

Chaos' Heir 571

Chapter 571 Insurrection

Amox and Khan weren't worried about their safety, but the situation still forced them to stop and think. The workers weren't strong, and a few rifles couldn't threaten elite third-level warriors. Yet, those weapons weren't pointed at them.

There was more to the matter, and Amox and Khan did their best to gain as much information as possible in those tense seconds.

Weapons weren't allowed in that environment. The station had lodging areas, but the workers couldn't bring guns. It was a security hazard managers had to enforce.

The station's purpose was the only explanation for the rifles' presence. Those weapons probably belonged to shipments the criminals had stolen and kept hidden inside the structure.

That prompt reaction was another important detail. Khan and Amox had barely spent half an hour inspecting the workers' lodgings. The criminals had been ready for an insurrection for a while.

Khan shortly considered leaks and similar issues in the Thilku political team. He also thought about his previous behavior since it might have spooked the criminals and prompted that reaction. Still, he quickly disregarded the matter since it wasn't the priority.

The presence of a few corpses stated how serious the criminals were about their insurrection. The killing wasn't only necessary to keep the other workers at bay. It also sent a message to the political figures handling the inspection.

Ultimately, the criminals had hinted at negotiations, and the hostages seemed to be their currency. It was unclear how much control they had over the station, but the situation in the room made their claim hard to ignore.

'They are probably looking for a safe route off the planet,' Khan concluded. 'Maybe even off the system.'

Khan didn't even consider whether that option was viable. He couldn't join negotiations involving an alien species and systems. He didn't have authority for that. Instead, his thoughts went over approaches that could destroy the stalemate.

The room only had ten armed Thilku. Khan could take care of them in a few seconds, and Amox's help would significantly reduce that time.

Nevertheless, Amox was blocking the passage. Khan would have to push him away or wait for him to leave the path open. Both options involved a delay that would lose things far more valuable than seconds.

Even with an open path, Khan wasn't confident he could prevent casualties. The criminals felt ready to fire at the first sign of violence, which was an outcome Khan wanted to avoid.

Moreover, Amox and Khan weren't necessarily on the same wavelength. The Thilku were quite ruthless when it came to those events. It was very likely Amox was ready to sacrifice the prisoners since they were guilty of getting captured.

A briefing between the two scouts sounded necessary to get on the same page. The station's overall situation was an issue that needed to be discussed too. Yet, moving or talking wasn't an option now.

The criminals didn't like the scouts' collected silence. Khan and Amox didn't look bothered or impressed by the situation at all, which intensified the overall tension.

"[You heard me]!" The armed Thilku spoke again, shouting. "[We have occupied this station]!"

The armed Thilku slammed his rifle's muzzle on the nearest prisoner's head to convey danger. However, Khan was a human, and those threats didn't work on Amox.

"[What do you think you are doing]?" Amox spoke chilling words. "[This station belongs to the Empire]."

"[Not anymore]," The armed Thilku stated, uncaring of the groans coming from the prisoner before him. "[We demand to speak with the city's Lord]."

"[We are here under Lord Exr's orders]," Amox responded. "[You know what that means]."

Lord Exr's name was common knowledge in the system, and the criminals showed decent composure when hearing it. The investigation was happening because of Lord Exr's authority, so they knew about his involvement. Still, a few Thilku shook and lost confidence at the thought of the possible consequences.

Khan understood that reaction. Lord Exr's authoring covered the entire system and even stretched past it. A common worker couldn't hope to attract his attention or interest. Yet, that created some doubts.

'Why did they even choose to rebel today?' Khan wondered. 'Is it desperation?'

The hypothesis that Khan's behavior had spooked the rebels got stronger, but that didn't change his situation. Actually, the slight loss of confidence from a few criminals prompted the Thilku in charge to move on with his plan.

"[We are well aware]!" The armed Thilku responded. "[He can hear our demands]!"

Amox didn't like how casually the armed Thilku had addressed Lord Exr. That disrespect could probably lead to permanent incarceration or death sentences in other situations, but the criminal didn't give Amox the time to think.

"[You can leave]," The armed Thilku continued, "[But the human stays behind. The Lord must value him a lot for sending him down here]."

Amox was about to lose it, and his foot slid forward to prepare a sprint. However, everyone in the room noticed that movement and a series of gasps resounded as more shouts arrived.

"[Stop right there]!" The armed Thilku shouted, waving his rifle at the prisoners. "[I won't hesitate to shoot, and we also have people in the storage areas. The goods are as good as gone if you attack us]."

The prisoners couldn't stop Amox, but the goods posed a problem he couldn't ignore. The unclear state of the station worked in the criminals' favor since Amox couldn't confirm whether the storage areas were in their control, and his hesitation explained how valuable they were.

Ambassador Abores' notes didn't contain many details about the goods, but Khan could learn a lot from Amox's reaction. A violent approach wasn't ideal when the criminals had the upper hand.

"They won't destroy the goods," Khan decided to speak, opting for the human language since the criminals might not know it. "They need them for their demands."

"Thilku don't serve criminals," Amox scoffed in his bad accent.

"We can always retreat and plan an attack later," Khan suggested.

"[Stop talking]!" The armed Thilku warned, but Khan and Amox ignored him.

"Retreat is failure," Amox exclaimed.

"We clean the station then," Khan said.

Amox showed his hesitation again before ultimately explaining the reason behind that feeling. "Me no authority over goods. Me can't make that call."

That short explanation was enough for Khan, which prompted another line out of him. "I'll create a distraction."

"[I said stop]!" The armed Thilku shouted, firing a few bullets at the kneeling prisoners. The first hit an alien's head, while the others inflicted injuries, making the room restless.

A series of cries resounded as a few prisoners stood up. Most criminals prepared themselves to fire while a couple lifted their rifles toward Khan and Amox. However, Khan opened his mouth, and a tinge of mana accompanied his faint voice.

"Fall," Khan whispered, sending tremors through the symphony that reached the various criminals. The latter lost their balance and grip on the rifles, preventing them from firing.

The prisoners used that window to attack, but Khan and Amox didn't bother with the issue anymore. They retreated into the corridor, and Amox sealed the door before nodding toward the lodgings inspected before.

"[Ah]!" Amox snorted, slamming both hands on Khan's shoulders as they crossed the corridor. "[We could have taken all of them]."

"[Of course]," Khan laughed, "[But you don't want to deal with Lord stuff, do you?]"

"[Not at all]," Amox chuckled before putting strength on his arms to stop Khan. They had arrived at the lodging's entrance, and Amox checked the other end of the corridor before pulling up his right sleeve.

Tracing a few lines on the armguard's rune activated one of its communication channels, and Amox didn't hesitate to speak words into it. "[Situation report]."

"[We are currently running away]," A hoarse voice came from the armguard. "[We are both safe, but insurgents are after us]."

"[Same here]," Another voice arrived. "[They almost trapped us]."

"[We tried to negotiate]," A third voice spoke, "[But eventually found an escape route],"

"[We dealt with the insurgents in our section]," A fourth Thilku said, "[But more are on their way. Should we plan a counterattack with the workers]?"

More reports resounded, eventually clearing all the teams. Everyone was fine but in different situations. Some were locked in sections full of criminals, while others were doing their best to avoid being trapped.

"[No, we evacuate]," Amox stated after hearing all the reports. "[Bring as many workers as you can to the surface]."

A series of positive replies came from the armguard, but Amox ignored them to move to the next task. He tinkered with the rune again, bringing up its holograms to type a long code, but his occasional glances at the corridor's end slowed him down.

"[It's fine]," Khan reassured. "[Nothing is coming in our way]."

Khan's words were all Amox needed to focus on his task and finish it in the following seconds. The code went through, and the armguard released a beeping noise before retrieving its holograms.

"[Rescue is on the way]," Amox shortly explained. "[We only need to get to the surface]."

"[Which way]?" Khan asked since he didn't know most of the structure's planimetry.

Amox thought briefly before looking at the lodging area, and Khan promptly moved aside to leave the entrance open. Amox shot forward without adding anything, and Khan followed closely behind.

The lodging area had a single corridor stretching from its other side, and the two scouts crossed it in mere seconds. They didn't use spells, but their natural speed remained awesome, quickly bringing them before another door sealed behind a bright rune.

Amox unlocked the door, but warnings reached Khan's senses and made him grab the red coat. He pulled Amox using as much strength as possible, and the two fell backward, ending on the floor.

Confusion didn't have time to arrive since a few bullets entered the corridor and flew above the two scouts, crashing into the walls. One look at the fuming spots snapped Amox out of his amazement and made him inspect the area past the entrance. A battle was unfolding there, and no one seemed to have noticed their arrival.

Amox couldn't see much from his position, but the battle could involve his companions, so he prepared to charge ahead. However, a foot landed on his abdomen, keeping him on the floor, and a figure soon filled his view.

Khan had stood up while Amox was still figuring out what was happening, and his senses had done the rest. He didn't only confirm that the battle had made them go unnoticed. He had also searched for his companions' presence and found nothing.

Amox recognized Khan standing on top of him and tilted his head to check what he was doing. The rune had moved to the wall after the door slid open, and Khan reached for it to trace some of its lines.

'Come on,' Khan cursed after his first attempt didn't cause any reaction. He even half-crouched to his left to let a bullet fly past him, but his hand didn't leave the rune during that dodge, and Amox could only feel surprised at that scene.

A gasp escaped Khan's mouth when his second attempt to use the rune generated a reaction. The door moved, sealing the corridor and saving the scouts from the battle in the next room.

Khan was so excited that he almost forgot he was still on Amox. The latter also ignored the issue due to the previous surprising scene, so the two spent a few seconds in their awkward position before realizing what was happening.

Amox couldn't help but laugh when Khan jumped past him to land behind his head. He didn't feel any pressure at all, and his smile broadened when he turned and saw Khan's stretched hand.

"[You really learned the symbols]!" Amox exclaimed, taking Khan's hand to help himself to his feet.

"[I only remember how to close doors]," Khan scoffed. "[I'd be lost if I had to open them]."

"[You are one strange human]," Amox laughed.

"[I hear that a lot]," Khan sighed before inspecting his surroundings. "[Is there another way out]?"

"[No]," Amox revealed, adjusting his coat. "[We must fight your way through]."

Khan nodded, but an idea popped into his mind when his eyes met Amox's. He instinctively looked at the tall ceiling before glancing at his companion meaningfully, and the alien laughed loudly when he understood that silent message.

Amox jumped, performing an almost perfect split and slamming his feet on the walls. The gesture had brought him more than a meter above the floor, putting the ceiling in his range.

The alien didn't hesitate to deliver a rising blow to the ceiling, and the metal bent under his raw strength. That surface's resilience excited him, and sparks came out of his hands. However, a bright purple-red glow soon reached his eyes and suppressed any other color in the corridor.

"[Get down]," Khan ordered from behind a smile, showing the glowing sword that had grown from his right hand. Needless to say, Amox laughed again when his guts told him how dangerous that spell was.

Chapter 572 Moon

The station wasn't only completely immune to the sea and Neuria's bad weather. It also used those natural events, transforming them into energy or redirecting them toward other purposes.

The swaying couldn't protect the platform's surface from heavy rain. However, the water that fell on its metal never created puddles. It didn't even leave wet spots. Instead, it moved on its own, sliding across the floor to head for specific runes.

An inspection from above would reveal a net of tiny rivers flowing across the platform, guided by an invisible force toward runes that absorbed them and prevented their accumulation. The Thilku had built a perfectly balanced system there, and the insurrection tried to break it.

The rain suppressed the whooshing noise that resounded on the platform when a circular shape appeared near its edge. An elevator went down, and two figures resurfaced when it climbed back up.

The figures belonged to a Thilku and a human from the political teams, and the two inspected their surroundings only to curse at the absence of allies. They were alone on the surface, and one look at the sky told them that reinforcements had yet to arrive.

The human ship had also departed during the investigation, leaving the two soldiers stranded in the middle of the sea. Nevertheless, their solitude didn't last long.

Another elevator descended on the opposite side of the platform and quickly brought two more people to the surface. The latter were also part of the political team, but both had suffered injuries.

The human fell to his knees when the rain became too much to handle. Blood was coming out of the right side of his waist, and his left shoulder also had a gory hole.

The Thilku at the man's side was no better. His cape had almost disappeared, replaced by charred rags that partially hid his exposed back. Many bullets had hit him, and smoke still tried to come out of those injuries, but his grip on the human's right arm never wavered.

The other team noticed the state of their companions and hurried toward them, forcing them to sit or lay on the floor to check their state. They weren't in critical condition but needed medical attention. Their injuries would worsen otherwise.

Similar scenes followed. Little by little, four more teams reached the surface. Some relied on elevators, while others used staircases only employed during crises. Their state wasn't ideal either, but they could move, and that was enough.

There was no silence in the middle of that heavy rain, but the soldiers couldn't help but feel it. They sensed it even when the noise of the waves submerged their words. The vast platform made them alone, and their worries intensified as time passed.

A whooshing noise eventually managed to pierce the rain, startling the soldiers, who prepared themselves for a fight. Those who could move created a defensive line before their injured companions, ready to protect them against threats.

The noise didn't belong to an elevator at that time. A long line had opened near the platform's center, revealing two halves of a circular passage that quickly opened up. That channel could fit two ships, but far different figures emerged.

The large passage had eight rows of stairs attached to its sides, and workers filled them. That wasn't enough to reassure the soldiers, but everything changed when they spotted two companions among them.

Everyone got busy. The soldiers on the surface moved toward the stairs to help the newcomers out of the passage. Soon, a group of thirty people formed, and one of the workers didn't hesitate to head for a rune on the floor after checking that no one was behind.

"Wait!" Elvis shouted at the worker before clearing his throat and mustering his best accent. "[We missing two soldiers]."

"[The insurgents might use the passage to get here]," The worker stated, searching for the support of the Thilku side of the political team.

The Thilku soldiers hesitated to make decisions without their leader, but the situation evolved before they could think about it. A bright red light suddenly fell on the platform, suppressing the beacon's illumination and lifting many heads.

Cheers inevitably resounded when the people on the platform noticed four circular ships descending through the dark sky and rain. They were big enough to carry multiple companies, making them overkill for the small crowd.

Moreover, a fifth smaller vehicle was above them but avoided getting too close to the station. That ship was the source of the bright illumination, which came from huge rifle-looking weapons stretching out of its sides.

The soldiers were the first to stop cheering at the sight of the descending ships. They were missing men, and some gazes fell on the still-open passage, hoping to spot their companions.

Sadly, the passage remained silent, but the surprises didn't end. Slight tremors suddenly spread through the floor, causing many frowns among the soldiers. They all knew how sturdy that station was, so it didn't make sense for it to tremble.

The situation escalated when large cracks expanded on an empty spot at some distance from the soldiers. The metal bent and screeched while a foreign force enlarged and deepened its fissures. The floor seemed about to crumble in that area, but an explosion happened instead.

Metal shards flew in every direction but mostly upward, sparing the workers and soldiers from evasive maneuvers. Fuming tiles fell everywhere around the new hole, and more smoke came out of it, but the arrival of two figures dispersed it.

Khan jumped out of the hole, gracefully landing at its edge before running his eyes over the platform. The symphony assaulted his senses, making him aware of the situation and bringing his gaze to the sky. He saw the ships, which reassured him enough to turn.

Khan stretched his hand, and six fingers immediately wrapped themselves around it. Khan had to bend backward to put more strength into his pull, but another figure eventually climbed out of the hole, and a laugh accompanied the event.

"[You should have made the hole bigger]," Amox complained among his laughs, but stepping on the platform brought a serious mood. He quickly realized what was happening and even saw the ships when he noticed Khan's finger pointed at the sky.

The four ships were too big for the platform, especially with the open passage, so they approached the edge to stretch their ramps there.

The crowd split in four directions, picking the ship closer to them. It was the same with the soldiers, who helped the injured toward those vehicles. Only Khan and Amox waited behind to oversee the rescue operation, but a message disturbed their task.

Amox pulled up his sleeve when a red glow pierced it. His armguard had lit up, and holograms came out to show a message. Khan politely diverted his gaze, but Amox's hand didn't hesitate to reach for his shoulder.

"[Lord Exr requests your presence]," Amox explained, glancing at the sky. "[He is in that ship]."

Khan also looked toward the smaller ship still hovering in the sky before speaking a single word. "[Sure]."

"[I'll clear a ship for you]," Amox stated, crossing Khan to head for one of the vehicles near the platform, but Khan spoke before he could do anything.

"[There's no need]," Khan called, jumping upward to immerse himself in the rain. "[Tell Lord Exr that I'll be there soon]."

Amox opened his mouth in surprise. He still couldn't get used to Khan's flying but didn't oppose that approach. As for Khan, he waited mid-air for a second to see whether Amox had something to say before shooting upward.

Few noticed Khan's departure, but he disregarded those gazes and escaped their line of sight. He was too fast, and the rain couldn't slow down his straight ascension toward the Lord's ship.

The main beacon acted as a road that Khan followed step by step. He could dive into the dark parts of the sky to stick to a straighter line but decided against it to remain as visible as possible by the ship.

The flight got Khan drenched, but he didn't care and focused on reaching his destination quickly. He needed a minute to arrive before the ship, and a ramp immediately came out of the opening in that circular shape.

Khan kicked the falling drops behind him to leap toward the ramp, landing at its center. The passage into the ship was already open, and a Thilku was even waiting for him, so he didn't dare to waste time.

The Thilku performed a traditional bow as soon as Khan stepped into sheltered areas of the ship, and he responded accordingly before following the alien. The two crossed a staircase, reaching a large circular room that acted as a control desk, and Lord Exr's tall figure stood out in that environment.

"Captain Khan," Lord Exr called, pointing at his right to invite Khan. "I wish this encounter was under better circumstances."

"[Lord Exr]," Khan said, performing a traditional bow before accepting the invitation. He crossed the circular room and reached Lord Exr's side before adding more polite words. "I'm sorry to have bothered you with this operation."

"It's not your fault," Lord Exr reassured, pointing at the control desk before him to show the scanners. "It seems the trail we followed was correct."

"The criminals didn't have big numbers from what I've seen," Khan revealed. "May I suggest an attack once the reports from the other teams arrive?"

"The situation has escalated past our political cooperation," Lord Exr stated. "This insurrection involves our internal arrangements, which I thought you weren't interested in."

"My Lord," Khan called. "We are almost sure these criminals had something to do with the bomb. The Global Army must have representatives during the attack."

"Neuria's safety comes first," Lord Exr declared. "However, I understand your situation, Captain Khan. We can discuss this more after the reports arrive."

Lord Exr's eyes remained glued on the control desk. They never moved to Khan, so he could only give up on the matter for now and scour his mind to search for leverage.

Nevertheless, a small, blinking rune appeared on one of the screens, attracting Lord Exr's attention, who glared at one of the Thilku near other consoles. The latter seemed able to feel the Lord's eyes on him, and an explanation quickly arrived.

"[It's coming from the station, my Lord]," The Thilku said. "[It's safe]"

"[Send it through]," Lord Exr ordered, and the rune on the screen expanded.

"[Am I talking to Lord Exr]?" A hoarse voice suddenly came out of the control desk.

"[You are]," Lord Exr replied. "[Who is speaking]?"

"[I've been appointed to handle the negotiations]," The voice responded, ignoring the question.

"[We have three hundred and twenty-two prisoners and ten containers full of goods. We will release them only if you fulfill our demands]."

Khan couldn't help but praise Lord Exr's calm. The Thilku didn't falter nor feel surprised at that request. He almost appeared used to them.

"[Answer my question]," Lord Exr said, his tone growing colder. "[Are any of you related to the delivery RC331]?"

Khan recognized that serial number. It belonged to the shipment that had raised a red flag during the part of the investigation handled by the Thilku. That was one of the main reasons behind the mission on the station.

"[We make the questions here]," The voice replied.

"[I'm Lord Exr]," Lord Exr declared, using an authoritative tone, "[Ruler of this system. You will answer me]."

The circular room experienced the pressure released by Lord Exr, but only Khan could feel it properly, and he had to use the entirety of his self-restraint to hide his reactions. That thick, heavy presence was almost suffocating. It told anyone in its range who was in charge.

Nevertheless, communication channels couldn't convey auras, so Khan didn't expect much from the insurgents. The criminals held the advantage there, but the answer that arrived surprised him.

"[Some of us tampered with that delivery]," The voice revealed. "[Now, for our demands]."

Lord Exr slammed his big hand on the screen before the voice could continue. The call ended, and his eyes went on Khan, carrying the entirety of the pressure shown before.

"Did you understand what they said, Captain Khan?" Lord Exr questioned.

"Every word," Khan said, holding back a gulp. "The trail was indeed correct. I can only praise and thank the Empire's investigation."

"I needed your confirmation," Lord Exr commented before turning toward the center of the room and raising his voice. "[Prepare the moon, and get those ships out of there]."

No one dared to say anything, and everyone got busy. The room only had six Thilku, but they all started tinkering with multiple consoles or making calls that involved codes Khan didn't know.

The symphony carried the only clues Khan could recognize. The area had gotten colder, and not because of Lord Exr. Each Thilku had begun to release a chilling resolve that didn't hint at anything good.

The scene on one screen changed. A barren, grey environment with a huge cannon standing at its center appeared, and Khan recognized it. He had seen those weapons when flying to Neuria. They were on the planet's moons, and understanding what was happening wasn't too hard after that.

"[Where are the ships]?" Lord Exr questioned, preventing Khan from raising any questions.

"[They are leaving the station now, my Lord]," One of the Thilku in the room said.

"[Let's get to a safe distance too]," Lord Exr ordered. "[Start charging the weapon]."

The Thilku complied right away, and Khan followed that development from the screens. He saw the four ships leaving the station and the cameras growing distant. Lord Exr's vehicle was also moving, but it stopped pretty soon.

"My Lord," Khan called in that silent window, but Lord Exr ignored him to move to the next phase.

"[How long]?" Lord Exr asked.

"[We are]," One of the Thilku voiced before going silent for a few seconds and raising his hand.

"[We are ready for your orders, my Lord]."

"[Fire]," Lord Exr said without showing any hesitation.

Khan almost couldn't believe what was happening, but his eyes instinctively went to the screens. He missed the cannon firing but turned in time to watch the station's fate.

A beam-like pillar pierced the sky, ending at the exact center of the station. The attack barely covered half of the platform, and nothing happened in the next second. Yet, an enormous explosion unfolded after that, creating a spherical red shockwave that engulfed the structure and expanded through the sea.

The scorching shockwave expanded for a while before transforming into a giant pillar of smoke. Waves as tall as buildings tried to submerge it, but the mark of that destructive weapon couldn't disappear so easily. Even a chunk of the sea glowed with a scarlet color while fumes continued to rise.

Khan couldn't move. The pillar of smoke and the red patch of the sea had taken control of his eyes and body. He felt empty, too shocked to sense or think anything, but the world around him continued to advance.

Lord Exr returned to Khan's side and stared at the screens too. He didn't appear happy about that outcome, but his expression conveyed pure firmness. He didn't hesitate to make that tough decision, and his mind carried no regrets.

"Why?" Khan eventually managed to mutter.

"Criminals have no place in the Empire," Lord Exr explained with the same firm tone from before.

'Three hundred and twenty-two prisoners,' Khan recalled. 'Three hundred and twenty-two innocents.'

"We could have taken the station back," Khan said. "This was unnecessary."

"Captain Khan, on what authority do you make that claim?" Lord Exr wondered.

The firmness in Lord Exr's tone reminded Khan of his situation. He had almost scolded the ruler of the system on matters strictly related to his duties. As much as he hated the recent event, he couldn't let his emotions take over.

"I apologize, my Lord," Khan promptly stated. "I was thinking about the criminals. The Global Army would have loved to interrogate them."

"They admitted their involvement in the illegal shipment," Lord Exr pointed out. "You can testify that."

'So,' Khan realized, 'It's my fault. I gave him that opening.'

The emptiness had disappeared, and only shock and negative emotions existed inside Khan now. He could feel himself growing unstable, but that couldn't happen before Lord Exr. He would scream, break stuff, and think about the event, but his current situation came first.

"Thank you, my Lord," Khan exclaimed as a clicking growl began to echo in the back of his mind. "You've proven yourself to be a true ally."

"Is the Global Army satisfied with this?" Lord Exr asked.

"What do you mean?" Khan questioned.

"You told me isolating the last phase of the criminal organization was enough," Lord Exr reminded. "The Empire isolated it."

Khan couldn't help but glance at his side to inspect Lord Exr, and the latter did the same. The two studied each other for a few seconds, almost feeling able to hear what was going through in their minds. Still, Khan had to make his move sooner or later.

"The Global Army is satisfied," Khan eventually declared, using words that formally ended the mission.

Chapter 573 Contact

Lord Exr's stern gaze remained on Khan for a few seconds before a faint smile interrupted it. Khan was replacing Ambassador Abores, so his words carried the same weight. In that situation, he was speaking for the Global Army, so Lord Exr could consider the mission over.

Khan couldn't share that faint happiness. The recent tragedy had given birth to dark emotions that sought control of his body, and more problems joined them.

The Thilku had always wanted that cooperation to be short. Any species would frown at a joint investigation in their territory, especially one as proud as the Thilku. That political task didn't only threaten to reveal classified information about internal affairs. It also showed weakness to the citizens, which Lord Exr couldn't like.

The Global Army was also willing to keep things short if the price matched the insult. It wanted reparations from the Thilku, and, ideally, it hoped that its Ambassadors would gather valuable information or leverage.

That couldn't happen anymore now. Khan had given the okay to end the mission. In theory, Lord Exr could send the humans home that very day. The reparations were still an issue, but the Thilku could deal with them without having foreigners in their territory.

As for Khan, he didn't only become the reason for that early withdrawal of troops. He was also the sole witness to the criminals' admission. The Thilku would provide recordings of the call with the insurgents, but the issue remained, and many were bound to dislike it.

'How many will believe that the call happened?' Khan couldn't help but think. 'How many will believe I was here to listen to it?'

Secret deals were common in politics, especially during missions outside the Global Army's territory. The lack of witnesses and higher-ups created the chance to reap personal benefits, and many could guess Khan had done something similar with Lord Exr to score another victory.

The potential rumors were also just a consequence of the main problem. Only Lord Exr and Ambassador Abores knew about the replacement. Elvis and the others could guess something, but that wasn't enough. Ambassador Abores could easily go back on his deal and use Khan as a scapegoat to justify that outcome.

'[Bloody rivers],' Khan thought in the Nele language to recall words Jenna had spoken in the past. That reminder brought some calm which he needed for his next step.

The Global Army might welcome that conclusion, but Ambassador Abores' stance was unknown. Khan couldn't bring himself to trust him when he held all the power in that political mission. He had to protect himself in some way, and that short notice only allowed him to find one option.

Khan forced himself to wear a polite smile that revitalized Lord Exr's expression. The Thilku let go of his remaining firmness, and one glance at the screens prompted his next statement.

"[Take it from here]," Lord Exr ordered. "[I'll feast in my quarters]."

One of the Thilku in the room abandoned his post to hurry toward Lord Exr, who left his spot while pointing at one of the four doors among the consoles. Khan instinctively followed him, and the invitation that followed validated his action.

"Come, Captain Khan," Lord Exr invited. "Let's entertain each other now that the crisis is over."

"Of course, my Lord," Khan accepted, letting Lord Exr lead him toward one of the rooms. When the metal door opened, a circular staircase appeared, and climbing it revealed an exclusive space almost as large as the control area.

Khan found himself in another circular room that had far different furniture. He saw a few armchairs, a short table surrounded by pillows, carpets, and drawers. The place didn't seem to belong to a ship, and probably only Lord Exr had access to it.

The short table already had plates and bowls full of food, and a few jugs also occupied its surface. That wasn't enough for a feast, but Khan didn't complain. Lord Exr was probably making the best out of an unexpected development, and Khan had to go along for his own good.

"Sit with me," Lord Exr ordered, approaching one edge of the table and occupying a couple of pillows. "I hope the Thilku's methods didn't ruin your appetite."

"I was merely startled," Khan lied, approaching the other side of the table to face Lord Exr. "I didn't expect such harshness."

Khan didn't waste time in pleasantries. He grabbed one of the jugs and filled two cups before handing one to Lord Exr. He even moved a few bowls to his side and began to eat after taking a long sip.

"You are truly odd, Captain Khan," Lord Exr announced. "You carry yourself like an experienced soldier but also mourn the death of aliens you never met."

Khan knew his façade had been perfect, but Lord Exr's had seen through it anyway. That revelation made him stop eating, but Lord Exr didn't let him dwell in that tension.

"Do not worry," Lord Exr exclaimed. "I know you must lie. The Thilku are a tough species to deal with."

"I don't enjoy wasting lives," Khan explained, opting for a more honest approach. "If possible, I'd spare innocents from learning the horrors of war."

"The weak die to the strong," Lord Exr stated, "Planets die to stars. It's the rule of the universe."

"But not everyone is a soldier," Khan pointed out.

"Were you a soldier when you fought your first battle?" Lord Exr asked, and Khan was almost ready to confirm that before a distant memory popped into his brain. He still recalled the Tainted rat from the mines, even if that event seemed to belong to a different life.

"See?" Lord Exr chuckled. "Being weak is a choice, just like allowing criminals to capture you."

Khan wanted to refuse that statement, but a few good points existed. He would have run toward the rifles if he had been in the workers' situation and had their knowledge of the Empire's methods.

"Let me ask you a question," Lord Exr continued. "I earned my position by fighting and leading many battles. I shed blood for the Empire. How should I treat people challenging my rightful rewards?"

"Three hundred twenty-two people weren't," Khan replied.

"Then, let me ask you another question," Lord Exr added. "Is my blood less valuable than theirs?"

That question could sound vague to an outsider, but Khan immediately understood its meaning. After all, he was a soldier. He had experienced undeserved disrespect from people who had never stepped on the battlefield.

Truth be told, Khan didn't have an answer. He had actually worried about the issue more than a few times, especially after Mister Chares' ambush. He had taken many lives for his goal, maybe too many for a single person.

Lord Exr saw the conflict inside Khan and moved to refill his cup. That made Khan snap out of his thoughts and address the matter. "This is why you wanted a soldier here."

"Indeed," Lord Exr chuckled. "I'm glad we can understand each other so quickly."

"I'll be blunt," Khan stated. "I'm uncomfortable with these harsh methods, but Neuria is yours, my Lord. You know better."

"No, no," Lord Exr shook his head. "I welcome your opinions, Captain Khan. Just make them count."

"I understand, my Lord," Khan exclaimed. "On that note, I do have something in mind."

"Note?" Lord Exr said, feeling confused before realizing what that word meant. "Oh, I get it. Please, speak away."

"I wouldn't dare to assume," Khan announced, bringing the cup to his mouth, "But destroying the station must cause delays on the plan to colonize the planet."

"That's something internal to the Empire," Lord Exr responded. "I won't hold the Global Army accountable for my methods."

"Thank you, my Lord," Khan said. "Though, I wanted to speak about something else. I'm not implying that you need it, but I might have connections able to accelerate the process."

"Neuria won't accept human workers," Lord Exr half-scoffed.

"But additional materials can help," Khan pointed out. "I'm guessing you'll rebuild the station. That doesn't necessarily need to weigh on the Empire."

"The Empire has no shortage of materials," Lord Exr directly declared, almost out of habit.

"My Lord," Khan announced. "With my contact, you'd receive help for the station, safe routes, and trading partners. All of that with a single move."

Lord Exr didn't want to hint at any weakness, but Khan had touched on a troublesome topic. The Empire's territory was too big, and the problems connected to that issue were bigger in Neuria due to its position.

A single station was easy to rebuild, but Neuria had also lost workers and goods during that crisis. Those assets were impossible to replace in a short time unless Lord Exr pulled manpower out of other jobs.

Moreover, the loss of goods involved issues with the established trading partners. Neuria and its system could lose a lot of money and time, and Lord Exr might have to ask for his superior's help to fix that.

Instead, Khan's offer created a far better solution. Neuria could get the lost trading routes back in business right away if the new partner were willing to strike a favorable deal.

"Do not take my words as an insult, Captain Khan," Lord Exr eventually voiced, "But why should I trust your contact over anyone connected to Ambassador Abores?"

"I thought you wanted a smoother cooperation," Khan reminded.

"We are talking about my planets," Lord Exr stated. "My amusement doesn't have a place in this matter."

"I can assure you," Khan explained. "My contact is one of the wealthiest forces in the Global Army and has connections Ambassador Abores can't reach. I'm sure the Empire recorded it already, so you can check it yourself."

Lord Exr tried to spot lies in Khan's statement but couldn't find any. Still, his guts told him that something was off, especially since he couldn't see the same loyalty in Ambassador Abores shown in the past.

"That's not the full story, is it?" Lord Exr asked.

"It isn't," Khan admitted, "But my claim remains true."

"What's the full story?" Lord Exr pressed on.

Khan hesitated briefly but eventually opted for honesty. "The Global Army isn't aware of my new role. Striking this deal will secure my position in case Ambassador Abores finds problems with this outcome."

Lord Exr wasn't completely privy to the Global Army's political system. He only wielded a general knowledge of the topic, but understanding Khan's issue was easy. After all, he was part of it.

"I'll have to check the Empire's records," Lord Exr said. "Who is this contact?"

Chapter 574 Scared

Lord Exr and Khan would have happily feasted until night, but duties arrived before they had the time to enjoy the friendly phase of the meeting.

The four ships with the rescued soldiers and workers needed directives Amox couldn't give on his own. The vehicles had medical teams, but they weren't enough to tend to the injured. Proper medical bays were necessary, and only Lord Exr had the authority to prepare similar places.

As for Khan, his position in Lord Exr's ship prevented him from directly supporting his team. Still, he could fulfill his leadership's duties by deciding the details for the rest of the operation with Lord Exr. That was enough for his role.

Lord Exr had to handle matters that involved classified locations and information to prepare the medical bays, and keeping Khan locked in the ship wasn't proper. So, he dropped him in front of the political building before departing to complete the rest of his duties.

By then, the heavy rain had reached the city, and Khan didn't linger under it. He didn't have other tasks, so he hurried inside the political building. He had the chance to rest, but his legs instinctively brought him toward one of the training halls.

The temporary calm created by Jenna's words had long since waned, and the arrival into an isolated environment shattered what remained of it. A chilling but wild aura began to leak out of Khan's figure as he removed his coat, shirt, and shoes while walking toward the center of the hall.

Khan tapped his bare foot on the floor to activate the menus and closed his eyes while browsing the options. He didn't need to see to set the desired training program, and clanging noises soon resounded from the walls around him.

Three gaps appeared on the training hall's walls. Three passages opened to reveal the workshops hidden behind the metal. Drills, tubes, and more had created a total of twelve humanoid robots that stepped out of the separate areas to enter the room.

The walls closed as the robots advanced. Mechanical noises reached Khan's ears and got closer, warning him about the lack of escape paths. Those training dummies had encircled him, and it wouldn't be long before attacks would fly in his direction.

The robots closed on Khan quickly, running and preparing attacks. Some performed heavy and slow martial arts, while others chose opposite styles. They coordinated to collide with Khan simultaneously, and he sensed the impending danger even with his eyes closed.

The negative emotions inside Khan made him desire to get hit. He wanted those incoming attacks to land. He yearned to be punished, but his mana had different ideas.

When the attacks were about to land, Khan's mouth opened on its own, and a clicking growl escaped it. Flares of mana accompanied that cry, rushing from every inch of Khan's body to create a destructive defensive spell.

The robots fell prey to the chaos element. The spherical defensive spell wasn't enough to destroy them, but its might had increased due to the fuel provided by Khan's emotions. Its push was stronger, trapping the training dummies in its violent gales that slowly eroded their surfaces.

The joints were the first to give in to the chaos element's destructive properties. Some robots lost their legs, while others saw their arms detaching themselves from their shoulders. Their metal came next, and the spherical spell didn't hesitate to move to their insides afterward.

Khan continued screaming while the destruction unfolded. He didn't even look at the robots while he vented his emotions. He felt pissed and empty at the same time, and, most importantly, he hated himself for how things had gone.

The spherical spell eventually lost its violence, dispersing and freeing the prisoners of its violence. The mana vanished, but only scraps and broken robots remained. One training dummy was still on its feet but fell forward as soon as it tried to take a step.

Khan's right hand snapped upward, grabbing the robot's head before it could fall. The dummy tried to attack, rotating its arms toward Khan. Yet, one had lost its forearm, and the other no longer had a hand.

The casual attacks didn't carry mana either since the spherical spells had broken the channels where that energy flowed. The robot simply threw weak punches that only managed to scrape Khan's torso due to the arms' sharp broken edges.

Khan let the robot attack a few times and ignored the drops of blood flowing from his new cuts. He looked at the dummy, but his thoughts were elsewhere and eventually rekindled his fury.

A flare of mana escaped Khan's right palm, engulfing the robot's head. His grip also tightened, and the destruction applied by his element allowed his fingers to pierce the metal.

Khan closed his hand, shattering the robot's head and letting it fall to the floor. The dummy didn't move anymore, and he threw away the debris in his palm before sitting among the marks of his destruction.

"Fuck," Khan cursed, punching the floor as hard as possible. The emptiness was returning, and feeling pain was better.

"Fuck!" Khan shouted, breaking his sitting position to throw himself on the floor. Some debris poked at his back, but he didn't care. He let the ceiling's illumination blind him while his thoughts resumed wandering.

Ignoring the death of three hundred and twenty-two workers was impossible for Khan. He wasn't that kind of person. He had promised himself long ago not to lose sight of the value of life, and his feelings made that task very easy at times.

However, Khan's reasonable side also had something to say. He couldn't have predicted that Lord Exr would blow up the station. He believed even Ambassador Abores would have found that development unexpected.

'Innocence doesn't imply lack of responsibility,' Khan thought. 'What kind of man would I be if I disregarded what happened?'

Khan wasn't guilty in the strict sense but had still played a role in those deaths. He was partially responsible and had even exploited the event to his advantage. The bitter taste in his mouth was justified, but he couldn't let it stop him.

'To think I even insulted Madam Solodrey about compromising herself,' Khan cursed. 'I'm a hypocrite.'

That acceptance brought new strength to Khan's mind. Power was still power, even if it came from negative emotions, and he couldn't refuse them. They were part of him, and, at times, they were him.

'[Bloody rivers],' Khan thought in the Nele language, closing his eyes and straightening his back. He crossed his legs to sit on the floor again, and his hands went on his lap to prepare for a meditative session.

All that death had made one lesson clear, and Lord Exr's words resounded in Khan's mind when he thought about it. He was still too weak to influence those fields, and that had to change.

Hours went by as Khan remained immersed in the meditative state, and the night arrived without anyone disturbing him. Everyone seemed busy with something, but he barely noticed the passage of time as his whole being focused on training.

Nevertheless, that peace couldn't last. Training halls usually needed to be unlocked from the inside, but Khan's room suddenly opened without his authorization.

"Captain!" Ambassador Abores shouted, storming inside the training hall to reach Khan. "I demand an explanation."

Khan had expected something similar to happen and had even heard the opening of the doors. He slipped out of the meditative state and glanced at the Ambassador without standing up. The man was livid, but Khan couldn't bring himself to care about his anger.

"The team suffered injuries," Khan casually said. "Lord Exr prepared medical bays to receive them. I'm sure they'll be cleared to return tomorrow."

"That's not what I asked," Ambassador Abores scoffed, annoyed by Khan's lack of respect. "How did you get an entire station blown up? And how dare you conclude the mission without conferring with me first?"

"Criminals have no place in the Empire," Khan repeated Lord Exr's words. "As for the mission, Lord Exr completed his part of the deal. I couldn't delay that decision."

"You could have!" Ambassador Abores scolded. "That decision wasn't for you to make."

"You gave me your authority, sir," Khan stated. "I used it."

Ambassador Abores wanted to rebuke Khan, but he had spoken the truth. Still, that didn't change the outcome or what he learned from Lord Exr himself.

"It sure sounds convenient," Ambassador Abores announced. "You being the only witness to the criminals' admission. Don't tell me you played me, Captain."

"Played?" Khan asked, his chilling presence intensifying. He broke his sitting position to stand up, and his cold expression failed to hide the fury behind his eyes when he looked at Ambassador Abores.

"You pretend to care," Ambassador Abores scoffed, understanding the reason behind Khan's anger, "But you didn't hesitate to advertise your girlfriend's family when the chance appeared. Congratulations. Lord Exr will use your connections."

"I had to protect myself," Khan explained. "You never know when someone decides to turn you into a scapegoat."

"And your timing couldn't have been more perfect," Ambassador Abores commented. "Captain Khan was once again in the right place at the right time."

"Captain Khan also gave you a chance to meet Lord Exr's superior," Khan responded. "I expect your speech to convey that information."

"You expect something from me?" Ambassador Abores questioned. "Since when do you feel entitled to give me orders?"

"What's the point of pulling rank?" Khan asked. "I'm the witness. I completed the mission and established a new connection between humans and Thilku. Either you take your piece of the reward, or we see whose words echo louder."

Ambassador Abores' anger went quiet, and an unsettling emotion replaced it. Khan had spoken the truth, but the Ambassador couldn't leave that open challenge to his authority unchecked.

"Or I could-," Ambassador Abores voiced before a chill ran down his spine, interrupting his line. He had intended to make a threat, but his instincts opposed that.

"You could?" Khan asked, almost eager to push that situation toward a violent outcome. The Ambassador was a fourth-level warrior, but he didn't care. He couldn't just stay silent after today's events.

Ambassador Abores didn't have Khan's senses, but his body was far from human. Something told him how dangerous the situation was, and a frown appeared on his face when he considered Khan as a possible cause.

Khan briefly inspected Ambassador Abores before scoffing and losing interest in the situation. He crossed him, heading for the exit, but one last line still escaped his mouth. "I expect that recommendation letter."

Ambassador Abores followed Khan with his eyes and continued staring at the open door even after his departure. Part of Khan's clothes were still on the floor, but neither had cared about them. Khan had been too angry, and the Ambassador had a strange question floating in his brain.

Chapter 575 Home

The environment inside the political building grew cold and tense in the following days.

Ambassador Abores and Khan would typically hold private meetings to discuss mission-related matters. Still, their relationship had taken a step back after their last interaction, leading to no conversations at all.

That stalemate didn't go unnoticed. Elvis and the others eventually returned to the political building only to end up in an aimless environment. No orders or reports reached them, enforcing a confusing waiting period that helped their recovery.

Khan knew he was ignoring part of his duties, but meeting other people wasn't ideal with his current mindset. He was still too intense and cold for the public, so he spent all his time studying or training.

That peaceful period didn't last long. With the mission officially over, Lord Exr found no reason to keep the political team on Neuria. It only gave it a week to recover before orders to leave the building arrived.

Strangely enough, no feast happened before the announcement, but Khan could guess why. The Thilku weren't the type to just kick out their allies. The Ambassador had probably opted for a private meeting with Lord Exr, using the injured soldiers as an excuse, and Khan could only go along with that.

On the morning of the first day of the week, the political team gathered in the building's main hall before heading outside. It was raining, and the human ship was already waiting on the sidewalk.

The time to drive had yet to arrive since the Thilku in the cabin didn't step out, so Khan and the others gathered in the passengers' area. The situation felt pretty tense, but no one dared address it.

The ship flew the team to the same landing platform seen after the arrival on Neuria. The four platoons and the gazebo had returned, and Lord Exr stood under it to oversee that political event.

The presence of the Thilku political team on the platform was the only difference from the arrival. Amox and his companions stood on the landing area with umbrellas and welcomed the humans according to their previous teams.

Of course, the Thilku didn't leave the Ambassador alone. The political team had two additional aliens that took care of covering him with their umbrellas.

Khan exchanged a smile with Amox when he stepped under his umbrella, and the two waited for the rest of their companions to be ready to perform a traditional bow. That gesture was obviously directed at Lord Exr, which made it last slightly longer than usual.

Still, the teams eventually broke the bows and exchanged simple salutes before returning to the ship. Ambassador Abores was the first to reenter the vehicle, and Khan soon remained the only human outside.

"[Are you going back to your family after this]?" Khan asked, stretching his hand.

"[If Lord Exr deems it appropriate]," Amox revealed, shaking Khan's hand. "[We still have to deal with that mess at sea]."

"[Maybe they'll send me back here soon]," Khan guessed. "[The next feast is on me if you happen to be here]."

"[You almost make me want to stay]," Amox laughed.

"[I don't want to end up on your wife's bad side]," Khan chuckled, and Amox laughed louder at the joke.

"Captain!" Elvis called from the ship's side doors while a Thilku walked down the ramp. Everything was ready for the departure, meaning that Khan couldn't waste time with Amox anymore.

"[I must go]," Khan sighed. "[It was nice meeting you]."

"[Likewise]," Amox said, letting go of Khan's hand. "[And marry your girlfriend. Don't be a coward]."

"[I'll do my best]," Khan promised, and the two nodded at each other before separating. Amox joined his companions on the platform while Khan climbed the ramp to enter the ship.

Khan ignored the gazes from the passengers' area and entered the now-empty cabin to take his place behind the steering wheel. The directives from the Thilku had already arrived, so he could immediately prepare the ship for the take-off.

"Captain," Ambassador Abores called, entering the cabin and closing the door behind him. An entire week had passed since the last time they talked, and things were clearly still tense between them.

"Is the route for the station clear?" Ambassador Abores continued.

"Affirmative," Khan confirmed, bringing up a series of holograms that showed a space station and the route to reach it. That structure had waited near Neuria during the mission and was now ready to receive the team.

"Fly slowly," Ambassador Abores ordered, leaving a rectangular device on the control desk. "You must memorize this by the time we reach the teleport."

Khan reached for the device, which his genetic signature unlocked. Its screen lit up, showing a long letter that Khan only skimmed through in those seconds. It was a summary of Neuria's events, which involved the praise Khan had requested.

"Stick to the story," Ambassador Abores added before leaving the cabin and sealing it again. Khan remained alone, but the device kept him entertained during the slow set-off.

After a few minutes of flight, Khan landed the ship inside the space station, and soldiers welcomed the team to lead them inside the teleport area. The machine activated, and the environment changed once again.

Everything happened so fast that Khan almost failed to realize how quickly things changed. Still, seeing the familiar environment of the Harbor gave him a reality check. He wasn't in an alien world anymore. He had returned to a place he could almost call home.

The reality check didn't rekindle Khan's anger or other negative emotions. He simply felt exhausted and for good reason. He had almost spent two months on Neuria, and his return to the Harbor was giving him a chance to relax.

Soldiers welcomed the political team with military salutes, but Khan ignored that and limited himself to following the Ambassador. The group left the teleport area and reached a hangar with cars waiting for them, and orders didn't hesitate to arrive.

"The mission is over, but more might follow," Ambassador Abores announced once the team stopped in the hangar. "You can take the week off, but I expect to see you in the office in the next one."

"Yes, sir!" Elvis and the others shouted, and Khan echoed that cry.

"At ease," Ambassador Abores continued. "Go back to your lodging and rest. You earned it."

Smiles and cheerful exchanges of gazes happened before the team performed military salutes and headed for the cars. The time for a break seemed to have arrived, but the Ambassador made sure to speak once again.

"Except you, Captain," Ambassador Abores added. "You have to accompany me to the Headmistress."

"With pleasure, sir," Khan stated, exchanging an empty gaze with the Ambassador. Their tension was still there, but they were both professional enough to ignore it.

The rest of the team didn't know how to react to the tension, but Khan and the Ambassador made it easy for them. The two headed directly for one of the cars, which set off, removing the problem from the area.

Remaining alone with Ambassador Abores wasn't ideal, but Khan had much to think about. Regaining access to the network had made many messages reach his phone, and that trip on the car's seats was the perfect chance to go over them.

Two months weren't a long period, especially when nothing exciting happened. Khan mostly found weekly updates from Jenny, who listed his income, expenses, and more. A few messages even involved Andrew and Francis, but nothing too relevant.

After going through Jenny's messages, Khan checked the network to see if anything relevant had happened. He found news about Monica, who had closed a deal the article didn't explain clearly. Still, he couldn't find anything else, so his thoughts went elsewhere.

'She probably knows that I'm back,' Khan thought as his fingers began to type a message. 'It's better to warn her anyway.'

After sending the message, Khan found himself with nothing else to do, so he closed his eyes and slipped into a meditative state. The Ambassador was busy with his phone anyway and barely noticed the event.

The car landed near the top of the embassy, and Khan and the Ambassador stepped out only to be escorted inside the Headmistress' office. Khan soon saw her behind her desk, immersed in long reports, but his attention mostly went on her mana, which was surprisingly calm.

'I guess the issue with the station wasn't a big problem,' Khan thought, holding back a sigh. He still felt the urge to be punished for how the investigation had ended, and that emotion was bound to stay for a while.

"So," The Headmistress exclaimed, lifting her head from the desk as soon as the door closed. "Is everything you reported accurate?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ambassador Abores declared, straightening his military salute.

"Captain," Headmistress Holwen called. "How exactly did you attract Lord Exr's interest?"

"I happened to save a Thilku during one of the missions, ma'am," Khan shortly explained, sticking to the story that Ambassador Abores had prepared.

"So I've read," Headmistress Holwen muttered, "But how did it go from there to you replacing Ambassador Abores?"

"It was under Lord Exr's request, ma'am," Khan said. "The Ambassador and I thought it would be a good chance to build connections with his superior, so we accepted."

"And how is that connected with the Thilku blowing up their own station?" Headmistress Holwen asked.

"That's on me, ma'am," Ambassador Abores interrupted, to Khan's surprise. "I miscalculated how much the Thilku hated criminals. It was lucky Captain Khan was there to listen to the confession."

"What about the Solodrey family, Captain?" Headmistress Holwen questioned.

"I hope you didn't expect me to ignore that chance, ma'am," Khan exclaimed.

Headmistress Holwen felt the urge to scold Khan, but Ambassador Abores' presence made her let the matter slide.

"It's fine, Captain," Headmistress Holwen sighed. "The Global Army will have some agency on those trades anyway, so I'll consider it a win."

"Do we have a new mission already?" Ambassador Abores asked, changing the topic.

"That would be impossible," Headmistress Holwen scoffed. "First, we must see what this cooperation involves. We should also push on the new contact you obtained, so I have nothing for you now."

"What should I tell the team?" Ambassador Abores wondered.

"Prepare for everything," Headmistress Holwen ordered, leaning on the back of her seat. "Our interactions with the Thilku are far from over."

"Yes, ma'am," Ambassador Abores exclaimed.

"You are dismissed," Headmistress Holwen said. "Captain Khan, if I could have a minute of your time."

"Of course, ma'am," Khan responded, exchanging a meaningful glance with the Ambassador, who simply nodded at him before heading for the door.

The Headmistress pretended to focus on her interactive desk again but paid close attention to the sounds in her office. She heard Ambassador Abores leaving but kept her head on the reports for a few more seconds before throwing a piercing gaze at Khan.

"Did something happen between you and the Ambassador?" Headmistress Holwen asked.

"Yes," Khan openly admitted. He wasn't in the mood for pointless lies, and the Headmistress noticed it. That was the very reason behind her question.

"Is there something I should know?" Headmistress Holwen questioned.

"Not really," Khan replied. He had the letter, and Ambassador Abores had publicly praised him. The deal was fulfilled as far as he was concerned.

"I see," Headmistress Holwen uttered. She could see the truth on Khan's cold face but decided not to pursue it.

"Get out now," Headmistress Holwen continued, diving back into her reports. "Rest if you can. You never know when things might get busy again."

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan said, performing a military salute and leaving the office.

The Ambassador didn't wait for Khan. He had already departed with the car parked on the roof, but another was already coming. It didn't take long before Khan could hop inside and head for the second district.

Seeing that casual reaction to the destruction of the station didn't improve Khan's mood, but he couldn't claim to be surprised. It would have been bad if the Global Army lost its connections with the Empire, but no one cared since that didn't happen.

'Why would they care?' Khan thought, lying on the comfortable seats while his hand moved under them to find the drawer with the bottles. 'Only Thilku died, and the bomb was an excuse anyway.'

The cruelty and sheer coldness of politics left Khan disgusted, and knowing he was a key part of them intensified that feeling. He knew his job was important to achieve his goals, but doubts appeared.

'If I continue on this path,' Khan wondered, 'How much of me will remain by the time I reach my goals?'

Of course, Khan had already pondered those issues. He was just letting his thoughts roam freely since the situation allowed it, and a drink soon kept him company.

The trip didn't take long since the second district was close to the embassy. Khan jumped out of the car and landed on the familiar empty sidewalk that he had learned to call home. Being back felt odd after everything that had happened, but his flat had booze, and that was enough.

'This is odd,' Khan thought when he realized that Monica had yet to reply to his message. 'She would usually call me on the spot.'

Khan drew his phone while strolling toward his building, but the arrival of a second cab distracted him. Looking at the actual vehicle also made him frown. That was a luxury ride with clearance to fly in the Harbor, which had to mean something.

The luxury ride approached the sidewalk's edge, but its passenger's door opened before the landing was complete. Letting the symphony interact with the car's insides told Khan everything he needed to know, and his eyes lit up as he changed direction.

An enchanting figure hurried out of the car. Monica appeared on the sidewalk, donning high heels and a pink halter dress. Her hair also looked bright and soft. She seemed to have just come out of an exclusive party, but only Khan existed in her eyes.

Khan and Monica basically ran toward each other until they ended up in their respective arms. Monica wrapped herself around Khan's neck, hugging it as tightly as possible to convey her feelings. Khan did the same with her waist, almost squeezing her due to how much he had missed her.

"I tried to contact you," Monica cried, "But you were still away. A call arrived when I was flying toward you, so-. So-!"

"It's fine," Khan whispered, kissing Monica's neck. "You are here, so it's fine."

"I missed you," Monica complained.

"I missed you too," Khan admitted, "But everything is fine now."

It was hard to describe how beneficial Monica's presence was to Khan's mood. Simply holding her in his arms dispersed the negative thoughts that had afflicted him in the past week. Khan felt at peace for a second, but something quickly disturbed him.

Monica wasn't the only one who had stepped out of the luxury ride. A third-level warrior had also entered the sidewalk, and leaving Monica's neck allowed Khan to recognize her.

Master Amelia crossed the sidewalk but stopped at some distance from the couple to show respect. Monica understood what was happening when Khan left her neck, so she let go of him to stand at his side. Of course, his right arm fell prey to her grip during that gesture.

"Master Amelia," Khan announced. "It's been a while."

"Almost one year, Captain Khan," Master Amelia replied, politely lowering her head. "Allow me to use this chance to apologize. I haven't shown the proper respect during our first meeting."

"I don't mind," Khan reassured. "Did you accompany Monica here? Is Madam Solodrey involved?"

"Indeed," Master Amelia confirmed. "Madam Anastasia is eager to talk with you. However, she understands that today might not be the right time."

"It isn't," Khan said, feeling pleased when a tremor ran through Monica's grip.

"I understand," Master Amelia nodded. "Still, we have a mandatory schedule to attend to. The Solodrey family wishes you to advertise your reunion."

"Advertise how?" Khan asked.

"I have a list of activities that could work," Master Amelia revealed, pulling out her phone. "I suggest the shopping district-."

"No," Khan interrupted. "We aren't doing that today."

"C-Captain," Master Amelia stuttered in surprise.

"I don't care what you tell them," Khan continued. "If you need a flat, mention my name to the Headmistress. We'll take our leave now."

Master Amelia wanted to say something, but Khan had already turned. Monica imitated him and showed a complicit smile when he reached for her hand. The two entered the building like that, and Master Amelia couldn't do anything to stop them.

Khan and Monica crossed the building's hall hand in hand and didn't separate even after entering the elevator. Actually, the new privacy made them drop their pretenses, and Monica couldn't refrain from falling on Khan's chest.

Seeing Monica's peaceful face almost quieted down Khan's darkest sides. He caressed her curls, enjoying how happy she was to have returned to him. She looked ready to fall asleep on the spot, and that drowsiness tried to spread to him.

'She must be tired,' Khan sensed, but recalling Master Amelia brought everything back. The politics were still there, and the Solodrey family had actively joined them now.

The elevator eventually opened, forcing Monica to open her eyes. She left Khan's chest and showed her beautiful smile before taking his hand and pulling him into the flat.

"Let's go home, dear," Monica giggled. She was the embodiment of happiness, but confusion arrived when Khan pulled her back.

The elevator closed in time for Monica's back to hit its door. Khan had pulled and turned her in an instant, almost forcing his lips into hers.

Monica didn't expect that sudden move, but getting a taste of Khan's lips calmed her down and changed her mood. Her hands rose to his hair, and she grabbed it to match his passion.

Nevertheless, Khan was rougher than usual. Each kiss replaced his negative emotions with Monica, and he wanted more. She was never enough, and the passion made her run out of air.

"Khan!" Monica gasped, interrupting the kisses and lowering her head to catch her breath. Still, Khan's hand didn't hesitate to reach for her chin, lifting her face to show his desperate eyes.

"Indulge me today," Khan almost begged, his gaze lost in recent memories.

Monica didn't know anything about the mission on Neuria, but glancing at Khan's face told her everything. She could read his expression and knew that rejecting him was impossible. After all, it was her role to support him in those moments.

Monica let go of Khan's hair and grabbed the hand on her chin. She lifted it, leaving a kiss on its back before reaching for her collar. It only took a pull to slide it past her head, and releasing it made the entire dress fall on the floor.

Chapter 576 Catching Up

The couple didn't calm down until late at night. Khan and Monica didn't even eat since he couldn't bring himself to stop, and the two fell asleep only when exhaustion had the better of them.

Still, sleeping had never been Khan's forte, especially after the transformation. He woke up hours before dawn, and his eyes instinctively fell on the figure on his chest. Monica couldn't appear more relaxed, and her snoring quieted down when Khan caressed her hair.

'This must be her first real night of sleep in a while,' Khan realized. Monica's extreme sides had deepened to match Khan's broader emotional spectrum, leading to a slight addiction that only he could satisfy.

Khan was no stranger to that addiction. It was a trademark of his love, which many had criticized during his time on Nitis. He had improved in that field but had also accepted that he couldn't change himself. In a way, he had simply matured.

That maturity didn't prevail that night. Khan continued caressing Monica's hair until an urge made him slip from under her. He carefully laid her head on a pillow before heading for her flat waist and claiming it as his new resting spot.

Khan didn't know the reason for that childish urge but didn't care enough to look for answers. He wrapped an arm around Monica's waist, snuggling his head on it and closing his eyes. He wouldn't fall asleep, but that felt like a good spot where to think.

Thinking turned out to be impossible since a tremor ran through the symphony, updating Khan about the situation. Faint rustling noises resounded before a careful and loving touch reached the back of his head. Monica had woken up, and her first instinct was to show her support.

"What did they even do to you out there?" Monica whispered, her caresses growing more intimate.

Khan's selflessness kicked in. He didn't want Monica to worry about him, so he left a kiss on her sensual waist before turning toward her and changing the topic. "I heard you closed an important deal."

"Don't change the topic," Monica scolded.

"You even came here all dressed up," Khan teased, leaving Monica's waist to crawl toward her face. "Was it all for me?"

Monica faltered when Khan's face was about to reach hers. Still, her resolve kicked in, making her deliver a soft slap to Khan's cheek.

"Tell me," Monica pouted before her voice threatened to crack. "Can't you tell me?"

Khan was usually unbeatable with words, but his girlfriend knew his weakness. Her cute but pained expression was too much for him to handle.

"Dammit," Khan cursed, letting himself go to crash back on Monica. "So much for being mine to use as I wish."

"I am that," Monica giggled, happy she could defeat Khan. She straightened her position, making him slide until his head reached her lap. Her hands followed, moving to his face to hold it lovingly.

"But," Monica continued, slightly leaning toward Khan's face, "I don't only take care of your dick, do I?"

Khan had a joke ready for Monica's lack of decorum but couldn't muster the strength to say it before that concerned expression. He rolled his eyes and brought an arm on his forehead while a sigh marked his surrender.

"We had reached a stalemate during the investigation," Khan explained. "Criminals had taken control of a distribution center at sea, but the Thilku leader blew it up."

Monica felt surprised, but her hands remained steady. She wouldn't let Khan experience the slightest discomfort.

"There were three hundred and twenty-two innocent workers still in the distribution center," Khan continued. "The Thilku leader didn't feel anything sacrificing them to get the criminals."

Monica let go of one of Khan's cheeks to uncover his face. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it was to experience something like that, but the contents of Khan's mind were clear to her.

"It wasn't your fault," Monica stated. "You know that."

"I still want to feel this disgust," Khan revealed. "If I stop, I might become like your mother. I might even turn into something worse by the time I find the Nak."

"You won't," Monica declared, forcing Khan's gaze to focus on her. "I know you won't."

"You don't count," Khan sighed, lifting a hand to reach for Monica's face. "You are blinded by love."

"I am," Monica confirmed, taking the hand on her face, "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Monica pulled Khan's hand, bringing it to her chest. She trapped his fingers, making sure that his palm adhered to her rib cage. Her heartbeat was slow but powerful, and Khan could sense far more from that simple touch.

"Am I lying?" Monica asked, confident in what her mana would tell.

Behind all the love, Khan could sense Monica's trust in him. It was connected to their relationship but with something deeper as a foundation. It was hard to put into words. Khan could only accept that those feelings were true.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Khan sighed, giving up once again. "I hope you are ready to see me like this whenever something bad happens."

"I wouldn't be worthy of standing at your side otherwise," Monica giggled, bringing Khan's hand back to her face to storm it with kisses, "And my Captain deserves the best of the best."

"You are the best of the best," Khan stated, snuggling closer to Monica's waist to hide his face into it.

"Scoundrel," Monica happily scolded when she felt Khan's lips on her waist, but her word had no consequences. She let Khan stay on her lap and alternated between caresses and kisses to his hand to make his rest more enjoyable.

"What was your deal about anyway?" Khan eventually asked, his lips still partially glued to Monica's skin.

"Nothing important," Monica scoffed. "My family wanted to close this deal about a mine of abyssclay for some time already, but the owner was set on selling only to me personally."

Khan had reached his personal paradise. He was on Monica's lap with his face immersed in her waist. There was no better place in the world, but those simple lines made that bliss crumble.

"And what did you do?" Khan questioned, his voice growing colder.

"I had to dine with him," Monica revealed, aware of the changes in Khan's mood. "He couldn't try anything, so he only suggested, but I glared at him at each compliment."

That explanation wasn't enough for Khan. He left his heavenly spot and straightened his back until Monica's face filled his view. She had truly disliked the dinner, but seeing how riled up Khan was put a smile on her face.

"Did you really glare at him?" Khan asked.

"I even refused his hand," Monica nodded. "He would have kissed it otherwise."

"Who is this man?" Khan wondered.

"Why do you want to know?" Monica teased.

"I want to glare at him too," Khan said.

"Do that if we happen to meet him," Monica giggled, lifting her left hand to put it between their faces. "For now, know he couldn't stop looking at this."

It wasn't hard to understand what Monica meant. She was still wearing Khan's ring, and its purpose was more than obvious. Monica had wanted it for that very reason, which had worked out.

Khan was still pissed, but seeing how happy Monica was warmed his heart. He didn't even realize that his head leaned forward, bringing his lips to the ring.

Monica fell into a daze watching Khan play with her hand. She made it easier for him, sticking out her ring finger to direct the kisses there. Khan eventually slid his face into her palm, and she instinctively leaned backward to return to the mattress.

"Why was Master Amber here?" Khan asked, crawling over Monica and sealing her lips with his.

"She," Monica gasped in the break between kisses and waited for the next one to continue her reply.

"She is here because of my family."

"Did they ask her to keep an eye on you?" Khan wondered, moving to Monica's neck.

"It's here to help me," Monica said, her breath growing ragged. "Help and protect me."

"Is it because of the Thilku?" Khan questioned, slowly making his way toward Monica's chest.

"I didn't receive the order yet," Monica replied, closing her eyes and reaching for Khan's hair, "But it must be connected to Neuria."

"Did your family send you here to reward me?" Khan scoffed, lifting his head to look at Monica.

"If they did," Monica responded, pushing Khan's head back to her chest, "I don't mind being sold to you."

Khan smirked, pleased by the answer and the gasps Monica voiced while he played with her. The grip on his hair grew tighter as he continued to descend, but he kept teasing Monica with more words.

"I'll teach you if you end up going to Neuria," Khan said by the time he reached Monica's belly button.

"Yes," Monica exclaimed in a tone that resembled a moan, "But not now."

That reaction made Khan prouder. He decided to slide even deeper to get where Monica wanted, but a hungry growl suddenly resounded in the bedroom.

Khan and Monica lifted their heads simultaneously, only to hear the growl again. It had come from Monica's abdomen, but Khan's body didn't let it remain alone. His stomach also cried in hunger, warning the couple about needs beyond their lust.

The couple couldn't help but explode into a laugh, and Monica pulled herself downward to reach Khan's face. She kissed him a few times while he lay on the mattress and left his chest open for her head. Meanwhile, he used his free hand to search for his phone lost on the bed.

Monica nestled on Khan's chest, and he held her tightly while voicing a short victory cry. He had found his phone, which he brought before their faces while opening menus connected to food.

"What do you want to eat?" Monica asked.

"Spicy chicken," Khan said without showing any hesitation.

"Predictable," Monica sighed, stealing the phone from Khan's hand, "But I pick the place."

Khan kissed the top of Monica's head while she browsed through the available places in the Harbor. In theory, it was too early for shops and restaurants, but anything was possible when requested from Khan's phone.

Food took half an hour to arrive, during which Khan and Monica mostly caught up with each other without leaving the bed. The period spent separated didn't affect their natural rhythm, and things only improved once their bellies were full.

"Cuddle me," Monica cried as the post-meal drowsiness appeared. She was already back on Khan's chest, and his hand was also on her hair.

"I never stopped," Khan chuckled, putting more strength in his caresses. He was finally fully relaxed, but his phone was already moving toward the next task, and Monica could soon see it.

Khan left the phone on the mattress as holograms came out of it. They took the shape of a specific test that featured intricate red runes. Those symbols were unreadable for ordinary humans, but Khan could make some sense out of it.

The holograms caught Monica's interest, but she remained silent to let Khan focus. In theory, she wasn't supposed to be in the room during those tests, but Khan was a special case, and the embassy was bound to double-check that result.

Khan followed the test's instructions, activating as many functions as possible on the runes the holograms put forward. He didn't recognize much, and things got worse once the phone brought up more complicated symbols, but the results were still somewhat satisfying.

"Wow," Monica exclaimed once the test ended. "Can you really read five hundred Thilku runes?"

"The test only makes a projection based on the lines I recognized," Khan explained. "It's probably lower since some complex runes don't highlight them."

"Isn't this still good?" Monica wondered.

"I wish it were better," Khan sighed, closing the test and throwing his head on the mattress. "Sadly, I'm already at the complex runes, and it takes a while to memorize them."

"You wouldn't accept mediocrity even if the fate of the world were at stake," Monica snorted, reaching for Khan's cheek to pinch it. "I bet you went on a training and studying spree after the death of those Thilku."

"The fight with the Ambassador also drove me to that," Khan smirked, peeking at Monica's pouting face.

"I can even imagine what you were thinking," Monica scolded. "You thought things would have been different if you were stronger or more knowledgeable."

"It's true," Khan pointed out. "They could have."

Monica wanted to refute that statement but couldn't. It wasn't a matter of destroying Khan's hopes. It was actually the opposite. Khan had done more with far less, so he probably could have saved everyone if he were slightly stronger.

"I'm just happy you came back in one piece," Monica admitted, hiding her face in Khan's chest. "I don't care about the Thilku. I just want you to be safe."

Khan understood Monica's concerns, but there was no solution to them. He could only cuddle her until she felt reassured enough.

"If you end up on Neuria," Khan mentioned once the idea popped into his mind, "You might meet Amox. He is a good Thilku. I told him about you."

"What did you say about me?" Monica wondered, peeking at Khan's face.

"That I loved you," Khan responded.

"Really?" Monica giggled, completely lifting her head and placing an arm under her chin. "And what did he say?"

"That I should marry you," Khan teased, and Monica's eyes widened in shock.

Khan wanted to tease Monica some more, but his phone suddenly rang, distracting him from that interaction. It was odd to receive a call at that early hour, but looking at the name on the screen made his mind go blank. Somehow, Mister Cirvags was calling him.

Chapter 577 Color

Khan froze, looking at the name on his phone. He didn't know much about Mister Cirvags, but the little information in his possession already stated how important he was.

Mister Cirvags was the figure in charge of all the Harbor's offices connected to the Thilku. He was the boss of Ambassador Abores' boss. His words were heavier than the Headmistress' now that Khan worked in that field.

Monica had only heard about Mister Cirvags, but seeing Khan's reaction told her how important that call was. She immediately left his chest, sitting obediently at his side to give him enough room to focus.

Khan cleared his throat and straightened his back to sit on the mattress. He tried to sort out his thoughts, but another ring resounded, bringing the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" Khan announced. "Captain Khan speaking."

"It's Cirvags," A voice Khan recognized came out of the phone. "I've seen the updates on your profile. Are you free for a meeting?"

"Of course, sir," Khan exclaimed. "I'll head to the embassy immediately."

"We are not meeting in the embassy," Mister Cirvags revealed. "I've already sent a car. Be ready in five."

"Yes, sir!" Khan stated, but the call ended before Mister Cirvags could hear his answer. Khan could only look at the blank screen afterward, but realizing what had just happened forced him to snap back to reality.

"I need a clean uniform," Khan stated, looking at Monica to convey the situation's urgency.

"In the third bedroom," Monica promptly replied, jumping out of bed to hurry toward one of the wardrobes.

Khan also left the bed, running through the flat to reach the third bedroom. He had multiple sets of clean uniforms there, but retrieving one reminded him about his naked state.

"Underwear too!" Khan shouted, hurrying back to the previous bedroom, only to find Monica wielding clean boxers and socks.

"I love you so much," Khan sighed, reaching Monica to retrieve his clothes. She giggled and hid them behind her, forcing Khan to embrace her to get them.

Monica didn't hesitate to kiss Khan, which he welcomed. Their lips remained glued even after Khan got his hands on his clothes, and Monica eventually grabbed Khan's face to force them to split.

"Don't forget Master Amelia's schedule," Monica said, giving Khan another quick kiss, "And my mother also expects a call."

"I won't miss the chance to show off my girlfriend," Khan promised, throwing the uniform on the bed to get started with his underwear.

"And my mother," Monica reminded.

"And I'll also call your dear mother," Khan cursed, moving to his socks.

Monica giggled and crossed her arms while watching Khan dressing up. The bedroom had a pair of shoes, and he didn't need his knife, so he could get ready without leaving his spot.

"Done!" Khan exclaimed after finishing buttoning his uniform. He began heading outside, but Monica promptly grabbed his hand to make him turn.

"Let me see you, dummy," Monica scolded, inspecting Khan's uniform from head to toe to fix any crease. She did her best with the little available time but still improved Khan's overall appearance.

"Thank you," Khan whispered once Monica was done, leaning forward to kiss her goodbye.

"Don't find ways to get hurt," Monica warned. "I'll see you later."

"Later," Khan smirked, trying to turn, but sensing Monica's hand on his wrist again broadened his smile and made him kiss her again.

"Love you," Monica muttered cutely when the two separated. Her voice almost tempted Khan to fall prey to her lips again, but time was running short, so he slapped her butt to end that interaction.

"Scoundrel," Monica complained from behind a smile. Khan only exchanged another look with her but eventually hurried inside the elevator to leave the building.

Even with the intimate exuberance, Khan still reached the sidewalk before the deadline set by Mister Cirvags. The early hour even provided an empty environment, but it didn't take long before a car appeared above the buildings.

The car's model gave hints Khan could recognize. Mister Cirvags had used a military vehicle to pick him up, partially explaining the purpose of the meeting. That wasn't surprising for Khan, but adding clues confirmed his initial assumption.

The vehicle landed at the sidewalk's edge, and a driver donning a military uniform came out to salute Khan. He only nodded at him before getting inside, and the set-off started right afterward.

The car's windows hid the insides, but Khan could see everything from his position. He kept track of the streets under him to get an idea of his destination. He had almost memorized the entirety of the Harbor by then, so relatively accurate guesses appeared in his mind after crossing a few districts.

The Harbor had living districts exclusive to teachers and other important figures, and the car entered one of them before slowing down. Khan found himself in a small dome featuring short but large buildings divided by empty streets, which the vehicle never approached.

Most of that district's buildings had landing areas on their roofs, and the vehicle settled on one of them. The driver didn't hesitate to leave his seat to welcome Khan outside, and he merely studied the area while following the soldier.

The roof had a series of bright menus in the corner, and the soldier crouched down to press them. A piece of the metal surface slid open, creating a rectangular opening that released a transparent elevator. The driver pointed at its entrance, and Khan got inside on his own.

The elevator's transparent door closed before descending. The lift only crossed one floor before stopping inside a generic room similar to what Khan had in his flat.

No one welcomed Khan, but the door past the elevator area was open, so he stepped forward and slowly advanced through the flat. The symphony immediately updated him, and he followed its clues while studying his surroundings.

The elevator area expanded into a large empty hall adorned with thick, vast carpets partially hidden by large couches. The place was bigger than Khan's living room, but its peculiarities were on the walls.

Shelves and cases covered by transparent glass stood on the walls, with some hanging directly from the tall ceiling. All sorts of items filled them, and a specific shade of red ended up claiming Khan's attention.

Khan crossed half the hall to reach a tall display case containing an item he knew well. The iconic Thilku cape stood inside the container, hanging from its shoulders to show its size. Khan had seen Mister Cirvags wear it, so his eyes immediately searched for more peculiar items.

It didn't take long before Khan ended up before the Thilku's dark military uniform. Those clothes were also inside a transparent container and attached to the wall to reveal every detail.

The items on display went beyond clothes. Khan found an old rifle covered in mud, a simple sword with dark trails of blood stuck to its edges, and a protective helmet with two holes on its forehead. The hall had even more than that, but Khan stopped his inspection since he had understood the purpose of the containers.

'They are trophies,' Khan thought before another realization arrived. That wasn't a simple flat. That was Mister Cirvags' real home.

"That's what a lifetime of service gets you," A voice that didn't take Khan by surprise resounded behind him. "Junk and old things you are too fond of to throw away."

Khan turned and wore a military salute to welcome the big figure that had entered the hall. Mister Cirvags stood before his office's entrance wearing a tight tracksuit that highlighted his burly body. His tired old face almost didn't match those muscles, but Khan didn't dare to underestimate him.

"You should never show your back in an unknown environment, Captain," Mister Cirvags scolded. "Though, I didn't catch you by surprise, did I?"

"You didn't, sir," Khan revealed. The office's door had been silent, but nothing could mask Mister Cirvags' heavy presence. Khan believed that even a non-initiate to the Niqols arts would sense something.

"[Come to my office]," Mister Cirvags ordered, switching to the Thilku language. "[Let's talk]."

The change in language came as a surprise, but Khan felt to understand what it meant. Mister Cirvags turned to enter his office, and Khan followed him to arrive in another big space.

The office in the flat was bigger than the Headmistress'. It had two couches, two armchairs, a spacious interactive desk, and four simple chairs. The place could almost fit two squads, but Khan kept his thoughts to himself.

"[I assume you feasted with the Thilku]," Mister Cirvags stated, leaning behind his desk to retrieve a red metal bottle. The color strongly reminded Khan of the Thilku, almost revealing its origin.

"[I did, sir]," Khan replied in the Thilku language. "[More than a few times]."

"[Your accent still needs work]," Mister Cirvags commented, leaving the desk after retrieving two glasses, "[But it's far better compared to the last time I met you]."

"[Thank you, sir]," Khan responded.

"[It wasn't a compliment]," Mister Cirvags warned. "[Me not pointing that out would have been a compliment]."

Khan chose to remain silent and follow Mister Cirvags with his eyes. The man headed for one of the couches, sitting on it before pouring the bottle's contents into the glasses. He even began to drink from one of them before his stern voice resounded again.

"[Aren't you going to sit]?" Mister Cirvags asked, and Khan hurriedly headed for the opposite couch. The man also handed him the other glass before resuming to drink.

"[I hope it's not too early for you]," Mister Cirvags said when he noticed that Khan didn't immediately drink.

"[Never]," Khan smirked, sipping from his glass. That booze definitely came from the Thilku but was of far better quality compared to what he had drunk on Neuria and Acarro.

"[You look in a good mood]," Mister Cirvags commented. "[I heard from Leticia that Neuria took a tool on you]."

"[Respectfully, sir]," Khan said, not surprised that the Headmistress had shared information, "[I've seen worse]."

Mister Cirvags had rarely lowered his glass. Still, he stopped drinking to inspect Khan's face, and a comment soon followed. "[Women sure hold a lot of power over your mind]."

"[Not women]," Khan corrected. "[One woman, my girlfriend]."

"[There's the bad mood]," Mister Cirvags uttered, scratching his short beard. His perfect accent didn't carry any amusement. It simply was an accurate description of the event.

Khan could guess what was happening but struggled to deal with Mister Cirvags. He couldn't understand his exact intentions, so he decided to ask. "[Sir, why did you request this meeting]?"

"[What's the Thilku Empire's weakness]?" Mister Cirvags suddenly questioned.

"[Sir]?" Khan called.

"[Do you know the answer or not, Captain]?" Mister Cirvags pressed on.

Khan knew when he was being tested, and his mana reacted to that open challenge. He could feel his brain growing empty to leave behind only useful information.

"[It's too big]," Khan responded. "[The Thilku cover too much territory. They lack the numbers to manage it]."

"[Differently from humans]," Mister Cirvags declared, "[Who limit themselves to outposts and share worlds with other species]."

"[Why are you testing me, sir]?" Khan asked, unfazed by the lesson. He had already extensively covered that topic in the Harbor's advanced classes.

"[Why did you start studying the Thilku symbols]?" Mister Cirvags asked, ignoring Khan's question.

"[I find them interesting]," Khan admitted.

"[Why]?" Mister Cirvags wondered. "[You never showed interest in human technology]."

"[The symbols are different]," Khan explained. "[They are a technology which aims to acquire intrinsic meaning. They are closer to the arts I excel into]."

"[You were sticking to your profile then]," Mister Cirvags said, lifting the bottle from the floor to hand it to Khan.

Khan grabbed the bottle and refilled his glass before giving it back. Mister Cirvags prepared his drink, but no question arrived. He leaned back into the couch and continued to look straight into Khan's eyes.

"[Is something the matter, sir]?" Khan eventually felt forced to ask.

"[Yes]," Mister Cirvags declared. "[I have one Ambassador and a Captain who somehow managed to achieve political success among the Thilku]."

Khan didn't need to add more questions. What had happened in Neuria couldn't be the norm. Lord Exr was a small fish in the Empire, but his superiors were no joking matter, and getting to them had consequences for the Harbor's political offices.

"[We exploited a fortuitous opportunity]," Khan shortly explained.

"[That I've read]," Mister Cirvags revealed. "[I'm wondering who created it]."

"[I'm sure you have the report, sir]," Khan uttered. That was his chance to double-cross Ambassador Abores, but the letter had already praised him. Adding fuel to that possible enmity didn't feel like a wise choice, especially since Khan didn't know how Mister Cirvags would react.

Mister Cirvags remained impassible. He scratched his beard a bit longer without changing his expression. Even his mana remained stable, hiding any possible clue.

"[Thilku value strength over everything]," Mister Cirvags announced, "[And you are strong, Captain]."

Mister Cirvags stood up before Khan could say anything. He headed toward his desk, activating its functions to tinker with the menus. He didn't add orders, but Khan left his couch and approached him anyway.

"[What is your impression of them]?" Mister Cirvags asked, his gaze lost in the menus.

"[Their methods are harsh]," Khan described, "[Ruthless even, but I wouldn't consider them evil]."

"[The definition of evil changes from species to species]," Mister Cirvags commented. "[Don't be bound to such trivial concepts]."

"[What should I be bound to, sir]?" Khan questioned.

"[The Global Army]," Mister Cirvags replied, keeping his head lowered. "[Humankind]."

Khan couldn't disagree more but kept those thoughts to himself. Curiosity tried to get the better of him, but he kept his gaze lifted to avoid peeking at the reports on the desk.

"[It's rare for a human to catch the Thilku's attention]," Mister Cirvags continued, "[Even rarer to be accepted. Yet, you might pull it off]."

Mister Cirvags didn't give Khan a chance to reply once again since his last tap made the desk release a series of holograms. A star map appeared, and Khan recognized Lord Exr's domain among the showcased systems.

"[Do you know where this is]?" Mister Cirvags asked, zooming in toward one of Lord Exr's systems to highlight a small planet.

"[Cegnore]," Khan responded. He had studied nothing else but the Thilku in the last period, especially Lord Exr's systems, so he could name the planets in his domain. Actually, he could do slightly more than that.

"[I know there's a war there]," Khan added. "[Everything else was classified]."

"[There is a war]," Mister Cirvags confirmed. "[And we have a few teams there]."

That wasn't Khan's first time in a similar situation. Even with most information being classified, Khan had already experienced Ecoruta, and Cegnore seemed to carry the same issues.

"[Do you want me to join a war, sir]?" Khan wondered in confusion. "[I'm just a third-level warrior. I'm not sure I can be influential]."

"[The enemies there aren't strong]," Mister Cirvags revealed. "[Not in terms of level, at least]."

"[Why don't the Thilku beat them then]?" Khan asked, his confusion intensifying. "[What do they need the humans for]?"

"[It's a matter of pride]," Mister Cirvags remained vague. "[You'll receive a report if you accept the mission]."

"[I had the impression you were more domineering, sir]," Khan couldn't help but say. He expected a direct order from someone like Mister Cirvags. That veiled politeness didn't suit him at all.

"[Many find it demeaning to be used as simple soldiers after achieving status]," Mister Cirvags declared, ignoring Khan's comment. "[They are not wrong, but that's how you get to the Thilku]."

Khan was no stranger to wars, but the opportunity to refuse made him think. He had been lucky in the past. Except for the almost-mindless Stal, he had never been ordered to kill needlessly.

Moreover, Ecoruta had been a dark period for Khan. He only wanted to lose himself back then. Instead, his mind was far better off now, and so was his life. Turning himself into a hired gun might break that balance, especially when involving a species he knew nothing about.

'Do I really want to kill just because I'm being ordered to?' Khan wondered.

The answer was a resounding no. It would have been different in the past or other situations, but Khan had options now. He could tread the path toward his goal without compromising himself too much. The request coming directly from Mister Cirvags was the only problem.

"[Maybe this can help you make up your mind]," Mister Cirvags eventually added, pressing a different label on the interactive desk.

The star map grew smaller to make room for a completely different hologram. The image of an ugly beast appeared, and the entire office grew colder.

The beast resembled a fat wolf with oddly long and slender legs. Its pointy mouth was also abnormal, with its upper side being almost twice as big as the lower. Still, Khan solely focused on its thick fur or, rather, on its unforgettable color.

Khan ignored Mister Cirvags and reached for the desk. He wanted to see the holograms' settings, but the menus didn't listen to his genetic signature. That realization made him look for his superior, who had an answer ready.

"You are seeing its actual color," Mister Cirvags said, switching back to the human language.

Khan calmed down after that confirmation, and his eyes returned to the desk. He retracted his hands, but his mana didn't stop radiating coldness. His energy already knew the answer. That beast's fur was like his hair and scar. The creature wore the Nak's colors.

Chapter 578 Decision

"Is this the Thilku enemy?" Khan asked, doing his best to remain calm.

"Mostly," Mister Cirvags vaguely explained. "They aren't really a species. It's complicated."

Khan couldn't understand much since his senses were useless with holograms. However, he knew a lot about the field. Tainted animals were a topic he almost didn't need to study to master.

Tainted was a status given to any creature or living being mutated by mana. Different species and scientists relied on specific names to split the field into many groups, but one aspect remained constant. The azure color came from the Nak.

"Is this a fifth-generation Tainted animal?" Khan questioned. "Sixth?"

Khan's question used Earth's timeline as a foundation. Five centuries separated humankind from the First Impact, which was enough for multiple generations of Tainted offspring. Six was even too small as a guess, but Khan's estimate had to consider the retention of the azure color.

"Second," Mister Cirvags revealed, shattering Khan's calm. "Some first-generation specimens appear from time to time."

The world around Khan crumbled only to take life again. Every artificial light, smell, or shade carried by the symphony intensified in his senses. The conflicting aspects of his nature reached a new agreement, fusing to create his best mindset yet as he looked at Mister Cirvags.

"Was there a Nak on Cegnore recently?" Khan said, almost unable to believe he was finally asking a similar question.

"Not exactly," Mister Cirvags gave another vague answer.

"Answer me," Khan requested before his last traces of reason reminded him where he was. "Please, sir."

"Why would I?" Mister Cirvags wondered.

"Because I'm asking," Khan exclaimed. He had planned to sound as polite as possible, but his current mental state turned his words into a threat.

"It's bad to have such an obvious weakness," Mister Cirvags scolded, tapping on the desk to retract the holograms. "It makes you easy to use."

Khan's gaze snapped to the empty desk before returning to Mister Cirvags with newfound anger. Mister Cirvags didn't falter at that feeling. He remained impassible as he waited to see Khan's course of action.

The urge to pursue a violent path tried to take over Khan. Except for the hand on Milia 222, that was the closest he had ever gotten to clues about the Nak. They were right before him, but a fifth-level warrior stood in his way.

'Calm down,' Khan cursed, trying to bring order to his boiling mana. 'This isn't the way.'

The curse didn't quell Khan's mana, but he still calmed down, retracting his anger and lowering his gaze in defeat. He didn't care about his disrespect toward Mister Cirvags. He simply didn't like how riled up he got whenever the Nak became part of the equation.

"Don't delude yourself, Captain," Mister Cirvags warned, losing interest in Khan to lean behind the desk. "You aren't difficult to figure out, and you didn't do a good job hiding your goals either."

That didn't come as a surprise to Khan. He had started to reveal his goals to receive offers that could match them. Moreover, his profile was public, and he had attracted enough interest to make higher-ups study him.

Mister Cirvags retrieved a rectangular screen from behind his desk before returning to the couches. He sat down to refill his drink, and Khan soon joined him to abide by the unwritten rules of that meeting.

"We mostly have scientists on Cegnore," Mister Cirvags revealed, throwing the device at Khan.

The gesture surprised Khan, but he still caught the device with his free hand without spilling his drink. The screen unlocked under his grasp, revealing a series of reports that immediately attracted his attention.

Images that Khan recognized accompanied the reports. The device depicted multiple shots of the Tainted creature shown by the holograms with details about its strength. Khan even saw extensive studies connected to those images, and opening a random tab put him in front of sentences he could barely read.

"Did Parver tell you the nature of his condition?" Mister Cirvags questioned.

"Partially," Khan replied, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Apparently," Mister Cirvags announced, "Something contagious infected Cegnore's natives. The Thilku caught it when they discovered the planet, basically switching sides."

"Why didn't they bomb them out of existence?" Khan asked, finally lifting his gaze.

"I don't know the details," Mister Cirvags stated. "It seems that an old commander got infected and requested a warrior's death. That didn't happen, so now the planet is a battlefield."

"I expected the Thilku to ignore the request," Khan admitted.

"Where would their pride go if they lost against their infected kind?" Mister Cirvags asked, clearing Khan's doubts.

"This illness," Khan changed the topic, waving the device. "Is that why you chose me?"

"Delusions, Captain," Mister Cirvags uttered. "You are special, but I've been in this field a long time. I've outlived many soldiers like you."

"I'm more special than others," Khan declared.

"For a third-level warrior," Mister Cirvags added. "And, no, I didn't choose you for your resistance to the illness. A pill can achieve that. You just fit the role and were likely to accept."

Mister Cirvags had never stopped looking at Khan, and he responded with a similar inspection. However, his senses didn't help. Mister Cirvags wasn't using any technique to hide his presence. His mana was simply calm and didn't cause any ripple.

"I thought I had to accept the mission before receiving this," Khan pointed out, lifting the device in an attempt to trigger a reaction in Mister Cirvags' mana. Still, nothing happened.

"You will accept," Mister Cirvags declared. "You are that kind of man."

The inability to read Mister Cirvags fueled the annoyance caused by his words. Khan didn't like how the man thought to have him figured out, and knowing he was right worsened that feeling.

"How long do I have to make my decision?" Khan questioned, suppressing his feelings.

"Until new orders arrive," Mister Cirvags revealed. "Well, until I find new orders to give you."

'Another vague answer,' Khan commented, holding back a sigh with the drink in his hand. He gulped down the booze and remained still for a second before standing up.

"I'll consider the offer, sir," Khan promised, looking straight at Mister Cirvags until the man finally broke into a reaction, which turned out to be a simple nod.

Khan headed for the office's exit but stopped at its edge. A doubt had risen into his mind, and he turned to voice it. "Sir, was this a favor?"

"No," Mister Cirvags said without adding anything. He kept drinking, uncaring that Khan was still looking at him.

Khan gave up on the matter and returned to the elevator room, carrying the device with him. The lift brought him to the roof, where the military ride awaited him.

The driver came out to perform a military salute, but Khan almost ignored the gesture to get inside the car. He had managed to remain calm during the last part of the conversation, but his mana boiled stronger than ever once privacy arrived, especially since the device was in his hands.

'Will I finally get some answers?' Khan thought, struggling to believe a similar moment had arrived. Still, the ringing of his phone disturbed him, and drawing it put him before a crossroad.

The screen showed a name Khan had expected to appear, but the timing couldn't have been worse. Madam Solodrey was calling him, but the other device had Nak-related information. Postponing the

conversation wouldn't be the end of the world, but Mister Cirvags' scoldings had gotten under his skin.

'Am I using my desperation to my advantage?' Khan wondered. 'Or is it controlling me?'

Khan had his ringing phone in his left hand and the device in his right. He only had to choose what to prioritize, and either option wouldn't lead to lasting consequences. Yet, that simple decision gained a deeper meaning in his mind.

The issue of compromising himself returned. The device symbolized Khan's ultimate goal and willingness to sacrifice everything else in his life.

Instead, the left embodied Khan's happiness and a future that could go beyond what his desperation had left him capable of imagining. It represented something he didn't want to lose, making him wish to be better.

Seconds flowed while Khan remained in that stalemate. Compromising himself was easy when the Nak were involved, but Monica was the only topic that could make him hesitate. That wait continued until another ring resounded, pushing him toward one of the two paths.

"Madam Solodrey," Khan sighed, mentally exhausted, while holding the phone to his ear.

"Captain," Madam Solodrey's voice came out of the phone. "Master Amelia suggested you could be free at this time. Was she correct?"

"I didn't expect such politeness from you, ma'am," Khan joked. "It must be my lucky day."

"Tasteless as always," Madam Solodrey scoffed. "You make praising you so difficult."

"It is my understanding that the Solodrey family appreciated my work," Khan exclaimed, switching to a more serious tone.

"It is appreciated," Madam Solodrey confirmed. "The Thilku have yet to hand over precise requirements, but the prospects seem to involve a quarter of a planet."

"That must be some lucrative business," Khan commented.

"Indeed," Madam Solodrey agreed. "I took the liberty of involving the descendants who vouched for you and their families in the deal. Of course, they'll get lower shares."

That news took Khan by surprise. Lucian and the other descendants had mentioned their interest in business opportunities, but Khan had obviously prioritized the Solodrey family. Still, Madam Solodrey had taken care of that part for him.

"Thank you, ma'am," Khan couldn't help but say.

"I initially planned to leave something for you," Madam Solodrey continued, "But your debt is too big, and my family will still shoulder the investment risk, so I cut it out."

"You almost had me, ma'am," Khan chuckled.

"Is the reward I sent you not enough?" Madam Solodrey asked. "My dear daughter is worth far more than a planet, even after getting tainted by a mutt."

"I don't appreciate how you talk about Monica," Khan warned. "She is not a currency."

"You wanted my daughter," Madam Solodrey declared, "You got her, along with all the obligations and customs proper of her status. I hope you are not regretting it now, Captain."

"Never," Khan promptly uttered. "Still, I must ask you to use her looks for me only, ma'am. I'll start requesting my presence whenever she has to close a deal otherwise."

That was Madam Solodrey's time to be surprised. Khan's statement had been strangely collected and reasonable. He even accepted to be tricked if necessary.

Nevertheless, Madam Solodrey's education didn't allow her to hint at her surprise, and her reply came after a single silent second. "You should focus on today's date. I expect the entire Harbor to see a happy couple."

"The Harbor will see more than that," Khan promised. "I might break some of your rules. You can't expect a mutt like me to behave with your enchanting daughter at my side."

"Tasteless," Madam Solodrey sighed. "I wonder where I went wrong with my dear daughter."

"I have a few guesses of my own, ma'am," Khan revealed.

"Be silent," Madam Solodrey complained. "I'll close an eye toward some misbehavior, but I'd better not find something indecent on the network."

"That's," Khan hesitated, surprised that Madam Solodrey had given up on the matter. "I'd never dishonor your daughter, ma'am."

"You already did, Captain," Madam Solodrey sighed. "At least you are shaping up to be worthy of putting a real ring on her finger. My husband is harder to convince but won't object if the engagement is profitable."

"Wait," Khan gasped. "Did the Solodrey family decide something?"

"No," Madam Solodrey denied, "So stop asking. Focus on preparing my daughter for Neuria. Her performance will be seen as your responsibility."

'So, she is going there,' Khan thought before making a promise. "You can count on me, ma'am."

"Also," Madam Solodrey added, "You can drop the ma'am in private. If you wish to, you can even use my name."

"I'll remember that," Khan exclaimed, amazed that something similar was happening, "Anastasia."

"Remember," Madam Solodrey repeated. "Only in private. Now, don't make my daughter wait."

Chapter 579 Fusion

Dawn had barely arrived, but the Harbor had already awakened, especially around the second district. Headmistress Holwen's security measures maintained order in that dome, but Khan could spot many onlookers and a few crowds in the areas around it.

The event was far from surprising, and Khan couldn't find the strength to care after everything that had happened that morning. Mister Cirvags and Madam Solodrey had filled his mind with doubts and thoughts which couldn't disappear in a single flight.

Returning to the building increased those thoughts. Khan landed and left his ride only to see two figures crossing the sidewalk to approach him. Master Amelia had arrived, and Andrew was with her.

"Welcome back, sir," Andrew announced with his impeccably firm stance. "I hope your mission was a success, sir."

"Thank you, Andrew," Khan nodded at the soldier. "Did Francis cause any problem?"

"No, sir," Andrew revealed. "Mister Alstair continued working in the office and sparring with me. He also refused to use the break you scheduled for him."

"That's good to hear," Khan nodded, glancing at Master Amelia. "Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Miss Monica is almost ready to head down," Master Amelia exclaimed, pulling out a small screen from behind her back. "I have the schedule for the date here, Captain."

"Let me see," Khan sighed, taking the screen and seeing a huge list paired with timestamps and more. The Solodrey family wanted him to spend the entire day outside, which wasn't an issue, but the number of activities was too high.

"This is a job," Khan pointed out, "Not a date."

"It is the schedule that would give the most exposure," Master Amelia explained.

"We'll do the shopping district," Khan stated, browsing through the list again, "The restaurant, Pandora, and another walk. You can keep the rest for the following dates."

Khan returned the device to Master Amelia before stepping forward, but the latter couldn't let the matter go. She had already been unable to stop him yesterday, and history couldn't repeat itself.

"Captain Khan!" Master Amelia called, raising her voice to force Khan to turn. "The Solodrey family prepared this schedule. You must follow it."

"Must?" Khan voiced, cordiality disappearing from his face. "Do you know who you are talking to?"

Master Amelia couldn't help but feel some regret at the coldness that flowed in her direction. Something was wrong with Khan, and she had become his target due to her words.

Khan could accept Mister Cirvags' scolding and cryptic behavior since he outclassed him in experience, status, and power. He was also willing to compromise with Madam Solodrey since she was important to Monica and her happiness.

However, Master Amelia was only a third-level warrior. Her position in the Solodrey family was valuable, but Khan was beyond her. He couldn't accept her orders, especially if he didn't agree with them. It would be an insult to his efforts to do that.

Truth be told, Khan didn't intend to sound so intense, but his morning had been far from good, and Master Amelia paid the price. She was an experienced warrior who trained descendants for a living, so experiencing the entirety of Khan's hard stance sent a chill down her spine.

"I will take Monica out on my terms," Khan continued. "As for you, I believe the Solodrey family ordered you to keep an eye on us."

Master Amelia gulped, but an answer eventually escaped her mouth. "It is customary to have an escort."

"That's not going to happen," Khan stated, his eyes lighting up when he recalled that Andrew was still there. "Andrew, take Master Amelia out on a date."

"Yes, sir," Andrew immediately agreed.

"Captain, this is," Master Amelia tried to complain, but Khan interrupted her.

"This is an order," Khan firmly explained, "For both of you."

The unreasonable nature of the request left Master Amelia unable to bargain or reply. She wasn't even working for Khan, but his orders sounded impossible to refuse in that situation and with his stern tone.

Khan lost interest in the matter and headed for his building, entering it to use one of the elevators. His return to the flat didn't go unnoticed, and a shout soon welcomed him.

"One moment!" Monica shouted from deep inside the flat. "I'm not ready yet."

Khan ignored the warning and crossed the elevator area and living room to dive into a corridor. He found Monica in a bathroom near their bedroom, adjusting her hair before a mirror.

"I told you I wasn't ready," Monica complained when she noticed Khan standing at the bathroom's entrance.

"You look ready to me," Khan commented. Monica didn't opt for anything too elegant. She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater and a new skirt, which brought light to Khan's eyes.

"Don't make that face," Monica pouted, leaving the mirror to reach Khan and wrap her arms around his waist. "We have a date."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world," Khan promised, lowering his head to search for Monica's mouth.

A long kiss unfolded, and a short one followed, creating an intimate mood that turned Monica's words into whispers. "Do you really want to take me out?"

"I do," Khan confirmed, inebriated by Monica's scent. "How else would I see you all radiant and happy?"

"Silver tongue," Monica scolded from behind her smile. "I wanted this new skirt to be a surprise."

"Consider me surprised," Khan chuckled, "And tempted."

"Stick to tempted until we get back," Monica giggled, reaching for Khan's lips again.

The kiss was short, and Monica forced herself to let go of Khan afterward. The mood was too right to risk remaining immersed in that intimacy.

"Do I need to change?" Khan wondered, heading for a bedroom.

"I like you in uniform," Monica teased, strolling behind Khan. "After all, you are my noble Captain."

"I'll just drop this then," Khan exclaimed, lifting Mister Cirvags' device to show it to Monica before throwing it on the bed.

"Right," Monica recalled, eyeing the device. "What's that? How did the meeting go?"

"Apparently," Khan sighed, trying to find the best way to describe his morning. "The Thilku are fighting second- and first-generation Tainted animals. It might be Nak-related."

"Wait a moment," Monica gasped, abandoning the playful mood to get serious. "How reliable is this information?"

"I don't know," Khan said, turning to shrug his shoulders. "I barely looked at the reports."

Monica froze before Khan's casual behavior. She knew how deeply the nightmares affected him. Her heavy sleep didn't make her ignore the sweat covering Khan whenever he woke up. That wasn't a topic she could take lightly or ignore.

"Let's postpone the date," Monica eventually suggested. "You need to look at the reports and-."

Monica couldn't finish her suggestion since two fingers suddenly trapped her nose. Khan had only needed a step to get before her, and that gesture generated an instinctive pout.

"Khan," Monica complained, but Khan didn't let her nose go. He shook his head to make her give up, and solemn words soon followed.

"I will do terrible things to achieve my goals," Khan announced. "Some I've already done. Now I have a choice, so I want to prioritize what makes me happy."

"But," Monica whined pleadingly, "Your nightmares. You are in pain."

"I'm always in pain," Khan uttered, "And I'll be for a long time. One day won't change that."

Monica snapped, slapping the hand on her nose to free herself. That compliance made her livid. It almost sounded like Khan was ready to spend the rest of his life in that condition, but she lost the chance to voice her anger since he took her head in his arms.

"I also have to deal with so much stuff," Khan cursed. "The higher I go, the more influential my superiors get. I compromise and compromise to search for freedom that never arrives."

Monica cried in anger, but Khan's chest suppressed her voice. She was ready to punch his torso, but the topic of the conversation made her hold back and stomp her feet to vent.

"But you know what I managed to get?" Khan continued, lowering his head to immerse his face in Monica's hair. "You."

Monica wanted to be angry from the bottom of her heart, but her body relaxed. She gave up trying to oppose Khan. Her very being knew he had won that discussion.

Khan relaxed his hug and leaned backward to peek at Monica, only to see an angry face. His smile melted that expression, and Monica heaved a sigh, resting her head on his chest again.

"You aren't doing this for me, right?" Monica muttered.

"Being a good boyfriend might cleanse me a bit," Khan revealed. "You know, if I make you happy, I might be worthy of happiness myself."

Monica retracted her head to glare at Khan. She didn't like that statement, but the context made it understandable. That was a rough period for Khan, especially with possible clues about the Nak standing right beside him.

"You need to change," Monica commented, pointing at a wet spot on Khan's uniform. "Don't do it in front of me. I'd jump on you right now."

"Alright," Khan snickered, leaving Monica to head toward the door.

"And," Monica continued, making Khan glance at her, "You always make me happy, even when I cry. I'll be mad for real if you ever doubt that again."

"Thank you," Khan whispered, and an exchange of loving smiles happened before he felt forced to run away. The bed would become too tempting otherwise.

Only the upper part of the uniform had a spot, and Khan wore a clean one in a few seconds. Then, he found Monica waiting for him in the living room, and she stretched her hand toward him, waiting for his fingers to arrive.

"You know," Khan announced, taking Monica's hand. "Your mother called."

"Oh!" Monica gasped, using her free hand to cling to Khan's elbow. "What did she say?"

"She actually congratulated me," Khan revealed. "She also confirmed that you will take over the new business."

"I'll be in your care then," Monica giggled as the two entered the elevator.

"She said that too," Khan recalled. "Oh, she gave me permission to call her Anastasia in private."

"Is she finally giving up?" Monica couldn't help but raise her voice.

"She did mention our engagement, now that I think about it," Khan vaguely said.

"What?!" Monica cried, uncaring that the elevator had opened.

"But she added that I have to convince your father first," Khan continued, pretending not to notice how worked up Monica got.

"Why are you telling me this now?!" Monica scolded, wary of the incoming exit.

"It's been a while since I could tease you in public," Khan laughed. "I missed this."

"Don't tease me about our engagement!" Monica complained, but the couple eventually left the building, forcing her to wear a fake smile.

"This date will be so fun," Khan snickered, his laugh growing louder when Monica pinched his side in an attempt to make him stop.

Master Amelia had gotten everything ready, so Khan and Monica only had to follow their new schedule.

A car picked Khan and Monica up and drove them to the shopping district, remaining on the street to increase their exposure. The vehicle had transparent windows, so any passerby could notice them and start rumors.

The district saw Monica smiling all the time while Khan brought her from shop to shop. She tried every piece of clothes she could get her hands on, and Khan soon suffered from a similar fate, but the process was the very opposite of painful.

A lunch in a relatively crowded restaurant followed, ending with a long, romantic walk in another district. Madam Solodrey's approval made the couple engage in public intimacy, which never exceeded short kisses or loving hugs.

The date ended in one of Pandora's shops to ensure Khan and Monica showed themselves to the Harbor's wealthy population. They only exchanged salutes with them, but that was enough. They could take the rest of the night for themselves, drinking and eating in the relative privacy of the place.

The return home was far from peaceful. Mister Cirvags had already interrupted the couple once, and the date had further delayed the inevitable. Entering the flat put an end to any self-restraint, leading to a series of wild hours.

Exhausting the wildness didn't mark the end of that day. Khan and Monica still had work to do and got into it without bothering to put back their clothes.

Monica lay belly down on the bed with a pillow supporting her chest. Her eyes were on the holograms released by her phone, which contained many pieces of classified information she wasn't supposed to have.

Khan obviously was the source of that info. He didn't steal anything from his office since his memory was enough. He had studied nothing but Thilku in the past months, so creating a summary about Neuria barely took an hour.

As for Khan, he lay belly up at Monica's side, wielding Mister Cirvags' device and going through its information. Sometimes his hand would caress Monica's back, but his attention on the reports never wavered.

The device's reports used heavy scientific language that Khan struggled to understand. He wasn't qualified to read that information but did his best to clear his most glaring doubts. The matter simply took longer due to that issue.

Khan's first and most important doubt involved the first- and second-generation Tainted animals. He had almost believed a Nak had been on Cegnore recently, but the reality was far different.

After rereading the same scientific piece four times, Khan sort of understood that the infection was to blame for those Tainted animals. It seemed that a virus had mutated when the Nak attacked the planet, turning it into an illness that spread their original mana.

For biological reasons Khan couldn't understand, the original mutation didn't lose intensity even after multiple generations. Cegnore's current Tainted animals were only distant offspring of the first infected specimens, but they retained those traits without watering them down.

Another doubt involved the switching sides Mister Cirvags mentioned. It didn't make sense for the Thilku to start working for the enemies. After all, humankind had Tainted humans too, and they could serve the Global Army without a problem.

The answer to that doubt turned out to be interesting. The Thilku and human teams had dealt with more than Tainted beasts on Cegnore. At times, they captured actual intelligent creatures, which all reported the same symptoms.

'Delirium, hallucinations, violent mood swings,' Khan read on the device. 'Don't tell me it's because of the nightmares.'

That finding stirred up Khan's curiosity and dark feelings. Professor Parver had given a clue, but Cegnore seemed to offer the possibility of testing it out. If Khan could get face-to-face with one of those intelligent creatures, he might get more answers about the Nak.

'This is good,' Khan concluded, 'Too good to refuse.'

Khan put down the device and half-slid to his right to lay his head on Monica's back. She peeked at him only to find him lost in his thoughts and with his arms crossed while his mind reviewed what he knew.

'The Thilku are strong,' Khan considered. 'They wouldn't lose against random Tainted animals. It must be the mutations.'

Khan reached for his head and tore away a hair to inspect it. The transformation had made him stronger than humans, so the animals, Thilku, and natives on Cegnore probably suffered from a similar condition. Their healthy peers simply weren't their match.

'Though, this still smells,' Khan wondered. 'I thought the Nak were a secret topic. I can't believe I'm getting access to something so close so easily.'

Khan wasn't disregarding what ordinary soldiers could achieve in the same years. Getting the mission on Cegnore had felt too easy for him, but others would need to spend an entire decade or longer to be granted that honor.

Nevertheless, Khan's paranoia didn't let him take the issue lightly. He kept looking for explanations, and only one guess sounded reasonable.

'Maybe it's because of the Empire,' Khan considered. 'The Global Army can't hide this since it's in enemy territory.'

The Thilku could have different policies about the Nak, which created that opportunity. That line of thought felt too optimistic, but Khan could only hope it was true since his mind was pretty much made.

'I need to get stronger,' Khan promptly thought once the decision arrived. He finally returned to reality, feeling the urge to test an idea, but his surroundings were problematic.

"Stay still for a second," Khan requested, throwing the device on Monica's side before almost lying over her.

"What are you doing?" Monica giggled as Khan made himself comfortable on her back.

"Shielding you," Khan explained. "This shouldn't be dangerous, but we can't be too careful."

"Khan?!" Monica called in a serious tone after realizing that he wasn't playing around.

"You'd throw a tantrum if I asked to remain alone for this," Khan declared. "So, stay put."

Monica wanted to complain, but Khan was right. Having him as a human shield was the best compromise she would ever get, so she limited herself to peek past her shoulder and his head.

'Something simple,' Khan thought, taking a deep breath before lifting his left hand. He stretched two fingers, and a tinge of mana appeared on their tips.

The mana grew darker and denser under Khan's control and manipulation. It almost gained liquid properties as he continued to accumulate it before performing a slow descending gesture.

Khan traced the air, creating a small line of mana that hovered above him. That energy was bound to disperse in seconds, but a silent request escaped his brain and forced the symphony to work with him.

The synthetic mana gathered around the hovering purple-red line, increasing its stability and giving Khan more time. He lifted his hand again, and a faint energy trail escaped his fingers before he used them to transform his previous creation into an odd cross.

The two energy trails were almost opposite in terms of nature and texture. One was bright and unstable, while the other was darker and denser. They seemed to belong to different elements and spells, but their contact generated a joint reaction.

The unstable line touched the dense energy, spreading its nature. The darker mana grew wilder, exploding into a sizzling flare that only stretched for a few centimeters. Khan never came close to being in danger, and his eyebrows arched in interest at that result.

Monica briefly stared at the faint remaining smoke before slipping out from under Khan to get a better view. All the traces of that experiment had vanished by then, which prompted her question. "What did you do?"

"I'm not sure," Khan admitted, his eyes inspecting shades only he could see. "I think I fused the Thilku runes with the Niqols arts."

Chapter 580 Theory

Monica didn't know what to say. Only a few people in the world could match her confidence in Khan and his value, but he still managed to surprise her.

"Aren't the Thilku symbols technology?" Monica questioned, focusing on Khan's seemingly lost face. "I thought you were only learning to read them."

"I'm not that useless at technology," Khan scoffed, crossing his arms while his eyes remained on the symphony. "I'm just not interested in it."

Monica frowned, completely slipping from under Khan to sit at his side. He was terrible at technology, so that explanation didn't make sense to her.

The traces of Khan's experiment left the symphony, allowing him to divert his gaze. Monica's inquisitive look immediately attracted his attention, and the confusion and curiosity conveyed by her mana made him jump out of bed.

"Alright," Khan announced, retrieving his phone to activate holograms. A Thilku rune soon appeared between Monica and him, becoming bigger enough to highlight every line.

"This symbol has no singular meaning, right?" Khan explained, moving his hand over the hologram to add details. "Trace this line, and you get a function. Trace this one, and you get another. Trace a few of them, and you can activate a complicated effect."

"This much I know," Monica nodded, adjusting her position on the bed and waving her phone at Khan. "You wrote it for me."

"Yes," Khan uttered, "But the foundation is a bit deeper. The Thilku use tubes of various materials and shapes to get each line to do what they want. The mana doesn't change on its own."

"It's normal," Monica commented. "The machine dictates the purpose, not the fuel."

"Exactly," Khan exclaimed, "But I know how to give mana purpose. The Niqols taught me that."

Understanding dawned upon Monica. She knew Khan's skillset, and that explanation allowed her to apply it to the current situation. Khan had basically replaced technology with alien arts.

"Are you trying to do what you witnessed with the Tors?" Monica wondered.

"No, the Tors are too specific," Khan shook his head, pacing alongside the bed's edge. "A human brain can't keep track of such minute details. I mean, I can't, and it doesn't sound reasonable to aim at that."

"But?" Monica voiced, knowing that Khan had more to say.

"But these runes are a good middle ground," Khan continued, stopping to point at the holograms. "Theoretically, their applications are endless since I can make them do anything I want."

Monica lost herself in Khan's excited expression. He resembled a child who had just gotten a new toy. Even Khan didn't realize how happy he was studying alien arts, but Monica clearly saw that.

Monica didn't only watch. Hunches assaulted her mind, almost transforming into proper thoughts. That achievement was extraordinary, but Khan paid it no heed, and Monica couldn't help but feel in awe.

Yet, darker thoughts also joined that feeling. Worry and fear showed their presence in Monica's mind. Khan was straying further away from humankind, and nothing could stop that process.

Monica didn't want to either, but her worries came from her unreasonable side. She feared the possibility of losing Khan, and regret appeared when she realized what was going through her mind. There was no hiding that reaction from him.

As Monica had expected, Khan's face snapped toward her. He didn't say anything, but she still wore an apologetic expression. She didn't want emotions she had no control of to worry him.

"It's nothing," Monica stated before Khan could get the wrong idea. "You are getting less human by the day. I got worried you might leave me behind."

Khan realized what had happened. He glanced at the hologram and scratched his head, but no solution appeared. He understood Monica's worries but couldn't comprehend them. Khan simply saw no difference between humans and aliens.

"Don't worry," Monica reassured, hugging a pillow to squeeze it on her chest. "I worry about a lot of stuff for no reason. There is nothing you can do about it."

"I disagree," Khan said, climbing on the bed to reach Monica's face. "I can find a way to reassure you whenever you worry."

"Won't I become too human for you?" Monica wondered, unleashing her cute tone.

"I'm the only one who can handle that temper of yours," Khan chuckled, leaning forward to kiss Monica. She lost herself in the gesture, but the following slap on her butt made her gasp and retract her head.

"And that will never be too human for me," Khan continued, happy to have taken Monica by surprise.

"Stupid," Monica complained, but traces of a smile appeared on her face. "Return to your explanation already."

Khan snickered but complied, leaving the bed to return before the holograms. He recalled where his explanation had stopped, so he resumed from that point.

"I still don't have a use for them," Khan revealed, nodding at the holograms. "I'm not good enough to do much with them either, so I don't know."

"You could create some protection," Monica pointed out. "We both know you need that."

"That could work," Khan agreed. "I could write a rune on my abdomen or something at some point."

"Anything that stops you from getting hurt," Monica voiced.

"I get it," Khan gave up. "I'll think about that. I still need months of study and practice to get close to something like that."

"As if you won't spend months studying and practicing," Monica scoffed. "I know my noble Captain through and through."

"That you do," Khan confirmed, sighing to sit at the bed's edge. He moved the phone slightly away to adjust the holograms to his new position, and Monica quickly crawled behind him to hug his back.

"What is it?" Monica whispered in Khan's ear, her arms clinging to his torso.

"I'm just thinking," Khan revealed. "I know far more than the Thilku runes, but it's hard to use everything I learned."

"Why is that?" Monica wondered.

"Well," Khan said, lifting both hands to show them to Monica. "The Nele arts work through requests. I must be as gentle and respectful as the first time I kissed you to talk to the mana."

Synthetic mana flowed toward Khan's right palm, creating a soft gust of wind that blew in Monica's face. Her curls moved a bit, making her experience the kindness of those arts.

"Our first kiss was far from gentle," Monica pointed out, "Or respectful."

"That," Khan exclaimed, suddenly recalling what had happened on Milia 222. "I used a bad example, but you get my point."

"I do," Monica confirmed.

"Instead," Khan continued, releasing mana from his left hand, "The Niqols arts are about asserting control through emotions. They have a domineering stance toward the environment, and their spells rely on that."

The mana in Khan's left hand accumulated in his palm, creating a small dark sphere that spun slowly. Even Monica could see the high amount of energy contained in the glowing item, stating its stark difference from the previous demonstration.

"They have opposite theories," Khan added. "I've wanted to fuse them for some time already, but I don't know how."

The glowing sphere spun for a few more seconds before dispersing. Khan lost himself in his thoughts, and Monica pulled him on her abdomen, spreading her legs to make room for him.

"I'm not sure I can use the Niqols spells either," Khan admitted. "Getting started with the Nele arts was easier now that I think about it."

"How do the Niqols' spells work?" Monica asked.

"You influence your surroundings," Khan explained, "Altering the mana until it works as part of your spell. You basically gain more range."

"Isn't that the same with the Nele arts?" Monica wondered. "You just ask instead of taking."

"I guess that's the issue," Khan sighed. "The outcome is similar, but the theory is conflicting. Besides, influencing the environment to that level is hard."

"Don't you do that on a daily basis?" Monica laughed.

"What do you mean?" Khan asked, lifting his eyes to look at the smiling face above him.

"Everyone understands when you are angry," Monica revealed. "You make the temperature drop with a look."

"That only generates a subconscious reaction," Khan disregarded the statement. "Only a few people can understand what is happening to them."

"I think everyone understands that," Monica insisted. "Many do, even when you aren't trying to scare them."

"How can you be sure of that?" Khan asked.

"Because you are at your sexiest when you get all bossy," Monica giggled, slightly lowering her head toward Khan. "I could picture you leading the Solodrey family since the issue with Francis."

Khan knew that something had changed inside Monica after that event. He was also aware of the effects his firm stances spread through the environment. Khan could see the symphony in the end. He couldn't possibly miss that.

However, except when Khan did that on purpose, he had always connected his ability to affect the environment to his element. In his mind, his mana was so intense and violent that the symphony backed off in its presence.

'Maybe I should give the Niqols spells another try,' Khan considered. 'I might be good enough now.'

"Also," Monica added when she saw that thoughts had stolen Khan's attention. "You can simultaneously be the kindest and most domineering with me. Mana can't be more complicated than my temper."