

Chaos' Heir 81

Chapter 81 - Requests

Khan didn't sleep much. His bed was perfect, and the flat was dead silent, but his eyes opened before dawn, and his brain didn't let him close them anymore.

The awakening ended up being quite messy. Khan jumped off the bed and placed his back on a wall while crouching his body to enter one of the few defensive guards described in the Lightning-demon style. The mess of his flat had startled him, and it took him some seconds to realize that no danger would come out of the corridor.

Khan felt slightly lost when his arms lowered. He wasn't on Istrone anymore, but his mind still felt battle-ready. His senses were alert, and the slight change in his vision could make him trigger the fighting instincts built inside the jungle.

More sweat than usual covered his body. Khan had gone from his usual nightmare to a battle stance, and his skin had reacted accordingly. Even his breath seemed about to grow ragged, but his resilience didn't allow his lungs to end up out of air.

'I'm really back,' Khan sighed when he managed to calm down.

It felt strange to be back inside the training camp. Khan had spent two weeks developing survival instincts and being alert for twenty-six hours straight every day, but he needed to forget those habits now. Still, he didn't know how easy that process would be.

The emptiness reappeared when he recalled everything that had happened. That emotion filled his mind and made him desire to go back to bed, but his body acted before he could even think about remaining still.

The bunk beds were lying on the ground together with other pieces of furniture. The walls of his bedroom featured some caved-in spots, and shards of wood and metal filled the floor. Khan started to sort everything out once he calmed down, and his flat regained some order after a few minutes.

Khan grabbed his phone and browsed through the menus at that point. He didn't have the right tool to clean everything, so he wanted to check where to get them. Yet, he soon noticed that most of the services that had required Credits in the past were now free.

'I guess the army wants to make it easy for us,' Khan concluded before tapping a few digital buttons to activate a few services.

The door of his flat soon opened on its own, and a cubical cleaning robot entered the corridor before scanning the whole area. Its mechanical voice announced every item that needed replacements and damage that the bedroom had suffered, but its questions managed to surprise Khan.

"Fixing the walls will require time," The robot announced. "Do you wish to change flat?"

Khan scratched the side of his head at those words. The Global Army would normally make him pay for the damages, but the robot didn't even mention Credits. It was clear that he was receiving special treatment after Istrone's event.

"It's fine," Khan eventually replied. "I only need the floor clean."

The robot beeped a few times before proceeding with its task. Khan could take a shower and wear clean clothes during the process, and he noticed that the moving cube had left by the time he was over.

The robot didn't limit itself to remove the shards of metal and wood from the floor. It also replaced the sheets and pillows on each bed, cleaned the corridor, and did laundry. Khan couldn't believe that it had done everything during his short shower, but he could only accept it as another special treatment after his feats.

Another robot entered the flat at that point. The machine brought a lunch box inside and left it on the bedside table before leaving in a hurry. Khan had ordered the best available breakfast since he was at it, but he didn't expect the army to deliver it so soon.

A complete breakfast that featured sweets, snacks, cereals, and other delicious meals unfolded in Khan's eyes when he lifted the lid of the lunch box. That sight would have normally made him drool in hunger, but he maintained his composure now.

Khan soon noticed that he couldn't fully appreciate the delicious tastes and appealing scents that filled his mouth and nose during the meal. He could sense them in their entirety, but no happiness spread inside him when eating them.

The emptiness inside Khan devoured everything. It didn't let him enjoy the best meal of his life, and he could only heave a helpless sigh when he finished eating. It would take him some time to relearn how to appreciate those small things, but he didn't know if his plans would allow him to do so.

Khan performed his usual meditation and morning exercises out of habit. He didn't even need to think about them to sit on his bed and start training.

The Global Army didn't give him a new schedule for the lessons and didn't notify him about special events, so he had the entire day for himself. He would have usually spent it inside the prisons of the camp before, but his return on Earth compelled him to attend more important matters.

Khan checked the list of professors on the phone and requested an appointment with Linda Norwell. He expected the network to require a few hours to plan the matter, but a notification reached his device mere minutes after filling the digital form.

His phone announced that he could find Professor Norwell in one of the basements under the canteen. The device didn't even set precise hours for the event. It only stressed to attend the meeting before the arrival of the curfew.

Khan didn't waste time and exited his flat. The soldiers guarding the entrance of the dormitory followed his figure with their eyes when they saw him departing toward the lessons building. They appeared conflicted and sad, but they didn't say anything.

Khan walked slowly. He could reach his destination in less than half an hour, but the emptiness of the training camp felt quite overwhelming. The streets devoid of recruits were a constant reminder of the tragedy that had unfolded on Istrone, and it inevitably brought tragic memories to his mind.

The faces of his victims would flash in his vision whenever he blinked. Khan didn't feel able to appreciate the newfound peace around him. That silence came from death, and the safety of the training camp appeared fake after his time in the jungle.

Khan had learnt to treat the training camp as his new home in the last six months, but that feeling wasn't inside him anymore. He saw clean streets, well-kept lawns, and comfortable benches, but they seemed to express a fake idea. They failed to convince him that peace existed after everything that he had gone through.

The main structure of the camp eventually unfolded in his vision, and Khan didn't hesitate to walk toward the basement. He met Professor Conche on his way, but the latter only revealed a surprised expression at his sight.

Khan found Professor Norwell inside the basement that the recruits had used in the last six months. She was sitting at the edges of the platform with a fuming cigarette in her mouth, and her gaze seemed lost when she inspected the large empty hall.

"I thought you would have taken a few days of complete rest," Professor Norwell exclaimed when Khan entered the basement. "It's not wise to make decisions right after what you've been through."

"I can't stay in my flat for too long," Khan revealed.

"I bet it must be suffocating," Professor Norwell announced. "These crises are unusual on allied planets, but I've seen soldiers coming back from the frontlines. What you are experiencing is completely normal."

"I know," Khan replied. "This isn't my first time."

Professor Norwell seemed about to say something, but she decided to remain silent. She was aware of Khan's background. He had experienced far more tragedies than her in less than seventeen years. Her words would be nothing more than noise in his ears.

Khan entered the hall and noticed that a few menus lit up whenever he stepped on the black floor. The basement was active, and it showed many programs that even the training area on Onia didn't allow him to pick.

"You have complete clearance on most services in the training camp," Professor Norwell explained. "They are free for you and the other survivors. You can use them while the higher-ups decide what to do for the rest of the year."

Khan nodded while browsing through the various menus. That training hall didn't have puppets at its disposal, but a map of the camp opened on the floor and marked the buildings that could offer that service.

The Global Army was even allowing him to train with puppets that used mana. The programs were relatively simple, but they were something useful nonetheless.

"I'm sure you are here to talk about your rewards," Professor Norwell exclaimed after Khan had remained silent for a few minutes. "Captain Godman has told me to satisfy all your requests, but I suggest you don't name anything too unreasonable. Pick something that suits your efforts on Istrone without going overboard."

"Can I pick two things?" Khan asked without raising his eyes from the floor.

"Of course," Professor Norwell replied. "Still, as I said, bleeding the army out now will only turn you into a greedy hero in the higher-ups' eyes. Try to avoid asking for too many injections of synthetic mana."

"I don't want synthetic mana," Khan revealed while lifting his head and walking toward the Professor.

The announcement surprised Professor Norwell. After all, the best that recruits in Khan's situation could ask for involved synthetic mana and cores. They were the most expensive resources available to them.

"What does the special training program include?" Khan asked before stopping right under Professor Norwell. "What benefits will I get if I decide to join it?"

"You will instantly have access to better martial arts," Professor Norwell explained as her eyes lit up. "The army will also do its best to find suitable training programs for your element. You will even gain the chance to complete a few missions and earn Credits."

"Is this special training program on Earth?" Khan asked.

"It will be for a while," Professor Norwell explained. "The army might deploy you to handle a few missions throughout the planet, but most of the training will happen here."

"That's not enough," Khan replied, and his words startled the Professor. "I don't want to remain on Earth."

Professor Norwell opened her mouth to speak, but she stopped when she realized how serious Khan was about the matter. He didn't feel attached to the training camp. That structure wasn't his home anymore.

"I'll see what I can do," Professor Norwell sighed. "I know that the army has training camps on some alien planets, but they are elite stuff. I don't know if I can get you inside with your merits."

"It doesn't have to be a prestigious location," Khan continued. "I just want the best training program that the army is willing to offer. I bet all of them are outside Earth."

Professor Norwell couldn't help but nod at his words. Gathering battle experience on other planets was the quickest way to improve. Earth was too safe and comfortable to offer the best training programs.

"Anything else?" Professor Norwell asked after taking out her phone and tapping a few buttons.

"I want a new martial art," Khan announced. "Something for my hands and suitable for the Lightning-demon style. I'd like it to feature weapons and have more than eighty points."

Chapter 82 - Nitis

Khan had made his decision to leave Earth again during his walk toward the basement. He didn't want to live in the constant reminder of Istrone's rebellion, and having to face everything without Martha felt pointless.

He knew that Lieutenant Dyester would understand his decision. The soldier had been a great Master, but Khan had to prioritize his mental state. Also, he felt that it was time to announce a proper collaboration with the Global Army.

His feats on Istrone would definitely attract the attention of the other families, so the Global Army would satisfy all his requests to rope him in. Khan had only decided to sell himself now that his value had reached its peak.

Instead, the decision concerning the new martial art had been in his mind since Istrone. Khan didn't forget how George could hurt the first-level warrior Kred with his enhanced branch. The boy's attunement with mana was lower than Khan, but the fact that he used a weapon allowed him to injure stronger opponents.

Khan wanted something similar, but he had to make sure that the army provided something suitable for the Lightning-demon style. He could already imagine how strong he would become if he fused his fast movements with deadlier attacks. Even stronger opponents would find it hard to defeat him in that case.

"Above eighty points, you say," Professor Norwell whispered while glancing at Khan.

She didn't find any hesitation in his words and eyes. Khan was perfectly calm and confident. He knew exactly what he wanted, and Professor Norwell could only start typing on her phone after that realization.

"I'll keep you updated," Professor Norwell announced when she stored her phone. "I don't know if the Global Army will give you everything you asked, but I believe you'll remain satisfied nonetheless."

Khan nodded and performed a military salute before turning to leave the basement. Still, Professor Norwell's words make him stop his tracks.

"There won't be lessons for the entire month," Professor Norwell explained. "This training camp doesn't have enough recruits to fill the classes anymore. Use this time to think about your decision to leave. No one will mock you if you decide to change your mind."

Khan nodded before leaving the basement and exiting the building. He had doubts about his decision to leave Earth again, but they vanished when his eyes fell on the empty streets again.

Remaining there was pure torture. Khan had Lieutenant Dyester, but everything else felt empty. The soldier wasn't in his peak condition either, so there was a limit to how supportive he could be.

Ylaco's training camp appeared unable to give him a reason to stay. Khan even knew that his father would approve his trips to other planets.

'How do I even tell him about this?' Khan wondered before heaving a helpless sigh.

Bret could still be in prison as far as he knew. He wasn't the type to behave quietly, and not having Khan around would only intensify those flaws.

'I'll have to rely on Lieutenant Dyester for that,' Khan concluded before moving toward the medical bay.

The staff of the medical bay was still in place, but Khan didn't see anyone running around. The nurses were exchanging lazy conversations with the soldiers, but everyone turned and revealed surprised expressions when they saw Khan entering the building.

"Is Doctor Parket inside?" Khan asked. "I didn't set an appointment, but I figured he could be free."

"He is in his office," One of the nurses exclaimed. "I'll tell him about your arrival."

Khan only had to wait a few minutes in front of the entrance before a soldier escorted him toward Doctor Parket's office. Glances fell on him, and whispers resounded through the corridors as he walked through the structure, but he ignored everything and entered the room once the man gave the okay.

Doctor Parket was in his usual spot behind his desk. A series of digital reports filled the table, and he lazily browsed through them with his fingers.

The Doctor didn't immediately raise his eyes when the door closed behind Khan. He continued to check the various reports before heaving a deep sigh and taking out his glasses.

"You have saved many lives," Doctor Parket announced. "You should be proud of yourself."

"I just did what I thought was right," Khan exclaimed while remaining in front of the entrance.

"That's more than enough most of the time," Doctor Parket said while swiping on the table.

A series of reports transformed into holograms that floated above the desk. Khan could recognize some of the names on them. They were the written version of the interrogations on the space station.

"All these kids are alive because of you," Doctor Parket said in a calm voice. "Soldiers tend to focus only on the ugly part after a traumatic experience. They often fail to see the good that has come out of their actions."

Khan nodded, but he didn't feel any better. He had been ready to abandon most of those recruits if the situation required it. Even freeing the cave had been nothing more than a necessity in his efforts to survive.

Moreover, the Kred were harder to blame than the Nak after witnessing their suffering. Their connection to the planet almost forced them to rebel. They had committed nefarious acts in the name of their hatred, but Khan actually understood their feelings.

Khan felt angry about what happened to Martha, but he knew the Kred's desperation far too well. Blaming them would force him to question himself, and he had no intention to dive deeper into his complicated psyche.

"Why are you here?" Doctor Parket eventually asked when he saw that Khan wasn't paying much attention to the reports. "I can summon a specialist in post-traumatic stress disorder if you need, but that's not my field."

"I only wanted you to check that everything was fine with my body, sir," Khan revealed. "I like to keep eventual mutations in check."

"You can drop the formalities for today," Doctor Parket sighed before standing up and wearing his glasses.

The Doctor picked his scanner and approached Khan's nape. The holograms above the table transformed before depicting the insides of his neck.

A series of words soon replaced the holograms before a mechanical voice resounded from the desk. "Mana core quality: Organic A-tier; Element: Chaos; Attunement: thirty-eight percent; Mana capacity: error."

Khan read the familiar lines while ignoring Doctor Parket's surprised gasp. It was clear that he was growing quickly. He only needed to add twelve points to his attunement to become a first-level warrior.

"No trace of mutations," Doctor Parket announced after leaving Khan's nape. "Still, your growth is amazing. Your similarities with the Nak are making your body attune with mana far faster than I predicted."

Khan had to close his eyes for a second to sort his thoughts. He couldn't help but feel a tinge of irony in the whole situation, and the urge to explode into a laugh was even trying to make its way through his brain.

The Second Impact had turned his life upside-down and had left him with reoccurring nightmares. However, that tragedy had given him a body that could adapt to mana faster than his peers.

The rebellion on Istrone had made him advance in the mental training, and it had even given him important battle experience. Yet, it had also forced Khan to realize his similarities with the Kred.

'Am I even human?' Khan scoffed in his mind. 'My body tries to imitate the Nak, and my desperation is similar to the Kred. I should study the Ef'i thoroughly. I might find something else about myself in them.'

Doctor Parket could sense part of the complicated emotions running through Khan's mind, but he didn't say anything anyway. He didn't have words that could make him feel better. The boy had to find a way to overcome that mindset on his own, or the Global Army would break him.

"Thank you for your time, sir," Khan eventually announced before turning to leave.

"Kid," Doctor Parket suddenly said and forced Khan to stop, "Be sure to tell me if you need anything. Also, try not to be alone."

"There is something," Khan said while turning toward the doctor. "Can you send my father to Lieutenant Dyester if he ever comes to visit?"

"Of course," Doctor Parket promptly announced.

Khan showed a slight smile before leaving the office and hurrying outside of the medical bay. It was still too early to have lunch, but he didn't feel like eating. He had taken care of everything in less than three hours, so he had the entire day for himself now.

Khan took his phone and sent a message to Lieutenant Dyester before checking the map of the camp. He quickly found the location of the best training halls available to him, and he didn't hesitate to walk there.

A large black building that didn't feature any window soon unfolded in his eyes. Khan moved his eyes between his phone and the structure while inspecting the many corridors and halls.

Khan quickly found a training hall that suited his needs and activated it with his genetic signature. Many menus appeared in his eyes, and he promptly initiated the same program that he had faced on Onia.

That training program didn't want Khan to use mana. It only tested the proficiency with his martial art, and he soon confirmed that he could clear the seventh level at ease.

Then, Khan tested the programs that required him to use mana, but he felt disappointed when he realized that the training hall only kept track of his power output. It used resilient targets meant to give a score to Khan's strength.

Khan went back to the previous training program and alternated fights with perfect executions that used mana. He even connected his phone to the structure and ordered large meals to take breaks.

Lieutenant Dyester didn't come to the training hall, but Khan didn't blame him. He was fine alone. The intense fights with the metal dummies even managed to make him forget about the emptiness eating his insides.

Then, his phone rang when it was almost time to return to his dormitory. A message from the Global Army had arrived, but Khan quickly read that it came from Professor Norwell.

'I didn't think they would act so quickly,' Khan read on his phone. 'The Global Army has agreed with your requests. You'll teleport to Nitis in two weeks. You'll get the new martial art there.'

Chapter 83 - Snapping

'They must really want me,' Khan scoffed in his mind. 'I guess I'll know how badly once I see the value of the martial art.'

Khan could understand how on point his guess had been from that quick answer. He knew that his value had increased a lot after Istrone's rebellion, but he remained a mere sixteen-year-old boy who had yet to complete his first year in the training camp.

There had to be a limit to how much the Global Army was willing to invest in Khan. Yet, the rapid answer from Professor Norwell confirmed that the situation was quite grim and that the higher-ups wanted to secure him before other families could attempt to buy his loyalty.

'Two weeks,' Khan thought while picking his clothes and leaving the training hall. 'Maybe the Lieutenant will come if he knows that I'm leaving.'

Khan didn't have anyone else in the training camp. Luke was a friend, but they had never deepened their relationship due to the boy's obvious hidden intentions. Only Lieutenant Dyester knew Khan's true face now that Martha was away.

'I'll teleport to Nitis in two weeks to join a special training program,' Khan wrote on his phone to send a message to his Master. 'I'll be in the fifth training hall of building N in these days.'

Khan didn't want to force the Lieutenant to face his pain. Everyone reacted differently to those intense emotions. However, he had decided not to let his desperation rule the entirety of his life, so he had to put some effort to preserve his only meaningful relationship left in the training camp.

It had taken Khan an entire day inside the training hall to make up his mind. The desire to isolate himself and let his sorrow thrive was strong, but he didn't want to have regrets before his departure. Lieutenant Dyester's help even came from Martha, so it didn't feel right to leave things like that.

Khan didn't let his thoughts linger on the matter anymore after the message. He had done everything in his power to make things right. The rest was up to the Lieutenant.

The dormitory soon appeared in his eyes. The soldiers guarding the gate were half-sleeping during their shift, but Khan ignored them and continued on his path.

Yet, the sound of hurried steps suddenly resounded from behind him, and Khan couldn't help but jump ahead while spinning mid-air to land with his face turned toward the gate.

Mana flowed through Khan's body and prepared him to deploy his martial art. He had become ready to fight in less than an instant, but confusion appeared on his face when he saw the two soldiers shooting complicated gazes at him.

"We didn't want to frighten you," The first soldier said.

Khan's eyes moved among the two men. His senses quickly evaluated them and gave him a vague understanding of their power. His chances to win the battle appeared non-existent, so he started to look for a way out of that situation.

"We wanted to say that we are sorry for the last time," The second soldier announced while raising his hand to express his harmlessness. "You didn't deserve that behavior."

The mental barrier had already formed inside Khan's brain. He had become ready to fight and kill if the situation required it, but the soldiers' reaction surprised him.

His eyes moved among the scene. The streets, the gate, and the buildings in the distance entered his vision and reminded him of his location. That wasn't Istrone. He was in Ylaco's training camp, so those soldiers weren't enemies.

Khan identified the soldiers at that point. They were the same men that had questioned him after his second fight with the four bullies. His brain then understood their words and connected the past events to his current situation.

'What am I even doing?' Khan cursed in his mind before straightening his position and letting the mana disperse inside his body.

Khan took a few deep breaths to calm himself down and disperse the mental barrier. His mind was clear now, so he quickly came up with polite words. "Don't worry. You were only doing your job."

Too much had happened in the last six weeks. Khan had gone on Onia before facing the rebellion on Istrone. He had almost forgotten about the issues connected to the Blackdell girl. That problem sounded so pointless after everything that he had gone through. He didn't even know if she was still alive.

"We still feel sorry," The first soldier repeated while performing a military salute. "Please, accept our apology."

"Please," The second soldier exclaimed while performing a military salute too.

"You can be at ease," Khan nodded. "Everything is in the past."

The two soldiers heaved a sigh of relief before revealing a smile and turning toward the gate. They wanted to add a few words, but it was clear that Khan was in no condition to receive them.

Khan stared at the soldiers' backs and turned when they crossed the gate. He felt unable to move his gaze before confirming that they had resumed their patrol.

'Dammit,' Khan cursed in his mind while hurrying toward his flat.

It didn't take him even a second to understand what had happened. His mind had snapped at the first unclear event. It had directly connected the loud steps to potential dangers and had made him ready to fight.

'I can't stay here anymore,' Khan thought while the door of his flat closed behind him. 'I'm dangerous.'

That realization made Khan wish that Martha was awake. She might not know what to say in that situation, but her words would still help.

Lieutenant Dyester would also be able to say something useful, but he was unreliable right now. Khan didn't even know if he had read his message.

The lack of options made Khan rely on his training schedule to suppress those thoughts. His meditation and mental training were the only stable pillars on which he could found his remaining time in the camp. Everything would change traveling to Nitis. He hoped that at least.

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Khan felt slightly better when he woke up. He still jumped out of bed as soon as he opened his eyes, but he had managed to rest a few more hours that night.

Breakfast arrived in his room while he performed his usual training. Khan ate everything before leaving the flat and walking toward building N.

A slight smile inevitably appeared on his face when he saw Lieutenant Dyester sitting in front of the building. A fuming cigarette was in his mouth, and his uniform grew dirty while he remained on the street, but he didn't seem to care about anything.

"Give me an actual hour next time," Lieutenant Dyester scolded when he noticed Khan. "I have waited here for two hours already."

"You could have sent me a message," Khan calmly replied, but the Lieutenant limited himself to snort before standing and entering the building.

Khan followed him, and the two entered the training hall without exchanging any word. It was clear that both of them wanted to talk, but neither seemed willing to make the first step.

"So," Lieutenant Dyester eventually said when Khan started to browse through the training programs, "Did the nightmares arrive?"

"They never left," Khan replied while giving voice to a short laugh.

Lieutenant Dyester took his words as a half-joke meant to hide the true state of his mindset, and Khan let him believe that. Only his father knew about the nightmares, and Khan preferred to leave it like that.

"I snapped yesterday," Khan revealed after Lieutenant Dyester fell silent. "I heard steps and went full kill or be killed. I guess part of me is still in the jungle."

"Is that why you chose to leave so soon?" Lieutenant Dyester asked. "Did peace become suffocating?"

"What was I supposed to do?" Khan snorted. "The streets are empty, the canteen is silent, and everyone treats me as a hero. I'd rather spend my time fighting than having to go through that for months."

Khan's foot quickly found his usual training program and pressed on the eighth level. He wanted to use those two weeks to approach the competent proficiency level, but he still struggled to advance.

"Do you use the mental barrier during battles?" Lieutenant Dyester suddenly asked when he read the difficulty level.

"I'm better with it," Khan revealed. "I don't commit the same mistakes."

"But you experience only half of the battle like that," Lieutenant Dyester added. "Cutting away your emotions might have been necessary on Istrone, and the training for your element might even require it, but you need to learn how to control them. You need to lose this bad habit."

"Do you want to make me weaker before my departure?" Khan asked while spreading his arms.

"A training dummy feels no happiness in a victory," Lieutenant Dyester sighed. "It doesn't even care about winning at all. It only does what the programming tells it to do. It doesn't commit mistakes, but it can't go beyond its limits either."

Lieutenant Dyester continued while pointing his forefinger toward Khan. "The mental barrier helps you express everything you have learnt without committing mistakes, but it might become a wall that prevents your improvements in the future. I'm not saying that you shouldn't rely on it if your life is in danger, but you definitely must not abuse it."

"What should I do then, Master?" Khan tried to mock the soldier, but the latter didn't fall for his words.

"Go to the previous difficulty level," Lieutenant Dyester ordered. "You'll fight every day of the next two weeks to get rid of that bad habit. You'll feel weaker for a few days, but you'll know that I'm right by the date of your departure."

Khan didn't completely understand Lieutenant Dyester's words, but his metaphor with the training dummy made sense, so he followed his orders.

"For your information," Lieutenant Dyester added after Khan turned, "This isn't only to prevent your growth from becoming stale. You need to feel to accept your emotions again. You need to stop treating your feelings as something that you can ignore whenever you want. They would lose every meaning in your mind otherwise."

Chapter 84 - Sharing

Khan didn't completely agree with Lieutenant Dyester's words, but he followed his directives anyway.

It felt good to have someone watching over him during his training. Lieutenant Dyester pointed out many mistakes that Khan had started to absorb in his battle style. They would have become bad habits in the long run, but the soldier had caught them before that.

The lack of the mental barrier made Khan slightly weaker due to various undesired reactions during the battles, but he started to notice unexpected improvements after a few days.

Being emotional during a fight was a disadvantage, but learning how to control those feelings helped Khan's mindset. Moreover, his combat instincts developed faster when he used the entirety of his mind against the puppets.

His success rate in the perfect execution diminished before slowly rising again. Khan managed to hold his ground against the ninth difficulty level after thirteen days spent familiarizing himself with his emotions. His mindset inevitably grew colder, but he began to feel better. He even started to appreciate his small achievements.

"Did they tell you when you have to leave tomorrow?" Lieutenant Dyester asked while eating a soup ordered through Khan's phone.

"I bet they'll send me a message in a few hours," Khan replied while wolfing a chicken wing. "What is it? Do you miss me already?"

"Hurry up and leave," Lieutenant Dyester snorted. "You ruined my perfect sleeping schedule! If only I didn't accept her-."

Lieutenant Dyester suddenly interrupted his line. Khan and the soldier had become able to exchange jokes again after spending two entire weeks together. They had healed part of their respective pain, but some topics still hurt too much.

The soldier had read the reports of Istrone's rebellion during those days. He was aware of what Khan had to overcome to return to Earth alive, and he also learnt about Martha's injuries.

His connection with Martha's family made him sad about the girl's situation, but he knew that Khan felt far worse.

"It's fine," Khan sighed while placing the chicken wing on the lunch box. "She will wake up and get back on her feet in no time."

Khan had been the one who benefitted the most from those two weeks. Part of his playful character had returned, even if he showed it only with Lieutenant Dyester. The emptiness that spread from his insides didn't feel too overwhelming anymore either.

Khan still lost himself in his thoughts. His regular face had also become cold and detached. He didn't feel as helpless as before, but the idea of remaining inside the training camp remained unbearable.

Leaving was mandatory in his mind. Peace was suffocating. Lieutenant Dyester didn't hide his worry concerning Khan's feelings, but their conversation about that topic didn't go anywhere.

Lieutenant Dyester eventually realized that only Khan could decide when to accept peace again. The soldier believed that Martha's awakening could trigger that event, but he had no power over the matter. He only hoped that Khan would miss Earth after spending more time on other planets.

"Khan," Lieutenant Dyester broke the silence that had fallen between the two.

"What is it?" Khan asked while sealing the lunch box and putting it away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lieutenant Dyester asked. "I might not be the most suitable listener for your situation, but I know what it's like to remain alone with your thoughts after a tragedy."

"What can talking even do?" Khan asked before heaving a helpless sigh. "I did what I needed to do to survive. I know that Martha's condition isn't my fault. The situation is just sad."

"You are young," Lieutenant Dyester commented. "You'll still be young when she wakes up. You only lost some time."

Khan stared at the black floor when Lieutenant Dyester forced him to think about his situation. His fears had never concerned Martha's health. His worries involved the changes in his character.

"She liked a joyful boy who could spit non-sense just to make her laugh," Khan eventually revealed. "She might not like the cold-looking me who can't even sleep properly."

Lieutenant Dyester remained silent at that point. Khan had started to speak. He only needed to give him enough room to continue.

"I didn't think that the aliens could be so different, you know?" Khan revealed after a few silent seconds. "I'm not talking about their aspect. Their morals, customs, and mindsets are different. I expected something similar, but..."

"But?" Lieutenant Dyester asked when he noticed Khan's complicated expression.

"The Kred are big. You know that," Khan said while standing up and lifting his arm to describe how tall the aliens were with his hand. "They reach physical maturity quickly. You basically can't differentiate between a kid and an adult unless you are an expert in the field."

"I do know that," Lieutenant Dyester revealed. "They are a strong species. Male and females are ready to jump into battle after little less than ten years of life."

"We were hiding behind trees one day," Khan continued while using his hands to describe the layout of the jungle. "I had sensed two Kred in front of us. They were with Luke and other recruits, but here I am. I see those tall aliens and decide that escaping is better."

"You had never faced a Kred before," Lieutenant Dyester commented. "You had also just learnt how to use your senses. Retreating when you don't know your odds is a good choice."

"I turn, right?" Khan exclaimed while crouching and replaying the scene with his body. "I turn and see this tall Kred trying to sneak up on us. I didn't sense her, but I attack right away. My knee hits her face before slamming her on the ground. Two perfect executions in a row. I was ready for the third, but she doesn't move."

Lieutenant Dyester held himself back from commenting. He had noticed how Khan had started using "her" to describe the alien. He knew that something was up.

"The other two Kred attack us," Khan continued, "But we deal with them. They turn out to be pretty weak, so the others tie them to a tree while I get the third. I had to spend a whole minute to understand that she was dead."

"Was she your first?" Lieutenant Dyester asked. "That's a good first. You didn't kill her on purpose. She had misjudged the power of your group."

"Of course she did," Khan snorted. "She was damned ten. Those three aliens were a young family who happened to be on patrol duty for the mighty higher-ups."

Lieutenant Dyester understood why that matter weighed on Khan's mind so much. He had basically killed a kid according to human standards.

"You can't use human morals to study the event," Lieutenant Dyester promptly replied. "The Kred are adults at that age. Don't see her as a kid."

"They begged us to see their daughter," Khan sighed. "They told us everything they knew for her, even if she was lying dead some meters away."

"You couldn't leave two angry Kred behind you," Lieutenant Dyester explained. "You wouldn't have been here otherwise."

"They were a desperate family," Khan shook his head while sitting back on the floor. "They are a desperate species. I know that feeling far too well, but I showed no mercy."

"Kid," Lieutenant Dyester sighed at the sight of Khan's sad face, "That's how the army works. You can avoid that nasty stuff by earning a position in a safe place, but wars will always exist around you. You should get away now if you worry about falling apart."

"That's not the issue," Khan struggled to say. "I've seen those who risked falling apart. I've seen recruits completely broken by the event even. I didn't."

"You had the mental barrier," Lieutenant Dyester replied.

"You can cut away emotions," Khan commented. "You can't cut away your true nature. I fear that I might be perfect for that stuff."

Khan didn't fear danger. He wasn't too worried about death either. Yet, his desperation scared him. He didn't know what that feeling would make him do if he grew too used to killing.

"Most of my platoon was dead by then," Lieutenant Dyester suddenly said while looking toward an empty spot in the training hall. "I was marching alone toward a large prison camp when I saw that the Kred had executed all my remaining friends."

Khan couldn't help but focus on the Lieutenant at that point. He had never thought that the soldier would reveal stories of the crisis from forty years ago.

"I get mad and start launching spells," Lieutenant Dyester scoffed. "It's hard to care about your actions when you have nothing left to lose. I kill freely, burning every Kred that tries to charge at me or run away. I am unstoppable, and the aliens eventually realize that."

"They start falling on their knees and putting their hands behind their heads. Do you believe it? They have the beheaded corpses of my friends around them, but they still try to surrender."

Lieutenant Dyester showed a dark expression, and his eyes fell on his hands. He started inspecting his palms and fingers while a faint disgust appeared on his face.

"You should never lose control of your emotions," Lieutenant Dyester exclaimed. "Mana gives us the chance to be gods among normal men. It makes killing too easy. I realized what I had done only after I couldn't find anyone else to burn."

Khan gulped. His situation had been completely different. He had never lost control of his actions during Istrone's rebellion.

"You might have more talent than me at this," Lieutenant Dyester revealed. "Killing will become easier, but don't let it grow meaningless in your mind. The ugly feelings that you experience after taking a life are part of what makes you human. Only those who can suffer can also experience love and happiness. Never forget that."

"Do you still suffer?" Khan asked.

"You shouldn't worry about me," Lieutenant Dyester said before giving voice to a faint laugh. "I'm a defective training dummy. I've tried to be a monster, but my mind opposed my programming."

The conversation ended with those words. Both Khan and Lieutenant Dyester had problems that they could only solve on their own. Still, Khan made sure to memorize the soldier's teachings and accept them in his mind.

His words still resounded in his mind by the time Khan returned to his flat. All of a sudden, his emptiness and sorrow didn't feel too bad anymore. They proved that he wasn't a mindless killer.

'Get better at killing without growing used to it,' Khan summarized in his mind before a notification reached his phone.

The Global Army had finally given him the schedule for his trip to Nitis. He would have to depart early in the morning. The message even said that he would spend the remaining months of the first year of training there.

Chapter 85 - Purr

Khan had obviously studied Nitis on the network during the two weeks of intense training with Lieutenant Dyester. The Global Army had landed on the planet for the first time only seventy years ago, which made it one of the last worlds discovered during the expansion of the human species.

Nitis was a cold planet mostly surrounded by pale darkness. The network described it as a world stuck in the last hour before dawn. Its distant star and its peculiar orbit never allowed it to bathe under the sunlight.

The planet was the home of an intelligent species called Niqols. They were quite similar to humans, except for their dark-blue skin, pale irises, and white hair. The network described them as a peaceful kind with a great understanding of mana and a deep enmity with the Nak. It seemed that they had also gone through something similar to the First Impact in the past centuries.

Khan did his best to memorize a few useful lines of the Niqols' language during his spare time, but his knowledge remained poor when the day of his departure arrived.

The main issue was that the Global Army's network didn't describe too much. Khan couldn't access most of its information due to his low clearance level. He could only learn a few basic features of the planet, the Niqols, and their language before exhausting what his phone had to offer.

Faint excitement built inside Khan when he approached the teleport. Those emotions mixed with his tragic memories, but he didn't let them take over his mind.

His conversation with Lieutenant Dyester had helped. Khan had slowly started to see his bad feelings as a sign that he wasn't a mindless killer. That realization didn't make him feel atoned for his actions on Istrone, but it allowed him to accept them and begin to move on.

Professor Norwell was waiting for Khan in front of the building with the teleport. She threw away her cigarette as soon the boy entered her vision, but she showed a confused expression when she saw that he was alone.

"Will Lieutenant Dyester show up for your departure?" Professor Norwell asked.

"We said everything we needed to say yesterday," Khan explained.

"Good," Professor Norwell exclaimed before leading Khan across the insides of the familiar building.

"Our young relationship with the Niqols makes this training camp quite experimental," Professor Norwell explained while Khan went through the usual scanners and forms. "The Global Army took the liberty to choose lessons connected to your goal, but you can modify them if you change your mind. The Captain on the site will be your only connection with the rest of humankind, so rely on her whenever you need something."

Khan memorized everything and nodded from time to time. He felt happy to see that he was looking forward to that experience. Also, thinking about leaving Earth made him ignore part of the silence that filled Ylaco's training camp.

Forsaking peace forced Khan to focus on his next task. He didn't go full battle-mode, but most of his useless thoughts disappeared in front of the potential dangers of an alien planet.

"Remember that your actions might have a political impact due to the young relationship with the Niqols," Professor Norwell explained as the duo entered the circular hall with the teleport. "These aliens are very similar to us. I hope this is enough to explain how bad things can go if you offend their species. You might be a hero for now, but the Global Army wouldn't hesitate to use you as a scapegoat to preserve this relationship."

"I understand, ma'am," Khan replied in a firm voice.

"The soldiers on the camp will brief you after your arrival," Professor Norwell continued. "We don't have many classes there. You will complete the fourth. Still, you'll learn everything in detail after the travel. I don't know much about Nitis either. What I explained comes from a summary that the army has pressed me to say before your departure."

Khan's eyes flickered at those words, but he didn't show any evident reaction. It seemed that Nitis' matters were classified even for the professors. He didn't know if the same applied to the Lieutenants, but he started to gain an idea of how frail the relationship with the Niqols was.

Professor Norwell didn't follow Khan on the teleport. She pointed at the platform once everything was ready, and he jumped on it. The soldiers wearing white medical coats shouted numbers and coordinates, and synthetic mana soon filled the oval structure before activating its functions.

Darkness unfolded in Khan's vision before a pale blue light allowed him to study his surroundings. He found himself on a grey teleport surrounded by black consoles and grey walls. A small team of soldiers wearing white medical coats handled the various machines, and a young man stood in front of him.

"You must be Khan," The man didn't hesitate to say while his eyes studied Khan. "The Global Army has sent us some redacted reports of the Istrone's rebellion. Great fucking job."

Khan inspected the soldier too. The man appeared to be in his twenties. He had slightly long blonde hair, large green eyes, no beard, and an aloof face. He seemed to look down on Khan with his uncaring gaze, but the latter felt that he wasn't doing that out of arrogance.

The man was slightly muscular and a bit taller than Khan. He kept his arms behind his back during the inspection, and a calm aura surrounded him.

"Thank you, sir," Khan promptly replied while moving his eyes on the boy's shoulders.

The uniform featured a star on each shoulder. The man had managed to become a first-level warrior and mage at his young age, which made him an elite even among talents.

"I'm just the second year in charge of the new class," The man replied. "Don't bother with the formalities. I don't want to feel old when I'm barely nineteen."

Khan nodded before jumping out of the teleport. That was the first building on a different planet where he didn't see any aliens. That feature hinted at how the relationship between the two species had yet to solidify, but his reasoning couldn't go further.

"I'm Paul Stratbert, but don't bother checking my family on the network," The man announced while turning and starting to walk toward the corridor connected to the circular hall. "Families don't matter much here. Only talent and achievements can get you into the special classes."

Khan couldn't help but notice how the structure appeared almost empty. He didn't see the usual soldiers handling scanners to check the newcomers. He had to pass through a rectangular machine that listed some of his important features on a nearby screen, but that was it.

"Almost thirty-nine percent attunement with mana when you aren't even seventeen," Paul whistled. "And they called me a talent."

"I have been lucky," Khan said to tone down those compliments.

"Lucky my ass," Paul scoffed. "You have the same numbers as someone who has received the first infusion of synthetic mana. Are you implying that everyone else has been unlucky?"

"I didn't mean that," Khan promptly replied while lowering his gaze.

"Then be proud about it!" Paul snorted. "This isn't a training camp on Earth. Playing it low will only make the army forget about you."

Khan felt surprised by how easily Paul could read through his behavior. The soldier had probably dealt with similar situations already.

"I'm the best of the best," Khan announced in an emotionless tone while inspecting the structure and avoiding Paul's sudden glance.

"Everyone is the best of the best here," Paul eventually explained when he understood that Khan wouldn't reply to his gaze. "Nitis even requires an attunement above thirty-five percent to breathe freely. The Global Army sends only true elites who have the potential to climb the ranks here."

"Do you plan on using this experience to get a promotion?" Khan asked as the exit of the building drew near.

"I have a shot at becoming a Lieutenant by the end of the year," Paul exclaimed as a tinge of pride appeared on his aloof face. "The final evaluation of the class under my management will influence the test a lot, so don't make me lose face."

"Noted," Khan said while a dark environment unfolded in his vision.

A dark-blue sky made the entirety of the scenery dark, but a faint radiance managed to reach the surface anyway and create unclear shadows.

An uneven plain spread from the lonely building and stretched in the distance until it met a short mountain chain. Dark grass grew from the ground and filled the scene with an eerie vibe.

Nitis was completely different from Istrone. The former lacked tall trees and featured small bushes at best. Narrow cracks and short elevations filled the plain, and a few paths cut right among them.

Khan saw a series of buildings in the distance. He wouldn't normally be able to notice them due to the faint darkness that covered the entirety of the scene. Still, those structures radiated azure light that almost managed to reach his position while they shone on the plain.

"Humans didn't want to mess with Nitis' layout since they didn't know how the Niqols would react," Paul explained. "I think the higher-ups of both species are discussing the purchase of lands, but the aliens don't seem to like that."

"It's still their planet," Khan couldn't help but comment while keeping his voice down.

"I agree," Paul announced. "Imagine if the same happened on Earth. Do you think humans would ever sell parts of their planet to an alien species? We are lucky enough that they let us stay here."

"Do they fear us?" Khan asked.

Paul clearly knew a lot more than the network, so Khan didn't hesitate to use him as a source of knowledge.

"They actually like us," Paul laughed. "We are really similar. They are above us when it comes to understanding mana, but we surpass them in the technological fields. They only want to make sure to keep clear walls between our species."

"How do we reach the training camp?" Khan asked when he didn't see any vehicle around him.

The teleport stood alone in the middle of the plain, and the area didn't feature anything else man-made. Only the city in the distance showed the presence of other intelligent living beings, but it was too far away to reach it on foot in a reasonable time.

"You'll eventually understand how things work here," Paul commented before putting his thumb and middle finger in his mouth to give voice to a loud whistle. "Remember that the Niqols have developed with mana as their foundation. They have a peculiar approach to most stuff."

The ground under Khan and Paul suddenly began to tremble. Two presences that carried dense mana became clear in his senses and made him lower his gaze.

Khan instinctively jumped backward as cracks opened around a fissure a few meters from him. Two large Tainted animals quickly crawled out of the ground and approached Paul.

The animals resembled giant moles. They had long black fur, unusual long limbs, and pale-grey claws. Their grey noses were quite long and hid sharp teeth, and loud barks came out of their mouths as they charged toward Paul.

Khan prepared himself to fight, but a confused expression appeared on his face when Paul gestured to him to stop. His feeling then transformed into pure astonishment when he saw the Tainted animals stopping next to the soldier and purring under his caresses.

Chapter 86 - Liiza

Paul petted the two large Tainted animals. They were as tall as him, but their bodies were almost three meters long. Still, they appeared harmless once their purr resounded in the area.

"They like to play a lot," Paul said as a faint laugh escaped his mouth whenever the animals tried to lick his face. "You can see them as large dogs if you want."

Khan's eyes fell on the creature's claws. Their nails were razor-sharp knives as long as his hands. He couldn't see a dog anywhere in those dangerous animals.

"Come here and let them know your scent," Paul ordered.

"Do I have to?" Khan asked without moving his eyes from the sharp claws.

"You must unless you want to walk to the city," Paul laughed. "They are our rides."

Khan blinked before scratching the side of his head and taking a few timid steps forward. The two animals noticed his movements and stopped playing with Paul to inspect him. They appeared curious about the new boy, and their noses trembled as they tried to catch a hint of his scent.

"We call them Ugu," Paul explained while continuing to pet the two animals. "They are quite docile. They only need to memorize you."

"Aren't they Tainted animals?" Khan asked while taking a few steps forward and stretching his hand toward the nearest Ugu.

"Animals have evolved differently here," Paul replied. "Technically, they are Tainted creatures, but they didn't mutate through the Nak's mana. The energy in Nitis has made all the animal species here gain strange features."

The explanation made sense in Khan's mind. It was the same as Istrone's vegetation. Those planets didn't need the First Impact to gain mana. Their flora and fauna had developed with that energy.

The first Ugu continued to sniff the air until it reached Khan's hand. The second creature soon joined its companion in the inspection while Khan remained alert.

"I think you can try to pet them now," Paul suggested when he reached the two animals. "You don't need to be soft. They are quite resilient."

Khan nodded before slowly moving his hand past their noses to reach the furry forehead of the first Ugu. His fingers almost touched the creature, but it suddenly lowered its head and started growling toward him.

The second Ugu quickly imitated its companion. Khan found himself in front of two huge animals that appeared ready to jump at him.

"Calm down!" Paul shouted while grabbing the fur behind the second Ugu's head, but his order didn't stop the first creature from leaping toward Khan.

The huge shape of the creature tried to slam on Khan, but the latter had been ready to fight since he sensed the two animals. His figure disappeared when the Ugu pierced him. Khan reappeared on the side of the beast with his knee raised to his chest, but he didn't launch any attack.

"How should I act?" Khan asked, and Paul couldn't help but remain surprised in front of the coldness of his actions.

The Ugu had tried to kill Khan, but he had dodged the attack easily without responding to that offensive. He remained ready to deliver a powerful blow, but he managed to withhold his technique and wait for Paul's orders.

"Don't hurt it," Paul quickly ordered. "I'll call someone. Can I leave you on your own for a minute?"

"No problem," Khan replied while lowering his leg and jumping on his side when the Ugu waved its long claws at him.

Paul continued to pull the second Ugu's fur while wrestling with his pockets. A phone eventually came out of his trousers, and he didn't hesitate to tap on its screen a few times before nearing the device to his ear.

"Yes? Miss Liiza?" Paul shouted while continuing to pull the animal from its fur. "There is a problem with the Ugu. Yes! [Thank you very much]!"

Khan continued to dodge the first Ugu's assault. Its movements appeared slow in his eyes. The dummy in the ninth level of the training program was far faster, so the animal never managed to touch him.

Paul stored his phone and opened his mouth to say something, but the words remained stuck in his throat when he saw how easily Khan was dealing with the Ugu. The boy didn't show any expression while dodging the relentless assault. He almost appeared bored about the whole process.

'Five times,' Khan counted in his mind. 'Six, seven, eight. These creatures are quite clumsy.'

Khan kept track of his chances to deliver techniques toward the animal during its assault. The Ugu was quite fast for its size, but its attacks were too straightforward to endanger Khan.

The quick movements of the Lightning-demon style would have allowed Khan to deliver many direct blows during the openings showed by the Ugu. He was only keeping track of his chances during a defensive approach even. Everything would be different if he decided to gain the upper hand.

Khan had to remain in that situation for entire minutes, and Paul showed a complicated expression at that scene. Part of him felt guilty about that outcome, but that emotion couldn't suppress the surging respect growing inside of his mind.

Paul had seen the recruits that the Global Army allowed to join the training camp on Nitis. He had been one of them even. They were all geniuses or special talents.

The background couldn't affect the Global Army's selection since the situation on Nitis was still unclear. Only the best of the best could go there and help reinforce the relationship between the two species.

Still, Khan appeared above that level. His moves were almost perfect, but his calm mindset was the most outstanding aspect of his character.

Khan wasn't using the mental barrier. Lieutenant Dyester had forced him to relearn how to fight without it in the past two weeks, and his training had worked perfectly.

Every dodge gave new insights on the Ugu's movements to Khan. He learnt how to punish those straightforward attacks quickly, and he also improved his dodges accordingly.

A loud screech eventually resounded in the area and made the second Ugu tremble in fear. Even Khan's opponent stopped moving and hid its head into the ground.

Khan glanced at the animal one last time before turning in the direction of the screech. His eyes went toward the dark sky, but he struggled to find the source of that cry. However, the glow of the city in the distance eventually revealed a huge figure diving at high speed toward the ground.

The figure appeared faster than Khan during its dive. He couldn't help but jump backward when he saw it approaching his position. Then, a gale engulfed his body and threw debris and dust in his eyes, but he protected them with his arms.

A large animal unfolded in Khan's vision when he lowered his arms. A creature that resembled an eagle with dark-grey feathers showed its large wings toward the two Ugu before giving voice to a second screech.

The Ugu raised their heads before putting them back into the ground. Their bodies never stopped shaking, and yelps eventually resounded from their figures.

"It wasn't my intention to disturb you so early," Paul promptly announced while joining his hands in front of his chest and performing a short bow toward the eagle. "The Ugu have reacted poorly to the newcomer, but I ignore the reason behind their odd behavior."

Khan inspected the animal while showing evident confusion. He noticed that the creature had three eyes during his second examination, but he remained perplexed.

'Is he talking to the animal?' Khan wondered, but the huge eagle suddenly lowered its body and revealed a dark figure sitting on its back.

Khan couldn't help but remain dumbfounded. A female Niqols was sitting on the eagle. Her smooth dark-blue skin seemed to glow under the darkness of the scene, her white eyes released a faint radiance that illuminated her face, and her long white hair enhanced her slender figure when it fell on her shoulders and back.

The Niqols were practically humans. Khan struggled to find differences in their facial features and bodies. The aliens' skin, eyes, and hair had different shades, but they were overall identical to the men and women from Earth.

Those similarities made Khan unable to ignore the Niqols' striking beauty. The alien was wearing a white tank top and tight trousers that enhanced her curves. Her chest wasn't big, but it highlighted the harmony brought by her slender figure.

The words "compatible sexual organs" read on the network during his study of the alien species inevitably appeared in Khan's mind. The Niqols seemed only a few years older than him, and he couldn't help but feel attracted by her.

'I can add my dumb taste to the things that make me less human,' Khan cursed in his mind while controlling himself.

Martha's face appeared in his mind and helped him control his emotions. Khan didn't let anything appear on his face. He maintained a cold expression while joining his hands, performing a slight bow, and speaking a few alien words trained during the past two weeks. "[I'm honored to make your acquaintance]."

Both Paul and the Niqols raised their eyebrows in surprise when they heard Khan. The alien language featured short syllables and clear sounds, and Khan's pronunciation was only slightly off.

"You are guests on Nitis," The alien said in a perfect human accent. "The honor is mine."

"Miss Liiza, let me express how sorr-," Paul began to say, but the alien raised her hand to stop him.

Liiza jumped off the eagle and patted its neck before walking toward Khan. He could see that the alien was as tall as him at that point, and he didn't fail to notice that her beauty was even more striking up close.

The Niqols bent toward Khan, and he instinctively retracted his head. Yet, the young woman shot an admonishing glance toward him, which forced him to resume his previous position.

Liiza sniffed Khan's face before placing her slim fingers on his forehead. Her skin felt cold, but that feature didn't surprise him since he had read about it on the network. The Niqols' average body temperature was nine to ten degrees lower than humans, which suited the planet's coldness.

Liiza closed her eyes while keeping her face near Khan's forehead. He couldn't help but think about Cora's kiss at that point. Part of him felt that he should divert his gaze, but he ended up inspecting the Niqols' face anyway.

The young woman eventually opened her eyes. The azure irises met the glowing white ones, and they didn't separate even after Liiza pulled herself back.

Paul's eyes widened at that interaction, and he quickly stepped in to question Liiza about the recent event. "Do you know why the Ugu reacted like that?"

"Yes," Liiza revealed while diverting her eyes from Khan. "It's quite simple. He smells like a Nak, and the Ugu hate them."

Paul shot a confused glance toward Khan, and Liiza also turned toward him at that point. The Global Army didn't warn the soldier about Khan's Tainted status since it didn't think that the topic was relevant. However, it became clear that Khan had to explain himself now.

Khan sighed before unbuttoning the superior part of his uniform and revealing the azure scar on his chest. His left shoulder even featured a patch of redder skin due to the cauterization on Istrone, but Paul and Liiza didn't notice it since the azure mark caught the entirety of their attention.

Chapter 87 - Flight

The incidents on Earth that involved the Nak's mana were quite famous, and Paul also knew that Khan came from Ylaco's training camp. It didn't take him much to link the azure scar to the Second Impact, which also helped explain why Khan was so good compared to his peers.

Liiza appeared curious about the scar. She neared Khan again and lifted her arm toward his chest without showing any hesitation.

Khan instinctively grabbed Liiza's hand to stop her action, and the two exchanged a long gaze again. Paul's eyes widened when he saw that scene. He quickly prepared a series of polite words, but they didn't get the chance to leave his throat since Khan released his grasp.

Liiza's slid her fingers through Khan's palm and forearm before reaching the left side of his chest. Her black fingernails softly scratched Khan's skin and went over the red patch on his left shoulder before reaching the edges of the azure scar.

The Niqols traced the scar's edges with her fingers before going over its insides. It was rare for Khan to have someone else touch that part of his body, but Liiza felt gentle and firm. She didn't cause him any discomfort.

Liiza eventually placed her whole palm at the center of his chest. She felt Khan's beating heart while her eyes moved on his face. Their gazes met again, and they remained fixed on each other for a few seconds.

The alien eventually retracted her hand and inspected her palm. Khan didn't know what she was thinking during the process, but he didn't feel the need to ask questions.

"He won't be able to ride the Ugu," Liiza eventually explained while fixing her eyes back on Khan's face. "They will never accept him."

"Will he have to walk?" Paul asked as a complicated expression appeared on his face.

It didn't matter how talented Khan was. The Global Army would deem him unfit for the training camp on Nitis if he couldn't use some of its core features.

"He needs to tame a [Aduns]," Liiza announced before pointing at the eagle behind her. "I believe you call them Aduns."

"We don't have the clearance for that," Paul politely replied. "With all due respect, your superiors have been quite clear."

Khan wanted to inspect Paul to study his reactions, but his gaze remained glued to Liiza's eyes. She appeared to be in the same situation, and her expressionless face barely moved when she gave her answers.

"They won't be able to say anything if an Aduns chooses him," Liiza explained. "I'll get him to a nest right away."

"We have yet to brief him!" Paul complained, and Liiza finally moved her eyes away from Khan to glare at the soldier.

Paul clearly regretted raising his voice. He lowered his head, and polite words came out of his mouth. "He doesn't know much about Nitis. Please, forgive him if he offends you by mistake."

Liiza limited herself to nod and return to her ride. She patted the eagle's neck, and the creature lowered its wing to make her jump on its back.

"What are you waiting for?" Liiza asked when she noticed that Khan had yet to move from his spot.

"Go," Paul whispered while approaching him and pushing him toward the Aduns. "This is your chance to remain on Nitis, but don't do anything stupid. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir," Khan promptly replied while approaching the creature.

The eagle followed his movements with its three eyes. Khan couldn't help but notice the differences with the Nak's organs. The Aduns' third eye was vertical and slightly bigger than the others, but it didn't radiate any light.

The Aduns didn't seem to like that Khan had to climb on its back, but it accepted the event with impeccable decorum. The creature appeared quite smart and well-trained. It didn't flinch for even an instant when Khan stepped on the dark feathers and arrived behind Liiza.

The Aduns appeared even bigger from that position. The creature was almost three meters tall, and its wings could cover a six meters large area when unfolded. Its back had enough space for multiple people, but Khan still struggled to find where to sit.

Khan studied Liiza's stance and tried to imitate her. Her hands were on the feathers on the eagle's neck, and she had wrapped her slim legs around the wings' base.

Khan couldn't do the same from his position, so he sat and tried to tighten his legs on the Aduns' back while grabbing the feathers right in front of him. He obviously put some distance between Liiza, but he was still close enough to touch her back if he crouched.

The eagle suddenly gave voice to a quiet high-pitched cry, and Khan instinctively tightened his grasp. Yet, his handhold vanished since his hands ripped a few feathers.

Khan's eyes widened when he saw the dark-grey feathers in his grasp. Panic built inside him. He had actually hurt a creature that seemed to hold an important place in the Niqols' mind.

Liiza didn't reveal any emotion. She released her grasp and bent backward to grab Khan's wrists. He let her lead him closer to her back, and Paul almost fainted when he saw the alien putting Khan's arms around her waist.

"You can't hold Aduns from there," Liiza quickly explained before crouching forward again.

Khan had to lie on her to remain attached to her waist. His chest was on her back, and her white hair often fell on his face.

Khan turned toward Paul and noticed that the soldier was holding his head while staring at the whole scene. His eyes were wide open, but they transformed into an admonishing gaze when they fell on Khan.

"I'll send him to the camp once we are done," Liiza announced. "Don't look for him if he doesn't return."

Paul wanted to say something, but the Aduns suddenly unfolded its wings and waved them, creating gales made of dust and terrain.

Khan couldn't help but tighten his legs on the creature's back, and the same went for his arms. His face soon touched Liiza's back, and the coldness of her body spread through her clothes to reach his chest and cheek.

The Aduns gave voice to a loud screech before flapping its wings again and separating from the ground. The creature seemed to struggle to set off now that it had two people on its back, but it slowly managed to gain height anyway.

Khan couldn't express what he was experiencing with simple words. His legs kept losing their grip on the eagle's back whenever it pushed him upward. The fear of falling threatened to take control of his mind, but Liiza's firm figure managed to reassure him.

Liiza barely moved while the Aduns went up and down in the sky. She seemed part of the creature during the flight, and Khan instinctively relied on her to avoid falling.

His embrace tightened, and his body grew closer to her. Khan was basically lying on her, and his unstable foothold often made his chest collide with her back.

Khan couldn't express how worried he was about his actions, but he did his best to regain some composure quickly. His legs continued to search for a stable foothold and eventually found it right above the wings' base. His grip on Liiza's waist never became rough either. He did his best to keep it gentle.

The wind grew more intense at some point, and Khan peeked past the immense wings to study his situation. His expression froze when he noticed that the Aduns was high in the sky already. Paul had even disappeared from his vision.

Talking with that intense wind blowing on his face was troublesome, and Khan didn't want to disturb Liiza anyway, so he remained silent and enjoyed the travel. That wasn't his first flight, but it felt like it. Using a vehicle couldn't even come close as an experience.

The eagle was alive. It reacted to Liiza's short but firm movements. The creature would turn to the right whenever the Niqols pulled the right side of its neck, it would go up when her legs tightened, and it accelerated when she crouched closer to its neck.

Khan couldn't help but admire such mastery in her flying skills. His body was practically on her, so he could sense when her muscles tensed or relaxed.

The awesome scenery from high in the sky and the incredible experience of flying on top of an alien creature made Khan ignore the inevitable arousal triggered by the situation. He focused on learning Liiza's moves instead of paying attention to her soft curves. Those sensations still reached his mind, but he made sure to isolate them in the corner of his mind.

The Aduns flew toward the mountain chain, but it avoided getting close to the shining city. Khan managed to see various dark buildings that featured strange symbols on their surface, but the creature turned before he could get a better sight of the Niqols' architecture.

The temperature fell as Liiza led the eagle toward a mountain peak covered by a grey material that resembled snow. Khan tried to get a better view of the area, but the Aduns suddenly started to fly higher in the sky.

The creature's stance went completely vertical from time to time, which forced Khan to focus the entirety of his efforts on not falling. His legs managed to cling on the Aduns' back, but the animal eventually folded its wings and turned its head toward the mountain below.

'Don't tell me!' Khan barely had the time to curse in his mind before the eagle dived toward the mountain.

His legs lost their grip on the creature's back at that point. Khan's body stretched into the air and managed to remain attached to the Aduns thanks to Liiza firm figure.

Everything disappeared inside Khan's mind. He could only think about tightening his grip on Liiza while the Aduns accelerated. The mountains grew dangerously close in his vision, but the creature suddenly folded its wings and resumed its horizontal flight right before crashing on the dark-grey rocks.

The sudden deceleration made Khan slam on Liiza's back, but she managed to remain in her position even after that intense impact. Still, Khan's face ended up peeking above her shoulder and lay next to her head.

"Did you really need to do that?" Khan couldn't help but ask while his cheek touched the alien's forehead.

"The Aduns do what they want," Liiza replied before giving voice to a faint giggle.

The event surprised Khan and make him turn to face her. Liiza's smiling expression unfolded in his vision, but she limited herself to glance at him before turning her head.

"You are still on me," Liiza eventually said, and Khan promptly slid on her back to resume his previous position.

The Aduns didn't do anything dangerous anymore. It continued to fly among the mountains until it gave voice to a loud screech and turned toward a rocky structure that featured a series of cavities.

The creature's screech echoed among the mountains, and other similar cries resounded in the area. Multiple Aduns peeked out of the cavities and welcomed the eagle back into the nest.

Liiza relaxed her legs, and the Aduns gently descended until it landed at the base of one of the mountains. The Niqols straightened her back at that point, and Khan imitated her movements while retracting his arms.

"I know that humans don't handle the cold as well as us," Liiza exclaimed while turning toward Khan, "But mana makes you able to endure this much, right?"

Khan couldn't help but memorize the moment when Liiza lifted her legs to turn toward him. He knew how soft they were, and his knowledge made the scene quite captivating.

"Cold shouldn't be a problem," Khan revealed while moving his gaze toward Liiza's face. "Can I really ride an Aduns without putting the humans at risk?"

"The Aduns are... I think humans would call them holy animals," Liiza explained. "My superiors won't be able to complain if you manage to tame one of them before they learn about it."

Chapter 88 - Test

Liiza revealed how her idea to make Khan tame an Aduns wasn't completely legal. However, a quibble could make him avoid eventual punishments and troubles.

"What do I need to do to tame an Aduns?" Khan eventually asked while his gaze moved toward the dark mountain at his side.

The dark sky hid the nests seen during the flight. They were at some point in the upper half of the mountain. High-pitched screeches echoed from time to time, but Khan couldn't see any winged figure above him.

"Climb the mountain and reach the nests," Liiza explained.

Khan couldn't help but shoot a confused glance toward Liiza. Her question about the cold suddenly made sense now.

"I don't have the proper equipment with me," Khan complained without mentioning that he had no idea how to climb mountains. "I don't have food either. How am I supposed to reach the nests?"

"That's your problem," Liiza replied in a plain tone. "The Aduns won't accept you if they don't see your struggles. The mountain is a test."

Khan hesitated. His eyes moved between Liiza and the mountain. He knew that his body had surpassed normal human standards already, but the journey could kill him anyway. He wasn't immune to cold and exhaustion.

"I might die," Khan commented.

"Then you have to understand how strong your desire to remain here is," Liiza continued. "Humans can't bring their vehicles here since their noise scares the animals. I believe your army won't let someone who can't use rides stay on the planet."

Liiza clearly knew a lot about the Global Army and its relationship with the Niqols. Khan started to wonder whether she was an important figure inside her species, but his thoughts soon returned to the main issue.

'I might die if I try to climb the mountain,' Khan thought, 'But I will have to return on Earth if I don't acquire a ride.'

Thinking about Earth made him recall the empty feelings that devoured his insides. Khan suddenly realized that his mind had never lingered on those memories after teleporting on Nitis. His arrival on the planet had made him forget about the issues that troubled him.

'Coming here has actually helped for a short while,' Khan sighed in his mind before jumping off the eagle.

"How do I know that the Aduns won't reject me like the Udu?" Khan asked without looking at Liiza.

The alien felt surprised by Khan's sudden change. He had been unable to stop looking at her before, but he seemed to care only about the mountain now.

"The Aduns aren't cowards," Liiza explained. "They respect strength, which is why you need to surpass this test. Also, you have a high chance to tame one of them even if you don't belong to my species."

"Why is that?" Khan asked.

"You survived the Nak," Liiza explained while lowering her gaze when Khan turned to look at her. "I felt your pain. They will too."

The Niqols eventually raised her gaze again and found Khan still staring at her. Cold winds blew through their hair and made them flutter, but neither of them seemed to care.

"I'm Khan, by the way," Khan eventually announced while revealing a faint smile. "Let's fly together if I get an Aduns."

Khan turned toward the mountain without waiting for the Niqols' reaction. He stepped toward the steep rocky surface and started to climb the tall structure.

Liiza showed a complicated expression after that offer. She revealed a faint smile that Khan couldn't see, and she inspected him while he made his way through the steep surface.

It was clear that Khan knew nothing about climbing mountains. He limited himself to rely on his physical strength to drag his body upward without caring about proper footholds or studying the path ahead.

He would jump on a rock as long as it felt stable. His steps were even light, so they never caused a landslide. Khan was nimble among that cold and unfriendly environment. He had trained his legs to be the strongest and swiftest parts of his body.

'I basically asked her out,' Khan thought while jumping from rock to rock. 'She even seems important here. Damn my hormones.'

Khan knew that he had to behave appropriately on Nitis, but he couldn't hold back in front of the seemingly deadly quest. Truth be told, he wasn't even sure whether he could flirt with someone properly so soon after Martha's events.

However, Khan couldn't control his tastes, and the quest made him forsake part of his restraint. He even ignored the possible repercussions that his actions could have on the Global Army since Liiza didn't seem the type to rat him out.

Khan didn't notice the emptiness inside him anymore when he started the climb. He didn't even realize that the feeling had stopped affecting his mind. The mission on a foreign world and the faint anticipation surging inside his mind made him ignore everything that didn't involve his current quest.

After all, he would get the chance to fly again if he succeeded. Anyone would be excited about that.

The sound of flapping wings eventually reached his ears. Khan saw Liiza and her Aduns leaving in the distance. They had left him alone in the middle of the mountain chain, which only intensified the danger sensed by his mind.

Khan continued to climb for a bit before stopping on a relatively large platform that came out from the mountain's surface. His phone quickly appeared in his hands, and his fingers tapped on its screen until he found instructions that could help him.

'Prepare your equipment carefully,' Khan read on the phone, 'Study the path thoroughly, partner up with experienced climbers, set your pace according to your endurance. Well, I'm doomed.'

Khan couldn't help but laugh when he realized that he had gone against every advice. He was alone, in an unknown environment, and without any gear. He could have won a prize for the least prepared climber in every alien world.

'Maybe this wasn't meant to happen,' Khan sighed when he reviewed the issue thoroughly. 'I bet I can still contact someone on Nitis and get back to the teleport since my phone works.'

Khan tried to find ways out of that option, but risking his life only to remain on Nitis seemed a bit too much. The army would find other suitable planets since the issue wasn't his fault. He would have only lost some time if he retreated now.

Yet, something peculiar eventually appeared in his vision. Khan noticed a relatively large path on the side of the mountain. The route was clearly artificial, and it seemed connected to the base of the structure. He couldn't see it because it started from behind his landing spot.

'Did Liiza leave me at some distance from the passage on purpose?' Khan wondered while scratching his head.

Khan didn't know anything about the Niqols' customs and personality. He would have already claimed that Liiza liked him if she were a human. However, the differences between their species made Khan hold back from coming up with possible delusions.

'Was she testing me?' Khan wondered while straightening his position and jumping from rock to rock until he landed on the path. 'Did she want to see if I would have given up before finding the path?'

His surroundings appeared clear. Khan couldn't see anyone, and even his senses didn't pick any odd trace of mana. He was completely alone with the cold wind, so his thoughts about Liiza slowly vanished.

Khan started marching toward the upward path that led him around the mountain. The wind grew stronger as he reached higher spots, but his body was able to fend it off, and his uniform managed to help him ignore the cold.

Mana flowed through his body whenever the cold tried to seep past his skin. Khan happily realized that he could endure that unfriendly environment easily, even if his situation worsened as he kept climbing.

The path grew narrower, the winds continued to intensify, and the temperature never stopped dropping. Khan felt forced to sit and meditate from time to time to disperse the cold, but the harshness of the situation didn't make him decide to turn back.

Hours passed, but Khan struggled to notice the flow of time due to the constant darkness covering Nitis. Still, his endurance was inhuman, and he barely grew tired even after walking for half a day.

A series of cavities eventually appeared in his vision. The high-pitched screeches even grew louder. Khan knew that he was getting closer to his destination, but a new series of problems arrived in that part of his journey.

Large amounts of grey snow would fall on the path every once in a while and forced Khan to crouch near the wall to avoid falling. Some rocks were too slippery to be suitable handholds, so he

had to put his full strength on his legs and push his back on the uneven surface of the mountain to remain on the track.

Cuts inevitably appeared on his back during the process. Khan couldn't risk falling from that height when the snow engulfed him, so he had to ignore the sharp rocks that pierced his uniform and skin during the small avalanches.

Khan noticed that the Aduns had something to do with the avalanches after experiencing a few of them. Their loudest screeches always preceded them. They seemed to do that on purpose since they had noticed the boy climbing the path.

The avalanches started to happen more often as Khan kept climbing. Aduns even flew at high speed next to the path to distract him and generate gales that could make him lose his balance. They never attacked him directly, but they didn't help him either.

'Damned birds!' Khan found himself cursing multiple times.

His senses had become able to predict the arrival of those creatures after experiencing their methods a few times. They even flew so close to the path that Khan could attack them without leaving it if he wanted. Yet, he held back from hurting the animals that could allow him to remain on Nitis.

The path eventually opened in a relatively large area that featured multiple cavities. Clear signs of nests filled those holes in the side of the mountain, but Khan had to get closer to them to inspect their insides.

Still, a series of Aduns flew out of the holes as soon as he became too close. The winds generated by the flapping of their wings pushed Khan backward and made him fall from the area.

Panic built inside Khan as his hands shot toward the side of the mountain. Cuts opened on his palms as they slid on the rocks, but Khan didn't dare to pull them back.

His fingers eventually landed on an almost dry and stable rock, which allowed him to stop his fall. Pain filled every inch of Khan's body, but he activated the mental barrier to cut everything away and gain a detached approach to his issue.

Khan inspected his surroundings and decided to descend to return to the path rather than risking climbing back on the flat area. He lost an entire hour of march, but his feet eventually stepped on the safe road again.

The mental barrier vanished once Khan resumed his march toward the nests. His body hurt in every spot, and his uniform was in pieces. Multiple cuts had opened on his torso, arms, and legs, but they were only superficial injuries that didn't hinder his walk.

The Aduns that had made him fall began to hover above him. Their screeches seemed to mock his efforts, but Khan didn't mind them. He had invested too much in that task to fall prey to those taunts.

Khan eventually returned to the flat area and crouched when approaching the nests. The Aduns followed his movements and continued to fly in a circle above him without ever falling silent. Faint tremors started to spread through the mountain at that point, and Khan quickly jumped inside one of the caves when he sensed them.

His quick reaction made him able to dodge the massive avalanche that covered the entire flat area and the caves. Meters of grey snow covered the entrances and made him unable to see anything. Only darkness filled his vision, but he didn't lose track of his position.

Khan sat inside the dark cave and meditated for a few minutes to stabilize his condition before approaching the snow that blocked the entrance. He started to dig through that soft grey material with his fingers, and cold inevitably seeped past his skin.

Khan forced the mana to flow through his body and disperse part of the cold trying to affect his joints while he dug through the snow. He made sure to have the side of the mountain behind him during the process, and cold wind eventually hit his hand when it came out of greyness.

Climbing through the snow was hard, but Khan used the mountain's surface to pull his body past the layer of greyness that covered the flat area. His foothold was unstable, but he became able to inspect the site once he came out in the open.

The Aduns in the sky had disappeared by then. Khan couldn't even hear their screeches anymore. Yet, a silent white figure gently descended at some distance from him and landed on the snow without falling inside it.

Khan couldn't help but remain in a daze at the sight of the white Aduns. The creature felt like a stranger in that dark world. It was just like him.

Chapter 89 - Snow

The white Aduns didn't look at Khan. It used its beak to scratch the feathers on its wings before inspecting the environment and giving voice to short screeches.

Khan didn't know what to do in that situation. Liiza didn't give him any instruction, but something told him that the test was over.

The Aduns standing on the grey snow was the first white creature that Khan had seen during his climb. All the other eagles featured darker shades, spanning from grey, blue, or completely black. The event didn't feel like a coincidence when Khan considered his situation.

'A white eagle for the alien boy,' Khan thought while struggling to find a decent foothold on the mountain's surface. 'It sounds proper.'

Khan studied his surroundings and showed a complicated expression when he realized that he didn't know where the mountain ended. Snow had submerged the entire flat area and had made walking over it dangerous.

The snowy surface was even frail. Khan didn't know how the eagle could avoid falling inside it. The creature was slightly smaller than the other Aduns seen during the climb, but it was still quite big compared to humans.

The Lightning-demon style gave Khan the ability to perform soft steps. He could reach the Aduns even in that environment, but he would risk falling inside the snow once he stopped.

"Hey!" Khan called. "Come here! Let's fly away together!"

Khan tried to contain his voice, but a few tremors still spread above him and made him slam his back on the mountainside. His fear of another avalanche caused an instinctive reaction developed during his climb.

No snow arrived, but the white Aduns also ignored him. The eagle had yet to turn toward Khan since its landing on the grey area.

'Do I have to jump on it?' Khan wondered.

He didn't like the idea of performing reckless actions, especially since the Aduns seemed to be his only way out of that situation. It would be hard to find the previous path with all that snow on the flat area, and the risk of falling was high. Going up appeared far easier.

'I hope it doesn't drop me mid-way,' Khan sighed in his mind while preparing for the imminent sprint.

Liiza had spoken about taming the Aduns, but Khan didn't know if the meaning in her mind matched his. Still, he was out of options, so he bent his body and let himself fall forward.

Khan never fell on the grey snow. His figure vanished as faint footprints appeared on the soft surface. The Aduns suddenly felt a foreign weight landing on its back, and a loud screech inevitably escaped its beak.

The Aduns started to fall inside the snow due to the additional weight, but it promptly flapped its wings to lift its body in the air. However, legs suddenly clawed themselves at the base of the wings.

Khan had studied Liiza thoroughly. He couldn't avoid memorizing the position of her legs and arms when the two flew across the sky.

"Calm down!" Khan shouted from the eagle's back. "Let's be friends!"

The eagle didn't seem to like that approach. It gave voice to a loud screech when Khan wrapped his arms around its neck. The cry generated another avalanche, but the Aduns set off before more snow could fill the area.

The environment changed in an instant. The wind blew on Khan's face while the Aduns flew around the mountain, and the sight of the distant surface made him tighten his arms and legs on the creature's neck and wings.

The Aduns gave voice to a painful cry before rotating on itself to get rid of the unwanted presence on its back. The world in Khan's vision spun, but he did his best to suppress his fears and soften his grip.

"I'm sorry, ok?!" Khan shouted. "I didn't want to hurt you!"

The Aduns ignored his words and tried everything in its power to make Khan fall. It rose high in the sky before diving at incredible speed and stopping only when the ground became too close. It spun mid-air so often that it almost affected its balance. It even tried to slam Khan on the mountain's side, but nothing worked.

Khan endured everything without releasing his grip. It didn't matter that his skin started to burn due to the scorching friction with the air. He didn't care that his insides seemed about to shoot out of his mouth. He even ignored the clashes with the rocky mountainside.

Deep injuries ended up opening on his back and shoulders after the Aduns slammed Khan on the rocky side multiple times. Most of the blood flowing out of his wounds dispersed in the sky as the

eagle accelerated, but some of it fell on the white feathers and tainted the previously spotless creature.

The eagle didn't appear bothered by the blood falling on its feathers. It actually stopped slamming Khan on the mountainside and limited itself to spins and sudden dives.

The Aduns eventually grew tired and stopped trying to get Khan out of its back. It continued to fly among the mountains at a moderate speed and avoided performing sudden movements.

Khan didn't trust the eagle at first, but a bit of confidence formed inside him after flying for almost an hour. He tried to imitate Liiza's movements to see if the Aduns followed his orders, and a broad smile inevitably appeared on his face when he succeeded.

Lightly pulling the feathers on the Aduns' neck would make it turn left and right. Tightening and relaxing his legs would trigger ascensions and dives. The eagle reacted to those simple gestures, and Khan slowly grew used to the strength he had to exert to avoid hurting the creature.

The Aduns still opposed Khan's orders from time to time, but they felt like jokes. The creature was only playing around at that point. It had already accepted its pilot.

A grey figure eventually flew toward Khan. Liiza and her Aduns appeared among the dark sky and began to follow him.

"This is great!" Khan shouted, but his words lost themselves in the intense winds that enveloped him.

Liiza shook her head and showed a slight smile before pointing at the base of a mountain. Her Aduns folded its wings and began to dive toward that spot, and Khan promptly followed them.

Liiza's landing expressed how nimble those creatures could be. Her Aduns unfolded its wings when it was less than two meters from the ground, and the sudden move managed to put an end to the incredible momentum accumulated during the dive.

Khan was on his first flight, so he approached the landing carefully. He kept tightening his legs whenever his Aduns gained too much speed, and the creature ended up performing a spin before reaching the ground just to piss him off.

"Give me a break," Khan complained when the eagle gave voice to a happy screech. "It's only my first time. I'll let you go as fast as you want once I get the gist of this."

The Aduns seemed to understand the meaning behind his words, but it replied by folding its wings and rolling on the ground before straightening its position. Snow covered Khan when the eagle went back on its claws, and his expression revealed how helpless he felt.

"You got a playful one," Liiza announced while continuing to wear her faint smile. "It must be young."

Liiza jumped off her eagle and neared Khan. Yet, her eyebrows arched when she saw that he wasn't leaving his Aduns.

"I thought you would have wanted to talk," Liiza exclaimed as her smile vanished. "I'll lead you to your camp now."

"Wait!" Khan exclaimed when Liiza turned to jump back on her Aduns. "Won't it fly away if I jump off?"

Liiza turned and understood the reason behind Khan's hesitation. She even realized that the misunderstanding was her fault since she had forgotten that Khan had been on Nitis for less than a day.

"The Aduns has already accepted you," Liiza explained while pointing at the white creature. "It won't allow others to ride it as long as you are alive."

"Oh," Khan couldn't help but exclaim while turning toward his eagle. "Aren't you sweet?"

Khan started to pet the eagle, but the creature saw that moment of distraction as the chance to roll on the ground again and cover Khan with another layer of snow.

Liiza covered her mouth to suppress a laugh when she saw Khan covered in snow. The scene seemed exhilarating, but Khan decided to get right to the point.

"How can I call it if I'm on the ground?" Khan asked while removing some snow from his shoulders and head.

"Come down, and you'll see," Liiza announced while crossing her arms.

Khan and the eagle exchanged a glance, but he eventually released his grip and jumped off the creature's back. Liiza had no reason to lie to him. She had even gone against her superior to help him.

The white eagle didn't fly away. It shook for a bit to remove the snow accumulated on its body, but it soon lowered its head to face Khan.

"Put your forehead on its vertical eye," Liiza explained. "Think of a name in the meantime."

Khan nodded without turning toward the Niqols. His hand reached the side of the eagle's head before his face bent toward its forehead. The Aduns closed its third eye when Khan's skin touched its feathers, and a strange event followed.

A foreign presence entered Khan's mind. He could sense a vague weight becoming part of his thoughts and releasing a series of faint sensations.

'Snow,' Khan thought, and the sensations solidified and fused with a small shard of mana inside his brain.

Khan's eyes widened when foreign emotions spread through his brain. They carried some tiredness but also sincere respect.

"Am I sensing its mind?" Khan asked while separating himself from the eagle and taking a few steps back.

"It's a mental connection," Liiza explained. "It consumes mana to remain active and send words to the other side, but you can sustain it since you passed the test."

"Wow," Khan exclaimed while testing the mental connection.

Sending thoughts on the others side felt almost instinctive. It didn't need training, but the Aduns didn't understand everything he said. The same went for Khan since the eagle could only speak through sensations. Yet, the creature clearly expressed that it liked the name Snow.

"I'm starting to like this planet," Khan laughed while returning near Snow and rubbing its feathers.

Khan turned at that point. An honest smile appeared on his face as the memories of the flight crossed his vision. Liiza had made him experience one of the most amazing things in his life, and he wanted to express his deep gratitude.

"Thank you for everything you have done for me," Khan exclaimed while performing a slight bow. "I hope I can repay this favor in the future."

"Don't thank me yet," Liiza commented as her expression became stern. "You still have to face your superiors."

Chapter 90 - Politics

"I thought the issue was with your superiors," Khan complained as worries appeared in his mind.

"I'm always in trouble," Liiza shrugged her shoulders, "And your situation is different."

"You are important then," Khan exclaimed.

"Just a bit," Liiza explained while rolling her eyes when she saw that worries appeared on Khan's face.

Khan noticed that reaction, but he didn't know what to think. He had yet to figure out Liiza's character, and the recent events didn't help with his evaluation.

Liiza had appeared cold during the first meeting, but she had started to laugh after the two spent a few hours together. Khan also had doubts about the Niqols' customs, so he never trusted the faint guesses that appeared in his mind.

"Did I make you angry now?" Khan asked while moving to her side and reappear in her gaze. "I don't know much about the Niqols, so forgive me if I don't understand stuff at times."

Khan's direct honesty slightly startled Liiza. None of the other humans on Nitis had ever acted so casually. Khan had been the first to behave without minding status and politics.

"It's fine," Liiza revealed. "It's just strange to talk with a human without seeing bows."

Khan frowned before a faint idea appeared in his mind. He still had his doubts due to the different customs between the species, but the only way to confirm his guesses was to question the alien.

"Could it be that you don't like politics?" Khan asked.

Liiza avoided his gaze and shrugged her shoulders again. The crossed arms on her torso enhanced the curves revealed by her tank top, but Khan only looked at the alien's glowing white eyes.

"Is that a bad thing for the Niqols?" Khan asked. "I thought you'd be more carefree."

"Why would you think that?" Liiza asked as her gaze finally returned on Khan.

"Well," Khan said while scratching the side of his head, "You ride animals. Isn't that an expression of freedom?"

"How are those things connected?" Liiza asked while showing a perplexed face.

The two remained in silence. Khan believed that he had found one of the topics he couldn't explain due to the Niqols' different customs, while Liiza remained curious about that.

"Okay, see it like this," Khan tried to explain, and his hands followed his words to create a better image of the topic. "Animals don't have politics, right? Being so close to them can hint at freedom."

"Animals have tight hierarchies and many rules," Liiza replied while tilting her head. "Aren't they a form of politics?"

Khan opened his mouth to reply, but his hand went under his chin when he realized that Liiza's words made sense. Animals didn't have proper verbal rules, but their instincts created environments that could feature basic forms of politics.

"You might be right," Khan revealed. "Humans have it all wrong."

"Why did you move your arms so much?" Liiza asked while pointing at his hands. "Is that another human thing?"

"Is this your first time seeing someone gesticulating?" Khan asked while explaining the meaning of the word by moving his arms.

"Humans never move their arms when they talk to me," Liiza announced while stepping forward and inspecting Khan's arms from different perspectives. "Is that what Paul was doing before? Why was he gesticulating?"

Khan couldn't help but recall Paul's glare at that point. He quickly drew his phone from his pocket and noticed that he had already spent more than fourteen hours on the test. Nitis' days lasted twenty-four hours, so it was already night by human standards.

"Do you have to go?" Liiza asked, but she didn't show any sudden or strange reaction at that time.

"Returning now might increase my chances of remaining on the planet," Khan laughed. "Can you tell me how to take care of the Aduns before setting off? I don't want to be completely lost when you aren't around."

Khan's honest concern about Snow surprised Liiza again, and she didn't hesitate to explain what she knew. It turned out that the Aduns were quite independent, so Khan only had to take his eagle for a flight once a week to strengthen their relationship.

"I have another reason to fly with it, don't I?" Khan laughed once the explanation ended. "It gives me the chance to hang around with you."

"Fly often then," Liiza said while revealing a faint smile and jumping on her eagle. "Don't lose track of me."

'You heard her,' Khan sent through the mental connection, and Snow gave voice to a proud screech when it sensed his intentions.

Khan jumped on his eagle and took the riding position, but Liiza shot in the air before he put both his legs under the creature's wings.

Snow promptly flapped its wings to follow the grey Aduns, and Khan released a loud curse while using the entirety of his strength to cling on his eagle and stabilize his position.

Liiza shot upward and tried to disappear among the dark sky, but Snow managed to catch up with her. Khan saw that Liiza laughed when she turned and noticed that he had yet to grow used to the flight. She was having so much fun that she didn't hesitate to make things harder for him.

The grey eagle suddenly dived toward the ground, forcing Snow to imitate it. Khan didn't even try to give orders during that situation. He let his eagle handle everything while he focused on preserving his life.

Liiza revealed her vast experience during the flight. She commanded her Aduns to ascend, dive, spin, and pass through narrow paths inside the mountain chain. Khan often cursed loudly as Snow followed her, but he eventually began to laugh when he saw that Liiza seemed truly happy.

The two circled the city and flew toward a small settlement nearby. Khan didn't recognize the architecture of the structures in that place, but Liiza's sudden dive confirmed that they had reached their destination.

The settlement featured a few windowless black buildings with strange glowing symbols and a tall structure near its edges. A tall fence that released a faint azure glow surrounded the entire site, and holes filled with white worms occupied the areas immediately past the barrier.

Khan could see Udu coming out of the ground and approaching the holes, but the Aduns' cries forced them to look toward the sky and retreat. Liiza made her eagle land in those feeding spots, and Snow imitated her.

Paul and other young recruits hurried outside of the buildings and started to run toward the two Aduns. Meanwhile, Liiza and Khan jumped off their rides and petted them while they fed on the worms in the holes.

"You definitely have fun making things hard for me," Khan commented before giving voice to a short laugh.

"It's your fault for being so expressive," Liiza smiled while trying to gesticulate, "But this thing that you do is still strange."

"I'll stop then," Khan sighed dramatically and performed a bow. "I can't have such an important Niqols displeased about my behavior."

"No, keep doing that," Liiza answered as her smile became strangely honest. "It's cute."

Khan's eyebrows arched in front of that sudden honest reaction. He couldn't help but fix his eyes on Liiza's face, and the Niqols did the same.

Paul had reached the two quickly enough to hear Liiza's last line. The scene that unfolded in his vision made him grab his hair and widen his eyes.

"What does that mean?" Liiza asked when she noticed Paul. "He did it again."

"I'll tell you once I understand that," Khan replied while turning toward Paul and pointing at Snow.

Paul didn't know what to think about the situation. Liiza seemed to have lost part of her detached demeanor, Khan was full of injuries, and the Global Army had gained its first Aduns rider. Moreover, Khan and Liiza seemed to be in flirting terms, which could cause many problems considering the frail relationship between the two species.

"Thank you for everything you have done, Miss Liiza," Paul eventually announced while performing the polite bows used by the Niqols.

Other recruits arrived behind him and imitated his gesture. Liiza found a small group showing their utmost respect toward her, and her expression gradually grew colder as she inspected that scene.

Liiza glanced at Khan at that point. He was staring at her and inspecting her reactions. She felt that he had noticed the gradual saddening of her face during the event.

"Khan!" Paul suddenly shouted, and Khan noticed his admonishing glare when he turned toward the soldier.

Khan showed a complicated smile before bowing toward Liiza. He knew that she had noticed his reaction, but her face still grew colder even if he peeked at her whenever Paul didn't look at him.

"It's only normal to help our guests," Liiza eventually exclaimed in an emotionless voice. "I hope this event will bring Niqols and Humans closer together."

Liiza then turned to jump on her Aduns. The eagle wanted to eat some more, but she patted its neck and forced it to set off.

Khan straightened his position and gazed at Liiza's disappearing figure, but the sound of multiple steps forced him to turn. An angry Paul unfolded in his vision, but the soldier calmed down when he saw that Snow stopped eating to glare at him.

"They are friends," Khan explained while turning toward Snow.

Khan had felt a bit of anger flowing out of the mental connection. Those emotions had created a warm feeling inside him since they confirmed Snow's concern, but he still had to stop the eagle.

The recruits showed surprised expressions when they noticed that Snow dived back to its worms after Khan's words. The creature was really listening to him.

"Leave us," Paul ordered after heaving a helpless sigh, and the recruits returned toward the camp.

Khan couldn't help but inspect those recruits. They were all young, but they had steady auras around them. Their bodies even contained a decent amount of mana. They were clearly above average as assets.

"Of all the recruits that the army could send here," Paul began to shout once the recruits returned inside the camp, "The damned womanizer had to end up in my team! What did you do with Miss Liiza for an entire day? Don't tell me that you have been inappropriate!"

"Does she like me then?" Khan asked as his eyes lit up. "It's hard to understand her reactions at times."

"I have no damned idea," Paul snorted, "But you are forbidden from touching, teasing, and fucking flirting with her. We don't want to cause a scandal."

"Is she so important?" Khan asked while wearing a stern expression and straightening his position to perform a military salute.

"You'll learn more about the Niqols' political system during the briefing," Paul sighed as his anger waned. "Consider her as a princess for now. Her parents are pretty important in the relationship between the two species."

"Yes, sir!" Khan exclaimed, and Paul studied his expression to understand if he was just pretending.

Khan's face didn't show any flaw. He appeared as the most devoted soldier in the entire Global Army, so Paul ended up letting him off the hook. He had no idea that Khan was already thinking about his next flight with Liiza.

"Come inside the camp now," Paul ordered in a calm voice. "It's too late to brief you, but Captain Erbair wants to see you. She said that she has to give you something."