

Chaos' Heir 551

Chapter 551 Speed

The hill was short enough to allow a complete view of the gazebo and the environment under it. A circular table with two chairs on opposite sides stood at its center, and a Thilku occupied one of them. Aliens were behind him, wearing firm stances or wielding rectangular screens featuring menus or the cameras' recordings.

The Thilku who had picked up Ambassador Abores led him to the table before pointing at the empty seat. The man sat down with the intention of starting a cordial conversation, but the blatant focus on Khan kept him silent. It was obvious the commanding officer was more interested in Khan than the Ambassador.

That behavior was predominant across the aliens. The team on the hill and the Thilku at its base only had eyes for Khan for reasons everyone could guess. He had defeated a Thilku during the previous meeting. Such a proud species simply couldn't let that go.

Khan was surprised to sense a general lack of anger. It seemed the Thilku didn't mind their previous defeat. They only wanted a chance to prove themselves during the current game. Khan liked that healthy competitiveness since it reminded him of the Ef'i, but his problems remained.

The vehicles were nothing special. Standard motorbikes and jeeps occupied the hill's base in two different spots. The human and Thilku teams had access to the same number and type of rides, and the latter didn't have any adjustment for the aliens' size. The Thilku wanted a fair contest, even going as far as opting for disadvantageous equipment.

Khan couldn't help but glance at the gazebo due to the incessant stares. He recognized one of the standing Thilku. He had been the commanding officer in the past meeting, but the sitting alien claimed his attention. The latter was another fourth-level warrior, but the silver ring around his almost bald head separated him from his companions.

'That's a crown,' Khan thought at the sight of the simple-looking item. He knew the Thilku had royalty and similar statuses, but they also awarded titles to performing soldiers. Khan couldn't pinpoint the reason from his position but decided to stop looking to avoid causing problems.

The sitting Thilku had the same idea. He stopped inspecting Khan and began interacting with Ambassador Abores. The two exchanged basic pleasantries Khan couldn't hear, and his interest in the conversation quickly waned too.

The contest of stares with the opposing team never ended. Khan's companions inspected the Thilku, doing their best to assess their prowess. They were evenly matched in mana, but the aliens' size remained a scary sight. Their interest in Khan was the soldiers' only consolation.

Silent and tense minutes went by under the soft morning breeze. Acarro seemed unaware of the imminent conflict and continued to bathe the teams with pleasant sensations. Khan would love to lie on the ground, relax, or meditate, but his job had very different plans.

A trace of synthetic mana eventually joined the symphony, making Khan lift his eyes to glance in the distance. His companions followed his gaze, and the Thilku felt confused about that gesture until whooshing noises reached their ears.

A relatively big ship became visible in the clear sky and flew in the teams' direction. The vehicle was triangular and resembled human technology, but the red runes on its wings revealed its belonging to the Thilku Empire. Those two symbols weren't enough to make its design unique, but the cage hanging from its base kept everyone's gazes glued on it.

A series of thick metal bars created a three-meter-tall square cage that didn't hide its insides. The box contained a huge creature that grew clearer as the ship closed its distance with the teams. The animal had six muscular legs, yellow fur, a tiger's body, and a three-eyed pig's head. Its size was impressive, but its flesh lacked any trace of fat.

The odd creature was enough to keep everyone interested in the ship, but Khan's inspection went past the simple flesh. His sternness intensified when he sensed the Tainted animal's level. That monster was as strong as him.

'They aren't holding back,' Khan thought. He had studied the past [Hunts], so the choice of the Tainted animal said a lot about the Thilku's intentions. They wanted the game to be tough and challenging.

"It's an Ilqiex," Khan announced, glancing at his companions. "Do you remember the tactic we planned for it?"

"Yes, sir," One of the soldiers faintly said before the others echoed his statement. Nods unfolded, and Khan checked their mana to confirm their knowledge. Still, the inspection also revealed a general lack of confidence.

'I can't really blame them,' Khan thought, holding back a sigh as his eyes returned to the Ilqiex. 'That thing is dangerous.'

The Ilqiex didn't stay still. It repeatedly bumped its head on the metal bars, uncaring of how pointless its efforts were. The ship remained unaffected by that aggression, but Khan didn't let that fool him. He could sense the strength behind those attacks. No second-level warrior could survive a direct hit.

The ship changed direction when it was about to reach the teams and flew toward the woods before stopping at its edges. It left the cage on the ground and set off again to disappear somewhere in the distance.

The Thilku in front of the alien team wore a broad grin that showed his long canines, and Khan replied with an emotionless stare. The two looked at each other for a while before the Thilku finally broke eye contact to nod at his companions.

The gesture made the Thilku approach the vehicles. The motorbikes were the most popular choice, but two opted for the jeep. As for the alien in charge of the group, he remained in his spot and resumed his stare toward Khan.

Khan could only imitate the Thilku. He nodded at his companions, who approached the vehicles to prepare for the [Hunt]. Four took two different jeeps, while three opted for the bikes, but Khan didn't hesitate to scold them.

"The Ilqiex will run into the wood," Khan explained. "Ignore the cars."

The woods in the distance weren't too thick, but a jeep would still have problems navigating them. Instead, the bikes offered more flexibility, and the soldiers followed Khan's orders since they understood his point.

The alien team leader seemed to approve of that choice but didn't say or do anything to convey that feeling. His stare was unfazed even when engines began to resound in the area, and Khan didn't let him be alone in that gesture.

Once everyone was ready, the cage opened on the side facing the woods, and the Ilqiex stormed out of it. The creature headbutted a tree, taking it down before running deeper into the new environment.

No one moved. Khan didn't bother inspecting the woods either since his senses were taking care of that. His gaze left the Thilku only when the latter looked at the hill to await orders.

The crowned Thilku exchanged a few more lines with the Ambassador before standing up to show his huge frame. He was taller than the average alien, and his face conveyed pure pride that his simple smile couldn't attenuate. The Thilku walked outside the gazebo to make himself more visible, and a short cry eventually escaped his mouth.

The cry had no meaning, but both teams were ready for it. Bikes and a single jeep shot forward, accelerating at full speed toward the woods. Their tires left heavy marks on the ground that disrupted the beauty of the place, but no one dared to decelerate.

Khan and the Thilku in charge remained at the hill's base as they inspected their teams hurrying toward the woods. They could move, but the alien didn't, and Khan played along. He wasn't interested in gaining that advantage when the Thilku wanted a direct face-off.

The Thilku nodded at Khan's decision, and his grin broadened even more as he completely turned toward the woods. He crouched forward, placing his six-fingered hands on the ground and bending his knees. His mana also moved, and crackling noises resounded as black sparks seeped past the thick cape.

Khan pretended to prepare to sprint too, but his attention remained on the alien. The Thilku saw mana like humankind, but Khan still found the topic interesting. He wanted to see a Thilku in action. Sadly for him, his eyes couldn't do much in that situation.

The sparks' noises intensified before thundering altogether. A roar-like sound filled the plain as the Thilku shot forward. His acceleration was incredible, and the grass burned whenever his feet touched the ground.

The Thilku instantly caught up with the vehicles before disappearing inside the woods. That speed was more than inhumane, managing to leave Khan speechless too. His mouth would hang in surprise if he didn't force himself to remain calm.

'Is he faster than me?' Khan wondered, but the flames rising from the grassland forced him to accept the truth. He couldn't achieve that explosive and destructive acceleration even with Maban's technique. The Thilku Empire had simply found him a perfect opponent.

Chapter 552 Chase

'What now?' Khan wondered. He couldn't help but hesitate before that insane acceleration, but his thoughts soon wandered toward different topics.

Time slowed down in Khan's eyes. His gaze remained on the woods, but his senses conveyed the entirety of the symphony to his brain. He could feel the cameras buzzing in the sky and the attention his lack of movements had attracted. The [Hunt] had begun, but he was still at the hill's base.

'How much should I reveal?' Khan thought, even if the answer was already clear in his mind.

The Thilku had spread rumors about Khan. Holding back might endanger that meeting and ruin possible future relationships. Besides, the still-burning grass told him he had to try his hardest for that game to be close.

'Help my legs,' Khan thought, heaving a sigh accompanied by a trace of his mana. The symphony listened to his request and sent energy toward his legs, allowing him to generate an inhumane sprint.

Differently from the Thilku, Khan's sprint didn't cause any disturbance in the environment. The grass barely moved, and the ground didn't experience the sprint. Yet, his figure almost teleported halfway through the plain, advancing and rising into the sky.

Out of habit, Khan drew his knife and held it firmly in his left hand. Meanwhile, his eyes and senses scoured the area below. He could feel cameras following after him to record the [Hunt], but they couldn't affect his decisions anymore.

A few vehicles had yet to enter the woods, but that didn't affect Khan's inspection. The many trees had relatively shallow green crowns that failed to hide the ground below. Khan could see past the many holes in that array of small leaves, and the symphony provided an even more accurate scenery.

The bikes, jeep, and the Thilku's explosive acceleration had left a deep mark in the symphony. Missing their traces was impossible for Khan. He could close his eyes and seal his ears, but his advance wouldn't falter.

Khan remained in the sky, kicking the air under him to fly above the woods. He wasn't as fast as the sprinting Thilku, but his speed was by no means negligible. Moreover, his ability to fly was an advantage he couldn't dismiss, especially since his senses removed any drawback.

Acarro's peaceful environment worked in Khan's favor. Each disturbance was a bright light that Khan could easily sense and follow, and that wasn't limited to the teams. The Ilqiex was also leaving tracks of its violent advance, and Khan headed directly in its direction.

The [Hunt] prevented using guns and similar weapons, but that was the end of the strict rules. Spells and martial arts were allowed, just like the fights between teams.

As for the win conditions, there were only two. A team had to drive the Ilqiex back to the cage or capture it with their bare hands and return it. The Thilku gave more value to the second approach, but that was far from mandatory, especially since it involved several issues.

'If we capture the Ilqiex first,' Khan thought, 'The Thilku might steal it back. Yet, that's probably for the best.'

Being the first to capture the monster before losing it would prove strength without leading to victory. That was the best compromise Khan could find with his knowledge and inspection, but another appealing option existed.

The Harbor had arranged a capable team, but the Thilku had the advantage due to their stronger bodies. Khan was the only one who could make a difference, which was bound to improve his position if he succeeded.

'I'll just see how things develop and adapt,' Khan put an end to that internal monologue. 'I'm not confident in getting to the Ilqiex first anyway.'

Khan released more mana in the environment to ask for the symphony's help, and that energy complied. He performed multiple full-speed accelerations while flying above the woods. That went on for entire minutes until a change eventually happened.

The Thilku in charge and Khan had put some distance from the vehicles. They weren't only faster. The woods also didn't hinder them. Khan wasn't even on the ground, so he never needed to dodge trunks or adapt to the terrain.

Still, the Thilku eventually slowed down, and Khan noticed that. The explosive acceleration from before waned, and the symphony added information Khan processed a full speed.

'Does that technique have a time limit?' Khan wondered, trying to understand the Thilku's state from above the woods. 'He doesn't feel tired. Maybe there are other limitations.'

The lack of a clear answer didn't discourage Khan. The Ilqiex was still distant, and the Thilku's deceleration created a window Khan didn't hesitate to exploit.

Khan kept accelerating with Maban's technique, doing his best to put as much distance from the Thilku as possible. He wanted to get to the Ilqiex first to decide what to do, and his legs never stopped kicking the air to accomplish that plan.

The Ilqiex didn't continue running in a straight line for too long. It eventually changed direction, making Khan's job easier. He quickly closed the distance with that monster, and that process accelerated when the latter completely stopped.

Khan dived toward the woods in a location distant enough to avoid getting noticed by the Ilqiex before advancing on the ground. The terrain under the crowns was quite even, but the symphony told him his time was limited. The Thilku and the vehicles were getting closer.

'Killing it is against the rules,' Khan recalled, 'But something that strong should survive without a few legs.'

Incapacitating the prey, calling the allied team, and distracting the opponents while returning to the plain. That was one of the agreed tactics that Khan planned to implement, and problems already stood in his way. The Thilku was closer than both teams, but he would worry about him later.

Shades of green and brown filled Khan's vision as he made his way through the woods. His steps didn't make any sound, but his presence was impossible to hide. He asked the natural mana around him to compensate for his intensity, but something told him that the request wouldn't last long.

Yellow shades eventually fused with the woods' scenery. Khan landed on a branch and half-crouched before peeking forward. The Ilqiex had calmed down and sat in a relatively empty area, and Khan could see it in all its magnificence.

'The rear legs are exposed,' Khan went through what he had studied about the Ilqiex, 'But the front ones handle the balance.'

The two targets would lead to opposite outcomes. Damaging the rear legs would only slow the monster down while attacking the front ones would incapacitate it. Ideally, Khan would aim for the latter, but preventing the Ilqiex's movements wasn't ideal when he had more enemies to handle.

'Rear it is,' Khan stated in his mind, and his mana reacted to his decision, disturbing the cover provided by the symphony.

The Ilqiex had crouched on the ground, but its head suddenly snapped upward. The monster also stretched its front legs while its protruded flat nose trembled. It had noticed something and a hoarse squeal left its mouth to announce the event.

Nevertheless, Khan was faster. His leap brought him behind the monster, and the following step sent him toward its butt. The Ilqiex couldn't react at all. The pain arrived before it could even notice what had happened.

Khan's glowing knife pierced the Ilqiex's right rear leg, digging a hole in its knee. He could have opted for a slash to maximize damage, but his lackluster knowledge of that creature's anatomy made him hold back. Such a strong Tainted animal wouldn't die so easily, but it was better to be safe.

The Ilqiex cried in pain and tried to stand up, but Khan was faster once again. The monster's flesh posed no resistance to the glowing knife. He could swiftly withdraw his weapon, jump toward the other rear leg, and stab its knee.

The monster instinctively stood on its front legs and kicked behind in a desperate attempt to catch Khan, but he was too fast. He had already withdrawn his knife and retreated when the Ilqiex attacked, but his job wasn't over.

Dark blood tainted the Ilqiex's fur as it straightened its remaining legs and sprinted ahead. The monster's priority was to escape that invisible threat, and Khan was okay with that. He only needed it to go where he wanted to.

The Ilqiex's top speed was scary, but its acceleration was manageable. Khan sprinted forward, relying on Maban's technique to catch up with the monster and fly above him. His body even began to spin mid-air before descending to deliver a heavy kick.

Khan had studied multiple reports in the past week, but the reality was always different. As soon as his heel landed on the Ilqiex's nape, he gained a complete understanding of its strength. The creature's muscle density and overall structure were so monstrous that simple kicks wouldn't do much.

As if to confirm Khan's understanding, the Ilqiex completely disregarded the kick and continued accelerating. That violent movement sent Khan flying backward, but he only needed to tap on the air to find his balance.

'They aren't close yet,' Khan thought as he continued to tap on the air with his eyes closed. His body naturally crossed the crowns to return in the clear sky, and he straightened his position to chase after the Ilqiex.

Buzzing noises reached Khan's ears again. He was being watched, but that didn't matter. His kicks couldn't make the Ilqiex change direction, so he would use something stronger.

The Ilqiex charged madly ahead. Its injured knees made it slower than usual, but that didn't stop it from taking down the trees on its path. The monster only wanted to escape and be free, but a shining spear suddenly fell a few meters in front of it.

The monster didn't give the event much thought, but the blinding pillar that followed made it squeal in fear and stomp its legs. Its feet dug through the ground as its huge body struggled to stop.

The abrupt stop still didn't bring the Ilqiex to safety. It had simply run too fast to avoid the flaring pillar altogether. The monster had to give up on sliding to jump to its right, diving through part of the purple-red mana to continue its escape.

The meeting with the chaos element burned part of the Ilqiex's fur. Its left side turned black, but that damage wasn't enough to interrupt its sprint. Yet, another bright spear fell, and the Ilqiex didn't underestimate it at that time.

Khan followed the Ilqiex from above the crowns and adjusted his aim depending on its reactions. His first attack had been too close, but his following ones matched his desires. He didn't want to hurt the Ilqiex any further. He only had to make it change direction.

The Ilqiex was focusing on escaping, so merely seeing pillars or spears was enough to make it turn. It didn't always go where Khan wanted, but he achieved his goal with his eighth spell.

Acarro's beautiful scenery had turned into a fuming and burning spectacle. A pillar was still stretching toward the sky too, but Khan barely paid attention to it. His focus was on the Ilqiex and the powerful aura roaring in its direction.

'So, he can use it again,' Khan understood as he let his body fall past the crowns. His loud assault was bound to attract attention, and the Thilku in charge didn't shy away from his responsibilities.

Khan could get to the Ilqiex before the Thilku but decided to wait and see the clash. That was an excellent opportunity to gauge his opponent's strength, and checking how the Thilku usually handled the [Hunts] wasn't a bad idea in the first place.

The Ilqiex continued to advance, unaware of the imminent threat, but the thundering noise eventually grew too loud. The monster tried to change direction again, but a big figure stormed out of the trees before it and aimed for a frontal clash.

Khan's mouth risked opening in surprise again when he inspected the clash from a secluded branch nearby. The Thilku rushed toward the Ilqiex, spreading his muscular arms and slamming his chest directly into the creature's head.

Surprisingly enough, the Thilku didn't fly away. The momentum accumulated by his insane sprint made the Ilqiex stop on the spot and the ground under them crack. Grass flew in every direction, but the Thilku didn't budge.

The Thilku didn't seem immune to the clash, but a hoarse battle cry left his mouth, and his mana moved toward his arms as he lifted them above his head. He quickly hammered them down, hitting the Ilqiex's head and triggering a reaction in the rest of its body.

'He made it faint,' Khan immediately understood from the mana's behavior.

The Thilku stepped back, allowing the fainted Ilqiex to fall to the ground. The monster's dark blood had accumulated on his chest, and he spat some of his own before wiping his mouth with his sleeve. He had taken a good hit, but his body could endure it.

'Is he stronger than the one I fought?' Khan wondered.

Khan partially lost himself in his thoughts as he waited for the Thilku to do something. He wanted to see how he would react now that the prey was ready for the taking, but more surprises arrived.

"[Blue hair]!" The Thilku suddenly shouted, lifting his chin to spread his hoarse voice through the woods. "Blue hair! [Come out]!"

Khan had understood the Thilku the first time, but that didn't affect his surprise. That was a direct challenge for reasons Khan couldn't be sure of, and the buzzing noise that reached his ears only made it harder for him to think straight.

'Fuck it,' Khan cursed, jumping down the branch without bothering to hide his movements.

The rustling of leaves attracted the Thilku's gaze, and his mouth broadened into a smirk when Khan walked out of a tree. The alien appeared unable to contain himself but still did to let Khan approach him.

Khan walked slowly, taking careful steps forward. The Thilku didn't move even after Khan entered the relatively empty spot he had occupied. He even let him get close to the fainted Ilqiex before finally saying something.

"Me challenge you!" The Thilku shouted, crossing his arms before his chest and straightening his back to look bigger.

"[I understand your language]," Khan said in an accent he could only describe as awful.

"[You defeated Cnabr]!" The Thilku shouted again, adding a scoff at the end of his statement.

"[Amox isn't as weak]!"

'Is he Amox?' Khan wondered, and the Thilku's smirk seemed to confirm that guess.

Chapter 553 Respect

'Is this out of pride?' Khan couldn't help but wonder before that stalemate.

Amox didn't falter nor move. He stood still and proudly in a stance that would intimidate any ordinary soldier. However, Khan had been in the Stal's trenches. Size alone couldn't scare him.

Instead, the fainted Ilqiex lying between the two was a far scarier sight. Khan had tested the monster's prowess first-hand, and seeing Amox taking it down so easily spoke for his strength.

Of course, things weren't that simple. Amox's first clash with the Ilqiex had carried his sprint's momentum. His sturdy body had handled the rest.

As for the blow that ultimately put the Ilqiex out of combat, Khan could only feel respect toward it. Those thick arms could crush any ordinary human. Still, even then, Khan had survived a frontal clash with a Bise. He couldn't feel scared.

The woods prevented the arrival of Acarro's pleasant breeze. Everything stood still in that relatively empty spot. Only the Ilqiex's heavy breathing disturbed the stalemate created by Amox and Khan's intense stares.

On the surface, Khan and Amox wore opposite stances. Amox was on fire, perfectly embodying intensity and pride. His very life was on the line there, and he showed it.

Instead, Khan appeared detached, cold, and almost uncaring. His presence would be barely noticeable without the natural tension leaked by his figure. His intentions were impossible to understand, but his insides showed a different picture.

The limitations imposed by the Ambassador and the overall political tension had put Khan in a tough spot, and his mana simply wanted him to let loose. He also wished to test himself against Amox, and a friendly battle that didn't involve killing was the perfect opportunity.

Khan tightened his grip on his knife but relaxed it right afterward. He probably couldn't defeat the Thilku without his weapon or spells, but nothing stopped him from trying.

"[I'm coming]," Khan warned, but the Thilku didn't spread his arms.

Khan released a tinge of mana in the environment anyway, and the Thilku lost track of him. The next thing he noticed was the heavy kick that landed on his right shoulder. His firm stance faltered, and his arms began to leave his chest, but Khan's offensive didn't stop there.

The direct hit told Khan about Amox's overall muscle density and structure. The alien was indeed strong, but nothing he didn't face before. Besides, his slow reactions put him at Khan's mercy.

Khan relied on Maban's technique to sprint again. Ground or air no longer mattered to him. He could keep the same inhumane speed while flying behind Amox. His body began to spin to accumulate momentum, but something changed inside the alien at that point.

The mana inside Amox grew wild, generating sparks that seeped past his uniform. Khan's heel was ready to hit Amox's nape, but the latter bent forward before the impact, and his body spun incredibly fast.

Thunder roared in the middle of the woods. Amox's body reached unfathomable levels of speed. It turned out that he didn't only bend. He had taken a proper step forward before twisting his torso and stretching his right arm.

Khan sensed that massive limb flying in his direction while his kick was still about to descend. Amox wasn't doing anything specific. His attack was merely relying on physical strength and speed, but his powerful body made it dangerous.

Thoughts had already abandoned Khan's mind, but he understood. Amox could only perform bursts of speed, and they weren't limited to mere sprints. He could enhance his reactions and gestures, surpassing anything Khan could handle.

The huge limb flew toward Khan while his leg was still descending. A clash seemed unavoidable, but Khan forcefully used his other foot to tap on the air and send himself upward.

That light tap couldn't disperse Khan's momentum. He continued to spin while flying upward, but his abrupt rise into the sky made him escape Amox's reach. The latter completely turned only to hit the empty air.

Khan adjusted his position, stopping his spinning motion and straightening his back. He stood a few meters above Amox, lightly tapping the air to keep hovering there. Ideally, the Thilku would follow him in his domain, but nothing similar happened.

Amox appeared excited at the fact that Khan could fly. He lifted his head and fixed his happy smirk on him without jumping after him. Khan had already shown enough flexibility in the air, so it made sense for an experienced warrior to choose to remain on the ground.

However, no stalemate arrived. Khan lifted his right hand, and three glowing needles appeared between his bent fingers. Amox also moved, stretching his left arm toward Khan and summoning more sparks.

Amox's two thumbs bent, creating a crackling black spark that connected their tips. Mana gathered inside it, thickening its figure, loudening its noise, and increasing its power before he reached for it with his right hand.

The sparks were still accelerating Amox's movements, which gained a stark fluidity Khan didn't miss. The Thilku had probably repeated that gesture thousands of times, achieving a certain harmony Khan couldn't help but respect.

Amox touched the thicker spark with his right hand, pulling it toward his chest. That crackling black thread stretched, gathering more power that shot forward as soon as he released it.

Khan had watched everything attentively, but his eyes widened in shock when Amox released the spark. After that gesture, something flew toward him, forcing him to kick the air to his right to fling himself away.

Khan's reaction had been instantaneous, but something touched his chest anyway. He was still flying away when he lowered his gaze and noticed that a long cut had appeared on his uniform. The attack had only grazed his skin, but burns had appeared on his clothes.

Amox summoned his mana again, following Khan with his stretched left arm. He was ready to launch another attack, but Khan didn't remain passive anymore.

Khan kicked the air under him to fly past the crowns. His ascension had been too fast to follow, leaving Amox clueless about his position. The Thilku waited patiently for his return with his left arm pointed at the sky, but something far different came down.

A glowing spear pierced the crowns before exploding mid-air. Amox kept his eyes open, uncaring of the purple-red color trying to blind him, but that didn't help.

Khan dived back into the crowns, using the blinding pillar to hide his presence. His knife glowed while he flew toward that thick, stretched arm, and its tip soon pierced the back of that huge hand.

Amox noticed Khan only when the knife stabbed his hand, and his fast reactions kicked in. The Thilku pulled his arm away, jumping to his right to distance himself from his opponent. Still, as the pillar's glow waned, he noticed three purple-red needles flying in his direction.

The Thilku had to dodge again, which wasn't a problem with his speed. Amox jumped to his left, leaving the needles' trajectory and escaping their explosion. Yet, he suddenly noticed that he had lost track of Khan, and the pain spreading from his shoulder told him where he was.

Khan had used the spear and needles as distractions, which had paid off. Even with Amox's fast reactions, Khan still injured his palm. That wound wasn't deep, but it remained something.

Now, Khan had his knife stabbed into Amox's left shoulder. He didn't aim for a simple thrust at that time. He had performed a proper slash, and his weapon was still running through that strong flesh when the alien noticed it.

Amox didn't hesitate to perform another escape maneuver. Cracks came out of his figure as he stepped forward and prevented Khan from completing his slash. However, something flew after him and turning put his face in the middle of the conical Wave spell.

The Thilku's skin and clothes vanished under the effects of that destructive spell, but he didn't stay at its center for long. Amox quickly sprinted to his right to escape the chaos element but found Khan waiting with his knife pointed at his left shoulder.

Khan's strength was remarkable, and his spells were scary, but that alone wasn't enough to put him among the best third-level warriors. Still, his battle prowess remained terrifying.

Amox understood the reason behind Khan's strength very well during those exchanges. His flexibility, both on the ground and in the air, made his fast movements his greatest asset. That was the backbone of his battle prowess, turning even the simplest attack into a potentially fatal injury.

No one could match Khan in that field. Amox could only react and surpass his speed for a short time. Yet, now that he had lost the initiative, retrieving it without reckless actions was impossible.

Amox steeled his resolve at the sight of the incoming knife. He could dodge it, but that wouldn't change his situation. It would only add another injury that would further weaken his condition. So, he decided to step forward, driving his shoulder into the weapon to gain the chance to attack.

Khan saw everything, from Amox's move to his resolve, and the latter speed prevented him from doing anything about it. The knife stabbed the Thilku's left shoulder, digging deep into his flesh before far more sparks came out of his body.

Thunder resounded in the middle of the woods as scorching sparks flew in every direction. Amox had released a proper explosion to catch Khan in its destructive power and stop that incessant offensive.

Khan released his mana as soon as he noticed what was happening. Purple-red flares shot out of his body to create an uneven defensive sphere that clashed with the incoming sparks and delayed their advance.

The delay allowed Khan to retreat, but some sparks still managed to pierce his mana in the meantime. Charred dots appeared on his uniform, stretching toward his skin at times but without ever inflicting serious damage.

The clash between the two spells was stunning from the outside. Amox had created a crackling and black dome, and a foreign purple-red sphere slowly escaped its rage.

The ground and trees nearby ended up paying the price for that clash. Grass took fire as sparks fell everywhere, piercing trunks and digging holes in the terrain. That natural paradise couldn't survive the battle between two third-level warriors, but neither cared.

The sparks quickly lost power, but Amox didn't move. Khan also let his mana disperse and opted for a simple landing. The two stood still, refraining from attacking any further to inspect each other.

The long cut on the chest and the many new holes had made Khan's uniform baggy. It wasn't too torn but remained quite unfit for the situation.

Instead, Amox was far worse off. His sparks and Wave spell had damaged his uniform and cape, which barely managed to remain on him. Moreover, blood had covered his left shoulder, his skin had cracked in many spots, and the injury on his palm had yet to close.

Even with those injuries, Amox remained the embodiment of excitement. He liked that Khan had put him in that position, and the statement that followed confirmed that fleeing.

"[Blue hair is strong]!" Amox claimed before opting for a question. "[What's your name]?"

"Khan," Khan stated, unable to hold back the smile rising toward his expression. "Captain Khan."

"[Khan]!" Amox laughed, his right hand going for the cape to remove it. He threw that traditional garment away before reaching for the upper part of his uniform and ripping it off.

Khan's smile broadened at that sight, and his hand instinctively went for his uniform's buttons. He imitated Amox, exposing his chest to prepare for the imminent clash. His defined muscles paled before the Thilku's burly figure, but neither took that detail into consideration.

"[I'm coming, Khan]," Amox declared, using the same words Khan had spoken before the battle. That was a show of respect that Khan didn't miss, but something distracted him from that exciting moment.

Amox summoned his sparks, but Khan promptly raised a hand to shout the best "[Wait]!" he could muster. The Thilku stopped and tried to follow his gaze but couldn't see anything. After all, Khan was looking at the ground.

An earthquake arrived in the following seconds, and cracks spread on the ground, creating relatively deep fissures that continued to enlarge. Amox spread his arms, ready to fight anything that came his way, but Khan suddenly appeared on his chest and kicked him away.

Initially, Amox believed that Khan had used that distraction to attack him. Yet, the lack of pain from the push told him that there was more at stake, and the huge figure that shot out from his previous position confirmed that guess.

Khan had also pushed himself away during the exchange but was close enough to inspect the scene. A big, black creature had come out of the ground. The monster had the body of a worm, with a big circular mouth full of teeth and six long claws stretching from its edge.

The monster was only as strong as a third-level warrior, but more came out of the ground. Soon, seven different worms appeared in the area and released screeches as they waited for their bodies to land.

Chapter 554 Hole

'Orze!' Khan immediately understood. He had studied Acarro's environment, including its fauna, so it only took him a glance to realize what had arrived.

The Orze were worm-like hunters that relied on tremors to find prey. They were blind and mostly lived underground. Their big mouths and silver claws made them natural diggers, and their appearance on the surface could only mean one thing. A whole pack had surrounded the area.

Generally, the arrival of a pack would be a serious threat. The surface already featured seven specimens, with most of them being as strong as third-level warriors. However, Khan had experience with outbreaks, and the [Hunt]'s regulations didn't extend to Acarro's fauna. There was no no-killing rule on the Orze.

Khan was still flying backward when the seven Orze jumped from the ground. More monsters were also hiding under the surface, but Khan only smiled. Fighting Amox had filled him with excitement, and the arrival of those new opponents had given him worthy targets.

The Orze closest to Khan was two meters long and half a meter thick. The screech leaking out of its mouth worked as a sonar that scanned its surroundings. It had already noticed Khan and its body began to twist in his direction. However, he was far faster than that creature.

Khan asked, and the symphony moved, giving him the means to generate an inhumane sprint that teleported him before the Orze. His right leg was already stretched, and his foot slammed on the worm's squashy body, digging into it until its wet skin gave in.

The Orze's screech turned high-pitched as Khan's leg dug into its body. He had hit the worm at its center, making it bend oddly. Yet, his offensive was far from over, and the glowing sword that grew from his right hand soon joined it.

Those worms didn't have the best bodies. They were actually weak compared to the Ilqiex. As soon as the chaos claw got close to the Orze, its wet skin crumbled and opened the way for its insides.

Khan stabbed his spell into the worm, and blood and gore followed. The Orze exploded as soon as half of the glowing sword entered it, leaving only a lifeless body and a maimed mouth.

'That's it,' A thought managed to appear inside Khan's brain. 'That's the feeling.'

Khan didn't enjoy killing, but that battlefield was different. He felt no pity or mercy toward simple monsters. The Orze were giving him a chance to use his power and sensitivity, allowing him to let loose without experiencing an ounce of remorse, and he loved it.

The previous execution had barely lasted a few seconds. Khan had dealt with the Orze quickly and smoothly before its companions could return to the ground. He had the chance to kill some more, and the symphony told him the path toward his next target.

Khan used his left leg to kick himself forward, uncaring that part of the Orze's corpse was still hanging from his right foot. That gory body part flew away as soon as he began to spin, and his now free limb delivered a round kick that landed on a monster that had appeared before him.

The new Orze bent under the kick. Its skin shattered, and its insides didn't even try to stop the attack. Khan almost cleaved the monster in half, but his attention didn't remain there. He closed his eyes and let his back face the cracked ground before pushing himself away.

Khan flew through the battlefield until another big figure appeared in his path. That Orze had almost touched the ground, but a purple-red flash happened before that inevitable event. The monster eventually landed, but a third of its mouth fell off, carrying gore and muddy dark blood.

Amox landed in the meantime. Normally, he would check the ground to make sure that the cracks didn't hinder his footsteps. Yet, his eyes couldn't leave Khan. His perfect execution of every move was too compelling to miss.

That execution wasn't limited to mere attacks or power. Khan never wasted time. Each of his steps was perfect and with a precise purpose. He was dancing to a song only he could hear, leaving Amox in awe.

Amox wanted to help. Taking care of that assault had the priority since both teams needed a clear area to move forward with the [Hunt]. However, Khan suddenly opened his eyes to glance at the fainted Ilqiex, and Amox recognized the emotions conveyed by his face.

That was the third time Khan had diverted his gaze for seemingly no reason, and Amox had seen all of them. The first had happened at the hill's base when the ship arrived, and the second before the Orze left the ground. There was a pattern there, so Amox didn't hesitate to follow Khan's eyes now.

Seeing the Ilqiex said everything that needed to be said. Amox understood what Khan had sensed and moved to prevent it. The two gained a joint goal and sprinted toward the fainted monster at full speed.

Amox used his black sparks and instantly reached the Ilqiex. Khan was right behind him, but the ground suddenly trembled again, and a series of holes opened under the fainted monster.

Those holes affected the many cracks, stretching and enlarging them until most of the surface crumbled. A series of underground passages became visible as debris fell on them, but Khan and Amox only looked at the many black figures partially hidden by that mess.

That general inspection was short-lived. An Orze had started to resurface below the Ilqiex. Its long claws had already closed themselves around the fainted monster. Its mouth was also getting closer, threatening to land on that defenseless prey.

Amox had lost his foothold when the ground crumbled. However, he was big and had already reached the Ilqiex. The Orze under the monster was within his reach, and he didn't hesitate to stretch an arm toward it.

The Thilku's big palm touched the rising Orze before a thundering noise filled the area. The monster directly exploded, sending fuming gore in every direction and saving the Ilqiex from that assailant.

Khan reached Amox at that point, but he and the Ilqiex were still falling. Too much of the area had crumbled for Khan to push them away. He lacked the strength and time to do so. Yet, that location was dangerous, especially if the trio ended up at its bottom.

"[Let's take them, Khan]!" Amox suddenly shouted, ending in a loud laugh.

Khan inspected the Thilku. He was brimming with excitement while glancing at the crumbling debris before him. He didn't even bother looking at Khan while his body was still falling.

"I thought you'd have me do all the work," Khan scoffed, using human language since he wasn't sure he could convey the joke properly.

Amox's laugh grew louder, and Khan didn't do anything to stop the inevitable fall. The terrain continued to crumble due to the many unstable tunnels, but stability eventually arrived, allowing the trio to land.

Khan had no problem securing a stable foothold. He actually never touched the ground until the whole fall stopped, but his feet eventually reached the new surface. The terrain was a bit sandy, and the slightest pressure risked making it cave in, but that wasn't a problem for Khan.

Amox was in a completely different situation. He wasn't only far heavier than Khan. He also lacked his smooth and weightless footwork, leaving his legs halfway into the ground after the landing.

The Ilqiex was in a similar situation. It had fallen flat on the new surface, digging into it for a good meter. It was still safe and asleep, but the incoming battles risked submerging it with debris or worse.

As for the area, a good chunk had caved in by a few meters. The trio was basically at the bottom of a big hole that didn't stay still. More ground crumbled due to the digging of the Orze. It wouldn't take long before they attacked.

Amox and Khan didn't need to say anything. Amox faced one side of the hole, and Khan had opted for the opposite. They had instinctively decided to split that outbreak since salvaging the Ilqiex was the priority.

Soon, five figures pounced out of the ground, leaping toward Khan, Amox, and the Ilqiex. Those Orze had no unique offensive pattern. They only wanted to stab their prey and drag it underground, but their opponents wouldn't allow it.

Khan was the first to move. Two Orze had jumped out of his side of the hole, making it his job to take care of them. He leaped forward, stopping before the monsters and lifting his left hand.

The conical Wave spell engulfed the Orze, and their weak bodies could only crumble under its power. The insidious chaos element dug through them, turning their skin and insides into dust and leaving maimed corpses behind.

Khan waited for the symphony to confirm the Orze's death before flinging his right hand to his left. Two needles had appeared between his fingers, and the gesture made them fly toward the Ilqiex to intercept the worm pouncing at it. The spells hit the monster's mouth, exploding and destroying a third of its body.

Amox also had two Orze flying toward him, but his legs were temporarily inconvenienced. At least, that was what Khan believed. The Thilku had a very different idea since he crouched forward and jumped, lifting a big cloud of dirt in the area.

The Orze were blind, so the cloud didn't hinder their offensive. However, the hands that landed on them did. Amox had reached for the worms' mouths, grabbing their opposite edges to slam the two monsters against each other.

The worms suffered damage but didn't die. Yet, Amox was still holding them, and the landing gave him the opportunity to slam them into the ground. Another cloud of dirt rose, and blood fused with it.

A second wave of Orze arrived. The worms decided to attack from every direction without targeting anything specific. They just wanted to make the entire area crumble to have that fight underground.

Khan counted eight worms. Usually, he would rely only on himself to keep the Ilqiex safe and clear the area, but Amox was quite trustworthy and capable. Besides, Amox was still eyeing his half of the hole, so Khan decided to stick to his side.

Three needles flew to Khan's right as he jumped ahead. The spells hit two worms and exploded, killing one and heavily injuring the other. Meanwhile, Khan lifted his knee and covered that body part with the [Blood Shield] before slamming it inside the third Orze's mouth.

The Orze's upper part exploded during the violent impact, and Khan didn't hesitate to use his free leg to kick himself to his left. Two worms were pouncing at the Ilqiex, and he couldn't let that happen.

Amox didn't stay still during the exchange. Black sparks came out of his body, making his movements surpass Khan's top speed. Three Orze were closing on his position, and he waited until they got into his range to take care of them.

Thunder roared in the hole as the three Orze exploded, leaving only gore behind. Amox sprinted toward the Ilqiex as soon as his feet touched the ground, reaching fainted monster at the same time as Khan, and the two instinctively went for different targets.

Of the two Orze pouncing at the Ilqiex, one saw a deep cut opening through half of its body, while the other directly exploded. A rain of dark blood followed, and Khan and Amox landed among it, uncaring of how dirty they got.

The pack of Orze was almost out of specimens, but Khan sensed their desire to keep attacking. Still, the symphony created a stronger urge inside him. He couldn't help but glance to his left to meet Amox's proud smirk and match that expression with a challenging smile.

The two had reached an understanding other than mutual respect. Yet, the problems weren't over, and Khan's eyes suddenly snapped at the Ilqiex. A hoarse squeal followed as the monster cried and struggled to its feet. The creature had awakened, forcing Khan and Amox to recall the [Hunt].

Nevertheless, as Khan and Amox focused on the Ilqiex, the four remaining Orze jumped at them from behind. Khan was the first to turn with his glowing knife and needles ready, and his prompt reaction pushed Amox to do the same.

In a few seconds, the four remaining Orze either exploded or died due to heavy injuries. Khan and Amox found themselves side by side before those new corpses but didn't exchange any glance.

They both peeked behind their shoulders only to see a deep channel leading to the hole's edge. The Ilqiex had left again.

Chapter 555 Reactions

The symphony showed traces of the Ilqiex's sudden escape. The monster was still nearby, but each passing second made it put more distance from the hole.

Khan and Amox shared the desire to exchange another smirk before getting back to the [Hunt], but something else attracted the former's attention. Khan glanced to his left to inspect one of the hole's edges, and the sound of tires eventually reached the area, updating Amox about the situation.

A series of bikes appeared on the hole's edge. Humans and Thilku peeked into the big cavity only to remain stunned by the sight that welcomed them. The many maimed corpses of the Orze created a disgusting scenery, but the two standing figures caused more shock.

Khan and Amox had dropped the upper part of their clothes long ago, but that only worsened their appearance. A lot of the Orze's muddy blood had fallen on them, adding a dark and disgusting touch to their overall presence.

"Go after the Ilqiex already!" Khan scolded, pointing in the direction where the monster had escaped.

"[Don't stand still]!" Amox gave a similar reprimand, also pointing toward the channel dug by the Ilqiex.

The two teams snapped back to reality and turned their bikes toward the Ilqiex before accelerating. Khan even heard a single jeep in the distance following along. Soon, the hole's edge became empty again, leaving only the two scouts.

At that point, Khan and Amox finally exchanged their smirk, which ended in a joint snicker. They were in no hurry to chase their teams, and Amox seized the chance to show his respect.

"[You are a formidable warrior, Captain Khan]," Amox stated, performing a customary Thilku bow even in the absence of his mantle.

"[You too, Amox]," Khan announced, imitating that bow. He had practiced it in the previous weeks, leading to a flawless performance.

"[Good bow]!" Amox praised, laughing in approval. "[Shall we]?"

"[Of course]," Khan responded, tapping the ground to send himself into the air. "[I'll go first]."

Amox didn't mind that gesture. The two had reached an understanding there. They knew how fast they were, and that slight advantage couldn't change the situation.

Khan sprinted toward the woods, flying above the trees while Amox half-crouched. He planted his hands on the ground and summoned his black sparks before thunder resounded in his spot.

The symphony kept track of Amox, but Khan could easily do it with his eyes too. Amox's inhumane sprint moved the trees and burned the grass, creating a fuming trail anyone could notice.

Khan felt no surprise when Amox surpassed him. The Thilku caught up with the teams in no time before running past them. That insane sprint was impossible to match, and Khan could play a battle of endurance with it.

'He can't have much mana left,' Khan considered, sprinting at full speed above the woods. He soon surpassed the teams but remained behind Amox, and the latter put more distance between them.

That wasn't an outcome Khan could affect. Amox was simply faster than him. Yet, possible plans formed in his mind. If Khan managed to make Amox run out of mana, he could leave him behind for good, gaining a stark advantage over the [Hunt].

Implementing that plan wasn't easy. With killing out of the question, Khan had to hold back his deadliest moves, which also happened to be his best. Even if he wanted to, he didn't know if he could win that game, especially since a lot depended on his team.

'Those things should have recorded enough already,' Khan thought when a buzzing noise reached his ears. 'Maybe losing won't be bad as long as I keep myself busy.'

Khan made peace with his internal struggle and decided to pursue the only path to victory he could find. Either way, the blame wouldn't be on him.

Louder thunderous noises eventually resounded, marking an event that the symphony conveyed to Khan. Truth be told, he could predict the nature of the matter even without his senses, but Acarro's natural mana confirmed his guess.

Khan flew toward the noise source, descending through the crowns at full speed to meet his opponent. Amox was waiting for him, standing next to the fainted Ilqix. He had caught up with the monster again, but his arm was on the sky, ready to unleash his fast spell.

Amox adjusted his aim as soon as he noticed Khan and more sparks surged as he pulled the mana between his thumbs. Something flew after Khan in the next second, but he had predicted that outcome, and two needles were already blocking that trajectory.

The Thilku's spell destroyed the needles, barely slowing down at all. Still, Khan didn't need anything else. The fraction of a second gained over his opponent's attack allowed him to dodge it and disappear.

Amox didn't even consider pressing on with that tactic. His left arm didn't only hurt due to the injuries on his shoulder. He had also lost track of Khan, so he knew he wouldn't get the chance to keep his distance anymore.

As Amox had predicted, Khan appeared behind him and stabbed his knife into his left shoulder. Khan planned to render the entire limb useless but sparks thundered, allowing Amox to react as soon as he felt pain.

The Thilku stepped forward and turned, stretching his arms in an attempt to catch Khan. Yet, the two had already gone through a similar exchange, and the experience didn't lead to different outcomes. Khan stomped his feet to launch himself upward before ricocheting through the air and reaching for Amox's back again.

Amox's attack missed, but his insane reactions made him turn again as soon as Khan's knife touched his skin. Due to the incoming thick arms, Khan couldn't remain in his position anymore. He kicked the air under him to escape once more, but his leg stretched at that time.

The Thilku had already accelerated his reactions to respond to the knife, so the leg took him by surprise. He tried to lean backward, but the tip of Khan's foot hit his chin, lifting his head in the impact.

Khan rose in the air and let himself turn upside down to dive directly toward Amox. His previous blow had opened a window he didn't hesitate to seize. However, Amox wouldn't let himself be passive anymore, and a large quantity of mana accumulated inside him.

Khan's eyes widened. He had seen a similar move during the previous battle. Amox wanted to release his explosion again to interrupt Khan's offensive. Khan could deal with it, but a prolonged clash would create problems since the Ilqiex was so close.

A snort left Khan's mouth as he suddenly changed direction, ricocheting through the air to land on the fainted Ilqiex. His steps were so light that the monster didn't feel anything, but he didn't look at the creature even once. His eyes remained on Amox, who turned to show his confident smirk.

"[You are smart]," Amox commented.

"[You could have killed it]," Khan groaned.

"[Could I?]" Amox feigned ignorance, but his pretense worked since it instilled doubt.

Khan couldn't be sure about Amox's control over his defensive technique. He didn't even know if the Thilku had something that simply resembled his previous spell. Too many variables were at play there, and he couldn't be reckless when the Ilqiex's life was at stake.

Realistically speaking, Amox wouldn't use something with such destructive might near the Ilqiex. However, that slight doubt made Khan hesitate, which was enough for Amox since he had interrupted the offensive without using any mana.

"[Let's not do that again]," Khan eventually stated, and the two shared a meaningful stare before something else attracted his attention.

Khan glanced at the trees behind Amox, and the sound of tires soon followed. A few figures became visible among the trees, but crackling noises followed.

Amox sprinted ahead, trying to catch Khan by surprise. He interrupted his advance right before the Ilqiex, performing a piercing motion with his right arm. Yet, his hand only touched empty air. Khan had disappeared as soon as Amox had summoned his sparks.

The Thilku didn't even need to ask where Khan had gone. He turned toward the trees behind him and sprinted at full speed. Soon, a predictable scene appeared in his view, and he moved to stop it.

Khan knew dealing with Amox quickly was impossible, but the teams' arrival had opened a different path. He could give his companions an advantage if he reduced the number of opponents they would have to fight.

A series of vehicles appeared in Khan's view when he crossed a row of trees. The two teams had almost blended due to the equal starting point, but a few Thilku were in the lead due to their experience with those games.

Khan saw two Thilku bikes mere meters ahead. The one on the left was advancing in a straight line, but the other was busy dodging a trunk, and Khan didn't hesitate to go for it.

The Thilku on the bike noticed Khan, but avoiding him was impossible. She had already decelerated to dodge the tree, and pressing the brakes wouldn't help. Khan was faster than her anyway, and his leg was already aiming for the front tire.

However, a thunderous noise resounded before Khan could hit the bike. Amox appeared beside him, ready to stab his thick arm into his body. His hand had stretched to take the shape of a blade, and Khan knew that a direct impact would put his ribs in danger.

The rider almost froze in fear. She even forgot to press the brakes as her brain tried to understand what was happening. Yet, before her thoughts could reach a conclusion, Khan disappeared, leaving only her companion at her side.

"[Keep moving]!" Amox shouted as the bike ran past him. His companion searched for his face to understand how angry he was, but he didn't look at her even once. Amox's eyes had already returned to the trees to look for Khan's next appearance.

Khan flew through the crowns, sprinting through the branches to hide his figure. The symphony had already found a new worthy target, and he dived toward it as soon as the right moment arrived.

The new Thilku targeted by Khan was near the end of the two teams. He was riding a bike too, and his attention was on the woods due to the many trunks ahead. He didn't even notice Khan diving toward his front wheel.

However, the Thilku's eyes widened in surprise when thunder resounded at his side, revealing Amox. The latter was already swinging his right arm, and looking at its trajectory made the alien notice Khan.

Khan was upside down, pointing his glowing knife at the bike's front tire. His weapon could almost touch it, but Amox's reactions had been as incredible as always. If Khan completed the attack, Amox would hit him for sure.

'Screw it,' Khan thought, steeling his resolve and summoning the [Blood Shield], covering his left side as he continued to descend.

The Thilku on the bike was powerless. He could only watch as Khan's knife cut through the front tire and split it in half. Amox's blow landed on his side right afterward, flinging him away.

The bike's front dug into the terrain now that its tire was gone. The vehicle's back began to rise, threatening to send the Thilku on it flying. Yet, Amox caught him by his cape and pulled him away.

The Thilku's eyes remained on the damaged vehicle, which rolled on the ground before slamming on a trunk. Metal shards flew everywhere, and important pieces of the bike also fell off, making it useless from that point onward.

"[Go]," Amox ordered, putting his companion to the ground and slapping his shoulder. "[Go help the others]."

The Thilku only needed to look at Amox's serious face to nod and run after the teams. He had lost his ride, but his job wasn't over. His companions were busy capturing the Ilqiex, and he needed to help.

Amox immediately lost interest in his companion and focused on the woods. He had seen Khan slamming on a trunk and piercing through it. He was sure he had suffered some damage, but it was unclear whether he was out of combat yet.

The Thilku eventually decided to run without the help of his sparks. He dived through the trees, crossing the trunk broken by the previous attack. He almost expected the area to be empty, but the standing figure waiting for him told a different story.

Khan was there, lying on a trunk while his hand massaged his left side. He looked in pain, but Amox couldn't see any injury on his body. Khan also stretched his back, showing how the attack didn't affect his flexibility.

"[That hurt]," Khan complained, his back hurting due to the clash with the tree. He could have avoided it, but that development would make the rest of his plan more believable.

"[You are tough]," Amox praised, almost glad that Khan was still on his feet. "[Can you fight]?"

"[Can you]?" Khan asked, smirking and lifting his knife, which glowed with his mana.

All things considered, that was the best outcome for Khan. He had weakened the Thilku team and showed his prowess while removing himself from an active role in the [Hunt]. He knew Amox wanted to keep him there to avoid messing with his companions any further, which was perfect for him.

As Khan had predicted, Amox summoned his sparks to sprint forward. The Thilku teleported before Khan, and his right arm lunged ahead.

Khan was ready for that. He had actually started dodging before the attack could unfold, allowing him to half-crouch to his right when the arm tried to slam on his chest.

Amox's stretched hand dug into the trunk, and Khan lifted his knife to exploit that window. The weapon aimed for Amox's right elbow, but he employed his quick reactions to throw himself forward.

The Thilku's huge body slammed on Khan, interrupting his attack and sending him backward. He had retracted his head in time to avoid getting hit on the nose, but his chest felt the blow.

Nevertheless, Khan could easily endure those clumsy attacks. He never lost his balance but let himself fly backward for a few meters before sprinting. He used the trees to hinder Amox's vision, and the latter noticed him only when a powerful kick landed on his right side.

Amox grunted and bent. He could react to the pain inflicted by the knife, but the kick unleashed its full power in a single instant. That didn't give him a chance to dodge or run away before it was too late, but his body could endure that much.

Sparks left Amox's dark-red skin and accelerated his movements. Two steps brought him to Khan's left side, ready for a descending blow with two arms. Theoretically, his speed made his attack unavoidable, but his limbs only hit empty air.

Amox was genuinely confused. That wasn't the first time Khan had dodged his attacks, but he still couldn't explain how. He was faster than Khan, and those short exchanges couldn't give him a chance to react. However, the reality told a very different story. Amox had managed to hit Khan only when he decided to trade his body for a bike.

That confusion never waned, but Amox didn't have the time to think about it since his knee began to hurt. Khan had appeared under him, delivering a sneaky kick the Thilku couldn't hope to dodge.

Amox used his sparks to try to cut Khan's escape path and gain any form of initiative over him. Yet, Khan wasn't limited by gravity. Trapping him was simply impossible, and he continued to slip away right before Amox's attacks could land.

The Thilku couldn't possibly know that Khan had long since stopped reacting to his attacks. He wouldn't have the time to dodge if he waited to see what was coming after him. His only option was to predict his opponent's moves, and the mana helped him with that.

Khan began to escape as soon as Amox's mana tried to give birth to the sparks. That was the signal Khan used to remain one step ahead of his opponent, and that approach never failed him throughout the battle.

Amox and Khan exchanged blow after blow. The Thilku always failed to hit his opponent, but Khan was in a similar situation. He delivered kick after kick, targeting joints and weak spots, but Amox never fell or slowed down.

The Thilku showed the full might of his body in the battle, and Khan did the same with his superior prowess. The two never stopped fighting and always did their best to take each other down. Still, a loud siren eventually resounded, filling the woods with its deafening noise.

Khan was about to deliver a descending kick on Amox's left shoulder, but the arrival of the siren made him push himself away. He kept spinning until his leg slammed on the ground, dispersing his momentum and sending dirt everywhere.

Amox could use that chance to attack but remained still. He glanced at Khan before lifting his gaze to the sky. Khan did the same, and a buzzing noise eventually joined the siren. A camera descended between the two, stopping above them to convey a message both could understand.

"The [Hunt] is over," A robotic voice came out of the flat, circular machine. "[The Hunt is over]."

Chapter 556 Lord Exr

Khan and Amox stared at the circular camera before heaving a joint sigh. The machine began to fly away, remaining under the trees and restraining its speed to act as a guide, and the scouts followed it.

Amox was taller, so he instantly reached Khan's side before matching his pace. Khan stored his knife in the meantime and nodded at Amox when he patted his left shoulder.

"[Good fight]," Amox stated. He was probably holding back, but his hand still felt heavy on Khan's shoulder.

"[You are a resilient one]," Khan praised before wearing a pensive face. He wasn't sure he had used the right words, and Amox noticed that.

"Me understand human language," Amox said, inviting Khan to switch language.

"[It's training]," Khan explained, adjusting his accent as well as possible. "[I need to learn]."

Amox was slightly taken aback but quickly laughed, resuming patting Khan's shoulder. The gesture was closer to punches than friendly exchanges, but Khan endured it.

"[You hurt my shoulder]," Amox complained, finally retracting his arm to inspect his injuries.

"[You hurt my back]," Khan pointed out as the two continued to follow the camera.

"[Only because you wanted to destroy the ride]," Amox stated.

"[I'm still hurt]," Khan responded, and the two exchanged glances before snickering.

The camera didn't announce the winner, but Amox and Khan didn't care. They strolled through the woods without minding their belonging to different species. The game had been a formal greeting meant to bring the two groups closer, and their respective stance made it a success.

Khan and Amox didn't add anything else. They limited themselves to that casual walk in Acarro's beauty, bathing in the light that managed to cross the crowns. The morning on that planet was lovely, and the two scouts began to recover under it.

A familiar scenery eventually appeared in the distance. Amox's eyes lit up, but Khan couldn't feel surprised since the symphony had already updated him. The trees ahead grew scarce, showing a plain that hosted some ruckus.

Khan and Amox accelerated without ever running, and the scene quickly grew clearer. The two scouts noticed their respective companions together with their vehicles. The big cage was also there, and the Ilqiex was trapped inside.

The Ilqiex was awake, but the many metal threads wrapped around its body were keeping it still. Those ropes bound its thick legs, mouth, and ankles, preventing it from struggling any further. The cage had also closed, making any effort pointless.

The monster retained Khan and Amox's attention only for a few seconds. The two scouts soon inspected the cage's surroundings, which revealed the game's outcome. The Thilku were congratulating each other and cheering while the humans stood on the side, wearing dejected and tired expressions.

It didn't take a genius to understand that the humans had lost, but Khan couldn't help but be curious. The Thilku were one vehicle down after his sacrificial play. Theoretically, his companions had a stark advantage, but he didn't know whether they had failed or avoided exploiting it.

'I need to look at the recordings,' Khan thought, instinctively heading toward the human team only to find Amox's big hand on his shoulder again.

"[Come, come]," Amox declared. "[We must feast now]."

Khan didn't know what to do, but refusing a direct invitation from the enemy scout wasn't an option. He showed his helplessness to his companions while heading for the cage with the Thilku. Amox let him go to exchange a few laughs with the other aliens, but they all eventually moved toward the hill, and the humans followed.

A separation happened during that walk. The humans remained slightly behind and didn't dare to mix themselves with the Thilku, but Khan was an exception. Amox reached for his shoulder whenever he risked leaving his group, putting him almost in the middle of the aliens.

The other Thilku didn't hide their interest in Khan, but only respectful and curious looks flew in his direction. No one spoke to him, and even Amox temporarily ignored him to exchange cheers with his companions.

Khan decided to go with the flow, and the hill's base eventually attracted his attention. Someone had set up a long, short table and placed multiple pillows at its sides. Drinks and food already occupied its surface, and big barrels stood nearby.

The customs in that phase of the game changed occasionally, but Khan imitated the Thilku around him, ultimately finding himself on an empty spot before the hill. Both teams were with him and created a line, either performing military salutes or traditional bows.

Khan opted for the military salute and waited. Soon, Ambassador Abores and the crowned Thilku stood up to leave the gazebo and make themselves more visible, but the former politely remained one step behind.

"You showed us an incredible spectacle," The crowned Thilku announced in a hoarse voice.
"Congratulations!"

The crowned Thilku translated the announcement into his language before switching again. "Now, wash yourselves, eat, and drink. You've earned it!"

After the crowned Thilku translated his second statement into his language, the aliens broke the line to cheer, and Khan followed suit. He wanted to limit himself to a smile and a few nods with his companions, but Amox's hand fell on his shoulder once again.

"[Come, Khan]," Amox called, leaving the group to head for the barrels. Khan followed him, splitting from both teams, which approached the table.

The barrels were open, and Khan could see his reflection when he peeked into one. A water-like liquid filled those containers, and Amox didn't hesitate to dive his head into it.

Amox washed his face before using his hands to take care of the rest of his body. Khan watched him for a few seconds before doing the same, removing all the muddy blood, gore, and sweat lingering on his skin.

That rudimentary bath wasn't ideal, but Khan had experience from the Slums and Nitis. He did a decent job at cleaning himself, even if his pants ended up drenched.

Khan didn't care about that, and Amox didn't either. The Thilku ended up in a similar state, nodding in approval when he inspected Khan, and his hand didn't hesitate to reach for his shoulder again.

"[Sit with me]," Amox requested, and Khan didn't dare to refuse.

The two headed for the table, which depicted a predictable scene. The humans and Thilku had sat on opposite sides and had yet to start eating. However, Amox had different plans and pushed Khan toward one of the short edges before sitting beside him.

Khan could feel many gazes falling on him as soon as his butt ended on a pillow. He was at the head of the table with the alien scout. That position had meaning even in their culture, but no one complained.

"[Take this]," Amox said, reaching for bowls, cups, and plates nearby to place them before Khan. He did the same for himself, and Khan soon had a complete view of what the banquet could offer.

Khan had studied the Thilku thoroughly, so that uncommon food didn't surprise him. The bowls had worms or insects of various kinds, with some still moving. The plates had bread-like meals or rare meat, while the cups held a dark, dense liquid that Khan recognized as booze.

"[To our human friends]!" Amox eventually exclaimed, lifting his cup into the air. The Thilku immediately imitated him, and the human side soon did the same, exchanging a public toast that marked the beginning of the banquet.

Khan took a short sip from his cup only to be invaded by a harsh and strong scent. The dense liquid was booze not meant for humans, but that wasn't Khan's first time with something similar. The Ef'i and Niqols had already trained him for those drinks.

Amox laughed when he saw Khan going for a longer second sip. He patted his shoulder again before taking a handful of worms and stuffing them into his own mouth.

Khan noticed the gesture and let go of his cup to try those worms. His hand and mouth showed no hesitation, and his eyes lit up when a pleasantly pungent flavor covered his tongue. That food was actually good, and he didn't hesitate to get a taste of everything.

The other humans didn't share Khan's enthusiasm. The Slums and Nitis had made him used to odd meals, but they couldn't adapt on the spot. They opted for the bread and meat but avoided the meals that were too disgusting-looking.

Amox continued laughing and eating, appreciating how much Khan was enjoying the banquet. He didn't expect such a flexible reaction from a human, and his inspection eventually attracted Khan's attention.

"[Shouldn't you get that treated]?" Khan asked after gulping down a mouthful of insects and nodding toward Amox's left shoulder.

"[Eating first]," Amox exclaimed. "[I'll be fine by tonight anyway]."

"[I agree on the eating]," Khan chuckled. "[This stuff is good]."

"[Fill your stomach]," Amox cheerfully ordered. "[You must recover your energy after our battle]."

Khan agreed with Amox and wolfed down anything that ended within his reach. Meanwhile, Amox acted as a perfect host, refilling Khan's cup whenever he emptied it or bringing more plates to their side of the table.

To the Thilku's surprise, Khan ate as much as them, stopping only when the table was devoid of food. He leaned backward at that point, placing a hand on the ground while wielding the cup with the other. Having a full stomach and a drink under Acarro's light felt fantastic, and he made sure to enjoy it to its fullest.

"[Did you like our food]?" Amox asked, half-turning toward Khan while wielding a cup. The table was a bit short for him, so he rested his elbow on it.

"[It was great]," Khan praised. "[I'm fully recovered]."

"[I only hit you once]," Amox laughed. "[You are a slippery foe]."

"[My]," Khan said, falling silent for a few seconds to recall the word he wanted to use. "[My girlfriend gets angry when I get hurt]."

"[Ah]!" Amox exclaimed, chuckling. "[I know what you are saying. My wife tries to kill me every month]."

"[Why]?" Khan asked, also laughing.

"[Thilku women have a temper when they are in love]," Amox proudly stated. "[I'd be worried if my wife stopped fighting me]."

"[I know the feeling]," Khan admitted. "[Do you have kids]?"

"[Two]," Amox nodded. "[A small boy and a girl as scary as her mother]."

"[That's good, right]?" Khan questioned.

"[She makes me proud every day]," Amox snickered, gulping down his drink and reaching for the jug with the booze.

"[Do you have kids]?" Amox asked, refilling Khan's drink before tending to his cup.

"[No]," Khan revealed, respectfully lifting his drink toward Amox before taking a sip. "[It's too early]."

"[Do you love your girlfriend]?" Amox questioned.

"[I do]," Khan opted for honesty.

"[Then it's the perfect time]," Amox declared.

Khan lifted his gaze, trying to think of a concise way to explain his situation before going for something vague. "[It's complicated]."

"[I see]," Amox let it go but reached for Khan's shoulder again. "[Well, a warrior like you will solve any problem]."

Khan ignored the red spot that had appeared on his shoulder due to the repeated slaps and politely addressed Amox's praise. "[You are strong as well. The Thilku never fail to surprise me]."

"[Ah]!" Amox snorted. "[You didn't point your knife at my face even once]."

"[And you didn't show me everything you can do]," Khan responded, and the two fell into a meaningful stare that conveyed some of the excitement created during their previous clash.

"[It's comforting knowing that you'll be at my side during the investigation]," Amox changed the topic. "[The humans are indeed capable]."

Khan's eyes lit up in interest now that Amox had mentioned the investigation. He had expected the Thilku to leave that kind of talk to the people under the gazebo. Still, the topic was in the open now, and he wanted to know more.

"[What do you know]?" Khan asked.

"[I know about the bomb]," Amox revealed. "[It's the work of filthy criminals]."

Amox ended his line by spitting on the ground. The gesture conveyed his deep disgust for the criminals, and Khan couldn't help but find it interesting.

"[I didn't think the great Thilku Empire had blind spots]," Khan said, hoping that his statement didn't offend Amox.

"[Don't talk like that now]," Amox snorted. "[Even the Thilku have criminals. Their shameful behavior is a stain on the greatness of the Empire]."

"[Sorry]," Khan made sure to say. "[I'm still figuring you out]."

"[The Thilku are proud but not delusional]," Amox explained. "[We are stronger than humans, so we have better criminals]."

Khan avoided agreeing or disagreeing with Amox and limited himself to memorizing that information. The Thilku were more mature than he had initially expected, and he didn't know how to take that news.

"[So]," Khan changed the topic, "[Do you have any idea where we'll begin investigating]?"

"[Are you looking for classified information]?" Amox snickered.

"[It might help prepare the human team]," Khan feigned innocence.

"[Ah]!" Amox exclaimed before lowering his voice and looking at the hill's peak. "[Only Lord Exr can discuss those matters. I'm sure your Lord will update you once you are gone]."

"[Lord Exr]," Khan muttered, also glancing at the hill's peak. He couldn't see much from his position since he was sitting, but the symphony filled the blanks.

Chapter 557 Picture

The meeting didn't continue for long once the food was over. The [Hunt] had given Ambassador Abores and Lord Exr enough time to talk and set the terms of their cooperation. Some details changed after the game's outcome, but the two handled them during the banquet.

After that, Khan only had the time to empty a few jugs with Amox before being summoned away. His conversations with the Thilku never went too deep in any field, but the two broadly smiled when they said their goodbyes.

The square platform brought Ambassador Abores to the bottom of the hill, and he performed a traditional bow toward his escort before heading for the human ship nearby. His team had already gathered there, welcoming him with military salutes, and they followed him inside as soon as he nodded.

The cargo area was as cramped as before, but Khan faced no problems inside the cabin. He also covered his chest with one of the spare tracksuits stored there, and the set-off began once the Ambassador obtained the Thilku's clearance.

"Sir," Khan tried to call during the flight since the Ambassador was in the cabin with him, but the man promptly shut him down. "Not here, Captain. The briefing will happen in the Harbor."

Khan could only remain silent after that reprimand and focus on driving the ship according to the Thilku's instructions. The human outpost eventually appeared, and Khan led the vehicle to the appropriate landing spot.

Soldiers greeted the team and gave them back their phones. Khan stored the device without looking at the screen while waiting for Ambassador Abores to exchange inevitable pleasantries. Doctors also checked everyone up, but their clearance arrived quickly.

The scientists had prepared the teleport in the meantime, so the team could directly step onto the platform when they reached it. Synthetic mana gathered on it as soon as the Ambassador gave the okay, and the machine activated, bringing everyone into a far different environment.

Khan had to hold back a helpless sigh when the stench of the synthetic mana filled his nostrils. That issue went beyond the energy amassed by the teleport. The metal walls and artificial illumination that filled his view told him that he had returned to a place that didn't fit his tastes.

'Home,' Khan mocked in his mind. Now that Monica was gone, the Harbor had lost most of its charm. He could keep himself busy with work and training, but Acarro's morning still shone in his thoughts and created a standard that the metal environment couldn't match.

"Let's move," Ambassador Abores ordered before Khan could lose himself deeper into his thoughts. The team left the platform and teleport area to cross a series of corridors, and one of the Harbor's iconic rides waited for them when they reached a hangar.

The team jumped inside and rejoiced at the comfortable seats that welcomed them. Only Khan remained focused on the synthetic mana. It was simply annoying for him to go through that significant change, but Ambassador Abores made sure to distract him.

"You all did well today," Ambassador Abores announced inside the privacy of that passengers' area. "Once we land on the embassy, you can take the rest of the day off."

Many eyes lit up at that statement. Lunchtime had already arrived, but it was the weekend. Most soldiers wouldn't want to spend it working.

"Except for Captain Khan," Ambassador Abores continued before cheers could hide his voice. "I know you must be tired, but a short briefing is in order."

"It's no problem at all, sir," Khan politely responded.

Ambassador Abores didn't nod or add anything. He looked at Khan for a few seconds before losing interest. That was in line with his usual behavior, but Khan couldn't help but find it slightly gentler.

That difference made Khan curious, and that feeling intensified during the slow flight toward the embassy. The hangars were quite distant, so it took a while before the ship could land on one of the rectangular roofs.

The team jumped out to perform military salutes, but only Khan and Ambassador Abores advanced inside. The two entered the embassy while their companions reentered the ship to fly to their respective homes.

Silence unfolded again as Khan and Ambassador Abores crossed the path that separated them from their office. They met many soldiers and workers along the way, and Khan's blue hair always attracted a series of polite salutes or nods. Ambassador Abores didn't earn the same attention since many didn't know him, but that didn't affect his mood.

The appointed office eventually appeared, revealing its almost empty state. Only Clarissa and a few soldiers were inside, and the Ambassador headed directly for his private room, even voicing an order as soon as he entered it.

"Clarissa, give us some privacy," Ambassador Abores ordered, and the woman hurried outside, closing the door to leave her boss and Khan alone.

Ambassador Abores slowly walked toward his desk, sliding his fingers over its surface. Menus lit up at his genetic signature, but he didn't press any of them. He didn't speak either, and Khan waited patiently near the entrance for that briefing to begin.

"I had my doubts, Captain," Ambassador Abores eventually revealed, still sliding his fingers on the desk and glancing at the empty wall behind. "However, I'm forced to acknowledge your value. You are the best third-level warrior I've ever seen."

"Thank you, sir!" Khan promptly stated. That was a proper compliment, but Khan held back his happiness. Even with the newfound kindness, Ambassador Abores remained quite aloof.

"You could have defeated him, right?" Ambassador Abores questioned. "That Thilku you fought."

"Probably," Khan remained vague. "The no-killing rule put many limitations on me."

"I can only imagine," Ambassador Abores casually said. "Your strength impressed the Thilku. I could reach many advantageous agreements because of that."

"Which agreements, if I may, sir?" Khan asked.

"Knowing that isn't part of your duties," Ambassador Abores scolded. "You should only worry about the next mission."

"Did Lord Exr give us something?" Khan asked, and Ambassador Abores' face snapped on him.

"How do you know that name?" Ambassador Abores gasped.

"I have good ears, sir," Khan lied, avoiding involving Amox.

Ambassador Abores didn't believe Khan for a single second. He could even guess how he had gotten that information. Yet, calling him out wasn't proper, especially after his performance.

"What else do you know?" Ambassador Abores questioned.

"I know less than you, sir," Khan stated.

"I would hope that," Ambassador Abores responded. "I'd be a failure otherwise."

"I never hinted at that, sir," Khan uttered.

Ambassador Abores inspected Khan for a few seconds before heaving a loud sigh. He reached for the back of the desk and activated its menus, which created a holographic map that involved multiple systems.

The Harbor had taught Khan how to read star maps, but he failed to recognize many of the systems depicted by the holograms. Still, he found Acarro and the Harbor, allowing him to draw vague conclusions.

"Do you know what this is?" Ambassador Abores asked.

"I can only guess, sir," Khan admitted.

"Then, guess," Ambassador Abores ordered.

"These," Khan said, stretching his hand toward the holograms to mark a few systems, "Are the bordering territories with the Thilku Empire. It's reasonable to think that the alien criminals have come or are stationed in some of these systems."

"Indeed," Ambassador Abores confirmed, pressing on a label to change part of the holograms. Most of the map turned red, highlighting the Thilku territory in all its greatness.

The Harbor's location had a strategic purpose, but the map showed its flaws. Being so close to the Thilku Empire left countless paths open. The criminals could have smuggled the bomb through any of them, turning the idea of a proper investigation into a delusion.

"Lord Exr believes the leak comes from his domain," Ambassador Abores revealed, pressing on another label that turned a small part of the red zone yellow. That new shade only highlighted three systems, significantly reducing the eventual area to inspect.

"Is the information trustworthy?" Khan wondered.

"That doesn't matter," Ambassador Abores declared. "Lord Exr speaks for the Thilku Empire, so our investigation will happen where he decides to have it."

Those short lines transformed into a world of possibilities when they entered Khan's brain. Lord Exr could be correct, but lying would also work in his favor since the Global Army would help him clean a random mess, leaving the actual criminals to the Empire's inside investigation.

"I understand, sir," Khan exclaimed. "I'll prepare reports for these systems."

"No," Ambassador Abores announced, zooming in on the map to point at a single planet in the yellow zone. "You'll prepare a thorough report on Neuria and study the other systems by yourself. You'd only risk confusing the others otherwise."

Those lines transformed once again. The Ambassador didn't say it, but his statement was basically a compliment. It meant that Khan could take that amount of information.

Moreover, the risk mentioned by the Ambassador could exist only if the next deadline was close. Ambassador Abores didn't specify it, but Khan could guess the investigation would start soon, probably in the following weeks.

"It will be done, sir," Khan promised.

"You've set a high standard for yourself," Ambassador Abores warned, falling on the seat behind the desk. "The Global Army already expected great things from you, but you involved the Thilku. They'll demand perfection, and failure to match what you showed will result in immediate discharge from the investigation."

"I'm glad I held back, sir," Khan responded, silently praising himself. Ambassador Abores noticed that but decided to ignore it.

"You are lucky Lord Exr used to be a soldier," Ambassador Abores continued. "A proper Lord might have ignored you."

"So, he isn't true nobility," Khan exclaimed.

"No," Ambassador Abores explained, waving his hand at the red holograms. "He received his title from the Lord of these quadrants. From what I understood, he gained enough military commendations to earn authority over those systems."

Khan quickly connected the dots. Helping Lord Exr meant doing his superior a favor. That idea was a stretch but could work as a first step toward deeper and more relevant parts of the Thilku Empire.

"I know you want my chair," Ambassador Abores changed the topic, and the room's vibe tensed. Khan also looked at him, doing his best to hide his true colors.

"There is no need to hide it," Ambassador Abores stated. "The entire Global Army knows you want to be an Ambassador. I think it's too early, but you might change my mind by the end of this investigation."

"What if I do, sir?" Khan asked.

"I'll write a suitable report," Ambassador Abores explained, "Maybe vouching about your capabilities."

"That," Khan gasped, but the Ambassador continued speaking before he could express his gratitude.

"Of course," Ambassador Abores stated, "Your current job has priority, and with that comes obligations and limitations. Don't play Ambassador without authority or counsel. You'll only get in my and the Global Army's way."

"Certainly, sir," Khan exclaimed. "I won't disappoint you, sir."

"We'll see about that," Ambassador Abores coldly scoffed. "Now, I have yet to receive all the details, so the official briefing won't happen today. You can take the rest of the day off."

"With your permission, sir," Khan stated, "I'd like to start studying Neuria right away."

"Suit yourself," Ambassador Abores responded. "I hope you won't use your exhaustion as a justification if I find mistakes."

"There won't be mistakes, sir," Khan promised.

"As you wish, Captain," Ambassador Abores sighed. "Leave now. I'm waiting to receive a few important calls."

Khan performed a military salute before storming out of the private office. His desk was empty, but he went for one of the cubicles to achieve better isolation, hoping it would lead to a faster study.

The genetic signature gave Khan access to his profile, allowing him to search for information otherwise classified. It took him only a few seconds to find reports about Neuria, but his thoughts began to wander at that point.

Ambassador Abores' warning was on point. The Thilku would show no leniency toward failure, especially if they were tricking the human team into a fake investigation.

Due to Khan's flashy profile, he would become the target of everyone's attention and eventual reprimands. His performance could very well decide the fate of his team.

Khan didn't overestimate himself. He actually had a deep understanding of his strength due to his experience with multiple alien species. He was way above average, but the Thilku were also surprisingly resilient. The best of the humans might not be enough to impress them.

'How much can I achieve with the [Blood Vortex]?' Khan considered before refusing that idea. He would still train with the alien technique, but the investigation had sounded close, which didn't give him the time to make significant improvements.

An idea then popped into Khan's mind. He went over it for a few seconds before peeking past his cubicle. The office was almost empty, and no one was paying attention to him.

Khan returned to his seat and hid his right hand under the small interactive table. His bright mana appeared, making the screen above him flicker and threatening to reveal his misdemeanor. He quickly retracted his energy and peeked past the cubicle again, and curiosity invaded him when he confirmed that no one had noticed him.

Khan hid his hand under the interactive desk once again before flexing his fingers to create a U-shaped gesture. Mana left his thumb and forefinger, fusing to create a single, gaseous thread.

The Niqols' teachings had long since become part of Khan's skillset, and he showed his mastery over them in that experiment. His mana's nature changed, condensing, thickening, and gaining elastic properties. Its color also brightened, but its surface gained uncommon stability.

Khan reached for the thread with his free hand, pinching and pulling it backward. His mana bent under his gesture, turning into a string ready to snap back to its original position.

'I can do this,' Khan thought, but faint complaints suddenly reached his ears. The few soldiers in the office were having problems with their screens, forcing Khan to disperse his mana.

'I need to hit the training hall tonight,' Khan smirked, straightening his back on the chair. His eagerness wanted him to go right away, but that would look bad after his bold claims with the Ambassador.

'Right,' Khan recalled, pulling out his phone. 'Monica.'

The phone showed no messages, but Khan sent one to Monica to update her about the [Hunt]. She had been waiting for that text, and a reply arrived in the next few seconds.

'Are you sure you aren't hurt?' Khan read on his phone, smiling at the love those words were able to make him experience.

'I swear,' Khan wrote. 'I'll show you the recording if I can get my hands on it.'

'You do that,' Monica replied. 'For now, are you alone?'

'I'm still in the office,' Khan explained. 'Sadly, this cubicle isn't sound-proof.'

'But you are alone, right?' Monica asked.

'I am,' Khan began to worry. 'Is something the matter?'

Khan's worry vanished in the next second. A picture reached his phone, and his eyes widened. Desire and lust invaded him at the sight of the captivating pose and clothes Monica had worn for him.

Being busy helped Khan ignore the drawbacks of his situation, but one look at the picture destroyed that fake balance. Khan's mouth opened, his eyes didn't move, and his grip on the phone tightened to reflect his internal state.

Barely a week had passed since Monica's departure, but staring at the picture made Khan experience the entirety of her absence. That was his first time dealing with the distance issue in his relationship, and his mana told him he wasn't good at it.

'Is everything okay?' Monica sent another text due to Khan's silence. 'Did I do something wrong?'

Love overcame lust, allowing Khan to put aside the picture to reassure his worried girlfriend. 'You just reminded me of how much I love you.'

Monica also went silent, but only for a short minute. A message soon reached Khan's phone, and a warm smile filled his face when he read the single word on his screen. 'Scoundrel.'

Khan lost himself in his thoughts for a bit, but a new message reached his phone. Monica couldn't leave that conversation at a simple joke and followed with a similar expression of affection. 'I love you too.'

A sigh escaped Khan's mouth as he brought his phone to his forehead. He closed his eyes and fought the urge to find loopholes that could make him fly to Monica right away. He wanted to see her. He yearned for her touch and love, but the Nak were the priority, and his job was his best shot at getting close to them.

Khan eventually calmed down. He lowered his phone, and the two main aspects of his life filled his view. The screen carried Monica's loving message, while the interactive desk had a series of reports on Neuria. That was his duality, and he wouldn't give up on anything.

'Are you free tonight?' Khan asked Monica through a message.

'We'll have our call, right?' Monica questioned.

'I want it to be longer,' Khan admitted. 'I miss you.'

'You are going to make me cry, dummy,' Monica scolded.

'Don't cry when I can't hold you,' Khan ordered.

'I won't,' Monica promised. 'The call can last as long as you want. Forever even.'

'I wish it were forever,' Khan teased.

'I'm really going to cry,' Monica complained.

Khan smirked and exchanged a few more messages with Monica before postponing their next conversation. His job required his attention now, and he planned to get something done before dinnertime.

Neuria was famous in the Harbor for multiple political reasons. The planet had a special embassy focused on the relationships with the Global Army, and its many docks made it a valuable node for the shipment of goods and similar tasks.

However, unlike Milia 222, Neuria was almost solely populated by Thilku. The Empire wasn't exactly welcoming regarding different species in their territory. That wasn't out of xenophobia or

similar issues. The Thilku simply had strict regulations enhanced by their pride, making them hard to approach.

'It reminds me of Earth,' Khan thought, skimming through the many reports on his desk.

The embassy and docks were only Neuria's highlights. The rest of the planet had cities, training camps, and military structures that weren't much different from Earth. The Empire was still working on populating that place and building more settlements, but that didn't make it less of a home for the Thilku.

The only peculiar aspect of the planet was its darkness. Neuria was similar to Nitis there due to the three moons that shielded it from any form of sunlight. That made the place quite cold, but nothing a coat couldn't fix.

'Criminals will probably live in empty areas or territories still in construction,' Khan guessed once he gained a general understanding of the planet. 'Just like the areas the Global Army left to die.'

The similarities with Earth were striking, but Khan didn't let them blind him. His study didn't ignore any detail or possibility, giving him an idea about his report by the time dinnertime arrived.

Khan took notes in the next hour before finally leaving his cubicle. The office had gotten empty during the afternoon, and only Ambassador Abores and Clarissa were still working. They were too busy to look past the windows, so Khan departed without exchanging any salute.

Finding a cab in the embassy barely took minutes, so Khan soon flew toward a nearby district featuring excellent training halls. He also ordered food and drinks once he isolated himself inside it, and some tinkering with the menus kept the scanners active but forbade recordings.

Khan didn't need to worry about the training hall's rates thanks to his agreement with the Headmistress, but that didn't make him lazy. His thoughts got to work as soon as the area was ready, and memories of his battle with Amox filled his mind, trying to bring valuable clues.

Replicating a particular behavior was child's play for Khan. His mana was wild and unreasonable, but his control was equally powerful. Bending his energy to his will didn't match his instincts, but it was doable.

However, imitating something wouldn't necessarily lead to the same outcomes. Each element had a specific set of spells for obvious reasons. Mana worked differently depending on its nature, and that affected the effects it could generate.

In Khan's case, imitating the process and gesture of Amox's attack wouldn't lead anywhere. He could turn his mana elastic and give it the properties of a bowstring, but that wouldn't create a matching spell.

'It's not imitation,' Khan eventually concluded, breaking his meditative state to get to the real thing. 'I must translate it to express my element's properties.'

Mere control wouldn't do. Khan's chaos used his emotions to transform without losing its effects, and a mental image of a scene that matched what he wanted to achieve usually helped. Finding those aspects was the only problem.

Khan usually used his negative emotions in those tasks, so he started with them, testing different feelings to see how his mana changed. He needed something flexible but explosive and, most importantly, fast.

The training hall kept track of the passage of time, but Khan barely looked at it. He had alarms ready, so he immersed himself in his training, changing the pace only when a call reached his phone.

Khan answered through the hall's menus since he had connected the phone to the place, and a holographic screen appeared on a wall. A familiar smile filled it, together with curls he had learned to love.

"Tell me again how much you love me," Monica ordered, eager to hear Khan's voice.

"Can you even sleep without me?" Khan teased, remaining at the hall's center to continue his training. "I remember someone revealing her addition to my chest."

"I can't," Monica revealed, avoiding jokes to convey her feelings. "It's hard without you."

A sniff tried to interrupt Monica's line, but she suppressed it. Still, Khan noticed it, and his longing eyes inevitably fell on the screen.

"We'll see each other soon enough," Khan reassured, "And I won't let you go for a single second in those days."

"Will you hold me the whole time?" Monica showed her needy side.

"I will," Khan promised.

"Swear it," Monica said.

"I swear," Khan stated. "I'll make up for all the time we spent separated."

Monica wanted to complain a bit longer to enjoy Khan's reassuring words. Yet, she knew how busy he was, so she steeled her resolve and held back, moving the conversation to different topics.

"This isn't your flat," Monica pointed out.

"Did you have something dirty in mind?" Khan teased, summoning mana in his right palm to inspect its properties.

"Yes," Monica whispered, "And it's your fault."

"I'm starting to feel proud about that," Khan chuckled, dispersing his mana to try again. "I wonder what the network would think if it knew about your message."

"Shut it," Monica pouted. "That's only for your eyes."

"I'd be jealous otherwise," Khan declared.

"How jealous?" Monica giggled.

"Immensely," Khan sighed, dispersing his mana again and peeking at the screen. Monica had taken her face between her hands, and her happy smile seemed able to shine on its own.

"Am I a distraction?" Monica wondered, feeling conflicted about that point. On one side, she liked that Khan was weak to her presence. Yet, she didn't want to get in his way.

"Yes," Khan admitted, "But I prefer it over not talking to you."

"Did you get more romantic after I left?" Monica teased.

"I'm the romantic," Khan claimed. "You are the dirty one."

"Did you call me just to tease me all night?" Monica complained.

"If it's not too much to ask," Khan didn't refute the question. He even glanced at the screen again, showing a face that conveyed his feelings.

"Tease me all you want," Monica shook her head, "As long as you want. I'm yours, remember?"

"I'm not used to this distance," Khan cursed, "Or selfishness."

"My noble Captain can overcome anything," Monica praised. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to do," Khan corrected, stretching his neck before removing the upper part of his tracksuit. "I'm trying to create a spell."

"Isn't it dangerous with your element?" Monica grew worried.

"A bit," Khan said, "But they'll probably send us to Neuria soon. I want to be prepared."

"Neuria?" Monica asked.

"It's in the Thilku's territory," Khan explained shortly. "The investigation should be about to start."

"What should I do with this information?" Monica asked.

"I don't think it's valuable right now," Khan stated. "Yet, Neuria is still in construction. Many parts of the planet are empty. I might overhear business opportunities once I get there."

"I'll see if my parents know something," Monica commented. "I'll update you once they answer."

"Sure," Khan voiced, heaving a deep sigh to steady his mind and opt for a different emotion. He attempted to summon his mana again, but that energy went out of control, generating a small explosion that dispersed its power.

Khan didn't get hurt and only waved his right hand to disperse the smoke lingering in his palm. Those shortcomings were unavoidable during experiments, but Monica might not take them lightly. Yet, one look at the screen revealed a far different picture.

Monica had fallen into a daze. Her eyes were fixed on Khan's figure, and her full attention moved between his naked chest and serious face. She even looked livelier, and Khan hated being unable to feel her mana.

"Won't you get bored looking at me training all night?" Khan asked, revealing a tinge of insecurity.

"It will be the highlight of my week," Monica reassured. "I love seeing you like this."

"Are you getting addicted to something new already?" Khan teased.

"Khan," Monica called, her tone growing hesitant, "Is it bad to want every night to go like this?"

Khan remained stunned for a second before dropping the teasing mood. Monica was experiencing the same longing as him, and seeing the emotions on her face warmed his heart.

"What are you even saying?" Khan chuckled. "I remember my girlfriend being needier than this."

"I'm trying to be mature, idiot," Monica cried but quickly calmed down to mutter affectionate words. "Khan, I love you so much."

"Me too," Khan smirked, turning to focus on his training. Still, he added one of Monica's iconic lines before proceeding. "Make sure to look only at me."

Chapter 559 Block

The long calls became a new addition to Khan's routine. They weren't the healthiest habit since they involved sleepless nights, but Monica and Khan were willing to pay that price to deal with their distance. The couple was adapting to their new situation, and that worked for now.

The lack of sleep wasn't a problem for Khan, so the long calls never got in the way of his other tasks. He still trained and worked, prioritizing his studies of the Thilku Empire to excel in his job. Soon, his reports spread throughout the office, and new developments arrived.

As Khan had predicted, the next mission's deadline was close, only three weeks after the [Hunt]. The Thilku Empire was requesting the presence of a human team on Neuria, and Ambassador Abores had to work overtime to get everything ready.

Of course, the Headmistress helped, facilitating preparations on multiple levels. She provided equipment, clearance, and more to get everything ready by the deadline.

Khan, the companions from the [Hunt], and Ambassador Abores gathered before a teleport in the middle of the appointed week. Luggage accompanied them, and a few wore sleepy faces due to the early hour. Yet, a glare from the Ambassador dispersed that drowsiness and made everyone jump onto the oval platform.

Getting submerged in synthetic mana wasn't the greatest experience, but Khan couldn't help but feel excited. He was about to reach an alien world in alien territory. His curiosity always skyrocketed during those events.

The machine brought the team inside a space station that the Headmistress had moved near Neuria's system. Getting clearance to teleport directly to the planet took longer, so the human team opted to fly there. Soldiers had even prepared a ship, so Khan and the others only had to hop on it.

Khan took care of the steering wheel, but the mission didn't allow much flexibility. As soon as he left the small space station, he had to follow a precise route within a specific speed range to approach the nearby planet with three moons.

"How are we doing, Captain?" Ambassador Abores asked, peeking into the cabin.

"We are on route and on time, sir," Khan exclaimed. "We should see the appointed landing area in a few minutes."

"Can you go any faster?" Ambassador Abores questioned.

"Is something the matter, sir?" Khan wondered, peeking past his shoulder to look at the Ambassador's face. "I thought we had to follow Lord Exr's orders to the letter."

"Thinking isn't part of your job," Ambassador Abores scolded. "Answer my question."

"I can accelerate a bit," Khan said, "But the Thilku want us to land at a precise time. We'll have to wait above the city if we arrive early."

"Do it," Ambassador Abores ordered.

"Is it fine to challenge them over a mere minute, sir?" Khan questioned.

"What did I say about thinking, Captain?" Ambassador Abores rebuked.

Khan didn't take those words seriously. That banter had actually become the norm between Ambassador Abores and Khan, and the latter was slowly testing his limits. After all, that playful side was part of his character.

The precise restrictions didn't allow much leeway, but Khan had held back on the ship's speed, so accelerating a bit didn't break the rules. He followed the Ambassador's orders, doing his best to gain a single minute over the planned arrival, but that effort didn't distract him from his surroundings.

The ship's scanners worked at full speed, recording details of the locations they crossed. The vehicle had to fly around one of Neuria's moons before heading for the planet, and multiple structures became visible on that satellite in the meantime.

Khan noted down those details without ever stopping. It wasn't surprising for the Thilku to build on a moon. Humans did it too. Still, it was interesting to see the types of structures erected there, which turned out to be defensive weapons ready to take down any invader.

The ship quickly dived into Neuria's atmosphere, revealing its dark, mostly cloudy sky. Rain soon fell on the canopy, but darkness never arrived. Artificial lights filled the distant lands and part of the vast seas, turning that permanent night into a colorful and bright environment.

The instructions led the ship toward the edges of a big continent, and getting closer to the surface showed a big bright city growing near the coastline. One block had long pillars of smoke rising to the sky, and Khan's destination was close to it.

The restrictions prevented Khan from bringing the ship down. He had to stop at some distance from the city, but his position granted him a good view of the area below, and he pressed a few keys to make his team see that.

Multiple screens lit up in the passengers' area to show what the scanners were picking up. The Global Army couldn't record anything, but studying the environment was different, and the reality was always better than reports.

A modern and technologically advanced city unfolded in everyone's view. Short and tall buildings alternated themselves in blocks that fulfilled specific roles. Big streets also divided them, making room for many terrestrial vehicles that hovered near the surface.

The heavy rain added a gloomy vibe to the area, and the artificial lights somehow worsened it. Khan had seen the coziness of an endless night, and Neuria didn't achieve it. The bright banners and signs added a robotic taste to the environment, dehumanizing it and turning the city into one big machine.

Khan had hoped for something different, but no sighs escaped his mouth. That city was surprisingly closer to Milia 222 than Reebfell, but he could work with that. He could work with anything.

Clearance eventually reached the control desk, allowing Khan to dive into the city. The instructions led him toward a relatively empty block that featured a landing platform surrounded by four Thilku platoons. The area had almost two hundred soldiers, but they weren't there for the human team.

A stage covered by a gazebo stood beside the landing platform, and Khan recognized the Thilku under it once the ship landed. Lord Exr was there, sitting behind a row of soldiers. The latter were familiar faces since they belonged to the team from the [Hunt].

One of the Thilku under the gazebo jumped forward and headed for the ship as soon as its doors opened. The alien reached the metal staircase that descended and opened the umbrella in his hands to welcome the most important guest.

The human team had gathered before the doors by then. Rain and cold seeped into the ship, but everyone was wearing warm dark-blue military coats that carried their stars. Khan was no exception, and he stood aside with his teammates to let the Ambassador advance.

The Thilku welcomed the Ambassador under the big umbrella. Its transparent, curved cover sizzled whenever drops fell on it, but both the alien and the Ambassador remained dry. The two even headed for the gazebo, while Khan took that chance to lead his team outside.

The cold rain fell on Khan's face as soon as he peeked past the ship. His companions suffered from a similar fate but didn't share his reactions. Khan enjoyed that weather due to all the natural mana it brought to the area, but the stench of the synthetic energy was impossible to miss.

One of the platoons split to step on the landing platform while Khan's team headed for the gazebo. The Thilku would take care of the ship and luggage inside while Lord Exr handled the political side. Khan and the others didn't have precise orders from that point onward, but they were bound to arrive.

Khan and his companions performed a line before the gazebo and wore military salutes. Heavy rain fell on them, but no one budged. Only Ambassador Abores had access to that private area, and the Thilku with the umbrella had already brought him next to Lord Exr.

The two leaders exchanged a few friendly lines that the rain made impossible to hear. Khan didn't even try to listen and let his senses spread elsewhere. He was in an alien city, so his interest was impossible to quell.

From above, the city didn't look anything unique or different from what Khan had seen on Earth or Milia 222. However, details appeared now that he was on the surface, and many red lights fell in the corner of his eyes, threatening to distract him from the gazebo.

The Thilku liked huge and vast buildings capable of leaving any onlooker in awe. Yet, the city only had a few of those since a lot was still in construction. Besides, its homes mostly had workers. A training camp could show a traditional style but not that settlement.

Nevertheless, the Thilku technology was inherently different. Most machines and anything in that field relied on the strange runes Khan had seen on the bomb. Those symbols were cores capable of

containing and releasing energy for specific purposes, and Khan could feel many of them in the blocks nearby.

Khan's inspection was short-lived since Lord Exr soon left his seat to convey orders to the soldiers under the gazebo. A series of hoarse cries seeped past the rain, but nothing specific ever reached the human team.

Still, the Thilku soldiers moved at that point, diving into the rain to reach the human team. Khan felt no surprise when Amox approached him. He was ready to perform a traditional Thilku bow, but the alien interrupted it by slamming his hands on his shoulders.

"[Khan]!" Amox laughed, uncaring of the rain falling on him and drenching his thick mantle. "[We are in the same team]."

"[Team]?" Khan repeated. He wasn't sure about his role there, so he hoped Amox could fill the gaps.

"[That district showed suspicious behaviors in the last period]," Amox explained, turning Khan to point him toward the block releasing pillars of smoke. "[We must go door to door to search for illegal equipment]."

"[Is this safe]?" Khan couldn't help but wonder. "[Won't my presence cause problems]?"

"[The humans are here under Lord Exr's invitation]," Amox claimed, continuing to pat Khan's shoulders. "[You have the same authority as us]."

Khan didn't trust that statement. The city had ordinary citizens who had probably never seen an alien. Having a human bossing them around couldn't feel good, but Khan couldn't refuse either.

Something distracted Amox while Khan was busy inspecting the fuming district. The Thilku stopped patting Khan's shoulders and dug his fingers into them as if to start a massage.

"[What is it]?" Khan asked, peeking past his shoulders to look at the Thilku.

"[Did you get stronger]?" Amox questioned.

"[It must be the coat]," Khan lied, chuckling to dismiss that statement. He had slightly abused the [Blood Vortex] in those weeks but didn't expect Amox to notice.

"[Well, it's good if you did]," Amox stated, finally letting go of Khan's shoulders to step at his side. "[We are in charge of a dangerous zone]."

"[Do you expect resistance]?" Khan asked.

"[If they are guilty]," Amox smirked, confidently crossing his arms before his chest.

Chapter 560 Inspection

Khan didn't like that situation. He was an alien for the Thilku, but Lord Exr expected him to enforce regulations. Many problems could arise from that, especially from an emotional standpoint.

Khan's broader mindset had often made him disregard his human heritage. He barely considered himself a member of that species. However, he wasn't blind to the many differences, both on a physical and cultural level.

'Orders are orders,' Khan thought, trying to seal his emotions into a deep part of his mind, only to fail immediately. That outcome was worrisome, forcing Khan to hope the situation never pushed him past his limits.

"[Follow me]," Amox announced once all the Thilku paired themselves with a human. The cooperation between the two species had given birth to mixed couples that would handle different areas, but they wouldn't be alone in the task.

As Khan and Amox walked past the landing platform and jumped onto the vast street below, a few squads from the four platoons reached for them, stopping a few meters away to build a formal line. Those troops occupied both ends of the road and remained still, conveying nothing but seriousness.

The heavy rain couldn't hinder Khan's inspection. He could almost smell those troops' resolve, intensifying his bad feelings. Something told him that he wouldn't enjoy that job.

"[They are with us]," Amox explained, pulling up his sleeve to uncover a device bound to his forearm. "[They'll support us and provide back-up if necessary]."

Khan didn't even nod. He glanced at the troops one last time before inspecting the device on Amox's forearm. It looked like a metal armguard, but red holograms came out when Amox ran his fingers on some of its rune's lines.

The holograms depicted a small map with dots and markers that Amox tinkered with by tracing more of the armguard's rune. That symbol worked like an array of menus, which Khan didn't have the time to master in the last period.

"[Is that our district]?" Khan questioned, showing his interest in the device.

"[Yes]," Amox confirmed. "[We must go past the factories to reach the workers' houses]."

Amox didn't say it, but a map was a map in every culture. Khan couldn't read some of its symbols but could guess his companion's intentions. Amox was planning how to approach the targeted blocks, and Khan waited for him to finish.

"[Alright]," Amox eventually nodded, slamming his hand on the holograms to put them back into the rune. He was ready to get going, but Khan's interest in the device made him voice a question. "[What is it]?"

"[I still don't know much about those]," Khan said, hesitating a bit before finding the word that could express what he meant, "[Runes]."

"[Oh]!" Amox chuckled, twisting his forearm to show the device. "[The theory is simple. Each symbol has multiple purposes, and we combine them to activate a function]."

"[It sounds complicated]," Khan admitted.

"[Maybe for humans]," Amox stated, waving his fingers over the rune. "[It's faster and more direct than your technology once you learn how to use it]."

"[How many symbols should I learn]?" Khan wondered.

"[Two to three thousand should be enough if you are interested]," Amox explained. "[There are older symbols even I don't know, but the Empire rarely uses them anymore]."

'It's interesting,' Khan thought. That technology still relied on synthetic mana but had a deeper approach to the whole field. It resembled a less scientific version of the Tors' arts.

"[Let's discuss this another time]," Amox exclaimed, pulling down his sleeve and covering the device. "[We must work now]."

Amox's eyes snapped on the fuming district and darted left and right a few times before his legs began to move. Khan followed closely at his side, putting some strength into his steps to match his companion's pace. The troops appointed to them also began to march but remained politely behind.

Khan had seen vehicles filling the city's streets from above but couldn't find anything similar on the roads before him. It seemed that the Thilku had restricted access to cars in the targeted districts to facilitate the investigation.

Amox led Khan directly into the district by walking at the center of one of its main roads. The rain continued to pour, making the metal surfaces slippery, but the scouts never lost their foothold. Their shoes got drenched, but their attention remained on their surroundings.

The district had tall and short structures, many featuring open and large entrances that revealed their insides. Ramps probably meant for vehicles connected them to the street, but their absence allowed Khan to inspect everything.

The large halls connected to the ramps featured heavy machinery of all kinds. Khan saw power hammers, mobile lifts, cranes, and much more powered by the Thilku's red runes, but the people managing them captured most of his attention.

Sweaty and often bare-chested Thilku stood before the heavy machinery. Orange and yellow lights flickered on their faces, hinting at the presence of fire or heat sources. They seemed to work according to a precise schedule, but Khan's passage often interrupted it.

Many gazes fell on Khan whenever he walked past the factories' open entrances. The Thilku inside them stopped in their tracks to inspect the human figure partially hidden by the rain, and their reactions fit a specific stance.

Khan sensed the heat from those factories, but a cold feeling always joined it. The Thilku's distrust toward the human presence was evident, and some of those emotions often led to anger, making a few workers spit on the floor to express it.

Amox noticed a few of those disrespectful gestures, and hoarse groans left his mouth. Glares at the workers in question accompanied them, but he never went past that. After all, the factories weren't his target.

Still, the scene confirmed what Khan had initially guessed. He was an alien there, especially for such a proud species. It wouldn't be odd for those workers to feel that the Empire was betraying them by cooperating with the Global Army on such a level.

The district was quite big, so Khan saw no shortage of expressions of distrust. However, the buildings eventually grew scarcer, showing almost empty blocks only filled with heavy machinery and materials. Those parts of the city were still in construction, and Khan occasionally found a few teams among them.

The air grew heavier and the rain dirtier due to the waste materials released by those construction plants. The symphony showed the consequences of technology and the price the environment had to pay for its benefits, which Khan's body instinctively rejected.

"[That's our target]," Amox announced once the two crossed the last empty blocks and saw a few rows of short buildings in the distance. "[We must search those houses]."

"[Why are they dangerous?]" Khan asked. "[You have yet to tell me that]."

"[Only if they resist]," Amox explained shortly.

"[But why?]" Khan repeated. "[Are they more than simple workers]?"

Amox hesitated to answer. That actually was the first time Khan had seen the alien in a similar condition. The topic involved issues Amox didn't want to or couldn't talk about. Yet, a reply eventually arrived.

"[Neuria is near the Empire's edges]," Amox explained. "[It's an honor to populate it and oversee its construction, but not everyone is a volunteer]."

"[Criminals]?]" Khan wondered.

"[Some]," Amox revealed. "[Others are retired or discharged soldiers]."

"[I understand]," Khan said, avoiding probing any further. It was clear Amox didn't want to add details about the matter since it involved the Empire's internal structure, and Khan respected that.

"[If we meet resistance]," Khan moved to a different topic, "[How should we handle it]?"

"[Suppression]," Amox stated. "[We are authorized to use lethal force if necessary]."

"[But you'd avoid it]," Khan added, sensing Amox's concerns.

"[They wouldn't take it lightly]," Amox said, nodding toward the closing buildings but remaining vague.

Khan didn't need anything else. A human killing in Thilku territory couldn't look good, especially considering that species' pride. The event could start a revolt depending on the workers' mood.

The street grew dirtier as the scouts approached the block. Those areas seemed to have yet to implement automatic cleaning services, but Khan mostly focused on the troops behind him.

Those Thilku soldiers had never left Khan and Amox alone, but their prowess was unclear. There were only first and second-level warriors, with some having guns and similar weapons under their coats. They could be useful, but the two scouts remained the main force.

Once the group reached the targeted block, Amox called the soldiers and gave orders. Some of those twenty troops had to block eventual escape paths, while others had to remain on the two streets that divided the district into four areas.

Khan used that chance to inspect his surroundings. The district had four rows of three-story-tall buildings that stood on a metal surface slammed there to act as a stable foundation. Barren and muddy ground encircled it, marking the end of the city.

The buildings had a few runes on their surfaces, but Khan couldn't see windows. Those structures were nothing more than black, rectangular houses erected for the sole purpose of providing warm beds to their inhabitants.

The area risked being dark due to its distance from the city, but the many street lamps made it quite bright. Those metal pillars had glowing red cubes at their top that shone on the buildings, dispersing Neuria's eternal night.

Khan couldn't help but find the area gloomy. If the city was Reebfell, those buildings were its Slums. They were cleaner and in a far better state than what he had seen on Earth, but their vibe was the same.

"[We should start]," Amox called while Khan was still immersed in his inspection. "[Don't draw your knife unless something happens]."

Khan complied, resting his hand on the sheath instead of the weapon's handle. Meanwhile, Amox strode toward the nearest door, and Khan made sure to remain behind him.

"[Open up]!" Amox shouted, placing his hand on the red rune beside the metal door. "[By order of Lord Exr, we must perform an inspection]."

A few seconds had to pass before a hoarse male voice came out of the door. "[Do you have any authorization]?"

Amox pulled up his sleeve and activated the device on his right forearm before pointing its rune at the symbol on the wall. The two exchanged information, which convinced the house's owner since its door opened.

Amox stepped forward when the tall entrance opened, and Khan followed. A simple room with carpets, a staircase, and a single couch became visible. A wall also had a holographic screen, but Khan couldn't help but focus on the tall figure staring at him.

The house's owner was an old Thilku with only a few white strands left on his nape. The man's wrinkled skin spoke for his age, but his size remained imposing. He wasn't only on the upper end of the Thilku's average height. He also had impressive muscles visible from under his baggy and ragged clothes.

The old Thilku appeared pissed about that inspection, but Khan's arrival transformed that feeling into contempt. He didn't like having a human in his home, and his mouth quickly moved to convey that.

"[Since when does the Empire ask for human help]?" The old Thilku snorted, glaring at Amox.

"[You will address Lord Exr's guests properly]," Amox scolded, stopping in the middle of the small room to wear a firm stance. "[Unless you want the soldiers outside to teach you how]."

The old Thilku completely ignored Khan to exchange a challenging gaze with Amox. Still, he eventually snorted and retreated toward a wall, waving his hands toward his furniture.

"[I have nothing to hide]," The old Thilku declared. "[Hurry and get out]."

Amox didn't like that reply but let it go and began to browse through the furniture. Admittedly, he went for a rough approach, lifting the carpets and throwing them away before doing the same with the couch.

Khan let Amox handle the bad-cop part and relied on his senses to search for anything unusual. That room had nothing suspicious, so he approached the staircase, but a reprimand flew toward him as soon as he stepped on it.

"[Human]!" The old Thilku shouted. "[Where do you think you are going]?"

The old Thilku was only a second-level warrior, so Khan wasn't worried. However, Amox took the matter seriously and approached the fellow alien to threaten him.

"[Are you hindering the investigation]?" Amox asked, standing firmly before the old Thilku.

The old Thilku's mouth opened to show the long canines. He hated that situation, but contradicting Amox wasn't an option, so he remained silent.

Khan saw far more due to his senses, and his broader emotional spectrum inevitably made him empathize with the old Thilku. He knew he had a job to do, but things wouldn't get anywhere at that pace.

"[It's fine, Amox]," Khan called, stopping in his tracks. "[Sir, you can accompany me upstairs if you feel uncomfortable]."

"[He even pretends to speak our language]," The old Thilku mocked, shaking his head when Amox stepped back. "[Taking orders from a human]."

Amox interrupted his retreat and lunged forward, lifting his elbow to deliver a precise blow at the old Thilku's chin. The latter immediately lost his balance, falling to the floor.

The old Thilku tried to stand up, but Amox grabbed him by his neck and dragged him toward the entrance. A second-level warrior couldn't do anything against Amox, so the two ended up outside.

"[Come here]!" Amox shouted, throwing the old Thilku in the middle of the street. "[Restrain him]!"

The order was for the troops left on the street, which didn't hesitate to reach the old Thilku and grab his arms to keep him on the ground. The alien wanted to complain, but his experience told him to hold back.

Khan left the staircase and peeked into the street while that situation unfolded. The absence of windows didn't mean that the various residents couldn't see. Some of the runes on the buildings had to have those functions, which didn't bode well for the investigation.

Amox stared at the restrained Thilku briefly before returning inside the house. Khan let him go ahead, and the two climbed the staircase to reach the second floor.

Due to the Thilku's size, the ceiling and furniture were taller and bigger, but their general function didn't change. Khan could recognize beds, couches, wardrobes, and far more without opening any drawer, and the absence of the old Thilku made him help Amox more directly.

"[Khan, you can't be soft]," Amox admonished while the two scoured the bedroom.

"[They have an alien going through their stuff]," Khan pointed out. "[How would you react]?"

"[It's their duty to respect Lord Exr's orders]," Amox declared. "[Chain of command is everything in the Empire]."

Khan decided not to reply. As much as he didn't like it, he also had orders. He had experienced a lot of freedom in that field ever since Ecoruta, but his new job reminded him of his position as a soldier.

The bedroom had nothing suspicious, but Khan's eyes lit up when he reached the third floor. The area featured boxes and more wardrobes that Amox didn't hesitate to approach, and Khan shared that hastiness at that time.

Amox couldn't help but notice the difference in Khan's behavior. He had lost his initial hesitation, and something told Amox that a good reason existed for that. He stopped his search to follow Khan, and his eyes widened when his companion opened a big box.

Khan had followed his senses there. He had felt the presence of magazines full of synthetic mana, and opening the metal box revealed three guns and a rifle. They weren't anything major, but only Amox could confirm that.

"[What do you think]?" Khan asked.

"[They aren't necessarily illegal]," Amox revealed, "[Especially for an ex-soldier]."

Amox pulled up his sleeve and reached for the red rune on the room wall. He inserted a few commands into his device before connecting the two symbols. His armguard drew information from the house before allowing him to check it.

"[He has permits for three S50 and an MS14]," Amox read, returning to the box to check whether the weapons matched those permits. "[He is clean]."

"[We should move to the next house]," Khan suggested.

"[Khan]," Amox called, placing a hand on Khan's shoulder before he could turn toward the staircase. "[He insulted you]."

"[Do you want to punish him for that]?" Khan asked.

"[I have orders to preserve the relationships with the Global Army]," Amox explained, feeling slightly pissed about the words he had just uttered.

Amox couldn't possibly know it, but Khan had already gained a general idea of his character due to his mana. In Khan's mind, Amox was a good man doing his best during a complicated job. His manners were rough, but that was the Thilku's approach.

"[I won't complain to my superior]," Khan reassured, chuckling to convey his meaning better. "[Besides, we want to avoid chaos, right]?"

"[Ah]!" Amox scoffed. "[I don't like it when you speak like that]."

Amox was talking about Khan's political persona. He preferred Khan when he acted like a simple soldier but still accepted the value of his words.

"[Let's just get this over with]," Khan stated, covering the box and heading for the staircase.

"[Hopefully, we'll get the chance to eat something together afterward]."

"[Now you are talking right]," Amox laughed, hurrying behind Khan to slam both hands on his shoulders. The blow would have made an ordinary human fly away, but Khan had gotten used to that by now.