

Summoning Millions of Gods Daily, My Strength Equals Theirs Combined #Chapter 24 -24-The Attitudes of All Parties - Read Summoning Millions of Gods Daily, My Strength Equals Theirs Combined Chapter 24 -24-The Attitudes of All Parties

Chapter 24: Chapter24-The Attitudes of All Parties

After a long and heated discussion, the members of the Royalist Party still failed to arrive at a clear conclusion.

Yet in the end, they had already reached a consensus of a different sort—whether or not this matter truly had anything to do with His Majesty, for the Royalist Party, it was a boon.

No matter the truth, they could seize this chance to strengthen themselves.

And so, their preparations were made accordingly.

To be cautious, however, William laid out further instructions:

"Regarding His Majesty's actual situation, I will personally investigate it together with Heimerdinger. As for the Grand Marshal and the Minister of Police, you must assign people to watch them closely."

His expression grew heavy as he continued,

"This time His Majesty's methods were anything but gentle. I worry that they might harbor dangerous thoughts of their own."

Rumors Among the People

The incident concerning the Minister of War, Nock, spread like a wild gust of wind, quickly blowing through every household.

Even the ordinary citizens of Eryndor began to hear the news.

And their reactions were filled with shock.

After all, by long-established reputation, Emperor Aurek's timidity and weakness had already become deeply ingrained in the hearts of the people.

But now? This same emperor had resorted to such forceful measures.

Whispers filled the streets:

"It seems the political situation in the capital will soon become turbulent."

"The empire has long since grown old. Its so-called prosperity is but a façade. Perhaps it won't be long before the Crossbridge Empire is consigned to history."

"And maybe, perhaps, a change of dynasty isn't such a bad thing after all..."

Even the commoners, in their own crude way, could see through the surface. They knew well the empire's condition.

Outside of Eryndor—the capital that alone clung to a semblance of stability—most of the provinces had already fallen into chaos.

Countless factions, great and small, fought like sharks in bloody waters. No one cared in the slightest what decrees Aurek sent forth from his palace.

For the Crossbridge Empire, only Eryndor still bore the gilded mask of imperial prosperity.

And now, even that mask seemed ready to crack.

Clover Auction House

In the southern quarter of Eryndor, within the most luxurious private chamber of the Clover Auction House, two figures sat together over afternoon tea:

Kafka, president of the Auction House.

Snow, patriarch of the powerful Kazek family.

Behind them, several young men and women of the new generation stood in respectful silence, attending their elders.

Snow finally broke the silence, his tone edged with unease:

"President Kafka, how do you view this matter?"

Kafka calmly lifted his teacup, taking a small sip before replying with deliberate leisure:

"This matter changes nothing."

Snow's brows furrowed.

"What do you mean...?"

Kafka set his cup down and answered evenly:

"The empire is beyond saving. You, of all people, should know that better than I. Though this emperor's actions are surprising, they cannot alter the inevitable."

Snow's frown deepened, lines creasing his forehead.

"Then do you think the emperor is attempting to bring change? To rescue this empire that stands upon its final twilight?"

Kafka chuckled lightly.

"What else could his motives be? If not to save the empire, then why stir up all this noise with meaningless acts?"

Another sip of tea. He continued with mild detachment:

"Still, I must admit, he is more clear-headed than those who came before him. Had he been born two centuries earlier, perhaps—just perhaps—he might have reversed the tide and rewritten destiny itself."

He sighed.

"But alas, he came into the world too late. The trend is set, the end inevitable. No emperor's resolve can now turn back the flood. To persist is meaningless."

Kafka's eyes glimmered as he added,

"I suspect His Majesty himself already sees this truth. Likely his only wish now is to ensure the empire does not collapse in his hands, and that history does not curse his name as the monarch who ruined Crossbridge."

The Younger Generation's Voices

At these words, the young girl standing nearby could no longer hide her dissatisfaction.

Her eyes shone with youthful stubbornness.

"Uncle, must it really be so? From what you've said, this young emperor seems remarkable to me. He knows the end is written, yet he refuses to surrender!"

Beside her, her elder brother spoke, his tone cool and disdainful:

"My sister, you are being naïve. In such a colossal situation, even a master-rank powerhouse could not turn the tide. What can one emperor do?"

His eyes hardened as he explained:

"The Ordon Theocracy is nothing less than a leech clinging to the Crossbridge Empire, draining away its last drops of blood. After so many years, how much lifeblood remains? Destruction is only a matter of time."

"If not for the Theocracy's involvement, the empire would already have been carved apart by enemies within and without. Tell me, in such a climate, what change can an emperor truly bring?"

The girl fell silent, though the admiration in her gaze did not dim.

Everyone with eyes could see: the Crossbridge Empire was terminally ill.

Unless the gods themselves descended, salvation was impossible.

The girl muttered softly:

"Then doesn't that make this young emperor a tragic soul? He is my age, yet dares to defy fate itself, to fight even knowing death awaits him. I find that... admirable."

Her brother scoffed openly.

"Admirable? Perhaps. But what use is admiration against destiny? The empire's fall is fated, and that is his destiny as emperor—to shepherd it into decline."

The weight of inevitability silenced even youthful hope.

Snow turned once more toward Kafka, respect flickering in his eyes.

"Clover Auction House truly harbors extraordinary minds. Tell me, do you intend to leave Eryndor?"

Kafka gave a soft laugh, shaking his head.

"For the Clover Auction House, the rise and fall of empires are but passing seasons. Our trade will continue, no matter which banner flies above the city walls."

Sapphire Bank

Meanwhile, in the glittering heart of Eryndor stood the Sapphire Bank.

On its top floor, within a chamber more lavish than many royal halls, sat its branch manager, Josephine.

Reclining lazily on a velvet sofa, she sipped her tea with practiced grace, her posture both indulgent and seductive.

Through half-lidded eyes she gazed toward the sky, then at the silhouette of Valoria Palace in the distance.

Her voice was a murmur to herself:

"If the Crossbridge Empire collapses now, that would be... troublesome."

Yet she knew the outcome was not for her to decide. Much would depend upon the will of Cardinal Austin, the crimson-robed hierarch whose shadow loomed behind the empire's fate.

With a thoughtful smile, Josephine reached across her desk, took up a feathered quill, and scrawled a few casual lines on a sheet of fine paper.

Then she tapped the surface of her ornate desk, summoning an attendant.

A clerk hurried in and bowed deeply.

"Manager Josephine, what are your orders?"

She answered with calm authority:

"There may be trouble ahead. Tell the staff to be careful in all dealings. And as for our business with the imperial government—suspend it for now. I will wait and see where the wind blows before deciding further."

The clerk bowed again.

"Understood, Manager Josephine."

And so, while His Majesty's sudden show of strength shook the capital, every faction—from nobles to merchants, from bankers to common folk—watched closely, waiting to see whether the flicker of imperial resolve could truly alter the fate of a dying empire.

Chapter 25: Chapter25-House Tascher

The deeds of Minister of War Nock could only be described as the darkest of crimes.

Aurek had no intention of sparing him.

His order was absolute—every member of Nock's family was to be executed. Not one would be left alive.

And as for Nock's allies, his collaborators, his so-called friends? They too would be hunted down. None of them would escape.

The city of Eryndor trembled.

For three days straight, tension hung in the air like a storm cloud pressing down on the people's hearts.

No laughter was heard in the streets. Conversations dropped into whispers. Every door was shut early, and the markets emptied long before dusk.

At the same time, Aurek's personal shadows multiplied.

Sixty more Elemental Assassins had been summoned to his service.

Sixty—an increase so sharp and sudden it shocked even those who thought themselves unshakable.

With the Gold Assassin at their head, this hidden legion had become a nightmare made flesh.

Even a Hero Rank powerhouse, the kind of warrior who stood as the greatest pillar of strength for smaller factions, would not be safe if Aurek turned his assassins loose.

For some factions, a Hero Rank fighter was the pinnacle of their might, the very foundation of their survival.

But in just three days, Aurek had created a force that could threaten such foundations.

It was as though, from nothing, he had conjured the strength of an independent faction.

And this was only the beginning.

His system would continue to evolve.

As his level rose, the number of assassins he could summon would grow as well. One day, that number would become a vast, unseen army stretching across the empire.

The thought filled Aurek with a grim confidence.

On the walls of Valoria Palace, he stood in silence, looking out over the countless lamps that dotted the capital like fallen stars.

Every light was a household.

Every light was one of his subjects.

They were his people, and he swore he would protect them, no matter the cost.

Behind him, Angie watched.

Her eyes were wide, her heart beating faster as she looked at his back, tall and unwavering against the night.

Her emperor had changed.

The world knew the empire was dying. Everyone knew it.

And yet Aurek had chosen to rise against that tide, to set himself against the world itself.

To Angie, still young, it was dazzling.

What girl would not admire a man who chose to fight fate itself, even knowing it was hopeless?

To her, Aurek was like the prince of every dream, the knight who fought an impossible battle with unshakable courage.

And yet she also knew the truth.

She was but Angie. A servant. A small shadow in the light of his majesty. She could never stand at his side as an equal.

Her head lowered.

Her messy thoughts were gathered and locked away deep in her heart.

When she lifted her eyes again, they were clear and pure.

"Your Majesty," she said softly, "I may be weak, and perhaps I cannot help you much. But I will always stand by your side."

Her words were quiet, but they carried a firm strength.

She understood what his actions meant. By destroying Nock and his household, Aurek had invited chaos upon the empire. Turmoil was inevitable.

Against such tides, she was powerless.

But she could remain close. She could serve him faithfully. And if the day came when her body was needed to shield him from death, she would give it willingly.

If she could protect him, even for a single heartbeat, Angie thought that her life would not have been wasted.

Aurek nodded slightly, his face calm, his eyes still fixed on the horizon.

No one could guess what thoughts lingered in his mind.

After a long pause, his voice broke the silence.

"Send word to House Tascher. I will be paying their family a visit."

Angie bowed deeply and hurried to obey.

Aurek, meanwhile, called forth the Gold Assassin.

"Send watchers," he ordered. "Jacoff and Troy. I want every movement, every word. Report everything to me."

For Aurek, the Elemental Assassins were far more than mere killers.

Their greatest strength was not the dagger in the dark.

It was their invisibility. Their ability to dissolve into the very elements themselves, slipping through shadows and walls, unseen and undetected.

Even Expert Rank warriors could not sense them.

Only those who had reached the Hero Rank, whose spiritual energy could extend outward, had any chance of detecting their presence.

And even then, that chance was slim.

Secrets could not remain secrets before Aurek.

Every man had things hidden, but with his assassins, Aurek could uncover them all.

That was the true terror of the Elemental Assassins.

Assassination was only the surface of their purpose.

With them, Aurek dreamed of scattering his shadows across the entire Crossbridge Empire.

Every movement, every whisper, every betrayal—none would escape his gaze.

A faint smile touched his lips.

"It is also time," he murmured to himself, "to see my empress."

Far across the capital, in the great fortress of House Tascher, one of the most powerful families of the empire, the clan's patriarch sat with his elders in heavy council.

Their castle was nearly the size of Valoria Palace itself, a monument to their wealth and influence.

The chamber was filled with solemn voices.

"Tell me," one elder asked, "do you believe what happened to Nock's household was truly the emperor's doing?"

Another nodded grimly. "It seems likely. Think back to the Royal Council chamber. Recall how Aurek looked at Nock. The hatred was clear."

"If that is true," a third muttered, "then we face trouble. The Unicorn Trading Guild will not swallow this humiliation. If they discover the emperor was behind it, they will certainly move against him."

The room fell quiet for a moment before another voice rose.

"What matters now is not guessing. We must learn exactly what strength Aurek commands. We cannot afford to underestimate him."

The elder hesitated, then added, "There is another piece of intelligence. From the Ordon Theocracy. A prodigy has emerged among them. His name is Sacco. The church has begun training him with the highest priority."

The air in the chamber grew heavy at once.

"Sacco? Impossible! How could he have risen so far?"

"Have you forgotten?" another demanded. "He came here once, seeking to fulfill his engagement with Josephine. And we cast him out! We humiliated him before the entire family, without the slightest courtesy."

The elders shifted uneasily. That memory was a wound they had all but buried, and now it returned with venom.

The elder who had spoken first continued, his voice low.

"I have heard that in only half a year, Sacco raised his strength to the Expert Rank. Half a year. Such speed... it is monstrous, the work of a true prodigy."

Silence spread across the council chamber.

They did not wish to admit it, but their judgment had been wrong.

Fear crept into their hearts.

Yule Tascher, the patriarch, frowned deeply. Of them all, he understood most clearly what Sacco's rise meant for their family.

But what was done could not be undone. The rejection had been absolute. The bridge had been burned.

At the time, Sacco's engagement to Josephine had seemed laughable, an insult to their noble blood. Refusing him had felt natural. Perhaps it had even been correct.

But the cruelty of how they had done it—that was the true mistake.

One elder finally broke the silence. "Yule, we must consider leaving ourselves a retreat."

Another quickly added, "Yes. The empire itself is crumbling. Even the protection of the crimson-robed cardinal will not last forever. And when Sacco grows stronger, it may take only a single word from him to strip away that protection."

The words lingered in the air, heavy as stone.

And when that day came, the elder said with dread certainty, neither Josephine nor House Tascher would be spared.

Chapter 26: Chapter26-Empress Josephine

The elders present were all shrewd and worldly men. Each of them had lived long enough to see countless shifts of power, and they could instantly read between the lines of any situation. They were well aware that with Sacco's terrifying potential, it would not take him long to fully grow into his strength. Once he did, a single word from his mouth could plunge the entire Crossbridge Empire into irreparable ruin.

One elder spoke in a heavy voice, his tone reflecting the gravity of the moment. "Right now, the Crossbridge Empire is extremely dangerous. Many major organizations have already withdrawn from the imperial capital."

Another added, "Should our House Tascher also follow suit and retreat? Perhaps it would be best to leave this land of turmoil altogether. The Empire is nothing but a vortex of disaster."

A third elder continued, his eyes narrowing. "Josephine, at least, has the protection of the Sapphire Bank. That should ensure her safety. But for us, House Tascher, there is no reason to be dragged down into the abyss alongside the Empire."

Indeed, this empire had already reached the end of its road. Its decline was irreversible. And if Sacco were to unleash his vengeance upon it, then what awaited would not

simply be additional misfortune—it would most likely mean the complete obliteration of all who stood in the wrong place.

Thus, the wisest course of action seemed clear: to distance themselves from the Crossbridge Empire before disaster struck.

Yule, the head of House Tascher, sat with furrowed brows. His face betrayed hesitation and uncertainty. He too had to carefully weigh the potential gains and risks of such a choice. At times, fleeing from danger was not the true solution. Sometimes running only made one appear weaker and invited other predators to strike.

Just as his thoughts churned, a servant's hurried voice rang from outside the chamber doors."My lord, His Majesty the Emperor is coming to House Tascher!"

The words stunned the assembly. Yule and the other elders exchanged quick glances, each filled with confusion. At this particular moment, why would the Emperor personally come to House Tascher?

After a brief silence, Yule finally gave his reply."I understand. Go at once to the Sapphire Bank and inform Josephine. Tell her to return so she may join us in welcoming His Majesty."

The servant bowed quickly and departed. Yet inside the hall, the elders could no longer hold back their murmurs.

"What could be the Emperor's purpose, coming to us now of all times?" one asked.

This question lingered uncomfortably in every elder's mind. Before doubt could fester further, Yule raised his hand and spoke with authority."Regarding Sacco, I want all of you to keep this matter strictly confidential for now. As for His Majesty's true intentions, I believe we will not have to wait long to hear them from his own lips."

He paused, his eyes sweeping across his peers."The Emperor's arrival may not necessarily be a bad thing for us. It could provide an opportunity—a chance to observe firsthand what stance he intends to take."

The news that Emperor Aurek was personally coming to House Tascher spread quickly. Immediately, the great household was set into a flurry of activity. Servants rushed about preparing the castle halls, the elders adjusted their ceremonial attire, and every corridor hummed with nervous anticipation.

At the same time, Josephine—who had been occupied with her duties at the Sapphire Bank—also received word. After a brief moment of contemplation, she made her way back to her family estate.

When the preparations were nearly complete, the rumble of wheels on stone echoed at the castle gates. At last, Aurek's carriage arrived and halted before the entrance of House Tascher's ancestral castle.

The door opened, and down stepped the tall, commanding figure of Emperor Aurek. His presence was striking. With sharp brows, star-like eyes, and an aura that seemed to sweep across the world, he carried himself with a majesty that was impossible to ignore.

Yule, as patriarch of House Tascher, was the first to step forward. He bowed respectfully. "Your Majesty Aurek, it is the greatest honor of our family to receive you at House Tascher."

The Emperor's reply was brief, but carried weight. "The glory of Crossbridge rests with you as well."

His voice was calm, almost detached, yet the words carried enough gravitas to silence the courtyard.

Then Aurek's gaze shifted. His eyes came to rest upon Josephine.

Josephine stood among them, radiant and dignified. She wore a formal gown that highlighted her tall, elegant figure. Around her slender, snow-white neck hung a dazzling gem-studded necklace. Her sapphire-blue eyes sparkled with clarity, and her golden wavy hair cascaded like sunlight across her shoulders.

But more captivating than her beauty was the aura she carried—a mysterious quality that set her apart from every other noblewoman. Unlike the superficial airs of aristocracy, Josephine's presence suggested something deeper, something enigmatic.

Aurek could not help but admire her. He had once thought that Angie was among the most beautiful women he had ever met. But standing before Josephine, he realized she surpassed Angie by far. Not only in appearance, but in temperament. Josephine's allure was undeniable.

Indeed, she truly lived up to her reputation as the most celebrated beauty of the Crossbridge Empire.

And beyond that, she was also the Empire's yet-unwedded Empress. Aurek mused inwardly with a faint smirk. Yes... it seemed his future wife was, without doubt, beautiful enough to satisfy even an emperor's standards.

For Aurek, to be emperor was not only about wielding power and authority. Beauty and companionship were also among the rightful enjoyments of his position. With Josephine by his side, he finally began to feel he had something close to the image of a true sovereign.

"Your Majesty, please, this way," Yule said, gesturing forward.

Aurek inclined his head and stepped into the castle halls, Yule leading the way. Josephine followed close behind, casting a thoughtful glance at Aurek's back. The elders of House Tascher trailed behind them, keeping their respectful distance. None of them had the privilege to walk beside the Emperor himself.

Soon, the group entered the grand reception hall of House Tascher.

Aurek's gaze swept across the assembled elders. Their postures were perfectly respectful, their words courteous, yet Aurek could clearly see through their act. Their reverence was superficial, nothing more than polite pretense.

House Tascher was, after all, one of the greatest aristocratic families within the entire Empire. Behind them stood considerable resources and influence, even forces that existed beyond the Empire's borders. Yule himself was an Expert Rank warrior, a formidable man by ordinary standards. And most of the elders here were of Elite Rank, impressive in their own right.

In past days, such a force would have been considered highly powerful—worthy even of an emperor's attempts to court their loyalty. But for Aurek now, their strength seemed pitifully lacking. He felt no real urge to draw them into his fold.

The silence grew heavy. Finally, Yule broke it with a carefully measured question. "We wonder, Your Majesty, what business brings you to House Tascher this day?"

Aurek's lips curved slightly, his eyes once again shifting toward Josephine. "I have merely come to see the Empress."

Josephine dipped her head slightly, offering a serene smile. "Your Majesty, I thank you for your concern."

As she spoke, her sapphire eyes studied him intently. She had long been aware of the downfall of the Minister of War Nock's household, and in her role as a manager of the Sapphire Bank, she had even made certain arrangements behind the scenes. Yet what truly puzzled her was the transformation before her.

Why had the once-weak emperor changed so utterly, as though he had become an entirely different person? Why was he now stirring storms across the capital with such force? And for what ultimate goal?

Aurek's calm voice interrupted her thoughts. "I have already begun preparations for the coronation ceremony of the Empress. If House Tascher faces any difficulties, speak of them now."

As he finished, his gaze swept over Yule and every elder in the hall.

The words landed like a thunderclap. The elders exchanged looks, their faces betraying unease. They understood perfectly: this was no casual remark. This was a demand—a direct pressure from the Emperor himself.

Now, House Tascher would have to make a choice.

But what choice would it be?

Every pair of eyes gradually turned toward Yule, the patriarch. The weight of decision lay squarely on his shoulders.

House Tascher's fate would be determined here.

Chapter 27: Chapter27-The Forceful Emperor

When the members of House Tascher laid eyes upon Aurek, silence immediately settled over them like a suffocating shroud.

Aurek's brows furrowed without his even realizing it. His voice cut through the air, low but filled with authority. "What is it? Are you troubled by something? Do you have difficulties you cannot speak of?"

Before the family patriarch Yule could reply, one of the elders could no longer restrain himself. He stepped forward, his voice hesitant but carrying a dangerous note of defiance.

"Your Majesty... I believe the current situation in the empire is far from stable. Perhaps it would be wiser if the Empress's coronation were delayed. Just for the time being."

Yule coughed lightly, clearly displeased, and turned a sharp glare toward the elder. But he did not openly rebuke him.

The other elders exchanged glances and then chose silence, none daring to speak, though their eyes betrayed their agreement.

The one elder who had spoken seemed to have already thrown caution to the wind, choosing to smash the jar once it was cracked. There was no fear left in his heart—only a desperate stubbornness.

He spoke more boldly now, each word laced with cynicism. "In my opinion, the empire is plagued with problems within. To be blunt, I do not wish for our House Tascher to plunge headfirst into this muddy water."

At these words, the other elders lowered their heads further, even Yule averted his eyes. No one wanted to confront Aurek directly.

But then, a calm and frosty voice suddenly broke the silence.

"Elder, I suggest you pay closer attention to your tone when speaking before His Majesty. And do not forget—your words represent only yourself. They do not speak for House Tascher as a whole. And they most certainly do not represent me."

The voice belonged to Josephine.

Her sudden interjection took Aurek off guard. He turned his head slightly, surprise flickering across his expression as he looked at her.

The entire political situation of the Crossbridge Empire was clear enough now. House Tascher, as one of the empire's great noble houses, surely saw it even more clearly than most.

Yet Aurek could not understand—why had House Tascher insisted on binding themselves to the royal family through marriage? What greater calculation lay hidden behind their decision?

But just moments ago, Aurek had confirmed one thing. House Tascher was preparing to abandon ship.

It was hardly surprising. Anyone with clear eyes could see that Aurek's odds of victory were slim, his position precarious. The empire teetered.

And yet Josephine, instead of distancing herself, had openly sided with him.

Why?

Could it be... that she was moved by his bearing? His poise? His kingly aura? Aurek almost chuckled at the thought. Absurd. Though, he admitted to himself, he did look rather handsome standing there.

Josephine turned toward Aurek, lowering her gaze respectfully. "Please forgive them, Your Majesty."

Through it all, Aurek's expression remained calm, his eyes cool and steady.

"I already understand. Your House Tascher doubts my ability to protect you."

The blunt words struck like thunder. Yule flinched, panic flashing across his face, and hurried to speak. "Your Majesty, that is not what we meant!"

Aurek's eyes narrowed, cold light flickering like steel. "I know that behind you lurk shadows, other powers pulling strings. But I do not care about them. What I will not allow is for you to question my strength."

The moment he finished speaking, a chill like a blade swept through the air.

And then, in an instant, everyone present—save for Aurek and Josephine—felt it.

An oppressive, lethal aura surged over them, pressing down on their bodies and souls.

It was the sensation of standing at death's edge. The certainty that if they dared to move even slightly, their lives would be extinguished.

And this was no mere illusion. Someone was deliberately exuding killing intent, letting them taste the breath of death itself.

Yule, House Tascher's only Expert Rank powerhouse, was the most shaken of all. His senses screamed at him. He could feel those hidden blades surrounding them, dozens, perhaps hundreds.

And yet, no matter how he tried, he could not lock onto their locations.

"What... what is happening?"

The elders' faces paled. They looked about frantically, searching for hidden enemies. But there was nothing—no figure in sight, no fluctuation of energy they could pinpoint.

Ghosts.

The word struck their minds all at once. Ghosts!

And with that thought came another image, horrifying and unforgettable: the annihilation of the Blackfish Gang, slaughtered to the last man, their entire clan erased overnight.

The realization dawned, and fear gripped their hearts.

The Emperor had such terrifying power at his command? How could they have been so blind, so foolish as to underestimate him?

Yule and the elders understood, in that instant, the gravity of their mistake.

They had gravely underestimated their Emperor.

Josephine's eyes, meanwhile, glittered with something else—interest. She studied Aurek more closely, her lips curving ever so slightly. Was it amusement? Curiosity? Perhaps even expectation.

The elders, however, could bear it no longer. They dropped into hurried bows, their voices trembling. "Your Majesty, please... please do not be angry!"

Faced with the edge of death, all their dignity crumbled to dust.

These were men who had climbed to the pinnacle of wealth and power. But when death reached out for them, all they could think of was survival. Family honor? The rise or fall of the empire? Such things meant nothing when compared to their own fragile lives.

Aurek's voice was cold, but not without restraint. "For the Empress's sake, I will spare you this once."

He lifted his hand ever so slightly.

In that instant, the suffocating killing aura dissipated like smoke, leaving the room suddenly weightless.

The elders gasped, relief flooding their faces as if they had just crawled back from the abyss itself.

But they had no idea that the Elemental Assassins were standing behind them the entire time. Silent, invisible, blades ready to fall at the slightest command.

The assassins had simply hidden their killing intent, but their presence was real. Had the elders so much as twitched the wrong way, their heads would have rolled before they even knew it.

This was the terror of the Elemental Assassins.

And they were only one branch of Aurek's hidden forces. Who knew what other troops lay waiting? Units more powerful, more terrifying still.

Even Aurek himself could not say for certain.

But today, he had not come to House Tascher to kill. The killing aura had been nothing but a warning, a reminder.

And with such a clever, perceptive woman as Josephine standing at his side, he saw no need to push the Tascher family into a corner.

"Concerning the Empress's coronation ceremony," Aurek said, his tone cold but measured, "see to it at once. I do not wish to wait too long."

This time, not a single voice dared rise in opposition.

Even Yule's tone shifted completely, his earlier reluctance swept away. "Rest assured, Your Majesty. House Tascher will carry out the task with utmost diligence."

By now, Yule had fully understood.

The Emperor's visit today was not just to push House Tascher forward—it was a show of power, a warning, and a declaration.

And that power was far greater than they had ever imagined.

After a moment of thought, Yule spoke again, more cautiously this time. "Your Majesty, there is another matter we wished to report. Rumor has it that within the capital, several factions are already preparing to leave. If it pleases you, I can speak with them on your behalf. If you were to recruit them, they may lend their strength to your cause. Their resources are not insignificant. They could be of use."

Aurek's lips curled into a cold smile.

So, there were factions abandoning the empire, unwilling to bet their lives on him. To recruit them would mean offering concessions, paying a price.

And if a mere Expert Rank like Yule could move them with words, then how powerful could they truly be?

Worthless.

Trash.

Aurek nearly laughed aloud.

"They are nothing but refuse. In my eyes, not even worth mentioning. If they wish to leave, then let them go."

His voice was utterly calm, his tone indifferent, as if speaking of dust carried away by the wind.

To him, these so-called factions were meaningless.

And in that moment, House Tascher finally began to understand.

This Emperor was no weakling clinging to a throne. He was forceful, unyielding, and merciless—a ruler who would not bow to circumstance, but bend the world itself to his will.

Chapter 28: Chapter28-Imperial Knights

Yule, along with the elders of House Tascher, were utterly stunned by what they had just heard.

Any faction worthy of being called a true power would have at least one Expert Rank master guarding it. That was the bare minimum for survival and influence. Such forces

were usually courted by leaders like Jacoff and Troy, recruited and drawn into their orbit.

And yet now...

The Emperor himself had shown complete disregard for them.

Could this mean that His Majesty simply did not care for such forces at all?

But no—these groups all had Expert Rank powerhouses. Was the Emperor saying their strength was meaningless? Or was it rather that the forces under his control were already so overwhelming that he could afford to ignore them entirely?

Josephine's eyes shone more brightly at that moment, as though a light had flickered awake inside her.

Aurek glanced at her, his tone calm and even. "Josephine, give me a little time. I will show you that the Crossbridge Empire will not fall so easily."

"Perhaps no one else will believe me, but I do not care about that. All I ask is that you believe."

Something in his gaze touched her deeply. The sincerity in his eyes brushed against the softest part of her heart.

In truth, Aurek and Josephine had known each other since childhood. Their relationship had always been close. And apart from Josephine, Aurek once had another childhood friend as well, someone who had been by his side growing up.

He often longed to see that girl again. But when it was confirmed that Aurek would inherit the throne, she had quietly left the Crossbridge Empire. No one knew why. No one knew where she had gone.

But now, Josephine had chosen to trust him. And if she believed, then Aurek would stop at nothing to prove to her that her choice was not misplaced.

"Your Majesty," Josephine said firmly, "I am willing to believe in you. No matter what happens, I will not leave the capital."

Her words were solemn, her voice clear, and her gaze softened as it met his.

Yule and the other elders remained silent. They had watched Aurek grow up with their own eyes. They knew well the hardships he had endured through the years. Those very hardships had shaped him into a timid, cautious, even cowardly man.

And yet, the Aurek standing before them now seemed transformed into someone entirely different.

Still, even so, how could he hope to reverse the tide?

If he were in any other empire, perhaps Aurek could restore prosperity, perhaps he could make the nation flourish again.

But the one he had inherited was not just any nation—it was the Crossbridge Empire. A crumbling ruin of a state, riddled with corruption, fractured by factions, on the brink of collapse.

Even if Aurek had lived a thousand lives, could he ever hope to mend such a wreck?

After a long conversation, Aurek finally departed from House Tascher.

His retreating figure, however, left a deep impression. That back—the back of their Emperor—was no longer the same.

Josephine's eyes lingered on him as he walked away. And in her mind resurfaced a memory from their childhood.

"If you feel tired being Emperor, why not just stop? Don't force yourself. Don't worry, I will protect you. You don't need to bear it all alone."

"Josephine... I know you want to help me. But there are some responsibilities that I cannot escape. Some duties that fall to me, and me alone."

...

Inside the council chamber of House Tascher, Yule's gaze swept over the elders gathered there. He sighed softly. "From this day forward, House Tascher will stand with the royal family. We have no other choice."

"I only wonder... how much longer the empire can last."

One elder quickly spoke up. "Patriarch, since things have come to this, we must prepare. We cannot put all our eggs into one basket. Our family is far too large to risk it all."

"In my view, whatever happens, we should thoroughly investigate the mysterious powers behind His Majesty. We must know their true strength."

"Only if we understand his capabilities fully can we decide our next steps."

...

When Aurek returned to Valoria Palace, he did not choose to rest. Instead, he turned to Angie, who stood silently awaiting his command.

"Go and summon William and Heimerdinger to the palace."

Angie bowed immediately and left to carry out his orders.

Aurek's eyes shifted, his gaze hardening as it fell upon the thought of Troy.

The Minister of War, Nock, was little more than Troy's puppet. Which meant Troy himself was Aurek's next target.

The reason was not merely politics. Aurek needed to gather more Emperor Points. The more points he earned, the stronger he would grow.

But striking Troy would require time and precision.

In the meantime, Aurek gave orders to the Gold Assassin. Several Elemental Assassins were dispatched beyond the city walls, tasked with eliminating notorious gangs and criminal organizations.

At present, Aurek commanded ninety Elemental Assassins. There was no need to keep all of them by his side. Even if a portion were used to shadow Jacoff and Troy, many remained idle.

So why not put them to use?

Aurek's logic was simple. If they were idle, better to have them hunt down the guilty, cleanse the surrounding regions, and earn Emperor Points in the process.

After all, each day Aurek could summon twenty more Elemental Assassins anew. There was no need for fear of depletion.

It was a straightforward philosophy: **fight to feed the fight, grow stronger through battle.**

This arrangement would not only stabilize the lands around the capital but also increase his Emperor Points—a perfect outcome.

Not long after, William and Heimerdinger arrived at Valoria Palace. They bowed low as they entered. "We greet Your Majesty!"

Aurek nodded, his expression calm.

"You summoned us here, sire," William asked respectfully, "is there a new mission you wish to entrust to us?"

Aurek thought for a moment before speaking. "There is indeed. I want you to mobilize the Imperial Knights. Station them around the capital, in the three cities closest to it."

The two men exchanged startled looks.

"Your Majesty," Heimerdinger said cautiously, "to redeploy the Imperial Knights on such a scale will surely provoke unease from the other two great houses. Should they choose to act recklessly, I fear it may bring danger to you."

Aurek, however, only let out a cold laugh. A flash of killing intent gleamed in his eyes. "Yes. That is precisely what I want. I want to force them into desperation."

William and Heimerdinger were stunned, confusion plain upon their faces.

Aurek continued, his tone calm yet filled with steel. "If I do not drive them into a corner, what reason will I have to eliminate them?"

At last, the two men understood.

This Emperor meant to strike directly at the Grand Marshal and the Minister of Police. He wanted them to act rashly, to reveal their hands.

And if the mysterious power that had destroyed the Minister of War's faction truly lay in Aurek's grasp, then this was the perfect strategy.

Push them until they could bear no more, force them to act, and then... crush them.

Before the Ordon Theocracy could fully withdraw its support, Aurek would strike first.

He would not wait for the storm to come—he would become the storm himself.

Chapter 29: Chapter29-Collusion in Disgrace

William and Heimerdinger exchanged glances.

In that brief silence, both men were calculating in their hearts, weighing the feasibility of the matter at hand. Each of them knew that the empire's survival hung on thin threads, and every move had to be considered not just once, but thrice.

After a short pause, William broke the silence. His tone was cautious, yet firm.

"If His Majesty wishes to mobilize the Imperial Knights, I will raise no objection. However, according to Your Majesty's command, moving the Knights to the three cities surrounding the capital will require at least half a month."

He leaned forward slightly, as though to underline the urgency.

"So the question we must ask ourselves is not only how to move them, but how we are to safeguard Valoria Palace during those fifteen days. Half a month is enough for much to happen. And though Wood has departed from the Royal Guard, there remain within that corps far too many men whose loyalty is... questionable. That, too, must be resolved."

"Half a month..."

Aurek, seated upon his throne, rubbed the bridge of his nose. His eyes narrowed as thoughts churned within him.

If there were no uncertain variables, he calculated that within those fifteen days he could summon at least three hundred Elemental Assassins.

And if he added to that his Gold Assassins, then as long as Cardinal Austin of the Scarlet Robes did not personally intervene, Aurek himself would not be in any danger at all.

This thought gave him confidence, and he spoke aloud.

"You need not concern yourselves with the safety of Valoria Palace. That, I have already arranged. What I do need from you is this: gather and compile every detail of Jacoff and Troy. I want a full report on my desk without delay."

William's expression grew complicated. He hesitated before replying, his brows furrowing, his heart tightening with both pity and guilt.

"Your Majesty," he said slowly, "it grieves me to see you bearing so much. I wish we could help shoulder some of the burdens that weigh upon you."

"We are old men, it is true. But that does not mean we are useless. There are still many matters in which we can serve."

From William's eyes, the Emperor was still only in his early twenties—an age when a commoner would be brimming with youthful pride, when a noble youth would be surrounded by admiring young ladies casting him handkerchiefs and gazes filled with adoration.

But Aurek was no commoner, no ordinary noble.

He was born into the House of Veynar, into the bloodline of rulers. From the moment of his birth, destiny had shackled him to the weight of an empire.

And now, a decaying empire at that.

A youth barely into manhood was being forced to share the tomb of a dynasty thousands of years old. Was this not cruelty?

Cruel, yes. And William and Heimerdinger knew with bitter clarity that this cruelty had been shaped, at least in part, by their own hands.

It was they who had guided, advised, and ultimately contributed to this state of decline.

And so, standing before their young sovereign now, their hearts were filled with shame.

"Forgive us, Your Majesty," William whispered, his voice hoarse. "It is our incompetence that has led to this."

Aurek straightened in his seat, his sharp gaze falling upon the two men. His brow furrowed.

"Our enemies are watching us with eager eyes," he said gravely.

"That means neither I, nor the two of you, can afford even the slightest hint of weakness or doubt. This is not the time for self-blame. It is the time for resolve."

"Our task is singular: to ensure the Crossbridge Empire endures. An empire that has lasted ten thousand years cannot be allowed to crumble at our hands."

"As for Jacoff and Troy... in my eyes, they are nothing but jesters, clowns performing their little play."

The words struck William and Heimerdinger like a splash of cold water.

Their momentary weakness, born of regret, was gone. They exchanged a glance and silently nodded. The Emperor had reminded them of the greater cause.

Indeed, the Emperor surely had contingencies they could not yet see.

And now, the three of them were bound together—three grasshoppers tied to the same rope, sharing the same fate. None could afford retreat.

After further discussion and clarification of duties, William and Heimerdinger departed the palace.

The moment they stepped out of Valoria Palace, they made straight for the garrison of the Imperial Knights.

The capital was a city drowning in undercurrents.

Foreign threats pressed from without, while within lurked hidden forces, whispering, plotting, waiting.

William and Heimerdinger understood that they must act swiftly. They must strike before the enemy had time to adjust.

Three days later, the news exploded.

Word spread like wildfire: the Imperial Knights had been mobilized and were marching toward the capital.

The entire city of Eryndor was thrown into uproar.

Jacoff and Troy, upon hearing it, were shaken to their core.

And not only they. All factions within the capital were rattled. Even the great nobles who ruled their own fiefdoms dispatched spies to learn the truth of what was happening.

What had seemed like stagnant waters had suddenly been stirred into chaos.

Even the common folk sensed the disturbance in the air.

"The Imperial Knights..." murmured a blacksmith, hammering upon his anvil. "That's the Emperor's greatest weapon of deterrence. If His Majesty is moving them, then this empire is headed into turmoil once more."

His words echoed the unspoken fears of the people.

Meanwhile, within Jacoff's residence, the Grand Marshal's expression was darker than ever.

Not even his beloved morning coffee could bring him comfort; the cup sat cooling, untouched.

"Can anyone tell me," he growled, "what exactly the Emperor means by this?"

If it were mere intimidation, why mobilize the Imperial Knights?

The Imperial Knights were far too important to be used as a bluff.

Could it be... that the Emperor was prepared to drag the empire into mutual destruction?

The thought unsettled him, but Jacoff quickly steadied himself.

After all, he was the Grand Marshal of the empire. The armies still in his command were formidable. Panic had no place in his heart.

Troy, however, did not share such calm.

Though he was the Minister of Police, his power was mostly administrative. His actual military command was limited.

Most of the empire's armies were under Jacoff's control.

And Troy, more than anyone, feared the Imperial Knights.

For their history stretched back to the very founding of the Crossbridge Empire under the first Aurek.

They had always been loyal, unwaveringly so, to the royal family.

They were the empire's greatest bulwark, the stabilizing weight upon which all else rested.

And throughout all the centuries, no one had ever successfully infiltrated or corrupted the Imperial Knights.

This was why Troy could not sleep easily.

The more he thought, the more dread coiled in his chest.

At that moment, however, Aris, seated nearby, spoke with un hurried calm.

"You need not be so worried, Troy. In fact... this may even prove to be an opportunity."

Troy's eyes lit up instantly. He leaned forward.

"Aris, please—help me this once!"

Aris smiled faintly, neither agreeing nor refusing. His words came smooth as silk.

"With the Imperial Knights in motion, your old rival Jacoff will certainly not be able to sit still. He will be forced to act. If you remain calm, you may yet orchestrate a scenario of 'watching tigers fight from a mountain top.'"

He gestured slightly with his hand.

"Your forces may be limited, but Jacoff commands plenty of soldiers. If we maneuver things correctly, the conflict between the Grand Marshal and the Emperor will grow irreconcilable. When the two sides clash and tear each other apart... you, Troy, will have your chance to reap the fisherman's profit."

His voice lowered, carrying a conspiratorial tone.

"Troy, we are partners, are we not? And truthfully, I would very much like to see you seated upon the throne yourself."

Aris's words slithered into Troy's ears, tempting and venomous.

Troy clenched his fists beneath the table. The thought of seizing the Emperor's seat—once unthinkable—now glimmered with dangerous allure.

Chapter 30: Chapter30-White-Robed Bishop Ramos

To say that Troy felt no temptation would have been a lie.

Of course he was tempted.

Yet he remained painfully aware of his own limitations. He knew his own weight; he knew how little true power he commanded compared to the Grand Marshal or the Emperor himself. And so, suppressing the ambitious flames flickering in his heart, Troy forced himself to remain calm, hiding every trace of desire from his face.

"Aris," he said carefully, "don't joke with me. I have no thought of replacing the Emperor. After all, I don't yet have the strength for that."

Across from him, Aris only gave a faint smile. His tone was leisurely, but his words carried weight.

"The Imperial Knights are indeed formidable," Aris said. "But their power ends at the borders of the Crossbridge Empire. When faced against other forces in this vast world, they are not nearly so invincible."

"And as for us—our Leap Mercenary Corps—we are prepared to help you."

The moment those words fell, Troy's heart gave a violent lurch.

He could hear it, even feel it—his heartbeat, thudding against his ribs like a war drum.

Help from the Leap Mercenary Corps?

That was no small promise.

It was almost laughable—who wouldn't desire to become the master of the Crossbridge Empire? Who wouldn't dream of donning the crown and ruling all beneath the heavens?

Troy's eyes gleamed as he leaned forward slightly.

"If you, Aris, can truly speak on behalf of the Leap Mercenary Corps and give me your support, then I will not forget such kindness. I will see you richly rewarded."

But then a sobering thought came to him, and he added, "Still... perhaps we should also consider the stance of the Ordon Theocracy."

At this, Aris frowned, just briefly. But he did not contradict the point.

For even he understood that the Ordon Theocracy's attitude was of vital importance.

The Leap Mercenary Corps, powerful as they were, could not afford to openly offend that colossal power.

Everyone with eyes could see that the Theocracy would one day abandon the decaying Crossbridge Empire.

But until that day came, until the Ordon Theocracy made its abandonment explicit, anyone seeking to meddle with the empire had to carefully weigh and respect the Theocracy's stance.

"It seems," Troy said, forcing a smile, "that the coming days will make Eryndor City very lively indeed. Once again, Aris, allow me to thank the Leap Mercenary Corps for extending its hand to me."

Aris inclined his head in acknowledgment. He was silent for a few moments, then replied, "I will contact the Corps about this matter soon. I am confident our reinforcements will not take long to arrive."

He hesitated, then added, "In addition, I will seek an opportunity to probe the attitude of Cardinal Austin."

It was obvious now—both Troy and Aris were moved by ambition, their hearts set on schemes of betrayal.

Yet neither of them realized that, as they whispered together, a faint breeze stirred through the chamber, carrying their words into ears unknown.

Meanwhile, Jacoff had reached his own conclusion.

He could not allow the Emperor to continue his reckless course. Or rather, the true reason was simpler: the Emperor's choices threatened Jacoff's personal interests.

And so the Grand Marshal resolved to visit Cardinal Austin and lay the matter before him.

At such times, no one could predict what the next step might bring.

When Jacoff arrived at the great cathedral, he was startled to see Troy already there, waiting at the entrance.

The two men exchanged looks—knowing, wordless. Neither questioned why the other had come.

For both understood: when matters touched upon the Ordon Theocracy, secrecy was futile.

The cathedral of the Theocracy was not a place one could describe merely as "grand" or "splendid."

Its magnificence went far beyond.

The gilded arches, the towering stained-glass windows, the solemn statues and holy murals—every detail spoke of power, wealth, and authority.

It was said, not without truth, that even the Valoria Palace could not match the cathedral's opulence.

As the two men stepped forward, a devoted priest in ceremonial robes approached them.

"Lord Jacoff, Lord Troy," the priest said respectfully. "What business brings you to the cathedral today?"

"We come seeking an audience with His Eminence, Cardinal Austin," Jacoff replied curtly. "There is a matter that must be explained to him in person."

Before the priest could respond, a figure approached from within the sanctuary.

He was a middle-aged man clad in white robes, his expression calm, almost kindly. His steps were unhurried, his presence dignified without being oppressive.

He raised his hand slightly, signaling the priest to withdraw.

Then his gaze turned upon Jacoff and Troy.

"Cardinal Austin is indisposed at the moment," he said in a gentle voice. "Whatever business you bring, tell it to me. I am Bishop Ramos, and I will see that the Cardinal is informed."

Jacoff and Troy exchanged glances. After a brief pause, they both nodded.

There was little choice; to force an audience with the Cardinal would be unwise.

"Very well," Jacoff began, his tone heavy. "Bishop Ramos, the matter is this: our Emperor has gone mad!"

"He has mobilized the Imperial Knights. They march now toward the capital."

Troy added swiftly, "We fear this reckless act will provoke a chain of dangerous consequences. But His Majesty will not listen to us. Therefore we came to beg that Cardinal Austin intervene, to counsel him."

Jacoff's face darkened as he pressed on.

"The empire's armies are already too few. If the Imperial Knights are pulled away, a vacuum of power will be created. Should any sudden event occur, the blow to the empire would be disastrous."

Ramos frowned slightly as he listened.

"You need not panic so," he said at length. "If Aurek has chosen this course, then he must be prepared to bear the consequences. His Eminence Austin is presently deep in meditation. He must not be disturbed for trivialities."

"For now, the affairs of this cathedral are entrusted to me."

Jacoff and Troy both stiffened.

The Cardinal was unreachable.

But Ramos... Ramos could be influenced.

Troy stepped forward quickly, pulling something from his cloak.

It was a mana stone, gleaming with rare purity.

"Bishop Ramos," Troy said smoothly, "this is a high-grade mana stone. I need not speak of its value—you surely understand."

Jacoff followed suit, producing a small artifact from his satchel.

"Bishop Ramos," he said, "this is a rare device, capable of shielding its bearer from the strike of an Expert Rank warrior. I believe it will be of more use in your hands than mine."

Their intent could not have been clearer.

Ramos's eyes flickered. For a long moment he was silent, weighing.

At last, he extended his hands and accepted both gifts.

"Indeed," he murmured, "these are items I happen to need."

He slipped them into his sleeves, then looked at the two men with a faint smile.

"Very well. I shall personally convey your concerns to Aurek."

Then his expression shifted, as though he remembered something.

"Oh, and one more thing. News has reached us: there are... disturbances within the Ordon Theocracy itself. Matters that may ripple outward and affect the Crossbridge Empire. I suggest you both make preparations."

The words were casual, but Jacoff and Troy's hearts both leapt.

They did not know what precisely was happening within the Theocracy, but the implication was obvious.

The stance of the Ordon Theocracy was changing.

And that change would inevitably shake the empire.

Back in Valoria Palace, Aurek was busy with matters of his own.

Before his eyes, translucent prompts continued to appear one after another.

Each listed another "black force" destroyed, another tally of Emperor Points earned.

Aurek found himself quite satisfied with the harvest.

True, it was far less than the colossal reward he had reaped after exterminating the Nock family—but it was still progress.

He spent a portion of his points to raise his cultivation to Apprentice Rank, level two.

The remainder, though insufficient for another breakthrough, he chose to save for later.

During these three days, Aurek's forces had swelled yet further.

Sixty more Elemental Assassins had been summoned beneath his command.

Just then, the air shimmered, and a Gold Assassin stepped out of shadow before him.

"My Lord," the assassin said, kneeling. "News has just arrived: Troy has conspired with Aris, the vice commander of the Leap Mercenary Corps. It seems they intend rebellion."

"The Mercenary Corps may dispatch men to aid him. But their true plan is this: they mean to push Jacoff into the front, to let him bear the brunt of Your Majesty's wrath, while they sit back and watch, waiting to reap advantage."

"And more—both Jacoff and Troy have gone to the cathedral. They hope to persuade the church to intervene, to obstruct Your Majesty's designs."

The assassin's words were like daggers, slicing away the veil of intrigue.

The stage of Eryndor was set, the actors moving into place.

The coming storm could not be held back.