

Chaos' Heir 321

Chapter 321 - Invisible

Cora had seen Khan's emotionless face, and she also remembered it well. Istrone's events couldn't just disappear from her mind, especially since her love for him was born during those days.

Time had passed since those events. Cora had the chance to learn far more about Khan, and her love for him had only deepened with every new detail that she noticed.

Cora adored his intense stares, naughty words, and careful touches. She felt protected and loved beyond reason in his arms. She believed that she liked everything about Khan, but that changed after he kicked the source of the mysterious voice.

A silent, chilling killing intent had filled Khan's face. That expression was different from the aloof and detached behavior on Istrone. It was a dark feeling that made Cora freeze.

Cora felt scared. She didn't know that Khan could make such faces. That was a part of him that Cora had never had the chance to witness up close. Still, she felt unmistakable warmth and love among that darkness and coldness.

Khan's touch had changed after hearing that mysterious voice. His playful and teasing hands had transformed into a firm grasp meant to keep Cora safe. He was holding her waist and shielding her with his body as he tried to understand what was happening.

'Was I too distracted?' Khan wondered as he inspected the empty area pierced by his raised leg. 'No, that's impossible.'

Khan's senses weren't a switch that he could turn off. They were deeper than his sight or hearing. His mind lived among the waves of mana, so no amount of booze or excitement could make him ignore a change in that energy.

His senses' range had also increased after training hard. Khan had become able to perform the [Blood Vortex]. He had gone far beyond human standards, and he had even proven himself to be better than the specialists' tools.

Khan wasn't in his peak condition, and he had been quite horny too. However, he had lived on Nitis. He had done far more in far worse states there. His senses couldn't be faulty, meaning that the explanation behind that strange event had to be somewhere else.

'Is this due to a spell?' Khan wondered among the silence.

That guess had obvious issues. Khan would have felt the activation of a spell unless the mysterious man cast it outside his range. However, that figure couldn't possibly know that the event featured someone with Khan's perception.

Khan even eliminated the possibility that the mysterious expert was hiding his presence. He would have sensed a void in the environment in that case. Instead, everything felt and appeared perfectly normal, as if that voice had never existed in the first place.

"Are you scared?" The male voice suddenly resounded from the opposite side, and Khan didn't hesitate to kick toward its source.

The attack failed again. Khan knew that he had kicked the exact source of the voice, but he didn't feel anything, and the scene showed no reactions.

"It's normal to be scared in front of the power of darkness," The mysterious man said from a spot behind Khan.

Khan launched another kick while keeping Cora in his embrace. He had left the wall now, but he didn't dare to let her go.

"You must be soldiers from the city," The voice resounded from a spot outside Khan's range after the kick failed. "The soldiers in the barracks would have already run at this point. Your reactions are also incredible. You must be an elite."

"And who would you be?" Khan asked while adjusting his grasp on Cora.

"I'm an interested party," The male voice resounded from the previous spot. "I must admit that I didn't initially recognize you as soldiers. Your act was really good. Luckily, I always make sure to overhear everyone's conversations before deciding whether to reveal my presence."

Khan's expression grew colder. The event around the fire had been loud and messy. The mysterious man would have needed to be right next to Amber and the others to hear their conversations, meaning that he had approached them multiple times already.

'Is darkness his element?' Khan wondered. 'Can he hide his presence to this extent due to a spell? No, it's not hiding. He is probably blending with the environment in ways that even my senses can't perceive.'

"Do you always act like this?" Khan eventually decided to resort to baits. "Do you cast your cloaking spell before reaching each party? That must be exhausting."

"I'm used to living among shadows," The mysterious man replied, and Khan confirmed that he had yet to move.

'He didn't deny it,' Khan coldly exclaimed in his mind as his thoughts went wild.

Khan's understanding of the ways of mana allowed him to come up with a decent hypothesis. He would have sensed the presence of someone with mana during the party, so the mysterious man probably was the cautious type. He activated his spell before reaching the squares, which explained why Khan had failed to sense his arrival.

Still, the nature of the spell remained unclear. Khan knew that mana could achieve extraordinary things, but there were limits to that power, especially for someone in the Slums.

'Is he invisible?' Khan wondered. 'That would make him at least a second-level warrior.'

The mysterious man had dodged Khan's kicks, so he was fast enough to react to those attacks. The Lightning-demon style was among the fastest martial arts in the army's archives, so it was unlikely that the figure could have access to something similar. His ability to avoid the blows came from his sheer reflexes and physical strength.

Khan didn't feel scared after that realization. His guess could be wrong, but he didn't have solutions for the other options. Instead, if his opponent was an invisible second-level warrior, he had a chance to win.

"Why didn't you attack us or leave after realizing that we come from the city?" Khan asked. "Are you interested in what we have to say?"

"Oh, I only wanted to see if you were bold enough to get at it here," The man casually responded. "I'm a bit disappointed. The women from the city aren't as shameless as I heard."

Cora didn't blush. She obviously didn't like that someone had seen her private moment with Khan, but the situation didn't allow her to consider those feelings. Danger had appeared, so Cora had to be ready. She had already prepared her mana while she waited for Khan to drop her.

"So, you aren't from the city," Khan commented.

"I might have revealed too much," The man coldly chuckled. "The sole fact that you are here means that someone from the Slums has done the same. I should pay them a visit one of these nights."

The killing intent in that statement was impossible to miss. Having an invisible opponent was scary, especially after learning that he had spent part of the party overhearing conversations right next to each group.

"Your business must have something to do with what happened in Dewwick," The man continued. "I have no interest in talking about that. I feel merciful today, so I'll let you leave."

"What if we didn't want to leave?" Khan asked.

"Are you sure you want to threaten me?" The killing intent in the man's voice returned. "I can follow you to your habitation, and you wouldn't even notice it. I can cut your girlfriend's throat while she sleeps in your arms. I can laugh right next to you while you fall into despair."

The threat inevitably affected Cora, but she wasn't to blame. The danger posed by an invisible assassin was too great. Her body tensed up as the desire to run away filled her mind.

Khan saw the situation differently. His experience and knowledge allowed him to find flaws in those threats. Ordinary soldiers had limited mana capacity, and a spell that could hide someone's presence to that extent had to be quite expensive.

It was already deep in the night. Khan could guess that the mysterious man had inspected different parties before reaching that square. He had most likely activated that cloaking spell multiple times already, which would put him close to his limit.

Of course, that guess worked only if Khan had understood the man's power correctly. A third-level warrior might have limits beyond his comprehension, but the conversation had revealed subtle hints that added value to his idea.

The threats were probably real, and it would even make sense for the mysterious man to let Khan's group go. The death of soldiers from the city right after Dewwick's matters would only force the Global Army's hand.

Nevertheless, the opposite situation was also reasonable. The mysterious man might be at his limit, and Khan wanted to test that possibility. The mission would go back to the starting point if he wasted that chance.

"Go back to the others," Khan whispered as he relaxed his grasp on Cora's waist.

"I can fight," Cora complained as her feet touched the ground.

"I know you can," Khan stated without moving his eyes from the previous source of the male voice, "But I can't let him turn you into a burden. I'm the only one fast enough to deal with an invisible threat."

Khan's choice of words had been perfect. He didn't blame Cora's prowess but the situation, which made his orders easier to accept. Cora was scared, but she was ready to give her everything to help Khan. Yet, he was better on his own now.

"Don't get hurt," Cora whispered before hurrying back to the party.

Khan waited a second before raising his hand and unleashing the Wave spell toward the previous source of the voice. Red-purple light filled the isolated corner and destroyed everything it touched. The ground and the walls at his sides shattered instantly, and the small structures they supported soon crumbled.

Cora saw the spell and heard the ruckus it created, but she didn't ignore Khan's orders. The commotion attracted the attention of those at the party, but they didn't care if a few houses crumbled. That was a common occurrence in the Slums.

Amber and Grant didn't give the matter much thought either. They remained in their act to avoid revealing their identity, and their position made it hard for Cora to reach them right away. She had a crowd to cross to warn them.

Khan didn't blink at all while the Wave spell unleashed its power. He didn't divert his gaze even when the fall of the metal tiles at his sides generated a few clouds of dust. His attention remained on the previous source of the man's voice as he searched for clues.

"You are still there, right?" Khan asked before adding a lie. "The dust moved oddly."

"No, it didn't," The man spoke from a different position. "Why did you unleash something so dangerous here?"

"I only wanted to prevent you from going after my girlfriend," Khan revealed. "You tried, didn't you? Your breath was a bit ragged."

The last statement wasn't a lie. The dust and mana carried by the Wave spell didn't meet any obstruction, but the man's voice had changed tone. The attack had probably taken him by surprise.

"Do you desire me to kill you so despe-?" The mysterious man asked, but Khan suddenly shot toward the source of the voice and released a kick, interrupting the question.

"You aren't untouchable," Khan exclaimed as he drew the knife from his underwear. "You must also be quite tired. Come on, run away and deactivate your spell. I will sense it."

That was a partial lie. Khan didn't know if the man had enough mana to keep the cloaking spell active until he left his range. Still, Khan couldn't do much more in that situation. He could only throw another bait and hope that the expert took it.

The man didn't speak anymore, but Khan had guessed as much. He calmly waited while holding his knife firmly. He was ready to react to any change in his surroundings.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, but pain suddenly filled Khan's mind. A warm sensation spread on his cheek and forced him to take a step back. The injury didn't expand anymore, but he still found a long cut on that spot.

'I can react to this,' Khan thought as he prepared himself for the next attack.

A few silent seconds went by again before a painful sensation spread on Khan's right shoulder. He didn't immediately react and let the injury dig deeply into his skin before crouching to sweep his surroundings with a rotating kick.

The attack didn't cause any reaction, but Khan still stomped on a few spots around him. He didn't know if the man's spell prevented him from experiencing sensations when interacting with that mysterious figure. That possibility felt unlikely, but Khan didn't want to take anything lightly.

The silence returned, but Khan didn't feel anxious. He had basically confirmed that the man wasn't too strong. His reactions were good, but his attacks were slow. Khan even started to believe that the expert didn't know any martial art.

Then, pain spread from a spot on Khan's left side, but he spun on himself as fast as he could. A red-purple membrane covered the knife as he waved it during the rotation, and a suppressed cry resounded during his attack.

Khan quickly turned toward the source of the cry, and his eyes immediately converged on a bloody item on the ground.. Two dirty fingers had appeared out of nowhere.

Chapter 322 - Deal

Khan didn't remain still in front of that initial success. He shot forward and threw a kick in the spot right behind the source of the suppressed cry.

A grunt followed his action, but he didn't feel anything. Khan couldn't confirm whether he had hit the man, but he still launched another kick aimed at the source of the new sound.

Nothing happened after the kick. The area remained utterly silent, but something eventually reached Khan's senses. A few drops of blood materialized mid-air before falling on the ground.

Khan's thoughts ran quickly as he reviewed his initial guess. The mysterious man clearly had access to something stronger than simple invisibility. It seemed that everything in the spell's range blended with the environment and became impossible to perceive.

Khan had never been in a similar situation. He believed to have hit the man with one kick, but he didn't feel that event. He could only charge forward whenever blood appeared in his view and hope that his attacks reached his target.

A strange fight unfolded. Khan kept chasing after every sound or item that appeared out of nowhere. The mysterious man resumed his attacks after he understood that the bleeding didn't allow him to retreat. Still, he failed to inflict deadly injuries since Khan dodged and counterattacked as soon as he felt pain.

Khan didn't fail to realize that the battle would have been entirely one-sided if the man had access to fast and powerful attacks. Still, he didn't lose himself in those thoughts. He would win as long as his opponent ran out of mana.

Each exchange was fast and only featured short breaks. Khan attacked if the man's blood betrayed his position and remained passive when he lacked clues. Yet, everything eventually went quiet for a relatively long time.

Khan didn't dare to move, but his body darted forward when a trace of mana appeared behind a house in front of him. That clue lasted for a mere second, and he didn't find anything when he reached his destination, but a similar event happened after he waited a bit longer.

Khan had immediately realized what was happening. The expert had reached his limit, so he was trying to run away. However, he had to disperse his spell to catch his breath from time to time, which gave Khan a chance to follow him.

The man's breaks started to happen more often. He had initially managed to go around a whole house before dispersing his spell, but that distance shortened as Khan continued to chase him.

Meanwhile, Khan's reactions quickened. He went from complete stillness to full-speed in an instant, and his opponent began to feel pressured by his relentless chase.

Eventually, Khan reached the source of the last trace of mana only to see a faint humanoid figure materializing in front of him. The event made him accelerate right away to deliver a powerful kick at the center of that shape, and everything changed after that attack.

Khan finally felt something. He sensed a sturdy and firm body under his half-broken shoe. He perceived the amount of mana that only a second-level warrior could have, and he even heard the thudding noise generated by his opponent's fall.

It was as if his kick had lifted the veil that prevented him from seeing the true nature of the environment. Khan could finally sense, see, and hear his opponent, and his power was in line with his initial guess.

The man was face down on the ground. He had long hair, and the dirt on it prevented Khan from seeing its true color. His clothes were nothing more than the usual rags worn by the other citizens of the Slums, and the same went for his smell.

The knife held by his injured hand was nothing special. It was sharp, but it didn't contain any mana. The man didn't have anything else worth mentioning either. He even looked poorer than other fellow citizens.

Khan disregarded the man's appearance after a quick inspection. He didn't hesitate to slam a kick at the base of his back and place his other foot on the injured hand. It was time to start the interrogation.

"Who are you?" Khan asked in a cold tone as his free hand reached the dirty hair to turn the man's head. "What's your role in the Slums?"

The face of a middle-aged man unfolded in Khan's view. The dirt on his skin covered eventual moles or similar traits, but Khan couldn't miss his clear green eyes.

"Why would I even answer?" The man voiced a weak laugh.

Khan pressed harder on the injured hand and lowered his knife. The sharp membrane covered the weapon as it approached the man's nape. Khan could kill his opponent in an instant, but he didn't need a corpse.

"Do you not care about your life?" Khan threatened. "Do you have any idea what the Global Army will do to you once I bring you back?"

"Actually, I don't care," The man laughed again. "Go on. Capture me. The lab will disappear as soon as I go missing."

'Is this a bluff?' Khan wondered. He had never mentioned the lab, but the man seemed to know something. Moreover, the amount of mana inside his body had to place him among important figures in the Slums.

"You are hesitating," The man teased. "How does it feel to be against someone who has nothing to lose? It's terrifying, isn't it? The Global Army has given you so much power only to see it become pointless."

"Is there a lab here?" Khan asked, ignoring the man's last line.

"Who knows?" The man whispered.

Khan didn't know what to do. The man had spoken the truth. Threats were useless against someone who had nothing, especially if he was willing to throw his life away. Khan couldn't see a path.

"Did you lose your tongue?" The man continued when Khan remained silent. "I bet you didn't expect someone from the Slums to put you in such a difficult situation. My life must be worthless in your eyes, but you still can't bend it to your will."

"Let's make one thing clear," Khan whispered as he bent forward even more. "I have fought and killed many times, but I've never considered a life worthless."

"The knife on my neck says otherwise," The man responded. "Will you kill whenever your superiors give the order? You are so young, but the Global Army has already corrupted you thoroughly."

"Do you think I fought you because of my orders?" Khan asked. "I have orders, but you decided to threaten my girlfriend. That's enough to earn a death sentence in my mind."

"You are quite dark," The man exclaimed in an amused tone. "Does your girl know about this side of you? You are way scarier than me."

"That's none of your business," Khan stated. "Now, time's up. Tell me what I should do with you."

"I told you," The man sighed. "I don't care."

'This is pointless,' Khan cursed in his mind. The man had put him in a pickle, but he didn't have many options. Bringing that mysterious figure to a barrack was the only reasonable approach.

"However," The man suddenly announced, "I might have an idea."

"Speak instead of wasting my time," Khan ordered.

"You can't find the lab without me," The man explained, "But you won't find it even if you capture me. You need my help."

"So?" Khan said in an aloof tone.

"I want to cut a deal," The man revealed.

"I don't have the authority to offer something like that," Khan admitted. "I don't even want you to get off lightly."

"I've already lost two fingers," The man laughed, "And I'm pretty sure you have broken something with those kicks of yours. Martial arts sure are interesting."

"What do you want?" Khan asked while trying his best not to show any emotion.

"I give you the location of the lab, and you let me go right now," The man suggested.

"How can I even trust you?" Khan snorted.

"You can't," The man stated. "This is a gamble."

"A bad one," Khan shook his head.

"Are you sure you want to miss this chance?" The man asked. "The Slums hide many things. Imagine how much there could be among these rotten houses and dirty streets. Some families might build entire cities, and you wouldn't notice it."

"You have started to sound desperate," Khan joked. "Maybe you do fear death."

"I'd pick death over imprisonment," The man admitted. "Besides, are you sure you want me to fall in your superiors' hands? I can tell you that you have chosen to give up on the labs to capture me."

Khan kicked the injured hand to remind his opponent about their position, but the latter only laughed. He had felt pain, but he had stopped caring about it.

"How much is hidden in the Slums?" Khan asked.

"I can't say," The man replied.

"Then all of this is pointless," Khan sighed. "You are just a liar hoping to pull a fast one."

"You misunderstood," The man declared before showing his tongue.

A series of azure lines had appeared on the tongue. Their light intensified and dimmed rhythmically, but the mana inside them didn't belong to the man. Khan could sense two different energies now that those shapes had come out in the open.

"Is this a restriction?" Khan asked.

"I can't confirm that," The man replied.

"You talked about a lab," Khan reminded.

"I only hinted at its existence," The man corrected.

"How would you even tell me how to find it then?" Khan questioned.

"I can tell you to walk in a specific direction for a set amount of time," The man explained. "There is nothing wrong in helping soldiers move across the Slums."

Khan had to deal with magical restrictions on Nitis. His father also had them, so he knew that loopholes existed. Yet, the main point behind that revelation was the presence of those techniques on a citizen of the Slums.

The man had conflicting features. He was a second-level warrior, and he knew a spell. However, he didn't have martial arts in his arsenal, and his weapons were also ordinary items.

Khan didn't know how to describe his opponent. The man could be a distant member of a family appointed to oversee the secret projects in the Slums. He could also be a citizen of those poor areas who had gotten lucky enough to know the right people and obtain his current job.

Both options were possible, but the restrictions stood in the way of the truth. Khan believed that the Global Army could remove them, but that would take time.

Moreover, if the theory behind the secret organization was real, the prisons and appointed structures might have had traitors and spies. The man might find a way out of the capture, leaving the Global Army without answers.

'I can't let him go, can I?' Khan thought as he reviewed the matter. 'He is dangerous, too dangerous. I won't feel safe with him around.'

Khan had already disregarded his mission. His thoughts now involved his person and those dear to him. Letting an assassin run freely throughout the Slums was simply dumb.

"Would it be easier if I told you how to counter my spell?" The man asked while Khan was immersed in his thoughts.

"Is it possible?" Khan questioned.

"Of course," The man revealed. "My spell has a heavy weakness."

"Which is?" Khan continued.

"Why would I tell you?" The man laughed. "I want you to promise me that you'll let me go first."

"It doesn't work like this," Khan insisted. "It's your time to take a risky gamble now."

The man fell silent, but he eventually heaved a deep sigh. His figure began to blend with the environment, and Khan started to lose track of him. He prepared to press on the injured hand again, but his opponent suddenly spoke. "Wait. I can't run away with you on top of me."

"Why are you activating your spell then?" Khan asked.

"I won't be able to trick your senses anymore if you manage to look past my spell even once," The man explained. "I'm literally under you, so the process should be quick. You should get used to the spell in a few minutes."

Khan decided to trust the man. The latter's figure disappeared completely, and Khan even stopped sensing him. Yet, his feet didn't touch the ground since they continued to stand on top of his opponent.

Little by little, sensations started to reach Khan's mind again. They were initially faint, but he eventually started to feel more and more.

The matter was odd since Khan never became able to feel the man in his entirety. However, he began to feel his mana and its effects on the environment.

In the end, a spherical membrane became clear in Khan's senses. It was impossible to miss now. He believed that even soldiers without his sharp perception would be able to notice it now.

"How could you work around such a significant weakness?" Khan asked.

"It's not easy to find," The man stated. "I don't usually allow someone to study me for so long."

"Is there a way for you to hide from me again?" Khan continued.

"Who knows?" The man wondered. "I don't have access to your resources. I only know about this weakness."

Khan remained silent. His common sense was telling him to capture that man. The mission was important, but he didn't care too much about it.

Still, finding clues about a secret organization in the Slums would add many merits to Khan's profile. It would also grant him access to classified information that would typically require a higher rank. The mission could be his ticket for the hidden aspects of the Global Army.

"Do we have a deal?" The man eventually asked.

Khan put a foot on the ground. His leg became faint inside the spherical membrane, but he remained able to sense it. The same happened after stepping off the man completely. He even felt his opponent moving under that spell.

"If I sense you near my squad or me again, I won't let you go," Khan threatened.. "Now give me those damned directions."

Chapter 323 - Funny

'He would have been my first,' Khan realized while walking back to the square.

Khan had killed many times, but the mysterious man would have been his first human. Still, he knew that his resolve wouldn't have wavered even if he had thought about that detail earlier.

Humans, Niqols, Stal, Guko, Ef'i, and Kred were all the same in his mind. Some were dumb, others barely expressed emotions, but Khan couldn't find differences among the value of their lives.

The issue with the mysterious man had been pretty straightforward. He had threatened to kill Cora, so Khan had been ready to remove the danger. That was Khan's true nature, and he didn't find anything wrong with it. He was done feeling hesitant about himself.

Khan sensed three familiar presences as he approached the square. Chasing after the mysterious man had led him deeper into the Slums, so Amber, Grant, and Cora were still searching for him. Yet, they didn't hesitate to show happy smiles when they saw his figure in the distance.

"Khan!" Amber and Cora shouted almost at the same time, but their smiles froze when they managed to inspect his state.

Khan's cheeks had two long cuts, with one dangerously close to his right eye. Two big patches of blood had tainted his sides, and similar spots occupied his arms and legs. The deepest injury was on his right shoulder, but he had seen worse.

Cora and Amber reached Khan in less than a second and inspected his injuries. Their worry was evident, and that feeling only intensified when they noticed the state of his shoulder.

"I'm fine," Khan tried to reassure the two women. "My right feels a bit off, but it will heal in no time."

"We should hurry back to the barrack," Amber exclaimed. "Your injuries might get infected with all this dirt on you. Hurry up and take off your clothes."

Khan followed Amber's orders, but the situation worsened when he took off his ragged pullover. The two women could inspect his state properly now. It was clear that Khan had gone through an intense battle.

"I shouldn't have left you alone," Cora whispered as her timid fingers traced the edges of Khan's injuries.

"What are you even saying?" Khan sighed while placing a hand on Cora's head. "I won, but he escaped in the end."

"Can you explain what happened?" Grant asked while approaching Khan.

"Someone with a cloaking spell was spying on us," Khan revealed. "I managed to get a few answers, but I couldn't capture him. I'm sorry."

A series of questions followed. Grant wanted to know every detail about that potential threat, and Khan described almost everything. He lied only when it came to the deal.

"I had him cornered," Khan sighed, "But I got distracted when he started answering my questions. I misjudged how much mana he had left."

"Don't blame yourself," Grant commented. "You won against a second-level warrior and even got answers out of him. We are lucky you were on the scene. Another first-level warrior would have died."

Khan nodded and let the pretense end there. He would tell the truth to Cora later because he didn't want lies between them. Amber also deserved his honesty, but the two women couldn't think about the mission while he was in that injured state.

The mysterious man had shared more than simple directions. He had also told Khan to wait one day before heading for that destination. He couldn't reveal the reason behind that, but Khan wasn't in the position to question him.

Khan obviously didn't like that lack of control. He had to trust an untrustworthy figure, but that was his best hope to find clues about a lab or a secret organization. Still, the fight had revealed a flaw in his senses, and he planned to fix it right away.

The group had no reason to remain at the party, so they hurried back to their habitation. They had a plan, but they needed to prepare for it. Also, Khan needed medical attention.

It was almost dawn, so the habitation was utterly silent. Everyone was asleep, but Grant summoned Ethan and the four students to update them about the recent developments.

Meanwhile, Cora, Khan, and Amber went into their rooms to clean themselves. Then, Cora and Amber reached Khan to patch him up, and the situation inevitably gave birth to a series of jokes.

"I didn't think you would take the "woman number two" joke so seriously," Khan exclaimed. "Well, I won't complain as long as Cora is fine with it."

"Can't you be serious at least now?" Amber sighed. "You could have died out there."

"Everything was under control," Khan stated while the two women tied the last bandages.

"I won't be a burden next time," Cora whispered.

"What are you even saying?" Khan scolded in a loving tone as he pulled Cora in his arms. "The opponent was a tricky second-level warrior. You didn't hesitate to do as I said. That saved me a lot of trouble."

"Khan," Amber called while placing a hand on Khan's shoulder, "I wish you didn't endure everything on your own."

The situation would have been incredibly awkward if the three didn't have a good relationship. Khan was on his bed, wearing only his underwear due to the injuries on his legs. Cora was between his arms while Amber was sitting at his side.

"I have really funny ideas right now," Khan admitted as he inspected the two women.

Cora didn't say anything. She limited herself to hug Khan while making sure not to touch the bandages. Meanwhile, Amber didn't react at all to the statement. She continued to stare at Khan while wearing her worried expression.

"Can't you rely on us a bit more?" Amber asked in the most earnest tone that Khan had even heard. "I thought we were friends."

Cora's hug tightened at those words. Khan felt assaulted from two different sides. Amber's worried face filled his vision, while Cora's warmth took care of his other senses.

"He didn't escape," Khan sighed. "I had him pinned down, but he suggested a deal. I know it's dangerous and a bit stupid, but I know how to counter his invisibility now. I wanted to do some research about it before telling you everything."

"What?" Amber gasped, and Cora separated from Khan's torso to look at his face.

"We would have never been able to continue the investigation without him," Khan continued. "I didn't say anything to Grant because he might decide to blame me if we come back empty-handed, but I trust you. I hope you'll keep this a secret."

Amber and Cora didn't know what to say. They didn't mind that Khan had taken that decision on his own, and they had no intention to rat him out. Still, they found themselves speechless now.

"Is that enough?" Khan chuckled while patting both Cora and Amber's heads.

Amber finally realized her situation. Khan was basically naked, and she was far too close to him. The funny ideas he had previously mentioned appeared in her mind, and they turned her worried expression into a scolding glare.

"That's my Amber," Khan laughed while lying down and pulling both women with him.

"What my Amber!" Amber complained, but she didn't push herself away out of fear of reopening Khan's injuries. "Cora, tell him something!"

Cora laughed as she snuggled on Khan's chest. The killing intent that Khan had shown before the battle had worried her, but she felt reassured to see that he was behaving normally.

"You are an idiot," Amber scoffed while giving up and resting on Khan's chest. "I'm glad that you are okay."

"Hey, I'm really strong," Khan plainly said while caressing both heads. "Also, I would have run back to you all if the situation became too dangerous."

"Let's hope to find something tomorrow then," Amber sighed.

Khan nodded and closed his eyes. He had yet to check the network for his research, and drowsiness was trying to take control of his mind. He also had his students to reassure, but all those matters could wait. It felt good to have people he could trust.

Nevertheless, Khan's self-restraint had a limit, and the presence of the two women on his bare chest made him approach a critical point quickly.

"Unless you two want to fulfill one of my fantasies, I think it's time to separate," Khan said in his playful tone.

Amber straightened her back and sat at Khan's side. She glared at him, but her gaze eventually fell on Cora's peaceful face. Amber ended up smiling, but she still complained. "You should scold him when he says stuff like this."

"He won't do anything bad," Cora exclaimed. "You are the same. I trust both of you."

"You are way too cute for this idiot," Amber sighed.

"The idiot would like some privacy with his cute girlfriend now," Khan joked as he hugged Cora and pulled her closer. "Make sure to send a detailed report. I hope the Global Army gives us something to counter cloaking spells."

"I'm sure Grant has already taken care of that matter," Amber responded while leaving the bed. "We should get an answer soon."

"I'll see you later," Cora saluted.

"Don't let him off the hook so easily," Amber suggested before leaving the room.

Khan didn't hesitate to turn when the door closed. Cora ended up under him, and she revealed a warm smile in front of his intense gaze. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and a suggestion left her mouth. "You should meditate to close your injuries properly."

"We are in our room," Khan whispered. "Time to make it up for last night."

Cora was worried about the state of Khan's injuries, but she knew that nothing could stop him now. Part of her didn't even want him to hold back. Her mind went blank as soon as their lips touched, and everything became messy afterward.

Khan did his best to remain wary of his injuries. He didn't care if they reopened, but Cora would get worried, and he wanted her mind to remain focused on far different interactions.

It was still morning when the two were done. Khan found himself with Cora resting on his chest. They were both beyond tired, but Khan was waiting for a message from the Global Army, and Cora was forcing herself to remain awake.

"I have never seen you so angry," Cora eventually revealed the reason behind her struggles.

"He threatened you," Khan didn't hide anything. "I was livid."

"What would have happened if he didn't offer you a deal?" Cora continued.

"I would have captured him," Khan exclaimed. "Well, I would have acted differently on a battlefield."

"Differently how?" Cora asked without hiding her faint hesitation.

"I would have killed him," Khan admitted.

Khan didn't fail to sense that Cora had raised her gaze to look at him. He could have worn a poker face during his answer, but he decided to show his resolve on the matter. He didn't want to hide from Cora.

"You are scary when you make that face," Cora declared.

"Do I scare you?" Khan asked while meeting Cora's gaze.

"No," Cora shook her head. "I just didn't know you could make that face."

"That's part of me," Khan said while turning to face Cora. "I can do bad things to protect myself, you, and my friends."

Khan was at the peak of his honesty during that revelation. The lingering fears that George had appeased returned, and Cora noticed them. She could see how hard it was for Khan to say all of that. She also understood that Khan was worried about her answer.

"I'll make sure not to put you in a similar situation again then," Cora declared as her hands reached Khan's cheeks. "I won't let you become scary."

Cora really was the epitome of cuteness. Her sweetness forced a loving smile out of Khan and made the two kiss again. Still, Khan thought about the issues with that statement during that gesture.

Cora was accepting Khan's dark side, but she wanted to prevent its appearance. Her intentions were pure, but Khan knew that her approach had an important flaw. Cora didn't understand that Khan wouldn't give up on that part of himself.

"I'll show likable faces if you let Amber be here with us," Khan teased as he decided to change the topic.

"See, I love this part of you," Cora giggled before diverting her gaze and wearing her timid expression. "Also, I'm already yours. Don't hold back if you want more."

Khan forgot about his worries and let his passion take over him. He felt forced to control himself only when a message reached the room.. The Global Army had finally sent studies connected to cloaking spells.

Chapter 324 - Affection

Many elements could lead to cloaking spells, and their strength changed according to the situation. The darkness and shadow elements were more powerful at night since the environment favored them, but mana with features connected to light or colors worked better during the day.

The report sent by the Global Army described a wide array of spells, and only a few of them shared the same weaknesses. A universal method capable of countering all of them didn't exist, but Khan didn't let the matter go.

The network struggled to reach those areas, but the building helped the phones connect to it. Khan could browse the various menus to find specific answers, but his search didn't lead anywhere. He ended up purchasing a new training method for his senses, but that was it.

The book would arrive directly to the camp, so Khan found himself with nothing to do. He meditated and enjoyed Cora's company for a while, but other pressing matters eventually forced him out of his room.

Khan didn't sleep, but another night had to pass before the investigation resumed, so he didn't mind leaving Cora on the bed to reach his students.

Amber, Ethan, Elsie, John, Dwight, and Ashley had gathered in the main corridor of the first floor to have their lunch. Cameron and his underlings had brought a few tables and chairs to improve the area, but the food remained quite bad, at least for soldiers used to the camp's canteen.

Of course, Khan's arrival attracted everyone's attention. He had donned a clean military uniform, but the bandages on his cheeks were enough to confirm that he had gone through a tough battle the previous night.

"Professor Khan," Elsie called in a pleading voice after the students performed a polite salute.

"I won't leave you behind tomorrow," Khan exclaimed before Elsie could voice that question. "All of us will be there, and I believe Cameron is already preparing more troops."

"That's right," Ethan revealed. "We can't miss this chance. The directions you retrieved are vague, but we plan to put out everything we have."

Khan could only nod. Another covert mission probably was the best approach, but the Global Army couldn't risk wasting those clues. Even if the investigation led to inferior results, the soldiers had to go all-out to come back with something.

The nature of the Slums was forcing the Global Army's hand. Finding clues was hard, especially since it was almost impossible to keep an ongoing investigation hidden. Khan's group had already run out of options, so a relatively massive expedition seemed necessary.

"We will have to be quick," Khan announced while approaching the empty seat next to Amber. "I can see a secret lab with self-destruct mechanisms. It would only make sense."

"Our priority is to retrieve clues," Ethan explained. "The lab and its tools aren't important. We need to uncover which families are behind its very creation."

Khan understood that point, so he nodded again. The conversation was over, but he found himself unable to focus on the food on the table.

Ethan had retrieved his haughty mood after spending a day in the habitation, but he still struggled to look at Khan in the eyes. Meanwhile, the four students couldn't keep their gazes away from Khan since they hoped to receive some last-minute lessons.

As for Amber, she wanted to look pissed, but her worry appeared whenever she inspected Khan's injuries. He felt forced to whisper a faint "I'm fine" to reassure her at some point, and the situation improved afterward.

The two couldn't go back to their usual jokes since a faint tension filled the group. The sole fact that Khan had suffered injuries proved that the imminent attack could be dangerous.

Moreover, Amber and the students had never seen someone injured in a mission. Khan's current state was a turning point in their minds. The five could finally realize that they were outside the safety of the training camp.

The day went on quickly. No one was really busy, but everyone preferred to review their state and make sure to be at their peak the following morning.

Khan didn't need preparations, but his students required some attention. He had a long conversation with them to explain the tactic to deploy during the attack. They weren't even first-level warriors, so they could approach the frontlines only if Khan, Amber, Grant, or Ethan were with them.

Khan wanted to fool around with Cora or tease Amber after handling the students, but both women forced him to meditate for the rest of the day. Most of his injuries weren't severe, but Amber and Cora remained firm on their stance.

Of course, when the night arrived, Cora's stance crumbled. She and Khan shared intimate hours in their room that swept away any trace of tension still lingering in her mind.

A few minutes before dawn, Khan and the others gathered outside their habitation to wait for the arrival of Cameron's forces. No one spoke, and the tension of the previous day returned stronger than ever. Still, they could at least rejoice about their appearance.

The investigation group was wearing appropriate military uniforms. Their weapons and stars were in the open, and their sole sight was more than enough to scare away any citizens who didn't know about the presence of that official building.

Cameron's forces didn't take long to arrive, and the event reassured even the most worried and tense in Khan's group. The platoon was thirty men strong, and two tall, two-legged robots equipped with long rifles accompanied it.

Those more knowledgeable in the difference between the various levels could see that platoon's power wasn't actually great. Khan didn't even like the idea of bringing so many soldiers who had yet to become first-level warriors.

A smaller group of stronger soldiers would have worked better for the attack, but the platoon's tasks didn't only involve the possible battle. If a lab truly existed, those troops would have to create a perimeter and evacuate the area to prevent the worst possible outcome.

The march began immediately. Khan's group and Cameron's platoon had already come up with a battle formation. Grant, Ethan, and Amber would be in the lead due to their superior level, while the others would follow closely behind. As for the two robots, they would cover the backlines and intervene if the situation required it.

Cameron's platoon had only a handful of first-level warriors, so Khan's group remained united. The march was more than a simple walk across the dirty streets. The soldiers almost jogged as they followed the mysterious man's directions. Soon, they went past the areas recorded during the last inspection, but nothing peculiar appeared on their path.

The soldiers didn't know what they were looking for. They only had directions, but sticking to them became troublesome after the march stretched for a few hours. Being unaware of the exact location of their destination made them feel lost and annoyed.

Khan was the calmer in the group. None of his companions shared his experience, but he still felt worried. The mysterious man might have lied, and Khan would be to blame for that useless march.

Khan obviously didn't believe that a failed march could create problems in his career, but he liked his untouchable state. Seizing another success would only improve his figure. Finding actual proof about a secret organization might make him enter an important environment even if his level wouldn't normally allow that.

The hours of the march went from three to six. Many soldiers from Cameron's platoon had long since begun to express their dissatisfaction, but the presence of specialists from the city forced them to keep their voices down.

Those many murmurs inevitably reached the soldiers leading the group. Ethan had also started to have his doubts about the indication, but he retained a stoic expression. Meanwhile, Grant moved his eyes between the street and the device in his hands. He frowned from time to time, but nothing alarming appeared on the sensor.

Some soldiers began to feel pretty exhausted by the eighth hour of continuous march. Their bodies were approaching their limits, and the students felt ashamed to be in that situation. Their endurance was slightly better than Cameron's underlings, but it remained quite humane.

Still, the ninth hour brought a change. The Slums' streets had always been empty since the group's uniforms scared the citizen, but nothing too odd had happened. Yet, the appearance of a trail of black smoke in the distance rekindled the soldiers' hopes.

The smoke was outside the range of Khan's senses, but its appearance made the group hurry toward its source anyway. The fast-paced march became a proper sprint that forced some weaker soldiers to remain behind with the robots since they couldn't keep up.

Khan, Amber, Grant, and Ethan separated from the main group since they were faster. A massive and distinct surge of mana eventually entered the range of Khan's senses and Grant's scanner. The two immediately confirmed that the phenomenon was far from natural, which made them hurry even more.

Citizens finally began to appear on the streets, but the four soldiers experienced no pleasure in that scene. Terrified men, women, and children ran as fast as they could to escape from the areas around the trail of smoke. Their screams filled the Slums, and their fears made them disregard the soldiers they met.

Khan instinctively wielded his peculiar second-grade knife, and the two specialists also began to move their mana to prepare for a potential battle. The smoke was still too distant to evaluate the threat properly, but they didn't dare to approach it carelessly.

Then, a few inhuman cries resounded in the area and fused with the scared screams of the citizens. Khan only had to advance a bit further to sense multiple influences affecting the mana inside the smoke.

His experience on many battlefields allowed him to reach a conclusion in an instant. Khan didn't hesitate to launch a warning that intensified the general panic. "Tainted animals!"

The four exchanged glances, but three pairs of eyes eventually fell on Amber. Someone had to warn the troops behind about the imminent danger, and she was the most suited for the task.

"Don't do anything reckless," Amber stated before turning to run toward the rest of the troops.

"We need to assess the area involved in the event!" Grant exclaimed as the three continued to sprint forward.

"We need to take care of the Tainted animals first," Khan declared as he interrupted the sprint.

The torrent of smoke appeared immense now that the trio was about to approach it. Its source seemed to be as vast as a few buildings, and the creatures inside it affected the mana that flowed into the environment.

Khan couldn't sense the creatures clearly, but their influence on the mana told him that they were charging in different directions. The soldiers had to establish a large perimeter to contain those rogue Tainted animals.

Ethan and Grant also stopped running, and their eyes widened in surprise when they looked at the scanner. They saw what Khan was sensing, and the scene terrified them.

The issue wasn't with the power of the Tainted creatures. The two specialists were second-level warriors, so those beasts couldn't pose a threat to them. Yet, the sheer number of animals released in the area was astonishing and worrying. The sensor in Grant's hands evaluated that there had to be at least twenty of them charging toward different directions.

"We must establish the perimeter now!" Grant shouted as he turned to look at the incoming soldiers. "Hurry up! Divide yourselves into four groups. We must run around the smoke!"

"Our priority is to find clues," Ethan reminded while suppressing his voice.

"What clues?" Grant exclaimed while pointing at the giant trail of smoke. "Everything is in pieces or will turn into dust in the next minutes. How are we supposed to retrieve something among that mess and Tainted animals?"

"We must try," Ethan declared. "Fuck the perimeter. Let's send everyone in."

"The density of synthetic mana in the air is already too high," Grant complained. "We risk experiencing the gravest infection since the Second Impact if we don't focus on evacuating the area and killing the rogue Tainted animals."

"Who cares?!" Ethan shouted. "Remember where we are. Let those lazy asses from the barracks handle this mess. We must remain on our target."

"I'm telling you that it's impossible!" Grant continued. "There won't be anything left by the time we manage to make our way through the smoke."

Part of Cameron's platoon arrived during that discussion. Amber, Cora, the four students, and the first-level warriors in the group could hear the topic of the argument, but the matter sounded hopeless.

The smoke was too thick, and the presence of Tainted animals made everything more dangerous. Escaping those threats was already challenging. Retrieving something from that mess didn't sound doable at all.

"I can go in," Khan eventually stated. "The smoke won't be a problem for me."

Ethan didn't want to leave that important task in Khan's hands. The latter had proven himself to be resourceful and strong, and their arrival to the smoke was also something to add to his feats. However, the Global Army had sent the specialists for that specific job. Relegating it to someone weaker than them would be improper and demeaning.

"Can you really do it?" Grant asked without worrying about eventual political repercussions.

"I can move relatively safely inside the smoke," Khan revealed, "But I don't know if I'll find clues. I can't sense them unless they have mana."

The two specialists didn't have the time to think about the suggestion since a series of figures began to leave the smoke and charge toward their group. Four Tainted animals shot forward and voiced loud cries at the sight of the soldiers.

The four creatures were nothing special. Khan saw a slightly tall wolf, a pig covered in scales, a winged mouse that didn't seem able to use those body parts, and a white monkey. Those animals were far from strong, but their azure eyes and the energy they released confirmed the presence of mana inside them.

"Prepare for battle!" Cameron shouted, and his underlings began to accumulate mana.

"Stay back," Khan ordered as he joined his palms without letting go of his knife.

Red-purple mana came out of Khan's hands and took the form of a long spear as he separated them. The Chaos spear could accumulate far more energy, but he didn't need much to take care of those four creatures.

Everyone on the scene watched in awe as Khan threw the spell toward the four Tainted animals. The spear hit the ground in front of the scaled pig before unleashing its destructive power. A short pillar appeared on the scene, and the creatures ended up caught in its might.

Not much remained of the Tainted animals after the pillar dispersed. The monkey and the mouse weren't near the center of the explosion, but the attack touched them anyway, and entire chunks of their bodies disappeared.

The mouse died due to the severe injuries in an instant, while the monkey managed to remain alive even if half of its body had lost its skin. Its flesh and a few organs were in the open, but the beast still charged forward.

"Remember to be confident in your abilities," Khan declared as he walked toward the monkey.

"Don't underestimate your opponent, but don't let it scare you either. Also, don't hesitate when it comes to delivering the finishing blow."

Those words were for the four students, and they noted down everything as they kept their eyes on Khan. He didn't appear ready to fight, but he suddenly accelerated when the monkey became too close.

The students remained in awe when they saw Khan reappearing behind the monkey. A long cut then opened on the creature's head and neck before splitting those body parts into two halves.

Khan remained silent for a second as he kept track of the mana that left the monkey's body and mixed with the environment. He had returned to the battlefield, and he felt at peace there.

Khan's calm inspired the students and gave birth to deep respect in the weak soldiers' minds. Amber, Grant, and Ethan also acknowledged Khan's strength once again after witnessing how natural he appeared among that mess.

Only Cora noticed the deeper meaning in Khan's expression. He wasn't merely used to the battlefield. He felt something toward it. That emotion almost seemed affection.

Grant and Ethan exchanged a glance. Time was running out. The longer they hesitated, the farther the other Tainted animals would go. They had to make a decision quickly, and Khan looked like the perfect man for the job.

Eventually, Grant and Ethan nodded at each other before performing the same gesture toward Khan. Other words were pointless. They would take care of containing the Tainted animals and leave the insides of the smoke to him.

Khan couldn't waste time in goodbyes or reassuring words. He winked at Cora and turned to face the smoke without waiting for answers. Everything disappeared from his mind at that point, and the symphony of the mana filled his thoughts.

'I can do it with this density,' Khan thought as he sprinted forward.

Waves of mana enveloped Khan as he approached the smoke. His figure was immersed in currents filled with power, but his gaze was on the dark gas right in front of him.

Khan performed a long leap, and his figure partially disappeared among the smoke. Yet, his companions saw how he didn't descend.. Instead, Khan kept rising as if he was climbing a staircase.

Chapter 325 - Colors

Everything was dark. Waves of black smoke surged and filled every corner of Khan's vision, but he could still see. Of course, he wasn't inspecting the scene with his eyes. He actually kept them closed as he let his mind experience the mana around him.

The smoke wasn't natural. A series of explosions might have caused such a vast and dense discharge of gas, but the mana told Khan a different truth.

The mana didn't simply hover in the area. That energy was part of the smoke and forced it to shoot upward. The pattern reminded Khan of a spell, but it had an artificial taste that he didn't overlook.

'Someone wants the smoke to keep flowing in these directions,' Khan thought as his light steps kept him above the surface.

Khan was performing small jumps on the dense currents of mana around him. He couldn't put too much strength since those footholds wouldn't be able to endure it, but that didn't change his situation. He was basically flying among the smoke.

The artificial taste in the smoke reassured Khan and confirmed that the event didn't have a mage behind it. The gas probably came from machines meant to cause those reactions. He compared it to a cloaking spell that had the purpose of buying time for those inside the area.

Still, the Global Army didn't want hypothesis, and Khan didn't throw himself into a possibly dangerous situation to have fun. He needed actual clues and answers, so he slowly descended when he felt to have reached the center of the wall of smoke.

The currents became more violent as Khan drew closer to their source. He felt pushed back, but his weight allowed him to continue the descent. However, the situation slowly worsened and forced him to change his approach.

Khan was only a newbie when it came to using the mana as a foothold. The habits developed in almost eighteen years of life also went against that new ability. Every human had to learn how to stand and walk, but things were different for Khan now.

The footholds around Khan had multiplied. They were under him, at his sides, and above him. He could step on most of the currents of smoke that were enveloping his figure, which allowed different types of sprints.

Khan could kick the smoke above him to descend. He could be upside-down but still, walk. His ability to step on mana had broken the bidimensional limits and had paved the way for tridimensional movements.

Khan experienced a tinge of fear as he let his head replace his feet before performing his light steps again. His balance felt off, and his movements lacked the previous confidence, but he took it slow and easy.

As Khan gained some confidence in that new type of movement, his descent quickened and transformed into more than a mere fall. He was jumping toward the surface and piercing the smoke that wanted to push him back up.

The smoke eventually became strong enough to push Khan out of his intended trajectory, but that wasn't an issue. Khan could easily kick the currents at his sides to adjust his position. He only had to spin and rotate on himself according to his needs.

The new type of movement wasn't much different from swimming. Khan wasn't good at that either, and his experience with water was almost nonexistent. Yet, he could find some similarities, and a smile inevitably appeared on his face when he thought about the differences.

'I might be able to do this with mere air one day,' Khan thought as he continued to dive.

Khan had loved his time on Nitis, and Snow had been one of the big reasons behind that. Flying was terrific, and Khan now had the chance to develop something similar with his own feet. Needless to say, that idea made him excited beyond reason.

The excitement didn't distract Khan from the mission. He continued to jump downward until he felt the presence of a firm wall that forced him to spin on himself. His feet violently touched the surface, and he straightened his back only to discover that he had landed at the bottom of the area.

Khan sensed less smoke in his surroundings, so he tried to open his eyes. Still, the area was too dark, and tears immediately started to form due to the pollution.

Khan had to close his eyes immediately and fight the instinct to rub them. He had to advance blindly, but the situation wasn't too bad. The area had less smoke, so less mana, but he could still inspect the various waves in his surroundings.

The floor felt metallic when Khan tapped on it. That alone confirmed the involvement of powerful forces from the Global Army, but it wasn't enough of a clue.

Smoke shot upward from different spots around Khan. Its intensity and the amount of mana in its insides prevented him from inspecting distant areas, but a few details quickly became evident.

Khan had to inspect the environment through the mana. The largest gathering of energy acted as lights that illuminated their surrounding areas, but their radiance wasn't immediate.

The lights were waves that expanded and interacted with the environment. Every surface rejected the mana and pushed it back, which allowed Khan to get an idea of the various items and general layout.

The area had a series of cubical structures that contained a lot of synthetic mana. That energy flowed in items right next to those containers, which gave birth to the dense smoke that Khan had just crossed.

Khan took a few steps toward the nearest container. He used his free hand to feel its smooth surface. It didn't feel like metal, but it was definitely firm and sturdy.

Instead, the machine next to the container was hard to define with only hands and mana. It had gears in its insides that made its surfaces tremble. Khan even felt levers and buttons, but he didn't touch them out of fear of causing a mess.

Technology was one of Khan's weakest fields, but he could understand basic things. Machines needed fuel to work, so he covered his knife with the sharp membrane and pierced the container.

The container had surfaces resistant to mana, but they couldn't oppose the Divine Reaper. The synthetic mana in its insides began to fill the area as soon as Khan withdrew the knife, and the machine stopped working after a few seconds.

'Maybe I can clear the area,' Khan thought, but an odd sound suddenly caught his attention.

The area was quite noisy. The multiple pillars of smoke filled Khan's ears with whooshing sounds that managed to cover anything released by the gears inside the machines. However, after Khan broke the container, a low growl pierced all of that.

A vast shape eventually took form in Khan's senses. He could feel something walking through the dense waves of mana and approaching his position. The smoke had prevented him from noticing that creature sooner, but it was impossible to miss now.

'A monster,' Khan concluded as he prepared for the imminent fight.

Khan bent his legs and raised his knife. His senses were powerful, but he failed to gain a clear idea of the monster's edges. The mana inside its body told him that it was as strong as a first-level warrior, but he had to wait for the waves in the environment to fall on its form to understand its shape.

The easier approach would be to launch a powerful spell at the creature. Yet, Khan wanted to preserve the environment as much as possible, so he waited for the monster to move.

The creature took timid steps forward, but it stopped when it reached the wave of mana released by the container. It didn't seem to have any interest in Khan. It only wanted to breathe the synthetic energy spreading in the area.

Khan remained still for a few seconds before deciding to turn his back on the monster. That wasn't the time to fight. The smoke alone wasn't enough to destroy clues, so there had to be something else at work there, and he had yet to find it.

Khan shed away his insecurities and began to move swiftly. It felt strange to walk and run without relying on his eyes, but the mana welcomed him with open arms.

His senses grew sharper as he relied more and more on the mana. Khan had learnt to lose himself in those symphonies, but he had never limited his perception to them. Yet, he had the chance to test that new approach now, and the results were incredible.

According to Khan's senses, the mana had the shape of a series of white currents in a black world. Its different natures gave birth to various densities and forms, and they even triggered multiple feelings when Khan perceived it.

Nevertheless, the currents of mana began to gain different colors as Khan devolved the entirety of his perception to them. Most of them turned azure, but some gained clearer shades when employed by the smoke.

Eventually, a reddish figure appeared in that azure, white, and black world. Khan sensed another monster next to the second container. The creature was slamming its limbs on the structure, but its attacks couldn't break it.

Khan bent forward and sprinted toward the opposite side of the container, but something cut short his movements. He slammed on an item that shot in the distance after the impact. The event didn't cause any pain, but it pissed him that he had failed to sense that hindrance.

Khan let a few seconds pass to wait for the waves of mana to reach the item. A few edges slowly became clear until he recognized its nature. He had slammed on a chair.

'Calm down and focus,' Khan scolded himself. 'Run through the bright areas and walk in the dark ones. I can do this.'

Khan followed his own directives. The bright areas contained a lot of mana, which made it easy for him to find eventual items or furniture. Instead, the dark ones required him to walk carefully and wait for waves of energy to reach them.

As Khan's confidence increased, his exploration became faster. He successfully reached the other side of the container with the monster and pierced it with his knife. The event attracted the creature, but the mana released by the structure allowed Khan to retreat silently.

Only a few monsters occupied that area. Khan counted four of them as he proceeded to break every container. The smoke finally stopped, but the area remained too polluted for Khan's eyes.

'What now?' Khan wondered as he tried his best to push his senses even further.

Khan didn't find anything special during his exploration. The machines might reveal something during a proper investigation, but he believed that they wouldn't lead anywhere.

It would be too stupid for a secret organization to leave clues in their hideouts. Still, the smoke was meant to buy time, so there was a chance.

The issue was that Khan couldn't inspect the area properly. His senses were incredible, but he needed to see to recognize eventual clues, especially if they didn't contain mana. He couldn't even find closed doors or similar passages in that state.

'Fuck this,' Khan thought as he pushed his mana toward his skin and made it shoot outward.

Khan opened his eyes and saw the wave of red-purple mana expanding from his figure. The cloud of smoke above the area kept everything dark, but the light released by his energy added some brightness to the environment.

The properties of his element also removed part of the pollution, but his eyes became teary anyway. Yet, the situation was almost bearable now and allowed Khan to see a few details.

Khan could finally gain a clear view of the machines and containers, but he quickly disregarded them. More lights appeared in his vision due to the synthetic mana expanding in the area, and the monsters next to them also became clear.

The release of mana moved the monsters' attention on Khan, but he ignored them for now. His priority was to find something that could connect the area to a family or an organization, and interesting items eventually appeared in his vision.

Rectangular structures stood above each container. They had a series of square broken items on their insides, and the smoke had only worsened their condition.

It seemed that someone had hit those items repeatedly with a bat. They were squashed, broken in half, or directly in pieces. Khan could see wires and gears coming out of the cracks on their surfaces, but the smoke had consumed their edges and covered them with dirt.

Their position was clearly intentional. Someone had broken the items before placing them in the line of fire of the machines, and Khan knew why.. Those structures resembled the servers seen on Ecoruta.

Chapter 326 - Limits

More tears fell from Khan's eyes. His mana couldn't get rid of all the pollution in the air, and that affected his visions in ways that he couldn't avoid.

Khan's peripheral vision grew unclear as he forced himself to inspect the environment. He couldn't remain blind in that situation. The tall, rectangular items with the broken servers didn't carry mana, so he couldn't retrieve them with his eyes closed.

A second wave of mana shot out of his figure to clean his surroundings. Khan felt slightly relieved, but his eyes continued to burn. Moreover, the monsters saw that new discharge of energy as a threat. They began to turn toward him and release low growls that hinted at their imminent charge.

The monsters had different shapes and features. Khan saw a slightly tall dog with azure fur, a monkey with gruesome claws growing from strange spots, a really huge cat, and a small rat with two sharp fangs that leaked a dense liquid.

Those creatures looked scary and angry. Their eyes and expressions revealed their innate aggression now that they had started to ignore the azure gas flowing out of the pierced containers. However, Khan barely viewed them as worthy opponents.

The structures in the Slums couldn't possibly compare to those in the big cities. Khan felt almost sure that none of those monsters had access to special abilities. Yet, that wouldn't make any difference in his mind.

Khan had survived a proper apocalypse of monsters on Nitis, and he had grown far stronger since then. Four scary-looking creatures were nothing more than sacks of meat in his mind. The only problem was with their size, especially with the oddly big cat, since it could destroy the already broken servers during the fight.

The tears made Khan's vision too cloudy, so he unleashed another wave of mana, but the monsters didn't remain still at that point. They shot forward, and the area suffered due to their reckless charge.

The containers were beyond firm, but that didn't apply to the machines next to them. The servers were even worse, and they fell as the monsters slammed on the various structures or directly jumped over them.

Khan also shot forward to shrink the battlefield. He had to release another wave of mana to reduce the pollution in his new surroundings, but part of his energy remained ready for the imminent battle.

The monkey jumped over a container and pushed the tall structure above it to charge toward Khan. The cat slammed a paw on the smoke machine to dash forward, which also made the servers fall.

Instead, the dog and the rat avoided the structures, but they shared the other monsters' destination. The four creatures were converging toward Khan, but he didn't flinch. A red-purple light had already covered his raised knife, and his feet were only waiting the right moment to unleash mana.

The rat was the first to reach Khan. The creature was incredibly fast, as fast as Khan, but its fangs were the only dangerous part of that tiny body.

Khan calculated the timing perfectly before performing a spin. The rat voiced a high-pitched squeak as it leaped and opened its mouth, but a foot slammed at its side and flung it in the distance.

Cracking noises reached Khan's ears, but he disregarded them. He didn't need to hear or see to know that the rat would die with his attack. His senses were also superfluous there. His knowledge came from sheer battle experience.

The monkey and the dog approached Khan almost at the same time. The monkey had jumped on two more containers to reach him and perform a leap aimed at his right side. Meanwhile, the dog had run in a straight line toward his chest.

Khan took a step forward and let the monkey fall behind him. His knife flashed as he side-stepped the dog and used that short rotation to send power to his left leg.

Khan had merely taken one and a half-step, but the dog lost half of its head, and the monkey found its neck crushed. His fighting style wasn't only deadly. It lacked useless movements and maximized the effects of his terrific techniques.

The cat reached Khan during the instant that he had lost to take care of the last two monsters. The creature stood on its two legs and reached a height of two meters before falling on his figure, but it only found the floor when it landed.

The cat hissed in anger and turned to look at its opponent, but a warm sensation spread from its huge belly when it stood on its legs. The creature's aggression made it ignore that feeling and shoot toward the human silhouette illuminated by the glowing light that had appeared behind it. Yet, its body lost power during the charge.

The monster's legs gave in and stopped supporting its huge figure. The cat fell on the floor, and a warm sensation welcomed it. The creature finally realized that Khan had cut its belly open and that its insides had already left its body.

The cat hissed in anger and tried to crawl in that state, but Khan had already stopped caring about it. He felt the urge to wipe his eyes, but nothing about him was clean. Smoke and blood had tainted his figure, so he would only worsen his situation if he attempted something.

Another wave of mana left his figure, but his eyes didn't benefit too much from it. Khan's vision was deteriorating quickly, but he couldn't leave yet. He simply didn't know where he was.

'Am I underground?' Khan wondered.

The descent through the smoke had made Khan lose track of his position, and the dark cloud above the area didn't help. The sharp membrane around his knife brought some light, but he saw nothing more than metal surfaces.

'I need to get back in the smoke,' Khan concluded as he tried to find something that could work as a staircase.

His search lasted only an instant since the whole area suddenly began to tremble. A proper earthquake unfolded as rumbling noises filled the environment. The event immediately opened cracks on the floor, and Khan felt sure about its artificial nature at that sight.

A curse resounded in Khan's mind, but he didn't remain still. The earthquake made all the servers above the containers fall, so he had to sprint toward the nearest to catch it before it crashed on the floor.

The item was far from light. The four pillars at its edges weren't an issue, but the servers attached to them were heavy. Moreover, the structure was as tall as Khan, which made transporting everything more challenging.

Khan stored the knife and hugged the structure with the servers. He was strong enough to carry it, but the darkness had returned now, and the earthquake made his footing unstable. Still, he waited for something to happen as he focused on reducing the destructive nature of his mana.

A wave of pale red-purple energy shot out of Khan's head and brought some light. His mana rose toward the cloud quickly, and following its trail didn't help his escape.

Khan approached the closest wall and released more mana, but he still couldn't come up with a method to leave that place. However, cracks eventually opened on the surface behind him, and dirt began to come out of them.

'What is even happening?' Khan cursed, but the answer didn't take long to arrive.

The wall grew closer as the cracks multiplied. The whole structure was collapsing on itself in a clear attempt to bury everything it contained.

Khan didn't know how much planning something like that had required. Building a structure capable of self-destructing and destroying every evidence without alerting the Global Army must have taken a long time and a detailed knowledge of the Slums. It also required access to multiple machines and workers, but Khan didn't linger on those thoughts now.

The collapse of the structure opened a path for Khan. He began to release mana like crazy as he dashed toward the center of the area and waited for one of the walls to reach him. As long as the cracks and dirt created vague footholds, he would have a chance to leave.

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Grant had shown great leadership abilities. Four hunting groups had come to life in no time under his orders. The two-legged robots had to remain in their spot since they were too slow to catch up, and the same went for a few soldiers. Yet, everyone else had sprinted toward different positions after picking a team.

Ethan had taken a few soldiers with himself before moving to the left side of the smoke. Grant had gone alone on the other side of the area since those weaker than him would only slow him down. Meanwhile, Amber, Cora, and the students had followed Cameron on the right.

Setting a perimeter with such short notice was a messy endeavor. The Slums' citizens had done the soldiers a favor by running away, but someone still occupied the dirty streets and frail houses, and a few required medical attention.

The soldiers had to ignore those in need for now since stopping the Tainted animals came first. The various teams split even further after reaching their appointed position to make sure to cover the entire area around the smoke.

Of course, the perimeter was far from perfect due to the lack of manpower, but those soldiers were enough for the number of Tainted animals spreading in the Slums.

Battles quickly unfolded. Mere Tainted animals couldn't do much against soldiers, but fear and ignorance ran strong in the Slums. Those who had yet to become first-level warriors didn't know how the infections worked, which affected their efficiency.

Luckily for them, Cameron and the other relatively strong soldiers were decent at their job. They also had specialists and knowledgeable people from the city to help them. A few battles lasted more than necessary, but the Tainted animals soon stopped being a threat.

Still, the earthquake arrived at that point. The event involved multiple quakes and made entire houses crumble. Ethan, Grant, and the team from the camp felt the need to prioritize their mission, so they all converged toward the dark cloud that still hovered at the center of the perimeter.

The ground crumbled as the earthquake continued. Rivers of dirt flowed somewhere under the dark cloud and created waves of dust that hindered the inspection. Grant and Ethan didn't know what to do, and Amber's group was equally worried, but they were out of options. They actually had to retreat since the destruction spread.

Then, Grant saw a scene that made his mouth open in surprise. He was retreating while the ground under his feet transformed into rivers of dirt when a dark figure left the cloud and jumped on one of the metal tiles flowing in his direction.

The figure was carrying something almost as big as it, but that didn't seem to affect its movements. Its steps appeared weightless as it jumped on every stable item that the ground carried in its violent flow under the cloud.

'It's not the same,' Khan thought as he performed small jumps whenever something decent appeared in his view.

The ground was too frail and threatened to trap his feet if it failed to move according to Khan's prediction. It was unreliable, so he used only the metal tiles from the broken houses, the rocks, and anything that looked stable enough for his martial art.

The careful approach forced Khan to go up and down those rivers of dirt. Still, the annoyance on his face didn't come from that. His mind was elsewhere as it tried to imprint the feelings experienced during his flight among the smoke in his memory.

Jumping on unstable footholds was incredible, especially since Khan was carrying the heavy servers. Another first-level warrior with a similar martial art might have failed at that, but that wasn't enough anymore for Khan.

Walking, jumping, and running felt limited now that Khan had experienced the freedom of the tridimensional movement. Being in a straight position was only natural, but it had become an annoying restriction now.

The ground eventually stabilized, and Khan had the chance to land.. The first good spot happened to be before Grant, who had remained with his mouth open even during his retreat.

Chapter 327 - Slipping

"Can you use this?" Khan asked while carefully placing the servers on the ground.

Grant was still too shocked by what he had seen to hear the question. Khan had literally walked through rivers of dirt and smoke while carrying a heavy object as tall as him. He had resurfaced during an earthquake that had made a whole district crumble underground, and his appearance didn't help Grant recognize him.

Khan was a black figure that revealed his true colors only on the spots cleaned by his tears. The smoke had covered his teeth with soot since he had opened his mouth from time to time. His eyes were also red and half-closed due to the pollution inside the underground structure.

Many would struggle to recognize Khan right now, and Grant's surprised state only slowed down his thoughts. The specialist kept moving his eyes between Khan and the tall item without understanding what was happening.

"Grant?" Khan called as he clapped his hands in an attempt to remove part of the dirt on them.

Grant finally recognized Khan, and his focus went on the item after replaying the initial question in his mind. The servers were broken, dirty, and far from usable, but they remained clues that the earthquake didn't cover.

"This-," Grant exclaimed before gulping and resuming his statement, "This is good, really good. The data might be impossible to recover, but the sole presence of servers in the Slums confirms the involvement of a family."

"Are they so unique?" Khan asked before spitting on the ground to remove the dirt from his mouth.

"Not all servers," Grant explained while approaching the tall item. "Yet, these are too good to be accessible by someone without a connection to the families. They are quite good."

"Hopefully, they are good enough to store information even in this state," Khan replied as his attempts to clean himself failed miserably. "Hey, is your uniform clean? I really need to wipe my eyes."

"I have a tissue," Grant responded while taking a clean tissue from his pocket.

Khan finally had the chance to remove some of the dirt bothering him. He could only continue to spit when it came to his mouth, but his eyes finally obtained some relief, and his fingers also became relatively decent at the expense of the tissue.

"There were more servers down there," Khan revealed as he turned to inspect the cloud of dust and smoke growing thinner. "The area also had containers of synthetic mana and other machines. I couldn't confirm much else, sadly."

"No, no, you have already done a lot," Grant announced. "You saved the mission."

"Did you catch the rogue Tainted animals?" Khan questioned.

"I handled my side," Grant stated. "We must regroup to know how the others fared."

"That might take a bit," Khan sighed as he did his best to inspect the cloud with his itchy eyes.

The area involved in the earthquake had been quite big, and the machines had also released a lot of smoke. An entire quarter had fallen underground, completely hiding the surface. It would take some time for everything to become clear enough to see the consequences of that destruction.

Grant took his time to inspect the tall item as the dust settled. He was too afraid to touch the exposed gears and wires, but he still did his best to remove part of the dirt from the intact surfaces.

His action didn't lead anywhere, but they kept him busy until the area became clear. Khan and Grant could finally inspect the aftermath of the earthquake, and the situation turned out to be worse than they had imagined.

Khan had understood that the lab was underground during his climb, but the earthquake had pushed it toward deeper areas. A shallow gorge filled with piles of dirt had replaced houses and streets. Khan could easily guess that it would take the Global Army an entire week to uncover everything hidden under those dunes.

Still, the disappearance of the cloud also allowed Khan and Grant to inspect the areas handled by the other teams. Familiar figures appeared in the distance, and they didn't hesitate to run toward the two soldiers when they saw them standing on their spot.

"Khan!" Amber and Cora shouted at the same time as they approached Khan. Meanwhile, the rest of the soldiers gathered around Grant and the servers. Only the two two-legged robots remained behind.

Khan inspected the two women briefly before taking Cora into his arms. They were both fine and without the slightest sign of injuries. Their uniforms had some blood, but that didn't come from them.

"How did the fight go?" Khan smiled as Cora dug her face into his chest, uncaring of his dirty state.

"We took care of every Tainted animal on our side," Amber happily replied.

"Our side is also clear," Ethan added.

"Same goes for ours," A first-level warrior from the last team exclaimed.

"What happens now?" Khan asked while turning toward Grant.

"Well," Grant sighed as he scratched the side of his head. "This whole area needs a fixed perimeter, at least until the experts confirm that there is no risk of infection. As for us, we need to deliver what you retrieved down there."

"Wait, are these what I think they are?" Ethan questioned while pointing at the broken servers.

"Indeed, Khan carried them out of that mess," Grant revealed.

"That's great!" Ethan announced. "We might get actual clues now."

"You can leave the servers to my barracks," Cameron joined the conversation. "We can take care of delivering them to the city."

"We won't leave something so important in your hands," Grant commented.

"Especially after seeing how you handle your side of the Slums," Ethan continued, and his tone carried clear annoyance.

Cameron didn't deny those accusations and nodded before voicing a question. "What about the investigation then? Will you come back after delivering the evidence to the city? Will someone remain here in the meantime?"

Grant and Ethan found themselves exchanging a hesitant gaze. The servers might be too broken to have any value as clues. Yet, the group had exhausted their leads now that they had found the labs. The area hidden by the piles of dirt could provide more answers, but digging them up wasn't part of their job.

"I guess we don't have much else to do here," Khan spoke, forcing the two specialists out of their pensive state. "Unless the Global Army wants us to stay here and wait for the excavations to begin."

"That's unlikely," Grant declared. "The Global Army will probably set a camp here to inspect everything that reaches the surface. We simply aren't qualified to help there."

"We don't have other options then," Khan stated before turning his focus on Cora.

Ethan and Grant were still unsure about that conclusion, but Khan had already understood that they couldn't do anything else in Reebfell's Slums. He lifted Cora's face and wiped out some of the dirt she had caught from his uniform before teasing her a little. "Silly girl, you are getting all dirty."

"Not here," Cora whispered as she hid her smile in Khan's chest again.

Khan caressed Cora's hair before moving to his students. Only two of the four recruits had blood on their uniforms, and Ashley appeared a bit shocked. Still, they didn't say anything and respected that intimate moment that Khan was sharing with Cora.

"I want to hear everything once we get back to the habitation," Khan declared. "Congratulations. You survived your first real fight."

"Thank you, Professor Khan," The four students shouted while performing a military salute, and Khan limited himself to nod at that gesture.

Grant and Ethan eventually accepted the undeniable. The two specialists grabbed the servers carefully and carried them across the Slums' streets as the group left the area.

Elsie couldn't hold back from talking about the battles, so Khan ended up receiving the four students' reports during the walk. He even made sure to hold Cora's hand and exchange a few jokes with Amber while going back to the habitation.

The mission had been quite important for the students and Amber. They didn't have to struggle much due to the poor level of the rogue Tainted animals and the help from Cameron's platoon. Yet, that day's events remained their first real experience on the field, and Khan could confirm that they had done decently.

As for Khan, he did his best to focus on his group, but his gaze often fell on his feet. He couldn't help but experience some discomfort now that he was forced to walk, and that sensation never went away. He became used to having it in the back of his mind as a constant reminder of what he could achieve.

Cameron's platoon and Khan's group split up after reaching the habitation. Cameron had to coordinate the reinforcements to send on the pit while Khan and the others decided to rest and contact the Global Army.

Grant acted as the middle-man between the superiors in charge of the mission and the group. The Global Army couldn't send everyone back right away, but it did request detailed reports to review the state of the investigation.

Needless to say, the group wrote the reports together to avoid differences in their stories. Khan wanted to keep his promise to Cameron, and the two specialists didn't complain at all. They didn't even try to take some merit for retrieving the servers.

The investigation team could only wait after sending the reports. It had already been late when the group returned to the habitation, and dealing with their duties had made the depths of the night arrive quickly. A fast meal and a series of baths were enough to put everyone far past their bedtime.

"You have been great out there, as always," Cora stated once she and Khan found themselves naked and exhausted under their sheets.

"My students told me that you have also done pretty well," Khan whispered as she pulled Cora on his chest and let her use that spot as a pillow. "Even Amber couldn't keep up with you."

"Don't be hard on her," Cora scolded. "She had never been to a real battle before. I would have wasted the last year if I couldn't do better than her. Besides, she has done well too."

"You are so protective toward Amber," Khan joked. "Should I have hope for one of my fantasies?"

"Stupid," Cora giggled, but her expression turned serious when she recalled something. "Did you hurt your feet down there? Why did you keep glancing at them?"

"How did you notice that?" Khan laughed. "I thought I was good at pretending."

"You are good," Cora admitted, "But I can see you anyway. I've learnt to look at you properly."

"Someone is obsessed with me," Khan mocked.

"You know I'm yours," Cora whispered before leaving a kiss on Khan's chest.

"You won't let me dodge the question, will you?" Khan sighed.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to," Cora replied, but it was clear from her tone that she wanted to know more about the matter.

"Let's see," Khan exclaimed. "I think I've had a taste of what I'll be able to do with my martial art in the future. It simply felt off to get back to my previous level."

"Do you mean when you jumped on the smoke?" Cora asked.

"I wasn't jumping on the smoke," Khan explained while waving his free hand in the air. "I was using the dense currents of mana as footholds."

"Is that part of your martial art?" Cora wondered.

"Not really," Khan responded. "Well, my martial art doesn't explicitly forbid it, but I think I'm growing in that direction due to my qualities."

"Growing toward the advanced proficiency level already," Cora muttered.

"I'm still far from that," Khan declared, "But I think to have found the path toward that goal."

"Currents of mana," Cora repeated. "You have learnt to sense them on Nitis, right?"

"Every soldier can develop sharp senses toward mana," Khan chuckled. "But, yes, Nitis made me grow a lot in those fields."

"And you are still focusing on those fields," Cora sighed. "Nitis must have been unforgettable."

Khan turned toward Cora. He saw the timid hesitation in her expression, but she avoided his gaze. Her eyes remained on the bandage around his shoulder as deep thoughts ran through her mind.

"You know it was," Khan announced. "I've never hidden that from you. You have even noticed that on your own."

"I'm not accusing you," Cora explained as she tightened her grip on Khan's chest. "I accept that you don't talk about your tattoo or your time on Nitis. I even admire you for pursuing alien paths together with human training methods. I'm just... scared."

"Why would you be scared?" Khan asked as he made sure to hug Cora tightly.

"I feel that you are slipping away," Cora whispered.

The entirety of the relationship with Cora crossed Khan's vision. He reviewed everything while wearing a frown, but he couldn't find changes in his behavior. Khan felt pretty sure that he had done his best with Cora.

"Is this because of the times when I leave at night to train?" Khan eventually questioned.

"No," Cora muttered while hiding her face on Khan's chest. "Leave it. You didn't do anything wrong. I just felt something strange when I saw you on the field today. It was as if you were going somewhere really far away."

Khan didn't know what to say, so he remained silent. Cora's intuition wasn't off, but Khan didn't feel the need to address it. Words were useless since she had already understood the core of the issue.

The two slowly fell asleep, but the morning arrived quickly, and it brought happy news. The Global Army had declared the investigation on Reebfell's Slums over.. The group would have to leave the area that same day.

Chapter 328 - Surprise

The departure from the Slums was quick. The specialists didn't bring much, and most valuable equipment had remained on the C-15 anyway, so the group only had to empty their rooms.

Khan, Ethan, and Grant didn't waste time in pleasantries with Cameron. They had nothing to say to the soldier and scolding him for how he handled the Slums was pointless. Leaving was the only option, especially now that the Global Army had given the order.

The flight was as comfortable as ever, and it left little space for privacy. Yet, Khan managed to find the two specialists alone and have a conversation that the others probably weren't ready to hear.

"Do you think they'll tell us anything about the other investigations?" Khan asked while looking at the two specialists on the other side of the interactive table.

"That's hard to say," Grant sighed.

"It's very unlikely," Ethan added. "We are talking about rogue families, secret organizations, and who knows what else. The higher-ups will probably keep every news limited to inner circles and trusted soldiers."

"Aren't you two specialists?" Khan asked. "You should be in the inner circle."

"We remain lieutenants," Grant exclaimed. "This is a problem way above our paygrade."

"Still, labs with synthetic mana in the damned Slums," Ethan shook his head. "This is Earth, our planet! How did we miss something like that?"

"You didn't miss it," Khan reassured. "I've lived in the Slums for eleven years without meeting anything similar. It's not a matter of paygrade. I'm afraid the powers behind these structures are simply too strong."

"Khan, it's exactly because you come from the Slums that you don't understand our frustration," Ethan scoffed.

"Frustration?" Khan asked.

"I don't want to sound spoiled," Grant announced, "But we have lived our whole lives believing to be on top of the world. We come from good families, and we have even worked hard to reach our current position. Yet, everything is different now."

"Politics have never been easy," Khan argued.

"But they have always been quite straightforward," Ethan complained. "Ploys and betrayals have always happened, but the goal was clear. Everyone wants to get rich, and I don't blame them. Still, I can't see the point of these hidden labs."

"Taxes?" Khan guessed.

"You can't be so dense," Ethan cursed.

"Ethan, behave. We are all tense," Grant scolded before turning toward Khan. "Yes, building labs in the Slums avoids many expenses, but the risks aren't worth it. There has to be something else, something that justifies going against the Global Army."

Khan knew that Grant's words made sense, but he couldn't come up with an answer. The two specialists were in the same situation, which was the reason behind their irritation.

"I guess we'll remain in the dark for a while then," Khan sighed.

"I'm not sure I even want to find answers," Ethan admitted while lowering his gaze. "This trip to the Slums has been more than enough."

Khan and Grant exchanged a glance and suppressed the smiles trying to appear on their faces. The seriousness of the topic made it easy for them to retain stern expressions, and Grant eventually rekindled the conversation. "Khan, what do you think they are hiding?"

"How would I know?" Khan honestly replied. "In theory, building labs and similar places in the Slums is far harder. I don't see the point unless there is something shady going on."

"That's what I was talking about," Grant continued. "You have been to many alien planets. Did you ever see dangerous alien technologies or similar things?"

Khan immediately thought about the anti-mana project, but that didn't fit the current situation. He didn't know if Captain Clayman had told the truth, but the secret structures in the Slums were way too old.

Moreover, the area uncovered by Khan didn't have anything similar to what he had seen on Ecoruta. The structure might have been a real secret lab meant to create Tainted animals at a low price, but that only gave birth to more questions.

What was the point of creating a lab if it wasn't the main purpose of the secret organization? Something like that would only attract unwanted attention unless the force behind it really needed money to pursue its real goal.

As for other technologies, Khan thought about the Niqols' arts. He knew that the humans wouldn't accept them so easily, but building secret locations to practice them felt too much. Risking to turn the entire Global Army into an enemy was just too dangerous.

"I am as lost as you," Khan eventually declared. "I can't see how forces as wealthy as the families would choose the Slums over their personal structures."

"I mean, I can come up with crazy theories," Ethan rejoined the conversation. "The Global Army must have forbidden some practices over the years. Maybe the families behind these structures want to keep them going through the money made by the secret labs."

"I'm also worried about what Madame revealed," Grant continued. "The Global Army has left many territories to die after the First Impact. I've never given them much thought, but who knows what humankind has built there during the last five hundred years."

"Careful, Grant," Ethan intervened. "It almost sounded as if you were throwing the noble families in this mess."

"Who would have the resources and knowledge to build something under the Global Army's nose?" Grant asked.

"I know that it makes sense," Ethan responded. "I'm just saying to be careful about what you say. Your career would end in an instant if our bosses were to hear you now."

"You are right," Grant sighed.

The trio went silent. There was far more to talk about, but everything was deep into theory territory. The lack of proper clues remained an issue that Khan and the specialists couldn't ignore by brainstorming for a few minutes.

The conversation was also dangerous since it probably involved influential forces. The noble families were too far away from mere lieutenants. Khan had been lucky with Rick Rassec, but that situation had deep problems too.

In the end, Khan and the specialists dropped the topic and reunited with the others. The two groups separated when the C-15 landed on the training camp, and everyone went on their way.

Khan had every intention of catching up with his training since it was still early, but a message reached his phone right after his group began to march through the camp's streets. Headmaster Pitcus had requested a meeting, so he had to leave Cora, Amber, and his students to reach one of the central structures.

"Did you request for me, sir?" Khan asked after crossing the office's entrance and finding the Headmaster's big figure sitting behind the interactive desk.

"Indeed," Headmaster Pitcus exclaimed while raising his gaze from the menus on the desk. "Please, heave a seat."

"Is there a problem?" Khan questioned while sitting on one of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Not at all," Headmaster Pitcus announced. "Actually, I read that your mission in the Slums went wonderfully. You have stood out once again."

"I was merely following orders, sir," Khan politely declined that compliment.

"You were the right soldier for the mission in the end," Headmaster Pitcus continued. "The Global Army has already sent a suitable payment to your account. You won't be disappointed when you withdraw it."

Khan sensed that something was off. The Headmaster was usually quite earnest and warm, but Khan now felt a hidden meaning behind his words. Also, getting paid a lot for a mission that had lasted only a few days sounded wrong.

"Do you have something in your mind?" Headmaster Pitcus asked when he noticed Khan's silence.

"I'm just confused, sir," Khan stated. "I didn't think such a short mission could be so profitable."

"Of course, the payment isn't for the mission alone," Headmaster Pitcus explained. "The Global Army wants you to remain silent about your findings. Your companions are receiving similar instructions right now."

"Will they also get summoned?" Khan asked.

"No, this meeting was only for you," Headmaster Pitcus revealed. "My superiors asked me to tell you the news personally."

"Why is that, sir?" Khan questioned.

"I suppose to show respect," Headmaster Pitcus answered. "I think the higher-ups want you to know that you aren't a simple lieutenant in their eyes."

"So, will I get updates on the investigation?" Khan continued.

"Unlikely," Headmaster Pitcus chuckled. "Think of this meeting as a sign that the Global Army has acknowledged your value. You will have a great future as long as you continue to perform well."

'And keep my mouth shut,' Khan continued in his mind while showing a fake smile. "Thank you, sir."

"Also, your lessons are doing well," Headmaster Pitcus declared. "I've read about the performance on the field of your students. I think the Global Army is ready to make your subject a core part of the training camps. Try to come up with a detailed program before the end of the academic year."

"A program?" Khan asked. "Something similar to my monthly reports?"

"Yes, but don't speak only about the results," Headmaster Pitcus ordered. "Other professors will probably use your training program, so add your reasons behind every exercise. You can even try to streamline it and come up with replacements for your more challenging lessons."

"I see," Khan nodded. "I'll do my best, sir."

"There is no hurry," Headmaster Pitcus exclaimed. "You still have more than a month to go. Learn what you can during the next lessons and write something that other professors can follow. Don't worry. I'll review it before sending it to my superiors."

Khan nodded again, and the meeting ended. He could reunite with Cora and resume his training schedule after spending some time with her.

Life went back to normal after the investigation ended, and time began to flow quickly.

Khan turned eighteen and experienced a lovely birthday with Amber and Cora in the city. The three had fun for a whole day, and the couple made sure to make that night matter.

The weeks that followed didn't feature anything odd or unusual. Khan was more than busy with his training schedule, Cora, and lessons. He barely had free time, but he didn't mind that situation.

Every aspect of his life was fulfilling. His students improved quickly, his training progressed well, and his relationship was in a perfect spot. Nothing was off on the outside, but Khan could feel the limits of that life slowly closing on him.

The new training programs helped keep Khan's mind busy, but various thoughts and urges inevitably appeared. He was getting stronger, but he couldn't test his power. He was even taking it easy inside the training hall since he was almost ready to use the "simulated mental battle".

Studying was another great distraction, but that also became boring as Khan found no chance to use his knowledge. Even the pilot training soon failed to fill him with the interest that it used to generate.

Nevertheless, Khan didn't show any odd behavior. He had already stopped holding back, so his growing restlessness went unnoticed. Only Cora felt that something was brewing inside him, but he never let those emotions affect his relationship.

Khan benefitted from that peaceful time in multiple ways, but his desire for action continued to grow. Still, his attunement with mana rose steadily and at an incredible pace due to the [Blood Vortex], so he postponed plans.

Becoming a second-level warrior would open far more doors, so Khan avoided thinking about an eventual departure or a different job. He knew that the breakthrough would eventually happen, but putting those thoughts in the back of his mind allowed him to enjoy what he had to the fullest.

Then, a strange and surprising event happened during the week before the end of his second year. The lessons were over since the students had various tests to handle, so Khan spent most of his time training and with Cora. He was with her in his flat when a message from Luke reached his phone.

"Luke is coming to visit the camp tomorrow," Khan announced while looking at his screen. "He is bringing Bruce."

"I don't think I met Bruce," Cora replied while adjusting her position on Khan's lap. "It's nice of them to visit you."

"I don't know," Khan said while checking the news depicted on the flat's wall. "Luke might be up to something. He is one of the really rich guys."

"You have also saved him on Istrone," Cora added. "He might just want to catch up."

"Maybe," Khan whispered before closing the menus on the wall and putting his phone away.

"Did Grant say anything about the investigation?" Cora asked since she knew what Khan had searched for on the news' menus.

"He is in the dark," Khan replied while lifting Cora's head to lie behind her on the couch. "No one seems to remember that Dewwick's mess happened less than two months ago. It seems that the Global Army really wants to keep that matter a secret."

Cora turned to face Khan, and he instinctively hugged her to pull her close. She had long since become used to that gesture, and her hands even went under his uniform during the process.

"Does it say when they will arrive?" Cora asked before leaving a kiss on Khan's chest.

"During the morning," Khan responded while moving Cora's hair to kiss her neck. "You can remain asleep if you want."

"I'll be sleepy, but I want to come," Cora declared. "We can even take it easy tonight."

Khan raised his head to meet Cora's gaze, and she let out a cute giggle when she noticed the desire in his eyes. The two quickly kissed, and Cora's laugh continued when they fell out of the couch.

The morning arrived quickly. Cora and Khan walked hand in hand toward one of the landing areas in the peripheral parts of the training camp. Luke had conveyed where and when he would arrive, so the couple could reach their destination in time to see a relatively small, triangular spaceship descend from the sky.

The spaceship turned to show its back toward Cora and Khan before landing on a large metal platform. A few soldiers stood at its sides and kept their eyes on consoles to make sure that everything went well, but the event didn't involve any problem.

A whooshing noise came out of the spaceship as part of its back opened and transformed into a staircase. A few figures immediately became visible, and Cora frowned when she sensed a tremor running through Khan's hand.

Luke and Bruce were the first to appear in Khan's vision. They had both grown since their last meeting, but a short figure behind the two men quickly claimed the entirety of Khan's attention.

The sight of long dark hair, big dark eyes, and familiar features brought Khan back to Istrone. His memories then showed him scenes from his first time on Onia and his months in Ylaco's training camp.

Cora wanted to tighten her grasp on Khan's hand to question him silently, but her fingers found nothing to touch. Luke and Bruce only sensed wind blowing on their faces before they noticed that someone had appeared behind them.

The few soldiers in the back of the spaceship prepared themselves for battle in front of that intrusion, but Luke promptly raised a hand to stop them. His focus then went on the figure that had appeared behind him. He wouldn't let his underlings interrupt that reunion.

"You have grown," Martha whispered while wearing a slight smile. Her eyes inspected every detail of Khan's face. She noticed his surprise, and part of her felt happy to see how shocked he was about her reappearance.

Similar shock ended up filling her mind since Khan took her between his arms without saying anything. Martha's first instinct was to push him away, but her strength disappeared when she heard his line. "I missed you."

Martha could only accept the hug at that point. She wrapped her arms around his back and ignored that everyone was looking at them to say a few words. "I'm sorry I took so long.. I'm awake now."

Chapter 329 - Awkward

Khan had seen incredible things during his travels on alien planets. He had experienced unparalleled bliss and deep pain, and seeing Martha awake immediately went in the first category.

Martha and Khan separated after a few seconds, and both of them smiled as they continued to inspect each other. Still, Martha's level eventually forced Khan to voice an incomplete question. "How did you-?"

Martha had changed in that one and a half years. Her face had lost every trace of immaturity, and she had also grown thinner, but Khan's question was directed at the amount of mana inside her body.

Khan didn't need to see the single star on Martha's right shoulder to understand that she had become a first-level warrior. However, she had supposedly remained in a coma until recently, so he couldn't explain how she had managed to reach that level.

"Luke helped me," Martha explained. "I'll tell you the details later if you have time. I know you have been busy while I was asleep."

"A lot happened," Khan sighed while reaching for Martha's right cheek. That part of her body was full of burns the last time he had seen her, but she was completely fine now.

"Hey, I'm fine now," Martha reassured while grabbing Khan's wrist to lower his arm.

That short interaction revealed a lot. Martha's hand twitched when she lowered Khan's arm, and she also stopped looking at him in the eyes during the gesture.

Instead, Martha noticed that Khan's expression carried an unfamiliar maturity. It was different from the Man-Khan that she used to find among his lies and jokes. She could almost see how much he had gone through in the last period.

The insides of the spaceship were utterly silent during the reunion. Everyone could understand the solemnity of the situation by the meaningful glances that Martha and Khan exchanged between themselves, but they couldn't remain there forever.

One of the soldiers behind Martha took a step back and forced Khan to snap out of that meeting. He wasn't alone, and he knew that his gestures could be misunderstood.

"Luke, Bruce," Khan called while turning to show a smiling face to the two friends, "It's nice to see that you are well. You have also improved since our last meeting."

Bruce and Luke's uniforms had one star on each shoulder. The two had also matured. Decent muscles had grown under their skin, and their faces also carried manlier features.

"Our deeds are nothing compared to your achievements," Bruce exclaimed.

"You have surpassed everyone's expectations," Luke added. "I knew you had a bright future in front of you."

"Thank you, Luke," Khan replied while glancing at Martha, "For everything."

"Nonsense," Luke laughed. "I didn't do anything. Now, let's get out of this ship. I need to have a talk with the Headmaster to finalize the terms of our stay in the camp."

"Are you moving here?" Khan asked as the four descended from the staircase and reached the platform.

"Not to study," Luke revealed. "I have some business to handle here in Reebfell. Though I would have loved to attend your lessons."

"Who would have thought that you would have gone from ignorant recruit to professor in less than two years," Bruce commented.

"Life can take strange turns," Khan vaguely replied as Cora entered his view.

Cora was wearing a warm smile. She appeared completely happy for that reunion, but Khan had learnt to recognize her mental state from her seemingly unrelated gestures. She was holding the edges of her uniform, and her posture revealed some slight tension.

"You are Cora from Istrone!" Luke exclaimed as the four soldiers jumped off the platform. "The descendants of the Ommo family are famous for their beauty, but you definitely raise the bar."

Luke's statement acted as a wake-up call for Khan. He wanted nothing more than talk with the woman eyeing him from behind his back, but he had to make something clear first.

Khan accelerated a bit to walk around Bruce and reach Cora. He turned, wrapping an arm around her shoulder to pull her close before announcing the nature of their relationship. "We are together. She is my girlfriend."

Cora lowered her gaze as her smile broadened. Khan had dispersed her insecurities and fears in an instant, and she couldn't help but feel grateful for that considerate announcement.

Meanwhile, Khan inspected the reactions of his friends. Luke and Bruce appeared temporarily startled, while Martha's smile saddened only for an instant before expressing honest joy.

Khan felt the need to talk privately with Martha, but that wasn't the right time. Faint awkwardness had also fallen on the group, and Luke and Bruce didn't hold back from exchanging a meaningful glance. Yet, they quickly went back to acting normal.

"That's good news!" Luke exclaimed. "I'm not surprised you managed to find someone. You have never lacked the looks in the end."

"Why don't we handle the business part of our trip for now?" Bruce changed the topic. "Let's catch up at dinner, maybe in the city. Khan, are you busy tonight? Of course, you can bring your girlfriend and other friends."

"Tonight sounds fine," Khan nodded. "The lessons are over anyway. Why don't I accompany you to the Headmaster's office now? Being your guide is the least I can do."

"I wouldn't dare to reject your offer," Luke laughed, and Khan pointed at a street as he began to lead the way.

The other soldiers inside the spaceship began to unload various baggage. Khan noticed how Luke and Bruce didn't travel light, but he quickly moved his attention elsewhere.

Luke and Bruce walked next to Khan and Cora, while Martha remained slightly behind the former. Still, Khan didn't let her stay outside of the conversation as he began to voice his questions.

"So, when did you wake up?" Khan asked as he let go of Cora and slowed down to reach Martha's side.

"Not long ago," Martha revealed. "A bit more than a month. My family kept me busy for a while, but my career inside the Global Army had to continue, so here I am."

"How was the awakening?" Khan questioned.

"Quite harsh," Martha admitted as she brushed away her hair to look at Khan. "Accepting that one and a half years had gone by wasn't easy, and my body still feels a bit strange."

"I wanted to ask you about that," Khan didn't hide his curiosity.

"Luke knows more about it," Martha explained. "He put me into a medical program involving the use of synthetic mana for healing purposes. I basically woke up when I turned into a first-level warrior."

"Synthetic mana?" Khan repeated while glancing at the tall man in front of him.

"I know," Luke raised his palms as if to admit guilt. "Martha has already complained to no end. Sure, synthetic mana is expensive, but what's the point of money if I can't use it to help my friends?"

"I'll definitely repay you," Martha promptly added.

"You have said that countless times," Luke joked. "I trust you, alright? Besides, your trip here is already removing Credits from your debt."

"Don't go easy on me," Martha ordered.

"You are as earnest as ever," Khan commented without hiding how pleased he felt about that realization.

Martha shot an annoyed glare at Khan, but her expression relaxed when she noticed his honest smile. She felt forced to divert her gaze, and a comment inevitably left her mouth. "You have made quite the name for yourself in this period instead."

"Did you read about me?" Khan teased.

"It's impossible not to hear gossips about you," Martha scoffed. "Winning the tournament on Onia would have been enough to make you famous, but you had to go far beyond that."

"You know me," Khan laughed. "I like to go all-out with stuff."

"I thought you had matured a bit," Martha pouted in front of Khan's carefree expression. "I guess I was wrong."

"Aren't you happy that I still know how to joke around?" Khan asked.

Martha fell silent as her eyes went back on Khan. She turned serious as the two looked at each other and forgot about those around them. It became clear that something meaningful was happening when Martha whispered a weak "a bit" to answer Khan's question.

Khan didn't know how to react. He recalled the message that Martha had sent to him on Onia after their visit to the medical bay. He could see the same honesty from back then on Martha's face, and he suddenly remembered why the attraction between them had existed in the first place.

Martha and Khan diverted their gazes almost at the same time since the situation was becoming too awkward. It was clear that they needed to talk, but the road was still long.

Luckily for them, Luke was exceptional in chitchats, and his understanding of social situations was also incredible. He didn't hesitate to take control of the conversation and prevent Khan and Martha from rekindling that awkwardness.

Luke explained how life in Ylaco's training camp had been after Istrone. Nothing significant had happened there, but he managed to stretch the story for many minutes, occupying a big chunk of the walk.

The rest of the walk mainly featured questions directed at Khan. Luke was smart enough to focus the conversation on the new subjects and Khan's teaching methods, so everything went smoothly.

The five eventually arrived in front of the building containing Headmaster Pitcus' office. The time for a short separation had come, but the awkwardness returned when Khan discovered that only Luke and Bruce had to attend the scheduled meeting.

"I don't mind coming with you," Martha said to Luke in a quick attempt to solve the silent issue. "I don't shine during meetings, but it shouldn't be a problem as long as I remain silent."

"I'm not against that," Luke replied, even if his expression said something very different.

Khan had never been the type to let problems stick for too long. He preferred to face them directly, especially when they involved someone important to him.

"Martha, why do you hang out with me?" Khan suggested before correcting himself. "No, please, join me for a walk. I want to talk with you for a bit."

"I don't want to impose," Martha responded while glancing at Cora.

"Cora," Khan called as he took the woman's hand and pulled her a bit closer, "I need to talk with Martha in private. Do you mind if I leave you alone for a bit?"

"Not at all," Cora exclaimed in the most loving tone in the world. "I also need to study. Will you keep me updated about tonight's dinner?"

"Of course," Khan replied.

"We should also invite Amber," Cora suggested. "She wouldn't miss the chance to know your friends from Ylaco."

"And I don't want to hear her complaints," Khan joked.

"I'll go to my dormitory then," Cora said to specify that Khan had the flat for himself.

Cora began to retract her hand, but Khan gently pulled her closer to leave a quick kiss on her lips. She whispered a sweet "see you later" when they separated before turning and going on her way.

"We'll also go now," Luke announced after a few seconds. "I'll leave Martha into your hands. I'll let you know when we are done unpacking everything."

"Sure, good luck with the meeting," Khan exclaimed.

"See you soon," Bruce added, and the two men left to enter the building.

Khan and Martha remained in their spot as they watched their companions' figures disappear. Still, both of them felt the need to say something once Cora vanished behind a building in the distance.

"Do you prefer my flat or a training hall?" Khan eventually asked.

"Do you have a whole flat?" Martha asked in a surprised tone.

"I have food and booze there," Khan added while continuing to stare at the building in front of him.

"I read on some reports that you started drinking," Martha revealed. "Lieutenant Dyester would be proud."

"He would probably kick my ass," Khan laughed. "How is he?"

"I think he started smoking less," Martha stated. "I only had the chance to talk with him once after waking up, and the prisons didn't smell as bad as I recalled. Also, he likes to check your profile from time to time, but he would never admit that."

"You sure gave me a caring master," Khan joked before wearing a serious expression. "He helped quite a bit after Istrone."

"I'm glad," Martha sighed. "Waking up was quite a shock, but you had to live through far worse during the last period. I got lucky."

"I'm just glad that you are fine," Khan stated while showing his honest face to Martha.

"A training hall will do just fine," Martha exclaimed when the sight of Khan's face became too much to bear. "I'm sure your flat is dirty and smelly anyway."

"I wonder if you have a different reason in mind," Khan teased, but Martha snorted and turned to walk on a random street.

Khan laughed and followed Martha. That was the wrong direction, but he would make sure to change it when they reached the first turn. Right now, he was simply happy to see that he could speak with her normally.

Chapter 330 - Walls

"You even know how to use Credits now," Martha commented when she saw Khan unlocking the training hall with his phone."

"You taught me well," Khan joked as the metal door slid open and he stepped inside the hall. "I don't even use these areas too often. I mostly spend money on books, food, and booze."

"I thought you would have locked yourself inside a training hall as soon as you got your hands on Credits," Martha replied while following Khan inside the hall.

"I tried," Khan laughed, "But I decided to slow down a little when I broke one of them."

"How did you even break a training hall?" Martha asked.

"My hand slipped, and one of my spells ended up on the workshop inside the wall," Khan partially lied.

"You are unbelievable," Martha couldn't help but laugh.

"I didn't do it on purpose," Khan swore. "I just reacted to the synthetic mana. Luckily, I'm famous enough not to face the consequences."

"Khan, hero of Istrone and basically every planet he goes," Martha mocked.

"The Global Army sure likes to put a face in front of its victories," Khan added. "Still, most of them are victories only for those who didn't get involved in the mess."

"Heroes usually are a miserable bunch," Martha responded. "We have known that since our first meeting with Lieutenant Dyester."

"Everyone would be a hero otherwise," Khan sighed as he connected his phone to the wall and increased the illumination in the area.

Martha noticed the change in Khan's tone. The faint sadness seeping out of his voice announced the arrival of Man-Khan, which confirmed her initial sensation. That part of him was different from how she recalled it.

"So," Martha exclaimed as she crossed her arms behind her back and took long steps into the hall, "Istrone, Nitis, Ecoruta, and Onia. You have been busy."

"You sure took your time reading my profile," Khan joked while turning toward Martha.

"I was worried," Martha admitted while continuing to walk through the training hall. "I only recalled the crash before everything went dark. I didn't know what had happened nor who had survived. I obviously checked."

"You did well back then," Khan stated. "Lesser soldiers would have died with your injuries."

"The nurses kept saying that," Martha replied. "Still, I woke up in a different world and body. Most of the recruits I knew were dead, and you were away doing dangerous things or getting girlfriends."

"Martha," Khan called, but Martha raised a hand to interrupt him.

"Don't get me wrong," Martha said. "I would have never wanted you to wait for me, especially since we had yet to become something. It's just, in my mind, everything happened only a month ago. I'm still getting used to how much changed."

"I wanted to wait for you," Khan declared.

"I told you that it's fine," Martha slightly raised her voice as she stopped walking to turn toward Khan.

"Let me finish," Khan scolded.

Martha saw the seriousness in his expression and showed her palm to let him continue. Yet, she turned to resume walking around the hall since she didn't want to show her face while hearing about that topic.

"I know you would have wanted me to move on," Khan sighed as a sad smile appeared on his face. "I imagined the conversation while standing next to your bed in Istrone's medical bay."

Martha stopped walking and crossed her arms. She lowered her head as she stared at the floor to let various thoughts take control of her mind.

"Still, I really wanted to wait a bit to see how long you took to wake up," Khan continued. "Your injury hit me hard, and everything that happened on Istrone only made things worse."

"But you moved on anyway," Martha exclaimed. "That alien girl must have been something."

"Yes, she was," Khan admitted. "I don't think others would have managed to make me decide to let you go."

"Not even Cora?" Martha asked. "She looks nice."

"Cora makes me feel lucky every day," Khan revealed, "But Nitis was different. [Liiza] was different."

Martha tried to mutter that name, but her accent was far off. She felt curious about Liiza since she had clearly had a huge impact on Khan, but another emotion also appeared in her mind. Part of her liked that Khan didn't replace her for a random woman.

"How are you holding up?" Martha eventually asked. "You have gone through a lot."

"I've started to drink," Khan chuckled before becoming serious again. "Well, I guess I'm doing fine, but I'm considering changing job recently."

"Why?" Martha asked while lifting her head and turning toward Khan. "You probably are the youngest lieutenant in history, and you are doing a great job as a professor, according to Luke's sources. Why would you leave?"

"Did you ask Luke to check on me?" Khan teased.

"I don't need to ask," Martha scoffed before turning again. "He talks about you non-stop."

Khan enjoyed seeing how easily he could piss Martha off. Her reactions were also genuine, and he seemed unable to get enough of them. He had really missed Martha.

"Life in the camp is getting boring," Khan revealed. "I like everything I do here, but I miss the action."

"Did you get dumb on the battlefield?" Martha mocked.

"I guess I did," Khan sighed. "Still, we can't change what we are."

"He even says wise stuff now," Martha whispered before a tinge of hesitation filled her tone. "Does Cora know?"

"I have yet to say anything about this," Khan explained. "I have yet to search for other positions even, but I think Cora understood something."

"She must know you well," Martha commented.

"I think that's the issue," Khan stated. "Anyway, enough talking about me. What's the problem with your body?"

"It's not really a problem," Martha sighed as she resumed walking across the hall. "I became a first-level warrior while I was sleeping. I have no idea how strong my body is. Everything feels off, and I even need to spend time absorbing all the synthetic mana properly."

Khan understood what Martha meant. He still recalled his breakthrough and the uneasiness he had felt afterward. The event in Martha's situation was far more drastic since she didn't have the chance to experience the gradual progression that regular training usually gave.

"You only need to get used to it then, right?" Khan asked while leaving the wall and taking a few steps toward Martha. "I can help with that. I can be your sparring partner until you feel like yourself again."

"Khan, it's more than that," Martha replied while stopping walking again. "I have to start over with my martial art since my habits are all messed up. I'm way behind my peers, and now I also have the debt with Luke on top of everything else."

"I'm sure the Global Army can refund part of it," Khan stated as he continued to approach Martha.

"You don't understand," Martha exclaimed. "The medical procedure was crazy expensive. My family would have never made it to the selection, let alone afford it. The Global Army's help doesn't change that."

"Then you'll work and pay it off," Khan declared. "As for the martial art, being your sparring partner can only help."

"Do you even have time to help others?" Martha wondered. "You must be pretty busy between your job, training, and girlfriend."

"I don't have a single second for myself," Khan honestly revealed, "But we are talking about you. I'll make time to help."

"You don't owe me anything," Martha pointed out.

"That's a lie," Khan laughed, "And I don't care. You have also arrived on the perfect period since my students are busy with tests."

"Does-," Martha voiced before taking a short break to sort her thoughts. "Does Cora know about me? Won't she get angry if you start spending a lot of time with me?"

"She has probably understood that," Khan announced, "But she isn't like that. I'm not saying that she won't feel jealous, but she won't try to stop me."

"I don't want to become a burden or cause problems," Martha whispered.

Khan had reached Martha by then. She still showed him her back while keeping her arms crossed. Accepting help was clearly hard for her, and the debt with Luke probably played a big part in that issue. Yet, Khan was more stubborn than her.

"Martha," Khan called while placing a hand on her shoulder, "Shut up and accept my help. I won't take no for an answer."

A tremor ran through Martha. Khan's warmth, resolute words, and general concern for her situation created a crack in the walls she had erected to deal with her trauma.

Martha wasn't as fine as she claimed to be. She had lost one and a half years of her life. Everything around her had moved forward while she had remained behind.

Moreover, Martha had awakened in an unfamiliar body, recalling only the ugly scenes of the crash. Then, learning about everything that had happened while she was asleep only worsened her situation. After all, she was one of her family's hopes.

It didn't take a genius to understand that her traumas didn't stop on Istrone. Martha had continued to hear bad news after waking up. She was incredibly late on her training schedule, the debt with Luke had obscured the compensation from the Global Army, and she was alone in a world that had left her behind.

Nevertheless, Martha's character had never been frail. She had been more mature than her peers even before enlisting, so she knew exactly what role she had to play after waking up. She had to pretend that everything was fine to avoid worrying her family and remain a valuable asset in the eyes of the Global Army.

It was safe to say that Martha had never dealt with her trauma properly. She had a few therapy sessions, but she had managed to get cleared for duty quickly through lies and pretenses.

The debt and her current level were burdens that she wanted to remove as soon as possible. Martha had to get a job and start earning Credits, even if that meant suffering in silence for an untold number of years.

All of that crumbled now that Martha reunited with someone that she truly trusted. She didn't even notice that her body tilted backward and ended on Khan's chest. He didn't avoid her, and his expression grew sterner than ever when she turned her head.

"I'm afraid that my body will stop responding again," Martha whimpered as tears fell from her eyes. "I have been unable to move while I was awake for so long on Istrone. I'm afraid that I'll remain stuck again if I let myself go."

Khan couldn't stop himself from wrapping his arms around her. She never turned to face him, but she didn't refuse the hug either.

"I wanted to be ahead of my peers to improve my family's martial art," Martha continued to sob. "Look at me now. I can't even control the mana inside my body properly."

"I'll teach you the footwork of my martial art," Khan promised as he tightened the hug.

"But, I can't steal from others to make up for what I lack," Martha rejected the offer, "Especially not from you."

"What are you even saying?" Khan sighed. "Lieutenant Dyester gave me this martial art. My techniques are yours to take whenever you want."

"I don't want to become a burden in your life," Martha sniffed as she lowered her head to place it on Khan's arms. "You don't deserve it."

Khan snorted and broke the hug to force Martha to turn. She kept her head lowered as he held her from her shoulders, but his next statement forced her to raise her gaze. "I told you that I would be there for you when your trauma arrived, right?"

"Do you remember that?" Martha asked, and her words carried a mixture of hesitation, surprise, and shyness.

Martha seemed ready to fall apart, but Khan was there to pick her up. He recalled that promise on Onia, but his resolve had far deeper reasons. He wouldn't leave Martha on her own after everything she had given him.

"Of course, I remember," Khan warmly declared. "Come on. You have taught technology to an idiot like me. You are far from a hopeless case. I'll put you up to speed in no time."

"Oh Khan," Martha dashed forward and sealed her grasp on Khan's uniform as she hid her face on his chest. She muttered a "thank you" that her sobs soon covered.

Khan hugged her again and began to caress her hair as he waited for her to calm down. Martha's state was awful, and it would require a lot of work to bring her up to speed, but the prospect didn't scare him. She was awake.. Nothing else mattered.