

Chaos' Heir 71

Chapter 71 - Anger

Khan inspected the Kred and tried to get a read of his actual power. The glowing plants around him hindered his senses, but the alien was standing right in front of him. Something eventually reached his mind.

The alien was a dense mass of mana. His entire body featured shining lumps of energy that empowered his already incredible innate features. There were empty spots, but they didn't create any weakness in that massive array of muscles.

Khan's eyes fell on the alien's foot. He had delivered a complete technique on that spot, but he had failed to inflict significant damage. However, a second inspection revealed that the body part had swelled. It was clearly bigger than the other foot.

'I can damage him,' Khan concluded in his mind.

His attunement with mana was pretty high, but it had yet to reach the fifty percent mark and allow him to claim the status of a first-level warrior. Still, he appeared close to that level since his blows could affect the Kred.

'I might be able to defeat him once the others arrive,' Khan thought as a few images flashed in his mind.

The Kred's reaction time was incredible, but Khan had managed to get past his defense and land a blow. The nature of the Lightning-demon style gave him a slim hope to avoid ending up in the alien's grasp again. In theory, Khan could slowly exhaust his opponent with a hit and run tactic since he was faster.

'I can't allow him to grab me again,' Khan sighed as pain continued to spread from his ankles and tried to seep past the mental barrier.

His plan could work only if the alien didn't catch him again. Khan knew that his body couldn't endure another beating since his insides already hurt. Moreover, the Kred had a high chance to damage his legs again since Khan's offensive relied on those limbs, and suffering severe injuries there would put an end to the battle.

Khan needed to go past perfection to handle the Kred. Simple speed wasn't enough. He had to perform feints and predict his opponent's reactions to always stay a few steps ahead in the battle.

Success in that approach wouldn't even ensure his victory. The Kred were innately more resilient than humans, and his opponent's body even had more mana. Khan was on the losing side when it came to sheer strength, endurance, and probably battle experience. He could only rely on his speed and companions in that situation.

'I don't have many choices,' Khan cursed before bending his body forward.

The alien's smile widened at that sight, and he raised his arms to prepare for the imminent attack. He pointed his palms toward Khan, and his sharp claws became ready to pierce the boy's skin.

Khan removed everything useless from his senses. The noises caused by the battles of his companions didn't reach his ears anymore. The various cells and prisoners became mere shadows in his eyes. The Kred's features also vanished and transformed him into a mere training dummy in his mind.

Khan shot ahead once his concentration reached its peak. Mana flowed freely through his body and accompanied his movements. A kick quickly flew toward the Kred's head, and the alien raised his arms to block that blow, but Khan's leg suddenly curved as his blurry figure crossed his opponent.

The Kred sensed his feet leaving the ground when Khan's shin hit his abdomen. The boy had relied on a feint again, and the power behind his blows seemed to have increased. The alien couldn't help but feel some discomfort on his belly, but his arms still swung after his opponent.

Khan saw sharp claws flying toward him and aiming for his face. He had stepped behind the Kred to complete the attack, but his opponent didn't lose track of him.

Khan jumped backward and distanced himself from the Kred. A claw managed to touch his cheek and open a small cut, but he barely felt that.

The Kred landed on the ground and gave voice to an arrogant grunt. He appeared completely unaffected by the recent attack, but Khan expected as much.

Khan shot ahead as soon as the Kred tried to restore his guard. His leg quickly rose and aimed for the alien's head again, but he performed a feint as soon as he saw the huge furry arms appearing on his path.

His heel fell on the already injured foot, but Khan didn't flow into another technique. He put power into his legs and jumped backward before the alien could launch his arms forward.

The Kred gave voice to an angry roar when he saw his opponent escaping his range again. Khan was slippery and hard to follow even with an enhanced body, but his blows felt like mosquito bites in the alien's mind.

Still, the Kred inevitably grew angry about that situation. He was stronger than Khan, but his power would be useless as long as he failed to catch him.

Moreover, it felt strange to fight against Khan. Warriors would show some reaction during a battle. Their species didn't affect that feature. Pain, anger, and other sensations were inevitable when exchanging blows powered by mana.

Yet, Khan's face appeared empty. It didn't show anything at all. The Kred could barely explain how he felt against that opponent. Staring in Khan's dead eyes made his spine tremble.

"You are a strange human pup," The Kred couldn't help but exclaim, but his words didn't reach Khan.

Khan shot ahead as soon as the Kred closed his mouth. His leg went for the alien's head again, and its shape grew blurry as soon as furry arms appeared on its path.

The Kred didn't fall for that tactic again. He swung his arm toward the base of Khan's leg to interrupt every feint and technique. After all, Khan had to slow down his offensive to chain two

attacks in a row and trick his opponent. The alien wanted to use that window to take care of his threatening speed.

Yet, the plant of Khan's foot suddenly hit his nose while his claws were converging toward the leg's base. The Kred didn't manage to maintain his composure due to the surprise that filled his mind, and his body inevitably bent backward.

Khan had faked his feint. He had pretended to flow into another technique, but his leg had only imitated his previous movements, which didn't make him waste much time.

The Kred's calculations ended up being off. He would have been able to reach Khan's leg if he feinted, but he fell short of a small instant since Khan's kick had continued to fly forward.

Tears accumulated in the alien's eyes. It didn't matter how powerful his body was. Every living being had vulnerable spots that mana could only cover partially.

The Kred roared in anger again as he wiped his eyes and tried to clear his nose, but a kick hit the lower part of his mouth and made some of his teeth crack. Khan didn't stop there, and multiple attacks fell on the alien's abdomen and injured foot while the latter remained in his confused state.

The alien eventually regained his vision and swung his claws forward, and Khan felt forced to jump backward. Two long horizontal cuts opened on his chest and divided his azure scar, but those injuries were too superficial to affect him.

"Enough jumping around!" The Kred shouted while spreading his arms and shooting forward. "Come here!"

Khan couldn't help but rejoice at that scene. The alien had finally lost his cool and had decided to launch a reckless assault.

The Kred closed his arms on Khan when he reached his position, but his figure vanished when those furry limbs touched his skin. Khan ducked at the last second, and his body rotated on his feet to cross the alien and deliver a kick on his back.

The alien bent forward, but he managed to preserve his balance and turn while swinging his arm. Khan jumped to dodge the attack, and his airborne figure spun to slam his heel on the Kred's head.

The Kred wanted to use his other arm to grab Khan now that he lacked footholds, but the latter pointed his free leg on the alien's chest and pushed himself away.

Khan performed a backflip and returned to his feet, but the alien didn't give him any time to breathe. The Kred immediately charged ahead and forced Khan to slide under his figure to dodge the incoming claws.

The alien wanted to turn, but a sharp pain suddenly spread from his groin and forced him to halt his movements. Khan had punched the alien's manhood while sliding between his legs, and he even followed the attack with a double kick performed by pointing his hands on the ground.

The Kred ended up losing his balance after the attack hit his back. He slammed on the wall at the end of the hall before slowly turning to face his opponent. Immense anger filled his eyes at that point, but Khan only took note of the various spots that had swollen.

Khan had landed blows on his opponent multiple times by then, but the latter didn't slow down at all. The Kred had suffered injuries on his foot, head, back, and abdomen, but nothing seemed able to affect him. The fast offensive had only managed to increase his anger.

Chapter 72 - Blood

Khan's breathing began to show signs of growing ragged. He still had mana available inside his body, but his muscles were starting to give in to the immense stress.

Instead, the Kred appeared at his peak condition. He had a few bruises on his body, and intense anger filled his face, but he stood straight and without showing the slightest trace of exhaustion.

Khan gulped and tried to steady his breath while the alien turned to face him. The Kred was livid, but he had abandoned his recklessness. He raised his arms and bent his legs before sliding on the terrain and approaching his opponent through short movements that didn't reveal any opening.

The Kred was using the forms of simple martial arts, but he didn't seem too confident in those techniques. His steps were slow, and his eyes often fell on his limbs to ensure they were in the correct position.

Khan had learnt a bit about martial arts during his intense training on Onia. His knowledge still had many blank gaps, especially when it came to styles that had earned many points. Yet, he had started to develop a faint battle instinct, which told him that the Kred didn't train much in those techniques.

Khan had also noticed that during the previous exchanges. The Kred's fighting style was messy and wild. It mainly relied on his physical superiority and natural features, but it didn't deploy mana to empower specific techniques.

'Do Kred outside of the Global Army even use martial arts?' Khan wondered as the alien closed on his position.

The lack of knowledge about that alien species was annoying. Khan ignored most of their customs and abilities, so his evaluation had many uncertainties.

However, it didn't make sense for the Kred to hold back, especially after Khan started to hit him often. Something was definitely off, and it seemed to benefit Khan.

'Maybe he only knows a few techniques,' Khan wondered as his figure bent to prepare for the imminent exchange. 'He might even be bad at them. Still, a martial art deployed by a first-level warrior should completely destroy me. I can't risk getting hit.'

The change in the Kred's behavior didn't affect his approach. Khan only had one valuable tactic in that situation. He had to wear the alien down with quick and safe attacks without ever exposing himself since a single hit from his opponent could put an end to the battle.

Khan waited until the Kred entered his range before launching his attack. His body turned to the side while his leg flew toward the alien's head.

The alien didn't care about the incoming attack. His arms moved forward as his muscles bulged. He appeared ready to endure the kick, and Khan didn't hesitate to put strength in his rear foot to jump backward.

The Kred's arms stretched before descending toward the ground. His claws stabbed the terrain and dug it until his hands disappeared among the roots of the glowing plants.

Cracks spread through the ground after the attack ended, and a slight tremor even reached Khan's feet once he landed. His eyes inevitably widened when he realized how powerful that technique was. He didn't know if his body would remain in one piece after getting hit by that blow.

"How far can you run?" The Kred snorted while retracting his arms and resuming his battle stance. "The jungle benefits my species, and you can't move as much as you want inside this cave. You have no chance to survive the rebellion."

Khan hated to admit that the Kred was right. He could always escape back into the forest, but that wasn't even close to being a solution. Also, the cave wasn't small, but it still restrained Khan's movements, which inevitably affected his high mobile martial art.

The new technique revealed by the Kred limited Khan's options since the attack could turn frontal blows and attempts to attack his sides into deadly situations. Khan could only attack his back now, but that made him predictable.

A solution eventually reached his mind as the Kred started to approach him again. Khan blinked before focusing on the incoming alien and waited for his opponent to launch his offensive before moving.

The Kred didn't fear Khan's blows, so he could deploy all his energies on attacking. It didn't matter if his techniques landed or not. Khan would still exhaust himself before him.

The alien launched his arms forward, and his claws pierced Khan's figure. Yet, the latter turned out to be nothing more than an afterimage.

The Kred managed to follow Khan's movements, but that knowledge didn't change his approach. He continued to perform his technique until his hands stabbed the terrain and caused a slight tremor to spread through the ground.

Khan ran around the alien and delivered his kick after his opponent completely bent. He wasn't trying to damage him too much in that situation. His priority was to push the Kred forward.

The Kred's feet left the ground after the impact. The alien flew for a few meters and turned as soon as he stepped back on the terrain, but the sole of a foot suddenly filled his vision.

Khan delivered a kick to the alien's face and ducked to avoid the incoming slashing arms. He had successfully disrupted the Kred's pace, but his plan didn't end there.

Khan rotated after crouching and swept the Kred's legs to make him fall on his back. The alien was incredibly steady, but his body had already bent backward after the kick, so the attack separated him from the ground.

A heel eventually landed on the Kred's groin before slamming him on the ground. Khan had connected three techniques in a row and had performed them with mana, but the alien tried to straighten his position as soon as his back hit the terrain.

That resilience left Khan speechless. He was doing his best. He had never fought so well in his entire life. However, the Kred was too strong.

Still, his plan wasn't to defeat the Kred alone. He didn't pay attention to the environment at all, but he recalled how big the second hall was.

The first attack had pushed the Kred among the recruits. They were still dealing with one of their opponents, but some of them noticed the arrival of the new alien and didn't hesitate to turn their offensive toward him.

George and Luke had dealt with their opponent and had begun to help their companions with the stronger Kred, but they suddenly noticed Khan throwing another alien among them.

The two boys immediately turned to help Khan since they valued him far more than the other recruits. George pointed his enhanced branch toward the Kred's chest while Luke threw a kick aimed at the alien's head.

The alien couldn't dodge the incoming attacks. He had been too caught in the battle to notice the crowd next to him. Also, his focus had been on standing up, so he didn't see the two boys.

George's branch pierced the right side of his chest and made him grunt in pain. Then, Luke's kick arrived and broke some of the already damaged teeth.

Khan attacked again at that point. His figure became weightless as he stepped on the alien's abdomen and deployed his technique. The entirety of his bodyweight converged on the tip of his foot and fell on the Kred.

George tilted his branch while making sure not to lose control of the mana inside it. The Kred instinctively grabbed that weapon and squeezed it until it broke, but the event only worsened his situation.

George didn't lose his balance when the branch broke. Instead, he continued to make mana flow in its insides while he crouched to stab it on another side of the furry chest.

The Kred raised his other hand to stop the boy, but Luke kicked him again and made him lose sight of the incoming attack. George successfully stabbed the alien, and Khan's attack followed.

The three boys unleashed a relentless offensive that didn't let the Kred stand up. Luke and Khan's attacks didn't do much since the alien's sheer resilience could make him endure those blows, but George was deadly with his branch.

Even that strong body couldn't do much against a proper weapon. George's branch ignored the thick layers of muscles and pierced everything on its path. The Kred couldn't help but suffer severe injuries during those exchanges, but the boys never let him regain his breath.

The beating continued even after the Kred stopped moving. George and Luke were in a frenzy, and they had to wait for Khan's orders to understand that the battle was already over.

"He's dead!" Khan shouted before turning toward the last standing Kred, but he halted his steps when the images of the other battle unfolded in his eyes.

Dorian, Ethel, Cora, Abel, and Jill were standing around the corpse of the last Kred. Most of the alien's face had turned into a meat paste, and Khan didn't fail to notice the blood falling from the recruits' hands.

Chapter 73 - Help

The sudden stillness of the scene was oppressive. The recruits found themselves unclear about what to do in front of the now silent cave. The noise caused by the blood falling to the ground became deafening, and only the ragged breath of the boys and girls managed to overcome it.

Khan's group had done it. They had cleared the cave and killed every Kred. They could move to the next step of their plan, but everyone required a second to snap back to reality.

"Break the bars and free the recruits," Khan ordered when he saw that some of his companions were still in a daze in front of the bleeding corpses. "We can't stay here."

The orders forced the recruits to ignore the cold and scary feelings surging inside their minds. They all began to move and focus on other tasks to keep themselves busy, but some of them didn't miss that Khan went straight for the end of the second hall.

The cell containing Lieutenant Sehlolo soon unfolded in Khan's eyes. The wolf-shaped Kred was still facing the end of the hole when he arrived, but she turned when she heard noises coming from behind her.

Khan had crouched in front of the cave, and his emotionless eyes inspected the Kred. Lieutenant Sehlolo couldn't help but compare that gaze to the memories in her mind. Only a couple of weeks had passed since the beginning of the semestral missions, but Khan had already transformed.

"We need to talk," Khan announced when he saw a tinge of regret appearing in the Lieutenant's eyes.

Lieutenant Sehlolo opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She tried to say something a few times, but her eyes eventually fell to the ground.

She couldn't stand to look at Khan in the eyes. The stark change in his behavior reminded her of the blood spilled during the rebellion.

"Do you regret what you did?" Khan asked when he saw that scene.

Khan's words transformed into sharp blades when they reached Lieutenant Sehlolo's ears. She tried to speak again, but she ended up turning her face on the wall to hide from the living reminder of her actions.

"The situation will only worsen if you don't do anything," Khan explained. "These prisoners are nothing more than targets among the trees. The Kred will kill all of them, and their blood will be on your hands."

Khan made sure to use his entire knowledge concerning human interactions during his speech. He relied on his previous talks with Lieutenant Sehlolo to choose words that could make her mind give in. It was clear that regret was eating her insides, and Khan wanted that feeling to grow.

Feelings seeped past the mental barrier during that speech. Khan had to be cruel during the past two weeks, but he had never enjoyed that behavior. However, a warm sensation spread inside him when he saw Lieutenant Sehlolo suffering due to his words.

Still, Khan decided to suppress that dark feeling too. Revenge was useless in that situation. He had to get the Lieutenant's help to have a chance to survive the crisis.

"You can still save us," Khan continued. "You can remain inside your cave and wallow in your regret, but we need something. We are basically stranded on Istrone unless you tell us how to get out."

Khan didn't know how the Global Army behaved in that situation. Part of him even feared that the higher-ups were busy solving greater issues since nothing in the last two weeks had hinted at the arrival of reinforcements. He needed the Lieutenant's knowledge to understand what to do and devise a plan to get him back on Earth.

Lieutenant Sehlolo opened her mouth, but no sound came out of it again. Still, Khan waited in silence at that time. He let her experience the pain that her species had inflicted on the young recruits while his cold gaze remained on her.

George and the others had started to free the imprisoned recruits, and noises inevitably spread throughout the cave. Most sounds were suppressed sobs or painful cries, but a few angry voices also reached the end of the underground structure.

Lieutenant Sehlolo heard everything. Each sob made her body shake. Her hand trembled whenever one of the prisoners exploded into tears, and her eyes flickered whenever curses reached her ears.

The prisoners were reminding her of the pain that her species had caused. The rebellion had destroyed the innocent excitement of mere kids and had transformed it into despair and anger. Those recruits would turn into soldiers who hated the Kred. The grudge between the two species had only intensified.

"You can help them," Khan added when he felt that the Lieutenant was ready to break. "You can save them and help your species. Wars will inevitably happen, but your actions can reduce the damage. Talk and help both species."

Those words tore Lieutenant Sehlolo's insides apart. Khan's eyes remained still when he heard the Kred clearing her throat. He didn't need anything else to know that he had succeeded.

"The rebellious factions have destroyed the teleport and blocked the communications with the orbit," Lieutenant Sehlolo explained. "The Global Army has a space station around the planet, but its sensors can't find much without receptors on the surface. The mana in Istrone's vegetation creates a shield that stops every attempt to inspect the planet."

"The higher-ups should still see the blank spot on their scanners, right?" Khan asked. "Why didn't they send someone at its edges and inspect the whole area?"

Khan didn't know how the scanners for Istrone worked, but it didn't make sense for the Global Army to be completely in the dark. After all, the soldiers must have known where the semestral missions happened. The complete lack of reinforcements in that area left him speechless and worried.

"The dark area isn't as small as you think," Lieutenant Sehlolo revealed. "The rebellious factions have deactivated the sensors in many sites."

"They should still know where we are," Khan continued.

"Not really," Lieutenant Sehlolo said while turning her face toward Khan. "The army makes sure that only a few trusted soldiers are aware of the location and details of the semestral missions. The families would find a way to help the recruits otherwise, and the Kred know that."

"I bet these soldiers aren't on the space station," Khan said.

"Leaving them there could create a breach in the security," Lieutenant Sehlolo explained. "All of them were on Istrone, and my species has taken care of them before the rebellion."

The situation appeared quite grim after that explanation. The higher-ups didn't know where the recruits were, and the Kred had even disabled many structures.

Convincing Lieutenant Sehlolo to become a guide for the group wouldn't help since Khan and the others would have to cross a long distance to reach the first working structure. The soldier could even be unaware of the actual size of the blind spot, which only worsened the overall situation.

"Do you think they are looking for us?" Khan asked.

"Definitely," Lieutenant Sehlolo revealed. "I wouldn't be surprised if many experts from the Global Army and the various families had already reached Istrone through the teleports outside the blind zone. They must be already on their way. I believe they'll converge here in a few weeks."

"But the Kred know that," Khan added when he saw that sadness had appeared in Lieutenant Sehlolo's voice during the end of her line.

"Yes," Lieutenant Sehlolo continued. "They are ready to move all of you soon."

Khan sat on the ground as he went through the issue in his mind. There wasn't much that the recruits could do. Even obtaining Lieutenant Sehlolo's full cooperation would still leave them in the middle of the rebellious factions.

"Do you think their sensors are pointing toward the blind zone?" Khan asked as a vague idea formed in his mind.

"Of course," Lieutenant Sehlolo replied, "But you would need something big to appear on their screens. Simple flares won't be enough."

Khan nodded before standing up and leaving the cave in silence. A grim spectacle unfolded in his eyes. His companions had freed most of the imprisoned recruits by then, but that wasn't enough to soothe their pain.

George, Cora, and the others had recruits clung to their shoulders and arms. Loud sobs came out of their hidden faces. Most of them were actually fine after spending so long inside the caves, but their minds were far from ok.

"What should we do now?" George asked when he noticed Khan. "Most of them aren't ready to move, and having such a large group inside the jungle will only turn us into a loud target."

"We need to get louder," Khan explained before claiming Dorian and Luke's attention. "Move everyone out and seal each passage. I don't want to see if she reacts in the wrong way."

Most of the prisoners knew that Lieutenant Sehlolo was inside a cave. The wardens had often mocked them about that, and Khan's companions had learnt everything from the cries that had reached their ears.

It was clear that Khan had something in mind. His worry about the Kred also hinted at something that the alien species wouldn't appreciate, so his companions decided not to probe further until they left the range of Lieutenant Sehlolo's ears.

It took a while to move all the recruits outside the cave. Dorian and the others even had to make sure that none of them overreacted in front of the sudden freedom. Calm was necessary, and Khan even needed everyone's help to deploy his plan.

The empty area around the cave unfolded in Khan's vision once he stepped out of the cave. Even that spot featured rich vegetation, but most of those plants barely reached his ankles.

Mana flowed inside those plants and made them quite resilient, but they were far from sturdy. A firm pull could break them, and fire could burn them if deployed correctly.

"What do you have in mind?" George asked when he saw that Khan remained silent while inspecting the various trees and plants around the cave.

"We need to create a signal," Khan explained. "I hope that a big fire will be enough."

Chapter 74 - Fire

It took a while to make the former prisoners understand that Khan's group required their help. George and the others needed even more time to convince them to stand up and start working.

Starting a fire on Istrone wasn't an easy task due to the mana flowing inside the plants. The constant bad weather didn't help with the matter either, but Khan was out of options.

Some of the prisoners turned out to have experience with fires that involved wild vegetation. They had received special training from their families to help them with similar situations, and the other recruits did their best to follow their instructions.

Moreover, two prisoners had the fire element. They couldn't cast spells, but their training had taught them how to heat their mana. Their ability quickened the gathering and preparation of the materials required to start the fire and allowed the group to be ready many hours before the arrival of the night.

Luke, Dorian, and other recruits sealed the various passages in the cave with branches, wood, and rocks. That method couldn't stop Lieutenant Sehlolo's eventual outrage, but it could buy them some time, especially since it prevented the smell from reaching the end of the underground structure.

Khan even kicked the narrow entrance until it crumbled. The recruits showed astonished expressions when they saw him hitting rocks for almost half an hour, but the cold aura surrounding him stopped any desire to talk to him.

The rain didn't stop falling, so the group had to create a fire that could resist it. They gathered many piles of dry branches under the trees behind the cave and lit them up through rudimentary methods and fire mana before waving makeshift fans toward the flames.

The resilient vegetation and the relentless rain fought the flames, but Khan had made sure to prepare enough dry materials for the task. The group had a time limit, so they had to succeed on their first try.

A few trees eventually took fire. Their large crowns ended up working against them since they blocked part of the rain, and the flames reached the falling water once they were too intense.

Also, the group was lucky enough to witness a strange reaction. The mana made the trees more resilient, but it transformed into powerful fuel for the flames once the plants died.

Starting the fire turned out to be the only hurdle in the task. The flames grew intense once the mana burnt, and the reaction became unstoppable after that event.

The flames spread once entire trees took fire. The recruits limited themselves to throw more dry materials and dig holes on the ground to keep the cave away from that destructive force.

Black smoke rose in the sky and created a long trail that spread high and wide. The beacon was in place, but everyone in the area could see it. The Kred who had gone hunting couldn't miss that, and Khan knew that they would hurry back to the cave to punish the culprits behind that horrendous act.

Khan didn't do much after the fire began to spread on its own. He sat near the cave and entered the meditative state to relieve his muscles of the stress accumulated during the battle.

He felt beyond exhausted. Khan had been awake for almost three days and had endured the blows of a first-level warrior. His insides hurt, his feet were sore, and his eyes begged him to sleep, but he didn't relax just yet.

The Global Army might arrive after the Kred, which would force the recruits to fight again. Khan couldn't allow himself to rest before such a significant event.

Anxiety built among the recruits as the minutes passed. The noise caused by the falling rain and the crackling of the fire filled their ears and prevented them from concentrating.

The recruits were basically warning the Kred about their successful rescue mission, but everyone knew that Khan's plan was their last real hope to leave the planet. Still, they couldn't help but shake as worries and fears built inside them.

The Kred had captured many of those recruits right after the crash. Those who had managed to put up a fight were too injured or inexperienced to achieve any result. They had no confidence in their ability, but a deadly battle was approaching, and they had to make the best out of that time.

A loud noise suddenly resounded while the group stared at the fire, meditated, or conversed to disperse the pressure that had filled their minds. The event startled them and even awakened Khan from his meditation, but the latter didn't move when he sensed that the sounds came from under him.

Slight tremors ran through the ground. The recruits quickly understood that Lieutenant Sehlolo was trying to escape the cave and prepared for the imminent battle, but confused expressions appeared on their faces when they saw that Khan remained in his spot.

Khan had faced the first-level warrior Kred and had sparred with Lieutenant Dyester for months. He knew how dangerous empowered soldiers could be, and Lieutenant Sehlolo was even a mage.

The chances of the group to defeat Lieutenant Sehlolo were non-existent. The situation wouldn't change even if all the recruits were at their peak condition and didn't have fears hindering their movements. Their opponent was a second-level warrior and a first-level mage. Only death waited for them if the soldier decided to kill them.

The entrance of the cave exploded and sent rocks and debris forward. Lieutenant Sehlolo's tall figure came out of the new opening before jumping next to Khan in an instant.

Her mouth opened when she looked at the massive fire raging through the forest. She appeared in pain at the sight of the burning trees, and blood even flowed out of her palms when she tightened her grasp.

"Your species has a good nose," Khan exclaimed without turning toward the Kred.

His eyes remained on the fire. He was too tired to pretend or beg for his life. The mental barrier kept out his unreasonable feelings and made the cold and cynical part of his mind accept his death.

"It wasn't the smell," Lieutenant Sehlolo revealed while gritting her teeth. "I heard the ground screaming in pain."

The Lieutenant was experiencing an internal battle, and her expression allowed the recruits to keep track of her predominant feelings. Flares of anger would often appear in her eyes, but a helpless sadness always suppressed it.

"I hope this works as a beacon," Khan sighed.

"I could still gain the Kred's favor if I killed all of you," Lieutenant Sehlolo threatened at the sight of Khan's uncaring attitude.

Humans couldn't understand Istrone's pain. They couldn't hear its screams and desperate requests. They didn't feel anything in front of the fire, and Khan embodied that feature in his current state.

Lieutenant Sehlolo couldn't help but feel hatred toward him and the recruits around her. Part of her wanted to go wild and kill everyone. However, her rational side knew how pointless that action would be.

Those recruits weren't guilty of anything. They had simply reacted to the rebellion. Burning the trees was a last desperate attempt to save themselves from a hatred that didn't belong to them.

"Can you promise me something?" Lieutenant Sehlolo suddenly asked as resolve overcame her sadness.

"Depends," Khan vaguely replied.

"Don't tell the Global Army about my involvement," Lieutenant Sehlolo announced. "I'll hold back the Kred if you promise me to remain silent."

The recruits couldn't hear Lieutenant Sehlolo from their position, and they didn't dare to get closer to the alien. They limited themselves to inspect the scene from behind the heavy rain and hope that Khan could handle the situation.

"Do you fear for your faction?" Khan asked after he thought about the reasons behind that request.

The Global Army would definitely retaliate against the Kred, and the culprits behind the rebellion would suffer a grim fate. Lieutenant Sehlolo wanted to save the wolf-like aliens from that.

"I do," Lieutenant Sehlolo revealed.

"Were they involved in the rebellion?" Khan asked.

Lieutenant Sehlolo replied after hesitating for a few seconds, "Some of them."

Khan fell silent and didn't let any of his thoughts affect his expression. Lieutenant Sehlolo often glanced at his cold eyes, but she didn't manage to understand what was going on in his mind.

"Fine," Khan eventually exclaimed. "Protect us, and I'll tell everyone that you had nothing to do with the rebellion."

Lieutenant Sehlolo glanced at the various recruits staring at her in fear. She didn't know if Khan could make all of them remain silent, especially after they experienced such a traumatic experience. Yet, she had to help her faction, even if that meant placing her hopes in a bunch of kids.

The Kred didn't say anything else. She placed a hand on the ground and closed her eyes before moving toward a side of the jungle. Everyone inspected her actions, but no one dared to stop her.

George walked toward Khan once Lieutenant Sehlolo stopped in front of the jungle's edges. His confused gaze clearly expressed his desire to understand what had happened during that interaction, but Khan shook his head before closing his eyes again.

Time flowed, and tall figures eventually appeared among the trees in front of Lieutenant Sehlolo. Angry Kred jumped out of the thick vegetation and set their bloodthirsty eyes on the various recruits.

Khan could sense that some of them had the same amount of mana as his previous opponent. That group of aliens featured multiple first-level warriors, but none of them dared to advance with Lieutenant Sehlolo on their path.

Roars and other animal cries resounded among the group of aliens. Lieutenant Sehlolo and the other Kred discussed in a language that the recruits couldn't understand even if they got closer to them. Their anxiety inevitably intensified at that scene, but all of them knew that they were powerless.

One of the Kred suddenly roared in anger and shot forward. The alien tried to run past Lieutenant Sehlolo and reach one of the recruits, but the soldier appeared on its path in an instant and pushed it back into the forest with a mere wave of her hand.

The Kred showed ugly expressions at that sight. Lieutenant Sehlolo's actions had proven her determination to the group, and the aliens couldn't help but hesitate.

Lieutenant Sehlolo was too strong, but there were many of them. They could reach some of the recruits if they charged at them together. A single soldier couldn't stop all of them.

Yet, the loud noise released by a series of engines suddenly pierced the rain and crackling fire. Everyone looked toward the sky at that point, and broad smiles appeared on the recruits when they noticed a few spaceships descending toward their position.

Chapter 75 - Camp

The Kred lost their desire to fight when they saw the spaceships descending toward the zone devoid of trees. Some of them took a few steps backs in fear, but the vehicles reached their destination in mere seconds.

The sudden acceleration of the spaceships left almost everyone on the scene speechless. Khan had struggled to follow their movements through the sky. They had been nothing more than faint dots hidden among the rain before, but they had transformed into huge figures that hovered above the cave just one instant later.

The spaceships were different from the troop carriers. They had an oval shape and didn't feature wings or tails. Three large rotating engines on their sides and back controlled their altitude and speed, but they stopped releasing noises once they stopped moving.

The front of the spaceships featured three large screens that hid the insides of the cockpits, and their size was almost the same as the troop carriers. Those vehicles couldn't carry many soldiers, but the recruits could understand that numbers didn't matter anymore.

The Global Army had found the recruits. The space station in the orbit would now learn about the position of the lost kids, and the news would reach the worried families. Khan only needed to inspect the reactions of the Kred to understand that he was safe.

"Get on the ground and place your hands behind your head," A mechanical voice resounded from one of the four spaceships hovering in the sky. "Any attempt to resist the arrest will authorize the use of lethal force."

The Kred were a driven species due to their tight connection with Istrone. The aliens in the area would rather try their chances than ending up in the Global Army's hands.

The time that the Global Army had required to find the recruits proved that the environment was in their favor. The Kred had a high chance to escape as long as they played their cards right, but their hesitation in following the orders forced the spaceships to act.

A trapdoor opened under one of the spaceships, and a human figure jumped out of it. A man fell for more than twenty meters, and the terrain shattered during the impact, but he appeared completely unaffected by the event.

The soldier wasn't tall, and his physique didn't feature any evident muscle. He had short black hair, a pair of cold green eyes, and a well-kept short beard that covered a good chunk of his stern face.

The seemingly middle-aged man sent to handle the Kred appeared rather plain. Some of the first-level warriors among the aliens radiated a wilder aura even. Yet, Lieutenant Sehlolo couldn't help but show an astonished expression and perform a military salute when she recognized that soldier.

"Welcome on Istrone, Captain Foxnor, sir!" Lieutenant Sehlolo shouted during her salute, and her voice was so loud that everyone in the area heard it.

The recruits paid more attention to the soldier at that point. The heavy rain still tried to hinder their vision, but the gales generated by the four spaceships dispersed part of it and allowed the kids to inspect the man properly.

Needless to say, astonishment and surprised gasps spread through the area at the sight of the four stars on each shoulder of the soldier's military uniform. The Global Army wasn't playing around. It had sent a monster to deal with the Kred.

Khan had noticed Captain Foxnor's power sooner than his companions. His face had remained unaffected by the event, but rumbling emotions were attacking the mental barrier in his insides.

His senses couldn't miss the intense energy contained in the Captain's body. Even those with poor sensitivity to mana could sense the threatening power that the plain man carried. He was a beacon that almost obscured the other presences in Khan's mind due to his intense glow.

"You have three seconds to get on the ground," The soldier said in a plain voice.

His tone was firm, but it didn't carry any peculiar emotion. It almost sounded peaceful even.

The Kred hesitated while inspecting the stars on Captain Foxnor's shoulders. They had to run away now if they wanted to have a chance to preserve their freedom.

The Captain closed his eyes while raising his right arm. His gesture seemed to match the time that he had given to the aliens. It would stretch completely once the three seconds passed.

One of the aliens suddenly took a step back, and that gesture triggered a mass reaction. The other Kred quickly turned toward the trees and began their escape, but three seconds passed before they could dive deeper into the jungle.

Captain Foxnor snapped his fingers once his arm completely stretched, and pale-white flashes suddenly illuminated the area. Multiple lightning bolts had materialized above the escaping Kred and had fallen on their heads without giving them any chance to dodge the attack.

The result of that spell was incredible. All the Kred except for one first-level warrior fell dead on the ground. Dark smoke came out of their figures as their fur and skin continued to burn even after the attack ended.

That scene left everyone surprised and worried. A single gesture from the Captain had been enough to take care of a threatening platoon of Kred. His attacks had even been so precise that the surviving alien didn't suffer any injury. The soldier had a scary level of control over his power.

"I'm not going to repeat myself," Captain Foxnor exclaimed in his calm voice.

The Kred looked at the dead companions and turned its body in anger. Pain filled its mind as the blood of the aliens flowed into the ground. Its suffering made it prefer death over imprisonment.

The alien shot after Captain Foxnor. It didn't care if its action was pointless due to the vast disparity in power. Its charge was an expression of the Kred's determination!

Captain Foxnor prepared himself to snap his fingers again, but Lieutenant Sehlolo jumped on the Kred before he could complete the spell. She pushed the alien on the ground and held its arms behind its back while sitting on them.

"I'm sorry for interrupting you, sir," Lieutenant Sehlolo explained while restraining the alien. "I believe you wanted to interrogate her, sir."

Captain Foxnor's eyes slightly flickered, but he lowered his hand and turned to walk under one of the spaceships. Khan stared at him for the entire time, but the soldier never wasted time inspecting the area.

A metal rope fell from the trapdoor, and the Captain grabbed it before being dragged back inside the vehicle. Meanwhile, two spaceships landed in relatively empty spots near the trees before their doors opened, and a series of soldiers jumped out of them.

Some of the soldiers ran toward Lieutenant Sehlolo and helped her restraining the Kred with metal handcuffs. Instead, others hurried toward the recruits while carrying lotions and bandages.

"Handle the others first," Khan announced when one of the soldiers tried to approach him. "I'm fine."

Khan was obviously far from fine, but he didn't want to relax yet. The mental barriers would crumble as soon as he allowed himself to feel safe, and he couldn't let himself experience the many suppressed emotions in that situation.

There would be time on Earth to deal with the mess in his mind, but he had to endure for a little more now. He would have to go through interrogations and other procedures before going back home, and showing weakness during them could ruin part of his achievements.

Khan knew that what he had accomplished on Istrone was terrific. He had saved his group, survived in the jungle for two weeks, and rescued many prisoners. The Global Army would definitely reward him after learning of his actions, and he suspected that even the families of his companions wouldn't hold back from showing their gratitude.

Everything was benefitting his plan to become an ambassador. His current cold mindset was perfect for seizing many favors from the Global Army and gaining a privileged status among the families. He felt nothing like a hero, but he only needed the higher-ups to see him in that way.

Lieutenant Sehlolo and a few soldiers dragged the prisoner into a spaceship, and the vehicle immediately set off while carrying the whole group.

Another spaceship landed in that spot after a few minutes. That vehicle was bigger than the others, and the soldiers that came out of it carried multiple devices that they didn't hesitate to place on the ground.

Items with the shape of small suitcases transformed into large azure tents that could fend off the rain. The Global Army built a camp in minutes, and the soldiers moved to handle the other issues afterward.

A few soldiers ran toward the fire and began to suppress it. A woman with a star on her left shoulder controlled part of the falling rain and made it accumulate above her figure before throwing it toward the burning trees.

Another soldier helped her while firing a device with the shape of a machinegun that launched a slimy substance. The flames immediately vanished when they touched that dense green material.

Another group began to carry the injured recruits toward the various tents that had appeared around the cave. Most of the kids didn't need anything special. A few nights of rest and light meds were enough to tend their condition.

Instead, others required immediate special care. Some soldiers escorted Ethel and two other kids who had a pale complexion into the spaceship, and the vehicle set off before dispersing into the sky.

Other spaceships descended and departed as the soldiers enlarged the camp and dealt with the kids. Khan's turn soon arrived, but he didn't let the soldier do much. He accepted the lotions for his cuts, but he refused further inspections.

Glances eventually started to fall on him. Khan had remained in his spot near the cave since it was clear that the group wouldn't leave soon, but the soldiers had started questioning the recruits in that period.

The prisoners didn't say much, but the core members of Khan's group were quite loud about his merits. A group of soldiers had even gathered around Luke when they became aware of his background, and he didn't hold back from praising Khan as much as possible during that interaction.

The rumors spread so quickly that a soldier with three stars on each shoulder eventually left the cockpit of a spaceship and walked toward Khan.

"I think it's time we have a talk," The slightly old man announced when he reached Khan. "You can address me as Captain Godman. I'm in charge of this rescue mission, and I can't wait to hear your version of the story."

Chapter 76 - Mark

Khan didn't hold anything back, but he made sure to tell his version of the story in a calm and precise way to show his ability to maintain a collected mind even after the mission ended.

Captain Godman had a few wrinkles on his face, but his eyes were lively, and his body radiated a steady vibe. His uniform couldn't hide his bulging muscles, and his short grey hair didn't manage to give him an old appearance.

The soldier appeared in his prime, but the stars on his shoulders clearly stated his inferiority to Captain Foxnor even if they shared the same rank. He seemed slightly weaker than Lieutenant Dyester, but Khan couldn't feel sure about that from a simple inspection.

Khan told everything to the Captain. He even managed to play it humble without forgetting to mention his many feats. He relied on his entire knowledge about human interactions to create a perfect image of himself without bragging.

Captain Godman often adjusted his black mustache with his fingers while listening to Khan's story. He remained silent for the whole speech and only nodded from time to time when he heard certain decisions that he approved.

The soldier didn't ask anything about Lieutenant Sehlolo, but Khan guessed that the Global Army would question him about that during the official interrogation. He mentioned her presence inside the cave, but he didn't give all the details about their private conversation since that situation didn't let him exploit the information properly.

The Captain took out a pack of cigarettes when Khan's story ended. The heavy rain had finally stopped, so he could pull an electric lighter from his pocket and smoke without worrying.

The soldier offered a cigarette to Khan, but the latter refused it. His curiosity about smoking had waned when he had seen people in the Slums trading cans of food to keep up with that bad habit.

"It's regretful that you didn't know more about Istrone," Captain Godman eventually announced while blowing smoke above him. "Your background even worked against you, but I can see that you did your best."

"Do you know about my history, sir?" Khan asked while turning toward the soldier.

"We checked you up since the Cobsend kid didn't stop narrating your deeds," Captain Godman said while giving voice to a short laugh. "You made good friends in the army already. I've seen soldiers undermining their companions to improve their chances of getting a promotion, but none of the recruits here dared to forget to mention your name."

"I wouldn't have survived without them," Khan promptly added to make sure that his pretense remained in place.

"And they wouldn't have survived without you," Captain Godman continued. "Still, you could have played it better, but you should blame the army for that."

"How so, sir?" Khan asked.

"You could have realized that the kid's families would have hurried on Istrone after the mission went sideways," Captain Godman explained while drawing something on the ground with his foot. "You could have avoided the patrolling Kred if you moved toward the edges of the blind zone. The Global Army would have even learnt about the rebellion earlier if you met the reinforcement deployed on Istrone."

Khan followed the Captain's foot with his eyes. The soldier was drawing a simple scheme of Istrone's situation to explain the different approaches that Khan could have taken.

The edges of the blind zone were farther away from the crash site than the plain, but they were safer. Also, those areas had soldiers from the families and the Global Army busy searching for traces of the recruits.

The Kred didn't make the plain the center of the blind zone to mislead the army, so Khan would have had a high chance to meet the reinforcements in a single week. In theory, he could have helped to deal with the rebellion far faster.

"I didn't think about that," Khan honestly announced when he understood the Captain's point of view.

"Of course you didn't," Captain Godman snorted. "You had no idea of the actual situation of the teleport, and you didn't know how the sensors on Istrone worked. You couldn't see the best course of action without that knowledge."

Khan turned toward the Captain again at that point. He didn't say anything, but even his aloof face couldn't hide his confusion. He didn't see the point of that speech.

"I'm not saying this to worsen your mood," Captain Godman explained. "Take my words as a special lesson for talented recruits. You have a high chance to end up in a position of power one day, and this might allow you to save lives."

"Thank you for your kindness, sir," Khan exclaimed as his eyes widened.

Khan didn't know how the Global Army would value his feats, but Captain Godman had basically revealed how important they had been. Even such a high-ranked soldier had acknowledged that Khan could end up leading platoons.

"It's rare to find good soldiers at such a young age," Captain Godman eventually said while standing up and patting Khan's shoulder. "Keep working hard and serving well, and you'll get somewhere. Wear something now. You'll have to stay on Istrone a bit more, and I bet you don't want to spend that time in pants."

Khan suddenly realized that he had yet to change into the clean uniform that one of the soldiers had brought him. He was only wearing the torn trousers that had accompanied him in the last two weeks.

Khan promptly stood up and performed a military salute before taking out the uniform from its cover and walking toward a tree to change himself. The mud, blood, and dirt that had accumulated on his trousers and pants made them hard to take off, and he ended up tearing them apart to quicken the process.

Remaining in the open was pointless now that the army had built a proper encampment. The soldiers had prepared enough tents for all the recruits, so Khan picked an empty one and allowed himself to rest. The exhaustion accumulated after staying awake for three days almost made him look forward to his familiar nightmare.

Khan slept for a long time while the troops on Istrone continued their tasks. The rescue missions were still ongoing, and the lack of sensors in the blind zone made the exploration of the forest slow.

The camp could communicate with the space station and the entirety of the Global Army through the spaceships, so multiple vehicles landed on the planet in the following days.

Each spaceship could only cover a small area, but the army used them to create checkpoints inside the blind zone. Moreover, the space station sent technicians toward the broken structures, and they worked day and night to restore the sensors.

Khan didn't do much during those days. George, Luke, Dorian, and Cora often visited him due to the habits developed in the previous weeks. The recruits spent a lot of time meditating together and exchanging faint jokes to relieve the pressure accumulated during their journey.

The soldiers brought other recruits into the camp as the days passed, but those scenes were a rarity. The troops returned with metal coffins most of the time since the Kred preferred to kill their prisoners before escaping deeper into the jungle.

Khan stood up whenever he saw soldiers returning into the camp with coffins or stretchers. He didn't forget about his friends after the traumatic experience. Bruce's location was still unknown, and the same went for Martha.

George and the others noticed his behavior, but they also acted in a similar way. They had lost friends too.

Still, Cora felt more emotional than the others. She came from Reebfell's training camp, so the return on Earth would inevitably separate her from Khan. Also, seeing the boy so interested in the dispersed recruits made her heart ache.

Cora couldn't muster the courage to question Khan about eventual romantic relationships, but the same wasn't true for Luke. The latter was easy to talk to and open about gossips, so she got her answers from him in no time.

Learning about Martha made Cora feel bad for Khan. She already had immense respect for the boy, but understanding that he had led them to safety while his girlfriend remained dispersed made her fall even harder for him.

Khan didn't share his pain with anyone, but he had endured his companion's suffering like a true leader. Cora couldn't find any flaws in his character, deeds, and appearance, but she felt unable to help him.

The desire to lift Khan's mood intensified as the days passed and the date of their return on Earth grew close. Cora didn't want the two of them to separate as simple acquaintances, but leaving a mark on him required all her courage.

Cora made up her mind one morning and reached Khan's tent when she knew that he would have been alone. The sun had just appeared, but she was aware that her friend was already meditating.

Khan opened his eyes and closed them as soon as he recognized Cora. It was unusual for her to come in his tent so early, but he had grown used to his friends going in and out of it freely, so he disregarded the matter.

Yet, ignoring Cora became impossible after she stood in front of him for entire minutes.

"What is it?" Khan eventually asked while interrupting his meditation.

"Do-," Cora began to speak, but she had to take a deep breath before she could say the entire line.

"Do you trust me?"

Khan noticed the slight blush on the girl's face, but he also saw that she was struggling to say those words.

"Of course," Khan replied in his emotionless tone.

"Then close your eyes for a bit and don't move," Cora exclaimed as her voice gained a begging tone. "I need to check something."

Khan knew that the girl had a crush on him. He even felt glad that his group had such a heartwarming presence during the travel through the jungle.

Cora had done her best to lift Khan's morale since the crash, and the latter couldn't ignore her efforts. His mental barrier still hid his emotions, but he could understand when he had to play along.

"Sure," Khan said while closing his eyes.

Silent seconds passed while Cora reaffirmed her courage. She took a while to bend toward Khan and place her hands on his cheeks.

Khan instinctively retreated when he sensed the warm sensation spreading on his face, but his eyes remained close to respect his promise with the girl.

"Don't move!" Cora complained, and Khan gave voice to a weak "sorry" before bending forward again.

A warm and slightly wet sensation then spread from his lips. Khan couldn't help but open his eyes at that point, and Cora's face filled his vision. The girl had kissed him.

"You opened your eyes!" Cora shouted while retreating as soon as she noticed that Khan was looking at her.

The girl's face became completely red, and she hurried toward the exit of the tent, but she suddenly stopped before lifting the azure fabric.

"Don't forget about me, ok?" Cora asked while keeping her voice down and glancing at the boy staring at her in surprise.

"How could I?" Khan replied while wearing a warm smile, and the girl quickly escaped from the tent after seeing that scene.

Khan's expression returned cold when the girl left, and his fingers instinctively went on his lips. That had been his first kiss, and he had to admit that it had felt good.

The entrance of the tent suddenly opened while he remained immersed in his thoughts. Khan initially thought that Cora had returned, but the appearance of Luke's figure made his eyes sharpen.

Luke was wearing a conflicted expression. Worry and sadness filled his face while his eyes moved between the ground and Khan. Still, the boy didn't take much to steel his resolve and explain the reason behind his visit. "They have found Martha."

Chapter 77 - Change

Khan's mental barrier shook when Luke's words reached his ears. Cora's kiss vanished from his thoughts as he jumped off his simple bed and ran to his friend.

Luke quickly led Khan toward one of the large medical tents built near the center of the camp. The soldiers didn't usually let anyone inside, but they moved away when they saw the boy with connections to the noble families and the famous kid who had created the signal for the army.

The two boys walked among the various beds containing injured recruits. Only those in severe conditions or deep need of rest could occupy those spots, so the scene was quite grim.

Khan ignored the severed limbs, bleeding bandages, and infected injuries that reached his eyes while searching for his friend. A familiar figure eventually appeared in his vision, and his mental barrier couldn't help but shake again.

Martha was sleeping in a bed near the end of the large tent. The soldiers with specializations in medical fields were still tending her injuries, so Khan could witness the entirety of her wretched state.

Large patches of burnt skin and missing flesh filled the entirety of Martha's right side. Even her face had turned into a mess of charred flesh.

Luke halted his steps when he saw Khan slowly walking toward Martha. The doctors had to undress the girl to apply many lotions and bandages to cover the burnt flesh, so they didn't notice the boy walking around them and approaching Martha's intact side.

Khan remained silent while the doctors patched Martha up and covered her with special blankets that radiated a warm orange glow. He completely ignored the ability of that item, but his mind barely produced thoughts in that situation.

"Can I?" Khan asked once the doctors straightened their position and heaved a helpless sigh.

Khan's sudden appearance startled them a bit, and concerns about his actual reasons even appeared in their minds. After all, the boy could have been in front of the naked girl for despicable motives. Yet, the evident sadness in his eyes made them drop their guard.

"Make sure not to touch the bandages," One of the doctors said. "Are you a relative?"

"No," Khan whispered as his hesitant hand slowly touched Martha's hair. "I'm just a friend."

The two soldiers exchanged a glance after witnessing that sad scene. They could sense the care in Khan's actions even with the mental barrier suppressing most of his emotions.

"She has been awake for a while after the crash," One of the doctors explained once she couldn't stand to watch Khan's helpless expression anymore. "She has managed to stabilize her condition before falling into a coma. They found her near the wreckage of her vehicle with her mouth pointed toward the sky."

Khan nodded as his hand reached Martha's intact cheek. She felt soft and warm, but he didn't manage to appreciate those sensations with the overwhelming sadness trying to fill every corner of his mind. Even the naked scenes from before had barely managed to enter his vision since he could only focus on her injuries.

"Will she wake up?" Khan asked, and the doctors didn't fail to notice how he didn't mention anything about her appearance.

"It's very likely," The other doctor announced. "Her coma is only a defensive measure of her body, but she should wake up once the damage retreats and nutrients flow again. It might take her a while to heal completely, but she is out of danger now that we found her."

"We'll move her to the space station in less than an hour," The first doctor continued. "You can remain here if you don't hinder our work."

"Thank you," Khan simply replied without moving his eyes from Martha.

The doctors didn't know what else to say to improve Khan's mood, but they didn't have time to waste there either. The soldiers continued to bring injured and half-dead recruits to the camp, so they had to deal with their patients quickly in order to have enough room for everyone.

The duo left Khan alone, and Luke showed a complicated expression before turning to leave the medical tent. Cries of pain and loud orders resounded inside the structure, but Khan barely heard anything while his attention remained on his friend.

'Thank you for not dying,' Khan sighed in his mind.

Everything about the situation was awful, but Martha was alive. That was the only positive aspect of the rebellion. Both of them had survived.

'What should I do now?' Khan thought as if asking Martha. 'We didn't even get the chance to talk.'

The promise to talk about their relationship became a sweet memory in Khan's mind. Looking at Martha in her current condition made him realize how important she had become in his life.

Martha had been a wonderful friend for almost six months. She had allowed him to get Lieutenant Dyester's training, and she had always helped him when his ignorance or doubts tried to affect his actions.

Moreover, Martha had never asked anything in return. She was nothing more than a young girl, but her maturity and cheerfulness had been one of the pillars on which Khan had founded his life in Ylaco's training camp.

The two of them had rarely gotten chances to see each other outside the lessons in the last period due to their packed schedules, but they had managed to grow closer on Onia. They had clearly liked each other for a while, but it had taken them six months to conclude that they couldn't remain simple friends, even if the army didn't give them much free time.

Khan almost heard Martha's replies in his mind. He could imagine her telling him to focus on his training and his goal to become an ambassador.

Khan then imagined how fun it would be to tease her about Cora. Martha would definitely pretend not to care about the event, and Khan would have to work hard to find her real feelings.

'I really wanted to see you jealous,' Khan eventually sighed again.

The hideous injuries didn't manage to ruin his mental image of the girl. Khan barely cared about them after everything that he had gone through. He only wanted to hear her voice and almost always correct ideas again since part of him felt utterly lost.

'I would have found a way to buy condoms for you,' Khan couldn't help but smile when he thought that.

Martha's angry face even appeared in his mind when he imagined her reaction. He knew it would have been fun to experience those moments with her, but the world didn't seem to like the idea of the two of them ending together. Actually, part of Khan started to believe that he was the issue in the matter.

'Maybe I attract problems,' Khan thought. 'What are the chances of experiencing the Second Impact and Istrone's second rebellion in a single life?'

Martha would scold him if she knew about those thoughts. She would remind him of how the world could simply be unfair at times. Having suffered once didn't save anyone from future traumas.

Khan eventually took Martha's hand in his grasp and waited in silence. His mind continued to be a mess, but only his memories of the girl managed to seep past the mental barrier.

The hour went by in an instant. Not even the meditations could make time flow so quickly. Khan didn't seem able to grow tired of staring at her, but the doctors eventually took her away and moved her toward a spaceship.

Luke neared Khan when he noticed him staring at the spaceship disappearing in the sky. George and the other friends limited themselves to gaze at him from their tents. Khan had taken care of them in the jungle, but they didn't know how to do the same for him.

The rain started to fall again by the time Luke patted his shoulder, but Khan barely felt that interaction. Seeing the spaceship leave made him feel as if part of him had ultimately vanished.

That departure seemed to deliver a killing blow to the boy-Khan that his mental barriers kept away from his brain.

"She'll wake up in no time," Luke said while trying to cheer Khan up. "Not even the Kred can make that girl stay put."

"I'm not worried about her," Khan honestly revealed without adding anything else.

Luke showed a confused expression, but he didn't find the time to say anything since Khan quickly turned to go back into his tent. George and the others wanted to show their support when looking at that scene, but they felt that Khan wanted to remain alone for the time being, so they didn't move.

Khan had spoken the truth before. He wasn't worried about Martha. She would definitely wake up one day, and everything would be almost the same in her mind. However, Khan didn't know what could change inside him in that period. He wasn't even sure if she could recognize him right now.

Most of those worries were paranoias enhanced by his sorrow and unstable mental state. His raging emotions were about to burst past the barrier, but he didn't let it fall. It even appeared sturdier after the time he spent with Martha.

Khan entered his tent and sat cross-legged on his bed. He didn't want to think anymore. His attention quickly moved on the mana in his brain before starting the eighth mental exercise.

Needless to say, Khan finally completed the exercise and moved to the ninth. He only had three lessons left to master left before the Wave spell.

Chapter 78 - Interrogation

Life in the camp on Istrone was peaceful but temporary. The recruits ended up spending two entire weeks in the various tents while the soldiers rescued and took care of the lost kids before the Global Army decided to start moving some of them.

Captain Godman reappeared on the camp and started managing the departures of the recruits who didn't feature any severe injury. A large spaceship landed in the area burnt by the fire, and the soldiers ended up moving Khan, George, and many others inside it.

The army had found Bruce in those two weeks, but the boy had many open injuries that his body didn't manage to heal due to a dangerous infection. His life wasn't in danger, but he couldn't join the first batch of recruits meant to return on Earth.

The spaceship set off once Captain Godman filled its seats with recruits. The vehicle's insides were vast but cramped due to the many rows of chairs meant to carry soldiers.

That vehicle could hold up to twenty people in its central part, and most of the recruits sitting inside it felt slightly excited when they fastened their seatbelts. Only Khan and a few others didn't let their first trip to space improve their mood.

The spaceship set off a few minutes after the recruits took their place. Khan felt a faint pressure landing on his body and pushing him down, but the sensation vanished quickly. Mechanical noises resounded from outside the vehicle at that point, and its doors eventually opened to reveal a dark-grey environment.

Khan left his seat and peeked out of the spaceship. The scenery had completely changed in a matter of minutes. He had gone from the simple tents and the flourishing vegetation of Istrone to a metal chamber full of glowing wires and beeping sounds.

Captain Godman quickly left the cockpit and walked in front of the central doors. A faint smile appeared on his face when he saw that Khan was already inspecting the outsides of the spaceship, but he didn't say anything until the rest of the recruits stood up.

"Gather up and get in line," Captain Godman eventually ordered. "Follow me closely and don't touch anything. Your families wouldn't be able to repay this beauty even if they sold the entirety of their resources."

"He's exaggerating," Luke whispered while walking next to Khan. "Space stations are old tech unless they have some special weapon. They have become rather obsolete after humans perfected the teleports."

Khan nodded and jumped off the spaceship to follow the Captain walking toward one of the corridors connected to that docking bay. Other vehicles filled the area, and he recognized the troop carriers and the smaller spaceships from before.

His lungs cheered in joy when he breathed inside the space station. Khan immediately recognized Earth's air, and energy filled his body after bathing inside it. Something inside him immediately felt at home.

The other recruits experienced similar sensations when they jumped off the spaceship. Their bodies felt relieved to experience Earth's atmosphere again. Mana made them able to breathe on foreign planets, but it couldn't alter their natural habitat.

"Don't waste time!" Captain Godman shouted from the end of the corridor. "Why would you stop to enjoy this fake air when you are about to get back on Earth?"

The Captain's words forced the recruits to snap back to reality. The fear of disobeying direct orders was intense, but nothing could beat their desire to go back on Earth.

Khan and Luke ended up leading the line of recruits behind Captain Godman. The soldier moved among the intricate array of corridors quickly and without showing any hesitation. He had memorized those paths long ago, and he had no interest in letting the kids inspect the insides of the space station.

A large hall that featured many desks and soldiers eventually unfolded in the group's vision. Khan felt that the area's layout was quite familiar, but it took him a while to connect that scene to the station in the Slums.

"We'll go over an official interrogation now," Captain Godman explained while the soldiers in the hall stood up and activated the holograms on their desks. "You, come with me."

Khan suddenly found Captain Godman pointing at him. He didn't know why he was receiving special attention, but he didn't mind it. That privileged status was a requirement for his goal.

Captain Godman led Khan inside a separate room that contained a table, a few chairs, and a window that showed the outsides of the space station.

Khan couldn't help but lose his focus when he saw the darkness of space expanding from the window. The spectacle was breathtaking, and he instinctively moved closer to that transparent material to inspect every corner of that scene.

A blinding star shone in the distance and almost hid the small white dots that disrupted the darkness of the void. A giant blue planet filled the lower part of the scene and multiple pieces of the space station that Khan didn't recognize occupied its sides.

Istrone was the most captivating part of that scene. Khan almost couldn't believe that he had been on that blue planet just a few minutes ago. The flight with the spaceship didn't make him experience much, but that large window compensated for that.

"You'll grow used to that eventually," Captain Godman announced. "You'll start to see every alien species as a potential threat instead of a chance to marvel at the vastness of the universe. A soldier's life isn't easy."

"I know that, sir," Khan replied while showing a sad smile.

The Captain almost regretted saying those words. Khan had just gone through hell on Istrone, and he had even survived the Second Impact. He had probably experienced more pain than some of the soldiers in the space station.

"Sit," Captain Godman eventually ordered. "I must warn you that the Global Army will record everything you say inside this room, so be careful. Still, don't worry either. Just make sure to tell the truth."

"Of course, sir," Khan promptly answered while taking his seat.

"I can vouch for your version of the story," Captain Godman said while sitting in front of Khan.

"You don't need to repeat it since the higher-ups will hear it multiple times from your friends. I'm only interested in what you know about the rebellion."

"In general or about specific details?" Khan asked.

"I'm talking about potential traitors inside the Global Army," Captain Godman exclaimed. "Many former prisoners claim that Lieutenant Sehlolo has been involved with the rebellion. That would make her entire faction a potential threat to the army. I know that you have talked with her alone two times. I want to know if you have learnt something more than rumors spewed by wardens."

Khan pretended to hesitate. He had already made up his mind about that topic, but he wanted the Captain to see a struggle inside him. The time for the partial lies had arrived, and he had to betray Lieutenant Sehlolo's trust without appearing untrustworthy in the soldier's eyes.

"I convinced Lieutenant Sehlolo to talk after defeating the first-level warrior inside the cave with the help of my team," Khan explained, making sure that his feat inside the cave ended up in the tape. "She had clearly been aware of the attack, but she didn't seem to know the actual target of the rebellious factions."

"Continue," The Captain said without showing any emotion.

"I had to find about the disabled sensors and blind zone from her before coming up with the idea of the fire," Khan added. "She even helped us by keeping the Kred at bay while we waited for

reinforcements, but I had to promise not to say anything about her involvement to make her cooperate."

"Why are you telling me this now, then?" Captain Godman asked. "Does your word have no value when you give it to an alien?"

"It's not about that, sir," Khan replied while lowering his head and making sure to keep his voice down. "I had to keep my companions safe, and"

"And?" Captain Godman pressured Khan to continue.

"And they killed my friends, sir," Khan concluded. "I don't hate the Kred in general, but I can't remain silent when questioned about the rebellious factions. The Global Army has to be aware of the potential threat to make sure that something like this doesn't happen again."

"Do you know what's best for the Global Army now?" Captain Godman scoffed.

"I didn't mean that, sir," Khan replied while raising his head to stare at the soldier. "I'm not saying this out of hatred. I only want the army to know that these traitors exist."

"Oh?" Captain Godman said in a surprised tone. "Why would you reveal this then? I didn't offer you anything in exchange, so I can only think that you want us to punish Lieutenant Sehlolo and her faction."

"That won't solve the issue, right?" Khan exclaimed. "I don't know much about the Kred, but I've learnt about their resolve in these weeks. They will never accept their loss, and humans don't have a proper way to discover moles. However, everything might be different if their spies were to double-cross them."

Captain Godman's expression froze before he exploded into a loud laugh and slammed his hand on the table.

"Do you want us to blackmail Lieutenant Sehlolo's faction to gain spies capable of infiltrating the Kred's society?" Captain Godman asked.

"Isn't that the best path, sir?" Khan questioned the soldier. "Unless I'm missing core information again."

"No, you got it figured out this time," Captain Godman announced. "Good thinking. The army was already planning something like that, but it's hard to obtain valuable leverage on the Kred. We have it now."

Khan opened his mouth to speak, but the soldier raised his hand to interrupt him.

"The army won't mention your name," Captain Godman explained. "Putting a target on your back isn't a good reward for your loyalty and service. Be sure to talk with Linda Norwell once you get back in Ylaco. I can understand why you are refusing to join the special training program right away, but that shouldn't prevent you from getting something."

Chapter 79 - Return

Captain Godman let Khan go after that short interrogation, but the other recruits didn't have it so easy. The soldiers had to record everything in the official tapes of the army, and the process ended up taking almost an hour.

The soldiers then led the entire group into a waiting room and provided some food while preparing everything for the return on Earth. It turned out that the space station had a teleport in its insides, but the Global Army preferred to avoid using it due to issues connected to the synthetic mana.

Many structures, machines, and vehicles inside the space station used synthetic mana as fuel, so the army preferred to avoid depleting its stashes. The teleports even consumed a lot of energy, so using those on the planets prevented eventual issues caused by a shortage of power.

Still, the situation was atypical due to the chaos on Istrone, and the army didn't want to send the recruits back on the planet after everything they had experienced. Using the stashes of synthetic mana in the space station was the least they could do to improve the kids' return.

Captain Godman didn't reappear. A simple soldier took care of leading the recruits across the intricate corridors of the space station until they reached a familiar circular area that contained an oval structure at its center.

Khan had grown used to that scene already. All the teleports looked the same. The only differences were in the materials that surrounded the actual structures.

The same dark-grey metal floor of the space station surrounded the teleport, and white consoles filled the edges of the circular hall. Many soldiers wearing white medical coats worked on those spots and tinkered with the holograms to ensure that everything worked perfectly.

The teleport still scared some of the recruits, but they didn't show any hesitation at that time. The soldier divided them according to their training camp, and each group jumped on the white platform as soon as they heard the order ringing in their ears.

Khan, Cora, George, Luke, and Dorian used that chance to say goodbye. That separation would make it impossible for them to meet for many years due to the training in their respective camps. They could contact themselves through their phones, but they all knew that their packed schedules wouldn't leave time for that.

"I guess we'll see each other around," Dorian announced while wearing a sad smile. "The Aiyti family isn't too wealthy, but you'll always have a friend there."

"The same goes for me," Cora continued while shooting shy glances toward Khan. "Make sure to give me a call if you ever end up near Reebfell. Also, who knows? We might find ourselves in the same platoon one day."

"I doubt any of us wants to be on the battlefield again," Luke laughed. "Though, I won't forget that you saved me. Make sure to contact me if you ever need something."

"We'll still belong to the same organization," George explained. "I think we'll definitely meet each other again."

"It's very likely as long as we chase similar goals," Khan added. "Take care of yourselves. I can't always be there to save your asses."

Khan's mental barrier was still in place, but he didn't want to ignore that moment completely. Taking good care of social relationships was necessary for his goal, and those recruits had even shared tragic moments with him. The group had grown close through pain.

"I don't think I like arrogant-Khan," Dorian laughed.

"He has every reason to be like that," Luke replied. "I bet our entire training camp will start to worship him once we return."

Khan couldn't help but show a complicated smile at those words. The Kred had managed to kill many recruits during the attack. There weren't many first years left to worship him.

That reaction reminded Luke of the tragic situation. He was still struggling to accept that new normality. Going back to Ylaco wouldn't solve anything since most of his friends were now inside coffins. Even the special class didn't have many survivors.

Luke's mistake was understandable. Every recruit was trying to get back to normality, and the most common approach was to pretend that nothing had happened.

However, it was impossible to ignore that their entire world had turned upside-down. Their very minds carried memories that had changed them completely.

Some recruits had matured during the rebellion. Others had discovered their true nature and talents after their struggles. Many more had fallen apart, and it would take them years of therapy and time among loved ones to recover.

Khan could see those changes in his friends. Luke had grown distracted after experiencing the near-death experience. Cora and Dorian had found their confidence and courage. George had gained a broader knowledge of the many talents inside the army, and he had also accumulated battle experience that allowed him to deploy his abilities correctly.

Khan had also changed, but he couldn't study his transformation as long as his emotions remained bottled in his mind.

Those bottled emotions would trigger changes that Khan couldn't predict, and the time to lower his mental barrier even drew near as the soldier continued to send recruits to the teleport. It was almost time to experience those raging feelings, and Khan didn't look forward to that.

"Flurris!" The soldier eventually shouted, and Dorian showed an honest smile before walking toward the teleport.

A skinny girl with a pale complexion who had remained alone for the entire time also moved and joined Dorian on the teleport. She also was from Flurris' training camp, but it was clear that her mental condition was far from optimal after the events on Istrone.

The teleport lit up, and the two recruits vanished. The soldier quickly called another city, and the recruits belonging to that training camp walked toward the structure while the technicians changed the coordinates.

Cora's time eventually arrived. The girl wanted to say many things, but it was impossible to talk with Khan alone in that situation, and she didn't really know how to face him after the kiss.

The girl limited herself to exchange polite words with Luke and George before jumping forward to hug Khan. The latter could avoid that gesture, but he didn't.

"I won't forget," Khan swore when he saw the girl leaving his arms and trying to say something.

Cora revealed a broad smile before walking happily back to the teleport. No one else in the group of recruits moved since she was the only survivor from Reebfell.

George and Luke shot curious gazes toward Khan, but none of them said anything. It was complicated to discuss Cora's matters when Martha was in a coma. Both boys knew that teasing him wasn't the right thing to do.

"Thank you for everything," George announced when it was his time to reach the teleport.

The boy didn't say anything else and hurried to the teleport. A few recruits joined him, and the structure soon made them vanish.

Luke and Khan's time arrived right after George. They were the only ones from Ylaco who could return on Earth right away since the other survivors were too injured to endure the teleportation. Bruce and Martha were somewhere inside the space station, and they would need a bit more to recover.

The scene felt lonely when Khan inspected the almost empty platform. The first year of Ylaco's training camp had less than one hundred and fifty recruits before the semestral mission, but only a dozen of them had survived the rebellion.

The army had yet to find traces of many lost kids, but everyone knew that the chances of finding survivors diminished as time passed.

The Kred's rebellion might have failed in the end, but the aliens had succeeded in their goal. The Global Army had lost more than ninety percent of its six-month-old recruits. The damage suffered in those short weeks was immense.

Synthetic mana surrounded Khan and Luke before their vision went dark. The two reopened their eyes in a familiar circular hall. Some discomfort spread from their bodies, but that feeling didn't manage to suppress the slight relief that they experienced when gazing at the room seen before their trip to Onia.

"Welcome back!" An elderly man with long white hair and a grey goatee announced while fixing his eyes on Luke.

"It's nice to see you too, Master Ivor," Luke exclaimed while jumping off the teleport.

Khan connected that elderly but lively figure to Luke's hired Master. The two even appeared quite close since they exchanged a hug once Luke left the platform.

Khan also jumped off the platform and limited himself to perform a quick inspection before fixing his eyes on the corridor that led to the exit. Lieutenant Dyester wasn't there, but he didn't feel bad about it since he knew about his history.

The soldiers in the building made the duo go through the usual scanners and inspections before letting them off the hook. A few surprised gasps resounded when the technicians read the machines' results, but Khan limited himself to take note of that event before hurrying outside the structure.

"Do you need anything?" Luke asked when his Master began to walk toward the boy's dormitory.

"I'm fine," Khan replied while wearing a fake smile. "I only want to see my bed again."

"I'm the same!" Luke laughed. "My dad wants me to do a complete check-up with better scanners, but I think I'll ignore him until I get a proper night of sleep."

"See you soon then," Khan said while waving his hand and going on his way.

Luke didn't have the time to say much due to Khan's sudden departure, but he let go of the matter after heaving a helpless sigh. His friend had every reason to act as he wanted after Istrone's events.

Khan's smile vanished when he felt sure that Luke couldn't see his face anymore. It wouldn't take him much to return to his room, but he wanted to go somewhere else before dealing with his emotions.

His phone had started to work again after the soldiers on Istrone provided charges. Khan could read on the screen that it was almost time for lunch, but he didn't feel hungry at all. He only wanted to talk with someone who could understand him.

Chapter 80 - Emotions

Khan walked the familiar empty streets until he reached the lawn that hid his training area. The trapdoor opened before he could knock on the ground, and the scent of smoke filled his nose when he approached the descending staircase.

Lieutenant Dyester had moved the table near the wall on the other side of the staircase, and he was sitting over it with his legs stretched. A fuming cigarette was in his mouth, and a bottle that contained a light-brown liquid was at his side.

"Have you been drinking?" Khan asked when he smelled the familiar scent of booze after the trapdoor closed.

It wasn't hard for Khan to recognize that scent. The same smell filled his home in the Slums.

"Bad memories, Khan," Lieutenant Dyester replied in a hoarse voice without using any special nickname. "I bet you have new ones now."

"Did they tell you about Istrone already?" Khan asked while sitting on the steps.

"Just the rumors," Lieutenant Dyester revealed. "I haven't watched any official interviews yet. I don't know if I will."

Khan didn't have a good reply for those words. Part of him felt that Lieutenant Dyester had every right to act like that, especially since he had already gone through a similar crisis forty years ago. However, another side of him wanted the soldier to behave like a proper grown-up and help him with his struggles.

Lieutenant Dyester didn't speak anymore, and Khan also remained silent. The former finished his smoke and immediately lit another one while taking sips from his bottle. Instead, Khan tried to sort his thoughts to find questions that could give him helpful answers.

"How was it?" Lieutenant Dyester eventually asked when the silence became too unbearable.

Khan believed that the soldier was questioning him about the rebellion, so he gave a short explanation. "Tiring, dirty, and bloody."

"They didn't change after forty years," Lieutenant Dyester commented before taking another sip from his bottle.

"I-," Khan began to speak before taking a second to choose his words and continuing. "I did some things there."

"Obviously," Lieutenant Dyester. "I bet you were the only one who didn't shit his pants. Still, I don't know how positive that is."

"I managed to survive because of that!" Khan complained.

"You are sixteen," Lieutenant Dyester scoffed. "Being able to remain calm among blood and corpses only hints at your pain. It's tragic that you have already grown used to it."

"I actually don't know how comfortable I am with it," Khan revealed. "I had to rely on the mental exercises to remain in control."

Lieutenant Dyester was the only man inside the entire camp who knew about Khan's training. He had helped him whenever the programs on his phone weren't clear or in front of bottlenecks, so he could immediately understand what technique Khan had used.

"Is the mental barrier still up?" Lieutenant Dyester asked.

The soldier was about to grab his bottle again, but he stopped when he realized that Khan was seeking his help. The effects of the abuse of the mental barrier became evident in his vision at that point. Khan didn't have a foul mood. His face was dark because his emotions couldn't reach it.

"I would have done the same if I had access to a similar technique back then," Lieutenant Dyester sighed while picking the bottle and staring at its almost empty insides. "Emotions can break you, especially when friends die in front of your eyes. Yet, life would be pointless without them."

"What should I do?" Khan asked in a helpless tone.

Khan felt lost, and he acknowledged that one of his suppressed emotions was his fear of the imminent changes. It was scary to sense the many feelings ready to eat him up while he had yet to find proper answers.

"It's pointless to speak about right or wrong," Lieutenant Dyester sighed while blowing smoke. "I won't give you speeches about the morality of your actions and the greater good of humankind."

Lieutenant Dyester stared at the almost empty bottle for a few more seconds before throwing it away. The item flew across the entire basement and shattered when it hit the wall on the other side.

"Humans have created ideas of right and wrong, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist," Lieutenant Dyester continued. "Still, spending your life thinking about that is a waste of time. You should decide what you want to be and do everything in your power to stay on that path."

"Is that what you did with your life?" Khan asked as a vague mocking tone seeped into his voice.

Khan didn't like that advice. A simple "be yourself" wasn't enough.

"I'm old, kid," Lieutenant Dyester sighed. "I might not look like it, but I've already lived a full life. I've become the hero of the Global Army and paid the price for my success. I've achieved my dreams, but I've realized too late that I didn't really care about them. I had to lose my friends to understand that they were the core of my happiness."

Khan remained silent. His contained burst of anger vanished behind the mental barrier. He felt able to see Lieutenant Dyester's true face in that situation. The soldier was a broken man who had lost everything and had no interest in trying to rebuild his life. He only wanted to punish himself.

"I know what I want already," Khan eventually revealed.

"That's not the point," Lieutenant Dyester replied. "Dreams are lies. They don't reflect the real world. Instead, the path to reach them is everything, and you must decide how to walk it."

"What do you mean?" Khan continued to question the soldier.

"You can keep that mental barrier up," Lieutenant Dyester. "I believe you have enough talent to make it permanent. A life like that is easy, and it will even provide great results."

"I hope there is a but coming," Khan said.

"Not really," Lieutenant Dyester laughed. "The other path sees you facing your emotions. It will have many low points and only a few highs, and it will probably create many issues along the way. As I said before, you only have to choose what you want to be."

Khan couldn't help but nod after that explanation. He had understood what Lieutenant Dyester meant at that time. A bit of confidence had even appeared inside him. Part of him felt ready to open his mind.

"Thank you," Khan whispered.

"Don't thank me yet," Lieutenant Dyester snorted. "The hard part arrives once we are alone with ourselves, but I believe we both have to face that now."

"I can't delay it any further," Khan sighed while standing up and climbing the staircase.

The trapdoor opened, but Khan didn't immediately exit the basement. His eyes turned toward the broken bottle near the wall, and a memory of his father suddenly filled his mind.

"You shouldn't drink that brand," Khan revealed. "My father has always avoided it because the family in charge of its production exploits workers from the Slums. You don't want to know what they do to retaliate."

Khan left the prisons of the camp at that point, and a speechless Lieutenant Dyester stared at the trapdoor closing to restore some darkness in the basement. His eyes slowly moved toward the light-brown liquid that had tainted the floor, and a gulp inevitably resounded from his throat.

Khan walked toward his dormitory in a hurry. The emptiness of the streets reminded him of the many dead recruits on Istrone, and those thoughts made his mental barrier tremble. It felt harder to keep it intact now that he had decided to take it down.

The soldiers guarding the gate of his dormitory showed surprised expressions at his arrival. They seemed about to say something, but Khan crossed them without waiting for their words.

His empty flat soon unfolded in his eyes, and Khan threw away his clothes before approaching his bed. He sat and watched the scene that had kept him company for almost six months before a few images appeared in his vision.

Khan reviewed his usual nightmare. He had committed those images to memory long ago, so it didn't take him much to imagine the tall Nak standing in front of him. The pain of the Second Impact seemed to fill his body, and desperation spread inside him, but he felt unable to found his life on those feelings.

'Finding the Nak is my goal,' Khan confirmed in his mind, 'But I don't want to make it the sole meaning of my life. I can't let this desperation drive my every move.'

Martha's injured face suddenly appeared in his vision. Khan had desires that went past his desperation. His goal to find the Nak was mandatory due to his nightmares, but he was already letting them control his nights and most of his days. He didn't want the entirety of his life to depend on them.

Khan sighed, and the mental barrier slowly crumbled. An intense flow of emotions filled his brain and made him feel dizzy. His vision grew blurry, his hands started to tremble, and his body fell to the side as his breathing became ragged.

The first wave of emotions mainly carried pain. Khan experienced all the suffering that he had suppressed during the travel across the jungle in mere seconds, but that felt rather easy to withstand.

The other feelings weren't as easy to endure. An intense sorrow filled his mind and made tears appear in his eyes. His hands continued to shake as he experienced anger caused by the unfairness of the world. He felt hatred toward the Kred who had hurt Martha and made him survive through hell.

Khan screamed and punched the wall of his flat. A dent appeared on the resilient metal before he jumped off his bed and started kicking the furniture around.

His attacks deployed mana on their own. He had grown so used to rely on that energy that he threatened to perform proper techniques even as he vented the intense feelings that had taken control of his actions.

The anger, hatred, and sorrow were nothing compared to the third wave of emotions. The corpses of the Kred killed by his kicks suddenly filled his vision. Khan felt able to recognize the differences among those inhuman faces when his mind reminded him that he was a killer.

The raging feelings were easier to handle. Khan could punch and kick stuff to vent them. However, the emptiness felt in front of the death perpetrated by his own hands was unbearable. It made him fall on his knees, and lay his side on the floor as he continued to see the faces of his victims.

The sensations felt during his first kill came back stronger than ever in his mind. Khan still recalled his faint excitement during his successful knee attack. He had felt truly happy about his power back then, but now those feelings caused only disgust inside him.

Fighting with mana wasn't a game. People could die whenever those attacks hit their target correctly. His techniques were lethal weapons, and it had taken him six months to acknowledge their dangerousness.

The emptiness didn't go away even after minutes passed. Khan straightened his position and placed his back on the wall as he sat on the floor. The cold of the metal felt nice. He liked sensing something when his body was so devoid of emotions.

A realization slowly dawned upon his mind as he remained in that state. Khan understood that there was no solution to the emptiness that he felt. He could only wait until he grew used to that condition and fused with it.