

Chaos' Heir 251

Chapter 251 - Fire

A few sunrays managed to seep past the narrow openings above the group and woke up some soldiers. Khan opened his eyes only to notice the slight hesitation and fear in his companions' expressions. Everyone knew that a tough battle was ahead of them, and anxiety inevitably spread.

Delia woke up as Khan began to move to check his state. The woman had fallen asleep next to him, and she had ended up using him to support herself again, but she had chosen his left side since she had noticed her habit.

Khan didn't mind Delia's behavior. His group was in a mess, and many soldiers had always fought behind trenches or in safe environments. He would allow her to rely on him if she needed that. He only hoped that she wouldn't get the wrong idea about the nature of their relationship, but those thoughts didn't last long in his mind.

Khan confirmed that his skin had mostly reached a stable state. It still hurt at times, but it didn't hinder his movements, which was enough for him.

"Who has the phone?" Khan groaned while scratching the corners of his eyes.

One of the soldiers on the other side of the group stood up and avoided stepping over the map drawn on the ground to deliver the phone and the severed hand to Khan. The man held the gory and smelly limb with two fingers and tried not to look at it, and similar disgust appeared on the others when they saw him walking among them.

Khan ignored those reactions and quickly unlocked the phone before reaching the human battle plans and projecting them next to the map through holograms. Then, he used his device to inspect the Stal's tactics, and some soldiers imitated him.

The map, the holograms, and the images on the screens showed some differences, but they remained relatively similar. Still, Khan preferred to use the original source to be more accurate when deciding his next move.

The group had already decided to attack the nearest trench. Still, they had yet to pick a path to get out of the canyon. The map on the ground couldn't possibly show all the possible branches of the structure, so the soldiers had to rely on the information obtained from the Guko for that.

The Stal's knowledge of the canyon wasn't as accurate as many hoped, but it prevented the soldiers from being completely lost in that environment. Khan could quickly find a few possible paths that led to the nearest trench, but none of them seemed better than the other.

"Do we pick randomly?" Gloria asked after reaching Khan's conclusions.

"One of the paths leads closer to the trench," Khan sighed, "But the map becomes unclear in many areas that involve it. I think we should use one of the large ones to avoid getting lost."

Khan and other soldiers had kept track of their movements inside the canyon, and the map helped them pinpoint their current position. They only needed to cross a few branches to enter one of the largest passages of the structure, and missing it didn't seem possible.

Of course, a larger passage meant less cover from potential projectiles, but Khan felt ready to take that bet. Everything about that mission was risky, with the greatest of them being remaining in the canyon for too long, so that option sounded like the most reasonable plan.

His companions' silence was enough to express their agreement. That event also made the soldiers stand up to prepare for the imminent march. Many of them wielded their rifles and adjusted their dirty military uniforms before waiting for Khan to give orders.

"Do you want me to redo your bandages?" Delia asked during the preparations.

Khan glanced at his companion. Not much of her uniform had remained after taking care of his injuries. Delia appeared willing to go further and remove the fabric that hid her waist, but Khan shook his head.

"It's fine," Khan reassured Delia. "Your bandages are perfect. They are still firm after these hours."

"Still," Delia continued, but Khan interrupted her by placing a hand on her shoulder.

"It's fine," Khan repeated while showing a fake reassuring smile. "We got this."

Delia felt able to hear the lies in Khan's voice, but she chose to believe in him anyway. She would have become a guinea pig for the anti-mana project if it weren't for him, so deciding to rely entirely on him turned out to be relatively easy.

The other soldiers had initially tried to avoid staring at Delia and Khan since they felt that the situation required some intimacy. Still, they ended up fixing their eyes on Khan after his confident statement. Many couldn't see through his lies, so it was easier for them to trust in him completely.

"Let's go," Khan ordered after tying the severed hand to his belt and storing the other phone in his pocket.

His confident expression transformed into a cold face after crossing his companions to lead them through the canyon. There were only twelve of them and nine rifles. The enemy platoon would probably have more than twenty-five Stal, and settlement with reinforcements was nearby. Khan's hopes relied on the surprise effect, and he planned to make full use of that advantage.

The group would approach the trench from behind the barrier, and the Stal were tall enough to be perfect targets from that position. However, the soldiers would have to reach that area in broad daylight, and they would be relatively in the open after the initial attack.

Attacking at night would have normally been better, but the group knew that taking the trench on their own would be hard. They had to rely on the allied fire from the other side of the battlefield, which required daylight.

The attack also had to be relatively swift since the arrival of reinforcements would put an end to the soldiers' escape. Dying in battle would become the best option at that point since they knew what fate waited for them if they allowed the Stal to capture them again.

Khan revised the plan countless times in his mind as he led the group across the canyon. It was almost impossible to get lost with so many eyes keeping track of the path, but his lack of worries in that field didn't allow him to reach better conclusions.

The battle would be a mess that featured many variables, and Khan tried to play them in his mind. The Stal would crouch to hide in the trench after the surprise attack, making them virtually impossible to hit with the rifles. That phase would require a distraction capable of forcing them to peek out of the channel, and Khan knew that he was perfect for that role.

Khan obviously didn't like the idea of charging on his own toward the enemy trench, but the situation didn't give him other options. He wasn't as good as his companions with a rifle, and he couldn't let the Stal drag the battle until reinforcements arrived.

Khan didn't explain his intentions to his companions, but he felt that everyone had understood them. The lack of enough rifles forced him to make use of his speed and close-combat experience.

The soldiers advanced quickly, and no one dared to speak. Many were hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, but they pressed on anyway. The recent events had steeled their determination and had removed most traces of inexperience from their minds, turning them into reliable soldiers.

In a way, Ecoruta had served its purpose for Khan's group. The surviving soldiers weren't the same troublemakers or clumsy kids who had earned a ticket for that ruthless planet. Fighting on the trenches had already started that process, but it had taken them that crisis to transform completely.

The group had to march for a few hours before reaching their destination. A relatively steep passage that led toward the surface unfolded in their vision and made their expressions darken.

Hesitation naturally spread among the group now that the battle was so close, but Khan didn't let that feeling stop him. He stepped forward and tested the passage while paying attention to his senses. The area felt empty, but he decided to climb on his own to check what his sensitivity to mana couldn't reach.

A simple gesture was enough to make the soldiers remain at the bottom of the canyon while Khan climbed the frail passage. His light steps didn't cause any reaction to the ground under him, so he became able to peek at the surface in no time.

The barren plain didn't change. Khan only noticed a few solitary bushes that had no leaves during his inspection. As for the Stal, he saw the vague shapes of a settlement to his right, and faint azure lights flashed in a distant spot in front of him.

Everything felt closer than Khan had expected. The map had been quite detailed, but he had needed to see the area with his own eyes to gain a clear idea of his situation.

The Stal's battle plans had informed the group that the trench didn't have vehicles, but the same didn't apply to the settlement nearby. The aliens had a tank and a few armored trucks that could make them reach the frontlines in mere minutes.

Khan returned to his group and inspected their faces. That probably was a good time for an inspiring speech, but he only had bad news to convey.

"The settlement is quite close," Khan announced. "We won't have long before the reinforcements arrive."

"So?" Delia asked before fear could take control of the group.

"So, nothing," Khan explained, deciding to make his tactic clear. "We reach the trench, kill as many Stal as possible, and keep firing to cover me. I'll jump among them and make sure that you can hit their heads."

"I will also go," One of the soldiers without a rifle exclaimed. "It's pointless for me to remain in the backlines."

"Some of us will die since we don't have any cover," Khan declared. "Still, we can't let our fire grow weaker. I need you two to pick your fallen companions' rifles and keep killing while I'm among them."

The man and the woman without rifles couldn't say anything in front of those words. Khan looked at them for a few seconds to confirm that they had understood their role before turning toward Gloria.

"I need you to pay attention to the second-level warriors," Khan ordered. "I can endure a blow or two, but defeating them inside a trench and in my current state is a bit hard."

Some soldiers frowned. Khan was saying that he would have a chance against second-level warriors in a different environment. They could accept that he could hold his ground for a few exchanges, but killing those strong opponents was something completely different. Still, they remained silent to avoid ruining the group's concentration.

"I can't tell first-level and second-level warriors apart from that distance," Gloria admitted.

"It's simple," Khan responded. "If they are alive after fighting me, shoot them."

Many would consider Khan delusional or extremely arrogant, but his group had already seen him jump inside a trench. They knew that he was speaking out of confidence.

"I don't know what's the ideal range for the rifles," Khan eventually said. "You will decide when to stop."

A series of nods unfolded in Khan's vision, and he took them as the signal to start the mission. He turned, and everyone followed him.

Climbing the passage turned out to be hard for the soldiers without suitable techniques, but the group eventually made it out of the canyon and half-crouched to begin their advance.

Ecoruta's warm sun shone on the group as they moved toward the azure flashes in the distance. They were slow, but that was fine for now.

The enemy trench eventually appeared in their sight and made them lower their heads even more. A platoon with more than thirty Stal fired from behind a barrier and ignored everything behind them. Bullets even flew above them, but they rarely hit something.

Khan and the others silently decided to accelerate. The whooshing noises covered their steps and allowed them to get close to the trench quickly, and they advanced until Clara spoke. "I can hit them from here."

A series of "me too" resounded among the group and made it reach a common understanding. The soldiers lay down and pointed their rifles at the trench, but they didn't pull their triggers yet.

"Make sure to aim at different targets," Khan whispered, and exchanges of gazes happened among his companions. Once everyone was ready, he whispered a soft "fire" that a series of whooshing noises and azure flashes didn't hesitate to follow.

Nine bullets flew forward, but only eight hit their targets. A few even failed to inflict deadly injuries and allowed the surviving Stal to voice angry growls that alerted the entire trench.

The Stal stopped firing at the human trench on the other side of the battlefield and turned, but more bullets flew in their direction. The soldiers had used that change to fire again and kill more aliens, but the loud growl that followed that event put an end to that trend.

The aliens quickly crouched inside the trench and made it impossible for the soldiers to aim at them. The Stal limited themselves to raise their rifles and fire blindly, and some of those bullets ended up flying relatively close to the group.

"I'm going," Khan announced as he began to stand up. "Don't stop firing for even a second, and try not to hit me."

Someone chuckled, but Khan didn't hear that. Thoughts disappeared from his mind as he sprinted forward and immersed himself in the currents of mana that flowed throughout the battlefield.

Chapter 252 - Pushing

Bullets flew and exploded on the battlefield. Khan sensed them crossing his sides and passing right above his head, but his stance didn't falter. He sprinted forward, keeping his back bent forward to remain outside of the projectiles that reached that part of the battlefield.

The random bullets fired from the Stal crouching inside the trench were the only threat that could reach Khan. He had to cut to his sides or perform short jumps to avoid what was flying toward him, but his actions felt almost natural by then. He didn't even need to think about his surroundings. His body moved on its own and dodged any mass of mana that tried to hit him.

The trench wasn't exactly close, but Khan reached it quickly anyway. A series of Stal oddly crouching on the channel unfolded in his eyes, and multiple presences became clear in his senses. He could locate the stronger aliens, and he didn't hesitate to avoid them.

Khan jumped toward his right. The leap was basically horizontal and never brought him higher than the barrier on the other side of the trench. His knife lit up while he was airborne, and he swung it under him to hit a head that had just noticed his presence.

The knife didn't meet any hindrance. It passed through the head without slowing Khan down. He could point his legs forward and land on the trench's side before sprinting past a series of Stal.

It felt annoying that the stronger Stal were on the left side of the trench. Khan would have had the chance to swing his knife at the aliens in that case. Instead, he had to go to his right and move on the trench's diagonal wall to avoid his opponents' huge bodies, making them too far for his weapon.

A series of growls resounded throughout the trench and alerted everyone about the presence of an intruder. Stal began to stand up to search for Khan, but bullets immediately reached them. Some aliens had forgotten about the enemies behind their barrier, and many paid the price for that.

Khan focused on attracting the aliens' attention for now, but it didn't take long before they put an end to his sprint. A Stal eventually slammed its two right arms on the wall without straightening its

position. Those thick limbs alone couldn't hinder Khan, but the area above him had bullets, and he couldn't slide under the Stal either due to its crouched stance, so he had to start fighting.

Khan performed another horizontal leap that made him pass right above the Stal's heads. His glowing knife flashed in the process, and blood spurted on his body.

The alien could only fall forward when it found one of its heads split in half. Khan landed inside the trench, but the event attracted the attention of the Stal in front of him that quickly voiced warnings.

Khan darted forward, swinging his knife while the alien in front of him was still busy growling. The Stal was crouching, so he could reach its heads without performing any airborne maneuver. His weapon swung horizontally, severing its faces into two halves.

The alien died on the spot, but it didn't move. Its corpse became a boulder that Khan kicked to open a path, but his eyes widened when he saw the Stal crouching behind it. The latter had its rifle pointed at him, and azure light soon filled his vision.

Khan bent his legs and moved his left arm in front of his face before deploying the [Blood Shield]. His unique mental state adjusted the position of his forearm and made it stand in the bullet's trajectory. The mass of mana slammed on the Niqols' technique and discharged its energy, burning his skin and trying to push him away.

Khan's feet dug the ground as he endured the power of the bullet. A burning sensation spread from his arm, but he ignored it. He could feel his tight grip on the knife, so nothing else mattered.

The Stal's humanoid features allowed Khan to notice the surprise that filled its face, but he didn't linger on those thoughts. The alien fired again, but he had already moved by then. He dodged the bullet and reached his opponent's head in no time.

Blood spurted on his torso as he almost beheaded the alien. The Stal lost its balance as its right head fell forward and revealed the small patch of skin that kept it attached to the neck. Khan was ready to push the Stal to the side and proceed forward, but his senses suddenly warned him of another threat.

Khan grabbed the falling alien from the rags that covered its chest and used it as a shield. An azure light flashed behind it before piercing the left side of its torso and passing right next to Khan's head. He didn't expect the Stal behind his opponent to fire at its companion, but he had the time to adjust his position and leave the bullet's trajectory.

Another azure light shone as the Stal fired again. Khan had to move his head away to avoid the bullet, and blood fell on his face since he had ended up in front of the hole created by the previous attack.

The Stal could finally see Khan after opening two holes in its companion's torso, but he kicked the corpse before another bullet could arrive. The dead alien flew forward and forced the Stal to raise its rifle and arms to defend, but a shadow appeared under it before the impact.

Khan stabbed his knife on the Stal's left head as the corpse fell on him. The heavy alien tried to press him on the ground, but he was strong enough to push it away with his shoulder and use the second Stal as a shield.

Khan could remain in that position for only a second since bullets started flying from behind him. He had to let go of the maimed Stal and jump on the wall to his left, making sure that his head didn't get past the barrier.

The bullets pierced the maimed Stal and continued to fly toward the aliens on the right side of the trench. The friendly fire killed a few of them, but more growls soon resounded and made everyone lower their rifles.

Khan never stayed still for too long. He sprinted forward as soon as the Stal lowered their rifles and descended from the wall to deliver an airborne kick on the first alien he found. The latter couldn't withstand the attack since it wasn't even a first-level warrior.

The kick slammed the alien on the ground and allowed Khan to move forward. A Stal growled as it straightened its position and spread its arms to block his path, but a bullet pierced its head as soon as it peeked past the trench.

Khan slid between the alien's legs as it fell lifelessly to the ground. Another Stal appeared in his view. The latter had begun to stand up, but it had tried to return to its crouching stance after witnessing its companion's fate. Still, Khan reached it before it could complete the action, and his body rotated before throwing a powerful kick.

The attack landed at the center of the Stal's torso and made it separate from the ground. The alien ended up leaving the trench's cover with its entire body, and a precise bullet hit its sides before it could start to fall.

Khan didn't even look at his opponent. He had sensed the incoming bullet from his companions, so he sprinted past the falling alien to approach the next Stal. He found another first-level warrior on his path, but the latter didn't wait for his arrival.

The Stal jumped forward and spread its arms. Khan saw a giant brown figure flying toward him and decided to slide under it while stabbing his knife upward.

The Stal couldn't catch Khan, and the knife ended up leaving a long and deep cut across its torso. Some of its organs fell out before it could land, and the rest followed after the impact with the ground.

The corpses or maimed Stal that Khan left behind hindered his pursuers. The aliens couldn't stand up since bullets flew in their direction whenever they peeked out of the trench, so they couldn't use their height to jump past their companions.

Khan noticed that event, but he barely had the time to rejoice since opponents kept appearing on his path. He had picked the side that had first-level warriors at best, and their crouching stance allowed him to reach their heads without jumping, but that also made many of them remain in their position after dying.

Khan often had to kick or push away the Stal that he defeated, slowing down his advance and forcing him to interrupt his momentum. He could have killed far more aliens in an open field, but he struggled to reach his opponents quickly now.

The annoying situation only made Khan work harder. He couldn't use his right hand, and his left arm had also suffered injuries, but his kick could make most aliens fly or disturb their crouching

stance enough to make their heads peek past the trench. His knife was as deadly as ever, and the channel prevented him from being surrounded.

In theory, Khan was unstoppable as long as he avoided getting caught or facing second-level warriors. He would eventually have to deal with the stronger Stal, but everything was going well for now. He could even consider approaching the human troops on the other side of the battlefield if he cleared the right side of the trench quickly.

Still, even in their stupidity, the Stal were a strong species that knew how to fight and wage wars. Khan continued to fight his way through enemies until an alien battle cry resounded throughout the trench and forced him to turn.

The scene that unfolded in his eyes felt almost unreal. Khan saw a second-level warrior pushing the corpses that he had left along the way without even bothering to stand up. The alien was strong enough to move at a decent pace when more than four bodies were trying to hinder its path.

The Stal also made use of its four arms smartly. It continued to push the corpses forward while constantly throwing some of them outside the trench. Its actions initially didn't lead anywhere since more dead aliens appeared on its path, but it eventually managed to accelerate as it closed the distance from Khan.

Khan had long since resumed his advance, but the incoming Stal turned out to be faster than him. He needed to kill and move his opponents, while the alien only had to push to reach his position. The sheer difference in their speed didn't matter when Khan couldn't move as freely as he wanted.

The Stal tried to help their leader when they noticed its actions. They jumped forward and did their best to hinder Khan's advance, and some of them even tried to catch him after losing one of their heads. The battle cry from before had turned them into cannon fodder that had the sole purpose of stopping him.

The chaotic nature of the trench made Khan's movements even smoother, but that alone couldn't get him out of the incoming threat. He was slowly getting faster in his kills and advance, but the Stal was getting closer anyway.

Khan eventually decided to jump right behind the barrier and sprint for a while to put some distance from the second-level warrior, but his plan crumbled as soon as he found corpses flying toward him. The Stal had turned its dead companions into weapons, and he couldn't jump over them since bullets still flew above his head.

Khan felt forced to jump back at the bottom of the trench, but the Stal arrived at that point. He found himself clung to the corpses that the alien was pushing forward, but he couldn't pay attention to them since other opponents appeared on the path ahead.

The first Stal to appear in front of him was a first-level warrior. The alien had already prepared itself to throw four powerful punches, but Khan decided to jump toward it to stab his knife at the center of its chest.

The second-level warrior reached Khan in no time and forced him to slam on the pile of corpses again, and he used that force to push his knife upward and cut a big chunk of his opponent's insides. The Stal was still alive, but Khan promptly slashed again and severed its heads in half.

The alien died, but Khan made sure to grab its ragged clothes and hold it in front of him. The second-level warrior couldn't hit him from behind the pile of corpses, but it continued to push everything forward, eventually making his meat shield slam on another Stal.

The matter didn't end there. More and more Stal fell prey to the second-level warrior's actions. That single alien was turning the entire trench upside-down, and Khan focused on remaining alive while two opposite forces tried to squeeze him.

Luckily for Khan, the Stal that ended up getting pushed by the second-level warrior lost their foothold and couldn't manage to express much strength. They became like Khan, and they couldn't even reach him since he was using one of their dead companions as a shield.

The second-level warrior had to stop throwing away corpses and use its four limbs to push since the weight had become too much even for its incredible strength. The alien had already captured Khan, but it seemed to have forgotten its initial plan. Everything had transformed into a contest in its mind, and it didn't want to lose.

Khan wanted to curse, but he didn't dare to lose focus. He continued to pay attention to his surroundings and waited for the right opportunity to appear.

After almost a minute spent between the corpses and the trapped Stal, Khan noticed that his legs and left arm became unable to create a safe area. He had stopped moving, and the group in front of him had started to push his meat shield with new strength.

Khan knew that he was no match for the Stal in terms of physical strength, especially with so many of them involved. He waited until the area above him felt safe before pointing one foot on the first foothold he found and pushing him away from that situation.

The meat shield fell on the other corpses as soon as Khan jumped above the messy group. Almost half of his body surpassed the barrier, so he immediately bent forward as he started to use the Stal's heads, shoulders, and limbs to sprint ahead.

It turned out that the second-level warrior had pushed the group until the end of the trench. The Stal that had fallen prey to the event had started to use the wall as a support to fight back against the force trying to crush them alive.

Khan used that chance to get out of the situation. Bullets flew in front and behind him, but he accelerated and slowed down while running on top of the Stal to dodge everything.

When Khan landed on the ground past the trench, he accelerated and moved toward the allied force on the other side of the battlefield. However, bullets started to fly toward him and forced him to resume his escape.

"You idiots!" Khan shouted at the allied trench when he had the chance to stop. "Do I look like a Stal to you?!"

Khan didn't know if the humans had heard him from that distance, but bullets stopped flying toward him, so he decided to shout again. "We are the survivors of Lieutenant Pouille's platoon. My team is fighting on the other side of the enemy trench. You can charge ahead safely!"

Khan didn't expect those words to have any effect on his allies, and the humans didn't surprise him. No one jumped past the barrier, and he couldn't wait for them. His cold face turned toward the

enemy trench, where he saw that some Stal were slowly escaping the cramped area and stepping on the surface to approach him.

Bullets immediately reached those aliens. The mess caused by the second-level warrior had made the Stal forget about Khan's group, and they paid the price for that mistake.

Khan stepped back to avoid getting in the way of his companions. His distraction had ended up affecting the Stal's platoon badly. Almost twenty of them had died, while the rest continued to hide inside the trench. That scene felt like a victory that the appearance of a bright azure light disrupted.

An explosion followed the flash of azure light. Khan had remained still as a large bullet fell in his companions' position and created a trail of smoke that made him unable to assess their condition. Then, the noise of engines reached his ears.

When Khan turned, he saw that two armored trucks and a tank had appeared in the distance.. The first two vehicles were even coming in his direction.

Chapter 253 - Vehicles

The Stal in the trench started to come out again after the tank attacked the soldiers behind the enemy lines, but bullets fell on them before they could reach Khan. The allies on the other side of the battlefield had targeted them had soon as they left their cover.

The help from the other platoon didn't improve Khan's situation. The Stal had gone back to the relentless but safe offensive iconic of the trench war, blocking one of the possible escape paths.

Khan found himself in a pickle. The two armored trucks were faster than him, and they could reach him before he arrived on the enemy trench. The battlefield had bullets flying everywhere, and the Stal in the channel had already started to point their rifles at him.

Khan was stuck between difficult choices. He could do his best to reach the allied barrier and hope to deal with the armored trucks along the way, or he could return inside the enemy trench and see if he could cause a mess again.

Both options sounded bad. Khan didn't want to face the trucks right next to the battlefield, and jumping back in the enemy trench would put him in front of second-level warriors. The presence of the tank didn't help either since it theoretically turned every empty area into a danger zone.

The special mindset that Khan achieved during battles couldn't help him there. His sensitivity to mana could only tell him where the danger lurked, and he sensed it all around him. Even standing still wouldn't prevent him from facing a threat.

'The allies will never be able to advance with a tank on the scene,' Khan eventually thought as he slowly bent toward the incoming vehicles.

A single tank had almost made the humans lose their trench on his first day on Ecoruta. Khan knew how that battle would go if he didn't do anything. The escape would fail, and the other platoon would retreat. The humans falling prey to that offensive would die or become prisoners for the anti-mana project.

The selfish option could save Khan a lot of trouble if it succeeded, which would mean forsaking his companions. He didn't really care about them, but Delia had been good to him, and he wanted to

help her. Since he would need to face threats anyway, he decided to take the path that could save everyone.

Khan stared at the incoming armored trucks while the mana on the battlefield played a symphony inside his mind. He sensed the Stal behind him getting their rifles ready and the many bullets flying around. He even felt a few projectiles arriving from his companions, indicating that some had survived the tank.

'It's only two vehicles,' Khan thought as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'I didn't survive for so long only to lose to two damned vehicles.'

Khan didn't forget the powerlessness felt when the Stal had ambushed his platoon. The situation was different now. He had fewer enemies, and he was strong enough to deal with them. After everything he had gone through, that was more than enough to fill his mind with confidence and determination.

When Khan opened his eyes, the trucks were only a few seconds from him. He could see their spiked wheels, their compact rectangular shapes, and the multiple metal protections on their corners, and the small dark windows that hid its insides.

They were nothing more than fast and big chunks of metal with high resistance to mana. A frontal hit could kill even second-level warriors, and they probably had bombs or other weapons at their disposal. However, their riders were known as a stupid species, so Khan could guess that they wouldn't be able to use all the functions of the vehicles.

Khan was slower than the trucks, but that only when it came to running in a straight line. He was faster in the initial phases of a sprint, and his agility was in a superior realm.

The first truck filled his view in no time, but Khan moved to his right before a frontal crash could happen. His shoulder felt warm when it passed next to the vehicle's side, but he didn't dare to let it touch the metal. Instead, he lowered his knife and covered it with sharp mana before stabbing it on the wheels.

A normal weapon would have allowed the truck to fling Khan away, but his knife empowered by the Divine Reaper didn't make him feel the slightest hindrance. He barely noticed that the blade crossed the rear wheel and almost cut it in half, uncaring of the metal protections and spikes that stood in its way.

Khan maintained the technique active until the knife came out of the other side of the metal wheel. He wasn't sprinting, and he had no intention of doing that. The second truck soon filled his view, and he repeated his swift dodge accompanied by a slash.

The second truck had tried to turn to its left after seeing what Khan had done to the first vehicle. It couldn't follow his movements, but it made the rear wheel escape from his range. His knife's tip only touched it and left a shallow mark that didn't affect its functions.

Both trucks turned, drifting on the barren ground as they tried to align their front with Khan's position. Yet, the damaged wheel of the first vehicle broke during the intense action and made its back hit the terrain.

The momentum accumulated during the turn made the vehicle dig the ground and come to a stop before it could point at Khan. It even tilted to its left due to the lack of a wheel and the hole. Yet, the Stal inside it still tried to accelerate.

The truck quickly brought itself outside the hole, but it remained tilted, and the Stal weren't smart enough to attempt to balance it by moving their huge bodies on the other side. Instead, they went along with that new angle, which ultimately made the vehicle fall on its left side.

The crash made the truck dig the ground again and rise a cloud of dirt. The spikes of its intact wheel managed to touch the ground, and it carried enough power to keep the vehicle moving. However, it slowly began to spin inside that pit since it was unable to turn or find other footholds.

The Stal didn't understand what was happening, but the aliens inside the second truck felt interested in the sudden event. Yet, they soon recalled about their targets, but they couldn't find him in his previous position.

Khan sprinted at full speed toward the tank. He didn't imagine that the first truck would actually end up in that poor position, but he soon became unable to sense it due to the distance.

The tank had moved in a different direction since it wanted to target soldiers behind the enemy lines. Yet, the Stal in the second truck eventually noticed him, and they didn't hesitate to accelerate toward him. Their vehicle was so fast that it caught up with him before he could get close to the four-legged weapon.

Khan sensed the truck moving in his direction but acted as if everything was normal. He continued to sprint forward until the vehicle was about to run him over before jumping to his right.

The currents generated by the truck almost flung Khan away when it passed next to him. Yet, they only managed to push him a bit. He could land safely and jump forward to reach the rear wheel before it left his range.

The glowing knife left a diagonal cut through the wheel. Khan ended up falling on the ground since he had basically thrown himself forward, but he didn't fail to raise his head and inspect the truck turning to its left to point at him.

The immense pressure that fell on the damaged wheel broke it. All the weight of the truck ended up on that spot as it touched the ground and tilted. Its lack of balance and momentum made it fall to its right side and rotate until it turned upside-down.

Khan felt lucky that the Stal had decided to turn the truck to the left, but he didn't waste time enjoying the moment. He jumped back to his feet in an instant and resumed his sprint toward the tank.

The four-legged weapon had fired two more large bullets toward his companions while he was busy dealing with the two vehicles, but he didn't turn to check their conditions. Khan moved quickly and eventually reached the tall tank.

Khan had already dealt with one of those vehicles. His knife glowed as he passed among its legs. The blade pierced the joints of two legs as he turned to prepare for the inevitable fall.

The two legs bent under the tank's weight and made it fall on the ground. The cabin behind the long barrel released a whooshing noise as it opened and revealed a Stal struggling to come out of that cramped area. The alien was a second-level warrior, but it couldn't do anything against the incoming attack since Khan had darted forward before its arms could leave the small space.

Khan didn't have the time to rejoice in front of the beheaded second-level warrior since a series of bullets flew in his direction. He crouched to hide behind the fallen tank and peeked past it as soon as his senses told him that the area was safe.

The Stal inside the trucks had come out. Each vehicle contained four of them, but one had died due to a bullet before managing to hide behind the dark metal. Instead, the others had placed a knee on the ground and had their rifles pointed toward him.

A few more bullets flew in Khan's direction and forced him to hide behind the truck again. The second wave of attacks had come from the enemy trench since it still had Stal focused on him. Those aliens didn't sound happy about his feat. Their growls reached his ears even if he was relatively far away.

Khan saw some familiar figures once the smoke created by the tank's large bullets dispersed. There had once been eleven soldiers there, but he could only make out four or five of them now. He couldn't understand what had happened to the others, but he didn't allow himself to think about that.

'It's only a few bullets,' Khan thought as he prepared himself to go back to the battlefield.

The path back to the trenches wasn't as messy as the actual battlefield, but it had a few Stal focused entirely on Khan. He wouldn't mind spending more time behind his cover, but the aliens wouldn't take long to understand what had happened, and he was the closest soldier to the settlement right now.

A curse interrupted the small break that Khan had decided to take. He suddenly sensed the familiar noises of the trucks coming from behind him. When he turned, he saw that four more armored vehicles had appeared in the distance and were converging toward his position.

There seemed to be no end to the number of reinforcements that the settlement was ready to deploy, but Khan accepted that outcome quickly. He took a deep breath and focused on his surroundings. He studied the barrage of bullets before darting out of his cover as soon as he found an opening.

Chapter 255 - Drained

Out of the four armored trucks, two of them were moving side by side toward Khan, while the others were slowing down as they approached the area behind his cover.

The two trucks would only need a few seconds to hit Khan, and he was in no condition to control his body properly. He wasn't even standing, but he couldn't fall prey to a frontal crash.

The vehicles seemed to have every intention to run Khan over. Their rectangular shape didn't even reveal footholds that he could use to his advantage. He could only tilt himself to his right, bend his legs, and kick the ground in the hope that he could push himself past the incoming trucks.

Khan didn't manage to go airborne, but he still pushed himself toward the space between the trucks and his cover. His right arm slid on the ground as huge metal figures filled his view. He felt that the end was near, but the vehicle's side eventually appeared in his eyes and confirmed that he had dodged the attack.

The Stal instinctively turned the truck to the left, but it didn't think about Khan's previous cover. The vehicle slammed on the overturned car and started drifting. The abrupt and violent maneuver made its back end on the second truck, which forced the aliens inside it to spend some time regaining its control.

Khan felt temporarily safe, but that feeling vanished sooner than he expected. The first truck partially stabilized after hitting the second and began to push the overturned vehicle. The Stal behind that cover had to run away, while Khan saw the tall metal structure closing in on him.

Khan didn't have the time to stand up, so he could only kick the ground again to push himself away from the truck's path. The vehicle continued to turn as it moved the cover, but it couldn't run over Khan due to its inability to perform sharp turns. It ended up completing a half-circle around him before moving a bit in the distance to adjust its position.

The second and the other two trucks entered the battlefield before turning to point at Khan. The bullets that fell on their dark surfaces didn't affect them at all. They were resistant to mana, so simple rifles couldn't take them down.

The first truck also managed to turn after getting close to the Stal's trench. Khan finally had the time to stand up, but he only saw four vehicles getting close to his position by then.

The trucks were approaching Khan slowly, but he felt unable to outrun them anyway. He was out of breath, drained, and on the verge of fainting. His vision also wavered, and his senses barely stretched past his figure.

Khan found himself glancing at the area while the trucks stopped around him and created a natural cover against the human trench. No bullet had flown toward him, and the Stal's barrier seemed silent. He couldn't confirm it, but he guessed that the plan had been a success.

The only Stal that continued to show their presence on the battlefield were the ones getting out of the trucks around him. Khan could hear the whooshing noises of the bullets, and a few azure lights even flashed behind the vehicles, but nothing reached his position. The four cars had created a cover that allowed the aliens to disregard their proximity to the battlefield.

Each truck had three Stal. Eleven of them were first-level warriors, while the last to appear in the open was a second-level warrior. They wielded enough power to be a small platoon, and they even had rifles with them. Meanwhile, Khan could barely remain awake. He felt trapped in a body that didn't react to his orders.

Messy thoughts surged in Khan's mind while the second-level warrior growled to order its underlings around. He didn't know the Stal's language, but he felt able to read their intentions from their gestures and approach.

The aliens didn't bother to lift their rifles. Part of the group glanced at the area behind their trench and gave simple answers before pointing at Khan and exchanging other growls. They felt very human in their gestures, something that the Guko couldn't express due to their pragmatism.

Khan felt that the Stal had given up on saving the trench. He guessed that they were preparing themselves to imprison the humans inside their territory and leave the area. The leader seemed

relatively bright for a Stal, so it could change tactics in the middle of a battle, even if it had to explain its decision multiple times to make its underlings understand its reasons.

'Maybe I'm just imagining everything,' Khan mocked himself as a weak smile appeared on his face.

Khan realized that his mental state wasn't ideal for analyzing the situation. He still had mana, but his body had reached its structural limit. He could see his torn bandages and his injuries after lowering his eyes. Khan struggled to believe that he could still stand in such a sorry state.

One of the first-level warriors approached Khan, and he tried to raise his knife, but his left arm trembled and never reached his chest. Still, the alien didn't like that gesture and delivered two punches with its left limbs.

Khan didn't even dare to activate the [Blood Shield]. A punch hit his face while the other landed on his right shoulder. The Stal was a first-level warrior like him, but the simple attack slammed him on the ground and made his bones release a worrying noise.

A violent cough retook control of Khan's lungs. The right side of his face felt warm and almost made him unable to sense that he was leaving the ground. The Stal had picked him up and had started to carry him to a truck.

Khan recalled those sensations. He had felt them when the Stal had taken him prisoner. Another weak smile appeared on his face when he realized that he had guessed the alien's behavior correctly.

'I might be really good at this alien stuff,' Khan joked in his mind. 'I would have become a great ambassador.'

Khan didn't delude himself. His mana was trying to disperse the weariness of his body, but even a long meditative session couldn't solve his problems. He needed food, water, and sleep to give his body what it needed to recover.

His state made a second escape impossible. Khan was in no condition to raise his knife, let alone defeating another jailer and getting out of the underground structure again. His fate would be sealed if he entered the truck.

'I can buy myself some time if it finally works,' Khan thought as he placed his broken hand on the Stal's waist.

The images of the Second Impact appeared in his mind, and they fused with the other tragedies in his life. He recalled the missiles blowing up the troop carriers on Istrone and that damned village near the lake on Nitis. His idea of destruction reached incredible levels of purity as the mental barrier appeared to cut away his emotions and mana gathered on his right palm before gaining red-purple shades.

The bandages that kept his hand still seemed to tremble while the mana began to express its power, but everything suddenly went dark. Khan didn't know why, but the Wave spell failed again.

The Stal didn't miss that sudden glow, especially the one carrying Khan. The alien voiced a loud growl as it raised him in front of its head and held the rifle with only one hand to deliver a punch to his stomach.

Khan spat saliva and blood. His world turned upside-down, but he managed to remain awake. Still, everything felt vague. He couldn't see the Stal clearly, but he noticed that it raised its free arm again and prepared it for another punch.

The growl of the second-level warrior resounded before the Stal could complete the attack. Khan's jailer hesitated a bit, but it eventually lowered its arm before putting him back at its side.

The walk back to the truck resumed, but it felt endless for Khan. Every heavy step of the Stal seemed to last an eternity. He could review his entire life in those infinite seconds. He wasn't even eighteen, but he had experienced a lot, maybe too much for a single person.

Khan didn't recall anything of his time inside Ylaco. His memories basically started on the cursed day of the Second Impact, and its scenes had haunted him since then.

His life in the Slums had been harsh, especially with his father being a drunk mess, but he had never found it hard. Stealing, working, enduring his hunger, and being worried about his safety was nothing compared to the horrifying scenes of the Second Impact.

Then, Ylaco's training camp arrived and changed his life forever. Except for the four bullies' incident, Khan had found a fantastic friend, a good master, and a path toward a world that went beyond human limits. He had learnt the wonders of mana, and he still felt amazed at how incredible that energy could be.

Onia had been a fun trip. Seeing an alien species for the first time outside his nightmares had been incredible, and his talent had even become public domain there. Khan had shown how a strict master and his relentless training could make him shine among recruits who had yet to receive synthetic mana.

Everything had fallen apart on Istrone. The blood, the losses, and the killing had changed Khan in ways that he had been unable to accept until Nitis, until Liiza taught him how to see past all that pain.

Everything had felt easier after Khan had experienced her cold touch. Many would see what he had gone through on Nitis as a hellish experience, but he could only smile when he thought about that cold planet.

'Why does it hurt so much?' Khan cursed in his mind. 'I've lived for twelve years with the same terrible nightmare, death seems to follow me, and I've become unable to trust my own father. Why does everything feel like nothing compared to losing you?'

Khan could only mock himself. He had to be truly broken to put a relationship that had lasted for less than a year above everything experienced in his life. Still, he couldn't control how he felt, and his eyes grew teary as the scenes of his last day with Liiza reappeared in his mind.

The Stal were about to put Khan into a cell again and use him as a guinea pig for the anti-mana project, but he could only think about his lost happiness. Dying felt easy compared to living with so much pain. Yet, it also felt unfair after everything he had survived.

'I guess I have nothing else to lose now,' Khan sighed. 'Blowing up is still better than becoming a guinea pig.'

Khan let mana flow inside his broken hand as the Stal placed a foot on the truck's entrance. The other aliens stepped toward the vehicle to check that everything went well, and the azure glow that started to come out of his palm only made them growl angrily again.

An exchange of growls happened before Khan's Stal raised him in front of its heads and prepared another punch. The alien tried to threaten him before attacking, and that gave him the chance to mutter something.

"[Feel my desperation]," Khan whispered in the Niqols' language before the mana on his palm transformed into a bright red-purple glow that engulfed the entire group.

Chapter 256 - Fried

Khan didn't know how to apply the Niqols' approach to the Wave spell. He knew the theory behind Liiza's ice, but each element required a different method or process to express its power.

The Niqols couldn't help Khan there since none of them had the same element, so he could only try to fuse the human training program to the Niqols' approach to mana. He knew that changing the nature of that energy required strong emotions. Still, he was also aware that the Wave spell needed specific images, something deeply connected to an idea of destruction.

Needless to say, Khan's greatest drive had always been his desperation, and his experiences on different planets had only strengthened it. His nightmares, Istrone, everything that had happened on Nitis, and his current predicament had turned that feeling into the most powerful fuel that his mind was able to produce.

Hence, Khan performed everything that his training program had taught him. He imagined all the death and destruction seen throughout his life while adding his desperation to that mixture, and the outcome turned out to be quite explosive.

Something broke inside Khan. He found it hard to describe that sensation. Pain and tiredness had filled his mind until he felt relief as if he had just taken off an uncomfortable shirt. Everything became slightly lighter for no apparent reason.

The mana accumulated on his palm suddenly turned red-purple before expanding into a wave of energy that released a strange noise when it spread throughout the air. It almost sounded like a desperate cry, but Khan didn't know how reliable his ears were in that situation.

The wave of mana quickly reached the Stal, but Khan barely had the time to inspect the scene since everything fell apart in no time. He couldn't move or even turn his head, but the alien had lifted him in front of its head, so he could see what his attack did to its flesh.

The alien's rough brown skin disappeared as soon as it touched the red-purple mana. Most of it simply vanished and left behind a few chunks of flesh as it revealed the Stal's insides.

Khan could glance at the Stal's skeleton, muscles, and organs for less than a second before they also started to vanish. Some of them lasted longer than others, but they eventually turned into a few gory chunks that began to fall with him.

The rifle endured the attack even longer, and the same went for the truck. The mana pushed the weapon away as it cracked its tough fabric before turning most of it into dust. The vehicle's dark metal seemed able to survive the spell, but it soon started to break as the mana continued to expand.

Khan fell on his feet, but he couldn't preserve his balance, so his back quickly ended up on the ground and left him staring at the sky. The wave of mana had vanished by then, and the area had also fallen silent. He couldn't hear the bullets anymore, but a grunt eventually reached his ears.

Khan slowly turned his head in the direction of the grunt. The thick legs of a series of Stal appeared in his vision and described the gory spectacle he had created. The spell had reached every alien in the group, but not in their entirety, allowing some body parts to survive the event.

The limbs laid among puddles of blood, tiny parts of the Stal, maimed corpses, and broken rifles. Still, Khan soon noticed a wounded figure past them. He recognized the second-level warrior that supported itself on one of the trucks.

The Stal had three arms crossed in front of its chest and head while the other clung onto the truck's roof. Part of the skin on its limbs and waist had vanished, transforming into large bloody spots that revealed thick layers of muscles.

The alien had managed to escape the spell's range in time to avoid severe injuries, and it now inspected Khan with wide eyes. The Stal slowly straightened its position and began to study the area. Its gaze didn't remain for long on its companions' body parts, but the sight of the broken vehicle seemed to stun it deeply.

Indecision seemed to appear on the Stal's face. It didn't immediately jump inside the truck to escape. Instead, it continued to gaze at the broken truck before fixing its eyes on Khan.

Khan felt that something was off. He recognized the hint of determination that had appeared on the alien's face, so he began to muster his mana again. A red-purple glow started to spread from his palm as desperation filled his mind. He could sense that the spell was about to work, but the violent cough from before abruptly took control of his lungs and broke his concentration.

The Stal darted forward when it saw the red-purple halo dispersing. It reached Khan in no time, and its feet landed at his sides as it drew its four arms forward. The alien wanted to kill him in a single blow, but a bullet suddenly pierced its right head and made it lose its balance.

The alien fell to its left, but it placed a knee and two palms to the ground as it forced itself to maintain its balance. The Stal didn't give up on its plan to kill Khan and did its best to prepare for a deadly attack while controlling its huge body with only one brain. Yet, two bullets landed on its side before its arms could descend.

The Stal growled, but dark blood filled its mouth until life abandoned its body. The alien fell to its side and lay on the ground right next to Khan.

A series of hurried steps approached Khan. He had to tilt his head while coughs continued to come out of his mouth, and the scene that unfolded in his eyes made the struggle worth it.

Delia, Gloria, and two other soldiers approached his position while wearing various expressions. Delia smiled happily while her three companions inspected the area with a mixture of astonishment, disgust, and even awe.

Their presence in that area confirmed that the enemy trench wasn't a threat anymore. Only four soldiers had survived the arrival of the tank, but Khan didn't have enough strength to feel sad or happy about it. His mood was far from ideal after his first and attempted second execution of the wave spell, so his exhaustion took the better of him and made his vision go dark.

The nightmare didn't care about Khan's condition. He was sleeping, so it had to take control of his dreams. However, he didn't mind it too much that time since it confirmed that he was still alive.

Waves of pain with unknown origin invaded his nightmare from time to time, but Khan couldn't focus on them. He was partially aware of what would follow the battle, but he couldn't think too deeply about the matter since the Second Impact often claimed the entirety of his attention.

When the nightmare ended and Khan opened his eyes, he found himself in a foreign and yet familiar environment. He didn't recognize the dark ceiling and the objects around him, but they gave off the same vibe as the moving camp.

Khan tried to turn to inspect his surroundings, but he quickly discovered that long metal handcuffs were binding his right arm to his simple bed. A small metallic structure also covered his hand and forced his fingers and palm to remain straight.

Khan quickly used his free arm to remove the sheets that covered his body. He was wearing a pair of clean trousers, but his torso was in the open and revealed a series of bandages that didn't come from a military uniform.

A tube with a transparent liquid came out from under the handcuffs, and a few consoles stood at the bed's side. Khan could see his knife on a table on the other side of the room, but his phone, Lieutenant Pouille's device, and the ring stolen from the Stal were nowhere to be seen.

Khan understood that he was safe and that the handcuffs probably didn't have any negative purpose, but he didn't like to be bound to a bed. He moved his back a bit and flexed his left arm to check their condition, but everything felt fine. He experienced a slight discomfort in the spots where the bullets had hit him, but that alone couldn't force him to lie down.

"Hello?" Khan called, but no one answered. He couldn't sense any presence past the walls of the large room nor hear steps.

The room featured two more beds with the same consoles but no nurses or doctors. Khan couldn't even see meds or other items in the room, and he had no idea how to call someone without a phone.

Khan wanted to stand, and he even felt the urge to pee, so he started inspecting the handcuffs. They had a simple circular button on the other side, and they let his arm free when he pressed it.

Khan inspected his right hand and the simple metallic structure over it for a few seconds before placing his bare feet on the cold floor and slowly standing up. He felt slightly dizzy, but he had kept his left hand on the bed during the process, so he didn't lose his balance.

A sense of tiredness pervaded Khan's mind, but he felt relatively okay. He didn't know for how long he had slept, but that couldn't be long since his body still needed to recover. Yet, he didn't feel hungry or thirsty, and the tube with transparent liquid seemed to be the reason behind that.

'I guess I shouldn't take it away for now,' Khan thought after seeing that the tube pierced his skin to send that liquid inside his body.

Luckily for Khan, the tube had a sack hanging from a simple stick on the other end. The item even had four small wheels that allowed him to carry it around easily.

Khan took the stick with his left and carried it with him. He retrieved his knife, but he noticed that a mark had appeared on one of its surfaces. Even the handle appeared damaged, and he couldn't see his sheath anywhere.

Khan disregarded eventual doubts and approached one of the two doors in the room. His short time inside the moving camp had taught him how those structures worked, so he recognized the bathroom in no time.

A surprising sight waited for Khan in the bathroom. A mirror right above a sink allowed him to see that someone had cut his hair short. He didn't have his half-burned and messy haircut anymore.

A few red spots also occupied the right side of his face, where the Stal had punched him. Khan didn't feel any pain or discomfort from there, and nothing seemed broken either.

'They have patched me up properly,' Khan thought as a helpless sigh escaped his mouth.

The tiredness and the vague discomfort couldn't hide the realization that something had changed inside Khan. He felt different, even if he couldn't explain how. Also, the sadness caused by his separation from Liiza and his other tragic experiences had intensified.

His mood was far from ideal, but he didn't mind that too much. Khan guessed that it was only normal to feel like that after his last battle.

The only consolations were his relatively good condition and his success with the Wave spell. Khan wasn't sure how to call his ability since it had been different from what he had seen in the training program, but it was easy to explain that event with his new approach to the chaos element.

The entrance slid open when Khan pressed a button at its side. A corridor expanded in his view, and a young soldier slept on a chair placed at its end. Khan didn't need to check the man's shoulders to know that he was only close to becoming a first-level warrior.

The soldier didn't wake up even when Khan got close to him, so he cleared his throat loudly. The man snapped awake and jumped to his feet to perform a military salute, but his stance relaxed when he noticed Khan.

"You shouldn't be out of your bed!" The man exclaimed.

"Can I remove this thing?" Khan asked while pointing at the tube attached to his arm.

"Wait here!" The soldier stated. "I'll call the doctor."

The soldier darted toward a door next to the chair, and Khan slowly followed him. A relatively large area appeared in his view, and many interactive desks filled it. That alone showed him that the quality of that structure surpassed his previous moving camp.

Khan entered the room and inspected it for a while before approaching the door crossed by the soldier. Different voices began to reach his ears, but he had to stop paying attention to them to focus on the middle-aged woman that appeared in front of him with the young soldier at her side.

"Why did you get up without my consent?" The woman asked in a chilling tone.

"I had to pee," Khan admitted while raising his right arm. "I made sure not to touch this."

Khan couldn't see the woman's shoulders due to the white medical coat that she wore over her military uniform, but she felt slightly stronger than Lieutenant Pouille. She had to be a second-level warrior.

Still, her appearance felt slightly off. She had long gray hair, even if her stern face didn't show any wrinkle. She was even quite slim, but her figure radiated a power that Khan couldn't ignore.

The woman inspected Khan sternly, but her expression relaxed when she saw that he didn't remove the tube. She approached him and placed a hand on his chest that he forced himself not to avoid before taking out the item from his arm.

"Your body is in a good state after only a bit more than a day of rest," The woman exclaimed after pointing at the stick and letting the soldier handle it. "They told me that you were tough. They weren't wrong."

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan casually replied. "Is it possible to know where I am? Also, I can't find my phone anywhere."

"I'm Lieutenant Ava Holger," The woman declared, "But everyone in the thirty-seventh battalion calls me Doctor or Doc. Come, I'll show you around."

Khan nodded and followed her through the corridor that expanded after the room. The two eventually crossed a large area that featured multiple screens and many unknown soldiers that didn't hesitate to inspect Khan curiously as he passed in front of the entrance.

Lieutenant Holger didn't stop and led Khan across a few corridors and other rooms. He could quickly understand that the structure was larger than his previous moving camp, but he understood its actual size only when the soldier made him exit it.

A green plain covered with short grass expanded past the structure. Khan could see a series of small metal habitations divided by small paths and two large roads that divided the encampment into four parts.

The habitations were rectangular and simple. Khan guessed that they contained only two rooms. Also, he noticed how the main structure just crossed didn't have wheels and represented the center of the encampment.

The encampment had hundreds of small habitations, and Khan could sense the many presences inside them as he followed the Doctor. She didn't leave his silent doubts unanswered and resumed her explanation during the walk. "This is one of the central areas assigned to the thirty-seventh battalion. We have moved your team here to brief you. It's curious that I'm not allowed to know the contents of their reports."

Khan pretended not to hear her. His companions had probably preferred to disclose the matters related to the anti-mana project to a superior to avoid spreading unnecessary rumors. He would have done the same since it was unclear how the Global Army would react to the news.

"Your spell has fried your belongings," Lieutenant Holger explained. "The chaos element and technology don't go along very well. Even your sheath has fallen prey to your ability. Was that your first time using it in battle?"

"How do you know that?" Khan asked.

"Chaos wielders are rare," The Lieutenant explained. "The number of soldiers who end up with that element is constantly shrinking, so it's really hard to find someone capable of using it in battle, especially at such young age."

Khan only nodded. He didn't want to reject that compliment through a simple lie, but he wasn't in the mood to make a smart remark either. The Doctor glanced at him to study his silent acceptance, but she couldn't see anything past his poker face.

The quadrant where the Lieutenant was leading Khan had larger habitations and a big interactive table in a relatively empty area. Khan could see multiple soldiers staring at the map depicted on the table and applying marks by simply touching it. Still, they all raised their heads when Khan and the Doctor approached them.

"You are awake!" A middle-aged man with a military uniform that showed three stars on each shoulder happily shouted. "Come, come. We have a lot to talk about. I hope that you didn't get tired of the fighting because I've already assigned you to the elite assault team ordered by HQ."

Chapter 257 - Legs

The soldier had short black hair and bright brown eyes. His happy and loud gestures didn't appear appropriate in his current location, but the men and women around him didn't seem fazed by them.

Khan inspected the soldiers in the area before glancing at Lieutenant Holger. The Doctor nodded and stepped aside and crossed her arms behind her back. The men and women on the interactive table revealed similar reactions. They resumed their study of the map without bothering that one of them had left them to walk toward the largest habitation in the quadrant.

'He must be a captain,' Khan concluded in his mind before hurrying behind the powerful soldier.

The man didn't say anything as he approached his habitation and unlocked the metal door with his phone. Then, he stood in front of the entrance and gestured to Khan to get inside.

The habitation's insides partially confirmed Khan's guess. The initial area was quite big and featured multiple doors. He could see a series of armchairs, one round table, and an interactive desk at its bottom. A few screens also hung from the walls and revealed openings meant for phones or similar devices.

Khan could immediately notice the ring stolen from the Stal on the interactive desk. Two phones stood next to the item, but they all featured multiple cracks that he could connect to his spell.

"Your companions told me that you have faced an entire trench and multiple vehicles on your own," The man stated as he closed the door behind Khan and walked toward the other side of the room. "Soldiers like you are rare, especially on Ecoruta. No one wants to fight properly here."

"I thought the orders to remain inside the trenches came from HQ, sir," Khan politely replied as the man tinkered with the interactive desk to open a drawer.

"That's because HQ doesn't want to win," The soldier announced while placing a bottle and two glasses on the desk. "The Global Army has nothing to gain from a complete victory. This isn't our planet, and the Guko would definitely renegotiate the terms of our alliance after the war ends. The current situation is theoretically perfect since it allows us to benefit from those aliens without giving them too much power."

Khan lowered his eyes as the soldier began to pour the booze in the glasses. He could finally understand the reasons behind HQ's orders. Forcing Ecoruta to remain at war granted a constant flow of resources and new technology without giving anything back to the Guko.

"Does it anger you that the Global Army is trading human lives for technology and resources?" The man asked before pushing one glass forward and pointing at a chair in front of the desk.

"I'm just a soldier, sir," Khan lied while approaching the chair. "I follow orders and do my best to survive."

"Is that so?" The man scoffed. "It pains me to see that such a promising soldier can't trust his superiors, but I can't blame you. I bet you would have tried to remain on Nitis if you had the chance."

Khan didn't sit nor answer. He stood next to the chair and kept his aloof eyes on the soldier. The latter appeared truly sad, but he couldn't drop his guard so easily.

"HQ's behavior angers me," The man eventually admitted as he sat behind the desk and pointed at the chair next to Khan again. "Sure, the war is granting immense benefits to humankind, but I can't simply watch as my soldiers die due to awful strategies. I want to change things, but my authority barely covers the thirty-seventh battalion."

Khan sat and took the glass. The strong smell of booze reached his nostrils as he glanced at the amber liquid. He wanted to drink, but he waited for the soldier to finish his speech.

"I have a plan to improve things for the thirty-seventh battalion," The man continued. "The news of the anti-mana project had forced HQ to grant me some freedom. The assault team has to take care of the underground labs, but nothing stops it from attacking settlements and seizing vehicles on the surface."

'Does he want to use the team as his personal army?' Khan wondered. 'His reasons aren't bad, but he is also planning to use human lives to pursue his goals.'

"Were the reports wrong?" The man asked when he saw that Khan had yet to say anything or drink from his cup. "I thought you liked drinking."

"It felt impolite to start without you, sir," Khan lied, and the soldier laughed before taking a sip from his glass.

Khan could only drink at that point. A pleasant burning sensation filled his mouth and throat. He could feel that the booze's quality surpassed everything experienced in the past, but he didn't show any reaction.

"I guess I can't gain your trust with expensive booze and nice words," The man laughed. "Yet, I still need your help. The assault team will have a few second-level warriors, but I need you in charge of the weaker soldiers."

"I can do that, sir," Khan stated before raising his right hand, "But I won't be at my best until my hand heals."

"Don't worry about that," The soldier exclaimed. "The Stal must have already moved the labs. We'll always be one step behind them, so it's better to take our time and prepare something that they can't stop. You will spend the next month here to recover."

Khan internally rejoiced at that news. He didn't care about his injuries, but he wanted to understand what he had achieved with the chaos element before jumping into another battle.

"My question had another meaning," The man exclaimed. "I wanted to know if you were willing to cooperate with my plan. That might involve partially lying about your reports."

"I'll do as you ask me, sir," Khan declared without showing any hesitation.

The man's words had sounded like a trick question, but Khan didn't let them sway him. He couldn't say no to a superior, especially during a war. Also, he would just come clean and blame the soldier if someone with a higher rank showed up.

The man didn't seem satisfied with that answer. He scratched his hair and inspected Khan as he took small sips from his cup. Khan couldn't understand what the soldier was thinking, but his face remained aloof and calm.

"Let's try to change approach," The man eventually sighed. "I'm Captain Jason Clayman. I'll become a Lieutenant Colonel in a matter of years. Help me, and you'll have an ally in the higher ranks. Is that enough to show me your true face?"

Khan had to admit that he didn't expect that sudden change in the Captain's behavior. Still, he couldn't continue pretending now that the soldier had shown his cards.

"I had many important things on my phone," Khan replied. "What will happen to them?"

"Everything is stored in the network, hidden by your genetic signature," Captain Clayman explained. "You'll gain access to everything you have lost once you receive your next phone. I've also commissioned a device that can resist your element. You won't even have to worry about the things you have taken from Lieutenant Pouille's phone."

"What about eventual rewards?" Khan asked. "The Global Army knows about the anti-mana project because I've made my team escape. That ring must also have its uses in its broken state, am I right?"

"You can name whatever you want," Captain Clayman exclaimed.

"I might need help there," Khan responded. "I already have two good martial arts, a first-grade weapon, and a training program for my element. I don't know what else I should ask for."

Captain Clayman's eyes widened in surprise before his mouth opened to create a satisfied smirk. He had predicted that Khan would have been an interesting soldier, and those last words only confirmed that idea. Khan had expressed his ignorance without any shame since the matter involved his strength.

"I've read your file," Captain Clayman replied while placing his legs on the interactive desk and glancing toward a random spot in the room. "What you have is already a lot for most first-level warriors. You can ask for synthetic mana, other spells, or knowledge. I'll send you a list once HQ gives you a new phone."

Khan nodded in satisfaction. He had faced his limits during the recent escape, and he couldn't wait to get rid of them. A second spell might help him avoid some of his weaknesses, and he didn't mind learning more about the world of mana.

"So, can I trust you?" Captain Clayman asked and forced Khan to snap back to reality. "I won't hide that your team will have to face dangers, but your companions in the thirty-seventh battalion will have it far easier if you succeed."

"Expanding can't be the only solution, sir," Khan stated. "Most soldiers here come from difficult situations that have never allowed them to develop their power, and being stuck inside a trench doesn't help. They need teachers, training areas, and actual combat experience."

"Small steps, Khan," The Captain declared. "HQ must feel forced to send them after we clear a large area. Focus on securing victories and clearing the underground structure. I'll take care of improving your companions' life here."

"I'll take my leave then," Khan exclaimed before gulping the remains of his drink and standing up to perform a military salute.

"Right, one last thing," Captain Clayman announced. "This stuff about the anti-mana project is a secret. I'm the only one in the entire battalion who knows about it, except for your friends, of course. HQ wants things to remain like this. Are we clear?"

"What about the assault team?" Khan asked.

"Only trusted soldiers will join the team," The Captain explained. "Though I'd still refrain from speaking about it even during the missions."

"Understood," Khan stated before turning to leave the habitation.

"Khan?" Captain Clayman called before Khan could leave the room. "Try not to abuse your fame. I don't want to put limits on you, but this isn't Nitis. Let's retain a human behavior."

Captain Clayman winked when Khan glanced at him. Khan could only nod before leaving the habitation in a hurry. He had vaguely understood what the soldier wanted to say, but those words only gave birth to a bitter feeling inside his mind.

Khan felt a bit lost when the entirety of the camp expanded in his vision. It was already night, and he had no idea where to go. He didn't even know if the Captain had prepared a habitation for him.

"Sir, sir?" The young soldier that Khan had seen sleeping outside the medical bay called while running toward him.

The higher-ups sitting at the table glared at the young man, but they decided to ignore him when they saw that Khan was involved. Meanwhile, Khan tried to understand why that soldier was using such polite words to call him.

"Sir!" The man announced after stopping in front of Khan. "I will be your guide and assistant during your stay inside the camp."

Khan quickly inspected the man. He appeared only a few years older than him. His short golden hair and green eyes gave him features that looked too pure for a battlefield. Even his behavior didn't make Khan feel next to a warrior.

"What's your name?" Khan asked.

"Rick, sir!" The soldier shouted and claimed the attention of the higher-ups on the table again.

"Stop calling me sir," Khan sighed, "And lower your voice."

"I'm sorry, si-," Rick almost whispered before shutting his mouth to interrupt his line.

"Where is my habitation?" Khan asked.

"It's right here, in the second quadrant," Rick announced while pointing at the habitations past one of the roads that divided the camp. "I'm sure that you'll like it. Only the Lieutenants can get one of the big tents."

Rick began to walk toward the second quadrant, and Khan calmly followed him. A series of gazes fell on his figure as soon as he arrived among the various houses. Many soldiers had gathered into small groups to exchange words or drinks, and they didn't refrain from sizing Khan up when he passed in front of them.

A familiar atmosphere filled the second quadrant, but Khan inevitably compared it to Nitis. He had spent many nights among fellow soldiers, but the humans didn't have the Niqols' hospitality. None of them tried to greet Khan, but he didn't mind that.

The situation changed when Rick pointed at the largest habitation in the area. Khan studied it for a few seconds before diverting his attention on a few figures rushing toward his position.

"You took your time!" Delia shouted before exploding into a happy laugh.

"I'm surprised he managed to wake up so soon," Gloria commented.

"Are you?" One of the other soldiers asked. "I was surprised he could sleep at all."

"Shut up, idiot," The fourth soldier scolded. "Try to be polite. We are alive thanks to him."

"That was a compliment," The third soldier scoffed.

"It didn't sound like that," The fourth soldier complained.

"I see that you have recovered," Khan stated as a sad smirk appeared on his face.

His platoon had initially counted more than thirty members, but only five of them had survived the imprisonment and escape. That was an incredible feat, but Khan didn't feel good anyway.

"Hey, no sad faces," Delia pouted while reaching Khan and checking his bandages. "You have been incredible out there."

Khan nodded without adding anything. Delia was right, but he couldn't decide how he felt. The aftereffects of the Wave spells were still filling his mind. He felt desperate even after going back to a safe area.

"Well, get out now," Delia stated to her three companions. "Khan still needs to rest. We can show him around tomorrow."

"They don't look so friendly," Khan joked while glancing at the soldiers who were still inspecting his group.

"They are just scared," Delia explained. "They have asked us many things about you while you were sleeping. I must say I struggled to believe my own words when I told them what you have done."

"I can blame you for this hospitality then," Khan joked.

"I just told them the truth," Delia complained. "Besides, I'm sure they'll grow more friendly once they get to know you."

"It's fine either way," Khan sighed. "I'll hit the bed for now. I'll think about everything else tomorrow."

"You can contact me from your habitation if you need anything," Rick exclaimed before performing a military salute.

Khan nodded and showed a fake smile toward his companions before approaching his house. Many thoughts weighed on his mind, and no one could help him sort them out. His feelings didn't listen to reason, and his element required tests that were too dangerous to perform among people.

The door of the habitation slid open as soon as Khan neared it. The area featured only a couch and a small table, but he could see that the house had three different rooms. He planned to inspect them before deciding what to do, but a figure slipped past the entrance before it could close.

"What are you doing here?" Khan smirked while turning to inspect Delia.

"You have promised me a drink," Delia reminded while taking out a small flask from her pocket. "I'm here to claim my reward."

"Did you want to remain alone with me so badly?" Khan teased as he threw himself on the couch.

"What if I said yes?" Delia giggled while taking her place on Khan's left. "Let me see your hand now. That thing is hideous, but it seems to do the job."

Khan stretched his right hand toward Delia, and she took his wrist carefully to study the metal item that kept his fingers and palm straight. Yet, she raised her legs and placed them on his lap during her inspection.

Chapter 258 - Change

"Delia, what are you doing?" Khan asked in a scolding tone.

"I'm checking your bandages," Delia replied, pretending that she didn't do anything strange. "Right, the drinks. I almost forgot about it."

Delia kept her left hand sealed on Khan's wrist and opened the flask with the help of her mouth. Then, she took a short sip before handing the item to Khan, and he seized it while glaring at his companion.

Delia ignored Khan's glare and continued to inspect his right hand. She turned his wrist carefully to study both its sides, but she didn't use the same grace with her legs. She moved them a lot as if trying to make sure that Khan felt them.

The camp had given a clean military uniform to Delia, but that didn't prevent Khan from imagining her firm curves. She had almost ended up naked during the escape, so he recalled what that dark-blue fabric hid.

Khan let her have fun. He took a long sip from the flask before handing it back to his companion. Delia seized the item and pulled herself closer to Khan before placing his hand at the base of her left leg, near her groin.

"You are taking advantage of a wounded man," Khan joked.

"Please," Delia sneered. "I have seen you dealing with a tank, a trench, and six armored trucks when you could barely stand. I wouldn't stand a chance if you decided to push me away."

Delia drank and handed the flask to Khan. His eyes inevitably moved between her legs and his right hand before falling on the item. He took it, but he didn't forget to question his companion. "Delia, why are you doing this?"

"I'm not doing anything," Delia whispered while reaching his left arm and tracing the bandages with her fingers. "You have gone all-out for our sake, didn't you?"

"I was only trying to survive," Khan explained. "I would have gotten injured even if I were alone."

"Liar," Delia exclaimed as she moved Khan's left arm away to open a path to his chest. "You could have avoided many of these wounds. I bet you could have outrun the first trucks."

"No, they were too fast," Khan admitted.

"You have dodged them while running toward the tank," Delia commented. "You could have dodged them while running toward the allied trench, but you didn't. You stayed behind and fought."

"It has been an instinctive reaction," Khan declared.

"Liar," Delia repeated. "I've watched you. Most of your smiles are fake, and you never tell the whole truth. Why did you decide to fight instead of running away?"

Khan didn't want to answer, but Delia pouted while placing the flask on his chest. He could only heave a deep sigh and drink before explaining his reasons under those unblinking dark eyes. "I've felt weak after the imprisonment. Leaving you all to die would have only worsened that feeling. Besides, I wanted you to survive that mess."

"You as in me?" Delia smirked while placing her fingers on his chest to trace the edges of his azure scars.

"I don't really know the others," Khan admitted without showing any shame for the hidden meaning of those words.

"Can I take that as a sign that you like me?" Delia whispered.

Khan couldn't help but fix his eyes on Delia's smiling face. She was almost ten years older than him, but her age didn't matter in that situation. He could only think about her soft body and bold moves. Her warmth spread on his lap and chest, but the most unbearable sensation came from his right hand that she had smartly placed near her groin.

Delia's warmth worked as a constant reminder of the differences between humans and Niqols. Khan felt that she was too hot, but that wasn't enough to drive him away. He could almost imagine the comfort that she could give him.

Delia seemed to understand the faint feelings exposed by his gaze. A hand went on his right wrist while the other squeezed his shoulder as she bent forward. She was already close to him, so she could reach his face in mere seconds.

However, Khan placed the back of his hand on her lips at the last instant. Delia glanced at the flask in his grasp before raising her eyes toward him. She was about to complain, but she found herself unable to speak when he made their foreheads touch.

"I'm still in love with her," Khan revealed while closing his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Delia tilted her head to free her mouth before whispering in a joking tone. "We can still have fun, especially after what we have been through. We both deserve to clear our minds."

"Do you really want to be my rebound?" Khan asked while opening his eyes.

Delia stared deep into Khan's eyes. The faint attraction that she had seen before had disappeared. She could only see his sadness now, and that sight felt overwhelming. Something told her that she had never experienced a similar feeling in her life.

"No," Delia sighed before laying her head on his shoulder. "I'm too old to get myself into half-hearted relationships."

"You are nowhere near old," Khan chuckled.

"I know, but you don't get to say it after refusing me," Delia complained.

"I'm sorry," Khan repeated.

"It's not your fault," Delia shook her head without leaving his shoulder. "I simply met you at a bad time."

"I still want you as a friend," Khan declared.

"You won't get rid of me so easily," Delia scoffed. "Also, I will know if you start to fool around with other women. I won't forgive you if you end up with someone else after refusing me."

"I'll be sure to put you at the top of my list," Khan teased.

"I didn't mean that!" Delia giggled before adjusting her position and lowering her voice. "That girl must have been amazing."

"She was indeed incredible," Khan sighed.

"Tell me about her," Delia requested.

"I'd rather avoid that," Khan uttered as Liiza's face appeared in his vision and intensified the desperate feeling inside his mind.

"Please," Delia begged. "I might feel better if I understand how amazing this Niqols was. Besides, I couldn't sleep after reaching the camp. A story might help."

Delia shot a begging glance toward Khan before closing her eyes and relaxing. She was sitting on him, but he felt unable to push her away. The escape must have left her with awful images, and he knew how bad that was once the dreams arrived.

"The first time I saw Liiza, she was riding an Aduns, which is basically a big eagle," Khan began to speak, and his story soon reached funny events or situations. He avoided the most important details, but Delia still giggled and voiced short comments from time to time.

Khan failed to notice when Delia fell asleep. He had been too caught in his story about Liiza that he didn't see when his friend stopped listening to him.

Delia slept peacefully on Khan's shoulder. She appeared incredibly cute under the dim white light of the habitation. The sensations radiated by her body were also hard to refuse, but her warmth made it easier for him.

'She didn't even bother to remove my hand,' Khan cursed in his mind before pulling back his right arm and placing it under her legs, paying attention to avoid touching the metal structure on his hand.

Khan stood up and lifted Delia. The woman didn't even try to wake up, so he could carry her around his habitation, dropping her gently only when he found a bed.

Delia whimpered a bit without waking up when she felt Khan's warmth leaving her, but he promptly placed a blanket over her. When she calmed down, he left the room and started inspecting the rest of his habitation.

The house had a living room with menus on the walls that could work without his phone, a bedroom, a bathroom, and an empty area with darker surfaces compared to the rest of the structure. Khan only needed to touch those walls to sense its familiar properties. That metal was resistant to mana.

'This shouldn't break so easily,' Khan thought. 'Good.'

Khan immediately sat at the center of the room and fell into his meditative state. He planned to perform a few tests with his spell after focusing on his injuries for a bit, but something strange happened as soon as he tried to increase the influence that his mana had on his body.

After becoming a first-level warrior, the energy that came out of the mana core only intensified the halo that filled his body. The same happened now, but the color of the aura turned out to be different. Khan saw red-purple strands coming out of his improved parts and starting the usual improvements originated by the meditative state.

Khan snapped out of his meditative state instantly and wore a shocked expression. The recent event made no sense. Even when it came to other elements, the mana gained different features and colors only after becoming part of a spell. He had seen that happening on different occasions. The Niqols' energy also retained its original azure shades before going through manipulations.

Khan tested the process again. He closed his eyes and focused on his mana core. However, the energy that came out of the organ was still red-purple for no apparent reason.

'This makes no sense!' Khan shouted in his mind. 'Even the Nak are azure. What is even happening?'

Khan initially looked for his phone, but he quickly recalled that he had yet to get a replacement. Still, he quickly disregarded the idea of finding answers in his device since the training program for his element didn't mention anything similar.

Another idea appeared in his mind, and he didn't hesitate to test it out. The knife had been in his pocket the whole time due to the lack of a sheath, and he quickly drew to create the membrane required by the Divine Reaper. His weapon ended up glowing with a red-purple light even if he didn't do anything different from usual.

Khan kept the membrane active for a while to study it. The sharpness that filled his mana when he performed the techniques of the Divine Reaper was still there, but he sensed something deeper now. His base energy had gained properties that he felt unable to suppress and barely noticed unless he paid close attention to them.

The barrier remained in its place until Khan noticed that the mark on his knife began to expand. He immediately dispersed his energy and inspected his weapon to check its condition. It was still virtually perfect, but the dent on its surface proved that his mana had gained destructive properties that damaged what it touched.

Khan reactivated the barrier and stabbed the knife on the floor. The metal couldn't do anything against his weapon. The blade created a perfect hole, and he didn't feel any hindrance during his attack.

The mark on the knife didn't enlarge during the few seconds in which the barrier had been active. It seemed that the weapon could survive his new energy as long as he limited its use to short amounts of time. Yet, that discovery didn't satisfy him.

Khan stood up and threw his knife toward the corner of the room before placing his right arm behind his back. Then, he pointed his left hand toward the wall in front of him and activated the Wave spell.

Khan took every possible precaution. He made sure to aim in the opposite direction of the bedroom as he focused on his desperation. However, the spell created a spherical attack that expanded everywhere.

The reinforced room was quite large, and Khan had previously decided to stand at its center since he had predicted a similar event. Yet, his mana dug the dark walls a few seconds after touching them. Even the floor revealed a smooth hole when his attack ended.

Khan quickly checked his right hand. The metallic structure was fine, but the same didn't go for the bandages on his left arm. A few aspects of his spell remained unclear. It almost seemed that the edges of the red-purple sphere carried its true destructive power, but he couldn't feel sure about that for now.

Moreover, Khan couldn't explain why his spell was so different from what he had seen on the training program. He felt unable to complain in front of that destructive power, but he remained annoyed by his inability to control its trajectory.

Khan wore a resolute expression and stretched his left arm again. He felt ready to test his attack all night if needed, but a tinge of hesitation eventually appeared in his mind.

His current habitation wasn't ideal for those experiments. Khan had already damaged it. Also, Delia was sleeping only a few walls away from his position. Testing his power so close to her was too risky. He didn't even know what effects the Wave spell could have on the metallic structure on his right hand.

'Knowledge, knowledge,' Khan repeated in his mind before picking his knife and sitting back at the center of the room. 'There must be something about this in the records of the Global Army. I might have to rely on Captain Clayman if the topic involves classified information.'

The heavy thoughts that filled Khan's mind didn't prevent him from falling into his meditative state. That process appeared unaffected by the changes in his mana, and his body also confirmed that theory.. Actually, the intensity of the halo felt stronger than before due to the vigor gained by his energy.

Chapter 259 Aggressive

Khan ended up spending the whole night immersed in his meditative state. He wanted to make sure that his new mana didn't cause any adverse repercussions, and he also felt interested in the properties of that energy.

The red-purple mana was aggressive, but Khan found it easier to control it. The connection with his energy felt deeper and rooted in his instincts, but that wasn't always a good thing.

Forcing the mana to act was easy. Khan barely needed to think about specific actions to activate it. Meditating, deploying the sharp membrane, and moving the energy across his body felt smooth and natural like never before.

However, the problems arrived when Khan needed to interrupt those actions. His mana didn't want to stop once obtaining a purpose. It ignored his orders and forced him to focus the entirety of his concentration on halting eventual effects. He even failed in the process completely at times.

That behavior was in line with what Khan experienced during battles or chaotic situations. He could finally explain the source behind the special mindset unlocked on Nitis. His mana preferred instinctive actions that showed no hesitation, which was exactly what he did on the battlefields.

Khan didn't initially intend to be awake all night, but he lost track of time during his study and meditative state. He didn't like that lack of complete control over his energy, but he had to admit that it felt good to let go. Part of him rejoiced to experience the aggressive nature of his mana, and his injuries also benefited from it.

His hand needed far more than a single training session to heal, but his other injuries healed faster than before. He could sense the exhaustion accumulated during the escape vanishing under the influence of the aura inside his body. New skin also replaced the burns and holes caused by the bullets.

After spending a whole night in that state, Khan felt to understand what Liiza had meant when she described the chaos element. Suppressing it went against its nature. He could apply that theory to his meditations, martial arts, and spell since they showed stronger effects when he abandoned every restraint.

That felt amazing, except when it came to the Wave spell. The spherical attack would create problems on a battlefield featuring allies or precious equipment. Even his weapons and clothes didn't seem immune to its destructive power.

Most of those worries and doubts remained in the back of Khan's mind. A single night wasn't enough to uncover all the secrets behind his new mana, and he lacked the knowledge to find answers. Still, he confirmed that it was dangerous for him to fight among allies before learning everything about his power.

Khan didn't notice the arrival of the morning, but he snapped out of his intense study when he heard faint steps resounding behind the walls of the reinforced room. The familiar presence also moved directly toward him, so he interrupted his training right before the metal door slid open.

"You are impossible," Delia commented in a sleepy tone while scratching the sides of her eyes.

"I lost track of the passage of time," Khan explained before adding a tease, "And my bed was taken."

"You could have joined me," Delia giggled before a yawn interrupted her gesture.

"You must really like teasing me," Khan joked before standing up.

"I usually am into older men, so be proud of yourself," Delia revealed while approaching Khan and taking his left arm. "Let me see."

"The Doc will probably scold me if you undo her bandages," Khan complained without stopping Delia.

"Then get scolded," Delia replied before undoing the knots and slowly revealing the skin under the bandages.

Khan could also see the state of his injuries in that situation. The burns had mostly disappeared, but red spots had remained where the bullets had landed.

"I think the bandages are useless now," Delia commented while moving her fingers over his back and stopping when she reached the tattoo. "You did this for her, right?"

"It was part of a test," Khan explained. "Her nanny didn't really like humans, and she was important to her."

"You are incredible," Delia sighed before wrapping her arms around his neck and placing her head on his nape. "You didn't deserve this."

"I know," Khan whispered. "At least I did my best."

Delia's warm breath fell on his neck rhythmically and made Khan lose himself in those sensations. It felt good to be with someone, even if that relationship didn't involve deep emotions.

The Niqols' approach told Khan to let go of his restraints and accept Delia, but it also forced him to experience his pain on a deeper level. The desperation that filled his mind didn't help there either, so he decided to enjoy that interaction without pushing it forward.

A slightly wet sensation eventually spread from his neck and interrupted his thoughts. Delia left a loud kiss before chuckling and teasing him again. "I would have definitely managed to kiss you properly. You shouldn't lower your guard so easily."

"Why didn't you do it then?" Khan asked as Delia broke the embrace.

"Because it would have probably hurt you now," Delia responded while wearing a smirk.

"I guess maturity really arrives once you get older," Khan joked before approaching the exit.

"Hey, who did you call old?" Delia scoffed, but she eventually smiled when she heard Khan's laugh. She had managed to lift his mood, and that was enough for now.

Khan's habitation had new uniforms ready for him, but he couldn't wear them with the metallic structure on his right hand. He limited himself to changing his trousers before leaving his house with Delia to find something to eat.

It was early in the morning, and the camp was completely silent. The only sound that reached Khan's ears came from the familiar figure sitting next to the entrance of his habitation. Rick was snoring loudly, but he woke up as soon as Khan kicked him softly.

"Sir!" Rick shouted when he noticed Khan and Delia staring at him.

"What did I tell you about this 'sir' stuff?" Khan scolded.

"My apologies!" Rick shouted again before straightening his position to perform a military salute.

"What did I tell you about your voice?" Khan scolded again.

"I'm sorry," Rick whispered while lowering his head in shame.

"How long have you been here?" Khan asked. "I would have let you in if I knew you were here."

"I didn't want to disturb you," Rick timidly replied while moving his eyes between Khan and Delia.

"It's not how it loo-," Khan began to explain, but Delia interrupted him before he could finish his line.

"It's exactly how it looks like," Delia declared while placing her head on Khan's shoulder and taking his left arm in her embrace. "You can also tell everyone if you want. Actually, please tell everyone."

Rick appeared embarrassed by that bold declaration. He even blushed a bit, and Khan could only shake his head before glaring at Delia. She limited herself to laugh and let go of him after squeezing his arm one last time.

"Why did you come here anyway?" Khan asked. "I thought I had to contact you, and it's way too early even for a guide."

Rick suddenly raised his head as he recalled the purpose of his visit. He reached for his pocket and took out a phone that was slightly different from those used by the other soldiers. It remained nothing more than a screen, but it had a darker color.

"I had to deliver this," Rick explained while handing the phone to Khan. "HQ sent a replacement suitable for your element."

Khan noticed that the phone was heavier than his previous device. It also felt sturdier, but he didn't try to confirm that. The screen activated as soon as his thumb touched the screen, and a welcome message that featured his name quickly appeared.

'Genetic signature acknowledged,' Khan read on the phone. 'Welcome back, Khan. Do you want to download the contents of your previous device?'

Khan pressed on the "yes" label, and a loading bar immediately replaced the previous menu. The process wasn't slow, but it would take a few minutes to end, so he stored the device in his pocket for now.

"Is there a canteen here?" Khan asked as his stomach started to torture him.

"I will lead you there immediately!" Rick shouted before covering his mouth with his hands.

"Just go," Khan sighed, and Delia laughed when she saw Rick shooting toward a seemingly random direction to escape that awkward situation.

Khan and Delia followed Rick toward the center of the second quadrant, where they found a relatively small building with interactive surfaces. The structure was nothing more than a black cube placed next to a series of metal tables and benches.

The menus on the interactive surfaces showed a series of plates that all the soldiers could select. Rick even explained how the structure never stopped working, so ordering food even deep into the night was possible. Only the types of meals changed depending on the hour.

Khan could only rejoice at that news. The night spent meditating had left him famished, so he didn't hesitate to order multiple plates right away. He couldn't use his right hand, so Delia and Rick had to help him carry the trays that came out of the cube whenever drawers opened on its smooth surface.

The food wasn't great, but Khan was nowhere near picky. Delia and Rick almost couldn't believe that he could eat so much so quickly, but they refrained from pointing that out.

The meal allowed Khan to learn more about Rick. It turned out that the soldier came from a good family with high standards, but his nature didn't suit battles. His parents had sent him on Ecoruta in the hope that the experience would have forced him to mature, but none of his superiors had found him ready for the battlefield until then.

Khan lost interest in Rick when his new phone completed the download. He could confirm that everything was in its place, including the training programs that had required external magical items to become part of his device. He didn't know how the Global Army had accomplished that, but he didn't bother thinking about it.

Khan initially intended to explore the books stolen from Lieutenant Pouille's device, but a message appeared on his screen before he could start searching for answers to his condition. Captain Clayman had sent him a list of possible rewards.

"Hey, help me out," Khan said while elbowing Delia's side softly.

"What is thi-," Delia said while bending toward Khan, but a long ooh replaced the end of his question when her eyes fell on the list.

"Ignore the synthetic mana," Khan added.

"Why is that?" Delia asked. "That's a lot even for wealthy families."

"Just do as I say," Khan uttered before whispering an honest "please".

The list had many labels, and Captain Clayman didn't specify how many Khan could pick. He could read the names of many books that involved knowledge about mana, mana cores, and uses of that energy. Instead, others revolved around historical records about past famous experts or general descriptions of the known alien species.

The amount of knowledge available to Khan was immense, and he couldn't wait to get his hands on it, but the techniques described on the list soon claimed the entirety of his attention. He could see training programs for two spells and abilities that used mana without requiring a specific element.

"I still think the synthetic mana is perfect for your current situation," Delia commented. "You are already strong. Adding other techniques might make you weaker until you manage to add them to your fighting style."

"Delia," Khan said in a scolding tone.

"If you really don't want what probably is the best resource available to soldiers at our level," Delia exclaimed, "You should just pick everything else. I still think you won't get the chance to use these techniques, except for these mental ones.. This "enhanced reading" is good to study, and the "simulated mental battle" should suit someone as thick-headed as you."

Chapter 260 - Rassec

"How do you even know them?" Khan asked.

Khan had yet to open the description of the two mental techniques on the list, so he could only guess what they did according to their names. Still, Delia seemed to know their exact uses and effects.

"Both techniques consume a lot of mana," Rick added before Delia could answer. "The "enhanced reading" is something that the Guko have created, so it's not perfect for humans. Meanwhile, the "simulated mental battle" is rather advanced. You might be unable to use it without some training."

"How can you both know about this?" Khan repeated as his gaze moved between Rick and Delia.

"Mana has various uses," Delia summarized. "There is a lot more past and in-between martial arts and spells. Magical items and techniques that don't require specific elements have become common after the Global Army interacted with multiple alien species. Still, most of them are too advanced for recruits or soldiers in their second year."

"How does he know about it then?" Khan asked again since Rick was quite close to his age.

"Are you implying that I'm old again?" Delia threatened while pulling Khan's ear, but he pretended to ignore her and kept his eyes on Rick.

"This knowledge has been part of my education before joining the Global Army," Rick shortly explained.

"You must be quite rich," Delia commented before letting go of Khan's ear.

"My family is rich," Rick stated. "I won't be until I prove myself worthy of the name that I carry."

Delia couldn't help but compare Rick with Khan. They were both young, but their lives had been entirely different, and that had led to opposite characters. Rick was timid and insecure, while Khan was the embodiment of confidence.

Meanwhile, Khan replied to the message to question Captain Clayman about the number of items in the list that he could request as rewards for his feats. He didn't expect the soldier to answer quickly, but the latter surprised him.

'Don't be too greedy,' Khan read the answer on his phone and quickly chose everything but the synthetic mana.

'That's still too greedy,' The Captain said in his answer before sending another list that gave a value to each label and number that he couldn't overcome.

Delia had started to advise Rick on how to improve as a soldier, but she moved her attention to Khan when he called her. The Global Army's generosity left her stunned for a few seconds, but she didn't feel too surprised since the matter involved Khan.

Delia also understood the necessity to keep a few things a secret from Rick. Those rewards would become part of Khan's assets, so it wasn't her place to tell everyone about them. Also, she could use that chance to tease him a bit more.

"You can find less detailed versions of these books on the network," Delia whispered to Khan's ear. "I suggest you go for the mental techniques, the training programs, the historical records, and the uses of mana."

"I want to become an ambassador," Khan whispered while turning toward Delia, "And I need information about mana for personal reasons. You know, my element can be troublesome."

Delia approached his ear again and replied in a soft voice. "Ditch the historical records and a mental technique then. The knowledge about the alien species is necessary for your goals, and you really need to learn more about the uses of mana."

"I don't want to give up on a technique either," Khan complained.

"The math is clear," Delia stated. "You can't pick everything."

"I hope the Captain says otherwise," Khan uttered while sending his choices even if they exceeded the max value set on the second list.

"Don't you feel any shame negotiating with a captain?" Delia asked.

"I don't know what that means," Khan joked.

"You must know the meaning of shame to ignore it," Delia corrected.

Rick lowered his head, but he inevitably glanced at the duo from time to time. Khan and Delia didn't seem to care that they were basically flirting in the open. Rick couldn't even understand how Khan could resist Delia's bold approach, especially with her doing everything in her power to get closer to him or make him aware of her captivating presence.

Needless to say, Rick began to admire Khan. The rumors about his feats on the battlefield and his evident experience with women created the image of a perfect man, everything that Rick's family wanted him to become. It didn't help that Khan was younger than Rick, which only made the latter decide that he wanted to learn everything he could during his time as a guide.

"Please, be my master!" Rick suddenly shouted while Khan and Delia were still busy teasing each other.

Khan and Delia raised their gazes from the phone and stared at Rick in confusion, but their eyes soon fell on the small group of soldiers approaching the area. They didn't even reach the cube before gathering around the trio's table.

Khan instinctively prepared for battle, but he forced himself to calm down. He had yet to see the effects of his new mana during a fight, and he wanted to avoid testing them when Delia was so close.

"Do you like the food in our camp?" One of the soldiers, a relatively young man, asked after inspecting the many trays on the table.

Khan didn't immediately answer. The stars on the group's military uniforms gave him a general understanding of the soldiers' power, but he wanted to understand their actual battle experience.

The soldiers were all first-level warriors and mages, but that alone didn't mean much. Power in the hands of a helpless kid was useless, but Khan felt to be among elites. Everyone in the group appeared confident, and they even made sure to remain outside of his knife's range during that conversation.

"I've lived in the Slums for eleven years," Khan replied without adding any emotion in his tone. "Everything tastes better than the food there."

"I've heard that you can dodge the bullets shot by a rifle laying on your face," Another soldier, a young-looking woman, stated.

"My arm and back say otherwise," Khan contradicted while showing the red spots on his forearm and shoulder.

"Is it true that you cut your superior's hand in the middle of the escape?" A third soldier, another young-looking woman, asked.

"Yes, but you missed the part when a giant projectile had fallen on him," Khan responded.

The group fell silent, and the tension in the area intensified. Rick instinctively lowered his head, and Delia wore a cold expression since she didn't like how the soldiers were treating Khan. However, everything ended when the men and women standing around the table began to laugh.

"You are one crazy fella," The man announced while suppressing his laugh and sitting next to Khan. "I had my doubts when the Captain assigned you as one of the leaders of the assault team, but you didn't flinch at all."

"Please understand that we tend to look down on the platoons on the trenches," One of the women announced while she and her companions sat around the table. "The soldiers in this camp generally have enough battle experience to avoid the mindless shooting on the frontlines. HQ deploys us only during important battles."

"Instead, some of us are simply too rich to face risks," Another soldier commented while glancing at Rick.

"Should you really speak about the assault team so openly?" Khan asked, hiding the fact that he felt glad that his new companions appeared capable.

"Only our target is classified," The first man replied. "I've learnt about it because I have friends in high places, but I won't put the mission at risk to brag about it."

"How can you be on Ecoruta with such good friends?" Delia questioned.

"Serving here is good for my profile," The man declared. "Also, my family business deals with the metal obtained from this planet. Being on the surface for a while has become a tradition for potential heirs."

"Wait," Delia exclaimed. "Are you from the Kilwood family?"

"I'm Moses Kilwood," The soldier announced before pointing at the woman near Delia, "And she is my cousin, Peggy Kilwood. We are competing for the next available position in our family, but I promise that we won't let that get in the way of the mission, Chief."

Khan couldn't help but inspect the two cousins. Moses had short brown hair and dark eyes, and his tight uniform revealed a few bulging muscles. Instead, Peggy had slightly long dark hair tied in a bun, blue eyes, and a slender physique.

The two soldiers didn't appear related since their facial features and skin were completely different. Moses had a round face that expressed pure confidence and a dark complexion, while Peggy was pale and had sharp traits.

"Don't call me chief," Khan complained.

"You are our chief, Chief," Moses responded. "Using only Khan isn't appropriate for our positions. Besides, you have already achieved enough to deserve a promotion."

"Call me boss or something if you must," Khan stated. "Just don't use Chief."

The statement surprised everyone, but Moses and the others didn't seem to mind it. Only Delia connected it to Nitis since Khan never acted irrationally unless something triggered bad memories.

"Well, Boss, we only wanted to check you out," Moses eventually explained while standing up.

"HQ doesn't want to send training areas, but we spar every morning a bit outside the camp. Feel free to come once your condition improves. I think it would be a good idea to get to know each other's power before going into battle."

"I'll definitely come to check you out," Khan promised as the rest of the soldiers stood up and performed military salutes.

Moses revealed a bright smile before leaving the area. The rest of the soldiers followed him without saying a word, but many glanced at Khan one last time during their walk. The women in the group even inspected Delia since she seemed pretty close to him.

"I told you that they were friendly," Delia commented after the soldiers disappeared from their sight.

"And young," Khan teased.

"Stop joking about that," Delia snorted. "I'm barely twenty-six. I'll keep my good looks until I'm forty if I improve quickly."

Khan smirked but didn't add anything. That interaction with the soldiers had reassured him, and part of him also wanted to see how strong they were. However, the issue with his mana remained. He didn't want to spar with them before understanding how dangerous he was. The same went for the mission in general. He preferred to understand the nature of his condition before jumping into a battle.

Khan didn't forget Rick's request, but his phone had the priority. The Captain had answered to accept his request. He would obtain the two mental techniques, the chaos spear spell, the chaos claws spell, advanced knowledge about mana and its uses, and a general description of the known alien species.

"B-boss!" Rick shouted after mustering his courage.

"You don't have to call me like that," Khan stated after putting away his phone. "You aren't part of the assault team, and I accepted only because Moses didn't seem the type to take no for an answer."

"I still wish to call you like this, Boss," Rick announced.

Khan sighed before standing up and gathering the trays to throw them inside the cube. He didn't address Rick at all, but Delia eventually called him when she saw the soldier's teary eyes.

"Why do you even want me as a master?" Khan asked. "I bet your family can provide you with someone far better than me."

"I had many masters," Rick revealed, "And my improvements aren't too bad either, but they don't match my family's standards anyway. Also, my character is a problem."

"What makes you think that I can fix that?" Khan questioned.

"I believe you wouldn't be afraid to hurt me," Rick honestly admitted.

The statement left both Khan and Delia surprised. Even the descendants from wealthy families had to grow used to struggles and pain at some point. The sole thought that no one dared to teach that to Rick didn't feel possible.

"How important are you?" Khan almost shouted.

"My family name is Rassec," Rick whispered, and Delia widened their eyes in astonishment. Even Khan had heard that name.. It belonged to one of the ten noble families.