

Chaos' Heir 261

Chapter 261 - Instincts

Delia paled, and Khan remained equally stunned even if he tried his best to hide his feelings. Rick was nothing more than a weak soldier with a bad attitude toward battle, but his name could make the entire Global Army tremble.

Of course, the ten noble families were immense. They had countless descendants, so many of them ended up failing to match their high standards. However, even the lowest member of those organizations could summon a force capable of scaring almost everyone in the entirety of humankind.

That power didn't only involve actual assets. The scariest aspect of the noble families came from their influence over the entirety of the Global Army. Ending up on their bad side could ruin the career of the most promising soldiers. Ricky probably didn't have access to such connections, but both Khan and Delia didn't dare to take his revelation lightly anyway.

"Does the Captain know?" Khan eventually asked.

"I believe he suspects something," Rick explained. "My family made sure to hide my origin, but Captain Clayman is incredibly sharp. It's not surprising that he will become a Major by the end of the year. After that, he only needs to become a fourth-level warrior to enter the list for the promotion to Lieutenant Colonel."

Delia couldn't muster the strength to speak in that situation. She didn't even try to stand up since she feared that Rick might find her actions disrespectful.

Khan was doing better than Delia. He had studied the noble families during his short period on Ylaco's training camp, and Martha had also explained multiple times how important they were in the current human society. Still, Rick had openly asked for his help, so he had to gaze past his amazement to make up his mind about the issue.

Khan could only see three options in front of him. He could ignore Rick altogether, pretend to help him through half-hearted exercises, or do his best to turn that clueless soldier into a proper warrior.

The three paths featured advantages and risks. The first and second options would limit potential adverse consequences, even if they could put Khan on Rick's bad side. Instead, the third path could cause many troubles if he hurt the soldier and his training didn't lead anywhere.

Khan only had to decide which risks he had to face. Usually, he would try to avoid political problems due to how frail his status was. Yet, Rick could become an ally that surpassed every potentially empty promise from Captain Clayman. He had the chance to establish a proper relationship with the young soldier if he actually managed to teach him something.

'A good ambassador wouldn't give up on this opportunity,' Khan thought before correcting himself. 'A partially crazy ambassador wouldn't. Still, what do I even have to lose here? My current fame is great, but I'll eventually need political allies, especially if I want to gain access to the information about the Nak.'

For once, Khan forced himself to think as an ambassador while ignoring any dirty feeling that his approach originated in his mind. It was time to be as calculative and cynical as possible, even if he couldn't avoid adding a personal touch to that behavior.

"Do you realize that I'm agreeing to help you only due to your family name?" Khan asked openly, without caring for Rick's feelings.

"That's fine," Rick stated as a smile appeared on his face. "I don't mind relying on my family as long as it helps toward my goal."

"What exactly is your goal?" Khan questioned.

"I want to become someone proud of my name," Rick explained. "I want to stop being a useless pawn that my parents are willing to hide away on some remote planet just to keep the standards of my family high."

"That's not enough," Khan exclaimed. "I'm no master, but I can probably force you to develop a better mindset, something that can face adversities without cowering in fear. Yet, the process won't be funny, and most of the results would depend on your actual determination."

"I've been pampered my whole life," Rick announced. "The masters willing to deal with someone with below-average talents had never dared to touch me. Even the many training areas that I've visited didn't allow me to test myself properly since my family didn't find me capable of overcoming those challenges. Please, just give me a real chance."

Khan had to admit that Rick's situation sounded awful. He could vaguely understand the fears of the masters, but he couldn't believe that even the training areas would avoid putting him in danger. It almost felt that the Rassec family had given up on Rick as soon as he showed less talent than other descendants.

That mindset was hard to acknowledge for ordinary soldiers, especially since Rick wasn't too bad. He wasn't even twenty, and he probably didn't get any infusion of synthetic mana, so his current level wasn't unusual compared to many young men and women. Rick wasn't Khan, but no one could label him as a failure so soon.

The noble families seemed to have a completely different view on the matter that Khan didn't want to explore too deeply. He could guess that the branch of Rick's bloodline was relatively poor compared to the others in his force, but his thoughts stopped there.

"I can't be your master since I still have a lot to learn," Khan admitted, "But I can give you pointers and try to reshape your instincts. I only want to make sure that this stuff won't end up ruining my future."

"I will never speak badly of you in front of my family," Rick promised.

"You don't have to speak about me at all," Khan corrected. "This isn't about your potential failure. I don't want your parents or other relatives to silence me to quell the rumors about a weak descendant among their ranks."

Rick widened his eyes as he understood that point. He immediately nodded and showed the purest expression that Khan had ever seen in his entire life. The soldier really wished to grow stronger, but Khan sighed internally at the sight of that evident naiveness.

"We can't let others see us," Khan stated. "You said it yourself. Captain Clayman probably knows about your status, so I don't want anything that can cause problems for me. You would also have to lie about eventual injuries, understood?"

"Yes, boss!" Rick happily shouted as he stood up to perform a military salute.

Khan felt a headache spreading inside his mind. Rick had been lucky enough to find him when he had yet to recover and obtain the knowledge that could improve his training. Khan would have probably considered refusing him a bit longer otherwise.

"Let's go to my habitation," Khan sighed.

Delia stood up, but she waited for Khan to cross her before following him. Instead, Rick shot forward as if he couldn't wait for his first real training session to begin.

The breakfast didn't last long, but a few soldiers in camp had awakened and had started to march toward the dark cube to have their meals. Some inevitably met Khan, Delia, and Rick, and they showed friendly smiles or curious glances.

"You must be Khan," A woman in her twenties eventually exclaimed when her group waked toward Khan and the others.

"Did the scar betray me?" Khan joked as he stopped in his tracks.

The woman was quite beautiful, and her long red hair was an unusual sight on the battlefield since she didn't tie it. Still, she and her group appeared weaker than Moses' team. Only a few of them were both first-level warriors and mages.

"You get to memorize most faces after spending a few weeks here," The woman announced while starting to play with her hair. "Yours definitely doesn't go unnoticed."

"I hope for good reasons," Khan teased while wearing a fake polite smile.

"Of course," The woman replied as her eyes checked his defined muscles with evident interest.

"You must still learn about our habits. We usually hang out outside the camp when it gets dark. You are welcome to join us if you want."

"I'll consider it," Khan replied while showing his right hand. "I hope this doesn't give me too much trouble."

"There's no hurry," The woman responded. "Take care of yourself first."

The woman showed an enchanting smile before continuing on her way, and her group followed her. Some nodded at Khan, but most of them completely ignored Delia and Rick.

Khan didn't mind that interaction too much. He knew that rumors about him had already spread throughout the camp, so his presence naturally interested the soldiers there. Moreover, he had grown used to being at the center of the attention on Nitis, and the polite manners of the humans could barely manage to annoy him.

Delia and Rick had different reactions. Delia felt a mixture of pride and jealousy, while Rick experienced pure admiration. His eyes seemed about to take fire when he saw how calmly Khan could handle those situations.

Similar events happened again while Khan and the others walked back to his habitation. Soldiers stopped on their way toward the dark cube to greet Khan and exchange a few polite words. The matter didn't only involve women, but they were still the majority of those interested in him.

By the time Khan's group reached their destination, Rick's eyes had turned into bright green lights, while Delia seemed to have learnt how to express two different emotions at the same time. She didn't like how famous Khan was, but she still felt that he completely deserved that respect and attention.

The trio entered the habitation, and Khan immediately led the duo inside the reinforced room. The poor state of the area left Rick completely stunned, but he didn't say anything.

"Can you be his sparring partner for a while?" Khan asked.

"I'm not touching him," Delia stated, but she tried to explain herself when Rick's puppy eyes fell on her figure. "I'm close to leaving this damned planet. I only need a bit more to accumulate enough Credits to purchase synthetic mana, become a second-level warrior, and apply for a safer position."

"Show me what you know," Khan ordered after abandoning any hope to receive Delia's help.

"How should I do that?" Rick questioned, and Delia hid her face behind her hand to avoid showing her disappointment. Luckily for Rick, Khan's expression remained aloof.

"You must know a martial art, right?" Khan guessed. "Punch and kick the wall so I can see it. These surfaces are quite sturdy, so don't hold back."

Rick's eyes lit up in understanding before approaching one of the walls. He quickly bent his legs and spread them a bit to create a stable battle stance before launching a series of quick punches.

Khan inspected the mana moving through Rick's body. The flow of his energy was smooth and precise, but he could see that some hesitation appeared whenever his knuckles were about to hit the metal.

"I said that you don't have to hold back," Khan soon reminded.

Rick gulped in front of Khan's stern expression, but he eventually resumed his attacks. He even deployed some techniques that relied on his elbows and knees. His martial art appeared quite balanced. It didn't focus on any specific aspect, but it also showed no opening or clear weakness. It was fast, powerful, and complete.

Rick slowly gained some confidence as his offensive continued. He grew used to the pain spreading from his knuckles, knees, and elbows, which made him express more power. It only took a few minutes before he started going all-out and deploying his martial art to the best of his capabilities.

'He isn't bad,' Khan thought while checking every technique that Rick deployed. 'If his initial mistakes have come from his anxiety, he has probably reached the competent level with his martial art.'

The event felt quite surprising for someone who claimed to have trained with bad masters throughout his life. Still, everything felt reasonable when Khan thought about the wealth that the Rassec family had invested in Rick.

"Okay, that's enough," Khan announced, and Rick turned toward him. "Your techniques are good for your age and level. You only lack the right attitude and experience."

"I can't gain experience as long as the Captain keeps me inside the camp," Rick explained.

"I know," Khan answered. "We must focus on the other problem then. Your instincts are bad, so we must get rid of them."

"How do we do that?" Rick asked, but Khan suddenly shot forward and kicked him at the center of his torso.

Rick flew across the room and crashed on the opposite dark wall. Khan didn't use much power in his attack, but Rick wasn't ready to endure it, and blood inevitably filled his mouth when he landed.

"I could have killed you there," Khan explained. "Pay more attention to your surroundings even with allies around you."

Rick coughed a few times, but he eventually stood up and nodded before wearing an honest smile and resuming his attacks on the wall. He became immersed in his training until another kick flew in his direction and forced him to throw himself on the floor.

Khan slammed his foot on the floor and made the whole room shake. The reinforced metal endured the blow, but that didn't hide the amount of power he had released during the attack.

The foot had landed next to Rick's head. Khan had missed him on purpose, and something similar had happened with his previous attack. The second kick had been so slow that Rick had been able to sense it, but his dodge had been awful.

"Your martial art has defensive stances and techniques, right?" Khan asked as he took a step back to let Rick stand up.

"Yes," Rick responded. "In theory, it has no weaknesses."

"But that only means that it requires more experience to reveal its true power," Khan explained.

"I couldn't get any real battle experience," Rick justified himself.

"You don't need to repeat that," Khan scoffed while checking his mana.

His kicks were relatively safe, but he wanted to make sure that his mana didn't start acting on its own due to his annoyance or similar feelings. Everything seemed in its place, but Khan still feared what could happen if he tried to use his power properly.

"Rick, your first instinct was to throw yourself on the floor," Khan scolded, trying to explain the gravity of the situation. "You should have tried to escape since I'm far stronger than you. I would have even accepted a defensive technique. Yet, you directly gave up on fighting. Why is that?"

"I felt a bit scared, so I panicked," Rick admitted.

Delia could only shake her head. She could see how massive Rick's weaknesses were. It wasn't a matter of lack of training. The soldier had developed horrible habits since no one had ever forced him to get used to pain. His first instincts were to give up instead of deploying what he knew.

Khan didn't know how to approach the issue. He never had similar problems, and he couldn't be a sparring partner in his current condition. Rick needed someone with the same level to slowly reverse nineteen years spent without knowing real pain, but the other soldiers seemed to despise him due to his apparent privileged state.

"You said that no one knows about your true identity here, right?" Khan asked.

"That's correct, boss," Rick replied.

"We need to find you someone willing to get you through this tedious part," Khan stated.

"How would I even find that?" Rick asked as a tinge of shame appeared on his face. "I'm a joke inside the camp. No one will take me seriously."

"They will if I'm with you," Khan declared.

"Do you plan on using your charm to make one of your suitors help him?" Delia teased.

"Not at all," Khan shrugged his shoulders before pointing at Rick. "He will pay them. I'll just stick around to make sure that everything goes smoothly."

"Thank you so much, boss!" Rick shouted as excitement filled his face. He seemed ready to get out of the habitation right away, but Khan moved his attention to his pocket when he heard his phone ringing.

"We'll continue this tomorrow," Khan announced after checking the message. "I have things to do now."

"But the day has barely begun," Rick complained before lowering his head as soon as Khan glared at him.

"I bet you have a good habitation," Khan guessed. "Go there and repeat all the techniques of your martial art until you fall asleep. Stop only when you need to eat."

"Do you mean all day long?" Rick asked in a surprised tone.

"You can perform your techniques perfectly," Khan responded, "But you don't see them as your first resource. You must start to change that, so repeat them until you run out of breath or mana. If you happen to recover during the night, wake up and start the training again."

"Will this really help me?" Rick timidly asked.

"You need to get rid of many years of bad habits," Khan explained. "Using every second to reshape your instincts is the least you can do for now."

Rick didn't feel happy about that training session, but he still nodded, performed a military salute, and left the habitation. Delia waited for the entrance to close before turning toward Khan and addressing his orders. "Why did you send him away?"

"The Captain has sent part of the rewards," Khan explained. "Besides, I didn't lie to Rick."

"Aren't you afraid that he might turn on you if he doesn't see improvements?" Delia asked.

"Delia, I recognize desperation when I see it," Khan said in an aloof tone that instantly saddened her.

"Look at the bright side," Delia tried to change the topic as she approached Khan. "You might have a friend inside a noble family if you actually turn him into a decent warrior."

Delia wanted to embrace Khan from behind to tease him a little, but he placed his left hand on her cheek before she could do anything. Delia blushed at that sudden action. She didn't even mind that he was holding his phone while using his thumb to caress her.

"I need to test these techniques," Khan announced. "My mana is dangerous, so I can't relax if you remain here."

Delia knew that Khan was sending her away, but the seriousness in his tone and his gesture made her accept his decision quickly. She caressed the back of his hand before taking a step back and turning toward the door. It didn't take long before she left the habitation.

Khan didn't feel good about exploiting Delia's feelings, but his bitterness mixed with his usual desperation after he sat and unlocked his phone.. The Captain had yet to send the two spells, but the mental techniques had reached his device, and he couldn't wait to try them.

Chapter 262 - Anomaly

Khan didn't mind the lack of the two spells in the initial wave of rewards. He guessed that the Global Army couldn't send them without adding magical items, so it made sense for them to take longer to arrive.

The books that Khan had requested had also arrived on his phone, but he ignored them for now. The mental techniques captured the entirety of his attention. Part of him even found it pointless to start studying the vast amount of knowledge on his device when he had just gained something that could theoretically improve that process.

Khan quickly pressed on the label "simulated mental battle" to check his first technique. A series of descriptions and multiple exercises that the phone could project through holograms appeared on the screen, and he studied everything carefully before activating the actual training.

The mental technique was simple in its theory. It didn't try to obtain any specific feature, so every type of mana could activate its effects. Its purpose was to create mental battles that could replace training areas or actual fights and allow soldiers to improve or retain their physical condition.

According to the descriptions, the "simulated mental battle" would still force the involved muscles to activate. It could even make the soldiers experience injuries suffered during the imaginary fight at its highest levels.

The effects' intensity and what remained on the body depended on the meditative state's depth reached during the execution of the mental technique. At its highest levels, the soldiers could even surpass what real battles gave.

Needless to say, Khan couldn't wait to learn and master that technique. He loved the training halls and their flexibility, but the "simulated mental battle" could give him far more. His location, situation, and condition wouldn't matter anymore after becoming good at that type of exercise.

The mental technique obviously had many layers of difficulties. Delia had told Khan that he probably wouldn't be able to perform it right away, and the descriptions on his phone explained why.

To activate the "simulated mental battle", Khan would have to gain access to a deep part of his brain, the area where his organ stored his memories. Then, he had to flood it with mana and force his energy to use some of the details found there to create an imaginary battlefield.

The weaknesses of the mental technique stretched past the difficulties connected to its activation. The soldiers couldn't create opponents or situations out of nowhere. Their memories had to contain

enough details about the intended battles that they wanted to imagine to make the "simulated mental battle" work.

Moreover, the soldiers needed a deep understanding of what they wanted to create. Seeing an opponent wasn't enough. They had to know a few basic features to make a similar mental copy. Of course, a high number of details would allow them to build something extraordinarily lifelike and push them deeper into the meditative state.

Other issues involved the strain that the mental technique applied to the minds. The "simulated mental battle" had to affect the body. Otherwise, it would lose every purpose, so the soldiers had to use large quantities of mana to make those effects possible.

The mana alone couldn't solve everything either. The mental technique worked like any other martial art since it put the brain under heavy stress. Abusing the "simulated mental battle" could lead to headaches, internal injuries, or even death. Those issues could appear even during deep meditative states in case of a defeat during the imaginary fight.

The great difficulty for the activation, the limited number of assets available for the mental battle, the vast amount of mana required to apply the effects on the body, and the heavy strain on the brain made the technique extremely complicated to use correctly. Khan even began to wonder if something like that was healthy for a first-level warrior during his read.

The many difficulties and possible drawbacks didn't scare Khan away. The two techniques gained on Nitis had similar dangers and harsh requirements. His current ability to manipulate mana didn't even allow him to activate them on his own, so he guessed that the mental skill would join that list for now.

Khan promised himself to test the "simulated mental battle" before jumping to hasty conclusions, but he put it away for now to approach the second mental technique. The "enhanced reading" featured a similar menu with shorter descriptions that stated its lower requirements in terms of understanding, training, and consumption.

'This one is quite easy,' Khan concluded after a quick read of the instructions. 'I only need to send set amounts of mana to my eyes and move them toward a specific area of my brain in a short time. I also need to stick to a precise rhythm, but I bet that I can memorize it in no time.'

His experiences on Nitis continued to show their incredible value. Khan had become relatively decent in his control of mana, which only involved the use of the energy outside his body. Everything would be easier when the process had to happen inside him, so he didn't hesitate to memorize the instructions and attempt to replicate them.

Mana came out of his mana core and flooded his brain with tiny masses of energy meant to become an essential aspect of the mental technique. Then, Khan placed them right behind his eyes and moved them slowly toward the spot marked by the instructions on his phone.

Khan repeated the process a few times, moving the masses of mana from the very front of his eyes to the center of his brain to memorize the path that they had to cross. It wasn't hard to control those lumps of energy after his training in the Niqols' approach and his exercises for the Wave spell. Still, the "enhanced reading" required a high speed and a specific rhythm to bring the loss of information to the minimum.

The instructions on his phone described how the actual memorization happened after multiple cycles of the mana going back and forth between his eyes and the center of his brain. The specific rhythm also maximized the amount of knowledge that would become a permanent part of his memories.

That mental technique featured similar drawbacks to the "simulated mental battle". It would put his brain and eyes under heavy stress and deplete large quantities of mana. Those requirements and possible adverse consequences were only light compared to the other ability. Still, they remained something that Khan had to be wary of, especially since he knew his character.

Khan kept his eyes closed as he moved the lumps of mana back and forth. Once he got that part right, he started adding the other steps required by the technique. It seemed that each mass of energy could transport only a set amount of knowledge, which would basically force him to replace them after two or three cycles.

The addition of that step brought Khan back to step one. He could preserve the intended speed with individual lumps of mana but replacing them always made him waste time and lose his momentum. It took him a while before he could get that part right too.

The last step was the harshest since it made Khan apply a specific rhythm to everything learnt previously. He had to move and replace the lumps of mana without ever getting off-track. An eventual mistake would affect the knowledge transported during the last cycle and force him to start the technique again.

Failing didn't sound too harsh in terms of drawbacks, but Khan changed his mind after experiencing that first-hand. The strain on his brain was manageable while the technique was active, but its abrupt end and its following restart created clear discomfort in the shape of a vague headache. That feeling even intensified as he continued to amass mistakes.

Khan couldn't reach a decent level before his headache started to affect his training. He felt forced to take a break at that point, and a mere glance at his phone even informed him that lunchtime had arrived.

An empty stomach and an intense headache didn't go well together, so Khan decided to stand up to reach the cube to eat something before taking a nap. Yet, he found a tray waiting for him right in front of his habitation's entrance. Someone had even drawn a heart and the letter "D" with a sauce on an empty spot.

'Delia is really enjoying this,' Khan thought as a smirk inevitably appeared on his face.

Khan picked up the tray and returned inside his habitation. He took mere minutes to eat everything, and drowsiness eventually arrived to warn him that he had to rest.

His habitation was empty, so Khan went for his bed. However, something felt off after spending a few minutes on the pillow. The sheets and blankets still carried Delia's faint scent, and his mind automatically recalled her warmth.

Everything would have still been fine if his mind had stopped there. Yet, Khan found himself imagining Liiza's coldness, creating a clash of memories that couldn't end as long as Delia's scent

continued to flow inside his nostrils. The situation became so troublesome that he had to leave the bed and reach the couch, where he finally managed to fall asleep.

The alarm on his phone rang before his nightmare could even come close to reaching the map of the unknown solar system. Khan felt tired when he woke up, and a deep sigh escaped his mouth when he sensed that a faint trace of his headache had remained after that short nap.

Khan decided to spend some time inside his meditative state, which luckily solved his headache and brought him back to his peak mental condition. His exercises for the "enhanced reading" resumed right after that, and he happily found out that his short break had brought positive results.

The tedious and repetitive mental exercises still kept Khan busy for a few hours, but he eventually reached a decent level of mastery over the "enhanced reading". The headache had returned by then, but a short meditation solved it and allowed him to test how powerful his mental technique was.

Khan unlocked the phone and found the book containing advanced knowledge related to the mana. He still prioritized uncovering the reason behind the change in his energy, so he didn't hesitate to test the "enhanced reading" while looking for answers.

The initial tests led to failures. Moving relatively empty lumps of mana was easy compared to the actual use of the mental technique. Khan only needed to stare at the hologram of a page to acquire the information it contained, but bringing everything to his brain felt complicated and heavy. He could clearly sense that his energy was carrying something.

Nevertheless, through sheer resolve and multiple attempts, Khan managed to complete his first cycles and experience how good the actual memorization was. It felt unnatural for the human brain to gain so much knowledge instantly, but he still achieved incredible results. He couldn't recite the page word for word, but he understood its contents without needing to review it.

A cycle took less than a second. Khan could almost memorize the entire page of a book with only a pair of lumps of mana. In short, he only had to remain two seconds on each sheet before moving to the next one.

If Khan didn't commit any mistake during the "enhanced reading", he could read entire books in less than an hour and memorize their general contents. A second inspection would probably lead to a complete understanding of their topics. He had the chance to study knowledge that would have usually taken weeks to learn in mere days.

The excitement didn't let him ignore his failures and the headache that they caused. Khan felt about to reach his limits again while studying the book, but he pressed on since he wanted answers. He only allowed himself to spend a few minutes inside his meditations before resuming his read.

The process was far from healthy, but it allowed Khan to find something that seemed to match his condition on that very night.. The book called it "mana anomaly".

Chapter 263 - Study

'The mana anomaly is a rare condition that can have multiple causes,' Khan read without using the mental technique. 'An excessive purity of the mana, a trauma that involves the mana core, or different mutations can alter the natural azure color and add unwanted features.'

The book went on to explain that the change usually wasn't abrupt. Changing the nature of the mana so radically and permanently was hard even when relying on external methods. Reaching Khan's

current state would typically require long months or years of specific procedures. Only traumas could cause something so drastic, but he had merely activated the Wave spell. That didn't sound enough.

'The anomaly can have multiple effects depending on the depths of the changes,' Khan continued to read. 'The different features can affect the normal functioning of the mana or even the user's behavior.'

The book followed that description with a few examples of known cases of mana anomaly. Emotional instability seemed to be a common problem in the harshest cases, and the same went for a general difficulty in controlling the energy. Still, the condition could also bring benefits if the changes ended up suiting certain spells or techniques.

Khan found himself in a strange spot after reading everything the book said about the mana anomaly. He felt almost sure that his energy had gone through something similar, but he didn't experience most of the listed effects.

The desperation that occupied his mind wasn't exactly unstable, and he didn't feel any difficulty controlling his mana. Actually, Khan even found it easier to move his energy around after the changes.

The current red-purple color put Khan among some of the harshest cases of mana anomaly, but he felt normal. The differences with what the book described made him wonder whether he had found the right condition, but he couldn't see anything else that caused similar effects.

'I can't fix the anomaly either,' Khan concluded after reading the cure to his condition.

The book stated that it was extremely hard to fix an anomaly, and reverting the mana to its previous state was basically impossible. The treatments involved expensive procedures and long years in which the patients couldn't use their energy at all. Khan wasn't only broke. He wouldn't even accept to slow down his growth over something that didn't cause any immediate problem.

Reading about all of that made Khan think about his father. Bret would probably be able to tell him something more about that new mana since he was aware of his son's physical condition. Yet, Khan didn't want to rely on him for now. He wasn't even sure whether he could trust him.

'The anomaly might be good for me,' Khan eventually thought as he put his phone down and massaged his temples. 'My mana seems to express the nature of the chaos element now. I might have an easier time learning the new spells. Also, it can't be bad in battles to have my element's destructiveness unless I start hurting allies.'

Khan summoned a bit of mana on his left palm. Except for the color, everything felt normal. He could move his energy quite freely and even affect its nature through the exercises learnt on Nitis.

The problems started when Khan tried to make his mana harmless. He wasn't a master when it came to manipulating his energy, but he had been able to achieve something decent recently. Still, now it was harder to make the mana obtain features that went against its aggressive nature.

That wasn't necessarily bad, but Khan felt a bit worried about his two alien techniques. The [Blood Shield] and the [Blood Vortex] required specific uses of his mana, and its constant destructiveness could cause problems there. However, Khan eventually put those thoughts in the back of his mind since his skill had yet to reach the point when he could deploy the two abilities on his own.

Knocking noises came from the entrance while Khan was immersed in his thoughts. He opened the door only to find Delia carrying two trays full of food. She limited herself to smile, and Khan made way for her while shaking his head.

"You should be happy that someone is taking such good care of you," Delia complained while reaching the couch and placing the trays on her lap.

"I am happy," Khan admitted. "I simply have a lot in my mind."

"Don't tell me that you have already studied everything the Captain sent you," Delia said in a scolding tone.

"I'm only at the first book," Khan complained while sitting on the couch and taking one of the trays. "Well, I've finished it."

"You already went through the reading technique, right?" Delia asked without hiding her faint surprise.

"It turned out to be quite easy to learn," Khan revealed. "The Niqols' teachings are paying off."

"Shouldn't you be exhausted by now?" Delia wondered. "I mean, I believe you had to practice for a bit before learning the technique."

"My brain isn't too happy about my training schedule," Khan admitted.

"I was talking about your mana," Delia explained. "How can you learn a mental technique and use it on the same day? Shouldn't you have run out of energy hours ago?"

"I have a good mana core," Khan half-lied. Truth be told, even he ignored the limits of his mana capacity.

The answer didn't convince Delia, but she didn't probe any further. The matter wasn't too important compared to Khan's feats. He had shown once again how amazing he was, and she couldn't stop smiling thinking about that.

"It's already quite late," Khan exclaimed after finishing all the food on both trays. "Are you planning on sleeping here again?"

"I'd feel lonely otherwise," Delia replied in a cute voice while laying her head on Khan's shoulder.

"I still need to study," Khan calmly announced while grabbing his phone. "I want to get over all the books before receiving the new spells."

"You are the only man on this planet who would choose to study over sleeping with me," Delia scoffed.

"That's why you like me so much," Khan winked at her before unlocking his phone and checking his books.

"You don't have to use mana, right?" Delia sighed.

"I'll use the mental technique, but it should be safe," Khan explained.

"Then you won't mind this," Delia said while lying down, throwing away the trays, and placing her head on his lap. "Move a bit too."

Khan shook his head but did as Delia asked. He made sure to give her more space so that she could lie comfortably, and she didn't hesitate to adjust herself. She even took one of his legs between her arms to hold it like a pillow.

Khan's eyes inevitably fell on Delia from time to time. Her short hair seemed soft, and part of him wanted to caress it. Still, he held himself back and tried his best to focus on the books to avoid thinking about Liiza.

The "simulated mental battle" would clearly need a long time, so Khan preferred to deal with his large amount of knowledge obtained from Lieutenant Pouille and Captain Clayman. His phone now contained many books that dealt with various topics, and some of them didn't even involve mana or alien species.

It turned out that Lieutenant Pouille was preparing himself for a test that would have probably brought him to the rank of Captain. His books covered multiple topics connected to battles, management of armies, and general knowledge about the Global Army.

Khan could finally learn things that had always been unclear in his mind. He understood the difference between the various levels assigned to the soldiers and even read how to obtain the stars on his left shoulder.

Soldiers became first-level warriors after their attunement with mana crossed fifty percent, and the army considered them as evolved beings after that stat went above one hundred percent. The book didn't say much about that mighty level, but it gave detailed descriptions of the previous stages.

'I'll become a second-level warrior when my attunement with mana reaches sixty percent,' Khan summarized in his mind. 'The third level arrives at seventy percent, the fourth at eighty, and the fifth at ninety, but these stages don't bring great changes.'

The book explained how soldiers mainly experienced a growth in their physical prowess by raising their attunement with mana. Their reflexes, muscles, and thinking speed would reach true inhuman levels by the end of that journey, but they would remain mortals.

Instead, evolving would bring a true transformation. The book stated that the difference between evolved beings and normal soldiers was immense. Their actual power was also hard to evaluate since they would have gone past the limits of their species by then.

Needless to say, Khan grew quite interested in the evolved beings. He had seen how humans without mana couldn't do much against proper soldiers, so he wanted to learn more about the level that stood even above that. Still, the book didn't say much about the topic. It only mentioned those powerhouses from time to time without ever explaining anything.

Getting acknowledged as a mage was as easy as Captain Erbair had once explained. Spells had grades like the magical items, so a soldier only needed to learn a few of them to receive a suitable number of stars.

'I only need to learn another first-grade spell to become a first-level mage,' Khan summarized in his mind after going through the whole book and taking a short break to deal with his headache.

Khan was getting better at the mental technique, but he kept making mistakes that intensified his headache and lingering tiredness. Still, a short meditation usually appeased those sensations and allowed him to get back to his studies.

The night passed quickly while Khan remained immersed on his screen. He couldn't read everything even with the mental technique, but it was easy to decide which topics to leave for later.

The general description about the known alien species was interesting, but Khan didn't need it right now. Khan found the various battle tactics rather boring, so he left them for later too. He didn't even know if he would ever pick them up again since he didn't really need them for his goals.

The book about the uses of mana was also quite boring since it was nothing more than an updated list of human achievements. Still, Delia had insisted on that topic, and Khan knew that his knowledge couldn't have such big holes, so he forced himself to go through every page.

The humans had achieved a lot with mana, and their experiences with alien species had even allowed them to replicate some techniques. His current "enhanced reading" was something developed by the Guko that the Global Army had adapted for its soldiers.

Countless similar techniques existed, but the book was clear about their inferiority to normal spells. Those abilities didn't require any specific mana, but that made them weaker.

The list also showed many examples of magical items, but they could literally be everything, so Khan found it hard to become invested in them. He read about special clothes that could defend against powerful spells, rings that could turn into shields, swords capable of shooting rays of mana, and much more. Yet, everything felt too distant for him. Also, none of them could ever replace a soldier's real strength.

Khan felt drained after spending the whole night reading. He had gained a vague idea about basically everything there was to know. Lieutenant Pouille's books had even given him a proper understanding of the requirements needed for eventual promotions or specific roles inside the army.

'I might really become a Lieutenant this year,' Khan thought as he put his phone away and tried to come up with plans for the future. 'I should also start studying multiple alien languages to solidify my path to become an ambassador. I need to request more books.'

Khan had to admit that his future inside the army appeared quite bright. He was young, but his growth had been incredible, and he had also added amazing feats to his profile. Still, his young age went a bit against the chance to get promotions since the army might believe that he was too immature to get them.

The need to sleep assaulted Khan's mind while he remained immersed in those thoughts. Delia had long since fallen asleep, and her hair inevitably filled Khan's vision while he considered his situation.

A faint urge made Khan caress her head softly. It felt good to fondle Delia's hair, but that only filled his mind with guilt. He knew that he had no actual reason to experience that, but his emotions worked against him.. His everything still belonged to Liiza, and his brain knew it.

Chapter 264 - Colder

"Don't stop," Delia whined when Khan retracted his hand. "It feels good to be touched for once."

Khan sighed before diving back on her hair. He felt guilty because he liked that gesture, so he wasn't exactly forcing himself.

"Are you finally starting to like me?" Delia asked while rubbing her head on Khan's leg.

"I've always liked you," Khan admitted. "That's not why I'm refusing you."

"I know, but it's nice to hear it," Delia stated. "I still have to take care of my pride."

Khan didn't say anything. He wanted to close his eyes, but Liiza's face appeared whenever he did that, so he focused on the sleepy figure resting on him. He wished things were easier, but his mind didn't release its grip on him.

"Did you get any sleep?" Delia eventually asked.

"No," Khan responded.

Delia let go of his leg and turned to face Khan. Her hand went on his abdomen to leave soft caresses as whispers left her mouth. "Lie down. Let me take care of you."

"I'm not sure I'd be able to sleep," Khan revealed.

"You wouldn't sleep anyway," Delia giggled as she straightened her position and crossed her legs.

"Come on. I'm sure Rick will show up soon."

The guilt inside Khan's mind intensified. He felt tempted by the offer, so his brain made him experience that sad emotion. Still, he eventually decided to lie down when Delia patted her thighs.

The softness and warmth that filled Khan's mind after laying his head on Delia's lap only intensified his guilt. He couldn't believe how something so simple could feel good and wrong at the same time. He found some peace but also a lot of pain.

'Are you going through this too?' Khan wondered in his mind. 'Are you resting in someone else's arms thinking about me?'

Khan had to force those thoughts in the back of his mind. He knew the Niqols' free nature, so he didn't like the images that his brain created. He didn't delude himself, but he felt that going over those topics would only add pain.

"Does it feel good when I do this?" Delia asked while rubbing her hands on his head and neck.

"Yes," Khan admitted, "That's why it hurts."

"Should I stop?" Delia asked after her fingers twitched in hesitation.

"No," Khan sighed. "I can't stop the pain anyway."

Delia's fingers twitched again, and her eyes felt teary when she tried to imagine what Khan was going through. She had to gulp and clear her throat before she felt able to resume speaking. "I... I don't know how to make you feel better. I'm afraid that I will hurt you no matter what I do."

"It's fine," Khan whispered. "It's not your fault. I'm actually surprised you managed to put me in this situation."

"I am indeed amazing," Delia chuckled.

"Experience comes with old age," Khan joked.

"Don't ruin it!" Delia complained, but a helpless smile appeared on her face when she heard Khan's laugh.

"You are a hard man to like," Delia sighed while pulling Khan's head closer to her waist.

"I do my best," Khan exclaimed before closing his eyes, ready to face everything his brain threw at him.

Images and sensations that Khan had shared with Liiza filled his mind and fought everything that Delia tried to give him. He slowly began to realize that his love for Liiza wasn't the only reason behind his current condition. Khan was scared. He feared that he would forget the immense happiness experienced on Nitis if he allowed himself to move on.

Khan didn't manage to fall asleep, but he didn't mind that. He meditated for a bit and let himself enjoy Delia's careful touches. He could almost feel her hesitation from her gestures, but that was fine for now. They had shared a bad and long experience, but they were still learning to know each other.

Delia's prediction turned out to be on point. It didn't take long before someone knocked at the entrance and forced the two to separate. Khan noticed the faint blush on the woman's cheeks, but he decided not to joke about it since she diverted her gaze to hide her mood.

"Rick," Khan said after the door slid open and revealed the young man's figure.

"Boss!" Rick shouted before covering his mouth.

Khan couldn't find the strength to scold Rick, and faint surprise spread in his mind when he checked his state. The soldier had bruises and cuts on his knuckles, and his uniform on his elbows and knees had broken.

'His determination isn't bad,' Khan thought. 'I wonder if he developed it only after feeling useless for so long.'

"Today is the day, right?" Rick asked without hiding his intense excitement.

"Yes," Khan announced. "We only need to find you a sparring partner. I hope you are willing to pay for that."

"Of course!" Rick shouted, and Khan rolled his eyes, forcing him to lower his head in shame.

"I still don't get how you plan on convincing the other soldiers," Delia asked while approaching Khan from behind and wrapping her arms around his abdomen.

Rick blushed when he saw that intimate scene. It was early in the morning, so he knew that the two had slept together. Thinking about that was enough to make him feel awkward, but it also solidified his respect for Khan. The latter didn't even react when Delia hugged him.

"Let's get something to eat first," Khan stated before glaring at Delia.

Delia giggled and left a kiss on his shoulder before picking the trays in the room and rejoining her companions. Her smile only widened when she saw how red Rick had become. She seemed to like teasing him.

The trio reached the dark cube in no time and dealt with the breakfast quickly. Then, Rick led Khan and Delia toward an area right outside the camp where the grass didn't grow. Patches of barren ground and a bit of mud tainted the otherwise green spectacle.

"Aren't they a bit too strong for Rick?" Delia asked as the group sat to wait for Moses and the others.

"I don't know anyone else," Khan admitted, "Unless you want me to reach out for some of the other soldiers on my own."

Delia's eyes snapped open when she recalled how popular Khan was. A fake smile appeared on her face as she patted Rick's shoulder and tried to reassure him. "Don't worry. You'll be okay."

Rick didn't understand what was going on, but he was too excited to care about it. He turned toward the camp often, hoping that Moses and his group would appear soon.

Moses and the others didn't take long to arrive, and they didn't hold back from showing their surprise either. A few smiles appeared on their faces when they saw Khan, but some frowned at Rick's sight.

"Have you decided to join us today?" Moses happily asked before glancing at the metallic structure over Khan's hand. "Are you sure you should fight in this condition?"

"I need a sparring partner for Rick," Khan explained. "I promised that I would teach him how to fight."

Some of the soldiers behind Moses laughed, but they diverted their gazes when Delia glared at them. She even felt a bit angry that Khan didn't say anything to defend Rick. The latter was a terrible soldier, but he had a good heart, and he had even proven his determination.

"We are a bit too strong for him," Moses honestly replied.

"I know, but you must know someone who isn't," Khan guessed. "Isn't there some promising soldier in the camp?"

"There is a kid who has yet to become a first-level warrior," Moses said while rubbing his chin.

"Still, she is quite troublesome. Nice words won't help with her."

"He'll pay her," Khan exclaimed while pointing at Rick, and the latter nodded to confirm his statement.

"She might hurt him, you know?" Moses continued. "Her family threw her on Ecoruta for a reason."

"It's fine," Khan stated. "Pain isn't a problem here. It might even help in his case."

Moses nodded and took out his phone and started sending messages. The device even buzzed a few times when replies arrived. It took a few minutes, but the soldier eventually raised his gaze from the device to announce his success. "She will be here in half an hour. I must warn you. She wasn't exactly happy when my friend woke her up."

Khan lost interest after settling the matter. He crossed his legs and began to meditate while Moses and the others reached the barren patch and started to practice some moves.

Some soldiers didn't like that Khan didn't bother to look at them. He could feel their disappointed and annoyed gazes on him, but he didn't care. They didn't know that he was inspecting them even during his meditation. Besides, he had nothing to prove.

Two soldiers arrived after a while. Khan interrupted his meditation to inspect the newcomers. One of them was a tall man with an annoyed look on his face, while the other was a young girl with messy red hair.

"Do I get to fight with him?" The girl asked as her green eyes lit up when they fell on Khan.

"No," Khan calmly replied while pointing at Rick. "I need you to beat him up a bit."

"Why would I fight against that kid?" The girl snorted. "Isn't he the weakest soldier in the entire camp?"

"You are younger than me!" Rick complained.

"He'll pay you," Khan continued, ignoring Rick's reaction.

"Is he a masochist?" The girl questioned. "I can use the money, but I don't think he'll last long."

"That's fine," Khan announced. "Stand up, Rick. Deal with the price yourself."

Rick followed Khan's orders, and the girl set a price before he could say anything. The two could reach the barren patch of ground quickly, and the other soldiers even made room for them as they created a half-circle to enjoy the scene.

"Rick, don't think about attacking," Khan ordered. "Focus on blocking her blows with techniques. Don't dodge, block."

Rick took a deep breath and bent his legs to prepare his defensive techniques. He was clearly anxious, but Khan could sense the mana inside him moving smoothly.

The girl glanced at Khan, and he nodded. A wild smile appeared on her face as she shot forward and waved her hand in an attempt to scratch Rick.

Rick jumped to his right and dodged the attack. The girl wanted to chase him, but Khan's voice resounded before she could move.

"Stop!" Khan shouted. "Rick, you dodged. Let her hit you."

"What?" The girl, Delia, and Rick asked at the same time.

"You heard me," Khan sighed. "Let her hit you and go back in your position."

Rick stared at Khan for a few seconds, but the latter's expression showed only coldness. The soldier eventually nodded and got closer to the girl before closing his eyes and clenching his jaw.

The girl glanced at Khan, and he nodded. She rolled her eyes and casually waved her hand at Rick's chest. Her fingers cut his uniform and left superficial cuts on his skin.

"Again now," Khan ordered even if the girl's attack wasn't serious.

Rick and the girl faced each other, and the latter shot forward as soon as he took a defensive stance. However, Rick dodged instead of blocking again.

"Do I have to hit him again now?" The girl asked.

Khan sighed and stood up before approaching Rick. The soldier lowered his head in shame, but he didn't even look at him. Instead, Khan stomped his foot twice to create two holes.

"Get your feet inside them," Khan ordered while pointing at the holes.

Rick could only follow the orders. He stood up and inserted his feet in the holes before Khan proceeded to cover them. Rick was obviously strong enough to get out of them, but the action would make it impossible for him to dodge the incoming attack.

"Go at it again," Khan ordered while taking a few steps back.

The girl didn't like that situation, but her hesitation vanished when she thought about the Credits that she would earn. She shot forward as soon as Rick raised his arms, and her fingers left cuts on his waist when he tried to bend backward to dodge the attack.

"Again," Khan shouted without showing any trace of mercy.

The girl attacked again, and Rick's instincts made him dodge. He even got one foot out of the hole at that time, but the sharp fingers reached his shoulder anyway.

Khan stepped forward and pointed at the hole. Rick placed his foot inside it and watched as Khan covered it. The soldier tried to look at Khan, but he ignored him.

"Again," Khan ordered after stepping back.

Those scenes repeated themselves for a few minutes. The girl attacked, and Rick's tried to dodge, only to suffer injuries. Most wounds were superficial, but some ended up going quite deep and causing significant blood loss.

The sparring reached the point when Rick struggled to stand and the girl tried to hold back her blows. Khan often had to remind her to hit him, which made a series of surprised gazes converge on him.

Moses and the other soldiers were actually starting to get scared. They knew that getting rid of bad habits was hard, but the process was killing Rick. Moreover, Khan didn't show any emotion. He appeared willing to continue that training even if Rick's complexion had started to pale.

"Khan," Delia called after standing up and approaching his ear. "His family might have discarded him, but you will still pay the price if he dies."

"A half-assed approach won't work with him," Khan explained.

"But maybe this isn't the way," Delia whispered. "Look at him. He will need to spend the whole day in the medical bay already. More might really kill him."

"He can see her attacks," Khan commented, "But his body works against him. He needs to get rid of those instincts today."

"He might not get past today," Delia continued.

"He will never become a warrior if he can't perform a single block in the face of death," Khan announced.

Delia wanted to complain a bit more, but she couldn't find words that made sense. She didn't like that approach, but Khan was right. Rick was a lost cause if he couldn't complete that simple exercise.

Another series of attacks and attempted dodges followed as the sparring session continued. Rick seemed about to faint after new injuries appeared on his body, but Khan didn't hesitate to step forward and slap him lightly to keep him awake.

Some of the soldiers began to think that Khan was enjoying that process. The training had transformed into torture that he didn't want to stop. Even Delia hated Khan's ruthlessness, but only because it was hurting Rick. She knew that his merciless approach was the very reason behind her survival during the escape.

Then, the moment that everyone was waiting for eventually happened. The girl waved her hand toward Rick, and he raised his arm to deflect it. The technique failed and made a few cuts appear on his forearm, but he didn't try to escape.

"Finally," Khan sighed as Delia voiced an excited cry. Even the soldiers in Moses' group appeared honestly happy that Rick had succeeded.

"Let's stop here for today," Khan ordered. "Rick, you need to go to the medical bay. Tomorrow we'll do this again until you can control your body properly."

Rick nodded and tried to perform a military salute, but he lost his balance during the action and fell to the ground. He even fainted after relaxing, and Khan could only shake his head at that scene.

"Did you really need to go that far?" The girl asked. "You are pretty cold for a hero."

"The battlefield is colder," Khan announced while approaching Rick and lifting him with an arm.. He would have to carry him to the medical bay.

Chapter 265 - Selfish

Khan dropped Rick on his shoulder and started moving back toward the center of the camp. Some of the soldier's blood fell on him, but he didn't have the upper part of his uniform, so nothing got dirty.

Delia quickly went after him, and the red-haired girl ended up joining the group. Khan and Delia shot curious glances toward her, but she had an explanation ready. "He still owes me Credits."

Moses and the other soldiers limited themselves to stare at the odd group as they left the barren area. They still didn't know how they felt about Khan's character, but some of them silently decided that they would test him properly once he got better.

Delia and the red-haired girl also didn't feel too good about what they had just witnessed. The latter could easily stop caring about the matter, but Delia was different. She liked Khan, so hating his ruthless side made her feelings messier. She knew that he had never tried to hide that part of him, but seeing it applied on his companions scared her a bit.

The red-haired girl actually eased some of the awkwardness that had fallen between Khan and Delia. Her presence prevented the two of them from talking properly, and she didn't even hold back from asking questions that also occupied the woman's mind.

"I still don't think he had to go through all of this," The girl announced while the soldiers in the camp inspected the badly injured Rick on Khan's shoulder. "Some people simply don't suit the battlefield."

"He wanted to learn to fight," Khan explained. "He had to start somewhere."

"I'd be surprised if he recalled anything about today," The girl continued.

"Rick is a tough man," Delia announced. "His determination is admirable. He will recall."

Delia glanced at Khan, but he pretended not to notice that gesture. He had understood that she wasn't feeling too good about what she had witnessed, but he couldn't say much either. In his mind, his ruthlessness had been necessary.

"Was that stuff about the battlefield true?" The girl asked. "I've been in a trench for a few months, but I've never fought for real. It doesn't feel like a proper battlefield when I shoot at aliens from behind a barrier."

"Why do you even want to see what a real battlefield is like?" Khan asked.

"I like fighting, and I'm good at it," The girl exclaimed. "There are no politics there, and our origin doesn't matter either. Battles are simple."

"You are way too young to have this mindset," Delia sighed. "Maybe you can have it only due to your inexperience."

"Why would my age have anything to do with that?" The girl complained while pointing at Khan. "I'm as old as him, but he became a hero in a few weeks spent on this planet."

"Our platoon had more than thirty soldiers and a Lieutenant," Khan revealed. "Only five of us have survived the escape. That's not really heroic."

"I guess you are right," The girl stated. "I don't plan on remaining here for long anyway. I only need to get Credits and some stuff to put on my profile before going somewhere else. I don't want complete safety, but Ecoruta is honestly pointless. Humans are nothing more than spectators in the fight between two alien species."

"Why not Earth?" Delia asked. "I'm sure the training camps need good soldiers after everything that has happened on Istrone."

"My family is on Earth," The girl replied. "Everyone there prefers my well-mannered sisters. I can't stand most social gatherings and similar events."

"You'll get your Credits if you keep helping Rick," Khan declared before recalling something. "I don't think I know your name."

"I'm Lucille, but don't use that name," The girl said. "I prefer Lu. It's shorter, and it doesn't remind me of my family."

"Alright, Lu, I'll need you to take care of Rick for this month," Khan continued. "You can decide what to do afterward, but I'd like for the two of you to keep sparring."

"Right, the assault team leaves in a month," Lu recalled. "Lucky you. Are you joining the attack?"

Lu glanced past Khan to look at Delia, and the woman showed a fake smile before replying. "I have yet to decide. I'm not excited at the idea of jumping back on another battle, but I want to make the Stal pay too. I'll think about it properly in the next weeks."

"You didn't tell me that you were considering joining the assault team," Khan uttered.

"You never asked," Delia responded as a weak smile appeared on her face.

"Are you already fighting?" Lu questioned. "Many said that relationships born on the battlefield don't last long. I know a few women who are only waiting for you two to break up."

"We have been in this camp for only a few days," Khan frowned. "How can someone come up with such ideas already?"

"Rumors run fast inside a camp," Lu explained. "Even I know that you sleep in the same habitation. You sure got over the alien woman pretty quickly."

Khan heaved a helpless sigh but remained silent. Delia casually naming Istrone had been fine, but he still couldn't deal with those who talked about Liiza without knowing what had really happened on Nitis. The misunderstanding about his relationship with Delia was kind of fine, but even she realized that she might have gone too far with it.

"See, don't become like me," Khan joked. "Avoid the battlefield and focus on your studies to get a nice position somewhere safe."

"My mother has always told me not to trust men who can't keep it in their pants," Lu announced. "I hate her, but she knows her stuff about men. I won't get lectured by someone like you."

Khan couldn't help but smirk in front of Lu's honesty, but Delia had a very different reaction. Lu's words explained precisely why she could trust Khan. She almost couldn't believe how wrong she had been about him.

Delia opened her mouth to say something in Khan's defense, but she ended up pouting when she saw that he glanced at her with curious eyes. She could read his desire to tease her in that gaze, which ultimately made her remain silent.

The faint awkwardness caused by Rick's training seemed to vanish after that interaction. Khan was still playful, and Delia rarely managed to get the upper hand in discussions, especially when she couldn't be intimate with him. His cold side still existed, but it wasn't a predominant aspect of his personality. Also, she could justify it after thinking about his life.

The group eventually reached the medical bay, and Rick's bloody figure helped them avoid the greetings that Khan would typically attract. It didn't take them long to find Doctor Holger, and she didn't hide her surprise at the sight of the injured soldier.

"What has happened to him?" Lieutenant Holger asked while leading the group to the room where Khan had woken up after his last battle against the Stal.

"Just harsh training," Khan admitted without mentioning any detail.

Lieutenant Holger helped Khan put Rick on the bed, and she quickly stripped him down to assess his injuries. Then, she moved to another room to pick a few lotions that she applied to his wounds as soon as she returned to the room.

The Lieutenant was fast with her movements. Khan had never seen anyone applying bandages so quickly. She was also precise and delicate at the same time, which only showed how experienced she was at her job.

"He'll need to spend the day here," Lieutenant Holger explained. "His injuries aren't severe, but he has lost a lot of blood. Still, tomorrow he should be back in fighting shape. Let me see your hand now."

Khan showed his right hand, and the Lieutenant carefully inspected it. She even touched it in specific spots to check the condition of the bones kept still by the metallic structure.

"You are healing faster than I expected," The Lieutenant eventually announced. "I should be able to remove this brace in two weeks, and you'll only need an additional week to recover completely."

"That's great," Khan exclaimed. "It was getting tiring to pay attention to this thing all the time."

"I noticed that you have damaged it a bit," Lieutenant Holger stated. "A replacement with metal resistant to your element has already arrived, so come here immediately if you happen to break it."

"Thank you, Doc," Khan honestly responded. He had to admit that he didn't expect the Lieutenant to be so mindful about those details.

"Right, HQ sent a package for you a few minutes ago," The Doctor continued. "You can pick it up on your way out of here. Just try not to blow up your habitation. Those things cost a lot."

"Is there a place where I can train safely and alone?" Khan asked, but the Doctor immediately shook her head.

"Privacy is hard to attain on a camp like this," The Lieutenant explained. "You should feel lucky that your habitation is big enough for the two of you."

The Doctor wore a warm smile as her eyes moved between Khan and Delia. The latter widened her eyes and diverted her gaze timidly, while Khan felt the desire to frown, but he eventually decided to ignore the issue.

"Can I remain here a bit?" Lu asked. "The guy still owes me money."

"Don't be loud and don't hurt him," Lieutenant Holger ordered. "I have nothing against that otherwise."

Lu nodded and gave her contact to Khan before he and Delia left the room. The two reached an area with a series of consoles, and one of them opened to reveal two caskets when Khan took out his phone near it.

"You are about to skip sleeping again," Delia sighed when she saw the excited expression that filled Khan's face.

"I'll just inspect them for now," Khan responded. "I'm not tired, but I don't know if the habitation can handle them."

Delia didn't say anything and limited herself to following Khan out of the central structure in the camp. She walked behind him until they reached his habitation and went inside with him.

"Hey, Delia," Khan called while placing the caskets on the couch, "I trust you, but I think it's better if I watch these spells on my own."

"Can we talk for a bit first?" Delia finally broke her silence, and her timid tone made Khan take her request seriously.

"You didn't need to be so hard on Rick," Delia stated. "He is a good soldier. He would have eventually reached that point even if you didn't put his life at risk."

"Delia, he couldn't go back to his habitation after another failure," Khan explained as he sat on the couch. "It was better to create an initial success. Besides, that's how I learnt how to fight."

Delia covered her face with a hand while she shook her head. She had to take a deep breath to calm herself down and resume speaking. "Can your life get any sadder?"

Khan diverted his gaze when he thought about all the details that Delia didn't know, and she heaved a helpless sigh when she noticed that reaction. She gave in on complaining and sat next to him before lying her head on his shoulder and taking his arm in her embrace.

"I don't like seeing you like that," Delia admitted as she rubbed her head on his shoulder.

"But that's how I am," Khan whispered. "That's how we escaped from the Stal."

"I know," Delia sighed. "I'm not saying that you are wrong, but I hate knowing that you actually take it easy on others. Most of your ruthlessness is toward yourself."

Khan felt surprised that Delia had noticed that detail so quickly, but he didn't say anything. There was nothing to add to her statement.

"Khan, why did you even come to Ecoruta?" Delia asked. "You could have gone everywhere with your profile, and the Global Army would have never sent you here on its own. Why did you choose a battlefield right after Nitis?"

"I wanted to grow strong quickly," Khan revealed without describing the deeper details behind his decision.

"Why?" Delia questioned. "Is it for her? Did you think that getting stronger could get you back on Nitis?"

"Part of me thought that," Khan admitted. "I've seen a lot of death in the planets that I've visited. I would have been able to change things if I were stronger."

"That's so silly," Delia scoffed. "It's not your job to save others or lead everyone to victory. You are seventeen, but you have already gone through so much. Try to find peace instead of punishing yourself over things that you couldn't control."

"I needed to clear my head anyway," Khan replied. "Ecoruta is helping. You are helping."

"Don't try to trick me," Delia threatened while pulling his ear to make him bend on her.

"You are clearly using your experience to your advantage," Khan joked when his arm ended up pressing on her chest. "Older women are so scary."

"Shut up," Delia ordered while adjusting her position to make him lay his head on her lap. "You would be naked if I were to try for real."

"Why aren't you doing that then?" Khan asked. "I thought that you wanted it."

"I want it," Delia sighed, "And I will take it if you start running away. Yet, I don't want you to sacrifice yourself to make me happy."

Khan remained silent for a few seconds. He couldn't believe that another woman had ended up mentioning that same problem. He had learnt a lot about relationships with Liiza, but it seemed that his bad habits were still there, and Delia had noticed them.

"I still plan to check the spells," Khan eventually said.

"I'll leave you be in one hour," Delia promised while caressing his head. "I'll be selfish for a bit now. Do the same if you can."

Chapter 266 - Line

Delia held back, but she still pushed the invisible line that Khan had drawn between them. At first, she limited herself to caressing his head and moving her legs to make sure that he experienced her softness. Then, her approach grew bolder and started to make his self-restraint waver.

It was fine as long as Khan could divert his attention from what was happening around him. Liiza's face always appeared in his vision when he closed his eyes, and his brain never stopped comparing the sensations experienced on the couch with what she had given him.

However, everything grew unclear when Delia pushed Khan closer to the couch's back and lay down in front of him. She never did anything too inappropriate, but her hands explored his bare chest and back, and she made their foreheads to keep their faces dangerously close to each other.

Humans and Niqols were different, but Khan recognized the arousal in Delia's half-closed eyes. She didn't hold back from getting closer to him to make their bodies touch. Her warmth and softness tried to take complete control of his mind, but she never managed to be his sole thought.

Khan couldn't lie to himself. He liked that intimacy. His brain seemed to reject that thought, but he slowly stopped seeing the reason behind that stubborn self-restraint.

Liiza and Khan weren't a couple anymore. They had broken up for multiple reasons, with one of them being the need to grow without each other's support. They needed to fix themselves and leave the rest to fate, mana, or whatever. There was no painless solution to their situation, so they had opted for something that could prevent both of them from remaining stuck in their current mindset.

Khan could predict what a Niqols would do after such a sad break-up. He didn't want to think about it, but he knew. Even that vague and unclear idea was enough to rip his heart apart, but that was the reality of the situation, and he couldn't do anything to change it.

Moreover, Khan had long since distanced himself from the typical human mindset. He could pretend to think like a member of his species, but his mind had moved on the Niqols' side.

His vaster emotional spectrum allowed him to experience what Liiza was probably going through right now. She was sharing his sadness, but that only made his thoughts grimmer. He knew what Niqols did when they experienced such intense feelings since he was aware of what he wanted to do to suppress them.

Those messy thoughts eventually led to a simple conclusion. Khan realized that he was tired of feeling nothing but despair and sadness. He wanted to experience something different, even if that

ended up leading to more pain. He desired a real break, and he had a chance to get it right in front of him.

Khan knew that his actions would hurt Delia. She was holding herself back for his sake, so he hated the sole thought of raising her hopes when he wasn't ready. Still, he was in desperate need of doing something for himself, something that could make that sadness stop even for a single second.

Delia was doing her best to make as much as their bodies touch, so she sensed when Khan began to move his left arm. His hand ended up between them, and his fingers traced a straight line that started from her waist and ended on her neck.

Delia gasped when Khan's fingers passed over her chest. They didn't apply enough strength to make him experience her whole softness, but she felt them, and so did he. Her breath grew deeper when he reached her neck and opened his hand to take her cheek. His thumb stretched toward the corner of her lips, but it never touched them.

Both Khan and Delia eventually opened their eyes and fell prey to a long stare filled with doubts, hesitation, and desire. She didn't want to make the first move out of fear that he could play along only to satisfy her, and he didn't want to cross that invisible line.

The minutes went on quickly as Delia tried subtler approaches to check how Khan felt. One of her legs made its way between his knees to make her waist touch his groin. She could sense him clearly, and that made a smile appear on her face. Her mouth widened enough to reach his thumb, which inevitably experienced the softness of her lips at that point.

Khan knew that his barriers were about to crumble, but he continued to hold back. Delia was there, ready for him, and he wanted her, but he didn't make the last step required for him to lose control of the situation.

The two passed short minutes in that state, staring and caressing each other without ever ending up doing more than that. They both wanted that, but they held back for different reasons, and the hour eventually went by.

"Khan," Delia called in a pleading tone as her warm breath expanded on Khan's face. "I think we have been like this for more than an hour."

"I know," Khan sighed. "My spells are waiting."

"I know," Delia whispered as she slowly separated from him and started to straighten her position.

Khan did the same. He pushed with his now free left hand on the couch to sit, but he soon found Delia on him. Her waist pressed on his manhood, and she took his face in her hands. When he raised his gaze to inspect her, a soft and wet sensation spread on his lips.

Delia quickly interrupted the kiss and left the couch while covering her mouth with the back of her hand. She muttered a hurried "sorry" before rushing toward the exit and leaving the habitation. Khan managed to snap back of his stupor only when the door closed.

'No,' Khan sighed as he touched his lips. 'I'm sorry.'

Khan knew that Delia had a good heart. That kiss had probably hurt her since she had ended up betraying her promise. Still, he could only see his faults. His actions were to blame for bringing her so close to her limit.

'I'm sorry for being so vague,' Khan said in his mind. 'I'm sorry for using you to gain some relief.'

The small break from the constant desperation and sadness ended with those thoughts. Everything returned stronger than ever and made Khan cover his head in shame. He didn't only take a first step toward going over Liiza. He had also hurt Delia with his indecisiveness.

'Why is this so hard?' Khan cursed before moving his eyes toward the two caskets at his side.

The spells offered a good distraction that Khan didn't hesitate to seize. He picked the caskets and opened them without bothering to inspect the luxurious decorations or padding that kept the tiny disks in their insides safe.

Khan quickly placed the two disks on his phone, and two new labels appeared in his magical items' menu after the device absorbed them. He had successfully gained access to the chaos spear spell and the chaos claws spell, and he didn't hesitate to open one of those programs.

A series of descriptions immediately appeared on the holograms that came out of his phone. The training program featured the same mental exercises of the Wave spell, but Khan ignored them since his approach to his element wasn't exactly human.

An expert that the training program didn't bother to name or depict accurately performed the technique. At the same time, the holograms marked a series of stats that Khan had to memorize before attempting to cast the ability. The chaos spear spell appeared simple at its core, but it had a few significant differences from the wave spell, and the same went for its effects.

To cast the chaos spear, Khan had to condense a dense mass of mana between his palms, stretch it to give it the shape of a small stick, and throw it forward. The projectile would basically pierce everything that stood on its path, and the attack would end with a violent explosion.

The relatively simple theory didn't do justice to the actual effectiveness of the spell. Khan could immediately see how its long-range could prevent potential friendly fire. He wouldn't have to fear his own element if he mastered something like that.

The complicated aspect of the spell was in the ideas required to gain those effects. The Wave only needed destruction, but the chaos spear wanted a mix of that thought, flexibility, and stability. The ability risked detonating between his hands if he tried to stretch it without the proper control.

Khan wanted to test the chaos spear immediately, but the condition of his right hand didn't allow him to start his first attempt. He could still try to use it, but he didn't know whether his control over mana would be ideal in that state. Moreover, he had to think properly about the idea to put behind the execution.

The second spell turned out to be even simpler. The chaos claws would only make Khan create a series of claws-like structures around his fingers. The theory behind the ability matched the Divine Reaper, except for the meaning required and the membrane's actual length.

First of all, the claws couldn't be empty membranes. They had to cover the fingers, but they also had to stretch far past them, so they needed to be actual structures made of mana to remain stable.

Their meaning didn't even involve sharpness. The claws wanted Khan to express the pure destructiveness of the chaos element to create weapons that could cut and pierce virtually everything. The ideas behind them still involved destruction, but they tried to give it a denser and more threatening shape.

Khan had to think about the ideas to use for the spells. The Wave spell was easy since all his traumas gave him images of general destruction. However, the chaos spear and the chaos claws wanted something more complicated that forced him to immerse himself in his bad memories.

There was another issue. Khan wasn't using the human approach to his element, so the lack of emotions requested by his training programs didn't apply to him. Still, he had to fill that spot with something, and he didn't know if his desperation could work with his new spells.

The only consolation came from the current state of his mana. In theory, his energy now always expressed the nature of the chaos element. That could bring some benefits during the execution of his spells.

The only way to see where Khan stood was to test the new spells. The chaos spear seemed far too dangerous to use without a clear understanding of his mana, so he opted for the chaos claws. The movements that his energy had to make to summon those weapons were quite intricate, but he approached them slowly to make sure that he memorized everything.

A series of exercises followed that memorization. Khan couldn't express how glad he felt about the Niqols' teachings. His ability to move mana inside his body had increased in ways that he struggled to describe, and his techniques naturally benefited from that. Imitating and perfecting the flow of his energy took more than half a day, but he eventually reached a decent level of confidence.

Khan eventually found an idea for the chaos claws. He had the perfect images of an unstoppable weapon deeply rooted inside his memories. He only needed to think about the Divine Reaper to imagine the type of destruction that he needed.

For the feeling, Khan believed that he couldn't use something as bottomless and overwhelming as his desperation. He needed something denser, precise, focused, and his thoughts eventually ended on the pain he had just experienced. Hurting Delia had created a sharp and subtle sorrow that he couldn't shake off.

'Don't blow my fingers off,' Khan asked as if he could talk to his mana.

A deep breath preceded the execution of what Khan had just learnt on the training program. His first attempts to use the chaos claws spell failed due to his anxiety, but he eventually relaxed and completed the exercise.

An unpleasant sensation filled his left hand after he summoned his mana. Khan saw his red-purple energy covering his fingers and enveloping them into a relatively dense membrane that appeared far from stable. Still, his attention wasn't on the flaws of his execution. He frowned after seeing that he didn't obtain claws.. The spell had given birth to a short sword that covered his entire palm.

Chapter 267 - Decision

The red-purple sword emitted buzzing noises. It wasn't completely stable, but part of the tremors that ran through its structure felt natural as if they were proper features of the spell. It didn't feel good to have that mass of energy right over the skin, but the technique vanished before Khan could study it any further.

'Is every human chaos wielder wrong about this element?' Khan wondered while inspecting his hand.

The spell didn't hurt his skin, but he had felt that it was possible to suffer from it. Still, his greatest concerns came from the unexpected shape that the mana had taken. Khan had seen the same happening with the Wave spell, so he started to think that the event involved a pattern of some kind.

The problem wasn't with the different effects. Khan was using an approach that involved two opposite theories, so those changes felt normal. However, the sole fact that the spells remained functional surprised him, especially since they typically required a certain amount of perfection in their execution.

'Is my element compensating on its own?' Khan asked himself. 'Is its freedom adjusting the spells to my approach?'

No one could give Khan answers, not on Ecoruta at least. The Niqols or even his father would be able to add details to that strange trend, but he couldn't reach them.

Khan allowed his mind to go quiet before summoning his mana again. The red-purple short sword reappeared, but it felt more stable now. He could lower his arm without losing control of the spell, and the floor soon showed him its effects.

The chaos claws spell resembled the Divine Reaper in its current form, but its effects weren't as clean as the martial art. A few cracks appeared on the floor as soon as the short blade got near it. Part of the metal directly shattered once the red-purple glow touched the surface and began to dig through it.

The destructive power of the blade stood in the spells' realm. It had the Divine Reaper's sharpness, but it also expressed the chaos element's innate destructiveness.

Khan guessed that non-lethal injuries could become deadly when the red-purple blade was involved. He could imagine what the spell would do to actual skin and muscles. A simple thrust could endanger a series of internal organs depending on how deeply or long the technique remained inside a body.

The blade vanished a few seconds after it entered the floor. Khan found it pointless to damage his habitation even more than that, so he decided to focus on smoothening his execution of the spell. He didn't know how to implement that new asset in his fighting style, but those exercises still counted as training.

Khan summoned the blade multiple times. The process wasn't tiring, and he didn't risk destroying his habitation with something so small, so he didn't hold back from diving into his training. A long meditation followed, and a repetition of all his techniques came after that.

Khan completed his training cycle past dinnertime when the night had reached one of its darkest hours. He was sweaty, tired, incredibly hungry, but he couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in the morning once he stopped keeping himself busy.

His indecision and hesitation had ended up pushing Delia past her limit, ultimately hurting her. Moreover, Khan could guess that the woman was probably blaming herself for what had happened. She didn't deserve that treatment. He didn't feel any deep feelings toward her, but she had been good to him.

Khan showered and changed his trousers before heading outside. He wanted to appease his grumbling stomach since that seemed the only problem he could solve. Still, the scene that unfolded in his vision brought his mind back to the previous issue.

Three trays stood next to the entrance. The food on them was cold but edible. There was even more than usual, but it didn't carry any special mark. Delia didn't leave any teasing messages.

'She isn't making it easy at all,' Khan sighed as he sent a message to Rick and sat on the ground to eat.

Khan usually didn't care about the quality of his meals, but the food felt bitter now. The silence of the night also prevented him from escaping his emotional conflict. Guilt and sadness fought each other inside his mind without managing to find a winner.

The pain seemed an inevitable outcome. Khan could ignore Delia and wallow in his longing and sadness, or he could give in and accept the guilt that would follow his decision. It would be easier if one of the options would spare Delia of that suffering, but that wasn't the case.

'When did I even become so scared of pain?' Khan cursed in his mind before diverting his attention to his buzzing phone.

Rick had answered his message even if it was deep into the night. His reply contained a simple map of the camp with a mark on Delia's habitation.

Khan sighed before standing up and marching toward the habitation. It didn't take him long to find it, and his hand soon knocked on the metal door. The entrance quickly slid open, but it closed as soon as Delia noticed the identity of her visitor.

"Open up," Khan said, knowing that she was close enough to hear him even if he didn't raise his voice.

His phone buzzed. Delia had sent a message containing a simple "NO", which only made Khan shake his head. He had yet to make his mind about the situation, but he still voiced his stance. "I guess I'll remain outside all night."

The door slid open before Khan could sit in front of the entrance. Delia limited herself to glance at him before turning to disappear inside her bedroom.

The entrance closed after Khan stepped inside. Delia's habitation was relatively big, but it fell far behind Khan's house. It had the usual couch and bathroom but no reinforced room.

Khan took a deep breath before the inevitable confrontation. He could finally understand the nature of his fear. Suffering was fine, but he didn't like to spread his pain. Khan didn't want his actions to make things worse for his friends.

"Delia," Khan called as he peeked past the bedroom's entrance.

Delia was sitting cross-legged on her bed. She glared at Khan, but she quickly diverted her gaze as hesitation and guilt appeared on her face. She didn't seem able to look at him for longer than a second.

"You shouldn't have come," Delia whispered. "I couldn't contain myself. I shouldn't have done that, not to you."

"You should worry about yourself," Khan stated as he approached the bed. "I can deal with myself."

"But you don't," Delia complained as she turned toward the wall when she sensed Khan sitting next to her. "You try to make it easier for everyone else, but you neglect yourself. You shouldn't accept pain so easily just because you have grown used to it."

"What happened wasn't exactly painful," Khan corrected.

"Don't lie to me," Delia replied. "You have come because you feel that you have wronged me, right?"

"Well, I did," Khan admitted.

"No!" Delia shouted while finally turning toward Khan and showing her teary eyes. "You should be mad at me for taking away your chance to choose when to move on. I forced you to betray your feelings for your ex. Don't pretend that you can ignore all of this."

Khan opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out of it. Every idea that appeared in his mind featured the very flaws in his personality that Liiza and Delia had noticed. He wanted to put all the blame on him so that Delia could be free of her guilt, but that would only anger her now.

"Fine, I can't ignore the kiss," Khan revealed. "Still, there are countless things that I can't ignore. My mind is a dark mess that doesn't give me any breaks. I'm either sad about everything that has happened on Nitis, guilty due to what I'm doing with you, or generally annoyed that problems appear wherever I go."

"That's exactly why you should give your everything to yourself!" Delia responded. "Be selfish. Do whatever you need to feel even a tiny bit better. Everyone would understand if you were to hurt others in the process. I know I would."

"I don't like it," Khan sighed. "I don't like the idea behind that nor how I'd feel afterward. What's the point of appeasing my pain by spreading it around? I wouldn't mind it with strangers, but we are past that by now."

"You are impossible," Delia exclaimed while shaking her head. "I've never met anyone as stubborn as you."

"It's part of my charm," Khan joked.

"Yes, together with absurd battle prowess, maturity, actual good-looks, a damn fine shape, and deep mindset," Delia declared. "It's a pity that you had to pay such a steep price for some of them."

"Oh my, don't fall for me so quickly," Khan mocked.

"I'm not an idiot," Delia responded. "You are a better soldier than me at such young age. You will reach heights inside the Global Army that I can't even imagine. It's pure luck that I had the chance to meet you when we are still vaguely equal."

"I've never thought about us in those terms," Khan said as a faint frown appeared on his face.

"I did," Delia uttered. "You will step on a path that I won't be able to tread. In ten or even five years, you'll be some bigshot in the Global Army, while I'll remain a simple soldier."

"I don't think I'd care about that stuff," Khan stated without limiting his thoughts on the current situation.

"This is the first time I hear you thinking like a seventeen-year-old," Delia said. "You are lucky you made friends with such an honest woman. Others might have tried to guilt-trap you into a relationship now that you are within their reach."

"I must be very lucky," Khan smiled while fixing his gaze on Delia's eyes.

Delia pouted, but Khan didn't move his eyes from her. The long stare made her feel awkward and eventually forced her to voice a complaint in a cute voice. "What is it?"

"You have calmed down," Khan stated.

"Are you still trying to make me feel better?" Delia voiced in an annoyed tone. "Listen to me. I can play that game too. Actually, I've already decided that I won't try anything serious with you to avoid adding problems to that mess that you call brain. You have just lost the chance to get one of the best girlfriends on this damned planet."

Khan continued to smile and stare at Delia. Her statement had been quite cute, and she had even tried her best to appear proud about it. The faint blush on her face had betrayed her real thoughts, but he refrained from pointing that out.

"Stop staring at me!" Delia complained in a cute voice. "I have a will of steel. Looking at complacent and mature won't get you anywhere."

"You really have the wisdom of the old age," Khan commented.

"What would that even mean?" Delia scoffed. "I'm only looking out for you."

"I can see that," Khan stated while bending toward Delia slowly. "I trust you now."

"What are you doing?" Delia whispered while retreating until her back reached the wall. "I already told you. We won't end up together. I won't allow it."

"I'm not trying to make you my girlfriend," Khan explained as he reached Delia and grabbed her side. "I only trust that you won't get hurt."

"Khan," Delia pleaded as she slid down until she lay her head on the pillow. She was basically accompanying Khan's soft pull, which put her under him in no time.

"It felt good, the kiss," Khan revealed while moving his hand to her cheek and rubbing his thumb on her lips. "I could forget about everything for a second. What came afterward was far from nice, but you are right. I should try to find small moments of peace."

Delia's breath became uneven as her gaze darted between Khan's eyes and mouth. She even began to raise her hands to reach his torso, but she closed them into fists to hold herself back.

"Can I be selfish then?" Khan asked before making their foreheads touch. "Can I use you to carve some fake peace in my life?"

Khan didn't lower his mouth to let Delia make that decision. He was still hesitant about that action, and she had to accept the consequences by herself to avoid future misunderstandings or grudges. However, Delia's hesitation lasted only a few seconds. Her hands soon relaxed and reached his head to make it cross the space that separated it from her lips.

Chapter 268 - Leader

Khan's optimistic approach turned out to be wrong on various levels. In theory, a human suited his body in ways that Niqols couldn't achieve, but the differences found with Delia only worked as a constant reminder of what he was doing.

That made Khan work harder on losing himself in the pleasant sensations that Delia generated. The lack of deep intimacy with the woman inevitably worsened the sex, but that didn't turn it into a bad experience. It was simply clunky at times, even if it improved as the two continued to remain wrapped in each other's arms and legs.

Delia wasn't new to that practice. She also had condoms in her habitations to be ready for those situations. Still, the two needed a bit to understand how to satisfy each other properly.

Delia felt initially surprised when she noticed Khan's curious but confident approach. She had no idea how someone so young could show no awkwardness or insecurity in front of an older partner, but he quickly made her forget those thoughts to focus on the actual event.

Instead, Khan found himself in the odd situation of being familiar with certain reactions even if unusual sensations accompanied them. Humans and Niqols were similar, but they felt different, especially during those situations.

Of course, that wasn't unusual at all. Khan had only experienced sex with Niqols, so his understanding of the practice was a bit off. It didn't take him long to grow used to those differences, and he even started to appreciate some of them near the end. Yet, he felt the need to hold back at times since Delia was no Liiza. Their chemistry wasn't bad, but it was clear that they had yet to know each other in that field.

The injured hand didn't help with the intercourse, but the two paid great attention to it. In the end, they both enjoyed the experience greatly and ended up staring at the ceiling while the morning grew close.

"You never stop surprising me," Delia whispered as she turned toward him to leave a kiss on his chest.

Khan didn't answer. He limited himself to reach the back of her head to caress her, but his eyes remained on the ceiling. The sex had mostly been a good distraction, but everything had returned now. The new intensity experienced after the quick kiss was nothing compared to what invaded his mind now.

There was a simple truth to the situation that went beyond the spiritual betrayal of his love for Liiza. Khan had mustered the strength to be intimate with someone else, so Liiza was also capable of that. The realization almost brought Khan to tears. He wanted to leave, go somewhere cold, and remain alone, but he found punishing himself more appealing.

Delia's warmth was a constant reminder of his actions. They made Khan feel awful, but that was fine. Being angry at himself was better than suffering about something that he couldn't control. Besides, part of him thought that he deserved that pain.

"Too soon?" Delia asked when she noticed that Khan kept his unblinking eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I think it would have always been too soon," Khan admitted without moving his eyes from the ceiling.

"You forced yours-," Delia tried to complain, but Khan promptly sealed her mouth with his hand and turned toward her to show a helpless smile.

"It has been good," Khan honestly stated. "I've forgotten about everything for a bit, so thank you."

Delia could only give in at the sight of Khan's honest expression. She didn't say anything when he removed his hand from her mouth, and she also remained silent when he sat to search for his underwear.

"I can remain down with you for a bit longer if you want," Khan proposed.

"It's fine," Delia sighed while sitting and approaching Khan from behind, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Rick will soon arrive at your doorstep, and we aren't lovers or anything. You ended up here to gain small moments of peace, so use me well without worrying about eventual consequences."

"I must be really good under the sheets," Khan joked.

"I'll tell you more the next time," Delia teased while turning Khan's head toward her and approaching his mouth before stopping at the last second. "If you want us to do this again."

"Are you really okay with our agreement?" Khan asked.

Delia nodded, and Khan completed the kiss before resuming searching for his clothes. The woman felt that he had ended the gesture hastily, but she didn't complain. Still, her hands moved on his back until they eventually reached the azure tattoo.

"What does it mean today?" Delia timidly asked.

"You don't want to know that," Khan exclaimed before standing up and reaching his underwear.

Delia obviously didn't feel thrilled about all of that, but she accepted Khan's behavior. She was paying him back for everything that happened during the escape, and she could even realize how hard that night had been for him. Also, in her mind, she had already acknowledged that Khan would leave her life once his mission on Ecoruta ended.

Khan dressed up quickly, and Delia did the same. When the two exited the habitation, they found Rick napping on the ground right next to the entrance. He appeared in a perfect state and ready for another ruthless training session.

A routine began at that point. Life in a camp could get boring rather quickly, but Khan never lacked things that kept him busy.

Rick would occupy part of his mornings. Khan always brought the soldier to the barren patch of ground and oversaw his sparring with Lucille. The first days showed little to no progress and left

Rick in a pitiful condition, but improvements slowly arrived and eventually led to more interesting fights.

Marcus and the other members of the future assault team tried their best to share meals with Khan or talk to him while they waited for his hand to heal. It was clear that his ruthless methods had created doubts in their minds, but they couldn't test him until his condition went back to its peak.

Khan spent the rest of the mornings, afternoons, and nights training. His foundation in the Niqols' methods had to improve to gain mastery over their two techniques. Moreover, his element required constant attention since he wanted to grow used to its new features and the changes it applied to his techniques.

Delia was the last meaningful part of that routine. She couldn't be with Khan all the time due to his relentless training, but she made sure to spend most nights with him. Their relationship remained rather superficial due to the limitations that they had set, but they still managed to enjoy a few intimate moments that warmed each other's hearts.

Sadly for Khan, most of his interactions with Delia always led to a vortex of negative emotions. He didn't even feel that he was moving on. Guilt, sorrow, and longing always tainted the memories of the warm moments shared with Delia, and the situation didn't improve with time.

The long time spent studying the nature of the chaos element forced Khan to inspect his very self. The mana naturally gained features from the mind and body of a soldier, so a bit of introspection was necessary even in his unique situation.

That allowed Khan to understand the nature behind his lack of emotional progress, and the truth turned out to be relatively simple. Nothing seemed able to surpass what he had experienced with Liiza, but that was fine. The issue came from the lack of deep feelings for Delia. Everything with her was purely physical, even if he generally liked her character.

That led to a simple conclusion. Khan wouldn't begin to move on until he allowed himself to feel again, but he didn't want that. He was actually scared of forgetting. He preferred the short relief over a possible solution to his issues because it kept him connected to Liiza.

A change in the routine happened when Khan felt that his right hand had completely healed. The event occurred deep into the night while he was in the middle of one of his long meditative sessions. He felt that everything was finally okay, so it was time to test his last spell.

Khan sat on his bed and checked his hand with his fingers. Only six days had passed after Lieutenant Holger had removed the metallic structure. He had healed fully only one day before her predictions, but that felt already a lot after considering the injuries that he had suffered.

"Is it morning already?" Delia whined when she sensed Khan leaving the bed.

"No, four am," Khan calmly replied.

"Training?" Delia asked.

"I need to try something," Khan explained. "This habitation might not endure it."

"Do I need to come?" Delia questioned.

"Not at all," Khan stated. "I don't know how dangerous this will be."

Delia didn't add anything else. The assault team would leave the camp in seven days, so Khan needed freedom to train and prepare for the mission. He would go back on the battlefield soon, and he couldn't allow himself to be unprepared.

Delia had initially expressed her desire to join the assault team, but Khan had ended up talking her out of it. He didn't underestimate her battle prowess or value on the battlefield. His words didn't even come from eventual concern about her safety. Delia simply had no reason to take those risks, and Khan didn't want her to go only to watch his back.

Khan left the habitation and moved outside the camp in a random direction. The frontlines weren't too distant, but the settlement's surroundings were safe and empty, which was what pressed him the most.

The plain extended for a while in every direction, so Khan marched among the dark environment until he felt distant enough to test his spell. His senses confirmed the absence of bystanders around him, so he quickly closed his eyes as he summoned images and feelings that he had prepared beforehand.

The chaos spear spell required flexible destruction, something rather hard to imagine. Finding a suitable emotion was also challenging, but Delia helped Khan once again.

During the past weeks, Khan had learnt to bottle up his sadness and suppress it for a few hours, depending on how long his intercourses with Delia lasted. The action left a bitter taste in his mouth and led to stronger feelings afterward, but it revealed a bit of control, which could be the key to his new spell.

The images were also tricky to find. Khan could only rely on vague spells deployed by the Niqols. He recalled the fiery snake, or the ability to build up energy before transforming it into ice. They weren't ideal examples, but he had nothing better to work with for now.

Khan summoned his mana and joined his palms while reaching a deep state of concentration. He had memorized how to move his energy in the past weeks, so he only had to perfect the execution.

Mana amassed between his palms. Khan could feel energy capable of blasting his arms away accumulating and struggling to maintain a stable structure. However, he kept going. He sensed the similarities with what happened with Delia. He still had time to gather power.

His palms slowly began to separate. A tiny flare escaped the mass of mana when it found an opening, but most of it remained in that dense structure. Khan stretched it until he created a thick red-purple line that almost begged him to let it explode.

Khan didn't lose control of the spell, even if he wasn't exactly suppressing it. He was using a feeling that added that nature to his mana. Still, his time was up, so he wielded the spear and threw it in the distance.

'I need to work on my aim,' Khan thought as soon as he inspected the spear.

The trajectory was off, and Khan even realized that he had applied too much strength. It was hard to balance his power with something that felt so light. Yet, his thoughts disappeared when the spear hit the ground.

The original chaos spear spell created a normal explosion, but Khan's version ended up summoning a bright pillar that slid on the ground as it continued to release its power. The simple detonation had transformed into something that added range and height to the spell. It even made its discharge of energy more immediate.

Khan couldn't rejoice at his success for too long since a presence suddenly entered his range. The event surprised him, but he didn't feel scared since he recognized the figure behind that aura.

"That was quite the spectacle," Captain Clayman announced while reaching Khan's side and bending forward to check the destruction unfolded by the spell. "The chaos element is definitely scary. I hope you have something less destructive for your mission."

Khan took that as a chance to reveal part of his power. Mana gathered on his palm before taking the shape of a short sword. The chaos claws spell had grown a bit in those weeks, but its range remained limited.

"That's not bad," Captain Clayman exclaimed while taking out a cigar from a pocket on his chest. "Did you show it to me to get your star?"

"I need a superior to confirm my ability to cast first-grade spells," Khan admitted.

"You'll have your new uniform tomorrow," Captain Clayman stated. "It's great that you have reached this level before the mission. It will help solidify your position as leader."

"The others already respect me a lot, sir," Khan explained. "There won't be any problem during the mission."

"It would be strange if they didn't respect you," Captain Clayman responded. "Your feats naturally attract attention, but you handled your fame quite well. You didn't end up stirring any mess, and you are even taking care of the Rassec boy."

Khan fell silent. He didn't say anything, and his eyes also remained fixed on the crater created by the chaos spear. Still, the Captain laughed as he lit up the cigar with two fingers.

"It's pointless to hide your surprise," Captain Clayman chuckled while patting Khan's shoulder. "It's only normal for me to know. His parents told me even before he reached Ecoruta."

"I thought they had cut him off due to his character," Khan stated.

"Well, they did that," The Captain replied, "But he remains a member of a noble family. I didn't think you had the guts to train him properly. I figured you would have spent all your time alone or with your woman."

"Rick isn't bad," Khan explained. "He has a good heart."

"And he can turn into an incredible ally if you make him somewhat important inside his family," The Captain laughed.

Khan didn't answer. There was no need to add words to that statement. Everyone could see the benefits of training someone who could have claims on positions inside a noble family.

An azure light eventually flashed far in the distance and attracted the duo's attention. Khan didn't know what could cause such an intense glow, but the Captain quickly explained without requiring questions. "We lost a trench. It's fine. HQ had planned that yesterday."

"Did they evacuate the area?" Khan asked.

"What do you think?" Captain Clayman questioned. "HQ needs to exploit the thinning of the enemy frontlines. It must appear as a real victory, or even the Stal would suspect something."

Khan limited himself to nod. He knew Captain Clayman's mindset, but he didn't dare to say anything on the topic. Khan was only a vaguely important soldier. He had no say on those matters.

"Imagine humankind five hundred years ago," The Captain sighed while smoking his cigar. "We had nothing more than broken cities and corpses, but we managed to rebuild and learn. It didn't take long before the first humans started to advance through the levels of mana. We should have gone extinct that day, but we have learnt to wield our new power and accomplished wonders with it."

The Captain appeared extremely disappointed about that story. He often stopped talking to smoke, but he always picked up from where he had left.

"Look at us now," Captain Clayman exclaimed. "We let our soldiers die to obtain a minimal tactical advantage in battles for a planet that doesn't belong to us. Are we even worthy of our ancestors who paved the way of mana?"

"Humankind is strong among the discovered solar systems," Khan commented.

"We are," The Captain scoffed, "But we have lost purpose. Wars have become playgrounds. We aren't aiming to see how far mana can bring us. We prefer to steal metal and seal alliances with an emotionless alien species instead of trusting each other."

"I'm sure some of us still pursue that goal, sir," Khan claimed.

"I know," The Captain sighed, "But it's pointless when only the minority shares that mindset. We have to show them how to do things properly."

"We?" Khan voiced in a questioning tone.

"You are an official leader now," Captain Clayman announced. "You have to show them more than raw prowess. You must inspire them.. Wars are hideous things, but everything becomes easier to overcome with a goal in mind."

Chapter 269 - Test

'A goal,' Khan repeated in his mind as his face grew colder.

Khan had a goal, but it didn't involve the war on Ecoruta or his future companions. The Global Army was a tool that he needed to use to fix his nightmares, and what he had learnt during the crisis on Nitis had made his loyalty waver a lot.

"I don't know if I'm the right person for that," Khan admitted. "I might be simpler than you think, sir."

"I find it hard to believe that," Captain Clayman contradicted. "Everyone in the thirty-seventh battalion has read your profile. Your ability to survive and come out on top of awful situations is unmatched in your generation."

"Is that enough to inspire?" Khan wondered.

"It's enough to make others follow you," The Captain revealed while blowing out a small cloud of smoke. "Your ideals will eventually fill what you lack, but you can get those later on. You are too young for that stuff."

Khan nodded, even if he knew that the Captain's guess was completely off. His ideals were already solid. His experiences inside the Global Army only added dark shades to them.

"I wish I could change things," Captain Clayman sighed when more azure lights flashed in the distance. "It becomes hard to understand all these small things after seeing what humans can achieve with mana. Most soldiers strive to gain minor safe positions when they can evolve past the limits of their species. I don't get how they can ignore that chance."

"Are you talking about the evolved beings, sir?" Khan asked as interest spread in his mind.

"I've seen one with my own eyes once," Captain Clayman exclaimed. "I don't claim that I'm strong enough to understand their power, but I didn't think a single glance could make me feel so small. They live in the same world as everyone else, but they experience it far differently."

"Do you know what evolving brings?" Khan questioned. "I couldn't find much about evolved beings."

"Only the noble families or the forces connected to them have accurate records," The Captain explained. "I had the chance to learn a few details, but they are useless in your case. See evolved soldiers as dragons among rats. They share the same air, food, and world, but things are different in their eyes."

"Dragons, sir?" Khan asked.

"What about them?" Captain Clayman questioned.

"I don't know what they are," Khan admitted.

"Oh," The Captain gasped. "They are huge fictional beasts. I guess your childhood wasn't great."

"The Slums aren't great at that," Khan chuckled.

"Anyway, back to my point," Captain Clayman announced while clearing his throat. "Humans can be drago-, I mean, big beasts, but they choose to remain rats. That's disheartening."

"Sir, training isn't for everyone," Khan complained.

"That's why soldiers need sources of inspiration," The Captain exclaimed. "They need dragons among them to show them the path. I hope that you will help me achieve this dream once you reach important positions."

Khan turned toward the Captain and nodded. "I don't like to see lives wasted. I want to change things if possible."

"Good, good!" The Captain laughed while patting Khan's shoulder. "I knew I could count on you. Still, remember this warning. Politics can be more dangerous than battles, so focus on making many powerful friends."

"I'll do my best, sir," Khan confirmed.

The Captain patted Khan's shoulder one last time before turning to walk back to the camp. His mood had improved after that conversation, but Khan's face grew colder after that departure.

Khan didn't lie, but his words only conveyed half-truths. He didn't like seeing lives wasted, but he couldn't prioritize them over his problems. He wasn't even sure he cared enough about the Global Army or humankind in general to fix it.

'Is this what I have to become to reach the Nak?' Khan wondered as the Captain's figure disappeared behind the distant buildings. 'Do I have to lie and use friends to get rid of the nightmares?'

Khan felt about to fall prey to his feelings. He didn't like what had happened after Nitis. He often had to resort to lies, and his only moments of peace came from a physical relationship that exploited a friend. That type of life didn't seem worth living after experiencing the happiness among the Niqols, but giving up wasn't an option. That self-loathe was better than the nightmares, at least for now.

Khan used his training to suppress the depressing thoughts that had filled his mind. Launching spells highlighted some of his worst emotions, but he preferred to focus on a few of them instead of experiencing his entire mental state.

Khan had come to Ecoruta to stop thinking for a while, but that peace was going against his plan. Luckily for him, it wouldn't take long before he could jump on the battlefield again.

Red-purple lights flashed in Khan's surroundings as his training continued. The chaos spear could deploy more power than the Wave spell, but its accuracy depended on him. A few exercises allowed him to grow used to the attack's weight and sensations, but he felt the need to perform more tests before the mission.

The chaos spear also gave Khan ideas on how to solve the issue with the Wave spell. He could control his mana with the former, so he could theoretically do the same with the latter, and his feelings were the key.

The chaos element's effects changed according to the feelings that Khan used during each execution. The expanding spherical shape of the Wave spell made sense when he paired it with his boundless desperation. However, he believed that reducing its range and forcing it into a single direction was possible as long as he found a different emotion.

Khan didn't have the time to test that theory since the morning arrived and his phone began to ring. Sweat covered his body, and faint drowsiness had taken control of his mind, but he could still attend Rick's training.

Rick and Delia waited for Khan in front of his habitation, and the group soon moved toward the patch of barren ground. Lucille even joined them along the road, and the morning training began as usual.

Rick seemed to have transformed in those three weeks. His face shone with pure excitement while exchanging blows with Lucille. His poor battle experience made him waste many openings or suffer a few injuries, but he could fight now. Traces of his old habits still existed, but he was giving everything he had to remove them.

Delia couldn't help but smile at those scenes. She had grown fond of Rick. His determination was inspiring, but she knew that Khan deserved most praises there.

On the other hand, Khan remained cold during Rick's training. Everything could work because the soldier knew that punishments would arrive if he failed in the exercises, and Khan had to remind him about that with his serious face.

Even Delia's warm gazes of soft caresses didn't distract Khan from the training. He was serious about Rick, and Delia's presence remained both pleasant and painful. She was a constant reminder of what Khan had decided to do to experience short hours of peace.

Khan had tried to hide that problems had started to appear, but Delia had noticed them. She was like a drug for Khan. Everything seemed to go well when he got his dose, but the hours after that were painful, and the intensity of his suffering was slowly increasing.

Liiza wasn't even the sole core of the issue anymore. Khan saw that Delia suffered whenever she couldn't gain access to his emotions. The limits of the relationship were slowly starting to hurt her, but Khan didn't stop using her even if he had noticed those problems, and that made him feel awful.

In theory, Delia never complained, and Khan was simply sticking to the rules set beforehand, but he felt terrible anyway. Even if they had broken up, Khan still thought that he was cheating on Liiza while hurting a friend at the same time. His only consolation came from the fact that a new battle would arrive soon.

"Khan, are you behind last night's mess?" Moses asked through a laugh as he and his group arrived on the barren patch outside the camp.

"What mess?" Delia asked.

"I'm talking about last night's fireworks," Moses explained. "Some soldiers saw lights flashing outside the camp for entire hours. We went to check the area before coming here. How did you even dig so many holes?"

"I was training," Khan admitted. "I can't test my spells inside my habitation."

"Are you back in fighting shape then?" Moses asked as his eyes lit up.

Similar expressions appeared among his group. The soldiers had waited patiently for Khan to join the sparring sessions, and the time had finally arrived.

"I can join you safely," Khan said while wearing a fake smile. "Shall we use your rules?"

"I have no intention of facing your element," Moses announced while following Khan into an empty spot of the barren area. "No spells or deadly attacks."

The event inevitably caught the attention of everyone in the area. Rick and Lu stopped fighting, and the others formed a large half-circle around Moses and Khan to inspect their battle.

"I know that you are fast," Moses announced. "I might have an advantage there."

Khan smirked, but his face quickly became serious. The coldness contained in his expression forced Moses to focus, and his hands shot forward as soon as his opponent moved.

Khan reached Moses in an instant, but a hand filled his view before he could start his attack. Moses used a martial art that focused on instinctive actions. His body moved on its own without requiring thoughts or strategies. He had reacted so quickly to the sprint that Khan couldn't even begin his offensive.

'So much for no deadly attacks,' Khan thought while inspecting the curved fingers aimed at him.

Khan had studied Moses' martial art in the past week, and he had even developed some respect for him. The automatic actions required a lot of training and experience to be efficient in an actual battle. It was almost impossible to take the soldier by surprise, but Khan was one of the few warriors in the camp capable of testing his limits.

Moses had joined his fingers to create two curved fangs. They were moving toward Khan's head, but the action didn't create openings.

Khan ducked to slide under the incoming attack, but Moses quickly lowered his arm in an attempt to catch him. Khan could push himself forward and escape the blow, but he decided to jump and spin on himself.

The airborne maneuver allowed Khan to dodge the fangs' initial descent, but Moses promptly changed their trajectory to wave them at the figure rotating at his side. His fingers would definitely stab Khan, but his eyes widened when he understood that his opponent had no intention to dodge them.

Moses' instincts made him interrupt the attack and half-turn while raising his arms above his chest. His quick reactions allowed him to protect himself before the airborne rotating kick landed on him. A shin landed on his forearms, and an unstoppable force pushed him away.

Moses' feet dug the ground as he slid a few meters away. Khan landed softly, but he didn't immediately sprint forward. His eyes rose to inspect his opponent, and a fake smile appeared on his face when he noticed the single drop of sweat falling from the soldier's forehead.

"You are one crazy fella," Moses exclaimed while inspecting his forearms.

Some soldiers on the scene had understood what had happened, but Rick, Lu, and others didn't see anything off. In their minds, Khan had managed to hit Moses, but the latter had successfully protected himself.

"I could have hit you," Moses stated in a confident tone.

"And you would have lost your arm," Khan replied.

The exchange had been simple. Moses had the chance to hit Khan, but he was ready to endure the blow. The sharp fingers would have pierced his side, but his kick would have landed before they could reach his organs.

Moreover, Khan had decided to push Moses. He could have focused his momentum on breaking his arms and what stood behind them, but he had held back to avoid causing injuries.

"Do you always fight like this?" Moses questioned.

Khan placed his hand on the new sheath at his side while revealing a meaningful smirk. He had only relied on the Lightning-demon style, and he had even limited its destructive power. His recent performance wasn't even close to his real fighting style.

"That's quite menacing," Moses admitted. "No wonder you could survive inside the enemy lines. I bet your size helps against the Stal."

"It depends on the situation," Khan revealed. "They are too tall, so I can't jump freely in crowded situations."

"I get that," Moses stated before stretching his fingers. "Do you want to go at it again?"

"Do you?" Khan chuckled while lowering his gaze to glance at the weapons hanging from Moses' belt. He used odd gloves that had two long blades coming out of the knuckles.

"It would be fun," Moses sighed, "But it would also endanger the mission. I believe everyone here is already satisfied with your power, am I right?"

The soldiers on the scene could only nod, and some of them even fell in awe when they glanced at Khan. They had initially hated his ruthless approach to Rick's training, but they couldn't say anything after realizing that he was worse toward himself. Someone like that would surely fit as a leader for the simple reason that no one would dare to question his choices.

Chapter 270 - Departure

The rest of the week before the mission went by quickly. The camp didn't offer many distractions, and Khan was too busy with his training anyway. The addition of the spells had only increased the number of daily exercises that he had to execute, but he never rested since his return to the battlefield was drawing near. He only used the last day to sleep and bring his condition to the peak.

Needless to say, his imminent departure saddened a few people. Rick didn't want his master to go away during such a critical phase of his training, but he accepted the necessity of the event. Moreover, Lucille would spar with him as long as he kept paying her, so his morning exercises wouldn't end.

Delia's situation was a bit more problematic. Her moments with Khan went from intimate sessions to cold and detached hours, and those extremes worsened as the departure grew close.

Khan was the main problem there, but Delia didn't shy away from accepting her share of the blame. Khan showed the classic behavior of an addict. He slowly built a resistance to his partner, requiring him to dive deeper into their intimate moments to reach the desired peace. Still, the moments outside of that state were filled with sadness and self-loathe that intensified with time.

On the other hand, Delia became unable to stay true to her words. She had always liked Khan, and gaining access to that intimacy made her feelings blossom. She tried to keep them hidden and always remained silent about them, but Khan noticed everything, and the scene only intensified his self-loathing.

There was no solution to that situation. Khan simply wasn't ready to feel good again, and Delia didn't want to coerce him into something that caused him pain.

The night before the departure confirmed some of Delia's worries. She didn't know how she understood that, but she felt sure that Khan was doing everything he could to make her happy. He had resorted to sacrificing himself again instead of pursuing peaceful moments, and Delia didn't stop him.

That selfish act made her avoid sleeping in Khan's arms that night. Delia felt ashamed about herself, and that feeling prevented her from sleeping. When the morning was about to arrive and Khan began to leave the bed, she voiced a weak "sorry" before turning to show her back.

"Why would you feel sorry?" Khan sighed without turning. "I'm to blame for all of this."

"No," Delia sniffed. "You tried, and I couldn't give you what you wanted."

"No one can," Khan stated. "I knew that, but I started this relationship anyway. I guess I've grown weak to sorrow after being happy for so long."

Delia angrily turned to throw her pillow at Khan. He had the chance to dodge it, but he let it hit his head anyway. When he turned, he saw Delia covering her chest with the blanket and glaring at him while a few tears fell from her eyes.

"Stop blaming yourself for wanting peace when you deserve it more than everyone else," Delia complained. "It hurts to look at you. It pains me to watch you lying and doing your best to help me when you are in this state. Just ignore my feelings and use me properly. That's all I ever wanted."

Those bold words left Khan speechless. It seemed that his pursuit of giving her happy moments had ended up hurting her even more.

"Khan, I'll be fine," Delia said in a pleading voice. "I will stay here for a bit more before returning to Earth and living the rest of my days there. Sure, I'll be a bit heartbroken, but that's fine. That's nothing compared to the idea of repaying you a bit."

"You don't have to repa-," Khan tried to reply, but Delia threw the second pillow at him before he could finish his line.

"I'm bringing balance to the universe," Delia scoffed. "Entire planets have to repay you. I'm just starting that trend."

Khan ended up revealing a sweet smile. Delia appeared indestructible. She could voice a proud statement with tears falling from her eyes. She could suffer but still do her best to grant him some peace.

"You are incredible," Khan smirked as he went back on the bed.

Delia began to retreat when Khan approached her, but she fell in a daze at the sight of those intense eyes. She wanted him so badly that disappointment filled her mind when he took her in a tight embrace.

"You have been a good friend," Khan whispered. "Every man would be lucky to have you as a girlfriend."

"I know," Delia chuckled while diving into Khan's neck. "I'm so amazing that the universe is punishing me."

"I'm so-," Khan tried to say, but Delia promptly pulled his ear to interrupt him.

"I don't want to hear that anymore," Delia snorted. "Don't be sorry about your feelings. You have always been honest with me. I know how much she meant for you, so I'm glad that I had a chance to fill her place for a few hours every day. It means a lot to me."

"You deserve far more," Khan commented while breaking the hug.

"I know," Delia stated while taking his face in her hands, "But not from you. You only have to think about the Stal now. If I'm here when you come back, I'll happily do my best to comfort you again."

Khan revealed another honest smile, and Delia couldn't stop herself from kissing him. Still, she quickly interrupted her gesture and started pushing him away.

"Go now before I change my mind," Delia scolded while lying down and showing her back to Khan. "And be careful. Don't you dare to die or suffer heavy injuries."

Khan's smile widened as he picked up his clothes and put both pillows back on the bed. He didn't add anything else as he left the room, dressed, and reached the habitation's entrance.

The stars on his shoulders reflected the pale morning light that shone on him when he opened the entrance. Khan stepped outside his habitation and kicked Rick lightly before moving toward the appointed gathering point.

Rick was taking his usual nap, but he jumped to his feet after the kick. His sparring session would start soon, but he wanted to make sure to say goodbye to Khan before the mission.

"I will make sure to work every day, Boss!" Rick shouted. "I won't let you down."

"Focus on not letting yourself down," Khan ordered. "You are doing good for now, but always remember that you are behind your peers. You need to work extra hard to catch up with them."

"I won't hold back!" Rick shouted again.

"Also, your family is a problem," Khan stated while lowering his voice. "Make sure to get trusted allies once you get out of Ecoruta. They don't have to be important. Focus on surrounding yourself with honest people while you find ways to train. You should even drop your naivety as soon as possible."

"I understand what you are saying," Rick whispered as his eyes fell on the ground, "But isn't that sad? I know that my character can be a problem, but I've still met you, Delia, and Lu."

"Rick, you are a good guy," Khan sighed, "But that's not enough most of the time. People will try to exploit your position. Even I agreed to help you due to your status. It won't bring you much happiness, but you need to start treating the world coldly. You must learn that more than everyone else in the Global Army."

"I will try my best," Rick promised, but his words didn't sound convincing enough for Khan.

"Rick, a Nak spaceship fell on my head when I was five," Khan reminded. "There is nothing fair about it, but it happened anyway. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Rick didn't like the idea of changing. He wasn't dumb, and he appreciated his own honesty. Yet, contradicting Khan was impossible. He could only nod and promise to himself to watch his back.

A large platoon unfolded in Khan's vision when he reached the planned gathering point, and Rick politely decided to stop following him at that point. The area featured thirty-four soldiers, with most of them being first-level warriors and mages. Only three of them were second-level warriors and mages, with one seeming oddly strong for her state.

Captain Clayman was also in the area. He waited as Khan took his place next to Moses' group and performed a military salute as he waited for his superior to speak.

"This won't take long," Captain Clayman announced while checking everyone's expression. "Most of you are unaware of the nature of your target. Follow my advice and remain ignorant about it. You don't want to learn secrets that could potentially hurt your career."

A few gulps resounded next to Khan. The soldiers remained quite stoic, but many inspected their surroundings to check who could know something about their target. They couldn't stop their curiosity so easily.

"We have gone over your assault on the underground structure more than necessary," Captain Clayman continued. "I only want to remind you of a few things. Your secondary mission can help many soldiers in the battalion, but you shouldn't lose your lives to complete it. Steal what you can, but always prioritize your safety. I forbid you from losing your lives over vehicles and resources."

It was a bit heartwarming to see a superior talk like that, and Khan could clearly see the general appreciation that the soldiers had for Captain Clayman during that scene. It was clear that most members of the assault team had a relatively close relationship with him or respected him enough to go against HQ's orders.

Of course, Captain Clayman wasn't starting any revolution. He only wanted the assault team to retrieve technology secretly to improve the situation of his battalion. His honest and harmless decision to preserve lives made Khan understand the kind of inspiration the soldier wanted him to spread.

'I'm not like him,' Khan thought. 'I don't like seeing pointless death, but I can't be so selfless toward humans.'

Khan tried his best to evaluate himself properly. He didn't see himself as a bad guy. The Slums had forced him to develop a selfish side, but he couldn't see that trait in terms of good and evil since surviving had the priority.

Istrone had seen a cold version of Khan, even if that had saved many recruits. Meanwhile, Nitis had experienced the betrayal of his own species, but he felt partially proud about that. He had spared many innocent Niqols from a lot of pain.

Overall, Khan could be evil for what he wanted, but he generally tried to avoid causing pain. That could be a good starting point, but he knew that it didn't suit the Global Army completely for a simple reason. He couldn't see the difference between humans and other alien species.

"Get moving now," Captain Clayman ordered after nodding toward the assault team. "Good luck to you all!"

The Lieutenant in charge of the team shouted a "yes, sir" that the soldiers behind her echoed. Then, she led her group toward a series of vehicles waiting for them in the distance. They were simple armored trucks, but they wouldn't need to enter the battlefield. Their sole purpose was to lead the assault team near the closest entrance to the underground structure.

"It has finally begun," Moses whispered as the group marched toward the vehicles. "Are you excited, Boss?"

"There is nothing to be excited about when going into a battle," Khan stated. "However, I must admit that I'm looking forward to completing the mission."

A few laughs that the Lieutenant had to suppress with a glare resounded among the group. The superior's eyes eventually fell on Khan to scold him, but she saw nothing more than pure concentration. He wasn't even looking at the path ahead. His gaze appeared lost even if he continued to express awareness of his surroundings.

Khan felt his self-loathe, sadness, and desperation melting to make room for a simple and profound mindset.. The mana in the environment played a melody, and he intended to focus on it for the whole mission.