Empress 61

Chapter 61: They've Rotted, and My Heart Is Breaking

"Look, look, the noblewoman sister is here!"

The excited voices of the children echoed over the former Imperial Knight Order camp, now the Knights Family Park.

A few children playing around rubbed their frostbitten red hands, gathering around Sif with excitement and a hint of restraint, chattering away.

"Jerry, look, Sister Sif looks so cool in armor today!"

"That's not just cool, it's truly heroic, Tom, you always use the wrong words!"

"You're all wrong, Sister Sif is the prettiest today!"

...

Listening to the children's candid and sincere compliments, Sif smiled happily and tossed Roland a "see, does anyone praise you" bragging look.

Though it was a boast, Roland didn't feel the slightest hint of displeasure.

Who says there's no sunshine in a Sussex winter, it's all in Sif's smile.

He started smiling too.

Finally, some children "accidentally" noticed Roland.

"Look quick, Sister Sif's guard is here too."

"Ah, Brother Roland is quite handsome too."

Though somewhat perfunctory, the children still gave a few praises for Sif's sake.

Roland proudly puffed out his chest, giving a "me too" look back to Sif.

Seeing the children chattering non-stop, Roland cleared his throat and announced loudly:

"Kids, head home for now, there are important things today!"

The children, though reluctant, bid farewell to Sif with heavy hearts and reluctantly made their way back home, turning back every few steps.

Roland? Just Sif sister's sidekick, not familiar.

If they couldn't listen to Sister Sif's stories, they were even less familiar.

Roland wouldn't mind the children, of course; he found the acting leader of the Knight Order, Warden, and presented the orders issued by the Heraldry Institute, asking to take over the unit.

Warden had already received the orders yesterday and knew who the new leader was, but he didn't expect Roland to be so young.

Warden was the typical Sussex strongman, nearly 1.9 meters tall, strong as an ox, with a ruddy nose still giving off a whiff of alcohol, suggesting he had quite a drink last night.

He squinted at Roland, sighing in his heart, apparently, the rumors were true.

The new leader is indeed Her Majesty the Empress's little lover!

Seeing Roland taking over the unit while bringing a beauty, Warden secretly felt disdain.

He could take down ten of those pretty boys like him.

But even so, outwardly, he had to listen to the pretty boy.

Thinking of this, Warden's initially spirited expression grew heavier.

He listlessly opened the safe, taking out the Golden Short Sword and official seal that represented the Knight Order Leader's authority, and handed them to Roland.

He offered the short sword single-handedly to Roland.

Roland didn't take it but just stared at him.

Warden was momentarily stunned, then realized that the pretty boy was trying to assert himself?

He was furious, just about to lash out, but caught sight of the white rose pattern on Sif's collar out of the corner of his eye.

This was a symbol of the Imperial Family.

He didn't know Sif, but he knew this girl couldn't be trifled with.

Warden quickly switched to a smile, holding the Golden Short Sword with both hands, raising it above his head, bowing slightly on one knee before Roland, and loudly reported.

"I, Warden, deputy leader and acting leader of the White Rose Knight Order, hereby transfer all authority to Sir Roland."

That’s more like it.

After all, it’s a handover of leadership, not child’s play; does that seem proper?

Roland knew Warden was annoyed, but he insisted.

If you have a temper, find a way to deal with it yourself; what’s that got to do with him?

You’re upset, huh? If you don’t want to do it, plenty of others will!

As the stay-behind leader, Warden most likely dreamed of getting a formal position from his acting role, and Roland’s arrival spelled the end of that dream. It’d be strange if he liked Roland.

This guy, with a face full of stubble, seemed rugged, but who knows what was really on his mind.

Roland solemnly took the Golden Short Sword and seal, completing the handover according to procedure.

After the handover, Roland unceremoniously sat in the primary seat, casually asking:

"Deputy Leader Warden, as the person in charge of staying behind, give me a brief introduction to the current situation of the Knight Order."

Warden looked at Roland unkindly, prepared to make a few lukewarm remarks, but the sight of the white rose on Sif’s collar made him wither instantly.

The Imperial Knight Order is commonly known, its official name being the White Rose Knight Order, because the white rose is a Royal symbol.

Seeing a high-tier noble girl from the Imperial Family accompanying Roland for the takeover, what else could he say?

While Warden didn't dare to confront directly, his attitude wasn't pleasant either.

"Sir Roland, the Knight Order hasn't received salaries for three years! I'm not complaining, but the brothers in the Knight Order need to eat, and their families need to eat too, so they've had to find ways out themselves."

"It's fortunate that the Stanley brothers are commercially savvy, earning money through logistics and trade. Now, except for a few members staying behind, the rest are working for Stanley Trading Company."

"Leader, don't blame them. If people didn't fend for themselves, they would've starved long ago. It's one thing for us to starve, but what about our families? If they all died, who would serve Her Majesty?"

Sif's eyelashes trembled slightly, her delicate fingers clenching tight under her hand armor. She had imagined the situation was bad, but she hadn't thought it was this dire.

She instinctively wanted to cast her gaze toward Roland but held back.

Roland was busy; she couldn't always rely on him to think for her.

She had a brain; why not use it.

Sif lightly furrowed her brow, beginning to ponder the meaning between Warden's words.

First of all, one thing was confirmed.

Warden is not genuinely loyal.

Not as much as Roland.

Sif unceremoniously concluded.

This was not the result of her peeling layers of analysis but rather the effect of her [Insight] ability.

She used her Extraordinary Abilities, standing behind Warden.

At a glance, a light blue mark appeared on Warden’s head.

Colors closer to red indicate loyalty, colors closer to black indicate disloyalty.

Warden’s mental defenses weren’t strong, easily seen through by Sif.

Sif, standing behind Warden, mouthed to remind Roland, "This man is disloyal!"

Roland nodded slightly, almost unable to hold back his laughter.

Sif’s cheating was quite adept.

But indeed, if you can peek at the answers directly, why solve the problem?

Now was not the time for class; this would be addressed later.

Roland engaged in a few conversations with Warden to understand the basic situation, then let Warden go and rest.

After Warden left, only Roland and Sif remained in the room.

Both seated, Roland slowly asked, "Sif, what do you think of the Knight Order’s current situation?"

"A bit dire, seems like we can’t count on them." Sif sighed.

"It’s indeed dire, but it may not be a bad thing," Roland said calmly.

"It may not be a bad thing, can they still change?"

Sif looked at Roland with incredulous eyes filled with joy.

She trusted Roland; after all, he always managed to create unexpected miracles.

The Knight Order had already deteriorated completely, and she wanted to see what Roland would do.

Roland took out a document from his file, handing it to Sif.

"This is a bill obtained from the Chief Steward. Over the past few years, the Imperial Family has financially strained, indeed reducing the Knight Order’s structure and funding, but the salaries disbursed were at eighty percent."

Sif took the bill, glanced at it, and her face instantly turned crimson.

"Despicable!"

Embezzling military pay, and they dared to embezzle hers.

Not only did they embezzle military pay, but they also falsely reported the number of people to claim additional pay.

Rough estimates suggest that over the years, the upper echelons of the Knight Order siphoned off seven to eight thousand pounds from the Imperial Family.

It’s no wonder this military force lacks combat effectiveness.

As knights weren’t suited for the battlefield, the Knight Order’s structure was reduced and relegated to the cold palace.

Yet, the Knight Order served as face, and the Imperial Family still had to maintain this useless army to showcase during important ceremonies.

The result was a bunch of parasitic living.

"How to handle this?" Roland asked softly.

He certainly had a plan, just taking the opportunity to give Sif a pop quiz.

Sif bit her lip; her icy eyes filled with killing intent.

These parasites took her money.

She knew the internal treasury was tight and had been actively leading by example to economize recently.

At night, she reduced her bedding to three layers, each meal didn’t exceed six dishes, and at night she didn’t turn on the Magic Lamp unless necessary but made do with a few candles instead.

And yet, these bastards extended their black hands into her Coin Box.

"We must kill... kill a chicken to scare those monkeys, as you said before."

Roland nodded with satisfaction.

Indeed, that’s how you kill the chicken to warn the monkey.

Sif learned quite well.