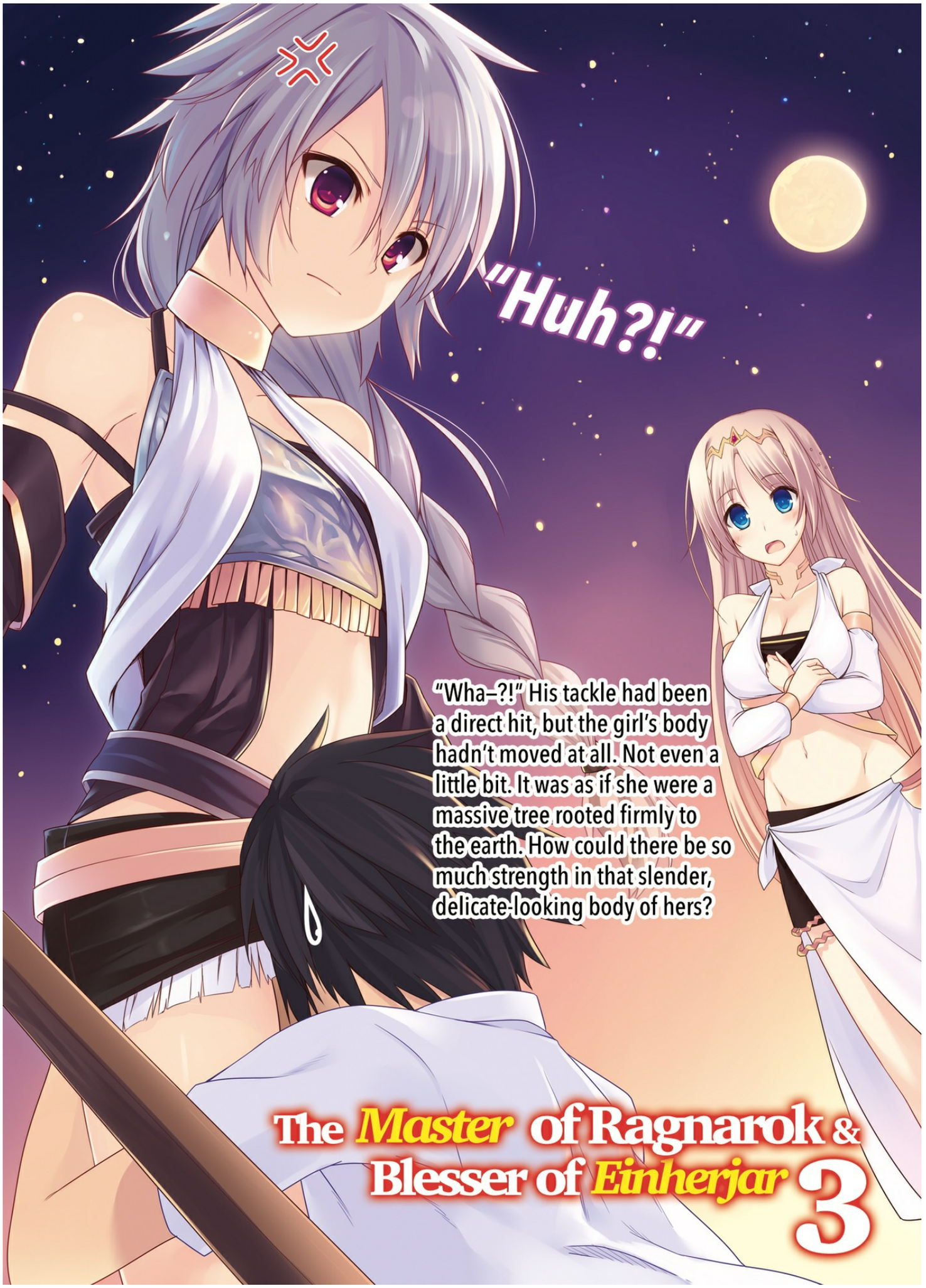
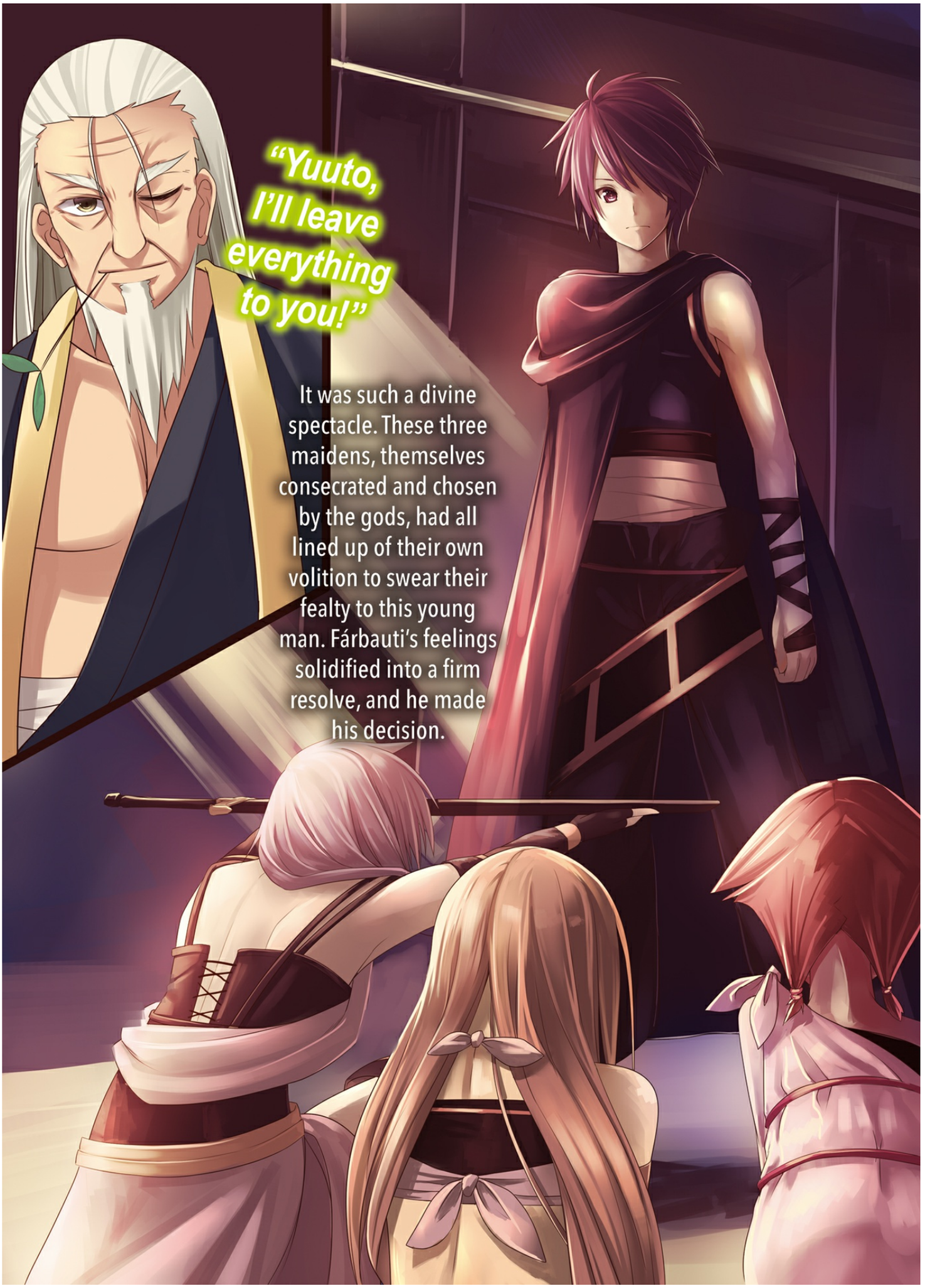
The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar 3

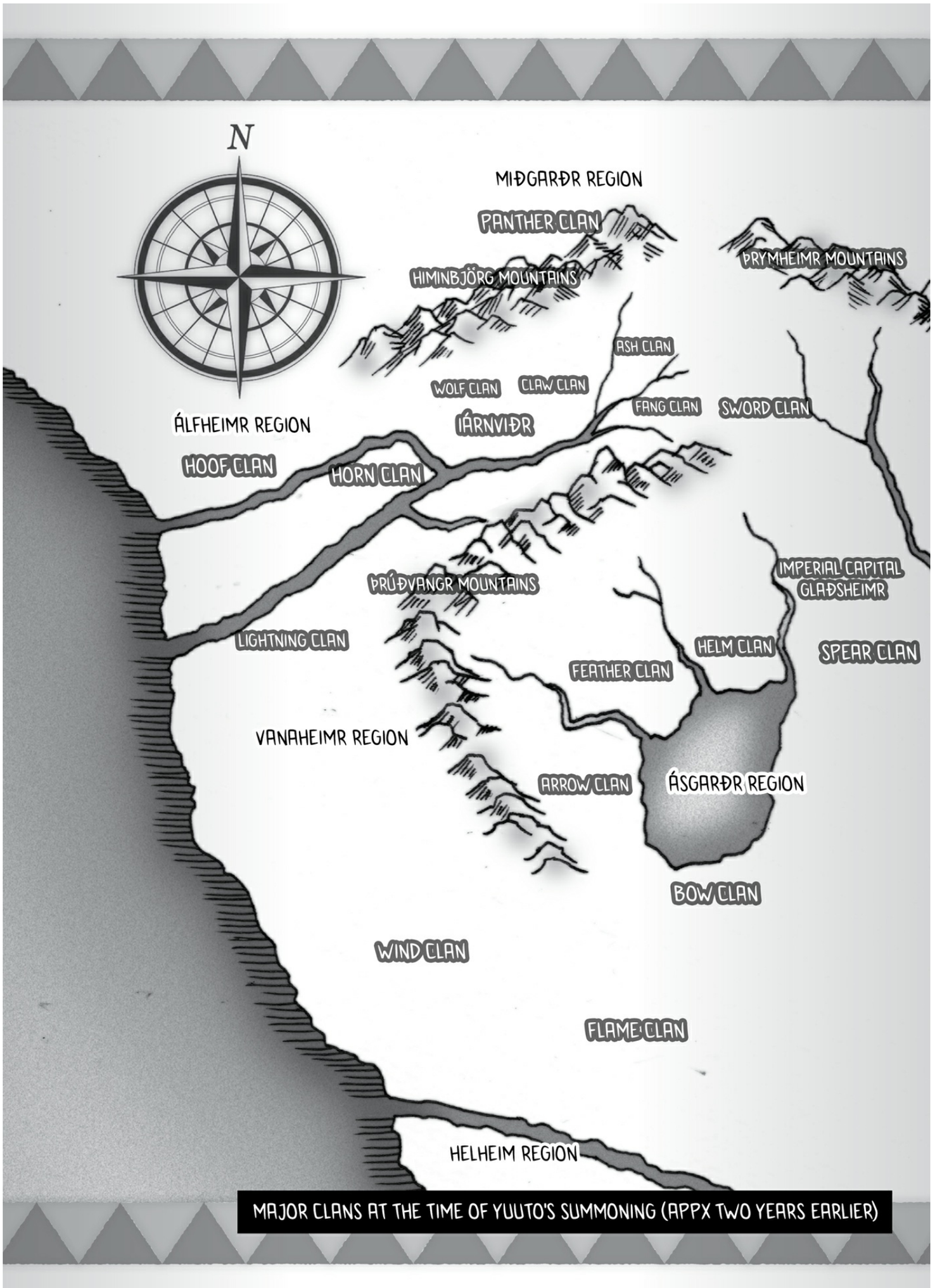
BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN




"Huh?!"
"Wha–?!" His tackle had been a direct hit, but the girl's body hadn't moved at all. Not even a little bit. It was as if she were a massive tree rooted firmly to the earth. How could there be so much strength in that slender, delicate-looking body of hers?
The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar 3


"Yuu-kun... You've gotten stron-ger."
"...Hey, Yuuto. Would you be willing to give up on going back home, and take Felicia as your wife?"
Loptr
Felicia's older brother by blood, and Einherjar of the rune Albiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. A brave general known in battle by the alias Býleistr, Sire of Lightning Within the Storm, and widely expected to be the next ruler of the Wolf Clan.
"Do you think... it'll finally work this time?"
He dropped to sit on the floor, staring ahead at the still-glowing bloom. Both of them had expended every-thing of themselves, body and soul, in the work they'd just completed.
"Have faith in your-self."
Ingrid
The Wolf Clan's genius master blacksmith, and an Einherjar wielding the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades. She combines her talents with Yuuto's knowledge to create something that will change the course of history for the world of Yggdrasil.


"Yuuto, I'll leave everything to you!"
It was such a divine spectacle. These three maidens, themselves consecrated and chosen by the gods, had all lined up of their own volition to swear their fealty to this young man. Fárbauti's feelings solidified into a firm resolve, and he made his decision.



MAJOR CLANS AT THE TIME OF YUUTO'S SUMMONING (APPX TWO YEARS EARLIER)



contents

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

ACT 6

ACT 7

EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD

Characters



Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Mánagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.

Yuuto Suoh

A boy summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. In the space of only two years, he rose to become the patriarch of the Wolf Clan.


Mitsuki Shimoya
Yuuto's childhood friend. After Yuuto is summoned to Yggdrasil, she maintains contact with him and provides support.
Loptr
Felicia's older brother by blood and the Wolf Clan's second-in-command. He is an Einherjar of the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.
Fárbauti
The previous patriarch of the Wolf Clan. Despite being in a state of semi-retirement, he was equal parts dignified ruler and mischievous old man.
Albertina and Kristina
Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.

PROLOGUE

“Big Brother, as your younger sister, I offer you congratulations from the bottom of my heart for receiving two new child subordinates.” Gently lifting the hem of her skirt and bending her knee, Linnea gave Yuuto a graceful curtsy. “And I sincerely thank you for inviting me to attend this happy occasion.”

She was a charming and rather cute girl around the age of fifteen or sixteen, but despite appearances, she was the fully-fledged “patriarch,” or sovereign ruler, of the Horn Clan, and had considerable administrative skills. As expected, her court manners were excellent. As the daughter of the previous Horn Clan patriarch, she had received special training and education.

She was referring to the Oath of the Chalice ceremony scheduled to begin at midday. The twins Kristina and Albertina, in recognition for their accomplishments during the recent war with the Lightning Clan, would be exchanging the vows of “parent and child” with Yuuto to become his clan subordinates.

After leaving the palace and starting on his way to join in the preparations at the clan’s sacred tower, the Hliðskjálf, Yuuto had run into Linnea by chance.

“Thank you for making the long trip here, Linnea,” he said.

“Hee hee! If it means I get to see you, the distance is no trouble at all.”

“R-right.” Yuuto’s response was clumsy.

After a series of events culminating in his receiving a marriage proposal from Linnea, he’d eventually managed to reject it. That hadn’t made her give up on her feelings for him, however, and now he often found himself unsure of how to interact with her when she treated him with adoration.

This patriarch who had crushed the armies of four rival clans, who was gaining renown in Yggdrasil as a wise and great ruler for one so young, was still unskilled when it came to matters involving women.

“Big Brother, returning my clan’s former lands is a kindness I could spend my

lifetime and still not fully repay," Linnea said. "No matter how many words of thanks I might give, they could never fully express the gratitude in my heart."

"Like I told you, you don't have to be so overly grateful," he said, exasperated. "That was a perfectly appropriate compensation for what you did."

During the last war, Yuuto had managed to seize the citadels of three fortified castle towns from the Lightning Clan.

One of these strongholds was the seat of a piece of territory near the Körmt River which had once belonged to the Horn Clan. That area had been taken from them by the Lightning Clan in an invasion during the rule of Linnea's father, Hrungnir.

Yuuto had chosen to give that city and its lands to the Horn Clan, but it didn't seem like a particular kindness to him. The Lightning Clan had been strong opponents, and without Linnea's efforts, victory would have been difficult. The Horn Clan had suffered their share of casualties, too. Properly rewarding others for their achievements was the natural and right thing to do as a ruler.

Yuuto didn't like how much he was being put on a pedestal, so he changed the subject with a question. "So, how's Rasmus doing?"

The Horn Clan's second-in-command, Rasmus, was still recuperating after having the bones in his right shoulder smashed by the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. It was his dominant arm, and there were doubts that he'd ever be able to wield a spear in battle again. And he wasn't the only valuable Einherjar the Horn Clan had lost.

Looking only at the overall results, one could say the battle had resulted in a great victory for the Wolf Clan. But that victory had not come easy, or without cost. The twin rune Einherjar Steinþórr had been a formidable enemy worthy of his reputation as the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir. The scars he had left behind were anything but shallow.

"Thank you for your concern," Linnea said. "He's doing quite well. His fever has receded, and his appetite is healthy."

"I see. That's good to hear."

Rasmus was Linnea's child subordinate according to the bonds forged by the

Chalice, but after her father Hrungnir's death, Rasmus had served as a de facto guardian for her. He was already over age fifty, and the standard of medical treatment in Yggdrasil was extremely primitive compared to Yuuto's 21st century world. It was possible he could have lost his life due to complications from his injuries. Linnea was surely the most relieved of anyone that he was on his way to recovery.

"Speaking of which, have you heard?" Linnea suddenly lowered her voice to a whisper.

That behavior was enough for Yuuto to infer what she might be talking about. "You mean the rumors that say that idiot survived." ("That idiot" being Steinþórr.) "Yes, although the idea is rather hard to believe. But..."

"I think it's pretty baseless, but yeah." Yuuto's stern expression gave way to a small sigh.

The death of the hero and patriarch of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, had been a catalyst. After the Hoof Clan's defeat three months earlier, the surrounding clans that Yngvi had subjugated or annexed had since broken off again. The Hoof Clan's power and influence was now declining considerably.

The death of a strong ruler meant the weakening of that nation, granting other nations a chance to take advantage of that weakness. Tracing back the threads of history, it wasn't that rare an occurrence for a state to try to avoid that outcome by concealing the death of its leader and operating as if he or she were still alive.

For a case of Japanese history, the Sengoku Era feudal lord renowned as the "Tiger of Kai," Takeda Shingen, was said to have given instructions to his generals to conceal his death for three years.

Thinking about it with common sense, the rumors were most likely to be that sort of misinformation cover-up. However, the reports he'd received from those who had fought Steinþórr in person, like Sigrún and Skáviðr, described him as a monster that defied all common sense. What if, by some chance...?

He couldn't totally discount the possibility. And if it really was true, it was something he couldn't afford to ignore.

“Once this ceremony is over, I suppose I’ll have Kris look into it right away,” Yuuto said.

Kristina was an Einherjar in possession of the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds, and she had extraordinary talent and skill when it came to gathering information. She would definitely be able to bring back accurate information on the situation.

“Hey now, what’s this about my daughter?” An artificially sunny, ingratiating voice cut into Yuuto and Linnea’s conversation. It was a familiar voice, strangely discomforting in the way a slimy slug might be.

Yuuto put on his own artificial cheery smile before turning around to reply. “Hey, Botvid. I didn’t realize you were already here.”

“Ha ha ha, my beloved daughters are being accepted as the sworn children of my dear Big Bro, after all. This is the big day when my children leave the nest and start a new life. It’s such a joyous occasion for me as a parent that I couldn’t help but feel impatient, so I put everything aside and raced here as fast as I could.”

Botvid gave a hearty, likable chuckle.

His outward appearance was that of a dull middle-aged man, portly and with thinning hair, but this man was the patriarch of the Claw Clan, the Wolf Clan’s eastern neighbor. He was well-known in the region as a cunning villain whom it was dangerous to be careless with. The dire crisis the Wolf Clan had once faced due to his actions was still a fresh memory.

That same Botvid was now rubbing his hands together and fawning over Yuuto. “But still, to think my Big Bro Yuuto would win so easily even against the Dólgþrasir... I’m beginning to think there’s no one in all of Yggdrasil who could defeat you.”

Yuuto glanced over to Linnea, standing at his side. She was gazing up at him with eyes sparkling with admiration and respect.

The two figures who had once been the greatest threats to the Wolf Clan’s existence were now in service to him. It really impressed upon him how much things could change over time.

“I’ve just been blessed with more advantages than other people,” he said. “That doesn’t make me some great, amazing person. The race goes not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, as they say. I can’t count on things to go my way over and over just because I have a few advantages; the world’s not such a forgiving place.”

Yuuto gave a deliberately cold response to Botvid’s fawning praise. It was how he really felt. Yuuto didn’t entertain in the slightest any ideas of himself as some great hero with outstanding abilities.

He owed everything to the fact that for some reason his smartphone could get a signal in this world, allowing him access to modern 21st century knowledge thousands of years ahead of Yggdrasil. It was a cheat that no other person could use, but he considered that borrowed knowledge as something separate from himself.

Ultimately, that was why no matter what results he was able to produce, he was never satisfied with himself. That was why he was able to so ravenously devote himself to increasing his own knowledge, to obtaining his own “strength,” so he could protect everyone.

That untiring aspiration to improve himself was Yuuto’s true talent, and was actually quite a rare trait, but he himself wasn’t aware of that.

Yuuto noticed that Botvid was staring at his face, as if inspecting it closely. “Hm? Is something wrong?”

Botvid still wore his smiling expression, but something about his eyes reminded Yuuto of a reptile eyeing its prey. It wasn’t the most comfortable feeling.

“Oh, no, no, I was just thinking to myself what an absolutely tremendous person you are, Big Bro. Accomplishing so much without becoming arrogant and prideful... you continuously surprise me.”

Botvid then muttered quietly to himself under his breath: “...There’d be an opening to take advantage of if you’d just let yourself get cocky, but not like this.”

Yuuto couldn’t possibly have heard the quiet remark, but ironically, he

shrugged and replied using some of the same words. “That’s because when I let myself get cocky, I always pay for it.”

He knew that his cocky behavior, his attempt to satisfy his vanity and impress Mitsuki and his underclassmen, was the reason he’d wound up in this strange other world of an unknown time and place.

And when he’d gotten carried away, mistaking borrowed knowledge for his own talents, letting that knowledge control his actions instead of informing them, he had lost someone important to him.

Indeed, two years earlier, he had been a foolish and hopeless child...

ACT 1

“Ow!” The sharp pain that raced through Yuuto’s neck brought him to his senses.

For a moment he had been entranced by the almost divine beauty of the girl in front of him, reminiscent of the beautiful valkyries of myth. But this wasn’t the time or place for such thoughts.

“ᚺᛟᛉᛞᛗ ᛞᚢ ᛁᛜᚹᛖ? ᚹᛖᛞ ᚨᛉ ᛞᚢ?!” The warrior maiden addressed him in a cold, sharp tone, her long silver hair swaying.

Yuuto managed to grasp that he was being interrogated, but he had no idea what she was saying. He had even less of an understanding why he’d found himself in this situation.

Yuuto was a totally average student, a second-year at Hachio City Municipal Middle School. After being invited along on a nighttime test of courage by his childhood friend Mitsuki Shimoya, he’d used his smartphone camera at the Tsukimiya Shrine to try to take a selfie with the sacred mirror enshrined there. Suddenly he’d heard a strange voice, and before he realized it, he’d found himself here.

This was somewhere indoors, even though he had just been outside, and both the girl in front of him and the group of men gathered behind him were clearly not Japanese.

“ᒧᑭᚨᎩ!” The silver-haired warrior maiden’s voice rose with irritation, and the flat part of her sword tip pushed Yuuto’s jaw upwards.

The cold feeling of the metal against his skin sent a shiver down his spine. The gold-colored sword currently pointed at his throat was definitely not a prop or toy. He rapidly understood that this was a serious, life-or-death situation.



“A-ai amu Japaniizu.” He identified himself as best he could in clumsy English, while raising his open hands in the air to indicate he wasn’t hostile. “M-mai nehmu izu Yuuto Suoh.”

It went without saying that English was a common international language throughout the world, and he used only the most basic of basic English words that even a common elementary schooler would know nowadays. He banked on the hope that this, at least, would get through to her, but...

“...? ᚹᚨᛞ ᛇᚨᚷᛖᛉ ᛞᚢ?” The silver-haired girl merely frowned suspiciously at him. It didn’t look like she’d understood him at all.

“Aaaugh, jeez, what am I supposed to do?!” Yuuto couldn’t help but cry out in a miserable voice.

Truthfully, he was inwardly begging that this might be a dream that he could wake up from. However, a layer of his skin had already been cut through, and the sharp pain in his neck was undoubtedly real.

Completely unable to communicate in this desperate situation, Yuuto was at his wits’ end.

At that moment, another girl’s voice cut in. “ᚹᚨ⋄ᚹᚨ ’ᚱᚢ⋄ᛖ.”

In contrast to the dignified and commanding blade-like voice of the silver-haired girl, this new voice was like a bell, clear and sweet.

When Yuuto glanced in its direction, he saw a girl with golden blonde hair, no less incredibly beautiful than the silver-haired girl, slowly walking over to him.

The thin, fluttering white garments she wore were reminiscent of an angel’s costume, and compared to the silver-haired warrior maiden’s clothing, they showed a lot more skin. Even though he knew this wasn’t the time or place, Yuuto had difficulty averting his eyes.

“♪～～～!” As she stood before him, the golden-haired girl slowly opened her mouth, and began to sing a beautiful melody.

Why are you singing all of a sudden?! Yuuto thought to himself, his confusion only deepening. At the same time, however, he found himself in awe of just what an amazing singing voice she had. He wasn’t an expert or anything when it

came to music, but even he could tell she was far better than a lot of the half-assed idols he'd seen on TV.

Eventually the golden-haired girl stopped and took a deep breath, crouching down so her eyes were level with Yuuto's. Then she smiled softly. "Can you understand my words? Oh, Child of Victory, Gleipsieg. My name is Felicia."

"Y-you know Japanese?!" Yuuto's eyes opened wide, and he unconsciously drew closer to the girl calling herself Felicia.

This was what it must be like to meet the Buddha in Hell, to find an oasis in the desert. There was someone he could speak with, one person with whom he could communicate. To think that such a simple thing would bring such relief to his heart!

"No, I do not know the language of those who dwell in the heavens."

"Huh? But look, you're speaking it to me right now."

"This is an effect of my galldr, my song magic. The one I used is called 'Connections.' The words we speak carry our thoughts and intentions. In other words, the spirit of language resides within them. For those who hear this song, the ability to send and receive this spirit of language is increased for a time."

"Galldr? Spirit of language?" Yuuto repeated.

Both of those terms had a fairly occult ring to them. He'd been raised in the scientific era of the 21st century, so he was quite skeptical about those sorts of things. But he couldn't deny her explanation, either.

He'd jumped to the conclusion that she was speaking Japanese because he understood her. But as he calmed himself and started to listen, he realized that the words Felicia spoke did indeed sound similar to those of the silver-haired girl from earlier, and they weren't Japanese at all.

And yet, somehow, he could understand their meaning. It was absolutely inexplicable within the realm of Yuuto's common sense.

Speaking of strange things, there was his sudden transportation here. After being outside in the mountains, he'd suddenly found himself in some sort of temple. This was a bona-fide supernatural mystery.

But however much it might fly in the face of common sense, there was no point in denying that this was actually occurring, that this was reality. It was hard to completely get rid of the thought that this might all still be a dream, but of course this was far too realistic an experience to be just a dream.

“Where... where is this?” Yuuto stammered. “Is it somewhere other than Earth?”

“Earth... A blue star floating through the midst of a dark, chaotic void? I see. So that is the world the Child of Victory resided in.” Felicia nodded to herself, as if thoughtfully digesting the new information.

Judging by her words just now, the concept of the world as a heavenly body floating through outer space was foreign to her. And yet, a single word — Earth — had conveyed that concept to her.

So this is the spirit of language, huh? Without a word of extra verbal explanation, the subconscious image and associated description that Yuuto held when he thought of the word “Earth” could be clearly transmitted. *That’s such a convenient power!*

Yuuto trembled at the implications. If he had that power, he was certain he could skip all the pain and trouble of studying and be an expert in English overnight.

“It sounds so different from our world. Ohh! You truly are the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, sent to us from the heavens above by our divine protector, Angrboða!” Overcome with emotion, Felicia’s eyes welled up with tears. She fell to her knees on the spot, and clasped her hands together in front of her ample bosom.

“Uhhh...” Yuuto scratched his head, puzzled and at a loss for how to react.

He didn’t remember ever hearing the name Angrboða before. He didn’t know how to respond to being hailed as being sent by some god he’d never heard of, but it was honestly a little troubling.

At the same time, there was one thing that rang a bell for him. Like any normal middle schooler, Yuuto was into works of fiction like manga, anime, and games.

“So you’re saying there are bad guys or something, and you want me to defeat them?” he asked hopefully.

The thing that came to mind was the typical setup for a fantasy RPG, so he went ahead and asked it out loud. A people in crisis, threatened by an evil demon lord or some powerful villain of that type, summon a hero from another world to save them. That sort of “isekai” story was such a common trope nowadays that it had gone past the point of cliché and become its own respected genre, in a way.

“Yes, we of the Wolf Clan are currently beset on the east by the Claw Clan, and from the west by the Horn Clan, and we have been driven to the brink of ruin,” said Felicia. “Even at this very moment, the Claw Clan invades us, and we were offering our prayers of supplication for victory in battle. That was when you appeared suddenly before us, from out of nowhere. Please, lend your power to the Wolf Clan, and save us.”

“Ohhhh! This is it, the real thing!” In response to Felicia’s almost painful plea for help, Yuuto raised his voice and let out a holler of excitement. It was such a lighthearted and casual attitude that one might question whether he truly understood the situation.

Thanks to the galldr of Connections, the two of them could communicate their thoughts to each other without problems, and yet there was a fatal gap in understanding between them.

“Oh, damn, now I’m getting all excited!” he exclaimed.

A world of swords and sorcery! Were there any other words that could make a boy’s heart dance so? No, there were not!

Such fantasies abounded in the world of the imagination, but the chance to experience one in real life was a different story altogether.

Perhaps due to the fact that Yuuto had an optimistic personality to begin with, his feelings of curiosity and anticipation now buried the concern and unease he had been feeling toward his situation.

“Ohh! So then, you are willing to lend us your aid, oh Gleipsieg?” Felicia asked.

“Oh, cut it out with the whole Gleipsieg thing. My name’s Yuuto. Yuuto Suoh.”

“I see. So you are Lord Yuuto-Suoh.”

“Just Yuuto is fine. I never really liked the last name Suoh anyway.”

“Right, then I shall address you as Lord Yuuto.”

“Uh, no, you don’t need the title. ‘Lord’ and the like don’t suit me.”

Yuuto was a normal boy who had grown up in rural Japan, in a family descended from generations of commoners. Being addressed with highly honorific titles made him antsy.

“No, I could not address the Child of Victory by his name with no honorific title. It would be...”

A cold voice interrupted. “Wait, Felicia. I don’t think this guy’s actually the Gleipsieg.”

It was the silver-haired girl who had been pointing a sword at Yuuto’s throat a minute ago. Her weapon was now back in its scabbard, and she was glaring at Yuuto suspiciously with her arms folded.

With the effect of the Connections galldr, Yuuto could understand what she was saying this time.

“Rún, you are being rude!” Felicia cried. “I can tell it is him. I swear upon my rune Skírnir, the Expressionless Servant. When my rune’s seiðr, Gleipnir, activated, I distinctly felt the sensation that it had grasped ahold of ‘victory.’ He is unmistakably the Gleipsieg!”

The spirit of language in Felicia’s unfamiliar words communicated their concepts to him.

Seiðr meant “secret art,” and it referred to a type of magical art that could produce much more powerful effects than a galldr, but in exchange required more time and a series of complicated ritualistic procedures to activate, as well as being more exhausting for the user.

When Yuuto had seen a vision of Felicia dancing at Tsukimiya Shrine, it must have been her performing part of that ritual. As the one performing the magic, she had apparently felt some sort of reaction.

Still, in contrast to Felicia's confident claim, the silver-haired girl's face remained clouded with suspicion. "Your power called him here, that much is true. He did suddenly appear from thin air, and his outlandish clothes are like nothing I've ever seen before. However..."

The girl called Rún suddenly leaned in incredibly close. Her beautiful, frigid face was right in front of his, practically touching his nose.

"Wh-what is it?" Yuuto's voice wavered slightly, and he felt his pulse quicken.

The silver-haired girl's negative feelings toward him were obvious — he could gather that much from her manner, as well as from the spirit of language carried to him through her words — but that was one thing, and this was another. With a girl this beautiful so incredibly close to him that he could see the length of her eyelashes and the luster of her smooth lips, it would have been far more ridiculous for his heart not to pound.

"Hm, just as I thought," she said scornfully. "I don't smell anything from this man. My rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon, is able to sniff out and discern any and all sources of danger. My nose doesn't react to him at all. But that's understandable. I could tell just from the conversation between the two of you that he's got no guts. He lacks any kind of resolve. Felicia, there's no way you wouldn't be able to tell that too, right?"

Rún hadn't minced words; her explanation was blunt and frank.

"W-well, that's..." Felicia looked troubled, and she didn't meet Rún's gaze. In other words, deep down, some part of Felicia felt truth in those words.

Looking behind the two of them, Yuuto saw the group of people who had been watching this whole time start nodding to each other in agreement, casting suspicious glares at him. That was enough to tick him off, of course.

"Hey, I never did anything to deserve being talked about like that by someone I only just met! Don't go judging people by looks, or smell, or whatever!"

"Oh? Well, you have quite a gutsy bark, at least, don't you?" Sigrún smirked. "I've got an idea. How about I test your power? That should clear things up... about whether you're really the Gleipsieg, or just some worthless fake."

The corner of the silver-haired girl's mouth curved upwards in a ferocious-

looking grin.

“H-how did things turn out like this?” Now, at the last minute, Yuuto was having second thoughts.

Just off to his right stood a towering, reddish-brown structure. Apparently he had been summoned into some sort of shrine or sanctuary located close to the top of that building.

After leaving the sanctuary and descending a very long stairway all the way to the ground, he had been handed a wooden sword and made to stand facing the silver-haired girl. Apparently Rún was a nickname and her real name was Sigrún.

Their dark surroundings were illuminated by the surging red light of fires in iron braziers. The bright circle of the full moon hung in the sky above.

He wondered how Mitsuki was doing right now. He had suddenly disappeared, after all. She had to be worried sick about him.

Oh, that reminds me, Yuuto thought, only now realizing that the smartphone he had been holding in his hand was gone. He tapped his pants pockets to check, but it wasn’t there, either. All he had was the solar-powered battery charger he always carried around for emergencies.

It was likely he’d dropped his phone in surprise the moment Sigrún had pointed a sword at his throat. He had to go search for it as soon as possible.

Just as he was thinking that, Sigrún spoke up. “You don’t seem too calm. What is it, have you started to lose your nerve? If you don’t want to embarrass yourself, you should probably back down, you know.”

“Tch. Shut up, I don’t need your advice,” Yuuto clicked his tongue and snapped back at her.

The phone weighed on his mind, but for now, he had to deal with the problem right in front of him. After being taunted that much, if he ran away from a fight with a girl, it would affect his honor as a man.

Off to the side, the blonde girl named Felicia looked troubled. Yuuto could see signs of heavy fatigue in her face.

She had already spent a great deal of energy using the seiðr known as Gleipnir, and then Yuuto had needed her to reapply the Connections galldr after its temporary effects had worn off. Those magical techniques of hers were certainly very useful, but it seemed that their effects didn't last very long, and they exhausted the energy of the user. They weren't something that could be used an unlimited number of times per day without rest.

"Heh. I suppose I'll just pray that attitude of yours isn't just for show." With one last implied insult, Sigrún readied her wooden sword.

Her stance was good, and it showed she had experience. It looked like she'd at least been through some training, so her confidence wasn't all talk.

But in the end, she was still just a girl. She'd taken a condescending attitude with him, but her body was far more slender and delicate-looking than Yuuto's. Just going by her long, thin arms, it looked like she would have trouble just lifting a heavy weapon in an actual battle.

Having the strong, muscular build of a female pro wrestler or something might have made it a different story, but there was no way she should be able to compare to a boy like himself in terms of muscle strength.

Yuuto's reflexes and overall athletic ability were slightly above average among his peers at his school. With his father being a traditional Japanese swordsmith, he'd had several opportunities to learn some of the basics from the *kenjutsu* practitioners who were his father's customers. And he'd kept up the routine of doing 100 practice swings every day. With an appropriate weapon in hand, he was confident he could win a fight against any other average young man.

"Well, I guess I'll just need to be careful not to injure her," he smirked. He didn't really like this girl, but she was still a girl, after all.

Of course, he was about to learn just how misplaced his chivalrous mindset was.

"Then let's begin," Sigrún declared.

"Wh—?!"

An instant later, he realized that the nearly five-meter gap between them had vanished, and the girl's beautiful and dignified face was already filling his vision.

Thunk! Yuuto felt an intense impact on his shoulder joint, followed by intense pain.

“Guh...! Aaahhhhhh!!” Yuuto screamed in anguish. Unable to even remain standing, he dropped the wooden sword and pressed his hand over his shoulder, dropping into a crouch.

It hurt so badly that he couldn’t even move. Sweat poured out of every pore in his body.

“Hmph, that’s about what I expected. No, even worse I suppose. Oy, Felicia, this man is definitely not the Gleipsieg. He’d be totally useless even as a foot soldier.”

“Wait, Rún! You went too hard on him!”

“No, I held back appropriately. I didn’t think he’d be this incapable of blocking an attack.” Sigrún blew off Felicia’s rebuke, completely unconcerned.

There wasn’t even any contempt in her tone anymore. She had completely lost any interest in Yuuto, as if he was nothing more than a pebble on the side of the road, a completely meaningless existence to her.

“...Wait.” Enduring the pain, Yuuto managed to call out.

He wasn’t a masochist, and normally he’d do whatever he could to avoid getting himself hurt. However, he couldn’t stand to let things end with a girl looking down on him like this.

He grabbed the wooden sword again, and clenched his teeth as he stood back up, resuming his stance. “One more round.”

“...Oh?” Sigrún asked. “So you want to get hurt again. You’re a pretty strange guy. Very well. This time, you go ahead and come at me. I’ll work you over a bit.”

Even as her words mocked him, her tone wasn’t completely disinterested. Her expression was ice cold, but Yuuto thought there was a hint of enjoyment somewhere in there.

Yuuto had seen this type of person before. It was that “sports club type” of personality, the kind you might see on the head of an athletic club or sports

team.

With a deep breath, Yuuto assumed the *chuudan* stance, his sword tip pointed properly at his opponent's eyes. He steadied his breathing and gathered his focus. The scenery around him seemed to fade away, the noise grew quiet to him, and he saw only the silver-haired girl.

Truthfully, he had been underestimating her. He had to admit that he had been the one foolishly taking her skill for granted.

Even though the combat had only lasted an instant, through that exchange, Yuuto had been made to realize the difference in ability between himself and his opponent. He recognized it on a deep level now. Her jump-in to close the distance had been as fast as lightning, her downward strike powerful and true, without the slightest bit of shift. He didn't think he could win against her in a straight fight, to put it bluntly.

"But I still can't just accept being shamed by a girl!" he shouted as he kicked off the ground, swinging his sword down in a diagonal arc from above his shoulder.

Using violence against a girl went against his beliefs, but his opponent was clearly far more powerful than he was. He didn't need to restrain himself here.

With a dry *thwack!*, she blocked his attack just as he'd predicted. Without stopping, he continued to unleash several more attacks in succession.

"That's no good," Sigrún said. "You're not controlling the sword. It might as well be swinging you around. Come on, step in harder, and don't leave your shoulders wide. Tighten up those armpits."

The silver-haired girl deflected every one of his attacks easily, all while pointing out the flaws in his form.

With each attack, it became more and more pronounced to him just how great the difference in skill was between them. At this rate, he could keep going for a hundred years and never even graze her.

Even knowing that, Yuuto kept up his reckless assault, swinging over and over.

"What's wrong? You were already slow, but you're getting even slower now.

Looks like you don’t have much stamina, either. Is this all you can manage?”

“Shut... up!!” With a howl, Yuuto threw all of his might into a thrusting attack aimed right at Sigrún’s chest.

“How naive!” Of course, Sigrún easily deflected it upwards with her own strike. It was a powerful counter completely different from the ways she had blocked his attacks until now.

Yuuto’s wooden sword flew out of his hand, spinning through the air.

...Just as Yuuto had planned.

“You’re the one who’s naive!” Unarmed, Yuuto lunged in closer.

From the beginning, he hadn’t had any intention of striking a girl with a sword anyway. He’d thrown his attacks at her with the full knowledge that she would definitely block them all.

“Huh?!” For the first time, Sigrún’s expression changed. But it was already too late!

There was an old Japanese proverb: “Upon victory, tighten your helmet cord.” It existed because of situations like this. It meant that people have a tendency to let their guard down and leave themselves open at precisely the moment after they think they’ve won.

Turning that around, you could also force people to leave themselves open if you got them to mistakenly believe they’d won.

It was a trick that showed up all the time in manga and so forth.

“Raaaaghh!” Yuuto dropped down, lowering his center of gravity, and hurled himself at Sigrún in a tackle. He threw both his arms around her legs. It was a double-leg judo takedown, called the *morote-gari*.

It did feel a little unsportsmanlike to use a move like this, but the jujutsu grappling techniques which became the foundation for judo had their origins in the anything-goes world of the battlefield. She had knocked his sword away, but that didn’t mean the fight was over. It was all on her for letting her guard down in that moment.

He would knock her down and pin her to keep her from moving. That should

put a sock in her. That was what should have happened...

“Wha—?!”

His tackle had been a direct hit, but the girl’s body hadn’t moved at all. Not even a little bit. It was as if she were a massive tree rooted firmly to the earth. How could there be so much strength in that slender, delicate-looking body of hers?

Yuuto felt a chill of terror run down his spine, and he looked up to see a gaze full of cold fury looking back down at him. And that was when he finally realized where his head was located.

Normally, one should hit with one of the shoulders during a *morote-gari* takedown, but Yuuto was inexperienced, and his tackle had been reckless. Yuuto had tackled with his head.

Right in between her legs.

“Khh...!” she shrieked. “Hyah!!”

Her sword lunged down.

“Gah!” Yuuto felt a heavy impact to the back of his head, and lost consciousness.

“Wah!”

When he next opened his eyes, Yuuto was looking at an unfamiliar ceiling. The gentle rays of sunlight entering the room at an angle told him how much time had passed.

“Wait, where is this?”

Yuuto picked himself up off of the hard bed and took a look around. He must have been carried here after losing consciousness.

The walls were painted with a hardened white plaster, but the workmanship was rough and the wall’s surface was coarse and uneven. Frankly speaking, it looked shoddy.

On a simple shelf assembled from wooden sticks, there were small earthen

bowls and cups alongside objects that reminded Yuuto of *haniwa* clay figurines.

It made Yuuto think of the images he'd occasionally seen on TV or the internet, of the houses of indigenous people in Africa or minority tribes that lived deep in the rural mountains of China and India.

At the same time, it brought home the feeling that what had happened the previous night wasn't a dream.

"ᚠᚺ ᚹᚹᛗ ᚺᚨᛜᛗᛖ?"

Yuuto turned in the direction of the familiar, soft voice, and there stood the golden-haired girl from yesterday smiling happily.

As their eyes met, Felicia cleared her throat, and her beautiful singing voice rang sweetly throughout the room. By this point, Yuuto had heard the melody three times already, and he could deduce that it was the galldr of Connections.

Once she had finished singing, Felicia exhaled softly, and turned to speak to him. "I see you have awakened, Lord Yuuto. Do you hurt anywhere?"

"No... no, I'm fine. But still... as soon as I got here, I put on a really pathetic show." Deflated, Yuuto let out a long sigh and scratched his head.

The memory from right before passing out was vivid. In the middle of a crowd of onlookers, he'd lost against a girl without even putting up so much as a fight, and then she had cleanly knocked him out. He'd humiliated himself.

Not to mention that he'd lost after using kind of an underhanded move. He had no excuses for himself. Just remembering it made his face flush hot with the embarrassment. He'd have loved to erase the whole experience from his memory if he could.

"Tee hee."

"Wha—! What's so funny?!" Yuuto raised his voice in irritation at Felicia. Why had she let slip a giggle? He'd thought of her as a kind person who was on his side, and so it felt like being betrayed somehow.

"Oh! I am sorry," she said. "I cannot say what the others might think, but I do not think you were pathetic at all. Rather, that fight only confirmed my belief that you must be the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg."

“Huh?? What are you talking about? I just woke up after being knocked out cold, you know?”

“Indeed,” she said. “However, if that had been a real battle, and you had been wielding a knife or a short sword, Rún’s corpse would have been the one lying on the ground.”

Felicia nodded to herself satisfactorily, and then she gave a playful, naughty grin that seemed much more in line with a girl her age than the older, wiser aura that she usually projected.

“Rún was so frustrated... The look of disappointment on that face of hers! Hee hee hee! Oh, it was truly a sight to behold.”

“So she was frustrated...” Yuuto had a hard time imagining that stone-faced girl showing so much emotion. Well, if that meant that he’d given her a little bit of a shock, that felt a bit good, at least. “Even then, though, she was totally holding back against me.”

Sigrún had easily blocked every single one of Yuuto’s attacks, and then even started giving him instructions like a coach.

If it had been a real battle, an actual duel where life and death were on the line, Sigrún wouldn’t have wasted time playing defense. Just like in the first round of their fight, she would have struck him in a mere instant, cutting him down, and that would have been the end of the story.

“Even though she *was* holding back, it’s impressive,” Felicia said. “Even I cannot touch her when she fights at her best.”

“Well, even if you say that...” Yuuto found his eyes naturally drawn to Felicia’s voluptuous chest. Sigrún, with her slender build, at least appeared to be quite nimble, but Felicia’s body was much more shapely and abundant in feminine softness. She didn’t look at all like a person who could fight.

“Oh, my,” she scolded. “I’ll have you know that as an Einherjar who carries the rune Skírnir, the Expressionless Servant, I am fairly strong. Within the Wolf Clan, there are perhaps only around ten or so who could defeat me.”

The meaning of that word slipped into his mind. Einherjar: A person chosen by the gods who housed a symbol of their sanctification, a rune, somewhere on

their body. They were able to use mysterious powers unavailable to normal humans.

The spirit of language in Felicia's words transmitted the concept to Yuuto. Yuuto realized he was experiencing one of those mysterious powers firsthand. He had no choice but to believe in it.

"I see," Yuuto said to himself with a nod. "So that's why she was so strong."

A full-strength tackle from a boy hadn't managed to move Sigrún's body even an inch. That did seem strange. There was also the seiðr that had summoned him to this world, and there were the galldr song magics like Connections. This world really was full of magic and mystery!

Yuuto's nearly-deflated heart was re-lit from within by the fires of excitement and expectations. "Awesome! So then, if I became one of these Einherjar, could I get stronger too?!"

"Yes, as the Gleipsieg, I am sure that very soon you will surely manifest a splendid rune, Lord Yuuto. Perhaps, like the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir of the Lightning Clan, you might even be blessed by the gods with twin runes."

"Ohhh, twin runes! That sounds so cool!"

Shining symbols would appear on the backs of both of his hands, or maybe one in each eye. And in that moment, he'd obtain power that set him utterly apart from others, and he'd mow down the enemies lined up before him. When that happened, even that Sigrún girl might be as weak as a child compared to him.

The thought gave him such a good feeling. He could feel himself tremble just imagining it.

"Oh, right!" he said. "I missed the chance to get an answer yesterday, but just where is this? Clearly it's not the world I'm from."

At the very least, in Yuuto's world there weren't any people with superpowered abilities like the Einherjar.

Not to mention the magics like the galldr, which was even now allowing him to understand a completely unknown language. If such an amazing technique

existed in Yuuto's world, he wouldn't have to be forced to study a foreign language like English at school.

"Ah, of course," said Felicia. "This is Yggdrasil, a land said to be formed from the body of the ancient Giant God, Ymir."

As Yuuto heard Felicia's explanation, he received the image of an enormous giant lying face-down in an endless sea. Across its back stretched mountains and plains, rivers and forests, and all of the bountiful natural world. That was how Felicia, or rather the people who lived in Yggdrasil, perceived their world.

"At the foot of the Himinbjörg Mountains which lie in the approximate center of this great land, is the capital of our Wolf Clan, Iárnviðr. That is where you arrived in this world, Lord Yuuto."

"Amazing!" he enthused. "It's a perfect fantasy world! And I think I've heard the word Yggdrasil before. Um... wasn't it Norse mythology?"

Yuuto placed a hand to his mouth and racked his brain. It was knowledge that he'd built up from media like video games, but he recalled that it was the name of a giant tree in Norse mythology that formed the root and axis of the world. Either way, the connection set his heart dancing.

"So then, are there names here like Gungnir, or Odin, or Asgard, too?" Yuuto threw out a couple of the major-sounding names from Norse mythology that he could remember. He was unable to conceal the enthusiasm in his voice.

"Erm, I do not recognize the first two words, but Ásgarðr is the name of the empire which rules over Yggdrasil."

"Empire... So even if the words are the same, they might refer to completely different things. Man... but still, we can communicate so perfectly, it's downright scary."

There were times when Yuuto and Mitsuki had difficulties communicating with and understanding each other, and they were childhood friends who spoke the same language and had known each other for as long as they could remember. And yet he could communicate perfectly with this woman he just met less than a day ago, who spoke a completely different language.

It was so overly convenient that he couldn't help but feel unsettled by it. It

certainly helped to make the discussion move along more quickly, though.

“Well, who cares about the details!” he declared. He clenched his first and psyched himself up. “Allllll right! Then first, about those runes... uh?”

Yuuto’s stomach emitted a loud, long, *growl*. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t had anything to eat except a small energy bar before starting the test of courage yesterday evening.

Felicia blinked in surprise, then smiled playfully. “Tee hee! Why don’t we have breakfast first?”

It’s tough. That was Yuuto’s first impression.

“Um, i-is it not to your liking?” a middle-aged woman with brown hair tied up in the back asked Yuuto, in a slightly fearful manner.

Apparently her name was Angela, and she had served as the maidservant in Felicia’s family for more than ten years. She was in charge of all the housework, and she had made all of the food currently lined up in front of Yuuto.

“Uh, no, it’s fine, really,” Yuuto said hastily. “It just surprised me a bit because it’s different from the bread that I’m used to. It’s not bad at all.” Yuuto waved his hands as he tried to dissuade Angela of her worries, then hurriedly resumed chewing.

The bread in front of him had a size and shape almost exactly like the “melon pan” sweet bread he’d grown up with in Japan, only lacking the signature cross-hatched pattern on top. And it was hard, rather than soft. It was quite a familiar sight in this alternate world.

Even back home in modern-day Earth, there were varieties of hard bread, like French baguettes. Yuuto had been put off at first because he’d been so used to a life of eating soft bread, but it had a nice freshly-baked aroma that made it tasty.

He took another bite. *Munch, munch, munch, clack!*

“Agh! Wh-what the hell?!”

He’d been prepared to put on a show of enjoying the food as tastier than it

really was, in order to spare them any concern over him. But when he suddenly bit down on something incredibly hard, the sensation shot from his teeth to the crown of his head, and he couldn't keep from grimacing.

Whatever it was, it was far too hard to chew properly. He spat it into his hand and saw that it was a tiny piece of stone.

Shocked, he looked over to Felicia and Angela, but the two of them just stared back at him quizzically.

Felicia believed Yuuto was something called the Gleipsieg, the Child of Victory. If she thought her maidservant had been rude or performed poorly in her duties, she would surely scold the woman, or order her to apologize to Yuuto. The fact that neither of those things was happening meant...

No way... does that mean this is normal for this world?! Yuuto held back the reflexive urge to look up at the ceiling in a gesture of disbelief.

He remembered hearing a story from his grandfather about how, back when his grandfather was still a boy, it had been common to find tiny bits of gravel mixed in with the daily rice, but Yuuto had never expected to experience a similar situation himself.

"Lord Yuuto?" Felicia asked.

"Oh, umm. Do you have anything to drink?"

"Yes, right here. Here you are."

Upon being handed the cup, Yuuto was once again unable to conceal his surprise. It seemed to be filled with milk, but the problem was with the cup itself. It looked to be simple earthenware, nothing more than pinched and hardened clay and dirt.

Looks like I found a really primitive place to show up in, Yuuto thought to himself with an exasperated wry smile.

"Well, 'when in Rome,' as they say." He accepted the cup and drained it in one gulp. His ability to get over these circumstances with just that one phrase showed that he was an optimistic young man at his core.

His eyes widened at the incredibly rich flavor of the milk, the likes of which

he'd never tasted. "Oh, this is seriously good."

If he were to guess, it was probably freshly milked. One of his classmates had once gone on vacation to the agriculture-rich prefecture of Hokkaido. From then on, that guy was always telling everyone, *"The kind of milk we drink here isn't the real deal!"* Yuuto now felt like he understood why.

Japan was world-famous as a nation full of delicious food, but being able to enjoy fresh organic ingredients like this was expensive for the average person. If he thought of it that way, one could say this was a rich meal cloaked in meager trappings.

"Oh, that reminds me!" Felicia suddenly clapped her hands together, then stood up and hurried over to the shelf on the wall, returning with something. "Is this perhaps yours, Lord Yuuto?"

"Ah!" Yuuto shouted in surprise as he stared at what she was holding. Its dark luster and distinctive shape were conspicuously out of place in this world. He had lost it during all the ruckus after being summoned here, and he'd been set on searching for it as soon as possible.

"Yeah, that's mine," he confirmed.

It was the LGN09 a.k.a. Laegjarn, Yuuto's beloved smartphone that he'd purchased after entering his first year of middle school. As he took it in his hands, he pushed the power button half out of habit.

Like most modern-day young people, Yuuto had a bit of what the adults called internet addiction, and going for long periods of time without access to any sort of connected device left him feeling unsatisfied and unable to calm down. Even as he pushed the power button, he started to tease himself internally for even thinking that he'd get a signal here.

"Huh?!" He opened his eyes wide at all the many Received Call notifications.

His shaking finger tapped the Call Log icon, and he saw his childhood friend's name over and over. There were near continuous notifications from 9 p.m. last night to around 4 a.m. this morning.

His heart hurt at how much he'd clearly made her worry about him, but right now there was something else that more fully captured his attention.

“Is it possible... that I can get a signal here?”

The class-wide test of courage event had started at around 8 p.m. After waiting their turn to begin walking, they should have reached the shrine and found the divine mirror just before 9 p.m. Meaning that this call record included calls received *after* Yuuto’s arrival in this world.

Yuuto immediately opened his Contacts list and selected Mitsuki’s name, then hit the Send Call button.

“...So it won’t connect, huh?” he murmured. “I mean, that figures, but...”

The only sound from the speakers was the annoying *beep, beep, beep* sound indicating an inability to connect. He tried several times, but the result didn’t change.

Looking more closely, the screen’s icon showing signal strength was displaying a red X.

That made sense, of course. Even within Japan, there were remote places up in the mountains where it was normal for cell phones to be unable to get a signal. It was crazy to think it would work in this alternate world of who-knows-where.

“But then, how does that explain this call log?”

The received calls had clearly come in after he’d arrived in this world. He really regretted having set his phone on silent mode in order to preserve the spooky atmosphere of a classic test of courage. If his ringtone had sounded, he would have noticed it and might even have been able to answer.

He stood there, thinking to himself with a difficult expression.

“Erm, is something the matter?” Felicia asked, peering at the smartphone closely with deep interest. “I... have never before seen an object shining like a rainbow with such vivid colors before. What sort of tool is it, and how is it used?”

Yuuto realized he’d once again been so absorbed in his own thoughts that he’d ignored Felicia and left her completely out of the loop. He really ought to reflect on his poor behavior. He’d only just met Felicia, but he was already

relying on her care and assistance in many ways. He shouldn't be so rude to her.

He cleared his throat to answer. "Right, so this is called a 'smartphone,' and it's a convenient tool with a lot of different functions. For example... aha. Could you stand over there for a moment?"

"Um, like this?"

"Okay, just like that!"

Be-beep... click!

"Wh-what was that sound, just now?! I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"It was the sound of the camera's shutter. Here, take a look."

Yuuto held up the smartphone to show it to Felicia, and she blinked in amazement at the image displayed on the screen.

"Wh-whaaat?! Th-this... this is... me?!"

Inwardly, Yuuto chuckled to himself a bit, like he'd just pulled off a prank. This was just the kind of reaction he'd been hoping for.

"A mirror... no, this is different from a mirror, isn't it?" Felicia nervously glanced back and forth between the smartphone and Yuuto, looking uncomfortable. "It's so strange... as if I'm looking at a single instant of myself that has been carved out... U-um, this doesn't pull out my soul or absorb my life or... or anything of that nature, right?"

Yuuto couldn't help but smile wryly at that. It was famously known that during Japan's Bakumatsu period in the mid-19th century, plenty of people had been superstitious about cameras arriving from the West, fearful that the device might steal one's soul. It seemed that there was something universal about human reactions to this sort of thing.

"You don't have to worry," he assured her. "There are no bad effects like that, or any at all, really."

"I... I see. That's good to hear."

Felicia gave a sigh of relief at the news, and Yuuto chuckled a bit to himself as he swiped his finger across the phone's screen. He was intending to browse

through his photos to show Felicia an example of the kind of world he lived in, but the very next image that appeared caused him to freeze up.

Against a background of dense forest, his childhood friend stood with an obviously frightened expression, looking like a threatened small animal. It was the last picture he'd taken before beginning the test of courage with her.

He remembered the long, long list of missed calls from her in his call log. Right now, she was no doubt burdened with even more fear and anxiety than she looked in this picture.

The hand holding the smartphone clenched it tightly. He took a deep breath to steady himself. Gathering his resolve, he addressed the other girl.

"Felicia, sorry about this. But for now, can you send me back to my world?"

"Huh?! Er, Lord Yuuto? D-did I perhaps, do something to upset you? If it's about Rún, I will make sure to reprimand her harshly."

"Ah, it's nothing like that. Don't worry. It's just that there's someone really worried about me back home, since I vanished so suddenly." He showed Felicia the screen of his smartphone once more, smiling awkwardly with embarrassment.

It was true that just the thought of becoming a powerful Einherjar made him practically ache with excitement.

Every day, Yuuto went to school and sat through boring classes, exchanged unimportant, trivial small talk with his classmates, went home, and messed around on his smartphone to pass the time. Compared to that repetitive daily life that felt like force of habit, spending his days in this world seemed like it would be full of fun and stimulation.

However, in order to enjoy all that, he needed to go see his terribly worried childhood friend, properly let her know the situation, and get her permission to go back. He felt it was the least he could do.

"U-um... er..." Felicia's troubled gaze darted this way and that. "But even if you ask that of me, um, that is..."

"...Eh? B-but wait, you're the one who called me here, right?" Yuuto felt a

shudder run through him as he had a horrible premonition about where this was going.

“Y-yes, I did. I have performed that ritual offering and supplication for victory several times before, but a messenger actually arriving from the heavens was a first for me as well, and... I honestly do not have any idea as to how you might get home, Lord Yuuto...”

“W-wait, wait, wait, hold on, are you serious?!”

“I... I am truly sorry. It never occurred to me that things might turn out this way...”

Felicia was so embarrassed that her expression was clouded over, and her gaze wandered around, unable to meet his eyes.

Yuuto felt his legs begin to give out from under him. She had been able to bring him here, so of course he’d assumed she would be able to send him home. After all, summoning him here without his permission without any way of sending him home would be no different from kidnapping.

“Wh-what the hell... this isn’t funny... You never said anything about this... oh! Oh, right! That shrine!” Yuuto stood up with a shout.

He remembered the divine mirrors inside of Tsukimiya Shrine and the sanctuary he’d been summoned into. The one in Tsukimiya Shrine had been rusted and clouded over to the point where it no longer served as a functional mirror, but it was the exact shape and size as the one here.

When Yuuto had found himself being pulled to this world, the mirror had given off some sort of mysterious light. Those missed calls also stood out. If the divine mirror had something to do with this, maybe the fact that he was far away from it now explained why he wasn’t receiving a signal anymore.

There was also that urban legend about Tsukimiya Shrine.

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

There was no way that didn’t have something to do with these extraordinary circumstances.

“Haah... haah...” Yuuto wheezed heavily, completely out of breath, as he leaned over with both hands on his knees.

It was evident that the sanctuary he’d been summoned into was near the top of a tall tower. But he hadn’t counted on just how much of a difference in effort it took to ascend a tower, compared to descending it.

After forcing Felicia to serve as his guide and making a big show of racing over to the tower and starting up it at full speed, the endlessly long stairway had completely sapped his stamina.

Apparently this tower was called the Hliðskjálf, a name meaning “sacred tower.” At a glance it looked to be about fifteen to twenty meters tall, about the same height as the roof of the middle school Yuuto attended. Yuuto had climbed all of that at a full run, so in a sense it was inevitable that he would be this exhausted.

Of course, Felicia was still at his side and wasn’t the slightest bit out of breath. “Are you all right, Lord Yuuto?”

This is just because I ran too hard at the start, and I didn’t get a full breakfast, Yuuto told himself, but his attempt to console himself felt hollow.

She was an Einherjar just like Sigrún, so she’d been granted physical abilities far more impressive than an ordinary person. Yuuto understood that on an intellectual level, but the longer he stayed in this world, the more his pride as a man was being thoroughly destroyed.

“Whew... Oh, wow. So this is what the towns look like in this world.” Finally catching his breath, Yuuto turned around and saw the streets of the Wolf Clan capital spread out below him.

The buildings lined up together within the tall inner city walls were all one story tall with flat roofs, but there was a certain grandeur to their appearance, an indication that they were part of the palace compound where the powerful resided. Then again, Yuuto had always associated palaces and castles with the color white, so seeing everything tinged with the red of the bricks did feel a little bit off to him.

Outside the walls, it was a totally different world.

Right near the walls themselves were rows of simple, modest houses. He'd seen them up close on the way over here, and they looked like they'd been made of nothing more than kneaded mud and clay. To Yuuto's eyes, they looked like a larger version of something a child might build for fun.

But even those were apparently the homes of the relatively more well-off, and as one got further out, the houses were thin shacks with thatched roofs.

He'd gotten a sense of it from things like the walls of Felicia's room and from her earthenware, but it seemed that civilization in this world really hadn't progressed very far at all.

"Well, forget about that. The mirror's more important right now." Yuuto turned around and took his first step back into the sanctuary.

The inside of it was a little bit smaller than the gymnasium at Yuuto's middle school. Unlike the previous night, there were no longer several dozen people present; it was completely empty and quiet now, enough for Yuuto's footsteps to echo off the walls.

The inner walls were painted over in what looked like hardened plaster, and the beautiful white surface was covered with various wall paintings. Like in a Buddhist temple or a Western church, there was a certain grand yet solemn atmosphere that impressed itself upon him.

"Oh, there it is," he said.

Making his way to the far end of the room, he found the divine mirror displayed on an altar there and nodded to himself in satisfaction. There was definitely no way this similarity between the mirrors could be a coincidence.

"Um, are you truly going back?" Felicia asked him plaintively, her cobalt eyes wavering.

To her, Yuuto was the Child of Victory Gleipsieg, sent by the gods to save her and her people from the crisis they were in. If he returned to his home world without doing anything here, what would become of them? That worry and fear was written all over her face.

“...Yeah, I am. Sorry.” Yuuto rested a hand lightly on Felicia’s head as he spoke.

No matter the situation, he didn’t like seeing a girl looking like she was about to cry. He didn’t care for that Sigrún girl, but Felicia had treated him well. He wanted to do something for her in return, and longed to become the kind of person who could help her, but he knew that a role like that was beyond him as he was right now. Thinking about things from a more level-headed perspective, there was a hard limit to what a mediocre middle school student like himself could accomplish in a world like this.

“Well then, I’m sure it’s a tough road ahead for you, but do your best!”

Throwing up his hand in a quick farewell, Yuuto turned on his smartphone and activated the camera app. Standing with his back to the altar, he used the front-facing camera to take a picture of himself and the divine mirror— —and nothing happened.

“Huh?” After a few minutes of waiting, Yuuto tilted his head, confused.

“Um, Lord Yuuto?” Felicia called out to him, just as puzzled and with her head tilted in the same quizzical way.

The fact that he’d waved goodbye and even given a farewell “do your best!” made this incredibly awkward and embarrassing.

“Is there something I’m missing, here?” Yuuto ran through the Tsukimiya Shrine legend in his mind again.

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

The answer came to him quickly. Outside, the sun was high in the sky and shining bright as can be.

“...Felicia, when’s the next full moon?”

“Eh?! Uh, yes, well yesterday was the full moon, so the next should be one month from now.”

“Ughhh, seriouslyyy?” Yuuto moaned in despair as he dropped into a crouch,

head in his hands.

If a minor like himself went missing for a month, it wasn't hard for him to imagine how serious things would get back on the other side.

He honestly didn't give a damn about his father, but he was probably going to catch a hardcore lecture and a serious interrogation about where he'd been and what he'd been doing from the police, school, and Mitsuki, just for starters.

Trying to use the excuse, "I was sent to another world, so I couldn't get in contact," would unmistakably do nothing more than pour gasoline on the fire.

At the very least, he'd like to report that he was safe and ask the people back home not to turn this into a big incident, but another look at his phone's screen confirmed that the signal strength icon was still displaying a red X. There weren't any options open to him.

Just thinking about it made him get more and more depressed. In other words — "Well, I guess wasting time thinking about it won't fix anything." Yuuto switched himself off of that line of thought and stood back up.

It was now a matter of fact that he'd be stuck here for a whole month, unable to contact anyone back home, and he was going to catch hell when he got back. In that case, rather than being afraid of the fallout, the best thing he could do for himself was to forget about that while he was here and focus on enjoying this alternate world to the fullest.

Best of all, as long as he was here, he wouldn't have to see the face of the man from his world that he hated most of all. There was nothing he could be more grateful for than that.

That was the extent of Yuuto's understanding of things at the time.

He was a persistently positive and optimistic boy.

He had yet to know the harshness and cruelty of the world of Yggdrasil.

ACT 2

“Ooooooh!!” Curled up on a hard bed, Yuuto could do nothing but groan loudly.

His abdomen hurt terribly. His chest and stomach were filled with a sickening nausea. He’d lost track of the number of times he’d had to race to the toilet due to vomiting and diarrhea.

His face, reflected in the surface of the water in his water jar, was pale greenish in color and very thin. These were the symptoms of food poisoning.

Modern-day Japan was one of the world’s leading nations in terms of sanitation. There weren’t that many countries where one could, for instance, simply drink the tap water straight from the pipe. In other words, Yuuto had grown up in an environment that was mostly germ-free, which meant that he had a very low resistance to bacteria and other germs.

Over the past few days, Yuuto had developed an aversion to even putting food or drink in his mouth. And yet, like any human, he could not live without eating or drinking. Whenever his empty stomach became too much to bear, he would fill it, and then be bedridden with sickness and pain again.

For the past full month, he had repeatedly gone through this hellish cycle.

He was borrowing a room in Felicia’s house and thus technically living together with her under one roof, but he didn’t have the energy to spare for any sort of thoughts, romantic or otherwise, about that situation.

A familiar, flat and unemotional voice was coming from the direction of the house’s front entrance. “Felicia, are you there?”

It was Sigrún. It seemed that she was friends with Felicia, and would come over from time to time to hang out when she was free.

He didn’t have the Connections galldr to help him right now, but he could understand all her words so far. After hearing the same words and phrases enough times, you started to remember them... like it or not.

“Hey, is Felicia—” As Sigrún poked her head into the room Yuuto was in, she noticed him and gave a long sigh. “Again? What a weakling. ᚨᛜ ᛒᚨᛉᛜᛖᚦ.”

These were also words he’d heard countless times, aside from that last part. As for the last part, he may not have learned it yet, but he could assume it wasn’t anything nice.

“Hey, Durinn, where’s Felicia?” Sigrún asked.

Struggling through his pain, Yuuto managed to squeeze out a hoarse answer. “Urgh... h-hausu koll.”

The Connections galldr put a strain on Felicia, so Yuuto had made an effort to learn at least some of the words most frequently used in everyday conversation. But Yuuto’s pronunciation of the language was still a bit strange to the ears of a native speaker.

Sigrún paused and thought for a moment before nodding. “Hm? Oh, on a house call.”

As both a priestess and a wielder of galldr song magics, Felicia was often sent out on house calls to attend to the sick and provide healing to them.

Having got her answer, Sigrún immediately lost all interest in Yuuto. “ᛎᚨᚷ ᚹᚨᛜᚦᚨᛉ ᛁ ᚲᛟᚲᛖᚦ.”

She quickly left, leaving behind only a few words Yuuto didn’t understand.

He felt an intense loneliness well up within his chest. Laid up in bed by illness like this, he wanted someone to be there with him.

He didn’t speak the same language as the maidservant Angela, and more than that, Angela herself seemed like she wished to avoid having anything to do with him. When she did interact with him, it was only in her formal capacity as a servant, and she maintained her distance.

Whenever Felicia actually had some free time, she spent it attending to him in a devoted manner, but she was incredibly busy, so she could never stay with him for very long.

“Mitsuki...” he murmured. He powered on his smartphone, and displayed his childhood friend’s picture on the screen.

By now, he'd said countless prayers of thanks to his late mother for making him carry a small solar-charged battery in case of a natural disaster or other emergency. It was only a solar battery, so it didn't last for very long on a charge, but even just being able to see a picture of Mitsuki like this was enough to alleviate his loneliness a little bit.

"I've had enough of this hell," he murmured. "I wanna go home to Japan. It's the day after tomorrow. The day after tomorrow, I can finally go home."

One month. It was far too short a time to learn the language, but it was more than enough time to learn the reality of life here.

Any hopes or expectations Yuuto had held for the mysterious world of Yggdrasil were now cut to ribbons, and as he waited for the moment he could return to his "boring" rural life in Japan, each day here felt like an eternity.

"Oh look, it's Annarr."

"No, no, his name is Sköll, remember?"

The next day, with his stomach pains finally receding a little, Yuuto was walking through the streets of town led by Felicia. As people passed by him, their deliberately loud insults reached his ears.

He'd long since become used to it. He tried to pretend he hadn't noticed, and slightly quickened his steps. As he did, he could hear the mocking laughter at his back.

He clenched his teeth tightly, and balled his hands into fists.

"Sköll" had caught on as a disparaging nickname for Yuuto. It meant "Devourer of Blessings." In other words, it meant he was a good-for-nothing, useless freeloader who wasted food and resources and provided nothing in return.

Right after his summoning, he'd been shown to be a total weakling by his very public loss to Sigrún in front of everyone. Ever since then, he'd spent most of his time ill in bed with stomach pains. Because of that, he was also sometimes called Durinn, a name which meant "Oversleeper."

At the beginning, a few people had continued to look at him with expectation, but their feelings had gradually changed to disappointment, and now the only looks Yuuto got from people were of contempt.

“Lord Yuuto, please pay them no mind.” As always, Felicia looked like she felt painfully sorry for him and offered words of consolation, but Yuuto turned away from her.

“Toodei, I go hohmu,” he tried to say. “...Aargh! Ngh!”

Realizing his mistake but unable to remember the right word for “tomorrow,” Yuuto was so overcome by irritation that he clamped a hand over his own mouth.

I’m going home tomorrow so don’t worry about me. Just leave me be. Unable to even communicate something that simple left him frustrated with himself.

“I don’t want any of your pity!” It was a line that was a popular cliche in manga, but now Yuuto understood the feelings behind it painfully well.

Yuuto himself no longer harbored any dreams that he might become some great hero. He himself knew better than anyone that he was nothing but an unlucky kid, a useless and pathetic stranger in this land. He was worthy of the nickname Annarr, which meant “foreigner” or “stranger.”

Glancing down the street, he could see beggars here and there. There were more than a few staring longingly at the foodstuffs on display in the bazaar-style marketplace. Theft, burglaries, and the like were pretty frequent, too. The Wolf Clan as a whole was clearly not doing very well.

And here he was, unable to do any work, eating that precious food, only to throw it up. Even he thought of himself as a wasteful freeloader because of that.

The more Felicia consoled him, the more wretched he felt, to the point where he wanted to find a hole and bury himself in it. Felicia still hadn’t given up her hope in him, and so whenever she gazed at him, he felt a weight and a pain that was unbearable.

Even so, being left alone at her house would have been even worse, and so regretfully, here he was following her around.

In this world, she was the only one who was kind to him, and the only one with whom he could communicate. If he couldn't be near her, he felt like he might go mad from loneliness.

And yet when he was with her and she was kind to him, instead of gratitude, he felt only a swirl of dark emotions, and he ended up taking a peevish and sulking attitude with her. Then he ended up hating himself even more for that, and the vicious cycle continued.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!!" With nowhere to direct his anger, Yuuto began kicking the ground and cursing.

"ᑭᖴᖻ‹! ᑭᖴᗰ ᔑᖴX ᑭIᑎ?!" A girl who had just been walking past him turned around to face him, clearly angry at him. In a stroke of bad luck, Yuuto seemed to have kicked the girl's leg by accident.

She had frizzy, unruly hair that she kept cut short. Yuuto also got the impression from her slightly upturned, almond eyes that she had quite the strong-willed, fiery personality, though of course her anger at being kicked was probably part of that.

"Oh! I'm sorry." He promptly apologized, but the words that reflexively came to him were in Japanese, and she tilted her neck and looked at him suspiciously.

"Ohhh." The girl's eyes caught sight of Yuuto's hair, and she nodded to herself as if she now understood something. It seemed she knew who Yuuto was. "Hmph. ᔑᗰ ᑎᕮᕮ."

Expressing her disapproval, the red-haired girl walked away.

Feeling quite embarrassed, Yuuto made to follow her, when—

"Ohhh, they're back!"

—someone's voice cried out and a commotion swept through the crowd, bringing Yuuto back to his senses.

Yuuto turned toward the western gate, where the voice had come from, and he saw a long line of soldiers carrying spears marching his way.

Almost none of them were uninjured. Everyone had a deep or painful-looking wound somewhere on their body, and there were some who had lost one of

their limbs. Their expressions were all dark and full of incredible exhaustion, mixed with relief that they'd made it back alive.

Without having to understand their language, that was enough to communicate to Yuuto the severity and the tragedy of the battles they had fought their way through.

Currently, the Wolf Clan was in the middle of an armed dispute with their neighbor the Claw Clan, according to Felicia.

To a Japanese person like Yuuto raised on the ideals of peace, that had sounded like the affairs of some faraway land. But seeing the injured soldiers up close like this, he was forced to recognize the reality.

Right now, he was in the middle of a war, and there was no telling when an attack could come.

And he was nothing more than a lost little lamb who lacked the means to fight back against that.

That evening, someone new came home to the house Felicia and Yuuto were staying in.

"Felicia, I'm home!"

Felicia greeted him joyfully, with tears of happiness in the corners of her eyes. "Welcome home, Brother! It's so good that you're all right."

When she was with Yuuto, Felicia always looked apologetic or concerned, so Yuuto found himself excessively irritated with this young man. Of course, at least half of that was due to his resentment at being unable to make Felicia smile like that.

The young man glanced over at Yuuto, and smiled as he asked, "And who are you? Why are you in my house?" But his eyes weren't smiling in the least.

He looked to be about in his twenties, and with his blond hair, blue eyes, and pretty face, he bore a resemblance to Felicia, which was only natural.

Yuuto knew about him from Felicia. His name was Loptr, and he was Felicia's blood-related older brother.

Coming home at night to find his precious little sister together with some strange man would be enough to make any older brother ill at ease, to say the least.

“Uh... er... I’m... uh...” Yuuto felt his mind go blank under the pressure of the man’s intense gaze.

He had intended to at least give a proper self-introduction in the language of Yggdrasil, but all the words had flown out of his head.

“Brother, don’t act so intimidating toward Lord Yuuto like that!”

“But Felicia, as an older brother, isn’t it only natural for me to be suspicious of some man I don’t know spending time with my unmarried little sister?”

“Geez! That’s not what this is!” Puffing up her cheek childishly, Felicia proceeded to explain the sequence of events thus far to her brother.

About how she had been deep in supplicant prayer to Angrboða, the guardian deity of Iárnviðr.

About how suddenly, Yuuto had appeared out of thin air wearing clothes the likes of which she’d never seen before.

And finally, about how Yuuto had faced off against Sigrún, wielder of Hati, Devourer of the Moon, and had managed to catch her off guard.

“Oho! So you managed to score a point against that girl with the gods’ own gift for battle!”

“Ahhh, no, she was going waaay easy on me, and calling it lucky would be an understatement,” Yuuto said. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do it again.”

“Still, that’s strange. There was such a major incident, and yet I never got a report about it.”

“The reason no one told you about it was, it ended up being pointless and not worth reporting to you,” Yuuto said with a pained smile, shrugging his shoulders. “Thanks to that silver-haired girl, as soon as I arrived, I was revealed for what I really am. I’m not the Gleipsieg or whatever, I’m just some useless Annarr who ended up here by coincidence.”

During this past month, he’d learned a little bit about the world of Yggdrasil.

In this world, power and strength were everything. Even the blood child of a nation's sovereign ruler, or patriarch, had to be content with the life of a rank and file soldier if he or she lacked the strength to rise higher. Likewise, even the child of an outcast or hated criminal could potentially rise up to become a patriarch.

The law of the jungle, that the strong should rule over the meek, was faithfully borne out in this world.

That way of thinking even applied to the gods. Or, more precisely, the logic went that a messenger sent by the gods must necessarily have some sort of power, and thus the weak and useless Yuuto was clearly some sort of faker.

In addition, food was known as a blessing from the gods, and whenever Yuuto ate the local food, he was wracked by pain and lay in bed sick. The chief rumor around town was that Yuuto's illness was a punishment from the gods for his attempting to masquerade as their messenger and deceive everyone.

"Coincidence?" Loptr asked. "Hrmm, so then you weren't sent by Angrboða after all, then."

"That's right. Before coming here, I had never even heard of that name."

"Well, that's his story. What do you say?" Loptr directed his question at his little sister standing next to him, as if he were testing her.

"Even now, I am convinced that Lord Yuuto is the Child of Victory. I most surely felt it. When I used my seiðr, I felt Gleipnir grasp ahold of 'victory!' No matter what anyone might say, I am certain that Lord Yuuto is the Gleipsieg."

Felicia gave her declaration without the slightest waver or hint of doubt, and Yuuto could only manage a long sigh in response.

While everyone else's opinions of Yuuto had fallen through the floor, only she continued to stubbornly insist that he was the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg.

These creatures called women were always prone to have blind faith in their own intuitions. Without a single bit of evidence, Felicia was asserting that her intuition was absolutely correct. She had that trait in common with Yuuto's childhood friend Mitsuki, and with his late mother.

Yuuto certainly believed that a woman's intuition was more accurate than a man's. But that was only a matter of relativity, and intuition was much more likely to be off the mark, according to Yuuto's personal experiences.

Perhaps Felicia had felt something strongly enough to convince her to have such absolute confidence, but at the end of the day, Yuuto felt that it had to be nothing more than a misunderstanding on her part. Yuuto knew that he didn't possess any sort of great strength.

"Oh? So Felicia is willing to argue that far for you," said Loptr. "How interesting. Oh, that's right, I hadn't properly introduced myself yet. It's a bit late, but I am Loptr. I'm Felicia's older brother by blood, and I serve as the Wolf Clan's second-in-command."

"Huh?! So you're the highest ranking person in the clan after the patriarch, then?" Yuuto's eyes went wide in surprise. He'd heard that Felicia had an older brother, but not that he was such an important person.

"Yes, well, my predecessor was killed in action during the previous battle, so it was only a field promotion." Loptr shrugged his shoulders, but something about that seemed far too humble.

The Wolf Clan might be a small and weak clan, but including its branch families, it still had tens of thousands of citizens. And the second-in-command was the head of all clan subordinates, and served as the acting patriarch when necessary, with access to all the patriarch's authority and command in such cases. He or she was also next in line to be patriarch.

Even if Loptr's predecessor had met an untimely end, without having accomplishments of his own as examples of his own strength and potential, there was no way someone as young as Loptr would have been recognized as fit to be the second-in-command.

"My brother is an Einherjar of the rune Alþiófr, the Jester of a Thousand Illusions, with powers which are like an all-around more powerful version of my own," Felicia added.

Yuuto had heard that Felicia's rune was an "all-purpose" rune with a wide variety of powers, rare even among Einherjar. Loptr's rune was an all-around more powerful version of that? It wasn't an especially detailed description, but

along with his position in the clan and the intimidating air he gave off, Yuuto could tell without a doubt that Loptr must be considerably powerful.

“Well, I hope we’ll get along well. It’s ‘Yuuto,’ right?” Loptr extended his hand to Yuuto amicably, a charming smile on his face.

He seemed frank and casual, and yet it didn’t come across as shallow or insincere in the slightest. To put it another way, he seemed outwardly easygoing, but he also projected a sense that he was down-to-earth, with an unshakable self-confidence at his core.

“Yes, I’m Yuuto Su—OW!!”

As Yuuto gave his self-introduction, his hand clasped Loptr’s, and in the next instant it was being squeezed with such incredible force that Yuuto cried out and his face contorted in pain.

Without seeming to pay any consideration to the pain Yuuto was in, Loptr quickly pulled his arm downward, forcing Yuuto’s body to pitch forward. He then pulled sharply upwards, and Yuuto barely managed to avoid tumbling to the ground.

“W-what are you—?!” Yuuto started to cry out in protest.

“Huh?” Loptr had a slightly surprised look in his eyes, and began to twist Yuuto’s arm. Despite his non-muscular appearance, he pulled with incredible strength.

“Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!!” Yuuto found himself unable to put up any kind of resistance, and it was all he could do to endure the pain.

“B-Brother?! Just what are you doing to Lord Yuuto?!” Felicia rebuked sharply.

“Ohh, sorry, sorry.” Apologizing, Loptr let go of Yuuto’s arm.

Finally free, Yuuto pressed a hand to his arm, which was throbbing with pain. He hadn’t done anything to deserve this kind of treatment.



He directed a resentful glare at Loptr, but the man didn't appear to notice at all. He seemed to be deep in his own thoughts, puzzling over something.

"Hmm, you don't seem any different from a total amateur to me... Did you really win a round against Sigrún?" Loptr asked.

"That's why I said I just got lucky!" Yuuto insisted. "It was a fluke. Heh, either way I'm still a weakling."

"No, no, what I mean is, and I know this is going to sound rude, I can't imagine someone like you being able to win against her at all, fluke or not. For reference, would you be willing to tell me how you did it?"

"Well, sure, I guess." Yuuto spoke with his face turned away, sulking a bit. "I didn't think there was any straightforward way I could beat her either, so I held my sword with a loose grip, and when the timing was right, I purposefully let her knock it out of my hands, to make her think she'd already won. Then she let her guard down, and I struck at that opening. That's all."

Loptr and Felicia kept calling it a win, but for Yuuto, the fact that he had done all that and still been miserably defeated meant that it was nothing more than a memory of failure and shame.

"Hmm, I see, I see. Haha! You did pretty well. There's no need to be so humble. That was definitely your win. You should take pride in it." Yuuto felt a *thwack* on his hunched-over back as Loptr clapped it.

It was probably nothing more than a hearty pat from Loptr's perspective, but it had enough force to push Yuuto forward several steps, and the impact left his back smarting.

"Like I said, it wasn't even a big deal," Yuuto said, even though he didn't exactly dislike what he was hearing.

He was genuinely happy to be recognized and appreciated by someone. That was especially true because he'd spent the past month being ridiculed by everyone around him as a no-good freeloader.

Loptr gave a mischievous smile. "I'll bet it was a good lesson for her, too. Lately I've been puzzling over just how to get her to be a little less soft and

naive.”

“Soft? She seemed cool-tempered and guarded to me.”

“Oh, well, it’s true that she’s been blessed by Angrboða with outstanding natural talent as a fighter. Even at her age, the only ones left who can give her a real fight are me and Brother Ská. But over-relying on that talent has spoiled her and made her soft.”

Loptr spoke with a gentle smile and in a cheerful tone. He didn’t look like the kind of fierce warrior who could go toe-to-toe with Sigrún. But the strength he had used against Yuuto a moment ago had been unnatural.

“She’s at the age with the most potential for growth right now. If she gets too satisfied with herself at her current state, she could lose the chance to polish her talents to an even greater shine, and I’ve been anxious to avoid that.”

“If that’s the case, I think it would have been better for you to have just gone ahead and taught her a lesson yourself,” Yuuto said.

Just remembering Sigrún’s cold eyes looking down at him filled his chest with an angry, sickening feeling that he couldn’t suppress.

If Loptr was really stronger than this Sigrún girl, maybe he could have knocked her down a peg or two, and taught her some manners and consideration for others. Then Yuuto wouldn’t have had to suffer such a humiliating experience.

“Haha! I’m too many years her senior in both age and experience. So if she lost to me, wouldn’t she just be able to use that as an excuse? Then there’d be no point. That’s why you were perfect for the job, in that respect. You’re clearly much weaker than her. Actually, you’re even weaker than average, worse than a green recruit in the rank and file.”

“You’re really putting a lot of stress on that point considering that I’m right here in front of you!”

“Ahaha!”

“Tacking on some refreshing laughter doesn’t make it funny!”

At first glance, Loptr seemed to be just a kind, sociable young man, but he seemed to have a few twists in his personality.

Even that side of him wasn't unpleasant at all, though. It was more like lighthearted teasing that came from a sharp sense of humor, one that kept conversation lively and undid the tension of the people around him. That was the kind of curious charm this young man had.

"Sorry, sorry," Loptr chuckled. "Still, she lost to you despite that. She's had to face how inexperienced she still is, and I'll bet that right now, she's frantically swinging around that sword of hers in training. And that's a good direction for her. Thanks to you, that girl is going to get even stronger."

"If that happens, I think she'll be too much for anyone to handle," Yuuto muttered.

"Hahaha! I wish for nothing more. I'd like to see her get so strong that even I couldn't lay a finger on her. Because, right now... the Wolf Clan needs every elite fighter we can muster."

Loptr's expression grew hardened and serious, and he stared off into space, as if he were gazing at something far, far away.

He was friendly and easy to get along with, but that wasn't all there was to him. He was the kind of person who could be trusted with the heavy burden of a position like second-in-command of the clan at a young age.

"So... the most recent battle was quite a difficult one, then?" Felicia asked, unable to conceal her concern.

As something which affected the very future of the nation, Felicia must have been quite curious about the current direction of the war, but she had held off on bringing up the subject out of consideration for Loptr and Yuuto's lively conversation.

"Yeah, it was really rough," Loptr confirmed. "That Claw Clan patriarch Botvid is a real problem. And as for the previous second-in-command... Father got caught up in that man's wily schemes and, regrettably, met his death. I told you about that in my correspondence, right?"

"...Yes." Felicia nodded once, her expression stiff. She was holding herself together, but the depth of her sadness was abundantly clear, and her face was darkened with its shadow.

By “Father,” Loptr was not talking about the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, but about his, and thus Felicia’s, father by birth. Yuuto could infer that much from the spirit of language in their words.

“Well, this time around, Brother Ská and I were able to rally the troops and withstand the enemy assault, and somehow we got them to withdraw for now. But our side had quite a lot of casualties, too.”

“I... I see.” Felicia nodded gravely, with her fists clenched.

The certain doom of her nation was creeping ever closer, and she looked as if she could hear the approaching footfalls. She could hear them and do absolutely nothing about it. That was the sort of hopelessly vexed expression she wore.

“So, that’s why I’ve got high expectations for you.” Loptr directed a keen gaze at Yuuto.

But for Yuuto, having expectations pinned on him like that was a problem. “I said it earlier, but I’m not some impressive person you can expect anything from. I’m not useful for or good at anything in this world.”

“Hmmm. You’re too humble, you know. I think that what the Wolf Clan needs most right now is someone like you.”

“Huh?”

“The situation for us right now is truly precarious. Brother Ská is holding the line at Fort Gnipahellir, but if that falls, the flames of battle will engulf Iárnviðr next. I’m going to try to avoid that outcome, but by the new year, the enemy will have re-organized their armies, and they’ll surely invade again. Honestly, I’m not sure we’ll even be able to hold out against them at this rate.”

Loptr sighed deeply, fatigue washing over his handsome face. There was no trace left of the almost annoying level of confidence and composure he’d displayed a moment ago.

“What we need is an idea that’s outside the box of common sense, some sort of plan or trick that can break us out of this hopeless situation and pull us back from the brink. I don’t care if it’s dishonorable, or disgraceful, or cowardly. To hell with fighting fair and square. In other words, just like how you got in a hit

on Sigrún despite the overwhelming difference in strength between you.” Loptr’s usual flighty manner made him a hard man to gauge, but Yuuto could tell from the weight of his words that those were his true feelings.

This young man was desperately struggling, trying to think of a solution. As second-in-command, he carried the weight of tens of thousands of lives on his shoulders. *I have to do something.* Those anguished words were written all over his face.

“You’re overestimating me. It’s not like I’d have any idea what to do, either.” Yuuto shook his head, and gave a small, disheartened laugh at his own expense.

He was so ashamed of himself for having treated this all like it was some sort of game. Sigrún’s words about him lacking any real resolve had been exactly right. He couldn’t imagine that someone as shallow as himself would actually be able to do anything to help.

“Plus, I’m going back to my own world tomorrow.”

“Oh, is that so?” Loptr asked. “That’s too bad. We’ve only just gotten to know each other. I’ve decided I like you, too. Are you sure you won’t stay here a while longer?”

“I’m happy to hear you say that, but...” With a dry smile, Yuuto shook his head.

The thing was, he was honestly happy to be appreciated like this. And that scared him. He knew that those expectations would only turn into disappointment.

“I’ve got someone waiting for me,” Yuuto explained.

There was someone on the other side who needed him, and for who he really was.

“Hold on, what the hell is this?! Don’t screw with me!!” Yuuto lost control of his emotions and almost threw his smartphone at the floor in fury, barely managing to stop himself.

The white disc of the full moon shone in the sky above.

He had made his way to the tower and run all the way up to the hörgr even before sunset. At the instant of moonrise, he'd been standing ready to use his phone to create the opposing mirror effect. But once again, nothing.

I can go home at the next full moon. That thought alone had kept him going, and finding out now that it wasn't true after all was something he couldn't accept.

The Yuuto of two years later would have scolded him for being naive enough to rely on such a simple assumption. At this point in time, though, Yuuto was simply filled with anger and resentment that things hadn't gone as planned.

"What the hell?! Why isn't it enough?! Just what the hell is missing here?!"

"Um, Lord Yuuto?" Felicia called.

"Wha—! You...!" Yuuto turned his rage in her direction and scowled at her.

Surprised, Felicia recoiled at his menacing attitude, but Yuuto ignored her and kept on going.

"That's right! It was you! I definitely heard your voice back then! You're the one who summoned me here! So send me back!"

"Uh, but, even if you say that, I-I don't..."

"You were doing some kind of dance back then, right? Well go on, do it again. That should be able to send me home!" Yuuto spoke feverishly, his arms crossed tightly and grasping his own shoulders.

Felicia looked at him with pain in her eyes, then silently shook her head. "Lord Yuuto, I would be willing to dance if that is what would satisfy you, but I do not have the power necessary to send you—"

"Don't give me that crap!" Yuuto raised his voice and cut off Felicia's words in a rough tone.

He already knew. He knew that there wasn't a single lie in anything she had said to him. Even so, he couldn't just accept that.

"Just do it for me, okay? If you do that, I'll be able to go home. I should be able to go home!"

Yuuto pleaded with her as if he was also trying to convince himself, clinging to his own words as his last hope.

Felicia looked away, as if she couldn't bear to watch him anymore, and sighed heavily. "...All right."

Felicia took a gentle step forward, and began to dance. Her expression was completely serious, and each and every one of her movements was sharp and nimble. It was gorgeous and bewitching, and under normal circumstances, her dance would be enough to enchant him.

However, something was wrong about it.

"Do it seriously!" Yuuto yelled. "It isn't going to work if you're just going through the motions! Back then you were more emotional, more intense!"

Yuuto knew that a work of artistic expression was an act that laid bare the condition of the heart and mind of the artist. As the son of a traditional Japanese swordsmith, he had come to know that through and through.

Felicia wasn't focusing her full mind on this place and moment in time, and she didn't have the heartfelt wish for victory for the Wolf Clan that she'd held the previous time. She was simply dancing. The "soul" of the dance, the most important part, was missing.

"But even if you say that..." Felicia's expression clouded over, and she seemed confused.

For her part, she was doing the best she could. However, true passion wasn't something a person could just summon and control at will.

"I don't care, just do it right. Send me home! Send me back to Japan!" Yuuto's voice grew shrill and hysterical. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn't stop himself.

Was he going to go back to having constant stomach cramps and nausea?

Was he going to go back to the constant scorn and ridicule from everyone around him?

Was he going to have to continue to face his own tiny, useless existence?

If he lost this chance to go home today, he'd have to repeat that life of hell for

another month. Just the thought terrified him.

“Quit screwing around!” he screamed. “You’re the one who called me here! So then you should be able to send me home! Take responsibility for this! If you couldn’t send me home, then you shouldn’t have damn well called me in the—”

Thwack!

Suddenly, there was a sharp impact on Yuuto’s right cheek, and he was sent tumbling onto the floor.

“Gah!”

A moment later, intense pain coursed through his head.

As Yuuto lay there struggling to process what had just happened, a displeased voice, hoarse and elderly, called down from above him.

“Pheew-ee. I can’t believe it. An old man’s just sitting here trying to enjoy a drink under the full moon, and you had to go and ruin it.”

Yuuto finally realized that he’d been punched. The pain spreading across the side of his face transformed into fuel for his anger.

“That hurt, dammit! Who are you, and what the hell was that for?!” Yuuto jumped to his feet and, pressing a hand to his cheek, glared with enmity at the man who had struck him.

It was a very old man. His hair was completely white, and his face was creased with layers of deep wrinkles. His body was mostly skin and bones, so skinny that he looked like a withered old tree.

Yuuto gasped and took a step back. “Urk! Wh-what’s with that old man?!”

At a glance, the man looked weak and frail, but there was also something strangely intimidating about him. The keen glint in his eyes was as bright as if he were still in his prime, and also seemed to express the depth of his accumulated years. Just being stared at by those eyes made Yuuto feel rooted in place, like his body was suddenly made of lead.

“F-Father!” Felicia gasped.

“Huh?” Yuuto was dumbstruck for a moment.

He knew her birth father was dead. If she was calling this man Father, then there was only one other person it could be...

“N-no way... You’re the patriarch?!”

“Yep, I am the patriarch and sovereign ruler of the Wolf Clan, Fárbauti.” Stroking his fine beard, the old man cackled. “Nice to meet you, Gleipsieg... or, going by how you were acting just then, maybe you’re as much of a letdown as the rumors say, and I should just call you Sköll, hmm? Keh-heh-heh.”

“F-Father, why are you here?” Felicia stammered. “Being out in the wind at night is not good for your health.”

“Keh-heh! I may be gettin’ old, but I’m not *that* weak. There was such a nice moon out tonight, I thought I’d enjoy it! And there’s no better place for that than here, where we’re closest to the sky.”

Laughing off her concern, the old patriarch took a gulp from the silver cup he was holding. It looked to be full of alcohol, and Yuuto could see that his cheeks were slightly red.

“And then what do I see but some guy ranting and screaming at a woman in a real unseemly fashion. Talk about killing the mood. It was ruining the taste of my drink, so I I thought I’d give him a bit of a scolding. No need to thank me, now. Keh-heh-heh!”

“Hmph, so damned arrogant.” Yuuto spit some of the blood in his mouth onto the floor. “I don’t need a lecture from an incompetent leader who’s letting his country waste away so fast that I can watch it happening.”

Under any normal circumstances, Yuuto would use polite speech with someone older than him or above him in station, but he’d just had his last hopes crushed, and was filled with the kind of desperation where he didn’t really care about consequences anymore.

Not to mention this guy had just punched him solidly in the face. There was no better target for all the pent-up indignation in Yuuto’s heart.

“The whole reason I ended up in this situation to begin with is because you couldn’t do your job as a ruler,” Yuuto snarled. “That’s right — you of all people don’t have any right to tell me how to act!”

“L-Lord Yuuto, please don’t...” Felicia nervously tried to dissuade him from saying any more, but to Yuuto, she was another one of the reasons he had been put into this hellish situation, and he didn’t feel the need to listen to any advice from her.

“What, are you gonna execute me for insulting the dignity of the sovereign? Ha! Go ahead and try it if you like. I’ll die laughing at this ruler who’s so petty, it’s no wonder your country’s going off a cliff.”

Yuuto kept on going and going and going. In the back of his mind, he could hear himself whisper, *Ah, well now I’m dead,* but the part of him that felt angry enough to not care what happened next still won out.

If this man had just been doing things properly, Yuuto could have stayed in peaceful Japan without ever having to come here. He had been made to suffer so much by being brought here, and the root cause of all of his suffering was up here having himself a drink without a care. He wouldn’t be satisfied until he got this guy to lose his temper and drop the “cool, wizened leader” act.

But contrary to Yuuto’s assumptions, the old patriarch didn’t get angry, but instead crossed his arms thoughtfully and closed his eyes. “Hrm...”

When he opened them again, the corners of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

“You’ve got some nerve, boy. You’re the first person who’s mouthed off at me that much despite knowing I was a patriarch.”

“Heh, so none of your retainers ever call you out honestly?” Yuuto smirked. “Guess they don’t have a lot of confidence in you, old man.”

“L-Lord Yuuto, p-please stop...”

“It’s fine, Felicia,” the patriarch said. “He isn’t one of my people. Let him say what he wants.”

“B-but...”

“I said that it’s fine.”

The old patriarch gave Felicia a single, strong glance, and she bowed once and stepped back.

“...All right.”

Despite only being here for a month, Yuuto was now acquainted with the fact that the people of the world of Yggdrasil rejected aristocracy and bloodline, and their society was an extreme kind of meritocracy.

Even in a tiny nation threatened by its neighbors, this patriarch was someone who had risen to that seat of power by virtue of his own abilities. There was indeed something lordly and commanding in his eyes and in his tone of voice.

“Boy, it’s just as you say. I don’t really have any right to criticize you.” At that, the old man sat down on the spot, cross-legged. Placing his hands on his knees, he bowed his head. “My weakness and failure has caused you so much trouble. I am truly sorry.”

“G-good... as long as you understand.” After receiving such a proper apology so easily, Yuuto had no choice but to drop his aggression. He almost felt disappointed at how quickly the tension had been deflected.

But the patriarch was much more shrewd than Yuuto could have surmised. “Now then, *I’ve* apologized.”

“What?” Yuuto tilted his head suspiciously, unsure of what Fárbauti meant.

In response, the patriarch glanced meaningfully over toward Felicia. “Don’t you have someone you should apologize to, as well?”

“Ah!” Yuuto couldn’t stop his exclamation of surprise as he finally realized the old man’s game.

This person had properly apologized to him despite being mocked and insulted by him. If Yuuto didn’t now admit his own fault and apologize as well, it would make him look bad.

By that same token, apologizing was the only way he wouldn’t lose face as a man. He’d been set up and led into this situation.

Fárbauti really was a cunning old fox.

“You... damned old geezer.” Yuuto reflexively spit out one more insult at Fárbauti.

“Keh-heh, well? Go on.” With a smug grin, the old patriarch gestured to Felicia with his chin.

There was no way out of this. If Yuuto ran away in this situation, he'd be throwing away his manhood.

"All right, I get it!" he snapped. "Felicia, I went too far! When I realized I couldn't go home, I took it out on you, and there was no excuse for that, and I'm truly sorry!"

He said his whole apology in one breath, and then bowed deeply with enough force that for a moment it looked like his forehead might hit his knees.

As he did, he heard the old man next to him whisper, "Hm, looks like the apple isn't rotten to the core," which grated his nerves, but he ignored it.

"No, you needn't apologize at all." Felicia seemed a bit embarrassed, and nervously tried to refute him. "It's just as you said, Lord Yuuto; I am the one who originally summoned you here."

But Yuuto continued, "Mm-hm, and if I'm being honest, I've had some pent-up anger about that. But that didn't make it right to speak that way to the person who's been looking after me ever since I got here. So, I'm sorry."

Here in Yggdrasil, Yuuto couldn't do anything. Indeed, he couldn't even survive on his own.

He'd been here for only one month, but it had been a full, long month. Yuuto had only been able to live through it because of Felicia's dedication. If she hadn't been there for him... If she had instead forsaken him in this world where he couldn't even speak the language, Yuuto would have likely been dead in a ditch within a week.

Ever since those first days, he had always felt grateful to her. And because he understood that upsetting her or getting on her bad side would directly affect his survival, he'd always held back his negative feelings around her. Not being able to let himself speak about it, he had desperately suppressed those feelings, deep in the recesses of his heart.

The truth was, he resented being pulled out of prosperous, peaceful Japan and into this barbaric world filled with poverty and war. And upon realizing he couldn't go back home after all, the dam had broken, and he had no longer been able to stop that resentment from bursting out.

“P-please raise your head, Lord Yuuto.” Felicia softly dropped to one knee and hung her head. “I... I am the one who should be apologizing!”

Felicia’s eyes were overflowing with tears.

“This entire time, I was unaware of the pain in your heart. No, I was pretending to be unaware. Being summoned alone to a land whose tongue you could not speak, mocked by those around you, of course you would be lonely and disheartened... and I averted my eyes from that. I kept telling myself that since you are the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, sent by the goddess Angrboða, then this must be destiny; that since I had acted in good faith for the sake of the Wolf Clan, I couldn’t have done anything wrong. Please, forgive me.”

She said she “pretended not to notice” my feelings, and that doesn’t sound like a lie, Yuuto realized. *In other words, she did notice them at some point, and felt guilty over it. That guilt, combined with her sense of responsibility for being the one who summoned me here, was what made her so dedicated in taking care of me.*

“It was only today, when I heard your cries of lament and felt your anger firsthand, that I finally realized you are human just like any of us,” she continued.

“Ha ha ha, you’re not so sharp, are you, Felicia?” Yuuto couldn’t help laughing. “You can tell just by looking at me I’m just a normal human being, not some messenger from the gods.”

“Hm, looks like the affair’s settled, then,” Fárbauti chimed in, then took another gulp from his cup.

“Sorry, old man,” Yuuto conceded, looking over at him. “I said some pretty nasty things to you, too. And... thanks.”

Yuuto’s head had cooled, and he’d regained his composure. If it hadn’t been for this old man, Yuuto might have created an irreparable gulf between himself and Felicia. With that thought in mind, words of sincere apology and thanks came easily.

“Keh-heh-heh, you don’t need to apologize to me. You said it before, but it’s true that I’m an incompetent patriarch who couldn’t protect his people.”

Fárbauti chuckled, as if laughing at himself, and tilted back his cup again. He was staring down at the city spread out below him. He was trying to act nonchalant, but there was clearly some bitterness in his voice.







Yuuto had already come to realize that this old man was far from incompetent. But that wasn't good enough in this case, and Fárbauti could do nothing but face the hopeless, vexing situation at hand.

Yuuto had heard it already from the clan's second-in-command Loptr, but the patriarch's manner drove home just how terrible the situation surrounding the Wolf Clan had become.

"It isn't your fault, Father," Felicia said. "You have ruled the Wolf Clan well for many years, and are loved and respected by the people. My late father Skíðblaðnir was grateful to you from the bottom of his heart for giving him a new home after he was driven out of the Hoof Clan, and even going so far as to make him your second-in-command. He always said that he was truly blessed to have the honor to serve you, Father. No, everything is because of that wicked man Botvid. If it weren't for his betrayal...!"

"That responsibility also falls on me, for not being able to sniff out the man's schemes." And with a bitter smile, the old patriarch explained the circumstances to Yuuto.

It would seem that originally, the Claw Clan and Wolf Clan had been indirectly related, what one might call "affiliated clans," and to that end Fárbauti, and the previous Claw Clan patriarch had exchanged the Oath of the Sibling Chalice, at about a sixty-forty split in terms of power and authority.

In Yggdrasil, the relationships formed by the Oath of the Chalice were unbreakable and absolute, and so, having eliminated the threat to his east, Fárbauti had been able to focus on the war with the Horn Clan to his west.

However, the current Claw Clan patriarch, Botvid, had forced his predecessor into retirement. And as soon as he took power, he attacked the Wolf Clan with lightning speed, snatching away a large chunk of territory.

Faced with this sudden betrayal, the Wolf Clan troops had been caught off-balance, and the renowned and distinguished patriarch of the Horn Clan, Hrungnir, had not missed the opportunity to make the Wolf Clan suffer a huge defeat and lose many of their soldiers.

It was perhaps a small mercy that, shortly afterward, the Horn Clan had pulled

back their troops in order to respond to the Hoof and Lightning Clans, which were beginning to act suspiciously. The Wolf Clan had narrowly escaped certain destruction, but even now, its fate was hanging by a thread.

"To think you got summoned here now of all times, with no way to return home. This must be a disaster for you," Fárbauti said. "It's not something one can fix with an apology, but still, I really am sorry."

"No, there is nothing for you to apologize for, Father... everything is my..."

"A parent takes full responsibility for his child's conduct." Smiling warmly, Fárbauti gestured with his hand to stop Felicia's protest.

Yuuto furiously scratched his head for a moment, then sighed deeply, shrugging his shoulders. "Enough. It's fine already. Out of consideration for the old man, I'll just consider the whole thing forgiven."

On the day my mother passed away, my father abandoned her in her final moments. I swore to myself then that I'd never become like him. Be it a family member or a lover, I will never, ever forsake the people important to me. I will hold myself to that vow at all costs, even if it puts me in danger.

There were no blood ties between Fárbauti and Felicia. But even so, the old patriarch looked at her with eyes filled with the kindness of a father toward his beloved daughter. Yuuto couldn't bring himself to hold a grudge against the man, not after being thoroughly impressed by his willingness to protect his family from blame without regard to himself.

"You know, you're a pretty good patriarch," Yuuto said. "Sorry for calling you incompetent."

"Hmph, if you really feel bad about it, then listen to a few more addled words from this old man," Fárbauti said.

"Hey, you're still gonna lecture me after all that?" Yuuto replied dejectedly.

Yuuto had decided that this old man was worthy of his respect. Normally he would have listened to the nagging voice of reason in the back of his head, reminding him that he should use polite speech with his elders, but he'd already come this far speaking to the man as an equal, and changing his manner of speech now felt like it would just make things awkward.

“Of course I am,” said Fárbauti. “I let you say whatever you liked a minute ago. Now it’s your turn to listen to me.”

“All right, all right. So what do you wanna say?”

“I’ll have you know, I’ve lived for more than sixty years now. I’ve been through one hairy situation after another. There was the eruption of the Surtsey Volcano, and the great flooding of the Körmt River. There was a great famine brought on by continuous drought, and once when I was a kid, I even saw the sun get swallowed up by darkness. I’ve faced the prospect of death on the battlefield more times than I can count on both hands. Even now, my clan is on the brink of total destruction.”

“You’ve had a life full of drama all right,” Yuuto agreed. “Actually, it’s amazing you’re still alive.”

“That it is, and you’re exactly right. I’m still alive!” Fárbauti used his lips to make the piece of bamboo grass he held in his mouth tilt upwards, and beat a fist to his chest with a powerful *thud.*

Even though he and his clan were backed into a corner, his face and voice were those of an indomitable man who would fight to the end.

“Why do you think that is?” Fárbauti asked, gazing into Yuuto’s eyes as if testing him for his response.

In the face of those piercing eyes that seemed like they could see through anything, Yuuto didn’t think he could get away with a halfway-clever retort. He shook his head, honestly unable to guess the answer.

The white-haired old man smirked, and said with utmost confidence: “It’s because, I never gave up.”

“...Huh?”

“Pardon?”

Yuuto and Felicia voiced their confusion in unison.

The look in both of their eyes said it all: *That can’t be all you have to say after making such a show and building it up like that.*

The old patriarch, unable to keep a straight face, cackled at their wide-eyed

expressions. “Keh-heh-heh! Remember this, boy. What separates success from failure, what determines life and death, isn’t intelligence or brute strength, or authority or wealth. In the end, all of that stuff is secondary. What wins it all in the end is...” Fárbauti paused, and punctuated his words by tapping a thumb to his heart. “...determination, the firm resolve to follow through on things, no matter what.”

“Uh... right.”

Faced with the patriarch’s intense speech, Yuuto found himself replying in the affirmative, but it didn’t really mean anything to him.

Honestly, it just sounded like a bunch of platitudes. The world wasn’t the type of place where you could make things work just by showing some spirit.

Rather than that sort of vague and abstract philosophy, Yuuto couldn’t help but see better examples of useful and beneficial power in Sigrún’s combat skills, Felicia’s galldr magic, or Loptr’s charisma and leadership.

“Judging by that look, you’re not convinced?” Fárbauti said. “Well, I guess that’s no surprise with how young you are. But you shouldn’t make light of how important it is. The power of a strong will draws good fortune to itself. And a heart that’s given up drives luck away.”

“Great, it’s starting to sound like something out of the occult,” Yuuto muttered under his breath.

This speech was Fárbauti’s way of trying to pass on some wisdom to a younger generation, and Yuuto didn’t want to say anything rude to the man’s face, so he didn’t say it any louder than that.

“So, what are you going to do?” Fárbauti demanded.

“Huh? What am I... What do you mean?”

“Are you going to keep looking for a way to go back? Or will you give up on seeing your homeland and live here?”

“There’s no way I’d give up!!” Yuuto shouted reflexively.

Mysteriously, as he said the words, it was as if a cloud that had been over his heart was cleared away. Even though it was a relief, it was a bit annoying, since

he was still skeptical towards the old patriarch's philosophy.

Certainly, he hated life in Yggdrasil. He was fed up with the constant stomachaches and derision. But that wasn't the strongest feeling he held within himself.

What came to mind from deep within his heart was the image of his beloved childhood friend.

"I... I'm definitely going to make it back home to Mitsuki!!"

Beep! Beep! Beep deedeleeeee... ♪

As if in direct response to his soulful shout, a nostalgic melody echoed throughout the room.

At first, Yuuto thought he might be so desperate that it was making him hear things, but he did indeed feel the vibration from the smartphone clutched in his hand, indicating that a call was being received.

"Wait... are you... kidding me...?"

His mind instantly flashed back to that log of missed calls, that could only have occurred after he'd arrived in this world.

"No.... no way..."

His voice a hoarse whisper, he turned over his hand and stared at the screen to find the name Mitsuki Shimoya displayed on the screen.

If he wasted even a second in hesitation, this miracle could slip through his fingers. Panicking, yet struggling to be as careful as possible, Yuuto pressed the Answer Call button and held the phone to his ear.

"H-hello! Mitsuki?!"

"Y-Yuu-kun?! That's your voice, right, Yuu-kun?! Finally! Finally! You finally picked uuup! I-if you're alive, call and tell me so, you idiooooot! Waaaaaaaauuughhh!!"

An endless stream of tearful yelling poured out of the speaker. It made his ears ring, but he didn't even think of taking the phone away from his ear.

"Sh-shut up! Th-there was... a lot happened to me, okay?!" As he shouted

back at her, his own voice was choked with tears.

He knew that a man wasn't supposed to cry in front of others. That was doubly true if it was in front of a girl he liked, over the phone or not. And yet he couldn't do anything to stop his sobs.

"A-anyway, where are you right now?!" Mitsuki exclaimed.

"This is going to sound made-up, but I'm in some kinda alternate world called Yggdrasil. I-it's true, okay? Please believe me, I'm begging you!"

Even as he said it, it sounded so much like something out of a prank that he panicked and started trying to defend himself.

If Yuuto were in her situation, if that was the explanation that he got after not hearing from someone from over a month and finally getting in touch with them again, he'd scream, "Quit screwing around!" and be furious with them. He had no doubt of that. But that absurd explanation was completely the truth.

Yuuto's mind raced, wondering just how he was going to get Mitsuki to believe him.

"....Okay, I believe you."

"Th-that's pretty quick of you," he said, stunned. "Even I feel like I'm talking nonsense here." This was going so well that it felt strangely anticlimactic.

"I saw you disappear into thin air with my own eyes, Yuu-kun. Your body went all transparent, and then vanished."

"Oh, so that's what I looked like." Yuuto remembered his vision of Felicia at that moment. At first she'd been faint and blurry, but gradually grown more and more solid and real. A similar phenomenon must have happened to his body.

"I... I was so w-worried about you, you know," Mitsuki said. "I... I thought I might never see you again, never hear your voice again. This whole month, I've been so scared and sad and uuughhh..."

His childhood friend broke down crying again.

"...I'm sorry." Yuuto did the only thing he could, and apologized.

A woman’s tears were unfair, as the saying went, and Yuuto now understood that painfully well. There were a bunch of things he’d wanted to complain to Mitsuki about, but now that she’d started crying, his mind had gone blank, sending those thoughts off to who-knows-where.

“A-and then, I remembered the legend about Tsukimiya Shrine, and tonight’s the full moon, and it was really scary to do it alone but I made it to the shrine, thinking if I looked into an opposing mirror like you did, I might be able to go where you are...”

“Y-you idiot! Don’t do it!”

“You’re too late. I already tried it.”

“Wha?! S-seriously, that was so completely thoughtless of you!”

“I don’t wanna hear that from you, Yuu-kun,” she shot back. “I thought long and hard about it before resolving to do it.”

“Urk...!” Faced with such a clear and direct rebuttal, Yuuto couldn’t say a word in response.

Mitsuki was the type of indecisive girl who, whether it was what snack to buy or what clothes to get, was always making Yuuto wait endlessly for her to make up her mind. And yet, once in a while, she’d take action based on her emotions and do something completely crazy or reckless.

He knew about that part of her personality, but this time was especially bad. He was dumbfounded with amazement that she’d watched a person disappear before her eyes, and then was willing to attempt to do the same thing herself.

“But when I tried it, nothing happened... but I couldn’t just give up, and when I tried calling, it worked.”

“It work— Oh!!” Yuuto suddenly raised his voice and shouted, surprising Mitsuki.

“Wh-what is it?!”

“Mitsuki, you’re at the Tsukinomiya Shrine right now, right? In front of the mirror?”

“Uh-huh. Oh!” On the other end of the line, Mitsuki seemed to have realized

the same thing he was thinking.

In the small town where the two of them lived, there were places here and there where cell phones didn't get a signal. Apparently this was because cell phones only worked within the coverage range of things called "base stations." That meant that his town was so far out in the rural countryside that the whole area wasn't covered by the nearby base stations.

Even within Japan, there were situations like that. And despite that, he was getting signal from all the way in a completely different world. It should have been impossible. But there was no point in denying the reality of what was happening to him right now.

And, for every effect, there was a corresponding cause.

"Wh-what is this? What's happening, Yuu-kun?"

"Who knows," he answered. "Well, I can tell you one thing. Where I am right now, there's a mirror in front of me that's identical to the one at Tsukimiya Shrine, and it's giving off a weird light."

"Whaaat?! Th-the one here's doing that, too!"

"I figured. I'm willing to bet that this thing is definitely one of the factors in what pulled me into this alternate world."

"But when I tried doing the opposing mirror thing just now, I couldn't go over there!"

"Yeah, I had the same problem. Looking into opposing mirrors under the light of the full moon is part of it, but it probably isn't enough to make it work."

Yuuto remembered once learning at a cram school about the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions. Both the full moon and staring into the divine mirror using an opposing mirror were surely necessary conditions for crossing between worlds. But they weren't sufficient conditions.

There was some other condition that had to be fulfilled.

Yuuto was able to calmly accept that now. He didn't plan to say it out loud because it irritated him, but the fact that he was calm was thanks to the rowdy old man next to him with a strand of bamboo grass in his mouth.

“What do you mean, ‘it isn’t enough’?” Mitsuki cried. “What’s missing?!”

“That’s what I’d like to know. But unless I find out what it is, I’m not gonna be able to go back home.”

“...You’re kidding, right? You can come back right now, can’t you? You’re just lying to try and scare me, Yuu-kun. Y-you’re not gonna trick me that easily.”

“I wish I could tell you it was a lie. But it just means we’re missing something, is all. It doesn’t mean that I can’t come back at all—”

Beeep-beep! Beeep-beep!

An electronic tone unfitting for Yggdrasil cut off Yuuto’s words. It was the warning tone for the battery being almost dead. If this was going to happen, he should have been more careful with how he used the battery, but Yuuto put off those regrets for later.

“Damn, already out of time, huh? I’ll give you more details next time we talk. So please, wait for me!”

“All right! Promise me! You’ll be able to call me again, right?! This isn’t the last I’ll hear from you, right?!”

“That’s right. I’m really sorry I made you worry. Anyway, I’m in one piece and I’m in good health. So don’t worry about me. And I’ll definitely find a way to get back home!”

“Right... Right! That’s a promise. You’d better make it back here!”

“Yeah, I promise! I’ll absolutely get home.”

“I believe you. Yuu-kun, you’ve always kept the promises you made with me. So I know you’ll keep this one too—”

Mitsuki’s voice was suddenly cut off.

Yuuto stared down at the black screen. Pressing the power button did nothing now. Still, the smartphone had already served an incredible purpose for him.

He was absolutely fed up with this world, and didn’t want to stay here any longer; that feeling hadn’t changed. If he could, he wanted to go home right this second. He could already feel a sharp pain in his gut just thinking about how

those days of stomach aches and mockery were going to start up again.

But the gaping hole of loneliness in his heart had been filled, if not completely. He had been beaten down by his own solitude and weakness and lost his self-confidence, but being reunited with his childhood friend, even just over the phone, had revived a bit of the spark of life in him.

He was an optimistic and happy-go-lucky kid from the country who tended to get carried away, but he was also an old-fashioned type of guy.

“Keh-heh-heh, looks like luck’s started coming in your direction, hasn’t it?” Fárbauti snickered. “There you go! Can’t make light of what I said now, eh?”

The old patriarch crossed his arms, laughing confidently.

“...Hey, gramps. You said that not giving up is the trick to life, right?”

“Yep, that’s it exactly.”

“I see...”

For now, I’ll trust in those words, Yuuto decided.

The sound of Mitsuki’s tearful voice echoed in his mind, and wouldn’t go away. He couldn’t let the girl he liked feel sad. That single, strong feeling granted him a new resolve.

If it helps me see Mitsuki again, I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll make it through any pain or hardship. I’ll survive, even if I have to eat rocks to do it. And then...

“I’m gonna find a way back home!!”

Grasping his newfound determination, Yuuto’s hand clenched tighter around his smartphone.

The night in Iárnviðr was dark, and deep.

In the 21st century, even rural farming villages like the one Yuuto was from would see the light of street lamps, or light coming from the windows of houses whose owners were staying up late. However, Iárnviðr had gone completely quiet, and the only light in the darkness was from the full moon, and from the torch Felicia was carrying.

“Uhh, so Felicia, I just wanted to say... um...” Walking back from the sanctuary, Yuuto gathered his courage and put his gratitude into words. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me!”

They had parted ways with Fárbauti at the base of the Hliðskjálf, so it was just the two of them.

“Oh, um, you don’t have to worry about what happened at the hörgr,” Felicia said ashamedly. “Really, I was the one at fault...”

Perhaps he’d accidentally dredged up her feelings of guilt, contrary to his intentions.

Yuuto hastily waved his hands in denial. “No, no, that’s not it! Please, let’s not rehash that whole thing again. Uh, though I guess it’s probably my fault for bringing it up, but...!”

“Er...”

“So, earlier,” he said quickly, “I apologized to you, but I never thanked you. Felicia, this whole month, you’ve helped me out and taken care of me. You’ve even done stuff like staying up late at night to tend to me when I was sick even though you had work during the day, and I just thought... it would be wrong if I didn’t properly thank you for that.”

Yuuto started to get embarrassed at what he was saying partway through, and he had to look away. His cheeks felt strangely hot. He was glad it was nighttime. His face was surely bright red, but at least the reddish light of the torch would help to disguise that.

“Really... Thank you very much!” Yuuto bowed his head, putting all of his feelings into it.

It was something he should have said to her back at the hörgr. He’d been trying to get himself to spit it out since then, while they were descending the Hliðskjálf’s stairs and making their way through the city gate. Now they were almost back at Felicia and Loptr’s house, and he’d only just been able to screw up his courage, telling himself that there might never be another good moment to say it if he let this one slip by.

“I am not worthy of such thanks.” Felicia placed a hand to her heart and

closed her eyes. It was as if she were reflecting deeply on Yuuto's words.

After a moment, she nodded strongly in affirmation.

"All right, I've decided. Brother! I want you to serve as our mediator." As she entered the door to her home, Felicia shouted for Loptr.

"Uh?" Loptr, who had been in the middle of enjoying a nightcap before bed, was totally taken off guard, and responded with quite the silly look on his face. "What's this all about, Felicia? And hey, what happened with you? Were you not able to go back home?"

"That's right, so I'm going to need to stay here for a while longer. I'm sorry for the trouble." Yuuto bowed his head politely.

"Hm, looks like you found some guts in the meantime. You've got a better look about you now," Loptr said, with a soft smile.

"...Guts?" Yuuto couldn't help recalling how when he'd first met Sigrún, she had criticized him using a similar remark, about how he lacked resolve. He didn't feel like he'd changed since then, so he wasn't sure what to think.

"When you left here yesterday evening, you had those dead fish eyes, like someone who'd given up on everything. But right now, I can see a strong willpower coming from them."

"Did I really look that bad?"

"Yeah, you had the eyes of a total loser. Like a soldier from a defeated army."

"That's an awful way of putting it." Yuuto felt dejected at hearing it put so plainly, but the description also hit home.

It's true that, right up until I left to go to the hörgr, all I could think about was escaping from Yggdrasil, from my pain and suffering. I had a completely negative attitude.

Loptr might seem casual and a bit shallow at first glance, but he actually had a deep understanding of people and a good eye for seeing their true nature.

It's no wonder he's serving as the second-in-command at his age, Yuuto thought.

“Brother, I’ll ask that you refrain from using such disrespectful language to describe the person who’s going to become my sworn big brother.”

“...What? Er, umm, that reminds me, you mentioned something about a mediator earlier... you can’t be saying—?!”

“Yes,” Felicia confirmed. “I want you to serve as the mediator so that Lord Yuuto and I may exchange the Oath of the Outer Sibling Chalice.”

Felicia gave a small nod as she spoke, her tone calm and matter-of-fact.

By contrast, Loptr looked quite troubled. “A-are you serious, Felicia? You have the potential to rise through the ranks and become one of the future leaders of the Wolf Clan, and I’m not just saying that as your family. Do you understand just how much weight your Chalice vow holds?”

“I am fully aware.”

“Today, when I visited the palace grounds, I heard some of the things being said about Yuuto, and frankly speaking, his reputation isn’t a very good one. If you start treating him with deference as an older brother, it’s going to affect how you’re treated, too. They’ll say hurtful things like, ‘For someone supposedly called the Wise Wolf Ráðsviðr, she’s a blind fool when it comes to someone she takes an interest in.’ You still want to do this?” Loptr asked carefully.

“I still want to.” Felicia looked straight back into his eyes and nodded solemnly. “I have come to deeply admire Lord Yuuto’s kind and magnanimous nature, from the bottom of my heart. After being charmed so thoroughly, there is no way I could not seek his Chalice oath.”

Loptr sighed and gave a somewhat resentful glance in Yuuto’s direction, then picked up his cup and drank its contents all at once.

“...Whew!”

His breath stank of alcohol, and to Yuuto, it looked a little like he was drinking away his sorrows.

Even though he had only known Loptr for a night and a day, he had gotten the impression the man was unflappable, and so seeing him like this made Yuuto

feel like he'd done something terrible to him. He felt his body tense up to think of it.

"U-um, so, what exactly is an 'Outer Sibling'?" Yuuto asked.

"Oh, good grief. He doesn't even know that, and you're going to make him your big brother." Loptr laughed wryly to himself and shrugged his shoulders. Then he proceeded to explain it to Yuuto.

Just as those who share the same parent in a normal family are siblings, the concept was no different among clan families formed by the Chalice.

However, if two people under different sworn "parents" came to recognize and respect each other, and they decided to exchange the Oath of the Chalice, they could become sworn siblings, as well. Such a sibling from outside one's clan family was known as an Outer Sibling.

Exchanging that oath with someone meant they could go around proclaiming how they were so-and-so's brother, and so those with high status or good future prospects within a clan were advised to be prudent about who they swore such oaths with.

"That's—! Felicia, don't you think this is a bit crazy all of a sudden?!" Yuuto began to panic.

"No, I am very much in my right mind." Felicia smiled at him softly. There was no hesitation or sign of misgivings in her eyes.

"But someone like me isn't worthy of being your sworn sibling, Felicia," he argued.

"That isn't true in the least. It is my earnest wish that I might receive your Oath of the Chalice."

"How can you see that much value in me...?"

"Tee hee. In my opinion, the others in the clan just lack a discerning eye for character. Despite being a complete novice, you won against Rún in a fight. They laughed and dismissed your win as nothing more than luck, which says a lot about them. And with what just happened, you have shown how broad-minded and magnanimous you are!"

“Huh?” Yuuto was baffled.

“They see a lion’s cub and call it a mere cat, deriding it as a weak fool. Honestly, one wonders who the real fool is in that situation. In the near future, every one of them will surely be bowing at your feet, Lord Yuuto.”

“Ohh?” Loptr said, grinning mischievously. “Felicia’s intuition *is* often right... So he’s going to transform into something major, is he? All right then, this is my chance. How about it, Yuuto? Would you become my little brother, as well?”

Loptr stared expectantly at Yuuto. He’d asked in a joking tone, but his fervent stare was void of humor.

“Oh, my, you’re indiscriminate as always, Brother,” Felicia said. “You mean to say you’d try to recruit even the messenger of the goddess Angrboða to work under you?”

“Hey, he says that’s not who he is, right?” Loptr retorted. “Then there’s no problem. In order to revive the Wolf Clan, I desperately need any promising recruits I can get my hands on.”

“Seriously, both of you are putting way too much stock in me here...” Yuuto wearily slumped his shoulders.

After all of that, half because he was going along with the flow and half due to the combined pressure from the two insistent siblings, that night, Yuuto exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with each of them, with the qualifier that it would only be for until he was able to return to Japan.

“I hope that we get along well from here on, Big Brother,” Felicia beamed.

“Make our little sister cry, and you’ll pay for it, Little Brother,” Loptr snickered. “Ha ha ha.”

As thus, in this strange other world, Yuuto gained a new family.

ACT 3

The night after Yuuto had exchanged his Chalice Oath, a total first for him, he was in the hörgr talking to Mitsuki, reporting on his recent situation.

“...And that’s pretty much how things are, for now. I never thought I’d end up adopting a new family in another world.”

Their original assumption had been that he could only make contact on the night of the full moon, but figuring he should give it a try anyway, he’d made his way to the hörgr. Finding that he could get a signal just as if nothing was out of the ordinary was disappointing in its own way.

“Hmmm... actually, I think that makes me even more worried,” Mitsuki said.

“Eh? Why?”

“Don’t do anything with Felicia, okay?”

“Wha—! Th-there’s no way I’d do that! She’s... sh-she’s just my adopted little sister!”

“You’re stammering.”

“That’s ’cause you’re saying outrageous things all of a sudden.”

“Am I? I don’t think it’s that outrageous.”

“Well, look, if it’s a matter of whether I like her or hate her, I like her, but...”

“See!”

“Just let me finish. To me, she’s both the person at fault for bringing me here and the one who saved my life after I arrived. She’s like an older sister to me and a younger sister, my teacher and my interpreter, and... well, there’s a lot there. But nothing romantic.”

“Hmmm, well, I guess I’ll believe you. Then, what about Sigrún?”

“She’s even more completely out of the question,” Yuuto replied wearily. “In fact, even if I made a pass at her, I bet she’d reject me by kicking me so hard in

the crotch that it'd lift me into the air..."

He shuddered at the thought. Just by imagining it for a moment, he could feel the muscles between his legs tighten uncomfortably.

Perhaps because she still couldn't get over that first fight, Sigrún had made Yuuto accompany her in sword training a few times now, whenever his fluctuating health was allowing for it. He'd been made bitterly aware each time just how absurdly great her physical abilities were. If he wasn't careful around her, he might literally end up unable to have children.

It was true that he thought she was a girl of outstanding beauty, but his strongest and most direct feelings toward her could be summed up by the phrase "let sleeping dogs lie."

"Anyway! You're going to come back home, right?" Mitsuki demanded. "So, no messing around with the girls over there!"

"Heh heh. Yeah, yeah, I understand."

"Wha— Why are you laughing?!"

"It's nothing."

"If it's nothing, then why did you laugh?!"

"Honest, it really is nothing," Yuuto repeated, cracking a smile.

There was no way he could tell Mitsuki the truth, that her getting jealous over Felicia and Sigrún made him happy. He didn't have any right to tell her.

They were both aware of the other's affections by now. However, Yuuto had decided that he would only ask her aloud and officially confirm it after he'd made it back to Japan.

He had every intention of making it back, but had no idea how long it would take. With things so uncertain, he didn't want her to be tied down.

"Still, it's so strange, isn't it?" Mitsuki said. "Not just that you got sent to another world, Yuu-kun, but that we can still talk on the phone like this. You said it was because of that metal called 'álfkipfer,' right?"

"Yeah, and that damn stuff's got me living a charmed life, all right." With a bit

of sarcasm, Yuuto shrugged his shoulders.

That metal was seriously a total mystery. It seemed the extraordinary powers of the Einherjar and the musical magic of the galldr also made use of the same power that was contained within álfkipfer, a divine energy called ásmegin. And the strangest thing about it was...

“So, the mirror over here, you think it’s the same?” Mitsuki asked.

“I’d say it’s a safe bet.”

Even now, during their phone call, the divine mirror in front of Yuuto was giving off a faint light. More than likely, the mirror back in Japan was producing the exact same phenomenon.

He’d never before heard of a metal that gave off light of its own accord. Yuuto’s head was filled with questions of how and why a fantastical material like that had come to be in Japan. Though, at this point, those sorts of details didn’t really matter to him.

The point was, although Yuuto didn’t understand the logic or mechanism behind it, there was no mistaking that the two worlds were connected through these mysterious divine mirrors. And while that connection might not be “wide” enough for a person to travel through right now, electromagnetic waves like the signal his smartphone used could get through.

The two worlds weren’t cut off from one another.

Yuuto just needed to find a way to get the connection in the same condition it had been in when he was brought to this world — wide enough for a person to pass through again.

“Hmmm, but I still wonder about it, Yuu-kun,” Mitsuki said. “Like, maybe you really were summoned to that world because you’ve got some sort of mission or destiny there, or something. So maybe if you take care of whatever that is, you’ll automatically get sent back home?”

“Hrm... A mission, huh?” Though he was ashamed to admit it, he felt like he’d spent this past month constantly making a disgrace of himself. When his mental state had hit rock-bottom, Fárbauti and Mitsuki had helped him out of it, but he still couldn’t imagine himself as the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, as Felicia kept

claiming.

Still, it was a fact that Felicia had been praying in ritual supplication for her clan's victory, and she insisted that she had felt her magic grasp hold of that when summoning him.

"In other words, can I go home if I help the Wolf Clan win?" Yuuto wondered. "Easy enough to say. I can't even have a real conversation with these people, so what am I supposed to do? It's like a game with the difficulty set to 'Impossible.'"

Yuuto was nothing more than a completely run-of-the-mill second-year middle schooler. He didn't understand the first thing about politics, economics, or military strategy. He also didn't have the sort of ridiculous power or abilities that would let him turn the tables all by himself, like the main character of a manga or game.

How was someone like him supposed to be able to save something as large in scale as a country?

Honestly, he had no idea.

Beams of sunlight poured down from above, causing the surface of the river to glitter beautifully.

The sounds of the flowing water and the chirping of small birds were mixed with voices bright with playful laughter.

"Ahhh, quite a view, isn't it, Yuuto?" Loptr cried.

"...I can't deny that."

"What's wrong?" Loptr asked with a broad smile. "If you're a man, you should speak your mind more clearly."

"Um, I don't think I'm in a position where I can do that." Yuuto smiled stiffly back, scratching his head awkwardly.

Out ahead of them were Felicia and Sigrún, as well as three other beautiful young girls, frolicking in the river and splashing water on each other. Their wet clothes were slightly transparent, which was quite arousing.

Yuuto had found himself in this situation after accepting Loptr's quite forceful invitation. He'd said that going out to have fun together was the best way to deepen their new sibling bond, but...

"When you think of summer fun, it's gotta be the river, am I right?"

As his new sworn older brother flashed him a thumbs-up, Yuuto wondered if maybe he'd made the wrong choice.

"I mean, why did you only bring girls?" Yuuto asked.

"ᚹᚨᚷ?" Loptr tilted his head quizzically.

It seemed that the effects of the Connections galldr had expired, so he could no longer understand Yuuto's words. Loptr seemed to realize this quickly, and he began humming a melody that was very familiar by now.

"There, that should do it. So, what were you saying?" Loptr picked up the conversation right where it had left off.

Apparently, Loptr could use all of the galldr spells that Felicia knew. In addition, his skills with a sword were supposed to be above even Sigrún's. Yuuto couldn't resist feeling jealous at such a ridiculously overpowered man.

Yuuto shrugged and repeated his question. "I was asking why you only brought girls with us."

"Eh? But if I brought guys, there'd be nothing good to look at there."

"W-well, I guess you have a point there. Actually, Loptr, I never realized you were such a playboy."

Yuuto had learned that all three of those other girls were Loptr's mistresses. Unlike in Japan, here in Yggdrasil, a man of means and dependability could freely take on many lovers. This man was the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, so it would be strange for him not to have at least one partner.

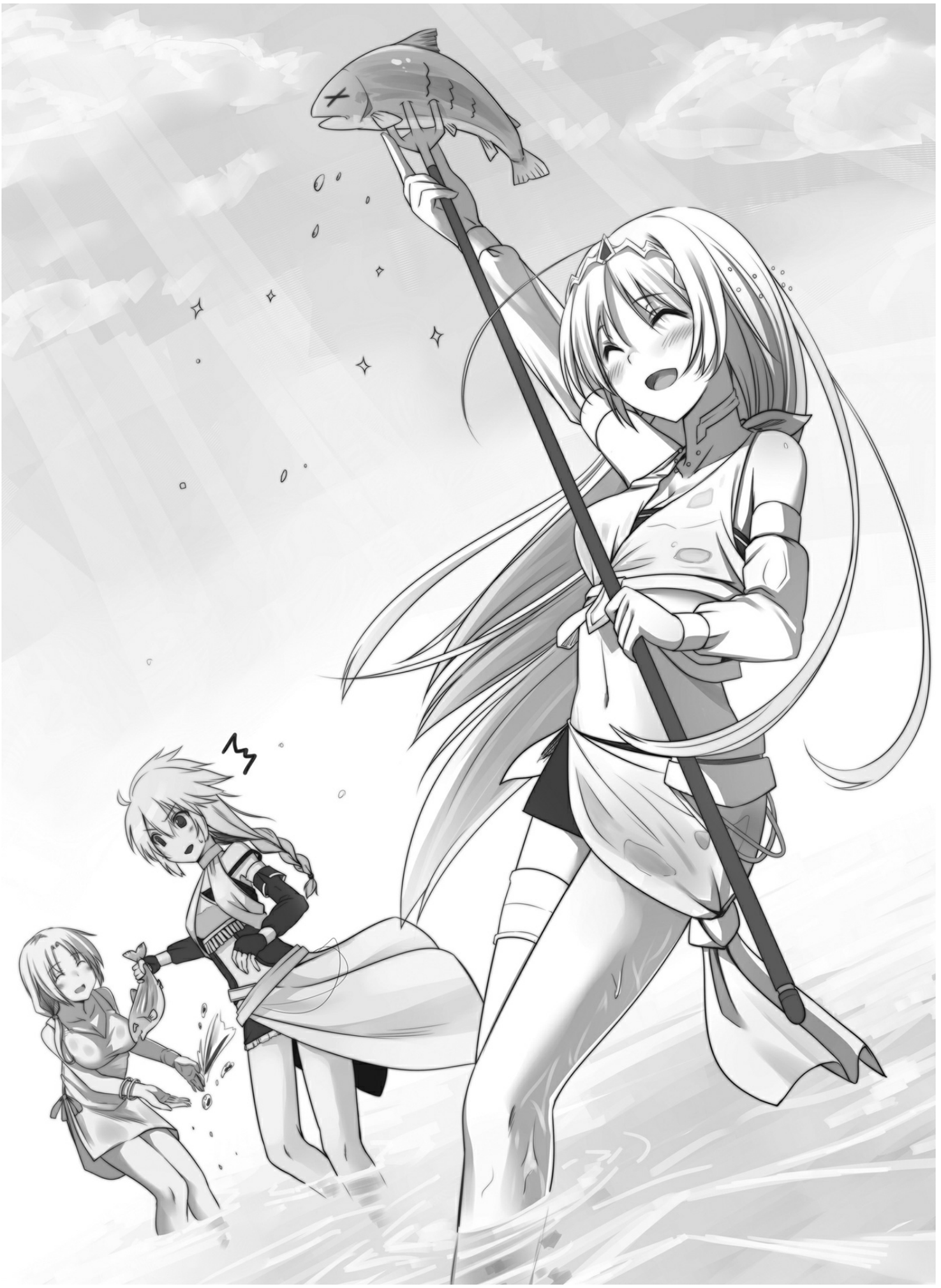
They say "God doesn't give with both hands," but that's a total lie, Yuuto found himself thinking. Right here was a man who had everything!

"Mm?" Just then, Yuuto caught something out of the corner of his eye. An entire stretch of the river's shoreline was stained an almost ominous-looking black. "Wait, could that be...?"

Just as Yuuto squinted to get a better look— “Big Brother!” Felicia called out to him.

When Yuuto turned to look, he saw that she’d cleanly skewered a fish with a wooden harpoon, and was hoisting it up to show off to him. She was normally so refined and ladylike, but it would seem she had a bit of a wild side, as well.

Her face was absolutely beaming, and it communicated plainly for all to see the deep affection she held towards Yuuto.



As Yuuto found himself drawn to smile and wave back at her, he suddenly felt a dark chill run down his spine.

“Hey, Yuuto,” said Loptr. “I know this is me saying this, but if you’re planning to take Felicia as your wife, I won’t forgive you if you fool around with other women, okay?”

He said the words in a light, joking tone, but Loptr’s eyes weren’t laughing at all.

It looked like this guy was a bit of the overprotective older brother type. He wasn’t obstinate enough to break out a line like “I’ll never let you lay a finger on my sister!” or whatever, but his strong desire to find a good man to make his sister happy came across loud and clear.

Loptr had lost both his mother and father, and Felicia was his last living blood relative. His feelings when it came to her were understandable.

“L-like I already told you, I have a girl I like back in my homeland,” Yuuto said quickly. “I’m not going to do anything like that.”

“Ohh, really? In any case, if you make my little sister cry... I’ll kill you, okay?”

“Ah... ahahaha.” Yuuto could only manage a dry, hoarse laugh in response.

Yuuto began to wonder, half-jokingly and half-seriously, whether he might meet his untimely death here in this world due to an enraged older brother.

“Raagh, damn you! Just freaking light already!” Spitting out the words in frustration, Yuuto moved the shortbow in his hand back and forth at high speed.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Over and over.

“Aagh, come *on*! Why the hell won’t it light?!”

Groaning aloud, Yuuto glared down at the wooden board in front of him with so much hatred that one might assume it had killed his parents.

There were several small, blackened notches in the board, one of which had a wooden rod inserted into it. The shortbow's string was wrapped around the wooden rod in such a way that moving the bow back and forth would cause the rod to rotate in place.

It was a method of making fire using friction, known as the bow drill method. It was supposedly a common way of starting a fire in Yggdrasil, but despite his working at it for almost five minutes, there wasn't even any smoke.

His arms were really starting to hurt, to the point he couldn't help but want to grumble out loud.

When he heard a tired *sigh* from above, Yuuto looked up to see Sigrún, who had likely come over to check on him, looking down at him with an exasperated expression.

"ᛚᛖᛜᛞ: ᛃᚠᚷ ᚷᛟᛉ." With that, Sigrún forcefully snatched the bow out of Yuuto's hands and re-wrapped the string around the wooden rod.

In less than ten seconds, there were puffs of white smoke rising from the board.

"Wait, but how?!" Yuuto raised his voice in wonder.

Sigrún ignored him, and with a well-practiced motion, she collected the small pile of blackened sawdust — now containing a tiny, fragile ember — and transferred it to a piece of cotton made from Osmunda fern.

She then placed the cotton into the center of the thin twigs and sticks that had been piled up as kindling, and blew gently. After a few moments, the fire crackled to life.

"Ohh, wow!" Yuuto found himself vocalizing his amazement and clapping his hands in applause.

Sigrún frowned at him with a complicated expression, and made a shooing gesture at him with her hands.

Even without understanding her language, Yuuto could understand that she was telling him that he was in the way.

With nothing left for him to do, Yuuto headed over to where Felicia was.

As Yuuto approached, Felicia turned around as if she could sense his presence, and greeted him happily. “ᛒᛉᛟᛞᛖᛉ!”

It warmed his heart all the more after the cold shoulder he’d just gotten from Sigrún.

She chanted the Connections galldr without Yuuto having to say anything. The process had become second nature to her.

“Were you able to start the fire?” Felicia asked.

“Not at all. Sigrún ended up shooing me away.”

“Oh dear,” Felicia giggled.

She was busy using a knife to gut the fish she had caught earlier. If this were Japan, a girl of around her age would surely be grossed out by such an activity, but Felicia didn’t seem to mind at all, grabbing and tossing out the guts with her bare hands.

“Hey, Felicia, about that knife, is it made of gold?” Yuuto asked.

“Big Brother, this is bronze. Gold is much too valuable to use for something like cooking.”

“This is bronze? But it’s not green at all.”

The bronze Yuuto was familiar with was a mossy, greenish color, like the old statue in his school’s courtyard. But the knife gripped in Felicia’s slender, pale fingers was a bright golden color. It had a reflective luster that didn’t bear any resemblance to his image of what bronze was like.

“I think what you are describing is likely bronze that has tarnished.”

“Ahh, I get it. So the green stuff was tarnish.”

Thinking back now, that statue in the school courtyard was exposed to the elements. After months and years of wind and rain, of course it would have tarnished. It would be strange for it to not have done so.

“Huh, so bronze starts out as this color,” he mused.

“Hee hee, this is the color of bronze knives and other blades, but the bronze we use in things like mirrors is a silver-white color.”

“Wait, there’s bronze that color, too?”

“Yes, its color varies by the amount of tin you mix with it.”

“Huh, really...” Yuuto took another, closer look at the bronze knife.

It had a novel appearance for a Japanese person like Yuuto, whose image of kitchen cutlery was the dull silver sheen of a steel *hocho*-style kitchen knife.

“Hmm... but wait, how come you’re using a bronze knife in the first place? Why not iron?”

“Oh my. Big Brother, you say such funny things.”

“What? No, I mean, isn’t it normal to use iron?”

“Er...? Ah, I see now. Iron is a gift from the heavens, after all. So it is used widely in the land beyond the heavens you hail from, then.”

“Wait, hold on, I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Yuuto objected. “Iron is a gift from the heavens?”

“Yes. To us, iron is something incredibly precious, which can only be obtained from stars that fall from the sky. It is even referred to as the metal of the gods. To trade for it, one would need five or even ten times its amount in gold.”

“You’re kidding me...” Yuuto was so shocked that his reply was in a quiet, raspy voice.

Yuuto had grown up as the son of a traditional swordsmith, and so iron had been a familiar part of his life for as long as he could remember. And that was supposed to be five to ten times more valuable than gold? That would mean even the failed pieces heaped in the storage building at his father’s workshop would be a literal mountain of treasure in this world.

“Huh? Wait, but that’s weird.” Yuuto’s head tilted to one side as a sudden doubt emerged.

Felicia had just claimed that they could only obtain iron from “falling stars” — in other words, meteorites — and nowhere else. But *that shouldn’t be the case at all.*

“Wait, it couldn’t be...!” One potential answer shot through Yuuto’s mind like

a flash, leaving him stunned.

Until now he'd had a vague, general understanding that Yggdrasil was a world with a fairly primitive level of civilization and technology. But he hadn't thought it would be to this extent.

Yuuto spoke through clenched teeth, resentfully. "I've finally found something only I can do, but... if this is supposed to be my 'mission,' then the god of fate has a real twisted sense of humor."

That night, Yuuto spurred his tired body up the stairs of the Hliðskjálf and stood before the divine mirror.

He'd come to call Mitsuki... but that wasn't all.

Tonight and tonight alone, there was something he needed to do first that was more important.

"Yep, there it is... so I *am* connected to the internet."

He'd speculated that since phone calls went through, perhaps this would work too, and it was just as he'd surmised.

He used voice recognition to perform an online search, and the search results came back just like normal.

"But it's gotta be this, of all things..."

A painful feeling filled his heart.

It was a path he had aspired to ever since he was a small child. But, sparked by his mother's death, it was a path he'd decided to turn away from.

The old Japanese saying, "If you hate a monk, you'll even hate his robes" was an apt one. Yuuto couldn't rid himself of the revulsion he now felt towards anything related to his father.

But...

If it helps me see Mitsuki again, I'll do whatever it takes. I'll make it through any pain or hardship. He remembered the words he'd sworn to himself after being encouraged by the old patriarch Fárbauti, and all too late, he started to

regret them.

There was no way he could have known that one of the trials put upon him would be something so clearly made to spite him.

What frustrated him most of all was that there didn't seem to be any choice in the matter, either.

The Wolf Clan was already on a countdown to its destruction. By the time this city fell into enemy hands, neither Loptr nor Felicia would likely still be alive.

Yuuto didn't want to lose his family again.

"Good grief, what is this thing you had to tell me so late at night?" Loptr yawned heavily, and shot Yuuto a reproachful glare. "I have to head out to work early tomorrow morning, you know?"

His mood was understandable, for he had already retired for the night only to be forcefully roused out of bed.

Indeed, it was incredibly rude for a younger brother subordinate like Yuuto to have woken his superior like this, and so the fact that Loptr was letting him off with only a mild complaint showed just how lenient an older brother he was.

"Brother, try to pull yourself together, will you?" Felicia reproached him. "Big Brother Yuuto says he has something important to discuss with us."

"It's funny. I'm the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, and the head of this household, and yet right now I can't help but feel I'm at the bottom of the pecking order here." Loptr gave an affected sigh at his sister's unsparing attitude towards him.

Yuuto felt a pang of sympathy for him. He was a good brother who cared deeply about his little sister, but that wasn't going to earn him any reprieve from her.

And, in a way, Yuuto was the root of that problem, too.

"I'm confident that this is far more important than what you have planned for tomorrow," Yuuto said.

"Oh, really now. That's big talk. If it turns out to be nothing special, you'll

regret...”

“I know how to smelt and refine iron.”

“What did you say?!”

“Huuuh?!”

The two golden-haired siblings goggled at him in unison. At that moment, their expressions were mirror images of each other.

They really are related, Yuuto reflected, his amusement somewhat at odds with the seriousness of the situation.

“You’re not lying or joking, right?” His usual confident smile gone, Loptr was utterly serious, and looked Yuuto straight in the eyes.

In an instant, the Wolf Clan second-in-command’s intense drowsiness had been banished completely. That was how shocking Yuuto’s single statement was.

“If I were, I would have picked a better time for it,” Yuuto assured him. He wasn’t cheeky enough to disturb the sleep of the man whose house he was freeloading in for the sake of a joke. “I found several deposits of iron sand on the banks of the river. If we use that, we can make a sizable amount of iron. It seems everyone here mainly uses bronze, so if you had iron, it would be a large power-up for your army, right?”

“It would. Of course it would.” Loptr spoke conclusively, without an ounce of doubt.

Loptr himself hadn’t yet had the opportunity to handle the stuff himself, but he’d learned by word of mouth that weapons and armor forged from meteoric iron were far stronger than conventional ones made from bronze.

If he could get such extremely powerful weapons into the hands of his rank and file soldiers, there was no mistaking that the Wolf Clan army would experience a sharp jump in strength.

“It wouldn’t just be a matter of escaping our current danger,” Loptr continued. “It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that we could launch our own assault, and take back the lands stolen from us by the Claw Clan.”

“Amazing!” Felicia cried. “My intuition was correct, after all! Big Brother, you are indeed the messenger sent by Angrboða herself to grant victory to our Wolf Clan.”

“Like I said, I’ve never heard of that name. And besides... I can’t guarantee that it’ll actually work out well.” Yuuto threw cold water on the two siblings’ excitement.

“Mm? What do you mean? You know the method, right?” Loptr asked.

“Yes, as information. It’s just... I’ve never actually tried it myself.”

Just once, he’d had the chance to assist with one portion of the iron-refining process. No, saying “assist” would be presumptuous.

As something of a workplace experience field trip, he’d only been allowed to be involved with a few of the highlights. It wasn’t like he’d been able to observe and work on the whole process from beginning to end.

It was just like knowing how to ride a bicycle.

To ride a bicycle, you maintained your center of balance while rotating the pedals with your feet. You came to a stop by gripping the brakes. You changed direction by turning the handlebars.

One could describe the knowledge of how to ride a bicycle this way, but by no means did that mean that just hearing that information was enough for someone to ride successfully.

Nowadays, the act of riding a bicycle came as easily and naturally to Yuuto as breathing, but it was something he’d learned the hard way back at the beginning of elementary school, falling over and over, until his body itself remembered. It was only after acquiring that experience, learning those little tricks and aspects of riding that couldn’t be easily described with words, that he could truly ride well.

To ride while doing a wheelie, you just focus your weight to the back and yank the handlebars upward to make the front wheel rise into the air, and afterwards, you just maintain your balance. Even though he had the knowledge of how to do it, Yuuto could easily see himself failing spectacularly were he actually to try it.

“More than likely, there will be a lot of trial and error, and I’ll fail many times,” Yuuto said. “Of course, I’m confident that I will eventually succeed. But I can’t promise that it’ll go smoothly in the meantime.”

“Hmm...”

“And also... I won’t be able to accomplish it by myself, and there will be a bunch of expenses involved, too,” Yuuto added. “I don’t have the power to arrange for any of that, either. So that’s why, um...”

At the end, Yuuto had trouble getting the words out.

He didn’t have the courage to say it.

It was far too shameless a request to make.

“...All right,” Loptr said. “I’ll find a way to take care of that part of it.”

“A-are you sure?!” Yuuto was so surprised at how easily his request was accepted that he couldn’t help but question it.

Loptr shrugged his shoulders and gave a wry smile. “It is a pretty preposterous claim on its face, to be sure. My other clan brothers might say I’ve lost my mind. But come on, Yuuto. You’re my little brother, and I’m your big brother.”

“Th-thank you very much, Big Brother!!” Yuuto was once again filled with admiration at Loptr’s generosity.

Since arriving in Yggdrasil, Yuuto had done nothing but shame himself. In the city of Iárnviðr, if one mentioned black hair, there was no one who hadn’t heard of Sköll, the Devourer of Blessings. He couldn’t even speak the language here properly.

And to the people of a world who only knew of iron as a gift that fell from the heavens, Yuuto’s claim would sound like a pipe dream.

His older brother was offering to trust in Yuuto and his suspicious claims, with no proof, and allocate both capital and personnel to him.

Yuuto was so grateful he felt he might cry.

“So this is the workshop belonging to one of the greatest master blacksmiths of this generation, huh?” Yuuto whispered to himself as he looked up at the building made of sun-dried bricks.

He could hear the *Clang! Clang!* of the hammer echoing from inside, a sound that made him feel nostalgic.

He was in a corner of the residential part of town surrounding the palace walls. It was an area where relatively more well-off members of the Wolf Clan lived.

It was fresh scenery for Yuuto, who so far hadn’t set foot anywhere other than the city’s main thoroughfare and the bazaar.

“Wow, it seems kind of impressive,” Yuuto murmured.

Though Yuuto had taken note of Loptr’s praise of this smith, he hadn’t really been awed by it. His own father had been lauded and praised by all the hobbyists and lovers of the fine arts as a master craftsman of the modern era.

So what?! a voice in his heart shouted in rebellion.

“Yes, I’m sure you’ll find a great deal of help and assistance here,” Loptr said. “And also, and this is the most important part, this master smith is someone I trust deeply. We can’t afford any chance of letting the knowledge of how to refine iron reach our neighbors, after all.”

He made sure to speak those last words in a low voice only Yuuto could hear.

With that imposing implication hanging in the air, Yuuto gulped nervously.

“Ingrid, I’m coming in.” Loptr gave a casual greeting as he opened the door, and made his way inside.

“U-um, pardon me for intruding!” A little timidly, Yuuto bowed his head and followed suit.

In an instant, hot air blew against him. A furnace made from clay was blazing brightly, and at an anvil stood a lone young girl swinging her hammer with intense concentration.

“Wait, it’s a girl?!” Yuuto shouted, doubting his eyes.

He'd heard this was a master blacksmith of remarkable ability, whose name was known even in distant lands, so he'd pictured a sour-faced and gruff middle-aged man. But the young girl in front of him was actually quite cute. She looked around the same age as him, with unruly, short hair.

The girl stopped swinging her hammer and turned around. "Hm? Oh hey, it's Big Brother Loptr. Long time no see. Do you need to order a new weapon or something?"

She wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve and gave them a lively smile.

"Actually, there's a favor I'd like to ask of you," Loptr said. "It's a major job."

"Oh, really?" There was a sparkle of interest in her slightly upturned eyes. She hadn't been the least bit hesitant at the mention of a major job. If anything, it seemed to excite her.

"Yuuto, let me introduce her to you. This is Ingrid. She's the youngest of our Wolf Clan's five proud Einherjar, and bearer of the rune Ívaldi, the Birther of Blades."

"I-it's nice to meet you. M-my name is Yuuto Suoh." Yuuto frantically straightened his posture as he introduced himself, and then humbly lowered his head.

In the past month, he'd come to learn that in Yggdrasil, Einherjar were seen as special and important. And she'd also called Loptr her "Big Brother." Since she wasn't related to him by blood, that could only mean that they shared the same clan parent via the Oath of the Chalice.

She looked no older than Yuuto, but there was no mistaking the implication that meant she had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice directly with the clan patriarch, and was at least a candidate for the upper echelons of the clan.

He decided it would behoove him to avoid giving a bad impression of himself.

Unfortunately...

"Tch. We've already met, jerk." Ingrid shot a fierce glare at Yuuto and clicked her tongue in irritation.

“Wha?” Taken aback and unsure what was going on, Yuuto looked more closely at the girl in front of him. But he still didn’t recognize her. “Um, have we met somewhere before?”

“Yeah, we *did*, and just three days ago, in fact!”

“Wha— Huh?!”

“You still can’t remember, huh? Well, that’s rich. You can go and kick a girl’s leg at full strength and then just forget about it, huh? That’s pretty damn brazen.”

“Ah... Aaah!” At that, Yuuto finally remembered. She was the girl whose leg he’d kicked by accident while stomping around in a fit back while depressed and sulking.

The faces of people from a foreign land had a tendency to look quite similar to him. He remembered that the girl from back then had had red hair, but he hadn’t properly remembered her face.

On the other hand, from her perspective, Yuuto had a face and hair color that were both incredibly rare in Yggdrasil. There was no way she could have forgotten him.

There was no way the two of them could have foreseen at this point in time that their chance reunion would, quite literally, make history for the world of Yggdrasil.

ACT 4

“Ugh, even in the winter, this place is always so damn hot!” Yuuto complained.

“Can it, Yuuto!” the red-haired girl shouted back. “Focus on moving your hands, not your lips!”

“I know!” Grumbling and swearing to himself, Yuuto scooped up more iron sand with the shovel he was holding and carefully deposited it into the blazing furnace.

On the opposite side of the furnace, Ingrid did the same, dripping with sweat as she dumped in a shovelful of charcoal.

Along with the two of them, there were about ten men quietly engaging themselves in their own part of the work, with everyone crammed into a workshop only ten meters long on each side. The knowledge of how to refine iron couldn’t be allowed to leak out and fall into the hands of their neighboring clans, so these men were trusted protégés that Loptr had hand-picked after several rounds of careful screening.

It had now been nearly half a year since Yuuto’s arrival in Yggdrasil.

The tatara furnace was a clay, foot-bellows furnace that had originated during Japan’s Yayoi Period, between 300 BC and 300 AD. In the modern era, one might still see the tatara method on display at a university’s cultural festival, or being used as a form of extracurricular training for students at a specialized vocational school.

Yuuto figured it was unlikely he’d be able to create the highest quality of weapons-grade Japanese steel, called *tamahagane.* But he’d been pretty sure he could at least produce some decent-quality iron within about a month.

Unfortunately, the results had been one failure after another, and even now, he had yet to succeed at refining iron even once.

In the end there was a huge difference between having just a smattering of

knowledge and having real world experience when it came time to put the real thing into practice.

“Hey Ingrid, the fire doesn’t look strong enough,” Yuuto said. “Pump the bellows some more.”

“I’m already on it!” Ingrid called.

Ingrid and a few of the men stamped their feet on the wide bellows board, pumping air into the furnace. This accelerated the combustion of the furnace fire, making it run hotter.

If one asked why humans had historically turned to using bronze weapons first rather than the superior iron, the answer was because the processes for smelting and refining iron required far greater heat.

A hotter flame required more oxygen, but there was a limit to the amount of oxygen found naturally in the air. Thus, it was only using techniques to pump large amounts of air quickly into the furnace that made it possible to produce flames hot enough to refine iron.

“Hey, Yuuto, this should be enough, right?” Ingrid asked.

“Hm, yeah, that should do it for now.”

Checking the color and strength of the flames, Yuuto stopped to take a short breather.

At this point in time, Yuuto had finally become able to understand and speak the local language, though not completely, of course. If he couldn’t communicate, then he couldn’t get anything done. It seemed that the necessity created by this kind of forced immersion had sped up his ability to learn the language.

“Good work today, Big Brother,” Felicia praised him. “You must be tired.”

Of course, that was in large part thanks to the assistance of Felicia, who could use her Connections galldr to enable him to understand the meanings of the words as he heard them.

Yuuto shook his head at her. “We’re not done yet. This is where the work really starts, in fact. Now that we’ve got the right temperature, from here on,

we have to keep this up for three whole days and nights without stopping to rest or sleep."

"S-sir, it isn't right to make the second-in-command do work like this..." a man objected.

"It's fine, it's fine," Loptr said. "The fate of the Wolf Clan depends on this work. Let me do it."

The golden-haired man took a shovel from the disconcerted worker, and began the work of scooping the iron sand to drop into the furnace.

Because of his elegant, noble figure, it looked out of place for him to be doing the kind of sweaty manual labor normally done by, for lack of a more polite term, the people at the bottom.

"What about your own work, Big Brother Loptr?" Yuuto shouted from the other side, without halting his own work.

"I blew it off to come over here."

"Hey!"

"Ha ha ha, only joking," Loptr snickered. "Well, it *is* true that I was so concerned with how things were going here that I couldn't concentrate well on my own work."

"No faith in me, huh?" Yuuto asked.

"If we don't get results soon, things are going to turn ugly, after all."

"...I understand, Big Brother."

The two of them continued their work in silence after that.

The next morning, a silver-haired girl popped in to the workshop for a visit.

"Yuuto, you're working hard, I see," Sigrún said. "I came to see how things were doing on your front."

"Oh, hey, Sigrún," Yuuto responded without turning to face her. "Morning."

The success or failure of the tatara method rested entirely on control of the

fire's temperature. If it was even a little too hot or too cool, the process would fail. Yuuto hadn't managed a success even once so far, so he couldn't take his eyes off of the furnace for even a second.

"Heh, you're finally starting to look a little more in shape," Sigrún said.

"Yeah, thanks to this." As they exchanged some light banter, Yuuto punctuated his remark by thrusting his shovel into the imposing mountain of iron sand piled up beside the furnace.

The tatara furnace method required very large volumes of charcoal and iron sand. Over these past five months, Yuuto had constantly helped out with the heavy work of chopping down trees and transporting the logs.

As for the process of smelting and refining the iron, he was working without rest for three days and nights at a time, continuously shoveling the heavy iron sand into the furnace. It was the kind of work that was exhausting just to think about. And that kind of work had put some muscle on him.

Also, by this point in time, his body was finally starting to adjust to the food of Yggdrasil, so he wasn't suffering from abdominal pains or sickness anymore.

Yuuto was fourteen, in the middle of the prime of his growth. He'd been eating a lot and working hard, and had grown quite a bit taller over the past half a year.

"So, do you think it will work this time?" Sigrún asked.

"I'll make it work."

"Good answer." She smiled slyly. "...Hey, look out!" Sigrún cried out in warning as Yuuto stumbled over his own feet.

"Whoa—?!"

His face came dangerously close to plunging into the furnace, but in an instant, Sigrún grabbed the back of his clothes and pulled him back to safety.

"Seriously, this is what I get for complimenting you."

"S-sorry. Thanks, though. You really saved me." Wiping off the sudden, cold sweat, Yuuto exhaled in relief.

Perhaps because of his intense focus, he'd completely blocked out any sense of fatigue, but he'd been at this work for a whole day and night without rest. Apparently, the exhaustion had gone to his legs.

"Give me that," Sigrún ordered. "This kind of thing is just my line of work."

"But, I can't..."

"You have to last three days and three nights, right? I'll take over for you for a bit, so sit down and rest your body." Sigrún somewhat forcefully took the shovel from Yuuto.

Yuuto got a sense of déjà vu. He remembered a time when he had been trying to light a fire, and something similar had happened.

Back then, Sigrún had been completely exasperated with him. But now, despite her curt words, he could sense that she was being more considerate and respectful toward him.

Things had changed.

"All right! With that, we're done with the bellows phase!" With his declaration, Yuuto took a few steps back on wobbly legs, and finally dropped to sit on the ground with a *thud.*

The walls of the clay furnace had become thin, and gouts of flame were spouting from inside. It had been three full days and nights since setting the fire, and they had finally reached the fated fourth day.

The workers pulled the ventilation pipes off of the furnace one by one, and sealed the openings with clay.

As Yuuto watched them, Ingrid came over to him.

"Not long now, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah, now we just wait for the fire to cool down a bit and then break apart the clay furnace." Nodding to himself, Yuuto grabbed a hoe and got to his feet. His exhaustion had reached its peak, but he just couldn't sit still.

He walked over and stood still next to the furnace for a while, inspecting the fire's strength.

“Okay, let’s break it!”

“All right!” Ingrid cried.

Ingrid picked up a hoe and stood next to Yuuto.

The flames were still burning inside the furnace, filling the air around them with heat, but the fire had grown much weaker compared to when they had been pumping it to full strength.

Yuuto set the hoe against the upper rim of the furnace, and pulled with all his might. Ingrid followed suit next to him.

The clay furnace walls had been pretty thick when they’d first built and dried it, but after three days of exposure to the powerful flames within, the clay was now brittle and thin, and it fell apart easily with their combined strength.

Sparks flew into the air, and a few blew into their faces, but they ignored those and continued.

At last, all of the tatara furnace’s walls were pulled away, and in the center lay the metal product, known as a bloom. It glowed bright orange like molten lava.

“Nice work, Yuuto!” Ingrid cried. “We did it!”

She turned to Yuuto and held up her open palm to him.

“You too, Ingrid. Thanks.” Without missing a beat, Yuuto reached up and gave her a high-five.

Both of them had expended everything of themselves, body and soul, in the work they’d just completed.

All that was left was to let the bloom cool for two hours, then get it outside and cool it further with snow and ice.

“Hey. Yuuto, why don’t you go get a bit of sleep?” she asked.

“The same goes for you, Ingrid. Go rest.”

The two of them had worked without sleep up until this point, and both had dark bags under their eyes.

However...

“I’d be too worried about how it’s going to turn out,” Ingrid said. “How the hell could I sleep?”

“The same goes for me.”

They both laughed.

For a quarter of a year, they had worked together towards the same goal, sharing the joys and sorrows that came with the task. They’d become close friends who really understood each other.

“Do you think... it’ll finally work this time?” Yuuto asked as he dropped to sit on the floor, staring ahead at the still-glowing bloom.

He’d proudly stated to Loptr and Sigrún that he would definitely succeed, but that had been when they were still midway through the work. Now that his part in it was finished and there was nothing more for him to do, Yuuto suddenly felt overcome by anxiety.

“Have faith in yourself,” Ingrid said.

“I don’t, and that’s why I’m asking you.”

“Ha ha, well, that’s fair. You really were slow and clumsy when you started out, after all.”

“You’re seriously gonna bring that up again?” Yuuto sighed dejectedly.

“You’re damn right I will. A few swings of the axe, and you hurt your back. You tried to carry the iron sand, and you spilled it everywhere. I cursed my luck at being forced to work under someone like you.”

“Yeah, real sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Now I’m grateful to Angrboða for letting us meet.”

With that, Ingrid sat down next to Yuuto. Without looking in his direction, she continued speaking while gazing at the bloom.

“I’ll vouch for you upon my name as Ingrid, the greatest smith in Yggdrasil. These past three months, you’ve worked your butt off. If anyone tries to give you grief, I’ll whack ’em with my hammer. So have some more confidence in yourself. Besides, I’m the ‘Birther of Blades,’ remember? We can’t fail forever

with me on the job. Yeah, that's what my gut's telling me: This time, it'll work. Your hard work is gonna pay off. And if for some reason it doesn't, I'll help you again. I'll help you out as many times as it takes. So... Hey, say something back already, Yuuto! This kind of stuff is freaking embarrassing to say right to someone's face, you know! Hey! ...Yuuto?"

Ingrid lightly prodded Yuuto's arm with her elbow, and his body swayed bit and then toppled over, to rest against her shoulder.

"What the hell, you fell asleep?" she exclaimed. "Geez, just after saying you wouldn't be able to do it. You should have stayed awake and listened to me, idiot. I'm not gonna say all that stuff to you a second time."

Ingrid gently took Yuuto's head in her arms, and complaining all the while, moved it to rest on her lap.

She tenderly stroked his hair, and smiled. "All right, this is a reward for all your hard work. Sleep well, Yuuto."



“Yuuto! Yuuto, come on!”

When Yuuto next came to, he felt his body being jostled. But his mind was muddy and clouded over, and he couldn’t think clearly.

He got the sense that something really important had happened, but in that moment his desire to go back to sleep won out.

Yes, sleep. Yuuto just wanted to keep sleeping.

After all, this pillow was the absolute best.

He was so fed up with the stiff pillows he’d had to use for the past half year. He was going to enjoy this one for all it had to offer; there was really no other choice.

“Wake the hell up already, Yuuto!”

“Ahh, shut up and lemme sleep...” Yuuto pushed away the hand that was shaking him, and tried to turn over to lay on his other side...

Squish.

As he did, he felt his hand catch on something soft.

What is this? He reflexively squeezed his hand in an attempt to identify what it was.

“What the *hell* do you think you’re doing, you jerk?!”

Thwack!

“Gaaah!” The sudden rush of pain forced Yuuto back to the waking world, and he opened his eyes.

As his mind cleared up, he remembered where he was and what he’d been working on when he fell asleep.

“That’s right! How’s the bloom?!” he shouted.

“They already took it outside and cooled it.”

“Wha— Why didn’t you wake me up for that?!”

“Because that’s a job the workers can do fine on their own. You need to focus on the work only you can do, and it’d be an issue if you were so sleep-deprived

you made a mistake inspecting the damn thing. Now come on, get up."

With that, Ingrid pulled on Yuuto's ear to force him to sit up.

When he did, Yuuto realized just where he'd been sleeping. "W-wait, huh?! The pillow was your lap?!"

"Y-you passed out and fell over on me all of a sudden!" Ingrid cried defensively. "I would have felt bad waking you up when you were so exhausted, so I made myself put up with it for a while. Honestly..."

"Sorry..."

With a loud "Hmph!" Ingrid stood up and quickly walked outside. Their work on the furnace had long since ended, but for some reason, her face was flushed.

"Hey, wait up," Yuuto said, hurrying to follow her.

Outside, there were rough and unevenly-shaped grey clumps scattered about on the ground. These pieces were what remained after the brightly-glowing bloom had cooled.

"T-this is...!" Yuuto suddenly rushed over to one of the clumps.

He just stood there, his face frozen in shock, his body trembling slightly.

"H-hey, did we do it?! Yuuto, is this refined iron?!" Unable to conceal her excitement, Ingrid's gaze shot back and forth between the chunk of metal and Yuuto's face.

In the world of Yggdrasil, iron was an incredibly rare metal, only obtained from meteors that fell from the heavens. Ingrid was famous enough as a smith that her name was even known in the imperial capital Glaðsheimr, but even she had never seen the real thing in person.

After a moment, Yuuto answered her...

...by shaking his head.

"No, this isn't iron," he declared flatly.

It was, however, something very familiar to him.

Indeed, this was exactly the stuff he'd been used to seeing all his life, as far back as he could remember.

There was no way he could mistake its appearance.

It was just that he had assumed there was no way an amateur like himself would create it.

Thirteen metric tons of iron sand. Thirteen metric tons of charcoal.

That vast amount of resources was what it took to obtain a mere 200 kilograms of this material.

The metal said to be the most perfectly suited to forging a Japanese sword—"This is... *tamahagane.* The highest-quality steel."

"Congratulations on finishing, Yuu-kun!" Mitsuki cried. "It must have been really hard work."

It was night, Yuuto was now up in the hörgr for the first time in a while.

The sanctuary at the top of the Hliðskjálf had no protection against the wind, and so it was freezing cold in there this time of year, but Yuuto was amply prepared by having wrapped himself in several layers of furs.

The theory was that he might be able to return home if he accomplished his "mission." In other words, by creating iron weapons that could transform even a weak nation like the Wolf Clan into a strong one, perhaps he had fulfilled his destined role in this world.

And tonight just happened to be the night of the full moon, as well.

That seemed more like providence than coincidence, and he'd gotten his hopes up, but...

"I guess... it didn't work," Mitsuki said.

"Yeah..." Yuuto said regretfully.

It seemed it had been merely a coincidence, after all.

Yuuto had tried creating the opposing mirror effect, but there was no sign at all of that feeling like the world was wavering, the phenomenon he'd experienced when shifting between worlds.

Their heightened expectations had only made the disappointment greater.

“Well, I guess it’s ’cause I haven’t actually won their war for them,” Yuuto said at last. “They say results are what matters in the real world, after all. I guess I was just getting ahead of myself.”

He tried to shrug and spoke in a laid-back tone. He was trying to change his attitude, since there was no sense moping and dwelling on what had already come to pass.

“It just means that the Wolf Clan still needs my help.”

He was saying it as much to himself as he was to Mitsuki.

Yuuto had been summoned to Yggdrasil in order to bring victory to the Wolf Clan. Refining iron had created an opportunity for them, but it would certainly be premature to say they’d actually gotten out of their current crisis.

Their first successful refinement had gotten them just about two metric tons of good iron. It would take several more successful repetitions of the same process to make enough for iron weapons and gear for the whole Wolf Clan army.

Starting with Ingrid, Yuuto had taught all of the relevant information he knew to the other people working together with him on the project. But there was a problem in the absolute lack of experience among the other workers.

No doubt Yuuto, with his slight edge in knowledge and experience, would need to keep directing the project himself in order to ensure the highest chance of success.

“Yuu-kun... you’ve gotten stronger,” Mitsuki said quietly.

“Huh? Well, yeah, after all the manual labor I’ve been doing.”

Yuuto had been sending current pictures of himself to Mitsuki, so he figured she was commenting on that.

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s like, I feel like you’ve grown up a bit. I mean, you’re not even the least bit discouraged right now. If I were in your shoes, I’d probably be so upset I’d go curl into a ball in bed and not come out for a week.”

“...Oh.” On hearing those words, Yuuto remembered how he’d been half a year earlier.

Back then, he'd lost himself in despair at not being able to go home, and had tried to shut himself off emotionally from the people around him.

At least compared to then, Yuuto did think he might have gotten a bit stronger.

His attempts to refine iron had been a series of failures. He'd nearly given up in despair several times, overwhelmed with anxiety and thinking, *It's impossible to do this just with basic knowledge gleaned from the internet.* But even then, he'd continued to struggle, finally grabbing hold of success by the brute force of his determination.

He had experienced accomplishing something by giving everything of himself to the effort. And there was something in life that a person could not obtain without such an experience.

The young man's success had planted new confidence in his heart — a true confidence that would not waver or break at every little setback, that would allow him to believe in himself come what may.

Just as Yuuto finished his phone call with Mitsuki, he heard a voice from behind him.

"So you were here, after all."

Turning around, he saw Loptr standing there, sighing in relief.

"Seeing as you got the iron refinement process to work and all, I was worried maybe you might have already gone back to the heavens after finishing your mission here."

"I tried, and it didn't work," Yuuto said.

"What, so you really *did* try and leave? You're a pretty cold-hearted guy. You should have at least said a proper farewell to me and Felicia before you left."

"The last two times, I did say my goodbyes to you two, and then I couldn't go home. I didn't want to jinx it, I guess. Though in the end, it didn't really matter. Well, if it had seemed like it was working, I was planning on leaving this here, so I would have been able to say goodbye either way." Yuuto looked down at the

smartphone in his hand.

Felicia had watched him operating it several times now. She should be able to mimic his actions and answer a call if it came in.

That being said, it didn't change the fact that it was a cold-hearted way to leave. Loptr was right about that. Even Yuuto thought as much.

"Didn't I tell you before?" Loptr asked sharply. "I said you'd pay if you made my cute little sister cry."

"Hey, I didn't want to see my cute sworn little sister crying either, okay?"

"So you were going to leave me to pick up the pieces, then? Good grief, that's cruel." Loptr made a show of sighing and shaking his head.

It was true that if Yuuto had managed to get home, he would have been forcing the most difficult role onto Loptr.

He knew that would've been bad of him, but he truly loved and respected this man as an older brother, and he honestly felt like he could have trusted Loptr to handle the situation well.

"Hey, Yuuto," the man said. "Would you be willing to give up on going back home, and take Felicia as your wife?"

"Wha—?! A-are you drunk or something?! What the hell are you saying?!" Yuuto flew into a panic, confused by how out of left field this was.

His first reaction was to think it was a joke, if one in extremely poor taste, but the look in Loptr's eyes told a different story. It was serious and earnest in a way that would be hardly imaginable given how easygoing, lighthearted and hard-to-pin-down he usually acted.

"I haven't had a drop," Loptr told him. "And I'm being absolutely serious here."

"Then that's even worse," Yuuto said. "I told you before, didn't I? There's already a girl I like back home. Didn't you say at the river that you wouldn't forgive any two-timing?"

"I'll overlook it in this case. Once the snows melt, the war will start back up. That girl's an Einherjar. As the clan's second-in-command, I can't let her abilities

go unused.”

The Wolf Clan’s territory lay in a high area of the Bifröst Basin surrounded by mountains, and the snows ran deep at this time of year. That served as a natural defense, and right now it was preventing the Claw Clan’s further invasion. But in another two or three months, that snow would melt.

The steadily encroaching footsteps of war were already reaching their doorstep.

“I don’t have the slightest intention of letting her die out there, of course, but you never know what will happen on the battlefield,” Loptr said. “Even if it’s only for a little bit, I want her to be able to experience some of life’s happiness as a woman, while she still can. As her brother, this is the only way I can do that.”

“...I’m sorry.” Yuuto turned his head, unable to meet Loptr’s gaze. It was all he could do just to get those words out.

“Felicia likes you,” Loptr said. “You care for her too, don’t you?”

“Please stop this, Big Brother.”

“...I see,” Loptr said regretfully. “That’s too bad. I’d have no worries entrusting my little sister to you, you know. Unlike anyone else.”

“I’m sure Felicia will be able to find someone even better for her than a cold-hearted guy like me,” Yuuto retorted. Not wanting to continue this line of conversation any further, he changed the subject. “And what about you, Big Brother? Why don’t you hurry up and tie the knot already? It doesn’t look good for the second-in-command to be unmarried.”

Around the start of the new year, Loptr had mentioned that he’d turned twenty-two. In Yggdrasil, where it was normal to marry before twenty, that was old enough where it wouldn’t be odd to already have a child.

And it wasn’t like he wasn’t popular; Loptr already had three women who held feelings for him. Just by order of age, he was supposed to have gotten married way before Felicia or Yuuto.

“You said it,” Loptr said ruefully. “I am the second-in-command. Eventually I

will... succeed the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. And that's been my dream ever since I was a child."

With a flip of his cape, Loptr turned around to gaze down upon the scenery below them.

It was the city of Iárnviðr, illuminated by the pale white light of the full moon. It was where Loptr had been born and raised.

"Right, so then that's all the more reason you should..." Yuuto began.

"And when I do, if I've kept the position of 'lawful wife' empty, I can use it for diplomacy, right?" The corners of Loptr's mouth turned upwards in a grin.

Around the world and throughout history, so-called political marriages were one of the fastest and easiest ways for two countries to establish friendly relations.

As a Japanese person from the 21st century, the idea made Yuuto uncomfortable, but at the same time, he also felt like he'd just been shown the gulf between the two of them.

His sworn older brother Loptr was thinking of his nation first, and having resolved himself to shoulder the burden of leading it, he was acting while thinking that far ahead.

Even though Yuuto had grown in this past half-year, even though there was only a six-year difference in age between them, Yuuto couldn't help feeling like his older brother was unattainably far ahead of him as a person.

Yuuto admired Loptr, and had heartfelt respect for him. He had no regrets about having exchanged the Oath of the Chalice and becoming sworn siblings.

But the feeling of inadequacy as a man compared to him was unbearably frustrating.

He couldn't suppress the urge to encourage himself with the goal that one day, he'd catch up.

However, that childish admiration would set the gears of fate in motion, and become the trigger for the tragedy that was to follow.

ACT 5

“I am sorry to have kept you all waiting.” A deep, throaty voice resounded solemnly throughout the ritual hall. “I hereby announce to all who have gathered in attendance on this auspicious occasion that I shall now have the honor of conducting the ceremony which binds parent and child through the sacred Chalice of Allegiance.”

The owner of the voice was a man who looked to be about halfway through his forties. He had a fierce-looking face, with imposing scars on his brow and cheek.

He bore no rune, but apparently he had shown valor in battle equal to any Einherjar, and his honest and steadfast disposition had earned him deep respect among his peers. This great man had been trusted with the position of assistant to the second-in-command, making him the second-highest ranked officer in the Wolf Clan.

Yuuto scanned the ritual hall, filled with all the prominent officers of the clan. Each of them had a certain gravity of presence about them, to be expected of those who had to earn their way up into their current positions by hard work and results alone.

The atmosphere in the hall was serious and tense.

“I am Assistant to the Second-in-Command Jörgen, and I shall serve the role of mediator for this rite. By the command of my father, the seventh patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Fárbauti, though I may lack the dignity appropriate to one honored with such a great task, I shall pledge here my very life that I shall serve it well.”

There were none present who did not know him already, but this sort of introduction was part of proper etiquette.

The mediator — a sort of “go-between,” and the person who actually handled the Chalice for the two people in the ceremony — was a role that in Yggdrasil

was customarily filled by the goði, the imperial priests and direct representatives of the divine emperor, in cases where both parties were clan patriarchs. However, since this rite was an internal matter within a single clan, Jörgen could serve in the role.

“Yuuto, this way,” the man directed.

“Yes, sir.” Yuuto stood up when Jörgen called his name, and made his way to the space in front of an altar with a blazing fire atop it, where the patriarch was already seated. Yuuto sat down across from him.

Taken in by the intense and oppressive atmosphere of the ritual hall, Yuuto’s heart was pounding loudly. It was too late to be concerned about it now, but he was still worried that he might make some mistake or blunder out of nerves.

Jörgen leaned over towards the white-haired old patriarch. “I humbly ask this of you, my father Fárbauti. Does your wish to make the honorable Yuuto into your sworn child remain unchanged?”

Fárbauti gave one glance towards Yuuto, then turned his gaze back to Jörgen and nodded.

“Yes, it is unchanged. I will make Yuuto my sworn child, and I will properly look after him.”

“Then I shall humbly request this of you, Fárbauti my father. Show the young man, who will become your sworn child, the sacred wine that he shall drink. If you please!”

As Jörgen gestured with his hand, Fárbauti grabbed both ends of the Chalice with his hands, lifting it gently up into the air. Following custom, he then placed it at his lips and took three heartfelt and precise swallows from it, before returning it to its place on the stand.

“I shall now receive the Chalice from you.” Jörgen stepped forward, and, after a bow, he took the Parent Chalice in his hands and poured some of the sacred wine from it into the Child Chalice that had been prepared nearby.

Once Jörgen finished pouring, he returned the Parent Chalice, then took out a small sheathed dagger and held it reverently out to Fárbauti.

“I shall ask once more of you Fárbauti, my father,” Jörgen said. “This Chalice, though it may be given under unusual circumstances, shall be that of your sworn child. I humbly ask that you give unto the honorable Yuuto the proud blood of our clan, that he might inherit the will and the history, the struggles and pain of our forefathers, so that you might guide him to become an exemplary member of our clan.”

“I shall do so.” Fárbauti took the dagger and pulled it from its sheath in an exaggerated motion. Its dull silver sheen marked it as made from iron, the metal which in Yggdrasil was a gift from the heavens itself.

Without any change in his expression, the old patriarch pulled the blade of the dagger across his own forefinger. He held that finger out, and let the drops of crimson blood fall into the Child Chalice.

A child carried the blood of his parents. And so, by having the blood of the sworn parent mixed in with the sacred wine, and then taking it into oneself, one became a child in both name and body.

“Thank you very much.” Jörgen gave another bow. With precise movements, he carried the stand it was sitting on over to Yuuto, righted himself, and spoke. “I humbly request of you, Yuuto, who shall become a sworn child. Please take the Chalice into your hands.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was finally Yuuto’s turn. Mistakes would not be forgiven. Yuuto grasped both ends of the Chalice, and carefully, carefully lifted it until it was level with his shoulders. Then he waited.

“Once you drink deeply of that Chalice, you shall become the sworn child of my father, Fárbauti. While you must surely be fully prepared for this, I remind you that once you declare him as your parent, those words are absolute and binding. There may be times when, for example, something is white, and yet your parent declares that it is black. In cases like those, you must swallow all other thoughts and also accept that it is black.”

In the world of Yggdrasil, a parent by the Oath of the Chalice was an existence of absolute authority to their sworn children.

One could not choose the parent or siblings they were born with, but one could freely choose one's clan parent through the Oath of the Chalice. Once that choice had been freely made, one was required to devote absolute loyalty of heart and mind, body and soul, to one's sworn parent. That was the custom in this world.

"If, despite that, you still possess the resolve to pledge yourself to this clan, and to our father, then drink three times of that Chalice, drain it, and take the sacred wine into yourself. If you please!"

At Jörgen's words, Yuuto followed the customary movements, drinking the wine from the Chalice.

With this, Yuuto had directly exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with Fárbauti, and had gone from being a guest of the Wolf Clan to a fully fledged member, and a child subordinate of its patriarch.

After the suffocatingly formal ceremony, it was time for a banquet full of song and drunken revelry.

"Congratulations to you, Big Brother Yuuto!" a clan member declared. "I should have expected nothing less of you! To think you would become a top clan officer right away, and tenth-ranked in the clan to boot!"

"Oh, come on, it's a natural outcome, considering what Big Brother Yuuto was able to pull off," another one interjected. "Now that our Wolf Clan troops are armed with the metal of the gods, they have nothing to fear from the Claw Clan!"

"Those crossbows and stirrups are amazing, too!" a third cried. "Both of them take something that used to require an incredibly long period of training, and make it so even a novice can fight on par with a veteran in no time!"

"Yeah, with those, our victory in the next battle is practically guaranteed!"

"Ohhh, and that reminds me, I had the chance to eat that gritless bread you came up with! It's exceptionally good!"

"And that new 'paper' stuff is so light and incredibly convenient, too!"

“Big Brother Yuuto, thanks to you, the city is flooded with traders and merchants. It’s the first time I’ve seen our city this bustling and lively.”

“That’s just what I’d expect from our Gleipsieg! Everybody else had their doubts about you, but I believed in you all along.”

“You weren’t the only one! Why, I told those doubtful hooligans off several times!”

The parade of clan members coming up to Yuuto to sing his praises showed no signs of stopping or letting up.

After his success at refining iron, Yuuto had continued to introduce advanced technologies unheard of in Yggdrasil, one after the other.

He’d come to realize that in the real world, good things and bad things didn’t occur uniformly or in equal measure. More often than not, they tended to happen in an oddly unbalanced fashion. So, a long string of bad things would occur in succession, and the reverse was also true.

As if to make up for the long run of bad fortune that had lasted a whole half a year since Yuuto’s arrival, for these most recent past couple of months, everything he was attempting seemed to work out smoothly and without any real problems. Right now, it seemed like everything was going his way. He felt almost almighty, like he could do anything right now if he tried.

Now that he’d made great strides in society, there was no end to those who wished to butter him up and curry favor with him. That was just the way of the world. Among them were even some of the people who had publicly mocked him, calling him Sköll the Devourer of Blessings and Durinn the Oversleeper. In his heart, he couldn’t resist snickering at how they could so brazenly change their attitude towards him like this.

Sigrún came over. “Congrats, Big Brother Yuuto.”

“Ah, hey, Rún. Thanks.” Just as Yuuto was feeling fed up with the whole charade, he broke out in a smile at seeing her familiar face.

And then his grin grew wider and more devious as he thought up a great little prank.

“But since I’m above you in the clan now, technically I’m like your older brother. You need to be using more respectful language with me. Come on, it should be ‘Congratulations to you, Big Brother,’ riiight?”

He’d been putting up with this girl talking down to him all this time. It was only human for him to want to use this chance for a little bit of payback.

One had to obey one’s superiors. That was how things worked in this world.

Yuuto was hoping to witness her shaking with humiliation as she forced herself to speak to him again formally and politely, but...

“It’s true that, formally speaking, you’re my older brother in the clan, but it’s not like I’ve directly exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with you.” Sigrún cut down his expectations flatly and concisely. “I only obey the orders of people I personally recognize as worthy.”

Of course, Yuuto no longer held any sort of grudge against Sigrún, and he even thought of her as a friend. *I just planned to tease you for a bit and then say, “Just kidding! C’mon, having you talk to me all formally would be so unfunny it’d make my skin crawl. Just treat me like you always have.” Then cap it off with a laugh!*

Instead, the way that Sigrún was refusing to change her attitude towards him regardless of rank or status was so dauntless, even manly, that it just left him feeling frustrated.

“Congrats, Yuuto!” Loptr called out to him.

Yuuto’s feeling of deflation lifted, and his mood picked back up as he turned around to reply. “Oh... Big Brother Loptr! Thank you!”

“Let’s... talk outside, for a bit, shall we?” The blond-haired young man gestured with his chin toward a doorway leading out of the hörgr chamber.

It was a direct invitation from the clan’s second-in-command. The people crowding around Yuuto all looked reluctant to let him go, but in this situation, they had no choice but to acquiesce out of respect.

“Thanks, Big Brother,” Yuuto said, breathing in deeply. In a crowded room like that, the air tended to grow stuffy and stagnant, and the refreshing outside air

out here felt great in Yuuto's lungs. "You saved me there."

"Heh heh, you're very welcome. It's been, what, seven days now? I'm glad to see you're looking well."

"Ahh, yeah... Guess I've only seen you in passing these days, huh?"

Having just told Sigrún to use respectful language towards her superiors, Yuuto was doing the exact opposite right now, speaking completely casually.

The downside of using polite language with someone was that it could also feel stiff and distant. They'd been living under the same roof for a long time now. In that time, Yuuto's love and respect for his sworn older brother had grown even deeper, but by this point, his way of speaking to him had grown completely frank and unreserved.

"Good grief, I really do have a cold-hearted younger brother," Loptr commented. "Felicia misses you too, you know."

"I'm sorry." A little ashamed, Yuuto lowered his head a bit.

Ever since he'd completed work on the iron refining process, it had become more and more common for Yuuto to get so absorbed in his work at Ingrid's workshop that he'd work around the clock, not coming back to the house for days at a time.

The biggest reason was that it was for the sake of getting back home, and to pay back the debt of gratitude he owed his new brother and sister, but he also simply enjoyed the act of making things.

"Honestly, when I heard the news from Father the other day, it blindsided me," Loptr said. "Did something make you have a change of heart? Enough for you to exchange your Chalice oath directly with Father, that is? And without even discussing it with me, either? Am I that unreliable as an older brother?" There was a bit of accusation in Loptr's tone.

Up until now, Loptr had repeatedly invited Yuuto to formally join his clan faction, but Yuuto had always steadfastly refused, with the argument that he'd eventually have to return to his own world.

However much he might always maintain that calm and gentle demeanor of

his, Loptr was human. As someone who had valued Yuuto's potential highly from the beginning and had sought to recruit him for so long, of course he couldn't let something like this go without at least throwing out a complaint or two.

"Actually, it's the opposite," Yuuto said. "Until now, I've always been relying on you to take care of things for me. I just thought, I can't keep constantly depending on my big brother, you know?"

With a wry smile, Yuuto laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

Yuuto was now no longer the weak child he had once been, unable to survive without the protection of Loptr and Felicia.

He wanted to show that he could stand on his own two feet, looking after himself and making his own decisions. And the reason that was so important was— "You don't have the time or the energy to spare on looking after me right now, anyway. Right?"

The battle that would decide the Wolf Clan's fate was already close at hand.

His sworn older brother carried heavy responsibilities as the clan's second-in-command, and was extremely busy right now, every moment of his time occupied with the preparations for the war with the Claw Clan. Yuuto didn't want to be an extra burden.

"My mission in this world is to bring victory to the Wolf Clan," Yuuto went on. "I'm going to do absolutely everything I can to make that happen. Big Brother, you just need to focus on doing what *you* need to do."

Yuuto didn't want to be a hindrance to the brother he was already so obligated to. He didn't want to be a pathetic man who was always saved by others; he wanted to be the kind of man who could *save* others.

He wanted to repay the kindness he'd received so far, even if only a little.

And that was why, despite the binding obligations it would create, Yuuto had resolved himself to exchange the Oath of the Chalice directly with the patriarch.

"O Angrboða, goddess who protects Iárnviðr! I, Fárbauti, patriarch of the Wolf

Clan, beseech you. Bestow your divine protection on these brave soldiers of the Wolf as they head to battle! Grant us victory!”

As Fárbauti raised his voice at the end, the crowd let out a roar that seemed to shake the very air, which echoed far and wide throughout the city.

“Victory!!”

Reports had come in that the Claw Clan was at last mobilizing their forces, and now in front of the sacred tower Hliðskjálf stood neat lines of fully-armed soldiers, at attention with the butts of their spears planted firmly in the ground.

They numbered just over one thousand.

These soldiers were going to join up with the five hundred soldiers at Fort Gnipahellir on the border with the Claw Clan, making a total force of fifteen hundred. The ones protecting the border with the Horn Clan could not afford to be moved, so this was the maximum number of soldiers the Wolf Clan could muster.

By contrast, taking into consideration the information they’d obtained so far, it was estimated the Claw Clan had roughly about two thousand to twenty-five hundred men.

Judging by numbers, they were at a disadvantage, but now the right hand of each Wolf Clan soldier held a spear that was strong enough to break through the shields of their enemies. And in their left hands were shields hard enough to withstand any kind of attack their enemies might bring to bear.

And on top of that...

“Second-in-Command Loptr,” commanded Fárbauti. “I grant you all authority as my representative. Lead this army, destroy the forces of our bitter enemy the Claw Clan, and take back the dignity handed down to us over the generations by our ancestors!”

“Sir! I shall!” Loptr said.

Commanding this army was Loptr, Einherjar of the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. He was the heroic general known throughout nearby lands by the alias Býleistr, the Sire of Lightning Within the Storm.

Beneath his banner were Sigrún, Felicia, and the man in charge of protecting Fort Gnipahellir, Skáviðr, who was known as the Strongest Silver Wolf, Mánagarmr. Each of them was a powerful Einherjar in their own right, on par with a hundred soldiers, and together they formed an incredible lineup.

“Come over here, Yuuto,” Fárbauti commanded.

“Sir!” Yuuto responded to the summons and moved to stand beside him, just as they’d discussed in advance. He could distinctly feel everyone’s eyes gathering on him.

During the Oath of the Chalice Ceremony, the room had been full of important people, but it had still been only a crowd of a few dozen. But now he was in front of a crowd of thousands. His couldn’t stop his knees from shaking. It was like his own body wouldn’t listen to him.

At that moment, Fárbauti’s hand grasped him strongly on the shoulder, and mysteriously, the shaking settled down.

“I’m sure all of you know of him,” Fárbauti said. “He is the young man with whom I exchanged the Oath of the Chalice just the other day, my new son. He is the one sent to us by Angrboða! He is the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg! As long as he is with us, the victory of the Wolf Clan is assured!”

“Gleipsieg! Gleipsieg!!” the crowd roared.

The waves of feverish cheers that rose up from the crowd overwhelmed Yuuto.

“Ha ha, wow... I can feel it in my bones,” he laughed wryly.

He knew that sound existed as vibrations traveling through the air, but the feeling of those vibrations reverberating through the very core of his body made him understand that knowledge on a physical level.

The fact that all of this raucous cheering was directed at him almost didn’t feel real, though. The trauma of how everyone had ridiculed and insulted him was still freshly etched into his mind.

“Go on, then,” Fárbauti urged. “How about you give ’em a response?”

“Y-yeah. I guess I should.”

At Fárbauti’s prodding, Yuuto put on the salesman’s smile he’d been practicing for this day, and waved to the crowd.

Instantly, he felt the roaring cheers grow even louder.

This was the reason Yuuto had agreed to exchange the Oath of the Chalice directly with Fárbauti.

He wasn’t powerful enough to take up a weapon and fight as a soldier. If a novice like himself wandered onto the battlefield, he would be nothing more than a hindrance.

Seeing how frustrated he was with himself, the old patriarch had approached him, asking him to take on the role of raising everyone’s morale.

The Wolf Clan’s fate, and his own, were both riding on this battle. He wanted to make sure he did absolutely everything he could.

He had once hated everything about this world. But now...

Loptr and Felicia went without saying, but now Sigrún and Ingrid were important to him, too. Even Fárbauti was someone he wanted to protect. He wanted to do something to help his family.

“Wow, you sure are popular, Yuuto,” Loptr teased, shrugging his shoulders. “I guess that’s what it means to be the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg.”

Even as he was about to set out for a battle where he’d surely face the constant threat of death, this man was cracking jokes. That sort of mettle was one reason Yuuto found him so reliable, but it also made him jealous.

“Bringing victory to the Wolf Clan is my mission, after all. This is the least I can do.”

Yuuto did his best to act confident in return, turning his lips playfully upwards. He couldn’t afford to act timid or shamefully in front of the older brother he respected so much.

“But, this really is all I can do for you. Take care of the rest for me, Big Brother.” Yuuto held his fist straight out, towards Loptr.

It was a gesture his older brother could never miss the meaning of.

“You got it.” Loptr grinned. “Leave it to me.”

With a smile full of confidence, Loptr bumped Yuuto’s fist with his own. And then he turned around to face his soldiers, shouting: “All troops, move out!”



“I see,” Mitsuki said. “So Loptr, Felicia, and Sigrún all left to go fight. I’m worried for them...”

“Yeah,” said Yuuto. “Well, all three of them are Einherjar, and I don’t think they’ll do anything too careless.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Mitsuki agreed. “I’m sure they’ll be all right. I know it’s rude to them to say this, but, Yuu-kun, I’m... really glad you didn’t go to fight with them.”

“Oh, well, don’t worry about me. I’m staying behind here, where it’s safe. Still, it sure has gotten quiet without them around.”

“...Yuu-kun, are you feeling lonely?”

“Wha— N-no, I’m not!”

“Your voice just cracked.”

“Dammit.”

Yuuto wanted to make some kind of argument back at her, but instead he held back, quietly cursing and clicking his tongue. He *did* feel lonely, and he figured anything he said would just make it more obvious to someone who knew him so well.

After the army’s departure ceremony, Yuuto had gone back to Loptr’s house alone.

Even though the Wolf Clan was a tiny nation among its neighbors, he was staying in the house of its second-in-command, so it was a large home. It felt too big and spacious to use all by himself (Angela the maidservant lived in a small hut separate from the main house). The emptiness, the absence of the presence of other people in that house, only worsened the feelings of loneliness within him.

And so, without consciously realizing it, his legs had carried him toward the Hliðskjálf.

But admitting that in front of his childhood friend would have hurt his pride.

“Uh, there’s something I need to look up, so I’m gonna go ahead and go now,”

Yuuto said.

“Oh, right,” said Mitsuki. “Okay. Then, call me again soon, okay? Bye bye!”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to you again soon.”

At first, they’d had a lot of trouble saying goodbye and ending their calls, but by this point, they were pretty easygoing about it.

Yuuto hung up. Then, with practiced movements, he opened his browser app. He roughly skimmed over the articles he wanted to check, and just as he was finishing, the screen went dark as its power died.

“Ah, I really cut it close there. Guess I spent too long on the call.” Yuuto gave a short chuckle at his own expense. It seemed that with so many of the people close to him gone away, he’d been more lonely than he’d thought.

“I wonder where they are right about now. Lessee, they were supposed to spend all day today heading north before turning east. Which means, since the north gate’s that way, then...”

Yuuto strained his eyes in that direction, but there was nothing to see but all-encompassing darkness.

“I wonder if they’re looking up at this sky right now, too,” Yuuto said, as his gaze wandered upwards.

Despite telling Mitsuki not to worry about him, the fact that he was the only one staying behind in safety hurt his conscience. Being unable to do anything but wait for everyone else’s return made him frustrated with himself, and impatient. He wished he could be working together with them somehow. He knew that was just his sentimentality talking, though.

“...Hm?” he murmured. “Huh, that looks a lot like the Big Dipper. Yeah, that ladle-like shape looks just the same. So they have that constellation over here, too, then... Wait, no, hold on!”

Realizing how silly a statement that was, he interjected at his own train of thought halfway through, and scanned the sky more intently.

As a boy raised in the countryside, Yuuto was very familiar with the stars in the sky. As a child, he’d even gone to official stargazing events a few times, at

Mitsuki’s invitation.

He couldn’t exactly name all eighty-eight major constellations or anything like that, but he’d memorized the Big Dipper easily back then because he’d liked the sound of its name.

“Right, so that smaller ladle nearby... that’s the Little Dipper and Ursa Minor. Okay, come on now. If I’m in a different world, then how come the constellations I can see are exactly the same?”

Yuuto was completely bewildered.

“Eh? You mean the North Star’s not that one on the ladle’s handle?” Yuuto asked.

“Correct,” said the priest. “Rather, it is the bright star on the bottom part of the ladle’s bowl. More precisely speaking, true celestial north is at a spot a little *below* the bowl.”

“O-oh, okay,” Yuuto said. “Thanks, that was a big help.”

He thanked the priest and hurriedly exited the chapel.

The night after spotting the Big Dipper, Yuuto had looked up some star charts online, and gotten to work right away comparing them to the sky.

The results: The positions of the stars here were completely identical to Earth.

It had been a complete oversight on his part.

Someone raised in the city would have probably been moved by the beauty of the star-filled sky here, sparkling like a sea of jewels, but for Yuuto it was something he was so used to seeing that he hadn’t paid it any special mind.

“But why would the North Star be different, then?”

Yuuto did what any modern Japanese person did when faced with something they didn’t understand: He Googled it.

The moon was still pretty close to full that night, so he could access the internet even at the base of the tower.

“Ohhh, so *that’s* what it is.” Yuuto quickly found the relevant information, and

expressed his surprise aloud at the answer.

Apparently, because the Earth underwent axial precession — a phenomenon whereby its axis of rotation gradually shifted — the North Star changed depending on the era. The North Star Yuuto was familiar with had in fact only become the North Star around the 16th century, and the previous one had been the star he'd just heard about, called Kochab.

"So does that mean... that I didn't get sent to another world, I got sent into the past?"

Kochab had been used as the North Star from approximately 1500 B.C. to 500 A.D. However, there had also apparently been a long period of time when Kochab was some distance off from the north celestial pole, and so people had used both it and the previous era's North Star, Thuban, to calculate where north was.

The priest's words implied the current situation here was similar.

"The spoked wheel was invented around 2000 B.C., so this has got to be sometime after that, at least," Yuuto murmured. "Gahhh, that's way too wide a margin!"

If he could take more precise measurements of the stars here, he might be able to get a more definite idea of what era he was in, but he didn't have the instruments or the knowledge to do that. He sighed.

"Welp, guess I might as well buy some ebooks and do some studying."

With that, Yuuto browsed through lists of books, downloading the ones that looked noteworthy with a quick *tap.*

Though so many had been sent off to battle, Iárnviðr was by no means emptied of its people. Life and business carried on in the city even during this time of war, though it somewhat lacked its usual lively energy.

"Stop the trial! Stop the trial!" Yuuto shouted as he pushed his way through a crowd of people gathered on a riverbank on the outskirts of town.

It was now three days since Loptr had taken the Wolf Clan army and departed

for the front lines.

Yuuto was fully out of breath, having raced over there as soon as he'd heard the news.

"Whew... Somehow, I made it in time." He exhaled in relief, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

By the looks of it, the accused, a middle-aged woman, had just begun to step off the bank into the river.

This was an Iárnviðr-style trial.

In the world of Yggdrasil, rivers were held very sacred. They provided bounty, nourishing the people and their crops, and yet they could also destroy those same lives and livelihoods with overflowing floodwaters.

And so in Iárnviðr, those suspected of a crime would be offered up to the mother of their prosperity, the Körmt River, thrown into the river to be judged by the holy spirits dwelling within. If they were guilty, they would be carried away by the current and drown, and if they were without sin, they would survive. It was, truly, an extremely rough and perfunctory method of deciding things.

"But Lord Yuuto, this woman might have been the one who killed my daughter!" A younger woman pleaded with Yuuto, casting a hateful glare towards the accused. "At this rate, my child's soul will never be able to rest in peace!"

Those who committed crimes needed to be punished; Yuuto believed this. But for someone who had lived his whole life in Japan, using this ridiculous kind of "trial by ordeal" to determine guilt or innocence was the height of madness.

"I will take full personal responsibility and hold an investigation into whether this person is actually the culprit or not," Yuuto announced firmly. "I'll deliver the verdict in due course, so please wait until then."

Yuuto was no god, and had no way of knowing for certain whether the accused woman had really committed the crime or not. He didn't believe that so-called gods or spirits would know the truth, either. That was why he intended to conduct a proper investigation.

Until only a few days ago, Yuuto would have had no choice but to watch such a farce of a trial as a powerless onlooker. Even with many hailing him as the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, officially he had still been only an honored guest of the second-in-command Loptr, with no actual authority within the clan.

But now, things were different. Yuuto had been appointed a clan officer at tenth rank, giving him more than enough discretionary authority. And if he did not use that power now, then when?

“Mama! Mama!” A child’s voice rang out from the direction of the accused, and when Yuuto turned to look he saw that a small girl of perhaps ten was clinging to the woman.

It seemed she had a daughter. It would be absolutely unforgivable to take that little girl’s mother from her for a crime she had not committed.

Yuuto couldn’t possibly have been more sure now that he had done the right thing. However...

“Lord Yuuto, please do not interfere,” the woman he had just saved reproached him. “My conscience is clear, and I have no misgivings.”

She went on to insist that to wait until he delivered his ruling while everyone else continued to view her with suspicion would be unbearable, while if she entrusted her life to the gods, it would be all over in a moment. She told him that because she had done nothing wrong, she believed for certain that she would be spared.

For Yuuto, it was the kind of statement the phrase “jaw-dropping” was meant to describe.

It was true that, in Yggdrasil, there were people like the Einherjar with magical powers, said to be chosen by the gods. It might be possible that supernatural existences like gods existed here, too. But even if that were true, those gods only bestowed their blessings on a very tiny number of people.

Just how could people have so much faith in these so-called gods? It gave Yuuto a headache thinking about it.

“Yuuto, it doesn’t do to be too greedy,” a man insisted. “Common wisdom

tells us that a severe punishment from the gods befalls those who seek to gain hold of more than has been allotted to them."

"Like I've *been saying,* if we plant clover, it will actually restore the fields," Yuuto snapped. "It will serve as food for livestock, and the dung from that livestock can be used as manure, so it will also fertilize the soil and increase the yield for next year's harvest!"

"No, no, that's simply impossible!" the man shot back. "Consecutive plantings weakens the strength of the soil. Indeed, such is the same of everything in this world; it is consumed when we use it. The idea that something would *increase* by using it, why, that goes against the very laws of the gods."

The man brought the palm of his hand down on the table with a *thud* and resolutely rejected the idea.

He was a man past his prime, and the top of his head had gone bald, leaving hair only on the sides. Though most in the clan had come to praise Yuuto and hail him as the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, there were still more than a few who refused to acknowledge him.

This man was perhaps the forefront of that sect, and his name was Bruno. As the head priest, he was in charge of managing the Wolf Clan's holy ceremonies, rites, and their related etiquette. And he had hated Yuuto with a passion ever since the moment the young man had suddenly appeared in the middle of a rite being led by Felicia.

He didn't hesitate to publicly state things like, "That one is not sent to us by the goddess, but by devils. That sinister black hair of his is proof."

He had served Patriarch Fárbauti faithfully for over forty years as his trusted subordinate and sworn younger brother, and so was a very influential voice within the clan. There was no greater impediment to Yuuto than this man, and also no greater irritant.

"Auughh, come *on* already!" His frustration at its peak, Yuuto ran his fingers wildly through his hair.

Their argument had already continued in this manner for over an hour, without any progress to show for it. Yuuto had done thorough research on the

subject using his smartphone, and had explained it to them with perfectly logical arguments, but all he was getting back was “the gods this, the gods that.” This was hardly even a real discussion.

Compounded with his earlier experience with the trial by ordeal, the idiocy of this situation had completely worn through Yuuto’s patience.

“Naturally, Yuuto, I am aware that you are well versed in a variety of knowledge, the method to refine iron being one such example,” Bruno continued. “But I’ve also heard that your projects often fail. The Wolf Clan has only a very small amount of land with soil suitable for farming, and we cannot afford even the slightest risk of losing that!”

All of the other clan officers present nodded vigorously at Bruno’s words.

It seemed that there wasn’t a single person in the room who was willing to give Yuuto their approval. He was completely alone here.

Still, Yuuto raised his voice again, refusing to give up. “It’s *because* there’s so little farmable land that we must use it as effectively as possible! If you sit on your hands because of the fear of failure, then the clan will always remain poor! Think of your children now, and the children soon to be born. What’s the point if you can’t give them enough food to fill their stomachs?!”

Not a day went by in which Yuuto didn’t see hungry-looking children as he walked the streets of town. Every time he saw them, he was filled with indignation and the feeling that he had to do something about it.

It was already almost time to harvest the barley crops. According to what he’d confirmed on the internet, clover should be planted next after barley.

Confucius had once said, “To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage.”

It would be one thing if Yuuto had lacked the necessary knowledge, but now that he knew it, it would be wasteful for him to allow those fields to be left fallow.

Yuuto continued making impassioned arguments for some time after that, but in the end, he did not convince a single one of the hard-headed men in that room to agree with him.

That night, Yuuto stormed up to the hörgr at the top of the Hliðskjálf.

“To *hell* with the gods!” Yuuto shouted, violently (and disrespectfully) kicking the walls. “If you think your gods are so great and righteous, then you can all take your stupid principles and jump in the river and you can fucking *drown!*”

“Well well, you’re pitching quite the fit, aren’t ya?” commented a hoarse old voice mixed with dry laughter from behind him.

It was the familiar voice of the man he’d crossed paths with in this place many times now.

“Oh, it’s you, gramps,” Yuuto said, turning around. “What, you’re here drinking again? If you don’t cut that out, you’re seriously gonna ruin your health.”

It was, of course, Fárbauti.

Yuuto visited the sacred tower frequently in order to call Mitsuki, and Fárbauti loved to come here at night and drink under the moonlight. It only made sense that they saw each other often here.

The old patriarch gave an affected shake of his head, as if to say *good grief.* “I’m not ‘gramps’ to you, not anymore. Did you forget the face of the father you exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with? Just deplorable.”

“Ahh, right, I guess you’re my ‘old man’ now, huh, Dad? I totally forgot.”

“Hmph, and you’re still the same bratty kid who doesn’t know how to talk with respect.”

“Ha, and you’re the same shitty dad who always has to have the last word.”

With that exchange of insults, the two of them smirked at each other knowingly, then laughed out loud.

By now, they had an unspoken understanding that the first thing they did whenever they met each other here was to throw a few abusive lines back and forth.

Of course, when Yuuto had met Fárbauti here his second time, he had given a

full and properly respectful apology for the initial rudeness he'd displayed before. The response had been a slew of remarks like "Talking like that doesn't suit you," and "It just sounds tedious coming from you," and "Your heart's not even in it."

Yuuto had stuck to just speaking bluntly and frankly after that.

At first it had just been a reaction to being pissed off, with no deep thought behind it, but years later, after becoming the patriarch, Yuuto would look back and understand Fárbauti's feelings.

The patriarch was, obviously, the most important person in the nation, whom everyone owed their loyalty and service to. Being revered and held in such esteem also meant always being treated with a certain distance.

He was a strong old man, who never seemed to be perturbed or shaken or lose his sense of dry wit no matter what the situation. He had lived a full life abundant with experiences both bitter and sweet. Yet he felt some sort of loneliness, and wanted at least one person with whom he could speak frankly and casually.

"That reminds me." The old patriarch lowered himself down to the floor, took out a flask made from sheep's stomach, and began pouring alcohol from it into a cup. "I heard you had it out with Bruno."

Yuuto couldn't keep himself from grimacing at hearing the name of the man who irritated him so much. As to be expected of the patriarch, Fárbauti had caught wind of the situation from earlier in the day.

"Yeah, I did," Yuuto snorted. "I wonder if there's anything I can do about that pigheaded idiot. All he does is get in my way."

"Keh-heh-heh, you're a real funny guy, you know. You know all sorts of things, but it looks like you don't know the first thing about people."

"Oh yeah? What's that supposed to mean, Dad?"

"No one's going to give your ideas a pass in public if you don't lay a little groundwork with them first, if you catch my drift." With a mischievous chuckle, the old patriarch took a swig from his cup.

Yuuto bristled, feeling that he was somehow being mocked. “Sneaking around and lobbying people behind the scenes isn’t my style.”

Yuuto was confident that he could push his ideas through without having to do anything underhanded.

In Yggdrasil, people still only planted every other year, so if he could implement the Norfolk system of crop rotation here, there would be a veritable explosion in agricultural production. It would even have a snowball effect in the years to come! His plan would have made everyone happier, and at no one’s expense. That was how ground-breaking it was.

For sure, if he could just explain that properly to everyone, they would understand. And yet all his efforts had been quashed by some incomprehensible concept of “the gods.”

Of course he felt like kicking the walls of the hörgr after something like that.

“You’re still so green,” Fárbauti said with amusement. “Well, this time around, there’s no way they would’ve agreed to it, even if you had gone around and tried to lay the groundwork first.”

“...Why?” Yuuto demanded. “If we did this, nobody would have trouble getting food anymore. How can there be no way they’d say yes?!”

Unable to accept what he was hearing, and unable to accept this situation, Yuuto took out his pent-up anger on Patriarch Fárbauti.

The white-haired old man took a drink, gave a long exhale that smelled of alcohol, and said, “It’s simple. Of course, fear and respect for the gods is one part of the reason, but... much more than that, it’s ’cause they feel like their positions are threatened by you as you move up the ranks.”

“.....What?”

It was such a completely unexpected answer, it took Yuuto almost a full ten seconds to comprehend the old patriarch’s words. Even once he finally understood them, he still didn’t *understand* them.

It was just way too stupid.

“Hey, hold on a minute, Dad. Do those guys really understand the situation

the Wolf Clan is in right now?”

At that very moment, the second-in-command Loptr and the other warriors of the Wolf Clan were marching towards the forces of the Claw Clan, fully prepared to fight to the death.

Thanks to selling off some samples of Yuuto’s creations, they’d somehow managed to secure enough provisions for the soldiers heading off to battle, but by prioritizing them it meant there was still an enormous shortage of food in the city. Right now, there were tons of hungry people in Iárnviðr unable to get enough food to get by.

He knew the old patriarch wasn’t the one to blame here, but he couldn’t keep himself from screaming in anger. “Is this any time to be screwing around and playing politics?!”

His plan would have made everyone in the Wolf Clan more prosperous as a whole. Hearing that the reason they rejected it was something like “they just wanted to sabotage your success” was as idiotic as it could get.

“No matter the time or place, people put themselves and their own feelings first,” Fárbauti said. “It’s just part of being human. Of course, that doesn’t necessarily apply to everybody.”

The old patriarch’s words were the type of profound outlook he’d gleaned from decades of experience leading and managing other people as the head of a nation, but they weren’t something the young Yuuto could understand or accept.

He couldn’t help thinking that if everyone could all just put their selfish feelings aside for a bit and think of the big picture, everything would work out so much better.

“Well, you just need to think about these things a little more objectively,” the old patriarch added. “I mean, you’re only halfway through your teens, and you’ve already exchanged the Oath of the Chalice directly with me and risen to tenth-ranked in the clan.”

“Hey, I never even asked for any of that,” Yuuto shot back. “You were the one who pushed the idea on me.”

“Just listen. So, you’ve got this new rank and status, and even though you just joined the clan and you’re nothing more than a glorified craftsman, you’re butting your nose into government affairs. And into agriculture, one of the pillars of our survival. That’s not going to sit well with anybody.”

“Ugh...”

“Oh, that reminds me, Yuuto. I heard you used the salary I gave you to hire people to do something as silly as cleaning the streets.”

“It’s not silly at all,” Yuuto said. “The city’s got a lot of raw garbage lying around, not to mention excrement from people, dogs, and cats. If you let that stuff go unchecked, it makes it easier for diseases to spread.”

For a good while after coming to Yggdrasil, Yuuto had been thoroughly traumatized by constant stomach pains and illness. After that kind of experience, he couldn’t tolerate how unsanitary things were.

He’d made a similar proposal to Loptr once, but perhaps because of how busy the man already was, no kind of garbage clean-up had begun. So, now that Yuuto was a clan officer himself, he’d decided to carry it out on his own.

“Oho, I see,” said Fárbauti. “So that’s what you were trying to do.”

“Well, it’s also because I think having a cleaner city just feels better, too.”

It was only three days after putting the plan into effect, but all of the accumulated garbage had been cleaned off of the streets, and Yuuto was feeling pretty satisfied with himself.

“Keh-heh-heh, I’ll tell you what Bruno and the others think about it. ‘Even though he’s just become an officer, look at him putting all his efforts into trying to buy popularity with the citizens. Looks like he just wants to get himself even higher up in the clan,’ is about the size of it.”

“Wha— Whaaaaaat?!” Yuuto was shocked, his mouth agape at the misdirected suspicions that had been directed at him.

His heart was filled with feelings of disgust. Honestly, the idea was so ugly that he didn’t even want to understand it.

Looking up towards the sky, the old patriarch then spoke to Yuuto as if he

could see right through to those feelings in his heart. “Yuuto. The light you give off is strong. Like the sun shining in the sky. However, where there is light, there will always be shadows.”

“Shadows?”

“Yes. The light you give off has the power to give hope to many people, and brighten their lives, but that same power also draws out the darkness within people’s hearts. I’m no different. If I were ten years younger, I bet I’d be scared deep down that you might be plotting to unseat me and take my place. Even now I’m jealous of you, thinking, ‘If only I had his knowledge and wisdom.’ If I were thirty years younger, and had just finally gotten ahold of the position and status I’d worked so, so hard for, for so long, only for some young whelp overtake me in a flash, I’m sure I’d have hated you.”

“That’s so freaking stupid.” Yuuto cast aside what he was hearing with that one curt remark. Honestly, all he could think was how unimportant all of that stuff was to him.

“You’re right, it is stupid,” said Fárbauti. “But... clinging to power and authority does things to a man’s heart. Many men are hailed as great heroes, only for a stupid thing like that to pull their feet right out from under them. Be careful.”

“Such rapid troop movements, and with such ferocity,” the man muttered to himself, stroking his flabby chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I’d say the second-in-command Loptr must be the one commanding them.”

His round belly bulged outward, and his appearance gave the impression he was a sluggish and sedentary man. He looked like the type who would instantly fall prey to the enemy if he fought on the front lines.

His face beamed with a cheerful and very friendly-looking smile. But his eyes were completely different.

The glint in his narrowed eyes was chilly and without a trace of emotion, like the eyes of some reptilian predator focused on its prey.

His name was Botvid, and he was the current patriarch of the Claw Clan.

He was currently in a hilly area a day's march east of Fort Gnipahellir. It was here that the armies of the Wolf and Claw Clans had met and immediately locked horns in battle.

In contrast to his own clan's twenty-five hundred men, his enemy only had fifteen hundred or so.

Originally, Botvid had sneered at their apparent folly, thinking, *They have a lot of nerve thinking they can come directly at me with numbers like that.* But, as it turned out, the Claw Clan was the one finding itself being pushed back.

"I'd like to simply chalk it up to the man known as the Sire of Lightning Within the Storm, but even then this is still a bit much," he muttered. "Now I wonder, have the fighters of the Wolf Clan ever been strong enough to be able to overwhelm a far superior force with a frontal assault like this?"

A young girl standing at Botvid's right side nodded in agreement with him. "Indeed, it is true that their second-in-command is the greatest military commander in the Wolf Clan. However, I would think that the enemy's strength is not due to that alone."

The girl was around eleven or twelve years in age and had a sweet, adorable appearance. However, her eyes held a cool, calculating intelligence within them, as though they could see through to the true nature of all things.

"Oh? So that would mean the information you brought me was accurate after all, eh, Kris?" the patriarch of the Claw Clan asked.

"Yes. It seems that the Wolf Clan really has succeeded in refining iron."

"Hmmm. Then this so-called Gleipsieg may not altogether be a farce after all, either. Heh! Heh heh heh!" Botvid broke into delighted laughter.

The enemy general was a young but skilled commander, renowned in the region, and the troops he was leading were a powerful, elite force armed with strong and sturdy iron equipment.

And the results of this battle had convinced Botvid of one thing: In a straightforward confrontation, he had no chance of winning whatsoever.

Botvid didn't stop laughing, despite understanding that — no, it was *because*

he understood it. “So, in other words, if we can get our hands on him, then this war of conquest will turn in my favor, won’t it?”

“Yes; I have heard he has been creating many other strange and marvelous items for them, one after the other. If those were in our possession, I believe we could more than make up for our losses this time.”

“I see, I see.”

Suddenly, another small girl standing at Botvid’s left side cried out in a loud voice, “I want to eat gritless bread!”

It was at complete odds with the mood of the conversation up to that point.

Her physical appearance was identical to that of the girl Botvid had previously been speaking to, but this girl had an air of positivity and carefree innocence about her.

The girl with cold eyes let out an exasperated sigh. “Honestly, you are such a glutton, Al.”

“But, but, ever since hearing about it, I’ve been wanting to eat it so bad I can’t stand it!” As if right on cue, the innocent girl’s stomach gurgled loudly. It seemed she was currently hungry, as well.

“Just deplorable,” the cold-eyed girl sneered. “Al, think about where you are right now. Even now, our soldiers are in the middle of fighting desperately on the front lines. Conduct yourself more seriously.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“That said, I knew this would happen with you, Al.” The girl with the cold eyes smirked. “And so, I got some of it for you in advance. I’m far too indulgent with you, you know. Really, it is such hardship having such a greedy, petty-minded sister.”

“Yaaay, Kris! That’s my sister. I love you!”

“So then, I’ll trade it for all of your allowance for this month.”

“Isn’t that way more greedy and petty-minded, Kris?!” The innocent girl’s eyes went wide at the outrageous price. However, apparently the tasty-looking treat in front of her was too hard to resist in her current hungry state. “A-all

right. I-it’s a deal!”

She agreed to the offer in an almost heartbroken voice, and took the bread from her sister.

“Allllll right then, I wonder how it tastes! Ahhhhh!” The innocent girl opened her mouth wide and bit down hard on the bread— *Clack!*

“Owwwwww!!”

—and let out a pitiful cry of pain.

She had always eaten her bread with careful and deliberate small bites, wary of the tiny particles of stone that could be mixed in. Believing there were none this time, she had bitten into the bread with a large, powerful chomp.

“Heh heh heh,” the other girl snickered. “Al, you really are too cute.”



“Forward! Push forward! Force your way through! Victory is within our grasp!” Loptr cried out to his troops, even as he struck down the Claw Clan soldier attacking him, breaking his enemy’s sword with the blow.

From the moment the battle started, the Wolf Clan had been dominating it.

That was, undeniably, due to their dreadfully powerful iron weapons. Several repeated clashes were enough to damage or destroy their opponents’ weapons and shields. And furthermore, that same iron equipment was lighter and easier to use than its bronze counterpart.

The enemy had greater numbers, but that was no longer enough to be significant. It was truly hard to believe this was the same enemy force they had suffered devastating losses to in the previous year.

For the soldiers who had grimly hardened their resolve to march into this decisive battle, it was honestly anticlimactic.

“Loptr!” a man shouted. “I shall take that head of yours!”

“Guah!” Loptr barely managed to block the heavy iron axe that swung downward at him. But that overwhelmingly heavy blow left his arms numb.

There was only one man Loptr knew of within the Claw Clan who possessed both such incredible strength and an iron weapon.

He was the Einherjar of the rune Alsviðr, the Horse who Responds to its Rider. He was the Claw Clan’s greatest warrior, equivalent in strength to the Wolf Clan’s own strongest, the Mánagarmr Skáviðr. His name was— “Mundilfäri!”

“Ha!” Mundilfäri shouted. “So you were able to withstand my attack. It seems you really have obtained iron!”

Using sheer strength to forcefully push forward, the bearded man stuck his face in close, the corners of his mouth turning upward in a smirk. This man was even more frightfully strong than Loptr had heard.

Loptr was not foolish enough to attempt to stand toe-to-toe in a contest of strength with such a monster.

Loptr took a deep breath. Then, for just an instant, he relaxed his muscles, and with perfect timing, blew.

“Uwah?!” Mundilfäri cried out in surprise, for in that instant, Loptr *had made his axe slip.*

Taking advantage of the opening as his opponent’s body moved sideways, Loptr attacked with his sword. “I don’t think so!”

Stomping a foot powerfully against the ground, Mundilfäri forcefully stopped his body’s momentum, and retaliated with an axe swing that repelled Loptr’s sword.

Loptr made the axe slip again, and brandished his blade in a horizontal, sweeping attack, but it was as if Mundilfäri could read his moves. Without a hint of panic, the bearded man leapt effortlessly backwards, and Loptr’s sword met only empty air.

“Tch, you really are skilled.” Loptr clicked his tongue in irritation and quickly renewed his stance.

“I can’t believe at your age you’ve managed to master the technique that withered old willow of a wolf uses,” Mundilfäri sneered. “So the rumors are true: That rune of yours, the Jester of a Thousand Illusions, Alþiófr, really can steal techniques from other people. But in the end, it’s only mimicry. It won’t work against me. I’ve dealt with the real thing plenty of times before now, after all.”

Mundilfäri tapped a finger to where a scar ran in a long, horizontal line across the bridge of his nose, and grinned proudly. Apparently it was a badge of honor from a wound obtained while fighting Skáviðr.

In other words, he had crossed blades several times with the Wolf Clan’s greatest fighter, the Strongest Silver Wolf, Mánagarmr, and had survived with only that mere injury. That marked him as an incredibly fierce warrior.

“Hee hee,” Loptr snickered. “So then, if I take you down, I can take the title of Mánagarmr for myself, don’t you think?”

“A wet-behind-the-ears brat like you? Not in a million years!”

Having finished delivering their boasts, they brought sword and axe to bear against each other once again.

What followed was no less than dozens of clashes, with no clear victor yet emerging.

But little by little, the equilibrium began to shift.

In terms of strength and technique, they were on par with each other, but there was one difference: Mundilfäri had faced a strong enemy using the same weapon and techniques before, and so he had a slight edge on Loptr in experience.

Mundilfäri quit relying on single, powerful blows, and began to use more and more rapid strikes. He was built like a bear, yet his movements were unbelievably agile and deft.

It was no longer easy to deflect his blows, or to make his weapon slip. Just as the man had boasted, he was quite experienced at fighting against Skáviðr's techniques.

"This is it! Die!" With a rending howl, Mundilfäri swung his iron axe straight down onto Loptr's head.

The golden-haired young man's body was unceremoniously split clean in two — — however, it offered no feeling of resistance, and there was no vivid spray of blood. It wavered, like a reflection on the water, and then disappeared.

"Guagh!" In the next instant, Mundilfäri cried out as intense pain and heat surged through his left eye.

An average person would have hunched over or dropped to the ground from the pain, but his warrior's survival instincts were stronger. He promptly leapt backwards, and was able to catch sight of the accursed enemy who had just taken his eye.

"Hm. Seems I came up half a step short." Loptr clicked his tongue again. The tip of the sword in his hand was dripping with blood.

Both sides of his body were fully joined together, and both of his feet were planted firmly on the ground.

"Damn you! So you used a galldr...!" Pressing his hand to his left eye, Mundilfäri hurled his accusation like a curse in a raspy voice. That hand grew

more and more stained with his blood.

A galldr was a type of magical technique in which spells were woven into songs, and they could cause various effects on those who heard them. What Mundilfäri had cut apart was an illusion born from one of those spells.

“That’s right. I had my little sister let me steal one from her.”

“Kh! I can’t believe I of all people, fell for such a trick!”

“With just the one eye, you’ll never be able to keep up with my attacks now,” Loptr mocked. “By taking the head of the Claw Clan’s greatest hero, the morale of my men will only rise even further. The Wolf Clan... will be victorious!”

“Ngh...!”

“Don’t worry, you won’t be alone for long. I’ll soon send that fox-faced, scheming patriarch of yours to join you in the realm of the dead. Now hold still, and let me add your blood to my blade!”

With that final, cold pronouncement, Loptr stepped forward to deliver the killing blow to Mundilfäri.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaghhhh!!”

“Uryaaaaaaaaaghhhh!!”

Suddenly, a deafening chorus of battle cries rising up from both his left and his right stopped him in his tracks.

Loptr had no idea what was going on.

Judging by the voices’ volume, and the way they shook the air, each group must have no fewer than one thousand men.

“A-an ambush?!” he gasped. But how could the Claw Clan have enough soldiers to employ that strategy?

With their current national strength, the Claw Clan should have been able to field at most two thousand to twenty-five hundred soldiers. Reports from the spies sent to infiltrate their territory had confirmed as much.

And yet, now the number of enemy soldiers blocking and surrounding the Wolf Clan troops was clearly much greater than that.

Something was clearly wrong here. The numbers didn't add up.

However, this was definitely not a trick or illusion.

From the left and right came the loud reverberations of countless feet as the enemy reinforcements charged forward, a sound that was soon overtaken by the whirlwind of screams and angry roars, and the clashing of metal against metal.

"At last. Heh heh heh, they sure kept me waiting." Mundilfäri's shoulders shook from his laughter. His face wore a smile that said he was absolutely certain of his victory.

In truth, the outcome of the battle had indeed already been determined.

Their armies' troop formations were structured in order to destroy enemies in front of them.

Because of that structure, they were incredibly vulnerable to assaults from the sides or rear.

Put another way, one could say that a core part of battlefield tactics was the problem of how to effectively strike at those weaknesses.

Surrounded on three sides, with attacks coming from the left, right, and from ahead, even the Wolf Clan army with its powerful iron weapons was at far too great a disadvantage.

They had no chance of winning.

In the blink of an eye, feelings of anxiety began to spread within the hearts of the Wolf Clan soldiers.

It didn't take very long at all for those feelings to morph into despair.

ACT 6

Scrape, scrape, scrape, scrape...

Splash...

Scrape, scrape, scrape, scrape...

The workshop was quiet, save only for the sound of a metal edge being sharpened, and the occasional sound of water.

Yuuto carefully held the blade up to the light of the morning sun streaming in through the window, examining it closely. Then, without a word, he returned to scraping it against the whetstone.

Ingrid sat in a chair nearby, watching every movement of his work intently, without so much as blinking.

Yuuto tirelessly continued to repeat this process, over and over, until at long last— “It’s... done...” Staring at the blade held up to the light, Yuuto spoke almost absentmindedly, and let out a long breath.

After such a long period of continuous mental concentration, his face showed marked signs of fatigue, but it was also filled with the accomplished expression of someone who had poured every last bit of energy into a task.

“It’s so... incredible.” Ingrid sighed deeply in admiration. “Just looking at it sends a shiver down my spine...”

Her reputation as a skilled smith and artisan had reached even the imperial capital of Glaðsheimr, and she was hailed as being among the five most skilled in all of Yggdrasil. And she was completely entranced with its workmanship.

“You don’t need to talk it up so much,” Yuuto said. “I’m not that satisfied with how it turned out.”

“N-not even with this?!”

“Yeah, this is still a long ways from perfect. But it gets a passing grade, I guess. Well, I did make the blade thicker since it’s going to be used in real battles, so I

guess there's no helping it if it turned out a little rough."

"Wait, but if you could make something this amazing, why didn't you make it right away? You had more than enough time to, right?" Ingrid continued to stare admiringly at the blade as she spoke, as if enthralled by it.

Yuuto let out a small, derisive chuckle. "I've made a lot of different things here so far, but this... this is one thing I could never really get myself to work on. Because it's the life's work and passion of a man I hate so much I could kill him, so I've hated it just as much. To be honest, I was sure I'd never have anything to do with it again for the rest of my life."

"Oh," Ingrid said. "Then how come you decided now you were gonna make something you've got such a bad history with?"

"When this war with the Claw Clan ends, my mission here will be finished, and I'll go back to my own world."

"H-hey... you don't have to be in a rush to leave." Ingrid interrupted Yuuto's explanation, looking slightly flustered.

Yuuto had let her in on the fact that he'd come from another world. And that he would eventually go back.

"You know," Yuuto said, indicating the weapon in his hand, "for as far back as I can remember, I've been fascinated by these things. Instead of hanging out with the kids from school, I'd spend all my time swinging a hammer just like this one."

Yuuto picked up a forge hammer lying next to him and gave it a few swings through the air, as if reliving some old memory.

"Really, the only person I'm actually 'close' with is my one childhood friend, a girl about one year younger than me."

"Oh... a girl."

"Hm? Why'd you repeat that part back?"

"U-um, n-no reason. K-keep going!"

"Uh, okay. So, well, that's how I turned out. I mean, I've got people I know, acquaintances, but nobody I'd really call a friend."

“You’re the same as me, then.” Ingrid spoke softly, folding her arms.

It was true. She was also someone who had devoted her entire youth to the art of craftsmanship. And as the wielder of the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades, her skill was in a realm beyond those around her. There was no one on her level with whom she could have a real discussion.

She had subordinates and apprentices, but no friends or rivals alongside whom she could improve her skills further. In the world of Yggdrasil, this girl had been alone.

Yuuto was now the first. The first person who could provide her with creative stimulation.

“Once this war ends, I’ll be able to go home,” Yuuto said. “Whenever I thought about that, I just started to get this strong feeling, like I wanted to leave something behind.”

“You’ve already left us plenty,” Ingrid said. “There’s the iron, and the gritless bread, and the paper.”

“That’s stuff that everybody gets to have, though. I’m not talking about that. For the brother and sister who took care of me this whole time... I think of them as true friends from the bottom of my heart, and I want to leave behind something special for them. Like, a keepsake, to remember me by. Not that I’m gonna die or anything.”

He was planning to leave his smartphone and solar-powered battery with Felicia. And the parting gift for her older brother would be the weapon he had just finished making.

It was a weapon made just for him, unique in all the world. Yuuto couldn’t call it a flawless piece, not even as empty flattery, but even so, it was something he’d put his heart and soul into making.

“Hmph, then we’re making another one,” Ingrid said.

“Wha?”

“Y-you’ve gotta give me one, too. I’ve had to look after you quite a bit myself. I-I’ve got every right to get one of my own. You cold-hearted jerk.”

Ingrid turned her face away from him. That face was rapidly turning red as an apple.

Yuuto gave a wry smile and shrugged. “That’s true. Now that you mention it, I guess I do have one more good friend. And she’s my best partner in crime, too.”

“How could you forget?!”

“Heh, my bad.”

“That’s not a real apology!” Ingrid crossed her arms and puffed out her cheek in a sign of displeasure.

She was lively and expressive with her emotions, befitting a girl her age.

The stoic Sigrún went without saying, but Felicia also always seemed to try and keep control of her own behavior, and sometimes her politeness and courtesy created a feeling of distance.

By contrast, Yuuto felt like he could talk with this girl the same way he would a male friend, and so he found her the easiest to interact with.

Just as that thought was crossing his mind, he noticed she was staring at him with a much more serious look in her eyes.

“S-so, Yuuto? You don’t have any friends back in the other world, but there are plenty of people c-close to you in this one. Sigrún and Felicia, and Big Brother Loptr, and, a-a-and I’m h-here, too. A-a-as a friend, I mean, as a friend. I didn’t mean that in a weird way.”

“Don’t worry, I got it. Why would I misinterpret that part? I just told you you’re my close friend, didn’t I? The one who understands me the most.”

“Y-you don’t get it at all...” Ingrid muttered to herself.

“Hm? I didn’t catch that just now.”

Yuuto didn’t know why, but for some reason, his good friend was currently on hands and knees striking the floor with her fist.

“I didn’t say anything!” she yelled angrily back at him with tears in her eyes, leaving him blinking in confusion.

Ingrid normally had a spirited personality and a tendency to care for others

like a big sister, but to Yuuto, it seemed like she got into foul moods at the strangest times.

“A-anyway!” she exclaimed. “I enjoy making things with you. I always get excited wondering what we’re going to make next. So, s-so that’s why, y-you should s-s-s-stay, you should s-stay here w-w-with—”

Slam! Suddenly, the door to the workshop burst open.

It was a soldier. He must have been in a great hurry; his face was flushed and he was out of breath. It was clear just from those details that something big had happened.

The soldier took several long, deep breaths, straightened himself, and then shouted his announcement.

“Lord Yuuto! You are summoned to an emergency meeting! Please, proceed to the palace at once!”

“A total... defeat...?” Yuuto stood motionless, shocked at Sigrún’s report.

The silver-haired girl’s face was covered in beads of sweat, and she was breathing heavily; she must have forced her horse to travel at top speed for a long while to race here with the report. She appeared to be in great discomfort just standing there. There was no trace of her usual cold, dignified air.

In the palace’s audience hall were gathered all the ranking officers of the Wolf Clan who, for various reasons, had not taken part in the sortie. Each and every one of their faces was stiff and drained of color.

“Wait, then what happened to Felicia?! What happened to Loptr?!” Yuuto raised his voice, pressing Sigrún for answers.

It was very rude to interrupt a report intended for the patriarch, but to Yuuto, those two were irreplaceable family. He couldn’t spare a thought for etiquette right now.

“...I don’t know.”

“W-what do you mean, you don’t know?!”

“Big Brother Skáviðr launched a suicidal assault that managed to punch an

opening in the enemy ranks, and thanks to that, most of the other commanders, including me, were able to escape from the front lines with our lives," Sigrún said. "That includes Big Brother Loptr, and Felicia. But as someone who can ride a horse, I had to leave them behind in order to get this message to Father as quickly as possible. I want to believe the two of them are fine, but the forces in pursuit will also be fierce. I can't guarantee anything."

"What the hell is this... No... I don't want this to be how we say goodbye..." The strength began to leave Yuuto's body.

Without any shame or regard for appearance, Yuuto crouched down on the spot, curling weakly into a ball.

He'd assumed he would be saying farewell to them once this battle was over. But that was supposed to be with both of them still alive, with everyone wishing for each other's happiness as they parted ways. Not some hopeless situation where they were separated by death.

"Why is this?" Fárbauti demanded. "We might not have been strong enough to win any battle, but with iron weapons and four Einherjar, and the entirety of our army fighting as one, we certainly should have won this battle. So how were our forces defeated?!"

The old patriarch leaned forward out of his chair as he hurled the question at Sigrún. His lack of composure showed in the demanding way he pressed her.

Sigrún clenched her fists in anger, and responded in a voice that sounded as if she were struggling to get the words out.

"It was... an ambush. As you said, Father, throughout the battle with the Claw Clan, our army had the advantage. However, just as we were one step away from victory, suddenly we were attacked from both sides by troops from the Fang and Ash Clans..."

"Impossible! Why would those two clans...?!" Fárbauti stood up so quickly in his confusion that his chair nearly toppled over.

It was the first time Yuuto had seen the usually-unflappable old patriarch visibly disturbed to such a degree.

A mix of voices, some resentful and some baffled, began to rise up from the

other clan officers gathered in the audience hall.

“I can’t believe this. Those two clans were supposed to be on hostile terms with the Claw Clan.”

“And the Claw Clan’s patriarch two generations ago was killed by the Fang Clan, so they should be bitter enemies.”

“I’ve heard that the Claw Clan’s been fighting over control of territory with the Ash Clan for many years now.”

“Damn them! Just when did they all join forces...?!”

“Grrr, this all started because they had the gall to attack their head family. They know nothing of honor and loyalty.”

With the words he could pick out and understand from the officers’ remarks, Yuuto desperately searched his own memory. He could remember having at least heard mention of the Fang and Ash Clans.

They were both clans who held territory in an area further east of the Claw Clan. Originally, in the past, those two and the Claw Clan had been like branch families of the Wolf Clan, with their patriarchs having been younger sibling or child subordinates of the Wolf Clan’s patriarch at the time.

Of course, now there was no Oath of the Chalice binding their current leaders, and each was more prosperous than their diminished former “main family.”

“Again... I’ve been had by that Botvid once again...” Fárbauti slumped back into his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

His voice was filled with resentment, humiliation, and defeat. The old patriarch’s face had lost any semblance of color and life, and he looked as if in these few moments he’d aged another ten or twenty years.

“Thinking back on it now, he was deliberately showing us his own troop movements, in order to distract us from the movements of the Fang and Ash Clans.” The old patriarch’s voice was almost a dull moan, his face twisted by a pained grimace.

So he used misdirection on us, Yuuto thought to himself.

It was a term he’d picked up from a popular basketball manga, but it

described a technique used in a magician's sleight-of-hand and in mystery novels.

By showing some obviously suspicious object or action, one could pull the audience's attention onto it, and away from the real heart of the trick.

Putting together what the other clan officers had said, those other two clans were on such bad, even hostile terms with the Claw Clan that there should have been no way they would provide reinforcements in battle. That way of thinking was a blind spot, and it had been exploited well.

And so the two clans had snuck up on the unguarded flanks of the Wolf Clan troops, and descended on them suddenly in a single, surprise attack.

Fárbauti often referred to the Claw Clan patriarch as a wily fox, and this level of cunning strategy seemed worthy of that moniker.

"I always knew he had a taste for sneaky tricks, but to think he'd come up with a plan so meticulous and so bold... I completely underestimated him!" Fárbauti groaned.

"Ah-choo!"

"What's wrong, Kris?" Albertina asked. "Do you have a cold?"

"Don't worry about me, Al, but come over here for a minute." Kristina reached out and hugged her sister.

"Hmm? Why are you hugging me all of a sudden? Ahaha, Kris, you're so needy sometimes."

"Since ancient times, it's been said that giving your cold to someone else makes it go away faster."

"Ohh, I've heard that, too. ...Hey, you don't mean me?!"

Cough, cough, hack!

"Ahhh, stooop! I'll caaaatch iiit!

"Oh my, but Al! Your sweet, precious sister is here suffering from a cold; are you saying you don't want to help me get better as quickly as possible?! What a

cold-hearted person you are!”

“Ehhh?! But I do want you to get well soon, and I’ll take care of you too, so isn’t this kind of different?!”

“Heavens! So you’re saying I should just keep suffering from this cold?! How heartless!”

“All right, I understand! I’ll do my best!”

As a look of tragic resolve born from love solidified in her eyes, Albertina embraced her identical twin sister.

That sister was by far the more heartless one for being more than willing to infect her just to get over a cold a little faster, but Albertina didn’t think that deeply about it.

There was no way her sister would do something cruel to her. She believed that from the bottom of her heart.

This, too, was one form of misdirection. After all, Kristina had no cold to speak of, so there was nothing to transmit in the first place.

With her face buried in her sister’s chest, Kristina giggled impishly.

“Heh heh, I’ll consider this a reward for myself. I’m glad it looks like everything worked out well. Still, we had to settle for an Oath of the Chalice with the Fang Clan that puts us at a 60:40 disadvantage, we had to cede that territory to the Ash Clan we’ve been fighting them over for so many years now, and our clan had to supply all the food and provisions for this war. If we don’t take everything we can get, this will still be a heavy loss for us. Well, it looks like this all might be worth that risk, so I’ll make sure we recoup every bit of our debts. Isn’t that right, Gleipsieg?”

“I’m so glad the two of you are alive!”

Loptr and Felicia returned to Iárnviðr two days after Sigrún’s arrival. For those two days, Yuuto had wrapped himself in blankets, forced his way into the guard station next to the city gate, and waited for the two of them the whole time. Spotting their figures amongst the numbers of beaten, weary soldiers coming

through the gate, he'd raced toward them while shouting and crying.

He was now seeing them again for the first time in two weeks, and he could tell at a glance what sort of terrible battle they'd been through by their clothes, which were covered in places with mud and in others with dried blood. Their luxurious golden hair was caked with dust and grit, and their faces were thin and sunken from fatigue and hunger. They looked nothing like their normal, beautiful selves.

But their clothes and bodies could be washed. They could rest and heal their exhaustion. If they were starved, they need only eat.

All those things were possible, because they were both alive! Not to mention they were both in one piece, with no permanent injuries.

Yuuto was dimly aware of just how terrifying the situation was about to become for the Wolf Clan, but for the time being, he was simply grateful from the bottom of his heart.

"I, too, am thankful to the goddess Angrboða that I was able to see you again, Big Brother." Tears began to well up in Felicia's eyes, and then she leaped into Yuuto's arms and began crying into his chest. "There were so many times, so many times I thought I would not see you again..."

It made a strong impression on Yuuto. Though she was normally so calm and composed, though she was a holy Einherjar warrior, she was still a girl in her teens, after all.

"Me, too! I was so worried I'd never see you again...!" Yuuto embraced Felicia back.

He wanted to feel her warmth. He needed to know that she wasn't some illusion, but was really and truly alive and here.

"I... I am very sorry," Felicia stammered. "That was disgraceful of me. But once I saw your face, the tears wouldn't stop..."

"It's fine. You must have been so scared. You can cry as much as you—"

"Ahem!"

The sound was like a bucket of ice water thrown on their dramatic exchange.

It was, of course, coming from their older brother.

“Hey, brother of mine,” Loptr said. “It so happens I made it home alive too, you know?”

“Ah! O-of course I’m also truly happy you’re alive, Big Brother Loptr, from the bottom of my heart!” Feeling the scornful glare of his older brother’s eyes, Yuuto quickly let go of Felicia and stood back.

He could see her pouting a bit in dissatisfaction, but he regained his composure. With their older brother and second-in-command right there in front of them, he didn’t have the audacity to keep holding her in his arms.

“Is that really true?” Loptr questioned. “It feels more like the two of you were off in your own little world, and I was completely ignored and forgotten.”

“Th-that’s not how it was, really!” Yuuto exclaimed, flustered.

“No, no, it’s fine, really. Actually, I’d much rather try and get you to take her into your care at this point, you know.”

“L-look, like I said before, I can’t do—”

“Don’t say that, I’m begging you. This country is done for already. Even if it’s just Felicia, could you escape and take her with you back to your own country?”

The eyes staring into Yuuto’s were completely serious, but at the same time, they looked like those of a man who had completely lost his way.

“At present, approximately one thousand soldiers were able to return safely to Iárnviðr,” Loptr reported. “I believe there are some survivors left who have yet to arrive, but they likely number at most one hundred men or so. Assuming that the Claw Clan was our only enemy, I failed to notice the ambush by the Fang and Ash Clans, and I lost many of the precious lives you entrusted to me, Father. I can offer no words in my own defense. Please punish me by any means you deem fit.”

In the audience hall of the palace, Loptr knelt before his patriarch and bowed his head low.

His face was gallant, filled with the grim determination of a sinner who

willingly wished to receive his just punishment.

The hall was filled with the other prominent officers of the Wolf Clan, and every one of their faces wore a dark expression. Those who had participated with Loptr in the battle had a look of sympathy in their eyes, while the glares of those who had not seen the fight were full of blame and reproach.

In the midst of that painfully oppressive tension, the old patriarch slowly shook his head, and then spoke calmly.

“No, you’re not responsible for this. Not a single person here, including myself, was able to perceive the movements of the Fang and Ash Clans. You did well to gather your panicked troops in the midst of a pincer attack, and bring such a large number back home to us. If not for you, we would have had far worse than our current losses.”

“Your kind words and generosity fill me with gratitude, Father,” Loptr said with relief. “It is all thanks to Brother Ská, who volunteered to go out and be the rearguard as we retreated. Without my brother’s fierce fighting, there is no doubt we would have lost far more soldiers.”

“I see. As expected of the Mánagarmr,” Fárbauti said. “However, I heard that Ská himself suffered some heavy wounds.”

“Yes, sir. It appears to have been a considerably fierce battle, and though he did survive, I believe in his current state, even someone as great as him will be unable to fight for the time being.”

“Hm... it’ll be tough without him.” The old patriarch rested his chin in his hands and sighed, seemingly at a loss.

Even Yuuto had heard tales about the Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf, stationed at Fort Gnipahellir. He was Loptr’s teacher in martial arts, and supposedly enough of a master fighter that he could lead Sigrún around by the nose.

Even in the context of this current war, Yuuto had seen the man’s name come up here and there in reports from the front, and it seemed like his furious efforts were worthy of the title of strongest in the Wolf Clan.

That must have made his inability to continue fighting all the more difficult to

bear for the old patriarch, who was already backed into a corner.

“And what of the enemy?” Fárbauti asked.

“Sir. After defeating our forces, the enemy captured Fort Gnipahellir, and even now they are marching towards Iárnviðr. Their number is... approximately six thousand.”

“...!” The old patriarch gave a slight gasp, then frowned pensively. All the color drained from his face. He had likely prepared himself for this, and so he did not become visibly upset, but it was clear that the impact of those numbers had hit him hard.

The old patriarch closed his eyes and folded his arms in thought for a moment, then stared upward into empty space and spoke. “We’ve only got a thousand men or so. It wouldn’t even be a contest. Even if we holed up within the walls and sealed the gates, we would not last long against a force that size.”

The old patriarch’s words were detached and matter-of-fact, and no one in that room raised their voice in argument against them.

Against an enemy army twice as large, they would still have been able to convince themselves that their loss wasn’t certain, that they would seize an opportunity and turn things around. But against a force six times as large, optimistic and encouraging words only rang hollow.

To add to that, the thousand soldiers of the Wolf Clan had already lost miserably in the last battle, fled the battlefield under pursuit, and were now completely exhausted. There were also more than a few with serious wounds.

With morale so low, it would be difficult even to rouse their fighting spirit enough to get them to face the enemy.

Throughout the audience hall, the heavy, silent force known as despair hung over everyone.

The first one to break the silence was the patriarch’s sworn younger brother and head priest, Bruno.

“B-Big Brother! At this point, any further resistance would just be wasting the lives of our soldiers in vain. I think that we have no choice but to surrender

honorably, and hope that the Claw Clan will show kindness."

As he pleaded, he looked up at the patriarch. His eyes were a mixture of guilt, expectation, and abject servility.

"Hah, so you'd be willing to offer Father's head on a platter just to save yourself then, you shameless dog." Sigrún spat the words out coldly at Bruno, with a look of total and utter scorn.

The Wolf and Claw Clans had been engaged in a bloody war for years now. The Wolf Clan had been on the losing side for most of that time, but it wasn't like there had been no casualties for the Claw Clan.

It wasn't something that would ever be forgiven with just a surrender and an apology. The leader of the losing side would have to take responsibility in some way.

Being forced to swear the Oath of the Child Chalice and become Botvid's subordinate and vassal was one possibility, but Fárbauti was already a very old man, and there was no telling how much longer he would live. Once a new patriarch took power, Fárbauti's old oath would mean nothing, and so there was little merit in that option for the Claw Clan. And with this difference in numbers, there was no need for them to offer a compromise.

A head on display would be a fitting way for the Claw Clan to satisfy their own troops, while making a strong impression on the people of Iárnviðr that their rulers had changed.

"In the past forty years, did the wine you hold in your Chalice get swapped out for muddy water or something?" Sigrún snapped.

When it came to the bonds of the Chalice, the child had a duty to protect the parent he or she had sworn allegiance to, even at the cost of his or her life. To Sigrún, the thought of this man letting her sworn parent die so that he might save himself was absolutely despicable.

However, Bruno hadn't given up yet. He shouted back at her with all the force of a sudden conflagration. "Shut your mouth! You're just a little girl whose only talent is fighting!"

"What was that?!" Sigrún raised her voice in response to the unsparing insult.

The intense spirit behind her shout was normally enough to make a grown man recoil, but Bruno kept on talking.

“You might think it’s fine as long as you get to fight, but what about everyone else?! At this rate, they’ll all be killed! You know perfectly well which choice will save the most lives, don’t you? And besides, it’s not even set in stone that they’ll kill Big Brother Fárbauti! They might just force him to step down! Then if the next to succeed as patriarch were to abdicate the position in favor of someone from the Claw Clan, then we can move things in a more peaceful direction!”

“That’s far too optimistic a way of looking at things,” Sigrún sneered. “Do you really think that fox-faced leader of the Claw Clan really has such a kind heart?”

“But this is our only option left, isn’t it?! At the very least, it would minimize the damage and casualties in the city! If we continue to fight, the city itself will definitely be destroyed! Do you want that?!”

“Ghh...!”

“Enough, Sigrún.” The old patriarch lifted a hand, and his soft voice silenced the angry, silver-haired girl.

He swept his gaze once over everyone gathered in the audience hall before speaking.

“He’s right. We have no other path before us than to surrender. If I offer up my head, Botvid should delay the ransacking of the city by about one to two days, and they won’t rob us of absolutely everything.”

“Ran...sacking? Even though you’re going to surrender, and even offer them your life, Dad?!” Yuuto couldn’t help but question this.

If they surrendered the city and allowed it to be occupied, it would be newly under the rule of the Claw Clan. It didn’t make any sense for them to perpetrate looting and violence against their new subjects.

The old patriarch frowned, then nodded slowly, allowing the regret and displeasure to show on his face.

“Perhaps it’s something you don’t understand because you’ve never been on

the battlefield yourself. War unleashes the beast nesting within a man's heart. If they don't allow something like this, they won't be able to regain control of their soldiers afterward."

"How can that...?" Yuuto was at a complete loss for words.

He had been living in this city for more than ten months now. If he traveled down to the bazaar, there were a few acquaintances he'd become familiar with, and thanks to Ingrid, he interacted with the artisans and craftsmen, too.

The knowledge that Yuuto had been inventing various items and making the Wolf Clan more prosperous had already reached the common people of the city, and these days, as he walked the streets, he even got a "Good luck to you!" from strangers more and more often.

Naturally, there were a great deal of women and children in the city.

Did they have no choice but to be trampled over and violated without recourse?

"Loptr, I'm sorry," Fárbauti said. "More than likely, as my second, you'll be executed along with me. As the future rulers of the city, the Claw Clan will think your existence is a threat, after all."

"I have been prepared for that since the day I took the post as second-in-command," Loptr said.

"And as for you two, Felicia and Sigrún."

"Yes, Father."

"Sir!"

With a look of guilt and great shame, the patriarch's eyes clouded over for a moment. "I know it's going to be a painful experience for the both of you, but... even so, please live on. If you live on, good things will be waiting for you in the future."

"...Kh!" Yuuto wasn't dimwitted enough to miss the meaning in the patriarch's words.

The town was going to be ransacked and overrun. There was no way that those blood-crazed men, ravenous to sate their desires, would ever overlook

two girls as beautiful as Felicia and Sigrún.

“That’s bullshit! There’s no way they should be allowed to get away with that! I mean, how can *you* allow that?!” Overcome with indignation, Yuuto forgot the fact that he was in public and yelled directly at the patriarch.

His sworn father and the older brother he respected would be executed and their bodies put cruelly on display in the streets, and his precious little sisters would be violated and degraded.

There was no way such an outcome could be for the best.

There was absolutely no way he could allow it to happen.

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” Fárbauti said wearily. “It will be forcing a cruel and painful experience on many people, but this is still the choice that leads to the fewest deaths. At this point, without some sort of actual miracle, there’s no hope for victory for us...”

Forcing out the words in a tight voice through clenched teeth, the old patriarch closed his eyes tightly and hung his head.

Before long, every person in the audience hall was looking down at the floor. The sounds of muffled sobbing could be heard here and there.

Despair held sway over all.

However, there was still one person left who still hadn’t given up.

One young man who told himself, *There has to be some way,* and desperately spurned on his mind to seek it out.

Trapped in the utter darkness with no exit in sight, he wandered, and wandered, and continued to wander in search of it, until— —at last, within the depths of Yuuto’s mind, a single ray of light pierced the darkness.

“That’s it! There’s a way!” he shouted.

He lifted his head and pressed closer to Fárbauti with a frantic expression.

“Dad! All we need is for a miracle to happen, right?!”

And with that, Yuuto began to reveal the plan that had come to his mind in a flash of inspiration.

He was excited and thinking out loud, so his words were clumsy and faltering, and the idea itself was strange, even bizarre, so the audience hall was soon stirring with murmurs and commotion.

Every one of the people there reacted with skepticism. Their eyes all seemed to say, *“It’s impossible to do something like that.”*

“Are you truly, truly saying you can cause a miracle like that to occur, Yuuto?” Loptr asked him, his voice shaking.

The look in Loptr’s eyes could have been excitement, or perhaps even fear.

“I’m not just claiming that it’s going to occur.” Yuuto stared right back into his sworn brother’s eyes and firmly reassured him. “I *know* that it *will* happen.”

He had absolute confidence in this. For if Yggdrasil was indeed Earth in the past, then this miracle would most definitely occur.

“If we make use of this, then there will be more than enough of a chance for us to...”

“Don’t spout such nonsense!” A heated shout like a conflagration cut off Yuuto’s words.

It was Bruno.

He glared at Yuuto with an expression of pure rage, practically growling. “Something like that can’t be created or caused by mere mortals! It’s beyond our knowledge! Do you then mean to claim you really are more than a mere man, that you’re the Child of Victory, the Gleipsieg?!”

“That’s right.” Yuuto responded to Bruno’s angry ranting by glaring right back at him. “If it means I can protect everyone, then I’ll become your damned Gleipsieg. I’ll become whatever it takes.”

Bruno had a tough, grizzled face, and a deep, booming voice. More than anything, he had a powerful presence born from the confidence he’d gained through his struggle to climb to his current position, forcing others to submit to his will along the way.

The sort of stern, hard-nosed “demon teacher” all the kids at school were

scared of was nothing more than a kitten compared to this man.

Such a man was even now unleashing the full force of his animosity directly onto Yuuto, and yet for some strange reason, Yuuto didn't waver in the slightest.

A fire down in the depths of his heart burned brightly, and that burning heat moved Yuuto ever forward.

"I'll even make a miracle happen, if that's what it takes."

"Keep your nonsense claims to yourself!" Bruno sputtered. "It's because you went and created iron that we're even in a situation like this in the first place. We got caught up in the illusion of victory, and charged into the Claw Clan head-on, and look where we are! You're no Child of Victory, boy. You're a demon child. Even now you're planning to goad us into another reckless battle we can't win, and steal even more of our lives away. You think I'll fall for that?! Big Brother! Everyone! You mustn't listen to the delusions this brat is spouting!"

Several people began to voice their agreement with Bruno's claims.

"Y-yes, that's right, it's just like Uncle Bruno says."

"I could never believe a miracle like that would occur."

The divine power of the Gleipsieg to bring victory had already been thoroughly disproven by the most recent battle. At this point, none of them could bring themselves to believe the apparent nonsense this young man was saying.

At this point, they had all fully given up, resigning themselves to the idea that surrender was their only choice. Their hearts had been crushed, and they had completely abandoned the will to fight.

"These damned idiots..." Something within Yuuto finally snapped.

They say a person's name represents their character, and for the young man named Yuuto Suoh, his true character shone forth when he needed to protect others around him.

He would protect those precious to him, his family, without fail, no matter what. That was something he'd sworn to himself when his mother passed away.

If he let the Wolf Clan surrender, he would once again lose his family. He was determined never to let that happen ever again.

The fire burning in the depths of his heart erupted like magma from a volcano, rushing out of him.

With precious family placed into a desperate situation—

“If you don’t want to win, then you can just butt the hell out!”

—the lion, king of all beasts, unleashed its maiden roar in the world of Yggdrasil.

The air surrounding the young man had changed completely.

It was cold, sharp, and heavy!

Pointing a timid finger at Yuuto, Bruno attempted to protest in a shaky voice. “Wha... w-w-what do you think y-you’re doing, t-talking to me like—”

“*OH?*” Yuuto snapped. “Like *WHAT?*”

“Eek!”

One fierce glare from Yuuto caused caused the words to catch in Bruno’s throat with a shrill gasp, and he fell flat on his bottom there on the spot, as if his legs and back had given out.

His face turned a rich shade of purple, as if he were having difficulty breathing, and he began sweating bullets, his teeth chattering loudly and his body shaking, and to top it off, a wet spot appeared on his pants. However, not one person laughed at him for it.

For everyone else in that place, Bruno was completely outside of their attention.

Every pair of eyes was currently helplessly affixed to the young man whose intimidating aura was nothing short of overwhelming.

“Y-Yuuto, j-just what are you...?” Loptr asked in a quivering voice, astonished.

After one glance in his sworn brother’s direction, Yuuto clenched his fist before calling out again to the crowd.

“I’ll make sure you win. Those of you that have something you want to

protect can follow me!”

It wasn’t a particularly loud voice. In fact, if anything it was low and subdued. But it carried a forceful power behind it, almost like magic that seemed to demand that any who listened to it obey, no questions asked.

He’s barely more than a child! Just what is this boy?! As those thoughts ran through the minds of the various clan members, and they stood transfixed, a single golden-haired figure stepped out in front of the young man.

“It is just as I always believed, and my intuition was not mistaken, after all,” Felicia said reverently. “You are the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg. My body and heart have already been given to you, along with my Oath of the Chalice. Please, make use of them as you see fit.”

Felicia knelt in front of Yuuto, and bowed her head deeply to him. Her cheeks were slightly red, and small tears dripped from her eyes onto the floor.

“M-me too, me too!”

Pushing aside the people in front of her, a young girl with red hair raised her hand and ran over to stand in front of Yuuto, as well.

“You’re the kind of guy who, when he says he’ll do something, always follows through, and I know that better than anyone else.”

With the corners of her mouth turning up in a grin, Ingrid followed Felicia’s example and knelt.

“The Child... of Victory...” Those words, a mere whisper, escaped the lips of someone in the crowd.

In the blink of an eye, the effect of those words spread throughout the audience hall, until everyone there was overcome with excitement, intoxicated by the enthusiasm.

“That’s right, he must be the one sent to us by the great Angrboða, the Gleipsieg!”

“Such a commanding presence! I could scarcely believe he’s still a child!”

“Overturning a mere hardship like this will surely be nothing with the Gleipsieg on our side!”

“I will stand with you.”

“Me, too! I will, too!”

In almost lockstep harmony, every one of them sang Yuuto’s praises, and all knelt before him.

In the midst of dark despair, just the presence of even a small light of hope had been enough to make them want to cling furiously to it. That was part of being human.

Right now, it was indeed Yuuto who had become the pillar supporting all of their hearts.

“W-what incredible strength,” Sigrún murmured. “I can’t believe I so completely misjudged him!”

She was filled with a great mix of emotions, and she clenched her fist tightly, her body still trembling.

The sight unfolding in front of her was unbelievable.

Until mere moments ago, everyone in this audience hall had been staring at the ground with dead-looking eyes. But now every set of eyes looking up at Yuuto was filled with the spark of life.

Just one person, by himself, had replaced the overwhelming despair of that place with hope. That wasn’t something an ordinary person could simply do.

“Please, let me serve you as well.” The silver-haired warrior made her way forward to kneel in front of Yuuto. “I was completely blind in my judgment of you. If by any chance, you could grant me forgiveness for my many instances of rudeness, Big Brother, I hope you might allow me to offer up my Oath of the Chalice, and my sword, to you. I now firmly believe that it was for the sake of serving you that I was born in this world, and for that sake that a sword first found my hand. Please, use this life of mine freely.”

Sigrún took the sword from her waist, still in its scabbard, and held it up with both hands, presenting it to Yuuto.

At that exact moment, the clouds in the sky above parted a little, and a single ray of light streamed in through the window.

“Ohhhhh!” Fárbauti shivered as he was emotionally moved to the greatest extent he had ever been in his long lifetime.

It was such a divine spectacle. These three maidens, themselves consecrated and chosen by the gods, had all lined up of their own volition to swear their fealty to this young man.

It was something he could not possibly have imagined when they first met.

He’d had an inkling there was some promise in the boy, sure, but nothing like this.

It was almost certain that this young man had simply been too lacking in a wide variety of experiences. That was why it was easy to misjudge his potential for growth.

Repeated experiences of hardship and failure had rapidly tempered and honed those amazing qualities that had been hidden within him, and this unprecedented crisis had finally forced their awakening.

Fárbauti’s feelings solidified into a firm resolve, and he made his decision.

He stood up, waving one hand for attention as he made his pronouncement.

“All right, then, I understand. Yuuto, I’ll leave everything to you. I’m entrusting you with the future of the Wolf Clan, my son!”

“So, with that settled, I’m leaving all of the battle stuff to you, Big Brother Loptr!” With a broad grin, Yuuto gave him a thumbs-up gesture.

The long war council meeting had finally ended, and the moon had already risen among the twinkling stars in the night sky. On a normal night in Iárnviðr everyone would have already been fast asleep at this hour, but there was light all around them from the flames of bonfires and torches being lit, and as Yuuto’s group made their way towards the Hliðskjálf, people were constantly running past them in either direction.

In just a few days, the allied army of the three enemy clans would begin their attack on Iárnviðr. Everyone was making their respective preparations to hold the city against the coming assault and potential siege.

Staaaare... Sigrún's gaze was uncomfortably intent.

"Weren't you the one Father entrusted with this plan, though?" Loptr prodded him with a wry laugh.

"Hey come on, I don't know the first thing about commanding troops or any of that," Yuuto responded a bit defensively.

The golden-haired young man made an exasperated face at him. "And despite that, you were still able to announce we would win while brimming with such self-confidence?"

"I'd say I'm doing absolutely everything in my power to make sure we *do* win. If someone experienced and used to command like you were leading the troops, Big Brother Loptr, our chances of victory would be much better than with me doing it. It's all about using the best person for each job. I've got things that I have to be the one to do, too. They're things that only I *can* do. So, let's both do our best, and take care of what we need to."

"Heh, all right then. This is also a chance for me to redeem myself. You can leave it to me."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

"Okay, then, I'll be on my way." With a small smile, Loptr waved and walked off.

For some reason, his back seemed smaller to Yuuto. Even his smile had seemed somehow different from usual, though Yuuto couldn't put his finger on exactly how.

"Hmm, Big Brother Loptr seems kinda down. I wonder if maybe he still hasn't gotten over his defeat from before?" Yuuto murmured to himself, concerned, as he watched Loptr's back recede into the distance.

Even a winnable battle might be lost if the commander in charge of the troops was in no state to lead them. That was one of Yuuto's misgivings, anyway, but even more importantly, he didn't want to see Loptr of all people looking disheartened. He wanted his sworn older brother to always be a confident role model, something greater than himself that he could always chase after.

Staaaare... Sigrún's gaze continued to pierce him.

"Indeed, that is the first time I've seen my brother like that, as well," Felicia said. "I am a bit worried. But I also think he will be all right. I might be saying this as his little sister, but he is a strong person."

"You're right." Yuuto nodded strongly in agreement. "He's the dependable older brother that we both rely on, after all."

Practically speaking, he didn't have the time right now to afford to worry about other people, anyway.

Staaaare...

"Right, we just have to focus on taking care of our own parts in this," Yuuto said. "Okay, this area should be good enough. Ingrid!"

"Mm? What?"

"I'm gonna lend this to you for now, so what I want you to do is watch the video I'm about to show you. Keep watching it, over and over, until the battery runs out of power. Once the video reaches the end, you can make it play again by touching this triangle-shaped button here."

Yuuto loaded up a web page with embedded video that he'd saved in his browser's bookmarks list, and after starting the video, he handed the smartphone over to the red-haired girl.

"Eh?" she gasped. "Wh-what are you doing? Isn't this thing really important to you? Are you sure that's okay?"

"Yeah, I am. You're my partner and I trust you, so I'm making a special exception and lending it to you for now. Don't break it, okay?"

"O-okay! I'll take really good care of it." Ingrid clutched the smartphone tightly against her chest.

Her expression was filled with joy and pride. Suddenly, the person standing in front of Yuuto didn't seem like the good buddy he'd been used to treating just like a male friend. Instead it was a girl whose cuteness was enough to make Yuuto's heart skip a beat. However...

"Hey, you should be looking at the screen! Videos use up a lot of battery

power! You can't waste a single second right now!"

Right now, chastising her mistake was more important to him.

He was a man who didn't understand a woman's heart.

"R-right. O-okay, got it! ...W-what is this?!"

"Heh heh, it's because all I've heard since I got here is that iron is a gift from the heavens. If we use this, it'll be a good way to make doubly sure we win, right? Do you think you can make it?"

"Um, well, I think I could probably do it, but this is gonna mean another stretch of working day and night around the clock."

"Sorry about that, but I need you for this, partner. You're the only one I can count on." Yuuto clapped his hands together and bowed his head to Ingrid in a solemn, pleading gesture.

It was an item that, back in modern-day Japan, elementary school students could make miniature versions of as part of their handicrafts projects over summer break. Someone like Ingrid, among the finest craftsmen in Yggdrasil, would surely already have an idea of how to make one.

In any case, this siege was going to be a battle against time. He needed her to work her absolute hardest for this to succeed.

"I'm the only one, huh?" Ingrid said. "Ohh, well, I guess if you're gonna insist like that. The Wolf Clan's in a pinch too, so yeah, I'll do it for you."

Ingrid turned aside, making to act like she was reluctantly agreeing to take on an annoying job. However, she couldn't hide that the corners of her mouth were turned up in a happy grin.

Staaaare...

At long last, Yuuto couldn't put up with it any longer, and he turned on his heel to question Sigrún.

"And just what the heck is going on with you, Rún?!" he shouted. "You've been staring at my face this whole time!"

Ever since leaving the audience hall, he had felt an intense, heated gaze

coming from Sigrún.

At first, he had just figured it was because he was the center of attention and discussion at the time, but even after leaving the hall and parting ways with Loptr, even as he was handing the smartphone over to Ingrid, Sigrún had kept her eyes fixed firmly on his face the entire time.

At this point, he was starting to worry there might be something wrong with his face.

“Uh... um...” For her part, Sigrún seemed nervous and timid as she spoke to him. “I was just wondering if... if it might be possible for me to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with you, and... and I know how things have been between us up until now.”

Ordinarily she was a girl who spoke frankly even to her superiors without any fear, so this was very uncharacteristic behavior for her.

It was the first time Yuuto had ever seen her so meek and fidgety.

“If you don’t mind, then I’m fine with that.” With a bit of suspicion, Yuuto nodded in assent.

It was true that at one time, her way of speaking to him had really ticked him off, but nowadays she felt more like the kind of smart-mouthed friend he could trade banter with. He had no real reason to refuse her request.

“T-truly?!”

“Uh, y-yeah.”

“Th-th-thank you so very much, Big Brother!” Sigrún bowed to Yuuto deeply that her head almost reached her knees. “It is such a relief to get that off of my chest. Honestly, I was so worried.”

When Sigrún raised her head again, her face was full of a joy that made her usual, stoic expressionless look seem like a false memory.

For some reason, Yuuto could see the image of a wagging tail behind her in his mind’s eye. “You’re making a really big deal out of my Chalice, though.”

Yuuto frankly had no idea why she was so eager to exchange the oath with him directly. Currently, the two of them were technically already siblings within

the clan, having both taken Fárbauti as their sworn father.

The two of them had yet to exchange any vows between each other directly, though. And it was true that two members of the clan who acknowledged and respected each other might take it upon themselves to exchange the Oath of the Chalice as individuals, to deepen their bonds with one another. He had learned that from exchanging oaths with Felicia and Loptr early on.

But he still couldn't come up with a plausible reason why she would be so insistent on exchanging oaths directly with someone like himself.

"Not at all!" she declared. "I wish to receive your Oath of the Chalice more than anyone else's, Big Brother Yuuto. I said as much during the war council, but I truly wish that you might allow me to devote my Chalice and my sword to your service."

"...Hey, are you feeling okay right now? What happened to that blunt, curt attitude you always have? It's so weird having you talk to me like this." Yuuto knit his brow with a mixture of awkwardness and concern as he said this.

The Sigrún he knew didn't flatter other people or follow their lead; she only followed her own principles, like a proud lone wolf.

Her manner was so different now that it didn't even seem like her. If Yuuto were able to put his current feelings at the time into words, he would have said he was a little creeped out.

"I cannot speak that way anymore to the person I've chosen to honor as my sworn older brother," Sigrún declared.

"No, if it's possible, I'd like it if you kept talking to me the way you always have before..."

"Please forgive me for that. The way I've treated you until now is such a great source of shame for me."

"...No, really, what the heck is up with her?" Yuuto decided he wasn't getting anywhere with Sigrún, and he turned to Felicia.

Felicia placed a hand over her mouth and giggled, as if she were truly enjoying herself at all of this. "Oh, there is nothing wrong. It's just that she has finally

been made aware of your greatness, Big Brother."

"Grr, it might be the truth, but it's really annoying hearing it come from you," Sigrún snarled. "It fills me with the utmost bitter regret that I lost to you in pledging loyalty to Big Brother first."

"Tee hee hee, you did always say things like, 'I can't understand how you could possibly treat someone like *that* as your older brother,' didn't you?"

"S-stop it! Don't repeat it! I haven't said anything like that for several months now!"

"Tee hee hee, now what else was there..."

"Look, I'm sorry! I admit I was wrong, so please don't say any more! I'm begging you!" Sigrún was panicking, stealing worried glances at Yuuto as she pleaded.

This gallant warrior who would not show fear in the face of any foe was now so completely afraid of Yuuto disliking her that she was barely in control of herself.

"Ohh, that's so cuuuute!" Felicia cried. "I never knew you had a side like this to you, Rún."

"I, however, always knew you were someone with a cruel streak." Sigrún spoke almost dejectedly, as Felicia laughed and covered her mouth with both hands.

What ever these two might say, Yuuto could see that they actually got along well. Even as they went back and forth with each other, there was a side to it that seemed almost playful.

He felt bad about interrupting their exchange, but Yuuto felt there was something he had to say, no matter what.

"Listen, Rún. I'm saying it again just in case, but I'm not actually going to make this miracle or anything like that. I just have the knowledge that it's going to happen, nothing more. I'm just a human, not some clairvoyant god or something. You're not having some kind of misunderstanding about me, are you?"

That would bother him if it was the reason she had come to respect him.

With regards to creating things, Yuuto accomplished the things he had only after a lot of trial and error, and a lot of diligent working through hardships and setbacks, and so he wasn't as hesitant to accept being praised or revered for that.

But when it came to this in particular, it truly was something he only just knew about, and he didn't want praise for it.

He had the pride of a true craftsman.

"No, Big Brother. While it is true that your revelation during the war council was so shocking that it made my blood run cold, that is not what made me feel this way about you."

"Huh? Then, what?" In Yuuto's mind, that was the only plausible cause for Sigrún to have come to acknowledge someone like himself.

What else could there be? Yuuto tilted his head quizzically, and Felicia burst out in laughter once more.

"Big Brother. The only thing Rún acknowledges is strength. Your powerful words during that argument absolutely mesmerized me."

"Yes, that massive and powerful aura of yours was incredible as well, but what truly inspired my devotion to you is how, in an instant, you blew away the despair that had taken hold of everyone's hearts," Sigrún said. "I realized that my mere physical strength and fighting skills are such petty and trifling things next to that strength of yours, Big Brother."

Sigrún closed her eyes, placing a hand over her chest as she spoke, as if recalling the memory of that event with the utmost reverence.

"Uh... okay..." Yuuto was more sure than ever that he was being grossly overvalued, but all he could manage was that halfhearted reply.

From Yuuto's perspective, the whole reason for that reaction to him was because of the legend of the Gleipsieg. In other words, he had won them over with the simple confidence of his claim, the same as if he were bluffing.

"Well, I'm sure this fever of hers will cool off a bit after a couple of days,"

Yuuto muttered. “I’ll be sure to tease her about it then.”

Scratching his head, Yuuto predicted that things would go back to how they were before.

However, Sigrún’s admiration and devotion to Yuuto did not fade away. In fact, it only deepened day by day.

“Th-the enemy’s going to attack where you are?!” Mitsuki’s shocked voice came to him, quivering, through the phone’s speaker.

It was only natural.

He had already told her that there was going to be a war, but it was supposed to be taking place far away from Iárnviðr.

Hearing all of a sudden that the enemy was going to be assaulting the city Yuuto was in must have been a total bolt from the blue for her.

“Yeah, but you don’t need to worry,” Yuuto assured her. “I’ve already come up with a plan for certain victory!”

“E-even if you say that... is it really going to be all right?!”

“Just trust me. I’m the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg. I’m the hero that’s destined to break us out of this crisis... right?” Yuuto boasted to her, full of self-confidence.

Of course he was also scared himself, but he wanted to do what he could to keep Mitsuki from worrying.

“Yuu-kun... You can’t die, okay?!” Mitsuki exclaimed. “Don’t do anything dangerous!”

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna die. I’m gonna win this battle and complete my mission, and then I’m definitely going to come back to Japan, and back to you!”

“Okay... okay... I’m waiting for you.”

“And when I do, I want you to... No, never mind.”

“Wha— When you say stuff like that, it just makes me want to hear it even more, you know!”

“I’ll say it when I get home.” Yuuto laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

He’d liked Mitsuki since even before he came to Yggdrasil.

And, once he’d come to a world without her, he’d come to realize even more just how important she was to him.

However, he had sworn to himself that he would only tell her those feelings after he’d safely made it back home.

And a man was never supposed to go back on something once he’d decided it in his heart.

“Enemy forces sighted, directly ahead! The enemy has begun their assault!!” The lookout’s piercing voice resounded as he shouted at the top of his lungs.

Next came the blaring war horns, their loud notes echoing over and over from multiple locations as they sounded the alarm.

“So, they’re here at last...” Yuuto whispered to himself tensely, his face tightly drawn, and stood up.

It had been only two days since the war council meeting where they’d decided to fight to the bitter end. A siege defense like this one was a battle against time.

Honestly, he would have liked for the enemy to have taken a bit longer to arrive. Of course, it would have also been a problem if they’d arrived too late.

“H-huh?” As he went to take a step forward, his legs began to shake.

He could hear his own heart pounding in his ears with such force he wondered if it might burst.

His teeth began chattering.

Loptr shrugged and teased him. “Ha ha ha, what’s wrong, have you gotten scared now that the battle’s right in front of you?”

The golden-haired young man stood nearby in his full battle attire, stately and imposing.

I wish you could share some of that calm attitude with me, even a little bit,

Yuuto thought grumpily.

“That’s mean-spirited of you, Brother,” Felicia frowned and admonished her older brother. “It can’t be helped if it’s his first battle, after all.”

Then she turned to Yuuto, and suddenly pulled his head to her chest in a tight embrace.

Felicia’s outfit was light on fabric, and left a lot of exposed skin. Before Yuuto had a chance to protest, his nose and lips were pressing up against her soft skin. And right on the symbols of her womanhood, of all places!

“W-wha?! Felicia?!” he exclaimed.

Felicia’s gentle words fell upon his ears as she lightly stroked his back. “It’s going to be all right. Big Brother, you can do this. You will surely be able to guide the Wolf Clan to victory.”

Strangely enough, he felt the anxiety in his heart start to disappear. It seemed like the touch of human skin really did have a calming effect.

“As always, you give me too much credit, Felicia,” he murmured. “I’ve been weak and shameful in front of you so many times now. Even at an important time like this, I’m a total disgrace. I can’t believe you haven’t given up on me.”

“Tee hee, even the greatest warriors get nervous in their first battle.”

“...I-is that how it is?”

It was true that he had heard similar stories back home, like one about how a world-class champion boxer had said that his most nerve-wracking match of all time hadn’t been his title bout, but rather his debut match.

If even the type of person who goes on to become greatest in the world finds their first battle scary, then an ordinary guy like himself being frightened was only natural.

“And it is also said that a great general must be cautious and prudent,” Felicia added. “A small amount of cowardice is perfectly appropriate. In fact, I would say it’s proof of your potential as a commander, Big Brother.”

“Ha ha ha, okay, now *that’s* taking favoritism way too far.” Yuuto gave a wry chuckle.

However, though Yuuto at this point in time had yet to research such things, even Cao Cao, great hero of the tumultuous Three Kingdoms period of China, had once been quoted as saying, “He who would be commander, must at times be a coward. He must not rely only on bravery.”

Felicia’s statement had been neither a lie nor a falsehood.

Still, regardless of its veracity one way or another, it had done Yuuto some good. He had lost a good deal of his earlier tension.

“I’m all right now,” Yuuto said quietly, and gently freed himself from Felicia’s arms.

His body had stopped trembling.

He felt someone’s eyes on him, and turned to see Sigrún staring at him in the same way she had the other day. She wore her typical serious, expressionless face, but to Yuuto she somehow seemed a bit displeased.

She’s probably just had her image of me shattered after seeing me act so pitifully, he thought.

She ran straight over to him and made a loud declaration. “B-Big Brother, I swear that I shall protect you with my life. You have absolutely nothing to worry about!”

“Uh, o-okay, thanks. I’m counting on you.” Yuuto pulled back a bit as he replied, overcome by her fierce, almost desperate demeanor.

But it seemed that wasn’t the sort of response Sigrún had been hoping for, and her energy visibly drained away, leaving her looking glum.

For some reason, Felicia was grinning and snickering to herself with a look of triumph... which drew a glare of pure ire from Sigrún.

“Ohh, this is a good view.” Atop a watchtower at one corner of the city walls, Yuuto placed a foot on the parapet and laughed as he looked down at what was below him.

It was the kind of overwhelming sight where one could do nothing but laugh.

Below him, lines of armed soldiers were marching forward with their spears

at the ready. Their golden-colored spearheads reflected the sun's light in a beautiful spectacle.

Of course, he was aware that the metal was bronze, not gold, but that glittering color was still a sight to behold.

Next to him, Felicia gave a heavy sigh and looked on with a stiff expression. "Y-you seem much more confident, Big Brother. While it is embarrassing to admit, I have started to become a bit frightened..."

Knowing the enemy numbers in her head was one thing, but that was totally different from the impact of seeing them from this angle. In the previous battle she'd fought on the ground, which made it harder to grasp the size and scale of the enemy forces. Being able to look down on them like this was only now giving her a real sense of just how great an enemy they were up against.

By contrast, Yuuto was calm and detached. "Mm, well, I'm sort of past fear at this point. Ha ha..."

He'd already been dropped into the depths of fear. Once he'd hit bottom, there had been nowhere left to go but up.

It did make a difference for Yuuto that, as a person from modern-day Japan, he was completely used to crowds and the presence of large numbers of people.

The local festival held in his area every May was famous nationwide, with tens of thousands of people attending each year. And he'd seen images of even larger crowds on TV, countless times.

At this point, the sight of around five or six thousand people wasn't going to overwhelm him.

"You really are amazing, Big Brother," she murmured.

"Save that praise for after we make it through this alive."

Felicia looked up at him with sincere trust in her eyes, and Yuuto couldn't help but find it a bit embarrassing.

As they were conversing, the enemy forces continued to gather, surrounding Iárnviðr.

“Well then, it’s about time for me to put on the performance of a lifetime!” Yuuto declared. “Felicia, Rún, get ready!”

“Right!”

“Sir!”

The two girls with hair of gold and silver reacted instantly to his signal, moving nimbly.

Felicia sounded a high note from a conch shell war horn, and Sigrún unfurled the large Wolf Clan army banner they’d hastily put together, waving it over her head.

These actions were conspicuous enough that their enemies, the troops of the Three Clan Alliance Army, soon took notice of Yuuto’s group.

After determining to his satisfaction that even persons far in the back of the crowd were pointing fingers in his direction, Yuuto leaned out over the parapet and shouted as loud as he could.

“I see you have made it this far! Aye, despite the fact that you are misguided fools who defy the will of the gods! I am the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, messenger of the goddess Angrboða! I am Sköll, the protector of the Wolf Clan! All of you gathered here are of family once born of our clan. You have forgotten the Oath of the Chalice sworn by your forefathers! Angrboða, great mother to us all, grows furious at those disloyal children who draw blade and arrow against their sworn parents! If you persist in doing us harm, the rage of the very gods shall fall upon your heads. If you fear not the gods, then come at us with everything you have!”

With this proclamation, the curtain rose on “The Siege of Iárnviðr,” as it would later come to be known among the people of the Wolf Clan.



“Now then...” Yuuto dropped down to sit cross-legged, and put the palms of his hands together.

For the time being, the fact that he’d been able to finish his entire speech without problems was a huge accomplishment. Except for one last task at the very, very end of it all, there was nothing left for Yuuto to do now. Rather, staying right there in that spot was now Yuuto’s most important job.

Sigrún spoke up after affixing the banner to a nearby pedestal. “It’s supposed to be one week from now, correct?”

She and Felicia were in charge of protecting Yuuto.

They were high enough up on top of the watchtower that the enemy’s arrows wouldn’t reach them, so there shouldn’t be any real danger to any of them, but it was important to be prepared just in case.

An important part of their strategy this time was in making sure to impress the image of Yuuto firmly into their enemies’ minds. Felicia and Sigrún were both beautiful girls, and they were also both Einherjar warriors whose names were known among the Claw Clan. Showing that the two of them were in his service would increase his prestige.

“That’s right,” Yuuto said. “If we hold out that long, we’ll win this. Even if they’re six times bigger, we should be able to do that much, right?”

Compared to battle on open territory, sieges tended to be long and drawn-out. And the tall walls holding back the enemy were actually quite reliable.

It would be one thing if their enemies had a crane and wrecking ball from the modern era, but the usual weapon for breaking through fortifications in Yggdrasil was a battering ram made from a big tree trunk and carried by hand. It would take quite a bit of time and effort to do any real damage with that.

In addition, there were soldiers armed with bows and slings on top of the walls, poised to rain down attacks on whomever got close. There was no way the enemy would make quick progress like that.

Even if their enemies tried to set up a ladder to climb, they’d be leaving themselves defenseless on the way up.

Those sorts of simple, brute-force attacks might work on a small fort, but weak and diminished clan or not, Iárnviðr was the capital city of the Wolf Clan. Against a fortified city this size, even an attacking force sixfold in number would have to be prepared to suffer very heavy losses if they tried to force their way in.

This was the reason it was held as common wisdom that attacking a castle or walled city required an army five to ten times the size of the defenders.

Conversely, if their enemies wanted to keep casualties to a minimum, the best move would be to construct fortifications next to the target castle to defend against archers, and cut off all supply lines, starving the defenders and breaking their spirits. Though it wasn't a showy or exciting strategy, it exploited the weakness of the defenders, and so it had become the method used most often in sieges, which was why they tended to turn into long affairs.

"So for now, things are going just as we expected them to," Sigrún said, watching the movements of the Three Clan Alliance Army.

The Alliance Army's soldiers had encircled Iárnviðr and were beginning to construct earthen fortifications. They were making all the preparations for a long-term siege.

It was the correct decision for the enemy's commander to make. The Wolf Clan had lost the majority of its strength in the previous battle, and they had no hope of reinforcements. In this state, they were likely to surrender before too long, so it was obviously better to go with the surefire long-term strategy rather than attempt a risky attack.

Yuuto grinned. "Yeah, we've got them just where we want them."

"So, you're the Gleipsieg?" Without warning, a cheerless voice came from directly behind him.

Yuuto felt a chill run up his spine.

It was clearly someone who knew him!

He nervously turned around. There was a man standing there whose appearance seemed to fit the word "sinister" in every way.

The man was clothed all in black, and seemed to be around thirty. His cheeks were thin and sunken as if he were diseased or starved, and his skin was sickeningly pale, but his eyes shone with a keen, cold light, like the eyes of some ravenous beast.

Is he an assassin who came straight here to kill me after hearing that speech?! That was the first thought that crossed Yuuto's mind, and he promptly reached for the sword at his waist.

"Big Brother Skáviðr!" the two girls called out, taking all the tension out of the situation.

Yuuto took a longer, more discerning look at the man in front of him. "Eh?! Wait... you're the one they call the Strongest Silver Wolf, the Mánagarmr?"

He was known as the strongest, so Yuuto had been picturing a more well-built and muscular man like Jörgen, the assistant to the second-in-command. This man didn't really fit the image. Frankly speaking, his outward appearance didn't make him seem strong at all, but then again, there was something, a strangely threatening air about him that marked him as no ordinary person.

"So we finally get to meet," the man said. He introduced himself in a low, dispassionate voice. "I'm Skáviðr."

"Ah... my name is Yuuto Suoh." Yuuto found himself standing at attention to give his introduction in return.

He was a young man who was used to using polite language and manners with his elders, but that was rare, even for him.

The person in front of him now had bandages wrapped around various parts of his body, blood slowly seeping through some of them. He was leaning on a cane with his left hand, without which it looked like he might not be able to walk.

Those wounds had come from the previous battle, where he had fought on without regard for his own life or safety, protecting his comrades until the last. Each one was a badge of valor.

Yuuto felt compelled to show the man all proper respect, for he was the man who completely embodied Yuuto's ideals.

“If he were alive, he’d be about your age,” Skáviðr murmured.

“I’m sorry?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Skáviðr shook his head and chuckled, as if in self-derision.

Yuuto got the strange impression that the shadow hanging over the man grew slightly darker, but he chose not to pursue the matter further. He had a feeling it was something he shouldn’t ask about.

Instead, he asked something else. “Um, by the way, what brings you here? Shouldn’t you be resting right now?”

“I came here to give you my thanks.”

“Me?”

“Yes.” Skáviðr nodded and unsheathed his sword.

Its silver blade was deeply stained with blood and flesh, most of its luster gone. As Yuuto looked closer, he saw plenty of nicks in the cutting edge.

The Three Clan Alliance Army had to be using bronze weapons and shields. Against such markedly weaker equipment, the fact that Skáviðr’s weapon had sustained this much damage in only a few days was a testament to just how fierce and desperate the battle had been.

“Without this, I would be nothing more than an empty carcass by now,” Skáviðr said. “Thanks to you, I somehow lived to see another day. I was able to save my brothers, as well. You have my thanks.”

“No, I... I was only just doing what I could...”

“That makes no difference to the fact that you saved me. Besides, I heard about what happened at the war council the other day. I already owe this life to you. I can’t do my work as well with my body in the shape it’s in, but if you don’t mind that, I want you to make the best use of me that you can.”

Skáviðr reversed the sword in his hand, then held it out to Yuuto.

The sword was the tool which protected a warrior’s life. The act of offering it to another person was, in essence, equivalent to offering up one’s life.

“Oh... okay, then. If you’re offering,” Yuuto said nonchalantly. He took the sword in hand rather casually, as if he hadn’t given the meaning much thought.

“B-Big Brother, I don’t think Big Brother Skáviðr is in proper condition to fight right now...” a worried Felicia began to interrupt.

Yuuto silenced her with a hand, and grinned. “This is my command. Please return at once to the sickroom and lie down. Rest. You are someone who is going to be very important to the future of the Wolf Clan, after all. We cannot afford to let you die here.”

“The future, you say?” Skáviðr stared intently at Yuuto.

“Yes, the future.” Yuuto looked straight back into Skáviðr’s eyes.

After a moment, Skáviðr gave a quiet chuckle and shrugged his shoulders. “I see. Then I suppose I’ll do as I’m told, and go lie down for a bit.”

“Yes. Please do.”

“Heh.” With a small, wry smile, Skáviðr turned and left the way he came.

As Yuuto watched the man’s back recede, he raised a hand to his brow in a crisp salute.

There was no tradition in Yggdrasil of using such a gesture, but for Yuuto, he felt he had to express his feelings of respect and admiration somehow for this hero who had put his life on the line to fight for others.

For the next week after that, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

The Alliance Army would launch attacks intermittently, but once the archers and slingers began to attack in response, they quickly retreated behind their earthen fortifications.

They would also sometimes suddenly burst out in a large chorus of raucous angry screams, or noxious insults, at random times throughout the day and night.

After having those physical and mental attacks repeated over and over countless times, this near-continuous assault was not even worth mentioning. And so from Yuuto’s perspective, for all of those days, nothing out of the

ordinary happened.

It would be wrong to say that made things easy, though.

Watching the sun slowly rise above the horizon after a sleepless night, Yuuto yawned. “So, we finally made it to today...”

In that instant, he was struck by a wave of dizziness.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, and massaged his temples. He had been trying to take advantage of the dark hours when the enemy couldn’t see him clearly to grab some sleep, but even with that, he was incredibly sleep-deprived.

He couldn’t get sleep even when he wanted to. Even if he did fall asleep, he was quickly woken up.

Nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Yuuto himself wasn’t doing anything special, either. He sat still and pretended to pray, or danced, or pretended to cast spells with silly gestures. That was all he ever had to do.

Even so, he felt awful, with a strange ache in his chest and a body that felt as heavy as lead. He was too tired to even move around anymore.

It wasn’t as if the Alliance Army was using the aforementioned tactics out of desperation, either. They weren’t seriously trying to attack; they were applying constant psychological pressure.

Humans were surprisingly vulnerable to stress. Without sufficient sleep, their minds began to suffer. If prolonged tension and stress continued, their hearts wore out easily. If you continued to expose them to a source of fear, they would become unable to think of anything except their desire to be saved from it.

By applying this psychological pressure to one’s enemies and pushing them to their wits’ end, one could force some of them to surrender or even betray their own. That was one of the basics of offensive siege warfare.

And the defending side had to withstand the pressure of the unknowns: when the enemy would pull back, how long supplies would last. Just thinking about such uncertainty was chilling.

That said, it would all end today.

Relaxing at the thought of that, Yuuto said, “Ingrid got what I asked for all set up and ready to go, so now this battle’s as good as...”

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack!” one of the lookouts began shouting.

Sure enough, the Alliance Army soldiers were pushing in force towards the main gate.

Again? Already? The sun’s barely started to come up, Yuuto thought dejectedly.

They were surely going to retreat again in a few minutes, but he couldn’t afford to ignore them, either. If Yuuto’s side were even a bit lax in their attacks, the enemy could seize advantage of that good fortune and begin ramming the gate or setting ladders up to climb the walls. If they let the enemy get inside the walls, it would be all over.

This just the kind of situation the phrase “no rest for the weary” was invented for.

“Big Brother Loptr must really be having it rough, too,” Yuuto murmured.

Loptr, as second-in-command and a veteran commander, was far more knowledgeable and familiar with these military situations than an amateur like Yuuto. Yuuto was sure he would give out precise orders and quickly repel the attack this time, too. However...

“Th-the gate has been breached! Th-the enemy is flooding in!” a lookout shouted.

“W-whaaat?!” Yuuto screamed.

He wasn’t the only one who raised his voice in shock. Felicia and Sigrún, who had been resting against a nearby wall, threw off their blankets and leapt to their feet, as well.

“How can that be?!” Felicia yelled.

“What?!” Sigrún shouted.

This was inconceivable.

There had been absolutely no warning signs of a breach in the gate. If a

battering ram had been used, there would have been sound and vibrations from the impact that Yuuto and the others would have noticed.

The fact that there weren't meant—

"We might have a traitor on our hands." Yuuto practically spat out the words with loathing.

It was the situation he had most feared.

"Could it be Uncle Bruno?" Sigrún furrowed her brow as she made the suggestion, perhaps remembering the events of the war council.

"Um, if I may speak as someone who works under him, Uncle Bruno has a cowardly side to him, and is very conservative and stubborn in his way of thinking, but even with that, he loves the Wolf Clan," Felicia said. "I do not think it would be him. Though I do not like him very much, either."

Felicia gave a troubled, bitter smile at that last part.

She worked as a clan priestess. She would have spent a lot of time in the presence of Bruno, the head priest, and likely knew him quite well.

"Then who is it?!" Sigrún cried.

Felicia smiled bitterly. "It would not be strange for anyone to have done it at this point."

"...That's true," Yuuto said.

The whole Wolf Clan army had been told that Yuuto was going to perform a miracle. And so they had only been told to hold out until then.

The idea of such a miracle happening was absurd on its face.

And in the ceremony right before the previous sortie, Fárbauti had declared that, "As long as the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg is with us, the victory of the Wolf Clan is assured." Then, after that bold promise, the result had been utter defeat.

In other words, the golden image of the Gleipsieg was already quite tarnished in the eyes of the Wolf Clan rank and file.

Much like Bruno during the war council meeting, there were undoubtedly

many who couldn't bring themselves to believe in him and his miracle.

It was more than sufficiently possible that one of those people had decided to save themselves, and had made contact with the enemy and opened the gate.

That, of course, was exactly why Loptr was supposed to have posted his most trustworthy soldiers next to the gate...

"Damn it, and after coming this far!" Yuuto pounded his fists against the stones in hopeless frustration, ignoring the pain.

Just a bit longer. Just a bit longer, and their miracle was going to occur! His fist hit the stone again and again...

Suddenly, the old patriarch's words echoed in the back of his mind. *"It's because I never gave up. What wins it all in the end is... determination, the firm resolve to follow through on things, no matter what."*

Yuuto ceased hitting the stone. "That's right. It's too early to give up now! Felicia! Rún!"

"Yes, Big Brother!"

"Sir!"

"Even if they got it open, the road through the gate is narrow," Yuuto declared. "There's a limit to how many men they can get through. You have to do whatever you can to stall them until it's time! They need your skills as an Einherjar down there right now!"

Sigrún looked back and forth between Yuuto and the mass of Alliance Army soldiers below, her face wracked with worry. "H-however, that would leave no one to protect you, Big Brother."

Though Yuuto had become slightly stronger and more dependable over the past eleven months, he was still far weaker than the average soldiers of this era.

Felicia was looking his way nervously as well, likely also wondering whether it was really all right to leave Yuuto here by himself.

"Don't get your priorities twisted!" Yuuto scolded. "If the enemy manages to get all the way up here, we're all as good as done for anyway. So go!!"

He pointed a finger sharply in the direction of the gate down below.

A leader had to ignore personal feelings, look at the situation rationally, size up the available options, and quickly make the best move. Yuuto was still a novice at giving orders to others, but he had already begun to exhibit signs of the great commander he would one day become.

“I understand,” Felicia said. “Big Brother, please take care of yourself.”

“Understood, Big Brother,” Sigrún agreed. “Please, be safe!”

“Yeah, you two be careful too.” Yuuto grinned and gave them a thumbs-up.

In truth, he was scared of being left alone. The thought of what might happen to him if an enemy soldier found him was enough to make his hair stand on end.

Even so, Yuuto was a man. With two girls prepared to go out and fight a life-or-death battle to protect everyone, he couldn’t allow himself to show any signs of fear.

If he didn’t act tough now, he would be a failure as a man.

“Oh, that’s right. Take this, Rún.” Yuuto picked up the item that he’d set aside next to himself, and tossed it to the silver-haired girl. Just yesterday, Ingrid had delivered it to him along with her report that she’d finished building what he’d requested.

Catching it in one hand, Sigrún stared at it, her brow furrowed. “What is this?”

“I’m gonna let you have that for now. It’ll probably come in handy.”

“Yes, sir! I am grateful you would lend it to me!” Sigrún held the item to her chest and bowed to him.

Felicia, by contrast, seemed to be quite flustered. “B-Big Brother, w-what about me?!”

Yuuto was slightly taken aback by her intensity and took a step back, but as he instinctively reached down with a hand to search, there was of course nothing there.

“Huh?! No, but.. that, that was all I had on me, so...”

“Hey now, don’t give Big Brother any problems, Felicia,” Sigrún snapped. “We don’t have time. Let’s go!”

Grabbing Felicia by the scruff of her neck, Sigrún ran off with her.

This was indeed a situation where every second counted. Felicia seemed to realize that as well, and resigned herself to running alongside Sigrún.

Yuuto watched them run off, the two of them looking heroic as—

“Listen, w-when it comes to Big Brother, *I* am the older sister of us, understand?!” Felicia shouted. “Just because he lent you something, don’t start getting cocky and...”

“Heh, I can understand that you’re jealous, but you don’t have to bark so loudly about it.”

“Grrr...!”

—as they absorbed themselves in an argument that made no sense to him, and only served to make him anxious.

At that moment, Felicia and Sigrún were not the only ones who lacked a sense of tension befitting their situation.

Down in the streets where the light of dawn had yet to reach, two girls made their way through the thin darkness, hand in hand. They were identical twin sisters, around eleven or twelve years of age, with their lightly-colored hair done up in side ponytails that made them look like mirrored reflections of one another.

“Now then, we’ve finished the job, so let’s be off at once, Al,” Kristina said.

“Gritless breeeaaad...” her sister moaned.

“Are you still going on about that? You *are* aware this spot is going to turn into a battlefield any moment?”

“But, but, but...”

“Honestly, you’re hopeless,” Kristina said with a sigh. “But I knew you would get like this again, so I’ve prepared some for you.”

“Really?! ...Wait, you’re saying that, but it’s actually bread with grit in it, isn’t it?! You’re not gonna trick me again!”

“I-impossible,” Kristina gasped. “Al is... learning?!” She recoiled, as if this were unbelievably shocking to her.

Others might have found it shocking just how much of a fool Kristina made her sister out to be. Though with the way Albertina usually acted, perhaps not.

“I suppose you would remember a prank from only a few days ago,” Kristina sighed.

“Ha haaaa! Did you think a mere trick like that would fool the great Albertina?” her sister preened.

“Actually, Al, there really isn’t any grit in this one, though.”

“N-no, you’re lying! You’re saying that to try and trick me again, right?!”

“Dearest sister, you are so distrustful,” Kristina said with a pout, fully aware that she herself was the one responsible for that.

Still, under normal circumstances, Albertina would never be this stubborn. As Kristina wondered to herself why that might be, Albertina provided her with a clue.

“Of course I am! It *really* hurt last time!”

“Ahh, you did bite into it with all your might, after all.” Kristina smirked.

It seemed the pain had let Albertina learn with her body, rather than her mind. It was no wonder she hadn’t forgotten.

“But this one truly doesn’t have any grit in it,” Kristina said. “As an apology for last time, I bought some gritless ground wheat properly from a trade merchant, kneaded the dough myself, and baked this bread last night.”

“I-is that really true? There’s no grit in it?”

“Ohh, it pains me to be so thoroughly doubted by my one and only sister. I swear on my life, there is no grit in this bread. It’s my apology, after all.”

“Oh... It’s an apology. Theeen I’ll eat it!” *Chomp.* “Mm, it kinda has a unique taste...”

“Yes, that’s because I kneaded boiled mugwort leaves into the dough. They’re very aromatic and used as cooking spice. Mugwort is very good for you, you know. It wouldn’t do if I didn’t make sure my sister stayed healthy.”

Mugwort was a common name given to several different but related species of plants, native to different parts of the world. Since ancient times, they had each been treasured for their medicinal properties. This was as true in Yggdrasil as Earth.

Even in 21st century Japan, the variety of mugwort known as *yomogi* was called the “queen of herbs” due to its many health benefits, and was a component in traditional Chinese medicine.

And as for its taste...

“Gaah, it’s bitter! This is so, so bitter!”

As a bit of trivia, in Nepal mugwort was called Titepati, a name which meant “bitter leaf.”

“I made it just for you, with love, so make sure to eat it all and don’t leave a single bite,” Kristina said.

“Ughh, it’s bitter! It’s sooo bitterrrr!” Even as she whimpered, Albertina continued to eat.

Yggdrasil wasn’t a world of plenty. Good food was hard to come by. However bitter it might be, she wasn’t going to waste food. That principle had been hammered into Albertina on a fundamental level.

Kristina, who had taken advantage of that fact, watched with a look of sadistic pleasure as her sister ate while crying. She really was a little devil.

And it was by her devilish hand that Iárnviðr was now facing its worst moment of crisis.

Looking up at the city gate some distance away, she chuckled to herself. She could clearly hear the angry cries and the sounds of clashing weapons. It appeared the fighting had begun.

“Heh heh... a task like this was nothing for Veðrfölnir, the Silencer of Winds.”

Young as she was, this girl was unmistakably an Einherjar, and she possessed

the extraordinary ability to erase her presence. With that ability in hand, she had infiltrated Iárnviðr with her twin sister and opened the city gate herself.

Of course, even for a naturally gifted spy such as herself, it would normally have been no easy feat to sneak into such a heavily fortified place, especially with everyone on guard against an ever-present enemy just outside.

However, right now the soldiers protecting Iárnviðr had endured battle after battle within the span of days, and they'd been pushed to their limits of fatigue.

Some sort of victory might have been able to push away some of that weariness, but their most recent battle on the open field had resulted in a significant defeat, and they'd been forced to flee in retreat while fending off pursuit and additional attacks. Even now they were surrounded by a much larger enemy force, and this whole week, they had been struggling against their fears with no end in sight.

In that state, they had no hope of being completely alert and vigilant, and this young girl had easily exploited that opening.

"All right, then! Mm-hm. Where to next?"

Humming a little tune to themselves, the young twins disappeared into the back streets of Iárnviðr.

The city gates, where normally local residents and trade merchants with their horse-drawn carts would be gathering, were instead awash with frenzied soldiers, swinging their weapons and bellowing war cries.

The Wolf Clan was not sitting idly by. They were trying to do everything they could to push back the enemy, so that they might close the gates once more.

The area under the gate itself had become a free-for-all where it was hard to tell friend from foe.

Raising his sword high in the air, the Wolf Clan second-in-command called out to his men. "Push them back! If we just hold out a little longer, the Gleipsieg will bring about a miracle for us!"

Loptr's normally well-kept hair was frayed and tangled. His normally

handsome face was ragged, with thick bags under his eyes, which were themselves bloodshot and fiendish-looking.

"Second-in-Command Loptr!" an enemy soldier shouted. "I'll be taking that head of yours—!"

"Like I'd ever let you have it!" Loptr broke his foe's sword with a downward strike, then took off the man's head with the next swing.

The fighting itself was progressing with the Wolf Clan having the advantage.

The road through the gate was only wide enough for ten men at most, so the number of enemies who could come through was limited.

In a fight with equal strength and numbers, the Wolf Clan and their iron equipment could overwhelm their opponents.

However...

"Damn it, there's no end to them," Loptr snarled.

Despite cutting down foe after foe, more pressed forward to replace them without end. The sheer difference in numbers was not so easily overcome, after all.

And to make matters worse, the Wolf Clan's soldiers were more worn out. If it were only a short battle, they could spur on their tired bodies for just a little bit longer, but as the fighting dragged on, they wouldn't be able to hold out.

As he watched one Wolf Clan fighter after another succumb to their wounds and fall, Loptr could only grind his teeth in frustration. "Damn it! At this rate..."

Clang!

"Wha—" Just now, his opponent had blocked his sword attack.

Even after multiple clashes, the man's sword showed no signs of breaking.

But that was only natural. His enemy was also holding an iron sword, after all.

"You *bastard!*" With a roar of fury, Loptr unleashed a series of attacks that cornered his opponent, culminating in a strike that finally brought him down.

Loptr was one of the top fighters in the Wolf Clan. His opponent had not been weak by any means, but even with an iron weapon, such a man was still no

match for Loptr.

But unfortunately, he wasn't the only soldier with an iron sword. More and more soldiers with iron swords began to pour through the gate.

"You fiends!" Loptr spat out the words with hatred. "You couldn't content yourself with killing my Wolf Clan brethren, you had to defile their corpses as well!"

The swords currently in the hands of his foes had originally belonged to the Wolf Clan. Loptr could recognize them by their shape and design.

There was only one possibility. The enemy had robbed the corpses of the fallen Wolf Clan fighters after the previous battle.

"Urraaagghhh!"

This was unforgivable to him from an emotional standpoint, but even more importantly, as the commander on the ground, he saw that it was clear and deadly threat.

With the difference in their equipment equalized, a fight between the well-rested and fed enemy troops and his own wounded and weary fighters was hardly an even match.

And the situation was about to go from bad to worse.

"Loptr! I'll be paying you back for this left eye, right here and now!" a familiar deep voice roared, and a familiar iron axe swung down towards him.

Loptr reflexively jumped backwards, and clicked his tongue in frustration. "Tch! Mundilfäri! This is bad."

With the Claw Clan's greatest warrior joining the fray, the situation truly was too much for him to handle.

"Now then, how about we continue where we left off the other day—!"

"Kh! Ngah!"

Against the mighty attacks of Mundilfäri's iron axe, it was all Loptr could do to defend, and he was driven backward.

His body felt heavy, and he couldn't keep up well with the oncoming attacks.

He'd built up too much fatigue from fighting for so long. It was taking everything in his power to guard and stay on his feet.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?!" Mundilfäri shouted. "You're not as nimble as you were last time!"

Not only was this true, Mundilfäri's attacks were even stronger than they had been the last time they fought.

Loptr remembered a bit of what Skáviðr had told him about Mundilfäri.

His rune Alsviðr, the Horse who Responds to its Rider, increased his physical strength when he faced a foe he had deep or personal connections with.

The reason he kept being able to fight with such unending might and success as the Claw Clan's great hero was that his opponents were hated members of the Wolf Clan, the ones who had slain his brethren, and that connection fed his power.

And now his opponent was Loptr, the accursed man who had beaten him once and taken away his left eye.

The increase in strength from that connection was more than enough to make up for the loss of his eye.

On the other hand, if Loptr could find a way to strike at him from that blind spot, he might go down easily. But it would be impossible right now to find an opening in the furious salvo of his attacks.

"Rrraagh!" Mundilfäri roared.

At last, one of Mundilfäri's attacks cut a shallow gash into Loptr's left arm.

"Gwah!" Loptr shouted.

Another, horizontal sweeping attack came right on its heels.

Loptr blocked it with his sword and tried to hold his ground, but then a spurt of fresh blood erupted from his arm wound, and the strength suddenly left him.

That was enough to tip the scales, and Loptr was thrown off balance.

"I've got you!!" Mundilfäri did not miss the opening. He put all of his strength into a downward slash.

Loptr kicked off the ground at the last instant, and managed to jump back, but...

“Gahh...!” With a cry of agony, blood leapt from a wound on Loptr’s face.

Seeing this, a sinister grin spread across Mundilfäri’s face—

In the very next instant, a slash cut into Mundilfäri’s cheek, as well.

“Haah... haaah... I... I won’t die here, not without achieving my dream first...!” Wheezing, Loptr readied his sword again.

A bright crimson line ran from his forehead down to his cheek. Mundilfäri’s last attack had carved it into him.

“Hmph, I didn’t cut deep enough.” Licking the blood from the cut on his own cheek, Mundilfäri let out a savage laugh. “But there’s no way you can beat me now!”

With that shout, he unleashed another rapid swing.

Loptr’s sword tumbled through the air. With the pain from his left arm sapping its strength, he had been unable to keep a grip on his sword with only his right hand.

“This is it.” Mundilfäri raised his axe high, and brought it down towards Loptr’s neck— “I won’t let you!”

—but at the last second, something black coiled around his arms, holding them back.

Mundilfäri turned to see a young girl with golden hair, pulling desperately with all her strength at the whip in her hand. Her face bore a strong resemblance to the second-in-command he had been fighting. It seemed they were family.

The frenzy of battle brought out the dark, bestial nature from within his heart. Perhaps it would be good to kill this young girl right in front of his hated enemy, as cruelly as possible.

Just as he was thinking that, he heard the cries of his fellow soldiers, one after another.

“Guaaah!”

“Gyaaah!”

“Wh-what *is* she?!”

A silver-colored tornado was tearing through his men on its way to where he stood.

In addition to being given the stolen iron weapons, those men were the elite soldiers of the Claw Clan. Yet they were no match for her.

“Mundilfäri! I, Sigrún, shall claim that rotten head of yours!” the silver-colored tornado screamed.

“Hmph, a little girl barely out of diapers,” Mundilfäri sneered. “How impudent!”

As the silver-haired girl charged straight at him, Mundilfäri swung his axe upward and readied himself to meet her attack.

It was his first time seeing her on the battlefield, but he’d heard rumors about her. She was a girl with a beautiful and delicate-looking appearance, and a dangerous she-wolf who had devoured the lives of many of his fellow Claw Clan warriors.

Even so, she was supposedly still much weaker than the Mánagarmr. If she were stronger, she would have already taken the title from him, after all.

Mundilfäri concluded that she was no match for him, for he himself was an equal rival with the Mánagarmr.

“N-no, Sigrún, stay back! You’re not ready to face him...”

Loptr’s pained cries were music to Mundilfäri’s ears. But it was already too late. Mundilfäri had already decided this girl would be his prey.

He poured every ounce of his strength and spirit into one great swing, and brought down his axe.

His opponent also swung her sword to meet his attack, but Einherjar though she might be, she was still only a girl with slender arms. She was thrown backwards by the sheer force behind Mundilfäri’s swing.

Taking a few extra steps back after the clash, the silver-haired girl planted her feet and clicked her tongue in irritation. “Tch, so one strike’s not going to work on a big axe like that...”

Her expression was far too calm and composed for someone who had just been blown backwards by a single attack.

That was when Mundilfäri looked at his weapon and cried out in surprise. “Wha—?!”

A huge notch had been cut into the axe’s blade, and a number of small cracks snaked outwards from it.

“W-what is that weapon?!”

Even though Mundilfäri’s own weapon had been badly damaged, the girl’s sword bore not a single scratch.

A pattern of white lines like waves ran across the side of its unblemished blade, and it continued to shimmer with a strange, almost otherworldly sheen.

Looking more closely at his fallen comrades behind her, each and every one of their iron swords had been broken.

Iron was supposed to be a divine metal, a gift that fell from the heavens. Just what sort of weapon could be more powerful?!

“Heh. My big brother, the Child of Victory Gleipsieg, graciously loaned this to me. Perhaps the ‘Sword of Victory’ would be a good name for it!”

Sigrún readied the sword and charged forward at gale speed.

Sigrún had always thought of herself as a sword. She had spend her whole life in dedication to sharpening her skills, her edge. And at long last, she had met a master who she felt was worthy of wielding her.

That sworn older brother whom she respected so deeply had told her to hold back the enemy at all costs. Therefore, there was nothing left for her to do but swing forth and execute that command.

“Khh!” Mundilfäri yelled.

As Sigrún brandished the sword in a sweeping strike as swift as a flash of light,

Mundilfäri caught it with his axe. But was already cracked and damaged. The cracks raced across the axe head, and unable to withstand the stress of the impact, it broke in half and crumbled apart.

And with the following, final blow, Sigrún's sword sliced straight through Mundilfäri, from his shoulder to his abdomen.

"Guah...!"

The man's bear-sized body was not invincible enough to withstand an attack like that. Blood sprayed from the wound as he fell backwards, crashing to the ground.

In that instant, in the far-off land of Yggdrasil, the *nihontou* had made its striking debut.

The nearby Wolf Clan soldiers cried out in elation, and the color of life began to return to their faces.

"She did it! She did it!! Lady Sigrún has defeated the greatest warrior of the Claw Clan!"

"We can win this fight!"

"All right, everyone, rally behind Lady Sigrún!"

"The 'Sword of Victory'... what an incredible weapon." Loptr clenched his fist tightly. "To think he even made something like that...!"

The most important thing in a battle was morale.

For many years, Mundilfäri had been a menace to the Wolf Clan in his role as the Claw Clan's most powerful warrior. Even the Mánagarmr had been unable to defeat him.

And now this beautiful young female warrior, not yet even twenty, had defeated him in a stunning fashion. Setbacks and defeats doubled or tripled a soldier's fatigue, but victory washed it away.

Her overwhelming victory had made such an impression that every one of the Wolf Clan soldiers present was now thinking something along the lines of, *With that monster out of the way, and with her on our side, we can drive them back!*

Sigrún still seemed to have plenty of stamina left. To the soldiers around her, she seemed almost like a goddess of battle. If she stood in front and led them into the fight, they might be able to push back the enemy forces despite their numbers, and close the gates.

Suddenly, from the eastern gate, more battle cries rang out.

“Uooooohhhhhhhh!!”

It was clearly different from the cries they had been hearing up until the night before, when the enemy was only testing them. These were louder and more chaotic.

“I-it can’t be! Did the eastern gate open?!” Loptr shuddered at thought of this worst-case scenario.

With Sigrún’s victory, the soldiers had recovered some of their morale, but it was still only a portion. The Wolf Clan didn’t have the remaining numbers or the strength to defend both the main gate and the eastern gate at the same time.

The Wolf Clan’s soldiers’ relief at defeating a powerful enemy lasted for only the briefest of moments, and then Iárnviðr faced its most desperate moment of crisis.

Meanwhile, on top of the watchtower, Yuuto was swallowing his dread.

It had already been some time since the gate had been breached. The sun which had started out peeking over the horizon was now sitting high in the sky.

He could see the battle at the gate from where he was. As Sigrún defeated one enemy after another, he told himself it would be all right, but then the war cries came from the eastern gate.

It had been breached, as well.

“So there was a traitor... or if not, then did an enemy spy sneak into Iárnviðr?!” he exclaimed.

There was no more time.

Even now, more and more soldiers were going to pour through the gates into Iárnviðr.

Once that happened, any miracle that occurred would already be too late.

“Come on... come on, where is it...?!” Yuuto clenched his fists so hard that his fingernails drew blood.

Yuuto had made sure to account for the difference between the solar and lunar calendars, but had he perhaps made an error in his math? Or were the historical records themselves incorrect? And what if it turned out that Yggdrasil wasn’t really the same world as Earth, after all?

Doubts filled his mind one after another, magnifying his anxiety.

At this very moment, his family was in danger. Loptr, Felicia, Sigrún, Ingrid, all of them. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Was a miracle fated never to occur, after all? At his wit’s end, Yuuto looked up at the sky once more... and he broke into a smile.

The sun was being devoured by the moon.

There was a concept in astronomy known as the saros.

It was the name given to a cycle used to estimate the day on which a solar or lunar eclipse would occur.

Yuuto had discovered this while downloading and reading e-books related to astronomy, trying to figure out what geographical place and time he had been sent to.

Nearly any ordinary modern-era Japanese person would know the fact that a solar eclipse occurs due to the positions of the sun and moon relative to Earth. Less well-known was the fact that they also happened in predictable cycles.

Approximately 6,585.3211 days (or 18 years, 11 days, and 8 hours) after one solar eclipse, another eclipse with nearly identical conditions would occur 120 degrees of longitude west of the first.

This constituted one saros period.

And so, after three saros periods, the cycle would complete one full 360-degree rotation of the Earth.

Therefore, approximately 54 years and 31 days after a solar eclipse, one could witness the same eclipse again in the same location.

Fárbauti had mentioned that he'd witnessed a solar eclipse as a child, causing Yuuto to wonder if there was a chance the same eclipse might occur again while he was here. He'd hired some people to search through the clay tablet records stored in the palace archives, and his hunch had been proven right.

Yggdrasil was a world where absurdly unscientific historical customs held sway, like determining a person's guilt or innocence by whether or not they were pulled away by the current of a river.

Because of the ominous imagery of the shining sun being slowly swallowed by darkness, solar eclipses have struck fear into people all over the world since ancient times, people who viewed them as a portent of great disaster.

And they also only happened very rarely.

Originally, Yuuto had only been interested in this out of self-preservation; he'd wanted to avoid people blaming him for such an event and making him into a scapegoat. Unexpectedly, the knowledge had come in handy for a completely different purpose.

The saros cycle was said to have been discovered by Chaldean astronomers somewhere around the 7th to 6th centuries BC. But it was knowledge completely beyond the reach of the people in the Bronze Age culture of Yggdrasil.

By using that knowledge, Yuuto was indeed doing the impossible: he had foreseen the "miracle" taking place at this very moment!

On that day at that moment, every person in Iárnviðr with a weapon in his or her hand, regardless of clan or affiliation, felt the same sensation. They felt it get darker even though it was daytime.

At first, they assumed it was simply that a cloud had passed in front of the sun.

However, as it grew steadily darker, they realized something was wrong.

The sun was being eaten away by something black. The blackness encroached further and further, steadily dyeing the sun's disc in its ominous color.

Every one of those people's gazes converged on a single point.

A single young man atop a watchtower was raising both hands, palms up, toward the heavens.

It was as if he were demonstrating that he himself had been the one responsible for this!

Whether they wished to or not, the soldiers all found themselves remembering the words that boy had said before the battle began.

He'd said that the rage of the gods would fall upon those who threatened to harm the Wolf Clan, then sat where he was and prayed to the heavens, occasionally standing up to perform some bizarre dance.

Looking closer at the large Wolf Clan banner on display, it included the image of a wolf in the process of devouring the sun, just like what was happening now.

Add to that the boy's alien appearance. None of them had seen a human being with hair or eyes like that before.

Maybe *he* was the "something" that was eating the sun!

"Sköll... Devourer of Blessings," a soldier gasped.

"He... he's devouring the blessings of the sky!" another one cried.

The majority of the soldiers drafted for these battles made their normal living as peasant farmers. From their perspective, the sun was the source of light and heat for their crops, the blessing of the sky. It was an object of both gratitude and fear, for it could also cause drought and famine.

Controlling the sun at will was a feat impossible even for the holy Einherjar chosen by the gods. If this boy were capable of it, then— "I-is he really a messenger sent from the gods?"

"Could this be divine punishment?"

"Hey, is it really okay for us to keep fighting?"

A sense of doubt and confusion suddenly began to spread among the Three

Clan Alliance Army soldiers.

People have a subconscious fear of the dark. As the light continued to vanish from the sky, the soldiers' fear seemed to grow and spread in proportion to the darkness.

The Alliance Army's control over its men had begun to deteriorate.

But there was one person who hadn't lost his cool, and remarkably had managed to see through the Wolf Clan's scheme.

"Don't panic, men!" shouted the Claw Clan patriarch, Botvid. "It doesn't occur that often, but the sun being covered in blackness is something that's been happening since ancient times. That black-haired boy is well-known for having all sorts of strange knowledge. He must have used that to predict this would happen, and now he's just acting like he caused it, nothing more!"

In cultures throughout ancient history, it was a common trend for the highest religious figure and the political ruler to be one and the same person. It was the same in Yggdrasil. In addition to being patriarch of his clan, Botvid was also the Claw Clan's highest-ranking priest.

He may not have previously known that it was possible to predict a solar eclipse, but he knew that there was actually a series of rules that governed the movements of heavenly bodies. This had been secretly taught to him by his predecessor, as part of the wisdom necessary for one who rules over the people.

"This phenomenon won't last long!" Botvid called. "Send out the word at once, and calm down our troops!"

Botvid was a wily man who had tormented the Wolf Clan with his cunning many times. Handling and disseminating information was his forte, even if he wasn't on the same level as his daughter Kristina.

He fired off precise orders in rapid succession. Because of that incredible competence and skill, by the time the sun's disc had become completely covered and the battlefield had become enveloped in dusky shadow, the panic among the Alliance Army soldiers had actually started to subside.

And that was when it happened.

The black-haired boy atop the tower abruptly swung his raised right hand downward in a powerful motion.

There was a *whoosh!* as if something big was flying through the air...

...and suddenly, a huge rock fell down from the sky.

It landed a short distance from the Alliance Army encampment, impacting with a reverberating *boom* so powerful it felt as if the land itself had recoiled.



It was the work of a trebuchet — a powerful fixed siege weapon.

It worked on the “seesaw principle” of physics, using a heavy counterweight attached to one end of the lever to cause the other end to fly upwards and launch the payload. It was quite a simple device conceptually, but the oldest written records of its usage were from the Byzantine Empire in 1165 AD.

From the perspective of civilization in Yggdrasil, it was an incredibly advanced weapon from over 2,500 to 3,000 years in the future.

But in the world of 21st century Japan, there were detailed videos on the internet showing how to construct miniature versions of this “super technology” with chopsticks, glue, a small weight, and rubber bands. There were websites with diagrams and detailed explanations of how they worked.

The largest versions of this weapon could launch a 140 kilogram stone as far as 300 meters.

The Wolf Clan hadn’t been able to shoot for a model that size under such a massive time crunch, but they’d managed one that could launch a 100 kilogram stone far enough to hit the enemy troops. For the master craftswoman Ingrid, known as Ívaldi, the Birther of Blades, it had been possible to build one just by imitating the process in the video.

When Yuuto later went on to conquer the fortresses and citadels of the Horn and Lightning Clans in very short amounts of time, it would be precisely because he had this weapon of unparalleled destructive power.

The black-haired young man swung down his left hand.

With another *Whoosh!,* a rock flew through the air again, this time bearing down directly towards the Alliance Army encampment.

As was to be expected, the first shot had been off the mark. But Ingrid had used that shot to calculate and re-calibrate the aim, and now she was locked on.

Even discounting the fact that trebuchets were easy to aim with to begin with, it was great work from her. Her reputation as greatest craftswoman in the Wolf Clan wasn’t for show.

“Aaahhhh! The gods! It’s the rage of the gods!” a soldier screamed.

“Forgive us! Please, forgive us...!” howled another.

Shields and earthen embankments could defend against normal arrows. But there was no way to defend against such large and weighty objects crashing down with such momentum.

With panic and commotion, the soldiers fled from the point of impact like ants scattering from a toppled anthill.

Somehow none of them were crushed directly, but the slower ones among them were struck hard by flying bits of shattered stone from both the rock and the ground.

The other soldiers of the Alliance Army all shuddered at the sight. There were even some who wet themselves in fright, or who prostrated themselves and began to pray for forgiveness.

Because their surroundings were so dark, their eyes couldn’t perceive that the rocks were being launched from within the city walls.

The rocks were clearly so large that even two or three full-sized adults would barely be able to lift them. The act of making those rocks fall accurately down on them from high in the air was something they couldn’t imagine being within the realm of human ability.

To those soldiers, this could be none other than the work of the gods.

And that was why Yuuto had added the trebuchet to his plan as insurance.

“Waaaaauughhhh! Divine punishment, this is divine punishment!” a soldier howled.

“What do you mean, ‘It won’t last long’?” another one screamed. “The gods just got even angrier!”

“So our patriarch really has been doing something wrong!”

“I don’t want to die because of him!”

“At this rate, if I die here I might end up in hell!”

“Run away, run away—!”

“I can’t fight against the messenger of the gods!”

Just as they had started to regain control of themselves, they had been shown another example of divine anger.

The soldiers now believed without a shadow of a doubt that the gods had grown furious at the actions of the Three Clan Alliance Army, had hidden away the sun, and were now hurling meteors down at them.

If they continued to remain the target of the gods’ anger, and the sun continued to remain covered... their crops wouldn’t grow, and they’d be forced to continue to live in this darkness. And if these meteors continued to fall, their houses might be destroyed, and they’d have to live every day looking up at the sky, afraid.

That would be a living hell.

The Alliance Army soldiers threw down their weapons, and began to flee in a desperate scramble.

The field commanders shouted after their troops, attempting to pacify them.

“Stop it! Don’t retreat!”

“Calm down, men! Remain calm!”

Normally, to the rank and file of the army, those field commanders were people of such higher station and authority that the very idea of defying their orders would have been frightening in itself.

But the soldiers had already trusted in the words of their commanders once, and had just had that trust repaid with further punishments from the gods. Even at this very moment, more rocks were flying down in their direction, one after another. The voices of their commanders reached their ears, but no longer reached their hearts.

The Alliance Army that numbered over six thousand had now lost its chain of command and fallen into pandemonium, with its soldiers fleeing for dear life. At this state of panic, not even a capable, veteran general would have been able to bring them under control.

A clear, cold and dignified voice rang out, and the Wolf Clan troops emerged

from the gates of Iárnviðr.

“Forward! Forward! The heavens are on our side! Our last defeat was only because we didn’t have enough faith in the Gleipsieg! Believe in the Child of Victory with all your heart, and the Wolf Clan shall not see defeat again!”

Leading the charge was a warrior maiden of divine beauty atop a horse, her bright silver hair streaming behind her.

The Wolf Clan soldiers all as one let out an exultant battle cry.

While this situation was a source of nothing but terror for the Alliance Army, for the Wolf Clan, it was terrifying proof that the gods had taken their side. There was no more hopeful reassurance than that.

There was no longer a single member of the Wolf Clan forces that doubted they would be victorious. All of their fatigue had been washed away. Rather, they felt untold strength welling up from within themselves.

With the force of an oncoming squall, the Wolf Clan charged into the Alliance Army.

One one side, there was a group who believed they’d been granted the favor of the gods, losing all fear of death and transforming into berserkers.

On the other side, there was a group who feared they had provoked the wrath of the gods, losing the will to fight and doing nothing but fleeing aimlessly.

The fact that one side was six times larger had become nothing more than a trivial detail.

Handily routing the enemy and driving them off, the Wolf Clan were swept up in the intoxication of their own triumph.

“Ah, the sun is...!”

On a terrace in Valaskjálf Palace, in the center of Glaðsheimr, a young girl looked up at the sky and cried out in shock.

Glaðsheimr was the capital city of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, located three weeks of Iárnviðr by foot.

Though the timing was slightly different, the eclipse was observable from here, as well.

“‘At the time of Ragnarök, a wolf shall devour the sun, and the stars shall fall from the sky.’” The young girl recited the words from memory in a clear, resplendent voice. “‘The Black One, holding aloft a Sword of Victory forged from blazing flames, shall appear spurring his horse across the bridge spanning the heavens.’ ...I see.”

It was one verse from a prophecy left behind from when the first divine emperor, Wotan, had instructed a greatly renowned völva to divine the future of the empire.

This girl was the current divine emperor of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. If one were to look back through the history of the empire, the strange phenomenon of a blackness blotting out the sun had occurred several times. Each time, the previous divine emperors had feared it might herald the arrival of the Black One.

This girl, too, clutched herself with both arms and trembled with fear.

“So, it has occurred in my generation. It is my first time seeing it, but it truly is sinister-looking. Hopefully the prophecy will go unfulfilled this time, as well...”

It had been quite some time since the divine emperor had held enough real power to control and rule over all of Yggdrasil. A few vestiges of past authority were all that remained.

This girl could do little more than pray.

ACT 7

Clan members crowded around Yuuto.

“Ohh, Big Brother Yuuto, you were so impressive yesterday!”

“To think that you could really make such a miracle happen! You really are the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg!”

Yuuto tried to deflect that praise. “No, I didn’t actually make it happen, I just knew in advance that it was going to happen, so...”

“Oh, come now, the movements of the heavenly bodies are directed by the gods, after all. The only one capable of knowing something like that is a messenger sent from the gods like yourself, Big Brother!”

“Indeed, Lord Yuuto’s wisdom must come from the gods; I cannot imagine otherwise. That boulder-throwing device was magnificent as well.”

“Ah, ahaha, i-is that so?” Yuuto placed a hand on the back of his head, wearing a sheepish grin. While it still felt a little embarrassing and uncomfortable, it also felt good to receive everyone’s praise like this.

Their happy voices really brought home his sense of accomplishment in being able to protect the city and its people.

All of the major core members of the Wolf Clan were now gathered in the audience hall under the patriarch’s orders. However, the patriarch himself had yet to make his appearance, and so, at the moment, everyone was gathered around their new hero and savior Yuuto, engaging in lively conversation about the previous day’s battle.

“If you had something like that, why didn’t you use it from the start?” a clan member asked.

“Technically it’s a weapon for destroying walls, and it takes a long time to prepare and load the ammunition, and if you try using it against infantry, it’ll usually just end with them dodging out of the way,” Yuuto explained. “The

enemy had already advanced so close to the city that we couldn't collect many suitable stones in time, leaving us with very limited ammunition. So, I wanted to make sure that we only used it at the moment where it would be at its absolute most effective."

"Ohh, now I see."

"Wow, you took all of that into account?" another clan member said. "You really are extraordinary."

"No, not at all, really..."

Well, maybe I am, added a voice in Yuuto's heart.

Yuuto had been nothing more than an ordinary middle school student in 21st century Japan, but in this world, he could say for certain there wasn't a single person with more knowledge than him.

He already possessed a wealth of information that nobody in this world could have any way of knowing. And he could access even more using his smartphone.

In that regard, he was unstoppable and unbeatable.

"As long as Lord Yuuto is with us, the Wolf Clan's future is secured!"

"All hail the Gleipsieg!"

"At this point, it might be best if you became patriarch so you could continue to guide us," a third clan member added.

"Uh, no, um, that's a bit..." Yuuto scratched his head as he struggled to come up with an appropriate response.

Now that he'd brought the Wolf Clan their great victory, Yuuto had accomplished his "mission," so he figured he should be able to return to Japan at the next full moon.

Now that he had grown close to more people, and received respect and praise from the people around him, he was a little bit reluctant to say farewell, but in the end, his determination to go home to Japan and Mitsuki remained firm.

“The next patriarch should really be Big Brother Loptr,” Yuuto finally replied. “Why, the reason we held out long enough to survive this long battle is pretty much all because of his hard work.”

Yuuto turned to Loptr, who was standing next to him, and lightly clapped a hand on his shoulder.

The upper-right side of the golden-haired young man’s face was covered by bandages. It was an appearance that was painful to look at, and made it abundantly clear to all who saw him just how desperately he had fought with everything he had to protect the capital city.

Fortunately, the clan members agreed.

“Yes, that’s true, our victory yesterday would have been impossible without the vigorous fighting by our second-in-command!”

“His command was brilliant, too. He completely redeemed himself from what happened in that previous battle.”

“Now, now, if we’re talking about fighting, Sigrún was incredible too.”

“Ohh, that’s right! I heard about that. They say you took down that Mundilfäri.”

“No, by my skill alone I would not have been able to strike down such an immensely powerful warrior.” The silver-haired girl spoke up, shaking her head slightly. She stood a good distance away from the patriarch’s throne, next to one of the hall’s entrances. “It was only because I had with me this Sword of Victory borrowed from Big Brother Yuuto.”

She held out the *nihontou* in her hand, still in its scabbard, for all to see.

“Ohh, so that’s the rumored Sword of Victory they say even cuts through iron!”

“I see, so that was your creation as well, Big Brother Yuuto.”

“Absolutely amazing! Please, make one for me, too!”

He’d tried to make Loptr the topic of conversation, but now all of the clan members in the audience hall had gone back to praising Yuuto. Yuuto felt a little bad for his sworn older brother, but at the same time, he didn’t entirely dislike

this either. After all, Yuuto had come this far by aspiring to be like Loptr as his goal.

"Oh, that's right," he said. "Rún. Can you give that back to me now?"

"Yes, Big Brother. Here." Sigrún walked briskly over to stand in front of Yuuto, where she went down on one knee and dutifully offered up the *nihontou* with both hands.

You really don't have to make such a big deal out of it, Yuuto thought as he took it from her. He then turned and held out the sword to Loptr.

"Yuuto...?" Loptr asked.

"I'm giving it to you, Big Brother. Originally, I made this for you as a parting gift. Well, it's not exactly brand new anymore, since Sigrún used it, but she defeated a powerful enemy with it, so actually I'd say that just adds to the value. Please, take it."

"...So you're making a show of flaunting your power," the man murmured under his breath.

"Huh?"

"No, it's nothing. Thank you." With a merry smile, Loptr accepted the *nihontou* from him.

For just an instant, Yuuto thought he saw a grim look on his older brother's face, but he assumed it was probably nothing more than pain from his injuries or something.

"Well, it's really nothing special, but take good care of it, okay?" Yuuto instinctively added a humble remark in typical Japanese fashion, but the latter half of it was certainly how he really felt. The sword was like a keepsake he would be leaving behind with his older brother as he returned to his original world.

It was way too embarrassing to say out loud, but if he were going to put it in more sappy terms, that sword was also like a physical symbol of the bonds of friendship between them. He really didn't want it to end up getting treated poorly or neglected.

“Good luck to you in the days to come, Second-In-Command.” Yuuto accompanied his words of encouragement with a light pat on Loptr’s back.

It might have seemed casual, but for Yuuto it was a gesture that contained all of his genuine feelings. He now had three precious sworn little sisters in Felicia, Sigrún, and Ingrid. He intended to leave the smartphone behind with them if he could, but even so, it was possible he’d never see any of them face-to-face ever again. This man was the only one he could entrust to take care of his family. It was because Loptr was here that he felt he could go home to Japan without any worries.

“‘Second-In-Command,’ huh?” Loptr gave a tiny smile. There was a hint of irony in his tone, and it seemed like his expression grew a bit darker.

Even though they’d driven off the enemy and the whole Wolf Clan was in a celebratory mood, he seemed gloomy.

Well, Loptr was tasked with the responsibility of the future of the Wolf Clan as its second-in-command, after all. Yuuto wondered if perhaps he was more relieved than excited, and if perhaps all the tension of the battle had left him with built-up fatigue that was catching up to him all at once.

“You’ve really come up in the world yourself,” Loptr said. “Haven’t you.”

“Ah, yeah, I guess so. Though that’s all over now.” Yuuto shrugged his shoulders.

Solar eclipses only occurred on the day of the new moon, so there was still a fair bit of time left until the next full moon. That said, it was only a little.

It would hardly be enough time for him to advance his career in the clan any further. Not that Yuuto had any intentions of doing so to begin with.

“Be silent! Big Brother Fárbauti has arrived!” Bruno spoke up in an unexpectedly shrill voice, and the commotion in the audience hall grew quiet in an instant.

Everyone moved to their designated locations and stood up straight, then bent forward slightly and bowed their heads. Yuuto had a proper understanding of how to act in public situations like these, and so he followed suit.

Amidst the silence, the old patriarch made his appearance from a side door, and slowly made his way over to sit atop the throne. He looked down upon his gathered clansmen.

“Everyone, raise your heads.” The old patriarch spoke with a low, dignified voice, and everyone present immediately obeyed his words.

No matter how amiable and good-humored this old man might normally act, he was indeed the father of the entire Wolf Clan and wielder of absolute authority.

“Everyone, I commend you for your good work during the battle. It was only because of all of your efforts that we were able to repel such formidable enemies. As a father, and as an older brother, I am deeply proud of every one of you.”

Everyone’s faces were beaming with pride upon hearing such words from their beloved patriarch.

Everyone in that audience hall had worked frantically to protect the Wolf Clan during the war. More than a few of them bore serious injuries. There were also those who had been part of their number a few days ago, but were no longer present. It was a victory the Wolf Clan had earned by truly uniting as one.

“And it was wholly my weak leadership that invited this unprecedented crisis onto our nation,” Fárbauti said, lowering his head. “I have no words to express how sorry I am to all of you.”

“B-Big Brother, please do not lower your head to us,” Bruno said hastily. “N-not one person here feels that way. Rather, it was only because you were our patriarch that we were able to drive off that formidable enemy at all.”

“I don’t need you to flatter me, Bruno. This whole incident has made me quite aware of just how much I’m truly lacking. I tried to rule with an emphasis on honor and duty, loving all of my children equally without favoritism, giving value and weight to everyone’s opinions and ideals to the best of my ability, so that I could become the sort of patriarch that anyone would look up to and respect... but that was wrong.”

Fárbauti clenched his right hand into a fist. Tightly, and strongly.

“What’s needed in a patriarch isn’t such sweet-sounding naive thinking. A patriarch, first and foremost, needs to protect his territory, protect the people who live there, and make their lives better... and he needs strength to do that! Without that, all those ideals are nothing more than a naive fantasy. It’s regrettable, but I didn’t have that all-important strength...”

His words were firm and decisive, but as he finished, all the strength left his clenched hand. His face looked completely worn out, and his voice took on a detached, distant tone.

“We may have managed to protect Iárnviðr, but Fort Gnipahellir was still captured by the Claw Clan. In the end, the situation surrounding the Wolf Clan has still only continued to grow worse. The Horn Clan is surely watching for their opportunity to prey upon our weakness. And even further to the west, I’ve heard that the patriarchs of both the Hoof and Lightning Clans have recently begun expanding their clans’ power and influence at a rapid pace. Now that we’re in this situation, we don’t need a weak pile of old bones like myself. We need a new, young person with strength who can serve as a real patriarch for the Wolf Clan!”

With his final sentence a hoarse cry, the old patriarch got to his feet.

As everyone’s eyes followed him, he took one slow step and then another, until he was standing in front of the golden-haired young man... and then, he continued walking.

He stopped in front of the black-haired boy standing just nearby, and turned to face him.

“Yuuto.”

“Uh?” Yuuto was caught off guard that he only managed a vague, idiotic sound in response.

He had been so certain that Loptr was going to be the one Fárbauti went to. After all, Loptr was the second-in-command. In this clan system that mimicked the structure of a family, the second-in-command was the equivalent of the “eldest son,” acting as a standin for the patriarch with full authority and power in all affairs where the patriarch was absent. And he was also generally treated as the next successor to the clan.

Why was the old patriarch now laying a hand on Yuuto's shoulder, he who was only tenth ranked in the clan, a brand new inductee, and an outsider to boot?

"From this day forward, you are the patriarch of the Wolf Clan."

"Huh? Whaaaaaaaat?!" Yuuto cried out hysterically this time, completely forgetting the formal situation he was in.

Just what the hell is this old geezer saying?! He didn't say it out loud, but for a moment, Yuuto actually thought that perhaps the old man might have finally gone senile.

"J-just what the hell are you saying, Dad?!" he shouted. "I already told you, I'm going back to the world I came from. When I agreed to your offer to exchange the Oath of the Chalice, I made extra sure you understood that!"

"That's... that's right, you did. I'm sorry, but I need you to let me go back on that agreement. Right now, you are the only one who can protect the Wolf Clan."

"What are you talking about?! You've already got someone! Big Brother Loptr is already a perfectly fine successor!" Yuuto shouted back at his patriarch.

But the old patriarch closed his eyes, and silently shook his head. "It's certainly true that Loptr is a man of fine caliber. He'd certainly make a much better patriarch than someone like me. But even so, he still doesn't have enough strength to protect and guide the Wolf Clan as things are now."

"Th-that's not true! Just look at this last battle! Big Brother Loptr did so much, and—"

"Heh... hahaha..." Yuuto's protest was cut short by a sudden, hollow laugh coming from right next to him.

As Yuuto instinctively turned to look in that direction, he froze.

What he saw was not the familiar, gentle and cheerful laughing form of his sworn older brother. It was a man with his face twisted into a dark sneer brimming with insanity.

"You can stop the act now, Yuuto."

“Act...? Big Brother, what are you...?”

“You yourself are against becoming patriarch, but after Father pleads with you enough, you’ll reluctantly accept. That’s what this is, right?” Loptr sneered. “Is it so you can avoid having me dislike you? Well, I’m sure you planned on making good use of me as your second-in-command going forward, so maybe that’s why?”

“N-no seriously, what are you talking about, Big Brother?!” Yuuto’s voice became shrill as he began to panic in earnest.

The things Loptr was saying sounded like he’d completely misunderstood this situation. And furthermore, it was an accusation that made absolutely no sense to Yuuto.

How had things suddenly taken such an outrageous turn? He didn’t understand it at all.

“Wait, Loptr,” Fárbauti said, alarmed. “This was nothing more than my own selfish idea, so...”

“It’s all right, Father, you don’t have to cover it up. Honestly... you really did a number on me, Yuuto. It seems like you managed to thoroughly cajole Father while my back was turned. I should have realized what you were doing much sooner. Yes, that’s right, like when you decided to exchange the Oath of the Chalice directly with Father, without even speaking to me!”

“No, no! I really don’t want to become patriarch at all!”

“You... if you didn’t have that smartphone or whatever it’s called, you wouldn’t be able to do anything!”

Loptr was crazed with suspicion, and Yuuto’s heartfelt, pleading attempts to defend himself no longer reached his heart.

“That’s right, even with that thing, you were nothing more than a worthless good-for-nothing without my help! To think that I put such trust in you that I was willing to make you my right-hand man, and even let you have my little sister, when all along you were such an ungrateful backstabber! It pains me to say it, but can’t believe I was such a fool. Ha ha ha! A fool, just a complete and utter buffoon! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Loptr continued his insane laughter, looking up at the ceiling with a hand over his face. It was a laugh overflowing with hatred, like a curse, and the sound of it would fetter and torment Yuuto's heart for many days to come.

For several moments, Loptr simply continued to laugh, and laugh, and laugh. And then...

"Keh-heh-heh, becoming patriarch has been my dream ever since I was a small child. For so long now, I've done everything in my power to reach for that dream. Just a little more... it was only just a little more... right as my hand was about to reach out and grasp it, Yuuto.... you... you... YOU OF ALL PEOPLE STOLE IT FROM MEEEEEE!!"

With a deafening scream, Loptr unsheathed the new sword at his waist. The sword that Yuuto had poured his heart and soul, his blood, sweat, and tears into forging, the gift that was a symbol of their friendship.

His eyes bloodshot from hate, without the slightest ounce of hesitation, Loptr swung the weapon— "Khh! Gah...!" The blade sliced a horizontal line deep into the chest of Fárbauti, who had quickly pushed Yuuto out of the way.

"....Huh? Fa...ther...?" The words leaked out in a raspy whisper from Loptr's lips.

His expression was blank, as if he was completely unable to comprehend what was happening.

However, in the next instant, fresh blood sprayed onto his face, and the warm heat from the life of his victim forced him to understand what he'd just done.



“U-uwaaaahhh!!” Loptr’s face was frozen with terror, and he shook his head left and right, taking one step backward, then another.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Loptr gave a throat-piercing howl at the top of his lungs, then turned his back on the falling body of the old patriarch and broke into a run.

As a few panicked people tried to stand in his way, he flailed wildly at them with the sword, without any form or technique, cutting them down, and ran out of the audience hall at top speed.

“B-Brother?” Felicia stood in place, dazed.

It seemed she couldn’t process what was going on either. This was supposed to be a happy occasion, a celebration of yesterday’s victory. It was supposed to be a day to remember, where both her brother by blood and her new sworn brother would be recognized for their valiant efforts.

Just what had caused things to turn out this way? The one who was able to recover himself fastest, and rapidly issue orders, was the Mánagarmr, Skáviðr. He barked his orders in a booming voice.

“Don’t let the kinslayer escape! After him! After him! Those with the proper skills, attend to Master at once. Quickly!”

Sigrún’s feet kicked against the floor as she sprinted out of the room, as if Skáviðr’s words themselves had launched her into motion.

Some followed after her, others began first aid on the patriarch, and others went to spread the word and call for help. Everyone hurriedly rushed to do what they could.

“Why... why did this happen...?” Yuuto faltered. “We win the battle, Big Brother Loptr becomes patriarch, and I go back home to my world. Everything was supposed to work out, so why...?”

Yuuto stood motionless and dazed within the commotion of the hall. Just like Felicia, his mind still hadn’t fully caught up to the reality of what was going on. The sworn older brother he loved and respected had tried to kill him, and his sworn father had protected him and been cut instead. Why had something like

that happened?

“Was I... was I the one to blame, Big Brother...?”

Yuuto’s eyes wandered over to the hall’s entrance in search of Loptr’s figure, though he was already long gone.

In his head, Loptr’s last words to him repeated over and over.

“Urrgh... Y-Yuuto...”

Fárbauti’s choked, raspy voice brought Yuuto back to his senses.

“D-Dad?! Are you okay?!”

Thank goodness. Dad’s not dead. In that case, we can fix this somehow.

With that desperate hope in mind, Yuuto turned around.

“Ah... aaaaahh....” Yuuto’s body shuddered uncontrollably at the shocking sight of his patriarch’s dying face.

Despite the vain attempts at first aid by the people surrounding Fárbauti, the old man’s face had lost all color, and the pool of blood beneath him was growing ever larger.

“Y-Yuuto. This wasn’t your fault. Please, d-don’t... don’t blame Loptr for this, either. Everything is... everything is because in my weakness. I failed to see the darkness growing in the heart of one of my children.” The patriarch coughed, blood spilling from his mouth.

“Dad, don’t talk anymore!” Yuuto ran over to his sworn father’s side.

It wasn’t clear whether Fárbauti had heard Yuuto’s voice or not, but the old patriarch lifted up his right hand. “Take... take my hand...”

“L-like this?! Like this, Dad?!” Yuuto squeezed the offered hand tightly with both of his own.

It already felt far too cold to be a living person’s hand. And with every second, Yuuto could feel it growing colder, and he despaired.

“Y-Yuuto, I’ve caused you so much trouble, and I know...” *cough cough* “...I know I have no right to ask this of you, but I must ask you... to take care of the Wolf Clan.” *cough cough* “A-and then... once you’ve saved the Wolf Clan from

danger and the day comes when you must leave this world... I want you... to make Loptr the next... patriarch...”

The patriarch’s head fell to the floor as if he had finally used up the last of his strength.

The strength faded away from the hand clasped in Yuuto’s fingers, as well. It was as if he could feel the man’s life itself disappearing.

“Dad? Don’t die! Don’t die on meee!!” Yuuto could do nothing more than sob helplessly like a child.

The people who had been attempting first aid stopped, and with looks of heartfelt pain, they shook their heads.

“It’s... it’s my fault,” Yuuto sobbed. “Who the hell cares about the Gleipsieg?! Why did I get so conceited? Big Brother was so troubled, and I never even noticed! He worked so long and hard to chase after his dream! And I... I stole it from him.”

Feelings of guilt and self-reproach tore through Yuuto’s heart like a violent storm.

There must have been some way. Some way to create a future in which Fárbauti retired peacefully, Loptr took his place, and Yuuto stood next to him, congratulating him.

If only Yuuto hadn’t gotten full of himself and acted so selfishly, if only he’d thought about things more from other people’s’ perspectives, if only he’d just considered his sworn older brother’s feelings, none of this would have come to pass. Those were the thoughts that raced through his mind.

If one were to look at the situation from an objective standpoint, asking a fourteen-year-old boy to be so proficient and capable at understanding others would be far too harsh. However, Yuuto didn’t doubt his own conclusions.

“It’s just like Big Brother said,” Yuuto said bitterly. “Why did I act like I was clever, when really I just cheated using borrowed knowledge?! In the end I didn’t understand the thing that was most important! Dad even took the trouble to warn me, too. Even I lost control of myself when I felt like I was backed into a corner. But I dismissed what Dad was saying, calling it stupid and

disgusting...”

Yuuto pounded his fists against the floor over and over. His knuckles started to bleed, but he paid them no mind.

“Without the smartphone, I’m just a stupid kid! I’m a stupid kid who doesn’t understand other people’s feelings! Big Brother was way, way, more fit to be the patriarch than someone like me!”

Protect your family at all costs. That was Yuuto’s personal ideal, his conviction. And despite that, because of him, his father and older brother’s lives had been ruined.

He was no different from his real father, the worthless man who had forsaken Yuuto’s mother.

“I’m worthless, I’m worthless, I’m worthless, AAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Epilogue

“Big Brother... Big Brother...” Yuuto felt his body being lightly shaken, rousing him from his slumber.

He felt like he’d been having a dream. A dream of memories both nostalgic and terrible.

Lately, he’d finally started seeing those dreams less often...

As his eyelids began to open, his blurry vision caught sight of swaying locks of golden hair.

“L-Loptr...?”

Perhaps because of the dream, that was the first name that had come to his half-asleep mind. It was only after the word had left his lips that his mind awoke completely.

Yuuto was no longer the lost young boy of two years ago. He was now the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, a figure of undeniable power and authority who had subjugated his clan’s erstwhile threats, the Horn and Claw Clans.

The person in front of him was Felicia, wide-eyed with surprise. Her expression darkened slightly, as if a shadow had passed over her heart.

“...Sorry,” Yuuto said.

Dammit, he thought bitterly as he apologized.

At some point, saying that name had become a taboo between the two of them.

For Yuuto, it was a painful reminder of how his immaturity had hurt his brother, driven him into a corner, and at last driven him mad. For Felicia, it was the name of a relative who had committed the most unforgivable and fiendish crime under the laws of the clan — the killing of his sworn parent — earning him the reviled moniker of “kinslayer.”

It was also the reason Felicia was Yuuto’s sworn little sister and not his sworn

child. As the sister of the man who had killed his own patriarch and tried to kill Yuuto, she believed she didn't deserve the right to be his sworn child.

Those close to her had all attempted to persuade her that the affairs and actions of one's blood relatives had nothing to do with the Oath of the Chalice, but she had stubbornly refused to relent on the matter.

A younger sibling subordinate was formally regarded as higher in status than child subordinates. However, management of internal clan affairs, such as promotions, was conducted with the parent-child relationship at its core. In other words, despite still being only in her teens, there would likely never be an opportunity for a younger sister such as Felicia to rise to a higher position in the clan.

She could not be promoted to second-in-command or assistant to the second, and she could never become the patriarch. And all due to her own decision, one that seemed to be a form of personal atonement.

"No, don't worry about it." Felicia spoke sadly, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Still, I wonder where that man is, and what he's doing now."

Yuuto was a bit surprised at this. He hadn't thought she would pick up the topic and continue with it.

It had already been more than a year since Loptr had left the Wolf Clan. Perhaps the wounds in her heart had healed a bit in that time, and the resistance she felt to speaking about him had lessened. Still, she had referred to him not as her "brother," but as "that man."

A search had been conducted with the full resources of the clan, but in the end, they'd found no clue as to Loptr's whereabouts.

The previous patriarch had asked him to take care of Loptr, but that was going to prove difficult.

Even if he did come back, no one would accept someone who had killed his own sworn father becoming patriarch.

Yuuto might want to name Loptr as his successor, but most within the clan would surely refuse to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with him. If that happened, the Wolf Clan would weaken and decline. With the weight of the

lives of everyone in the clan resting on his shoulders, Yuuto couldn't allow himself to be swayed by personal feelings in this matter.

"Who knows," Yuuto said sadly. "But wherever he is, I hope he's alive."

If the man had managed to start a new life in some other land, perhaps taken a wife and had a child, and found some small measure of happiness... that was all Yuuto could earnestly hope for.

It was true that Loptr had insulted Yuuto, tried to kill him, and killed the predecessor and father figure Yuuto had respected. But Yuuto just couldn't find it in himself to resent him. Instead, whenever he thought of him, he only felt the gripping pain of guilt in his chest.

"Fate really does never work out the way you want it to," he said.

The man who had dreamed of becoming patriarch since childhood, and had spent his life in constant effort to achieve that, had gotten his dreams shattered and become an exile from his clan, while a boy who was only desperate to go back home and had no interest in power or authority was now the patriarch instead.

What am I doing sitting in this chair? he often wondered to himself, even now.

In the end, though the Wolf Clan had seen several victories, Yuuto had been unable to return to Japan.

The idea that he would be able to go home if he completed his mission here had been nothing more than an assumption he and Mitsuki had come up with on their own. In hindsight, he now wondered incredulously just how he had so easily and fully believed in that assumption, despite there being no evidence for it.

The bitter experience of losing two people precious to him, and the more than a year of harsh days he'd spent fighting for the future of the Wolf Clan as its patriarch, had changed the boy's naive and impulsive heart. It had fostered a new sense of objectivity in him.

Of course, some possibility did still remain that he might be able to go home if he accomplished some sort of task or mission here. But rather than getting

caught up in arbitrarily assumptions about what that was, he was broadening the scope of his vision, considering various possibilities, and approaching the problem from many different angles.

“Lately, whenever I think about that man, I feel this strange uneasiness...” Felicia said.

“Whoa, whoa, that’s not a good sign. Felicia, your intuition is often on the mark, you know.” Yuuto furrowed his brow, wondering if perhaps something had happened to the man.

If nothing else, Loptr was an Einherjar with battle skills on par with Skáviðr. It was unlikely that he would go down in any normal circumstance, but...

Maybe the reason Felicia had taken this chance to bring up Loptr in conversation was because she could no longer deal with those feelings of uneasiness on her own.

“For some reason I just... have a really bad feeling,” Felicia whispered with a serious expression, clutching one hand to her chest.

Nóatún.

Surrounded by wide tracts of grain-producing lands fertilized by the Örmt River, it was the capital city of the Hoof Clan, one of the Ten Great Clans regarded as the largest and most powerful in all of Yggdrasil.

The city had once reached the heights of prosperity when it was the home territory of the late Yngvi, called the supreme ruler of Álfheimr, but now it had been transformed into a chaotic, living hell.

Soldiers ravenous to sate their greed, lust, and thirst for blood roamed the streets, hooting and hollering with wild delight. They assaulted the homes of the people and took their valuables. If they found a woman, they ignored her tearful screams and had their way with her right there on the street.

Crying children bound with ropes were being rounded up to be taken away. It was because they would fetch a good price as slaves.

There were flames beginning to rise in several places throughout the city, as

well.

“Pillage everything! Despoil them all! Burn everything! Show these fools what happens to those who dare defy us, the Panther Clan!” The patriarch of the Panther Clan gave out his cruel orders from atop his horse, his feet planted firmly in the stirrups.

Judging by his voice, he was a young man. It was difficult to tell his exact age from his appearance, however, for the upper half of his face was covered by a black mask which reflected the light with a dull sheen.

The members of the Panther Clan had heard it was because he had an ugly scar. None of them had ever seen his uncovered face.

“Just what I’d expect of you, Father! You felled the capital of the Hoof Clan so effortlessly!” the man serving as adjutant praised his master.

This man who called himself Hveðrungr had suddenly appeared before them a year ago, and possessed knowledge of a great many crafts and techniques.

Most amazing among them were stirrups and the making of iron.

The Panther Clan was made up of nomads who traveled the grasslands with their livestock. Everyone in their clan was capable of riding a horse, and since they also made their livelihood through hunting, all of them were proficient with a bow.

With the addition of stirrups, they were able to further steady their bodies on top of a moving horse, allowing them to wield spear or bow on horseback with ease.

In other words, every single member of the clan could fight as seasoned cavalry! And iron was much more hard and durable than their old bronze weapons.

Newly armed with these two things, the sheer mobility and destructive power of the Panther Clan defied description.

What had once been nothing more than a single clan roaming the Miðgarðr region had, in the blink of an eye, annexed the surrounding clans and finally grown powerful enough to overrun even a nation as large as the Hoof Clan. And

it was all thanks to the new technology this stranger had provided.

Because of that, the man had continuously racked up achievements and recognition within the clan, rising in rank at an incredible pace, until at last he'd received the honor of succession despite being an outsider, becoming the sixth patriarch of the Panther Clan.

The Panther Clan patriarch's mouth twisted into a cruel sneer as he spoke with a icy tone that sent a chill down his adjutant's spine. "Heh, something like this is no challenge for me. This is still merely nothing more than a stepping stone."

The eyes behind his mask were ablaze with hatred and insanity. However, the power of that passionate fire had propelled the Panther Clan forward at a rapid pace.

The adjutant thought his master to be a frightening man. Just what could it be that spurred him on so?

With his golden hair flowing in the wind, the patriarch of the Panther Clan set his sights on something far, far away.

"Keh heh heh, all it took was a little knowledge of these things, and now everything goes exactly how I want it to. I lost everything to you once. This time, I am going to be the one to rob you of everything. Just you wait, Yuuto...!"

To Be Continued

Afterword

Taka: “It looks like volume 3 is easily going to go over 300 pages. Can you extend the deadline?”

Editor: “Let’s stick with our normal three-month deadline for now.”

Several Weeks Later

Taka: “I’m totally not going to finish it on time! Extend the deadline, pleeeaaaase!”

Editor: “Good luck, and do your best.”

A Few More Weeks Later

Taka: “I can’t do this, I can’t I can’t I can’t! This is totally impossible, believe me. I’m very sorry, please, you really have to extend my deadline. I’m begging youuuuuu!”

Editor: “I’m eagerly looking forward to reading it.”

If this book has managed to hit publication right on schedule according to the standard three-month pace, it is only thanks to the (devil) editor who ignored the author’s crying and begging with a smile.

On that note, hello and good to see you all again. This is Seiichi Takayama. (Just now, when I tried to type my name “Seiichi,” it autocorrected to the kanji characters for “sex” and “position” by mistake. What the hell is with this PC?) Together with my previous series, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki (Pandora*

Box), this marks a milestone worth commemorating, my tenth volume released. What's more, I heard it's also Hobby Japan's 500th volume released on the HJ Bunko label.

What's *more,* volumes 1 and 2 of *The Master of Ragnarok,* along with this volume, are going to get a massively expanded additional print run! So that makes the release of volume 3 a real cause for celebration.

This is all wholly due to the readers who have given me their encouragement and support. Thank you very much.

While volume 3 is truly a memorable achievement, it was also just as rough as the description above.

I just worked out the average page count of my nine previously published volumes, and it was 263.5 pages. Since I'm still writing this afterword, I don't know the precise number for this volume yet, but I've heard it's going to wind up being somewhere around 350 pages, give or take.

That's right, that's over 30% more than my usual. I'm always finishing right at the very last minute of my usual three-month deadline period, so I think normally the logical thing to do here would be to go with four months.

Seriously, I still remember how only just a few days before the deadline (thinking, *Well, I'm really up against the wall now*), I had just passed 240 pages, and normally that's around when the end was in sight, but instead it was like, "Huh? I don't get the sense that I'm getting close to the end at all?!" I was at my wit's end. I'm just glad I somehow made it just in the nick of time.

...Well, it seems like I also ended up forcing both my editor and my illustrator, the great Yukisan-sensei, into a horrifically fierce crunch time, though. (Sweating.) No, seriously... if volume 3 does manage to release on time, it is entirely thanks to those two.

Now then, to briefly discuss the plot of this volume without any spoilers.

For starters, it's a flashback arc.

The rough plot for this volume was something that had already been worked out during the early planning stages for the series... but, stories are living things. Quite often, the details in my head and what actually comes out in the

manuscript end up being different from each other.

Plans are just that: plans.

Plans and schedules are made to be disrupted (deep meaning)! I think I heard a voice filled with resentment cry out just now, but I'm just not gonna worry about it.

So on that note, there were various changes I made, including major changes I was forced to make with the plot, but now that I've managed to finish it and get it published, I'm sighing with relief.

The main character of this series, Yuuto Suoh, is one of those so-called overpowered main characters, but at the same time, I gave him the aspects of the type of main character who goes through growth.

Volumes 1 and 2 show him after he's already gone through some amount of growth, but this story is about an ordinary middle school boy, and the important episode that served as the biggest catalyst for his rapid growth and the budding of the qualities of a ruler within him.

I hope you also enjoy this story featuring Yuuto-kun when he was still young and inexperienced. Although, that said, at the end of volume 2 he's still only a 16-year-old youngster. (lol) Please look forward to Yuuto's further adventures from here on as well, as he continues to grow and mature.

With that, it's time for the usual thanks and acknowledgements.

To my editor.

It's because of you that I was somehow able to finish this by the deadline. Thank you very much. But thanks to that, I also gained 3 kilograms! How are you gonna make this up to me?!

To the great Yukisan-sensei, thank you very much for the many cool and cute illustrations you provided this time as well. I couldn't stop trembling when I saw the illustration for the climactic scene! My gratitude goes out to the people in sales, proofreading, printing, distribution, and at the bookstores, and everyone else involved in the production of this volume.

And, to the readers holding this book in their hands right now, thank you from

the bottom of my heart.

With that, I wish to see you all again in volume 4.

Seiichi Takayama

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

ACT 6

ACT 7

EPILOGUE

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 4 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 3

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Curtis Teal Edited by Emily Sorensen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2014 Seiichi Takayama Illustrations Copyright © 2014 Yukisan

Cover illustration by Yukisan

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2014 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2018 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: September 2018