

In the Name of Empress

#Chapter 17 - 16: Will You Be a Coward for Life, or a Warrior for Three Seconds? - Read In the Name of Empress Chapter 17 - 16: Will You Be a Coward for Life, or a Warrior for Three Seconds?

Chapter 17: Chapter 16: Will You Be a Coward for Life, or a Warrior for Three Seconds?

Looking at people through the lens of familial affection, they always seem extra wonderful.

For example, Roland in Lisa's eyes is simply the best.

Take off the familial lens, and problems are everywhere.

For example, Empress Sylph, already succeeded but yet to formally ascend, in Wald's eyes.

When Sylph was humming a light tune upon returning to Sheffield Palace, a maid rushed over and whispered, "The Minister of Internal Affairs is waiting for you in the study."

"When did the teacher arrive?" Sylph feigned composure, but her wandering gaze betrayed her inner anxiety.

"Mr. Wald has been waiting for at least four hours, there should be something urgent."

"Ah?" Sylph's last bit of composure froze.

She understood the teacher well.

If there were just an urgent matter, he would have sent someone to find her.

Unless he was coming for her directly.

The teacher's anger would burn fiercer with prolonged waiting.

Sylph could well imagine how fierce the storm to follow would be.

Ordinarily, she should return to the bedchamber to change and bathe before seeing the teacher, but thinking of how Wald had already waited four hours, left her no mood for this, she hurriedly headed towards the study.

Her speed perfectly balanced on the verge of losing the composure and demeanor of a noble.

Though anxious inside, she remained the elegant Empress.

When she stepped into the small study, Wald's face was calm, sitting upright and proper.

Seeing Sylph return, he rose to greet her with the most standard etiquette befit a subject before their liege.

Sylph's heart sank, growing cold halfway.

Something's wrong.

If the teacher couldn't help but talk upon seeing her, it wasn't serious.

If the teacher was all business-like, now that's serious.

Thinking of how she had been out wandering these past few days, Sylph knew she was at fault, quickly responding with a student's courtesy.

"Teacher, you have waited long. If something arose, send word and I would've come back sooner."

"In Sussex, we don't have the custom of subordinates summoning the lord."

Wald spoke sternly, "If word got out, Your Majesty's dignity would be ruined. Outsiders might even think the dominator of Sheffield Palace has been replaced."

Sylph fell silent for a moment, sighed lightly, and said softly, "I was never the master of Sheffield Palace, nor have I been educated in this regard."

"That's my negligence; today I must teach you this lesson."

Wald's gaze suddenly turned sharp.

"Sylph, class is in session!"

Sylph was startled by Wald's abrupt change but quickly realized.

The teacher indeed waited for her with a purpose.

If it's not a reprimand, no matter how demanding the class, it's a good lesson.

She grasped the hem of her skirt, knees slightly bent, replied softly, "Please, teacher, commence the lesson."

Wald gestured for Sylph to sit and calmly asked, "Sylph, do you wish to be a titular puppet, or an emperor who controls destiny?"

"Even if I want, can I truly achieve it?" Sylph asked abruptly.

Sovereignty is never divine-granted, it must be sought.

The nobility and the secondary forces of Sussex grow increasingly large, the space for sovereignty had long been eroded beyond recognition.

But for this, Father wouldn't have gone personally overseas to seek allegiance from foreign lords.

Father's death is suspicious, but cannot be thoroughly probed; whoever investigates becomes the next.

Seeing Sylph on the verge of despair, Wald's expression was calm, yet his voice pierced Sylph's heart like a blade.

"Will others spare you? You are a Transcendent, originally just Tier Nine "Lady," no one cared, but now you are the Emperor, you qualify and have the ability to ascend to Tier Eight "Princess" or even Tier Seven "Empress," do you know what this means?"

Sylph's pink face was bloodless.

She clearly knew what it meant.

Though few knew, she was very aware that the structure of the Transcendent society is similar to ordinary people, all pyramid-shaped.

The higher you climb, the harder it gets.

Tiers Nine to Seven are lower Transcendents, fundamentally no different from ordinary people, merely possessed of special Abilities, still subject to aging, illness, and death, a Tier Seventh strength could live up to three hundred years.

A well-trained mundane assassin can entirely send off a Tier Seven Transcendent under specific conditions.

The power of Transcendents comes from stars; different ascension paths correspond to different paths amongst stars.

Under the stars, lower Transcendents are equivalent to mundane, can have similar or even identical star paths, but from Tier Six onwards, it changes.

The path towards the pinnacle of the pyramid narrows.

Tier Six Transcendents can comprehend the Power of Stars, fundamentally different from mundane.

They shun mundane struggles, stepping onto the path in pursuit of stars.

The Power of Stars doesn't emerge or vanish from nothing, conflicts never cease.

The amount of Power of Stars a Material Plane can hold is capped, some have, so others lack.

Ascension rules thus dictate that Transcendents of the same star path are born enemies.

While those accompanying each other are merely rivals, the explorers of the same star path are irreconcilable foes.

Regrettably, this world already has a Tier Seven, striving for Tier Six female monarch.

Empress Sofia Friedrich Vladimir from the Land of the Frost Vladimir Empire.

She reigns over a vast empire, commands an elite army of millions, her white chamomile flag signifying authority flies across fifteen time zones.

Her command includes a fearsome underground intelligence agency, Rurik Shadow, before its pervasive Nightwalkers, Sussex Military Intelligence Bureau is mere bumbler.

Where her gaze reaches, is where the empire's sword points.

She has no rivals.

The monarchs of several mundane great nations are not Transcendents, the Transcendent monarchs of small nations also pose no threat to her position.

She once boasted, given two hundred and fifty years, she could make the whole world learn standard Rurik Language.

She wasn't boasting, but she doesn't have two hundred and fifty years.

Can humans live over three hundred years?

Yes, by ascending to Tier Six.

Thus she has no time to waste, always devoting her principal efforts towards pursuing stars, allowing other great nations room to breathe.

Yet all this changed after Sylph became Queen of Sussex.

She has a rival now.

Or rather, her stepping stone to Tier Six had arrived.

Sylph's tears and blood will become the most dazzling adornment on the scepter raised high during her ascension.

This is destiny.

Unless Sylph has the power to counterstrike, using Sofia's blood to dye the scepter red.

Sylph's originally fair face could find not a hint of color.

Wald's piercing gaze carried hints of murderous intent, the voice cutting, cried out:

"Sylph, stand up, face your destiny!"

Sylph's spirit jolted, her previously trembling slender hand quivered even more fiercely.

But this time it's not cowardice, but excitement.

The Monarchs of Sussex have historically expanded territories, defeating countless seemingly invincible opponents, thereby establishing the world's top Navy and expansive lands spanning millions of square kilometers.

Sofia is an Empress, and so am I!

Why should it be her treading on my blood to ascend, and not the reverse?

Destiny, ultimately must be faced.

The first to flash before Sylph's eyes was not the founding monarch Emperor Sussex, nor the most famed monarch, King of the Ocean but rather the unlucky yet fortunate Roland.

This guy had no idea what kind of opponents he was about to face.

But Sylph found it hard to sympathize with Roland, for she was the equally unfortunate Sylph facing equally invincible and formidable opponents.

At this moment, the spirit of thirty-four generations of past Sussex Sovereigns possessed her.

Sylph ignited.

The illustrious achievements of these regal ancestors in expanding territories and slaying arch-enemies flashed rapidly through her mind like a cinematic sequence.

Finally, freeze-framed before her eyes.

Her eyes gleamed with scarlet.

Wald looked at her with anticipation.

At this moment, the noble blood coursing within Sylph awakened, even if facing a legendary Giant Dragon capable of shattering the heavens and earth standing before her, she wouldn't retreat.

Courage filled Sylph's tender body, her eyes shot a frightening cold gleam.

A flash and gone.

Sylph's lips trembled, the shaking voice had a hint of sob.

"Teacher, I want to abdicate, I will return to my Tyrone Earl's Domain. Please inform the cabinet to select a new Emperor for me. I have two distant cousins who are family branches, they both can."

"Teacher, what's wrong, teacher?"

Chapter 18: Chapter 17: A Deal Must Be Equivalent

Sylph chose cowardice.

Roland chose courage.

Just as Sylph was frantically summoning the court physician to save the teacher, Roland was pounding the table, roaring at the bald editor:

"Sir Byron, don't tell me the prize money hasn't arrived yet."

The training session ended quickly today. Margaret was pleased with Roland's progress and gave him more free time.

Relieved, Roland immediately went to Collins Publishers to find Chief Editor Byron to claim the prize, but Byron evaded skillfully with both soft and hard tactics.

Ordinary people would probably leave timidly, fearing repercussions, but Roland didn't care.

He had been rejected by Byron countless times; what could be worse than this?

In this world, one pound of gold coin is equivalent to 7.5 grams of gold, with strong purchasing power. His prize money could buy four houses in the bustling district of the Imperial Capital.

With this money, does he care if the publisher won't accept his manuscript?

Even if Sussex doesn't accept it, he can entrust Alina to publish it in the Jin Yuan Kingdom. By then, he would be a returning overseas artist, and his status would skyrocket.

In any case, today's prize must be claimed!

Faced with the aggressive Roland, Byron was startled and didn't even dare to make eye contact, but he still wouldn't budge.

"Roland, this is the Royal Essay Award; the prize money doesn't arrive that quickly. Moreover, the literary bigwigs are not satisfied with the essay results."

Under Roland's murderous gaze, Byron took Roland to his private office and whispered:

"Roland, you've offended a lot of people, do you know that?"

"I haven't done anything wrong. If anyone is offended, they should look for the reason within themselves."

Byron reached out to pat Roland's shoulder and whispered with earnestness:

"Roland, unless you can fly out of Sussex, you must abide by the rules. In the literary world, it's not just about talent, but also about social etiquette. Many bigwigs participated in this essay contest, yet an unknown young person like you won the championship. Can they accept this?"

Roland thought to himself that he won the championship through his own abilities. If it weren't for Count Sif's explanation, he might not have even survived; if he doesn't take this championship, who deserves it?

He didn't immediately slam the table in retaliation, after all he wanted to know who the enemies were and understand their true thoughts. So he whispered:

"Sir Byron, what do you mean?"

Seeing Roland calm down, Byron whispered, "I have no opinion; who wins doesn't matter to me. I'm thinking of your welfare."

"For a young and talented person like you, you need the passage of time. A distinguished guest suggested as long as you voluntarily relinquish your essay ranking..."

Roland squinted but didn't speak.

The main course was coming.

Byron lightly coughed and whispered, "The champion of the essay will be invited to attend the Royal Arts Salon, a very high-level event where cabinet ministers and the speaker will be present."

"You don't even know gentlemanly etiquette; attending will only embarrass yourself. Your embarrassment aside, it will be a disgrace to Her Majesty the Empress."

Byron chuckled and whispered, "You know what? Her Majesty the Empress is not yet of age, she's at a stubborn age; embarrassing her, what would happen?"

"Becomes resentful, maybe even lose one's head," Roland followed his words.

Byron slapped his thigh, chuckling:

"You get it. Her Majesty the Empress is sensitive; your novel already displeased her. If you disgrace her again, it will be a double humiliation. Even for venting anger, your fate won't be good."

"So..."

"What are the benefits of voluntarily giving up the championship?" Roland asked bluntly.

Byron was taken aback.

That esteemed guest did prepare benefits, but he didn't expect Roland to be so direct.

He awkwardly chuckled, then playfully said, "Roland, I told you before your novel is worldly, but you didn't believe it. What kind of literary scholar talks about money all day?"

Roland glared at him, and sneered, "Who recognized me as a literary scholar, you?"

Byron was speechless for a moment.

Indeed, they never considered Roland as one of their own, yet they tried to bind him with their rules. Wasn't that sheer folly?

Byron softly coughed and said, "Roland, if you insist on the prize, the most likely outcome is being stuffed in a sack and thrown into the Tamas River with a rock. It's common here."

Roland remained noncommittal.

But those were meaningless words before; he's been waiting for a "but."

Seeing Roland unmoved, Byron realized this guy wasn't easy to fool, so he gave up the scare-then-persuade strategy and said directly:

"I know you want the prize to buy a house. That esteemed guest respects your talent and request, willing to give you 150 pounds as compensation, enough to buy a house with some extra."

Roland's eyes widened at Byron, asking surprisingly:

"Do you mean I give up the 500-pound prize, the championship glory, the opportunity to attend the Royal Arts Salon, just for 150 pounds?"

He stared at Byron like he was an idiot, making the bald editor's face slightly flushed.

Of course, the guest prepared more than just this.

He just wanted to keep a large part, leaving Roland with a "taste" — was that too much?

Don't push your luck!

Byron glared back unyieldingly, looking Roland in the eyes.

His meaning was clear.

Kid, don't push it. You're lucky to taste the soup, and you want to take the whole pot?

Seeing Byron unwilling to relent, Roland stood up directly.

"Roland, where do you think you're going?"

"Nothing, just heading to Sheffield Palace to find the Minister of Internal Affairs for the prize."

Seeing Roland really about to leave, Byron hurriedly blocked his path.

The fat man now moved agilely like an athlete.

"Don't go, let's talk it over."

"Since it's a business deal, it must follow commercial rules; otherwise, there's no room for discussion."

Roland sneered, "The championship prize is mine, no doubt. If we're talking business, the guest needs to compensate me additionally for the loss of honor."

Byron, frustrated by Roland's unyielding attitude, gritted his teeth and threatened:

"Roland, I'm telling you, there are only a few teachers in the Imperial Capital who can teach nobility etiquette, and none of them will teach you, even with money! Even if they were willing, a few days would still be insufficient."

"You are bound to make a fool of yourself!"

Roland's mouth curled with a contemptuous sneer.

The etiquette teachers outside don't teach him, so what about those inside the Imperial Palace?

He snorted lightly, dismissively saying, "Whether I can find a teacher is my business. What we're discussing now is how much the champion's glory is worth in money."

Byron's old face turned red, but he ultimately couldn't match Roland's disdainful gaze.

He knew very well that Roland wasn't the kind of rookie who'd wet his pants at just being scared a little.

He also knew that if he didn't come up with a reasonable price, Roland would never accept the deal.

Thinking that he could have made a huge profit, but was forced by Roland to make only a small gain, Byron's heart was bleeding.

Gritting his teeth, he said, "A total of eight hundred pounds, that's the bottom line!"

"I will only consider it for two thousand pounds, and remember, that's just considering. I will outright reject any insulting offer below this amount," Roland said in a deep voice.

Of course, he didn't accept the deal.

Accepting the deal would be insulting Count Sif's goodwill; absolutely not.

But that didn't mean he couldn't have some fun with the other party.

Seeing Roland's arrogant attitude, Byron was so angry he almost had a brain hemorrhage.

If he accepted Roland's exorbitant price, he would end up losing two hundred pounds.

He did indeed have money, but he only liked to suck blood, not bleed.

Byron, embarrassed and enraged, lowered his voice and said, "Roland, the esteemed guest only offered one thousand pounds."

"One thousand five hundred pounds. Otherwise, I'll go to Sheffield Palace myself to claim the prize."

After a slight pause, Roland said in a deep voice, "Anything below this price is an insult to the champion's glory and this wonderful novel."

Byron almost had a brain hemorrhage.

There was only one sentence written, and he asked for thirteen sets of houses in the Imperial Capital Core District; why don't you just go rob them?

Even though he was almost fainting from anger, Byron knew that Roland, young and arrogant, would not easily compromise.

Since he wasn't scared from the beginning, the result was already destined.

He stared fixedly at Roland.

If anger could kill, Roland would have died thirteen times.

Finally, under Roland's 'take it or leave it' gaze, Byron compromised.

This way, he could at least get a small commission.

"One thousand five hundred pounds, with a five hundred pound deposit upfront, and the remainder after the deed is done!"

Roland stood up and started to walk out straight away.

Byron stopped him, angrily asking, "What exactly do you want?"

"Give it all to me."

Byron was speechless.

His chubby face twisted and twitched with anger, but he still gritted his teeth and opened the safe, taking out a large bag of gold coins and handing it to Roland.

Just as Roland was about to reach out, he pushed the contract over.

"Sign it!"

Roland took a quick look. It was a secret contract. Once signed, it meant he voluntarily gave up the writing contest championship.

And he would receive fifteen hundred pounds of gold coins as compensation.

This was quite reasonable.

Roland quickly signed his name.

"Deal, pleasure doing business with you."

Byron said nothing with a dark face, watching Roland leave with a trace of ridicule in his eyes.

Young people are indeed greedy enough.

It's just uncertain whether they'll live to spend this money.

Leaving the publisher, Roland whistled, almost unable to hold back laughter.

He did indeed sign to give up the championship.

But he knew very well that someone would definitely try to reclaim this money by force.

The Empire tacitly approves of private contracts, but there are legal constraints. If one party uses violence to endanger the other party's personal safety, the contract becomes void, and the compensation specified in the contract must be paid as compensation.

This law comes from the previous Jinquehua Kingdom, very ancient, and after the Sussex Empire sank the Duke of Jinquehua Dynasty, they retained some laws, of which this is one.

Professional lawyers may not know this.

But Roland knew.

These fifteen hundred pounds he was determined to get.

Since it's already a life-and-death struggle, there's no need to be polite with the enemy.

Just as he was about to leave, the newspaper boy appeared again.

"Sir, would you like to buy a newspaper?"

"Which newspaper?"

"The Sussex Sun's writing contest special, one shilling!"

"Why don't you go rob... wait, it's the Sun?"

Roland took out a silver coin, handed it to the newsboy, and grabbed the newspaper.

Got to admit, even if the Sun's news is wild, sometimes it's very accurate.

He opened the newspaper, reading it as he walked.

This special edition was very detailed. Not only did it publish exciting excerpts from the award-winning works, but also included brief introductions and interviews with these famous writers.

Roland patiently flipped through it, looking forward to seeing the champion's masterpiece.

However, all he saw was a line of small text, rendering him speechless.

"The champion of the writing contest will be announced live at the Royal Literary Salon. Stay tuned."

As expected from the Sun. No wonder it's called a tabloid.

Bah!

Roland laughed, tore the newspaper into pieces, and tossed it into the trash can.

A beautiful day, except for the shilling silver coin that was wasted.

Chapter 19: Chapter 18: A Brush of Hands

The reward was in hand, heavy and substantial.

Roland didn't rush back to take Lisa to see the house, but went to find Count Tyrone first.

He wasn't seeking protection but wanted to quickly tell the truth.

Outsiders thought this championship was appointed by the Empress, but only Roland understood that it was Sif, the Empress's good friend, who fought for it on his behalf.

He could argue that the situation during the transaction was urgent and he was forced, any reason would do, and Sif would probably understand.

But it was essential to inform her immediately afterward.

This was respect; she had the right to know.

Respecting others is respecting oneself.

If she found out later that the essay contest championship was exchanged for money, Sif wouldn't be happy.

Roland could disregard what his enemies thought, but he had to consider her feelings.

They were friends.

The barriers of trust don't always exist, like Brother Xun and Tuzi, they were also good friends—oops, it's Brother Tuzi.

Even though Sif didn't want to remove her veil, her attitude towards him was indeed friendly.

When they discussed novel plots in the study, they were simply author and reader.

Roland understood that he was someone who valued emotions; he wasn't worried about Sif's anger or potential revenge, not even her complaining to the Empress.

Sif wasn't there, but the butler, having seen Roland before, smiled and said:

"Mr. Roland, Miss is close with Her Majesty and often stays overnight at the Imperial Palace, she won't return today. If you have any matter, please come earlier tomorrow."

The Count enters the palace to change clothes and turns into the Empress, why would they leave the palace without a reason?

The butler knew, but he didn't say.

Roland hesitated a bit and softly said, "This matter is very important, I'll write a personal letter, please help me send it to the palace."

"Can't it wait a night?"

The butler lightly frowned, neither refusing directly nor agreeing.

"The Count may choose not to look, but I must inform today."

"It seems this matter is indeed important, let's talk face to face then."

As Roland insisted, a soft voice spoke from behind him.

It was Sif herself.

Looking at Roland's straight back, Sif suddenly thought of Teacher Margaret's recommendation, and her irritable mood slightly calmed down.

Just an hour ago, Teacher Wald had uncharacteristically lost his temper at her.

His words were vehement, his tone impassioned, completely at odds with his reputation as a wise man.

In the end, the teacher was so angry he fainted on the spot, and if a doctor hadn't been nearby, there might have been an incident.

Sif understood Wald's anger.

She was indeed somewhat lacking in ambition.

But she also had words to say.

Is Empress Sofia someone who can be easily provoked?

In the past dozen years, there had been several empresses worldwide, but they all later let their husbands become emperors and themselves became empress consorts.

Those who didn't meet such ends died.

Everything the teacher said was correct, how could the Empress of Sussex Empire bow to the barbarians of the Land of the Frost? But who could provoke Sofia?

The thought of opposing such a tyrannical empress made Sif shiver.

Is this a matter of wanting or not?

She might want to, but she lacks the ability.

Currently, she hasn't formally ascended the throne; strictly speaking, she's not yet the Empress, so for now, Sofia wouldn't concern herself with her.

Once she ascends, Sofia will undoubtedly send a friendly personal letter, asking if she has any plans for a husband to act as emperor.

If not, then they are enemies.

Sif just wanted to be a peaceful emperor, even if just a mascot. She just didn't want to die; was that too much to ask?

The teacher felt wronged, but she felt even more so.

Who had ever understood her?

Originally she was enjoying a leisurely, carefree life as a little princess in the Earl's Domain, but was pulled forcefully to become an Empress, without a reliable helper. Was it easy for her?

As she vented inwardly, Teacher Margaret's words suddenly flashed through her mind.

"Roland has great potential, maybe not so noticeable now, but definitely an unpolished gem."

At the time, she didn't think much of it.

How many unpolished gems could there be? A collection of gems only nurtures a batch of useless dependents.

But looking at Roland's straight back and his composed smile when he turned around, she suddenly had a bold idea. Since Teacher Mary recommended it, why not give it a try?

After all, she had nothing left to lose.

Teacher Margaret had seen many young aristocratic talents, and she never praised any one of them. Perhaps Roland truly had something exceptional?

With the beauty filter recommended by Teacher Mary, looking at Roland again, Sif suddenly found his appearance unexpectedly elegant and pleasant to the eye.

The prejudice from writing books like "Oh My, the Empress is Pregnant, Who Did It?" also improved significantly.

As little figures battled in Sif's mind, Roland turned at the sound and greeted Sif with the gentlemanly manners he had just learned.

He was the winner of the essay competition and a guest of the Empress, so it was reasonable for him to consider himself a gentleman.

Seeing his courteous demeanor, Sif couldn't help but inwardly marvel.

No wonder Teacher Mary specifically recommended him; Roland really learns quickly.

Roland was unaware that his impression in Sif's eyes had improved; he felt somewhat anxious inside.

After all, he exchanged the championship for money.

Although he calculated this, selling is selling; that's a fact.

How should he start speaking later?

Roland was conflicted, as was Sif.

She hadn't thought about how many more opportunities she would have to meet Roland and hadn't even taken off her mask. Though she had ample reasons, it was indeed somewhat impolite.

It created a distance.

What if Roland thought of her as an arrogant noble?

How should she start speaking later?

As Roland and Sif made eye contact, speechless and choked, the butler couldn't hold back any longer.

"Are you two going to talk inside? Just standing here? Journalists might eavesdrop outside later."

The aged but poised butler lightly coughed to remind her, "Miss, it's cold outside; better invite the guest in for a cup of tea."

Sif snapped out of it, pinching the corner of her skirt to return the gesture to Roland, then motioned with her hand.

"Mr. Roland, we have Marlan Red Tea exclusive to the Imperial Family. Please, join me for a cup."

"It is my honor."

Roland extended his right hand, and Sif hesitated for a moment, suddenly realizing this was the hand-holding courtesy popular among the upper nobility in the Duke of Jinquehua Dynasty.

Ladies attending banquets often wore long trailing skirts, making it difficult to walk. Considerate gentlemen would extend their right hand for them to lean on.

Banquet ladies wore gloves, so there was no direct contact.

This expressed politeness without taking advantage, and the etiquette quickly spread.

After the Duke of Jinquehua Dynasty was replaced by the Sussex Empire, this etiquette continued among the upper nobility until an incident later on.

The tyrant nicknamed Blue Eyes cut off Duke Alphonse's hand.

The reason being Duke Alphonse offered the hand-holding courtesy to Blue Eyes' secret lover.

This blatant violation of the rules unsurprisingly sparked a civil war.

Blue Eyes' performance on the battlefield was an eyesore, unworthy of his brutal and murderous reputation.

After his defeat, Blue Eyes himself was exiled, and his direct descendants were stripped of succession rights, it was Sif's ancestral line that inherited.

Perhaps because the throne was taken unjustly, Sif's ancestor had an ambiguous attitude towards the hand-holding courtesy that sparked the internal war of the Empire.

This gentlemanly etiquette gradually faded into the annals of history.

Seeing Roland's right hand extended flatly, Sif was dazed.

This secret was unknown to the world, but as a member of the Imperial Family, she naturally knew.

But how did Roland know? Could he have an unknown background?

She hesitated whether to place her hand.

She did wear gloves, but the thin lace gloves were almost as if not wearing any.

Placing her hand felt like directly giving her hand to Roland.

Her subconsciously extended hand hovered in midair, seemingly frozen.

In her moment of hesitation, Roland inwardly cursed himself.

Showing off with something he just learned, idiot.

Even if Sif considered him a friend, the chasm between nobility and commoners still existed.

Sif surely didn't know this age-old etiquette that had long been lost.

In the simple ways of Sussex, unmarried men and women rarely had intimate contact; it wouldn't be right for Sif to think he was taking advantage.

In a flash of thought, Roland realized and immediately withdrew his hand.

In a lightning-fast moment, Sif also realized and immediately extended her hand.

No matter how complicated the hand-holding courtesy was, the etiquette itself wasn't problematic.

Roland's gentlemanly invitation was polite and rejecting it for no reason would make her seem rude.

That wouldn't do.

She was an elegant imperial... ahem, imperial maiden and couldn't lose courtesy before a guest.

They very tacitly moved simultaneously.

Roland withdrew his hand, and Sif extended hers.

Their fingertips in the air were barely a touch, sparking a...

brush of fingers.

The old butler standing behind them glanced up silently at the sky.

This damned overcast sky, how annoying.

Our Sussex has everything good except not enough bright sunshine.

Chapter 20: Chapter 19: I Have an Empress Friend

The mist swirled around, with the rich aroma of tea wafting through the air.

Perhaps the awkward silence from their earlier lack of rapport lingered, as both Roland and Sif remained silent, quietly sipping their tea.

Under the late autumn sunset, the warm red tea not only dispelled the chill of autumn but also gradually eased the awkwardness.

The maid poured the tea and, seeing Sif wave her hand, inquired whether Roland needed anything. After receiving his reply, she bowed and left.

The well-trained maid, graceful and poised, was the complete opposite of the demonic puppet maid at Alina's residence.

Sipping lightly from his teacup, Sif's heartbeat gradually calmed as she softly spoke:

"Roland, there's a painting on the wall behind you; how do you find it?"

This was clearly an attempt to break the ice, and Roland knew Sif was trying to ease the atmosphere, so he turned as instructed, his gaze falling upon the painting.

With just one glance, Roland was stunned. The girl in the painting was beautiful, but that wasn't the main point; the key was that the girl in the painting bore at least an 80-90% resemblance to the elf he had encountered in his dreams.

Though lacking features like the pointed, delicate long ears of the Elf Race, the girl's milk-like smooth skin and the serene, elegant forest aura were remarkably similar.

Her face was almost identical to that of the elf maiden's.

If such a girl existed in reality, she would definitely be a beauty capable of sparking wars between two nations, a femme fatale of her era.

"This young lady's beauty is indescribable, fortunately, she's just a figure in a painting."

"What do you mean?" Sif raised an eyebrow, softly asking.

"If there were such a beautiful girl in reality, she would certainly be a calamity for all living things."

Sif murmured leisurely, "A calamity for all? Your choice of words is as vivid as ever. You're right, without enough power, being too pretty isn't a good thing."

After a moment of contemplation, she slowly said, "Turn around."

Roland obediently turned around.

Then he saw the girl from the painting sitting across from him.

The world lost its color.

All the hues and light converged upon Sif's face.

Roland's heart skipped a beat.

He nearly stood up to ask if the elf in his dream was her.

But he held back.

Upon closer examination, the features had their own unique beauty, and the aura was completely different.

Compared to the naive purity of the elf maiden, Sif's clear eyes held a subtle, heart-wrenching melancholy undetectable to most.

It wasn't the trivial sadness of a love-stricken girl sighing over fallen petals, but the sorrow of confronting a thorny, insurmountable problem.

She had her own burdens.

Roland was almost ready to declare himself in love, but his mind remained clear.

Men are often attracted to the beauty of eighteen-year-old girls.

But a wise man wouldn't simply marry based on appearance.

The swirling tea mist drifted right in front of him, blurring the exquisite face within the fog.

The mist, moved by a gentle breeze, looked like a flowing river.

Charlo, who admired the Count's Daughter, still lingered beneath the Tamas River, keeping company with the fish every day.

Wake up.

The mist in front of him was just a thick curtain.

The elf from his dream walked into the painting, then floated into reality from the painting.

But it was all false.

The real world remained in shades of black, white, and gray, with Sif's brilliance stinging his eyes. But he quickly regained his composure, even feeling a slight sense of loss.

After all, this world was not perfect.

People are often harsh on those scoring ninety-nine points for not obtaining full marks, and Roland's disappointment was the same.

His gaze upon seeing her true appearance did not seem peculiar to Sif.

She often wore a mask or veil, not out of arrogance, but simply out of inconvenience.

Yet, Roland's subsequent change in gaze slightly surprised her.

The expression on Roland's face was neither greedy nor shocked, nor was it humbled with inferiority, but simply one of disappointment.

Disappointment?

The temperature of Sif's cheeks rose rapidly.

Am I really so disappointing in appearance?

How incredibly rude!

She didn't wish for Roland to be enchanted by her beauty, staring at her with lustful eyes. However, that didn't mean she accepted him finding her not beautiful enough.

Despite her displeasure, Sif managed her emotions well, softly saying:

"Roland, I don't have many friends; besides... Her Majesty the Empress, it's you. Teacher Wald taught me that when associating with friends, one should be sincere. Hence, I am revealing my true appearance."

"Everyone has secrets; some things you will come to know in time but not now."

Roland's gaze pricked Sif's pride.

But she acknowledged Roland.

A man who isn't swayed by beauty is either questioning his sexuality or possesses extreme self-discipline.

Roland was evidently the latter.

She decided to accept Teacher Mary's suggestion, cultivating Roland as part of her foundation.

She doesn't have much capital to win over young talents.

Then let's just be sincere.

"Tell me, what's so urgent that it requires a handwritten letter sent to the Imperial Palace to find me."

She blew the floating leaves and continued to adjust her mood with a tea-drinking motion.

"I sold the essay contest's championship."

Roland knew Sif was very busy, so he explained the situation in the concise style of the essay.

"Pfft!"

The tea sprayed all over the table, Sif's face flushed, losing all gracefulness.

She had seen the world.

She had experienced her father's passing, what scene hadn't she encountered?

But still, Roland left her speechless.

Even if Roland had written a love poem on the spot to express affection, she wouldn't be surprised, although absurd, it would at least make sense.

However, what Roland did now was entirely illogical.

"How much did you sell it for?"

Sif bit her lip, her voice was soft, yet the coldness filled the room.

"Fifteen hundred pounds." Roland was very honest.

Sif slowly put down her teacup, the corner of her lips trembling slightly, "This is the championship I won for you from Her Majesty the Empress!"

"Without me, you would've been hanged at Monarch Square."

Of course, Roland wouldn't say that without Sif, he would have already left with Lisa.

But he couldn't say that, and since he wouldn't say, he had to defer to Sif's statement.

Sif's slender fingers pressed her temples, trying to calm herself.

She almost failed, but fortunately remembered Teacher Wald's teachings.

"Even the most heinous criminals have the right to defense."

The teacher was right, at least let Roland finish speaking.

Sif took a deep breath, her soft voice disappearing, replaced by iciness.

"You may argue."

Roland breathed a sigh of relief, Sif's response far exceeded his expectations.

Teacher Mary had hinted to him that he would be introduced to a very powerful Imperial Family young lady.

Roland thought for a moment and understood.

It was definitely not the Empress, but Sif.

Compared to the unfamiliar, quick-to-anger Empress, Sif was somewhat closer.

Serving with the Emperor is like walking with a tiger, the Empress is too dangerous.

At least he and Sif were friends.

Being friends, as long as there's mutual fondness, fine, but working for Sif requires consideration of whether this leader is worth following.

Sif was evaluating Roland, and Roland was observing her too.

To Roland, Sif scored very high.

He also understood that his initial score in Sif's mind had dropped to zero, he needed to earn points now.

Roland took a sip of tea, organized his thoughts, and truthfully recounted the entire process of being threatened and bought off by Byron at the publishing house.

During his narration, Roland also presented his own analysis process.

As he spoke, Sif's expression gradually relaxed, then became particularly grave again.

"Roland, it's unnecessary, this is too dangerous."

Roland recalled the past, and said leisurely, "My father was very skilled in combat, under his stick teaching, my combat skills easily handle gang thugs."

"But they are in the shadows."

Sif said a bit anxiously, "I can let the Military Intelligence Bureau..."

Her words abruptly stopped halfway.

By the time the Military Intelligence Bureau figured out who the mastermind was, Roland would either have already solved the problem or been solved by it.

Sussex Empire ranks first in comprehensive national strength worldwide, except the Military Intelligence Bureau is inept.

This is consensus.

What's more embarrassing is that she couldn't even command those incompetents.

Sif suddenly felt a wave of sadness.

If someone can't even manage useless people, isn't that more pathetic?

Watching the light gradually fade from Sif's eyes, Roland could guess what she was thinking.

He unexpectedly felt a bit of heartache and blurted out:

"Miss Sif, we're friends, if you have any difficulties I'll do my utmost to help!"

He merely felt sorry for a friend, nothing more.

But saying it out loud felt strange however he thought about it.

Fortunately, Sif didn't overthink, she just gazed at Roland.

Just as Roland felt a little uneasy inside, Sif softly said, "I don't have much trouble, but I have a close friend in the Sussex Empire who is the Empress, she's facing many difficulties, can you help me... help me come up with some solutions for her?"