

Chaos' Heir 521

Chapter 521 Blackmail

Khan froze, keeping his phone lifted even after the video ended. Instead, Monica leaned forward, crawling over Khan's lap to touch the screen and make the interview start again.

The couple rewatched the footage from start to finish without uttering a single word. The interview didn't have much. The many generic questions and answers barely carried any detail, with Rick's last statement being the only exception.

Monica would open her mouth in surprise if she weren't supporting her chin with her hand. The video was shocking for multiple reasons, and she couldn't even begin to list them in terms of relevance.

The engagement was extraordinary news bound to fill the network for the next few weeks or months. A noble holding an interview was also unusual, especially since the matter didn't involve the Global Army. Rick had merely announced his relationship through public channels, which didn't play well with his status.

At last, mentioning Khan and involving him in such a high-profile event would improve his image by leaps and bounds. The interview had made his relationship with Rick public, bringing to two the number of noble families in his social array. That was unheard of for a simple Captain.

"So," Monica voiced, letting go of her chin to point at the screen. "That's the Rick you told me about."

"That's him," Khan nodded.

"What exactly did you do to him?" Monica questioned. She knew that Khan had trained Rick, but that reward sounded too much.

"I had him beaten up," Khan revealed.

"What?!" Monica gasped, placing both hands on Khan's right thigh to slightly lift her torso.

"By her," Khan continued, pointing at Lucille on the screen.

"Wha-?" Monica gasped again but couldn't finish her sentence. She froze, and her eyes darted between Rick and Lucille, hoping to make sense of that situation.

"Did I break you?" Khan asked, half-turning to caress Monica's head.

"You can't tell anyone," Monica warned, fixing her serious eyes on Khan. "Who knows about this?"

"The beating?" Khan wondered. "A few soldiers from my time on Ecoruta, a Captain, and my ex."

"We must kill your ex," Monica nodded.

"Did you just ignore the others?" Khan asked.

"Your ex is more important," Monica replied. "We must get rid of all the sluts in your life."

"What about you?" Khan questioned, sliding his hand across Monica's hair to pinch her cheek. "My lovely, favorite slut."

Monica pouted and seeing Khan's teasing smile made her roll her eyes. Yet, she still crawled forward to straighten her position and sit beside him.

"Scoundrel," Monica muttered.

Khan chuckled and pulled Monica closer. Usually, she would play hard to get, but his braced foot made her quite cooperative. A giggle even left her mouth when Khan put her between his legs and kissed her nape.

"Stop it," Monica happily whined, forcing herself to keep her arms crossed even when Khan hugged her from behind. "We have to talk about this first."

Khan groaned, rubbing his face on Monica's neck before bringing it to her left shoulder. She didn't hesitate to wrap an arm around it and kiss his cheek a few times, but the two eventually turned toward the still-lifted phone.

"Is this a problem?" Khan questioned, looking at Rick's pure face. "Can nobles get engaged so freely?"

"Not at all," Monica replied. "They usually host many secret meetings with the involved families before holding an exclusive event for the official announcement."

Monica didn't know the details about Rick's relationship but added another comment before Khan could speak. "It's rare for people of our generation to hear about it until the deed is done. Few of us can even attend those events."

"Did you?" Khan questioned.

"Never," Monica uttered, "But my family prepared me for the eventuality. I've also had to study these subjects since the nobles might have been interested in me."

Khan didn't need to ask for details. Monica was beautiful, talented, and from an extremely wealthy family. She was a perfect candidate outside of the nobles.

"Can you even refuse if a noble wants you?" Khan wondered.

"It wouldn't depend on me," Monica explained. "My family would have the last word on the matter."

"Wouldn't they accept right away?" Khan asked.

"It's not as straightforward as it seems," Monica sighed. "Marrying into the nobles improves relationships but sacrifices a descendant. Instead, a union with a similarly wealthy family will provide riches and more profitable alliances."

"And I bet many families want to avoid giving more power to the nobles," Khan added.

"Indeed," Monica nodded. "On the surface, everyone respects and obeys the nobles, but schemes are always in motion."

Khan wrapped his right arm tightly around Monica's waist and tilted his head toward hers. He didn't say anything, but that gesture spoke words Monica could hear. She knew he was glad he had found her before those ploys could reach her.

"I'm sure these two didn't even kiss before last night," Khan commented as the screen claimed his attention, "And now they are engaged."

"Really?" Monica frowned. "You told me the Rassec family didn't acknowledge him as a Prince, but this remains hasty."

"Do you think they went through the proper channels?" Khan asked.

"You don't have different options at that level," Monica explained. "Besides, getting an interview requires authorization. The Rassec family probably allowed this to exclude him from the main family."

"I hope he didn't do it for me," Khan sighed. "Though, being his best man is bound to make everyone worried about getting in my way. I wonder if I can accept already."

Khan closed the network to check his messages but couldn't find anything from Rick or Lucille. He didn't get any official communication either.

"It's not something you accept or refuse," Monica stated. "The Rassec family will contact you when the time is ready."

"You mean us," Khan corrected. "They must allow me to bring someone, and you are on top of my list for now."

"For now?" Monica grimaced, slightly retracting her head to look at Khan.

Khan didn't show his usual teasing smile. Different thoughts occupied his mind, and he voiced them when his eyes met Monica's. "Say, are we taking it too slow?"

"What do you mean?" Monica questioned.

"Those two have barely been together but are already engaged," Khan responded. "We are approaching one year."

"Should we get married, dear?" Monica teased.

"I don't know," Khan remained serious. "Should we? What's the proper timing in your world?"

"Wait," Monica instantly blushed. "You are not being serious."

"Am I?" Khan wondered. "I don't know what to think."

Monica couldn't keep her eyes on Khan anymore. She took her head in her hands and shook it a bit before peeking at Khan again. That had sounded like a proposal, and Monica felt overwhelmed by the thoughts it caused.

"We've barely dated at all," Monica whispered, diverting her gaze again. "I mean, if you really wanted to, I could think about-. No! It's too soon! But if you asked me properly-."

"I really broke you now," Khan commented, leaving his phone on his thigh to tilt Monica's head toward him.

"I'm not even twenty-three," Monica panicked. "I can't get pregnant so soon."

"How far did you even go?" Khan scolded.

"We should have two kids at most," Monica continued. "The birth control treatment will take a few months to wear off, so if we keep track of my ovulation."

Khan sealed Monica's mouth with his hand, but she kept saying words that his palm blocked. He had never seen her so caught in her thoughts, but the scene looked cute.

"Calm down," Khan eventually stated. "I was just confused. I don't know how long people with your status take to get married."

Monica tried to say something, but Khan kept her mouth sealed. He also gave a silent order with his expression, so she took a deep breath and began to calm down.

"That's it," Khan praised, slowly retracting his hand. "That's my cute girlfriend."

"It usually takes years," Monica explained, wearing a pout. "The engagement can come first, but the couple doesn't marry until it has a stable footing, like jobs or political positions. They can also make that step to claim businesses or assets."

"So, Rick is the strange one," Khan nodded, putting his worries in the back of his mind. Still, he was the only one to do that. Monica wasn't ready to let go of the topic so soon.

"Then," Monica sniffed. "You weren't proposing. You don't want me as your wife."

"Monica, we agreed on waiting," Khan reminded.

"What about our children?" Monica whined.

"What children?!" Khan cried before exploding into a laugh and pulling Monica closer. Confusion still filled the room, but the two found stability in their kisses.

"Your mother also wants me to get a better status," Khan sighed while Monica half-turned to let him lie his head on her chest. "And your father thinks I owe him a fortune. They'll never accept me now."

"Let's ask them," Monica stated, seizing Khan's hand to place it on the phone resting on his thigh. Many calls were still coming, and Monica answered the one carrying her mother's name.

"Mon-!" Khan tried to warn, but Monica had already answered the call, and only a second had to pass for Madam Solodrey's voice to come out of the phone.

"Captain, you finally answered," Madam Solodrey declared. "You owe me an update on the recent events, and get my daughter to look at her phone."

"I'm here, mother," Monica spoke before Khan could say anything.

"Monica, dear," Madam Solodrey exclaimed. "Not keeping up with your calls is a bad habit. I hope it doesn't happen again."

"Mother, can I marry Khan?" Monica went straight to the point, completely ignoring her mother's scolding.

"What?" Madam Solodrey gasped. "Where does this come from? You know Captain Khan is in no position to enter our family, and you can't be a wife yet."

"But you didn't mind setting me up," Monica pointed out. "Were you hoping I'd leave with Francis quietly?"

"I prepared you for the political life," Madam Solodrey uttered. "You should have known that my public statement wouldn't have been enough to protect you."

"I know you didn't even try," Monica replied.

"These accusations are unfounded and disrespectful," Madam Solodrey scolded. "Did Captain Khan put you up to this?"

"My Captain spent the last two days fixing this mess," Monica explained, "And he did, didn't he?"

"Monica, dear," Madam Solodrey opted for calmer tones. "If you could let me speak with Captain Khan for a second."

"He will speak to you," Monica declared, letting a silent second pass before continuing, "After meeting the involved factions in our family."

"I will not bargain with my daughter," Madam Solodrey scoffed.

"I'll opt for blackmail then," Monica uttered. "Make the involved factions step forward or prepare yourself to become a grandmother."

"What?" Madam Solodrey raised her voice. "Monica, are you pregnant?"

"Get the involved factions," Monica repeated, "Make them apply pressure to the Alstair family, and we'll talk."

"Monica!" Madam Solodrey shouted, but Monica closed the call and crossed her arms to wear a firm stance.

"I can say goodbye to my testicles," Khan commented, "But it was nice seeing you standing up to your mother."

"I was protecting our family," Monica scoffed.

"What family?" Khan asked before giving up on the matter. Madam Solodrey had been nicer than usual, showing the effects of Rick's announcement. Khan probably had the upper hand now, so he could allow himself to joke a bit.

Monica glanced at Khan's phone. Calls were still flowing, and the same went for messages. A noble had gotten involved, and everyone wanted a piece of the news. Her man's popularity had skyrocketed again, and she couldn't even attempt to control herself after the recent outburst.

Khan watched as Monica threw his phone away before placing a hand on his chest. Her curls hid her face, but she applied some pressure, and Khan let her push him down.

Monica slowly escaped Khan's legs to sit on him and slide toward his chest. She didn't say anything, but Khan could feel everything without relying on his senses.

"I thought it was time for cuddles," Khan announced.

"That was before my Captain resorted to a noble to protect our relationship," Monica replied, sliding a bit further.

"My, my," Khan played along. "Don't tell me that my girlfriend only cares about status."

"Shh," Monica whispered, placing a finger on Khan's mouth. He smirked, and Monica took that as the signal to keep sliding until her waist reached his head.

Needless to say, the couple remained unavailable for the rest of the morning, and their studies took over after they managed to rest. Meanwhile, the political world shook. Rick had forced everyone's hand, and more public statements in Khan's favor arrived, ultimately making the meeting mandatory and giving it a date.

Chapter 522 Scared

Luke and Bruce were the first to appear publicly after Rick's interview. They had to slightly delay their plan due to the commotion the announcement caused, but things still worked in Khan's favor.

Claiming a part in Khan and Monica's relationship played into Madam Solodrey's announcement, turning Luke and Bruce into insightful figures with a great understanding of the political environment. Madam Solodrey's partial lie worked against her, elevating Khan's most influential allies and solidifying his position.

John and Zoe came after, and their interviews covered different topics. Zoe focused on praising Monica to add value to her decision to be with Khan. Meanwhile, John stuck to the original plan, complimenting Khan's prowess, growth, and resolve while highlighting his rash decisions.

That development forced Lucian, Lucy, and Mark to take a stand. Khan almost didn't need them anymore for his goals, so they appeared in the open to reap part of the benefits.

The three descendants played into John's interview, emphasizing how Khan's true potential could come to light only with expert supervision. They avoided being as harsh as they had initially planned, but their statements still tried to build a firm connection to Khan.

The network went on fire in those days. That huge mobilization of young descendants was unusual, especially when involving such high-profile figures. It almost seemed that a new alliance had formed, and Khan stood at the very center of it.

Monica ghosted her mother in those days. The latter could confirm with the appointed doctor that the birth control was going perfectly, but the public pressure and Monica's lingering threat weren't something she could ignore. Khan was gaining too much relevance, so Madam Solodrey had to comply with the blackmail to prevent the worst possible outcome.

The internal pressure from the Solodrey family fused with everything else and granted Khan his wish. In the middle of the week, a message reached Francis, confirming that the meeting would happen on the weekend.

Khan and Monica holed themselves in their room once the news became official. Preparations were in order due to the event's political relevance, and failure wasn't an option. Summoning representatives with such short notice was bound to be expensive, so it was safe to assume that Khan wouldn't get any redo.

When the weekend started, on the morning of the appointed day, Monica adjusted Khan's military uniform and combed his new haircut three times before sending him off. A cab was already waiting for him downstairs, so his trip to the embassy began immediately.

Khan would be lying if he said that he wasn't tense. Much depended on the meeting's outcome, with his relationship only being the most immediate aspect. That encounter would shape his career and political future, risking delaying or destroying his goal to find the Nak.

The passengers' area went cold as Khan's mental state deteriorated. The clicking growl showed its presence while silence reigned around him. Utter calm and ferocity joined their forces to fill Khan's mind with something stronger than both. He was ready, but the representatives would be readier than him.

The cab reached the embassy's district and used a secret entrance to park directly inside the pyramidal structure. A team of stern soldiers was already in the area, but the opening of the vehicle's doors made their stance falter. The air itself warned them that something dangerous had arrived.

When Khan appeared, the soldiers held their breath to fight the desire to step back. He had left his crutches in the flat, but the braces were still there, forcing him to limp. However, his odd pace didn't affect his proud and firm posture in the slightest.

The welcoming team forgot to say anything, and Khan didn't care enough to admonish them. The soldiers had created a path for him, so he trod it to dive deeper into the embassy.

A metal wall opened, leading to a vast corridor that Khan didn't hesitate to enter. He wasn't waiting for anyone, and the welcoming team snapped out of their stupor when the door was about to close. They hurried at Khan's sides to lead the way, but none felt in charge.

The team split when they arrived in front of an elevator. Two soldiers followed Khan inside and led him to the appointed floor. A relatively big hall unfolded once the lift opened, and Khan noticed the Headmistress waiting for him on the other side.

The soldiers remained inside the elevator while Khan headed for the Headmistress. The latter wore a grim face, and some helplessness joined it when Khan reached her. Khan didn't look at her even once, and his eyes remained fixed on the door before him after he stopped.

"You played your cards well," Headmistress Holwen praised. "A noble from the Rassec family.... Truly resourceful."

Things were still tense between Khan and the Headmistress. The two had only exchanged official communications during the week, so they had yet to talk properly. Headmistress Holwen's praise wanted to be a step in the right direction, but Khan was in no mood for hollow pleasantries.

"Is everybody here?" Khan asked.

"Yes," Headmistress Holwen confirmed, "All forty of them. If you wish, I can announce you."

"I must do this on my own," Khan stated.

"I hope you have a good plan," Headmistress Holwen sighed. "You won't find allies in that hall."

Khan didn't show any emotion. Truth be told, his plan was lackluster. He had nothing substantial to offer, and his leverage was almost non-existent. Francis was still in his flat, but killing him wasn't really an option.

Moreover, the representatives in the hall had to rely on multiple teleports and fast ships to get to the Harbor on time. Those expenses put Khan at a disadvantage even before the meeting had started.

Khan eventually nodded, and the Headmistress understood that silent order. She pressed on the door, which opened to reveal a big hall similar to those used for the lessons. Seats and interactive desks created an elevated half-circle around a central square that Khan didn't hesitate to approach.

Scoffs, faint murmurs, and a few laughs resounded while Khan limped toward the central square. He didn't look at the seats even once, but his senses updated him on the general arrangement. His guests had split into two groups, occupying different areas of the hall to state their allegiances.

The central square had a small platform with a long desk and chair, and Khan jumped on it. Still, he didn't sit. He walked before the table, leaning on its edge before turning toward the audience.

Khan crossed his arms and kept his head lowered. His eyes were closed, but the audience couldn't see that. He pretended to sort out his thoughts while his senses did their job, and faint mockeries resounded once a few seconds passed.

The meeting truly had forty people, and their power was quite shocking. Khan couldn't find a single second-level warrior among them. Everyone was either in the third or fourth level. That was a show of force, but Khan could immediately realize that only a few were actual representatives.

The audience was using cloaking techniques, but Khan could see past the third-level warriors, and those in the fourth level affected the symphony anyway. He could easily differentiate between experienced soldiers and mere politicians, and that detail joined his vague plan.

"Thank you for coming with such short notice," Khan eventually stated, lifting his gaze to look at the audience. "Though I believe none of you had any choice."

The faint insult stunned the audience, and Khan used that time to inspect them a bit longer. The group on his right had darker skin tones, with some sharing facial features with Monica and her parents. Instead, Khan spotted multiple golden heads on his left, marking their belonging to the Alstair family.

Of course, exceptions in appearances existed, but they were few, which couldn't be a coincidence. Even those Khan had marked as soldiers carried easily recognizable features, which told him how the representatives had probably handpicked their guards.

'Anything to look oppressing,' Khan mocked in his mind as a man among the Solodrey group stood up to slam his hands on the desk. Others imitated him, and a series of shouts flew in his direction.

"How dare you talk to us like this?!" The first man to stand up cried.

"Insolence!" A woman in the Alstair group shouted.

"Who does he think he is?" Another woman complained.

"I should leave immediately!" A man declared.

"That would teach him!" Another man agreed.

The storm of cries didn't end any soon, but Khan didn't falter even once. He kept his cold face on the audience, moving his eyes whenever someone spoke. He didn't show any trace of emotion. Those empty threats couldn't impress him.

"Are you done?" Khan asked once the hall began to quiet down and everyone resumed their seats.

"I wouldn't talk like this, young man," A middle-aged man from the Solodrey group warned, pointing at Khan. "Coming here was a favor, so show some gratitude."

"It's Captain Khan," Khan corrected, "Not young man. I thought you lofty figures would know how the Global Army's ranks work."

The audience grew angry again, but Khan continued to speak before anyone could interrupt him. "Besides, this is no favor. I forced you to come here."

Grim faces filled Khan's view. Some went completely cold too. He had spoken the silent truth, and those representatives couldn't argue against him.

"Youn-," A man in the Solodrey group began to say, but Khan's instantaneous glare made him correct his approach. "Captain Khan, why don't we get to the point? What do you even want to achieve with this meeting?"

"Mister?" Khan questioned.

"Solodrey," The man proudly announced. "Tobias Solodrey."

"Mister Solodrey," Khan exclaimed. "My goal is quite simple. I want your factions to stop plotting against my relationship. Actually, I want you to protect it."

Khan then turned to his left to address the other group. "As for you, I want you to drop your schemes against my girlfriend. You lost your opportunity long ago. Accept defeat with dignity."

Stupor filled the symphony but laughs soon disrupted it. The entire audience exploded into snickers and mocking comments. They almost couldn't believe that Khan had made them come so far just to give unreasonable orders.

"Captain, on what ground are you asking this?" Tobias Solodrey laughed.

"Fame must have gotten to his head," A woman from the Alstair side mocked.

"Maybe his last injuries affected his brain," A man in the Alstair group claimed. "How does he expect us to take him seriously?"

"Captain Khan, we gathered forty representatives as a show of respect," A woman in the Solodrey group exclaimed. "We expect you to do the same."

"Twelve," Khan responded.

"What?" The woman asked, but Khan suddenly stomped his right foot on the floor, releasing a purple-red cloud that shattered his braces and sent them flying.

The abrupt gesture and the appearance of the chaos element made the guards in the audience drop their act and stand up to protect the real representatives. Some even jumped on the interactive desks to shield their employers from eventual attacks, completely giving out their identity.

"There are only twelve representatives here," Khan calmly explained, unfazed by the guards' prompt reaction, "And I'm not injured anymore."

Khan lifted his right leg to show his bare foot. He twisted his ankle and stretched it forward, proving how he had regained full mobility in his limb.

The representatives were shocked beyond their minds. Initially, they thought that information about their strategy had leaked, but that wasn't possible. They had been careful during their preparations, and Khan didn't have the connections or time to uncover them.

The possibility of a spy appeared but was quickly discarded. Khan had never met the people in the hall. He didn't even come close to getting their contact, let alone learning their identity. His inhumane senses were the only explanation, which remained stunning since the meeting had barely gone on for a few minutes.

"I'll overlook your attempt to scare me," Khan continued once the representatives were ready to hear his words, "But the guards have to go. They can't attend this meeting."

Hesitation spread, but Khan added words bound to corner his guests. "Unless you don't feel confident in being alone with me. In that case, I would let them stay."

The representatives had an impossible choice to make. Forcing the guards to stay would state that Khan was strong enough to worry them. Yet, that would add value to his figure, ultimately giving him the relevance he needed for his requests.

The representatives nodded, whispered, and exchanged silent orders with their guards to send them away. The soldiers descended the staircases among the desks to reach the square and glared at Khan before heading toward the exit.

Khan didn't let anything affect his expression. Fourth-level warriors sent silent threats, but he kept looking at the representatives. The guards didn't claim his attention even once.

The hall felt empty after twenty-eight people left all at once, and Khan remained silent even after privacy returned. He almost looked bored in the eyes of the representatives. Also, shockingly enough, he seemed to have gotten in charge of the event.

"I suppose we can talk openly now," Khan struck while the iron was hot. "You went to the trouble of disguising guards as representatives. I must truly scare you."

The representatives couldn't ignore that emotional blow. Khan had humiliated them publicly and was also correct. They had underestimated Khan's connections, which was why they had tried to scare him with a show of force.

"Captain," Tobias ended up being the first to speak. "Maybe we got off on the wrong foot."

"No," Khan stated. "You did exactly what you wanted to do. I just surpassed your expectations. The Alstair side is getting used to that."

Khan nodded at the group to his left while keeping his gaze on the Solodrey faction. He was hinting at the events with Francis, mocking those representatives to create a gap he could exploit.

Tobias remained serious, but a woman behind him smiled, and the Alstair representatives didn't miss that. They said nothing, but that little gesture had created a small crack between the two groups.

"I never expected such arrogance from a single Captain," A woman in the Alstair group declared. "Since you mentioned it, the Alstair family expects reparations."

"For?" Khan questioned, glancing to his left.

"We invested a good deal of Credits and efforts into establishing the relationship between Francis and Miss Solodrey," The woman explained. "You didn't only ruin it. You are also actively preventing any further investment."

"You bet on the wrong person," Khan responded. "That's not my problem."

"You have humiliated our descendant for the entire duration of your stay on Milia 222," The woman claimed. "You are even keeping him hostage at this very moment!"

"I protected Monica from the mana-tampered booze Mister Alstair forced her to drink," Khan corrected, looking at the Solodrey faction. "She knew about the tampering but drank anyway to keep up with her social duties."

"We never agreed to anything like that!" One of the women in the Solodrey group cried, glaring at the Alstair representatives.

"We never cleared him for anything like that either!" A man in the Alstair group shouted.

"But you did clear him for your scheme," Khan pointed out, looking at the Alstair group before glaring at the Solodrey representatives, "And you accepted that deal. How is claiming Monica's insanity better than being with me?"

"You have no place in this conversation!" One of the Solodrey representatives scolded.

"I forced you to gather here," Khan reminded. "This whole meeting is my place."

"Don't push it," Tobias warned.

"Why shouldn't it?" Khan asked. "I surpass the Alstair candidate in many fields by leaps and bound. Mister Alstair couldn't have summoned you here, but I did. How is it that you still refuse to accept me?"

"Preposterous!" Someone in the Alstair group voiced, and similar complaints resounded from that side, but Khan only looked at the Solodrey representatives.

"I've already established friendly relationships with two noble families," Khan continued. "Who else can claim the same?"

The representatives could think of a few figures, but Khan was still special. His lack of background made his current position incredible. It was impossible to predict how far he could go.

"Monica's parents publicly accepted me," Khan added. "It won't be hard for you to switch sides, and I'm only requesting protection from future suitors."

"You are asking us to trust you," One of the women in the Solodrey group said.

"I'm telling you I'm better than any possible suitor," Khan declared, "But you already know that. You wouldn't have sent someone you have no intention to accept to mess with me otherwise."

"How dare you speak for the Solodrey family?!" Someone in the Alstair group said, but confusion arrived when she noticed that the representatives from the other family didn't join her complaint.

The Solodrey representatives remained silent and inspected Khan from head to toe. He was right once again. His potential was terrifying, so they had opted for such a hasty ploy. He risked escaping their reach if he continued to grow at that pace.

"I'll bring honor to the Solodrey family," Khan promised, "As well as wealth, political relevance, and status. Eventually, at least."

The six representatives from the Solodrey family remained still a bit longer before exchanging glances. Some even used the desks to send silent messages. They were considering the matter, and Tobias eventually conveyed their decisions.

"You do realize this is no final decision, don't you?" Tobias questioned. "Also, we are only some of the factions of the Solodrey family. This solution is far from permanent."

"I'm well aware," Khan nodded. "Time is all I need."

"Very well," Tobias uttered, crossing his muscular arms to wait for the rest of the meeting to unfold.

The Alstair group understood what was happening, and it wasn't their place to oppose that decision. They still belonged to a different family, so Khan was the only available outlet for their anger.

"Captain Khan," A woman from the Alstair group called. "Do you realize what you are doing? It's not wise to have us as enemies, especially in your position."

"You should be glad I didn't kill Mister Alstair on the spot," Khan scoffed. "It's what he would have deserved."

"You don't have any authority on the matter," A man from the Alstair group stated. "Instead, it's within our right to see you as the reason behind our wasted investments. Personally, I expect bonuses too."

"On that topic," Khan exclaimed, almost hating himself for what he was about to say, "I have a proposition."

"Did we finally scare you?" The previous woman sneered.

"Political enemies are inevitable," Khan rejected that question. "However, I might know how to fix the problem in your case."

"What problem?" An Alstair representative snorted.

"You wasted many resources on a descendant," Khan said. "If I give him back to you like this, that investment will remain a failure."

Khan was once again correct. Francis had never been too exceptional, and the recent events had greatly affected his mental state. The Alstair family would probably fail to find any use for him in his current state.

"What are you suggesting?" A representative questioned.

"Let me train him," Khan offered. "I'll turn him into a proper warrior who might make you proud one day. Your Masters have already failed, so I'm your only real option."

"You held your position as a teacher for less than a year," A woman in the Alstair group pointed out. "What makes you think that you could accomplish something like this?"

"Rick Rassec can vouch for my training methods," Khan responded. "You can ask him if you have doubts."

Mentioning a noble always caused surprise, and Khan's statement was no exception. However, rumors started to run after Rick's announcement. Many finally connected Princess Edna's words during Khan's promotion to that man from the Rassec family, ultimately confirming the validity of the training methods.

"We won't let you use our descendant as a source of Credits," A representative exclaimed.

"Don't give him money then," Khan suggested. "I can cover the expenses of his training. You can just leave him to me."

The Alstair representatives began to converse among themselves. The offer was quite good since it allowed them to exploit Khan's fame. Besides, they didn't want to lose a descendant at the center of multiple investments. It would hurt their position against enemy factions otherwise.

"Very well," One of the Alstair representatives stated, "But we expect great results. We won't accept someone barely able to match a guard."

"Understood," Khan showed some compliance.

"It seems we have all reached a conclusion," A Solodrey representative announced, standing up. "Should we end this meeting, Captain Khan?"

"Let's call it a day," Khan nodded. "Thank you for your time."

"May this be the beginning of a long cooperation," The standing representative laughed, and the others joined him, leaving their seats. The Alstair group did the same, and Khan remained on the platform to watch everyone depart.

"Captain, could I have a second of your time?" Tobias called when the other representatives were about to leave the hall. "Alone."

Khan nodded again, glancing at the departing representatives and waiting for the entrance to close to jump out of the platform. He approached Tobias fearlessly, even if the middle-aged was a fourth-level warrior with a huge, muscular figure.

"I wanted to take this chance to warn you, Captain," Tobias said, lowering his head to face Khan and highlighting his tall figure. "We agreed to your requests, but your behavior was unacceptable. Remember that the Global Army itself would justify our decision to punish you."

Khan remained emotionless. Tobias' square face filled his vision, but he looked at it as if it were nothing more than a wall.

"Also," Tobias continued, "Many factions among the Solodrey family would be happy to see you disappear. Don't give us an excuse."

"Kill me now, then," Khan stated.

"What?" Tobias frowned, slightly retracting his head.

"We are alone," Khan said, "In front of each other. You could kill me with one attack if you wanted to."

"Do you realize what you are saying?" Tobias questioned.

"But you don't want to kill me," Khan continued. "This is a last attempt to teach me my place. Well, it's not working."

Tobias arched his eyebrows in surprise before completely straightening his back. A satisfied smirk appeared on his face, and he kept wearing it even after he turned toward the exit.

"Some representatives aren't as nice as us," Tobias declared when he was about to reach the exit. "What will you do when someone calls your bluff?"

"I'll block the first attack," Khan calmly explained, "And make the entire embassy crash on them."

Tobias wanted to keep his eyes on the exit, but Khan's statement made him look at him. Surprisingly, Tobias didn't find any lie in Khan's expression. He truly believed he could stop the attack of a fourth-level warrior.

That surprise was short-lived. Tobias was a busy man, so he put the conversation in the back of his mind and crossed the exit, leaving Khan alone in the hall.

Chapter 523 List

Khan stared at the closed exit before heaving a deep sigh. He walked toward the nearest wall and sat on the floor to let the metal chill his thoughts.

The cold was good. The cold had been good for Khan since Nitis, and some tension waned as he closed his eyes and rested his head on the wall.

The meeting didn't lead to any written deal, but that was the norm. The political world worked through mutual respect, fame, face, and the value of one's word. Gentlemen's agreements were more common than actual contracts, and their value wasn't inferior in the least.

The representatives could go back on their word, but their credibility would vanish in that case. That wouldn't be too important when dealing with an inferior political figure, but Khan had already proven to have good connections. He was almost certain he had achieved his goals, meaning he had to stay true to his side of the deal.

'Training Francis,' Khan listed in his mind, 'Develop the relationship with the other descendants, reach an understanding with Madam Solodrey.'

Cold enveloped Khan's bare foot, making him open his eyes and spread his knees to look at it. He had healed faster than anyone could have predicted, but that sight reminded him why he wasn't wearing his right shoe in the first place.

'Wayne,' Khan continued to list, 'Mister Chares, Raymond, Honides.'

The deal with the representatives was only one side of Khan's duties. He still had to work for the Headmistress to keep increasing his value, advance his career, and repay his debt.

'Professor Parver,' Khan recalled, closing his eyes again and lightly bumping his nape on the wall. 'I also need to ask him for a room suitable for the [Blood Vortex].'

Khan's duties couldn't get in the way of his training. His level and prowess were the backbones of all his achievements and current status, so raising them had the priority.

'Studying,' Khan thought about the last item on his list. 'I can't slow down when the semester is so close to ending.'

Less than two months separated Khan from the end of the semester, and two waves of tests were waiting for him. His grades were good, but he needed to be more than that to match Madam Solodrey's expectations and secure a job that could put him closer to finding the Nak.

The situation looked far from good. Khan could avoid sleeping, but his time remained limited, and his tasks were too many for the average soldier. Sacrificing something seemed necessary, but Khan couldn't afford that, and everything would be pointless if he ended up ruining his relationship chasing political success.

'No one can do so many things simultaneously,' Khan thought. 'That's why I need to succeed.'

Being infallible was the most direct path toward Khan's goals. It was hard, impossible even, but Khan could say the same for his aspirations. He had started below everyone else, so he had to put in far more effort than anyone.

Khan wanted a drink, Monica, or anything that could distract him from his thoughts, but wasting time wasn't an option. Even that short break was too much. Still, the entrance opened before he could stand up.

"It seems the Harbor won't fall today," Headmistress Holwen announced, letting the exit close behind her, "And that without dishonorably discharging you."

Khan glanced at the Headmistress before closing his eyes and casually addressing her. "They had already agreed to help me. They wouldn't have come otherwise."

"That's the power of a noble," Headmistress Holwen stated. "It can move mountains and change the most stubborn of minds."

"I just need time," Khan commented, "And they know it. They won't get the chance to treat me like this in a few years."

The comment was arrogant, but the Headmistress couldn't refute it. If Khan kept it up at his current pace, he would truly become untouchable.

"About our private business," The Headmistress mentioned, stopping before Khan.

"I'm sorry, Headmistress," Khan uttered, opening his eyes to look at the woman. "It's better if I keep the details for myself."

"As long as you solve this," Headmistress Holwen exclaimed. She couldn't oppose Khan's decision right now. Their relationship risked shattering if she pushed him.

"I see you are better," Headmistress Holwen continued, eyeing Khan's bare foot. "I take it you are ready to resume working."

"I am," Khan nodded, standing up while sliding his back on the metal wall.

The Headmistress inspected Khan from head to toe. He looked ready to jump on his ship and complete his next mission, but she knew when she had to slow things down.

"Next week," Headmistress Holwen said, shaking her head. "You'll resume working next week. Go home now."

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan stated. "Also, I'll take care of Mister Alstair from now on. I hope my privileges can extend to him."

"The representatives updated me already," Headmistress Holwen revealed. "Consider it done."

"I'll need a flat for him too," Khan added. "I can't have him living in mine."

"I'll take a look at the available habitations in the district once I get back to my office," Headmistress Holwen said.

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan voiced, performing a military salute before heading toward the exit.

The Headmistress hesitated while watching Khan leave. She didn't want things to remain so cold, but her position was difficult, and Khan was at fault anyway.

"Captain," The Headmistress eventually called before Khan could leave. "The Harbor will always be my priority, but if I could choose sides-."

"It's fine," Khan interrupted, facing the Headmistress but lowering his gaze. "I put you in an impossible position, so it's fine."

"You did," Headmistress Holwen commented. "However, it wasn't right for the families to disrespect you so openly. You are still a soldier."

"Right or wrong doesn't matter," Khan lifted his gaze and wore an empty smile. "It's all about power."

"Captain," Headmistress Holwen called again but failed to find the right words. She wanted to reassure Khan, but he was correct, and it would be wrong to lie to him.

"Ma'am, I should probably go," Khan declared. "My girlfriend's mother is still worried about a possible pregnancy. The Harbor will truly fall if I keep her in the dark any longer."

"What?!" Headmistress Holwen gasped. "What did you say to Madam Solodrey?"

"We were just teasing her," Khan chuckled, turning toward the entrance and waving his hand dismissively, "And it was really sexy to see my girlfriend take the lead."

"I don't need to hear these things!" Headmistress Holwen scolded.

"I wasn't talking about that," Khan laughed as the entrance opened. "I didn't expect you to have such a dirty mind."

The Headmistress was ready to shout, but Khan left the hall before she could speak. He had run away after his stupid comment, and the Headmistress couldn't help but feel pissed about it.

"Scoundrel," Headmistress Holwen scoffed, but a smile followed. She was happy that the political world didn't crush Khan's playful side.

Khan hurried outside the embassy and rode the first cab he found to return to the second district. The trip was relatively short, but the news of his meeting had already spread, and his flat showed part of its consequences.

"Are you sure you are not pregnant?!" Madam Solodrey's voice reached Khan's ears as soon as he left the elevator.

"Mother, I'm sure," Monica reassured, looking at the holograms depicting her mother, "But I expect more protection on the family's side now. I won't mind letting him knock me up to achieve that."

"Don't use such crude words," Madam Solodrey sighed. "To think my dear daughter would go against me over a man."

"I'm impossible to resist," Khan claimed, entering the main hall to reach the back of Monica's couch. "Though your daughter is cuter."

"Captain," Madam Solodrey scoffed, and her expression grew colder when Khan stretched his arms past the couch's back to hug Monica. "I heard your meeting went well."

"News run fast," Khan commented.

"They always do," Madam Solodrey stated. "I didn't expect you to be able to involve the Rassec family. That was a smart move."

"Is that a compliment?" Khan gasped. "Are you ready to be my mother-in-law?"

"What?!" Monica and Madam Solodrey cried at the same time.

"Admit it," Khan laughed. "I'm growing on you."

"I don't know where this impudence comes from," Madam Solodrey said, "But I won't accept getting addressed so disrespectfully."

"Come on, ma'am," Khan whined. "We are all one big family. We should be friendlier to each other."

"What family?" Madam Solodrey cursed. "You are an outsider crawling his way into my daughter for political influence!"

"I actually like her butt more," Khan revealed.

"Khan!" Monica scolded, peeking past her shoulder to shoot an admonishing glare.

"Well," Khan continued, focusing only on the holograms. "I'm very busy, so let's do this another time."

Khan let go of Monica to jump on the other side of the couch and close the call. Madam Solodrey and Monica didn't have the chance to stop him, and the former even failed to voice one last complaint.

"What are you saying to my mother?!" Monica shouted, pulling Khan's arm to make him turn toward her.

"The truth," Khan shrugged his shoulders. "She can't do anything to me right now, so I felt like showing my true self."

"But you can't talk with my mother about that!" Monica shouted again, and her anger increased before Khan's amused face. He was having fun teasing her as always.

"You are terrible!" Monica cried, pulling Khan closer. "I almost don't want to give you my gift now."

"Ooh?" Khan asked, kneeling before the couch and crossing his arms on Monica's legs. "Do I get a gift now?"

"Only if you tell me how much you love me," Monica jokingly snorted, "And prove it too."

Khan smirked and crawled his way to Monica's face. She pretended to play hard to get, but her anger melted as soon as their lips touched.

Chapter 524 Princesses

Francis retreated, jumping backward to put distance from his opponent. Meanwhile, orange sparks gathered at the center of his palms and clashed with each other to generate an explosive reaction.

George wore an annoyed expression as he slowly chased after Francis. The latter was fast, faster than him, but the training hall's wall would eventually arrive. There was a limit to how much Francis could retreat.

The explosive reactions ended with Francis snapping his arms forward. Two orange lightning bolts flew at high speed and with extreme precision toward George, but he only needed to twist his fingers to cut them in half.

Loud crackling noises filled the hall as the lightning bolts exploded, sending sparks everywhere. A blinding orange flash hindered Francis' vision, but his eyes widened in shock when he saw George sprinting through it.

Francis retreated once more, but a gasp escaped his mouth when his back hit the metal wall. He inspected his surroundings to find an escape route, but George accelerated, making the next clash inevitable.

Orange sparks gathered in Francis' palms to prepare an offensive, but George sent more mana to his right hand while taking a deep breath. His arm rose, performing a smooth, seemingly slow waving motion that sent a dark-silver flash forward.

A clanging noise resounded when an oblique cut opened above Francis. The attack distracted him, disrupting his mana and dispersing his sparks. He quickly tried to summon his spell again, but a dark-silver sharp tip suddenly reached his throat.

"You are dead," George declared, pointing two fingers at Francis. A five-meter-long ethereal sword stretched from them, and the slightest gesture could make it pierce Francis' throat.

Francis was no stranger to that outcome. George had already defeated him twice that morning, so he retracted his mana to mark his surrender. He lowered his head in defeat, and George snorted before dispersing his sword.

"You failed to mind your surroundings again," George scolded, "And you keep escaping. You are faster than me, so you can face my sword head-on."

"I understand," Francis weakly said.

George rolled his eyes. That wasn't the face of someone who had truly understood his words, and glancing at the hall's stalls didn't help. Khan was there, immersed in his phone's screen and seemingly unaware of the sparring session. He was studying the notes Monica had prepared for him, and his gaze didn't move even once during the battle.

"Review our exchanges," George ordered, dismissively waving his hand. "We'll resume in five."

Francis nodded and looked at the uncaring Khan for a few seconds before sitting on the floor. Menus opened, allowing him to review the battle and gain additional information due to the hall's scanners.

Meanwhile, George walked toward the stalls before jumping on them to reach Khan. He had complaints ready, but Khan spoke before him. "You are going too easy on him."

"You got the okay to train him only yesterday," George pointed out. "His mind isn't into it yet."

"Then, rough him up," Khan said, keeping his eyes on the phone. "He won't learn anything if he keeps escaping all the time."

"Did you grow eyes on the sides of your head now?" George snorted. His comment carried no insults but hid genuine concern. It was hard to see Khan as a simple human when he saw so much.

"Peace and women made you soft," Khan joked, lifting his gaze to smile at his friend. "Maybe you should show him your sword."

"Don't even joke about it," George shook his head, performing a grabbing motion toward the bottle at Khan's side. "I'll really hurt him if I use it."

"I thought you learnt to control yourself," Khan teased, throwing the bottle at George.

"Since you are so full of wisdom and orders," George complained, catching the bottle, "Why don't you train him yourself?"

"I don't trust myself," Khan said, putting away his phone to wait for the bottle to return. "Besides, I thought you would have enjoyed this break."

George took a long sip from the bottle before sitting beside Khan. He handed Khan the booze, who also drank. Neither bothered to mention the early hour, and the time for serious talks naturally arrived.

"She still worries," George commented.

"They never stop worrying," Khan said. "We aren't exactly the brightest and most careful soldiers in the world."

"We do have good looks," George stated, accepting the bottle.

"That we have," Khan nodded. "Luckily, Monica isn't weirded out by my hair."

"Do you think she was serious about the pregnant thing?" George asked.

"Probably," Khan voiced, showing his palm to wait for the bottle. "It's not like we are being careful. Her birth control made us lose any self-restraint."

"As if you ever had any to begin with," George snickered. "You would have robbed medical bays if I weren't here to solve your condom issue."

"It was way easier on Nitis," Khan cursed. "Why can't humans invent reusable ones? How hard can it be?"

"So people can use their parents' condoms," George teased.

"We don't talk about that," Khan warned. "Well, I guess things are better than ever now."

"Monica's parents hate you," George listed, "Most descendants want to ride your fame, the Harbor is using you as an errand boy, and you are stuck training your love rival. Things couldn't be any better."

"You forgot Wayne and the criminal organization," Khan reminded.

"That's the cherry on top," George chuckled.

"At least I have you," Khan stated, showing a faint but genuine smile.

"Don't do that," George warned. "Keep your puppy eyes for Monica."

"She is just jumping on me lately," Khan sighed as the exchange of booze continued.

"That must feel terrible," George snorted, "So terrible I feel like punching you."

"I'm not the one putting kinky ideas in her mind," Khan pointed out.

"That's what friends are for," George claimed before squinting his eyes when he noticed that Khan was lost in his thoughts. "Wait, did it work?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Khan exclaimed.

"You had your eyes on her butt for a while," George snickered. "Maybe her lying skills are better than I imagined."

"Shut it," Khan scoffed. "Focus on Anita instead. You know you don't need to break up with her, right?"

"It would be a crime to keep all this greatness away from other women," George joked.

"It's not like you'll get deployed or anything," Khan continued. "It's time to settle, start a family, and take over your father's position."

"Kill me already," George cursed.

"It can't be so bad," Khan laughed. "Peace, love, and money. What more can a man desire?"

"More love, more money," George declared. "Anyway, we both know you are saying this to keep me sheltered and safe."

"How is that bad?" Khan wondered.

"That's your dumb side speaking," George scolded. "Don't worry about others when you have so much on your plate."

"Hey, I'm doing far better," Khan claimed. "I'm not as dumb as I used to be."

"Says who?" George chuckled. "You are just wearing better clothes in my eyes."

"I'm-!" Khan wanted to complain, but George was right. It was easy to find similarities between his behavior with Liiza and Monica, especially in its extreme aspects.

"Just shut it," Khan sighed, "Or I'll tell Anita about your kinks."

"You can't possibly know them all," George proudly stated before a memory popped into his mind and made him smile. "Do you remember Kelly? She really gave you a hard time."

"She somehow survived," Khan commented. "I guess Nitis' crisis was an eye-opener for her."

"Imagine meeting her now," George chuckled. "It would be fun to slam your rank in her face."

"I wish I could do that to Monica's mother," Khan cursed, but his phone rang, and drawing it showed an annoying name. "I guess her ears were burning."

"Have fun with that," George laughed, leaning toward Khan to steal the bottle only to find out that all the booze had disappeared.

"Anastasia!" Khan exclaimed, answering the call and showing his tongue to a disappointed George. "Not even a day has passed since our last call. Did you miss me already?"

"Captain, I never authorized you to drop your formalities," Madam Solodrey scolded. "It's uncomfortable to see such friendliness from you."

"As you wish, ma'am," Khan announced. "I'll stick to mother-in-law."

"I hope for your own good that no one else is hearing this call," Madam Solodrey threatened, and George showed his thumbs at those words before leaving the stalls.

"I would never betray your trust, ma'am," Khan lied before changing the topic. "Is there a specific reason behind this call?"

"I wouldn't waste time calling you otherwise," Madam Solodrey revealed. "I wanted to inform you that the Solodrey family reached an agreement. We won't accept any suitor or allow any ploy for now."

Khan didn't expect to receive similar news so soon. Merely a day had passed from his meeting with the representatives, but the Solodrey family had already taken a stand.

Moreover, that stand didn't only involve a few factions. It seemed that the entirety of the Solodrey family was on the same page now, even if for different reasons.

"I appreciate that," Khan honestly exclaimed. "Thank you, Madam Solodrey."

"So, you know what respect and manners are," Madam Solodrey uttered.

"You won't regret it, ma'am," Khan promised. "I'll make your daughter happy."

"Happiness is-," Madam Solodrey began to say.

"A luxury to people in your position," Khan interrupted. "Still, that's my main goal. If becoming worthy of the Solodrey name is the way to do it, I shall."

Madam Solodrey fell silent. She was the most understanding of Monica's parents, and a tinge of proper parenthood still existed inside her. She wouldn't hold back from cheering for the couple if Khan could become worthy while making Monica happy.

"Captain," Madam Solodrey called, carefully choosing her words, "Earning our name is no easy feat. However, were you to succeed, you would become privy to some secrets otherwise unattainable inside the Global Army. I'm sure I don't have to say anything else."

"You don't, ma'am," Khan perfectly understood what Madam Solodrey meant. "Though these incentives are unnecessary. I'm serious about your daughter."

"I would have had your head on a plate if I doubted that," Madam Solodrey sighed. "Sadly, you took your stubbornness from your mother. I guess we'll see whether that's a good thing or not."

Curiosity invaded Khan, but he held it back. He knew Madam Solodrey had no intention of answering his questions. She was just throwing baits to deepen Khan's reliance on the Solodrey family.

"Have a good day, Captain Khan," Madam Solodrey continued. "I expect tonight's date to go well, and my husband is also waiting for your next payment. Don't falter, and remember that we are always watching."

Madam Solodrey closed the call before Khan could voice any salute. Watching the empty screen, Khan could almost feel the political strings latching onto his limbs and hindering his movements. Protection and control went hand in hand in that world, and the pressure intensified as Khan dived deeper into it.

A message from the Headmistress arrived, confirming that she had increased the security in many districts. Khan and Monica would go out with Lucy and Mark that night, making those measures necessary. The event could be a friendly meeting, but Khan knew Madam Solodrey wanted him to push his political connections forward.

"That's what you get for chasing princesses," George announced. He had returned near the stalls, and one look at Khan's expression told him everything he needed to know.

"Do you think nobility is hereditary?" Khan wondered. "Maybe I'm attracted to political influence."

"You just love problems," George snorted, "Especially when they have a nice... face."

Khan sighed. He couldn't go against his nature, and the problems with Monica had positive sides. Without her, Khan would have taken far longer to leave his mark on the political world, let alone receive his current education.

"I admit there is something else," George continued. "Probably, you only fall for women who can stand proudly at your side."

"I'm a nobody from the Slums," Khan dismissed that vague compliment. "Anyone can stand at my side."

"Then," George voiced, "How is it that wherever you go, people start following you?"

"Not everywhere," Khan shook his head, reopening Monica's notes to resume studying.

"My father once tried to go all philosophical on me," George revealed. "He said that a king needs a queen, but very few women can be queens."

"He was just trying to make you stop fooling around," Khan pointed out.

"Maybe," George spread his arms and turned, "But Liiza was almost royalty, and Monica is no different. That makes it two out of two."

Chapter 525 Group Date

A team of waiters wearing suits welcomed Khan, Monica, Lucy, and Mark when they stepped out of the cab. The vehicle had flown the group to the top of one of the tallest buildings in the Harbor, and the attendants soon led them into the isolated room that would hold their dinner.

The Kingsize's flashy luxury and the past dinners had made Khan used to high-end restaurants, but he could still appreciate the beauty of the place. The waiters had led his group into a vast room featuring two giant windows that granted a perfect view of the district. The ceiling was also transparent, allowing the guests to see the universe past the dome.

"We'll take it from here," Mark announced, nodding at the waiters to send them away. Only the four students remained in the room, and Mark took it upon himself to lead the way toward the short table in the corner.

"It's lucky that we could plan something so quickly," Mark exclaimed, reaching one of the armchairs to stand behind it. "I thought you would be swamped after the recent events."

"I am swamped," Khan revealed, imitating Mark, "But I can't go around breaking promises. I'm glad Pandora found us a good place with such short notice."

"Don't be surprised," Lucy stated, pulling back an empty armchair beside Mark and accepting his hand to take her seat. "You are too famous to ignore. Pandora craves your presence."

Khan imitated Mark once again, letting Monica pull back her armchair before taking her hand. The couple exchanged a knowing smile at that poised gesture and relied on their eyes to convey their thoughts.

"I suppose you also wanted to see Monica in a dress," Lucy teased before clearing her throat and lifting her chin to attract Mark's attention while pretending to ignore him.

"You are beautiful tonight, Miss Saurac," Mark promptly exclaimed, lowering his head toward Lucy in respect.

"Thank you, Mister Bonelli," Lucy used a pleased tone, lowering her chin to show a cute smile. "You are quite charming yourself."

"I didn't forget you like green," Mark remarked, adjusting his dark-green waistcoat while taking his seat.

Everyone had worn elegant clothes that night. Lucy was almost blinding with her one-shoulder golden dress, and her lips and eyelids matched its color. Monica had gone easier on the makeup, but her red halter dress could capture anyone's gaze, and her exposed back was bound to trap it there forever.

Instead, Mark and Khan had gone for a less flashy option. Mark had a black shirt under his waistcoat, while Khan had a blue blazer and a dark jumper that matched his pants.

Mark and Lucy noticed how Khan and Monica didn't break eye contact while the former took his seat. They seemed able to communicate with looks alone, and the intensity of those gestures told a story their friends could read.

"The flight clearly wasn't enough for Khan," Lucy giggled, "Or Monica."

"Oh, Monica does spoil my eyes very often," Khan revealed, stretching his arm over the table.

"He just didn't see this one until the last minute," Monica added, gently placing her hand in Khan's palm. "We would have been late otherwise."

"We can always postpone," Mark jokingly suggested.

"It's fine," Khan reassured, finally looking at his friends but keeping Monica's hand in his palm.

"We are just happy."

"This is quite new to us," Monica continued. "I admit I couldn't wait for us to date properly."

"It must have been a real struggle," Lucy commented, noticing how Khan rubbed Monica's fingers with his thumb.

"It had its ups and downs," Khan explained. "It still has them, but that's how relationships are, especially when they involve wealthy women."

"I knew he could take it," Monica praised. "I knew I could trust him with one look."

"Did you?" Khan teased, peeking at Monica.

Monica didn't reply. She supported her head with her other hand and let her tempting eyes reveal her thoughts. Happiness seemed on the verge of exploding out of her figure, but her expression never lost its elegance.

"I might be a bit jealous of them," Lucy commented.

"Why don't we order something in the meantime?" Mark suggested.

"I completely agree," Khan laughed, and the group used the table's menus to decide the kind of treatment the restaurant would provide.

It didn't take long for a notification to appear on the table, and waiters entered the room when Mark touched it. The attendants delivered drinks, and Khan and Monica made sure to hold their hands openly during the process.

Once the waiters left, Khan and Monica abandoned that public display of affection to focus on their friends. As much as they liked their new situation, they still had to build on that, which involved social obligations and some effort.

"So," Khan was the first to speak after everyone got a taste of their drinks. "Monica tried her best to explain your situation, but I'm afraid I don't get it yet. Are you engaged or not?"

"Khan, it's embarrassing," Lucy complained, but her giggle added a joking vibe. "You shouldn't ask such things so bluntly."

"It must be hard to understand from your perspective," Mark had a calmer approach, even if a smile always occupied his expression. "Our families have a silent agreement, but nothing is official yet."

"Why not make it official?" Khan wondered. He was only pretending not to know the entire situation to make conversation, but part of him was still curious about Mark and Lucy's reactions.

"It's a long process," Lucy explained, "And our families are still waiting to see who can gain the most out of this union."

"You would," Monica exclaimed, "Both families would focus on you at that point."

"You must consider our financial standpoint," Mark mentioned.

"You have a space station," Khan pointed out.

"That's not nearly enough," Mark revealed. "Besides, the space station comes from my father. It's mine only in name."

"But you should have plans, right?" Monica asked.

"Maybe after the Harbor," Lucy guessed, showing some rare shyness. "I'll start working more with my family, claiming a few businesses along the way."

"Same here," Mark added. "I have a financial plan ready. I just don't know how easy it will be to implement it."

"How much of your family opposes your union?" Monica asked Mark.

"A good chunk," Mark revealed. "Those factions know they won't get the chance to oppose me once I obtain the Saurac family's support. That's why they are delaying things."

"I'm equally stuck," Lucy continued, "And if I... Well, if I happen to lower my value, my family would push me away."

"And my family would play hard to get to claim more benefits," Mark uttered.

Lucy and Mark weren't speaking too openly, but Khan could read between the lines. Basically, Lucy couldn't date since sex was a risk, and that would hurt her political position, which Mark's family could exploit.

"Wow," Khan exclaimed. "That sounds annoying."

"It's normal for us," Mark explained. "If we both reach the right political and financial influence, our families will give the okay."

"You two are the anomaly here," Lucy teased. "Monica, how did it really go? Even with Khan's charm, it must have taken a lot of courage to, you know."

The more Khan learnt about descendants, the more his surprise intensified. Monica had truly taken a considerable risk on Milia 222 and had barely made Khan experience its weight. She had even let him hang around with Jenna while she knew about all the problems that could fall on her.

"I wanted it," Monica proudly claimed. "A Solodrey doesn't need other reasons."

Khan couldn't give clues about his partial ignorance, so he limited his gestures to loving glances at Monica. She pretended to miss some of them, but her smile always broadened at that attention.

"What about you, Khan?" Lucy retained her teasing tone. "Monica must have left quite the mark for you to fight so hard to keep her."

"Marks are my weakness," Khan stated, "Especially when they come from her."

"Khan," Monica pretended to complain but covered her mouth to hide her smile. "That's between you and me."

"I'm not giving any details," Khan reassured. "I'd get jealous if someone knew."

"That's good," Monica nodded, "Because they belong only to you."

Mark and Lucy didn't know how to react when Monica and Khan fell into an intense stare again. They would feel bad for getting in their way, but something told them it was better to interrupt them.

"By the way," Mark announced, "Congratulations are in order. I heard you gained the Solodrey family's protection."

"It's not even a day since that," Khan sighed, facing his friends again, "But yes. There shouldn't be any more Mister Alstair scenarios in the next period."

"How is the training going?" Lucy wondered. "It must be hard for you, considering what happened."

"That's the easy part," Khan revealed. "My charm will also defeat her mother sooner or later. However, her father is a tough one."

"What are you going to do with my mother?" Monica almost snapped.

"Oh my," Lucy gasped. "He is bold indeed."

"I wish I could sell my boldness," Khan cursed. "Mark, you excel in many businesses. Do you know an easy way to make a few billion Credits?"

"If it's money you need," Mark's eyes lit up, "You just have to ask. I can make you partner with many of the Bonnelli family's businesses. How much can you put upfront?"

"Not much?" Khan wondered.

"Why don't we start with a loan, then?" Mark suggested. "I can set you up with a barely noticeable interest rate."

"Mark, stop thinking about money," Lucy complained. "Excuse him. It's a side effect of his education."

"Don't worry," Monica reassured. "We are actually grateful for his offer, but Khan can easily ask my family too."

"That would increase his debt with the Solodrey family," Mark pointed out. "If I understood correctly, that's what Khan wants to avoid."

"We won't get a debt with another family," Monica refused. "We don't need it to be together."

"She is using us a lot," Lucy commented.

"She likes when she can speak for both of us," Khan explained.

"I would almost say she has a bossy character," Lucy continued, "But I've seen how she acts around you."

"It's my duty to look out for my man," Monica declared.

"Still," Mark exclaimed, "Involving the Rassec family was a bold move. I had no idea you had such a connection."

"My life before the Harbor wasn't useless in the end," Khan chuckled.

"You did the Global Army multiple honorable services," Lucy praised, "And seeing you redeem all those favors for Monica was quite inspiring."

"I wish he didn't," Monica sighed. "I'm so ashamed of the happiness I feel."

"Hey," Khan called, leaning to his right to reach for Monica's hand. "You being happy gives value to all my efforts."

"Marcia would have loved to see this," Lucy gasped as the couple fell into another loving stare.

"Khan sure is a hopeless romantic."

"Things worked out in the end," Mark added. "Even our families are pressing us to get closer to him. He will accumulate new favors in no time."

"Madam Solodrey is also pushing me to deepen my relationship with you all," Khan revealed, letting Monica go. "Though I admit I'm not a fan of shallow friendships. I wonder if we could avoid that part altogether."

"Anything you wish," Lucy stated. "I am quite curious about your true faces too."

"Honestly, Khan," Mark smiled, "We can't really refuse you anymore. I also feel we owe you an apology for how our interviews ended up being."

"That's for the best," Khan reassured. "They will keep you stuck with me, which is what I need."

"And I'll make sure none of you get any strange idea," Monica almost threatened. "Khan might not have my family name yet, but I expect the same respect you show me."

"No offense, Monica," Mark laughed. "We might have to show him more respect than that."

"It's no offense at all," Monica uttered. "It would actually please me a lot."

"Don't tell me I'll also be like this if things become official," Lucy teased.

"I wonder," Khan exclaimed. "Why don't you just date anyway? I can give you tips if you need them. I'm something of an expert in secret relationships."

"I'm afraid I can't afford the risk," Mark immediately refused. "Miss Saurac is beautiful, and I'd be lucky to have her as my fiancée, but I must look out for my family first."

"You'll make me blush, Mark," Lucy politely replied, nodding at Khan. "I don't mean any disrespect, but what you did was truly dangerous. I can't risk making my family lose face."

Khan expected a more human reaction from the two descendants, but their firm stance told a different story. They liked each other. Their mana confirmed that. Still, their loyalty toward their families and the political environment was too strong to follow their feelings.

Khan acknowledged that different perspective, but his feelings didn't allow him to understand it. He knew he could never be like Mark and Lucy. The scene actually saddened him enough to avoid the topic for the rest of the dinner.

The conversations during the dinner covered different topics but remained superficial. Mark disclosed more of the financial world, and Lucy talked about her plans, but no deals happened. The group simply focused on getting to know each other to lay the foundation for eventual cooperation.

The dinner ended with the two couples staring at the district from the room's huge windows. They all had drinks in their hands, but their stances revealed the different nature of their relationships.

Mark and Lucy faced the left window, standing side by side without falling into any affectionate gesture. Their elbows touched from time to time, but the two always split afterward, tainting the symphony with their helplessness.

Meanwhile, Khan and Monica were in a far more loving position on the right window. Khan had his palm glued to Monica's bare back while she rested her head on his shoulder. The two swayed a bit as if on the verge of dancing, and the beautiful scenery in their eyes barely distracted them from their respective warmth.

The dinner wasn't the date's climax. After eating and drinking, the four took another cab to fly to the shopping district. It was pretty late already, and the Headmistress' security measures made the streets even emptier, allowing the two couples to wander in complete safety.

The different stances remained during the slow walks. Lucy clung to Mark's elbow, but the two didn't dare to break the limits of their political personas.

Instead, Monica and Khan were an actual couple, and anyone could tell that. The two walked hand in hand into multiple shops to make the entire Harbor aware of their relationship. Monica's happiness even took over at some points, turning her into a simple girlfriend that claimed the entirety of Khan's arm for herself while dragging him around.

That was simple normality. Countless couples could experience it freely, and Khan had his fair share of that with Cora. Yet, the faces that Monica made told him how that was her everything.

Khan almost couldn't believe how happy Monica was. Her smiles were blinding, and her voice became the most pleasant melody Khan had ever heard. He was speechless, unable to refuse the slightest request that reached his ears. That date was Monica's everything, and her joy became his.

"What is it?" Monica eventually asked. She had noticed Khan's pensive gaze long ago but had to wait for them to enter a shop to voice her question.

Khan remained silent, looking at Monica holding his arm tightly. She was the embodiment of happiness, and Khan made sure to burn that image into his memory.

"We can have as many dates as you want," Khan promised. "I'll take you out every time."

Monica only needed a look to know that Khan's promise had deeper meanings. The urge to kiss him on the spot invaded her, but her mother had given precise guidelines. The shop was almost empty, but waiters still roamed it and peeked in their direction, preventing any form of explicit affection.

"I love you," Monica whispered to make sure no one could hear her words. "Come here a bit."

Monica led Khan toward a counter while Mark and Lucy entered the shop. The transparent desk didn't have much, but Khan could immediately spot what Monica wanted. The glass hid a series of rings, with some having large jewels.

Khan didn't understand anything about jewels but knew those rings were expensive. He was almost sure he couldn't afford some of them, but the idea of refusing Monica's whim never crossed his mind.

The waitress behind the counter widened her eyes in shock when she saw the couple inspecting the rings. She knew who Monica and Khan were. She had recognized them immediately, and doubts on whether she was authorized to sell such items to them filled her mind.

Nevertheless, Khan didn't give the waitress a chance to speak. Only Monica existed in his mind, and his question was as direct as possible. "Which one do you want?"

Monica knew Khan's financial situation better than anyone else. Besides, her family could give her all kinds of jewels with a simple request. Flashy rings didn't interest her. She only wanted something that told everyone that she belonged to Khan.

"That one," Monica said, pointing at a simple blue ring partially hidden by the other flashy jewels. "I want to try it."

"S-size?" The waitress stammered.

"Five," Khan replied before Monica could say anything. Needless to say, his knowledge generated a few gasps among the onlookers, and even Lucy didn't hold back her excitement.

The waitress could only comply. She crouched behind the counter before standing up to place a ring on the transparent surface. Khan knew what Monica wanted him to do, so he seized the item and let his fingers memorize its texture.

The ring was quite plain. It was nothing more than a round piece of metal carrying a shade similar to Khan's hair. Some would even call it cheap compared to the other jewels under the counter, but Khan knew Monica had already made up her mind.

When Khan glanced to his right, Monica let go of his arm and faced him. Eagerness built up inside her when she lifted her left hand, and a tremor ran through her when Khan seized it.

Khan didn't waste time in ceremonies. He slipped the ring on Monica's fourth finger before kissing the back of her hand. Monica threatened to jump on him as soon as he let her go, and it took the entirety of her self-restraint to limit herself to a hug.

"I love you," Khan whispered while partially immersing his face in Monica's curls. He didn't kiss her, but her hug tightened anyway. She seemed ready to squish his torso to a pulp, which made him happier.

"Are more congratulations in order?" Lucy teased as she and Mark approached the counter.

"Lucy," Monica giggled, leaving Khan to approach her friend. She didn't hesitate to show her ring to Lucy, and the two began to exchange high-pitched whispers while smiles invaded their faces.

Instead, Mark simply nodded at Khan, and he lowered his head as a sign of respect. That gesture wasn't anything official but worked as a statement that the entire Global Army was bound to understand. It could cause problems, but Khan couldn't regret his decision when Monica looked so happy.

That was almost perfection. In a life without nightmares, Khan would have given anything to make that moment last forever. He would have made Monica's happy face his entire world. However, his problems stretched deeply, and his phone never forgot to remind him about them.

Monica and Lucy didn't hear the buzzing noise. Even Mark missed it since the picture the two excited women created was too magnetic. Khan was in the same situation, and his eyes remained on

Monica while he drew his phone. Still, looking at the screen brought coldness to that intense happiness.

Jenny had sent her weekly report earlier than usual to highlight one specific message. The text was anonymous, but that alone revealed the sender's identity.

'Congratulations on your engagement,' Khan read, forcing himself to keep his head lowered to avoid acting suspicious. Madam Solodrey had told him they were always watching, so it was safe to assume that Raymond could do the same, and the proof had just reached Khan's phone.

Chapter 526 Greenhouse

"That's enough for tonight," Professor Parver announced, sitting behind one of his lab's interactive desks. "I'd like to keep you here longer, but we can't get in the way of your normal studies."

"I wouldn't mind remaining here a few more hours," Khan revealed, removing his phone from his desk. "As long as it isn't too much for your condition, sir."

"No, no," Professor Parver refused, waving his hand. "Doing too much would only confuse you. I must give you the time to absorb what you learnt today. Besides, you must prepare for next week's tests."

"As you wish, sir," Khan said, standing up to prepare for his departure from the lab. "I have yet to hear from the Headmistress for the next mission."

"It should probably be Abora again," Professor Parver stated. "Miss Bevet can hardly contain herself from sending you right away."

'No Honides,' Khan thought before changing the topic. "I have been meaning to ask, is there a secluded place I could use to meditate on this floor?"

"Is there a problem with the training halls?" Professor Parver asked.

Khan rarely wanted to overshare, but telling the truth was the fastest way to achieve his goals. "I have an alien technique I can't use around synthetic mana. I was wondering if you could suggest a place without it."

"Without it inside the Harbor?" Professor Parver didn't hide his surprise but still spent a few seconds thinking about the topic. "Maybe a greenhouse will do. You should ask Miss Bevet about it."

"Could you mediate for me, sir?" Khan requested.

"Gladly," Professor Parver showed one of his kind smiles. "She should be in the western sector. I can contact her while you head there."

"Thank you, sir," Khan voiced, performing a military salute and leaving the lab.

Since Khan's injuries had healed, he didn't need soldiers driving him around anymore. He had also gotten used to the underground floor's general layout, so he promptly jumped in the jeep outside the lab to head toward his new destination.

The giant garden grew closer in Khan's vision, and a soldier near it eventually waved in his direction. Khan approached the woman, and the latter led him into a more private part of the sector to leave him in front of a lab.

The soldier left the jeep to send a notification inside the lab, and its entrance soon opened. Carla Bevet's exquisite figure appeared in the open, and her slightly dirty tracksuit allowed Khan to see her in her natural element.

"Captain, you already arrived," Carla announced, showing a genuine smile. "I just finished talking to Professor Parver about your request."

Khan left the jeep to perform a military salute, and politeness filled his voice when he spoke.

"Thank you for seeing me so quickly, ma'am. I hope I'm not imposing."

"I'm the one who's sorry for showing myself in this state," Carla replied.

"You shouldn't, ma'am," Khan shook his head. "It elevates your beauty to see you immersed in your job."

"Always such a player," Carla giggled, letting the lab close behind her to reach Khan. "You sure know how to make women fall for you."

Khan ignored the teasing comment, and Carla crossed him to enter the jeep and extend an invitation. "Let's go for a ride, Captain."

The soldier remained in front of the lab while Khan and Carla left with the jeep. Carla only pointed in a general direction, so Khan rode forward without making any turns.

"I read about yesterday's events," Carla teased. "You made this old woman's heart skip a beat."

Khan could only show an awkward smile. No matter how often Carla joked about her age, she still looked almost as young as Khan.

"So," Carla continued, "Between you and me, did you get engaged?"

"It was just a gift for her birthday," Khan calmly explained.

"A ring is much more than that," Carla pressed on. "Don't tell me you are up to no good again, Captain. It would fit your character to have a secret marriage."

"I always play by the rules, ma'am," Khan joked. "Monica simply wanted a ring."

"And you bought it for her," Carla stated, "You even put it on her finger. You must know how it looks."

"I'm not sure what you are implying, ma'am," Khan feigned ignorance. "I just wanted to make my girlfriend happy."

"Captain, don't make me beg," Carla chuckled. "At my age, gossip is one of my few remaining guilty pleasures, and you know I'm a fan of you."

"Miss Bevet, as much as I'd like to please you," Khan announced, "Monica is my priority. I wouldn't be worthy of her if I went around revealing our secrets."

"Such respectable dedication," Carla praised. "Pity. It only makes me more curious."

Khan laughed to avoid giving a precise reply, and Carla understood it was time to drop the topic. She focused on providing directions from that moment onward, and the signal to stop the jeep arrived in minutes.

"Linus told me about your bias toward synthetic mana," Carla said, stepping out of the jeep to approach a nearby lab-like building. "I don't know if this place can meet your requirements, but it's worth a try."

Carla unlocked the lab with her genetic signature and phone, and Khan followed her inside. A simple room with a few interactive desks unfolded in his vision, but Carla headed directly for an elevator on the other side.

The two descended for less than two seconds. The elevator brought them to a lower floor that turned out to be far bigger than the upper. A long and quite vast room stretched from Khan's position, and ten huge tables filled with peculiar pale-grey plants occupied it.

Khan could immediately feel the difference from the outside world. The ceiling had many white lights fueled by synthetic mana, and tubes stretched over the plants to create an irrigation system reliant on the same energy. However, very little leaked into the room, making the natural mana far more abundant.

"There are many greenhouses like this in the Harbor," Carla explained, leading Khan into the room. "Does it meet your requirements?"

"It might," Khan nodded. "Though my intentions involve bringing foreign materials here. Would that be a problem?"

"Are the materials toxic in some way?" Carla questioned. "Can they affect this atmosphere?"

"They shouldn't," Khan reassured. "It's just a blood-based liquid."

"It's no problem then," Carla stated. "This greenhouse isn't too valuable even, so feel free to request new arrangements if needed."

"Thank you, Miss Bevet," Khan uttered. "How can I repay you?"

"Don't even mention it," Carla rejected the question. "You are providing great services to the Harbor already. This is just me repaying favors."

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan repeated. "If you wish, we can set up an appropriate schedule right now."

"This greenhouse is completely automated," Carla explained. "I check it only once a month, so you can come here whenever you want."

"That would be perfect," Khan declared as his eyes threatened to light up.

"I'll add you to the authorized personnel immediately," Carla stated. "You won't have to ask anyone's permission that way."

"Thank you so much," Khan said. He didn't expect to get that opportunity so easily, so his gratitude was genuine.

"Captain, I know you are hesitant about the scientific field," Carla exclaimed, "But many experts consider you part of it already. It's only normal to grant you access to some of our special structures."

Khan wasn't anywhere close to being a scientist, but the Harbor had made him part of that environment. He was a mere cog in that big field, but that was enough for some specialists.

"You can contact me directly if you have any problem," Carla continued. "As for now, I have to get back to work, and you need to rest. I seem to remember that the tests are getting close."

"They are," Khan nodded. "You have been incredibly helpful, ma'am. I won't waste any more of your time."

"It's always a pleasure, Captain," Carla giggled. "I look forward to our next proper meeting."

"Me too, ma'am," Khan stated, ending the exchange of pleasantries. Carla only needed a minute to update the greenhouse's security settings, so the two could leave right afterward.

Carla refused Khan's offer for a lift, and the two split, allowing him to go on his way. In theory, he had to go back and study some more, but his new opportunity caused a change of plans.

Khan still had part of the Radola inside a hangar, so he headed there after a quick stop in the shopping district. He had lost his special bucket on Milia 222, but his skill had improved since then, so he didn't bother to order a new one. He only purchased some essential equipment necessary for his alien technique.

The special box had kept the dead Radola in decent condition, but retrieving enough blood after so long was challenging. Luckily for Khan, he could use the hangar's tools to help himself. The menus actually provided a precise procedure once he marked suitable settings.

Khan was ready to start the procedure right away. He left his new flasks on the floor before entering the box. Yet, he remembered his position when he was on the verge of getting dirty.

'I can't go around looking like a mad beggar anymore,' Khan sighed.

Khan left the box and removed the upper part of his military uniform, throwing it on the floor. A smile broadened on his face when he saw the three lipstick marks on his torso. Monica had made sure to leave them before he could attend the private lesson, and they were still there.

As if hearing Khan's thoughts, a call carrying Monica's name reached his phone, and he didn't hesitate to answer while continuing to undress.

"Will you be late, dear?" Monica asked before Khan could say anything.

"Professor Parver and Miss Bevet found me a place for my technique," Khan explained. "It will be pretty late by the time I'm done with it."

"Miss Bevet," Monica whined. "Are my kisses still on you?"

"They never left," Khan chuckled. "I can still feel your lips if I close my eyes."

"Close them then," Monica teased, "And don't open them until you get back to the real thing."

"I will," Khan promised. "Don't wait for me. We have lessons tomorrow."

"I can't sleep without your goodnight kiss," Monica stated. "I'll prepare more notes and a bath for you in the meantime. If I feel alone, I'll just look at my hand."

"You sure have nothing but me in your head," Khan joked.

"You made sure of that," Monica replied. "So, hurry and let me take care of my Captain."

"I'll see you in a bit," Khan promised. "I love you."

"I love you too," Monica responded, and Khan closed the call to get back to his project.

Calculations happened in Khan's mind when he looked at his tools and materials. He couldn't attend the lessons with evident injuries, so the [Blood Vortex] couldn't remain active for too long. Still, the trips across the Harbor were bound to eat away some time, delaying what could have been a shorter training session.

'I should use my trip to Abora too,' Khan considered. 'Purchasing Tainted animals here is a pain, but Pandora and the shopping district should have what I need.'

A new schedule took form. Khan had to step on the accelerator, especially since Raymond wouldn't let him relax. His attunement with mana had to increase drastically, and Khan wouldn't hold back now that he had regained access to his best training method.

Chapter 527 Fight

Khan had the chance to experience a peaceful and relatively normal life in the weeks that followed his agreement with Carla Bevet.

The first week mainly focused on studying and finding a balance with the [Blood Vortex]. Khan didn't care about his appearance, but his relationship came with obligations, so he had to make sure his face didn't carry any injury or mark of the alien technique.

Of course, the focus on those practices didn't stop Khan from attending to his other duties. The lessons, Francis, and the social gatherings still happened, especially with the approaching tests. Everyone worked overtime now that the semester had reached its last phase, and Khan obviously had it worse than his companions.

The second week featured the tests and more of the usual routine. Studying, training, and deepening the social array became the norm for Khan, interrupted only by the missions. Luckily for Khan, those tasks didn't involve anything dangerous or too time-consuming, so he could complete them without encountering problems.

Andrew dealt with multiple chores, saving Khan some time and easing the effort required by his packed schedule. He could do almost everything without risking exhaustion, and rewards arrived by the third week.

"Khan!" Monica shouted, almost ripping Khan's sleeve to make him lean toward her phone. "You are first! You are first!"

"It's just alien languages," Khan stated, happy to see his girlfriend so excited about him. "You are still first in alien customs."

"You scored second there," George snorted, browsing his phone. "You actually made Lucian third."

"And you are third in alien environments," Anita added, also looking at her phone. "Lucian beat you there, but it's still a great achievement."

The test's results were scheduled to come out on the night of the first day of the week, so the four had gathered in Khan's flat to drink and wait. Needless to say, everyone remained glued to their phones in the minutes that followed the event.

'I'm still not good enough with the mnemonic subjects,' Khan realized when Monica reached those topics.

Khan had aced the alien-related subjects, but those involving regulations were still a pain for him. He didn't perform poorly. His lowest score put him in eleventh place, but his average had yet to match Madam Solodrey's requirements.

'Eighth,' Khan read his overall score on Monica's phone. 'Dammit.'

Khan held back a helpless sigh while diving deeper into the couch. He didn't want to distract Monica, but she noticed his suppressed reaction and didn't let him remain alone. Khan's left arm was still in her grasp, and she put it on her shoulders to join him.

'Damned regulations,' Khan cursed in his mind, keeping his eyes closed while pulling Monica closer.

Memorizing hundreds of regulations was easy. It took time, even with the Guko's reading technique, but Khan had spent months studying and reviewing them with Monica.

The memorization wasn't the issue, at least not in Khan's case. His experience as a soldier got in the way when facing the tests' tricky questions. Many rules went directly against what he had seen on the battlefield, making his common sense his greatest enemy.

Familiar movements happened on Khan's lap, forcing a smile out of him and opening his eyes. Monica had stretched her tempting legs on him, and her proud gaze shone while she rested her head on his shoulder.

"I know it's good," Khan reassured, reaching for Monica's legs to adjust her position. "I just wanted more."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Monica feigned ignorance. "I was simply mad you weren't looking at me."

Khan gave in and slightly pinched Monica's leg to play with her black tights. She showed a pleased smile and put her phone before them. Still, as soon as Khan lowered his head, she leaned forward to whisper into his ear.

"And if my mother says something," Monica made sure to keep her voice down, "We can bring up my pregnancy again."

Khan couldn't help but peek at Monica when she pulled back her head. She was only teasing Khan, but some shyness forced her to lower her gaze. She tried to look at him a few times, but her mind didn't allow that eye contact.

A chuckle escaped Khan's mouth. He knew the reason behind that reaction. The recent events had made Monica consider that topic seriously, and those ideas came back whenever she mentioned the issue.

Khan had to admit that he wasn't completely immune to the idea either. His right hand moved on its own, leaving Monica's tights to reach for her phone. He obviously didn't care about the device, and Monica couldn't keep her gaze lowered anymore when he touched her ring.

The two exchanged a gaze full of meaning. Khan and Monica didn't need words to know what they were thinking. They understood each other in a few seconds and resumed looking at the phone in a far cuddlier mood.

The new advanced classes' rankings shone on the screen. Monica was still first, and Lucian and Mark occupied the spots below. Lucy was fourth, and Marcia was fifth, but the name of the sixth place saddened the couple.

The top five didn't change in the new tests, putting Anita in the sixth position once again. That achievement was far from bad. Many would even consider it exceptional, but Anita's mother was bound to have a different opinion.

"You got eleventh," Anita announced before anyone could feel pity for her. "You could have been in the top ten if you worked a bit harder."

"I can't express how boring studying is," George scoffed, storing his phone. "I don't even need most of these subjects for my family's businesses."

"Why do you even bother then?" Anita sighed, and a trace of regret appeared on her face as soon as she realized how spiteful her question had been.

"Mostly because you care about that," George revealed.

The regret on Anita's face intensified as her eyes snapped to George. She opened her mouth in surprise before her expression broke.

"I didn't mean to," Anita muttered, her voice breaking. "I'm sorry, George."

Anita jumped on her feet to leave the couch. She knew her mother would call her soon, and lashing out at her friends wasn't the way to prepare for that. She would rather go back to her flat than spread her bitterness.

However, a hand reached Anita's side before she could even attempt to leave. George had stood up with her, and his voice gained a proud tone while he waved his hand at the ceiling.

"See?" George announced. "You care too much about this stuff. Luckily, I like you enough to teach you how to solve this problem."

"What are you waving at?" Anita questioned.

"It's a metaphor," George groaned, "Or whatever it's called."

Anita showed a blank face. A helpless sigh formed in her throat, but what came out took the shape of a laugh. That reaction surprised her so much that she covered her mouth to suppress it, but George's proud face ended up winning.

"You are so stupid," Anita snickered. "Metaphor.... Why am I even laughing?"

Anita slowly calmed down, eventually heaving a sigh. She rubbed the corners of her eyes before looking at George again. Seeing his face made her smile again and reassured her enough to show some weakness.

"George, I have to call my mother," Anita revealed. "Could you be in the room with me?"

George's first instinct was to refuse, but the faint wetness under Anita's eyes delayed that reaction. Two heavy glares also reached his figure, making him give up on the matter altogether.

"We'll take a bedroom," George sighed, glancing at the glaring couple. "Be right back."

Monica and Khan nodded simultaneously and followed their friends' departure with their eyes. Still, their expressions relaxed once they remained alone, and laughs resounded when they looked at each other.

Buzzing noises eventually arrived. Khan pulled out his phone and saw that his classmates had sent him kind messages for his new score. Everyone congratulated him, and he took his time to reply to each text.

Monica put away her phone and watched Khan's different replies. Sometimes, a comment would fly, and both would laugh. That was their normality, and they welcomed it with open arms.

"Shouldn't the Headmistress brief you about your next mission?" Monica asked once Khan was done with his phone.

"Your birthday is on the weekend," Khan reminded, letting go of his phone to reclaim Monica's left hand. "The Headmistress will probably do us a favor and leave it free."

"That's not really a favor," Monica pointed out, kissing Khan's shoulder when he saw that he had started to play with her ring. "She is just trying to get even."

"At least I'll get to spend the day with you," Khan sighed. "What do you have in mind? Date, dinner, or bed?"

"All three of them," Monica whined, hiding her face in Khan's chest. "I want to cross the entire Harbor hand in hand, have a dinner just you and me, and stay between your arms all night."

"Needy as always," Khan chuckled. "Just like I love it."

"I also want everyone to see us," Monica continued, "During the walk, at dinner, and in bed."

"Did you turn into an exhibitionist?" Khan teased.

"I want everyone to accept that you are all mine," Monica groaned. "If they lose hope, I won't have to worry about the sluts anymore."

"Is the ring not enough?" Khan laughed.

"Never!" Monica exclaimed. "You need a mark too. Get tattooed my name on your forehead."

"You wouldn't like me anymore with something like that on my face," Khan commented.

"It would be worth it," Monica claimed.

Khan continued to laugh, and a few cuddles followed. Monica remained on him, deep into his chest, and he caressed her hair, following the rhythm he knew she loved.

Different thoughts arrived after a few minutes went by. Khan stopped playing with Monica's ring to wield his phone, but the network and his inbox had nothing valuable. Even checking the Harbor's jobs showed little promise.

"What is it?" Monica asked, her words making Khan's skin shake. "I'm no Jenna, but I know when you stop thinking about me."

"It's curious that you would mention her so close to your birthday," Khan joked.

Monica delivered a soft punch to Khan's torso as soon as his line ended, and his laugh inevitably followed. He couldn't get enough of teasing her.

"You can get all of me whenever you want and without limits," Monica stated, lifting her head to show her threatening eyes, "But let another woman touch you, and I'll go really crazy."

"That's," Khan hesitated before continuing, "Tempting."

Another punch arrived, and a third followed. Monica snorted while resuming her position on Khan's chest, and an arrogant statement left her mouth. "You won't trick me. I know you spend every second wanting me. You love me too much even to consider being with someone else."

"That's completely true," Khan casually said.

"Sound more convincing," Monica pouted, and Khan couldn't refrain from cuddling her a bit longer.

"I'll never get a chance to get back to Honides at this pace," Khan revealed once his attention returned to his phone. "I wonder if I should just go there in the middle of the week."

"Now that I think about it," Monica said. "Why don't you go this week since the Headmistress is leaving it open?"

"How would I justify leaving you alone on your birthday?" Khan questioned. "I don't want to miss it either."

"Let's just go together then," Monica suggested.

Monica was sitting sideways on Khan, and the two looked at each other after that statement. Monica was being serious. Her mana confirmed it, but that made Khan refuse even faster.

"You are not getting down there with me," Khan declared. "It's too dangerous."

"Do you think I like the idea of you going alone?" Monica asked. "What happens if it's Induna all over again? What happens if it's worse?"

"Better to me than you," Khan didn't falter.

"You know I can get there whenever I want, right?" Monica snorted. "I feel like calling my family immediately when you say that stuff."

"Monica, we are talking about Raymond Cobsend," Khan warned. "His mess on Milia 222 injured you. I'm not letting his next scheme kill you."

"I don't care," Monica declared. "I've decided. You only have to choose if you want to fly alone or with a ship tailing you."

"Monica," Khan called.

"Don't Monica me!" Monica shouted, slightly straightening her position to grab Khan's hair. "This is a constant reminder of how poorly things could have gone on Milia 222, and you want me to let you go alone."

"I'm stronger," Khan pointed out.

"Oh, Captain Khan, the unmatched genius," Monica mocked, jumping off of Khan and grabbing his collar with both hands.

A firm pulling motion tore apart Khan's jumper, exposing his chest. Monica continued to break his clothes until his entire torso was in the open before occupying his lap to keep him still.

"This!" Monica shouted, almost stabbing her finger into a visible red mark on his chest. "This is your genius."

"You know it's not a big deal," Khan pleaded.

"And this!" Monica continued, pointing at another red mark on Khan's torso. Those were the remains of the injuries caused by the [Blood Vortex]. Khan wasn't going all-out with the technique, but that allowed him to use it more often, leaving lasting signs on his skin.

"And this, this, this, and this!" Monica cried, pointing at the various marks visible from her position. "Hurting yourself is your fucking genius."

"Okay, you made your point," Khan cursed. "I'll hire a team or something, but you can't come."

"You can't hire a random team for this mission," Monica declared. "Only the people who won't share your secrets can go."

"You can't come," Khan ordered, but Monica was beyond reason. She reached for his trousers and tore them open to uncover more skin.

"And this!" Monica shouted, pointing at the first new red mark that appeared. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? I count them whenever I suck you off!"

Khan knew that Monica had noticed. He couldn't possibly miss shifts in her emotional state, especially during heated situations. She had never said anything because the marks weren't proper injuries, but holding herself back became impossible in front of Khan's stubbornness.

"You are not coming," Khan repeated.

"You can't stop me," Monica stated, grabbing Khan's hair again.

Khan had to admit that he was in a pickle. He had been unable to refuse Monica's help on Milia 222, and the two shared proper love now. Khan knew Monica wouldn't stay put unless he found a reasonable justification.

"If they link you to Raymond's businesses," Khan announced.

"I'm only going for a trip with my future fiancé," Monica stated, using calm tones to pretend to be in an interview. "I never said this to anyone, but he is irresistible behind the steering wheel."

"How would you justify the unusual location?" Khan asked.

"I was sharing the seat with him," Monica continued her pretense, "And I tilted the wheel by mistake, pushing us into the wrong quadrant."

"No one will believe you," Khan uttered.

"They will when I describe our position in great detail," Monica said, nearing Khan's ear. "After all, it's one of our favorites."

Beating Monica in that game was simply impossible. She knew no shame or limits when it came to helping Khan. She could also stay true to those threats, and her past interview proved that.

The sliding of a metal door resounded from a corridor, but Khan and Monica continued to stare at each other, and she didn't hesitate to add another threat.

"If you keep me in a cage," Monica voiced, "I'll only be a shadow of the woman you love. You must let me help you."

"I agree," George's voice resounded from the corridor before his figure appeared in the main hall. "You must let us help you. Though, what are we doing exactly?"

"Khan will fly us to Honides' eleventh quadrant this weekend," Monica explained.

"Wait, I never agreed-," Khan tried to say, but interruptions felt mandatory.

"I'll finally have a chance to bring out my sword," George laughed. "Oh, you should add Francis too. Seeing a real battlefield can only help."

"If Francis dies-!" Khan spoke, but interruptions arrived again.

"You have a hired guard," Monica reminded. "I know you want to assign Andrew to me, but not a chance."

"So, it's the five of us," George exclaimed.

Khan's eyes darted between George and Monica. He actually had to turn to look at George, but the situation didn't need that visual aid to reveal its conclusions. It seemed that a team for the weekend had formed in those minutes.

Chapter 528 Bomb

As much as Khan hated the idea, Monica was right. Using her birthday as a cover-up story wouldn't only provide the perfect justification for the sudden trip. It would also force the Headmistress to grant more support, which took the form of a surprisingly nice ship.

Once the weekly lessons ended, the unlikely team returned to their habitations to retrieve useful gear before making their way to the appointed hangar. The place was empty due to the Headmistress' help, and only one shining vehicle stood at its center.

"Oh," George gasped, stopping in his tracks when the entirety of the ship entered his view. His loose backpack even slid through his right arm, falling on the floor.

"You don't have to be so dramatic," Monica giggled. "It's nice, but the Harbor should have better models."

"It's not the model," George explained, glancing at Khan's back. "It's the paint."

Monica, George, Andrew, and Francis stopped to inspect the ship. The vehicle had a triangular shape due to its pair of wings, but its body was quite thick, having enough room for a spacious cabin and cargo area.

Still, the color was the ship's flashiest detail. That pure-white shade was unusual for those vehicles, and Khan wouldn't have it any other way.

"[Always a romantic]," George commented in the Niqols' language.

"[It's not like you didn't know about it]," Khan snorted, approaching the ship without deigning his companions with a single glance.

"[I didn't think it was so accurate]," George admitted. "[You took your time choosing it]."

"Hey, no alien languages," Monica complained before hurrying to Khan's side. She held back from taking his hand, but a question still left her mouth. "Was it really that white?"

"Just like snow," Khan muttered, finally breaking his firm stance to glance at Monica. He still didn't like the current arrangement, but her loving expression made him feel helpless.

Monica continued to hold back even when the group entered the ship. Khan let them in through the side door connected to the cargo area, which contained seats and special protective suits perfect for Honides' bad weather.

"I briefed you on the suits," Khan announced, pointing at the gear hanging from the ship's walls. "If I ever clear you to land, wear them and wait for their menus' approval. Don't forget to activate the lights either."

Honides' winds were dangerous, so the red suits had hermetic locks to block debris and metallic dust. Various lights also covered their surface to enhance their visibility, and filters occupied their backs to allow the passage of safe air.

"You might have to help me wear it," Monica attempted a tease.

"If I ever clear you to land," Khan repeated, avoiding looking at Monica to head for the cabin.

Khan had inspected the ship in the previous days, so the arrival in that spacious area didn't bring any surprise. He had already studied that half-circular control desk and spherical canopy. He knew his way around that environment, so he headed for the pilot's seat as soon as he stored his backpack.

The knife hanging from Khan's belt didn't get in the way of the ample and comfortable seat. He could immediately activate the control desk and start the check-ups for the set-off. Numbers and words soon appeared on a window to his left, but the symphony eventually distracted him.

The sound of steps echoing through the cabin forced another sigh out of Khan. He knew who had gotten inside, so he mustered a cold voice for his warning. "According to the regulations, you can't be here."

"Why?" Monica asked.

"Because you are a distraction to the pilot," Khan explained, forcing himself to focus on the control desk.

Monica felt a bit guilty for the happiness she experienced. Differently from her companions and their tracksuits, she had dressed properly, wearing a skirt she knew Khan liked. Those clothes didn't suit the incoming mission, but her backpack carried a change she planned to use before the landing.

"I guess I'll test your skills today," Monica exclaimed, sealing off the cabin and reaching for a seat on Khan's right.

Khan pretended to ignore Monica. He let the ship do its check-ups and reviewed the results before establishing a connection with the cargo area.

"Andrew, talk to me," Khan requested.

"All the goods and gear secured, sir!" Andrew responded through the ship's speakers. "We are taking our seats now, sir."

"Tell me when you have fastened your seatbelts," Khan ordered. His group only had third-level warriors, but he still wanted to go slower than usual, which made saving time his priority.

A few silent seconds had to pass before Andrew spoke again and confirmed that everyone was sitting properly. Khan also wore his belt at that point, but glancing to his right revealed that Monica wasn't doing the same.

"Wear your safety belt," Khan ordered.

"I don't know how," Monica blatantly lied.

Khan wanted to curse but steered his resolve and unfastened his belt to stand up. He reached Monica and secured her on her seat, ignoring the gasp she let out when he sealed the lock on her waist.

"Thanks," Monica whispered, but Khan kept ignoring her to return to his seat. He checked with Andrew once again and started the set-off after confirming that everything was ready.

The auto-pilot handled the departure from the Harbor, and Khan accelerated once he gained control of the ship. The control desk had already planned a route, and he followed it while maintaining bearable speed levels.

The pressure vanished once the ship reached the intended speed. Khan tried to relax, but the situation inside the cabin kept him on edge, so he summoned notes to distract himself with some study.

Sadly for Khan, Monica wouldn't let things fall silent. She had loved the confidence Khan had shown with the ship, and his detached mood prevented her from conveying those feelings.

"How long are you going to be angry at me?" Monica eventually questioned.

"I'm not angry," Khan revealed, pretending to be immersed in the notes. "I'm worried."

"I've already fought at your side," Monica stated.

"We went over this," Khan responded. "I trust you, but this is an unnecessary risk."

"You could be in danger," Monica pointed out. "That makes it necessary for me."

Khan pretended not to hear those words. That argument had become the norm in the past days, and conclusions had yet to arrive. The two simply stopped talking about it when the conversation became pointless, and their feelings usually took over at those points.

Movements happened during the silence. Monica lifted her left leg to place her foot on the seat, exposing most of her tights. Khan forced his eyes to remain on the notes, but his senses told him what was happening, and resisting that temptation took the entirety of his self-restraint.

Minutes passed, and a familiar scent took control of the cabin. Khan recognized every aroma and even listed them in his mind. He could understand which beauty products Monica had used as well as identify her natural trace.

The situation was agonizing. Khan and Monica's passion didn't take any break in the past days, but they were probably flying toward danger, which enhanced any lingering feeling.

Then, a stronger and clearer scent arrived. Khan barely needed to smell it to know what was happening, and an instinctive gulp took control of his throat.

"Sorry," Monica muttered. "You looked too cool, and my mind did the rest."

Khan opened his mouth to speak but closed it right afterward. He used the entirety of his self-restraint to enter the meditative state, but his senses continued to make him aware of his surroundings. Monica never stopped looking at him, and her mana cheered seeing him resting.

An alarm eventually rang, snapping Khan out of his meditative state. He drew his phone and looked at the screen for a whole minute before saying words he knew would bring a change to the atmosphere.

"Happy birthday," Khan announced, finally looking at Monica. "I love you."

A tremor ran through Monica. She had spent hours looking at him, and that moment made everything worth it. She gave up holding back, unlocking her belt to stand up and approach Khan.

"You looked really cool," Monica whispered when she reached Khan's side. "You still do."

"Is it so hard to understand that I want to keep you safe?" Khan asked.

"Is it so hard to understand that I want to do the same?" Monica questioned, placing a hand on the arm on the armrest.

"I can't avoid this," Khan stated. "You can."

"You know I can't," Monica shook her head. "Your problems are my problems, just like mine are yours."

Khan knew Monica was right. He hated the idea of putting her in danger, but that was his life, and she had decided to be a part of it. Just like he had to deal with her family, she had to face his Nak-related issues.

It was unclear who made the first move. Monica started leaning forward, and Khan began to rotate his seat. Her hands went for his safety belt, unlocking it to pave the way toward his open arms. She sat on him, and he hugged her tightly as if worried she would disappear if he let her go.

"Use your spells even if I'm nearby," Khan ordered while Monica immersed her face in his neck. "I can survive them."

"But you'll get badly hurt," Monica uttered, "And the others-."

"I'll protect George," Khan interrupted. "I don't care about the others enough to risk losing you."

Monica pulled her head back and slightly straightened her position to face Khan. She could see the worry in his eyes and attempted to reassure him. "You know my family developed contained versions."

"Weaker contained versions," Khan pointed out. "Monica, promise me, and I'll let this matter go."

"I was growing fond of angry sex," Monica teased, but Khan's expression didn't falter.

"Promise me," Khan repeated.

Monica couldn't refuse Khan when he wore that face. She gave up, and a sigh followed. "I promise. I'll look out for myself out there."

Khan pulled Monica closer and placed his ear on her chest. He confirmed that she was telling the truth, and his gesture transformed into a tight hug.

"Stop it," Monica stated, caressing the head rubbing on her chest. "You are going to make me cry."

"It's your birthday," Khan said. "You can do anything you want."

"Anything?" Monica asked.

"Anything," Khan confirmed.

"Are you so scared of losing me?" Monica questioned.

"More than anything in the world," Khan revealed.

"Then," Monica voiced, pulling Khan's head away from her chest to look him in the eyes, "Hold me and never let me go."

"Monica," Khan almost begged, "If we start now, you'll be-."

Monica placed a finger on Khan's mouth to interrupt his line and take the lead in the conversation.

"What would you do if these were our last hours together?"

Something clicked inside Khan's mind. His self-restraint didn't even try to show its face. The mere thought of losing Monica gave birth to a series of steamy hours that ended only when Honides appeared on the ship's canopy.

Monica wore her tracksuit while Khan got the ship ready to enter Honides' atmosphere. The grey planet was behaving that day. The scanners showed calmer winds compared to his previous visit, but he still waited for everyone to confirm that the safety belts were on before announcing his landing to the outposts below.

"Activate the shields," Khan ordered, "And show me the path to the eleventh quadrant."

The ship complied, using its fuel to create a membrane that shielded it from Honides' winds. Tremors still ran through the metal, but the vehicle remained stable, allowing Khan to fly directly toward his target.

Reaching the surface was far easier with a ship suitable for that environment, but arriving in the quadrant confirmed what Khan had seen during his study. The area didn't have anything special. It was a simple and barren plain invaded by violent winds.

"What now?" Monica asked since she kept track of the scanners.

"I need to go down there," Khan calmly accepted, leaving his seat to prepare for his task.

"Khan, if you even consider leaving us up here," Monica began to threaten, but Khan reached her seat and lifted her chin before she could finish.

"I trust you," Khan stated, warmly kissing Monica. "I'll pull you down once I figure out what's happening."

Monica could only muster a timid nod, and Khan returned to the desk to tinker with commands. He set the signal to make the ship land and established a connection with his phone to activate the remote control.

Khan unlocked the door to the cargo area, revealing his sitting companions. Andrew was calmly waiting for orders, Francis was tense, and George was bored. The latter yawned while holding his black sheath, but his eyes lit up when he noticed Khan.

"Are we going down?" George asked.

"Not yet," Khan stated, heading for the back of the cargo area.

"Boring," George groaned. "You know I had to fight with Anita to get here. The least you could do is deploy me."

"I'll just check the surface," Khan reassured. "If there is any action, you'll be part of it."

George yawned again before slamming his fist on the ship's wall. Holograms came out, creating a screen that depicted the environment below. The scanners enhanced the image, but the scene appeared empty anyway.

Khan reached the back of the ship and touched the wall. A narrow door opened, showing a cylindrical room that could barely fit one man. That mechanism allowed people to exit the ship without letting the winds inside, and he planned to use it to scout ahead.

"Hey, Khan," George called before Khan could enter the small room. "Something is happening."

Khan turned and frowned when he looked at the holograms. The scanners still didn't pick up anything, but the scene was changing. A long fissure had opened on the surface past the winds, and its two halves moved to create a deep underground passage.

'What is happening?' Khan wondered, hurrying back inside the cabin to get his hands on the controls. He was ready to leave the area at the first sign of danger, but nothing came out of that new passage.

"The scanners don't see it," Monica gasped while inspecting the images in the canopy. "Do you think-?"

"They are inviting us in," Khan completed the sentence, and wild thoughts followed.

It didn't make sense for a criminal organization to reveal its secret lair willingly. Khan couldn't help but consider an involvement from Raymond's side, which probably meant Nak.

Khan instinctively glanced at Monica before lowering his gaze. The already strange situation had become even stranger, and he didn't know what to do. He had gotten badly hurt the last time he followed his curiosity, but there was more at stake than himself now.

"Can I really put your life at risk?" Khan felt forced to ask while his eyes went to the scanners' images.

"I'm yours to use as you wish," Monica responded, "Even fight if necessary."

"George?" Khan called.

"Just go down already!" George shouted, and Khan didn't hesitate anymore. He made the ship descend through the passage but kept the speed low to be ready for any eventuality.

The passage was dark, but the ship's lights illuminated it, allowing everyone to inspect it. That rectangular metal channel went down for two hundred meters and ended in another metal layer.

The entrance above began to close once the ship completely crossed it. Khan killed the urge to get out, and artificial lamps lit up once the tunnel sealed off the outside world. The scanners also began to work properly, revealing a door at the end of the passage.

Khan made the ship land at the bottom of the tunnel and waited. Nothing came out of the door, and the vehicle's communication devices remained silent. No one was trying to reach out to him, leaving only one available option.

"Let's head out," Khan ordered, leaving his seat to march toward the cargo area. Monica promptly followed him, and the same went for Andrew and George. Only Francis hesitated, but seeing his companions waiting before the metal wall made him stand up.

Khan pressed on the wall to open the ship's side doors, and a metal staircase stretched from them, stopping when it touched the tunnel's floor. He was the first to peek out of the vehicle, but the symphony showed nothing dangerous.

"Stay close," Khan ordered, drawing his knife while descending the staircase.

The gesture changed the group's mood. Tension spread as everyone became alert. Monica remained behind Khan, ready to intervene. Andrew and Francis followed a few meters away, and George took care of the end of the line, wielding his sheath with his left hand while his right was on the black handle.

Khan showed no surprise when the door opened as soon as he approached it. That clearly was an invitation, and he studied the symphony for a few seconds before diving into the new corridor.

Artificial lamps lit up as the group advanced into the relatively narrow corridor. Synthetic mana filled the area, but Khan couldn't find any clue in it. He could only march forward, and a new door eventually appeared.

Khan slowed down his advance without losing a tinge of seriousness. The door opened when he approached it, revealing a vast hangar immersed in yellow light. He had to cross the entrance to see it in its entirety, and confusion arrived when he felt the absence of living beings.

"What is even happening?" Khan wondered as the entirety of the hangar filled his view. "What is this place?"

The oval area had tens of consoles growing from its walls, and large dark tubes stretched from them to converge into a huge central structure. The item was eight meters tall, large, and deep, giving it a spherical shape disrupted only by its many flat faces.

"What is that thing?" Khan thought, carefully advancing into the hangar and jumping past any tube on the way. His group imitated his every step, even if their movements generated far more noise.

Khan ignored the faint ruckus to get closer to the central structure. His experience told him that the place was no hangar. It resembled a lab, but that oval shape added details that tingled the back of his mind.

The slow advance eventually put Khan before the central structure, revealing more details. The machine was standing on a circular platform connected to the various tubes, and strange symbols made of squares and circles occupied its faces.

"I can't feel anything coming from it," George was the first to break the silence. "Khan?"

"It must be stealth tech," Khan guessed. "Even I can't feel anything."

"I've seen these symbols somewhere," Monica cursed, frowning while scouring her memory.

"This is the Thilku's alphabet," Khan revealed. "I can't read it, but I'm sure of it."

"The Thilku Empire?" Monica gasped. "What's alien tech doing here? And why is it hidden?"

"Because it's a bomb," Francis declared, making the group turn toward him. "This weapon can blow up the Harbor and half its moon."

Chapter 529 Teleport

Khan didn't initially believe Francis. He had no respect for the man, but the fear radiated by his mana was undeniable. Francis' eyes were also wide open, highlighting how scared he was of the tall, spherical structure.

The time for questions ended at that realization. Khan turned to inspect the machine, but only confusion appeared when he reviewed what he knew of the Thilku.

Humankind didn't have proper enemies. Wars had happened in the past, and some battlefields like Ecoruta still existed, but they didn't take anything away from the current relative peace.

However, strange and tense relationships existed, especially with fellow colonizers. Things were even worse with species that could match humankind's prowess, and the Thilku were one of them.

Khan had studied the Thilku in his lessons since the Harbor's location had something to do with them. That species' territory was nearby, making the system an ideal political outpost. Still, that knowledge didn't help Khan much.

'The Thilku are allies,' Khan thought. 'Why would they give humanity a bomb?'

The experience accumulated in the previous years allowed Khan to create different hypotheses. Many species didn't have joint political ideals. Khan had seen that with the Kred, the Niqols, and humans, so it made sense for the Thilku to have similar factions.

Yet, smuggling required two players. Some factions had chosen to purchase that bomb or simply allow its presence in human territory, and Khan couldn't find a suitable motive.

'Contraband?' Khan wondered. 'It makes no sense with these kinds of weapons. It must be easier to achieve the same results with human technology.'

Khan wasn't completely sure about that point since he didn't know all the regulations connected with dangerous weapons. Still, it stood to reason that interspecies smuggling was harder than simple smuggling, at least in theory.

'If it's not about the weapon itself,' Khan considered, and a new round of hypotheses arrived.

The bomb's danger wasn't its only striking feature. Its belonging to an allied species added a new layer to the finding, and scary thoughts appeared as Khan dived into it.

If a similar bomb exploded in human territory, the Global Army would have to question the Thilku Empire and demand reparations. It was a simple matter of pride and face. Humankind couldn't show weakness before such incidents.

Yet, the Thilku were famously proud. Khan had learnt enough about them to know they wouldn't just accept to pay reparations if only a few criminal factions were to blame. The Global Army could push them, but that would endanger their peaceful relationship.

'Are they trying to start a political incident?' Khan wondered. 'Why? Where did they plan to detonate this thing?'

Khan was sure that the bomb was meant to explode. The criminals' behavior fit that hypothesis too much to allow doubts. They had also searched for a trustworthy pilot, so it was safe to assume that Honides wasn't the weapon's target.

Of course, Khan remained immersed in his thoughts only for a few seconds before opting to leave. He was curious, and the answers seemed close, but his loved ones were next to a literal bomb, so getting back to safety was the priority.

"Let's get back to the ship," Khan ordered. "Hurry!"

No one spoke or dared to complain. As soon as the order resounded, George turned and took it upon himself to lead the group back to the corridor's entrance. Yet, predictably, the door remained closed.

"Move," Khan stated, lifting his right arm to gather mana in his palm.

"I wouldn't do that," A robotic voice suddenly came out of the ceiling, invading the underground hall and echoing in its air.

Francis gasped, eyeing the ceiling to search for the source of the voice, and the others imitated him. Still, Khan immediately lowered his gaze and retracted his mana to address the previous statement.

"Mister Chares, I suppose," Khan stated. "Don't tell me you didn't make this room chaos resistant."

"The bomb is not as stable as it looks," The robotic voice explained. "We don't want your talent for destruction to set it off."

Khan's thoughts ran at full speed. Mister Chares didn't confirm his identity, but using tools to mask his voice gave clues. He probably didn't want Monica and the others to learn too much about him, stating how he wanted the group to survive.

"Why did you let me in?" Khan asked, keeping his gaze on the bomb. There seemed to be a path to survival, but some doubts remained.

"It was to prevent you from digging with your spells," The robotic voice explained. "This place isn't the bomb's target."

"What's its target?" Khan questioned.

"You'll see," The voice declared. "Your spy forced my hand by sending you here. It seems you got caught in the crossfire, Captain."

The statement went against what Khan initially believed. That was a proper threat, and Khan couldn't ignore it anymore.

George didn't say anything. His right leg slid forward, and his torso half-turned toward the door. His sheath stretched past his left side, and his hand reached for the handle.

"George?" Khan called.

"I can't allow that," The voice declared, and metallic sounds followed.

The sudden movement destabilized George's balance, but he quickly regained it and drew his sword. A fast and almost unnoticeable gesture unfolded. George slashed his weapon forward and sheathed it instantly, launching a dark-silver flash that crashed on the new wall.

"I thought you weren't a terrorist!" Khan shouted while the new walls finished isolating the hall.

"How is detonating a bomb any different?"

The tubes detached themselves from the platform under the bomb, generating whooshing noises and releasing faint azure clouds. That color disappeared in less than a second, but its effects continued to spread, and Khan could sense them clearly.

The tubes were filling the hall with more synthetic mana. Something else also moved from behind the new walls, sending the group into disarray. No one knew where to look, but it was clear that they were stuck there.

"Wait!" Khan shouted. "I'll fly the bomb. Just let my companions out."

"It's too late for deals, Captain," The robotic voice stated. "In another life, don't play with powers you don't understand."

pǎndǎ-ñovê·cóm "Wait!" Khan shouted again, but no answer came out of the sealed ceiling.

"Mister Chares!" Khan called after a few seconds, but no answer came.

"What do we do?" Francis muttered, visibly scared about that development.

"Risk it, Khan," George declared. "Blow this thing open."

Monica didn't say anything. She simply nodded at Khan to convey her trust. Andrew also remained silent, but the hall continued to claim his attention.

Khan didn't have much choice. He made his way through the group to approach the new wall with the intention of piercing through it. Yet, a random thought formed when he looked at the floor. Khan knew that oval shape. It was actually absurd how he didn't recognize it until now.

"Khan?" George called since Khan turned to show his frown. The latter appeared interested in the ceiling, but his eyes were elsewhere. He was looking at the hall's symphony, and the increasing density of synthetic mana eventually answered his doubts.

"This is a teleport," Khan announced, lowering his gaze to inspect the floor again.

Khan's companions followed his gaze, and surprised gasps resounded when they also recognized that familiar oval form. It even made sense since Khan had refused to fly the bomb through normal methods. Yet, problems remained.

After confirming that the hall could be a teleport, the group focused on the bomb. They didn't know whether that practice would set off the weapon, but combining it with Khan's spells didn't sound ideal.

"Where are they teleporting us?" Francis couldn't refrain from asking.

"Probably where they want the bomb to explode," Monica guessed.

"It's almost done, right?" George questioned, letting his gaze wander through the room.

"Maybe," Khan nodded, keeping track of the accumulation of synthetic mana. "I'm not exactly a scientist."

A spark suddenly flared on the bomb's surface, making the team step back. A second followed, and more materialized around the weapon as the concentration of synthetic mana created instabilities.

Francis was desperate for a solution, but no one spoke. He inspected his companions, hoping to find something, but everyone had different mindsets.

George had already given up on the matter. He stood straight and coldly with a firm grasp on his sheath. A battle could be waiting on the other side of that teleport, and he wanted to be ready for it.

Andrew could retain his calm. His battle experience told him that panicking was pointless, so he wore a stance similar to George's to prepare for eventual dangers.

Khan studied the symphony. He wasn't hoping to find a way out of the situation, but his options had waned. He had no alternative but to inspect the bomb's behavior.

However, warmth spread on Khan's right palm, making him turn. Monica had reached his side and had taken his hand to hold it tightly. A beautiful and peaceful smile also bloomed on her face when Khan looked at her. She didn't seem to have a single regret in the world.

"Don't you dare feel sorry," Monica cheerfully threatened. "I'm glad I'm with you."

Khan could only give up. Monica knew how Khan thought, so she spoke to stop his selfless ideas. Her statement also worked, making Khan tighten his grip on her hand and move his gaze back to the bomb.

More sparks accumulated around the bomb as the synthetic mana's density increased. That weapon seemed ready to explode, but nothing changed in its structure. That electricity didn't damage it either, sending some hope to the group.

However, the array of sparks suddenly grew unstable, generating a lightning bolt that flew directly toward the ceiling. The metal layer endured the attack, but more followed, and their directions happened to be completely random.

The group instinctively half-crouched, but Khan's eyes widened in shock when he saw a lightning bolt flying in his direction. He could react faster than his companions, so he kicked Monica away and used her to jump on the other side.

George also jumped, and Andrew threw himself over Francis to put both on the floor. The lightning bolt crossed them, landing on the metal wall without inflicting any damage or injury.

"Khan!" Monica called as soon as she managed to straighten her position. Khan's kick didn't hurt her, but she had still flown for a few meters. The same went for him, leaving the two quite distant from each other.

Khan had landed on his feet and was ready to fly toward Monica, but more lightning bolts shot out of the bomb, crashing in many spots and preventing any movement. The entirety of the group was stuck in their place now, and an even greater change arrived before they could do anything about their situation.

The hall suddenly disappeared. Khan's senses went messy, making him lose track of his surroundings. Chaotic and random strands of mana reached his mind, but none granted any clue. He also experienced uncomfortable pressure, which didn't last long.

Everything began to stabilize when Khan felt a solid surface spreading below him. He quickly realized he was lying on rocks, and his senses filled him in on the rest of the environment. When he turned, he saw a blue sky, and the faint sound of waves reached his ears. However, an aura quickly claimed the entirety of his attention.

"I knew it," Khan coughed, standing up to stare at an opening in the rocky ground a few meters before him. "I knew you could survive that."

"Things tend to go bad when I'm around," A tall figure walked out of the opening, letting the light shine on his handsome face. "I wonder whether this applies to you or me."

Khan tightened his grip on his knife. Luckily, he didn't lose his weapon during that scuffed teleport, and looking at Wayne's excited face told him he would need it.

Chapter 530 Alive

Khan kept his eyes on Wayne, but his mind worked at full speed. He had breathed that air and sensed that symphony. He knew where he was without needing additional clarifications.

'Lauter,' Khan realized. 'It makes sense.'

The bomb probably was part of a terrorist ploy, and Lauter was a perfect target due to its connection to the ships' fuel. The weapon would inflict a lot of damage to the Harbor if it exploded there.

Moreover, Lauter was mostly automated. It had many outposts with teams of soldiers and scientists, but the population density was relatively low. The casualties would be minimal, even with such a powerful bomb.

Traces of synthetic mana stretched in the distance and leaked out of the underground passage behind Wayne. Khan could confirm the presence of outposts or similar human settlements. He could also conclude that the bomb must have landed nearby. Yet, a problem remained.

"Where are my companions?" Khan questioned. He was alone, and too little had passed from the teleport. His friends' auras had yet to affect the symphony, and their location might even delay that event.

'If I had to guess,' Khan thought, 'They ended up underground. I would have sensed something otherwise.'

A teleport, especially one so scuffed, had to leave traces, but Khan couldn't find anything. He sensed the tremors caused by his arrival, but that was it.

"Oh, you weren't alone," Wayne exclaimed. "Of course. Captain Khan has companions willing to follow him into danger."

Wayne sounded happy about Khan, but something darker had joined his mana. That detail was faint but seemed to carry enough energy to grow stronger.

'He doesn't know,' Khan realized, ignoring Wayne's mana for the time being. Other priorities required his attention, preventing him from dealing with that unexpected reunion.

"Wayne, your organization teleported a bomb here," Khan announced. "We must evacuate immediately."

"I'm aware of that," Wayne declared. "My job is to defend its location until its detonation."

"Wayne," Khan frowned, "You'll die if you stay here."

"I know," Wayne laughed. "I guess my cover is impossible to restore, so they chose to dispose of me here."

"Who are they?" Khan questioned.

"Beat me, and I'll tell you," Wayne challenged. "I'll tell you everything I know if you do."

"I can't waste time with you," Khan snorted, "And I know you can't promise that."

"This is my last mission," Wayne explained. "I'll be free afterward, whether I fail or succeed."

"Free to let a bomb kill you," Khan pointed out.

"That's my place," Wayne declared, "Just like yours is to bathe in the light of fame."

The darkness inside Wayne grew stronger, but Khan's priorities remained. He was curious, but death was looming above him and his companions. He couldn't afford to waste time.

The lack of signs of the teleport forced Khan to consider underground options, and the passage behind Wayne was the closest target. He could start exploring from there and fly elsewhere if his search went nowhere.

"Thinking about leaving already?" Wayne laughed.

Khan ignored the comment. He was far faster than Wayne, so the latter would never catch up with him. His current location was the only issue, but he was confident that a spell would force the man to move.

"That's it!" Wayne exclaimed as soon as Khan's face grew colder. "That's the spirit. Come here and show me why you are better."

Khan ignored the comment again, gathering mana into his hand before snapping it forward. Two needles materialized and flew in a straight line toward Wayne, but a tremor suddenly ran through the area, making them explode before they could reach their target.

Wayne's smile broadened, and the darkness inside him intensified. Khan also felt surprised. That was the first time he had managed to sense the effects of Wayne's element, but they had been too short and random to draw any conclusions.

"I'll fight you," Khan opted for a different approach to save time, "But only after bringing my companions to safety."

"My life will end in five minutes, Captain," Wayne announced. "I can't wait that long."

"Why five minutes?" Khan asked, dreading the ominous feeling that those words carried.

"Because that's the bomb's timer," Wayne laughed.

Khan's mind went blank. His thoughts disappeared as he shot upward, taking position ten meters above the rocky surface and joining his palms to summon his mana.

The symphony almost talked to Khan due to how quickly his senses worked. He instantly became aware of the place's size. The island under him was big, placing it near the center of the Global Army's territory and giving him an idea of his current location. He had studied Lauter thoroughly for Lucian's mission, so he knew that quadrant mostly stretched underground.

That realization could be wrong, but Khan didn't have time to linger in doubt. He didn't even care about how much he had to destroy to achieve his goals. He separated his palms, giving birth to a chaos spear he instantly threw toward Wayne.

Pure excitement invaded Wayne as his darkness grew. A deeper tremor expanded from his figure, stretching through the symphony around him and altering its functions. Khan saw shades changing in his eyes, and his spear suffered in that environment.

The spear only managed to cross half the distance between Khan and Wayne before exploding. The wild pillar it generated forced Khan to fly to his left, but the mana under his feet suddenly ignored his requests, making him lose his foothold.

Khan found himself freefalling diagonally, getting farther away from the underground passage. He tried to reestablish a connection with the surrounding mana, but that energy actively ignored him, preventing his ability to fly.

Wayne didn't stay still. His eyes lit up at the sight of Khan's free fall, and he charged ahead to intercept him. His speed couldn't match Khan's, but his body generated a scary momentum that peaked when he leaped.

Khan couldn't avoid the imminent impact. Wayne was flying toward him, ready to unleash the entirety of his momentum in a reckless attack. Nothing could stop that exchange, so Khan sent mana to his knife to prepare a similar offensive.

Wayne joined his hands and lifted his arms above his head. Meanwhile, Khan slashed his glowing knife forward. The two attacks happened simultaneously. Wayne was taller, but Khan's weapon granted him superior range. Still, that wasn't enough to select a winner.

The knife's tip pierced Wayne's right side, digging into his rib cage and rising across his chest to aim at his neck. Meanwhile, Wayne lowered his arms, threatening to slam his joint fists on Khan's head.

Khan tilted his head to his right without interrupting the slash. He was ready to endure the blow to kill his opponent. However, Wayne's muscles suddenly thickened, and the mana around the knife faltered, slowing Khan's attack.

Wayne's fists landed at the base of Khan's neck as soon as the knife reached his throat. The impact sent Khan flying downward, removing the weapon from Wayne's flesh and putting an end to that exchange.

Cracking noises reached Khan's ears, and pain tried to enter his mind. However, a clicking growl filled his thoughts and kept those distractions away, allowing him to focus on his landing.

Khan sent mana in every direction, creating platforms that even Wayne couldn't affect. Yet, he was going too fast, and the single stomp he managed to perform only slowed down his inevitable landing.

The rocky surface held strong when Khan slammed into it. The violent impact forced him to bend his knees to endure the remaining momentum, and his muscles bulged as he forced himself to remain on his feet.

Only a second had to pass for Khan to understand his condition. His left shoulder was unresponsive. Wayne had broken it with his blow, but the situation was in Khan's favor now.

Wayne's attack had been too strong, stopping him mid-air while instantly sending Khan to the ground. Khan could exploit that window to deliver a deadly blow to Wayne, but time was against him, and that opportunity would be hard to come by again.

Khan sprinted forward, accelerating as much as possible while seizing the knife with his right hand. Wayne was still above him, leaving the path toward the underground passage open, and he couldn't miss that chance.

"Yes, yes!" Wayne shouted, almost uncaring that Khan was ignoring him. "That's how it should have always been!"

The symphony reacted to the shouts, sending unclear tremors toward the ground. Khan planned to outrun them but ended up mistiming a step, slipping on a smooth rock, and stopping to regain his balance.

Khan didn't blame himself for even a second. He didn't make those mistakes. It was simply impossible with his experience. That event had been Wayne's doing, but his window had yet to close.

"Help my legs!" Khan shouted, sending as much mana as possible into the environment while leaping forward. He had no confidence in his alien technique, but everything would work as long as Wayne's strange skills targeted it over his sprint.

However, Wayne didn't stay still either. He had begun to fall, and the entirety of his mana suddenly descended toward his left foot, adding power to his momentum and generating a sprint that could almost match Khan's speed.

Calculations happened in Khan's mind and led to annoying conclusions. He took a step forward before stopping to swing his knife upward. Wayne fell before him, and the weapon dug into his crossed arms, halting its advance when it touched his firm bones.

Wayne's violent landing made the surface tremble. Rocks shattered all around him, creating cracks that reached Khan's feet. Khan was ready to run around Wayne, but the symphony shook, telling him his sprint would fail.

Khan opted to retreat, jumping backward to return to stable ground. Wayne also stopped moving, limiting himself to lowering his arms. His left forearm had a deep cut that reached his bone, and his chest carried an oblique injury that connected his side to his throat. Yet, blood had already stopped leaking from them.

"Do you understand what you are doing?" Khan cursed. "We will both die at this pace."

"That's fine, isn't it?" Wayne laughed. "The great Captain Khan always comes out on top of these situations. People praised you even when you slaughtered simple workers."

paṇḍa-ñovê|·cóm "I'm not to blame for your situation," Khan declared.

"I know," Wayne stated as a tinge of craziness joined his expression. "However, here we are, two extremes of the same environment struggling toward our own goals."

"You have orders," Khan pointed out, "Not goals."

"Why do I feel like this, then?" Wayne laughed. "The experiments couldn't make me experience this. Killing didn't either, but I'm already feeling more alive after a few months with you. I need more, brother."

Khan's mind didn't allow thoughts, but realizations arrived anyway. He only needed one look at Wayne to know that avoiding the battle was impossible. Wayne was ready to throw his life away for the sake of that confrontation.