

Darkness 321

Chapter 321 - The Fiefdom

Two weeks passed since Kahn won the Emperor's Chosen competition and rightfully became the new Sovereign of the Verlassen mountain range.

As per traditions, a grand coronation ceremony was held and in front of the entire Rakos Empire, Kahn was officially appointed as the new ruler of this part of the empire.

He was legally given all the rights and took an oath just like a Crowned Prince inheriting the position of the Emperor.

A grand celebration was held by the government throughout the empire and their generosity as well as support to Kahn, the new Emperor's Chosen was displayed to the masses.

At the night, a great banquet was held and all the top officials of the government, clan leaders of the most influential clans, heads of the biggest business corporations, honorary ranked officers of the military and the leaders of the free folks aka the political figures.

Many Saints and their respective forces tried to make friends with Kahn as he was now the owner of the biggest reserve of the mana ore and monster-related materials in the empire.

Yet the real truth that no one from the public could see was that all of the people present in the banquet actually abhorred him and already started conspiring against him... including the Pureblood faction after Kahn had basically given them a middle finger by choosing this region.

"Start pulling out our people and officials from the Verlassen mountain range one by one from all the cities and government sectors.

This kid thinks he can run a fiefdom of that scale on his own. Let him gloat for a few days..

After that, he will come crying and beg all of us to give him support." spoke some of the clan leaders and top officials.

Just then, the three faction leaders entered the conversation while Kahn was surrounded by people coming to greet him.

"It's too early. Let him play for a few months. Then we will make our move." spoke Stalin, the faction leader of the Neutral Faction.

"I don't understand, sir..." spoke a minister of the parliament.

Just then, Allister interjected and explained.

"Why appear as his enemy? Instead, we can make an example out of him about how those who do not come from a proper background like a noble faction or military house; do not possess skills to rule a fiefdom or any part of the empire as matter of fact.

And once everything goes according to our plans.. The public of the empire itself will label him as an incompetent sovereign and we will be justified to take away his position." spoke the old vampire who himself was disappointed and angry after Kahn had pulled a UNO reverse card on him in the finale.

Then Jeremiah, the old elven saint spoke in a condescending tone..

"No matter how talented he is.. A warrior and a king are not the same breed. He will make a fool out of himself and we won't even have to raise a finger.

So let him receive all the attention for now.

The higher he rises... the greater his fall will be."

[Only if I had a skill that could read thoughts.. I would know what those fuckers are planning.] thought Kahn as he greeted another minister with a smile on his face.

But unbeknownst to all of them, Kahn had already planned his moves and knew that soon, he would have to run the whole place on his own.

Kahn earned 3140 trillions aka 3.14 quadrillion gold coins after gathering all the wealth from the competition. Although it wasn't remotely as big as the earnings made by the top three noble factions.. He had cost all the other two factions who bet on Cassandra a big chunk of their wealth and profits by winning the match.

And he was certain that soon, these people were going to create problems for him one way or another. So rather than waiting like an idiot.. He was going to place his cards as soon as he went to the capital of Verlassen mountain range and assumed command.

In a way, it was going to be him against the government, noble clans, military officials and factions very soon.

But rather than becoming afraid, Kahn with his business mind saw this as the biggest opportunity for a major expansion.

He had already learned all the important history about this part of the empire and how it functioned.

Verlassen Mountain Range had a total of 187 million normal citizens spread across thousands of cities. While it was guarded by nearly 48 million soldiers that were comprised of normal soldiers and ones sent by the three factions as part of a pact made between them separately.

This part of the empire was basically a warzone and a lot of wealth was spent by the government in the name of military management, provisions and maintaining order because of the annual monster tide. But from the intel Kahn received..

This was one of the most corrupt regions as only the powerful people with connections ruled over here while the shallow management cost only the lives of honest soldiers and innocent citizens.

And millions of heinous criminals throughout the empire such as serial killers, rapists, murderers and those who have committed unspeakable crimes were sent here after receiving a death sentence and forcefully admitted in the military and told to fight against the monster tide.

Everything was about hunting the resources of the inner areas that were spammed with unimaginable and insanely strong monsters that were still unheard of to most of the empire. Here, existed the type of monsters and species that Kahn hadn't even read about or seen in any dungeon either.

In terms of resources, harvesting rare materials from monsters and given how their uses directly affected many professions and businesses of the empire which led to this region playing an important part in the economy, it was no different than a treasure trove.

But because of the restrictions of no Saint being able to enter here.. The best warrior they could send was a semi-saint. But given the power struggle in the capital.. There were only 6 other semi-saints with war experience of decades stationed here.

And 3 of which were sent by the three noble factions while only 3 were the native commanders who controlled it and actually fought for the lives of the citizens while the ones sent by the factions who were there just to display the support in the eyes of the public.

But it was mentioned that most of them had abused their authority from time to time as per the secret intel he gathered by Ronin after Kahn decided on Verlassen mountain range before the finale.

Each one of these saints lead six different fronts and held command of their own armies.

Yet the reason why the Verlassen region was added to the list of fiefdoms available to be chosen was because the government wanted to appear fair and just and pretend to give its native citizens hope for a better future.

And after Kahn chose this region... he was going to be the biggest authority and the ultimate ruler even if none of them wanted to.

Kahn on the other end saw nothing but opportunities for both the Bloodborne company and Seven Deadly Sins for a grand expansion.

And meanwhile.. He would also clean the scums who were plaguing the management and playing with normal people's lives to rule as its proper sovereign.

Many new challenges were awaiting him. But Kahn knew one thing in his bones that once he settled down there properly...

Chapter 322 - Welcome Ceremony

Four days after all the authority and legal rights were handed to Kahn as the new sovereign of the Verlassen mountain range, he finally left for the capital of this region and his new base of operation.

And the capital was called... AESIR.

Kahn was granted 7 Warships by the government as a form of showing their support and after Kahn was done settling all the things in Rukon District, let it be ensuring the safety of Albestros, Sirius and The Bloodborne company or leaving people in charge of the Seven Deadly Sins... he and all the subordinates departed for their new home.

After spending 12 hours flying via the warships that could travel one thousand kilometers in just an hour, Kahn finally entered the capital which itself had more than 40 million citizens in total population.

The rest of the citizens were spread across many other cities and business hubs that contributed greatly to the economy. And the center of command was obviously the capital which was going to be his new headquarters.

When Kahn's 200 meters tall, 400 meters wide and massive warships landed in the central region and close to his new castle under the public eyes, the entire crowd was excited to see their new ruler finally coming to live among them.

Kahn was already informed that his welcome would be celebrated throughout all the cities and settlements within the region and his welcoming ceremony would be broadcasted for all the masses.

Shhhooooaaa!!

Kahn walked out of the main entrance of the ginormous black warship and following him, six humanoid figures escorted their master.

Kahn was now donned in a gray and royal attire that made him look like a prince of a European country. His appearance and the aura he emitted gave a hint of a domineering sovereign who had confidence and authority oozing out of him.

[[Author : For Kahn's new appearance, refer to the current cover of the novel.]]

A long cue of beginner grandmaster rank warriors dressed as Kahn's new Royal Guards had taken a stand on both sides and under the eyes of the public, they escorted their sovereign.

After walking a mile and being welcomed under loud cheers from the bustling crowd, he walked towards the podium that was placed right at the main entrance of his new castle that was situated very high in the capital grounds and one had to walk hundreds of stairs just to reach here.

And finally, under the expectant gazes of the more than 220 million citizens that belonged to different species, races, genders and colors; Kahn finally began his speech.

"People of Verlassen mountain range who eagerly waited for my arrival since the Emperor's Chosen competition ended and now gathered to welcome me while putting aside all your work and chores...

I have one thing to say to all of you." spoke Kahn with a benign and charming smile on his face.

"I, Kahn Salvatore... have come back to my home!" he said with a tone full of compassion and nostalgia.

"Yeeeeaaaahhhh!!"

"Yes! He's one of us!!"

"Welcome home!!"

"We believe in you, our Lord!"

Soon, thousands and millions of people cheered and applauded Kahn. The overly crowded and bustling city of Aesir was now shaking with people's chanting and loud screams.

The same scenarios were happening in thousands of cities, towns and villages spread across Verlassen and people wholeheartedly welcomed their new ruler whom they had attached all their hopes onto.

Kahn then continued and spoke in a vehement voice..

"I'm not here to make false claims or act like everything is under control. I am fully aware of the misery of people here because it is the only way to make a living and survive..

To all of our people who have lost their families, loved ones and friends.. To all of the soldiers who leave behind their homes to protect us over the border and sacrifice themselves while facing the monster tides every year... I promise you that I'll make sure it doesn't happen again as long as I'm here." he spoke with a resolute tone.

Another wave of ear-deafening cheers resounded throughout Verlassen.

But as soon as the crowd finally settled down.. Kahn spoke with the eyes of a domineering tyrant as his tone became extremely serious.

"I know of another truth that has been hidden from you all of you till now."

"The corruption that happens in the government sectors that was running this place till now..

The abuse of authority by those who control the military..

The underhanded measure taken by the powerful to keep oppressing those who want to rise in ranks and make better lives for themselves.

Those who scam and cheat under the name of business related to materials and ores..

I know all of it." spoke Kahn as his gazes shifted to thousands of high-class and influential figures who had come to attend this welcoming ceremony.

At this moment, many of the conglomerates had a surprised expression on their face as soon as they heard Kahn's words.

In front of all his subjects, Kahn made another declaration.

"Previously, the government was in control. But now, I am the one who makes rules here and the highest authority.

Soon, I will make new laws and regulations.

My new order will be made equal for all of the citizens.

There will be a new set of criteria while lending tenders and deals. Let it be the military stationed here or the organizations that impact the economy.

Let it be someone who is from a commoner birth, from an influential noble clan, ministers or someone from a military house background..

No one shall be an exception to these rules.

I will cut down the head that stops the normal citizens of the Verlassen to live their lives as proud members of society. I will cut those hands who steal from the hardworking people who barely earn enough to feed their families." spoke Kahn with his heavy and tyrannical voice.

All the citizens watching him on the broadcasting screens were shocked and then rejoiced to hear his truthful words.

Millions of people teared up after his promise as if a dam of grief they had amassed over the years had finally broken.

While the elites of the society and many officials felt a sense of dread and contempt towards Kahn.

He spoke again with an iron will in his eyes..

"I, Kahn Salvatore, take an oath that as long as I'm alive, I shall give my everything to my people and protect them at all cost.

So keep believing in me and I shall make this place not only a haven for you to live..."

His emotional face full of care and warmth appeared on the screens as the new sovereign completed his speech.

"But a motherland you could be proud of!"

Chapter 323 - The Expendables

In the central region of Aesir where the welcome ceremony was held and their new ruler had finally introduced himself to the masses and given his reassuring and heartwarming speech.. The common folks finally felt like there was indeed someone who cared for them.

Many had feared that Kahn would be no different than those people sent by the government and noble factions who ruled over them but treated their lives as nothing but mere assets needed to work in hunting and harvesting monsters and cores.

Nonetheless, their new sovereign straight up announced that no one will be treated differently and he even went as far as directly mentioning the crisis related to corruption, malpractice, nepotism, elitism as well as abuse of power and authority that was exercised heavily in this region.

This made them let go of their worries and all of them welcomed this man who was born amongst them and returned to serve their home.

However... Kahn's provocative speech had already left a bad taste in the mouths of the ruling class. Let it be powerful clans, factions, government officials, heads of business organizations and military officers.

He had openly declared that he won't be sharing the same table as them or become their ally just through his speech.

But there was nothing they could do here because he was now the legitimate sovereign of this region. He was the one who had the authority to change rules and punish people.

The so-called government branch that ran this region of the empire from the past hundred years no longer had any authority left as the man in front of them was now the personification of the Law itself.

While millions of people loudly cheered for Kahn happily, some shedding tears of joy... the rich and powerful had eyes full of worries and fear for their future.

Just because of one damn competition.. All the power they held over a century was now only existing on paper. As soon as Kahn willed it.. He could rightfully take it away.

Their new sovereign who spoke about implementing laws to treat all the people fairly was actually detrimental to their existence.

Because if they tried to riot or target him in any way.. He'd be justified to wipe them out because he was literally the strongest person in the Verlassen mountain range that spanned over 8000 kilometers.

The man in the center of attention had already declared his stand through this speech without directly speaking a word against them.

When the speech ended and Kahn was led to his new castle where he would hold meetings and rule the whole region from..

Kahn folded his arms behind the back and walked like a true lord of this place while being surrounded by the six humans who seemed to be his followers and the royal guards.

As per his orders, all the important government officials, military officers and the six semi-saints who ruled the different regions and commanded an army of their own had also come to attend the ceremony followed behind him.

Inside the main hall of this ginormous 400 meters tall and 3 kilometer wide castle that could easily house 5 to 8 thousand people on its 4 floors. Kahn walked towards the end of this hall that was befitting to be the court hall of a king.

He sat upon a black and golden throne which was situated two levels of platforms above the rest of the seats and had two armrests with heads of lions carved in them.

Kahn sat down and signaled all the people to take their respective seats. He looked towards all of them and spoke in his kingly voice.

"All of you have heard me. So tell me.. What is your stand? Will you keep serving me and the people of Verlassen or will you oppose the new laws I'm going to implement?"

And if you're going to report everything I do here to the noble factions who control the parliament and military... then you best relinquish your positions when I'm being nice."

He spoke and gazed at all the 18 figureheads of the management of this region. Apart from the six semi-saints, the rest were normal people with no fighting class job.

"What's this?! We were officially appointed by the government. We have performed our duties properly till now. Just because you won this region as your reward doesn't mean you can run it without our help or the infrastructure the government and military has already established." spoke a bearkin semi-saint commander who had the sigil of the demi-human faction on his armor.

"Is that so? Aren't you forgetting something?"

"I'm the government and law here now." spoke Kahn with lifeless eyes.

"As for the infrastructure.. It is indeed necessary to run the whole fiefdom. But you're forgetting something.." spoke Kahn and clasped his hands together and folded his legs as he spoke in a carefree tone.

"A system to rule is necessary.. But people running it are replaceable."

To his response, everyone present here had an aghast expression. All of them were top officials of their respective departments of the government and military.. All their power, influence and authority came from their respective positions.

Every one of them was sent here because they didn't have enough influence to stay at the capital as part of the ministry or held big positions in their respective faction. Here, they were the top sharks.. But compared to the people from capital Rathna, they were just the errand boys.

If Kahn took away their positions... they'd be nothing more than just decoration pieces. And now... most of them felt a sense of dread but no one spoke a word.

The bearkin semi-saint however, had a haughty expression on his face as if he didn't fear Kahn in the slightest.

"And do what?! Without us.. You can't even protect the six major cities that basically run the economy here. Who are you going to replace us with?" he asked with a condescending tone.

"Ah... so cliché and stupid." murmured Kahn to himself.

[He's talking down on the strongest guy in the room because I'm asking politely..] he thought.

"Let me be very clear about something.

To someone like me..." he spoke.

Kahn then stood out from his throne and walked towards the bearkin semi-saint as if looking at a dead man. He spoke in a grim and tyrannical voice that sent shivers in their spines..

"All of you are expendable."

Chapter 324 - Setting Hierarchy

After making his claims about how he only saw the top figureheads of his fiefdom as nothing but expendable chess pieces, Kahn walked towards the bearkin semi-saint with a fierce expression.

"Don't worry.. Although I don't have a semi-saint to replace you..." spoke Kahn and let out a wide grin.

"I have them!"

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

CRACKLE!!

The next moment, the six subordinates Kahn brought with him who stood silently on both sides of the hall till this point suddenly released all their auras and shook the entire room in an instant.

Omega and 5 of the generals revealed their full aura of peak grandmasters all at once!

A deathly and terrifying killing intent was directed at the bearkin semi-saint who had a shocked expression.

"How... Six peak grandmasters all at once?!" spoke one of the ministers.

"Wait.. Didn't he come back from no powerful background? How does he have six peak grandmasters with him? None of them belong to any faction or clan either. Who the hell is backing him?" spoke some of the officials among themselves.

"Just two of them are enough to fill your place. And I have six who serve me loyally.

So do you think I'm without options?" asked Kahn in a mocking tone.

"You... don't think you can control everything just because you have the authority. I have spent more than a decade here.

I know my area better than anyone else. If you try to replace me.. Do you think people will be happy?

Even my soldiers in the army will start riots themselves!" exclaimed the bearkin as he was on full alert mode.

"You mean the people you've brought from the capital and mixed in the army? And the people whom you have created tiers with behind the curtains by using your authority to make deals under the name of commissions and provisions for the military?" asked Kahn and suddenly activated War Dominance.

"What?!"

Speechless! The bearkin was rooted on the spot.

[This bastard.. How does he know?] asked the bearkin to himself.

The next moment, Kahn took out a leather-ish parchment made from monster hide and started reading the content on it loudly...

"Commander Aswala Bhaloo, leader of the Igi army and the personnel in charge of the south-east borders of the Verlassen mountain range.

47 cases of assaults, 13 charges of bribery, 5 cases of illegally selling military provisions to the powerful business organization and also one case of a homicide of an officer who tried to expose you 7 years ago." spoke Kahn as he listed out the wrongdoings of this bearkin semi-saint right in front of all the other semi-saints and ministers of government.

"Anyway.. None of the cases were filed or there was any prosecution by the court either. So you're safe... for now." spoke Kahn with his wrathful eyes as if he barely resisted the urge to kill this commander.

"You also have quite a knack for gambling, am I right?" asked Kahn with a light grin.

Flabbergasted! The bearkin semi-saint was completely flabbergasted.

[How.. How does he know all of this?!] he exclaimed in his mind.

"You know what.. I'm feeling generous today since it's my first day. However..." spoke Kahn and the next second, something horrifying happened.

Everyone.. Even the other semi-saints dressed in regal clothes and wearing their armors felt like a mountain descended on their heads.

The bearkin had his face convoluted and his 3 meters tall figure faltered. Even though both of them were semi-saint, the bearkin who became a semi-saint more than a decade ago... was still forced to bow in front of the source aka Kahn.

[Hey, human! I no longer have to hold back, right?] asked Rudra in Kahn's mind.

[Yes. There are no saints here and my own aura is stronger than all of them so no one can sense you.

So you can finally reveal your aura. Let's do it together.] replied Kahn.

Throughout the whole Emperor's Chosen competition, Rudra had completely hidden his own aura and presence so no saint or a mage was able to sense him inside Kahn's shadow.

Plus revealing a Basilisk.. One of the five Godbeasts even under a pretense of being his familiar would've been an extremely stupid move on their side.

Because both of them weren't foolish enough to let others detect a Godbeast like how Solomon once detected him when Kahn was weak. And it ultimately led to Kahn being trapped inside a barrier where Rudra was forced out of his body.

Their lives were in jeopardy back then so both of them had learned their lessons.

BOOM!!

SHRILL!!

Before everyone could grasp the new information at hand.. Kahn activated War Dominance and released his full oppressive and deathly black and red aura in the meeting hall.

BOOM!!

Another loud burst of energy was revealed from Kahn's body and this time.. A black fog instantly filled the entire 500 meter long hall.

A dense and visible murderous aura which was many times stronger than before suddenly filled the surroundings as it forced everyone except his subordinates and two of the commanders to kneel in front of the new sovereign.

"What's this.. Isn't he just a semi-saint like us.. Why is his aura as strong as a legitimate saint?" wondered the semi-saint saint from the neutral faction.

"That's right.. And he's so young unlike us. Imagine what will happen if he becomes a saint one day." replied the other semi-saint.

Little did they know that it was Kahn and Rudra's mixed aura that was equivalent to a saint's aura.

But unbeknownst to them all, hundreds of dark shadows exited Kahn's body and using this dark fog as a cover, they mixed in the shadows of all the people, let it be the ministers or the other commanders... all of them had these black shadows mixed with them without being able to sense anything.

Kahn already knew that these people wouldn't serve him loyally and report back everything to their respective forces.

How he was running the fiefdom or how he was managing the economy or taking measures to protect the people..

None of them had any form of loyalty to him. So Kahn decided to intentionally create a beef with them from the get-go.

But amidst all of this display of power.. Two semi-saints were untouched by Kahn's murderous aura.

Kahn had already investigated all of these people before he came to assume command.

Out of the 6 semi-saints, 3 of whom belonged to noble factions.. And the rest were natives of Verlassen.. But only 2 of the commanders had the history of fighting with their lives on the line to serve and protect the people.

Both the old men looked at Kahn and they too understood why he hadn't targeted them like the rest.

[Commander Stark and Commander Mormont.

Both of their Houses are military clans that protect the North of the mountain range.

The only two commanders worth keeping around.] spoke Kahn to himself.

On the very first day, Kahn had already achieved one of his primary goals.

To provoke and see who was on his side while leaving his assassins in their shadows who would alert and inform him if any of them tried to conspire against him or create problems in the future.

There were no exceptions.

Kahn then walked towards the bearkin and spoke in a deathly tone.

"I will give you one week before you leave the position under the pretext of old age or some other reason. This is my last warning.

And if you decide to refuse... Know that there will be a public execution where my sword will cut down your head. Understood?" declared Kahn to the now kneeling semi-saint officer.

"From this day forth in this fiefdom..."

His gaze then shifted to all of them and he spoke in a tyrannical voice that resounded in the entire hall.

"I stand at the pinnacle of hierarchy!"

Chapter 325 - Giving Warning

After releasing his full aura mixed with Rudra's, Kahn now appeared like a primordial monster looking down upon their measly lives to all the people, let it be government ministers or the military officials.. All of them felt they'd die any moment.

Only now did they understand that the one whose authority they refused to accept and tried to act stubborn in front of was actually someone comparable to a saint based on his aura alone.

"The old rules have changed. So let go of your notions of the power and authority you once held. The sooner you accept it, the better.

As for me.. I will rule over this fiefdom in the way I see fit. So make your choice.

You're either with me.. Or you're against me." spoke Kahn as his insurmountable pressure cracked the bones in all of their bodies.

"I have already gathered more than enough information about all of you here.

Who made what kind of deals with the elites of the society.. Who swindled what kind of funds using their positions and authority... I know everything.

So all of you have only one week to make a final decision. After that.. Your fate will be sealed.

Because I don't want snakes in my house and I'm not afraid of getting bitten in order to kill them either." he said in his tyrannical voice and delivered his final warning.

But in reality, Kahn didn't trust any of them at all. This intimation was something he was doing to succeed in his plans. .

"Except commander Stark, commander Mormont and my subordinates.. All of you, including the royal guards, may leave the hall." he said and lessened his aura to let everyone else move and breathe properly.

Under his orders, everyone else apart from the stated people left the long meeting hall.

"I wonder if you understand why I asked you to stay?" asked Kahn as he gazed at the two old men donned in armors.

The first of them was an old human swordsman while the latter was an old dwarven warrior.

To his question, both the old semi-saints gave him an understanding nod.

Both of them were battle-hardened warriors who understood politics in their field very well.

"We do.. My lord. What you seek from us is complete allegiance." spoke commander Mormont.

"With all due respect.. My lord. Although we know that you mean well...

It's still too early for us to pledge our loyalty to you. We're not the kind of men who take that word for granted." said commander Starrk.

However, despite their refusal.. Kahn nodded in response and had a content expression on his face.

"As expected of two great commanders who have been serving the Verlassen mountain range for more than three decades." he spoke with a soft smile.

Kahn signaled them to sit down as he sat back on his throne and continued their conversation.

"I won't ask you to blindly follow me. What I want you to do is protect your regions as you always have.

I already had my people investigate which commander actually ruled fair and just and cared about saving people's lives here. And that is why I have chosen to not make out an enemy of you unlike I did with them." he said and revealed his intentions.

"Just like you, my lord... this is our birthplace. We were born here and we will die here.

And unlike those people in the government and the other semi-saints sent here from the capital... We have a sense of belonging and duty to this region.

Our houses have protected this region even before the Great War when the Imperial Family was overthrown.

Our clans and armies are made from people who live here since birth so it's natural that we only seek to better their lives.

These are our people who suffer every year in the end.

If not for us being semi-saints.. Those people from the government and noble factions would've brought some outsiders from the capital and only rule in the name.

The situation is much more dire than you know." spoke commander Mormont.

Kahn nodded at the response from the dwarven semi-saint as he shared his opinions.

"I know. And that's why, I will be needing your help and assistance. I was only born and raised here till the age of 5 but you have lived here far longer and know many things that I have no knowledge of.

And since our motives align.. I chose to speak with both of you first." iterated Kahn.

"But unlike before... you don't have to rely on those bastards just to get simple things done and protect the lives of our people.

From this moment.. Both of you have my full support." spoke Kahn in a solemn tone.

"Just list everything you need and who are creating obstacles for you.

Who is stealing money and who is controlling the criminal activities.

For now.. Although I don't trust you completely either.. I'll provide everything in my power to bring stability." spoke Kahn.

Both the semi-saints looked at him with skeptical eyes but still followed through with his commands.

And an hour of discussion, both of them finally left and now, Kahn and his generals were the only people left in this giant meeting hall.

"Master.. What's our next move?" asked Omega with a curious tone.

To his query, Kahn let out a chuckle and spoke in a carefree tone.

"Don't worry. We have already achieved our first objective." he replied.

"The fish has taken a bait." spoke Kahn and leaned against the royal throne.

Since the very beginning, Kahn's aim was to provoke them through his speech as soon as he landed in Aesir. And through his intimidating warnings in the meeting hall, Kahn already made them become wary of him.

And now, he was waiting for them to do something he expected them to do very soon.

He spoke again with an evil grin on his face after successfully completing the first phase of his upcoming plans.

"Now we wait for them to deliver themselves on a silver platter."

Chapter 326 - Planned Beforehand

After Kahn was done laying out traps to catch the big fishes, the meeting continued in the main hall of his new castle.

All his actions ever since he landed in Aesir weren't just done out of a fluke but premeditated and well-thought strategies.

Back right when Kahn was curious about the Verlassen mountain range when the competition was close to the quarterfinals, Kahn had Ronin hire plenty of big and powerful spy organizations to gather information about it.

Ronin changed his appearance each time he visited one of these organizations that exceeded their own Seven Deadly Sins by many times and had their information network spread throughout the empire.

He spent billions of gold coins to hire these reputed organizations to gather information about this region and mainly about the people such as military commanders, conglomerates, native clans who ruled and controlled various parts of it from a long time.

And through those organizations, Ronin received reports about the rumors, notable incidents and corruption cases against all of them.

But since the system itself was corrupt, none of these people ever had to face any consequences and the three factions who controlled the government were allied in this act of misconduct.

But even so, Kahn and the company had no solid evidence to act against them even if he was to become a new sovereign of this region. And he had to do things systematically lest his name and reputation were to hit the bottom from the very beginning.

He had to do everything by justifying his actions and also needed full public support while doing so otherwise the government would use his conduct to call them unfair means and try to bring down his reputation.

And soon, they would come up with multiple reasons to declare him as the unworthy ruler and try to take away his authority.

Hence, Kahn's plan was to not only create an image of the humble ruler in front of the public of his new fiefdom.. But to put all these upperclassmen and business tycoons into disarray.

And through this meeting where all the heads of the government departments, ministers and the semi-saints in charge of the military armies were gathered..

He used his own black and red aura, mixed with Rudra's black fog as a cover-up to plant his assassin subordinates in their shadows. Each of these people currently had more than 50 assassins hidden within them, commander Stark and Mormont were no exception to this.

After learning his lessons with the Chamber of Commerce when he met all the top tycoons of Rukon District and didn't plant his assassins in their shadows.. Kahn had become wiser to not give an opportunity to his potential enemies at all.

And most importantly, he had given all of them recording and projection artifacts.

Because of Kahn's firm stand about how he wasn't going to play along and cornered them to make a choice...

All of them would be scared for their illegal activities to be exposed by Kahn.. After this incident, all of them were riled up and soon, would try to cover their own tracks.

And that's where Kahn's assassins would come into play.

All of them were ordered to gather evidence, records, ledgers, record who these people met with and what kind of organizations did they deal with and how he will gather all the evidence to indict them in the name of stealing from the people and misusing their positions and authority.

All Kahn needed was enough time till his subordinates reported back after they gathered enough proof. So once he had it all, he could start the next phase of his grand plan.

"Ronin, you're in charge of handling these affairs as usual. Once we have proofs and recordings against all of them.. We will make our next move." commanded Kahn.

"Yes, my master. I will take care of everything." spoke Ronin as he slightly bowed.

Just then, the subordinates in white and purple mage robes asked..

"What should be our next move then, my lord?" asked Ceril.

Kahn then looked at all of his subordinates present in human forms and spoke with a solemn tone..

"For now, our priorities should be fully controlling the military and economic infrastructure of this region.

I'm only the ruler in the name for now.. But if I want to truly control everything, running these two sectors with my own hands is a must.

If the first phase of my plans succeeds, then I will have legit reasons to do a takeover and no one would be able to raise any questions." spoke Kahn with a serious expression.

"Omega, Jugram and Oliver... I'm leaving a particular task to all three of you." he said.

The three subordinates instantly kneeled in front of their master and spoke..

"We will not disappoint you, master!" said the subordinates in unison.

For the next one hour, Kahn told all the subordinates about what he wanted them to accomplish and how they should approach the matter at hand.

And once he was done.. All of the subordinates had surprised but also excited expressions on their faces. As if they were proud of their master who was nothing but a genius mastermind.

"Then what about me? I can't be of much help in these activities." finally, Armin spoke.

To his question, Kahn nodded back and replied.

"You have a major part to play. Just be patient."

"Then what about me, my lord?" asked Ceril as he suddenly felt left out.

"Ha ha! Don't worry about it. I already have different plans for you. It's something I'm certain you will absolutely love." replied Kahn and gave a sinister smile.

"Tomorrow... we will expand our own army." he said.

Soon, Kahn explained another plan that would soon play a crucial part in his rule as the new sovereign.

All the subordinates were once again in an awe of how evil and cunning their master has become over the short span of a month alone.

Kahn was fully going to exercise his rights as the new sovereign of this region.

He let out a chuckle and declared...

"An army that will be loyal only to me."

Chapter 327 - The Sinners

The very next day, Kahn relayed his orders throughout the Verlassen fiefdom that soon, he will begin visiting all the major prisons situated in the important cities and also the areas controlled by the military.

This news shocked many among the populace as this was something unheard of because till now, they only knew that the government transferred most heinous criminals who had been given a death sentence throughout the empire and used them to fill the numbers in the military to fight against the monster tide.

But most of the time, this idea had backfired as these people were so erratic that it created chaos amongst their ranks. And if not for the powerful semi-saints commanding the armies, it would've caused mayhem instead.

So Kahn's motives through this declaration had greatly piqued the curiosity of the general public.

And the first prison he would start with was the central prison placed in the capital Aesir itself.

At the time of noon, Kahn and his entourage of royal guards descended from their warship in the middle of this 10 kilometer wide prison which facilitated more than 20 thousand prisoners. And this wasn't even the biggest prison settlement in the Verlassen fiefdom either.

Other prisons that were made hundreds of years ago, housed 10 times the numbers while keeping all these criminals away from the general population. So Kahn started with the closest one and soon, he planned to visit all of them one by one.

After he exited the warship, Kahn was greeted by the prison management and the main head who was a beginner rank grandmaster halberd warrior.

One thing Kahn had noticed so far was that despite there being a great need of high-ranked warriors, the Verlassen mountain range that was now the Verlassen Fiefdom had a limited number of semi-saints and grandmaster rank warriors as if the government itself didn't want to provide it a helping hand.

Behind Kahn, a long batch of hundreds of soldiers dressed in gray armors walked in a disciplined manner. In their hands, were wooden crates.

Soon, the total number of soldiers piled to a thousand and even the jailor and the management people felt a sense of dread as if a war was about to happen here.

Soon, everyone kneeled in front of Kahn and introduced themselves. Kahn on the other end asked them about the functionality of the prison and started a discussion of his own.

"Tell me.. How are you managing it? Are the funds allotted to you are enough?" he asked the jailer.

The next second, however... the beginner rank grandmaster snakekin had an aghast expression as if he didn't dare to answer the question.

"Don't worry. You have nothing to fear about. You're under my protection." spoke Kahn as he affirmed the jailor who seemed conflicted.

"To be honest, my lord. On the record.. We have millions of gold coins in the annual budget to use for maintaining our prison. But in reality... we haven't even been receiving one-third of it every year from decades.

Yet the documentation is always filed with the full amount mentioned. I dare not point fingers at anyone but.. But those who tried to expose this matter before me all disappeared.

So I couldn't dare to speak about it... before you came." revealed the snakekin with honesty.

He too was one of Kahn's supporters and after hearing Kahn's moving speech yesterday.. He dared to come forth with the truth.

Kahn nodded and understood the situation.

"Mister Rotich!" called out Kahn.

Soon, a green thrall dressed in aristocratic clothes ran towards them and stood straight in front of him.

This was one of the people who were in charge of informing Kahn about the happenings of the fiefdom since he was new.

"How much of our annual budget is spent on managing all the prisons in Verlassen?" asked Kahn with a serious tone.

"My lord, more than 20% of the annual income is spent on the management of these prisons throughout the Verlassen mountain range in hundreds of cities.

If I'm not wrong, it's nearly 200 billion gold coins every year." spoke the thrall.

"That much?.. Yet why aren't they receiving the funds?" asked Kahn.

Because despite that much allotted money, the situation here seemed worse and didn't appear like the prison was well maintained given the sheer number of people it housed.

The prison labor wasn't enough to fill the cracks in the walls if they didn't have enough money to buy the construction materials at all.

"My lord.. That's.. That's.. In the hands of ministry of finance." he spoke with a shuddering voice.

"I see. Those bastards not only sent the scums of society to live here.. They use these folks to swindle money in the name of managing these prisons.

If not for me taking charge here.. No one would've found out either." spoke Kahn in an exasperated tone.

There seemed to be no end to the scams and money embezzling in this region of the empire.

"My lord.. The situation is even worse in other major prisons. We receive at least that much because this prison is situated in the capital.

Compared to this.. Other places that house more criminals don't receive enough money.

Every year, there are plenty of cases when those prisoners escape because of worn down constructions and not enough men to stop them." revealed the snakekin again.

Kahn clenched his fist in anger after hearing this fact. Because these prisoners were mostly filled with rapists, murderous and some who even did acts such as cannibalism.

Yet to risk the lives of common people because of their greed was something he found as crossing the limit.

"I see. Well, I will soon take care of it. But first.. Gather around all the prisoners in the main grounds and arrange a podium where I can speak with them all at once." commanded Kahn in his gray general-like attire.

"Yes, my lord." spoke the snakekin jailer and left to make the arrangements.

Kahn looked at the open ground with his eyes full of wrath and spoke in a grim voice.

"Let's see how many of these sinners are useful."

Chapter 328 - Left And Right

ONE HOUR LATER

Kahn stood in the center of a podium arranged at one end of this 4 kilometer long ground where more than 20 thousand prisoners were gathered and surrounded by nearly four thousand armed guards, a thousand on all four sides.

On Kahn's left side, a thousand soldiers in gray armor, whose origin was unknown to everyone even now stood with the wooden crates on their hands.

Using a sound amplifying artifact, Kahn spoke to all the inmates who were fed and sheltered using the taxpayer's money despite deserving to die in a cold night.

"Inmates of the Riker Prison, my name is Kahn Salvatore. Some of you might have heard of me recently. As for those who didn't.. Let me formally introduce myself." spoke Kahn as if he was a politician who came here to do some charity work.

"I am someone who is now the Sovereign of the Verlassen mountain range. Now it has been declared as my fiefdom so in other words, I'm its rightful ruler." he explained.

"Today... I came here to meet all of you despite being very tight on my schedule.

To offer you a godsend opportunity." spoke Kahn in a vehement tone.

"Soon, you all will be sent to different borders of the fiefdom, enlisted in the military and forced to fight against the yearly monster tide without proper training or weapons.

Well.. Dying such a useless death is indeed befitting for low pieces of shit like you people.. But I'm a magnanimous lord who cares even for the worst of the people in my rule.

So I will give you two choices." spoke Kahn after berating the thousands of people in front of him, instantly garnering their hatred.

"On your left, there are blood-bind contracts held by my people.

The terms are that you will willingly follow me till your dying moments and accept whatever orders I give to you. Whether it's fighting against a monster tide or guarding my backyard. You will have no free choice or any form of freedom whatsoever.

In other words.. This is a Slave Contract." revealed Kahn in a happy tone as if he was doing a kindness to these people.

These blood-bind contracts were something Kahn bought with his own money and he had to spend 200 million gold coins from his own pockets. And these weren't even the ten percent of what he brought from the capital.

"I will personally see to it that you're all well-fed, well-armed and trained so that you don't die in vain... although none of you deserve a good death anyway.

So if you like my kind and generous offer, go to your left and complete the blood-binding ritual.

However, if you don't want to accept my offer and still go through old methods where your fate is uncertain, you can stand on the right side." He spoke as both his hands spread to two different sides.

The expression on his face seemed like he was doing a great service to these criminally insane prisoners.

"Pfft! What the fuck did I just hear?" laughed dozens of prisoners after Kahn's sudden offer.

"Who the hell does this kid think he is? Lord my ass!"

"He thinks he's some hot shit because he is made the ruler of this place. How about giving me a weapon?.. I'll show him who's the boss!" exclaimed one of the tall and burly wolfkin inmates.

Soon, thousands of the prisoners started laughing at Kahn as if they were looking at a fool.

And despite a minute passed... not a single one of them moved towards the soldiers holding the crates.

"Airshh... So many ungrateful people." spoke Kahn with an expression as if he was somehow wronged.

"Aren't I being kind to these people already? Don't you think so, mister Rotich?" asked Kahn to the middle-aged man.

To his question.. The middle-aged man only had a complicated reaction..

"You are, my lord. Just that some people don't know how to see what's good for them." replied Rotich with an awkward expression.

"I guess I have no choice but to help them open their eyes." spoke Kahn and let out a long sigh.

But the very next moment... his eyes turned furious and a loud burst of black and red aura exploded out of his body.

Shockwaves of fierce wind shook all the people around him as their clothes fluttered from the outburst of Kahn's aura.

Unlike the people from prison's management or the soldiers who came with Kahn.. All the prisoners amassed in this 4 kilometers long ground felt like a monster was standing right in front of them.

And before anyone of them could get the gist of the things.. Kahn summoned Lucifer and threw it high in the air.

In the following moments, hundred aura swords appeared that were made from five different elements and quickly coalesced around the black greatsword with crimson vein patterns on the blade.

And in just 20 seconds.. A 250 meters long ginormous sword formed in the air that leaked the mix of different elements from it.

"Dragon Strike!"

Kahn shouted and launched his biggest single-strike attack in the middle of the open ground.

BOOM!!

An ear-deafening explosion occurred and shook the entire open ground as hundreds of long and deep crevices formed in the middle of this ground. Hundreds of prisoners were flung in the air and fell on the sides.

Shocked! Let it be the prison management or the prisoners who barely managed to stand up after this loud and ground-shattering strike had a shocked and scared expression.

With just a single strike.. Kahn killed more than 2,000 of these criminals made of rapists and murderers. Their mangled, shredded and torn up bodies dying the ground red with a pool of blood.

The very next second, Kahn's image flickered and he appeared right in the center of the crowd and activated war dominance albeit very weakly. But enough to scare them out of their wits.

"I hear that you fuckers have been creating a lot of noise lately.

Beating up the guards, killing other inmates for fun and trying to escape from time to time.

I feel bad for them, you know.

So I think it's better to lessen their burden a bit." said Kahn with a disheartened expression on his face.

He looked at the jailer and spoke loudly.

"Don't you think it'll be good if I decrease the numbers? After all, the lesser people you have to look after.. The easier it is to manage the prison, right?" asked Kahn to the snakekin.

In response.. The beginner grandmaster snakekin nodded and spoke in a merry voice.

"Excellent idea, my lord. I wonder why I did not think of this myself." he said and let out a chuckle.

Kahn's gaze then shifted to all the people looking at him as he turned his head around and looked around the thousands of scared prisoners who were trying to run away from him to save their lives.

"Now then.." spoke Kahn and gave a menacing look to everyone around. His words then resounded in the whole open group as he asked in a deathly voice..

"Who wants to reconsider their choice?"

Chapter 329 - Enjoying The Chaos

In the midst of mangled and shredded flesh, Kahn stood at the center of the open ground of this prison. His wrathful figure and grim tone appeared like an apostle of death to all the prisoners.

After Kahn's sudden killing of the prisoners, everyone including the normal guards was on high alert. But after their head himself aligned with their sovereign, they all felt relieved.

However, the atmosphere was still grim because none of them had expected Kahn to suddenly outright kill these many people.

"Oye, you bastards. You still don't seem to understand.

When I say that I'm the new ruler of this fiefdom.. Means I'm the law itself.

Unlike before.. The government won't be protecting your lives to fill the numbers in the military. Here, if I willed it.. I can kill every single one of you whenever I please.

Why do you think I came to visit this place instead of going to normal ones where other criminals are kept?

People like you who have destroyed millions of lives and their families and don't deserve to be spared but at least I'm giving you a chance to repent.

It's far bigger kindness than fuckers like you would ever deserve. So shut the fuck up and sign the contract!

Or you know the consequences." declared Kahn

Soon, all of the people came to understand that they never had a choice, to begin with. Those who would not choose Kahn as their new master would be killed regardless of their opinions right here.

And the only way to stay alive and live to see the sun tomorrow was by going through the blood-binding ritual and leaving their fates in the hands of this murderous tyrant.

"Oh, by the way.. There are only 15 thousand contracts. I will kill the remaining ones who did not complete the ritual. Haha!" spoke Kahn and?chuckled like a psycho.

The very next seconds, thousands of the inmates ran towards the dormant soldiers who held the contracts and started their rituals like a flock of birds.

None of them wanted to be the last guy and join their former inmates in the journey to the afterlife.

A fight between the inmates started as they tried to grab the contracts and complete the ritual as fast as they could.

Soon, it created another outbreak and caused a bloodbath amongst the prisoners but instead of meddling in.. Kahn sat on a chair and enjoyed the chaos with a sinister laugh... completely opposite of the image of a kind and worthy sovereign who was just and righteous.

"Ha ha ha! Master is getting creative these days. I love it!" spoke Ceril with an exhilarated face as he enjoyed death and merciless killings the most.

In reality, Kahn had more than enough contracts.. But he just wanted to see whether his choice about choosing these monsters living in the society was actually what he thought or he made a bad call.

But after watching the whole fiasco in front of him, his resolve was affirmed furthermore. That he did not make a wrong choice. If put in the army, these bastards would've made the same choice and caused chaos in their ranks when it came to fight the monster tide.

"Where are the female prisoners?" asked Kahn to the snakekin jailer.

"They're kept in a different facility very far from here.

But my lord.. Is it appropriate to use them as well?" asked the beginner grandmaster.

"Don't look down on women. They can be great spies and informants. And then can infiltrate places where men can never reach.

I won't leave them out because they're also precious assets. After all, I treat everyone fairly in my fiefdom. Regardless of their species or gender." spoke Kahn as he patted on the jailer's shoulder.

After 3 hours passed, all of the remaining prisoners had successfully completed their contracts and chose to become Kahn's slaves in the hopes of living longer.

Yawn!

Now only 17 thousand remained as the chaos from before took another thousand lives. Yet there was no hint of remorse or sadness on Kahn's face. Instead, he yawned in boredom.

Kahn's loud voice filled the wide prison grounds again as he declared his final orders.

"All of you will follow the rules here and wait for my call.

If any of you try to create a scene, I grant the prison management the authority to kill you on the spot.

Soon, my people will come here to shift you to a different base. So stay cooped up and enjoy a comfortable rest.

Because after that.. The real hell will begin!"

Announced Kahn and looked at the jailer as well as the rest of the people from the prison management.

"I will look into this matter and soon I will be sending my people with enough money." promised Kahn.

On the same day, Kahn traveled to the 2 nearby cities to the capital and repeated the same procedure of enslaving these prisoners in different prisons.

It wasn't that the government couldn't think of this plan..

It's just that they needed a lot of money for this blood-bind method which they couldn't justify in the budget.

Kahn was spending his own money instead of looking for available funds because if he waited for the government's support, he would have to wait a long time to get simple things done.

In the evening, Kahn and the company returned to their castle and following him, the thousand soldiers also entered the castle.

"Make arrangements for their accommodations. Soon, the next batch will also come." ordered Kahn to Ronin.

In fact, these were some of the most skilled fighters from the seven deadly sins, Kahn's own underworld criminal organization.

He had reasons of his own to call them all here.

At midnight, he held another meeting with all the subordinates.

"What's next, my lord?" asked Ceril, the mage subordinate.

He had a happy expression as of now because Kahn had ordered their people to bring the dead bodies of those prisoners who died in the outbreak and later, Kahn handed down all the space rings to Ceril that held these bodies inside them.

"We will be visiting a particular site."

Kahn revealed their next step as he gave the dark summoner subordinate a coy smirk and spoke.

"Someplace where you'd feel like home."

Chapter 330 - Meeting Of The Elites

After yesterday's events, news spread across the fiefdom in hundreds of big and important cities about Kahn, their new sovereign's activities. That when he visited some of the prisons that facilitated the criminals sent from throughout the empire, he uncovered a big scam.

That how the previous ruling government and officials had embezzled the money from the annual budget that was allotted to the prison management and put most of it in their own pockets.

The ministers and officials in charge were now under surveillance and being questioned by the authorities that were newly formed by the new ruler.

This revelation shook many of the normal citizens as well as people working in government sectors such as the ministry of finance. Many of the officials were now under custody and were brought in for questioning. As of now, nearly 40 people were arrested and many others were under the judiciary's surveillance.

Although it looked like Kahn was acting too quickly but in reality, these were the people whom his assassins had gathered the evidence against.

After he put more than 40 assassins in every one of these ministers and officials on the very first day of his arrival in Aesir after he conducted a meeting in the castle... these subordinates of Kahn spread and mixed into the shadows of the others who worked in these departments and played a part in embezzling money and malpractice.

And under the pretense of revealing the scam related to the money embezzlement of the prison management budget, Kahn and his own militia in gray armors started seizing the documents and records of these officials and brought them into custody.

They already knew where to look so it was going to be a smooth ride for him. And soon, he would go after the others who also had these assassins planted in their shadows as soon as they gathered enough evidence.

In a way, this was also his declaration that he wasn't going to stand the old management in the eyes of the elites and powerful. And this was just the beginning.

Unlike the capital Rathna, where Kahn was a nobody with no actual authority or power against the government or the noble factions.. Here, he was the one being who everyone had to answer to.

At the time of the noon, there was a secret meeting held amongst the top conglomerates and government officials who had ruled over this region from decades and now decides to come together and joined hands against a common enemy.

In a grand meeting hall, over a hundred nobles, military officers and aristocrats sat across each other and loudly discussed amongst themselves.

"Is he out of his mind?! Does he thinks we're nobodies?" spoke a blue demonkin noble in an enraged tone.

"How the hell did he find out about that much inside information so soon? He's been here only for two days?!" asked a dwarven conglomerate in a worried tone.

"That's not the issue... we need to think about how to a way to tackle this? What did the three?main headquarters say?" asked a foxkin minister from the pureblood faction.

At the middle of this meeting hall, was a tall and grizzly bearkin who seemed to be one of the strongest people present in the room.

"We have relayed this information to the capital. But they're saying that we should stay silent for now. It's too early to act against him." spoke the bearkin in a solemn tone.

Just then, a middle-aged vampire spoke...

"Easy for you to say, Commander Aswala. Unlike you, we don't have any backing from the capital or the military.

Given your position, he might not even do anything to you. But it's not the same case for us. We don't even have a semi-saint on our side.

If he and his force of those gray armored bastards were to barge through our doors tomorrow, we can't even put up a resistance of any sorts!" shouted a dwarven businessman in a discontent tone.

At this moment, there were 3 semi-saints present in this meeting hall, and the one in the middle was none other than the semi-saint Kahn had warned on his first day.

"That's not the main problem here.." spoke the bearkin and looked around the hundreds of top figureheads around him.

"Don't you think he's moving too quickly?

Neither does he wants to become an ally nor wants our support to rule this fiefdom. He deliberately wants to become our enemy and make us stand against him.

Unlike how we expected him beg for our support or take a month or two just to understand how to rule this region... He's acting like he's done this before.

He knows where to strike first and on the day of his arrival, he already claimed to know who made what kind of scam and did what kind of crimes.

For someone without any background or experience in ruling... he seems to be well versed in this field.

And I'm afraid this isn't even his main card. The Ministry of Finance was just a provocation. Soon, I think he will hit other departments of the ministry and various military sites." spoke commander Aswala.

At his declaration... all the other people present had an aghast expression. They too understood that this was nothing but the first step and there was more to come in the future.

After his warring words.. Some of the noblemen and officials looked at each other and nodded in unison.

A lionkin semi-saint, one of the people who was present on the day of the meeting and belonged to the Neutral Faction stood up and spoke in a grim tone.

"How about we all work together and use our influence and connections to tarnish his name and spread rumors that he's doing this out of jealousy and wants to seize full control of the fiefdom to establish laws that would only benefit him?" proposed the lionkin.

Facepalm!

The bearkin facepalmed himself and spoke in an irritated tone.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?! Haven't you realized that things have changed from the day of his arrival?"

Everyone already knows that whoever throws stones at him first..." spoke the bearkin in an exasperated tone.

Many nodded at his words as they understood what the bearkin was about to say.

"Will become his biggest target!"