

Darkness 621

Chapter 621 The Perpetrators

The fifth and the final round began under the discerning eyes of all the population of the Vulcan empire. The powerful, rich, poor and middle class... all of them paid their full attention to this last bout of skills that would decide the final victor of this duel.

At this moment, Helsi is under extreme stress as he was still unable to accept the fact that Kahn, who trained under Throk was already a Saint Blacksmith in just a year and half. This revelation by his opponent was simply too mind-boggling.

Kahn made sure that his words were heard by no one else than Helsi so even the judges were still under the impression that both the challengers were of equal rank.

[How did this happen? This is impossible!

I have been training in this craft for more than 37 years and even I am only a semi-saint blacksmith.

What kind of freak is Kahn? He clearly wasn't even a saint when I first met him that day.] he kept questioning himself again and again over and over because he just couldn't wrap his head around this information.

What did it mean if Kahn was a Saint Blacksmith?

Wouldn't it be enough for Kahn to win the final round as well?

And what would happen to Helsi if he lost?

The entire dwarven race and all the people of the empire were looking at him as their representative and fully supported him since the first round.

But if he lost this duel? His entire life would be completely destroyed as a result. A dwarf blacksmith who lost to a human in a duel... he would be the first one to shame all his ancestors in the history of this empire.

On top of it... he joined Tawerik and had plenty of people who invested in his training. He had made a lot of connections in the past one and half year, something that Throk hadn't been able to offer.

Thus, he also had a lot to lose compared to Kahn and seeing that his loss was eminent... Helsi was extremely nervous to the point he couldn't even hold his hammer without his hands shaking constantly.

But unbeknownst to him... there were billions of people who were in a similar situation as him. Even in the colosseum, no one is even dared to breathe loudly, cheer for the dwarf or even discuss anything among themselves.

This created a huge mental pressure on people who were eagerly waiting for Kahn's loss, wanting to feel good about themselves and had the halo of superiority compared to the human race.

The nobles, the fireborne clan members, the dwarven race people... Even Tawerik and his people; everything had completely quieted down at this point.

Because if Kahn won the last round... then Tawerik will lose the company and everything he built over the past 100 years of his career in this trade.

Throk only had his company to lose.

But Tawerik had an entire corporation that not only made weapons but traded in many other sectors. He had 100 times more wealth and influence to lose than Throk.

And now all of it was risked because of his overconfidence and just because he wanted to destroy his long-time rival blacksmith.

[Alright then... let's start!] Kahn suddenly stopped forging and walked into the middle of the arena.

"I have a favor to ask to the judges." spoke Kahn loudly, his voice instantly echoing in the colosseum.

"What is it?" asked master Druvagar.

Without wasting a second, Kahn looked at Helsi and pointed his left forefinger at him...

"Let me switch positions with him."

The entire audience had their mouths agape and even the judges were bamboozled after Kahn made this request. No one had any idea why he wanted to switch places with his opponent.

"No!" suddenly, Tawerik shouted. And at this moment, Kahn's subordinates also noticed 6 more surprised faces who seemed to be aware of the fact that he was given trash quality materials.

Out of the 6 other people, five belonged to none other than the High Elders dwarven council.

[It was like that. Tawerik must have made some inside deal or the Dwarven Council itself wanted me to lose.

Given the fact that they're one of the organizers... they fully had control over the forging materials given to both of us.] thought Kahn.

He had finally found out the main perpetrators. Although it was the first place he should've looked... Kahn's plan was more elaborate and diabolical than just saying the duel was rigged.

Kahn already predicted that it could be Tawerik who could be behind it. But the High Elders of the Dwarven Council also being involved was unexpected.

Nevertheless, till this very round... he had already set a perfect trap for the main culprits regardless of who they were and now... it was time to expose them in front of the whole empire.

Kahn didn't care if it was Tawerik or the whole fucking Dwarven Council.

He was already well experienced in screwing over authority since his time in Rakos Empire. And he still remembered one of his mottos in this new life.

That he will not mess with random innocent passersby. But if someone threw stones at him...

He'd throw a fucking mountain on them!

Since these people were trying to screw him over for their personal gains... he would fuck over them ten times more. And boy Kahn was a very vengeful man.

All of these thoughts only took a second in real-time and Kahn formed another strategy on the spot.

Because he was fully capable of dealing with Tawerik and the Dwarven Council as per his previous plans.

But the biggest surprise that he didn't expect in the slightest was the identity of the 7th culprit.

Never had he thought that this person would also have joined hands with the people who wanted to see him fail and Throk lose his company. And the final main culprit was none other than...

Hector Hos Sigfreed, the First Prince.

Chapter 622 According to Plan

While everyone around him was befuddled, Kahn was inwardly happy because finally, he unveiled all the culprits after his subordinates finally noticed the changes in their faces as soon as he asked to swap positions with Helsi.

Unlike others, these seven people didn't have an expression of surprise but extreme worry since their interests were at stake. Their aghast expressions gave away their involvement in providing Kahn with trash-quality materials.

If Kahn had been hasty, he wouldn't have even been able to find the real culprits. And the biggest one of them all he hadn't even expected.

The first prince Hector was also part of this scheme for some reason.

Kahn quickly racked up his brain and deduced some possible reasons that could've caused the first prince, who was also one of his master's backers to take part in this ploy.

[Don't tell me... he...] thought Kahn and looked towards Throk sitting under a pavilion.

Normal people wouldn't understand the long game. But Kahn certainly did after weighing the benefits Hector could achieve in case Kahn lost the blacksmithing duel.

If he lost, Throk would lose the company and all his assets would be gone as per the bet they made. It was already common knowledge to the whole Vulcan empire at this point.

And because of Kahn's actions a year and a half ago when they orchestrated a plan to take out Rogis, the Second Prince who was now locked up in a cell... allegedly. It involved getting Hector and Venessa backing Throk and becoming his official sponsors.

Just having a Saint Blacksmith at his disposal had already cemented his follower base and helped him gain tremendous support from influential people around the empire.

Hector had already seen through the merits of having a saint blacksmith associated with his force. And in case Kahn lost... Throk would be penniless soon and then won't be able to recover the same level of respect in the field or create another company anytime soon.

Later, Hector could simply extend a helping hand and make Throk work for him instead with the promise of riches or helping him in restoring his lost reputation.

And through planning and schemes, he'd be able to put Throk under his thumb, making him one of his pawns in a few years.

This was the only plausible reason that could explain why someone like the first prince had gotten involved in petty espionage.

Why was Kahn so adamant about this being the main reason?

Because if Kahn was in Hector's position...

He would've done the same.

But before the judges could ask more questions, Kahn quickly turned his gaze and walked towards the direction of a particular person sitting on the platform above the seats for the judges.

Kahn stood in front of the Pope himself and quickly kneeled as he pleaded.

"Your holiness... Only you can bring me justice." he spoke in the voice of a man who had been greatly wronged.

"What do you mean?" asked Demiurge, the pope who was slightly taken aback after being brought into the limelight.

At this moment, Kahn went to the Pope because they were also the part organizers of the duel. But the culprits were Tawerik, the Dwarven Council and the First Prince.

Among all the people present here, the only person who had authority and prestige above them was the Pope himself.

The Dwarven Council had no authority over the people other than the dwarven race while the imperial prince couldn't do anything other than exerting some authority using the imperial clan because of his heritage.

In the Vulcan empire, because of its religious structure, the Pope was only below the Emperor.

Kahn already knew that the Church had nothing to do with this, so they were the best choice to use as a shield and an axe to deal the final blow on his behalf.

"The materials I received in this round have been tampered with." said Kahn in an obedient tone.

"Lies! This human is lying!" suddenly, one of the high elders burst out in rage. Kahn laughed hysterically in his mind Freewebnovel.com.

"This is a big accusation, young man. You better not be messing with us!" said another one of the high elders.

"Prove it." said the Pope with a stern gaze. As if he had no time to spare for any of these small quarrels and had to go somewhere important.

Kahn simply walked towards his end and threw down the container of materials that he was given for this round.

"If the judges would be so kind." said Kahn and looked at the Trinity.

The saint blacksmiths didn't waste another moment and quickly used their auras and senses to quickly check the materials.

Druvagar simply pulled the materials and crushed a few metal ores with his bare hands.

Ivaldi and Fili did the same with the samples and used their respective methods to check their quality.

"These materials have been adulterated. Too many low quality ores have been mixed. Completely unsuitable for forging!" spoke master Fili as he used his saint pressure and turned a block of metals and ores into dust within a few seconds.

Soon, an argument started from the dwarven council and Tawerik's side that it might have happened by mistake for this round.

[Bingo!] said Kahn inwardly and right in front of the whole empire that was watching this current predicament... he walked towards his forging and assembly table.

"Then what about these?" loudly asked Kahn.

One by one, he took out four objects and placed them in front of the tables.

Gasp!

Shock!

The High Elders of the Dwarven Council, Tawerik and his people and even Hector had grim expressions.

Because what Kahn presented in front of the judges at this moment were...

The materials from the first four rounds!

Kahn purposely said that the materials were tampered with for the last round only when he pleased the Pope, knowing that the Dwarven Council would use the most obvious excuse first.

Ivaldi, Druvagar and Fili didn't spare another moment and quickly assessed the quality of these materials too. And instantly, their faces turned furious.

Kahn on the other hand gave a smirk towards Tawerik whose forehead was full of sweat already. This final move was something he already planned ahead.

Because of his meticulous planning from the very first round, all of the conspirators had fallen into his trap.

And now he was awaiting on the most crucial part of the plan that he was expecting...

The Results.

Chapter 623 Final Result

At this moment, everyone in the empire was clearly aware of how the whole duel was a setup in order to make Kahn lose. And the sanctity of this ancient tradition of the dwarven blacksmiths was now thrown out of the window to achieve that goal.

With this, the whole truth was revealed, many people had eyes full of disbelief and everyone became certain of one thing...

The entire Blacksmithing Duel was compromised and the culprit was... The Dwarven Council.

And the victim of this ploy aka Kahn Salvatore was actually the one who goaded and exposed it by himself.

Kahn planned everything since the first round.

He lost it on purpose to make the culprits think that he couldn't differentiate between poor materials and good ones...

In 2nd, he won by a big margin as he leveled up his crafted weapon by a whole rank; evidently making them anxious and thus, he received another batch of trash materials.

In the 3rd round, he used Mineral Transmutation to break down the scythe from the inside after he successfully forged it.

At this point, Helsi had 2 wins already. And like greedy foxes who wanted to benefit the earliest... The conspirators sent another batch to confirm that Helsi won the fourth round.

But in the fourth round, Kahn made a Quasi-Legendary rank weapon by using all of his trump cards and gifts. Making the score 2-2.

And because of this result, he subconsciously forced the council to send another set of trash materials for the final round. Because now, they had no choice due to Kahn's capabilities he already displayed and Tawerik, High Elders and Hector were simply afraid to see all their plans failing in the end.

And finally, Kahn used those materials and previously gathered samples to expose them in front of the whole empire.

BOOM!!

At this moment, the judges released their full saint pressure and spoke in an infuriated voice.

"The most sacred rules of the blacksmithing duel that have been practiced since ancient times have been broken." said Ivaldi.

"An unfavorable situation created for a particular challenger in the duel so that he'd lose... It's a great crime against the rules of the blacksmithing profession." spoke Druvagar with a look of disgust visible on his countenance.

"This conduct during this duel has committed the great taboo against the laws of our ancestors and the dwarven race." said Fili as he was barely holding in his anger.

Despite their differing personalities and set of beliefs, all the judges shared one thing in common. And that was respecting the laws and traditions of the blacksmithing craft that were passed on by their ancestors since the empire itself was founded.

And now, all three of the judges were thoroughly infuriated after seeing how rules were broken and the whole duel was nothing but a sham.

"As per the rules in case a duel has been tainted..." spoke Ivaldi and the rest of the judges joined together as their loud voices echoed in the entire empire through the projection screens.

"The Blacksmithing Duel has been forfeited!"

An atmosphere of chaos formed over the empire and among the audience. Every class of citizens went into an uproar and many questions were raised by the spectators.

But to many, it was already evident that the duel was nothing but a sham so nobody tried to go against this decision.

As for the perpetrators... It was the Dwarven Council who was in charge of providing the crafting materials and also the High Elders just tried to shirk away the responsibility, saying that it happened only by mistake for the final round.

Unlike the Judges, the high elders of the dwarven council weren't blacksmiths. They did not follow the creed of competing with skills. Thus, they sabotaged the whole thing to make Kahn lose miserably before the competition even began.

Thud!

Helsi dropped on his knees, his entire being completely shocked and his eyes wide open in disbelief.

Because if the duel was rigged from the beginning... that also meant he didn't win those two rounds because of his skills but because Kahn's materials were of low quality, making his crafted weapons turning inferior to his.

"No... I cannot accept this! I will not accept this!"

This can't end up as a draw! I didn't even win those two rounds with my own abilities.

All of my achievements... they weren't because I was better but because Kahn was dealt with a disadvantage." said Helsi.

His voice was loud enough for everyone to hear it clearly.

His current state of denial showed Kahn that Helsi was a blacksmith with pride and had a moral code even as his competitor.

But he was unaware of how his new mentor aka Bifur Tawerik was a devious person who would do anything to win even if it meant discarding their honor.

Forget feeling angry... many felt pity for Helsi at this point. Because his name was also dragged into the mud because of the acts of the dwarven council.

At this moment, even the Pope is also looking at the High Elders without hiding his scornful expression.

Did Demiurges care about the competition being rigged?

Hell no!

But on the surface, the Church of Hetrax supported Throk and thus, he had to show this expression of disdain on his face.

In his eyes, he cared only about their own image but since he was appearing on a live broadcast, he had to maintain his just and righteous persona.

In another scenario, he might have as well joined the whole arrangement to deepen the ties between the church and council for the sake of mutual benefits.

"I agree with the decision made by the three judges. The duel has been forfeited.

As for the matters of rigging the duel... the Church and Imperial clan will soon set up an investigation committee. And we will find the true culprits and every single person involved.

They will be severely punished by our laws.

That I promise you in the name of our great god Hetrax!" declared the Pope in front of the audience and the people of the empire.

On the surface, his face was oozing law and righteousness. But in reality, he had other plans. Because Kahn just now gave him the best tool...

To control the Dwarven Council.

Chapter 624 Real Motive

Although the Pope talked big about punishing the guilty party... given the position, influence and power held by the Dwarven Council in their empire... He knew that taking any drastic measures against them would do more harm than good.

But this also meant who could get them out of their predicament and put a leash on them. As for the matter of rigging the duel...

Who the hell cared if one man or an entire human race was conspired against? Their opinion didn't matter to the church or any ruling authority.

But this newfound information also gave him a lot of opportunities.

In reality, Kahn had just presented him with an excuse to suppress the council because after this incident, the High Elders would need a lot of help in correcting their public image.

And who better to help them spread lies and reform a person's image in society and on the common populace other than a religious institution that had great importance in their culture?

[Good. They will have no choice but to side with us soon.] thought Demiurges.

Meanwhile, many people including the famous dwarven blacksmiths and elven artificers felt dread and fear towards Kahn.

Because this man was too exceptional. All of his achievements happened in such a short time and it was simply too stupefying even if he was trained by a saint blacksmith.

If not for the faulty materials... Kahn would've easily won this duel.

Some people who did not hold anything against the human race as they only valued skills and achievements in their craft openly started praising Kahn for his attainment.

Some said that he was unlucky and would've officially won the duel, etching his name in the history of their empire as he'd be the first human to ever win a blacksmithing duel against a dwarf.

As for the Blacksmithing Duel being forfeited...

It was exactly what Kahn wanted.

While the duel was nulled and many people were greatly disappointed and some even inwardly happy as they feared a human winning the duel... the human challenger was dancing in joy in his head.

Kahn already knew of the rules and the duel getting canceled seemed the best way for him to benefit from all sides.

Because him competing in this duel was due to his intentions to save Throk.

He did it to protect his future prospects in the empire and also not gain unnecessary attention. If Kahn won... there would be too much trouble coming his way instead.

Both Kahn and Throk had no interest in Tawerik's company because his identity as a human would always be a problem even if he won.

Kahn only wanted to protect his assets and that was Throk Oakenshield's weapon forging company where he had a lot of authority and controlled the flow of money.

He wasn't a fool to get mixed into high stakes after several years of experience at this point.

In the Rakos Empire when Kahn won the Emperor's Chosen competition... he risked it all because he was going to get a goddamn fiefdom for himself. A very fitting and tremendously helpful place he needed for the future growth. If the circumstances with the Tablet of Arcana hadn't forced him to flee... he would have had a smooth sail in Rakos Empire till he became a 6th stage saint.

But in the Vulcan empire... the whole battle of skills was only to protect Throk's reputation and his company. Any more than that would become a huge liability.

Nevertheless, screwing over the Dwarven Council and Tawerik was also important at the same time. Because it would deter them from causing trouble for him or Throk later.

And with the duel nulled, the contract would be voided as it could also be considered a draw. Helping Kahn achieve a peaceful life while giving him time to grow quietly. This was the best outcome for Kahn in every way.

As for representing the Human race or improving their position in this empire's social structure...

Kahn couldn't give two shits about it at this point.

Throughout the duel rounds, many humans cursed Kahn and flung up profanities whenever he lost. Many people saying that he would doom whatever reputation they regained after the imperial decree.

Little did they know... that it was this very man whose actions led to Rogis being exposed, the imperial court taking drastic measures and finally, the Emperor being forced to lift the restrictions on the human race to quell protect the image of his reign and the pride of the imperial clan.

If not for Kahn, they'd still be treated like animals in a slaughterhouse before he came to this empire.

But Kahn also didn't want to get into unnecessary trouble.

He was neither a Hero of Justice nor a Revolutionary.

And even if he wasn't a human... It was the same regardless of the species. The sense of popularity and fame worked very similarly to earth.

You were a Hero when you won the battle or you were a pathetic loser who would be scorned even by your own family when you lost.

Kahn had already experienced that first-hand in his previous life since his parents were the prime example of this mentality. So he was well aware of this nature of people no matter what part of the world they came from or where they stood in society.

So because of this result... Kahn would save his assets, hold even a bigger influence by showcasing his skills as a blacksmith and not piss off the wrong people in order to maintain his background.

After many proclamations by the Pope... the matter was finally settled and this empire-wide event finally ended.

[It's time.] said the Pope as he signaled his allies and vanished from the colosseum.

While people were leaving the colosseum, Kahn was having a chat with Throk in a room as they too prepared to leave.

Just then... a brown bearded dwarf walked through the door, standing in front of him and Throk.

Thud!

This dwarf suddenly knelt on the ground. His expression was full of loss and helplessness.

"I'm sorry master... I... I... I failed you."

Spoke the dwarf whose eyes had tears welled up as he spoke in a stuttering tone because his heart was heavy with guilt.

This dwarf with a haggard and miserable face was none other than...

Helsi.

Chapter 625 The Retribution

Throk and Kahn faced Helsi who had a miserable and crestfallen look on his face. Based on their senses as Saints, they already noticed his presence but didn't show any hostility on their faces.

"And why are you here?" asked Throk in a serious voice.

"I... just found out that it was master Tawerik who messed with the duel by joining hands with the High Elders.

I had a big argument with him and now... I have left his tutelage." spoke Helsi with a guilty expression.

"And? Now that your new master has thrown you out like a dog, you want to return to my master?" asked Kahn with a suspicious gaze.

"No... it's not that. I just wanted to explain things with the master first. About why I left back then." he said.

"Shut it! I don't want to hear anything. All I know is that you betrayed me right when I needed you the most. And now you think that making some excuse will make me forgive you?!" shouted Throk as his blood boiled in rage after remembering those moments.

When he was dealt with a low blow, even his most trusted disciple from the past 3 decades abandoned him and joined the enemy side. This was a memory that was etched in his mind.

"No... I'm not deserving of your forgiveness." Helsi looked up while still kneeling on the floor, two big teardrops poured down on his cheeks.

Soon, Helsi started citing his end of the story and explained why he did what he did.

To summarize... Helsi was a talented blacksmith even before Throk took him in as one of his disciples.

He had his aspirations, his talent came through a lot of hard work. He lived and breathed for this craft, unlike others who only wanted fame and make riches out of it.

Under Throk's mentoring, his talent reached a whole new level and soon, Throk became an idol for him in many ways and Helsi wished to even surpass Throk one day. But after Throk's beef with Rogis happened... It also scared him to his core.

Even someone like Rogis couldn't kill Throk because he was a famous person in the empire. But what about innocent bystanders like him who lacked both strength and standing?

He was a common citizen with no connections or backing. A blacksmith with no skills or abilities to fight against someone. Hell, he couldn't even protect himself.

People like Helsi often died as a medium to set an example or collateral damage in the feuds of the powerful. On top of it, Helsi had to look after his parents, his wife and children. He wasn't someone who could afford to risk his life when many people depended on him.

Because as things appeared back then, Helsi felt that his life would be forfeited or he'd be ruined sooner or later.

Thus he became even more afraid for his life because messing with an imperial prince was no different than a death sentence.

Sniff!

Sniff!

"I'm sorry master... I am a complete failure. Both as a Blacksmith and as a Dwarf of honor.

Instead of standing on your side in turbulent times... I ran away like a coward. I have repaid your kindness with nothing but betrayal.

Someone like me doesn't deserve any redemption." spoke Helsi as the tears poured like raindrops.

Although he was forced to betray his master due to the circumstances back then... it didn't change the fact that he had broken the trust Throk had in him.

"After this... I will quit blacksmithing and leave Nidavellir.

These hands of mine do not deserve to hold a hammer again. My feet do not deserve to walk into a forge again. This part of my life is over." said Helsi and got up on his feet.

"Farewell master. Thank you... for everything for me even though I have only let you down." he said and wiped off his tears.

Even Kahn could see the conflict in his eyes.

Grown men did not cry until they could no longer bear the suffering. This was something Kahn also experienced in his previous life on the day when he committed suicide. He had been completely broken down because of his miserable circumstances.

[At least try to talk it out with him.] said Kahn to Throk.

[What do you mean? You want me to mend differences with this traitor?! You think I'm a forgiving person, boy?] retorted the old dwarf.

[This is not my place to speak. But you're no saint either, old man.

Remember the first day we met...] Kahn rebuked and continued with a somber expression.

[Although I have a habit of repaying kindness ten times and enmity hundredfolds... sometimes circumstances force you to do things that go against your morality and creed.] he spoke to Throk.

[Also, you too should've swallowed that insult by Rogis and thought about the people who work for you.

You also forced him to make that choice. You said he was your most prized pupil but you did not think of the consequences before you burst out in rage.] he reminded the old blacksmith.

Throk was a person with anger issues and a loud mouth back when Kahn met him.

[It's not like he's entirely guilty... but he isn't innocent either.

But Helsi was never part of the plot set by Tawerik and the Dwarven Council and still adhered to the rules of smiting and teachings you taught him. Throughout the duel, he only wanted to win with his own skills and talent. I never sensed any hostility or malicious intent from him either.

He too was a victim just like you back then. Think of this whole development as him being lost for a while.] iterated Kahn.

"Alright, I will leave you two alone. Talk it out or kill each other, that's up to you both."

Kahn then walked out of the room and closed the door. Some people deserved a second chance unlike many but forcing his own opinion on Throk wasn't a good thing either.

Whatever happened from here... Whether Helsi gets his chance at retribution or not would be decided by the duo of former master and pupil.

YAWN!

Kahn yawned and decided to leave the colosseum.

Just then... a mysterious red hooded figure appeared in front of him along with a group of people.

Kahn was quickly taken aback because the group of people included Venessa, Hector and the Hero's Party.

"Kahn Salvatore, you have been summoned." spoke this hooded figure as he revealed his face.

An old and bald fireborne revealed his face.

[Careful boy. He's a 5th stage saint.] warned Rathnaar.

"By whom?" asked Kahn as he spoke in a scared and bewildered voice to maintain his appearance of a weak human.

To his question, this old fireborne replied in an authoritative voice...

"The Emperor."

Chapter 626 Plot Twist

As soon as this 5th stage saint revealed that the Emperor himself summoned Kahn, the latter was rooted on the spot, completely flabbergasted. This was something he hadn't seen coming from any possible angle.

Then he looked at the members of the group. It included Venessa and Hector, the two imperial scions. And there were 8 members of the Hero's Party including the Hero of Fire himself.

[What the... do they know?] he wondered after looking at the lineup including this person in the front who was a 5th stage saint.

[Don't panic boy. You make a wrong move and they might get even more suspicious. First, try to inquire what this summon is about.] said Rathnaar in an observing tone.

The old fireborne in front of Kahn was a 5th stage saint. A being who could kill him before he even moved a muscle.

"May I ask what is it about?" queried Kahn in a submissive voice.

"Shut up and come along! His Majesty summoning you is a great honor to you." spoke the fireborne as he slightly released his saint pressure.

"Maybe lord father is impressed with your performance, human.

Don't ask unnecessary questions." spoke Hector, hiding his hatred towards Kahn.

Because the duel was forfeited, it greatly damaged his future plans. And the main cause of this was Kahn, a pesky and weak human.

[When the time is right... I'll kill him with my own hands for making me suffer such a huge loss.] thought Hector inwardly.

Venessa on the other hand simply nodded from behind the old fireborne, signaling Kahn to comply.

But to an observant man like Kahn, he quickly noticed that Venessa was somehow reluctant to have him come with them.

[Tag along. You have a divine ability that can help you escape whenever you get a chance.] said Rathnaar in Kahn's mind.

"Apologize for my discourteousness, my lord." spoke Kahn and quickly summoned his usual black and gray longcoat which instantly turned his image from an unkempt and untidy blacksmith to an heir of some noble clan.

The aura of class and regality oozed out of Kahn as soon he equipped the attire that Albestros made using the Invimarak Hide he had been wearing since he was in Verlassen.

His sudden change in appearance also surprised many members of the hero's party. Because now, he looked no different than someone of equal standing as them.

To their surprised gazes, Kahn casually replied...

"What? I wanted to look presentable in front of his majesty."

The next moment, the old fireborne took a square-shaped brown artifact and activated it.

All of them were quickly enshrouded by a red barrier and the following moment, all of them disappeared from the spot.

Swoosh!!

A few dozen kilometers away, their figures reappeared inside a grand hall of a ginormous warship.

"This... this is the Church's warship given to the Hero's Party." spoke Hector as soon as he saw the sigil and the crew operating the warship.

[Why are we here instead of the warships owned by the imperial clan?] wondered Venessa in her mind.

But since the man in red robes was a trusted figure of the emperor, she and Hector did not dare question unnecessarily because currently, this old man had a bigger prestige than both of them.

Soon, an hour passed and the capital borders were already crossed a while ago.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Hector as found something odd happening.

Because this old fireborne said that they were summoned by the Emperor, none of them brought any of their saint rank guards or security with them. Even their departure with this old fireborne wasn't known to anybody.

Kahn with his Eidetic Memory remembered where he had seen this old fireborne before.

But instead of replying to Hector's question... this old fireborne gave a nod to Axel and his group.

Ching! Ching! Ching!

The very next moment, all the members of the Hero's Party quickly distanced themselves from Venessa, Hector and Kahn as they encircled the trio in seconds and now, the three of them were trapped inside a pentagram-shaped suppression barrier.

"Arghhh...." groaned Kahn as he was instantly forced to kneel while Venessa and Hector fared no better because of this sudden move.

"What the hell are you doing?!" shouted Venessa as she quickly released her aura, trying to break through the barrier.

But the next second, she retracted it as soon as she thought of Kahn who would die because of her saint pressure.

Hector and Venessa loudly asked questions to this 5th stage saint but their words weren't audible outside the suppression barrier.

3 hours passed and they traveled over 5 thousand kilometers away from the capital Arkensan.

Finally, they stopped in an unknown grassland, completely secluded from any civilization for more than 50 kilometers.

Soon, the trio was teleported outside the warship. But this time, there was no suppression barrier.

However, the Hero's Party quickly surrounded them and the 5th stage saint took an artifact he started recording this whole scene.

"I believe you can handle it from here." he said to Axel.

"You may leave. Tell the Pope that we will accomplish our mission after I receive the signal." replied Axel who was donning his usual Red and Black armor.

Without replying, the old fireborne quickly took off with the warship and departed towards the capital.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you miscreants!" shouted Hector as his eyes revealed the rage filled in them.

This time, the members of the Hero's Party that also included Azerog, who was a 4th stage saint, had prideful expressions. Their look towards Hector, Venessa and Kahn hinted that they didn't care whether they were offending the imperial prince and princess.

"Apologies, lord Hector. Things have taken a troublesome route." said Axel as he snickered.

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

One by one, all the members of the Hero's Party revealed their saint pressures as they revealed their hostile killing intent towards the Trio.

"Don't you get it, you dimwitted moron? This place..." spoke Axel as he too redirected all of his murderous aura towards Hector.

"Is your execution ground."

Chapter 627 The Spider's Web

A few hours later, inside the Imperial Palace where the imperial trial was once held, a figure of a hooded fireborne in red robes suddenly appeared.

"What is it, advisor Aikbach?" asked Havi Hos Sigfreed, the Emperor of the Vulcan empire.

"Your majesty! We're in a great emergency!" shouted this fireborne and took off his hood.

"The Hero's Party has kidnapped prince Hector and princess Venessa!" shouted this fireborne as he revealed his shining-like-sun bald head to the emperor.

This was the very fireborne who left Kahn, Venessa and Hector with the Hero's Party few hours ago.

This old fireborne was one of the 4 advisors of the emperor. One who also partook in the imperial trial and actually backed Venessa during the trial when she revealed Rogis' deeds in front of the whole empire.

"What?!" shouted Havi, his eyes revealing his bewilderment.

Without wasting another moment, the advisor named Aikbach took out an artifact and a holographic video of the Hero's Party surrounding Hector, Venessa and Kahn in the sky while revealing their hostile intentions appeared in front of the emperor.

"I just received a secret transmission from our spies. The Hero's Party somehow managed to kidnap both of them.

Your majesty... they've gone rogue!

I think they want to kill them." he bellowed with a gloomy expression.

BOOM!!

Havi did not hold back and quickly revealed his intense saint pressure of an 8th stage saint.

For the first time since he became the emperor, someone openly tried to harm his children.

"Why?!" he asked hurriedly.

"Your majesty, I don't know. But we don't have much time to assemble our forces. We must leave quickly or it will be too late!" said Aikbach.

"Where?" asked Havi without a second thought since both of his children's lives were at risk.

"The Northern Plains." replied Aikbach.

"But if we leave through a warship, it will take us hours." spoke the old advisor.

"We don't need that. Let's go!" spoke Havi and soon, a massive bird-like entity made of blistering flames that were expelled out from his body amassed in between them.

This entire broke through the ceiling of the imperial palace, quickly alerting the royal guards. But Havi had no time to spare and inform them of the situation.

He was the strongest person in the entire empire, he was fully capable of protecting himself.

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

Multiple shockwaves were released as Havi and Aikbach boarded this bird-like creature that broke the sound barrier because of its tremendous velocity.

In just 10 seconds, they were already out of the imperial clan's lands.

"Those bastards! I'll kill everyone if anything happens to my children." spoke Havi to himself.

Within an hour, Havi and the advisor appeared in the middle of the northern plains as this bird entity traveled at a supersonic speed while completely protecting the passengers with its aura.

[Terrifying! He didn't even use his bloodline and just this creature created from his body's flames is enough to burn down the capital itself.] thought Aikbach as he shuddered in fear.

So far, no one had seen Havi's peak strength after he became an 8th stage saint just a few years ago.

"What's this? Didn't you say they're at the central region of the northern plains?" asked Havi as he looked around the open lands of this region.

This area called the northern plains had no fertile soil and environment suitable for living for normal people within one thousand kilometers of the area because of a battle between a Godbeast and the

Emperor of the old generation 600 years ago; leaving this place with nothing but barren lands that could not grow a single plant life after the fight.

"I don't sense anyone except the two of us in 800 kilometers." said Havi after activating his peak senses.

Because of their fast traveling ride, he could not do so before but now that he did, Havi couldn't sense Hector or Venessa at all.

"Because they're not here at all."

Shing!

BOOM!!

Before Havi could react to this sudden arrival of another individual, over a thousand different pillars of white light erupted at set distances within all of the span of the northern plains.

Each of these pillars was a couple of kilometers in width and their height rose to more than 15 kilometers (around 50 thousand feet) high in the sky.

And finally, at that height, all these ginormous pillars started connecting their lights in different directions, their speed so great that it only took 10 seconds before all of the ends of the bright pillars extended and connected to each other like spider-webs in the sky. Thick layers of impenetrable barriers formed on top of this magical formation, forming a thousand kilometers perimeter barrier that isolated everything from the outside.

"Arggghhhh!!!" bellowed Havi as his body was greatly suppressed and his mouth started throwing up blood in succession.

"The ancient Flame Killer formation... isn't it majestic?" asked the new arrival with a smug expression on his face that floated in the sky like standing on the solid ground 5 kilometers away from Havi. In his hand was a Legendary rank artifact with the insignia of the Church of Hetrax.

Aikbach had already appeared behind this figure who had a calm and collected expression.

"You... what's the meaning of this? Are you trying to commit treason..."

Demiurge!" said Havi as he looked at the Pope who suddenly appeared out of nowhere, evading even the senses of an 8th stage saint like him using a mysterious artifact.

"It took us 50 years to set this ancient formation here without anyone noticing. But since the northern plains was nothing but full of barren lands... the security here was non-existent.

And to set up this Flame Killer formation, the only suppression barrier that can prohibit the imperial fireborne blood from activating their primordial bloodline at full capacity... We made a lot of sacrifices.

Finally, I'm relieved to see it being used." said Demiurges, revealing unnecessary information instead of directly responding to the emperor's question.

"And now..." he looked at Havi whose chest and stomach convulsed because of the effects of the suppression barrier while he kept throwing up blood again and again.

Demiurges then declared with an elated smile...

"You will be its first victim."

Chapter 628 The Hidden Ones

The entire area of the northern plains that spanned a thousand kilometers in total perimeter was now completely isolated from the outside world while only three saints remained inside.

"What are you trying to do, Arhlem?! Where are my children?!" asked Havi in a thunderous voice.

"Hah! How uncommon to see you care about the lives of your children.

Don't worry... they're being guarded by the Hero's Party in the middle of the eastern grasslands. But even I can't tell for how long they'll stay safe." he replied in an insidious tone.

Havi was thoroughly infuriated at this point. He came here quickly without a second thought without informing his forces because he feared for his children's lives. But he didn't expect that one of his most trusted aides had already joined hands with the Pope.

"You... Advisor Aikbach... Why? Were you also part of this too from 50 years?" asked Havi with a rage-filled expression. Aikbach was the Imperial advisor since the time his father reigned as the Emperor.

"You... why did you side with the church? You were my father's most trusted aide. Why did you betray me?" he asked Aikbach.

Although it looked like Havi was greatly disheartened by this betrayal... in actuality, he was just stalling for time while barely containing the backlash on his body and trying to adapt to this suppression.

"A loyalty bound by soul-oath is no loyalty, Havi.

It was your father who took advantage of my fealty to the throne and made me accept soul-oath. But afterward... He basically turned me into a slave of the imperial family, making me cover up his failures and the wanton massacres he caused in the name of eradicating rioters.

That is why I chose to betray the imperial clan." revealed Aikbach. His tone filled with disgust as he recalled the previous Emperor, Havi's father.

Havi did not show any expression of disbelief as if he too was aware of this fact since long.

There were no righteous rulers. Even the kindest monarch would have to bloody his hands in order to maintain peace in the empire.

He was no exception because he too ruined the fate of the human race for the sake of maintaining his reign intact during the turbulent times.

"Then why aren't you dead yet?" asked Havi, completely unshaken by this information.

"Because the soul-oath ritual was performed by me. I obviously know the way to undo it." replied Demiurge instead.

"It was when you became the emperor, I granted him freedom in exchange for spying on you.

And given his hatred towards the imperial family... he gladly joined our ranks." said Demiurge.

Pthew!!

Havi spat out another mouthful of blood. He could feel the flow of blood in his body slowing down, greatly diminishing his strength to a degree that he now possessed power comparable only to a 6th stage saint.

He tried to reveal his strength but his body greatly received backlash instead. For someone of his rank... Losing two ranks in strength meant losing around 28% of your total combat power. And this was when he wasn't even engaged in a battle. As for how much he'd be suppressed when the fight broke out... even he couldn't predict at the moment.

"So are you ready to die?" asked the Pope as he folded both arms behind his back.

"Kill me? Heh!!" said Havi in a mocking tone.

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha!" he laughed hysterically.

"Just with you two? Although I'm suppressed... I can easily kill a 5th stage saint and a 6th stage saint. And both of you are very weak because of your class." said Havi in a tone filled with disdain. His title as the strongest person in the empire wasn't just for show.

But he wasn't an idiot to blindly charge and try to kill them. He wanted to gauge the opponent's tricks first because a moment of negligence would cost your life in a battle.

"Oh... that would indeed be the case." replied Demiurge.

"But you're not fighting us... you're fighting them." he said with a carefree expression.

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

BOOM!!

Three massive bursts of energy exploded in 3 different directions. Each one was at least 20 kilometers away from Havi. Yet because of their power levels and ranks, this gap was no different than a few footsteps for them.

Havi could clearly see these three hooded figures in white and red even from this far distance. For someone from the earth, Havi was already in the realm of gods and he had yet to reveal his real strength.

Without standing at a ceremony, these three figures who had perfectly hidden themselves using the same artifact as Demiurge, took their hoods off and finally revealed their real identities.

"Long time no see, your majesty." spoke one of these firebornes who seemed to be a pugilist/brawler class individual.

But the next moment, Havi was completely shocked as soon as he recognized him.

"The last time I appeared to the outside world... your father had just become the emperor." said the second figure who held a double-bladed spear in his left hand.

"You... how are you still alive?" asked Havi as he recalled the real identity of this second fireborne.

"The 'Hos Sigfreed' bloodline is indeed worthy to lead our empire.

In just 4 decades, he already became an 8th stage saint. Even the six fireborne clans can't compete against the imperial family's bloodline." Finally, the third figure spoke who had a shield and a sword, revealing his Knight class.

Havi was flabbergasted again. Because this person was already a great figure in the history of the Vulcan empire.

"How? You were supposed to be dead over a century ago!" Havi kept questioning as he could not believe what he was seeing.

Given his bloodline effects, he could easily take down the two traitors in front of him.

But now... these 3 people who were hidden all this time... they were someone even he had to be worried about because of their identities and skills.

Because every single one of these three individuals who was supposed to be dead a long time ago... Was once the Holy Champion of the Church of Hetrax in their respective eras.

But the most threatening part wasn't their titles but their ranks.

Because every single one of these new enemies was a...

7th Stage Saint!

Chapter 629 The Champions

Havi still had a perplexed expression as he gazed at the three saints who revealed their malevolent aura directed at him. All three of them... were the supposedly deceased Holy Champions of the church of Hetrax.

The first one died 30 years ago, Havi himself attended the grand funeral. The second was supposed to have died during a fight at the southern border against the army of the Rakos Empire close to 50 years ago. And the last one died during the previous Empress and his grandmother's reign more than 90 years ago.

But not only all of them turned out to be alive, but they were also 7th stage saints, surpassing their previous rank before their supposed deaths.

Previously, Havi thought that this treason was planned when he became the Emperor... but now, it looked like all of this was planned way long ago even before his father was the emperor.

At this moment, Demiurge revealed a coy smile, feeling proud of himself.

This was exactly the hidden method the church had which Demiurge mentioned when all the top ranking members had gathered for the annual congregation last year.

The pope had declared his intentions to plot and kill the emperor after the incident with Rogis and the imperial decree where thousands of powerful figures from the Church were involved in the crimes against the human race.

As a result, many important figures of the church were hunted down and killed by the imperial clan. On the surface, it looked like the Emperor was punishing evil to the masses.

But in reality, it was the political move to tip the balance in his favor in the name of enforcing justice.

During the congregation, it looked like it was the main reason why the Pope had finally lost and decided to commit treason to the majority of the members of the church.

But the whole treason itself was something planned way ahead in reality.

Havi looked at the three seventh stage saints in three different directions who surrounded him from 20 kilometers afar.

"Donatello Strvenee." he spoke as he looked at the fireborne with the purple glowing double-bladed spear.

"Leonardo Wright." he said as he glanced at the Knight class fireborne with a shield and a sword.

"Raphael Broxter." he mumbled as he looked at the brawler glass saint.

Donatello, Leonardo and Raphael... all three of them were the Holy Champions of their times. The strongest warriors of the church that even the imperial clan had to acknowledge.

"Tell me something... Since when did you plan this?" asked Havi as his body finally managed to adapt to this thousand-kilometer-wide suppression formation.

"Do not think so highly of me. I only followed the instructions of my predecessors after I became the Pope a century ago.

After the Great War in the Rakos Empire where the three 7th stage saints killed the Emperor 100 years ago and overtook the empire, the Church also decided to groom their champions in case we needed to do the same in the future." revealed the pope in a carefree tone.

"All these people who had the potential to become 7th stage saints and had absolute loyalty only to the church had their deaths disguised in the eyes of the public. And the church had been secretly nurturing them with all of the resources and means we had.

Feel proud of yourself, Havi. You were the only Emperor who forced our hand to make them all reveal themselves." he said and then looked at the old advisor. He quickly handed him the mysterious artifact he was holding.

"You may leave." spoke Pope to Aikbach.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Havi. Because having another fighter on their side was helpful in times of emergency. Yet Demiurges told Aikbach to leave.

"Someone has to lead the imperial clan and the fireborne clans in different directions.

Nobody knows you're here and I'll make sure that no one is prepared to defend against the church's forces when they attack the imperial clan.

We carefully planned everything, your majesty." said Aikbach with a mocking tone and disappeared from the Flame Killer formation using the artifact given by Demiurge.

At this moment, Havi was indeed trapped from all sides and he understood that soon, a fight was inevitable as he was slowly recovering his strength.

"Then tell me one thing... Why go this far?"

The deal I proposed with the Hero of Fire and Venessa's marriage would've greatly helped you without shedding a single drop of blood or risking the lives of your people." he asked with a somber expression.

"That was indeed a good deal you offered me all those years ago. But the reason why we chose to go this route wasn't because of you.

But because of the Hero of Fire himself. Your arrangement wouldn't have worked because of his nature." spoke Demiurge with a stern gaze.

"What do you mean?" asked Havi with a curious countenance.

"Ha ha! You don't even know his real personality or his origins. Yet you were ready to sacrifice your daughter in order to protect her from the six fireborne clans.

But instead, you ended up condemning her to even a worse fate." laughed the Pope loudly as if he was looking at a fool.

In the following seconds, he took out a recording artifact and activated it...

3 Minutes later...

Havi was flabbergasted and also terrified after Demiurge revealed Axel's deeds that they had filmed without the latter having no knowledge of it.

The emperor had an ashen expression after watching what kind of person Hero of Fire truly was.

Previously, he hadn't inquired or put a tail on Axel to show his good faith regarding the deal he made long time ago. But because of it... he had no idea what kind of monster Axel was in reality.

"He... he isn't a human, is he?" asked Havi with a gloomy face.

"He is... Well, not entirely.

The world he came from is a very unique one. And because of his lineage, god Hetrax chose him.

Let me tell you something.

Among the new generation of summoned heroes, Axel is the only one..." said the Pope as his loud voice reverberated in the open desolate lands of the northern plain...

"Who can kill the Demon God."

Chapter 630 The Machinations

Demiurge openly declared that Axel had the potential to even defeat the Demon God. The very entity all the chosen Heroes were summoned to kill in Vantrea. But no one had succeeded in the past 3 thousand years thus very being. Yet, the pope spoke confidently that the new Hero of Fire would certainly be able to do the job as soon as he became a Demi-God.

"Although Axel has the potential... he still needs time to become a Demi-God.

And after that... he might as well even surpass someone like the 8th Hero of Darkness, 6th Hero of Space, 5th Heroine of Lightning, Emperor Rathnaar of the Rakos Empire, the 3 living Archangels and the last remaining Elder Dragon, Baltaraaz.

He will be able to become stronger than all these untouchable legendary figures one day." spoke Demiurge vehemently as if he could already see the bright future.

"We will have Venessa marry Axel and since your daughter will be wed to him, he will have a legit claim to the throne as well.

Later, we will take over the empire and then make him the Emperor on the surface.

Since he's the chosen Hero of our god Hetrax... people will come to accept him as the new ruler very soon." the Pope revealed his intentions.

"As for the fireborne clans... once you're dead... they will look for their own survival and eventually join us after we reveal our three 7th stage saints." he iterated.

"Aren't you being too overconfident?" asked Havi with a contemptuous gaze.

"The previous emperor of the Rakos Empire was only a human in the end despite being an 8th stage knight. He had no bloodline-related abilities that raised his battle strength.

Even with your big cannons... I'm fairly capable of facing all three of them myself if I use my bloodline.

It seems reckless of you to not consider that fact." said Havi as if he was still looking down on his opponents.

But truth be told, he was trying to probe them first and get the overly chatty Pope to reveal some more information by trying to instigate him.

"My my... Did you really think we were that ignorant?" smirked the Pope.

"We went to great lengths to prepare everything from a century ago. Everything was going to fall into order after your father's death. But things took an unexpected turn in the past 3 decades.

Because you're even a bigger nuisance and harder to kill... Compared to how easily we finished off your father and elder brother."

BOOM!!

Without even waiting for another moment and thinking about the backlash on his body, a massive burst of fire exploded from Havi's body and spread across 5 kilometer radius as soon as Pope mentioned his father and brother.

"You! What did you say?!" shouted the emperor in a tyrannical voice that sent shockwaves in the surrounding.

Demiurge on the other had retreated 10 kilometers far from him in a second, he still maintained that smug smile as he riled up Havi whose body was now covered in flames while the surrounding area turned into a large pit of fire akin to a volcano.

"You really don't know anything. Did you think this whole plan was orchestrated just for you?"

No... it was for the entire imperial clan. Just that we had to alter a few things here and there." he replied in an elated voice.

"It took us decades to weaken the previous emperor's body through many methods.

Unlike you, he was a devotee of our god Hetrax. Thus he visited the church very often. Through many interactions and feasts we held for him, we slowly poisoned him.

And finally when his health dwindled, we weakened him even more in the name of curing his condition.

Your father was a 7th stage saint but he couldn't even lift his hand in his final days. Just achieving that took us over 20 years." said Demiurge gleefully.

"After his demise, we targeted your elder brother, Vili. But we couldn't use the same method.

However... the Elven empire's attacks on the western border presented us a great opportunity as he went there to lead our forces." he grinned.

"You bastards!! Don't tell me..." shouted Havi as his eyes were wide open with shock.

"Yes. It was us who contacted their forces and revealed the crown prince's location as well as how to infiltrate the area he was staying in.

All I can say is that he did put up a good fight despite only being a 4th stage saint back then." replied the pope without the slightest hint of guilty consciousness.

They even joined hands with the enemy empire to kill Havi's elder brother, betraying their motherland just so they could cripple the imperial family and take control over the empire amidst the chaos.

"But you and that cunning mind of yours... you married the heiresses of the two strongest fireborne clans and even married a princess of the neighboring empire to stabilize the whole situation.

That was when we had no choice but to delay our plans." he spoke.

"You... you killed my father and brother. And that poison..." Havi stuttered.

"Yes. It was the Church of Hetrax who provided those two fireborne clans with that poison.

But instead of targeting you... those morons used it to kill that human wife of yours." said the Pope as he unveiled one secret after another.

Why was he revealing all this information like an idiot?

It was because he wanted Havi to lose his calm and get enraged to the point he'd lose his sanity as they engaged in a battle soon.

Sometimes breaking your enemy's mind can lead you to a swift victory.

"It was me who told you about them being the guilty party. And look what you did...

You traded your daughter's fate in order to protect her life by joining hands with me... the one who played a part in her mother's death. Ha ha ha!!" laughed Demiurge loudly.

Havi was losing all of his rationality as he found the truth about the deaths of his family and his true love.

The church has ruined his entire life just to become the sole ruler of the empire.

He fell into their diabolical plans and even ruined Venessa's life thinking he was doing it for her own sake.

"Like I said... we did not come here unprepared."

Finally, the pope suddenly revealed his own aura and Havi's expression turned grim.

Because just now... Demiurge revealed their final trump card as he revealed his real rank at this moment.

As if the previous situation wasn't precarious enough, the emperor was now facing...

Four 7th stage saints!