The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

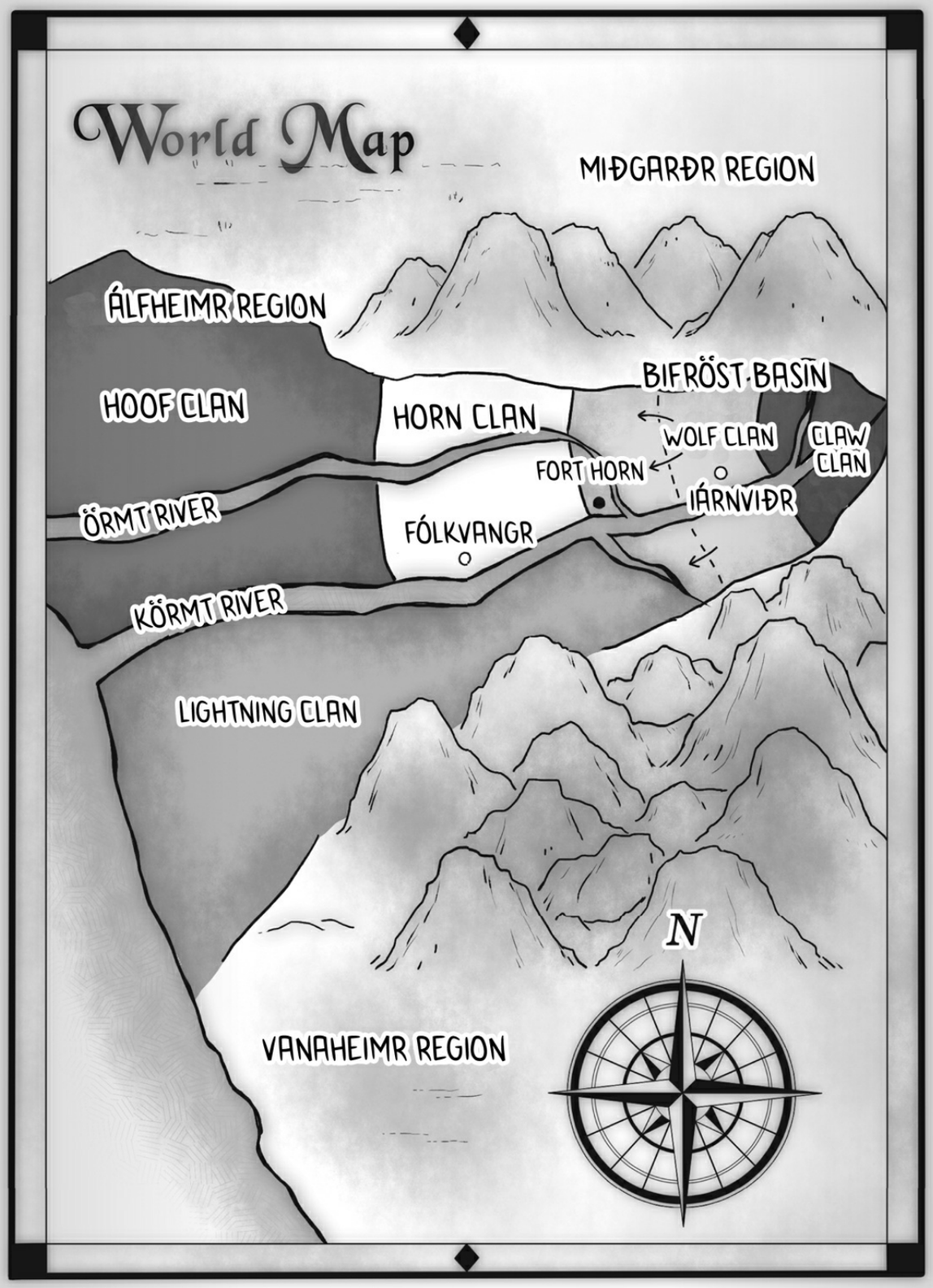
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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN




"All troops... charge!!"
Yuuto Suou
A boy who was suddenly summoned to Yggdrasil. Using modern knowledge in many of his battle strategies, he has ascended to the rank of sovereign of the Wolf Clan in just two years.
With a mighty motion of his hand, Yuuto gave the order, and an ear-piercing battle cry swelled around him.
The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar


“Your teasing of our sovereign borders on treason, Felicia, and I cannot abide it. You are upsetting Father.”
“Tee hee hee, if I may, shall I quell that energy for you?”
Sigrun
A girl who serves Yuuto as a child subordinate. The strongest warrior in the Wolf Clan, she carries the nickname “the Strongest Silver Wolf, Mánagarmr.”
For some reason, her eyes were not on Yuuto’s face, but on another part of his body. Yuuto was, after all, a boy in the midst of puberty, and it was the morning.
Felicia
Yuuto’s adjutant, and a girl who, through the Chalice of Allegiance, has become Yuuto’s little sister subordinate. She is an Einherjar who bears the rune of “the Expressionless Servant Skirnir.”


"What?!"
"Prepare yourself!"
Yngvi could only see it as black magic, the way that she took that posture and swung her weapon without dropping it, all without falling.


World Map
MIÐGARÐR REGION
ÁLFHEIMR REGION
HOOF CLAN
HORN CLAN
BIFRÖST BASIN
WOLF CLAN
CLAW CLAN
FORT HORN
IÁRNVIÐR
ÖRMT RIVER
FÓLKVANGR
KÖRMT RIVER
LIGHTNING CLAN
N
VANAHEIMR REGION



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PROLOGUE

There is a legend at the Tsukimiya Shrine.

It says, “Within the divine mirror resides a mysterious power.”

It says, “The divine mirror is actually a precious mirror of great renown.”

It says, “If you gaze into the mirror through an opposing mirror on the night of a full moon, you will be pulled into another world.”

Really, it’s just the type of cliché urban legend you might find anywhere.

There are an abundance of similar stories scattered throughout the world, of using opposing mirrors and saying a chant to summon a devil, or of being able to see the past and future that way. It’s likely that the wondrous image of infinite worlds stretching out before them, like when looking through a kaleidoscope, entrances people into conceiving of such fantasies.

In actuality, the aforementioned legend was not something passed down at the shrine from generation to generation or anything, but just a rumor that began circulating at some point among the residents of nearby Hachio City.

Undoubtedly that rumor was intended to lead to a situation just like this.

“Y-Yuu-kun, Yuu-kun, Yuu-kuuun! Let’s turn back!” the teary-eyed girl walking next to Yuuto said in a quavering voice, pulling hard on his sleeve.

Yuuto Suoh’s heart thumped conspicuously louder. With her looking up at him with tears in her eyes like that, as a guy, he couldn’t help but feel the impulsive desire to protect her.

Her name was Mitsuki Shimoya. She was Yuuto’s childhood friend, one year younger than him and in her first year of middle school. Her large, round eyes left quite the impression, adding to the honest, rustic charm of a girl raised in the country.

“Hey, hey, we’ve come this far. It’s too late for you to say something like that now,” Yuuto sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

The steady wind rustled the trees, as the chirping of insects resonated here and there. If one gazed into the surrounding brush, they would see nothing but all-consuming darkness.

Nestled in that dark mountain forest, the little old dilapidated shrine was faintly lit by the light of the full moon and stars.

“I told you, it’ll be fine,” he assured her. “Everyone who’s done this before has lived to tell the tale, after all.”

“Bu-bu-but!” Mitsuki cried, gripping his sleeve tightly.

She was always a cheerful girl, with an unflappable smile that glowed like a sunflower, but her greatest weakness was ghost stories, something her childhood friend Yuuto knew well. Even though this test of courage had been planned as an amusing group activity by Mitsuki’s class, her fear of ghosts had led to Yuuto, who was a grade above them, being dragged into it.

Thanks to that, the underclassmen had ganged up and teased them both about it, and Yuuto found himself feeling embarrassed. Still, it wasn’t totally a bad experience.

From the time they were very young, Mitsuki had always relied on Yuuto. Up until they’d finished lower elementary school, he’d found it cute, as if he’d ended up with his own little sister. But in the latter years of elementary school, not liking the way it was causing his friends to make fun of him, his demeanor toward her had grown cold. He’d gotten annoyed by her constant dependence on him.

When he’d entered middle school, Yuuto’s feelings toward Mitsuki had done another about-face. Perhaps he’d come to feel that being relied upon wasn’t so bad, or rather he’d started to take pleasure in it. Now, in his second year of middle school, he actually wanted to be relied upon.

His emotions were so fickle.

He was finally beginning to understand why.

“If you’re that scared, then stay back. I wanna hurry up and get this over with,” Yuuto said as he waved his arm, pulling his sleeve away from Mitsuki’s grasp.

It wasn't like he didn't feel a pang of guilt for acting this way with her, but too much time indulging in arguing back and forth like this might lead to being branded a wimp by the underclassmen, and their making fun of him was the last thing he wanted to deal with. And most of all, he just wanted to look cool in front of her.

"Now, then..." He leaned into the shrine's double doors, pushing them open with an audible creak.

Inside the room was a rusted round mirror, in even worse shape than the shrine itself. No, to be honest, it was doubtful whether one could even call it a mirror. Dirtied, blurry, and broken, it was unable to even reflect Yuuto's face back at him as he stood right in front of it.

He heaved a sigh, disappointed. "This old thing's pretty shoddy."

"Y-Yuu-kun?! Saying something like that is bad luck!" she cried.

"You worry too much, Mitsuki," Yuuto said. "Awww, but just taking a picture of it is no fun."

Taking out his cherished smartphone, the LGN09 aka Laegjarn, he paused for thought.

As proof that one actually took the proposed route without chickening out, the rules of this test of courage stated that one was supposed to take a photo of the mirror in the shrine, then head back. But being a year older, Yuuto found himself wanting to take it a step further than the underclassmen would.

"Hey! Wh-what are you doing?!" Mitsuki nearly shrieked as her features stiffened.

"Hm? I just thought I'd take a selfie with this divine object. Oh, speaking of which, do you think using a front-facing camera counts as an opposing mirror?"

"Wh-whawhawha! D-don't! Yuu-kun, if you end up in another world, I'll..."

"It's all right," he assured her. "It's just a superstition."

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"Huh?!" Inside Yuuto's mind, something akin to an incantation resonated.

It wasn't Japanese. Nor was it English. It was some language unfamiliar to him. But still, somehow, he got the feeling that it was calling him.

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Once again, what sounded like a voice resonated through his mind. Clearer than before, easier to discern.

It was a young woman's voice.

"Wha... huh?" Just as Yuuto turned in the direction of the voice, an intense dizziness overcame him.

His consciousness and vision were hazy, but he could see... two mirrors. Emitting a strange light, they seemed to be move before his eyes, overlapping and separating, over and over. It was rather like a kaleidoscope.

Even more bizarre, in the background of one of the two mirrors appeared the faint form of a girl. The girl danced about with a wild intensity, as if possessed. Her pure white garments, reminiscent of the ones worn by priestesses in service to a deity, fluttered daintily around her as she moved.

"What is this?!" Shocked, Yuuto rubbed his eyes, yet the image would not disappear.

In fact...

While at first the image was so transparent it was like looking at a hologram, the colors gradually became more opaque, and the girl's supple body gained a tangible appearance.

"Yuu...kun... Yu...ku..."

Mitsuki's voice seemed so far away. He could scarcely hear the last of what she said.

Instinctively, he looked behind him.

"Huh?!"

He was at a loss for words. Mitsuki was no longer there, and a solid white wall now blocked his path. The wall's surface was densely covered with a variety of drawings. Many of the images were modeled after people, but among them

were some pictures that looked like indescribable monsters, some combination of human and beast.

“Where the hell did this come from?!”

Just as he muttered those words aloud, he became aware of some sort of commotion all around him. It sounded like a sizable amount of people.

But that was strange. Why would there be this many people deep in the mountains this late at night? Especially when they hadn’t been there a moment ago. It had all happened too suddenly for it to be students that had come running from the meeting spot.

Bewildered, Yuuto turned his head to look in front of him once more, and his eyes opened wide.

Even though he should have been outside, this was clearly inside a room. In a wide space the width of a small gym were several dozen people clothed in plain, simple garments, men whose chiseled faces were clearly not of Japanese descent. They were all watching him cautiously with surprised expressions.

“Have I ended up on some movie set or something?” he wondered. “...And, hey, that mirror!”

The mirror adorning the altar behind the men looked familiar. Though this one was far and away more lustrous, more brilliant, it otherwise appeared a perfect match to the one enshrined at Tsukimiya.

“If you gaze into the mirror through an opposing mirror on the night of a full moon, you will be pulled into another world.” The rumor of Tsukimiya Shrine suddenly appeared in Yuuto’s head.

“That can’t be true, can it?! There’s absolutely no way...”

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As those cryptic words rung out in Yuuto’s mind, a golden blade was thrust at his throat.

It happened so suddenly, Yuuto found himself unable to speak. Even if he could speak, he doubted they would understand his words. From the tone of the speaker’s voice, Yuuto gathered that the harsh tone might be used by

someone demanding an explanation, but that was all.

Unsure of what to do, his eyes alone followed the blade down to pretty, thin fingers, reminiscent of icefish. Lifting his gaze, he saw locks of silver hair that seemed to glisten. They danced around in his field of vision.

She was a girl of incredible beauty, the likes of which he had never seen. It was like one of those valkyries that you read about in myths and legends had jumped straight off the page.

She looked about the same age as Yuuto, maybe a year older. She had a beautiful face, as if it had been chiseled from ice, and a frigid expression to match.

Yuuto was so struck by her that he forgot his current situation.

At that time, he had absolutely no idea of the harsh misfortune that awaited him.

ACT 1

“Yeaaaaaaaah!!” The troops around him roared a thunderous war cry.

The vibrations from thousands of people stomping their feet seemed to flow up through the wheels into his body, resonating to the core of his being. It felt as if the land itself were shaking.

From the carriage of a chariot, Yuuto continued to observe the battlefield.

Large quantities of corpses were tragically scattered about the dust storm-ridden wastelands. The majority of them were the corpses of enemies, but the number of felled allies was not insignificant.

Their now-masterless weapons, bathed in the rays of the sun, shimmered a golden color.

Between that sight and the scent of blood wafting across the battlefield on a dry wind, Yuuto could not suppress an overwhelming feeling of nausea. Even now, he still wasn’t used to the atmosphere of the battlefield.

The major improvement compared to his first campaign was that at least he hadn’t thrown up yet.

“It seems the battle has mostly been decided. I shouldn’t be surprised, Big Brother, but your command was truly spectacular.” Felicia, the girl standing next to Yuuto as his attendant, offered her compliment in a lively tone. “Against an enemy with superior numbers, and yet claiming a victory so easily... It is hard to see you as anything other than a reincarnated god of war.”

She was an impressive beauty with a shimmering, mature smile. Long, golden hair that fell past her waist trailed gently behind her in the wind. The thin, white garments she wore, exposing a great deal of skin, felt very out of place here on the battlefield.

“It’s no big deal.” With neither pride nor modesty, Yuuto responded with disinterest. Indeed, for him, this was nothing to brag about.

He had simply known the relevant information.

“The amazing ones are Alexander the Great and Oda Nobunaga,” he said. “I didn’t come up with those ideas.”

“Huh? Alex...?”

Yuuto met Felicia’s quizzical head tilt with an attempt at a wry smile.

The tactic Yuuto had employed was thousands of years old in his world: the phalanx battle formation of the citizen soldiers of Hoplite, who had struck with unbelievable spears three-to-four times their height. In one-on-one combat, this ridiculously long weapon would be ineffective due to the inability to make tight movements, rendering it nothing more than a big, useless stick. Therefore, no one in this world had taken the time to properly consider it. But in large group battles, it readily became a brutal weapon.

The longspears could be used to pierce enemies from within tight-knit, seamless formations, so that opponents could not get close to you without adding their bodies to the pile. There was a similar concept in Japanese history called the “wall of spears.”

The sarissa of Alexander the Great. The longspear of Oda Nobunaga. In the world of the future, these were seen as tactics that had assured victory to supreme rulers and heroes in long-gone time periods.

“I’m nothing more than a cheater... urk!” Yuuto ended up gulping back his words and averting his gaze from Felicia. The carriage swayed as if a wheel had hit a stone, and her large breasts were bouncing up and down before him.

“Oh, my! Hee hee!” Felicia flashed a mischievous smile. Perhaps she had noticed what had gotten him worked up.

Yuuto suddenly realized that his face had flushed a bright red. He found himself extremely embarrassed.

Still, this was the battlefield. They didn’t have a moment to spare on such frivolity. Flustered, Yuuto shook off any carnal thoughts and turned his mind back to the battle.

“All right, clearly we’ve shaken the enemy. This is where we finish this. Raise

your banners high, and all troops... charge!!”

With a mighty motion of his hand, Yuuto took up the mantle and gave his order...

Bwoooooo! Bwooooooo! The soldiers guarding the perimeter around him blew the trumpet shells in unison. At the same time, an ear-piercing battle cry swelled around him.

Yuuto screwed up his face at the loud burst of noise, and then, suddenly, his eyes found their way to a corpse on the ground. It was a face he recognized. It wasn’t someone he could say he’d been close with, but he could remember talking with that soldier a few times.

His death had been the result of Yuuto’s orders, and nothing else. Something bitter spread through Yuuto’s heart, and he felt a heaviness, as if his back were being weighed down.

“Why am I even doing any of this?” He wasn’t saying it to anyone in particular, just muttering to himself.

About two years had passed since he had come here, to the world of Yggdrasil.

The people here fought endlessly over limited land and resources. Sword or spear in hand, they mercilessly stole each other’s lives as horse-drawn chariots raced across the bloody battlefield.

The strong seized everything while the weak were trampled and oppressed.

Though he had been tossed all alone into this uncivilized world where he didn’t even speak the language, he had overcome the ups and downs and, through a bunch of strange circumstances, he’d ascended the ranks to spearhead this clan, the Wolf Clan, as its patriarch.

He was in a position to command another man’s destiny with just one word.

“Big Brother, you know, you have a bad habit of taking everything upon yourself?” Suddenly, someone embraced him tightly from behind.

It was Felicia. That warmth brought Yuuto indescribable comfort and reassurance. She could be shameless and cheeky at times, but Felicia was a girl

who was sensitive to the subtleties of the human heart. Naturally, she had quickly picked up on his concerns.

Like a whisper, a lovely melody tickled his earlobe. Mysteriously, upon just hearing that melody alone, it felt as if the anxiety that had eclipsed Yuuto's heart was fading.

It was a galldr. A secret art that combined magic with music and, depending on the incantation, could have any one of a variety of effects on the listener.

"This is all I can do for you," Felicia said.

"This is more than enough. Thank you." Expressing his heartfelt gratitude, Yuuto gently freed himself from her arms. The beating of her heart, her warmth, and her softness against him all combined with the effects of the galldr to calm him, with the exception of the one part they could not subdue.

Specifically, his lower half.

"Oh, Big Brother, you're so cruel ≡," she giggled.

"The battle isn't over. "Don't let your guard—"

Fwoosh!

Suddenly, an arrow flew right at Yuuto. It stopped within ten centimeters of his forehead.

"Indeed, it would not do to let our guard down." When Felicia opened her hand, the arrow she had yanked from the air toppled to the floor of the carriage.

She had grabbed the arrow that had come flying at Yuuto at high speed and protected him, before he could even try to dodge it. She had tremendous dynamic vision and reflexes.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

Without a moment's pause, numerous arrows continued to rain down directly toward Yuuto.

"Oh, my!" Felicia swiftly took up the rope wrapped around her waist and, with a snap of her wrist, put it to use. She swirled the rope through the air like a

rhythmic gymnastics ribbon, knocking the arrows to the ground one after the other as they came.

The rope was a coarse type used to bind captured enemies, and was considerably heavier than a ribbon, but Felicia flung it around without a hint of discomfort. Her arms were slimmer than Yuuto's, but she possessed fierce strength.

"Thanks, Felicia," he said. "Your rope technique was as effortless as ever. You're like a warrior queen."

"Hee hee. But you would be considered the king, correct? So does that mean you're trying to propose?" Felicia shrugged her shoulders playfully.

There wasn't a hint of fear or nervousness in her. As one might guess from the preceding spectacle, Yuuto, being from modern-day Japan, would be no match for her as a warrior. Not only was she accomplished in rope technique, she was a proficient wielder of blades and spears, and was hailed as one of the Wolf Clan's foremost soldiers.

On top of that, Yuuto realized that from the beginning she hadn't let her guard down once. Instead she'd made a show of playing around earlier to try and keep him from worrying too much.

Yuuto couldn't disparage someone like her, who, despite living side-by-side with death, had an attitude so relaxed that she could spare concern for those around her. It was a state of mind he couldn't yet reach.

"Hm, it seems to have come from over there." Felicia fixed her gaze upon the origin of the arrows, and Yuuto saw what looked to be the silhouette of a man on a small hill wielding a bow.

The moment she caught sight of him, he seemed to realize he had been discovered, and the figure scampered down the mountain and disappeared into the enemy army.

Yuuto gazed at the hill from which the archer had disappeared, muttering, "By all appearances, he did all that himself from 100 meters away. Even Nasu no Yoichi would be astonished."

"The only one who could pull off a feat like that, even in a clan as large as the

Horn Clan, is Haugspori, wielder of the Ljósálfar. I can think of no one else. He is as masterful as the rumors said." Felicia spoke with wary respect.

"But it was pretty much you alone that defended against those arrows, Felicia. Geez, it figures that you Einherjar are superhuman." Yuuto gave a dry smile.

One major difference between the world Yuuto had come from and this world was the existence of Einherjar, the name given to humans chosen by the gods.

These people had mysterious designs called runes located somewhere on their bodies, and those runes would grant their holder various kinds of divine protection. So if that person carried the rune of the Light Elves, Ljósálfar, they might be granted talent with a bow and the ability to read the winds.

People bearing such extraordinary powers were so scarce that they were said to be one-in-ten-thousand, so no matter the clan, they were appointed to important posts.

Felicia, who served as Yuuto's adjutant, was an Einherjar who possessed the rune of Skírnir, the Expressionless Servant. Being young and female and yet among the clan's foremost warriors was due to that mysterious power.

"Run is safe... isn't she?" Yuuto asked. A look of distress crept onto his face as he thought about another Einherjar of the Wolf Clan, and he shifted his gaze back to the front lines.

Due to his command to charge, the battle there had become even more violent. Indeed, the aforementioned Einherjar should have been fighting there.

The side with the clear advantage was the Wolf Clan, which Yuuto was in charge of. They were gradually scattering the enemy forces and pushing back the front lines. Still, the battlefield was an unpredictable place. Even if they won, that didn't mean no one would die.

Just like that soldier whose name he didn't know.

"Tee hee. There is no need to worry," Felicia said. "She is our Mánagarmr, you know? She should be..."

"Sigrun of the Wolf Clan has seized the sovereign of the Horn Clan!"

Felicia's voice was drowned out by a victorious cry from the front lines.

The nearby soldiers all beamed with pride, pumping their fists in the air and joining the front lines in cries of victory.

From a distance, Yuuto caught sight of the soldiers of the Horn Clan fleeing in throngs. There even appeared to be those who had cast aside their weapons and surrendered.

Felicia let out a giggle and gave Yuuto a wink. "Just as I expected. It seems Run has come through for us."

"Make way! Father! Father—!" A dignified voice unbefitting the battlefield rang out like a bell, and a mounted soldier rushed toward Yuuto, her long silver hair flicking around behind her like a tail, breaking soldiers out of their battle formations as she went.

Other, equally ill-fitting voices rang out throughout the battlefield, sounding as if they were intoxicated.

"Ohh, it's Elder Sister Sigrun!"

"Lovely as ever!"

It wasn't like Yuuto himself didn't understand their feelings of admiration. Even from far away, she was a good-looking girl. Her arms and legs were long and slender, and her long silver hair trailed behind her as she spurred her horse, making her appear like a fantastical character from an ancient myth.

The cries of admiration continued.

"Elder Sister, yet another grand achievement for you!"

"That's our Mánagarmr! The likes of the Horn Clan could never stand against you!"

"You're in my way. Move," Sigrun spat curtly, her cold gaze holding no emotion for the soldiers showering her with flattery and praise.

The soldiers huddled together with an "Eek!" at her sharp glare.

Those icy good looks had only increased in intensity these past two years, and even now, she was cloaked in a sharp, blade-like air that gave the impression

that touching her would see one sliced to pieces.

Though her build was so dainty that she might look barely capable of holding a sword, she had earned the title of Mánagarmr or “the Strongest Silver Wolf” by being the most elite of the elite, with no one able to even come close to her abilities. On a closer look, one could see that the soldiers’ eyes showed a mix of awe and fear.

“Ah!” The second she caught sight of Yuuto, her expression completely softened. She slowed her horse to a trot and approached Yuuto’s chariot, where she gently descended from the horse’s back. “Father, you are safe! No injuries, I trust?”

“I wasn’t even on the front lines, so there’s no way I’d get injured,” Yuuto assured her. “Run, I should actually be asking you, are you hurt?”

“Worry not. Thanks to the divine protection of Angrboða, I am completely safe. There isn’t even a scratch on me.”

“That’s the most important thing. Also, I’m proud of you for capturing the leader of the Horn Clan. Good work.”

“I am unworthy of such praise, Father. I am humbly overjoyed.” Though her speech was formal, a broad and joyful smile spread across Sigrun’s face.

As soon as she realized that, Sigrun stiffened her expression, but she was so happy at being praised by Yuuto that the corners of her mouth couldn’t help but betray a smile.

“Pff, Run, you are indeed a faithful dog,” Felicia giggled.

“Pff!” Before he had a chance to stop himself, Yuuto also sputtered a laugh at Felicia’s words. It was a cruel thought, but Yuuto couldn’t look at Sigrun right now without the word “sit” coming to mind.

“Father? Have I said something strange?” Sigrun tilted her head. That habit was reminiscent of a dog, too. Once he became aware of it, Yuuto realized he couldn’t see her any other way, and it bothered him.

“N-no, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Though saying that while covering his mouth and averting his gaze wasn’t very convincing. But of course, he

couldn’t say what he was thinking, either.

Knowing that if this conversation went any further he might out himself, Yuuto decided to bring them back on topic.

“What’s more important is your reward. What would you like? Your accomplishment was so great, I’ll give you anything you like.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Anything that I can give you.”

“A-all right! Th-then, will you pat my head?!” Sigrun gazed up at Yuuto, her twinkling eyes overflowing with hope, when in reality, what she had asked for was so trivial.

That aloof, unapproachable air that had surrounded her earlier was nowhere to be found. Now Yuuto really couldn’t help but see her as a dog who had spotted its master and was waiting for a treat.

“U-uh, well, just asking for something so small is a bit...” Yuuto wore a troubled expression, scratching his cheek.

Meting out punishments and rewards was the sovereign’s most important job. Allowing the one who had captured an enemy general to accept such a meager reward was clearly a problem. If rumor got out that her glorious achievement was repaid with a pat on the head, it was a safe bet that no one would want to serve under Yuuto.

“That reward would mean more to me than any other!” Sigrun protested firmly.

It didn’t seem like she was pretending to be altruistic or showing consideration for the Wolf Clan’s financial state. It seemed that this was, from the bottom of her heart, her most sincere wish.

Smiling wryly in resignation, Yuuto gently placed his hand on Sigrun’s head. “You really did well.”

“Was I able to be useful to you, Father?”

“Yes, more than any other. Mm, so I cannot let you get away with requesting only this. Hey, Felicia, you choose something for her at your own discretion

later...”



“Pffff! Ha ha ha! I can see it.” Felicia burst out laughing. “I can see that tail wagging back and forth!”

He looked over and saw that the golden-haired beauty, completely unconcerned with who might be watching, was doubled over and clutching her stomach. Her shoulders were quaking and she was even scraping her nails along the inner wall of the carriage. No matter how you looked at it she was laughing too much, making a huge scene.

Yuuto lamented that, if only Felicia didn’t have moments like these, she would be a perfect combination of beauty and competence. But now she would be of no use until her laughing fits subsided.

“Uhm, what on Earth is Felicia—” Sigrun began.

“Leave her be. In life, there are some things that are best left a mystery.”

“Ah! I see! If you say so, Father, then it must be meaningful!”

“No, really, it’s not that big of a deal.” Yuuto dejectedly dropped his shoulders.

Felicia had her own quirks to be sure, but Sigrun’s blind acceptance of Yuuto and anything he said also worried him.

If one were to describe Sigrun in simplest terms, it would probably be as a dedicated warrior. Though she had natural talent and had been given the title of Mánagarmr at such a young age, she seemed ignorant of worldly affairs, her life having been focused exclusively on the martial arts.

That was likely why she would only open her heart to those who showed strength and those whom she respected.

Actually, during the first six months or so after Yuuto had come to this world, Sigrun had treated him like the soldiers back there, as no more than a rock on the side of the road. In spite of the astounding way they had first met, back then she hadn’t even bothered to remember his name.

With her knee on the ground, that same girl now showed that she acknowledged Yuuto as her master and was eager to serve him.

“It’s rather ironic,” Yuuto muttered in self-deprecation.

In the two years — just two years — since Yuuto had arrived, so many things had changed in rapid succession. The world around him, and Yuuto himself.

He had been fair-skinned when he'd arrived, but his skin had since been tinged by the sun; his slender build hadn't changed, but his muscles had been toned considerably. He had grown quite a bit taller. And, he had also learned a great deal of the skills necessary in order to get by in this world.

Yuuto had survived numerous bloody battles. He was no longer some child wandering lost and afraid through this world. Including the branches of the clan, he now held the lives and futures of tens of thousands of members of the Wolf Clan in his hands, as their sovereign patriarch.

"Oh, this is no time to be getting caught up in sentimentality," he said. "Run, what of the imprisoned sovereign of the Horn Clan?"

Sigrun, who had shown her more puppy-like side while being petted by Yuuto, instantly snapped back into her more dignified demeanor. Though Yuuto had fewer chances to see it for himself these days, this image was the one that came to mind for most members of the Wolf Clan when you mentioned Sigrun.

"Sir. As I wanted to confirm your safety first, Father, I left her in the custody of some nearby soldiers. They should be on their way by chariot as we speak."

"I see... well then, I wonder what we should do with her." For no particular reason, Yuuto looked to the sky.

The setting sun had begun to dye the western sky crimson. The cries of the crows lured in by all the blood had become loud and grating.

On his mind at that moment was, naturally, what he should do with the enemy sovereign. He glanced over at Felicia, who had finally managed to suppress her laughter.

"Will she seriously accept my Chalice?" he asked.

"It is difficult to say," she told him. "I have heard that Lady Linea, the sovereign of the Horn Clan, is exceedingly proud. She may likely prefer an honorable death to a life stained with disgrace."

"In which case, having her die on us would be problematic." Yuuto heaved a

sigh of frustration.

In the world of Yggdrasil, the sovereign served as “parent” to all members of their clan, and the clan members served in the roles of either “children” or “younger siblings,” organizing the clan in something of a pseudo-family structure.

Through the ritual of “the Chalice of Allegiance,” a sovereign and their children and siblings would establish a firm bond similar to a ceremony traditionally held at Shinto weddings and Yakuza initiations. The sovereign would provide for his children and younger siblings with care and affection, and in return, they would show their sovereign the deference and respect due to a parent or an elder sibling. These pseudo-familial relationships born of the Chalice were given more importance than actual familial relationships.

In other words, if their sovereign were killed, the members of the Horn Clan would likely never forgive the Wolf Clan, would lose themselves in hatred, and would seek vengeance for their slain parent.

“The enemy’s second-in-command was not supposed to participate in this battle, correct?” Yuuto asked Felicia.

“Correct. Apparently, due to an order to stay behind to guard their clan’s capital.”

“I met the Horn Clan’s second-in-command once, while accompanying your predecessor,” Sigrun put in. “I can confirm the second-in-command was not participating in this battle.”

Amid the chaos of the battlefield, the spread of misinformation was common. But with Sigrun having taken command of the front lines, Yuuto could trust her words above any others’.

“Which means part of the chain of command is still intact. This has become rather troublesome.” Yuuto scratched his head.

While the second-in-command was treated more like the head of the children and siblings, they were still the family’s number two. In the event that the unthinkable should befall the sovereign, they were next in line of succession.

And in the clan’s tradition, that successor would have been chosen for

second-in-command not through blood relationships, but by virtue of strength and ability. The new ruler would doubtless be a competent opponent as well.

“If we kill her, it becomes a case of number fourteen of the Thirty-Six Strategems: ‘Borrow the corpse, revive the soul.’ It will only renew their army’s morale. In that case, we have no need to provide them with a just cause.” Yuuto took his cherished smartphone from his pocket and held down the power button, turning the phone on.

Thanks to the miniature solar battery Yuuto had started carrying after learning his lesson back during a severe earthquake, he had been able to keep using his smartphone during the two years since his arrival in this new world.

But it was still a miniature battery. Even if he kept it out in the sun all day, he could only keep the power on for approximately thirty minutes at a time. It was such a minuscule amount of time. So he’d vowed to only use the phone in times of absolute greatest need.

After some time, the home screen appeared, and he tapped the “Hindle” icon. On the next screen appeared the famous “Fuurinkazan” banner popularized by Takeda Shingen, which denoted the e-book version of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War,* a Chinese classic that was still heavily revered in the 21st century. It was something Yuuto had downloaded after becoming sovereign, and he had lost count of how many times he reread it.

“This... really is cheating,” he murmured. “My smartphone has so much to offer.”

If Yuuto were to take to the front lines, he would be no match for even a novice soldier. There was so much in this world he was inexperienced with; he couldn’t even read and write their language well yet.

In all honesty, to describe him with the word “useless” would be an understatement.

But there was the one thing only Yuuto could do, the one weapon only he possessed: knowledge from the 21st century.

Granted, he was still a student. The knowledge and skills he possessed had their limits. For example, if he wanted to build a computer from scratch here, it

would be essentially impossible.

Still, in this world where civilization had yet to flourish, there were still countless things he could create even without any special skills or knowledge.

In this battle, for example, they'd used longspear-style weapons. If it hadn't been for a certain popular historical strategy game he'd played, there was no doubt Yuuto would have never come up with the idea for the longspear.

These groundbreaking ideas seemed so obvious to him in hindsight, but it was frustrating in the heat of the moment when he was trying to come up with something. It was like the Egg of Columbus.

Normally such innovation was the realm of geniuses with the ingenuity to smash through commonly-held ideas, but Yuuto instead was leveraging knowledge from the future. That's why, to him, all he was doing was meeting each challenge that came his way by cheating.

He flicked through numerous pages until he found one that was relevant. He had long ago memorized what was written where.

"The best thing of all is to take the country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good. So too is it better to capture an army entire than to destroy it. Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

Putting it simply, fighting and winning was only the second best strategy; forcing total surrender from the enemy was the best strategy. Yuuto gave a nod, reflecting on each word as he followed the text with his fingers.

"Figures," he said. "We have no choice but to strike a deal."

Hearing his words, Sigrun and Felicia quietly bowed their heads in assent.

It wasn't like the Wolf Clan had much choice. They had already seized one-third of the Horn Clan's domain. That was more than enough for the spoils of war. Trying to cut deeper into enemy territory would be dangerous, and dragging the state of war out for too long would exhaust their country's own resources.

This seemed to be the right time. However, the problem remained: what kind of agreement should they reach?

The fighting had started a month earlier with an invasion by the Horn Clan, and the Wolf Clan had suffered significant losses as a result. Though killing the sovereign would come with its own problems, Yuuto's people would be expecting some significant trade-off from the Horn Clan for all the fighting.

Yuuto folded his arms and gave a frustrated groan as he considered the problem. "Considering the situation, we could normally have them trade food and minerals or some other goods in exchange for the return of their sovereign, or perhaps have them cede territory to us. But if possible, I'd really rather have her accept my Chalice."

Even if the Horn Clan's food or territory were taken, the root of the problem would still remain. Yuuto wanted the warring between the Wolf Clan and the Horn Clan to go no further than this. He had no territorial ambitions. He had only one guiding principal as sovereign, and that was to bring the people of the Wolf Clan lives of peace and abundance.

To that end, this world's custom involving the Chalice was extremely convenient. It was so sacred and revered that to go against the Chalice even once was taboo; to break one's vow would cause any faith placed in that person to fall to ash.

One couldn't select the parents that give birth to them or the siblings they were raised with... but with the Chalice, they were granted the choice of whether or not to accept this new bond. To betray the person you had chosen to honor as parent of your own free will was thought of as the most despicable, base act.

In other words, having the enemy sovereign accept his Chalice and become a child or younger sibling of his would mean that the Horn Clan could not oppose Yuuto — or, by extension, the Wolf Clan itself.

Paradoxically, because of that, a sovereign with the duty to protect their own clan would simply not allow themselves to accept the Chalice and end up subordinate to another sovereign. They couldn't accept it.

"In that case, it's kind of cheating, but I guess we'll need the same strategy we

used with the Claw Clan?” Yuuto thought back to that time, and snorted derisively at his memory of himself.

In all honesty, he didn’t want to do it. Still, he was the sovereign. His position required that he put the needs of the clan over his own needs.

The words of Sun Tzu began to play back in his mind.

Two years ago, when he had been swept into this world and left to wander helplessly, the Wolf Clan, which had in no way been prosperous, had still taken Yuuto in and fed him, and so he had come to care deeply for them.

He had made several friends like Felicia and Sigrun, who had stuck by him through the good and the bad. He wanted to protect them somehow. He didn’t want to see those close to him die, or to watch them suffer any more sadness.

Yuuto heaved a long, drawn-out sigh. As long as it meant that the loss of human life would be diminished, enduring something personally unpleasant was a price he’d be more than willing to pay.

“All right, set up the tent. Prepare for our meeting.”

“Hey, don’t push.” A young girl was being led into the tent. “I can walk on my own!”

“Huh?” A vapid exclamation of shock slipped from Yuuto’s lips. Rubbing his temples with his index fingers, Yuuto gave Felicia, who was seated at his side, a perplexed look. “...This kid is the sovereign patriarch?”

To be sure, the clothes she wore were far more elegant than those of a typical soldier, and a golden circlet glistened on her forehead. There seemed to be no doubt that she possessed social standing. Even though he knew that, he couldn’t help his surprise at her age.

Seated at his side, Felicia gave a solemn nod. “Yes, this is Lady Linea, the sovereign patriarch of the Horn Clan.”

“But she’s still just a kid.”

“You look about the same age as me, boy!” the Horn Clan sovereign shouted, displeased with Yuuto’s brash words.

Returning his gaze to her, he saw she was glaring at him, her eyes filled with rage.

Her hair, trimmed short and neat around the nape of her neck, gave her a boyish appearance, and she was actually a very cute girl. She was probably about one or two years younger than Yuuto. Seeing her little body bound up in all those layers of rope made him feel a bit sorry for her.

Yuuto had heard that the current sovereign of the Horn Clan was female. Though just a girl, she had risen above and taken control of the wild and rowdy warriors in her clan to become their sovereign, a feared and valiant woman known as Hildisvíni, “the Crimson Lady Tiger.” But the girl who was before him, growling and making threats, gave him less of an impression of a lady tiger than of a wild cat.

“Well, I guess in this place, that isn’t so strange after all,” he said.

In truth, a young man like Yuuto was serving as the Wolf Clan sovereign as well, and though both Felicia and Sigrun were girls still in their teens, they were both placed in respected positions within the clan.

In Yggdrasil, strength was everything. If you had strength, then being young or female was irrelevant.

“Anyway, I suppose introductions are in order. I am Yuuto, the sovereign of the Wolf Clan.”

“...Hmph.” Linea responded to Yuuto’s introduction by averting her gaze and planting herself firmly on the ground.

But Yuuto could see through to her rapid trembling. Acting so brave was likely a ruse to divert attention from her fear.

“I care not for useless overtures. Let me get straight to the point. Will you become one of my subordinates — one of my children, that is?” Yuuto said, putting on an air of arrogance.

“I refuse! Why would one of the Horn become subservient to one of you Dogs? Cease this nonsense!”

Without the slightest hesitation, Linea refused his proposal outright. And

calling them dogs showed that she clearly viewed them with contempt.

“True, we may have suffered a defeat this time! But the national prowess of the mighty Horn Clan still far exceeds that of you Dogs. Such a miracle won’t befall you again. Now, if you’re going to kill me, then do it! But your head will be next to roll. So go wash off that neck of yours and await your fate. Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Heh heh... aren’t you the one who should cease speaking nonsense?” Felicia touched a hand to her cheek and asserted that with a long sigh, as if dumping a bucket of cold water on Linea at the height of her amusement.

Her earlier burst of laughter now gone, Linea’s face now flushed an angry crimson in the blink of an eye. “Whaddya mean, nonsense?!”

“I mean the nonsense you speak each time you open your mouth. To be sure, we may have once seemed like dogs to you. But by our elder brother’s hand, we have been reborn. We are indomitable, real Wolves. So long as he is in command, a mere gathering of *slow-witted pigs* will be no match for us.” A smile stretched across Felicia’s lips, and her tone was polite, but that couldn’t disguise the degree of disdain in her words. You could find no better example of an insult wrapped in superficial courtesy.

“What?! This feeble-looking little kid couldn’t be that great!” Linea declared.

Thud! Shiiiink!

A mighty sound rung out through the tent. Sigrun, who had been silently waiting at Yuuto’s side up to that point, had slammed her fist down onto the wooden desk in front of them, breaking it completely in half.

This wasn’t the typical strength one might expect of a woman. Even among large men, there were few who could pull off such a feat.

A design which had not been there before appeared on Sigrun’s left shoulder, and began to emit a faint light. It was the rune Hati, the Devourer of the Moon, which granted its bearer wolf-like traits and extraordinary physical strength.

“Mind your tongue. I’ll not forgive anyone who insults Father.” Sigrun straightened herself up again and gazed down at Linea with arrogance. In her expression and voice, there wasn’t even a hint left of the sweetness that she

used when interacting with Yuuto. She was cold like ice, sharp like a blade.

“Ngh!” Linea reflexively flinched.

Sigrun had been the one who captured her. Even though Linea had surely been under the protection of several sturdy soldiers, having the fight brought so physically close to her during the last battle had no doubt etched a real fear of Sigrun into the very marrow of her bones. That terrifying strength had just been put on display once more. There was no doubt that Linea was terrified.

The air still tense, Sigrun gave an audible snort. “Just like Father, you became a sovereign at a young age, but no matter how you look at it, you don’t even hold a candle to his greatness.”

“Now, now, Run,” Felicia told her. “That comparison itself is an insult to Big Brother.”

“Hmph,” Sigrun said. “I hate it when I actually agree with Felicia, but for once, she and I see eye-to-eye.”

“Ngh! Nnngh!!” Linea seemed unable to find any words.

“My, my, groaning and moaning... who is the real dog here?” Felicia mocked.

“That’s right, grunt and snort like the pig you are. It really suits you,” Sigrun agreed.

Watching the unrestrained banter between the pair, Linea suddenly howled with fury. “Why, you—! Don’t look down on me!”

Linea’s frightened expression instantly replaced by rage, she lunged at Sigrun despite the bindings. The guards who had brought her in quickly held her shoulders down. Still, her growls and hate-filled glare pierced Yuuto and the others.

She really was like a mad dog.

“Well now. It seems the rumors of your pride are well founded,” Yuuto said under his breath, so that Linea wouldn’t hear.

That pride was likely a surface cover for an inner lack of confidence. The outburst from earlier was the result of her inability to stand being looked down upon. Still, that would make this the opportune moment.

“Both of you, restrain yourselves,” Yuuto ordered. Straightening himself up from having rested his chin in his hands, he feigned an exasperated tone. “She is still, for better or for worse, the Horn Clan’s sovereign. Mind your rude words.”

“Sir!” The two immediately complied.

Yuuto knew that they’d been acting just as he’d instructed them to, but he couldn’t bear to hear any more. He didn’t see himself as such a grand figure. He’d been trying to endure the fidgety feeling and anxiety that always arose from their flattery.

“You must forgive their rudeness, Lady Sovereign of the Horn,” he told Linea. “I apologize that my subordinates have somehow missed learning discipline.”

“...No, well, I also went too far in calling you dogs,” Linea responded. Her attitude had softened considerably.

Since becoming sovereign, Yuuto had been reading books on negotiation techniques. He felt such techniques were vital for someone at the top.

One of those techniques was playing “good cop, bad cop.” It was a common feature in police procedurals. With this technique, an aggressive police officer would use insults, threats, and a rude, oppressive manner to antagonize the target. Then a second police officer with a gentler demeanor would intervene, chiding the aggressive cop, so that conversation would flow better, and the good cop would garner goodwill and sympathy.

In this situation, Felicia and Sigrun were playing the bad cops, while Yuuto played the part of the good cop.

“Let’s get back on topic,” he said. “What were we talking about again? Oh, yes, the matter of you becoming my child.”

“...And I told you I wasn’t interested.” Linea once again stated her refusal, but this time, it lacked her prior ferocity. It felt like she was saying it to half-heartedly reassure herself.

Things were proceeding as planned, and Yuuto couldn’t help but gloat in his mind.

His conscience was scolding him for swindling, deceiving, and threatening a girl of such a tender age, but if they couldn't bring these negotiations to a proper conclusion, the fighting would continue and both sides would see even more bloodshed. Yuuto had no choice but to use these means in order to avoid that outcome.

The foundation had been laid. Having waited until the time was right, Yuuto could now make his real demands.

"Hm... well how about becoming a little sister of mine?" he asked.

The sovereign patriarch of the Horn Clan, Linea, was as flummoxed as a person could be.

No matter how many times she thought it over, she couldn't come up with a satisfactory explanation for how they had reached these circumstances.

Three or four generations ago, the Wolf Clan had been flourishing, but now they were in ruins; they'd become a puny clan whose national power was vastly inferior to that of the Horn Clan. And up until recently, they had been warring with their neighboring country, the Claw Clan. It wasn't hard to imagine that they'd continue to fall deeper into disarray.

Furthermore, when the new Wolf Clan sovereign came to power a year ago, she'd heard he was a mere sixteen-year-old boy of unknown origin. He should have been easy to deal with...

Should have been.

After gathering nearly double the soldiers as their enemies and expecting a flawless battle, and instead suffering a cruel and crippling defeat... the proud commander had now resigned herself to her fate as a prisoner of the enemy.

The reality she was forced to face now was stark: the enemy she had scorned as mere dogs now clearly saw her people, the Horn Clan, as completely beneath them. Of course this behavior was partly just a boast, the Wolf Clan exaggerating their strength to a defeated foe in order to move negotiations in their favor. Being the victor had its perks, after all.

Still, that was only half of it. The looks of respect and adoration that the people of the Wolf Clan gave Yuuto clearly weren't normal. They were all

showering the devotion due a sovereign upon this weak boy.

That included even Sigrun the Mánagarmr and Felicia the Alsviðr or “Wise Wolf,” warriors whose names were known even among the Horn Clan. And more than anything else right now, the fact that the Horn Clan had experienced such a crushing defeat at his hands was surely a spur in Linea’s side.

She was beginning to wonder if she hadn’t made a gross miscalculation. If things kept up like this, her own clan might be destroyed.

“...A little sister?” Linea said slowly.

Having such a concession presented to her as if Yuuto were offering a helping hand, even Linea couldn’t refuse him outright this time.

It was common knowledge in this world that becoming a child subordinate meant absolute obedience on principle. Of course, she couldn’t accept that.

Younger brothers and sisters were also expected to revere and obey the older sibling, but it wasn’t as iron-clad as with child subordinates. As an option, there was more reason to at least consider it.

“That is the one and only compromise I’m willing to offer,” Yuuto told her.

“Ngh!” Linea let out a wordless, anguished cry.

It was a matter that required careful deliberation, but there wasn’t any time. Thinking things over calmly in the current situation would be near impossible in the first place. Consequently, she hadn’t noticed the trap.

Yuuto might be treating it like a concession, but he hadn’t given her anything — he was merely withdrawing the more forceful demands. It was a tactic referred to as “highballing.”

It was a negotiation tactic used in cases where one knew their actual demands would be refused from the start, so they issued even higher demands first, and then after those demands were refused, issued smaller demands, the ones that were originally intended.

In addition, because of the effects of the aforementioned “good cop, bad cop” tactic, he had planted the unsettling possibility that perhaps his proposal was rather kind.

Linea had been completely taken in by Yuuto's plan.

"Unngh, but..."

Still, it seemed Linea wasn't yet sold on becoming Yuuto's younger sister. Apparently she was still resistant to the idea of becoming obedient to those lower-ranking dogs. If she shamelessly became the little sister to a "dog" and then returned to her country, she would not be able to avoid accusations that she had sold out her people.

Being viewed that way would be unbearably humiliating. She likely felt that death really would be better than such a fate.

"N-no, we of the Horn Clan will not place ourselves below you, the Wolf Clan..."

"I see. Then I guess I have no other option. We'll have to have a second Van on our hands."

"...?! Then you plan to burn our town to the ground?!" she exclaimed.

Yuuto's comment was so casual, seeming almost like an afterthought, yet Linea was seething. The sovereign of the Wolf Clan was looking down on her with cold, inhumane eyes, seeming completely unfazed by the now-threatening mood.

Van.

The name of a town that had once been a part of the domain of the Claw Clan.

It was no longer there.

That was because the man before her had burned it all to the ground, including women and children, not leaving a single resident alive.

"Only if you won't accept my Chalice, that is," Yuuto added. "I have no intention of pardoning anyone who would go against me."

"...!"

His clear, cold declaration caused the blood that had flushed her face to now completely drain from it.

When Linea had raised her troops to attack the Wolf Clan, one of the reasons was her feelings of righteous indignation at the Vánagandr — “The Tragedy at Van,” and at the sovereign who had ordered the attack. She could not accept something, or someone, so inhumane. Now the thought of that atrocity again weighed heavily upon Linea’s heart.

Though she bore the title of “sovereign,” she was still a young girl, not even fifteen. This was the first time she had really understood since becoming sovereign the reality of her decisions impacting the lives of tens of thousands of people. Her body would not stop quaking.

“It doesn’t matter to me either way, so what’ll it be?” Yuuto asked. “Hurry up and decide. My offers don’t stay on the table long.”

“Urgh!!” she finally exclaimed. “Very well. I’ll become your little sister. However, I’m not becoming some child subordinate! Just a little sister!”

In the depths of overwhelming sorrow, Linea accepted Yuuto’s proposal.

“Pheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeew.”

Once the meeting of sovereign patriarchs had adjourned and Linea was completely out of sight, exhaustion overtook Yuuto’s body, likely a result of maintaining such tension for so long.

Following that prolonged sigh, his body slid wearily from his seat onto the ground.

“A-are you all right, Father?! Has something happened to your body?” Sigrun rushed to Yuuto’s side, genuinely panicked.

Not a shadow of the coldness or hardness either of them had shown to Linea remained. Realizing this, Yuuto couldn’t hold back a wry smile.

All of the Wolf Clan took so poorly to being called dogs, but the way Sigrun was acting now made it impossible not to think of a dog whimpering with worry for its master. Of course, there was no way he could say something so rude, so he said something else instead.

“I’m just tired. You always worry too much. Though I suppose I am weak and

fragile by the standards of this world.”

“N-no, that’s not...” Sigrun’s voice shrank and her words trailed off.

She really does think I am weak, Yuuto thought with a wry smile.

But he didn’t fault her for that at all. When he had first come to this world, the food and water here hadn’t quite agreed with him, and he’d regularly had a hard time keeping anything in his stomach. He suspected that the image still stuck with Sigrun, even now.

“Tee hee! Slumped over on the ground like that, no one would ever believe you were the great ‘Hróðvitnir’ whose name is famous among our neighboring countries.” Felicia’s eyes narrowed in amusement.

Yuuto had slid to the ground, leaning his back against the legs of the chair for support, dignity be damned.

“That’s still infamy though, not fame,” he said pointedly, straightening himself up.

Following the incident at Van Yuuto had gained the alias Hróðvitnir ‘the Infamous Wolf’, along with a reputation for being an unforgivable and inhumane despot.

He had actually helped spread that reputation on purpose.

Just as with Sun Tzu, Yuuto had begun reading Machiavelli’s *The Prince* after becoming sovereign in order to properly gain knowledge befitting a leader. It said that those who would be leaders, while normally behaving benevolently, would have to be cool-headed or downright vicious at times. It also said that, if committing any such atrocities, they should be done all at once, rather than little by little.

It would make people fear you, take away their desire to fight you, and ultimately cull them into obeying you.

One famous example of this was the atrocity by Masamune Date at Odemori Castle. While capturing the castle, Masamune had led the massacre of its inhabitants. Upon hearing of this, his enemy Sadatsuna Oouchi had been absolutely terrified, and retreated from Obama Castle without putting up a

fight. Reaching Obama Castle, Masamune captured it without having to spill a drop of his own men's blood. Even the aforementioned Sadatsuna Oouchi later became subservient to Masamune.

In a sense, you could say the idea for the Vánagandr had been born from this event.

"I still cannot accept it," Sigrun said indignantly. "Father never even committed an atrocity in Van. He's such a benevolent person..."

"I'm not benevolent, just soft," Yuuto said with a pained expression, muttering as he shook his head from side to side.

Reality is not so simple. Just as being cool-headed and dispassionate might let you avoid bloodshed at times, being too overly friendly might actually lead an enemy to think lightly of you, and only intensify the fighting and bloodshed as a result.

It was true that Yuuto had burned Van to the ground, but in reality, he had secretly relocated its residents to a town in Wolf Clan territory first. And thus, the legend of his atrocity had been born.

It is said that there can be no damming of rumors. If the truth got out and caused neighboring clans to look down upon the Wolf Clan as weak, that could lead to outbreaks of fighting in which far more Wolf Clan blood would be shed than that of the Van residents who had been spared. Yet though he'd known that risk, Yuuto hadn't been able to kill those people. He couldn't go that far. He couldn't be that cold-hearted.

Even though the reality of this world, in which weakness and softness would be repaid in bloodshed, had been made clear to him time and time again.

"...Huh?"

He was suddenly embraced and pulled closer. In the next moment, a soft, warm sensation covered his face.

Again? As soon as he realized who it was, Yuuto panicked and tried to pull back.

"I find your generosity to be invaluable, Big Brother," Felicia said. "Please do

not blame yourself.”

Felicia’s soft, gentle voice somehow robbed him of the strength to resist. He could feel her heartbeat. It felt as if the self-loathing that had bruised his own heart was being healed.

“...Felicia, thank you, as always,” he said.

“Tee hee! I haven’t done anything you need to thank me for.”

“Still, I appreciate it.”

“I-I also have such respect for you, Father!”

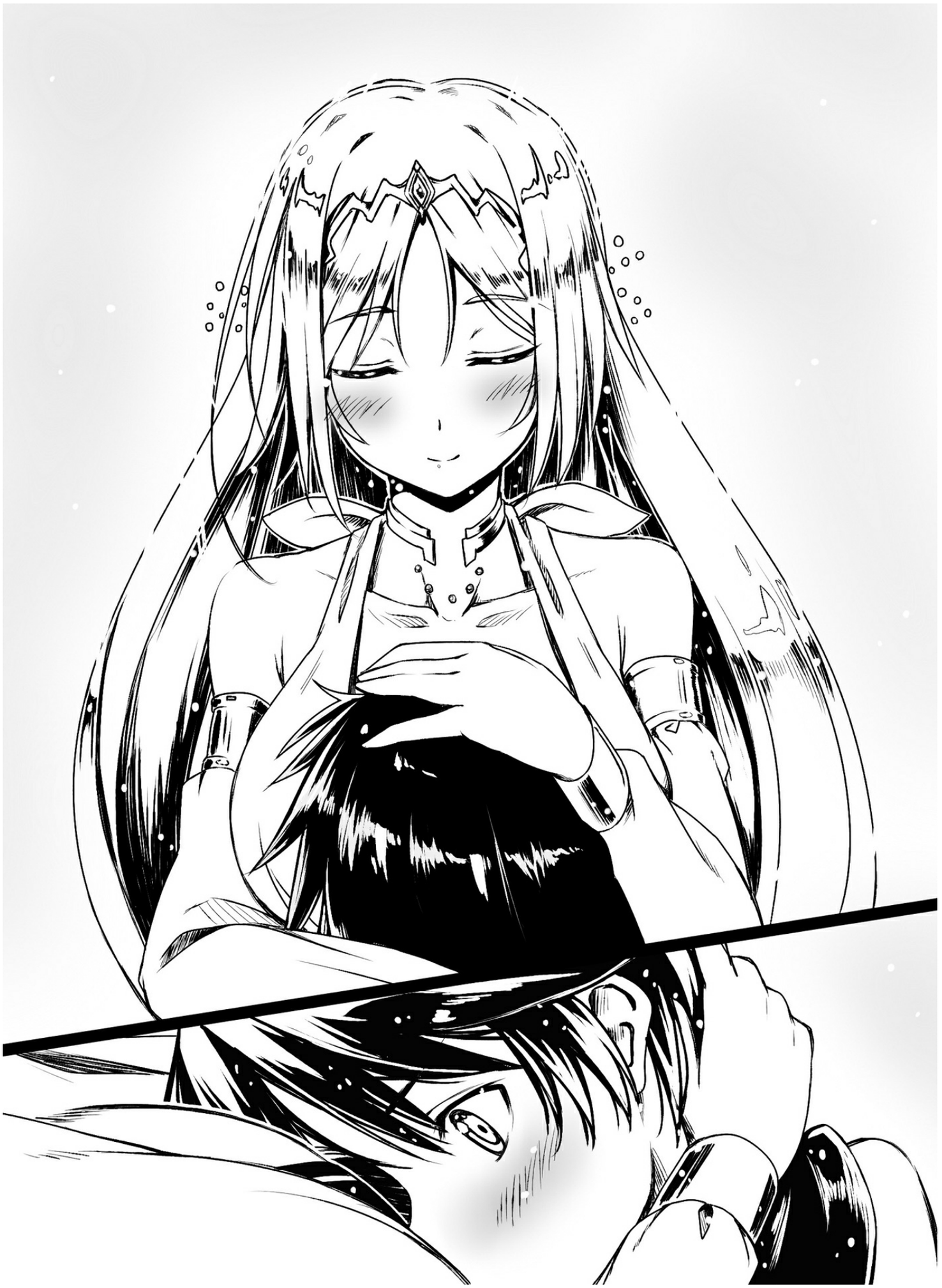
“Ah, and thank you, Run.”

“Yes!” A smile spread across Sigrun’s face like a flower in bloom. She was genuinely overjoyed at Yuuto’s simple words.

Yggdrasil was neither the time nor place in which Yuuto had been born and raised. There were many aspects of life here that were inconvenient, and homesickness regularly blew through his heart like a cold wind. But he also had people like Felicia and Sigrun who dearly cared for him, and who helped him.

A smile appeared suddenly on Yuuto’s lips.

“All right, let’s go. Back to our town, Iárnviðr.”



ACT 2

The earliest memory Yuuto could recall was of a billowing furnace flame within a dark room.

Yuuto's father had been a serious craftsman who rarely came home, choosing primarily to lock himself away in his small workshop on the edge of town. He'd been taciturn, and even on the occasions that he came home, he would rarely speak to anyone.

Naturally, Yuuto had no memories of playing with him. Even so, he would frequently head to the workshop and simply watch his father, as he swung his hammer with single-minded concentration.

When he reached upper elementary school, his father began to allow him to help out. The first time he did was the first time Yuuto's father had ever taught him to do anything, and Yuuto made sure to remember all he was taught.

Thinking back now, there wasn't much he'd been able to do as an elementary schooler. Still, being able to help his father was something he'd been proud of.

Yuuto had loved his father. He'd respected him from the bottom of his heart.

He had felt that way up until two months before he'd been stranded here in Yggdrasil.

Up until he'd heard those words his father spoke the day his mother died...

"Tch, not again." Opening his eyes wide, Yuuto heaved a deep sigh and got to his feet.

Even though he didn't want to think about his father, sometimes such memories would rise to the surface in his dreams. Nothing was more depressing to him.

The interior of the tent was at the mercy of an unknowing darkness. Apparently it was still night. Half a day had passed since the battle with the

Horn Clan. They were scheduled to arrive in the capital of the Wolf Clan, Iárnviðr, the day after tomorrow.

The distance was close enough that a person traveling by car could have reached it in a matter of hours, but with infantrymen accounting for over half of their armed forces, this was as fast as they could go. And making camp did little to relieve the exhaustion. He wanted more than anything to get back to town and to his own room, but there was little to be done about that desire for now.

“Mnn, I guess I’m up, then,” he muttered. He had hoped to fall back asleep, but his mind was wide awake. For the time being, it didn’t seem like sleep was a possibility.

Damn you, old man, Yuuto cursed to himself and went to the curtain hanging over the entrance, pushed it open, and stepped outside.

An unfathomable number of stars twinkled in the sky, as if it had been blanketed with jewels.

Back in 21st century Japan, thanks to light pollution in the cities, the rural countryside was really the only place one could see such a view. But Yuuto had been raised in the country, so it was a sight he had grown up with, and thus he wasn’t particularly moved by it. All it did now was solicit homesickness.

“Oh, yeah. Today would be Tanabata,” he murmured.

In the northeastern sky, Yuuto had noticed that two particularly bright stars had risen from the horizon, reminding him of the date displayed on his smartphone. It was also two years to the day since he had come to this world.

“Having incurred the wrath of the heavens, Orihime and the Shepherd could never again meet,” Yuuto murmured the old legend to himself while using those two stars as a starting point to look for others.

Before long, he managed to find Lyra and Aquila. Directly beneath that, at the boundary of the horizon, stretched a band of cloudy light — the Milky Way, the “river of heaven” flowing through space.

“Really... the night sky here is no different from the one back in my world.”

To the stars, even several millennia were no more than the blink of an eye.

Despite his melancholy, Yuuto clung steadfastly to that thought.

This familiar night sky was a significant piece of information. It meant that Yggdrasil was not another world, but rather somewhere on Earth.

Based on a few other deductions, he had concluded it was possible that he'd been thrown into the past. Hazarding a guess from the culture and the tools they used here, it seemed likely to be between 2000 and 1300 BC. In other words, the later Bronze Age.

For starters, on modern Earth, Yuuto didn't think there was still a place where wars were waged with swords and spears. Perhaps they still did in the backwoods of Africa or the like, but the constellations put this place in the northern hemisphere.

Then there was the land. Not only the Horn Clan, but the Hoof Clan also boasted a wide expanse of fertile land. He'd heard that on Yggdrasil, there were numerous clans the size and scope of the Hoof Clan.

It was hard to think that during or after the imperialism that began during the mid-15th century's Age of Discovery, the Westerners aggressively invading other territories in the name of God and empire would look the other way at somebody else having a lot of vast, arable land. They'd certainly want to colonize it. Yuuto could only explain this situation by his having been thrust much further into the past.

"Still, where exactly is this place?"

Gazing at the sky alone, he couldn't help but wonder. Yuuto had lost count of how many times he had asked himself that question, and so, directionless, he gazed off at the mountain range, illuminated by the light of the moon.

It was the Himinbjörg Mountains, one of three mountain ranges that sprouted out from the center of Yggdrasil and together were known as the "Roof of Yggdrasil."

Yuuto remembering having heard the word "Yggdrasil" even before coming here. It was a word used quite often in games and manga. It referred to the world tree that appeared often in old Norse myths. The town they were heading to now, Iárnviðr or "Ironwood," was also a name that showed up in

Norse myths often, known as a forest inhabited by wolves.

“However, this isn’t Northern Europe,” he murmured.

Checking his phone and searching online, he quickly figured out how to gauge latitude. If he could measure the angle at which Polaris sat in the sky, he could figure it out. Though nothing more than a mere amateur astronomer, Yuuto guessed that they were more or less between the northern latitudes 50 and 52, so approximately aligned with the central part of Germany.

Norse myths were originally referred to as myths of the Germanic people, which might lead one to think that this was Germany, but that didn’t seem to be the case either.

The mountain range Yuuto now gazed up at seemed tall enough to pierce the heavens, yet it was something he’d been unable to find anything similar to anywhere near the 50 degree latitude line. And he had stared at the map of Europe displayed on his smartphone so hard that he thought he might bore a hole in it. He had yet to try maps of China and America, though.

Still, if this were China, the eye and hair colors of the people here appeared far too Western to match, and as for America, what he knew about the terrain there was too vastly different from what he’d heard so far of Yggdrasil.

“I really have no idea...” Yuuto vigorously scratched his head.

It didn’t help matters that he didn’t know the longitude. For the past two years, the GPS on his smartphone had regularly reported “unable to detect your location at this time” and nothing more. Still, with modern-day knowledge, he’d assumed ascertaining the longitude should have been easy, and yet it was proving to be frustrating.

He didn’t even know the location of the Royal Conservatory in Greenwich, England, and that was the starting point for finding longitude. As a result, he had pretty much given up hope of pinpointing his current location.

“Oh my, Big Brother. You can’t sleep?”

Hearing someone suddenly call out to him from behind, he turned around to see Felicia, her golden hair trailing in the wind, smiling gently.

Yuuto smiled bitterly and gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. “I had a weird dream. It woke me up.”

He had intended this as a casual comment, just to make conversation, but he saw Felicia’s smile cloud over instantly, the wheels in her keen mind beginning to turn.

“Your kindness truly is one of your most admirable points, Big Brother. But there really is no need for you to concern yourself so...”

“Oh, no. It wasn’t about the battle.” Sensing that Felicia was worried, Yuuto tried to intercept her concerns.

Back when he’d first arrived, he’d had nightmares after every battle. At those times, it had always been Felicia who’d gently embraced the disturbed Yuuto, comforting him.

Since he had come to this world, Felicia had nobly devoted herself to him. Not just since he’d become sovereign patriarch, but ever since he’d arrived, unable to speak their language, unable to do work that required strength. Yuuto could not even count the number of times that this devotion had saved him.

Even if for her, that devotion had been no more than an attempt to atone for what she had done.

“Well then, what kind of dreams did you have?” She sat down softly next to Yuuto, and casually asked him her question.

A sweet and characteristically feminine smell filled Yuuto’s nose. On the battlefield, one couldn’t possibly bring along something like perfume, and so Yuuto was completely mystified as to how a woman could smell so good here.

“Oh, one about my stupid father. Ugh, it makes me sick thinking about him,” he said in a calm voice, trying to steel his quaking heart.

“Your real father? I see. You must miss him.”

“Bah! What’re you saying? I don’t ever wanna see a jerk like that as long as I live!” Yuuto spat and looked the other way with a *hmph*.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Felicia making auditory gasps, like giggles. Or at least, that was what he thought, but the next instant, he noticed

she was biting her lip, as if enduring some pain.

“You’re the one who worries too much about things, you know.” Yuuto turned Felicia’s words back on her, patting the top of her head.

Yuuto could guess which thoughts occupied Felicia’s mind. She was upset with herself for laughing at his reaction earlier, thinking she had no right to laugh about this. The one who’d pulled Yuuto into this world, who had separated him from his family and loved ones, had been none other than Felicia herself.

“I am grateful for your concern, but I am the one at fault, after all,” Felicia said with a self-deprecating laugh.

These days, she teased Yuuto and only showed him her glowing smile, but back in those early days, her face had always been stiff and her expression dark.

The rune she possessed, of the Expressionless Servant Skírnir, was a rune of all-purpose utility. It granted her extraordinary talent and skill in both the athletics and the arts, along with the ability to wield mysterious powers such as the galldr.

Amongst the numerous powers granted by the Expressionless Servant was something called “Gleipnir.” It was the power to capture and bind things that contained alien or aberrant qualities.

It had originally been a technique intended to seal the superhuman powers of other Einherjar, but that was just its main purpose. There was a good chance this power may have accidentally activated in an unexpected and unintended way.

Yuuto didn’t really understand magic, so he was making a lot of inferences. However, the possibility was rather high that...

“It wasn’t your fault alone,” Yuuto offered in a clipped tone. “I’m at fault for not being more cautious.” A modest smile formed on his lips.

To say he’d never felt anger about what Felicia had done would be a lie. But she hadn’t pulled him into this world intentionally. It had been, through and through, the result of a series of coincidences.

Yuuto suspected that looking into the opposing mirror at the shrine might

also be one of the main factors that had landed him here. That's why one part of Yuuto believed that his actions were just as much to blame.

Still, Felicia felt a great deal of guilt regarding him, and was trying to do all she could for him. And if she hadn't been around, Yuuto was sure he would have fallen into despair and killed himself, or, otherwise unable to get food, would have died of starvation. That was why he had nothing but gratitude toward Felicia, and though he often told her so, she seemed to take it as just him being considerate. It didn't seem like that would change anytime soon.

"Uhm, Big Brother?" Felicia's face flushed red with embarrassment as she stared up at Yuuto.

He took a breath. "Oh, sorry. Bad habit of mine."

Panicked, Yuuto pulled his hand away from Felicia's head. He had been patting her head for some time without realizing it. Perhaps because he had spent so much time looking out for his crybaby childhood friend, whenever he saw a girl on the verge of tears, he had a habit of patting the girl's head in order to comfort her.

Reluctant to part just yet, Felicia gave him an intense gaze and reached for his hand. "Oh, I don't really mind though."

Yuuto's pulse responded to her amorous gesture by quickening.

"Oh, no, well, you're older than me, so I shouldn't... oh!" It was too late for him to regret or take back those words.

The amorous look swiftly disappeared from Felicia's face. Just like how Sigrun lost her sweetness when she interacted with people other than Yuuto.

"That is true," she said. "Indeed, I am older than you. Yes... yes, in half a year, I shall reach the milestone of my twentieth birthday yet unmarried. Yes, yes, I might have waited too long! Still, that doesn't mean I am not attractive. It is merely that I have not been taken as any man's bride because there is no one worthy among the Wolf Clan, that is, it is I who have declined them. Furthermore, I have pledged my life to serve you in the first place, Big Brother, so how dare those rotten old men say things like...!"

The words that fell from Felicia's lips, curses drenched with disdain, elicited a

stiff and nervous smile from Yuuto.

Do not speak to Felicia about age and marriage, he thought with amusement. That was, among the people of the Wolf Clan, a well-known unspoken agreement.

The gentle Felicia, whose brilliant smile was normally unflappable, changed her demeanor as soon as the topic came up. Instantly dark... almost pitch black!

It was the norm in Yggdrasil for girls in their teens to be married off. To a person from the 21st century like Yuuto, it might have seemed a little too soon, but looking at it from a human behavior standpoint, perhaps a modern Japanese person's behavior was more unnatural.

Speaking globally, up until the latter half of the 19th century, marriage during one's teenage years was normal. Japan was the same. And it had been a common perception throughout the world during those times that a girl who hadn't married in her teens must have something wrong with her.

Having little time left before reaching that time limit, Felicia was feeling an extreme amount of pressure from everyone around her, so her anxiety regarding the subject was exceedingly normal.

"W-well, if you go by the way my world counts years, you would only be 17," Yuuto told her.

"That's right!" she cried. "It's the calendar that's at fault here! Of course, your country is using a more reasonable calendar, Big Brother! Why couldn't my date of birth have been seven days off? And that dog girl, she's only 18 this year! It's all so strange!" Felicia clenched her fists as she shouted, a golden wolf howling her troubles at the moon.

Perhaps this was the cause of her harsher feelings toward Sigrun.

Here in Yggdrasil, they didn't think in terms of the number zero, so as soon as a person was born, their age was counted as "one." And, as a culture using the lunar calendar, once the new year arrived, everyone instantly advanced their age for the year.

In other words, for someone like Felicia, who was born at the end of one year, within several days of her birth, she was already considered "two years old,"

while someone born at the beginning of the year, like Sigrun, got twelve months before she was considered two. For a girl who was concerned about her age, such a method of counting must have seemed unfair.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I lost my composure for a moment.”

“Oh... well, I was the one in the wrong,” Yuuto told her.

“As penance, please allow me to offer you a lullaby.”

“Hey, I’m a little too old for...”

“Old?”

“No, never mind! It’s fine.”

Feeling Felicia’s expression beginning to ice over once more, Yuuto quickly retracted his words. Even though he was supposed to be the sovereign, he reflexively took on a formal, standing-at-attention posture.

Felicia nodded coolly and headed for Yuuto’s tent.

“Hey now, you really shouldn’t be in a guy’s sleeping quarters in the middle of the night...” Yuuto started to protest.

“Oh? Personally, I would not mind attending to your needs through the night. It has been said from ancient times that the skin of a woman soothes the anxieties of the battlefield.” Felicia’s narrowed eyes filled with sensuality as she gave him a flirtatious glance over her shoulder.

On top of that, her form, illuminated by the moonlight, made her seem magical, giving her a more bewitching beauty than in the light of the sun, causing his heart to pound louder and louder.

Yuuto was, after all, a teenage boy. Having a girl, and especially a girl as beautiful as Felicia, talking about “attending” him through the night, wasn’t something he would be uninterested in. He gulped instinctively.

“Hee hee, so, what shall we do?” she asked.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m afraid I must decline. I wouldn’t want to betray her.” Yuuto said matter-of-factly, averting his gaze.

He said it to Felicia without looking at her because he was afraid that if he

looked, her charm would overcome all sense of reason.

Even without Mitsuki to consider, that didn't necessarily mean he would have given in, either. She clearly still felt deeply guilty toward him. He would be taking advantage of those feelings, and her unconditional devotion toward him. It would be sullying the person who saved his life with his own base desire; it would feel like the act of a beast. Yuuto's pride wouldn't allow for that.

"Oh, that's too bad." With a mischievous smile, Felicia disappeared into the tent.

Yuuto instinctively looked at the sky. "Just give me a break already. Even my rational mind has its limits."

Taking a deep breath to try and calm himself, Yuuto followed Felicia into his tent.

The flame of a lantern lit by Felicia filled his tent with a soft, orange glow. She was sitting on the wooden bed on the far edge of the tent. She gave him a sweet smile, patting her lap.

"I have no intention of leaving until you are able to rest, Big Brother."

Having gotten the drop on him, Felicia sat there, smiling gently and sweetly.

A man who does not return a woman's advances should be ashamed. The words ran through his mind. His reasoning reactivated, telling him not to fall for it.

"You have hardly slept at all during this past month, right?" she said. "The battle is over, so you must rest. Please, let me do this one thing that I can for you."

Her eyes were filled with such worry that it seemed as if she might cry, and in the end, he couldn't refuse her. She was right; for the past month, he had been so tightly wound, wondering if and when he might be attacked by the enemy, that there were many days in which he'd slept shallowly, if at all.

She always seemed to be joking around, but in reality, she was genuinely concerned for him and his health. The truth was, with his nerves on high alert, he didn't feel like he would be able to sleep deeply tonight either.

“...All right, I’ll leave it to you,” he said at last. Yuuto readied himself, flopping down on the bed and resting his head in Felicia’s lap. As a small act of resistance, he lay with his head facing Felicia’s abdomen. He didn’t want her to see his face right now.

“Yes. Goodnight, Big Brother,” she said. A gentle, soothing melody fell from Felicia’s lips.

He remembered hearing that musical phrase before, because this galldr, one of “peaceful rest,” had been sung to him numerous times.

I guess I really am tired, Yuuto thought, and just as he did, his eyelids grew heavy, and his consciousness was absorbed by the galldr, allowing him to fall into darkness.

“Father! We can see our town, Iárnviðr!” As Sigrun’s voice rang out, Yuuto straightened himself up within the carriage.

A grand sight jumped into Yuuto’s view: a wide expanse of open fields dotted with exposed earth and rock, with a vast mountain range faintly visible in the distance.

Over a hundred sheep marched slowly across the fields, followed by a dog. The sheep in the pasture were the Wolf Clan’s main source of food, as well as used to make clothing, which made keeping them an indispensably important industry. In the direction the sheep were heading was a faint, but visible, reddish-brown structure. It was the sacred tower Hliðskjálf, the unmistakable symbol of the Wolf Clan capital, Iárnviðr.

“We’re finally home,” Yuuto said. “I feel like I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.”

It had been over a month since they’d been back to the town. He really had been yearning for a roof over his head and a warm bed. Instinctively, a sigh of relief escaped Yuuto’s lips.

“Yes. That town is the den of our Wolf Clan after all,” Felicia said happily, seated next to Yuuto.

Coming home and breathing a sigh of relief, hmm? Yuuto let out a wry laugh.

His feelings on the subject were very complex, but in the end, that town had come to feel like a second home to Yuuto.

“I wanna get a bath as soon as possible,” Sigrun said earnestly, galloping along next to the chariot on her favorite horse. Mánagarmr or not, she was still a girl, and naturally wanted to feel clean.

“Yeah, true. I wanna get one, too,” he agreed.

Being able to get a bath in this time period was, to a person from the 21st century like Yuuto, something to be truly grateful for. He wanted to get the sweat, grime, and most importantly, the smell of blood, off of him.

“Tee hee! In that case, Big Brother, I shall wash your back for you,” Felicia teased.

“Tch...!! Father! Though it might be presumptuous, I shall assist, as well!”

“No, I’m fine.” Yuuto outright turned down their offers.

Of course, as a man, the prospect of two beautiful girls wanting to wash his back made his heart sing, but in the end, keeping a clear head was paramount. Falling asleep in Felicia’s lap the night before had already been straddling the line. Yuuto didn’t want to become a sleazebag politician, using his position as a cover for any unsightly pursuits, and he clung to that ideal within his boyish heart.

“Oh, yeah,” Yuuto asked, changing the subject. “So how did it feel trying that out?”

“Oh, you mean this thing?” The seemingly meaningful question Yuuto had asked Sigrun caused a smile to spread across her face that was so bright that it reminded him of a child being given a beloved toy.

A bad feeling rushed up Yuuto’s spine, but it was already too late.

“It was really amazing! I was able to fight freely without any restraint! It was all thanks to you, Father! Saying that your magnanimous nature ranks on par with the gods who dwell in the heavens would be no exaggeration. I am sure that your swooping in to rescue us, the members of the Wolf Clan, was no less than a gift from the heavens...”

“Okay, I get it! I get it! Enough already!”

“I-I see.”

Yuuto’s flustered attempt at putting a stop to Sigrun’s overtures caused her bouncy expression to instantly droop.

When Sigrun began praising her master, it was near impossible to make her stop. Yuuto was happy that she held him in such high regard, but it was extremely embarrassing and hard to hear.

“U-uhm, have I said something that displeased you, Father?” Sigrun asked, her expression now fearful and timid. She looked like a dog with its tail between its legs after being scolded by its owner, giving rise to torturous feelings of guilt within Yuuto. Perhaps his tone had been too harsh.

“N-no, that’s not it at all!” he said hastily.

“Really?”

“Of course not. Thank you for sharing your thoughts.”

“Of course! Please don’t hesitate to ask me for them anytime.” A satisfied smile and a muffled giggle reached Sigrun’s lips.

First the tears, now the smiles. Yuuto could do nothing more than give a defeated, wry grin.

The Strongest Silver Wolf, having stood invincible on the battlefield, now had been reduced to mood swings of joy and sadness by Yuuto’s words.

Yggdrasil was divided into eight large territories.

Among those, travel between the regions of Ásgarðr, Miðgarðr, and Álfheim was obstructed by three steep mountain ranges collectively referred to as “The Roof of Yggdrasil.”

The only path through was the long, narrow Bifröst Basin, which stretched through the mountain ranges and connected the three regions. Up until a hundred years ago, the entire basin had been overseen by the Wolf Clan, but then their branch clans had begun to rise up, leading to the current situation in which they were a puny clan who owned only a small piece of the western part of the corridor.

The Wolf Clan capital Iárnviðr, situated at the western entrance of the basin, had been flourishing for a long time as a strategic trade location. As it was of upmost strategic importance, it was constantly under attack, so a wall three times the height of the standard citizen had been built to protect it. In one of the corners stood a conspicuously large gate, stained a vivid green and covered with countless white and yellow drawings of wolves.

Once they arrived at the gate, one of the several soldiers who had gathered there rushed up to Yuuto's chariot and began speaking to him.

"Welcome back, Father! We have received word from a fast horse. Please accept my most sincere congratulations on your great victory and for capturing the patriarch of the Horn Clan."

Yuuto was a man, so having beautiful girls like Felicia and Sigrun call him "Father" felt awkward, but, he realized, not completely. But it was only natural that having a muscular, sturdy man over forty with sword cut scars on his forehead and cheek calling him "Father" made Yuuto feel extremely uncomfortable.

Yuuto gave a slight bow, and expressed his gratitude in a formal manner. "Thank you very much. Jurgen-san, you've done well monitoring the place."

The man called Jurgen knitted his brows together, and his already-hardened expression became even more rigid. "That will not do, Father. You are constantly apologizing and lowering yourself. It is unbecoming of a sovereign to use polite speech with his child subordinates."

"Oh..."

Thinking of how the man always found fault with him, Yuuto grimaced. It had been a month since they'd last seen each other, and Yuuto had completely forgotten.

As a genuine Japanese person raised in the country, the belief that elders should be treated with respect was something that permeated every fiber of Yuuto's being. A value like that, which he had been born and raised with, wouldn't be changed so easily.

"I keep telling you, don't I?" Yuuto said. "Just call me by my name. There's no

need for formalities. It's hard to be comfortable with someone several years older than me abasing themselves all the time. Jurgen-san, wouldn't you feel awkward if someone called you their father while you were still a youngster?"

"I most certainly would not," Jurgen declared nonchalantly, his expression completely unshaken.

Yuuto couldn't read even a hint of emotion from Jurgen's brash response. Perhaps it was part of the wisdom of growing old. The many deep wrinkles etched into his face were the result of experiencing the heaviness of living, and yet he gave off a feeling of stability, like a mountain, unshaken.

This was to be expected of the Wolf Clan's unflappable second-in-command, a great man of dignity and of the caliber revered in the leader of the clan's subordinates. Yuuto couldn't help but feel unsettled and ill at ease over such a person abasing themselves for him.

"Anyway, I was always just supposed to be a standin leader to get us through that battle a year ago," Yuuto said. "There's been so much confusion, and I know we've been struggling, but now that our battle with the Horn Clan is finally over, let's choose a proper sovereign."

"Huh? What are you saying after all this time? That's all in the past now. You have spent this past year consistently producing such spectacular results. There isn't another member of the Wolf Clan more worthy of the position of sovereign than you are."

"No, it would be strange for a neophyte outsider like myself to remain sovereign," Yuuto said. "Jurgen-san, you would definitely be a much better fit..."

"Father, do not concern yourself so with age or place of birth. In your position, ability is everything. You are infinitely greater than me or any other. No matter who you ask in our clan, everyone will tell you the same thing." Jurgen stated this as if it were fact.

"There is no doubt," Sigrun agreed. "With all due respect to our second-in-command, it is true that even now everyone would nominate you over him for the position, Father. That is because you are the sort of great hero that only appears once every 100... no, every 1,000 years."

“Tee hee! Of course, the second-in-command, as a leader in our clan, possesses his own indisputable talents,” Felicia said. “It’s just that if he were compared to you, Big Brother, he would be inferior in every way.”

Apparently having eavesdropped on their conversation, Sigrun and Felicia started in on Yuuto again.

Come on, give me a break already, Yuuto thought, heaving a sigh. The two of them normally disagreed on everything, but for some reason, when it came to showering Yuuto with praise, they managed to come together.

“You guys really are overestimating me,” he complained.

“Overestimating? No, this is different,” Felicia said firmly. “Our clan was at the end of its ropes, but within just a year, we’ve been able to force the Claw Clan and the Horn Clan into obeying us, and by means impossible to me, or to the second-in-command.”

“No, it would have been impossible to anyone other than Father,” Sigrun corrected.

“That’s what I keep saying!” Yuuto exploded. “I’ve just been cheating! I just happen to have access to knowledge that doesn’t exist in this world; I myself am nothing special...”

“Knowledge by itself is just knowledge,” said Jurgen. “It’s just a tool. To leverage it, to utilize it properly, that is a competency all its own! And, without a doubt, you possess that competency!”

Jurgen clenched his fist in sync with those passionate words. Felicia and Sigrun both vigorously nodded, as well.

“I give up...” Yuuto shrugged his shoulders, his palms facing upward. It was impossible to convince them. Hearing it from one person was bad enough, but having three gang up on him was more than he could bear.

To be fair, Jurgen was making a logical argument. However, the knowledge Yuuto possessed was too advanced for this world; it was akin to the alien technology of science fiction. Yuuto felt that the potential power of that knowledge couldn’t be understood with logic or common sense.

Naturally, everyone's praise and acknowledgement made him happy. On the other hand, no matter how much they extolled him, he saw what he was doing as nothing more than cheating — borrowing power from someone else. For this reason, Yuuto constantly kept that fact in mind, in order to avoid arrogance getting the better of him.

In order to be more like a truly worthy sovereign, he strove to maintain a reflective heart, an inquisitive nature, and a prudent ear to hear the thoughts of his subordinates.

Yuuto hadn't yet realized a simple truth. In a world where most people who obtained political power or great wealth became haughty and corrupt, those very principles of his were the difficult-to-obtain qualities that drew people to him, the qualifications of a "King."

Upon finishing his conversation with Jurgen and passing through the gate, Yuuto was greeted with cries of joy and voices extolling their sovereign patriarch, as if the people had been lying in wait.

Along both sides of the broad street that ran through the center of town were lines of people so thick, they resembled a hard wall.

"Sieg, Patriarch! Sieg, Patriarch!" the people cried.

Yuuto winced at such a reception, but was quickly able to calm himself. He had already experienced this two months earlier, after his triumphant return from the battle with the Claw Clan.

"Tee hee. You're as popular as ever, Big Brother. Since they have all come here, why not give them something in return?" Felicia suggested, returning their cheers with a wave.

I'm not as good of a performer as you are, Yuuto thought as he gazed about the crowd of people. The faces of everyone in the crowd overflowed with cheer and broad smiles.

Each of these soldiers was someone's older brother, or younger brother, or son or father, or husband or boyfriend. The people weren't just celebrating the victory; they were celebrating the safe return of their loved ones.

"That's right," he murmured. "This too is part of the sovereign's job."

Yuuto stepped onto the rim of the carriage and lifted the sword sheathed at his hip into the air. Reflecting back the light of the sun, the blade shined a dull silver.

Being so oddly embarrassed in situations like this only lead him to feel further shame. The source of this was his first year of middle school, where, through an odd set of circumstances, he had been chosen for the lead part in a play and had failed spectacularly.

I guess I've become something of a performer, as well, Yuuto thought lightly, as he struck a pose.

"Sieg, Patriarch!!" The sudden outburst of cheers caught him off guard.

"Whoa!"

The waves of sound from the cries rolled over him, causing him to stumble and nearly fall on his backside.

Nevertheless, the cries of joy echoed through the center of town, until the sound had magnified to absurd levels, causing the entire town to shake.

"They really are fired up..." Yuuto was dumbfounded at the din he had escalated. Of course he'd intended to get them excited, but he hadn't expected it to reach this level at all. It seemed as if the returning Wolf soldiers had lost their nerve, too, their faces reflecting back either bewilderment or shock at the raucous reception.

"That's our Father!" someone in the crowd screamed rapturously.

Even Jurgen, who was always so calm and collected, his expression not easily shaken, couldn't hide his shock at the frenzy which Yuuto had stirred up.

The only two who looked completely normal were Sigrun and Felicia. The two of them exchanged glances, nodding in approval.

"My, our people are so sensible," asserted Sigrun.

"Yes. They've accepted a proper leader and have come to appreciate him so well," added Felicia.

Even upon their arrival at the palace, the cheers continued to ring out.

The palace of the sovereign patriarch who governed over the Wolf Clan was at the very center of town, with a wall surrounding it even taller than the one surrounding the town.

Its outer walls were made of connected column-like shapes painted with a beautiful white stucco, reminding Yuuto of the Parthenon in Greece. There was a world of difference between this grand fixture and the common houses found throughout town, which looked to Yuuto more like shabby sheds or barns.

Yuuto had nothing but admiration for such a grand structure. While his time should have been far ahead of the cultures of 3,000-4,000 years prior, this was still the type of giant, magnificent building that would earn solemn words of praise from anyone.

As Yuuto stopped his chariot at the castle gate, the elder members of the Wolf Clan came to greet him and shower him with praise.

“Welcome home, Lord Yuuto.”

“Congratulations. We have received word that it was a thorough win.”

“With Lord Yuuto around, the Wolf Clan will be able to see continued peace.”

Though they were referred to as elders, they were all about in their 40s and 50s, their bodies still pliable and shapely. They were still in their prime.

They had all been younger brother subordinates to the previous sovereign — so, they were equivalent to uncles to Yuuto. In other words, they were also the ones who hadn’t accepted Yuuto as sovereign, and therefore, had refused both the Sibling Chalice and the Child Chalice.

“We have prayed to Angrboða for victory every day without fail,” one of them said.

“Yes. We of the Wolf Clan must not forget that today’s prosperity is all thanks to the divine protection of Angrboða,” added another.

“Indeed, indeed. Cheers to the master of Iárnviðr, Angrboða!”

The Angrboða whose praise they extolled was the guardian deity who was enshrined at Iárnviðr, and thus worshiped as the goddess presiding over the people of the Wolf Clan. In a roundabout way, they were also claiming this

victory as the result of their prayers.

Being from the 21st century, Yuuto could see their manner of speaking as nothing more than sheer impudence, but they seemed to be quite serious. Just as in the Middle Ages, when witch trials had been commonplace, and people had had no countermeasures for the threats of the wild, peoples' lives and minds were firmly entrenched in the realm of the spiritual.

"Pardon me, I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I'm afraid this conversation will have to wait until later," Yuuto said curtly, brushing off the words of the elders, and passed through them without stopping.

It wasn't Yuuto's intention to reject the sacred mysteries of this world. After all, the existence of mysterious powers like the galldr and other abilities of the Einherjar had been demonstrated to him many times. Even the fact that Yuuto was here now couldn't be explained by 21st century science.

Also, Yuuto got the sense that here on Yggdrasil, faith in a deity was an extremely important component employed in controlling the people. That was why he had no intention of taking it lightly.

It was just that, in that moment, Yuuto had something far more important than gods that he was concerned about.

"Your manner was a bit curt with the other elders back there, Lord Yuuto," the head of the elders protested. Bruno's face was grim with displeasure.

Humans were said to become more firm in their resolve as the years passed, and Bruno proved to be a particularly strong example of that at times like this, nagging and preaching to Yuuto about the principles of the Chalice.

Having the clan run with the parent-child relationship at its center was the way of the world here. Consequently, though these men had been given the position of elder, they actually had no real power. Even so, they were still his elders and uncles, and thus should be shown the proper respect due to them.

"But I *am* in a hurry! Please allow me to speak with everyone tomorrow!" Yuuto's voice became rough with irritation.

Normally, Yuuto would be able to keep up surface appearances, interacting with those around him with a friendly demeanor. But right now, he couldn't

help but feel impatient. He hadn't heard her voice in a month. It was so close. He couldn't wait a minute longer.

"I fear not, Lord Yuuto!" the man declared. "Any matters relating to the Chalice are of utmost importance, and thus, such a situation receives priority! As the sovereign, you of all people should know that...!"

"I will be happy to hear the elder's thoughts on this matter," Felicia cut in with a broad smile between Yuuto and the ever-persistent Bruno. "Later on, I will share the information with Big Brother." She gave Yuuto a wink.

"Thank you, Felicia! I'm counting on you!"

"I will not let you down. But, if you are in a hurry, please be sure not to hurt yourself, all right?"

"I'll be careful!"

Even as he said those words, Yuuto sped off, unable to linger a moment longer.

Bruno's shouts echoed after him. There would be hell to pay later. But he didn't care about that!

He rushed through the courtyard thick with date palms, turning on the power to his smartphone as he went. The strength of his smartphone's signal was still being displayed with a red X over it.

"Tch, I guess it still won't work here." Yuuto clicked his tongue, unintentionally chiding himself for wasting precious battery power.

Clenching his phone tightly, Yuuto quickened his pace.

Standing next to the palace was Hliðskjálf, the sacred tower with a height that dwarfed the palace itself. The entire structure had a reddish appearance, and that wasn't solely the fault of the sun setting in the western sky. It was because the tower had been built with hand-fired bricks.

The front of the tower was connected to the top floors by a long staircase. It was an easy target for one to attack, but the structure was not for defense; rather it was obviously for religious observances and ceremonies.

If Yuuto were to describe the tower's shape in one word it would be "kagami

mochi,” the stacked decoration featured during Japanese New Year’s. According to Yuuto’s research, it had a great deal in common with the ancient Mesopotamian ziggurats. Those structures, in turn, were based around the Tower of Babel from the Old Testament. Similar structures could be found in Europe and Central and South America, erected by ancient civilizations, in some universal human desire to get them a little closer to heaven — and by extension, God, in order to offer their prayers.

“Huff... huff...”

He was already feeling pain in his chest and sides from those long stairs, but he quickly made his way to the top, to the altar called a “Hörgr” that had been erected there.

The place, two years earlier, was where Yuuto had found his way into this world. Offerings of prayers for victory, the Chalice ceremony, and many other holy rituals were conducted here.

Without Yuuto noticing, the sun had set and the moon had begun its climb in the eastern sky.

There was no sign of any other person, and the interior was filled with a solemn atmosphere. Enshrined at the altar was the divine mirror, bathed in the light of the moon and emanating a strange light of its own.

On first glance, it seemed nothing more than a simple mirror, but it was actually made of a rare metal housing sacred power, known as elven copper. The galldr and the power of the Einherjar both originated from this elven copper.

Yuuto was certain that this mysterious, rare metal also had something to do with how he was brought to this world.

Yuuto had been going with the theory that Yggdrasil was somewhere in the deep past, but there was no metal with such properties anywhere in the 21st century. The mysteries of this world only ever seemed to increase.

However, in that moment, it didn’t matter.

At that point, what was most important to him was—

“Hello! I’m so glaaad! Yuu-kun, you’re all right!”

“Sorry for worrying you,” Yuuto said. “But I’m totally fine.”

“Yes, yes. I’m really so relieved. Welcome home, Yuu-kun.”

“Yeah, I’m home. Mitsuki.”

If he was near the divine mirror, he could connect to the world he was originally from.

This discovery had not been by accident. He had been wondering if he could possibly get back home using opposing mirrors once more, and had tried it hoping he could. Unfortunately, while he had been unable to return to the 21st century, when he’d checked his smartphone for confirmation, the screen had indicated that he was getting a signal!

“Listen to this, Yuu-kun! Ruri-chan is so mean,” Mitsuki said.

“Oh?”

Yuuto sat and listened to Mitsuki’s trifling stories, offering an interjection every now and then. The topic didn’t matter. As long as it was something light. If they each could hear the other’s voice, and know that they were well, that was all that mattered.

The main point was that war was an implicit taboo. It was obvious that such a topic didn’t make for pleasant conversation. It would be foolish if they wasted their limited time on difficult subjects that would only leave them feeling more depressed.

“And then, after that, Ruri-chan...”

Bee-boop, bee-boop.

All of a sudden, Yuuto’s phone rang out with cruel warning sound, cutting off Mitsuki’s words. It was a sound informing him that he was almost out of battery power.

“Aww...” Mitsuki likely heard the sound too. Her voice was disappointed. Lonely.

Naturally, Yuuto felt the same way. He enjoyed their time, but it always ended

too soon.

“I guess we’re outta time,” he said. “I’ll call you again.”

“Okay, I’ll be waiting. Oh, I didn’t get a lot of money from work this time, but I’ve charged up your phone’s account.”

“Sorry for all the trouble.”

“You promised never to say that, Pop,” Mitsuki said in a slightly solemn tone, then broke in with a giggle the next second. This was a standard, joking exchange between the two.

“Seriously though, you’re a lifesaver. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Eheheh.” Mitsuki gave a little laugh, embarrassed.

The ebooks Yuuto had been buying to survive in this world weren’t free. The money for those books was money Mitsuki had been saving from her daily newspaper job. Yuuto could never thank her enough for that.

“I’ll be waiting for your call,” she said. “As long as it takes. Take good care of yourself, Yuu-kun!”

“Yeah, I know! Later, Mitsuki.”

With those words of farewell, Yuuto hung up the phone. For a moment, his finger hovered ruefully over the button, unmoving, but he steeled himself and ended the call. He had no intention of appearing any less masculine to Mitsuki of all people.



Being thrown alone into this world had made Yuuto realize a few things. Things like how much he loved Mitsuki. That was why he needed to return to the world where she waited for him.

“But can I really get home?” he sighed, at a loss.

If it was by an Einherjar’s power that he’d been brought there, then Yuuto felt it wouldn’t be strange for such a power to send him home. However, if such an Einherjar existed, where would they be? With limited means of communication and transportation here on Yggdrasil, finding one seemed as hopeless a task as grasping at clouds.

Part of the reason he’d taken the position of sovereign was because it afforded him the chance to receive information and rumors from all over the place. He had hoped it would be more effective than braving the dangers of trying to visit all of the different regions on his own. It had yet to yield any worthwhile results, though.

He couldn’t expect help from the people in his home world, either. Yuuto’s disappearance two years ago had caused a bit of a stir. And yet, no one would believe Yuuto or Mitsuki.

It was only to be expected, after all. Hearing an absurd, nonsensical story about opposing mirrors being used to fling someone into another world, most adults saw it as nothing more than tomfoolery. One detective had agreed to come to the shrine, jokingly holding up an opposing mirror and looking through it to the divine mirror, but nothing happened.

As a result, since Yuuto could still reach them by phone, the incident was instead seen as nothing more than a malicious prank, and as far as the police back in Hachio City were concerned, he was a runaway. Even if the police really did put their all into it and managed to reach the truth of what happened, he doubted they would be able to actually extricate him.

“Even if I could make it home...” Yuuto gazed down at his own two hands. Those hands had been stained time and again with the blood of others. He no longer had the right to touch her with such filthy hands. He began to question himself.

“...No, I can’t do this right now.” Yuuto shook his head, trying to shake all the bad thoughts away.

What good will I be if I grow soft? I will get home to her, no matter what! Yuuto vowed to himself once more.

“Father, if you linger here all night, you’ll catch a cold.”

“!”

A familiar voice called out from behind Yuuto, causing his back to instinctively freeze up. He did so out of guilt.

When he looked behind him, Sigrun was standing there inconspicuously. She had likely been there, hiding in silence and out of sight, the whole time he had been on the phone.

The arrangement was that, in Felicia’s absence, Sigrun would take up the duty of guarding Yuuto. Even though she was likely exhausted from all that time spent on the battlefield, she’d had to pursue Yuuto up the long stairway after he’d run off, selfishly. He felt guilty for being the recipient of such loyalty.

Suddenly, the faces of everyone in the Wolf Clan began flashing through his mind. Indeed, someday, he would have to return to Japan. Thinking of not just Sigrun, but everyone who depended on him and looked up to him, made Yuuto waiver in his desire to return home.

People who had shown him great hospitality, for whom he had great affection.

If it had been a year earlier, he could have left them behind easily.

But now, he was no longer so sure.

In the dusk, the man sat himself upright.

Next to him slept a naked woman. Her skin was moist with sweat, and an obscene air wafted through the room.

“What is it?” the man glared at the door and asked in a haughty manner.

There was a trembling form standing outside the door. They likely hadn’t

expected to be noticed or acknowledged before speaking.

But for this man, who always behaved as if he were on the battlefield, this was nothing special.

“F-Father, please, forgive my intrusion at this late hour. We have received intel from one of our spies that the Horn Clan’s second-in-command, Rasmas, has departed. It is regarding the Wolf Clan establishing a bond with the Horn Clan via the Sibling Chalice.”

“Ohh? The Sibling Chalice, eh? ...Hmph, this is perfect, then. Actually, this is the best-case scenario. Gather the troops.”

“Sir! Ha ha! My arms cry for the thrill of battle once more,” the man’s subordinate said with a curt laugh.

“Mm, yes, we can finally open the way to our long-coveted Bifröst,” the man agreed. “Now then, how will that famous little brat from the Wolf Clan handle this?”

As he shifted his large body, a broad, fiendish grin stretched across his face.

ACT 3

“It’s morning, Father.”

“Please wake up, Big Brother.”

Two voices — one dignified like the ringing of a bell and the other soft like silk — roused Yuuto from his slumber.

There was a clattering, like someone was moving something heavy. In the next instant, sunlight pierced his eyelids. Someone had removed the boards in front of the windows.

Glass did not yet exist in this world, so windows were covered with wood and branches.

“Oh, good morning, you two,” Yuuto said, opening his eyes.

Two angels, their gold and silver hair respectively glistening in the light of the sun, popped into his field of view.

For a moment Yuuto let himself enjoy believing he’d awakened in Valhalla, the heavenly plane where heroes went after death. It helped to soothe the slight disappointment he also felt upon seeing them. Waking up in his room in modern day Japan to find it was all a dream was never going to happen, after all.

The silver-haired girl, Sigrun, took a knee on the spot and offered her greeting. “Good morning, Father.”

The golden-haired girl, Felicia, set a tray with bread, soup, and milk on the bedside table and flashed Yuuto a broad smile. “Good morning, Big Brother. Your breakfast is waiting.”

The aroma of freshly baked bread tickled Yuuto’s nostrils. Enticed by that scent, the dazed Yuuto finally lifted his head.

“Whew, I haven’t slept that soundly in a long time.”

Sitting himself up on the edge of the bed, Yuuto gave a long stretch. Naturally,

as the mattresses in this world had no firmness to them, they weren't exactly high-quality. He couldn't exactly praise beds here for being comfortable to sleep on, but even so, this was his own room, and here was the one place where he could truly relax. In a matter of one night, his exhaustion had been swept away and his body felt lighter.

"I trust you slept well," Felicia said.

"Yeah, I'm overflowing with energy."

"Yes... I can see that."

For some reason, her eyes were not on Yuuto's face, but on another part of his body. Yuuto was, after all, a boy in the midst of puberty, and it was the morning.

"Tee hee hee, if I may, shall I quell that energy for you?" Felicia gave Yuuto an alluring smile, then thrust one hand onto Yuuto's bed, using the other to brush the hair from his face, bringing hers closer.

Yuuto began to tremble, flustered, and shook his head vigorously side-to-side. "N-no, like I always tell you, that won't be necessary."

"I don't believe that's what your body is saying."

"It's just a physiological phenomenon!"

It was a little more than just that, if he was going to be honest. It was just that he couldn't exactly say something like that out loud.

Felicia licked her lips seductively. "Tee hee, well, shall we make that the focus of your morning studies, I wonder..."

"Your teasing of our sovereign borders on treason, Felicia, and I cannot abide it. You are upsetting Father. Shall I cut you down here and now?" Sigrun, who had been quiet up until that point, placed a hand on the sword at her hip, giving off a menacing air.

Having recoiled at Felicia's aggressive advances, Yuuto secretly applauded Sigrun's reliable interference.

"Listen, Run," Felicia said. "Caring for Big Brother's health is a part of my professional duties as adjutant. For a man, there are some things that, if he

does not release them, could be damaging to his health."

"What, is that true?"

"Indeed. And not only that, but from antiquity, there are kings who have been driven mad at the behest of a woman. It would be dangerous for Big Brother, our sovereign patriarch, to not be shown the ropes in advance lest he be seduced by the wiles of a wicked woman."

"Hmph, I see," Sigrun pondered. "That does sound rather logical. Father, though my body be meager, please feel free to make use of it, as well."

Seeing how easily coaxed and convinced to switch sides Sigrun was, Yuuto instinctively gazed up at the ceiling. He then chanced a glance in Felicia's direction, and she gave him a smug, self-satisfied grin quickly, so Sigrun wouldn't notice.

No matter how one looked at it, Felicia was definitely the wicked woman in this situation.

Rumble.

Yuuto's empty stomach let out an unrestrained cry. He had been too exhausted to eat dinner, so it was only to be expected. However, it was also an unparalleled opportunity for a counterattack.

"R-right now, hunger is more important than lust! Let's eat, let's eat!" Yuuto cried.

"True, one cannot fight on an empty stomach," Sigrun agreed.

Once again, Sigrun quickly flipped back from Felicia to Yuuto's side. Apparently she herself wasn't aware of her switching allegiances, though.

During wartime, the most important thing was military logistics — namely, the security of food supplies. As the Strongest Silver Wolf Mánagarmr, there was no reason Sigrun wouldn't know that. She treated satisfying the stomach as a top military priority.

"Oh... my... that's too bad," Felicia teased. "When you feel that embrace of a woman, there are a wide variety of things that can be overlooked or forgotten..." Her words trailed off into a flirtatious whisper.

“I-I’m saved...” Breathing a sigh of relief, Yuuto turned his attention to breakfast.

The bread and soup were served upon silver dishware. Yuuto felt sorry for the commoners out in the town, who were relegated to earthenware that they had made themselves, but he also understood that a sovereign who lived too modest an existence would leave a bad impression. Besides, more than anything he was averse to the earthenware, fearing that it would cause him stomachaches again.

“Father, please pardon the rudeness.” Sigrun brought her nose close to the bread and soup on the stand, sniffing it. After giving a nod, she took a bite of the bread and a sip of the soup.

Of course she wasn’t teasing Yuuto by eating before him. This was essential, as it was a food-tasting to check for poison.

The truth was that, even though this wasn’t a job Yuuto had asked Sigrun to do, she did have a nose with an unbelievable gift for detecting poisons. She had detected poison hidden in his food twice now. In both instances, her superior instinct had alerted her to not allow anyone to eat the food.

“It is safe,” Sigrun said. “Please, go ahead.”

“Right. Thank you, as always.”

Even as he gave his thanks, Yuuto couldn’t help but feel frustrated. Day after day, he had to be on alert to the threat of death by poisoning. Being sovereign was a fateful job.

“All right, *itadakimasu*.”

His breakfast having been confirmed safe, Yuuto placed his hands together, then reached for the bread. Even though Yggdrasil had no such pre-meal custom, it was hard to get rid of a habit that had been ingrained on his mind over years of practice.

The bread looked somewhat like melon bread from back home. The heat still wafted off of the freshly baked bread as Yuuto lifted it to his lips and opened his mouth wide. This was technically an indirect kiss with Sigrun, but after a year of this, Yuuto had long since gotten used to it. If he let it bother him every time, he

would never eat.

“Mm, this is delicious!” he declared. “There’s a world of difference between this and what I had when I first arrived. I guess being a cheater has its benefits.”

Yuuto kept on muttering to himself, satisfied, as he took in the fresh aroma and soft texture of the dough.

In order to make bread, one first had to grind wheat into wheat flour. When Yuuto had first come to this world, the milling method had been a primitive one, consisting of setting the wheat on a flat stone, then intently grinding and mashing it with a long, slender, round stone.

However, with this method, wheat husks and bits of stone inevitably ended up mixed in with the flour. As a result, bread made with that wheat flour inevitably had a hard or sand-like consistency to it, a most unpleasant experience.

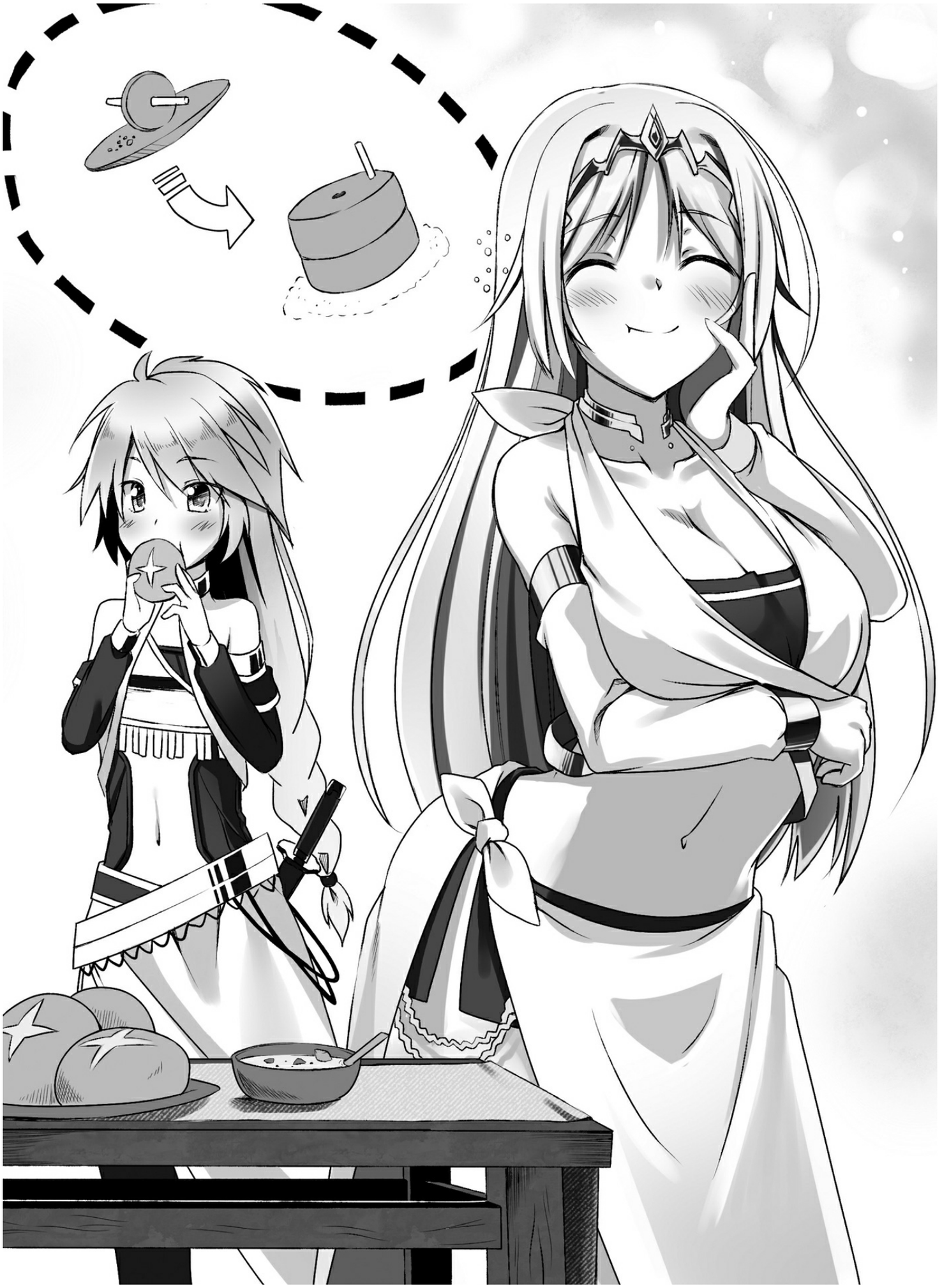
“Thanks to your efforts, Big Brother, the bread as of late has been rather delicious.” Felicia smiled happily.

Sigrun gave a deep nod.

Naturally, anyone would prefer to have the food they ate daily be as delicious as possible. Yuuto certainly felt that way.

Having been long accustomed to modern bread, Yuuto had not been able to stand the gravelly bread initially served to him, and so he’d used the internet to research millstones, and had read a number of ebooks on the subject. He had then been able to able to establish a new method for the people of Yggdrasil, called a rotary quern, where two circular stone disks were stacked atop one another with a piece of wood rotating the top disk.

Incidentally, the rotary quern had first been historically documented around 600 BCE, so it was still an advanced technology several centuries ahead of Yggdrasil.



“Oh yeah, the bread just reminded me. How are things going with the water wheel?” Yuuto asked, having suddenly remembered.

He had been put off by the fact that he was the only one eating such delicious bread. But there was a hard limit on what they could make using only manual labor. So he had once again found an ebook on the subject and, through trial and error, they had constructed a small water mill.

This had been surprisingly convenient, and so they now had five up and running. Still, it was the handiwork of amateurs. It had been a year since they had built it. He wouldn’t be surprised if something were to go wrong with it.

“It is currently operational with no issues,” Felicia told him.

“I see. That’s good news.” Nodding, Yuuto drank his milk in one gulp. It had a freshly squeezed, rich flavor to it, infinitely more delicious than the milk for sale in his home of modern-day Japan.

In this regard alone, people here lived lives of far more luxury than modern-day Japanese people. Even so, Yuuto couldn’t help but feel an insatiable dissatisfaction. Though he had spent two years in this other world, Yuuto was still Japanese.

He understood that it was rare because of the climate and the soil here. But still...

“I really want some rice,” he sighed.

Ever since he’d arrived, Yuuto had kept craving the taste of white rice.

“...Thus, the first Divine Emperor Wotan unified all of Yggdrasil, founding the sacred empire of Ásgarðr and proclaiming Glaðsheimr its capital. This was 204 years ago.” Felicia’s sonorous voice rung out through the patriarch’s office chamber.

In Yuuto’s eyes, Felicia was not only competent as an adjutant, a bodyguard, a sister, a friend, and a benefactor, but also a capable teacher.

Upon his initial arrival in this world, Felicia had been the only one able to communicate with Yuuto, by utilizing the galldr “Connections.”

Working as a priestess at the time he arrived, she had often visited the palace's shrine and taught him the language of this land.

Humans are often capable of showing a previously unthinkable strength when they are pushed into corner. Within three months of his arrival, Yuuto had gained the ability to communicate on a basic level with people other than Felicia. Now, two years later, he could converse with almost no difficulty, but since he had become sovereign, there were numerous other things he needed to know. That was why mornings were set aside for lessons, when Felicia would lecture him about Yggdrasil.

Today's lecture seemed to be about history.

"It really is full of names and titles from popular Norse myths," Yuuto said. "I guess this world really does have a connection to the one that I came from..."

"Big Brother, is there something on your mind?" Felicia asked.

"No, it's nothing. I'm just mumbling to myself. Please continue."

"Very well. Emperor Wotan created a unified method of measuring length, size, and weight, or in other words, a system of measurements. He also unified the numbering system, decided on the Nordic language as the common tongue, and standardized a variety of other things. In order to encourage trade between all of the regions, he took great pains to establish trade routes along roads and waterways. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the policies Emperor Wotan put in place still live and breathe in the lives we are able to lead at present."

"Wow, he was a pretty wise ruler." Yuuto breathed in astonishment.

200 years later, and the things he did are still impacting us today. That's impressive, Yuuto thought with genuine admiration.

"Indeed, he was a grand emperor with a unique ability to get things done. It was just that Emperor Wotan was a bit too forceful, and made far too many changes in one area."

"Meaning?" Yuuto asked.

"Emperor Wotan's most drastic reform was actually the clan system. At that

time, succession was determined by blood and heredity, and he forbid the old ways in order to foster succession based on skill and ability."

"It sounds like a good idea to me." Yuuto tilted his head, unable to grasp what could be the problem.

No matter how great the parent, it would be no guarantee of the competency of the child. Though in some cases, the apple wouldn't fall far from the tree, in others, a meager man could give birth to a mighty king. In that case, Yuuto thought, allowing people with greater skill to become leaders over people succeeding by heredity was more efficient.

"Naturally, there was no shortage of lords overseeing territories passed down through generations who resented this," Felicia explained. "And there were many who opposed his other radical policies."

"I see. So he had invited the ire of those who had a vested interest in things staying as they were."

Yuuto's hand instinctively shot into his pocket. Machiavelli's *The Prince,* which he had read time and time again, sprang to mind. Machiavelli had stated that being hated and scorned were unavoidable for a monarch. He'd said that stealing one's social position, wealth, or wife invited a particularly strong brand of resentment, so one would do well to be careful.

Yuuto was also someone who was introducing new methods and ideas into the world. This lesson wasn't irrelevant to him.

"In addition, his policy also only allowed for hereditary succession within the house of the Divine Emperor," she said. "In other words, he was trying to weaken the power of the feudal lords, while at the same time trying to strengthen the position and authority of the Divine Emperor. It likely meant that as the ages went by, he would strip more and more of the power to fight against the emperor away."

"Wow, that's practically cheating," Yuuto remarked wearily. "Of course they would rebel against him."

Just as the proverb about he who takes the first step said: a leader who wouldn't take initiative and lead by example couldn't expect those under him to

agree to follow suit.

“Even so, people who had lived in deep fear of Emperor Wotan’s great power were quiet during his reign. Once the next emperor, Sigi, took the throne, the empire rapidly fell into disorder,” Felicia said.

“Guess it’s only to be expected.”

“During the reign of Emperor Sigi, because Emperor Wotan had called for succession via power over succession via heredity, many people took those words to heart. Violent conflicts broke out in every region, leaving only the powerful in their wake.”

Yuuto nodded. “I see. So with things going that way, they must have moved toward the system of nominating sovereigns from among the strongest child subordinates.”

“Yes, well, the past system of hereditary succession had fallen apart. But if they had actual power, a biological heir could still succeed the throne.”

“Still, that’s only if one’s power is recognized by others, right?”

“Indeed. If they lacked true strength, no matter how beloved they were by their parents, the other child subordinates would not recognize them as a sovereign successor.”

“I see.” Yuuto reflected on this.

Yuuto’s predecessor did have one son by blood, but he was over thirty with no power or prospects. The man had resigned himself with a low position that meant he could not even sit at the foot of the leaders’ table. If things had been as they originally were, he would have been king, reigning over tens of thousands of people.

On the other hand, despite their youth, Felicia and Sigrun had both been welcomed into positions of power and garnered much respect.

If the child of an outcast or criminal had strength and power, then he could be accepted as a leader, while the birth child of a sovereign who lacked power could be taken lightly. That was a fundamental law here on Yggdrasil. Yuuto thought it was harsh, but also exceedingly rational.

Once the former power structure had come down, it had been only a matter of time before those who'd climbed the ranks based on actual ability would band together and form a new power structure.

Felicia continued. "In this way, the overall might of the sacred empire of Ásgarðr began to weaken, but as Emperor Wotan expected, the authority of its central state grew," Felicia said. "For the leader of a clan with no established political backing to be able to reign as leader over a large area, they would need some sort of moral justification, such as being a representative of the heavens. Of the Divine Emperor"

"Hm, like the shogun and the emperor of the Warring States Period."

"Huh?" Felicia, who had continued her lecture undisturbed until that moment, tilted her head. No matter how intelligent she was, there was no way she would have knowledge of the history of Yuuto's world.

Yuuto waved his hand with a wry smile. "Basically, it's a position easily used for political ends. One can be appointed to an appropriate position and have their claims legitimized, without having to muddy things up with useless battle and arbitration."

The Warring States Period was a time in history that would be enticing to any boy, and so Yuuto had researched it thoroughly. Mainly due to the influence of a certain strategy video game series.

Felicia's eyes widened, slightly surprised at her student's words, then her face broke into a smile, satisfied with his superior knowledge. "I should expect no less, Big Brother. It is just as you have deduced."

"Welcome, welcome! you'll find nothing but good quality products here."

"How about it, young lady? A comb made in Ásgarðr."

"Ahh, you have a good eye. This here is a blade forged by the finest and most famous craftsman in Vanaheimr."

Yuuto and Felicia had reached a good stopping point and decided to take a break walking around the palace, when they'd heard a din coming from the courtyard and noticed the crowds of people.

There was a bazaar going on, with traders and merchants trying to sell their wares. They made their living by buying products in one territory and selling them in another, further away territory. It was a dangerous line of work, one where a person might be attacked by bandits or run out of food midway through the journey, and yet, many would take it up in pursuit of wealth.

“It seems rather lively.” Seated next to Yuuto, Felicia nodded in satisfaction.

The venue fee charged to the merchants was an important source of income for the Wolf Clan. The people who inhabited the palace were comparatively more well-off than the commoners who lived in town, so the palace was an ideal place to set up and sell their wares.

In a courtyard roughly the size of a school sports field, there were tents set up under the eaves, with a wide variety of wares ranging from food and clothing to arms and jewelry, to even livestock.

For a town like this in a prime position for transportation, merchandise was in abundance. If one had the money, they could acquire just about anything.

That included... people.

“Our product today is this mother-daughter pair,” one merchant called. “What do you think? The mother is beautiful, isn’t she? Not only that, but she has that beautiful, almost translucent light skin characteristic of the northern territories! And her build tells us she has been well-cared for. Please have a look at the daughter, as well. Her looks resemble her mother, doesn’t it? I bet that someday, her beauty will surpass her mother’s. Keh heh heh!”

The merchant was a man with a sturdy build, his head wrapped with a white piece of fabric. He gestured toward the mother and daughter, who were embracing one another, with a vulgar grin.

Though both mother and daughter quaked with looks of fear in their eyes, they held each other closer, asserting to the world that they would not be torn apart. From the looks of it, the daughter was scarcely ten years old.

“To think, even a child that young...” Yuuto furrowed his brow.

In other words, this was slave trading. It wasn’t something that only happened on Yggdrasil. It had been a trade executed in public all throughout

the world until the modern age. Those people were the last remnants of war-torn countries, bought and sold by merchants after their lands had been invaded by other clans.

“Sold.” Yuuto thrust up his hand, causing a stir as he broke through the crowd.

On Yggdrasil, people with black hair were exceedingly rare. So the merchant quickly realized just who Yuuto was.

“Ohh, our Lord Sovereign Patriarch! Thank you very much! Then regarding the payment...”

“Felicia.”

“Yes. This should be more than enough, right?” Felicia quickly produced three gold nuggets the size of pebbles from a leather pouch and placed them in the merchant’s hand. This was enough to pay for two human beings.

Trying to suppress his resentment with this situation, Yuuto approached the mother and daughter, squatting down so he could be eye-level with the young girl. Her body quaked, and she hid behind her mother. Those movements alone told him that she had endured some terrifying experiences.

It wasn’t like this merchant was especially cruel or evil. It was just that these merchants didn’t see the slaves as the same level of human as themselves.

The grand philosopher Aristotle in Ancient Greece had affirmed the legality of the sale of humans, without the slightest qualm. The morality in this era was similar to that one.

“It’s going to be all right now.” Yuuto gave the gentlest smile he could offer as he spoke, glancing around quickly. He quickly found who he was looking for. “Hey, you there, guard! Take these two to the grand chamberlain! And be sure that you treat them with respect.”

“Sir!”

To the palace guards, Yuuto was greater than the clouds in the sky. Suddenly being called upon by him made them aware that they were being watched, and they would subsequently snap to attention.

As he watched the mother and daughter disappear into the palace, Yuuto wore a sour expression. The act of buying humans had roused feelings of visceral disgust from within him.

As sovereign, forbidding slavery within the Wolf Clan's territory wasn't outside the realm of his power. However, even if he did so, the merchants would just sell the slaves elsewhere. He couldn't save everyone. As a weak nation reliant on trade, Yuuto also wanted to avoid baiting the ire of the merchants.

In that case, purchasing them was the only means he had available to allow the slaves to lead lives where they could be treated like normal humans. Since the slaves Yuuto purchased were seen as property of the sovereign, no one dared to persecute or oppress them. They were all able to work comfortably within the palace without fear. Every one of them uniformly expressed their gratitude to Yuuto.

Still, it always left a lingering unpleasant feeling that tormented Yuuto's heart and mind.

There was no way he could rescue every slave. He could only save those within his reach. He couldn't even defend his actions against those who might call them hypocritical.

"It's just a drop in the bucket." Yuuto clenched his fist tight. He couldn't help but feel anger at how minuscule his ability to help really was.

"Where are you looking?! Don't look at the enemy's sword. Look at their whole form! Next!" Sigrun's dignified voice echoed around them as they approached the castle gates.

When he looked over, Yuuto saw that Sigrun was giving the palace guards combat training. Her platinum blonde locks fluttered sweetly about her.

"Your step-in is too shallow. Tighten up your guard on the sides. Next!"

One after another, Sigrun would have them launch an attack at her with wooden swords, then deflect their attacks with ease.

Yuuto picked up on a sternness in her voice that made him tremble. Since she was usually so meek and docile in her interactions with Yuuto, it was refreshing,

and a bit nostalgic, to see the brusque, coarse manner with which she reprimanded and pushed the soldiers she was training. This, after all, was the manner in which she had trained Yuuto when he had first arrived in this world.

“As always, she’s so strong it’s like cheating.” Yuuto said, letting out a long sigh of wonder.

The guards training with Sigrun were most certainly not weak. They were far from perfect, but it was clear that they could be trusted with the protection of the palace. All of them were undoubtedly skilled. And yet, Sigrun dealt with them as skillfully as if she were dealing with babies.

“She truly is,” Felicia mused. “Even when I have battled against her, I could scarcely last 10 rounds.”

“Even you, Felicia...?”

As they observed the mock battles, Yuuto found himself dumbfounded. Felicia herself was one of the Wolf Clan’s greatest technicians with a sword. Considering that even she couldn’t hold her own in a fight against Sigrun, it made all the more clear the fact that Sigrun’s fighting skill was incomparable to any other.

“It would seem that while my abilities granted from the Expressionless Servant Skírnir are multi-faceted, they cannot stand against an opponent who specializes in a particular field.” Felicia heaved a melancholic sigh, placing a hand on her cheek.

She was a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none. She likely felt some sort of complex regarding that subject. In spite of what she was saying to Yuuto, Felicia’s abilities made up for a lack of proficiency through their versatility.

“What’s the matter?! Is that all you got?!” Sigrun shouted. “Are those magnificent muscles just for show?!”

The difference in average physical prowess between men and women in Yggdrasil was a hard fact. On top of that, the guard battling Sigrun was in good shape, his arms twice as thick as hers.

And yet, though her opponent put all of his might into the attack, Sigrun effortlessly deflected it. She was certainly no mere human.

On the other hand, she doesn't seem like a monster, either, Yuuto thought.

Back in the world Yuuto had come from, there were a small number of athletes who ranked among the best of the best that described a certain state as being in the zone, which was a state of concentration in which they exhibited strength and skill normally thought impossible.

A famous baseball player once known as the God of Batting had explained that it was as if the ball had stopped.

A pitcher with a record number of strikeouts had once described it as being as if the boundaries of the strike zone had been illuminated for him. Just by pitching to those areas, he could strike a batter out.

A soccer player had once said that, at times, it was as if he could see the playing field from a bird's eye view.

From what Yuuto had witnessed, while there were exceptions, this was generally what the Einherjars' powers were like. Even though their powers were said to come from a divine blessing, it wasn't a case of having such superhuman strength that one Einherjar could slaughter one or two hundred soldiers like some video game. It was just that they were always in the zone.

"Father?!" Though she was in the throes of battle, Sigrun whirled around.

Her opponent's wooden sword couldn't be stopped so easily. Fearing the worst, Yuuto drew in a deep breath.

As previously stated, Einherjar were not invincible. Especially considering that Sigrun's Devourer of the Moon Hati did not grant her body any additional toughness or resistance to injury. Being hit on the head by a wooden sword with such force was not something one would easily recover from.

THUNK!

However, the sound that reverberated upon impact was not the normal dull sound of hitting a human, but rather a stiff, dry sound.

"...You monster," Yuuto growled. "Do you have eyes in the back of your head? You really are a cheater."

Yuuto shook his head in bemusement, heaving a sigh of relief. Even though

she had looked away, Sigrun's wooden sword still successfully intercepted her opponent's attack.

It definitely made Yuuto realize that her second name, The Strongest Silver Wolf Mánagarmr, was not an exaggeration. Though Sigrun was young, it seemed she had clearly reached the stage of mastery where she need not rely on her eyes to see.

"Mm-hm, that was a good attack," she added. "All right, let's take a short break!"

"Thank you very much! Mother!" The soldiers responded in unison without missing a beat.

They also bowed their heads rapidly, out of adherence to Sigrun's typically strict method of instruction. It was odd to see them referring to Sigrun as "Mother" despite her young age.

If the sovereign patriarch's Chalice were given freely to just anyone, it would be taken lightly, and the chain of command would become convoluted. So Yuuto had given his Chalice only to those in the Wolf Clan in the upper echelons of leadership, and those aspiring toward those positions, resulting in fewer than fifty people having received his Chalice.

Anyone outside of that group had accepted the Child Chalice of one of those leaders, and thus that led to the creation of numerous factions, in which they would serve the clan as a whole under the direct management of that leader.

It wasn't just Sigrun; the second-in-command, Jurgen, as well as Felicia, were Yuuto's subordinates while also being bosses of their own factions.

In general, a faction tended to share certain characteristics with its boss. Sigrun's faction comprised many of the Wolf Clan's fiercest warriors, while Felicia's contained a great number of civil officials.

"Hey there, good work with the training," Yuuto told Sigrun as he approached. "As expected, you're as strong as ever."

Sigrun then turned to Yuuto and, a broad grin stretching across her face, rushed over to him immediately.

“Hello again, Father! Are you done with your lessons?”

Her change was so instant and so drastic that no one would suspect that she had been the demon trainer mere moments ago.

“Only about halfway done,” Yuuto said. But forget about that — you were amazing earlier. Stopping that attack without looking and all. That must be part of the power granted by the Devourer of the Moon Hati, right?”

“Oh, yes. I can tell by the sound of the blade slicing through the wind...”

“Ahh, that makes sense. A d— I mean, a wolf’s sense of hearing is leaps and bounds over that of a human.”

He quickly covered for the fact that he’d started to refer to her as a dog. Somehow, lately, Yuuto had come to notice more and more of Sigrun’s dog-like attributes.

“Still, Run, I really am envious of your various abilities,” he added.

“Th-that is not true! Compared to you, Father, I am nothing...”

“No, don’t put yourself down like that. You truly are amazing.” Yuuto folded his arms, nodding repeatedly in affirmation.

The desire to become strong was a fundamental, primitive desire for any man. A man couldn’t help but yearn for such preeminent physical abilities.

When he had first arrived here, Yuuto had gotten food poisoning about once a week. While his body had now gotten used to the food, back then it was bad enough that he even developed an aversion to putting food to his mouth. One could not survive without eating, so it had been a hellish time for him. If he’d had her strength, he was sure it would have all gone much smoother.

“My powers are of no use outside of battle,” Sigrun told him. “They would also be nothing when matched with 100 soldiers. My power is nothing when compared to the ability you have to lead tens of thousands of people, Father.”

“Huh, wait, didn’t you tell me in the past that I would never amount to anything?” he added.

“Ungh, wh-what happened back then was the greatest embarrassment of my life...” Sigrun’s expression clouded over with displeasure, looking bewildered.

Things really were different now. There was a time she had been a little mean, and but now she couldn't help but treat him with the utmost respect.

Back then, she hadn't been the only one who had felt that Yuuto was completely useless. The majority of the people in the Wolf Clan had looked down upon Yuuto with disdain.

When he'd first arrived in his strange clothing, there had been those who'd thought he might be an emissary of the heavens, but after more than a month of what those same individuals had presumed to be feigned weakness, they'd decided that they had in fact been mistaken.

He hadn't been able to speak their language, hadn't been able to do manual labor, and he hadn't even been able to manage simple tasks that a child with no sense of the world could handle. He had also quickly tired, or else his stomach would get ill and he would need to lie down.

Yuuto cast a glance over to the adjutant standing at his side.

"Hm? What is the matter, Big Brother?" Felicia tilted her head, quizzically.

Back in those early days, she had been the only one to show Yuuto such kindness and familiarity. No, wait, there had been one other person. Felicia's real older brother, a man who had been a peerless and true friend to Yuuto. He had been strong, clever, and popular. He was the one upon whom the Wolf Clan had pinned their greatest hopes.

But he was no longer here.

"No, it's nothing." Yuuto gave a slight shake of his head.

He had no right to speak of that man. Nor did he have the courage to do so. In the same way that Felicia felt indebted to Yuuto, Yuuto felt indebted to Felicia.

The reason was because it was Yuuto who had stolen away Felicia's one and only flesh and blood relative.

"Regarding the experimental introduction of that Norfolk system that you proposed, Big Brother, development of the four test crops seems to be continuing with no issues," Felicia said.

As the sovereign patriarch, spending his days looking over information,

approving requests, and addressing unresolved issues was a part of Yuuto's daily work.

Every day, from midday onward, Yuuto found himself completely swamped. Having been away for over a month now, a mountain of work was now waiting for him.

"At least it seems like we've had a strong start," he said.

Considering that most of the Wolf Clan's territory was mountainous or hilly terrain, it wasn't well suited to growing crops. However, naturally, the people couldn't survive without food to eat.

So while considering how to increase their crop output, the first thing that had come to Yuuto's mind was something he had seen in his textbook at school about semiannual crops, or having two crops a year. By having two different crops each year on the same piece of farmland, one could increase crop productivity.

But that was an amateur mindset. Upon further research, Yuuto had learned that growing two crops a year was a huge drain on the land, so while it was fine for a temporary solution, he understood that it would quickly rob the ground of all its nutrients and make it barren. It was obvious that within five to ten years of repeated use, the land would be tapped out.

While researching growing two crops a year, he'd learned about the Norfolk four-course system, a method of dividing a piece of farmland into four parts, such as into barley, clover, wheat, and turnips in turn, then cycling through the four crops throughout the year.

There were also concerns about the land on Yggdrasil drying up, so presently, they could only harvest every other year to guard against such an outcome.

But with the Norfolk system, by planting clovers, a crop from the pea family that could restore the land that had lain fallow up to that point, and by planting a root crop like turnips that could become feed for livestock, they could improve agricultural production and restore nutrients to the earth at the same time. Moreover, it would surely increase livestock food output, as well.

"Well, it'll take several years before we'll know how truly effective it is,"

Yuuto said, heaving a sigh.

Considering how innovative it was, it wasn't something that could be fully implemented immediately. After all, Yuuto's only experience with the system was from reading about it. He'd discovered that there was a lot of knowledge in the world that could only be gained through actual execution.

For example, Yuuto understood the primitive idea of starting a fire by pressing a wooden pole in the space between two wooden boards and rotating it rapidly, but he still couldn't get the hang of actually doing it. Just knowing something was very different from putting it into practice.

Though he had closely followed what was written in the books, if they implemented the system on a wider scale and it failed, it was likely that some people might die of starvation. So they were still only trying it out on a small plot of land.

The trade-off was that they could only harvest once a year for now. So each cycle would take a total of four years. It was a reform that was taking a painfully long time to implement.

"Next," said Felicia. "This paper, which you have introduced, Big Brother, has become increasingly popular, and many have requested increased production."

"You say I introduced it, but really, the paper and the Norfolk system aren't things I thought of — and the methods for both I acquired through cheating."

"But you must also acknowledge that, thanks to those ideas, a great burden has been lifted from many of our citizens. It truly is commendable."

"That's true," he said. "It's good that our people have enough to eat."

When Yuuto had first come to this world, he'd experienced many times how it felt to go hungry, and that feeling of hunger had created irritability in him.

While the written word had existed on Yggdrasil, "paper" itself had not existed yet. Words etched into clay tablets and wood blocks were the primary methods of transferring information.

Being from modern-day Japan, the first thing that had popped into Yuuto's head was the word "papyrus" that he had seen in a textbook. Naturally, he'd

looked it up online and found something about creating paper from weeds.

It'd seemed so simple that even a layperson could handle it, so Yuuto had attempted to make some, and though the final product had been so low-quality that no modern-day person would consider it worthy of sale, it actually flew off the shelves of the merchants' stalls.

Weeds sprouted plentifully in the region. And the production of paper took no more time than growing crops would. Using the paper as another revenue stream was another point in its favor.

With the profits from the paper, he would purchase all of the wheat the merchants had to offer, then grind it down in the water mills they had discussed at that morning's breakfast, then sell the resulting flour for even more profits. Through this chain of economic strategies, the Wolf Clan's food and financial situations had improved drastically.

Saving the people from starvation with a consistent income, improving the standard of living, and chasing away foreign invaders netted him the support of the people. Thus, the peoples' enthusiastic reactions at the previous day's victory parade weren't out of place.

"Well, what would you like to do? Shall we increase output?" Felicia asked.

"No, we'd better not. For the present at least, we should stay the course."

"Understood. Well then, I shall do as you have asked."

"In all honesty, I do want to teach the townspeople how to use paper." Yuuto couldn't shake his feelings of guilt over the people living in the palace monopolizing the increased profits. He often toyed with the thought that maybe teaching the townspeople how to use paper would also bring them increased prosperity.

But paper was simple enough to make that even an average middle school student like Yuuto could make it by just looking up information online. It didn't require any highly specialized skills or anything. If he taught the townspeople, it was something that could easily spread to the outside world. And then others would begin producing it, and the Wolf Clan would no longer have the market cornered.

The implication was that they would regress back to the days of poverty, in which food would be scarce. Who would travel long distances and pay large amounts of money for something they could make themselves back home?

As the sovereign, he had to avoid such a situation at all costs.

A guard rushed into the office suddenly, stood at attention, and announced, “Pardon the interruption! We have received a correspondence from the Horn Clan!”

The previous system had required one to go through numerous guards before reaching the sovereign himself, but Yuuto had found this to be the height of ridiculousness, and so, pending only a check to ensure the visitor carried no weapons, they could now immediately proceed to the sovereign.

This had stirred up plenty of complaints from the elders about authority and dignity and the like. It often caused Yuuto to reflect on the fact that change was difficult.

“My, that was fast.” Her eyes wide with suspicion, Felicia accepted the flat clay clump from the guard.

Yuuto had sent a correspondence five days earlier, after the fighting had ended. When sending only a letter and requesting only a letter in return, the travel time took only a matter of hours, but taking one’s time with a letter and its response was a custom of not only the elders, but of the general populace of Yggdrasil.

But for Yuuto, the speed of information was the difference between life and death. It made him think of what Sun Tzu had said about the influence of speed on warfare: the difference of only a few hours could impact the tides of battle. In times such as these, Yuuto wanted to have no regrets.

“Well, then...” Felicia picked up the wooden hammer lying on top of Yuuto’s desk and brought it down upon the clay tablet. She smashed the simple clay tablet, adorned only with a seal likely belonging to the Horn Clan, and from within came a second clay tablet with text etched into it.

Important correspondences such as this were sealed in this way: the letter itself was baked into a second, plain clay tablet in an effort to conceal it from

the eyes of others.

“Let’s see. ‘Inform the sovereign Lord Yuuto of the Wolf Clan. I am Rasmas, of the Horn Clan.’” Holding the clay tablet, Felicia read the introduction.

This form of starting a letter with “Inform__, I am __,” was a very formal, traditional form of letter-writing on Yggdrasil.

As the literacy rate on Yggdrasil was lower than one percent, it was common to have letters and reading handled for one by a secretary, who was professionally trained for reading and writing. Therefore, “Inform __” was actually a directive to the secretary reading the letter.

“‘Several members of our upper echelons, myself included, will be in attendance at the Chalice Ceremony. We expect to arrive within seven days. We trust that you are treating our leader hospitably.’ It’s dated three days ago.”

The content was fairly concise, yet the clay tablet was as big as Yuuto’s hand. Sealing the correspondence made it even bulkier. When compared to paper, it really was a troublesome material.

“Treating her hospitably, eh?” Yuuto said. “Speaking of which, is she doing well? She’s not feeling unwell or anything, is she?”

“Indeed, she is exceedingly well. I am told that she ate all of her breakfast this morning.”

“I see. If she’s eating normally, then I am sure she’s fine.” Yuuto heaved a sigh of relief.

Though she had consented to become a little sister subordinate, it was still only a verbal contract. Naturally, he couldn’t let her roam free, so she was currently confined to one corner of the palace.

Though she would soon become a little sister subordinate, she was still sovereign of the neighboring nation, the Horn Clan. It wouldn’t do to treat her poorly, either.

Upon reaching the palace, they had untied her rope restraints, and granted her a room of her own in which to relax. Still, it wasn’t unthinkable that she might have a sudden change of heart; she might think herself a hindrance to her

own clan and attempt suicide. Yuuto found himself fearful of the potential predicament that might result. And on a personal level, Yuuto couldn't stomach the thought of a girl of such a tender age dying, either.

"Be sure to treat her hospitably, as the letter states," he ordered. "But also, be careful so that she does not run away on us."

"Tee hee."

"What is it, Felicia? Have I said something funny?"

"No, I was just thinking how reliable you've become when compared to how you were two years ago."

"...You really don't need to flatter me."

"But you've already done so much for us. Ever since you arrived here, Big Brother, we of the Wolf Clan have seen no end to the improvements in our clan. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart that it was you who became our leader." Felicia gazed at Yuuto with an impassioned expression.

Looking into her eyes, Yuuto could not sense a hint of falsehood. His face immediately became red. While Yuuto had become used to words of praise by that point, and he was used to teasing from Felicia, being met with such a sincere gaze was downright unfair. He couldn't bear to look up at her.

"Hee hee!" she giggled. "You know, the adorable way you react is yet another facet of your charm, Big Brother."

Yuuto might have felt pride in how much he had grown in the past two years, but he felt that no matter how many decades he spent here, he would never get used to Felicia.

The second Yuuto opened the door, he was assaulted by a curt snarl.

"What do you want?" The Horn Clan leader didn't even attempt to hide her disdain.

Within these palace walls, she was the only one who would dare take such a tone with him. In all honesty, Yuuto hated the constant formality showered upon him, as he didn't feel he deserved it, and thus he found some comfort in

her brusque manner.

“Am I not allowed to come see my future little sister subordinate?” he asked.

“No.”

“Well, that’s a shame.” A wry grin instinctively seized Yuuto’s lips.

After inquiring about Linea’s condition, he’d wanted to check on her with his own eyes, but she didn’t seem to be in good spirits.

“Is something not to your liking? Is there anything you need?” he asked.

Though she was a prisoner of war, Linea was also a vital guest to the Wolf Clan. In the interest of building better relations, it was important to ensure that they accommodated her as much as possible. In reality, the one who would arrange such things was Felicia, who was silently taking notes behind him.

The room that they had confined Linea to was actually a guest room at one corner of the palace. At a glance, the room had been meticulously cleaned and the furniture chosen and arranged with care. The basket on the table overflowed with a variety of fruits.

Linea popped one grape after another into her mouth, chewing them as she spoke. “There is nothing that I lack. But there are certain inconveniences.”

“Hmm, well, I’ll see to it those inconveniences are handled straight away.”

“Good, so that means you’ll get out of my room. And could you get rid of that guard by the door for me?”

“That’s a difficult request,” Yuuto laughed, shrugging his shoulders.

Until the Chalice Ceremony to make her a member of the Wolf Clan was complete, he simply couldn’t allow her to roam free. He knew that was true, but he could tell that having someone remain at the entrance the whole time, checking in on her occasionally, wasn’t very comfortable for her.

“No, wait, I know. Could you at least switch the guards out with female servants?” she asked, the idea apparently suddenly occurring to her.

Considering she’d been monitored this whole time by members of the opposite sex, it was natural to think she might feel more at ease with someone

of the same sex monitoring her instead.

Yuuto glanced over at Felicia, and she gave him a nod.

“That should be possible,” she said. “Naturally, palace guards will still need to be stationed somewhere nearby.”

Yuuto nodded back. “Right, then make it so.”

“Understood.”

“...Is that the fabled paper?” Linea mumbled absently, looking at the memo pad Felicia was holding.

Within the palace, the use of paper was already so widespread that even minor notations such as these were being recorded on it, but it still remained a curiosity to people from other nations.

“Yes, it’s a rather handy tool. I’m very grateful to Big Brother for it.” Felicia smiled, her pen made out of reed — something else Yuuto had learned to make from the internet — darting across the page.

The clay tablets and wood blocks that had been in use up to two years ago had been heavy and unwieldy, and would have been a nightmare to lug around.

“Lord Yuuto, you and I are so close in age, and yet you truly are impressive,” Linea said.

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Yuuto asked cautiously. Her attitude up to that point had been so hostile that he suspected ulterior motives in her sudden change.

Linea gave him a wry smile. “Maybe in the end, I wasn’t a suitable sovereign, after all. Experiencing defeat after defeat in battles where I was on the offensive, leading to my being taken prisoner... heh heh... With that reception yesterday, it made me think that you really are something.”

“What exactly are you after?” Yuuto was used to flattery from his own subordinates, but to have an enemy leader even begin to compliment him, it seemed to come out of left field. It was natural for him to suspect she might be plotting something.

“Ha ha! I just spoke what came to mind without thinking. I guess I was just

feeling jealous of you.”

As she stared intently at Yuuto, Linea’s eyes brimmed with the maddening pangs of jealousy and envy.

Perhaps her youth itself brought its own brand of hardship.

Even though there wasn’t that much of an age difference between them, to see someone else so admired and respected by others, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to have such complicated feelings.

Yuuto started to speak, then quieted himself. He knew that forced sympathy would only cause her more pain. There were no words the victor could offer the loser, as it were.

Even though the sun was on the verge of setting, a hot blast of air burned his cheeks.

This area was the deepest part of the palace, where only a small number of the Wolf Clan’s members were allowed to go. The corridor Felicia and Yuuto were walking down was essentially a straight corridor, situated past a guard post with ten guards jammed into the entrance, and another two guards stationed in front of the workshop at the end of the hall. The stationing of guards was so tight, not even a mouse could hope to slip through.

On seeing Yuuto’s face, the guards immediately snapped to attention. “Oh, good to see you Lord Patriarch! Please, come in!”

Several beads of sweat dripped down Yuuto’s face. The area around the workshop was unbelievably hot. The air itself seemed to be burning, making the area feel no different from a sauna.

“Good work.” With those sincere words of appreciation, Yuuto entered the workshop.

Two men stood at the center of a dim room the size of a classroom, working around a clay, bucket-shaped kiln. A dazzling orange light blazed forth from the upper half of the kiln.

“All right, keep at it now. Oh, huh? Yu-Yuuto?!”

The girl standing off to the side, staring at the kiln, noticed Yuuto and her eyes grew wide. Her willful, upturned eyes and frizzy, short hair gave her a lively air.

“Yo, long time no see, Ingrid,” he said. “You really shouldn’t be that surprised to see me.”

“Oh, l-long time no see. Y-yeah, I guess I did hear that you’d come back or something.” Ingrid responded to Yuuto’s greeting by scratching her cheek and giving an indifferent response.

He got the feeling she was covering up how she really felt. Since this was par for the course with her, Yuuto took no offense and spoke, shrugging his shoulders. “What the heck? You’re acting so cold. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Shut up. I’ve been down here firing the kiln since yesterday. S-so I don’t have time to worry about the likes of you. And, hey! No one said you guys could take a break! Keep going!” Glancing over at the kiln mid-conversation, Ingrid gave her workers a tongue-lashing without a hint of leniency.

Younger than the men working the kiln, it might seem as if she had been relegated to menial tasks, but in reality, this girl of only sixteen was actually the Wolf Clan’s eighth highest ranked member, and the head of the workshop Mótsognir.

Like Sigrun and Felicia, Ingrid was also an Einherjar, in possession of the rune of Ívaldi, the Birther of Blades, and the Wolf Clan had come to rely on her superior blacksmithing abilities.

On first glance, she seemed moody and curt, but...

“Agh, I told you not to get so worked up,” she told one of her subordinates. “Do that, and you’ll burn yourself. Just calm down already.”

Yuuto knew well that she was actually a very kind girl. She was just prone to act in misleading ways contrary to her feelings, what one might call a devil who’d fallen from heaven.

Thinking back on something that had happened two years earlier, Yuuto’s face spontaneously broke into a smile. When he had only recently arrived in this world, she had rebuked or scolded him one minute, then worried over him the next.

With the rotary quern and water mill, if Ingrid hadn't lent Yuuto her talents, he would have been unable to build them alone. Because of that, she was, like Yuuto's adjutant Felicia, an irreplaceable right-hand assistant.

Glancing at the workers who were putting everything they had into what they were doing, Yuuto said, feeling a little guilty, "I'm sorry, if you guys are busy, maybe I should come back another time?"

"D-don't worry about it. Th-though I'm not exactly free at the moment. But since you've come after such a long absence, take your time." Ingrid gave a dramatic jerk of her chin, indicating a nearby chair.

Yuuto took a step forward, realizing that it wouldn't do to just stand around, but then he noticed the sullen look on Felicia's face.

Trying to steady her voice, Felicia offered Ingrid some frank advice. "Lady Ingrid, about that tone you're always using with Big Brother, it..."

Ingrid let out a moan and screwed up her face. "Ahh, I see. Well, in the past, this guy — no, wait, that's not it, uh, F-F-F-Father? Well, he knows that it's just a habit that I can't get rid of... I-I-I-I'm sorry, F-F-Faaagh!"

"Heh heh!" Yuuto inadvertently burst out laughing at Ingrid. Up until to that point, she had been acting with such vigor, and now she was biting her tongue.

"Ahh! D-Don't laugh! No, I mean, please do not laugh at me!" Ingrid pleaded, with slightly teary eyes.

She had once been a fairly shy person, but her embarrassment now was worse than it ever had been before. Her face was a brighter red than the inside of the kiln.

Yuuto waved off Ingrid's embarrassment. "I told you to act like you normally do. Having you speak formally to me feels so cold, Ingrid."

"I-I guess you're right. Doing things the way we always have is best!" Ingrid's expression instantly changed and she nodded in satisfaction, as if the suggestion had been hers all along.

"A-ahem!" Felicia cleared her throat, seemingly on purpose. Apparently, she wasn't pleased. "Big Brother, Lady Ingrid. I understand that the two of you are

close, but it is vexing that you cannot manage to separate public and private behaviors."

"W-we are not close!" Ingrid declared.

Her sudden denial hurt Yuuto's feelings a bit. But he understood that it was a reflex, a denial that she couldn't help but give.

Yuuto let the words slide, saying, "Well, you see, that isn't what I want, either..."

"This is one area where I cannot just allow you to do as you please, Big Brother," Felicia said apologetically. "Lady Ingrid is in a position of high standing, and there are many people around, as well."

She glanced over and met the eyes of the other workers. It wasn't possible to guarantee that the workers wouldn't let word spread that Ingrid acted so casually around Yuuto. Being friendly in speech and manner was fine, but discipline and order were important to an organization such as theirs. For someone who should be an example to the group to infringe upon that order, and for those under them to suddenly follow suit, would certainly impact the organization's ability to regulate itself.

"Aunt Felicia is right," Ingrid said reluctantly. "I'll try to... no, I will be careful from now on. Please forgive me, Father."

Ingrid's expression stiffened and she tightened her posture, turning to Yuuto and bowing her head.

Seeing her like that made Yuuto aware of the distance between them. Felicia's admonition reminded him of another piece of advice from *The Prince,* about the value of a dignified manner for a leader. He understood that it was the way things had to be, but still, he and Ingrid had a bond forged through hours of trial and error, drenched in sweat. Yuuto could do nothing but bite his lip at the loneliness drilling its way into his heart.

"Oh, but, when it's just the two of you, you can call each other by name and behave however you see fit," Felicia said, suddenly choosing that moment.

Instinctively glancing back at Felicia, Yuuto saw her give him a mischievous wink. Felicia often found herself going soft when it came to Yuuto.

“Please just be sure to keep a clear distinction between public and private mannerisms, all right?” she added. She didn’t forget to add a wag of her index finger and a serious expression in for good measure.

Yuuto’s face illuminated with joy as a smile worked its way across his face. “Right! Got it. I’ll be careful! All right then, Ingrid, when it’s just the two of us alone, we’ll do as we’ve always done!”

“A-a-a-alone?! W-w-w-w-what’re you saying all of a sudden?!” Ingrid stammered, with such consternation that it was embarrassing to watch.

Her manner of speaking had also returned to its former casual state.



“Hey now, don’t make it sound weird,” Yuuto said. “I just meant, when we get together next, let’s make something again. Things are busy now, but I should have some free time soon.”

“Ah, I-I guess that’s how it goes. Well, all right. Yeah. Uhhm, ah!” Even though Ingrid looked dejected for a moment, that look was quickly replaced with a broad smile as she nodded vigorously.

Ingrid followed that with another, heavy sigh. “It’s really hard for me to talk with people. I’m much more comfortable working with my hands and making things.”

“You’ve got the heart of a serious craftsman after all,” Yuuto agreed.

There were those who were bad at talking to others and spent all of their energy on making things. For instance, Yuuto had heard that many novelists, whose entire profession was built around words, commonly found themselves unable to converse when face-to-face with others.

On the other hand, he felt kind of sorry for a girl of Ingrid’s age feeling that way. He thought perhaps that rather than just him always meeting with her alone, perhaps it would be good to persuade her to interact with others, as well.

As he was giving it thought, Felicia pressed her hand over her lips, a giggle escaping as she broke into an amused smile. “Big Brother, you’re as naughty as ever...”

“Agh! Geez! Why did you two even come here! I’m busy! Quit interrupting my work!” Ingrid yelled, flustered. Her face had once again turned as red as a tomato.

“Wha?! Well, earlier, you told us to take our time,” Yuuto protested.

“Shut up! I have no memory of saying something like that! If you have no business here, then leave!” Ingrid began hastily pushing Yuuto’s back, then began to lock the pair out of the workshop.

Forget formality, she had switched from speaking casually to barking orders. Yet Felicia, who should have been bothered by it, was pounding the wall, her

body racked with laughter.

“Thank you for your hard work today, as always.”

“Yeah, thank you too, Felicia.” The two of them had since returned to Yuuto’s bedroom.

“Well then, I’ll be back in the morning to rouse you once more. Good night, Big Brother.” With an elegant bow, Felicia left the room.

As soon as Yuuto closed the large, wooden door, he fell back several steps and flopped down onto his bed.

“Whew, I’m exhausted.”

The second Yuuto landed on his bed, waves of fatigue seized his body, and he released all the air in his lungs with a long sigh.

The room was dimly lit by the orange glow of a solitary lamp. This world still lacked candles, but they had earthenware lamps with wicks made from strands of wood and cotton. With such dim lighting, he could scarcely make out what was in his room.

“Maybe it’s those of us from modern-day Japan who are strange for wanting to work through the depths of night.”

Saying that, Yuuto took the solar battery, which had been charging on the windowsill, and attached it to his smartphone.

On Yggdrasil, rising before the sun and having dinner followed by going to bed shortly after the sun went down was the norm. It was probably safe to say that that was how most humans had lived their lives until the modern era. Looking at it from a historical perspective, until the advent of lighting in the 19th century, this was likely how everyone had conducted themselves.

Even though Yuuto’s official business had concluded for the day, he still had work to do. Or rather, only when no one else was around could he indulge in the unique advantages of a modern man.

“I guess it should be enough now.” Yuuto turned on the power to his smartphone, the phone manufacturer’s logo appearing on screen after some time.

Poking around online, occasionally buying e-books, seeking knowledge that might be useful in this world — these had all become a part of Yuuto's nightly routine.

To be fair, it wasn't as if Yuuto didn't have reservations about bringing knowledge from the 21st century into this world. He was tormented by worries like, "What if that knowledge only made a bigger mess of things," or "Was it even acceptable for him to introduce such knowledge?"

But if Yuuto hadn't put such knowledge to use, the Wolf Clan might have been completely erased from existence by now. On top of that, the images of children crying from hunger that had greeted Yuuto when he first arrived, as well as images of the corpses of those who had looked out for him, still remained seared into his memories.

He knew what needed to be done, but he was having a hard time convincing himself. Having the knowledge and ability to change things, but doing nothing, seemed infinitely more sinful. Thus, Yuuto continued to defy his instincts.

He thought back to the cold way he had treated Mitsuki in elementary school, having been unable to stand the teasing from his friends. It was a dark and shameful part of his past. He didn't want to do something he'd spend the rest of his life regretting like that again.

And more than anything else, he didn't want to fall into the trap of becoming like *that man.*

"Anyway, I guess I should go back to what I was reading before the battle started," he said aloud.

The moment his home screen appeared, Yuuto tapped on the icon for "Hindle," his e-book reader, and from the covers lined up before him, selected a book on the topic of the history of economics.

On Yggdrasil, bartering was the primary method of doing business. Trading or bartering was fine if both parties gained something of equal value, but if the transaction favored one side over the other, it became difficult to continue doing business. And finding someone who wanted to trade for what you had was also difficult. He couldn't help but think of it as highly ineffective.

Gold and silver could be used as substitutes for trade, but they came with their own burdensome balancing act. They also couldn't prevent people from using tricks to fraudulently sway the value of currency.

In that moment, Yuuto had an idea — using paper money as a common method of financial exchange. They had already made paper, after all, and if it improved the smoothness of their business transactions, it could provide a jolt to their overall commerce, thus bolstering the Wolf Clan's overall national prowess.

However, things were never that simple.

"Mnnn, I don't really think I'll be able to put this into practice," he murmured.

As he continued reading, Yuuto realized his own superficiality. Just circulating paper money with an amount written on it wasn't as simple as it sounded. First of all, they would need the printing technology to duplicate the same thing over and over. The function of the product would depend heavily on whether or not they could prepare similarly valued precious metals and whether or not they could gain the confidence of governments.

According to this book, the first appearance of paper money in history had been in eleventh century China, during the Song Dynasty. The book also said that if they flooded the market with too much currency, the value would drop rapidly, causing inflation, and the value of products would also collapse, signaling the end of an economy.

"If the society in question hasn't matured enough yet, then this might cause them further chaos," he sighed. "I had hoped this would be a good idea, though."

Yuuto lifted his face from the screen, gazing up at the ceiling, at a loss.

That's it! An idea flickered into his mind, but he realized that this too might not be doable once he actually researched it.

"Provided it doesn't require too much startup capital, it may really be a good idea. Well, but, we could probably use it to mint coins? ...Oh, I'll have to finish this later."

The battery gauge indicated in the top left corner had changed to red, and so

Yuuto pressed a button to return to the home screen.

The liquid crystal display used up the most battery power. Especially Yuuto's fairly large five-inch screen. With the battery power supplied by the solar battery, he could get in at most 30-40 minutes of continuous reading.

"Well, before bed, I guess I should at least call, so I can hear her voice."

He switched his cellular data on (keeping the cellular data on drained the battery much faster, so he kept it off as a default setting), and called his childhood friend.

Yuuto's room was in the northeastern part of the palace. The previous sovereign patriarch's room had been in the center of the palace, but Yuuto had protested and had them move his room. Since this room was the closest to the sacred tower, his phone could connect as long as the moon was at least half full.

"Hello!" A bouncy voice resonated from the speaker after the phone rang only once.

Yuuto's lips broke into a smile at the realization that she had been anticipating his call. "Hello. Good evening, Mitsuki. It's me."

"Yeah, good evening, Yuu-kun. You must be tired after all the work you had to do."

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired."

He hardly had any battery power left. He wouldn't be able to have much of a conversation with her. This would be a secret tryst that only lasted a matter of minutes.

Considering all the important things he used his phone for, perhaps he should learn to be more efficient with scanning the e-books for information. But this was the only stretch of time where Yuuto truly began to feel his heart heal.

"Good night, Mitsuki," he said.

And so, Yuuto managed to pass another day as the sovereign unscathed.

ACT 4

“Now then, we shall commence the Chalice Ceremony,” the man intoned. “I am Alexis, and as goði, I shall supervise these proceedings. This day is particularly auspicious...”

At the center of the ceremonial hall, a middle-aged man in good shape with a beard was beginning to make his speech. The man’s body was cloaked in smooth, lustrous, and high-class clothes. They were made from an extremely rare cloth known as “Sieke” that could only be produced in lands far to the east. Judging by what he could see, Yuuto was certain it was silk.

Which was only to be expected of a representative sent as an envoy of the divine emperor. It was natural that he would be wearing something so expensive.

“...and that has brought us here,” the man continued. “And now, on this most wondrous day, I present the two parties intended to be bound by the ties of sibling-hood: as the elder brother, the eighth sovereign patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Lord Yuuto. And the younger sister, the sovereign patriarch of the Horn Clan, Lady Linea. And through the authority of this Chalice, the Wolf Clan and the Horn Clan will be bound as kindred clans from here on.”

Droning on and on about things that were utterly pointless, Alexis had finally reached the reason everyone was gathered here. Yuuto couldn’t help but be reminded of his principal’s speeches during morning assemblies at his school. While this was a tradition and a part of the social ritual, he couldn’t help but fight off the urge to yawn.

Incidentally, Yggdrasil had no concept of family names. If one needed such a thing, they usually used their designated clan as such. That was what it meant to be a clan: those bore the same lineage, a family.

“You shall thus be united. While I know it is unnecessary, I will check the sacred wine once more.”

The goði Alexis lifted the silver pitcher and tipped the spout, splitting the stream of alcohol into the two Chalices with his hand.

There were around twenty people on either side of the goði. They were almost all members of the Wolf Clan, but around five members of the Horn Clan were also in attendance. As it was a sacred ceremony, not one of them was making a sound. Only the sound of liquid made an odd echo.

Having filled both Chalices, Alexis picked up one and took a sip. He was testing it for poison. These Chalices were tying the interests of two countries, after all. While it was a rare occurrence, the position of goði required one to risk their life.

“Indeed, it is a fine liquor,” he said. “Now then, Lord Yuuto, you will be serving as the elder sibling.”

Alexis returned the Chalice he had tested to the podium, then turned to face Yuuto once more and called upon him. The tension, which had been uncomfortably thick up to that point, now increased further.

Yuuto gulped, finding the solemn atmosphere of the ceremony difficult, making it hard for him to breathe. He could feel everyone’s eyes focused on him.

“Yes.” Yuuto thrust out his chest and responded with a hoarse, subdued voice. He tried to maintain as much of an air of dignity as possible, so as not to bring shame upon the Wolf Clan.

“By sharing the Chalice with her, you intend to make her your little sister,” Alexis intoned. “If it is truly your will that you both watch over each other in times of wellness as in times of illness, in times of joy as in times of sorrow, in times of wealth as in times of poverty, then please drink deeply of this Chalice. You may proceed!”

Yuuto furrowed his brows at the man’s words. Though this was the standard, accepted speech for the Chalice to cement sibling bonds, it sounded to Yuuto like marriage vows. He was still only sixteen, and already had his heart set on a certain girl.

Of course, he understood they were only taking a vow to be siblings by way of

the Chalice, but Yuuto still couldn't help the psychological aversion he felt.

"Well, no time like the present," he murmured.

Yuuto was the one who had said he wanted this, and those words, once given voice, could not be taken back. Having steeled himself, he reached for the Chalice of elven copper right in front of him.

The Chalice would bind two clans by way of their sovereigns. If the Chalice the Wolf Clan prepared was too shabby, it would reflect poorly upon them. And for the Horn Clan, who had lost everything, it would appear that the Wolf Clan thought even less of them. Elven copper was the same weight as gold and had its own inherent value. So the Wolf Clan having made it from such metals was a sign of utmost respect toward the Horn Clan.

"Here goes." He gulped down the Chalice's contents in one go. An intense burning sensation filled his mouth, and gulping it down caused his stomach and throat to flush with heat.

Honestly, it was unpleasant beyond belief. His head began to feel hazy.

Why do adults drink this stuff? Yuuto wondered, mystified. He drank what he estimated to be the requisite amount, then pushed it toward Linea.

"And now, Lady Linea, we pose to you the same inquiry..."

"...Okay," she murmured.

"The moment you drink from that Chalice, you become Lord Yuuto's subordinate. From that moment, you are expected to loyally serve your elder brother and his clan without fail. If you have truly prepared yourself for this vow, then demonstrate your resolve by drinking the remaining contents of this Chalice and letting that resolve forever thrive within."

Linea narrowed her eyes at the Chalice.

And she just kept staring and staring.

Just as the fear that she actually might back out of becoming his little sister subordinate gripped Yuuto, Linea violently seized the Chalice and downed its contents in one gulp.

There was no ceremony nor dignity to her movements. It was a tiny act of

rebellion.

“Whew!” Linea wiped off the now-empty Chalice with a handkerchief from her pocket and, using both hands, rose halfway and fell back. She then bowed deeply. “Please look after me for all eternity... Big Brother.”

Her voice was so slight and so full of bitterness that it was hard to tell that she was asking him to do anything for her.

There were several members of the Horn Clan in attendance. Though they might not have agreed with the idea of the Chalice, there had to have been something that had sold them on it.

At any rate... the Chalice Ceremony concluded without incident.

The longstanding dispute between the Wolf Clan and the Horn Clan had finally been brought to a close. For a relationship that had been like oil and water for so long, they could now begin anew as kindred clans. Thanks to the Chalice, they could celebrate peaceful days with no war, at least for now. Yuuto’s mission as the sovereign had been fulfilled. He could now turn his attention to finding his way home without feeling guilty.

Yuuto pondered the situation leisurely, feeling a sense of relief.

“Princess! Th...thank heavens you’re safe!” A middle-aged man burst into sobs with no concept of shame or care for the eyes upon him.

“Second-in-command, I’ve already told you, I’m not your princess anymore,” Linea said, seeming keenly aware of the eyes upon her. “Come on, we’re in public. This is embarrassing.”

The ceremony was over, and after half a month of waiting, this would be the first time the Horn Clan had their sovereign back.

Though the rest of them didn’t make quite the scene the middle-aged man had, the other delegates in turn greeted their sovereign patriarch joyfully, their eyes blurry with tears.

“Those Wolf fiends didn’t harm you, did they?”

“They really are beasts.”

“It’s utterly disgraceful to think we’re now a kindred clan of theirs.”

With a bitter grin, Yuuto called out to them cheerfully and broke into their conversation.

As soon as he did, all of the Horn delegates moved between him and Linea, as if to protect her, and glared down at him. Their feelings of hostility and trepidation were made abundantly clear. It was completely natural, considering that he had kept their sovereign locked up in the palace.

“Hey now, don’t make such scary faces,” Yuuto said. “I’ll say this again: You guys know we’re not enemies anymore, right?”

He lowered his shoulders, as if to placate them. A cold sweat trickled down his back. All of them, even the highest members of their leadership, wore hardened expressions, like yakuza members being threatened. If Felicia hadn’t been behind him as his guard, Yuuto might have immediately turned tail and run away.

“Stand down, all of you,” Linea ordered. “He is my big brother, after all.”

“...Yes, ma’am!”

At Linea’s insistence, the emissaries from the Horn Clan reluctantly backed down, opening a path for Yuuto. But they did not waiver a bit in their vigilance. It was as if to show that they would do anything to protect their sovereign.

It was obvious that Linea was beloved by her child subordinates. The other day, when he’d visited her room, Yuuto had thought that she’d seemed jealous, perhaps because she was unpopular among her own people, but it was clearly the opposite.

“Big Brother, please forgive my child subordinates and their lack of manners.” Linea turned back to face Yuuto and gave a small bow.

They had only just shared the Chalice, and yet she was addressing him more formally, using a more polite manner of speaking. Perhaps because two sovereigns were involved, the people around them understood the weight of the Chalice.

Yuuto waved his hand, as if to tell her not to worry about it. “It’s only natural

that they would protect their sovereign. They're good child subordinates."

"They really are good subordinates. Too good for me." The slightest hint of a shadow eclipsed Linea's face.

Somehow, those words hit home for Yuuto. He had experienced the same feelings and worries she was feeling now. It was likely that she, like him, didn't feel deserving of such fierce loyalty from her subordinates.

Linea had endured a crushing defeat, and now she and her people had been forced to become subservient to the Wolf Clan, whom they had considered beneath them. There was no doubt that, for now, her worries were greater than Yuuto's.

"Big Brother, shall we go get some fresh air together?" she asked.

"Hm? Sure, that's fine with me." Yuuto readily agreed to Linea's invitation, giving her a nod. She had been locked away in a room ever since she'd come to Iárnviðr. He figured she just wanted to see the outside, to breathe fresh air, but...

"Oh, you all, wait here," Linea commanded the Horn Clan emissaries with a flick of the wrist.

They had just gotten their sovereign back, and this was a foreign land. The Horn emissaries exchanged uncomfortable glances.

"Princess?! I-it's dangerous to go alone," her second-in-command protested.

"It's all right," she assured him. "If someone wanted to hurt me, they would have done it long before now."

"B-but!"

"We siblings need to have a private conversation. Don't worry. We'll be right back," Linea said firmly.

Yuuto followed Linea, bewildered. Glancing back over his shoulders, Yuuto's eyes met several faces, gnashing their teeth and glaring at him.

"Hey, is this really okay?" he asked hesitantly. "You finally got to see your subordinates again. Don't you have a lot to talk to them about?"

“We’ll have plenty of time for that on the way home.”

“Indeed, if you wished to speak with Big Brother, now would be the time for it,” Felicia added.

“Hey, Felicia! Why are you coming along, too?!” Yuuto cried.

“Because it is my job to guard you, Big Brother.”

“Uhm, you know that’s not what I meant, right?!”

While dedication to her duties as his guard was normally something Yuuto was grateful for, sometimes Felicia’s dedication was an annoyance. Linea had left her subordinates behind, so Yuuto’s adjutant coming along made him look weak and cowardly.

“Since she’s your little sister too, I suppose there’s no way around it,” Linea said. “This is a siblings-only conversation.”

“Are you really okay with this?” he asked.

“Sure, I don’t mind.” Giving a quick nod, Linea stepped through the door.

From the top of the tower, where the ceremony had been held, one could easily see straight across to the horizon. A sigh of astonishment slipped from Linea’s lips at the magnificent view before her.

The town below, shielded by a tall outer wall, was full of wooden houses. The bazaar that ran along the main road that stretched from the palace to the gate was clearly, even from this high up, bursting with activity.

Linea took in the scenery for some time before turning back to Yuuto. A resigned look of sadness appeared on her face. “Sorry for making you wait.”

“It’s fine. So, what did you want to talk about?”

He could tell from Linea’s expression that this was no trivial matter. So much so that it seemed he would need to prepare himself for whatever it was she had to say. He gulped loudly.

Almost in sync with that, Linea dropped rapidly into a bow. It was with such fervor that her forehead practically hit her knees. “I humbly ask of you: please, please treat my people, the citizens of the Horn Clan, as you would the citizenry

of the Wolf Clan.”



Yuuto quickly determined that Linea was talking about the Horn people living on land that had been seized by the Wolf Clan.

Taking conquered peoples as prisoners of war or forcing them into slavery was something that seemed to be accepted throughout the world. The country that lost would often have the land they were born and raised on confiscated, have their dignity and rights as a person stolen, and be exploited via manual labor. He was sure that it was for this outcome that Linea grieved.

“I know what I’m asking for is impossible,” she pleaded. “I know it may be of no value to the Wolf Clan. If my body pleases you, you may do as you like with it! Please, I beg of you...!”

She was still such a young girl. It was only natural that she might fear this male she scarcely knew forcing himself upon her. The body she offered up quaked uncontrollably. And yet, to protect her people, she was trying to offer herself in their stead.

“Uh, well...”

Having the values of someone from the 21th century, Yuuto found it incredibly difficult to accept the idea of a slave. He had intended to give her equal treatment from the start, so the fact that she made such a show of offering herself left him a bit taken aback.

That being said, when Yuuto had pressured Linea into becoming his little sister subordinate, he had threatened harm to her people. It made sense that she would feel such anxiety.

Yuuto laughed wryly and began patting Linea’s head.

“Big... Brother?” A note of bewilderment echoed through her voice, likely not understanding why Yuuto was doing what he did.

At this point, Yuuto finally felt like he was beginning to understand why Linea’s people idolized her so. There were few monarchs who concerned themselves with their people the way she did.

Though her clan had been the ones attacking the Wolf, she likely felt that the Wolf Clan might ride the wave of militaristic fervor and further threaten the

Horn Clan, so this was her only chance to protect them.

“I’ll listen to whatever it is you need to ask me, my adorable little sister,” he said fondly.

“Thank you — agh!”

As Linea raised her head to gaze joyfully up at Yuuto, he forcefully held her head against his chest instead. Looking her in the eyes would be way too embarrassing right now.

Statues that must have represented gods were lined up on a pyramid-shaped altar made of stacked jagged stones. Above the altar hung the mirror that had brought Yuuto to this world, and a torch that burned without end.

The Chalice Ceremony held before the altar earlier had been a sacred affair, one conducted in near silence, but now, the men were seated next to the altar, making music on pipes, and the women were losing themselves to dancing in tune with the music.

One of those women was Yuuto’s adjutant, Felicia. Already well-known for her versatile talent pool, Felicia was a skilled and prominent dancer among the Wolf Clan.

It was a feast to celebrate the fact that the Wolf and Horn Clans had become definitively intertwined as kindred clans. There were plenty of people showering the dancers with adoration, and just as many laughing and drinking together to their hearts’ content nearby.

“Everyone seems to be having a great time,” Yuuto commented.

With the burden of the ceremony now lifted, Yuuto was enjoying the atmosphere of the feast and the food that came with it. While he didn’t think it appropriate for him to directly engage in the frivolity, he didn’t dislike the lively celebration, either.

There was a jolt beside him.

Standing behind Yuuto in Felicia’s stead, Sigrun started to her feet, giving off a dangerous aura.

“Hi there, Yuuto-bro. It’s been two months.” Someone swiped the pitcher right from in front of Yuuto.

He was a man that appeared to be in his late thirties, with a pot belly and a jolly smile that left a genial impression.

“Yo, bro,” Yuuto said. “You been well?”

“I’m grateful for your concern, thank you,” the man said. “Yeah, I’m well. But, wow, to think that the Horn Clan would cave in this easily. Ah, there’s no way a guy like me’d be any match for you. I just feel totally embarrassed at my own stupidity back then.”

“It’s unsettling hearing such flattery from my own sibling,” Yuuto answered. “So what’re you scheming this time?”

“What? I’m not scheming anything. It’s how I really feel. You’re so harsh. Oh, here.”

As the man bowed humbly, he held the pitcher out to Yuuto.

Yuuto took up his glass and accepted the liquid the man poured into it. He then lifted the cup to Sigrun’s nose, and only once she nodded in affirmation did he tilt the cup back.

The man’s name was Botvid, and he was Yuuto’s younger brother subordinate. He came off as timid and rather like a servant, giving the air of a man who would never get anywhere, but in reality, he was the sovereign patriarch of the Claw Clan, with whom the Wolf had been in violent combat up until two months ago.

Unlike Yuuto, who had gained superiority through modern knowledge, this man had climbed to the position of sovereign through brute strength, and had almost single-handedly pushed the Wolf Clan to the brink of destruction. He was the very epitome of a person it would do well to not judge by outer appearances.

“I wouldn’t call it scheming, but I did have something I wanted to ask you,” Botvid said.

“Oh?” Yuuto took another sip of his drink. He couldn’t help but feel thirsty

with the amount of nervousness he felt coming face-to-face with this man, with whom he couldn't put his guard down for even a second.

Even regardless of the defensive barrier he was erecting around his heart, he wound up startled.

"I was just wondering what consideration you were giving to your own marriage."

"Pbfhuh?!" Hardly prepared for the question that came his way, Yuuto spewed the mouthful of water he'd had in his mouth. Of course, it landed directly on Botvid's face, who was sitting right in front of Yuuto.

Yuuto coughed violently. "S-sorry."

"Not at all. Please don't worry about it. Guess it went down the wrong pipe?" The smiling sovereign of the Claw Clan wiped his face off and made a casual joking comment.

Anyone observing the man at that moment would see him as generous and big of heart, but Yuuto knew there was deception lurking beneath that poker face. From the moment Botvid had appeared in front of Yuuto, the smile on his face hadn't wavered, not even when Yuuto had spewed water on him.

"I'm told nothing has been decided regarding this matter as of yet," the man said.

"I-I'm still a little young to be getting married."

"You absolutely are not too young. Bro, you're at exactly the age where it would be completely normal to take a wife."

"Uhm..." Yuuto was at a loss for a response. He had answered from the perspective of someone from the modern day, but having observed the way people fretted over Felicia having waited too long at seventeen by his calendar, he understood that their line of thought was different.

"Well then, how about my daughter?" the man asked smilingly.

"So that's your real aim. You really were scheming something." Yuuto gave a light snort and rested his chin in his hands. The older he got, the more dull and troublesome the conversation got.

Basically, this was intended to be a strategic marriage. Yuuto found it difficult to accept that sort of thing, but he knew because of his love of the Warring States Period that this had been common practice all throughout the world up until modern times.

“No, I just felt that it might be advantageous for us to forge a more longstanding bond with you and the Wolf Clan,” the man said. “How about it? Say yes now and I could add a second to sweeten the deal?”

“Whoa, hey...”

What is he, a host on a home shopping show trying to hock his wares? Yuuto thought, astonished.

In a way, it showed how desperate he was to buy Yuuto’s favor. Offering up both his daughters, he was clearly trying to forge favorable relations.

Yuuto’s perception of himself was fairly low, but the fact remained that in the year since his inauguration as sovereign, he had brought the Wolf Clan back from the brink of destruction, and he had crushed the Claw and Horn Clans without completely destroying them. Looking at it objectively, Botvid’s assessment of Yuuto as an excellent marriage prospect for his daughters was spot on.

There was also the fact that, as relations between the Wolf and the Horn deepened, the inferior Claw Clan likely felt a sense of impending danger.

Botvid almost doubled over, bringing his face closer to Yuuto. “They’re beautiful girls, if I do say so myself. Yes, looks just like their mother. You can rest assured that they don’t look a thing like me.”

“I think you’re being a little hasty,” Yuuto said, holding up a hand so that Botvid wouldn’t come any closer. He was trying his best to evade the stench of alcohol wafting off the middle-aged man. “This is a matter of political importance. This isn’t something you decide under the influence of alcohol.”

Though Yuuto was being ambiguous about it, accepting the proposal wasn’t an option for him. He had no intention of settling down in this world. The idea of getting married in this world had never occurred to him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the man said. “I just thought it might be a good way of uniting

our clans for the long haul."

Readjusting his position in his seat, it was clear Botvid had no intention of giving this up. In fact, a light glinted in Botvid's eyes, as if he'd just remembered something.

He gave a single nod. "Mmm, well, you do have a good point, Big Bro. Well, I certainly don't want to earn the ire of everyone attending this fine feast by monopolizing the man of the hour. Later."

Botvid slapped his knees and stood up, withdrawing as if his nonchalant air up to that point had all been a ruse.

Yuuto had a bad feeling as he watched the man's back disappear.

It would be some time before his premonition would bear fruit.

"So, how about my granddaughter, then? She is rather beautiful, if you'll permit me to say so myself, and I believe you may find her to your liking, Lord Yuuto."

As Bruno, the head of the elders, chatted happily before him, Yuuto couldn't help but feel a sense of futile déjà vu, thinking to himself, *not again.*

There was no end to the stream of people coming to pour Yuuto's alcohol and chat with him. Among them were many who, like Botvid, came with their own marriage proposals. This was the sixth one who had come.

It seemed that the type of people who would flock to power all had similar lines of thinking. Yuuto felt as if he had gotten himself caught in an infinite loop.

"I've told you, I have no intention of marrying anyone right now," he said firmly.

"Ah, but you are of that age, Lord Yuuto," the man said smoothly. "Ah, uh, naturally I wouldn't demand you take anyone too far beneath you for your wife. You could take her as a mistress, as long as you were to treat her well..."

Bruno refused to give up, even as Yuuto clicked his tongue and tried to send him away. The man's emotional stamina would not be exhausted.

Yuuto was well aware that this was normal in this world. *Still, your grandchild*

is not a tool for political warfare, he thought, righteous indignation raging within his heart.

Bruno was one of those who had refused to serve under Yuuto when he'd first become sovereign patriarch. As support for Yuuto had grown within the Wolf Clan, his attitude had suddenly changed, and he'd begun trying to get close to Yuuto. Now he was offering up his own granddaughter.

With things like this happening, Linea and the rest of the Horn Clan were well within their rights to denigrate the Wolf as dogs.

"Oof." Yuuto hopped to his feet.

"L-Lord Yuuto, what is the matter? Did I say something that bothered you?"

Bruno was a little flustered at the fact that Yuuto had suddenly stood up. His face stiffened in anxiety, perhaps feeling slightly displeased.

"I need to use the bathroom," Yuuto declared.

Yes, you did bother me, Yuuto thought, but his poker face helped to sell his lie as he strode quickly away from Bruno.

This whole thing was so ridiculous, he could stand it no longer. If he'd stayed there even a minute more, he might had said something he'd regret.

"Oh, I shall go, too..." Bruno began, starting to rise to follow. "Ulp!"

One glare from a keenly observant Sigrun had him settling back into his seat.

The man might have been a little more persistent with the mild-mannered Felicia, but with the awe and fear commanded by the Strongest Silver Wolf Mánagarmr, even the head of the elders wouldn't oppose her. Yuuto really could count on her.

Felicia let out a long sigh. "I would like such a guard dog for myself. You seem to be having so much fun, turning down those marriage requests."

She had an air of frivolity about her, but her voice was quite sincere. Clearly Felicia had faced problems of her own due to Bruno's matchmaking offensives. Yuuto instinctively let slip a bitter laugh.

"Pardon me, Lord Yuuto," the master of the Chalice Ceremony said, stepping

towards him. “Congratulations on this day’s accomplishment.”

“Oh, Lord Alexis, thank you for coming all this way today.” Yuuto panicked and lowered his head. Upon reaching Felicia and Sigrun, he took a formal posture, going down on one knee.

The goði, a member of the empire’s upper echelons who stood as a representative of the divine emperor, was of far higher rank than Yuuto, who was really nothing more than a feudal lord.

It was that official power from the emperor that granted a sovereign their authority to govern. Defying the divine emperor’s authority was equivalent to defying the law itself. Therefore, if the Wolf Clan’s sovereign was considered the incomparable head of a mighty clan, then that certainly meant the goði was owed the upmost respect.

“Well, now that these two clans who have warred so long have become kin, perhaps we can finally have some peace in the Bifröst Belt,” the man said warmly. “I am grateful and pleased that you have bound yourself to a worthy clan.”

“No, no, I’m the one who is grateful to you, from the bottom of my heart, for putting on such a wonderful ceremony.”

Yuuto felt that Felicia and Jurgen were far better at these exchanges of pleasantries and honeyed words. He honestly found it to be a vapid and futile exchange, but this too was part of the sovereign’s job.

“This might be a little forward of me, Lord Yuuto, but from where do your biological father and mother hail?” Alexis inquired, gazing not at Yuuto’s face, but higher up on his head, at his hair.

Within Yggdrasil, people with blond, brown, or red hair were fairly common. There were those with darker-tinted hair, but it was almost always just a dark shade of brown. Very rarely was it jet black, like Yuuto’s hair was. It wasn’t surprising that Alexis would be curious.

Be that as it may, it was rather rude for him, someone who had barely ever spoken to Yuuto, to ask such a question.

“From the east.” Yuuto gave a safe answer.

Having come from so far in the future, there was no way he could honestly say more than that. If he were to just come out with the truth, it was unlikely that anyone would believe him, and it was possible that diplomatic relations could become problematic for the Wolf Clan if people believed their sovereign to be mentally unfit.

“Hm, I don’t know that I’ve seen people that look like you as far east as I’ve gone.” Alexis tilted his head, making a grim face.

Indeed, this was to be expected from the leader of the Holy Empire of Ásgarðr — in other words, the unified state of the entire land area of Yggdrasil. He was likely familiar with every area of Yggdrasil. The fact that “as far east” as Alexis had been didn’t have people with black hair was an extremely important point.

Yuuto made a note in his mind, and his mind responded with, *This could be your chance.*

“Kind of on the same subject, but have you ever heard of any Einherjar with the ability to go, er, I mean, send someone to another world or anything?” Yuuto asked.

It wasn’t just the size of land they owned, but also the rich and longstanding history that made the Holy Empire of Ásgarðr the premiere kingdom of Yggdrasil.

Yuuto had asked in the hope that he might find some leads or ideas to get him back to his home world, but Alexis’s face only grew more sour, then it loosened in confusion as he spoke.

“Hm? To another world? Do you mean the realm of the gods, by any chance?”

“H-huh, well, uhm, something like that.”

“Certainly, anyone seeking an audience with the gods themselves would have to have the brazen nature that you yourself possess, Lord Yuuto, but I’m afraid I can see such a desire as nothing other than arrogant recklessness. To the gods, as we humans lack the ability to control natural disasters and such, we are seen as merely weak and powerless, and nothing more. If you incur their wrath, it will not be just you, but all of us upon whom they take out their wrath.”

Yuuto winced at being chided in such a harsh manner. Being from 21st

century Japan, he could feel a gap between himself and the people of this time, who were zealous in their faith and very superstitious.

Lately, Yuuto had been thinking that, considering how he had been thrust into Yggdrasil and forced to accept the existence of Einherjar, it wouldn't be that strange for there to be something so transcendental, but he couldn't bring himself to get as worked up about the possibility as the people of Yggdrasil might.

That being said, at this rate, he wasn't going to get the information he needed. He had to smooth the whole thing over somehow.

"Uhm, actually, when I asked about the world of the gods, it was more figurative than anything else. You see, I was just wondering if there was another realm where people lived, whether the gods had made other peoples and realms beyond us. That was all."

"I see. So that's what you meant," Alexis intoned, showing he was satisfied with Yuuto's answer. It seemed he had at first interpreted it as Yuuto having ambitions of acquiring even more territory. "But I must apologize. I am afraid I will not be of much use to you. If it were the other way around, I might have some ideas, but..."

"...The other way around? You mean, someone coming here rather than us going there?!" Yuuto cried.

It didn't matter how trivial the information was; if it was about moving between worlds, Yuuto wanted to hear it. If he could understand why he had been brought here, then perhaps he could find a way to get home.

Yuuto might have been lobbing questions like he was grasping at straws, but Alexis made a bitter face like he had swallowed a bug. As if to say, *Damn it!*

"...I'm afraid that was a slip of the tongue. Please forget what I said. I'm afraid it's a matter of top security for our empire, so I cannot tell you. Please forgive me."

"What?! Can't you tell me something?! I will tell no one else!"

"Please try to understand. It is not at my discretion..."

“Please, anything!” Yuuto cried in desperation.

Having come this far, he couldn’t hold back now. Yuuto hounded the man over and over again, but each time, Alexis just shook his head.

A clue had been dangled so neatly before him, and yet he couldn’t grab hold of it. All Yuuto could do in response to that feeling of vexation was to bite his lip.

As soon as the feast ended, Yuuto quickly withdrew into his room.

Everyone spending time with Yuuto at the feast had been a decade or two his senior. More importantly, he had to keep up appearances as the sovereign patriarch to ensure he maintained the requisite dignity. It was completely mentally exhausting.

Hitting his bed with a thud, Yuuto called his childhood friend, seeking some sort of relief.

“You old perverted harem master!” she shouted. This was the first thing he heard upon calling her.

Yuuto could do nothing but stare blankly at the ceiling. “Oh, hey, Mitsuki-san, what’s this all of a sudden?”

“Well, you shared a Chalice with that sovereign girl from the Horn Clan or whoever she is, right?”

“Well, yeah. I did, but...”

Yuuto tried not to weigh Mitsuki down with the gritty stories of life in this world, but he had told her about today’s Chalice Ceremony.

His intention had been to relieve any concerns she had, to tell her there would be no disputes this time.

And as a result...

“See, I knew it! You really are running a harem!”

Yuuto couldn’t help but feel how ridiculous the whole thing was.

“It’s so important, I had to say it twice.” Her laughter cackled out from the

speaker.

He was sure that Mitsuki had meant it all as a joke, but her first words still stuck in his heart, and the blood was still flowing to his face.

He had received numerous marriage proposals today, but as he had felt guilty and committed to none of them, he felt no further cause for concern or need to mention them.

“Huh? But didn’t you say she was a little sister subordinate rather than a child one?” Mitsuki added. “Then I guess ‘master’ would be strange. In that case...you’re a harem big brother?”

“I’ve never even kissed a girl before, and yet you’re making all these terrible accusations,” he complained.

“Oh, you’ve never been kissed. Mmm. Not yet, I see. I see, I see. Not even one kiss.”

She repeated the same thing over and over in that bemused tone of voice.

They had been friends for so long. Yuuto knew she meant no harm. He knew that, but the veins in his forehead still throbbed.

“You talk as if you have,” he said curtly.

At Yuuto’s age, having experience with women was something that granted social status. Having been reminded over and over that he had no such experience really was annoying to him.

Mitsuki’s next words hurled Yuuto into the depths of chaos. “Mm, I have.”

“Y-you’ve what?!”

“Tee hee hee! Jealous?”

“Y-y-y-y-yeahh, right!” Yuuto sputtered impudently.

He could in no way bring himself to be happy for her. The panic that seized him would have been enough to shake the girls of the Wolf Clan of their infatuation for him.

Who? Who was it with?!

Yuuto and Mitsuki were childhood friends, but it wasn’t as if they had been

going out. He wouldn't have been surprised if, during these two years he had been gone, she had fallen for someone. He would have been in his third year of middle school, so they were both at the right age to be interested in such things.

All of the outrage that had filled Yuuto's head earlier was gone, replaced with the question of who Mitsuki had shared her first kiss with.

Was it someone he knew? Maybe it was a new guy she'd met in the two years he'd been gone? Or could it have been...?

"...So, wh-who is it?" He couldn't stand going back on his words from earlier, but Yuuto really just had to know.

"Ohh, so you do wanna know."

"Ng!"

Mitsuki, you brat! were the words he wanted to say, but he caught them before they left his throat.

Mitsuki was younger, but here she was, stringing him along. It was rather humiliating. Still, even if it was by force, he had to know who Mitsuki had kissed.

"Tee hee!" she giggled. "Yuu-kun, it was you."

"...Huh?"

"Come on, it was when we were in kindergarten. A kiss on the cheek, right? You don't remember?"

"Uh... uhm..."

His brain was working at full tilt, trying to dig up that memory. He had a faint recollection of something like that...

Yuuto slumped to the floor on both knees and heaved a big sigh. "Come on, don't scare me like that."

"Tee hee! Now you've had a taste of my own pain. Geez, you just surround yourself with one girl after another. I mean, I know you can't help it, but still..."

"Huh? What was that?" Yuuto asked. Mitsuki had muttered that last part too

quietly for Yuuto to hear clearly.

“Noooothinnnng.”

It clearly was *something*, but Yuuto had decided not to push further. He no longer had the desire to do so.

“Give me a break,” he complained. “I came back to my room because I was wiped out, and this is how I get treated? I can’t take it!”

“Ahaha! Sorry.”

“You’re not even the least bit remorseful.”

“Nope.”

“You little—! Someday, I’ll get you!”

“There it is! You’ll come get me? Then you had better hurry...”

“Huh?! Wha?!” For a moment, he didn’t understand what she meant. But when understanding came, his pulse began to quicken. It was a complete surprise attack.

Mitsuki, you cheeky little—! His lips turned up into a smile as the thought came to him.

“...Yeah,” he said. “I will, no matter what.”

At any rate, he had learned that Alexis, or rather, the empire, held some sort of clue. If he could earn their trust through some sort of tribute, then perhaps they might tell him.

No, somehow, he would have to make them tell him.

“No matter what?” she asked. “I can’t be waiting for you for—”

“Please excuse my disturbing your rest, Big Brother!” Felicia’s distressed voice came with the inelegant slamming of the door.

What? It was just getting good, Yuuto lamented, his shoulders slumping. But from Felicia’s behavior, it was clear this was no trivial matter.

“Mitsuki, I’m sorry,” he sighed. “Something’s suddenly come up.”

“Huh?! Wh-what’s happened?!”

“I’m not sure. We did just finish a battle. It’s probably nothing dangerous. Just rest easy. Goodnight.”

“Wait, ‘goodnight’?! Yuu-kun? Yuu...”

He succinctly ended the discussion by ending the call, and went so far as to power the phone down.

He had a bad feeling about this. He didn’t want Mitsuki to hear any upsetting conversations. And more importantly, if Mitsuki was present, he wouldn’t be able to switch his mindset.

“What’s happened, Felicia?” he demanded.

His face no longer bore the youthful exuberance fitting a boy of his age that it had a few moments ago; now it was pulled taut with concern.

Felicia gazed at Yuuto’s smartphone apologetically, but she responded to Yuuto’s question straight away. “W-we just received word via carrier pigeon from the border fortress Fort Horn. You see... the Horn are being attacked by the Hoof Clan.”

“Did you say the Hoof Clan?!” Yuuto’s eyes opened wide in shock.

Even Yuuto, who wasn’t very knowledgeable about this world, had heard of the Hoof Clan.

There were approximately a hundred clans, give or take, in all of Yggdrasil. Among those, the Hoof Clan was one of the Ten Great Clans.

“Thank you all for gathering in spite of the late hour.” Glancing around at their faces, Yuuto first thanked the many officers for their efforts.

The various officers of the Wolf Clan had been gathered and lined up in the audience chamber, with the second-in-command Jurgen at their helm.

Everyone, from the lowest private to the highest ranking officer, stood at attention, ready for bed, yawning or giving superficial grins, with some of them looking downright unwilling to take in whatever was coming their way. Naturally, the youthful Einherjar, meaning Felicia, Sigrun, and even Ingrid, were also present.

Linea was present, as well, as she too was now an affected party. The emissaries from the Horn Clan were here with her.

“We’re in a dire situation, so I’ll get right to the point,” Yuuto announced. “Four days ago, a major power from the west, the Hoof Clan, launched an invasion into the territory of our allies, the Horn Clan, toppling the fortress at the border of their territory. The Hoof troops are estimated to number around 10,000, while they are said to have over 500 chariots.”

“10-10,000?!”

“D-did he say 500 chariots?!”

Cries of shock and panic arose from the various officers throughout the audience chamber.

10,000 might have seemed like a small number to someone from the 21st century, but in a world like Yggdrasil, where farming technology was still in its infancy, it was unlikely that there were many nations that could support such a large population.

In fact, the Battle of Kadesh had been said to be the grandest battle in ancient history, with the Egyptian forces boasting over 18,000 troops.

The shock for the people from the tiny, remote clan of the Wolf must have been unfathomable when they’d heard the Hoof Clan had 10,000 troops. The Wolf Clan had at most 2,000 troops that it could mobilize.

War was first and foremost a matter of numbers. At a glance, stories of a small army toppling a large military were spectacular, but that was specifically because they were almost always impossible, so when such things did come to pass, they were shining beacons in history.

The difference between the two clans was obvious.

“The sovereign patriarchs of this world are clearly rather cunning,” Yuuto said. “They don’t miss a thing.”

“What are you saying?” The head of the elders, Bruno, tilted his head.

You’re the adviser. You figure it out, Yuuto thought, but he maintained a stoic expression and continued speaking.

“The Horn Clan just endured a crushing defeat at the hands of us, the Wolf Clan, and their forces have been wiped out. We’ve been holding Linea, their sovereign, as our prisoner of war, so the Hoof Clan know she isn’t there. And her second-in-command made the journey here for the Chalice Ceremony today. There would be no better time to invade than this.”

“Hmm, I suppose this is exactly the moment they have been waiting for.” The second-in-command, Jurgen, nodded thoughtfully.

The emissaries from the Horn Clan all furrowed their brows, their faces grave.

Linea interjected, “This is my fault! It’s because I lost...” and continued to blame herself, almost in a trance or a stupor. Her face was so pale and heartbreaking to behold that Yuuto couldn’t bear to look.

But this was war. If he wasn’t honest about the situation at hand, it could impact the outcome of battle. He couldn’t just hold back for the mental well-being of his cute little sister subordinate. Indeed, he had to cast off all his emotions, and so he continued speaking as the sovereign of the Wolf Clan.

“This situation requires urgent action. We of the Wolf Clan must send immediate aid to our sister nation, the Horn Clan.”

A clamor of voices erupted among the troops assembled throughout the audience chamber.

They understood why. By exchanging the sibling Chalice, both nations were bound to protect one another. It was an absolute law here on Yggdrasil.

But asking them to face off against an enemy five times their size was insanity. There was likely no way they could win, so it was as if he was sending them to their deaths. It wasn’t surprising that everyone would be so flustered.

“B-but, Lord Yuuto, it was the Horn Clan who were attacked, not the Wolf Clan,” Bruno objected. “So long as we do not meddle unnecessarily, no harm will come to us, correct?”

Bruno had been the one to explain the vow of the Chalice to Yuuto, so he clearly knew the moral implications of what he was saying. However, the enemy this time was far too strong. The Chalice had been originally created in order to help the organization run smoothly. It would be a matter of putting the cart

before the horse if the Wolf Clan was destroyed protecting the Horn Clan. There was no place for trying to keep up appearances at a time like this.

“Bruno, you bastard!!” Several of the emissaries from the Horn Clan were outraged. Among them, the Horn Clan’s second-in-command, Rasmas, was spurring on the outcry.

It was a natural reaction, considering that to him, it likely looked like his country was being cast aside.

“Why are you angry?” Bruno snorted. “I am not saying that we intend to attack you along with the Hoof Clan or anything. At the very least, you can fight without fear of an attack coming from behind. If you consider all that has happened over the years between us, you have more cause to thank us than to be angry with us.”

Then Bruno turned away from them dismissively.

Voices of dissent and opposition to the idea of deploying troops gushed forth from the assembled officers.

“Ohh, that is true, so true!”

“I feel bad for the Horn Clan, but we’ve only just given them the Chalice. We have no need to foster their good will.”

“Mmhmm. Indeed, there is no obligation for us to cross blades with the Hoof Clan.”

They were all exchanging glances and nodding in agreement. It was likely that Bruno’s words spoke for all of the officers in attendance.

Still, Yuuto found these words to be anything but rash. They all had families and ways of lives to protect. Endangering all of that for a clan that only the day before had been an enemy didn’t make sense.

“Our clan no longer has the strength to stand against the Hoof Clan.” Linea’s quiet voice rang out as she stood pale, the blood completely gone from her face, in that war-weary room. “Without aid from the Wolf Clan, my people will...”

They were countries that bordered one another. As her clan’s sovereign, she

had intimate knowledge into how the Hoof Clan operated.

The Hoof Clan was a clan who had rapidly expanded its influence by enslaving people from other nations and forcing them into hard labor.

Those slaves, stripped of their individuality and treated as property by their "owners," were a crucial source of hard labor during this era. It was common knowledge that people from countries that had been destroyed in war were fit to be used like tools by their fellow man.

"We're supposed to protect the people of the Wolf Clan, not the Horn Clan," Bruno shot back at her.

"Yes, it's your job to protect your own people," another man agreed.

"We have no resources left to defend your people because of all that time you Horn Clan spent attacking us."

Whether trying to appeal to the majority or to lord their prowess over the weaker party, Bruno began taking the lead, speaking self-servingly of their war weariness. Perhaps it was because the clans didn't see people from other clans as humans on the same level as themselves.

"H-how could you all...?!" Linea's eyes became empty, swallowed up in despair.

Thud! The sound of something hitting the wall echoed through the audience chamber.

"Don't spout such cowardly things, you spineless imbeciles!!"

Yuuto's voice, like a peal of thunder, boomed throughout the audience chamber. There were no longer any signs of the normally gentle, weak-hearted boy.

Blood was starting to drip from the right fist he had struck the wall so forcefully with. He showed not the slightest hint of concern for his bloody fist; instead, a glint of rage in his eyes pierced through every person in the audience chamber.

What shot through his mind now were the words of his father when Yuuto had informed him of his mother's critical condition from the hospital.

“I’m afraid I can’t get away from my work right now. I’ll be there later.”

His father had always prioritized his work over his family, but at that moment, he had even put his own convenience over them. As a result, he hadn’t been there to care for Yuuto’s mother in her final hours. This when Yuuto’s mother had always worried over the man who had left her behind.

There was no way Yuuto would abandon his family. No way he could. He wouldn’t become like that awful man. Those thoughts and feeling spurred Yuuto on.

“Isn’t the vow of the Chalice of Allegiance supposed to be absolute?!” he bellowed.



Yuuto had pressured Linea into taking the Sibling Chalice. But he himself had chosen to make her his little sister, with no one pressuring him to. Even if it was out of a sense of duty, Yuuto felt that Linea was his family, and he needed to protect her.

“Weren’t you all just full of congratulations for Linea and me earlier today at the Chalice Ceremony? The very ceremony that was intended to connect us and the Horn Clan together as family?!”

The elders and upper leadership all lowered their heads simultaneously at Yuuto’s words. They had already said their piece. In this situation, what Yuuto was saying should amount to nothing more than noble lip service.

And yet, they could say nothing in response.

As was to be expected from elders or those in leadership, everyone here had long records of military service that had gotten them to this point. They were in this position specifically because they had endured so much hardship on the battlefield. And yet, people of such prestige had been silenced by a boy of at most sixteen.

“Hee... hee hee hee...” Even as she held her quaking body with both arms, Felicia couldn’t help but crack a smile.

If it came to an actual fist fight, Yuuto would be the weakest one in the room. Everyone there knew that. And yet, every one of them was awestruck by him in that moment — even the Wolf Clan’s strongest soldier, Sigrun herself.

Right now, what was causing Felicia’s entire body to quake was not a spine-chilling fear, but rather an even greater sense of amusement.

This was it. This was the hidden, other side of the spectacular leader she had been so enthralled by.

Clearly the knowledge Yuuto possessed was essential for the Wolf Clan. But could a mere weakling boy with some knowledge, useful knowledge and nothing else, have inspired such intense devotion in someone like Felicia, or in the Wolf Clan’s fiercest warriors, like Sigrun and Jurgen?

Especially in times of great crisis, humans are bound to show their true

character. Those who would normally rant about morals and bravery might run away when faced with true danger. The head of the Elders, Bruno, in particular, fit this pattern.

And then there were examples to the contrary. Like this normally seemingly unreliable boy, whose true character was that of a mighty lion.

Yuuto Suoh had once learned that the kanji that made up his name meant "Protect those around oneself and fight with bravery." That was truer now more than ever. He always showed his true strength when it came to protecting people. Even if the fact that it was for a girl from another country might cause offense.

"I will save the Horn Clan," Yuuto declared. "It has been decided."

No dissenting opinions arose in response to Yuuto's words. Even Bruno's pale face was nodding repeatedly.

Felicia smiled wryly at Linea, who was standing frozen with her teeth chattering after witnessing the sudden and fierce change in Yuuto. When they had first met with her, Felicia had bristled when Linea referred to the Wolf Clan as dogs. It seemed silly now, to have been concerned about such a trivial thing.

When Yuuto had first come to this world, he had been as helpless as a nursing kitten. However, after enduring battles for over two years, he had grown into an indomitable lion cub. While a lion slept, one could pull whatever mischief they liked. But if the lion awakened and roared with rage, it didn't matter what you were, be it a wolf or dog or whatever — no one would be able to stand against him.

Yuuto plopped down on the throne and rested his chin in his hands, still seething.

"A strategy of vigilance is the lowest strategy," he declared. "Remaining neutral will lose us credibility on both sides."

It might seem like a good strategy to wait until they had more information, and in the meantime, to keep up a good facade on all sides and bet on the winning horse when the time came.

However, that wasn't actually the case. That would be merely declaring their

position only upon ascertaining the actual state of affairs and choosing their allegiance based on the victors and the victims.

According to *The Prince,* neutrality would only lead to destruction. The brave were better off making their allegiance clear. Yuuto fully agreed with that sentiment.

Humans were more likely to trust those who stood by them and helped them in tough times, versus those who would only kiss up to them upon assuring their victory and value. They would also remember those who'd treated them cruelly as opponents.

During the Battle of Sekigahara, the Satake and Akita Clans had taken a neutral stance and lost territory as a result; on the other hand, the Shimazu Clan had been able to return to their territory after their brave, but antagonistic actions. The way they'd ended up dividing the country had gone exactly as Machiavelli had predicted.

"Not only that, but our clans exchanged the Chalice in front of an emissary of the Divine Emperor," Yuuto declared. "We will not nullify the vow that accompanies that Chalice just because of the situation. Just try and scrap the vow of the Chalice on the day we shared it. See how quickly the Chalice of the Wolf Clan loses its value! And if we did that, we would be giving the Claw Clan every excuse to betray us."

"...Ah!" A look of comprehension ran across the faces of the officers.

The Hoof Clan were such a large military threat, they had been distracted and totally failed to think of such an outcome. A worthy leader who wanted to be seen as an elder brother should absolutely protect his subordinates. If he cast aside his little sister subordinate, Yuuto would lose all respect as an older brother and leader, and no one would be judged harshly for defecting to other clans.

"The Hoof Clan is a clan with whom we have no ties," Yuuto said firmly. "So if we allowed the Horn Clan to be destroyed, then it would be only a matter of time before we were bordered by a much more powerful clan. Naturally, the Hoof Clan would make it known far and wide that the Wolf Clan had broken its vow to the Horn Clan. The morale of the soldiers would drop, and the Claw Clan

might switch their allegiance to the Hoof Clan. They'd launch a pincer attack on us. There would be no way we could win."

To the Wolf Clan, that would be the absolute worst-case scenario.

Perhaps it was like Jurgen had said, and this had been the plan all along. If that was indeed the case, Yuuto couldn't help but be astonished at the ingenuity of whoever within the Hoof Clan had come up with such a plan.

Still, he couldn't allow himself to play right into the enemy's hands.

"The Horn Clan have about 2,000 soldiers left to defend their capital," Yuuto continued. "As for the Claw Clan, their territory doesn't border that of the Horn Clan. There is no need to fear their betrayal right now. If we're prepared to worry later about being betrayed from behind when we're up against an enemy force five times our size, why not take them head on now with combined forces, and even the odds down to an enemy only twice our size?"

"Hmmm..."

"Th-that is true..."

The officers buzzed, breaking into a cold sweat at Yuuto's speech.

The one who was commanding them now was the national hero Yuuto, the one who had destroyed the Claw and Horn Clans in rapid succession. A military force five times their size would of course be difficult to defeat, but they could actually see the possibility of winning against an army twice their size. The officers weren't enthusiastic by any means, but they had begun to consider launching an attack as the best alternative.

"Well, have you all prepared yourselves?" Yuuto barked. "Run!"

"...Sir!"

At Yuuto's summons, the silver-haired girl took a step forward from the row of assembled officers. Her movements were slower than usual, as she had been completely awestruck with Yuuto. She appeared to be trembling with anticipation.

"Take charge of the Múspell unit and head out first," he ordered. "Use Pattern B: Mongol Formation. Don't do anything reckless. Prioritize preventing

loss of troops over trying to take down the enemy."

"Understood!" Sigrun gave a bow and then rushed out of the audience hall.

She understood, without having to be told, that there wasn't a second to waste. As the Strongest Silver Wolf, Mánagarmr, even with the brief instructions he had given her, Yuuto had absolutely no doubt that she would make the right decisions on the field when the time came.

She was normally so unquestioningly faithful that it caused Yuuto a bit of discomfort, but right now, she truly was his most reliable soldier.

"Jurgen!" he barked.

"Sir!" his second-in-command answered.

Though they were in such troubling circumstances, Jurgen couldn't hide the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

Normally, Yuuto gave off the impression that he wasn't very dependable, but at times like this, he was quicker than even the longest serving general to steel himself for the battle ahead.

Youth itself is recklessness, Jurgen thought with a smile, but he knew it wasn't true here.

Over the past year, Jurgen had come to know Yuuto for who he truly was. Yuuto was in no way ignorant to his responsibilities as the sovereign patriarch. He actually understood them better than any other. His assessment of the situation earlier had been exceedingly accurate. And most importantly, he had the ability to sway those before him.

He wasn't even twenty yet. There was no doubt that he would only continue to mature.

Even though it was obvious he didn't care for the position of sovereign, Jurgen felt that people with an aptitude for that position as great as Yuuto's were few and far between. He was a leader worthy of followers.

"Hurry and assemble the troops. Have all preparations complete by dawn!"

"Understood sir!" Jurgen responded to Yuuto's haughty, authoritative tone with a single bow.

Normally, Yuuto would have used restraint when speaking to Jurgen, who was two decades his senior, but this was an emergency situation. He had no time to worry about how he might be perceived.

For Jurgen, who had demanded dignity from his leader, this was the Yuuto he had wanted to see.

“Linea!” Yuuto called.

“Y-yes?!” Linea stood at attention.

She was the Horn Clan’s actual sovereign, and not merely Yuuto’s retainer. Even so, there was no room for her to oppose Yuuto in this ghastly situation.

“Return to the Horn Clan at once and rally your soldiers.”

“U-understood!”

“Ingrid!”

“H-hwha?! You want m-me?!” Ingrid let out a panicked reply.

Though she had been granted the rank of eighth in line through her many achievements, Ingrid had little sense of actual battle. She had likely never thought she would be called upon like this.

“You must have one of *those* ready,” Yuuto said. “Now is the time to use it. Could you please lend it to Linea?”

“S-s-seriously?! Wait, really? But she’s not one of us.”

“But she *is* my little sister.” The corners of Yuuto’s lips lifted into a grin.

They were definitely family now, born of a bond deeper than blood forged by the Chalice. Unlike Botvid from the Claw Clan, he could also trust her on a personal level. On top of that, this was a most pressing matter. They didn’t have the luxury of arguing over particulars.

Ingrid, seething with irritation, finally, but reluctantly, relented.

“Ahh, geez! You’re always such a pushover, but you’re acting pretty bold and forceful here!” she complained, then added in a softer tone, “W-well, fine... I guess that part of you is why I have such faith in you.”

ACT 5

Originally, the Hoof Clan had been an offshoot of a branch family of the Boar Clan, a clan that had exerted a great deal of influence throughout Álfheim, but then they had become a tiny clan by secluding themselves off in the westernmost part of Álfheim — which was incidentally the westernmost tip of Yggdrasil itself.

After that, the current sovereign patriarch of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, had followed up his ascension to the position by swallowing up all the clans that surrounded the Boar Clan's main family, transforming the Hoof Clan into one of the top ten strongest of Yggdrasil's close-to-100 clans.

Yngvi, the man who had rejuvenated the Hoof Clan, had turned 36 this year. His body still overflowed with the strength of youth, but he also was cloaked in the stubbornness and cunning that experience brought. His body and mind were clearly at their peak, which stimulated his desire for power even further. Even if he won all of the territory up for grabs, it would only swell his ambition more.

If he seized the fertile territory the Horn Clan owned around the Körmt River Basin, there was no doubt that the Hoof Clan's influence would grow exponentially, and the path to the Divine Emperor and Ásgarðr would open for them.

The Hoof Clan had awaited an opening for some time, and then they had learned that not only had the Horn Clan and Wolf Clans been fighting, the Wolf Clan had crushed the Horn Clan.

On top of that, they had learned from one of their spies that the Horn Clan sovereign was being held prisoner by the Wolf Clan, and even the second-in-command had taken leave to go inspect the sovereign's current state. That had created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

In truth, what the Horn Clan offered up now could hardly be called resistance, and the Hoof Clan had quickly toppled three fortresses. Yngvi found it all rather

anticlimactic and unsatisfying. Yet he spared no time for lamentation. He simply moved on to lead an assault on the Horn Clan capital, Fólkvangr.

“Heh heh heh!” he snickered. “This must mean that the heavens themselves are grooming me to be Supreme Ruler.”

What he was saying was arrogant, plain and simple. Normally, insecurities at the top roll downhill, but as the leader of the Hoof Clan was full of confidence, the people below him felt no fear or trepidation, either. Having no lack of confidence was another type of leadership skill.

Suppressing his desire to take and seize, Yngvi instructed his solders to take a break. “We’ll make camp here tonight. Don’t let your guard down, though.”

Proud though he might be, Yngvi was a general with a long record of service. He knew in the deepest parts of his being that the slightest bit of negligence on the battlefield could mean death. He wouldn’t be foolish enough to keep marching the soldiers into exhaustion out of pride. He would need the service of these soldiers’ children and grandchildren, after all. It wouldn’t do to have them die in vain.

Plotting their next move in a tent that had been erected, Yngvi suddenly realized there was some activity from troops in the back.

“Hm?” he murmured. “What...?”

No sooner had he started to ask what was going on than...

Bwoooooo! Bwooooooo!!!

An ear-splitting noise echoed across the entire area. It was the sound of a Horn Clan signaling an enemy attack.

“Well, well! To think they would dare to launch the first attack!” The corners of Yngvi’s mouth twitched into a sneer as he rose to his feet. He fully expected that the Horn Clan would just shut itself in, like a turtle in its shell, and wouldn’t come out.

But this was exactly what Yngvi had been hoping for. A siege would have taken a considerable amount of time.

Owning such a wide territory, the Hoof Clan’s land bordered far more

countries than the Horn Clan's land did. It will become increasingly dangerous for the Hoof Clan to focus its soldiers solely at the Horn Clan. And if Yngvi, the sovereign, stayed away from his country too long, too much would be left undone. So if they could settle everything on the battlefield in one go, it would be a cause for celebration.

"Well now, let's make quick work of them," he said confidently, standing to survey the enemy he was about to destroy.

But even that arrogance was blown off as quickly as a curtain in the wind.

Yngvi's tent was situated on a tall hilltop from which he could survey his entire military. An unbelievable sight was unfolding below him now, illuminated by torches and moonlight.

"Wh-what is that?!" Yngvi exclaimed.

Judging from the crest they wore, the soldiers appeared to be members of the Wolf Clan. They had come to help their kin in the Horn Clan and join in the battle. That was fine. It was all according to plan.

Their numbers were even fewer than he'd expected. Probably only about a hundred troops. It was absolutely not enough to take on the Hoof Clan military that numbered around 10,000.

Still, all hundred troops were on horseback.

And against those hundred on horseback, the Hoof Clan troops were unable to effectively fight back. Outmaneuvered, they could barely manage to put up a struggle and quickly fell into panic, with cries of pain and agony rising from the battlefield as it fell into chaos.

"Their troops are on horseback?! Fools! How do they expect to fight?!" Yngvi shouted.

Fighting on horseback took a long period of training. At least five or ten years. No matter which clan, finding people who could ride horses was difficult — they were a rare commodity.

The Hoof Clan was one of the Great Clans. They had quite a few who could ride a horse. Even Yngvi himself was skilled in riding, among the best in his clan.

Still, even with his skill, he would never consider battling on horseback. With little to support one's legs, there was the anxiety that battling on horseback would surely lead to being knocked off one's horse and felled. Combat with the enemy while riding on horseback was a game of chance.

Or that was how it should have been.

The troops who launched the night attack pulled arrow after arrow from the quivers on their backs and fired, while other troops swung the spears they held with lightning speed, raging with such fervor without ever losing their balance.

They were making ample use of the one hundred people at their disposal, as if they had trained years for this attack. Among them was a woman young enough that one might call her a girl instead.

It was like a nightmare.

Yngvi pinched himself in his thigh, and felt a rush of pain. This was no dream; it was reality.

"This... can't be!" *Smack!* He slapped both of his cheeks, trying to bring himself back to reality.

This was the battlefield, and right now, they were under attack from the enemy. And he, as the commanding officer, could not lose his wits now.

"Calm down, all of you!" he bellowed. "Unexpected though this may be, the enemy is still small in number. If we remain calm, we can defeat them! Messengers! Inform the front lines! Quickly!"

Yngvi yelled so loud that his voice cracked, and those close to him snapped back to attention. Several of them rushed toward the front lines in a panic.

No matter what, Yngvi was still the hero who had united the gigantic Hoof Clan. The common generals, rushing around in confusion, would only worsen the situation.

He quickly pulled himself together and oriented himself to the situation.

It was easy to put into words, but the situation was chaotic, changing moment to moment, and with one miscalculation capable of turning the tides on the battlefield from victory to defeat, remaining calm was very difficult.

More than anything, the reason he had been able to readily quell the chaos at the front lines was because of the respect and trust he'd earned through his many military achievements, as well as his willingness to execute anyone who would throw his military operations into disarray.

However, the enemy general was fairly capable. As soon as they saw that the Hoof Clan had pulled themselves together, they ordered a retreat. They withdrew suddenly and smoothly, without a hint of doubt or confusion.

Having been preparing for a counterattack, the soldiers of the Hoof Clan were more than a little disappointed.

"Don't let them get away!"

"Take them out!"

"Knock them off their horses!"

Naturally, along with their angry cries, the Hoof Clan soldiers sought to give chase, but of course the enemy was on horseback. As if to show that catching up to them was impossible, they slowly drew further away, until the Hoof Clan lost sight of them in the dark of night.

After tormenting their forces, the enemy had escaped without them being able to fell even one soldier. There could be no greater disgrace.

But for the Hoof Clan, this was only the beginning of the nightmare.

At almost the same time, a Horn Clan unit together with Linea reached the Horn Clan capital safely, ready for battle.

It had been two months since Linea had been there in her office, but she had no time for sentimentality. She continuously drove away everyone who came to call upon her. Finally, when she had given most of her instructions, her body was seized by a great weariness.

"Those stirrup things are incredible," Linea muttered quietly, leaning back in her chair.

Linea had a fair amount of skill in horseback riding. But she had always been able to handle at most walking them at a trot, not riding a horse at full gallop.

Obviously, a horse and its rider each had wills of their own. Meaning that, sometimes, one would act in ways unpredictable to the other. Even a shiver, for example, might throw the horse into a state of confusion. In that case, the rider would likely lose their balance and topple off. Try as they might to fix their posture, there would be nothing to grab onto.

That was why, having these stirrups provided some form of assurance for a change. Even at Linea's level, she could manage galloping around on a horse. Because of this, trips that would normally take four days by chariot had now been shortened by two days. This difference was huge.

When Linea had first returned, the absence of both the sovereign patriarch of the Horn Clan and her second-in-command had led to an internal disagreement over whether the clan should surrender to the invaders or retaliate. Had she been even a day later, the split between the two factions would have completely divided the clan. The reason she had made it in time was thanks to those stirrups.

Most importantly, with stirrups it would only require a little training for solders to learn to battle with weapons on horseback. When that was pointed out to her, she realized that she hadn't considered the possibility. Or rather, it would be fair to say it hadn't been something she'd had a chance to consider, as the thought of fighting with weapons atop such an unstable animal defied all common sense.

To be sure, this wasn't a matter of her being incompetent or dim-witted. The Wolf Clan's foremost soldiers, Sigrun and the second-in-command Jurgen, had far more experience on horseback than she, as well as more experience with military tactics. The same was true for the Hoof Clan hero Yngvi. And it wasn't something they had even considered, either.

That was no surprise, as the stirrup wouldn't be developed until the fourth century C.E., meaning they were seeing a product from almost two millennia in the future! For Yuuto's part, he'd been completely unable to get on a horse at one point and merely wondered if having a saddle and stirrups made would make it easier for him, but it was such a far-advanced technology for this era that it might as well be cheating.

“First those longspears, and now these stirrups... Big Brother Yuuto really is a reborn god of war,” Linea murmured.

“I would agree. That is no exaggeration. That war meeting he conducted gave me chills. Ha ha!” The Horn Clan’s second-in-command, Rasmas, gave a restrained laugh. As if putting into words what he had only just remembered, his body gave a small shiver. “Speaking honestly, I felt such indignation at the thought that you would be downwind of such a puppy, Princess, but he might even be more comparable to a lion... I was so blind.”

“I’m surprised you would admit to that, Rasmas,” said Linea. “Still, this battle seemed so hopeless, and now it feels like we might actually win.”

“Let’s win, no matter what. We mustn’t allow ourselves to be trampled by the Hoof Clan.”

“Yeah, you’re right!” Linea said, giving a decisive nod.

She couldn’t help but feel that it was her own weakness that had invited this crisis. Even after assuming the role of a general, she could never escape the constant doubt about whether or not a battle could be won. But there was no time to think about that now. All that she could do was give everything she had to that which she could change.

“Princess, in the event of our victory in this battle, I have a proposal.”

“What’re you being so formal for?” Linea asked. “And it’s a bit hasty to speak of after the victory before we’ve won.”

This battle truly was for the fate and future of the Horn Clan.

Now was not the time for idle thoughts; it was the time to devote oneself body and mind to victory. On the battlefield, the slightest lapse in mental fortitude meant the difference between winning and losing, or more importantly, life and death.

She thought dubiously that something like that should have been far more obvious to a soldier like Rasmas with a long record than to someone young like her.

But the second she heard Rasmas’s proposal, all of those thoughts were

swept away. In fact, even though it shouldn't have been that way, for a long while, Linea's mind went blank.

"Linea, I'm sorry I kept you waiting," Yuuto said.

The main troops of the Wolf Clan forces that were under Yuuto's command had arrived in Fólkvangr after four days at the most, just in time to serve as reinforcements for the anxious Horn Clan troops who could hear the Hoof Clan on their doorstep. Nevertheless, the speed of soldiers' advance is limited by the slowest branch of the force. For the Wolf Clan which focused on infantry, they had still arrived rather quickly, all things considered.

The Wolf Clan troops had completely blown the Horn Clan away in their last battle, so the Horn Clan knew the strength of the Wolf Clan better than any clan in Yggdrasil.

The citizens of the Horn Clan now gazed with great faith upon the soldiers of the Wolf Clan, who had gathered in the center of town.

"Where is the enemy now?" Yuuto asked Linea as he leapt from his chariot. He'd come to pick her up.

Meeting Yuuto's gaze, Linea's face flushed red so quickly, it almost seemed like one could hear the blood rushing to her face. "Huh?! Wha?!"

"Hm? What's wrong? Have you caught a cold? I didn't want to say anything, but you look a bit unwell."

"N-nnn-no! Since we're about to head into battle, I'm just getting excited, is all! That's all!"

"Hey, hey, you're too worked up over it, then. If the Horn Clan's supreme commander isn't level-headed, they can't do their job, right?" Yuuto said in a surprised voice, his face full of unease.

A supreme commander was in charge of the lives of an entire army. The slightest miscalculation could mean the difference between life and death for many people.

In times like these, a friendly army's general needed to build up goodwill.

“Ahh, geez, it’s because Rasmas said something weird,” Linea said. “I’m so worried that I can’t look you in the eye, Big Brother!”

“Huh? Did you say something?” Yuuto said.

“No, not a thing!”

“I see. So?”

“Yes? What do you mean, ‘so’?”

At Linea’s dumbfounded nature, Yuuto scratched his face in vexation. “I asked you! Where is the enemy now?”

Though Yuuto was normally gentle with any girl he needed to protect, in this moment, on the precipice of battle, he had exhausted his patience. He couldn’t help but speak gruffly to her.

Linea came to her senses, conveying the requested information. “I... I am sorry! According to estimates from what our scout said, they have gotten within half a day’s walk from us or so.”

“Half a day, eh? Whew, we really were just in time.”

Next to Yuuto, his adjutant Felicia also breathed a sigh of relief. “Truly. If the capital had been taken before we arrived, that would be the worst situation imaginable, so I am truly relieved.”

However, when she shifted her gaze to Linea, she then breathed a heavy, loaded sigh.

“Well, I suppose Big Brother has already technically taken this town,” said Felicia. “It might be another facet of your amazing nature, but to think that you wouldn’t discriminate against another nation, Big Brother...”

“No, no, this is different from those forts I captured before,” said Yuuto. “Taking a town of this size would be difficult.”

“Tee hee! Big Brother, you could likely take it without even going into battle.” Felicia laughed suggestively, making Yuuto wonder when she would finally stop overestimating him. He didn’t realize the true meaning behind Felicia’s words.

Anyway, blaming anyone right now seemed harsh. All Yuuto cared about was

whether or not he could win the battle at hand. There were numerous things that must be done to allow for it.

And the matter at hand right now was...

“All right... let’s eat!” Yuuto called out in a high voice, plopping down on the spot and sitting cross-legged. “Those who desire it may have one drink of alcohol.”

His adjutant, Felicia, began issuing orders to prepare the food to those standing nearby, but Linea’s eyes opened wide in shock.

“Hey, first food and now alcohol! How can you be so laid-back?! The Hoof Clan are almost here, Big Brother! We’re at a disadvantage in sheer numbers, so we have to hurry to find a vantage point and put our soldiers into position...”

“‘Standing your ground awaiting those far away, awaiting the weary in comfort, awaiting the hungry with full stomachs, is mastering strength,’ Linea.”

“Huh? Wh-what’s that mean?” Linea’s mouth was agape like a pigeon who swallowed a peashooter at Yuuto’s memorized but difficult sayings. Like she scarcely understood his meaning.

“It’s a verse from the long-praised war words of Sun-Tzu, which has remained relevant for 2,500 years,” said Yuuto. “We make camp in an advantageous location and wait for the enemy coming in from far away, we rest up and await our exhausted enemies, and we eat to our heart’s content in order to await our starving enemies. This is how we master strength.”

Yuuto spoke authoritatively as if he fully understood what he was talking about, even though he was merely repeating Sun Tzu’s war manual. Yuuto felt that the implications of those words were rather obvious. He had to pay respect to Sun Tzu for the book he had penned.

At any rate, the man’s words perfectly fit the Wolf Clan’s current situation.

“They come from far away, they’re tired, and they haven’t eaten,” said Yuuto. “There’s no way they can make a display of power like that. So... let’s eat!” Yuuto playfully exchanged glances with Linea, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

“I... I see. That’s so like you, Big Brother! To think you would be so familiar with such an ancient war manual!” Linea interjected over and over, apparently expressing heartfelt admiration.

Despite all of the trouble Yuuto had given her, the reassurance he had brought now was the equivalent of him having brought 100,000 soldiers. She repeated his words until they sunk in, etching them into her heart.

“Uhm, but we’re supposed to make camp somewhere advantageous, right?” she asked. “If we take our time, won’t we run out of time?”

“Sun Tzu also said that by making use of detours, we can still have a sort of advantage. We’ve already planned for this.”

“R-rrright!” Linea’s cheeks flushed, her voice quaking with emotion. She had now sunk to her lowest. Her eyes as she gazed up at Yuuto were overflowing with adoration. That was why she hadn’t realized.

Yuuto was brimming with a superficial confidence, but his fist was clenched tightly with worry. “Run... don’t die on me,” he muttered so that Linea couldn’t hear.

As the sovereign patriarch, he had sent his strongest warrior because she was the best for the mission. He refused to see it as a mistake this late in the game. But in this world, Sigrun was a precious friend to Yuuto. Yuuto’s heart was torn up over the prospect that he might be sending her to certain death.

A firm, yet gentle, voice tickled Yuuto’s earlobe. “Big Brother, Run will be all right. She can handle it.”

Even though Felicia shouldn’t have been able to hear his muttering, it seemed as if his anxieties had reached her, and right away, tears welled up in Yuuto’s eyes, ready to spill forth. This superior adjutant didn’t seem like someone he could keep secrets from very well.

Standing suddenly, he put his lips close to Felicia’s ear. “I... was the one who decided fighting would be the best option. I still think that, for the Wolf Clan, that was the best choice, without a doubt. But... if we surrendered and handed over our land, at least everyone would be spared from death.”

He knew that, as the one who’d decided they should go into battle, he was

the last person who should be saying something like this. His own words made him want to vomit. Even so, doubt was eating away at his heart.

Even if they became slaves forced into harsh labor, or were taxed increasingly mercilessly, their lives becoming true struggles, that would surely be better than death, he thought. In order to protect the citizenry of the Wolf Clan, he had sent some of those very citizens off to certain death. Wasn't he just sending people to die on a whim?

Every time they went into battle, these were the inconsistencies that came to his mind.

"Big Brother, I do not desire the 'peaceful life' of a slave," Felicia said, her eyes steeled with determination. "Everyone else here feels the same way. Who in the world would wish their wives, parents and grandparents, siblings, or children to suffer such painful experiences? Everyone who has gathered here has done so in order to protect their families!"

"Everyone else feels... the same as me?" he repeated.

That can't be, echoed a voice of reason in the corner of Yuuto's mind. No matter how difficult it was, there had to be someone who felt that any alternative was preferable to dying.

Even so, he wanted someone to acknowledge his choices. To say that he wasn't mistaken.

Trying to protect someone increased the probability that one would die. In order to make a level-headed decision, he would need to dispel all doubts.

"Yes! You are our sovereign!" Felicia declared. "If you tell us that white is black, we will claim it ourselves; if you tell us to fight, we will fight; if you tell us to die, we will die. Yes, to us, you are absolute! Long ago, when we shared the Chalice with you, we were entrusting you with our lives, as well. So please... use us as you see fit!"

"...Geez, being the sovereign is a heavy job after all," Yuuto exclaimed.

He was free to do anything. He would be *forgiven* for anything. Being a sovereign was a heavy burden. Whoever said that freedom and duty went hand-in-hand was telling it like it is.

Bwoooooo! Bwooooooo!!

“Ngh! Again?!” Yngvi spat at the war horn he was growing sick of hearing. There was no way he could sleep soundly like this.

From the initial attack, for three days and nights hence, Yngvi and the Hoof Clan had taken intermittent attacks from the horseback troops.

It was always night when they attacked. They would slip into the darkness and launch their assault.

It seemed that the enemy knew an alert was being sounded, so they didn’t chance rushing deep into the formation the way they had the first time.

They rolled in, kicking up a cloud of dust, and as soon as they knew the enemy was there, they fired off a slew of arrows, turned, and retreated.

This time it was the same thing. By the time Yngvi set eyes on them, they had already begun their retreat, and soon after that, they disappeared into the darkness.

“Cowards! Every time you turn tail and run away!” Yngvi hollered. “Can you not fight head-on?!”

Losing himself to his anger, Yngvi kicked a nearby tree trunk. Unable to suppress his rage, he stamped his feet.

In order to cope with the constant surprise attacks, they had, for two days, kept a battle formation in which the Hoof Clan troops made a circle around Yngvi, or what might be referred to in modern-day Japan as a “squares and circles” battle formation.

Thanks to this formation, the casualties had been lessened, but the morale of the Hoof Clan had plunged significantly. Living in constant fear and tension, never knowing when they might be attacked, never able to let their guard down, unable to ever make a counterattack, and always being on the receiving end of an attack... it was enough to fatigue the heart.

That being said, they already knew the enemy was approaching. They couldn’t let their guard down now. And it was obvious that if they wavered, the enemy

would see it as a good opportunity and launch an attack.

They sent out scouts to patrol, but in the dark of night, locating the enemy was difficult. More than anything, the enemy was swift.

It was true that, due to being easily visible in the light of day, the enemy would not attack during that time, but the Hoof Clan soldiers were so fatigued from the night attacks that they had to take many breaks. The “squares and circles” battle formation that worked so well against the enemy was not well-suited to moving around. The Hoof Clan’s marching speed had noticeably slowed.

This was just the situation Yuuto had been aiming for. The Hoof Clan forces, which numbered in the tens of thousands, were being toyed with by a force of around one hundred.

“Finally dawn, I see.” Yngvi gazed sleepily at the eastern sky, now dyed a pale crimson.

Their initial plans had been long delayed, but they would finally reach Fólkvangr before noon. Even if they attacked the Horn Clan stronghold and put a stop to those annoying horseback attacks that had been plaguing them for days, they still couldn’t take it easy.

Yngvi’s rage up until this point felt like an unending torture. Making vows to himself in the depths of his heart, Yngvi returned to his tent and closed his eyes.

Having passed the night keeping watch, he hadn’t slept. Soldiers could not make a show of power on little sleep. Expecting flawlessness was a known habit of Yngvi’s.

Exhausted, sleep was quickly upon him...

Bwoooooo! Bwooooooo!!

The resonant sound of the war horns woke him once more.

Over these past three days, the attacks had only come at night, so they had been careless. But the enemy was not acting as he might have expected. He was irritated at his own naivete.

Yngvi yelled, spurred on by that irritation, “Where are they this time?!”

“They’re coming from Fólkvangr! It isn’t the horseback troops this time! Low-end estimates of the enemy numbers put them at least at 3,000. We think this may be the enemy’s actual army!”

“Ha! S-switch to a closed formation. Be quick about it!” Yngvi issued his directions in a panic.

The “squares and circles” formation was very effective against the surprise attacks coming from every direction, but weak against an attack coming from just one direction. If they battled like this, they would endure great casualties.

The Hoof Clan soldiers were highly skilled, and their officers had been pulled from the best of the best and placed according to their strengths. In any normal circumstance, they would have had their soldiers readied in the blink of an eye.

But, with the current state of the Hoof Clan being a tense one, right when they had expected to rest at dawn, they had finally snapped. They were fatigued from not being able to get enough sleep, and this was the final blow to their already low morale.

Reorganizing their battle formation took too long, and in that interim, the enemy army charged in, cloaked in a cloud of dust.

In this way, the curtain rose on the battle between the Hoof Clan and the joint armies of the Wolf and Horn Clans.

War cries and screams rang out ceaselessly from both sides.

Both sides fought with a bloodlust that permeated the battlefield, as if the manifestation of their wounded hearts. The battlefield overflowed with signs of death, so much so that one could feel it in their bones.

The Wolf Clan and Horn Clan joint armies organized their troops in a triangle formation, with the Wolf Clan troops as a central guard and the Horn Clan troops falling back a bit on the right and left flanks. It was a fish scale-like formation, perfect for putting a few troops in the front to break through.

“All right, keep going!” At the very front of the triangle, Yuuto was leading the attack from atop his chariot. With a loud yell, he encouraged his troops forward, afraid their resolve would break at any moment.

Likely thanks to Sigrun's efforts, the soldiers in the Hoof Clan had been ready to flee, and with this attack, many of them were unable to cope. With the vigor of their onslaught, they cut a swath straight through the enemy forces.

Battle was primarily won through numbers. This involved fighting face-to-face and handling defeat head-on. But the strategy Yuuto had employed was causing a disturbance.

Sun Tzu had said this was one way for a small force to topple a larger one. "If the enemy is taking his ease, you can harass him, if well supplied with food, you can starve him out, if quietly encamped, you can force him to move."

This overlapped with what Yuuto had told Linea in Fólkvangr: "Standing your ground awaiting those far away, awaiting the weary in comfort, awaiting the hungry with full stomachs, is mastering strength." This had been an important view held by Sun Tzu.

While they hadn't been able to starve the troops, two out of three still wasn't bad. Even though there were still many enemy troops, there weren't nearly as many as there had been before.

The Wolf Clan forces easily took out the soldiers of the Hoof Clan, shooting and striking them down. Just as Yuuto was beginning to feel that this had become a one-sided massacre, and that victory was assured...

"Big Brother! The Hoof Clan has regained control of their troops!" Felicia called.

"Tch! Already? I should expect no less from the man who built such a large nation in one generation." Yuuto clicked his tongue.

He had planned for them to ride their initial momentum and clear away the enemy forces, taking out the generals in the process, but it appeared things wouldn't go according to plan. The enemy had pulled itself together faster than he had expected.

In the blink of an eye, the Wolf Clan's fervor dulled. Yuuto, having taken command, realized that the Hoof Clan side had the power to readily push them back.

"Somehow, it seems we won't be able to solve this through ordinary means."

Sensing a rough battle lie ahead, Yuuto bit down hard on his lip.

On the other hand, gnashing his teeth, Yngvi was feeling the same way.

They had taken minimal casualties in the chaos at the start of battle, and he had pulled his troops together and launched a counterattack, but no longer felt that victory was guaranteed. To think that they were constantly being assailed by such a small army!

This was likely due to the fatigue from days without sleep and the subsequent decreased morale. But more importantly than that...

“What are those spears?!” Yngvi screamed.

Just as they had when they fought the Horn Clan, the Wolf Clan wielded spears in tight formations that doubled their reach. The Hoof Clan’s attacks couldn’t reach the enemy, and the Wolf Clan could still launch a one-sided counterattack.

If this had been a simple battle where the longspear-wielding soldiers could only stab forward, it would be easy to dodge the attack and go in for the kill. But since there were too many spears gathered together, there were no openings to get through to attack, and no way to evade the counterattacks. And that wasn’t all; they easily pierced right through the Hoof Clan’s bronze shields. Those shields could not stop the spear attacks. This was, in truth, the most frustrating thing of all.

“Could they be made out of iron?!” Yngvi wondered.

As it was the Bronze Age, these people did not yet know how to properly refine iron. Still, that didn’t mean that they didn’t know what iron was. They had found iron in meteorites, which themselves were rare but often held large quantities of the metal. On Yggdrasil, this firm metal that fell from the sky and was infinitely sturdier than bronze had been long treasured as jewelry or money.

“But they couldn’t have that much...” he went on frantically. “Have they found a way to manufacture iron?!”

Though it was difficult to believe, that was the only conclusion he could come

to. Iron was normally a scarce material that could only be found by picking it up from meteorites. Even a big clan like the Hoof Clan had very little. He couldn't imagine an impoverished clan from the mountains possessing such a great quantity.

"Keh heh heh, I'd heard these Wolf Clan brats pulled all these strange tricks. It seems that was true. Fascinating! Truly fascinating!" Yngvi couldn't suppress the laughter that had welled up and burst forth from within.

Surely it was because of these weapons the Wolf Clan possessed that they'd been able to stand against and destroy the Horn Clan and Claw Clans.

"Heh heh, I truly do have good fortune. This surely means the heavens have allied themselves with me."

With such impressive materials, the Wolf Clan could slay other, punier clans. Yngvi's heart swelled with a noncommittal respect.

If the Hoof Clan were equipped with iron weapons, they would become even mightier, and the supreme military force of Yggdrasil would be even more of a threat.

"Such strength could change the world," he said with awe.

With the experience of hundreds of battles behind him, Yngvi's words were accurate in their foresight.

If one examines ancient Eastern history, it was the Hittites who had first succeeded in refining iron. Thus, they became a country that established a hegemony and held the world of the Bronze Age in their grasp.

"Now then, what shall we do?" Yngvi licked his lips and turned his eyes once more to observe the battlefield.

Certainly, with the iron longspears, the Wolf Clan was a menace. Though their numbers were fewer than 2,000, the most elite warriors of the Hoof Clan army that had suppressed Álfheim would be no match for them. There was a real possibility that if the Hoof Clan went at them head-on, they could take out this army of 10,000.

That being said, this was a head-on attack.

“Hmph! They’ve given up!” Yngvi yelled.

To be sure, those longspears were frightening when faced head-on. He thought that, once they returned home, they would forge a troop using similar weapons. However, with that close battle formation and considerable length, it didn’t seem at all that tight turns would work well for them. If they went at their enemies from a right angle, it might be troublesome for them.

In other words, if they launched an attack from the side, the enemy forces wouldn’t be able to launch a decent counterattack.

On top of that, the Hoof Clan had their five hundred much-cherished chariots. If one were to go on numbers alone for basis of militaristic power, the Hoof Clan, who had slaughtered numerous enemies, would be granted a quick victory.

“Heh heh! This flat patch of land those fools have chosen will be their downfall.”

The large wheels on the chariots severely restricted their movements.

The chariot’s one weakness was the terrain on which it could be used, but that would be a non-issue here.

A general as experienced as Yngvi knew enough to send a spy to do a preliminary investigation of the Horn Clan’s territory so that they could plan the route that would best demonstrate the power of their chariots.

Riding around on his favorite chariot, Yngvi laughed without fear. “I will end this battle with my own hands!”

As their sovereign patriarch headed for the front, the Horn Clan soldiers let out a battle cry.

“Incredible! We can win this battle!” Linea called, as the Wolf Clan troops broke through the vanguard with a steady advance.

Her forces had once suffered greatly at the mercy of the spearmen. If anyone knew the threat they posed, she did.

That was exactly why she knew that her clan had no allies more dependable

than they.

“Attack coming from the enemy’s left side!” she called. “There it is!”

Her body shook.

Linea had recently experienced an unending string of defeats. She told herself that this was not the time to worry over whether she was worthy to command her troops, and tried her best to overcome her doubts.

Before the battle started, Yuuto had told Linea about the longspear unit being weak to a side attack. It had been such a brief time since she’d become his subordinate, so the things her older brother had shared with her left a deep impression on her heart. She wanted to live up to his expectations. Indeed, she had made a vow to do so.

“Uwah!”

But all of those feelings blew off like dust in the wind when she saw the sheer magnitude of the enemy forces.

Linea had had much experience on the battlefield. Even when she had faced off against the longspear unit, her heart had burned with hatred but had never frozen with fear.

A huge number of horses, each several times larger than a human, moved forward, their movements causing tremors in the earth. Their overwhelming size called forth a true wave of terror.

It seemed that her own soldiers felt the same way. They were losing their nerve upon seeing the chariot unit approach in a cloud of dust.

“Stand strong and firm! If we can hold them back, victory will be ours!” Linea shouted with all her might, but her words failed to reach her soldiers.

The soldiers of the Horn Clan had fallen into a complete state of frightened panic. They had lost before the battle even started.

“Uwaaaaaagh!!”

“Eeeeeek!!”

The moment the two armies clashed, cries went up from the front lines.

The chariot unit very easily and with no resistance broke up the front lines and cleaved the Horn Clan forces in half.

At the center of the vanguard, shocking as it was, was what looked like a giant. Swinging around a giant spear with no restraint, it was like an angry demon, mowing down the Horn Clan troops with viscous attacks.

As if in response, the Hoof Clan solders were letting out war cries that seemed to shake the ground, as if trying to boost their own morale.

“Th-there’s no way we can win against them!” Linea gnashed her teeth in despair.

More than her own death, Linea feared the fact that she wouldn’t be able to protect everyone. Though she had done everything in her power, the hard truth, that she was actually powerless, had been laid bare for all to see. Her beloved subordinates were being silently turned into corpses, one after the other.

“Save them... please, save them all, Big Brother!” she pleaded into the air.



“They’re still going?!” Yuuto bit his lip, staring at the deadlock with a grim look in his eyes.

The enemy was no fool. In order to avoid facing the longspears head on, the front lines had gone on the defensive, while launching an attack with arrows from behind.

Little by little, the Wolf Clan soldiers were beginning to experience casualties. It was clear that, even though they had caused the enemy many more casualties, if they continued to take damage like this, they would be at a disadvantage by number of troops alone.

“Big Brother, the Horn Clan troops on our left flank are being attacked by chariots!” Felicia called.

“It seems they’ve figured out our weakness!” Yuuto moaned.

This was the first time the Hoof Clan had experienced the enemy’s specialized tactics. And in that small period of time, they had seen through to the longspear troops’ weak point and changed strategies accordingly. The ability to come to such a conclusion amid all the chaos and to launch a counterattack so soon afterwards was truly admirable.

Yuuto couldn’t help but call the enemy general exceptional. He was truly a troublesome opponent that was difficult to battle.

“But in this game of tactics... It seems like I’m the victor. Well, I did cheat, though,” Yuuto said, the corners of his mouth twitching into a grin.

A different part of the passage he had recited from Sun Tzu earlier came to mind. “By holding out advantages to him, he can cause the enemy to approach of his own accord.”

In other words, you could make the enemy approach you of their own accord, exactly according to your plans, as long as you fool them into thinking they have something to gain from it.

Having faced the menace of the longspear troops, the enemy would be certain to figure out their weak point, and then they would attack it. They’d done so with the strongest force in this time period, the chariots.

So, that would be the perfect time and place to set a trap.

In war, lowering enemy morale was essential. One would need to smash what the enemy put its faith in most until nothing remained. Mental attacks were of great importance.

If an enemy lost their last ray of hope, even an army of tens of thousands would be degraded to a giant mob. And if that happened, the mob would no longer be an enemy of the Wolf Clan.

You're up, Run! Yuuto thought. *Destroy them!*

Mm, so they finally brought out the chariots. Snacking on a loaf of bread, Sigrun was surveying the battlefield from a forest off in the distance.

The Múspell unit, led by Sigrun, remained hidden in the forest a short ways from Fólkvangr in order to rest up for their next day — or night — of battle.

Just as the Hoof Clan had been steadily driven to exhaustion with surprise attacks, the Múspell unit had to attack an overwhelmingly more powerful force over and over, day and night. It was taxing for them too.

If their hiding place was discovered and surrounded, things would be over then and there. One must be attentive at all times, not just during battle.

Furthermore, this strategy relied heavily on speed, and so they had to be ready to act on a moment's notice. The rations they had carried with them had been quickly exhausted, so they had survived on food acquired locally. Yuuto of the Wolf Clan had warned that pillaging was unacceptable; so silver nuggets were to be used in exchange for food.

Since the Horn Clan benefited from the fertile land along the Körmt River Basin, they had expected they'd be able to find food and provisions along the banks of the river, but as they had been unfamiliar with the land, finding villages had proven to be difficult. They had barely taken anything resembling a real break, so the Múspell unit was even more exhausted than the Hoof Clan.

"Ohh, it looks like they figured it out," Sigrun exclaimed, partly with admiration.

If an enemy was due accolades for their strength or cunning, then she would pay them the proper respect. That was the way a true soldier like Sigrun handled things.

The chariot unit was moving around the main theater of the battlefield rather than through it. The reason for that was clear. It was so that they could surpass the infantrymen and swing around in order to launch a side attack on the longspear unit.

Even in the wake of Sigrun's surprise attack, the soldiers had been able to quickly calm themselves. Because of that, their first plan to take advantage of the chaos and burn enemy supplies had been unable to come to fruition.

Perhaps it was the result of his experience, but the general who led the Hoof Clan was surprisingly skilled at coping with these unexpected situations. The soldiers surely had great faith in him. Simply giving soldiers commands when in such a state of confusion was not enough to bring them back around. If they were not addressed by someone with suitable dignity and charisma, it would not work.

All Sigrun could do in the end was click her tongue in astonishment. "To think I'd be able to lead a great general like that around by the nose so easily."

A slightly scornful laugh slipped from her lips.

Naturally, they had no time for Yuuto to make minute-by-minute plans for this particular battle. She had heard the details from Yuuto in advance: the weakness of the longspear unit, the fact that the enemy would probably send a detached force to launch a side attack at that weakness, and how to cope with such an outcome.

"All right, finally it's my turn!"

At almost the same moment that the chariot unit clashed with the Horn Clan troops, smoke rose up from the Wolf Clan's main unit. It was the signal for the Múspell unit to charge.

Sigrun turned around and urged the soldiers who had battled for three days and three nights to charge forward: "Now then, everyone, brace yourselves for the final push!"

All of their faces were thick with shades of exhaustion, yet in the blink of an eye, fighting spirit suddenly brimmed over in their eyes. Wasted effort can double one's fatigue, but seeing good results can grant one a vigor that sweeps fatigue away. The Múspell unit's effort had borne fruit, and their morale had never been higher.

Sigrun's heart warmed at how dependable they all were. "Victory depends on what we do here now! Let's show the Hoof Clan troops the terror of our assault, and the true spoils of Valhalla!"

"Yeaaaaahhhhh!!"

Sigrun thrust the spear she was holding into the air, and the soldiers let out a war cry so great, it caused the air to quake.

Within Sigrun, the Devourer of the Moon Hati responded to the war cry, and she now wore a ferocious smile, just like a hungry wolf.

True, she was a warrior whose only talent to offer her master was her fighting ability. In peacetime, she could do little to help him. But it was specifically because of that, that now more than ever was the perfect chance to serve him.

"Múspell unit, attack!"

In time with her command, Sigrun kicked her favorite horse and charged forward.

Her subordinates followed behind her. The chaotic pack of ferocious Wolf Clan troops burst out of the forest and quickly gained on the back end of the chariot unit.

"Ngh! Them again!" Yngvi spat in disgust.

Just as the Hoof Clan had launched their surprise attack, they were met with another surprise attack. They had ended up in something of a pincer formation. The magnitude of this disgrace continued to seethe through his body.

They had been thoroughly had by the enemy. The hatred he felt went through to his bones.

"Lieutenant Assistant! Handle the forward Horn Clan troops! I'll deal with

those brats over there!”

Leaving the rear to the throngs of soldiers overseen by the Lieutenant Assistant, Yngvi boomed his sonorous order and rounded his chariot on the horseback soldiers.

The Horn Clan forces, who had led the initial charge, had long since lost their fighting spirit. They were no longer a threat.

“I’ll take out all the rage I’ve accrued on you fools here and now!”

These enemies had refused to fight head-on, simply choosing to run away from him every time. If they were coming in for the kill, then this was just the opportunity he had wished for.

The troops with the longspears were still a menace, but with the chariots’ mobility, things would surely work out. Right now the instinct born of his years of military experience told him, the real threat he must defeat was none other than this force of horseback soldiers.

And yet, what unfolded here would still have been unbelievable to Yngvi if he had not seen it himself.

The horseback troops moved past him, going twice as fast as the chariots, coming up on their side. Boosted by the velocity at which they moved, their spears struck the chariot wheels one after the other.

The chariots were comprised of a wooden carriage that seated two large men at most, and were supported by two wheels. They could handle quite a load. But striking the chariots’ wheels disrupted their movement, knocking the chariots off balance and toppling them, one after another, onto their sides.

“Gagh!”

“Gyagh!”

Soldiers thrown from numerous chariots were either stabbed by spears or crushed by oncoming horses.

Needless to say, the chariot was the strongest weapon in existence on Yggdrasil. Watching the overwhelming gains they had made against the Horn Clan troops, that much was obvious.

But that was limited to this era alone. In another 1,000 years, the chariot would reign until it was chased off the worldwide theater of battle by the appearance of cavalrymen.

In terms of sheer manpower and ability, the Hoof Clan forces had the upper hand, as they had the chariots and could move more quickly. On the other hand, from its inception, the Múspell unit had trained specifically to do battle with chariots. It was a development that made the difference in ability rather one-sided.

The Hoof Clan chariot unit, which had boasted that it was unbeatable within Álfheim, had been said to always lead a one-sided battle that no enemy could launch a counterattack against. Though many might oppose them, they always had mobility on their side.

Which was why this situation had them so stuck.

One of the Wolf Clan horsemen called out to Yngvi, who had taken up position at the center of his chariots. “Wearing such attire, you must be one of their generals! Well, your head will be mine to claim!” She readied a spear, and charged at Yngvi.

“My, what a surprise...” Yngvi murmured.

When someone as experienced as Yngvi saw a person ready their weapon, he could get a sense of what that man was capable of. It felt like this person was a talented fighter, but in the end, nothing more and nothing less. He couldn’t figure out how he had kept from falling down while swinging around a spear on horseback.

“Take that!” The horseman’s spear aimed for the wheels of Yngvi’s chariot and swung.

But Yngvi had already witnessed that attack before.

Clang!

Yngvi’s spear repelled the spear of the cavalryman away from the wheels of his chariot.

If he knew where the attack was coming from, such a feat was easy for him.

“Petulant child,” he called. “Know your betters. The likes of you will never be a match for an Einherjar like me! I wield Gullinbursti, the Golden Boar Who Pulls the Chariot!”

Yngvi put everything he had into both arms, swinging his spear upward mightily. With the weight of that one attack, he flung the cavalryman’s spear into the sky. This abnormal physical strength was the power of Gullinbursti. Then Yngvi used his follow-up blow to slit the cavalryman’s throat.

“Nagh!”

A weak voice emanated from him as blood spurted from his neck, and the man toppled limply to the ground. The horse, having lost its master, began looking around in a panic.

“Christoph! You bastard!” At that moment, a girl locked eyes with Yngvi, enraged that he had cut down the subordinate she had trained with for so long.

She was a beauty, with striking silver hair that trailed behind her. She clearly wasn’t fit for the battlefield. But her eyes were different than the women’s in the back room of his palace. These were not the eyes of a woman. They were the eyes of a ferocious animal who, if one approached unprepared, would maul you to death.

During the night attacks, Yngvi hadn’t been able to distinguish the faces from afar, only the eyes, but the way those eyes and her silver hair glistened in the moonlight had left an impression on him. He had witnessed the arrows she had launched, striking down several of his subordinates. This time, he could clearly see her ferocity on the battlefield. She was clearly stronger than any of the other soldiers.

“Little girl!” he called. “So you’re the one in charge of this unit!”

“Indeed! I am the Einherjar of Hati, the Devourer of the Moon! I am the Mánagarmr, Sigrun! I see that you yourself are also an elite warrior. So give me your name!”

“A mountain dog like you should have heard my name long ago. I am the sovereign patriarch of the Hoof Clan and the supreme ruler of all of Álfheim, Yngvi!”

“Ohhh, then with your defeat, we’ll have won this battle, then!”

“Forget it! Without you to lead them, your horseback troops will quickly fall into disarray! I’ll knock that head off of your shoulders!” he called out in a booming voice.

“Interesting. Take me, if you think you can!” she yelled just as ferociously.

Sigrun charged. As they passed each other, Sigrun aimed her spear at the top of Yngvi’s shoulder and struck. Unlike the cavalryman from earlier, she was much faster. Her speed was so fast, it was an attack one might have called divine.

However, this was Yngvi, the hero of the Hoof Clan who had defeated more than a hundred enemy fighters with his own hands. He could easily see the movement of the spear. A high-pitched sound rang out as the two spears clashed.

The one that went flying was Yngvi’s. It hit the wall of the carriage hard.

It was decided not by a difference in raw physical strength but by a difference in speed. There was a major difference in the speed of a horse that carried only a small girl versus the speed of two horses meant to carry a chariot with two large men inside. That speed affected the momentum and impact of their strikes.

Having shot past Yngvi’s chariot, Sigrun pulled hard on the reins of her horse. Perhaps in shock, her horse’s front legs kicked up.

“What is this?!” Yngvi could only see it as black magic, the way that with her horse in that posture she held on to her weapon without dropping it, all without falling.

What surprised him even further was how this time, she pulled the bridle to the right and, in an instant, turned to pursue Yngvi’s chariot.

He was captivated by her skill in handling the horse alone. If they hadn’t been in the type of situation they were, he would have readily invited her to become his subordinate.

Still, this was the battlefield. There was no time for such frivolous thoughts.

Grabbing the rim of the carriage, he picked himself up, grabbed his spear and hurriedly readied it.

The chariot he rode on was still in the middle of a turn. He had found the mobility of chariots so reliable up to that point, but now, seeing the harmony between horse and rider before him, he couldn't help but feel slow by comparison.

"Prepare yourself!" she cried.

"This is nothing!" he roared back.

Upon being attacked by the spear once more, Yngvi supported himself by putting a leg on the wall of the carriage, dropping his center of gravity, then returned the strike.

Sigrun's eyes filled with shock. She likely hadn't expected him to prevent such a critical blow.

"Ng! That strength, that coloration — that must mean your weapon is made of iron?!"

"Hmph! You're not the only ones with iron weapons!"

To be sure, iron was a metal that was scarce, and thus had five times the value of gold. But as someone who had become the sovereign of a major clan like the Hoof Clan, it was only natural that Yngvi had come into possession of some for himself. This spear had been with him for ten years, protecting his life and serving as a trusted partner in battle.

After that, the two warriors halted their horses and continued the lightning fast exchange of blows.

Because of the ferocity of their battle, the nearby soldiers of both armed forces would not dare approach to help. Anyone who could not skillfully enter the fray would likely get swept up in the onslaught of blows, likely dying a futile death amid the fury of strikes.

They went at it for a long time, their battle constantly ending in what seemed like a draw, knocking both off their equilibrium.

Their speed was almost equal. But there was a regrettable difference in their

physical strength.

In general, having the higher vantage point in battle was advantageous. Naturally, attacking from higher up added weight to the strike. Taking all of that into account, it was Sigrun who was at the disadvantage.

As time passed, Sigrun's one-sided disadvantage became more and more apparent. When she moved to attack, she had to swoop her spear upward in an arc. Yngvi had been sidestepping most of her thrusts up to this point, leaving her stabbing at air. She was finding it hard to compensate and keep her posture when stopping his attacks. She fell backward, losing balance.

Yngvi had no intention of letting the opportunity evade him. He went all in to launch the finishing blow, and using the chance for an all-or-nothing sweeping attack.

"Haah!!"

"Ungh! Whaa?!"

Sigrun used that divine speed of hers to react and turned her spear vertically, blocking his attack. However, she was too light. Her body was thrown up into the air.

In that moment, Sigrun tossed her spear aside and tried to tuck and roll as she hit the ground, to diffuse the impact of being thrown from her horse. It wasn't something she thought about. Young though she was, she merely followed the intuition she had developed from so much experience on the battlefield.

"Tch!"

Using the momentum from being thrown, Sigrun quickly recovered. She had practiced breakfalls many times, though that didn't mean there was no impact. Her face twisted in pain. If she had landed on her back, there was no doubt that the injury would have been so severe that she would not have been able to move for some time. Still, it was obvious that she had been cornered in a most disadvantageous situation.

"I suppose this means I win." The corners of Yngvi's mouth twitched upward as he turned the point of his spear toward Sigrun once more.

Part of his skill was being able to calculate offense and defense based on a quick calculation of his strengths versus an enemy's weaknesses. It was something he'd honed over the twenty years he had spent on the battlefield.

"You truly have a great deal of skill, little girl... no, hero of the Wolf Sigrun. If you had been born five years earlier, the outcome of our conflict likely would have been the opposite."

For Yngvi, this was the highest possible compliment. After all, as arrogant a king as he was, he was implying that Sigrun had the capability to be even greater than him.

Those with strength should lead, and those without should follow. Survival of the fittest. It was the primary law of this world, Yggdrasil. The clan system itself ran on the same idea. Yngvi was a perfect example of this.

He had treated the weak as slaves with no value in his kingdom, working them heartlessly to the bone and treating them as if they were not human, and yet, if he was faced with a strong person, even as an enemy, he would show them respect.

Sigrun stared at Yngvi in silence. Her eyes affirmed that, though the situation was dire, she hadn't lost her fighting spirit.

Yngvi also pulled himself together. Though both of them were strong, Yngvi had the advantage of experience. And the difference between being on foot or in a chariot was great.

More than anything else, space was vital in a battle. And without her spear, all she had left was a sword at her belt. Trying to reach Yngvi, who was in the carriage of the chariot, would be difficult. There was only a one-in-ten-thousand chance he could lose. But he knew from years of experience that, no matter how he might respect an opponent, he could spare no amount of negligence. A wounded boar would only become even more vicious.

"This is the first time in a while I've had such an enthralling battle," he called. "May we meet again in Valhalla!"

Yngvi charged toward Sigrun with his chariot.

Even as he felt he couldn't bring himself to crush such a warrior, he also knew

it was a soldier's etiquette to put another out of their misery. Yngvi thrust his spear with all his might down at Sigrun's heart.

"Wha?!"

In the next second, something happened to him that had already happened numerous times in this campaign — a sight unfolded before him that made him doubt what he was seeing.

Yngvi's spear was an invincible weapon that had won him many battles, destroying any number of weapons and guaranteeing him victory. The Hoof Clan soldiers sincerely believed that the heavens themselves had granted Yngvi that spear.

The tip of that rare weapon refined from meteoric iron fell away, cut clean through as if it were butter.

The girl before him held a strange weapon that glinted the same silver color as her hair. It was a weapon the likes of which Yngvi had never seen in his long military career. It was a sword, but it was a single-edged one. The blade itself had a soft curvature and featured a strange and beautiful pattern along its length, like waves of white lines. Not only that: as many times as the blade might have been used, there wasn't even a hint of a nick in it.

"Haaa!" With a sharp scream, Sigrun kicked off the ground and leapt into the air. She held that mysterious and beautiful weapon high above her head, then swung it downward.

"Ngh!!" Yngvi immediately reached for the sword strapped at his side to stop the blow. Though he had always favored fighting with his spear up to this point, this sword was also an uncommon blade made of refined meteoric iron.

Even that wasn't enough to stop his enemy's blade, and with great force it cleaved right through his sword and sank into the top of his shoulder.

With a *slice*, the awful sound of flesh being cut apart reached his ears.



“I’ll return your words from earlier, hero of the Hoof Clan,” she said. “If I did not have Father, the outcome of our conflict would have been the opposite.”

Still holding her sword aloft, Sigrun landed on one knee as she touched down on the ground. Flashing through her mind was the moment when, despite being at a clear advantage on her fast horse, she had been bested and knocked to the ground. It was vexing, but in that moment she had lost the battle as a fighter. What had finally reversed the fate of their duel was simply the difference in quality of their weapons.

“Uwaagh! Our sovereign has been felled!” a soldier screamed.

“It can’t be! Our sovereign?! Not by that little girl!”

“Retreat! Without the sovereign, we cannot win!”

“Eeeeyagh!!”

The Hoof Clan soldiers emitted cries of grief. They were thrown into complete chaos at the death of their sovereign, who had been lauded as the strongest.

The remaining Hoof Clan chariots spun around in a panic and sped away.

Yngvi truly had been the great man responsible for holding the Hoof Clan together. The sovereign’s words had been law: “Follow the sovereign, and victory is yours.” One might say that what had drawn the Hoof Clan members to him was an almost-religious devotion.

In other words: he had been the source of their firm structure during battle, but now that he was gone, their structure had become rather brittle.

“Ngh... Ouch!” Sigrun staggered as she tried to stand, wrinkling her face from the sharp pain in her left foot. When she’d fallen off the horse, her foot had been caught in the strap, and she had twisted it.

Sigrun confirmed that Yngvi had in fact fallen from his chariot from that attack. Glancing around her, she quickly found him.

Dragging her leg, she approached him and peered into his face.

“Cough! W-what is that weapon?” Somehow, Yngvi still had breath in his lungs. The rune of Gullinbursti, the Golden Boar Who Pulls the Chariot, must

have yielded uncanny physical strength.

However, his chest was dyed red with a great deal of blood, and the shadow of death was eclipsing his face. Anyone could clearly tell that he wouldn't live much longer.

Before going into battle, the plan might have been to take him alive, but in the end, Sigrun did not have that luxury, and so she had to make the choice to sentence him to public execution.

Sigrun spoke, thrusting the weapon she held out in front of Yngvi. "Apparently it's called a *nihontou*. Father is afraid it isn't anything close to what his real father made, though."

In the area between two mountain ranges that formed the territory of the Wolf Clan, they had been able to find high quality iron sand in the soil. They had then refined the iron sand in a Tatara-style furnace, a Japan-specific refinement method, then used the resulting steel, tempering it and refining it, over and over, into a blade so sharp it could cut through iron in the right hands.

Even before he had been old enough to know what was going on, Yuuto had watched his father at work. The entire operation had been burned onto the insides of his eyelids. He had studied the Tatara-style furnace over and over again. These experiences had been a great deal of help to him.

It was something he and Ingrid, the master of the forge, had spent half a year working on, giving their all to create.

"So you're... saying there are even better weapons... than that?" Yngvi gasped. "The world is so... cough... so vast. I would have liked to have held one myself... cough... but it doesn't seem like that will happen now. Still... if I must die at the hands of a warrior like yourself... then... I... am... satis...fied...!"

"I also feel a great deal of pride that I could cross blades with one such as yourself. We shall meet again in Valhalla."

"Hmph!" Yngvi gave a satisfied smile and closed his eyes at last.

These were the final moments of the mighty man who had commanded the people of Álfheim.

Sigrun thrust her blade into the ground and then lowered her head gently. She was expressing her condolences at the death of a warrior.

After a period of silent prayer, Sigrun once again lifted the blade out of the ground and thrust it toward the heavens.

The sovereign of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, had been killed by Sigrun of the Wolf Clan!

EPILOGUE

The news of the death of the sovereign patriarch of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, spread like wildfire throughout the battlefield.

At first, the members of the Hoof Clan on the battlefield didn't believe it or wrote it off as lies, but in the ensuing silence from their military headquarters, their doubts began to grow.

Yngvi was definitely not the sort of man who would leave his soldiers crippled with grief. He was the type who could, however, see the chaos within his troops, and, issuing swift orders, reassure them. If he had been alive and heard the fake news that he was supposedly dead, he would surely have made an ostentatious display to show he was in good health.

But that never came.

It was only a matter of time before the soldiers realized that the supposed lies were actually facts. In that moment, they were assailed by an uncertainty so great, it was as if the ground shook beneath their feet.

They had fought with no doubts they would win specifically because they had Yngvi. How could such a heroic and strong sovereign have been felled by an enemy clan's sovereign?

Almost all of the Hoof Clan soldiers, with the exception of the officers, were farmers or slaves. They had been forced into battle. Several of them finally began to drop their weapons and run away.

As one fled, then another or two more would pursue, beginning the chain of deserters. In that moment, it was as if the firm control of them had never existed, and the Hoof Clan's army dissolved.

In the meantime, the allied forces of the Wolf Clan and Horn Clans only increased their enthusiasm at the news of the enemy general's death.

If there had been a worthy second-in-command who could have taken over the army in Yngvi's stead, perhaps they would have held out, but it seemed that

Yngvi had been far too great. There were many capable generals and officers in the Hoof Clan's military who had been valuable to Yngvi, but no one individual who could replace him now that he was gone.

The Wolf and Horn Clan combined forces let out a cry of victory at the sight of the retreating Hoof Clan forces.

The following day, in the Horn Clan Capital Fólkvangr, they held a magnificent festival to celebrate their victory.

As if placing a blessing upon the Wolf and Horn Clans together, the skies had cleared up, leaving not a cloud and making for the perfect day for a festival.

Throughout the town rang out the whistles of flutes and the banging of drums, as the people were overjoyed that they had been saved and were able to carry on their lives.

In the plaza at the center of town, the soldiers of the two clans were drinking together. The only way to persuade two bitter enemies to become friends was by finding another common enemy. Though they had quarreled for years as bitter enemies, this victory had, while not completely, at least started the process of sweeping away old hostilities.

Yuuto heaved a heavy sigh at the vulgar, audacious laughter of the soldiers in the distance. "I guess it really was an easy victory, after all."

Considering the charisma he'd had, the death of Yngvi would thrust the Hoof Clan into chaos. Even if his second-in-command succeeded him, that new sovereign would have his hands full for some time, trying to settle matters of authority and power within his own clan.

In other words, though they bordered the Horn Clan, the Hoof Clan had been destroyed, leaving not a trace. They were no longer a country that would invade on their own whims. At the very least, it was acceptable to say that the menace who had launched an unheard-of attack upon the Horn Clan had been destroyed.

However, a mountain of problems remained.

The death of the supreme ruler Yngvi had likely had the impact of arousing

the ambitions of nearby clans, who had likely watched for an opening like a hawk. If one looked at the Horn Clan on its own, peace had come to them, but looking at Álfheim as a whole, this most recent battle would lead to a general feeling of unease. If that led to a disturbance involving the Horn Clan, then, much like this time, the Wolf Clan would be sure to get involved, as well.

Still, one could not comfortably predict the future. Yuuto was still groping in the dark for a way to return home to the 21st century.

Yuuto intended for the Chalice he had shared with the Horn and Claw Clans to be a lasting bond, so he would need to make arrangements for the friendly relations to persist after he was gone. Just thinking about it made his head pound.

But his current problem was...

“Mm, the water’s so nice,” Sigrun murmured. “It’s like the spoils of our victory.”

“More like it brings you back to life,” Felicia said. “Ahh... my exhaustion’s being washed away... ♪”

“You sound like an old lady, Felicia.”

“O-old?! I-if I’m an old woman, then so are you, Run! You’re only seven days younger than I am!”

“You’re still clinging to that? You really need to get over it.”

“As if you could understand the extra seven days of toil I have experienced on this plane!”

Felicia and Sigrun had broken into an argument, and Yuuto was between them.

Though he had so much going on in his mind, Yuuto honestly just wanted them to give him a break.

They were within the giant hot spring within the Horn Clan capital. It was a holy place, normally only granted to those who worked in holy occupations to use to cleanse themselves. Therefore, natural though it might have been, both of the women were stark naked as the day they were born. And, even though

there was a male in their presence, neither made an attempt to cover themselves.

The truth was, part of the reason he had busied his mind with such troublesome thoughts was to escape these circumstances. Even so, the fact that his eyes would occasionally shift to their bodies was something that he, as a guy, couldn't help.

He attempted to appeal to his own sense of reason, even if he didn't have to hold back, but he found it difficult to take control. The soft sound of splashing water finally attracted his eyes away.

"Tee hee! If you're really that curious, then it's fine to take a look," Felicia giggled. "My mind and body all belong to you, after all, Big Brother."

"Aagh! Don't say such embarrassing things! I'm not looking at anything. I'm not interested!" Yuuto lied, growing angry in response to her wicked gaze.

It was like he had completely lost all of his senses at Felicia's normally-lukewarm gaze. It was as if Yuuto had asked himself how things had ended up like this, then answered his own question.

Yuuto generally bathed alone back in the Wolf Clan's capital city. At first, the maids had tried to assist him with the bath, but he had firmly refused, insisting, "Let me at least enjoy my bath in peace!" But now they were within the Horn Clan stronghold, where they had battled for their lives just the other day. It was Felicia who insisted that he couldn't be left alone in this most vulnerable, naked state.

That being the case, Yuuto would have just headed back to the Wolf Clan capital, but a feast to celebrate their victory was in the works here at the palace. Naturally, as the Wolf Clan's sovereign patriarch, Yuuto had no choice but to attend, as he was the main party who had lead everyone to victory in this battle.

And Yuuto had been filthy with soot from the several days they had spent journeying here. This was a feast being held for the neighboring clans. If he didn't ensure that his appearance was neat, it would reflect poorly on the Wolf Clan.

So now that everything had been put to rest, and with these two beautiful girls on either side of him, he covered his body a bit, blushing. There was not a hint of dignity befitting a hero who had destroyed a great clan such as the Hoof Clan.

“Uggh, why is it that you two have to guard me?” he moaned. “If you think about it, male guards would have been fine.”

“But I’m always your guard, Big Brother, am I not?”

“This is former enemy territory,” Sigrun declared. “I would be nervous if Felicia were the only one with you. I feel I am most suited to this task, as the Strongest Silver Wolf Mánagarmr.”

“That’s true, yes. And since Run is also female, her seeing me naked doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

“Have you forgotten that I’m of the opposite sex?!”

“You’re a special case, though,” the two of them asserted at the same time, as Yuuto sank into the hot water.

If Mitsuki knew about this, she would likely cut ties with me, Yuuto thought, as a chill reached him even in the warmth of the bath.

Speaking of Mitsuki, he was only now realizing that he had ridden off into battle without telling her where he was going. She was likely worried that she still hadn’t heard from him. The thought made him restless somehow.

“I-I’m just going to get cleaned up,” he said. “I still need to get things ready.”

Somehow, unable to remain any longer, Yuuto stood up in a panic and headed for the washing area. He was a bit embarrassed that they would see him naked, but they had seen him when he’d gotten in, so that feeling waned. His priority was getting out of there. A man of virtue shouldn’t allow himself near such a situation.

“Oh! Please wait!” Sigrun held Yuuto back, reaching for the sword she had leaning on a nearby wall.

Her harsh tone caused him to turn around, afraid some ruffian might be on the attack, so he stiffened.

He couldn’t really tell through the steam, but she was much more petite than Felicia, with a slightly more rounded shape. He suddenly shifted his gaze in the direction Sigrun was glaring: the entrance to the bath. Straining his ears, he could hear some sort of exchange.

Perhaps someone was coming.

The top members of the Múspell unit that Sigrun oversaw were on the other side of the wall. Yuuto tilted his head, certain that, if it were a suspicious person, they wouldn’t be able to enter head-on, and then he saw a shadow standing there.

“What are those fools doing? I told them not to let anyone through,” Sigrun spat in an agitated tone and walked several steps ahead of Yuuto.

As she did this, her toned buttocks made their way into Yuuto’s line of sight, and he couldn’t look away as she was in front of the entrance, so a feeling of disgust with himself at such a crucial time welled up within Yuuto.

“Big Brother,” a familiar voice said.

“Linea...?” Yuuto couldn’t see her through the steam, but he recognized her voice.

She was no suspicious person, but rather the master of this castle, and his subordinate. She had entered, and of course the Múspell bodyguards would have been unable to send her away.

Passing into the steam, Linea appeared. While they had once been hidden by fabric, the majority of her sides and thighs were visible, giving Yuuto’s eyes no safe place to land.

“What is it you need, Big Sister?” Felicia asked in a cold voice.

Technically, Felicia had been the first to become Yuuto’s little sister subordinate, so Felicia was the one who should be called “Big Sister,” but as Linea had been the Horn Clan’s sovereign, her social standing was higher, and so Felicia must have chosen this form of address to reflect that.

“I have something important to discuss with you, as the sovereign of the Horn Clan,” said Linea.

“Is it really so important that we have to discuss it here?” Yuuto asked. “I can listen to what you have to say later...”

“They say that if you want to be truly honest with someone, you must bare everything to them. And so I thought if I must do so, then right here is the only place we can discuss it.”

“Hmph. And yet despite that you’re covering up your front side,” Sigrun snorted, sounding bored.

Simple as she was, that still seemed a bit ugly for her to say. It was actually something Yuuto had expected her to say. It was, and yet inside, he let out a small scream.

If she taunted Linea like that, then surely...

“...As you wish, servant girl.” The towel shielding Linea’s front fell away.

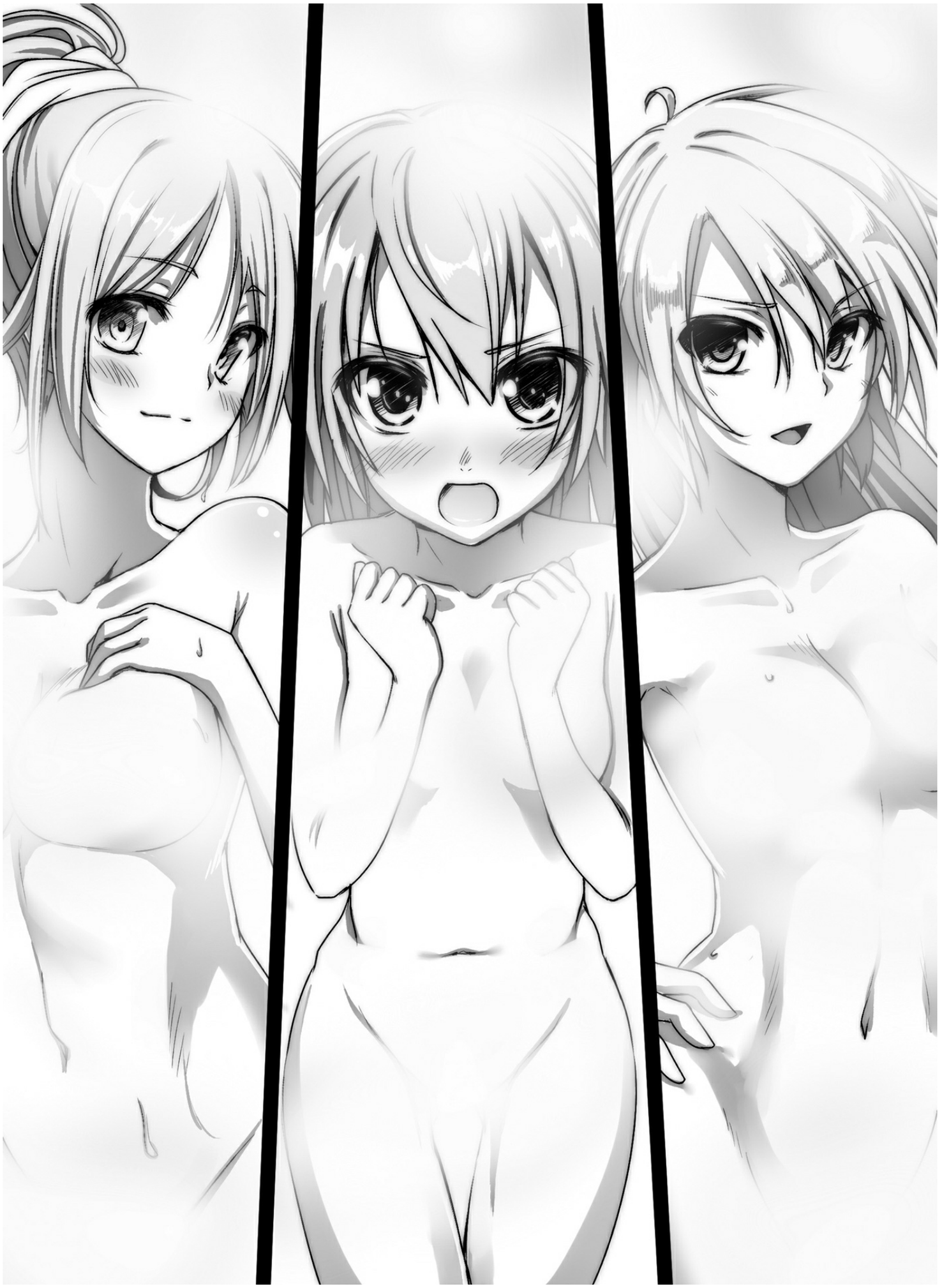
Figures! Yuuto thought, wanting to cradle his head in his hands with frustration. He was surrounded on all sides by flesh. He tried with all his might not to look down, but it also seemed like looking away to the side would be taken as rude.

Just what kind of torture is this? Yuuto wondered tearfully. As he stood there, unable to look at Linea, Felicia spoke for him.

“So, what did you wish to speak to me about?”

Linea seemed lost for only a moment, before her sharp gaze zeroed in on Yuuto and she spoke.

“Big Brother! Please marry me!”



EPILOGUE II

Glaðsheimr, the capital of the Holy Empire of Ásgarðr was situated in the center of the continent, where all the riches from surrounding territories gathered, blessed by the fertile land granted by the river Ífingr.

With that abundance as a backdrop, as well as murals, carvings, and decorations aimed at the upper class, it was a capital where other aspects of culture such as dance, singing, and poetry thrived even among the common people.

On the other hand, such wealth led to a loss of ambition, a loss of a desire to create anew among the populace, making their society one of corruption, of stagnation and putrefaction.

The Holy Ásgarðr Empire held supremacy over all of Yggdrasil on the surface, and yet here it was, falling into ruin.

Ruling at the peak of prosperity meant that all that remained was inevitable decline. It was a capital past its prime, where looks of feeling trapped or of deterioration flashed across the faces of its citizens.

At the center of the capital, on the banks of the river, sat the tallest building yet constructed, the palace where the divine emperor who oversaw all territories within Yggdrasil lived, the palace of Valaskjálf.

It had been built by tens of thousands of slaves owned by the first emperor, Wotan, over a period of twenty years. It was a mighty palace that boasted such vast size that it could fit a small town within its walls.

“What?! Yngvi of the Hoof Clan has been felled?!”

In the deepest part of the palace, beyond a veil made of silk, the thirteenth divine emperor was harshly questioning the chamberlain who had fallen prostrate.

Even as the voice boomed with a solemn dignity, there was a sweetness to it, like a ringing bell. The current divine emperor was still a relatively young girl,

which was a fact well known throughout Yggdrasil. Yet there were few who had actually beheld the divine emperor's face.

The number of people throughout the empire who had actually been allowed an audience with the divine emperor were few and far between. That secretive nature seemed to stir the imaginations of the people, and her beauty was said to be so great that anyone who looked upon her would lose their eyesight.

"Yes. Alexis, who is currently dispatched to the region, has reported that this is fact," the chamberlain said, lifting his head.

The goði's job hadn't merely been to conduct the Chalice Ceremony. He had also had the mission of investigating the state of things throughout the land and sending information back to Glaðsheimr.

The Empire may have declined to the point where its national power was only on par with a medium-sized clan, but its intelligence gathering network was still unsurpassed.

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but it seems there can be no doubt," the divine emperor said. "It seems the sovereign patriarch of the Wolf Clan truly is the dark presence we have feared."

"Y-Your Majesty. You mustn't say such things so recklessly..."

"Hmph! Even though it's finally here, I suppose it's natural that some will still have objections. Anyway, you must understand, right? This matter won't remain limited to Álfheim," the girl emperor then spoke more softly. "If it is truly as the völva has said, then perhaps the great uprising will overtake the entire realm of Yggdrasil."

"C-can it really be?!" The chamberlain was quaking at the gravity of the situation.

The emperor replied quietly and firmly, and yet, somehow, in resignation.

"The Time of Ragnarok is upon us."

To be continued...

Afterword

Taka: “So, what did you think of the outline I sent you?”

Editor: “Yeah, I read it. You need to tighten up the plot a bit more.”

Taka: “You r-read it...? Uhm, actually, I’m having a hard time expressing what I want to say, and I still have so much more I want to write. I keep thinking, ‘When should I do this? Now, of course!’ So, please allow me to do so!”

Editor: “H-huh?!”

Greetings to those of you who are new here. Welcome once more to those who’ve read my work before. I am Takayama Seiichi.

Taka: “Please allow me to set aside my plans for a new series, and hand in the plans I’ve written for *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar.*”

The plans for the new series were rather impossible, if I do say so myself. I had heard from authors who had been at this longer that if planning a new series was too hard, they would set it aside and try a different plan.

I’m so thankful for how patient everyone in the HJ Bunko Editorial Department is.

Oh, by the way, the plan I’d tossed aside was one that would be familiar to those I knew in my amateur days. Since I had been working on that plan for so long, I had thought I should turn it in as it was. It was a personal favorite of mine. The editors never complained about the fact that I wrote slowly. I feel like they waited patiently for me.

Well, getting back to the work at hand, having a modern boy summoned to an isekai to fulfill a vital role is an archetypal plot in a genre of books about the path to becoming a king.

That being said, this one needed to have some extra originality added to it. I

found this idea fascinating and fun to write about. It probably took about two years before I could get so into it that I started to enjoy writing it the way I do now.

Even though my previous work had been a public work, there were various restrictions, and I pushed through everything I wanted to write in one volume. Of course, having become a pro, and having readers buy your books, one tends to attempt to pour all of the ideas they want to include into the final product.

Still, even as restraints are applied to me, I continue to fight on, and that's the truth. That's the nature of this current work. With no limitations, I was able to write completely freehand and at full power. I'm pretty pleased with the end result.

I'm having a difficult time saying what I want to. (LOL!) A well-loved novelist once said on Twitter, "It is better to fail after trying than to fail after never trying. Not having a result, or having something that looks like crap and using that as an excuse, is wrong."

I agree firmly with this, and if I'm going to do it, I need to set aside all excuses, even if that means I have to move forward toppled over.

I've done my best with this work, so I really hope you readers can have an enjoyable experience. And if you're standing in the bookstore, reading this afterword, please take this up to the register!

Well, I guess it's about time for the customary thank-yous, but why is this afterword six pages?! Even though I really didn't have that much to say!

Ah, well, to fill in space, please allow me to advertise for the work I just completed in February of this year, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki: Pandora Box.*

Ah, well, thanks to that work, I have all these new ideas in my head.

Hmm... ahem!

I love Taiwan, I really do!

I wrote about this in my previous work, but it was in Taiwan that I held my first signing ever. It truly was a wonderful experience, like a dream. Everyone in

Taiwan, thank you so much!

Moving on from that, Asumin is totally cute, really! *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki 1. Super Reading CD Asumi Kana* is now on-sale at Animates and Tora no Anas throughout the country, as well as through Amazon. Having a super popular voice actress like Asumi Kana read volume one with such exuberance is one of my new projects.

Asumi-san's divine performance is a must-listen. We've also put it up as an Android app, and a free demo version exists, so please, give it a listen!

On top of that, the third and final volume of *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki: Pandora Box* is being shelved in bookstores at almost the same time as this book, so please check it out.

Well, I'm running out of room, so please allow me to move on to my "thanks and acknowledgments."

To my editor, M-sama, please forgive me for all the selfish requests I made! I am incredibly grateful for your unending patience with me. (I wonder when it was that I got to stop apologizing for the deadlines...) Thank you to my illustrator, Yukisan-sama, for the amazing illustrations! With the sale of this volume, I look forward to a long working relationship with you.

And to Master O, who always accepted me, even though you won't call me your pupil, I can see you as nothing other than my master.

As the days go by, my gratitude toward you only deepens! I love you, seriously I do!

And thanks to R-san for all of your advice! I guess having someone to talk to really is a big help! Let's go drinking again!

To the two K-sans — thanks! Let's talk creation again soon! Please hurry over to this hellish side. I will welcome you.

To everyone involved with the publication of this book, I extend my sincerest gratitude.

And more than anyone else, thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the readers who picked up this book. Since the next volume will be on sale soon, it

would mean a lot to me if you could share what you loved about this volume with your friends and acquaintances.

I hope that we can meet again in the next volume.

Seiichi Takayama

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 1

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Amber Tamosaitis Edited by Emily Sorensen

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