

Chaos' Heir 491

Chapter 491 Abora

A long report reached Khan's ship once the call with the Headmistress ended. Intel about Abora and details about the mission filled the holograms, occupying many pages that the control desk couldn't show simultaneously.

Khan could only sigh as his satisfied smile vanished. He had expected things to take that turn. After all, Professor Parver had introduced him to multiple experts, and he was working for all of them now. The Headmistress simply acted as a middleman tasked with delivering as many challenging missions as possible.

'This should come from Carla Bevet,' Khan thought before skimming through the pages to find the mission's target. 'Great, I have to retrieve a plant now.'

That was an inaccurate summary of the mission. The plant was the target, but its location made it unreachable for ordinary and unequipped soldiers. Abora's poisonous swamps were only one of the hindrances to overcome. That planet had a rich and dangerous ecosystem, where even the vegetation fought for territory.

Khan enjoyed visiting, exploring, and learning about new planets. He would prefer to interact with other intelligent species due to personal inclinations and goals, but having a chance to fly on his own was already enough, at least for now.

The generally boring targets weren't even a problem. Khan didn't mind being an errand boy since Monica was the prize. Still, the immediate appearance of a new mission hinted at a pattern. There was a high chance the Headmistress would overwhelm him with tasks that left little to no free time.

Khan was no stranger to packed schedules. Yet, he risked spreading himself too thin. He was working on multiple political and non-political layers to achieve different goals. Not giving each of them the proper time could make him fail at everything.

A response ran through Khan's mana while those thoughts occupied his mind. The unreasonable desire to pursue everything without leaving anything behind filled him, and his resolve complied.

'I will get rid of these nightmares,' Khan declared, 'And I won't lose Monica.'

Two goals fueled by opposite emotions dispersed Khan's vague exhaustion. Desperation and love fused to create a firm peace. Nothing could disturb Khan now. Only his studies, the mission, and his training existed.

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The missions' secrecy would theoretically keep the rumors in check, but the soldiers liked to talk. They couldn't reveal those tasks' purpose, but the gossip about Khan had no limitations.

Khan found it easy to ignore the rumors. His classmates were more interested in his relationship with Monica anyway, and he spent his time outside lessons inside his flat. As for Monica, she was still in hiding, and the descendants' patience held on only due to her status.

Once the last weekly lesson ended, Khan returned to his flat to retrieve his knife. Meeting Monica before a mission led to predictable outcomes, but he still managed to reach the appointed hangar by dinnertime.

The soldiers had long since been ready for Khan's departure by then. They had even painted the borrowed ship white, so Khan could set off without wasting too much time.

Abora was more distant than Honides, but the ship could still reach it in a day. A greenish planet entered the range of Khan's scanners on the weekend's first night, and he followed the Headmistress' instructions to coordinate with the outpost he had to reach.

Diving into Abora's atmosphere revealed many of its details. Khan crossed a thick layer of dark clouds before finding himself immersed in heavy rain that tried to hide the planet's true face. Still, the ship's scanners ignored the weather and gave a complete view of the surface.

Abora's surface wasn't actually visible. Tall trees with dark, green, and yellowish crowns covered the ground and partially shielded it from the rain. The only areas without them were vast and dark-green swamps resembling immense lakes.

Khan's destination was another exception. An area slightly away from the rain's range featured an odd hole among the immense crowns, and flying above it revealed its nature. The Global Army had dug out all the trees in that relatively large quadrant and had replaced them with a big, square outpost.

Replying to a transmission that reached the ship put it on autopilot to begin the landing procedures. Khan left his seat while the vehicle descended toward the center of that three-story tall structure. The building's flat roof opened to reveal a vast hangar, and Khan only needed a few minutes to reach it.

When the roof closed, Khan left the ship to meet the usual welcoming party. Still, the tense and stern symphony that touched his senses described an environment that reminded him of the battlefield. Abora's soldiers seemed more than simple workers and scientists.

The soldiers' appearance deepened that first impression. The cold gazes, overall calm attitude in Khan's presence, and various visible scars told him that those warriors had seen battles. They had probably grown accustomed to it after being deployed on that planet.

'Nice place,' Khan couldn't help but comment without meaning any sarcasm. He preferred true soldiers over simple guards or political monsters, and Abora provided just that.

"Sir, this way, please," One of the soldiers, a burly and tall man with a hideous circular scar on his cheek, called while stepping out of the welcoming line.

Khan appreciated that lack of political pleasantries and followed the soldier outside the hangar. Silence reigned for most of the walk, but the meeting with a worker wearing a white medical coat marked the beginning of the briefing.

"Captain, I believe Headmistress Holwen gave you a thorough briefing already," The scientist announced while joining Khan and the soldier in their walk.

"Correct," Khan confirmed. "I also have the map with the necessary markers. I only need a container, the antidotes, and a lift to the targeted location."

"If I may, sir," The scientist didn't hide his hesitation toward Khan's preparation, "Abora's vegetation can be confusing to an outsider. I'd like to go over the target in your presence."

"Go ahead," Khan nodded, and the scientist picked up a large screen from his deep pocket.

"This is a Dridie," The scientist exclaimed, bringing a picture to the screen and showing it to Khan without interrupting the walk. "It's a rare plant here on Abora, and the mutation you have been tasked to retrieve is even rarer."

Khan recognized the image on the screen. The Headmistress had already sent him similar intel, but he studied it again anyway. The device showed a small, short bush filled with tiny purple leaves that stood out from the rest of the greenish vegetation.

"Its color is quite striking," Khan stated. "I don't see how I could miss it."

"It's really small compared to its guards, sir," The scientist pointed out. "The same goes for the surrounding trees, and the swamp's fumes won't help your search."

"Wait," Khan called. "What guards?"

The scientist touched the screen to bring out a different image. A leafless plant with thick, spiked, pale-green branches that ended in scarlet flowers appeared, and the man even zoomed in to reveal the Dridie hidden behind its base.

According to the Headmistress' reports, the mutated Dridie was at most twenty centimeters tall, and the comparison with the spiked plant surprised Khan. The latter was bound to be at least twice his size, if not more.

"Why didn't they appear in the reports?" Khan questioned. "And how are they protecting the Dridie?"

"These are parasitic plants called Feicox," The scientist explained, opening a different image to show the spiked plant in its entirety. "Abora is full of their spores, so they appear whenever an environment becomes suitable for their growth."

"And the Dridie is to blame for that," Khan understood. According to the report, the Dridie was an excellent fertilizer, and its mutated version intensified those qualities.

"Exactly, sir," The scientist exclaimed. "Our probes have come back just recently, and they spotted three Feicox around the Dridie. There might even be a fourth growing as we speak."

"Can the Feicox really develop so quickly?" Khan wondered.

"Not under normal circumstances," The scientist revealed. "The Dridie is enabling such fast development."

"Derek, get to the point if you are in a hurry," The soldier scolded.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Derek, the scientist, uttered. "Captain, I'm afraid the matter is quite urgent. The more the Feicox develop, the weaker the Dridie becomes. We might lose the mutation if we don't hurry."

"I planned to leave right away already," Khan revealed. "Unless there is something else I should know."

"I'm afraid there is, sir," Derek sighed. "The rains are moving in this direction. It won't be long until they cover the entire quadrant."

The Headmistress' report obviously involved that topic too. A big part of Abora's fauna used the rains to expand their territory, especially when it came to the Tainted animals in the swamps. Since Khan had memorized that intel, he knew that his destination involved those environments.

"How long do I have?" Khan directly asked.

"Four hours," Derek responded. "Maybe less."

"Let's not waste time then," Khan declared.

"Sir, I must stress out how frail the Dridie is," Derek continued while the trio entered a new hangar solely filled with terrestrial vehicles. "Your element might destroy it by simply standing next to it."

Khan couldn't help but glance at Derek. The latter appeared genuinely sorry about the situation. He was asking a lot from Khan, but that was part of his job.

"These Feicox," Khan voiced, understanding the hidden meaning behind Derek's words. "Are they dangerous?"

"Yes, sir," Derek nodded. "Very."

"A Feicox gave me this," The soldier added, pointing at the scar on his cheek. "Calling them plants doesn't do them justice. They are damned turrets."

The soldier was a second-level warrior that Khan had already acknowledged in terms of battle experience, so seeing him speak so highly about the Feicox felt troublesome. Khan was stronger, but the situation would basically prevent him from using spells.

"It's alright," Khan reassured. "I'll take care of it."

Khan's confidence acted like a virus that spread among the group and even touched the team they were approaching. A series of soldiers had gathered around a jeep, and a tall bag stood at their feet.

"Here, Captain," Derek called, hurrying toward the bag to take out a half-transparent and rectangular machine. "You just need to place this on the Dridie. The extractor will handle the rest."

Khan reached Derek to study the extractor. The machine had dark and circular pieces on its two sides, featuring spacious openings. It seemed he could use both to retrieve the Dridie.

"Here," Derek eventually said, storing the extractor in the bag and handing it to Khan. "Take this too. It will track your position and confirm the target."

Derek gave his screen to Khan as soon as he put the bag on his shoulders. Khan activated it and spent a few minutes growing comfortable with its menus before storing it in the backpack.

"One last thing," Derek added, stretching his hand toward one of the soldiers, who delivered a small flask containing five violet pills.

"This is the antidote for the fumes," Derek explained. "Take one pill once marks appear on your skin. It will make the poison harmless but won't stop you from getting infected again."

Khan seized the flask and stored it in his free pocket before voicing a simple question. "Anything else?"

"No, sir," Derek shook his head before wearing a serious expression and performing a military salute. "I wish you good luck."

"Good luck, Captain!" The soldiers behind Derek echoed.

Khan nodded at the group before jumping into the jeep. A pilot was already on the steering wheel, and the vehicle advanced as soon as Khan occupied his seat.

The jeep headed for one of the walls, which opened to reveal the outside world. The Global Army had created a comfortable path after removing many trees, but the latter still existed, and reaching them alerted the entirety of Khan's senses.

Abora's vegetation wasn't simply full of life. Its environment radiated different strands of mana, probably belonging to Tainted animals and dangerous plants. The latter weren't even passive inhabitants. As soon as the jeep rode on a path among the trees, hundreds of eyes converged on Khan.

Chapter 492 Stain

The tension of the battlefield fell on Khan, but he felt something different in that symphony. Animals and plants experienced emotions differently, and the colors in Khan's eyes reflected that.

The trees conveyed a primordial vibe. Khan found no reason in that symphony. Only lingering aggression and wariness existed in that environment, and he became their main attraction.

Khan could also feel how the many hidden eyes were disregarding the jeep and the pilot. Everything was on him, and only one explanation existed for that instinctive behavior.

'They know I'm the main threat,' Khan understood as the jeep dived deeper into the trees.

Reports couldn't match the magic of Abora's environment. The trees' pale-brown trunks stood tall and straight, even if they gave off flexible vibes. All kinds of plants encircled them, assaulting Khan's eyes with green, purple, and yellow colors.

Flowers with odd and uncommon shapes grew from bushes or directly from the ground. Transparent drops rested on their petals or leaves, showing how the rain could pierce the thick crowns above.

A prevalent wetness that the incoming rains were bound to intensify also filled the area, and the ground reflected that. Dark-green mud splashed in every direction when the jeep's tires ran over it, creating slimy puddles all around that path.

The jeep's tires tried to cover that swampy forest's sounds, but nothing escaped Khan's ears. The environment's hissing, chirping, croaking, and buzzing were constant and overwhelming. Abora was a breathing and living planet, and the outpost's presence couldn't tame its wild aspects.

Khan couldn't help but feel invigorated. He had spent so long inside space stations or environments tamed by the Global Army that he had almost forgotten what authentic wildness was. Besides, that was his first time witnessing it with his new senses, and the scene was blinding.

Mana flowed in every direction. Every plant, animal, and even part of the ground radiated that energy and applied their influence. Khan's senses had to work overtime to capture everything, but

his brain could take it. An ordinary human would faint under that assault of information, but he felt born to live among that harmonious mess.

'Istrone should be similar to this,' Khan thought as the jeep advanced.

The path led deeper into the forest, growing narrower and muddier. The forest was slowly erasing that mark left by the Global Army, but the jeep could still advance. Yet, Khan knew his time was approaching.

Drawing Derek's screen could keep Khan updated on the remaining path, but he preferred to continue looking at the forest. The tension remained constant, with nothing attempting to attack the jeep. Everything was waiting for something, and Khan wanted to be ready for that.

Swaying motions appeared in the environment as the jeep advanced, and a foul smell also reached Khan's nostrils. The darkness of the night tried to hide the source of that strange event, but Khan felt unable to miss it. He could see the larger puddles and the wet chunks of the ground around the trees releasing gases full of mana.

Khan instinctively grunted as those gases seeped into his body, and the pilot also brought a wet tissue to his mouth. A bitter taste spread on Khan's tongue and made him lower his gaze. He could feel that foreign mana invading him, but no marks had appeared on his skin yet.

"It will get worse later on, sir," The pilot warned through his wet tissue. "I won't be able to bring you any closer at that point."

"It's fine," Khan grunted again, stretching his neck due to the vague discomfort he experienced. It felt odd to have that invader running inside him, and forcing his mana to flow seemed unable to fix the issue.

'Maybe I should get healing techniques next,' Khan wondered, but the path continued to retain most of his attention.

The swaying motion intensified, but Khan didn't experience any dizziness. The foreign mana also continued to expand, uncaring of the chaos element's hindrance, but Khan soon grew used to that discomfort. That process never stopped, and the car eventually stopped.

"I can't go any further, sir," The pilot coughed while tinkering with the jeep's menus to check his coordinates. "You must proceed East for three hundred meters to reach your target."

Khan checked the map on the jeep's menus' before drawing Derek's screen. The device showed the same directions, so he lifted his gaze to look at his route. He would have to abandon the path and dive into the forest to reach his target.

"You can go back," Khan said while adjusting his backpack, checking his pockets, and jumping out of the jeep. When his feet dug into the mud, a splashing noise resounded, but his balance didn't falter.

"Sir, if the rains arrive," The pilot announced.

"You won't be able to pick me up," Khan interrupted. "Don't worry. Go before you faint on me."

"Thank you, sir," The pilot nodded before another cough forced him to trail the path in reverse gear.

Khan kept his eyes on the trees while the jeep disappeared. His eyes started wandering left and right when he couldn't hear the tires anymore. He almost expected something to happen once solitude arrived, but everything remained still.

'What are they waiting for?' Khan wondered before taking a careful step forward. Nothing happened, so he advanced again, leaving the muddy road and crossing the first line of trees to immerse himself in the forest.

Three hundred meters were nothing for Khan, but he couldn't exactly sprint forward. There were too many trees on the path ahead, and a sudden release of mana might affect that tension. A chain reaction could unfold if he weren't careful.

Nevertheless, the constant tension slowly affected Khan's patience. The symphony felt on the verge of exploding on him, and that vibe intensified with each step that splashed on the mud. He didn't like being the prey of unknown opponents, so he decided to make the first move.

'I can play this game too,' Khan thought before eyeing a rare short tree on his right.

The tree's yellow crown was perfectly still, and no sound came out. Yet, Khan knew that something was waiting among those large leaves, and his left hand went on his knife's handle while he sent some emotions forward.

Altering the mana had become as natural as breathing for Khan, so he easily conveyed aggression to the creature inside the crown. No response arrived, but Khan kept his focus on that spot and waited for a reaction.

The creature inside the crown didn't have Khan's patience. It didn't even have intelligence. The aggression felt simply triggered its instincts, forcing it to pounce at that threat below.

A huge yellow snake pierced the crown to dive toward Khan. Its big mouth was already open, showing the two rows of curved fangs ready to stab its prey. Purple drops fell from those teeth, but they never found any skin.

The snake froze when an unbreakable grip seized the base of its head and prevented it from diving any further. Khan held the creature above him, uncaring that the fanged mouth could probably swallow his head in a single bite. He felt no fear either. He couldn't be afraid in front of a Tainted animal as strong as a first-level warrior.

'You are big,' Khan commented while glancing at the flexible body stretching from the crown. The snake had shown four meters of its figure, but much more seemed to remain inside the branches.

A sudden change in the mana inside the snake forced Khan to draw his knife. The creature's tail came out of the crown, pointing its sharp tip at the center of Khan's forehead. However, a purple-red flash unfolded before the Tainted animal could complete the attack.

Khan let go of his prey and waved his hand to shake off the dense blood that had covered it. Meanwhile, the snake's two edges hung lifelessly from the branches, and blood fell from one of them to reach the severed head on the mud.

The encounter with the snake didn't force the forest's hand. Everything continued to remain still, and the same went for the tension. Khan didn't know how to feel about that, but his mission had priority, and the incoming rains made him decide to avoid wasting any more time.

Truth be told, Derek had given Khan a four hours window. The jeep had barely taken twenty minutes out of that, so even a poor estimate would still grant Khan a lot of time. However, he didn't know how hard it would be to retrieve the Dridie yet, so he played it safe.

Khan crossed one hundred and fifty meters without encountering any danger. Many eyes were still on him, but the general stillness made him advance without worrying about those weak threats.

The environment changed at that point. The ground grew even muddier before transforming into a small, greenish lake that appeared filled with slime.

'It can't be too deep,' Khan considered while looking at the muddy lake.

Khan stopped by the lake's shores and put some strength into his right leg. His foot dug into the ground easily, diving for at least ten centimeters before finding a firmer surface.

'The lake is bound to be worse,' Khan thought. 'Flying should be better, but.'

Khan diverted his gaze, letting his eyes wander on that mostly still surface. Some bubbles popped in a few areas, but nothing truly moved. Yet, he sensed that the lake's population was far from zero.

'Annoying,' Khan cursed. The snake from before and the lake confirmed how Abora's fauna had exceptional cloaking abilities. Khan could still sense those creatures, but identifying the exact number of threats was impossible under that slimy cover.

Khan inspected his right and left while calculations ran through his mind. The lake was relatively small. He could walk around it in a few minutes and avoid risking alerting its inhabitants.

Derek's device fell into Khan's hands while he crouched on the shore. The map on the screen confirmed his idea, but the marker about his target appeared oddly close.

Khan lifted his gaze and tilted his head to gaze at the opposite side of the lake, but the trees there hindered his vision. He straightened his position and walked alongside the shore to find a better spot, and a familiar plant eventually fell into his view.

A thick, spiked branch peeked out of a tree on the lake's opposite side. Khan couldn't gain a complete view of the scene, so he trailed the shore a bit longer until he could see the entire Feicox.

'Is that it?' Khan wondered while tinkering with the screen to activate its camera.

Khan pointed the device at the Feicox and used its zoom function to inspect it. The screen recorded a series of stats and highlighted a faint purple shadow stretching behind the plant's base.

With the map and the camera active, Khan moved a bit more and eventually found what he was looking for. The device captured a clear picture of the Dridie. He only had to cross the lake to reach it.

'What now?' Khan wondered.

Everything would be easier if Khan could use spells, but the Dridie's frailty worked against him. He didn't expect the plant to be so close to the lake either. He risked starting a war between vegetation and Tainted animals if he wasn't careful.

'I can't even see the other Feicox from here,' Khan thought while trying to peek past the trees in front of his target. 'Where are they?'

The device ended up solving the issue. An icon lit up on the screen, attracting Khan's attention. A square moved on a trunk in the distance until a scarlet flower peeked past it, and part of its spiked branch soon became visible too.

'That's the second,' Khan exclaimed before a ripple flowed through the symphony and made a chill run down his spine. His eyes remained on the screen while the tension intensified. He saw the flower pointing in his direction while a hole opened at its center.

Khan instinctively jumped to his side, using as much strength as his body could provide. A bullet reached his previous position, and its impact on the muddy ground created a fuming dark-green puddle that released sizzling noises.

The symphony went crazy after the attack. The forest awakened, and countless cries reached Khan's ears while he was still in mid-air.

Khan prepared himself to retreat, but something flew toward his back. A light tap on the air put him in a spinning motion, and his glowing knife severed the head of a snake-like creature that had come out of a bush in half.

The dangers didn't end there. Something came out of the lake's shore, forcing Khan to turn. A slimy tongue shot forward and crossed many meters to reach Khan, only to have a violent kick interrupting its motion. Khan even shattered that body part with his attack, making it explode into a cloud of blood.

Another dangerous sensation spiked in Khan's senses, making him swing his knife upward. A yellow bird-like creature had dived toward him, but his weapon cut it in half. Yet, something else flew toward him in the meantime, forcing him to leap away from the lake.

Khan landed behind a tree nearby, splashing mud in every direction. He sat on the dirt, uncaring of the stains and wetness spreading on his uniform. He didn't hold back during his previous sprint, but his right arm told a chilling tale.

A hole had appeared on the screen in Khan's hand, and smoke came out of its edges while the dark-green liquid's corrosive properties continued to work. A similar stain had occupied Khan's right forearm, and the sizzling noise it released filled his mind with pain.

Chapter 493 Superior Firepower

All hell broke loose. Multiple creatures emerged from the lake, trees, and bushes to create a chaotic battlefield. Meanwhile, the Feicox shot corrosive bullets toward anything that dared approach their territory.

Khan was just outside the battlefield's range. His butt and back grew cold while he remained on the ground, and a constant stream of information assaulted his senses. However, his injury kept his attention away from the mess.

Mana seeped into the dark-green stain while the broken device fell into the muddy ground. Khan released his energy, turning it into a flare that shot out of his forearm to overwhelm the corrosive attack.

The chaos element did its job, but the process was far from pleasant. Khan's head shook as he closed his eyes and let his mana eradicate that threat. The corrosive liquid fought back, using every second it had to damage Khan's flesh, and almost a minute had to pass before the purple-red light removed any trace of it.

Khan's breathing turned into grunts. He opened his eyes only to see drops of sweat falling from his eyebrows. He had to wipe his face with his left arm to check the injury, and the scene that fell into his view made him gulp.

The dark-green liquid had removed the superficial layer of skin, exposing the flesh and muscles. The latter had also suffered under the attack's corrosive properties, creating an injury that still sent pain to Khan's mind.

'This will leave a scar,' Khan thought before disregarding the issue. His body already carried marks of his many battles. Adding another barely mattered at that point.

Nevertheless, the danger the Feicox posed was more than clear now. Their corrosive properties were scary, and Khan could find a worrying matter capable of topping that. He had used his full speed during the evasive maneuver, but the bullet had still hit him.

'They really are damned turrets,' Khan cursed. He still found it surprising that a mere plant with barely enough mana to match a second-level warrior could achieve so much, but reality spoke for itself.

The mess unfolding behind Khan made him curious enough to peek past the trunk, but an incoming corrosive bullet forced him to retract his head. The Feicox wasn't only keeping track of his position. It also had insane reflexes that truly resembled a machine.

'How do I solve this?' Khan wondered while sitting deeper in the mud.

A distraction was out of the question. The last bullet had shown Khan that the Feicox saw him as the main threat, which wasn't surprising. If he were to look at the battlefield through his senses, he would see himself as a blinding presence, and those plants probably viewed something similar.

Maban's technique could help, but Khan's hands were tied. Without his spells, he would have to approach the Feicox directly, limiting his attacks to his knife and kicks. Besides, he had to mind the extractor, and the poisonous fumes were another annoying variable.

Khan glanced at his backpack. The extractor wasn't too big or heavy, but he couldn't speak for its resilience. He could probably avoid putting it in danger with Maban's technique, but his speed might damage it on its own.

As for the poison, Khan could sense the foreign presence spreading even further, but marks had yet to appear on his skin. His flask of antidotes was still full too, so he could ignore the issue for now.

The idea of giving up never crossed Khan's mind. Only simulations occupied his thoughts, and they didn't look too good.

Going straight for the Dridie was doable. The Feicox were fearsome but remained plants. Khan believed that a single kick in the right spot could kill them.

The aftermath was the issue with that simulation. Killing the Feicox wouldn't fix the battlefield. It would probably make many Tainted animals strive toward the Dridie, turning Khan into its new guard.

That wouldn't normally be a problem, but the Dridie's frailty undermined Khan's confidence. He didn't know if he could fill the Feicox's role without his spells. It was probably better to keep those plants alive until he could safely extract his target.

'So,' Khan thought as he understood how to succeed. He had to take care of the battlefield first.

Khan's incredible senses made him aware of the many creatures that had joined the fray. None was strong enough to be a threat, but they were too many to consider any complicated tactic. Khan could only opt for the most straightforward approach.

'I'll kill them all,' Khan stated inside his mind, and a plan automatically formed.

Khan opened and closed his right hand. The new injury occupied a quarter of his forearm, so flexing his fingers hurt. His grip was also shaky, but everything worked well enough to make it useful.

Standing up came next. Khan left the mud and glanced at the trunk behind him until his eyes reached its crown. That mess of leaves was tall enough to be a safe area, so he kicked the ground to fly toward it.

Khan paid attention not to leave the trunk's cover and dived headfirst into the green leaves almost thirty meters above him. Branches broke and flexed during his passage, spreading a rustling noise that stopped once Khan's landed at the tree's top.

An awkward silence unfolded. Khan stood at the base of a branch in front of a snake-like creature entangled around a chest-sized strange bird. The former had even started gulping its prey, but Khan couldn't leave anything alive.

A purple-red light flashed, killing the snake and the bird to make the crown safe. At that point, Khan removed his backpack and bound it to a few branches before checking the area again. The Feicox appeared unable to notice him at that height, but things would probably change if he got closer.

Still, those plants would have to wait. Khan's focus was on the lake. Strange toads, snakes, birds, and much more had fallen prey to an all-out battle that knew no sides or alliances, and Khan had to bring peace, even if it meant erasing that environment from existence.

Khan checked the area one last time before leaping ahead. He crossed the crowns, savoring a whiff of clean air that carried no fumes or wetness while joining his palms.

The chaos spear took form during the short flight. Then, Khan kicked the air above him to dive back into the crowns and let the lake fill his view. He could see two Feicox from that position, and they also noticed him. Bullets immediately flew in his direction, but he released the spear before rising once again.

Khan crossed the crowns to reappear in the clear night sky, but the incoming masses of mana forced him to kick forward. The attack pushed him backward, allowing him to avoid the three corrosive bullets that clashed in his previous position.

The three bullets fused, splashing a few drops before falling prey to gravity. That dark-green liquid soon returned to the crowns, unleashing its corrosive properties on those harmless leaves.

Only Khan noticed that event since an explosion unfolded at the center of the lake and attracted everyone's attention. A purple-red pillar grew high and unleashed destruction in every direction. Loud cries resounded, even reaching Khan's ears, but he only cared about creating another spear.

The opening created by the corrosive liquid allowed Khan to aim his spear without diving back into the lake area. His precise throw made the spell cross that gap and reach another spot on the battlefield, filling it with its iconic purple-red light.

The symphony added details that Khan couldn't see from his position. The destructive pillars were scaring away most survivors, with many heading toward the Feicox. The latter could easily take care of those threats, leaving Khan with only one side to worry about.

Khan created another spear before diving through the opening. His previous spells had split the battlefield into two main sides, so he threw his attack toward the shore without Dridie.

The third spear landed and exploded, creating another violent pillar that further split the battlefield. Khan could now see five different populated areas alongside the lake's shores, but two were near the Feicox, so he focused on the others.

Khan went upside down and dived at full speed toward the closest shore. The Feicox were too busy with the incoming enemies to mind him, so he flew straight for a large frog-like creature enduring the relentless assault of two small birds.

The three Tainted animals were too busy escaping and fighting to notice Khan, so he stomped the frog and one bird with a single kick. The attack made the two creatures explode, and his knife followed, cutting the last enemy's head.

Khan used what remained of the two corpses to jump to his right, where another battle between two Tainted animals was unfolding. A kick and a slash killed them both, allowing him to sprint toward a third fight.

The spears had caused waves that splashed mud and dirty water everywhere. The various fights only intensified that mess, and the fumes hindered the visibility. In theory, keeping track of individual battles was impossible, but Khan had the symphony on his side, and following it made that chaos his home.

Khan killed almost ten Tainted animals in a short minute before heading toward his second target. His sprint brought him to another battlefield in seconds, and his attacks flew everywhere to optimize his killing time. Yet, his luck ran out soon enough.

A tremor ran through the symphony while Khan was slashing his knife toward an unaware bird-like creature with scales instead of feathers. He needed less than a second to complete his attack, but the incoming danger forced him to sprint ahead.

Two corrosive bullets reached Khan's previous position, with one hitting the previously targeted bird. More attacks threatened to arrive, and time in Khan's mind almost slowed down as he kept track of them.

Activating Maban's technique and flying above the crowns was the intelligent choice. It would allow Khan to escape the Feicox's focus and dive directly toward his next targets. However, the chaos gave birth to a reckless idea, and Khan didn't hesitate to pursue it.

Khan leaped forward instead of rising, flying behind four Tainted animals fighting in the mud. The incoming bullets missed, but the Feicox sent more of them. Still, Khan had a shield now.

The bullets crashed on two Tainted animals, hitting a third with their splashes. Meanwhile, Khan kicked the fourth creature before heading toward a different battle.

Now that Khan knew how fast the bullets were, he could adjust his movements and pace to use them to his advantage. He only needed to sprint right before the firing. That was a dangerous game, but Khan felt unbeatable in that mess.

Khan used Maban's technique as soon as the second battlefield was no more. In the Feicox's perception, he basically teleported into another crowded area before slowing down, almost challenging them to fire again.

The Feicox had no pride or emotions. They existed only to protect their suitable environment, so they didn't hesitate to target the biggest threat again. Khan couldn't even dare to catch a breath since the battlefield and bullets kept him completely busy. He had to wait for that third area to become clear to take a break.

Khan used Maban's technique again when he couldn't find Tainted animals in his immediate surroundings anymore. The sprint brought him above the trees, outside the Feicox's range, but the symphony told him that his job was far from over.

The lake had dried up in a few areas. The spears had left three huge holes with fuming terrain rather than mud, and the Feicox's many bullets had worsened the rest of the environment.

That area wasn't suitable for life anymore, and its previous inhabitants had understood that. Most had died during the escape and battles, but the trees around the shores were still safe and viable.

That wasn't even the end of it. The survivors had occupied those trees, but other Tainted animals had already claimed them as their territory. Battles soon unfolded again, and they remained too close to the Dridie for Khan to ignore them. He simply couldn't focus on his target just yet.

'A forest isn't easy to tame,' Khan sighed. He had miscalculated that environment's resilience, but his plan didn't change. He had mana, and strength still ran through his legs. He had no reason to stop now.

Since the battles had spread past the lake's shores, Khan could rely on more destructive methods. He had to limit the number of chaos spears before, but that distance from the Dridie gave him unrestrained freedom.

Khan went up and down the crowns, throwing a chaos spear whenever the path ahead became clear. His superior firepower became evident in that phase, and explosions resounded everywhere as bright pillars replaced trees and ground.

The wet environment couldn't take fire, but grey and dark columns of smoke rose everywhere. The flourishing forest turned into a scorching wasteland under the relentless assault of Khan's spells. He

had to throw more than ten of them to clear everything, and the Feicox took care of vanquishing the remaining threats.

Khan returned above the crowns once the symphony grew emptier. His air support and the plants on the ground had wiped out an entire ecosystem, but the mission was far from over. Humidity even reached the air past the trees, forcing him to inspect his surroundings.

'Can I finish in time?' Khan wondered, glancing at the incoming dark clouds in the distance. It had taken him almost an hour to clear the entire lake, and the rains had never stopped advancing.

The sight of the clouds forced Khan to focus. He turned himself upside down, and the mana in his surroundings flowed toward his legs while his feet stomped the air.

The Feicox couldn't see much among that mess of smoke, but missing Khan's arrival in their range was simply impossible. Those plants' branches flexed to point at that incoming blinding presence, but the latter teleported before they could shoot.

Khan landed above a scarlet flower, shattering it and destroying a part of the branch below in the process. Time slowed down at that point. That was the closest he had been to the Feicox, and his eyes finally caught a glimpse of his true opponents.

Three fully-grown Feicox encircled the small Dridie, and a fourth was growing in an empty spot nearby. Trees surrounded them, but Khan only looked for the red color. Except for the newborn, each plant had four flowers.

Khan noticed the two pale-red buds growing from the newborn but moved before it was too late. The mana around him flowed toward his legs, giving him abnormal speed that made him crush two flowers during his evasive maneuver.

A series of corrosive bullets flew everywhere, but Khan was too fast for them. He jumped toward the Feicox again as soon as he landed on a trunk, and Maban's technique activated when more attacks converged toward him.

Khan destroyed three flowers with that second sprint, but bullets suddenly shot out of the newborn's buds, forcing him to retreat. The messy escape maneuver interrupted his offensive and put him at the center of the Feicox's assault. He used a tree as cover, but the corrosive liquid that fell on it destroyed the trunk.

As the trunk fell, Khan went upside down and used it as a path that shielded him from incoming bullets. The crown eventually appeared in his view, and Maban's technique pushed him past the leaves and outside the Feicox's range.

Khan ended up behind another tree, with his butt in the mud again. His hands quickly went on his left shoe since a few drops of the corrosive liquid had fallen on it. He didn't hesitate to throw it away, and his bare foot soon disappeared in the mud.

'The buds broke,' Khan thought, recalling the previous scene. 'They shouldn't be able to fire anymore, which leaves six flowers.'

Khan took a deep breath and prepared himself for his next sprint, but the discomfort inside his body suddenly intensified. He opened his uniform to check his chest, and a sigh escaped his mouth when he saw that purple spots had appeared on his skin.

The flask with the antidote immediately fell into Khan's palm, and he opened it to gulp one of the pills. Khan stored the container right afterward, but his chest grew heavy before he could peek past the tree.

Khan wanted to breathe, but his chest grew heavier and heavier, preventing him from sending air to his lungs. Cold sweat accumulated on his face and back as he did his best to remain behind the tree, and the arrival of retches eventually put him on all fours.

The mana inside Khan surged through his throat and converged into his mouth. Khan puked saliva mixed with violet shades that reminded him of the pill, and intense dizziness took control of his mind.

Chapter 494 Poisoned

The world in Khan's eyes spun, and his balance grew unstable. He felt on the verge of fainting, but more retches took control of his stomach and made him puke again.

Khan's stomach was basically empty, limiting his retches to mere spitting. His saliva still carried those odd violet shades, but they eventually disappeared, and the same went for the puking urge.

The weight on Khan's chest eased, but the dizziness remained, and his gaze grew unclear. Tunnel vision fell on him, but he could still notice the spreading of the purple marks on his hands. He forced himself to look at his open uniform too, where he saw that his torso was full of similar spots.

The symphony added details, giving Khan a vague idea of his condition. The odd color in his saliva cleared any doubt. His body had rejected the antidote, triggering the opposite effects.

Khan could feel the foreign mana flaring inside him. The poison was showing its effects, and his body appeared unable to contain them. A sense of weakness even arrived, and Khan swayed to his left as his balance gave in.

As soon as Khan's left arm peeked out of the trunk's cover, a corrosive bullet landed on his elbow, making him lose his grip on the knife. The weapon fell into the mud as pain filled his mind, bringing enough clarity to push him back into the tree.

A purple-red flare engulfed the dark-green liquid, erasing it before it could do too much damage. Khan even tore away the broken sleeve to check the injury. It wasn't too deep, but his grip felt shaky and weak. Even flexing the arm was troublesome. The Feicox had hit him well, probably taking out his left hand from the rest of the battle.

The dizziness returned as the pain waned, and Khan took a deep breath to muster the entirety of his concentration. He slightly crouched forward and eyed the small hole in front of him before snapping his right hand at it.

A bullet flew into that spot, but Khan's limb ended up being faster. The knife returned to his hands while the corrosive liquid dug through the mud. He had retrieved his weapon, but the sense of weakness returned stronger than ever, forcing him to lie on the trunk.

'Don't faint,' Khan cursed as the weakness intensified. 'Don't you dare faint.'

Khan's body didn't listen to that order. He was burning. He had to use the entirety of his concentration to remain on the trunk, but his mind was shutting down.

"Don't faint, dammit!" Khan shouted, slamming his injured elbow on the trunk. The wave of pain that followed brought clarity, temporarily awakening him.

Khan lay the back of his head on the trunk as grunts and gasps left his mouth. He could feel the weakness returning and attempting to remove his clarity, but that window gave him the time to think.

"[Jenna, help me]," Khan ended up whispering in the Nele's language, and the mana in the environment moved to comply with that request.

Khan's eyes widened as a trail appeared inside the symphony. The mana wanted him to go deeper into the forest, toward a nearby spot his senses could barely reach.

Moving felt hard, but Khan still mustered all the available strength to straighten his position. He slid on the trunk to help him stand up, and resolve fell on his expression as mana, both outside and inside his body, flowed toward his legs.

An inhuman sprint unfolded, and bullets flew on the path Khan crossed. Nothing hit him, but a sudden surge in his dizziness made him trip and crash in the mud. The wet ground couldn't disperse his momentum, so he slid and rolled on himself until his back landed on a tree.

A loud grunt left Khan's mouth as he hurried to his knees, but no bullets flew at him. It seemed that he had left the Feicox's range with his last sprint, so his eyes went on the symphony to follow the trail it conveyed.

After a few seconds, Khan's gaze fell on a green bush in the distance. The symphony wanted him to go there, but he felt too weak to walk, so he crawled through the mud until he reached his destination.

Khan grabbed the bush and pulled to bring himself closer. It turned out that the symphony wasn't targeting that plant. The mana had led Khan to the bluish flowers hidden behind it.

Jenna had taught Khan how to make potions and ointments, but he didn't have the strength or time to perform those arts. He put the knife in his left hand while his right reached one flower, pulled it out of the ground, and sent it into his mouth.

Khan munched, uncaring of the mud lingering on the flower's roots. The plant's texture was too elastic, so he eventually forced himself to gulp everything. His stomach was weak, but the Slums' habits kicked in, making it accept that uncommon meal.

The foreign mana screeched when the plant's properties spread through Khan's body, but that single meal wasn't enough to defeat it. The bush still hid two bluish flowers, and Khan didn't hesitate to seize them to eat once more.

The second meal had a greater effect on the poison and stopped its expansion. Yet, it didn't fix Khan. It only stabilized his symptoms without solving any of them.

Khan remained weak, with tunnel vision and precarious balance. The purple marks were still there, and he had yet to leave the poisonous fumes. He didn't know if he could get infected again.

The mission was another problem, but Khan accepted that he was in no condition to complete it. He crawled past the bush to lie on the tree behind, and his knife returned to its sheath while he drew his phone.

'Two hours,' Khan thought while setting the alarm. 'No more.'

The phone returned inside Khan's pocket when he closed his eyes. His consciousness faltered, but he still put himself in a meditative state to let his mana handle his condition.

The meditations always made the time pass faster, but Khan felt to have spent less than a minute in that state when the alarm rang. He drew his phone to check whether he had committed a mistake, but the numbers on the screen didn't lie. Two hours had passed, but the purple marks were still there.

The marks weren't the only lingering symptom. Khan still felt weak and feverish, but the world had stopped spinning. He could also retain some clarity without hurting himself.

'The Dridie,' Khan thought while using the trunk behind him to get back on his feet.

Khan's balance was still slightly off, but he could stand and run, which was enough for mere plants. The symphony even told him that the lake area had retained its desolate state during the past hours. He could still complete the mission if he hurried.

Khan drew his knife, but the grip on his left hand felt too weak and flexing his arm hurt. He had to switch palms to hope to perform the Divine Reaper decently, but another problem arrived.

A kick brought Khan in the air, and a second stomp tried to make him cross the crowns. However, his foot pierced the invisible mana, failing to provide a foothold and interrupting his flight.

Khan lost his balance and crashed headfirst into the mud. He had fallen from a considerable height, but the soft ground had deadened the impact. The cold wetness that spread on his face also brought some comfort and allowed him to ignore the faint soreness in his limbs.

'I can't fly in this state,' Khan quickly accepted while standing up again. His balance was too off to allow his most advanced technique.

Mud ran over Khan's face while he took deep breaths. He would normally wipe that dirt away, but the coldness it released felt nice, so he left it there. Meanwhile, his senses reached for the symphony to locate his targets and prepare a suitable route.

'Six flowers,' Khan thought, and a tinge of mana left his body to fuse with the environment and empower his sprint.

Trees flashed in Khan's tunnel vision. He always felt on the verge of crashing into them, but his figure managed to slip by, eventually arriving in front of familiar spiked plants. The Feicox noticed him, but he ran past them before they could shoot.

Three flowers exploded during Khan's passage, and bullets flew after him. However, he used the tree directly in front of him to run toward its crown and dodge them.

The Feicox adjusted their aim as their corrosive liquid dug through the trunk, but Khan flung himself toward them, diving directly toward one of those dangerous plants. A descending kick landed at its base, destroying its branches and killing the two flowers on them.

The kick was so violent that mud splashed in every direction, creating a hole in the ground. Still, there was another flower, and Khan's landing gave it a chance to aim properly.

A corrosive bullet flew toward Khan, but he limited himself to throwing his knife at it. The weapon was incredibly sharp on its own, so it pierced the dark-green liquid and reached the scarlet flower behind.

However, the knife's edge was too thin to take care of the entire bullet. The latter continued to fly forward, hitting Khan on the right side of his chest.

Khan held back a shout. Pain invaded his mind, creating the urge to get rid of the new injury. Yet, he couldn't release his mana so close to the Dridie, so he jumped away and crashed on the ground before sending purple-red energy to his chest.

The chaos element destroyed the dark-green liquid, and exhaustion tried to take over Khan, but he didn't let himself rest. He struggled to his feet and approached the Dridie to check the area. A few buds had appeared during his meditative session, but his kicks destroyed them and the branches underneath.

Khan fell to his knees at that point. He was still burning, and the dizziness had never vanished. The sense of weakness was there too, but the empty area brought some reassurance. He couldn't see any Feicox in his surroundings. Only the tiny Dridie had remained.

'Come on,' Khan cursed in his mind while crawling toward his knife. 'Just a bit more.'

Khan retrieved the knife and supported himself on a trunk to stand up. He wasn't getting any worse, which was good, but he needed to rest, and the forest wasn't the place for that.

The barrage of chaos spears had removed most of the mud and slimy water, so Khan could cross what remained of the lake without faltering. His tunnel vision got in the way, but the symphony helped him find his old tree, and a series of deep breaths happened when he reached its base.

Khan stored the knife and jumped on the tree's trunk, running over it to reach its crown. His backpack was still there, and he retrieved it before leaping and doing his best to slow down his descent.

The mud helped soften the landing, but Khan still fell on his butt. His balance was too unstable to perform acrobatic feats, but the backpack remained safe in his arms, and the mission's end finally appeared in his view.

Khan crossed the lake again before taking out the extractor. Placing it on the small Dridie activated its functions, which made it dig into the mud to seize the plant, its roots, and part of the ground underneath.

Once the process was over, Khan put the extractor inside the backpack and secured it on his back. He had lost Derek's device, but the path was nearby. He only needed to reach it to find his way back home.

'I did it!' Khan couldn't help but exclaim in his mind. That mission had pushed him to his limits, and he couldn't wait to return to a safe place.

Yet, a splattering noise suddenly spread, and a drop fell on Khan's face when he lifted his head. The forest also awakened once again since the rains had arrived.

Chapter 495 Limits

Abora's outpost had a clear chain of command, and a Lieutenant stood on top of it. The place also had many soldiers busy with different tasks, but a good chunk of them had left their posts and had gathered in a control room to keep track of the outside scanners.

The Lieutenant in charge, a bald and burly middle-aged man, inspected the various screens on the wall, but nothing specific happened. The scanners only recorded rain and the forest immersed in it.

"How long has he been out there?" The Lieutenant asked without diverting his gaze from the screens.

"Six hours, sir," Derek replied. "Two hours since it started raining."

"And what's your professional opinion?" The Lieutenant wondered. "Should we send probes?"

"Lieutenant Monton," Derek called before lowering his head. "If he is dead, the Feicox wouldn't have left much of him."

"We are still talking about a Captain," Lieutenant Monton cursed, "A Captain in bed with the Solodrey family."

"Should we prepare for the worst, sir?" A soldier in the room asked.

"We don't know if this outpost will survive the Solodrey family's anger," Lieutenant Monton stated, "Or the nobles for what it's worth. Still, the mission came from Headmistress Holwen. She might need to find a scapegoat, so start running if you wronged her in the past."

A series of exchanges of gazes unfolded, but no one left the room. The soldiers there were too low on the chain of command to earn a meeting with the Headmistress. Even Lieutenant Monton had never been in her office.

"O-our," Derek stammered as a realization fell upon him, "Our data was perfect. Captain Khan agreed to the mission willingly."

"Yeah," Lieutenant Monton sighed. "Be sure to tell the Headmistress that if she ever comes down here."

"Sir, there is something in the third quadrant!" A soldier suddenly exclaimed, bringing all the eyes in the room to the fourth screen.

The scanners picked up a presence that could match Khan's signature, but the soldiers didn't let those stats reassure them. They waited and waited until a trunk at the forest's edge trembled, and a limping Khan came from behind it.

The soldiers didn't immediately recognize Khan. Mud and blood covered him, and his uniform was long since gone. He was only wearing his ragged pants and his dirty sheath, but the backpack hanging from his shoulders revealed his identity.

"Send a medical team outside!" Lieutenant Monton shouted, breaking the tense silence. "Now!"

The room took life, and everyone exited it to resume their tasks. Only a few soldiers headed toward the hangar closer to the third quadrant to retrieve medical equipment and attend to Khan.

As for Khan, he felt drained. His feet were heavy and dug into the mud, and every drop that fell on him threatened to make him collapse. The fever had gone up, and he could barely focus on the outpost ahead, but his legs kept moving forward.

A team of soldiers left the outpost when Khan was almost in front of it, and a series of shouts followed. A few questions even reached Khan's ears, but he didn't care enough to force himself to answer.

When the team reached Khan, he removed the backpack to hand it to the first soldier in his reach. Another tried to grab his arm to support him, but he pulled it away to keep moving forward on his own. He was on autopilot, which didn't allow anyone's help.

The soldier who seized the backpack hurried inside to check its contents. Meanwhile, Khan limped forward, and his balance threatened to crumble when a metal floor replaced the mud. He staggered, but a wall was nearby, and he used it to support himself.

The sudden loss of balance made a soldier reach for Khan, but he grabbed the incoming hand before it could touch him. His cold eyes also went on the woman, which turned her worry into fear.

'Right,' Khan thought as the autopilot took the backseat. 'I made it back.'

Khan looked at the scared woman for a few more seconds before letting go of her hand. He also pushed himself away from the wall to keep walking, but more people arrived.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Monton called while hurrying through the corridor. "We thought to have lost you out there."

Khan ignored the Lieutenant, but Derek was also with him, and he didn't miss the purple spots. He approached Khan, and a worried question left his mouth. "Did you lose the antidote, sir?"

"It doesn't work on me," Khan weakly whispered, browsing through his right pocket to take out the flask with the pills. Derek promptly accepted it, but that didn't ease his worries.

"Sir, the medical bay is just around the corner," Derek stated, and Lieutenant Monton followed with another offer. "You can stay here as long as you want!"

"No, I need to go back to the Harbor," Khan voiced another whisper. "Is my ship ready?"

"Sir, you can't-," Lieutenant Monton muttered.

"I can," Khan interrupted. "Prepare my ship."

"But, sir," Derek added.

"I have classes tomorrow," Khan said before Derek could add anything. He even continued to advance, but his unstable stance depicted a clear picture of his condition.

Lieutenant Monton and Derek exchanged a glance before looking at Khan again. They could see how weak he was, but nothing seemed able to make him stop. The scene was actually a bit pitiful and shed light on Khan's true state.

Khan was nothing short of a celebrity. Everyone in the Global Army had heard about him, and the soldiers in that outpost were no exception. Still, his fame told stories of an incredible warrior who could come out on top of any threat, which wasn't what Lieutenant Monton and the others saw.

The soldiers around Khan couldn't help but gain insights into his situation from watching that scene. He could barely stand, but his worries were on the Harbor's classes. That wasn't resolve or work ethic. That was an obsession fueled by something too deep to see.

Lieutenant Monton wanted to object, especially after seeing through Khan, but the latter outranked him. If Khan wanted to get on the ship, the Lieutenant couldn't do much to stop him.

However, Derek forgot ranks and status. He was a worried scientist, and the scene made him put that feeling into words. "Captain, the poison is still active. We can't clear you to fly without checking you."

"My ship," Khan voiced, uncaring of Derek's argument. He only wanted to go back to his flat right now.

"Sir, you might be contagious!" Derek shouted, blatantly lying about the poison's properties. Everyone in the area knew the truth, even Khan, but he was too tired to recall that detail, and the possibility of infecting his friends made him give in.

"Alright, check me," Khan nodded, "But prepare my ship in the meantime."

"You heard the Captain!" Lieutenant Monton raised his voice, and the soldiers in the area hurried through the corridor to reach the hangar. Meanwhile, he remained with Derek and escorted Khan toward a medical bay nearby.

Derek ran scanners over Khan's figure while he sat on a simple bed. It was hard to tell whether he was conscious since his half-closed eyes were always lost somewhere, but no one dared to interrogate him. Clearly, he was too tired, so the soldiers respected his silence.

A soldier even tried to give Khan a warm and wet towel, but he ignored it. He was beyond dirty, but returning to the Harbor was the sole thought that existed in his mind.

"Sir, can I have a moment of your time?" A soldier interrupted the silence to call for Lieutenant Monton, and the latter followed him outside the room. A few minutes had to pass for him to return with a shocked expression and a device.

"Captain," Lieutenant Monton called before clearing his throat. He didn't know how to put his thoughts into words, but looking at the screen again forced him to continue.

"Sir, did you do this?" Lieutenant Monton eventually managed to ask while showing the screen to Khan and Derek.

Khan's gaze focused on the device, which conveyed a far too familiar scene. The screen was showing the destroyed and still fuming lake area, and its state made Derek open his mouth in shock.

"The lake was in the way," Khan limited himself to explain before eyeing Derek. "Are we done?"

"Oh, yes!" Derek gasped. "Your body is naturally building resistance to the poison. You won't gain full immunity, but a few nights of rest will get you back to your feet."

Khan jumped off the bed at those words. Derek had basically cleared him, and he couldn't wait to leave.

"Is my ship ready?" Khan asked.

Lieutenant Monton was still shocked by the scene on the screen. He couldn't believe that a single man had caused so much destruction. It was actually scary to think that, but his duty eventually had the better of him.

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Monton replied. "I don't advise it, but you can depart immediately."

Khan didn't say anything else. He left the room and followed a soldier toward a hangar, where a welcoming party was already waiting for him. He obviously ignored those military salutes and entered his ship to begin the set-off procedures.

"Use the same speed as yesterday," Khan ordered the ship. "I'll leave the trip back to you."

"Sir, such levels of speed in your condition-," The ship's robotic voice tried to give a warning, but Khan silenced it by pressing a key on the control desk.

Khan managed to relax only when the set-off started. A tired sigh escaped his mouth when the ship left the metal floor, and his consciousness faltered. The nightmare was calling him. He was ready to sleep on that very seat, but his hand promptly rose to deliver a slap to his cheek.

"Pull out the notes," Khan ordered, delivering another slap to himself to remain awake. His mission was over, but his duties were still there, and wasting time wasn't an option. His body couldn't have limits when so much was at stake.

Chapter 496 Clothes

Khan's trip back to the Harbor was rough. He studied most of the time and even meditated a bit, but the real improvements arrived when he took a short nap.

The ship alerted Khan about his imminent arrival at the Harbor, waking him up in the process. He still felt tired, and the fever had yet to leave. However, checking his skin confirmed that the purple marks had disappeared, and the same went for the foreign mana.

'I should be fine by tomorrow,' Khan thought, stretching his back and voicing an annoyed groan at the vague weakness that filled him. A tremor even ran through him due to the fever, but he felt well enough to survive a day of lessons.

The trip had taken a full day, and the landing procedures wasted more time. It was already early morning when the ship entered the Harbor's hangar. The lessons were only four hours away, and returning to the second district was bound to occupy one of them.

Luckily for Khan, he had sorted things out with the Headmistress. The call during the trip back to the Harbor had given her the time to prepare the hangar for his arrival and immediate departure. A cab was already waiting for him next to his landing area, and he could get in without attracting annoying attention.

Of course, some soldiers still saw Khan leaving the ship to get into the car, but his messy appearance worked in his favor. No one dared to approach him. Many even struggled to recognize him. Yet, the scene was bound to hit the news sooner or later, and Khan also knew that Abora's outpost would spread rumors about his feats.

As soon as Khan sat in the cab, he took out his phone as if waiting for Jenny to call. Yet, his device remained silent, allowing him to check other details that he was too weak to study during his flight.

The knife ended in Khan's hands, and he cleaned its edge on the seat's fabric to get a good look at it. The blade had endured the corrosive bullet perfectly, but marks had appeared on the handle.

That small damage didn't make the knife any worse. Khan could barely notice it when he wielded it, so he eventually stored it in the sheath. His phone was also still silent, so he used that window to meditate.

Only a handful of people knew about Khan's return, and the trip back to the flat wasn't enough to overcome the Headmistress' preparations. When the cab stopped, Khan found an empty sidewalk and swiftly headed to the elevator to avoid potential onlookers.

The arrival inside the flat broke the peaceful silence that had filled Khan's trips. George, Monica, and Anita were waiting for him, and their excited calls turned into confused and worried gasps when they noticed his state.

"I need to take a shower," Khan stated, lifting a hand to stop the incoming Monica and open a way through his friends.

George didn't dare to question Khan. He even pulled Anita away since she was too shocked to move at Khan's passage. As for Monica, she followed Khan silently and entered the bathroom while he undressed.

The dirty and broken pants fell on the bathroom floor, and the sheath quickly followed, leaving dark stains in that otherwise clean room. Khan forgot to remove his right shoe but entered the bathtub anyway, and a warm liquid soon fell on him.

The dried mud, blood, and dirt took a while to come off, but the intensity of the shower eventually won. All the stains caused by the journey on Abora flowed away, revealing the skin underneath and the various injuries.

Khan didn't like that incoming warmth when fused with his fever. Still, something even warmer eventually spread on his back, and peeking past his shoulder revealed his worried girlfriend.

Monica entered the bathtub without removing her clothes. Her simple pullover and yellow skirt became drenched in a few seconds, and her curls suffered from a similar fate, but her eyes never moved from Khan's body.

Khan showed an apologetic expression when he turned to face Monica. He had only notified her about his return without adding any detail about his state. Yet, he couldn't hide anything now.

Monica moved her fingers around the injury on Khan's chest before heading for his right forearm. She traced that wound's edges before checking his left elbow. Those marks were hideous, and only time would turn them into scars. Besides, they looked painful.

"You said you wanted marks about you," Khan joked. "I got three, just like you asked."

"Not this kind," Monica whispered as her hand went on Khan's forehead, and her face darkened as another comment left her mouth. "You are burning."

"The poison is already gone," Khan explained shortly. "I'll be fine soon enough."

Monica didn't react to those words. She let go of Khan's forehead before crouching in the bathtub to reach his shoe. Khan finally noticed it and supported himself to the wall to let Monica remove it.

"Turn," Monica said while straightening her position. "I'll wash your back."

"Monica, there is no-," Khan began to refuse, but the glare that unfolded in his view made him shut up. Monica was strangely calm, but that gesture told him that she had already snapped on the inside.

Monica's anger wasn't directed at Khan, but he played along anyway to avoid becoming its target. He let Monica help clean him, and she even hurried outside once she was done to retrieve new clothes.

"Monica, you know that the Headmistress has nothing to do with this, right?" Khan asked while wearing the clean tracksuit. "I'm the one accepting these missions."

"I know," Monica replied in an emotionless tone. "I won't say anything to her."

Khan sighed in relief. He was worried Monica would take her anger on the Headmistress, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"Hey," Khan called again since Monica was too detached. "I have to attend lessons, but we'll talk tonight, okay?"

Monica looked at Khan, finally showing something different from apathy. She appeared surprised, but that feeling vanished when she performed a nod.

"You still have a few hours," Monica pointed out. "Wait for me in our bedroom. I have to pick up something."

"Sure," Khan said while trying to take Monica's hand to claim their usual kiss, but she stormed out of the bathroom before he could reach her.

'She is pissed,' Khan sighed in his mind. He knew what was happening in Monica's thoughts. She didn't like seeing Khan pushing himself so hard while she remained in the safety of the flat.

Khan understood how useless Monica was probably feeling, but the situation didn't allow any different approach. He was the one who had to raise his status to be worthy of the Solodrey family. There was no way around that problem.

Leaving the bathroom put Khan in front of George and Anita, but he shook his head to convey his intentions. He wanted to remain alone with Monica for a bit, and George understood him with a single glance.

'I have two and a half hours,' Khan thought after entering his bedroom and checking his phone. He should probably rest a bit longer, but studying and his girlfriend had the priority. He even took out a clean military uniform and placed it on the bed during the wait.

Monica didn't take long to reach the bedroom while carrying random clothes. She even sealed the entrance before throwing all that on the bed and showing a playful smile.

"Monica, I don't think we have time," Khan snickered, even if his senses told him something was off.

"You don't get to have an opinion," Monica giggled, reaching Khan to push him onto the bed. She even climbed on him and sat on his waist before adding another order. "Close your eyes now."

"Monica, I might infect you," Khan objected, but Monica crossed her arms and showed another glare that forced him to give up. He didn't know what she wanted to do, but letting her have fun sounded fine.

Still, a frown appeared on Khan's face when Monica seized his right wrist and tied something around it. At that point, Khan couldn't keep his eyes closed anymore, and glancing at his arm revealed what Monica was up to.

"Are you tying me up?" Khan questioned while Monica finished the knot on that soft fabric and bound his hand to the bed's metal edge.

"Of course!" Monica snorted, straightening her back to pick up one of her clothes and move to Khan's left hand. "You are full of injuries and have a fever but still speak about lessons. The only way to make you rest is to tie you up."

"Monica," Khan called while Monica leaned over him to tie his left hand. "How can these clothes even hold me? I can easily rip them off."

"Do it then," Monica pouted, "But you'll lose your favorite skirt in the process."

"What?" Khan asked before glancing at his right hand again. It turned out that Monica had used one of her skirts to tie him up.

"And your favorite underwear," Monica continued once she was done with Khan's left hand.

Khan looked at his left wrist and confirmed what Monica was saying. She had actually used her underwear to tie him to the bed.

"Do you recognize these?" Monica added when she picked up more clothes and showed them to Khan.

"That's my favorite tights," Khan recognized.

"Your favorite tights!" Monica repeated, turning to reach Khan's left ankle. "If you want your left leg back, you must break them!"

"Monica, come on," Khan called, but Monica ignored him and finished the knot on his ankle before picking up more clothes.

"I think you know this too," Monica exclaimed, letting a bra hang above Khan's face.

"That bra is innocent," Khan pleaded.

Monica bent toward Khan's face to let him experience her warm breath before whispering playful words. "And you'll have to break it if you want your right leg back."

Khan could only watch as Monica turned to tie his right ankle to the bed. Once she was done, she resumed her sitting position on Khan's waist and crossed her arms again to convey her firm stance.

"You used your skirt and underwear on my hands on purpose," Khan commented.

"Obviously," Monica scoffed. "Those are your favorite, so you must break one to untie the rest."

Khan wanted to laugh. It was so lovely seeing how deeply Monica understood him. If possible, he would spend the next month like that, but other tasks required his attention, and Monica had to understand that.

"Monica, I need to attend classes," Khan tried to explain. "Wayne will be there, and showing my face will improve my fame even more."

"Rip my clothes apart and go," Monica didn't waver.

"Come on," Khan called. "You know I'm right."

"You are," Monica nodded, "But I won't let you kill yourself."

"I'm fine," Khan complained, but a sniff reached his ears and made him drop his casual attitude. Monica also bent forward to take his head into her hands, and a few tears fell on his face when she got right above him.

"I don't want you to get those kinds of marks," Monica sniffed. "I'd rather break up with you than let you suffer alone."

"Don't even say that," Khan uttered.

"I don't care!" Monica cried. "I don't want to be happy by sacrificing your health. I'd rather take all the pain away with me."

Khan recognized Monica's feelings because he also experienced them. He was willing to give his everything to his girlfriend, and she shared that stance. They had the same mindset. The situation simply didn't allow Monica to do much.

"How do you think I would feel without you?" Khan asked while Monica closed her eyes above him to hold back her tears.

"Safe," Monica cried, "Without my stupid family causing problems for you. You would be-."

"Sad, lost, lonely," Khan interrupted. "Definitely heartbroken. The last time I lost the woman I loved, I threw myself into a war. I'd probably do worse things now."

"T-then," Monica stuttered while opening her eyes.

"Then," Khan interrupted with a sigh. "I should focus on what's truly important. We need your family's approval, but I can't make you sad."

"So?" Monica wondered as some hope seeped into her sad expression.

"So, I'll rest today," Khan explained. "The fever should go down by tomorrow. It's probably for the best to hide my face until Jenny updates me."

"Jenny," Monica snorted, straightening her back to cross her arms. "Why is it always women with you?"

"Jealous?" Khan teased.

"Incredibly," Monica pouted before shooting a meaningful glance at Khan. "I can't leave my man alone for even a day."

"Am I still your man, then?" Khan wondered.

"You would be even if I broke up with you," Monica claimed.

"How does that even work?" Khan laughed.

"It works because I say so," Monica declared.

"Sure, sure," Khan chuckled. "Now, will my merciful girlfriend untie me?"

"No," Monica rejected. "Never trust a scoundrel!"

Monica leaned forward after her statement and reached Khan's left shoulder to turn it into her pillow. She made sure not to touch any injury before speaking sensual words. "And you know I enjoy it when you are in my control."

"Naughty girl," Khan joked. "Can I at least get my welcome-back kiss?"

Monica didn't hesitate to reach for Khan's lips. The two exchanged a long kiss interrupted by many short ones. It actually took them a few minutes to separate.

"You'll get much more once you feel better," Monica whispered, running her tempting fingers over Khan's mouth.

"This fever can't vanish quickly enough," Khan voiced, making Monica explode into a cute giggle.

"Well, how does this work with food?" Khan questioned. "I can't eat like this."

"I'll feed you," Monica exclaimed as her eyes lit up. She liked the idea so much that she straightened her position and hurried outside the bedroom to grab some food.

Khan shook his head, but a smile remained on his face. Getting spoiled for once felt nice, and he loved the idea of spending the day with Monica. He knew calls and studies would eventually distract him, but that wouldn't be enough to ruin his intimacy.

Still, a familiar presence arrived at the bedroom's entrance before Monica could return. Khan lifted his head to glance at that spot, and a serious request quickly left his mouth. "George, untie me."

George would normally never hesitate to help Khan, but his sly gaze immediately recognized the type of clothes binding him to the bed.

"Kinky," George commented without moving from the entrance.

"Come on," Khan called, "Before she comes back."

"Man, I consider us brothers," George stated, "But here is where I draw the line."

"Stop joking," Khan complained. "Help me out of here."

"Kinky, kinky," George muttered, shaking his head. He even left the entrance, and Khan could only slam his head back on the pillow. It seemed he wouldn't break free any time soon.

Chapter 497 Space Pirate

Khan woke up in the middle of the afternoon sweaty as ever, and the odd clarity that filled him conveyed a reassuring message. His fever was gone, and the same went for most of his exhaustion. He could benefit from another nap, but resting too much wasn't his style.

Tempting thighs occupied Khan's vision and distracted him from his thoughts. Monica had freed him, offering her lap as a pillow. She was wearing a skirt, so Khan's struggles during the nightmare had partially uncovered her legs.

'I told her not to stay like this,' Khan sighed, kissing Monica's thigh before turning. She had fallen asleep without putting a single pillow between her back and the metal wall, and her head hung to her left while random snores left her mouth.

Khan lowered his gaze and opened his tracksuit. The hideous injury on his chest became visible, and he touched it to check it out. The wound still hurt, but some flesh was already growing over it. There might only be a faint mark once the healing process ended.

Repeating the process for the other wounds showed similar results. Khan's healing properties were incredible and didn't let him down. It had only taken him two days to make an almost-complete recovery.

Khan closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his head on Monica's lap before forcing himself to sit down. A sleepy complaint left her mouth while she snapped awake and showed her confusion, but a smile arrived when Khan took her in his arms.

"See," Khan whispered, holding Monica's shoulders to keep her right before him. "You fell asleep."

"I was watching over you," Monica pouted. "How is your fever?"

"I'm fine," Khan responded, lowering his head to reach for Monica's lips.

"Check it," Monica stated, turning her head to make Khan's kiss end on her cheek.

"As you wish, ma'am," Khan sighed, and Monica turned to face the wall while he tinkered with the menus. A function activated and checked Khan's temperature before giving a satisfactory result.

"I told you," Khan said. "I'm fine."

"Check again," Monica ordered.

"What?" Khan asked, pulling Monica closer to his right shoulder. "Do you want me to be sick?"

"I like taking care of you," Monica revealed. "You never let me when you are fine."

"I can always get sick again," Khan suggested.

"No," Monica whined, laying her head on Khan's shoulder. "I like when you take care of me too."

"Speaking of which," Khan chuckled, turning to reach for Monica's waist. Yet, Monica's arm rubbed his chest, where his injury was, making him groan and interrupt the gesture.

Monica immediately realized what was happening and opened Khan's tracksuit to check his chest. That slight touch didn't worsen anything. It only caused pain.

"It will be sensitive for a while," Khan guessed.

Monica couldn't do much for that injury but didn't let its location discourage her. She quickly slipped from Khan's arm and crawled behind him to reach his left side. His elbow was also wounded, but she could get under it without touching that painful spot.

"I'll take my kiss now," Monica requested, and Khan didn't hesitate to comply.

The couple moved by the force of habit at that point. Khan turned to sit by the metal wall, and Monica put a pillow there before climbing on his lap. They were so used to being together that they already knew what they wanted and how.

"Check your phone," Monica whispered while her mouth went on Khan's neck. "It rang a few times."

Khan lost himself in Monica's loving kisses while taking out his phone. He didn't receive any calls, only messages from Lucian and Jenny. The former wanted to know if he had retrieved special flowers that Pandora might desire, while Jenny had merely updated him about the recent events.

Opening Jenny's message confirmed what Khan had already suspected. Abora's outpost had shared the pictures of the lake area without adding any details. It only stated that Khan had caused that destruction.

The pages about Khan had gotten to work with that information. A video of the fuming lake and a vague picture of his return to the Harbor created a clear story. He had gone all-out on Abora, and his fans didn't hesitate to use the word "monster" as praise.

Monica had stopped playing with Khan's neck to check his phone, and reading those comments saddened her for multiple reasons. She didn't like how the entire Global Army was ignorant about Khan's best sides but hated even more that his fame was necessary. After all, only a monster could hope to stand in the same realm as the Solodrey family.

"I'd love you even if you were a real monster," Monica uttered while returning to Khan's neck. "Do you know why?"

"Because I'd be your monster?" Khan wondered.

"That," Monica giggled, "And because I'd be the only one to know how lovely you are."

"I've never been called lovely in my life," Khan scoffed, throwing his phone in the corner of the bed.

"You are so sweet and protective," Monica continued. "Truly the best kind of scoundrel I could catch."

"I let myself be caught," Khan stated.

"I had to fight a witch and throw myself at you just to get your attention," Monica snorted.

"You also invaded my room," Khan added, "Slapped me a few times, and forced me into a date."

"I'd do that and more to get you," Monica claimed. "You are worth it."

Khan couldn't help but glance at Monica, and her captivating gaze drew their lips together. Monica left Khan's neck during the kiss, and her hands went on his hair while she claimed ownership of his lap.

"You might want to come up with something new," Khan joked when their lips separated. "I might grow bored of this position."

"You love me too much for that," Monica played along.

"Someone is getting arrogant," Khan exclaimed, reaching for Monica's lips again while pushing her down. "It's almost a pity that you are also right."

Monica giggled, forsaking words to wrap herself around Khan's neck and waist. The two finally had more time for themselves, and neither wanted to waste any second of it.

However, Monica's phone rang while the two were still busy kissing, and complaints inevitably resounded. Khan limited himself to a loud groan while Monica directly shouted.

"How does this keep happening?" Monica cursed. "Do they have cameras waiting for us to fuck?"

"Who is it?" Khan asked, leaning to his right to give Monica enough room to pick up her phone.

Monica browsed her skirt's pocket and pulled out her phone before wearing a surprised expression. She showed the screen to Khan and reading her mother's name made him give up on speaking again.

"Mom, what is it?" Monica asked once the phone reached her ear. "I apologize. Mother, what is it?"

Khan smirked at Monica's annoyed expression and kissed her free cheek before moving downward. Monica caressed his hair, but Khan soon escaped her reach and arrived at her knees.

'Where did I see this?' Khan couldn't help but chuckle as his lips fell on Monica's soft, smooth skin. The same scene had happened with Liiza inside their cave, and those similarities only reaffirmed his feelings for Monica.

"How long am I supposed to remain hidden?" Monica asked, shooting a glare at Khan that didn't last long under his affectionate gestures.

"Yes," Monica eventually whispered, throwing her head on the mattress and closing her eyes to enjoy Khan's foreplay. "I'm listening."

Khan's smile broadened when Monica opened her legs and reached for her skirt. She grabbed that soft fabric in preparation for what was coming, and the gesture partially uncovered Khan's inevitable destination.

"What?!" Monica suddenly exclaimed, slightly straightening her position to grab Khan's hair and interrupt his descent. "Do you want to talk with Khan?"

Khan frowned, but Monica appeared as confused as him, and the nod she performed told him that their intimacy had to wait. Khan felt forced to leave Monica's legs alone and wait for her to hand over her phone, but Madam Solodrey had other plans.

"Us together?" Monica questioned. "Mother, Khan just came back from a difficult-. Yes, I understand. I'll wake him up."

Khan spread his arms in confusion, but Monica received more questions. "I never agreed to return to my flat. Besides, the entire Global Army knows we sleep together."

Monica lowered her gaze to listen to more questions, and the faint words that managed to reach Khan's ears allowed him to predict her reaction. As expected, Monica grew livid and raised her voice.

"I don't care how shameful it looks!" Monica shouted. "And not living with the man I chose would send the wrong message. You taught me that!"

Madam Solodrey added more complaints, and the word "marriage" also came up, but that only made Monica angrier.

"I'm sorry, mother," Monica snorted. "I didn't think being your daughter meant losing control of my pus-!"

Monica couldn't finish her line since Khan leaped to seal her mouth. The conversation was fun to listen to, but he was already on Madam Solodrey's bad side, and letting Monica fight with her was bound to worsen his position.

Khan stole Monica's phone in the middle of her muffled complaints and brought it to his ear to make the call move to the next topic. "Madam Solodrey, what a pleasure! I heard you wanted to talk with me."

"I wanted to talk to you," Madam Solodrey corrected, "And my stubborn daughter. Put me on the screen."

"As you wish, ma'am," Khan responded, shooting a meaningful glance at Monica to calm her down. She complied without hiding her annoyance, but Khan ignored her to connect her phone to the room.

"Wait!" Monica gasped when she realized what Khan was doing. "I'm a mess."

Monica didn't attend to her appearance after Khan's shower, and he had even slept on her. Her skirt was full of creases, her pullover had a few dark stains, and her hair didn't carry its usual volume.

"You are as beautiful as ever," Khan reassured, starting the video call and hurrying back to the bed. Monica wanted to complain a bit longer, but the appearance of her mother's face on the wall forced her to stay put.

"Good evening," Madam Solodrey announced to abide by political pleasantries. "Ideally, I would have discussed this in person, but my dear daughter's reckless actions made me busier than usual."

Monica diverted her gaze. She knew how deeply the interview had affected her public image, and her family had obviously faced annoying consequences. From a political standpoint, her actions had been a mistake she had been willing to make to protect Khan.

"It's saddening to see how harshly you let yourself go in these two weeks," Madam Solodrey continued, targeting Monica's appearance. "Your political image would crumble if someone saw you like this."

"Monica has just finished tending to my injuries," Khan intervened, opening his tracksuit to show his injured chest. "I can't imagine anyone minding their appearance during that practice."

"That's because you are an ignorant mutt," Madam Solodrey responded. "Any member of the Solodrey family must be able to show their superior status even in the middle of a swamp."

'Is this an attack on me?' Khan wondered. His appearance after Abora's mission was already public news, so Madam Solodrey had probably seen it.

"Mother, please refrain from insulting my boyfriend," Monica said, conveying as much seriousness as possible. "If you have a problem with him, bring it to me."

"I wish it was so simple," Madam Solodrey sighed. "I would have pulled you out of the Harbor already otherwise. Sadly, it seems I raised you well."

"Mother?" Monica asked while taking Khan's hand. Those words hinted at something hopeful, and even Khan could feel that.

"Your stunt cornered us," Madam Solodrey revealed. "Splitting you from the Captain would say that my rebellious daughter tricked her family. We can't appear as fools when the entire Global Army is looking at us."

"You could have smeared my reputation," Khan suggested, pretending not to see Monica's glare. "I know you considered that."

"We obviously did," Madam Solodrey confirmed. "However, that would still say that the Solodrey family made a bad investment or let a simple Captain trick them. It would also ruin my daughter's prospects since she would be at the center of the issue."

Khan understood that reasoning. The Solodrey family would have to sacrifice something to remove Khan from the equation. Monica would be the smallest price, but that remained too much due to her relevance among her generation.

"So?" Monica questioned, tightening her grip on Khan's hand.

"As regretful as it is," Madam Solodrey exclaimed, "I must give my public approval of your relationship."

Monica couldn't hold back an excited cry when she heard those words. She even jumped on Khan due to the unstoppable happiness she experienced. Monica touched many of Khan's injuries when she threw herself at him, but he didn't dare to show any pain in front of her mother.

"What's the catch?" Khan wondered while keeping Monica steady in his embrace.

"There is no catch," Madam Solodrey replied, uncaring of the steady gaze that Khan continued to point at her. "However, being my daughter's official partner comes with obligations that must match the Solodrey family's standards."

"Khan is-," Monica tried to complain, but Khan sealed her mouth and brought her on his shoulder to let Madam Solodrey continue.

"I'll provide precise instructions after this call," Madam Solodrey explained. "Still, to summarize, we expect proper conduct in public. We can't have any shameful behavior connected to the Solodrey name. Actually, we want every family to envy my daughter's decision to have you as her partner."

"What else?" Khan questioned.

"You'll be under thorough scrutiny," Madam Solodrey continued. "You didn't earn the Solodrey name yet. You aren't even my daughter's fiancé. No matter what we announce publicly, you are just a soldier who was given a chance."

"What else?" Khan repeated, knowing that Madam Solodrey was far from done.

"We are aware of your duties with Headmistress Holwen," Madam Solodrey stated. "Yet, we'll treat you as an asset of the Solodrey family from now on. That includes tasks within your missions or duties that require your rank and expertise."

Khan nodded. The Solodrey family wanted to leave their brand of ownership on him. That wasn't ideal, but Khan expected a similar outcome.

"Also," Madam Solodrey added, "As my husband already mentioned, you are indebted to the Solodrey family. We expect half of your future earnings as temporary compensation for the interest amassed until now."

Monica couldn't stay put anymore. Madam Solodrey wasn't only after Khan's money. She would also take it just to fill the interest rate without actually affecting the overall debt.

"There's the catch," Khan chuckled, using both arms to keep Monica put and silent.

"It's no catch," Madam Solodrey scoffed. "This is preferential treatment. Any other soldier would have been imprisoned, sold, or forced to work for the rest of his life."

"I guess I should be flattered of such concern," Khan joked.

"I definitely expect gratitude," Madam Solodrey revealed. "Though, I want to see it in your actions. Words and promises are useless to me."

"I'll match your expectations, ma'am," Khan promised.

"More words," Madam Solodrey scoffed. "Consider yourself lucky, Captain Khan. It's not my style to offer a path to redemption."

Monica grew even angrier. Khan didn't do anything wrong, but her mother continued to claim moral superiority, and he was letting her take it.

"I am lucky," Khan declared. "I have the chance to make your daughter happy without resorting to ploys."

"Oh, did you even have ploys?" Madam Solodrey didn't hide her haughtiness.

"Of course," Khan laughed. "I'm among the best students in the Harbor with meaningful connections stretching to the nobles. I was far from cornered."

Monica calmed down to focus on Khan. She didn't know where he was going with that speech, but the topic interested her.

Truth be told, Khan was partially lying. He had a possible plan but had never moved to implement it. That reasoning simply was the result of his accumulated experience and knowledge.

"And how would you use these qualities?" Madam Solodrey questioned.

"Nothing too complicated," Khan stated. "I'd simply have kidnapped your daughter, stolen a ride, and lived the rest of our days as space pirates."

"I'm in no mood for jokes, Captain," Madam Solodrey warned.

"I'm not joking," Khan pressed on. "You'd be surprised by how good your daughter looks in leather boots."

"Captain," Madam Solodrey called, not knowing how serious Khan was about that topic. "I expect you to refrain from wasting my time in useless talks from now on."

"They aren't useless if they can make Monica happy," Khan declared.

Madam Solodrey inevitably glanced at her daughter. Khan wasn't restraining her anymore. She had calmed down enough to feel a bit embarrassed about that straightforward compliment, and a genuine smile had also filled her expression.

"I told you already," Madam Solodrey announced. "Happiness is a luxury for us and you too now."

Khan wanted to speak some more, but Madam Solodrey closed the call, making the screen on the wall go dark. At that point, a message reached Monica and Khan's phones, and the room's menus confirmed that the instructions mentioned before had arrived.

"I'll buy new boots if you like them so much," Monica whispered now that privacy had arrived.

"I prefer your skirts," Khan teased, lifting Monica to put her on his lap. "Still, I wouldn't be against trying something new. I'm sure anything will look perfect on you."

"Scoundrel," Monica giggled, stretching her legs and laying her head on the intact part of Khan's chest. "What was that pirate thing anyway? If you wanted to get on my mother's nerves, I could have helped."

"I was serious," Khan revealed. "Well, it was just a vague idea."

"What do you mean?" Monica questioned, lifting her head to look at Khan's mysterious expression.

"Escaping is hard but not impossible," Khan explained. "I'd just need a short window to get outside the system and into outer space. I still have much to learn about those paths, but there must be one leading to some lawless zone."

"And you would kidnap me for such a long and dangerous journey?" Monica wondered.

"Definitely," Khan stated, lowering his head to face Monica. "You are stuck with me now, and I'm not easy to get rid of."

"Wasn't that my line?" Monica questioned.

"I stole it," Khan claimed, "Just like I'd steal you from your family."

"Alright, space pirate Khan," Monica giggled, pushing on Khan's shoulders to make his back hit the mattress. "We have many regulations to review, but I think celebrations are in order."

"Oh?" Khan feigned ignorance. "What's there to celebrate?"

"The fact that you got the best girlfriend in the world," Monica responded, "And I got the best boyfriend in the world."

"We already had that," Khan continued to play dumb while Monica leaned on him and planted her hands at his head's sides.

"But we can be that in the open now," Monica stated, "Without resorting to your kidnapping plan."

"I guess I can put my great escape aside for now," Khan nodded before a meaningful smirk appeared on his face due to how intensely Monica was looking at him.

Chapter 498 Open

"Tense?" Monica asked while her fingers remained tightly entangled with Khan's.

"I should be the one to ask that question," Khan pointed out.

"I am," Monica didn't even try to pretend, "But I also feel-."

"Happy?" Khan interrupted, and the two exchanged an excited smile.

"I've dreamed about this for months," Monica revealed, sliding on the cab's seat to snuggle closer to Khan.

"I know," Khan stated. "Don't lose your cool."

"I should be the one to say that," Monica giggled.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Khan responded. "I can't be jealous when you can be at my side."

"The same goes for me," Monica voiced, but Khan rolled his eyes.

"What?" Monica scowled.

"Just try not to kill anyone," Khan coughed. "They are allowed to invite me to dinner, even if they are women."

"It's only proper to ask the girlfriend first," Monica declared.

"You will definitely kill someone," Khan sighed.

"It might be within my rights," Monica snorted before calming down and resting on Khan's shoulder. "It's a pity we can't be all lovely-dovey in public."

"Your mother wants us to show manners proper of the Solodrey family," Khan exclaimed, reviewing the many obligations memorized the previous night. "I can wait for the lessons to end to kiss you."

"Can you?" Monica questioned.

"Probably not," Khan admitted. "But it's either that or my testicles."

"Technically," Monica wore a playful smile, "Those are officially mine now."

"George said that happens only after marriage," Khan recalled. "Knowing you, I'm actually a bit scared."

"What do you mean knowing you?!" Monica shouted.

"Oh, we arrived," Khan announced, and the two glanced at the window in front of them, which showed one of the embassy's roofs.

The cab landed, dispersing the playful mood and bringing back some tension. That was only the second day of lessons, but a monumental event was about to unfold. Monica and Khan were about to appear in the open as an official couple for the first time.

Monica tightened her grip on Khan's hand, and he pulled her to make her turn. The couple didn't need words. They instinctively exchanged a passionate kiss that had to be enough for the rest of the morning.

"I love you," Monica whispered when the kiss ended.

"I love you," Khan repeated before delivering another kiss. The two then looked at the door's handle for a few seconds before deciding to open it.

The Headmistress had opened a private route inside the embassy for the couple, but Monica remained a respected member of the Solodrey family. A few soldiers wouldn't do as a welcoming

party. A whole team was waiting on the roof, and none dared to lower their gazes to look at the newcomers.

Khan could sense the difference from his usual welcoming party in the symphony. The roof carried more than respect. Fear and tension that surpassed what the couple was experiencing filled the area, adding value to the event.

Monica had already worn an elegant smile to keep up with the political façade, while Khan went completely cold. He was the one being tested, so his behavior couldn't convey any hesitation or tension. He had to look the part of a man worthy of the Solodrey name.

The change in status became more evident once the team of soldiers allowed the couple inside. Khan had always attracted a lot of attention, but that gained a different nature now. The corridor had workers, Professors, and other students, but no murmurs resounded while Khan and Monica crossed them, walking hand in hand.

The audience seemed to hold their breath to avoid disturbing the couple's passage. Monica and Khan had never managed to generate that reaction on their own. Yet, everything had changed now.

'Madam Solodrey only said that her family was always aware and in favor of our relationship,' Khan thought. 'Imagine if she actually made me Monica's fiancé.'

Of course, things were complicated at that level of the political environment, and Khan knew it far too well. Someone with Monica's status getting into a public relationship was a big deal that usually led to marriage and other important benefits.

Khan could obtain untold riches and assets if his relationship went well, which was likely to happen in the public eye since the Solodrey family had given their official approval. It would actually be hard for the couple to break up after the event.

The wall that usually separated Khan from ordinary soldiers and students had grown even taller, and it took two elevators to reach an environment that didn't have a similar tension. Soon, many polite smiles broadened before the couple, and excited cries and questions followed.

"Monica, congratulations!" Zoe was the first to leave the group of students to approach the couple, but everyone else soon followed her.

"Monica, we want to know every detail," A couple of women announced as soon as they reached Monica.

"Count me in," A fourth woman stated.

"How did you get your parents' approval?" A fifth woman questioned. "I'm asking for a friend."

Anita was also among that female group but remained slightly behind to let her companions have fun. That process was a mandatory political procedure, and she didn't need to wait her turn due to how easily she could meet Monica.

Khan couldn't remain outside that procedure, but it took a different shape for him. The group of students had split into two parts, and he got all the men, who mostly shook his hand and offered polite congratulations.

"Thank you, Mark," Khan smiled. "John, thank you, thank you."

The different nature of those congratulations forced the couple to split. Khan and Monica ended up on opposite sides of the corridor to attend to unique conversations.

"To gain the Solodrey family's approval truly shows your worth, Captain," Mark, one of the students, exclaimed once the round of congratulations ended. "I now understand why none of us could ever hope to get close to Miss Solodrey."

"You haven't been paying attention, Mark," John, another student, stated. "Miss Solodrey chose the Captain. Though I can also see why."

"Indeed," Mark laughed. "Well, celebrations are in order. Why don't we gather at Pandora tonight? My treat."

"It is a good chance to discuss the recent scarcity of Asnian," John agreed. "Captain, what do you think about that?"

'What the fuck is an Asnian?' Khan cursed in his mind, but someone intervened to help him.

"Don't bore Khan with your financial issues already," Lucian announced, stepping into the frontlines to join the conversation. "Let's stick to wishing him good luck."

"I agreed when I heard drinks at Pandora," George also joined the conversation.

"Mark, it seems Lucian wants to keep all the financial talk for himself," John complained.

"It's our fault for not recognizing the Captain's value soon enough," Mark pointed out.

The interaction wouldn't look special to an outsider, but Khan noticed stark differences from his previous treatment. His classmates had always been polite to him, but that was the first time anyone ever mentioned financial investments and similar topics.

'I see,' Khan realized. 'I've entered the inner circle.'

Khan's official status as Monica's boyfriend didn't only give him access to the Solodrey family's wealth. It also made him able to affect certain markets since his girlfriend's assets encompassed an immense array of transactions.

The group even arranged themselves according to their status. Lucian, Mark, and John could interact with Khan directly since their families were close to the Solodrey family in terms of wealth and influence. Instead, anyone behind them could only hope to become part of the social events they organized.

Of course, the public was unaware of Khan's actual situation, but he had to play along to match the Solodrey family's standards. He was unprepared for anything beyond simple dinners and other specific topics, but fixing that issue had become a priority. In the meantime, he would have to rely on George and Lucian.

"I think I'm free tonight," Khan revealed. "Though I'm still recovering from my trip on Abora, and I only have war stories. I hope that's not a problem."

"Oh, the Captain thinks we want to hear about that," John chuckled. "How cute."

"John, those are talks for after we are properly wasted," Mark scolded.

"Don't think you'll get this one drunk so easily," George commented, pointing his forefinger at Khan.

"George, can't you help your brothers out?" John complained. "We are young men in desperate need of advice from the best Casanova on the market."

"How come no one asked me?" George snorted.

"Anita terrifies us," Mark admitted, and John nodded behind his shoulder.

"Guys," Khan called, lowering his head and voice to make the conversation more private. "Please, keep these jokes for yourselves. Monica doesn't enjoy how popular I am."

"I feel the sudden urge to punch you," George commented.

"Khan could have phrased it better," Lucian laughed.

"He is the chosen one," John gasped.

"Man," Mark exclaimed before coughing to correct his words. "Captain, you really need to have a drink with us."

"Only if you stop calling me Captain," Khan played along, and the group reached a silent understanding.

On the other side of the corridor, Monica was going through very different questions, and the many voices coming in her direction had already turned into whispers.

"Is it true what they say about the Captain?" One of the women around Monica asked. "That he has inhumane stamina?"

"Lucy!" Anita scolded. "That's not proper at all!"

"But Monica kept him for herself all this time," Lucy complained. "We deserve details."

"I'm with Lucy here," Zoe nodded. "And, Anita, don't lie. We know you are keeping your secrets."

"I'm more interested in another part of the topic," Another woman in the group announced. "Miss-, Monica, I was planning to talk to my mother about something, but I don't know how to mention it to her."

"Oh, more gossip," Zoe gasped. "Tell us, Marcia. Tell us."

"Your enthusiasm is heartwarming," Monica decided to speak through her elegant persona. "To tell the truth, I was worried you might judge me poorly."

"Don't even joke about it," Zoe stated. "We can't imagine what you had to go through."

"That's right," Lucy added. "We are happy for you."

"As long as you are happy," Marcia continued.

"Yes, I am," Monica confirmed, showing an embarrassed smile and playing with her curls.

"Everything still feels like a wonderful dream."

"My girl is so lost," Anita teased.

"I can't help it," Monica did her best shy-girl performance. "It's my first time feeling like this. Please, go easy on me."

Monica's pretense was so perfect that even her ill-intentioned companions melted a bit. She was the embodiment of an innocent woman struggling with her first love, and her classmates wanted to cheer for her.

"Don't worry!" Zoe announced, taking Monica's hands. "We'll take care of you properly. In exchange, you'll give us a few secrets."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Monica giggled.

"Oh, don't play dumb," Zoe complained. "Don't think you can escape after that interview."

"Is Khan okay?" Monica pretended not to hear Zoe's line as she hurried toward Khan.

Khan was still busy with the chit-chat when he felt Monica getting close. He turned in time to grab her hand, and she didn't hesitate to hold the entirety of his arm before addressing the other classmates. "I hope you are treating my man well."

"We wouldn't dare to do otherwise," Mark promptly said. "By the way, congratulations, Miss Solodrey. You found a great partner."

Similar congratulations followed as the two groups became one again, but Khan and Monica soon focused on each other. She had actually pulled him to get his attention, and a question escaped her mouth when she grabbed his uniform's edges. "Are you already making plans without me?"

"The guys invited me out tonight," Khan explained. "We are going to Pandora."

"But we had that thing tonight," Monica played it vague, pulling the edges of Khan's uniform again without adding anything. She only wore a fake pleading expression that Khan could easily unmask.

'Needy girl,' Khan thought. He didn't have anything planned for that night, but Monica seemed set on making a statement.

"It seems I won't be able to join tonight," Khan apologized to his classmates, stretching his arm behind Monica's back to reach the other side of her waist. "Shall we postpone to tomorrow?"

"You do you, Cap-, Khan," John stated. "We wouldn't dare to get in the way of... anything you need to do."

Monica wore an obvious triumphant expression and began to pull Khan away. He could only show another apologetic face at his companion while heading for the classroom, creating a scene that made the audience reach the same conclusion. Khan truly seemed the embodiment of helplessness.

However, Lucian was interested in any matter related to Khan and couldn't leave that vague topic alone. "Is this a thing I should know about?"

"Oh, no," Khan exclaimed, turning to face Lucian. "Monica just wanted you to see that she is my priority."

"Khan," Monica pouted, but Khan broke her expression by pinching her cheek.

"But you are my priority," Khan confirmed, and Monica gave up in front of that honesty. She lowered her gaze to hide her smile and let Khan guide her inside the classroom. She was simply walking, but everyone imagined her hopping happily.

"Did he just pinch Monica Solodrey?" Mark gasped.

"And she liked it," Zoe commented.

"Don't tell me he won her over," Lucy wondered, "Not the other way around."

"The chosen one," John announced.

Lucian could only shake his head. He was a master of social interactions but still needed time to accept Monica's true face. He couldn't see through her, and his classmates didn't help.

Khan and Monica took their seats, and the other classmates followed. George, Anita, and Lucian sat near the couple, and a small group formed behind them. Only one exception existed in that arrangement.

"I'm sorry I couldn't join the congratulations," Wayne announced, reaching for the seat on Khan's left that he had left empty on purpose. "I got lost again."

"How did you get lost after attending classes for two weeks?" Khan asked, pretending that everything was normal.

"One elevator brought me to the wrong floor," Wayne laughed, "And it took me a bit to find the way back here."

The sole idea that an elevator could malfunction was unrealistic, but Khan had seen similar small issues around Wayne in the past weeks. They were mostly minor technical problems that had become an odd pattern since Wayne continued to be at their center.

"Also, I wish to apologize, Miss Solodrey," Wayne stated, peeking past Khan to look at Monica. "I will never touch you without your permission again."

The conversation didn't go unnoticed. After all, Khan wasn't the only one with doubts about Wayne's identity. The events with Monica had made most students reach out to their families to investigate, but no one came back with answers.

"I thought you would have apologized for exposing my birth control," Monica directly uttered, uncaring of the implications that her words could have.

"Was that me?" Wayne wondered. "I guess it's possible. I'll apologize for that if you feel it's needed."

"No need," Monica disregarded the matter. "Besides, you have only exposed the obvious. You might have actually brought Khan and me in the open faster."

Khan had a hand on the interactive table, and Monica took it since the Professor had yet to arrive. The two even exchanged a glance at that point, but that cute gesture couldn't distract the audience from other topics.

Many students had suspected that Wayne had something to do with the birth control's strange reaction. The lack of proof had delayed eventual investigations, but Monica appeared convinced of his involvement, and her classmates noted that down.

"Oh, Captain," Wayne exclaimed. "You became a pilot and even got the woman of your dreams. Is there anything you can't achieve?"

"Are you jealous now?" Khan performed a fake laugh.

"Maybe," Wayne wondered, lifting his gaze to browse his thoughts. "I don't really have those feelings, but you might be able to trigger them."

"Do you want me to?" Khan questioned.

"I don't know," Wayne shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just curious. I like everything, and bad things still happen. I wonder how I would react to someone I envy."

Khan tried to look into Wayne's innocent face but found the usual honesty. The man knew something, but that secret was immersed in genuine feelings that depicted him as a simple student.

A message suddenly reached Khan and forced him to interrupt the inspection. He pulled out his phone only to see that the Headmistress had sent a briefing for his next mission.

"Let me guess," Wayne spoke while Khan opened the message. "They are sending you to Induna this weekend."

Khan's gaze tried to flicker, but he kept it on the phone. He knew Wayne couldn't look at the screen from his position, but the name on the message didn't lie. The next mission was on Induna.

Chapter 499 Gig

The ability to see the symphony was almost a double-edged sword. Khan couldn't help but be confused by Wayne's presence. That steady, cheerful mana grew stranger every time he inspected it but continued to lack clues.

Nevertheless, Wayne stopped being Khan's priority after the statement. Monica could read the Headmistress' message, and Wayne's spot-on guess made her wary and worried for Khan's safety.

"Will I see you there?" Khan spoke before Monica could do anything. He even drove her hand to his mouth to kiss it. That was already bordering the limits of what Madam Solodrey allowed, but it successfully calmed Monica down.

"Why would I be there?" Wayne questioned, showing his usual innocence.

"It doesn't matter," Khan said before glancing at the hall's entrance. "Oh, the Professor is coming."

The conversation ended at that low point, and the mandatory social interactions that filled the rest of the day didn't give the couple time to think about it.

Surprisingly enough, even the Professors congratulated Khan and Monica before continuing their lessons. The event was so big that no one could shy away from it, and its consequences created mandatory tasks.

Monica's needy character could only delay the inevitable. The next night, Khan and Monica had to separate to attend different social events, and neither was too excited about them.

The female side of the advanced classes invited Monica into a large flat rearranged for the occasion. Soft carpets, comfortable couches, and a few armchairs filled the vast main hall, and the students gathered there while servants delivered drinks and light food.

"Now that we are all served and comfortable," Zoe announced as every eye in the hall converged on Monica. "Details!"

A series of "yes!" and similar comments followed. Monica covered her mouth to hide her fake smile and wore a shy expression. That development was predictable, so she already knew how to handle it.

"I'm so embarrassed," Monica revealed. "I feel I'm forgetting my entire education."

"My, my," Lucy gasped. "Even Monica Solodrey loses her cool when her man is involved."

"I'm unfit for my family name," Monica sighed. "It's just. I can't help it, you know?"

"We don't know," Zoe complained as her friends leaned forward to get closer to Monica's couch.

"That's why we want you to tell us."

"I think Anita can be calmer than me," Monica finally showed her smile.

"You won't involve me in this," Anita chuckled, leaning on the back of Monica's couch. "Come on, girl. Our parents can't reach us here."

"I guess there is something I can share," Monica pretended to give up while taking a sip from her drink. "I know I said we got together during the trip to the Harbor, but our relationship started a bit earlier."

A series of gasps resounded, even if many were fake. The decision to fly to the Harbor was a clue to that truth, and Monica's classmates had already noticed it.

"How did it happen?" Marcia asked. "Did you really push for it?"

"Initially, it was just curiosity," Monica revealed, playing with her curls. "I mean, how could I not be interested in him? Khan already had a great reputation, and you should see him without a shirt."

"The network is full of those pictures," Zoe laughed while exchanging complicit smiles with her friends. "We are all with you there."

Monica retained her smile, but some annoyance began to arrive. She didn't like how everyone could drool over her boyfriend so openly.

"Anyway," Monica continued. "I sought chances to talk alone and even took him out on a date. He was so different from my other suitors. It was the first time someone treated me as Monica without the Solodrey."

"Is that when you two got together?" Marcia asked.

"No," Monica chuckled, showing a genuine smile. "He had just come out of a long relationship. He only wanted to focus on Mister Cobsend's assignment and protect his old friend. Then, the Nele accepted him, which made everything more complicated."

"You must admit that the Captain has a knack for getting closer to aliens," Lucy commented.

"He is a natural," Monica confirmed. "He spoke, ate, and slept like them in a few weeks. He is truly unbeatable on the field."

"That sounds troublesome," Zoe exclaimed. "Why go through that hassle for someone not interested in you?"

"If I want something," Monica stated, "I get it. That's what my mother taught me."

"The Captain couldn't win against Monica's pride," Lucy joked, and a series of laughs resounded.

"I wish," Monica sighed. "He never offended me, but I couldn't attract his attention with expensive dinners and good drinks. Only honesty made him falter."

Silence spread in the hall as Monica lowered her gaze. She had spoken the truth, and her friends understood that.

"Well, honesty and nice clothes," Monica cheered the mood. "He liked me. That just wasn't enough to move him."

"You wouldn't think that from his record," One of the women in the hall pointed out.

"He is pretty serious about everything," Monica explained, running her finger on her glass' edge.

"He doesn't notice half-measures. Yet, the more of my education I put aside, the less I could retain my cool in his presence."

"This sounds like one of the books I used to read when I was younger," Marcia declared.

"It reached the point when I didn't even think about my position," Monica continued. "I just went for it, hoping he would accept me."

"So bold," Anita couldn't help but exclaim.

"How did you know he wasn't playing with you?" Zoe wondered.

"I wouldn't be tricked by something like that," Monica proudly stated before lowering her gaze again. "Khan never cared about my wealth or influence. He never asked for any favor. He just likes me."

Monica had partially dropped the act during her explanation. She had revealed small truths about her relationship, and her expressions inevitably became honest. Still, she appeared more elegant and beautiful than ever because of that.

"Who knew that the path for Monica's heart was to treat her as a simple woman?" Lucy commented without hiding her surprise.

"I wouldn't have accepted any man," Monica corrected. "I'm sure you are aware of his feats and skills. No one in the Global Army or families even comes close."

"Still, Monica," Zoe voiced. "Weren't you worried about his background? Having fun is one thing, but now that your family has acknowledged him, marriage isn't too unlikely."

"Zoe is right," Marcia added. "I understand your feelings, but did you stop to think about it properly?"

"My friends," Monica exclaimed, "I'm a proud descendant of a Solodrey family. I chose Khan because I can imagine myself standing at his side for the rest of my life."

Another wave of gasps resounded. Those wealthy ladies were no strangers to occasional hook-ups and believed that Monica had initially chosen to do the same with Khan. However, her last statement made her sound ready for marriage.

"I might have spoken too much," Monica realized.

"You just told the truth," Anita giggled. "It was adorable."

"I might have also meant that as a warning," Monica also laughed. "Khan naturally attracts women for some reason. It feels necessary to say that he is mine."

"Is this Monica Solodrey's jealous side?" Zoe joked, not realizing how serious Monica's words were.

"It is," Monica stated. "I know you wouldn't dare to do anything that might hurt my relationship. Still, a reminder sounds mandatory. Don't you think so, Zoe?"

Zoe's smile froze. She was one of the few who had openly tried to flirt with Khan, and it was clear that Monica didn't forget it.

"Of course," Zoe voiced an awkward laugh. "You said it yourself. We could directly treat Khan as your husband."

"I'd appreciate that," Monica agreed, and her elegant smile began to leak some coldness. Somehow, her kind words sounded like a threat.

"We need another round!" Anita announced since she knew where that situation was going. "And I think it's time to move to the spicy details."

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Khan had a slightly different version of Monica's social gathering. Mark had booked a room in Pandora's main building to host the event, and only a handful of the advanced classes' male population had been allowed to join it.

Moreover, the conversations had never focused too heavily on the relationship with Monica. Actually, that topic had yet to come up even after multiple rounds of drinks.

"Can you see this number here?" Mark questioned while pointing at a number on the top-right corner of the holograms in front of the couch.

"Two million assets," Khan confirmed before adjusting his position on the couch, "And the number next to that is their value in Credits."

"Correct," Mark exclaimed, placing a hand on Khan's shoulder. "Now, look at what happens."

Mark opened a series of menus featuring graphs and many values before hitting a key marked "sell". The number of assets immediately went to zero, but the Credits in Mark's wallet increased for the corresponding amount.

"What should I see?" Khan wondered. He was no expert on those sales, but there was nothing strange in Mark's procedure.

"Here," Mark called, opening a different menu. "The price of that material plummeted since I filled the market with it. There is no demand anymore, so how should I spend the Credits I just obtained?"

"Do you save them?" Khan guessed.

"I could," Mark laughed, "But that's money to throw away, not save. I filled this account to see how long I could play with it before running out of Credits."

'Money to throw away, he says,' Khan thought, hiding his disbelief. Mark's account had more than fifty million Credits. That amount would set anyone for life, but Mark was ready to waste it to kill time.

"Ideally," Mark explained, "You should buy another resource that has fulfilled its demand some time ago. Its production would have restarted by now, so you can try to monopolize it and wait until its price skyrockets."

"Do you mean altering its rarity?" Khan asked.

"Something like that," Mark nodded. "Of course, you need an understanding of many socio-political events to predict whether the demand for your assets will return."

"It sounds like gambling," Khan commented.

"It's not gambling in the hands of an expert," Mark proudly claimed.

"Mark often forgets to explain how his family owns many of the factories involved with the production," Lucian said from the other side of the room. "It's easier to win bets when you are a few steps ahead of everyone else."

"Lucian is right," Mark showed a shameless smile. "The game is rigged in my hands, but that's the beauty of being rich."

"I can think of a few other benefits," John announced while smoking a smelly cigarette on another couch.

"That guy spends a fortune in a certain brothel," Mark joked.

"Only the finest women in the universe," John shouted, blowing grey smoke out of his mouth.

"Maybe that's why my parents have yet to find me a fiancÃ©e."

"Why would you want it?" George scoffed from the other edge of Khan's couch. "It becomes too troublesome to get lovers once you are engaged."

"Mister Ildoo is so wise," John groaned. "How did you convince Anita to go out with you with your reputation?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," George feigned ignorance, focusing on his drink.

"I think you set some record in descendants dated in a month," John explained.

"It's not my fault if my charm makes women crazy," George sighed.

"Did you steal that line from me?" Khan frowned.

"If you used it first," George announced, "It's because I inspired it."

"I preferred when Havaa hit you," Khan joked.

"She did throw nice punches," George laughed. "You don't find those women among humans."

"Lucian, they are speaking in code again," Mark complained.

"They have a special connection," Lucian uttered. "Who are we to break it?"

"That's right!" John added, lifting his arms to the ceiling. "They might reveal the secrets of the universe!"

"What is he saying?" Khan asked.

"John, are you high?" Mark questioned.

"What do you expect?" John laughed, throwing his cigarette into an empty corner of the room.

"They sold me this as the best product on Abora, but it's quite bad."

"You should always use a trustworthy dealer," Mark sighed. "Speaking of Abora, I heard you had it pretty rough there, Captain."

"Plants aren't as harmless as they look," Khan nodded. "Though, I've mostly recovered already."

"I heard the strange guy, Wayne, talking about Induna," John announced. "Did the Global Army assign you a mission there?"

"Yes," Khan confirmed. "Yet, I can't tell you the details."

"I don't care about the details," John shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't understand why you do it."

"I need merits and Credits," Khan summarized.

"I think John is saying those missions are beneath you now," Mark translated. "Isn't that right, guys?"

"Captain Khan has always been too qualified for them," Lucian commented. "Still, if he says that he needs them, then he needs them."

"Am I missing something?" Khan remained confused.

"Khan, the Solodrey family acknowledged you," Mark stated. "You could book space stations freely if you know your way with words."

Khan didn't hide his confusion. He knew how wealthy the Solodrey family was, but a space station remained too big. It went far beyond the money Mark had in that account.

"Oh, wow," John gasped while leaning on the couch's arm. "He really doesn't know."

"Mark is a perfect example," Lucian intervened. "He received a space station for his thirteenth birthday."

"An entire space station?" Khan asked.

"It wasn't as straightforward as Lucian made it sound," Mark said. "A small family gifted it to improve their chances of marrying into us. They initially aimed for me, but my father directly refused."

"So," Khan tried to understand, "You got a space station without giving anything in return."

"We did take their most promising descendant," Mark explained. "We married it off to a small branch of my family. Still, the space station was quite old and poor, so my father gave it to me as a personal project."

"Did everyone in the other family change their name?" Khan chuckled, still incredulous before those big political moves.

"No, we only took the descendant," Mark revealed. "The family crumbled afterward, and other organizations absorbed anything worth saving."

Mark wasn't showing any arrogance. He wasn't even trying to brag about his wealth. He had described the death of a small family as a common occurrence that didn't deserve any second thought.

Khan struggled to adjust his perspective. He liked Mark, but that side of him belonged to a world he couldn't judge. Also, according to the conversation, Khan had just joined that side.

"Do you really own a space station?" Khan changed the topic to mask his internal conflict.

"Yes," Mark nodded, tinkering with the holograms to make a small space station appear. The image also had multiple branches that explained the various functions of the structure, the people in charge of them, and how expensive they were.

"It's nothing great, really," Mark continued. "I'm barely meeting expenses since there isn't much on it. Still, we can visit it one of these months. Its hospitality is one of its best aspects."

Mark's casual tone highlighted once again how distant Khan was from that world. The student wasn't even twenty-five but owned such an incredible structure.

"That's why I asked," John commented. "People will lend you more than space stations if you wave the Solodrey name around."

"But I don't own much," Khan pointed out. "Monica and I aren't even engaged yet."

"It doesn't matter," Mark stated. "Actually, it might grant better offers."

"You are between the touchable and untouchable right now," Lucian continued. "Since you have the Solodrey family's approval, many organizations will fight each other to earn favors from you."

"And here I was worried about making a good impression on Monica's parents," Khan mocked himself.

"Did you?" George asked.

"Oh, yeah," Khan scoffed. "I'm like a son for Madam Solodrey."

"You can't blame her for having her reservations," Lucian declared. "I believe you understand why now."

"I always understood her," Khan sighed. "I might prefer that even. Since she acknowledged me, she knows I can be good for her daughter."

"This guy got the daughter and defeated the mother," John voiced his disbelief. "You are built different, my man."

"I am part Nak," Khan joked, pulling a strand of hair to show its azure color.

"It is truly commendable," Mark praised. "Everyone expected Monica to end up with Lucian or someone at the level of your friend Luke Cobsend. No offense, but you weren't even on the list."

"There was a poll too," John revealed. "You made everyone lose their money."

"I bet some girls got it right," Lucian guessed.

"I know they did," George confirmed.

"How did you two even get together?" John asked. "I thought you were into aliens."

"John!" Mark scolded.

"It wasn't an insult," John lifted his hands to convey innocence. "I've seen pictures of the Nele when the rumors about you pointed in that direction. I'd never look at another woman again if I had a chance with them."

"Looks sure help," Khan laughed.

"As if you ever had an ugly woman," George snorted.

"I was saying," Khan cleared his throat. "I wasn't planning on getting into another relationship. Only Monica could make me change my mind."

"I heard the craziest stuff," John stated. "Did she pay you to get you into dates?"

"What? No," Khan shook his head. "Monica would never resort to that. It was a gradual process that eventually led us to the current situation."

"Wasn't the Alstair guy also there?" John wondered, looking at his companions to confirm that information. "How did you find the time with that dog clung to her legs?"

"John, Francis is our friend," Mark scolded.

"Whatever," John sighed. "That guy is weirder than Wayne."

"John," Khan called, and John's bloodshot eyes fixed themselves on him before widening in fear. The room's temperature had suddenly grown cold, and palpable killing intent had fallen on him.

"Y-yes?" John felt forced to ask as clarity spread in his mind.

"No one clings to Monica's legs but me," Khan said, showing a smile that radiated far different emotions.

"Of course," John coughed. "I was just saying-."

"Don't," Khan interrupted. "I won't speak badly of Mister Alstair. He simply has nothing to do with Monica or me."

"Alright," John stated. "Still, since we are on the topic, how is life with Monica Solodrey?"

"Don't take it the wrong way," Mark added. "We have known Monica for years. We are just curious about her character outside social events."

"And you will remain curious," Khan laughed as the mood grew more cheerful. "I want those sides of her to be only mine."

"Why does he look cool when he says that?" John wondered.

"Don't let him fool you," George warned. "He goes full husband material. That's why he is so secretive."

"We are already seeing surprising scenes in public," Lucian chuckled. "I believe we'll have fun for the rest of the semester."

"You should plan more private parties," Mark suggested. "They might give us a chance to know each other."

"That's a good idea," Lucian agreed. "I only wish Khan wasn't so busy."

"Didn't you change your mind yet?" Mark questioned. "You don't need to kill yourself for status anymore."

"It's not that," Khan uttered, deciding to reveal something to sow seeds that could bloom in the future. "The wealthy life sounds fun, but I want to find the Nak, which means exploring the universe and learning from aliens."

"The Nak?" Mark asked while everyone showed confusion. Only George shot a knowing glance before focusing on his drink.

"It's something I must do," Khan remained vague. "You do what you want with this information."

Khan paid attention to the symphony, but nothing strange appeared. He sensed curiosity, detachment, and interest, but none was as intense as he wished.

"It's understandable," Mark stated, even if he didn't pinpoint the reason behind Khan's goal. "I guess you'll visit Induna on the weekend."

"That I will," Khan nodded.

"You know," Mark continued. "Induna has interesting shells under its ice. If you found some-."

"Hey, hey," Lucian interrupted. "Khan already has a deal with me."

"And Lucian comes first again!" John exclaimed before lying down.

"We'll stick to parties then," Mark shrugged his shoulders. "Cover yourself on Induna. I don't want you to use a cold to ignore our invitations."

"I'm good with cold," Khan declared. "Also, we won't hide from social life anymore. Appearing in public as a couple is part of the gig."

Chapter 500 People

Meeting the descendants after achieving that new status gave Khan a broader perspective on the amount of wealth they actually held. Calling them worlds apart almost didn't fit the description. No one could accumulate that sum in a single lifetime, especially without a background.

The situation appeared hopeless, but Khan could find a positive side. The reality check made him give up trying to match the descendants in that field. He would never achieve that, so he had to prioritize the only thing they lacked, which involved the Global Army.

When the last weekly lesson ended, Khan jumped on his ship with a newfound resolve. The lack of alternatives made the path toward his goals easier to pursue, and his body reacted to that mindset, allowing him to fly faster than before.

Induna was farther than Abora and Honides. A cheap ship would generally take two full days to cover the distance that separated it from the Harbor, but Khan saved twelve hours due to his incredible resilience.

After one and a half days of flight, a pale-blue planet appeared in the ship's scanners, forcing Khan to endure the deceleration procedures. Calls also arrived to coordinate his landing, and it didn't take long before the vehicle pierced Induna's atmosphere.

A bluish landscape unfolded on the canopy's windows. Ice spread everywhere, creating frozen mountains, plains, and canyons. Pale-blue snow fell from grey clouds that covered the entire planet, making it hard for Khan to spot the outpost with his eyes.

The ship obviously had scanners for the task, and the autopilot had also coordinated with the targeted outpost, so Khan could let go of the steering wheel. His eyes wandered to the windows as Induna's details ran through his thoughts. Still, the scenery confirmed that there wasn't much to know about that planet.

According to the reports, Induna was a lifeless planet that the Harbor mostly used to dig out water. Valuable metals and minerals existed under the ice, but nothing was vital to the Harbor's survival.

The findings hidden in the ice were the only exception to Induna's otherwise plain environment. Fossils and much more coming from before that ice age filled the planet, and many scientists were interested in them. Yet, their retrieval could be troublesome and expensive, which explained Khan's presence.

The autopilot led the ship behind a huge frozen mountain and toward its base. Something moved there, and a black building became visible once the gate at its center opened, making the snow above it fall.

The ship crossed the gate and landed on a vast hangar, mostly featuring small terrestrial vehicles. Soldiers wearing long black coats and thick hats waited in the area, and the usual military salutes unfolded when Khan appeared in the open.

"Sir, please, wear these," One of the soldiers left the welcoming party to approach Khan and hand a coat and a hat.

The temperature in the hangar was strangely low, and the gate's opening had made it fall even further. Khan had no problem enduring that cold, but his mission would involve the outside world, so he wore his new clothes.

"I'd rather hurry," Khan announced since the soldiers had yet to break their military salute. "Is everything still as stated in Headmistress Holwen's report?"

The trip had taken a while. It was early morning of the last day of the week, making it impossible for Khan to return for the first lessons. Yet, he could still save a few hours if the mission didn't feature problems.

"Yes, sir!" The soldier that had handed the winter clothes responded while leading Khan into a different part of the hangar. "The snow never stopped, but we have machines that keep the area clean."

"Let's see this cave then," Khan ordered, and the hangar began to move to start the mission.

The soldier led Khan to a closed jeep that could hold up to eight people. However, only five entered it to leave Khan alone on the backseats.

That preferential treatment was nothing unusual after Madam Solodrey's announcement. The soldiers didn't know whether to see Khan as a Captain or a descendant, so they did a bit of both in their manners.

No one spoke unless called. No one turned unless Khan's requests required that. Everyone in the vehicle acted like the slightest mistake could lead to a death sentence, and the symphony conveyed their tension.

Khan played along with that treatment. He preferred silence anyway since it let him study the environment in peace, but Induna didn't offer much in that field.

The Global Army had dug multiple roads that stretched from the outpost to the various extraction plants. Small and big automated vehicles filled them to deliver any retrieved goods, mainly consisting of blocks of ice. Induna didn't have anything else. Khan could only enjoy the cold piercing into the jeep and wait.

Almost half an hour had to pass for the jeep to reach a small plain. An encampment made of metal tents filled it, and a vast path divided it in half, leading to a big opening in the wall of ice in the distance.

Pale faces, drooling noses, and tremors unfolded in Khan's view. The encampment's welcoming team had more than twenty soldiers, and snow had covered them. Those warriors were freezing, but no one dared to move.

"At ease," Khan announced as soon as he left the jeep. Induna's cold reached him at that point, threatening to make his entire body shake. Snow also fell on his face, attempting to hinder his vision.

"Return to your tents," Khan continued. "I only need my escort."

Sighs of relief followed Khan's order. Many soldiers in the welcoming line split to hurry back to their tents. Only a few remained outside, and the team from the jeep joined them to create Khan's escort.

"This way, sir," One of the soldiers in the team announced while pointing at the opening in the distance.

To Khan's surprise, the plain's ground wasn't slippery. A layer of snow had covered it, but finding stable footholds wasn't a problem. The Global Army had probably done something to the ice below, which made the walk toward the cave more comfortable than he expected.

That changed as soon as the team crossed the cave's entrance. The Global Army had dug through the ice to create a vast descending path that could fit a jeep. There was even a metal staircase on its left side, but Induna's cold had made its steps slippery.

The escort's soldiers knew their way around that environment, so they supported themselves on the staircase's handrail to avoid losing their balance. As for Khan, mere ice couldn't affect his feet, so he waited for his companions to advance.

The staircases went on for hundreds of meters and even turned a few times. Rocks eventually appeared on the various surfaces, leaving the job to fend off the darkness to the many electric lamps hanging from the ceiling.

On the fifth turn, the staircase ended in a narrow and dark crevice that could barely fit a full-grown man. Khan peeked through the gap, but his heightened eyes couldn't see much. He only noticed that the hole stretched quite deeply.

"The scanners on the surface show an underground room in a branch of this hole," One of the soldiers explained. "Sir, the fossil shouldn't be bigger than a fist."

"Remind me why you didn't enlarge this opening," Khan ordered.

"The cave isn't stable enough for that," The soldier responded, "And we don't have the best probes on Induna."

"There isn't much to probe," Khan commented. "I'll need a bag."

"Sir?" The soldier asked. He had just explained how small the fossil was, so Khan's request didn't make sense.

Khan only needed to look at the soldier to make those doubts useless. The team was carrying a couple of backpacks, but they were full, so they emptied one on the spot to complete Khan's request.

The warm coat and hat fell on the ice with the backpack's contents. Khan undressed to make the passage through the hole more comfortable and even shook his head when one of the soldiers tried to give him a torch.

"It won't take long," Khan announced, suppressing the tremor the cold tried to trigger.

Khan jumped into the hole and let the cold seep through his uniform to reach his skin. He slid through that dark cavity for tens of meters until the space grew big enough to fit a whole jeep.

Khan kicked the icy surface behind him to stop sliding and freefall. Of course, his feet promptly moved to slow him down, and he even lifted a finger to release some mana and illuminate the area.

The symphony and the mana's illumination allowed Khan to find the mentioned branch quickly. He only had to descend a bit longer before finding himself before another narrow passage that led into a vast underground room.

The cold began to get to Khan at that point. The temperature had dropped even further, threatening to affect his ability to move. He had to activate the kinetic barrier to keep himself warm, which began to melt the ice around him.

Khan believed that the cave would survive that little warmth. Still, he was no expert, and facing pointless risks wasn't ideal at those depths. Also, he wanted to hurry back to his ship, so he put his senses to work and scoured the area.

The underground room was uneven, with many hidden corners and small cavities. Yet, the surfaces were made of simple rocks and ice, so Khan easily spotted unusual items. Anything that didn't properly reflect the membrane's purple-red light could contain something valuable.

Khan used his technique's warmth to melt those surfaces and retrieve the items inside but often ended up with mere rocks. However, a few exceptions existed. Khan found three rectangular shells that the ice had preserved quite nicely, a few broken ones, and what looked like bones.

Khan's latest finding completed his mission. The wall at the end of the room hid a blue crystal containing a mosquito-like creature. That was what the scanners had picked up, and Khan dug through the ice to retrieve it.

A second inspection of the room didn't reveal anything, so Khan left and flew back to the initial cavity. The escort team was still waiting for him, and surprise spread when the soldiers saw Khan returning so soon.

Some doubts inevitably appeared, but Khan silenced them by taking out the blue crystal from the backpack. A soldier used one of the tools on the ground to inspect it, and confirming its authenticity marked the mission's success.

Khan wore his winter clothes again and climbing the staircase warmed them up. The encampment eventually appeared, signaling his return to the surface. It seemed he could prepare for his departure immediately, but the arrival of a small triangular ship hinted at problems.

In theory, Induna had ships flying from outpost to outpost. Yet, many were automated and mostly meant for transporting cargo. Instead, the vehicle that had descended toward the encampment could barely fit a small team.

Khan's escort team shared his surprise, especially since the ship never completed its descent. It stopped a few meters from the ground to hover above the metal tents.

The situation was so unusual that some soldiers left their tents to inspect the ship. Still, the vehicle didn't make any official announcement. It only rotated to point its back at the cave's entrance and open its backdoors.

'No fucking way,' Khan cursed when a familiar figure appeared at the center of those open doors. Wayne stood there with his usual smile, ignoring the snow that fell on his military uniform.

'How did he even get here so soon?' Khan wondered.

Wayne had attended Khan's last lesson, and the latter had left the Harbor right afterward. His ship's speed theoretically made it hard for anyone to reach Induna as fast as him, and his dive into the cave lasted less than an hour.

Khan and Wayne kept their eyes on each other while the rest of the soldiers remained confused. The two young men were the only ones with a vague idea of what was happening, but neither moved.

"You keep these," Khan eventually announced while handing his backpack to the nearest soldier, "And prepare my ship."

The escort team was confused, but the idea of contradicting Khan never crossed their minds. They simply performed military salutes, but he ignored them before leaping toward the ship.

A few jumps through the snow made Khan reach the ship and land at its entrance. Its passengers' area was empty and devoid of any tools. Only Wayne and the seats stood there.

'I should have brought my knife,' Khan thought while Wayne continued to show his excited smile. The man appeared happier than usual, and no darkness tainted its presence.

"I thought you wouldn't have come," Khan commented.

"I didn't expect it either," Wayne laughed. "They only told me to hop on this ship."

"From the Harbor?" Khan questioned.

"I can't reveal that," Wayne replied.

"Who told you that?" Khan pressed on.

"I can't reveal that," Wayne responded.

"What can you reveal?" Khan directly asked.

"Nothing, really," Wayne laughed. "I know as much as you from now on."

"And what does this now stand for?" Khan wondered.

"You coming with us," Wayne stated. "I don't know why or where."

Khan kept his eyes on Wayne, but his senses reached for the environment. The backdoors were still open, and Khan could feel the many eyes on him. More soldiers had come out of the tents, and he had become the main attraction.

As for the ship, Khan couldn't sense anything strange. The cabin had a wall that separated it from the passengers' area, but Khan could still feel the second-level warrior in the pilot's seat. The vehicle had only that.

"Why would I come?" Khan asked.

"I don't know," Wayne admitted. "They only told me that you would."

Khan had long since suspected Wayne of being part of a larger conspiracy involving Mister Chares and possibly the Hive. Still, in the weeks since Wayne's arrival, Khan had been unable to find a single clue about his identity or goal.

The Headmistress and Lucian were in the same situation, and the other students were no different. No one seemed to know where Wayne had come from. His grades were good, but the lack of background and meaningful connections made him suspicious.

Realistically, Khan had no reason to follow Wayne. His duties lay elsewhere. He was a student, so it was in his interest to return to the Harbor as soon as possible.

Yet, Wayne seemed to know something about Khan's family, and events with Monica had added fuel to his curiosity. That might have been a coincidence, but it still happened.

"Why do I feel like I won't learn anything if I don't follow him?" Khan wondered. Somehow, he knew that he had to face risks to uncover truths. Luckily for him, he was no coward.

"Lead the way," Khan eventually gave up.

"Wonderful!" Wayne exclaimed before slamming his fist on the ship's side. The pilot understood the meaning of that gesture and closed the doors to begin the flight.

"You are happier than usual," Khan commented, inspecting anything he could sense.

A lot of snow had entered the ship due to how long its backdoors had remained open. Khan was wearing a coat and a hat, but even he felt cold. However, Wayne appeared perfectly comfortable without winter clothes.

"It's nice to be just the two of us," Wayne responded. "Isn't it?"

"It would be nicer if I knew who you really were," Khan uttered.

"I'm not at liberty to reveal that," Wayne laughed.

'Predictable,' Khan thought before opting for a different approach. "What about the raised-in-the-dark stuff? Can you tell me about that?"

"Oh, that's easy," Wayne exclaimed. "I was promising, so they did everything they could to make me the best."

"What do you mean?" Khan asked.

"I'm like you," Wayne stated, "Modified and enhanced. Just, I could never gain any glory from my successes."

"An incident mutated me," Khan pointed out.

"I guess yours was a coincidence," Wayne admitted, bringing a hand to his chin and diverting his gaze. "Mine wasn't. I lost count of the injections and trials they put me through to give me this strength. You sure are lucky."

Khan's mana shook a bit at those words. No one truly knew how desperate the nightmares had made him, and being labeled as "lucky" felt like an insult. Still, Wayne had revealed something that made him ignore that anger.

"Did they experiment on you?" Khan questioned.

"Oh, yeah!" Wayne laughed, reaching for his uniform's buttons to uncover his chest. "I still have scars from those procedures."

Khan had to hold back a frown. Wayne's muscular body carried cross-shaped scars, and Khan could only see those on his chest and shoulder. They also looked like old wounds that had started to fade, but missing them was impossible.

"Why?" Khan couldn't help but ask.

"Talent, I suppose," Wayne wore his innocent smile while buttoning his uniform.

'Maybe,' Khan thought as a random idea popped into his mind.

"You said we are like brothers," Khan reminded. "Does it mean you are half noble?"

"I can't reveal that," Wayne laughed.

Khan couldn't find more questions, but his mind continued to run. George's hypothesis of a loaned descendant appeared in his thoughts and made him create shocking scenarios.

Wayne had to have powerful backing. His sudden arrival at the Harbor alone could confirm that, but better clues existed. It simply didn't make sense that the Headmistress and the other descendants couldn't find anything about him.

That left Khan with three options. Wayne could be a member of a secret organization, a wealthy family, or a noble family. Only those forces had the power to create such a convincing fake identity.

Wayne's words made Khan inclined toward the nobles since he suspected his mother had a similar status. Moreover, it would sound more reasonable for forces at the peak of humankind to achieve all of that.

Of course, Khan knew that those options could blend. Wayne could be part of an illegal faction of the Hive built by the very nobles. The edges weren't too clear on that topic, and Khan couldn't find answers just by thinking about the matter.

The lack of other available topics created a lasting silence. Khan and Wayne remained on their feet, staring at each other in a stalemate that involved a cold face and the embodiment of happiness.

The flight lasted longer than Khan expected. He didn't check the time but could feel that at least twenty minutes had passed before the ship began its descent.

The ship eventually landed, and its backdoors opened into a snowy environment. Wayne directly jumped out, while Khan took a few seconds to inspect his surroundings. He couldn't find anything strange. He actually didn't find anything at all. The vehicle had reached another frozen plain that lacked any trace of technology.

Wayne didn't say anything. He simply looked at Khan with his usual smile, eventually making him jump out too. The two ended up in that frozen desolation, and the ship's doors closed behind them.

Khan glanced at the ship when it set off. He could intervene, break its doors and take control of it but held back. That dangerous development confirmed the importance of the event, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it.

The ship quickly disappeared among the snow, leaving Khan and Wayne seemingly stranded on Induna. The two didn't know where they were, but something else happened before any of them could speak.

A whooshing noise fused with the snow blowing when warm air seeped from a nearby frozen spot. Black lines appeared on the ground to create a square that descended to reveal a metallic structure underneath.

"I think it's for us," Wayne announced, heading directly for that new opening.

Khan inspected his surroundings once more but eventually followed Wayne. The two reached the opening and found a descending metal corridor equipped with staircases and electric lamps. The place reeked of synthetic mana, and its entrance closed as soon as Khan left its range.

Wayne and Khan's steps on the metal staircase echoed through the corridor, revealing its size. The two had to descend for a while before finding a change in the environment. A door eventually unfolded in their view, and its opening revealed its purpose as an elevator.

'Even deeper,' Khan took a mental note while entering the elevator with Wayne. The machine's entrance closed on its own before moving down, but the descent didn't last long.

Khan didn't know what to expect from that underground structure, but the opening of the elevator didn't disappoint. An immense hall filled with piles of boxes, long assembly lines, and workers unfolded in his view. The area was crowded, and many eyes fell on him.

Wayne stepped out of the elevator, and Khan waited a few seconds before following him. He knew he was walking into a trap, so escape plans formed and broke inside his mind.

Khan glanced at the tall ceiling before feeling forced to lower his gaze. Some workers ignored their assembly lines to show pure awe at his arrival. Proper reverence also filled the symphony, and neither of those feelings targeted Wayne.

'Do I know these people?' Khan wondered while going through the vast path at the hall's center.

The workers weren't wearing military uniforms, but their bodies radiated mana. Khan mostly sensed first-level warriors, but a few powerful auras existed somewhere. The symphony carried traces of people as strong as him, but he seemed unable to recognize anyone.

The awe and reverence weren't isolated cases. Every worker showed those emotions as soon as they recognized Khan. A few dropped their boxes or posts on the assembly lines to step toward the path. No one approached him, but a group began to form around him.

The situation was strange, but that feeling transformed into coldness once Khan noticed something familiar. Huge shelves became visible after crossing a few assembly lines, and the items on them made Khan stop in his tracks.

Body armor, visors, and rifles Khan had seen wielded by the kidnappers on Nippe 2 filled the shelves. Their numbers were in the hundreds, and workers stuffed them into boxes before sealing those containers. A shipment appeared in motion, and Khan couldn't even begin to guess its recipient.

Wayne noticed that Khan had stopped and imitated him. He even followed his gaze but found nothing familiar in that military equipment. The man only felt curiosity, which was his general feeling toward almost everything.

"Where are we?" Khan felt forced to ask, even if he knew his question was pointless.

"I wouldn't know," Wayne replied. "It looks like a warehouse."

"An illegal warehouse," Khan corrected.

"And who deemed it to be illegal?" A familiar voice resounded behind one of the shelves, and Khan and Wayne turned toward its source.

Khan had kept track of the symphony, so he felt no surprise when a third-level warrior, a tall man with a sword hanging from his waist, became visible. Yet, the worker was carrying a rectangular device that radiated holograms, and the face in those images made Khan instinctively reach for his missing knife.

"Mister Chares," Khan saluted. "It has been a while."

"Almost five weeks," Mister Chares said through the holograms. "I told you I couldn't wait that long, Captain."

"You should have contacted me sooner," Khan suggested.

"The change in your status got in the way," Mister Chares explained. "By the way, congratulations. Miss Solodrey looks like a lovely girl."

A tremor ran through Khan's mana, but he remained calm enough to continue the conversation. "To answer your previous question, I've seen this equipment during a kidnapping attempt on Princess Edna. Owning a warehouse full of it tells me it's illegal."

"I never said I owned it," Mister Chares pointed out. "I'm not even there."

"And where are you?" Khan asked.

"That's not important," Mister Chares stated. "What's important is my schedule. I must make a delivery soon, which still lacks a pilot because of you."

"You can have illegal warehouses on Induna," Khan commented. "You can find a replacement for your incompetent nephew."

"Sadly, this business requires trust," Mister Chares sighed, "And clearance in the Harbor's system. That's not easy to find with Headmistress Holwen reinforcing her security with each passing day."

"It seems you are too late," Khan uttered.

"On the contrary," Mister Chares declared. "I have the perfect replacement right here."

"Why would I help you?" Khan questioned.

"Because it's your legacy," Mister Chares responded. "Look around you. These are your people."

Khan kept a straight face but still diverted his gaze. A big group had formed around him, and a few took Mister Chares' words as the signal to step forward.

"Captain Khan," A middle-aged woman announced when she left the group. "It's wonderful to meet you. You truly represent the best of us."

"Who is this us?" Khan asked.

"People wronged by the families, obviously," The middle-aged woman revealed.

"Captain, sir!" A man called while also leaving the group. "I'm from the Slums, like you. The Global Army left me to die, but the organization saved me."

"Me too, sir!" A second man called. "My family was destroyed long ago, but the organization took care of all its descendants. They have mana now."

The first calls caused a chain effect. Khan soon found multiple people in the group searching for his attention through stories of how they had escaped the Slums of bad situations thanks to the organization's help.

"Why do they call it organization?" Khan questioned among the shouts. "Is Hive too hard to remember?"

"The Hive is a terrorist faction," Mister Chares explained. "This organization has a different purpose."

"Which is?" Khan pressed on.

"Giving a chance to those abandoned by the Global Army," Mister Chares continued. "You are living proof that commoners have the same or more talent than any descendant."

Khan began to understand the situation. His background had turned those workers into fans since they saw the realization of something impossible in him. After all, Khan had touched the nobles while coming from the Slums.

"I don't do charity," Khan eventually said, "And I definitely don't work in the dark."

"You only need to name a price," Mister Chares repeated the words he had used during their first meeting.

"When is the delivery?" Khan asked.

"I'll tell you if you join," Mister Chares replied.

"What should I deliver?" Khan continued.

"I can't say until you accept," Mister Chares stated.

"What's the purpose of the delivery?" Khan pressed on.

"Join," Mister Chares voiced, "And the answers will come."

Khan didn't like that. He had already been a pawn in someone else's game, and the experience had been far from enjoyable. Besides, collaborating with a criminal organization wasn't ideal in his current political situation.

"I have answers that might truly interest you too," Mister Chares showed a knowing smile. "I know the names your parents were forced to abandon."

Khan's expression tried to flicker, but he suppressed any reaction. He embodied detachment, even if curiosity had already filled his mind.

"Out of curiosity," Khan said. "What if I refuse?"

"Captain, let's not do this," Mister Chares retained his smile, but his tone went cold.

"Answer me," Khan ordered.

"Very well," Mister Chares uttered, and part of the holograms changed to depict a familiar scene. Khan saw himself in the device. The hall had recorded his arrival.

"Linking me to illegal organizations?" Khan wondered. "No one will believe that."

"Are you sure?" Mister Chares asked. "Doubt is a powerful weapon. It might break even the most powerful bond, especially when so much is around it."

Khan's mana shook again. Mister Chares was clearly hinting at his relationship with Monica. His friends and trusted superior would never believe random claims, but the Solodrey family might decide to distance itself due to such dangerous rumors.

"I think I'll leave," Khan turned toward the elevator.

"Violet forty-six," Mister Chares promptly said, and Wayne's eyes lit up. He performed a long jump to land between Khan and the elevator, and his excitement explained his stance.

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave," Mister Chares declared.

"Do you think you can stop me?" Khan scoffed, lifting his hand to make mana flow out of it. "Do you know who I am?"

"Captain," Mister Chares said as his smile disappeared. "We are a few hundred meters underground. You might destroy the ceiling and escape, but what would happen to the rest of the people here?"

Mister Chares' words hit the mark. Khan kept his eyes on the holograms, but his senses ran through most of the hall. More than a hundred people had to be down there, and the symphony didn't flag them as ill-intentioned terrorists. Actually, many felt completely innocent.

"Captain, don't endanger your people," Mister Chares continued. "They respect you so much. It's only proper to fulfill their feelings."

Those emotional tricks couldn't work on Khan, but he had similar problems to handle. Mister Chares was right. If he went wild, he risked submerging most workers in the rubble.

"I'll just use the elevator," Khan announced, retrieving his mana and stepping toward Wayne. "Move."

"Make me," Wayne laughed, and Khan didn't hesitate. The synthetic mana in the area moved toward his legs to create an inhuman sprint.

Khan delivered his fastest kick at the center of Wayne's chest. Yet, to his surprise, Wayne managed to react to it. He lifted his arm in time to intercept Khan's foot, and the impact made him slide on the smooth metal floor.

Wayne slid for a few meters, and his smile broadened once he stopped. Instead, Khan felt stunned. Wayne didn't only endure his best kick. An ordinary third-level warrior would have a few bones broken after that impact, but Wayne didn't even lose his balance.

"You definitely are faster than me!" Wayne exclaimed, seemingly unable to contain his excitement.

"Captain, I only need to keep you here," Mister Chares spoke again. "If I release this recording now, you'll be on the clock to prove your innocence. In half a day, the Solodrey family will have retracted its acknowledgment."

'You should really stop mentioning my girlfriend's family,' Khan cursed in his mind as his dark sides grew louder and louder. He could almost hear the clicking growl rising through his spine, but sanity still prevailed.

"Evacuate," Khan whispered as a hand reached his temple to massage it.

"What did you say?" Mister Chares asked.

"Evacuate!" Khan shouted, turning his head left and right to look at the crowd. "Evacuate now if you want to live."

"Captain, be reasonable," Mister Chares pleaded.

"Reasonable?" Khan chuckled, pointing his intense gaze at the holograms. "I'm ready to paint this planet red."

"Cap-," Mister Chares tried to call, but Khan spoke before he could complete his line.

"Please!" Khan shouted at the crowd. "Leave now! I beg of you! Don't make me do it!"

"You are surrounded, Captain," Mister Chares stated as more strong auras joined the group. "I don't know what you have in mind, but you can't escape on your own."

Khan had to admit that the situation didn't look good. There was a total of four third-level warriors in his surroundings and tens of weaker workers. Wayne was also an annoying variable, and Khan didn't even consider the many weapons on the shelves.

'On my own, he says,' Khan thought as the clicking growl inside his mind grew louder. He had already decided what to do but retained enough sanity to speak one last time. "I'm really sorry for what's about to happen."

Khan stretched an arm at his side, and mana gathered into his palm. That mass of energy expanded until a clicking growl began to resound in its fabric. The cry grew loud enough to make some shelves tremble, and a gust of wind blew through the hall when that purple-red mass left Khan's hand.