

## Summoning Millions of Gods Daily, My Strength Equals Theirs Combined

*Chapter 6: Chapter6-Rising 9 Levels in a Row!*

In the blink of an eye, the entire room was drenched in blood.

Other than the few awakeners who had been present, every last member of the Blackfish Gang had already been slaughtered!

It was a one-sided massacre. The killing unfolded so swiftly that it was over within just a few breaths of time. The battle ended before it had even truly begun.

Now, the only ones left breathing were the three awakeners.

But facing an enemy they could neither see nor touch, even the awakener who was their leader was driven into shrieking terror. His voice cracked as he screamed again and again,

"Who are you? Who the hell are you?!"

The other two awakeners had gone completely pale, trembling so violently that they could not even form words. Their eyes darted about wildly, but there was nothing they could latch on to—only shadows.

At that very moment, eight figures gradually revealed themselves before their eyes.

They appeared indistinct, their forms half-real and half-illusory, as though they existed in both worlds simultaneously. They seemed like phantoms born of mist, and yet there was a palpable solidity to their presence. Their outlines wavered, but no matter how hard the awakeners tried, they could not see their faces.

Just then, an icy, chilling voice broke through the oppressive silence. It came from the lips of one of those spectral assassins.

"State your identities. Tell us what faction you serve."

The sound seemed to crawl beneath the skin, colder than the sharpest blade.

Upon hearing this, the awakener leader's face twisted with horror.

He had never expected these shadowy assassins to speak. At first, he had assumed that these strange killers—who could conceal themselves so perfectly—were some kind of alchemical puppets forged by a master craftsman.

But now, he realized with dawning terror that they were no mere constructs. They were living, breathing humans!

And yet, if they were indeed flesh and blood, how could they vanish into thin air, how could they strike unseen like vengeful spirits?

The truth of their existence shattered everything he thought he knew. As an apprentice-rank awakener, one who stood proudly above the common masses, he suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

There was not a shred of doubt in his heart—these beings could snuff out his life as easily as a man might crush an ant.

"We... we are from the Unicorn Trading Guild!" he stammered desperately. "We're just following orders, nothing more! Please, don't kill me!"

The assassin's voice cut through again like a blade of frost:

"So it was the Unicorn Trading Guild that sent you to cause chaos in the outer city?"

By now the awakener had been utterly broken. His will collapsed like rotted wood, and he began to spill everything he knew without reservation.

"N-no... not just the Unicorn Trading Guild. Our activities in the outer city—they were orchestrated with help from the city's police department!"

"I've told you everything I know! Please, I beg you, spare me!"

But the Elemental Assassins had no interest in his pleas. They cared only for the information they were ordered to retrieve. Once they had obtained it, one of them turned slightly and gave a cold command to his comrades:

"According to His Majesty's orders, dispose of them all."

The awakener leader's eyes bulged wide at those words.

"His... Majesty?"

For a brief instant, his mind reeled. The only emperor of the Crossbridge Empire was supposed to be a useless fool, a man lying in a coma. Could it be... could it be that these terrifying ghosts were his agents?

Before he could untangle the thought, his body suddenly lifted into the air. A sharp, searing pain ripped through him. He turned his eyes downward in time to see his own neck spurting fountains of blood.

"No... no... no!" he gasped, his last words gurgling in his throat.

The only response was the cold rasp of blades being drawn, the metallic chime echoing mercilessly in the night.

No one—absolutely no one—would have ever imagined that such a gruesome and merciless slaughter could take place here, in the very stronghold of the Blackfish Gang.

The screams of agony and despair echoed throughout the courtyard for a full half hour. They rose and fell like waves, then finally dwindled into silence.

When it was over, the Elemental Assassins dragged forward an entire wagon-load of straw. They set about their grisly task with quiet precision, fulfilling His Majesty's decree to the letter. By the time they were done, the mutilated corpses of the Blackfish Gang were grotesquely stuffed with straw and prepared for display atop the highest section of the city wall—a ghastly warning to all.

Valoria Palace

High upon the city's walls, within the palace, Aurek stood with scepter in hand, gazing toward the distant horizon.

By now, the Elemental Assassins should have begun their operation. If everything had gone according to plan, then the Blackfish Gang would already be nothing more than a memory.

Just as this thought crossed his mind, a glowing message frame materialized before his eyes:

[Emperor Point +10]

[Emperor Point +10]

[Emperor Point +10]

On and on the notifications streamed in, a cascade of glowing prompts. Aurek's pupils gleamed with sharp light.

So... the Elemental Assassins had indeed taken action.

After several seconds, the prompts ceased. Aurek's gaze turned toward his current Emperor Point tally—120 points.

This confirmed it: the task was complete.

What shocked him, however, was the sheer speed. Barely two or three hours had passed since he had dispatched them. Finding the Blackfish Gang's hideout should have consumed time, and yet the mission was already over.

Such efficiency was nothing short of extraordinary.

And this had been accomplished with only eight Elemental Assassins.

Aurek's throat tightened as his imagination soared. If the number were multiplied tenfold, a hundredfold, even a thousand or ten thousand times—what kind of awe-inspiring spectacle would that be?

His lips had gone dry just from contemplating it.

What Aurek did not know, however, was that the Assassins' actual efficiency was even greater than he realized.

From the moment they had locked onto their target until the complete annihilation of the Blackfish Gang, less than a single hour had elapsed.

The remaining time? It had been spent skinning the gang members alive and stuffing their corpses with straw, just as commanded.

At that precise moment, Aurek suddenly felt something new stirring within him.

[Combat Strength Increased!]

A sudden surge of warmth and power bloomed in his chest, spreading outward like wildfire into his limbs. He clenched his fists instinctively, marveling at the vitality now flooding his veins.

Level 9!

His eyes widened. He had not anticipated this—when the Elemental Assassins slew his enemies, his own strength would rise as well!

The ability to perceive the existence of energy—that was the true boundary separating ordinary humans from awakeners.

And now, Aurek felt it clearly. His chest throbbed with a rhythm of power. Though faint and still small, this reservoir of energy had pushed him up to the threshold of Level 9.

It was astonishing. Just a heartbeat earlier, he had been nothing more than a helpless mortal. Now, he stood reborn as an awakener!

Before his eyes, another glowing message materialized:

[Reminder: When the units under your command slay enemies, your own strength will also increase.]

"What... it works like this?" Aurek whispered. For a brief instant, he was stunned. Then his lips curved into an incredulous smile.

In the normal course of things, improving one's rank as an awakener was an arduous struggle. Countless awakeners labored year after year, training diligently just to build up their inner reserves of energy. Others relied on rare encounters with magical artifacts or divine treasures to push their limits.

But almost all of them followed the first path—endless discipline and patience. For outside forces were fleeting, never a foundation to rely on.

Yet here Aurek found himself upon a third path.

He did not need to lift a finger. He did not need to train or bleed. With every foe his assassins struck down, his own strength surged higher.

If eight Elemental Assassins could bring him this much benefit, what would happen when his armies numbered in the thousands, the tens of thousands?

Would he not become truly invincible?

The thought made his blood race, his spirit swell with exhilaration. His chest rose and fell as he tried to calm himself, but the corners of his lips trembled with suppressed joy.

At that moment, Aurek could not have felt more elated.

And his gaze drifted once more to his ever-growing tally of Emperor Points...

*Chapter 7: Chapter7-The Royal Guard*

Unnoticed by most, the sky gradually darkened, and the weight of night settled over the imperial capital.

Eight Elemental Assassins, their blades still reeking faintly of blood and straw, drifted back like shadows returning home. The Valoria Palace welcomed them in silence.

A glowing message appeared before Aurek's eyes as he checked his summoned forces:

[Elemental Assassin]

[Quantity: 10]

[Initial Rank: Elite Rank Lv.9 (Can consume Emperor Points to further increase level)]

The very sight of these assassins, perfectly loyal to his will, made Aurek's chest swell with satisfaction. His own strength had just risen, breaking through from elite rank Lv.8 to elite rank Lv.9.

The rush of power coursing through him left him nearly light-headed with exhilaration. To think that just yesterday I was a powerless fool, and today I can already feel the weight of strength gathering within me.

"Your Majesty," one of the assassins spoke, his tone respectful, his words as sharp as his knives, "the Blackfish Gang has been eradicated in its entirety."

"Furthermore," another assassin added coldly, "we discovered that their actions were directed by the city's police department. We also found three awakers among their ranks—they were agents of the Unicorn Trading Guild."

Aurek's brow furrowed deeply. The web of conspiracies was tightening faster than he anticipated.

The police department...

In the Crossbridge Empire, the police were not like those of Earth. Here, the police corps wielded immense power—not only in maintaining law and order, but also in supervising officials and even engaging in intelligence operations and covert activities.

If this matter truly implicated the Minister of Police, then the trouble was far greater than a simple gang.

The Minister of Police was not merely an administrator. By imperial custom, the Minister was often appointed as Deputy Secretary of State, one of the three giants of the empire, standing just beneath the Emperor himself.

Aurek's gaze hardened, and his voice grew colder.

"A pack of parasites," he spat. The glint of murderous intent flickered within his eyes.

The Western Gate of Valoria Palace

Meanwhile, at the western gate of the palace, Wood, the deputy captain of the Royal Guard, reclined lazily, savoring the rich flavor of fine grape wine. He swirled the liquid in his goblet with a self-satisfied smirk.

Just then, the hurried footsteps of a guard echoed from nearby. The man stumbled toward him, panting, his face pale.

"Deputy Captain! A disaster! The Blackfish Gang has been annihilated!"

Wood's relaxed expression stiffened. He straightened instantly and demanded, "Are you certain of this?"

"I am certain," the guard stammered. "We don't know who struck them down, but the killers were merciless. They skinned the bodies and hung them from the city walls as if to make a spectacle of them..."

As the guard's words painted their grisly picture, Wood's eyes narrowed, gleaming with shrewd calculation.

What a perfect opportunity.

William, the senior commander, had been troubled for weeks by the Blackfish Gang. If Wood could seize this chance to claim credit for their downfall, he would surely earn a handsome reward.

But then hesitation flickered across his face. William was a seasoned fox, not someone easily deceived. Attempting to fool him might bring more trouble than benefit.

No, better to bypass him entirely. Better to petition directly for a decree from the so-called useless emperor.

If he could obtain an imperial edict bearing the royal seal, then not even the Minister of Finance could deny him the generous bounty.

Wood snapped his hand through the air.

"Prepare me a commendation petition—at once!"

Half an hour later, Wood strode confidently toward Aurek's residence within the palace, the petition clutched in his hands.

The emperor was, by all accounts, still in his coma. But that hardly mattered. As long as Wood could borrow the imperial seal and stamp it upon his petition, the treasure vaults would open.

A bounty of ten thousand gold coins—already he was dreaming of how to squander it. Fine silks, imported wines, courtesans from the eastern provinces...

But his greedy fantasies were interrupted by a voice as cold as steel ringing from behind him.

"Deputy Captain Wood. Why are you here in the inner palace when your post is at the western gate?"

Wood froze. He turned slowly, his face darkening. There stood Angie, eyes sharp with suspicion, her hand resting near her sword.

So it's her.

A trace of disdain curled across Wood's lips. He sneered, and instead of answering her accusation, he barked a question of his own.

"And who do you think you are, daring to question me? Tell me—has His Majesty awakened?"

"Not yet," Angie replied firmly.

"Is that so? Then allow me to see him myself."

Wood stepped forward arrogantly, shoving past her as though she were a mere servant.

Angie immediately moved to block his way.

"Deputy Captain Wood, ahead lies His Majesty's residence. Without his command, you cannot enter."

"Who says I'm barging in? I'm here to report the annihilation of the Blackfish Gang directly to His Majesty."

Wood's laughter was sharp and scornful. Suddenly, in one fluid motion, he drew his sword, the gleaming tip leveled at Angie's throat.

"Do not delay the affairs of state! If you get in my way again, I'll cut off your head!"

Before she could react, his sword thrust forward with lethal intent.

Angie twisted, but not fast enough—a shallow line of blood opened across her cheek.

She staggered back, stunned—not by the pain, but by the audacity. He truly dared to strike at me? Here, in Valoria Palace itself?

This was no mere arrogance. This was madness.

Her eyes blazed with fury. In truth, her strength was more than enough to end Wood's life with a single stroke. But her loyalty to the emperor stayed her hand. She would not risk drawing unnecessary scandal upon His Majesty by shedding blood within these sacred halls.

Pressing her rage down, she steadied her sword and glared coldly at Wood.

"Deputy Captain," she declared, her voice like ice, "if you insist on forcing your way forward, you commit treason. And if you do so, the entire guard will fight you to the death!"

Wood froze. He had not expected her to respond so fiercely.

For a heartbeat, he wavered. The thought of beheading her for defiance flickered through his mind. But then reality set in—Angie was strong, and if she resisted, he might not win. And more importantly, was ten thousand gold really worth branding himself a traitor?

He spat on the ground and lowered his sword.

"Bah! Not worth the trouble. With you barking like a rabid dog, I'll take my report to William instead."

Within the Palace

Aurek, meanwhile, remained unaware of the confrontation brewing outside his chambers.

His mind was consumed with thoughts of the empire. The events of the previous day had opened his eyes: the Crossbridge Empire was a viper's nest, filled with shadows and schemes.

He spent the entire night poring over memories, seeking to understand the political undercurrents at play. Sleep did not touch him.

Nor was he the only one awake that night. Throughout the capital, countless nobles tossed and turned in their beds. For they, too, had learned of the Blackfish Gang's fate.

The gang had not only been exterminated—they had been flayed alive and displayed upon the walls like grotesque trophies.

The message was unmistakable. Someone had defied the delicate balance of power that held the city together. Someone had broken the unspoken pact among the factions.

But who?

Spies were dispatched in every direction, racing to collect whispers.

And when their reports returned, the nobles were shaken to their cores. Not only had the Blackfish Gang perished, but even the awakeners from the Unicorn Trading Guild had been slaughtered—stripped of skin and hung for all to see.

This was not merely vengeance. This was an open declaration of war upon the Guild.

But who dared provoke such a titan?

### The Imperial Guard

At that same hour, Gaia, commander of the Imperial Guard, prepared for the upcoming council meeting. He had not yet left his estate when a servant rushed into the chamber, his face drained of color.

"Lord Gaia! Terrible news! The Blackfish Gang has been wiped out, flayed, their remains hung from the city walls!"

The man's voice trembled. "And not just them. The awakers of the Unicorn Trading Guild—they were butchered the same way!"

"What!?" Gaia's voice thundered, his brows knitting tight. Someone daring to lay hands on the Unicorn Guild's awakers was almost unthinkable.

His suspicion immediately turned to one man: Cardinal Austin, the red-robed archbishop. In all of Eryndor, only that ruthless priest had the power—and the audacity—to strike at awakers so brazenly.

But as Gaia considered the matter, he allowed himself a smile. Perhaps this was not a bad thing after all. At the very least, the Blackfish Gang problem was solved.

### The Inner City

Elsewhere, in the heart of Eryndor, Senator Heimerdinger also received word of the massacre. After a brief hesitation, he sent his own agents to investigate. Then, without delay, he dressed for the council and made his way to the Senate chambers.

When he arrived, he immediately approached William, the wizened minister, whose lined face carried the weight of many schemes.

"William," Heimerdinger said gravely, "the Blackfish Gang... who do you believe destroyed them?"

William's eyes narrowed, his thoughts heavy. After a long pause, he met Heimerdinger's gaze and spoke slowly.

"You suspect Cardinal Austin, do you not?"

Heimerdinger's lips tightened.

"Given the circumstances, he is the only one with such ability."

William nodded slightly, though he remained silent.

In truth, eliminating the Blackfish Gang was no great challenge. William himself could have arranged their deaths easily. But doing so without leaving any trace, without provoking the tangled powers behind them, was a far different matter.

That was why this attack was so shocking.

Yet Heimerdinger shook his head suddenly.

"No. If Cardinal Austin had done this, he would have proclaimed it openly. And according to the reports I've gathered, the Cardinal has been immersed in prayer of late. It is unlikely he acted."

"Moreover," Heimerdinger continued, lowering his voice, "I have uncovered another lead. One of the Blackfish Gang's minor associates claimed... all of this was the work of ghosts."

#### *Chapter 8: Chapter8-Dragged Back*

A rare look of seriousness appeared on William's face.

The existence of ghosts was something that, for most people, lived only in legends and rumors. Rather than worrying about whether ghosts were real or not, William's greater concern was what purpose they served. What if these so-called ghosts carried hidden motives? That was what truly made him uneasy.

"For now, we should wait and see. Let's observe in silence and also watch how the others react," William said to Heimerdinger. Then, as if something had suddenly crossed his mind, he added, "There is something else you may not know. Our Majesty has finally awakened from his long slumber, but his temper has become somewhat strange."

"Just yesterday, His Majesty suddenly commanded me to begin cultivating a group of officials, and also told me to soothe the other members of our Royalist Party."

Hearing this, Heimerdinger's interest was immediately aroused. "So His Majesty intends for us to strengthen our power?"

William, however, shook his head, his expression grave. "No, I cannot explain it clearly. It is only a feeling. But I sense that ever since His Majesty awoke, he has changed. Heimerdinger, what do you think?"

Heimerdinger thought for a moment and then replied calmly, "If it is His Majesty's command, then we follow it. Besides, it is true that we now need to enhance our strength."

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At Valoria Palace, as Aurek opened his eyes, today's reward of ten Emperor Points was deposited into his account.

For the newly acquired Emperor Points, Aurek had no intention of saving them. Instead, he immediately summoned another ten Elemental Assassins.

As light flickered, ten more assassins appeared before him. Yet unlike the previous ones, these Elemental Assassins emerged at only elite rank level 8. The eight who had carried out yesterday's mission had already advanced to elite rank level 9.

With their strength enhanced once more, Aurek felt reassured. If things continued at this pace, it would not take long before he possessed a powerful army.

But still, he thought, their ranks were too low. He would need to find a way to upgrade the [Emperor's Scepter]. With that plan forming in his mind, Aurek also ordered the assassins to conceal themselves.

Today was the day of the council assembly. Aurek intended to make an appearance, to show himself, and to observe the reactions of the different factions.

Yet just as he was preparing, he realized something strange. Angie, who always stayed by his side, was nowhere to be found.

Strange. Wasn't Angie the one who almost never left him, clinging to him like his shadow?

He stepped out of his quarters and looked around, but still could not see her. Frowning, he ordered his guards to summon her immediately.

Moments later, Angie appeared before him. But she kept her head lowered, as if afraid something might be discovered.

"Your Majesty, you called for me?" she asked softly.

"Come with me to attend the assembly," Aurek said casually. Yet he immediately noticed her strange reaction and frowned. "Raise your head."

Angie's face paled slightly at the order, but she dared not disobey. Slowly, she lifted her head.

When Aurek saw the bright red scab across her face, his expression instantly turned dark, his eyes filled with fury.

"Speak. Who did this to you?"

"Your Majesty, it is nothing," Angie whispered, lowering her head again.

"What? Do you mean to disobey my order?" Aurek's tone was stern, carrying the weight of imperial authority.

Angie had no choice but to answer in a low voice. "Do not be angry, Your Majesty. Yesterday I offended Vice-Captain Wood. It was my fault."

She did not want the matter to spread, because she knew His Majesty had only just awakened and now carried heavy burdens on his shoulders. She did not wish to add to them.

But when Aurek heard her explanation, his eyes grew sharp and dangerous.

Wood—the vice-captain of the Royal Guard, and also the trusted confidant of the Minister of War, Lord Nock.

The Minister of War was responsible for military deployment, the planning of campaigns, and though he often clashed with the Grand Marshal, he was a frequent guest of the Minister of Police. His status was somewhat lower than the Minister of Police, but still far above what Aurek could deal with lightly.

To put it bluntly, even if Wood killed Angie outright, the emperor would be powerless to retaliate. Such was the reality of the royal family's weakened position.

It was no wonder Angie chose to conceal the truth, not wishing Aurek to be placed in such an impossible situation.

But now, things were different.

"Rise. I know you have suffered greatly," Aurek said quietly.

Angie froze for a moment, then her cold, proud face showed a trace of grievance. She had not expected His Majesty to understand her feelings. For a moment, she nearly broke into tears.

Aurek could imagine easily how much humiliation she had endured. That alone made his chest burn with rage.

Angie was his personal guard. For her to be humiliated in such a way was no different from slapping him in the face. Did they truly believe he was still weak and could be trampled at will?

Damn it. Did they really think he was easy to bully?

"Come with me!" Aurek said coldly. He brought Angie and his guards with him, marching straight toward the western gate of the palace.

And it was the western gate that Wood was assigned to guard.

"Your Majesty, perhaps we should let the matter drop..." Angie whispered.

"Silence!" Aurek snapped.

Under his lead, they advanced rapidly toward the western gate.

Wood, in charge of the gate, naturally saw Aurek coming. He froze in shock. The emperor was awake?

"Royal Guard Vice-Captain Wood, pays respects to His Majesty!" Wood hurriedly knelt.

Aurek looked at him coldly, quickly sensing the man's strength—no wonder he had become vice-captain, for he had reached elite rank level 1.

"Kneel!" Aurek commanded.

Wood frowned but did not dare defy the order here in the palace. He knelt down.

"Wood, you trespassed into my residence and laid violent hands upon my Angie. Do you confess?"

Wood was startled, just beginning to think of how to respond, when Aurek spoke again: "Whether you confess or not does not matter. Today, I must put you to death."

With those words, Aurek turned to Angie and commanded, "I order you—kill him."

What? Had she heard correctly?

Angie froze in place, unable to move. She had never imagined His Majesty would directly order the execution of Wood.

Was this still the same emperor, once so cowardly and easily humiliated?

Seeing her hesitate, Aurek's brows drew together, and imperial authority swept over her like a storm. "What is this? Do you dare defy my order?"

Angie's heart quivered. She opened her mouth to speak, but Aurek suddenly thrust an iron rod into her hands.

"If you cannot do this, then you are unworthy to remain at my side. I have no use for the weak."

Hearing this, Angie's eyes grew firm. She took the rod and raised it high.

"Angie, you dare strike me!?" Wood shouted in disbelief.

The iron rod came down.

*Chapter 9: Chapter9-Minister of War Nock*

Wood could never have imagined that someone like Angie—a mere palace attendant—would actually dare to strike him down.

Instinctively, he wanted to rise and resist. But before he could act, Aurek's icy voice cut through the chaos like a bucket of cold water poured over his head.

"If you so much as dare to resist, I will annihilate your entire family!"

The words froze Wood in place. His body stiffened, his mind blank, his heart seized by a sudden, paralyzing fear. In that same instant, Angie's iron rod smashed brutally into his thigh.

"Ahhh!!"

A howl of agony tore from Wood's throat, his body convulsing uncontrollably as pain wracked every nerve.

Angie, however, hesitated. She knew well how sensitive Wood's position was, and deep down she feared the consequences of striking him. Her eyes flickered toward Aurek, almost pleading for some sign. What she saw instead was her emperor's gaze, cold and merciless, sharp as a blade of ice. The look alone made her shudder.

In that moment, she understood his meaning perfectly.

Angie clenched her teeth, raised the iron rod once more, this time aiming directly at Wood's head.

Wood felt the scent of death descend upon him. Fear erupted violently inside him, ripping through what little composure he had left.

"You dare kill me?! I'll destroy you!!" he bellowed, his voice breaking under the weight of terror.

In a desperate frenzy, Wood twisted his body and dodged Angie's strike. His hand moved with instinctual speed, yanking his sword from his belt. With a savage roar, he slashed the blade in a deadly arc straight toward Aurek's head.

The sudden reversal sent shockwaves through those gathered. The western gate erupted into chaos. Guards shouted in panic, the air filled with confusion.

Angie and the rest of Aurek's attendants snapped back to their senses, their first thought to shield their emperor.

But they had all overlooked one crucial fact: Wood was an Elite Rank warrior. When he launched his full-strength strike, his speed was blistering—far faster than they could hope to intercept.

Even Angie, standing closest, realized she was a moment too slow. Her eyes widened in horror.

"Your Majesty, look out!"

Yet Aurek never moved. From the beginning to the end, he stood rooted in place, not retreating a single step. There was no trace of fear upon his face, only a cold, disdainful smile curving his lips.

And then it happened.

A whisper of wind swept across Wood's back. In the very next instant, his limbs twisted unnaturally, his arms and legs snapping one by one with audible cracks.

The scream that erupted from him was blood-curdling, so shrill and agonized that it echoed across half of Valoria Palace.

"To raise your blade against the emperor... Your House Rosewood truly dares much!" Aurek's voice thundered with icy authority.

"Guards! Break his bones, strip his skin, and send what remains to House Rosewood. I demand their explanation for this insult! At the same time, surround their estate with the Royal Guard. Without my command, no one enters, and no one leaves!"

...

Angie stood motionless, her eyes blank with shock. She could scarcely believe what she had just witnessed.

Never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined her emperor transformed into such a figure—fearless, commanding, and merciless. The timid, spineless man she had known seemed gone forever, replaced by someone unrecognizable.

After a brief daze, Angie's heart began to pound, her eyes filling with a new light as she looked at Aurek once more. Respect, awe, even reverence—all shone clearly upon her face.

Yet still, questions lingered. Who had acted just now? Who had so effortlessly crippled Wood's deadly strike? Angie had seen nothing—only the stir of a breeze, and then Wood had collapsed in ruin. The impossibility of it made her tremble.

"Long live His Majesty!" Angie cried, bowing low. Her voice was trembling with emotion, laced faintly with tears.

For years she had endured humiliation while serving by Aurek's side. Countless times she had swallowed her pride, telling herself that her emperor's weakness left her no choice but to endure.

But this time—this time was different.

Her emperor had risen, not only to defend her, but to punish the one who had dared hurt her. His fury had been for her sake.

For the first time, Angie's frozen heart began to thaw, warmth flooding into places she thought long dead. Yes, her emperor had changed. But perhaps... this change was not such a bad thing after all.

...

Outside the western gate, several Royal Guards forced Wood onto the ground.

With Aurek's cold gaze upon them, they lifted heavy iron hammers and brought them crashing down upon his legs.

A sickening crack echoed as bone shattered. Flesh and blood sprayed, leaving his thigh a mangled ruin.

Wood screamed again, the sound tearing through the air. His face twisted hideously in pain, his eyes bloodshot and filled with venomous hatred as he glared up at Aurek.

The other soldiers who had once been friendly with Wood lowered their heads, fear gripping them. Their bodies trembled, each man terrified of being implicated by Aurek's wrath.

The hammers fell again and again, each blow pulverizing another bone. Wood's body convulsed violently as his limbs were destroyed, reduced to fragments.

The scene was ghastly, a spectacle of blood and brutality. Even the soldiers carrying out the task felt their stomachs twist with nausea. Yet under the piercing weight of Aurek's cold gaze, not one dared to hesitate or plead for mercy.

At last, when Wood was little more than a broken shell of himself, a figure approached from the distance. Towering, broad-shouldered, exuding an aura of authority. Behind him marched more than a dozen guards.

The soldiers halted at once. They recognized him immediately.

It was none other than Nock, the Minister of War of the Crossbridge Empire.

Nock's cold eyes swept across the scene, then fell upon the soldier still clutching the hammer. With a curt gesture, he ordered the man to step back.

But the soldier hesitated. He turned, uncertain, glancing at Aurek, who stood a short distance away, his back turned but his aura dominating the field.

Nock's expression darkened. His gaze flickered to Aurek, lingering for a long moment, before he motioned to his men. They rushed forward and tried to lift Wood from the ground.

Seeing his savior, Wood's fading consciousness flared with hope. Like a drowning man clutching a straw, he cried out hoarsely, "My lord, save me!"

But Nock's face hardened. Without warning, his palm lashed out, striking Wood across the face with a resounding crack.

"You worthless fool!" Nock thundered. "You brainless swine! You were made vice-captain of the Royal Guard to protect His Majesty, and yet this is how you behave? Do you not understand the meaning of restraint?"

"My lord, I... I truly know my mistake!" Wood sobbed. The slap had stung, but deep in his heart he understood. This was not cruelty. This was Nock shielding his life. For that, Wood remained silent, enduring the pain.

With a cold snort, Nock stepped forward and approached Aurek. He bowed perfunctorily, his manner formal but lacking genuine respect.

"Nock pays respects to His Majesty," he said.

Aurek did not respond. His lips curled into the faintest of mocking smiles.

In truth, he had expected this. He knew well that after Wood's fall, Nock would not sit idly by.

But what Nock did not realize was that Aurek had deliberately kept Wood alive for this very reason—for bait.

The Minister of War, Nock, was in fact the loyal subordinate of the Minister of Police. Among the three great powers of the empire, the Minister of Police had always sought to extend his influence into the military.

Yet the Grand Marshal held supreme command over the armies, and would never allow such interference without a fight. Thus, the two factions had long been locked in bitter struggle.

Wood's position had become a critical pivot, a piece neither side could afford to lose. For this reason, even Nock himself would not easily abandon him.

And so Aurek waited. He knew the trap was set.

Because whether it was the Minister of Police's faction, or the Grand Marshal's, both held influence powerful enough to shake the entire Crossbridge Empire. Even as emperor, Aurek had to tread carefully.

But he also knew: the game had begun.

*Chapter 10: Chapter10-And You Dare to Act Arrogant?*

"What business do you have here?"

Aurek turned, his scepter gleaming faintly in his hand, and cast a cold glance at Nock, who was still bent in a bow. His tone was like frost, sharp and unyielding.

Nock froze for a moment. The emperor... was different. Aurek had been in a coma for so many years, but now that he had awakened, it was as if he had become a completely new person.

Yet after a brief hesitation, Nock forced a respectful tone. "Your Majesty, it seems you may have misunderstood Wood. What happened just now was because he was concerned for your safety. In the heat of the moment, he made a mistake. I beg Your Majesty to give him another chance."

Aurek narrowed his eyes. A glint of icy light flickered in his gaze as his fingers absently caressed the jewel embedded in his scepter. His voice was calm, yet it carried a dangerous edge.

"So... what you are saying is that you want to plead for him?"

The Minister of War stiffened. His eyes flickered as he carefully studied Aurek. Something about the emperor unsettled him. The man before him no longer resembled the weakling he had known years ago. This Aurek was calm, steady, and there was even a faint sense of oppressive power radiating from him. The realization unsettled Nock more than he cared to admit.

"Your Majesty," Nock said at last, "over these many years, Wood has been deeply loyal to you. Just now he was merely a bit rash. Please, I implore you to give him another chance. You have my word—this time I will discipline him personally, and I guarantee you will have a satisfactory explanation."

Hearing these words, Aurek could not help the cold laugh that stirred within his heart.

Loyal? That man had already drawn his blade and nearly cut me down. And now you tell me he is loyal? That it was merely a rash mistake?

Do you really take me for a fool?

Displeasure churned within Aurek. Just a Minister of War, daring to lecture me as if I were some naïve child—do you even know who I am? Do you know who founded this empire? Do you remember who the emperor truly is?

"This matter is no longer yours to meddle in," Aurek said coldly. "Wood drew his blade against me. For that, I sentenced him to death. Are you intending to defy my command?"

The so-called useless emperor had dared to oppose him? A flicker of displeasure crossed Nock's face, though he quickly smoothed it over.

"Your Majesty, I urge you to think carefully. Wood has always been loyal to you. If you treat him so harshly, do you not fear chilling the hearts of those who serve you? Please understand, my words are only out of consideration for Your Majesty's benefit."

Aurek almost laughed aloud. Consideration? What he really meant was a threat. Nock's tone was cloaked in politeness, but the implication was clear: if you execute Wood, you will make an enemy of the forces behind me.

He must believe that, with the Minister of Police behind him, Aurek would not dare move against him.

The thought stoked Aurek's fury further.

"Nock," Aurek's voice cut through the air like a blade, "it seems you still do not understand me. If you dare take him from here today, then bear the consequences yourself."

As he spoke, Aurek gestured casually, signaling the soldiers holding the great hammers to step back. Every motion, every word was deliberate, calculated. He had been laying this trap from the beginning, all to lure the Minister of War into revealing himself.

And Nock had walked straight into it.

In that moment, Aurek was already prepared. If Nock insisted on taking Wood away, then he would be forced into a position from which there would be no retreat. If he chose to abandon Wood, then Wood would suffer a brutal death.

Nock's expression shifted, flickering between hesitation and anger. He had not expected this. The emperor—once a coward who bowed before everyone—was suddenly so domineering, so unyielding.

Perhaps the years of slumber damaged his mind, Nock thought bitterly. But he still hesitated. Should he save Wood?

For a heartbeat, his gaze hardened with cruelty. Yet at the same time, an inexplicable chill slid down his spine. He felt as though the edge of a dagger had been pressed against his throat. The sensation was so vivid that it forced sweat to bead on his brow.

Quickly he turned his head, scanning the shadows, but there was nothing—no assassin, no hidden guard. Only silence.

What was happening to him? Why did it feel as if unseen eyes were watching his every move?

Nock wrestled with his unease, but in the end he made his decision. Straightening his shoulders, he strode past Aurek and entered through the western gate of Valoria Palace, moving directly to where Wood lay broken.

He knew the risk of defying the emperor. As Minister of War, he should weigh Aurek's warning carefully. But in truth, he was not alone. Behind him stood the Minister of Police, the man whose spies spread throughout the empire like an invisible web. Even within Valoria Palace itself, no one could say how many of his agents lurked in shadow.

That was why even William, the Secretary-General, treated the Minister of Police with caution.

Nock was certain. The emperor would not risk offending the Minister of Police for the sake of someone like Wood. It would be irrational.

And if Aurek had lost his senses? Well, then William and Heimerdinger would surely remind him of reality. They would restrain him, guide him.

With this logic, Nock's hesitation melted away. His eyes hardened, and with a dismissive wave of his hand he commanded, "Enough. Take Wood away."

The words fell like iron.

As his guards moved, they lifted Wood from the ground, dragging his shattered body with them.

Around them, Angie and the other palace guards bristled. Their faces were dark with anger and indignation. But they dared not act rashly. The Minister of War commanded immense power, his foundations deep and unshakable. Even the emperor himself, they feared, could do little against him.

The bitter thought left them all suffocating with frustration.

Nock, after seeing Wood carried away, wasted no more time. He gave a brief nod, his expression unreadable, then turned and left with his entourage, striding toward the council chamber.

...

It was not long before the Royal Council hall filled with people. In the very center sat the throne reserved for the emperor alone.

At his left and right were the empire's most important officials—among them, the three great powers: the Secretary-General, the Grand Marshal, and the Minister of Police.

The Secretary-General oversaw all civil administration. The Grand Marshal commanded the armies. The Minister of Police was different, wielding power in intelligence, surveillance, and matters that touched every shadow of the realm.

Troy, the Minister of Police, was already seated in the foremost position. A man in the prime of his life, his eyes radiated a sharp, cold brilliance, like a blade concealed within the folds of silk.

Beside him sat the Grand Marshal, Jacoff—a man built like a beast of war. Even seated, his presence was like that of a tiger crouched to spring, radiating raw menace.

On the other side was William, the aged Secretary-General, the staunchest pillar of the Royalist Party. His hair was white, his face lined with age, but his eyes still glimmered with wisdom.

Behind them, in the second row, sat Senator Heimerdinger, his status not high enough to grant him a place among the first rank.

The chamber grew restless as Aurek entered. Murmurs spread briefly through the hall. The emperor, who had slumbered for years, was awake and present at the council.

Yet the stir soon subsided. For in their eyes, Aurek was still the weakling emperor, too timid to matter. Who would take him seriously?

Once everyone was seated, William cleared his throat, his voice carrying over the chamber.

"The first matter on today's agenda concerns the Blackfish Gang. I would like to hear everyone's opinions."

And thus, the council began.