking their position into the formation once the castle was in sight, and their roles were far different. Liiza had a supportive role due to the vast area that her spell could cover, while Khan had to deal with the annoying assets that the rebels wanted to protect.

"[Leave the strongest to me]," Khan said when a familiar figure approached his side.

"[Only if you reach them first]," Ilman laughed, and the two exchanged a resolute nod.

More Niqols and two soldiers gathered around Khan and Ilman. Their group had the least troops compared to the other teams, but that felt natural when their role was so specific. They never had to join the fray unless they felt certain about taking out a troublesome asset. They were assassins who had to thrive in the chaos of the battlefield.

Chapter 217 - Explosions

The army assembled into a battle formation as it advanced through the thin pale-grey fog. Khan, Ilman, and a few others were on the left side of the main group and let the latter approach the castle before them.

The fog slightly hindered everyone's vision, but it never fully hid the area. The castle remained visible, even if only in the form of a vague shadow that featured no details.

Khan drew his knife and wielded it firmly with his left hand. His expression grew colder as he followed the two soldiers and the adult Niqols in charge of his team. He was right between those leaders and the other students, and Ilman made sure to remain near his side.

The two soldiers were strong and relatively young, but they didn't gain any battle merit throughout their lives. Casper, the bald, short man with an unkempt beard, had two stars on his right shoulder and none on his left. Instead, Lorna, the slender woman with short blonde hair and dark eyes, was a second-level warrior and a first-level mage.

Their level was enough to award them with a promotion, but they remained simple soldiers.. Khan still didn't understand how the ranks in the army worked, and Nitis' state had never given him a chance or the time to gather intel about that topic. Yet, he could guess that the issue had something to do with their background or actual achievements.

As for the adult Niqols, Khan had never managed to learn her name. She was one of the aliens he had met in the palace, but they had never interacted due to their different position and duties. Still, Khan could sense how her power seemed to be slightly below Casper.

The students behind Khan were Niqols specialized in quick attacks, but their power felt underwhelming. Except for Ilman, none of them would have the chance to kill Niqols with power similar to first-level warriors or above unless they worked together or found a lucky opening.

Many thoughts about the situation and the power of the team tried to rise inside Khan, but he silenced them. He couldn't lose his concentration. He had to give his everything on his sprints and maximize the number of perfect executions of the Divine Reaper.

The many traps triggered by Yeza had turned the area into a mess of holes, fuming patches, dangerous puddles, and broken weapons. The fog also carried an acrid smell that the three Niqols didn't manage to remove when they blew the toxic cloud away. The odor forced many eyes to release tears, but only when it came to weak students.

Khan had to pay attention to his path, but his sensitivity to mana helped in the task. Luckily for him, each dangerous or annoying spot resulted from traps, which left behind mana that he could sense. His eyes were partially unreliable when it came to distant areas, but he could compensate for that easily.

The army trod through the fog and approached the castle slowly. The air didn't move, and the river had stopped flowing in that area, so the battlefield was utterly silent except for the few steps heavy enough to echo among the rocky walls. Niqols and humans also voiced surprised gasps whenever they walked on some broken weapons or puddles, but those noises vanished quickly among the fog.

A scarlet light suddenly flashed on the castle before vanishing among the fog. A whooshing noise followed and grew louder until Yeza's deafening shout resounded throughout the battlefield.
"[Shield]!"

Yeza's order made a few Niqols jump next to her and point their hands toward the ground. A wall grew in front of the central team before an explosion resounded on the other side. The structure partially broke as flames spread on its surface, but the aliens dispersed them by making that chunk of terrain fold on itself.

"[Charge]!" Yeza shouted once the path ahead reappeared, and everyone started to run.

Battle cries echoed on the battlefield as the army dropped its silent approach. The Niqols and humans didn't abandon their position, but each team advanced far faster than before.

Three lights flashed on the castle, and the whooshing noise returned, but multiple sources caused it now. The fog didn't allow the army to understand the trajectory of those projectiles, so each team leader gave different orders.

"[Shield]!" Yeza shouted, and a thick wall rose from the ground. Her team hid behind it and waited for the explosion to unfold.

"[Halt]!" The Niqols in charge of the backlines ordered to make everyone stop.

"[Take cover]!" Lieutenant Kintea, who was in charge of the team on the right, shouted, and those behind him jumped on the rocky wall to hide.

"[Disperse]!" Lorna ordered, and her team members sprinted in different directions that still brought them closer to the castle.

Khan went on his left and made sure to keep the rocky wall close. The whooshing noise grew louder, but it crossed his position and culminated in an explosion behind him.

Two more explosions resounded on the battlefield. One of them happened on the wall in front of Yeza's team and the other on the area that divided her from Lieutenant Kintea's group.

Flames filled those three spots, but the wall fell forward to fuse with the ground and suppress them. As for the two other fiery areas, the army let them go to resume the charge forward.

It didn't take much for the red flashes to reappear. The whooshing noises returned, but a series of painful cries resounded after the detonations happened. Khan had sensed another projectile crossing his position before exploding somewhere behind him and taking the lives of two students who had decided to run together.

Those scenes repeated themselves in a relentless cycle that eventually added scarlet shades to the fog due to the many fires that the army left behind. A scorching smell filled the area, but no one noticed that change with the tension that filled their minds.

Painful cries, orders, and shouts mixed with the mess that had descended on the battlefield. Everyone tried to remain close to their team leaders in the hope of increasing their chances of survival, but Khan's group was an exception.

Khan ran as if his life depended on it. He tried his best to sense the arrival of those exploding projectiles whenever the whooshing noise reached his ears, but he failed to feel them until they came close to his position.

Khan changed direction whenever the red lights flashed on the castle. Those devices mostly focused on Yeza's team since it contained the highest number of troops, but projectiles still flew on the other groups. They were so fast that Khan never managed to understand their form, but he didn't care too much about that. He had a goal shared by all his companions.

In theory, a frontal attack against such a big castle would have little chance to succeed. The structure had many defenses in places, and it could even rely on the rebels in its insides.

However, the army's firepower wasn't weak. Yeza, Captain Erbair, and even the weaker first-level mages could unleash an overwhelming power with their spells. Moreover, the attackers' main goal was to bring their leaders close enough to affect the structure's functions.

The rebels practiced arts belonging to the same time as the castle, but Niqols had adapted its functions to the new ways throughout the years. Yeza and other experts in the manipulation of mana had a high chance to take control of the various symbols now tainted with red shades.

The battle would be over once the castle fell, and the rebels knew that far too well. They assaulted the army with their defenses, but their enemies also knew what they had to face. The projectiles managed to kill a few Niqols who didn't stick to their leaders' orders, but their group mostly survived that barrage of attacks.

Khan felt lost from time to time. He often remained alone among the fog only to run into some of his companions whenever the castle launched another attack. The structure slowly grew bigger in his eyes as he continued to advance. The army was about to reach their destination, but the rebels didn't hesitate to give their everything during that last part.

The usual red lights flashed on the castle, but they didn't stop at that time. Khan almost stopped running when he saw that the red radiance continued to shine for nearly half a minute.

Panic immediately filled his mind. Khan sprinted forward without bothering to change direction. He rushed his way toward the side of the castle as multiple whooshing noises filled the fog. His senses soon became able to locate many threats, but that only made him accelerate.

Only a few seconds had to pass before explosions began to fill the battlefield. The orders shouted by the leaders mixed with painful cries and rumbling noises. The entire valley shook as the temperature rose due to the appearance of countless fires. The foggy area transformed into a red hell that didn't seem to know the end to its chaos.

Khan sensed projectiles flying above his head and exploding behind him until one of them exploded relatively close to his position and flung him away with the heatwave that it created. He flew for a few meters, but he didn't lose control of his movements.

After the landing, Khan rolled on the ground before jumping to his feet and resuming his sprint. The explosions finally ended, but he couldn't see much. A single drop of sweat fell from his forehead as he tried to understand the true nature of the shadows that the flickering flames created among the fog, but he failed in the task.

A ringing noise had taken control of his right ear after the close explosion, but that issue didn't last long. It ended when Khan realized that the shadowy shape of the castle had spread high above him. He had basically reached his destination, but a series of dark figures suddenly appeared on his path.

Khan immediately sprinted to the side, but he didn't forget to keep track of those figures. The latter advanced for a few steps before amassing in front of the castle. In Khan's vision, they were nothing more than a vague black area in the middle of the scarlet fog, but his sensitivity to mana allowed him to recognize them as Niqols.

Yeza's voice resounded throughout the fog as another mass of dark figures advanced toward the castle. "[This castle belongs to true Niqols. Traitors who can't respect a global crisis aren't worthy of what our ancestors left behind]!"

"[You and your generation have ripped away from our species what made us Niqols]!" A rough voice resounded from the black figures near the castle. "[Our ancestors built these structures for us. You can ask the humans for new ones since you like them so much]."

Khan stopped retreating and half-crouched. Those words told him how the situation had progressed. The rebels had finally left the castle to prevent the army from reaching the red symbols. The battle was about to enter its critical phase, so he had to remain nearby to fulfill his role.

Winds suddenly blew toward the castle. Khan's hair had gotten quite long during his time on Nitis. It reached the halfway mark of his neck, so it fluttered as those gales pushed the fog behind the structure and cleared the battlefield.

Khan finally became able to see the many fires and the two armies. Many had survived the explosive barrage. It even seemed that Yeza's group was better off compared to the other teams.

Ilman was near Yeza's group, while Casper and Lorna stood close to the rocky wall. The adult Niqols was right behind Khan, while the other Niqols were farther away from the castle.

Khan had ended up on the frontlines of his team, but he didn't have the chance to think about his position since a series of presences became clear in his mind as the fog continued to leave the area.

A small team of Niqols appeared on his side of the battlefield. Khan diverted his attention from the two armies and turned to see a group of aliens that had tried to use the fog to hide their presence. It seemed that his enemies also had a team of assassins ready to take out troublesome targets.

Chapter 218 - Fast Blows

An awkward exchange of gazes happened. Khan was alone on the left side of the battlefield, with the army of rebels to his right and the enemy team of assassins ahead. His companions were behind him in different locations, so he ended up staring at the Niqols who had tried to use the fog to hide.

The enemy group of assassins only had five members, and they were all adults. He sensed that the man in the lead was at the same level as Casper, but the others were weaker, which meant that he could face them. Yet, he remained still since the dispersion of the fog had made the battlefield end in a silent stalemate.

Khan tightened his grip on the knife as he waited for something to happen. He didn't dare to be the first to move when both sides had warriors far stronger than him. It was also against his role to attract attention to him.

His opponents seemed to share his intentions. The enemy Niqols remained still as they inspected the rest of Khan's team. It wasn't hard to notice the other assassins, especially since they had recognized the imminent threat.. The two groups were sharing the same part of the battlefield, and Khan's side had the numerical advantage. However, his companions were quite distant, except for the adult alien.

The silence felt deafening, but a series of lights soon shone on the battlefield and attracted everyone's attention. Lieutenant Kintea was in charge of the team featuring a series of experts with ranged abilities, and he didn't hesitate to give a silent order during that stalemate.

A fireball, a fiery serpent, a series of arrows, a glowing spear, a sharp gale, and a blue mass flew above Yeza's group and crashed on the enemy army. Only a few rebels managed to react to the wave of destruction unleashed by those attacks. Many died in a single exchange, and the event marked the beginning of an angry charge accompanied by battle cries.

The assassins in the rebel army moved their attention away from the two armies when they saw that the battle had started, but a peculiar scene soon unfolded in their vision. They saw their leader pushing Khan's arm away with a bloody line spilling out of his cheek.

Khan had exploited that distraction to attack the man in charge of the enemy team, but the latter had managed to react to his abrupt offensive. He had lunged his knife forward to aim for the Niqols' head, but the alien had managed to raise his arm and deviate the blow. The weapon only managed to graze his cheek, where it left a long cut that almost reached the ear.

The Niqols was still surprised, and his balance wasn't ideal, so Khan decided to press on. He twisted his wrist to slash his blade at the alien's forearm, but the latter reacted at an unfathomable speed.

Time seemed to slow down in Khan's eyes. His knife glowed with an azure light as it approached the alien's forearm pushing his wrist, but the Niqols also attacked. The fingers of his left hand curved and released mana that took the shape of long claws as he swung them toward Khan's waist.

Khan didn't have time to think. He had to trust the instincts developed throughout his battle to decide how to deal with that situation. He could give up on his attack and retreat, but he opted for another path.

The Niqols' attack was faster. The glowing claws traced an ascending slash that aimed to rip Khan's entire torso to shred, but they found themselves unable to rise after they landed on his side. The alien's eyes widened as he cut part of the robe and uncovered the array of clotted blood vessels that had stopped his technique from digging into Khan's skin.

The glowing claws began to slide across the patch of abdomen protected by the [Blood Shield]. They left superficial cuts that didn't release any blood as they tried to reach the part of the skin not affected by the defensive technique, but they stopped moving when a sharp pain spread in the Niqols' mind.

Khan had continued his attack after deploying the [Blood Shield]. He had twisted his wrist to make his knife fall on the alien's forearm, which severed it with a clean cut. The Niqols couldn't help but stop his offensive, and Khan used that chance to run toward the other enemy assassins.

The Niqols shouted in anger when he saw Khan running away, but he couldn't follow after him since another opponent arrived. The adult alien in Khan's team had charged ahead and had decided to take care of that injured enemy.

Khan felt off after deactivating the [Blood Shield]. He gritted his teeth as his mind grew lighter and his heart transformed into a hammer that attacked his rib cage. The second checkpoint of the Niqols' technique was a bit too much to endure at his current level, but he could continue to run after using it, so he didn't mind those side effects.

Khan didn't fail to understand what had actually happened. He realized how impressive his previous feat had been. He had exchanged blows with a Niqols who felt as strong as Casper, a second-level warrior, and he had won.

The power of the [Blood Shield] was incredible, and his clever use of the surprise effect had allowed him to leave a severe injury on his opponent. Khan didn't only attack while the two armies distracted everyone. He had also used the seconds of disbelief experienced by the strong Niqols to complete his attack.

Khan also knew that the exchange had been quite lucky. The Niqols' power had even left him speechless since the former had managed to react to his fast surprise attack. It was clear that he couldn't stand his ground in that battle, so he had used the first opportunity he found to move toward other opponents.

The rest of the enemy assassins felt frightened in front of the scene. Khan had won the exchange of blows with their team leader, and he was running toward them now. Yet, they didn't have the chance to escape since he was faster than them.

The first Niqols to appear on Khan's path was a woman who mustered the entirety of her courage to face him directly. Pale-red blood vessels became visible on her neck as she charged ahead to swing her hands at her opponent. She tried to interrupt Khan's momentum, and she partially succeeded, even if most of her feat came from his state.

Khan was still dealing with the drawbacks of the [Blood Shield] when he saw the woman stepping forward. Her hands were blades ready to behead him, so he ducked to slash his knife at her side. He failed to perform the Divine Reaper correctly, but a deep cut opened on his opponent's waist anyway.

Khan's knee slid on the ground before he jumped back to his feet. The quick exchange had cleared part of his dizziness and had made him ready for his next opponent.

A male Niqols had leaped toward him after seeing his glide. It was hard to keep track of Khan's movements even if the other assassins were at his same level, but the previous exchange had forced him to slow down. The alien didn't miss that opportunity and raised his knee to deliver a strong blow aimed at Khan's chest.

The Niqols timing had been exceptional, but he didn't expect Khan's martial art to be so flexible. The latter stomped his right foot on the ground and rotated on himself before going airborne. His left leg helped give more power to the mid-air spin and allowed him to fly over the alien's attack.

Everything had happened in less than a second. Khan spun above the Niqols' raised knee before delivering a powerful kick to his face. The alien's vision went dark as the attack made him fly to the left.

The last two Niqols approached Khan at the same time before he could touch the ground. The woman among the two was wielding a short spearhead that she didn't hesitate to lunge forward. Instead, the male alien deployed a variant of the palm strikes that saw him placing a hand on top of the other and thrusting them forward.

The aliens' timing had been good again. Their attacks would land on Khan before he could touch the ground. The situation seemed to force him to rely on the [Blood Shield] again, but he didn't know its effectiveness against the palm strike.

Khan quickly decided that avoiding the palm strike had the priority. The [Blood Shield] appeared on his right palm as he stretched his hand to grab the spearhead and pull. The woman's stance was firm, so she remained in her spot as Khan used her to flung himself forward.

The two Niqols followed Khan with their eyes as they saw him flying past them to land behind the woman. The latter turned, but the sharp tip of the glowing knife immediately filled her vision before it made it go dark.

The man tried to deploy his palm strike while Khan was busy drawing the knife out of the woman's head, but a foot suddenly appeared on his face and forced him to duck. The Niqols tried to continue his attack by aiming at Khan's unprotected groin, but his leg descended in no time and hit his opponent at the center of his forehead.

Khan couldn't muster much strength from his stance, so the Niqols only felt intense dizziness spreading throughout his mind when he slammed on the ground. Still, he didn't recover fast enough to dodge Khan's next attack. The glowing knife dug a hole in his head and killed him on the spot.

Khan opened and closed his right hand to disperse the tense feeling that had filled it after activating the [Blood Shield]. He turned to see the state of the other assassins, and he was pleased to see that his companions had taken care of them.

Casper, Lorna, Ilman, and adult Niqols, and the other surviving students in his team had gathered behind him, but they didn't hide their surprise in front of his battle prowess. The humans had learnt that Khan had become a first-level warrior, but they didn't expect him to be so strong right after that breakthrough.

Khan didn't waste time dealing with those stares. He gazed at the battlefield and noticed how chaotic the situation had become after only mere minutes. The two armies had fused to create a messy battlefield that featured multiple smaller fights.

Many died every time Khan blinked. The battlefield was merciless, especially to those who happened to suffer from the reckless attacks of the leaders. Finding openings among that mess would be challenging, but Khan was ready to give his everything to reduce the number of losses that his side had to suffer.

Chapter 219 - Battlefield

Khan had to admit that he had underestimated the battlefield. He had been in messy battles between Istrone and Nitis, but he had never seen something so massive and chaotic.

The two armies had clashed in the area right in front of the castle, and Lieutenant Kintea's team had to join the main group since the situation didn't leave openings for ranged attacks. Almost two hundred Niqols and humans were fighting in a relatively small battlefield, creating a crowded and deadly environment that Khan didn't know how to approach.

Each path had a battle. Spells and attacks powered by mana flew everywhere and often traveled for a few meters before reaching a target. Khan even witnessed instances of friendly fire, which were inevitable considering how crowded the area was.

The rest of his group shared that hesitation. Their task was to remove troublesome targets, but they didn't know how to approach the battlefield. The weaker Niqols in the team had initially believed that their role would have made them safer than those in the frontlines. However, the reality of the situation soon became evident. That large battle had no safe areas..

Khan tried to inspect everything calmly, but the pressure he felt intensified with each second that he spent standing still. His eyes darted among the battlefield in a desperate attempt to find a safe path, but he only saw chaos in his vision.

Moreover, each area had his friends or acquaintances, and he often saw some of them falling under the enemy offensive. Death was the true ruler of the battlefield, and it could arrive randomly.

Khan eventually noticed a peculiar scene. A group of young Niqols had surrounded an adult alien who could withstand their blows due to the sheer thickness of his skin. It was clear that he was empowering his natural defenses with his mana, but that wasn't everything. The man was also relatively nimble and could use his fingers to tear a path among his enemies.

The young Niqols couldn't do anything in that situation. At times, their palms managed to land on their opponent, but those attacks didn't lead to any result. The man endured everything and used those openings to sever what his fingers could reach. He traced lines of blood in the air whenever he swung his hands.

That battle was relatively close to the edges of the battlefield. Khan only needed to cross a few Niqols entangled in other fights to reach that position. That would leave him among the mess, but he didn't care. Khan couldn't remain on the sidelines anymore. He preferred to be in danger rather than watch the aliens who had parted and fought with him dying while he didn't move a single step.

Khan shot ahead without warning his companions. The first battle on his path featured two young Niqols dodging each other's techniques, but one of them lost her head as soon as he crossed that position.

The second battle had three Niqols and a soldier. They appeared equally matched, but Khan planned to change that. One of the two enemy aliens seemed as strong as a second-level warrior, but the chaos of the battlefield didn't allow him to see the shadow approaching him from behind.

Khan prepared himself to slash the back of the man's knees, but the latter suddenly dodged to his right to jump away from the path of a fireball that was flying toward him. Khan ended up in the spell's trajectory during a slow phase of his sprint since he had started his attack, so he couldn't avoid the fast projectile.

The [Blood Shield] covered Khan's arms and torso as he used the instant before the impact to protect his head. The fireball hit his crossed forearms and filled him with a scorching sensation before flinging him away.

Khan flew until he hit an adult Niqols behind him. The latter didn't see him since she was busy dealing with another alien, and the impact disrupted her momentum, giving a chance to her opponent to inflict a deadly injury.

Khan's sleeves were on fire, but he tore the burning parts away as soon as he landed on the ground. Then, he rolled to his left and jumped to his feet before inspecting the scene. A woman was lying

lifelessly on the uneven terrain. A puddle of pale-red blood expanded from her throat, and a slender male alien stood next to her.

The panic caused by the sudden situation made Khan raise his knife as soon as he saw the bloody dark sword wielded by the Niqols. His senses were deafening him. The mana in the area forced his mind to absorb countless pieces of information that only intensified his confusion and prevented him from realizing whether the swordsman was a foe.

The Niqols nodded before performing an abrupt dodge to his right that partially avoided the attack launched by a rebel behind him. Khan saw blood filling the air behind the alien's left shoulder. His ally had managed to avoid a deadly blow aimed at his neck.

Khan regained his concentration and prepared himself to help his ally, but his mind suddenly sensed a dangerous mass of mana approaching him from behind. He instinctively jumped to his left and saw an ethereal yellow spear crossing his previous position before ending at the center of his ally's chest.

The man had been too caught in his new opponent to notice the spell. His eyes widened when the attack pierced his chest and continued to fly forward, stabbing the raised right arm of the woman behind him.

Khan shot ahead and reached the woman in an instant. The latter had launched an attack to the ethereal spear to shatter it, so she could only jump back when she noticed the shadow approaching her at an insane speed. Yet, Khan leaped after her and lunged his weapon forward. Pale blood vessels started to appear on the Niqols' face, but the glowing knife managed to stab the upper part of her face before the technique could protect her.

Khan fell on the woman's corpse, but he promptly jumped back to avoid ending inside the battle in front of him. His ally and his opponent were lying lifelessly on puddles of pale-red blood. He didn't even have the time to understand their level, but that didn't matter anymore now that they were dead.

The scene tried to fill Khan's mind with thoughts, but the chaos of the battlefield suppressed them. His sensitivity to mana made him hear a concert played by the waves of energy flying around him.

Khan found it impossible to think among those deafening sensations. They almost made him unable to move due to the pressure that accompanied them. Still, his body acted as soon as one of them became too close to his position.

A Niqols had approached Khan when she saw that he was standing still among the battlefield. Her sharp fingers had descended as soon as she reached his position, but he stepped forward to avoid the attack.

The woman tried to wave her hands after Khan, but a foot suddenly landed on her nose and made her fly backward. Khan sprinted toward his opponent to finish her as soon as she landed on the ground. However, another ethereal spear flew in his direction and threatened to hit his chest.

Khan crouched and slid on the ground. He had reacted so quickly that the woman had ended up falling on him. The event interrupted his momentum and trapped him, but he quickly pushed his opponent away.

The woman began to roll at his side, but she immediately pointed her palm and knees on the ground to stop herself. Her back was facing Khan, but she didn't hesitate to wave her free hand blindly behind her.

Khan noticed the attack as soon as he tried to straighten his back. Sharp fingers were flying toward his face and forced him to bend to his left to dodge them. The woman's timing had been perfect, so her nails managed to dig two cuts that connected his right eye to his ear.

The woman tried to push herself toward Khan after her attack failed to inflict serious injuries, but the latter promptly grabbed her arm and pulled. Meanwhile, his right leg rose and prepared itself to discharge an attack as soon as the opponent arrived.

The Niqols covered her face with her free arm as soon as she saw Khan's foot flying toward her. That simple protection didn't prevent her vision from growing blurred, and her opponent didn't let her go either.

Khan pulled the woman and slammed his foot on her again. A cracking noise eventually reached his ears as her forearm broke and opened the path for a direct attack. The Niqols tried to free herself, but Khan's grip was firm, and his offensive relentless. He was basically sitting on the ground, so he couldn't muster much strength, but he compensated by kicking his opponent's face until it transformed into a gory mess.

Khan felt the instinct to lie down after letting go of the woman, but he felt utter fear when he inspected the battlefield from his position. He was sitting among attacks that flew through the air and Niqols struggling to kill each other. He would get stomped if he dared to remain there.

A familiar scene appeared in Khan's vision as soon as he stood up. He noticed his initial target behind two Niqols who were exchanging blows madly. The alien was still fighting against younger troops, but another friendly face had joined them. Doku was there, doing his best to take down the powerful opponent with his precise palm strikes.

Doku's attacks failed to do much, but he seemed able to slow down his opponent's offensive. Still, the latter continued to use his incredible defensive ability to injure the Niqols around him. It appeared that taking him down would require a steep price.

Khan wiped away the blood flowing from the cuts on the right side of his head before shooting ahead. His knife flashed as he jumped right in the middle of the two Niqols exchanging reckless blows, and his ally soon noticed that he was continuing to attack a headless corpse.

The Niqols with the enhanced skin managed to stab his fingers in a student's chest, but a shadow soon appeared in his vision. Khan came out from behind his injured companion and reached his target in an instant. His knife rose even faster and stabbed the lower part of the alien's mouth.

The knife pierced past the mouth and reached the brain. The Niqols continued to move and tried to close his arms on Khan's throat, but the latter pulled his weapon and opened his opponent's head in half.

It had taken a while and many deaths, but Khan had finally killed the target chosen when he was still outside that mess.

Chapter 220 - Chase

Doku and Khan didn't have the time to exchange words. They nodded at each other before the rage of the battlefield fell on them and forced that small group to separate.

Khan sprinted among the group of Niqols and rare humans while swinging his blade and kicking whenever he found a good opportunity. The chaos of the battlefield still ruined every plan that tried to form in his mind and forced him to improvise, but his speed and deadliness gave him an advantage that most didn't share.

Khan had a specific role in that battle, but it was impossible to keep it in mind in that situation. He could barely think at all with the pressure that the mana around him applied to his senses. Khan soon lost himself among the cycle of sprints, dodges, and attacks that his body performed. He emptied himself of every useless feeling and sensation to blend with the battlefield and become nothing more than an expression of his expertise.

Interrupting the flow of his thoughts and regressing to a mere mass of instincts seemed the only valid option in an area that lacked order. Planning something would only lead to hesitation, which usually brought death, and Khan couldn't die there. He didn't allow himself to commit mistakes after surviving through twelve years of nightmares. He couldn't be sloppy now that he had found someone who could grant him peace..

Khan didn't have the time to appreciate how easy it had been for him to blend with the battlefield. It felt almost natural to adapt his movements and flow among the waves of mana that reached his senses.

His reactions quickened, his attacks became more precise, and his movements grew smoother. Khan experienced his strongest state yet, but he couldn't appreciate it. His thoughts were elsewhere, hidden by a dense and seemingly empty layer that forced his mind to remain immersed in the mana around him.

The head of a young rebel exploded when Khan kicked it, but he quickly bent backward to dodge an ethereal spear flying in his direction. Another young rebel tried to attack him while he was in that odd position, but he performed a back handspring to get out of that situation.

The rebel tried to chase after Khan, but the latter threw a kick at his opponent's head. The attack shattered the girls' teeth before breaking her neck and flinging her backward.

Khan shot to his right. He had instinctively chosen the annoying spear-thrower as his next target, but it had taken him a while to identify the Niqols responsible for those spells. However, he had eventually explored the messy battlefield enough to notice a tall woman conjuring those yellow ethereal weapons out of thin air.

His last sprints had brought him closer to his target. Still, the woman seemed to have realized that he was coming for her since she retreated whenever he got too close. She even had a group of young Niqols around her that opened a path and fought to protect her.

Each step forward that Khan took led him in another battle, but he didn't complain nor hesitate. It felt almost good to be lost in that mess. Khan felt as if every move he performed was better than the previous. He was striving toward the perfection that his current level could touch, and a tinge of ecstasy inevitably seeped inside his seemingly empty mind.

Khan began to welcome battles. He rejoiced whenever his target retreated and gave him the chance to fight a bit more before reaching her.

A fireball flew across the battlefield, and Khan risked getting in its trajectory. The spell carried an immense amount of mana, so he sensed it before it was too late. He could stop and let the attack pass, but his body continued to move forward.

Khan jumped to fall to his knees and started sliding on the ground. His back bent backward as he almost lay down and continued to glide. He kept his eyes open as the fiery projectile crossed his position. The scarlet flames shone in his vision, but that scene lasted for less than a second. The fireball soon continued its flight and exploded as soon as it landed on someone.

The fireball had made many take a step back, so Khan could take his opponents by surprise when he jumped back to his feet. The two young Niqols on his path only saw a shadow before both of them found a horizontal cut splitting their foreheads into two parts.

Khan was too immersed in the battlefield to rely on moves that could reduce the issue caused by failed executions of the Divine Reaper. He slashed and lunged freely without worrying about the success of his techniques. He danced according to the rhythm of the mana around him, and his approach led to evident benefit.

His smoother moves and quicker reflexes weren't the only aspects affected by his strange mental state. His martial arts also benefited from the absence of thoughts, especially when it came to the Divine Reaper. Khan couldn't remember the last time he had failed to execute his techniques correctly, which led to a sharp improvement of his battle prowess.

Khan didn't limit the Divine Reaper to lunges or slashes aimed at vital spots. He didn't fear eventual failures, and the success of his executions allowed him to kill in ways that he had been too scared to attempt.

The knife glowed as Khan approached a male Niqols who appeared as strong as a second-level warrior. The alien wasn't paying attention to him, but he turned when he sensed the mana behind him gaining sharp properties.

The Niqols quickly stepped forward to push his opponent away and turn to face the new enemy. Khan had his knife near his chest, ready to thrust it as soon as his opponent entered his range, but the alien managed to attack before that could happen.

The man joined his palms before making one of them slide toward Khan through a sharp movement. The gesture released a curved azure line that flew forward at high speed.

The line's mana carried the same nature as the energy around the knife, and Khan didn't miss that detail. His first instinct was to dodge, but the Niqols quickly released a second attack that joined the first and transformed them into a sharp cross.

Khan would have to slide to his sides to dodge the azure cross, and his body even started to crouch to proceed with that plan. However, everything changed when a cruel smirk appeared on the Niqols' face. The man kept his palms ready to attack again as soon as Khan picked a direction.

Khan continued to crouch, but his movement soon transformed into an abrupt leap that made him fly in the top-right opening of the cross. The sudden event surprised the Niqols since he had prepared an attack aimed toward the ground. He couldn't move his palms in time to adjust the trajectory of his technique, so he abandoned his initial plan and raised his arms to protect his face.

Khan stretched his knife forward and turned his wrist so that the blade would end up in the path of the Niqols' forearms. The latter barely managed to protect his face before his arrival, but his eyes widened when he saw the glowing weapon cutting his left wrist and approaching his face.

The alien began to dodge to his right, but he was one second too late. The knife reached his nose and started digging his flesh while he continued his evasive maneuver. The Niqols ended up completing his move, but blood suddenly spurted out of his face. The weapon had managed to cut half of his nape during the attack.

Khan began to roll on himself while still airborne and continued the movement once he landed on the ground. He went back to his feet in an instant without wasting time checking the opponent behind him. His senses had already told him that the man had fallen.

Similar scenes happened while Khan continued to move forward. He didn't always kill, especially when his opponents were stronger than him, but his deadliness remained far above average. Many of those who appeared on his path died or suffered severe injuries that significantly affected their battle.

Khan also had to change direction many times. Everything was fine when he met young rebels or adults at his level, but he couldn't jump among those with the power of second-level warriors recklessly. He had killed some of them, but he had always needed to exploit the surprise effect or similar tricks in the feat.

His chase of the spear-thrower led him to the other side of the battlefield, but he always made sure never to get near its center. The area had strong warriors everywhere, but the real leaders were fighting in the middle of that mess, and no one could disturb them.

Khan never tried to inspect the center of the battlefield, mostly because he felt that the waves of mana there had enough power to sweep him away. Yet, he saw spells and people flying from that location at times, so he could keep track of the trend of the overall fight.

His side was winning. Khan didn't know how or why, but he could see the ranks of rebels thinning as the battle continued to unfold. The fight among the leaders would probably play an important role in the assault's outcome, but that wasn't his problem. Performing well among that mess helped more than enough.

Another spear flew in his direction, but he dodged it with a single sidestep. Niqols jumped toward Khan, but he slashed, kicked, lunged, and sprinted depending on the nature of the situation. He even ran away when necessary, but his target remained in sight, and he eventually reached her.

The woman was only a first-level warrior, but her spell was annoying and deadly. Her spear barely had any weight, so she could throw them across the entire battlefield. Her aim was even incredible, but the chaotic nature of the area made her hit rebels at times.

Khan's relentless chase had led the woman and her team to the edges of the battlefield. They could still retreat into the empty areas at the side of the castle, but that would only open the path for her opponents. The rebels had to stop the enemy army from reaching the structure, so leaving the mess wasn't an option.

The woman could only continue to escape Khan by reaching the part of the battlefield on the opposite side of the castle. The two armies had blended by then, so that area had the same number of allies and enemies. Yet, it also featured the rear team.

Khan had reached the point when no battles stood between him and the spear thrower. The weaker Niqols around her couldn't help but shake in fear when they saw that fast opponent sprinting toward them. They had kept track of Khan's feats during their retreat, so they knew that their numerical advantage might fail to lead to a victory.

The tall woman among them threw a spear aimed at Khan. The spell appeared even faster at that distance, but the same went for him. The previous battles had perfected his moves in ways that even he struggled to believe.

Khan jumped forward, and his opponents opened their mouths in surprise when they saw him stepping on the yellow spear. The ethereal fabric of the weapon felt strange under his foot, but it was dense enough to act as a foothold.

The spear shattered into a cloud of light that dispersed in no time when Khan leaped again. The weaker Niqols lost him until he landed on the heads of two of them.

The landing was so soft that the Niqols almost failed to notice his arrival, but what followed carried opposite properties. Khan raised his glowing knife as part of his mana rushed downward and instantly increased his weight.

Khan slammed on the ground, carrying the two Niqols with him. The two aliens fell, and their heads ended up in the holes dug by Khan's feet. The event attracted the attention of their companion, who focused on the blood flowing out of the cavities, but another surprising event soon entered their vision.

Half of the spear thrower's head fell among the Niqols and filled their minds with utter fear, but only a few had the time to move. Khan didn't hesitate to throw kicks around him, crushing the skulls or rib cages of anyone who dared to be too slow to leave his range.

Khan chased the escaping Niqols, but ice suddenly grew from the ground under them and pierced their legs before transforming them into frozen statues. The latter quickly shattered into countless shards and revealed the rear team at some distance from the main battle.

Liiza lowered her hand and revealed a warm smile when she saw that Khan was safe. The latter couldn't break his concentration, but he still nodded at his girlfriend. She didn't add to avoid distracting him, and the two soon focused on other parts of the battlefield.

Khan felt refreshed after that short interaction. He was ready to follow the waves of mana again, but a scene made that faint happiness end up with the rest of his thoughts. He saw Azni carrying Asyat on her shoulders. A river of blood had replaced the latter's right leg.