

Chaos' Heir 581

Chapter 581 Tests

The break given by Ambassador Abores allowed Khan to relax and focus on his situation. He didn't only have Mister Cirvags' offer to consider. The conversation with Monica had also opened a new path that required tests.

The first issue was easy to clear once Khan took the time to consider it properly. Mister Cirvags' offer would split him from Ambassador Abores, solving the internal conflict caused by Neuria's events.

Moreover, the mission in Cegnore involved Khan's main goal. It could bring new leads on his search for the Nak. Even if Mister Cirvags was untrustworthy, Khan couldn't ignore that opportunity.

Accepting Mister Cirvags' offer pushed Khan's thoughts to the next problem. Cegnore was a battlefield that the Thilku struggled to dominate. He needed to get stronger to affect that environment.

That new problem was connected to the conversation with Monica, and Khan only knew one way to tackle it. As the weekend approached, he reserved one afternoon to spend that time in a training hall.

Due to the nature of the training session, Khan opted for one of the best halls in the Harbor. He even used the network to help with that choice, and entering it cleared most of his worries.

The training hall was vast, with chaos-resistant materials reinforcing its surfaces. The place lacked stalls, and its menus offered a broader set of fighting programs. Khan could also customize the metal puppets if needed, but that option was useless now.

'Did I really miss something?' Khan wondered, removing the upper part of his uniform and shoes to prepare for the training session.

The conversation with Monica broadened Khan's perspective, but that would be pointless if he couldn't translate it into improvements. Still, there was value in her words, making tests necessary.

'I might be too detached from the human's perspective,' Khan admitted, 'But that doesn't make me wrong.'

Khan decided to tackle the issue step by step, analyzing his skillset to check whether his alien knowledge had made him miss aspects of his growth. He ignored his martial arts for now, but his spells earned the entirety of his attention.

The spherical version of the Wave spell expanded from Khan's body as soon as he mustered his mana. The attack stretched uniformly in every direction, affecting the symphony in the process.

The reinforced floor endured the attack, and Khan didn't hesitate to stretch his right arm once it was over. The conical version of the Wave spell left his palm, sending its destructive influence on the symphony before dispersing.

Khan noted down every detail but couldn't find anything valuable. He had mastered that spell long ago, and the symphony had never reacted differently to its power.

The only noticeable difference was in Khan's mind. His spell required far more concentration to work properly during his first attempts. That wasn't necessary anymore, but Khan linked it to the mastery achieved over the years.

The chaos claws, chaos spear, and needles showed similar results. Khan could cast them without thinking too much about the necessary emotions and images. He had long since mastered those spells, so summoning them had almost become as easy as breathing.

'This is nothing special,' Khan thought, watching his needles disperse. 'I did the same with my martial arts, and the process isn't exclusive to me. That's just how training works.'

Testing those spells didn't convince Khan, but the training session was far from over. He had expected a similar result from his older techniques since the time spent with them could justify any improvement. Instead, his newer ones had a chance to show peculiarities.

Khan pondered about casting the cloud spell before rethinking that idea. That creature embodied the chaos element, and he had already studied its nature. He knew what his mana harbored.

The [Blood Shield] also belonged to the old set of spells. Khan watched the clotting of the blood vessels in his hand before retracting the technique. Summoning that protection had become second nature to him. He couldn't learn anything from it.

However, the other defensive technique didn't share that accumulated experience. Khan opened his mouth to release a clicking growl that sent violent flares of mana in every direction. The spell protected him from every angle, but dispersing that mana brought Khan back to the starting point.

'This one required some training,' Khan thought, studying his surroundings, 'But nothing much after that. It's the same as the other spells. It became easier to cast through training.'

Khan had only one test left, so he tinkered with the menus to make a circular target appear on a distant wall. He lifted his right hand, using his thumb and forefinger to create a U-shaped gesture, and his eyes closed to let him focus on his emotions.

The disgust experienced during the many political compromises invaded Khan, adding flexibility to the mana that left his fingers. Moreover, the scene of Amox using his spell filled his vision, giving him the perfect representation of what he wanted to cast.

A dense but flexible thread connected Khan's thumb to his forefinger, and he pinched it with his free hand to pull it toward his chest. His eyes opened at that point, and he aimed the attack at the distant target before releasing his mana.

The spell made no sound, but a short explosion unfolded on the target, covering it in the chaos element's iconic purple-red color. Khan didn't hit its exact center, but the released power was satisfactory. He only had to work on his aim.

Nevertheless, Khan didn't focus on his performance. His attention was on his execution since he wanted to find peculiarities or clues that might hint at his growth. It felt easy to cast the spell, but that couldn't convince Khan.

'Did I always have it easy?' Khan wondered. 'I spent some time mastering this spell, but was it easier than the previous?'

Khan scratched his head but couldn't find a straight answer. He recalled his initial struggles with his spells, but that was the truth with his new one too. It was hard to spot improvements when he used training sessions as his foundation.

'This is pointless,' Khan eventually sighed, sitting on the floor to review his issue. 'How is studying my spells going to help with alien arts?'

The conversation with Monica resounded in Khan's mind while he lost himself in his thoughts. Any project with the Thilku runes would require more training, while he was already good at the Nele and Niqols arts. Fusing them appeared impossible.

'Kind and domineering at the same time,' Khan cursed. 'This isn't sex. How am I supposed to do that with mana?'

No matter how much Khan thought about the issue, conclusions failed to arrive. That wouldn't be surprising to any expert. After all, fusing different alien arts wasn't a common practice. Yet, Khan couldn't give up so easily, especially since he had already succeeded in another field.

'I guess I'm not comparing them on the same field,' Khan realized. 'I can use Nele techniques but not Niqols spells. I can't fuse anything if I'm stuck at the basics.'

Khan was underestimating himself. Truth be told, his mastery over the Niqols arts was far superior. Most of his skillset relied on them. He had only failed to rely on their more advanced theories.

'Is it really easy for me to affect the environment?' Khan wondered before testing that theory. He had no shortage of bad thoughts and memories, so his mind instantly grew cold.

Khan's mana echoed his mindset, which affected the symphony and changed its shades. The temperature dropped as tension spread through the hall. It almost seemed that the air was ready to explode.

'Isn't this just my mana?' Khan considered. 'The chaos element wouldn't be so problematic otherwise.'

Khan tried not to be delusional. He knew how stubborn he could get, but trusting Monica's suggestion wasn't easy. Khan didn't question her judgment, but her senses weren't good enough to be a clue.

'Maybe I should try it out and see what happens,' Khan eventually concluded. 'I'm getting nowhere with this anyway.'

Khan's expertise had grown leagues beyond what it was on Nitis. He had reached the point when even the Thilku saw him as a shaman. Studying his memories added a new layer of understanding, but nothing he didn't already consider.

Still, Khan couldn't disregard Monica's words before doing everything in his power to test them. He quickly devised a simple training session and immediately put it into practice.

The Niqols' spells demanded control over the environment. The symphony had to gain a specific purpose and shape to echo the intended effects, which required inhuman ability in the manipulation field.

For the first attempt, Khan didn't jump into anything complicated. He closed his eyes and focused on the theory behind the cloud spell. The chaos element was hard to control, so he isolated its fundamental nature to have an easier time affecting the environment.

A clicking cry soon filled Khan's mind, and he kept it there to let his mana handle the rest. The chaos element initially sent the symphony running, but Khan didn't alter his presence and continued to convey those violent meanings.

Slowly, Khan's presence began to affect the synthetic mana. The changes were greater in his surroundings, but the distant areas also started to morph to echo his element's basic instincts.

Intense urges invaded Khan while he forced the clicking growl to cry louder. He usually never let it fill his mind for so long, and his body threatened to slip out of his control under that exposure. Yet, he kept going until his limits arrived.

When Khan felt about to lose it, he opened his mouth and released his mana to vent those violent emotions. The symphony was ready to receive it, and the synthetic mana transformed, imitating the chaos element's nature.

Suddenly, a purple-red color filled the entire hall, creating gales that ran in every direction. Khan sat at the center of that storm, screaming a clicking growl that deepened the effects of his mana.

The symphony calmed down only after it exhausted the traces of Khan's influence. Khan also relaxed at that point, but his eyes widened in surprise when he inspected his surroundings.

The storm didn't reach the ceiling or walls, but the floor was a different matter. Cracks had appeared on that smooth surface, lifting chunks of metal at times. Khan saw spikes and holes created by his mana's random and wild movement, and a curse didn't hesitate to resound in his mind.

Chapter 582 Applications

"How did this happen again?" Headmistress Holwen cursed, struggling to believe the scene stretching from her position.

"Training halls hate me, ma'am," Khan shook his head, standing beside the Headmistress while also inspecting the scene.

The training hall was mostly fine, but a good chunk of the floor needed to be replaced. The metal surface had gained many holes and spikes. It had bent in multiple spots, and cracks plagued the place. The Headmistress struggled to find a single area retaining its original smoothness.

"Fourth-level warriors would find it hard to cause this damage," Headmistress Holwen complained, glaring at Khan. "What were you even doing?"

"I was trying something new," Khan revealed. "I don't know whether to consider this a success."

"I consider it a pain," Headmistress Holwen snorted, raising her voice. "This is a state-of-the-art training hall! Do you know how expensive the reparations will be?"

"I have no idea, ma'am," Khan admitted, responding to the glare with a shameless smile. "Though I'm glad I won't have to pay for them."

"Do you think this is a joke, Captain?" Headmistress Holwen unleashed her scolding tone, which spread her cold pressure in her surroundings.

"I don't, ma'am," Khan replied. "However, I feel I'm not to blame. I did the appropriate research before choosing this training hall."

"How do you explain this, then?" Headmistress Holwen shouted, pointing at the broken patch of floor.

"The training hall wasn't advertised properly?" Khan guessed.

"You!" Headmistress Holwen scoffed. "Should I ban you from the training halls, Captain? Is that what you want?"

"But, ma'am," Khan voiced, "I took the necessary precautions this time. You ban me from the training halls, and I'm forced to train elsewhere."

Headmistress Holwen couldn't believe she was having that discussion again. She also hated the fact that Khan was right. He had chosen the best training hall in the Harbor, but the place had betrayed him.

The damage inflicted by Khan was actually surprising. The Headmistress could only blame the chaos element for that outcome, and even that was pushing it. Still, she knew an entire block would crumble if Khan pulled off something similar outside a training hall.

"Just," Headmistress Holwen sighed, retracting her glare, "Just be more careful. I can't spend the Harbor's yearly budget repairing training halls."

"This shouldn't happen again, ma'am," Khan promised. "Not too soon, at least."

The glare returned, but the Headmistress soon dropped it again and moved toward the entrance. Khan followed, remaining at her side to leave the building. He had already dressed up, so staying behind was pointless.

"I heard you accepted Mister Cirvags' offer," Headmistress Holwen changed the topic as the two headed for the building's exit.

"It was a good offer, ma'am," Khan remained vague but still tried to hint at something, "For many reasons."

"I can see the appeal," Headmistress Holwen exclaimed. "Maybe leaving Ambassador Abores' team is for the best."

"I had the same idea," Khan agreed.

The two fell silent, even if both had more to say. The Headmistress was privy to Cegnore's classified information and knew Khan. Meanwhile, Khan had already mentioned the topic to the Headmistress but wouldn't ask again since he was aware of her stance.

"Are you going to make a mess, Captain?" Headmistress Holwen eventually asked.

"I'll just do my job, ma'am," Khan reassured. "Whatever it might entail."

"Somehow, I doubt it," Headmistress Holwen scoffed.

"Then, stop me," Khan said, glancing at the Headmistress. "Stop me if you think I won't do a good job or for other reasons."

Headmistress Holwen also looked at Khan, and the two remained in that stalemate while continuing walking. They both understood the hidden meanings behind their statements, but tackling them wasn't an option. It was better not to mention those troublesome topics.

"You won't have clearance for the scientific teams' findings," Headmistress Holwen revealed, breaking the stalemate to look ahead. "The human ones, at least."

Khan's eyes tried to light up, but he hid that reaction by also looking ahead. He didn't miss Headmistress Holwen's silent advice and obviously planned to apply it once he landed on Cegnore.

"Headmistress, ma'am," Khan called since the mood felt right. "Can I trust Mister Cirvags?"

"Are you working for the Global Army, Captain?" Headmistress Holwen asked.

"Of course, ma'am," Khan confirmed.

"Then, you can trust him," Headmistress Holwen stated, uncaring of whether Khan had spoken the truth.

The conversation ended as soon as the two left the building, but neither moved at that point. The Headmistress had to handle Khan's mess, and he needed to call a cab to get to his next destination.

"You can use my car, Captain," The Headmistress announced, nodding toward the vehicle waiting by the sidewalk. "It will bring you to the second district."

"I'm not going to the second district, ma'am," Khan revealed. "I'm meeting Miss Bevet at the greenhouse."

"Are you planning to destroy that too?" Headmistress Holwen said, her words sounding like a warning.

"I won't do anything dangerous, ma'am," Khan promised. "Miss Bevet wouldn't trust me otherwise."

"The underground district is full of expensive equipment," Headmistress Holwen continued.

"I understand," Khan sighed, trying to appear defeated. "The plants won't notice me at all."

"The plants will be the last of your problems otherwise," Headmistress Holwen pressed on. "Move along now, Captain."

Khan retracted his shameless smile and performed a military salute before heading for the car. Conveying his destination to the driver started the set-off, and his face grew cold as he inspected the Headmistress' disappearing figure.

'The Thilku scientists,' Khan thought as his target grew clearer. He had yet to go through Mister Cirvags' complicated report, but a plan was slowly taking form, and clues were also piling on.

Khan didn't know why the Headmistress had decided to disclose that information. He wasn't even sure about the clearance level required to learn about the Nak. He had convinced himself about the existence of a conspiracy, but that opportunity was making him think.

Humankind had buried something about the First Impact. Khan was almost sure of that. However, he didn't know if the hindrances toward finding the truth came solely from a lack of clearance. His unique situation could have something to do with that.

Thinking about that topic had never brought answers, and Khan had no luck now either. He could only wait for the mission on Cegnore to start to find more clues and, hopefully, results.

'At least I know I can use the Niqols spells,' Khan moved to happier thoughts. 'Still, can I really cause more damage than fourth-level warriors?'

Khan had seen fourth-level warriors in action and knew how destructive his element was. Yet, Headmistress Holwen's surprise had been genuine. The test had probably involved something deeper than raw power.

Moreover, Khan had been thorough. He had even seen how the hall handled his other spells. His experiment had given birth to something stronger than his average techniques, and studying it might unlock the next level of his skills.

'The Niqols' spells aren't inherently stronger,' Khan thought. 'Arguably, all my spells use their theories. The test was simply different.'

Khan reviewed the steps of his experiment. In his opinion, he didn't do anything out of the ordinary. He had only filled his surroundings with the chaos element's iconic nature before triggering it.

Confusion arrived, and Khan's eyes began to wander. Still, when they fell on the seats' fabric, they focused again. The foundation of an idea had appeared, and he crouched down to explore it.

Khan knelt, half-sitting before the seats and running his hands over their fabric. That material wasn't mana-enhanced, but the synthetic energy in the area occasionally seeped into it.

'Maybe,' Khan thought before gazing at the car's ceiling and standing up. His hands ran over that surface, but his senses failed to find any flaw that could allow the passage of synthetic mana.

'Are my senses not enough for this?' Khan wondered, looking at the seats again. 'Theoretically, no surface is perfect.'

Khan couldn't help but think about the chaos claws. The technique could spread destruction even before entering a certain material. He had connected that effect to the chaos element, but maybe there was more to it.

'Maybe I didn't only affect my surroundings,' Khan considered. 'Maybe I also affected the mana seeping into the floor. That might explain the damage.'

Khan returned to his seat, scratching his head as he reviewed that possibility. The chaos element had innate destabilizing properties, and all the synthetic mana affected by Khan echoed those effects. In the right conditions, his mana seemed unstoppable.

'This thing is powerful,' Khan concluded, looking at his hands. 'Dangerous, but powerful.'

The issue remained. Khan didn't know how to fuse Nele and Niqols arts. Yet, he had unlocked a new path that showed insane potential. Exploring it was the only problem.

'I can't test this in the Harbor,' Khan thought. 'I need to be on a planet to see how far I can push it and whether I can control it. I guess I'll be busy on Cegnore.'

Khan spent the rest of the flight immersed in his thoughts, and his attention rarely wandered even after the landing. He had grown so used to diving into the underground district that he barely realized when he arrived before the appointed greenhouse.

Miss Bevet wasn't there. Khan had lied about that part, even if only partially. Miss Bevet had already cleared him for the greenhouse. Her presence wasn't necessary for Khan to get in.

Entering the greenhouse made Khan want to give Andrew a raise. The soldier had handled all the requirements for the [Blood Vortex] while Khan was away, leaving a suitable bucket and blood in the area. Khan could start immediately, and that was exactly what he did.

'I wonder if I can create a rune for this,' Khan thought while pouring blood into the bucket to prepare it for the alien technique. 'I'd need to adapt it to each environment, but that's doable.'

Now that the Thilku runes were an option, ideas flooded Khan's mind. The virtually endless applications could shorten many of his tasks or training session. That was the purpose of technology, and Khan had just gained access to it.

Molding the blood to serve Khan's purposes took a while, but the wait didn't weigh on his mind. He had gotten used to that practice, and fond memories always arrived while he lost himself in it.

Once the blood was ready, Khan undressed to paint the marks on his body. That was another practice he had long since committed to memory, so the process barely took a few minutes.

However, before Khan could lie on the floor and draw the last mark, he lost himself in one of the greenhouse's mirror-like surfaces. His brain couldn't stay silent in front of his reflection. He couldn't help but connect his bloody tattoos to the Thilku runes.

'What bucket,' Khan thought, tracing the marks' edges while his eyes remained on his reflection. 'I might turn the entire technique into a rune.'

Chapter 583 Pictures

Once the [Blood Vortex] was done, Khan spent a few hours meditating to absorb the mana accumulated under his skin and start healing. He cleaned himself up afterward, but only time would remove the lingering marks.

Luckily for Khan, the underground district was an isolated space that offered a lot of privacy. He had already tested that he didn't need capes or hoods to hide his appearance while leaving the area, and that night was no different.

A car dropped Khan before his building, and he hurriedly got inside. Various thoughts still filled his mind, but the opening of the elevator quieted them down to remind him about one particular issue.

A worried face appeared in Khan's view as soon as he left the elevator. Monica was on the other side of the room, peeking past the entrance, and her eyes darted among his visible marks.

"You know I can't hold back before Cegnore," Khan promptly announced to avoid a fight.

"Just shut up," Monica snorted, hurrying inside the room to take Khan's hand. "Come with me."

Khan could reject Monica, but her bossy stance was always fun to explore, and she intrigued him now too. The two crossed most of the flat until Monica led Khan into a bathroom that seemed ready for him.

The bathtub had warm water, and fresh underwear rested on the furniture around it. Monica had also prepared clean clothes and a medical kit with a series of ointments.

Monica didn't hesitate to reach for Khan's uniform, carefully unbuttoning it to remove those clothes. Khan could only go along with that practice, which eventually left him naked.

"In the bathtub," Monica ordered, pointing at the water and doing her best not to look at the various marks left behind by the alien technique.

Khan smiled and nodded, entering the cozy bathtub and sitting inside it. The water was perfect, and his situation was about to improve.

Monica placed a small container beside the bathtub before also undressing. Her moves had no grace, but Khan remained captivated by them anyway. That wasn't his first time witnessing a similar scene, but he seemed unable to get enough of Monica.

"Don't give me that look," Monica scolded, kneeling inside the bathtub while seizing the container. "I'm not in the mood."

"You are always in the mood," Khan teased.

Monica glared at Khan while opening the container. She threw the lid away, and a pungent smell invaded the bathroom. Khan couldn't help but focus on the yellowish ointment inside the box, but Monica quickly reclaimed his attention.

"Arm," Monica ordered, showing her hand.

"You were ready for this," Khan pointed out, stretching his left arm.

"I know what goes through your mind," Monica responded, dipping her fingers into the container to retrieve a bit of ointment. "I bought this as soon as you left."

"You shouldn't have," Khan said, watching Monica place the ointment over his red marks.

"You get a say on what I buy only after marrying me," Monica commented, and Khan couldn't help but smile at the concentration she showed when tending to his injuries.

Khan let Monica take care of him without assaulting her with jokes. She was thorough, emptying the entire container on his injuries before helping him out of the bathtub.

"The ointment will take a few minutes to dry up," Monica explained as she bound her wet hair with a towel. "Don't dress up before that."

After the order, Monica wanted to leave the bathroom, but Khan clung an arm on her waist to pull her onto his torso. Monica was ready to shoot another glare, but a kiss landed on her cheek before she could turn.

"Khan," Monica complained. "The ointment."

"You were right," Khan whispered, kissing Monica's cheek again. "I guess I can be pretty blind at times."

"Was I?" Monica gasped before wearing a pout as soon as she saw Khan's shameless smile. "Of course I was! You'd be lost, hopeless, and sad without me."

"All true," Khan chuckled, approaching Monica's ear. "Does the doctor allow me to dry her hair?"

Monica tried her best to preserve her pout, but her cute voice betrayed her. "Only because I want to keep an eye on you."

Khan couldn't help but laugh again, and a long intimate moment unfolded. The two dried themselves up, often exchanging flirtatious jokes before wearing clean clothes and heading for their bedroom.

Monica threw herself on the bed to retrieve her phone and activate holograms. Khan's notes filled her view, but she didn't dive into her study yet.

As for Khan, he connected his phone to the room to pull up Mister Cirvags' report. The wall gave him more room to divide and sort out the many tabs, and he needed that arrangement to hope to understand as much as possible.

"Did you make the new schedule for Francis?" Monica wondered, turning belly up to look at Khan.

"I reviewed something Andrew wrote," Khan replied, tinkering with the wall. "It's a pity this stuff is classified. A secretary would have helped."

"I just don't want the Alstair family creating problems for you," Monica sighed.

"I signed him for a few courses here," Khan revealed. "Also, as long as his family thinks he defused the bomb, I'm fine."

"They should have paid you for being his caretaker," Monica snorted.

"They did," Khan chuckled. "You are mine, aren't you?"

"Scoundrel," Monica giggled. "Hey, we must celebrate our anniversary once we are done working."

"Is it one year already?" Khan frowned, peeking past his shoulder to look at Monica.

"Dummy," Monica scolded. "Our first anniversary is next month. Don't forget something so close to your birthday."

"Now that I think about it," Khan uttered, "I do remember a certain present."

A pillow flew toward Khan and hit his head. The event only made him laugh, and his smile broadened when he saw Monica with her arms crossed and wearing an angry face.

Khan snickered, crawling over the bed to reach Monica. She played hard to get, but he had the right words to melt her anger.

"As far as I'm concerned," Khan whispered to Monica's ear, "We have already hit one year. I didn't forget the nights when you were too shy to kiss me."

Khan expected a loud reply, but Monica remained silent and pushed him down on the mattress. She couldn't lie on his chest due to the injuries, so she claimed one of his arms and wrapped it around her torso before hitting a pillow.

"What is it?" Khan asked, gladly joining that spooning.

"My family will turn our anniversary into a public event," Monica explained, "But they got the wrong date."

"They don't know how quickly you jumped on me," Khan teased.

Monica suddenly turned to face Khan, but no scolding arrived. Instead, her needy side showed its presence. "I want to celebrate the right date, just the two of us."

"Two celebrations?" Khan wondered. "You have become greedy."

"So what?" Monica scoffed. "You let me be as greedy as I want, so deal with it."

"How could I refuse such kind words?" Khan chuckled. "Sure. Let's find the time once we stop working."

Monica's face lit up, and she couldn't stop herself from seizing Khan's face. She kissed him, but her hands touched his injuries, causing discomfort.

Khan grunted, and Monica quickly let him go. She also tried to wear an apologetic expression, but her happiness got in the way.

"Sorry," Monica giggled. "I just love you so much."

Khan didn't care about that slight pain, and that statement made him disregard it completely. He took Monica into his arms, and the two got into their favorite sleeping position.

Needless to say, the couple didn't sleep. After a few flirtatious exchanges, Monica retrieved her phone, and Khan tinkered with the wall behind him to create holograms at his side. They had much to study, and time wasn't on their side.

'There isn't much about the natives,' Khan thought after spending some time on the report. 'The same goes for the infected Thilku.'

The report had information about a few imprisoned intelligent beings but nothing directly connected to the Thilku or Cegnore's natives. Khan could accept the nightmares as one of the reasons behind the switching sides, but going crazy didn't explain everything. It actually left many gaps in the intel.

'Maybe the battlefield only has Tainted animals,' Khan considered. He had yet to reach that part of the report, but everything pointed in that direction.

The guess led to troublesome thoughts. Khan didn't want to deal with mere beasts. Cegnore had beings like him, people who mutated through the Nak's mana. They probably had lived with the Tainted state far longer than him, meaning they could have more answers.

However, it seemed that the human and Thilku armies mostly dealt with Tainted animals. The intelligent creatures were rarer and lived in unexplored areas. Khan still didn't know if the battlefield had trenches, but those beings would probably reside past them in that case.

'I might need to get creative,' Khan thought before recalling another problem.

"Hey," Khan called, stretching his arm to his right to touch Monica's back.

"Did you find something interesting?" Monica wondered, lifting her head to check Khan's holograms. She couldn't see anything specific among those complicated sentences, so her attention fell on Khan.

"You trust me, right?" Khan asked, looking into Monica's eyes.

"What are you saying now?" Monica snickered.

"You know I can handle myself, right?" Khan pressed on. "Especially on a battlefield."

"What?" Monica gasped, her expression growing sterner since she could guess what Khan was thinking. "What are you planning?"

"Nothing yet," Khan shook his head. "I just don't want you to worry, no matter what the Global Army says."

Monica fell silent for a few seconds to study Khan's face. She knew what that expression meant. Khan was developing plans that went beyond his orders, which could create problems on an alien planet and territory.

"I always worry," Monica sighed, lowering her head. "There is nothing you can do about that."

"But do I have your trust?" Khan asked, reaching for Monica's chin to lift her face.

"Always," Monica nodded. "Don't forget you are the man I love. I know you are the best."

"Keep that in mind while I'm away," Khan stated.

"I'm getting worried already," Monica cursed. "I bet you won't have any connection to the network there either."

"Most likely," Khan nodded before thinking about something. "Are you going to give me a parting gift again? I memorized every detail of the album you left me before Neuria."

"As you should," Monica snorted, but looking at her phone gave her an idea, which she didn't hesitate to whisper. "Why don't you take the pictures this time?"

Chapter 584 Cegnore

The couple's break only lasted for an additional week before duties arrived. Monica could remain in the Harbor since the Solodrey family had a lot to prepare, but Khan was alone, so he had to leave as soon as Mister Cirvags gave the okay.

Another public and sad goodbye unfolded before a teleport. That was the second time Khan and Monica had to split, but the experience wasn't any easier to face. Actually, the two spent a bit longer in each other's arms since Madam Solodrey had allowed those intimate interactions.

"Try to come back before your birthday," Monica almost begged, squeezing Khan's neck.

"You'll probably still be on Neuria by then," Khan chuckled, his hands sealed on Monica's back.

"I don't care," Monica cried, doing her best to keep her voice down. "Come back anyway."

The soldiers in the teleport area tried not to look in the couple's direction, but glances happened. Moreover, a few whispers reached their ears. Khan was sure gossip would spread, but it was hard to care about it when Monica was in his arms.

"I'll do my best," Khan promised. "You also do a good job out there, and we'll get back together in no time."

"I will," Monica nodded, holding back any possible tear for fear of ruining Khan's uniform. "Kiss me and leave. I won't let go otherwise."

Khan didn't dare to disobey. His face dived into the curls until he found familiar lips. The two kissed, and Monica slowly relaxed her grip on Khan's neck to move her hands on his cheeks.

Monica was showing far more initiative than she had ever done in public, and the scene shocked the curious soldiers. They almost couldn't believe Monica was a simple woman in love once she dropped her political persona.

Once the long kiss ended, Monica began to retract her hands, but Khan grabbed them to reach for her lips again. That was his way of saying goodbye, and Monica welcomed him.

Nevertheless, the two separated after the second kiss, and Khan limited himself to one last caress before jumping on the oval platform. Synthetic mana immediately accumulated around him, but he stared into Monica's worried eyes until the scenery changed.

Khan found himself in a new teleport area, but the differences quickly became noticeable. The soldiers and scientists in the room wore sterner faces. Their presence was also firmer and calmer. Those workers had seen actual battle, and it showed.

The room was also simpler and slightly smaller. Khan saw fewer consoles and dimmer lights, but the matter wasn't surprising. He knew what Cegnore's route involved, and some eagerness inevitably arrived.

"Captain Khan!" One of the soldiers called, stepping before the oval platform to perform a military salute. "Your ship and documents are ready."

"Lead the way," Khan ordered, jumping off the platform.

"Yes, sir!" The soldier stated, turning to head for the exit. Khan followed her, discovering more of the place and confirming the information in Mister Cirvags' report.

Cegnore was part of the systems ruled by Lord Exr but was deeper into the Empire's territory compared to Neuria. Humans couldn't bring space stations there, so the trip to the planet required a few mandatory stops.

The current space station was close to the Thilku territory, but its location had nothing to do with its purpose. That place simply had a specific clearance that created a direct connection with the Empire.

The soldier led Khan into a small hangar but didn't stop there. She quickly dived into another corridor featuring multiple consoles and doors that hindered her passage. Her phone opened those barriers, eventually bringing the two into another teleport area.

More differences became visible. The new teleport area had even sterner vibes that didn't hesitate to converge on Khan. A few consoles also featured small Thilku runes Khan couldn't read from his position, but the arrival of a new soldier cut his inspection short.

"Sir, Captain, sir," A soldier called, leaving his console to bring a rectangular device to Khan. "I need your phone, sir."

Khan was aware of those procedures, so he drew his phone and showed it to the soldier. The latter placed his device above the screen and activated a few menus to pass the documents needed for the rest of the trip.

"We are done here, ma'am," The soldier eventually announced, retracting his device and looking at his companion.

"Captain," The female soldier exclaimed, pointing at the phone, "You must show this to access the other locations. Even the human soldiers won't let you advance otherwise."

"I'm well aware," Khan replied, checking the new label on his phone. Opening it revealed a Thilku rune shining with blue shades. That symbol had no meaning but worked as a code that granted clearance.

"This way, sir," The female soldier interrupted the inspection, pointing at the new oval platform.

Khan stored his phone and jumped on the platform, but the accumulation of synthetic mana didn't begin right away. The soldiers got busy, shouting orders and codes before the okay arrived and cleared Khan for the teleport.

The scenery soon changed again. The same stern vibe welcomed Khan, but heavy tension joined it, creating a new environment in his eyes. A corridor also stretched from that teleport area, and Khan saw red shades near its bottom.

"I need to check your identification, sir," A soldier in the room announced, leaving his console to reach the platform and show a screen to Khan.

Khan drew his phone and pointed the new rune at the screen. The device checked his clearance, and the soldier reviewed the results before nodding at the corridor. "This way, sir."

Khan followed the soldier across the corridor before finding himself in a new environment. As soon as the red illumination arrived, the place's surfaces gained runes and grew bigger. Khan could see a spacious area stretching before him, but a transparent door guarded by a Thilku stood in the way.

"Sir, you must show your authorization there," The soldier with Khan exclaimed, pointing at a rune on the door's left side.

Khan approached the rune, and the soldier moved to the symbol on the opposite side of the door to perform a similar gesture. The entrance required two authorizations, and Khan followed suit to clear the passage.

The transparent door opened after a few seconds, and the soldier crossed it to lead Khan deeper into the area. Khan also stepped forward but didn't refrain from exchanging a look with the Thilku guarding that passage.

"[Blue hair]," The Thilku grunted, crossing his huge arms. "[Lord Exr welcomes you]."

"[I'm honored]," Khan promptly said, stopping to perform a traditional Thilku bow. The guard didn't reply with the same gesture but nodded in approval.

Khan left afterward, and his attention returned to the area. He had reached a big hangar filled with various Thilku vehicles. Most were circular ships of different sizes, with Thilku soldiers roaming among them, but Khan also spotted a few human rides in the distance.

"This way, sir," The soldier with Khan called. "We must go through a few more stops."

Khan continued to follow the soldier while his attention remained on the hangar. That was a Thilku space station that the Empire used for political reasons. Having a human team would have been impossible otherwise. Still, Khan couldn't see anything special or unique compared to his stay in Neuria.

'Our technology has a lot in common,' Khan thought before the arrival at another mandatory stop forced him to show his phone. The soldier with him did the same, and the two gained a Thilku escort.

The Thilku led the two toward one of the human ships before another round of authorizations happened with the team stationed there. A minute had to pass before Khan gained access to the vehicle, and explanations followed.

"I'm sure you already know, sir," The human soldier announced while the Thilku team got the ship ready, "But you won't have access to manual controls. The ship is programmed to follow the route set by the Thilku."

"I know," Khan smiled. "We must play by our allies' rules."

"Captain, sir," The soldier continued, lowering his head. "We didn't get the chance to paint the ship."

"Oh," Khan exclaimed before chuckling. "I'll survive one flight in grey."

The soldier didn't speak again, and the Thilku eventually left the ship, opening a path for Khan. He took his place behind the control desk, and his tasks ended.

The control desk activated as soon as Khan sat down. The auto-pilot ran various check-up programs before sending fuel to the engines. It didn't take long before the ship left the floor and slowly headed for the mana barrier separating it from open space.

Khan could only watch as the ship handled everything. He couldn't even activate holograms to keep track of the trip. The canopy showed open space, but Khan couldn't recognize much without the help of scanners.

The beauty of the universe captivated Khan's attention for a while, but the lack of planets in sight eventually distracted him and made him pull out his phone. He had no connection to the network, but his interest was in a specific folder, and opening it put him before a vast album about Monica.

'My birthday is in three weeks,' Khan thought. 'I'll never get back before that.'

A sigh escaped Khan's mouth while his eyes continued to browse the album. Part of him wanted to make Monica his priority. He loved her too much to risk hurting her. Yet, his other, darker side pushed him into places where they couldn't be together.

'When will this end?' Khan cursed. 'How will this end?'

Doubts Khan couldn't solve invaded his mind, but the pictures on his phone added peace. His life had never been better, but there he was, flying into a battlefield to find answers that might not exist.

Luckily for Khan, a brownish planet soon became visible from the canopy, distracting him from his internal conflict. The ship also accelerated, making him store his phone to prepare for the imminent landing.

Mister Cirvags' report contained information about Cegnore, and Khan confirmed part of it while diving through the planet's atmosphere.

Barren lands expanded in every direction. Mountains occasionally appeared in the distance but didn't disturb that mostly plain scenery. Rare green spots existed, but the place remained lifeless.

That only applied to the surface. Cegnore was similar to Onia, even if for different reasons. Plants thrived below due to the vast array of underground rivers. Caves also stretched in every direction, creating a hidden environment that the humans had barely started mapping.

Of course, exploring Cegnore wasn't the Global Army's prerogative. That planet belonged to the Empire, so learning about it was sort of forbidden. The restrictions were laxer due to the ongoing war, but that still didn't give the humans any authority.

Khan tried to memorize anything that fell into his view, but the quick descent eventually interrupted his inspection. The ship dived toward a big, square structure standing in the middle of a brown plain, and Khan only spotted a trench in the distance before focusing on the landing.

A circular door on the structure's roof opened to let the ship through. Khan ended up in a human hangar with several vehicles and soldiers. A team was already waiting for him, and he greeted it once the auto-pilot allowed him to leave.

"Captain Khan!" A relatively young male soldier, a third-level warrior, left the team standing in line to welcome Khan at the bottom of the ship's ramp. "It's an honor to have you here."

The soldier performed a military salute, but Khan knew his identity from Mister Cirvags' report. That sharp dark face, almost completely covered in long red dreadlocks, belonged to a fellow Captain.

"Captain Chaunac, right?" Khan asked, stretching his hand forward. "You don't need to be so formal when we share the same rank."

"You are too kind," Captain Chaunac exclaimed, shaking Khan's hand. "Welcome to Cegnore, and please, call me Caspar."

"Will do," Khan promised. "I'll be in your care."

"We'll all be in yours," Caspar smiled, nodding at the team behind him to make it take care of the ship. "We have prepared a simple refreshment for your arrival. Our resources on Cegnore are scarce, but we did our best."

"I'd like to take a stroll outside first," Khan revealed. "If it's not a problem."

"Oh," Caspar uttered, glancing at Khan's hair before nodding. "Of course. I'll lead the way."

Caspar accompanied Khan to a jeep with a sealed canopy before jumping into the driver's seat. Khan was with him and noticed how the vehicle confirmed the complete isolation from the outside world before turning on.

"It's protocol," Caspar explained, driving the jeep through the hangar. "All the vehicles here must be shielded from the outside atmosphere."

"Is the illness so contagious?" Khan questioned.

"It is," Caspar sighed, "And dangerous even. Mana usually makes us immune to these infections, but Cegnore is different."

Khan knew what Caspar meant. It was almost impossible to mutate after gaining control of mana, but Cegnore's illness overruled that truth. The first wave of Thilku wouldn't have switched sides otherwise.

"We have timers for our pills," Caspar continued, showing the watch on his right wrist. "They are mandatory even if our tasks don't involve stepping outside."

"You can't risk an outbreak here," Khan commented. "The Global Army would lose this structure."

"Indeed," Caspar agreed. The jeep had entered a large corridor meant for vehicles by then, but another spacious area appeared at its end. Soldiers filled it and protected the big gate standing on the opposite side.

"With me, Captain," Caspar ordered, leaving the jeep to approach the left side of the area. A transparent office stood there, and Caspar touched one of the windows to summon an attendant wearing the Global Army's colors.

"I need a boost," Caspar explained, keeping his fingers on the window. "I'm going outside."

Khan was at Caspar's side and studied the scene. The attendant stuffed a small box into a drawer before pushing it to the other side of the window. Caspar retrieved it and lifted its lid, revealing a tiny blue pill.

"Thank you," Caspar said, gulping down the pill and putting the box back into the drawer.

"Does the sir also need a boost?" The attendant asked, looking at Khan.

"Are you colorblind, soldier?!" Caspar suddenly shouted, turning every eye in the room on him.

The sudden shout shocked the attendant, but more surprise arrived when he took a proper look at Khan. His blue hair became impossible to miss, revealing his identity and answering the previous question.

"I'm sorry, Captain Khan, sir!" The attendant cried from the other side of the window while performing a military salute. "I didn't recognize you."

Khan didn't care about that matter. He actually ignored it to focus on Caspar's mana. The pill had altered its flow, making it calmer and denser. That change didn't affect its power or flexibility but increased its resilience toward external influences.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Caspar said since Khan had remained silent. "I didn't have the time to announce your arrival to the entire structure."

"It's fine," Khan shook his head, snapping back to reality. "So, can we go now?"

"Of course," Caspar declared, pointing at the huge gate. "We only have to go through there."

Caspar took out his phone and hurried ahead to show his clearance to the team defending the gate. A path opened when Khan got there, allowing the two Captains to use a relatively small door that brought them to the other side of the passage.

"If my memory serves me right," Caspar announced, waiting for Khan to cross the door to seal it, "You met my cousin many months ago."

"Miss Nadia Chaunac, am I right?" Khan recalled. "She honored my promotion to Captain with her presence."

Caspar nodded happily, but Khan only paid attention to his surroundings. The door had led him inside an isolated chamber illuminated by white lights. The place didn't have menus, but a passage on the other side eventually opened.

Khan's eyes lit up at the arrival of natural mana. He breathed the new air in, rejoicing at the stark difference from his previous location. His senses couldn't help but cheer, but something else joined that happiness.

"We are here," Caspar chuckled, leaving the chamber to step on the barren brown terrain. "No sign of life for at least ten kilometers in every direction. If I may, Captain, I don't think this is the right place for someone of your caliber."

Khan also stepped outside, and a hand instinctively went on his nape. His mana core had reacted to the new atmosphere. It had become the source of an odd sensation he had already experienced on Milia 222.

"Trust me, Captain," Khan declared. "I'm in the right place."

Chapter 585 Briefing

The brown color reached into the horizon and stretched almost endlessly. Soft winds picked up debris from the frail terrain, lifting thin clouds that couldn't do anything against Cegnore's red star.

The place was lifeless and slightly cold. It would even look empty to an ordinary human's eyes, but Khan was different. The symphony spoke to him through colors only he could see. The area lacked brighter shades, but they existed far in the distance.

"Is the night close?" Khan wondered, his gaze locked on the horizon. "I have yet to connect my phone."

"The night is six hours away," Caspar responded. "It will be darkness for fourteen hours after that."

Khan was already aware of that but felt like getting a second opinion. He didn't know how much he could trust Mister Cirvags' report, but the data about Cegnore seemed to be on point.

The days on Cegnore lasted for thirty-six hours and had far more light than darkness. Khan liked the additional time, but the odd sensation spreading from his mana core made him wish the night was already there.

"How is the situation?" Khan questioned. "Do you expect attacks?"

"Why don't we talk about this inside?" Caspar laughed. "The refreshment is there. I can brief you in front of a drink."

Khan wanted to look at the empty horizon a little longer, but a new sensation hit his senses, turning his gaze to Caspar. Some fear and anxiety had appeared inside the Captain, even if his expression showed neither.

"Is it that spooky out here?" Khan asked.

"I hope you don't blame me, Captain," Caspar smiled, showing slight surprise at Khan's perception. "The air itself is an enemy here."

That almost absence of surprise told Khan how far the rumors about him had spread, but he quickly put the matter in the back of his mind. He gazed at the horizon again, yearning to dive deeper into it, but his reasonable sides had the best of him.

"Let's go inside," Khan ordered, faking a smile. "I'm hungry."

"We'd better fix that!" Caspar exclaimed. "I also have to introduce you to the crew. Many aren't privy to your arrival."

The two returned inside the chamber, which released a dense gas as soon as its exit closed. The decontamination lasted a few minutes, and the passage leading back inside opened afterward.

Khan's arrival didn't go unnoticed. He had barely spent a few minutes in the structure, but his hair was too eye-catching. Moreover, rumors spread quickly in such an isolated environment, bringing more people before the huge gate.

"What is this mess?!" Caspar snapped at the curious crowd. "Clear the area, and make the cafeteria ready!"

The shout startled the soldiers, who hurried back to their posts. Still, most of them shot one last glance at Khan before focusing on their duties.

Khan felt helpless about how used he had become to fame, so he focused on noting details. Between that gathering and Mister Cirvags' report, he estimated that the building had little more than a hundred soldiers. That force wasn't nearly enough for a war, and its average level was lackluster.

It took to give Khan a general idea of the troops' power. He couldn't see a single fourth-level warrior, with the majority being in the second level. First and third existed, but in lower numbers.

'What does Cirvags expect me to do with this?' Khan cursed.

Truth be told, Mister Cirvags had never told Khan to win that war. His orders had actually been quite vague, and his report didn't help. Khan had chosen to come for personal reasons, but his role didn't involve anything special.

"Captain, let's go back to the car," Caspar suggested, bringing Khan back to reality. The two got into their jeep, and Caspar drove it into the previous passage.

"I'm sorry for the mess," Caspar sighed, his hands sealed on the steering wheel. "We rarely have visitors here, especially some with your profile."

"It's odd," Khan commented. "I thought people would kill for the opportunity to serve here."

"It's hard to get into this field," Caspar explained. "The pay is good for ordinary soldiers, but any Lieutenant or higher needs clearance from the Global Army and the appropriate qualifications."

"Did you study to become an Ambassador?" Khan probed.

"Oh, no," Caspar snickered. "My family got me this job since it would look good on my profile. I'm sure you understand."

"You make it sound less serious than it is," Khan pointed out. "This is the Empire's territory in the end."

"True," Caspar nodded, "But we don't interact much with the Thilku. I haven't seen one in weeks."

'This complicates things,' Khan thought. Mister Cirvags' report had hinted at something similar, but he didn't believe it was so bad.

"We must get out," Caspar announced while the jeep was still in the middle of the passage.

The two got out and approached a door on one of the walls, ending in another corridor. The passage was short and quickly opened into a vast cafeteria that could hold up to fifty people. Most tables had room for five or more, but the one on the other side of the room only had two chairs.

The place already had soldiers, who stood up as soon as Khan and Caspar became visible. Military salutes unfolded, and people still arriving from other passages imitated that behavior even if they didn't understand what was happening.

Caspar didn't bother with the salutes and strode forward. Meanwhile, Khan performed a few nods before giving up on greeting all the soldiers. The two Captains eventually reached the last table, and Khan approached one of the chairs while Caspar took care of the introduction.

"We are in the presence of Captain Khan!" Caspar shouted, his deep voice spreading through the cafeteria. "He'll be the highest-ranking officer here from now on."

Khan didn't sign up for that, but it was too late to take back Caspar's words. The soldiers also agreed with a joint "welcome, sir", so Khan could only give up on the matter.

"I thought we shared the same rank," Khan whispered, waving his hand at the soldiers to make them relax.

"We both know we don't," Caspar muttered, nodding at the soldiers. The latter still didn't move, but Khan gave them general permission to sit by occupying his seat.

"You don't have to worry, Captain," Caspar promptly continued while also sitting down. "I'll handle the paperwork and other arrangements. You can use this building and these troops as you wish."

Waiters entered the cafeteria while the rest of the soldiers took their seats. The former prioritized the Captain's table, delivering simple food and booze. That welcome was nothing special, but Khan barely looked at it.

"That's very kind of you," Khan exclaimed once the waiters moved to other tables. "However, I'd still like to be updated on the situation."

"All my intel is yours, Captain," Caspar responded. "You just have to ask."

"Alright," Khan stated, seizing a bottle. "I know the scientists are in charge."

"That's right," Caspar confirmed, smiling when Khan poured booze into his cup. "The white coats run this place. We are basically protection."

"Anything you can tell me about them?" Khan wondered.

"They live in a separate section of this building," Caspar explained. "We meet a few of them only when they have to hand us missions."

"Missions?" Khan questioned.

"It's random stuff," Caspar casually replied. "Sometimes, they involve retrieving a patch of soil from a quadrant. Other times they request for Tainted animals."

"Do they come here often?" Khan asked. "I only know they attack at night."

"It's more complicated than that," Caspar sighed, taking out his phone to activate a series of holograms.

A simple map appeared at the table's center, and Khan recognized his current building on it. He also saw the trench spotted during the landing, while the other marks were strangers to him.

"We are here," Caspar said, highlighting the marks Khan recognized. "You can see how we are behind the Thilku's trenches."

Khan nodded while his attention remained on the map. Four more symbols were on the upper-right side of the holograms, marking the Thilku's buildings and trenches. Khan believed the aliens had far more manpower on the planet, but that information was probably classified.

"The attacks do arrive only at night," Caspar continued, "But they get to the Thilku first. We clean up anything that goes astray or slips through the Thilku's defenses."

'We have only leftovers,' Khan thought, holding back a snort. The humans didn't only lack a spot on the frontline. They weren't even part of that war.

"So, our interactions with the Thilku?" Khan wondered.

"Almost non-existent," Caspar responded. "We can't interact with their trenches, and our movements are limited. We only see Thilku when they chase Tainted animals into our quadrant."

"I see," Khan uttered, leaving his thoughts for later. "What about the Thilku who switched sides? That topic wasn't clear in my report."

"I don't know about the Thilku," Caspar sighed, "But I've been here for one year. I've seen things, scary things."

"Explain," Khan ordered, curious.

"We've had a couple of casualties," Caspar stated, lowering his head. "Nasty stuff. The pills can't fight the infection when those creatures have their teeth stabbed into you."

"Wait," Khan's eyes lit up. "Did mutations happen after suffering injuries from Tainted animals?"

"Captain," Caspar gulped, slowly lifting his head. "I don't want to ruin your appetite."

Caspar didn't get the chance to close his mouth since looking at the table showed him the might of Khan's stomach. The attendants had only brought two sets of four plates, but Khan was already done with three.

"We can eat first if you want," Khan said, finishing munching the big bite in his mouth.

"No," Caspar cleared his throat, pushing away his amazement. "It's fine. Yes, mutations can happen if the injury is deep enough or the contact lasts too long."

"You don't know about the Thilku," Khan announced, "But you know about the humans."

"Indeed," Caspar nodded. "Though, not much. Of the two casualties, we put one down on the spot, while the other died before we could deliver it to the white coats."

"You must have seen something, Captain," Khan declared. "You wouldn't have brought up the topic otherwise."

"The second casualty," Caspar sighed, appearing strangely rattled. "She-. It started talking about a voice in its head, a calling of some sort."

Khan had to work overtime to keep his face in check, but his mana didn't bother to ask for his opinion. Excitement and tension fell on the table, stretching into the room. That silent reaction was so palpable that Caspar inspected his surroundings in confusion.

'Monica was right, alright,' Khan cursed before changing the topic. "I seem to understand that you've never faced intelligent creatures here."

"What we know about them comes from the Thilku," Caspar revealed, focusing on Khan. "Those specimens are rare even in their trenches, so we never get to see them."

Caspar was talking from experience, so Khan could guess that outbreaks had happened in the past. The Global Army had probably gotten more than second-hand information, but not in the last year.

'Complicated indeed,' Khan thought, falling silent and pretending to focus on the little food still on the table.

Being at the Thilku's mercy was mandatory due to Cegnore's location. They dictated the rules and limits since that was Empire's territory.

However, the Global Army only had an almost uneventful trench. Khan wanted to see the Tainted animals, but they weren't his end goal. He eventually had to get to the intelligent beings, but access to Thilku's battlefield was necessary for that.

'I can't fly past the trenches on my own,' Khan considered. 'Not now. I'd be breaking a dozen interspecies regulations.'

The issue wasn't impending. Khan had just gotten to Cegnore, but his thoughts didn't stop shouting. Valuable options appeared in his mind even if he didn't search for them, and a few were truly good.

'Maybe they can feel me too,' Khan wondered. 'Spending time outside might attract them to the human trench. I also have a good excuse for that.'

The outside world had nothing valuable. Khan could let loose without worrying about causing damage. He was finally on a planet, so he could explore more of the Niqols' spells.

'If that doesn't work,' Khan thought, pointing his eyes at the map, 'I can always call them. I wonder if I'm good enough to reach the Thilku's trenches.'

Caspar noticed the eagerness in Khan's eyes but had no idea what it involved. He couldn't possibly imagine Khan was making plans that could endanger the entire human building.

Chapter 586 Trench

The food on every table vanished in the first half an hour of the refreshment. Yet, everyone used that chance to drink longer since the night was still far away.

Eventually, soldiers started to leave, and that trend continued until only Khan and Caspar remained in the cafeteria. The two mostly exchanged polite lines that Khan had mastered during his political dinners, but relevant information occasionally flew.

Once the Captains felt that the time was right, they left the cafeteria and dealt with the issues that the hours before the night allowed them to solve. Khan gained the highest clearance level available, and Caspar also accompanied him to the biggest office that side of the building had to offer.

"Your desk has a direct line with mine," Caspar explained, waving his hand from the office's entrance. "Your quarters are past that door, and a team will always be nearby to handle your every need."

"Thank you, Captain," Khan replied, inspecting the area. "I'll make myself at home."

"Of course," Caspar stated, stepping out of the room. "Nighttime is still four hours away, but I wish to remind you that your attendance isn't mandatory."

"I'll be there," Khan declared, nodding at the Captain. "Call me when you are about to head outside."

"Certainly," Caspar uttered. "I hope you enjoy your stay, Captain."

Khan wore a fake smile that disappeared as soon as he closed the door. The area's solitude brought out his true colors, but he didn't fall prey to them yet.

A quick inspection of the area unfolded. Khan checked the office, going through its large desk, comfortable chair, and couch before moving to his quarters. The latter consisted of a simple bedroom with a bathroom attached to it, but Khan didn't feel the need to complain.

Even after getting used to the Harbor's luxury, Khan remained a citizen of the Slums. He had learned to appreciate high-class environments, but his tastes were still humble. The only aspect that had slightly changed involved Monica's clothes, but she wasn't there to pamper him.

Khan connected his phone to the interactive desk once his inspection was over, and the device downloaded the last bits of information Caspar didn't have the time to share during the refreshment.

Meanwhile, Khan activated the desk's menus to compare the report in his mind to what the building contained. The study was short since the soldiers couldn't access much information. Khan actually felt surprised by how little the scientists shared.

'I learned more from Cirvags' report,' Khan cursed, leaning on the back of his seat. 'I guess Caspar made a few interesting points too.'

After fusing the knowledge from the report and Caspar, Khan found himself before a troublesome picture. Cegnore's overall state was still a mystery, and the same went for the Nak-related topics, but a first goal had already taken form.

'I need to get myself involved with the Thilku,' Khan concluded.

The goal would be impossible for an ordinary soldier. Even low-level Ambassadors would have problems solving that issue, especially if they had no history with the Thilku.

Khan wasn't an Ambassador, but Lord Exr knew about his presence on Cegnore. He had welcomed him through one of his soldiers, which had to mean something.

'[Blue hair],' Khan thought in the Thilku language. 'There might be rumors about me here already.'

The Thilku would never let a human team get in their trenches. Still, making an exception for Khan was possible. Creating that opportunity was the only issue.

'I'm getting ahead of myself,' Khan sighed, shaking his head to disperse his loud desires. 'I should see how I do against these Tainted animals first.'

Khan pressed on the desk to bring out the hologram of the Tainted animal seen with Mister Cirvags. He had learned more about those creatures since his arrival in Cegnore, and part of that wasn't reassuring, at least for him.

Pressing on another label added details to the picture. Cegnore had never seen a Tainted animal as strong as a fourth-level warrior, but their base stats were surprisingly high. Moreover, they could see in the darkness, which explained why they attacked at night and added scary clues.

'Evidence suggests these creatures' attacks aren't random,' Khan read on the holograms. 'However, even when intelligent specimens appear, they show no connection with the monstrous troops.'

Those vague words had a clear meaning for Khan. The mutated Thilku or Cegnore's natives had to be in charge of the Tainted animals, but their location remained unknown, especially to the human side.

'Dammit,' Khan cursed as some restlessness appeared. 'I hope we get some leftovers tonight.'

Since the night was still hours away, Khan alternated study with meditation to keep himself busy and kill time. Caspar's call eventually arrived, and Khan didn't bother to change before heading outside.

Khan had read the building's safety measures and general arrangements, but taking the lead on his first day wasn't ideal. He didn't want that role for now, so he followed Caspar's directives and let him handle that process.

The human trench could only fit a platoon, but the Thilku's leftovers hardly required half of that. The humans had adapted to that trend, dividing Cegnore's troops into four huge teams that alternated themselves.

Twenty-five soldiers occupied a series of vehicles and headed for the huge gate to form an orderly line. The attendants handed pills and checked them with scanners one by one before allowing them to leave.

That thorough safety measure slowed the departure, and the gate worsened the process. That huge passage had two layers, which could never open at the same time. The door could only fit three vehicles, which forced everyone in line to wait.

Khan and Caspar were in the same jeep at the end of the line, and the safety measures delayed their turn at the gate by ten whole minutes. Khan wasn't in a waiting mood, but Caspar and his surroundings distracted him long enough to keep his enthusiasm in check.

The enthusiasm both increased and decreased after getting outside. Khan could relax since the annoying part of the trip was over, but the trench was coming, which inevitably gave birth to excitement.

The cars' tires left deep marks on the brittle ground as they accelerated through the plain, creating brownish clouds. The vehicles were fast and had powerful scanners, so Khan soon saw the approaching trench.

The place was simple but decent. The trench was longer than Khan had expected, and metal reinforcements covered the side facing the potential battlefield. Four manual turrets also peeked out of it, creating a good defensive line that could handle most threats.

'Twenty-five soldiers are probably too much,' Khan couldn't help but think, especially when he considered the few specimens getting to that trench.

"Do you ever get big assaults?" Khan asked as Caspar parked the jeep behind the trench.

"Here?" Caspar asked. "Never. We bring rifles and magazines just in case, but the Thilku never let too many specimens slip by."

Khan looked outside the window to avoid showing any disappointment, but everyone eventually finished parking and left their vehicles. The soldiers followed Caspar's lead, jumping inside the trench and taking their assigned position, and Khan was among them.

"Activate the scanners!" Caspar ordered once everyone was in position. "I don't want anything to go wrong!"

The soldiers tapped on the metal reinforcement, bringing out menus that depicted scenes far in the distance. The place had scanners, and Khan didn't miss that detail.

'The Thilku will have something similar,' Khan thought, glancing at the dark sky. 'Maybe if I fly high enough.'

"Lights!" Caspar continued, and the vehicle's headlights lit up to illuminate all the areas past the trench. That glow was blinding, but the channel offered some protection.

"Alright!" Caspar shouted again. "We have a long night ahead of us, and you know the punishment if I catch you napping."

A series of "Yes, sir" resounded, but Khan couldn't hold back his curiosity. "What's the punishment?"

"I lower their pay," Caspar snickered, pointing at the center of the trench. "Those are our spots. They are the only clean ones."

The metal reinforcement in the spot pointed out by Caspar stretched to the trench's floor, dividing it from the ground. Moreover, all the images from the scanners converged there, and the two Captains took their position behind them.

"Fourteen hours to go," Khan exclaimed, sitting on the metal floor while pretending to focus on the scanners.

"Indeed," Caspar sighed, joining Khan on the floor. "Cegnore's long days give us enough time to sleep, but a fourteen-hour shift is still taxing."

"Do you come out here every night?" Khan wondered.

"I take one day off every week," Caspar explained. "Two Lieutenants replace me."

"Well," Khan joked. "You can take a nap tonight since I'm here."

"I wouldn't dare," Caspar smiled, shaking his head. "This is my chance to leave a lasting impression."

"Give me a week before starting with politics," Khan chuckled.

"I apologize," Caspar laughed. "My family's training is hard to ignore."

"That speaks for your family's value," Khan praised. "Do you mind if I meditate to kill time?"

"Not at all," Caspar gasped, slightly disappointed he couldn't spend the night deepening his relationship with Khan. "I'll tell the soldiers to be silent."

"No need," Khan stated, crossing his legs and closing his eyes. "Just warn me if the scanners pick up something."

"You can count on me, Captain," Caspar promised, and a newfound resolve filled him as he glared at the menus. He was almost hoping he could get the chance to warn Khan.

Khan shared that hope, but the symphony told a far different story. He couldn't sense anything at all. There was no trace of those Tainted animals.

Of course, the night was still young, so Khan didn't despair yet. He tried his best to focus on meditating, even if a lot of the situation went against him. He didn't only want to keep track of the area. Khan also had the odd sensation to try to ignore.

As time passed, boredom fell on the trench. The job forced the soldiers to stare at the empty plain for hours, and the presence of two Captains prevented casual conversations. Even Caspar started to feel affected by that mood, but no complaints came out of his mouth.

Khan was no stranger to boredom, but far stronger emotions pushed it into the backline and filled his mind with proactive ideas. He wasn't completely powerless. In theory, he could do more than wait for the Tainted animals. Yet, Khan managed to hold back for now.

The complete stillness didn't last forever. Something faint and barely noticeable reached Khan's senses, and his eyes snapped open. He suddenly stood up, and Caspar's worried questions turned into background noise as he focused on the dark horizon.

The plain looked empty. The vehicles' headlights illuminated a good chunk of the area, and the soldiers before them created shadows that stretched into that white glow. Darkness still existed in the distance, but no figures moved inside it.

Ordinary soldiers would only see an environment split between black and white, but far different colors filled Khan's eyes. The symphony shone on its own, and a faint tremor ran through those shades but was too distant to reveal any clue.

The tremor grew closer, eventually showing its colors. Purple-red shades joined the symphony, revealing their source and part of their power. The natural mana's behavior slightly changed under that influence, and Khan lowered his head to check the images on the metal surface.

Caspar still asked questions while his eyes moved between Khan and the horizon. However, Khan's gesture made him look at the screens, and answers eventually arrived.

"There," Khan said, pointing at one of the screens.

Caspar promptly tapped on the image to expand it and zoomed in to see whether the scanners picked up something. That camera was pointing at the darkness, and a barely noticeable movement suddenly happened inside it, triggering a few menus.

"Incoming!" Caspar shouted, lifting his head to glare at both sides of the trench. "Battle stations!"

Many soldiers had noticed Khan's odd behavior, so they had already snapped out of their boredom. Caspar's shout confirmed their suspicions, making them pull out their rifles to bind them to the trench's metal reinforcement.

"Hold your fire," Khan calmly muttered, jumping out of the trench and landing on the metal reinforcement.

Caspar opened his mouth in surprise, but Khan had given an order, and he didn't dare to reject it. He also knew his role, so another shout resounded through the trench. "Hold your fire!"

The soldiers didn't need to question Caspar's orders since Khan soon became impossible to miss. He was the only figure walking through the illuminated area, and his knife fell into his grasp as he advanced toward the darkness.

Khan was in no hurry to reach the threat, but his mana had other ideas. His senses worked overtime to gather as much information as possible, and the process accelerated once a big figure peeked into the illuminated area.

Holograms were nothing compared to real-life experiences. The creature Khan had seen with Mister Cirvags stepped into the light, running at full speed toward the human trench and filling his senses with information.

The beast was hideous, and its azure fur didn't make Khan miss its odd proportions. The wolf-like creature was three meters long and four tall, and its bloated belly didn't match its slender legs. Yet, its mouth remained its strangest feature, causing disgust in anyone looking at it.

Saliva drooled out of the longer upper part of the monster's mouth. Its tongue was also in the open, moving left and right and matching that mad charge's rhythm. The Tainted animal seemed to be in a hungry frenzy, and the intensity of its urges left deep marks on the symphony.

'It's mindless,' Khan concluded, tightening his grip on his knife only to relax it right afterward. 'I need to test stuff first.'

The Tainted animal clearly carried the chaos element. Except for the Nak's hand, that would be Khan's first time facing an opponent that shared his mana's qualities. However, he couldn't take the incoming battle seriously since the monster was only as strong as a second-level warrior.

Khan advanced in a straight line toward the incoming beast, doing his best to suppress his wildest sides. He wanted to kill the monster on the spot. His desperation begged him to do that, but focusing on the long game required sacrifices.

The Tainted animal looked uncomfortable in its body. Its charge showed no balance but remained oddly fast. It didn't take long before Khan entered the creature's range, and its deformed mouth opened to turn its leap into a deadly attack.

Nevertheless, the monster ended up slamming headfirst into the ground. Its teeth stabbed the soil, and its mouth closed to bite a good chunk of it.

The creature gulped, uncaring of the pain of the impact and the dirt in its throat. It didn't even mind that its attack had failed. Only hunger occupied its simple mind, and the figures visible in the white light quickly attracted its attention.

However, a cracking noise suddenly resounded among the silent plain, and pain followed. The wolf howled at the dark sky before releasing a hoarse angry growl. It turned, and its fury converged on the figure touching its butt's fur.

Khan let sensations invade his mind as his palm ruffled that thick fur. It was different from his hair, but he still found similarities. Yet, the wolf's butt eventually escaped his reach.

The Tainted animal began to turn but suddenly lost its balance, crashing to the ground. It tried to stand up, only to fall once again. One of its rear legs had bent backward since Khan had crushed its knee, and the wolf didn't have the clarity to notice the injury.

The wolf's hunger made it disregard any notion of pain. That beast existed only to bite and eat, and Khan was in its range. Standing up wasn't an option, so it stomped its working legs to leap in his direction.

Unfortunately for the beast, Khan disappeared before the leap could risk reaching him. The wolf crashed on the ground and ravaged that brittle surface. It ate the soil as if worried Khan would escape if it didn't. The creature didn't even bother to check whether he was there in the first place.

Khan felt a bit lost watching the wolf feasting on soil, but his legs promptly moved to reattract its attention. He had moved on the creature's back again, which left its last intact rear limb exposed.

Another painful howl filled the plain as Khan shattered the wolf's knee. The creature tried to turn, but its broken rear legs left it stuck on the ground. It still tried to crawl, but Khan instantly reached its head and pressed it down.

The Tainted animal grew excited since Khan was so close. An abnormal amount of saliva escaped its mouth, creating a puddle on the ground. Its working legs also shook left and right, trying to reach for Khan. Yet, their odd proportions worked against it.

'Its aggression is scary,' Khan thought, his foot sealed on the wolf's head, 'But even third-level warriors won't be a problem if that's all they can do.'

Khan immediately found a flaw in that reasoning. He was strong, but the Thilku couldn't be underestimated. They would have never struggled against such creatures, and the wolf didn't hesitate to answer his doubts.

Khan's eyes widened when mana accumulated inside the wolf. He knew that pattern. He had mastered it long ago, so his legs promptly sent him into the sky and away from the Tainted animal.

Purple-red light followed that accumulation of mana. A bright sphere expanded from the wolf and dug through the ground, destroying anything in its path.

Khan watched everything from a safe position in the air, but his surprise was hard to describe. Somehow, the Tainted animal had used the Wave spell.

Chapter 587 Delivery

Mutated animals could develop abilities. That wasn't news to Khan. However, seeing the wolf use his spell made his mind go blank.

Thoughts quickly returned and allowed Khan to make some sense of the event. The spherical version of the Wave spell wasn't the result of the human arts. It was a mere explosion founded on an intense feeling. In the wolf's case, hunger probably was the fuel.

The spell continued to expand, digging a hole into the ground and putting the monster in a problematic situation. As soon as the purple-red color vanished, the wolf found itself at the bottom of a pit, which wasn't easy to escape with two broken legs.

The difficult situation didn't demoralize the wolf. It howled and growled in hunger while doing its best to crawl out of the hole. The creature didn't have anything else in mind.

Khan inspected the scene for a few seconds before tapping the air behind him. His figure disappeared, and cracking noises followed. The wolf noticed Khan only when he placed his foot above its head, and trying to grab him revealed that its remaining intact knees had been crushed.

The injuries and pain didn't get in the way of the wolf's frenzy. It continued to struggle and drool, focusing only on trying to get a taste of Khan. His position made that attempt structurally impossible, but the Tainted animal didn't care.

Khan felt both disappointed and curious. The spell and frenzy confirmed connections to the Nak, but the wolf was too weak to explore the topic any further. Its mindless state also prevented it from showing more clues.

The wolf struggled a bit longer, but Khan's foot didn't move, so it accumulated its mana. The creature wanted to summon the Wave spell again, but its head slammed into the ground before it could complete the casting.

The impact didn't make the monster give up, but Khan pressed on its head again, sending it deeper into the ground. Luckily for him, the wolf was pretty sturdy, so he didn't have to worry about holding back too much.

Khan had to repeat the stomping twice before the wolf finally fainted. Some blood accumulated in the hole created by its head, but it was alive, which was enough for Khan.

Caspar and the team in the trench didn't dare to leave their posts since Khan had given clear orders. Still, their eyes had remained glued on the scanners or battle, so they noticed Khan walking out of the hole.

Nevertheless, the soldiers' eyes widened when more of Khan became visible. He wasn't only leaving the hole. His right hand clung firmly to one of the wolf's paws as he dragged the creature out in the open.

"Caspar!" Khan called as he pulled the wolf toward the trench. "I got it!"

Khan was close to the trench, so everyone could hear his shout, and Caspar didn't hesitate to add new orders. "Get the binding equipment! Captain Khan got a live one!"

A few soldiers dropped their rifles to climb out of the trench and approach their vehicles' trunks to retrieve the appropriate equipment. A series of metal ropes and syringes soon appeared in their hands, and they brought them to the other side of the area to reach for Khan.

"You know what you are doing, right?" Khan asked, letting go of the wolf's paw and stepping away to create room for the four soldiers.

"Yes, sir!" One of the soldiers declared while her companions injected the syringes' contents into the monster. "This sedative comes directly from our scientists, who have already tested it."

'You wouldn't use metal ropes if the sedative were so reliable,' Khan thought without expressing his concerns. As long as he was there, the wolf couldn't take the team by surprise.

The soldiers bound the wolf's broken legs and mouth before dragging it toward the trench. Meanwhile, Caspar gave more orders, building a metal bridge that led directly to the vehicles. Everyone appeared ready and used to that practice, which partially reassured Khan.

"I remember reading that the scientists wanted a Tainted animal," Khan commented, crouching on the metal reinforcement while watching the soldiers load the sedated wolf onto a vehicle.

"That mission never leaves," Caspar explained from the bottom of the trench. "The white coats always want more guinea pigs."

"How does this work?" Khan wondered.

"A team will deliver the Tainted animal and return here," Caspar responded.

"Directly to the scientists?" Khan asked.

"Sort of," Caspar remained vague. "Their side of the building has a drop zone. We just leave the beast and get out."

'No contact even there,' Khan thought. 'Maybe I can pull some strings.'

"Do you expect more Tainted animals to arrive?" Khan questioned.

"We'll see," Caspar sighed, peeking into the empty area illuminated by the headlights. "We might have more leftovers coming, but that's usually rare."

Khan also stopped looking at the sedated wolf to eye the illuminated area. The symphony still carried traces of his battle, but his gaze stretched past that. He searched for more Tainted animals, but the plain disappointed him.

'I won't miss anything if I leave now, right?' Khan considered before checking the time on his phone. The night was still in its early stages, but an attack had just arrived. The chances of getting more in the next few hours were low.

"I'll handle the delivery," Khan eventually declared, standing up and jumping on the other side of the trench. "I'll come back soon."

"Captain, the soldiers can handle that," Caspar pointed out.

"It's my chance to get used to the area," Khan casually justified. "It won't take long."

Caspar couldn't add much to that statement, and the soldiers loading up the wolf also heard everything. Khan didn't need to say anything else to make those underlings step aside and let him enter the vehicle.

A car was nothing compared to a ship, especially since the former had auto-pilot options too. Khan could get going as soon as the menus confirmed the complete isolation from the outside world, and a map even appeared when he inserted his directives.

It didn't take long for Khan to return to the building, but the map didn't point him at the main gate. Instead, it made him ride to the structure's right side, which featured a less flashy passage.

"Requesting authorization to drop a live Tainted animal," Khan stated as soon as the vehicle established a connection with the entrance.

A few seconds had to pass before the hidden gate opened to reveal a small and empty warehouse. Khan tried to get inside, but the vehicle didn't respond to his directives. The auto-pilot had activated, making the car slowly advance and stop at the center of the new area.

The entrance quickly closed, and Khan planned to wait a bit to study his situation. However, a robotic voice suddenly came out of the control desk. "Drop the cargo."

That wasn't the end of it. The car's four doors unlocked and completely opened, almost forcing Khan to leave. He wasn't sure whether the scanners had checked his identity, but it was clear that the scientific division didn't care about such things.

'Is this process automated?' Khan wondered, jumping out of the car to inspect the area. He couldn't see any menu or camera in his surroundings, and even the flow of synthetic mana remained hidden behind the warehouse's metal surfaces.

Khan glanced at the sedated wolf on the car's roof before experiencing some annoyance. He understood his role on Cegnore and even accepted it, but that treatment wouldn't do. He deserved better.

"I'm Captain Khan," Khan shouted, performing a military salute out of habit. "Professor Joshua Parver and Headmistress Leticia Holwen can vouch for my qualifications as a scout."

Khan let a whole minute pass after his announcement, but no reply arrived. The warehouse remained silent and completely ignored his introduction.

"I request a meeting with a representative of the scientific section!" Khan continued, hoping that a direct approach could work. Sadly for him, the scientists had different plans.

"Drop the cargo," The robotic voice came out of the car again. "Captain Khan."

Khan glanced at the car before fixing his gaze on the wall before him. That wasn't the work of a program. Someone was behind the robotic voice, but Khan's request didn't affect them in the slightest.

'I should just lay low and focus on the Thilku side,' Khan thought as his annoyance intensified.

"To the one behind the speaker," Khan announced. "Think of someone that can order you around. I had their superiors at dinner, so drop the act."

Khan's plan would endanger the soldiers and his career, so he wanted to gather as much information as possible before employing it. The human scientific team could help, so he didn't refrain from using his fame, hoping to bend some rules. As for eventual consequences, he would deal with them afterward.

The silence returned and reigned for a few seconds, but a whooshing noise eventually broke it. Part of the wall to Khan's right moved, revealing a narrow passage from which a young man donning a long white coat came out.

"Captain Khan," The young man called in a scolding tone while approaching the car. "This is highly irregular. We have procedures for a reason-!"

The scientist didn't have the chance to finish his line since Khan materialized before him. The young man was only a second-level warrior, so his eyes couldn't follow Khan at all, and his sudden sprint threatened to make him lose his balance.

"Were you scolding me?" Khan asked, his tone conveying a chilling vibe that made sweat pour out of the scientist's back.

"S-sir," The scientist stuttered. "There are regulations here."

"I know," Khan wore a fake smile. "I only wanted to see if our scientists were kind enough to indulge me."

"I," The scientist gasped before that blatant façade. "I can't speak for the scientific department."

"Then go to someone who can," Khan ordered, dropping his smile to show his real colors, "And tell them that I want an actual report."

Chapter 588 Deals

The threat didn't evolve into anything specific. The scientists didn't have the authority to fulfill that request, and Khan couldn't barge into the scientific division either. He could only let the man go and wait for his superiors to review the matter.

After that, Khan dropped the sedated wolf on the floor and left the warehouse to return to the trench. Nothing had changed during the short trip, so he resumed his position beside Caspar and prepared for another meditative session.

"Did you meet any problem?" Caspar couldn't help but ask since Khan had yet to close his eyes.

"The car handled everything," Khan reassured. "What do you think the scientists will do with that creature anyway?"

"No idea," Caspar responded. "It's probably better not to know."

"Aren't you curious?" Khan wondered.

"A bit," Caspar admitted, "But knowing my fate if I get infected is scarier."

Khan didn't probe any further. That feeling belonged to the battlefield, and he respected it. He even understood why Caspar preferred to remain in the dark.

"You are quite easy to talk to," Khan commented, changing the topic. "I thought families forbid that."

"They do," Caspar laughed. "Well, I come from the poorer side of the Chaunac family. I had to back up my privilege with a few results."

"You made it to Captain and this job," Khan pointed out. "That's more than a few."

"I already told you my family helped," Caspar dismissed the praise, "And I was lucky enough to find good soldiers while serving."

Caspar couldn't hide his mana from Khan, so his genuine traits were evident. The man had received political training but also appeared quite honest. He seemed to be the kind of soldier Khan could go along with.

"You aren't lying to me just to make a good impression, right?" Khan joked, even if he already knew the answer to his question.

"I wouldn't dare," Caspar promised. "I'll annoy you with politics in exactly one week."

"Alright," Khan snickered. "I'll get back to meditating now if you don't mind."

"Feel free to do so," Caspar exclaimed. "The way I see it, you are in charge, Captain."

Khan limited himself to a polite nod before closing his eyes and starting a meditative session. Most of his attention obviously remained on the symphony and odd sensation, but he still managed to get some work done.

Sadly enough, hours went by without showing any change. The illuminated area remained peaceful, and boredom filled the trench due to the uneventful period. That trend continued until dawn approached, marking the end of the shift.

Returning to the building after achieving so little left Khan restless, but the peace of his accommodation allowed him to review the matter clearly. He had fought a Tainted animal and declared his stance toward the scientific department. He couldn't expect much more from his first day on Cegnore.

Nevertheless, even if the day had officially ended, Khan's tasks didn't. No orders were waiting for him, but a ringing noise resounded in his office mere minutes after he returned inside it.

When Khan opened his door, three long white coats unfolded in his vision. A middle-aged man stood before the entrance with two relatively young women at his sides. The three wore stern faces, and their mana conveyed similar emotions.

The corridor's symphony also reached Khan, revealing the presence of onlookers. He even sensed Caspar, who added confusion and tension to the area. That meeting clearly was unusual for the soldiers, but Khan welcomed it with a smile.

"May I help you?" Khan asked, pretending not to know the reason behind that event.

"We'd like to have a talk with you," The man declared. "In private."

"Please," Khan exclaimed, moving aside to open the path for his office. "Come in."

The three scientists walked inside without adding polite remarks or gratitude. They behaved like they were in charge of the place, which wasn't far from the truth. However, Khan only saw three third-level warriors, so he couldn't feel threatened.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you much," Khan announced, sealing the door. "I have yet to grab anything from the cafeteria."

"Those pleasantries won't be necessary," The man stated, turning to face Khan. "This meeting won't be long."

The two women turned with the man, and Khan found three pairs of cold eyes fixed on him. The scientists were doing their best to convey their superior rank in the building, but nothing could affect Khan's carefree attitude.

"Sit, at least," Khan uttered, pointing at the single couch in the office. "I'll grab a chair in the meantime."

"That won't be necessary either," The man declared, trying to stop Khan.

"I hope you won't mind me taking the couch then," Khan chuckled, heading for that comfortable seat. "It has been a long night."

The women grew slightly uncomfortable before Khan seemingly uncaring behavior, but the man retained his sternness. That reaction described their internal hierarchy, which Khan had already established.

"Captain Khan," The man cleared his throat while occupying a spot in front of the couch. "We are aware of your exploits and political relevance. However, that doesn't give you any right to break the building's regulations."

"I simply requested a report," Khan shrugged his shoulders. "I can't do my job if I'm not privy to all relevant information."

"You exposed one of my scientists to the risk of infection," The man continued. "That behavior is intolerable."

"He could have talked through the speaker," Khan pointed out, still showing a smile to those stern faces.

"That doesn't matter," The man stated. "We'll ignore your transgression this time, but you'll force us to send a complaint to the Harbor if this happens again."

"Can I at least know who I am speaking to?" Khan wondered since the scientists had yet to introduce themselves.

The man disliked how Khan ignored the gravity of the situation, and his question didn't help. The scientist actually hesitated, but an answer eventually left his mouth. "I'm Winston Wulfo, second in command of Cegnore's scientific department. You can confirm my credentials with Captain Chaunac."

"I'm honored my stunt could bring out the second in command," Khan laughed. "You must take me very seriously."

"This is no joking matter," Winston scolded. "You put the entire building at risk."

"I guess I did," Khan sighed, leaning deeper into the couch. "You all must be pretty on edge. I bet getting only leftovers doesn't help."

"We aren't here to make conversation," Winston declared. "We delivered our message, so we'll take our leave now."

Winston suddenly turned, and his companions imitated him. However, before they could step toward the door, Khan said something that tingled their interest. "I could get you better guinea pigs. Maybe even intelligent beings."

Something changed inside Winston, and his companions noticed that. The two women shot a meaningful glance at his face before he turned to look at Khan.

"On what basis do you make such claims?" Winston asked, but Khan didn't reply. His smile disappeared as his eyes moved between the two women.

"Leave us," Winston ordered, understanding that silent message. The two women felt surprised but still complied.

"Do you want to sit now, Mister Wulfo?" Khan questioned as soon as the two women left.

"Was your claim a lie to remain alone with me?" Winston asked. "I hope you don't expect me to fall for empty threats like my underling."

"I stand by my words," Khan stated. "I can bring more enemies to the human trench. As for the intelligent beings, that's a matter of luck."

Winston tried to find the truth in Khan's emotionless face, but the effort didn't pay off. Khan was simply too good at hiding his intentions.

"I," Winston hesitated. "I'll accept the seat, Captain."

"Take the couch," Khan smiled, standing up. "I know better than mistreating a guest."

Winston could only comply with Khan's request, occupying the couch while he retrieved the chair behind the interactive desk. Soon, both sat down, facing each other, and Khan let the scientist have the first line.

"So, Captain," Winston announced, showing far more politeness than before. "How would you bring more specimens to the trench?"

"That's my issue to handle, Mister Wulfo," Khan replied, using the same politeness, "And I won't share the specifics. I'm sure you understand."

"Then," Winston continued, "What do you ask in return?"

"Complete access to all the information gathered by the scientific department," Khan went straight to the point. "I also want what you obtained from the Thilku."

"That's preposterous!" Winston shouted, standing up. "The scientific department can't reveal classified information."

"I'm not asking the scientific department," Khan calmly explained. "I'm asking you."

Winston's eyes widened in surprise when he understood what Khan meant. He was actually suggesting breaking rules to reap benefits.

"I think you are mistaking Cegnore for the Harbor, Captain," Winston smirked, returning to the couch. "My word is heavier than yours here. I could get you deported for merely speaking about breaking regulations."

"But you are still here," Khan sighed. "Why don't we skip the part where you pretend to be loyal and get to the point?"

Winston couldn't help but hate how that conversation was going. He had partially lied with his previous statement, but Khan didn't take the bait. Khan appeared in complete control of the meeting.

"Sharing classified information is a grave crime," Winston commented.

"It will be our secret," Khan responded. "I'll dispose of any device you deliver to me if that's what you need to feel safer."

"I can't trust you so blindly," Winston refused. "You must give me leverage on you for this deal to be equal."

"It won't be equal," Khan declared. "I have the currency you want, and you aren't the only buyer. If you refuse, I'll make the same offer to the Thilku."

"That's treason," Winston gasped.

"I'm a trusted figure among the Thilku," Khan uttered. "Making deals with them is my job."

Chapter 589 Mind Control

Cegnore was an isolated environment, but rumors still reached it. Many weren't privy about Neuria's recent events, but almost everyone knew that Khan had scored a spot in a political team featuring an Ambassador.

Rumors about other Captains would have struggled to echo that far, but Khan was unique, and he knew that. His fame gave value and weight to his claims and requests. Winston would have never taken him seriously without actual proof otherwise.

Khan's awareness of his status had given birth to his current attitude and behavior. That wasn't only the result of his fame, and his approach wasn't random either. He was choosing his words to get what he wanted as fast as possible.

The Nak also played a role in that choice. When Khan's main goal was involved, he found it easier to show a firmer and darker stance. He couldn't bother resorting to compromises and nice words when more straightforward options were available.

Moreover, Khan had spent a year dealing with wealthy descendants and people beyond his reach. The teams on Cegnore weren't even close to that political relevance. Khan could ignore pleasantries and etiquette without worrying about repercussions.

Winston didn't like the situation, but Khan was right. He could always reach for another scientist even if he didn't contact the Thilku. Winston knew for a fact that his boss would accept that deal, so closing it now was the only way to secure benefits for himself.

It didn't help that Winston had already shown interest in the topic. His decision to remain alone with Khan confirmed that the currency was valuable. Refusing the offer wouldn't grant better terms.

Truth be told, sharing classified information was no big deal, especially when far away from the Global Army's territory. Winston could program a device to erase its data after a single read in minutes. He wouldn't have to worry about leaving evidence of his crime.

The problems lay elsewhere. Khan would hold a lot of power over Winston if that deal happened. He would basically obtain permanent leverage that could become problematic outside of Cegnore.

"Bringing more enemies to the human trench is a dangerous business," Winston eventually announced, changing his tactic. "The Global Army would look for someone to blame if casualties happen."

"And you would bring up my name in that instance?" Khan wondered.

"If the situation requires it," Winston smiled, believing to have found a weak spot in the deal. "I'm simply looking out for myself."

"I wonder," Khan continued. "What would you tell the Global Army about me?"

"I," Winston exclaimed, but his confidence waned right after the first word. He actually didn't know what Khan's methods involved.

"You should start with the alien arts," Khan whispered, almost mocking the scientist.

"Right!" Winston stated, clearing his throat. "Your alien arts did... They did..."

Khan appeared eager to hear Winston's explanation, but the silence that followed only made it harder for him to come up with something. Winston's mind was blank. He couldn't even invent a lie under Khan's amused gaze.

"The Global Army doesn't understand half of what I do," Khan declared, "And I'm being humble. Just give up and stop wasting my time."

Winston experienced a deep sense of defeat. Khan had no openings. No matter how Winston tackled the conversation, he couldn't get on top.

The defeat put Winston before two options. He could leave, avoiding risks and forgetting that the conversation had ever happened, or accept and try to establish favorable terms that could help his career.

Khan didn't need to wait for Winston's answer to understand his stance. The scientist's mana had shown greed ever since the initial offer, and that feeling always won.

"My superior never learns about this," Winston declared once he completely gave in. "Our deal never leaves this room."

"Of course," Khan promised.

"And," Winston continued, "My superior has priority over eventual findings. I need the guinea pigs to arrive when I'm alone on duty. I won't get priority otherwise."

"Give me your working schedule," Khan replied, "And I'll try to stick to it."

Winston gulped. His requests were over, and Khan didn't even flinch hearing them. His confidence was almost scary, especially considering what his plan involved.

"I also need another thing," Khan exclaimed since Winston didn't add anything. "The scientific department can refuse trips outside or directly enforce lockdowns. That must never apply to me."

"Captain, this planet-," Winston protested, but Khan didn't give him the time to finish.

"You don't need to know what I plan to do outside," Khan stated, "But I can promise I won't cross the agreed boundaries."

Khan was speaking the truth. For now, he wanted to keep things relatively legal. He would resort to reckless and criminal actions only if he ran out of options.

Winston studied Khan's face but eventually accepted that he was speaking the truth. The deal was happening. He only had to add a few last words to seal it. "We have an agreement then."

Khan nodded, seemingly losing interest in the matter. That reaction almost made Winston stand up on the spot, but Khan suddenly added something else.

"There's something I don't understand," Khan announced, fixing his eyes on Winston again. "I know your report will involve the topic, but I'd like to hear your opinion first."

"Which topic, Captain?" Winston asked, resorting to politeness again. There was no need to avoid etiquette now that the two had reached an agreement.

"The Thilku who switched sides after being infected," Khan explained. "How did that happen? I only heard rumors."

"That's," Winston's first instinct was to postpone that explanation, but the deal was already in place, so refusing the request felt pointless. "The mutations don't only affect the body. The mind also changes."

"I know they start hearing voices," Khan pressed on. "Some described it as a calling."

Winston didn't hide his surprise before Khan's knowledge. That was a lot for someone who had just gotten to Cegnore. However, one look at his blue hair cleared eventual doubts.

"That's not inaccurate," Winston replied, lowering his gaze to sort out his thoughts. "Captain, have you ever witnessed mind control?"

Khan's eyes flickered as old memories from Nitis resurfaced. He had seen something similar. That event had started a mess that had followed him to Milia 222.

"I did," Khan revealed. "Mana can come in incredible and scary forms."

"That it can," Winston sighed. "The Thilku have been cryptic about that topic, but we deduced that the mutation took over their minds. We have more hypotheses too, but it's hard to confirm them without proof."

"What hypotheses?" Khan questioned.

"Who controls the mutations?" Winston wondered. "Who controls the mutated specimens? Did the illness develop a will? Are the natives in control? Are they a hive-mind, or do they retain free will?"

Winston's questions confirmed that Khan had made the right move. Seeing that the scientific team was exploring the same doubts that afflicted his mind reassured him and added fuel to his enthusiasm. Khan could add insights into the topic but chose to remain silent.

"I'm sure your report will expand on those questions," Khan said.

"I'm no liar nor slacker," Winston snorted. "I reached my current position through efforts alone. I agreed to your conditions, so I won't hold back my expertise."

"I'm glad to hear that," Khan uttered.

"Can I take my leave now?" Winston asked. "Lingering here will only create suspicions."

"Of course," Khan exclaimed, standing up and showing his hand. "I'm sure our cooperation will be fruitful, Mister Wulfo."

"I hope so, Captain Khan," Winston stated, standing up and shaking Khan's hand.

The friendly gesture lasted only a second, and Khan escorted Winston outside afterward. He even sealed his door to avoid eventual probing questions from onlookers, but his day didn't end there.

Khan waited a whole half an hour before leaving his office and rushing toward the building's main gate. The guards before the exit were surprised to find someone willing to leave during the day, but refusing Khan was impossible. He had the clearance to go out in the end.

After a lengthy security check, Khan finally stepped outside the building and found himself in the barren plain again. The soldiers had given him a device that could keep track of his position, and he carried it with him as he flew toward a random location south.

The building had scanners, and Khan didn't know their range. Still, there was a limit to how far he could go, so he flew toward the farthest edges of the human area before landing in a suitable spot.

Khan inspected his surroundings after landing. He was in another barren plain, but the human building was nowhere near. The device also confirmed how much distance he had put from it, which reassured him. Khan could focus on his training without worrying about prying eyes there.

'Mind control,' Khan couldn't help but think about Winston's words as he left the tracking device on the ground. 'I didn't consider that.'

Khan's thoughts remained on the topic as he flew away, putting some distance from the tracking device. He was fine with the building knowing his position, but his training could destroy that piece of equipment, and he wanted to avoid the rescue party.

Chapter 590 Secret Weapon

The scene was the embodiment of destruction. The ground had shattered, caved in, and turned into dust everywhere. The barren plain had gained a massive hole, and Khan stood at its center.

The hole wasn't the end of the destroyed area. Deep cracks stretched from its edges, creating more cavities that destabilized the already brittle ground. A good chunk of the plain appeared on the verge of turning into sand, and Khan was behind that transformation.

The poor state of the plain would shock inexperienced soldiers, but those initiated to alien arts would find the atmosphere far scarier. The air was shaking, threatening to explode on the spot. A deep sense of violence filled it, spreading a suffocating warmth that dispersed Cegnore's slight cold.

Khan had his eyes closed, and two drops of sweat ran down his forehead to fuse with his eyebrows. His back was also wet, and patches of dirt had long since stained his uniform.

Those traces of exhaustion didn't reflect Khan's actual state. No pants affected his breath, and strength still filled his muscles. His mind was also oddly awake, pushed beyond its limits by the recent training session.

Khan suddenly opened his eyes, and a crack expanded under his feet. He glanced to his right, and a sandy cloud rose. He repeated the gesture to his left, and a chunk of soil fell from the hole's edge.

Each gesture caused a reaction in the environment. Khan was one with the area, but his control was limited to a single purpose. The symphony carried pure chaos, which echoed even his slightest movement.

A burning sensation invaded Khan's mind. His thoughts grew duller as he forced himself to calm down. He took a deep breath, savoring the chaos he had spread in the environment and doing his best to interrupt his destructive influence.

Some exhaustion arrived as Khan calmed down. His training in the Niqols arts required the clicking growl, and forcing it to shout for long periods didn't have the best effects on his mind. He could achieve higher awareness and influence, but a hefty price waited for him afterward.

Khan let himself fall to the ground, which slightly crumbled under his weight. The dirt didn't bother him, so he leaned backward, lying on that brittle surface and spreading his arms. For once, he wanted to sleep, but an alarm distracted him before that idea could take form.

A groan escaped Khan's mouth when he retrieved his phone and checked the time. His stamina was absurd, but the number on the screen still surprised him. He had spent almost nineteen hours training in the plain, and the night was now approaching.

'I'm not sound of mind alright,' Khan cursed. He had initially believed Cegnore's longer days would have worked in his favor, but his dedication had surpassed his expectations.

The dedication wasn't completely to blame. Khan knew his desperation gave inhumane power to many aspects of his character. However, the recent training session featured something else.

After Khan confirmed that he could use the Niqols arts, something had unlocked inside his brain, and he couldn't ignore it. He liked the Thilku runes, and the Nele occupied a special place in his heart. Yet, the Niqols' techniques came from Liiza and worked as the foundation of his spells. He was too close to them to hold back.

'At least I confirmed I can get better at this,' Khan thought, reviewing the training session, 'Even if I still have no clue how to implement the Nele's approach.'

Khan had found it easier to affect the environment compared to his first attempt. He couldn't quite control the effects of his influence, but that wasn't an issue when he limited himself to pure and unrestrained destruction.

That practice was actually intoxicating. Being surrounded by chaos was oddly similar to blindly following the symphony, even if for opposite reasons.

Khan became an almost passive weapon of the symphony when he lost himself on a battlefield. Instead, filling the environment with chaos gave him a more active role. He expanded his mind rather than turning it into an empty vessel meant to exploit his surroundings.

'It's as if I become the battlefield,' Khan realized, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve to remove the grains of dirt that had fallen into them.

Of course, both approaches had benefits and flaws. By letting the symphony act as a guide, Khan could save a lot of energy. His battle prowess also bordered perfection in that state, granting him a significant edge over most opponents.

Instead, affecting the environment was a heavier practice, both in terms of effects and energy consumption. It wasn't graceful or perfect, but it could produce far more power. It was unparalleled when it came to pure destructive capabilities.

Khan remained immersed in the topic until a second alarm resounded. The phone reminded him about his night shift. He would need to leave in the next few minutes to avoid being late, but his mind wasn't cooperating.

'Secret weapon it is,' Khan sighed, lifting his phone above his eyes and heading for a specific folder. The album had far more than tempting pictures. He had also taken videos of Monica, and playing one of them put a smile on his face.

Scenes that would earn anyone a death sentence if they were spread filled Khan's vision. Loving giggles and tempting moans reached his ears, steering away exhaustion and the threat of slumber.

The video retained Khan's full attention for a few minutes before he stopped it and lifted his legs. He closed his eyes, storing his phone and stomping his feet to the ground. When he reopened them, he found himself mid-air.

Khan flew to where he had left the tracking device and headed back to the human building after retrieving it. He didn't rush his return and used the trip to review his training session. He had much to consider, but many conclusions were hidden behind improvements he had yet to achieve.

The night fell when Khan reached the building, and vehicles were already in the process of leaving the main gate. The team appointed for that shift was going through the safety measures required by Cegnore, and Khan landed next to that exit to wait for his ride.

A few minutes had to pass before the last vehicle crossed the gate and approached Khan. One of its doors opened, showing Captain Chaunac in the driver's seat.

"I was about to send a rescue party!" Caspar announced as his eyes inspected Khan's poor appearance.

"Is there room for me on the night shift?" Khan wondered, nodding at the empty seat beside Caspar.

"Of course," Caspar replied, unlocking the opposite door, which Khan didn't hesitate to approach. The two soon sat side by side, and more words flew while the car isolated them from the outside world.

"Did your training go well, Captain?" Caspar asked, looking at the dirty spots on Khan's uniform once again.

"It could have gone better," Khan vaguely responded, "But I like Cegnore. It's just a bit sandy."

"You are one of the few who can say that," Caspar laughed. "No one else would have the guts to train outside."

"It's not really guts, isn't it?" Khan sighed. "I'll try to come back earlier from now on."

"You don't have to worry about that," Caspar reassured. "I told you already. Your attendance isn't mandatory."

"You aren't the only one who wants to look good for our superiors," Khan exclaimed.

"About that," Caspar uttered as the vehicle finally cleared him. "I've seen the white coats enter your office. Is everything alright?"

"Don't worry about it," Khan reassured. "I was only sealing secret deals with the scientists."

Caspar frowned, but one look at Khan's shameless smile made him explode into a laugh. "Don't tease me like that, Captain!"

Khan also snickered but dropped the topic to focus on his surroundings. He was returning to the trench, and refraining from joining a battle wasn't an option. He could only hope more leftovers would arrive.

Sadly for Khan, peace reigned over the entire night and never relaxed its grip. The trench saw no action, leaving Khan in a meditative state for fourteen hours straight.

Caspar and the team were obviously happy about that outcome, and Khan did his best to hide his disappointment. He found it easy to distract himself that night, so the return to the building went smoothly.

Nevertheless, Khan noticed something strange when he returned to his office. Everything was exactly as he had left it, and his mind yearned for some rest, but a device had appeared on his interactive desk, and his exhaustion immediately disappeared.

Khan didn't hesitate to reach for the device, which lit up without requiring his genetic signature. That alone was a statement of its contents, and reading the many labels on the screen confirmed that.

'I didn't expect Winston to be so fast,' Khan thought, a smirk filling his face. 'He must be starving for intelligent beings.'

The device didn't only complete Winston's side of the deal. It also marked a critical moment in Khan's stay in Cegnore. He could finally put his plans in motion.