

Chaos' Heir 461

Chapter 461 Auction

A group of soldiers accompanied Khan to his flat once the meeting ended. They helped him gather his stuff and load it into a ship before heading for the second district.

Khan gave his goodbyes to Perry and used the flight to warn Monica about his recent gains. Needless to say, congratulations reached his phone, and Monica also took care of giving him enough time to settle.

George's building had a few flats available, and the Headmistress assigned one to Khan. He didn't have much, so a single trip through the elevators was enough to bring all his belongings to his new home. The soldiers simply performed salutes and left afterward.

Khan explored the flat for a few minutes before disregarding the matter. The area was almost identical to George's place anyway. It only felt emptier since he was alone, but that was about to change.

The decision to get a better flat had nothing to do with comfort. Khan would barely notice that. He had simply opted for something that could make being with Monica easier.

Moreover, the Solodrey family was paying for the other flat, so taking away that expense was bound to speak in Khan's favor. Being closer to the embassy was another advantage, especially when his schedule was so tight.

A sigh escaped Khan's mouth when he lay on a couch in the living room. It was already late. He had wasted a lot of time with the Princess, the Headmistress, and the trips across the Harbor, but the following day wouldn't have lessons due to the recent crisis. In theory, he could rest and focus on healing, but studying came first.

The flat warned Khan about the arrival of an elevator, and the symphony revealed the newcomers' identity. Monica, George, and Anita entered the habitation and reached the living room, but Khan didn't bother to lift his head.

"Khan, this is a well-deserved improvement," Anita praised while politely waiting at the room's edge.

"I'll finally have my flat for myself," George announced while approaching the couch in front of Khan and dropping a bottle on the floor. "I figured you didn't have this yet."

Monica remained silent and happily hopped toward Khan's couch. She carefully sat on him before leaning forward, and a cute "hey" left her mouth once their eyes met.

"Hey you," Khan smiled as his left hand dug into Monica's curls to pull her closer.

Anita felt the need to divert her gaze in front of the kiss, but her eyes always returned to the couple. A curious smile fused with a gasp to create a strange face. She had learnt the truth about Monica and Khan, but seeing them openly express their affection hit her differently.

"I know that look," Monica whispered when the kiss ended. "You need your girlfriend's knowledge."

"I do," Khan groaned while pulling Monica onto his chest, "But later."

"Not a chance," Monica refused to fall on Khan's chest and pulled herself upward to take Khan's head into her arms. "I'm taking care of you today."

"You sure like it when I'm injured," Khan teased.

"I like when you are completely in my power," Monica corrected.

"Am I not always like that?" Khan joked.

"Sweet talks won't get you anywhere," Monica replied, "But keep them coming."

Anita remained stunned. Khan was snuggling on Monica's chest, and she wasn't showing the slightest embarrassment. The two appeared completely comfortable with each other, which revealed how far they had gone.

George opened the bottle and took a loud sip as if nothing strange was happening, forcing Anita to divert her attention. She joined him on the couch, which gave her a better look at the loving couple. Anita didn't know Khan too well, but seeing Monica's true character was almost mesmerizing.

Anita had known Monica for a long time, enough to get used to her elegant and polite manners. Personas were common among descendants, but Monica had always worn that role perfectly. However, the scene unfolding in Anita's vision went far beyond that. For a second, she almost believed to have someone else in front of her.

Affectionate and relaxed gestures had replaced Monica's elegance. She was lying on Khan, uncaring of how shameful that position was, and a bright smile shone on her face while she played with his head.

As for Khan, he was utterly captivated by Monica's affection. His eyes remained glued to any trace of her brimming happiness. Her smile, her fingers running over his face or through his hair, and the meaningful glances she shot from time to time entranced him. He almost couldn't believe how beautiful she was.

"You are thinking about something nasty," Monica pouted when an instinctive smile made its way onto Khan's face.

Khan shook his head. "I just wished I could keep you this happy all the time."

Monica almost froze. She suddenly became aware of Anita and George, and embarrassment crept in. Part of her wanted to hide, but Khan's words made her unable to react.

Khan began to straighten his back, and Monica slid onto his abdomen to sit on his lap. She glanced at the other couch, but Khan's intense gaze brought her attention back to him.

Heightened senses and inhumane sensitivity were pointless in that situation. Khan knew how weak Monica became whenever he got serious. He had memorized most aspects of her personality, and they all felt beyond cute.

The abrupt shifts in Monica's mood, unreasonable threats, surprising courage, wits, and genuine affection were clear in Khan's mind. He knew her well, and she had even proven herself. Somehow, he was sure he was with the right person.

"Khan," Monica almost begged, but Khan didn't stop looking at her. Something had clicked inside him, and ignoring it was impossible.

Anita had covered her mouth to suppress her gasps. That scene was too romantic for her, especially since it involved Monica. She had never seen her in that state, but her evident happiness warmed her heart.

As for George, he kept his bottle nearby while nodding in approval. He had already reached conclusions about Khan and Monica, and that scene only confirmed them. Of course, he was happy for his friend since he knew how much that mattered to him.

Monica had to resort to the entirety of her political training to handle the situation. She mustered enough strength to hop off the couch, but her eyes never left Khan's, and the same went for her hand. She pulled him toward her before finding an excuse for their friends.

"I need to change his bandages," Monica explained, trying to keep her voice straight, "And I promised I'd help him study tonight."

Monica didn't give Anita and George the time to reply. She immediately headed for one of the corridors, pulling Khan with her.

"Wow," Anita couldn't help but exclaim once she felt sure the couple had left.

"Khan has that effect on women," George smirked, reaching for Anita's shoulder to pull her to his side. "I'm glad he found someone like Monica. They look good together."

Anita nodded and let George caress her arm. She even relaxed on his shoulder while her mind did its best to accept the previous scene. Yet, she pushed herself away once she realized where she was.

"What?" George asked since he found himself in front of Anita's glare.

"We are in Khan's flat!" Anita scoffed.

"So?" George questioned, revealing how clueless he was about the issue.

"Unbelievable," Anita cursed, and a quarrel started as soon as George spoke again.

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Monica and Khan studied, but only after dealing with more pressing urges. They basically had an entire flat for themselves, and the morning wouldn't feature lessons either, so they stopped holding back and took their time to enjoy their feelings.

The time for serious talks also arrived. Monica was the perfect advisor when it came to secrets that might involve the Global Army's upper echelon, so Khan didn't keep any secrets from her.

Sadly, Monica couldn't provide definitive answers. She had no clue about the Nak's location or whether the Princess had told the truth.

The same went for the noble guard's issue. Khan's insane idea made sense, but there could be other explanations. Still, even Monica had to admit that Ella's words were suspicious.

Khan's serious problems ended up delaying the complete blooming of the couple's emotions, and the insane amount of homework further got in the way. By the time they had some free time, the morning of the second day had arrived, marking the resumption of the lessons.

Khan expected to find a gloomy atmosphere when he joined Professor Boatbell's lesson with Monica and George. Instead, the descendants already inside welcomed him with a cheerful applause that the Professor echoed. Nippe 2's events had gone public, and the class was showing its appreciation.

Similar scenes happened in the following days. Professors, soldiers, and workers inside the embassy stopped Khan to offer genuine congratulations. Countless articles about him flooded the network, and many reporters tried to contact him.

Khan used his injured state to deflect most of that attention. He knew he would have to address it at some point, but studying came first. His social tasks would have to wait a bit longer, especially since he had an important appointment the night before the two free days.

"Help me with this zipper," Monica called. "It always gets caught in my hair."

The request made Khan snap back to reality. He was in his flat, in a bedroom with Monica, and they were getting ready for Pandora's auction. Yet, his thoughts had wandered when Monica had started trying out dresses.

"Khan?" Monica called again, diverting her gaze from the interactive mirror to peek at the bed behind her.

Khan left the bed and reached Monica, grabbing her waist to make a cute laugh escape her mouth. She didn't let the gesture distract her and tied her many curls into a ponytail before lifting it, but the kiss that landed on her nape broke her concentration.

"Come on," Monica giggled while reaching for the back of Khan's head to pull him onto her shoulder. "We'll be late."

"I'm not the one who took one hour to choose what to wear," Khan teased before leaving a kiss on Monica's exposed shoulder.

"I thought you enjoyed the spectacle," Monica whispered to Khan's ear.

"Definitely," Khan muttered while his mouth was still on Monica's skin. "I could look at you all day."

Monica melted. She kissed Khan's cheek and felt the urge to turn, but one look at the interactive mirror confirmed that they were truly late, and she wouldn't allow him to miss the auction.

"The zipper," Monica reminded while doing her best to keep her hair lifted with one hand. "I want to show you how I look."

Khan played along and left Monica's waist to reach for the zipper on her back. His right hand and shoulder had yet to heal fully, so he fastened the dress slowly, prioritizing saving Monica's curls over completing the process.

Another kiss landed on Monica's nape when Khan was done with the zipper, and she finally turned to show her appearance. She was wearing a yellow drop waist dress ending in a relatively long skirt that aimed for elegance rather than sensuality. Still, Khan found both in that scene.

"How do I look?" Monica asked, wrapping her arms behind her back to show the entirety of herself.

"This might be the first dress I wouldn't tear apart," Khan teased.

"Really?" Monica wondered.

"No," Khan laughed while approaching Monica, forcing her to lean on the mirror, "But you do look beautiful."

"Scoundrel," Monica giggled. "You can take it away later, but don't you ruin it."

"As if you'd care once we are at it," Khan joked. Monica prepared a slap, but Khan's injured state made her hold back and opt for a passionate kiss.

The couple left the flat in the following minutes since Khan had already worn his tight black suit. Those clothes were truly too elegant for him, but Monica didn't accept any compromise. She even made him keep the brace to appeal to the audience's better side.

A hovering limousine was already waiting for the couple on the other side of the building's sidewalk, and the absence of crowds made the trip into it peaceful. The Headmistress had stayed true to her word, granting Khan some privacy even in the open.

Monica used the flight to review the auction's regulations and procedures with Khan. She made sure he recalled all the hand gestures and signals necessary to be part of those lofty events, and he proved himself ready.

Surprisingly enough, the limousine flew toward the embassy's district and headed for one of the top blocks of the pyramidal structure. The vehicle quickly landed, and two guards dressed in white tuxes showed their scanners when Khan and Monica walked toward them.

The scanners confirmed Khan and Monica's membership to Pandora and opened the way inside a dim environment covered in dark-red carpets. A long and vast staircase unfolded in the couple's vision and descended many floors to reach an illuminated stage, and hundreds of seats filled its sides.

The entrance closed behind the couple before they could understand where they were, and a cozy warmth immediately enveloped them. Captivating scents also reached their nostrils, and a few heads turned to look at them. The white tux standing on the first step even approached them to express his greetings.

"Miss Solodrey, Captain Khan," The middle-aged man politely called while performing a bow as soon as he reached the couple. "Pandora is glad you joined tonight's auction."

"We couldn't possibly miss it," Monica showed her elegant manners while clinging to Khan's left elbow.

"Ma'am, sir, did you already choose your seats?" The middle-aged man asked, making sure to address Monica first every time.

"We were hoping to find a few empty seats among the stands," Monica explained.

"Ma'am, Pandora will find you a place in the gallery if you wish," The man revealed. "It would be disrespectful toward you and Captain Khan to offer any less."

"Please pardon my rudeness," Monica lowered her head in shame. "I planned to give Captain Khan a complete experience of the auction. I didn't foresee this kindness from Pandora."

"Oh, it's no rudeness at all, ma'am," The man immediately smiled. "Your decision to introduce Captain Khan to this world speaks for your manners. Pandora hopes it can do the same in the future."

"I'll make sure of it," Monica promised.

The man nodded and turned toward the stands. His expert eyes quickly found empty spots the couple could occupy, and a glance at his phone helped him find the best ones.

"Please, ma'am, sir," The man addressed the couple again once his search was over, "At least allow me to escort you to your seats."

"With pleasure," Monica replied, and the man began to descend the enormous staircase to lead the way.

Monica and Khan followed slowly behind the man, smiling and nodding whenever someone in the audience did the same. They both recognized many faces but only exchanged quick salutes.

The white tux eventually opened a passage in the staircase's handrail to lead the couple into a relatively spacious path among the stands. Khan and Monica didn't disturb anyone while following the man, and they soon found themselves in front of multiple empty seats.

"Enjoy your night, ma'am, sir," The man saluted before leaving toward the staircase.

Monica took the lead at that point. She could choose seats near other people, but privacy was a luxury in the stands, so she opted for two comfortable armchairs in the middle of the empty area.

Khan had already inspected the area. He had seats in every direction, but they were empty for many meters. Moreover, multiple groups all over the stands were in a similar situation. Almost everyone opted for that kind of privacy.

A screen came out of the seat's right arm once Khan sat down, and multiple menus lit up. A list of the items on auction and many more goods filled his vision, but he had other questions to address before that.

"Why didn't we choose the gallery?" Khan whispered, and his voice didn't travel far since many murmurs filled the area.

"People might fail to see you up there," Monica explained while eyeing a long balcony stretching from the tall ceiling. Khan could see silhouettes from his position but nothing more.

"We'll have to come again and take those gallery seats," Monica sighed while connecting her phone to her seat's screen.

"Is this about earlier?" Khan wondered.

"We can't refuse an open act of kindness," Monica explained. "It's rude among these circles. We must reassure them by accepting their offer."

"Sure," Khan immediately agreed. Monica was the master there, so he didn't dare to object.

"So, we must buy something now, right?" Khan checked. The entrance to the auction was free, but it was customary to order food or drinks to cover multiple expenses.

"A few drinks each should be enough," Monica confirmed. "Spending more would usually grant us a better profile, but I'm legacy, and you are you, so we don't need to."

"Doesn't the Harbor take a percentage?" Khan recalled.

"How much do you have now?" Monica asked.

"Around eight hundred thousand," Khan revealed.

"Then, we can get more," Monica approved, "And don't hesitate to ask me for money if needed."

Khan connected his phone to the screen and began scrolling through the various menus. Everything was overpriced there, with drinks going for as much as tens of thousands of Credits, but Monica had prepared Khan for something like that.

In the end, Monica and Khan ordered a couple of drinks for a few thousand Credits each, and a waiter in a white tux promptly delivered them. The latter even brought a small table with ice and other refreshments, so those glasses didn't become a bother.

"So," Khan announced once the waiter left, "How much can I tease you here?"

"Shut it," Monica scolded. "I bet everyone is looking at us already."

"They are," Khan confirmed. It wasn't everyone, but many in the audience didn't miss the chance to shoot glances in his direction.

"You are about to make Pandora lose millions," Monica cursed. "Try to behave for a few hours."

"You had this idea," Khan chuckled. "What does it say about you?"

"That I'd do anything for my man," Monica responded, and the couple fell into an intense stare. Monica even enjoyed it more than Khan since he had to limit himself to look at her in that situation.

A few more groups entered the hall, and the auction started when almost ninety people had taken their seats. A trapdoor opened on the stage, and a platform rose to bring a man and a woman into everyone's view.

Khan quickly lost interest in the loud speeches and polite greetings shouted by the couple on the stage. The screen on his armchair took note of their words, so he only needed to look at it to keep track of every item.

Truth be told, Pandora was offering fascinating goods. Booze and food cooked through special procedures involving mana, rejuvenating ointments from extinct species, weapons carrying the same power as spells, and much more reached the stage. In another life, Khan would have liked to take a look at all of that, but his position limited him to a single chance.

Monica bidding on a bag made from the skin of a rare alien creature managed to distract Khan, but she gave up after raising the price two more times. The item ended up selling for eleven million, and the customary applause that followed gave Monica a chance to explain herself.

"Vrans' bags always sell for more than five million," Monica revealed. "They would have never let me get away with my offers."

"Did you play just to raise the price?" Khan questioned.

"We need to participate," Monica stated, "Or at least pretend. Also, I had to show you how to bid properly."

Monica showed another happy face when she saw Khan struggling to hold back. He couldn't really help himself. She was doing so much for him, and her reactions remained too cute.

"You are killing me," Khan cursed.

"You deserve it," Monica giggled.

The couple exchanged more jokes and ordered another round of drinks as the auction continued. It would take a while to reach Khan's target, so he let Monica handle the pretenses. She proved herself perfect for the role, sometimes even managing to back out of a bid right before her competitors ran out of money.

"Won't this get many families mad at you?" Khan wondered when Monica made another competitor spend three additional million due to her constant bids.

"Yes and no," Monica tried to explain. "These Credits will still go to the Harbor and Pandora, which will provide better services to the families. Besides, anyone here can afford to lose a few million."

"Anyone but me," Khan snickered.

"You are a special case," Monica declared as annoyance seeped into her voice. "I'm sure some slut here would happily act as your benefactor. No one should try after tonight."

"Are you marking your territory?" Khan teased.

"Yes," Monica scoffed. "You better not have a problem with that."

"I wouldn't dare," Khan joked. "Mark away, ma'am."

The glare that followed made Khan laugh, and the atmosphere remained cheerful. Yet, it tensed up once Khan's target became close, and a nod from Monica forced him to prepare.

"Our next item consists of a partial spell copied by a rare species of Tainted animals," The male announcer declared through the microphone on his mouth's side.

"The spell's range and efficiency can make it a trump defensive card against any incoming attack," The female announcer continued. "It might need some tweaks and the right element to make it work, but Pandora strongly believes in its potential."

A series of holograms rose from behind the announcers to show simulations of the non-elemental spell. Of course, those images depicted an impenetrable spherical shield that could envelop any caster, but more knowledgeable people knew it would take a while to reach that level.

"Pandora sets its starting price at one hundred thousand Credits," The male announcer resumed once the holograms went dark.

"Who offers one hundred and fifty thousand?" The female announcer followed.

Khan had received precise instructions from Monica in the previous days. Bidding alone wasn't enough. Matching the minimum price would appear as an open insult to Pandora, so he had to pretend to try.

The screen was already on the right menu, so Khan only had to put his left hand above it and perform the corresponding gesture. The scanner in the device recognized it, and a notification reached the announcers.

"We have Captain Khan for two hundred and fifty thousand Credits!" The male announcer shouted.

"Congratulations on Captain Khan for his first bid tonight," The female announcer continued while triggering general applause. "Pandora hopes you are enjoying the night."

Khan nodded left and right, showing a fake smile to the many hands clapping for him. He even stood up at some point to perform a half-bow, and the gesture highlighted his brace.

The tension grew stronger once Khan returned to his seat. The announcers began to ask for higher bids, which he could theoretically still match. Yet, he would probably decide to keep his money if the price became too insane.

"No one?" The male announcer asked once a few silent minutes went by. "Pandora hasn't seen so much goodwill since the last visit from a noble."

Laughs resounded, but the female announcer began the countdown. "Two hundred and fifty thousand and one, two hundred and fifty thousand and two, two hundred and fifty thousand and three!"

A round of applause started while the male announcer conveyed his congratulations. "Captain Khan wins! Pandora wishes you good luck with the spell!"

Khan had to stand up again to address the applause and could sit only after a few minutes. The screen drained his Credits in the meantime, and waiters soon arrived with his prize inside a luxurious casket.

Monica and Khan exchanged a knowing smile once the waiter left, and her genuine happiness almost pushed him over the edge. However, they both had to stay still a little longer since the auction had yet to end.

Another hour had to pass before the announcers went through the remaining items. Khan and Monica had a few more drinks and decided to leave only once most groups had reached the exit. That was another planned move since departing as soon as the auction ended could be seen as impolite.

Still, the two announcers climbed the staircase and intercepted the couple when they were about to leave the passage among the seats. The two were all smiles, and their mana felt fine too, so Khan decided to pull Monica forward for once.

"Miss Solodrey, we hope you enjoyed this night," The male announcer stated through a bow.

"Captain Khan, congratulations on your purchase again," The female announcer continued while also performing a bow. "Pandora won't consider it a loss since it arrived to you."

"You are too kind," Khan did his best to sound polite.

"You truly are," Monica added. "Though, Captain Khan might have something that could repay your generosity."

Khan and Monica had prepared for that eventuality earlier, so he didn't falter. He pretended to recall something and feigned some embarrassment when explaining the matter. "I have this knife. It's a second-grade weapon, but it's damaged, and I'd just destroy it in a training hall. I wonder if Pandora can help."

"A second-grade weapon?" The male announcer questioned.

"It's the same knife he used to kill the Nak's hand," Monica partially lied. "Its cracks actually come from that battle."

"Ooh?" Both announcers gasped before exchanging a look.

"I have no real use for it," Khan continued. "If Pandora agrees, I can sell it through your channels. I'd even take a lower share since you have been so good to me."

"Captain Khan, don't even mention it," The male announcer promptly exclaimed.

"Pandora will happily make it a part of the next auction," The female announcer stated.

"And don't worry about this night," The male announcer added. "You'll get the share you deserve. It would be shameful for Pandora to gain from your services and refuse to give you a fair share."

Chapter 462 Dates

Khan and Monica exchanged simple salutes with the announcers before leaving the embassy. The hovering limousine was already waiting for them on one of the roofs, so they could set off immediately.

The limousine had all kinds of comforts, from darkened windows to a small fridge, but Monica could only think of lifting the curtain between the pilot and the passenger's seats. As soon as she established some privacy, she jumped next to Khan and took his left elbow in her arms.

"Someone is happy," Khan laughed as Monica curled on the seat to lie on his shoulder.

"We did it!" Monica exclaimed, and giggles followed.

"We indeed did it," Khan nodded, looking at the luxurious box on his lap. "Do you think they found out about our plan?"

"My plan," Monica corrected. "Well, I only bid on things I might realistically desire, and your knife should settle the rest."

"We can claim that gallery offer and sell the knife on the same night," Khan suggested. "That should save us some time."

"It would," Monica voiced, slightly turning her head to hide her face in Khan's shoulder.

"What is it?" Khan asked.

"Nothing," Monica stated, but her tone said a lot, and Khan had already understood what was going through her mind.

"Did you enjoy our night out?" Khan wondered.

Monica nodded while keeping her face hidden. Still, she eventually turned to show a strange expression. She wanted to say something but remained silent, waiting for Khan to figure things out himself.

"We are spending a lot of time together now," Khan announced. Monica had settled in his flat since the elevator didn't have cameras. No one could know in which apartment she slept.

"We are," Monica confirmed.

"We are basically living together," Khan continued, leaving a kiss on the top of Monica's head.

"We are," Monica giggled, "Even if we barely leave the bed."

Khan laughed with Monica, and the two snuggled closer, but she eventually diverted her gaze. Something was still on her mind, and Khan spoke again to address the matter. "But?"

"But," Monica repeated, "I would like, you know, to do more couple's stuff."

"Like?" Khan asked. He had an idea but wanted to hear it from Monica.

"Walking hand in hand in the middle of the street," Monica responded, "Going on dates, being honest about us for once."

Khan rubbed his cheek on Monica's curls. He understood her struggles. He even shared most of them, but they both knew why they weren't dating in the open.

"I could get all cute for you before a dinner or something," Monica continued, smiling at the thought of the scene. "You know, couple's stuff."

"You are always cute," Khan praised.

"But I want to be cute for you," Monica complained. "It's different."

"What else?" Khan joked. "Will you also bring me to those social events you like so much?"

"They are such a bother," Monica scoffed, "But picturing you at my side feels nice. I would finally have the chance to show off my boyfriend."

"Am I that amazing?" Khan chuckled.

"I chose you," Monica smirked, "So yes."

Khan laughed, leaving another kiss on Monica's curls before speaking reassuring words. "We'll get there."

"I know," Monica stated. "I just felt like whining a little to my man."

"Needy girl," Khan teased, and Monica wore a proud expression before closing her eyes. It was late, and the weekly free time had just begun, so it was normal to feel tired.

Khan glanced at the box on his lap before looking at Monica again. She was the sole reason behind his cheap purchase, and more Credits were bound to flow thanks to her. Monica had also been an endless source of help with his studies. Her support had been incredible, and she had never asked for anything in return.

'How much patience does she even have?' Khan thought as his packed schedule appeared in his mind.

"Hey," Khan eventually whispered.

"What is it?" Monica asked in a sleepy tone.

"Let's do the gallery and the knife on separate nights," Khan suggested.

"What?" Monica questioned, opening her eyes to look at Khan. "Why?"

"To get two nights out of that," Khan explained. "They won't be actual dates, but that's the best we can do for now."

"What about your schedule?" Monica wondered. "You are barely sleeping as it is."

"Fuck my schedule," Khan responded. "I want to do something for us."

Monica wanted to refuse, but her smile betrayed her. When she noticed it, she gave up on hiding her true feelings, and her arms quickly reached for Khan's neck.

The couple kissed, and Monica tightened her hug on Khan's neck as her happiness became too intense to contain. Her lips soon found his mouth again, but she eventually returned to his shoulder.

"Don't take too long to come home tonight," Monica warned before closing her eyes again.

"What?" Khan asked.

"I know you want to try the spell," Monica voiced. "I'll wait for you, but don't overdo it. You are still injured."

Warmth filled Khan's chest, but he still decided to continue with a joke. "Do you have something nasty in mind?"

"I just like to wake up next to you," Monica revealed, and the warmth spread through the entire car.

The limousine dropped Khan in front of a building full of training halls in the second district before heading toward his flat. The area was empty due to the late hour, so Khan entered the structure without wasting time.

Many of the Harbor's services had taken note of Khan's profile after his deal with the Headmistress. He only needed to show his phone to unlock countless doors freely, and the training halls were one of them.

Soon, Khan entered the largest training hall in the structure and left his luxurious box on the floor. He even connected his phone and tightened the brace before closing his eyes to focus on the symphony.

Khan quickly reopened his eyes and jumped upward. A tinge of his mana fused with the environment and slightly altered the symphony's structure. The synthetic energy became a force he could manipulate, allowing his feet to find platforms in the air.

Another jump brought Khan closer to the hall's ceiling, and a third made him shoot forward. He even kicked the air a few times to turn himself upside down and begin a reckless dive toward the floor.

A violent landing seemed about to unfold, but Khan tapped on the air a few times to adjust his position and disperse his momentum. He stopped falling when he was only a meter from the floor, but gravity eventually brought him down.

Khan wasn't really training. His injured state didn't allow him to see how far he could push his new proficiency level. He was only doing his best to remember the sensation of flying, but no problems appeared there.

Something had clicked on Nippe 2. Khan's mind had reached a level of understanding he couldn't forget. His mind had expanded, and that change was forever. Flying was part of him now.

'If I can fuse Maban's technique to all my sprints,' Khan thought while adjusting the brace once again, 'I'll probably become unbeatable in the third level.'

The "probably" was superfluous. Khan had enough battle experience to know how powerful his new proficiency level was. Adding Maban's insane speed to his flight would make him unstoppable.

The desire to train harder showed its presence, but Khan knew his limits. Flying put a lot of strain on his limbs, which didn't work well with his injuries. He had to wait a bit longer, but that didn't make him powerless.

Khan moved his attention to the box on the floor. He sat in front of it and lifting the lid revealed a few items. He saw a disk and a few screens, which forced him to reach for his phone.

The disk fused with the phone once Khan completed the usual procedure for magic items, and he lit up the screens in the meantime. The latter had reports, explanations, and raw data about his purchase. It seemed that Pandora had already done its fair share of tests.

Khan used the hall's menus to bring up the video contained in the disk. Images started to play on the floor together with multiple stats. The footage depicted some otter-like creatures with fins and scales, and the recording highlighted their mana while adding many details to the scene.

Some soldiers fired at the otters, but the latter instinctively unleashed their mana to create the famous spherical defensive spell. Still, their energy was denser compared to humans, and it even carried metallic properties that accumulated on the edge of the technique.

The bullets failed to pierce those dark spherical shields, and the latter even deflected some of them. Clanging noises resounded through the hall as the otters used that chance to run into a river nearby to escape the assailants.

The video continued, showing a different but similar scene. The Global Army tried to capture those otter-like creatures once again but failed to inflict any damage to their spherical shields.

The recording went on, showing glimpses of those Tainted animals in their natural environment. Everything was for the purpose of gathering data, which the Global Army definitely accomplished. The video had countless details, especially regarding how the otters used their mana.

Khan remained pleasantly surprised by the number of examples the video provided and played it again once it ended. He focused on the otters' mana and composition during his second watch, and more details became clear.

A sigh escaped Khan's mouth once his second watch ended. He had completely understood the spell's advantages and shortcomings, which made him realize why it was so hard to apply to humans.

The otters had a naturally metallic mana, so they only needed to push it outside their bodies to create a shield. Instead, humans would require an additional passage to obtain similar properties. Even Khan's mana anomaly wasn't enough to reach such strong effects.

The high consumption was a known problem. The otters relied on their spell to escape from sudden attacks. They never used it in prolonged fights. They actually didn't fight at all due to the nature of their species.

Those features would usually push humans to stay away from something so troublesome, but positive aspects existed, and they were incredible. The spell's power was terrific, but that still didn't cut it. The unbelievable casting speed was the true gem of that alien technique.

Of course, the otters could deploy their shields so quickly due to the absence of additional passages. They only had to release their mana, and the latter would do the rest. Khan needed to achieve something similar to retain the spell's positive aspects, and a few ideas had already taken form.

Khan skimmed through the screen to make sure he had understood everything correctly. The reports of Pandora's tests confirmed his idea, so he eventually stood up to try a few things.

At first, Khan followed the otters' casting method. He concentrated on his mana for a few seconds before unleashing it from the entirety of his body. The execution only released uneven flares that didn't take the shape of a sphere, and even their power turned out to be disappointing.

Khan expected a similar result. The otters already had mana in the right places, so they didn't need to control it. In their case, a simple release was enough, and Khan could reach similar speed levels only through training.

The power was the only thing training couldn't fix. Pandora's tests had also shown similar results. Humans had a different type of energy, and Khan's mana anomaly couldn't fill that gap.

The shape of the technique made Khan release the spherical version of the Wave spell. That was closer to what he was trying to achieve, at least in terms of power and effects. However, the casting time was too long and shortening it was impossible. He would have already done it otherwise.

The short tests left Khan in a pickle. He stood between two extremes, with a useless release of mana on one side and an offensive spell on the other.

A compromise wouldn't work either since it would remove the otters' spell's good qualities. Khan needed that casting speed without losing too much power. Achieving it was the only problem.

Khan scratched the side of his head while inspecting the hall. He had another idea, but the area might risk paying the price. Still, those worries couldn't do anything against his curiosity.

'Alright,' Khan thought while closing his eyes again. 'I know you are here, and I need that power.'

The insides of Khan's mind remained silent, but he didn't let that fool him. There was a power inside him that could make the spell feasible. He only needed to learn how to harness it.

'Come on,' Khan cursed. 'We are on the same side.'

The silence remained undisturbed. No clicking growl arrived, but Khan knew it to be inside him.

'Fucking mindless cloud,' Khan cursed again.

The clicking growl had resounded when the Princess exposed Khan's relationship and had even saved him on Nippe 2. He didn't know if the cloud or the transformation were to blame, but that was part of him now. He was sure of it.

The cloud had the strange ability to make the chaos element terrifying. It didn't do anything special, but its mana could devour metal and pierce walls. That was the kind of energy Khan needed for the spherical spell to work.

'Fine,' Khan thought. 'You asked for it.'

The trigger for the clicking growl was evident, and Khan had no shortage of sad thoughts. He also knew how to play dirty, which he didn't hesitate to do in the safety of the training hall.

Memories from Nitis, Earth, and much more crossed Khan's mind before his thoughts gave birth to entirely made-up scenes. He wondered what would have happened if the kidnappers had hurt George and Monica. Many things could have gone wrong during the attack, and Khan considered all of them.

'Here it is,' Khan smirked when a faint sound began to echo in the back of his mind. His mana also started to boil, foreboding the incoming wild emotions.

Khan kept his imagination running until the clicking growl became loud enough to suppress his thoughts. He found it hard to control his fake scenarios, but the process had already been a success, and he unleashed the otters' method to see if something had changed.

Wild flares of purple-red mana escaped from multiple areas of Khan's body. They carried no order and definitely didn't create any spherical shape. However, the raging power they unleashed seemed able to destroy anything in their path.

Khan's mind went silent when the mana dispersed, but he smiled in satisfaction. That path could work. He needed to adjust many things, but it was a viable approach. Yet, a strange detail caught his attention when he thought about trying again.

'Where did my clothes go?' Khan wondered since he found himself fully naked. Only burnt and torn rags had survived his flares, and they were on the floor.

'I was wearing my good suit, wasn't I?' Khan shook his head while tinkering with the menus to request more clothes. It seemed that Monica would get an additional date since he now lacked things to wear in the following auctions.

Chapter 463 Infusion

"Man, I'm telling you," George cursed. "That woman is evil incarnate!"

"Not getting laid sure is driving you crazy," Khan commented, keeping his eyes on his phone.

"It's been weeks already!" George shouted.

"Two at most," Khan pointed out.

"Two and five days!" George corrected. "More than three if you count the occasional hookups!"

"Are we keeping track of the hours too?" Khan wondered.

"You talk like this," George scoffed, "But you would be more desperate than me in my situation."

Khan lowered the phone to show a mocking expression. He wanted the best for George, but he only had himself to blame for his predicament.

"How did you even fuck up after Nippe 2?" Khan questioned.

"A lot can happen in two weeks," George muttered.

"You just had to remain serious for a few hours," Khan scolded.

"It was more than a few," George clarified. "The next day, we fought again, and somehow we kept arguing whenever we were about to go all the way."

"Then, don't fight," Khan casually said.

"You should see her," George snorted. "She seems to sense when we are about to do it. Damned woman. Her timing is the worst."

"Oh, shut up," Khan chuckled. "You love it."

"I can't love it when I'm not getting any," George complained.

"Just drop the tactics and be serious," Khan sighed. "You are into her anyway. Stop acting so scared."

"That's big coming from you," George rebuked. "Did you even tell Monica how you feel about her? Did she?"

"If I tell her," Khan announced, laying his head on the couch's back, "I go crazy. If she tells me, she goes crazy. We know. We simply aren't saying it."

"Sounds really brave," George mocked.

"What do you want me to say?" Khan wondered as his eyes wandered among his flat's ceiling. "Things have calmed down for once. I'm not in a hurry to get back into the drama."

"Oh, shut up," George laughed. "You love it."

"I don't love getting called all kinds of things by those reporters," Khan cursed while waving his phone. "I've read absurd articles. Some even think I'm the Princess' sex toy."

"She did go public saying she rewarded you on her ship," George pointed out.

"She answered one question about the Nak!" Khan almost shouted. "One! How can people jump to completely different conclusions?"

"You don't exactly have a bad record with women," George coughed. "If I didn't know you, I'd be the one spreading those rumors."

"She is a fucking noble," Khan declared.

"And you went fucking all around the universe," George teased.

"Says the bane of wealthy women," Khan fought back.

"It's not about how many booties you tap," George explained. "It's their quality."

"I've never seen you with an ugly woman," Khan uttered.

"You still get the best," George smirked. "Am I wrong?"

"Leave my booties alone," Khan responded before throwing his phone on the couch's corner and grabbing the almost-empty glass on his right. His injuries had healed, so he could move his hand and shoulder freely.

"Khan," Monica's voice resounded from the bottom of a corridor. "Cuddles."

"Come on the couch," Khan shouted. "George is here."

"How is she doing?" George wondered.

"She should be fine next week," Khan revealed as steps resounded through the corridor.

A sleepy Monica with a blanket hanging from her shoulders hurried through the flat to lay on Khan's couch. His lap became a pillow for her, and he didn't hesitate to start caressing her hair.

The symphony in Khan's eyes revealed a messy scene. Monica had gotten her infusion two days after the auction, and a full week had passed since then, but her body was still struggling to absorb that synthetic mana.

That struggle had led to fever, shivers, and a series of other symptoms, forcing Monica to skip the past lessons. Yet, she was getting better, and her attunement with mana was bound to get close to seventy percent once the absorption ended.

"What were you talking about?" Monica asked while adjusting the blanket around her and getting closer to Khan's waist.

"George was complaining about not having sex," Khan explained shortly.

"Really?" Monica questioned while her eyes remained closed. "How did he fuck up after Nippe 2?"

"That's what I asked him," Khan revealed.

"Don't start working together," George warned. "I know all your secrets."

"Khan, George is threatening us," Monica whined.

"He is just desperate," Khan played along, patting Monica's head to pretend to reassure her.

"Are you sure you don't need to be in the medical bay?" George wondered. "Mana rejection can be dangerous."

"The infusion was simply big," Monica muttered from the blanket's cover. "The doctor already checked me, and Khan is always at my side."

"The medical bay gave her a special bracelet," Khan added another detail. "They keep track of her condition all the time, so it's fine."

"What if something happens and they find her here?" George asked. "What's your excuse?"

"Homework," Khan and Monica said at the same time, and that complicity made them laugh. Still, a tremor turned that cute cry into a groan.

"Shh," Khan warmly scolded when Monica tried to turn. "Meditate. I'll watch over you."

"Do one of your alien massages," Monica ordered.

"You know I don't know any," Khan chuckled. "I might be able to do something with plants, but you would refuse that."

"Why?" Monica questioned.

"Because Jenna taught me that," Khan revealed.

"Don't say that witch's name," Monica complained. "Hold me!"

"Sure, sure," Khan let Monica turn and abandoned his glass to hug her. Her condition had made her quite demanding, but he didn't mind fulfilling those wishes. He found them cute anyway.

"Right," Monica recalled. "I finished the list. It's on my phone. Right pocket."

Khan broke the hug to send a hand under the blanket. He quickly found Monica's phone but retrieving it didn't give him access to the list.

"Can you unlock it?" Khan requested.

"Kiss first," Monica pouted.

Khan smirked and complied, leaving a loving kiss on Monica's lips before taking her back into his hug. Monica seemed satisfied, so she unlocked her phone while it was still in Khan's hands.

"It's in my notes," Monica voiced before returning to the warmth of her blanket and cuddling on Khan.

Khan reached Monica's notes and found the list. The time to handle his many invitations to dinner had come, so Monica had graded all the families or important figures she could think of. Still, the name on the top added a sour feeling to her selfless effort.

"Lucian," Khan sighed.

"He has money," Monica explained, "And everyone holds him in high regard. No one will complain if you choose him as your first."

"I don't know what to expect from him," Khan said things Monica already knew. "He might turn the dinner into a trap."

"That's why you have to contact him," Monica showed her political expertise. "Take him by surprise. I'll come with you, so he won't have time to prepare."

"You don't have to get involved with this," Khan uttered, "And you are still unwell."

"I'll get better," Monica promised. "With me there, he'll have to drop any ploy."

"Monica," Khan called, but Monica groaned and rubbed her face on his waist. That marked the end of the conversation since Khan couldn't argue while she was in that state.

Of course, Khan appreciated Monica's resolve, and his cuddles conveyed his feelings. Monica began to relax and get drowsy under that affection, but a notification hit the flat's walls and disturbed her rest.

"It's Anita," Khan put down Monica before she could peek at the walls, "And she has a package?"

The elevator didn't take long to open, and Anita soon reached the living room while carrying a chest-sized metal box. The container initially confused Khan, but clarity arrived when he recalled his purchases.

"Hi," Monica called while Khan's waist hid her face.

"How is she?" Anita asked, making her way inside the room to hand the box to Khan.

"She is getting better," Khan took the box and placed it on the armrest. "The fever is down, and her appetite is returning."

"Khan is taking care of me," Monica added. "I should get ill more often."

"Shh," Khan caressed Monica's curls. "I told you to meditate."

"Kiss first!" Monica complained.

"Sure, sure," Khan complied, and the cuddles that followed the kiss made Monica relax again.

Anita felt slightly embarrassed to be so close to that intimate scene, but the evident affection made her smile. Seeing Khan being so protective added a layer of romance that Anita couldn't help but like.

"A soldier left this for you," Anita whispered while eyeing the box to avoid disturbing Monica. "I offered to take it up since I was there."

"Thank you," Khan used the same faint voice and decided to ignore the glare that Anita shot at George. She appeared angry at something, but George looked completely clueless.

Khan moved his attention to the box and lifting the metal lid revealed an item he had been eager to receive. A long knife rested among luxurious sheets together with a matching sheath, a screen, and a small bottle.

The screen lit up as soon as Khan took it, revealing a series of lines and a symbol with a signature on it. The device was a mark of authenticity, confirming that the weapon had been the work of a master.

Khan stored the device and seized the bottle, which turned out to be a maintenance product. The instructions on its label wanted him to apply the liquid on the edges after every battle to preserve the knife's sharpness.

The sheath was simple but beautiful. Its dark leather had white designs that wrote "Captain Khan", and its shape allowed a quick draw. That wasn't an item meant to hang on a wall. The battlefield was its place.

The light weight was the first thing Khan noticed when he lifted the knife. The weapon had no strange patterns or design choices. Its grey handle was thick, simple, and incredibly comfortable. It fit perfectly in Khan's hand no matter how he held it.

As for the black blade, it was thinner than Khan's previous knife, but a single touch told him about its sturdiness. Its two edges also felt sharp enough to cut the very air, and its tip radiated a menacing aura he couldn't ignore.

Khan didn't know much about magic weapons, but his senses had evolved, and they told him to fear that third-grade knife. That dark metal carried a level of perfection he couldn't explain. It clearly was the work of a master.

"That's a nice blade," George whistled. "I would have to go into my family's armory to find something so fine."

"Keep your head down," Khan whispered to Monica while placing the knife on his glass. The sharp edge began to pierce it without meeting any resistance, and Khan could notice the cut only after retrieving his weapon.

Khan placed his free hand on Monica's head to make sure she remained down and sent mana to the other. A purple-red glow enveloped the knife, which perfectly withstood the weight of the chaos element. He even tested it on the glass, splitting it in half without any effort.

'There is almost no hindrance in the metal,' Khan realized while retracting and summoning his mana again. 'This thing seems to welcome mana.'

Anita had joined George on his couch during Khan's inspection, so he had enough room to wave his knife a few times. The light weight was simply unbelievable, and Khan couldn't wait to test it in an actual fight.

"Should I apply this liquid already?" Khan wondered since he had cut the glass.

"No," George replied, "But you should do it after a long session in a training hall. That blade isn't as frail as it looks, but better safe than sorry."

Khan nodded while storing the knife in the sheath. He would trust the blade expert on that point.

"Did you get all of that for one hundred?" George questioned.

"Ninety-five," Khan corrected.

"That's a good deal," George exclaimed. "The price could have easily touched two hundred due to the chaos-resistant materials."

"I guess being famous is saving me money," Khan laughed.

"No shit," George snickered before glancing at the mess of curly hair sleeping on Khan. "By the way, I've also contacted my family for the infusion. If I'm lucky, I should get it in a couple of weeks."

"Isn't it too early for you?" Anita expressed her worries.

"My control over mana isn't so shallow," George reassured. "I was just being lazy about it."

Anita instinctively looked at Khan to confirm George's story, and he nodded. George could definitely get the infusion.

"Besides," George continued, "Everyone will try to get one once Monica shows up with a third star. That's how these things work."

"Most people in our class aren't that close to the third level," Khan pointed out before resuming his cuddles. "Even Monica might need an entire month to complete that breakthrough."

"They'll mostly do it to save face," George explained. "In my case, I'll take a small one. I can handle the rest by myself."

"Aren't you just afraid to suffer mana rejection?" Anita snorted.

"Afraid isn't a word I'd associate with myself," George rebuked. "You should know that."

"Maybe I was talking about a different type of fear," Anita pressed on.

"Hey," Khan scolded. "No fighting while Monica is resting."

"So protective," Anita giggled. "That's how a man should be."

George spread his arms in annoyance. He had literally guarded Anita on Nippe 2, but she pretended not to see his gesture now.

"Khan," Monica called in a sleepy voice. "I'm cold."

"You should go to bed and sleep," Khan stated while putting the sheathed knife back in the box.

"Carry me," Monica whined, and Khan didn't hesitate to comply. He put both arms under her before standing up, lifting her with him.

"We'll take our leave," Khan announced, nodding at the couple before disappearing inside a bedroom.

"Captain Khan is so romantic," Anita sighed as her dreamy eyes remained on the corridor where the couple had disappeared.

"Romantic? Khan?" George gasped.

"Unbelievable," Anita shook her head.

"I call that intense," George argued.

"Maybe I want a bit of intense," Anita replied.

"How was Nippe 2 not intense?" George wondered.

"In the Harbor," Anita explained, "Not among sand and doctors."

"It would be easier if you didn't shut me out every time," George complained.

"Is this my fault now?" Anita raised her voice.

"We both know you are the one running away," George uttered.

"As if you aren't relieved whenever I do," Anita responded.

"You know I'm that kind of idiot," George cursed. "It's not like I want you to do it."

"Then, what do you want?" Anita asked.

"I think you have a pretty good idea of what I want," George stated.

"And that's all you can think of," Anita sighed.

"I don't care about sex," George snorted. "I just wish we stopped hiding behind fights."

Anita froze for a few seconds. George's words had taken her by surprise, but something about them felt off, and she made sure to tell him. "I don't believe you."

"Okay, I care about sex," George admitted, "But can we at least talk openly? I thought I proved myself already."

"Maybe I'm not sure yet," Anita revealed, diverting her gaze to hide her faint blush. "Maybe I need more time. Is it too much to ask?"

George was no stranger to women or relationships. In a way, he had more experience than Khan. When George looked at Anita's blonde hair, he knew he was in front of a crossroads. One path led to a seriousness he had avoided in the past, while the other would make him lose Anita.

"I knew you were evil," George heaved a helpless sigh.

Sadness invaded Anita. She knew she wasn't as bold as Monica, but she had still hoped George would see past her grumpy character. Yet, it seemed that his patience had reached its limit.

Anita stood up, ready to leave the flat while she could still hold back her sadness, but a hand seized her waist and pulled her. She fell at George's side, and he even pushed her toward the elevator.

"What are you doing?!" Anita complained.

"We are going to my flat," George calmly explained. "You don't like to make out here."

"Make out what?" Anita shouted.

"Right," George chuckled. "You call it staying late."

"Wha-?" Anita began to ask before changing her line. "Are you serious? Even after what I said?"

"Yeah, yeah," George sighed. "You want to be spoiled, reassured, and everything. I blame me and my stupidly good tastes."

Anita frowned. She had to replay those words to understand that George had praised her.

"I'm warning you," George continued once the couple entered the elevator. "I expect it at least three times a day once I earn that troublesome trust."

"Unbelievable!" Anita gasped as the elevator's doors began to close. "Don't say such things!"

"I said my piece," George cleared his throat, and Anita took a deep breath to begin her next rebuke. Still, a smile had appeared on her face by then.

Chapter 464 Trap

The auto-pilot went off, allowing Khan to perform a manual landing in the hangar. He handled the steering wheel carefully but firmly, and the engine became silent once the ship touched the metal floor.

"Impeccable, sir," Lieutenant Shurpard praised. "You handled your eighth flight masterfully."

"It's the seventh for the Global Army," Khan corrected since his first flight didn't count toward his license.

"It still is an amazing achievement, sir," Lieutenant Shurpard did his best to praise. "I've never seen such a natural pilot in my life."

"Ships are easy," Khan sighed, tracing the keys on the control desk with his fingers. "They are meant to be as easy as possible. Once you memorize the commands, you only have to get used to the responsiveness."

"Sir, trainees take years to gain confidence on the steering wheel," Lieutenant Shurpard pressed on. "You had it since your first day."

Khan kept his eyes on the command desk as calculations happened in his mind. He had gotten his hands on the flight simulator even before reaching Milia 222, and Snow had been with him for months. In theory, he had put enough time into that training to justify his skills.

"Do I need to wait two more weeks to book ships?" Khan eventually asked.

"I'm afraid so, sir," Lieutenant Shurpard confirmed. "You should also pass an initial practical test for safety reasons. Still, the Headmistress has already reached out to handle eventual payments."

Khan held back a sigh. That was already his fifth week attending those flying lessons, but the Global Army's regulations still prevented him from going out alone.

"Sir, look at the bright side," Lieutenant Shurpard laughed, trying to change the topic. "This schedule isn't getting in the way of your studies. I heard you did well on the tests."

"Those tests were only an excuse to mark the end of the year," Khan explained, "And the middle of the class isn't what I'd call well."

A week had passed since the arrival of the third-grade knife, and the year had changed. Khan had entered his fourth academic year, which the Harbor had welcomed with a wave of tests. His scores surpassed everyone's expectations, but half of the advanced class was still above him, including Monica, who was first.

"Captain," Lieutenant Shurpard called, doing his best to find words that didn't risk offending Khan, "You surpassed many descendants. I'm sure the next tests will go even better!"

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Khan showed a fake smile. The Lieutenant couldn't possibly know how wrong he was, but Khan didn't blame him. It had taken him weeks of group studies to learn the difference in raw knowledge between Monica and himself.

"I believe in what I said, sir," Lieutenant Shurpard claimed. "Now, I should return to my post. I hope you get a good rest tonight."

"Oh, Lieutenant," Khan chuckled while leaving the pilot's seat. "My day is far from over."

The Lieutenant searched for Khan's face, but he never turned. The ship opened when Khan touched the exit, and a metal staircase brought him to the hangar's floor. A car was already waiting for him in another area, and he didn't hesitate to reach it.

'I'm coming back,' Khan sent a message before checking the time. The scheduled dinner was still a few hours away, but time was always tight when Monica had to prepare.

'Hurry!' Monica texted. 'I can't decide what to wear!'

'That's because you have too many clothes,' Khan replied.

'Shut up and move your ass,' Monica answered, and her angry tone resounded in Khan's mind, making him smile.

The hangars were quite distant from the second district, and the cab's quality couldn't affect the trip's length too much. Khan knew he was in for a long ride, so he closed his eyes to meditate to make it pass quickly.

Seeing the empty sidewalk in front of the habitation was always nice. The Headmistress was granting Khan some peace from the consequences of his fame, but chaos arrived as soon as he entered his flat.

"Khan, you are here!" Monica shouted from somewhere in the flat as soon as the walls notified her. "Come quickly!"

Khan scratched the side of his head and followed the symphony into a bedroom, where he found a pile of clothes blocking his way. He had to move them aside to enter the room, but more were waiting for him inside.

"That's why we never use this bedroom," Khan commented while making his way through the sea of dresses, shoes, and more. "This room belongs to your clothes."

"Khan," Monica called in a pleading tone. She was in front of an interactive mirror, and two skirts hung from her hands.

"Black is elegant but too tight," Monica explained. "Instead, cherry feels childlike."

Khan couldn't look at the skirts since Monica was only wearing an unbuttoned shirt and underwear. Truth be told, she had just started to recover from her infusion. The couple didn't have sex in a while, and the scene reminded Khan about that.

"Wait!" Monica shouted when she recognized Khan's expression. "Tell me which skirt first."

"Pleated red one," Khan promptly said while approaching Monica.

"You always liked pleated skirts," Monica nodded before throwing away both skirts and jumping forward. Khan caught her mid-air, and her legs immediately wrapped themselves around his waist.

Monica trapped Khan into a kiss but eventually pulled herself back and caressed his cheek to ask a sensual question. "Can we now, Doctor Khan?"

Khan didn't even try to hide his desire. He placed his ear at the center of Monica's chest and closed his eyes to listen to the entirety of her body. She had yet to absorb all the foreign synthetic mana, but stability had finally arrived.

Monica's eagerness would usually push Khan to crack a joke, but he was in the same situation. When he left her chest, he showed a meaningful smile that she rewarded with another kiss. It didn't take long before the two fell on the mess of clothes lying on the bed.

However, the walls lit up before the couple could go any further. Monica and Khan groaned at the same time, but frowns took control of their expressions when they saw no names on the notifications. Someone was ringing, but the building didn't reveal their identity.

"Did Lucian send someone so early?" Monica wondered.

"An escort would still announce themselves," Khan pointed out as he left Monica's loving hug. "It's better if you get dressed."

Monica was pissed about the interruption but still complied. The situation was strange. The couple had been pretty open about the incoming dinner, and news always spread quickly when Khan was involved. The entire Harbor knew about their plans, so no one would dare to disturb them at that hour.

Khan left the bedroom and reached the elevator to activate one of the menus. A camera on the first floor showed its images, and Khan's eyes widened in shock when he recognized the face on the screen.

"Who is it?" Monica asked from the open bedroom.

"Monica, dress up now!" Khan shouted, and a gulp followed. He granted passage to that unexpected visitor before inspecting his clothes. His military uniform was a bit of a mess, and he used those seconds to sort it out as well as possible.

Terror made its way into Khan's mind as the elevator started to move. He could face monsters and stronger soldiers without breaking a sweat, but that situation put genuine fear inside him. He actually had to close his eyes for a second to calm down and perform a military salute.

"Madam Solodrey!" Khan shouted as soon as the elevator opened to make sure that Monica heard him. "What a pleasant surprise!"

A beautiful but aloof face that reminded Khan of Monica crossed the elevator and glanced at him for a second before inspecting the room. Monica's mother was actually there, in Khan's flat, and she appeared far from happy.

"Captain Khan," Madam Solodrey casually spoke, "Is my daughter here?"

Khan didn't freeze but still hesitated to give Monica more time. Ideally, he would have left her mother downstairs, but that would have made everything more suspicious. Moreover, she was the main reason behind his enrollment into the Harbor.

"She is getting ready, ma'am," Khan calmly explained. "She is accompanying me to a dinner tonight, and I need her help choosing what to wear."

"You are dining with Lucian Hencus tonight," Madam Solodrey exclaimed. "Imagine my surprise when I heard that from his father."

Madam Solodrey was a fourth-level warrior, but Khan could read her mana. She was a bit pissed, but a layer of detachment enveloped her, making her emotions strange to sense.

"Ma'am, why don't I accompany you inside?" Khan ignored that dangerous topic and wore a fake smile. "I can offer you a drink while we wait for Miss Solodrey."

"You do have some manners," Madam Solodrey commented while bending toward Khan to inspect his face. "Your looks are also as good as the network says."

"Mom!" Monica called from the corridor as her hurried steps resounded in the flat. It only took her a few seconds to reach the elevator, and a question promptly left her mouth. "What are you doing here?"

"You will address me properly in public," Madam Solodrey scolded.

"Mother," Monica corrected, digging out her elegant manners to perform a perfect bow, "What are you doing here?"

Madam Solodrey kept track of the bow from start to finish, and a slight nod escaped her head. Monica had worn the pleated skirt and adjusted the shirt above, creating a picture that seemed to satisfy her mother.

"I'm pleased to see you didn't get shabby," Madam Solodrey voiced in her aloof tone, "But your hair needs work. I hope you didn't plan on meeting Mister Hencus like this."

"The dinner is still one hour away," Monica explained, "And Lucian isn't worthy of my best efforts anyway."

"But Lucian's father is," Madam Solodrey rebuked, causing a wave of shock to spread in the room. "Come, let's talk inside while Captain Khan fetches us some drinks."

Khan half-bowed and hurried inside, reaching the living room to prepare the welcome. Luckily for him, everything was in order, and he had even used the Headmistress' rewards to get good bottles.

"I was on my way to this quadrant to catch Princess Edna," Madam Solodrey explained as she slowly walked toward the living room. "I couldn't arrive in time, but I was close enough to attend this dinner."

"Will Lucian's father be at the dinner?" Monica couldn't believe her ears. "He didn't warn us."

"It seems the Hencus boy wanted to lay a trap on you," Madam Solodrey revealed. "Luckily, his father knows his place and contacted me. Apparently, he had also started traveling toward this quadrant to meet Princess Edna."

The two women reached a couch, and Monica immediately sat. Instead, Madam Solodrey gave a hesitant look at the pillows before deciding to join her daughter.

Khan arrived with two half-full glasses in the following seconds, and the look on Monica's face told him what she was about to say. The presence of those two powerful figures would shift the focus away from Khan, and she didn't like it.

"Mother, this dinner is for Captain Khan's career," Monica opposed that development while taking her glass. "You'll overshadow him with your presence."

"Did you expect me to refuse Mister Hencus' invitation?" Madam Solodrey wondered while also seizing the glass. Still, unlike Monica, she only glanced at it before putting it down.

"You didn't have to agree to this specific dinner," Monica pressed on.

"Monica, dear," Madam Solodrey sighed, "I'm a busy woman. I must seize these opportunities. Besides, it was about time I met our promising investment."

Khan had remained at the couch's side after delivering the glasses. The conversation involved him, and he also wanted to take a better look at Monica's mother. She carried a distinct elegance, but her aloofness made her feel unapproachable.

The inspection ended after Madam Solodrey's last words. Khan found two pairs of beautiful eyes on him, and his entire brain worked to generate a fitting reply. "Your interest honors me, ma'am."

"You are the youngest Captain in history," Madam Solodrey exclaimed, "And you saved Princess Edna from a kidnapping attempt. Interested is the least I can be."

"I did make sure Miss Solodrey was safe too back on Nippe 2," Khan added.

"I'm sure you did," Madam Solodrey disregarded the comment. "Please, sit. After all, this is your flat."

Khan performed a quick bow before reaching the opposite couch. He didn't have the time to fill a glass for himself, and regret began to appear now.

"Mother," Monica tried to call.

"Dear," Madam Solodrey interrupted, "I'm talking with the Captain."

Khan felt Monica's worried eyes looking for him, but his gaze remained on her mother. Madam Solodrey was inspecting him, and he couldn't risk giving anything away.

"I admit I was skeptical when Monica contacted me," Madam Solodrey announced, "But I heard your tests went well. Maybe there is a student inside you."

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan replied.

"However," Madam Solodrey continued, "The middle of the class is unbefitting of a figure related to the Solodrey family. I expect you to be in the top five by the end of the semester."

Khan held back a gulp. Meeting Madam Solodrey's expectations in a few subjects wouldn't be a problem, but the top five remained hard to reach. Still, only one answer was acceptable in that situation. "I won't disappoint, ma'am."

"Good," Madam Solodrey exclaimed. "Now, Monica, go redo your hair. Get something more elegant too. I won't lose face tonight because of you."

A wave of anger surged inside Khan, but Monica stood up before it could turn into words or actions. Moreover, something felt off and managed to distract Khan from that disrespectful statement.

Monica left, but Khan kept looking at her mother. The latter was aware of the dinner and the tests' results. She also knew that the flat belonged to Khan. Telling Monica to change implied that she had suitable products and clothes in the habitation, which could easily lead to problematic realizations.

As expected, the atmosphere changed as soon as Monica left. Faint tension filled the living room, adding a strange scent to the symphony. Madam Solodrey was dropping her façade, and Khan's face instinctively grew cold while he waited for her next words.

"The Harbor is an isolated environment," Madam Solodrey stated as her dark eyes fell on Khan, "But its rumors spread throughout the universe. I know what you are doing, and I'm telling you to stop it."

"Ma'am?" Khan feigned ignorance.

"Don't play with me, Captain," Madam Solodrey warned. "I know my daughter, and a mutt like you isn't worthy of her."

'Mutt?' Khan repeated in his mind. 'Is she talking about my mutations or something else?'

"I also know your kind," Madam Solodrey continued. "Congratulations. You gained my attention. Now, name your price and stay away from my daughter."

Khan's mana had already started to boil, but some coldness enveloped all of that. He could remain calm, but that didn't lead to appropriate behaviors. Instead, it only made his tongue sharper.

"Ma'am, I don't think I can name a price," Khan opted for an honest approach.

"I know your kind," Madam Solodrey repeated. "You used your opportunity well, but it's time to end it. What did you have in mind when you tricked my daughter?"

"You misunderstand," Khan remained polite. "I can't name something that matches your daughter's value."

"Try," Madam Solodrey ordered.

"I refuse, ma'am," Khan smiled.

"I told you not to play with me," Madam Solodrey reminded. "I'll get you to stay away one way or another."

Khan had spent more than the last month immersed in regulations and descendants. His studies and Monica's relentless teaching had deepened his knowledge of the political environment, which allowed him to notice clues in Madam Solodrey's words.

"I understand," Khan exclaimed. "You can't use your authority to force me out. I must decide on my own, or everyone will get suspicious."

"You have a wild imagination," Madam Solodrey scoffed.

"Not at all," Khan admitted. "I'm probably dumber than the average soldier, but even an idiot would understand what's happening. You can't touch me directly. Doing that would hurt your family."

The matter didn't only involve Khan's recent feats. Someone would understand something if he cut ties with Monica, which would lower her value. Madam Solodrey didn't want that outcome, especially when her daughter was so outstanding.

"Don't underestimate me, Captain Khan," Madam Solodrey threatened. "I get what I want."

"And how much of yourself did you have to compromise to get there?" Khan wondered while loudly sniffing the air. "I can smell your corruption. It makes it harder to understand whether your interest is purely toward Monica or your family."

Nothing happened to Madam Solodrey's face, but her presence suddenly disappeared. Her mana transformed into a blank spot Khan couldn't sense.

"It seems you were the one underestimating others," Khan chuckled. "Why don't we change the topic? I'm interested in that mutt thing."

"We'll change the topic when I decide," Madam Solodrey stated.

"Ma'am, I don't want us to be enemies," Khan tried to bring some peace.

"Most of the Global Army doesn't want me as their enemy," Madam Solodrey smirked.

"You misunderstand again," Khan shook his head. "I want us to go along for Monica. She would be sad otherwise."

Madam Solodrey continued to hide her reactions, but a crack had opened in her belief. Khan didn't look interested in political gains or using the Solodrey name to his benefit, and his answers sounded stupidly honest, especially those involving Monica.

"Happiness is a luxury to people in my position," Madam Solodrey commented. "You wouldn't understand."

"I hope I never do," Khan declared. "Still, shouldn't you wish for your daughter's happiness? I thought that was the job of a parent."

"Don't you dare lecture me on parenthood," Madam Solodrey snorted.

"Why?" Khan wondered. "Because one of my parents abandoned their noble status?"

A twitch finally ran through Madam Solodrey's face. Khan had voiced one of his deepest doubts, and that slight reaction didn't go unnoticed. Yet, it would take far more to make Madam Solodrey lose her composure.

"You are in no position to make my daughter happy," Madam Solodrey went back to the previous topic. "You have no idea what that would imply either."

"I'm trying to fix that," Khan stated. "So, am I a mutt due to my mutations? Or is my family to blame for that?"

"The Harbor alone can't teach such things," Madam Solodrey ignored the dangerous topic.

"Was it my mother?" Khan pressed on. "I heard she was a handful."

Madam Solodrey didn't answer, but her silence was deafening. She had come there to threaten Khan, but there he was, staring at her with his confident eyes. One single look told her that she couldn't scare him away.

"Did you think I would give you answers?" Madam Solodrey eventually sighed.

"Not at all," Khan admitted. "I only wanted you to stop talking about Monica, ma'am."

The shameless smile that followed almost made Madam Solodrey lose her composure. Khan had used such a hot matter to change the topic and succeeded.

Of course, that was what Khan wanted Madam Solodrey to believe. Part of him hoped to get answers, even if he knew the chances were slim. He managed to get a distraction and a twitch out of his questions, but that was it.

"Why are you going to such lengths?" Madam Solodrey questioned. "You can get anything you want. I'm giving you that opportunity. Is it stubbornness?"

"This might be hard to explain," Khan laughed as some sadness seeped into his smile. "I lost everything a few times. It took me a while to make peace with that, and I'm in no hurry to experience it again. I have a fighting chance, so I'm taking it."

Back on Nitis, Khan had only been able to fight. He simply had nothing else to offer to the Niqols or the Global Army. Yet, things were different now, so he made sure to use all his weapons.

"Resolve alone can't earn you the Solodrey name," Madam Solodrey stated.

"I'm working on that, ma'am," Khan promised.

"Such gall," Madam Solodrey chuckled. "I guess I'll test you."

"Ma'am?" Khan asked, but the opening of a door interrupted the conversation. Monica returned to the living room, showing far softer curls and a new turtleneck sweater. Still, she had kept the skirt chosen by Khan.

"Is this acceptable, mother?" Monica questioned, performing a bow when she reached her mother's couch.

"It will do," Madam Solodrey nodded while standing up. "Captain Khan, I hope my daughter taught you how to dress because we'll leave in ten minutes."

"Mother, the dinner isn't due for another hour," Monica reminded.

"The Hencus boy wanted to lay a trap," Madam Solodrey announced. "Arriving early should disrupt his plans."

Khan didn't hesitate to stand up and head for a bedroom, but Madam Solodrey voiced another comment before the metal doors could stop her voice. "This dinner just became interesting."

Chapter 465 Beautiful

Khan's sense of style had never improved. He was still clueless about clothes and their value, but he didn't fear Madam Solodrey's judgment. After all, her daughter was the true owner of Khan's wardrobe.

Monica had arranged Khan's clothes into sets, so he couldn't make mistakes. He quickly retrieved a black shirt, grey pants, and black shoes from his wardrobe before wearing them. In a minute, he left the bedroom to rejoin the two women.

"Is this acceptable?" Khan used Monica's words as soon as two pairs of eyes fell on him.

"Far from it," Madam Solodrey commented. "Teaching must not be my daughter's forte."

Monica showed a sweet smile to Khan before lowering her gaze. Some sadness seeped into her expression since her mother was taking it out on Khan. She didn't mind when the insults targeted her, but involving Khan in her problems always soured her feelings.

"On the contrary, ma'am," Khan responded. "Monica is the only reason I could score so high on the tests."

Madam Solodrey was about to turn, but hearing Khan calling her daughter by her first name made her shoot a glare at him. He responded with an innocent smile, which said a lot about his stance.

"You will address my daughter with the proper respect," Madam Solodrey ordered.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Khan performed a military salute. "Force of habit."

The second reply told Monica that something had happened while she was away. The discovery didn't surprise her since she knew her mother's character, but Khan's challenging stance was problematic.

Madam Solodrey snorted and approached the elevator. Meanwhile, Khan ignored Monica's questioning gaze to reach her side and pinch her waist. The gesture granted him a glare, but Madam Solodrey didn't give the couple the time to clear things out.

"I hope to see a car by the time I get down," Madam Solodrey announced, forcing the couple to hurry.

Khan's status made a ship arrive in a matter of minutes. The dinner would happen outside the Harbor, and he had already booked a suitable vehicle, so calling it early wasn't a problem. Yet, Madam Solodrey began to reveal her intentions at its sight, and they were far from friendly.

"Is this the best a Captain can get?" Madam Solodrey questioned at the sight of the ship. The vehicle wasn't bad. It actually met some of the Harbor's loftiest standards, but Madam Solodrey appeared displeased anyway.

"Ma'am, I would have prepared something better if I knew about your arrival," Khan justified.

"Are you implying my daughter alone isn't worthy of your best efforts?" Madam Solodrey asked.

"I didn't-," Khan tried to speak.

"You said enough," Madam Solodrey interrupted while heading for the ship.

Monica gave Khan another sad look, but he shook his head to reassure her before following Madam Solodrey. He was starting to understand the kind of test Madam Solodrey wanted to have, and things were bound to get worse during the dinner.

The ship only had a central room connected to the pilot's cabin, but that was enough for three people. The seats could also move freely to create more space, but Madam Solodrey didn't hold back her disgusted look when she looked at them.

Luckily for Khan, Madam Solodrey didn't voice any comment. She limited herself to a long inspection before choosing a seat at the center of the ship's left side. Monica joined her while Khan decided to remain on his feet right outside the pilot's cabin.

"Should I set off, sir?" The pilot asked once everything was set.

"Yes," Khan confirmed. "You received the directions, right?"

"They are on the screen," The pilot revealed, and Khan peeked into the cabin to inspect the holograms coming out of the control desk.

"Perfect," Khan exclaimed. "Let's go."

The ship left the sidewalk through a perfect set-off. Nothing reached its insides, and Khan clung to a handhold while moving his attention to the two women. Monica was still trying to understand what had happened while her mother found something else to criticize.

"Dear, sit properly," Madam Solodrey scolded, forcing Monica to give up on her inspection and straighten her back.

"Don't press your hair on the seat," Madam Solodrey continued. "Do you want to see your work go to waste?"

"Adjust your skirt," Madam Solodrey added another reprimand. "It will get full of creases otherwise."

More reprimands arrived, and Monica obeyed all of them. The pilot could hear her mother, making her unable to refuse or object to anything she said.

"Ma'am," Khan tried to come up with something to divert the attention from Monica, but Madam Solodrey didn't give him any opening.

"I'd focus on the dinner if I were you," Madam Solodrey warned. "As for me, I have to make sure my daughter doesn't bring any shame on our family."

Monica kept her gaze lowered, and some detachment joined her expression. That probably was her usual behavior among her family, and Khan couldn't help but feel irritated since he knew her story.

"Remember that we share many years of friendship with the Hencus family," Madam Solodrey added. "I expect you to treat Lucian accordingly. He is also one of your most valuable suitors."

"Mother, we have already talked about this," Monica finally spoke.

"And we'll talk about it again until you make up your mind," Madam Solodrey stated, gently moving away some of Monica's curls to caress her shoulder. "Dear, innocent flirting never hurt anyone, and you had so much practice."

Monica couldn't help but feel ashamed. The Solodrey family's upbringing had taught her the manners proper of a female descendant, which involved political flirting. That behavior was almost an instinctive part of her character now.

Khan had seen that side of Monica's education on Milia 222, and the two had even talked about it. Lucian had also mentioned something similar after the battle against George, so Khan wasn't surprised.

The peculiar situation fused with those words to create a perfect environment for Khan's jealousy, but he didn't experience anything similar. Monica's shame filled his senses and made his feelings unstable. He could remain cold during the conversation, but something escaped his control now.

A buzzing noise ran through the ship as some lights and screens flickered. Nothing major happened, and the vehicle even continued to fly properly, but everyone noticed that event.

"We must have touched an external interference, sir," The pilot reassured before anyone could ask questions. "Everything seems in order."

"Such a cheap choice," Madam Solodrey commented in an attempt to belittle the ship and Khan, but he couldn't pay attention to her. His eyes were on his handhold and the black mark that had appeared because of his mana.

'Not a good sign,' Khan suppressed a sigh. Talking back to Madam Solodrey had been easier in the privacy of the flat, but having an audience forced Khan to hold back, which he couldn't do very well.

Nevertheless, a worried gaze forced the coldness to take control of the wild emotions. Monica knew what had happened, and Khan could feel her eyes on him. He would surely fail to behave appropriately if he only thought about himself, but Monica gave him the power to succeed.

The interference strangely brought positive changes. Madam Solodrey fell silent, creating a tense and awkward atmosphere no one could affect. That mood was far from good, but Khan preferred it over the relentless scolding toward Monica.

The uneventful flight led the group outside the Harbor, where a circular vehicle was waiting for them. Lucian had chosen to imitate the Virrai family, using a big ship that could provide the utmost privacy and show his finances, but no one was in the mood to remain surprised at its sight.

A docking station opened at the center of the circular ship, and Khan's vehicle landed inside it. Breathable air arrived once the area severed its connection with the universe, and soldiers crossed multiple doors to prepare a welcome worthy of the guests.

Madam Solodrey was the first to cross the metal staircase and descend into the ship. Monica followed closely behind, and Khan left after her. Meanwhile, the soldiers waited at the room's edges while two figures approached the group.

"Anastasia!" A middle-aged man with short blonde hair and emerald eyes exclaimed while walking toward the group. Madam Solodrey showed a rare smile at his figure and stretched her hand to prepare herself for a polite greeting.

"You are as beautiful as ever," The middle-aged man continued before leaving a kiss on Madam Solodrey's hand. "I hope this invitation wasn't too sudden."

"Lionel, you know a married woman can't receive these compliments," Madam Solodrey giggled.

"My words carry nothing but the truth," Lionel stated, letting go of Madam Solodrey's hand. "Your husband and my wife know that."

"Mister Hencus," Monica announced, reaching her mother's side to make Lionel notice her, "Meeting you again is an honor, especially during such pleasant circumstances."

"Miss Solodrey!" Lionel gasped loudly. "You have grown to be a match to your mother. The Solodrey family must be blessed with exceptional looks."

"You are too kind," Monica smiled, performing an elegant bow.

Lucian had let his father take the lead, but that didn't stop him from shooting a meaningful glance at Khan. The latter didn't miss anything in that situation, but his mood was too jumpy to care about that gesture, especially when a far more interesting figure was on the scene.

Lionel shared some features with Lucian. They had the same hair and eyes, but he was taller and burlier. His figure also was a blank spot in the symphony, but the mana that touched him revealed part of his strength.

Khan had already seen similar reactions. They were weaker compared to what Colonel Norrett caused, but they belonged to the same realm. The smiling and polite Lionel had to be a fifth-level warrior.

"Mister Hencus," Khan decided to claim Lionel's attention once his inspection ended, "Your presence here is a pleasant surprise. I didn't think I'd have the honor to meet you so soon."

"Captain Khan," Lionel gasped again, spreading his arms to highlight his happiness, "I longed for this meeting. I'm sorry I didn't invite you directly. I worried I would ruin your schedule."

"You wouldn't have ruined it, sir," Khan reassured. "Finding the time to meet you would have been a happy task."

"I'm glad to hear that," Lionel laughed. "Now, I'll let my son complete his political duties."

"Thank you, father," Lucian nodded before stepping forward to reach Madam Solodrey's stretched hand.

"Madam," Lucian called after kissing Madam Solodrey's hand, "You look younger with each passing year."

"Lucian, dear boy," Madam Solodrey chuckled, "I told you to call me Anastasia many times. When will you drop these formalities?"

"Maybe next year," Lucian guessed.

"That's what you said last year," Madam Solodrey nodded in approval while retrieving her hand.

"Miss Solodrey, you are as charming as ever," Lucian moved to Monica. He got close enough to try to take her hand, but she performed a bow before his polite greeting could start.

"Lucian, we are classmates who have known each other for years," Monica declared. "I'll feel offended if you don't drop these formalities."

"Very well, Monica," Lucian agreed, "But let me say how beautiful you are again. This skirt is especially exceptional."

"I had Captain Khan's help when I bought it," Monica revealed. "You know he is my secret weapon regarding clothes."

"Captain, does your talent even have limits?" Lucian wondered while approaching Khan to shake his hand. "I'm glad you decided to schedule this dinner. We have a lot to talk about."

"I can't wait," Khan responded.

"Perfect!" Lionel exclaimed as soon as Lucian finished greeting Khan. "The waiters should have arranged the dining table by now. Allow me to lead the way."

The group exchanged a series of smiles before following Lionel. On the surface, the greetings had gone well, but the tension had already intensified. Khan couldn't read Madam Solodrey's mana now, but it was clear that she didn't like Monica's last comment.

In theory, the presence of Lucian's father could bring some stability. There had to be a limit to how much Madam Solodrey could say in front of an equally important figure. Even scolding Monica publicly was off-limits due to the repercussions those actions would have on her family.

However, Khan didn't dare to underestimate Madam Solodrey. She had to be a political monster, and he was walking into her hunting area. She was probably preparing her next move, and Khan felt cornered.

Lionel led the group across a few corridors that opened into a big rectangular room. A group of servants was waiting next to the walls with drinks and plates, and a long table occupied the area's center. Food and booze were already near each seat, and Lionel had even planned other arrangements.

"Anastasia, one end of the table is yours," Lionel announced while reaching the other side of the room. "I'll take this end and claim Captain Khan for me. Is this disposition acceptable?"

"Of course," Madam Solodrey agreed, and some displeasure seeped into her face when Lionel searched for Khan's approval.

"How could I refuse, sir?" Khan smiled, approaching a seat on the table's long side to be close to Lionel.

"Miss Solodrey, Lucian, please," Lionel continued, pointing at the seats on the other long side.

Everyone quickly took their places. Khan found himself alone on his side, with Lucian in front of him. Monica and Lucian were close to their respective parents, and the waiters began serving Madam Solodrey to start the dinner.

"My informants told me that the Virrai family's representative invited you to one of these," Lionel used his cheerful tone to address Khan. "I hope my welcome can come close to theirs."

"The ship and this assortment are amazing," Khan honestly praised. After all, he had received nothing but questions and booze when the representative came.

"They better be," Lionel laughed. "You can't imagine how expensive they are."

The waiters continued to approach the guests in order of importance, leaving Lionel and Lucian for last since they were the hosts. Monica saw booze poured into her glass, and Khan came next.

"Lucian tells me your tests' results surprised everyone," Lionel continued. "Many expected you to struggle in the advanced classes, but you aced them."

"I have to thank the Harbor's teachers," Khan deflected the praise. "They are very good at their job. Also, I would have never caught up so quickly without Miss Solodrey's priceless help."

"Ah! Miss Solodrey!" Lionel gasped. "I almost forgot. Congratulations on being the first in your class. You bring honor to your family."

"Thank you, Mister Hencus," Monica lowered her head in respect. "Though Lucian deserves similar praises. He scored second while helping multiple members of the advanced classes with their studies."

"Monica is too kind," Lucian promptly opted for a humble approach. "She scored higher than me while dealing with the aftermath of the infusion. I'm not sure I could have done the same."

"They are such a good pair," Madam Solodrey praised. "Lionel, are you sure we can't arrange something once the semester is over? It would be nice to see our kids grow closer in a different environment."

"Anastasia, you only have to suggest," Lionel laughed. "I'll give the offer my undivided attention."

"We'll see where they are at after the semester," Madam Solodrey kept it vague. "I'll come up with something at that point."

Monica smiled, but her mana told a far different story. Her mother was cornering her, and she had no moves at her disposal.

Khan was in a similar situation. He couldn't even pretend in front of those obvious implications, so he hid his mouth behind his drink. His emotions and coldness could live in harmony, but they started a fight now, and even he didn't know who would win.

"If I may," Lucian suddenly announced, "I'd like to include Captain Khan in any future project. His potential is unmatched, and it would be a pity to let him leave so easily."

Khan gazed at Lucian from behind his glass, and the two seemed to converse during that silent exchange. Lucian had decided to help him on purpose, and his reasons were unclear.

"Mister Hencus exaggerates," Khan deflected the compliment again. "I am a reliable asset on the battlefield, but I'm just getting used to the political field."

"Captain, you protected me on Nippe 2," Lucian lied. "Don't offend me with these formalities."

"I'm sorry, Lucian," Khan played along. "I might be a bit tense."

"Nothing is scarier than politicians," Lionel snickered. "Still, Lucian is right. You are the most sought soldier in the entirety of the Global Army. It would be nice to monopolize you."

"The Solodrey family was lucky enough to find him first," Monica intervened. "I might have to owe a favor to Luke Cobsend for giving me that opportunity."

"I'm sure Luke feels the very opposite," Khan reassured. "Your help on Milia 222 didn't go unnoticed."

"Such a sweet tongue," Monica teased. "Everyone knows you handled everything on your own. You wouldn't have become the youngest Captain in history otherwise."

The back and forth between Khan and Monica was natural for the two. They had enough practice on Milia 222 and the Harbor to be experts at that teamwork, but they weren't alone now.

"Our kids are correct," Madam Solodrey spoke. "Captain Khan is indeed an extraordinary talent. I'm lucky my dear Monica recognized and secured his value before any contender. Still, I wonder if the Captain is willing to take things one step further."

"Ma'am?" Khan asked.

"Why don't you formally join us?" Madam Solodrey questioned. "A simple contract would be enough to give you a taste of my family's benefits. I can also add a time limit to provide an easy way out."

Monica and Lionel's poker faces remained perfect, but the former's mana revealed clues Khan didn't miss. Instead, Lucian dared to arc his eyebrows while focusing on his plate. That was another intentional gesture that only Khan noticed due to the attention on him.

"Why is he risking so much to help me?" Khan wondered. Monica's mana and Lucian's reaction told him the offer was no small matter. It was important enough to surprise the people at the table, and that said a lot.

"A contract would be pointless, ma'am," Khan chose to show what he had learnt in the last period. "The Harbor and Miss Solodrey's help are favors I plan to repay. There is no need to sign anything to have me on your side."

Khan had promised allegiance with the Solodrey family, but his words had the opposite effect. He had expressed his loyalty while preventing Madam Solodrey from making things official.

"I think Captain Khan is too young and promising to make such decisions right now," Lionel stepped in to change the topic. "Why don't you consider something small instead? My son actually came here with an offer."

"Thank you for introducing the matter, father," Lucian exclaimed before addressing the curious gazes. "It's true. I had an offer in mind far before this dinner. Captain, you once told me you'd consider it if I came to you with a mission. Well, here I am."

'Is he doing all of this to make me accept?' Khan wondered. 'It can't be. It's too little.'

Jobs were no big deal. Khan would have considered a good offer even if it came from a stranger, so Lucian's behavior had to have deeper meanings. Still, for now, Khan limited himself to a polite reply. "I'm all ears."

"I don't want to discuss the boring specifics at dinner," Lucian exclaimed. "Yet, to add some context, I want to send a team on Lauter to establish an outpost. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Khan's studies obviously involved the quadrant's peculiar location and resources. Lauter was one of the planets in the system, and the Harbor retrieved a special gas important for the ships' engines there. Its atmosphere wasn't as harsh as Nippe 2', but extracting that resource was dangerous for multiple reasons.

"I thought the Harbor had priority over the resources of this system," Khan expressed his doubts.

"There are heavy taxes," Lucian explained, "In certain locations. Building an outpost outside them would provide a stable source of income and help the future descendants of the Hencus family in the Harbor."

Khan didn't know nearly enough about Lauter to feel confident in a mission there, but that knowledge was easy to get. The payment wouldn't be an issue either since the Hencus family was involved. Time and Lucian were the only problems, but Khan didn't have the power to refuse right away.

"Send the details over," Khan nodded. "I'll study them, but I can't promise I'll be part of your team. It took me weeks to make the time for this dinner."

"No, Captain," Lucian corrected. "It would be your team. I want you to build it since your qualifications exceed mine when it comes to the field."

That detail was the most surprising part of the dinner. Lucian was asking for more than a hired gun. He wanted Khan's authority.

'The location must be hazardous,' Khan realized. 'Still, the reward should match that.'

"I'll give it a look," Khan nodded again, but his words carried more conviction now. The matter was exciting and matched Colonel Norrett's last directives.

"Excellent!" Lionel laughed. "Captain, I also heard your flights are going well. Who knows? You might be in charge of the ship by the time the mission starts."

"Is the Captain already getting the license?" Madam Solodrey questioned. "I thought he just started attending the flights."

"Captain Khan cut a deal with Headmistress Holwen to fly more often," Monica explained.

"Besides, he already knew his way around ships on Milia 222. The regulations are probably slowing him down."

"I understand and accept the necessity for regulations," Khan declared. "Yet, yes, I can already complete the flight required by the license."

"Incredible," Lionel praised. "I thought my son praised you too much, but I changed my mind. Captain, you deserve all your fame."

"Thank you, sir," Khan replied. "Yet, I still have a long way to go."

"It doesn't seem that long," Lionel snickered. "Don't you agree, Anastasia? Captain Khan might truly reach the peak of the Global Army at this pace."

"And that would be a waste of his talents," Madam Solodrey sighed. "The Global Army is so narrow-minded. You should consider marrying into a good family and obtain true leverage on the universe's politics."

"I must agree with Anastasia," Lionel uttered. "Joining a family would broaden your perspective. I'm sure mine would be willing to suggest a few candidates, but they might not be worthy of your fame."

"As Lionel said," Madam Solodrey continued, "The Solodrey family is blessed with good looks. We would gladly offer the most beautiful figure in our reach to give you our name."

'Old hag,' Khan snorted in his mind. Madam Solodrey had said the very opposite in his flat. Still, she couldn't have used worse words in that situation.

"Ma'am, with all due respect," Khan announced, "I'm sure Miss Solodrey is the most beautiful figure in your reach. I actually wouldn't limit her to that."

Tension spread in the room. Madam Solodrey's poker face remained perfect but also still. She froze in front of Khan's guts, but the blame was on her. She didn't expect him to include Monica in that group or speak openly about it.

"Captain Khan is right," Lionel exploded into a laugh. "Many recent rumors put Miss Solodrey and Princess Edna on the same level. You must be truly proud of your daughter."

The tension intensified as Madam Solodrey remained still. Monica showed fake smiles left and right to deflect those praises, but panic had already taken control of her mind. Even she didn't know how to defuse that situation.

"Captain, don't tell me that Miss Solodrey stole your heart?" Lionel's unrestrained laugh prevented the arrival of the silence.

"I wouldn't dare to even hint at such a thing, sir," Khan promptly shook his head. "However, would anyone be surprised? The entire embassy turns when she appears."

"Captain, you'll make me blush," Monica giggled while covering her mouth, "And we both know they turn because of you."

"Miss, I might be the most promising figure in the Global Army," Khan voiced a shameless self-praise, "But I know they don't turn to look at me. I'll keep a secret how I know that."

Khan made his words self-explanatory on purpose. He wanted the table to know he was interested in Monica without actually saying it, and Madam Solodrey couldn't even contradict him. After all, he was using her words to praise her daughter.

"So, Anastasia?" Lionel teased. "I think Captain Khan would take your family name for your daughter."

"Of course he would," Madam Solodrey snapped out of her stillness. "It's my dear daughter we are talking about. However, Monica currently has no intention to marry, and her parents agree. We believe she must reach her full potential before considering partners."

"Completely understandable," Lionel agreed. "Lucian and I reached a similar agreement. Marriage is off the table for now."

"Who knows?" Madam Solodrey wondered. "Our kids might change their minds at the same time."

"They might have competition by then," Lionel laughed. He didn't look at Khan, but it was clear that his comment involved him.

The dinner continued, but the conversations grew lighter. Madam Solodrey didn't expose herself anymore since Lionel seemed to like Khan, and random topics flowed as plates and drinks arrived.

Khan couldn't help but get a good impression of Lionel, but his guard remained high. Being unable to sense his mana made him suspicious, and the connection with Lucian complicated everything. Something was probably up, but Khan couldn't discover much, especially during the dinner.

Lionel's exuberance never allowed the table to fall silent. He seemed born to generate new topics, and Khan felt grateful for that. The constant talk dispersed part of the tension and awkwardness, allowing him to survive the entire dinner without losing control or causing political damage.

The situation changed once Khan, Monica, and Madam Solodrey returned to their ship and flew toward the Harbor. A chilling tension enveloped the group and destabilized the air. Everything felt ready to explode, but only silence reigned during the flight.

The ship dropped the trio in front of Khan's building, and Madam Solodrey led the way inside. The silence continued even in the elevator, and the detonation happened once the privacy of Khan's flat arrived.

"That was disrespect at its finest," Madam Solodrey coldly reprimanded once she turned to face the couple. "Captain Khan, I hope you had your fill of fun tonight because you won't experience anything remotely similar ever again."

"Mother," Monica tried to appease the situation, but her mother didn't give her a chance.

"Don't mother me," Madam Solodrey scolded. "You must have been happy to put me in such a shameful position. Were your laughs honest when this mutt insulted me?"

"Mutt?" Monica asked.

"All the years invested educating you," Madam Solodrey cursed, "And you throw everything away for a soldier. I'm at a loss for words."

"Mom, Khan isn't-," Monica raised her voice, but that couldn't work against her mother.

"I know exactly who Captain Khan is," Madam Solodrey snorted. "Did you enjoy using that loud snake against me? I don't know about your talent, but you are cold-blooded enough to survive politics."

Monica opened her mouth to speak, but Madam Solodrey glared at her. Her gaze then returned to Khan, but he continued to remain silent.

"What is it?" Madam Solodrey wondered. "Are you finally afraid of me? Where are the guts you showed me earlier?"

Khan continued his silent stare. He had a lot to say, but his mind wasn't in the right place, and Madam Solodrey looked even worse than him. Still, that could be another test, so he waited to see where the situation went.

"Silence," Madam Solodrey scoffed. "I guess you only talk to spread lies about my family."

"They weren't lies," Khan couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"What?" Madam Solodrey asked.

"They weren't lies," Khan repeated. "Monica is the most beautiful figure in your reach. Honestly, I don't see why people prefer Princess Edna to her."

Monica lowered her gaze in embarrassment. Receiving those compliments in front of her mother was too much, but her reaction was sincere.

Madam Solodrey didn't miss Monica's reaction, and some surprise replaced her fury. She had spent her life teaching Monica how to hide her true emotions, but there they were.

"What else?" Madam Solodrey scorned. "Were you serious about the marriage too?"

"I told the truth," Khan revealed. "I wouldn't dare to even think about that. Monica is outside my reach."

"Ooh?" Madam Solodrey pressed on. "You are the most promising figure in the Global Army. You said that yourself. How are you not at my daughter's level?"

"Being promising doesn't translate into assets," Khan explained. "Maybe in the future."

"And why shouldn't I secure you now?" Madam Solodrey wondered. "My dear daughter has already shown herself unwilling to meet the family's standards. I should just give her away."

"Your daughter scored first in the Harbor's tests while shivers made her unable to stand," Khan revealed. "She also helped me secure my spot while she was burning with fever."

"We taught Monica the Harbor's subjects as part of her education," Madam Solodrey pointed out.

"Just like every other family did," Khan stated. "She still surpassed their descendants."

Madam Solodrey finally fell silent, but Khan wasn't done. "She has also secured a good friendship with a noble and skillfully manipulated Pandora's auction to her benefit. Her last infusion will put her above her peers in terms of stars, effectively making her the Harbor's best student."

Monica tried to hide the loving smile on her face, but her mother noticed it. She couldn't help herself when hearing Khan acknowledging her efforts. He was the opposite of what her parents had gotten her used to.

"And she brought no shame on you," Khan concluded. "She earned you countless praises without giving anything away. Isn't that the definition of a perfect politician?"

Madam Solodrey couldn't even pretend to be angry when the speech ended. Khan had hit the mark, adding details about Monica that her mother didn't know. Those revelations were praiseworthy, but Madam Solodrey didn't dare to voice any compliment.

"What a troublesome mutt," Madam Solodrey eventually sighed while eyeing Monica. "I guess I did raise my dear daughter to be worthy of the Solodrey name."

Monica's gaze darted at her mother, but the latter spoke before any question could arrive. "As such, her judgment can't be too off. She knows her value, so you must be at least decent."

"Ma'am?" Khan called.

"I stand by my words," Madam Solodrey declared. "You aren't worthy of my daughter. No Captain is."

Khan felt able to read between the lines, and his shamelessness came out. "So, is Major enough? Lieutenant Colonel?"

"If you don't know," Madam Solodrey smirked, "You are still far away."

Madam Solodrey walked between the couple and entered the open elevator. Her aloof stance intensified, and she even pressed a key to return to the first floor.

"Captain Khan," Madam Solodrey called when the elevator began to close. "If I hear anything similar to a pregnancy, I will personally remove your testicles."

The elevator's doors closed, reflecting Khan and Monica's stunned faces. Madam Solodrey had finally left, but neither found the strength to move. Too much was happening inside their minds, and they were already exhausted.

"I can't understand your mother," Khan admitted.

"I never could either," Monica sighed, taking Khan's hand. "I still think she only sees me as a political currency."

"Yeah," Khan joined the sigh, finally letting go of all the mental pressure and tension accumulated during the dinner. "I probably love you more than her."

Khan took less than a second to realize his mistake. He had used a dangerous word, a word he shouldn't have spoken. Still, his mental exhaustion and the sudden relaxation had made his tongue slip.

The faint possibility that Monica missed that word existed since she was in the same situation. However, her grip on Khan's hand tightened, and her timid voice resounded in the room. "What did you say?"

Khan slowly turned to face Monica, and her expression said everything. She was stunned but due to a different type of shock. Fear, hesitation, and disbelief had filled her eyes, but she still mustered the strength to repeat her question. "What did you say?"

Monica's tone told Khan that nothing could get him out of that conversation. The topic was in the open now, and his feelings took over.

Truth be told, Khan had spent many nights and meditative sessions thinking about the matter. Love wasn't an easy topic for him since it involved his time on Nitis. Still, he had long since realized how he felt.

Partially, Khan believed he had become ready to love again. Enough time had passed since Liiza, and many meaningful events had happened in those years. Yet, that would make people like Cora and Martha able to replace Monica, which wasn't the case.

Monica wasn't patient but had still shown that quality in unrealistic situations. She had survived Jenna, who could probably scare away any other human. That was no small thing, and her feats didn't stop there.

The ability to go against the Solodrey family's indoctrination was incredible and gained more value after seeing Madam Solodrey. It had probably taken Monica immense courage to start her relationship, and Khan wouldn't disregard that.

Everything else was a matter of time and effort. Small things that transformed into huge deals after days, weeks, and months. That process had already failed Khan, but Monica managed to make it bloom.

"You heard me," Khan firmly stated. "I love you."

Khan had come from a world of pain the first time he uttered those words. Instead, everything was different now. His love was the result of many happy moments accumulated over time.

Khan's current love was different from what he had experienced on Nitis. Yet, he couldn't rate them. He couldn't decide which one was better. He could only acknowledge what existed in his mind now, and Monica was at its center.

"You said it," Monica muttered.

"Yes, I said it," Khan sighed. "It slipped."

Monica seemed unable to get past her disbelief, but an even stronger emotion took over her body when Khan began to divert his gaze. She pushed him onto the wall and delivered an almost violent kiss that sealed his lips and made him unable to breathe.

That explosion was so messy that the couple fell to the floor, but that wasn't enough to stop Monica. She kept her lips on Khan while he struggled to adjust her position.

"Finally," Monica sniffed before storming Khan with more kisses. "I. Was. So. Scared."

The kisses happened so often that Monica could only fit a single word into each separation. Her mana resembled a storm due to her emotional state, and the fear of negative consequences caused by the infusion forced Khan to end that fury.

"Monica," Khan called before resorting to physical strength to push Monica away. "Monica!"

Monica gasped for air while Khan kept her on his lap. She appeared far from stable, and worry piled up inside Khan. However, all of that vanished with Monica's following words.

"I thought I was going to ruin everything," Monica revealed as tears ran from her eyes. "I love you so much I was going crazy."

Khan finally figured everything out. Monica's frenzied state wasn't the result of the infusion. It was an explosion of bottled-up feelings in front of someone that shared them. That understanding put Khan in the same situation, and a simple pull made that mad affection resume.

Chapter 466 Packed

Khan woke up a few hours before dawn, and the scene that unfolded in his eyes made him frown. That wasn't his bedroom's ceiling. He was in the living room, and his naked back soon noticed how cold the floor was.

Memories flowed into Khan's mind as soon as he tried to recall the previous night. Madam Solodrey, the dinner, and the chaotic time in his flat became clear and filled him with a sense of exhaustion that didn't match his actual state.

A loving smile appeared on Khan's face when he peeked at his chest. Monica was sleeping on him without a single blanket covering her naked beauty. The couple had tried to reach the bedroom the previous night, but their location proved their failure.

Khan caressed Monica's hair and left a kiss on her head, which earned him a cute moan. Monica even snuggled closer without waking up, and he made sure to keep her stable on him.

The rest of the room caught Khan's attention at that point. He lifted his head to search for his stuff, but only chaos awaited him. Monica's skirt hung from a couch, his shirt lay next to the elevator, her heels stood in different parts of the room, and his shoes were nowhere to be found.

The scene turned Khan's smile into a shameless grin, and his eyes lit up when he found his pants. Surprisingly, they were within his legs' reach, and he used one foot to pull them closer.

Monica complained through a sleepy cry but didn't wake up. Khan could seize his pants and retrieve his phone to check the time and other notifications. The lessons were many hours away, but the device carried something able to keep him awake.

'Lauter, Lauter,' Khan sighed. Lucian had sent a message with all the mission details, and reading through them would take a while.

Khan opened the message before getting distracted by troublesome thoughts. A lot had happened during the dinner, and Khan recalled Lucian's explicit assistance. Still, he remained unable to explain that behavior.

'It can't be just this,' Khan thought while skimming through the message. 'It's not important enough to deserve favors.'

Ships didn't run on simple synthetic mana. Their tanks had additional materials that increased the efficiency of that energy, and Lauter had one of them. The special gas on that planet was actually a key ingredient in the creation of fuel.

The market couldn't get enough of that gas, but its incredible demand didn't make it rare or precious. Owning an outpost for its extraction was profitable, but that business couldn't have much value in the eyes of the Hencus family.

Khan could use the Harbor to justify the Hencus family's interest in building the outpost, but doubts remained. The job wasn't special. Khan only needed to open the network to find available positions for similar tasks in the quadrant, so Lucian's behavior had to have different explanations.

Going over the dinner didn't bring the answers Khan hoped to find. Lucian definitely had something in mind, but only an open talk might reveal his intentions.

Khan's attention returned to the message, but he couldn't remain focused for too long. Lucian had sent multiple reports filled with details, and some even included potential candidates for the team. Khan couldn't get over everything in those hours, especially since he wanted a second opinion before considering the offer.

A quick search through the network brought Khan to the Harbor's menus. Shops' catalogs and much more opened on the screen, and he browsed them to reach areas where his rank had some value.

The Harbor and the embassy mostly had descendants, but they were structures of the Global Army. Khan could obtain a series of documents and reports about Lauter for free due to his rank, and he planned to compare them to what Lucian had sent.

A sigh escaped Khan's mouth once the process was over. He let go of his phone and stared at the ceiling while his mind wandered. He had yet to absorb all the previous night's events, and that peace gave him a perfect chance.

Monica was the first thing that came to Khan's mind, not only because she was sleeping on him. The expression of their feelings had been an important event for both of them, and its conclusion had brought something Khan didn't experience in a long time.

Khan's free hand joined the cuddles while he watched Monica sleep. He almost couldn't believe he had reached that point. The very universe seemed to be against him, but he had managed to find some happiness, and Monica was an important part of it.

Thinking about Monica inevitably made Khan review every word uttered by her mother. Madam Solodrey had been a real pain until the very end, but her goodbyes had given hope, which almost felt unreal after everything Khan had witnessed the previous night.

Lucian was an issue Khan had already given up on figuring out now, but his father was another important variable. Lionel had worn the role of a friendly figure, but Khan didn't miss Madam Solodrey's comment about him. She had called him "loud snake", which wasn't hard to translate.

'He could keep up with everything without knowing the context,' Khan realized. 'Maybe I've spoken too much.'

In hindsight, Khan realized how reckless he had been. He had exposed relatively secret information to a potential enemy party, and the stuff about his family wasn't exactly safe either.

Khan didn't know what had happened to his family. He had hypotheses approved by Monica's knowledge, but there was no certainty in any of them. The matter could involve dark secrets that powerful parties would stop at nothing to suppress, and Madam Solodrey might be one of them.

Of course, that was Khan's paranoia at its worst. He couldn't help but consider terrible scenarios, but there was some truth in them. He didn't regret his behavior, but he realized he had to be more careful, especially as his fame increased.

A doubt made its way onto Khan's mind and brought his attention back to the phone. He browsed the network but found no articles about the previous night. The reporters had yet to hear from Lionel and Madam Solodrey, and Khan took that as good news.

The tremor that ran through the symphony broadened Khan's smile, and his gaze went to his chest when a hand covered the screen. Monica had woken up, and her loving expression added warmth to her following words. "You aren't looking at me."

Khan let the phone go and tried to take Monica's hand, but she moved it to his chest to climb closer to his face. She even partially straightened her back before voicing a sensual order. "Carry me to bed."

The idea of refusing the order didn't even cross Khan's mind. He straightened his back, and Monica slid her arms around his neck to prepare. Khan then took her waist and planted his feet on the floor before standing up.

Monica wrapped her legs around Khan's waist while her gaze remained fixed on him. Khan also looked only at Monica while carrying her to their usual bedroom. Their eyes could tell entire stories, but neither spoke during the walk.

Khan eventually approached the bed, and Monica let go of his waist to make her feet touch the floor. She even took the lead, pushing Khan onto the mattress before slowly crawling over him.

Monica ran her hands over Khan's torso until she sat on his waist. Khan could feel everything, and Monica knew it. She was also in the same situation, but her teasing expression hinted at something different.

"Say it," Monica gave another order while her palms remained on Khan's chest.

Khan didn't need to ask any questions. He knew what Monica wanted to hear, so he complied. "I love you."

Monica's smile broadened, but she didn't let that reaction ruin her plan. Some playfulness made its way into her expression as another order left her mouth. "Say it again."

The desire to tease Monica became impossible to ignore, so Khan straightened his back to sit on the mattress. Monica bent forward to make their foreheads touch, and her eyes closed as she waited for those beautiful words.

"I love you," Khan whispered, and genuine happiness replaced the playfulness on Monica's face. She couldn't help but deliver a slow kiss that allowed her to savor the entirety of the moment.

Monica retracted her head during the kiss, and Khan soon moved to her neck. A gasp left her mouth as she reached for the Khan's nape. She couldn't express how blessed she felt, and burning passion filled her, making her push Khan back to the mattress.

Khan chuckled, but any plan to tease Monica disappeared in front of her intense gaze. She never stopped looking at him, even while she adjusted her position on his waist. Her face told Khan that the madness from the previous night had yet to disperse, and he welcomed it with open arms.

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George barged into Khan's flat during the afternoon, and the scene that welcomed him explained why he didn't receive any answer. The clothes lying around the rooms and furniture cleared his doubts.

The mess didn't scare George away. He merely nodded in approval and dived into the living room to search for a few bottles. Once he found them, he approached one of the couches and waited for the inevitable welcome.

A door eventually opened, and steps resounded. George finished filling a second glass before lifting his gaze. He had a joke ready, but his friend's state made him change it.

"And my women are violent," George commented.

Khan rubbed his eyes and followed George's gaze to understand what he meant. His military uniform was mostly open, which revealed the nail marks on his chest. Hickeys were also there, and their presence told Khan that his neck couldn't be any better.

"I knew you wouldn't miss classes unless something happened," George pressed on while handing the second glass to Khan. "You always make me proud."

"Are the classes already over?" Khan groaned while taking the glass and inspecting the room. He looked left and right until he found his phone lying behind a couch.

"Damn," George exclaimed. "It must have been quite the experience."

Khan ignored the comment and sat on the opposite couch. He took a sip from the glass while his phone made him aware of the time and many messages. Only a few hours separated him from dinner. The couple had basically spent most of the day in bed.

"Your girlfriend sure wears interesting underwear," George continued while eyeing the clothes in the corner of the room.

"Jealous?" Khan joked.

"Monica and Anita should talk more often," George suggested, "Especially about style."

"Don't let her hear you saying that," Khan chuckled, but the images on his screen cut his voice short. He was using his phone as a mirror, which confirmed the messy state of his neck.

"It's Nitis all over again," George teased.

"Except for Madam Solodrey threatening to remove my testicles," Khan cursed. "Do you have the notes from today's lessons?"

"Anita is bringing them over," George revealed. "I read about Madam Solodrey crashing your dinner. How did it go?"

"Read?" Khan questioned before realizing what George's words meant. A short search on the network revealed many new articles, and a few claimed to have Madam Solodrey's direct quotes.

"How bad is it?" Khan groaned again and closed his eyes. He didn't want to deal with those problems now.

"Bad?" George scoffed. "You received nothing but praises. The others even thought you skipped classes to let things calm down."

"What?" Khan asked.

"You attended a dinner, man," George explained. "The gates are open. You can't avoid invitations anymore, and there is a mountain of them. I had to act as your secretary today to calm those spoiled brats down."

"I don't know how the Colonel expects me to attend all of them," Khan admitted.

"Look at the bright side," George exclaimed. "Your balls should be safe with the other descendants."

Khan shook his head and emptied his glass. Half of George's drink had already disappeared, so Khan seized the bottle and refilled it before taking care of himself.

"I guess you guys said it," George announced, searching for Khan's eyes to perform the Niqols' traditional toast. Of course, he met his gaze without needing to think about it.

"It slipped," Khan explained after his sip.

"How does something like that slip?" George questioned.

"I don't know," Khan sighed. "I was tired, and something came out. Everything got messy afterward."

"I can see that," George chuckled.

"Shut up," Khan snorted. "Don't you have your relationship to think about?"

"A gentleman like me doesn't need to think to make things go well," George claimed.

"Please," Khan snickered. "I can hear you dying inside."

"We are almost there," George promised. "We must be."

"George Ildoo in a serious relationship," Khan joked. "It's quite a sight."

"A true friend would have stopped me," George scolded.

"I only have your best interests in mind," Khan promised.

"When is the marriage again?" George rebuked.

"We don't talk about that today," Khan replied, "Or ever. That word is officially illegal in this flat."

"It must have been quite the dinner," George laughed.

"You have no idea," Khan sighed while finally mustering the resolve to dive into the network again. He had gotten the hang of browsing through articles in the past weeks, so he quickly reached the important sites.

'Captain Khan obviously is a figure worthy of his fame,' Khan read one of Madam Solodrey's quotes. 'My daughter, the current best student in the Harbor, acknowledged his talent even before his heroic deeds on Milia 222 and Nippe 2, and I didn't hesitate to provide my support.'

'Is she for real? Khan thought when he discovered that the other articles had similar quotes. Madam Solodrey had used the dinner to bring more fame to Monica and herself and had even stolen some of Khan's words in the process.

Lionel was also part of those articles and corroborated Madam Solodrey's praises. Still, differently from her, he kept the focus on Khan, even claiming that his talents stretched past what the network had managed to record.

'I really can't understand her,' Khan eventually closed the network and disregarded the matter. Madam Solodrey's methods were annoying, but she had said good things about him, and that was enough for now.

"I told you it went well," George stated when Khan lowered his phone. "Now you just have to repeat last night two hundred times."

Khan couldn't find the strength to curse. He had promised Madam Solodrey he would be in the top five by the end of the semester, which required more study, and that was only one of his tasks.

The flights didn't occupy much time but took hours away from the free days. Khan also had two more auctions to attend to complete his unwritten contract with Pandora, and some dinners had to happen in the meantime.

Khan couldn't forget his training either, and Lucian had just added another task to that mess. Refusing the mission felt like a reasonable choice when he reviewed everything, but missing the chance to accumulate more money and fame couldn't be the right path.

'War is so much easier,' Khan cursed while moving to Lucian's message. His schedule was so packed that even those seconds mattered.

A tremor in the symphony made Khan interrupt his reading. He lifted his gaze, and a sleepy Monica came out of the corridor to enter the living room. George also glanced at her, and his eyebrows arched in surprise.

Monica had always minded her appearance, but her current state was the total opposite of that. She had worn one of Khan's pullovers, forsaking her pants since the piece of clothing reached her thighs. Her hair was also a mess, but she didn't care.

"Morning, George," Monica yawned while walking directly toward Khan.

"It's almost dinner," George muttered, but his voice disappeared when he inspected the scene.

Monica usually sat at Khan's side, but he instinctively pulled himself back and opened his legs. Monica sat between them and cuddled in the hug that followed.

Of course, George didn't mind that intimacy, but the evident indifference in Monica's actions was stunning. Anyone would understand what the couple had just done by looking at the couch, and she seemed proud of it.

Monica ignored George's surprised face and wrapped an arm around Khan's head as soon as he put it on her shoulder. A loud kiss on his cheek followed, and she even whispered a cute "I love you" in his ear.

Khan rubbed his face on Monica's shoulder before turning to face her. The two exchanged a quick kiss and shared a giggle when their lips separated. The surprise abandoned George at that point, and only a genuine smile remained.

"We skipped classes," Monica exclaimed as she made herself more comfortable between Khan's legs.

"Apparently, it was for the best," Khan revealed. "Now I can pretend I foresaw the storm."

"What storm?" Monica wondered while accepting Khan's glass and taking a sip.

Khan soon replaced the glass with his phone and led Monica to the various articles. She took even less than him to inspect them, and understanding dawned upon her mind.

"My mother knows no shame," Monica snorted. "At least she praised you."

"Instead, Lucian and his father are unknown problems," Khan added. "I need to talk with him."

"Do it before the mission," Monica suggested. "I'll worry otherwise."

"You'd worry anyway," Khan pointed out, trading the glass for his phone again. "So, you think I should go."

"You want to go, right?" Monica commented while holding the glass with both hands. "It's money, social credit, and rank. It's perfect for you."

"And Lauter isn't too bad," Khan continued, reopening Lucian's message.

"What's the matter with Lauter?" George questioned.

"Lucian offered Khan a mission," Monica summarized while Khan was busy reading. "He would also need to make his own team."

"Why didn't I get my invitation yet?" George complained.

"Do you want to come?" Khan asked. "From what I'm reading, Lauter sounds beneath you."

According to Lucian and the Harbor's reports, Lauter had a welcoming atmosphere. A calm sea occupied most of the planet, with only small islands disrupting that blue spectacle.

The valuable gas filled the islands' underground caves and made them devoid of life. Only the sky and sea had threats due to the high number of Tainted animals and monsters roaming them.

Khan would love to have George at his side on the battlefield, but mere Tainted animals couldn't be a problem. Khan would rather leave George in the Harbor than take away time from his studies over a mission with no dangerous variables.

"I'll see it as holidays," George announced, "And Anita won't be able to say anything if I use you as an excuse."

"Hey, don't lie to her," Monica scolded.

"Khan truly needs my help with...", George tried to crack a joke, but a realization made him opt for a question. "What exactly do you have to do there?"

"I'm still reading," Khan responded. "Short version, Lucian wants an outpost in a tax-free area. I don't know the specifics yet."

"Keep me updated," George voiced. "I'll practice calling you sir in the meantime."

The walls lit up and warned the group about Anita's arrival. The elevator didn't take long to bring her into the flat, and the same surprise that had hit George filled her when she noticed the mess.

"Anita, thank you," Khan called once Anita entered the living room, but she remained silent. Seeing Monica wearing nothing but a pullover while sitting between Khan's legs was too embarrassing for her.

"She brought the classes' notes," Khan explained while Anita approached the couches.

"Oh, thank you, Anita," Monica exclaimed. "I'm sorry I didn't warn you."

"It's okay," Anita finally snapped out of her amazement. "I worried your fever had returned, but you look fine."

"The dinner was exhausting," Monica responded before showing a meaningful smile to Khan, "And we lost track of time."

Khan couldn't refrain from kissing Monica, which only made Anita more embarrassed. Yet, the intimate gesture ended quickly, and she used that opening to reach the couple's couch.

A tinge of shyness spread inside Monica when Anita bent toward the couch, but she suppressed that feeling and began playing with her curls. Khan noticed that reaction, but the situation didn't allow him to question her.

"It might have been for the best," Anita revealed as she and Khan established a connection between their phones to begin the exchange of notes. "The articles caused quite an uproar. Everyone wanted to get a piece of you."

"I'm sorry you and George had to deal with it," Khan said, going through the various authorizations required to receive the notes. "By the way, tell me if your family wants to meet me. You'd be on the top of my list."

"Is this favoritism, Captain?" Anita teased. "I'm not humble enough to refuse these offers."

"I'm only glad I can prioritize a friend," Khan stated before peeking at the other couch. "The same goes for you. I don't believe that your parents never asked for me."

"I planned to postpone it until the very end," George revealed, "But you had to go all politician on me."

"We could plan something for the same night," Anita suggested, "To save Khan some time."

Anita forced herself not to look at George, but the two smirks coming from the couch were no better. Khan and Monica had understood Anita's intentions. She wanted to use that chance to meet George's family.

Monica pulled Khan's sleeve, and he showed a sorry expression to George before playing along.

"That's a good idea. We should definitely do a joint dinner."

"If that's what you prefer," Anita added, and George didn't hold back from glaring at Khan. Still, the eager look that Anita showed to George made him give in.

"I'll contact my parents," George sighed. "You win this one."

Anita turned to hide her happiness and mimed a "thank you" with her mouth. The scene was cute enough to remind the couple of their feelings, which made them snuggle closer, uncaring of the audience.

"Well," George announced and stood up since the situation was getting dangerous, "I actually had plans to study with Anita. We'll take our leave now."

"We just-," Anita frowned.

"Anita, Anita," George interrupted and seized Anita's waist to keep her at his side. "Let's go study."

Anita understood the hidden meaning of that second statement and let George push her toward the elevator. However, she managed to voice a warning before the two could leave the flat. "Don't use this for nasty purposes. We will study."

Khan and Monica exploded into a laugh when the elevator closed, and she dived deeper into his embrace now that some privacy had returned.

"Anita is so cute," Monica commented. "I hope George treats her well."

"He is the best once he gets serious," Khan praised, "And you are cuter."

"And you are the best," Monica corrected. "The very best of the best in the entire Global Army."

"You meant universe," Khan teased.

"That's me," Monica claimed. "I'm the best girlfriend in the world, and you are lucky to have me all for yourself."

"I am indeed lucky," Khan left a kiss on Monica's curls. "Incredibly lucky."

Monica immersed herself in that affection, but the disappearance of her shyness forced another statement out of Khan. "I thought you'd be comfortable around Anita by now."

"Oh, that," Monica gasped before showing a playful face to Khan. She took his free hand and guided it toward her exposed legs before pushing it under the pullover.

Khan didn't initially understand what Monica had in mind, but everything became clear once he reached her lower waist. He had committed those areas to memory, so he didn't miss the absence of underwear.

"You naughty girl," Khan snickered, and Monica giggled when he threw away his phone to push her onto the couch.

Chapter 467 Budget

"I'm glad you found the time to see me," Professor Boatbell announced while taking his seat behind the metal table. "I know things aren't easy for you in this period."

"Don't even mention it, sir," Khan politely replied, sitting on the other side of the table. "I'm actually sorry I couldn't plan something with your family's representatives. I hope this dinner won't offend them."

"Don't worry about it," Professor Boatbell reassured. "I've already warned them, and they understand your situation. They even wish to express their gratitude for having this dinner in the first place."

Khan smiled but didn't add anything. His return to classes had been messier than he expected, so he had used Professor Boatbell to escape the many invitations. The two had met in one of the Harbor's restaurants the same night, and the place had granted them a private room.

"As expected," Professor Boatbell sighed once the silence reached its fifth second. "I had a wealthy family's education, but politics have never been my strong point. My mind is blank now that I have to start a conversation."

"That's surprising," Khan admitted. "Your lessons have given me the opposite idea."

"That's because I love the topic," Professor Boatbell explained. "Maybe I would have been better at this if I hadn't spent so long studying alone."

"If I may, sir," Khan exclaimed, "I'm glad you did. Your lessons probably wouldn't have been as good otherwise."

"Thank you, Captain," Professor Boatbell replied. "Though you also deserve praise. Your tests' results surprised everyone."

"I have good teachers," Khan deflected the praise, "And I find most subjects interesting, especially yours."

"History is fascinating," Professor Boatbell declared. "We must know it to avoid repeating mistakes."

Khan nodded even if his interest in Professor Boatbell's subject mostly involved the Nak. Learning about humankind's evolution might reveal holes that hid the secrets he sought.

"Shall we order something?" Khan wondered.

"Of course," Professor Boatbell exclaimed while tapping on the table. "You must be famished."

"I'm always famished," Khan laughed as a series of menus lit up on the metal surface. The place had many options, so the two took a few minutes to study everything and make their orders.

"See?" Professor Boatbell called once the awkward silence returned. "Blank again."

"Sir, please, don't force yourself," Khan smiled. "If it makes it easier, just drop the formalities and speak openly."

"I could never disrespect you like this," Professor Boatbell stated.

"I might prefer it," Khan revealed. "Besides, I have many formal dinners waiting for me. Something friendlier might be for the best."

"Are you sure?" Professor Boatbell questioned. "I don't want to risk abusing my position as a teacher. You outrank me outside the embassy."

"It's fine, sir," Khan reassured. "Just speak your mind."

"Well," Professor Boatbell sighed. "Starting with some honesty will set the proper foundation."

"Sure," Khan confirmed.

"I know this dinner is a fortuitous event," Professor Boatbell revealed. "I've seen how your companions assaulted you after my class. I'm here because you needed someone to occupy your night."

"I did plan to accept your invitation anyway," Khan explained. "I simply thought I could kill two birds with one stone."

"That's totally understandable," Professor Boatbell uttered. "I'm not angry or offended. Being the only one here actually improves my position in my family. In a way, you turned me into a representative."

"I guess we both got something out of this," Khan stated.

"Indeed," Professor Boatbell replied. "Though, I hope we can still have a fruitful dinner. Honest but fruitful."

"We are on the same page, sir," Khan agreed. "Again, meeting you has always been my intention."

A notification lit up on the room's metal walls, and Professor Boatbell unlocked the entrance. A waiter crossed the door and delivered drinks before performing a polite bow and leaving the two alone.

"Captain," Professor Boatbell announced after performing a simple toast, "Have you ever considered the academic path?"

"Becoming a scientist?" Khan wondered. "Professor, I'm sure you are aware of my family situation."

"I know," Professor Boatbell stated, "And I mean no disrespect mentioning it. Still, the Global Army has countless scientific branches, and you would probably shine in all of them."

"I think you are overestimating me," Khan laughed.

"Not at all," Professor Boatbell pressed on. "I read your work on the Tors. It was amateurish but promising. You could do wonders after completing the Harbor's education and spending a few years in the field."

"Sir, I am a soldier," Khan explained. "Soldiers belong to the battlefield."

"Most soldiers choose the battlefield due to a lack of alternatives," Professor Boatbell pointed out. "They fight so they won't have to fight anymore. You have already achieved that goal."

"Maybe I enjoy fighting," Khan suggested.

"That's understandable," Professor Boatbell nodded. "I don't understand it myself, but I can accept it."

A notification lit up on the walls again, and Professor Boatbell unlocked the entrance to make another waiter enter the room. She delivered two steaks and a meal Khan didn't recognize before leaving the area in a hurry.

"You should add some green to your meals," Professor Boatbell voiced a friendly scolding when Khan seized the two steaks.

"A balanced diet never was the priority in the Slums," Khan chuckled without hiding his desire to taste the steaks.

"But you aren't in the Slums anymore, Captain," Professor Boatbell replied. "Just like you aren't on the battlefield."

"Do you have something in mind, Professor?" Khan smiled before gulping down a big bite. "I thought we were being honest."

"As a matter of fact, I do," Professor Boatbell declared. "Well, it didn't come from me. My family pressed me to mention how honored we would be to welcome you among our researchers."

Khan didn't hide his surprise, but the sudden offer had nothing to do with it. The Boatbell family didn't have specific scientific branches or contracts with the Global Army. It only had a few talents who happened to shine in those fields.

"I understand your confusion," Professor Boatbell continued. "You could get far better offers and positions from the other students. Yet, you'd have undisputed authority in my family, and we'd also make sure to meet all your needs."

"But, sir," Khan frowned, "I'm no scientist. I merely started my academic journey."

"And yet your talent is evident," Professor Boatbell responded. "My subject might not suit your peculiar situation, but imagine what your insightful mind could provide to humankind. Honestly, I think you would be perfect for the job."

Khan understood what the Professor meant. Khan's mutations and element made him unsuitable for the human arts, but he had a broad perspective regarding aliens.

Someone like Khan would find it easier to translate foreign methods to add them to humankind's collection. He had already proven his talent with the Tors, and the Professor wanted him to apply that expertise to more alien species.

"I can't accept," Khan eventually admitted, "Not now, at least. I have too much on my plate."

"Of course," Professor Boatbell uttered. "I never expected you to agree right away. Actually, as your Professor, I advise you to focus on your studies. You are doing well, so keep working hard."

"Thank you, sir," Khan replied.

"I only want you to keep this offer in mind," Professor Boatbell continued. "The big families have more resources and better authorizations, but there is value in working for a smaller one. I'm sure you are already aware of the advantages."

"I am," Khan confirmed without adding anything. Freedom was an important currency, and only smaller families could offer it without asking for anything in return. He could also aim to become a patriarch there if he played his cards right.

"Let's drop the serious topics for now," Professor Boatbell laughed. "Your food will get cold if-."

Professor Boatbell couldn't finish his line since a glance at Khan's side of the table revealed two empty plates. He had already eaten his steaks, and his drink also needed a refill.

"Do you want to order something else, Captain?" Professor Boatbell cleared his throat.

"I wanted to wait for you to finish," Khan revealed. "Still, I wouldn't mind another drink right away."

"Please, feel free to use the menus," Professor Boatbell reassured. "Making this dinner satisfactory is the least I can do."

"Bring my thanks to your family," Khan smiled while tapping on the table to activate the menus.

"Though, I would appreciate hearing your opinions about your subject. I'm especially curious about the First Impact."

"Captain, I might annoy you for hours if you are not careful," Professor Boatbell laughed. "I lose track of time when I talk about the topic."

"I don't mind," Khan stated. "It would be a waste to miss this rare chance."

"Sure," Professor Boatbell agreed, "But I have a condition. I'd like to hear more about Milia 222. You must have had the chance to interact with other alien arts during your time there."

"We have a deal, sir," Khan chuckled, and the Professor showed a similar expression.

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"I must say," Professor Boatbell announced once he and Khan stepped on the sidewalk, "This dinner was quite pleasant. Your insights into the Fuveall were captivating."

"I also had fun," Khan praised. "Your knowledge of the events after the First Impact is deeper than I thought."

"I built my career on it," Professor Boatbell laughed. "It's a pity it will be hard to meet again under these friendly circumstances."

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

"Don't force yourself," Professor Boatbell reassured. "I'm sure the next months will be hard for you."

Khan couldn't disagree. The Professor had given him a chance to escape the many invitations, but they were still there, and Khan needed to address them. He only wanted more time to prepare accordingly.

A message reached Khan while the two waited on the sidewalk for their cabs. Monica was checking on him, and he didn't hesitate to give her a summary.

'The dinner went well,' Khan wrote. 'I'm coming back now.'

'Hurry,' Monica replied. 'I miss you.'

'I'll be there in no time,' Khan wrote, but the arrival of a familiar presence in the symphony made him cancel the message. A car with lowered windows was descending toward the sidewalk, and he knew who was inside.

'Something came up,' Khan decided to send while the car landed. 'I'll explain later.'

Professor Boatbell understood that something was up, and the opening of the car's doors answered his questions. Lucian came out of the vehicle, and a big smile shone on his face when he approached the two.

"Professor, Captain," Lucian greeted.

"Lucian," Professor Boatbell called. "Are you here for Captain Khan?"

"Is it so obvious?" Lucian chuckled. "Still, yes, I was hoping I could have a talk with the Captain. We have a private matter to discuss."

Khan couldn't help but show a cold face, but his expression grew warmer when the Professor searched for his eyes. Khan smiled and nodded to reassure him, effectively agreeing to Lucian's invitation.

"I should take my leave then," Professor Boatbell stated. "Don't stay up too long. You both have classes tomorrow."

"Of course, Professor," Lucian replied.

"It won't take long, sir," Khan added.

An exchange of polite smiles happened before the Professor headed for the sidewalk's edge. A car had arrived by then, and he entered it to leave the area.

"This way, Captain," Lucian called while pointing at his car, and Khan followed him inside. The vehicle showed the luxury he expected from the Hencus family, and the passenger seats also had two soldiers he didn't recognize.

"Don't mind them," Lucian declared. "I was dealing with something, and they happened to stick around."

Khan only needed to glance at the two soldiers to figure them out. They were second-level warriors with battle experience, but their cold expressions couldn't scare him.

"Won't you ask me how I found you?" Lucian questioned.

"The entire Harbor keeps track of my movements," Khan revealed. "The Headmistress is taking care of dispersing the crowds, but that doesn't hide me."

"Someone made a site for that," Lucian explained. "It also has pictures and rumors."

"I guess I'm a celebrity," Khan sighed. "So, why did you come to see me?"

"Not here," Lucian stated. "Let's go somewhere private first."

Silence fell into the car while it flew among the buildings. The vehicle remained inside the shopping district but opted for a tall structure with a landing area near its top floors.

"You stay here," Lucian ordered the two soldiers while leaving the car. "Captain, with me."

Khan followed Lucian past the landing area to enter deeper parts of the building. A room with an assorted table eventually unfolded in his eyes, and Lucian didn't hesitate to reach for one of the armchairs at its sides.

"Please," Lucian called since Khan remained on his feet. "I'm sure you also wanted to talk to me. There is no point in this fake hesitation."

Khan reached for an armchair on the opposite side of the table, but his hesitation remained. He was in an environment chosen by Lucian, and the metal walls hindered his senses. He didn't know what to expect.

"Don't worry, Captain," Lucian exclaimed. "This room has no cameras or recorders. I'm willing to go through your alien technique to reassure you if necessary."

Lucian's mana confirmed that he was telling the truth, but Khan didn't give him any satisfaction. He simply made himself comfortable and reached for one of the bottles on the table.

"Good," Lucian announced. "We won't have the limitations of the political dinners here."

"Why did you help me?" Khan went straight to the point. "You had no reason to take my side during the dinner."

"I didn't," Lucian corrected. "I took my side."

"How?" Khan wondered. "I would have considered your offer anyway. Instead, your help makes it suspicious."

"Oh, that," Lucian realized. "See it as my way of asking for forgiveness. I underestimated you, and I wanted to make us even."

"What are you talking about?" Khan coldly asked. "You read the reports about Nippe 2's events. The kidnappers simply didn't prepare for me."

"Yes, that report," Lucian voiced in a mocking tone. "As if anyone would trust it to describe the entire story. Anyway, I was talking about our common friend, the one you claimed to have never touched."

Khan didn't answer. He knew the Princess had made Lucian suspicious about the nature of his relationship, but he couldn't speak openly about it.

"I truly believed your lie," Lucian continued. "I mean, it made sense, especially considering Monica's education. I didn't expect to be so wrong."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Khan declared, "Or where are you going with this."

"Nowhere," Lucian laughed. "I was only explaining my reasons. I felt sorry for underestimating you, so I decided to help."

"In a political dinner with your father," Khan pointed out.

"Captain, every descendant has their parents as their first enemies," Lucian explained.

"Undermining their position while gathering more influence is part of the game. My father would be proud of me if he knew how much I'm not telling him."

Lucian's explanation had a deeper meaning. It wanted to tell Khan that he didn't reveal anything about Monica.

"Though, you sure didn't do a good job hiding it," Lucian continued. "I had a hard time holding back the laughs when you cornered Madam Solodrey."

"I was only speaking the truth," Khan partially lied.

"A dangerous truth," Lucian corrected. "Yet, I admire your guts."

"The game," Khan mentioned to change the topic. "What is it? I don't get why you would undermine your father."

"To take his place, obviously," Lucian stated, "And eventually get in charge of the Hencus family."

"Isn't that your birthright?" Khan wondered.

"Each family has different methods," Lucian explained, "But all of them have many branches and descendants. Mana also makes us live long enough to witness the birth of new talents. The competition can only increase as time passes."

Understanding dawned upon Khan. Lucian probably was the best descendant in his family, but that could change in the next decade. His father also looked quite capable and powerful, which made his ambition harder to accomplish.

"Don't overthink it," Lucian uttered. "Every descendant has to play a similar game. Even Monica is in the same situation, but I'm sure you know that better than me."

Khan kept his expression cold and suppressed any reaction. He had gotten an idea of the internal struggles of the families, but their specific situations still escaped his mind. He knew Monica's issues but had never applied them past her parents.

"On this topic," Lucian continued, "I think it's time to talk about your mission. I need it to gather merit inside my family, so I'm eager to hear your opinion."

The dinner with Lucian happened only two days ago, and Khan had been incredibly busy during that time. Still, he had given a better look at Lucian's mission and had even started developing plans.

"Unless," Lucian added in front of Khan's silence, "You need more time."

Khan and Lucian exchanged a look for a few seconds, but the former eventually took out his phone. Khan reached the mission details and activated some holograms before placing the device on the table.

The holograms took the shape of a planet that shone on Lucian and Khan's faces. More than half of that spherical object was red, while the rest carried an iconic azure color.

"The Global Army has rights over most of Lauter's empty areas," Khan announced while tapping on the azure parts to add yellow shades to half of them. "If you want to avoid taxes, you must build in these territories."

Khan tapped on the remaining azure parts, and the holograms changed. The planet disappeared, leaving only a few dots and small bright patches above the table.

"There are a few available islands," Khan continued, pointing at the largest bright patch, "Especially here. Yet, these areas have the highest concentration of Tainted animals since the Harbor kicked them out of the other territories."

"I know all of this, Captain," Lucian stated. "I personally reviewed these reports before sending them to you."

Khan held back a sigh. In theory, the mission wasn't too hard. Any relatively wealthy family had enough manpower and weapons to clear the packs of Tainted animals and establish an outpost. That huge mobilization simply wasn't cost-effective.

"If I have to be real," Khan declared, "It doesn't sound possible to complete the mission without going above your ideal budget. The biggest chunk of the expenses simply can't be avoided."

Khan had done the math with Monica. The mission involved fixed expenses like fuel, ships, bullets, and weapons. Khan could save money when it came to manpower, but that would lower the mission's success chances.

"I hired the most promising figure in the Global Army for that reason," Lucian explained. "It's your job to make it possible."

"Some of these locations have hundreds of Tainted animals," Khan rebuked. "Recent reports even confirm the presence of specimens as strong as fourth-level warriors. Any team would need air support."

"Air support is expensive," Lucian revealed. "A few missiles can make the mission cross its budget."

Khan knew that. He had actually remained stunned when he learnt about the cost of missiles, and that wasn't the end of it. Bringing those weapons to the Harbor's system required many authorizations, which weren't cheap.

"A high-level warrior might replace them," Khan suggested. "I'm sure your family has many under their payroll."

"I've been clear in the reports," Lucian reminded Khan. "Asking my family's help would take away merit from myself. Besides, high-level warriors are expensive, and descendants carry similar problems."

Lucian had used precise words, and Khan didn't miss their hidden meaning.

"George would be cheap," Khan reassured. George wouldn't join Khan for money, so he was the perfect candidate for the mission.

"That's not the point," Lucian rejected. "Involving another family would muddle the business' ownership. George could even give me his word, but those above him would always be able to ignore it."

"So, I can't hire George," Khan sighed.

"No," Lucian confirmed, "Or any other descendant."

"Lucian, there are many Tainted animals down there," Khan tried to appeal to Lucian's reasonable side.

"You have experience with outbreaks," Lucian pointed out. "Who better than you knows the dangers that those creatures pose?"

Khan's gaze inevitably wandered on the map as memories filled his vision. He had a better understanding of the power wielded by high-level warriors now. He knew Yeza and Captain Erbair could have survived in the valley. They didn't because Yeza wanted to save as many people as possible.

"Captain, did I choose the right person for the job?" Lucian wondered. "I can come up with better incentives if that's what you need."

Khan didn't bother to give those words any value. He would only play by Lucian's rules if he did. Instead, his thoughts remained on the mission. In theory, sticking to its budget was impossible, but he could make a difference.

"I need to redo the math and find suitable teammates," Khan exclaimed. "I won't know for sure until then, but it should be possible."

"That's what I want to hear," Lucian stated. "Who knows? This might be the beginning of a lasting cooperation."

"I'm just considering a job with good pay," Khan disregarded Lucian's words.

"For now," Lucian smiled. "It's never bad to have the support of a big family, especially in your unique situation."

"Are we done here?" Khan questioned, retrieving his phone and storing it in his pocket.

"I think we are," Lucian confirmed while standing up. "Allow me to bring you back home. It's the least I can do after imposing on your night."

"There's no need for that," Khan refused. "Just show me the way to the first floor."

"As you wish," Lucian agreed. "Good night then, and make sure to bring my salutes to Miss Solodrey. I had no intention of making her wait for you."

Chapter 468 Interviews

"Article 190-11," Monica exclaimed while checking her phone from under the bed's blanket. "Section 7."

"Stored weapons must have the safety engaged and the magazines removed," Khan stated from the bed's edge while his eyes scoured the images on the wall. His flat depicted Lauter's possible targets and reports about the Tainted animals in those areas.

"Article 190-8," Monica continued, adjusting her position to make the pillow more comfortable. "Section 2."

"The detention of captives must abide by the laws described by the interplanetary intelligent beings' rights," Khan responded. "Breaking such laws can result in the enforcement of punishments highlighted in the war crimes' sections."

"Unless," Monica pressed on.

"Unless the captives belong to specific categories," Khan added, "Or their crimes involve customs and traditions the Global Army swore to respect."

"In addition, the Global Army must abide by the laws and customs of the local governments, especially when reckless actions might lead to interplanetary crises or wars."

"That was good," Monica praised.

"I still think it's a bunch of crap," Khan commented while using the menus on the floor to change the images on the walls. "All these rules become useless when the commanding officer decides to ignore them."

"They are in the tests," Monica scolded, "So you must memorize them."

"I know," Khan sighed. "I just wish they didn't try to sound so smart when writing them."

A giggle resounded from behind Khan while he kept tinkering with the images. He had isolated one of the largest available territories, and the reports connected to the area were both reassuring and disheartening.

"The archipelago again," Monica voiced when she lifted her gaze to check the images.

"It's the most promising target," Khan explained while zooming in to make the walls highlight a series of islands. "Taking this location would compensate any expense above Lucian's ideal budget."

"It's also the most dangerous location," Monica added, and whooshing noises followed her words.

Khan kept inspecting the reports on the wall while Monica crawled toward him. She left a kiss on his tattoo before hugging him from behind. He dug a hand into her curls when she rested on his shoulder, but his thoughts remained on the mission.

"The missiles should clear the way long enough to place the turrets," Khan suggested.

"You learnt about the missiles two days ago," Monica pointed out.

Khan used the menus to start a simulation. The images changed, transforming into a simple picture of the sky above the archipelago. Many red dots hovered in the area, and a black symbol descended among them before detonating.

A simulation wasn't the best method to describe a weapon's power to Khan. He had a hard time converting the numbers on the images into actual events, but his ignorance didn't make him blind. Even a child would understand how fearsome a missile was from those scenes.

"Are missiles really this powerful?" Khan asked, glancing at the face resting on his shoulder.

"Humans had weapons of mass destruction even before obtaining mana," Monica revealed. "Now, nobles can terraform planets to turn them into holiday camps. Believe me. The Global Army has scarier things than missiles."

"So, should I trust missiles or not?" Khan wondered.

"There's more to it," Monica sighed. "Some families might think you have aligned yourself with Lucian if you take the archipelago."

"I'm just doing a mission," Khan complained.

"Some might see your willingness to face more risks as a sign of loyalty," Monica explained.

"Lucian admitted it openly. He is doing this to garner merits, which opposing factions inside his family might not like."

"Is every family so complicated?" Khan cursed, bringing his gaze back to the images.

"The number of internal conflicts usually matches their wealth," Monica stated. "That's how the political game works, and you can't ignore it anymore."

"What a mess," Khan cursed again.

"It's messier than you think," Monica exclaimed, "But also simpler. Enforcing order remains a priority, and everyone wants to get richer and more influential without creating big waves."

"I'm starting to understand why the Slums are so poor," Khan admitted.

"Many have to starve to allow a few to conquer the stars," Monica voiced. "That's what my father always says."

The tinge of shame that spread inside Monica expanded like a cloud in the bedroom's symphony. She even turned her head to make her hair hide her face.

"You know I don't think so little of you," Khan declared, turning toward Monica again.

"I'm still a piece in the machine that made you starve in the Slums," Monica uttered.

"And I joined that machine when I enlisted," Khan added. "We are together in this."

Khan felt Monica's mouth turning into a smile, but a pout replaced it when the images claimed his attention again.

"Article 111-14," Monica called. "Section 12."

Khan scoured his memory until a frown appeared on his face. "The interplanetary regulations don't have that article."

"Civil regulations," Monica revealed.

"Oh," Khan exclaimed, and laughs tried to escape his mouth when he recalled the article's contents. "Marriage certificates require the bride and groom's signatures on the necessary papers to make the event official."

Monica peeked past her curls to see if her plan had worked, and her hug on Khan's chest tightened when she found him looking at her. Still, Khan wouldn't let her win so easily.

"Article 112-14," Khan announced, "Section 1. Divorces require the appropriate documentation and signatures-."

Khan couldn't finish his line since Monica pulled him down and made him explode into a laugh. He ended with his back on Monica, and she tightened her hug again to keep him still.

"You aren't looking at me," Monica complained, even if she was the reason behind those words.

Khan seized Monica's hands to break her hug. She let him do as he pleased and even welcomed him when he turned. Her wrists remained in his grasp, and a tempting expression bloomed on her face when he trapped her arms above her head.

"You know what happens when I look at you," Khan stated, but Monica was already past words. She tilted her head to prepare for a kiss, and Khan didn't make her wait.

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Khan spent the rest of the week attending his usual duties, but a new task joined his already-packed schedule. Both Monica and George believed that Lucian's mission could benefit Khan's future, so he formally accepted it and coordinated with the Headmistress to start interviews.

"Sir, I hope your tenth flight went well," The soldier tasked with picking up Khan announced as soon as the two met in one of the hangars.

"It's the ninth for the Global Army," Khan corrected while eyeing the two stars on the man's right shoulder. "Roger, right? The Headmistress said good things about you."

"I'm flattered," Roger performed a military salute. "Sir, the car is ready for you, and the rest of the team is waiting in the appointed location."

"Let's not waste time," Khan nodded. "Lead the way."

Roger led Khan to a car waiting in an empty area of the hangar, and a short trip began. The vehicle brought the two to the seventh district, before a building with the flat provided by the Headmistress, and the crowd waiting on the sidewalk made Khan sigh.

"The Headmistress released an official warning," Roger revealed in front of Khan's annoyed expression. "However, many soldiers are willing to face punishments to get a chance to join your team."

"They would be among the candidates if they met my requirements," Khan commented. He had used the network, Monica, and George to filter through the many applications, but that still didn't stop the crowd.

"I've contacted the team leader inside," Roger stated while storing his phone. "They are coming down to help with the crowd."

"There is no need," Khan uttered while leaving the car. "Just follow me."

Shouts filled the area as soon as Khan appeared. Two lines of soldiers were keeping the path toward the building open, but the crowd threatened to break through them. The general excitement became palpable, but the arrival of a purple-red light turned everything into gasps and worry.

Khan let his mana flow freely from his shoulders to create a harmless cloud that dispersed above him. He wasn't hurting anyone, but the sight of the chaos element always forced the bystanders to reconsider their behavior, and the current crowd was no exception.

Truth be told, Khan was sticking to the rules for once. The Harbor forbade that behavior, but the Headmistress' involvement overruled those restrictions and gave Khan a lot of freedom. He could even use non-deadly force if necessary.

Roger followed Khan's orders and stuck to his back, even if he was no stranger to the fear of the chaos element. His eyes darted up and down whenever a purple-red flare threatened to get too close. Still, the walk didn't last long, and Khan held back his mana once he entered the building.

Four soldiers hurried out of an elevator in the main hall and showed their surprise when they saw Khan and Roger. They quickly approached the two to perform military salutes, and one of them decided to speak. "Sir, we were on our way to help."

"It's fine," Khan reassured. "Is everyone here?"

"Yes," The soldier confirmed. "All the candidates are waiting in the appointed flat. We can start as soon as you are ready."

"Good job," Khan praised. "Give me five minutes, then send them over. Start with the Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir!" The soldier exclaimed, and his companions echoed those words.

Roger accompanied Khan to the elevator and led him to the fifth floor. Another hall unfolded in their vision, and the two approached one of the flats, which opened once Khan showed his phone.

The soldiers had already arranged everything. They had turned the bedroom into an office with a few chairs and an interactive desk. The Headmistress had even made them leave a few bottles for Khan.

"I'll wait outside," Roger announced while Khan studied the area. "I hope the interviews go well, sir."

"Thank you," Khan muttered as the door closed behind him. The place was perfect, so he approached the desk to connect his phone before sitting behind it.

A series of reports lit up on the desk when Khan played with it. He had devised a plan, so he knew the requirements his team had to meet. Finding the right people while sticking to Lucian's budget was the only problem.

A notification appeared on the walls exactly five minutes after Khan's order, and he unlocked the flat to make the first candidate come in. A tall and burly man in his thirties with short black hair approached the desk, and the military salute that followed seemed to speak for his stern character.

"Captain, sir," The man called, "It's an honor to meet you."

"Sit, Lieutenant," Khan ordered while highlighting the man's profile on the desk. "My schedule is quite packed, so I hope you won't mind if I keep things short."

"Not at all, sir," The man confirmed.

"So, Lieutenant Clayman," Khan began while fixing his poker face on the man. "Are you related to Captain Jason Clayman?"

"We share some blood, sir," Lieutenant Clayman explained, "But we have rarely interacted. I only know he speaks highly of you."

"And I speak highly of him," Khan responded. "He was good to me on Ecoruta."

"I'm happy to hear it, sir," Lieutenant Clayman added.

"Well, do you know why you are here?" Khan questioned.

"I hope because my profile meets your requirements, sir," Lieutenant Clayman said.

"It definitely does," Khan confirmed while lowering his gaze to scroll through the man's profile.

"You are actually too good for my mission. Why are you so cheap then?"

"Sir, my priority was to work with you," Lieutenant Clayman explained. "I thought accepting a lower pay might give me more chances."

Khan didn't admit it, but Lieutenant Clayman's plan had worked. He was actually the only Lieutenant among the candidates, and his profile also shone compared to the others. Getting him at that price was almost too good to be true.

"I'm flattered," Khan casually stated as his eyes returned to the Lieutenant, "But you must understand that your behavior makes you suspicious. How do I know you don't have a hidden agenda?"

Khan had to ask those questions since the mission involved a wealthy descendant. He had to be sure before hiring someone so qualified.

"I'm afraid you can't know, sir," Lieutenant Clayman bluntly declared. "You can check my recommendations, but nothing after that."

Khan allowed himself to show his surprise. Lieutenant Clayman's bluntness was refreshing, and his mana confirmed his honesty. The man was a second-level warrior, so Khan had no problem reading and acknowledging him.

"Alright," Khan exclaimed while taking out a different menu. "You have experience on the field. Tell me what you think about this."

Lieutenant Clayman lowered his gaze to inspect the menu. Khan was showing him an incomplete version of his plan, but he still took his time to study it. He raised his head only after ten entire minutes had passed.

"Sir, I don't see how this is possible," Lieutenant Clayman stated. "We can't get the island with such a small team and a single missile."

Khan had eventually opted against attacking the archipelago, but the budget problem returned at that point. He had to cut expenses, limiting the number of weapons and teammates the mission would have.

"We will," Khan declared. "I won't share every detail, so you'll have to take me at my word."

Lieutenant Clayman browsed through the plan again before showing his stern face. Strangely enough, he had already decided to trust Khan.

"So, are you in?" Khan asked.

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Clayman uttered.

"Sign this and come on the other side of the table," Khan ordered while pulling up another menu. "You can take your time to read through it."

Lieutenant Clayman didn't look at the contract on the interactive table. Instead, he kept his stern face on Khan to voice another issue. "Captain, from what I read, you don't need me. I wouldn't cover any specific role."

The honest gesture improved Lieutenant Clayman's image and made Khan speak openly. "I need a ranking officer to keep things in check. That's your role."

"I understand, sir," Lieutenant Clayman said before pressing his thumb on the contract. He placed his genetic signature without even reading it.

The Lieutenant complied with Khan's remaining order once the contract business ended. He lifted his chair and reached for the other side of the table before sitting at Khan's side. He also made sure to stay slightly behind him to highlight his authority.

"This is the list of candidates with their profiles," Khan explained after tapping on the interactive desk. "Tell me what you think."

Lieutenant Clayman dived into the list without saying anything, and Khan used that time to enjoy one of the bottles. The man's dedication and seriousness were reassuring to watch, and Khan couldn't help but see the mission in a more positive light because of that.

"Sir, the pilot is unqualified for the task," Lieutenant Clayman eventually announced. "He has done poorly in the simulations, and his only real flight almost ended in tragedy. I can't advise against hiring him enough."

"He is pretty bad," Khan agreed while pulling up a copy of the pilot's profile, "But he is incredibly cheap."

The pilot's profile had nothing but critiques. Apparently, the man panicked easily, which prevented him from getting more flight experience. He was a terrible choice, but Khan could make it work.

"Sir, the pilot probably is the most important member in these kinds of missions," Lieutenant Clayman pressed on. "Instead, this man is a liability who can endanger everyone's life."

"He only needs to keep the ship afloat," Khan explained. "He won't have to do any maneuver. He won't even need to land."

"Sir, he might panic once the situation gets rough," Lieutenant Clayman continued. "Actually, according to his profile, he will likely panic."

"It will be your job to keep him in check," Khan laughed. "Look, the autopilot could fly this mission, but the Global Army's regulations force me to hire a pilot. If things get bad, you'll be able to remove the manual control."

"I understand, sir," Lieutenant Clayman nodded.

"What do you think about the others?" Khan wondered.

"They look good, sir," Lieutenant Clayman stated. "Two gunners stand out from the others, which is the number the mission wants. This tech expert also has decent qualifications."

Khan agreed with the Lieutenant's opinion. He had also identified those promising candidates, but the interviews remained mandatory. A profile wasn't enough to convince him.

"Are you ready to start with one of them?" Khan wondered while emptying his drink. "I want you to take the lead in these interviews."

"Anything you need, sir," Lieutenant Clayman uttered. "Though, I must mention the main issue again. This team is too small, especially if you plan to use a single ship and missile."

"What would you suggest?" Khan asked.

"Ideally, sir," Lieutenant Clayman stated, "Three pilots accompanied by a main ship and two secondary ones, four to six gunners, two tech experts, and two missiles."

"We'll get it done with less than half of that," Khan reassured. "I'll fill the other roles."

"Sir, no soldier can replace ships," Lieutenant Clayman pointed out. "The secondary ones would be ideal for scouting the area."

"I can," Khan declared. "I'll personally handle that part of the mission."

The remaining interviews went relatively smoothly. The profiles had already given Khan an idea of the best candidates, and seeing them in person confirmed it. He assembled a decent team by the end of the process, but his schedule didn't grow any lighter.

The new week brought additional tasks. Khan fulfilled Pandora's invitation to the gallery on the first day and forwarded the specifics of the mission on the second. Lucian was busy getting his infusion, but Khan needed him to deal with the various authorizations, especially those involving vehicles and weapons.

The dinner with George and Anita's families also gained a date. Khan planned to meet them on the weekend, but that didn't make the other days freer. The mission had a team now, so simulations became mandatory.

On the afternoon of the third day, Khan made his team gather in a special training hall near the hangars. The place could simulate most ships and environments, so Khan had no problem replicating the mission's conditions. Still, issues remained, and his companions were to blame for that.

"Boss, I have a question," Manuel, one of the gunners, announced. "What do you exactly mean by don't shoot pointlessly?"

"Sir, the assignment is indeed confusing," Leona, the second gunner, added. "How can we understand when firing is allowed?"

Khan's eyes darted left and right to inspect the two gunners. They were sitting on opposite sides of a holographic ship, and the lights around them created bright cannons. The hall provided a perfect simulated environment, but that didn't help with their doubts.

Truth be told, Khan expected similar questions, but the gunners' characters made them harder to solve. Manuel was a trigger-happy soldier looking for a chance to unload his magazine, while Leona wanted to improve her profile, which required actual shooting.

"We are on a tight budget," Khan vaguely explained. "Your magazines are expensive, so you must hold back the bullets when possible."

Khan had spoken nothing but the truth. He was doing everything in his power to cut expenses. He had also used the Headmistress' support to get those training sessions for free. Yet, short explanations weren't enough for the gunners.

"Boss, I have another question," Manuel continued. "Why did you hire two gunners instead of one with more magazines?"

'Because the regulations force me to have at least two for safety reasons,' Khan thought but decided to give a different explanation. "If things go south, the mission's success will be in your hands."

"Sir," Leona called, "Knowing all the mission's details would prepare us for that eventuality. It would also help us decide when firing becomes necessary."

"Focus on your current tasks," Khan ordered. "If I feel the need to share more specifics, you'll know it."

"You heard the Captain," Lieutenant Clayman stated from the center of the holographic ship. "Prepare for the simulation."

Khan held back a sigh when Manuel and Leona turned to focus on the holograms. The two gunners were as confused as before, which could affect their performance. Still, Khan couldn't risk telling the entirety of his plan to people that enemy parties could easily buy.

Moreover, Khan's plan wasn't exactly easy to trust. A lot depended on his battle prowess, which many wouldn't be ready to believe. His fame was incredible, but simple soldiers would still have doubts, especially when they were understaffed and theoretically ill-equipped for the mission.

The chain of command forced the team to stick to Khan's orders, but the symphony in his eyes revealed a disheartening scene. He could see his underlings' lack of trust and confidence. Even Lieutenant Clayman was no stranger to those feelings, no matter how much he hid them.

Khan could find external aspects to blame but decided to focus on his shortcomings. He had already experienced the weight of leadership multiple times, but that situation felt different. In a way, it also gave him a better idea of what it meant to be a Captain.

Istrone, Nitis, and Ecoruta had featured crises in which Khan mostly needed to survive. That task wasn't only straightforward. Khan also had the chance to show his prowess in those situations, which granted him the undisputed trust of his companions.

Teaching had a higher purpose, but Khan could use his goodwill to compensate for his rough methods. He lacked the training and education to convey his subject properly, but he knew how to make his students experience it, which solved his problems.

The mission in Reebfell's Slums was a simple matter of experience. Khan didn't really lead there. He was the only one who knew how that place worked, so people listened to him.

Milia 222 was the closest thing to Khan's current mission. It had a purely financial purpose that didn't affect Khan's beliefs. Still, he had mostly acted alone there, and his interests in alien species and arts had often taken priority.

Instead, Lucian's mission featured a horrible combination for Khan. It had nothing to do with him, its goals were money-related, and its budget was awful. The threat of political issues also prevented an open approach, which made earning the teammates' trust quite tricky.

'Maybe trust is a luxury in these missions,' Khan considered. 'I just need them to follow my orders in the end.'

Khan could come to terms with that idea, but that didn't make it any happier. He knew he didn't want to be that type of leader, and the current mission could set the right foundation. He just didn't know how to do it from inside a training hall.

"Sir, we are waiting for your orders," Lieutenant Clayman declared, forcing Khan out of his many thoughts.

"Perfect," Khan exclaimed while peeking at the back of the holographic ship. "Seth, list the requirements."

"The turrets need one minute to target the landing area," Seth, the tech expert, explained, "Ten minutes to land, and two minutes to go online."

"Tyler, when does the clock start?" Khan asked while turning toward the holographic pilot's cabin.

"As soon as the ship is in position, sir," Tyler, the pilot, replied.

"Gunners, when is your window?" Khan questioned.

"We go online once the ship releases the turrets, sir," Leona responded.

"And we stop firing once they activate," Manuel added. "If the boss ever authorizes us to fire at all."

"Manuel, don't disrespect the Captain," Lieutenant Clayman scolded.

"Alright," Khan shouted. "Start the simulation."

Lieutenant Clayman complied, tapping his foot to start the training program. The floor immediately changed color, creating a realistic distant sea. A few black and many red marks also appeared to replicate the environment the team would find during the mission.

"Calculate the ideal target," Khan ordered.

"Calculating, sir," Seth claimed, and a circular target appeared on the floor.

New holograms shone in front of Khan to give him a better idea of where the target was. He saw that mark descending toward the red dots before stopping somewhere among them. It even changed color, and Seth didn't hesitate to explain what it meant.

"Ideal target found, sir," Seth shouted.

"Fire," Khan ordered, and the hall's ceiling helped depict the scene.

A holographic missile came out of the ceiling and crossed the ship before fusing with the floor. Khan could keep track of its movement from the images in front of him, and the explosion that followed cleared most of the red dots.

"Disenga-," Tyler began to say, but Khan interrupted him. "Negative! We must wait for the radiation to stop messing with our scanners."

"Sorry, sir!" Tyler promptly stated, and Manuel couldn't hold back a mocking smirk.

"Scanners online, sir," Seth eventually stated.

"Disengage main ship," Khan ordered, and Tyler complied.

The holograms changed to replicate the ship's movements during the mission. Four huge pillars also materialized at its sides while the images in front of Khan showed its trajectory.

A few minutes had to pass before the ship reached its destination, and Khan had to hold back the desire to curse when silence reigned. Someone had forgotten his role.

"Tyler?" Khan called, mustering his calmest tone.

"Yes, sir," Tyler replied.

"The ship is in position," Khan reminded.

"You are correct, sir," Tyler announced.

"Then, say it," Khan ordered.

"The ship is in position, sir!" Tyler shouted, raising his voice in a lame attempt to cover his mistake.

"Seth, target the landing area," Khan ordered, "And start the clock."

"Yes, sir," Seth stated. "Targeting program engaged."

"Tyler, keep us still," Khan declared. "Don't move the ship for any reason."

"Yes, sir," Tyler replied.

"Gunners, study the area," Khan continued. "The explosion cleared the way, but new Tainted animals will arrive. Be ready for them."

"Boss, I thought we weren't supposed to fire," Manuel pointed out.

"You fire today," Khan explained. "I want to see how you do."

"Is there something at stake, boss?" Manuel questioned while exchanging a glance with Leona. The two gunners showed their competitiveness, and Khan didn't miss it.

"The most accurate between you gets priority on the first necessary shot," Khan decided to add fuel to the competitiveness.

"Now we are talking," Manuel laughed, and Leona responded with a snort.

"Fire only when the turrets are in danger," Khan uttered.

"Yes, sir!" Manuel and Leona shouted at the same time.

"Sir, landing area targeted," Seth stated.

"Launch the turrets," Khan ordered.

"Launching turrets," Seth repeated, and the four pillars at the ship's sides fused with the floor before turning into part of the scenery.

Khan checked the holograms before nodding in approval. Tyler didn't mess up during the discharge, but the mission had only begun, and the rest of the simulation would provide important data for his role.

The floor didn't show any change for now. The pillars descended safely and approached the black mark at high speed. That peace allowed Khan to move his attention elsewhere, and he decided to point it at the pilot.

Khan crossed the holographic ship to reach the pilot's cabin. Tyler was so focused on the images in his vision that he didn't notice his arrival, but that was fine. Khan preferred that over a panic attack.

However, Tyler's mana and his behavior showed red flags. A few drops of sweat had appeared on his neck, and his hands held the fake steering wheel too tightly. Khan could see him survive a simulation and the test, but an actual mission was bound to make him more anxious.

'It's a miracle he got his license,' Khan thought. 'Maybe he has connections with some higher-ups.'

Of course, Khan didn't voice those thoughts. The floor even claimed his attention in the next seconds since red dots began to reappear in the area.

The missile was bound to scare many animals, and the following radiation could keep packs away. However, Lauter's Tainted creatures were very territorial and hated when foreign forces or items entered their environments.

The turrets were safe, but the incoming red dots were targeting them. There were only four of them, but their numbers were bound to increase in the next minutes, and the pillars still needed nine to reach the black mark.

"Boss, can we start firing?" Manuel asked as more red dots appeared in the previously cleared area.

Khan didn't immediately answer. He would already be down there during the actual mission, but his task was still a secret. He planned to use the simulation to get an idea of how many Tainted animals he would have to fight, and seeing the gunners' performance wouldn't hinder that project.

"What's your professional opinion?" Khan questioned.

"Sir," Leona called, "If we don't start firing now, too many enemies will enter the turrets' range."

"Alright," Khan announced. "Remember to focus on accuracy. Fire!"

Manuel laughed while immediately pulling the trigger. Leona started firing only a second after him, and the hall applied their inputs to the simulation.

A few red dots disappeared, but more replaced them. There seemed to be no end to those enemies, and they all saw the descending turrets as their main targets. They charged recklessly at them, but the gunners contained their numbers.

Khan kept track of the clock as the simulation continued. Manuel and Leona were doing a good job, but two gunners were too few for the mission. By the seventh minute, the first Tainted animal reached the turrets, and an unstoppable chain reaction followed.

More and more Tainted animals escaped the barrage of bullets and reached the turrets, eventually destroying them. By the ninth minute, the four pillars were no more, and the simulation marked the mission as a failure.

Curses and sighs resounded in the hall. The simulation had shown the limitations of such an understaffed team, and many gazes turned in Khan's direction. He was the only one who could affect the mission, but he kept his eyes on the floor.

'Twenty to thirty Tainted animals,' Khan calculated. 'Fewer if I can be a good bait. I can't really miss either. It's doable with some bullets, but the final two minutes might be troublesome.'

"Sir?" Lieutenant Clayman called since Khan was still immersed in his thoughts.

"Manuel has forty percent accuracy," Khan exclaimed while checking the images. "Leona wins with forty-two."

"Are you for real?!" Manuel cursed. "Boss, I fired more than her. If we consider the number of bullets-."

"I can calculate how much money you wasted," Khan interrupted. "I told you to focus on accuracy."

Leona voiced a mocking scoff aimed at Manuel, but Khan didn't let his speech end there. "Still, these numbers are too low. I want both of you to raise your accuracy above sixty before the mission."

The gunners revealed their shock, and Khan didn't give them a chance to address the matter. He took out his phone to check the hour, and a curse resounded in his mind.

It wasn't late, but the lessons had ended only a few hours before that gathering. Khan had done some homework during the trip in the cab, but more waited for him once he left the training hall.

Moreover, Khan needed to review past lessons with his friends, spend time with Monica, and train. He would usually resort to the simulated mental battle during those busy periods, but a lot of the mission would depend on him, so he planned to hit the training hall once Monica fell asleep.

The dinner with George and Anita also required some preparations that Khan had to stuff into his schedule, and he couldn't take time away from the simulations. His team needed as many of them as possible before the mission.

'Depending on the number of questions,' Khan calculated, 'Each simulation takes twenty to thirty minutes. I can fit five more of them before dinner. Hopefully, the others can remain focused.'

"Sir, can we have a word in private?" Lieutenant Clayman requested while Khan kept looking at his phone.

"Of course," Khan agreed. "Prepare another simulation and review your roles in the meantime."

"Yes, sir!" Everyone shouted while Khan and Lieutenant Clayman headed for an isolated corner of the hall.

"What is it?" Khan asked.

"Sir, I believe you should rethink your approach to the mission," Lieutenant Clayman went straight to the point. "The team isn't ready, and I'm not sure the pilot will ever be."

"The authorizations will take a while to arrive," Khan explained. "I plan to practice every day except for the weekend until then."

"Sir," Lieutenant Clayman said as his expression grew sterner, "Failing this mission would put a red mark on your otherwise immaculate profile. You won't ruin your career, but many will question your leadership skills."

"Thank you for your honesty," Khan replied, "But the opposite is also true. If I succeed, many doors will open for me."

"I understand, sir," Lieutenant Clayman nodded. "Though, I think you already have countless doors ready to welcome you."

"They are never too many," Khan chuckled as past conversations surged into his mind. He had gone over the topic with Monica and George. Succeeding in the mission could give him access to the jobs he truly sought once the semester ended.

"I understand, sir," Lieutenant Clayman voiced without adding anything.

"What about you?" Khan wondered. "You are almost a third-level warrior, right? Are you aiming for a promotion?"

"If the Global Army finds me worthy, sir," Lieutenant Clayman responded.

Khan glanced at the rest of the team inside the holographic ship before turning to the Lieutenant again. The latter definitely was the most qualified among his underlings. Having him as second in command at such a low price was actually incredible.

"I don't know how much influence I have," Khan announced, "But set them straight, and I'll try to make some calls. Of course, the mission must be a success first."

"I'm flattered, sir," Lieutenant Clayman performed a military salute as a twitch ran through his stern expression. "I'll whip them into shape."

"Go ahead," Khan laughed, and Lieutenant Clayman immediately turned to reach the rest of the team. Orders also came out of his mouth, but Khan barely heard them. He had remained conflicted until now, but that last gesture felt right.

Chapter 470 Three

A streak of busy days went by. Khan attended every lesson, practiced with his team, and spent his nights inside training halls to get as comfortable as possible with his fighting style.

Those tasks would usually leave ordinary soldiers with no free time. Still, Khan made sure to handle his studies during the long trips in the cabs or whenever he returned to his flat.

Reviewing the mission also wanted a piece of Khan's day. His team had to perform almost perfectly to hope to succeed, so he couldn't stop improving many details, especially as the simulations provided more data.

The simulations forced Khan to move some of his studies to the weekend, so he never got the chance to sleep properly. His short periods of rest turned into occasional naps, and the first free day even prevented them. The flight didn't mess up his schedule, but he had an important date that night.

Khan, George, Anita, and Monica found themselves in the same luxurious car near dinnertime. They were all wearing their best clothes, and the faint tension in the area created a peculiar silence.

"Come on," Khan eventually laughed. "This can't be worse than Istrone."

"It is for me," George snorted. "Why did I even agree to this?"

The comment saddened Anita and forced a helpless sigh out of George. He took her hand and did his best not to look annoyed before voicing affectionate words. "I just recalled why."

Monica and Khan couldn't help but smirk. George and Anita were an odd couple, but they were cute, especially in those moments. Besides, they looked happy.

"I can still go back," Monica mentioned. "You don't have to force yourself."

"No, it's fine," Anita shook her head. "My mother would demean me anyway. I'd rather have a friend at the table."

The dinner with George and Anita's families was happening that night, and Monica didn't initially plan to join it. Yet, Anita's mother had insisted on her presence, ultimately forcing her to attend.

Monica knew Anita's situation better than anyone. Anita's mother would probably compare the two women, but Monica's refusal would have only hurt her friend. It would say that Anita didn't have enough influence to bring Monica to dinner.

Khan could only exchange a meaningful glance with George. Monica had spoken with the two to make them understand Anita's situation. The dinner had every right to be an unpleasant mess, but Khan felt to have enough experience. Also, he had just completed his tenth official flight, so his excitement was hard to quell.

"Khan would have taken your side anyway," Monica declared. "I've trained him thoroughly for this dinner."

"Yes, we don't want anyone threatening my testicles this time," Khan nodded before grunting when Monica elbowed his side.

"What?" Anita exclaimed, but Monica and Khan chuckled, refusing to answer. They lost each other in their respective eyes, and Khan put an arm above her shoulder to pull her closer.

"What time are you coming back tonight?" Monica whispered into Khan's ear.

"Probably by dawn," Khan replied. "I'm not sure either."

"You still have to review general diplomacy's notes," Monica reminded, leaving Khan's ear to adjust her position.

"I know," Khan sighed. "I'll see how it goes, but don't wait up for me."

"I'll wait up as long as I like," Monica pouted. "Take care of me by taking care of yourself."

Monica crossed her arms, but Khan had a joke ready for her ear. "Do you want my good night kiss so badly?"

Monica disregarded her pretenses and turned to mutter honest words. "Yes, I can't sleep without it."

Anita and George could only hear half of that interaction, and most of it sounded like cute flirting. They had no idea Monica was speaking the truth, but that part of her character was solely for Khan to experience.

"I want one now too," Monica continued in the needy tone Khan knew far too well.

The couple exchanged a quick kiss, and what followed made Anita shy. Khan's expression betrayed his thoughts while his intense gaze remained on Monica, and she rejoiced at that undivided attention. She also played along, reaching for his torso while lifting a leg to place it on his knee.

George cleared his throat to remind the couple about his presence, and Khan and Monica separated. The two didn't appear any calmer, but their more appropriate position gave Anita a chance to speak.

"Monica!" Anita gasped.

"He is my man," Monica complained. "I do what I want with him."

"They are just jealous," Khan commented.

"I'll break up with you if I get this shameless," Anita warned while eyeing George.

"Don't worry," George stated. "That's my role."

"Breaking up or being shameless?" Anita questioned.

"I'll-," George began to speak before recalling where the car was heading. "It's better if I don't say anything tonight."

The joyous moment ended with those words, and the tension returned. George and Anita clearly had issues with their parents, and their worry forced Khan and Monica to stay put. They were their close friends, so they wanted to prioritize their well-being.

The car entered the shopping district and headed toward one of Pandora's exclusive restaurants. The place was masked as a regular mall, but its upper side featured secret landing areas. It also had private rooms, but Anita's mother had pushed for an audience.

A large dark window above a bright banner slid open once the car hovered near it. A landing area unfolded in the scanners, and the vehicle flew into it to deliver the group.

A waiter let the window close before approaching the group and leading them into deeper parts of the building. Khan and the others had to cross a few narrow corridors but eventually arrived at a dim dining area with enough seats to hold thirty people.

Khan noticed Pandora's iconic style. The dim illumination, the closed space, and the slightly isolated tables were a distinctive signature of that exclusive club. Even its audience was respectful enough to avoid breaking into shouts whenever they recognized him. His group obviously received glances, but no one disturbed them.

The waiter led the group to a table at the end of the room. That spot allowed a complete view of the area, but the opposite was also true. Anyone could see and keep track of those seats, which said a lot about Anita's mother's intentions.

"We'll start serving once everyone is here," The waiter politely said before departing as soon as Khan nodded at him.

The guests had yet to arrive, but everyone knew the appropriate seating arrangements. Khan and Monica occupied one long side of the table, leaving the other to George and Anita. The short edges were for the dinner's main figures, and they remained empty while a silent wait unfolded.

George barely had the time to fill Khan's drink before two figures entered the dining area. A tall, middle-aged man who was the spitting image of George and a charming woman with Anita's blonde hair walked among the tables while a waiter led them toward Khan's group.

The newcomers attracted the area's attention, and Khan shared that feeling. He inspected his guests from head to toe, especially the man, and the symphony helped his senses in ways only a few people would understand.

The woman had an elegant smile, but her figure was a blank spot. She was hiding her mana, but her interaction with the synthetic energy revealed some arrogance and pride. She seemed to like being at the center of attention.

Instead, the man didn't bother to hide his presence, which revealed only seriousness. He wore the stance of a soldier on the verge of joining the battlefield.

Khan, Monica, Anita, and George stood up as soon as the newcomers reached the table, and different salutes left their mouths.

"Madam Wildon, Mister Ildoo," Monica and Khan voiced at the same time.

"Mother, Mister Ildoo," Anita followed.

"Madam Wildon, father," George concluded.

"I'm sorry for the wait," Mister Ildoo announced while lowering his head. "I lost myself in a pleasant conversation with Madam Wildon."

"Mister Ildoo only indulged my whims," Madam Wildon took part of the blame.

"Please, after you," Mister Ildoo stated while pointing at the edge near Monica and Anita.

Madam Wildon performed a half-bow before heading for her seat, and Mister Ildoo soon imitated her. The entire group sat down, and an exchange of polite comments unfolded.

"Monica, it has been too long," Madam Wildon was the first to speak. "I can see that the rumors are true. You have turned into a beautiful woman."

"Thank you, Eveline," Monica replied. "Though, this wouldn't have been possible without Anita's help. She made sure I could meet my mother's requirements."

"Anastasia is a hard woman to please," Madam Wildon chuckled. "I'm glad my daughter could help. I wish she could achieve similar results, at least in her studies."

Madam Wildon kept her eyes on Monica during her comment. She didn't deign her daughter with a single glance while putting her under Monica so openly, and the latter could only wear a polite smile to avoid rejecting her statement.

Khan obviously could see more than his companions. He noticed Mister Ildoo's unfazed expression, George's coldness, and Anita's helplessness. Everyone accepted Madam Wildon's impolite words, no matter how deeply they affected them.

'Disgusting,' Khan couldn't help but think since he understood the dinner's political array and consequences.

The Wildon family was less wealthy than the Solodrey family but stood above the Ildoo family. Moreover, the etiquette prevented people from speaking about others' businesses, which forced George to remain silent. His father could try to intervene if necessary, but that would be seen as impolite.

Only Monica could have an influence there, but she remained a descendant. She couldn't openly fight against Eveline since it might ruin the relationship between their families. Khan was in an equally difficult position since he needed to show reliability and manners, especially in front of an audience.

As for Eveline, she was simply bitter. In the political environment, her family was a cheap version of the Solodrey family, and the same applied to Monica and her daughter.

"George, am I right?" Madam Wildon eventually continued. "I know you are also shaping up to be a worthy heir to your family's power."

"You are flattering me, ma'am," George coldly replied.

"It's the truth," Madam Wildon pressed on. "I initially thought you would have opted for a battle-focused path, but your performance in the Harbor changed my mind. You might become one of the most capable descendants."

"I'm unworthy of these praises," George declared. "Miss Wildon is the one keeping me on par with the lessons. I would have scored far worse without her help."

George didn't address Madam Wildon with the proper respect, which earned him a glare from his father. Still, George ignored it and proceeded to fill his drink.

"It seems I raised a kind daughter," Madam Wildon exclaimed, finally looking at Anita. "Maybe show some kindness to yourself for the rest of the semester. Helping your friends is honorable, but you must prioritize your achievements."

"Yes, mother," Anita promptly agreed.

"Captain," Madam Wildon continued, turning toward Khan. "I hope you don't mind me addressing you for last."

"Not at all, ma'am," Khan opted for an aloof tone. "I am a simple soldier in the end."

"Far from simple," Madam Wildon praised. "The entire Global Army is spreading tales about you, and every family wants you. That's not what I call simple."

"I'm glad the army is acknowledging my efforts, ma'am," Khan responded.

"I heard from Anastasia that you are considering wedding into her family," Madam Wildon announced. "Would it be disrespectful to ask you to consider my family too? I'm sure my daughter can match her candidates."

Khan couldn't even try to describe the changes in the symphony. Luckily for him, his friends didn't put any blame on him. They only felt angry at how quickly Madam Wildon was willing to give her daughter away.

"I'd be the luckiest soldier in the Global Army if I married Miss Wildon," Khan chose his words carefully. "However, even Madam Solodrey agreed that I should focus on my career. I'll consider these offers in the future."

"Of course," Madam Wildon nodded as displeasure joined her tone. She even glanced dismissively at Anita. She didn't like how easily Khan had refused her daughter.

An awkward silence followed. Madam Wildon had no intention of speaking, so Mister Ildoo let a few seconds pass before taking the reins of the conversation.

"Captain Khan," Mister Ildoo surprisingly decided to address Khan first. "I'm glad we could finally meet. You have done a great service to my son and my family, so let me express my deepest gratitude."

"I'm the one who should be grateful, sir," Khan revealed an honest smile. "George saved me in ways his profile doesn't describe. I'm lucky to have him in my life."

"I think he would say similar words about you," Mister Ildoo guessed, and George promptly nodded. "I would be dead without him, and I'm not the only one."

"That's a fact, Captain," Mister Ildoo continued. "If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to contact me. My family owes you a lot."

"Don't even mention it, sir," Khan shook his head. "I already consider your family as a close friend. If there is something I can do for you, be sure to tell me."

"I'm glad to hear you say this," Mister Ildoo showed a faint smile. "Still, please, call me Michael. I can't bear to see you use such formalities among friends."

"I'll do my best, Michael," Khan uttered.

"Now," Mister Ildoo moved to the other seats, "Madam Wildon and I already had our talk, so I should address my son's classmates. He is lucky to have such beautiful and capable women as his peers. I'm sure he is learning a lot from you both."

"We are also learning from him," Monica stated. "It's rare for our peers to have battle experience. His perspective is unique in the entire Harbor."

"His reliability is worthy of praise," Anita added. "The official reports don't mention it, but George protected us during Nippe 2's awful events. He was among the first to stand up and set a defensive perimeter."

"I was unaware of these feats," Madam Wildon exclaimed. "You raised an honorable son, Michael."

"It's hard to get mentioned when Captain Khan is on the scene," George laughed. "I simply took care of the closest problems while he was saving Princess Edna."

"Don't sell yourself short," Madam Wildon scolded. "You protected Monica and my daughter. I'll make sure this news reaches the appropriate channels."

"It's not necessary," Mister Ildoo politely refused.

"It is," Madam Wildon pressed on. "The Global Army should notice its talents."

Madam Wildon couldn't help but sound bitter again. Also, she was the one applying a different standard to her own daughter. After all, Anita had scored sixth on the tests, but her mother didn't bother to praise her.

Khan could remain mostly calm since the matter wasn't too close to his heart. However, Anita's sadness and George's cold helplessness flicked a switch in his mind that almost made him speak.

Still, a foot touched Khan's leg before he could come up with a suitable answer. Monica kept her face pointed at Madam Wildon but didn't forget to watch over him and send a warning when she felt he could explode.

"Mother, make sure to mention how Mister Ildoo didn't leave his post even after the reinforcements arrived," Anita added. "He let the doctors visit him only once Captain Khan returned."

"Quite the heroic behavior," Madam Wildon praised. "Anita, did you take a liking to Michael's son?"

Madam Wildon was just teasing, but Anita's answer revealed clues about their strange relationship. "I'll consider him as a suitor if that's what you want."

"You are too serious, dear," Madam Wildon giggled and reached for Anita to caress her hair. George gulped down his drink in the meantime, and Khan and Mister Ildoo didn't miss that gesture. As for Monica, she had to keep her fake smile on to avoid worrying Madam Wildon.

Khan emptied his drink before anyone else could notice George's gesture and refilled those glasses. At that point, the two performed a quick version of the Niqols' toast, and Khan found Mister Ildoo's eyes on him when he began to drink.

Mister Ildoo seemed to have no intention to speak, and waiters with food arrived in the next few seconds, changing the atmosphere at the table. The time for formalities ended, leading the political event to more superficial topics.

Khan only had a few dinners, but the current event was similar to his previous ones. Mister Ildoo and Madam Wildon asked the same questions Khan had answered with Mister Hencus and Madam Solodrey.

Of course, a difference in the tones existed. Among the questions about Khan's missions and flights, he could understand the general stance of his guests.

Madam Wildon didn't hide her haughtiness. She remained polite, but her words sounded forced, almost rehearsed. Besides, she rarely missed the chance to send passive-aggressive reprimands to her daughter.

The situation put Mister Ildoo in a tough spot, but he did his best to appear friendly, especially with Khan. He seemed truly interested in learning more about him, even if his stern character made him sound detached.

Less than two hours went by in that suffocating atmosphere. Jokes and answers flew until the dinner formally ended. In theory, the group could remain at the table to enjoy drinks and continue their conversations, but Madam Wildon stood up, forcing everyone to imitate her.

"You don't have to end the dinner because of me," Madam Wildon expressed when everyone left their seats. "I simply have an appointment I can't postpone."

"Madam, it wouldn't be fair or polite," Mister Ildoo declared. "Our children, Miss Solodrey, and Captain Khan also have to study. It's better to end this dinner on this high note."

"You are such a gentleman, Michael," Madam Wildon praised. "Now, a car is already waiting for me. I'm afraid I must hurry."

"Travel safe," Mister Ildoo stated, and the others echoed his words.

"Send my salutes to your wife," Madam Wildon giggled. "As for you, go to bed early. Mana keeps us young, but a good routine helps."

Fake smiles broadened in Madam Wildon's vision, and she merely nodded at them before heading for the exit. A lot of the tension vanished when she departed from the dining room, but no one dared to comment on that.

"My car is also on its way," Mister Ildoo revealed when the group turned toward him. "I must take my leave soon."

"Travel safe, dad," George said.

"Don't worry about me," Mister Ildoo scolded. "You have good friends, but don't abuse their kindness. Improve your scores and make us proud."

Mister Ildoo didn't wait for George's answer as he turned toward Monica and Anita. "It has been a pleasure to be in your company. Your generation is lucky to have you."

Anita and Monica performed the exact polite bow, and Mister Ildoo mustered a faint smile before turning toward Khan.

"Captain, would you mind escorting me to the landing area?" Mister Ildoo questioned.

"It's no problem at all," Khan responded, and Monica reassured him when he searched for her eyes. "We'll take care of the ride."

A waiter arrived to escort the group outside, but Mister Ildoo exchanged a few words with him to change his plans. The man led Mister Ildoo and Khan into the narrow corridors stretching out of the dining hall. Yet, the two didn't arrive at the landing area.

The waiter made Khan and Mister Ildoo stop in the middle of a corridor, and a wall at their side slid open to reveal a small desk. A barman stood behind it, and she showed a bright smile while waiting for her orders.

"I'm Michael Ildoo," Mister Ildoo declared. "Pandora should know what I want."

"Of course, Mister Ildoo," The barman responded. "One or two glasses?"

"Two," Mister Ildoo replied.

"They are on their way," The barman announced, and Mister Ildoo crossed his arms on the desk to wait for the drinks.

Khan didn't know why Mister Ildoo had brought him there, but the latter seemed to have friendly intentions. He only had a hard time showing them past his stern face, but Khan was willing to be patient toward George's father.

The barman took less than a minute to deliver two small glasses filled with a yellow liquid. The strong scent of booze reeking from them spread throughout the corridor in a matter of seconds, and Mister Ildoo nodded at Khan to give a silent order.

"Thank you, Michael," Khan said while taking his glass.

"Don't rush it," Mister Ildoo warned while also taking his glass. "Take short sips."

Khan couldn't help but become curious about the drink, and his first sip met his expectations. The booze was harsh on the throat and mouth but managed to spread its exquisite taste. It was strong, but Khan appreciated it.

"My son likes it," Mister Ildoo revealed after his sip. "I figured you would also like it."

"I do," Khan admitted. "I wish I had an entire bottle now."

"Don't look at me," Mister Ildoo sighed. "George emptied the entire canteen."

Khan wanted to laugh, but surprise took priority. Mister Ildoo had cracked a joke, which was quite shocking after what Khan had witnessed during the dinner.

"He," Mister Ildoo continued as his eyes wandered into the drink, "He was lost after Istrone. He didn't show it, but I knew."

"Istrone hit everyone hard," Khan stated. "For what it's worth, George already knew what to do during the crisis. I guess you are to thank for that."

"He showed talent at an early age," Mister Ildoo explained. "I prepared him accordingly. Still, I can't imagine what happened down there."

Khan took another sip but didn't answer. He had gone over Istrone, but its events remained ugly. The sadness and desperation experienced there wasn't something he could forget.

"Nitis saved him," Mister Ildoo continued. "I don't know how, but it did. Now, he is in the Harbor, studying among the best descendants. Maybe things ended well."

"George has always been smart," Khan praised.

"I know he came here for you," Mister Ildoo revealed. "He showed no interest in interplanetary politics until he learnt that you were coming. He even scored near the top ten. I don't know if my son is a genius or an idiot."

"I'd go for the former," Khan uttered.

"Of course, you would," Mister Ildoo sighed. "Still, you are aware of his flaws."

"He just likes booze and women," Khan laughed. "Who doesn't?"

"You are on his side, aren't you?" Mister Ildoo asked while finally diverting his gaze from the drink.

"Completely," Khan honestly replied.

"That's good," Mister Ildoo approved. "People at your age need good friends. Take care of my son, Captain."

Mister Ildoo's words carried his honesty and made Khan answer seriously. "I will."

"If he doesn't do the same for you," Mister Ildoo added, "Tell me. I'll beat some sense in that idiot."

"He is the most reliable person I know," Khan commented.

"Didn't Miss Wildon say something similar?" Mister Ildoo wondered. "Captain, is my son dating Madam Wildon's daughter?"

"Sir, I consider your family an ally," Khan showed a shameless smile, "But my loyalty is with George."

"I see," Mister Ildoo stated. "I should prepare for a political incident. It's better to avoid having the Wildon family as an enemy."

Khan couldn't refrain from laughing at that joke. Michael seemed to get his son, and it felt nice to joke about him. As for that isolated drink, Khan guessed that Michael wanted to speak openly for a bit.

The glasses became empty after Mister Ildoo's last joke, and a few words to the barman made a waiter arrive. Khan and Mister Ildoo returned to the landing area and split to head to different rides.

Khan, Monica, Anita, and George heaved a tired sigh when they found themselves inside the privacy of their ride. The dinner didn't last long, but the exhaustion caused by those political events was hard to bear, especially when it involved their families.

'That wasn't too bad,' Khan thought when he reviewed everything that had happened.

The dinner didn't change anything in Khan's situation, and Madam Wildon had been quite annoying. Yet, he had reached a silent understanding with Mister Ildoo, which was enough for him. Also, he had completed another mandatory political event, which made him feel lighter.

Still, one person in the vehicle didn't share Khan's feelings, and the symphony soon made him aware of that. He lowered his gaze only to find Anita looking at the floor. She appeared spent, and a sob put panic into her eyes.

"I'm sorry!" Anita gasped, but a second sob arrived and forced her to cover her mouth. Yet, that didn't hide the tears falling from her eyes. She didn't want to have that outburst, but her body had a different opinion.

"I didn't mean to-," Anita tried to say, but it was too late. She began to cry, and George supported her with a hug. Khan could only show a complicated smile when Monica looked at him before she also reached for Anita.

'It was bad for her,' Khan realized in front of that sad scene. 'Descendants sure have it hard.'

Expectations, political pressure, and competition could crush the descendants under their weight. That probably wasn't the first time Anita had cried due to her mother's treatment, and it surely wouldn't be the last.

Khan pitied Anita but didn't move from his seat. George and Monica were enough to comfort her, and he didn't know her well enough to join them. Still, his thoughts wandered, forcing him to grasp the sad truth of that environment.

In a different situation, Monica, George, and even Khan would have sacrificed part of their goals to help Anita. However, they all had problems that pointed in the same direction.

Monica would be in Anita's place if she didn't do well in the tests or other political matters. George needed good scores too to please his family, and Khan was in a similar situation for multiple reasons.

Entering the top five meant that someone else couldn't get those spots. That was the nature of the competition every descendant was forced to face. Khan would love it if he and his friends were to claim them, but reality didn't work like that, and he couldn't think about others when things were already so hard on him.

Anita calmed down during the flight back to the second district. She was actually fine. Her sadness had just been overwhelming for a few minutes. Still, her tears were dry by the time the group entered Khan's flat.

"I'm so sorry for earlier," Anita exclaimed as the group crossed the elevator room.

"Parents get to all of us from time to time," George reassured.

"We know how you feel," Monica added.

"Thank you," Anita said as a smile bloomed on her face. She was still in George's arms, and genuine happiness shone in her eyes when she looked at him and Monica.

"Monica," Khan called once that happy moment ended. He tried to be silent, but everyone ended up turning toward him.

"Right," Monica heaved a worried sigh. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"I will," Khan promised, welcoming Monica into his hug. "Are you okay here?"

"Yes, I'll take care of her," Monica muttered. "Focus on yourself now."

"I'll be fine," Khan reassured, searching for Monica's face to lift it toward him. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Kiss," Monica requested, and Khan complied. He even added a "love you" before returning inside the elevator.

"He can't take a break," George commented once the elevator's doors closed.

Monica wanted to add another comment but found Anita staring at her when she turned. That reaction had nothing to do with the previous outburst. Instead, it expressed only shock.

"Monica?" Anita spoke before Monica could question her. "Did I hear him right?"

Monica initially didn't realize what Anita meant, but understanding soon arrived. Anita had yet to learn how far Monica's relationship had advanced, but that instance was self-explanatory.

"We have been together for months already," Monica explained while playing with her curls, "And we have grown quite close."

Anita gasped and left George's hug to reach for Monica's hands. The matter was serious, and Monica's shy behavior highlighted how important that was to her.

"Are you two that serious?" Anita whispered.

Monica couldn't find the words to answer, so she limited herself to a nod. The gesture made Anita gasp again, and excitement soon followed.

"Girl, we have to talk," Anita giggled before pulling Monica deeper into the flat.

George couldn't say anything at that scene. He only sighed when he remained alone. Everything pointed toward a lonely night, but Anita didn't let him down.

"George, aren't you coming?" Anita called, and George couldn't help but feel happy. He hurried toward his girlfriend, making a single stop to seize one of Khan's bottles.

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Excitement filled Khan's mind, but he did his best to focus on the contents of his phone. A car was bringing him to the hangars, which were quite distant from the second district, and he used that time to review the general diplomacy's notes.

An almost empty hangar unfolded in Khan's vision when the car dropped him off, but he followed the symphony to find a group of soldiers. The latter were surprised to meet him at such a late hour, and that feeling intensified when he showed him his permits.

"Sir, these are the available ships," One of the soldiers explained after bringing Khan in front of three vehicles. "They all have limitations, but their tanks are full, so you can set off immediately."

Khan's options were far from ideal. He had to choose among a fat ship, a small hovering car modified for short trips in space, and a triangular vehicle with barely any comfort.

Of course, Khan wouldn't be picky in that situation. He also knew those vehicles' specifics, so he opted for the triangular ship since it had a higher speed limit.

"Sir, I must remind you-," The soldier tried to go through formal warnings, but Khan was too excited to let him finish.

"Warn the control tower about my departure," Khan ordered. "Is the operating system ready to receive me?"

"Well, yes, sir," The soldier stammered.

"Good," Khan exclaimed. "I'm going in."

The soldier's eyes widened in panic, but his companions shook their heads when he tried to speak again. Khan's authority was overwhelming in that place, so no one dared to go against his wishes.

Khan showed his phone to the ship before placing his hand on its grey surface. The vehicle recognized his genetic signature and permits, and its canopy opened. In a couple of jumps, Khan found himself in the pilot's seat, and his fingers immediately went on the control desk to start the engine.

"The vehicle is not cleared for set off," The ship's mechanical voice warned when Khan tried to start the engine.

'Come on,' Khan cursed before peeking past the open canopy to glare at the stunned soldiers. They were still there, but Khan's gesture made them hurry to contact the central tower.

Khan almost counted the seconds as he waited for the authorization to arrive, and his eyes lit up when the control desk turned azure. He quickly handled the last necessary commands and made the canopy close before giving an order to the autopilot. "Take me out."

The set-off started once the autopilot confirmed the order, and a smile broadened on Khan's face. He was finally making his first solo flight, and his excitement was bursting.

The slow and mandatory departure of the autopilot felt like a punishment. Seconds lasted for entire minutes in Khan's mind as the ship flew through specific channels to leave the hangars and arrive in the open.

'Finally!' Khan thought as soon as the ship left the transparent dome and the autopilot took the backseat.

The eleven flights with Lieutenant Shurpard had filled Khan with confidence. He grabbed the steering wheel and pushed it down as hard as possible to make the ship accelerate at full force.

The sudden acceleration slammed Khan's back on the seat, but he only laughed and descended toward the surface to make the flight more exciting. The moon's rocky ground soon filled his vision and sensors, and he dived straight into a crater to test the ship's limits.

"Warning, approaching top speed," The ship's mechanical voice declared while Khan climbed out of the crater and headed for a nearby mountain.

"Fuck you!" Khan laughed, accelerating even more to reach that top speed.

A reckless flight unfolded. Khan vented all the pressure accumulated in the last period through dangerous maneuvers and loud laughs no one could hear. He was having genuine fun, but the ship's limitations eventually got in his way.

"Approaching tank's critical level," The ship warned. "Crossing it will engage the autopilot."

"I know, I know," Khan cursed before pulling up the scanners. The moon had a suitable landing spot nearby, and he reached it without crossing the tank's limit.

'Now,' Khan thought once the ship stopped. He gazed at the darkness past the canopy and took a deep breath. He was about to do something hazardous, but his curiosity was impossible to quell.

Mana left Khan's body and covered every inch of his body. He cut his connection to the outside world before forcing that membrane to shake. The barrier grew warm, but Khan waited until his energy became almost scorching.

'That's one,' Khan thought and rechecked his non-elemental spell before moving to the following matter.

"Open the canopy," Khan ordered.

"The procedure is forbidden," The ship responded.

"Override limitation," Khan continued. "Authorized by Captain Khan."

"Processing," The ship stated. "Captain Khan doesn't have the necessary clearance to remove canopy limitations."

"Override limitation," Khan tried one last time. "Authorized by Headmistress Leticia Holwen."

"Processing," The ship repeated, but the process took far longer. Khan almost had to wait an entire minute before the vehicle spoke again. "Canopy limitations removed."

"Open the canopy," Khan ordered as more mana came out of his body and created a second barrier around his head.

"Depressurizing cabin," The ship said as whooshing noises enveloped Khan. "Opening the canopy."

Utter silence unfolded as soon as the canopy opened. Khan watched the dark glass rising but soon closed his eyes to keep track of his raging curiosity. That feeling almost threatened his spell's stability, and he couldn't be reckless about them.

After checking everything, Khan reopened his eyes and unfastened his belt. Putting strength in his legs quickly revealed the lighter gravity, and that slight push almost sent him out of the cabin.

Khan took things slowly. He waved his arms and bent his legs to get used to the different gravity before carefully stepping out of the cabin. He realized he had stopped breathing when he stepped on the ship's tip, and a laugh tried to escape his mouth.

'Come on,' Khan forced himself to calm down. 'I know the technique works.'

Khan took a careful breath. The membrane around his head shrunk, but the gesture worked. He could breathe in open space, even if only for a few minutes.

'That's two,' Khan thought before lightly pushing himself to his left. The gesture generated a jump that made him cross the ship and slowly land on the moon's surface.

'Wow,' Khan exclaimed in his mind as his mana blew away the sand accumulated on the rocky surface. He was walking on a moon, and the experience felt unreal.

Khan forced himself to lift his gaze. He had limited time, and each second mattered, so he put strength into his legs to perform a real jump.

The gesture pushed Khan far above his initial calculations. He rose for tens of meters, and the ship grew smaller in his eyes. However, he didn't panic and released flares of mana from his shoulders.

The mana made Khan stop rising and pushed him down once his momentum dispersed. That lighter gravity didn't allow him to fly freely but was enough to test his control, and he met his high expectations.

Khan released flares of mana from his sides, shoulders, and feet, obtaining the desired effects. Without gravity, that energy would give him complete control over his movements. Yet, on that moon, he eventually returned to the surface.

'That's three,' Khan exclaimed in his mind before checking the state of his membrane. 'I should have another minute.'

Khan could test his techniques again, but one minute barely counted as training. He didn't want to spend those valuable seconds like that, and the ship's tip ultimately claimed his attention.

A weak jump brought Khan back on the ship, and he walked on its surface until he reached its tip. There wasn't much space there, but Khan still sat down and crossed his legs.

The universe filled Khan's vision and made his thoughts wander. He almost couldn't believe to have reached a similar point. Three years ago, he was nothing more than a boy from the Slums. Yet, now, even space couldn't reject his presence.