

Chaos' Heir 401

Chapter 401 Curse

Nothing appeared on Khan's face. His expression remained cold, but his thoughts shook. Rodney had actually named something that could lead to cooperation.

The urge to kill Rodney was strong, but Khan felt the need to suppress it. Rodney was an annoying enemy, but Raymond was far worse. The latter wasn't someone Khan could handle on his own, let alone defeat him on a purely political battlefield.

"Great minds think alike," Rodney laughed when Khan entered the car and closed the door behind him.

Khan didn't say anything. He slowly drew his knife as he took his place on a seat in front of Rodney. He was interested in what Rodney had to say, but he wanted to keep the games at a minimum.

Rodney's smile froze when he saw the sharp knife, but no panic spread in his mind. He sighed before reaching for a drawer under the seat to his right. A bottle and a few glasses came out, and he didn't hesitate to pick them up.

"You won't refuse a drink, will you?" Rodney asked as he placed two glasses on the seat and started filling them. "Don't worry. I'll drink before you."

Rodney did exactly as he had announced. He picked up one of the glasses and took a long sip. He even loudly gulped to prove that the booze was safe.

Of course, Khan had already checked the safety of the booze through his sensitivity. Yet, coldness never left his expression. His stern gaze remained on Rodney even as he took the remaining glass with his free hand.

"See, we can have a mature conversation," Rodney exclaimed. "We don't always need threats."

Rodney pretended not to keep track of the knife, but Khan could sense his lingering fear. Still, that reaction confirmed the honesty behind the meeting. Rodney was scared, which meant that he was really exposing himself in the hope of solving his problems.

"Now," Rodney announced as soon as Khan took his first sip, "Why don't we start with an exchange of information?"

Rodney showed his usual smile, but Khan didn't answer. He kept staring at him in silence to study his faintest reactions. Khan especially took note of the changes in his fear. It seemed that he wasn't the only reason behind that emotion.

"Didn't we reach an agreement already?" Rodney felt forced to ask since Khan had yet to acknowledge him.

"I see," Khan eventually spoke. "You must be really desperate to look for my help."

Rodney's smile disappeared. He tried to hide that reaction by bringing the glass to his mouth, but he quickly gave up on that. Khan's senses were too troublesome even to attempt something like that.

"Desperate," Rodney scoffed. "I know true desperation. You made me experience it."

"Losing political privileges is nothing," Khan chuckled. "I think you finally met something that makes you truly scared. You wouldn't even come close to me otherwise."

"Think what you want," Rodney stated, "Just tell me when you are done gloating. I don't have all the time in the world."

"Me?" Khan asked. "You misunderstand. I don't have to say anything."

"Lies won't get us anywhere," Rodney pointed out. "We both know I would already be dead if you had no intention of hearing me out."

Rodney was showing proper resolve, which was quite surprising. Khan could almost feel able to trust him, but his tone remained cold. "Speak then."

"I want an exchange of information," Rodney repeated.

"I'll decide whether to share something after I hear what you have to say," Khan declared.

"That won't work," Rodney regained his smirk. "You'll just kill me once I reveal everything I know."

"That's not my problem," Khan uttered.

"It is because you need my help," Rodney replied.

"I'll be the one to decide that," Khan stated.

Rodney fell silent for a few seconds. He didn't like how tense the meeting was getting, but the situation was hopeless. The two of them shared too much history to speak in friendlier terms.

"Fine," Rodney accepted. "I'll trust you on this one."

Khan voiced a faint scoff. He didn't believe that Rodney would show all his cards for even a second, but he still chose to listen.

"I got this job through my family," Rodney started explaining now that the two had reached a silent understanding. "I knew I couldn't get anything legal with my current reputation, but Milia 222 could still offer decent opportunities, so I accepted without asking too many questions."

"I don't believe you," Khan interrupted. "You aren't the type to jump blindly into a mission."

"You didn't exactly leave me in the best situation," Rodney complained.

"I don't believe you," Khan repeated.

"It's the truth," Rodney announced. "I knew it dealt with something illegal, but I couldn't learn much from Earth. I discovered more only after coming here."

Khan scanned the synthetic mana and confirmed Rodney's version. Yet, he remained silent to keep the tension high.

"My job as a guide was only a cover-up," Rodney continued, "A useful cover-up. It allowed me to keep track of the surface while I gathered information on the dock. I must say I learnt a lot during my time here."

"And you have yet to say anything valuable," Khan pointed out.

"I'm getting there," Rodney sneered. "Look, I realized I was dealing with something important the first time I saw the Bise. They are the reason behind my personal investigation. I don't like to be in the dark when my future is at stake."

"What could you possibly learn while working in the dock?" Khan asked. "I've also been there."

Khan wasn't trying to insult Rodney. His comment merely hinted at the secrecy of the dock. Rodney had been there longer than Khan, but that didn't change how hard it was to uncover illegal activities.

"You'd be surprised," Rodney laughed. "Maybe you would have found out if you didn't abandon the humans every time."

"I'm not in the mood for your xenophobia," Khan threatened.

"I'm serious," Rodney responded. "Do you even realize how far our influence spreads? We are so lucky to be born into our species. It's a pity you never gave humans a chance."

"I did," Khan voiced. "I even cleaned up their mess after they let kids transform into monsters."

"Right, the dutiful Lieutenant Khan," Rodney mocked, "Always ready to jump into the fray, especially if he has a chick to protect."

Khan felt incredibly tired. His patience had long since run dry. He wanted to hear what Rodney had to say, but he wouldn't let him insult his feelings.

A purple-red membrane enveloped the knife while Khan thrust it forward. He didn't want to kill Rodney, but he didn't need his legs to speak. Maybe that injury would even push him to get to the point.

Nevertheless, Rodney pushed himself away before the knife could touch his left knee. The weapon pierced the seat and cut through the metal under it, but Khan promptly withdrew it to continue his assault.

"I hired Orlats to spy on themselves!" Rodney shouted as soon as Khan turned toward him. The sudden revelation made Khan stop, but he kept the purple-red membrane active to show his stance.

"I didn't stop there," Rodney hurriedly added. "I also hired humans and Fuveall. I bribed anyone I could to have my personal spies on different floors."

"How much did you even spend?" Khan asked.

"A lot," Rodney admitted. "I even considered forming my own faction before abandoning the idea. I have the wealth and the wits to accomplish that. You know I do."

"Why did you do all of this?" Khan wondered. "It's way overkill."

"And how would you know?" Rodney snorted. "You have no idea how families work. I fucked up on Nitis, so I became expendable. It was up to me to reinforce my position."

Rodney's words carried no lies. His situation probably wasn't as bad as he tried to make it sound, but it couldn't be good to have factions inside your family treating you as disposable currency.

Khan could understand Rodney better now. He could imagine Rodney doing his best in his assigned task while also preparing for an eventual betrayal. His efforts had probably earned him some promotions too, which explained his importance in his business.

Rodney's reaction also revealed another important detail. Khan had been on the seat, so he couldn't rely on his incredible speed, but Rodney had dodged his attack anyway. The man had developed good reflexes. His status as a second-level warrior wasn't just for show.

"So," Khan continued while withdrawing the mana around the knife and returning to his seat, "What did you discover?"

"I told you I realized something was off when I first met the Bise, right?" Rodney repeated while straightening his position and picking up the bottle that had fallen during his escape. "I already knew that my boss couldn't be the head of the operation at that point."

"How?" Khan asked.

"Because I didn't know her," Rodney explained. "I don't know everything there is to know about politics, but I always remember important figures. She was a complete stranger. She still is, if I'm being honest."

"You can't use your knowledge as proof," Khan stated. "This barely counts as a clue."

"Please, see the threads already," Rodney complained. "My family put me in this business, a business that deals with Bise. The smuggled goods are also highly illegal and pricy. A common criminal wouldn't be in charge of all of that."

"Did you open one of the boxes?" Khan asked in surprise.

"I opened more than one," Rodney sneered. "To summarize, I was in the middle of an important business dealing with valuable goods. I obviously predicted the involvement of a wealthy family."

Khan nodded. Rodney's reasoning made perfect sense, especially from his perspective. Still, Khan had only learnt that Rodney's boss was a woman for now.

"Go on," Khan ordered.

"I started investigating after reinforcing my position here," Rodney revealed as he refilled his drink. "I learnt secret paths and hidden alliances among various factions, but the real breakthrough happened when I found a completely hidden area between Lower Level 1 and 2."

A tremor ran through Khan's mind, but he hid that reaction. He remained as collected as possible as he voiced another question. "On the fourth asteroid?"

"Where otherwise?" Rodney sighed. "I only managed to gaze at the place from outside. It's a stupidly large building, but I don't know anything else."

"Yes, you do," Khan uttered.

Rodney shot an annoyed glance at Khan before continuing. "Really, I never got inside, but I found something odd. Some of our goods went there, but the place also received different deliveries, deliveries from the surface."

Everything fitted Khan's hypothesis perfectly. Rodney was probably speaking about the place where the stolen reinforced fabric went. It would actually be an incredible breakthrough if that intel were accurate, but Khan didn't forget who Rodney was.

"These are just words," Khan announced. "They make an interesting story, but how can I believe you? As far as I know, you just want to send me into another trap."

"You don't have to trust me," Rodney declared, "But your actions speak loudly. You want to believe me because you know that something is off."

"Not killing you is confirming some sort of conspiracy now?" Khan mocked.

"Yes," Rodney said without showing any shame. "I initially thought your arrival was unrelated, but everything changed when you sought me out. You even checked the box and stole the fabric. At that point, I was certain your group had something to do with my business."

Khan wanted to refuse those accusations, but any attempt would sound pointless. He had already announced his interest in the Bise, and the open box left in the secret corridor only confirmed his intentions.

"The Cobsend family has many buildings on Milia 222," Rodney continued, "But you chose to settle on the second asteroid, so your mission involves the industrial district. Did something go missing? I can think of a place where to retrieve those goods."

Rodney's reasoning was flawless. Things were easier from his perspective, but Khan still felt the need to praise his efforts. Rodney had discovered the nature of Khan's investigation with nothing but spies.

"I don't understand," Khan admitted. "You can come up with so many ideas. Why would you even be worried about Mister Raymond's arrival?"

"I can deal with criminals and other descendants," Rodney explained. "Raymond Cobsend is beyond me, and I don't know if I'm on his side. Honestly, I wouldn't like that either since I'm in no position to protect myself in that case."

"What exactly do you want?" Khan went straight to the point.

"I want to help you finish whatever you are doing here," Rodney declared. "I know you'll leave once you are done, and the same should go for Raymond. I'll let the situation calm down before redeeming your letter and returning to Earth."

"Aren't you overreacting?" Khan honestly asked. "Raymond Cobsend might have nothing to do with this. He isn't even the type to deal with illegal business."

"That's where you are wrong," Rodney corrected. "You and I are easy to understand and even easier to predict, but Raymond is a different beast. That man will betray his own family to fulfill his goals."

"Easy to understand?" Khan repeated as annoyance seeped into his voice. "You don't know who I am."

"Let's not get back to the knife business," Rodney pleaded. "You are an emotional outcast. You will always put your loved ones above your species or organization."

The description was strangely fitting, but Rodney continued before Khan could say anything. "On the other hand, I can only think about myself. No matter who I have to sacrifice, I will always take the path that will benefit me."

Another accurate description reached Khan's ears and forced him to evaluate Rodney's previous statement. Raymond was definitely intriguing, but Khan wanted to know what made him different.

"Instead, Raymond is unpredictable," Rodney explained. "I don't know why he came here, but I won't get caught in the middle of his plans. The risks far outweigh the benefits."

"You are willing to give up and betray everything you built here due to unfounded fear?" Khan couldn't help but ask.

"That's what I need to do to survive," Rodney stated in the most serious tone he could muster. "I'm sure you can understand as much."

Khan didn't say anything. He still believed that Rodney was overreacting, which hinted at a trap. Yet, he couldn't find any lie in Rodney's words and thoughts.

"I guess your offer involves the path to the hidden area on the fourth asteroid," Khan uttered. "Sure, I'll take it."

"Not so fast," Rodney smirked. "I would lose all my value if I gave you the path."

"More ploys?" Khan sighed.

"Nothing like that," Rodney reassured. "I will give you the path. I will actually show it to you, but not today."

"I refuse," Khan directly replied. "I almost fell into space the last time I trusted you."

"It will only be the two of us this time," Rodney explained. "I'm not allowed in that area either, so I'll face the same risks as you."

"Putting yourself in danger doesn't reassure me," Khan scoffed. "Besides, I don't want to give you time to prepare. It's better if we go now."

"There are too many guards now," Rodney revealed, "And I believe you want your team to be nearby to intervene, am I right? I can give you all of that."

"I'm curious," Khan mocked. "How will you make my team move to the fourth asteroid?"

"I won't do anything," Rodney chuckled. "One of Milia 222 festivities is due in exactly one month. The fourth asteroid will be the center of those celebrations, and I'm sure the Cobsend family will have front seats."

"You want to exploit the confusion of the celebrations," Khan understood.

"The crews on Milia 222 aren't famous for their work ethic," Rodney voiced. "I've been among them long enough to know that many will leave their posts to join the celebrations."

"And the guards in this hidden area?" Khan asked. "They must be more trustworthy."

"Some are," Rodney agreed, "But they are no match for the two of us. We'll get past them in no time."

Khan felt quite conflicted. Rodney was being honest, but everything was a bit too much to take in a single meeting. Khan had gone from completely lost to having a real chance of retrieving the reinforced fabric. He only had to trust someone he wanted to kill.

Still, one month was a long time. Khan could spend it looking for clues that would hopefully confirm Rodney's story. Luke was the only problem since he might decide to pull the plug on the investigation if the other teams came back empty-handed.

"I want to be able to contact you this time," Khan declared.

"I'll assign an Orlats as my middle-man," Rodney exclaimed as his smirk broadened. He knew that Khan had already accepted his offer.

"I want weekly updates," Khan added, "Especially on this boss of yours. I need to know what she looks like."

"Consider it done," Rodney agreed.

"One last thing," Khan said as his tone grew colder than before. "Don't even think about getting out of my reach in the hidden passage. I will kill you and let my mission fail if I even smell that something is off."

"No fun allowed with you," Rodney joked. "It's fine. Getting all of you out of Milia 222 is in my best interest."

Khan snorted without adding anything else. He stormed out of the car and closed the door before waiting on the sidewalk. The vehicle set off, and he watched it disappear in the distance.

Trying to make a point of what had just happened turned out to be quite challenging. Rodney didn't actually know much, but he had vital information that Khan couldn't obtain due to his position.

Raymond's stance remained a mystery, but the presence of a hidden structure probably owned by the Cobsend family changed everything. That building might be the secret lab working on reverse-engineering the reinforced fabric. If Rodney had spoken the truth, Khan might have solved the case.

Nevertheless, going into a secret area with Rodney as the only ally sounded dangerous and ridiculous. Khan needed to prepare accordingly, and a second visit to the dock seemed necessary for that goal.

Strangely enough, Rodney's motivations were the only reassuring aspect of that new mess, but Khan couldn't see them as a good sign. The situation was truly terrible if his enemy was the most trustworthy aspect of the mission.

'What to do now?' Khan wondered as he glanced at the streets above Lower Level 1. He vaguely recalled where Luke's building was, so he opted for a walk to clear his mind.

Truth be told, Khan didn't need to complete the investigation. He had no real obligation or connection to the issue. A mere visit to Sen-nu would even grant him the video of his assault at the Orlats business, proving that he had risked his life for Luke's sake.

Khan's actions on Milia 222 were beyond reproach. He had spent some time pursuing his personal goals, but he had also given his everything to find out the thieves. Luke would probably give him a raise even if the investigation were to fail.

Joining Rodney in his secret mission was far from necessary. Khan could call it a day, share everything he knew with Luke, and accept defeat. His career would advance, and his finances would increase.

Yet, the end of the investigation would mark Khan's return to Earth. His profile would surely offer him new, interesting jobs, but none of them would bring him to a similarly diverse environment.

If possible, Khan wanted to remain on Milia 222 a bit longer. He wished to deepen his relationship with the Nele, have another meeting with the Fuveall, and meet the Tors again.

Moreover, Khan didn't want to leave Jenna just yet. The end of the mission would also send Martha somewhere else since she had to continue paying back Luke. Monica was another problem since Earth and other environments wouldn't give Khan enough privacy to date her.

Milia 222 was giving Khan so much that leaving it had become hard. Still, he couldn't just remain there on his own. He needed a reason, which Luke could provide, and he had no intention of lying to him to achieve that. Khan would only ruin his relationship with the Cobsend family if he tried.

'I guess I need to keep going,' Khan thought as streets, buildings, and vehicles crossed his vision. 'Maybe I'll even understand what Raymond is up to if I go there.'

Khan also thought about the strange sensation on the fourth asteroid. A hidden place right above Lower Level 2 sounded like the perfect area where to hide something Nak-related, and only going there could provide answers.

As the walk continued, Khan accepted that he would see the investigation to its end. The decision was the result of different factors, but he could summarize them into a single statement. He simply wanted to stay.

The planning phase arrived after the decision was made. Khan needed a lot, but one month was enough to prepare everything. He only had to negotiate the freedom to move as he wished.

Minutes turned into hours as Khan crossed the city. He checked his phone from time to time to make sure that he was going in the right direction, and he remained pleased by the absence of messages. It seemed that Luke trusted him on that one.

Luke's building eventually appeared in the distance, and Khan approached it with a heavy heart. He would need to come clean about everything once he went back, but the universe promptly placed more problems on his path.

A couple of familiar presences claimed Khan's attention while he walked toward the building. That pairing was odd, so he changed direction to see what was happening.

Khan only needed to turn a corner to see Jenna and Monica standing next to a building's metal wall. Tension filled the synthetic mana around them, but sadness and anger also showed their presence. Moreover, seeing that Jenna had worn the spray on her own alarmed Khan.

"I told you that he would find us," Jenna happily exclaimed in perfect human language. "I'll leave you two to it then."

Khan didn't have the chance to question Jenna since she hurriedly left and disappeared behind a corner. He could still sense her, but she allowed the couple to have their privacy.

"What happened?" Khan quickly asked as he checked his surroundings. The street wasn't crowded, but people still occupied the sidewalk. He couldn't act freely there.

A sniff made Khan aware of the gravity of the situation. All the sadness and anger in the area came from Monica, and he even saw a tear falling from her lowered face.

"Hey, talk to me," Khan questioned as he got closer to Monica. The urge to lift her face invaded him, but he suppressed it.

"Why?" Monica asked while raising her face to show her teary eyes. "To hear more lies."

"What lies?" Khan wondered.

"I-," Monica sniffed. "I thought we were getting somewhere."

"Monica, what did Jenna-?" Khan tried to ask, but Monica slapped him before he could finish his question. He had seen the attack coming, but he didn't do anything to avoid it.

"I trusted you," Monica cried. She wanted to say more, but a sob interrupted her attempt and made her bring a hand to her mouth.

Monica diverted her gaze and tried to leave, but Khan reached for her arm. Still, his gesture only led to a loud "don't touch me!" that Khan felt forced to obey.

Khan understood that he couldn't pursue Monica now, especially inside Luke's building. He would have to deal with the issue later after understanding what had happened. Luckily, the culprit was spying on him from behind the corner.

"[Get here already]," Khan sighed, and his sensitivity perceived a happy figure jumping out of the corner to approach him.

"[What did you do now]?" Khan asked when he turned to face Jenna. For some reason, she appeared more joyful than ever.

"[I didn't do anything special]," Jenna giggled as she took Khan's arm and rested her head on his shoulder.

"[Jenna]," Khan called.

"[I told you that she had to learn her place]," Jenna explained. "[I simply described in great detail the depth of our relationship]."

Khan felt the need to curse. Jenna's topic was something he and Monica had silently decided to avoid. She knew that alien customs were at work there, but learning about their details was bound to trigger her jealousy.

'It's not the end of the world,' Khan heaved a sigh of relief before focusing on Jenna. Her smirk seemed able to describe her thoughts, and Khan could barely believe his eyes when he saw it.

"[Are you waiting for me to scold you]?" Khan asked.

"[You were so bossy this morning]," Jenna voiced a cute laugh, and Khan finally cursed.

Chapter 402 Manners

A normal person would get incredibly mad at Jenna, but Khan didn't belong to that category. His relationship with her was also far from the ordinary, and they had both expected something like that to happen.

Moreover, Jenna didn't do anything terrible, at least from Khan's perspective. She had revealed a truth that Monica was bound to learn sooner or later. Khan would have preferred Monica to hear it from him, but Jenna's toxic sides had ended up getting there first.

"[Are you mad at me]?" Jenna asked without hiding her anticipation. She looked eager to reexperience their previous interaction, but Khan's silence ruined her plans.

Khan already had a heavy mind after meeting Rodney. He was in no condition to deal with those new problems. His team was also waiting for him inside the building, but he didn't hurry inside.

Jenna's smirk turned into a surprised face when Khan reached for her hair. She remained clung to his arm while he caressed her. His unexpected reaction told her that something was wrong, but his lost gaze didn't let her pry into his problems right away.

Except for the dock, Khan and Jenna had always restrained themselves in public. She had also avoided expressing her affection outside of the Nele's district. Appearances were a big deal for her species, so that behavior was safer.

Still, a lot had changed since then, and not only for Jenna. Her urges had continued to intensify, and Monica's situation had ultimately made her explode. Holding back had become impossible for her, and Khan found himself in a similar situation.

'One step at a time,' Khan thought while immersing himself in Jenna's affectionate warmth. 'Without pretenses or lies.'

"[I messed up, didn't I]?" Jenna exclaimed when she felt that the proper time to speak had arrived.

Khan finally focused on Jenna. Her gaze expressed her confusion. She seemed busy looking for a reason behind her recent action, and some sadness arrived when she realized what she had done.

"[How could I ever be mad at you]?" Khan reassured before Jenna could blame herself. "[The way I see it, I put you in this situation]."

"[Don't even try that]," Jenna complained.

"[I could have solved this by kissing you during our first meeting]," Khan joked. "[You wouldn't have had the time to be jealous if I did]."

"[We both know why you didn't]," Jenna stated. "[We both know why you always stop me]."

Khan could only smile. They had gone over that topic many times, both explicitly and in their minds. The Nele's approach to feelings was too similar to the Niqols'. Khan would have used Jenna to replace Liiza without ever loving her like the latter.

That was unacceptable for Khan. The closer he grew to Jenna, the more he wanted her to experience true happiness. Allowing her to fulfill her feelings would trap her in a relationship where she would always be in second place, and she deserved better.

Monica was by no means inferior. She also deserved someone who put her in the first place, but her human approach to feelings created a path that Khan could tread.

Khan could have a different relationship with Monica, one that didn't initially involve a broader emotional spectrum, something innocent born only by mutual attraction.

Of course, that type of relationship involved different risks. Khan would never find complete satisfaction if everything remained under human terms. Monica might also be unable to keep up with Khan for various reasons, but he was willing to take that risk. He wanted to try to be happy, and that path showed some potential.

"[Are you calm now]?" Khan asked while the long exchange of gazes with Jenna continued.

"[No]," Jenna stated without bothering to hide her lie. She could almost feel that Khan would let her go if she said otherwise.

"[I've met Rodney]," Khan revealed since Jenna's reaction reassured him. "[He has more eyes than we initially realized. I'm afraid we can't beat him in that field]."

"[How did he even get here unnoticed]?" Jenna wondered.

"[He is aware of my senses]," Khan explained, "[And he is smart enough to expect the same from your species. He must have hidden his face even before crossing the short-distance teleports]."

"[Troublesome]," Jenna commented. "[None of us had the chance to sense his presence properly]."

"[It doesn't matter]," Khan responded. "[He won't give any of us the chance to sense him. He'll remain hidden until the celebrations arrive]."

Jenna's questioning gaze forced Khan to spill the bean. He summarized the contents of his meeting with Rodney, highlighting the time left before the mission and his plans.

As a citizen of Milia 222, Jenna was aware of the celebrations, but her knowledge ended there. She knew nothing about a hidden area above the dock, let alone any structure inside it.

Yet, Jenna's focus remained on Khan's requests. The walk back to the building had given him the time to devise plans, and one of them involved the only place on Milia 222 with natural mana.

"[Everyone will welcome you with open arms]," Jenna exclaimed before recalling something.

"[But, are you sure? Your departure will create problems]."

"[Let me handle Luke]," Khan reassured. "[As for Monica, we never had any future if she can't get over you]."

"[I like seeing you so confident]," Jenna commented, but the kiss that landed on her forehead pushed back her resurfacing urges.

"[I need you to take care of the messenger]," Khan whispered while his face remained close to Jenna's. "[I can't trust anyone else]."

"[You have grown sly]," Jenna complained.

"[I've always been sly]," Khan teased, "[But you know I'm telling the truth]."

Jenna sighed. She didn't like the idea of leaving Khan again, but she had no other options. The Nele were perfect for the task.

"[We might fail]," Jenna warned. "[The Orlats are annoying, and Rodney's allies don't end at that species]."

"[They are hired muscles]," Khan declared. "[Quality beats quantity. Besides, I only need to know if the messenger slips up]."

"[Since everyone has seen us already]," Jenna teased, "[I'm the only one who can report to you without arousing suspicion]."

"[I wouldn't think of anyone else for that role]," Khan revealed. "[Hurry up now. We'll be together soon anyway]."

"[I won't let you go for even a second once we get home]," Jenna giggled and squeezed Khan's arm before letting it go. The two separated, and Khan followed Jenna with his senses once she disappeared around the corner.

The synthetic mana eventually gained features that Khan could recognize. Everything was too distant from him to provide an actual description, but he could confirm that more Nele had arrived in the area. Jenna must have joined them, and Khan understood that his time to return had also come.

'Quality beats quantity,' Khan repeated in his mind as he walked around the building to reach its entrance.

Rodney's words resounded in Khan's ears while he remained immersed in his thoughts, and he couldn't refute them. Being a member of the human species granted incredible advantages, and Khan relied on them, even if not on purpose.

The Orlats had a bad reputation and an even worse character. The Fuveall were famous for relying on technology over people, and their peculiar beliefs didn't help with political relationships.

Instead, the humans occupied a middle ground that allowed them to be anything they wanted. They were a flexible species that held great influence in the universe. They were so flexible that extremes like Khan and Rodney could exist inside the same organization.

Khan had to thank his species for his current knowledge, at least partially. He had mostly abandoned the Global Army's teachings, but that same organization had opened the doors for the alien arts so dear to him.

However, when Khan compared the two, he preferred his approach over Rodney's. He would always choose fewer but meaningful relationships. Having a bunch of puppets under his payroll didn't interest him in the slightest.

When Khan entered Luke's building, he was still immersed in his thoughts, but the tension that landed on his senses forced him to snap back to reality. The four first-level warriors, Francis, and Bruce were in the main hall, and they appeared far from happy.

"What took you so long?!" Bruce immediately exclaimed while leaving the armchair.

Khan only needed a glance to understand that the attack on the warehouses had failed, but he had expected a similar result. Meeting Rodney had only confirmed his guess, so that scene didn't surprise him.

"Where is Luke?" Khan asked, going directly to the point as he made his way through the room.

"I'm sick of this!" Francis shouted while leaving the couch to step in front of Khan. "You can't treat us like this!"

Khan didn't even realize that his hand went for the sheath, but Francis' following words made him interrupt the gesture. "What did you even do to Monica? I've never seen her act like that!"

'Right,' Khan thought as his annoyance suddenly disappeared.

Monica had cried. Khan could imagine that her return inside the building had been far from peaceful. Martha was also nowhere to be seen, and part of him hoped she was with Monica.

Khan believed that Monica had to accept Jenna's situation, but he could acknowledge his wrongdoings. He didn't feel wrong for what he did with Jenna, but he was guilty of keeping Monica partially in the dark.

"You are right," Khan muttered. "I'll do better."

Francis wasn't ready for that honest reply. Khan appeared genuinely sorry and willing to make up for his mistakes. Even his gaze expressed some shame when he lowered it.

"Y-," Francis eventually managed to stammer, but Khan abruptly lifted his gaze and interrupted his line. Yet, Khan's eyes didn't point at him. They looked past Francis to inspect the elevator in the back of the hall.

The sound of opening doors made Francis turn. The elevator had just landed, revealing Luke standing inside it. His face was oddly cold, but Francis became unable to inspect it since Khan's back filled his vision. He had crossed him during that unexpected arrival.

"We need to talk," Khan announced before Luke could say anything. Silence reigned while Khan entered the elevator, and no one spoke even after its doors closed.

Luke kept his eyes on the entrance while the elevator reached the last floor. He remained silent even after marching into the corridor and entering the meeting area with the interactive desk. Meanwhile, Khan followed him closely and sorted out his thoughts.

"What the fuck are you even doing?!" Luke exploded once the metal door closed behind Khan.

Luke turned to show his livid face. The failure of the assault on the warehouses had clearly dealt a painful blow to his morale, and Khan's behavior had only worsened the situation.

"I give you all the resources and freedom in the world," Luke continued, "And you treat me like dirt! I'm not even asking for much. Just show some respect in public!"

Contrary to Monica's events, Khan felt no remorse before Luke's anger. He was in the wrong, but Luke had used Martha against him. That remained unforgivable.

"So?" Luke asked. "Nothing? Will you just stand still and in silence?"

"I'm waiting for you to calm down," Khan finally spoke.

"Calm down?" Luke repeated. "I've failed in a vital family mission, and my best subordinate can't even bother to stick to basic manners!"

Luke realized that something was wrong as soon as his phrase ended. The area grew cold, and a chill ran down his spine.

"You hired me," Khan slowly spoke, "But I'm not your subordinate."

Luke wanted to respond, but his better self took over and made him take a deep breath. Venting was pointless, and Khan was right. Calling him a subordinate had been a mistake on many levels.

"Sorry," Luke quickly voiced. "I have a lot on my plate, and I took it out on you."

Luke's social skills prevented an unnecessary escalation, which also made Khan take a step back. Luke's behavior was quite understandable, and the words he chose simply revealed goals that Khan was already aware of.

"There is a bottle in the back," Luke continued. "And I need a drink. I hope you'll accompany me."

"Of course," Khan accepted while mustering a shameless smile. "Something to eat would be nice too."

"No problem," Luke chuckled before his tone turned slightly serious, "But you'll tell me everything afterward."

"I planned to do that in the first place," Khan revealed, and the two approached the interactive table to begin that meeting.

Drinks came out and food arrived while Khan described everything he knew. He also talked about Rodney but avoided details that might reveal too much about the Nele, especially those involving the dock.

Luke had already understood that his family had become a suspect in Khan's mind, and learning about the Fuveall's opinion on security systems played in favor of that hypothesis. Yet, the news remained a bit shocking, especially when he heard how much Khan could connect to it.

"How do you know that my uncle is guilty?" Luke asked once the explanation ended.

"I wouldn't dare to throw such accusations," Khan stated. "Mister Raymond does fit the profile of someone who could pull this off, but I have no actual proof."

Luke's gaze fell on his drink as he reviewed what he had just learnt. His expertise didn't involve technology, so he couldn't reject the opinion of a Fuveall. He was also out of reasonable answers. Only an actual ghost could have stolen the reinforced fabric after his arrival, and the scanners in the factory would have probably captured it anyway.

"It would make perfect sense," Luke eventually sighed. "My uncle is one of the few with the knowledge, influence, and resources necessary to plant someone inside the factory. Part of the crew might be loyal to him."

Khan nodded without adding anything. He knew that Luke might pull the plug on the investigation anyway, so he remained silent to wait for his decision.

"Changing the security logs," Luke scoffed. "Of course. There wouldn't be any need to resurface either. My uncle might have built a secret passage under the factory before the start of the project."

That idea had escaped Khan's mind, but he wasn't really to blame since he didn't know the entire timeline of the factory. Still, a secret passage would surely come in handy when stealing something.

"Did he set me up to fail?" Luke wondered. "It's strange. My father only cares about results, but my uncle is different. I know he loves me, so he must be up to something important."

"Should I back away?" Khan asked.

"Would it piss you off?" Luke chuckled.

"A bit," Khan admitted, "But the mission is yours. Only you can make that decision."

"Both paths will anger someone inside my family," Luke helplessly revealed. "If I retreat, my father will see me as a failure. If I keep going, I might ruin my uncle's plans."

The decision was far from easy. Khan didn't envy Luke's position. In comparison, his desire to remain on Milia 222 was relatively pure.

"I guess I'm my father's son," Luke cursed. "I love my uncle, but this is my mission. He should have asked permission before messing up with it."

"I'll follow my plan then," Khan responded. "Rodney can't be trusted, but he seemed really scared. He should lead us to the hidden area."

"About that," Luke called. "I don't like leaving everything on you. Let's double-cross Rodney. Master Ivor would be more than happy to come along."

"I wish it were that easy," Khan uttered. "I hate to admit it, but the guy is pretty smart. He won't give us the chance to double-cross him."

"What about the spies?" Luke wondered. "I'm richer than him. I'm sure I can bribe someone in his network."

"It's too risky," Khan stated. "Some of his spies are blackmailed criminals who won't budge before money. We might get unlucky and bribe one of them only to have Rodney learn about our attempts."

"Who even is this guy?" Luke scoffed. "I've never seen such meticulous planning."

"Survivors have the bad habit of being a few steps ahead," Khan voiced while losing himself deep in his memories. "Istrone was bad, but Nitis was worse, and Rodney saw his share of things there."

"I feel so powerless," Luke sighed. "At least, keep me in the loop, and try not to disappear for too long before the celebrations. I'll come up with a story to get the team ready."

"Right," Khan recalled, "Is my stuff here? The luggage I left on the first asteroid."

"Yes, of course," Luke announced. "It should be in your room. Didn't you check?"

"I never thought I'd need it," Khan shrugged his shoulders before standing up. In his mind, the meeting was over.

"One last thing," Luke called before Khan could turn. "Do I need to know anything about Miss Solodrey?"

"Luke, you aren't dumb," Khan declared. "You know you shouldn't ask such questions."

With that, Khan turned and approached the entrance. He almost expected Luke to stop him, but the silence that followed told him that he could leave.

'This is done,' Khan thought as soon as the corridor expanded in his view. He had a lot to do, but he needed to make a stop before starting his preparations. Hopefully, Monica was ready to see him.

Chapter 403 Skirts

Khan's vast experience in lies and pretenses could give birth to reasonable justifications and excuses that even someone like Monica would believe. Yet, he didn't want to rely on any of that.

The imminent meeting would probably establish the relationship's future as long as Monica was willing to receive Khan. He didn't want lies to taint such an important step, but that desire left him in the dark.

Khan was still unaware of many aspects of Monica's character. He only knew where he stood, and she might not accept that. There was only uncertainty ahead, but Khan had to advance anyway.

The corridor went by, the elevator descended, and a familiar door eventually filled Khan's vision. He had reached Monica's room, but his arrival felt too early. A childish desire to postpone that event surged, but his resolve held firm, and a knocking noise soon resounded.

Khan's sensitivity allowed him to sense what was happening past the door, and some surprise arrived when a familiar presence approached it. A warm smile appeared on his face when he took a step back, and Martha's figure unfolded in his vision once the entrance opened.

Martha shot an emotionless glance at Khan before stepping forward to let the door close behind her. Some helplessness seeped into the synthetic mana, but Khan also sensed some peace.

"You turned into a scoundrel," Martha commented, "And an idiot."

"I have always been an idiot," Khan pointed out.

"That's true," Martha sighed. "The scoundrel part is an exaggeration, but you messed up this time."

"I know," Khan admitted as his smile vanished and his eyes went to the door. "Is she willing to talk?"

"Beats me," Martha scoffed. "Even I can't predict her mood swings."

Khan remained silent. Seeing Monica cry had been far from good. If possible, he wanted to see her smile before the end of the day.

"Cora was really too good for you," Martha continued, claiming Khan's attention.

"I know," Khan repeated. "Maybe I should just give up on this stuff."

"I didn't mean that," Martha revealed. "Cora was all good. You are better off with someone who is also bad."

Khan knew that Martha's words were on point, but he frowned anyway. He couldn't understand why she was giving him romantic advice.

"You-," Martha voiced before diverting her gaze and wrapping her arms behind her back. She appeared unwilling to speak, but she eventually mustered her resolve. "It took me a while to accept how much you have changed."

The atmosphere immediately grew serious. Khan and Martha had some unfinished business, and Milia 222 didn't give them much time to deal with it. Martha had also needed time, but she seemed ready to speak now.

"I should have checked on you more often," Khan realized.

"No, you shouldn't have," Martha scoffed. "I'm not helpless anymore, remember? You made sure of that."

Khan wanted to frown again, but an idea suddenly popped into his mind and made him smile. He had understood something, so a question followed. "Did you get the chance to fight today?"

"I did," Martha chuckled. "I didn't freeze, so you can stop worrying about me."

Martha's expression told Khan that the fight had gone well. That reaction reassured him a lot, but he still followed with an honest answer. "I will always worry."

Khan's words triggered a reaction in the synthetic mana around Martha. Her face remained calm, but her emotions didn't lie. Her heart was still too close to the matter.

"That honesty of yours is always so sneaky," Martha cursed. "Can't you just be an idiot all the time?"

"I do my best every day," Khan joked. "I just happen to fail."

"You are hopeless," Martha giggled before calming down to show a warm smile. "I'll miss your stupid jokes."

"Are you leaving?" Khan promptly asked.

"No," Martha replied, "But the mission is almost over, isn't it? Also, you aren't the type to stay in the same place for too long."

"We can arrange something-" Khan said, but Martha interrupted him. "Stop right there. I don't need a caretaker."

"I'm not your caretaker," Khan explained. "I'm your friend."

"Yes," Martha sighed. "That's why I need you to understand. I can't move forward if I remain in the safety of the past."

It was clear that something had changed in the last period. The missions with Monica and the friendship with Jenna had made Martha grow, eventually leading to that moment.

Khan understood what Martha was trying to say, so he didn't add anything. He waited, and his friend eventually continued.

"I need to face my own missions and gain my own experience," Martha stated. "I need to make my own mind on the universe and see who I'll become."

Khan agreed with Martha. He would worry, but she needed that experience. Moreover, Luke would probably opt for an easier mission after Milia 222, which reassured Khan about Martha's future.

Martha seemed to freeze for a few seconds when she saw Khan's smile. She could almost sense the gesture's concern and affection, which pushed her speech into the next phase.

"You don't feel emotions like humans anymore, right?" Martha asked.

A tremor ran through Khan's eyes. He didn't expect Martha to mention that topic, but it made sense considering her friendship with Jenna.

"It's hard to explain," Khan revealed.

"I bet," Martha uttered. "I bet it's even harder for you."

"At times," Khan nodded. "It can be very worth it."

"Does Monica make it worth it?" Martha wondered.

"I'll see," Khan responded. "I still can't say much about that."

"Hey, Khan," Martha called as a faint blush covered her cheeks, "You can see emotions, right?"

"Not really see," Khan vaguely answered.

"How does it work?" Martha questioned.

"They are sensations," Khan tried his best to explain, "Which turn into colors when I close my eyes."

"Which colors do you see around me?" Martha wondered.

Khan closed his eyes to gain a better view of the symphony. Various shades occupied the corridor, but the most intense were around Martha. She wasn't doing anything, but her emotions had given the synthetic mana a cozy yellow color.

"Yellow," Khan revealed while opening his eyes. "It's quite nice."

"Do you know what it means?" Martha asked.

Khan could say a lot, but he only nodded. Martha's blush intensified, but she promptly took a deep breath to calm down.

"I guess there is no point in hiding them," Martha cursed before stepping forward and wrapping her arms around Khan's torso.

The surprising event left Khan with his arms lifted, but the purity of Martha's feelings quickly made him give up. He hugged her back, and the two remained in that position for almost a minute.

"Martha," Khan called when the two separated.

"No," Martha stated. "Don't say anything."

Khan obeyed, but some sadness inevitably seeped into his face. He wanted Martha to be happy from the bottom of his heart. Yet, he couldn't be the reason behind that happiness.

"I'm pissed about us missing our chance," Martha suddenly admitted, "But not so much anymore. I'll focus on myself from now on. If I don't stop liking you even after becoming independent, I'll come to get you."

"I might be in a very dark part of the universe by then," Khan smirked, "And I might not be alone."

"We'll have our talk if that happens," Martha laughed before lifting her right hand. "In the meantime, friends?"

"We'll always be friends," Khan promised while taking Martha's hand to pull her back into his arms. She complained at that abrupt hug but quickly gave up and joined the affectionate gesture.

"You do realize that this isn't a goodbye?" Khan joked when the hug went on for more than a few seconds. "We will stay here for at least one more month."

"Monica might kill you today," Martha pointed out while separating from Khan.

"Right," Khan sighed.

"She has a nasty temper," Martha chuckled as she stepped aside. "Good luck."

"I'll do my best," Khan replied as he approached the door. Martha began to walk toward the elevator, but she decided to add something before Khan could knock. "I explained part of Jenna and the Nele's customs. I thought hearing them from me would help."

"I hope it did," Khan said while showing a grateful face to Martha. "Thank you."

"Don't make things worse," Martha warned, "Or you'll hear it from me."

Khan and Martha ended up laughing. An exchange of meaningful gazes followed, but Martha eventually turned to leave. Khan kept track of her until she entered the elevator, and his focus went back on the door at that point.

"Monica," Khan called while knocking on the door. "Can we talk?"

Nothing came out of the door. Utter silence unfolded, and Khan let a few seconds pass before knocking again and voicing another line. "I know you are awake. Give me a chance to explain."

Silence unfolded again. Monica seemed to have no intention of opening the door, so Khan decided to resort to tricks.

'Her anger is better than her silence,' Khan thought before cracking a joke. "You don't have to dress up. I like you even without your skirts."

The door unlocked right away, even if Khan didn't sense anyone coming from the other side. Monica had opened it remotely, and Khan didn't know whether that was a good sign.

Khan crossed the entrance only to find a pillow flying in his direction. He caught it before it could hit his face, but another arrived right after the door closed.

The first pillow acted as a shield for the second, and Khan felt the need to rely on it for the following items. Shoes, bags, and even a small mirror flew in his direction as he tried to get deeper into the room.

The storm of items eventually ended, allowing Khan to reach a spot where he could see the bed. Monica was on the opposite side of the mattress, covered by a blanket. He couldn't see her face from his position, but the synthetic mana told him everything he needed to know.

'Why am I having fun when she is so pissed?' Khan cursed as he touched his face. 'I'm even smiling.'

Khan approached Monica slowly, taking his time to put away his smile. He could sense how pissed she was, but that was fine. Instead, the lingering sadness that enveloped that anger was far harder to take.

The bed was dangerous territory. Khan didn't dare to approach it. Instead, he walked around it to slowly reach the side where Monica was.

As soon as Khan reached Monica, she threw the blanket on him and started slapping blindly. She never truly tried to hit him, and he had the pillow as a shield, but the words that accompanied that explosion were far from pleasant.

"I trusted you!" Monica screamed. "Am I just a game to you?! Go away! Leave me alone!"

The explosion didn't end there. Monica voiced her insecurities and anger while attacking the pillow. Her slaps were relatively harmless, but Khan felt bad nonetheless and let Monica vent.

A sob eventually resounded in the room and ended that fury. Monica lowered her face to cry, but she lifted it as soon as Khan removed the blanket from his head.

"Leave," Monica sniffed in a far calmer tone. "I'll really hit you if you don't."

"Sure, hit me," Khan said as he threw away the pillow and crouched before the bed. He even placed his arms on the mattress to leave his face uncovered.

Khan's resolve made Monica even angrier. She lifted her right arm to prepare a slap, but her hand remained in the air. A sob then broke her posture and made her reveal the sadness hidden under her rage. "Why did you lie?"

"Technically," Khan announced, but a slap landed on his cheek before he could continue his line.

"You can't even try to be serious," Monica shook her head before turning and lying back on the bed. She didn't care that her pillows and blanket were gone. She simply couldn't stand to look at Khan.

That comment told Khan how serious the situation was. He could take anger, but that intense sadness was too much. Part of him even wondered whether the damage was too serious, but he wouldn't give up without trying.

"Did Martha tell you anything?" Khan asked, but no answer came.

"Let's see," Khan continued. "You know how the Nele have only one lover throughout their lives? That creates an extreme mindset deeply ruled by feelings."

Monica remained silent. Khan could only stare at her back while he chose his following words. He didn't want to reveal any secret about the Nele, but he had to give something to explain his situation.

"The feelings are a problem," Khan followed. "Some Nele experience them more intensely, and Jenna is one of them. You can't imagine how extreme her thoughts are."

"Jenna, Jenna," Monica snorted as she straightened her back without turning. "Did you come here to justify her? Sure, I forgive her. Now leave."

"Do you know why she told you those things?" Khan asked.

"I don't care anymore," Monica replied.

"She sensed that I was getting serious with you," Khan continued, "And her jealousy made her act crazy."

A change finally happened, but not in Monica's posture. A new feeling joined the sadness and rage. The synthetic mana gained a sliver of hope.

"We have never kissed," Khan pressed on. "We sleep naked because that's the closest she can get to experiencing a real relationship, but we have never actually done anything."

"Do you take me for a fool?" Monica wondered. "Do you want me to believe that you never kissed her after sleeping together for so long?"

"You forgot the naked part," Khan pointed out.

"I didn't forget it!" Monica shouted as she turned to deliver another slap, but she interrupted her attack when she saw Khan's honest smile.

"You finally turned," Khan exclaimed. "I'm sorry for making you cry."

"Shut up," Monica whined while lowering her head. "So, what? Should I just accept that you sleep with another woman when you aren't with me?"

"Jenna would probably invite you over," Khan revealed.

"What?!" Monica gasped as her gaze went back to Khan.

"She has already accepted you," Khan exclaimed. "She is actually the one who pushed me to consider you. I would have tried to avoid getting too close otherwise."

"Why would she do that?" Monica asked. "Doesn't she like you?"

"That's the point," Khan stated. "I give her the closest thing to a relationship, and she takes care of my happiness. You simply happened to be suitable, according to her."

"Wait," Monica stated. "Did you kiss me because Jenna told you so?"

"No, she only put the idea in my mind," Khan laughed. "I did the rest by myself. She even got pretty jealous afterward."

"I don't get it," Monica voiced. "Why didn't you choose her?"

"Because I can't give her what she deserves," Khan revealed.

"Why?" Monica pressed on.

Khan diverted his gaze. He was about to speak about things that still hurt him deeply, but he had to try for that slim chance of being happy.

"The Nele experience feelings like the Niqols," Khan explained. "There are some differences, but still. I would have a type of relationship with Jenna where she would always be second place."

"And what about me?" Monica asked. "Would I also be a second place?"

"I have no idea," Khan admitted. "I only know that I like what we have and want to see where it leads. It's a risk, but that's all I can give."

Monica didn't ask another question. She lowered her gaze as she absorbed everything she had learnt. Truth be told, Martha had already reassured her, but the matter was still hard to accept.

"Did you never kiss?" Monica questioned.

"Never," Khan swore. "We had many opportunities, but we always stopped."

"But, why do you have to be naked?" Monica asked.

"Jenna got naked on her own during our second meeting," Khan sighed. "She never agreed to wear clothes after that."

"Second meeting?!" Monica gasped.

"I told you," Khan chuckled. "It's Nele stuff. It's only more intense with Jenna. We had reached a frail balance, but you shattered it."

"How is this my fault?" Monica pouted.

"You should have tried to be dumber," Khan joked, "Or more boring. You were also too hot for me to completely ignore you."

"Shut up already!" Monica complained as shyness filled her expression.

"Monica," Khan called in a serious tone, "I have always been honest with you, but I get it. If you can't accept my strange friendship with Jenna, I'll just walk away."

"Is she so important to you?" Monica asked.

"She is," Khan revealed, "But so are you. However, similar situations might appear in the future, and I can't force you to accept them."

"How many women do you plan on having in your bed?!" Monica shouted while lifting her gaze.

"Hopefully, only one," Khan declared. "I was talking about other alien customs. I wanted to prepare you to avoid this fight in the future."

"I'll always complain if you bring other women to bed," Monica scoffed.

"I'm sure you'll be able to kick them out," Khan laughed.

"Don't joke about it!" Monica cried. "It's not funny."

"Isn't it?" Khan asked as he stood up to climb on the bed. "You know I like teasing you."

"Get off!" Monica ordered. "I'm still mad at you."

"But you aren't breaking up with me, are you?" Khan wondered as he got closer to Monica.

Monica crossed her arms and fixed her gaze on the mattress. She could hear Khan's honesty, and she couldn't deny her feelings, which eventually made her voice a weak "no".

Khan reached for Monica's face when he got close enough. He took her cheeks between his hands and used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. He couldn't believe that he had made her cry, and he promised to make up for that.

"Did you really think about getting serious?" Monica questioned in her shy tone.

"Yes," Khan revealed. "Something clicked after our night together."

"Don't talk about that," Monica timidly complained. "It was only yesterday."

"You know I like teasing you," Khan repeated. "You are too cute for me to hold back, especially when you get mad."

"Am I only someone to tease and kiss then?" Monica asked.

"I have far more in mind," Khan smirked. "Do you want to hear it?"

"Not a chance," Monica finally smiled and reached for Khan's wrists. That gesture marked a change in the mood, and the two soon found themselves immersed in a deep kiss.

"I have yet to forgive you," Monica pouted when the kiss ended.

"I have yet to forgive myself," Khan whispered, and Monica's pretense melted before going for another kiss.

The couple eventually lay in bed. Monica used Khan's left arm as a pillow while she kept giving and receiving kisses. The intimate gesture never became too passionate, and it took a break when Monica found something to say.

"A risk," Monica said while caressing Khan's face. "My family will never accept this relationship. I guess I also don't know if we have a future."

"I'm fine with that," Khan stated. "Are you?"

Monica replied with a kiss, but she added something when their lips separated. "Though, I'll need to talk with Jenna. I don't want her to tempt my man so brazenly."

"You can always get naked and do the same," Khan suggested.

"Shut it," Monica snorted, but her tone soon grew timid. "You'll have to settle for the clothes I decide to use."

"Well," Khan chuckled. "It's your fault I have a thing for skirts now. You must take responsibility."

"I will," Monica replied without hesitation, and the seriousness that accompanied her statement affected the mood. The two fell into another kiss, and words took a long time to return in the room.

Chapter 404 Plans

Milia 222 never truly slept. It only took breaks. The dome always radiated light, preventing the citizens from experiencing the darkness of the night. Still, some calm and silence managed to reign during specific hours.

Khan inspected the empty streets from the room's darkened windows. A few citizens appeared from time to time, but they were mostly drunks who had just come out of clubs or crew members with night shifts.

Only the Orlats managed to claim Khan's attention, but none of them stopped near the building. He had hoped that Rodney's messengers would reveal themselves that night, but nothing suspicious happened.

Thoughts whirled inside Khan's mind as he lost himself in the peaceful scenery. He couldn't sleep when he had so much on his plate, and the details of his plans became clear as he kept reviewing them.

Khan didn't question Rodney's confidence, but he couldn't leave everything in his hands either. The mission could feature unexpected dangers and twists, which required heavy preparations to counter.

In theory, the mission was relatively straightforward. Khan only had to get into the secret area, dispatch the defenses met along the way, and retrieve evidence of the theft.

Still, Khan had seen enough of Milia 222 to know that every corner could hide complications. The place might even involve something as important as the reinforced fabric. A smooth retrieval sounded impossible, especially when he added Raymond Cobsend to the equation.

Rodney might be a flaw that even Raymond didn't predict, but Khan could still identify blind spots. The woman in charge of the operation was a critical variable, and the purpose of the whole theft remained unclear.

Khan didn't have the time or means to clear those variables, so he focused on what he could achieve the month before the celebrations.

The hidden area would probably prevent communications, but the Fuveall might offer a solution. Khan needed them to obtain something remotely reliable to call for help in case things went wrong.

The Orlats would usually be ideal for surveilling certain areas, but Khan couldn't rely on them due to Rodney. Yet, the Nele were beyond trustworthy, so Khan could leave that task to them.

Except for those two fields, Khan could only focus on increasing his personal power. Of course, he had never slacked off, and one month was too short to achieve significant improvements, but he had options that most humans lacked.

The hidden dome on the third asteroid could enable the [Blood Vortex]. Khan's attunement with mana had almost reached sixty-one percent before the departure to Neo Station, and he could probably add one point to it if he threw caution to the wind.

That improvement wouldn't be significant, but Khan couldn't disregard that opportunity when his life was at stake. Adding some resilience to his body would also make the [Blood Shield] easier to endure, which was necessary for his survival.

Khan had also commissioned another spell to the Tors. He didn't know how long it would take them to complete it, and he had to add a training period. He would probably need a week to master the new move, and he couldn't disregard that part.

'If only I could increase my proficiency level,' Khan sighed while his gaze remained lost in the scenery.

Khan's martial arts were the only other aspect of his arsenal that could provide a significant increase in power. A lot could change if the Lightning-demon style or the Divine Reaper reached the advanced level. However, he had no control over the process.

The advanced proficiency level wasn't a fixed goal. The martial arts could evolve in different directions depending on the user's qualities and fighting style.

Khan had found his direction, and he had even tested a few things along the way. Yet, his understanding of mana and physical prowess were still falling short. He had never stopped training, but the advanced proficiency level required a sort of enlightenment on top of relentless exercises.

'That's not something I can force,' Khan sighed once his mental summary ended. 'I guess I know what to do.'

A timeline had taken form in Khan's mind. First, he would wait a week on the second asteroid to meet the messenger and check whether the Nele found something. Then, he would head for the third asteroid and remain there for two weeks before traveling to the dock.

Khan would prefer to resurface on the last day to join the celebrations, but things could change depending on what the messengers said. Luke might also need his help, so he accepted that his schedule might change during his stay inside the dock.

A snore eventually managed to distract Khan. A smile appeared on his face when he turned to see the mess of curly hair resting on the bed. Monica had fallen asleep hours ago, and Khan didn't leave her room.

'At least I made up with her,' Khan thought while suppressing the urge to tease Monica.

The morning was still far away. Monica's job with the Orlats was over due to the recent attack, but Khan still held back from waking her up. She had been mentally exhausted from the fight, so she deserved some rest.

The yellowish bra on the corner of the bed filled Khan with some pride. Monica had a bad temper, and she overreacted at times, but her actions spoke loudly. She wanted to make their relationship advance. She simply couldn't let go completely.

Khan didn't blame Monica for that. The insecurities of her first relationship weren't easy to overcome, and they were still a young couple. Moreover, her position added problems, even if she didn't want to admit it.

Monica was the descendant of an extremely wealthy family. Her parents had definitely stressed how important her value as a political currency was. She didn't like her situation, but she couldn't disregard it easily either.

Khan could only imagine the pressure that Monica's parents had put on her. Choosing to give the entirety of herself to someone would require more than simple desire. She would need firm resolve and confidence in her partner to make that important step.

'I can almost hear George's jokes,' Khan laughed in his mind. 'I should call him once this is over.'

Khan shook his head before deciding to move on with his plan. He sat cross-legged on the floor and fell into a meditative state. He couldn't achieve much with that training, but wasting time wasn't an option.

Hours went by. Time always flowed quickly during the meditative state, even if Khan never lost his awareness of his surroundings. His senses remained on the symphony, and his eyes opened when a tremor ran through it.

"It's still early," Khan said when he met Monica's sleepy gaze.

Monica wanted to say something, but some panic filled her face when she noticed her bare chest. She quickly crossed her arms over it, and a whisper escaped her mouth once she managed to focus on Khan. "Scoundrel."

Khan smirked before standing up. He grabbed the blanket from the floor and carried it onto the bed as he crawled through the mattress. Monica became unable to hide her emotions when he covered her. She fell into a daze as she watched Khan's careful and gentle actions.

"Better?" Khan asked as he lay next to Monica.

Monica didn't bother to nod. Instead, she wrapped herself in the blanket before snuggling into Khan's arms. He moved some curls away, and a kiss landed on her forehead when he uncovered it.

"Don't get used to this," Monica warned.

"I know," Khan smirked. "I plan to do far more before that."

"You'll never get tired of teasing me," Monica sighed.

"I don't remember you hating that," Khan pointed out while caressing Monica's back from above the blanket. "You seemed pretty caught in the moment."

"I lowered my guard," Monica scoffed before showing her puppy eyes. "But, it was nice."

"Was it now?" Khan teased as he drew his face closer to Monica's. "We can resume from where we left off if you liked it so much."

"Get out of my room already," Monica voiced, but she still accepted Khan's slow kiss. She even immersed herself so much in it that she stopped holding onto the blanket to explore Khan's bare chest.

"How can I be so weak against you?" Monica whined once the kiss ended. "I never lost my cool so easily in the past."

"That's because you don't want to remain cool with me," Khan explained. "Isn't that the whole point of liking me?"

"I'm making it too easy for you," Monica exclaimed as a smile broadened on her face.

"I can't complain," Khan chuckled.

The two exchanged a few more kisses. The atmosphere was turning pretty intimate again, and Khan didn't want to interrupt that process, but he felt the need to come clean with his plans.

The idea of keeping Monica in the dark or lying to her couldn't stick, especially after the recent fight. Moreover, Khan was getting serious with her, so he had to trust her with the truth.

Monica didn't hide her surprise when she heard about Rodney and the other details of the investigation. She also reached the same conclusions as Khan before he could mention his hypothesis of a traitor inside the Cobsend family.

Learning that Khan would leave soon obviously was sad news, but Monica accepted it quickly. It was a matter of duty, so she couldn't object. Still, she made sure to voice her complaints about a specific aspect of those plans.

"Two weeks with the Nele?!" Monica almost shouted. "How many times will you sleep with Jenna in that period?"

"Probably every night," Khan admitted before correcting his statement. "Well, she won't leave my side during the day either."

"And will you be naked for the whole time?" Monica raised her voice.

"Only when we are alone," Khan laughed, but Monica's dark face cut his smile short.

"I need to go there," Khan tried to convey his plan from a different perspective. "The Nele have a special place on the third asteroid, which can help with my training. It's for my safety."

"Sure, safety," Monica snorted. "What happens if you find more Nele like Jenna? Will they also sleep with you?"

"I hope that doesn't happen," Khan sighed. "Two jealous women are already too much for me."

"What two?!" Monica complained while pushing Khan away. "I'm your woman. Jenna's jealousy is her problem."

"Yes, you are my woman," Khan chuckled, "And Jenna knows that."

Monica wanted to shout some more, but she felt powerless before Khan's warm smile. Her reasonable side understood that Khan had to go through that process. She simply hated the idea of sending him in another woman's arms.

"I need to talk with Jenna before your departure," Monica announced while crossing her arms and fixing her gaze on the ceiling. "I won't let you go otherwise."

"Fair," Khan stated as he got closer to Monica to take her in his arms again, "But I don't want to be anywhere near you two when that happens."

"Don't even think about it," Monica scolded. "You must be there and take my side."

"Two women is definitely too much," Khan joked.

"Get out already, you scoundrel!" Monica ordered as she tried to push herself out of the hug.

"Alright, alright," Khan laughed as he tightened the hug. "I'll obviously take your side. After all, I'm your man."

Monica stopped struggling when she heard those words. Her timid eyes went up to look at Khan's face. The urge to punch him surged as soon as she saw his smirk, but that feeling transformed when he caressed her hair.

"You are so unfair," Monica complained.

"And you are too cute when you get angry," Khan teased.

The two looked at each other for a few seconds, but Monica eventually pushed Khan away. Her gentle touch revealed that she was up to something, so he let her go and watched as some shyness appeared on her face.

Monica seemed scared, but that fear vanished when she glanced at Khan again. She gulped as she partially straightened her back and grabbed the blanket's edge to uncover her chest.

Khan didn't even bother to try to think. His mind went blank, and desire took control of his body. He stood on his knees to pull Monica from her waist, and their passion handled the rest.

The lights on the last floor of Raymond's building turned on when he left the cylindrical elevator and strode through the vast area. His walk didn't feature any interruptions or pointless detours. He took the shortest route to his office, and his gaze never stopped looking forward.

Raymond carefully removed the upper part of his expensive suit and folded it before laying it on a couch. He remained in his shirt as he went to pick up a bottle from his desk before moving to the wall's menus.

A few options lit up and went dark before part of the wall opened to reveal a small hole. Raymond put his phone inside and let the menus do the rest as he moved back to the desk to pour himself a drink. Once he had a full glass, he reached the couch and sat exactly at its center.

"Update me," Raymond exclaimed.

A holographic screen materialized a few meters from the couch and showed the image of a woman. She was gorgeous, but a hideous scar ran over her left eye and reached her cheek, ruining her otherwise flawless beauty.

The picture moved, revealing its nature as a video. However, interferences ran repeatedly, showing how the connection was far from good. Still, the audio didn't suffer from similar issues.

"We are keeping our eyes on the Semmut boy as you instructed," The woman said in a cold tone.

"Where is he?" Raymond asked.

"He is on the second asteroid," The woman replied. "He never stays in one place for too long and spends most of his time in a car. Honestly, we would have never found him without his meeting with Lieutenant Khan."

"He is resourceful," Raymond laughed. "What else?"

"His messenger is on our payroll," The woman explained. "He isn't telling him much, but we can safely assume he is planning to enter the lab. He will likely bring Lieutenant Khan with him too."

"Rash, rash," Raymond shook his head. "Kids nowadays have no patience."

"We have a few third-level warriors available," The woman exclaimed. "I can dispatch them and myself to defend the lab."

"No," Raymond objected. "Clear the way. Make the kids struggle a bit, but let them safely reach the lab."

"Sir?" The woman called.

"We have gathered enough data," Raymond stated. "Milia 222 has long since become limiting. I'd rather use Bret's son to see if he can trigger something."

"I'll clear the logs in the meantime," The woman uttered.

"Yes," Raymond agreed. "Save what you can save. Burn the rest. Leave only the sample for the kids."

"It will be done, sir," The woman declared before her picture disappeared from the screen. Even the holograms went dark as soon as Raymond tapped on the floor.

"Bret, Bret," Raymond sighed as he played with his drink. "I hope your son doesn't disappoint me."

Chapter 405 Slut

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Monica scoffed.

"You can say anything you want," Jenna mocked. "The truth won't change."

"Your truth is bullshit!" Monica almost shouted.

"And yet it remains true," Jenna responded.

"I'm Khan's woman," Monica declared, "And he is my man. That's how things are."

"Be it as it may," Jenna voiced, "Our connection goes beyond what you can offer."

"I won't take lectures by someone who can't even kiss him," Monica insulted.

"What?" Jenna chuckled. "Do you think exchanging a few kisses puts you ahead of me? You know the things we have done. We aren't in the same league."

"Your vixen tricks can only achieve so much," Monica sneered.

"I don't do tricks," Jenna teased. "I offer myself completely, which is something you clearly have a problem doing."

"You-!" Monica blushed. "How can you be so shameless?"

"Shameless?" Jenna wondered. "Maybe you should sort out your mind instead of making my Khan hold back."

"Your Khan?!" Monica complained.

"You heard me correctly," Jenna smirked. "We both know that I sent him in your arms. I wouldn't have done it if I knew you didn't have the guts to open your legs."

"What?!" Monica gasped. "You can't talk to me like this."

"You are just a little girl," Jenna sighed. "You are useless to Khan if you can't relieve him properly."

"Relieve?!" Monica gasped again before turning to her right. "Khan, help me out here. Tell her how things are."

"Can you leave me out of this?" Khan almost begged while massaging his temples.

A bit more than a week had passed since the meeting with Rodney. Khan had encountered the messenger the previous day, but the Nele couldn't find much. The second asteroid had exhausted its options, so Khan had planned to leave, but Monica and Jenna had things to sort out first.

Needless to say, the meeting had been a complete disaster. Jenna and Monica had been at each other's throats for entire minutes. The hidden street enveloped by purple light was the only consolation Khan could find.

"You can't remain silent when she insults me like this," Monica scolded.

"Yes, Khan," Jenna giggled. "Tell her how pent-up you have been. I already know because I see it every time we are together."

"What do you see exactly?" Monica shouted. "Khan?"

"Oh, don't look at him," Jenna teased. "You know what I'm talking about. Your gaze must have slipped down there more than once."

Monica gasped again before focusing on Khan and showing her puppy eyes. "Khan, you promised."

Khan didn't want to be anywhere near that situation, but he had to handle it. Jenna wasn't a problem. She was only using that chance to vent and have fun. Still, Monica was an entirely different issue.

"You both know how things are," Khan announced, hoping his words would end that fight. "Monica is my girlfriend. Nothing will change that."

"What's even her use when she can't satisfy you?" Jenna snorted. "You should just use me while we are away."

"Can you stop talking about sex?" Monica questioned.

"Why?" Jenna chuckled. "You should just get it over with if it bothers you so much."

"You have no say in my private life," Monica stated. "Our private life."

"I'm only trying to help Khan," Jenna explained. "I won't let you take advantage of his patience."

"You don't know how it is between us!" Monica complained.

"I know he is holding back for your sake," Jenna revealed. "Isn't that right, Khan?"

Two pairs of beautiful eyes landed on Khan's face, and he didn't dare to look at either of them out of fear of triggering someone's anger. He only wanted to summon all his mana and run away.

Every reasonable part of Khan's mind told him to side with Monica and end that fight. He would soon be alone with Jenna anyway, and she would understand his actions.

However, similar situations might happen in the future. Monica needed to understand that her perspective had to expand to accept Khan in his entirety. She could decide not to do that, but their relationship wouldn't last long in that case.

"I'm obviously holding back," Khan admitted before pulling Monica's right arm to make her fall in his hug.

Monica wanted to say something, but the situation made her uncomfortable. They were in the open, and Jenna wasn't the only one in the area. A group of Nele also stood at the end of the hidden street.

"She teases me more than you," Monica whispered.

"So, we tease her back," Khan smirked before lowering his head to kiss Monica.

The synthetic mana revealed the changes in the surroundings. Khan could sense Jenna's jealousy, but she also radiated some curiosity and general acceptance.

Khan wiped his upper lip when the kiss ended. Monica was wearing the brownish ointment to protect herself from the Nele's pheromones, and some of it had ended on him.

Monica had fallen into a daze. Khan had spent a lot of time in her room during the past week, which further deepened their relationship. She knew exactly what Jenna meant, and she couldn't understand why she even bothered holding back with him.

"I make that face too when I'm with him," Jenna sighed. "He is pretty unfair at times."

"Incredibly unfair," Monica agreed.

"Are you teaming up against me now?" Khan laughed while fondling Monica's hair.

"He is thinking about nasty stuff," Jenna teased. "I told you he needs to relieve himself."

"Don't give Monica strange ideas," Khan said before using an arm to hide Monica's face. "One perverted woman is already too much."

"I told you already," Jenna exclaimed. "She is probably like me."

"How can you even say that?" Monica asked as she broke free from Khan's hug.

"I hope you are," Jenna giggled. "You won't be able to keep up with Khan otherwise."

Monica shot a glance at Khan that expressed both annoyance and embarrassment. She didn't want to talk about that stuff in the open, but Jenna knew how to make her angry.

"Okay, you'll never manage to go along in such a short time," Khan announced. "Jenna, please reassure Monica about us. Do it for me."

"Unfair," Jenna scoffed before turning toward Monica. "We are only friends. We won't cross the line, but only because we decided that."

"[Jenna]," Khan scolded.

"It's my turn now," Jenna snorted as she stepped toward Khan to hug his arm and continue talking to Monica. "Don't screw up, or I'll take him against his will. I'll do that even if you make him wait too long."

"Hey, who do you think you are touching?" Monica asked as she grabbed Khan's free arm.

"Don't worry," Jenna teased. "I'll touch a lot more once I get rid of his clothes."

"Khan?!" Monica shouted.

"This meeting is over," Khan exclaimed before turning toward Jenna. "[I'll see you tonight]."

"[Don't make me wait too long]," Jenna voiced while lowering her head to leave a kiss on Khan's cheek.

"What did you just do?" Monica cried as she left Khan's arm to reach for Jenna.

Jenna let Khan's arm go, so he stepped forward to intercept Monica. She seemed set on reaching Jenna, so Khan lifted her to leave that street.

"You slut!" Monica shouted from above Khan's shoulders while he carried her away. "I won't forget this."

"I hope I didn't ruin your last day together," Jenna laughed while waving goodbye to Monica.

Monica almost screamed, but Khan put her down at that point. A kiss landed on her lips before she could say anything, and Khan also kept her still until he sensed that her anger was under control.

"Are you calm now?" Khan asked after lifting his face.

"No," Monica pouted.

"We can walk hand in hand for a bit if you behave," Khan whispered.

A flicker ran through Monica's eyes. Her relationship with Khan had rarely gone out of her room since everything was still a secret. She could get a few minutes of normality now, and she didn't dare to miss out.

"Unfair," Monica complained, but she still took Khan's hand and started strolling toward the end of the street.

"[You know what to do, right]?" Khan asked when he reached the group of Nele.

"[We have the portraits we need]," The only second-level warrior in the group said. "[We'll keep watching out for clues]."

Khan nodded. He had already sorted that part of the plan out. The Nele would keep watching the messenger and contact Luke if they found something. They wouldn't actually meet him, but he had been more than happy to provide a phone.

The situation was quite strange from Monica's perspective. The Nele were usually completely detached in the open, but they showed friendliness in Khan's presence. They also allowed themselves to be curious about the whole fight, which wasn't a common sight.

Khan also felt strange, but for opposite reasons. His relationship with the Nele had improved greatly, but most of that had happened in the dock. The aliens in the group had probably only heard rumors, which left room for hesitation.

"[Be safe]," Khan eventually voiced.

"[You too]," The second-level warrior responded.

The meeting ended there, with Khan and Monica enjoying the short privacy the walk out of the purple street could offer. It felt nice to have that moment of normality, but it ended too fast, even if Monica tried to be as slow as possible.

Letting go of Monica's hand annoyed Khan, but he couldn't help it. Milia 222 had too many eyes, and he wasn't ready for a political scandal. The two could only walk side by side, pretending not to desire to get closer.

Luckily for the couple, Luke's building had been relatively peaceful in the past week. The mood was too sour for the happy meetings in the main hall, and everyone wanted to prepare for the celebrations. Monica and Khan could go straight to her room without meeting anyone.

"I can't stand her!" Monica exclaimed as soon as the door closed behind her. "She thinks she can lecture me just because her pants are looser than mine."

Khan did his best to hide his smile, but Monica defeated his efforts by turning to shoot an angry glance. She was so livid that he couldn't help but let out a faint chuckle.

"On which side are you?" Monica scoffed. "Why don't you go to that slut since you clearly like her kisses?"

"Didn't we already have this conversation?" Khan teased.

Monica suppressed a scream as she stomped her feet. Her rational side had already accepted the matter long ago, but her emotions had different opinions.

"I can't stand her," Monica complained in a far quieter voice.

"Do you know why she tries so hard to get on your nerves?" Khan asked as he slowly approached Monica. "Her jealousy is connected to how close we get."

Monica let Khan pull her waist, but her eyes remained on the floor. The meeting didn't achieve anything in the end. She had only gotten mad.

"Also," Khan continued while lifting Monica's face. "Jenna is a dear friend, and she isn't a slut."

"Are you defending her now?" Monica questioned.

"I told you," Khan stated. "The Nele experience feelings differently, and their customs enhance that feature. They can give the entirety of themselves to their loved ones without a second thought."

Monica would typically have a hard time understanding that different perspective. She was simply too human. Dating was a regular part of relationships in her mind, and she didn't experience feelings like the Nele.

However, spending time with Khan made her aware of many surprising aspects of her character. Part of her had even begun to envy Jenna for her freedom and boldness.

"I can't stay put when someone insults Jenna," Khan continued. "It's fine if you are joking, but I'm afraid you might start to believe what you are saying."

Monica stared at Khan for a few seconds before heaving a helpless sigh. "Always so protective."

"Would you prefer me to be like this only toward you?" Khan teased.

"Yes," Monica admitted. "I wish I could monopolize that side of yours."

"Someone is getting bold," Khan laughed.

"I'm too mad to be shy," Monica pouted before laying her head on Khan's chest. "Sorry for being a moody mess."

"I like that about you," Khan reassured. "I knew we could work since you first slapped me."

"I can do that as many times as you want today," Monica sneered.

"I can think of better things to do," Khan joked.

Monica left Khan's chest and looked at his smirk for a few seconds before taking his arms. A tinge of shyness appeared on her face as she led Khan to the bed and made him sit. She had yet to get used to those bold gestures, but she didn't let anything stop them.

"Khan," Monica whispered as she sat on Khan's lap, "How bad is it?"

"Bad what?" Khan asked.

"Holding back," Monica explained.

"Don't let Jenna's words get to your head," Khan chuckled. "She only wanted to tease you."

"But there has to be some truth in them," Monica pointed out. "What you are about to do is dangerous. I don't want anything to distract you."

"Distract me?" Khan repeated as his smile broadened. "And what would you suggest to avoid that?"

"I-," Monica stammered. "I want to help. Just tell me what to do."

Monica sat deeper in Khan's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her skirt had hidden it, but she could feel the bulge on Khan's groin.

"I can-" Monica began to say, but Khan suddenly grabbed her nose and pulled her face closer to his.

"What are you doing?" Monica pouted.

"My woman is acting strange," Khan revealed. "I'm resorting to extreme measures."

"Let go of my nose," Monica complained.

"Only if you stop forcing yourself," Khan chuckled.

"Fine," Monica cursed. "I'll stop."

Khan let go of Monica's nose only to place his hand on her cheek. Both of them smiled before falling into a long kiss that brought Monica with her back onto her bed.

"Maybe loosening your pants is a good compromise," Khan whispered once their passion finally took a break.

"Not a chance," Monica quickly replied before lightly pulling Khan from his hair.

The gesture's purpose became clear only when Khan could see the entirety of Monica's face. Her expression was going in direct opposition to her words.

"[I see that my words helped]," Jenna proudly announced. "[I don't know if I should be happy or jealous]."

"[You are both already]," Khan shook his head.

"[You know me so well]," Jenna giggled as she tightened her hug on Khan's arm. "[Yet, she still has a long way to go. She didn't even take off your pants]."

"[You know her situation]," Khan sighed. "[It takes time]."

"[You can use me in the meantime]," Jenna whispered, "[And after]."

"[I'll really give you a muzzle]," Khan cursed, and the conversation remained on that topic for a while.

It was night. Khan had left Monica to join Jenna on the trip to the third asteroid. He was one day behind his original schedule, but the events with the messenger had made that delay impossible to prevent.

Jenna and Khan crossed Lower Level 1 in a cab before going for the elevators and reaching the short-distance teleports. Arriving on the third asteroid was as easy as ever, and the same went for getting into a zone connected to the hidden dome.

More rumors had spread on the third asteroid, and the Nele only needed to see Jenna clinging to Khan to recognize him. Jenna had also lost most of her self-restraint in public, so she freely hugged and joked with Khan, uncaring of the gazes from members of different species.

Khan didn't spend much time on foot, but he could still see how his welcome had changed. He met very few stern stances along the way. Most of the Nele either nodded at him or showed curiosity toward his relationship with Jenna.

Getting into the secret passage wasn't an issue with Jenna. The two soon used the elevator for Lower Level 2 and reached the dome to attend to the cleaning process.

Khan rejoiced when the natural mana in the corridor surrounded him. His senses cheered. He had almost forgotten a world without the stench of synthetic energy, but the Nele were there to remind him.

Seeing settlement gave birth to similar emotions. The trees, the ground, and the general vegetation were a sight for sore eyes. Khan had lived among metal for months by now, and the scene made him aware of how much he had missed that alternative.

"[Let's get you to Caja]," Jenna announced while also experiencing the same happiness that had filled Khan. "[She must be eager to see you]."

Khan limited himself to following Jenna through the path at the center of the settlement. Nele came out of shops and houses to inspect the scene, and some actually smiled when they noticed Khan. The welcome was even friendlier there.

Jenna seemed in a hurry, so Khan didn't have the chance to interact with anyone. The two soon left the central path to get into the woods and walk toward the large hut used during the previous visit.

The powerful presence inside the hut told Khan and Jenna everything they needed to know. The two crossed the wooden entrance and revealed smiles seeing Caja sitting on the floor. She appeared as elegant and bright as ever, and she had even prepared three fuming cups for them.

"[Caja, I'm back]," Jenna happily exclaimed before sitting on a spot next to Caja.

"[Not for long, I believe]," Caja chuckled.

"[It's a pleasure to meet you again]," Khan politely stated. "[Thank you for all the help your species provided]."

"[Ooh]," Caja voiced while she inspected Khan. "[You've grown, young man]."

"[Jenna has to take credit for that]," Khan revealed. "[I wouldn't have gotten where I am without her]."

"[Take credit]?" Caja wondered before glancing at Jenna. "[Is he talking about money]?"

"[It means that I helped him]," Jenna explained. "[Though he also did a lot for me. He still does]."

"[Oh, silly me]," Caja laughed. "[I should hang out on the surface more often. I won't understand a single word you say in a few years]."

Caja pointed at a spot on the other side of the cups, and Khan didn't hesitate to sit there. The three took their drinks and began enjoying them without needing additional words.

"[You have also changed quite a bit]," Caja eventually said when she got a better look at Jenna.

"[Do I need to know something]?"

"[I bothered Khan quite a bit in the last period]," Jenna revealed. "[I'm having a hard time controlling my emotions]."

"[The beauty of youth]," Caja exclaimed before turning toward Khan. "[I hope she didn't cause too many problems]."

"[Even if she did]," Khan voiced, "[I wouldn't call them problems]."

"[Quite direct]," Caja commented, "[And driven. We managed to get some reports from the dock. Maban spoke highly of you]."

"[I only helped when necessary]," Khan responded.

"[Facing a third-level warrior on your own doesn't sound necessary]," Caja declared. "[Still, a human joining the hunting season. That must have been quite a sight]."

"[Again, I only wanted to help]," Khan remained humble.

"[Do you find killing easy]?" Caja wondered. "[Did you want to prove your worth]?"

Khan knew what Caja was thinking. The hunting seasons often involved innocents, at least in matters directly connected to the Nele. Still, the dock wasn't a cradle of good people, and that wouldn't have saved them anyway.

"[I wanted to make Jenna safe]," Khan revealed his motivations. "[I wanted to make the Nele safe]."

"[Is blood a worthy price to pay]?" Caja asked.

"[I've done worse for worse people]," Khan stated. "[If being a weapon helps you, I'm willing to become one]."

"[You have truly taken a liking in our species]," Caja laughed. "[That's good, but weapons we have. You need to become more if you truly want to help]."

"[Caja, Khan has a lot to handle]," Jenna intervened. "[Adding pressure won't help]."

"[You defended him so quickly]," Caja sneered while lifting a hand to cover her mouth. "[What an intriguing scene]."

"[I might not be in the best condition to mind my manners]," Jenna admitted.

"[You didn't even during our first meeting]," Caja teased. "[It's good that you found a way to explore yourself. I approve this]."

"[Thank you]!" Jenna exclaimed before wearing her shameless face. "[So, do you mind if I sit next to him]?"

Caja happily nodded, and Jenna didn't hesitate to leave her spot to reach Khan's right side. In a few seconds, her head was resting on his shoulder.

"[So, you requested for this environment to train]," Caja stated. "[I imagine the technique involves the type of mana]."

"[Correct]," Khan replied.

"[Do you want to seal the same deal as last time]?" Caja asked.

Khan moved Jenna away for only a second to take out his backpack and place it in front of him. A short search inside the item made him pull out a cylindrical container with a dark-red liquid, and the mana it radiated revealed its nature.

"[I have enough for one use]," Khan explained, "[But I'd need to rely on you to continue]."

"[More blood]?" Caja questioned. "[That's not a problem]."

"[I don't mind showing this technique to the teachers here]," Khan added. "[It doesn't suit your arts, but you might be able to develop something similar if you see it]."

"[Are you suggesting a public demonstration]?" Caja wondered. "[Why not? It's about time more Nele got to know you anyway]."

Chapter 406 Alive

The settlement was small enough to plan events in a matter of hours. It was already late when Khan and Jenna arrived in Lower Level 2, but that played in their favor. Nothing major was going on, so Caja could gather the interested parties without problems.

Khan and Jenna waited by the lake for everyone to gather, and five Nele eventually reached them. Caja was among them, and Khan also recognized Pascatte.

"[It's nice to see you again]," Pascatte announced when the group reached the couple. "[I understand that you have more alien arts to show us]."

"[It's complicated]," Khan exclaimed as he stood up to greet the Nele. "[This technique involves the absorption of mana inside the body. It's quite forceful, so it might not suit you]."

"[That's why we are here, isn't it]?" Caja chuckled. "[Focus on your technique. Leave the theory to us]."

Caja didn't say anything specific, but Khan understood that the Nele around him were experts. Pascatte was a teacher, and Khan could safely assume that the others had a similar status. It would be up to them to decide whether their methods could replicate the [Blood Vortex].

Khan nodded before returning to the ground and emptying his backpack. The bucket, the container, and a few sets of clothes came out, and Khan sorted them out to have them where he wanted.

Usually, the [Blood Vortex] would require a thorough study of the environment, but Khan had already spent days near that lake. Moreover, his overall control over mana had improved, and his relationship with Jenna had given him insights into how the Nele affected an area.

Khan had only needed to return to the lake to know that he could perform the [Blood Vortex] there. He recognized those shores, and their specific energy signature grew clearer in his mind as he poured the blood into the bucket.

Mana came out of Khan's hands as soon as he placed them on the bucket, but that energy quickly changed color to obtain the features he needed. The process immediately attracted the group's attention, and even Caja bent forward to inspect everything closely.

The Nele were no strangers to the manipulation field, but they didn't apply it like the Niqols. Khan was showing them something complicated and exotic, which managed to retain their attention for its entire duration.

'It's done,' Khan thought when the blood became a dense, dark liquid that suited his needs. 'Now, the easy part.'

"[Jenna, I need some space]," Khan requested as he stood up.

Jenna didn't hesitate to comply, but surprise appeared on her face when Khan started undressing. She had questions, but Khan spoke as soon as his shirt fell to the ground.

"[I hope you don't mind if I get naked]," Khan asked while moving his gaze among the group. "[This technique requires it]."

"[We are all a bit too old to mind something like that]," Caja joked, "[And I'm sure Jenna won't complain]."

Cheerfulness invaded the mood. The Nele laughed, and Jenna didn't bother to deny that comment. Her expression actually agreed with it, but her smile vanished when she understood something was off.

"[Jenna]," Khan called again through a serious tone. "[Don't interrupt me for any reason]."

Jenna knew that tone. It carried the same seriousness that Khan expressed whenever he trained, but something deeper had joined it at that time. The alien technique brought Khan to another planet, among the best memories of his life.

Of course, Khan's warning had a different purpose. He wasn't even aware of the face he was making. He only wanted to prepare Jenna for what was coming.

Khan's mindset changed the mana in ways that Caja and the others could read. The cheerfulness quickly disappeared, and seriousness took over as soon as Khan finished undressing.

The phone acted as a mirror as Khan dipped his fingers in the bucket to use the modified blood as ink. He had long since committed the [Blood Vortex]'s marks to memory, but drawing them still took time due to the precision they required.

Khan lay on the ground before completing the last mark. Then, the [Blood Vortex] activated, creating a sucking force that attracted the mana and sent it inside his body.

The Nele remained silent, but Khan could sense their surprise. Their reaction was perfectly normal, and that feeling only intensified when Khan's skin started to burn.

Jenna understood the meaning of Khan's warning at that point. The urge to jump in manifested itself, but she suppressed it to let the technique continue. Still, Khan didn't make it easy for her.

'I have less than two weeks,' Khan thought as he steeled his resolve. It was time to endure as much as possible.

Jenna's emotions grew more prevalent than the others as the [Blood Vortex] went on. The group could sense the injuries Khan was suffering, and Jenna couldn't share her companions' calm. The scene resembled proper torture and watching it hurt her.

Part of Khan wanted to interrupt the [Blood Vortex] to end Jenna's suffering, but he kept going. His flesh burned under the friction caused by the flowing mana, but he barely felt it. His mind was elsewhere, reviewing memories that still managed to stir his emotions.

Eventually, Khan felt forced to interrupt the technique. His senses warned him about the seriousness of his injuries, so his hand snapped to remove part of the closest mark.

Jenna gasped when she saw how deeply the [Blood Vortex] had dug, but the bitter spectacle had just begun. Khan groaned as he stood up to walk inside the lake and remove the remaining marks. More and more injuries appeared as Khan cleaned himself until he finally turned to show his condition.

Red lines covered most of Khan's body, and some blood fell out of them. He had gained hideous marks which fused with the azure scar to create a strange scene.

Jenna could only focus on the injuries, but the other Nele were different. Khan's current appearance couldn't be farther from a human. Watching him walk out of the lake left a deep impression in their minds that they couldn't put into words yet.

Khan felt some discomfort. Moving in that condition was annoying since everything triggered pain. Even putting back his pants back on made him release a grunt, and another followed when he sat on the ground.

"[The mana is under these marks now]," Khan explained as he crossed his legs and prepared to meditate. "[I need to absorb it to complete the procedure]."

"[Do you plan on using this technique for your whole stay here]?" Jenna asked as she sat next to Khan.

"[It's the fastest way to increase my attunement with mana]," Khan stated without hiding the helplessness that Jenna's concerned gaze caused.

Jenna pushed on an intact part of Khan's shoulder to make him half-turn and show his condition. Those injuries would take a while to heal, especially without specific ointments, but Jenna planned to take care of that.

"[How fitting]," Jenna sighed.

"[Fitting]?" Khan asked.

"[For you]," Jenna continued. "[I know your character, remember? These arts involve prices and sacrifice. They are perfect for someone like you]."

"[My resolve is worthy of legends]," Khan joked.

"[It's not resolve]," Jenna corrected. "[It's selflessness. You don't see any problem in hurting yourself because you are too used to it. You don't see the value in avoiding this pain]."

"[Liiza cried the first time I overdid]," Khan revealed. "[She even hit me]."

"[I can see why]," Jenna uttered. "[I wish I could also beat some sense into you. It's a pity you see your value only when reflected in those you care about]."

"[I wish there were another way]," Khan sighed.

"[No]," Jenna objected. "[You wish I weren't here to see this]."

Khan could only reveal a meaningful smile and watch as Jenna stood up. She appeared pretty annoyed and sad, but her following words carried as much affection as she could muster. "[I'll bring you something for your injuries]."

Jenna turned to leave, and the group inspected her departure before focusing on Khan again. Pascatte and one of the male Nele even crouched toward Khan to get a better look at the injuries and the mana under them.

"[It's quite forceful]," The male Nele commented.

"[And goes against our methods]," Pascatte added.

Khan agreed with those evaluations. The [Blood Vortex] forced the mana to enter the body. The technique wasn't a request but an order.

The steps required to activate the [Blood Vortex] were also a problem for a species that heavily focused on the mana in the environment. Khan didn't know if the Nele had the necessary expertise in the manipulation field to accomplish such a feat.

"[Take note of the specifics]," Caja eventually ordered. "[Add them to our records for now. We'll perform a proper study once things stabilize]."

"[You can come to see it the next time too]," Khan stated while pointing at the empty container. "[I just need more materials to perform it]."

"[Next time]," Caja repeated. "[Abusing this technique will push your body to the limit. It might end up doing more harm than good]."

"[I'm aware of the risks]," Khan revealed. "[This is my sole option, and I can pursue it only if you help me]."

Caja gave another look at Khan's injuries before nodding at her companions. The group quickly began to leave, but Caja remained.

"[You truly are a peculiar human]," Caja announced. "[Your arts are even more diverse than your heritage]."

"[My element is my only conflicting heritage]," Khan pointed out.

"[Maybe]," Caja voiced. "[Still, your perspective is unique. Mixing different arts is uncommon, but I guess it suits the chaos' freedom]."

"[Aren't you trying to do the same]?" Khan wondered.

"[My species has lost a lot over the years]," Caja explained. "[We must use others to accelerate the reconstruction of our records]."

Maban had said something similar. The Nele had basically reinvented their traditions and arts after achieving freedom, but it would take them a long time before reaching their neighbors' levels.

"[Also, I never said we would mix the two arts]," Caja chuckled. "[Our goal is to create a version of your technique that we can see as ours]."

'A proper translation then,' Khan thought before voicing an idea that popped into his mind.

"[Shouldn't I do it? I'm the best for the job since I know both arts]."

Caja didn't expect that reaction, but Khan's sincerity put a warm smile on her face. She could see that his desire to help didn't hide any deeper purpose. He only wanted to give a hand.

"[Do you really have the time to think about others]?" Caja joked. "[I thought you were in a hurry]."

"[Oh]," Khan recalled. "[Right. Maybe I can work on it once my mission is over]."

Caja shook her head, but her smile remained. She still recalled how tense Khan had been during their first meeting. He had acted as a young ambassador back then, but he seemed to treat the Nele as friends now.

"[No wonder Maban accepted you]," Caja commented. "[Focus on yourself for now. Then, if you ever achieve a good status and still want to help, we'll continue this conversation]."

Khan understood Caja's thoughts because Jenna had teased him about the same topic. She didn't want to burden him with the problems of her species, at least not with superficial ones. Khan would become able to provide significant help only if his position in the Global Army improved.

"[Don't tell me that you are already thinking about it]," Caja laughed while covering her mouth with a hand. "[It's reassuring. We might really count on you in the future but deal with your problems for now. Jenna wouldn't like it if you ruined your life over us]."

"[I-]," Khan wanted to say something, but Caja suddenly turned. Soon, Jenna's presence entered the range of Khan's senses and explained the purpose of the gesture.

"[I've taken some from our stash]," Jenna exclaimed as soon as Khan and Caja could see her. "[I hope it's not a problem]."

Jenna's crossed arms contained a series of flowers, leaves, roots, and chunks of wood. She had also stuffed a couple of cups in her hands, but she seemed ready to bring everything back if Caja said otherwise.

"[It's not]," Caja announced. "[Treating him is the least we can do]."

"[Did you learn how to adapt the technique]?" Jenna questioned in surprise as she reached Khan to drop the items at his side.

"[Nothing like that]," Caja sneered. "[Let's say that our allies deserve our support]."

"[Thank you]!" Khan promptly declared.

"[No, thank you]," Caja responded. "[I'll give you some privacy now. Feel free to join the lessons tomorrow if you are interested]."

"[I'll do my best to participate]," Khan promised, and Caja shot another smile at him before turning to leave.

An expert like Caja could easily hide her mental state, especially from Khan. However, her thoughts sent a slight tremor in the mana. She felt reassured. The Nele had truly found a loyal ally.

Jenna began to arrange the chunks of wood while Khan watched Caja disappear among the trees. Her last smile had given away something. She had made a decision, but Khan couldn't point out the exact topic. Still, he thought about his betrayal on Nitis for some reason.

"[Do you always end up in this condition when you use that technique]?" Jenna asked before murmuring something that only the mana heard. In an instant, the chunks of wood lit up to create a fire.

"[I'm pushing myself a bit more]," Khan explained. "[It's my best bet]."

"[So, you always suffer injuries]," Jenna replied as she started adding the leaves to the fire. "[Learn this then. It might come in handy in the future]."

Jenna didn't look at Khan at all. Her full attention was on the flames and the mana in the environment. Murmurs accompanied the addition of new materials, and crackling noises resounded whenever the process altered the fire.

"[Are you making a potion]?" Khan wondered.

"[Yes]," Jenna confirmed. "[I'm using suitable plants and mana to enhance their properties. I'll teach you the theory in these weeks]."

Khan didn't need to ask to know Jenna's reasons. She didn't want to feel useless while he immersed himself in that intensive training. Moreover, the ability to concoct ointments could genuinely help, and she desired to pass it on to him.

"[Did you ask Caja for permission]?" Khan questioned.

"[Do you think I'd care right now]?" Jenna responded, finally lifting her gaze. "[You told her something, didn't you]?"

"[I didn't say much]," Khan admitted. "[I only offered my help]."

"[You can barely take care of yourself]," Jenna mocked. "[Saving my species is not your job]."

"[Still]," Khan sighed. "[You took care of me in the dock, you showed me your methods, and you are even helping with the investigation. I want to give something back]."

"[Most of our forces are free now]," Jenna revealed. "[We finished stashing goods long ago. As for the dock, you did more than you should have there]."

"[Stashing goods]," Khan repeated. "Imminent chaos. [Do you think your prediction will become true during the celebrations]?"

"[That's not how it works]," Jenna stated while adding the last materials to the fire. "[You know that]."

The flames turned from red to orange after the last addition, and Jenna promptly placed a cup near their base. A dense yellow liquid soon made its way through the burning chunks of wood, and Jenna collected it without spilling any drops.

"[Drink up]," Jenna ordered when she handed the full cup to Khan.

Khan didn't dare to object. Smoke came out of the cup, but he drank the whole liquid in one gulp anyway. He knew the potion wouldn't burn.

Warmth filled Khan's chest before spreading through his body and flowing toward his injuries. A lot of mana had gathered there, but the potion's effects ignored it to focus on the maimed flesh.

"[I'll teach you how to do this and some ointments]," Jenna declared. "[It would be better if you learnt to recognize the vegetation, but that's too much to ask, especially if you travel often]."

"[I can always ask the mana, can't I]?" Khan wondered.

"[Yes]," Jenna said, revealing a wonderful smile. "[You are truly getting better at this]."

"[Don't jump on me]," Khan laughed while raising his arms. "[I'm injured]."

"[Don't worry]," Jenna giggled. "[I'll be the one taking care of you in these weeks]."

"[How can I even not want to save your species]?" Khan shook his head. "[I should meditate]."

"[I'll be here]," Jenna promised before following with a question when a shameless smile appeared on Khan's face. "[Did you get a dirty thought? I should hurry and get naked]."

"[It was something random]," Khan revealed while closing his eyes. "[I wonder, can someone even buy a planet]?"

Jenna exploded into a laugh, but the meaning behind the statement made her melt. She fought the urge to jump on Khan and limited herself to sitting behind him. His back was intact, so she could use it to convey her warmth.

The stay in the hidden dome didn't offer any free time. Khan used the [Blood Vortex] whenever his body healed, followed Jenna's teachings when he was at his lowest, and handled his other exercises in between that.

Needless to say, sleep rarely arrived and only when Khan absolutely needed it. He was willing to exhaust himself completely since the dock would give him time to recover, and Jenna supported him to the best of her abilities.

The chances to socialize also didn't arrive often. Khan and Jenna ate with the other Nele and even attended some morning lessons, but that was it.

The Nele still grew used to Khan's presence, and Jenna's unrestrained affection vouched for him in ways that meetings couldn't achieve. The general curiosity soon transformed into proper salutes, with some aliens even taking their time to exchange a chat with him during the meals.

In a way, that type of life was perfect for Khan. He had Jenna and natural mana. A man like him didn't need anything else. Still, at the end of the second week, it became clear that his body couldn't sustain that rhythm forever. Moreover, Monica made her way through his thoughts more than once. Khan actually missed her.

The time to leave eventually came, even if Khan almost forgot about it. He had to thank the weekly updates with Luke for that since Jenna didn't dare to mention anything about it.

Khan and Jenna exchanged general and short goodbyes with Caja and a few other Nele before resurfacing and making their way toward the fourth asteroid. By then, the celebrations were less

than a week away, and crossing the short-distance teleports revealed that some preparations were already in place.

Most asteroids featured similar sceneries, but Khan noticed many peculiar details when he left the hangar. Crowds filled the streets on the first floor, and hundreds of ships flew around the central pillar before diving into the city below.

The shops on the streets and the city below also showed some changes. Brighter banners had appeared on most buildings, and the same went for shining graffiti that radiated different colors. Flags and giant balloons even occupied the space between the first floor and Lower Level 1, hinting at the imminent celebrations.

The overall cheerful atmosphere was another different aspect that usually belonged to the first asteroid. Milia 222 seemed ready to party, but Khan couldn't enter that mood due to the strange sensation that assaulted his sensitivity.

"[It has gotten stronger]," Khan revealed when the elevator granted some privacy.

"[I still don't feel anything]," Jenna cursed before shooting an annoyed look at the red marks on Khan's face. "[Don't get into fights this week. Focus on healing and stabilizing your mana]."

"[I'll only have a few meetings and sleep with you]," Khan promised. "[The dock might even be empty, all things considered]."

"[Let's hope empty of troublemakers]," Jenna added.

The newfound chaos of the fourth asteroid stirred Khan's sensitivity. He would typically enjoy the city's crowded streets and happy mood, but the strange sensation ruined any chance of having some fun.

The increased intensity of that sensation was another problem. Khan could easily connect the event to the recent theft, but the absence of actual proof forced him to put those thoughts aside.

Khan found some consolation in his short time. Exploring the celebrations wasn't an option in his situation, so he ignored everything as he strode toward an area occupied by Nele. He would use their passages to reach the dock.

The journey to the lower levels went smoothly. The Nele in charge of the various checkpoints recognized both Khan and Jenna, so the two could reach Lower Level 3 without meeting any problems.

The symphony of mana partially confirmed Khan's guess. There seemed to be fewer crews on Lower Level 3, but the area remained quite populated. Yet, nothing had changed for the location of the small Nele's district, so the two could head in its direction right away.

Maban wasn't in the district, but Khan and Jenna found Piran, who provided a room without asking questions. Still, Khan left on his own right after dropping his backpack since he wanted to settle his matters as soon as possible.

The path toward the Tors' district had long since become part of Khan's memory. He crossed the dock's streets and reached the area with oily synthetic mana in no time before sitting on the floor to wait for someone to receive him.

As always, the Tors took a few minutes to show their presence, and they said the exact words Khan wanted to hear when they jumped over the guardrails. "Come, chaos wielder."

Some anticipation built up in Khan's mind as three caped Tors led him inside their district. The aliens left once they reached a familiar small house, and Khan crossed its entrance without hesitation.

The city above turned out to be only one of the things that had changed. A large hole now spread from where the trapdoor had once been. The Tors had enlarged the passage for the lower floor, and bright purple-red light came out of it.

Khan didn't need to use his sensitivity there. His eyes were enough to confirm that the Tors had created something chaos-adjacent, and a short peek at the area below convinced him to jump through the hole.

Clanging noises resounded as soon as Khan landed on the lower floor. He had fallen on a layer of junk and random metal items, but the reptilian alien hanging from the wall didn't mind that, and noticing the source of the purple-red light put Khan into the same mindset.

The Tors was almost exactly where Khan had left it. Only the number of flasks connected to the metallic structure on its back had changed. The alien was using four of them, which spoke loudly about the difficulty of the project.

That change remained quite superficial compared to what had fallen in Khan's vision. The array of tubes and pipes was still there, but it was far larger than before due to the bright figure contained inside.

Khan almost couldn't believe his eyes. The tubes contained a purple-red cloud with no fixed shape and trembling surfaces. The amount of mana inside was incredible and made it worthy of second-level mages, but Khan only experienced fear at that sight.

'What is that thing?' Khan gasped in his mind, and the situation didn't hesitate to turn even stranger. The cloud's tremors intensified when Khan focused on its energy, and a clicking growl came out of it. The spell seemed alive.

Chapter 407 Mindless

Khan felt stuck. An instinctive fear took control of his body and made him unable to move. His sensitivity to mana became his worst enemy as he focused on the spell contained inside the array of tubes.

The spell seemed able to sense Khan's gaze. The clicking growl from before had been a reaction to his presence, but that process had just begun.

The purple-red cloud grew unstable. Its surface shook violently as parts of its bright body stretched forward to reach the tubes.

The spell gained a spiked shape that pressed on the machine as it continued to expand. Its tremors even intensified, which added power to its efforts. The mana inside the tubes began to flicker under that pressure, and the Tors voiced a loud hiss once the situation became too dangerous.

The Tors' tail left the wall to crack on the spot containing the hidden drawer. The gesture made the pieces of metal on the floor fly in different directions, and some ended on Khan. The room was too small to dodge them, but Khan was in no condition even to bother to try.

The hidden drawer slid open, and the Tors quickly picked up one of the flasks inside it. Its tail rose to connect the new item to the machine on its back, and new mana flowed inside it.

The Tors stuck out its forked tongue, which lit up and started to shake as the new mana flowed inside it. A high-pitched noise soon echoed, growing loud enough to snap Khan back to reality and force him to cover his ears.

The cloud released another clicking growl as the high-pitched noise assaulted its seemingly ethereal fabric. Its spikes lost power, and the same went for its tremors. The spell couldn't retain its stretched shape under that assault, and its size shrunk to add stability to its structure.

The high-pitched noise continued to echo until the Tors felt that the spell had given up on trying to break free. Its tongue stopped trembling and began to dart left and right to check the condition of the tubes.

Khan remained silent even after the situation calmed down. He was too immersed in the study of the spell to question the Tors. His instinctive fear slowly turned into a clue, and his sensitivity didn't hesitate to add details.

'Is it really alive?' Khan wondered before disregarding that question. "Alive" could have different definitions, and he lacked the expertise to come up with a definitive answer.

However, Khan could focus on different features that still expanded his understanding of the matter. He couldn't determine whether the spell was alive, but he could confirm that it expressed a will in line with the chaos element's nature.

The vast amount of mana contained in the cloud was also surprising. The Tors had created something relatively weak during its previous commission. Yet, the new spell had abandoned that quality and Khan could understand why.

In the first commission, the Tors had to limit the spell's power to strive for structural stability. Khan had even given precise requirements, and the Tors could fulfill them only by restraining the final product.

Instead, those limits didn't exist anymore during the second commission, so the Tors created something that expressed the chaos element in its entirety. The cloud represented its wild and unrestrained power, which explained the reason behind Khan's fear.

The spell wanted to be free and force its effects on its surroundings, and Khan could recognize that violent urge with a single glance. He felt like he was in front of a mindless beast that only wanted to destroy. Fear was the sole sane reaction.

'That's not something I can control,' Khan understood during his short inspection. 'That's not something anyone should try to control.'

Khan wanted to feel disappointed, but the Tors had done an excellent job. The cloud had the potential to be stronger than the chaos spear. Still, its nature made it unfit for any arsenal.

"Why did you create something like this?" Khan eventually forced himself to ask.

"We summoned chaos," The Tors hissed.

"But why?" Khan repeated. "No one can wield something like this."

"Wielding it wasn't a requirement," The Tors reminded.

Khan couldn't contradict the alien. He recalled the details of his commission, but he didn't expect the Tors to develop something so unstable. It simply didn't suit their technological approach to mana.

"Why this shape?" Khan continued.

"Chaos chose it," The Tors stated. "We restrained it."

Khan fell silent. Questioning the Tors on their methods was useless. The alien wouldn't reveal its species' secrets. Also, Khan could find the last details on his own.

The spell didn't have a fixed shape. The recent reaction had shown how the chaos among the tubes was ready to expand. Humans might not know the reason for that behavior, but Khan didn't even need to think to find the answer.

'Flow,' Khan thought. Somehow, the Tors had harnessed the chaos element's main driving force. They had created something that could expand as long as it had energy. As for its limits, Khan would have to test them out for himself.

The problems started there. Testing out the spell would involve a dangerous process in which Khan couldn't ensure his safety. He couldn't even try to control the cloud since that would go against its nature.

As for being able to master the spell before meeting Rodney, Khan didn't have any confidence in that. He didn't even know if he would ever add that cloud to his arsenal. Still, he could ponder about that problem later. Time wasn't on his side now.

"Open it up," Khan requested, "Just like last time."

"Chaos will eat you," The Tors warned.

"Luckily, I've already paid you," Khan joked.

The Tors was in no mood for jokes. It turned its head to fix its reptilian eyes on Khan, and they remained there for a few seconds before an answer came out of its mouth. "Do it yourself."

After those words, the Tors sent its tail on the hidden drawer and seized the flasks inside it before leaving the wall. The alien slithered through the opening to reach the upper floor, and Khan soon heard the entrance opening and closing.

'No faith in me at all,' Khan mocked before heaving a sigh. 'I can't blame it.'

The instinctive fear returned as soon as Khan focused on the spell again. Luckily for him, the cloud didn't immediately go crazy. Instead, it sent a strange influence that affected the synthetic mana in ways that resembled feelings.

'What is it doing?' Khan wondered before a strange idea formed inside his mind and made his eyes widen in surprise. 'Is it trying to communicate?'

Khan immersed himself in his sensitivity. The cloud was gazing back at him, even if it didn't have eyes. The symphony carried something akin to curiosity, but that feeling was different from what Khan experienced with other living beings. That emotion expressed something primitive.

It soon became clear that trying to understand the spell through a human mindset was stupid, even impossible. Khan wouldn't only have to rely on his alternative methods. He also had to accept that his broad emotional range wouldn't help.

'What are you trying to tell me?' Khan wondered before shutting down his thoughts.

There was only one explanation for the spell's primitive curiosity. It had sensed that Khan was a kindred soul, a being driven by the same force. Still, that wasn't enough to establish a connection. It might actually lead to another dangerous outburst.

Khan didn't know why, but he felt the need to do something before the situation worsened again. His very guts pushed him toward that decision, and he didn't dare to ignore them.

The instinctive fear intensified when Khan stepped toward the array of tubes. The Tors had placed them near the ceiling, so he had to reach for the parts connected to the walls to lower the container and put him in his range.

Khan moved slowly. His gestures were careful and straightforward, but the spell's wariness increased anyway. The cloud didn't show any reaction, but Khan could feel those changes through his instinctive fear.

Eventually, Khan brought the array of tubes right in front of him. He only had to stretch his hands and move some pipes away to reach the spell, but some hesitation inevitably appeared. He didn't know how to approach that dangerous energy. He wasn't even sure he could defeat it.

"[I'm not your enemy]," Khan said, doing his best to send his emotions to the synthetic mana while covering his hands in purple-red energy. For some reason, he had used the Niqols' language, and the situation didn't give him the time to think about that detail.

The announcement seemed to work. The instinctive fear's intensity remained stable even as Khan stretched his glowing hands toward the tubes.

The mana inside the tubes dimmed when Khan made way for his hands. He wasn't doing anything special with his energy, but the chaos element's innate features were enough to affect the environment, especially when the area had two sources of that power.

The cloud remained still even after Khan wrapped his glowing fingers around it. He could feel some resistance when his mana touched the spell's energy. He could immerse his hands in that seemingly gaseous shape, but he held back for obvious reasons.

Khan let his hands rest on the spell while focusing on the symphony. The two types of mana were different but also similar. They belonged to the same energy firm and even carried equal urges. Yet, pursuing a peaceful approach with a wild beast turned out to be impossible.

The spell's glow suddenly intensified, and its tremors returned. The mana on Khan's palms shattered, exposing his hands to the destructive chaos nearby.

Khan summoned the [Blood Shied] to cover his hands and forearms, but the spell only took that as a threat. Its tremors grew wilder, and a violent expansion began.

Pain filled Khan's mind. The spell's chaos tore his skin apart and pushed on the clotted blood vessels. The [Blood Shield] held strong, but the technique had a time limit. Moreover, the cloud was stretching toward the openings in the array of tubes, threatening to reach unprotected parts of Khan's arms.

Khan could fight the spell, but he needed something first. He ignored the pain as he unleashed as much mana as possible. Flares of purple-red energy shot out of his injured palms and pushed on the cloud, forcing it to abandon its wild assault to focus on the imminent threat.

The wild mana unleashed by Khan didn't carry any special features. He was relying on the sheer superiority of his energy reserves to contain the cloud while his inspection continued.

The chaos element acted as a connection between Khan and the spell. The two couldn't communicate through normal channels, but their similarities made them able to understand each other when their energy clashed.

Khan learnt more about the spell's urges while his hands continued to release mana, but the latter shared those benefits. The cloud could gain insights into Khan's goals, which only made it angrier.

The clicking growl returned as the cloud's tremors intensified. An even stronger pushing force landed on Khan's mana and shattered it, exposing his hands again.

The spell had the chance to expand again, but it didn't resort to its previous random approach. Instead, it labeled Khan's hands as mortal enemies that needed to be destroyed immediately.

An even greater pain filled Khan's mind. He tried to summon more mana, but the cloud destroyed it in no time. That vulnerable state even allowed the spell to expand the range of its destruction, which soon involved Khan's wrists and forearms.

The cloud was managing to expand without losing power. Its violence actually increased, which didn't make any scientific sense since its energy reserves were limited.

However, Khan knew the reason behind that unrealistic reaction. The spell's desire to break free had grown stronger, and its energy had reflected that change.

"[Is that it]?!" Khan shouted in the Niqols' language while the cloud continued to expand. "[Do you only desire destruction for the sake of destruction]?!"

Questioning a wild mass of destructive energy sounded beyond stupid, but the cloud seemed able to understand Khan's words. Still, the spell had only one answer for him.

An even louder growl resounded in the room. The cry resembled a proper scream that echoed deep into Khan's mind. Feelings he had also experienced multiple times showed their presence in a primal form and made him able to translate what the spell wanted.

The spell was born in captivity. The unfairness felt due to never experiencing true freedom was deep and intense, and the anger it triggered only added fuel to its power.

Khan could finally understand the spell. In a way, it expressed what he had realized only recently. The cloud carried an uncompromising desire to break free, even if that involved destroying anything in its range.

That urge was quite simple. If a wall stood in the way, the spell would destroy it. If a path were too narrow, the spell would enlarge it. If anyone became an enemy, the spell would kill them.

The spell's basic and dangerous idea of freedom was almost enlightening. Khan could see the true shape of the chaos element in all its radiance. Part of him even felt pity. After all, the cloud was right.

However, an even stronger emotion surged inside Khan and pushed away the pity. He had experienced the same unfairness, but his situation had involved far more than a childish desire for freedom. He felt insulted that his thoughts had resonated with something so mindless.

"[You don't know what unfairness truly is]," Khan voiced in a chilling tone before the circular version of the Wave spell came out of his chest.

The expansion of the Wave spell pushed away the cloud and freed Khan's arms, allowing him to retreat without suffering additional injuries. His attack destroyed the array of tubes and damaged his opponent, but the clicking growl that reached his ears told him that the battle wasn't over.

The Wave spell had destroyed part of the cloud, but the latter was free now, and it had no desire to return to captivity. New power flowed through its fabric and made its chaos more dangerous, but two purple-red needles landed on the wall behind it before it could resume expanding.

The needles pierced the metal wall before detonating and touching the cloud with their explosions. The spell lost even more energy, which finally brought a change in its behavior. A survival instinct overcame its anger and made it shoot toward the hole in the ceiling.

Khan could hear all the changes in the spell's mindset through the symphony. He had understood his opponent, so he knew what it would do as soon as it made decisions.

The cloud flew toward the ceiling only to see three more needles cutting its path. One of them even dug through its structure, and its explosion destroyed almost half of its remaining energy.

The spell didn't give up. It took a sharp turn to its left to avoid the detonation of the other needles, but Khan was faster once again. A straight version of the Wave spell shot out of his left hand and invaded the area the cloud wanted to cross.

The cloud lost even more energy when the Wave spell touched it. The path toward the upper floor seemed closed, so the remaining chaos decided to fly through the openings created by the first two needles.

However, that change of direction left the cloud exposed for one second too long. Khan used his right hand to launch another straight Wave spell, which finally hit his opponent directly and enveloped it in his attack.

The cloud struggled, but it couldn't do anything against Khan's attack, especially in its weakened state. Yet, it continued to voice its mindless anger even before completely exhausting its energy. Death failed to take away its desire to be free.

Khan fell to his knees once the situation calmed down. He wasn't tired, but his mind felt heavy. His arms hurt, and a single glance at them told him that their condition was far from good. Moreover, his feelings weren't exactly happy either.

'True freedom,' Khan thought as rubbles fell from the ceiling and uncovered more of the upper floor. 'I can't deny its existence, can I?'

A sad realization enveloped Khan. That new spell was a reflection of his life. It was too dangerous even to test it, but preventing it from existing wouldn't speak well for him. He was equally doomed if the cloud couldn't find a place in the world.

Chapter 408 King

Creaking noises resounded in the small house. The ceiling bent in multiple spots due to its new holes. The whole metal surface seemed on the verge of falling apart, but it somehow remained in its place.

The rest of the room wasn't better off. Two big holes had opened on a wall, granting a view of the lower part of the Tors' district. The various tubes had also turned into a broken mess, but a failsafe had prevented leaks.

The clash with the cloud had trashed the small lab. Fixing the tubes seemed impossible. A proper replacement appeared mandatory, and Khan didn't know how expensive that would be. He only hoped that the Tors would face the matter reasonably.

The damage wasn't even the main issue. Khan had worse problems to worry about, starting with his arms. The prolonged contact with the violent chaos had turned them into a bleeding mess, even if the [Blood Shield] had saved him from harsher injuries.

That wasn't even the end of it. Injuries would heal, and Credits could fix any damage. Yet, nothing could help with Khan's internal conflict. The cloud had shown him a bitter truth that he still didn't know how to overcome.

'Mindless pursuit of freedom,' Khan thought as he sat among the rubble, 'Uncaring of the consequences or destruction it causes.'

Khan had reached a similar mindset recently, but he couldn't be as uncompromising as the spell. Nitis had taught him how even the deepest feelings had to face reality sooner or later. Sometimes, the universe didn't offer alternatives.

The issue existed in that duality. Khan had to find common ground between a mindless pursuit of what he desired and an intelligent approach to the world. He had to be uncompromising while abiding by certain rules.

Khan realized that the issue had no real solution. Those two paths had opposite features that couldn't coexist, which wasn't surprising. He was comparing himself to a wild beast. Society didn't have a place for that.

However, old memories played in Khan's mind as he reviewed the matter. He recalled Yeza and Captain Erbair. Those two powerful women had died under the assault of mere animals. They had the chance to survive, but that didn't change the nature of the event.

'I can act as I want in wild environments,' Khan thought. 'That has never been in question. But, still, there must be a way.'

The idea of living as a hermit crossed Khan's mind, but he quickly disregarded it. That was another compromise that saw him abandon many things he liked. The answer had to be able to exist everywhere, in every political environment and society.

'What should I have done to avoid breaking up with Liiza?' Khan wondered.

The question didn't feature any guilt or regret. Khan wasn't afflicting himself over past decisions. Instead, he wanted to find a theoretical alternative to understand if the path he sought could even exist.

Khan still didn't know much about the universe, but he had matured greatly since Nitis' events. His knowledge in multiple fields had also expanded, granting him a new and broader perspective.

It was undeniable that a mere first-level warrior had no power over those matters. Khan would be helpless even if he reached the third level. Sheer personal power couldn't fix Liiza's issue.

Khan would have needed far more and not in a single field. Salvaging his relationship with Liiza would have required political influence, immense financial prowess, and the resolve to give everything up to keep his love alive.

Those three major areas also had smaller fields. The political influence would have had to involve multiple species and a force capable of holding its own against other factions. The same went for the financial aspect. Mere Credits wouldn't have been enough. Proper structures would have been necessary even to consider pulling off something like that.

As for the last area, Khan didn't lack resolve, but his nightmares had been a big part of the issue, and he still didn't know how to fix them.

'Even proper ambassadors would have failed,' Khan concluded.

The theoretical figure taking form in Khan's mind was closer to a king than a wealthy individual with good political connections. He would have needed to be something akin to a country capable of asserting dominance in the very universe. He would have required an entire faction or organization just to have a shot.

'A leader,' Khan sighed as he recalled a past conversation with Jenna. 'I should have created an organization for the sole sake of my love.'

The matter sounded unreal and even quite unfair, but Khan couldn't find a better answer. That was the solution provided by his new knowledge. That had to be his goal to achieve the unreasonable freedom the chaos element desired.

'I'm getting ahead of myself,' Khan joked, even if his mind started to envision the details of that goal.

Building an organization wasn't too hard, at least theoretically. Money could purchase structures and soldiers, and achieving political influence would help establish the connections necessary to remain relatively independent.

However, Khan didn't want something so soulless. He wouldn't be any different from Rodney or Luke otherwise. His ideal organization would need true loyalty, similar to what he had achieved among the Niqols.

'I missed using their language,' Khan chuckled. 'You'll always be a part of me, won't you?'

Khan shook his head as he finally stood up. Strangely enough, he didn't experience any sadness. Instead, some restlessness invaded his mind. He wanted so many things that staying still was simply impossible.

'So much for avoiding battles,' Khan mocked himself as he focused on his arms. Nothing was broken, but he would still need time to heal.

Khan instinctively reached for his trousers to rip them apart and create some simple bandages. An annoying pain spread while he covered his injuries, but his restlessness suppressed all of that.

'I need to get that cloud out of my head,' Khan realized once the time to leave arrived. He even lightly slapped his cheeks to calm down. Finding an actual solution had given him a purpose. His mind was full of various desires, and he didn't know how much he could suppress them.

Khan jumped on the first floor once he felt able to control himself, and a hooded Tors appeared in his vision once the entrance opened. The cape prevented any inspection, so Khan could only resort to words.

"I can pay you back for the damage," Khan announced in an attempt to salvage his relationship with the Tors.

"Leave, chaos wielder," The Tors hissed from behind the hood. "No more deal."

"Wait," Khan called as the Tors began to turn. "We can still-."

"Too dangerous," The Tors interrupted. "No more deal."

Khan didn't want to lose that rare political connection, but reasoning with the Tors seemed impossible. The caped alien even left without bothering to escort him outside the district.

The end of the cooperation wasn't a real issue. Khan wouldn't know what more to commission to the Tors, and his departure was close. He only felt annoyed to have missed the chance to establish a proper relationship with the species, but the matter had probably been impossible since the very beginning.

'I really need to calm down,' Khan thought as the desire to call the Tors again showed its presence.

Khan took a deep breath before marching toward the district's exit. He had to make another stop before returning to the Nele, so he crossed a series of streets until a familiar presence entered his senses' range.

"[What happened to you]?" Sen-nu exclaimed in the Fuveall's language when Khan stepped on his street.

Khan had never given his appearance much thought, but he had to admit that he didn't look good. His face still showed the marks caused by the [Blood Vortex], and the same went for his exposed legs. Also, the bandages on his arms were quite messy, which only worsened his image.

"[I need your help with something]," Khan went straight to the point while taking out his phone. "[I hope your stash can meet my standards]."

"[Ah]!" Sen-nu gasped. "[Are you making fun of Sen-nu now? Do not worry. The quality of my items is undisputed]."

"[About that]," Khan stated as he crouched before the sitting Sen-nu. "[I don't want the stuff you sell to random customers. I need premium items]."

"[Sen-nu only sells premium items]," Sen-nu proudly claimed.

"[Come on]," Khan whispered. "[You must have something of slightly better quality, especially when it comes to communications in the dock]."

"[My human friend]," Sen-nu chuckled, "[Your words reveal your ignorance. Any expert would acknowledge Sen-nu's genius with a single look at my products]."

"[So]," Khan continued, "[You don't have anything better]."

"[It's not about quality]," Sen-nu explained. "[Communicating in the dock requires overcoming specific jammers and hindrances. Even the best devices can't achieve that with absolute certainty]."

"[What do you suggest then]?" Khan asked.

"[Sen-nu could give you something specific if you knew the exact hindrances to overcome]," Sen-nu suggested.

Khan could only shake his head. He didn't even know where Rodney would lead him, let alone the technical details of the area.

"[I'll go for the most reliable communication device you have]," Khan sighed.

"[If you only want reliability]," Sen-nu announced, "[You can sacrifice flexibility. Sen-nu has a pair of devices that can only communicate with each other. They are your best choice if you accept to have a single caller]."

"[I'll trust your expertise]," Khan nodded, and Sen-nu immediately reached for the backpack behind him to pick up the items.

"[Sen-nu must warn you]," Sen-nu added while handing two phone-like devices to Khan. "[The reliability will decrease once the celebrations reach their most critical hour. I suggest you wait for things to calm down before handling whatever you have in mind]."

'Great,' Khan cursed in his mind but purchased the items anyway. He had never planned to rely on the devices in the first place, but refusing to prepare for the worst was simply stupid.

"[Do you need anything else]?" Sen-nu asked when Khan stored the new devices in his pocket.

"[That depends on what you can offer]," Khan smirked.

"[That's what Sen-nu likes to hear]!" Sen-nu laughed, and the contents of his backpack soon filled the street.

Khan ended up purchasing a few more items from Sen-nu. The alien sold him a tracker that could help his companion follow his movements and an advanced scanner for the mana. Khan wouldn't usually need something like that, but the strange sensation of the fourth asteroid convinced him to leave nothing to chance.

The meetings were finally over at that point. Khan could return to the Nele's district and complete his preparations, but a familiar figure waiting by the first purple lamp told him that he would have to overcome a fight first.

"[Weren't you supposed to take it easy]?" Jenna scolded when she noticed the bandages on Khan's arms.

"[I'll explain later]," Khan reassured as he dropped a bag to the floor. "[Can you take this into our room for now]?"

"[Are you planning on training already]?" Jenna wondered.

"[There is something I need to test out]," Khan revealed. "[I even need to ask Piran for permission]."

"[Piran]?" Jenna repeated. "[Is it dangerous]?"

"[A bit]," Khan admitted, "[But I'm not worried about me. I'm only afraid of the damage I might cause]."

Jenna's eyes darted up and down as she inspected Khan from head to toe. The Khan she knew would never consider causing problems for the Nele, but she didn't mishear him. She could quickly conclude that something had changed again.

"[Did something good happen]?" Jenna questioned.

"[I don't know how good that was]," Khan laughed. "[It only forced me to think. I guess I can see my path more clearly now]."

"[Which is]?" Jenna asked.

"[Being myself]," Khan shrugged his shoulders. "[That's the only way to build meaningful connections. As for being a leader, only time will tell if I'm fit for that]."

Khan's speech didn't make much sense, but Jenna felt able to understand him anyway. She had seen how lost he could appear, but that seemed impossible now. He had gained a new goal that made him brim with confidence and resolve.

"[Do you know how hard it is for me to hold back when you look like this]?" Jenna teased as she picked up Khan's bag and reached his side.

"[Holding back is a pain]," Khan cursed. "[I should just give up on that altogether]."

"[Are you finally ready to take me then]?" Jenna giggled as she grabbed Khan's arm in a spot without injuries.

"[I can't wait for Monica to get this bold]," Khan snickered, and Jenna immediately complained, making him explode into a loud laugh.

Jenna and Khan separated shortly after. Jenna had her duty with the vegetation in the dock to attend, and she also wanted to concoct some potions for Khan. As for him, Piran had granted him access to the training hall, and he needed to make the best out of the short time before the mission.

In theory, summoning an entirely new spell would require many attempts and a lot of thinking. Khan usually needed to find precise emotions and images that depicted what he wanted to express.

However, the cloud was different. The latter required a complete absence of those rules. Khan believed he could summon it by giving free rein to everything he had inside.

When the night arrived, Jenna resurfaced while carrying a bowl containing a dense ointment. She wanted to apply it to Khan's arms, but he had yet to come out of the training hall, and disturbing him wasn't an option.

Still, Jenna didn't want to go back to her room already, and there was a high chance that Khan might need treatment once his session was over. So, she opted to wait in front of the training hall for him, and Piran's arrival gave her the opportunity to kill some time.

"[I didn't expect you to agree to Khan's request so quickly]," Jenna joked once the conversation reached that topic. "[Are you sure Maban won't complain]?"

"[This district is far from vital]," Piran explained, "[Especially with most of our resources safe on the third asteroid. Also, how much damage can he even do]?"

"[He did crash a ship in the middle of a street]," Jenna pointed out.

"[That kind of damage is easy to fix]," Piran revealed. "[Besides, I'm sure he'll be careful]."

A loud explosion resounded as soon as Piran finished his line. He and Jenna turned in the direction of that noise only to see that a man-sized hole had appeared in a spot right next to the hall's entrance.

An intense purple-red glow invaded the area, and a clicking growl followed. The smoke released during the explosion quickly vanished, revealing a large, bright cloud hovering in the middle of the hole.

Jenna and Piran prepared for the fight as soon as the cloud focused on them, but a glowing spear suddenly fell at its center and exploded to unleash the entirety of its destructive power.

A pillar of purple-red light enveloped the cloud and destroyed any trace of its presence, but part of the metal wall also fell prey to the attack. The man-sized hole transformed into a big and fuming opening, and a figure slowly appeared at its center.

Khan wore a shameless smile when he peeked past the opening to look at Jenna and Piran. Jenna found it hard to hold back a laugh while Piran could barely believe what he had just witnessed.

"[I'll pay you back]!" Khan promised before inspecting the nearby streets. "[Maybe it's better if you keep this area empty while I'm here]."

"[Get out of the training hall already]!" Piran shouted, and Jenna's self-restraint gave in, making her explode into a laugh.

Chapter 409 Return

The mess caused by the cloud ended up locking Khan out of the training hall for the rest of his stay in the district, and he didn't even try to complain. The test had confirmed that a single week wouldn't be enough to master the new spell, so Khan gave up on the project and focused on recovering.

Peaceful days went by in which Khan did nothing but rest and stick to a relatively easy training routine. He let his body heal and absorb the absurd amount of mana gathered on the third asteroid while engaging in the usual social events of the district.

Life during that week was truly blissful. The problems of the surface seemed unable to reach the dock, and the general cheerfulness caused by the incoming celebrations added a layer of peace that prevented the arrival of crises.

That peace allowed Khan to give free rein to his personality. The Nele weren't treating him as an outsider anymore, so they slowly became aware of the shameless aspects of his character. Laughs often resounded whenever Khan teased Piran about the training hall, and similar jokes flew in his direction once everyone felt comfortable enough.

The situation could easily lead to multiple meaningful connections. The calm environment and lack of duties could give Khan the chance to make proper friends in the district, but time wasn't on his side, and the Nele also had to move at some point.

As the celebrations drew close, the population of the dock diminished. Entire crews and groups resurfaced to prepare for the event on the fourth asteroid, and Khan's time arrived on the last day of the week.

Khan took care of Jenna's intense mood for most of the day before reaching the inevitable goodbyes. The two separated, and he left the district before going to the elevators handled by the Nele.

Even without Jenna, the Nele granted Khan safe passage to the surface. He could return to Level Lower 1 without meeting any problems, and his phone started to buzz as soon as the dome's light resumed shining in his vision.

The return of the connection to the network would generally put Khan into battle mode, but the chaos that welcomed him on Lower Level 1 took priority. The celebrations were only one day away, and the streets perfectly depicted how close the event was.

The shops owned by Nele usually scared away bystanders, but that didn't apply now. Khan could barely keep track of the number of people that welcomed his return to the city, and his sensitivity also struggled to adjust to the mess.

Many groups belonging to different species roamed through the streets, even filling the areas past the sidewalk. The place was so crowded that Khan couldn't spot any vehicle in his surroundings. He had to lift his head to see cabs still performing their job by flying among the buildings.

The various groups were up to different activities, but the mood was overwhelmingly happy. People drank in the open, shared special smokes that gave off a strange scent, and wore eccentric accessories, dyes, or clothes that suited the incoming event.

The messy state of the street forced Khan to rely on his eyes. He walked around the block to study the situation, but the scenery didn't change. It seemed that the entirety of the city had fallen prey to that happy mass of visitors.

Moving by foot turned out to be troublesome. The night had started, so the various groups Khan encountered on his path were overly friendly or straight-up wasted. He would have joined that happy mood in different circumstances, but his mission didn't give him that chance.

'I guess getting picked up is impossible,' Khan thought after gaining a general idea of the situation.

Khan noticed a few concerned texts when he finally checked his phone. Luke would have preferred for Khan to resurface earlier, while Monica simply wanted to check on him. As for the actual updates on the messengers, the situation didn't change. Khan was meant to meet Rodney tomorrow.

The how and where of the meeting were still unclear, but Khan knew that Rodney would reveal himself at some point. The mess he was inspecting would also provide a nice cover, so the chances of getting spotted by interested parties would be low.

'Where are you?' Khan sent to Luke once he found an empty corner where to wait for an answer.

A few minutes had to pass before the phone buzzed again. Luke had replied. 'We are on the fourth asteroid, Lower Level 1. I can send someone to pick you up if you need.'

'No, just give me your location,' Khan responded.

A few seconds passed, and a new message reached Khan's phone. Luke had sent an interactive map with a marked location. It seemed that the group had already settled in another building owned by the Cobsend family.

'Definitely not close,' Khan thought before sending a message to Monica. 'Can you talk?'

The reply arrived almost instantly, and Khan already came up with jokes while he read Monica's answer. 'I can. Did something happen?'

The walk to Luke's building was bound to take a while. Khan would have to roam through the city for at least a few hours. He could spend that time deep into his thoughts, but a better idea had already popped into his mind.

Khan rechecked the map before starting a call and bringing his phone to his ear. Ringing noises resounded as he walked through the crowd, and a familiar voice eventually came out of the device. "What were you thinking?!"

"You told me you could talk," Khan laughed.

"I meant through texts!" Monica complained. "I had to make a run for the corridor to avoid getting caught."

"But you still picked up," Khan teased.

"I thought you were in danger or something," Monica explained. "I'll hang up if you called only to tease me."

"I did miss teasing you," Khan admitted.

"I bet Jenna filled that role more than well," Monica scoffed.

"She surely did her best," Khan chuckled, "But your reactions are cuter."

"I'm hanging up," Monica threatened.

"Hey," Khan called before Monica could follow through. "I really missed you."

Monica remained silent for a few seconds before voicing a faint whisper. "Liar."

"I felt like hearing your voice," Khan continued. "I figured we could talk a bit while I make my way through the city."

"Can't Luke send someone to pick you up?" Monica wondered.

"I already refused that offer," Khan revealed. "It's a mess out here. A ship will only attract attention, and I'd rather sneak out without anyone recognizing me tomorrow."

Silence fell again, but the call remained active. Khan couldn't hear much with all the mess that surrounded him, but the fact that Monica had yet to hang up said a lot about her thoughts.

"Did you really miss me?" Monica eventually asked.

"Of course," Khan stated. "I thought about you many times."

"Not all the time?" Monica asked.

"Don't get ahead of yourself now," Khan joked, and a giggle resounded from the phone.

"It feels nice to hear your voice," Khan said. "I can't wait to see you."

"You won't sweet-talk your way into my pants," Monica uttered.

"I don't need words for that," Khan claimed. "I'm only going easy on you."

"Damned scoundrel," Monica sighed.

"You are the one who fell so hard for me," Khan pointed out.

"Who fell for who?!" Monica shouted. "Argh, fuck you!"

The loud curse only made Khan laugh harder, but the silence that followed made him stop. Monica was up to something again, and Khan calmly waited to understand what she had in mind.

"Give me one second," Monica soon continued. "I need to come up with an excuse to leave the others."

"I'll wait here," Khan replied, and faint voices started to come out of the phone while he continued to cross various groups.

A few minutes had to pass before Monica's voice resounded from the device again. "Are you still there?"

"Never left," Khan responded.

"The others will think I'm crazy," Monica cursed. "I had just joined them."

"And they don't even know your true colors," Khan voiced.

"That's your fault," Monica scoffed.

"How is your temper my fault?" Khan wondered.

"Because I say so," Monica pouted.

"I got myself such a troublesome woman," Khan sighed.

"Yes," Monica agreed as her tone grew warmer. "Now I'm your problem to handle."

"This problem is lucky to be so cute," Khan teased, "And wait until you hear about that butt."

"Don't be so dirty on the phone!" Monica scolded. "At least wait until we are together."

"Do you want me to say this stuff to your face?" Khan asked.

"Shut up," Monica ordered before revealing her true feelings. "I've missed you too."

"I'll be there in a few hours," Khan reassured. "Why don't you tell me how you have been in the meantime?"

Time began to flow faster at that point. Monica shared what she had experienced in the past weeks, and Khan did the same. A few bits of the story inevitably led to some fights, but the call remained on friendly terms, especially since both of them couldn't wait to see each other again.

Khan didn't forget to keep track of the streets during the call. He was crossing a good chunk of the city, and every block was as crowded as ever. Only the decorations changed, even if he had seen most of them when he first returned to the asteroid.

The national pride took a specific shape as more graffiti and banners crossed Khan's vision. The symbol seen when he first obtained the authorization to enter the dock turned out to be quite popular during the celebration. Every corner carried the images of the seven spheres connected by a line that ran through their center.

'There must be some factions that want complete independence,' Khan guessed before Monica claimed the entirety of his attention again.

Monica didn't interrupt the call even after two hours had passed. She didn't voice a single complaint about the noise around Khan or the breaks he took to check the map. Also, she became more proactive as the conversation continued, allowing Khan to have company throughout the walk.

"Okay, I think I see Luke's building," Khan announced when a five-story metal building became visible at the end of the street. "Which floor is your room again?"

"Do you think it's wise to come?" Monica asked. "Francis calmed down, but this place isn't too big. Someone might find out."

"I honestly don't care," Khan admitted, "But I'll stay put if you are too worried."

"You are so unfair," Monica cursed. "I can't refuse after such a long call."

"Are you dying to see me?" Khan teased.

"Yes," Monica exclaimed in her shy tone. "So, hurry up with Luke. I'll wait for you."

"I'll see you in a bit," Khan promised before ending the call and hurrying toward the building.

The night was still young when Khan crossed the building's entrance. Dinnertime had passed by a few hours, so he didn't feel surprised to see some of his companions in the main hall.

Martha wasn't there, and the same went for the four first-level warriors. The main hall only had Luke, Bruce, Francis, and Master Ivor, and they all turned when Khan arrived.

"Khan!" Luke immediately exclaimed.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Khan," Master Ivor followed.

"You have been missed around here," Bruce joked while playing with the cigarette in his hand.

Only Francis remained silent, but Khan didn't feel the same hostility as before. The man appeared confused, but Khan didn't have time to waste, and his words matched that mindset.

"Luke, let me update you properly," Khan announced. "I'd rather make it quick and sleep early."

"Of course!" Luke agreed as he left the couch. "Follow me. This building isn't as modern as the other, but I'm sure it will please you."

Khan nodded, even if he barely cared about those details. Moreover, the main hall, elevator, and corridor that unfolded afterward hardly seemed any worse than those in the other building. Everything carried the same modern and clean vibe. The current place only felt less luxurious.

Luke quickly led Khan into a meeting hall on the last floor. The place was relatively small but comfortable. Armchairs surrounded an interactive table, while simple furniture stood near the walls. The room didn't have windows, but Khan felt sure that the menus could provide something similar.

"I believe you read my messages," Luke announced while browsing through the furniture to pick up a bottle and two glasses.

"I did," Khan revealed. "It's not surprising. It makes sense for Rodney to keep us in the dark until the very last moment."

"I thought you had a different deal with him," Luke pointed out.

"And how should I enforce it?" Khan shrugged his shoulders. "Pulling myself out of the mission was my only option, but I can't do that anymore, can I? I bet Rodney figured that out."

"That Semmut guy is getting annoying," Luke cursed.

"You don't know the half of it," Khan chuckled. "Anyway, I bring gifts."

Luke finished pouring the booze while looking at Khan, who dropped down his backpack and pulled out a few items. The special phones and the tracker appeared in the open, and Khan didn't hesitate to place them on the desk.

"These should give us a better shot at communicating while I'm away," Khan explained. "These will keep track of my position."

"I could have provided similar items," Luke stated.

"These are tailor-made for the dock and backed by Fuveall's technology," Khan revealed. "They should be more reliable."

"Don't forget to send me the bill," Luke nodded. "You did great. Better safe than sorry."

"I guess that's it then," Khan declared. "I'll take my leave."

"Wait!" Luke called before Khan could start to turn. "We should discuss contingency plans and much more."

Khan revealed a smile, even if he had already shaken his head in his mind. Rodney had complete control of the mission. Luke simply lacked the details to create contingency plans.

"Luke, there isn't much we can do at this point," Khan explained. "Once Rodney shows his face, the mission will be in my hands. Calling for reinforcements is the best I'll be able to do."

Luke wanted to do more, but the situation didn't allow it. He had nothing to offer, and any information he could share now would become clear tomorrow anyway. He would keep Khan awake for no pressing reason if he decided to prolong the meeting.

"I'm sorry," Luke eventually uttered. "I can't do anything."

"That's not true," Khan corrected as he reached for the full glass near Luke and drew it to his mouth. "Mister Raymond will join the celebrations, won't he? He is your mission."

"Do you think I can make him talk?" Luke scoffed. "You met him. You know how skilled he is with words."

"I don't expect you to get a confession," Khan responded. "I only want you to keep him there. It's in everyone's best interest if he doesn't come near the hidden area."

"I should be able to do this little," Luke promised.

"Also, keep an eye out for the woman, Rodney's boss," Khan warned. "You can't follow us into the hidden area, but you can put someone near the entrance to check whether she shows her face."

"I have already made preparations for that," Luke revealed. "In theory, you'll also have air support."

"In theory?" Khan repeated.

"Lower Level 1 will be full of ships tomorrow," Luke explained. "I don't know how much support you'll be able to get with such traffic."

"It is indeed a mess out there," Khan admitted as he drank from his glass. "Missing out is almost a pity."

"We'll all get our chance eventually," Luke declared. "Now, did you eat anything? I can make someone come here or send them directly to your room if you want."

"I'll think about that once I drop this stuff," Khan said while pointing at the backpack next to him.

"Right, this building isn't too big," Luke uttered. "Though I can get you a pretty room."

"I'd like it on the second floor," Khan announced, "On the west wing."

Luke nodded before wearing a frown and pointing his inspecting eyes at Khan. He respected everyone's privacy, but he had inevitably learnt about the rooms chosen by his companions, so he knew who slept in that area.

"Are you sure I don't need to know anything about Miss Solodrey?" Luke asked.

"Luke, you know the risks I'm taking for your mission," Khan declared without hiding his smirk.

"The least you could do is close an eye before this stuff."

"Khan, do I need to explain the political implications of what you are doing?" Luke wondered. "It won't be long before others notice something, and I won't know how to help you at that point."

"Well, I'm not the one who has to get even," Khan stated as he emptied his drink. "It might not take long, but you surely have time to come up with something."

"Khan," Luke called, but Khan didn't make him continue.

"You are smarter than me in that field," Khan winked at Luke. "You'll do great. I trust you."

After saying that, Khan left the glass on the desk and gathered the items he needed before turning. Luke felt the need to keep that conversation alive, but no word came out of his mouth, and Khan's figure soon disappeared behind the metal door.

During the silence that followed, Luke realized that the past interaction had been quite odd. Khan didn't show any of his hostility when hinting at Martha's events. He had actually felt quite relaxed, even if his behavior showed newfound confidence.

Khan was obviously unaware of Luke's realizations, but he didn't care. Playing the good soldier was fine, but only among strangers or actual superiors. Luke was closer to a friend than an employer, so he didn't bother resorting to polite words or similar tactics.

The elevator brought Khan to the second floor in a few seconds, and he crossed the corridor before choosing a random flat close to where he wanted to go.

The flat's insides were comfortable and cozy. A big bed and a desk occupied the main room, and a door connected it to a relatively spacious bathroom. A man like Khan couldn't find any complaint about the area, but his thoughts barely lingered on that scene as he threw his backpack away and immediately left.

Monica had given precise directions, so Khan could find her room without contacting her again. Her presence also entered his senses' range when he knocked on her door, and the entrance soon opened to reveal her exquisite figure.

"How many skirts do you even have?" Khan commented when he glanced at Monica's red skirt.

"Hurry up before someone comes," Monica scolded as she grabbed Khan's arm and pulled him inside the room.

"Someone couldn't wait to get her hands on me," Khan teased, and a smirk appeared on his face when Monica's grasp on his arm grew softer.

"Nothing?" Khan continued since Monica kept her face lowered, but that stance only lasted one more second. He could soon see Monica's smiling face while she drew closer to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him.

"Did you really miss me?" Monica whispered once the kiss ended.

"You have no idea," Khan responded, and a giggle resounded when he lifted Monica to make her cling to his waist with her legs.

The two didn't use words anymore. They fell into a kiss as Khan carried Monica to bed. They both knew their time was short since the next day would mark the beginning of a dangerous mission.

Chapter 410 Warning

Rivers of vehicles hovered among the buildings, and a sea of people occupied the streets below. Balloons and other decorations shone everywhere, and entire structures had changed color to match Milia 222's iconic pale-blue light.

Khan inspected the crowded scene from the calm of his cab. The general happy mood from the previous day was nothing compared to that morning's chaos. The fourth asteroid had turned into a loud beast now that the celebrations had begun.

"I didn't expect it to be so messy," Luke commented while inspecting the scenery outside the cab. "We will never get there on time."

"We won't be the only ones late," Bruce reassured. "Also, it's just a matter of taking our seats. The hard part should be over at that point."

Bruce, Khan, Luke, and Master Ivor were in the same cab, and an almost identical vehicle flew behind them to carry the rest of the group. Darrel, Isaac, and Claudia had to remain behind, but that didn't affect the plan.

"How do you plan on leaving once we take our seats?" Luke asked while turning toward Khan.

"I can't say yet," Khan admitted. "I expect Rodney to have prepared something."

"What if he didn't?" Luke pressed on.

"I'll jump on heads until I find an empty spot," Khan explained.

"Come on," Bruce chuckled. "Sharing information will only make our job easier."

Khan stopped looking at the scenery to show his smirk to his companions. Master Ivor ended up voicing a chuckle while Luke and Bruce heaved sighs and shook their heads. Khan had actually been serious.

"Let's do an item check right now," Luke announced.

"We did it before getting on the cab," Khan pointed out but opened his backpack anyway to show its insides.

The backpack didn't have much. It only contained the phone meant for the dock and the scanner for mana. Khan had already put the tracker under his shirt, and Luke had the rest of the items.

"Alright," Luke nodded after a few seconds. "We are truly ready."

Khan didn't say anything, but his expression showed his agreement with Luke. The items were ready, the Nele knew about the plan, and a few vehicles would keep track of Khan's movements once he left the celebrations. He only had to wait for Rodney to begin the mission.

"This is it then," Bruce exclaimed.

Khan and Master Ivor exchanged a glance but opted to remain silent. The pressure was getting to Bruce and Luke, but words wouldn't calm them. Only the end of the mission could disperse that tension.

"Just make sure to check the items every few minutes," Khan eventually said. "You can enjoy the celebrations in the meantime."

"Enjoy the celebrations," Luke scoffed. "I have a lot on my plate here, too much even, and this is the best I can do to help."

"That's why you called me," Khan claimed.

"Still," Luke sighed. "Something must change once all of this is over. I need to do and be better."

Khan agreed with that comment, but he let his curiosity take over and bring his gaze back to the scenery outside. His vehicle was slowly moving toward its destination, so new interesting details managed to enter his vision.

Luke had shared the details of the celebrations during a joint breakfast a few hours ago. The fourth asteroid would have multiple events that day, but Luke's group would only attend the main one, which would happen in a big square modified for the occasion.

The square stood near the center of Lower Level 1, so the trip would usually be pretty short. Yet, the traffic slowed everything down.

Luke and Bruce exchanged some casual comments as the slow flight continued. The conversation helped them deal with the tension, and Khan didn't bother to join it. He had gotten too used to those kinds of missions, so he spent his time lingering on various thoughts.

Khan's injuries had healed completely, but he couldn't say the same for his attunement with mana. He had improved too fast, and only a long period of rest would get him used to those changes. Still, his check-up technique didn't show any significant red flags, so he didn't see it as a big problem.

Except for that, Khan was in great shape, both physically and emotionally. His body was stronger than ever, his arsenal lacked weaknesses, and a strange mental clarity had invaded his thoughts.

Mastering the cloud would have further improved the situation, but Khan could see the positive side of his failed test. The spell had shown him a path, which had straightened his thoughts in ways he didn't think were possible.

That change didn't only benefit Khan's normal mental state. His relationships had also improved due to that newfound resolve. He had gotten closer to the Nele, begun to show his true colors to Luke, and even taken another step with Monica.

For once, the future didn't look as grim as before. Khan knew he would face hardships, especially once politics became a deeper part of his life, but he didn't let those thoughts sour his mood. Khan was ready to overcome both war and peace to build his path toward freedom.

An entire hour had to pass before the vehicle made substantial progress on the flight. The tall buildings suddenly grew scarcer to create an open environment. The appointed square became visible, and Khan couldn't help but gasp at its incredible design.

The square was big, even too big for a city with limited space. Twenty or so buildings surrounded it to mark its edges, and multiple seats stood before them to create the arena that would likely host the celebrations.

The seats immediately attracted Khan's attention. The poorest ones were staircase-shaped structures as tall as six-story buildings. Then, various ships hovered above them and acted as platforms for the people inside them.

At last, actual platforms floated above the ships and created luxurious seats that allowed the landing of small vehicles. Some of those structures even had crews that provided food and other services. Khan could only feel marvel at that sight, and a bitter smile appeared on his face when he accepted that he would miss all of that.

Luke knocked on the wall that separated the group from the driver's seat, and the latter understood the silent order. The vehicle changed direction and rose a bit to reach a landing area on a building nearby.

The cab behind did the same, so both vehicles soon landed on the building. The cars opened, and the groups jumped out to regroup one last time before the beginning of the celebrations. Of course, the pilots didn't join that event.

"Let's go over our seats again," Luke announced as soon as everyone stepped on the landing area.

Khan ignored the following exchange since he had already heard those same orders a few hours ago. Instead, he gazed at the giant square to get a clear picture of the area.

The lights, the many vehicles, the decorations, the people on the various seats, the platforms, and the cylindrical structure in the distance created a breathtaking scene. Khan had seen many strange things, but that was the best expression of technology he had ever encountered.

Moreover, Khan's inspection went far beyond his eyes and ears. The symphony of mana created an incredible drawing that added fuel to the general happiness of the place, and that feeling was bound to intensify as more people reached the square.

"Khan?" Luke eventually called since he noticed that Khan wasn't listening to him.

"You and Ivor will go on a platform," Khan summarized. "The others will split on our ships while I'll be on the staircases."

Khan had sounded far from serious, almost pushing Luke to scold him. Yet, he had committed the details of the mission to memory, so reprimanding him was pointless.

"Remember to contact me," Luke stated, and Khan simply nodded. The others didn't know everything, so the two kept their interaction vague.

Luke went on to give other warnings to the team, but his words became unable to reach Khan's ears when he looked at Monica. She was beautiful in her pink dress, and the elegance she had learnt to radiate made her stand out.

Monica was only pretending to pay attention to Luke. She had noticed Khan's gaze long ago, and he was aware of that. He knew she would be embarrassed in that situation, so he continued to look at her to tease her a bit.

Khan stopped when Luke clapped his hands and prepared himself to give the last orders. The group had to split, and everyone was ready to jump back into the cars. However, a third vehicle suddenly approached the building and landed in the same area.

Luke, Bruce, Master Ivor, and Khan understood what was happening before the new vehicle could give any hint. The car was too luxurious to hide its owner, and the powerful presence inside it gave Khan everything he needed to find his answers.

A door on the side of the vehicle opened, and Raymond stepped out to greet the group with his broad smile. His expression depicted pure friendliness that made it extremely hard to suspect him of any conspiracy, but Khan continued to look past that, and what he felt wasn't reassuring.

"You are a sight to behold," Raymond exclaimed while reaching the group. "The future of the Global Army couldn't look any better."

"You are too kind, Mister Cobsend," Monica promptly thanked while performing an elegant bow.

"I'm only speaking the truth," Raymond laughed. "Well, how is my nephew treating you?"

"I booked the best seats I could find," Luke explained.

"I believe you," Raymond announced. "Still, some of you don't have a platform, right? Mine is pretty large. You are welcome there."

"We can't accept such generosity," Bruce refused as politely as he could. "Besides, we wouldn't want to disturb you during the spectacle."

"Nonsense," Raymond scoffed. "Let's get you all on a platform. I'll unite two or three of them if we don't have enough space."

When Raymond picked up his phone to complete the new arrangements, some panic invaded Luke's mind. He instinctively glanced at Khan before suppressing any reaction that could take control of his face.

Luke was in a pickle. He needed Khan on the ground, but he couldn't come up with a valid excuse. Also, contradicting his uncle wasn't a smart political move. They could have the best relationship, but members of other families would still see that as an internal conflict.

Khan retained his calm, but his thoughts were equally wild. He considered the possibility that Raymond had uncovered the plan, but he quickly disregarded it. Worrying about that now was pointless. It was better to focus on solving the imminent issue.

"Mister Raymond, I'm afraid I have to refuse your offer," Khan declared before anyone could speak.

"How so?" Raymond calmly asked.

"I made the same request to Luke," Khan lied. "There is someone I have to meet. She is pretty important to me."

"Are you choosing a woman over my kind offer?" Raymond questioned as his smile slowly faded.

"She is not as reasonable as you," Khan tried to justify. "Her temper is impossible to deal with."

Monica looked away. Khan wanted to make everyone think he was talking about Jenna, but his description matched Monica's character, and she knew he was doing that on purpose.

"Lieutenant Khan," Raymond announced, ultimately abandoning his friendliness as he stepped toward Khan. "Are you certain about this decision?"

Khan pretended to struggle to choose his next words and spoke when Raymond reached him.

"Please, sir. I really need to see her this morning."

"I wonder what's so important about that," Raymond insisted. "Explain yourself, Lieutenant Khan."

"Well," Khan cleared his throat while his voice turned into a whisper, "I haven't gotten laid in a while, and we booked this room for the day."

Utter silence fell in the area. Khan had whispered, but the noises coming from around the building didn't cover his words, so everyone heard him.

Luke and the others almost couldn't believe that Khan had voiced such an idiotic line. Those words had no place in a conversation with someone like Raymond Cobsend. They weren't exactly impolite, but they covered topics that would make anyone feel awkward.

The tension intensified as the silence continued. Everyone was waiting for Raymond to speak, but the latter seemed at a loss for words. His mouth even hung open as he tried to make some sense out of what Khan had just said.

As for Khan, he didn't mind showing his shameless and straightforward side. He had done the same on Onia with Colonel Norrett, and that behavior made sense at his age.

Moreover, Raymond had shown his contempt for politics during their meetings. His behavior might have been a façade, but it would make sense for him to disregard those obligations and let Khan have some fun. It would even be in line with his profile.

A laugh eventually broke the silence. Raymond brought his hand to his mouth to suppress his outburst and turn it into elegant chuckles. His reaction reassured the group, and the words that followed ended that tense moment.

"Sorry for pressuring you," Raymond laughed. "I didn't expect this. Of course! Even I wouldn't choose to spend these celebrations on a boring platform with such an interesting alternative."

"I would have rescheduled if I knew about this offer a little earlier," Khan lied again.

"No need to add anything," Raymond exclaimed. "You go and do what you must do. Ah! Being young sure is fun."

Khan wore a smile but didn't say anything. He could feel his companions' gazes on him, but he decided to ignore them. Most of the team didn't know about Raymond's potential involvement in the theft, so their confusion was more than justified.

Only Luke and Monica gave off notable reactions. Luke felt reassured, while Monica experienced a mixture of shyness and embarrassment. Khan had used her in his lie, and his words had carried a truth that made her blush.

As for Martha, she understood that something was going on, but she also knew that the situation didn't allow questions. She would have to wait until after the mission to learn the truth.

"Very well," Raymond soon announced. "Since everything is set, why don't we reach our seats? I'm confident I can arrange the platform while I take Lieutenant Khan to the staircases. Unless he wants to refuse this offer too."

"I'll gladly accept the ride," Khan smiled.

"I'll see you in the platforms area then," Raymond declared. "Lieutenant Khan, with me."

Khan turned toward his companions to nod before hurrying after Raymond. Needless to say, Amanda and Francis were staring at him in disbelief, and their expressions didn't change even after he entered Raymond's car.

The car's insides reflected the luxury noticed outside. Khan found himself among comfortable and spacious seats, interactive menus, and a small selection of bottles locked in a transparent case.

"You sure know how to make this old man laugh," Raymond exclaimed after closing the door.

"I was only telling the truth," Khan lied.

"A woman with a bad temper," Raymond chuckled. "It does remind me of your parents."

"Maybe it's in my genes," Khan guessed.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Raymond laughed. "Oh, do you have a seat already?"

"Yes," Khan replied while taking out his phone to check one of Luke's messages. "I'm on D344."

"I'll drop you there," Raymond responded as he tapped on the interactive menus to give new directives to the pilot.

"Thank you for this, Raymond," Khan voiced.

"Don't even mention it," Raymond stated. "These celebrations are a joyful occasion. I won't let politics stand in the way of your fun."

"Again, thank you for understanding," Khan added.

"It's fine," Raymond waved his hand dismissively. "You should pursue every opportunity you have at your age. It will be too late for that once you become important, and I know you will."

Ships usually didn't fly directly on the staircases, but Raymond's vehicle ignored that rule. It entered the square and hovered above the lower seats until it stood right above Khan's spot.

"Send my regards to your girl," Raymond voiced when Khan opened one of the doors on the side.

"I will!" Khan happily said before jumping down. Only three meters separated him from his spot, so the landing didn't cause any problem.

Raymond's vehicle took off right after the landing, and Khan followed it with his eyes. The small ship flew directly toward the topmost area, where three platforms were hovering toward each other.

Khan heaved a sigh in his mind before shooting cold glances at his surroundings. His landing had attracted a lot of attention, and the people nearby didn't hold back from inspecting his figure. Some even whistled for no clear reason.

'So much for going unnoticed,' Khan cursed before sitting on the spot with the symbols "D344" written in various languages. The people around him kept shooting glances in his direction, but they soon lost interest since he wasn't up to anything interesting.

The square was still empty, but the event was bound to start soon since the staircase area was basically full. The sky above was almost completely packed too. The audience had arrived, so it was time for the celebrations to start.

Khan ignored the square. He wanted to see what Milia 222 had in store, but he had to remain focused on his senses. There were so many people that identifying Rodney's presence could be a problem, so he needed to keep his entire concentration on the matter.

Some distracting scenes managed to make Khan falter for a few seconds. The purple areas on the staircases always attracted his attention, and familiar faces crossed his vision from time to time, even if they always disappeared among the crowd.

Still, even with those random distractions, Khan's awareness of his surroundings remained high, so he didn't miss the arrival of a third-level warrior.

Khan didn't want to alert anyone, so he pretended not to notice that new powerful presence. However, he felt forced to turn when he sensed it sitting on the seat on his left, and what he saw shattered his confidence.

A beautiful woman with long golden hair had taken her place next to Khan. Her tracksuit did its best to make her appear plain, but her beauty overcame that hindrance and made many gazes turn to inspect her.

Shock often followed. Inspecting the woman's face made the onlookers aware of the hideous scar that ran over her left eye and cheek. That wound acted as a turn-off for most of the audience, but Khan was an exception, even if for different reasons.

Khan had never felt the woman's presence or seen her on Milia 222, but Rodney had provided a portrait that looked exactly like her. She was his boss, and she had chosen to sit right next to Khan.

The event couldn't possibly be a coincidence. The staircases had too many seats for that. Moreover, Raymond had just dropped Khan there, which would explain how the woman knew about his spot.

Khan diverted his gaze and stared at the square while his mind grew cold. Killing in public wasn't a viable option, but striking now would grant him some degree of initiative, which could make the difference between life and death.

Thoughts swirled. Khan slowly grew convinced that he had to do something before the woman could take control of the situation. Part of him even abandoned the idea of preserving the mission. He only had to decide how to handle the matter.

"Don't bother," The woman said before Khan could make up his mind. "You wouldn't succeed anyway, so don't bother trying."

Khan remained quite surprised by the coldness of the woman's voice. It was deeper than emotionless. It almost sounded robotic, which matched what her thoughts radiated.

The synthetic mana around the woman carried a chilling feeling. It expressed a peaceful but firm coldness that didn't accept any compromise. That was the mind of an assassin.

"Your presence confirms my guesses," Khan stated. "You'll have to kill me to keep your secrets, and I won't die without putting up a fight."

"Do you think I learnt about your seat from the landing?" The woman wondered in the same robotic tone. "I've known about it since your employer booked it. That's the kind of power you have chosen to oppose."

"So, you admit it," Khan voiced.

"This must be your attempt to make me say a name," The woman declared. "How naïve."

"It was worth a shot," Khan chuckled.

"No," The woman corrected. "Thinking that getting a name will change anything is naïve."

Khan scoffed before continuing with a question. "What do you want? I'm down to fight if that's what you came here for."

"I don't fight kids unless ordered to," The woman announced. "I've come here to warn you."

"Are you on my side now?" Khan joked.

"I'm warning you on behalf of my Master," The woman continued. "Don't disappoint him."

"Can you be more specific?" Khan questioned, but the woman directly stood up and began to leave.

Khan kept his cold eyes on the woman until she reached the passages among the staircases and left the area. Even her presence escaped the range of Khan's senses by then, but he continued to stare at the spot where she had disappeared.

'Master,' Khan thought. 'It must be Raymond, but why would he want to warn me?'

Khan couldn't remain immersed in his thoughts for too long since a familiar presence suddenly reached his senses. The crowd muddled that sensation, but Khan was sure. Rodney had arrived in the area.