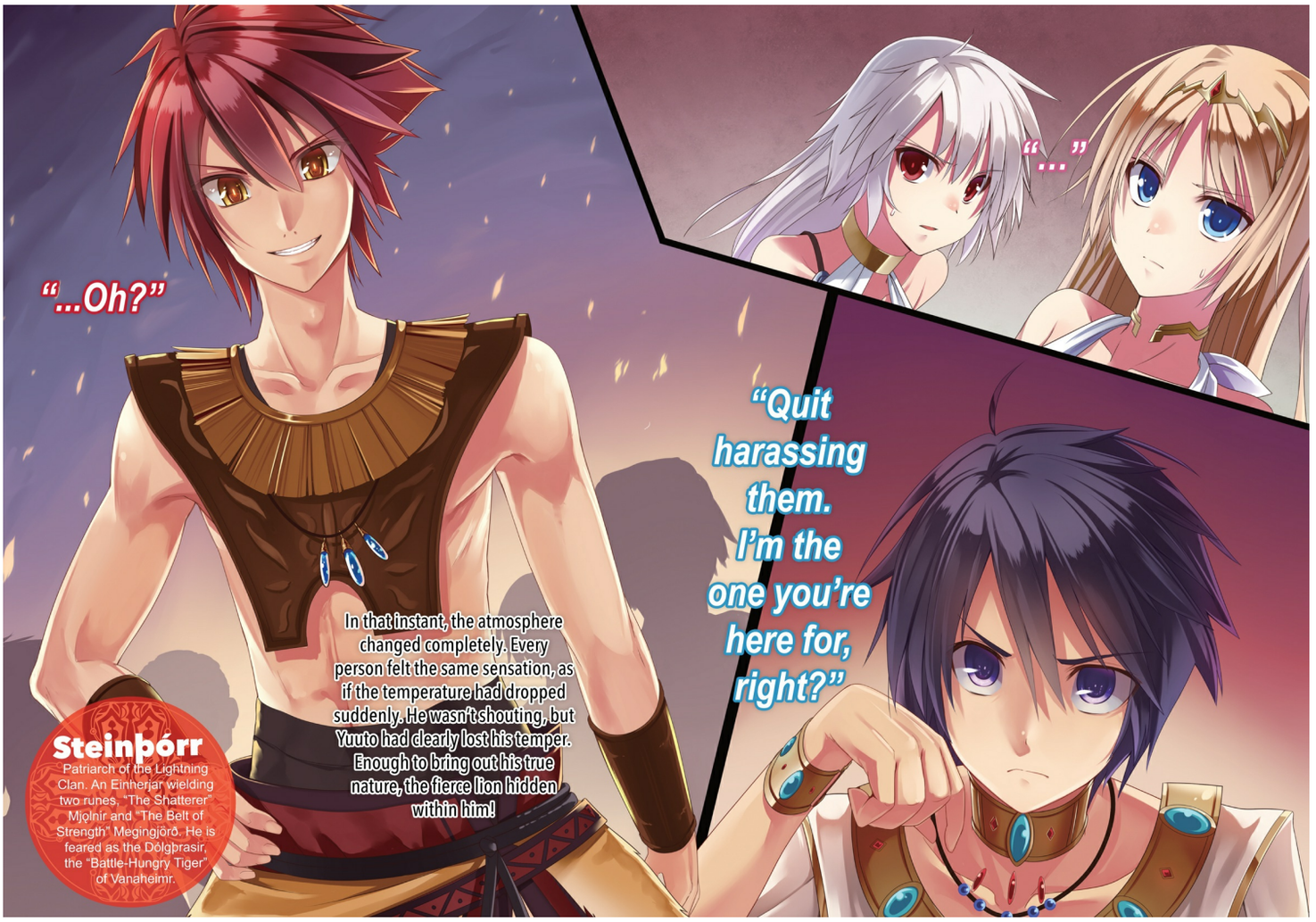
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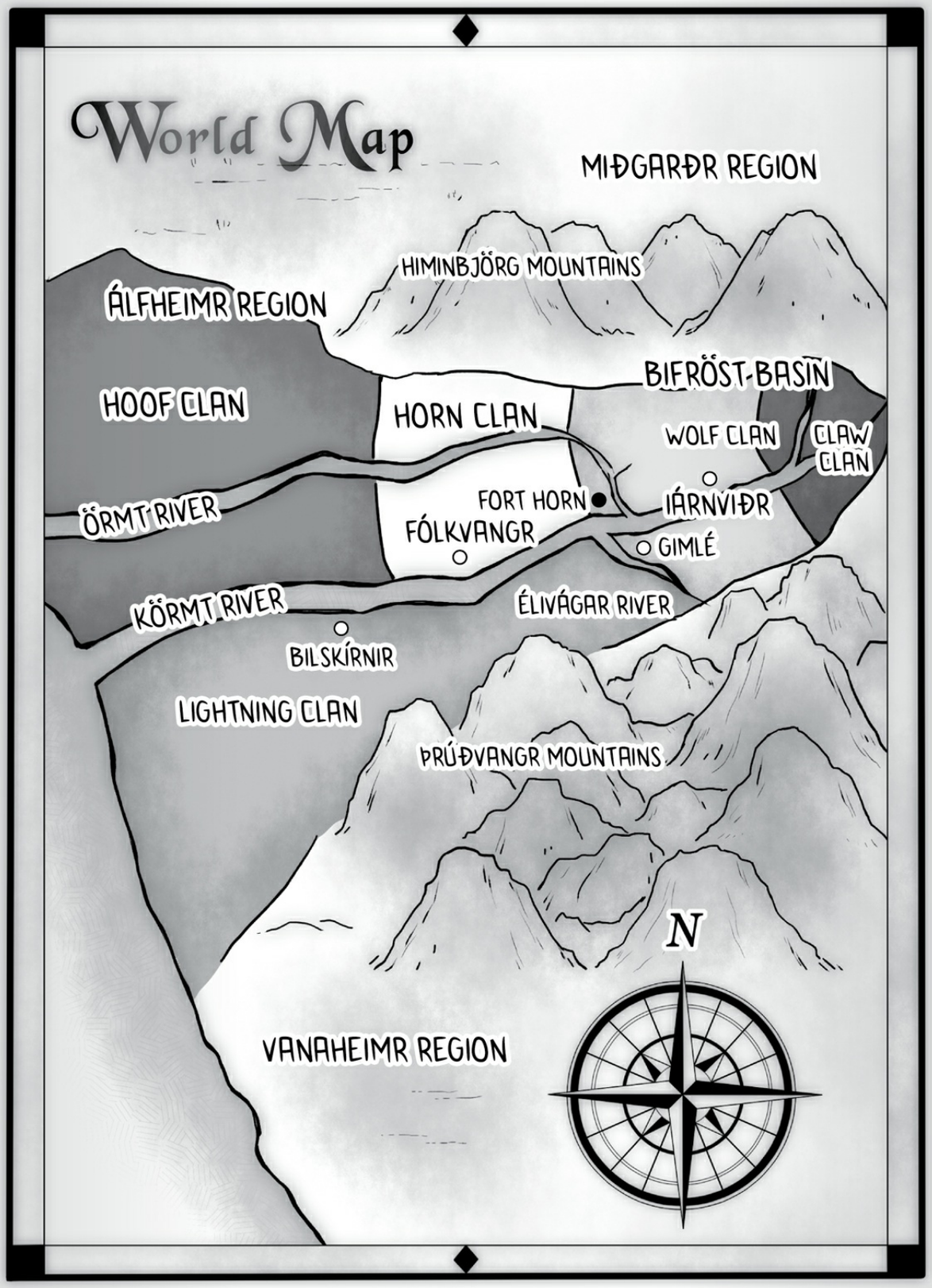
BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN




"Eheheh. I... I just wanted to see my husband's face right away."
"I'm sorry. I tried to stop Al, but she insisted."
"...What?" Yuuto had just heard something he couldn't ignore.
The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar 2


"...Oh?"
"..."
"Quit harassing them. I'm the one you're here for, right?"
In that instant, the atmosphere changed completely. Every person felt the same sensation, as if the temperature had dropped suddenly. He wasn't shouting, but Yuuto had clearly lost his temper. Enough to bring out his true nature, the fierce lion hidden within him!
Steinþórr
Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar wielding two runes, "The Shatterer" Mjolnir and "The Belt of Strength" Megingjörð. He is feared as the Dólgþrasir, the "Battle-Hungry Tiger" of Vanaheimr.


"I think I should get a turn now."
"I'll do anything for you, Big Brother."
"Oh, my, what are you saying, Rún? I will be going next."
A simple turn of his head would unmistakably give him a view on par with Shangri-la. If it was a question of whether he wanted to look or not, he certainly did. But...


World Map
MIÐGARÐR REGION
HIMINBJÖRG MOUNTAINS
ÁLFHEIMR REGION
BIFRÖST-BASIN
HOOF CLAN
HORN CLAN
WOLF CLAN
CLAW CLAN
ÖRMT RIVER
FORT HORN
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Characters



Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and his sworn younger sister via the Oath of the Chalice. Wielding the rune of the Expressionless Servant, Skirnir, she is a multi-talented Einherjar.

Sigrún

A soldier and sworn daughter to Yuuto via the Oath of the Chalice. She holds the rune of the Devourer of the Moon, Hati, and the title of Mánagarmr, "The Strongest Silver Wolf."

Linnea

The head of the Horn Clan. She attacked the Wolf Clan but lost to Yuuto, and ended up taking the Oath of the Chalice to become his sworn younger sister.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern world. In two short years, he has ascended the ranks to lead the Wolf Clan as its patriarch.


Mitsuki Shimoya
Yuuto's childhood friend. She's been able to contact Yuuto even after he was sent to Yggdrasil, and provides support for him.
Ingrid
She runs the Wolf Clan's workshop and smithy. She is Yuuto's sworn daughter subordinate, and wields the rune of the Birther of Blades, Ívaldi.
Albertina & Kristina
Twin daughters of the patriarch of the Claw Clan. Al and Kris for short. Teasing her sister Al is Kris's purpose in life.
Skáviðr
Assistant to the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan. He is known and feared as the "Sneering Slaughter, Níðhǫggr."
Steinþórr
Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar in possession of two runes. It is said there are only a few such people in all of Yggdrasil.

PROLOGUE

The wind was strong that night. It felt especially strong to Alexis, standing on top of the Hliðskjálf.

He couldn't actually see it right now from the top of the sacred tower, but a great town lay spread out in the blackness below him.

He was in Bilskírnir, capital of the Lightning Clan, in the western region of Yggdrasil known as Vanaheimr. The Lightning Clan controlled the entire northern stretch of Vanaheimr.

This city, which overflowed with bustling energy during the day, now lay dark and silent. Most of the residents had already retired to bed in preparation for the next day's work.

Alexis was a goði, a high official and priest of the empire which ruled over all of Yggdrasil, the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

It had been some time since the Empire had lost the ability to actually control and govern its distant territories, but its symbolic authority still remained. As a representative of that authority, his main duties included presiding over affairs related to the Chalice and serving as a neutral mediator between warring parties. His official social standing was above even the clan patriarchs ruling each territory.

Normally, such a person shouldn't be sneaking around in the middle of the night like this. But this was the beginning of his true job.

"Right..." Alexis rummaged around in the pocket of his robes and took out a small mirror.

Illuminated by the crescent moon above, the mirror's surface shone with a strange light.

He closed his eyes and recited the incantation.

It wasn't long before he heard the hoarse voice of another man. *"Hm, right on*

time.”

There was no other figure besides Alexis atop the Hliðskjálf.

“And, how did things go?”

Alexis heard the words not with his ears, but directly inside his own head.

This was one of the powers of his rune Gnævar, “Traveler of the Skies.” Utilizing a matched pair of mirrors made with elven copper, also known as Álfkipfer, it allowed him instant communication with another person over great distances. In this world, normally the quickest method of long-distance communication was a clay tablet carried by a messenger by horseback, so his ability was both rare and incredibly valuable.

Alexis came from a humble peasant family, with no education or skill in martial arts. His rise to the position of goði had been due, in large part, to this power.

“Yes, sir. As you wished, I spoke with the Lightning Clan’s patriarch, but he remains quite the fickle man.”

“Go ahead and indulge a few of his selfish demands. Do what you must in order to make him willing. But it mustn’t go public that we were involved in any way. Do you understand?”

“Completely, sir.”

“Good. Before the Black One has a chance to grow powerful, do whatever it takes to send him to his grave.”

ACT 1

Yuuto was completely unable to move, like a deer frozen in headlights.

The situation was growing worse by the minute.

How had things ended up this way? Although, thinking back on the sequence of events leading up to this point, he felt that this was probably the only way it could have turned out.

“W-wow, um, it’s pretty hard, isn’t it?” Linnea’s voice next to his ear was nearly a whisper.

Perhaps due to nervousness, her voice was stiff and quiet. That embarrassment was, in its own way, incredibly charming.

A girl yet halfway into her teenage years, Linnea was the patriarch of the Horn Clan, ruler of the fertile lands along the Örmt and Körmt Rivers. She was also Yuuto’s sworn younger sister, a type of clan subordinate.

Ordinarily clothed in high-quality garments and ornamental accessories befitting her high status, right now she was as naked as the day she was born. Her body was still developing, somewhere midway between child and adult, with an unsteadiness that was in its own way inviolably sacred.

“And, really big...” Linnea said with a sigh of admiration.

Her breath tickled Yuuto’s earlobe, and a shiver ran down his back.

“Oh! I-I’m sorry, was I rubbing too hard?” Linnea apologized worriedly and stopped moving her hand.

“N-no, no, you were doing just fine!” Flustered, Yuuto responded in a tone unbefitting his position.

His whole mind seemed to focus on where Linnea was rubbing, and he was unable to think about anything else. The steamy, humid air clung to his body. His head was spinning.

His whole body flushed with heat, and he felt like he could faint at any

moment.

It was a poor display to be sure, but Yuuto couldn't help it. After all, this was his first time, too.

"I'm not very good at this, am I? Um, if there's any way I could do better, please don't hesitate to tell me. I'll do anything for you, Big Brother..."

"Y-you're doing fine! It feels great, I promise!" Yuuto assured her.

"Thank goodness. This is the first time I've ever washed a man's back, so..."

And this is the first time I've had my back washed by a woman! Yuuto caught the words in his throat before they escaped and remained silent.

In his mind, he apologized over and over to the childhood friend waiting for him in a faraway land.

The stone-walled room was filled with clouds of thick steam. He was in a private bath in Sessrúmnir Palace, in the heart of the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr.

In preparation for an official ceremony to celebrate the recent victory over the Hoof Clan, Yuuto had come here to clean and purify himself. However...

"I think I should get a turn now," a voice clear as a bell called from behind him. "I followed decorum and let you go first because you are above me in status, but I also want to wash Father's back."

"Oh, my, what are you saying, Rún?" another voice, gentle like silk, responded. "I will be going next."

"What...?!"

"Tee hee! Of course yielding to your betters is right and proper in this case. So, as a younger sister I should take priority over a child subordinate such as yourself."

"Grrr...!"

The familiar voices of the two arguing girls echoed off of the walls behind him.

Sigrún and Felicia. Those two young women belonged to the Wolf Clan, of which Yuuto was patriarch, and they were among the clan's most powerful

warriors.

Yuuto's self-control was keeping him from turning around to look, but he didn't need to see to know. This was a bath, after all. Naturally, their slender, attractive bodies would be lavishly and fully exposed.

The child subordinate, Sigrún, was tall and slender, her cool beauty accented by long platinum blonde hair reminiscent of the moon on a dark, clear night. In contrast, Felicia had dazzling golden locks like the sun and a mature, glamorous beauty.

A simple turn of his head would unmistakably give him a view on par with Shangri-la. If it was a question of whether he wanted to look or not, he certainly did. But...

"Protect me from impure thoughts, protect me from impure thoughts, form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form is emptiness, emptiness is form..." Closing his eyelids tightly, Yuuto repeated Buddhist mantras to himself in a desperate attempt to clear his mind of unnecessary desires.

In part because his father was a traditional katana smith, he'd had plenty of exposure to these kinds of chants and mantras meant to focus the mind, and had memorized several. However, even holy mantras with hundreds of years of evil-repelling history were barely a match for the urge welling up from within him.

The young man behaved as if his self-control were the only factor in this situation, which might have come across as quite arrogant to some, but he was not entirely to blame for that. After all, he knew that if he stared long and hard at them, these beautiful girls would probably... no, they would absolutely accept it.

In the world of Yggdrasil, there was a customary practice where two people exchanged vows and became sworn family, through a sacred rite known as the Oath of the Chalice. One could not choose the parents they were born from, but with the Chalice, a person could choose a parent or sibling according to their own will. To the person one chose as a sworn parent, the Oath of the Chalice required a pledge of absolute loyalty and lifelong service, both body and soul. Such was the law of the land of Yggdrasil.

Which meant that whatever Yuuto wished, the girls who were bound to him by oath could not refuse.

He was suppressing himself with an iron will, but for a boy like Yuuto in the throes of puberty, this was simply torture. And despite the fact he was nearly past his mental limit...

“Aha! That’s it! Father, I believe I managed to earn some merit during the last battle. I would like to receive my reward for that here and now. Please, allow me the honor of washing your back before Felicia!”

Acting as if she’d stumbled upon a great idea, Sigrún suddenly appealed to him with an almost triumphant attitude, her words passionate.

As the last battle, Sigrún had single-handedly taken down the enemy’s supreme commander, an achievement far beyond what her words might suggest. It ought to be an accomplishment worthy of any material reward or honorable title should she wish it, leaving Yuuto to wonder why she would wish for something so trivial.

“Rún, bringing that up now is cowardly!” Felicia shouted at Sigrún, as if condemning some coward who had used bribery and deceit to earn her prize. “You are the Mánagarmr, a virtuous and proud warrior, are you not? When did you become such a shameless woman?!”

Far from shameless, isn’t she way too modest? Yuuto thought, but he also knew that there was quite a gap in moral values between a 21st century person like him and the ancient world of Yggdrasil.

It was a bit unfair to the both of them after they’d expressed such a strong desire, but Yuuto spoke up.

“Both of you, that’s enough. Thanks to Linnea, I’m more than clean enough, so I don’t need my back washed any more.”

“Big Brother?!”

“Father?!”

Felicia and Sigrún both raised their voices in a panic, as if they couldn’t believe him. Even a dog who’d had a treat pulled away from in front of its eyes at the

very last moment wouldn't raise such a forlorn cry.

It was almost enough to make Yuuto falter, but he continued. "Sorry, but at this rate, if my back were scrubbed any more, it would start to sting."

Linnea had, in accordance with her honest and hardworking nature, scrubbed vigorously with all of her strength. It had felt pretty good, and now he felt cleaner than ever, but any more than that would just irritate his skin.

There was going to be a victory ceremony after this. It might be a joyous occasion, but underneath that window dressing it was also a forum for serious international diplomacy, hidden motives, and intrigue. One could call it another type of battlefield.

It would be no laughing matter if a lapse in concentration due to some minor pain led to some political blunder.

"I... ohh..." Wincing, Sigrún let out a sullen, guilt-ridden whimper.

To Sigrún, who had lived her whole life devoted to the martial arts, situations like this were her greatest weakness. She was immensely loyal to Yuuto, and surely had been eager to show that loyalty to him through action, even in the form of what was supposed to be a reward from him. She wasn't good at masking her emotions, like her disappointment now. But that honesty was also one of the most charming things about her.

Felicia, on the other hand, continued to express her discontent in a sulking manner. "Well! Even if it's you, Big Brother, this is too insulting by far. Are you suggesting I would be selfishly ignorant of your needs? Besides... don't you think it is quite unfair that you would pamper a sibling from outside like Elder Sister Linnea while ignoring a sibling from your own clan?"

True, Linnea was Yuuto's sister by the Oath of the Chalice, but she was from outside the Wolf Clan. Giving someone with a closer bond from within his clan lesser treatment was improper. Yuuto knew that on some level Felicia's logic held water, but...

"Wait, wait." Yuuto realized the trap. "Felicia, you were the one who insisted Linnea wash my back in the first place!"

"B-Big Brother... did... did I cause you pain?" Linnea spoke to him like she was

about to cry.

“No, um, that’s, that’s not it! Look, don’t cry oka— Ah!!” Yuuto had reflexively turned to pat Linnea’s head to console her, caught a glimpse of skin, and quickly turned himself back to facing his original direction. He decided to pretend he hadn’t seen any pink protrusions.

“S-sorry, um, after spending so long looking after this crybaby kid who was like a little sister to me, I’ve got this habit now. Whenever I see a girl start to cry, I reflexively pat them on the head... Okay, that’s totally just an excuse. Sorry. I mean it.”

“N-no, it’s... B-Big Brother, I don’t mind if it’s you who’s looking. Y-you know, since you’re going to be my... h-h-husband... I might not be as impressive as Lady Felicia, but p-please, look at me as much as you like!”



“Whoa, whoa, just... just wait a minute.” Yuuto waved his hand in a gesture behind himself as he spoke. “Calm down. I’m begging you, let’s just calm down for a sec!”

“If I may be so forward, perhaps Big Brother would do better to calm down himself,” Felicia responded.

Felicia was right, of course. Taking deep breaths, Yuuto chided himself for getting so worked up. But his heartbeat showed no signs of settling down.

“And Elder Sister Linnea, I wonder if you are perhaps getting ahead of yourself,” Felicia added coldly. “Your earlier proposal has not yet been accepted.”

“Urk. Um, however, a marriage between myself and Big Brother would benefit both our clans, Horn and Wolf.” Linnea managed to argue back against Felicia. However, her stammering was proof that she understood she was overstepping her bounds.

At the same time, that also meant Linnea herself was quite in favor of the arrangement.

At the moment, that was a problem that vexed Yuuto far more than any puerile awkwardness.

Yuuto Suoh had once been a normal student, attending a middle school in modern-day Japan. For some unknown reason, he had been summoned to this ancient world of Yggdrasil, where he’d spent the past two years.

Judging from things like the positions of the constellations, he was pretty sure this world was still Earth, but quite a few points didn’t add up.

There was the era, for instance. Based on the tools the people used and the materials used in their weapons, the level of civilization here was about on par with the end of the Bronze Age.

So then, had he been thrown into the past? It didn’t seem to be as simple and straightforward as that. The position of the North Star meant this area should be somewhere between 50 to 55 degrees north latitude, but not a single map

of that latitude matched up with any of the local geography he'd seen or heard about.

Of course, an even better example would be the existence of people with superhuman powers, known as Einherjar.

"Here you are, Big Brother," Felicia said as she handed him a cup filled with water.

It was the middle of summer, yet the cup was ice-cold. Naturally, there were no refrigerators or other such conveniences in Yggdrasil. She had cooled it with magic, a musical spell called a galldr.

There were said to be dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people with powers like this in Yggdrasil. They couldn't be explained by the science and common sense of the world Yuuto had come from. So then...

Where am I, really? An unease he couldn't put into words was always gnawing at his heart.

Yuuto pushed those thoughts aside. Dwelling on it wouldn't help anything, and right now, it was more important to focus on the problem right in front of him.

"Big Brother, please marry me!"

Less than thirty minutes had passed since Linnea's sudden, vehement proposal. At the time, Felicia had saved him with a tactful response:

"Intruding on a superior's bath and immediately making such a request is disrespectful. A younger sister should begin by washing her brother's back to pay her respects before demanding any favors."

Her quick wit had gotten him out of that situation temporarily, but... he had been so distracted by the girls at his back that he hadn't been able to gather his thoughts properly.

Actually, even that argument Felicia had started about who would go next might have been meant to give him a little more time to think of his response to the proposal. That level of consideration and attentiveness was so characteristic of her.

He felt a little ashamed of himself for only being able to realize it after the fact. On the other hand, how was he expected to be calm and observant, surrounded by three beautiful girls in the nude? What was the point of extra time in a situation where he couldn't think rationally?

He didn't have the luxury of complaining, though. Yuuto was the Wolf Clan's patriarch, entrusted with the lives of tens of thousands of his clansmen. It was a position that didn't allow for making excuses, whatever the reason.

"Ahhh, so good! Ice-cold water right after a hot bath is the best!" Yuuto said as he downed another cup.

Now that he was out of the bath, Yuuto took the opportunity to refresh both his throat and his thoughts. The steam that had clouded his mind for various reasons seemed to wash away with the cold water, and he could think much more clearly.

"Oh, and thank you too, Rún." Yuuto turned to thank Sigrún, who was standing at his left side.

She responded with a business-like tone, bowing her head. "Ah! No, it's an honor to be of service to you, Father."

Still, looking closely, he could see the corners of her mouth turning upwards, and the peacock-feathered fan she was holding began to move faster, like a dog wagging its tail.

With his body flushed from a hot bath in midsummer, the breeze she was sending him felt wonderful... but Yuuto just couldn't feel comfortable with having a girl do work like that while he reclined in a chair. However, he could practically already see the sad puppy face she'd make if he declined the offer, so he let her do as she wished.

"Right. Now, let's have the full story," Yuuto began.

Sitting in a chair across from him, his sworn younger sister Linnea stared at him with a tense look on her face as he pressed her for the details. Everyone was clothed now, so there was no need to worry about getting flustered or distracted.

“You and me, get married? Where in the world did that come from?” he went on.

“Huh? Is it really that strange?” Linnea asked, tilting her head to one side in heartfelt curiosity.

It was a cute gesture, sweet enough to set a man’s heart pounding, but there was no room to admire it in this situation.

Linnea continued, her tone suddenly very serious. “For many years, we of the Horn Clan and Big Brother’s Wolf Clan have fought amongst ourselves as irreconcilable enemies. However, now that Big Brother and I have sworn the Oath of the Sibling Chalice, the two clans have become kin. If we become husband and wife, it would further deepen the bond between our clans. That would be extremely valuable for both of us.”

“But, well, okay I understand that, but...” Yuuto fumbled his words and averted his gaze, unable to withstand the passionate sincerity in Linnea’s eyes.

It was a custom that had been repeated countless times throughout human history, all over the world: The leaders of two opposing powers would join hands in marriage, facilitating friendly relations and serving as a guarantee of mutual non-aggression.

Rationally, he understood it. However, Yuuto had been raised with the values of modern-day Japan. He was resistant to the idea of a so-called strategic marriage on principle. And he knew that Linnea surely wouldn’t understand that feeling if he explained it to her. In this situation, in this world, the one with strange ways of thinking was Yuuto.

“You’re the Horn Clan’s leader, their patriarch. Are you okay with just blowing off such a heavy responsibility?” Yuuto decided to lead with a different question instead.

If Linnea were to marry Yuuto, she would have to come live with the Wolf Clan. That would at the very least seriously hinder her ability to perform her duties as patriarch.

He hadn’t known Linnea for very long, but her feelings towards her people were genuine. She had offered up her own body at one point to guarantee their

safety. You wouldn't find a ruler with more compassion than that. Someone like her, neglecting her duty to lead her people for the sake of a political marriage? It seemed odd.

"That's why I would have Big Brother stay here in Fólkvangr and govern the Horn Clan together with me..."

"Wh-whaat?!" Yuuto let out a hysterical shout before he could stop himself, cutting off Linnea's words.

Yuuto and Linnea might be sworn brother and sister by way of the Chalice, but this conversation was also a diplomatic talk between the heads of two nations, with their national interests at stake. With that in mind, Yuuto had of course been taking care to keep his emotions close to his chest and maintain a poker face, but Linnea's suggestion was so unexpected that he lost composure.

"What nonsense!" Sigrún also raised her voice in indignation. "Father is *our* patriarch! Why would the Wolf Clan give him over to the Horn?!"

However, Linnea matched her glare for glare and shouted back. "Of course he could continue to lead the Wolf Clan! But tell me, isn't Big Brother really the caliber of leader who shouldn't remain patriarch of such a puny clan as the Wolf?!"

"Hmmm..." Sigrún grimaced, but said no more. It was clear that she had mixed feelings. It had to be aggravating to have her clan declared "puny," yet the master she loved and respected was being praised by those words, too. Because of that, it would be difficult for her to refute.

As a girl who'd dedicated her life solely to the martial arts, Sigrún wasn't skilled at conversation to begin with. As she struggled to find the words to respond, Linnea pressed her further.

"The mountainous territory of the Wolf Clan is mostly rocky soil unfit for farming, is it not? By contrast, we of the Horn Clan are blessed with the fertile lands between the Örmt and Körmt Rivers! Moreover, Iárnviðr seemed to be a prosperous town, no doubt due to Big Brother's influence, but our capital Fólkvangr is on another scale entirely! For someone destined to conquer and rule over others, it should be plain to see which of them would be a better choice for his stronghold."

“Wha— Are you joking right now?!” Yuuto shouted. “Do you have any idea what you’re saying?!”

Yuuto was half angry, half worried. Offering to hand over the sovereignty of one’s nation to a foreigner wasn’t merely reckless; it wouldn’t be surprising if her clansmen persecuted her as a traitor for it. It was completely outside the bounds of sanity.

“I am well aware,” Linnea continued. “I make this offer after long and careful consideration! So again I ask, please! Please marry me and lead my people, lead the Horn Clan...”

“W-wait just a minute, Elder Sister,” Felicia interrupted and stepped between them.

Linnea had gotten carried away in the tension of the discussion, and had left her chair and begun to draw closer to Yuuto. Felicia, who normally maintained an easygoing air about her no matter the situation, had an unusually troubled expression.

“C-certainly, I think it is a favorable marriage proposal, but, how should I put this...” Felicia paused a moment. “It feels too convenient. The Wolf Clan gains far too much.”

She said exactly what Yuuto had just been thinking.

To the Wolf Clan, there was indeed nothing more appealing than the opportunity to more than double their territory, with most of that fertile land between the twin rivers to boot. On the other hand, he couldn’t see much benefit in it at all for the Horn Clan. If an outsider like himself showed up and started ordering people around, it would be unpleasant for everyone. The commoners would be disgruntled, and the clan’s higher-ups would see him as a constant thorn in their side. Becoming a vassal state would mean collecting taxes for their new sovereign, and there was always the chance they’d receive some unreasonable demand for tribute.

Of course, if one was willing to pay that price, there was also plenty to gain by entering into the protection of a strong nation.

“If you pick a fight with us, you’d better be ready to take on our powerful allies

too!”

If a deterrent like that managed to reduce the risk of invasion enough, the vassal state could focus that much more effort on domestic improvements instead of defense, and its citizens could have more peace of mind.

But it was fair to say that the Horn Clan was already under his protection. They had become so along with their patriarch Linnea, who had become his little sister by the Oath of the Chalice. It had been proven in their battle with the Hoof Clan. His clan had come to their aid with full reinforcements, and thoroughly driven off the invaders.

Even if the Horn Clan were to further strengthen their bond with the Wolf Clan, it was hard to think they’d get any additional deterrent effect out of it at this point.

“Linnea,” Yuuto said, looking her directly in the eyes, “no more of this diplomatic guessing game. Let’s just be frank with each other. What are you really after? What is it you want from us?”

A deal like this would be one thing if the Wolf Clan were still putting military pressure on them and they reluctantly agreed to it, but that was far from the case. She’d brought the offer to him; he suspected there had to be some ulterior motive.

“As I have said several times, what I want is for Big Brother to rule and guide the Horn Clan.”

“Felicia said it earlier, but every sweet deal’s got a catch,” Yuuto said coolly. “There’s nothing more expensive than ‘free.’ There’s no way I’m taking what you say at face value.”

He was of course very much aware of the fact that Linnea was a person of sincere and honest character, but he had to be cautious. He couldn’t afford not to be. As patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Yuuto’s decision would sway the fates of tens of thousands of people.

“But that really is what I want!” Linnea insisted.

Yuuto paused and took a deep breath.

“...Linnea.”

He lowered his voice, his tone more severe. If this back-and-forth kept going, it would just be a waste of time.

Linnea seemed to pick up on his irritation and gave a small nod. “I understand. I’ll tell you the whole truth.”

“Please do,” Yuuto implored.

Linnea’s love for her clan and her willingness to do anything for her people had made a great impression on Yuuto. The Chalice had made them sworn siblings, but he’d come to care for her as he would a real younger sister. This was still a discussion between two patriarchs, so he couldn’t make any hasty promises, but he had every intention of accommodating her needs as best he could.

Linnea took several deep breaths to calm down, swallowed once as if emotionally preparing herself, and then spoke in a grave voice.

“I... didn’t earn my position as patriarch. I inherited it.”

Yuuto had resolved himself not to act surprised at whatever she might say, but even so his eyes went wide. He quickly caught himself, and glanced at Felicia for confirmation.

She looked just as surprised as he was. So then, Felicia hadn’t known it either.

“Hey, was it okay for you to tell us that?” Yuuto asked.

As a neighbor and former enemy, the Horn Clan’s internal situation was something Yuuto had paid plenty of attention to. The fact that this information had never reached his ears, or any of the Wolf Clan’s by extension, meant it had been deliberately covered up.

The reason for that was clear. Bloodline heritage meant that a leader’s succession hadn’t been due to merit or ability. In this world, that alone was more than enough to earn contempt.

Yggdrasil was a brutal world of survival of the fittest, where the strong took what they wanted and the weak were oppressed. If someone without power or

ability became a clan patriarch, they might find their country harassed and encroached upon by its surrounding neighbors in no time.

“I’m trying to hand over that inheritance, after all,” Linnea said. “There’s no point in hiding it anymore.”

“Well, I guess that’s true, yeah.” Yuuto found himself still having trouble accepting the situation, because he’d seen Linnea’s spirit as a patriarch firsthand. But he listened and let her continue her story.

“My father, the previous patriarch Hrungnir, was a courageous warrior and general, and his enemies feared him by the name Gullfaxi, ‘the Golden Stallion.’ He loved the people, enriched the country, and was fair and just with all of his subordinates. Everyone in the clan sang his praises and called him Gullveig, ‘the Golden Hero.’ I know it sounds partial coming from his daughter, but he was truly a splendid patriarch.”

“I see. Sounds like your dad was a great man.”

“Yes, he was... but even a great man like him was short-sighted when it came to his only child by blood. I was born late in his life, after he’d been trying to have children for a long time, so maybe that made me overly precious to him and clouded his judgment. Even though Rasmus and several other leaders in the clan were stronger candidates for the position, I was the one he chose as his successor.”

“Now I get it,” Yuuto said, thinking back. “That explains the ‘princess’ remark.”

During the celebration after the Oath of the Chalice ceremony, Linnea’s second-in-command Rasmus had called her that. Now that he thought about it more carefully, in a clan society where parent-child relationships forged by the Chalice were given much more importance than bloodline, it was an extremely odd thing to hear a leader called that. And then there was her young age.

There’d been plenty of hints. However, in Yggdrasil the very idea of hereditary succession was akin to a taboo. Inadvertently, Yuuto had eliminated the possibility from his mind.

“Naturally, there were more than a few who viewed my succession as a

problem, and voiced their concerns.” Linnea looked down as she spoke. “Then there was my age, and the fact that I’m not an Einherjar. Surely that also made them uneasy.”

Her hands, resting on her lap, clenched into fists.

Yuuto had already inferred that Linnea probably wasn’t an Einherjar. With her honest personality, if she’d had some kind of power, she would have told Yuuto about it so they could use it to help during their battle with the Hoof Clan.

“But I also wanted to be patriarch!” Linnea’s voice wavered. “I wanted to follow in my beloved father’s footsteps, to protect what he had spent his life protecting! I thought... I thought I’d be able to do it.”

There must have been a stubborn optimism born of youth that had driven her. Something like, *“If I just believe in myself, I’ll manage somehow.”* But Yuuto didn’t think that self-confidence had been necessarily misplaced. It was naive at best to think that a non-Einherjar couldn’t be capable and talented. Even in the Wolf Clan, there were those like Jörgen who had risen past Einherjar to a higher rank, and he wasn’t the only one by far.

One reason for that was that most Einherjar powers were heavily weighted towards skill in combat. It took far more than valor in battle to govern a nation.

In Yggdrasil, ability was everything. No matter how magnificent the previous patriarch may have been, Rasmus and the other clan officers wouldn’t have chosen to follow that man’s child for this long just because she was his blood.

At the very least, from Yuuto’s memories of facing her as an adversary in war, he didn’t think Linnea had made any significant blunders. The Horn Clan had attacked the Wolf Clan only after gathering nearly double their enemy’s troop strength. They had kept a steady chain of command, avoided the cardinal sin of spreading troops too thinly, and kept all of their soldiers moving to positions where they could be useful. They had kept their supply lines intact, as well.

When discussing strategy and the art of war, these were things that might be called obvious, or a matter of course. But in war, even the obvious was easier said than done. It was no simple feat to understand the movements of thousands of troops, to keep them fed, to control their actions.

“But I couldn’t do it,” Linnea continued. “I started a war only to be beaten back, had my clan’s lands seized, got taken prisoner. I lowered myself and my clan beneath another with the Oath of the Chalice, invited the invasion of the Hoof Clan, and threatened the very existence of my people. That’s what my rule has gotten me.” Linnea was trembling with frustration at herself.

Atop the Hliðskjálf in the Wolf Clan capital, Linnea had once confronted Yuuto to express her love for her clansmen. She must have had hopes and dreams for what she wanted to accomplish as patriarch. And in spite of that, she was now admitting that she had been powerless to fulfill them. Even Yuuto could tell that the pain of it was tearing her apart inside.

“Compare that to Big Brother’s leadership. On the battlefield you win victory after victory, even defeating the Hoof Clan’s hero Yngvi easily. In only a year of rule you rebuilt the Wolf Clan from a state of poverty and weakness, and the citizens of Iárnviðr are smiling and happy. You’ve made me realize how stark the difference is between me and the real thing.” With a weak smile, Linnea turned to gaze out the window.

It was the look of someone yearning for something long gone.

It was the look of someone so exhausted that they had simply given up.

“If a sham like myself continues on as patriarch, the Horn Clan will just continue its decline. In that case, I think using my status as a woman and pulling in a strong, true patriarch capable of ruling the clan is the least I could do for everyone. My final task.”

“Whoa hold on already!” Yuuto shouted. “You know the Horn guys aren’t just gonna shut up and accept that! Hell, what about that second-in-command of yours, Rasmus? He’s definitely gonna be against—”

“Rasmus himself was the one who proposed this marriage plan to me.”

“...Huh?” Yuuto had lost count of the number of times today he’d let out a goofy sound in response to surprising news.

“From the very beginning, he has worried about how it must be difficult for a woman such as myself to hold the clan together. He’s often advised that I find a reliable man to make my husband, so that the two of us could rule together as a

couple. Rasmus has become completely enamored with you, Big Brother. He's been saying things like, 'We can entrust the princess to a man like him!' and going around trying to convince all of the other clan officers."

"When the hell did I get so popular with him? That doesn't make any sense..." Yuuto pressed his hands to his forehead, bewildered.

The last time, the only time he remembered exchanging words with Rasmus, it had been the celebration after exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with Linnea. At the time, Rasmus and the other Horn Clan members had treated Yuuto like a common ruffian who'd stolen away their precious princess, and their glares had been practically murderous. How in the world had the man's opinion of him risen so highly in the time since then? Yuuto couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Big Brother, I am inexperienced and not much good at anything, but I promise to devote myself to you with all my heart in the days to come. I hope you will take care of me." Linnea recited the words one might expect to hear on their wedding night.

Yuuto could only make wordless nonsensical sounds as Linnea bowed her head to him, blushing sweetly. "Urk...! Er, umm. Ahh, uhhh—"

If it was simply a question of yes or no, he absolutely couldn't accept Linnea's proposal. Yuuto was going to find a way to return to his own world. The idea of taking on a marriage partner in a world he never planned to spend the rest of his life in was absurd. After all, if he did that, he wouldn't be able to uphold his end of the vows. It would be dishonest.

More than anything, there was Mitsuki, the girl he'd already decided upon in his heart.

This wasn't the first marriage proposal he'd dealt with, and he'd easily managed to turn down each one up to now. However, this time it was a proposal directly and personally from the patriarch of the Horn Clan. And it was accompanied by unprecedented concessions to the benefit of the Wolf Clan. If he carelessly turned down an offer like that, it would make Linnea lose face and besmirch her honor, and might even endanger the burgeoning alliance between the two clans. As the Wolf Clan's patriarch, that was something he had to avoid

at all costs.

But how exactly could he go about refusing her in a way that didn't upset their relations? He found himself in a mental panic, completely unable to come up with the solution.

"Elder Sister, as I stated before in the bath, perhaps you are being too hasty," Felicia chided Linnea gently. "The marriage of a patriarch affects the future of the whole clan; it is a serious government matter. It would be wrong for just the few of us to make such a decision here, on a moment's notice."

Felicia's voice was soft but resolute. It was a suggestion with no room for rebuttal.

I'm saved, Yuuto thought as he glanced over to Felicia, and she gave him a little wink that only he could see. It looked like she hadn't been able to stand to watch him flounder any longer. She really was a reliable adjutant.

"R-right, it's just as Felicia says," he said hastily. "For now, I would like to go back home and discuss your proposal with the clan."

"Hmm..."

Yuuto had done his best to maintain an air of dignity as he chimed in after Felicia, but Linnea was frowning with a difficult expression on her face. Because of how unbelievably beneficial the offer was for both of them, she likely had assumed things would get wrapped up nicely here and now.

On the other hand, it looked like she also agreed with Felicia's logic.

"You're right. I'm embarrassed to say, perhaps I was being too impatient," said Linnea. "Well then, I'm looking forward to hearing a favorable answer."

"W-well, ahh, just... be patient with me, okay?" Yuuto barely managed a stiff reply.

He'd managed to get a bit of an extension, but only a little bit.

"Ughhh, this kind of stuff is so oppressive!" Yuuto moaned.

In the small private room off to the side of the spacious ritual hall, Yuuto was having Felicia help him get dressed.

“And now all this crap’s literally weighing me down, too...”

Normally, Yuuto would forgo ornamental clothing and accessories, preferring a light all-black outfit that emphasized ease of movement, but today’s ceremonial etiquette wasn’t going to let him get away with that.

His outfit made him think of an Egyptian pharaoh, with an extravagant gilded choker, a golden bracelet inlaid with jewels, and some other jangly thing attached to his head.

“Tee hee,” Felicia said with a sweet laugh. “It’s only for the length of the ceremony, so just be patient for a little bit.”

She was kneeling on the floor, bent over and carefully wrapping some sort of belt around Yuuto’s waist, which was covered with even more shiny gilded ornaments. At her side lay a gold scabbard with intricate engravings, and an absolutely luxurious-looking sword embedded in places with jewels.

Back when he was still living in the 21st century, if he’d seen a sword like that, he probably would’ve thought, *Whoaaa, so coooool!* and gotten excited like a normal boy. Now when he looked at it, all that came to mind was, *Ugh, if you equipped something like that, it’d be hard to walk.*

The thought brought his spirits down a bit, so he turned his gaze to look out the window. The streets and houses of Fólkvangr spread out below him.

Just like with the Wolf Clan, the hörgr, or sanctuary, where the Horn Clan conducted various holy rites was constructed on top of their Hliðskjálf. To Yuuto, the Wolf Clan’s sacred tower was shaped a bit like a tower of stacked kagami mochi, but the Horn Clan’s Hliðskjálf was more similar to a pyramid. Its actual height was taller than the Wolf Clan’s, too. Perhaps details like this varied from nation to nation.

“Looking at it like this, even though they’re both part of Yggdrasil, our towns and lands are pretty different, huh?” Yuuto said, mostly to himself. It was a bit of a late realization, but it had just started to sink in.

Iárnviðr was situated higher up in the mountain basin, and there was a plentiful source of lumber nearby, so the common folk had homes and buildings made mostly from wood. Meanwhile the cityscape of Fólkvangr was stained a

brownish-red, and it wasn’t even dusk yet.

In the areas around Fólkvangr, the sediment flowing down along the Körmt River had slowly accumulated over time, forming something called an alluvial plain. It was fertile land well-suited for farming, but lacking in lumber or good stone. As a result, most of the commoners’ homes were constructed from sun-dried bricks of baked mud.



“If you were to take Elder Sister Linnea as your wife, this city would become yours, wouldn’t it, Big Brother?” Felicia asked nonchalantly.

“Felicia, you know there’s no way in hell I can do that,” Yuuto snapped back, exasperated.

For Felicia, who actually knew the whole truth behind his circumstances, who had just barely come to Yuuto’s aid when he’d struggled to give an answer to Linnea, to say something like that, was a little more than he wanted to hear right now.

Felicia continued anyway, seemingly ignoring his tone. “Whether one looks at these extravagant decorations, or the vast fields of golden wheat outside the capital, it is easy to see that this is an affluent nation. If you became the patriarch of this land, every day you would be served more delicious food than you could ever eat, and beautiful maidens from across the land would gather just to wait upon you. Anyone would be jealous of such a life; surely you would enjoy it, as well.”

“That’s just not who I am, okay?”

From the perspective of a normal young man, the idea of being popular with women and paid attention to by the people around him was far from unappealing. But if it all came just from having money or political power, that just seemed hollow to him. As for food, 21st century Japan was in the middle of an age of plenty, so he’d experienced that already.

“Right now, the Hoof Clan has lost their patriarch and single greatest warrior, falling into a state of complete disarray. Now would be the perfect opportunity to invade,” Felicia said. “With this land as your base and stronghold, I think the path to supreme ruler of all of Álfheimr would be open to you...”

“And I said I don’t want anything to do with becoming something like that! Even dealing with just the Wolf Clan is too much for me to handle. Actually, what’s with you right now? You know there’s no way I could agree to it! It’s like you were just... No, I’m sorry, Felicia. You’re right, of course. Something like that would be a dream come true for the Wolf Clan, right?”

Felicia was Yuuto’s sworn younger sister and his adjutant, but before that, she

was a member of the Wolf Clan. One of their top officers, who had to always be thinking of the clan's future. To put it bluntly, it was only natural for her to think of the needs of the clan before Yuuto's personal convenience.

Thinking about it, that meant Yuuto was clearly a failure as a patriarch for thinking only of his own personal desires instead of the vast wealth he might be able to secure for the Wolf Clan.

"Eh, ah, y-yes, it certainly would," Felicia stammered. "But it's too much to ask in the end, isn't it? I knew that was the case, but the prospect of obtaining the Horn Clan lands for the Wolf Clan caused me to get a little greedy."

"O-ow?! Too tight, too tight!" Yuuto yelped.

"Oh!! I-I'm so sorry!" Flustered, Felicia loosened the belt she had overtightened. She was usually so deliberate and careful in everything she did. The mistake was unlike her.

"...So, why did you really say all that?" Yuuto asked.

"Huh? Um, l-like I said, I got greedy, and—"

"Yeah, that's a lie." Yuuto shook his head. "You can't fool me. After all, for the last two years, aside from when we're in bed, we've spent almost all our time together."

Felicia's excuse about getting greedy was clearly something she'd come up with as an afterthought. And unlike her usual carefree demeanor, he could tell from her tone of voice that she was upset. And then there was the mistake with the belt. He'd really be a failure as a commander if he failed to notice with all of those clues.

Felicia said nothing, caught out in her lie.

With her arms still wrapped around Yuuto's waist as she tied the belt, her face was behind him, and he couldn't see her expression. After some time, he thought he could feel her grip tighten ever so slightly against the belt again.

"'With this, I can go back home without any worries.'"

"Wha—?!" Yuuto suddenly felt like a claw had grabbed him by the heart. They were the exact same words that he'd been thinking to himself a lot these days.

“So, that is what you’ve been thinking,” Felicia said.

“...So, you realized it.”

“Of course I realized,” Felicia said with a slight grin. “After all, for the past two years, aside from when we’re in bed, we’ve spent almost all our time together. I started to get an inkling of it starting around when you managed to capture Elder Sister Linnea... but I became certain of it during your conversation with Alexis.”

This time it was Yuuto’s turn to remain silent. It seems like there was absolutely nothing he could keep secret from his adjutant.

For the past two years, Yuuto had desperately wanted to go home. But, from the moment he’d arrived in Yggdrasil, the Wolf Clan that had adopted him had been continuously at war. Until very recently, just living to see another day had to be his topmost priority, and looking for a way home had unavoidably taken a backseat to that.

Then there was his family. Sure, it was just a social construct created by swearing upon a sacred chalice, but no matter the reason, he’d formed family bonds. Leaving his family behind to a fate of certain death while he alone escaped to safety was something he knew he would have felt guilty for.

But now the Wolf Clan had grown considerably more large and powerful than it had been two years ago, and its two longstanding enemy clans, the Horn and Claw, had become sworn family by the Oath of the Chalice.

With the recent threat of danger starting to subside, Yuuto was aware of how much more he’d been thinking about searching for a way home. What he’d never dreamed of was that someone else would notice that secret hidden in his heart.

“Now that there’s nothing left to keep you here, I just felt this terrible uneasiness, Big Brother,” said Felicia. “Like if you returned to Iárnviðr, you might suddenly disappear, and I just... Please, forgive me. Even though everything is my fault, I said such impertinent things to you. Even though I have absolutely no right to. Truly, I don’t know why...”

Her voice was filled with regret, and she looked to be genuinely perplexed by

her own emotions. It was true that Felicia always maintained an adult level of composure, supporting Yuuto in his moments of weakness. It was very unlike her to lose control of herself to her emotions like this, and it probably bothered her greatly, as well.

“Hey. Sorry,” Yuuto apologized, patting Felicia’s head.

“Y-you have nothing to apologize to me for, Big Brother! I was simply being selfish. I lost control of myself and acted shamefully towards you.”

“Even so, I’m sorry.”

“Like I said, you have— Ack! W-what are you doing?!”

Yuuto silenced Felicia’s argument by ruffling the top of her hair.

He was apologizing because he was the one who’d forced her into feeling this way. She’d said it herself: She became certain of it during his conversation with Alexis. She’d likely already been aware of the change in his attitude, and then that conversation must have made it worse for her.

It also showed just how much she had secretly wanted Yuuto to remain in Yggdrasil. Felicia was the one who had accidentally summoned him here in the first place. She had been suppressing her desire for him to stay despite the guilt she felt for bringing him here... or perhaps because of it.

“I’m just way too insensitive, aren’t I?” Yuuto said softly. “I’ve been depending on you way too much, Felicia.”

He felt just how immature he was all over again.

During these two years, the person who had been the closest to him, who had constantly supported him, was Felicia. Of course they’d come to care for each other. It would be odd if they hadn’t. Yuuto thought of her like she was his real sister.

And all the while, he’d been making her help him search for a method to return home. Even he thought he was a pretty terrible guy for that.

“H-hooold o-on! Hold on a moment, Big Brother!!” Felicia suddenly shouted in a manner that made her previous lack of composure look tame by comparison.

“Huh?!” Yuuto didn’t have time to react.

Felicia abruptly stood up leaned in close, bringing her pretty face right up to his nose. “R-really it makes me very, h-happy when you rely on me! S-so, please act like you always have and tell me anything you might need!”

“B-but, well...”

“Please forget everything that just happened. I, Felicia, simply made the greatest blunder of my life. From now on, I will give everything that I am to devote myself to the needs of Big Brother’s heart without being restrained by my own, so please let me serve you! Please!”

“O-okay.” Yuuto could only nod in agreement, taken aback by Felicia’s almost threatening air of servitude.

Yuuto had been starting to think that going forward, he should be making an effort to be more attentive of Felicia’s emotions, while refraining from relying on her support too much. It would seem that wasn’t what she herself wanted.

The hard reality of the situation also occurred to him: the fact that, without her support, there was no way someone inexperienced and ignorant of Yggdrasil like Yuuto could ever get anything done.

Yuuto smiled wryly. “Well, all right then, I guess I’ll be causing you more trouble from here on out, but thanks, Felicia. I’ll be relying on you. You’re... you know. You’re my most trusted confidant, after all.”

Immediately after saying it, he felt his face heat up. Trying to express his feelings in person was always like this. The embarrassment got in the way. But he’d still managed to say what he really felt.

A confidant was someone you could be honest and open with about anything, ask for advice about anything, and trust them to do the same. Sigrún was loyal to be sure, no more or less so than Felicia, but as a source of private counsel, there was no one greater than Felicia.

After all, it was true. Aside from when they were in bed, the two of them had spent practically all of two years together.

“Eh?! Oh...”

Felicia just blinked for a moment, as if she hadn't understood what she'd heard, and then she smiled. It wasn't her usual mature and composed, yet slightly playful, smile that Yuuto was used to. It was the joyful, unadulterated grin more suited to a girl of her age, like a bright flower suddenly blooming.

"Y... yes!! Please just leave everything to me! I, Felicia, shall absolutely and without fail stop this marriage to Elder Sister Linnea!"

Felicia was even more unlike herself, brimming with enthusiasm and shouting in a crisp, almost manic voice. It would seem that Yuuto's words had made her quite happy.

Now that he thought about it, Yuuto realized that he'd thanked Felicia many times before, but he'd never really told her how much he trusted and relied on her.

Just thinking these things in my heart won't do. I need to make sure and properly say them, or I'll regret it, Yuuto thought to himself with renewed conviction.

He'd already lived through the worst example of that. He'd become more than childhood friends and less than boyfriend and girlfriend with Mitsuki, and while he'd been dragging his feet, he'd been sent to this faraway land before he ever got a chance to confess. So much for learning from his mistakes.

"...Oh! That reminds me, I still need to think of a way to explain this to Mitsuki." Yuuto remembered yet another depressing problem on his hands, and was at a loss.

But at the very least, this was a problem that he needed to handle alone.

Was he just fated to have trouble with women? Yuuto seriously began to consider the possibility.

Priestesses clad in thin, fluttering clothes danced around the ritual hall, their movements in time with the somewhat solemn music of the pipe flutes.

Torches blazed brightly at the center of the hall. Their wavering light played against the white plaster walls, giving them a slight red tinge.

On the ceremonial altar lay a young goat, surrounded by enormous quantities of wheat and liquor. This offering to the gods was an expression of gratitude for the victory they had provided.

Drought and storm, earthquake and flood... all were thought to be the workings of the gods here in Yggdrasil. So, too, were victory and defeat in war.

Many sincerely believed that failure to appease the gods would invite their anger, and the swift destruction of one's country.

That was why a clan patriarch also had a role as ceremonial priest. He or she would represent the whole clan in rites of offering, acting on behalf of the entire clan to show their gratitude. Neglecting these duties would put Yuuto's subordinates, and his clan as a whole, into a state of unease. A lack of scientific merit was no excuse to cut corners.

"Phew," Yuuto sighed with relief. "Done and done!"

Having finished the rite, he flopped down into the seat reserved for him with a *thud* and cracked his neck back and forth.

Normally he'd be able to relax and enjoy himself at this point, but his mood was still dour. The members of the Horn Clan in attendance were all looking in Yuuto's direction and whispering to each other... which had nothing to do with it. He'd already gotten used to derisive looks and gossip two years ago. Whenever he caught scent of that attitude, it didn't bother him.

The source of his melancholy, Linnea, cheerfully handed him some tea. "Thank you for your hard work, Big Brother! Here you go."

Today's ceremonies were also meant to show to the rank and file of the Horn Clan that their former enemy the Wolf Clan was now their ally. Therefore, one might say it was only reasonable that Linnea, patriarch of the Horn Clan, should sit right next to Yuuto. Reasonable, except for the part where he had to spend the whole event next to the girl whose marriage proposal he knew in his heart he had to reject.

Yuuto would have liked nothing more than to flee from the ceremonial hall at top speed, if he thought he could get away with it.

"Y-yeah. Thanks." Yuuto awkwardly accepted the cup of tea from her and

quenched his thirst. He could barely taste it, and he almost immediately felt his throat drying out again from nerves.

“Oh, this is tasty,” Linnea said, placing some mutton on the tip of a skewer. “I really like it. You should definitely try some too, Big Brother.”

With her other hand held under it like a plate, she gently brought the bite-sized piece of meat up to Yuuto’s mouth. Her lively manner and her smile of genuine adoration were enough to give Yuuto sharp stomach pains.

He would have preferred to politely decline, but they were in public, and in its own way, this offer was a diplomatic matter. As the older brother, he should accept the gesture from his sworn younger sister and reinforce their hierarchical relationship.

Yuuto steeled himself and took the bite of meat into his mouth.

Om. Munch munch...

The meat was crisply roasted, with the sharp smell characteristic of mutton. It was probably quite delicious, but at the moment Yuuto was so preoccupied that he just didn’t have the mental capacity to appreciate the taste.

“H-how is it?” Linnea asked.

“Y-yeah. I, um, I think it’s good. Probably.”

“O-oh, that’s wonderful! I’m so relieved that the cooking of the Horn Clan suits your tastes.” Linnea was all smiles, seemingly delighted from the bottom of her heart.

If one stopped to think about it, phrases like “I think” and “probably” were clearly strange in this situation, but Linnea didn’t show the slightest hint that she’d noticed.

Looking at her in such a state of happiness, Yuuto felt like his conscience was being skewered as well.

“W-well then, u-um, t-then...” Linnea, suddenly bashful and stammering, began piercing another piece of meat with the skewer.

Why don’t you just stab me with that thing and be done with it? It’d almost be easier to take at this point! Yuuto thought. The emotional stress of the situation

was starting to take its toll on him.

However, his nightmare was only just beginning.

“S-say ‘Ahhh’... ≡” Her face red as a beet, Linnea once again held out a piece of mutton. Her sugary tone sent an uncomfortable chill down his spine.

Physically it was the same act as just a moment ago, but with just those words, the tone of the situation changed completely. Rather than a subordinate attending to her superior, it was more like—

“Ahh, but you two have such an intimate relationship,” an elderly man broke in, addressing them jovially. “Truly, you look just like a husband and wife.”

It was Rasmus, the Horn Clan’s second-in-command. It looked like he was already deep in his cups. He still had his legs about him, but he was red-faced and bleary-eyed.

Dammit! You’re sure enjoying yourself! Yuuto couldn’t hold back a bit of inner bile at the man. If it hadn’t been for his putting weird ideas into Linnea’s head, Yuuto could have simply been enjoying the ceremony right now.

“D-don’t mock your p-patriarch!” Linnea stammered. Her attempt at a harsh scolding tapered off, ending with her casting her eyes downward, embarrassed. “B-besides, you were the one who said to do that...”

The last part of it almost sounded like she was muttering it to herself, but Yuuto caught every word.

So the “say ahhh” thing was your doing, too?! Yuuto glared at Rasmus with something similar to murderous intent.

“Please accept my apologies,” Rasmus said with a plastered grin. “Ahh, but still, anyone so lucky to have our princess as his bride would be a happy man. You won’t find many women as beautiful, wholesome, and dedicated as her. Do you not agree, my uncle from the Wolf Clan?”

Yuuto found himself clenching his fist silently under the table at Rasmus’s shameless question. He should have expected no less of the man tasked with managing a clan as big as the Horn. Rasmus had phrased things so that a denial would be problematic, while agreement could be taken out of context.

Yuuto found himself unable to think of a good way to turn things around. Just as he was starting to get flustered, he felt something incredibly soft squeeze against his upper arm.

“Oh, my, that is a comment I cannot overlook,” Felicia said with a bewitching smile. “You *are* aware that there are plenty of good women in the Wolf Clan?” Felicia snuggled up against Yuuto’s arm and shot Rasmus a meaningful look.

Rasmus frowned, visibly taken aback.

However partial Rasmus might be to Linnea’s charms, he couldn’t honestly admit that she was more physically alluring than Felicia. For one thing, there was no way the still-developing Linnea could match her in volume and proportion.

“Oh, and Rún, you should refill Big Brother’s cup, as well,” Felicia called.

“Hm?” Sigrún frowned. “It annoys me when you give me orders like that. Though, as a sworn daughter, I want to attend to Father anyway, so I’ll go along with it.”

Sigrún had been standing just out of the corner of Yuuto’s vision, quietly paying attention to their surroundings. Her long silver hair flipped about like a tail as she turned to face him.

She was a beauty on par with Felicia. In terms of pure sexiness, the win might go to Felicia, but Sigrún had an almost artistic beauty, as if a sculptor had removed every impurity, and her stoic features seemed to radiate a divine aura.

“Big Brother, please place your hand around my shoulder,” Felicia whispered into Yuuto’s ear as she lovingly caressed his neck and chin. The motions tickled Yuuto here and there, but he managed to hold himself together enough to do as she said.

“Hm? W-what’s the plan, Felicia—”

“Oooh! ≡” The second Yuuto’s hand touched her shoulder, Felicia gave a sensual cry and fell into Yuuto’s arms. It was a performance on her part; Yuuto hadn’t pulled on her shoulder at all. But to the people watching, it had to look just like Yuuto had forcefully pulled Felicia into an embrace.

“Here you are, Father.” Sigrún leaned in with perfect timing, pitcher in hand, and began pouring tea into Yuuto’s cup.

It all came together to produce what was unmistakably the picture of a debaucherous man being waited on by his harem.

That’s our Wise Wolf, Ráðsviðr! Usually Yuuto would have hurriedly shaken her off, but right now he was internally applauding her.

Linnea was revered as “princess” and the patriarch of her clan. Her pride shouldn’t be able to forgive being treated as merely one woman amongst many. So, giving the impression that he was loose with women might encourage her to retract her proposal. Yuuto, for one, thought the idea wasn’t half bad.

“Uuurgghhh...!” Linnea couldn’t contain her displeasure, growling and puffing out her cheeks.



“Tee hee hee,” Felicia giggled, grinning triumphantly. “Oh my, but whatever seems to be the matter, Elder Sister Linnea? Could you perhaps be jealous?” She slowly traced a circle on Yuuto’s chest with her index finger.

You’re really at home playing the role of the wicked woman, Felicia, Yuuto thought to himself, then quickly drove the words from his mind. It was rude to think something like that about her when she was making such an effort for his sake.

“I— I am not jealous!!” Linnea raised her voice in indignation, but her denial wasn’t persuasive at all. Her jealousy was plain for all to see.

For a few moments Linnea looked down, biting her lip and quietly groaning in frustration, but suddenly she looked back up.

“H-hmm. I-I see now. With someone of Big Brother’s c-caliber, it’s inevitable that mobs of women would flock to him. Very well. Permitting some philandering is also a wife’s duty!”

Linnea clenched a fist and announced this in a loud voice, as if she were also trying to convince herself.

“Eh? Huh?” Yuuto started to get the impression that he had somehow just stirred up more trouble for himself.

And that was when it happened.

Sigrún was the first one to notice. With sudden, animal-like agility, she rose up with a start and glared warily toward the entrance, lowering her center of gravity. She placed a hand on her sword hilt, ready to draw at a moment’s notice.

Her expression was more serious than Yuuto had ever seen, and a large bead of sweat was already making its way down her cheek.

“What’s going on, Rú—” Yuuto didn’t even finish his question before he, too, noticed.

The great ritual hall had been filled with noise and celebration, but the sound died down completely as if a wave of silence washed over the hall, starting from

the entrance. Every person was staring at the same point, their expressions rigid with shock.

Standing in the entrance was a well-built, bearded, middle-aged man in silken robes. It was someone Yuuto knew: the goði Alexis. He was a high official of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, a representative of the Divine Emperor, and the man who had overseen Yuuto and Linnea's Chalice Ceremony. However, the person everyone was staring at was not Alexis, but the man standing next to him.

He looked young, perhaps around twenty, with hair as red as flame. He was tall and slender, with a toned build that suggested both strength and agility.

His masculine features were offset by his eyes, which were brimming with an almost childlike curiosity.

Indeed, there was nothing particularly exotic or abnormal about the young man's appearance. And yet, Yuuto was completely unable to take his eyes off of him.

"W-what the hell is that guy?!" Yuuto gasped. Before he knew it, he had already half risen to his feet, his body tensed in preparation for fight or flight.

He felt a mysterious terror well up within him in response to this man, as if an instant's lapse in caution would mean his own death.

As if a wild tiger had suddenly appeared before him.

"Steinþórr! Why is he here?!" Linnea burst out, her voice shaking.

Even Yuuto had heard that name before.

In western Yggdrasil, ever since the founding of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, the region north of the Körmt River had come to be known as Álfheimr, and the region to the south known as Vanaheimr.

The Lightning Clan controlled a vast northern stretch of Vanaheimr along the entirety of the Körmt River, and Steinþórr was their patriarch.

His manner of fighting, less brave and more fearless and savage, had earned him quite the nickname.

"The Dólgþrasir... So that's the 'Battle-Hungry Tiger' of Vanaheimr, is it?" Yuuto spat out the words with a small shudder, wiping the sweat from his cheek

with the back of his hand.

He'd heard the rumors, but until recently, it had been a name that seemed far distant, from a territory that hadn't yet bordered his own.

"Yes," Linnea replied. "Even the great hero of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, feared his power. After facing him once in battle, Yngvi offered up the hand of his own daughter in marriage and swore an oath of equal brotherhood upon the Chalice... all to avoid fighting a man over ten years younger than him."

"That... sounds like a tough opponent."

Yuuto had faced Yngvi in battle once before, and had been astonished by the man's abilities. Yngvi had mounted responses to each of Yuuto's futuristic battle tactics, despite seeing them each for the first time. His strength of command had brought his troops back from the brink of panic each time Yuuto had rattled them, and his sheer valor in battle had even managed to overwhelm the Wolf Clan's strongest, the Mánagarmr Sigrún.

In a single generation, Yngvi had raised the Hoof Clan up into a large nation that had been poised to seize control of all of Álfheimr. His abilities were those fit for the role of a "supreme ruler," one who seizes rule over the land through military conquest.

"He's just like Takeda Shingen," Yuuto murmured.

"Huh?" Linnea looked at him quizzically.

"Sorry, just talking to myself," Yuuto replied with a wry smile.

It was often said that Oda Nobunaga, the powerful military conqueror of Japan's Warring States era, had once sought a peace treaty and alliance with Takeda Shingen. Despite having multiple times the military strength of Takeda's armies, Oda had extended every courtesy to him. That showed the extent of how much he had feared Takeda Shingen's power.

This wasn't just some problem from recent or ancient history, though. In their previous war with the Horn Clan, the Wolf Clan had seized some riverside territory, and now they shared a border with the Lightning Clan.

Unfortunately, it appeared their new neighbor was a real handful.

“Lord Alexis! Why have you brought someone like him here?!” Rasmus questioned the bearded goði, never taking his glare off of Steinþórr.

This was the center of the Horn Clan’s capital, and on top of that, it was their most sacred religious site. There were multiple layers of security to get through before entering, so it wasn’t a place a foreigner should be able to just wander into.

It was clear that Alexis had used his diplomatic privileges as representative of the emperor to bring the Lightning Clan patriarch in with him.

“Aw, c’mon, don’t sweat the details, old man.” Steinþórr was completely unfazed. “We’re celebrating’ here, right? Just thought I’d come wish you congratulations as the head of your neighboring country.”

“How dare you say something so shameless, when you took our previous patriarch’s life with your own hands!!” Rasmus shouted.

“Ahh, that Hrutin-something-or-other old guy, right? Everybody said he was so amazing, and then he didn’t even put up a fight.”

The clan patriarch’s predecessor wasn’t just Linnea’s father by blood; he would have been her sworn parent by the Oath of the Chalice, effectively the grandfather of the entire clan. Furthermore, he had been a beloved grandfather, who had blessed his clan with many great undertakings and left an indelible mark on their history.

Steinþórr had spoken of such a man as indifferently as if he was talking about yesterday’s weather, hardly worth remembering. Cries of resentment started to be heard from around the crowded hall.

Steinþórr responded with a chuckle and waved at the crowd. “Well, c’mon, who cares about some old dead guy anyway.”

“How dare you... how dare you make light of us!” His rage at its peak, Rasmus unsheathed the sword at his waist. Even if it came from the patriarch of the Lightning Clan, to forgive being publicly disregarded so thoroughly would put not just Rasmus’s dignity, but the dignity of the Horn Clan as a whole in jeopardy. “Don’t think you can just brazenly walk into this place alone, make remarks like that, and go home alive! I’ll take that head of yours to make as an

offering at the previous patriarch's grave! Hey, everybody!"

At Rasmus's signal, several of the men from the crowd followed his lead, drawing their swords.

There were a few terrified shrieks from some of the women present, and suddenly the hall was in an uproar.

As for the red-haired young man, he was surely aware of all the bloodlust aimed his way, but seemed to pay it no mind. He scratched his head with a bored, unimpressed expression.

"Come now, Rasmus," Alexis said with a pained expression, stepping between the two men. "This young man is my guest. Please consider my position, and forgive his rudeness as a favor to me."

Clearly experienced as a mediator in conflict, Alexis spoke confidently amid the tense and violent atmosphere. One wrong move and he could easily be the one to get cut down, intentionally or accidentally. Yet his calm expression had not changed.

He wasn't just some goði, but clearly a man of considerable grit.

"Khh...!" Rasmus screwed his face up as if he was squashing some disgusting insect.

At least officially, the patriarch of a clan was a retainer of the Divine Emperor. That official authority was used as part of the justification for a clan's rule over their territory. A goði was the Divine Emperor's proxy. His words were the emperor's words, and his guest was an imperial guest.

Injuring or killing Steinþórr here would be an insult to the honor of the Divine Emperor. If it were done in spite of the goði's attempt to stop it, the dishonor would be unforgivable.

"If you say so, Lord Alexis," Rasmus said, "then I have no choice but to back down." He lowered his sword. His voice was still bitter and shaking with anger.

Likely the only thing that restrained him was his sense of responsibility as the Horn Clan's second-in-command.

The Holy Ásgarðr Empire had truly ruled over all the territory of Yggdrasil 200

years ago. Now, its sphere of influence had shrunk to something more comparable to a medium-sized clan like the Horn Clan. Geographically and politically speaking, it was far away from this place. However, its lingering authority still commanded respect. The empire could grant the Horn Clan's neighbors the official rights to attack them.

Currently the Horn Clan had had its territory in the east seized by the Wolf Clan, while its western towns and villages had been devastated by the invading Hoof Clan before they had been driven off.

With an internal situation like that, Rasmus had to avoid granting his neighboring clans any excuse to attack.

"Looks like you get to live another day, gramps." Steinþórr grinned.

"You fool, I still—" Rasmus had started to raise his voice toward Steinþórr again, but could say no more. In an instant, Steinþórr had completely closed the distance between them and entered point-blank range.

He was already so close to Rasmus that a sword would be useless, and Rasmus found himself unable to move or react. Steinþórr leaned in close to Rasmus's face, their noses almost touching, and laughed at him.

"Yeah, I was never here for you in the first place, gramps. Well, hey, at your age, you probably don't have that long left, but take care of yourself."

With those words, Steinþórr suddenly dropped down to a crouch, and flicked the blade of Rasmus's sword with his finger.

That was all he did.

"You're... kidding me...!" Yuuto gasped at what he saw, while the stone floor of the hall echoed with the clatter of metal.

Certainly, bronze was more fragile than iron. That was just a fact. But fragile or not, there should be no way for a person to break a bronze blade apart with just a flick of the finger!

That impossibility had just occurred in reality, right in front of him.

"That's the power of the Shatterer, Mjǫlnir," Linnea explained. "It's a unique rune with all of its divine energy, its ásmegin, focused solely into the power of

destruction...”

Usually, an Einherjar’s rune provided them with about four or five different abilities. For example, Sigrún’s rune Hati gave her an enhanced overall physical ability stronger than your average burly male warrior, but it also gave her a sense of smell that could detect poisons and enemy presences, an uncanny sixth sense in combat, and a wild roar that inspired her allies and intimidated her enemies.

There were exceptions, as well. Felicia’s rune Skírnir was fairly special, and bestowed her with many and various abilities and powers. This was offset by a cost, however, as none of Felicia’s abilities were exceptionally powerful. As a jack-of-all-trades, an Einherjar specializing in only a few of the abilities she possessed would surely outclass her.

So then, the opposite must also be true. If all of a rune’s power were compressed and focused, one could perhaps obtain a ridiculous strength capable of snapping a bronze sword in two with a finger flick.

After reaching that conclusion, Yuuto realized something else.

“Hm? But what about his movements right then?” he asked Linnea. “They were also pretty unnatural, weren’t they?”

Rasmus was the leader of four powerful Horn Clan Einherjar known as the Brísingamen, or “Four Flames,” which had caused quite a few painful defeats for the Wolf Clan before Yuuto’s arrival. Even past his prime as he was, Rasmus should still be quite strong and skilled. And yet, he hadn’t been able to react to Steinþórr’s speed at all. Even Yuuto, watching from the sidelines, had barely been able to follow him. It was hard to believe someone could move with such lightning-quick precision without the blessings of a rune.

There were, of course, those warriors like the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command Jörgen, who had, through years of intense training, obtained a level of skill that would allow them to fight on nearly equal footing with an Einherjar.

It was only Yuuto’s intuition, but he definitely got the sense that a man like Steinþórr didn’t obtain such skill through long years of rigorous training. He was just purely and simply strong. A flawless untrained strength born from within, like that of a bear or tiger, or some other fierce beast.

“Yes,” Linnea continued. “He has phenomenal arm and leg strength, thanks to his rune Megingjörð, the Belt of Strength.”

For a second, Yuuto thought he’d heard her wrong. If his memory wasn’t mistaken, he’d just heard about Steinþórr’s rune, and it had a different name. He didn’t have the best memory, but he was confident that he wasn’t the type of person who forgets what he’d just been told, like some senile old man.

“Linnea, are you saying... Does this guy have *two runes*?!”

“Yes, Big Brother. He is one of only a very few, perhaps three at most, in all of Yggdrasil who is a twin rune Einherjar.”

“...What a freaking cheater,” Yuuto said with a weary disgust.

There was no way of conducting any kind of survey or measurement in this world, but Yuuto’s understanding was that only about one in every ten thousand people received the blessings of a rune. He had never considered the possibility that someone could be granted two of them.

“Oookay, then. Let’s see here.” Steinþórr glanced around. “Ah, there he is!” His eyes met Yuuto’s.

Before Yuuto could even finish thinking *Oh, crap...* to himself, the red-haired young man was walking casually toward him with a delighted smirk.

“Halt.” Sigrún stood in Steinþórr’s path, her stance wide as if protecting Yuuto. “I won’t allow you any closer to Father.”

She punctuated her warning with a small movement, her hand slightly loosening her sword from its scabbard. Yuuto had never seen such a grim look in her eyes before, and her face was covered in beads of sweat.

Yuuto was shocked. *All I’ve done today is witness the impossible,* he thought to himself. Not even in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined seeing the Strongest Silver Wolf, the Mánagarmr, terrified of someone!

“Hm?” Steinþórr stopped, peering down at Sigrún intently. Unlike with his interaction with Rasmus a moment ago, there was the glint of interest in his eyes.

Yuuto could hear Sigrún’s teeth grating; Steinþórr’s leering gaze must be quite

unpleasant for her. Even so, the normally short-tempered woman remained silent and endured the offense. That only served to impress upon Yuuto all the more just how unfathomable a threat Steinþórr was.

“That silver hair means you’re the Wolf’s top fighter, Sig-somethin’-or-other, yeah?”

“It’s Sigrún.”

“Right, yeah, don’t really care ’bout the details. I see... you do have that strong battle aura going on. Looks like you takin’ out my Father-in-law in a one-on-one fight wasn’t a total lie. Eh, still no match for me though.”

Nodding to himself as if satisfied with his own assessment, Steinþórr seemed to lose all interest in her and turned his gaze back toward Yuuto.

He’d brought up the death of his wife’s father casually, without even a hint of hatred. It had been a political marriage between two clans. However, there was no sign of a grudge regarding the matter that might be used to justify a war of revenge, so it was perhaps hardly surprising that Yuuto breathed a sigh of relief. As someone who preferred peace, he’d absolutely rather not have to go up against a monster like that.

“You certainly know how to upset a celebration, Lord Steinþórr.” Linnea couldn’t mask her irritation. “Or is it just in the nature of a beast to be ignorant of the trouble it causes for others?”

This ceremonial victory celebration was being hosted by the Horn Clan. Steinþórr’s intrusion and antics had ruined things badly enough that Linnea, as sponsor and host, had suffered a loss of face. It was only human nature to want to respond with a snide remark or two.

“...Mm?” Steinþórr glanced over to her. “Ohh! You’ve gotta be the new patriarch of the Horn Clan, then. Your name’s, uhh... wait, what was it again?”

“Wha—!” Linnea was struck speechless by the additional insult.

It had fallen on hard times in the past few months, but the Horn Clan was still a prominent nation and an influential force in this region. Adding to that, it shared a lengthy national border with the Lightning Clan along the Körmt River. As a patriarch, to not even have one’s name remembered in such a situation

was nothing less than humiliation.

“My name is...”

“Ahh wait, wait, don’t tell me, I heard it from Röskva. Ummmmmm...” Steinþórr loudly mulled it over for a moment. Then he declared, full of confidence, “Yeah, that’s it! I remember now! Borghildr!”

It was a completely unrelated name, without a single matching syllable. One might think it was an obvious provocation. But if it were, there would be at least some measure of spite or sarcasm mixed into his tone.

The young man’s remarks were free of any such inflection; he was simply saying whatever came to mind. Knowing this made his personality all the more infuriating.

Stifling her anger, the young patriarch of the Horn Clan announced her own name. “...It’s Linnea.”

She knew what she had to do here. The situation had already been mediated by Alexis, and her country was in an unfavorable situation politically. For a proud girl like her, it had been an impressive display of self-control.

“Huh? So that’s what it was. Ah well, who cares about the details. It’s not like I have any business with some wet-behind-the-ears little girl, anyway. Though maybe I could spare some time for the pretty lady over there with curves in all the right places.”

“Grr...! You *bastard*!” Linnea finally lost her temper, perhaps because she had already been compared to Felicia just a short while ago, and the shame was still raw. As she roared in anger, she moved to stand up from her chair, but an arm around her shoulders held her back.

It wasn’t a particularly strong grasp. But it was also an embrace that seemed to contain determination, that would not take no for an answer. Linnea gave a small shudder and the strength left her body.

Yuuto waited until he was sure Linnea had settled back into her seat, then glared sharply at the red-haired young man. “Quit harassing them. I’m the one you’re here for, right?”

In that instant, the atmosphere changed completely. Every person felt the same sensation, as if the temperature had dropped suddenly. And it was all due to a few words by a young boy who had, up until that moment, appeared timid and mediocre.

To Yuuto, family was more important than anything else. It might not have been intentional, but this man had made a mockery of Yuuto's sworn daughter, his sworn little sister, and the late father that sister had adored. It was more than enough to make Yuuto detest him.

He wasn't shouting, but Yuuto had clearly lost his temper. Enough to bring out his true nature, the fierce lion hidden within him.

"...Oh?" For the first time, the cocky grin disappeared from Steinþórr's face.

The "cheery, ignorant and innocent young man" seemed to vanish as well, as if a mask had been ripped away, revealing something terrible underneath. The man before Yuuto now had the air of a ravenous beast. He glared at Yuuto with an intense expression like a predator that had finally found the prey it had been searching for.

The real pitiable ones in this situation were the members of the Horn Clan. They had been swept up in their celebration, only to be blindsided by the sudden intrusion of the Lightning Clan patriarch and overwhelmed by his monstrous power. If that hadn't been enough, the young man they had secretly looked down upon and planned to try and take advantage of had also suddenly revealed a hidden, fearsome side to himself.

Unable even to bring themselves to run away, the members of the Horn Clan stood fixed in place as if weighed down by the oppressive, suffocating tension in the air, faces pale and bodies trembling.

The silent standoff continued for a few brief moments. Finally, a smirk appeared on Steinþórr's beastly countenance.

"What the hell, man! So you can make that face, after all! For a minute there I was thinkin' you were a total let-down, you know?"

"What?" Yuuto responded in an irritated growl, unable to make sense of what Steinþórr was saying. The aura of anger emanating from his body swelled even

greater.

The tension in the air grew even heavier, and a few gasps of fear could be heard here and there in the crowd.

But for the red-haired young man, the intimidating presence washing over him only increased the width of his smile. “Ha ha! I didn’t even get chills like this that time I met my father-in-law,” Steinþórr said. “Seriously, I like you, man.”

“Yeah? I’m not the least bit happy being liked by someone like you.”

“Aww, come on, don’t be so cold.” Steinþórr’s attitude was suddenly friendly and over-familiar. “We’re neighbors. We should be gettin’ along. Let’s just have fun times together from here on out.”

Yuuto clicked his tongue, thrown off by Steinþórr’s change in mood. “Tch. What the hell is with you?”

He still detested the guy; that much hadn’t changed. But as easy as it was to meet hostility with hostility, it was harder to stay hostile toward someone acting friendly towards him.

“Hey, Wolf Clan patriarch. What’s your name?”

“It’s Yuuto. Yuuto Suoh.”

“Yuuto-Suoh, huh?” Steinþórr repeated to himself. “Kiiinda weird for a name. But I’ve got it memorized now. I’ll never forget your name, Yuuto-Suoh.”

He announced that loudly, for all to hear. This same man had never bothered to even try to remember the name of the patriarch of the Horn Clan, Linnea, or her father, the Horn Clan predecessor renowned as a great man, or Sigrún, the Mánagarmr of the Wolf Clan.

Yuuto failed to acknowledge the meaning of that announcement.

“Man, you really are cold,” Steinþórr said, turning away. “Ah well, guess I’ll call it a day here and head home. I got to see somethin’ interesting, after all. See ya ’round, Yuuto-Suoh.”

He waved casually with his back still turned as he walked away.

The crowd parted in front of him wordlessly, as if on cue. Just like the tale of

Moses parting the Red Sea, a legend still far off in the future.

As Steinþórr strolled out of the hall along the path that had opened for him, everyone else could only watch him go, dumbfounded.

“P-please wait for me, Lord Steinþórr!” Alexis called after him, as if just coming to his senses, then turned and gave a quick bow to the crowd. “Now then, if you will excuse us. Please take your time and enjoy yourselves for the remainder of the evening. Farewell!”

The goði then left, following after the Lightning Clan patriarch.

Even after the two of them had left, the ritual hall only returned to silence, the heavy and oppressive air still lingering for a while.

The first thing to break the silence was a loud *gasp*.

It was Sigrún. She was down on one knee, wheezing heavily. She must have been holding her breath.

“Haaaaaaaah...” Next by only a few seconds was Felicia, with a loud sigh. “Aah, my mouth has gone completely dry.” She quickly grabbed a cup of water in front of her and began gulping it down without any of her usual grace or manners.

“To think that it wasn’t even a battle and he still managed to exhaust you two this much,” Yuuto said with concern. “He’s a strange one, but also a hell of a threat, it seems.”

“It wouldn’t be nearly this bad if it were just that guy...” Sigrún began.

“Yes, as Rún says, if it were only him...”

Sigrún and then Felicia spoke in vague terms, casting meaningful glances at Yuuto. Sigrún in particular had spoken in an uncharacteristically roundabout way, unlike her usual blunt frankness.

Yuuto tilted his head, wondering just what it could mean. Then he realized.

“Oh, right. You also had to worry about protecting me.”

Yuuto’s trusted subordinates, Felicia and Sigrún, were also his personal guard. They had a duty and responsibility to protect their patriarch with their lives.

It must have been incredibly taxing mentally to stay on constant guard against a man that ridiculously powerful. Yuuto felt simultaneously grateful and guilty toward them, for always protecting a weak person like himself. He knew it had to be very difficult.

“Uh, well, that’s not exactly it...” Sigrún searched for the right words. “You might say it felt like being thrown unarmed into a cage where a lion and tiger were facing off...”

“Indeed,” Felicia agreed with a nod. “That was it exactly. I felt as if I might die from fright.”

“As terrifying as not one beast, but two...” Yuuto’s tone was grim. “That makes sense; he is a twin rune Einherjar, after all. So that Steinþórr is just that much of a monster.”

“...” Felicia and Sigrún said nothing, their expressions stiff, as if they were stumped at how to respond appropriately.

Yuuto thought he could understand their reactions. He’d previously had the same problem with the Hoof Clan; he had thought of the Lightning Clan as a large and powerful but distant nation, separated from his Wolf Clan by the territory of the Horn Clan.

But with his recent victory over the Horn Clan, the Wolf Clan had claimed a fair amount of Horn territory, and it now shared a border with the Lightning Clan. With such an extremely dangerous man as his new neighbor, frankly, trying to figure out how to handle him was already making Yuuto’s head hurt.

He sighed. “He’s known as the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir, so at first I’d thought of him as somebody like Takeda Shingen, the ‘Tiger of Kai.’ But after all that, I’d say he’s more like Lü Bu or Xiang Yu.”

“May I presume that those are the names of heroes from your world, Big Brother?” Felicia asked.

“Yeah, both of them had incredible courage and skill.”

Lü Bu had been a legendary military commander during the late Eastern Han dynasty of Imperial China, famous for his unparalleled strength.

Meanwhile, Xiang Yu was lauded as having been Chinese history's greatest military commander, surpassing even Lü Bu.

"That said, I was totally belligerent with him, wasn't I?" Yuuto began to second guess his earlier behavior. Steinþórr had clearly been the one who'd started things by trying to pick a fight, but Yuuto had decidedly answered in kind.

"I think perhaps it was the right choice," Felicia reassured him. "Responding to rude behavior timidly will only end with us being taken lightly."

"Yeah, you're right." Yuuto knew that there were consequences to being looked down upon. It could mean becoming a target for invasion, or harassed with outlandish demands.

The way of thinking that assumes that if one makes concessions, the other party will make concessions too, was hopelessly naive. In the real world, the only people that logic would work with was the Japanese. If one drew back out of a fear of conflict, the other would seize the opportunity and advance to close the gap. This was the reality of international diplomacy. It was especially true in a world like Yggdrasil where the law of the jungle prevailed.

In this most recent encounter, being passive or defensive would have been the wrong answer.

"Well, it seems like the guy took a liking to me, so maybe things turned out okay, after all." Yuuto gave a long sigh of relief.

His clan's longtime enemy the Horn Clan had been brought in as a sister clan, and the unexpected battle with the Hoof Clan had also been brought to an end. After being kept busy by constant war for so long, things had finally settled down, giving him the chance to really start searching for a method of returning home. Fumbling into another war with his new neighbor would have been the height of stupidity.

"Umm, well..." Felicia looked back and forth, scanning the whole of the ritual hall, with a difficult expression. "I think things may have turned out well for the Wolf Clan and the Horn Clan, but they may become a bit more of an issue for you personally, Big Brother."

As Yuuto followed her gaze and looked out across the hall, for some reason all of the gathered Horn Clan members seemed to go rigid at once in response.

Yuuto frowned, puzzled. “Hey, Feli—”

“Ohh, that was just what I’d expect from my uncle from the Wolf Clan! I just knew there was something about you!” Rasmus interrupted Yuuto before he could finish his question. The Horn Clan second-in-command ran up to them, his face flushed with excitement.

“Big Brother... I’ve fallen in love with you all over again!” Linnea chimed in loudly from right next to Yuuto, her face blushing a bright red and eyes sparkling as she stared lovingly up at him. “I can no longer think of spending my life married to anyone but you, Big Brother!”

Rasmus continued unabated. “I had spent so much time and effort trying to convince them with my own words, yet to think you could bring their hearts to heel with just that short exchange! Goodness gracious, if that isn’t proof of your capacity to be a supreme ruler, then the title itself has no meaning.”

Rasmus was practically gushing, but Yuuto was having trouble following exactly what he was talking about. Just what in the world had happened to cause these two to have such a sudden increase in their opinion of him? All he’d done was glare angrily at an arrogant jerk. Both Rasmus and Linnea had done the exact same thing themselves.

He glanced over to Felicia in a bid for help, but she was hanging her head in her hands, covering her face as if in sorrow.

“...Just what exactly did I do?” Yuuto asked, baffled.

“It certainly is a lively town, isn’t it?” Alexis commented.

Having exited the palace, Alexis glanced left and right at his surroundings as he walked the crowded streets of Fólkvangr. Small children ran back and forth along his path, laughing, as if guided by the pipe music and songs trailing in the air. The town was awash in the atmosphere of celebration, and there were smiles on everyone’s faces.

As he passed by a street stall that was apparently serving as a makeshift bar,

he saw people binge drinking in broad daylight. Every one of them was making merry, rejoicing in the peaceful moments they had been blessed with.

“And so, how was it?” Alexis continued, speaking to the red-haired youth walking just ahead of him. “I took quite a risk coming down here with you to meet him. Surely you have an opinion, at least?”

While bringing a goði like himself had ensured their entry into the ceremonial hall, there was nothing safe about barging into the Horn Clan’s stronghold with no men or retainers, not to mention Steinþórr being their predecessor’s killer. When the boy had suggested it, Alexis had had serious doubts about his personality. It was not the proper act of a patriarch entrusted with the lives of an entire clan.

On top of that, Steinþórr had interrupted a sacred celebration with audacious behavior, provoking everyone around him. For a moment, Alexis had begun to doubt the boy’s sanity. Alexis had had ample experience in his position as goði dealing with chaotic and often violent situations, and yet he still got chills thinking back to what had just happened.

Of course, the young man’s logic was no doubt very simple. If it came to it, this young man possessed an absolute confidence that he could fight his way back out of enemy territory alone, and return home alive and well.

That confidence was not mere hubris, either. This monster had the ridiculous strength necessary to make such a thing a reality. However, if by chance such a situation had come to pass, Alexis would have had no hope of survival. Goði or not, it wouldn’t have been odd for him to be executed as punishment for bringing Steinþórr with him in such a worst-case scenario.

Once again, he felt a deep sense of relief that he’d made it out of there in one piece.

Steinþórr turned back to reply to Alexis with his carefree and innocent expression. “Yeah, thanks again for bringin’ me here. I wanted to get a look at him at least once, this so-called ‘Black One.’”

“Don’t use that name carelessly. It will cause us problems.” Alexis furrowed his eyebrows and chided Steinþórr in a lowered voice. That name was the Holy Ásgarðr Empire’s highest taboo. It was absolutely not okay to speak of in the

middle of town.

“Eh, who cares about details like that.” Without even a hint of concern for the warning, the patriarch of the Lightning Clan tore off a hearty bite from the meat he was carrying.

Damned barbarian. Alexis was unable to resist cursing the boy in his heart.

Officially, the patriarch of a clan was a local vassal in service to the Divine Emperor. As a high official of the central government permitted the honor of representing the Divine Emperor, a goði was much higher in station. But that was, of course, nothing more than his official status, and Alexis had next to no actual political power.

Even so, the local clan lords relied on the Divine Emperor’s authority as backing for their right to rule their regions. At the very least, they were required to show verbal respect to the emperor and those above themselves in station. Despite that, a goði representing the Divine Emperor had to deal with some insolent boy speaking to him the same as he did everyone else. It was truly vexing.

“The man who will destroy the world, huh?” Steinþórr muttered aloud. “I only sorta half believed it, but he ended up being more than I expected.”

“Hmm. Then, will you agree to our request?” Alexis asked.

“Yeah, I will. Against him, I think I could really go wild.”

The man known as the Dólgþrasir bared his teeth in a savage grin.

ACT 2

“Okay, just need to calm down. Calm down.” Yuuto placed his hand on his own chest, and focused on taking deep breaths. In an apt reflection of his current state of mind, Yuuto’s heart was hammering like the bell of an old-fashioned alarm clock.

His hand was trembling with fear.

His mouth was completely dried out from the anxiety.

The nervous fear he felt now made what he had felt when he saw Steinþórr for the first time seem trivial in comparison.

In the darkness, moonlight streaming in from the window danced bewitchingly across the surface of a familiar, round mirror.

Somehow, perhaps due to its being made with the material known as “elven copper” or Álfkipfer, Yuuto could contact his original world while in proximity to this mirror. The only reason he had been able to survive these two years in a land of war and strife had been the various kinds of modern information and knowledge he’d had access to, thanks to that connection. However, all of that had been due to the assistance of one very important person.

“Ughhhhhhhhh, Mitsuki’s definitely gotta be mad at meeeeee...” Whining pathetically, Yuuto crouched down, smartphone in hand.

Upon returning to the Wolf Clan capital Iárnviðr, he had raced over to the Hliðskjálf without a moment’s delay and climbed the stairs, only to find himself struggling to make his finger push the Send Call button.

“I’m not sure. We did just finish a battle. It’s probably nothing dangerous. Just rest easy. Goodnight.”

That was the last time he’d spoken with her, over three weeks ago. Mitsuki was well aware that Yggdrasil was a dangerous and deadly world. It wasn’t hard to imagine how much she must be worrying about him.

That was exactly why he should just hurry up and call her, to put her mind at ease. But the circumstances behind the end of their last conversation having been what they were, he found himself unable to think of the right thing he should say to her first when she answered.

She was definitely going to start crying. Yuuto had a really hard time dealing with a crying girl, and in particular, he never wanted to hear Mitsuki cry. Stuck in a separate world as he was, he wouldn't even be able to pat her head. He just didn't know what to do.

"I guess worrying about it endlessly isn't gonna help anything," he told himself. He breathed in and out deeply. "Right. Just gotta psych myself up and do it. For starters, hit the button first, then worry about the rest later."

He screwed up every scrap of courage he had, and then tapped the Send Call icon.

The mechanical dial tone echoed, the signal that there was no turning back. Yuuto gulped anxiously.

"Yuu-kun! Yuu-kun, is that you?! Are you all right?!" Just like always, Mitsuki picked up after only a single ring, before he even had a chance to mentally prepare himself.

That was more than enough proof for Yuuto that Mitsuki had spent more than three weeks almost constantly looking at her phone, and before he knew it, he was unable to make words.

"Ah... Mi-Mitsu... ki... I... I..." Only a faltering stammer managed to escape Yuuto's lips.

However, for a childhood friend he'd known for 14 years, that was more than enough.

"Y-Yuu-kun, it really is you! I'm so glad... You're alive. You're aliiive... Waaaaaaughhhh!"

"Wh-whoa, n-no! D-don't cry, Mitsuki—! I'm begging you, I'm begging you, okay?!"

Just like Yuuto had predicted beforehand, Mitsuki broke out into a wail and

began crying her eyes out, and all he could do was plead with her.

Meanwhile, Yuuto also felt a heat stirring within his heart.

It was the sense of relief at having survived to hear the voice of his beloved childhood friend once again. Even more than that, it was the happiness of knowing that someone cared enough for him to weep with joy at learning he was alive, guilty pleasure though it might be.

“Mitsuki,” he said soothingly, “I’m still here. I’m still alive. I’m really sorry I haven’t been able to contact you until now. I shouldn’t have worried you like that.”

It was as if all his worrying a minute ago over what to say had been nothing but a charade, and an open-hearted and frank apology just came out naturally.

Even though there was no one there to see it, he bowed his head so forcefully that he banged it against his own knee.

After who knew how long, the sound on the other end of the line changed from loud crying to soft sniffles.

“It’s really... It’s really you. Y-you’re not hurt anywhere, right, Yuu-kun?”

“R-right, I’m fine. I’m in perfect health, actually.”

“You didn’t call me for over three weeks, so what were you doing?”

“Uh... ummm...” Yuuto wavered for a moment on how to answer, but then decided to just confess the truth honestly. “I was... I was at w-war.”

He had considered whether he should tell a white lie to keep her from worrying, but he didn’t want to lie to Mitsuki of all people.

“I see...”

“...!” With just those two words from Mitsuki, Yuuto reflexively snapped to attention, unable to move. Her voice had been as cold as a wind blowing up from a frozen hell.

“Yuu-kun,” she said icily.

“Y-yes!”

“Sit down.”

“Eh?”

“Didn’t you hear me? Sit down where you are. Right now!”

“Y-yes ma’am!” Yuuto hurriedly sat down on his knees in the formal *seiza* position, as he was told. Just like when he’d apologized earlier, there was no one there to see him, so he could have simply not done it and said that he had, but the thought of what might happen on the off chance he got found out was more than enough to scare him away from that idea. A wise man keeps away from danger, as the saying goes.

“Yuu-kun, I do understand that you have responsibilities as a patriarch, okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“I’m pretty sure I’ve told you this before, but I’m absolutely against it, though. I’d much rather you stay somewhere safe, away from all of that.”

“...I’m sorry. But, a lot’s happened.”

Until very, very recently, the Wolf Clan had been weak and under constant threat from its neighbors, its very existence as fragile as a candle in the wind. There had been no such thing as a safe place. The only way to survive had been for them to fight their way back up.

“Yeah, and I know I can’t just say, ‘I understand what happened,’ but I at least understand that you’ve been through a lot and you’ve got your own reasons.”

“Th-thank you.”

“Yuu-kun, I know there’s burdens you have to carry that I’m sure I could never imagine, living in peaceful Japan. But even so...”

“Y-yeah?”

“Just how the hell much do you think I’ve been worried about you?!!” Mitsuki screamed in an earsplitting voice that was enough to make Yuuto pull away from the phone.

“I-I’m really sorry.”

“Yuu-kun, you’ve done a great job bringing your clan together as a leader, so

you should know all about this, right? It's called 'the lifeblood of an organization.' Ho-Ren-So."

"Uhh, um, it's that Japanese business slang that means r-reporting, contacting, c-consulting, right?" Even as he was saying the words, Yuuto felt the blood draining from his face.

In the course of his duties as patriarch, he'd become bitterly aware of the importance of these three things. And those vital aspects of communication were exactly what he had neglected in regards to his one and only childhood friend.

"I've gotten absolutely nothing from you, you know?" she scolded. "You could've at least sent me a text, right?"

"...Yes." Yuuto nodded, his head drooping lower with each sentence.

He could perhaps think of a few excuses. He'd been swamped with preparing for battle and there'd been no time to spare, for instance; or he'd been too preoccupied with trying to think of how to win and survive. But, faced with the girl who'd spent more than three weeks waiting on him while he failed to contact her, heart aching the whole time, Yuuto felt that telling her excuses like that would just be unmanly.

"Yuu-kun, I really hate the idea of you going into battle, I really, really hate it, but... it's something you can't avoid, right?" Mitsuki said. "So, at the very least, tell me about it. If you just cut off contact from me without any warning... my heart won't be able to take it. It'll make me worry about you if you tell me, sure, but if you don't, I'll just worry even more."

"...Sorry," Yuuto said quietly.

"All right. Then I'll stop lecturing you now." Mitsuki's tone changed, and she went back to her usual bright and cheery self. "Can you tell me about what's happened over the last three weeks?"

"Yeah, I can, but... Since the lecture's over, does that mean I can stand up again?"

Mitsuki burst into giggles. "Ahaha! Whaaat, did you really take that sitting down part seriously? You wouldn't have gotten caught even if you didn't do it.

You’re so faithful, Yuu-kun!”

This is coming from the person who talked like there’d be hell to pay if I didn’t do it, Yuuto sighed. He was wise enough not to voice those words out loud.

That said, if I make it back to the modern world, I might well end up wrapped around Mitsuki’s finger. Yuuto smiled wryly. The image of that peaceful future seemed lovely to him... and so far away.

In either case, somehow Yuuto had overcome what had currently been his greatest obstacle.

The summer full of conflict and upheaval had come to an end, and a bountiful autumn was approaching.

“Aaaugh! Give me a break! This is way too muuuch.” Yuuto slumped listlessly face-down onto his desk, which was piled high with documents.

When all things were said and done, Yuuto had a strong sense of responsibility, so it was quite rare for him to complain or whine out loud. In this situation, however, there was nothing else he could do.

Before he’d had a chance to properly deal with the aftermath of the battle with the Horn Clan, he had been rushed into a campaign against the invading Hoof Clan. So now there was a mountain of backlogged issues requiring his judgment as patriarch that needed to be resolved.

In addition, it was just about time for his clan’s annual harvest festival. This year it was also doubling as a celebration of their victory against the Hoof Clan, so they were planning something particularly lavish.

With all the extra preparations, the amount of busywork was enough to make his head spin.

“I am sorry to ask this of you when you are already so tired,” Felicia asked him with a pained expression, “but if nothing else, you must finish memorizing this ritual prayer...” She held out a paper memo for him.

“Ughhhhh...” Yuuto responded with a pathetic groan.

Over the past two years he’d learned to speak the language of Yggdrasil for

the most part, but these ritual prayers he had to learn were full of words not used in normal speech, and he was having a hard time with them.

They wouldn't be so difficult to learn if they were words he knew the meanings of, but to him they seemed like a string of unintelligible sounds, and wouldn't stick in his head.

"Sorry for making you do this so many times, Felicia," he moaned. "You've gotta be tired, too."

"Oh, no, it's quite all right. That means I get more time to have my Big Brother all to myself, after all. Actually, it would be just fine with me if you kept making lots of mistakes." She said this while giving him a suggestive, sidelong glance.

Ever since their return from Fólkvangr, Felicia had been acting a bit different. She had become even more involved in attending to Yuuto's needs than she'd used to be, all while smiling and seeming to genuinely enjoy it.

When Yuuto had told her she was his most trusted confidant, it must have really made her happy. That knowledge somehow made Yuuto feel a bit awkward about having done it.

"No thanks," he said. "Failing that much would just be uncool."

He frowned in concentration and began trying to recite the prayer once more, then realized that his own mood had become a bit more relaxed, and his head clearer.

Because he had felt bad for making Felicia assist him in practicing, he'd tried too hard to learn the lines quickly and had been rushing himself. With work like this, getting impatient only caused one to fall into a vicious cycle.

Felicia's words had probably been meant out of consideration for him. As always, Yuuto found her incredible in that regard, better than he deserved in an adjutant.

"Well, you have a point, Felicia," he said. "A few flubbed lines aren't going to kill anyone."

The judgments a patriarch had to make always had serious, life-and-death outcomes for someone, whether it was directly or indirectly so. Messing up a

few lines of a prayer recital, however, wasn't going to cause a big deal by any means. Thinking of it that way, one could say that boring busywork like this was the price of peace, and he'd gratefully accept that.

Just as Yuuto was coming around to those thoughts—

"Father! I beg your pardon, but I must see you!" A hoarse voice called out and the door to the patriarch's office burst open with great force.

"Mm? Is that you, Second?" Yuuto looked up to see the Wolf Clan's second-in-command, Jörgen, enter the room, wheezing violently.

Coming from Japan, Yuuto had a lot of trouble addressing someone older than himself by name, without any kind of honorific. For a while he had tried adding "mister," but it hadn't gone over well, so lately he had started using an abbreviation of Jörgen's job title instead.

Jörgen was a fierce-looking man in his early forties, but despite his appearance, he was good at caring for others, and his subordinates were very attached to him. When Yuuto traveled abroad, Jörgen served as the acting patriarch and governed Iárnviðr in his stead. He was a trustworthy and dependable man.

"What is it? What's happened?!" Yuuto asked, already feeling a sense of foreboding.

In any normal circumstances, Jörgen would have called to him from outside the room, and waited for his permission before entering. He wouldn't have breached decorum by barging in like this. That meant whatever was going on had to be something terribly important.

Jörgen didn't pause. His momentum from bursting into the room carried him straight to Yuuto's side.

"Father! Please help me," he pleaded in a desperate voice. "My child! My child is going to be killed!"

Led by Jörgen, Yuuto raced toward the castle gate.

As he approached, he could hear some sort of raucous noise coming from

outside the gate. It was already getting dark, but there seemed to be a lot of people gathered there.

There was a fervent excitement in the air that somehow reminded Yuuto of the battlefield. It was strangely menacing.

Just as he ran completely out of breath, he passed through the gate, and as he did his eyes met those of a man on the other side.

The man was perhaps around age thirty, and the glint in his eyes was piercing and cold, like that of a bloodthirsty wolf.

He was dressed all in black, with dark brown hair that cascaded down to his shoulders. He was tall and slender of build, but upon a closer look, he was skinny and very pale, almost sickly. Something about him seemed uncanny.

At his feet, a younger man lay bound with rope and gagged with a cloth. The man in black held a sword pressed to the back of the bound young man's neck, poised silently. It was as if he were the Grim Reaper come to take the man's soul.

"Skáviðr, wait! I've brought Father here!" Jörgen called out, interrupting the scene.

Upon hearing this, the man called Skáviðr looked at his sworn older brother with an air of utter annoyance. "This is my job. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't interfere. And I cannot believe you went as far as to make our liege lord take the trouble to come all the way down here himself."

"You think I would just let this happen?!" Jörgen bellowed, burning with rage. "What parent would stand by while his child is killed without trying to protect him?!" He stood protectively in front of the bound youth.

Evidently, this boy had taken the Oath of the Chalice to become Jörgen's sworn child. In other words, he was a young member of Jörgen's own faction or "family" within the greater Wolf Clan.

"Hey, Assistant to the Second," Yuuto said, addressing Skáviðr. "For now, just explain to me what's going on. Did this guy do something?"

Yuuto already had an idea of what the situation might be, and a strong sense

that it wasn't going to be pleasant, but he asked anyway.

"...So, you brought him here without even an explanation?" Skáviðr asked Jörgen disdainfully.

"And how would I have time for that?" Jörgen responded in turn with a look of plain hatred.

Yuuto gave an exasperated sigh. Looking to his side, he saw that Felicia wore a troubled expression, as well.

Felicia frequently quarreled with Sigrún, but one might describe it as the fighting that occurs between two people who are close. On some level deep down, the two of them acknowledged and accepted each other. The two men glaring at each other in front of Yuuto gave off no such impression. The air between them was thick with a murderous intensity.

Skáviðr's official title was "the Assistant to the Second-in-Command," and accordingly, his role was to assist and support the clan's second-in-command in his duties. And yet, his way of thinking was completely opposite that of Jörgen's, so the two of them were prone to end up at odds with each other.

As the officers in the clan's number two and number three positions, with heavy responsibilities, their relationship had only grown more openly hostile over time.

"I said, *explain yourself*." Yuuto raised his voice and rephrased his request as a command.

Skáviðr hadn't lent an ear to the pleas of his sworn brother and superior, but he couldn't ignore an order from the patriarch. "It was discovered that in the course of his return from battle, this man entered a village of our ally the Horn Clan, where he committed various acts of violent assault."

"Tch...!" Yuuto clicked his tongue and his face contorted in disgust.

Acts of looting and violence by an army against local residents were an inseparable part of war here.

Obviously, death was final and absolute. Those who were constantly exposed to the threat of death dealt with an incredible amount of stress. Without some

way of letting off steam, that stress would build to a breaking point, and the disgruntled troops would be unable to function.

For that reason, from ancient times on up until recent history, acts of pillaging and looting had served in a sense as a reward for those troops who risked their lives in battle. In other words, the soldiers in this ancient world didn't view such acts as morally wrong.

Once victory was secured, soldiers could enter captured towns and villages and rob and kill the people there, have their way with any women there, and otherwise satisfy their desires to their hearts' content. This was viewed as their right as soldiers, taken for granted.

Of course, Yuuto couldn't possibly accept values like that. However, trying to refute them with the common sense of the 21st century would be meaningless. The reality of life here was cruel and heartless. Idealistic arguments and pretty words wouldn't work at all.

"Therefore, in accordance with the laws of the Wolf Clan, I was about to carry out his execution," Skáviðr said, his words hinting at the key change Yuuto had made.

The change was this: an absolute, uncompromising law.

Rather than arguing based on his own naive feelings, Yuuto had used his position as patriarch to overcome the harsh reality here.

During China's Warring States Period, one of the classical schools of thought that emerged was the philosophy that later came to be known as Fa-Jia, or legalism.

Unlike a system where an administrator or official arbitrarily metes out rewards and punishments based on personal morals, legalism advocated for a set of impersonal, strict, and rigid laws that formed a basis for governing society; in other words, a constitutional government.

After Shang Yang, who was practically the embodiment of the ideals of legalism, became prime minister of the state of Qin, what had been a weak and uncivilized country was reborn as a powerful and prosperous state with a centralized system of law and government. It was said that this system of law

was the foundation upon which the first Emperor of Qin later unified all of China and began the Qin dynasty.

During this same era, there were many other examples of legalist prime ministers whose leadership and reforms brought their states to their heydays: for instance, Zichan of the state of Zheng, Guan Zhong of Qi, Shen Buhai of Han, and Wu Qi of Chu. But after their deaths, when laws they had enacted began to lose authority or respect, their countries eventually entered into decline once more.

In the 21st century world where Yuuto was from, the most developed nations followed some principle of constitutionalism and rule of law, too. Countries who ignored their own laws and governed by authoritarian fiat became targets of ridicule and scorn.

The fact that the rule of law was superior to the rule of man had long since been plainly borne out by history. In order for a smaller, weaker nation like the Wolf Clan to survive in a world of chaos and war, in order to make their nation prosperous and strong, Yuuto had concluded that government based in the rule of law was indispensable.

“Big Brother, you are the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan,” Skáviðr said, turning to Jörgen, “a man admirable enough to be trusted to act in place of the patriarch. I hope you aren’t telling me you don’t know our laws?”

“Ngh...!” Jörgen gave a low grunt and recoiled slightly from Skáviðr’s sharp gaze. It seemed that remark had cut deep. “A-all right! I’ll make him carry a wooden sword on his back, and make sure he never does something like that again, so please let him off with that!”

Making someone “carry a wooden sword on his back” was a turn of phrase in Yggdrasil, referring to a punishment whereby one struck the criminal’s back with a wooden sword over and over. It was among the more severe punishments a superior could enact against their subordinate.

“Hmph, how soft.” Skáviðr dismissed the idea with a short, scornful laugh. “The law of the Wolf Clan requires capital punishment for those who rape women or children. And it would be one thing in enemy territory, but this was in our sister nation. There are no extenuating circumstances to consider here.”

Yuuto wasn't an expert in the field of law. He wouldn't have been able to create a detailed body of laws, nor would a complex and nuanced array of laws have been able to penetrate a populace who wasn't used to thinking of the rule of law as absolute.

Yuuto had taken inspiration from things like the Code of Ur-Nammu and Code of Hammurabi, which would be more fitting for this era. The laws and punishments he'd established focused mainly on things like murder, theft, assault, sex crimes, destruction of farmland, and compliance with military orders. In particular, the crimes of murder, robbery, rape, and violation of military orders carried the maximum sentence.

"Originally, this should have been your duty to perform, Big Brother," Skáviðr said coolly. "But as his parent, you would of course have some sentiment for your child. That is why, as the official in charge of carrying out executions, I am offering to do it for you. Now, if you understand, I would have you move aside."

Skáviðr placed a hand on Jörgen's shoulder, and forcefully pushed him to one side.

Jörgen hurriedly spun around and grabbed Skáviðr's shoulder, clinging on in an attempt to hold him back.

"W-wait!" Jörgen cried. "That young man, he's a top veteran warrior within the Jörgen family, and I've judged that in the future he might be worthy of directly exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with our father. If he were to die now, we would be losing someone valuable to the future of the Wolf Clan."

"Hm. It is true that he has had quite a few military achievements," Skáviðr mused while staring down coldly at the young man at his feet.

Contrary to the two men's words of praise, the bound and gagged man looked helpless and pathetic. That said, Yuuto knew that was only because his opponent had been too strong.

In contrast to his sickly appearance, Skáviðr was an Einherjar with a rune called Dáinsleif, "the Bloody Blade," and he was also the previous Mánagarmr. Last year he had lost the title of strongest in the Wolf Clan to Sigrún, but he was unmistakably still a match for her on the battlefield. Even with some fair measure of skill, the young soldier would have stood no chance against Skáviðr.

There had been no other possible outcome for him than swift and effortless capture by his opponent.

“It’s true that this time his behavior might have gotten a bit out of hand, but that happens a lot with the more talented ones, their vigor makes them act rashly,” Jörgen pleaded. “One could say it’s two sides of the same coin. It’s proof that he’s got a promising future ahead of him. And in the most recent fight alone, he brought us significant gains on the battlefield. With that in mind, couldn’t you lighten his sentence?”

“Hm... sufficiently rewarding those who bring success is also the law of the Wolf Clan.” Skáviðr seemed to relent a bit.

No one would serve long under a leader who only doled out the “stick” of harsh punishments. If that was all the leader did, feelings of frustration and discontent would build, and it would eventually lead to animosity towards the leadership. Thus, the Wolf Clan offered rewards to replace the act of looting and pillaging. All who participated in a battle received money or other material goods or supplies. It was a “carrot” made possible by the economic power they had gained through the trade of goods such as milled flour and paper.

If the young warrior had been as successful as the two older men acknowledged, then his pay should be quite sizable. Indeed, in Yggdrasil, where slavery was common practice, it would literally be enough to buy a person’s life several times over.

“Y-yes, it is, isn’t it?” Jörgen, upon getting Skáviðr to agree with him, began to grow hopeful. “So, you’ll... Wha—?!”

Slash!

Skáviðr’s sword fell mercilessly upon the young man’s neck, from which fresh blood burst forth.

“My liege,” he said, turning to Yuuto, “I would ask that this man’s remaining family be given an appropriately generous reward.”

Skáviðr spoke dispassionately, after having killed a man and been sprayed by his blood without the slightest change in his facial expression. He flung the blood from his sword with a quick swing and returned it to its scabbard—

Jörgen, his face dyed red with indignation, had drawn his own sword and was pointing the tip right at Skáviðr.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Skáviðr asked coldly, betraying no emotion.

“I should ask the same of you! We hadn’t even finished talking! Why did you kill him?!”

“Rewards and punishments are separate matters, and I am only the official in charge of executions,” said Skáviðr. “I simply performed the extent of my official duties. Is there some problem with that?”

“You bastard!” Jörgen had thrown away any last remnants of composure and was lost to rage.

No parent would watch their child killed and not be angry. It was even said that one’s most foolish children are the most beloved. And by the customs of Yggdrasil, the bond of the Chalice was stronger than that of blood.

Jörgen had brought up his subordinates within the clan the same as if they were his own flesh and blood children, and doubtless they had also walked the thin line between life and death on the battlefield many a time, becoming comrades as well as family. The depth and strength of that bond was something an outsider could never hope to know.

“H-hey, both of you! Wait!” Yuuto, faced with a situation that suddenly threatened to boil over, panicked and attempted to interrupt the two of them, but—

“Yeah, that’s right, you didn’t have to kill him!” someone in the crowd shouted.

“He was a hero! He showed the strength of the Wolf Clan to our enemies!”

“You go on about law this, law that, but you were just trying to hurt our second-in-command, weren’t you?!”

“Ahh, that’s got to be it. You can’t directly attack the second-in-command, so you were using excuses to find fault with his subordinate. Hey, there’s nothing

uglier than a jealous man, you know!”

“Lord Jörgen, teach that bastard a lesson, cut him in half—!”

The jeering shouts from the gathered masses drowned out Yuuto’s voice.

Every one of them expressed sympathy for the slain young man, and hurled abuse at Skáviðr who had conducted his execution. To the people here, there was likely still a lot of deep-seated hatred and fear toward their longtime erstwhile enemy, the Horn Clan.



“Hmph. Well, my work here is done. I suppose I should leave, since I’m not wanted.” With a shrug of his shoulders, Skáviðr abruptly turned on his heel to leave. He deliberately left his back exposed to Jörgen, who still had a blade pointed at him.

The second-in-command was the head of the patriarch’s direct subordinates, and also a candidate to be the next patriarch. With his opponent publicly sheathing his weapon and turning his back to him, if Jörgen attacked him in such a state, it would be an act of ultimate disgrace.

Perhaps Skáviðr did so because he knew this, but it was also true that if he were to be attacked now from behind, he would be cut down with ease. For him to turn his back on Jörgen anyway in this situation, without the slightest change of expression, definitely required a certain level of grit.

“Oh, that’s right.” Just as he was passing through the gate, Skáviðr stopped and looked back over his shoulder for a moment. “I had better say this much for the benefit of all you fools. If any of you do something to catch my eye, don’t think for a moment you’ll get out of it alive, either. If you don’t want your blood to become a stain on my blade, you’d do best to follow the law. Do that, and you won’t have to deal with me. Heh heh...”

As he spoke his face was inscribed with a cruel and callous smile. After a moment, Skáviðr calmly passed through the gate toward the palace grounds.

A rush of fear silenced the crowd’s commotion, and suddenly it was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. Once Skáviðr had completely gone out of sight, their complaints burst forth again.

“Did you see that? He laughed like that during a previous execution, too!”

“Well yeah, he’s the ‘Sneering Slaughter’ Níðhǫggr, after all. That bastard loves killin’ people.”

“Not only that— supposedly he walks around in town every day looking for somebody he can kill. Gaaah, gives me the creeps!”

Words of resentment and spite rose from everyone’s lips.

As Yuuto listened, he suppressed the words he had felt himself about to say in

response. He had to remember his primary duty. Allowing himself to succumb to his emotions here would be a foolish waste of the sacrifice that had just been made. There was something else he needed to be doing now.

“I’m sorry.” Yuuto knelt down next to the dead youth, placing a hand on the body’s chest, and offered up a silent prayer.

Ordinarily, according to the values of this world, what he had done was perfectly normal and commonplace. Of course there were plenty who expressed disapproval at such acts, but even those people would have eventually rationalized it as something they couldn’t do anything to change.

As someone who had brought in foreign values from another era and forced them on the people here, Yuuto felt that he had the obligation to at the very least offer his condolences to a casualty of that change.

Additionally, this was Jörgen’s sworn child, as Jörgen was to Yuuto. They might not have directly exchanged the Oath of the Chalice, but he still had been something like Yuuto’s grandson.

“Protect your family.” That was supposed to be Yuuto’s personal creed, but far from protecting the boy, it had been the law Yuuto had established which had killed him.

But as long as Yuuto was patriarch, he had to strive for the happiness of the many. He couldn’t allow himself to prioritize his urge to protect his family if it meant innocent citizens would be harmed in the process. For the citizens, too, were Yuuto’s family.

“What aids one may harm the other,” as the old saying went. When two equal duties were in conflict, one had no choice but to pick a side. There was nothing else he could have done. Nothing else he could have done, but still...

The emotions of Yuuto the individual and the rationale of Yuuto the patriarch clashed, leaving a feeling of hopeless contradiction. *What am I even doing?* Emptiness and self-loathing ran through his heart.

His visible anguish gave a very different impression to the people gathered in front of the castle gate.

“Such kindness! Look how much he grieves even for the death of a single

member of his clan.”

“Indeed, that’s exactly why the brave fighters of the Wolf Clan look up to him as father despite his youth. Seriously, he is such a different caliber of man from that Níðhǫggr!”

“We should offer our prayers to that unlucky young man, too.”

“Ohh, you’re right, you’re right!”

Emulating Yuuto, the others each placed a hand on their own chests, and began silently praying. There were a few who were moved to tears.

I’m not some great man of character like you think! Yuuto wanted to shout it aloud. But even if he did, he would have no way to explain himself to them.

Yuuto clenched his teeth hard, unable to resolve his hopeless feelings.

“Well, that man is as terrifying as ever,” Felicia muttered quietly once she and Yuuto were back in the patriarch’s office, and gave a long sigh of relief.

Felicia would normally greet any fellow ranking officer of the Wolf Clan and at least exchange a few words with them. She had instead restrained herself to merely a curt nod of respect, so she must have really had trouble dealing with Skáviðr.

“Pardon me Father, I’m coming in.” As soon as Sigrún’s cool, dignified voice had announced her presence from outside, the office door opened with a *ka-chack,* and she strode into the room.

Sigrún almost always wore a stern expression, with a cold and blade-like air about her, but it was nothing like Skáviðr’s sinister aura. It was rather more like a kind of cold beauty that inspired both fear and reverence.

“Father, envoys have arrived from the Claw Clan, and they wish for an audience with you,” she said.

“They were sent by Botvid?” Yuuto said with a grimace.

Botvid was the patriarch of their neighboring nation, the Claw Clan. Yuuto had managed to force his allegiance, taking him as a sworn younger brother, but behind that friendly smile of his, one could never tell what the man was really

scheming. He was a man Yuuto couldn't afford to let his guard down around.

"Well, maybe it'll serve as a good change of pace," Yuuto said, folding his arms behind his head and stretching his back. After the ordeal from earlier, he still felt a bit depressed. "Are they in the audience chamber?"

"Yes, I'll fetch a chamberlain and... Ah!" As Sigrún turned back toward the office entrance, she gasped in surprise.

Two girls were peering into the room from the doorway. Once their eyes met Yuuto's, they popped out and brazenly entered the office without a second thought. They looked to be children of around 12 to 13 in age, and quite adorable in appearance. Yuuto noticed that they had identical facial features.

"Twins, huh?" he said. "Hey, you two, this area's off limits to kids!"

The central palace was a residence for the sovereign ruler of the Wolf Clan. Naturally, if he or she had spouses or children, they would all be living here, too.

This area was supposed to be off limits so that no one without express permission would be able to enter, so Yuuto figured they must have gotten lost and accidentally wandered in here. However...

"Lady Albertina! Lady Kristina! I thought I told you that you must wait in the audience chamber!" Sigrún politely reprimanded the girls, and Yuuto gave them a second look.

Upon closer inspection, their attire was somewhat different from the style of clothes worn by people of the Wolf Clan. Additionally, the fabric hanging loosely from their shoulders appeared to be made of silk, indicating they were the daughters of someone of high status.

"Eheheheh," one of the girls giggled. "I— I just wanted to see my husband's face right away."

The girl who said this had her hair in a short side tail to the right. She rubbed the back of her head and giggled with a bright, genuine innocence.

"I'm sorry. I tried to stop Al, but she insisted." The other girl raised a hand daintily to her cheek as she spoke. She had her short side tail on her left side,

and also had a more sullen expression, in contrast to her sister's.

Shocked, Albertina turned to confront her sister. "Whaaat?! But Kris, you're the one who said we should secretly follow after her!"

"What are you talking about? Al, don't try to blame your actions on me." Kristina feigned ignorance, tilting her head slightly as if puzzled. "Weren't you the one going, 'I wanna see him, I wanna see him, I wanna see hiiiiim,' and whining like a spoiled child?"

"That's not true!! Well, okay, no, I did say something like that, but Kris, you were the one who first suggested it!"

"So the truth comes out," Kris said triumphantly. "In other words, you *did* say it, didn't you?"

"W-well, yes I did, but, but, but..."

"Come on, Al, you need to apologize. You've offended the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. Look at what a mess of things you've made. Come on now, quickly! Apologize, or do you not care what happens to the people of the Claw Clan?!"

"E-eeeehhhhh?! I-I'm so sorry!" Confused, Albertina apologized profusely.

"Truly, I must also humbly apologize for my no-good sister's careless blunder," Kristina followed up without missing a beat.

"Huh? Eh? Huh? Wait, why is everything all my fault now?"

"Oh, Al, you really are hopeless, aren't you?" Kristina snickered.

Albertina turned her head this way and that, completely lost as to what had just happened, while Kristina seemed to gaze at her sister with an almost rapturous smile.

What the hell is with these two? Yuuto wondered, dumbfounded. Felicia and Sigrún seemed to be thinking the same thing; both of them were also astonished into silence, their mouths agape, which was unusual for the two of them.

At that point, the girl named Kristina gently lifted the hem of her garments, letting them flutter out around her as she gracefully dropped into a kneel, and reverently bowed her head.

“If I may start over formally, I apologize for not properly introducing myself sooner. I am Kristina, daughter by birth of Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan. This is my older twin sister, Albertina. By order of Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan, we have come here to have the honor of serving as your wives. I hope we will get along well in the many years to come.”

“...What?” Yuuto had just heard something he couldn’t ignore.

“Damn that old fox,” Yuuto uttered with contempt. “So this is the kind of crap he was planning.”

Yuuto leaned over the desk, his chin in his hands. The first thing that came to mind was his conversation with the Claw Clan patriarch after Yuuto and Linnea’s Chalice Ceremony. Botvid had asked him about his marriage prospects, then followed up with a *“Well then, how about my daughter?”* and tried for the hard sell. He’d even said *“Say yes now and I could add a second to sweeten the deal.”*

Of course, Yuuto had rejected the offer, which should have put the topic to rest. At the time, he’d found it suspicious that the Claw Clan patriarch had so readily backed down, but he’d never expected an aggressive tactic like this... It was like a bolt from the blue.

“I’m not sure what he expects me to do with the two of you, considering I never agreed to take you in the first place,” said Yuuto. “I’ll need to ask you to go back home.”

“Awwww! After we took the trouble to come all the way here, that’s no faaaair!” Albertina puffed out her cheeks and pouted.

This wasn’t the type of attitude she should be taking with the patriarch of another country, much less the sworn older brother of her own patriarch. But, her completely unrestrained innocence made it easy to think *she’s a child after all, what can you do?* and overlook it.

Her straight-faced sister, meanwhile, gave a very different impression.

“That’s true,” Kristina said matter-of-factly. “For the whole journey here, Al was saying things like, ‘Apparently he’s an amazing person. I’ve heard he’s also pretty scary, though,’ and, ‘Ohhh, I really hope he’s handsome,’ and even, ‘Albertina, I love you. Now, become my bride!’ ‘Ohh, Lord Yuuto!’ In the end

she was putting on a pathetic one-woman show that was painful to watch. I really wish you would take her feelings into consideration."

"K-Kris, I wish you'd consider how I feel about you t-telling him that!"

"...Snrk. Heh heh."

"And I wish you wouldn't snicker like you're reimagining it and laughing at me!"

"..."

"Don't just look at me with pity in your eyes without saying anything!"

"Al, you're annoying. And disgusting."

"When you say things like that directly, it's just as hurtful!"

For some reason, Kristina was emotionally driving her sister into a corner.

As Albertina slumped down, half sobbing and dejectedly tracing a circle on the floor with her index finger, Kristina gazed down at her with a look of ecstasy. Her cheeks were flushed red, and she held her own trembling body with both arms, as if trying to suppress shudders of pleasure.

"Oh, Al, you really are completely hopeless. But don't worry, I would never abandon my sweet, hopeless sister. I will always be there to help you when you need me, now and forever." Kristina began to pat Albertina on the head, consoling her.

Yuuto rubbed his eyes; for a second he was sure he'd seen a pair of bat-like wings on her back and a pointed tail poking out from under her skirt. As a firsthand witness to their exchange, he could only think, *You've got a lot of nerve to say that when you're the one who tormented her.* However...

"Kriiis—! Th-thank youuu! Sorry I'm such a terrible sister. Please, I hope you'll keep looking after me!"

Albertina embraced her sister, choking back sobs and crying tears of gratitude. She seemed completely oblivious to the fact that her sister had completely set her up. This girl was so pure and sweet that she lacked the capacity to doubt other people. Or, putting it less kindly, she was a bit of an idiot.

“Hee hee hee. Al, you’re so adorable,” Kristina said, returning the embrace. She tenderly patted Albertina’s back, while wearing an impishly sweet smile that was quite fitting for a little devil.

At first, her behavior had made Yuuto wonder if she hated her twin, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. It seemed that Kristina did have genuine affection for Albertina, perhaps even a little too much affection. It was just an incredibly warped, twisted love.



“Looks like we’ve got some top-class weirdos on our hands,” Yuuto said with a weary sigh, keeping his voice low so the twins wouldn’t hear.

Felicia gave a wry smile and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “It would be tempting to suspect that he offered up his daughters as brides just so he could be rid of their nuisance.”

“I agree,” Yuuto replied, nodding slightly.

“Calling us a nuisance is a remark we cannot ignore!” Kristina exclaimed.

“Yeah, we can’t ignore it!” Albertina added.

Kristina and Albertina suddenly raised their voices in sync, and thrust their right and left palms, respectively, out towards Yuuto. With their respective opposite hands at their hips, they took on a symmetrical pose.

In an about-face from her earlier calm and collected disposition, Kristina suddenly shouted at him with overflowing anger, “Do not put me in the same category as someone like Al!”

“*That’s* the part you’re angry about?!”

“I have never been so insulted in all my life.”

“I-it’s that bad for you?!” Albertina cried.

“Because Al is, she’s... oh...”

“Why did you just trail off there?! Now I really need to know!”

“...I’m sorry. I could not say it because it would be just too sad for you to hear.”

“Just what is it?!”

As tears began to well up in Albertina’s eyes as she grew more and more panicked, Kristina turned away from her with a sorrowful, pained look. Naturally, once her face was turned away from her sister’s view, Yuuto could see an evil grin spread across it.

“Okaaay...” Yuuto watched with a stiff expression as the conversation ran away from him again.

Talking with these two girls definitely seemed to throw him off. Honestly, he was starting to feel like just leaving them to it, but he was in no position to do that now.

“Did you hear everything we were saying to each other?” he asked. They were, after all, envoys from the Claw Clan, so Yuuto had taken extra care to speak with Felicia quietly so that they wouldn’t hear. The word “nuisance” the twins had quoted had been discreetly whispered directly into his ear. It was a little hard to believe their hearing was good enough to pick that up.

“Heh heh heh, it just so happens that we’re both Einherjar!” Albertina declared this with a look of triumph, puffing out her flat chest with pride.

The phrase that immediately came to Yuuto’s mind was “pearls before swine,” but having just been overheard, he exercised restraint and kept it to himself.

“I bear the rune Veðrfölnir, the Silencer of Winds, and my sister Al bears Hræsvelgr, the Provoker of Winds. Lord Yuuto, please make use of my power in your path of conquest.”

“Right, please use her... wait, Kris, why are we telling him just to use yours?!” Albertina exclaimed.

As for Kristina, the words “a lunatic with a knife” seemed most appropriate to Yuuto, but of course he was wise enough to keep his mouth tightly shut. He preferred to avoid doing anything that would create even a slim chance of being targeted by her verbal assaults.

Yuuto took a long, deep breath and gathered his thoughts.

Listening to the two of them go back and forth was like the conversational equivalent of a cozy field of wildflowers and an eerie hellscape being blended together, and getting drawn into that world was enough to make his head spin.

He recalled what he needed to say the most, and began from there. “I said this at the start, but I never agreed to take you as wives.”

“Hmm, is that because you decided to go forward with the engagement offer from the Horn Clan? I suppose with rule of their entire clan on the table as a prize, even the two of us fail to measure up.”

Yuuto frowned. “Seems like your hearing is quite good indeed.”

In the uncivilized world of Yggdrasil, there were no telephones, internet, or other such convenient tools for transmitting information. The current fastest method in widespread use was a clay tablet carried by a messenger on horseback, which meant it took a number of days to gather intelligence from another country.

Less than ten days had passed since Linnea had proposed marriage to Yuuto.

Taking into account the geographic distance between the Claw and Horn Clans, and the fact that the two girls had been traveling en route to the Wolf Clan capital for some time, this was information that should normally have been physically impossible for them to obtain.

At first he thought it might have been a leading question, but the phrase “rule of their entire clan” was too specific for that.

“I am the daughter of Botvid, after all. I am nothing if not sharp of hearing.” Kristina chuckled quietly and flashed Yuuto a meaningful smile.

Meanwhile, there was another daughter of Botvid present, who let out a surprised, “Ehh?! But I didn’t know that!” and was clearly as shocked as Yuuto had been.

But setting that aside...

“Anyway, that’s a separate issue altogether,” Yuuto said. “What’s important is that for this sort of thing, there are certain proper steps that must be followed and arrangements that must be made, or it’ll cause problems for us. I’m going to draw up a proper letter of objection to the engagement, so for now I’ll have you two leave and wait for—”

“W-wait just a moment, Big Brother!” Felicia suddenly raised her voice to interrupt him. “These two are the daughters by birth of Big Brother Botvid, which makes them children of high status, like princesses. Sending them directly back home as they are now would be, er... It would, um...”

Felicia trailed off with a worried expression, glancing over at the twins. She was clearly wary of the fact that her previous whisper in Yuuto’s ear had been overheard.

“Heh heh, I do not mind if you say it out loud,” Kristina said with another chuckle. “Yes, the two of us are also meant to be hostages, offered to the Wolf Clan as physical proof of our clan’s loyalty to yours.”

“Tch. What the hell does he think his daughters are?!” Yuuto spat out the words, his face twisted in a grimace of blatant resentment.

It was true that in the clan society of Yggdrasil, the bonds formed by the Chalice were given more weight than those of flesh and blood. But that was only one aspect of society here, and a person’s sentiments were not so easy to just divvy up according to rules or customs.

Yuuto and Botvid had exchanged the Oath of the Sibling Chalice and become sworn brothers, but considering their history up until that point, it would be impossible to call theirs a relationship built on real trust.

Botvid surely felt this, as well. And so, as he’d seen the Wolf Clan continue to increase in strength day by day, he’d decided to offer his own daughters up to them as a show of loyalty.

Yuuto understood the logic behind it. It was something that had been practiced the world over, throughout history. Even so, he was nearly overcome by the hate bubbling up in his heart.

“Heh heh, how frightening. So is this the ‘angry lion’ I’ve heard so many rumors about?” Kristina’s words themselves invoked an air of confidence, but for the first time, her smile grew tense.

Albertina was teary-eyed and shaking like a scared puppy.

“Right, sorry,” Yuuto apologized curtly. “I’m not mad at the two of you, okay? I’m just a little pissed off at my brother who decided to use two young girls like yourselves, his own damn daughters, as hostages.”

The image of the man Yuuto hated most, the man who had forsaken his wife for the sake of his own selfish desires, had flashed in the back of his mind for a second. He knew that was making him lash out.

“My, those are surprising words coming from the so-called Infamous Wolf Hróðvitnir, the man who brought about the Vánagandr,” said Kristina. “Oh, that reminds me, your paper production is quite profitable, isn’t it?”

“...You really do have a knack for gathering information, don’t you?” Yuuto spoke in a low, guarded tone, narrowing his eyes.

Inside, he was completely astonished.

This Kristina girl used her silly antics as a mask to hide her true character, a shrewd girl too dangerous for him to let down his guard with. Yuuto had to admit that he’d fallen for the ridiculous conversations from earlier, which had clouded his judgment and caused him to underestimate her.

Back when he had been negotiating to have Botvid swear the Oath of the Chalice to become his sworn younger brother, Yuuto had spread certain information to use as leverage: that he had ordered a Claw Clan village called Van to be burnt to the ground and wiped off the map, and every single resident slaughtered.

Of course, in reality Yuuto could never have brought himself to do such a thing, and had instead had the villagers brought back to Iárnviðr, where they were employed in jobs such as the manufacture of paper. However, the knowledge of these facts was treated as a matter of the most absolute national secrecy, never to be revealed.

It had been meant as a deterrent toward other countries, a threat that any who attacked the Wolf Clan would suffer for it. If it were discovered that Yuuto had actually lacked the resolve to go through with the act in the first place, it would instead be considered a sign of weakness and a source of disrespect.

And this girl *knew*.

In order to protect his clan, he couldn’t afford to let that go. That said, he didn’t want to act too roughly towards a child, either.

Just as he was puzzling over what exactly to do, Kristina shrugged her shoulders with a sigh and spoke up. “The truth is, I only learned it moments ago. I wield the Silencer of Winds, Veðrfölnir. My specialty is erasing my presence and infiltrating places, or sneaking around. So please, rest assured that my father Botvid doesn’t know anything, yet.”

“Well, there’s no way I can send you home now.” Yuuto shrugged in resignation and gave a bitter laugh.

He was a little less worried, truthfully. If she had really intended to spread the secret elsewhere, she wouldn't have willingly shown her hand here. Thinking back on it now, it should have been strange to begin with that a seasoned martial artist like Sigrún had been so easily tailed all the way up to his office.

"Geez, you really had me fooled," said Yuuto. "So this is the real you, then? Was all that from before just an act?"

"Yes. I find that playing the fool encourages people to lower their guard, and they let all sorts of things slip. Well, I won't deny that teasing my dear, sweet Al is my personal hobby, though."

"Heh, I see." Yuuto nodded, impressed.

He recalled an anecdote about a Sengoku Period warlord, Takeda Shingen. There were varied accounts of the matter, but it was said that he had purposefully acted like an utter fool in public, in order to deceive neighboring states and lower their guard.

Despite her childish appearance, this girl was not to be taken lightly.

"Still, didn't you think it was possible that all of this might anger me enough to do something to you, or to the Claw Clan, in retaliation?" he asked.

"Putting together all of the information I have gathered thus far, I concluded that the chances of that were exceedingly low."

"Oh, you're something else, all right!" Yuuto slapped his knee and laughed in amusement.

Yuuto had completely taken a liking to Kristina. Of course, even that might be something she had calculated after investigating his personality, but even that thought was enjoyable, too.

"To be frank, I'd really like to have you as a child subordinate," he said. "I'm still gonna have to pass on the whole taking you as a wife or concubine thing, though."

"Heh heh. Lord Yuuto, your ability to say such things is perhaps yet another example of your great capacity as a ruler," Kristina snickered.

"Hm?" Yuuto glanced left and right at Felicia and Sigrún, and noticed that

both of them wore expressions that indicated mixed feelings.

Apparently they didn't understand why Yuuto had been heaping praise on Kristina. From their perspective, she was an impudent little girl with a troublesome personality to boot, and an unsettling level of knowledge of Wolf Clan affairs. In particular, the first half of that had left quite a bad impression on them.

However, Yuuto had read his way through a slew of books on military strategy and tactics, and there was no way he could overlook her terrifyingly huge value as an asset.

Even his beloved author Sun Tzu had written, "Know your enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster." And in the 21st century world Yuuto had come from, there was the maxim, "He who controls information, controls the world."

In the undeveloped world of Yggdrasil, Kristina's exemplary talent for gathering intelligence was something Yuuto wanted desperately. Most importantly, he could use it to help him look for a way to return home.

"Still, this is a fortunate coincidence," Kristina added. "The truth is, I had entirely no interest in becoming your wife or concubine. And... I had entirely no intention of letting you lay a hand on a certain someone."

Glancing over at her sister, Kristina smiled sweetly. She was undoubtedly extraordinarily skilled, but there was no mistaking that she was just as extraordinarily twisted.

Albertina shivered, as if she'd felt a momentary chill, or a bad premonition.

"In that case, why did you come here?" Yuuto went ahead and asked her outright, though he had started to form a guess based on the various hints scattered throughout their discussion.

"While I know it is an act of insolence, I came here to gauge and test your caliber as a leader, Lord Yuuto."

"You arrogant child! I had restrained myself because of your high status, but to speak of testing Father goes beyond the limits of insolence!" With a voice as sharp and cold as ice, Sigrún started to lay into Kristina.

Sigrún was at heart an extremely serious and sincere person, who in the lingo of 21st century Japan might be called a “sports club type.” It was a stereotype characterized by adherence to strict manners and a reverence for the rules and hierarchy in typical Japanese sports clubs. She likely couldn’t just overlook the blatant disregard for decorum and standing in Kristina’s words and actions. The twins’ earlier ridiculous act had also indubitably grated on her nerves.

Most of all, her loyalty toward Yuuto was on the level of blind faith. Hearing that this had all been some test to make her beloved Father prove himself had been the last straw for her.

“Hey, wait up, Rún,” said Yuuto. “The fact that she’s admitting to that now means that she acknowledged me as worthy, right?”

Gesturing softly with one hand to hold Sigrún back, Yuuto shot a glance at Kristina as he spoke.

Yuuto was the kind of person who hated when others lowered or abased themselves in relation to him. Learning he was being “tested” didn’t exactly feel good, but he would have found it far more unreasonable for someone to trust some punk kid like himself unconditionally. After all, it was said that your body and soul both depended on whom you entrusted them with.

“Lord Yuuto, patriarch of the Wolf Clan.”

With nary a trace of her earlier whimsical expressions, Kristina addressed Yuuto with utter seriousness, gently dropping to one knee. As she looked over to Albertina, her sister hurriedly assumed the same formal posture.

“We sisters are yet without a parent by the Oath of the Chalice. While I do acknowledge my father Botvid as a patriarch of considerable ability in his rule of a clan, I would rather pledge this one and only life of mine in oath to the greatest Chalice in all of Yggdrasil!”

“I appreciate your high opinion of me, but that’s way too much praise,” said Yuuto. “We’re past the need for flattery, you know?”

“No, these are my true feelings. I recognize your ability to see through misleading first impressions, ascertain the truth, and react with flexible judgment. I have also seen your briefly shown but unforgettable aura, the rare

aura of a true conqueror. And then there are all of your many accomplishments thus far. Under your leadership, I am convinced that we sisters could use our abilities to their fullest extent. Please, let our names be added into your family! Please, let us sit at the foot of your table!”

“Please!” Albertina chimed in, and with their chorus of pleas, the twins bowed their heads low in unison.

Now what should I do here? wondered Yuuto.

Based on what he’d heard so far, he didn’t feel like this was a lie, but that was still nothing more than a feeling. As patriarch, he couldn’t make his decision so readily based on that alone. He was also concerned about Botvid’s true intentions. Yuuto was sure there was no way the old fox was unaware of his daughter’s true nature. And both of them were incredibly valuable Einherjar. There was likely some sort of catch or ulterior motive.

“Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, as they say,” he said. “All right. Now, I can’t just go recklessly offering my Chalice vow to children from another clan; my clansmen would never have it. So, the two of you are gonna bring me tribute. Some accomplishment suitably worthy of your high opinion of me. Do that, and I’ll let you swear on my Chalice.”

“Tribute, you say?” asked Kristina, raising her head.

“Yeah.” Yuuto grinned at her.

Botvid was, at the least, a sworn brother to Yuuto. Even if he was scheming something, it probably wasn’t anything too harmful to the Wolf Clan.

And Kristina had said “our abilities.” Her sister might seem like an airhead by all appearances, but she was also an Einherjar. She definitely had something good.

If they were going to test him, it was only fair to test them right back.

“Do your best and work hard, yeah?” he said. “The Chalice of the Wolf Clan patriarch doesn’t come cheaply.”

ACT 3

“Luu la laa! ♪” From behind Yuuto came a voice singing out of tune, accompanied by a roaring wind.

The voice belonged to Albertina, merrily enjoying herself as she rode astride her horse.

As for the girl’s other half, Kristina rode alongside Yuuto’s carriage, occasionally sneaking warm glances in her sister’s direction and letting slip a chuckle or two.

“Wow, this is convenient,” Yuuto exclaimed, impressed by the much higher than normal speed of the carriage.

It was a technique that combined the powers of both twins. Kristina rode alongside the carriage and used the power of the Silencer of Winds, Veðrfölnir to remove any headwind, while Albertina rode behind them and used the power of the Provoker of Winds, Hræsvelgr to create a strong tailwind.

Thanks to that, they were on track to arrive at their destination early.

“I am glad to see that it’s to your liking,” Kristina replied. “In exchange for your Chalice oath, I could promise you pleasant travels from now on, as well.”

Yuuto shook his head. “Quite the attractive offer, but not enough. I’m not giving it to you yet.”

“That’s disappointing,” she remarked, though she didn’t actually seem that disappointed.

The two girls were currently being treated as Yuuto’s live-in guests.

The annual harvest festival having concluded successfully and without incident, Yuuto had been preparing to head out to inspect the new territory he’d won from the battle with the Horn Clan when they had asked to accompany him.

“If you could use this power to affect the battlefield as well, then it’d be *really*

convenient," Yuuto added.

"We would like to be able to do that," Kristina replied. "However, we can only control winds in our immediate surroundings."

"That's disappointing." Yuuto sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

Being able to control the battlefield winds on a tactical level would carry an immeasurable advantage. One could use headwinds to shorten the range of enemy arrows and boost the range of one's own with tailwinds. With a constant tailwind, one could also easily set up traps and strategies to kill the enemy using fire.

But, having a few supernatural powers didn't change the fact that Einherjar were still human. Expecting abilities that inhumanly powerful from them was unfair.

"Disappointing... Crap, I'm getting way too used to Yggdrasil." Yuuto shuddered at the realization that his thoughts had immediately turned toward violence.

In the two years since he'd arrived, the Wolf Clan had been in a state of war almost the entire time, so in a way it was inevitable, but Yuuto was a bit worried about how things would go once he made it back home.

"We shouldn't have to go to war anymore... right?" Yuuto murmured.

He had received information from multiple sources that several clans subservient to the Hoof Clan had broken off and declared independence upon Yngvi's death.

One could safely assume those fragile new clans wouldn't be invading the Horn Clan for the time being.

"Yes, it's all thanks to you, Big Brother," Felicia said. "I never imagined the day would come when we could take a leisurely trip together like this. Although the presence of a pesky third wheel or two does muddy things a bit," she added in a mutter.

"It's an inspection, not a vacation," Yuuto chided her with a wry smile.

Despite saying that, it was true that Yuuto himself felt considerably more

carefree and relaxed compared to the many times he'd rode off to battle.

"Still, that idiot Steinþórr still worries me. I'm not sure how to put it— I just have a bad feeling about him, or something." Yuuto sighed heavily.

After the fateful encounter with his new neighbor, Yuuto had returned to Iárnviðr and immediately set about gathering information on Steinþórr and his Lightning Clan. What he had come to understand about the man known as Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, was just how absurd his strength really was.

Steinþórr had assumed the role of Lightning Clan patriarch three years ago, at the age of only sixteen. Likely underestimating the young patriarch, the Hoof Clan's hero Yngvi had led an invasion, but Steinþórr had driven them off masterfully.

After the battle, he had sworn the Oath of the Sibling Chalice to become brothers with Yngvi, and with the threat from their north neutralized, the Lightning Clan had begun their expansion eastward. The surrounding smaller clans had been crushed one after the other, and in a mere three years, the Lightning Clan's military strength had more than doubled. All the while, this red-haired young man had constantly fought on the front lines, yet it was said that he hadn't sustained any injury, not even a scratch.

Yuuto wanted to believe that was just hyperbole purposefully spread to other nations as a boast of strength, but at the very least Steinþórr hadn't had any visible scars.

In spite of the fact that the various opponents he'd attacked had also undoubtedly included Einherjar warriors, his trail of victories left nothing else to say, except that this young man was a monster.

"I'm sure it will be all right, Big Brother. After all, it seems he really took a liking to you," Felicia teased, giggling mischievously.

One wouldn't have to be as observant as she was in order to notice that Yuuto held less than pleasant feelings toward Steinþórr; anyone who had been present at that ritual hall would have been well aware.

"Come on, cut it out." Yuuto frowned, genuinely upset.

From the moment they'd first met, there had been something about that

fearless young man that Yuuto couldn't stand. Even just thinking back on it incited a nauseating pain in his chest.

It wasn't really because Steinþórr was rude and arrogant. If that had been the reason, Yuuto would have been more annoyed at the way Kristina and Albertina had first behaved. Yuuto had thought maybe it was because of how his younger sister Linnea had been made a fool of, but even that wasn't enough to explain the visceral hatred he felt toward the man.

Finding himself unable to figure out the reason behind his irritation annoyed Yuuto even further, which increased the hate he felt toward Steinþórr. It was a classic vicious cycle.

"But if you swore the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with him, the peace of the Wolf Clan would be all but secured, wouldn't it?" Felicia said.

"Urk." Yuuto groaned, grimacing as if he'd just swallowed something disgusting.

He would honestly rather die than become brothers with that man, but as a patriarch, Yuuto couldn't let himself make decisions based on personal feelings alone. If he were to think about his country's future prosperity, naturally it was an option that had to be on the table. Even if just imagining it was enough to give Yuuto goosebumps in revulsion.

The city of Gimlé had been built near the intersection of two rivers: the Körmt River, the great mother river whose waters nourished the greater Álfheimr region, and the Élivágar River, a smaller tributary flowing down from the steep Þrúðvangr Mountains which formed one corner of the "Roof of Yggdrasil."

A portion of the wall surrounding the city had collapsed, and bare-chested and sunburned laborers were laying new bricks. Looking into the town proper, one could see that in several places along the main street, carpenters were busy assembling houses. Every member of the populace walking along the main street, from women and children to the elderly, was busily working together to carry more bricks to and fro.

"This is a fact of life in war. Please do not worry yourself unduly over it." Felicia's words were considerate, but a cloud remained over Yuuto's heart.

“Yeah... I know that,” Yuuto said with a bit of self-derision. He looked over the city, burning the scene into his eyes. Just looking at it caused his chest to tighten up with guilt, but that was all the more reason he needed to remember this.

He needed to remember the image of the people who suffered because of what he had done.

The fortress citadel at the center of the city was still damaged or destroyed in areas, and had been left exposed to the elements in a way that continued to markedly showcase the ravages of war. That was because reconstruction of the city proper had been given priority, and there weren’t enough people to spare.

This fortress was one that Yuuto had assaulted and captured during the war with the Horn Clan. Since the fortress itself was the target, he’d focused on trying to avoid excessive damage to the city, but it had been hard to avoid completely.

“This sure is a large town, though, isn’t it?” Yuuto murmured, turning back toward Felicia.

“Yes, I’ve heard reports that its population exceeds that of Iárnviðr.”

“It does seem pretty rich in resources.”

“Indeed. At the time, it was so amazing that I was left speechless.” Felicia gave a small sigh of admiration.

There was no trace of it now after the fall harvest, but at the time he’d taken the fortress, the entire landscape outside the city had been covered in waving heads of golden wheat, stretching as far as the eye could see. The locals apparently referred to that sight as Iðavöllr, “the Shining Fields.” From the perspective of someone from the Wolf Clan, whose territory was mostly in mountain foothills with rocky soil unfit for farming, the sight must have been more captivating than any gold or jewels.

“For my part, I’m breathing a sigh of relief that our own food situation is about to improve dramatically,” Yuuto said.

Currently, the Wolf Clan was making up for its food supply shortages through trade. They’d been unable to avoid buying at a comparatively high rate, and had

been going into the red financially at times in order to supply their citizens. And the countries they were trading with didn't really have much of a surplus in food production to begin with. One bad harvest season would make market prices soar, and there was a chance that there wouldn't be enough to spare for trading at all. One could call food supplies a nation's life support system, and Yuuto wanted to make it possible for the Wolf Clan to provide for itself with its own food production.

"Hey hey, Lord Yuuto..." Albertina was tugging at his cloak, and Yuuto turned to find her with an absolutely pitiable look on her face.

"Huh? What's wrong—" he began, but then her stomach gave off a lively, thunderous growling, and he surmised the rest.

Holding a hand over her stomach, Albertina smiled, embarrassed.

The sky was already beginning to glow with the setting sun. It must have been some time since they'd eaten lunch, not to mention the fact that she'd been using the power of her rune to create tailwinds to push Yuuto's carriage the entire time. It was no surprise she'd worked up an appetite.

"Oh, you're so hopeless, Al," Kristina said. "I guess there's nothing for it. Well then, I still have some bread I saved from lunch, so..."

"You're going to give it to me?!"

"I'm going to eat it myself, of course." Kristina stuffed the leftover bread into her mouth all at once and began chewing furiously. It was a pretty big piece of bread, so both of her cheeks were puffed out like a squirrel's.

"Ah... ahh... ahhhhh..." Albertina fell dramatically to her knees, reaching an arm out to her sister in vain with tears streaming down her face. She was wailing forlornly like it was the end of the world.

Watching that reaction, Kristina looked absolutely ecstatic, as if she were walking on air. As always, she was completely devoted to picking on her sister.

"We'll get you some food real soon, so don't cry." Yuuto, feeling a bit sorry for Albertina, patted her on the head, tousling her hair a bit. They'd arrived in Gimlé ahead of schedule thanks to her, and he definitely wanted to get her a good meal.

“Wahhh! Thank you so muuuch...” Albertina gripped his hand and thanked him profusely.

Meanwhile, her sister responded with a chilly objection. “Oh, my. Lord Yuuto, could I trouble you not to feed her without my permission?”

Kristina’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes weren’t. Looks like this wasn’t so easy a problem to solve.

Yuuto couldn’t help but give a wry smile.

Whatever she might say to the contrary, Kristina had waited to make a show of eating in front of her sister until the city was right in front of them, when they would be able to get something to eat without much of a wait. Yuuto had the feeling that if they really were out of food with no way to get more, she would have given the last of her own food to Albertina.

“Seriously... you are one twisted girl.”

“It sounds like you’re really having trouble with it, then,” Yuuto said.

“Yes, sir.” The middle-aged man sitting across the desk from Yuuto sheepishly bowed his head repeatedly, wiping sweat from his brow with a small cloth. “It’s just that there are quite a few differences from what we’re used to, and, um...”

He was supposed to be about in his mid-thirties, but he must have seen his share of troubles, for he looked much older. His brown hair already had bits of white in it, and there were thick crease lines etched into his face.

The man’s name was Olof. He was the Wolf Clan’s fourth-ranked officer, and the new governor put in charge of running the city of Gimlé.

He didn’t have any particularly outstanding achievements to his name, but he had gained his current rank by fulfilling any mission or assignment given to him without any fanfare or complaint, and over time, his long and steadfast dedication had made him a valued and experienced general.

Ruling over a newly annexed territory was expected to bring its share of troubles, and Yuuto had determined that a man known for his plain but solid results would be the best fit for the task. It seemed it had been rough sailing

even for Olof, though.

“Even so, we have to get this Norfolk system implemented somehow,” Yuuto said.

“I’ve given everything I have to try and make it so, sir, but I fear I wasn’t up to the task.” Olaf bowed his head again. “I am truly sorry.”

“No, it’s okay, I understand that it’s difficult.” Yuuto waved his hands, trying to reassure the apologetic Olof. “I know it’s gonna be tough, but keep trying.”

The Norfolk system was a four-course farming system in which four different crops (barley, clover, wheat, and turnips) were planted in four fields, and then their positions were rotated with the new planting each year.

In the 18th century, the tremendously rapid increase in agricultural productivity, in no small part due to the widespread use of this crop rotation technique, had come to be called the Second Agricultural Revolution.

Until the advent of this system, it had been difficult to prepare an adequate amount of fodder for all of one’s domestic livestock, and so as winter approached, it had been common to slaughter most of them, which in turn prevented one from retaining a large number of livestock.

For Yuuto, that meant that in preparation for this year’s coming winter, he wanted to at least draw up a plan for the planting of turnips and clover. The turnips would serve as livestock fodder during the winter, while the clover would both feed the livestock and help renew the soil.

“The greatest problem for us,” explained Olof, “is that this city was under the control of the Horn Clan for many years, and the people here truly came to love and appreciate them. So, they do not look too favorably on our rule.”

“I see,” Yuuto said, nodding. “Well, the Horn Clan did improve life here by a lot, after all.”

Linnea’s father was known colloquially as Gullveig, “the Golden Hero,” and it seems that name was no exaggeration. Linnea herself was so devoted to the well-being of her people that she had been willing to offer up herself as a sacrifice for their sake. It was likely that she had learned this sense of devotion from her father’s teachings, and by watching his example.

“Yes, sir,” Olof said. “And when outsiders like us come in at that point, demanding that they change the practices that have been passed down for generations, it’s quite difficult to get any of them to lend an ear...”

“Yeahhh, that’s gonna be the case when your farming customs have been passed down for hundreds of years...” Yuuto couldn’t help but agree with Olof’s point, sighing bitterly and folding his arms.

In the “information society” of the 21st century where Yuuto came from, advances in technology were practically a monthly or even daily occurrence. But in ancient eras, there had often been periods of several hundred or even a thousand years with no significant or revolutionary change, where people simply continued to use the technology and practices passed down to them.

For example, even though the concept of fighting while riding on a horse had already come into being by around 1,000 B.C., it took another 700 years before the bit mouthpiece was invented, and 1,400 more years passed before the advent of the modern stirrup.

“‘There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.’ ...So it is.” With a bit of irony, Yuuto quoted Machiavelli’s *The Prince* from memory.

In that book, Machiavelli followed this with, “Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.”

And this was agriculture, the core and foundation of people’s livelihoods. Failure would mean they might have nothing to eat the following year. Yuuto could understand why the people of Gimlé would think twice about trusting something new.

By the time he’d tried putting the system into practice with the Wolf Clan in Iárnviðr, Yuuto had already built up a reputation with several accomplishments for the clan, and he’d earned the trust of high-ranking authorities in the clan like Felicia and Jörgen. And those Wolf Clan authorities already had the wholehearted trust of the citizens. That was the only reason he’d been able to implement even a partial version of the system as smoothly as he had.

Gimlé was, in this regard, enemy territory, and just across the Élivágar River border lay the Lightning Clan's territory. If he wasn't careful with managing the emotions of the local population, at worst it could lead to a revolt, creating a fatal opening in Wolf Clan defenses and inviting invasion.

"There's seriously nothing harder to deal with than human emotions," Yuuto grumbled, and sighed.

"You are quite right, sir." Olof gave a stern, solemn agreement.

Then they exchanged glances and both gave a wry laugh.

No matter how sound the logic, no matter how revolutionary the expected result or improvement, without the ability to sway the human heart, any new idea was nothing more than a pie in the sky.

Knowledge from the 21st century was, at the end of the day, nothing more than that. Just how long had it taken him to learn that simple fact?

"Good grief. So, what can we even do about it?" At a loss, Yuuto stared up at the ceiling.

Little did he know, a solution to this problem he had thought extremely difficult to solve was even now racing toward him from an unexpected direction.

Whether that solution would be something desirable to him or not was another matter entirely.

"Big Brother! It's good to see you again after so long!!" Linnea cried.

"Uh, y-yeah, g-good to see you too, Linnea." Taken aback by his sworn sister's sudden arrival in the citadel, Yuuto struggled awkwardly to return her greeting.

It was about five days since Yuuto had arrived in Gimlé. He had been visiting various locations in the city, asking indirect questions of the residents, and had just begun to really get a feel for the difficulty of the problem facing him.

"W-why are you here, though?" Yuuto asked, his face tense.

It wasn't that he disliked her; in fact, he actually liked Linnea. But right now, she was the one person he least wanted to see.

Thanks to Felicia's expert wit in handling the situation, Yuuto had managed to buy some time to think, but even with all that time, he still hadn't been able to come up with a diplomatic, problem-free way to turn down her marriage offer. It was still something that he racked his brain over.

"Originally, this city was under the rule of the Horn Clan," Linnea explained. "Of course, I have absolute faith that you can bring the people here peace and prosperity, Big Brother! It's just that it's something I thought about a lot, and... When I heard that you would be coming here, I thought, this a great opportunity. Um, and... B-Big Brother, I also just wanted to see you, too."

As she said the last part, Linnea's voice cracked and faded out. Her face turned bright red, and she looked down, embarrassed.

Yuuto was almost unable to make out the words... almost. He thought about how much better it would feel if he hadn't heard them, and cursed his hearing.

He had absolutely no idea how to deal with this.

For the past two years, he had plunged himself feverishly into the study of government, economics, and military science, but that had left him without a moment of time to learn about relations with women. And it wasn't like he'd had any life experience to draw on, either. He was just a green recruit, like many young men his age.

"Um, so, um, if it's possible, I'd like to hear your answer soon..." With her two index fingers pressed together, Linnea asked him in a small voice. But her truly sweet, even adorable mannerisms just drove the sword that was Yuuto's conscience all the more deeply into his own heart.

"Ahhh, so in regards to that, um..." Yuuto's face had broken out into so much cold sweat that one might mistake him for a toad fresh out of the water.

I have to think of an excuse...! Yuuto's mind raced, but there was no chance of him coming up with something useful when he hadn't been able to after all this time.

"Big Brother?" Linnea asked.

"Uhh... um um um..."

“I’m terribly sorry, Elder Sister Linnea,” Felicia said with a bow of her head. “The truth is, another offer of marriage came to us from the Claw Clan, and as it is a delicate political matter, we hope you could grant us a little more time.”

In the end, it was once again Yuuto’s talented adjutant who came to his rescue in a moment of desperation.

“Wha— Did you say the Claw Clan?” Shaken, Linnea’s face changed from that of a young maiden in love to that of a composed patriarch. She locked her gaze on Felicia, pressing her for the details, when...

“Right here, that’s meeee!” Albertina raised her hand and called out energetically.

“Or so she says, but she is nothing more than a concubine, and I am the actual marriage candidate,” Kristina added.

“Ehh?! But I’m technically the older sister, Kris!”

“Ability and merit are everything in this world, Al. Heh heh heh...” Kristina snickered to herself like some evil magistrate out of fiction.

For someone who had outright stated she had no interest in marriage, it seemed she was willing to go to any lengths to tease her sister.

“Grr, to think you had Big Brother let you accompany him on his inspection tour... If you’ve already earned his favor in that way, I can’t take you lightly.” With a fearful expression, Linnea took an unsteady step backward.

It would appear she assumed that Yuuto had brought the twins along as his “favored mistresses” or something to that effect. In actuality, they had stubbornly decided to come along of their own accord.

“B-Big Brother!” Linnea cried. “With all due respect, the Horn Clan is greater than the Claw Clan in terms of national strength. I think it is obvious which one of us would lead to better prosperity for the Wolf Clan.”

“Oh, my, trying to snare a man with material wealth?” Kristina sneered. “You must truly not have much confidence in yourself as a woman. Hee hee.”

Kristina placed a hand over her mouth and giggled haughtily, in the style of your typical evil woman character.

She was totally enjoying herself. While her main target was of course her sister, it would seem that she also just loved sadistically picking at people in general.

She really was a girl of bad character.

“Rrrrgh!” Glaring at Kristina, Linnea growled, presumably unable to come up with a response to her taunts.

“Hee hee.” Kristina giggled again. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying how frustrated she was making Linnea, but to Linnea’s eyes, it had to seem like Kristina was gloating over her marriage prospects.

“Grr...!” Linnea’s face twisted up with displeasure. That reaction of hers was even more of a treat for Kristina, but she didn’t realize it.

“S-so more importantly, Linnea, you were concerned about the state of the city, right?” Yuuto hurriedly attempted to change the subject.

Partly he did so because he felt sorry for Linnea, but mainly he had determined that this topic was too dangerous. It would be a real problem for him if it were revealed that he’d tried to send the twins back home. He wanted to keep Linnea thinking that he was struggling to decide between the marriage offers from both clans.

To Yuuto, it felt like he was acting the part of the sort of man who would string along multiple women and never commit.

Back home in the 21st century, I thought disgusting jerks like that were the worst, so how did I end up as one? he lamented to himself.

“Oh, uh, yes,” Linnea said, seeming to come back to her senses at Yuuto’s words. She stopped glaring menacingly at Kristina and her sister. Returning to her earlier courteous manners, she turned to face Yuuto. “On my way here, I took the liberty of viewing the state of the city, and I was relieved to see that the reconstruction appears to be proceeding well.”

“Well, it’s shameful to admit, but the truth is it’s actually not going all that well,” Yuuto admitted.

“I-is that so?!”

“Yeah,” Yuuto said. “It seems the previous rulers here were pretty amazing at their job.”

“Ah...! That’s, um, what can I say...” Linnea nearly broke out into a wide grin, then stopped herself, looking apologetic. Even so, her modesty couldn’t completely conceal the happiness from her cheeks, creating quite a mixed expression.

Yuuto found the sight heartwarming as he continued explaining the situation to her. “So because of that, there’s something I’ve wanted to find a way to put into practice here, but we can’t get anyone to agree to it, and we’re deadlocked. I guess there’s no way around that but to start by earning their trust slowly and steadily, right?” Yuuto raised both hands in a wide shrug.

Haste makes waste, as the famous expression went. Just because he had 21st century knowledge, that didn’t mean that things would always go his way. Even if it felt like a frustratingly long road, he was going to have to walk every step of it.

“Um, incidentally, what sort of plan is it?” Linnea inquired. “If it’s all right, would you be willing to tell it to me?”

“Hmm, what should I do...” Yuuto only hesitated for a moment. “Ahh, sure, why not. So, the thing is...”

Yuuto gave Linnea a rough explanation of the Norfolk crop rotation system.

In an era when it was no exaggeration to say a country’s national strength was equivalent to its agricultural productivity, putting this system into practice would bring immeasurable benefits.

He’d wavered a little bit on whether it was right to give such valuable knowledge to someone from another clan, but he’d decided to tell her. It wasn’t because he’d come to like Linnea or wanted to bring happiness to the citizens of the Horn Clan, though he couldn’t deny that he also held those kinds of naive sentiments. No, as a patriarch, he had a more practical reason for his decision.

The Horn Clan had recently suffered a serious decline in national strength. In their defeat by the Wolf Clan, they had lost a large number of soldiers and a

good portion of fertile land, including Gimlé. And in their most recent war with the Hoof Clan, their western lands had seen a lot of damage. From a geopolitical perspective, the Horn Clan was what one could call a buffer state, shielding the Wolf Clan's western side from the many other clans it bordered. It was like how Tokugawa Ieyasu had been for Oda Nobunaga.

Now that they'd formed an alliance, it wouldn't be very good for the Wolf Clan's national security to let the Horn Clan grow too much weaker.

"Oh... Ohhh..." Linnea nodded and let out sigh after sigh of wonder as Yuuto explained the crop rotation system. By the time he finished, she was so deeply moved that she trembled with excitement, and began to praise him relentlessly. "Wooooooooow! Amazing! Amazing!! That's too amazing! Not only can you win in battle, you even think of splendid ideas like this! I-I admire you from the bottom of my heart! Big Brother, I think your wisdom surpasses that of the gods in the heavens!"

"N-no, see, I didn't actually think of any of it, though," Yuuto said, recoiling from Linnea's downright ferocious praise.

Inwardly, he was also thrown off for another reason. Yuuto had never before seen a person emotionally moved on such a deep level just by a simple scientific explanation. Humans couldn't comprehend something that was too far removed from the bounds of their own common sense. In Yggdrasil, planting the fields every other year was still the common practice. Though the Norfolk system had already produced definite results in Yuuto's world, there was still no precedent here.

With a proposal that sounded far too good to be true, it was normal for people to get suspicious of fraud, and there were plenty who might react with anger, claiming the gods would not allow such blasphemy.

"I understand!!" Linnea suddenly stood up, and with a face filled with determination, thumped a fist to her chest. "For my big brother, and more than anything, for the people of Gimlé! Though I may be unworthy, I, Linnea, will do my utmost to assist you!"

"Ohh, it's Lady Linnea! Lady Linnea's here!" a man cried.

“Thank you so much for coming here to see us,” a woman added. “It’s so wonderful to have the chance to look upon your face again.”

“Here are some apples we’ve harvested. Please, make sure to enjoy them to the fullest.”

The people of Gimlé adored Linnea in a way that could be called religious. It was almost like they viewed her as some sort of living god. There were even some who exclaimed “Praise be!” and prostrated themselves the moment they saw her.

“You’re... seriously amazing...” Yuuto said, taken aback.

“No, it’s my father’s influence. I have nothing to do with it...” Shaking her head, Linnea gave a forlorn denial. She seemed to have lost confidence in herself with all that happened over the last few months, but Yuuto couldn’t agree with her at all.

Yuuto was revered in Iárnviðr, but not to this extent. And more to the point, it was a different *kind* of reverence. The emotions Yuuto felt from his clansmen were those of gratitude, praise, and respect toward a ruler who led them and who gave them the gift of his Chalice oath. There was a certain sense of distance.

Meanwhile, the worship the people of Gimlé showed Linnea contained an affectionate warmth, as if she were their own flesh and blood family.

The fact that Linnea was the actual daughter of the previous patriarch was a secret, so that couldn’t be the reason. Besides, however talented and virtuous a ruler her father might have been, if she herself hadn’t had her own charisma and appeal, she wouldn’t have obtained this level of deep affection from her people.

“They really do love you, huh?” Yuuto murmured. He’d come to see her in a completely new light.

However, he would soon come to realize that even his new assessment of her had been far, far, far too low.

“You... you’re *seriously* amazing...” Yuuto gasped.

“Indeed...” Felicia murmured.

Yuuto and Felicia could only manage those few words, and sighs of admiration, at how things had unfolded.

It was now the third day since Linnea had arrived in Gimlé. It had been less than three days, yet she had spoken to every influential figure in the city, and gotten each of them to give their agreement on a plan to implement the Norfolk system. That alone would have been cause for celebration, but wouldn’t have left them in such a state of shock.

No, what overwhelmed the two of them was that, in such a short time, Linnea had already worked out the details of who would be planting what crops where, and even how to regulate the balance of economic interests that would arise among the citizens who planted different types of crops.

“Hey, wouldn’t it be interesting if we did this?” Everyone has had the experience of coming up with a great idea and saying that. However, such visions rarely become reality. Ideas by themselves have no power to make anything happen.

One needs to put in actual work: putting together a concrete schedule, procuring supplies, gathering people, allocating roles. It is with this ability to get things done that an idea first begins to take shape in the world.

Linnea possessed that ability.

In the Wolf Clan, officers like Jörgen and Olof excelled in that department, which was why they were given valued appointments like second-in-command or governor of Gimlé. But Linnea’s practical skills were far beyond even theirs.

Natural talent might have played a large role in that, but it was more likely because Linnea had, from her youngest days, been trained vigorously by her great father in the skills necessary to fulfill her future role.

“So then, Big Brother.” Linnea didn’t seem to take notice of their reaction. “The greatest cause for concern for many of the people involved is about what would happen in the event of a bad harvest. If you can promise them a financial guarantee of these amounts in the event of that happening, I think everyone will feel secure enough to work together on this. So, I would really like to get

your authorization for this.”

“Y-yeah, uh....” Yuuto looked down at the paper placed on the desk in front of him, covered with tightly packed lines of text, but he couldn’t read it. He glanced up at his adjutant, and with a reserved expression, she gave a single nod. It seemed like these were reasonable conditions.

“W-well then, let’s proceed with this. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, I will,” said Linnea happily. “Thank you very much!”

“No, you’re the one who deserves thanks.”

“I’m just doing what I can for everyone in Gimlé.” Linnea’s smiling face was colored with fatigue; she likely hadn’t slept much in the past two days. But even the signs of weariness were outshone by her joy.

In the realm of sheer looks, Linnea was no comparison for Felicia or Sigrún. But there was a charm she had that they did not, an ability to move people’s hearts.

I bet the people of Gimlé were done in by that smile of yours, Yuuto thought with certainty.

Logic was not enough to push people to change. What had changed them was undeniably Linnea’s sincerity.

Despite her noble birth and standing, she always put herself among the common people, listened to their voices earnestly, and worked harder than anyone else. That single-mindedly earnest approach convinced them that she really thought of their well-being, and that they could entrust her with their fates.

“If that fool Steinþórr is Xiang Yu, then she’s like Liu Bang and Xiao He put together,” Yuuto muttered to himself. “It’s no wonder at all she got picked to be patriarch at her age.”

Liu Bang hadn’t been known for being particularly exceptional in heroism on the battlefield nor in ingenuity, but he had seemed to have some mysterious quality that attracted people to him, and many capable and talented people had gathered under his leadership.

Among that number had been Xiao He, whom Liu Bang had praised as the greatest retainer in all of unified China.

Xiao He hadn't performed any miraculous or spectacular feats on the battlefield, but he'd been a skilled administrator of Liu Bang's stronghold in Guanzhong. From there, he'd consistently sent soldiers and supplies to the front lines, without any interruptions and without causing any undue strain on the populace.

"Making her my little sister as soon as I could was such a good call," Yuuto said with a wry smile. She was like the strongest parts of two great historical figures combined into one, which made her so high-level that she might as well be cheating.

It was true that when he'd faced her army on the battlefield, he frankly hadn't considered her much of a threat, but knowing her now, he was glad from the bottom of his heart that he'd never have her as an enemy again.

Yuuto's surroundings were bathed in darkness. The only light in the room was from the dim, wavering flame of a nearby lamp.

Normally Yuuto would use his free time before bed at night to read e-books and study, but tonight he was skipping his usual routine.

Tomorrow morning he would be leaving Gimlé, and borrowing the twins' powers, he should arrive back in Iárnviðr sometime around evening two days after that. It had already been twelve days without hearing Mitsuki's voice, and he was really starting to miss her. He wanted to save as much battery charge as possible for the day he got back.

"With everything that happened, this was a worthwhile trip, huh?" he murmured.

Yuuto would have liked to fall asleep right away, but thanks to his routine, he was usually up at this hour, and he wasn't the kind of person who could easily fall asleep whenever it was convenient for him. So, while he waited for his eyelids to get heavy, he was ruminating over the days he'd spent in Gimlé.

"It looks like governing this place is going to go more smoothly than I'd

originally thought, which is great.”

That was all thanks to Linnea. Though the populace’s antipathy towards the Wolf Clan hadn’t disappeared entirely, Yuuto had received reports from Olof that it had subsided quite a bit.

Linnea had personally gone around and laid the necessary social groundwork for them, making sure the people would obey Yuuto, and the Wolf Clan by extension.

Olof was also an honest, diligent and dependable man. With everything set up this neatly for him, there was no worry he’d drop the ball and ruin it.

“Big Brother, are you awake?” a voice asked.

“Huh? Oh, it’s you, Linnea.” Yuuto sat up. He was a bit surprised to hear her voice from outside his door just after he’d been thinking about her. “It’s the middle of the night. What’s going on?”

“Would it be all right if I came in?”

“Sure, it’s fine, but what did you need to talk with me about? Is it something about Gimlé?”

“No, it’s not about that...” The door opened, its hinges making a slightly unpleasant *squeak*.

Linnea seemed somewhat nervous as she entered the room, and Yuuto noticed she wasn’t wearing her normal formal attire, but a loose-fitting nightgown.

Clenching a fist in front of her chest as if gathering her resolve, she stood before Yuuto. Straining his eyes in the dark, he could see that her hair was wet. Was it some kind of perfumed oil? There was some kind of sweet scent wafting towards him.

“Big Brother Yuuto...” She called his name in a delicate voice, and her garments slipped off of her and fell to the floor. Even in the near darkness, her naked body stood out sharply against her surroundings.

“Wait, hold on, L-Linnea?!”

Damn it! Too late, Yuuto cursed his naivete. These past few days, Linnea had

been so swamped with her work that the only time they'd spoken with each other it had been about Gimlé, and he'd completely let his guard down.

While he was still caught up in his confusion, she suddenly embraced him, with an amorous look in her eyes. A small but unmistakable soft sensation pressed up against Yuuto's chest.

"Please, lie with me," she whispered sweetly into his ear, her voice flushed with passion.



“Gah...!” Yuuto felt pins and needles rush up his spine. All of the thoughts were blasted away, and his mind went blank as a sheet. As if guided by some invisible force, Yuuto’s arms slowly lifted and began to wrap around Linnea’s back—

Yuu-kun...

—but before they could, the image of his childhood friend’s face briefly and intensely flashed through his mind, and he somehow managed to restrain himself.

It was a close call; he had almost completely lost himself.

Yuuto closed both eyes and took a long, deep breath, then grasped Linnea’s shoulders and pulled her body off of his.

“Why...? Am... am I really unattractive after all?”

“No. It’s... not that.”

“...Please don’t worry about my feelings,” she said. “The truth is, I had already figured it out. Whenever I brought up the subject of marriage, you would get such a distressed look on your face, Big Brother.”

“Ah...!” She had hit the nail on the head, and he couldn’t say anything in return.

Young as she was, Linnea was still a woman. Compared to men, women are said to be markedly superior in their ability to perceive a person’s lies or hidden emotions from the tone of his or her voice, facial expressions, or seemingly trivial body language. According to one theory, this natural advantage in perception and insight comes from having to take care of infants, who can’t speak any language.

Yuuto was forced to realize all over again that he should never underestimate a woman’s intuition.

“I understand, though,” she said sadly. “There are Lady Felicia and Lady Sigrún, and those twins from the Claw Clan. All of those women around you are so pretty, are so cute, there’s no way you would ever want to lie with someone like me.”

“No, you’re plenty attractive,” Yuuto fumbled. “It’s just, um, I’m the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. I can’t afford to get married thoughtlessly without first... No, no, that’s not true.”

Yuuto caught himself halfway through the lie and bit down on his lip, shaking his head from side to side.

He couldn’t keep doing this superficial act. He was always just making these excuses, trying to say just the right thing to keep from hurting her feelings. How could he have continued to be so dishonest towards Linnea, who always gave all of herself into everything she did, with sincerity and humility? How could he do the same thing again here and now?

He couldn’t stand how pathetic he felt.

“Hngh!!” Yuuto took a deep breath... then grunted and slammed his forehead hard against the wall with a *bam!*

Bam-bam-bam! Unsatisfied, he banged his head several more times.

“B-Big Brother?! What are you doing?! Blood! You’re bleeding!”

“I’m fine.” He held up one hand to stop Linnea, and pressed the other to his forehead. There was indeed something warm and wet there.

Anyhow, it hurt. It was a ridiculous amount of pain. But in a way, that had pushed all the annoying, pretentious thoughts out, and his head felt strangely clear.

He knew exactly what he needed to do now.

“Linnea, I’m sorry! I can’t marry you,” he said, bowing his head to her deeply.

Yuuto wasn’t childish enough to cling to thinking that if he just honestly explained his situation, everybody would understand. He couldn’t afford to be a child.

As a patriarch, strategy was absolutely necessary in all things. If the situation called for it, he would even deceive someone without hesitation.

However, with someone who was completely open and honest with him, he felt that he needed to respond with honesty and integrity in kind, not as a clan patriarch, but as a civilized human being.

“I... see,” Linnea whispered, keeping her emotions in check. “Could I at least... ask you the reason why?”

Yuuto raised his head and looked Linnea in the eyes.

Honestly, he did find her cute. She was a kind girl, who was considerate to others, and who idolized him like a puppy. He couldn’t deny that somewhere deep down, he had become fond of her.

That was exactly why he needed to tell her.

“There’s a girl... I’m in love with. I... don’t want to betray her.” It took quite a bit of willpower to squeeze the words out of his throat.

Linnea stared at him, puzzled. That was only to be expected. In this world, it was common for men in positions of power to have several mistresses or concubines. And a marriage with Linnea involved the politics of both of their nations.

What is this person even trying to say? wouldn’t be an unusual response. What he’d said was so unnaturally sentimental, it might seem incomprehensible to her.

“I’ll... tell you the whole story,” he said. “Without covering up any of it. You might not believe me when I say this, but I’m... not from this world.”

“What... are you...?”

“I came from far, far, in the future— several thousand years. That’s why I have all this knowledge that you all don’t.”

“...I-it is a hard story to believe right away. But... there are a lot of things that fall into place, too,” Linnea mumbled with a serious expression.

Of course she wouldn’t be one to believe a story like his without question. But she had also witnessed Yuuto bringing ideas and inventions into this world that had never existed before, over and over. In a way, his explanation was hard *not* to believe.

“It’s all true,” he said. “And eventually, I’m going back to my own world. Well, I have no idea how to actually get back, but I want to do whatever it takes to do it.”

“...Is it because that girl you love is there?”

“Yeah. So that’s why... I can’t commit myself to marrying anyone in this world.” He managed to declare it clearly and concisely.

If he hadn’t declared it with certainty, it felt as if his heart might waver. If he hadn’t had Mitsuki, he surely would have accepted Linnea’s advances. No, it wasn’t just her. By now, he would have likely have had sexual relations with Felicia, or Sigrún.

Because they would never have refused him. Because such egoistic behavior would be tolerated from someone in the position of patriarch.

“So she’s someone you care for that much, Big Brother... I’m jealous. She must be a truly marvelous person.” Linnea cracked a tiny smile.

Even if Yuuto’s story was on par with a dream or fairy tale, she must have decided from his tone to trust that he wasn’t lying.

“I don’t know about that,” Yuuto admitted. “She’s fussy about things, and she’s a crybaby, and lately I’ve learned that she gets *really* scary when she’s angry. She’s totally hopeless, see?”

Exactly that. She was hopeless. That was why he had to get home, no matter what.

The child still deep within his heart had sworn, *I am the one who will protect her.*

He wasn’t going to surrender that role to anyone.

“Well, I don’t know when it’s going to happen yet or anything, but it’d make me happy if you and your clan still get along well with the Wolf Clan even after I go back home,” Yuuto said. “I plan to at least make arrangements with my Chalice to prevent infighting.”

“That will not be an issue for me,” Linnea said. “However, there is still a problem. If you are returning to your own world, Big Brother, then I am not sure what I should do.”

Linnea sighed. She was still only in her teens, but in that moment, it was as if she were an old lady weary of life.

“With me as patriarch, the Horn Clan will only continue its decline. Rasmus is already quite old for the position, and Haugspori is a skilled general but has little interest in governing. This is a real problem. Just who should I turn to?”

“Er, it’ll be just fine if you stay on as patriarch, Linnea,” Yuuto said. “Honestly, the skills you showed off here in Gimlé practically swept me off my feet.”

“There’s no need for flattery, Big Brother. I’ve been made fully aware of my own limits.”

“Wait, it’s not flattery—”

“I’m not good enough. ‘I’ll be able to protect the Horn Clan my father loved just fine,’ I thought. ‘I can grow the clan to be even bigger than he did.’ Truly, I... I was so conceited. Everything I accomplished, I only did so by borrowing my father’s power and legacy; it was all a sham. But I’m someone who couldn’t even realize that. I’m a coward who was face-to-face with my father’s killer and couldn’t do anything except yell at him... There’s no way I can protect the Horn Clan!”

“H-hey, Linnea,” Yuuto cut in, unable to stand watching Linnea denigrate herself like this, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Being used by someone with real strength is more fitting for someone like me,” Linnea confessed. “If I don’t have someone to take the lead, then the anxiety is so overwhelming, I don’t know what to do anymore...”

Overcome in her despair, Linnea gazed at Yuuto. Her eyes were lifeless and desperate, as if crying out for rescue, in a servile way that seemed so unlike the Linnea he knew.

Yuuto finally, painfully understood what it meant that Linnea had offered to hand over the Horn Clan. Her spirit had been completely broken.

As soon as she’d become patriarch, one incident after another had weakened the Horn Clan, and she’d lost all confidence in herself.

And the one who had driven her to that state, who had set in motion the events that had destroyed everything she’d built up, was Yuuto himself.

Under normal circumstances, the Horn Clan should have enjoyed a sweeping

victory in their war with the Wolf Clan, for the Horn Clan had no weaknesses to speak of. And with their longstanding enemy finally destroyed, Linnea's name would have echoed throughout the region as the patriarch who had brought her clan to even greater might through battle.

She certainly had the strength to accomplish that. She possessed a skill in large-scale strategy that went beyond mere battle tactics. But reality had had exactly the opposite outcome in store for her.

She had made Yuuto her enemy, an outsider with knowledge beyond the realm of common sense, and that was what had thrown the gears of her fate into disarray.

Yuuto didn't regret doing what he'd had to do to protect the Wolf Clan, but he still felt the pang in his conscience. He couldn't stand to watch Linnea like this anymore.

With a very long sigh, Yuuto looked up at the ceiling, and began to mutter softly. "Why don't I tell you an old story? It's about a worthless brat of a kid."

"Huh?"

"So this kid, he had access to all kinds of knowledge nobody else in this world had, and everybody started praising him up and down. Everybody who had once looked down on him, called him completely useless, switched to completely the opposite, lining up to fawn all over him and curry favor. And it felt so good that he completely let it go to his head. Ha, even though all of it was just because he'd gotten a hold of some borrowed knowledge, ideas he'd never have been able to come up with himself, and there was absolutely nothing amazing about the kid himself."

"So... that person is..."

As expected, Linnea had guessed who this story was about.

In answer to her questioning gaze, Yuuto grinned and gave a short, self-derisive laugh, and continued.

"So he kept getting more full of himself to the point where he believed without a doubt that he, the guy with all this knowledge, was always right, so when someone tried to advise him of the danger, he laughed it off as jealousy...

Well, everyone knows what happens to idiots like that. ‘I’ve done things exactly how the knowledge said, so everything will be fine,’ he thought, and that carelessness cost him big time.”

Even as he said it, Yuuto was astounded by how idiotic he’d been. Even though that same cockiness had been the very reason he’d become stuck in this world and unable to go home, he hadn’t even learned from his mistake.

Continuing to the next part of the story was difficult for him emotionally.

“So normally the one who pays the price in the end should be the idiot himself. But that’s not how it ended up. Instead, the one who died was someone who had helped look after him from back when he was still ignorant and useless, someone who had always tried to keep him on the right path. Just, incredibly nice. And this person died protecting that idiot kid.”

Yuuto flashed back to that scene and clenched his back teeth, enduring the pain that came with the memory. The ache in his chest was stronger than the pain he’d gotten from banging his head against the wall a moment ago.

He waited for it to settle down, and let the tension out of his shoulders before he spoke.

“I was just like how you are now. I learned all too clearly how lacking I was. I blamed myself and blamed myself, over and over. But... what’s really important is what you do after that.”

Remembering what had been entrusted to him, Yuuto’s hands balled into tight fists.

Back then, things had been so desperate, he hadn’t been able to afford the time to sit around discouraged. That had turned out to be good for him, in retrospect.

With the painful lesson he’d learned from that experience taken to heart, he’d been able to move forward, relentlessly.

“‘Hyaku-ren-sei-kou,’” he continued. “It’s a saying in the language of my country, and it roughly translates to: ‘Steel is tempered one hundred times.’ It means that only by going through many experiences that challenge and temper the body and soul does someone finally become a strong, exemplary person.”

It was Yuuto's personal motto now.

He knew he was still a kid. He had an overwhelming lack of life experience. However, as patriarch with the lives of so many resting on his shoulders, he didn't have the luxury of childish excuses.

And so he must continue to temper himself, without becoming prideful or complacent, learning and accumulating experiences. Then he must turn them into his own strength.

He reminded himself constantly that 21st century knowledge was nothing more than a cheat he was borrowing, so that he would never again get carried away with himself and repeat the same kind of mistake.

"Even in the history I'm familiar with, out of all of the great figures who've left their mark on the world, there isn't a single one who never had a failure or setback," he said. "In particular, there was this incredible guy Liu Bang who led the nation of Han. He lost 72 times against the same opponent but never gave up, and in the end, he united the land under his rule."

Nobody ever wanted to experience failure. For someone as kindhearted as Linnea, the fact that her failures would lead to deaths must have been all the more unbearable for her. Even so, Yuuto hardened his heart to that fact and continued his pep talk.

"Hey, Linnea. This is a crucial moment for you. Are you really going to give up here, after one failure? You haven't even finished being tempered once. From here on is when you have the chance to truly get stronger!"

"That's... but..." Linnea's eyes wavered, still doubtful.

She must have wanted to be the one to protect her clan herself more than anything. If that hadn't been the case, she wouldn't have pushed herself for so long, from such a young age, to gain the abilities she had.

But her confidence and spirit, once shattered, wasn't going to be restored so easily. "Can I truly become stronger, though? Can I really gain the strength to protect the Horn Clan?"

Linnea had already become unable to judge her own abilities in an optimistic light. However, that was exactly why she could become stronger.

“I’m sure you can do it.” With absolute confidence in her, Yuuto nodded strongly. “You’ve got way more of a knack for this stuff than me.”

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates had once said, “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing,” and “The true wise man is one who is aware of his own ignorance,” as well as other quotes pointing to the importance of being aware of one’s own foolishness and ignorance.

Even the basketball coach in a sports manga Yuuto had read long ago had said, “The first step for a crappy player to become a great one is to realize how bad you are.”

There was a mountain of quotes like this if one looked for them.

In the past, he hadn’t really gotten it. He’d always thought it just came down to raw talent. After overcoming his setbacks, however, Yuuto now understood.

Ignoring reality in favor of naive illusions weakened and undermined the heart. And it wasn’t easy to recognize one’s own immaturity and weakness. However, true strength and spirit of ambition came to those who accepted and faced reality, however difficult and painful.

It wasn’t something he could say to her directly, but the only cause of Linnea’s failure had been in having Yuuto as an opponent. Even looking at the city of Gimlé, one could see she had considerable ability as a patriarch. If she pulled herself out of her current state, there was no doubt she’d gain even more experience and skill, becoming a fine patriarch anyone would deem worthy of her title.

Yuuto lay a hand on Linnea’s head, and gave her a small smile. “Hey, don’t worry. As long as I’m still in this world, I’ll help you any way you need helping. You’re my cute little sister and all, you know? Take it slow, step by step, and you’ll get stronger.”

“...Right!” Tears still dripping from both eyes, Linnea nodded firmly.

Yuuto knew this didn’t mean she’d completely recovered. In the end, the only one who could save someone’s heart is one’s own self. All Yuuto could do was provide Linnea the opportunity to do that. Whether she effectively used that chance or wasted it was up to her. But he somehow got the feeling that she’d

made it past the worst of it.

Suddenly, she was looking at him with a serious look in her eyes. “Big Brother, it’s wrong to give up too easily on things, right?”

Yuuto had already decided that he wasn’t going to lie to her. So he answered honestly.

“Yeah, that’s right. There are times when it’s important to know you should give up, but I think giving up right away is wrong.”

“Right, it is, isn’t it?! So I’m not going to give up on you, Big Brother!”

“Whaaat?!”

Yuuto blurted out his surprised reaction in an almost wild tone, despite himself. It was a natural response, given that he’d so thoroughly and clearly explained why he couldn’t marry her, only to have her bring the subject back up again now.

“Wait, hold on! Like I just said, I have to go back home! I can’t be the patriarch of the Horn Clan...”

“Yes. I understand that. I no longer have any intention of asking you to take over the Horn Clan, Big Brother. I will protect it myself. But that and my feelings of admiration for you are separate matters. Actually, after speaking with you tonight, my feelings for you have only grown deeper!”

“But, no, I told you I’ve already got someone I like, okay?” he protested.

“Yes, I’m aware. That is why I stated that I won’t give up. Even if I lose 72 times, it’s fine if I win in the end, right?! I cannot deny that I am still far from a suitable candidate, but I’ll improve myself as a woman. I shall capture your heart, and steal you away from that other woman!”

“Uh. Ummm...” Yuuto couldn’t even string two words together in his mind, and all he managed was a groan in response.

Just how had things ended up this way? Where had he made the mistake that led here?

“Apologies for disturbing your pleasant conversation,” a third voice said smoothly.

“Gah!”

“Aah!”

At the sudden voice of a third party, both Yuuto and Linnea shouted in surprise.

The fact that neither of them expected to hear another voice here, this late at night, was part of that, but so was the speaker’s playful tone.

“K-Kristina, what is it?” Yuuto recognized the voice, and spoke through the door.

Thinking back, when the Hoof Clan had begun their invasion, an eerily similar situation had happened, with a sudden call in the night.

He didn’t have a good feeling about this.

“There is something urgent I must report,” Kristina said.

“All right, come in,” Yuuto told her.

Linnea raised her voice in panic. “H-huh, w-wait, Big Brother?!”

That’s when Yuuto realized: Linnea was still stark naked! With how absorbed he’d gotten in their serious discussion, and how dark the room was, he had completely forgotten about that.

With another *squeak*, the door opened, and Kristina chuckled.

“Oh, my,” she said with a grin. “Were you in the middle of something fun?”

“We weren’t. So, what’s the report?”

Yuuto didn’t give Kristina anything more than a curt, weary response. She knew exactly what was (or wasn’t) going on, but had asked anyway.

Kristina’s smile disappeared, and when she next spoke, it was with utter seriousness, without an ounce of her usual playful tone.

“The Lightning Clan has begun preparations for war.”

Just when Yuuto had been thinking he’d resolved a major issue, he was out of the frying pan and into the fire.

This was turning out to be one unlucky day for him.

ACT 4

“Now then, give us the details.” Yuuto sat across from Kristina, his hands clasped and elbows resting on the desk.

Gathered around them in the mess hall were his adjutant, Felicia; the citadel’s current master, Olof; and the Horn Clan patriarch, Linnea.

Albertina was also present, but she had already started dozing off while sitting in a chair. She was still a child in both mind and body, so staying awake at such a late hour must have been difficult for her.

Yuuto could easily picture the conversation getting pulled off track if he let Kristina pull Albertina into it, so once everyone had gathered in the room, he immediately led the discussion and asked for her report.

That turned out to be an excellent decision.

“During this inspection trip, I had my own look around the city and gathered various pieces of information,” said Kristina.

“Well, wasn’t that shrewd of you,” Yuuto said with a shrug, as if to say *good grief*.

Of course, half of his reaction was an act. He had suspected she was gathering intelligence in Gimlé.

In terms of distance, this place was far from Claw Clan territory. If, for some reason— for example, if Yuuto returned home and his Chalice oaths became invalid— the relationship between the Wolf Clan and Claw Clan were to worsen in the future, there was little to no chance that the information gathered here could be exploited to use against the Wolf Clan. At worst, the people of Gimlé could perhaps be incited to riot, allowing for an attack from behind, but it would be impossible to set that up during the short span of an inspection trip.

Therefore, his plan had been to give her free rein for the time being, and ascertain the extent of her abilities and her loyalty. As a result, she’d brought him some unpleasant news, but that was far better than if it hadn’t reached his

ears at all.

“In particular, I found pubs and the like were a treasure trove for intel,” continued Kristina. “When alcohol lightens a person’s mood, it also tends to loosen their lips, after all. So, according to what a trader was saying, it would seem that in the Lightning Clan capital, Bilskírnir, there’s a large increase in the demand for tin. So much so that even increased prices aren’t dissuading the clan from buying it up.”

“Tin...” Yuuto raised his head. “For bronze.”

A small amount of tin could be used to turn copper into bronze, markedly increasing its hardness. In Yggdrasil, where the use of iron hadn’t yet become widespread, bronze was the typical metal used in arms and armor.

However, tin was a fairly rare metal, and only found in limited areas. If there was a demand for large amounts of it in the Lightning Clan capital, that meant there was an extremely high chance they were preparing for war.

“Still,” Yuuto said, “that alone doesn’t mean we’re going to be the ones they target, does it?”

The Lightning Clan’s territory was vast, bordering quite a few other nations. There were the Hoof and Horn Clans to their north, and Yuuto had heard there were a number of clans to their south, as well.

“He also mentioned that some of their government officials have gotten into the habit of making lots of friendly small talk with any traders arriving from the east, as a guise for trying to get information out of them.”

The only nation on the map on the eastern side of the Lightning Clan was the Wolf Clan.

“I see now,” Yuuto said, unable to suppress a bitter laugh. “Yeah, that’s plenty fishy.”

Those officials had surely done their best to properly hide their true intentions, but they’d been up against sharp-witted traveling merchants, who were much better at that game. Thus, the ploy would have been completely obvious.

Yuuto quietly swore to himself that if he was probing for intel and didn't want it to get found out by his enemies, he'd just go with an honest bribe. Instances like this one showed that information could be worth more than gold.

"And so, Lord Yuuto. Would you be willing to send me to the Lightning Clan?"

"Hrm..." Yuuto's brow furrowed.

It was true that he wanted intelligence on the Lightning Clan more than anything else right now. Of course, Yuuto had already been regularly sending spies disguised as traders into Lightning Clan territory in order to gather information. But this Kristina girl was far superior to any spy he knew of. She could use her power to control winds in order to eavesdrop, as well as conceal her presence.

More than anything, she had a keen mind. The true value in information was in what one could deduce when it was combined and analyzed, just like how Kristina had used the info on the demand for tin and the government officials to perceive the threat of war. In this world where literacy rates were less than 1%, her abilities were nothing short of outstanding.

That was the very reason why Yuuto had wanted her as a subordinate in the first place, but...

Yuuto stared down at Kristina, at her small body.

"Ooh! ♪" Without changing her deadpan facial expression in the slightest, Kristina moaned and made a show of wriggling her body, but Yuuto just ignored it.

She was a child. Precocious and cheeky though she might act, one look at her appearance showed she was a young and tender child.

"Sending you into enemy territory is another matter." Yuuto paused, considering the worst-case scenario. If by some chance she were to die, it would weigh far too heavily on his conscience.

Of course, Yuuto knew he would also be shocked and dismayed if any subordinate, such as Sigrún, were to die. But in someone like Sigrún's case, she was a military woman who had sworn the Oath of the Chalice to stake her life on the battlefield for Yuuto and for the Wolf Clan. She was a mighty warrior

who bore the title of Mánagarmr. Telling someone like her that he didn't want her to go into danger would be more than just rude, it would be an insult to her pride.

However, the twins from the Claw Clan had no connection to him via the Chalice. They were technically his guests. He couldn't make them do anything too reckless.

"It's just too dangerous, or rather..."

"Dangerous? Hee hee." With a coquettish grin, Kristina abruptly kicked over the chair her sister was sitting in.

"Bwah?!" Knocked awake by the sudden impact and the tilting chair, Albertina could do nothing but cry out in a silly voice as she fell over onto the floor—

—or so one might assume. Instead, she flipped her body in midair, sticking a skillful landing on all fours. Yuuto went wide-eyed in surprise. Her reaction had been as nimble as a cat's.

"A-an earthquake?! What's happening?!" Kristina shouted in panic as her gaze darted around.

"Al, please capture Olof over there," Kristina said. "Take him alive."

"Huh?"

"What?"

Thrown off by the sudden turn of things, Albertina and Olof's eyes widened and they stared blankly at Kristina.

"Lady Kristina, what is this all of a sudden?" Olof asked.

"B-but Kris, isn't he from the Wolf Clan?"

"Never mind that," Kristina said, lowering her tone. "Just do it."

"Y-yes!" Albertina's body shuddered, as if recalling some sort of traumatic experience. And then she disappeared.

"Wha—?!" At the sound of Olof's surprised voice, Yuuto turned to look in his direction and was shocked at what he saw. Somehow, Albertina had gotten

behind Olof and was holding a short blade to his throat.

Olof was a man who had worked his way up to the fourth ranked in the Wolf Clan. He had experienced countless battles, and distinguished himself with his military achievements. And he hadn't had the time to put up the slightest resistance.

It was true that Olof hadn't been prepared for the surprise attack. On the other hand, hearing someone proclaim "take him alive" should have given him just enough time to put himself on guard. So the element of surprise had been mitigated.

That meant Albertina's level of agility might even surpass Sigrún's. Her movements had been so swift that Yuuto had been unable to follow them with his eyes.

"All right, Al, that's enough." Kristina's words resounded clearly in the silent room.

Albertina immediately pulled her blade away from Olof's throat, and began bowing her head in apology to him over and over. As for Olof, his face was more rigid and blanched than it had ever been.

"So, it's true that we lack pure physical strength and wouldn't do well wielding spears on a battlefield," said Kristina. "But if it came to close quarters combat in the middle of town, it would be hard to find someone better than my sister."

"After seeing that, I'm gonna just thank the heavens that my own head is still attached." Yuuto had just fully realized how dangerous these twins were. He had been completely deceived by their childish appearance and innocent behavior. If Kristina was the perfect spy, then Albertina was a natural born assassin.

"Hee hee! Taking your head would have been quite impossible, Lord Yuuto. Miss Felicia was constantly by your side, and the palace was full of a number of frighteningly strong people, after all."

"So past tense, then? You twins are scary as hell." Yuuto couldn't help but put a hand to his own throat as he let out a sigh.

It was true that until recently, the Wolf and Claw Clans had been at war with each other. It would have been more unnatural if Yuuto hadn't been directly targeted at some point.

Looking back through the pages of history, setting aside internal strife and domestic power struggles, one didn't usually find examples of a foreign agent successfully assassinating a king.

In practical terms, the twins would have had to slip past multiple layers of highly vigilant guards, during a time of heightened alert due to war, in order to reach Yuuto's bedchambers and kill him. That must have been too difficult even for them.

That being said, sneaking into the crowded city itself was a much easier matter, and on the off chance they were spotted, they likely would have been able to get away from the town guards with no trouble.

"Hee hee!" Kristina giggled. "Didn't I say so at the very beginning, when you called the two of us twins a mere nuisance? 'I have never been so insulted in all my life,' I believe?"

The next morning, Yuuto hurried along his preparations for the departure from Gimlé.

He needed to get back to Iárnviðr as quickly as possible, but before that, there was still a lot to do.

He'd already had Felicia draw up the necessary documents and send them first thing in the morning, by carrier pigeon, to Jörgen in Iárnviðr.

Surprisingly, the history of carrier pigeons goes back quite a ways. There are descriptions on Sumerian clay tablets from as far back as around 5000 BCE describing their use. And, until the first fax machines were invented halfway through the 19th century, they remained the fastest method of written or drawn correspondence.

As for their present use in Yggdrasil, it didn't go beyond tying the vine or stem of certain types of plants to the pigeon's leg, which served as a code and could only transmit very simple, limited information. It wasn't like one could get a

pigeon to carry a clay tablet with a real message on it, after all.

And so message by pigeon wasn't a highly regarded means of communication, and most domesticated pigeons were being raised as a food source.

But with the advent of paper, sending more detailed text had become possible. The cruising speed of a carrier pigeon was around 50 to 70 kilometers per hour. It would likely arrive within the day, much faster than a messenger by horse.

At the moment, only the Wolf Clan possessed this rapid means of communication. The twins, who'd departed for Lightning Clan territory, had been given several pigeons, as well.

The successful return rate of a carrier pigeon was around 60%. So if they needed to send a message and wanted to be absolutely sure of its arrival, they'd need to use all their pigeons, and would only be able to communicate once. But Yuuto trusted that the younger twin, Kristina, would be able to make the correct judgment in that situation.

Linnea approached Yuuto and spoke just as he had finished giving Olof detailed instructions on what to do after he left. "Big Brother, I'm also thinking of returning to Fólkvangr in order to start preparing my army."

There was bravery in her voice, and a light had returned to her eyes that showed she had regained some self-control. She must have been able to put a lot behind her after a night's rest.

"It may only be slightly, but I want you to allow me to repay you for the battle with the Hoof Clan!"

It seemed that she had roused herself into action, unable to allow herself to remain weak while her brother was facing a crisis, and Yuuto was grateful for it.

"Okay, I'm cou—" Yuuto began to nod but then stopped. He put a hand to his mouth, deep in thought.

After a while, Yuuto seemed to speak absentmindedly to no one in particular.

"So the wheat harvest is already over, and if the terrain here is like that, then... yeah, I should be doubly sure about this, just to be safe."

“Big Brother?”

Yuuto was standing completely still, staring at a single point in space. Just as Linnea called to him, he suddenly turned to face her.

“Linnea, leave gathering the troops to Rasmus. I have a different favor to ask of you. Normally, it’s not something I should be asking the patriarch of a different clan... but it’s something only you can do.”

“Only me?”

“Yeah.” Yuuto grabbed Linnea by both shoulders.

Her face turned a bright shade of red, and she averted her gaze from Yuuto’s, but he was too excited to notice that.

He brought his face even closer to hers, his eyes serious, and spoke with feverish enthusiasm.

“You’re the only one I can rely on for this, not anyone else!”

Three days after Yuuto arrived back in Iárnviðr, the intelligence Kristina had gathered on the Lightning Clan was proven to be correct.

The man before him in the audience chamber was middle-aged, perhaps 40, and was dressed in gray furs. They looked like wolf pelts.

“Now then, what is your business here, good envoy of the Lightning Clan?” Yuuto inquired in a haughty manner, resting his chin in one hand.

The envoy’s face was taut and pale, yet there was no hesitation or fear in his eyes, only a sort of tragic resolve.

After wetting his lips once with his tongue, the envoy began to speak in a strained voice. “I carry a message from my patriarch.”

“From that... from Steinþórr?” Yuuto had almost slipped up and said “that idiot,” his usual way of referring to Steinþórr, but managed to catch himself. He couldn’t let himself call the patriarch of the Lightning Clan an idiot in front of one of that clan’s own members. “Felicia.”

“Sir.”

Yuuto gestured with his jaw, and Felicia proceeded to approach the envoy and accept the message from him, gracefully following the motions of proper etiquette. She returned to Yuuto's side and looked over the contents of the message once, then opened her eyes wide in surprise.

"What is it? What does it say?" he said.

"I will read it aloud exactly as written. 'Inform Lord Yuuto, patriarch of the Wolf Clan, that I am Steinþórr, patriarch of the Lightning Clan. The patriarch of the Hoof Clan whom you killed, Yngvi, was my sworn brother by the Chalice, and also the father by blood of my most beloved wife. Our hearts, both husband and wife, are torn apart with grief. I should like to invade the Wolf Clan territory right now, that I might take your head and offer it before the grave of my dear brother; however we of the Lightning Clan do not desire a meaningless war. If you of the Wolf Clan have even the slightest bit of regret for your actions and wish to make amends, then hand over the city of Gimlé to us at once. If you refuse, we will show you no mercy.' ...That is the whole message."

"Even nonsense has its limits! We would never accept such absurd demands!" Sigrún shouted.

"Did you forget that the Hoof Clan were the ones who invaded the Horn Clan first?!" Jörgen raged. "Our patriarch did no more than abide by the sacred bond of the Sibling Chalice and send troops to assist them! And death is a constant companion in war. We have nothing to be blamed for!"

Before Yuuto had a chance to open his mouth to respond, Sigrún had protested her indignation, followed by his second-in-command Jörgen. They had been sitting silently nearby in the audience chamber, but could do so no longer.

The message had been a completely one-sided display of willful rudeness toward the Wolf Clan, so it was only natural for the two of them to get angry. It had been meant to try to provoke a fight, to put it plainly. But Yuuto remained eerily calm, putting on a pained expression as if he seriously took the message to heart.

"Hmm, Lord Steinþórr's anger is certainly well warranted," he said. "Gimlé is an extremely important piece of land to the Wolf Clan, and yet I would like to

do anything I can to avoid armed conflict with the Lightning Clan, who are known for their dauntless courage in battle. I would like some time to think about this."

"Father?!"

"Father?!"

"Big Brother?!"

Jörgen, Sigrún, and Felicia spun around to face Yuuto, their inability to believe what he was saying written all over their faces.

Yuuto silenced them with a meaningful look, then turned to smile broadly at the envoy. "Good envoy, you must be tired from your long journey. I will have a room prepared for you, so you should relax in Iárnviðr for a short while as our guest. The gritless bread we make here is exquisite, you know? And our mountains are abundant with wild game. We'll extend you our full hospitality, so please enjoy yourself."

The moment the envoy left the room, Sigrún and Jörgen rushed toward him with all the intensity of wildfire.

"Father! Just what did you mean by that?!" Sigrún shouted.

"Yes, please explain it! The thought of giving up Gimlé to that wretched beast is beyond the realm of sanity!" Jörgen exclaimed.

Yuuto looked over at Felicia in a plea for assistance, but even she wore a troubled expression, and was clearly expecting a full explanation. It looked like he was surrounded on all sides on this one.

"Father, we are being disrespected here!" Unable to restrain his anger, Jörgen slammed his fist into the wall with a *bam*.

Compared to the modern-era Japan Yuuto hailed from, the people in Yggdrasil were noticeably more uncivilized in their temperaments, but Jörgen was among the more moderate among them. If Jörgen had been pushed to this point, one could only imagine the fallout if some of the other ranking officers of the Wolf Clan had been present for that audience.

Yuuto himself, however, merely nodded coolly. “Yeah, they were definitely looking for a fight with us. But just because they’re asking for one doesn’t mean we have to give it to them, right?”

Around the world, past and present, pretexts and justifications had been indispensable for wars. By publicly declaring one’s own side to be justice and the enemy to be evil, the soldiers gained morale, and it served as an appeal to legitimacy among other neighboring nations.

Looking at it inversely, if one didn’t allow the opponent to have their justification, it served as a deterrent and they couldn’t so readily invade.

“How can you be so easygoing about that?! What do you suppose will happen if we give them Gimlé? They’ll just get even more cocky, and soon they’ll be asking us to hand over Iárnviðr!”

“Yes, that sounds about right,” Yuuto agreed.

Machiavelli had once said: “If you yield through fear and to escape war, the chances are that you do not escape it; since he to whom, out of manifest cowardice you make this concession, will not rest content, but will endeavor to wring further concessions from you, and making less account of you, will only be the more kindled against you.”

That Yuuto seemed to take Jörgen’s words in stride only poured oil on the fire of his anger, and he screamed at Yuuto, red-faced. “Father!!”

“Calm down a bit, okay? No one’s saying we’re actually going to agree to any of it. I only said I’d take it into consideration.”

“What is there to even consider here?! Cutting off that messenger’s head and sending it back would have been a good enough response!”

There is a tale from the Kamakura period of Japanese history, in which the demands for tribute by Kublai Khan’s Yuan Dynasty in China were so insolent that Hojo Tokimune, the effective ruler of Japan at the time, had had an emissary cut down in response. Tracing back the threads of history, examples like this of killing the messenger are too numerous to count.

Thinking about the historically proven events that occurred afterward, Yuuto leaned his body back against the chair. “Hey now, if we did something like that, the Lightning Clan would invade us right away.”

Just as Yuuto had sent spies to infiltrate the Lightning Clan, they surely must be sending spies of their own into Wolf Clan territory, disguised as traders or the like. Once they’d heard that the Lightning Clan envoy had been killed, that news would make it back to Steinþórr quickly.

“I’d like nothing better than to see him try,” Jörgen said, caught up in his own excitement. “Father, when did you turn into such a coward?! Wagging your tail at someone who has made such a fool of you, it is disgraceful as a man of the Wolf Clan!”

Yuuto shot him a chilly look.

Jörgen was the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command. Most of the people he dealt with were deferential to him, treating him with the utmost respect. Subconsciously, that sort of treatment had begun to feel natural and right to him.

That was how authority and power slowly poisoned the heart and made a person more arrogant. The insolence of others became unforgivable. Indignation made it impossible to see what was right in front of oneself. Defending the dignity of one’s station became the only focus. It was a bane common among powerful authority figures.

But the current Yuuto wasn’t naive enough to care about such empty vanity.

“Think about it,” Yuuto told him. “They went as far as to send us that ridiculous envoy and message. That means they’re already finished preparing for war. But we’ve only just gotten started. Do you see?”

“Ah!” Jörgen made one final grunt, then went silent. All the blood that had rushed to his head was finally starting to come down, it seemed.

Normally, fighting a war requires a considerable amount of preparation time.

During the Hoof Clan invasion, they’d sent out in a rush whatever forces they had on hand, and that had put a limit on how many soldiers they could recruit and assemble. And the unreasonably hard marching pace the soldiers had been

put through had meant that, by the time they reached Fólkvangr, they'd been completely exhausted and hardly able to fight well.

At that time is was a necessity born out of crisis, but it was undoubtedly a much better plan to do whatever it took to avoid falling into that type of situation again.

"B-but, Father, right now that envoy is surely in his room laughing at how much of a coward he thinks you must be!" Jörgen protested. "As your child subordinate, the thought of the father I respect being mocked is something I cannot stand!"

Jörgen was practically gnashing his teeth in frustration, and Sigrún and Felicia were nodding in agreement with him. Jörgen must have said what the two of them were also feeling.

"I'm grateful you feel that way, but for now, you have to endure it," Yuuto said. "This war has already begun. And all warfare is based on deception. Let him laugh at us as much as he wants; I'm happy he's letting himself be fooled. If it gets us more time, then it's a small price to pay."

Right now, what they needed more than anything else was time. If Yuuto could buy that time by losing face, he'd buy it up like it was the last bit of merchandise in the last minutes of a bargain sale.

"Second, you're in charge of making sure the envoy is entertained. In fact, butter him up with flattery. I don't even care if you let him get the idea I could grant him my Oath of the Chalice. Just make sure he has the best time he's ever had in his life."

As he gave Jörgen the orders, Yuuto recalled the face of the Lightning Clan envoy. That man had had the eyes of someone who had prepared himself for death. His mission had been to die if necessary, to create the pretext for the Lightning Clan's invasion. Perhaps he'd done it in exchange for a secure life for his family, and the honor of serving his nation. People like that prepared their hearts to withstand pain and fear, but often weren't as prepared to cope with flattery and temptation.

On one side was the man who had ordered him to die, and on the other the man who offered warm and hearty hospitality. There were few hearts that

wouldn’t be swayed by that imbalance.

“Let’s play the part of the cowards, and get him to forget his loyalty and his mission. If things go well, I’d like to get some more intel on the Lightning Clan, too.” With a bit of a wicked grin, Yuuto chuckled to himself.

He was no longer the foolhardy boy he had been two years earlier. He’d acquired the shrewd strength he needed to survive in the war-torn world of Yggdrasil, a mixture of toughness and flexibility.

“Oh, and it’s possible he might try to taunt or provoke you, so don’t take the bait,” Yuuto added. “Endure it with a smile.”

Usually Jörgen was a gentle person whose temper Yuuto didn’t have to worry about, but after the example with the message earlier, he thought it best to make sure.

“Felicia, spread a vague rumor in the city that implies I might want to exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with that idiot. Honestly, the thought makes my skin crawl, but it could make the spies lower their guard, so we’ve gotta do what we’ve gotta do.”

“R-right!”

“And also... hmm, yeah, let’s put a plan in place to seal off the city roads on the same day the troops are assembled. We want to delay the spies’ return to the Lightning Clan, even if it’s just by a little.”

“U-understood.”

“Well, that should get us a little bit more leeway to work with, but the fact that we have to hurry hasn’t changed. It probably won’t be long until that idiot gets tired of waiting and makes a move. Okay, what else...” Yuuto idly tapped his finger on the desk.

With a perplexed look, Jörgen said, “Father, if I may ask, what was your age again? I seem to recall that you were in your teenage years.”

Why would you ask that now? Yuuto thought, but answered anyway.

“I just turned 16 last month. Oh, in Yggdrasil custom, I think that would make me 17, though?”

“Even though you have lived less than half as long as I have, just what experiences did you go through to become as cunning as a seasoned veteran? For the sake of educating future generations, could you tell me?” Jörgen sighed and shook his head back and forth in amazement.

Yuuto gave a wry smile. He couldn’t believe how much the people of this world were so quick to put a kid like him on a pedestal like that. It wasn’t good for his upbringing. He’d once already almost lost his way due to it.

And so Yuuto said, with self-admonition:

“Well, it’s just because I’ve had access to a lot of ways to cheat.”

The moon in the sky and the nearby torches lit his path.

Step by step he made his way up the staircase, preparing his resolve. When he reached the top, he sat down and looked up at the sky, and pushed the Send button.

“Hello, you there, Mitsuki?”

“Yuu-kun, your voice sounds gloomy. Did something happen?”

That was just what he should have expected of his childhood friend, who’d been spending time with him since their earliest memories. Even over the phone, she could pick up on the slight variation in the tone of his voice, and deduce that something was wrong.

Yuuto couldn’t help but chuckle at the irony. Even though he was in a completely different world, he still couldn’t keep anything hidden from her.

“I’m going to have to go into battle again.”

There was a long silence before she spoke. “...I see. There’s nothing I can say to stop you, right?”

She clearly had a lot that she wanted to say. But the fact that she’d held those words back showed that she could read from Yuuto’s voice how solid his determination was.

“I’m sorry, for always making you worry.”

“Men really are selfish. It’s always the girls who get pulled along and end up crying. It’s just the truth of how the world works.”

“I’m sorry...”

“No, don’t be. That was just me being a bit mean. Since I made you feel bad too, that makes us even this time, Yuu-kun.”

Hearing this, Yuuto felt that his end of the debt was far too heavy for that to make things even.

Even though she knew he couldn’t accept it, she was doing what she could to try to erase his feelings of guilt for making her worry. The spirit behind her words seemed to seep into his chest.

He felt the hand holding his smartphone clench tighter. “Thanks, Mitsuki. Sorry for always making things hard for you.”

“You promised you wouldn’t say that, Pops. Come back alive, okay? That’s a promise too, okay?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

Despite the fact that he knew she couldn’t see it, Yuuto held up the little finger of his left hand, and swore to her in his heart once more that he would come back victorious.



One week later, Yuuto received word from Kristina that she'd left the Lightning Clan capital, Bilskírnir.

And with his preparations fully complete, he dispatched his troops.

ACT 5

“Master, what do you need from me this late at night?” Skáviðr asked as he entered the room.

“Mm, well, take a seat,” Yuuto said, making a gesture for him to sit down.

“Sir!” With an unsociable no-nonsense expression that matched his words, Skáviðr dropped down to one knee and held himself at attention.

Yuuto had been trying to imply that it was okay to relax but... *This is just how this man always is,* Yuuto thought with a wry chuckle.

They were in a small settlement on the banks of the Élivágar River, not too far off from Gimlé. The Wolf Clan troops led by Yuuto had made this settlement the center of their base camp tonight, and were recovering from the fatigue of the day’s march.

A house in the center of the settlement slightly larger than the others had become Yuuto’s lodging for now.

It might have been larger than the others, but the house was made of sun-dried bricks that looked in poor repair, and the inside was pretty old, too. From the perspective of someone from the modern era, it might as well have been an abandoned building or ruin.

It was still a lot better than what the average soldiers had to put up with camping outdoors, though. It would be bad karma for him to complain too much.

“At least it doesn’t seem like there’ll be any work for me to do here,” Skáviðr laughed derisively at himself, as if he were making light conversation.

“It is abandoned, after all,” said Yuuto. “Linnea did her part well.”

“Hm, the patriarch of the Horn Clan did?”

“Yeah, we’re right alongside the border here. I have no intention whatsoever of letting the Lightning Clan break into our territory, of course, but just in case

worse comes to worst, I thought I should have everyone evacuated."

When invading an enemy country, pillaging the local towns was the long-held custom in Yggdrasil. So Yuuto had a duty to protect the people within his clan territory as their patriarch.

That said, this area had originally been the territory of the Horn Clan, and the locals were hardly accustomed to being ruled by the Wolf Clan. His forces couldn't just roll in and say, "We're going to have a war now, so hurry up and evacuate your homes, and go off somewhere else." It would be questionable whether the people would obey in the first place, and it might also invite a hostile response.

Linnea, on the other hand, was widely beloved and respected among the people here, and she was familiar with all of the small villages and settlements in the area. More than anything, she was incredibly skilled at setting up organized plans and executing them.

He'd figured she'd definitely be able to secure a destination for the people to evacuate to, and take measures to ensure they got the food and water they needed. It was a fitting example of finding the right person for the right job.

"All right, to start off, here you go." Yuuto sat cross-legged in front of Skáviðr, and handed him a silver cup. Then he proceeded to fill it up with the wine he'd had Felicia procure for him.

The sinister and gloomy man in front of him broke out in a pleasant smile. "Well, well. To think I get the pleasure of my master pouring me a drink himself."

"I'm really grateful to you," Yuuto said. "This is the least you can let me do."

"I haven't done anything worthy of gratitude, but still, I accept. ...Mm, that's good." Skáviðr downed the whole cup of wine in one quick gulp, and then shivered slightly as it hit him. He truly seemed to have enjoyed it.

Yuuto knew that this man was a huge fan of alcohol, and of this type of wine in particular.

Yuuto steeled himself, and broached the subject he needed to ask. "So, how many did you kill on the way here?"

“Three. With this many people all together, a few fools are bound to show themselves.”

The current Wolf Clan forces, including reinforcements from the Claw and Horn Clans, numbered around 5,000 in total.

In addition to all of the Wolf Clan’s recent military strides, their recent victory against the Hoof Clan must have been some kind of turning point, for there had been a stream of skilled fighters making their way into Wolf Clan territory over the past month, with the hope of becoming commissioned officers.

There were more than a few among their number who could only be described as scoundrels. And with everyone preparing to head into battle, there were those whose fighting spirit also heightened their aggression. It was inevitable that there’d be incidents of trouble at the villages where they had stopovers.

“I’m sorry for making you be the one who has to kill his comrades,” Yuuto sighed.

It was an inevitable problem. It couldn’t be eliminated entirely. But he’d been able to reduce it. It was for that reason that he’d needed to make everyone thoroughly aware that the crime of disobeying military orders carried a severe punishment.

There was an old Japanese proverb: “Punish one, warn one hundred.” It meant that punishing one person for their crime or mistake can serve as an example to others, deterring them from committing that same crime or mistake.

No one would want to kill someone who’d been their comrade up until yesterday. However, someone had to be the one to do it.

It was all the more true at that time in particular, when they were marching to do battle with the Lightning Clan. If it wasn’t made abundantly clear that one mustn’t disobey the orders of their superiors, then even a winnable battle might be lost. There was no space for naive talk of ideals or principles.

The one who executed those punishments would be resented, shunned, and feared. And the one who had taken that role upon himself was Skáviðr.

“There is not a single thing for you to apologize over, master,” said Skáviðr. “I don’t feel the slightest bit of pain over cutting down fools who would hurt women and children. This is my way of making amends to my wife and child.”

He was already over thirty. In Yggdrasil, where marrying during one’s teens was totally normal, it would be strange for him not to have a family of his own. But Skáviðr was alone. He had lost his wife and eight-year-old son when bandits broke into his home.

“It really should be my job to do it, though...”

“Master, to our people you are a light of hope. A social outcast like myself is a more fitting choice for such dirty work.”

“But, still...”

Yuuto understood. Logically, he knew Skáviðr was right. That was why, when Jörgen’s child subordinate was executed, he’d restrained himself from saying anything.

When the citizens were raining jeers down upon Skáviðr, Yuuto had wanted to come to his defense, to shout out loud that their patriarch was truly the one to whom they should direct their anger. He had felt sick with himself as he’d received everyone’s praise, and he’d wanted to set the record straight with them all.

But that would have only served his own self-satisfaction. Skáviðr had taken that hated role upon himself for the sake of the nation, and Yuuto couldn’t allow himself to sully that noble determination for his own petty reasons.

Even knowing all that, he still had trouble accepting it emotionally. It was unbearable for him to watch someone else take on the dirty and unpleasant roles resulting from his decisions, while he remained clean and blameless.

A clan’s patriarch must seek the happiness of the many. This was the result of that, and another example of putting the right person to the right job, but Yuuto still couldn’t forgive himself.

“Heh, do not feel like you need to take everything onto yourself at such a young age,” Skáviðr chided kindly, with a somewhat nostalgic look in his eyes. “It’s fine to leave these sorts of things to adults.”

If his son were still alive, he'd be Yuuto's age now. Perhaps he saw a bit of his son in Yuuto. But it would have been uncouth for Yuuto to ask about that.

"Master, there are things that only you can do. Only the lion can hunt the tiger. Please protect the smiles of the people of the Wolf Clan. Nothing would make my wine taste sweeter than that."

"The Lightning Clan has 8,000 men," Yuuto said. "There's not as great of a gap in numbers between us as there was with the Hoof Clan, but they've still got the advantage on us by a lot."

He'd gotten the info from Kristina, and the numbers were likely fairly accurate. Once more, the battle ahead of him was going to be a rough one.

The next day, Yuuto moved his troops across the Élivágar River into Lightning Clan territory. He'd managed to avoid letting his enemy make the first move and prevented the invasion of his own territory.

At least for now, that meant he'd won the battle on the information front.

He set up his troop formation with the hills at their backs, and had them rest to regain their spirits while he waited for the Lightning Clan's army.

That army showed themselves two days later. It was here that the first spark of the fires of war was lit between two clans, Wolf and Lightning.

A battle on level ground usually began with the exchange of arrows.

The common strategy was to use the archer fire as moving cover, while using chariots to close the distance or flank, until finally the two sides were pulled into close combat.

"Hey, why're their arrows reaching us from that far away?" Steinþórr stood atop the earthen fortifications he'd had constructed for his battlefield headquarters, tilting his neck quizzically as he stared out toward the front lines.

The wind was blowing from his side, so it should have been a headwind for the enemy. And yet, as if to spite that, the Wolf Clan's arrows were reaching his men from outside of the range of his own archers. It was profoundly mysterious

and upsetting.

“I have heard that the Wolf Clan patriarch has a number of strange tools at his disposal,” a well-built man at Steinþórr’s side answered in a humble manner. “Perhaps this is the effect of one of them.”

His severe face carried the air of a military veteran, while the composed look in his eyes indicated a calm intelligence.

His name was Þjálfi. He was an Einherjar bearing the rune of Tanngrísnir, “the Snarler,” and he was Steinþórr’s confidant and military advisor.

“Ah, who cares about the details,” Steinþórr muttered. He raised his voice and shouted an order, thrusting his arm out in front of him in a gesture of command, palm facing forward. “Guard yourselves with your shields and advance!”

A situation where only the enemy got to attack meant that only his own casualties would increase. If he was to win this contest, he’d need to first reach a distance where his own attacks could hit.

Archers might have a bit of range, but so what? They were only arrows. The exchange of arrow fire was nothing more than a prelude, a skirmish lasting only until the chariots and infantry closed in and melee combat began.

All it meant was that this time, the rain of arrows as they advanced would last a bit longer, and if they guarded themselves carefully with their shields, there shouldn’t be many casualties. Indeed, he assumed the danger would be trivial—

“Graah!”

“Aaagh!”

Cries of pain rose up one after another from the front lines.

“What just happened?!” Steinþórr shouted.

“Th-the enemy’s arrows are piercing through our shields, sir!” a lookout reported.

“What?!” Steinþórr scowled in response.

While many clans in Yggdrasil relied on wooden shields, the Lightning Clan

was blessed with plentiful supplies of copper, and so equipped their soldiers with bronze shields. If it were an attack from a heavy weapon like an ax or warhammer, it might be understandable for a bronze shield to break, but from mere arrows? Steinþórr had no idea what in the world was going on.

"...It's iron." Þjálfi spat out the words in an almost hateful tone, grimacing. "Lord Alexis said that during the war with the Hoof Clan, the Wolf Clan had their soldiers equipped with spears of iron. To think they would use it in arrows, as well..."

"Wait, iron, seriously man? You're saying they got enough of that stuff to just shoot it at us?!" Steinþórr couldn't help going wide-eyed in shock at the idea.

In a way, that was a natural and justified reaction. In Yggdrasil, iron was something rare and only obtained from meteorites, thought of as literally a gift from the heavens. Arrows were meant to be nothing more than disposable ammunition. To take something whose value far outshone that of gold or silver, and just throw it away like it was nothing, seemed outside the realm of sanity.

"Perhaps from their perspective, it is no longer an especially rare or precious commodity," Þjálfi's murmured.

His words had hit the mark precisely. The Wolf Clan had access within their own territory to all the iron sand they could want. Due to its relative density, the iron sand had accumulated in riverbank sediments in what was called a longshore drift mineral deposit.

Those deposits had been yet untouched by human hands, and the mountainous lands of the Wolf Clan were also abundant with the lumber necessary for iron production.

If it were for something like forging a proper *nihontou*, higher-quality iron sand from the mountains would be better, but river iron sand was more than good enough to make iron equipment for their common soldiers.

With the continuous wars with the Claw and Horn Clans leading right into their rushed battle with the Hoof Clan, the Wolf Clan had never had the chance to prepare enough of it, but this time around, they had come fully prepared.

"Dammit! You think I'll stop now?! They're using some petty trick or

something to make their arrows fly farther and faster, but it looks like that's making the gap between one volley and the next longer, too. Don't flinch! Now's the time to press forward! Faster! Go faster!"

Human nature is such that, when faced with something completely unforeseen, a person often momentarily freezes up, or their mind goes blank. An average commander would have surely been shaken by the overwhelming effectiveness of the enemy's attacks and fallen into a panic.

However, Steinþórr quickly saw through to their weakness, the fact that they couldn't fire in quick succession, and made the swift decision to charge relentlessly forward without the slightest hesitation.

This was indeed the man who, despite his youth, had won battle after battle as commander, and within a scant three years had come to rule over all of northern Vanaheimr.

However, even someone as great as he could not begin to imagine that the fusillade of iron arrows was, to the Wolf Clan, really and truly exactly as he had said: a petty trick. The Lightning Clan soldiers were about to experience the true terror of the Wolf Clan army.

"The enemy forces aren't stopping! They're charging this way!" the lookout reported.

"As expected of the Lightning Clan," Yuuto nodded with his chin in his hand. "They're known for dauntless courage in battle, after all. Not even crossbows could stop them, huh?"

The crossbow was a type of bow that had been used extensively in China as early as the 5th century BCE. It was made to be held horizontally instead of vertically. The arrow was placed on a wooden base called a stock, and could be fired by pulling a trigger.

Pulling the bowstring back required more time and effort than a normal bow, and so it lacked the capacity to fire in quick succession. While an expert archer might be able to fire ten or more arrows in one minute, a crossbow wielder might only manage two.

In exchange, it boasted range and penetrating power the likes of which bows of this era could not hope to compare to. And the arrowheads were iron, not bronze. That hardness complementing the arrows' flight speed made for a mighty weapon.

Furthermore, in Yggdrasil, the vast majority of soldiers were peasant farmers. Learning to use a bow effectively required a lot of time and training, but a crossbow only required a fraction of that to obtain a base level of accuracy, and it provided the same strength of firing power no matter the user. It was the ideal weapon for peasant soldiers, provided to them centuries ahead of its time.

"All right, it should be time now," Yuuto said. "Have the crossbowmen fall back."

Yuuto could see that the Lightning Clan soldiers were making their way through the rain of iron arrows, closing the distance, and would soon be within range to attack the Wolf Clan army.

After they'd desperately withstood that assault and made it all the way to this point, he felt a little bad for them, but this was a battle of life and death for everyone. As the one entrusted with the lives of his own soldiers, he couldn't afford to show any mercy.

He inhaled deeply, then threw out his arm and shouted in a thunderous voice.

"Phalanx spearmen, charge!!"

In response to Yuuto's command, his personal guardsmen rang the signal gongs, and waved the banners of his headquarters up and down. That ensured that the orders would instantly reach allies fighting a distance away from him.

Both visual and audio signals were used simultaneously, so even if a soldier didn't catch one of the signals, there was a good chance he might catch the other. And, because the Wolf Clan was so consistent in the enforcement of their laws, their soldiers had a much more thorough culture of discipline trained into them. His army's swift response to orders and well-controlled movements wasn't something showy, but in this type of era, it was a standout sign of excellence.

"Yeaaaaaaaah!!" With a roaring war cry, the phalanx troops began their

advance, and a mere moment later met the Lightning Clan infantry head-on.

The spears they were carrying were more than twice as long as those of the Lightning Clan, and they, too, were made with iron. By thrusting those weapons forward all at once, the enemy could neither evade nor block them, and for their part the enemy's attacks could not reach the phalanx. It was a completely one-sided fight.

This had been the driving force behind the Wolf Clan's victories against the Claw, Horn, and Hoof Clans, their consistently unbeatable tactic. And even now against the Lightning Clan, it was once again providing results. Even with their superior numbers, the Lightning Clan warriors were no match for it. They fell dead, one after another, in the face of the Wolf Clan's assault.

"They're putting up less resistance than I thought they would." Yuuto knit his brow, suspicious.

He had been fairly certain the enemy would struggle against him, but it had gone so well that it was almost anticlimactic. These were the soldiers of the Lightning Clan, renowned for being daring and resolute, yet he was sure the Hoof Clan had been more tenacious.

"Could it be that we of the Wolf Clan have become just that much stronger?" Felicia asked.

"No, I don't think that's it." Yuuto shook his head slowly at her suggestion.

There was less of a difference in numbers than when they'd fought the Hoof Clan. And unlike the previous war, the Wolf Clan soldiers hadn't had to make a sudden forced march, they'd gotten the necessary training, and they'd received plenty of food and rest before the battle. They'd also been able to fire far more arrows this time around.

With the full and complete preparations they'd been able to make before engaging in battle, one could say that this outcome was natural enough, but to Yuuto it still felt like there was too much of a lack of resistance from the enemy.

The Hoof Clan troops responded to their master's orders quickly and with a level of cohesion that didn't break down even when they were cornered by Yuuto's tactics. Looking at the Lightning Clan soldiers by comparison, they

certainly were bold and daring enough to push forward through the crossbow barrage and into the wall of longspears, but they seemed to lack coordination somehow.

This was a large-scale battle, of thousands versus thousands, and it was plain to see which kind of force would be more of a threat.

“Well, maybe I should just be giving more credit to Yngvi,” Yuuto said.

Yuuto was a ruler his army had defeated, the late patriarch of the Hoof Clan who had built up his nation into a great power in the span of one generation. In the end, Yngvi had been no match for Yuuto’s modern-era knowledge and tactics, but he had still been a rare breed of warrior and general, and a hero to his people.

Their individual strengths as fighters aside, as generals, the younger Steinþórr was just not as skilled as the much more mature Yngvi had been.

That’s all there was to it—

“...No, there’s no way that’s it.” Yuuto just couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had.

Everything was going his way. Yuuto had already learned that things don’t just work out that easily in life. Times like this were exactly when one might unexpectedly fall into a trap.

Three years ago, that same Yngvi had been handily repelled by Steinþórr. And that was at a time when the Lightning Clan had been much smaller in size and strength than it was now. Yuuto couldn’t forget that overwhelming aura he’d seen at the Horn Clan’s victory ceremony.

There was something more to the man, for sure. Yuuto got the impression that Steinþórr, true to his alias, was watching him like a crouching tiger even as he withstood the Wolf Clan’s attacks, waiting for the chance to strike.

If he was merely overthinking things, that was fine. Yuuto made an effort to suppress his excited emotions, and renewed his focus.

“A battle maniac like him would first get his opponents to bring out their full strength before smashing them to pieces, but this isn’t a game to me. I’m not

gonna give him the chance to strike back.”

“Ah! All right, men, that’s the signal from Father,” Sigrún said. “Everyone, show me your fighting spirit!”

Confirming the signal banner from her position in the left flank, where she had been waiting excitedly for her chance to sortie, Sigrún called her subordinates to attention.

This time, they weren’t going to be using the type of hit-and-run surprise attacks they’d used against the Hoof Clan. Back when they’d been fighting in the territory of their allied nation the Horn Clan, they’d had plenty of information about the geography, and supplies and assistance from the citizens. This time they were in enemy territory, and needed to avoid any high risk maneuvers.

Thanks to that, both the people and horses had energy to spare, and they’d been ready and waiting for their signal to head into the fight.

“Múspell unit, forward!” Sigrún unsheathed her *nihontou* as she shouted the command.

Her clear and gallant voice was brimming with fighting spirit, and it stoked the flames of excitement within her men.

Her elegant and beautiful figure resembled how one might imagine one of those mythological warrior maidens who guided souls in the afterlife. It was a far cry from the image one might imagine from her warrior title.

Under her leadership, it was said her men did not fear even death, and the Múspell unit charged ferociously into their enemies.

“Distant foes, hear my voice! Those nearby, come and look upon me! I am the Mánagarmr, Sigrún of the Wolf Clan! If you have no more use for your life, then come at me!”

As she announced her name, Sigrún cut her way into the rear of the Lightning Clan troop formation. She swung her spear, quickly lopping the head of a chariot rider clean off and sending it flying.

It was the “Hammer and Anvil” tactic. By using troops with low mobility but high defense and endurance to stop the enemy’s advance and hold them in place, one could send a more highly mobile group around to the enemy’s rear or sides, and catch them in a pincer attack.

The famous Alexander the Great had been fond of using this tactic, and it was said he’d defeated the far more-numerous Persian army multiple times with it. It was the Wolf Clan’s trump card, and it had brought them victory in battle against both the Horn Clan and the Hoof Clan.

Fundamentally, troop formations are constructed assuming that they’ll be fighting an enemy force in front of them, and so they are especially vulnerable to attacks from the sides and rear.

And the Múspell unit was a cavalry unit, unprecedented in the world of Yggdrasil, boasting the fastest and most powerful assault capabilities heretofore known.

Caught by the furious attack from both sides, the Lighting Clan soldiers suddenly fell into a state of panic. They completely lost control, and in the midst of the pandemonium that followed, they were scattered without any resistance.

“Hah!” As Sigrún continued striking down her foes left and right, her ears picked up the whinny of an excited horse, accompanied by the sound of wheels rumbling heavily against the ground.

What appeared before her, pushing aside the nearby foot soldiers, was what was considered the strongest military weapon known to Yggdrasil, whose number in battle was said to be equivalent to an army’s power: a chariot!

“Hmph, so you’ve shown yourself.” Sigrún gripped her spear more tightly.

Yngvi of the Hoof Clan had favored a logical, ordered construction to his military formations, and had created a large chariot-only squad to emphasize their overwhelming power and mobility. The Lightning Clan was more traditional, having constructed mixed squads with both infantry and chariots.

Those of a high status would ride the chariot and fight from on top of it, commanding a force of followers as infantry alongside them. It was more

difficult to be hit by enemy attacks atop a chariot, and being raised higher up made it easier to read the battlefield and give orders to subordinates. And more than anything, it allowed superior officers to stroke their egos. That was the most standard way of utilizing chariots, not just in Yggdrasil but throughout their use in Earth's history.

This also matched up with the intel they'd gotten from Kristina.

"I'll put a stop to your antics here and now, wolf girl!" the large man atop the chariot platform shouted, and readied his spear and shield.

He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and far from being shaken by the earlier attack from behind, the hunger for combat was written on his face.

It was a fine expression. Sigrún felt the warrior's flame within her spark again. Fighting so many weaklings who couldn't give her a challenge had started to make her bored.

"Ha! Then stop me if you think you can!" Sigrún answered his bold words with her own, and spurred her horse toward him, thrusting her spear toward him the instant he was within her reach.

Clang!

"Augh!"

The man's weapon easily stopped Sigrún's killing blow, and the strain of the impact rushed across her face for a moment.

It had a shape like a spear combined with a sickle blade. The L-shaped portion and Sigrún's spearhead were locked together, and they struggled for dominance.

It was a halberd-like polearm known as a dagger-axe. It was a two-handed weapon that could be thrust at the enemy to stab them, while the sickle-like part could be used to snare and slice an enemy's neck or other vital areas.

There were more than a few in Yggdrasil who favored this weapon because it was easier to fight with while riding on a chariot than a normal spear.

"A chariot, and an iron weapon," Sigrún yelled. "You must be a man of note. Tell me your name!"

Sigrún had noticed that the blade of the man's weapon gleamed with the same dark luster as her own iron spear. It wasn't a rarity for the Wolf Clan anymore, but for other clans, an iron weapon couldn't be created without the use of meteoric iron, and so such a rare and precious item would be worth five times its weight in gold. The fact that this man was allowed to carry such a powerful and valued weapon meant that he must be a hero of some note within his clan.

"I am Þjálfi, assistant to the second-in-command of the Lightning Clan."

"Kh! So you are Steinþórr's right hand, spoken of in rumors as the 'Iron Gauntlet' Járnglófi! You are a worthy opponent!"

With another *clang*, Sigrún flung Þjálfi's dagger-axe aside and unleashed a horizontal sweeping attack.

With that as their cue, a fierce battle unfolded between them.

Though the two of them exchanged more than ten attacks in what seemed like the blink of an eye, there was no deciding blow.

"Damn, this is going nowhere," Sigrún growled.

True to the iron gauntlet of his alias, Þjálfi's defense was as solid as a wall. No matter how many attacks Sigrún threw at him, she felt no indication that she could find a way to break through it.

That was perhaps to be expected of an Einherjar extolled for valor even within the nation ruling over all of northern Vanaheimr. It was only natural that even the Strongest Silver Wolf would not be able to defeat him easily.

Sigrún's main objective was taking Steinþórr's head. In truth, she knew she couldn't afford to be kept fighting here for too long.

"In that case—" Sigrún released her right hand from the haft of the spear.

Although this is so obvious a fact that it might not need mentioning, holding a weapon in both hands gives its attacks considerably more force than merely holding it one-handed. For Sigrún to deliberately switch to holding her weapon in one hand, and her non-dominant hand at that, created a gap in her defense that could be called nothing short of fatal.

Þjálfi suspected for a moment that it might be a trap, but his warrior's urges were stronger. Before he had a chance to think, he reflexively thrust forward his dagger-axe.

"Haaah!" Sigrún let out a fierce cry, and there was a flash of silvery light from near her waist.

"Wha—?!"

The head of the weapon Þjálfi had used to overwhelm and dominate his opponents had been sliced cleanly off. The veteran Einherjar's face twisted with shock and surprise, and for a moment, he couldn't move.

Just like when Yngvi's weapon had been sliced in two, this was due to a single strike from the *nihontou*.

Normally, iron can be made harder through a heating and cooling process known as "quenching." However, meteoric iron has completely different material properties from natural iron found in underground ores, or man-made iron created through the thermite process. It cannot be made harder through quenching.

And so, a weapon made from meteoric iron was no match for a blade folded, tempered, and hardened countless times. It was soft by comparison.

"Prepare yourself!"

Sigrún quickly placed the sword's grip to her mouth and held it in her teeth to free her hand, readied her spear again in both hands, and raising her arms high she swung down—

—and witnessed the iron spearhead being broken off.

"Hey, this guy's my right-hand man," Steinþórr said. "I can't go lettin' somebody kill him that easily."

"Kh!"

The red-haired young man whirled his massive hammer around to rest it on his shoulder, laughing boldly, and Sigrún felt a shudder run through her whole body.

Was it from joy that her target, the Lightning Clan patriarch, had shown

himself before her? Was it from anger that her favorite spear had been destroyed? Was it a warrior's excitement at the prospect of facing such a strong enemy?

No, it was nothing of the sort. The shudder was from pure terror.

The energy that seemed to radiate off of him here, on the battlefield with his weapon in hand, was totally different from when she had met him in the sacred hörgr of the Horn Clan. He was like a completely different person. The power seemed to flow out of him, as if it couldn't be contained within his physical body, and just standing before him subjected Sigrún to a crushing pressure that she had to struggle to endure.



“So we meet again, girly. You’re pretty good, puttin’ Þjálfi up against the cliff like that. I guess you killin’ the old man wasn’t just some fluke. So then, let’s see what you’ve got!”

“Kh!”

The hammer created its own wind with the force of its swing as it swept down toward Sigrún, and she threw aside the now-useless spear and intercepted the attack with the *nihontou*.

“Oh?” Steinþórr said.

“Rrrgh!”

On one side was a hammer which had smashed countless other weapons to pieces, now filled with the divine energy known as ásmegin channeled from its wielder.

On the other, a blade tempered to the point where it could even slice through iron.

The result of the collision between these two weapons, which had both been considered invincible until now—

“Wow, that thing withstood my attack? That’s one nice weapon you’ve got there.”

“So... I can’t cut it, then...!”

—was that they were completely evenly matched.

However, if the weapons were of equal strength, then it all came down to the difference in their reach.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! Ha!”

“Guh!... Hrgh!” Sigrún gasped.

It was a fighter on horseback versus one on a chariot. The sword, intended for use in close-range combat, couldn’t reach its target.

Steinþórr pelted her with incessant, one-sided attacks, and Sigrún found herself forced into a purely defensive battle. To make matters worse, Steinþórr was able to swing the iron hammer around freely without any difficulty, despite

its weight and size.

“Grrr...!” As she weathered the hail of blows, Sigrún somehow managed to take advantage of a small gap in Steinþórr’s attacks to put some distance between them, and immediately pulled on the reins and spun her horse around.

Strength recognizes strength. For two expert fighters, a few moments in mutual combat was enough for them to each gauge the other’s relative strength to some degree.

Sigrún understood that if she continued to fight in this situation, all that awaited her was an absolutely certain death.

“We’re retreating!” Sigrún shouted the command as she kicked her horse.

Her hands wouldn’t stop shaking, but this time it wasn’t from fear. Steinþórr’s fierce attacks had left her hands so numb, it was all she could manage not to drop her sword.

“So that’s what you meant by ‘doesn’t break and doesn’t bend,’ huh?” Sigrún murmured. “Looks like I was saved by you again, Father. If I hadn’t had this, I would have been pounded into a lump of meat by now...”

Sigrún gritted her teeth, weighed down by the feeling of defeat. Since she had received the title of Mánagarmr, this was the first time she had been so completely and thoroughly beaten.

She turned to look behind her.

The Múspell unit was properly following her, urging their horses to keep up. They didn’t seem to have suffered many losses. The advantage they got from attacking the enemy’s rear had borne fruit.

To her, that was the greatest consolation.

“The Múspell unit has begun to withdraw!” the Wolf Clan lookout called.

“Is Rún okay?!” Yuuto shouted.

“Sir! She is alive and well!”

“Really?!”

“Even at a distance, there is no mistaking Lady Sigrún’s silver hair, sir.”

“I see.” Yuuto breathed a heavy sigh of relief at the report from his lookout.

He admonished himself that as patriarch he shouldn’t show such favoritism. But controlling his emotions to conform to that logic was not so easily done.

Regardless, he’d managed to confirm her safety, and that was all that mattered. His heart had regained a sense of calm, but now another problem had reared its ugly head.

“So, he brushed off both the ‘Hammer and Anvil’ and Rún, did he?” With a hand over his mouth, Yuuto muttered to himself, puzzling over what to do.

Up until this point, those tactics had never failed to settle a battle in his favor. Just the fact that his established winning formula had broken down was enough to make him feel things were heading in an unpleasant direction.

“The twin rune Einherjar...” he murmured. “I told Sigrún to run if she judged that she couldn’t win against him. It looks like she listened.”

The divine power of a rune was said to grace fewer than one in ten thousand people, and Steinþórr’s body held that power twice over. Steinþórr had overwhelmed Sigrún with his presence even during their brief meeting in the Horn Clan capital.

Sigrún was still young, and she was someone important to the future of the Wolf Clan. Taking that into consideration, Yuuto understood that it might hurt her image, but he couldn’t allow her to do anything too reckless. More than anything, he just absolutely didn’t want to lose her, though he fully knew how naive that thinking was for a patriarch.

“Hmm, so even for the Mánagarmr, it would seem that facing a tiger was too heavy a burden for a lone wolf to shoulder.” Skáviðr spoke dispassionately as he examined the battlefield from atop a horse nearby.

His pale and withered frame struck an even more unsettling figure than normal here on the battlefield, but to Yuuto, his almost irritating level of deadpan calm was something dependable about him.

“When I gave her those instructions, it looked like it hurt her feelings a bit, though,” Yuuto admitted. “I felt bad for her.”

“It was the right decision. If you had not done that, I think that in all probability she would have put her pride as a warrior first and continued fighting, and there would be another body on the field by now. That savage hound dog only ever listens to your orders after all, master. I can just picture how frustrated she must be right now, keh heh heh... Ah, excuse me.” Skáviðr placed a hand over his mouth, but didn’t fully hide his smile.

Harsh talk, as always. Skáviðr always played the role of the unlikeable pariah, but he had a bit of a sardonic personality to begin with.

Yuuto cast him a sideways glance, shook his head, and got his thoughts back on track. “This is a mass battle. It doesn’t matter how strong that guy is; we just have to beat him with sheer numbers.”

He stared out at the movements on the battlefield. Sigrún’s ambush may have failed, but the situation on the ground was still overwhelmingly in the Wolf Clan’s favor.

If his forces kept up the push, enemy soldiers should start to flee at the realization of their heavy disadvantage, and the enemy formation should fall apart. If he struck at that vulnerable moment, no amount of valor could withstand it.

“Raaaaaaaaahhh!!”

Suddenly, a great war cry louder than anything so far rose up in unison from the Lightning Clan warriors. It was enough to shake the very air, and Yuuto could feel the vibrations against his skin.

Yuuto didn’t need to wonder what was happening. He knew. His face became tense and he grit his teeth.

“There he is!” Yuuto’s eyes spotted the shock of burning red hair, conspicuous even from far away.

The young man drove an ornamented chariot clearly different from the others, one hand swinging around a long warhammer large enough that a grown man might struggle to lift it. He raced past his own vanguard and

charged into the Wolf Clan forces.

“That’s exactly what they call the ‘poor man’s courage.’” The corner of Yuuto’s mouth turned up in an ironic smirk.

Facing foes no matter how strong, ignoring the odds no matter how bad, Steinþórr was simply fighting head-on without relying on any tactics or petty tricks. As a matter of fact, it was really cool. So cool that it was sickening. If the enemy was going to come at him with an idiot’s brute force courage, then that was cause for celebration. But deep down, Yuuto also found it hopelessly irritating.

“‘The poor man’s courage: the courage of a man who hastens to rash action without thinking whenever the blood rushes to his head.’” Felicia, standing next to him, responded by easily reciting the explanation from memory. “‘A petty courage without any discretion or judgment, revolving only around physical strength.’”

Yuuto just stared at her, wide-eyed and astonished. One time during a discussion about Steinþórr, he had brought up that old idiom and told her about it.

“I’m surprised you remembered that,” Yuuto said.

“That is because I always make a habit of memorizing your words of wisdom, Big Brother.” Felicia’s response was quick and matter-of-fact, and looking at her smiling face, Yuuto give a wry smile of his own. He could only admire her impressive memory.

“Well, it couldn’t hurt to remember words that have made it across thousands of years of history.”

“Tee hee. That is certainly true,” Felicia agreed. Then, more softly, she added, “If you are going home eventually, I at least want to be able to remember your words.” She closed her eyes tightly as she said this, clenching one hand tightly in front of her chest.

Something about that felt a little strange to Yuuto, but thinking about the battle was more important right now. He returned his gaze to the battlefield.

“It’s exactly as you said, Felicia. If physical strength was all it took to win a

battle, military tactics would never have been invented.” He raised his voice and shouted: “Phalanx troops, victory is in sight! Put a skewer through that red-headed pig!”

If the man was going to come charging in head-first in a chariot, then that was just what Yuuto wanted.

The very reason Yuuto had made longspear-wielding units the central force in his army was because in Yggdrasil chariots were the main players on the fields of war.

Just like cavalry, the use of heavily armored infantry with longspears had come about as a response to chariots. A normal spear or sword couldn’t reach an opponent riding a chariot. What had emerged as a countermeasure was the tactic of using many longspears, with their low maneuverability but long reach, to create a thrusting assault that left no gaps.

The downside was vulnerability to attacks from the sides, but with an enemy in front; it was as one-sided as a victory in rock-paper-scissors.

Just as Yuuto had predicted, the horse pulling Steinþórr’s chariot was taken down ruthlessly by the wall of spears, and the chariot stopped in its tracks.

In the next instant, that red-headed young man would meet the same fate as his horse— or that was how it should have been.

As the countless spears rushed toward him, Steinþórr swung his great hammer, and with that single swing, the whole line of spears was smashed apart. He followed with another swing as he leapt down from the carriage, and several soldiers were sent flying. He swung once more.

The Wolf Clan soldiers tried to guard with their iron shields, but even those were smashed to bits and blown away as if they were nothing.

It was impossible to even guess just how much strength was put into each one of those blows. It wasn’t human. One might have thought it was the work of an elephant or large bear.

The “Belt of Strength,” Megingjörð, and the “Shatterer,” Mjǫlnir. These two abilities had brought forth all the fury of a storm cloaked in lightning.

And into the wide gap that had been created, the Lightning Clan soldiers behind Steinþórr rushed forward, and the Wolf Clan's hardened defensive formation was pried open by force.

"What... what is this..." Looking down at the scene playing out before his eyes, Yuuto gasped.

He'd controlled the war for information, acted swiftly to take the best terrain with hills protecting his rear, and set up advantageous formations.

The power and range of the crossbows had slowed the momentum of his enemy and let him grasp the initiative.

With Skáviðr's assistance, he'd thoroughly established discipline and respect for the law in his troops, which had made them swift to respond to their patriarch's orders, and cohesive in their actions as a group. It should have been one of the foremost armies in Yggdrasil in that respect.

And as far as equipping them with hardened iron went, it should be safe to say Yuuto was ahead of all of Yggdrasil.

Against the enemy chariots and infantry, he'd met them with the overwhelmingly superior longspear soldiers in tight formations, and having stopped their movement, he'd set his cavalry unit against them from behind, overpowering them with the "Hammer and Anvil."

Yuuto might have had fewer men in total, but in terms of both strategy and tactics, the Wolf Clan should have far outstripped the Lightning Clan in military might. There was no cause for defeat anywhere to be found.

And in spite of all of that, as if all of their advantages up until now had been nothing but a lie, the Wolf Clan had begun to be slowly, gradually, yet unmistakably pushed back.

"Come on, no matter how you look at it, this is just cheating," Yuuto muttered.

Battles were not something won by individuals. All else considered, in battle, numbers made the difference. Beginning with the words of Sun Tzu, numerous works on the art of war had begun with that as one of their founding principles. And yet, that underlying principle had, by the hand of one foolhardy man and

his brute force, been overturned.

The powers of an Einherjar were amazing, but they were still human. Because of that, Yuuto's understanding had been that there were no Einherjar with such a monstrous level of power, but it would seem the holder of the twin runes was the exception.

The genius of war Napoléon Bonaparte, who at one point held half of continental Europe under his control, once said: "An army of one hundred sheep led by a wolf is better than an army of one hundred wolves led by a sheep."

The most important thing on the battlefield was morale. If the supreme commander stood at the head of his own army and inspired them, of course the army would get a rush of increased morale. And so, with a valiant general who had smashed through all common sense leading the way, the morale of the Lightning Clan troops had all at once risen to a fanatic fever pitch.

Riding that wave, they had pushed back the supposedly superior Wolf Clan forces, and were even now beginning to overpower them.

"'My strength can move mountains, my spirit can cover the land,' is that what this is?" Yuuto spat out. "Seriously, this guy isn't actually a previous incarnation of Xiang Yu or something, is he?"

He had gone past amazement and was now simply aghast at what he was seeing.

The quote was one part of a poem Xiang Yu had once composed and recited himself. Xiang Yu had won a great victory against an army of 500,000 with only 30,000. He'd gone up against another army of thousands with only 28 horsemen and taken the enemy general's head, striking down hundreds on his own in the process. Whether it was greater or lesser, Steinþórr's strength was of that same nonsensical quality.

"Master."

"Skáviðr, what is it?"

"As our strategies so far have not been effective, perhaps we should retreat for now, before it is too late."

“Nngh.” Yuuto glowered and gritted his teeth.

The tide of battle had already shifted in the Lightning Clan’s favor.

Yuuto concluded that if they continued fighting as they were, there was a strong chance that red-haired general might overtake them with his current momentum.

The current Yuuto was not so obstinate that he would cling stubbornly to theory. However illogical it was, the reality playing out in front of his eyes was all that mattered, and he had the strength of heart to acknowledge that.

“Tch. I had wanted to decide things here, but... knowing when to retreat is a crucial part of war too, huh?” he said.

Fighting while retreating would result in a considerable number of casualties, but a mistake in judgment about when to withdraw would lead to vastly more. He needed to make a swift decision.

When the time came, he had to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many. The ability to make those cold-hearted decisions was also something necessary for one who stood at the top.

“I believe it is a wise decision, master,” Skáviðr said. “Please, leave protecting the rear guard to me.”

“You really do always take on the worst jobs,” Yuuto sighed. “Don’t die out there.”

“Heh. I won’t die. Didn’t you tell me once before, Master? ‘Ill weeds grow apace.’ The unlikable ones are the ones most likely to succeed.” Skáviðr’s mouth twisted into a sneer.

Waiting at the tail end of the retreating forces in order to hold the enemy at bay, the rear guard had the most dangerous mission with the highest chance of death. Even knowing that, this man showed not the slightest change in his emotions at the prospect, and even tossed out a joke. He had considerable grit.

With a tight, severe expression, Yuuto gave his command.

“We’re retreating. We will withdraw methodically, carefully, and quickly!”

Steinþórr lay about with his warhammer. “Raaaaaaaaaah!”

Blood stained his body red, which gave rise to even greater bloodlust. No matter who came at him, no matter how great the number of enemies, he couldn’t be overwhelmed. He trampled all in his path with his unmatched strength.

“There really is no end to them,” he muttered.

A knot of soldiers rushed forward, filling the gap he’d managed to create in their formation. Their coordination was impressive.

Once they were in place, they rained down a deluge of spears at him.

Even Steinþórr couldn’t dodge such a perfectly coordinated attack. He was forced to stop in his tracks and focus on striking down the weapons coming at him.

Though the enemy lines were crushed every time he charged forward, his reckless attacks meant his allies couldn’t advance either. Nor could the Lightning Clan, which was waiting in reserve, utilize their full power.

“Hmph, no point in worrying about the details. It’s just a test of endurance now!”

For every foe he struck down, another came in to take their place. Still, their numbers couldn’t be infinite.

Steinþórr’s stamina wasn’t infinite either, though. He couldn’t keep fighting forever. If he retreated, or was defeated, the Wolf Clan would overwhelm the Lightning Clan in no time at all.

The outcome of this battle depended on him. Knowing that was enough for him.

“Heh heh! This is finally starting to get fun!” Steinþórr wiped the blood off his forehead and grinned savagely. The tension that came with knowing victory or defeat hinged on your actions was quite invigorating.

Steinþórr truly lived up to his title of Battle-Hungry Tiger. He seemed to be the incarnation of war itself. In his three years as patriarch, he’d spent a scant three months in his capital, Bilskírnir. The rest of the time had been spent on

the battlefield. But he had never been satisfied.

He'd thirsted for a real challenge, something his enemies had never been able to give him. The only time he'd felt even the least bit of excitement was when he'd faced Yngvi of the Hoof Clan.

In deference to that, and to the fact that he'd been presented with a girl that was to his liking, he had sworn the Oath of the Chalice with them. Thinking back on it now, though, that had been a mistake. Because then Steinþórr had had no one worthy to fight against.

Just as he'd been considering breaking the oath, he'd heard that Yngvi had perished in battle. Supposedly he had perished at the hands of one of the weakest clans, the Wolf Clan. He'd been thwarted by their patriarch, a young boy in his teens. The Wolf Clan had been so weak Steinþórr had forgotten they existed.

How had their patriarch managed to defeat Yngvi, especially with such a small army? Naturally, this had piqued Steinþórr's interest. Fortunately for him, the goði had secretly asked him to destroy the Wolf Clan, as he had suspected the clan might bring Ragnarok to Yggdrasil.

This had to be fate. Steinþórr didn't doubt that this young man had been sent to him by the gods as an obstacle in his path of conquest.

Seeing his opportunity, he'd forced the goði— whose name he'd already forgotten— to let him meet with the man they wanted dead.

He hadn't really expected much, which was why he'd been surprised. He'd felt goosebumps for the first time in his life upon meeting this patriarch. He'd been certain that he would enjoy fighting against him.

And now, all of his expectations had been met.

Never in his life had he experienced such a thrilling bloodbath.

But all good things had to come to an end. The more enjoyable something was, the faster it passed by.

"Retreat! Retreat!" A loud voice carried across the battlefield, and a series of sonorous gongs sounded from the Wolf Clan's camp.

Steinþórr stopped fighting to catch his breath, and watched as the Wolf Clan retreated. “Hmph, looks like it’s my win. You’re one impudent brat, though.”

It was a well-structured, orderly retreat.

Steinþórr could tell the troops were well-trained. In fact, there was a thing or two his troops could learn from that. He realized now, as the dust began to settle, that it was the Wolf Clan’s impressive coordination that had given him so much trouble.

Steinþórr spotted the enemy general shouting orders from horseback, close to the head of his forces. “Don’t panic! Maintain formation and retreat as fast as you can!”

The enemy general was a thin, pale-faced man who unsettled Steinþórr. It appeared he was the one directing this splendid retreat. Despite the danger of his mission, he remained calm.

Steinþórr couldn’t help but be impressed at his enemy’s composure.

“But that means if I take him out, their formation’ll crumble.” Steinþórr’s lips curled up into a wicked grin.

It was common sense to weaken your prey before going in for the kill. And the difficulty of the hunt made for the perfect seasoning. There was no fun in an easy victory. Victory was only rewarding if it was earned through a hard-fought battle. Only then would it taste as sweet as it should.

Steinþórr knew this victory would be sweeter than any wine. Which was why he refused to let his prey escape. Anyone that stood in his way would be eliminated.

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!” With a massive bellow, Steinþórr leaped forward.

He’d learned from the earlier incident with the silver wolf. He knew a soldier on foot was at a disadvantage against a mounted foe. But something as trivial as a “disadvantage” meant nothing to him.

He gripped his warhammer in both hands and swung with all his might. He had expected someone as weak-looking as this man to be obliterated with a single blow. However—

“What?!”

Until this moment, he had always wielded his hammer as proficiently as his own two arms and legs. But a strange force suddenly pulled it forward, dragging Steinþórr with it.

“Hmph!”

“Whoa?!”

Steinþórr’s adversary took advantage of his surprise, and thrust at Steinþórr’s neck with his spear. Steinþórr just barely managed to dodge.

Another three thrusts followed right after.

Unable to withstand the onslaught, Steinþórr jumped back.

“You’re pretty good. What’s your name?” Steinþórr licked his lips in anticipation. This was the first time he’d ever had one of his attacks deflected. Not dodged or blocked, but deflected. Battle lust flared within him. Whoever this spindly man was, he was tough.

“They call me Skáviðr. While I am honored by your praise, I have no intention of fighting you here.”

“What a cold guy. Come on, let’s have some fun.”

Though the tiger was eager for blood, Skáviðr simply scoffed and turned his horse around.

“Hey, wait!”

“Ooh, look at that! Iron, iron, as far as the eye can see! If you take some home with you, you’ll be rich beyond your wildest dreams!... Heh, farewell.” Skáviðr flashed Steinþórr a triumphant grin and galloped away.

“Graaah!” Though they called him Dólgþrasir, there was no way Steinþórr could actually run as fast as tiger. Which meant he couldn’t chase after Skáviðr. He ground his teeth in frustration at letting his enemy escape.

What enraged Steinþórr even more was that his opponent had sneered at him. He had dared to look down on the Battle-Hungry Tiger. There was nothing more humiliating than being looked down upon from horseback.

“Damn you! Don’t think I’ll let you escape from...” Steinþórr trailed off as he turned around and saw what was happening.

The soldiers of the Lightning Clan were completely ignoring the Wolf Clan, who had completed their retreat. They were focused entirely on the spoils in front of them. It was a universal rule that the winners of a battle would plunder their vanquished foe’s valuables. In fact, most soldiers participated in war only so they could share in the spoils.

There are uncountable records of battles that were lost because soldiers stopped fighting and started looting. The most famous of which perhaps was the Battle of Gaugamela that was fought between Alexander the Great and Darius III of Persia.

At first, the Persian army had seemed to hold the advantage. But after they had broken through the Macedonian lines, the soldiers had become more interested in plundering the enemy headquarters than cutting off Alexander’s retreat. As a result, they’d let victory slip through their fingers and suffered one of history’s greatest defeats afterwards.

Even Julius Caesar, from whom the term “kaiser” came, suffered many humiliating defeats because his soldiers disobeyed orders and pillaged with abandon.

All of which proved that it was nearly impossible to stop soldiers from letting greed get the better of them.

Skáviðr had made that announcement at Yuuto’s behest precisely because Yuuto had known it would stop the enemy.

At the moment, the battlefield was littered with arrows the Wolf Clan had fired, and shattered spears and shields that Steinþórr had destroyed. All of which were made of iron, a metal revered in Yggrasil as a gift from the heavens, far more valuable than gold or silver. Yuuto had clearly seen no reason not to make use of them to buy time for his retreat.

“Grr, chase after them, you louts! Get going!” Steinþórr’s order rang across the battlefield, but to no avail.

“Goddamnit! I’m not satisfied yet!” Steinþórr grumbled to himself, repeatedly opening and closing his fist.

He had never faced an opponent so tough. Yet, at the end, he’d let his prey slip through his fingers.

Rage smoldered within him.

“I think you’re the only person who’d still want to fight after that, Father. We may have chased them off, but we’re the ones who lost more men.” Þjálfi, Steinþórr’s right-hand man, shook his head, his expression grim.

Steinþórr might be the one who led his clan to victory, and the one who decided who they’d would fight against. But it was Þjálfi who trained the troops, made sure they were provisioned, and kept order within the ranks. He was the de-facto quartermaster and drill master of the army. His words were not to be taken lightly.

“Oh, is that so? Well, I guess it’s true we fell for his ruse.”

“Indeed. Loathe though I am to admit it, his troops are far better-trained. You saved us from quite a bind, Father.” Þjálfi smiled bitterly.

The difference in their armies’ strengths had been made abundantly clear in this battle, and the Wolf Clan had had the advantage. Even for a genius commander, overcoming that advantage would have been impossibly difficult. The Wolf Clan had even managed to defeat Yngvi, one of the craftiest and skilled commanders Þjálfi knew, with an army half the Hoof Clan’s size. And yet, the Lightning Clan had overcome the overwhelming distance in strength between themselves and the Wolf Clan, all thanks to a single warrior.

“But it seems even the Wolf Clan’s Patriarch has discovered he cannot take us head-on,” Þjálfi said.

Though he sounded calm, Þjálfi’s mind was a whirl of emotions.

Who else in the world but Steinþórr could have pulled off such a feat? This man was sent from heaven to quell Yggdrasil’s conflicts, and would be the next ruler of the world. Of that Þjálfi was certain. He was also certain he’d been born in order to aid in that quest.

“Hmph, but that doesn’t mean we can just let them run away like that,” Steinþórr grumbled.

“Indeed. Our army has far lighter equipment than theirs. If we chase after them now, we should be able to catch up easily. If we let them escape here, they will just return with another clever trick up their sleeves. Crushing them now would be for the best.”

“That sounds pretty fun in its own way.” Steinþórr cracked his knuckles.

While he would have preferred fighting them again after they’d regained their strength, the thought of facing them head-on right now had more than enough appeal.

Especially since his side had been the loser in terms of the number of casualties suffered, striking now would be the perfect opportunity to get back at them and make up the difference.

Steinþórr shouldered his warhammer and made to follow his men. “All right, let’s go into pursuit! Everyone, follow...”

“Please wait,” said a cautious voice. “You can send your men to pursue, but you should stay here and rest.”

The owner of that voice was, of course, Þjálfi.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” said Steinþórr. “I haven’t had enough fun yet.”

“I know better than anyone how bottomless your stamina is, but... war is won through keeping soldiers rested and fed. You haven’t eaten anything since you started fighting, have you?”

“Mrrghh...”

Groooooooooowl! At Þjálfi’s words, Steinþórr’s stomach let out a loud roar.

Though Steinþórr possessed monstrous strength, he was still human. After fighting for so long, it was only natural that he would be hungry.

“I’ll prepare you a fresh chariot and a change of clothes,” said Þjálfi. “I doubt their patriarch will have retreated on foot, so you’ll need it anyway.”

Steinþórr couldn’t refute that logic, so he just frowned silently.

His old chariot was too damaged to ride now. He could have just taken one from one of his officers, but it would have reflected badly on him as a patriarch.

His clothes were so stained with blood that they were as red as his hair. Worse, the blood had started to dry and make his clothes stiff. He hadn't even noticed until Þjálfi had pointed it out, but now they felt uncomfortable to wear.

The Lightning Clan's greatest weapon was the morale of their troops. And Steinþórr instinctively understood that he was the one who inspired them. He knew if he looked shoddy, it would dishearten his men.

"Tch, I guess you're right."

"I'm glad you understand. Fear not, our foe this time is quite tough. The fight's only just begun. We will need your strength again soon enough."

Steinþórr sat cross-legged on the ground. "Hmph, if you say so. I'll let Ving take charge of the pursuit. Now get me some food!"

"Yes sir, I shall bring you something right away." Þjálfi bowed reverently and hurried to find food.

Before Yuuto's arrival, the Wolf Clan had lost most of its battles and been forced to retreat countless times. Every time, it had been Skáviðr who had acted as the rear guard. The way he'd sneered at his enemies while cutting down ranks of soldiers had earned him the title of Níðhǫggr, the Sneering Slaughter.

It was during their retreat, with the Lightning Clan hot on their heels, that this reaper of death had shown his true strength.

"Keep fighting! No one is allowed to retreat until I order otherwise! If you don't want to die, then fight for your life!" Skáviðr continued giving orders while he skewered rows of soldiers with his spear. Though his voice was soft, it struck fear into the hearts of his men.

For an army, the best soldier was one that followed orders. A force that moved as one coordinated mass had better chances of victory, and a lowered rate of casualties. Therefore, discipline was king.

And Skáviðr was a man who'd publicly executed dozens for disobeying orders.

If he gave an order, it was followed to the letter. Everyone in the Wolf Clan knew the consequences of disobedience.

"Don't forget, the Wolf Clan rewards valor," he called out. "Any soldier who falls in battle will have their family looked after for the rest of their lives! You know our master isn't one to break his promises!"

The members of the Wolf Clan knew that very well.

Yuuto had learned from the history of Wei Yang, and had made sure that people trusted the law. The way he'd done so was by planting a tree at the southern gate, and promising enough silver to last someone a lifetime if they carried the tree over to the northern gate.

Naturally, most of the citizens hadn't believed him. It had sounded too good to be true, and they hadn't even bothered trying to move the tree. But one curious man had tried it on a whim. As promised in his edict, Yuuto had granted him a pile of silver.

He had repeated similar stunts until the people of the Wolf Clan implicitly trusted that any promise he made would be carried out.

If one led only by threatening punishment for those who disobeyed, the people would quickly grow dissatisfied. A leader needed both the carrot and the stick if they wanted to inspire loyalty in their citizens.

"Don't think about anything but the enemy in front of you. Fight for your countrymen, for your country, and most importantly, for your family!"

"Uwooooooooooooooooooh!" The men of the rear guard unleashed a desperate battle cry.

They knew if they tried to flee, Níðhǫggr the Sneering Slaughter would end their lives. He'd been able to hold his own against Mánagarmr the Strongest Silver Wolf, so the average soldiers knew they stood no chance. They'd just die a shameful death as deserters. Worse, their family wouldn't even be looked after.

At least if they died fighting, their families wouldn't go hungry, and they'd be

honored by their comrades. If hell awaited them regardless, they might as well pick the one with better perks.

They were fighting with their backs to the wall. Desperation granted them strength. They fought with such ferocity that the Lightning Clan's soldiers, known to be the bravest troops who served a patriarch who feared nothing, faltered.

Morale was essential to winning any fight.

Normally when an army pursued a fleeing foe, they were the ones who had the advantage and easily cut down stragglers. The right to steal the vanquished foe's weapons and equipment was the reward soldiers received for putting their lives on the line.

But no one wanted to continue risking their lives after they'd already won. They just wanted to take what they'd looted and go home. It stood to reason that their morale would begin to falter as they thought back to why they were fighting.

Just as they were about to break, a man with a warhammer plunged into the fray with a spirited yell. "Outta my waaaaay!"

He brushed aside the spears thrust at him and charged forward on his chariot. Unlike the other Lightning Clan soldiers, he wasn't afraid of the Wolf Clan's resolve to fight to the death.

"Did Steinþórr return? No, that's not him," Skáviðr muttered.

This newcomer had the same blazing red hair as the Lightning Clan's patriarch. Even his face and physique were similar. But their ages were completely different. While Steinþórr appeared to be nineteen, this foe was well into his twenties. Moreover, this man wasn't nearly as intimidating as Steinþórr was.

"But he's still strong," Skáviðr said in annoyance.

The Wolf Clan's elite soldiers threw themselves at this new fighter, but they were unable to even scratch him.

Chances were he was an Einherjar. Normal soldiers wouldn't stand a chance.

“Get away from that man! I’ll handle him!” Skáviðr called. He had finally managed to rouse them enough to fight to the death; he didn’t want the morale he’d worked so hard to build to be ruined by one man.

He drove his spurs into his horse and thrust his lance at the newcomer.

The red-haired man deflected Skáviðr’s spear and yelled, “Ngh! So you’re the general of the rear guard! You’re quite skilled. Indeed, you make for a worthy foe! I am VingeÞórr, the man who will send you to Valhalla. Carve my name into your soul!”

“Ah, so you’re the stupid sibling. It must be tough, being ordered around by your younger brother,” Skáviðr sneered.

VingeÞórr lashed out in rage. “You bastard!”

It appeared Skáviðr had touched a nerve. One could see how he’d earned his title.

“Uwooooooooooooh!”

“Hmph!”

VingeÞórr rained a storm of blows down on Skáviðr. Though he’d always stood in the shadow of his younger brother, VingeÞórr was still a great hero who was known even to the remote Wolf Clan. He was the Einherjar of Grídarvöl, the Giant Club. And true to his name, his blows were the heaviest Skáviðr had ever felt.

“When it comes to pure strength, you’ve even got our silver wolf beat,” Skáviðr said coolly.

“Silver wolf? Oh, you mean Mánagarmr. Well, she’s just the strongest among a bunch of weaklings. If it weren’t for my brother, I’d be the strongest man... Wha?! Urgh!” A searing pain burned though VingeÞórr’s chest.

Skáviðr’s spear had pierced his heart.

VingeÞórr hadn’t even seen the blow coming.

“You’re not worthy to be my foe.”

VingeÞórr’s body slipped out of the chariot as Skáviðr pulled his spear out. He

didn’t even smile as he flung the blood off his weapon.

The Lightning Clan troops all looked at their leader’s corpse. One of their greatest heroes had just been slain, and by a man who looked like the reaper of death himself.

While the Lightning Clan soldiers hesitated, the Wolf Clan army pressed forward.

“U-Uwaaaaaaaaah!” One of the Lightning Clan soldiers dropped his weapon and fled.

With that, the floodgates were open. One after another, soldiers began to flee and desert.

“Looks like we fought them off,” Skáviðr said. “In that case, there’s no reason to remain. Let’s retreat, men!”

“Uwooooooooooooooooh! Níðhǫggr! Níðhǫggr! Níðhǫggr!” The Wolf Clan soldiers raised their weapons and cheered, glad to have survived.

Skáviðr had served as the rear guard for countless battles in which they had retreated. He no longer remembered how many anymore. Despite that, he’d always survived.

This gloomy, sinister-looking man appeared to have been shunned by even death himself. But that was precisely why his soldiers found him so reliable.

Because they knew he would get them out of any death trap imaginable.

“Ving is dead?!” Steinþórr couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

His brother was eight years older than he was, but he’d served him well, and together they’d made the Lightning Clan into what it was today. And even in Yggdrasil, where the bonds made by vows were more important than bonds of blood, losing someone he’d known ever since he was a child was still a terrible blow.

“Aaaahh! Waaaaaah!” Steinþórr was never a man to hide his emotions, and despite the fact that there were people around him, he began to sob loudly.

He began to use his iron hammer to crush the rocks and trees around him. He

was exactly like a child throwing a tantrum, and there was nothing anybody could do to stop him.

“Þjálfi! This is your fault! You were the one who told him to do it!”

“I never thought for a moment that my plan would cost VingeÞórr his life... Words cannot express my sorrow.”

“That’s right! It was your fault! Your fault!”

“I’m sorry.”

“Your apologies won’t bring him back!” Steinþórr rammed his foot hard into Þjálfi’s stomach.

Þjálfi landed hard on the ground and tumbled backwards several times before coming to a stop. Even after he stopped moving, though, he lay crumpled up on the ground, spitting out blood. He must’ve damaged his internal organs.

“I-I’m sorry! Are you all right?!” Steinþórr yelped. The sight of him in so much pain seemed to bring Steinþórr back to his senses. He ran over to Þjálfi and helped him up.

“No, compared to the pain of losing your brother, father, this is noth... gwah!” Þjálfi tried to hide his pain, but his body wouldn’t let him. He collapsed back to his knees, unable to stand.

Þjálfi was renowned for his strong body, but even he could barely move. Steinþórr had used a kick, not his hammer, but his strikes were still unbelievably powerful.

“I’m so sorry,” Steinþórr moaned. “I was the one who agreed to your plan, and I was the one who sent Ving out there...”

“Hahh... Hahh... D-do not concern yourself with me. Focus instead... on the battle in front of us. My uncle’s death has struck fear into the soldier’s hearts. This time, you’ll have to go out there yourself!”

“Of... of course! You’re right!” The childlike confusion faded from Steinþórr’s face, and once against the lust for battle for burned in his eyes.

He would have to avenge his brother. He swore to himself that he would get revenge, but first he needed to worry about his men who were still living.

“But Þjálfi, you need to rest,” he added.

“What?! I will always be by your side... ugah!”

“Look at yourself. I can’t take you to the front lines like that.”

“B-but...!”

“If you die, what will I say to Röskva back in Bilskírnir? The bonds of the clan are important, but so are bonds of blood.”

When he’d told Sigrún that he couldn’t afford to lose the man so easily, Steinþórr had meant it. Þjálfi’s sister Röskva was a master politician who did an excellent job of ruling the clan capital. It was only thanks to the two of them that Steinþórr was able to live his life as he chose, and focus on fighting.

He was still young, and he wanted to keep fighting for a long time. He couldn’t afford to lose either of them.

After his lord had just lost his own brother, Þjálfi had no choice but to obey his words. That, and he wasn’t stupid enough to think that he could fight when he was this badly injured. “...Of course, sir. Farewell, and good luck to you!”

“Luck? I don’t need luck. The only path to victory is through power!”

“Heh... then I will rest, and await news of your victory.”

“Leave it to me,” Steinþórr said confidently. “I am Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, and I will devour any foe that stands in my way!”

Steinþórr drove his army onwards.

Simply standing at the vanguard had a huge effect on his soldiers’ morale.

None of them could imagine him losing. There was an aura of power about him, an aura that said to the soldiers that if they followed him, their victory was assured.

Yngvi of the Hoof Clan had used fear to keep his soldiers in line, but Steinþórr inspired frenzied loyalty by making his men think only of victory.

The army raced on, like a tiger chasing its prey, until at last they’d succeeded in sighting the tail of the Wolf Clan.

The Wolf Clan’s forces were in the middle of crossing the Élivágar River.

On the banks of the river, Steinþórr saw a young boy with black hair, an extremely rare sight in Yggdrasil.

“That’s him!” he shouted.

Just like the indigenous people of Africa, growing up in a place with few buildings to obstruct their view gave the people of Yggdrasil vision that far exceeded that of the modern Japanese. Even from a distance, he could read the boy’s expression.

In a battle, fording a river was one of the most dangerous things you could do. It slowed you down, and it made you an easy target for the enemy.

The boy was letting out a big yawn. Perhaps he was relieved that he’d crossed the dangerous river successfully. If so, he’d let his guard down far too early.

“Heh! I won’t let you get away!” Steinþórr whipped his horses and spurred his chariot to go faster.

Many soldiers still hadn’t crossed the river. They would be the first to become his prey. He couldn’t wait to see if the boy would still be yawning after that.

“So you did come, Dólgþrasir.” As he approached the riverside, the lanky, gloomy-looking man blocked his path again. The man was defending their rear guard, so it was inevitable that they’d meet here.

Rage began to boil up from within Steinþórr. “Skáviðr! I’m here to avenge my brother!”

He pointed his hammer straight ahead and ran his chariot straight for the man.

All traces of the Lightning Clan’s easygoing patriarch were gone. Now he had the face of an angry demon, and the aura of power surging around him was more intense than it had ever been before.

But his brother had been famous for his valor, and this foe had slain him. So this was no ordinary opponent. The man shrugged off the flames of Steinþórr’s rage with a cold smile.

The armies of the raging Lightning Clan and desperate Wolf Clan collided.

“Haaaaah!” With a shout, Steinþórr brought down his iron hammer on his

hated foe. This strike was far more powerful than the ones he'd used in the last battle.

But that strange force appeared again, and his hammer deviated from its mark.

"Hah!"

"Woah!"

Steinþórr blocked Skáviðr's counterattack with the head of his hammer. He'd already fought this foe once. His technique was easy to block, once you knew it was coming.

"All right then, how about this...!" With a cry of "Orah-orah-orah!!" Steinþórr shifted to using fast attacks instead of powerful blows.

The innate sense for battle that he was born with was telling him that this opponent was best fought with many fast attacks, instead of a single strong one. He didn't even need to use his full power to begin with. His ásmegin contained the divine power of the Mjǫlnir, and it could crush anything in a single swing.

Or at least, it should have. But the lanky Wolf Clan member was still standing in his way, and the spear in his hand was still unbroken.

"He's fast!" Steinþórr muttered.

And what was worse, his foe's spear would target the small openings in his attacks. It was hard to see, and harder to block. The battle had gone on for a while now, but his hammer had almost never found its mark. It was almost enough to make him think he was fighting a ghost.

But he'd figured out the trick.

"I get it. Your skill is to make my weapon slip."

"I guess you would figure it out, yes," Skáviðr sighed as he struck at Steinþórr's hammer from below in mid-swing, sending it flailing upwards.

Before, he would've taken advantage of this opening to strike, but instead Skáviðr kicked his horse in the side and spurred it away from Steinþórr.

Skáviðr panted. “Hahh... Hahh... Hahh...”

Steinþórr could see that the man was exhausted. The man’s face had seemed at first to be sardonic and easygoing, but now it was dripping with sweat and exhaustion.

He could understand why.

Steinþórr’s attacks weren’t supposed to be blocked. Doing so would simply destroy your weapon. So instead of trying to block the attacks head-on, his opponent would deflect them in another direction, protecting his weapon.

It wasn’t as easy as it sounded. Deflecting an attack in that manner was far more difficult than simply blocking it, especially against an enemy of unparalleled strength like Steinþórr. Just thinking about it was enough to make him dizzy.

“Wait, I thought that silver-haired she-wolf was supposed to be the strongest,” Steinþórr commented. “You’re way stronger than she is.”

“I’m not the type who enjoys the spotlight. And her style is far more beautiful than mine, isn’t it? Don’t worry. In another two years or so, she really will be stronger than me,” Skáviðr said flatly.

There was no false glory or braggadocio in his words. He seemed to be simply stating the truth. If Sigrún were here, she might have thrown a tantrum.

“Whew... I guess it’s about time.” Skáviðr pulled his horse’s reins and turned it in the direction of the river, then rode it forward.

The rest of his men in the rearguard were using their longspears to keep the Lightning Clan army at bay as they began to cross the river themselves.

“You’re running again?!” Steinþórr shouted.

“Our army is almost done crossing the river. There’s no reason for me to stay here.”

“I won’t keep letting you get aw... What?!” Suddenly he saw an arrow out of the corner of his eye. Instantly, he tilted his head to dodge it.

“Haugspori is one of the Horn Clan’s finest archers. And he’s very good.”

Skáviðr smiled as he drove his horse into the water.

Steinþórr rushed to follow him, but then he saw a man on the other side of the river with three arrows cocked into his bow.

“Tch!” Steinþórr used his hammer to knock them down.

Like Skáviðr had said, only a skilled archer could play a trick like that and still be accurate over a long distance like this.

In that short window of time, Skáviðr had already gotten a good lead on Steinþórr. He was going very fast for someone fording a river.

The water wasn’t as deep as he’d thought, perhaps. He’d heard that the Wolf Clan patriarch had spent a lot of effort on irrigation to expand his croplands. And there hadn’t been much rain lately, either.

“Follow me, everyone!” Steinþórr shouted, holding his hammer high. “These cowards think they’re safe on the other side of that river! Show them the true terror of the Lightning Clan!”

Crossing a river in battle was a dangerous act, one that would bring with it many casualties. But the Wolf Clan was fleeing and had no way to stop them. If they moved now, the crossing would be easy. He couldn’t let this opportunity go to waste.

“Whew. Looks like they took the bait.” As he watched the red-haired young man leap into the river, Yuuto let out a sigh of relief.

He’d heard the story about Tokugawa Ieyasu soiling himself after Takeda Shingen had pursued him in the Battle of Mikatagahara, so he’d thought he’d been prepared. But he’d still had no idea that a fighting retreat was so nerve-wracking. This was far worse than he’d thought.

“Great work, Yuuto!” Albertina called as she offered him a water bottle made from the dried stomach of a sheep. With Felicia gone, she had offered to guard him instead.

Yuuto took the bottle and greedily gulped down its contents, then collapsed into a carriage.

“I never want to go fishing again,” he sighed as he stretched out his limbs.

They had used “the fishing hermit”— a strategy where an army’s forces were split into three parts. One would let the enemy force to them to retreat as bait, then lure them in to where the other two were waiting. Then the rest of the army would surround them and wipe them out.

The strategy was said to be both invented and put into actual practice by Shimazu Yoshihisa during the Japan’s Warring States Period.

There were other similar strategies from all around the world. The Mongols were said to have been masters of using fake retreats to surround and destroy the enemy.

The strategy he’d chosen for this battle was an adaptation of that.

The way Yuuto saw it, the key to the fishing hermit strategy lay in the bait. If they ran too soon, the enemy would sense a trap. Only after a real battle could you make the enemy feel that they’d truly beaten you. Only then would they have no idea they were falling into a carefully laid trap.

At that point, any incongruities would just seem like a coincidence, something that could be easily ignored as you pressed in for the kill.

It sounded easy, but a fighting retreat to lure the enemy in was extremely difficult. Any retreat could easily turn into an all-out rout.

Only because they were being led by Skáviðr, a man who’d experienced many such retreats in his life, and because their emphasis on laws gave the Wolf Clan a degree of cohesion that was rare in these times, could they even hope to pull it off.

“‘Never show your trump card first. And if you do, make sure you have something else up your sleeve,’” Yuuto quoted to himself. “That’s good advice.”

That was a line from a popular manga from before Yuuto was born. It was still something you saw online a lot, and Yuuto had seen it several times.

True, the “Hammer and Anvil” tactic was far beyond any other tactics in use right now. It was Yuuto and the Wolf Clan’s trump card.

But there were no absolute guarantees in this world. You never knew how a

battle was going to go. If he used the same tactic again and again, eventually the enemy would develop a way to counter it.

So just in case, he'd thought up another card to put up his sleeve.

Another reason the plan had been successful was his soldiers' absolute confidence in him, but Yuuto still hadn't realized this.

"All right, I suppose it's time to end this," he said. "Everybody ready?"

The Lightning Clan army was three quarters of the way across the river, and they seemed to almost have reached the other side.

Suddenly, however, the smile on Steinþórr's face was replaced with a look of tension.

The enemy must have dug trenches, because light infantry appeared out of nowhere on the other side, holding strange-looking bows in their hands. Then they began to rain arrows down on the Lightning Clan forces as they crossed the river.

"Tch!" Steinþórr grunted as he spun his hammer in a circle, blocking the rain of arrows from hitting him.

But the horses in front of him weren't so lucky. They'd been given horse armor to block arrows, but those couldn't stop arrows made of iron.

With a dying whinny, they went down into the river.

"Gyah!"

"Gfwah!"

The Lightning Clan soldiers behind him were screaming in agony.

Steinþórr gripped his hammer tightly and unconsciously gritted his teeth.

"He set up an ambush while we chased them... It was a mistake to let my guard down against the black one. But your stale old tactics can't stop me now!" Steinþórr shouted as he jumped forward out of his chariot, landing on the back of one of his fallen horses and then leaping forward again.

He covered a distance as long as the height of three or four men in a single bound, landing firmly on the other side.

“Now it’s time for you to pay for slaughtering my men from a distance like cowards! And you’re going to pay with your lives!”

The Wolf Clan archers froze in fear at the howl of the tiger, and their arrows stopped. They were completely overwhelmed by the sheer intensity radiating from him.

“Hmph. You don’t exactly play by the rules, do you, Dólgþrasir?” asked the lanky man, reappearing again.

“Hmm? You’re not going to run anymore?” Steinþórr’s lips curled up into a smile.

“Correct. My master has given me strict orders to stop you here.”

Skáviðr lowered his spear and charged on his horse at Steinþórr.

As he charged, his horse began to move faster and faster. That was just what Steinþórr wanted.

“You think you can do that?” Steinþórr’s smile was that of a carnivorous beast. This foe fascinated him, but the man had already escaped twice, and he was beginning to feel frustrated. He was very happy to see his enemy coming to him.

“Hah!”

The spear lashed out at the speed of lightning, but Steinþórr waited until the last moment to dodge, and then grabbed it by the handle and brought his hammer down.

Skáviðr’s spear, which had survived so many of Steinþórr’s attacks, shattered easily.

Steinþórr tossed the remains of the spear he was holding back over his shoulder and laughed. “I’ve learned to counter your techniques. It will take more than you to stop me.”

“Yeah, I never thought I could fight a monster like you alone.”

“Huh?!”

As Skáviðr smiled, Steinþórr saw a woman he recognized behind him. A silver

valkyrie, holding a sword high above her head, was charging for him on a coal-black horse.

“Steinþórr! I’ve come to pay you back for the way you mocked me!”

“Hah! Too easy!” Steinþórr easily dodged her attack, but when he went to strike back, what looked like a black snake lashed forth and wrapped itself around his hammer.

“Would it be all right if I joined in the game, as well?” A girl with long, golden hair and loose clothing that looked like it had no business being on a battlefield was riding a horse and holding a whip in one hand.

He recognized her. It was the girl who’d been standing next to the Wolf Clan’s patriarch. The force that was pulling at his hammer was far greater than the thin arms of a girl could generate. She was clearly an Einherjar.

“Gaah! Get off me!” he shouted.

“Oh dear, how dangerous.”

As he yanked hard at the hammer, the girl let the whip relax and fall. Perhaps she knew she couldn’t beat him in a test of strength.

But Skáviðr took advantage of the opening this created to draw and strike with the blade at his side. And from the other side, Sigrún slashed out with her own sword.

“Gwaaah!” Steinþórr moaned in pain as he was attacked by both the new and old Mánagarmrs at once. Even he was forced to go on the defensive against these fierce attacks.

But then the indomitable tiger patriarch of the Lightning Clan just laughed.

“Ha! There are three of you, and that’s the best you can do?!”

“Who said there were only three of us?”

“Gwah?!” Steinþórr heard the sound of something whistling through the air, and he quickly twisted his body. He felt something brush right past his cheek.

“Don’t forget about us, either,” the young man with the bow spat. “We have a very old debt to repay to you.”

It was the young man who'd been firing arrows at him from across the river before. Haugspori, his name was.

Three chariots sped past the archer.

They had spears attached to their wheels, and they tore through any Lightning Clan soldiers that had made it across the river.

He recognized the white-haired girl in the middle chariot. It was the young patriarch of the Horn Clan. The two men at her side were muscled and tough, too. Both of them had shining runes on their left shoulder. The four Einherjar of the Horn Clan, the Brísingamen, were all here.

"You're up against seven Einherjar," Skáviðr sneered. "Still want to laugh?"

Even as he chuckled, though, Skáviðr kept attacking.

"Ngaaaaah!"

"Let me tell you what your greatest weakness is. You see, you're too strong. Look, your allies behind you can't keep up, can they?"

Skáviðr was right.

The water wasn't that deep, but it still went up to a man's waist. And they were also exposed to a hail of crossbow fire. Most of the Lightning Clan army had barely advanced at all. And anyone who did make it across the river would be faced with Einherjar chariots.

Steinþórr was completely cut off from the rest of his forces.

With a howl, the thin Wolf Clan launched a sideways attack.

He was about to block it with his hammer when a chill went down his spine. That was his instincts talking. Steinþórr listened by bending his body to the side, and the blade of the silver she-Wolf Clan lunged through the space he'd made.

He locked the blade at his side with his arm and tried throwing her off horseback by making a sharp turn, but an arrow heading for his side forced him to let go and repel it.

A split second later, Skáviðr attacked him with a diagonal downwards slash. They didn't allow him even a moment's rest.

“Hyeah!”

A foot soldier’s greatest advantage over a horse rider was his maneuverability, so Steinþórr used it to dash away and escape their reach. But as he did so, the leader of the Horn Clan forces charged him from atop a chariot and attacked him with a pike.

Golden hair swayed at the edge of his vision, and suddenly, a song with beauty unbefitting a battlefield resounded all around.

The form of the leader of the Horn Clan forces was doubled.

“Tch! A galldr!” Steinþórr clicked his tongue.

Enchanted songs such as this one bestowed various magic effects upon their listeners. Though they weren’t significant, in battle, the slight difference they provided could mean life or death.

“Insolence!” Guarding against the attack from the form emanating killing intent, Steinþórr roared vigorously and undid the spell.

Skáviðr fled. Steinþórr wanted to go after him, but the man knew he wouldn’t stand a chance in single combat, and was already increasing the distance between them. If the galldr hadn’t put a lag on his reaction time, Steinþórr would’ve made short work of the aged soldier.

As he ground his teeth in frustration, another chariot bearing the Horn Clan crest charged him head-on.

“Hgaahh... Nh?!” He raised his hammer in preparation, but froze in shock when the driver and Einherjar both jumped out of it.

The chariot was now empty, but the loss of weight increased the speed of its charge towards Steinþórr. Of course, the horse didn’t want to crash and be hurt, so it quickly turned around, not minding what became of the vehicle.

With extraordinary reflexes, he jumped up, placed a leg on the chariot’s edge, and sprang forward, negating the impact.

After he landed on the ground, but before he could fix his posture, the silver she-wolf made her steed gallop towards him. “Steinþórr! This is your end!”

The diagonal position of the *nihontou* made it clear she planned to finish him off with a sideways slash. The thin man followed after her, looking hungry for blood.

The Dólgþrasir was completely cornered. Even the Lightning Clan soldiers, who knew him well, were fully aware of it.

However...

“The likes of you...” The fighting spirit emanating from Steinþórr’s back grew even greater and began to distort the surrounding air like a heat haze.

The arm holding the hammer began to swell.

“...SHALL NEVER STRIKE ME DOWN!”

Twisting his body, gathering rotational momentum, mustering all his strength, and channeling Mjǫlnir’s divine powers, he launched a mighty strike at Sigrún’s *nihontou*.

It might’ve been the most powerful attack he’d ever unleashed. Though the blade could somehow bear it, the same couldn’t be said for Sigrún’s hand. She was forced to let go of her *nihontou*, letting it fly through the air.

Steinþórr then swung his hammer sideways, breaking both front legs of Skáviðr’s horse. A whip wrapped around his right hand, but he paid it no heed. The second-in-command of the Horn Clan was drawing close, so he swung his weapon again and pulverized the man’s right shoulder.

Not wasting a moment, he then took a nearby stone in hand and threw it towards a man preparing to launch an arrow, shattering the back of his hand.

He finished off by jumping atop a running chariot and crushing the skull of the unknown Horn Clan Einherjar riding it.

The shocked Einherjar watched as the Battle-Hungry Tiger leapt off, stood tall on the ground, and roared towards the skies.

“I fell for this, you say? Ha! Don’t make me laugh! I’m the Dólgþrasir! All and any traps crumble before my might! Kyah ha ha! Ha ha ha! HAAAAA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

Covered in the fresh blood of his enemies, Steinþórr voiced a resounding

guffaw. Neither “man” nor “beast” seemed apt for him anymore. He was more like a monster, unleashed upon the world by a capricious god.

“This can’t be...” Felicia’s voice was hoarse, thick with disbelief.

They were the combined elite of the Wolf and Horn Clans. As those chosen by the gods, they had powers that made them rise above the rest. And yet, they had yet to land a single strike on this man. They couldn’t even scratch him. Not only that, but their efforts had left them drained, withering their potential for further battle.

“Not even the seven of us could beat him...” Sigrún’s expression was one of pure despair.

She had been dedicating her life to the arts of war for as long as she could remember, and though she didn’t consider herself to be the best in Yggdrasil, she had thought she would at least make the top five.

Despite that, the man laughing luridly in front of her was so far above her level that she couldn’t even hope to reach him.



“Tch. He’s certainly hard to deal with,” Skáviðr spat as he brushed away the sweaty hair covering his face. Blood was dripping from his brow, thanks to the wound he’d gotten falling off his horse. The long battle was also taking its toll. His face was so thick with exhaustion, he looked like a walking corpse.

“What? Giving up like the weaklings you are?” Steinþórr formed an indomitable grin as he lightly hit his shoulder with the handle of his hammer. His steady breathing made it clear that the ferocity of the battle so far didn’t bother him in the least. The man wasn’t just on a different level— he was in an entirely different realm.

Skáviðr sighed and shook his head. “It truly seems like no amount of struggling could help us emerge victorious. You are indeed a man of valor, worthy of being called the overlord of the battlefield.”

“Kyah ha ha! Well, you are all quite capable, too. This is the first time I’ve been faced with such adversity. Be proud of yourselves.”

“Fffffff! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Skáviðr covered his face with his hand and howled with laughter while facing the sky.

“Why the laugh? Did the fear make you lose your mind?” Steinþórr raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“How can I *not* laugh?” Skáviðr retorted. “Did you not find it strange that you’re only fighting us and the bowmen? Did it not strike you as odd that we don’t have our infantry here?”

“What...?!”

“Did I not tell you that we were ordered to *stop* you here? Indeed, we’re only here to hold you back. A whole seven Einherjar gathered to keep you away. Be proud of yourself.”

As Skáviðr formed an indomitable smile similar to the one he’d had, Steinþórr realized that Sigrún and the other Einherjar were systematically retreating from the battle.

A cold chill went down his spine as Skáviðr, having lost his beloved steed, jumped onto a passing Horn Clan chariot and raised his voice.

“No matter how strong you are, it’s naught but the hardiness of a brute. You’re nothing compared to the might of our lord, the ruler of the three realms and master of heaven and earth! Strain your ears! You were too caught up in the battle that you failed to notice the coiling of the all-consuming Jörmungandr!”

The low rumble Steinþórr suddenly heard made it clear that the man wasn’t merely bluffing. The sound gradually grew louder and more sinister, and soon enough, an enormous wall of water entered his vision.

“What?! A FLOOD?!”

“Let me end this by asking it again. Did your beastly mind finally grasp that you fell for a trap, Dólgþrasir?”

With those words as his last, Skáviðr rode away at immense speed.

With the violent stream fast approaching him, Steinþórr couldn’t even give chase to his escaped enemies. Though his leg strength was far above an average human’s, it was no match for a horse’s, and it was impossible to escape the jaws of the great serpent of water bearing down upon him. His hammer could shatter anything, but that was exactly why it would mean little against water.

The sight was overwhelming, and even Steinþórr couldn’t help holding still in awe. It was something only a god could stand a chance against.

Nature wasn’t something that mere humans could tame. They could only present offerings and prayers to their gods, hoping they would listen. Steinþórr was shocked, unable to comprehend how his enemy could have brought about something like this.

There were hellish cries from behind him. He turned around to see the soldiers of his clan despair at the face of inescapable death.

And a moment later, with an impact unmatched by any he’d ever experienced, his consciousness was cut off.

“Hey, nice work.” Yuuto jumped off of Albertina’s horse and spoke to Linnea, who was looking at the river, completely dumbfounded.

The terrain upstream was too rough for chariots, so he'd had to arrive here using the elder twin's help.

"I have never even heard of such an amazing strategy!" Linnea exclaimed.

"It's just a sandbag strategy. I'm glad it worked well."

Upon seeing Steinþórr for the first time, Yuuto had pictured Xiang Yu and Lu Bu, and that impression had only gotten stronger the more information he gathered.

Xiang Yu, probably the strongest general in Chinese history, had been an astoundingly valiant sort, second to none. In an era when might made right, he had been unmatched in all his military endeavors, achieving a victory for every battle he took part in. The only great failure had been given to him by the brilliant Han Xin, one of the Three Heroes of Han. And the sandbag strategy was among the most famous of the clever schemes he'd used.

It was a splendid plan that involved damming up the upstream of a river with a simplistic weir, waiting for the opposing force to cross the water, and then breaking the construct, creating a flash flood and effectively using the water as a weapon.

"You might be the incarnation of a war god," Linnea said in awe. "Assisting you with this has been the greatest honor of my lifetime."

"Aren't you a bit too young to be saying stuff like that?" Yuuto asked with a shrug.

Though he was the one who'd brought this idea forward and made the final decision to execute it, Linnea was the one who'd polished it and commanded the people. She'd evacuated them from the dangers of the battle, made them build a wooden fence to place across the river, and had them throw wheat bags full of dirt into the water, creating the simple weir they'd needed.

Of course, they hadn't neglected to consider that a noticeable lack of flow could make the enemies suspicious, so they'd made sure to optimize how much water they let through.

Linnea was loved by the people, excelled at commanding them, and had a knowledge of irrigation and civil engineering in general. Without her, this

scheme wouldn't have gone nearly as smoothly.

"All that aside, was it really all right?" Yuuto asked.

After a momentary stupor, his sister figure gave a reply he wasn't quite expecting. "Eh? Oh, we made sure that the deconstruction would be safe, so we don't have any casualties."

"...I see." Rather than pointing out the obvious, Yuuto just closed his eyes and nodded.

This plan had probably ended several thousands of lives. Though he didn't have anyone else he could rely on for this, the fact that he'd involved her in something so dirty cast a shadow upon his heart.

In case that fact had been worrying her, he'd been intent on making it clear that it was all his own responsibility, but she hadn't seemed to care about it one bit. He couldn't tell whether she'd forgotten about that due to the elation of victory, or whether she simply couldn't feel like a killer unless she delivered a killing blow directly.

"Oh, I would like to give my earnest thanks for giving me a chance to avenge my father!" Linnea added enthusiastically. "This also made me more confident in myself."

"I guess this is what's *normal* in this world."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing. I'm happy for you."

To protect herself and her dear people, and to avenge the beloved father she had lost, Linnea hadn't hesitated to fight and take the lives of her enemies. It wasn't about what was right or wrong.

Even to gentle, people-minded Linnea— or perhaps *because* she was like that — fighting for what she found dear came so naturally that she didn't even stop to think about it. And to Yuuto's mind, that was worthy of praise.

In fact, he was the weird one here for wallowing in doubt and guilt.

"I must say... I never expected to see something that the Dólgþrasir would be so helpless against." Linnea's tone was thick with astonishment as she looked at

the remains of the weir.

“I know what you mean...” Yuuto recalled the great earthquake and tsunami that had occurred back in Japan several years ago. He’d watched the news about it, and the ghastly scenes he’d seen on the TV were burned onto the back of his eyelids.

People were extremely powerless against the threat of nature. Despite knowing this— or perhaps *because* he knew this— he’d used it for a deed so sinful, it made him grind his teeth.

Hell probably had a place ready for him, but he’d decided to keep moving forward regardless. For the sake of those he wished to protect, and to return home alive.

“Natural talent, powers borrowed from gods or from Álfkipfer...” he murmured. “Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

From the moment he’d laid eyes on Steinþórr, Yuuto hadn’t liked him one bit. The man had annoyed him to extents he found hard to express, but he hadn’t even known why until he’d talked to Linnea in Gimlé.

That man reminded him of how much of a fool he used to be. That was why he’d humbled himself and made sure he was prepared for this.

Yuuto had even had a plan in case the enemies had figured out their plot.

He placed his hand on the blade at his side and formed a self-derisive smile. “I’m not gonna lose to idiots who get all uppity just because they have a cheat or two.”

“Oh man, did I lose hard! That guy is insane!” The red-haired youth was spread out on the riverbank, looking up at the cloudless sky.

He had no clue where he was— he’d simply woken up to this.

He tried to get up, but the pain burning his body whole made him lie down again. He’d probably suffered many strong impacts while he was out cold, and it was clear that a number of his bones were broken.

Despite surviving many battles without gaining as much as a scratch, he was

now completely thrashed. It would definitely take a while until he was able to freely move his body again.

Still, he was lucky he'd ended up as he had. It had definitely been a life and death situation, and even he was surprised that he was still breathing.

It might've been naught but the whim of a god, but now that he'd survived, he had to make his enemies pay for this humiliation.

"That aside, how do I get back...? Oh, whatever. Details, details..."

EPILOGUE

The moment the flash flood subsided, Yuuto made his armies advance further into the Lightning Clan's domain.

With almost half of their soldiers dead, and with the fate of their patriarch uncertain, they were as good as defeated and could barely be called an "army" anymore. Upon seeing the organized ranks of the Wolf Clan, most of them simply scattered and fled.

Though Yuuto was a pacifist at heart, he wasn't naive enough to assume a nonaggressive defense policy.

War wasn't cheap.

There was the cost of weapons and armor for every soldier, the preparation of consumables such as arrows, and, of course, the immense amounts of food used up while marching forward and back. All of it had a price. Obviously, some didn't make it back alive, which called for compensations to their families. Victory cost money, as well, since it was necessary to reward those who helped achieve it, especially since he'd forbidden pillaging. It was far from a philanthropic business.

Yuuto had no intention of waging war himself, but if war was waged against him and he had to spend money on defending his lands, he had to choose between allowing his nation to gradually become poor or finding ways to break even, and his people would certainly not approve of the former.

In fact, before Yuuto had become patriarch of the Wolf Clan, it had been on the brink of destruction exactly because it was constantly on the defensive. He had no intention of repeating that mistake.

After his army had scattered and driven off the remaining Lightning Clan troops, Yuuto conquered three forts with next to no bloodshed, placing the local towns and villages under his rule.

What followed was a triumphant return to Iárnviðr. After that, he reported to

Mitsuki that he was all right, and a while later, he decided to sneak out into town and have a good time.

It had been a whole year since he'd walked the streets on his own two feet. As the Wolf Clan's patriarch and hero, he would always become the center of attention, making the people humble or outright prostrate themselves before him, and he didn't feel comfortable about that.

It didn't help that his appearance stood out among the people of Iárnviðr. Though he could hide his pure black hair with a hood, the same couldn't be said for the eyes, and though he had a bit of a tan, the ivory skin tone unique to his race was sure to attract the people's attention.

Yuuto held Kristina's hand as he walked. "Man, thanks to you, I can finally walk around town like normal. Thanks," he said with delight.

By holding her hand, he could borrow her Veðrfölnir powers and conceal his presence, preventing him from attracting attention.

"Honestly, I would prefer not having to hold a man's hand, but you're an exception, Father," she said.

"Ha ha. What an honor." Yuuto shrugged.

Spearwork wasn't the only thing that could earn merit in a war. She'd brought the information that the Lightning Clan was preparing for battle, and that was more than worth its weight in gold. Then she'd infiltrated Bilskírnir and acquired information such as the enemy count, composition, weaponry, and day of departure, which had greatly helped Yuuto come on top in this battle. Those accomplishments had indeed been a worthy tribute, and Yuuto had no problems with granting her his Oath of the Chalice.

Of course, the direct exchange of the Oath of the Chalice with a patriarch required an appropriately elaborate ceremony. Since that would take some time to prepare, he hadn't yet actually exchanged the Oath with her yet. She was currently his sworn daughter on an unofficial level, sort of like how a company back in modern Japan might give a provisional employee status to a prospective employee.

As for Albertina, who'd also become his sworn daughter...

“Hey, Kris, Kris, look. The food on the skewers in that shop looks delicious. Can I buy some?”

“Oh, what a nice smell. It’s probably really good.”

“I know, right?”

“Okay, then go and buy some.”

“Yaaay...! I’m baaack! And I’ve got one!”

“And now I take it from you and quickly eat it.”

“Gyaah!”

As always, she was being bullied by her sister. The girl just never learned.

Yuuto silently, yet intently, wished for her happiness in the future.

“I must say, it’s quite curious how nobody is noticing you.” Felicia stared at Yuuto and said that with wonder in her tone. Unusually for her, she hid her beautiful figure with a hooded robe, trying not to stand out too much.

Because he had the twins with him to act as his bodyguards, he’d told her to take a rest, but she wasn’t having it. In fact, she’d gotten mildly upset at the suggestion. It had left Yuuto puzzled, since he’d merely wanted her to take a breather from her taxing duties as his adjutant. Not even with his modern knowledge could he understand the heart of a maiden.

“He looks normal to me,” Felicia added.

“I only negated his presence and made him melt into the scenery. It doesn’t do much if you notice and stare at him.”

“I see.” Felicia nodded. Being a wielder of galldrs, she was quite interested in such matters.

“Are you sure that’s all right, though?” With his thumb, Yuuto pointed behind him, at Albertina. She was crouching on the ground, crying the biggest tears and attracting lots of attention from the surrounding people.

“You stand out far too much, Father,” Kristina told him. “If Al attracts most of the eyes, no one will look at us.”

“Ohh, that makes sense.” He nodded and looked at the town.

It was loud and full of energy. Compared to a year ago, it also had far more people walking its streets. Prosperity attracted both visitors and migrants from the neighboring lands.

Yuuto often rode on the main road leading to and from the outside, but he hadn't walked on the other roads for a long time now, so he found this experience somewhat nostalgic and exciting.

"Hm?"

Suddenly, he noticed a familiar silhouette.

Short, unruly hair and facial features one could call "charming," rather than "beautiful." She was clearly shopping, humming as she eyed the goods in the bazaar.

"Hey, Ingrid, what a coincidence."

"Uah! Y-Yuumgh!"

"Shh, keep it down, okay?" Yuuto lightly tapped her shoulder, but that was enough to almost make her shout his name, so he quickly put a hand over her mouth. His little sneaking trip had only just begun, after all. He didn't want it to end so abruptly.

Despite looking like nothing more than a cute town girl, Ingrid was the eighth ranked of the Wolf Clan. And as the owner of the Ívaldi rune, she was an exceptional blacksmith.

Her contributions in iron refinement and crossbow creation had made her a leading figure in the clan's advancement.

"Have you calmed down yet?" Yuuto asked him.

"Hhw chn I chlm dhwn whhn yhh'rh thhchhng mh lhps?!" ("How can I calm down when you're touching my lips?!") Ingrid's face turned beet red as she responded to the question with an obvious complaint.

She's as short-tempered as ever, Yuuto thought with a wry smile on his face. Though he felt as if he was misunderstanding something, he chose to just continue the talk instead of clearing it up. "I'll let go if you promise to be quiet."

Ingrid quickly nodded, and Yuuto did as he said he would. The girl took a

moment to catch her breath, then looked directly at him with a serious expression on her face.

“Wh-Why are you here? Do you have any idea what would happen if the people noticed?”

“Oh, I can walk around fine thanks to her powers.” Still holding Kristina’s hand, he held it up, and for some reason, it made all color drain from Ingrid’s eyes and her face turn expressionless.

“Ohh, I see... So you went and got yourself another girl. And just look at how well you get along.”

“You idiot. It’s not like that.”

“It not *not* like that either, though,” Kristina commented. “We *are* queen candidates, after all.”

“Hmmm, she certainly seems comfortable at your side. And you’re just walking around touching girls’ lips. Ah, crap, why am I so...?” Her tone was cold and composed at first, but Ingrid gradually turned red again and began mumbling instead.

The undulation of emotions made Yuuto falter. “I’m telling you, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh, you don’t have to hide it from me. You sure are big and important now, aren’t you? Big enough to get all and any girls you want, huh?”

“Speaking of which, there are marriage proposals flooding in from all of the neighboring clans as well,” Kristina said.

“OHHHHHH?” Ingrid looked at Yuuto with scornful eyes, as though he was the enemy of all womankind.

He shifted his gaze to the left and down, and saw an imp with a full smile on her face. Kristina had said that on purpose, and was clearly proud of it. She was a mean girl indeed. When it came to mischief, she didn’t spare anyone.

“How did you even turn out like this? Remembering the time we met makes it even less believable. You used to be a useless, weak blockhead who could barely talk.”

“Oh yeah, sorry about all the trouble I gave you back then.”

“Oh, you should be.” Ingrid sounded vexed. “Hmph.”

The hopeless boy from back then was now a great hero, defeating the surrounding clans one after the other and spreading his territory wide. The world was a mysterious place, indeed.

“But... to think that it’s been a whole two years since then...” With a whisper, Ingrid looked up at the sky. She seemed to be running her mind through her memories.

To Be Continued



Afterword

Editor: “Let’s add chapter titles.”

Taka: “No one cares about those anyway. Thinking of chapter titles is always a chore. Besides, do you even have the time for that when we’re always working until the last minute?”

Editor: “Let’s think of an English title for the book.”

Taka: “Whatever, I don’t care.” (Visibly unmotivated.)

Editor: “Let’s think of a subtitle for volume 2.”

Taka: “Thinking of those is always... [omitted].”

Editor: “Wait, why are you dumping so many lines to revise this close to the deadline?!”

Taka: “I wanted to polish up the quality a little. Good luck!”

...My editor sure is a patient man. It makes my egoism stand out in comparison.

With that said, it’s been a while, everyone. This is Takayama Seiichi speaking. Thanks to your support, Volume 1’s sales have been quite favorable, so we were able to bring you the next volume. Thank you so very much.

This series’s title includes “Hyakuren,” a word to which I ascribe quite a few meanings and interpretations. In the first volume, I focused on the meaning “well trained in many fields.” As for this second volume... Well, I’ll let you read and find out for yourselves.

But seriously, this time was a real challenge.

Up to now, I’d always started writing the next volume before the previous one was released. But this time, we decided we would only continue publication depending on Volume 1’s sales, and we only got the go-ahead after it had sold out.

Here I was, thinking nonchalantly that Volume 2 would only come out four months from now, in December.

But my patient editor then told me, “It’s a bit of a tight schedule, but we’re releasing it three months from now, in November.”

And all I could think was, “Are you serious?!”

He knows I hardly ever meet my deadlines, but he still came to me with this absurd demand.

Damn it! After three years, he finally sees me for the slacker I am! I worked hard! I worked real hard! And this is my record for largest page count, to boot! Makes me wanna pat myself on the back.

Well, when it comes to creative work, the quality tends to rely more on the creator’s motivation, passion, and enthusiasm, than on the length of time devoted to the production process itself. We live in a world where it’s common for a work that’s done in three weeks to be more polished than one that was done in three months.

Somehow I got into the right mood for writing Volume 2 (which is how I even finished it in time!), and I’m fairly pleased with how it came out. It’ll make me happy if you’ll enjoy it, my dear readers.

Well, time to give some thanks.

To my editor: as always, we were cutting it close to the deadline, but I’m not apologizing this time, lol. But thank you for all your help! I really am grateful.

To my illustrator Yukisan, thank you for your many cool and cute illustrations! I look forward to your work on the next volume.

I extend my thanks to all parties that were involved in the production of this volume! And my deepest gratitude to all you readers who picked up this book! Nothing would make me happier than knowing you enjoyed it.

And as for next volume, finally! At long last! That girl should finally get more chances to shine! That’s right, the girl that hasn’t appeared on the cover art despite being there since Volume 1, even though Linnea has been on the cover twice already.

Look forward to it! I hope I can meet you all again in Volume 3!

Seiichi Takayama



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 2

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Curtis Teal Edited by Emily Sorensen

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