

Gods Daily 96

Chapter 96: The Cardinal Arrives at Court

Cardinal Austin lifted his eyes as the Black Dragon lowered its massive head, the missive clenched delicately between fangs. With measured reverence, Austin received the letter.

He unfolded the parchment, eyes sweeping rapidly over the script traced in enchanted ink. The moment he recognized the author, his pupils shrank sharply, like a night-hawk caught off guard by sudden flame.

The letter—astonishingly—was from Sacco.

Sacco, whom Austin had always dismissed as little more than a pawn on the chessboard of the Theocracy. A name he had scarcely bothered to remember. Yet now that very name loomed high above, a constellation in the heavens, forcing even him to raise his gaze.

To command the Black Dragon itself—an emissary of Ordon Theocracy's will—to cross borders and deliver a single letter... This was no ordinary correspondence. This was a proclamation, an assertion of supremacy, a silent act of domination.

And the letter, though addressed to Aurek, was in truth written because of the young lady of House Tascher.

The Black Dragon's voice rolled like thunder through the skies:

"Holy Son Sacco has been enthroned. This letter bears his will... and by extension, the will of the Ordon Theocracy."

The air quivered under the weight of its roar.

Austin bowed his head. His reply was calm, solemn.

"I understand."

To him, the letter was no mere parchment. It was a dagger inlaid with a sacred sigil—gleaming, elegant, and pressed cold against the Empire's throat.

The time had come for Aurek—and for the Empire—to make a choice.

"At last..." Bishop Ramos muttered under his breath, his voice trembling with excitement he could not suppress.

Behind him, the clergy of the Theocracy exchanged furtive glances, eyes alight with awe, with fear, with fervent joy.

Elsewhere, in a corner of Eryndor City:

Within a blacksmith's shop, a hammer halted mid-swing. The man wielding it lifted his gaze toward the Cathedral. His eyes, like tempered steel, were cold and unyielding.

And in the upper chambers of the Black Dagger's residence, a woman lounged against a velvet curtain, her figure languid. She watched the dragon blot out the sky, a faint smile curling her lips.

"So it begins... chaos at last," she murmured. Her fingers idly twined a lock of hair. "I suppose even I will be dragged into this filthy water. Damn that Josephine. She leaps willingly into the firepit, and insists on dragging me down as her cushion."

Her tone was careless, yet carried the subtle bitterness of someone unwillingly entangled.

Elsewhere again, on a quiet street, a young girl turned to her elder brother.

"Brother, what is the Theocracy's intent?" she asked, wide eyes reflecting both innocence and dread.

The youth did not answer immediately. His gaze remained fixed upon the Imperial Palace, its silhouette sharp against the horizon. Only after a long silence did he nod slowly.

"It is time," he said simply. "We should go to the palace."

For many, this was the moment they had awaited—a chance to witness how the young Emperor would face the judgment of the Theocracy.

A hush fell across Eryndor City.

The lively clamor of the streets dwindled into whispers, even the wind seemed reluctant to stir. An oppressive stillness spread like fog, pressing against every chest.

At last, the reclusive Cardinal Austin emerged from the Cathedral.

His pace was slow, deliberate. Each step fell with solemn gravity, as though he walked within the verses of a sacred text, a march both stately and irrevocable.

Countless eyes followed his crimson figure. With every stair he climbed, with every step toward the palace, the tension in the city coiled tighter.

In the Grand Hall of the Palace, Aurek stood upon the imperial dais. The Emperor's Scepter rested firmly in his hand, his shoulders draped in deep violet robes of state.

His gaze swept across the gathered court, sharp and unyielding.

Below, the Minister of Rites droned on, reciting petitions regarding the Empire's upcoming Firstfall Festival, and the proposal to combine it with the ceremony of the Empress's coronation.

Aurek answered with but a single word:

"Approved."

His tone carried the weight of finality.

And at that precise moment, a figure strode unannounced into the hall.

Every minister—Winston, Heimerdinger, Gaia, Angie—turned as one, their eyes fastening upon the crimson-robed man.

Austin entered, his robes gleaming white trimmed with silver, the sacred insignia heavy upon his chest. His presence was like the echo of ancient monasteries, a tide of scripture incarnate. Each step resounded with unseen hymns.

He was no ordinary man. Austin was one of the few Master Rank powerhouses alive, a figure whose strength alone was enough to keep the Crossbridge Empire restrained beneath the shadow of the Theocracy.

The ministers' faces grew grim.

In recent days, Eryndor City had been drenched in storms of blood and thunder, yet throughout it all, Austin had remained unmoved in his Cathedral, silent and immovable. That he now chose to walk into the palace personally could mean only one thing—this moment was of extraordinary significance.

Austin's eyes lifted to meet Aurek's.

Once, he had not even deigned to attend an emperor's coronation. Yet today, he stood here, confronting Aurek directly, bringing with him the weight of the Theocracy's will.

Their gazes met.

For the briefest instant, Austin felt it: a pressure tangible, like an invisible wall smashing forward. Cold, domineering, absolute. It forced his eyes to falter, ever so slightly.

His heart gave a jolt.

This was no longer the gaze of a boy-king. This was the gaze of a sovereign steeped in divine authority, a presence that carried echoes of godhood itself.

Austin steadied his spirit and produced the letter.

"Your Majesty," he intoned, his voice deep as a prayer.

"The Ordon Theocracy has sent this letter—for you."

A courtier hurried forward, took the parchment reverently, and bore it up to the dais.

Austin continued, his words deliberate, heavy as stone:

"Lord Sacco has ascended as Holy Son of the Theocracy. He speaks with the voice of the Church itself. Regarding House Tascher, he requires your stance—and the stance of the Empire. The Church awaits your decision. This will determine our final judgment."

At this, Winston and Heimerdinger exchanged a glance. Anger and dread both flashed in their eyes.

They understood. This was no letter. It was a sacred sword, suspended above the Empire's throat.

Silence smothered the hall. Only the faint crackle of candle flames filled the void.

No one dared speculate what Aurek might be thinking—not William, not Angie, not even those closest to him.

For the man standing before them was no longer the naïve monarch of yesteryear. He was Emperor—ruler of Crossbridge, commander of armies, bearer of destiny.

Aurek accepted the letter.

He moved slowly. He did not even glance at the sigil upon its wax seal—the cross that symbolized the Theocracy's supreme authority. He simply held it, as if it were no more than a dry leaf.

Then he turned, facing the black-and-gold throne behind him.

"Austin," Aurek's voice rumbled, low as a whisper from the earth itself, "do you know how long the Crossbridge Empire has served the Ordon Theocracy?"

Austin blinked, caught off guard by the question.

"Ten thousand years," Aurek answered himself. His voice began to rise, rolling like thunderclouds gathering.

"For eight centuries, the Empire has knelt like a lamb—offering gold, land, faith, even freedom. And the Theocracy, in return, has granted only decrees, judgments, and chains."

The air quivered as his voice grew sharper, more resolute:

"A mistake that has endured for ten millennia—ends here, with me."

Austin's pupils contracted violently.

The ministers trembled, scarcely daring to believe their ears.

In the next heartbeat, Aurek spun. His arm swept outward.

The letter flew from the dais, tumbling through the air. And before it touched the ground, golden fire erupted, devouring parchment and seal alike.

The flames painted Aurek's face in searing light, his eyes gleaming like frozen lakes, cold yet absolute.

"I am weary," Aurek said, his final words falling like divine edict.

The fire consumed the Theocracy's message, and in that blaze an age-old order trembled, its end heralded by a single act of defiance.