

Chaos' Heir 591

Chapter 591 Disbelief

Khan had been awake for almost sixty hours by then. He needed a shower and decent sleep, but a new priority had arrived, relegating those tasks to the backlines.

The device shone in Khan's face as he reached for the seat behind his interactive desk. He instinctively lifted his gaze, but looking at the office reminded him that he had no booze, pushing his eyes back to the screen.

Winston had left instructions. He obviously didn't sign them, but those notes still warned Khan about the inevitable erasure of the information on the device. Khan only had time until the night to read and memorize as much as possible.

Worry never crossed Khan's mind. His ability to stride forward after sleepless nights was unmatched, so he quickly accepted that his rest would have to wait. As for the shower, he didn't even consider it.

Hours went by in which Khan remained immersed in his study. It soon became clear that Mister Cirvags' report had covered most key information, giving a comprehensive overview of the scientific team's discoveries.

However, some details had been left out, especially those involving the scientists' deductions. Many lacked proof but added clues that Khan could fuse with his unique insights.

It turned out that the Thilku were quite stingy. They completely hid information related to Cegnore's underground world and overall environment. Khan could accept that due to the interspecies treaties, but the secrecy in other topics slightly annoyed him.

The shared information reeked of Thilku's pride. The human team never received data about mutated aliens or natives. That secrecy was understandable, but Khan could read between the lines and see how the Thilku simply didn't want the Global Army to know about their defeats.

The same went for the attacks. The Thilku didn't share much about their trenches and battles. The scientists had to deduct most of that from the leftovers that reached the human area, but the results were far from accurate.

Nevertheless, positive aspects existed. The Thilku didn't hold back information about the peculiar infection and intelligent beings. They tackled the issue both anatomically and psychologically, opening a window into that topic that Mister Cirvags' report didn't provide.

The details about the illness used words that Khan struggled to read, let alone understand. That wasn't an issue of bad translations. The human scientists were far above him in those fields, so he had to stick to the descriptions and hypotheses to get something out of them.

'The virus is extremely aggressive,' Khan read on the device, 'But its uncommon mutations are far scarier, and the influence of Nak's mana is very likely to blame.'

Khan understood that part. Mana was a force of change capable of mutating any living being, but the Nak's influence added a unique spin to it.

'The enforced behavior also matches some of the theories around the First Impact,' The hypothesis continued. 'The mutated beings seem to lack any goal outside eating and spreading the infection, which can be considered in line with what the Nak did on Earth.'

Khan struggled to believe what he had just read. A few people had admitted to harboring similar doubts about the First Impact, but only in confidence. Yet, that was the first time someone talked about that conspiracy without him probing about it.

'Am I finally high enough to learn about this?' Khan wondered. 'Are my efforts finally paying off?'

The topic of the Nak had been so distant for Khan that he didn't know how to react to that discovery. Still, time wasn't on his side, so he forced himself to delay the disbelief for now.

The reports about the virus didn't contain anything else Khan could understand or use. The scientists speculated about its range of effects and ability to mutate mana-wielding beings, but nothing more.

Still, moving to the mutated beings' topic brought new interesting developments. The device had deep details about the anatomy of those creatures and eventual patterns in the mutations, but it took the scientists' hypotheses to capture Khan's attention.

'The joint and organized attacks don't match the Tainted animals' nature,' Khan read. 'They must have leaders, an instinctive purpose, or both, but the few traces of intelligence we are aware of keep that secret hidden.'

That was in line with Khan's deductions too. It also justified his desire to explore the areas past the trenches and the underground world. However, the device wasn't done yet.

'Ordinary beings who show slight intelligence aren't of much use either,' The notes continued. 'Their thoughts are messy, unstable, delirious. They suffer from hallucinations, and the few common points boil down to probably inaccurately translated words.'

The device had long since captured Khan's attention, but the possible translated words displayed under that hypothesis elevated his concentration to new levels.

'Son, heir,' Khan read, and his mouth moved when he reached the last word. "Host."

That couldn't be a fortuitous chance. Khan was sure of that. He couldn't be mistaken about that. He heard a Nak speaking that word whenever he slept, and things were too perfect to be a coincidence.

'This is impossible,' Khan thought, trying to find more descriptions on the device. Still, the hypotheses were over. He only saw scientific reports waiting for him.

'Is it impossible?' Khan wondered. He didn't know what to believe, but that coincidence was hard to ignore. If the intelligent beings spoke the same words as his nightmares, he had to have found something.

Khan wanted to read some more, but his arms gave up and made him place the device on the interactive desk. He had too much on his mind to focus on studying, but one thing was clear. He had to find a way to speak to the mutated Thilku or natives.

'Why would the Tainted animal want to spread the infection?' Khan thought. 'How would the Nak lose an attack on a mana-less civilization?'

The two questions felt connected, even if Khan couldn't prove it. The behavior of Cegnore's fauna would explain why the Nak had lost during the First Impact. They had probably never planned to win in the first place.

'All of that just to spread the infection?' Khan wondered. 'No, to spread mana.'

Khan couldn't help but think about the fear he experienced during his nightmares. The Nak in his dreams was scared about something, and the source of that feeling probably was a piece of the puzzle Khan was still missing.

'Don't get ahead of yourself,' Khan thought, forcefully shaking his head. 'It's just a word, which won't be anything more unless I find proof.'

As much as Khan wanted to be realistic and calm, he couldn't control the urges of his mana. He knew he was one step away from flying straight past the Thilku trenches and searching for answers. Yet, doing that without a plan risked destroying everything he had worked so hard to obtain.

The device suddenly beeped, distracting Khan from his thoughts. The screen flickered, turning white and then dark. Khan tried to touch it but to no avail. His fingers didn't bring up any menu.

However, the screen didn't remain completely dark. White letters slowly appeared, describing a schedule that Khan didn't take long to decipher. Winston had left a timeline of his shifts, highlighting when he would be in charge of the scientific department.

'Twice a week,' Khan read. 'Tomorrow would work for him.'

The idea of starting the plan excited Khan, but he forced himself to remain calm. His reasonable sides actually needed a few minutes to win over the chaos in his mind, and clarity arrived afterward.

Khan was no stranger to jumping blindly into dangerous situations. Yet, he wasn't in a hurry now, and the price to pay in case of failure would be far higher than injuries.

Getting answers was the most crucial goal in Khan's life, but he didn't forget Mister Cirvags' warning. His desperation could easily make him suicidal or worse. He might get what he wanted, only to lose the means to continue his journey.

'This is only my third night,' Khan realized, 'And I can't look too desperate in Mister Wulfo's eyes.'

The entirety of Khan wanted to put the plan in motion, but he decided to wait. He could still study Cegnore and the human trench for a while, and that was exactly what he did.

The erasure of Winston's report marked the beginning of the night shift, which Khan attended without bothering to change or shower. His appearance attracted unwanted attention, but he didn't care enough to address the issue.

Another peaceful night went by, and many followed. Khan spent an entire week fulfilling his duties without ever breaking the rules. He had the chance to fight twice, but both featured a single Tainted animal that could barely match second-level warriors, so he didn't count them.

Of course, even if the night didn't provide excitement, Khan always kept himself busy with his training during the day. His packed schedule began to affect his appearance, but Khan seized the initiative before things could get too bad.

After a week of study, on the first available night marked by Winston, Khan gathered with Caspar and the team in the trench. That shift didn't feature anything unusual. Actually, the atmosphere was quite relaxed due to the recent peaceful period.

However, as soon as Caspar looked away, Khan summoned a tinge of mana on his palm and blew on it while thinking about a request. He didn't muster anything complicated, but the symphony shook heavily, creating a gale only he could see.

'Come and get me,' Khan thought, repeating the words of his request while his eyes followed the invisible gale. That mana flew in the distance toward the place he knew featured the Thilku trenches.

Chapter 592 Pack

Khan didn't know how effective his call would be. He wasn't even sure his words would reach the Thilku's trenches. Yet, he had to try to make the situation evolve.

The human trench wasn't aware of the danger Khan was trying to attract. Caspar and the other soldiers remained relaxed, and barely anyone checked the scanners. Everyone was expecting another peaceful night, including Caspar.

Khan couldn't help but focus on that peace. The soldiers' relaxed expression almost gave birth to some guilt, but Khan's excitement instantly suppressed that feeling. He was playing with their lives, which he didn't like, but his options were limited.

'I won't let anyone die,' Khan promised to himself. He didn't feel good about the plan, but keeping everyone safe would help disperse the bitter taste in his mouth.

Khan's presence had grown heavier after training in the Niqols arts, and the same went for the changes in his mental state. He tried to hold back, but his excitement inevitably spread through the trench, affecting the general atmosphere and air.

Caspar and the soldiers noticed that change on an instinctive level. They felt confused, looking at the scanners to search for answers. A gut feeling was telling them that something was off, but the peace in their surroundings slowly reassured them. They never fully relaxed again but still grew used to that new atmosphere.

A waiting game started, with each passing hour making Khan doubt the effectiveness of his call. Failure was an option, but his thoughts were already on possible next steps. Still, that worry turned out to be pointless.

A tremor suddenly ran through the peaceful symphony, and a second followed. That trend continued until all the natural mana in the area shook, but that wasn't the end of it.

The ground began to shake before the scanners could pick up anything. Cracks opened on the area illuminated by the vehicles' headlights, and clouds of dust rose. Something big was coming, and the soldiers looked for answers on the scanners and the two Captains.

"Battle stations," Khan whispered, standing up and jumping on the metal reinforcement. "Fire at anything that crosses me."

"Captain!" Caspar gasped, planning to complain. The earthquake hinted at something far more dangerous than simple leftovers, so he didn't want Khan to face it alone. However, the scanners suddenly beeped, claiming his attention.

Caspar's eyes widened in shock when he read the scanners' findings. More than ten figures had appeared in the dark areas, and that number increased. The human trench had never seen a similar attack, but the team had enough weapons to deal with it.

"Battle stations!" Caspar shouted, shock invading him once again when he realized that Khan had left. "Fire at anything that gets too close!"

Khan had already disregarded the trench. His full attention was on the dark areas ahead while he ran through the shaking ground, and his knife fell into his palm as the symphony conveyed a scary picture.

A total of twenty figures had appeared among the darkness and were running at full speed toward the trench. Four were as strong as third-level warriors, while the others were weaker.

'It's a proper pack,' Khan thought, his grip on his knife tightening. 'Help my legs.'

Natural mana flowed toward Khan's legs, generating an insane acceleration that brought him into the sky. He instantly reached the incoming pack, and laying his eyes on it added details.

The pack contained the same types of Tainted animals Khan had faced in the past week. Those wolf-like creatures came in different sizes and proportions due to the chaotic nature of their mutations, but their base stats didn't change.

The monsters didn't sense Khan floating many meters above them. They only cared about the trench in the distance, and their exposed salivating tongues conveyed their hunger. They were ready to feast on the human team, but a series of explosions abruptly halted their advance.

Painful and angry cries escaped the monsters' mouths as purple-red pillars grew before them. Some specimens tried to run around them only to fall prey to more explosions. A few directly died in the process too.

The soldiers on the trench were ready to fire as soon as enemies appeared, but their tense expressions froze when the purple-red light shone on their faces. They could connect that color to Khan, but awe remained. After all, he had cast almost ten spells in a matter of seconds.

Khan studied the monsters' reactions before turning himself upside down. That instinctive behavior didn't show any trace of intelligence, so he didn't need those specimens.

Of the four stronger monsters, one had half of its body burnt by an explosion while another was retreating. Instead, the last two were side by side, howling at a pillar shining before them. The light was so bright that they didn't notice Khan landing between them.

Khan had already tested himself against those monsters, and the attack featured too many of them to take prisoners. So, his knife flashed as he swung it to his left, and a thudding noise followed.

The wolf on Khan's right heard the noise and turned, only to see a furry head roll in its direction. That body part belonged to its companion, but its vision went dark before any realization could arrive.

Khan didn't even look at the second wolf while he drew the knife out of its head. The beast crashed dead on the ground while he glanced at the bright pillars on his left. His spells were still raging and blocking the pack's path, but that situation wouldn't last forever.

The execution of the two powerful wolves had attracted some specimens' attention. One of the weaker monsters nearby had noticed Khan and didn't hesitate to pounce at him to exploit his apparent distraction. Yet, Khan pointed his free palm at the creature without moving his gaze from the pillars.

The conical version of the Wave spell engulfed the leaping wolf and burned its fur to a crisp before assaulting its flesh. The monster's skin shattered, and its muscles crumbled, killing it before it could touch the ground.

Khan gracefully stepped forward, letting the dead wolf crash behind him. The creature's body crumbled due to the many injuries it suffered. It transformed into a gory spectacle that created a big, bloody puddle, but none of that touched Khan.

The light generated by the Wave spell had notified the pack about Khan's presence. He even remained near the bright pillars, further exposing his figure. He wanted those creatures to look at him, and they didn't disappoint.

Hunger took over the monsters' brains, making them hurry toward Khan. Five of them reached his position before the rest of the pack and leaped forward, spreading their odd mouths to try to eat him. However, they ended up headbutting into each other without hitting anyone.

Khan reappeared above the group with a fully formed chaos spear. He let the glowing weapon slip from his palm, and a new pillar surged when it hit the Tainted animals. Still, that violent mana never reached Khan.

The partially burnt, stronger monster had also moved toward Khan, but the appearance of the pillar made it stab its paws into the ground to interrupt its momentum. The Tainted animal successfully stopped, but the world in its eyes suddenly turned upside down. Its headless body even appeared in its vision before everything went dark.

Only the remaining strong wolf in the pack could keep track of Khan's movements. The creature had also retreated a bit during the mess of pillars and explosions, but its eyes never left Khan.

Strangely enough, the wolf seemed to have some basic understanding of battle tactics. Its retreat had been strategic since its new position better suited its abilities, and the chance to use them appeared when Khan beheaded its companion.

The wolf's belly expanded until it reached the ground while mana accumulated inside it. Its mouth also opened, and blinding purple-red light shone from its throat.

A whooshing noise resounded when the belly suddenly shrunk, releasing all the accumulated mana. A big bullet escaped the wolf's mouth, flying rapidly toward Khan's position before exploding into an uneven pillar.

The wolf's hunger took over at that point. The creature ran at full speed toward the pillar, hoping to retrieve Khan's remains. However, an unstoppable pressure landed on its head, slamming it to the ground and interrupting its charge.

With the head pinned down, the wolf's body rolled on itself, and its back slammed into the ground. The creature slid for a few meters before stopping, but something suddenly grabbed its throat and pulled it up.

Khan stood on the wolf's belly with its throat firmly sealed in his grasp. His eyes were on the creature's face, trying to spot any trace of intelligence. However, as soon as the Tainted animal realized where it was, its hunger took control and made it struggle to bite at Khan.

The wolf howled and growled as its mouth opened and closed, stretching forward to reach for Khan's face. The creature was doing its best, but Khan's arm didn't move. Still, he saw nothing more than animal instincts, so his knife flashed forward.

The upper part of the monster's head fell off, and its movements stopped. Khan also let go of the creature's throat before looking into the distance. He was in the dark areas, outside the scanners' range. No one would notice him if he decided to leave.

'It's too soon for that,' Khan sighed, lightly tapping on the wolf's belly to send himself into the air. 'I can't go MIA yet.'

Four Tainted animals crashed on Khan's previous position. Those creatures had followed him, but their leaps failed to achieve anything. The assault only earned them first-row seats at the center of a new pillar.

Silence invaded the battlefield at that point. Khan inspected his surroundings while walking through the air, but the lack of external inputs made him sigh. He had disposed of the pack on his own and without encountering difficulty, but that wasn't his goal.

'Should I send another call?' Khan wondered, landing on the ground and storing his knife. He was ready to return to the human trench, but his senses suddenly alerted him about another threat.

Khan didn't have the time to dodge or think. A clicking growl escaped his mouth and sent flares of mana in every direction. The [Blood Shield] also covered his arms, which he crossed before his head as he turned to face a new threat.

A purple-red bullet as big as Khan's chest pierced the defensive flares of mana and landed on his crossed arms. The impact was so violent that Khan lost his footing and flew backward.

The bullet didn't exhaust its power after hitting Khan. It continued to push him away, burning through his skin and trying to pierce the [Blood Shield]. The alien technique was ready to give in, but Khan forcefully pushed his arms upward to send the purple-red attack away.

Chapter 593 Sniper

Khan kicked the air to push himself further back. His body half-spun to straighten his position, and another stomp followed to send him higher in the sky.

The bullet eventually lost momentum and began to fall, generating a large explosion once it touched the ground. The brittle surface had already suffered from the previous battle, and that detonation expanded the existing cracks, creating holes in multiple spots.

Khan kept track of the explosion's power without moving his eyes from the dark areas ahead. The symphony was a mess, but the bullet had left a long trail that dived into distant places.

As the explosion continued to rage, Khan gained a better understanding of its power. The bullet belonged to the realm of third-level mages but was stronger than his spears. It didn't only have more mana. Its density was also far higher.

Khan's arms were proof of the bullet's prowess. His defensive ability had always been unmatched among opponents at his same level due to the [Blood Shield]. Yet, that sudden attack had threatened to break through it.

The burns, pain, and smoke from Khan's forearms didn't affect his inspection of the dark areas. As surprising as it sounded, the bullet had come from places beyond his senses' reach. Its speed had also been incredible, turning him into a sitting duck in his current location.

That show of speed and power wasn't enough to scare Khan away. He could easily retreat, and a similar attack wouldn't take him by surprise anymore. His confidence allowed him to move away from the topic, which couldn't help but trigger his excitement.

'A sniper,' Khan considered. 'Can that be an instinctive behavior?'

Mutations could create all sorts of monsters, but general patterns existed. After all, animals mainly thought about eating and procreating. Some had more complex behaviors that involved control over territories or similar aspects, but most of that was connected to the two main drives.

Instead, the sniper attacked after the pack was no more. That distance wouldn't even allow it to retrieve eventual remains. There didn't seem to be any hunger involved in that behavior. Actually, Khan could see hints of a battle strategy.

'Come on,' Khan thought, keeping himself in the air. 'Fire again.'

The symphony could lead Khan to the bullet's source, but his freedom had limits. He risked crossing the human borders if he advanced carelessly, and that wasn't the right time or situation to break interspecies treaties.

Silent seconds went by, in which Khan's patience ran out. He lifted his right palm and summoned a tinge of mana before blowing on it. A simple message joined the symphony, creating a gale that flew rapidly toward the bullet's source.

The message didn't cause the reactions Khan hoped, but something else changed in the symphony. Lights only Khan could see appeared on the ground as more tremors unfolded. A new earthquake arrived, and a big chunk of the brittle surface caved in.

The new lights brightened as many tunnels became visible. An array of underground caves appeared before a huge cloud of dust surged, hiding it again. Still, multiple figures moved among that mess, announcing the arrival of a new pack.

Khan didn't have time to count the new opponents since his senses suddenly screamed, making him kick the air to his right. He moved away just in time to dodge another purple-red bullet, which crossed his previous position to fly in the distance.

The bullet entered the area illuminated by the vehicles' headlights and continued to advance, falling only when the human trench grew close. It landed near that defensive line, shocking anyone inside it.

'What is this range?!' Khan almost shouted inside his mind. Even his newest spell couldn't come close to that absurd feature. He could barely cross a quarter of that distance with it.

Khan would find it easier to justify that range in the presence of a cannon or similar weapons. However, the element carried by those bullets was a clear mark of a Tainted animal. Shockingly, something as strong as a third-level mage could achieve such incredible feats.

The amazement didn't make Khan miss details. The second bullet's timing had been too perfect to come from a mindless beast. He knew he was against something new, and the symphony could lead him to it.

Nevertheless, the new pack didn't stay still during Khan's inspection. Twenty or so wolf-like Tainted animals had resurfaced and begun to charge toward the human trench. Those numbers weren't enough to overcome Caspar's team, but the sniper was a dangerous variable Khan couldn't underestimate.

That advancing pack was an ideal distraction for both sides. The sniper could target the trench safely, but Khan could also use that chance to seize the uncommon specimen. Yet, he knew how he would feel if his companions suffered injuries.

"Fuck!" Khan eventually shouted, kicking the air before him to send himself backward. The natural mana also moved toward his legs, generating an inhumane acceleration that the pack couldn't match.

The pack almost had the same composition as the previous one. The new enemies only featured an additional specimen as strong as third-level warriors, but that didn't make any difference in Khan's mind.

The wolf-like creatures escaped the dark area and peeked into the white light, showing their ugly faces to the human team. The soldiers got ready to fire, but something crashed among the pack, halting the aiming process.

Khan landed on one of the weaker creatures' heads, which exploded on the spot. The impact made the headless body roll forward, slamming on Khan's back and pushing him ahead.

Khan used that push to accelerate even more, sending himself ahead of the pack while turning to face it. Needles flew left and right during that spinning motion, often landing on the Tainted animals before releasing their power.

The soldiers in the trench didn't get the chance to witness Khan's performance earlier since the battle had happened in the dark areas. Yet, the headlights granted a perfect view now, and the scanners also helped watch the spectacle.

Eyes widened and mouths hung in surprise as Khan flew left and right. The pack was ignoring him, and he showed no mercy. He only used one attack for each monster, which more than halved the number of threats rushing toward the trench.

The process had taken less than a minute, and the soldiers couldn't help but remain stunned at that show of efficiency. Khan was an unstoppable killing machine, effortlessly disposing of enemies that would take an entire team to fend off.

The scene was so mesmerizing that the soldiers missed the arrival of another purple-red bullet. The attack was as fast as the previous one but flew higher, gaining a longer range. Still, something got in its way before it could begin to descend.

Khan didn't miss the bullet. Its arrival actually partially confirmed the presence of an intelligent being. The attack had also targeted the trench, and he couldn't let it land.

When the bullet reached its highest point in the sky, Khan flew past it, stabbing a spear in its dense texture. The clash between the two spells generated a massive explosion that added purple-red tinges to the illuminated area, but nothing reached the surface or trench.

The explosion was so large that many soldiers forgot about the incoming pack, but Caspar showed his worth in that situation. His shouts resounded through the trench, bringing everyone's attention back to the remaining Tainted animals, and bullets finally began to fly.

Khan found himself above the explosion. The raging mana released in the detonation blocked his sight, but he relied on far more to study his surroundings.

The events on the surface became clear once Khan focused on his hearing and sensitivity. He had killed the stronger specimens during his assault, so the soldiers found it easy to fight back. They were dealing with the remaining monsters at a decent pace, reassuring Khan and turning his gaze toward the dark areas.

The human team could take care of itself, so Khan didn't hesitate to sprint back into the dark areas. He remained in the sky to deal with eventual additional bullets, but his flight remained uneventful even after abandoning the headlights.

The symphony acted as a guide that led Khan farther away from the human trench. He was probably going too far, but the lack of witnesses made him ignore that detail. Everything would be fine as long as he captured the sniper and brought it back to safe areas.

The darkness of Cegnore's night couldn't hinder Khan's vision, but a sudden flash of light tried to blind him, forcing him to close his eyes. His ability to see turned into a flaw, but his senses perceived the dense mass of mana flying toward him, and a needle formed in his hand before it was too late.

Khan sent the needle forward and released a clicking grow, covering his arms and face with the [Blood Shield]. An explosion unfolded, sending raging mana in every direction, and Khan sprinted directly into it.

The chaotic and wild purple-red flares illuminated the night, acting as a small star that shone on the plain below. No one sound of mind would dare to challenge that energy, but a fuming figure pierced it, shooting at high speed toward the ground to crash into a specific spot.

The scent of burned clothes and flesh invaded Khan's nostrils as his eyes slowly opened. He had chosen his landing spot for a precise reason, and the figure that unfolded in his vision confirmed that he had made the right choice.

A wolf-like creature stood a few meters from Khan, but he instantly noticed key differences from the other Tainted animals. That monster wasn't fat. Its belly was flat, and its azure fur hid defined abs. Its mouth also had normal proportions, and its face lacked the frenzy of its companions.

The monster didn't appear surprised about Khan's arrival. Its mana conveyed calm and confidence while its blue eyes looked past the smoke flowing out of its mouth. The creature was studying Khan, and he shared that interest.

Khan's eyes remained on the wolf as his right hand went to his chest. A pulling motion ripped the burned uniform off, exposing his intact torso and scar. That blue mark attracted the monster's attention, which began to move.

The wolf had its limbs stabbed into the ground, and retracting them made it assume a surprising posture. It didn't go on all fours. Instead, it stood on its rear legs and let the front ones lie at its torso's sides. That was a humanoid stance, and Khan didn't miss it.

Khan lifted his knife and prepared for a fight, but the wolf didn't share those intentions. Its eyes went to Khan's hair, which had surprisingly survived the explosion, before it pointed its right paw at him.

A low growl followed, and Khan didn't make much of it until his mind translated it. That cry had carried a thought, which he felt in the shape of the words "Potential host".

"That!" Khan thought, struggling to believe what he had just heard. "That was the Nak's language!"

Chapter 594 Horizon

Khan's memories of the Nak language were older than his tragedies. He was still in Ylaco's training camp back then, but Professor Thogett's xenolinguistics class had already given him troublesome clues.

Even before learning the Niqols' arts and transforming, Khan had confirmed that he could understand the Nak language. He didn't need studies or experience for that. His brain instinctively translated those seemingly meaningless sounds.

The same had happened with the Tainted animal, but Khan had reason to be surprised anyway. The fact that a monster seemingly evolved from mere beasts could speak that language was shocking. Yet, there was more to it.

The monster had used the same words from Khan's nightmare, which the scientists had also reported. He already didn't believe the matter to be a coincidence, but that event dispersed his last doubts.

"What do you mean by that?" Khan asked, but the humanoid wolf didn't move. It kept its paw pointed at him while showing the same calm as before.

Khan couldn't share that calm, and annoyance surged when he realized how he had to speak. He knew the theory behind the Nak language, and his expertise in the Nele's arts turned his attempt into a perfect execution.

"[What did you mean by that]?!" Khan shouted. He had only voiced a meaningless clicking growl, but the right thoughts filled it.

The growl changed something inside the wolf. A tremor ran through its mana but didn't affect its firm posture. It almost felt surprised that someone had replied to its cry, but understanding Khan's question was another matter altogether.

"[Potential host]," The wolf repeated through another seemingly meaningless growl. Khan's brain instantly translated it, but that didn't make him any happier.

'It must have limited cognitive abilities,' Khan quickly concluded. He believed the humanoid wolf was special, but its intelligence probably didn't involve every possible field.

Khan's mana had long since crossed the boiling point by then, but his mind was calm and used those wild urges to quicken his thoughts. That conclusion led to a strategy, which he instantly implemented.

Even when Khan spoke his version of the Nak language, words couldn't reach the humanoid wolf, so he would let the scientists deal with it. Capturing the creature came next, so natural mana flowed toward Khan's legs to generate a sudden acceleration.

Ideally, Khan would always try to inflict a deadly injury on unaware opponents. His speed was his best asset, so it was better to exploit it before enemies could catch wind of it.

However, killing wasn't the plan now. Khan aimed to capture, which involved immobilizing and putting the creature to sleep. The wolf had assumed a humanoid posture, so its legs became his first targets.

Many beings as strong as third-level warriors could follow Khan's sprint, but reacting to it was almost impossible. Khan teleported behind the wolf, and the glowing knife swiftly slashed the back of its right knee.

The wolf howled, turning toward the source of the pain to swing its stretched limb. Its reaction was quick, and the same went for its turning speed, but putting flesh and bones in front of Khan was a mistake.

The incoming limb approached Khan's face rapidly, but he was faster. Lightly tapping the ground pushed him to his right, putting him right below the paw's claws. He also lifted his knife, and the dash ended in a rain of dark blood.

Khan found himself a few meters to the wolf's right, and one glance at his left revealed the result of his attacks. The monster had leaned toward him since one of its legs had lost a joint, and its stretched forearm had bent oddly, hanging from the thin piece of flesh that still connected it to the rest of the limb.

The wolf could still stand on the damaged leg, but its flexibility disappeared. The same went for the other injured limb. A sharp movement would be enough to tear the entire forearm off. The monster had lost half its battle prowess, but Khan didn't celebrate yet.

'That should have cut the entire arm,' Khan thought, his feet already mustering the next sprint.

Khan was no stranger to oddly thick muscles, so the partially failed severing didn't bother him. The monster's body was nothing compared to Wayne's, and that was enough. As for eventual surprises, he didn't plan to discover them.

The wolf howled in anger as its calm shattered, but the kick that landed on its nape cut its cry short. Khan had put as much strength as possible into the attack, and the monster slightly bent forward under its weight.

Nevertheless, Khan suddenly found himself unable to push the wolf any further. The monster's back tensed up, and the same went for its abs, turning its slightly bent posture into an immovable object.

Khan sprinted again, but the wolf's eyes lit up, releasing purple-red beams. The monster also spun on itself, following Khan with its gaze in an attempt to hit him with the attack.

The Lightning-demon style offered immense flexibility, but the humanoid wolf only had to turn its head and eyes to point its beams at Khan. The amount of mana in the attack even sent warning messages to his senses, forcing him to run around the monster to search for an opening.

The beams dug deeply into the ground and stretched in the distance as Khan flew up, down, right, and left. He was faster than the attacks, but the difference wasn't big enough to create a window where he could dive in.

Moreover, mana had accumulated inside the Tainted animal, creating the specific pattern for the spherical Wave spell. The wolf was ready to cast that ability as soon as Khan got too close, but he didn't take the bait.

The situation worked in Khan's favor since his energy consumption was far lower. He couldn't go in yet, but the wolf was relying on mana-hungry spells. It was bound to get tired before Khan, and he continued to fly and evade while waiting for that opportunity.

Still, the wolf lasted longer than Khan had initially predicted. He spent half a minute flying around the monster without ever finding the right opening.

As the seconds passed, Khan decided to move to a more active role. After all, time wasn't on his side, but the wolf launched a loud howl before he could summon his mana, and the already destroyed ground began to shake again.

Khan had witnessed a similar scene, and the lights that appeared in his eyes confirmed his hunch. Until now, he had flown close to the surface to search for wider angles to exploit, but his next steps sent him higher in the air.

The beams followed Khan, and being almost right above the humanoid wolf made it harder for him to dodge. However, the changes involving the ground were far more concerning.

The earthquake continued until the surface crumbled, revealing an array of underground tunnels. Khan spotted far more passages than before, which had a matching number of Tainted animals. A new pack had arrived, and its cries filled the area.

Khan counted six specimens as strong as third-level warriors and more than twenty weaker creatures. None seemed to feature intelligence, but that didn't change their overall battle prowess.

The cloud of dust that had risen from the surface couldn't hinder Khan's inspection. He tried to figure out the pack's intentions, only to be distracted by a new detail. The humanoid wolf had finally retracted its beams.

The end of one attack only marked the beginning of another. The pack didn't move, so the symphony was messy, but the humanoid wolf shone brighter than its companions, allowing Khan to see its body through the dust.

The humanoid wolf did its best to get on all fours. The injured leg wasn't a problem, but the right arm was gone, and no amount of strength could keep it straight. So, the monster limited itself to three limbs, stabbing them into the new surface while mana gathered in its abdomen.

Khan didn't need more clues to understand what was happening. He joined his palms, creating a chaos spear as he flew higher in the sky. The humanoid wolf eventually finished gathering mana, and a dense bullet shot toward Khan.

The bullet met a falling spear during its flight, exploding into a sea of raging waves that created a blinding surface in the middle of the sky. Khan flew above it, standing in areas the flares couldn't reach while his senses worked overtime.

The new pack wasn't moving toward the trench, which was reassuring. Yet, Khan didn't know how it would react to his retreat.

Attacking the humanoid wolf in the middle of so many Tainted animals was also a problem. Khan could try to pull something off with his speed, but the threat of the spherical Wave spell remained since many of those specimens had enough mana to cast it.

Khan reviewed simulations and plans in his mind while flares continued to rage, but something else suddenly reached his senses, sending his gaze into the distance. Mechanical noises had joined the howls and growls below him, and a familiar red glow soon appeared on the horizon.

Chapter 595 Invitation

Khan's senses had long since gone beyond what anyone could consider human. That didn't only apply to his sensitivity. His ears, touch, nose, tongue, and eyes had also evolved, developing a connection to mana.

That had expanded the range of what Khan could feel, and not only in terms of depth. He could also sense things far away, which was exactly what happened now.

The mechanical noises and red lights were distant, but Khan knew what they meant. He had actually predicted a similar outcome. It was one of the possible consequences of his call.

However, the timing wasn't ideal. Khan was in a troublesome situation, and retreating would leave him empty-handed. He could still call the Tainted animals on a different night, but people might become suspicious, so it was better to get something now that he had the chance.

Khan fixed his eyes on the purple-red waves that separated him from the surface. That bright mana tried to blind him, but his focus was already past it. The pack's arrangements filled his mind, removing any useless thought and turning him into a weapon of the symphony.

The goal was simple. Khan didn't know if he had stepped outside the human territory, so subjugating the special wolf there might get him nowhere. He needed to bring it closer to the trench to increase his chances of keeping it.

Since the matter involved the Nak, Khan's brain worked overtime, reaching unprecedented levels of thinking speed. It highlighted all the Tainted animals that could cast the Wave spell and studied the humanoid wolf. Khan would only get one chance, so he had to succeed.

Khan exhaled slowly before letting himself fall into the blinding waves. He turned upside down, and the flares shone on his face, sending warmth that warned him about their danger.

Nevertheless, the bright surface wasn't equally dense everywhere. Its wild nature created thinner and safer areas, and the symphony led Khan toward them. He only had to stomp the air to send himself in that direction.

The pack was howling at the sky, seemingly angry at the bright patch that illuminated the area. Those waves of mana were so brilliant that the monsters didn't notice the two spears that fell through them until it was too late.

The howls transformed into painful cries and yelps as the two spears exploded in the middle of the pack. Scorching pillars surged, killing some specimens and forcing many to retreat. Chaos spread, creating the perfect hunting ground.

Khan used the confusion to dive through the bright surface and toward the pack. Smoke surrounded his figure due to his burning pants and flesh, but no pain reached his mind. Only the symphony filled his silent thoughts, warning him about a possible problem.

The pack had fallen prey to its most basic instincts, but the humanoid wolf didn't let the spears distract it. The creature had its eyes fixed on the bright patch in the sky and didn't miss the appearance of a fuming figure. It was actually waiting for it.

The humanoid wolf's eyes lit up, shooting beams that rose into the sky to intercept the fuming figure. The monster was sure an evasive maneuver would follow. Yet, to its surprise, Khan continued to descend in a straight line.

Khan had only needed a few exchanges to understand how strong the humanoid wolf was. The power of that specimen's spells was off the charts, but its body didn't share that feature.

However, the wolf remained as strong as a third-level warrior, stronger actually. It wasn't Wayne, but its flesh had still partially survived the Divine Reaper. That wasn't a feat many could accomplish.

It would take something special to make the wolf faint, and Khan could only think about a concussion. Still, he needed to go past his peak speed to deliver it, which involved exploiting the gravitational pull without changing direction.

Khan experienced no particular emotion at the sight of the beams. He felt no fear, worry, or resolve. His mind existed for a sole purpose, and his body moved to fulfill it.

The blood vessels in Khan's right forearm clotted as he stretched it forward. The beams hit it and began to dig into his flesh, but the alien technique held strong.

Sadly, Khan's speed worked against him. The [Blood Shield] endured as long as possible, but the beams eventually pierced the technique, digging into Khan's flesh and aiming for his bones.

Still, that moment didn't last long. After all, Khan was descending as fast as possible. It only took a second for the wolf to enter his range.

While the beams were still firing, Khan abruptly spun, channeling all the accumulated momentum on his stretched left leg. Pain spread from his back, but he ignored it as the tip of his heel became the home of immense power.

Everything went silent for a fraction of a second when Khan's heel hit the wolf's head. The impact was so violent that winds blew from its position. The monster's limbs also dug deeper into the ground, immobilizing it.

'Something cracked,' Khan thought, worried about the humanoid wolf's condition, but the situation prevented him from delaying his next move.

Khan landed before the humanoid wolf but didn't bother to look at it. The symphony had already told him that the creature had fainted, and the limbs stabbed into the ground also kept it straight.

However, the situation was different around Khan. The pillars were still distracting many Tainted animals, but a few had noticed Khan's arrival, and his landing only brought more attention to him.

Those Tainted animals had simple minds, so they hurried toward Khan as soon as they saw him. Yet, Khan suddenly lifted his right leg before delivering a powerful stomp that spread his mana through the surface.

The monsters only cared about their hunger, so the stomp didn't scare them away. However, cracks quickly opened under their paws, and their weight did the rest. The many underground tunnels collapsed, destroying the new surface and removing their footholds.

The destruction spread all around Khan. Half of the pack fell, buried under dust and soil. That already messy environment changed once again, but two figures remained unaffected by the event.

The humanoid wolf also began to fall as the ground under it collapsed. However, Khan's back was ready to receive it, and the kick that followed sent both of them into the sky.

A burning sensation spread from Khan's back as the wolf's fur rubbed on it, but he disregarded the pain and flew forward. The monster was heavy, which affected his speed, but nothing stopped him from returning to the edge of the illuminated area.

Khan could push himself until the human trench but opted to land there. Caspar and the other soldiers would be a hindrance in the imminent meeting. It was better if he dealt with it on his own.

The pillars eventually dispersed, and the dust lifted by Khan's stomp vanished, allowing the pack to make a point of the situation. Those monsters noticed Khan in the distance and planned to go after him. However, the mechanical noises got closer, claiming their attention.

A team of forty Thilku riding bikes and jeeps rushed through the plain to intercept the pack busy climbing out of the new hole. Their arrival rekindled the monsters' hunger, and a battle unfolded.

Khan watched the battle from his position while keeping track of the humanoid wolf's mana. The creature lay fainted at his side, but its breathing was irregular and faint. The kick had got it good, and Khan could only hope its resilience triumphed.

Surprisingly enough, the Thilku fought with their bare hands. They didn't rely on rifles or similar weapons to deal with the pack, but their performance was overwhelming anyway.

The Thilku team wasn't only more numerous. It also only had third-level warriors, which gave the pack no chance to win. Most monsters died in the following minutes, while a few ended up in chains and loaded on some cars.

Khan wasn't exactly hiding himself, especially with the headlights shining so close. The Thilku had noticed him, but nothing came in his direction during the battle. The aliens kept ignoring him even while preparing the prisoners, but something changed once that process was over.

A group of four Thilku hopped on their circular bikes and pointed their red headlights at Khan. He showed no fear as the team approached him and even performed a traditional bow when the rides stopped a few meters away.

The four Thilku dropped out of the bikes and walked among the red lights before stopping in front of Khan. They didn't say anything, but Khan felt their gazes even with his head lowered.

The Thilku inspected the fainted wolf before moving to Khan's injuries. He had burns everywhere, and his right arm featured two deep, bleeding cuts that almost reached his bones. His back also had similar wounds, even if far lighter.

Still, the Thilku's attention eventually moved to Khan's blue hair. They had been briefed about Khan, so they instantly recognized him.

"[Thank you for the help]," Khan announced at that point, breaking his bow and straightening his position. "[Our team would have found it hard to deal with the pack]."

The scar became visible, and the Thilku's eyes fell on it, but their duties eventually took over. One stepped forward and pointed at the fainted wolf before uttering predictable words. "[The Thilku need that specimen]."

"[Regulations state that humans can take anything in their territory]," Khan declared. "[This specimen belongs to me]."

"[Cegnore belongs to the Empire]!" The Thilku grunted, raising his voice.

"[I respect the Empire]," Khan said, "[That's why I'm honoring the agreements it signed]."

The Thilku opened its mouth, but nothing came out of it. Khan had cornered him with a single reply. He had put himself on the side of the Empire while also preserving his interests.

"[However]," Khan continued, leaning toward the fainted wolf to lift it, "[I must repay you. Your whole team is invited to a feast in the human building]."

Chapter 596 Surgery

The Thilku would have never expected a human to invite them to a feast, especially on their own planet. However, they didn't misunderstand Khan's words, and refusing wasn't an option either.

Feasts weren't only crucial in the Thilku's customs. The alien team had effectively helped the humans in that raid. Khan was also important enough to claim some authority. Ignoring the invitation would basically be impolite on many levels.

Khan adjusted the humanoid wolf on his back before glancing at the Thilku. The aliens did their best to retain blank faces, but it was clear that the invitation had put them in a tough position. The four even exchanged looks before the Thilku in charge eventually replied.

"[We'll inform the rest of the team]," The Thilku announced before realizing that the event required better manners. He quickly grabbed his cape's edge to perform a customary bow, and polite words followed. "[Thank you for having us, Captain Khan]."

'They really know about me,' Khan thought before wearing a fake smile. "[I'll inform my team]."

Khan didn't wait for a reply. He set off while the Thilku was still immersed in his bow, and the team soon became too far to check its behavior.

The human trench quickly grew near, and every eye inside it fell on Khan as he landed behind it. Caspar didn't hesitate to jump out of the channel to greet him, but Khan didn't give him a chance to speak.

"We'll have a feast with the Thilku in a few hours," Khan announced, adjusting the wolf on his back. "Get the cafeteria ready."

"A feast?" Caspar gasped as panic invaded him. "We barely have food for ourselves. How can we-?"

"Just do it," Khan ordered, fixing his cold eyes on Caspar. "Ask the scientists to give a share, and don't be stingy. The Thilku eat a lot."

"But, Captain," Caspar tried to complain. He didn't want to refuse Khan, but bringing the Thilku to the human building was a safety hazard. He wasn't even sure the decontamination process would work on them.

"Make it happen," Khan declared. "Mention my name whenever someone complains."

Caspar didn't know what to say, and his eyes eventually fell on Khan's body. He was a mess, and the deep cuts on his right arm made Caspar wonder how he could still use that limb.

"Khan," Caspar gulped, using a far different tone. "Are you okay?"

Khan was ready to set off again, but Caspar's new tone claimed his attention. His stern mood faltered when he saw Caspar's worried expression, but helplessness soon invaded him.

"I'm always okay," Khan reassured, smiling and nodding at the fainted wolf. "I'll deliver this to the scientists. You take care of the feast."

The smile conflicted so much with Khan's appearance that Caspar couldn't find the strength to argue anymore. The scene made him sad, and that feeling remained even after Khan left.

'He is a good man,' Khan thought while flying across the dark sky. He wasn't used to genuinely good people, so the interaction made him feel guilty. Still, he was sure he would get the chance to clear the issue in the following nights.

The discomfort caused by the injuries grew stronger now that the tense part had ended. Khan had become used to burns, but his back hurt and his right arm eventually fell in his view.

'I can't move my pinky and ring finger,' Khan thought, staring at his shaking right hand. The two cuts had stopped bleeding, but the damage remained, and medical attention seemed mandatory.

'Monica will be so mad,' Khan sighed before disregarding any useless thought and hurrying back to the human building.

Khan had memorized the area's layout, so he met no problems during the flight. He even landed before the entrance connected to the scientific division, and, to his surprise, the gate opened almost immediately.

"Step forward, Captain," A robotic voice came out of the warehouse that unfolded in Khan's eyes, and he complied with the orders. He entered the area, and the gate closed to isolate him from the outside world.

White gas came out of openings across the warehouse once the place was isolated. The contamination process started, and Khan dumped the wolf on the floor while waiting for it to end.

A few minutes had to pass before the warehouse sucked back the smoke. A narrow passage on Khan's right opened at that point, and a man wearing a white coat and a gas mask emerged.

"Mister Wulfo?" Khan called, recognizing the man from his mana signature.

"Is this the specimen?" Winston spoke through the mask, hurrying toward the fainted wolf. "Is it alive?"

"It breathes," Khan commented, looking at the creature. "I had to rough it up a bit."

"It is indeed different," Winston commented, crouching toward the monster to turn its belly up. He was wearing long gloves, so his gestures carried no hesitation.

"The Thilku sent reports describing similar features," Winston continued, lifting his head to look at Khan. "Are you sure it's intelligent?"

"It spoke," Khan revealed. "It used the Nak language to say host."

"Did it?" Winston gasped, excitement building inside him. "Wait, how can you be sure of that?"

Khan wore a blank face before pointing at the scar on his chest. Winston immediately realized how stupid his question had been, but after taking a good look at Khan, more details fell into his view.

The mask partially hid Winston's face, but Khan could sense his feelings through his mana. He didn't want to explain himself with the incoming feast, so he took the chance to say his goodbyes.

"I'll take my leave now," Khan declared. "We'll have between thirty to forty Thilku in the cafeteria tonight. I hope the scientific division can share some of its provisions."

"Oh," Winston nodded, lowering his head before lifting it right away. "What?! The Thilku here?!"

"Is that a problem?" Khan wondered. "The building should be equipped for the eventuality. We are in Empire territory in the end."

"We do have the equipment," Winston stated, standing up, "But we need time to prepare."

"Get it done," Khan ordered. "I need this meeting."

Khan didn't wait for Winston's reply. He also needed to prepare for the meeting, so he turned to approach the exit. Winston didn't know what to say, but noticing the two long cuts on Khan's back made him gulp loudly.

"Captain," Winston called. "Wait a moment."

"What?" Khan asked, peeking past his shoulder, but Winston had already stopped looking at him. The scientist had begun tinkering with the warehouse's menus, and pieces of the floor soon moved to release a cage that trapped the fainted wolf.

The cage began to move on its own, approaching one of the walls and opening another passage. It didn't take long before the wolf left the warehouse, disappearing once that surface closed.

"Come with me," Winston ordered, heading for the corridor he had used before. Khan didn't know what was happening, but Winston's mana reeked of good intentions, so he followed him.

The corridor was narrow and had multiple turns. It was hard to navigate, but the walk didn't last long. Winston soon pressed on a surface, which opened into a white lab full of machines Khan didn't recognize.

"Sit there," Winston announced, pointing at a chair in the middle of the lab. "I'll be right back."

Winston quickly walked through a door on the other side of the lab, leaving Khan alone. The place had a big window that showed a similar area, and Winston entered it to retrieve a few machines.

"Captain," Winston said once he returned inside the lab, "Remove your pants. Underwear too."

Winston dropped the new equipment on an interactive desk nearby and removed his mask. He took a deep breath, enjoying the unfiltered air that reached his nose, but a frown appeared on his face when he noticed that Khan was still seated.

"Captain?" Winston called.

"Well," Khan voiced, clearing his throat. "You are a fine-looking man, Mister Wulfo, but I have a girlfriend."

The statement removed any strength from Winston's body. His face lost any trace of life as he stared blankly at Khan.

"You aren't the playful type," Khan commented, slightly disappointed. "I guess I'll have to stick to Captain Chaunac."

"Do you want me to check your injuries or not?" Winston asked.

"Yes, yes," Khan laughed, jumping on his feet and removing the sheath. His pants were a mess, so he directly ripped them off, and he showed no shame when he moved to his underwear.

Winston carefully inspected Khan's movements to check his state before grabbing a scanner from the interactive desk. He approached Khan and moved the machine across his body, often mumbling or gasping when results appeared in his eyes.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Winston couldn't help but ask, pointing at the hideous injury on Khan's right arm.

"Of course it does," Khan replied, lifting his right hand to check how much he could move. "I think two or three fingers are dead."

Winston felt at a loss for words. Khan's voice didn't convey any sadness, fear, or pain. He looked used to getting hurt, which made Winston feel bad when he recalled his age.

"The cuts are deep," Winston eventually explained, dropping the scanner to retrieve a rectangular machine. "This will fix nerves and tendons, but you'll need a few weeks to recover full mobility."

"Weeks I have," Khan uttered while Winston brought the rectangular machine to a desk nearby and opened its lids. Many tiny mechanical arms featuring blades and other tools became visible, and Winston pointed at a long hole under them.

"Place your arm here," Winston ordered. "I'll get the painkillers."

"Are they mana-based?" Khan asked.

"Of course," Winston replied.

"Then, no," Khan sighed, crossing Winston to place his right arm in the appointed spot.

"Captain, the surgery is invasive," Winston tried to convince Khan.

"No," Khan repeated, shaking his head and closing his eyes to prepare for the procedure.

"It will leave a scar," Winston warned.

"It won't be the first," Khan chuckled.

"Very well," Winston sighed, closing the lid and activating the machine's functions.

The machine scanned Khan's arm before binding it in multiple spots. Metal restrictions trapped his elbow, wrist, and biceps, almost forcing him on his knees.

"Here," Winston said, handing Khan a piece of cloth. "Bite on this."

Khan accepted the offer, seizing the cloth and putting it in his mouth. He bit hard on it, and the pain soon started.

Grunts escaped Khan's mouth as he felt tiny blades piercing his flesh and scouring through it to reach the injured areas. He had grown used to the pain after fighting and meditating, but that continuous suffering was different since he could escape it.

Khan's mana reached the boiling point, and he couldn't trick it. That energy knew that Khan could escape the surgery and found no reason to remain trapped under it.

Things threatened to worsen when a clicking growl resounded in the back of Khan's mind. The cry grew louder, warning about an imminent explosion. The critical point was approaching, and Khan could only think of one method to calm down.

"Get out!" Khan shouted, the piece of cloth falling from his mouth.

"Captain," Winston called.

"Get the fuck out!" Khan shouted again.

Winston could see that Khan was in pain but didn't think much of it. Yet, people's pride worked in mysterious ways, and Winston respected it enough to head for the exit.

"Wait," Khan grunted, forcing himself to stand straight. "Hand me my pants."

Winston complied, giving the ragged pants to Khan, which he held still with his legs while retrieving his phone. He unlocked the screen, glaring at Winston to remind him about the previous order.

'Stupid mana,' Khan cursed while reaching for the familiar folder and waiting until Winston left the lab to open a specific video.

Monica's face filled the screen. Her eyes were closed, and her messy hair covered her cheeks, but a giggle soon escaped her mouth. She looked at the camera before turning to her side, using her left arm as a pillow.

"I thought we were done with the videos," Monica teased, her half-sleepy eyes moving between the camera and the face behind it.

"I couldn't help myself," Khan's voice came from the phone. "You were too beautiful."

The camera retreated, giving a better view of Monica's body. Her chest and flat belly appeared on the screen, and a hint of legs joined them.

"You are a hopeless scoundrel," Monica scolded. "I forgive you only because your head is filled with me."

"Not only my head," The Khan on the phone said. "You made sure of that."

Monica pouted, but recalling the imminent departure made her drop her pretenses. If Khan wanted to bring more of her to Cegnore, she wouldn't refuse.

"So," Monica said, lowering her voice to gain a tempting tone, "What should I do, dear?"

"I won't let you sleep if we make another video like that," The Khan on the phone laughed, and a hand moved past the camera to reach Monica's face. "Give me something for when I miss more than your butt."

"Dummy," Monica pouted but still rubbed her cheek on Khan's palm. She closed her eyes to memorize his touch but eventually opened them to look at the camera. "Remember that I love you, okay?"

"I love you too," Khan said, matching the words he spoke in the video. The camera fell on the mattress at that point, and sweet sounds resounded until the couple remembered to close it.

Khan let himself fall to his knees and brought his silent phone to his forehead. The video had successfully distracted him, calming down his mana and making him stick to the surgery. However, loneliness filled that space.

'When did I become like this?' Khan wondered.

The Slums had made Khan independent. He had gotten used to being alone, but loving Liiza had changed more than his emotional spectrum.

When Khan kept himself busy, things were still fine, but the empty moments reminded him of the absence of what he truly wanted. He had loved again with Monica, and not having her at his side created a void he couldn't fill.

'When did I unlearn how to be alone?' Khan cursed.

Truth be told, Khan was being harsh on himself. He didn't forget how to be alone. He had experienced something far better, which created an unbearable comparison. Khan had learned bliss, so misery was tougher to handle.

'The dangers of happiness,' Khan sighed. Part of him wished to be perfect, but love came with flaws, and the current loneliness was one of them. He preferred that temporary weakness over a life without Monica.

Khan's arm stopped hurting, and he lifted his gaze to inspect the machine. The latter remained silent, so he straightened his position and lay down his phone before waving at the window. Winston was on the other side, and the gesture made him move.

"Did the machine finish?" Winston asked as soon as he entered the lab before approaching Khan to get his answer. He lifted the machine's lid and freed Khan's arm before inspecting its state.

Khan could also peek at his arm from his position. Two burn-like scars had appeared on his forearm, going around half of it. Those marks were flashy, but time would probably take care of them.

Winston pressed his fingers in various spots of Khan's forearm, sometimes triggering slight pain. Everything looked fine, so new orders arrived. "Try to move it. Slowly."

Khan did as Winston had ordered. He lifted his arm and flexed his elbow. Everything went well there, but pain arrived once he tried to close his fingers. Khan could slowly make a fist, but the process hurt quite a bit.

"It will get better," Winston reassured, recognizing the pain on Khan's face. "I'll find a brace now."

"No brace," Khan refused. "I can't look weak before the Thilku."

"Your arm didn't actually heal," Winston tried to explain. "The sutures might snap if you move it too much."

"I'll be careful," Khan promised. "Just make tight bandages."

Winston wanted to argue, but defeating Khan with words was simply impossible. He had already tasted defeat once and wasn't eager to experience it again.

Moreover, Khan had stayed true to his word and had shown surprising endurance during the surgery. Winston disliked his methods and personality. Still, he couldn't help but feel some respect.

"Bandages it is," Winston sighed. "I also need to take a look at your back and burns. I would suggest you avoid showers, but you aren't exactly a good patient."

"Showers I can avoid," Khan laughed. "The Thilku usually celebrate after missions, so being dirty is fine."

"Oh," Winston exclaimed. "I didn't know that."

"I told you," Khan uttered, shooting a meaningful glance at Winston. "I am a trusted figure among the Thilku. Knowing them is my job."

Winston struggled to match Khan's young face with his expertise and feats. However, the many marks on his naked body helped. Khan still carried some scars from all the bullets or wounds he had suffered, which created a far different image.

"I'll get the bandages," Winston eventually said, diverting his gaze and heading for the previous interactive desk. Yet, the temperature suddenly dropped, forcing him to interrupt his search and look at Khan.

"Say," Khan voiced, inspecting the ceiling and the corners of the lab. "Does this place have cameras?"

"Of course," Winston revealed, confused about the faint fear spreading inside his mind.

"Are they active?" Khan asked.

"No," Winston replied. "We both know this isn't standard procedure."

"Are you sure?" Khan pressed on while his gaze continued to wander the ceiling.

"I know how this lab works," Winston snorted. "I happen to be the second in command of the scientific division, in case you have forgotten."

"That's for the best," Khan exclaimed, finally looking at Winston to show one of his darkest faces. "I wouldn't hesitate to destroy the entire building to prevent what happened here from leaking outside."

Chapter 597 Feast

The threat ruined any chance to improve the relationship with Winston, but Khan felt the need to say it since Monica's video was involved. Nevertheless, Winston was a professional and continued patching him even if the tones had grown colder.

Khan and Winston didn't exchange any unnecessary pleasantries once the visit was over. Winston limited himself to accompanying Khan to the other section of the building, but nothing other than that. They couldn't spend more time together since both had important tasks.

The scientific side had spare military uniforms, so Khan reappeared among the soldiers donning clean clothes. However, his appearance carried the marks of the recent battle, and rumors had already spread.

The uniform hid most bandages, but some peeked past Khan's right sleeve to keep his wrist still. He also had a large band-aid on his left cheek, and his blue hair was as flashy as always. Anyone could identify him and confirm the rumors, and murmurs spread as he crossed corridors and halls.

"I heard he defeated four waves on his own," A soldier whispered.

"No," Another soldier stated. "It was five."

"I also heard five from some of the guys who came back with the Captain," A third soldier said.

"Damn," Another soldier exclaimed. "Is he even twenty yet?"

"In a couple of weeks," A soldier responded. "What were you doing when you were that age?"

"Cleaning weapons in a training camp," The previous soldiers scoffed.

"Don't compare us to him," Another soldier scolded. "He isn't like us."

"He is the monster of Nippe 2," A soldier voiced, and many echoed those words.

The soldiers were doing their best to suppress their voices, but nothing could escape Khan's ears. Still, he ignored the comments and walked with his gaze fixed ahead. He was willing to play the role of the monster as long as it brought him fame.

Khan's attitude toward the rumors didn't change even after the soldiers began talking about the Thilku. The news of the invitation had spread quickly, and many had questions about it. Yet, no one dared to bring their doubts to Khan.

Crossing the building took longer without jeeps and similar vehicles, but Khan stuck to walking to show a confident stance. The soldiers had to see that mere battles couldn't take him down. He had to convey a superior and unreachable aura, and that steady stroll fulfilled his goal.

Reaching the cafeteria brought a change in the scenery. Caspar was there, shouting orders to multiple soldiers busy rearranging the area. Those seats weren't Thilku-friendly, and the same went for the space among tables, so adjustments were needed.

"Captain!" Caspar gasped when he noticed Khan approaching his position. "Is everything okay?"

Caspar's eyes darted between Khan's exposed bandages, but the latter dodged the question. "How long until we are ready?"

"Half an hour," Caspar responded. "It would help if we knew when the Thilku were coming."

"What about the trench?" Khan asked, ignoring Caspar's hidden question. It was still night, so a team had to be outside to defend the perimeter.

"I replaced all the empty spots and added a little extra," Caspar revealed. "Though, everything seems quiet for now."

'Hopefully, that pack was the last,' Khan thought before changing the topic. "Captain, how is your Thilku?"

"What?" Caspar exclaimed, and understanding what the question meant made him shake his head.

"I couldn't possibly preside in official meetings with the Thilku."

"A few of our soldiers have to be here," Khan said, glancing at Caspar, "And I need someone to keep them in check."

Caspar didn't know how to react to the offer. He moved away his dreadlocks to get a better look at Khan, but the latter appeared completely serious. Khan was doing him a big favor, but meeting his expectations could be problematic.

"Captain," Caspar called, planning to tackle the issue seriously. However, Khan didn't give him the chance to speak.

"Caspar, can I leave this to you?" Khan directly asked, leaving Caspar speechless once again.

Caspar almost couldn't believe that Khan wanted to rely on him. The idea was flattering, and other aspects of the request looked appealing too. That was Caspar's chance to get closer to the Thilku and deepen his relationship with Khan. He couldn't miss it.

"Yes, sir!" Caspar almost shouted, performing a military salute. "Leave it to me!"

"Captain, we have the same rank," Khan reminded, chuckling while eyeing a corner of the cafeteria. "I'll be there if you need me."

"You heard the Captain!" Caspar shouted at the soldiers, even if none of them was nearby. "Hurry up with those chairs!"

More orders resounded, but Khan didn't bother to hear them. He reached the cafeteria's corner and sat down, closing his eyes to meditate.

The previous week had been quite stressful due to the training sessions and night shifts. Cegnore's longer days had worsened it, and Khan had also fought and suffered injuries on top of that.

It was safe to assume that Khan was exhausted, and his mind confirmed that. Even his check-up technique sent warning signals, especially from his right forearm. He needed to rest and let himself heal, but his night wasn't over yet.

Minutes and hours passed while Khan forced his mana to flow through his body. His energy enveloped the many injuries, quickening the healing process and slowly increasing his attunement.

The process was as painful as ever, especially with the new injuries, but the meditative state helped suppress any reaction. Khan's poker face didn't falter while he sat cross-legged on the floor, and a change in his surroundings eventually forced him to open his eyes.

Caspar was walking toward Khan, and seeing him opening his eyes made him stop to perform a military salute. Khan understood what was happening even if no words flew in his direction, so he stood up to prepare for the event.

"How many?" Khan asked.

"Twenty," Caspar replied. "We can match their numbers."

"Do it," Khan nodded, scratching the corners of his eyes, "And come with me to welcome them."

Khan inspected the cafeteria while Caspar turned to convey the new orders to the soldiers. The new arrangements offered fewer and bigger tables that had more space among each other. Larger seats also stood at their sides, creating a comfortable environment for the Thilku.

After conveying the orders, Caspar reached Khan's side, and the two left the cafeteria to approach the main gate. The area was surprisingly orderly now, featuring two rows of soldiers that stretched from that big entrance. The teams were ready to welcome the Thilku, and the two Captains joined them.

The security measures made the process slow and clunky, but a small passage at the center of the gate eventually opened, releasing the first wave of guests. Three Thilku stepped forward, entering the human building and inspecting it with their wary eyes, but Khan didn't leave them alone for too long.

"[Welcome to our headquarters]," Khan announced, reaching the three Thilku and performing a traditional bow.

"Thank you for having us, friends," The Thilku in the middle of the trio stated in a good human accent while bowing. The alien's imposing and muscular figure could trick even expert eyes, but the golden hair stretching from her nape marked her as a woman.

Khan didn't think much of that. He mostly focused on the trio's level, which matched his. He had yet to see someone stronger than a third-level warrior on Cegnore, but that probably was a planned move on the Thilku's side.

'They must have someone stronger,' Khan thought, interrupting the bow to show a polite smile at the trio. The female Thilku also straightened her back and moved to the mandatory pleasantries.

"We didn't expect such invitations in our home," The female Thilku exclaimed.

"[Please, you are guests]," Khan responded, imitating Lord Exr's words. "[Your language is more than fine]."

The female Thilku didn't expect Khan to have such fitting manners, but her face didn't convey her surprise. Khan still sensed it but decided to ignore the reaction.

"[You did us a favor]," Khan continued. "[A feast is the least we can do to repay you]."

"[From what I hear]," The female Thilku uttered, "[You were holding your ground just fine. You match your reputation, Captain Khan]."

"[I'm flattered]," Khan smiled. "[May I know who am I speaking to]?"

"[I'm Vaasa]," The female Thilku revealed. "[I handle some of the relationships with the Global Army]."

"[That's why you know me]," Khan laughed.

"[Your name is known in Lord Exr's domain]," Vaasa explained. "[The Thilku don't ignore allies who helped them]."

'They spread it on purpose,' Khan thought with a polite smile plastered on his face. 'How fitting.'

It made sense for the Thilku to praise allies, even if they came from different species. It would go against their pride to ignore such feats.

Nevertheless, Khan couldn't help but feel slightly troubled. Being famous was good, but Vaasa didn't sound like the average Thilku. She was less friendly than Amox and Lord Exr. She was closer to a politician than a soldier.

Khan and Vaasa didn't exchange more words in that public area. They remained silent while the Thilku completed the safety measures and crossed the gate. It took a while, but a team of twenty aliens eventually gathered inside the building.

Caspar and Khan didn't hesitate to lead the Thilku deeper into the building. They avoided vehicles to pretend that they had nothing to hide, and the silence continued until everyone gathered in the cafeteria.

Troops were waiting in the area, with each soldier standing behind their appointed seats. Caspar took care of leading the alien team toward the tables while Khan brought Vaasa toward a more isolated spot that would offer the two some privacy.

As soon as Khan and Vaasa sat down, the feast began. Soldiers delivered booze and cold food, which everyone ate with their bare hands. Caspar knew about those details, and Khan could only rejoice to see the humans sticking to his directives.

Of course, Khan didn't pay too much attention to the general arrangements or atmosphere. He only occasionally checked that everything was okay while his focus remained on Vaasa.

The two exchanged basic pleasantries and meaningless words for the first part of the feast. Vaasa wanted to leave the first move to Khan, and he had a similar idea. They studied each other in that phase, and Vaasa strangely lost the upper ground.

Khan could express himself with more than words. His lack of hesitation toward eating with his bare hands, unbiased behavior, and openness created a strange image in Vaasa's eyes. Somehow, she felt to be in the company of a Thilku rather than a political ally.

Khan aggravated that trend by sharing stories about his time in Neuria. He opted for the happy ones, mentioning Amox as often as possible. Things worsened when he started discussing the Thilku runes, forcing Vaasa to change the topic.

"[It's uncommon for beasts to attack the human trench]," Vaasa casually mentioned. "[The Global Army was lucky to have you here]."

"[It's more than uncommon, isn't it]?" Khan replied, his eyes lighting up at that opportunity. "[We were supposed to get leftovers, not proper assaults]."

"[Cegnore's environment can be hard to predict]," Vaasa vaguely said. "[We are still working on listing every possible pattern]."

"[That's dangerous]," Khan pointed out. "[If something bigger comes in our way, we might lose this building]."

"[The Empire is responsible for this building and its inhabitants]," Vaasa stated. "[Nothing will happen as long as you are under its protection]."

"[Having the Empire's protection is reassuring]," Khan uttered, "[But you said it yourself. Cegnore is unpredictable]."

"[Hard to predict]," Vaasa corrected. "[What happened tonight was an oddity]."

Khan and Vaasa exchanged a meaningful glance. Her face had grown slightly colder, while Khan still wore a fake smile.

"[My Thilku isn't perfect]," Khan lied. "[Apologies]."

"[I don't mind speaking your language, Captain Khan]," Vaasa offered.

"[I wouldn't dare to impose on guests]," Khan chuckled. "[However, the issue is worrying. I'm afraid I'll have to request additional troops and weapons. Maybe a second building, too]."

"[That's impossible]," Vaasa declared. "[The Empire and the Global Army have signed precise agreements]."

"[But the situation changed]," Khan pointed out. "[Cegnore isn't as safe as the Global Army thought]."

"[No one ever said Cegnore was safe]," Vaasa commented.

"[Not as safe]," Khan corrected. "[I'm guessing the Empire is willing to increase our protection due to the recent developments]."

"[That would be a hasty move]," Vaasa rebuked. "[We still don't know much about this odd event]."

"[So, what]?" Khan wondered. "[Should we remain exposed, hoping that tonight's attack doesn't happen again]?"

"[A temporary retreat might be wise if you don't trust the Empire]," Vaasa suggested.

"[I wouldn't insult the Empire like that]," Khan responded, "[But I also have a responsibility toward my troops. I must demand more after tonight's events]."

Khan never missed the chance to remind Vaasa about the recent battle. That was his greatest leverage since it had happened outside the Thilku's reach. If he exploited it properly, he could force closer cooperation or deployment of more troops.

"[As I said]," Vaasa continued, "[Tonight was an oddity. At most, we can point more scanners in your direction]."

"[Did you map the entire underground area already?]" Khan questioned. "[Your scanners might not be enough otherwise]."

Vaasa opened her mouth to reply but quickly closed it. She couldn't answer Khan's question without revealing classified information, which prevented her from reassuring him.

Khan knew Vaasa's troubles very well. The Empire had to be against welcoming more human troops on Cegnore. After all, that territory didn't belong to the Global Army. Yet, the odd event demanded a response, and the Thilku couldn't keep it to themselves.

"[I fear I must involve my superiors]," Khan pressed on to deepen Vaasa's doubts. "[We could let them discuss the topic with Lord Exr. Still, this building would remain exposed in the meantime]."

Vaasa felt even more conflicted. The Empire would look bad if another attack happened while the human trench lacked additional defenses. The bomb had already hurt the relationship between the two species, so avoiding another incident was mandatory.

The idea of leaving things to Khan's superiors and Lord Exr wasn't ideal either. The Global Army was the victim in that situation, which gave it leverage to request more information and influence on Cegnore.

Of course, the Empire could always kick the humans out of the planet, but those procedures took time to unfold. The Global Army could also oppose the change and stick to preexistent deals, accepting the eventual loss of the settlement to gain more leverage.

Vaasa quickly realized that her preparation wasn't a match for Khan. She had joined that feast at the last minute while Khan had simulated the event in his mind for days. Vaasa wasn't to blame since she couldn't predict Khan to cause such a mess, but that didn't change her situation.

"[There might be a different option]," Khan suddenly announced, distracting Vaasa from her confusion. "[It's more of a theory than an option, but you can give me your opinion about it]."

"[What theory?]" Vaasa asked, hoping to get out of that pickle.

"[Well]," Khan cleared his throat, pretending to inspect his surroundings to check that no one would hear him. "[I might be the reason for tonight's attack]."

Vaasa was initially confused, but everything became clear when she looked at Khan's hair. The theory made sense considering his mutation and offered an option Vaasa didn't hesitate to mention.

"[If that's the case]," Vaasa exclaimed, reclaiming her composure, "[You might be a security hazard here]."

"[Are you suggesting that I leave the planet?]" Khan wondered, his tone growing colder. "[On what authority]?"

"[It was a suggestion]," Vaasa stated, realizing her mistake. "[Though it's worth notifying your Lords about it]."

"[I won't bother them with unfounded worries]," Khan stated. "[Besides, I've been specifically chosen for this mission. I plan to complete it successfully]."

Vaasa wanted to change Khan's mind, but the topic had nothing to do with her or the Thilku. That problem could affect Cegnore's balance, but the lack of proof prevented her from involving her superiors.

"[I have a different suggestion]," Khan added, pretending that the idea had just popped into his mind. "[My side can't face these dangers every night, but the Thilku can]."

"[I can't remove troops from our trenches in favor of the Global Army]," Vaasa uttered.

"[What about the opposite]?" Khan asked. "[What if I came to your trenches]?"

Chapter 598 Core

Vaasa had already lost count of how many times she had been at a loss for words, but the last was the worst. Khan's suggestion was preposterous and nigh impossible, but she couldn't help but consider it.

Leverage was the main issue. As soon as the superiors got involved, the Global Army would gain the upper hand in eventual negotiations. Humankind was the injured party in that situation. There was no denying that.

Moreover, Khan's theory was interesting. The Thilku knew more about Cegnore, but the planet still hid many mysteries. If Khan's presence could cause valuable changes, the Thilku would want a piece of that, if not a monopoly.

Nevertheless, Vaasa didn't have the authority to authorize that move. Inviting Khan to the Thilku's trenches was problematic on many levels, which prevented her from answering without conferring with her team.

Khan could almost hear what was happening in Vaasa's mind, and her partially hidden confusion solidified his confidence. He had successfully thrown the bait. Now, he could only hope the Thilku took it.

Truth be told, Khan had no intention of involving his superiors. In that case, things on Cegnore would become too political, limiting his movements. Keeping everything among soldiers granted him more freedom, which he needed to pursue his goals.

Silence fell on the table, and Khan let it brew for a while. The longer Vaasa avoided speaking, the more confident he became about his bait. Yet, he eventually decided to add a finishing blow.

"[I know how hasty this sounds]," Khan sighed, pretending to back off from his offer. "[Maybe, I could propose the idea to Lord Exr. Of course, as long as you allow me to contact him]."

Most soldiers wouldn't dare to utter similar words. Even some Ambassadors would refrain from making such requests. However, Khan was an exception, and Vaasa knew that.

The sole fact that Khan felt entitled to ask to speak with Lord Exr described his unique status and planted an idea in Vaasa's mind. Humans couldn't go to the Thilku's trenches. Still, Khan would be one of the few allowed inside if they could.

"[I'd avoid bothering Lord Exr until we have proof]," Vaasa eventually replied. "[However, I will share your theory to our scientists]."

"[Feel free to do so]," Khan said. "[Though I'm compelled to do the same with tonight's events]."

"[Of course]," Vaasa voiced. "[We would never ask you to falsify reports]."

"[I'm glad we understand each other]," Khan smiled. "[I guess we can only wait for now]."

"[Indeed]," Vaasa agreed. "[Yet, we will still point more scanners in your direction. That much I can promise]."

"[It's not as reassuring as reinforcements]," Khan stated, "[But I understand you also have protocols to follow]."

That conversation ended with those words. Ordinary soldiers would think that Khan and Vaasa were leaving the decision to their superiors, but the reality was different. A waiting game had just started, and Khan had the power to bring the odds in his favor.

After dropping the topic, Khan and Vaasa went back to the basic pleasantries, which continued until the feast ended. Khan and Caspar escorted the Thilku out at that point before splitting to return to their lodgings.

A wave of exhaustion assaulted Khan as soon as he reached the privacy of his habitation. He didn't bother undressing as he crossed the office and threw himself into bed. His knife was still at his side, and he held its handle while sleepy thoughts crossed his mind.

'I'll wait a week,' Khan thought. 'I'll call the monsters again if the Thilku don't make their move.'

The Global Army and the Empire could write off that night as a random event, avoiding searching for solutions or new deals. Khan was ready to force their hands, but playing the slow game increased his chances of keeping politics away.

'They must invite me to the Thilku's trenches,' Khan trusted. 'After that, I'll see whether to go MIA.'

Khan let go of the knife's handle and drew his phone. Monica had asked him to return before his birthday, but things were moving slowly on Cegnore, and he couldn't accelerate them.

'I'll make it up to her,' Khan sighed, leaving his phone on the mattress. 'We also have to celebrate our anniversary twice.'

Thinking about Monica brought the peace required to trigger Khan's drowsiness. He fell asleep, and the darkness lingered for only a second before the nightmare started.

Hours passed in which Khan slept deeply. Sweat accumulated on his body as the morning arrived, and occasional tremors threatened to wake him. Luckily, Winston's bandages were tight, which prevented Khan from twisting his injured limb.

Khan's body was as impressive as always. It took him only five hours to completely recover from a week of training, but waking up revealed that fixing his injuries would take more than a day.

A slight discomfort spread from Khan's back as he rolled on himself to point his face at the ceiling. He lifted his right arm and tried to make a fist, but the process still hurt. It was easier than before, but not by much.

'This hand is useless for now,' Khan thought, glancing at the phone at his side to check the time.

Theoretically, the injured arm didn't prevent Khan from training since he was focusing on the Niqols' arts. It was also the right time to leave the building since the night was far away, but Khan considered taking a day off to meditate and quicken the healing process.

The idea sounded wise, so Khan jumped out of bed and undressed. He threw his drenched clothes on the floor and the sheath on the bed before walking into the office wearing only underwear. The sweat didn't affect the bandages, so he didn't think too much about them.

The past week had given Khan the chance to add vital items to his habitation. His drawers now had booze, which he retrieved before heading for the interactive desk. He had decided to focus on meditating, but that break also gave him time to study the Thilku runes.

However, before Khan could activate the interactive desk, he noticed something was off. A rectangular screen had appeared under his entrance. Someone had slipped it inside from the door's drawer.

Khan left the booze on the interactive desk and retrieved the device, which lit up without requiring his genetic signature. He immediately thought about Winston, and the screen's contents confirmed that idea.

The first device from Winston had countless labels and info. Instead, the second only showed a handful of tags connected to videos. Khan hurried behind his interactive desk as soon as he started one, and his eyes lit up at the sight of a familiar figure.

The video showed the humanoid wolf standing straight and bound to a series of restrictions. The creature had its limbs, joints, neck, torso, and abdomen chained to a metal structure enveloped by protective glass that isolated it from the outside world.

A half-spherical machine also stood on the wolf's head, partially covering it. Wires spread from that item and stretched into the metal structure, sending data that the video showed in the corner of the screen.

The monster was awake but in a daze. Its face showed no aggression, but Khan couldn't see confidence either. He couldn't sense the wolf, and the data on the screen were beyond his expertise, but Winston had left a few notes that helped him comprehend the scene.

"Test, test," Winston's voice came from the device as the video continued. "This is the third recording on unique specimen B22. Winston Wulfo is in charge of the study."

Khan couldn't help but scoff, leaving the device on the desk while reaching for the booze. He didn't get cups, so he drank directly from the bottle while his eyes remained on the video.

"Previous tests confirmed the different anatomy," Winston said. "Specimen B22's mutations are seamless compared to Cegnore's basic fauna. It's unclear why the infection gave better results, but a blood sample excluded any connection with the Thilku."

The screen showed a graph that compared the Thilku's and wolf's genetics. Even Khan could see the two species had nothing in common.

"Is it possible that the natives have these features?" Winston wondered. "Any study is inconclusive due to lack of proof, but the Thilku scientists don't support that theory, and I agree."

Khan was with Winston, or at least hoped he was right. He wanted Cegnore's natives to be more than intelligent animals since he probably needed them to get answers.

"The scanners confirmed that specimen B22 has cognitive abilities," Winston continued. "The concussion suffered during its capture might have lowered them, but I still managed to confirm some data our Thilku allies shared with us."

More notes appeared on the screen. Winston had basically confirmed that the humanoid wolf used the words described by Khan and the Thilku's reports. The scientist didn't find anything new, but Khan could still consider that a win since he had been the one to capture the specimen.

"I also tested theories about potential hive-mind or external control," Winston added. "Even when exposed to Cegnore's atmosphere, specimen B22 doesn't receive any information."

'No external input,' Khan thought. 'Well, I would have sensed it otherwise.'

"It's still unclear how these creatures demand order," Winston said. "I'll perform more experiments in the presence of other specimens. For now, I can only conclude the behavior is instinctive. The illness grants them drives that guide their attacks and eventual retreats home."

The video ended, but Khan didn't immediately start another. Winston had been up to something with the last statement. It was very likely that the orders and plans didn't exist in the atmosphere. They probably came from inside the monsters.

'Can this act as a guide?' Khan wondered, letting go of the bottle to grab his nape. 'Can my core guide me toward the natives?'

Chapter 599 Commander

Winston's following videos studied the humanoid wolf more in-depth, but he failed to obtain any conclusive data. The issue of the orders and intelligence remained a mystery.

Khan could still get valuable information out of the device. The monster's anatomy and amount of mana were easy to check for Winston, and his videos conveyed them. The scientist basically did a complete check-up and shared it with Khan.

As always, the device erased its data once Khan was done watching everything. The screen went dark, and Khan threw it away without a second thought. He didn't exactly learn something new, but Winston had still solidified the information in his possession.

Khan brought the bottle to his mouth while leaning deeper into his seat. He had all the right ideas and plans but continued to lack key information. Also, the first move wasn't in his hands. He had to wait for favorable developments to move forward.

'Being ready to seize the right opportunity is the best I can do,' Khan thought, moving his attention to the interactive desk. 'I need to work harder.'

A long studying session unfolded before Khan focused on meditating. He also ate inside his flat and rested a bit longer until the night eventually arrived.

Caspar's concerns about Khan's health couldn't make him remain behind. Khan departed for the trench with the team, but the peace that reigned over the shift killed his curiosity. He had initially

wondered whether his actions had caused a change in Cegnore's patterns, but that didn't seem to be the case.

That development wasn't ideal, but Khan could find positive aspects to it. He was still injured, so spending the night meditating helped. Also, being in control of the outbreaks in the human trench gave him the flexibility to actuate his plans when they would benefit him the most.

The following days featured a similar trend. Khan attended his night shifts only to face utter peace. No leftovers came, allowing him to focus on recovering.

The trend continued even after the new week arrived. The soldiers were obviously happy, but Khan counted the days from the first outbreak. He couldn't let the higher-ups dismiss it as an oddity. He was ready to make a mess again, but a surprising event arrived before he could complete that plan.

One afternoon in the middle of the week, Khan was meditating in his flat. His arm had improved but still needed care, so he invested hours in that training to quicken the healing process.

Nevertheless, a light suddenly shone on Khan's closed eyes, forcing him to open them. He was on the seat behind the interactive desk, which had turned on to show a surprising text.

'Accept communication?' Khan read on the desk, frowning.

The building had no connection to the network, but internal communications were possible. Still, they often featured the caller's name. That secrecy made Khan think of Winston, but pressing the label revealed a far different face.

Holograms came out of the desk when Khan accepted the call, and the azure lights immediately turned red. A screen appeared before him, showing a figure that almost widened his eyes in shock.

"Captain Khan," Lord Exr exclaimed. "We meet again."

"My Lord," Khan suppressed his gasp to appear more confident. "I didn't expect your call."

"But you did expect me to intervene," Lord Exr responded. "Isn't that why you mentioned me to my soldiers?"

"I," Khan began to say before deciding to drop his pretenses. "I hoped you would have supported my idea due to our existing relationship."

"The idea of admitting a human into my trenches?" Lord Exr wondered. "I didn't know our relationship was that good."

"It's for practical reasons," Khan pointed out.

"I heard about your theory," Lord Exr exclaimed. "Your presence might attract the monsters, but why would the Empire care?"

"It would give the Empire a chance to seize the initiative in this war," Khan stated. "If it doesn't already have it, of course."

"The Global Army isn't aware of the state of this war," Lord Exr declared. "The Empire wishes things to remain like this."

"That's why I suggested going alone," Khan replied. "The word of a single soldier can't match yours."

"But you aren't a single soldier, Captain Khan," Lord Exr uttered. "You have been sent here on purpose, after all."

Khan couldn't object to that point. As little as his rank meant among Thilku, the Global Army still trusted him. Publicly denying his claims wouldn't stop humankind from learning more information.

Lord Exr appeared amused by Khan's silence, but his face didn't convey any anger or sternness. The sole fact that he had chosen to call gave Khan hope, but turning that feeling into reality sounded difficult.

"I wouldn't go for political reasons," Khan promised. "My issues are personal."

"That doesn't," Lord Exr exclaimed before thinking about his words for a second, "Change the facts."

'What does he want me to say?' Khan cursed. He didn't understand where Lord Exr was going with that, but something told him that he wasn't against the idea of welcoming him into the Thilku trenches.

"My Lord," Khan announced, "I've said my piece. The decision is yours."

"Won't you try to convince me, Captain Khan?" Lord Exr wondered.

"I understand you can't trust my words," Khan said. "However, if more attacks reach the human trench, my superiors will surely intervene. I was hoping to keep this among soldiers."

Lord Exr scoffed, his amusement intensifying. He shared Khan's intentions, but that reply had added key information. Somehow, Khan appeared certain more attacks would reach the human trench.

"I consider our relationship good," Lord Exr suddenly revealed. "The party you advertised has recently landed on Neuria, and its performance is satisfactory."

"Oh?" Khan asked, his eyes lighting up. "Is my girlfriend there?"

"It is my understanding that she is," Lord Exr replied. "My soldiers praised her manners and Thilku."

"I'm happy to know that," Khan smiled, slightly lowering his head in respect. "I trust the Thilku will take good care of her."

"Does your girlfriend need assistance?" Lord Exr questioned, surprised by that statement.

"It's a saying," Khan chuckled. "She wouldn't be my girlfriend if she needed that."

"I see," Lord Exr nodded. "You seem to have chosen a worthy woman."

"She chose me," Khan laughed.

"Very Thilku of her," Lord Exr commented. "I approve."

"She would fit well with your species," Khan declared. "I'm sure she'll continue to do a good job on Neuria."

"I trust your word," Lord Exr uttered.

Khan couldn't help but lift his eyebrows. Lord Exr couldn't have spoken randomly. He must have chosen his words, which theoretically extended past Neuria and Monica.

"My Lord," Khan announced, "If you trust my word on this, how is Cegnore any different?"

"It isn't," Lord Exr stated, crossing his huge arms before his chest. "How sure you are about your theory, Captain Khan?"

That sudden change of pace tried to startle Khan, but he had too much experience in that field to lose his cool. Lord Exr was asking him a direct question. That was his chance to get what he wanted.

"Quite sure," Khan responded. "Though, depending on the situation in your trenches, the results might differ, both in the good and bad sense."

"What do you mean by good and bad?" Lord Exr asked.

"My Lord, respectfully, I should be the one to ask that question," Khan declared. "What would you consider good or bad for your trenches?"

Lord Exr wore a confident smile. He had liked that answer. He was looking for something similar, and Khan had also already proven himself to be unique.

"I can arrange something," Lord Exr said, interrupting himself to search for the right human word, "Unorthodox. The Thilku can make use of a bait."

"My Lord," Khan shook his head, "I'm a soldier. I want to fight."

"Those are my trenches," Lord Exr declared. "What you want is inconsequential."

"Let my strength speak then," Khan pressed on. "I can be an asset, just like I was on Neuria."

"The Empire doesn't need help fighting its wars," Lord Exr uttered.

"It's my war, too," Khan responded, ripping open the upper side of his uniform to expose his scar. "It has been for almost fifteen years."

Lord Exr was aware of Khan's scar, but the gesture still affected him. Khan wasn't acting as a politician. He was risking insulting Lord Exr to have things his way. Normally, that would be a problem, but Lord Exr saw something different due to the unique situation.

Khan was a security hazard for the Thilku trenches. However, Lord Exr saw no political interest on his face. Khan wasn't trying to push his career further. He only wanted to fight monsters.

"My Lord," Khan continued, resorting to words Lord Exr knew very well, "Is the blood I spilled not worth this chance?"

Lord Exr smiled again. He liked the soldier side of Khan's personality. He truly was an odd human in the alien's eyes, but not in a negative sense.

"The Empire doesn't do charity," Lord Exr scoffed. "I'll let you fight if that's what you want, but only as a common soldier. You'll have to follow orders from Thilku you outrank according to your government."

"Rank has no relevance on the battlefield," Khan commented, lowering his head in respect. "Thank you for understanding, my Lord."

"The moment you become a hindrance," Lord Exr announced, "You'll become a simple bait. You have been warned, Captain Khan."

Lord Exr was showing a more domineering side while talking to Khan, and the latter could guess why. Khan had offered himself as a soldier, so Lord Exr had regressed to a commander. In short, politics had left the call, and Khan could only rejoice at the event.

Chapter 600 Order

The order arrived as suddenly as the call and took everyone by surprise. The news spread like wildfire, putting Khan's name in every rumor and story flying through the building. The impossible had happened, and there was no stopping it.

The morning after the call with Lord Exr, Khan left his flat with a bag full of clean clothes and a few cans of food. His sheath was at his side, and his phone was in his pocket. He didn't need anything else to leave.

Two soldiers were waiting outside Khan's flat, but his arrival in the corridor made them lower their heads. They didn't know how to meet his gaze after all the rumors heard during the night, and he didn't care enough about the issue to address it.

Cegnore's long days had changed most soldiers' routines. They usually rested in the morning due to the night shifts or to prepare for them. Still, Khan saw a completely different scenery when he stepped into the corridor, and the symphony told him that the unusual event didn't stop there.

The corridors and halls that Khan crossed while escorted by the two soldiers were full of curious and surprised troops. He even spotted a few white coats along the way, which expressed the importance of the event.

Khan couldn't claim to be surprised. Receiving orders directly from the Thilku was a big deal for that settlement. Still, he marveled at how quickly the news had spread. The call had arrived in the middle of the night, but the entire building was already aware of its contents.

'I guess it can't be helped,' Khan thought, his face showing no emotion. 'The Thilku barely contact this building, let alone ask for someone.'

The order had been quite simple. The Thilku had used their authority over Cegnore to request Khan's presence. The call didn't involve details about the length of that task or anything similar. It simply asked the building to send Khan over, and he accepted.

Murmurs filled any area Khan crossed, but no one got in his way. None of those soldiers or scientists had any authority over that order, but the arrival at the main gate showed someone willing to step slightly outside his role to check that everything was alright.

"Give us a moment," Caspar ordered, leaving the team before the main gate to approach Khan. The two soldiers at Khan's side couldn't refuse Caspar, so they departed to offer the Captains some privacy.

"Captain," Caspar exclaimed, lowering his voice and head as soon as he reached Khan. "We can still appeal to the Harbor. The Thilku can't do this."

Caspar's worry was almost heartwarming. From his perspective, the Thilku were abusing their authority to bring Khan to their trenches. He didn't know the specifics, but the matter was disrespectful and dangerous enough to trigger his anger.

Khan understood Caspar's perspective. The human settlement had it easier but lacked vital information about Cegnore. Sending soldiers into the Thilku trenches would expose them to unknown dangers. That couldn't be legal or in line with the interspecies treaties.

However, Khan probably was the only one who could make that transfer without additional preparations. He didn't need special pills for the infection, and his prowess spoke for itself. He had also already worked with the Thilku. Khan was the perfect figure to send to their trenches.

"It's fine," Khan reassured, using words he had already spoken the previous night when the order arrived. "I want this."

"I beg you to reconsider," Caspar pressed on. "Except for the unknown danger, you'd also be in structures unfit for humans. Their doctors might lack proper medications or a basic understanding of our anatomy."

"This is for the best," Khan shook his head. "Both for my career and Cegnore's situation."

Caspar wanted to argue some more, but hearing about Khan's career forced him to be silent. He couldn't get in the way of the youngest Captain in history, who was also in a relationship with a highly wealthy and influential descendant. His family would disown him if he tried.

"Captain," Caspar said before gulping and sighing in defeat. "Khan, I wish you good luck out there."

"Thank you, Caspar," Khan nodded. "I'll try to come back soon."

"And in one piece," Caspar chuckled.

Khan replied with a smile, and Caspar took it upon himself to accompany him to the gate. After reaching it, the Captain performed a military salute that the soldiers in the area imitated, and Khan ran his gaze over those troops before crossing the smaller entrance.

The gate skipped many safety measures due to Khan's unique condition and opened on the other side. By then, he had gotten used to that procedure, but the planet had more than a brownish plain to offer that morning.

A circular bike stood a few meters past the gate, and a Thilku sat inside it. The alien was donning the traditional red cape, which fell onto the back seat. Still, the vehicle was big enough to fit Khan even with that hindrance.

Khan nodded at the Thilku only to receive an inquisitive glare. The alien didn't hide his suspicion, but the orders had come from above, so he didn't stop Khan from occupying the back seat.

No exchange of words happened as the Thilku set off. The bike made the brittle ground crack, but the plain offered enough room to accelerate beyond reasonable limits.

Khan didn't mind the high speed and focused on clinging to the bike's seat while inspecting his surroundings. Cegnore's surface was desolate and lacked valuable landmarks, but Khan still confirmed that the vehicle was going in the right direction.

The bike ran past the human trench, crossing the boundaries of the Global Army's territory to dive deeper into the planet. More plains stretched in every direction, interrupted by the occasional hills or shallow gorges, but Khan's eyes rarely rested on the scenery. He only looked at the symphony, which hinted at an imminent change.

The world in Khan's vision changed as the bike continued to advance. New, colder colors joined the symphony, and the effects didn't stop at his senses. The surface gained holes, cracks, and other evident marks. That area had probably been flat, but something had destroyed it.

A foul stench eventually reached Khan's nostrils. The smell of blood, sweat, and saliva invaded him, adding details to a scene he had already imagined. A battle had unfolded there, and the reason for that soon became clear.

After a few minutes, a tall and large structure appeared in the distance. A huge rectangular building grew on the horizon and drew close, allowing Khan to notice more details.

The structure was at least five times bigger than the human building, and its smooth surfaces hinted at similarities. However, immense windows that separated each floor soon became visible, and the same went for their insides.

The Thilku couldn't opt for their traditional open spaces and balconies on Cegnore, but those immense windows offered a valuable alternative. Vast insides were also visible from them, but something else soon caught Khan's attention.

The Global Army had placed its building far away from its trench, but the Thilku had gone for the opposite approach. A spacious channel crossed the ground before the Thilku structure and stretched in the distance, reaching areas that Khan couldn't see with his naked eyes.

Multiple vehicles also stood behind the huge trench. Khan counted at least fifty of them from his position, but more probably existed farther away. That channel was too long to ignore checkpoints, and its size hinted at the number of Thilku stationed there.

'They must have an entire battalion here,' Khan realized as his attention moved to the trench.

Surprisingly, the Thilku trench lacked rifles or heavy weapons but was far cleaner and more organized. Metal surfaces covered its bottom and walls, leaving no open spot. That channel couldn't crumble with those reinforcements, and red runes shone across them.

Moreover, tunnels stretched from the trench and headed for the huge building. Khan couldn't see them from his position, but his senses felt the mana flowing through them. The Thilku had underground passages, which probably helped deploy numerous troops.

'And there is another one further ahead,' Khan thought, recalling the map shared by Caspar. 'Probably more.'

Khan was sure the Thilku didn't share the entirety of their intel. The Global Army knew about the two trenches, but Cegnore was bound to have more.

'A thousand?' Khan wondered, trying to calculate the number of Thilku deployed on Cegnore. 'Two? It might be double that if they have more places like this.'

The difference in manpower between humans and Thilku was immense, and for a good reason. Yet, Khan was aware of the Empire's problems. Its domain was too big, so wasting so many troops on Cegnore probably hurt the Thilku deeply.

Khan disregarded his political thoughts and focused on the current situation. The bike soon reached the building, stopping before its huge gate, and the driver pointed his hand at it without adding anything.

That silent order was enough for Khan. He left the bike and waited before the gate, staring at the big rune on that surface. His studies allowed him to understand the defensive purposes of that symbol, but the entrance opened before he could learn all of them.

A rectangular room unfolded in Khan's vision, and he stepped inside to let the decontamination process start. The place wasn't empty. It had a drawer on its right side, and human letters shone with a red color above it.

'Belongings,' Khan read before dropping the bag and sheath on the drawer.

A dense gas invaded the room at that point. The decontamination process tried to make the air hard to breathe for humans, but Khan's lungs had no problem adapting to the new atmosphere.

The drawer closed while Khan waited for the process to end. The gas lingered in the room for a few minutes before getting sucked away. Another entrance then opened, showing an open space full of big figures.

An entire company expanded in Khan's eyes. Almost two hundred Thilku occupied the vast hall that stretched from the entrance. The aliens either sat near the walls or feasted on huge carpets close to those surfaces. Some napped on makeshift beds or sharpened their weapons on strange anvils, but Khan's arrival brought their attention to him.

Tension immediately spread in the hall. All the Thilku in the area stiffened and wore stern faces, interrupting their tasks. No one spoke, but everyone inspected Khan from head to toe.

A whooshing noise resounded in the silent hall, distracting Khan from the staring crowd. He glanced to his right, noticing that a drawer with his belongings had slid out of the gate. The Thilku had yet to move, so Khan retrieved his things while waiting for developments.

The area remained silent even after Khan wore his sheath and backpack. The Thilku didn't exchange any rumors. They remained perfectly still but ready to act if something happened. They didn't like that human presence among them, but kicking Khan out wasn't their decision to make.

Khan didn't dare to advance randomly and without additional authorizations, so he remained before the entrance. He didn't shy away from the cold glares coming in his direction. Actually, he tried to answer all of them with confidence and calm.

The confidence shown by Khan turned into mocking behavior inside the glares. Some Thilku believed that Khan was underestimating them, which hurt their pride and gave birth to anger. A few aliens began to move, threatening to stand up, but a new whooshing noise interrupted that trend.

A big door on the other side of the hall opened, revealing a vast corridor and Vaasa at its center. She briefly inspected the area before finding Khan and calling him. "[Captain Khan, this way]."

Vaasa had to shout to make sure her words reached Khan, and he nodded at her before advancing. The company had left the central areas of the hall empty, so crossing them wasn't a problem. Khan only had to ignore the glares piercing his figure, but his fame had made him used to them.

Khan walked quickly but firmly. He didn't want to appear scared by that atmosphere. Yet, at the same time, he couldn't waste Vaasa's time.

Vaasa turned as soon as Khan reached her and dived deeper into the corridor. The place had multiple doors at its sides with big runes locking every entrance. Khan did his best not to appear interested in them, but each symbol that crossed his view transformed into meanings inside his brain.

The Thilku didn't appear interested in Khan's curiosity and focused on reaching the end of the corridor. At that point, she approached a door to her right before moving her fingers on the rune that locked it.

The door opened, and a narrower corridor unfolded. The passage was still big enough to fit five grown men, but new Thilku occupied it, and Khan found himself before a series of glares once again.

"[This will be your team, Captain Khan]," Vaasa announced, stepping aside and pointing at the new corridor. "[Your companions will show you your lodgings]."

Khan looked at Vaasa before turning toward the corridor. The place had twenty or so Thilku as strong as third-level warriors sitting on the floor or leaning on the walls. Some donned their uniforms, while others were half-naked, showing newly applied bandages that covered injuries suffered the previous night.

The situation was beyond tense. Khan was not welcome there but advanced anyway, and Vaasa closed the door once he entered the corridor, isolating him in that new environment.

All the sitting Thilku stood up in that privacy, and stern stances unfolded in Khan's vision. That was one of the coldest welcomes Khan had ever faced, but his expression never faltered.

"[It's an honor to serve with you]," Khan announced, performing a traditional bow that no one imitated. The Thilku mostly glared at him while some inspected the bandages popping out of his right sleeve.

"[Ah]!" A Thilku in the back of the relatively short corridor snorted, stepping forward to become more visible. "[Blue hair even bows like a Thilku]."

Khan straightened his back and inspected the speaker from head to toe before wearing a fake smile and engaging in a conversation. "[I've learned on Neuria]."

"[We know about you, blue hair]," The Thilku continued, advancing to reach the center of the corridor. "[The Thilku don't need a human to fight for them]."

"[I'm fighting for myself]," Khan stated. "[I can only rejoice if that happens to be at the Thilku's side]."

Khan's politeness annoyed the Thilku, who crossed his arms in anger. He was only wearing pants, so the gesture highlighted his bulging muscles. Still, that sight couldn't make Khan falter.

"[Well]," The Thilku exclaimed, half-turning. "[Come, blue hair. I'll show your lodgings]."

Some smirks appeared among the squads, and a few snickers resounded, but Khan still advanced to reach the Thilku's side. The aliens also slightly closed on him without blocking his way. They wanted Khan to feel pressured, but his face continued to show no reaction.

"[This is your locker]," The Thilku announced, relaxing his arms to point at a drawer three and a half meters from the floor. "[Touch it and it will record your signature]."

The Thilku proudly smiled while looking at Khan. Something so high was nothing for the aliens' stature, but a human couldn't reach it. Of course, that didn't apply to Khan.

Khan's right ankle moved slightly, pushing him into the air. The ceiling was tall, so he had no problem reaching the locker and hovering before it.

The aliens remained stunned at Khan's flight. The Thilku who had tried to make it hard for him even looked at his companions, but they only shook their heads or showed admonishing gazes. A few were aware of Khan's abilities but forgot to share the information.

The drawer opened when Khan touched it, revealing enough space for his bag. He stored the item and closed the lid, descending into a graceful landing.

"[Thank you for your help]," Khan said as soon as he landed, showing one of his brightest smiles to the Thilku.

The Thilku promptly hid his shock and moved to his next plan. He also smiled and hurried to the end of the corridor before pointing at a surface with a bright rune.

"[Blue hair, here]!" The Thilku called. "[This is your room]."

The Thilku wore another smirk, and the same went for the rest of the team. Actually, more smiling faces appeared now. Reaching the locker wasn't surprising for those who knew about Khan's skills, but the rune was bound to stop him.

Khan reached the rune and slightly tilted his head while his eyes ran over its lines. It wasn't complicated, but there were enough differences to force him to hesitate.

The Thilku at Khan's side felt proud before that hesitation. He crossed his arms again and raised his voice to make a suggestion. "[Oh, you must learn how to open it. It's fine. If you agree to follow my orders-]."

The Thilku didn't have the chance to finish his line since part of the wall suddenly slid open to reveal a small room featuring a huge bed. The alien looked down only to see Khan with his stretched arm. He had used the rune without asking anyone's help.

"[Thank you again]!" Khan announced, showing nothing but his brightest smile. "[I'm sure we'll get along]!"

The Thilku remained speechless while watching Khan enter the room. He tried to look at his companions, but they shared the same shocked expression. They only wanted to tease Khan, but he seemed comfortable in that alien environment.