Empress 251

Chapter 251: Have You Ever Gone Crazy for Yourself? (Part 3)

"Retreat!"

Christine gave a light reprimand, warning Roland.

Watching the erupting volcano, she reminded him while stepping back.

Roland was not even really her friend, just a partner; there was only so much she could do.

If Roland insisted on seeking death, she couldn't do anything about it.

Anthony was also retreating, nearly sitting down on the ground in his nervousness.

He felt a bit regretful, thinking maybe he should have tried harder to persuade them.

But he had seen the look in Lisa's eyes, shining as if a blind person had just seen the light.

Everyone will die; perhaps dying in pursuit of progress is also a kind of happiness.

The Lisa of the past might have been content with mediocrity, but not anymore.

Roland's face turned pale as he pulled Sif's long spear and slowly retreated.

He could no longer see Lisa, nor hear any sound, but he could clearly feel Lisa was in there.

She wasn't dead yet!

Retreating back to Christine's side, Roland's throat moved, but he couldn't form any words.

Christine nodded silently, Lisa was still alive, at least for now.

All they could do was pray.

The volcano erupted once more. Poisonous smoke spread across the mountain top, and lava continuously flowed out.

In such a terrifying environment, could Lisa really still be alive?

Roland trembled, being forced back constantly by the lava.

Since they couldn't help, they had no choice but to retreat to a safe area.

The four of them silently watched the increasingly terrifying crater, unable to say a word.

The atmosphere was particularly oppressive.

Three minutes passed, each second torturous for Roland, with those three minutes feeling as long as three complete epochs.

Not seeing Lisa, he realized how important she was to him.

After his parents passed away, Lisa took on the task of taking care of his life, as if it was a matter of course.

Lisa lived in the house left by her father, but with her looks, it wouldn't have been difficult to marry a rich man.

She definitely didn't stay for the material life.

In her heart, Roland had long become her family.

She helped Roland find a job and started looking for a suitable wife for him when he came of age.

She was like a sister, but her concern was a bit overbearing.

While being under Lisa's control, Roland felt somewhat troubled, even thinking she was like a young version of his mother, meddling too much.

Now he realized that Lisa had long been integrated into his world, unable to be severed.

Lying on the carriage pretending to be drunk, he finally understood Lisa's true thoughts.

Even though he was unclear when their non-blood-related affection had changed, none of it mattered.

He needed Lisa to stay by his side, it was that simple.

Flames and smoke blocked him from Lisa, and for the first time, he felt afraid.

He feared this might be the last time they met.

Earlier, when Lisa turned around, he saw that her eyes held three parts reluctance and ninety-seven parts resolve.

Every few seconds Roland would glance at Christine's pale cheek.

As long as the Life Mark still existed, Lisa wasn't dead, there was still hope.

Another torturous three minutes passed, Roland’s hand trembled like that of the boxer, Ali.

This was a race against time, with every additional second bringing more danger.

When Roland’s nerves were stretched to the limit, Christine suddenly stood up, with a trace of pity in her eyes.

Roland’s heart stopped.

Lisa’s Life Mark had disappeared.

Christine quietly bowed her head and prayed softly.

"Shut up!"

Sif interrupted her prayer.

"Alive, we need to see her, dead, we need to see her body, why curse her when you haven’t seen anything?"

Christine obediently lowered her head and kept silent.

She didn’t want to quarrel with Sif, not because she feared this foolish Empress, but because she didn’t want to make the atmosphere more uncomfortable.

Sif grabbed Roland’s hand and pulled him to the side with effort.

"Roland, Lisa..."

"I know, no need to comfort me."

Tears welled up in the corners of Roland’s eyes as he softly said, "Perhaps one day I’ll see her in another world, hoping she hasn’t forgotten about me."

"Roland! She isn’t dead!"

"Not dead? But her Life Mark has already disappeared."

Sif’s cheeks were flushed crimson from the scorching heat as she softly asked, "Miss Lisa likes you, right?"

Roland said nothing.

Silence was also a default answer.

Perhaps this would make Sif unhappy, but right now he didn’t care about any of that.

Sif bit her lip and said, "I don’t want to explain, but believe me, Lisa must have encountered something miraculous, rather than dying."

Roland wanted to ask Sif the reason for her judgment, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

Lisa was flesh and blood, a carbon-based life form, her existence couldn’t defy physical principles.

A carbon-based life form couldn’t survive in such harsh conditions.

At least humans couldn’t.

He understood Sif’s meaning, as long as no body was found, it meant she was missing.

Legally, Lisa could survive for three more years.

Just like his father, who hadn’t yet reached the end of the death verdict period. Even if bones and flesh sank into the muddy ground, legally, it was still just missing.

Just like the Late Emperor, Edward, at least legally, he was still alive.

It was truly self-deception.

Roland didn’t break down hysterically like in a romantic drama, nor did he shout at Sif like in a third-rate melodrama, narrating the bond between him and Lisa.

The Path of Transcendence is only an ascent with a beginning and no end.

Either die halfway or continue forward.

Lisa’s passing corroborated this point.

He wouldn’t be dejected or dispirited; he would continue forward until he ascended to the pinnacle of power alongside the three goddesses.

"Sif, I’m fine. No matter where Lisa’s soul has scattered, even if it’s the Nether River, Netherworld, or even the Sea of Annihilation, I’ll bring her home."

Not just Lisa; there was also the Elf Sylph, now just a wisp of consciousness, trapped in the Flower Sea Dream Realm.

Chapter 252: Have You Ever Gone Crazy for Yourself? (Part 4)

Lisa’s death made Roland’s heart as firm as iron.

He would definitely go to the end!

Looking at Roland’s determined expression, Sif was infuriated.

Of course, she knew Lisa was still alive. Lisa was her rival in love, and she had a special sense for Lisa.

She had just used [Insight] to take a look at the volcano’s crater. She didn’t see Lisa, but the faint red glow representing a threat still existed.

Not only existed, but it was even gradually increasing.

Sif tiptoed and grabbed Roland’s shoulders, almost sticking close to his face.

Locking eyes, Sif growled softly in some anger.

"I said she’s not dead! Not legally dead, but truly not dead!"

"...Not dead?"

Roland’s pupils trembled.

He could hardly believe his ears.

"I don’t want to explain, but please believe me!"

Roland nodded heavily. The calmness he had barely maintained broke down instantly, his tall figure collapsing like a taut bowstring released.

Sif held him tightly, feeling Roland’s trembling body, and softly comforted him: "Don’t worry, let’s wait a little longer."

Looking at the volcano's crater continuously spewing magma, Sif's mood was somewhat complex.

Lisa was a rival in love.

By common sense, she should hope Lisa burns to death in the magma.

But she just couldn't bring herself to hate Lisa, after all, Lisa had no hostility toward her.

Sif suddenly had a jolt, she found a reason to hope for Lisa's return.

As long as Lisa was alive, she was a conquerable rival!

If Lisa died, she would become a lifeless ghost, forever living in Roland's heart, forever above her!

Although the surroundings were incomparably scorching, Sif's mind was incredibly calm.

She released Roland, slowly squatted down, kneeled on one knee, and began to pray devoutly.

Seeing Sif's actions, Roland was somewhat bewildered.

He could feel Sif's sincerity.

Did she really hope so much that Lisa was safe and sound?

At this moment, Sif in Roland's eyes seemed like an angel descending to the human world, pure and perfect, making Roland feel somewhat ashamed.

He clumsily imitated Sif's posture, kneeling on one knee, hands clasped, ready to pray.

Just as he was about to pray, he abruptly remembered he didn’t seem to believe in any god.

The only ones he could pray to were...

"Father, Mother, if you can hear my prayer, please bless Lisa with safety!"

You may not believe in gods, but you must believe in your parents.

Maybe it was the prayers’ effect, or maybe heaven hadn’t turned against them, as in the fifth minute after the volcanic eruption, Lisa finally emerged from the searing magma.

Although her clothes were burned full of holes, leaving only the fireproof undergarment, and although she looked extremely disheveled, and although she trembled with each step, she emerged alive.

The two rings on her fingers were completely shattered, and the fireproof magic equipment was all damaged.

At least she was unharmed.

Roland dashed over like lightning, hugging Lisa tightly.

Anthony looked up at the sky, though he never studied astrology, gazing at the stars was a kind of enjoyment.

Christine "focused" on praying, as if nothing in the world concerned her.

Sif...

She ran off to retrieve her long spear.

Although that long spear was tossed just a few meters away, she couldn’t see it, searching all around.

Lisa was hugged tightly by Roland, completely stunned.

This was the first time Roland embraced her in front of so many people.

It felt so warm...

Wait, Sif was still right there!

She forcefully twisted Roland’s arm, constantly giving him looks as a reminder, almost ready to bite if needed, until Roland finally released his embrace under her gaze’s threat.

"Sister, I was really afraid I’d never see you again! These were the longest five minutes of my life."

"Me too."

Lisa slightly lowered her head, speaking softly: "I encountered something very strange, but..."

"As long as you’re alive, everyone has their own secrets!"

Roland interrupted Lisa.

If it’s inconvenient to say, it’s okay; safety is what matters most.

Chapter 253: Both Newcomers and Veterans Can Smile

As the group of five happily departed, Sif slowed her pace, approached Roland, and walked alongside him with a composed expression.

"Did you feel it?"

"Someone’s watching us, a transcendent," Roland said calmly.

"Could be Tier Seven, but it’s definitely not Sofia," Sif whispered.

"Reason?"

"If it were that woman, it’s impossible for us both to notice unless she did it intentionally. She is the Empress, after all; there’s no reason for her to run around wildly every day."

As soon as she finished speaking, Sif felt her words were somewhat presumptuous and quickly added softly, "I’m different from her; I haven’t formally ascended the throne yet."

As long as it’s not that woman.

If it’s someone else, even if they are a Tier Seven transcendent, so what?

As long as we protect our main force, Master Anthony, ordinary Tier Seven is no match.

Roland glanced sideways at Anthony’s sturdy figure and suddenly felt that this bear-like unconventional mage didn’t quite need protection.

Anyway, it was a close call tonight; let’s go back and rest well.

Without a word, the five rode back to Hansa City.

At this time, the early morning sunlight was slowly rising from the east, illuminating Val City.

Upon entering the city, Anthony and Lisa went to find a place to rest at the hotel, and Christine also made an excuse to leave.

"Roland, I must go and preside over the transfer ceremony."

Transfer ceremony?

That’s right, today is the day the Val City State flag officially lowers.

Val City State will announce the end of its last day of official business at noon and transfer its power to representatives from all sides.

Because it is a peaceful transition, the personal and property safety of Val City State’s numerous officials is guaranteed by several major countries.

But they also lost the most crucial thing, power.

Previously, Val City was not so significant, and the plenipotentiary representatives sent by various countries and groups were not so weighty that they could entirely accept them.

However, after the Magic Crystal Ore Vein appeared, Val City had already become the focus of various powers.

This place is destined to become a micro-battlefield, where elite forces from various countries will engage in bloody, brutal yet controllable clashes on this stage.

Through this confrontation, countries will probe and pull each other, ultimately determining whether and how the continental treaty will be renewed.

If any faction can monopolize or form an alliance to occupy Val City, the ownership of the Magic Crystal Ore Vein will naturally be revealed.

Of course, all this is already irrelevant to the officials of Val City State.

Under the morning's first ray of sunshine, Mr. Tony looked at himself in the mirror, noticing crow's feet already at the corners of his eyes.

He was already forty-seven, in the latter half of his career peak as a man.

He should have held power, maneuvering skillfully among countries to secure benefits for Val City.

However, international circumstances suddenly changed; who could have predicted it would come to this?

In diplomatic negotiations, he truly did his best.

But unfortunately, diplomatic skills couldn't change the fact that Val City State is weak and helpless.

Among this group of tigers, leopards, jackals, and bears, the sheep at the table have no chance of changing their fate of being torn apart and devoured, no matter how innocent.

Unlike beasts, humans have slightly better manners, and that's the only difference.

Tony stepped out of his room and headed towards the municipal hall.

The city-state government is the city government.

To improve administrative efficiency, Val City State did not employ many idle, redundant officials.

Their streamlined government framework brought extremely high administrative efficiency.

Although Val City State was just a small force with a population of tens of thousands, it could control the Golden Waterway and accumulate vast wealth; this effective administrative system is largely to thank.

This administrative system is very advanced, far surpassing the cumbersome bureaucratic systems of several major countries.

However, it's of no use.

Against absolute power, the best skills are useless.

Laughing at himself, Tony walked towards the municipal hall.

People on the roadside recognized him.

People stopped walking, watching the old leader go to work for the last time.

Usually, they had some complaints about the officials, disliking their profiteering and inefficiency.

But as Val City State was about to cease functioning, all complaints disappeared.

What use is there now in saying this; the nation has fallen.

People remembered the benefits of having a city-state government.

In this era of officials' absolute power, Val City State had a relatively clean official system and basic civil rights assurances.

All this is gone.

When the Val City State flag lowers, they will become subjects of Sussex, Vladimir, Tirol, and other countries.

Moreover, they are destined to be second-class citizens without civil rights.

Even among locals of these major countries, only a few possess rights to participate in governance and politics.

Thinking about the inevitably bleak future, the people standing on both sides of the road felt a sudden heartache.

Mr. Tony took off his hat, waved to the crowd beside him, and greeted them warmly.

But attentive observers noticed the tears in the corners of his eyes.

As he was about to enter the municipal hall, he slowly turned around and bowed to the crowd along the road.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your support over the years. Today is the last day of work for Val City State. If there’s anything..."

Tony paused for a moment, laughed at himself, "If there is something, we probably can’t handle it, but I can document it for you and pass it on to the new government."

"After all, this is our last chance to make a request; they should consider it."

As he spoke, Tony’s voice choked up, unable to continue.

"We want Val City State!"

A young girl’s clear voice broke the silence.

Her mother, terrified, covered her mouth and forcibly dragged her to the nearby alleyway, spanking her hard.

Chapter 254: Both Newcomers and Veterans Can Smile

If it were usual times, people around might laugh at the little girl, or some might hold back the angry mother, but today no one moved.

People’s moods were all very gloomy.

They did not follow the little girl in her excited slogans either.

Children might be ignorant, but adults could not be.

Police from various countries were already stationed near City Hall, shouting "We want Val City State" at this time was essentially no different from rebellion.

Nostalgia is just nostalgia, Val City State was destined to perish in the end.

People hurriedly dispersed, and Mr. Tony somewhat wistfully put on his top hat, maintaining the most elegant posture as he walked towards City Hall.

Roland and Sif happened to pass by, silently watching this scene.

Lisa and Master Anthony had exhausted much of their energy last night and returned to rest.

Christine was busy, leaving only Roland and Sif wandering around the city like outsiders.

Roland was the Governor, and Sif was the Empress. This city had interests tied to Sussex, yet due to unforeseen circumstances, it had nothing to do with them, the Dominators of the Empire.

They had no immaculate laughter for Val City State.

Educated gentlemen and ladies might lack compassion, but there was no need to rub salt into others' wounds.

"This Mr. Tony is truly a pity."

Sif spoke softly.

"A pity?" Roland asked quietly.

Sif sighed softly, somewhat wistfully saying, "I got some intelligence from Alina and learned a bit about Mr. Tony."

"This person can't be considered a clean official. Although he wasn't greedy or corrupt, he helped his family make a fortune through the intelligence he controlled, fortunately without breaking the law."

"Compared to his money-making skills, his ability to govern a city is stronger. Val City is only a quarter the size of the Imperial Capital and has far fewer people, yet the city is clean, beautiful, and effectively governed, with more smiles on passersby's faces compared to those in the Imperial Capital."

"It would be great if he were my official."

Sif sighed and shook her head.

Roland smiled and clapped softly, quietly commending, "Congratulations on finding a suitable civil servant."

"Ah? But he isn't Sussex, is he?" Sif's eyes widened.

"He can be." Roland smiled.

"So should we invite him for a talk?" Sif's eyes lit up.

Roland wasn’t wrong.

Val City State was divided and occupied by five countries, and the people here would be allocated to each country according to the occupation zones.

The officials were relatively free; they could choose to stay or leave, join any country, or leave Val City to join another country.

Sif looked at Roland nervously, asking softly, "Do we have a chance?"

"We are his only choice."

Sif pondered for a moment, a slight smile appearing at the corners of her lips, understanding Roland’s meaning.

The Vladimir Empire, which proposed the partition plan, was seen as the culprit by the Val people.

If Mr. Tony chose them, he would be accused and looked down upon by the seniors and juniors of Val City State.

People would also suspect if he had taken benefits from the Rurik people.

He could go anywhere, but not the Vladimir Empire.

After excluding the wrong options, the next to be excluded would be Prudon Kingdom and Tirol Kingdom.

They had friendly relations with the Vladimir Empire, with rumors even saying they were brewing an alliance.

Turning to them wouldn’t work either.

The Weimar Federation, a nation soon to be served up as a dish, was also not an option.

Going to them, Mr. Tony might experience another partition.

The remaining choices were only the Jin Yuan Republic and the Sussex Empire.

The Jin Yuan Republic had just experienced internal unrest, and stabilizing order required time.

Their overall national strength lagged behind the Vladimir Empire, sufficient to protect themselves against the Empire but challenging to attack.

Turning to them would only ensure temporary peace.

If seeking peace, he could choose the further New Continent or South Continent, where, with Mr. Tony’s financial resources and connections, he might make his mark overseas.

Without the Sussex Empire, this might even be the best choice.

However, the Sussex Empire was right here, and there was unlikely reconciliation possible between them and the Vladimir Empire.

As long as Mr. Tony was shown that joining Sussex was better than venturing overseas, he would join.

Sif stood by the roadside, lost in thought.

Moments later, she murmured somewhat troubled, "I can offer favorable terms, but I can’t give unlimited preferential treatment, as it would disrupt the balance."

"If Ados and the others work hard, allowing newcomers to surpass them will make them feel hurt."

Sif suddenly thought of Lisa.

She had arrived later than Lisa yet attempted to secretly take Roland away; Lisa was certainly hurt.

That’s why Lisa went crazy and ran towards the volcano.

Although Ados and the others wouldn’t jump into the volcano, if Tony were heavily used, their resentment would surge like a volcano.

Roland was impressed by Sif.

She had indeed grown.

As a monarch, the most important thing was not wisdom or bravery but understanding balance.

Sif was already on the right track.

Roland did not know that Sif learned this principle from Lisa’s leap into the volcano. If he knew, he would probably have a very colorful expression.

Seeing Sif’s contemplative state, Roland gently reminded, "While it’s true that newcomers having better treatment than the old can cause imbalance, having worse treatment than the old can also discourage newcomers."

"Should they all have the same treatment, evenly dividing power?"

Sif asked, biting her lip.

Her fingertips trembled slightly.

Did Roland mean for her to share with Lisa?

Her heart stopped beating abruptly, and she was stunned.

Roland, is this really your true thought?

Sif felt a sharp blade pierce into her heart, making it hard to breathe.

This was not love.

Love is exclusive, possessive!

The books say so.

Roland did not notice Sif’s expression as his eyes suddenly lit up.

You are so right, Sif!

He said softly, "Why can’t we share? As long as Tony and the others make sufficient contributions, we can grant them Val City State citizenship, allowing them to become citizens with equal rights as those at home."

Sif was stunned.

She stared blankly at Roland for a long time before reacting.

So Roland was really just considering how to settle Tony, without using this opportunity to hint at her anything?

She felt a little embarrassed, asking softly, "What did you just say? Give them equal citizenship? Of course, we can, as you said."

Seeing Sif so receptive to advice, Roland felt great and made a gesture of invitation, inviting Sif to a cafe to calm their nerves.

After all, everything that happened last night was too exciting.

Walking side by side with Roland, Sif took a deep breath, but Roland's words made her have to think about how to position Lisa.

In just half a second, she ruled out the wrong option of excluding Lisa.

After last night, if she couldn't see Lisa's feelings for Roland, she'd be an idiot.

She was very smart, seeing long ago that these two had issues.

She and Roland were innocent, but Lisa and Roland were not.

Sif tried hard to find reasons to persuade herself.

Always think positively. Roland's refusal to abandon Lisa showed he was devoted and faithful.

If Roland abandoned his childhood sweetheart at the sight of a chance to marry the Empress, he would be too frightening a person.

Fortunately, Roland was not that kind of person.

Sitting in the cafe, looking at the bustling crowds outside the window, Sif's mind was blank.

The Fengrao Doctrine advocates loyalty and mutual trust between spouses, strictly enforcing monogamy.

Though the wise created a system of official lovers, their status remains much lower than a wife's.

Could Lisa accept this?

Sif's thoughts wandered wildly, her face burning hot.

Clearly, she hadn't confirmed a relationship with Roland yet, but she was thinking about these matters already; what was happening to her?

No, no, there's nothing wrong with her; this is just the way a politician thinks.

Always consider a few steps ahead.

If it were before last night, Lisa might have accepted, but after last night's adventure, Lisa's future was limitless, would she still participate as a weaker party?

What to do?

Coffee was served, the white mist curling, making the girl's worries somewhat hazy.

Seeing Sif still pondering how to recruit Tony, Roland jokingly said:

"Why think so much, once you're here, you're family, and internal conflicts can always be resolved."

"Huh?"

Sif’s eyes widened.

Is this your solution, Roland?

Chapter 255: I’m Waiting for My Cooldown, What Are You Waiting For?

The coffee tastes good, but Sif isn’t in the mood to savor it; her mind is a bit unsettled right now.

People often speak their true thoughts unintentionally.

Roland appeared to be talking about recruiting Mr. Tony, but he had also mentioned that words shouldn’t be taken at face value, and that one must carefully discern the underlying meaning.

Sif’s conjecture wasn’t baseless; Roland often posed related test questions.

Is this his way of probing?

The hand gripping the coffee cup tightened more and more, and with a slight crack, the beautiful white porcelain cup developed a clearly visible fracture.

Roland squinted his eyes, noticing Sif’s distracted state.

The Transcendent’s muscle control ability far exceeds that of ordinary people, so accidentally crushing a cup is almost impossible for a Transcendent.

Unless it’s intentional, or one is distracted.

Sif’s distraction seemed normal; after all, the events of last night were too thrilling. Even if she wasn’t directly involved, she surely was concerned about him...

Right?

Roland relaxed his brow, giving up on futile speculation.

Never try to fathom the thoughts of young girls. Philosophers explore the origins of the universe and the meaning of life, but they never waste time on this.

He’s not a philosopher, nor would he waste time here.

Roland snapped his fingers, summoning the waiter.

"Sorry, this cup..."

Before Roland could finish, the waiter quickly apologized to him, "Distinguished guest, please wait. I’ll immediately bring you a new coffee; we apologize for any inconvenience to you and the lady."

Lady?

Roland paused, noticing Sif’s rapidly reddening cheeks, and lightly coughed to signal the waiter to stop spouting nonsense.

After all, Sif is young, she’s not yet... Wait, by the laws of this era, she’s already of marriageable age.

After all, this is a romantic era where the legal marriage age is two years earlier than the coming-of-age ceremony.

The service attitude here is quite good, but it’s a pity the waiter’s discernment isn’t sharp enough to recognize that Sif is an unmarried young maiden.

Just as Roland was unsure what to say, Sif’s heart almost leaped out of her throat.

Lady, he said lady?!

Can even strangers tell that she and Roland make a pair?

The chaotic emotions were instantly replaced by joyful delight and shyness.

The second cup of coffee arrived swiftly, the milk and cane sugar transforming its taste from bitter to bittersweet.

Sif pinched her fingertips, gracefully lifting the coffee cup and sipping it gently.

Sunlight streamed through the windowpane, scattering like golden specks over her hair, dyeing it in dazzling brilliance.

Roland stared, transfixed.

At this moment, Sif is the epitome of a perfect goddess.

He somewhat wished time could forever freeze in this moment, so he could quietly sit here and admire this ultimate beauty.

But alas, time waits for no one.

With the clock pointing to eleven, the Val City State government would announce its dissolution in an hour, and they must head to the city hall to meet with Mr. Tony before the city's dissolution.

Snapping his fingers once more, the waiter appeared with a polite smile.

A few silver coins lay quietly on the table, alongside two empty cups.

Two of these silver coins were his tip.

Before leaving, Roland casually asked, "Waiter, what do you think of Mr. Tony?"

If it were in the past, the waiter might have hesitated to speak frankly, but with the Val City State about to dissolve, Tony no longer wielded power as an official and felt free to express openly.

After a few seconds of contemplation, the waiter softly said, "He is a brilliant official, but unfortunately born in Val City State, without a stage to showcase his talents. If he were managing internal affairs for the Emperor of a major nation, perhaps he'd be able to exhibit his talents."

Roland was somewhat surprised; he didn't expect the waiter to have such high praise for Tony.

"How so?"

The waiter calmly responded, "Sir, I don't understand politics, but I do know that during his five-year term, my income doubled, and my boss's income more than quintupled."

Perhaps thinking about the imminent loss of the state, he politely bowed to Roland, hastily concluding the conversation.

This reason was sufficient.

As an administrative officer, achieving a doubling of citizens' income within just five years is the greatest political accomplishment.

Roland quietly adjusted Tony's evaluation to Level S.

The officials of the Three Overseas Provinces, though capable, were nurtured by the Empire's bureaucratic system, lacking in constructiveness.

They are suitable for holding cabinet-level positions within the Governor's Territory but need more experience to become members of the Empire's Cabinet.

Opportunities for advancement had arisen, but not everyone could keep pace; some were bound to fall behind.

When some fall behind, others must step up, and Tony is the excellent substitute Roland selected.

Glancing at the introspective Sif, Roland’s lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Looks like Sif is considering Mr. Tony’s future too.

Roland didn’t know Sif was still savoring the joy brought by the term "lady."

Her mind, filled with the crimson rose, recalled another matter: Roland promised her not to rush into marriage.

Since Roland isn’t in a hurry, she can wait.

After all, that woman is still watching her from the distant Saint Rurik Palace.

She needs to survive first.

If she were to unfortunately die in battle, then there’d be no need to compete; Roland would surely belong to Lisa.

She absolutely must not die!

All distractions were instantly dispelled, as Sif stood up with flair, tossing aside the slight worries brought by Lisa’s transformation last night.

Now it’s work time.

"Let’s go, time to get busy."

Roland was slightly surprised; Sif’s expressions earlier were rich enough to seem like she was performing in a blockbuster.

Sif may be young, but she’s a seasoned actress.

Displaying such genuine emotion means she truly has something on her mind.

Roland and Sif left the coffee shop, heading towards the city hall.

Chapter 256: I’m Waiting for My Cooldown, What Are You Waiting For? (Part 2)

There are fifty-five minutes left until the dissolution of the Val City State.

Since they were going to invite Tony to join them, they might as well go directly and have a straightforward talk in the office.

The café wasn’t far from the city hall, so they weren’t in a hurry, strolling casually while observing the residents walking on the street.

Sif remained silent for a while, then sighed softly as she looked at the hurried crowds: "As we’ve walked along, these citizens seem very calm, but there’s a sense of bewilderment in their eyes."

That bewilderment is to be expected. After all, the Val City State has existed for over a century, and the currently living individuals have scarcely experienced the earlier history.

Roland spoke softly: "Yes, their country is disappearing. The Val City State has existed for over a hundred years, and the identity these citizens have known from childhood is that of the Val City-State People. Suddenly having to change nationality, their confusion about the future is very natural."

Sif responded with a light "Hmm," not wanting to continue with the slightly heavy topic.

Although the sun shone brightly, the increasing presence of military and police forces from various countries on the street made the atmosphere somewhat oppressive.

Approaching the city square, Sif suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She squinted her eyes, feeling the unmistakable hostility from across the way without any need for Insight.

They were people from the Vladimir Empire.

She softly reminded, "They should be those who appeared at White Mountain last night."

Roland also stopped walking.

Seven or eight hulking figures, burly and bear-like, were escorting a towering leader like walking iron towers.

The leader, clearly distinct, was nearly two meters tall, and although wearing a long robe, the bulging muscles couldn’t be concealed.

No wonder it’s the Vladimir Empire; are all their people muscle-bound giants?

Even though the leading brute looked like a bull-headed fool, Roland wouldn’t judge a book by its cover.

The fifth and second seats of the Shadow Sanctuary didn’t seem to be very clever, but since the sanctuary was selected by Sofia herself, it’s impossible for all of them to be brainless.

This seemingly reckless fellow might actually have an excellent brain.

The giant man’s pace was swift.

The sight of seven or eight bear-like burly men walking together was striking in itself, and his heavy-footed walk quickly caught the attention of passersby.

He opened his wide mouth, revealing white teeth set in a bright smile, and his booming voice echoed throughout the long street.

"Hello, Lord Roland!"

A simple sentence pinned down Roland.

The thunderous voice made it clear to everyone that he was here to provoke. But just like Camille, Roland couldn’t avoid it.

Avoiding it now would mean the whole world knows that the Governor of Sussex fled in disgrace when facing the Chief of the Shadow Sanctuary.

At a critical moment in the overt and covert struggle between the two nations, this kind of infamy would be enough for the Cabinet to impeach Roland.

The Vladimir Empire was known for its martial valor, as was Sussex. In such a situation, cowardice was not an option.

Roland greeted him with a smile. Although it was their first meeting, he knew the man’s identity—Sahalin, the Blade of Destruction, Chief of the Shadow Sanctuary.

He had a slight headache.

Why do people from the Shadow Sanctuary appear to all be battle maniacs?

Sahalin’s strength remained an unsolved mystery; some said he was at the peak of Tier Eight, while others claimed he had already stepped into Tier Seven.

But one thing was certain, Sahalin was practically invincible at the Tier Eight level.

Roland was definitely not a match for him.

He had only stepped onto the Path of Transcendence for six months, while the opponent had been famous for over twenty years. If he could win, Sahalin might as well just end it right there.

He couldn’t win, couldn’t escape, and couldn’t use any dirty tricks in front of such an audience.

Without even making a move, Roland was already at a disadvantage.

Sif stepped forward a half step, ready to meet them before Roland.

Before she could take a step, Roland placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

"This is a grudge between me and the Shadow Sanctuary."

Sif was somewhat surprised; Roland’s Extraordinary Profession leaned towards support and defense, and facing Sahalin, he didn’t stand a chance.

Neither did she, but she was the Empress; Sahalin couldn’t possibly act violently in public.

If force doesn’t work, surely clever tactics should solve it, right?

Her gaze at Roland was filled with doubt, like a giant question mark.

Roland had no time to explain, he only gave her a resolute look that said, "Leave it to me."

Sif stepping forward might block for a moment, but in the eyes of onlookers, it would look even worse.

A dignified governor hiding behind a woman, what does that say?

Sahalin's booming voice was slightly less imposing than Anthony's, but still had no problem covering the entire street.

He could ensure the entire street's onlookers would spread the story of this encounter.

The next day, all the Rodinia Continent would hear about the fair-faced one being frightened by the big bear, cowering under the Empress's skirt.

The rivalry between nations is not only a contest of comprehensive national strength but also a battle of momentum.

Roland had to step up.

But he wasn't reckless; he was prepared.

Divine Protection's cooldown had only a few dozen seconds left.

After all, this was a public street; however crazed Sahalin might be, he would not realistically attack a foreign leader and important official with weapons.

If he dared, Sofia would definitely tear him to pieces.

In the eyes of the Magic Empire's descendants, the Rodinians were all from the Barbarian Race, but even among barbarians, there was a hierarchy of disdain, with the Rurik People at the bottom.

Sofia was very mindful of her public image.

Behind closed doors, she might put a knife to someone’s throat for a death threat, but in public, she maintained the elegance of the Ice Queen.

In a flash, Roland understood the limits of this confrontation.

Just like that day with Camille, Sahalin would only slap him a few times, repaying Roland in kind by making him cough up blood and saving face.

Roland calmly greeted Sahalin, "Mr. Sahalin, has Mr. Camille from your esteemed nation returned home?"

Chapter 257: I’m Waiting for My Cooldown, What Are You Waiting For? (Part 3)

Sahalin’s expression turned somewhat stiff, and his round eyes squinted slightly.

He had considered all possible responses from Roland, except for Roland being proactively provocative.

It makes no sense; doesn’t Roland understand the power balance between the two sides?

Sahalin was puzzled. From the intelligence gathered, Roland’s persona was clear, portraying that of a cunning, treacherous schemer.

Such a person would not easily choose to confront a stronger enemy head-on.

Roland surely understands the power balance yet dares to provoke cynically; he must have something up his sleeve.

Despite appearing boisterous, Sahalin was the strategist of the Shadow Sanctuary.

According to Sofia’s evaluation, the five members of the Shadow Sanctuary share one and a half brains, with Sahalin being the complete one.

He completed his logical thought process in a flash.

That sneaky Roland must be hiding contingencies!

Sahalin added a tactic to his plan—he must hold back when making a move later to counter hidden ambushes.

If Sussex Empire's strong members hide in the shadows and he strikes with full force, he'll be at his weakest and vulnerable to attacks.

Fortunately, Roland is quite weak; a little earnest effort will suffice against him.

Sahalin strode toward Roland.

His steps were large, but his pace was not particularly fast.

His peripheral vision was searching both sides of the long street, yet he couldn't find any hidden strong individuals, leaving him somewhat anxious.

A pack of wolves in the sunlight may not be scary, but a snake hidden in the shadows is deadlier.

Camille has already been thwarted by Roland, disgracing the Shadow Sanctuary; if anything else goes wrong, without the Empress's accountability, he ought to apologize.

Though unable to locate hidden foes, Sahalin had a vague idea of their outline in his mind.

Last night, he had spied on Roland and his companions at White Mountain.

With the cover of the vast snowfield, he hid very well and witnessed a scene that startled him.

He couldn't comprehend how a human of flesh and blood could survive through volcanic magma, but he knew that seemingly fragile girl had tremendous potential.

Even more worrisome was that the imposing elderly man akin to a giant bear.

Sahalin vaguely felt that the old man's strength was far beyond his understanding.

Initially, he thought the old fellow was a mage, but upon seeing the sturdy muscles of the elder, he couldn't be sure.

The Vladimir Empire has good relations with the Jidong Magic Association, and he had seen many mages.

Most mages he encountered were immersed in magic research and alchemy, their eyes empty, their bodies frail.

He had never heard of a mage like the white-haired old fellow.

Could he be a Demon Warrior?

If it's the old fellow hiding in the shadows, Roland has indeed the arrogance to boast.

Sahalin almost confidently concluded that it was the old man hiding in the shadows.

He decided to devote seventy percent of his effort to guard against the old man's sneak attack, using only thirty percent of his strength to deal with Roland.

After all, just a youngster who has barely broken through to Tier Eight; thirty percent strength is sufficient.

While Sahalin envisioned the hidden ambusher, Roland calmly walked forward.

Roland’s pace wasn’t fast.

After all, the cooldown for Divine Protection was still pending.

But he couldn’t walk too slowly, or Sahalin might see through his lack of confidence.

The distance between them grew shorter, and Sahalin stopped, calmly saying:

"Camille had to return home early, he asked me to greet you, and he will repay your hospitality in the future."

"Haha, Mr. Camille is truly courteous."

Roland stopped a few meters before Sahalin and extended his hand with a smile.

"I will often visit Val City in the future; there will be many opportunities for us to meet."

"Visit frequently? I recall your country’s chief representative stationed in Val City isn’t you, Lord Roland." Sahalin remarked indifferently, also stretching his hand toward Roland.

He planned to take the chance during the handshake to crush Roland’s hand bones, letting his screams echo down the long street.

Though his original plan was to shatter Roland’s shoulder bones as he did Camille’s, a handshake would suffice.

In any case, a scream is just a scream; no different.

Roland smiled, extending his hand to shake with Sahalin.

Shaking hands was his active choice.

The hand is the most sophisticated organ, but the power of fingers is far less than that of a clenched fist or a joined palm.

If this dim-witted bear were to slap solidly a few times, even activating Divine Protection might still result in injury.

A handshake doesn't allow much leverage, enabling Roland to mitigate Sahalin's strength advantage to the maximum extent.

Where power lacks, intelligence compensates.

Engaging in a hand duel was the best strategy Roland could conceive.

Neither losing face nor being crushed miserably, while being able to probe the opponent's strength.

Sahalin's hand felt slightly cold, and the giant bear-like hand looked somewhat furry.

Damn, it really felt like a bear's paw.

As soon as their hands clasped, wild strength transmitted through the palms.

Roland seemed to be gripped by a giant bear; immense power seeped through the fingers, compressing his nerves, nearly screaming at the spot.

The cooldown still had three seconds left.

He must withstand these three seconds with sheer ability.

"Mr. Sahalin, has Her Majesty Sofia returned to the country?"

"Lord Roland, that’s not for you to ask. If I inquire about your Empress’s whereabouts, would you tell me?"

Under the watchful eyes of the public, Roland’s question obliged a response from Sahalin.

Speaking would divide his attention, slightly weakening his concentrated power.

Sahalin was somewhat baffled; what’s the use of Roland spouting this gibberish? Does he think he can stall with these nonsense words?

What a joke, he could crush Roland’s hand within seconds.

Since he was assured of victory, Sahalin didn’t fret; he decided to intensify his effort slowly, toying with Roland.

In the presence of absolute strength, any scheme is just a farce.

Taking into consideration the powerful white-bearded Demon Warrior lying in wait, Sahalin instantly grasped Roland’s intrigue.

Chapter 258: I’m Waiting for My Cooldown, What Are You Waiting For? (Part 4)

Distract him with chatter, hold his attention with a handshake, to prevent his escape, then let the old guy finish the backstab.

It was indeed a perfect plan, but he wasn’t foolish.

Sahalin had been through countless battles, and was familiar with sneak attack tactics during conversation.

His gradual exertion of force allowed Roland to successfully survive the most dangerous three seconds.

Cooldown over.

If this were a game, Roland would definitely be tempted to type sarcastically in the public chat, "I'm waiting for CD, what are you waiting for?"

But this was reality, and he was a gentleman with manners, no need to trash talk with a dumb bear.

He smiled as he activated Divine Protection, his body enveloped in a golden hue.

Sahalin shuddered abruptly, suddenly exerting more power.

Here it comes! Roland, that sly fox, is about to exert force, and the old fox must be about to make a move too!

Trying to fool him, Roland was still a bit too green.

Sahalin abruptly exerted force, heavily gripping the protection provided by Divine Protection.

Roland remained motionless, smiling.

The surrounding onlookers were somewhat surprised.

They didn't know Sahalin, but from his attire, they could tell he was a high-ranking representative from the Vladimir Empire.

They recalled the incident a few days ago when Roland made Camille cough up blood and started laughing.

"Look, the Rurik fool is up against Governor Roland again."

"These dumb bears are best at brute strength, yet they still can’t match up."

"Shh, keep it down, didn’t you see the dumb bear’s face turn red?"

A few bystanders whispered among themselves, just loud enough for Sahalin to hear.

Sahalin did indeed turn red with anger.

He never dreamed Roland would be this troublesome.

When they first clasped hands, he felt Roland’s strength was far inferior, naturally thinking that everything was under control, so he wasn’t in a hurry, planning to toy with Roland.

When the golden light emanated from Roland, he realized something was amiss.

His enormous strength was absorbed by the golden light, unable to harm Roland at all.

His face flushed red, sweat beading at his temples, while Roland seemed calm and collected.

In the eyes of others, it naturally seemed that Roland had him easily under control.

He was almost seething with rage.

Clearly, his strength was overwhelmingly dominant, how could it be like this?

Although somewhat annoyed, Sahalin gritted his teeth and persisted, knowing that the golden light must be Roland’s special ability, and if he could outlast it, he could still crush Roland’s hand bones.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t a complete victory.

However, Roland offered no opportunity, smiling as he patted Sahalin’s shoulder with his other hand and softly teased,

"Val City State is about to end the day, I have an appointment to meet with Mr. Tony, does Mr. Sahalin plan to join us? If there’s nothing else, perhaps we can have tea together sometime."

The long street was bustling with people.

Sahalin took a deep breath, released Roland’s hand, and asked in a solemn voice,

"What is this golden light?"

He had no choice but to release his grip.

Everyone here had status, even in conflict, one couldn’t behave like a drunken brawler relentlessly clinging.

With so many eyes watching, if he didn’t let go, it would reinforce the stereotype of the Rurik People as barbarous and uncivilized through his actions.

There’s plenty of time to come, no rush to gain or lose at the moment.

Sahalin’s flushed face instantly returned to calm, as if nothing had happened.

His inquiry about the golden light protecting Roland wasn’t just idle chatter, but a reminder that special abilities offer only temporary protection, not permanent safety.

He wanted to maintain his image, but Roland’s answer made him regret his loose tongue.

"Are you referring to the Holy Light that grants me protection? It is the supreme reward from the Great Goddess for safeguarding the Holy Spring Revival Ceremony."

"Under the Holy Light’s protection, no Light Believer can harm me!"

Sahalin’s face changed dramatically.

That bastard Roland was too vicious.

Of course he knew it was nonsense, but others didn’t know.

The Rurik People were also followers of the Faith in Light, so the impact of this statement was self-evident.

If in future conflicts they couldn’t harm Roland, this statement would gradually become an ironclad belief, firmly ingrained in the soul of every Rurik individual.

Chapter 259: The Powerless Have No Right to Choose

As she stepped into the city square, walking alongside Roland, Sif finally couldn’t help but ask, "Did you really receive the Goddess of Light’s protection?"

"Whether it’s true or false doesn’t matter; what matters is that others believe it."

Roland explained with a smile, "That statement will become a blade hanging over the Rurik People. As long as I survive the next few conflicts, they’ll automatically feel weaker when facing me."

Sif wanted to say something but stopped.

Roland was right; the weight of that statement would only grow as Roland continued to survive in harsh struggles.

But it would also double the danger Roland faced.

Sif said nothing, just extended her right hand to shake Roland's.

Her palm was damp with nervous sweat.

Earlier, watching Roland confront Sahalin head-on, her heart had been in her throat.

She worried every second that Roland might scream in agony, but her fear dissipated as the golden light rose.

Roland had won.

He not only won the battle of strength but also threw out that deadly statement.

This was a group weakening spell aimed at the Vladimir Empire, more effective than any magic.

No need for words; she chose to walk alongside Roland.

Holding Sif's delicate, slender hand made Roland's heart feel particularly delightful.

Shaking hands with a bear wasn't exactly a pleasant memory.

Sahalin's strength was somewhat surprising to him.

However, shaking hands wasn't exactly an attacking posture; Sahalin couldn't shake the Divine Protection, but he did take down about a tenth of the shield.

Roland could feel that Sahalin wasn’t going all out.

The big bear seemed worried about some nonexistent enemy.

Distracted, improvising against the wind, and still managing to destroy a tenth of the shield, this showed how strong Sahalin’s raw power was.

If it were a fair one-on-one confrontation, Sahalin would be fully capable of tearing the shield apart.

The moment the shield broke would be the moment Roland reported to the Netherworld.

Seeing Roland silent, Sif knew he was still replaying the earlier conflict in his mind and smiled as she said:

"Roland, twenty years ago, Sahalin was already a superstar across the continent. You’ve just become a Transcendent, your potential far exceeds his. Given time, he’ll never be your match."

Time?

Roland and Sif fell silent.

What they lacked most was time.

In silence, they walked across the square toward the city hall.

The guards politely made a gesture prohibiting passage and softly said, "Sir, our government is about to cease operations. If you have any matters, please come back in the afternoon for the new government."

His tone carried a faint sadness as he continued to loyally fulfill his duties.

Although he didn’t know where he’d be working tomorrow, he was still a guard at Val City Hall for now.

Roland looked at the guard’s calm face and said with a smile, "I am Lord Roland, Governor of Northern Rodinia in the Sussex Empire. I have an appointment with Mr. Tony. We have half an hour; it’s plenty of time."

The guard lowered his arm, switching to an inviting gesture.

He didn’t continue to interrogate.

With the fall of Val City imminent, even symbolic resistance served to justify his wages.

Not even the Executive Officer could stop the Sussex people; how could he manage?

The guard sighed and silently looked at the city-state flag fluttering on the square.

There was only half an hour left—oh, twenty-nine minutes—before the glorious flag would be lowered.

He’d no longer be a Val City-State citizen but rather a subject of God knows what country.

Just a subject, not a citizen.

Citizenship wasn’t so easily obtained, especially for outsiders.

The fall of a nation was a big deal, but what did it have to do with someone earning two marks and fifty fenney a month?

At the top floor of the city hall, in the Executive Officer’s office.

The door was wide open, and Executive Officer Tony, in uniform, stood by the window, silently watching the outside.

Footsteps echoed from the hallway, but Tony did not turn; he merely said indifferently:

"Val City-State is about to stop functioning. Please come back in the afternoon for the new government if you have matters to discuss."

"That won’t do; this must be handled by you."

A familiar voice came from behind.

Tony’s shoulders shook slightly, almost imperceptibly.

His memory was impeccable, instantly recognizing the uninvited guest’s voice.

It was Roland, the Governor from the Sussex Empire.

He sighed deeply, his voice particularly melancholic, "Lord Governor, according to your country’s notice, the official in charge of the handover isn’t you."

"Indeed, I’m not here for the handover. I’m here to see you."

Tony slowly turned, looking at Roland and Sif, unsure of what to say.

After a few seconds of silence, he glanced at the clock on the wall and said with a smile, "Alright, we still have twenty-nine minutes."

"Governor Roland, and this is..."

"Sylph Sussex York," Sif said calmly.

The name Sylph hadn’t been used for a long time, and saying it out loud brought a peculiar sense of unfamiliarity.

Both Sussex and York were common surnames, but combined they’d represent the Imperial Family.

With Mr. Tony’s experience, the moment he heard the name, he knew Sif’s identity.

He certainly knew Sif’s identity, but she often transformed into Count Tyrone and roamed around. If she didn’t admit it herself, she was just a Count.

Tony secretly sighed; what was meant to come finally arrived.

Just a while ago, Sahalin had come by; although he spoke politely, the underlying meaning was strong.

Join the Vladimir Empire or become an enemy of the Empire.

If you don’t join, even going overseas you’d still be considered an enemy.

He didn’t answer directly, merely telling Sahalin he’d discuss it with his family and reply later.

He’d been standing at the window earlier.

The view from here was excellent; he could clearly watch the entire confrontation between Roland and Sahalin.

Chapter 260: The Powerless Have No Right to Choose (Part 2)

A war between the Sussex Empire and the Vladimir Empire is inevitable, and this is a continental consensus.

The world is vast but cannot accommodate two overlords.

The Sussex Empire dominates the seas, while the Vladimir Empire is invincible on land.

Tony doesn’t want to pick sides, but he knows there’s no choice.

Just like the Val City State, what they want to do is less important than whether they have the ability.

The great vortex is about to come, and the small fry won’t survive at all.

Sahalin’s conditions and threats are laid out clearly; it’s just unclear what terms Roland and Sif can offer.

He personally poured tea for the distinguished guests and invited them to sit down.

Before Roland could speak, he calmly said, "Miss Sif, Mr. Roland, you should have met Sahalin just now; he just came to see me."

He cleverly avoided using their official titles, instead opting for neutral terms.

This was not impolite.

Since the Val City State hasn’t perished yet, he’s still a Val City man.

Facing foreigners, it’s appropriate to address them as Mr./Miss/Mrs.

This also allowed him to maintain his dignity of equal standing.

This was his final defiance.

Roland and Sif exchanged a glance, leaving the lead in the conversation to Sif.

Although many say he can decide for Sif, it’s all rumors; he never controls Sif’s thoughts.

As long as Sif wants to do something, he will support her fully.

Sif calmly looked at Tony and said steadily, "Mr. Tony, join us, I will give you a stage to showcase your talents."

Tony, well-experienced, has seen it all before, so no clever rhetoric would work on him, and he got straight to the point.

Tony seemed somewhat stunned by Sif’s directness.

After a moment of silence, he softly asked, "If I join your country and do not go into politics but enjoy a leisurely retirement, is that possible?"

"Of course, it is."

Sif looked into Tony’s eyes, engaging her insight.

Above Tony’s head, fierce flames burned, flames of hatred and resentment.

Seventy percent of these flames were directed at the Rurik People, with thirty percent aimed at her.

Tony was not an ordinary person, he knew the division of Val City also had the Sussex’s contribution.

He was angry and didn’t want to serve the Sussex government.

Tony didn’t expect Sif to accept these terms and didn’t know how to respond.

Amid his silence, Sif asked directly, "Mr. Tony, do you think our country is involved in the division of yours as well?"

Tony remained silent for a few seconds, trembling as he lifted the teacup to mask his feelings, but failed.

He simply put down the teacup, gritting his teeth as he responded, "Isn’t it so?"

Roland and Sif appeared reasonable, at least not so ruthless as to attack him for a slip of the tongue.

Although Sussex people were also robbers, they at least pretended to be gentlemen.

The grievance pent up since the start of the international conference finally had an outlet for release, Tony stood trembling and accused:

"The only difference between your country and the Vladimir Empire is that you devour with better manners. Your ambition to annex Val City is no less than theirs."

Sif sat quietly, saying nothing.

She had no intention of refuting, for Tony was stating facts.

Since the beginning had been made, Tony spoke smoothly.

He named and accused the barbaric acts of the major powers, primarily the Vladimir Empire and the Sussex Empire.

Sif listened attentively, and Roland did not interrupt.

Mr. Tony indeed was well-informed; many things he mentioned were new to Sif.

Even though he spoke briefly, Tony still talked for a good ten-plus minutes.

With ten minutes left until the end of the workday, Tony exhaled lamentingly, "Miss Sylph, Mr. Roland, I have no grudges against you, I'm just tired. This world exhausts me. I just want to buy a manor in the countryside and enjoy my twilight years peacefully."

"Impossible to achieve." Sif calmly stated.

Tony was amused by anger. At least Sahalin put up a facade, while Sif didn't even bother.

He retorted irritably, "Since it can't be done, there's nothing to discuss."

"I mean it's not possible for you to enjoy a peaceful retirement."

Sif analyzed calmly for Tony, "Mr. Tony, I can accept you living as a civilian, but can the Rurik People accept it?"

"I have no reason to assign special protection to a mere civilian; sooner or later, you would meet a realistic unfortunate accident arranged by the Rurik People."

"And if it were on their side, no need to elaborate."

"I can go to other countries..."

Faced with Sif's clear gaze, Tony's voice grew weaker and gradually faded.

This kind of talk might deceive a passerby but not Sif.

Where else could he go?

The Tirol Kingdom, Prudon Kingdom, and Vladimir Empire were closely related and would likely tie him up and hand him over.

The Jin Yuan Republic might not fear the Rurik, but they wouldn’t specially protect him either.

He had talent, but unrealized talent amounts to nothing.

His administrative capabilities made him the focus of competition among countries, leaving him unable to remain neutral.

Neutrality is not that simple.

Tony sighed helplessly, softly asking, "Miss Sylph, may I inquire about my worth?"

"Absolutely, as long as you bring your country’s administrative system to serve me, I will grant your followers citizenship. Of course, citizenship is not free; they must pay taxes and contribute to the Empire."

"Citizenship?" Tony was somewhat astonished.

"Yes, no wordplay, full rights as an Imperial Citizen."

Tony couldn’t believe his ears; this was an offer Sahalin would never dare make.

Sahalin promised him high ranks, wealth, and even the temptation of nobility titles, but when it came to the future of the Val City-State people, he was vague.

Surprised, yet still a bit skeptical, Tony tried to test, "According to treaty provisions, our citizens are not restricted by occupied zones and can freely acquire the nationality of any country. Would your country also accept 500,000 Val people?"

"Very welcome."

Sif smiled and said, "Do you remember the thirty thousand wandering refugees?"

Tony’s expression stiffened slightly.

The spark that led to the division of the Val City-State was precisely these refugees.

A fleeting sadness.

Blaming the spark for the explosion is unreasonable; even without the refugee incident, the division of the Val City-State was inevitable at some point.

He understood Sif’s message.

She was able to accept these over thirty thousand refugees despite the diplomatic pressure from the Jin Yuan Kingdom; naturally, she could withstand the pressure from the Vladimir Empire to take in all Val City-State people.

Tony pondered for a moment, then slowly said, "I will inform everyone of your terms and let them choose for themselves. As for myself..."

He softly asked, "If I serve you, how do you intend to arrange for me?"

"I look at talent first, then character when employing someone. I fully recognize Mr. Tony’s character; your level would depend on your ability."

Sif calmly explained, "You could start as the Deputy Minister in Charge of Internal Affairs in the Governor’s Territory."

She was the Minister of Internal Affairs; the Deputy was the actual head of the department.

The term ’Deputy’ was something Roland brought with him. It was a bit odd but unique.

Tony was momentarily confused, not quite understanding what it meant to be ’Deputy.’

Roland gave him a brief introduction, and Tony immediately understood.

In name, Sif’s deputy, but in reality, the Minister of Internal Affairs in the Governor’s Territory.

He did not expect Sif and Roland to value him so highly; he was somewhat caught off guard.

He almost nodded right then, but necessary reservation had to be maintained.

He slowly said, "I need to discuss with my family and will give you a reply by tonight at the latest."

Roland smiled and extended his hand to Tony, shaking it, "Mr. Tony, I believe you will make the right choice."

Tony did not respond immediately but couldn’t help asking, "Mr. Roland, I’m curious, both you and Miss Sif seem to have a high regard for my ability. May I know why?"

"It’s not my evaluation, but the assessment of ordinary people in Val City."

Roland slowly said, "In five years, you have significantly increased citizens’ income, and this is precisely the ability we need."