

Gods Daily 97

Chapter 97: The King's Sword: Touch It and Perish

The letter curled within the golden sacred flame, blackening, cracking, until it surrendered at last—falling apart into a fine, weightless ash that drifted down over the mirror-bright floor of the throne hall.

Austin's eyes darkened, a sky gathering storm before the break of thunder.

Around him, ministers blanched. Pupils widened in disbelief as they watched those cinders fall, as though they were watching faith itself crumble into dust at their feet.

A razor wind rose from nowhere, whistling through the high arched windows, snapping the tall banners and stirring the deep purple of Aurek's royal robes.

Upon the golden throne, the emperor's gaze—cold as forged steel—cut across the hall.

That glance alone pressed the chamber into hush. Even breathing turned cautious, as if a careless exhale might profane the moment.

"...Weary?" Austin finally breathed, incredulity biting at the word.

Weary—of the Ordon Theocracy's presence within the Empire?

Ridiculous. Without the Church's guidance and protection, what foundation or glory could this Empire claim? That simple truth was something even commoners should grasp. How could Aurek not?

He had not even looked at the letter from the Holy Son of the Theocracy. He had thrown it aside and burned it like refuse.

Such disdain—near to sacrilege—stoked a blaze of fury in Austin's chest.

"Beyond Eryndor City, there are countless eyes watching," he said, voice cold as iron, slicing through the suffocating silence. "Countless ears are waiting—for the will of the Church and the answer of the Empire."

"And now they will hear this—Your Majesty's choice." He lifted his chin. "I confess, I am surprised."

"Pray you do not live to regret it."

The warning rang frost-sharp.

"The proud emperor refuses even to read." Austin's tone did not waver. "Then hear this: on the day of the Empress's ceremony, His Highness Sacco, Holy Son of the Theocracy, will come in person to Eryndor City. He will stand before you."

"And there—he will answer your decision today."

"His deeds have already entered legend. Any who defy his will will pay a price beyond bearing."

"What Your Majesty has proclaimed, I shall report faithfully to the Ordon Theocracy. The Church will render its final judgment."

"Your Eminence!" Winston blurted, aghast.

He took a step forward—only to be ignored. Austin's attention did not flicker.

At this point, nothing anyone said outweighed the emperor's choice. If Aurek had resolved himself, all counsel would break like waves upon a cliff.

"However bright a star may shine, it cannot out-blaze the sun." Aurek's hand rested on the Emperor's Scepter. He lifted his head slightly, eyes narrowing with chilly thought. "Within the bounds of the Crossbridge Empire, however lofty the mountain—none is greater than royal authority."

His voice rang like a sword drawn: clean, cold, unyielding.

"Return," Aurek said, as if delivering a verdict. "Tell the 'prodigy' your Church has anointed that if he lays a finger upon my king's sword, I shall erase his legend entirely."

"Very well..." Austin's face finally showed raw anger.

Aurek slid him a sidelong glance, the edge in his eyes impossible to face straight on.

"And you, Austin—your Cathedral is the Church's banner in this city. Whether it continues to stand in Eryndor City depends on my will alone."

"Since Your Majesty is so resolute," Austin answered, bowing stiffly, "then govern yourself accordingly."

He flicked his sleeves in a harsh arc, turned on his heel, and strode from the hall.

The Cathedral's presence was the Theocracy's authority made stone. From Aurek's words, the message was clear enough: the Empire no longer required the Church's guidance. If so—further debate was worthless.

Winston, Heimerdinger, and the rest of the court stood mute, unable to form even a single complete sentence. They could only watch Austin depart—knowing he would carry the Empire's final will to the crowds thronging outside.

It felt as though some ancient anchor had been cut loose. Unease swelled, nameless and vast.

The ministers turned, looking to Aurek's profile—cold, decisive, unshakable.

"Those rats who peep from the darkness," Aurek murmured, eyes lifting to the dome above—painted with scenes of imperial epics—"it's time they came into the light."

He did not hesitate. Not now. Not for this.

Just as he would not hesitate regarding the Empress's ceremony; there would be no compromise. He would never let a so-called Holy Son of the Theocracy humiliate Josephine.

Perhaps House Tascher had erred. Perhaps Josephine herself had made mistakes.

But so what?

Josephine would be Empress of the Crossbridge Empire.

She represented royal authority—the dignity of the Empire itself.

If imperial sovereignty bowed, it would not be sovereignty. Not even to the Church.

This meant conflict was inevitable; at some point, masks would be torn away. In which case—better to lay the cards down now.

This choice would not merely shake the chessboard; it would remake it. It would force those hidden presences to step forward, to prepare their lines for the Theocracy's ultimate judgment on the day of Firstfall Festival.

Aurek had foreseen all of this.

For now, though he had chosen to rupture relations, until the Theocracy formally announced the abandonment of the Empire, the opportunists would still hold their breath. Patient jackals did not rush the kill; they waited for the signal—so they could feast upon the "banquet" they had helped to prepare.

And he—he would prepare as well.

Aurek turned slightly. His voice filled the vaults.

"Pippin!"

The general jerked from his daze, armor clanking as he stepped forward and bowed deeply.

"I await Your Majesty's command!"

Aurek gripped the scepter. His free hand lifted in a loose gesture.

A lance of gold—condensed from kingly will and the Empire's own vitality—shot from the dais and sank into Pippin's chest.

Pippin's spirit reeled.

A vast, mysterious power coursed through him; the world's mana surged as if summoned, pouring into his body like a flood.

The long-denied sensation of breakthrough struck him with tidal force. He raised his head sharply, eyes wide with disbelief.

The emperor had bestowed power upon him—shattering the bottleneck that had chained him for so long.

"I grant you the Imperial Minister's Chapter," Aurek declared. "With the Empire's fortune upon you, your strength will rise; in the field you will command as a war-god, and your realm will ascend by leaps and bounds."

"Your Majesty's grace!" Pippin dropped to one knee. His armor rang against stone, the sound heavy with devotion.

Gasps rippled through the court.

The scholars and legalists strained their senses; they could feel the surge within Pippin, shocking in its magnitude. What esoteric law—what sovereignty over fate—did the emperor command?

"Winston. Heimerdinger. Gaia. Angie. Scholars..."

Aurek's voice sounded again, naming the Empire's pillars.

Those named bowed as one.

"I grant you likewise the Imperial Minister's Chapter. Under the Empire's mantle, you will be shielded by the national fortune. Bathed in the Empire's radiance, you will repel corruption, avert calamity, and never fall into darkness. This blessing shall extend to your bloodlines."

As his words fell, strands of gold—thick with imperial will and mana—flowed into each minister. Bodies trembled. A holy warmth cloaked them; somewhere between heart and soul, a subtle tether linked them to the Empire's source. Their strength, their senses—their very clarity of thought—rose sharply.

"This... this is the Empire's light?" one scholar whispered, awestruck. "Your Majesty can marshal national fortune—and turn its brilliance upon us? This is... beyond the bounds of theory."

The others felt it, too—shock and joy twined together.

"Our lives for Your Majesty!" voices rang, choked with feeling. "We give thanks for this impossible grace!"

To be bathed in national fortune—this was a gift out of legend. None had imagined the emperor would wield such a miraculous art.

Their awe settled into resolve. Hearts that had quivered since the letter burned now stood steady as pillars. Follow this sovereign—and perhaps even the colossal shadow of the Church could be met head-on.

Aurek looked down upon the fervor with a still expression.

With ties severed to the Theocracy, the Ministers' Chapters would be his ballast stone—steadyng the court. Next, he would put Eryndor City and its borders in order.

He dismissed most of the officials, keeping only Winston, Heimerdinger, Gaia, and Pippin.

"Your Majesty," Winston began at once, voice low but firm, "you have my unconditional support. But are you truly prepared? A final break with the Ordon Theocracy may unleash chaos like a burst dam—a flood without end."

He might not see the entire board, but even the simplest consequences weighed like iron on his mind.

"Ten millennia ago," Aurek replied, calm yet absolute, "our forebears chose wrongly. Here—with me—that choice must be corrected."

"The Empire's honor is not for trampling."

He turned to Pippin. "General Pippin!"

"Your servant!"

"You will take eight hundred thousand Imperial Knights and purge all hostile elements across the four provinces nearest Eryndor City—Dorine, Katpiler, Dahlby, and Landor. Any who resist—execute on the spot."

"I will send additional support."

"I obey!"

Pippin accepted without hesitation.

Gaia spoke next, measured and practical. "Your Majesty, each of the four provinces maintains a provincial guard to assist their governors. Their fighting power is not equal to the main legions, but most remain loyal to the Empire. If we assemble and reorganize them, they could form a credible army to deter petty rebels—while the Imperial Knights remain to guard Eryndor City. That would be safer."

"No," Heimerdinger countered at once, brows drawn tight. "The Imperial Knights must anchor the four provinces. If the rabble rises and Eryndor City lacks buffer territory, the capital faces immediate peril. Your Majesty's intent is to transform those provinces into a fortified belt. Stationing the Knights there is strategically superior to garrisoning them in the city."

Gaia fell into thought. Winston and Pippin exchanged glances and understood: this was the deeper design.

Aurek delivered his judgment.

"The eighty thousand City Guard will remain under Gaia's command. Maintain daily order and patrols—that is enough. As for Eryndor City's safety... do not trouble yourself. I have made arrangements."

Gaia bowed. "I receive the edict."

"The true enemy," Aurek said, setting the scepter's end upon the floor with a quiet, ringing tok, "is a hungry wolf pack—coveting the Empire's lands and glory."

His eyes sharpened, an eagle's gaze cutting beyond walls and roofs, as though he could already see the storm rolling toward them.