

Chaos' Heir 351

Chapter 351 - Home

Khan didn't like how things had gone with Monica, and Martha's judging and surprised glances had also become a permanent memory in his mind. Yet, he couldn't do anything about both situations. Khan was simply himself. He wouldn't be sorry about that.

Meanwhile, there was a situation where Khan could do something. The reports had shown nothing but a perfect investigation. The soldiers appointed by the Cobsend family had been thorough, detailed, and even exceptional, but Khan found a vague flaw.

That detail wasn't a proper flaw. The investigators had really done their best and had pushed themselves into territories that Khan couldn't even begin to approach. However, he had the chance to turn one of the marked dead ends into something more.

'The Orlats told the investigators that they didn't know anything about the stolen leather,' Khan summarized in his mind. 'However, they stated that the Nele usually knew everything about illegal skin since it was a sensitive subject for them.'

That answer made a lot of sense. The Nele's tragic history would obviously make them relate to species that suffered from a similar fate. If the reinforced fabric used skin from intelligent beings, there was a high chance that the Nele would care about it.

The vague aspect of the flaw came later. The investigators had gone to the third asteroid to interrogate the Nele, but they didn't receive any real answer. The reports even described those aliens as distrustful, distant, and annoyed about those questions.

That also made a lot of sense. The Nele weren't xenophobic, but they didn't trust the members of the other species easily. They were overprotective toward their own kind, and they always prioritized their survival.

The vague issue appeared at that point. The investigators had left the third asteroid empty-handed without confirming or refuting whether the Nele knew something. Those aliens were a lead that the soldiers couldn't pursue, but Khan believed to have a chance there.

'Am I making this up because I want to go to the third asteroid?' Khan wondered as he dived deep into his thoughts and checked his state through one of his techniques.

Everything was normal. Even the anger from the previous day had disappeared. Khan knew that his desires had nothing to do with that plan. There could be something worth pursuing on the third asteroid.

Excitement started to build up inside Khan as he reaffirmed that decision. He couldn't wait to see the Nele, but he couldn't rush his departure either. He smelled, and it was wise to take a nap before something so important.

Khan closed all the reports on the wall, took a bath, and went to sleep. He woke up slightly after dinner, but he disregarded the food as he wore some of the clean clothes in his room before darting outside.

The building on the second asteroid was even bigger than the one on the first, but Khan couldn't avoid meeting his companions. The group had gathered in the living room right before the exit to talk about their findings, and Khan's arrival inevitably attracted everyone's attention.

"Hey, where are you running off to at this hour?" Bruce asked in a playful tone.

The smell of booze and smoke had reached Khan's nostrils as soon as he left the elevator. Bruce and the others had occupied three comfortable couches that encircled a short table. Bottles, cups, and a fuming ashtray stood at their center, and some of the soldiers already showed signs of drunkenness.

Master Ivor was absent, and Martha seemed the only one completely sober. Luke appeared too busy reviewing things on his phone to drink, but he didn't hold back from launching casual smiles at Khan.

As for Monica, she had joined Luke in those polite smiles toward Khan. She had also added a teasing look at his clothes, but her eyes darkened when she glanced at her cup.

Monica was pretending that everything was normal, but she couldn't hide her hesitation in front of her drink. Francis was sitting next to her, and he had even stretched an arm on the back of the couch. He wasn't touching her, but it was clear that he couldn't wait to do that.

"Why am I already thinking of a way to help her?" Khan cursed in his mind.

"I'm going to investigate," Khan explained while slowly approaching the short table.

"Khan, it's already late," Bruce added. "Take it easy tonight and tell us how you ended up in a cell."

A few laughs resounded on the couches, and Khan also smiled. Even he found the topic funny, but he still had to fake his reaction since he had something far more important in mind.

"Most of the illegal activities happen at night," Khan chuckled before pointing at the bottles on the table. "Is there a cup for me?"

"I'll tell the domestics to bring one," Luke exclaimed.

"No need," Khan replied as he casually bent toward the table and seized Monica's cup and the bottle next to it. "I'm in a hurry. I might come back with something valuable if I'm right."

"Hey!" Francis called, but Luke spoke before he could continue to complain.

"Good luck!" Luke shouted. "Don't forget to send me the details of your expenses!"

The sound of the sliding door suppressed the echo of Luke's words and announced Khan's departure. The group soon disregarded the event, but Francis couldn't hold back from complaining. "Why did he take my bottle?"

Luke and Bruce exploded into a laugh. The event didn't have much value in their minds but seeing that Francis cared about it added a fun aspect to the whole matter.

"Don't think too much about it," Luke explained when he suppressed his laugh. "Khan forgets about everything else when he has a precise goal."

"You had to see him in Ylaco's camp," Bruce continued. "He would always have bruises and whatnot at the beginning of each week."

"Lieutenant Dyester is one of the reasons behind his current strength," Martha declared.

"Oh, I'm not trying to offend anyone," Bruce responded. "I was just explaining how Khan probably didn't even realize that the bottle belonged to Francis."

"And the cup to Monica," Francis added.

"I'm sure Khan won't mind that Monica drank from it," Luke laughed. "Don't worry. I've already told the domestics to bring more booze and another cup."

Francis couldn't say anything at that point. He glanced at Monica, but she wore a perfect smile as she shook her head gracefully. He couldn't possibly notice that she had to use the entirety of her willpower to keep her hands still and stop her from sending a message to Khan right away.

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"This booze is really odd," Khan thought after sniffing the liquid inside the bottle for the fifth time.

Khan was storming through the city's streets. He had already thrown away the cup next to one of the cleaning robots, and his phone showed a map that pointed toward the nearest elevator.

During the walk, Khan had taken his time to inspect the bottle. He knew that the item probably belonged to Francis due to its position on the table, and his senses found something surprisingly odd inside it.

'Is this mana?' Khan wondered as he continued to inspect the bottle. 'Why is there mana inside booze?'

Khan couldn't believe what he was sensing. The liquid inside the bottle radiated faint traces of natural mana that were barely noticeable. He had to use the entirety of his concentration just to notice them.

The phone ended up answering Khan's doubts. He searched the matter on the network and discovered that some brands of booze relied on the influence of mana to affect high-level warriors. Still, their targets usually involved third-level warriors or above.

Out of curiosity, Khan took a short sip from the bottle to experience its effects. The booze didn't feel strong, but a quick inspection of his state through his technique revealed that his focus was slightly off.

'This drink is quite sneaky,' Khan concluded before throwing the bottle at the nearest cleaning robot. 'No wonder Monica got so wasted. I'm surprised she could walk at all after a few cups of that thing.'

That conclusion added a point to Monica's alibi, but Khan decided not to draw conclusions so soon. His focus soon returned to the Nele and the third asteroid, and his excitement returned stronger than ever.

Reaching the third asteroid was far from complicated. Khan only had to use an elevator to get to the streets above and walk until he arrived in the hangar with the short-distance teleporters.

The soldiers inside the hangar only needed to scan Khan's genetic signature and some Credits to allow him in the lines. In a few minutes, Khan's hair turned into a spiked mess that attracted the attention of the other people in the third asteroid's hangar.

Khan didn't care about the surprised and interested gazes. He left the hangar in a hurry and inspected the new environment briefly before approaching the nearest elevator.

The third asteroid shared the same layout as the previous two, but its contents changed quite drastically. The four vast streets on the first floor weren't nearly as crowded, and the number of shops was also a small fraction of what Khan had seen before.

It was clear that the third asteroid marked a change in Milia 222's trend. The area had stopped targeting tourists and travelers and had become an actual home, especially for certain species.

Khan couldn't help but notice many purple spots during his trip inside the transparent elevator. The city on the lower level was similar to what he had seen on the second asteroid, but the average heights of its buildings seemed shorter.

A few spots in the city seemed empty, but they turned out to be small stands occupied by Nele. Only a few had fortune-tellers, but those shops remained a common sight along the streets.

Khan didn't need to interact with anyone to find a path. The investigators had already given him everything he needed, so he reached a parking lot and took a cab to travel to the city's center.

The trip took a while. The city wasn't too big, but the high density of smaller buildings slowed down the cars. Of course, Khan didn't mind that slight delay since he could use that time to review the reports.

When Khan left the car, he toured among the area to match what he saw with the descriptions in the reports. The neighborhood had multiple purple shops, and the Nele behind those stands didn't hold back from following Khan with their eyes.

Khan eventually found what he was looking for. A small shop with no windows stood between two stands, and its metal door didn't need any unique process to open.

Khan pushed the door open and found himself inside a strange environment. Wood replaced the iconic metal floor of those places, and plants stood on the furniture all around the small room.

The shop had a single armchair, a carpet, and a sleepy male Nele resting on a transparent case that acted as a counter. Khan's arrival alerted the Nele and forced him to straighten his position, but the latter didn't speak as he crossed his arms behind his back.

'He's wielding his weapon,' Khan thought as he inspected his surroundings.

The environment was definitely peculiar for a place in the middle of space. Plants and similar items usually were too annoying and expensive to preserve there, but Khan knew that the shop didn't lack money. It couldn't when an entire species supported it.

"[I offer myself with nothing but respect]," Khan stated as he approached the counter.

"We don't read the future here," The Nele responded in a perfect human accent as he inspected Khan from head to toe. He appeared surprised that Khan didn't show any reaction to his pheromones.

"I'm not here to know my future," Khan revealed. "I need to go downstairs."

The fact that someone so young knew about that topic left the Nele speechless. Still, the alien recovered quickly and voiced a warning. "You'll be alone down there. Many outsiders think to understand our ways, but most fail to respect them, which doesn't end well."

"Thank you for your concern," Khan politely replied, "But I still wish to go."

"As you wish," The Nele sighed as he pressed on a spot behind the transparent counter to open a secret door on the wall behind him. "There are no handles. Don't lose your balance."

Khan nodded as he entered the secret passage. The area was dark, and it turned out to be smaller than the elevators on the first floor. Yet, as it began to descend, all those details disappeared since a spectacular sight became visible.

The secret passage was an elevator connected to the lower level, which wasn't a simple platform. The Nele had built a separate dome under the city.. That was their true home.

Chapter 352 - Tactics

It felt strange to see Milia 222 under such dim illumination. The platform where the city grew hid the dome on lower level 2 from the constant pale-blue light radiated by the ceiling, but that didn't mean that the whole area was dark.

The platform on lower level 1 didn't cover the entirety of the asteroid, leaving a few areas where the ceiling's glow could pass. Moreover, the other side of the city had a few artificial lights that engulfed those lower areas in a dim, purple halo that stated who owned the place.

The underground dome also had a few lights on its metal surface, which allowed Khan to study the area during his trip on the elevator. He could immediately confirm that the lower level 2 was only a fifth of the city above, and he even saw small vehicles approaching it from different spots.

'They have secret entrances,' Khan understood from that quick inspection.

The dome couldn't reveal anything else from the elevator's perspective, but Khan still tried his best to memorize the location of the secret entrances. He guessed those vehicles came from even deeper parts of the asteroid, but the poor illumination prevented him from finding clues that could support his hypothesis.

The elevator stopped right next to the dome's base, and its landing gave Khan an idea of the general heights of the structures inside. There couldn't be skyscrapers there, which hinted at the presence of a relatively small population.

The elevator's entrance opened together with a door on the dome's metal surface. Khan stepped forward only to find himself in a bright chamber illuminated by the Nele's iconic purple lights, but the various menus that appeared on the walls didn't surprise him.

The investigators had explained that procedure on the reports. Khan browsed through the menus before letting the chamber do the rest. A few holes opened on the metal walls and blew dense air that converged on his figure. A countdown that started from one minute also appeared in front of him.

According to the reports, that procedure aimed to remove any substance that could cause problems for the dome's environment. Yet, Khan noticed that the chamber did far more than that. It also targeted the scent and brims of the synthetic mana that had remained attached to his clothes or body.

Many questions appeared in Khan's mind, but he answered all of them as soon as the chamber let him go. A long corridor unfolded past the exit, and his senses immediately noticed a stunning feature.

'This is natural mana!' Khan gasped when the comforting embrace of the energy inside the corridor enveloped him.

'How is this even possible?' Khan wondered while focusing on the purple light coming out from the corridor's corners.

The corridor's insides only had natural mana, but its artificial lights seemed powered by synthetic energy. Khan couldn't be entirely sure about that detail since the metal walls hindered his senses, but a lot of the area pointed in that direction.

'The two energies don't interact with each other,' Khan confirmed as his inspection continued. 'The Nele must have invested on high-end channels to move the synthetic mana without letting any of it taint the environment.'

A normal human wouldn't understand that obsession toward natural mana, but Khan was different. He actually rejoiced when his thoughts went on his techniques. He had given up on using the [Blood Vortex] on Milia 222, but the Nele might open that option again.

The environment after the corridor only confirmed Khan's guess. A green scenery unfolded in his vision once the exit opened. Trees, general vegetation, and actual ground appeared in his eyes while a wave of natural mana filled his senses.

Khan couldn't believe what he saw. The dome had proper woods growing in its insides. He could also sense the presence of Tainted animals in the symphony played by the mana, but he couldn't understand anything specific from that position.

The pure amazement couldn't last long. Khan felt forced to focus when a series of intense gazes converged on his figure. A path stretched from the corridor's exit. Multiple small houses or stands stood at its sides, and their owners had all peeked out of doors and windows to study Khan.

That reaction wasn't surprising. Khan expected something similar from a settlement entirely occupied by Nele, and the investigators had also mentioned something similar in the reports.

The Nele allowed access to their home. They couldn't forbid that on Milia 222. The seven asteroids only had a few private areas, which mostly involved special mansions or fabrics that required guardians with special agreements with the police.

Still, even without regulations, it was common sense to refrain from going into certain areas for superficial reasons. The species on Milia 222 survived and lived together through silent agreements and general respect for their different customs, and those rules became more important in locations similar to the underground dome.

A few naïve, careless, or uncaring travelers would still disregard those silent rules, but things rarely ended well for them. In Khan's case, no one would be able to find him if the Nele decided to make him disappear. The alien on the other side of the elevator could simply claim to know nothing about the matter to put an end to the eventual investigation.

The Nele that were inspecting Khan were trying to understand the reasons behind his visit. They were also paying attention to his movements to see whether he disrespected their home, but he didn't commit any mistake.

Khan remained on the path without vegetation as he studied his surroundings. The investigators had relied on a polite but slightly forceful approach during their visit. They had questioned every Nele willing to talk to them, but Khan planned to use a far different tactic.

Khan didn't interact with anyone as he walked through the path. His eyes darted left and right as he let his senses scan anything that didn't end in his vision.

The settlement seemed to have many houses with only a few shops. Still, the latter weren't too uncommon along the path. Khan could see many stands with potions, pendants, or other simple items that radiated distinct and peculiar strands of mana.

However, the areas outside the path seemed to contain the most interesting aspects of the settlement. Khan had to suppress the urge to step on the vegetation and explore the woods whenever vague traces of battles or training areas reached his senses.

The general style of the buildings was as crude as possible. The Nele had tried to limit the presence of items that could affect the purity of the dome's mana, so the houses and the shops mostly relied on natural materials.

Wood, leaves, and metal slabs without the slight trace of synthetic mana made most of the buildings and prevented them from growing past three or four stories. The settlement resembled an excellent and clean version of the Slums, with only a slight presence of technology.

As for Khan, he felt to have gone back on Nitis' environments. Everything under the dome was different from that cold planet. The temperature was quite high, the symphony of mana was unfamiliar, and the energy radiated by the Nele was unique, but Khan still found some comfort while walking on the path.

That feeling came from the general atmosphere that filled the dome's insides. Khan didn't know how, but he felt sure that the aliens living there had a deep attachment and respect toward the mana. He could almost sense that detail on his skin.

Needless to say, the Nele didn't share Khan's calm and happy mindset. They were wary about his presence, and his seemingly unfocused behavior only intensified their worries.

Any other human or alien would have asked questions by then. Even regular travelers would have visited shops or similar structures to interact with the population. Yet, Khan ignored all of that to have a peaceful stroll on the path surrounded by woods.

As the minutes passed, the Nele grew nervous. They were overprotective toward their kind and home, so they suspected Khan of harboring ill intentions. That wouldn't even be their first time dealing with criminals visiting the dome only to understand its structural weaknesses.

Eventually, the Nele decided to use one of their most effective ploys. They knew how powerful their pheromones were, and their customs gave them many reasons to kick out outsiders as long as they met some conditions.

A small group of beautiful Nele came out of the woods to step on the path and walk toward Khan. They were all young, stunning women, and they marched side by side to occupy most of the road.

Khan barely flinched at that sight. The group had no intention to space for Khan, but he stepped on the grass next to the path and used his light steps to leave the vegetation almost untouched.

The women couldn't help but feel surprised at the swiftness of Khan's movements. He has sprinted around them without making any sound or hurting the grass. He didn't even glance at the group to inspect their departing figures.

The Nele inspecting the scene understood that they couldn't use the pheromones to trick Khan, so they moved to their next tactic. A series of kids came out of the woods to follow a toy flying a few meters above their heads.

The toy flew toward Khan, but he easily dodged it. However, the kids charged at him as if they didn't realize that he was standing on the path.

Of course, Khan had understood what was happening. He had long since sensed the Nele spying him from the woods, and the reports had also warned him. The investigators didn't meet similar problems, but Khan expected his different tactic to cause that reaction.

A simple evasive technique allowed Khan to avoid all the kids. He didn't touch any of them, but the Nele's ploy didn't stop there.

"[Ouch]!" One of the kids fell to the ground when she realized that Khan had crossed the group.

Khan glanced at the scene and sighed. He could guess what was about to happen, so he prepared for the imminent discussion.

"Hey, you!" A male Nele shouted while coming out of a house near Khan's position. "Yes, I'm talking to you. Can't you understand your own language?"

Khan understood that he couldn't avoid that problem since the Nele approached him. His first instinct was to wear a fake smile, but he dropped it when a question left his mouth. "What is it, sir?"

"What do you mean?!" The Nele angrily replied. "You used a martial art among kids. Do you have no respect for my kind?"

"It's the exact opposite," Khan stated. "I'm in awe of what you have built here. I never expected to find a place with such pure mana on Milia 222."

Khan's statement startled the adult Nele. He didn't expect a human to sense the difference between synthetic and natural mana, but that only made Khan more dangerous in his mind. Someone like him really had the chance to find structural weaknesses in the dome.

"Why did you use a martial art so recklessly then?" The Nele continued. "People like you aren't welcome here."

"I have shown nothing but respect for your customs," Khan responded. "I hoped you would have done the same. My control over my martial art makes it far from reckless."

"How can you say that when you made a kid fall?!" The Nele insisted.

"Why are you blaming me for something you told her to do?" Khan asked before glancing at the kid on the ground. "[Isn't that right, young lady]?"

The kid almost nodded, but the adult Nele interrupted the scene with another question. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"Well," Khan uttered. "I understand that you must be as careful as possible, but, yes. Technically, you lied."

"[Arrogant human]!" The Nele shot forward while drawing something from his pocket.

Khan noticed the lack of killing intent in the Nele's attack. The root he had taken out of his pocket only pretended to aim at his face. Khan could even dodge it easily, but he opted for a different approach.

Everything ended in an instant. The Nele's eyes widened when he saw that Khan had grabbed the alien's wrist to move it closer to his face. The root had ended up piercing his cheek, and a trace of blood had started to fall from that spot.

"You should at least aim properly when pretending to attack," Khan laughed as he let go of the wrist and took a step back to make the root leave his cheek.

"You touched me," The Nele whispered.

"[Stop this]," A voice interrupted the event, and Khan smiled at the figure that had come out of the woods.. He couldn't fail to recognize Jenna from the first asteroid.

Chapter 353 - Learn

Khan knew that his behavior could appear disrespectful and arrogant, but acting as a mere ambassador would only make the Nele treat him like a political figure from the human race. He didn't want that, especially since his intentions went beyond the simple search for the reinforced fabric.

Behaving normally without holding anything back was the only solution that Khan could find. Some Nele might not like his character, but he believed that they would appreciate his honesty once they accepted him. That moment might never arrive, but Khan didn't want that outcome to be his fault.

Jenna wasn't wearing anything fancy. She had a loose dark-green jumper that covered the entirety of her waist, and her dark trousers were baggy. They also had a few holes and spots, which hinted at their extensive use in the woods.

According to human standards, that style wouldn't do justice to her beauty, but Khan believed that she looked far better now than when he met her on the first asteroid. Those baggy clothes suited the relatively wild environment perfectly and almost turned Jenna into part of the woods, which was where the Nele's true splendor lay.

The man understood something from Khan's smile and Jenna's silent disregard for the recent event. Usually, the Nele would do everything in their power to kick out or even kill someone who had dared to touch them, but Jenna appeared fine with it.

"[Is he the guy]?" The man eventually asked as he massaged the spot where Khan had grabbed his wrist.

"[The leader will give an official announcement later]," Jenna announced. "[For now, she wants to talk to him]."

"[If that's what the leader wishes]," The man sighed before glaring at Khan. The gesture was a clear warning, but Khan only performed a respectful nod to reassure the Nele.

The Nele turned to approach the kids, and Khan wiped his cheek before dashing toward Jenna. She was standing on a patch of ground that the trees' roots had lifted a few meters above the ground level, but Khan only needed to perform a short jump to land at her side.

Jenna couldn't help but stare at Khan for a few seconds before turning to walk inside the woods. Khan followed her, and he didn't hold back from inspecting the trees now that he could take a closer look at them.

The green color had control over most of the woods. Large green leaves created vast crowns that shielded the area from the purple light coming from the dome and shops on the path. Short grass filled the ground, and the trunks also carried dark-green shades.

Khan felt surprised to see that the trunks were oddly soft. He could bend their surface by applying a weak pressure, and his mark disappeared as soon as he retracted his hand.

A few purple flowers also grew next to the trees' bases. They were a rare sight, but Khan couldn't fail to notice them due to the high concentration of mana in their structure.

The trees, flowers, grass, and even ground carried mana. They didn't reach the levels of Istrone, but they clearly used that energy as a core part of their lives.

"Do you like our woods?" Jenna asked when she noticed that Khan wouldn't take his eyes off the vegetation.

"They are a rare sight for humans," Khan replied.

"That's not the whole truth, right?" Jenna questioned.

"I guess I connect them to important memories," Khan vaguely explained.

"I see," Jenna whispered before falling silent.

More interesting details appeared along the way. Khan noticed a relatively vast empty spot behind a few trees that contained young Nele. They weren't doing anything. Actually, they were keeping their attention on Khan, which explained how the area was probably a training ground.

Some small huts made of wood and leaves appeared in the distance from time to time. They didn't seem to have any specific purpose, but their surfaces reeked of types of mana that Khan had never sensed.

The most surprising sight came from the seemingly simplest areas. Khan noticed provisions and much more orderly amassed in the few paths that tainted the woods. He saw bottles, pills, and much more in those piles of goods, and a vague guess inevitably formed in his mind.

"Shouldn't you store provisions somewhere else?" Khan voiced a vague question that tried to hide his real doubts.

"We stashed those goods in a hurry," Jenna revealed. "We have yet to relocate them to suitable areas."

"Is it because of your prediction?" Khan directly asked.

"Yes," Jenna uttered without adding anything else.

"I thought your predictions were far from accurate," Khan pointed out.

"We have different types of fortune-tellers," Jenna explained. "Many pretend to know how to do them, while others simply lack talent. We can keep the real data among the species like that."

Khan didn't feel the need to speak anymore. That simple statement from Jenna had already explained a lot. In short, the Nele scammed most customers, but Jenna was the real deal.

'Imminent chaos,' Khan thought as he recalled Jenna's prediction. He didn't have the time to give the matter much thought, but seeing how the Nele were already stashing provisions forced him to reevaluate the issue.

Jenna slowed down when the two were about to reach a large hut that could probably contain fifteen people. The structure had a circular shape, with wood as its wall and leaves as its roof. Something like that would usually appear quite frail, but the mana reeking out of its surfaces revealed a far different truth.

Jenna led Khan through a wooden door and pointed at one of the pillows on the wooden floor before leaving the hut. Khan sat, and the solitude of the structure gave him the chance to inspect his surroundings.

The hut's insides were extremely simple. A few soft mats and pillows covered the floor, and four small fires flickered in opposite spots next to the wall. The flames stretched on the wood and even covered it at times, but the material didn't burn. It didn't even turn dark.

The wood wasn't the most peculiar aspect of the hut. Khan felt almost drawn by the scent coming out of the flames. He experienced a relaxing effect whenever that strange odor reached his nostrils, and the mana carried by that transparent gas was also impossible to miss.

'Interesting,' Khan thought as he inspected the fires.

The Niqols mostly used cauldrons to concoct potions or substances that relied on mana, but the Nele seemed to rely on the flames to achieve similar effects. He couldn't notice any unique material burning inside the fires, but his hypothesis sounded solid anyway.

Of course, Khan didn't believe to have discovered the depths of the Nele's arts from that simple inspection. Yet, customs usually expressed the nature of a species, especially in aliens that had such a deep attachment to mana. He had found fire in the hut, so there was a high chance that the Nele relied on flames.

Two presences approached the hut's entrance while Khan was immersed in his inspection. He recognized Jenna even before she opened the door, but the other was unknown. Moreover, it felt deeper and stronger, and he placed it around the realm of a fourth-level warrior.

"Sorry for the wait," Jenna announced while leading an elderly woman inside the hut.

The woman's green hair was pale, and some of its strands had also turned grey. Her eyes were also darker compared to what Khan had seen inside the settlement, and a few wrinkles filled the corner of her eyes.

Nevertheless, the signs of old age didn't diminish the woman's charm at all. She radiated a distinct elegance that even Monica couldn't achieve. Her faint steps carried grace that Khan couldn't imitate, and her presence as a whole felt like a pulling force that made Khan focus on her.

"Nice to meet you, young man," The woman announced as she and Jenna moved a few pillows to sit in front of Khan. "I'm Caja, leader of this settlement."

"Khan," Khan replied. "The pleasure is mine."

Khan felt a bit stunned. He didn't know why, but Caja strongly resembled Zalpa in his mind. He expected something similar due to the similarities between Niqols and Nele, but the intensity of that feature left him slightly speechless.

"Which language do you prefer?" Caja asked while crossing her legs and joining her hands on her lap.

"[Yours]," Khan responded.

"You don't need to be so polite," Caja said in a lively voice as a warm smile appeared on her face.

"It's not about politeness," Khan revealed. "[I only want to practice my accent]."

Caja and Jenna remained a bit surprised, but Caja soon chuckled. "[As you wish]."

Silence fell inside the hut, but Khan didn't dare to break it. Caja was inspecting him, so he let her take her time.

"[Jenna was right]," Caja eventually exclaimed. "[You are an odd human. Well, you aren't completely human, but that's not the reason]."

Khan's eyes flickered, but he came clean right away. "[I part Nak due to an incident. I hope that won't cause problems]."

"[Why would it]?" Caja asked. "[The Nak are one of the purest expressions of mana in the universe. We respect them as a species]."

Khan's expression tried to turn cold, but he suppressed that urge. Yet, his internal conflict didn't escape Caja's attentive and penetrating gaze.

"[Do you have a problem with what I said]?" Caja wondered.

"[I despise the Nak]," Khan admitted.

"[Oh, I wasn't praising them]," Caja explained. "[I was only describing their nature]."

"[Their nature is quite destructive]," Khan pointed out. "[Do you think that the mana as its core is destructive as well]?"

"[Who said that the Nak have a destructive nature]?" Caja questioned. "[That species spread unfathomable pain throughout the universe, but that alone doesn't express their nature. You should know it since you share their iconic element]."

"[The chaos element destroys]," Khan stated.

"[Does it]?" Caja asked. "[Is that all you know about your element? Maybe you are more human than I thought]."

Khan had to drop his internal conflict and use Liiza's words to answer Caja. "[I know that chaos is the freest of the elements]."

"[You do know something then]," Caja announced. "[Did the humans teach you that]?"

"[No]," Khan replied.

"[I see why you are odd]," Caja declared. [You are part Nak, and you accept alien teachings. Calling you human doesn't do you justice]."

"[I don't like to judge people through their species]," Khan revealed. "[I can't see the difference among them]."

"[That begs the question]," Caja voiced. "[Did you become like this because of the incident, or were you always supposed to achieve this mindset]?"

"[I can't answer that]," Khan responded.

"[Try]," Caja ordered. "[Your manners are good, and your honesty is evident. Yet, I want to understand what kind of man you are before making my decision]."

"[What decision]?" Khan asked.

"[The Nele have gone through too much]," Caja declared. "[We can't trust foreigners so easily]."

Khan couldn't argue there. He forced himself to review his life, and a few things immediately became clear. His nightmares, element, and life in the Slums had been core reasons behind his open mindset. Still, everything crumbled when he thought about Liiza.

"[I would have reached this mindset one way or the other]," Khan declared. "[It might have taken longer without the incident, but I can't imagine a different version of myself]."

Caja fell silent, and Jenna didn't utter any word either. It was clear that the leader needed time to think.

"[This is indeed troublesome]," Caja announced. "[I should kick you out anyway due to the potential danger that you represent for the Nele. Still, something tells me that I won't find another human like you]."

"[I sorry, but I don't understand what you mean]," Khan admitted.

"[The Nele can't live like this forever]," Caja sighed. "[Life on Milia 222 is too unstable. We have allies, but they don't understand us. You might]."

"[I'm flattered]," Khan couldn't help but exclaim.

"[Don't you want to know how I reached this conclusion]?" Caja asked.

"[Because you saw my pain, right]?" Khan guessed.

"[You do understand us]," Caja whispered, and Jenna also ended up wearing a surprised expression.

Caja diverted her gaze before moving her eyes back on Khan. She didn't show any emotion, but Khan guessed that she was still conflicted about him.

"[Why did you come here]?" Caja eventually changed the topic.

"[I'm part of an investigation]," Khan revealed. "[Reliable sources said that you are aware of the activities involving illegal skin and similar materials]."

"[Don't insult me]," Caja snorted, and Khan widened his eyes in surprise. He really didn't understand what he did wrong.

"[Don't talk about work]," Caja continued. "[I want to know your true motives, the same motives that made you approach Jenna]."

Khan sighed in relief in his mind. It seemed that Caja was still studying his character, so he didn't hold back from revealing his true reasons. "[I want to study your arts.. I want you to teach me what the humans can't]."

Chapter 354 - Friend

It was clear that Caja had no interest in Khan's mission or general reasons behind his presence on Milia 222. She only had her species in mind, so her questions aimed to uncover Khan's true character and desires.

Khan's answer sounded quite vague in Caja's mind. She felt proud of her species' arts, but she couldn't understand why Khan wanted them. Mere curiosity couldn't explain his desires either.

"[Why]?" Caja asked. "[Humans are ignorant to the ways of mana, but their methods are efficient. If it's about power, your species already has worthy paths]."

"[My element is troublesome to handle with only human techniques]," Khan explained before revealing something deeper, "[And I find their approach to mana too limited. I can't stick to that after learning more expansive arts]."

"[Show us what you learnt]," Caja ordered. "[I want to see these arts]."

Khan didn't expect that request, but he didn't refuse it. He raised his hand, and the blood vessels on his palm popped out before transforming into a sturdy shield lying right under his skin.

"[Interesting]," Caja commented. "[I'm not privy to this technique, but I know it's not human. Doesn't your species ban arts requiring tampered blood]?"

'She already understood the core material for the [Blood Shield],' Khan thought before voicing a meaningful answer. "[I'm not sure, but I don't need to worry about that as long as my superiors remain in the dark]."

"[Remain in the dark]?" Caja whispered before glancing at Jenna.

"[It means that his superiors don't know about his alien techniques]," Jenna explained.

"[Oh]!" Caja exclaimed. "[That makes sense. I'm sorry, young man. I spend most of my time among my species, so I don't know every alien saying]."

Khan couldn't help but find that funny since it made him think about the Niqols and their lack of understanding of many gestures. It was actually surprising to see some of the Nele unclear about something after sharing Milia 222 with many different species.

"[Anyway, I'm afraid that's not enough]," Caja declared. "[Your openness to alien arts doesn't make you suitable for ours. I want to see how you create those techniques. I'll take my decision afterward]."

Khan's eyes lit up as an idea formed in his mind. He could probably trick the Caja into giving him what he needed to advance the [Blood Shield] to the next checkpoint. Still, his relationship with the Nele would end if they discovered his tactic.

"[I actually need to improve my technique]," Khan eventually decided to be honest. "[Can I use your resources to do it]?"

"[Why would we even do that]?" Caja wondered.

"[I paid a hefty price to get my hands on this technique]," Khan stated. "[It also has a deep meaning in my mind. I need something in exchange if you want to see it]."

"[Should I remind you that you have come here looking for help]?" Caja chuckled. "[I praised you before, but don't misunderstand my words. You are far from necessary to the Nele]."

Khan didn't know what to say. He felt conflicted about showing the procedure for the [Blood Shield] without getting anything in return. He didn't lie about his emotional attachment to the technique. Revealing its secrets sounded like a partial betrayal toward the Niqols, so he wanted something to justify that sacrifice.

"[Is the deep meaning connected to your one]?" Jenna asked while Khan was busy sorting out his thoughts.

Khan felt conflicted once again. He had always avoided addressing the topic directly since that would make it real. A positive answer would confirm that Jenna's words were true, which couldn't be good for Khan's mind.

Caja noticed the conflict hidden behind the silence. She saw the longing and coldness in Khan's face as the memories from Nitis took control of his thoughts. A human might fail to understand what that expression meant, but Caja was different.

"[I see]," Caja sighed. "[I'm sorry. We will provide what you need as long as the price is reasonable]."

Khan didn't expect that answer, but he didn't hesitate to describe what he needed. "[I need blood and flesh from a creature as strong as a first-level warrior if not stronger]."

The human classification of power wasn't a secret. Most species that had interacted with the Global Army knew about it, so Caja didn't need help understanding Khan's words. Still, she wore a cold expression as she thought about the matter.

"[You said creature]," Caja pointed out, "[Do you mean that a Nele would also work]?"

The threat in Caja's voice was impossible to miss, but Khan didn't lie to her. "[Yes, a Nele would also work. I only need flesh and blood to carry enough mana]."

"[I see]," Caja repeated as her expression relaxed. "[I'll see what I can find. Jenna, keep our guest company]."

Jenna nodded as Caja left the pillow and straightened her position to approach the hut's exit. She didn't add anything else as she left Jenna and Khan alone.

"[She said that you are a guest]," Jenna exclaimed while wearing a gentle smile. "[That's good progress]."

"[Thanks]," Khan shortly replied.

Jenna also left her pillow to approach one of the fires. She lifted her jumper to take out a few roots and leaves hidden under it before throwing everything into the flames.

The process wasn't as simple as it looked. Jenna was adding mana to those materials before feeding them to the fire. The latter then caused a reaction that filled its flickering flames with a unique energy that Khan didn't recognize.

"[I can feel your gaze]," Jenna giggled.

"[What are you doing]?" Khan asked.

"[I'm making a drink]," Jenna responded as she tapped on a spot on the floor to reveal a hidden drawer. "[You humans would classify it as tea]."

Khan fell silent to continue his inspection of the procedure. Jenna took out two cups from the hidden drawer and placed them at the sides of the fire. Then, a dense dark liquid came out from the flames' base and slowly entered the two items.

Jenna couldn't fill the entirety of the cup from that angle, but the liquid stopped flowing when they were only a quarter full. Jenna could remove the items from the fire at that point before returning to her pillow and handing one of them to Khan.

"[We used flatter cups back then]," Jenna explained while bringing her cut to her face to smell the liquid in its insides. "[We lost that tradition after everything we suffered]."

Khan imitated Jenna. The drink was strong but not alcoholic. Also, it contained mana, so Khan felt sure that it would have some effects on his mind.

"[The drink will calm you down]," Jenna revealed as if she could understand Khan's thoughts. "[It will make you more honest but also clear-headed. It should be a good advantage in your imminent performance]."

"[Do you usually drink things like this]?" Khan asked.

"[Yes]," Jenna stated. "[We secretly despise anything that might hurt our ability to think or affect our behavior. We prefer showing our truer selves all the time]."

'That' the exact opposite of the Niqols,' Khan thought before correcting that idea. 'Well, maybe there is a similarity there too. They just have opposite approaches.'

Khan took a sip from the drink as his thoughts flowed freely. The liquid was hot but not scorching. It filled his mouth, throat, and chest with intense warmth, and some sweat even appeared on his forehead.

The drink's taste was incredible. It was intense but also soft. Khan could experience the entirety of its flavor without experiencing any burn or difficulty. The liquid was really easy to gulp down, and its effects arrived almost immediately.

Khan felt a bit light-headed. The sensation resembled drowsiness, but he didn't have the urge to sleep. It made him feel safe and in complete comfort, but he managed to remain alert due to his fondness for cold temperatures.

"[It's delicious]," Khan declared. "[It's a pity humans don't have anything similar]."

"[I can teach you how to make it if Caja accepts you]," Jenna offered.

"[I wouldn't refuse the offer]," Khan announced. "[Though I'd probably go for booze most times anyway]."

"[You don't seem the type to enjoy losing control]," Jenna commented.

"[It's not that]," Khan stated.

"[It's connected to your one]," Jenna interrupted.

Khan felt forced to take another sip to avoid addressing the topic, but the drink only made things worse. He wanted to hold back his words, but they came out of his mouth anyway and revealed his true feelings.

"[I wish you stopped mentioning this stuff all the time]," Khan exclaimed.

"[What stuff]?" Jenna teased.

"[You know]," Khan sighed, "[All the talk about the one. I understand it's a big deal for the Nele, but things aren't always so easy]."

"[Maybe I'm too Nele to understand your view]," Jenna wondered. "[We see love, true love as the most important aspect of our lives. We wouldn't even mind hurting our species because of it]."

"[Isn't that dangerous]?" Khan asked.

"[Of course]," Jenna uttered. "[Yet, anything can become dangerous in the right conditions. We simply believe that we should do everything in our power to be happy, and that often involves our loved ones]."

"[Love isn't always enough]," Khan declared as he took another sip from his cup.

"[Isn't it]?" Jenna asked. "[Love is the greatest drive in the universe. It can topple entire civilizations. Why would you go against its nature]?"

"[Love can hurt]," Khan exclaimed. "[Love can destroy. Love can kill]."

"[Let it hurt]," Jenna responded. "[Let it destroy. Let it kill. All of that is fine as long as you can fulfill it]."

"[It's not so easy]," Khan repeated as his gaze fell on the floor.

"[Easy]?" Jenna said in a questioning tone as she left her cup at her side before placing her knees on the floor to approach Khan.

Initially, Khan started to retreat since he didn't know what was happening. Still, Jenna raised her palms to reassure him, so he let her do what she wanted.

"[Do you think we don't have urges]?" Jenna asked as she reached Khan's hands.

Jenna's slender fingers moved over the back of Khan's hand before sliding toward his wrists. She also got closer as she reached for his cheek, hair, and neck.

"[I've always wanted to try touching a human]," Jenna revealed as her eyes moved left and right to explore Khan's face. "[You are so similar to us, but your customs are completely different. I envy your emotional freedom a bit, but I also pity how easily you disregard it]."

Khan didn't expect his visit to the third asteroid to lead to that, but he didn't reject it either. Jenna's fingers were warm, warmer than humans, but they carried no lust. She was merely curious.

"[How does my touch feel]?" Jenna asked as she sat right in front of Khan and took his hands in her grasp.

"[It's warm]," Khan stated. "[Maybe too warm]."

"[Don't you like it]?" Jenna asked. "[I read that humans would get aroused in no time if a Nele touches them]."

"[I'm sure most humans would find it hard to control themselves in this situation]," Khan declared.

"[Caja says that it's even harder for us]," Jenna uttered. "[We hold back out of devotion to love, but it's far from easy]."

"[Why are you doing this with me then]?" Khan questioned. "[Why are you trusting me so much]?"

"[Because you are harmless]," Jenna smiled, but the innocence in her expression made Khan snap.

Khan left Jenna's grasp and placed the cup at his side before grabbing her wrists. Jenna didn't fight back and let him lift her arms. Khan then put a knee in front of her to approach her face and make their foreheads touch.

Jenna gasped as Khan slowly pushed her back. It didn't take long before Jenna ended up with her back on the floor and Khan above her. Their torsos weren't connected, but that didn't change the nature of the situation.

"[Who is harmless]?" Khan asked. "[Nele and humans are different. I don't have to hold back]."

"[You can take me if you wish]," Jenna whispered as arousal filled her face, "[But will your feelings be okay afterward]?"

Khan was only a few centimeters from Jenna's face. She was even more stunning now that desire had appeared on her expression. She was clearly suffering from the years spent holding back her urges, and that only intensified her natural beauty.

Still, her words felt like sharp blades in Khan's mind. Jenna had mentioned an issue that had afflicted him since his separation from Liiza. Even Cora couldn't fix it after spending so long together. Khan couldn't help but feel a bit guilty whenever he was with another woman.

"Fuck," Khan muttered as he lifted himself before sitting next to Jenna.

"[That was exciting]," Jenna commented as she did her best to steady her breath.

"[You really shouldn't be so careless]," Khan scolded.

"[It's fine, right]?" Jenna asked as he straightened her back to sit at Khan's right side. "[I feel that I can trust you completely now]."

"[I didn't expect the Nele to be so twisted]," Khan scoffed.

"[That might be me]," Jenna revealed. "[My talent as a fortune-teller comes from my deeper understanding of mana. Yet, I'm afraid that it also makes my urges stronger]."

"[That sounds like a curse]," Khan exclaimed.

"[It might be]," Jenna agreed, "[But that's what makes me who I am. I feel no shame in fulfilling part of my desires when I can. Would you]?"

"[Depends]," Khan sighed. "[I told you. It's not always easy, especially when you take politics and different customs into consideration]."

"[Can't you ignore all of them]?" Jenna wondered as she bent toward Khan and pressed her body on his right side. "[Do you wish to live your life for politics]?"

"[It's not that]," Khan stated as his expression grew cold. "[I tried really hard to keep what I had. I've done everything I could and have gone to any length, but I failed anyway]."

"[Did you]?" Jenna asked.

"[I could have pushed harder]," Khan admitted, "[But that would have made her unhappy. Our separation was necessary]."

"[We would justify anything if done in the name of love]," Jenna revealed.

"[I've already committed crimes and done untold things]," Khan declared. "[I'm afraid I could have turned into a monster if the situation required that]."

"[So what]?" Jenna asked. "[Even monsters can love]."

Khan sighed before turning to look at the alien lying on his shoulder. Jenna appeared utterly at ease right now, and Khan couldn't help but shake his head.

"[You are an interesting species]," Khan commented.

"[You are an interesting human]," Jenna replied. "[It's a pity you have already found your one. I might have fallen for you otherwise. I can feel that we are compatible]."

"[I guess friends doesn't sound bad]," Khan stated.

"[No, it doesn't]," Jenna agreed. "[I hope Caja lets you stay. Oh]!"

Jenna suddenly exclaimed, and Khan also moved his attention toward the door. They had both sensed Caja's presence drawing near, but they also noticed how she was carrying something containing a lot of mana.

Khan didn't know how to behave since Jenna didn't leave his side. She actually wrapped her arms around his elbow to keep him close, and Caja inevitably showed a surprised expression when she entered the hut and saw that scene.

"[We became friends]," Jenna explained before Caja could get the wrong idea.

"[Forgive her]," Caja sighed. "[We grow up hearing stories about our species and in an isolated environment. Most of us develop intense anger toward foreigners, while others forget about their manners once they establish trust]."

"[It's fine]," Khan replied while focusing on the bloody bag carried by Caja. "[I don't mind it]."

Caja inspected Khan deeply to search for clues that might hint at impure thoughts, but he appeared completely calm. He didn't accept the situation just to remain close to Jenna.

"[I've brought what you have requested]," Caja stated as she dropped the bag in front of Khan and returned to her pillow.

Jenna let go of Khan at that point and took her seat next to Caja. Meanwhile, Khan opened the bag and noticed a strange rat-like creature inside it. The animal was as big as a dog, but its belly was abnormally large, and its tail had spikes that released a bad smell.

"[Its tail is poisonous]," Caja explained as Khan took out the dead creature and placed it on the bag.

"[That won't be a problem]," Khan declared as he crawled toward his cup before going back to the creature.

According to Khan's senses, the strange rat was a monster, even a strong one. He would place its power near the top of the first-level warriors' bracket. It probably was enough for the next checkpoint of the [Blood Shield].

Moreover, the creature was still warm. It had probably died in the last minutes, but Khan couldn't find any injury on its dark fur. That detail was interesting since it could reveal something about the Nele's techniques, but he forced himself not to think about the matter.

"[Where can I operate]?" Khan asked while bringing his gaze on Caja. "[I don't want to turn the floor into a mess]."

"[Don't worry about the floor or the carpet]," Caja announced. "[Do what you have to do]."

Khan didn't ask the question again. He emptied his cup and took a deep breath before drawing his knife and approaching the creature.

In theory, a simple monster risked falling short when it came to the third checkpoint of the [Blood Shield], but the high quantity of mana inside the strange rat reassured Khan. Also, he could make up for those shortcomings by adding more blood.

Khan removed part of the fur before opening a hole in the rat's back. He didn't add any mana to his knife since his element could ruin the material, but the weapon never met problems.

Khan cut a thumb-sized chunk of meat out of the rat and placed it at the center of his crossed legs. Blood flowed on his trousers, but he remained calm as he summoned mana on his free palm and altered its nature.

The purple-red mana grew clearer and dimmer as Khan suppressed its destructive properties. Then, he placed it right above the chunk of flesh to force the blood to follow his demands.

The chunk of flesh had lost a lot of blood, but what remained in its insides slowly converged at its center under the influence of Khan's mana. The gory material began to break in some spots during the process, but Khan promptly adjusted his intensity to grow even gentler.

The effects of the calming drink became evident during the procedure. Khan felt beyond clear-headed, and he could also sense how his control over mana had never been so precise.

The boost of the drink couldn't completely make up for the inexperience in the procedure. Khan committed a few mistakes that forced him to remove some tiny chunks of flesh, but he improved whenever he cut the rat open to add blood to his material.

Khan's trousers turned into a mess as the procedure continued, but the chunk of flesh eventually reached the intended power level. Khan could almost compare it to his second-grade weapon at that point, even if only in terms of mana.

'This should be it,' Khan thought before placing his knife on the floor and seizing the chunk of flesh.

Khan touched the item, pressed on its surface, smelled and licked it before feeling almost sure that the procedure had been a success. He only had one last step to complete.

"[Don't worry about me]," Khan warned before throwing the flesh in his mouth and gulping hard.

A heavy pressure immediately landed on Khan's chest. He felt as if his heart would stop, and breathing became impossible. He ended up crouching forward, worrying Jenna, who tried to reach him. Still, Caja interrupted her by placing a hand on her shoulder.

Khan didn't panic. He was used to those effects by then. He waited until his body adapted to the new presence in its insides and allowed him to breathe again.

His ragged breath slowly calmed down as he regained control over his body. Khan performed his check-up technique and confirmed that everything was okay. Only his mind was oddly relaxed, but the drink explained that detail.

Khan exhaled loudly before pulling back his sleeves. Then, when he activated the [Blood Shield], Caja and Jenna noticed how blood vessels clotted throughout his arms. The two Nele actually couldn't see how far they stretched.

Chapter 355 - Answer

Khan could sense that his body suffered when using the [Blood Shield] at full power. He used the check-up technique while the clotted blood vessels covered his arms, so he could see how quickly some important organs deteriorated while the alien ability was active.

Khan had to disperse the technique after a few seconds to avoid facing drawbacks. He took a few deep breaths as he unfolded his sleeves and calmed down. He would need to perform a few tests before using the [Blood Shield] in an actual battle, but he felt satisfied that the procedure had been a success.

"[So, you have improved the overall sturdiness and extension]," Caja commented while Khan calmed down. "[Still, the burden that your body has to carry to activate the technique has also increased. You might end up killing yourself if you aren't careful]."

"[These arts carry great danger]," Khan revealed, "[But they also grant great power]."

"[Power]," Caja sighed as she placed a finger on her left temple. "[The Nele can't condone such gruesome and dangerous practices. They go against our very nature]."

Khan could only nod at that remark. He didn't feel too disappointed. He had done his best to establish a good relationship with the Nele. Khan couldn't blame himself if they decided to refuse him anyway.

"[However, it's clear that your understanding of mana goes beyond human standards]," Caja continued, "[Far beyond them actually. I never thought I'd live to see a human like you]."

"[So]?" Khan asked when Caja's silence stretched for a few seconds. Jenna also couldn't hold back from staring at her.

"[Jenna, do you realize how dangerous it is to accept an alien in our inner circle]?" Caja scolded since Jenna didn't stop staring at her. "[It's not a decision that we can take back, and it might even have heavy repercussions in the future]."

"[I don't think he would hurt us]," Jenna stated.

"[Sadly, politics go beyond personal feelings and honest intentions]," Caja explained as she fixed her dark, piercing eyes on Khan. "[What would happen if your superiors compel you to reveal our weaknesses? How can I feel safe knowing that this seemingly simple decision might lead to our destruction]?"

Caja was exaggerating, but Khan couldn't blame her. It was her job to consider the worst-case scenarios, especially when it came to aspects that had remained hidden from other species for a very long time.

Khan couldn't lie. He had no answers that could reassure Caja, and his promises weren't enough since he couldn't back them up with actual power or status. He was nothing more than a second-level warrior asking for something that went far beyond his reach.

Still, both Caja and Jenna waited for an answer, especially the latter. Khan felt able to read Jenna's meaningful expression. She wanted him to say something that could lead to Caja's approval.

'Why is she even so into all of this?' Khan wondered as he immersed himself in Jenna's expression. 'We are talking about her species. I should be nothing more than an unnecessary risk.'

The answer to those doubts was simple but deep, and Khan only had to accept it to find it. The mana was telling Jenna that he was trustworthy, and that was enough for her.

'They really are similar,' Khan sighed in his mind as memories took control of his thoughts.

"[I can't address your doubts]," Khan eventually replied, "[I simply can't. Yet, I know that I don't want to see anything bad happening to your species. You don't deserve that]."

"[You barely know us]," Caja pointed out.

"[But you resemble a species dear to me]," Khan responded. "[They are worthier than humans. I'm sure the same applies to you]."

"[Are you asking me to trust you out of a mere resemblance to someone I don't even know]?" Caja questioned.

"[I'm asking you to trust my feelings]," Khan corrected.

Caja fell silent, but her face showed no reactions. She didn't expect Khan to bring the topic to a field so close to her species, but that could still be a clever tactic to gain her trust.

However, it was impossible to miss how attached Khan was to the whole matter. He had also drunk Jenna's tea, so there was a high chance that his words couldn't get more honest.

"[Humans aren't like us]," Caja sighed. "[Their emotions can change drastically during the long life that mana grants. Still, what kind of Nele would I be if I rejected such honest feelings]?"

Jenna smiled, and Khan's eyes also lit up, but Caja spoke before they could jump to conclusions. "[I'll watch you closely. Consider this as a testing period. You will gain access to part of our culture, but you won't get to its deeper secrets until I decide otherwise]."

"[That's perfect]!" Khan couldn't help but exclaim. "[Thank you]!"

"[Don't thank me yet]," Caja snorted before turning toward Jenna. "[I believe you want to take care of this, right]?"

"[Leave it to me]," Jenna exclaimed in a gentle but happy tone. "[I'll introduce him to our world]."

"[Good]," Caja announced while standing up. "[I'll return to my duties then]."

"[Thank you again, ma'am]," Khan repeated.

"[Caja is more than fine]," Caja chuckled as she pulled her hair to show her proud expression. "[Don't make me feel old. I'm still in my prime]."

Khan smiled and followed Caja with his eyes as she left the hut. Soon, her presence escaped from his senses, which forced him to move his attention on Jenna.

"[What happens now]?" Khan asked since Jenna limited herself to smile.

"[I'll do as I said]," Jenna revealed as she stood up and approached Khan to take his hand. "[I will introduce you to the Nele's world]."

Khan could only follow Jenna's gentle pull. He grabbed the knife and stored it back in its sheath as he stood up and followed the Nele. Jenna didn't let go of his hand even after they left the hut, and he didn't oppose that decision.

The two strolled among the woods, and Jenna smiled whenever the environment captured Khan's attention. She seemed to enjoy seeing him so focused on her home, and she didn't hold back from pulling him toward unique flowers or special features of the area.

The stroll brought the two next to the training area and back on the main path. The Nele on the road remained stunned seeing Jenna holding Khan's hand so casually, but her happy face told them that all of that was consensual.

"[Won't the other Nele get the wrong idea about us]?" Khan asked once Jenna led him on the woods on the other side of the main path.

"[Caja will explain everything soon enough]," Jenna revealed while lifting the hand clenched to Khan's palm. "[Why? Do you hate this]?"

"[No, but we usually don't do this with friends]," Khan stated.

"[I want to do it]," Jenna calmly responded. "[Would you prefer me to hold back]?"

"[I guess it's fine if that's what you want]," Khan sighed.

"[I knew we were compatible]," Jenna giggled as she stepped closer to Khan to lay her head on his shoulder. "[I wonder how this would feel with my one]."

"[Peaceful]," Khan whispered as memories filled his mind.

"[I hope this brings you part of that peace]," Jenna said in a serious tone.

Khan glanced at the face resting on his shoulder. Jenna appeared slightly worried. She didn't only care about her urges with her behavior. She also wanted to comfort Khan a bit.

"[We might have really ended up together]," Khan sighed as a sense of defeat invaded his mind. He gave up on trying to evaluate Jenna through human standards and accepted her for who she was.

"[That shouldn't stop us from enjoying what we can have]," Jenna uttered.

"[That sounds so wrong]," Khan laughed, but he let go of all the sensations that had no place in that relationship. Once he removed lust, curiosity, and other negative thoughts, he felt able to appreciate Jenna's positive and wonderful aspects.

"[That way]," Jenna exclaimed, and the two resumed their stroll.

Khan experienced nostalgic feelings as he smirked, talked, and joked with Jenna. It was rare for him to have friendships with women that featured no sexual tension or simple attraction. Even Amber didn't fit in that category.

The only pure friendship that Khan could remember was with Azni. Things were completely different with Jenna, and the two had even admitted that they liked each other, but Khan still felt similarities in how he could treat her.

It felt liberating to ignore the potential consequences of certain actions. Khan could caress Jenna's hair, pull her toward areas that made him curious, and accept her touch knowing that those gestures wouldn't involve anything romantic.

That relationship had the potential to become one of the most honest that Khan had ever experienced, and he welcomed it with open arms. He actually started to embrace Jenna's spontaneous gestures as the stroll continued.

"[We are here]," Jenna announced when the two reached a small lake filled with greenish water.

The water could look dirty at first glance, but Khan quickly noticed that its greenish color came from the vegetation nearby and on the lake's bed. The liquid was so clear that he could almost count the short plants growing inside it.

"[How can you even have something like this here]?" Khan questioned.

"[That's a secret]," Jenna laughed as she let go of Khan's hand and approached the lake's shores.

Khan felt curios, but all the feats achieved during the stroll crumbled when Jenna pulled her jumper to remove it and throw it on the ground. Her smooth and sensual back filled his view, and it didn't take long before her lower half also became naked.

"[What are you doing]!?" Khan exclaimed as his eyes inevitably inspected every inch of Jenna's figure.

Khan couldn't stress enough how beautiful Jenna was. She lacked Yeza's intense sensuality, but her figure carried a captivating harmony that made Khan's gaze glued on her perfect pale-green skin.

'Don't they have underwear or something?' Khan cursed as he tried his best to calm down, but Jenna only worsened the situation.

"[You have to remove the blood from the procedure]," Jenna explained while half-turning toward Khan. "[Do you need help undressing]?"

Jenna had almost exposed the entirety of her front without any shame, and Khan had to fight against his deeper instincts to avoid having lustful thoughts.

Khan needed a few seconds to realize that his fingers and trousers still had the strange rat's blood on them. He had even passed some of that to Jenna's hand, but she didn't mind it. She appeared entirely at ease even while Khan inspected her from head to toe.

"[I'm good]," Khan muttered as he removed his clothes.

Jenna showed no hesitation in inspecting Khan's nude figure. She shared his curiosity and lust, but she only revealed a bright smile and stepped inside the lake when she felt to have looked enough.

"[Aren't you coming]?" Jenna asked as she walked toward the center of the lake.

Khan's mind was a mess, but he still decided to enter the lake. The bed deepened quickly, but the warm water never crossed his shoulders. As for Jenna, she had half of her chest exposed as she waited for Khan to reach her.

"[This is the best spot]," Jenna exclaimed as she lifted an arm out of the water and stretched it toward Khan.

Khan felt defeated once again. He couldn't get rid of his impure thoughts in that situation, but he did his best to suppress them as he approached Jenna and took her hand.

"[You should be able to feel the difference if we are this clos-]," Jenna began to say as she tried to lay on Khan's right side, but a high-pitched moan escaped her mouth when her chest touched his arm.

"[I'm sorry]," Jenna quickly followed as she slowly tried to lay on Khan again. "[I didn't expect the sensation to be so intense]."

"[You are impossible]," Khan sighed as he reached for Jenna's face to remove a wet strand of hair from her forehead. "[Don't be so careless around others]."

"[But I'm not around others]," Jenna pointed out. "[I'm with you]."

The honesty and firm trust expressed by Jenna's face were heartwarming. Her mind was probably even messier than Khan, but she was still doing her best to introduce him to the Nele's world.

Khan knew that Jenna was also fulfilling her curiosity, but he couldn't blame her for that. Slowly, the liberating feeling from before returned stronger than ever. If they could do that together, it was safe to assume that they could become sincere friends.

"[I give up]," Khan whispered. "[Take your time. I'll wait]."

Jenna nodded as she slowly got closer. She hesitated from time to time, especially when she rubbed her sensitive spots on Khan, but she eventually calmed down.

"[Do the Nele always teach mana like this]?" Khan wondered when he felt Jenna relaxing on his arm.

"[No, we rarely get so close since we grow used to how we feel when we are young]," Jenna revealed. "[Yet, you have already been introduced to mana, so I need something more drastic to make you notice our different approach]."

"[And you are also having fun]," Khan declared.

"[This is so exciting]," Jenna giggled while laying her head on Khan's shoulder and tightening her grasp on his arm. "[I can't wait to fall in love]."

"[You are so naughty]," Khan joked.

"[Aren't you also like that]?" Jenna asked.

Khan rolled his eyes. He couldn't deny that statement when he thought about his sexual life with Liiza. Still, he only voiced a faint "[maybe]" to avoid triggering questions.

Jenna laughed when she heard that, but she understood that the time to go back to the main topic had arrived. She lifted her head and stretched her free arm to place her palm on the lake's surface. Mana then left her figure, but her energy dispersed when it touched the water.

"[I don't know all the details of your arts]," Jenna announced. "[However, I've understood a few things while I watched you modifying the flesh. You imposed a specific behavior on the blood to make the technique express it]."

"[That's correct]," Khan admitted without showing any surprise toward Jenna's sharp senses.

"[Your fundamentals are sound]," Jenna declared. "[I think some of the most talented members of my species would have a hard time being your equal there. Still, our approach is completely different]."

The water a few meters from Khan and Jenna suddenly surged and created a short column that flew for a couple of seconds before falling back into the lake. Some drops ended on Khan's face, but he was too captivated to care about them.

Something incredible had happened. The water seemed to have moved out of its own volition, and Khan had only sensed a faint burst of mana during the event.

"[Do you want to see it again]?" Jenna asked.

"[Yes, please]," Khan exclaimed as he prepared his senses to pay extra attention to everything happening in his surroundings.

Jenna waited until she felt that Khan's attention had reached its peak before rereleasing her mana. Strands of energy came out of her free arm and fused with the lake. Initially, Khan had believed that the mana had disappeared, but he could sense how faint strands remained in the water.

Those strands of mana slowly flowed toward a distant spot in the lake before fusing and generating the same surge as before. Khan didn't miss anything now, but that only intensified his shock.

Controlling the mana when it was at some distance from the body was quite hard but far from impossible. Only a handful of soldiers would be able to use spells otherwise.

However, the interesting aspect of Jenna's performance came from the small quantity of mana used. Also, she didn't activate any spell. She had only sent a faint input, but the water had reacted accordingly.

"[Did you get it]?" Jenna asked.

"[I know what happened]," Khan replied, "[But I don't know how you did it]."

"[I expected as much]," Jenna revealed. "[You have learnt to sense, control, and change the mana. You know how to impose your will through your energy, but you have never tried to talk to it]."

"[Talk to the mana]?" Khan questioned.

"[Exactly]," Jenna chuckled as she waved her free hand to point at the whole environment. "[Mana is everywhere. It has different natures and purposes depending on the area, but it can turn into almost everything if it wants]."

"[What about the limits of the elements]?" Khan asked.

"[Who said that elements have limits]?" Jenna wondered. "[Sure, someone with the water element will have an easier time talking to the mana near lakes and ponds, but that's not absolute. Mana is mana. Its temporary shape doesn't prevent it from changing]."

Khan would have a harder time understanding what Jenna meant if he didn't learn from Liiza how the Niqols used their spells. They focused on taking control of an area before activating the effects of their mana, but he could see how a subtler approach could work.

"[Give it a try]," Jenna cheerfully ordered.

"[It's too dangerous]," Khan immediately refused. "[I might hurt you]."

"[Don't fail then]," Jenna responded as her head went back on Khan's shoulder.

Khan came up with countless excuses and even more replies, but something in Jenna's calm expression told him that none of them would work. Resolve built up inside him at that point. In theory, he had everything he needed to succeed.

Khan placed his left palm on the lake's surface and took deep breaths before summoning his mana. Strands of purple-red energy began to leave his body, but the water suddenly churned and splashed all over Jenna and him.

"[You must be gentler]," Jenna scolded. "[You aren't using your mana to do something. You aren't even giving orders to the mana around you. You are asking a favor to a stranger]."

'How do I even talk to mana?' Khan wondered before closing his eyes to immerse himself in the environment's symphony.

The various strands of mana around Khan had different shades and filled the black world seen by his closed eyes. He could understand where the lake's influence stopped to make room for the air and the various trees, but he didn't know how to interact with that.

The symphony became messy as soon as Khan released a strand of mana. The properties of his element seemed too intense to blend with the environment. The energy around him rejected his presence by shattering and giving birth to violent reactions.

"[Gentler]!" Jenna scolded again. "[How did you approach us when you didn't know how we would react? How did you touch me when you were still worried about our relationship? How did you hold your one when you had yet to understand what she liked]?"

Khan loudly exhaled as he let go of every intention or desire. Only a faint worry and shyness remained in his mind as he released his mana inside the lake. He didn't ask anything. He was merely focused on avoiding hurting the water.

Something strange happened as Khan kept his eyes closed. The symphony stopped shattering and accepted the addition of Khan's mana. New colors appeared in the dark world inside his mind, and an intense purple-red shade eventually forced him to look at a distant spot.

Bubbles came out a few meters in front of Khan before a proper hole opened. The water had merely carried the primal nature of his mana and expressed it in a different spot, but that seemingly meaningless reaction sounded like a proper statement to him.. It was as if the lake had given an answer.

Chapter 356 - Trust

Khan couldn't hide his surprise, or, rather, he couldn't think about his reactions when the entirety of his attention was on the lake. He wanted to give some meaning to the recent event, but he failed to translate that answer even after putting his whole self into it.

"[What even happened]?" Khan wondered as he struggled to accept the recent event.

"[The mana heard your request]," Jenna softly explained.

Khan wanted more than that short explanation. He had already expanded his mindset once after learning the Niqols' approach, but that new path went in a completely different direction.

Understanding what had happened wasn't too problematic. Khan knew that the mana as a whole was a deep and complicated topic. He would be the first to claim that he was still ignorant about it, even if his knowledge was far above human standards.

The issue came from the lack of tangible connection between his action and the lake's reaction. Spells and similar techniques would always leave a trail of mana that Khan could study or follow, but the recent event almost entirely lacked that aspect.

Khan had sent mana into the water, and the lake had reacted almost on its own. To put it into simple words, Khan had increased the amount of chaos in the environment until a natural reaction unfolded.

That reasoning still had flaws that Khan couldn't ignore. Usually, the chaos element would cause abrupt reactions that messed with the environment's harmony. However, the recent event had been in line with the symphony. It had been an active part of that melody.

'Can I actually destroy without destroying?' Khan wondered as questions connected to the very nature of his element filled his mind.

"[What is it]?" Jenna asked since Khan remained silent.

"[I'm trying to make sense of what just happened]," Khan revealed.

"[You won't get anywhere if you use your human perspective]," Jenna scolded.

"[But I need to try]," Khan stated. "[I can't abandon my knowledge to embrace yours. I already carry two perspectives. I can add a third]."

Jenna couldn't argue with that. Khan wasn't a Nele, and asking him to become one would be unfair toward his past experiences. Assimilating different approaches and turning them into a single path was no easy feat, but she had to respect his decision.

'So,' Khan tried to summarize, 'I can use the mana as mere energy, and I can acknowledge its different natures to manipulate it according to my desires. Yet, I can also obtain similar effects by talking to it. Does this make any sense?'

It didn't make any sense, but Khan couldn't deny what had just happened and what Jenna had shown before. The mana could act on its own if he asked nicely enough.

"[What can you do through this approach]?" Khan asked while glancing at the face lying on his shoulder. "[I understand that the mana consumption is low, but what are the limits of these arts]?"

"[Do you mean in terms of power]?" Jenna questioned before raising her free arm and pointing her finger at a spot in the distance.

Khan saw and sensed mana leaving Jenna's arm to fuse with the water and flow alongside it. The lake didn't oppose that invasion at all. It almost looked happy to accept the faint requests carried by Jenna's energy.

The mana gathered in a distant spot before creating two slim currents of water that left the lake's surface and intertwined as they rose higher in the air.

The currents created large arcs whenever they touched, but they didn't lose water during the process. They appeared almost solid as they continued to rise to build a simple and tall transparent structure.

Jenna didn't let the demonstration end there. She pointed her forefinger at the structure and waved it left and right as she sent more requests. She appeared connected with the mana in the distance, so the water reacted without delay.

Drops fell from the various arcs and ended on the intersections below before giving birth to simple figures. A tree, a dome, and a hut appeared in the spaces delimited by the currents, but the structure never trembled during the process.

The level of control necessary to build something similar made Khan's mind go blank, but he quickly recalled that the demonstration didn't involve that field. Jenna wasn't using her mana to order the water around. She was asking the lake to create that structure.

The approach allowed Jenna to use less mana and limited her mental efforts. Something so complicated was easier than a human spell for her, and Khan could confirm that by how relaxed Jenna's body remained through the whole process.

"[I realize it might be strange for you]," Jenna admitted as she lowered her free arm to make the structure crumble back into the lake. "[Establishing a conversation with the mana and voicing requests is as easy as breathing for me. I barely have to think to do things like this]."

"[Is the same with synthetic mana]?" Khan wondered.

The Nele didn't use those exact words to describe synthetic mana, but Jenna understood what Khan meant, so she quickly answered. "[The fake mana makes things both easier and harder. It's easier to establish a conversation, but it's harder to produce powerful effects through it]."

"[Because it lacks innate natures]," Khan declared.

"[Exactly]," Jenna uttered while lifting her head to shoot a pleased glance at Khan. "[You did understand then]."

"[I'm still wrapping my mind around it]," Khan sighed. "[I think I need to experience talking with the mana a bit more before getting a clear idea]."

"[You can do it here]," Jenna revealed. "[We won't kick you out after introducing you to our customs]."

"[Thank you]," Khan smiled, and Jenna revealed a similarly warm expression.

"[It's quite late already]," Jenna eventually announced. "[Should we get out]?"

"[Sure]," Khan limited himself to say, and the two slowly left the lake. Of course, Jenna made sure to remain close to him through the whole process.

"[Don't wear those]," Jenna said when Khan wanted to reach for his clothes on the ground. "[I'm sure someone will bring new clothes when we wake up]."

"[I think I won't sleep]," Khan revealed. "[If it's not a problem, I'll spend the night training here. I can't stop now]."

"[So, we won't sleep together]," Jenna added in a disappointed tone.

"[Why would we sleep together]?" Khan scolded, but Jenna laughed as she clung tightly to his arm.

"[Fine]," Jenna continued to laugh. "[I'll sleep on your lap while you try to talk with the mana]."

"[Do you realize that we are still naked]?" Khan commented.

"[You'll have an easier time connecting with nature like this]," Jenna pointed out. "[Also, you'll be too worried about hurting me to fail if I remain here]."

"[I know that you have far naughtier thoughts]," Khan complained.

"[I know that you have already given up]," Jenna joked, and Khan could only sigh at that answer.

"[You are impossible]," Khan eventually whispered.

"[Aren't you enjoying this]?" Jenna asked as she left Khan's shoulder.

Khan could see Jenna in her entirety again. She was still holding his hand, but his attention inevitably fell on the drops running over her smooth skin and curves. Many would kill to get a glimpse of that perfect beauty, but he was there, treating her as an honest friend.

"[It's really hard at times]," Khan admitted, "[But it becomes incredibly relaxing when I can ignore some stuff]."

"[It's the same for me]," Jenna exclaimed while glancing at Khan's groin. "[I'm getting used to seeing it]."

"[That's not something you should brag about]," Khan scolded, but his voice transformed into a laugh when Jenna jumped on his neck to hug him closely.

"[Thank you for indulging me]," Jenna whispered. "[I thought this stress would remain with me until I found my one]."

Khan never underestimated Jenna's urges. He was open-minded enough to understand that her curse had deep repercussions on her character, but he realized how profound they were only now.

Khan didn't do anything special in his view, but Jenna appeared genuinely grateful. His mind instinctively ignored the soft sensations pressing on his chest as he reached her hair to caress it.

"[Don't get so serious about it]," Khan sighed. "[We are friends, right]?"

"[So, can I sleep on your lap]?" Jenna asked while breaking the hug to make their foreheads touch.

"[Sure]," Khan agreed, "[But watch your hands. We don't want your future loved one to say that I've defiled you]."

"[I can't fall in love soon enough]," Jenna cursed.

Khan laughed before sitting cross-legged on the ground. Jenna didn't hesitate to lay her head on his lap, and he adjusted it to make sure that it remained as far away as possible from his manhood.

"[How does it work with attacks]?" Khan asked as he caressed Jenna's hair and went back to the main topic.

"[We fill the environment with more mana]," Jenna explained. "[I can use attacks even in the absence of water. The mana in the air can gain its nature easily]."

"[What happens in the absence of mana]?" Khan wondered.

"[We surround ourselves with our energy and create a small environment]," Jenna responded. "[Our attacks won't be as strong in those conditions, but we won't be powerless either]."

'Maybe that's how they contained them during their years in slavery,' Khan thought. 'I guess I can't avoid learning their weaknesses.'

"[What about your predictions]?" Khan continued.

"[That's a complicated topic]," Jenna stated as she turned to face the ceiling and seize Khan's left arm in her grasp. "[All the Nele are born with innately high sensitivity to mana, but there are rare talents even among us. I'm one of them]."

"[Do you sense deeper aspects of the mana]?" Khan guessed.

"[No, it's more about memorizing patterns]," Jenna explained. "[I've seen most of Milia 222. I know how its environments feel, so I replicate its layout in my mind. As for the predictions, I add a variable to that and see how it transforms]."

"[Chaos in my case]," Khan stated.

"[I don't know what it will involve]," Jenna revealed in a vaguely apologetic tone. "[I don't even know if it will happen. I wish I could tell you more]."

"[I wish you would let go of my arm]," Khan reassured Jenna through a joke.

"[It's like you are hugging me]," Jenna giggled as she squeezed Khan's arm, uncaring that it pressed on her chest.

"[Sleep already]," Khan ordered. "[We'll have more time to talk tomorrow]."

Jenna smiled before turning to her side and closing her eyes. Initially, she struggled a bit, and Khan could even feel her skin heating up. Yet, she eventually relaxed and began to approach her slumber.

Khan had to limit his caresses to Jenna's arms since every spot around them would lead to impure thoughts. The fact that they were both naked remained a constant distraction too, but deeper thoughts made their way inside his mind as he managed to ignore those aspects.

'What would have happened if I met her before Liiza?' Khan wondered while inspecting Jenna.

The answer arrived quickly. Khan knew that he would have fallen for Jenna. Her honesty, beauty, and innate understanding of his situation weren't details he could ignore.

Jenna was also kind. Khan couldn't see much during their short interaction, but he had realized how she tried to make him comfortable even when she pursued personal interests.

Moreover, Jenna's radical idea of love matched Khan's dark side. She was probably more extreme than her peers due to her talent as a fortune-teller, so Khan knew that she could accept him in his entirety.

Yet, Liiza was even more than that. If Khan had to compare the two women, Liiza remained above. She shared his lack of trust toward her own species, which made her unique even among the Niqols.

'Friends doesn't sound too bad,' Khan eventually thought. 'I might even prefer that right now. At least George isn't here to mock me.'

Jenna eventually relaxed until she fell asleep, and Khan waited a few minutes before focusing on what he had learnt that night. He closed his eyes and spent a decent amount of time studying the environment before attempting to release mana.

Of course, Khan's approach to the training was extra careful. Jenna was defenseless right now, so a mistake on his side might hurt her seriously.

Khan waited until he felt confident avoiding mistakes before striving to repeat what he had achieved in the lake. He still recalled the sensations that had established the first connection with the mana, but replicating them turned out to be complicated.

That outcome felt almost natural since Khan had already experienced his first time. His worry mostly came from Jenna's position, and his shyness couldn't be as honest as before. Moreover, he lacked actual favors to ask the mana.

Khan didn't want anything specific from the mana around him since he only knew how to destroy with the chaos element. He preferred to obtain a mere reaction in the water nearby or something similar instead of damaging the Nele's home, so he focused on that.

The immersion into the area's symphony wasn't too hard to achieve, but Khan had to invest hours in reestablishing a connection. Still, he rejoiced whenever his mana caused a faint gust of wind or a slight tremor on the lake's surface.

Those small reactions were enough to give Khan an idea of what worked during his attempts. They slowly allowed him to establish a method that went beyond the mere "talking to mana" preached by the Nele.

Ideas on how to fuse that approach with Khan's arts appeared, but he kept them in the back of his mind for now. He wanted to prioritize getting used to and learning more about the Nele's methods before finding common points and building on them. Yet, everything felt promising, which made him work even harder.

Spending entire nights training had become a standard part of Khan's routine, and the new project made him forget about the passage of time. That isolated environment didn't help either since it replicated Milia 222's constant illumination. The morning arrived, but he realized that only when a figure approached his position.

"[Hi]," Khan announced when he turned to glance at a young Nele carrying changes of clothes.

The boy wasn't older than thirteen, and he expressed no curiosity for Jenna's naked figure. He could only see her back from his position, but his attention remained fixed on how close she was to Khan.

The boy placed the clothes on the ground when he managed to ignore that scene, but his attention eventually went back on it. He appeared hesitant, and Khan finally decided to address the matter.

"[Is something wrong? Do you want to ask me something]?"

The hesitation vanished at that question, and the boy stopped holding back. "[Are you two lovers]?"

"[No, we are just friends]," Khan replied without forgetting to wear a reassuring smile.

"[Can we trust you then]?" The boy continued.

The curiosity and worry carried in the boy's question left Khan speechless. That behavior perfectly expressed how the Nele felt about foreigners. They didn't innately hate aliens, but they had grown up hearing awful stories about their history, which made them hesitant.

"[I'll do my best to earn your trust]," Khan declared since he couldn't find better words.

The boy seemed to like that answer. His face remained aloof, but he nodded before turning to run in the distance. A few voices mixed with the noise of the woods, but Khan couldn't hear much. He could only guess that the young Nele had reached some friends.

"[Why did you leave me on my own]?" Khan whispered as he stared at the spot where the boy had disappeared.

"[I wanted to see your reaction]," Jenna replied in a sleepy voice. "[You are good with kids]."

"[Don't get strange ideas already]," Khan sighed.

"[I had a wonderful dream]," Jenna exclaimed. "[We did so many things]."

"[Let go of my arm, and get dressed]," Khan scolded before his expression turned serious.

Khan couldn't get the boy's face out of his head. He felt terrible knowing that someone so young had to live in fear of everything and everyone past that small settlement. He almost didn't realize that a few words left his mouth while he remained immersed in those thoughts. "[I meant it.. I'll earn your trust]."

Khan and Jenna wore the clothes brought by the boy. The Nele didn't seem to care about appearances in the settlement, so the two ended up with similar baggy dark jumpers and flexible trousers.

The quality of the clothes was nowhere near what Luke had given to Khan. The jumper's rough fabric scratched his skin, but he didn't mind that. He had worn far worse in the Slums. Besides, everything felt quite comfortable even if it was clearly cheap.

Khan had developed the habit of planning schedules, especially for his training, but Jenna didn't give him the time to think. As soon as they finished dressing up, she took his hand and led him across the woods to return to the main path.

A surprising and slightly heartwarming sight unfolded in Khan's vision when he reached the main path. The settlement had a relatively large circular square at its center, and multiple Nele gathered there to have their breakfast.

"[Come]," Jenna pulled Khan as multiple gazes fell on them.

Khan couldn't help but feel a bit out of place in that situation. The square had four large tables on one side, and fires flickered on them. A few Nele fed ingredients to the flames before gathering the liquid coming out of their bases into wooden bowls.

Long lines stretched from the tables. The Nele in the settlement orderly approached the fires and grabbed the bowls handled by those in charge of serving the breakfast.

It was clear that the procedure involved the Nele's customs, so Khan didn't want to join it after a mere day spent in the settlement. However, his opinion and desires didn't matter when Jenna kept his hand firmly sealed in her grasp.

Khan and Jenna got in one of the lines under everyone's watchful gazes. No one complained, but it was still hard to ignore the only foreigner in that usually quiet part of the day.

The Nele behind the tables didn't hold himself back from inspecting Khan either. He looked as old as Caja but not as gentle or open-minded. He hesitated to hand a bowl to Khan, but Jenna seized it from his hands and put an end to the issue.

"[They'll get used to it]," Jenna reassured in an apologetic tone when she led Khan to a relatively isolated spot in the square.

"[I don't blame them]," Khan stated as he sat on the ground and briefly inspected his surroundings.

Khan had sat because the Nele on the square had done the same. They had formed groups in different spots on the ground to enjoy their breakfast and talk. Still, their conversations were nothing more than whispers interrupted by random glances in Khan's direction.

"[It's usually louder]," Jenna revealed as she sat on Khan's right.

"[I can imagine that]," Khan uttered. "[It's fine. I would be far more suspicious in their situation]."

"[Give them time]," Jenna sighed as she placed her head on Khan's shoulder. "[They can sense what you are. They won't take long to trust you]."

"[Shouldn't you eat]?" Khan scolded.

"[I can eat like this if you stay still]," Jenna giggled as she neared her bowl to her mouth.

The breakfast was nothing more than a fuming dark-green soup that radiated appealing scents. Khan sniffed his bowl a few times before taking a short sip.

A storm of flavors filled his mouth, but a hot sensation soon suppressed them. The breakfast was almost scorching, but it didn't burn Khan. Moreover, it seemed to reinvigorate his slightly tired mind.

'Their cuisine is more than simple food,' Khan thought. 'They use their arts even on soups.'

Even the Niqols didn't go as far as using the mana in their meals, but Khan could find a few explanations for that. The Nele's approach suited those daily occurrences more, and there was a chance that the Niqols had something similar in their old ways.

Khan almost wolfed down the soup. It was delicious, and its high temperature didn't hinder his actions. Yet, Jenna eventually joked and forced him to take a short break. "[Not so quickly. Enjoy it properly]."

Even after the joke, Khan still emptied his bowl before everyone else. He couldn't get rid of that old habit so quickly, but he swore to do his best when among Nele. He could see how they didn't appreciate his quick meals too much.

Jenna took her time with her bowl, and her head never left Khan's shoulder. Khan tried to study his surroundings a bit more, but a bit of the soup spilled on Jenna's cheek due to her odd position, which forced him to move his attention back on her.

The Nele on the square almost couldn't believe how naturally Khan pulled his jumper's sleeve to clean Jenna's cheek. His actions carried no hesitations, and Jenna's behavior lacked discomfort or annoyance. Her evident acceptance almost showed how deeply she trusted Khan.

Caja had made an official announcement the previous night without adding many details. She had only stated that he wasn't a threat, but the Nele on the square felt that there was more to it. Some even managed to connect his presence to their recent stashing of supplies.

Curiosity inevitably built up in the Nele's minds. They shared Jenna's urges and interest in foreigners, but they didn't feel ready to drop their barriers just yet. However, they didn't hold back from studying the situation as much as possible.

Jenna didn't say much after finishing her meal. She continued to rest on Khan's shoulder as traces of drowsiness appeared on her face. Khan didn't know what to do without her directives, but the cute scene eventually led him to cuddle her a bit.

Of course, those intimate gestures only intensified the curiosity and surprise in the Nele on the square. The whispers grew louder, but Khan never managed to hear complete sentences.

Nele came and left the square as the breakfast continued, but all of them showed similar reactions at the sight of Khan and Jenna teasing each other. She often laughed, while Khan mostly scolded her, but his hands never left her hair or neck.

Jenna stood up only once the breakfast ended and the Nele began to remove the tables. She led Khan back into the woods and toward an isolated small hut that worked as a public bathroom.

The small bathroom featured a small pond that changed its water after every use and a hole that emptied itself on its own. Nothing there involved technology, which allowed Khan to confirm that the Nele could leave lasting orders even in materials like ground or water.

After that short stop, Jenna led Khan in an area they had already crossed a few times. The two soon found themselves at the edges of a relatively empty spot in the middle of the woods, with young Nele sitting on the ground as they listened to the words of an older alien.

Khan and Jenna's arrival made the older Nele fall silent, but Jenna promptly nodded to make her resume her speech. Khan quickly understood that the gathering was nothing more than a teaching session meant to instruct the younger generations about the Nele's ways.

A few core differences from the Niqols became evident as the lesson progressed. The Nele were born with high sensitivity to mana, but they still practiced to improve it. Yet, their exercises often involved personal conversations with the energy in their surroundings instead of a raw gathering of information.

Similar differences appeared when the lesson moved to the control field. The Nele's exercises focused on expressing orders and desires that the mana around them had to follow. They still delved into training aimed to enhance their overall ability to move their energy, but they appeared a bit superficial.

The manipulation field wasn't any different. The Nele's focus was on their surroundings since that's where their arts expressed their power. They didn't care about turning slaps into punches or anything similar as long as the mana in the environment could fulfill their requests.

Khan knew that everything explained during that lesson was quite secretive. The Global Army had gathered deep intel in the Nele's arts, but hearing a proper teacher gave an entirely different perspective.

Khan memorized all the words that reached his ears as he leaned on a tree at the training area's edges. Jenna stood at his side, but she respected the silence of the lesson and held back from teasing Khan to let him concentrate on those explanations.

Each lesson transformed and gained different shapes when it entered Khan's mind. He had the unique advantage of inspecting the matter from three different perspectives, so he dissected everything he heard and studied it through his broader knowledge.

Weaknesses inevitably became evident. Khan could see the shortcomings of the Nele's approach without even looking too hard for them. The synthetic mana alone could lower their offensive power, and achieving true mastery of their arts required harsh training since youth.

Still, the Nele's innate talents made those weaknesses less relevant. Humans or even Niqols would have a hard time becoming truly strong through those arts, but the Nele were an exception. That was the very reason behind the direction of their training.

The lesson lasted a few hours. The teacher alternated explanations to exercises when he corrected her students' approach to the field. It was nothing special, but Khan still immersed himself in the scene since it brought him back to his time in [The Pure Trees].

"[Today's lesson is over]," The middle-aged teacher eventually announced before turning toward the tree where Khan and Jenna were standing. "[Jenna, do you want to add something]?"

"[Sure]," Jenna gently exclaimed as she left the tree and showed smiles while walking among the sitting students to reach the teacher.

"[You all know Jenna]," The teacher stated. "[She is often busy on the other asteroids to keep track of Milia 222's situation, but her talent is greater than mine. Her insights in the mana are lessons that you can't miss]."

"[Thank you, Pascatte]," Jenna replied, "[But I won't share my insights today]."

Khan was enjoying seeing Jenna receiving so much respect, but his expression froze when she pointed at him and expressed her intentions. [Today, I want you to listen to a different perspective. Khan is a remarkable human. I'm sure you can learn something from him]."

The situation became incredibly awkward when all the Nele in the training area turned to look at Khan. He didn't expect Jenna to put him into that situation, but he forced himself to calm down and play along.

Khan left the tree to walk among the students while paying extra attention not to touch any of them. He soon reached Jenna and Pascatte, but he only found curious and distrustful gazes waiting for him. Even Pascatte didn't hide her reluctance.

Khan had learnt a lot from his time on Reebfell, and he had even taught the Niqols' arts to Martha. Still, holding a class of Nele forced him to summon the entirety of his knowledge. He couldn't expand on the topics touched during the lesson, but he didn't want to make a pointless speech either.

The students' innocent faces made Khan forget about the eventual political implications of that situation. He focused on what he liked about his previous job and fused those emotions with the honest desire to help those young Nele.

They deserved his lessons even more than the humans, so Khan didn't hold anything back.

"[Your approach to mana is marvelous]," Khan declared, doing his best not to ruin his accent. [However, it heavily relies on your environment and your innate abilities. I think you can improve the exercises targeting your individual control]."

Khan showed his hands and pulled down his sleeves before summoning a small lump of mana on each palm. Then, he moved those small spheres over his skin and made them circle his fingers a few times.

No one seemed to care about the odd shades of Khan's mana. The students actually appeared captivated by how easily he moved his energy over his body. Even Pascatte didn't hide her interest as she bent forward to get a clearer line of sight.

Jenna smiled when she noticed those reactions and took a silent step back to let Khan claim everyone's attention. Pascatte could straighten her back at that point, and she even glanced at her hands while thoughts ran through her mind.

"[You all can do this]," Khan declared once his demonstration ended. "[Why don't you try]?"

The students glanced at Pascatte, who nodded and triggered a series of attempts to replicate Khan's exercise. Sadly, all of them failed since the young Nele instinctively tried to rely on the environment to achieve that level of control.

'They are too used to controlling the mana outside their body,' Khan sighed in his mind. 'Maybe this exercise opposes their training too deeply.'

"[Khan, right]?" Pascatte called, interrupting Khan's thoughts. "[Can you show the exercise again]?"

Khan didn't expect that request, but he didn't let that chance go. He promptly repeated the exercise, and Pascatte didn't hesitate to get closer to him to study his hands carefully.

"[This might have potential]," Pascatte whispered. "[Can you be more specific on the execution]?"

Khan didn't know how to fulfill Pascatte's request. He could guide her through the exercise, but that would require physical contact. The only solution was to use Jenna as a middle-man.

"[Jenna, give me your hand]," Khan requested as he turned toward Jenna.

Jenna's face seemed on the verge of lighting up due to how happy she was to see Khan slowly finding his place in her home. She didn't hesitate to step forward to help him out, but Pascatte surprisingly got in her way.

"[Use me]," Pascatte exclaimed while stretching an arm toward Khan.

The request left even Jenna stunned, but she didn't say anything. She only felt a bit anxious to see Khan's first real interaction with someone other than herself.

"[Is that a problem]?" Pascatte asked when she saw that Khan hesitated.

"[Not at all]," Khan quickly replied as he carefully took the back of Pascatte's hand in his grasp.

Some students gasped when they saw that interaction, and Khan also felt that Pascatte suppressed an instinctive reaction to keep her hand in his grasp. Still, he ignored all of that to perform his task to the best of his capabilities.

"[Summon your mana]," Khan ordered. "[Let me guide it]."

Pascatte made some of her mana seep past her palm, and Khan sent gentle waves of energy to give it a spherical shape and move it across her skin. Pascatte could experience the sensations generated by the exercise like that, and her knowledge would allow her to explain it to her students.

"[Interesting indeed]," Pascatte commented during the exercise.

"[I can continue if you need]," Khan revealed.

"[No, I think I got the gist of it]," Pascatte stated while retracting her hand. "[I need to study it a bit, but it should have the potential to improve a few exercises]."

Pascatte inspected the back of her hand for a second before lowering it and fixing her eyes on Khan to express her thoughts. "[Thank you]."

Khan nodded, and Pascatte kept her eyes on him for a few more seconds before turning to leave the training area. Her action told the students that the lesson was over, so they stood up and glanced at Khan before disappearing among the trees. Some waved at Jenna during the process, and she replied through warm smiles.

Once everyone left, Jenna jumped on Khan and hugged him from behind. He shared Jenna's excitement, so no rebuke let his mouth. He even turned to show his happy face to her.

"[That was great]!" Jenna giggled.

"[She let me touch her]," Khan incredulously stated.

"[I told you]," Jenna continued as she let Khan turn toward her completely before squeezing his neck. "[The others will accept you in no time]."

"[Maybe I can really help you out]," Khan guessed as he didn't shy back from replying to the hug.

"[Are you going all selfless now]?" Jenna teased before heaving a disappointed sigh.

"[What is it]?" Khan asked since he couldn't see Jenna's face.

"[You won't be all mine anymore once the others start to trust you]," Jenna complained.

"[I've never been all yours]," Khan snorted before ending up in a laugh.

"[I need to make the best out of this time together]," Jenna exclaimed while relaxing the hug to show her face to Khan. "[Let's get naked again]."

"[Slow down that naughty mind of yours]," Khan made their foreheads bump softly. "[We'll still be friends. That won't change even after you fall for someone]."

"[You are so good to me]," Jenna sighed. "[Can't we kiss or something]?"

"[You know we can't]," Khan scolded.

"[I know]," Jenna giggled. "[Still, I claim my right to pick your next partner. Don't think that you can go around kissing everyone just because you are a human]."

"[When did you get this right exactly]?" Khan wondered.

"[Let's go]!" Jenna laughed as she seized Khan's hand and began to pull him. "[We have to get naked]."

"[You are impossible]," Khan gave up and followed Jenna through the woods, unaware that a happy smile had taken control of his face.

Gossips spread throughout the settlement as the day went by. Caja's announcement from the previous night, Khan's statement to the young Nele, and the events in the training area created a curious picture that made everyone interested.

Khan clearly had good intentions. Moreover, the Nele's pheromones did not affect him. Jenna had also used her relatively prominent status to add value to Khan's presence by spending time with him.

Meanwhile, Khan and Jenna ended up in the lake again, but the two focused on his training. They still exchanged jokes from time to time, and they were often naughty, but they never crossed the line.

Khan noticed the changes in the general atmosphere as he attended lunch and dinner in the central square. Something was happening in the settlement, but a single day wasn't enough to cause anything significant.

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"[Good morning]," Jenna exclaimed in a sleepy tone as she stretched her arms before cuddling back on Khan's lap.

"[You should drop this before it turns into a habit]," Khan scolded as he inspected how closely Jenna got to his exposed groin.

"[I'll stop if you sleep with me instead of spending the night training]," Jenna suggested.

Khan studied Jenna's seemingly pure smile before adding something. "[With clothes]."

"[Naked]," Jenna bargained. "[It would be nice if you cuddled me too]."

"[The cuddles only come with the clothes]," Khan uttered.

"[I'll take naked then]," Jenna giggled as she adjusted her position on Khan's lap. "[I know you'll cuddle me anyway]."

"[Why do I even bother trying?]" Khan sighed as he caressed Jenna's head.

"[Don't stop]," Jenna teased. "[It's sweet to see you going all human on me]."

"[I had to choose the most twisted of the Nele as my friend]," Khan cursed.

"[I chose you]," Jenna corrected. "[And, no, you never had the option to reject me]."

"[Someone is getting arrogant]," Khan commented.

"[I'm opening up as I find new things I want to do with you]," Jenna revealed.

Khan didn't answer. He only felt happy that Jenna was having fun and was trusting him enough to show more of herself every day. Still, some concern suddenly appeared in his mind.

"[I'm not keeping you too busy, right?]" Khan asked. "[Don't you have some special tasks outside the settlement]?"

"[The Nele have survived here even before my birth]," Jenna stated. "[I can take some time off. Also, I'm working closely with a potential future ally. That's an important task]."

"[You are giving a hard time to a potential future ally]," Khan mocked while ruffling Jenna's hair.

"[I think the potential future ally is harder than me]," Jenna giggled as she peeked at Khan's groin from behind her messy hair.

Khan shook his head as he pushed Jenna's head back on his lap. Those jokes had no deeper meaning, and they were also becoming the norm when they were alone.

"[I'm more worried about you]," Jenna revealed when she stopped laughing. "[You came here with a group, right? Don't you have to update them about your status]?"

Khan froze when those words awakened thoughts and memories that had remained suppressed under the excitement toward the Nele's arts. He had forgotten something important mentioned on the reports.. His phone had no connection to the network inside that hidden dome.

Chapter 358 - Protect

The new approach to the mana, the interesting customs of the Nele, the lack of difference between day and night, and Jenna's company had kept Khan so busy that he had forgotten about a key detail from the reports. His phone had become useless as soon as he entered the underground dome.

Jenna understood something when she felt that Khan tensed up. She peeked past her messy hair to glance at his face, and she found him staring at her with wide eyes.

"[Where can I get some connection]?" Khan promptly asked.

"[Let's go]," Jenna exclaimed, and the two immediately stood up to reach their clothes lying on the ground.

Jenna didn't take Khan's hand at that time. She darted forward as soon as the two wore their baggy clothes, and Khan didn't hesitate to follow her.

Khan fished out his phone from his pocket, but he muttered a curse when he saw that the screen didn't show any notification. He had hoped for something to be able to reach his device, but that wasn't the case.

Jenna was fast, and she knew the environment so well that she could use its mana to move swiftly among the trees. Khan could surpass her, but he had to remain behind her since he didn't know where to go.

The dome wasn't too small, but the two could reach its edge in less than thirty minutes when sprinting almost at full speed. The metallic wall that marked the end of that environment soon unfolded in Khan's vision, but he had to continue following Jenna for a bit longer to reach his destination.

Jenna eventually stopped in front of a purple symbol on the metallic wall. Pressing it revealed an entrance connected to a small room, and Jenna's explanation soon followed the event. "[You can link your phone to the walls inside, but we will keep track of your calls]."

Khan nodded before shooting inside the room. Dim purple light enveloped him, but he disregarded the new environment to look for an opening for his phone. He found it in an instant, and the sounds of multiple notifications rang as soon as he connected the device.

'Fuck me,' Khan cursed as he used the menus on the wall to expand his inbox and study it quickly.

The oldest message belonged to Monica. She had expressed her gratitude the morning after Khan stole Francis' bottle, but she didn't add anything else. It seemed that she was restraining herself after understanding that Khan didn't fully trust her.

What followed was far more troublesome. Monica, Martha, and Luke sent worried messages to check on Khan, but the lack of a connection to the network had made him unable to receive them.

Luke had also called a few times, especially the previous night. He was clearly worried, and Khan felt forced to contact him now that he had the chance.

The phone rang for a while, but a video soon appeared on the wall. Luke's sleepy face became visible right before a question resounded from the speakers. "Khan! Are you okay?!"

"Everything is fine," Khan reassured. "I've only lost track of the passage of time. It's hard to tell when days end if I don't sleep."

"Where are you?" Luke continued as he adjusted his position on the bed and tinkered with the illumination in his room. "I checked Milia 222's records. I know you have gone to the third asteroid, but I couldn't find anything else."

Khan glanced at the entrance, and Jenna nodded. Khan could bring his eyes back on the screen as he summarized what he could. "I'm in the Nele's home. I think they might know something useful."

"The Nele?" Luke gasped before noticing Khan's baggy clothes. "I see. How is the investigation going?"

"I'm getting somewhere," Khan half-lied. "I'm sorry for disappearing. I realized that I had no connection only a few minutes ago."

"Don't worry about that," Luke sighed. "It would be strange if you got used to Milia 222 so quickly. Everything is fine as long as you are okay."

"I'll try to come back with news as soon as possible," Khan promised.

"Sure, do what you have to do," Luke stated. "The others have yet to find anything, so don't rush it. I never expected the investigation to end quickly anyway."

"Do you have any news worth mentioning?" Khan asked.

"Not really," Luke revealed. "Everyone is struggling to approach specific activities. I'm trying to use my influence to help them, but it's too soon to know if it will work."

"I'll do my best on my end then," Khan declared.

"Alright," Luke exclaimed. "I'll tell the others that you called. Good hunt."

Khan showed a confident smile before closing the call. A sigh escaped his mouth as he retrieved the phone. He felt lucky that Luke was so permissive toward him, but that emotion vanished when he recalled what he was willing to do to bring him there.

"[Is everything okay]?" Jenna asked from outside the room.

"[Yes, I'm good]," Khan replied as he browsed through the inbox. Martha and Monica probably wanted answers, but he would let Luke handle that part. He didn't have the time to have long conversations anyway.

"[He sounded relaxed]," Jenna commented as Khan left the room and the entrance closed behind him.

"[That's just because he was talking to me]," Khan explained. "[I think I need to get back on the mission]."

"[Do you want to see Caja]?" Jenna wondered as she took Khan's hand.

"[Is it possible]?" Khan asked.

"[She is definitely awake]," Jenna stated. "[Come. I'll bring you to her]."

The walk that followed was far more relaxed. Jenna even respected Khan's pensive state by remaining silent and letting him sort out his thoughts.

'I'm not here on holiday,' Khan cursed himself for forgetting about such an important detail. 'I'm not free to do what I want.'

Khan wouldn't hesitate to exploit eventual opportunities, but the situation had been far different now. He had almost completely forgotten about his mission, and he couldn't allow it to happen again.

Still, Khan knew how thorough and serious he was. He didn't forget about Martha and the mission because he didn't care about them. He had simply found something that he liked far more, which spoke loudly about his personality.

'I really love studying alternative approaches of mana and immersing myself in alien customs,' Khan confirmed while glancing at Jenna. 'I guess that's who I am.'

"[What is it]?" Jenna asked when she sensed Khan's gaze on her.

"[Thank you]," Khan replied in a plain tone.

Jenna turned to search for an explanation behind that sudden statement, but Khan kept an aloof face while his eyes remained on the path ahead. Jenna didn't get her answers, but she felt that atmosphere had warmed up, so she slowed her pace while placing her head on his shoulder.

The two didn't speak anymore. They resembled a lovely couple as they strolled through the woods, but they both knew that their relationship only involved friendly affection.

Khan didn't want to put what he felt into words. Something told him that he would ruin that emotion if he tried. Still, his gestures expressed how grateful he was for how openly Jenna had welcomed him. Khan wouldn't have reached that deeper understanding of his character otherwise.

Jenna led Khan in a thriving area of the woods. The grass was taller there, and the presence of many trees forced them to jump or change direction to reach their destination.

Everything felt vibrant there. Khan couldn't help but notice how the vegetation seemed more lively, and he soon confirmed that the cause wasn't internal. Something was giving the various plants more energy.

The source of that strange phenomenon became evident when a crouched figure appeared in the distance. Caja had her forehead and hands on the ground while she sent delicate waves of mana into the whole environment.

Khan wanted to get closer to inspect the procedure, but Jenna made him stop to avoid disturbing Caja. The two remained silent as they marveled at the massive amount of energy that Caja spread in her surroundings.

"[It's getting harder to influence everything with my power alone]," Caja announced at some point while straightening her position to sit on the ground. "[Someone will need to replace me in a few years]."

Khan had already vaguely understood what Caja was doing, but her words brought a wave of surprise in his mind. Apparently, she was using her mana to influence and control the harmony of the environment under the dome.

Khan had seen other fourth-level warriors. He had even met soldiers stronger than Caja. Yet, he felt sure that none of them could accomplish something so complicated. They simply lacked the amount of mana required by the procedure.

However, Caja didn't rely on the sheer power of her mana. The environment helped her and worked according to her wishes. She only had to spread her requests throughout the woods, and the latter would do the rest.

'Amazing,' Khan exclaimed in his mind since he felt unable to say anything.

"[So, how does our humble home look?]" Caja asked while turning to face Khan and Jenna.

Jenna finally led Khan forward, and the two joined Caja on the ground. Jenna sat next to her while Khan occupied a spot in front of the two women.

"[Your customs are incredible]," Khan admitted. "[I can't express how grateful I am for this chance to learn them]."

"[Pascatte told me that you didn't only learn from us]," Caja responded before showing her hand and performing the exercise that Khan had taught the previous day. "[This is indeed interesting. The new generations will benefit from it]."

"[I'm glad that I could help]," Khan politely uttered. "[I'll try to come up with other exercises as I learn more about your approach to mana]."

"[That's some determination]," Caja chuckled. "[Do you like us so much? Or, maybe, is this about someone in particular]?"

"[We are only friends]," Jenna declared.

"[You sure are having a lot of fun for being only friends]," Caja laughed. "[It must be nice to be young]."

"[I wouldn't dare to do anything improper]," Khan reassured.

"[I think you have already gone past that]," Caja teased. "[It's fine. I approve as long as you are both having fun. It's actually heartwarming seeing a Nele and a human getting so close]."

Caja heaved a sigh and stretched her neck to disperse the stiffness accumulated during the procedure, but a question soon left her mouth. "[So, why did you come to see me]?"

"[I need to talk about work]," Khan explained. "[As much as I enjoy being here, I can't disregard the reason why I flew to Milia 222 in the first place]."

"[Can't you?]" Caja questioned. "[Do you have special obligations toward the humans? You didn't seem too attached to your species]."

Caja's words revealed how she was vaguely inclined to let Khan remain there, but he couldn't accept that offer. His nightmares wouldn't go away even in that peaceful environment.

"[I need the humans]," Khan revealed, "[At least for now]."

"[I see]," Caja whispered and remained silent for a second before continuing. "[Well, that might be for the best. It can only benefit us if you gain some relevance among your species]."

"[I won't forget what you did for me]," Khan swore.

Caja studied Khan's expression for a few seconds before feeling satisfied. She nodded, and Khan expressed his request. "[Some human investigators came here months ago. A few Orlats told them that you might have had answers, but you didn't help them]."

"[Oh, yes, I remember them]," Caja announced without hiding her annoyance. "[They were very human]."

"[I'm here for the same reasons]," Khan declared.

"[I remember them talking about stolen goods]," Caja uttered, "[Stolen goods that probably involved illegal skin. They thought we might know something about it]."

"[Do you]?" Khan asked.

"[We know by not knowing]," Caja explained. "[The other species on Milia 222 know that we don't like the topic, so they try to avoid smuggling those goods in front of us]."

"[So, you don't really know]," Khan guessed.

"[We might have a few leads]," Caja stated. "[Though, they might not involve what you are looking for. A lot of illegal materials end up reaching Milia 222. It's not easy to search for something specific unless you know the right people]."

Khan could only nod. He knew that questioning the Nele only had a faint chance to bring answers, but he had to try anyway.

"[Why are you looking for these materials]?" Caja continued.

"[It's only a job]," Khan revealed. "[I was simply hired]."

"[Are you okay with these practices]?" Caja wondered.

"[I have learnt what the mission involved only after landing here]," Khan revealed.

"[That's not what I asked]," Caja coldly answered. "[Would you have accepted the job if you knew what it involved]?"

Khan kept his eyes on Caja and let her inspect him. He knew that the topic could create a crack in the relationship built during those days, but he couldn't lie now.

"[Yes]," Khan declared. "[I had to look over someone dear to me. I had to join this mission]."

"[Let me ask you something]," Caja sighed. "[If you learnt that the illegal skin came from the Nele, what would you do]?"

Khan didn't expect that question, but his gaze instinctively moved on Jenna. She showed nothing more than a warm smile, but Khan's eyes grew cold when he imagined that someone could kill her to get her skin.

The same went for the other Nele in the settlement. Khan didn't establish deep relationships with them, but they deserved peace. They had gone through too much to suffer again.

"[That's how we feel whenever we hear about these materials]," Caja revealed.

"[I don't condone these activities]," Khan replied as his gaze went back on Caja, "[But I'm too weak to do anything about them. I helped when I had the chance]."

Khan was obviously talking about the Niqols, but Caja didn't care. She had already made her decision, and she didn't hesitate to voice it. "[We might be able to help you if we encountered this material before]."

"[What]?" Khan gasped. "[Why]?"

"[Because you will tell us what you learn]," Caja declared. "[You might be weak, but we have some influence here. Your information might give us a chance to do something]."

Caja was basically asking Khan to double-cross the humans or act as a spy for them, and the suggestion didn't sound too bad. The mission only involved the thief. In theory, it didn't clash with Caja's request.

"[I can do that]," Khan announced. "[Just, I don't want to become a sacrificial pawn]."

Caja glanced at Jenna, and the latter quickly explained. "[He doesn't want us to sacrifice him for the sake of our mission]."

"[Oh]!" Caja chuckled. "[I'm really out of touch. Don't worry. That won't happen. I don't want Jenna to get angry at me]."

The atmosphere relaxed and allowed Khan to heave a sigh of relief. He nodded to express his stance, and both Jenna and Caja revealed smiles at that gesture.

"[Generally speaking]," Caja exclaimed, "[Most illegal goods arrive directly on the fourth asteroid]."

"[I thought the first asteroid was a mandatory landing area]," Khan pointed out.

"[That's a tricky topic]," Caja replied.

"[The hangar on the first asteroid is too small for big merchant ships]," Jenna added. "[Besides, each species has its secrets, so they can't let every ship reach public areas]."

Khan didn't know how to take that news. He knew that the fourth asteroid had an overall equal distribution of Milia 222's species, but his reports didn't reveal anything specific. Even the investigators didn't mention anything similar.

"[Don't be so surprised]," Caja continued. "[Some knowledge is available only to those living here or involved in specific activities. I'm sure your employers did their best, but even they couldn't tell you everything to avoid breaking secret deals]."

"[So, the fourth asteroid is a dock]," Khan summarized.

"[It's a huge dock]," Jenna explained. "[We don't have the greatest structures there, but the other species transport various goods]."

"[The initial idea was to control each other by having a single big dock]," Caja added. "[Yet, as time passed, we silently decided to do our best to ignore each other. Everyone could get a share of illegal activities like that]."

Khan believed to have reached a decent understanding of Milia 222 by that point, but those revelations forced him to review everything he had learnt.

On the surface, the seven asteroids were exactly as the reports described. Luke had even given Khan the best descriptions he could find. However, Milia 222 had an entire world hidden from the public that only those inside it could know.

Khan had to admit that he didn't find the matter surprising. He had seen how that underground dome had connections with ships that didn't come from the superior floors. Every species probably had something similar, and he wasn't even considering the wealthy individuals who had unique assets there.

"[I'll reunite with my group and see if I can understand what the illegal skin involves]," Khan uttered. "[Thank you for your help]."

"[The dock is quite secretive as a location]," Caja revealed. "[You won't get there easily. We might have some connections]."

"[I can't involve you]," Khan immediately refused. "[I'm afraid my employers might blame you for something]."

Caja seemed to like that answer, and the happy tone in her following words highlighted that detail. "[You might still fail to interact with our forces there. My authority alone might not be enough to make the Nele help you]."

"[I'll take my time to win them over]," Khan declared, but Caja had something else in mind.

"[Is this okay with you]?" Caja asked while turning toward Jenna.

"[I would have suggested it if you didn't say anything]," Jenna exclaimed.

"[I'll respect your wishes]," Caja nodded before turning toward Khan. "[Can I entrust her to you]?"

"[What]?! " Khan almost shouted as his eyes darted on Jenna. "[No, I can ask-]."

Khan couldn't complete his sentence. He could already imagine what Jenna would say to convince him, and he knew that he couldn't win against her.

"[I'll protect her]," Khan announced in a resolute tone.. "[I'll protect her even from my species]."

Chapter 359 Attention

The conversation led to immediate preparations. It was still early in the morning, and Khan didn't have much, so he and Jenna could depart from the underground dome in no time.

Jenna decided to change clothes, and she obviously requested Khan's help. She was going back to the surface, among other species, so she had to mind her appearance.

Her choice fell on a greyish dress that left her shoulders uncovered and ended in a long skirt. Khan literally had to put those clothes on Jenna since she didn't want to hear reasons, and some young Nele brought a simple backpack for her in the meantime.

The two didn't need anything else. Jenna led Khan toward the same elevator that he had used to reach the hidden dome. He didn't have to go through the whole cleaning procedure at that time, so he could quickly gain access to the spectacle hidden by Lower Level 1.

The secret door inside the shop opened and revealed the familiar transparent counter. A relatively young Nele stood behind it, and he didn't look surprised when he noticed Khan and Jenna. Khan actually felt to have seen him inside the dome.

"[Be safe out there]," The Nele announced when Khan and Jenna left the secret elevator.

Jenna revealed a smile as she led Khan toward the entrance. He only managed to exchange a glance with the Nele, but the latter made sure to nod at him during that instant.

'Maybe they are really starting to accept me,' Khan thought before another event distracted him.

Khan didn't particularly mind that Jenna always tried to hold his hand. He had even learnt to gain some comfort from that gesture during the past days, so he couldn't help but notice how abruptly she let go of him.

The whole aura around Jenna changed when she pushed the door open and left the shop. She went from her joyful and playful self to a stoic stance as soon as she stepped into the city.

Khan inevitably thought about their first meeting on the first asteroid. He recalled how distant and wary Jenna had been with him, but the sudden change still left him somewhat disappointed.

"[Do you miss me already]?" Jenna asked when she turned to look at Khan's curious gaze.

"[Maybe just a bit]," Khan admitted.

"[I'll remind you of these words once we are alone]," Jenna whispered as she suppressed the smile trying to make its way into her expression.

Khan also decided to wear an aloof expression as the two went back on the streets. He found more open shops compared to his last visit, but the scenery didn't change much.

There was only one odd detail in that scene, something that stood out from the otherwise purple environment. An Orlats dressed as a beggar rested in a corner free of the purple lights, and its attention immediately fell on Khan and Jenna.

"[Spies]," Khan commented while pretending to glance at one of the shops.

"[It's fine]," Jenna stated. "[This is our home. Orlats can't move too freely here]."

Khan could only agree with that statement. The Orlats probably had ointments or similar items that could help them resist the Nele's pheromones, but their freedom would obviously be limited on the third asteroid.

Still, the presence of the Orlats revealed an incredible truth. Khan was more than sure that no one had followed him back then, but a spy had still managed to trace him there.

'How quickly do they even exchange information?' Khan wondered before disregarding the matter to focus on more important issues.

Caja had stated that the Nele might help Khan as long as he learnt which material the factory used to produce the reinforced fabric. However, that wouldn't necessarily lead him to the thief.

The issue was far more complicated than that. Khan might find who smuggled the illegal skin and trace those who knew about it, but that would only set another starting point.

Knowing about the illegal skin didn't necessarily turn someone into a spy. The smugglers probably had nothing to do with the factory. Yet, the investigators had already cleared all the workers and chiefs. The absence of leads forced Khan to go deeper into the whole business.

There was also a chance that the Nele had found the actual reinforced fabric, but Khan didn't want to be too hopeful. He focused on his first step, which inevitably involved Luke.

"[I know you don't want to involve us]," Jenna eventually said as if she could sense what Khan was thinking, "[Yet, are you sure that your employers can get us into the dock]?"

"[They must]," Khan replied. "[The mission would be impossible otherwise]."

The walk through the city's streets seemed normal, but Khan noticed how the Nele inside the various shops looked at him differently now. He didn't know if Jenna's presence had influenced them, but he could see how those aliens carried less mistrust toward him.

Khan and Jenna didn't remain in the streets long enough to make him study the situation thoroughly. The two quickly headed for a parking area, where they took a cab with a Nele driver. Their trip inside the car went on silently, and Jenna even held herself back from exploiting that temporary privacy.

Everything changed when Jenna and Khan left the cab and used the elevator to reach the main street on the first floor. The third asteroid lacked the diversity of the previous two, but it still featured a few aliens from other species, and they couldn't keep their eyes off the scene.

Khan and Jenna weren't doing anything special. They were simply walking side by side, but that was enough to make the scene interesting.

The event was quite rare, especially since Khan was too young to be a prominent figure in the Global Army who could handle political relationships with the Nele. It didn't take long before murmurs started, and some aliens even picked up their devices to inform their factions.

"[Wait a second]," Jenna called before the two could enter the hangar.

Jenna browsed through her backpack to take out a clip that she attached to a strand of her hair. A couple of taps on the item made it light up and spread a purple glow that warned everyone nearby about her presence.

Khan's expression flickered when he noticed the slight sadness and annoyance that ran through Jenna's eyes. She clearly didn't like that procedure, but it was necessary when leaving the third asteroid.

"[I'm used to it]," Jenna reassured since she saw what Khan was thinking.

"[You might deserve some cuddles]," Khan sighed.

"[Another line to quote when we are alone]," Jenna joked, and the two entered the hangar to approach the short-distance teleports.

The general surprise and interest from before reappeared in a more evident and intense version after the two left the teleports. The hangar had a very diverse crowd, but Khan and Jenna seemed magnets able to attract everyone's attention.

"[What happened]?" Jenna commented as a short giggle found its way out of her mouth.

"[Oh]," Khan exclaimed when he understood that Jenna was talking about his spiked hair. "[I don't want to show my mana]."

Jenna and Caja knew about Khan's mana anomaly since they had seen him in action. They didn't address the issue, so Khan believed that his condition wasn't a proper illness in their culture. Yet, his answer didn't confuse Jenna, which revealed how she could connect his problem to his actions.

"[I'll be slow]," Jenna said in a sweet voice. "[Pay attention]."

Jenna placed a hand on Khan's head before sending faint requests to the synthetic mana around her. Her energy flowed slowly and culminated into a soft spark that made his hair fall.

"[Did you get it]?" Jenna asked while bringing her hand back to her side.

"[I might be able to replicate it with some training]," Khan confirmed.

"[I'll show it again later]," Jenna smiled before moving forward.

Khan followed her, and he even did his best to keep his gaze straight, but his senses caught the many gasping eyes fixed on him. Jenna had touched him in public, and the crowd couldn't hold back their surprise.

The rumors spread, and they incredibly reached the hangar's outsides before Khan and Jenna could exit it. The two found countless stares pointed at them as they made their way through the second asteroid, but they instinctively moved toward the nearest elevator to escape that situation.

Khan felt a bit guilty when he found himself thanking the purple light that accompanied Jenna. No one had dared to get close to them because of it. The crowd had actually moved away from their path as soon as they noticed them.

"[Is every day like this for you]?" Khan sighed in the privacy of the descending elevator.

"[It's usually easier]," Jenna explained. "[It's rare for us to walk with humans]."

"[You would be stressed even without your urges]," Khan stated.

"[That's the price we have to pay for sharing this home]," Jenna replied while taking Khan's hands. "[Though, Milia 222 has its perks at times]."

Khan didn't even try to hold back. Jenna's sweet face carried too much, and the elevator was still far away from the city. He pulled her until she fell into an unexpected hug.

"[Thanks]," Jenna softly whispered once she managed to immerse herself in the hug. She couldn't express how relaxing that gesture was for her, but she believed that Khan could understand her emotions.

The landing of the elevator forced the two to separate. The streets that followed didn't spare them from unwanted attention, and that problem continued during their wait in the parking area.

It was hard to find a cab with a Nele driver on the second asteroid, but Khan and Jenna didn't mind waiting a bit longer for something suitable to arrive. The alien didn't hide his surprise when he saw Jenna with a human, but he decided to remain silent and lead the two toward their destination.

Another problem appeared when Khan and Jenna stepped out of the cab. They had arrived in front of Luke's building, but Jenna's light wouldn't do much in that closed environment. However, Khan had no intention of leaving her outside.

"[I guess I need to use it]," Jenna announced even before Khan could mention the problem.

Khan remained silent while Jenna took out a cylindrical item from her backpack. She appeared disgusted at its sole sight, and her expression didn't improve when she pressed on its tip to spray a white gas all over her.

Khan was immune to Jenna's pheromones, but he couldn't fail to notice how her natural aura affected her surroundings, especially in an environment with synthetic mana. Yet, the spray suppressed that ability and slightly dimmed her innate beauty.

"[That's the ointment for the pheromones]," Khan exclaimed once Jenna put away the cylindrical item.

"[It always itches, especially on my face]," Jenna cursed without hiding her disgust. "[It's also a pain to remove. You'll have to scrub me properly later]."

"[Sure]," Khan replied, avoiding cracking jokes due to how disgusted Jenna appeared. "[Anything you ask]."

"[I didn't think you would turn so permissive]," Jenna uttered. "[I might decide to use this spray more often then]."

"[Don't push it]," Khan sneered. "[Come on. It's time to work]."

Khan only needed to show his phone to get him and Jenna inside the building. The main hall was empty, but waiters were probably on their way to welcome them. Still, Khan sent a message to Luke before approaching one of the couches with Jenna.

The waiters obviously arrived before Luke, and they showed their vast experience in the field by suppressing any type of surprise at Jenna's sight. The youngest struggled a bit, but Jenna and Khan didn't care.

Khan sent the waiters away, but the main hall didn't remain empty for too long. Familiar auras soon seeped out of the elevator, and the faces that followed failed to suppress their surprise.

Luke, Bruce, Monica, Francis, and Martha entered the main hall and remained stunned to see Khan and Jenna comfortably sitting on the couch. The presence of a Nele inside the building was shocking, but the group also remained surprised at how close the two looked.

"Khan!" Luke exclaimed after snapping out of his amazement. His social skills also kicked in and made him address Jenna with a polite "[Ma'am]".

The others didn't have poor social skills, but the surprising scene prevented them from using them to their full extent. They only nodded at Khan before imitating Luke's "[Ma'am]".

Jenna had gotten entirely into her part by then. She wasn't Khan's friend or a special guest now. She was a Nele inside a human structure, so she acted as detached as possible. She didn't even answer since she knew that Khan would take control of the conversation right away.

"Luke, we need to talk," Khan exclaimed as he stood up from the couch. "In private."

"Sure," Luke replied as his gaze darted between Khan and Jenna.

Khan bent toward Jenna to approach her ear and whisper words that his companions couldn't hear. "[I'll take care of this quickly]."

"[I'll wait for you here]," Jenna whispered as she placed an arm behind her waist.

Bruce and the others could only remain stunned once again. Khan didn't actually touch Jenna, but that didn't really matter when the two could get so close so comfortably.

Instead, Jenna's stance revealed how she wasn't comfortable around the group. Khan left her to reach Luke, but she had no intention of socializing. Bruce and the others could only remain silent as Khan warned them through a cold gaze and followed Luke to the nearest room.

"You are incredible!" Luke didn't hold back from shouting as soon as the metal door closed. "How did you get so close to a Nele in less than three days? You could write a book and become rich in an instant."

Khan didn't share Luke's happiness. He inspected Luke coldly for a few seconds before going straight to the point. "Why didn't you tell me about the dock on the fourth asteroid?"

Luke seemed to freeze, but he wasn't the type to come up with lies once caught red-handed. He heaved a sigh and wore his business face as a simple explanation left his mouth. "I told you that a lot of stuff is classified. Even I shouldn't know about the dock. I had to threaten one of the investigators in private to learn about it."

'So strict,' Khan commented in his mind before following with another cold remark. "Didn't you think we would have found the information useful?"

"Why?" Luke asked. "The dock sees all sort of illegal stuff, but it rarely exports. The reinforced fabric is also too precious to end up in that environment."

"How can you know that?" Khan questioned.

"Because the smugglers are easy to buy," Luke stated. "They usually refuse merch that is too hot, and you can't imagine how quickly the rumors about a well-paid job spread here."

'I sort of can now,' Khan thought while reviewing his trip back to the building. 'Also, the smugglers might not have known that the reinforced fabric was so precious.'

"How would smugglers even get inside the factory?" Luke continued. "You have seen the place. You can't get in there without multiple authorizations."

"I'm not saying that the smugglers have something to do with the thief," Khan pointed out, "But they might have leaked something to interested parties. I'm unable to look for all the potential culprits right now."

"You wouldn't get answers anyway," Luke revealed. "Smugglers rarely stay on Milia 222 for too long, and even the residents only do a few shifts a month. There are no official records either since everything is illegal, so finding who brought and unloaded related materials is impossible."

"I might have a way to find them," Khan stated before pointing at the door behind him. "The Nele might be able to help."

Luke felt a joke surging inside his mind, but the conversation was too serious even to make it reach his current thoughts. He could only mutter a confused "why?" while his face remained serious.

"Partial cooperation," Khan half-lied. "They help us search for the fabric, and we share information. They take things at heart when they involve skins and similar materials."

"Khan," Luke called before taking a moment to sort out his thoughts. "That's a dangerous game. They might blame my family if the Nele end up causing some major problem."

"I can act alone," Khan reassured. "Well, with Jenna. I only need you to get me in the dock."

Luke appeared conflicted about the matter. Khan's offer made sense, but it remained a faint hope. Moreover, it could lead to many problems if something goes wrong.

"How do you intend to proceed?" Luke asked as he turned to his right and placed a hand on his forehead to think.

Khan quickly voiced a simple list. "Enter the dock, question the Nele, question the smugglers, get new leads about the thief."

"This sounds ridiculous," Luke scoffed. "If you are right, these smugglers had meetings with members or representatives of important families. Someone will warn them, and you'll put yourself against powers that I can't keep at bay."

"Do you have other ideas?" Khan asked.

Luke's eyes darted back to Khan, but he didn't speak. The mission had yet to go anywhere, and Milia 222 was so secretive that even his connections were failing to put his companions inside illegal activities.

Luke felt sure that he would eventually succeed, but that would put his companions in danger anyway. The mission was nowhere near easy or safe, so Khan's offer was in line with its requirements.

The vague doubt that Khan was pursuing his goals crossed Luke's mind, but he had no right to voice it. He had basically forced Khan to come, so he needed to show trust to earn it.

"I honestly don't care about Milia 222's politics," Luke eventually announced. "Still, it's an important strategical point that my family can't lose. You'll need to lie if you get captured or worse."

"That's not a problem," Khan uttered.

"Also," Luke continued, "If you do put the blame on my family, I won't be able to affect the eventual consequences. The same goes if you stay silent, but my family suffers anyway. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"It won't be hard to pretend that I fell for a Nele," Khan declared.

Luke's business face trembled for an instant, but it stabilized when he voiced a question. "Did you?"

Khan wore a faint smirk that made Luke drop the matter and heave a loud sigh. He crossed his arms as thoughts ran through his mind. Khan had no idea how troublesome his request was, but that reaction revealed enough.

"I need some time to get you in the dock," Luke exclaimed at some point. "Also, the others did investigate in these days. It might help to hear their reports before the leaving."

"We can plan meetings," Khan agreed.

"Don't mention the dock during those meetings," Luke warned. "And, yes, the Nele can be there. I guess that's part of our cooperation."

"Correct," Khan replied.

"I swear," Luke declared. "I would have refused anyone. I agree only because you'll be on the field."

Khan wore his faint smirk again, but his lack of answer told Luke that the private meeting had ended. The two left the room to reunite with the group, and they found them in the same atmosphere as before.

"[Ma'am]," Luke took control of the conversation right after entering the main hall, and his good accent surprised even Khan. "[I'll have the best room in the whole building ready for you in no time]."

"There is no need for that," Jenna spoke in her perfect human language as she left the couch.

Bruce and the others opened a path for Jenna as she walked toward Khan, and their eyes widened in shock when she grabbed his elbow.

"I'll be with Lieutenant Khan," Jenna announced.

"I'll see you all later," Khan stated before glancing at Jenna. "[Let's go]."

Luke and the others couldn't speak. They even held their breath as Khan and Jenna reached the elevator and disappeared behind its metal doors.

Chapter 360 Meetings

"[Harder]," Jenna cried.

"[It will hurt if I go any harder]," Khan grunted.

"[Khan]," Jenna called in a pleading tone.

"[Fine]," Khan whispered. "[Brace yourself]."

Faint cries and even a few suppressed moans followed that exchange of words. Anyone would get a specific idea of what was happening when hearing that conversation and those tones, but that conclusion would be completely wrong.

Khan and Jenna were in the bathroom, under the shower, but they weren't doing anything sexual. Jenna had simply wanted his help to remove the spray from her skin, and he quickly discovered that the process wasn't as easy as it looked.

The gas had almost fused with Jenna's skin and hair, creating a slim layer that was hard to remove. Khan had to put real strength while scrubbing her with a soft sponge, but the process still took an entire hour.

Khan was also to blame for that lengthy process. He didn't want to hurt Jenna or rip off her hair, so he needed her reminders to put some real effort into the scrubbing.

"[I feel so clean]!" Jenna announced when she felt that Khan had removed all the itching gas from her.

Khan heaved a tired sigh and threw the sponge on the wet floor, but he soon found his hands full. Jenna didn't hesitate to jump on him to express her gratitude, and both of them had to muster the entirety of their self-restraint to suppress the urges caused by the naked hug.

"[Let's get you some clean clothes]," Khan stated as he stopped the water and left the shower while Jenna continued to cling to his neck and waist.

"[Clothes won't hide that thing pressing on my butt]," Jenna whispered to Khan's ear.

"[The others have no idea that your stoic face hides such a lewd mind]," Khan sighed.

"[I like how I can speak my thoughts freely with you]," Jenna giggled as she hid her face in Khan's neck while he carried her back into the bedroom.

"[Hey, what are you sticking your tongue out for?]" Khan scolded.

"[You taste good]," Jenna responded while leaving a deep kiss on Khan's neck.

"[Jenna]," Khan complained before placing Jenna on the bed and grabbing her elbows.

Jenna let Khan do as he wished. Khan lifted her arms while pushing her onto the bed. Jenna's eyes half-closed as Khan made their foreheads touch. Their noses were so close that they could feel their breath spreading on their faces, and their wet bodies didn't help defuse the situation.

Khan was lying on Jenna, between her legs. She was welcoming that action, and both of them could feel their respective warmth. Their eyes didn't hide their excitement either, and their faces seemed to grow closer with each passing second.

Jenna and Khan seemed unable to stop. They could feel how they were both ready to go all the way. Their mouths opened to blow inviting warmth and wetness as they grew closer. They were almost on the verge of kissing, but Khan abruptly turned his head and laid it on Jenna's chest.

"[That was close]," Khan cursed.

"[That was so exciting]," Jenna commented as she wrapped her arms around Khan's head.

"[Make some room]," Khan ordered as he pushed Jenna deeper into the bed.

Jenna soon reached a pillow, but the two didn't change position. Khan rested on her chest while she caressed his head. He even closed his eyes to enjoy that relaxing moment.

"[Do you want to sleep before getting back to work?]" Jenna asked.

"[No, it's fine]," Khan muttered. "[We'll sleep tonight]."

"[You can use my chest as a pillow]," Jenna teased.

"[Shut up]," Khan scolded while pinching Jenna's waist.

"[You'll leave a mark]," Jenna complained.

"[You can at least try to sound disappointed]," Khan joked.

"[Will my kiss leave a mark?]" Jenna asked.

"[Will you kiss me again if I say no?]" Khan wondered.

"[Maybe]," Jenna laughed.

"[You are impossible]," Khan cursed as he snuggled closer to Jenna's neck.

The two remained in that position for a while, enjoying the increasing affection that their time together was generating. They felt close even if they had known each other for barely three days, but the world eventually caught up to them.

A cute groan left Jenna's mouth when Khan's phone rang. She tried to put more strength into her hug, but she had to let Khan go when he pinched her again.

Khan went to the bathroom to find his clothes and retrieve his assets. He brought the knife back to a bedside table while checking his phone. Luke wanted to plan the details of the incoming meetings, and he also wished that Khan had told him more about Jenna's situation.

"[You are fine with human food, right?]" Khan asked while writing a short message. "[Luke will probably agree to anything you ask, so tell me if you want something specific]."

"[Expressing requests would show acceptance of the cooperation]," Jenna stated without forgetting to add her annoyance to her tone. "[It's better if I remain detached and let you handle everything]."

Khan nodded as he sent the message and connected the phone to the wall before approaching the entrance. He was still naked, so he stopped the door before it could open completely before peeking outside.

The corridor that expanded from the room was empty, but the waiters had already brought clean clothes. They had even prepared a few sets for Jenna to let her choose what she preferred.

"[These look nice]," Khan exclaimed as he closed the door and placed the clothes on the bed.

Jenna briefly inspected them before going back to pretending to be annoyed, but Khan knew how to handle her. He laughed as he reached the pillows and took Jenna in his arms.

"[We can stay naked until the meetings]," Khan reassured while caressing Jenna's hair. "[I'll even help you choose what to wear]."

"[Will you help me wear them?]" Jenna asked in an emotionless tone.

"[You sure like to be spoiled]," Khan joked.

"[You are the best]," Jenna exclaimed as she dived into Khan's chest and let him cuddle her properly.

The meetings would happen after lunch, which was still a few hours away. That time wasn't enough for a complete training session, so Khan didn't mind spending it in the comfort that Jenna's company generated. Still, it turned out that Jenna had other plans.

"[Do you feel any difference?]" Jenna eventually asked while sliding her head closer to Khan's face.

"[Right]," Khan exclaimed as he raised his arm and closed his eyes to immerse himself in the synthetic mana that filled the room.

Khan didn't achieve much in the Nele's arts, even if he had spent two sleepless nights training. The mana would reply at times, but those events were random.

However, Khan now felt as if the distance between him and the mana had shortened. Faint purple-red strands of energy left his hand and mixed with the environment as he tried to establish a conversation, and a warm breeze eventually blew in the room.

"[I never succeeded so quickly]," Khan gasped.

"[The synthetic mana is easier to talk to]," Jenna stated. "[Well, it's not really a conversation]."

"[I can feel it now]," Khan exclaimed. "[It's still faint, but I can sense something different. I don't know how to describe it. It feels shallow]."

Khan wasn't coming up with random words. He had always felt an innate disdain toward the synthetic mana, but there was something else now. That energy felt almost simpler and lighter, but Khan knew that those words couldn't properly describe its qualities.

"[Shallow works for now]," Jenna uttered. "[You know the mana, but you are still a novice in our arts. You'll manage to see different details after learning how to establish a conversation]."

"[It's still easier to control it]," Khan continued before releasing a far denser wave of mana from his palm.

The light in the room flickered under the interference caused by the chaos element. Khan forced his mana to expand slowly and create a small cloud that influenced the environment.

Khan frowned as he focused on using his mana to alter the energy in the room. That was already an advanced exercise, something that went beyond the requirement of the [Blood Vortex]. Khan wanted to take control of the synthetic mana instead of talking to it.

That exercise didn't come from books or teachings. Liiza unleashed her spells through that approach, and Khan tried to imitate her. His control was still lacking in that field, but he was slowly getting there.

Khan had to let his mana disperse at some point. Forcing his energy to affect instead of destroying was exhausting. He even felt that he was too violent in the process, but that was the best he could do.

"[I think I can use your teachings to improve on this field]," Khan revealed. "[Faint mana capable of affecting a large area. That should be the last step]."

"[Are you sure that's all you want]?" Jenna asked as she lowered Khan's arm to raise her own.

Jenna released her energy, which dispersed immediately. Soft gales quickly started to blow in the room, and Khan widened his eyes in marvel when he saw that they gained different colors.

"[The universe is big]," Jenna announced. "[Many intelligent species have developed unique arts connected to mana. I can't claim that ours is the best, but I can see its strong points]."

The multicolored gales converged right above Khan and Jenna to create a small tornado that never abandoned its different shades. Jenna was only using the colors to highlight the various winds and show how she could prevent them from fusing.

"[Taking control and altering nature are different things]," Jenna explained as she made the tornado shrink and land in her palm. "[You are forcing the synthetic mana to imitate the nature of your element, but that will only allow you to trigger destruction on a larger scale]."

Jenna closed her hand and brought it before Khan's face. Khan instinctively took it in her grasp, and Jenna opened it to reveal the new shape of the tiny tornado. It had turned into a half-transparent flower with multicolored petals.

"[The chaos element is violent]," Jenna continued, "[But there's far more to it. I think you can get somewhere with your approach, but you should think about what you want to achieve]."

Jenna lifted her head to blow on her palm. The flower dispersed, and its various colors quickly vanished into the air.

"[That's a tricky question]," Khan sighed as Jenna placed her hand back on his chest and he closed his eyes.

The mana could accomplish marvels, but Khan had always used it as a weapon. The nature of his element didn't help even when he learnt alternative methods, but the Nele's approach seemed to offer a new path.

Still, having a new path didn't bring answers. Khan wouldn't know what to tell his mana to do even if he had alternatives. He could think of different weapons or uses, but they always involved destructive purposes.

"[You don't need to find the answer now]," Jenna reassured. "[Take your time. Learn. Study the world and yourself, but don't put limits on your elements. They exist only in your mind]."

Khan and Jenna didn't speak anymore. The sheets became drenched, but they didn't care. They let the room's warmth take care of that as they rested in silence and waited for the meeting to arrive.

Jenna pretended to be picky during the dressing part, and Khan let her have fun. She was using the clothes as an excuse to make Khan touch her all over, but she eventually opted for a simple black hoodie paired with slightly baggy trousers.

The first meeting was with Luke. Khan let him inside and saw him pushing a short cart with a few plates on it. The scent coming out of that meal was so appealing that even Jenna raised her head to peek at it, but Luke's smile flickered when he inspected the scene.

Jenna and Khan weren't hugging anymore, but they weren't too distant either. They were sitting side by side, and Luke could recognize that they didn't use any dryer on their hair.

The sheets also showed signs of having dried up naturally. They were messy, and they almost showed the silhouettes that Khan and Jenna had created by resting in the same position for a few hours.

Yet, Khan and Jenna's clothes were clean and tidy. They didn't get wet, which told Luke that the two had worn them only after drying up.

Luke could only add those details to the idea that had already filled his companions' minds. Everything pointed toward the fact that Khan and Jenna were an actual couple, and Luke could only act accordingly at that point.

Khan also inspected Luke, but for very different reasons. He was worried that Jenna's pheromones would cause problems, but Luke seemed to have come prepared. He had applied a brown ointment under his nose, which allowed him to act normally even in the range of Jenna's influence.

"I can come later if you want to enjoy the meal peacefully," Luke eventually exclaimed.

"Don't worry," Khan replied as he approached the cart to take two plates and hand one to Jenna.

"Fine then," Luke announced. "I'll add a few reports to your list. I just want to remind you that all of this is classified."

Luke approached one of the free openings on the wall and plugged his phone to create a series of images. Most of them were reports, but Khan and Jenna also saw pictures that could turn into holograms to inspect them better.

"The material used in the stolen item comes from Tainted animals similar to chameleons," Luke explained while using holograms to add details. "Their skin has great flexibility, especially when it comes to alterations that involve mana. It's honestly the best of the best."

"What's the illegal part?" Khan asked. "I don't see the problem with Tainted animals."

"The location is the issue," Luke replied. "These chameleons live on a planet currently at war. The Bise are fighting with another species that shares their xenophobia, so exporting resources is sort of a taboo. That's why we have to smuggle it."

"How does that even happen?" Khan questioned.

"The Global Army has no involvement in this," Luke revealed. "The Bise are the smugglers, but they only deliver the merch. Another criminal organization on milia handles the sale."

Luke's eyes often fell on Jenna, but she remained emotionless. She didn't react to the explanation at all, which left Luke disappointed. He hoped to get some confirmation that she had interacted with the material, but she stood perfectly still.

"Is that all?" Khan asked.

"I'm afraid it is," Luke admitted. "I still don't think this lead is solid enough to require an investigation. You know what kind of hindrances a thief has to overcome. Simple smugglers can't do that."

Luke was paying a lot of attention not to name the factory or the reinforced fabric. He didn't know how much Jenna knew, but he didn't want to reveal classified information pointlessly. Leaving that knowledge to Khan was more than enough.

"I'll see what we can do with this," Khan stated. "I know it's a long shot, but it doesn't hurt to pursue it while we lack other leads."

"I'm just worried about your safety," Luke smiled.

Khan nodded to reassure Luke, but he quickly changed the topic. "Bruce should be next, right?"

"I can speak for Bruce and Amanda," Luke declared. "They have worked under my supervision and reported to me after every trip. They have tried to enter a few inner circles in some clubs, but they never got past the first bodyguards."

"Which clubs?" Khan wondered.

"I'll send you a list," Luke stated. "Their descriptions are quite thorough. You will appreciate them."

Luke knew when his time to leave had arrived, so he didn't hesitate to exit the room after exhausting the topics. The second meeting happened a few minutes later, and it featured Darrell Armend, Isaac Foreters, and Claudia Palbeel, the other first-level warriors on the team.

The three were young, and they all carried the same noble aura that Khan had noticed on Bruce. Darrell was the shortest of the group, with well-developed muscles, short dark hair, and green eyes. Issac was tall and slender, with dark skin, slightly long curly brown hair, and blue eyes, while Claudia had a fair complexion, long blonde hair, and dark eyes.

Seeing Khan and Jenna sitting on the same bed shocked the three wealthy soldiers, but they lacked Luke's sharp eyes. They didn't notice all the details that the sheets and hair carried, but they still reached the same conclusions.

Khan felt glad that the three had the same brown cream under their nose. He wasn't sure descendants from wealthy families would accept to find compromises with seemingly random guests, but they behaved adequately and respected Jenna's species.

The three soldiers had clear limits due to their level. They had to act carefully on Milia 222, and most criminal organizations wouldn't take them seriously even when they worked together, so they had focused on smaller operations.

Darrell, Isaac, and Claudia had tried to investigate the drug traffic in the city on the second asteroid, with few results. They had failed to turn into dealers, but they had gathered enough information to give Khan a general idea of how to purchase those substances.

That wasn't much, but it still added details to Khan's understanding of Milia 222. The city had far more than they showed, and he slowly uncovered parts of it as he heard reports and lived inside it.

The third meeting was incredibly awkward. Martha and Monica had entered Khan's room to reveal what they had learnt during their investigations, but each of their lines ended with faint glances at Jenna.

"I know this isn't much," Monica explained in a steady tone and through her elegant manners after exposing her report. "We will continue investigating and keep you updated. Luke is processing everything we bring to him, so he is the most aware of the bigger picture."

"Every detail matters," Khan commented while looking at the many reports that had ended up covering the wall. "The answer must be somewhere here, on Milia 222."

Monica knew how to separate her feelings from her manners, so she behaved politely even if she was clearly interested in the nature of Khan's relationship. However, Martha appeared slightly sad, and she couldn't stop a pressing question from leaving her mouth.

"Are you leaving soon?" Martha asked.

"I don't know how soon," Khan revealed without adding too many details. "It mostly depends on Luke."

"It must be important if we can't learn anything about it," Monica added, trying to keep the conversation on the main topic. "You might be onto something."

"That's hard to say," Khan admitted. "I'll tell you if I find something."

"I can't wait for your call," Monica teased while showing one of her elegant smiles and retrieving her phone.

Martha had to gulp to suppress further questions, and Monica helped by approaching the exit. The two women left without wasting time in goodbyes, but Khan heaved a sigh once the door closed.

Both Martha and Monica didn't send any message to Khan after his return to the building. He didn't even talk to them to explain the nature of his relationship with Jenna. He didn't know how he felt about Monica, but he wanted Martha to learn the truth.

"Why is this always so troublesome?" Khan cursed in his mind as he lay down and crossed his arms on his forehead.

"[Are the meetings over]?" Jenna asked.

"[Yes, they were the last ones]," Khan replied. "[Now we need to sort everything out, update you on important aspects of the investigation, and wait for Luke to open the path for the dock]."

"[That might take a while]," Jenna stated while taking off her hoodie. "[I don't know how influential Luke is, but the dock isn't easy to approach]."

"[Are you undressing]?" Khan questioned when he heard Jenna.

"[Of course]," Jenna giggled. "[You should too. It can't be good to remain up]."

"[You woke up less than ten hours ago]," Khan scolded.

"[I'll force myself to sleep to help you rest]," Jenna giggled. "[Though I'll need an incentive]."

"[Sleeping is a waste of time]," Khan claimed before performing the check-up technique. He was still fine, but his mind was showing signs of exhaustion.

"[I guess I'll only put you in danger if I train in this condition]," Khan sighed.

"[That's exactly what I meant]," Jenna declared as she threw her clothes away and went under the sheets.

Khan raised his arms to glance at Jenna. She was showing a pure smile, but he could see the thoughts hidden behind that expression. She was too easy to read for him now.

"[Remember to watch your hands]," Khan warned as he removed his clothes and went under the sheets.

Jenna didn't hesitate to cling to Khan, and her legs ended up ignoring his warning right away. Khan and Jenna only laughed at that interaction, but they soon relaxed to attempt to sleep.

"[Those two]," Jenna spoke before they could fall asleep, "[Martha and Monica, they both like you]."

"[Martha and I have history]," Khan revealed. "[She is the reason why I came to Milia 222]."

"[She seems nice]," Jenna uttered.

"[She is]," Khan agreed. "[I'm lucky to have her in my life. As for Monica, I still don't know what to think about her]."

"[Why is that]?" Jenna wondered.

"[Everything in the investigation points toward a spy]," Khan explained. "[She is a suspect]."

"[I see]," Jenna whispered. "[I don't know about the investigation, but her feelings seemed honest. I could sense her yearning without even looking too hard]."

"[I can't trust her so easily]," Khan sighed.

"[So]," Jenna exclaimed, "[Who do you like the most]?"

"[Between them]?" Khan asked. "[Definitely Martha. We were even about to end up together]."

"[Really]?" Jenna wondered. "[I think Monica suits you more]."

"[How]?" Khan asked.

"[Martha seems really nice]," Jenna repeated. "[Maybe too nice for you. I can't see her getting her hands dirty if the situation needs it]."

"[She can fight]," Khan pointed out.

"[It's not about fighting]," Jenna explained. "[I'm talking about the dark parts, your dark parts]."

The surprise that Martha had shown when Khan had threatened Milia 222's soldier reappeared in his mind. Khan knew that Martha wasn't naïve, but she remained good at her core.

Instead, Khan's mindset was twisted. He had initially been afraid of those dark aspects, but Liiza had helped him accept them. They were part of his character, and he couldn't throw them away.

"[Are you saying that Monica can]?" Khan asked.

"[She does feel more suitable]," Jenna stated. "[Of course, not more suitable than me]."

Khan laughed, and Jenna soon imitated him. The two snuggled closer and voiced a few more jokes, but they eventually let their drowsiness take over their minds.