

## **In the Name of Empress**

### **Chapter 16: Chapter 15: The Early Worm Gets Eaten by the Bird**

Roland had never seen Los Angeles at four in the morning, yet he was fortunate enough to witness the nightscape of Sussex City in the Imperial Capital at that hour.

The nightscape of the Imperial Capital can only be described in one word.

Dark.

So dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of you.

At this time, industrial civilization was still in its infancy, magic civilization was not widespread, and the indulgent nightlife was only for a few nobles.

The downside was stumbling as you ran.

The upside was not having to worry about bumping into people.

Who in their right mind would go out at this hour?

Frightening away a couple of stray cats, Roland finally made it home.

He intended to go straight to bed, but he habitually headed to the small dining room.

The wooden house where he and Lisa lived was public property built by the Empire, with ownership belonging to the Empire, and tenants only had usage rights.

His father was a junior officer before his death, honored with war achievements, allowing them to rent at a lower price.

The rear-guard battle was too brutal, and he and his comrades ultimately became one with the earth, impossible to recover.

According to Imperial law, such cases are considered missing, reclassified as dead after three years.

His father was dead, but officially still "alive."

Once three years confirm the death, procedures to reclaim public rental housing or collect full rent will be carried out.

In a few months, without surprises, Roland would have to move out.

Of course, if he could find the official responsible for the specifics and include something round and hard in the beef jerky he sent, no one would nitpick.

The Empire was obliged to protect the orphans of soldiers, so this made sense.

Roland's house had only the father and son duo, spacious enough to sublet extra rooms to Lisa's family.

No rent charged, the price was taking care of Roland and his father's daily needs.

His father was mostly in the military camp, and Lisa's family mainly took care of Roland.

Over time, he grew closer to Lisa; his father seemed more distant.

No matter how late it was, Lisa would wait to dine with him.

He had never tried coming home past midnight.

The Imperial Library closed at ten, leaving him nowhere to go.

Tiptoeing into the dining room, Roland originally thought there would only be a bowl of cold Talia noodles on the table, but he quickly stopped short.

Lisa was also in the dining room.

She lay on the table, her hair slightly messy, sleeping just like that.

The noodles, kept warm with a water basin, had long lumped together, and the hot water had turned cold.

Roland's fatigue vanished instantly.

He picked up the bowl, grabbed a fork, twirled up the noodles, and ate them.

The familiar taste, just cooler.

This was probably the taste of home.

If there were someone in this world who purely treated him well, it must be Lisa.

They were like little hedgehogs shivering in the cold wind, trying hard to stay warm together without pricking each other.

Swallowing the cold noodles, this dinner was by no means sumptuous, yet a smile spread across Roland's lips.

Upon just returning home from Belphar District, he saw a small house for sale.

The yard was small, somewhat dilapidated, evidently unoccupied for a long time.

Although he couldn't see the flyer on the door, it surely had a contact number.

A rundown house was easier to bargain for.

After tomorrow's training session, he'll take Lisa to see the house.

Of course, before house hunting, he had to find Chief Editor Byron to collect the prize money.

The contest results were already determined, and the prize should be cashed in.

As Roland ate, Lisa awoke from her dream, rubbing her eyes.

"Roland, why aren't you home yet..."

She looked at Roland eating the noodles, surprised and momentarily unable to distinguish dream from reality.

"I was delayed for a while, but fortunately made it back. Your cooking is still the best, sister."

Lisa's gaze gently fell on Roland, softly complaining, "Really? I haven't forgotten the pained look someone had while eating yesterday."

"That's not your fault, sister; it's the problem with Sussex Country's dishes."

Roland teased with a smile.

Everyone knew the pinnacle of Sussex cooking was fried potato chips and fried fish.

Everything else was considered dark cuisine.

But that didn't mean these "national dishes" were particularly tasty.

They were merely passable.

Being used to Talia cuisine, Sussex-style dishes were naturally hard to accept.

Lisa, slightly bewildered, looked at the moonlight outside, filled with surprise in her voice. "Is it the second half of the night now?"

"If we sit for a while after eating, we can watch the sunrise over the Tamas River."

Lisa let out a soft "Ah" and gazed at Roland with concern.

"Then you should hurry and rest. At daylight, I'll take a leave for you at the post office. Teacher Margaret would surely understand."

No, she wouldn't.

Roland thought silently.

Margaret's attitude towards him changed because he cooperated, completing tasks smoothly.

If Roland became an obstacle to completing tasks, she'd surely flip out.

He said with a smile, "It's fine, I've already had some sleep."

"Where did you sleep? Can you sleep well away from home?"

"At Alina's."

Roland gulped down the last noodle, narrating what had happened earlier before Lisa could question him.

Lisa's expression turned peculiar.

Angrily patting the table, she was about to object when she couldn't help but complain.

"Miss Alina went too far. You are at least a guest, and she let you leave in the middle of the night."

"Uh, I left on my own accord," Roland softly reminded.

Lip-biting, Lisa said, "If she wanted you to stay and rest, she could've had her obedient Demonic Puppet Maid execute orders, or at least leave a note by the bed?"

Roland fell silent.

He hadn't thought about it that much.

What Lisa said wasn't wrong; Alina merely offered him a temporary place to rest, unconcerned whether he stayed or left.

"I always felt there was something wrong with that woman, and it's big!"

Grabbing Roland's sleeve, Lisa softly spoke, "Try having less contact with her, okay? You're too simple-minded; I'm worried you'll suffer."

Roland wanted to mention an agreement with Alina, but under Lisa's anxious concern, any reasoning felt like an excuse.

All words faded, leaving just one.

"Okay."

Alina's request for him to model was just a pretense; she was actually using him as an observation sample.

Last night, while drawing, she was secretly playing cards again.



Roland didn't look back, but saw through the window's reflection.

The fireplace's flames illuminated the window, exposing Alina's stealthy card movements entirely.

The agreement had been fulfilled; he owed Alina nothing.

Seeing Roland heed the advice, Lisa's lips curled into a satisfying smile, causing her anxious heart to settle.

Resolute against letting Roland clean up, she picked up the dishes, heading to the kitchen.

Roland returned quite late, as the sky had already started brightening, with a brand new sun about to rise.

Just as she prepared to wash the dishes, a large hand reached over to take the cloth.

"Sister, I know what you're worried about."

Roland submerged the dishes in the sink, calmly scrubbing them.

"But I'm already in too deep, with no way out."

Wiping the water droplets off the dishes, a slight smile tugged at his lips as he pointed at a bird.

"The early bird catches the worm. Since there's no choice, why not start early?"

Coincidentally, the great tit Roland pointed at flew rapidly toward a wooden house, catching a small worm in its beak, then flew away happily.

Lisa stayed silent.

The early bird gets the worm, but what about the early worm?

The golden-red sunlight crept into the room, landing on Roland.

His smile melted into the sunlight, exceptionally brilliant.

Lisa also began to smile.

She might be the shivering little worm, but who dared say Roland wasn't the early bird?