

Summoning Millions of Gods Daily, My Strength Equals Theirs Combined #Chapter 11 -11-The Parliament - Read

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Chapter 11: Chapter11-The Parliament

When William mentioned the Blackfish Gang, the expressions of the parliament members instantly turned grave. The name alone was enough to stir unease, for everyone present had already heard of the terrifying fate that befell those gang members.

It was said that they had not merely been executed but flayed alive, their skins peeled away and stuffed with straw, turned into grotesque effigies, and then hung on the city gates for all to see. The twisted, contorted expressions frozen upon those faces made even hardened soldiers shudder.

More disturbing still was the rumor whispered across taverns and markets alike—that the Blackfish Gang had not been crushed by imperial authorities or rival gangs. Rather, they had provoked a mysterious entity, a ghostly specter, and it was this phantom that condemned them to such an end. What this ghost truly was, or whether it even existed, no one knew for certain. But fear of it spread rapidly.

At this moment, one parliamentarian broke the silence. His voice rang with cold disdain.

"I, for one, believe those Blackfish scum received only what they deserved. All of you here know their crimes over the years. Surely none among us can deny it."

He turned his gaze toward William.

"William, I suggest that our Parliament issue a formal statement. We should thank those responsible for cleansing the empire of these vermin!"

After speaking, he smiled faintly and glanced toward another member seated not far away. That man, in turn, met the look with a smile of his own. He leaned forward and, eyes gleaming, said,

"My suspicion is that this may well be the work of the Red-Robed Archbishop. With His Eminence's strength, disposing of such insignificant rabble would require no more than a flick of the wrist."

William did not smile. Neither did Heimerdinger. Instead, they exchanged a glance, each silently wondering who the true hand behind the bloody spectacle might be.

Just then, a sudden shift came over the hall.

Aurek appeared, holding the scepter of his station, and walked toward the imperial throne. The throne itself occupied the very center of the Parliament chamber, built atop a high platform so that the emperor might look down upon his ministers from above.

The appearance of Aurek startled everyone. A collective gasp spread through the chamber. For some time now, he had been absent from such gatherings, and his return alone was enough to provoke surprise. But it was not merely his presence. What left them all stunned was the aura he now carried.

Between his brows, in the set of his shoulders, in the very tone of his presence, there was a gravity, a regal strength that none had ever truly felt from him before. It was the unmistakable bearing of a king.

"Your Majesty!" voices rang out.

"Your Majesty, you have awakened at last!"

The parliamentarians, the ministers, even the most arrogant nobles—all of them rose at once, bowing deeply. Whether their gestures came from true loyalty or empty obligation hardly mattered. In that moment, none dared remain seated.

"Enough. Be seated."

Aurek's voice carried the weight of command. He sat upon his throne, and only then did the others dare return to their seats.

His eyes swept over the chamber. For a fleeting moment, they lingered upon Nock, the Minister of War. Then he turned his gaze away.

"Proceed," Aurek said.

William inclined his head slightly. But before he could continue, another voice cut through the chamber.

The Grand Marshal, Jacoff, who had until now remained silent, suddenly spoke.

"Your Majesty, in these recent years, every province of the empire has seen the rise of countless gangs. Some of these gangs have grown so arrogant that they dare to murder their local lords. I believe it is imperative that we deploy the army at once and eradicate them completely."

"Only by destroying every gang can Your Majesty rule without fear of unrest."

His tone was steady, his argument seemingly flawless. Anyone unfamiliar with him might easily have mistaken him for a loyal minister concerned solely for the empire's safety.

At the same time, Heimerdinger, representative of the Royalist Party, rose from his seat.

"Your Majesty, I must disagree with the Grand Marshal. Merely exterminating gang members would treat only the symptoms, not the disease. These gangs are born from administrative neglect. They thrive because people are left idle, with no means of survival. I believe the solution lies in governance. We should create more posts, more opportunities, so that the idle masses may find honest work."

He paused, then shifted the weight of his words.

"Of course, such reforms require the cooperation of the landed nobles. For if they claim lordship over their fiefs, then they bear responsibility for protecting the people within them."

Aurek understood at once what Heimerdinger was suggesting. The empire of Crossbridge was at this moment beset by dangers both internal and external. If the unrest of the gangs could be used as a pretext to keep the nobles occupied—forcing them to deal with it themselves—then time might be bought for the empire.

And there was more. Suppressing gangs required troops. If the empire deployed its central forces, its already strained treasury would collapse further. But if the fief-holding nobles were compelled to act, then the empire would conserve its strength and its coin.

Before Heimerdinger could elaborate further, Jacoff spoke again, his voice sharp.

"Heimerdinger, you have never commanded troops in war. You make the matter sound far simpler than it is. If the nobles commit their forces to suppressing gangs, then our neighbors—those ever-watchful enemies—will surely seize the chance to move. If we lose territory because of this distraction, Heimerdinger, will you bear the responsibility?"

Heimerdinger faltered. He had not expected Jacoff to counter him in this way. His lips parted, ready to argue, but before he could, Aurek's voice cut in.

"In that case, we shall follow the Grand Marshal's advice."

The words fell like a thunderclap.

William and Heimerdinger both stiffened, their faces paling. They opened their mouths, instinctively ready to plead their case. But Aurek raised his hand, silencing them at once.

"Enough. The matter is decided."

Across the hall, Jacoff blinked in surprise. He had not expected the emperor to agree so readily.

In the past, whenever William and Heimerdinger opposed a motion, Aurek would at least deliberate. Yet today, he had agreed without hesitation.

Even Gaia and the other members of the Royalist Party found themselves bewildered. This was not the Aurek they knew. His behavior was strange, his decisions uncharacteristically abrupt.

William and Heimerdinger, however, were not merely confused. They were angry.

All they had done was for the good of the empire. For the good of the emperor himself. And yet, how could Aurek not see it?

For the first time, doubt crept into William's heart. Had their emperor already abandoned hope?

"Very well. Is there any other matter for discussion? If not, then today's Parliament shall be adjourned."

Aurek's tone was weary, almost disdainful of state affairs. Yet behind his mask of indifference, he was smiling coldly to himself.

If the Grand Marshal so desired this responsibility, then let him have it. Aurek would see what game he could play.

As for arguments and wasted words—why bother?

"Your Majesty, I urge you to reconsider!" William cried.

"Yes, Your Majesty, these are matters of state. They must be weighed carefully!" Heimerdinger pleaded.

But Aurek ignored them both. Rising from his throne, he turned away and left the chamber.

He knew well enough they would follow him soon enough.

Across the room, Jacoff frowned unconsciously. Something about today's session unsettled him. Though the emperor had supported his proposal, a strange sense of unease gnawed at him.

And more troubling still was this realization—once, he had been able to see through the emperor with ease. But now? Now Aurek felt like a man cloaked in shadows, unreadable and distant.

Chapter 12: Chapter12-Wood's Suspicion

Throughout the heated debate in the Parliament, Troy had remained silent. He had not added his voice to the quarrel, nor shown any interest in the verbal sparring between Jacoff, Heimerdinger, and the others. He simply watched Aurek's departing back, his eyes narrowing slightly, until at last his brows furrowed in visible concern.

The Emperor seemed... different.

Something in his manner, in the way he dismissed arguments so quickly, struck Troy as unfamiliar. It was as though Aurek had changed into a man no longer bound by the hesitation or uncertainty that once defined him.

While Troy pondered this, the Minister of War, Nock, quietly approached. He leaned in close, his voice lowered so that only Troy could hear.

"Lord Troy," he whispered, "before today's session began, His Majesty lost his temper."

Troy's eyes sharpened, his brows tightening further.

"Oh? What exactly happened?"

Nock chuckled softly, as if amused that the matter could cause alarm.

"In truth, it was nothing of importance—at least on the surface. Yesterday afternoon, there was an incident. The Royal Guard's officer Wood apparently clashed with Angie. It even went so far that blades were drawn."

Troy's expression hardened.

"And what was the outcome?"

Nock smirked, clearly relishing the story.

"This morning, His Majesty was enraged over the matter. He wanted Wood executed. Fortunately, I arrived in time to intervene. Had I not stepped in, Wood would likely be a corpse by now."

For a moment Troy said nothing. Silence hung between them. Only after a pause did he murmur,

"And did His Majesty say anything further?"

Nock gave a mocking little laugh, his tone laced with sarcasm.

"Nothing at all. My guess? He must be wary of your stance, my lord. Otherwise, such a minor incident would never have ended so quietly. His anger burned itself out, and the matter has been dropped."

Troy gave a small nod, the corners of his lips curling into a faint, almost unreadable smile. He understood well enough. In politics, many things did not need to be spoken aloud. A simple understanding was sufficient.

"Very well," Troy said at last. "Let us leave this matter behind. There is something more important I must entrust to you."

He straightened slightly, lowering his voice.

"Send men at once. Work with the city constabulary and investigate every rumor, every trace connected to this so-called 'ghost.' I want its nature revealed. We cannot afford to let such uncertainty fester."

As he spoke, his hand rose almost unconsciously to rub at his brow. The tension that had been gathering there seemed to weigh upon him more heavily with each passing day.

The Blackfish Gang had roamed so brazenly through the capital itself, their influence spreading like rot. For them to have acted so openly, support from powerful patrons was inevitable. Without such backing, their survival would have been impossible.

And yet—despite this invisible support—an entire gang had been wiped out overnight. Not merely defeated, but annihilated in a fashion so brutal, so merciless, that the very sight of their corpses had silenced the city with terror. Who possessed such power? And what purpose lay behind such cruelty?

The mystery gnawed at Troy, leaving him restless.

Nock, unaware of the depth of his superior's thoughts, merely inclined his head in obedience.

"I will see to it immediately."

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In Valoria Palace, the corridors gleamed with polished marble, and the high arches carried the echoes of approaching footsteps.

Angie, ever composed and graceful, stood waiting. When she caught sight of William and Heimerdinger, she dipped into a courteous bow.

"My lords, His Majesty awaits you."

Her words startled them both. Surprise flickered across their faces. Neither had expected a direct summons so soon after the Parliament's conclusion.

They exchanged a quick glance, silent agreement passing between them. Without speaking further, they quickened their pace, following Angie's direction toward the Emperor's chamber where matters of state were handled.

They entered and bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty!"

"Rise. There is no need for such formality."

William straightened, worry etched across his face. He stepped forward quickly, unable to restrain his concern.

"Your Majesty, there is something we must urgently—"

But Aurek lifted his hand, cutting him off before he could continue.

"I know what troubles you," Aurek said calmly. "But you need not worry. For now, remain as observers. Trust me—before long, you will see things unfold in ways you have never imagined."

William and Heimerdinger glanced at each other again, bewilderment clear in their eyes. The Emperor's words made little sense.

Heimerdinger could not hold back his frustration.

"Your Majesty, I still fail to understand. Why did you agree so readily to the Grand Marshal's proposal?"

Aurek smiled faintly, his expression unchanging.

"Does it truly matter whether I agree or not?"

He leaned back slightly, his tone light, almost dismissive.

"In the empire's current state, even had I refused, if Jacoff wished to act, who could have stopped him?"

The blunt truth of the question struck them both silent.

Indeed, with the power Jacoff commanded, if he chose to pursue a course of action, there was no force in the empire that could realistically stand in his way.

Seeing their silence, Aurek let out a soft chuckle.

"So you see? My agreement changes little. But with my consent, Jacoff will act all the more boldly, without hesitation. That is precisely what I want. When he does, we shall have the perfect chance to observe the cracks and flaws within the Crossbridge Empire."

His voice carried quiet confidence, as though all the turmoil and danger were but pieces on a chessboard under his control.

"As for the others in Parliament," Aurek added with a derisive smile, "they are nothing but useless fools. I do not even bother to consider them."

William and Heimerdinger frowned deeply. His words left them unsettled.

For years, the two of them had struggled ceaselessly against Jacoff and Troy. Their endless schemes, their constant battles—both open and hidden—had worn the Royalist Party down to exhaustion.

And yet here was their Emperor, speaking as though none of it mattered. Speaking as though Jacoff's ambitions and their sacrifices were beneath his notice.

Why was he so confident?

The truth was bitter. The empire still stood, teetering though it was, in large part thanks to the Royalist Party's efforts, thanks to the resistance led by William and Heimerdinger. Without them, the Grand Marshal and Troy might have long since seized control entirely.

But Aurek seemed to look straight through all of that, as though it were irrelevant. He seemed transformed—no longer the hesitant monarch they once knew, but a man who carried himself with unfathomable certainty.

The change made them uneasy. Very uneasy.

"Your Majesty," Heimerdinger asked at last, voice low with concern, "what is it you truly intend?"

Aurek hesitated, then decided to reveal a sliver of his thoughts.

"William, Heimerdinger—you are the men I trust most. Therefore, trust me in return. Go back and wait quietly. Tomorrow, all will become clear."

His words, meant to reassure, had the opposite effect. The two men felt their unease deepen.

They bowed reluctantly, anxiety pressing down upon them like a weight. In their hearts, a terrible thought grew.

The Crossbridge Empire was already tottering on the brink. And if even their Emperor now seemed reckless, perhaps salvation was already beyond reach.

Could Aurek truly change anything? They doubted it. For this was not Aurek the Great, the first of his name, whose genius had once forged the empire. This Aurek was young, untested, and surrounded by enemies.

As they prepared to take their leave, Aurek's voice called after them.

"Oh, William. One more thing."

William turned back.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Tell me honestly. How many troops remain loyal to the crown?"

William did not hesitate.

"The Imperial Guard remains steadfast. Roughly one hundred thousand men. In addition, part of the Royal Guard—some twenty thousand—can still be trusted. Beyond that, there are the Imperial Knights, stationed outside Eryndor. They number around eight hundred thousand cavalry. They are the last true bulwark of the empire."

Aurek's brows knit together.

"Only eight hundred thousand?"

The number was far less than he had hoped. For an empire spanning more than three hundred provinces, housing over a thousand great cities, such a force was woefully insufficient.

He knew well that Jacoff alone commanded at least two million troops. And as for the great nobles—each with their own fiefs and private armies—none possessed less than several million well-trained soldiers.

A bitter truth.

But Aurek took a steadying breath. He had one weapon the others lacked—the Elemental Assassin.

Drawing in a long breath, he exhaled slowly, his voice calm.

"Very well. William, Heimerdinger—return now. Await my command. When the time comes, act exactly as I order."

The two ministers bowed once more, their hearts heavy with doubt, before withdrawing.

Behind them, Aurek sat in silence, his expression unreadable, his thoughts hidden behind that faint, mysterious smile that none could decipher.

Chapter 13: Chapter13-Making an Example of You

In the end, William and Heimerdinger decided to wait one more night.

Though their hearts were full of unease, they both felt strongly that the Emperor before them—since his awakening—was no longer the same man he had once been. Something within Aurek had changed, something subtle yet unmistakable. And until they understood what it was, they chose caution over confrontation.

After the two men departed, silence returned to the chamber. Then, without warning, twenty faintly translucent figures emerged before Aurek, as though conjured from the very air.

They were his Elemental Assassins, their forms shifting with flickers of light, each one carrying an aura of cold lethality.

"Master," they intoned in unison, voices echoing like whispers from another realm. "We are at your command."

Aurek's gaze turned hard, a flash of killing intent glimmering in his eyes. His words were calm, yet carried the chill of death.

"Exterminate Nock's entire household. Leave Nock alive. I want the world to see clearly what awaits those who defy me."

The assassins bowed their heads wordlessly, their figures flickering before they vanished into nothingness.

When they were gone, Aurek lifted his head toward the distant blue sky. His thoughts were heavy.

The Crossbridge Empire had already rotted to its very core. Every fiber of the realm was infected by decay. To save such a diseased body, drastic remedies were required.

An empire in chaos must be ruled with iron and blood, he thought grimly. Only by wielding merciless measures could he hope to seize even the faintest chance at survival for the empire.

The Royalist Party themselves no longer believed that the fate of the Crossbridge Empire could be changed. But Aurek refused to surrender to despair. He had resolved that he would try—he would gamble everything on his own hands.

Whether success or failure awaited him at the end of the road, he would not regret the attempt. So long as he fought, his conscience would remain clear.

As for the Grand Marshal, and as for the Holy Theocracy—they would wait. And when the time came, he would confront them all.

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In the city of Eryndor, the atmosphere was heavy with dread. The sudden annihilation of the Blackfish Gang had shrouded the entire capital in the shadow of the so-called "ghost."

Whispers flew across the taverns, marketplaces, and noble courts alike. Some speculated that the mysterious specter was none other than a secret force unleashed by the Red-Robed Archbishop Austin himself. Who else, after all, possessed the strength to wipe out an entire gang in a single night with such gruesome precision?

The fact that the Ordon Theocracy had offered neither denial nor clarification only fueled suspicion further. Their silence was more unsettling than any denial could have been. It made the people wonder: Who truly stands behind this ghost?

"Investigate this phantom immediately," Nock barked after returning to his estate. "Uncover its background, its origin, its masters. I want to know exactly which power dares lurk behind the mask of a ghost."

He gave his order with his usual arrogance, expecting swift obedience. But then, from a nearby corner, a quiet voice spoke.

"My lord Nock," said Wood. The once-proud officer now sat in a wheelchair, his body broken, his voice heavy with bitterness. "There is something I must tell you."

Nock paused, turning his head. "What is it?"

Wood's eyes darkened. "It concerns what happened this morning, at the west gate of Valoria Palace..."

He began to recount everything that had transpired. His words came slow and deliberate, filled with resentment. He spoke of the moment he had drawn his blade against the Emperor, of the sudden and inexplicable force that had rendered all four of his limbs useless.

What chilled him most was that no one else present had been capable of such an act. It had been as though someone invisible had materialized behind him, struck him down, and then vanished without a trace.

Nock listened in silence, his brows furrowing. Wood's description awakened his own memories of the morning, of that uncanny sensation that had swept over the gate—an eerie shiver, a hair-raising chill that still lingered in his bones.

"Are you certain," Nock asked carefully, "that it was not an ambush? Perhaps someone struck from behind?"

Wood shook his head vehemently. "Impossible! I myself am of Elite Rank. My senses are sharp, and we were in plain view of many witnesses. If anyone had attempted a sneak attack, others would surely have seen it. Yet when I questioned my most trusted guards, they all swore they had seen nothing. They felt only the faintest breeze, passing like a whisper."

His voice grew harsh. "If this was indeed a sneak attack, the one responsible would have to be of at least Expert Rank!"

He met Nock's eyes directly. "My lord... is it not possible that the one who struck me down was the ghost?"

"Ghosts?" Nock scoffed. His lips twisted into a mocking smile. "Do you truly expect me to believe in such fairy tales?"

His voice dripped with disdain. "You are frightening yourself with shadows. Think clearly. If the Emperor truly possessed such power, why would he need to rely on those relics William and Heimerdinger? Why would he cling to them at all?"

He leaned forward, his tone darkening. "Do not trouble yourself with fantasies. Once I eliminate William and Heimerdinger, the Emperor will be utterly powerless. That is the only truth you need concern yourself with."

Wood clenched his fists in his lap, bitterness thick in his heart.

Nock turned then, eyeing him coldly. "Your condition makes you unfit to continue in the Royal Guard. You would only be a liability there. I will arrange for you to transfer to the Ministry of War, to serve in logistics. It is a lesser role, but time is long. Opportunities always arise. You may yet find a future."

He spoke casually, as though dismissing a broken tool.

The Crossbridge Empire was collapsing. Everyone could see it. Yet from the ruins of a crumbling empire, a new order was bound to rise.

Whether it was Troy, Jacoff, or others, many were waiting for that day. And all of them believed it would come soon. For even the simplest of fools could see that the Crossbridge Empire was on its last legs.

No one could halt the fall. Not even the imperial throne.

Wood's lips curled into a cold smile. His hatred for Aurek had already consumed him entirely.

"Very well," he muttered, nodding heavily. In his heart, a vow took shape: Because of that Emperor, I am ruined. Because of him, I am crippled. Let him wait. On the day this empire collapses, I will watch with my own eyes as the royal family is cut to pieces, slain without mercy.

Nock offered no further words. In truth, Wood was worthless to him now. If not for the fact that Wood still had loyal subordinates within the Royal Guard, Nock would not have bothered to save him at all. Even so, the man's value had diminished almost completely. He was not worth any more of Nock's time.

"Go rest," Nock said curtly. "I have more pressing matters."

Leaving Wood to stew in his bitterness, Nock rose and made his way deeper into his castle.

He passed through a series of long, shadowed corridors until he reached the most hidden chamber of the keep. This was no ordinary room—it was the sanctum reserved for his most important guests.

Two young men stood outside the door, clad in ornate robes of fine weave. Their posture was proud, their expressions haughty, as though they stood above all others.

Nock stopped before them, bowing slightly with uncharacteristic respect. "Is Mentor Butler Brown still in meditation?" he asked.

Though he held the title of Minister of War, one of the highest offices of the empire, his voice was deferential. Even he did not dare offend the two youths before him.

For they were emissaries of the Unicorn Trading Guild.

The Unicorn Guild dwarfed the Crossbridge Empire in influence and power. It maintained close ties with many theocratic and secular organizations alike, forming networks of wealth and alliances beyond imagination.

More than that, the Guild itself commanded great strength. Among its ranks were numerous Awakeners, individuals who wielded formidable abilities. Rumor even held that the Guildmaster himself had reached the exalted Master Rank.

Faced with Nock's respect, the two young men showed only scorn. Their eyes gleamed with arrogance, their tone lofty, as though they addressed a servant.

"Nock," one of them replied coldly. "Our mentor remains in meditation. When his meditation is complete, he will break through to Expert Rank."

Nock's eyes widened, delight sparking across his face. Each advance in Awakener rank represented a transformation of power. For Butler Brown to ascend to Expert Rank meant a massive leap in influence.

This was not just anyone—this was Butler Brown of the Unicorn Guild, the very man who stood as Nock's backer.

Though Nock had aligned himself with Troy, in his heart he had no desire to live forever in another man's shadow. Every man harbored ambition, and Nock was no exception.

And with Butler Brown at his side, perhaps his ambitions could soar even higher.

Chapter 14: Chapter14-The Slaughter Begins

Unnoticed, the sky had darkened completely, and night draped itself over the land.

Around the perimeter of Nock's castle, guards patrolled as usual, their boots echoing across the cobblestones. Yet in the next instant, something unnatural occurred. Every man halted, frozen in mid-step, and then, almost simultaneously, their heads toppled from their shoulders, rolling across the ground like discarded fruit.

Eighteen Elemental Assassins had entered the estate, silent as shadows, leaving no trace behind. None had seen them come. None had even heard a whisper.

Their division of labor was precise, practiced, and merciless. Four of them remained at the gates, their blades ready to cut down any fool who attempted to flee. The remaining fourteen slipped noiselessly into the depths of the castle itself, moving like phantoms through corridors and courtyards.

Nock, as the Minister of War, had taken great measures to secure his estate. His guards were numerous, vigilant, and well-trained. But even so, they never saw the Assassins coming. Not a single cry was raised until it was far too late.

In the hidden corners of the night, countless guards fell where they stood, cut down in silence. One by one they collapsed, blood spreading dark across the flagstones. No alarm bells rang. No clashing of steel echoed. Only the soundless fall of corpses testified to the massacre.

Ten minutes passed before the stillness was broken at last by a piercing scream. It echoed through the castle halls, shattering the illusion of safety.

The residents of the castle—the servants, attendants, and kin of Nock—finally realized that something was horribly, terribly wrong. By the time they noticed, however, it was already too late.

The guards were gone. Every last one. Their bodies lay butchered, piled into grotesque arrangements. In the great hall of the castle, corpses and severed heads had been stacked into a grisly mound, a mountain of the dead.

When word of the horror reached Nock, he hurried to the hall under the protection of his personal guard.

The moment his eyes fell upon that dreadful sight—the mountain of slaughter, the lifeless faces of his men—his expression twisted. His fury darkened his face to the color of ash.

"What in the hells has happened here?!" he roared. "Who has done this? Who dares to butcher my men?!"

His voice thundered through the chamber, demanding answers, demanding reason where none could be found. But the servants, trembling and weeping, could offer no response. Some of them, driven mad by fear, turned and bolted, rushing desperately toward the exits in a blind frenzy.

The sight made Nock's jaw tighten—but then he froze.

For as the servants fled, their bodies reached a certain point in the hall. And there, without warning, their heads separated cleanly from their necks. Blood sprayed in crimson arcs as each fell lifeless to the ground.

The only trace of their killers was a faint stirring of the air, a breeze brushing past as if mocking them all.

Nock's heart pounded in his chest as he watched his household descend into carnage. The castle became a charnel house, the stench of fresh blood saturating the air. The floor glistened dark red, slick beneath the feet of the terrified survivors.

Several of his most loyal guards, seeing their lord, rushed forward to stand at his side. They had scarcely taken two steps before their heads were lopped clean off, tumbling to the floor.

"The wind..." Nock whispered, his pupils shrinking sharply. He had noticed it now—the pattern, the fleeting sign. It was not blades he saw, but currents of air, sharper than steel.

His instincts screamed, and in the same breath he summoned his inner energy. He was no stranger to blood. He had risen from the rank of a mere soldier to the highest office

of War Minister through carnage and cunning. Countless lives already stained his hands. He was no stranger to death, and he was not one to cower.

Snarling, he strode out of the hall, intent on hunting down these unseen assassins. But when he stepped into the courtyard, his breath caught.

What greeted him was devastation.

Everywhere, the bodies of his kin lay strewn across the ground. His wives, his concubines, his children, his brothers and sisters, even his aging parents—all of them had been decapitated. Their lifeless corpses sprawled in pools of blood, faces frozen in horror.

Nock's body trembled violently. Rage and grief surged through him like fire and poison entwined. His teeth clenched, his features twisted with fury until his face became a mask of pure madness.

Around him, the few remaining guards pressed in tight, their faces pale, eyes darting toward every shadow.

"My lord, are you unharmed?" one of them asked, though his voice quavered.

"Who is doing this?!" another cried.

Nock's throat burned as he bellowed, voice hoarse yet filled with uncontainable wrath.

"It is the ghosts! It must be them!"

"They are unseen, untouchable, yet they kill with ease! Too many of our number have already fallen to these specters!"

His fury boiled over. "So this is the so-called ghost!"

He drew his sword with a roar, swinging it with all his might. The blade tore through the air, unleashing a torrent of sword energy. The currents surged outward, cutting across the courtyard in wide arcs, striking walls and statues alike.

Nock's plan was simple—if the killers could not be seen, then he would cover the space in indiscriminate strikes. He would force them into the open.

But scarcely had the light of his sword faded when screams erupted behind him. He whirled, eyes wide, only to see his guards collapsing one by one, their heads severed mid-scream.

"Damn you!" Nock howled. His voice cracked with desperation. "Whoever you are, come out! Face me! Do you dare to fight me openly? Or are you nothing but rats skulking in the shadows?!"

His rage spiraled into madness. He longed to lay eyes upon his enemy, to clash steel against steel. But no matter how he raged, no matter how he searched, there was nothing.

"Lord Nock, we must retreat!" one of the few survivors pleaded. "We cannot fight them! Not like this!"

The last of his guards formed a barrier around him, guiding him deeper into the castle. They knew that only one hope remained: to reach that man. Only in his presence might they have a chance of survival.

Even so, as they fled through the corridors, men continued to fall, struck down by unseen blades.

The castle had become a vision of hell. Every wall dripped with blood. The air reeked of iron and fear.

But at last, Nock reached the innermost chamber. Before the great doors stood two young men in ornate robes, both frowning at the sight of him.

Nock wasted no time on dignity. He collapsed to his knees, pounding the ground, his voice breaking into a desperate cry.

"Butler Brown! Save me, I beg you!"

The two young men began to sneer at him, their lips parting to chastise his pitiful display. But before they could speak, their eyes widened.

Behind Nock, his remaining guards were dying in droves. One after another, their heads fell from their shoulders, rolling across the blood-slick stone.

The Elemental Assassins showed no mercy, no hesitation. Their orders were absolute: annihilate Nock's bloodline, leave none alive. All who dwelled within these walls were marked for death.

Even as Nock groveled at the chamber doors, the slaughter did not pause.

Then, suddenly, the air changed.

A surge of overwhelming energy pulsed from within the chamber. It was so vast, so potent, that the doors themselves exploded outward in a thunderous blast. The entire castle quaked under its force.

From within, a figure emerged, each step carrying with it waves of raw power that rolled across the courtyard. The very air seemed to tremble around him, bending to his will.

The assassins' unseen winds faltered, stilled for the briefest of moments.

The two young men instantly turned, bowing low with reverence.

Nock lifted his bloodshot eyes, as did the last of his shattered guard. All of them fixed their gaze upon the newcomer.

A subtle aura of energy radiated around his form, circling him like a mantle. For those with trained eyes, the truth was obvious: this was no ordinary man.

Only those of Expert Rank could project their energy beyond their bodies, controlling it at will.

Butler Brown had broken through. He had ascended.

His cold gaze swept across the courtyard, pausing upon the kneeling figure of Nock and the ruin spread behind him. Blood, corpses, and horror lay in every direction. His frown deepened. Closing his eyes briefly, he extended his senses, probing the space with his new power.

And yet—nothing.

He found no trace of the killers. No disturbance, no ripple, not even a hint of the presence that had slain so many.

Impossible. With his strength, he should have detected something. Anything. Yet the shadows mocked him with silence.

Nock, meanwhile, had begun to recover his breath. His mind cleared, his fury narrowing to a razor's edge. In his thoughts, a single name blazed with certainty.

His lips twisted, his voice trembling with rage.

"Aurek. It's you!"

Chapter 15: Chapter15-When the Expert Rank Strikes

"Tell me! Was it Aurek who sent you?!"

Nock's head jerked upward, his voice erupting into a hoarse, furious roar that echoed across the bloody hall. His rage was no longer the rage of confusion, but of realization. The puzzle pieces had finally fallen into place.

The mysterious force that annihilated the Blackfish Gang. The unseen hand that shattered Wood's limbs. The assassins who tonight butchered his household and turned his castle into a slaughterhouse.

They were all Aurek's doing.

At last, the truth dawned on him.

His mind flashed back to the moment at the western gate of Valoria Palace earlier that very day. He remembered the young emperor's words, cold and threatening. He had thought Aurek's fury then was nothing more than the impotent rage of a powerless monarch, a caged lion baring its teeth.

But now he realized the joke had always been on him.

The true clown was himself.

Aurek—this seemingly indecisive and unremarkable emperor of the Crossbridge Empire—had hidden his strength in plain sight, fooling them all. He had played the weakling while secretly wielding a power so terrifying it could alter the fate of kingdoms.

How laughable! How blind he had been!

He had once believed the most dangerous man in the empire was Jacoff, the Grand Marshal, or perhaps Troy with his intricate webs of influence. Yet all along, the emperor had been the wolf in sheep's clothing, biding his time in silence.

But what of it?

Even if Aurek possessed this dreadful power, what could it change? The empire was collapsing, crumbling like a rotted edifice. No matter how fiercely the emperor struggled, the ending would remain the same—ruin and dust.

As Nock's thoughts burned with fury and despair, the Elemental Assassins adjusted their positions. They had felt it too—the suffocating aura radiating from Butler Brown.

This was the pressure of an Expert Rank awakener. His presence was like a mountain pressing down upon them. Compared to Elite Rank, the difference was like night and day.

And yet, the assassins did not flinch. Their faceless discipline was unbroken.

Five of them slipped soundlessly toward Butler Brown's back, their movements so subtle they seemed to merge with the night itself. The others spread outward, weaving themselves into an invisible formation that hemmed the battlefield with silent menace.

A breeze stirred. Two of Nock's surviving guards stiffened as though touched by an invisible blade. In the next heartbeat their heads spun into the air, blood spraying across the flagstones.

But in that same instant, Butler Brown moved.

No one saw where the weapon came from, but suddenly a longsword glimmered in his grip. He raised it casually, and then his body blurred. In a flash he appeared beside the fallen guards, his blade already carving arcs of killing light.

Sword energy burst outward, dense and unrelenting. The space ahead was sealed within a lattice of blades, as though an iron web had been flung over the courtyard.

Two of the assassins were forced to retreat, their forms twisting into existence as they strained to block the flood of sword strikes.

For the first time, the crowd saw them—saw the "ghosts" that had haunted the empire.

And the sight froze their blood.

They were not men. Not creatures of flesh and bone. They were puppets—soulless constructs encased in armor, their faces hidden, their movements eerily mechanical.

Nock's jaw dropped. The realization struck him like lightning. These were no assassins of flesh—they were puppets, engineered with terrifying skill.

Butler Brown's eyes narrowed. Shock flickered across his stern face.

Puppets were nothing new to him. Many organizations employed them. Some even specialized in their creation, and there was said to exist an entire guild devoted solely to the art of puppet mastery.

Yet these were unlike anything he had ever encountered.

To conceal themselves so completely, to move unseen and strike with the subtlety of a whispering breeze—such craftsmanship was beyond belief. Even Butler Brown, who had seen the wonders of the world, was astonished.

"So, the emperor of the Crossbridge Empire is not the fool he pretends to be," Butler Brown murmured coldly. "To think mere puppets could withstand my strikes."

If word spread, none would believe it. Two constructs, standing firm against the onslaught of an Expert Rank.

His eyes gleamed with interest.

"I must see what secrets lie within you."

With a snort, he swung his sword once more. Steel rang, and his energy surged.

But this time he no longer toyed with them. His power unfurled in full force. The energy within his body surged outward, condensing into countless threads of invisible force. They stretched across the battlefield, filling the space like the strings of a vast, unseen instrument.

His sword dissolved into starlight, a thousand gleaming sparks. Within the lattice of energy threads, the fragments of his weapon darted and weaved, flickering with impossible speed.

With a single blade, Butler Brown forged an entire net of swords.

Murderous intent filled every inch of the air.

Gasps rippled through those who remained alive. Nock's surviving guards stood frozen, eyes wide. For the first time, they witnessed what true power looked like.

"So this... this is Expert Rank?" one whispered, his voice trembling.

The two young men from the Unicorn Trading Guild watched with barely restrained excitement, their eyes glowing with hunger. This was the power their mentor commanded, the future they longed for.

But suddenly, Butler Brown's attack faltered. His body stilled, his brow furrowing.

A killing intent swept across his back, sharp as a dagger at his throat.

He spun instinctively, placing his sword behind him in a swift parry. Sparks exploded as steel met steel, the clang of metal ringing like thunder. A dagger had struck from the shadows, deflected at the last instant.

Before he could turn fully, a breeze surged before him. The two young men cried out in alarm.

"Mentor! Ahead of you!"

Butler Brown smirked coldly. With a twist of his wrist, the longsword at his back flared with light, and in a blink it cleaved forward to his front.

The assassins melted away, their forms dissolving into the air once more.

Nock gaped in disbelief. He had never imagined enemies so elusive, so relentless. Puppets that could vanish and reappear at will? If he had not seen it himself, he would have sworn such things were impossible.

The two young men drew their swords, their faces tense. These constructs were too dangerous. They could not stand idle while their mentor fought.

Then, out of the corner of their eyes, they saw it—something shifting, a shadow darting behind Butler Brown.

"Mentor! Behind you!" they shouted desperately, rushing forward.

Butler Brown's face twisted. His voice snapped out like a whip.

"No! Stay back!"

The two froze, confused. Why such urgency?

And then, a strange sensation gripped them.

The world tilted. Their bodies seemed to lift into the air. Their vision spun as they looked down—and saw their own headless corpses crumpling below.

For a heartbeat they did not comprehend it. The horror only struck when they realized the truth.

That was their blood on the stones. That was their flesh collapsing lifelessly.

They were dead.

Two young apprentices, awakeners of Apprentice Rank, cut down in an instant without so much as a chance to defend themselves.

The courtyard grew still, heavy with dread.

How many puppets lurked unseen? How many blades hovered in the air, waiting for the next strike?

The survivors felt a crushing despair settle over them. None could escape the thought: death was everywhere.

No one knew whose head would be the next to fall.