

Chaos' Heir 241

Chapter 241 - Platforms

Khan ended up on the trajectory of four punches that forced him to cross his arms and activate the [Blood Shield]. He had managed to take one of Lieutenant Pouille's opponents by surprise, but his sneak attack had revealed his position, allowing one of the Stal around the group to target him.

The impact with the four punches flung Khan back. He didn't have the time to plant his feet on the ground, so the attack pushed him in the trajectory of the Stal that Lieutenant Pouille had just killed. The alien fell on him, forcing his momentum to an end.

The Stal that the Lieutenant had previously pushed away had noticed Khan's actions. An angry growl came out of its two heads as it decided to deal with the impaired human before turning toward its other opponent. The same went for the aliens that had gathered around the group since Khan now stood in the open.

The aliens never reached Khan since Lieutenant Pouille charged toward his previous opponent and slammed his palms on its side. The attack was more effective from that position, and the soldier also had the chance to use his full power on a single target. The Stal ended up leaving the ground and flying for a few meters, allowing Khan to push the corpse away while retreating on that now safe path.

Chaos quickly fell on Khan and the Lieutenant again. The former saw Stal stepping on their companions' corpses to reach their opponents quickly, but the situation had changed now that his leader didn't have multiple strong aliens against him. Khan could slash his way through the many limbs that tried to hinder his escape while Lieutenant Pouille took care of opening a path.

Khan could feel himself flowing among the waves of mana. He almost forgot that he was in control of his body. He ducked, jumped, and slashed depending on the hindrance that appeared on his path, without ever forgetting to follow the mass of energy radiated by his superior.

Blood spread his view, and growls filled his ears as the escape continued. Khan struggled to keep track of the limbs severed with his knife, but a refreshing sight eventually unfolded in his eyes. He finally saw the remains of the initial barrier and the rest of his platoon farther away. Those soldiers had taken position next to the moving camp, and they had their rifles ready to fire as soon as they had clear shots.

Khan had lost sight of Ian and one of the other soldiers. His group had shrunk, but his mind didn't have any room for those worries. Lieutenant Pouille suddenly changed the direction of the retreat to move behind the nearby building, but that meant more battles.

A Stal tried to approach Khan through a frontal charge, but it vanished from his view since Lieutenant Pouille made an alien fly in its path. Khan couldn't relax yet since another Stal approached him from his left and forced him to slide on the ground while waving his knife upward.

The alien had stretched its arms toward Khan and had tried to follow his movements, but it lost one of its hands when the knife flashed. The sharp pain didn't interrupt the Stal's charge, but it forced it to lift its limbs out of fear.

Khan spun on himself while straightening his position to stab his knife on the Stal's left side and lift it until the mana around it lost its power. The alien found a long and deep cut after Khan retracted

his weapon. It still wanted to charge at its opponent, but a sense of weakness quickly filled its body and made it fall to the ground.

Delia tripped over the corpse, but Khan was the perfect handhold to prevent her from falling. He found the woman on him while he was in the middle of turning toward the Lieutenant, and the event didn't slow him down. He simply decided to jump back and carry his companion with him.

Delia only needed a second to restore her balance and leave Khan. The two found three Stal closing on their position, but they were too big to attack them at the same time. They ended up obstructing each other assaults, wasting the tiny window caused by Delia's fall.

Khan used that chance to duck past the thick limbs and slash a torso open. The three aliens tried to follow his movements, but that only hindered their movements further since he was too small for those tall beings.

Delia voiced a high-pitched cry during that moment of confusion. The mana that accompanied the spell scared Khan and made him interrupt his attack. He even covered his ears before that soundwave could reach him, but that mana turned out to be harmless to him.

The same didn't go for the three Stal. The alien with the open torso saw more blood bursting out of its injury, while the other bleed from their eyes, ears, and noses. The first Stall directly fainted, while its companions fell in an intense confused state.

The confused Stal fell prey to their instincts. They waved their arms left and right while they waited for their senses to regain some clarity, but Khan and Delia didn't waste that chance.

Khan couldn't approach his opponents from behind due to the other aliens gathering in that position, so he limited himself to open two deep cuts on the closest Stal's legs. Instead, Delia studied the messy attacks of the other Stal before pulling one of its arms at the right moment and disturbing its balance.

Both Stal ended up on the ground, and their huge bodies hindered their companions. Khan and Delia could finally chase after Lieutenant Pouille and resume their escape.

Bullets started to fill the battlefield as soon as the entirety of the human group reached the building. Khan and the others focused on pushing the aliens back into the exposed areas so that their companions could gun them down. Azure projectiles flashed non-stop in the area, but the soldiers never stopped kicking, punching, and launching spells to repel the Stal.

The enemy platoon finally shrunk to a point when Khan's group could see the end of that mission. Some Stal had accepted that they couldn't remain in the open and had found cover behind other buildings, but many had fallen under the rain of bullets. Others had died due to the bombs, and the retreat had also killed a few of them.

Victory felt incredibly close, but none of the soldiers dared to lower their guards. Still, Khan eventually found himself with no Stal to fight since Lieutenant Pouille was enough to push most of them in the open.

Khan finally had the time to inspect the battlefield. Clara, Delia, Lieutenant Pouille, and the man that he didn't have the time to know were around him. Ian and the other two soldiers were nowhere to be seen. Khan could only guess that the corpses in the area were hiding them.

A small group of Stal was hiding in the building on the other side of the exposed area, but they were no threat to Khan's group. None of them was as strong as Lieutenant Pouille, so he could disregard them.

Other aliens were still approaching Khan's group from behind, but they also lacked warriors capable of dealing with Lieutenant Pouille. A few structures had suffered some damage due to the bombs and the vehicle, but they all seemed operative. Khan couldn't see the anti-aircraft gun from his position, but it couldn't be too far away. Everything was going perfectly, but his eyes suddenly widened in astonishment.

The many bullets flying across the battlefield and the various discharges of mana prevented Khan from sensing events too far away. However, he felt unable to miss the sudden appearance of a series of presences.

Tall bodies full of mana appeared in each building of the settlement. They were so numerous that Khan managed to sense them among the chaos created by the small battles around him and the many bullets. He could easily connect those presences to the Stal, but he couldn't explain how those aliens had remained hidden for so long.

The issue wasn't purely linked to his sensations. The Stal were simply too big, so the settlement couldn't contain many of them. The number of aliens that Khan's group had seen seemed already able to fill those buildings.

Khan knew that those reinforcements had just arrived in the settlement, but that didn't happen through teleports. He would have sensed them otherwise. The only possible explanation involved underground passages directly connected to the buildings, but that created a discrepancy with the intel about the Stal. In theory, that species wasn't intelligent enough to rely on such battle tactics, and they would have never remained hidden for so long during an enemy attack.

Khan could still believe that the new troops had required a few minutes to reach the settlement after receiving an alarm, but their joint arrival felt too coincidental. The aliens had appeared at the same second, even if the buildings were in different positions.

Lieutenant Pouille didn't need Khan's warning to notice the new wave of Stal that had appeared in the settlement, but he shared his stupor. Still, it was up to him to give orders, and the situation left him with only one option.

"Retreat!" Lieutenant Pouille shouted before the rest of his underlings could notice the incoming Stal.

The Lieutenant immediately moved past Khan and the others to appear in the area invaded by flying bullets. He put his arms forward and discharged mana multiple times to make sure that no projectile landed on his body. Khan followed closely behind him, and the other soldiers disregarded their confusion to chase after their superior.

A few bullets exploded in front of Lieutenant Pouille and filled the group's surroundings with azure light before the soldiers in the safe spot understood that their allies had appeared in their line of sight. Only a few confident marksmen decided to continue firing, but they remained stunned when they saw many figures hurrying past the covers or outside the buildings.

A new platoon of Stal had appeared out of nowhere, but the soldiers didn't fall prey to their worries. They were in a safe position, and their camp was right next to them. They only had to take a few steps to return inside their habitation, so they continued to fire at their enemies to open a path for their allies.

Even those who didn't have a good aim decided to join that assault. A few bullets ended up flying in Lieutenant Pouille's direction, but he handled them with his spells. Drops of sweat had covered the soldier's face, hands, and uniform, but he didn't hold back his attacks. Still, it was evident that the effort was bringing him closer to his limits.

Everything changed again when part of the ground behind the camp opened to reveal large platforms full of Stal. Lieutenant Pouille couldn't help but hesitate for an instant at the sight of those new troops, but he didn't give up. He knew how powerful the moving quarters could be, so he continued to do his best to reach it.

Nevertheless, the ground under the camp suddenly opened to allow the passage of another platform. The Stal standing there raised their thick arms and worked together to tilt the huge structure until it turned upside-down. Even the soldiers in the safe spot lost hope when a small platoon of aliens replaced their quarters. They couldn't understand how the situation had gone south so abruptly.

The soldiers stopped firing, and Lieutenant Pouille halted his retreat. The aliens were everywhere, and they even advanced to encircle the human group. HQ had sent them to fight a platoon, but they had an entire battalion around them now. That scene didn't leave room for hope.

Khan soon remained the only one who still inspected the environment to find possible escape routes. He couldn't give up on his life so easily. He had suffered too much to die on that planet.

His inspection didn't give promising results. He could use his speed to take by surprise one of the weak spots in the encirclement, but he would remain in the open afterward. He had a chance to outrun the strongest Stal in the area, but some of them had rifles, while the others could always seize them from his companions.

The faint hope to survive that crisis was enough for Khan. He didn't care how slim his chances were as long as he had a shot. Yet, the Stal didn't advance after completing the encirclement. They remained still and turned only when another hole appeared on the ground among them.

The humans on the scene also gazed at the new platform rising among them, and pure astonishment filled their faces when they saw a group of Stal with a Guko in their lead. The latter quickly jumped off that secret elevator to point the screen in its hands toward the soldiers.

The inspection lasted for a whole silent minute until the Guko voiced something in the Stal's language and returned to its platform.. The Stal then took out large handcuffs and black sacks from their backpacks before approaching the humans.

Chapter 242 - Hands

It didn't take a genius to understand the Stal's intentions, but they were still surprising. Imprisoning those humans made no sense from a tactical standpoint since none of them had any political value. Most of the soldiers on Ecoruta were even outcasts who had caused problems inside their families.

'What do they even want to do with us?' Khan wondered as the Stal wielding handcuffs and sacks approached both human groups.

Khan couldn't find answers to his doubts. His paranoia made him think that his mana core had something to do with it, but he didn't dare to consider the possibility of such a complicated ploy when he had yet to decide how to act.

His risky escape paths slowly vanished as the Stal grew closer. Khan knew that his chances were less than slim, but they only worsened as the aliens approached the humans without breaking the encirclement. Each second spent hesitating put him into more danger, but he couldn't make a decision, especially when death didn't appear impending. He would remain alive as a prisoner, while the rifles would probably kill him if he tried to run away.

The hesitation ended up making that decision for Khan. Only a few seconds had to pass before his chances to escape vanished completely. Still, he immediately switched his mindset to prepare for an eventual jailbreak. When a Stal approached him, he raised his hands forward to make sure that it didn't tie them behind his back.

The Stal didn't seem to care about that detail. It handcuffed Khan's hands with those heavy tools before covering his head with the black sack. He felt unable to see anything afterward, but his sensitivity to mana still worked perfectly, and he could clearly sense the alien taking away his knife.

Khan had to force himself to remain still when he sensed two thick arms wrapping themselves around his waist and lifting him. The Stal barely felt his weight as it carried him toward the platform where the other aliens were gathering the prisoners. Khan could notice the entirety of his team around him, but his focus was on the mana inside his body. Everything worked perfectly, so he had to come up with a plan.

The entirety of his knowledge ran through his mind as the platform began to descend. Khan heard the ground closing above him, the Stal's random grunts and growls flew toward his ears, and their strong smell filled his nostrils, but he remained focused on his thoughts.

Khan didn't experience any fear. An alien species had taken him prisoner, and he didn't know what would become of him, but he didn't panic. Actually, his mind seemed to work faster under those terrible conditions. It was something similar to the mindset that he obtained during battles. The tragedies were his home.

'I can't become a prisoner if the Nak have already trapped me for years,' Khan joked in his mind before suppressing those thoughts and going back to his situation.

Many details of his imprisonment were still unclear. His best bet would normally be Lieutenant Pouille, but he didn't know if they would end up in the same cage. The Stal might commit that mistake, but that event felt unlikely with a Guko leading them.

Khan could also put his hopes on his companions. Some of them were first-level mages, which hinted at the possibility of destructive spells. However, he put those thoughts on hold for now. He would consider them only after studying the eventual underground cages.

After clearing those topics, Khan dived deeply into everything he had learnt throughout the years. He had spent too little on Ecoruta to realize that his expertise already differed deeply from regular humans.

Khan's power came from two worlds. His core was still human since he mostly relied on his martial arts while fighting. Yet, the Niqols' way had become an important part of his being. He didn't approach the mana through the teachings of the Global Army anymore.

Still, his expertise with the Niqols' arts had yet to reach decent levels. His sensitivity to mana was great, and his control was above average, but his manipulation couldn't touch Liiza's realm. He was vaguely successful when it came to adding sharpness to his energy, but that was it.

The [Blood Shield] was a defensive technique that would obviously prove itself useful during an eventual escape, but it couldn't break him free of his shackles. Khan could only think about his martial arts after excluding everything else, but he found only disappointment there.

The Stal had taken away his first-grade knife. Khan couldn't rely on the deadly Divine Reaper, and the Lightning-demon style couldn't help against those aliens due to their incredible physical prowess. He could still hope that his jailer would be weak, but he didn't dare to bet everything on unclear information.

Khan found himself lost. All his power felt useless when the Stal could outnumber him or limit his offensive. A mere alien species with incredible physical strength had been enough to put him into that awful situation.

'Am I really so weak?' Khan wondered when the platform stopped moving and the Stal began to march forward.

The Stal had rendered Khan useless by taking away his knife. He cursed himself for having such an evident weakness. The situation would be different if he could launch his spell, but that wasn't the case. His only option seemed to kick his way out of that prison, which was obviously unfeasible.

Khan tried to wrap his mind around his problem while keeping track of his movements. The Stal were far from graceful. He could understand whenever his jailer turned or walked in a straight line, and his senses inevitably brought another wave of worries. The aliens kept marching for entire hours, which only shattered every vague plan he had developed.

'I'll only end up in the middle of the enemy territory if I take the first available elevator,' Khan concluded in his mind as he started to repeat in his mind the turns that the Stal had taken.

A series of "left" and "right" resounded in Khan's mind in an endless cycle that took complete control of his mental faculties. He added a new direction to that silent prayer every time the Stal took another turn, but he didn't dare to lose focus. His ability to find the elevator near the river depended on how much he could memorize.

The worries that accompanied that idea never managed to appear in Khan's mind. He knew that the Stal would probably advance now that Lieutenant Pouille's team had lost its claim on the territories past the river, but Khan didn't care. A lot could go wrong in that situation, so he focused on what was within his power.

The long march changed pace as grunts and vague cries seeped past the black sack to reach Khan's ears. He tried to understand what was happening through his sensitivity to mana, but the Stal gave him answers before he could find them on his own.

The Stal removed the sack on Khan's head before throwing him away. He tried to inspect his surroundings, but the impact with a metal wall made his consciousness go dark for a few seconds. When his vision stabilized, he found himself inside a small black cell illuminated by dim light.

Khan immediately snapped out of his stupor and straightened his position to move forward. The cell appeared open, and he could even see the back of the group of Stal marching through the corridors right outside the entrance. However, something suddenly appeared on his path and forced him to halt his track.

Nothing had appeared in his vision, but Khan knew that a dense layer of mana had covered the entrance. The mass of energy was transparent, so he could see everything happening in the corridor, but he didn't feel confident enough to touch it.

A crackling noise followed by a painful cry resounded in the area while Khan tried to study the barrier. Those sounds came from his right, while the Stal were moving toward his left, so he could link them to another prisoner. It didn't take him long to understand that someone had tried to touch the dense mass of mana and had suffered because of that.

Khan disregarded the barrier to focus on his situation at that point. The cell was large, and its advanced technology stated how the Guko had probably built it to contain Stal. The corridor had similar architecture. It was large and tall, completely made of dark metal, and dim white lights came out of its corners to illuminate the area.

The Stal continued to throw humans inside cells without stopping marching through the large corridor. Khan couldn't understand their intentions, but he could confirm that he would remain alive for the time being.

Khan stopped inspecting the area after the Stal disappeared and noises stopped echoing throughout the corridors. The structure didn't have much else to study, so he sat on the floor and repeated the turns taken by the aliens in his mind before focusing on coming up with an escape plan.

"Is Lieutenant Pouille here?" A voice suddenly resounded from his right.

"Lieutenant Pouille?" Another voice came out from the cell to his left.

"Is the Lieutenant here?" A third prisoner shouted, and Khan recognized Clara's voice even if a series of cells divided him from her.

"I'm here," Lieutenant Pouille eventually shouted, and his voice came from a distant spot on Khan's left. "Stop crying and shut up! They might come to beat us up."

"What should we do now?" A soldier asked, completely disregarding the previous orders.

"What's the plan, Lieutenant?" Another voice resounded.

"Is the Global Army aware of our position?" A third soldier shouted.

"HQ knows about these underground structures," Lieutenant Pouille explained, "But they can't study them from space. We have even gotten far away from our initial position, so you can forget about reinforcements."

"What do you mean, Lieutenant Pouille?" Clara cried in a pleading tone. "Why was a Guko working with the Stal? Why did they even take us prisoner? Do they want to trade us with HQ?"

"How the fuck would I even know that?!" Lieutenant Pouille shouted in an angry voice. "I'm only a Lieutenant. HQ gives orders, and I follow them. Still, let me break it down for you. No one is coming to save us."

More pleads resounded from the various cells, but Lieutenant Pouille didn't answer anymore. Khan could only hear as the many voices quieted down before turning into occasional cries and sobs.

'Is this a way to get rid of troublesome soldiers?' Khan wondered after sorting out his thoughts. 'Is the Global Army really unaware that some Guko are working with the Stal?'

Khan's paranoia affected his thoughts, but he tried to suppress them to avoid developing biases about the situation. Nothing told him that the Global Army had something to do with his imprisonment. The cooperation between the two alien species was still suspicious, but he couldn't find anything that involved the humans in the matter.

Khan went back to his planning. He repeated the left-right prayer in his mind before trying to develop a tactic that could allow him to escape. He still didn't know much about his situation or the Stal's intentions, but he had to solve a major problem first.

In the current state, Khan would be unable to deal with a single first-level warrior from the alien species. His experience could give him a chance against those strong beings, but he didn't know it would take to win in a direct clash when relying only on his kicks.

Saving time was mandatory while deep inside an enemy structure. Khan couldn't give the Stal the chance to alert their companions in the eventuality of a battle, but he couldn't perform his deadliest techniques right now.

His thoughts didn't lead anywhere, and they eventually turned into desperation. Khan couldn't find any solution, and Liiza's face appeared in his vision as he started to accept that his life was in the Stal's hands.

Khan almost couldn't believe how intense his feelings for Liiza were. He had said goodbye and tried not to think about her, but she always reappeared whenever he let his mind wander. It felt almost funny to compare his current state to his life on Nitis. He had left that dark planet mere days ago, but that time already felt like an eternity.

A surge of anger made Khan slam his arms on the wall to his right. The thick handcuffs didn't even leave a mark on the dark metal, and the impact didn't damage their structure either. They also seemed meant for a stronger species, which only removed any idea of breaking free through brute force from his mind.

'Liiza would have frozen these things with a simple thought,' Khan smiled while thinking about his talented ex-girlfriend. 'Zalpa could have turned them into dust by blowing on them. Even items resistant to mana can't do much when someone forces their very nature to change.'

Khan had initially desired to blame his ineptitude, but an odd idea formed in his mind as he continued to think about the Niqols. He raised his hands and stretched his fingers before tilting his head to inspect them from a different angle. He had to admit that they could look like short blades.

Chapter 243 - Price

'What's the difference between a first-grade weapon and a first-level warrior?' Khan wondered as mana started to seep out of his skin and move toward his hands.

Khan quickly halted his actions and retracted his hands before inspecting the corners of his cell. He didn't know if the area had cameras, but he refused to take risks, especially now that he might have solved his greatest problem.

The question continued to resound in his mind even after he stopped testing his theory. Khan had long since committed to memory the requirements for the Divine Reaper. He had performed those techniques with mere dull null-grade weapons, so his hands could work. He felt sure that his body met the minimum requirements for the martial art.

Khan felt even more confident after thinking about the Niqols. They could transform caresses into punches as long as they manipulated the mana accordingly, so the same had to be true when it came to blades. Applying sharpness also was Khan's best field since he had already become used to that meaning by training in the Divine Reaper.

Everything seemed perfect. Khan almost couldn't believe how he had failed to consider that possibility until now. He only had to transform the Divine Reaper into a Niqols' martial art to deploy the same effects with his bare hands.

The process would obviously be complicated for normal humans. A weapon would help create the sharp membrane required by the Divine Reaper, but Khan felt confident in replicating it on his hands. The situation would be different with other features, but he knew that he could succeed when it came to sharpness.

Khan had finally decided how to take care of his jailers quickly. He couldn't test his theory out of fear of being discovered, and he didn't know how effective his attack would be, but he wasn't lost anymore.

The time to define the rest of his escape had arrived, but he could only wait before approaching those essential parts of his plan. The Stal would have never thrown Lieutenant Pouille into those cells if the barrier couldn't stop his spells. The same would probably apply to the eventual jailers that would pick him up, and Khan could guess that something similar would happen to the rest of the prisoners.

Khan had to understand how the Stal behaved and gain insights into their intentions before deciding how to act. The situation would remain hopeless if multiple aliens were to appear for each prisoner. However, he had a chance to do something if he had to deal with a single Stal. Its level wouldn't matter too much since he planned to exploit the surprise effect to the fullest.

Only a deafening and tense wait could bring answers. Khan didn't know what the Stal wanted to do with him and his group, but he remained calm and made sure to preserve his condition. He didn't meditate nor train since that would make him hungry faster, and he even avoided moving as his entire focus went on gathering information about his imprisonment.

Khan's habits made him perfect for that role. The Slums had taught him how to endure hunger and thirst. His nightmares and time on Nitis had made him used to spend entire days without sleeping. The many tragedies overcome throughout his life had given him a firm mindset that could survive heavy stress. He could wait calmly without growing anxious or committing mistakes.

It was hard to keep track of the passage of time inside the underground cell, but Khan could rely on his phone for that. The Stal didn't need to take the device away since it had lost connection with the Global Army's network even before going underground.

The night arrived, and the morning replaced it, but no Stal walked through that corridor. Only the afternoon brought a change to the long hours that Khan spent as alert as possible.

A single Stal suddenly walked from the left of the corridor and crossed the various cells until it arrived in front of the last one. Khan counted the alien's steps after it moved past his entrance. He then heard a few cries and the noises caused by clear physical struggles before a thudding sound put an end to the matter.

The steps then resounded again. Khan didn't move, but his eyes remained fixed on the barrier. The Stal crossed his cell with a fainted soldier held firmly in two arms, but he disregarded his companion. His focus remained on the alien as he tried to find items or armors that might protect it when picking prisoners. Khan even paid special attention to its power to prepare for his turn.

The barrier hindered Khan's sensitivity to mana, but he could still inspect something when the Stal was in front of his cell. The alien was a first-level warrior, while the prisoner in its arms was only close to that level. Moreover, he noticed that the Stal wasn't wearing the dirty rags seen during the previous battles. It had a tight dark suit that covered the entirety of its torso and simple metallic protections on legs and armpits.

The Stal crossed the entrance of Khan's cell before he could gain a clear idea of the suit and protections' power, but he didn't mind that too much. He was planning to kill his future jailer quickly, so he couldn't aim at those spots. Everything was fine as long as the aliens kept their necks and heads uncovered.

'Not yet,' Khan reminded himself before repeating the route to the platform in his mind.

A single inspection wasn't enough to create an escape plan. Khan didn't know if the Stal would behave differently the next time they decided to take one of the prisoners, so he continued to wait.

The night arrived again, and the morning followed, but Khan had to wait for the afternoon to hear the heavy steps of another Stal. The jailer didn't change, and it also wore the same protections. Still, it didn't have yesterday's soldier in its arms, and the walk past Khan's cell lasted slightly less too.

The noises of a physical struggle and painful cries resounded for a few seconds before the Stal returned to the left side of the corridor while carrying a soldier. Khan could sense that the prisoner was a proper first-level warrior, which filled his mind with hope.

Everything would become problematic if his jailer ended up being a second-level warrior, but he could handle things easily with someone at his level. Khan didn't know how the Stal planned to keep the entire platoon alive if they kept picking only one soldier a day without bringing water or food. Still, he didn't care too much about that since the situation benefited him.

Khan had used the steps to guess how long it would take for a jailer to appear in front of him. The last prisoner was only two cells away from him, meaning that it would take three more days for his turn if that trend continued.

Remaining without food or water for three more days would be harsh, but Khan knew that his body could take it. His battle prowess would be far from ideal, but he had to seize every chance he got.

The next day was identical to the previous. The same armored Stal crossed the corridor, reached the rightmost cell, and knocked a prisoner unconscious before dragging them somewhere.

Something different happened on Khan's fifth day of imprisonment. A few Stal went cell by cell to deliver simple trays that contained a small white bar and a simple flask full of water. A small spot opened in the barriers to allow the passage of those plates, and the aliens didn't leave each entrance until the prisoners gave those tools back. It wasn't hard for the humans to understand those strange growls when four hands pointed at the items.

Khan behaved impeccably. He ate the small bar and gulped all the water without even bothering to understand their taste. He had heard the noises of heavy beatings before, so he quickly gave everything back before sensing the small opening in the barrier close.

The previous routine resumed on the sixth day. The now-familiar armored Stal reached the cell on Khan's right and beat the soldier inside it before dragging them away.

The tension in Khan's mind intensified once the heavy steps stopped resounding throughout the corridor. He had managed to ignore loneliness, boredom, and fear the previous day because he had a goal, but everything came back stronger than before now that his plan was about to start.

The white bar and the small flask of water only managed to put a patch to his hunger and thirst. His lack of sleep also filled his mind with a faint weariness. Yet, he remained as focused as ever, even if intense emotions raged inside him. It seemed that he could grow calmer in the hours that preceded a battle.

Khan counted the hours without looking at his phone. He had never managed to understand if the cells featured cameras, but he didn't dare to take risks, especially now. The wait felt endless, and his emotions only intensified after each minute, but his body instinctively relaxed while that chaos filled his mind.

Then, the echo of familiar steps reached his ears. Khan's mind went blank as his thoughts vanished. It was now or never, so he deployed the preparations he had imagined during the past days.

Khan had played everything in his mind countless times after coming up with a plan. His imprisonment would end soon, after seven days spent in a cell. He would escape or die trying.

Khan slightly stretched his legs before placing his back on the wall to apply some pressure. His position didn't reveal the tension that afflicted his muscles. No one would notice that he wasn't really sitting on the floor.

Each step that reached his ears filled his body with the need to tremble, but no muscle moved. Khan remained perfectly still as he closed his eyes and played the incoming battle in his mind one last time. Then, he opened them right before the Stal appeared in front of his cell.

Khan immediately noticed his first miscalculation. The Stal stepped forward without waiting for the barrier to go down. Its body crossed that dense mass of mana without suffering any injury.

A series of images flashed in Khan's vision while the Stal bent downward and pulled two of its arms back to prepare punches. He had nothing but time in the previous days, and he had spent them considering what could go wrong with his plan. That granted him the promptness needed to decide whether to fight the alien inside the cell before it completed its attack.

The barrier was a miscalculation, but Khan knew that he wouldn't be able to be as quick as he wished if he let the Stal grab him. Even if he somehow managed to get out of that strong grip, he would still be in an unfavorable position that wouldn't allow him to perform a quick kill.

The thoughts about the barrier vanished as his right leg shot forward. Khan slowed down his attack on purpose, and the alien didn't disappoint him. The Stal voiced a growl as the hands prepared for the attack opened to grab the incoming limb.

Khan unleashed all the power amassed inside his left leg when he sensed the alien's thick fingers wrapping around his ankle. He jumped forward without bothering to control his movements, and he ended up being so fast that the Stal couldn't use its free arms to stop the assault.

Nevertheless, the Stal chosen to be a jailer was an experienced warrior. Its reflexes were incredible, so it promptly pulled Khan from his leg. He felt a massive force interrupting his charge, but he didn't care about the imminent clash with the floor. Only the alien's throats existed in his view.

Khan performed what he didn't dare to try in the past days. Mana accumulated over his stretched and tense right hand to create a sharp membrane. He swung his chained arms at the Stal's heads while it pulled him downward. The [Blood Shield] covered his back right before slamming on the floor, but intense pain reached his mind anyway.

A mess followed. Khan forced his vision to focus, but a torrent of blood hindered it. Then, the Stal's heavy body fell on him, but he quickly tried to lift it. Still, the action revealed the true source of his pain. His back had always been fine, but the same didn't apply to his right hand.

Khan noticed the deep cuts on the alien's throats before focusing on his right hand. The Stal's heads hung from small patches of brown skin as blood continued to flow on him. His attack had almost beheaded his opponent, but his weapon had paid the price to that achievement.

Countless cuts had opened on his right hand, and his fingers had even bent unnaturally. The same applied to his palm, which seemed split into two parts. It was clear that his injuries didn't affect only his skin. His bones and muscles had also suffered from the drawbacks of the Divine Reaper.

Chapter 244 - Escape

Khan wanted to scream, but only suppressed groans came out of his mouth as he pushed himself away from under the Stal's corpse. Curses resounded in his mind, and pain made a mess out of his thoughts, but intense anxiety also fought against those sensations to remind him about his situation.

His jailer was dead. His escape had begun. Khan couldn't allow himself to waste time or cry over his hand, but the pain felt unbearable. He ended up on the verge of fainting every time his cracked fingers or palms moved.

Khan headbutted the wall behind him in a desperate attempt to suppress part of the pain spreading from his right hand. A second of peace filled his senses, but everything soon returned and almost froze him on the spot. Still, he slammed his head on the dark metal again and used that short moment of clarity to decide what to do.

Istrone came back to his mind. Khan thought about Ethel, but he refused to consider amputating his hand. He wouldn't even know how to do it in that situation.

His eyes eventually fell on the metal protections on the Stal's limbs, and an idea formed in his mind. Khan threw himself over the almost beheaded corpse and tinkered with one of those metal shields to open it. It turned out that the item had two metal laces that featured a single button on their surfaces.

The laces unlocked when Khan pressed those buttons. He tore away part of his trousers before applying his hand on the metal protection and tying it with the help of his mouth. The armor was far too long to be useful with the Divine Reaper, but he couldn't find a better solution for now.

Khan slammed his head on the metal wall again before adjusting his cracked hand on the metal protection and tying it firmly with the bandages. Blood fell from his forehead, but he ignored it. After creating a tight knot, he closed his eyes to enter the meditative state and see whether his mana could help with his injury.

The mana had affected the entirety of Khan's body after becoming a first-level warrior, but only half of it had improved completely. The other half was still in the process of fusing with his energy, and his cracked hand featured many spots like that.

Still, Khan noticed that the pain dimmed when he forced his mana to send stronger radiations. The different suffering that usually accompanied meditations arrived, but he could only rejoice when he experienced that since he saw that his hand was trying to heal on its own.

'Not now,' Khan reminded himself before snapping out of the meditative state and focusing on his situation.

His experience with the mental barrier turned out to be helpful. Khan pushed away his pain to create a small but peaceful environment inside his mind. He could think almost clearly there, and that was enough for now.

'Can I cross the barrier now?' Khan wondered while inspecting the dead Stal.

Everything was silent. Khan didn't know whether the structure had silent alarms, but they would be outside his control, so he disregarded those fears. His focus was on the Stal's corpse. The alien was so tall that its legs had remained outside the cell. Still, the barrier didn't do anything to them.

Khan took away another protection from the Stal's limbs before throwing it toward the barrier. A crackling noise resounded before that dense layer of mana flung the metal item back inside the cell. Khan bent to his right to avoid the piece of armor, and his eyes inevitably fell back on the dead alien.

'Does it need a genetic signature?' Khan wondered. 'No, they would have been able to give the trays without opening the barrier otherwise.'

That conclusion forced Khan to dive on the Stal. He took out its metal protections, removed the tight suit, and even tore apart the rags that covered its lower body. The two huge donges of the alien appeared in his view, but he paid no attention to them as he continued searching for something that could make him cross the barrier.

Khan found something only when he inspected the alien's hands. One of them had a metal ring that felt like a magical item after a second inspection. Khan quickly took it, and a change immediately happened.

The crackling noise returned after Khan seized the item. The barrier began to affect the corpse and dug its way through the two legs. It only took a few seconds before the mana cut the alien's limbs.

The deadliness of the barrier left Khan dumbfounded for a second, but he forced himself out of that mental state to jump to his feet. The ring was too big for his fingers but too small to become a bracelet, so he used his cracked hand to wear it.

A wave of pain spread from his wounds as he wore the ring with his little finger and ring finger. Khan clenched his teeth as he checked that the item didn't risk slipping out on its own. Everything was perfect, so he approached the barrier.

The slight hesitation in Khan's movements vanished when he noticed that his left hand crossed the barrier without problems. He even felt the synthetic mana falling on his skin, but that sensation lasted for less than a second since he prioritized getting out of the cell.

'I did it!' Khan couldn't help but shout in his mind when he stepped on the corridor.

His excitement didn't make him forget about his situation. Khan inspected both ends of the corridor and confirmed that he was alone. He instinctively turned to his right, but a series of thoughts inevitably appeared in his mind when he noticed that everything remained silent.

'Are they really unaware about my escape?' Khan wondered as his eyes fell on his cell.

The Stal had to open the barrier to deliver food, but that didn't happen now. Yet, in theory, Khan would have had to cross it anyway since the alien had come to pick him up.

Khan had paid incredible attention to the sounds that had reached his cell during the last days. He knew that the Stal didn't say anything while picking up the other soldiers. The ring didn't even have buttons, so he felt relatively sure that he couldn't send communications from his end.

The only possible conclusion was that the barrier wouldn't have opened at all. Still, that created questions since Khan would have needed to cross the dense layer of mana anyway.

Khan felt the need to run away immediately, but he would need a long time to reach the initial platform. He didn't even know whether the underground structure would feature other areas on his path, but he felt certain that the Stal would eventually notice his escape.

The unclear functions of the underground structure forced Khan to come up with a simple plan. A good escape required a distraction, so he bent forward to pick up one of the severed legs and pushed it toward the barrier.

The barrier rejected the severed leg, but Khan tried a different approach. He put the limb at his side and carried it like the jailer had done with the soldiers the previous days. Then, he tried to enter his cell, and his eyes lit up when he noticed that the dense layer of mana finally allowed the passage of that foreign item.

'They would have needed to retrieve the trays personally if they didn't open the barrier,' Khan summarized in his mind after understanding how the barrier worked. 'I can carry things out.'

Khan let go of the severed leg and hurried toward the next cell. The soldier inside it had noticed that something had gone wrong, and Khan's appearance almost made him shout in excitement.

"Shut up," Khan whispered before the soldier could say anything. "Stay still, and trust me."

The soldier covered his mouth with both his hands after that reminder. A frown appeared on his face when Khan bent forward and wrapped his limbs around his waist, and a complaint tried to seep out of his fingers when he saw the barrier growing close in his vision.

The soldier didn't have time to complete his complaint since Khan brought him out of the cell in no time. The barrier didn't oppose the process, and the man could soon stand up on his own.

"Than-," The soldier tried to express his gratitude, but Khan interrupted him with a glare before approaching another cell.

Similar scenes unfolded as Khan went cell by cell to carry his platoon into the corridor. No one understood how he had managed to escape, but they waited for him to free everyone while making sure to keep their mouths shut.

The last imprisoned soldier was Lieutenant Pouille. The man didn't need reminders, so Khan could carry him out of the cell silently. Still, a gasp inevitably escaped his mouth when he noticed that his entire platoon was standing in the corridor.

"How did you even-," Lieutenant Pouille tried to whisper, but Khan promptly interrupted him.

"I don't have time to explain," Khan replied while keeping his voice down. "I've memorized the path back to the elevator. We must leave now."

Those whispers managed to reach the soldiers on the other end of the group due to the deep silence. Everyone inevitably smiled and nodded at that news, but hands fell on Khan's shoulder when he turned to begin the escape.

"We won't be able to reach the initial elevator if the Stal have habitations along the way," Lieutenant Pouille stated while showing his handcuffs, "Especially with these."

"I know, but it's better than advance without a clear target," Khan complained.

"We can fight our way toward the nearest elevator before stealing something on the surface," The Lieutenant suggested while pointing at the left side of the corridor.

"You can go there," Khan whispered while pointing at the right side of the corridor. "I'll stick to my plan."

"The Stal's forces must have expanded after our defeat," Lieutenant Pouille explained. "The safest place where to resurface is behind the enemy lines."

Khan felt anxious since freeing all the soldiers had taken a few minutes. He wanted his escape to start right away, but he had to admit that Lieutenant Pouille's words held some truth.

The lack of alarms or reinforcements even stated how confident those aliens were about their underground prison. Khan didn't know if the Stal were too stupid to consider those aspects. The situation had too many variables, and his knowledge of Ecoruta wasn't on par with the Lieutenant. He didn't want to put his trust in someone else, but he had to admit that his power alone might end up failing him during a solitary escape.

"Wait for a second," Khan whispered before hurrying toward his cell and carrying the huge Stal outside.

The soldiers instinctively gathered around Khan, but they let the Lieutenant pass. The latter's eyes widened in surprise when he saw Khan removing the metal protections and the tight suit before handing them to his group.

Khan couldn't use something so long for the Divine Reaper, but his companions might find those items useful. Lieutenant Pouille didn't hesitate to pick the suit, while others took the pieces of armor to wear them or use them as weapons.

Then, Lieutenant Pouille followed Khan on the other side of the group as he started marching toward the corridor's left. The soldiers behind them didn't know who was in charge, but they tried to be as silent as possible as the escape began. They even half-bent forward to imitate Khan's movements.

"Why is no one coming?" Khan whispered.

"There might be only one Guko in this area," Lieutenant Pouille guessed without wasting more words in his explanation.

That short line was enough to reassure Khan. The Stal probably had no idea how to use the underground structure or their items properly, and the presence of a single Guko could explain those many flaws in the prison.

"Can you fight?" Lieutenant Pouille asked when his eyes fell on the messy bandages and long protection on Khan's right hand.

Khan had been able to use only his right hand with the Divine Reaper before, but that would be almost impossible now since the long armor would hinder his slashes. He could probably perform something decent if he waved his chained arms from right to left, but that was far from ideal nonetheless.

"We must find a way to remove these handcuffs," Lieutenant Pouille announced after noticing that Khan hesitated to answer, and the latter could only nod as the group went deeper inside the enemy territory.

Chapter 245 - Advance

Many faint steps resounded in the silence of the corridor. The soldiers had instinctively arranged themselves according to their confidence against the Stal, but Khan and Lieutenant Pouille remained in the lead. The former knew that his kicks wouldn't be so helpful against that powerful species. Still, he didn't dare to let anyone else be in front of the group since his sensitivity to mana was too valuable in that situation.

The dim lights coming out of the corners of the metal surfaces allowed Khan and Lieutenant Pouille to see almost everything in the corridor. Their group crossed many empty cells before arriving at a turn that Khan inspected silently before advancing. No one was in sight, but that wasn't enough to remove the tension that filled his mind.

Random thoughts appeared in Khan's mind while the group moved silently. He didn't forget to add the new turns to the path that he had memorized, but he still spared some attention to his hand and martial art.

Khan's hand had stopped bleeding, but he didn't dare to remove the piece of armor. Yet, he forced himself to think about his failed attempt to perform the Divine Reaper barehanded to develop solutions.

Khan had confirmed that he could perform the martial art without weapons, but his body wasn't strong enough to endure the backlash that accompanied those techniques. Still, he had access to the [Blood Shield], which could theoretically solve the issue or prevent him from suffering such severe injuries.

The handcuffs and the bandages would hinder Khan from using his left hand to perform the Divine Reaper, so his attention went on his feet. In theory, he could use them for his techniques, but he decided to avoid that until he saw how effective the [Blood Shield] was. His escape would end if he ended up injuring his legs.

A change eventually happened. Khan and Lieutenant Pouille noticed a door in the distance, and they quickly informed the other soldiers about it. Everyone slowed down to reduce the noises released by their advance, and Khan suppressed his thoughts to focus on his senses.

The door was on the right side of the corridor, so the group could approach it safely. Still, the Lieutenant performed a few silent gestures to make everyone form a single line once that entrance grew close. He even tried to take the frontmost spot, but Khan didn't let him.

Khan sensed strange waves of synthetic mana, but he couldn't find anything that belonged to a living being. After peeking inside past the door, he saw a small room full of tall rectangular items with azure tubes running over their surfaces.

Khan stepped inside the room while shooting a confused glance at Lieutenant Pouille. The latter followed him inside before wearing a deep frown. Other soldiers peeked past the entrance, but they decided to remain outside after noticing that the room couldn't contain all of them.

"Do you know what these items are?" Khan asked while searching for buttons or writings that could give him some clue.

"They are servers," Lieutenant Pouille explained, "Pretty good servers. They even use an immense amount of mana."

"What's a server?" Khan asked.

"They help process information," Lieutenant Pouille replied. "The Global Army would kill to study these."

Khan dismissed that explanation after labeling it as useless for his escape. He inspected the room one last time before approaching the entrance. Yet, he stopped after seeing that Lieutenant Pouille's eyes remained glued on the tall servers.

"What is it?" Khan questioned.

"One of these would be enough for an entire space station," Lieutenant Pouille sighed before following Khan toward the entrance.

The Lieutenant didn't need to add anything else to explain what he meant. An entire space station only required one server, but that underground room had more than ten of them. Both Khan and the soldier couldn't understand what process would even need such massive technological power.

It immediately became evident that the underground structure had some important purposes. After all, something so important as the servers was in a random room that didn't feature any protection.

Khan let those worries escape from his mind once the group resumed the escape. The corridor had yet to show proper exits or actual habitation, and he didn't like remaining still without a plan in mind.

It didn't take long before another change appeared in Khan's view and forced the group to a stop. After another turn, he noticed that the corridor ended in a tall door that seemed to lead to an area featuring a different illumination instead of the dim lights around him.

Azure flashes fused with a constant bright white light, but Khan didn't focus too much on those features. He had sensed the presence of living beings as soon as the group had approached the new area.

Khan pointed at Lieutenant Pouille and the five soldiers who had taken the pieces of armor before proceeding forward. The six men and women followed him slowly, allowing him to approach the entrance before them.

Their silent movements didn't cause any reaction in the lifeforms inside the new area. Khan could get close enough to recognize the source of the presences sensed before. He could confirm that four Stal and a Guko were standing and sitting in silence, and only two of the tall aliens were first-level warriors.

'The jailer must have come from here,' Khan thought before turning toward his companions and doing his best to describe the situation.

Lieutenant Pouille didn't need Khan's descriptions, but the other five soldiers fixed their eyes on his left hand as he explained what would wait for them past that entrance. Luckily for Khan, the two species were so different that his companions understood him quickly.

The squad prepared themselves for a battle. They didn't need to speak to understand what they needed to do. Their priority was to kill the Stal. As for the Guko, they silently decided to interrogate it after dealing with the other threats.

Lieutenant Pouille raised his chained arms to perform a countdown with his fingers. Khan and the soldiers shot forward as soon as their leader closed both hands into fists, and the aliens inside the new area inevitably noticed their arrival.

Khan charged directly for one of the weak aliens. A series of desks and large chairs stood on his path, but he dodged them easily. A Stal was sitting on the opposite side of the room, but it had no time to stand up since a kick slammed on one of its heads and turned it into a bloody pulp.

Growls resounded, but they quickly turned into grunts as the soldiers began to fight with the aliens. Khan disregarded his companions to inspect the area before shooting toward an entrance on the room's opposite side. His senses reassured him, but he still peeked out of the opening. He saw the now-familiar corridor but nothing else.

The Stal did their best to fend off the intruders, but nothing could stop Lieutenant Pouille. Heads exploded, and bodies slammed on the ceiling whenever he waved his chained hands. The other soldiers were also quite strong, so all the tall aliens died in a matter of seconds.

The death of the last Stal made everyone glance at the Guko. The small alien had remained on its tall chair during the battle. It didn't even try to escape while it watched its companions die.

Delia reached the Guko and placed the piece of armor to its short throat before nodding at her companions. Lieutenant Pouille approached the first entrance to gesture at the other soldiers to advance, while Khan focused on inspecting the area.

The area was quite large. It featured the same tall servers seen in the previous room, but it also had two large desks, four chairs, and a few screens on the wall in front of the Guko.

A series of writings in a language that Khan didn't recognize filled the screens. The lack of images that depicted the cells or corridors reassured him, but he didn't let anything appear on his face. He didn't know why the Guko had remained still, but he wanted to show his coldest expression anyway.

The platoon had a bit more than twenty soldiers, and the room had enough space for them, but Lieutenant Pouille made sure to leave a few of them on both corridors. Of course, Khan decided to inspect the second entrance thoroughly before leaving his spot to someone else.

The room seemed distant to other areas or aliens, so the group slowly relaxed before encircling the Guko. Lieutenant Pouille even waited for Khan to arrive in front of the alien before starting the interrogation.

"Why didn't you try to escape?" Lieutenant Pouille asked, without trying to understand if the Guko knew the human language.

"I would have never outrun you," The Guko replied in a perfect human accent. "Also, you would have hurt me after catching me."

The alien's straightforwardness left Khan surprised, but the Lieutenant didn't seem to find any problem with that.

"How many Stal does this underground structure contain?" Lieutenant Pouille questioned.

"The entire structure currently has two battalions," The Guko replied. "Yet, I believe you are interested in the number of warriors nearby. There are only three squads in areas less than a day from here."

"Why are you collaborating so easily?" Lieutenant Pouille eventually asked the question that was afflicting everyone's minds.

"You would hurt me if I didn't," The Guko explained. "Moreover, showing my value can preserve my life, which is the ultimate goal of every living being. My actions are as logical as possible."

Khan finally understood how deep Guko's pragmatism was. Those aliens were basically robots that followed a series of simple goals, which worked in his favor.

"Why do you have no doors?" Khan asked, voicing another doubt that was in everyone's minds.

"The Stal are a dumb and short-tempered species," The Guko explained. "They would break the doors if they forgot how to open them. Moreover, being able to inspect each area helps their poor sense of direction."

"How can they get lost here?" Delia questioned. "There is only one corridor."

"I can list the number of cases involving dispersed Stal if you want," The Guko declared, but Delia quickly shook her head.

"Why are you cooperating with the Stal?" Lieutenant Pouille asked. "Is your species betraying the humans? Are there spies among you?"

"The Guko have a hard time understanding the idea behind lies," The alien revealed. "None of us can be a spy."

"How could you have kept your cooperation with the Stal hidden then?" Lieutenant Pouille continued.

"The Guko with the humans don't know about us," The alien declared. "Many of us have become prisoners of the Stal during the initial stages of the war, and some have managed to prove themselves useful enough to obtain partial freedom. I'm one of them."

"Useful how?" Khan asked.

"The Stal are aware that they can't win this war on their own," The Guko announced. "They need our weapons, technology, and intelligence, and we provided it to preserve our lives."

"What are you doing here?" Khan continued. "Why did you take human prisoners? How could you keep new weapons hidden from the humans and the members of your species helping them?"

"The majority of our species is with the humans," The Guko responded. "We couldn't win in a race toward the newest technologies, so we focused on developing a final weapon capable of winning the war on its own."

"How can something like this even exist?" Lieutenant Pouille questioned.

"It would be easier to show it to you," The Guko stated, but Delia pressed her piece of armor on its throat to stop any attempt to leave the chair.

"We aren't as stupid as you think," Lieutenant Pouille scoffed.

"I'm aware of your intelligence," The Guko explained. "I'm only unclear about the limits of your comprehension."

"Try us," Khan threatened.

"Can I have any assurance that you won't kill me in a burst of anger afterward?" The Guko asked.

"No," Khan, Lieutenant Pouille, Delia, and a few other soldiers answered at the same time.

"Very well," The Guko exclaimed in its aloof voice. "The final weapon's project is called anti-mana. The humans simply happen to be perfect guinea pigs due to their incredible diversity."

Chapter 246 - Armory

The soldiers immediately understood the Guko's attempt to ensure its safety. Its revelation hinted at awful scenes of humans used as test subjects or material for the anti-mana project. The alien had actually considered the possibility of an emotional reaction from its captors.

Flashes of anger appeared in the eyes of some soldiers, but Khan, Lieutenant Pouille, and those close to the Guko remained calm. The others also managed to contain themselves since the relationships among the platoon were relatively shallow except for a few exceptions.

"What's anti-mana?" Lieutenant Pouille questioned to turn the interrogation toward important topics.

The Guko remained speechless for a few seconds at that question. It didn't seem to understand how to explain the project better, but it tried anyway. "Project anti-mana strives to create a form of energy capable of countering every item, weapon, technique, or spell that uses mana as its fuel. In short, it has the potential to revolutionize the very structure of most societies and win this war in a series of short battles."

Lieutenant Pouille's question was a mere attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the projects, but he didn't need an explanation about the possible consequences of anti-mana. The same went for the other soldiers. Among the platoon, only Khan knew how life without mana worked due to his life in the Slums, but even he realized how revolutionary that change would be.

The sole idea of undoing five hundred years of technological progress founded on mana was unthinkable. Everything would fall apart if anti-mana became actual energy. Every discovery or achievement might become obsolete, especially when related to wars or battles in general.

"How close you are to completing this project?" Khan found himself asking out of pure curiosity.

"That's unclear even for us," The Guko explained. "The anti-mana project theoretically requires a comprehensive study of all the forms that mana can obtain. We don't know when we'll start seeing a pattern in its behavior, so we keep adding information as we develop different approaches."

"How close are you?" Delia repeated in a chilling voice. She couldn't remain completely calm when she realized that adding information meant using more humans as guinea pigs.

"I can't give real answers," The Guko replied.

"Guess then," Delia threatened while pressing her piece of armor even more on the alien's throat.

The Guko lowered its three eyes. They darted left and right as calculations happened in its mind, and its antennas imitated those movements before stopping once it found an answer. "The project should be thirty or forty percent complete, but most of us believe that its progression will accelerate after crossing fifty percent."

The explanation brought some reassurance. The project was still far away from completion, according to the Guko. In theory, the Global Army still had the time to take it before deciding what to do with it.

"You said you wanted to show us the anti-mana project," Lieutenant Pouille continued. "Is the lab close? Can we reach it without alerting the Stal?"

"Of course," The Guko exclaimed. "Those of us who have earned the Stal's trust have also gained the chance to build separate structures to avoid interferences. The Stal are too dumb to be close to valuable tech, so they let us on our own there."

"How can they be sure that you will follow the plan?" Khan asked. "They can't trust you so deeply, especially since they are aware of their stupidity."

"They have members of my species keeping track of our actions," The Guko revealed.

"Don't you have camaraderie or something in your species?" Delia questioned.

"Our species is already safe with the humans," The Guko stated. "Everything here is about individual survival."

The cold, robotic answer left no room for rebukes. The soldiers in the room understood that approach. Khan basically always had that mindset, so he could quickly accept that the Guko would bring that behavior to its limits.

"Lead us to the lab," Lieutenant Pouille ordered, but a series of eyes immediately fell on his figure.

"Shouldn't we prioritize our escape?" Khan voiced everyone's thoughts. "We are still deep into the enemy territory. The Global Army can interrogate this Guko on its own once we are safe."

"A possible leak in the information connected to the project will lead to its relocation," The Guko contradicted.

"See? This is our only chance to find the lab," Lieutenant Pouille declared.

"I still believe that we should leave first," Khan continued.

"The Guko are a pragmatic species," Lieutenant Pouille uttered while raising his chained arms and pointing at his shoulders. "They will naturally establish deals with the high-ranking soldier, am I right?"

"That's correct," The Guko promptly replied.

Khan fixed his cold eyes on Lieutenant Pouille. He knew that the soldier didn't care about him or the rest of his underlings. The man was probably trying to use that situation to regain the Global Army's favor, even if that meant putting his entire platoon at risk, but Khan couldn't do anything about the matter.

Going back on his own now would only worsen his situation. The Guko had confirmed that most troops had reached new battlefields, which meant that Khan couldn't use the initial elevator since it would bring him behind or in the middle of the enemy lines. His best bet was with his platoon and the alien.

Khan closed his eyes and nodded, and the Lieutenant could only rejoice at that scene. The soldier knew that Khan had gained a lot of favor after freeing everyone, so convincing his underlings to follow him without their savior would have been complicated.

"Let's go then," Lieutenant Pouille ordered. "I'd also wish to obtain a complete map of this underground structure and the current battle plans of the Stal's forces."

"I can get them immediately," The Guko revealed while stretching its short arms toward the screens, but Delia interrupted it by putting force on her piece of armor.

"I won't gain anything by creating a trap or alerting everyone," The Guko explained. "You would only kill me before attempting a reckless escape."

Delia didn't fully believe those robotic words, but Lieutenant Pouille placed his chained hands on the piece of armor before nodding at her. The soldier could only snort before retracting her weapon.

"Do you want me to remove the handcuffs too?" The Guko asked as it approached the screens.

"Of course," Lieutenant Pouille announced, and a series of mechanical noises resounded in the room as the handcuffs unlocked.

Khan cursed in his mind and his expression twisted as the handcuffs slid on his wrists. An intense wave of pain had reached his mind as soon as the heavy item touched the bandages. His suffering continued even after he freed his limbs and slowly removed his piece of armor.

"Hey," Delia whispered while approaching Khan and carefully placing a hand on his right shoulder. "Let me help you."

Khan felt the instinctive need to reject Delia, but he suppressed his social paranoia for the sake of his hand. He slowly removed his blood-stained bandages as Delia tore away her sleeve and picked his piece of armor to create a better sustain.

The lack of handcuffs allowed Khan to tie the armor around his forearm, creating a more manageable fortification. Delia couldn't help but show a surprised expression when she saw the actual state of the wounded hand, but she still proceeded to create firm bandages that could keep it still.

Delia didn't know how Khan had managed to escape from his cell, but the scene uncovered part of his deep resolve. He didn't only go through the interrogation and battle without letting his hand hinder him. He had also remained silent when she applied the new bandages.

"Thanks," Khan weakly whispered after checking his new bandages and waving his arms at his sides.

Delia had done an excellent job. His wounded hand didn't move at all when he moved. Still, most of his happiness came from his newfound freedom. He could finally rely on the Divine Reaper again, even if he didn't know how much the [Blood Shield] would help.

'I might need to try that out if I end up injuring my left hand too,' Khan sighed as his thoughts went to the Wave spell and Liiza.

There was something in Khan's arsenal that both Liiza and his training program had told him not to use. He was still unable to execute the Wave spell, and he didn't know if the human teachings were to blame.

Still, the alternative approach saw a complete disregard for the rules that past mages with the chaos element had set. The matter had been different with the Divine Reaper since his proficiency with the martial art was already bordering the competent level. He had suffered severe injuries, but they had been the result of a miscalculation. He knew what drawbacks his attempt could cause.

Instead, trying to execute the Wave spell while letting his emotions take control of the process could directly kill him. Khan even heard Paul's words resounding in his mind when he thought about that. He had no intention to become like one of the past soldiers who blew themselves up to test new approaches.

"Is it too tight?" Delia asked, forcing Khan to snap out of his thoughts.

Delia appeared truly worried about his state, and he blamed his sad expression for that. Thinking about Liiza always added evident longing to his face, and he had no control over it.

"It's perfect," Khan replied while wearing a fake smile.

Lieutenant Pouille and the Guko had completed the download of information on the soldier's device while Khan and Delia had been busy with the bandages. The group could move afterward, but the alien revealed more detail as it let everyone into the second corridor.

"There is an armory along the way," The Guko explained while walking carelessly and crossing corners without bothering to check them first. "Rifles and some weapons that the Stal have seized during your capture are stored there, but you would have to fight a small squad to enter it."

"Why didn't you say anything before?" Khan asked as he made sure that he and Lieutenant Pouille remained in front or next to the alien.

"You have asked about the lab, not the armory," The Guko justified. "I can take you to the lab without meeting Stal or showing you a short detour that would involve a small battle."

Khan would have already seen red flags in those words, but they had come out of a species that struggled to lie. He had learnt about that feature from a Guko, but its explanation had sounded believable. It even made a lot of sense when paired to their almost complete lack of personalities.

Khan's doubts or thoughts didn't matter too much when Lieutenant Pouille had made it clear that he was in charge. The soldier didn't hesitate to accept the Guko's suggestion and prolong the group's stay inside the underground structure.

The corridor never changed. It was the same large metallic tunnel that featured an evident lack of branches or large underground areas. Most of the structure seemed made of mere passages that connected one small important room to another.

The armory was slightly different than the previous control room. The corridor unfolded into a relatively large hall that had many lockers at its sides. Five Stal lazily patrolled the area or sat on the metal floor without paying much attention to their surroundings. They almost seemed to have forgotten their job there.

Khan and Lieutenant Pouille inspected the Stal and the lockers from the turn right before that area. The five aliens were all first-level warriors armed with rifles, but that wasn't a problem on its own. The main issue was that the corridor continued for a while before reaching the hall, so the aliens would have the time to point their weapons and fire them before any intruder could get to them.

Lieutenant Pouille had already shown that the rifles couldn't do much against his spells, but the soldiers still feared that the Stal would sound the alarm if they recalled how to do that. The situation required a distraction, and Khan didn't hesitate to offer himself for the job.

A series of whispers preceded the simple plan. Lieutenant Pouille nodded at Khan before preparing himself to sprint forward. Delia squeezed his shoulders to reassure him before doing the same, and the other soldiers also showed encouraging faces or gestures.

Khan inspected everything coldly, limiting himself to a fake smile for Delia. He didn't offer himself as the initial distraction due to his speed. He only wanted to be in a position of control during the attack.

After the soldiers involved with the mission completed their preparations, Khan shot forward, crossing the corner and sprinting across the corridor to reach the armory in no time.

The Stal were in no position or mood to notice Khan right away, but they still jumped to their feet and began to point their weapons when they saw someone stepping inside the armory. Still, they were too late at that point, and Khan could easily slip past them to reach the alien near to the hall's exit.

The Stal had remained half-kneeled on the floor while aiming its rifle at the corridor, but that only made a perfect target for Khan's technique. The alien fired a shot that missed him as he covered his hand with the [Blood Shield] and applied the theory behind the Divine Reaper.

One of the Stal's heads split in half and fell on the floor as Khan stopped in front of the hall's entrance. Pain spread from his left hand, but its intensity was far inferior to what his other hand had to suffer. Still, the situation didn't give him the time to assess his injuries since multiple angry eyes and rifles turned toward him.

The four Stal tried to aim at Khan, but a series of loud steps suddenly resounded behind them and made them turn again. Other soldiers had crossed the corner, and Lieutenant Pouille was in the lead.

Khan used that chance to approach another Stal and wave his left hand. The pain intensified as a head fell, but everything was still bearable. The other aliens disregarded him and fired at the incoming soldiers, but Lieutenant Pouille stopped the bullets, giving Khan the time to reach another opponent.

Khan's hand had become a firm blade with the addition of the [Blood Shield], but he still suffered when using it as an actual weapon. Even the Niqols' technique couldn't make his body match the first-grade knife, at least for now.

Lieutenant Pouille entered the hall before Khan could go after his fourth opponent, and the battle ended a few seconds afterward. Khan could finally inspect his hand when peace spread among him. His skin had broken in many spots, and his overall grip felt weak, but nothing important was broken.

Chapter 247 - Lab

'Incomplete,' Khan thought when trying to find the right word to describe his technique.

The [Blood Shield] had provided the structural firmness required to prevent his bones from breaking, but his skin and the muscles under it had suffered during the execution of the Divine Reaper. He had salvaged his hand with that adjustment, but he couldn't let go of the knives just yet.

The issue wasn't too important now since Khan could locate his knife from the corner of his eye. The Stal had locked it behind one of the metal lockers that featured small windows that showed what they contained. He would go back to full power soon, but he didn't abandon his new technique completely.

Knives and other weapons were external parts of his strength. Crises could remove them temporarily or forever, depending on how grave they were. Khan acknowledged that it was better to keep as much power on himself to be ready for every situation, and his new technique could help in that matter.

Still, Khan also accepted that he would probably need to be a second or third-level warrior before obtaining the physical resilience required to remove drawbacks. He even guessed that the Divine Reaper would get stronger as his ability with mana and proficiency level increased, but his

reasoning became too complicated at that point. It had too many variables that he couldn't calculate to worrying about them right now.

The soldiers stormed inside the hall after the battle ended. Many had watched Khan's incredible battle prowess. He was fast and deadly even against opponents that humans couldn't theoretically overpower at close range.

His strength, coupled with the fact that he was the reason behind the escape, only increased the soldiers' respect. Some of them even started to show signs of reverence. Khan had barely entered the second month of his second year in the Global Army, but he was already leagues beyond their peers.

Most of Khan's companions were even far older than him. They had to overcome problems within their families and the Global Army, which had eventually slowed down their improvements. Yet, those years felt wasted in front of someone who had virtually reached that power on his own.

The Guko didn't need orders to open the lockers. It reached one of the consoles at the center of the hall and tinkered with its menus under Lieutenant Pouille's strict surveillance before all the weapons in the armory became available to the soldiers.

Khan's left hand felt sore and weak, but he still went straight for his knife and tested the power behind his grip. The result felt rather disappointing, so he tore away another piece of his trousers before applying bandages around his fingers. His idea was to tie his weapon to his palm, but Delia promptly came into his aid.

"What are you doing?" Delia chuckled before heaving a helpless sigh when she saw Khan trying to tie bandages with his single usable hand.

"I don't want to drop it," Khan shortly explained while trying to make a knot with a finger and his mouth before giving up and letting Delia take over.

"You know that you can ask for help, right?" Delia scolded. "I believe everyone here would love to give you a hand. Oops, bad choice of words."

"Do you like to tease injured men?" Khan joked while Delia undid the bandages and wrapped them again around his hand without tying the knife inside them.

"Only when they think that they have to do everything on their own," Delia sighed before revealing a cheerful smile. "You are too young to play the broody solitary man. Let big sis take you under her wing."

"I'm not Faith or Milo," Khan rejected the offer while glancing at the siblings who were checking the rifles retrieved from the lockers.

"You definitely aren't," Delia said in a pensive tone while completing the knot, "Which only makes watching you sadder."

Khan revealed a fake smile before recalling something that he had yet to mention. "I'm sorry for Ian. He seemed a good guy."

"We weren't lovers or anything similar," Delia promptly announced before crossing her arms and snorting softly. "He could only dream about that. Still, he has been a good friend. Maybe dying up there has saved him from the anti-mana project."

"Maybe," Khan whispered before trying to stick his knife inside the bandages.

"Don't ruin my masterpiece!" Delia scolded. "Try holding it normally first. It should feel firm enough."

Khan glanced at Delia's slightly annoyed expression before testing her words. It turned out that the bandages helped his tendons and muscles create a firmer grip, allowing him to hold the knife tightly without requiring much strength.

"Told you," Delia announced proudly at the sight of Khan's surprised expression.

The right corner of Khan's mouth inevitably turned upward in front of Delia's earnest approach. Still, Lieutenant Pouille didn't let him appreciate that short peaceful moment for too long.

"Gear up quickly," Lieutenant Pouille ordered. "Get one rifle each and move toward back into the corridor. We have another target to hit before getting into the real mess."

The orders reminded the soldiers about the dangerous part of their mission. Everything was going well and smoothly inside the underground structure due to the Guko and the relative absence of Stal. However, their path would eventually lead to the surface, deep inside the enemy territory.

Khan had only gotten a taste of how battles worked on the surface, but that had been enough to accept the value of weapons. Yet, a problem remained, and he decided to voice it to Delia after picking a rifle from a locker.

"How do you use this thing?" Khan whispered to Delia, who had already turned to sort her things out.

Delia glanced at Khan waving the rifle left and right. She felt the need to laugh at his almost clueless face, but she suppressed that feeling to focus on helping her companion.

"I guess you know how to fire," Delia commented, and Khan promptly nodded. "Everything is a matter of stance then. The butt goes on your shoulder and your other hand on the handguard. This button removes the magazine, but you can refill it by sending mana to the rifle. Still, I suggest you take an additional magazine in case you find yourself empty or tired in the middle of a battle."

"That sounds easy," Khan commented before securing the rifle behind his back through its belt.

"That's how it's meant to be," Delia explained as a tinge of sadness seeped into her voice. "Everyone can fire a weapon. The point is to make even untrained soldiers able to kill."

Khan showed his honest half-smile again in front of Delia's sad comment, but she quickly regained a hint of cheerfulness and nodded before turning again. Khan reminded himself to tie another magazine to the belt with the sheath for the knife before joining the other soldiers.

Lieutenant Pouille let the Guko lead the group into a part of the previously crossed corridor. The alien then tinkered with a wall, and buttons slowly came out of it as it pressed them in seemingly random order.

"I would prepare the rifles," The Guko suggested.

"I thought the place didn't have Stal," Khan complained.

"It doesn't," The Guko explained, "But the other members of my species there might decide to sound the alarm before understanding what's their best chance to survive. A rifle pointed at their heads should solve that."

Khan couldn't argue anymore, and even Lieutenant Pouille felt the Guko's words to be reasonable. A simple gesture with his head made Gloria and other confident marksmen raise their rifles and point them at the wall as they waited for the alien to open the passage.

The Guko pressed one last button, and a whooshing noise resounded in the corridor as the wall started to slide open. The two sides of the metal door moved slowly, but the soldiers quickly noticed three Guko standing on top of narrow staircases that allowed them to oversee a long and bloody metal table.

The Guko immediately stopped what they were doing when the soldiers pointed the rifles at them. Khan couldn't help but notice how those aliens were different from the one leading his group. They had collars around their necks, and they wore dirty and torn rags. Moreover, a few pale bruises tainted their faces, describing how their imprisonment had been far from peaceful.

Khan's eyes soon fell on the table. Blood and other disgusting body parts still occupied its white surface. He even recognized a foot among that mess, and it didn't take him much to connect it to the last soldier taken by from the prison.

"We only vivisect and add information to our register here," The allied Guko explained. "The actual testing workshop is right behind this area."

The allied Guko advanced, and the soldiers followed behind it. Most of them decided to divert their gazes as soon as they understood what the table contained. Some felt angry enough to glare at the aliens on the narrow staircases while moving their hands dangerously close to their rifles, but Lieutenant Pouille made sure to scold everyone with his eyes.

The allied Guko reached the end of that long hall before using some screens to open the wall. Another whooshing noise resounded, and a far different area unfolded in the group's vision.

The second area was big and had a large circular tube that appeared empty at the moment. Yet, a container filled with a dark-blue gas stood at its center and illuminated the entire hall with its dim light.

A series of smaller tubes came out of the circular item and entered the walls before coming out in the first area and going directly at the table's base. The project seemed to have two different phases connected, and the dark-blue gas probably was the product of that study.

"I can give a detailed description of the process," The allied Guko exclaimed. "However, I believe you want to keep these explanations for later. We don't have too much time."

"How much of the anti-mana project is here?" Lieutenant Pouille asked. "You must have other underground labs across the planets."

"There are four more, but they are near the frontlines," The Guko revealed. "As I said before, humans are the best guinea pigs, so the labs have to be close to where they can appear."

"Do these labs share data and updates?" Lieutenant Pouille continued.

"Of course," The Guko declared. "We share information once a day and process everything again to check that no mistakes have happened during the project."

"Can you access the other labs remotely?" Lieutenant Pouille questioned.

"I would need the authorization of the Guko managing them," The alien replied. "I'm afraid that's impossible even if I explain my situation. You can't promise those Guko's safety, so they will never collaborate."

"But you can access this, right?" Lieutenant Pouille asked before continuing without waiting for an answer. "How much would the anti-mana project lose if we wiped this lab clean?"

"Only a day worth of data in terms of immediate loss," The Guko explained. "The greatest loss would be the destruction of valuable equipment that's hard to replace. The project as a whole would take a heavy hit."

Lieutenant Pouille fell silent as he scratched his beard. His underlings could see that he had come inside the lab with a plan, but the last revelations had shattered it.

"I know that you want to stop the anti-mana project," Khan decided to speak, "But we can't remain down here for too long. It's clear that we can't reach the other labs. Let's go back to HQ and regroup before sending forces prepared to study this entire underground structure."

"You really don't get it, do you?" Lieutenant Pouille sighed. "Humans are the best material for this project. What do you think the Global Army will do once it gets its hands on this knowledge?"

A realization abruptly filled Khan's mind. He didn't need to think too much to understand that the Global Army would do everything in its power to obtain the anti-mana energy, even if it meant sacrificing many soldiers in the process.

"Anti-mana can't exist," Lieutenant Pouille stated before a resolute expression appeared on his face. Then, he neared his hand to the allied Guko, and its head exploded after a faint discharge of his vibrations.

Chapter 248 - Surface

The execution of the Guko turned the atmosphere upside-down. The soldiers didn't feel good after seeing the remains of their companion on the table. Still, everything gained a different vibe after Lieutenant Pouille killed the alien without a single warning.

Many instinctively opened their mouths to complain, but they remained silent when they recalled that Lieutenant Pouille had already obtained everything he needed for the escape. The Guko had downloaded the Stal's battle plans and the blueprint of the underground structure on his phone. Leaving wouldn't be a problem, but his actions had still affected them deeply.

Khan had seen enough tragedies in his life to remain calm. Lieutenant Pouille's actions had surprised him, but he understood the reasons behind them. The soldier had acted out of fear that his world could fall apart due to the revolutionary form of energy.

'How far is he willing to go?' Khan wondered as his hand casually neared the knife in his sheath.

Keeping the anti-mana project a secret was impossible since the entire platoon would go through a briefing after reuniting with the Global Army. The Lieutenant could ensure that everyone would keep their mouth shut only if he shut them himself.

"Shoot them," Lieutenant Pouille firmly ordered after pointing at the three Guko on the staircases.

"We can help you," The first Guko pleaded in a robotic voice.

"This structure is vast and complicated," The second Guko added. "Having a guide is necessary."

"We know the paths toward the other labs," The third Guko exclaimed in an attempt to use the Lieutenant's intentions to its favor.

Their aloof but honest pleas made the marksmen hesitate. It was easy to kill from the trenches or shoot the Stal that had forced them to defecate in a small hole in the corner of their cells. Instead, executing defenseless Guko who had every intention to collaborate made their triggers incredibly heavy.

"I gave you an order," Lieutenant Pouille stated in a cold voice, and Gloria ended up being the first to overcome her hesitation.

A clean shot turned the second Guko's head into a bloody pulp. Gloria's actions made the other two marksmen fire, and the area soon fell silent as the soldiers' gazes converged on the three corpses filling the narrow staircases with pale-green blood.

Lieutenant Pouille nodded before throwing his punches around. The circular tube didn't survive long under his assault, and the same went for the various screens in the second hall. He even used his spells whenever he saw a server or something that seemed able to store data.

The soldiers inspected that calm and calculated destruction in silence. They remained still, and only Khan eventually decided to step over the remains of the circular item to get close to the spherical container with the dark-blue gas.

Khan was too worried about the gas' properties to touch the transparent surface of its container. Still, he remained curious about that substance and let his senses inspect it.

His sensitivity to mana normally reacted only to that energy, but every environment featured it. The complete absence of mana was another detail that he could study with his senses, but the gas felt peculiar nonetheless.

The dark-blue gas was still mana, but Khan noticed how it released faint radiation that kept the energy outside the container away. It basically created a small area where normal mana couldn't enter.

'Is anti-mana just another element?' Khan wondered, but the arrival of the Lieutenant put an end to his inspection.

"Do you think I should disperse it?" Lieutenant Pouille asked when he gazed at the dark-blue mana.

Khan's eyebrows arched in surprise. The Lieutenant was asking for his opinion, and his firm expression revealed how serious he was about the matter. Khan could only guess that his actions during the escape had given away the power of his senses.

"We don't know what effects it will have on us," Khan responded. "It seems to push mana away, but I can't learn much more."

"Same here," Lieutenant Pouille sighed. "Though, it does feel like mana. Anyway, I guess we should fire at it when we are about to leave."

The friendly interaction reassured Khan about the Lieutenant's intentions. Yet, another doubt remained strong in his mind.

"What should we tell the Global Army?" Khan asked as he followed Lieutenant Pouille into the first hall where he was about to resume his destruction.

"We tell it the truth," Lieutenant Pouille stated before punching a hole into one of the screens. "The situation would have been different if we brought something back. Instead, HQ would prioritize destroying the project since it can't have direct access to it. Everything that comes after that is outside of our control."

"What do you mean?" Khan asked.

"You can't destroy an idea," Lieutenant Pouille explained. "I can only hope that the Guko on our side are dumber than these."

Khan let the Lieutenant complete his destruction before gathering outside the lab with the rest of the soldiers. The Guko's death had put him in the annoying situation to depend on his superior, but he could only play along.

Lieutenant Pouille studied his phone for a few long minutes as he rejoined his underlings. The device battery wouldn't last much longer after the week spent inside the cell, so he made sure to memorize the escape path in case it turned off.

The sunlight would solve the battery issue, but the group had to reach the surface first. The phones would also probably fail to access the Global Army's network since soldiers would be deep in the enemy territory, but that wasn't too important when the Lieutenant had the Stal's battle plans.

"I have it," Lieutenant Pouille exclaimed. "There is an elevator past the armory. Let's go. Gloria, blow the anti-mana up once we are set."

Khan took his place in the lead, next to Lieutenant Pouille, and the rest of the soldiers created a line behind them. Gloria peeked inside the lab with her long rifle, and a simple exchange of glances with her superior was enough to make her open fire.

The group began to run forward as soon as an explosion resounded from inside the lab. They had already crossed that part of the corridor, so they reached the armory in no time, but a high-pitched alarm suddenly started to echo from behind them.

None of the soldiers stopped moving, but everyone realized what had happened. The underground structure probably had protocols in place for eventual leaks of the dark-blue gas, and the destruction of the container had eventually triggered them.

Mechanical and whooshing noises resounded from behind the group as they left the armory and proceeded through the corridor that followed. The underground structure was locking down the areas affected by the incomplete anti-mana, but those effects didn't involve their location. Still, anxiety inevitably built in everyone's mind since the Stal would finally understand that something troublesome had happened.

Khan let Lieutenant Pouille get in front of him whenever a new area appeared or the corridor divided itself into multiple branches. The soldier never hesitated, so the group advanced quickly. The place was also completely deserted, so they could avoid getting into useless fights.

The escape felt endless. The underground structure was immense, and Khan soon lost himself even if he had tried his best to memorize every turn and path crossed in the past hours. Everything became more intricate as they advanced, but Lieutenant Pouille never stopped to recheck his device.

The number of turns and branches that the group had to cross made Khan question whether Lieutenant Pouille's confidence was only a pretense, but a familiar scene eventually unfolded in his eyes. The corridor ended into a large rectangular platform that brought joy to the sweaty and tired soldiers.

The group didn't hesitate to cross the corridor and jump on the platform. Still, nothing moved, so everyone started looking for buttons that could activate it.

Delia soon found a series of buttons in the corner of the platform. There were four of them, and she instinctively pressed the topmost. That ended up triggering another alarm that she quickly turned off by slamming her fingers on that key again.

Delia then pressed the second topmost button, and the elevator finally started to rise. The area above the group was dark, but a fissure soon opened and allowed the pale light of the two moons to seep inside the rectangular cavity.

"Stop staring," Lieutenant Pouille cursed when he saw that many of his underlings had fallen into a daze at the sight of the sky. "Prepare your rifles. You don't know what's waiting for us up there."

Khan had already drawn his knife, but those words made him suspect that the Lieutenant didn't mention everything about the escape. His senses and the scenes that unfolded in his view as the elevator reached the surface only confirmed that idea. He jumped forward as soon as a two-headed figure became visible.

Khan crossed the small patch of ground that divided him from the surface before the elevator even began to stop. He found himself flying toward a confused Stal, and his knife promptly shot forward. The alien fell on its back after the weapon dug a hole into its right head.

A series of azure flashes illuminated the area as soon as Khan landed on the alien. His companions had fired their weapons after noticing the many aliens that had gathered around the elevator to check who was reaching the surface.

Khan could see a few buildings and sense multiple aliens. The Lieutenant had made them come out in a settlement, but there didn't seem too many aliens there. The surprise attack had already killed fifteen of them, leaving only ten or so Stal spread among the different structures.

"Clean everything up," Lieutenant Pouille whispered before inspecting his surroundings and charging toward one of the buildings.

Khan imitated his superior as he shot toward a building that contained two first-level Stal. A tall, sleepy figure appeared in his view when he arrived in front of the structure's entrance, but the event didn't surprise him. He promptly jumped forward, and his glowing knife severed both heads in half.

The Stal fell lifelessly on the ground, and Khan jumped over it to reach the second presence. He found the second alien snoring loudly on a simple but large bed, and his knife didn't hesitate to descend. He even repeated his attack to make sure to pierce both heads.

When Khan left the building, he noticed that the battles had pretty much ended. The Stal had shown awful responsiveness to the sudden attack. Many didn't even bother to wake up among the mess, but Khan found it almost understandable. His group had come out deep inside the enemy territory. No one would expect the appearance of such a numerous and armed group of humans.

Lieutenant Pouille ran from building to building to make sure that his underlings had killed everyone. He ignored Khan's structure and inspected his surroundings again to fuse the map seen on the phone with those scenes.

The soldier eventually took his phone out again, but the device had died during the escape. He had to glance at the moons and check the hour from one of his underlings before picking a direction and starting another run. The settlement didn't have vehicles that the soldiers could use, but the Lieutenant didn't appear worried about that issue.

The soldiers seemed to run for their lives. Lieutenant Pouille often ended up distancing himself from the group to check the areas ahead, but he always let them catch up with him afterward. It took a while, but a forest eventually appeared in the distance and forced everyone to accelerate.

The sky had partially brightened by the time the group reached the edges of the forest, but that only made them run faster. They had to put as much distance as possible from the settlement to avoid getting taken by surprise by hidden elevators again, and Lieutenant Pouille never failed to urge them.

The forest wasn't too big, and its trees didn't create the best safe areas. They were tall, but their trunks were thin, and their red-brown crowns didn't have many leaves. Yet, the Lieutenant still ordered the group to stop after reaching a deep area that hid them from the barren plains around it.

"Let's rest here for a few hours," The Lieutenant ordered. "We are far from safe, but we are on the surface. Make sure to piss, sleep, and suppress your hunger. We'll get food after seizing the next settlement."

Chapter 249 - Path

The long and tiring escape culminated into a tense break. The stress and exhaustion accumulated after spending seven days in the cells and running for entire hours almost made the soldiers faint now that they had the chance to relax.

Khan hated the idea of sleeping, but he had remained awake for too long. A short nap wouldn't allow him to recover completely, but it wouldn't hurt either, especially since his hands also needed some attention.

The slightly damp environment felt welcoming while Khan walked among the trees and found an isolated spot close to the main group. Sitting on the layer of red-brown leaves that covered the ground was almost natural for him. Falling asleep turned out to be easy now that he didn't have to be in a cramped warm room.

The nightmare was as punctual as ever, but the arrival of a foreign presence awakened Khan before the solar system could fill his view. He quickly opened his eyes and turned to his left, but he relaxed at the sight of Delia's surprised face.

"Talking about a light sleeper," Delia joked.

"How long did I sleep?" Khan asked as he scratched the corner of his eyes before glancing at the few sunrays that had started to seep through the crowns.

"Less than an hour," Delia replied while crouching next to him. "You can rest a bit longer. The others won't be ready to leave anytime soon."

"Why aren't you resting?" Khan asked while taking out his phone and throwing it into one of the bright patches in front of him.

"I slept a lot inside my cell," Delia explained before pointing at Khan's hands and revealing a faint smile. "Also, someone had to change your bandages."

"You don't need to worry about me so much," Khan sighed while ripping away his sleeve and giving it to Delia. "I'm resilient."

"We would have turned into materials for the Guko's project if it weren't for you," Delia replied while turning the torn sleeve into bandages and taking Khan's hands carefully. "Let us help."

Khan didn't say anything else and focused on his condition. His left hand was mostly fine since it had never suffered severe injuries. It didn't even feel weak anymore, but Delia decided to reinforce it anyway.

The right hand was still a mess. A single day wasn't nearly enough to heal broken bones, and the pain that they radiated when Delia removed the piece of armor to handle the bandages only proved how bad the situation was.

Still, Khan rejoiced in front of the slight improvements. His right hand had long since stopped bleeding, and its superficial injuries had also healed. It would take a while and proper medical attention to fix everything, but he felt that everything would eventually be okay.

"Did you use this to escape?" Delia asked after picking the large ring and inserting it in Khan's fingers carefully before applying bandages over it.

"I wonder if I should throw it away," Khan admitted. "I think it's a simple key, but you can never be too sure."

"I bet you'll get something good if you manage to bring it back to the space station," Delia responded. "Keep it. The Stal will learn about our position anyway. No point worrying so much when our situation is already quite bad."

Khan nodded and let Delia complete the bandages before testing them out through a few quick gestures. She was right. The Guko working with the Stal wouldn't take long to figure out where his group had escaped, especially since they had left a trail of corpses behind them. The point in the escape was to be faster than their pursuers so that they couldn't catch up even if they learnt their position.

"You never take it easy, do you?" Delia commented when she saw that Khan closed his eyes to enter a meditative state.

"We'll share a drink once we get back," Khan promised.

"I want to smoke so badly," Delia complained before sitting next to him and placing her back on the trunk to rest.

Khan knew that meditating would only worsen his hunger, but he felt the need to take care of his hand. The influence that his mana applied to his body intensified as he focused on his training, and a faint pain spread in his mind as that energy tried to fix everything wrong with him.

Those short hours couldn't heal much, but they allowed Khan to put his hand on the correct path. It was incredible how deeply his mana knew his body. He wasn't a doctor, but he could see that his energy tried to align bones and muscles.

The faint shouts and orders that resounded from the main group forced Khan to come out of his meditative state. Delia had hugged her legs and had placed her head on her knees during her nap, but the trunk was too small, so she had ended up partially lying on him.

Khan took her shoulder and shook her lightly. Delia appeared lost for a few seconds when she reopened her eyes, but the shouts that reached their position soon reminded her about her situation.

The two stood up and walked back to the main group after Khan's retrieved his phone. It turned out that all the soldiers had used the illuminated spots on the layer of leaves to charge their devices. Tired faces had gathered around Lieutenant Pouille as they waited for him to complete studying the map on his screen to find a suitable path.

The Lieutenant didn't have it easy. The battle plans on his phone were clear, but some of them might have become unreliable after the escape. He didn't know whether the Stal had decided to close on them or had continued with their initial tactics.

Moreover, the environment in that region didn't help the soldiers. The forest was one of the few natural covers in the otherwise flat area. All the possible paths back to the allied territories would force them to march in the open.

Lieutenant Pouille knew that the chances of ending up in another encirclement would only increase if his group spent too long in the open. Stealing vehicles and making their way directly toward allied areas was their best bet, but that only created another problem.

The Stal were advancing now that they had defeated part of their enemies. Most of their vehicles were near the frontlines. The settlements in Lieutenant Pouille's area would probably lack those assets, which made his decision even harder.

"We don't have safe paths," The Lieutenant eventually announced. "We can try to take a long road around the trenches to reunite with other platoons of the thirty-seventh battalion, but that would stretch our travel by several days."

"Can I take a look?" Khan asked, and the Lieutenant handed him the phone.

Khan could immediately see what the Lieutenant wanted to propose. One of the trenches was relatively close to their position. It would take the group less than a day to reach it, but that meant fighting in the open against a force that outnumbered them.

"Is there a fight here?" Khan asked while pointing at the nearest trench depicted on the screen.

"Probably," Lieutenant Pouille revealed before taking his phone back. "We can theoretically take the trench by surprise, but the settlement nearby would be able to send reinforcements. We can't even seize it before approaching the frontlines due to the secret elevators."

"Can we even bet on our allies?" Khan questioned.

The Stal had probably set up a trench to defend against human forces, meaning that the soldiers would have access to reinforcements as long as they managed to notify their allies. However, Khan had seen how unwilling the Lieutenant had been to leave his position back then, so he could guess that the other higher-ups would share the same mindset.

"We can always split and send a team past the trench," Khan suggested.

"Someone would have to be a decoy without knowing whether reinforcements would ever arrive," Lieutenant Pouille sighed.

"I'm fast," Khan exclaimed.

"You are also one of the best warriors we have," Lieutenant Pouille declared.

"I'm no different than a below-average marksman if the battle turns into trench warfare," Khan responded.

"How do you even plan on convincing the allied forces to advance on your own?" Lieutenant Pouille asked. "Leave it. The rest of the battalion wouldn't even trust my words without a proper briefing. We must take the long path."

That conclusion didn't leave room for complaints, and Khan couldn't say much either. The Lieutenant knew how the higher-ups thought better than his underlings, so he had to trust his words, even if the other plan had fewer variables.

"We should still have some form of surprise effect if we play it smart," Lieutenant Pouille explained. "Our priority right now is to vanish so that the Stal won't be able to encircle us. Prepare yourselves. We have a long road ahead of us."

The soldiers suppressed their complaints and followed after the Lieutenant as he resumed the march across the forest. The area featured a few animals, but the group didn't have time to hunt them. They were also too loud for that task.

Nevertheless, the Lieutenant and a few soldiers had a general understanding of Ecoruta's flora, so they managed to seize edible roots along the way. The group never stopped for more than a few minutes, but they couldn't ignore the few sources of food and water that they found.

The forest quickly ended, and a seemingly endless barren plain expanded from that position, but the Lieutenant quickly picked a direction and led the group forward. Their return in the open brought rekindled the tension that the rest had slightly appeased, but the hurried pace forced the soldiers to remain focused on saving energy.

Ecoruta's sun was hot, and the constant march across its barren areas only worsened the soldiers' condition. Even the first-level warriors among them ended up slowing down after tense hours went by.

The rifles turned into anchors that tried to fix their feet on the ground, and their uniforms transformed into damp tissues that irritated their skin. Their shoes also started to burn, but the Lieutenant didn't allow any break.

Khan's eyes darted left and right as he made sure to pay attention to his surroundings. Still, his sensitivity to mana couldn't do much in that situation since the plain expanded past its range. He would probably see eventual opponents before sensing them.

Everyone expected Stal to appear in the distance sooner or later. Their group wasn't large, but they were still running right in the middle of the enemy territory. Lieutenant Pouille was keeping them away from the settlements, but the risk of being discovered existed and was even relatively strong.

The morning went by, but no Stal appeared in sight. The soldiers didn't know if the aliens had disregarded their escape or had been too busy in the trenches. Still, the barren environment that surrounded them couldn't provide answers.

A change happened when the group found an abandoned trench on their way. According to the battle plans on Lieutenant Pouille's phone, the Stal had long since left that area to advance, so he decided to use the area as a temporary resting spot.

The soldiers entered the trench and quickly set up a guard duty before taking naps or removing their sweaty uniforms to let them dry. No one cared about privacy in that situation, and many even ignored the alluring half-naked companions resting near them. They could barely muster the strength to think when their hunger and thirst had seized control of most of their brains.

Khan didn't sleep, but he didn't volunteer for the guard duty either. He paid attention to his surroundings on his own, but only whenever he forced himself to come out of his meditative state.

Nothing came in their direction, but that didn't reassure the group too much. If a battle had to happen, they preferred to have it in their current advantageous position. Yet, Lieutenant Pouille summoned everyone after a mere hour and forced them to resume the march.

Khan ended up waking up Delia again, and she quickly ran after him after donning back her uniform. Many imitated her due to the confidence that Khan radiated in that unclear situation. He had actually gained a decent number of loyal followers during the escape.

Of course, Khan didn't bother to pay attention to those soldiers. Even Delia's half-naked sleeping figure couldn't distract him.

When the night approached, the group saw the scenery in front of them changing again. Relatively short buildings appeared in the distance and forced everyone to crouch as Gloria began to inspect the area through her rifle's scope.

"They seem calm," Gloria commented.

"How far are we from our elevator?" Khan asked.

"Not far enough," Lieutenant Pouille revealed. "We must get past this settlement to be relatively safe, but there is a trench nearby and a large camp on the other side. Let's lie down and wait until it's deep into the night before moving."

The soldiers could only obey. The Lieutenant had calculated that they would reach that area during the dark hours, but they were still in the middle of a plain. No one had noticed them because they were still far away from the settlement, but the Stal would see something if they resumed moving now.

Needless to say, some soldiers fell asleep during the long wait on the ground. Many of them couldn't fight the tiredness and stress accumulated for so long, and every break turned into an opportunity to recover.

Khan and those who remained awake kicked the soldiers that started to snore or make too many noises, but the night eventually reached its darkest hour. Lieutenant Pouille whispered orders at that point, and the group followed him as he resumed the advance.

The soldiers didn't run. They marched while keeping their backs bent forward to avoid exposing themselves to eventual night guards. The Lieutenant even led the group to the settlement's right to avoid getting too close.

Each step felt too loud as it resounded among the silence of the night. No one spoke, and Lieutenant Pouille used hand gestures to give simple orders from time to time. They mostly involved Gloria and her scope, but they also dealt with eventual changes of direction.

The slow, sneaky march turned out to be far more tiring than their previous hurried advance. The tension almost made some soldiers trip and voice gasps at the first unfamiliar noise, but everyone managed to remain as silent as possible.

The tensest moment arrived when the group crossed the settlement. The faint hope that the group could overcome that hindrance without getting noticed tried to take control of their minds, but they suppressed it as they remained focused on their task. Cold drops of sweat fell from the soldiers' foreheads and tried to distract them, but everyone behaved impeccably.

Still, perfection wasn't always enough. A loud growl suddenly resounded from behind the soldiers, and a series of heavy steps began to echo in the night. The group turned to check whether the alarm was for them, but a series of azure flashes filled their vision and forced them to abandon their attempt to remain hidden.

"Run!" Lieutenant Pouille shouted even if everyone had already started darting forward.

The initial bullets missed everyone, but they increased as more and more Stal woke up and started firing at the humans. Still, the soldiers had put enough distance between them and the settlement, and the darkness of the night worked in their favor. The azure projectiles flew in their direction, but they often ended up hitting the ground behind them.

Some bullets successfully fell among the group, and their explosive power managed to hurt or destabilize a few soldiers, but no one stopped to help them.

Khan soon found himself in the lead, next to Lieutenant Pouille. He had already been in a similar situation on Nitis, so his senses worked at full speed to make him dodge any bullet that flew in his direction. He jumped left and right whenever he ended up in the trajectory of those masses of mana.

"Don't stop until you reach the canyon!" Lieutenant Pouille shouted even if no one could see that destination in the darkness of the night.

Some died, but many managed to leave the range of the rifles and survive that sudden attack. The canyon also became visible as the minutes passed. It was nothing more than a narrow passage that led toward underground areas, but that was more than enough for the soldiers. Nothing would be able to fall on them if they reached the depths of that territory.

The passage slowly revealed its true nature. It was a steep slide that led directly to the dark depths of the canyon. Climbing it would require a long time due to its frail structure, but no one cared about that right now. Everyone followed Khan and Lieutenant Pouille without bothering to think too far into the future.

Khan prepared himself to jump inside that long hole that stretched in the distance, but a bright azure light suddenly shone above the group and made many of them lift their heads. Khan's senses warned him about the presence of a dense mass of mana falling in his direction, so he promptly sprinted to his left and activated the [Blood Shield] to cover his right side.

The soldiers behind Khan imitated him, and the same went for Lieutenant Pouille, even if he moved in the opposite direction. Yet, the bright bullet fell faster than everyone expected and ended up crashing right in front of the Lieutenant.

Khan only noticed a chest-sized mass of mana falling on the ground before an explosion flung him away. Something burned, but he disregarded those sensations to focus on restoring his balance.

Khan fell and rolled on the ground before jumping back to his feet. His right side hurt, and his head felt hot, but he quickly focused on his surroundings to understand what had happened.

The last bullet had created a fuming crater, and its explosion had affected some soldiers, including the Lieutenant. Khan could sense his superior lying behind the smoke as his companions continued to hurry toward the canyon.

Khan cursed in his mind as he shot toward the Lieutenant. He reached him in mere seconds, but the scene that unfolded in his eyes after crossing the charred crater left him stunned for a second.

The Lieutenant's left arm had disappeared, and the same went for part of his shoulder and side. Part of his uniform was on fire, and charred skin spread under him. Khan could even see part of his rib cage from behind the torrent of blood flowing out of his body.

"Help me," Lieutenant Pouille weakly said, but an azure light suddenly flashed in the distance and forced Khan to act.

Khan unsheathed his knife and cut the Lieutenant's hand before going for his right pocket. He had long since memorized where the soldier stored the phone, and he performed a full-speed sprint after retrieving the device and the severed body part.

The [Blood Shield] covered his back as another bullet fell right behind him. The mass of mana caused an explosion that flung him away again, but he ended up flying directly inside the passage at that time. Pain spread from different parts of his body as his charred skin slid on the barren ground.

Chapter 250 - Pain

Khan felt on fire even if the [Blood Shield] continued to protect his back. The passage was long, and its steepness prevented him from adjusting his position or controlling his descent. He was almost free-falling, but he prepared himself for the inevitable landing.

Many presences drew close as Khan continued to slide on the passage. Pain tried to make him unable to keep track of them, but he suppressed everything for the time being.

Then, when Khan felt close enough to his companions, he forced himself to bend forward and kicked the ground to jump. The long leap made him cross the messy group, and his airborne rotation allowed him to land comfortably without ending on his companions.

Ecoruta's two moons couldn't illuminate the depths of the canyon, but no one dared to stay still. Many tried to hurry forward only to trip on their companions or eventual rocks standing in their path.

"Calm down and use your phones!" Khan shouted when he sensed the clumsy advance of his companions.

A series of gasps resounded among the narrow passage before a few screens lit up and illuminated the area. Khan was already holding the severed hand, his knife, and the Lieutenant's phone in his left hand, so he couldn't rely on his device. Still, his experience of Nitis and his sensitivity to mana allowed him to turn and proceed along the passage without needing sources of light.

The group began to advance steadily. Some had suffered injuries, but the adrenaline running through their bodies allowed them to ignore their pain and focus on the escape. Many doubts had even tried to fill their minds, but no one dared to speak when the threat of the Stal was so close.

Khan didn't have the time to study the environment. He prioritized getting out of the settlement's range, so he advanced blindly, doing his best to memorize every turn or branch that appeared on his path.

The canyon didn't follow a simple route. Its initial narrow passage enlarged and shrunk randomly, and it even revealed multiple paths that stretched in different directions.

Khan didn't want to lose himself, and the paths that stretched to his sides could lead him closer to enemy settlements, so he did his best to advance in a straight line. That hurried and silent march had to continue for an hour before he felt confident enough to take the first turn that led to a relatively large area and rest.

The soldiers behind Khan instinctively followed him. They adapted to his pace, pointed their screens toward him to imitate his steps, and stopped as soon as he turned to face them.

Multiple lights fell on Khan. At first, they moved over his body and stopped whenever they found an injury, but they eventually converged on the gory spectacle in his left palm. Everyone could see the large patch of blood created by the severed hand, the dirty phone, and his phone.

"What-?" One of the soldiers asked, but Khan interrupted him by shaking his head and sitting on the ground.

Khan threw the severed hand and Lieutenant Pouille's phone on the ground before sheathing his knife. His left palm was sticky due to the blood that had fallen on it, but his attention went on his injuries first.

The two explosions had injured his right side and back. Khan soon discovered that his robe had remained in its place due to his intact left side, but it barely offered any protection now. It had turned into a burned rag that he didn't hesitate to take out to transform into bandages.

Khan did the same for the bandages on his right hand. Most of them had burned, and the skin under them had suffered a similar fate. Still, the injuries didn't go too deep thanks to his prompt use of the [Blood Shield].

His back was in a similar state. Patches of burned skin filled it, but the damage didn't spread to his muscles. The fall through the passage had worsened those wounds, but they remained superficial injuries that a few meditative sessions would fix.

His hair was the only thing that his meditations couldn't fix and the [Blood Shield] couldn't protect. Khan didn't cut it at all, and it had become quite long after his long period on Nitis, but the explosion had burnt many strands, especially those on his right and back.

Khan picked one of the few strands of hair that had survived the explosions and stretched it in front of his eyes. Memories and sensations slowly appeared in his mind as he let his thoughts wander. He could almost sense Liiza's cold hands on his head.

'She really liked it long,' Khan thought as a helpless sigh escaped his mouth. The knife soon reappeared in his hand before shining with azure light and cutting what was left of his long hair.

The soldiers didn't say anything in front of that scene. It felt dumb to mind something as trivial as hair after suffering so many injuries, but something told them that the matter had a deeper meaning for Khan. They felt almost able to read the sadness in his eyes.

"Delia, can you-?" Khan began to ask, but the woman didn't let him finish. She had moved forward as soon as she heard her name.

Khan inspected his companions while Delia crouched next to him and started to patch him up. Everyone was mostly fine. He had been the only one to survive or manage to reach the passage after facing the large bullets. That was good news since no one in the group would slow him down, but it also meant that many had remained behind.

The group only had twelve survivors. Some had also lost their rifles in the messy escape, so the situation wasn't ideal. Yet, Khan couldn't help but focus on the positive aspects. It would be easier to remain hidden with a smaller team, and the same went for preserving order among the ranks.

"Oh," Delia softly exclaimed as her timid fingers touched the tattoo on the back of Khan's right shoulder. "You might need to retrace this."

Khan dismissed those words. The tattoo was part of him. He believed that it would reappear even if the entire patch of skin were to blow up.

"You can leave something in the open," Khan whispered. "Most of these injuries will go away in no time."

"It's fine," Delia said while compensating for what remained of Khan's uniform with part of her clothes.

Delia was almost done, so Khan began to prepare his next move. He cleaned the screen of Lieutenant Pouille's phone with what remained of his pants before pressing the severed hand on it. The device lit up, and he quickly browsed through the various menus to search for useful functions.

Khan couldn't always use his fingers to browse the phone. Some menus required the constant use of Lieutenant Pouille's hand due to their classified nature. The martial arts, training programs, and some reports wanted that disgusting process, and they refused any attempt to transfer them to other devices.

Instead, other menus worked perfectly, so Khan transferred to his phone everything that sounded interesting. He only had to place his device on top of the screen to begin the process, and he obviously started from the information obtained in the underground structure.

"Is this really the time to steal?" Gloria asked when she saw that Khan had no intention to address their current situation.

"Don't worry," Khan exclaimed while waving the severed hand. "I'll pass it around once I'm done."

"I wasn't talking about that," Gloria complained. "We are still deep into the enemy territory, and the Stal know our location. Leaving should be our priority."

Khan sighed before inspecting his companions again. He could see that many soldiers shared Gloria's thoughts, and even Delia avoided his gaze now that she had completed the bandages.

"We don't know how to leave," Khan explained. "We don't know where we should come out, and we also lack a proper plan. I'd rather spend the night recovering and studying the Stal's battle tactics instead of walking blindly inside this canyon."

"What if the Stal search for us?" Gloria continued.

Khan pointed at the opening above him before explaining his idea. "We are at least twenty meters under the surface. The canyon is narrow in many areas, which offers natural protection against bullets. The environment doesn't allow the passage of numerous platoons either, so we can hold our position if the situation requires it."

"The Stal know this area better than us," Gloria didn't give up.

"They won't be able to take us by surprise as long as I'm here," Khan stated, and the intense confidence contained in his words left the group speechless. Even Gloria found herself widening her eyes in surprise in front of that bold announcement.

Normally, no one would trust such a young companion right away. However, Khan had done nothing but prove his prowess since his arrival on Ecoruta. Moreover, everyone had read about his achievements on other planets, so they knew he had experience in those situations.

Khan waited for his device to complete downloading everything before going back on the classified information. The training methods for Lieutenant Pouille's element were useless to him, but he decided to read their descriptions anyway. The same went for the martial arts, but he didn't have any luck there either. His techniques weren't only better. They also conflicted with anything that sounded vaguely interesting.

Instead, the reports were different. They were simple and contained orders that Khan wouldn't normally be able to access. Some didn't even involve Ecoruta, but they were too old to have any relevance to his current situation.

'The Global Army is as uncaring as ever,' Khan commented in his mind after skimming through the reports.

The orders weren't too explicit, but they often pressed the Lieutenant to hold specific places at all costs, even if that led to the destruction of his platoon. Khan learnt the position of some important mines or the reason behind a few trenches, but most information didn't help his situation. The only valuable reports involved the allied troops, which could help him decide how to approach the rest of the escape.

"Pass it around," Khan eventually said while handing the severed hand and the phone to Delia. "Download what you want and try to take turns if you are interested in the training programs. Still, let's prioritize coming up with an escape plan. We must compare the battle tactics to decide where to go."

Delia stared at the severed hand for a few seconds before slowly taking it. She was clearly disgusted by the action, and she even had to gulp a few times to suppress her retches, but her eyes gained determination every time they fell on Lieutenant Pouille's phone.

The tragic nature of the situation almost forced Delia to put aside her disgust. Khan had offered her something that the Lieutenant had never wanted to share. He had given her the chance to be a part final decision.

The other soldiers didn't miss that detail. The few who still had faint doubts about Khan's leadership found a new confidence. They couldn't complain when their voice already had value.

Khan stopped caring about his companions while they were busy with the phone. He could close his eyes and enter the meditative state to deal with his injuries.

The burning feeling slowly vanished and allowed Khan to appreciate the [Blood Shield] even more. He almost couldn't believe that an attack capable of blowing a second-level warrior away had only left him with superficial injuries.

Eyes started to fall on Khan and eventually forced him to come out of the meditative state. A few soldiers had sat around holograms coming out of the Lieutenant's phone. The others had formed a circle that included him and had drawn a simple map on the ground.

The map was simple. It used circles to mark the human troops and squares for the Stal, creating an accurate description of the current situation on the battlefield. That had rendered the phone superfluous, allowing the soldiers interested in Lieutenant Pouille's techniques to focus on them.

A few soldiers in Khan's group appeared completely lost. They managed to look at the map only for a few seconds before glancing at their companions to check whether they were doing better.

Instead, other soldiers had already made up their minds. The battlefield only had a few valid paths, and their character had been enough to pick one of them.

Khan could see that Lieutenant Pouille's initial indecision remained as an issue. The group had the chance to reach the frontlines directly and hope that their allies on the other side would help them or resume their attempt to leave the area stealthily. Yet, the second option felt unreal after the recent events.

Both options involved huge risks, but Khan immediately felt inclined to move toward the frontlines. That had also been his initial idea, and the recent developments had only pushed him in that direction.

More and more soldiers raised their eyes, but no one spoke. Many wanted to hear their companions' opinions before voicing their ideas, while others simply didn't have the confidence to state their thoughts over such a difficult situation.

"We should reach the frontlines," Khan said to shatter the silence. "The Stal might be stupid, but we are still on their side of the world. They must have dispatched troops to patrol the area before the trenches."

"I agree," Gloria stated. "Though I'd avoid separating. Lieutenant Pouille was right. We can't trust the other platoons. We have to take the trench or at least create suitable conditions for a victory."

"Maybe we can hide here for a while and wait to be rescued," Clara stated. "This canyon is quite safe, especially with our rifles. We can even try to disturb the Stal if we learn this area well enough."

"You forget food and water," Khan contradicted. "Besides, this map is our only advantage, but it loses value quickly. We might have mere days before the situation changes again."

The explanation removed every idea connected to plans that would take many days to unfold. Everything would be different if they had access to food and water, but the canyon was too barren for that.

"We attack then," Delia announced. "Nice talk."

A few soldiers chuckled but sighs soon followed. They didn't need words to decide that the end of the night would mark the beginning of their attack.

Khan used that chance to take out his phone and browse through his gains. The Lieutenant had been far from rich, but his device contained many books that involved various topics, and he had taken all of them without bothering to read their titles. Still, now he could see many interesting labels, some about subjects connected to the role of an ambassador.

Khan only spent a few minutes on the screen. He wanted to prioritize his meditations and maybe even sleep a little before tomorrow's battle. The morning wouldn't take much to arrive, so he couldn't waste time studying.

No one added ideas to the battle plan, so Khan approached the frail wall and laid his back carefully. It hurt a little, but he could endure it. The other soldiers imitated him and prepared themselves to rest.

"It's almost intact again," Delia said while sitting next to Khan. "Did you trace it with mana?"

"The Niqols do very little without mana," Khan revealed while glancing at his tattoo.

"What does it mean?" Delia asked.

"It depends on the day," Khan lied as he closed his eyes.

"What about now?" Delia continued.

"Pain," Khan sighed before falling into his meditative state.