The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN





ACT 1: The Little Foxes in the House of Tablets

"Ephy, knead my clay for me, would you? Al's, too!" The first part of the day's classes had finished, and the children were taking a short break, when Kristina loudly called Ephelia over and began giving her orders. She sat with her legs crossed and her cheek resting on one hand, looking like a queen on her throne.

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar* 5

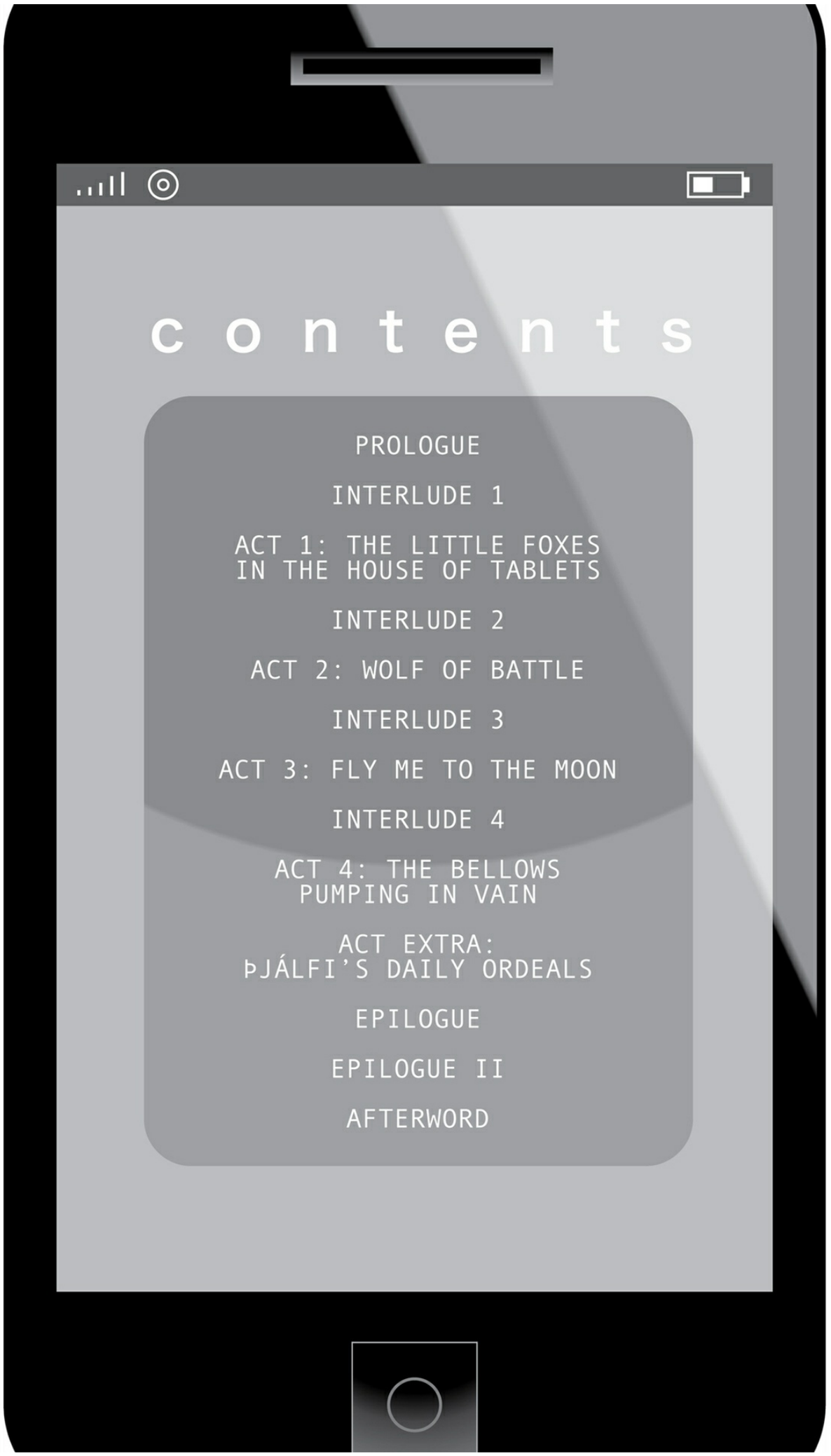

ACT 2: Wolf of Battle
Sigrún jumped backwards and put some more distance between herself and the great wolf. Then she deftly returned the *nihontou* to its scabbard, and lowered herself slightly with her sword hand still on the hilt. It was the stance of *iai*, a uniquely Japanese traditional sword style seen nowhere else in the world.



ACT 3: Fly Me to the Moon



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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.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. In the space of only two years, he has risen to become the sovereign, or "patriarch," of the Wolf Clan.

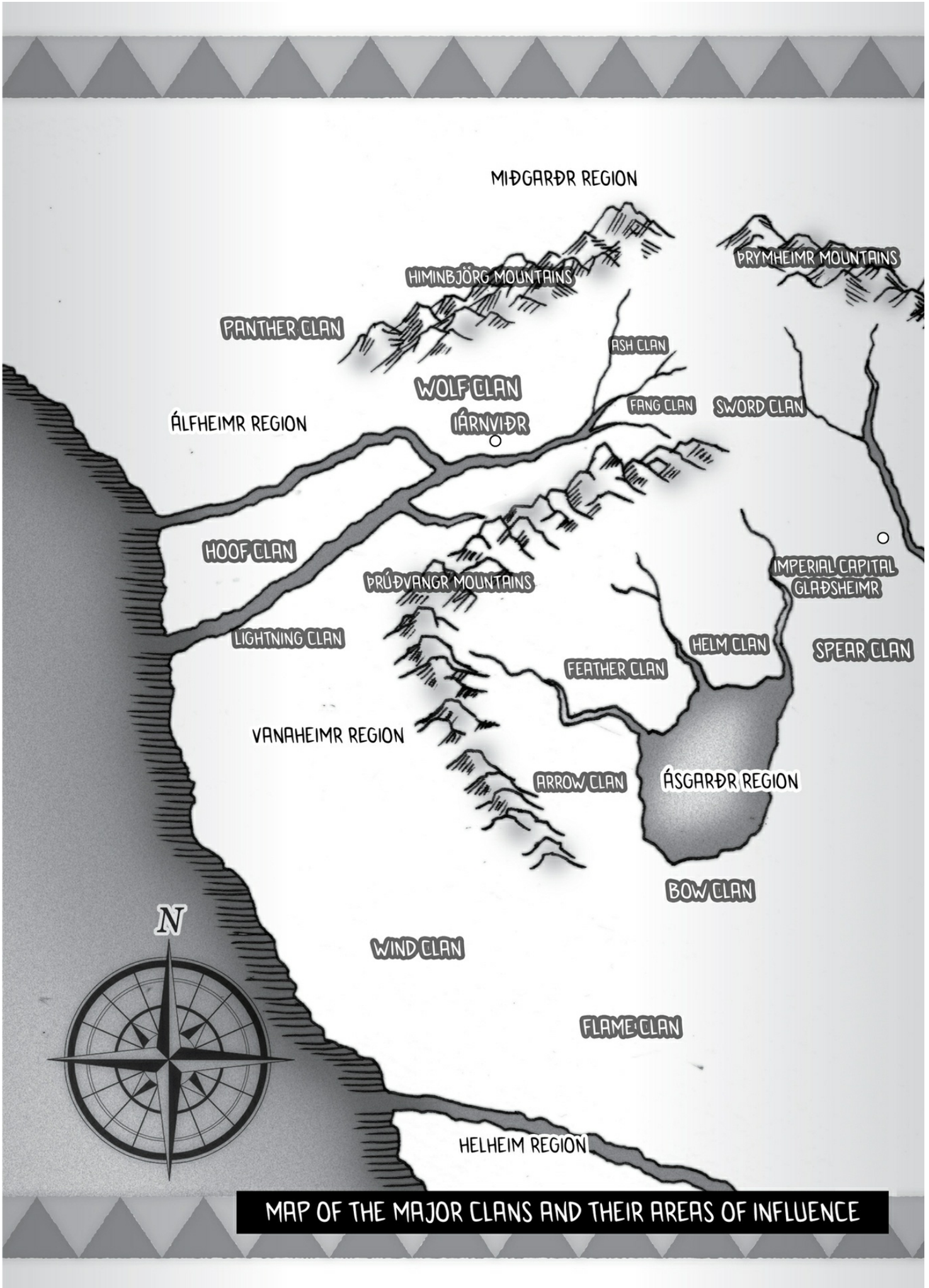
Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan. She once attacked the Wolf Clan but lost to Yuuto, and ended up becoming his sworn younger sister.

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.


Mitsuki Shimoya
Yuuto's childhood friend. After Yuuto is summoned to Yggdrasil, she maintains contact with him and provides support.
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.
Ephelia
A young girl rescued by Yuuto when he found her being sold by a slave trader. She now works as a servant in the Wolf Clan palace.
Hveðrungr
The masked patriarch of the Panther Clan, his true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth. He is an Einherjar with the rune Alþiofr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.
Steinþórr
Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar in possession of two runes. It is said there are only a few such people in all of Yggdrasil.



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

PROLOGUE

Nearly a month had passed since the Panther Clan's invasion.

Flakes of snow fluttered gently down from the cloud-covered sky like tiny pieces of cotton, and the courtyard to Yuuto's right was already fully covered in a layer of white.

The air against his face was intensely chilly, and he could see his own breath, each exhale a little white cloud.

"Wow, I knew it was freaking cold today, but it's already the first snow of the season? Looks like winter's really here." Yuuto's teeth chattered as he spoke, and he hunched his body over against the cold wind as he made his way towards his office.

He was a young man with black hair and black eyes, and an overall appearance that still retained some of the vestiges of boyhood here and there.

That was, of course, because until just two and a half years prior, Yuuto Suoh had been just an ordinary boy, attending a public middle school in modern-day Japan.

But for some reason, he had been transported to the ancient world of Yggdrasil, and now...

"Ah, my Lord Patriarch! Good morning, sir!" a guard called.

Another guard on duty greeted Yuuto energetically as he approached. "Good morning, my Lord Patriarch. I have heard stories about your great victory in the recent war. Nothing brings me greater pride as your grandson, sir."

Now Yuuto was the sovereign, or "patriarch," of the Wolf Clan, a position in which even big, tough-looking men like these guards bowed their heads to him.

"Hey, good morning to you both," Yuuto returned their greetings and gave them a few words of encouragement as he passed by them. "Looks like it'll be a cold one today, eh? Keep up the good work."

That encouragement pleased the men greatly, and their faces were flushed

with joy as they responded with an energetic “Yes, sir!”

To them, Yuuto was someone extraordinary and irreplaceable, a hero who had saved the Wolf Clan from the brink of destruction and, in a brief span of time, guided it to become the large and powerful nation it was today.

There was nothing unusual about their reactions towards him, but Yuuto still just couldn’t shake how awkward it felt.

Walking in step next to him, a beautiful, golden-haired young woman giggled, and smiled sweetly at him. “Tee hee. I see you have become much more comfortable in your role as the patriarch, Big Brother.”

Her name was Felicia. She was Yuuto’s trustworthy adjutant, skillfully providing him with assistance in a variety of tasks and supplementing his knowledge of this unfamiliar world.

“Hardly,” Yuuto replied. “Even just now, before I spoke to those guys, I had to run through the lines once in my head to make sure I didn’t screw it up.” He gave a wry chuckle and shrugged.

It had already been a year and a half since his becoming the patriarch, but it still felt strange and uncomfortable whenever he had to speak with a blunt, casual tone to those many years his senior.

“Is that so?” she asked. “I think you seemed perfectly natural just now.”

“Really? Huh, well, I guess I’m starting to get used to it a bit, then...”

Yuuto’s train of thought was cut off by the loud *whoooosh* of a sudden gust of wind.

“Eeek!” Felicia quickly moved to hold down her skirt as the blast of wintry air assaulted them.

Felicia was an Einherjar, a warrior with supernatural powers, and she reacted with magnificent swiftness, but even so, for just a moment, her beautiful long legs were exposed all the way up to the thigh.

Normally, it was a moment during which any red-blooded man would be compelled by his instincts to look. However...

“Uggghhh, so cooooooold!” Yuuto had no attention to spare as he shouted and

wrapped his arms tightly around himself, shivering.

The Wolf Clan capital of Iárnviðr was in a high-latitude region, a basin nestled between two mountain ranges, and the winters there were terribly cold. It was a world of difference from Yuuto's rural hometown, where the winters had grown milder and snowfall rarer in recent decades.

Yuuto found himself walking much faster. "C-c'mon, Felicia, let's hurry."

"Yes... Big Brother..." Felicia replied slowly. Then she began to mutter to herself quietly, under her breath. "D-drat, even though I went through the trouble of making sure he could see... Ughhhh, I may very well lose my confidence as a woman. Ngh, is it my age? Is it because I'll be turning twenty in less than two months?! Is that it?!"

"Hey Felicia, what are you waiting for... whoa, what's with the scary face?!"

"Eh?! N-nothing. It is nothing at all, Big Brother. Let us go to the patriarch's office at once. Because of how cold it has gotten, I have arranged for that item you mentioned to be prepared more quickly."

Yuuto tilted his head in puzzlement for only a brief second before the answer flashed into his mind. "Item... oh, you mean *that*?!"

As previously noted, winters in Iárnviðr were fiercely cold.

And there was no home heating like in 21st century Japan. The chimney, as it turned out, hadn't been invented until around the 11th century. Naturally, that meant there were no chimney fireplaces that could safely heat a whole room in Yggdrasil. The only heating option was a sunken hearth in the center of the room, little more than a fire pit, which held an open-air fire and required the air to be ventilated frequently.

With that sort of heating method, one could only get warm next to the fire from the heat coming directly off of it, and so for both of the past two winters, Yuuto had often been incredibly cold even indoors.

He'd grown fed up with that situation, and so this year, he'd asked a favor of Ingrid, a master craftsman and Einherjar bearing the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades. He'd described a certain item to her and asked her to build it for him.

“All right, then let’s get right to it! As patriarch, I’ll test out its capabilities myself!” With that high-spirited proclamation, Yuuto opened the door to his office.

He came here every day for work, and immediately noticed how much it had changed overnight. He was grateful to his subordinates, who must have really burned the midnight oil to make this happen.

The desk and shelves Yuuto used were still in their original locations and positions. Only one thing had changed: the place that normally held a table and chairs for receiving guests. But that single change had completely altered the atmosphere of the office.

The reception table and chairs had been neatly put away, and in their place was a low table covered by a large blanket that reached the floor on all sides.

It was a *kotatsu*.

No matter how you looked at it, it was a *kotatsu.*

Yuuto couldn’t hold himself back a second longer, and ran over to stick his feet under the blanket. “Ahhh, it’s so waaarm...” A smile spread across his face.

The space inside the *kotatsu* was filled with heated air, which enveloped his legs and filled his whole body with an indescribable feeling of comfort.

This *kotatsu* was heated from underneath by an iron brazier containing charcoal. There was also a safety measure in place, a small barrier surrounding the brazier to prevent one’s feet from accidentally touching it.

“Don’t just stand there, Felicia,” he invited her. “Try it out.”

“Eh? Is it r-really okay?”

“Of course it is. I couldn’t hog something this warm and wonderful all to myself! It’d be a waste.”

“Th-then, if you’ll excuse me.” Felicia sat down and put her feet in, and immediately let out a long, “Ohhhh...” sighing with pleasure in a way that also had a tinge of sensuality to it.

Without Yuuto needing to say another word, Felicia proceeded to stick her hands into the *kotatsu* as well, warming up the fingers that had grown so numb

from the cold outside.

“Haahh...” She let out another sigh of pleasure.

It looked like one try was all it had taken for her to become fully ensnared by its magical comfort.

“This is... a wonderful item, Big Brother...”

“Isn’t it, though?” he agreed. “Now if only we had a *mikan*, this would be perfect.”

“What is a *mikan*?”

“Ah, right, you don’t have ’em here. It’s a kind of orange, a juicy fruit that’s sweet and just a little bit sour. In my home country, eating a *mikan* sitting at the *kotatsu* is such a tradition, they’re practically a set.”

“Hmm, so that is one of the foods eaten in the land beyond the heavens. It’s a shame, then. This experience is already so wonderful, I feel as if my heart has wings. If there is a fruit that goes so well together with it, I would love to try it at least once.”

“Yeah, I’d love that too, but even Ginnar hasn’t heard of them.” Yuuto curled up against the *kotatsu* like a housecat, soaking in the warmth.

Ginnar was a merchant trader whom Yuuto had just recently made into his sworn son via the sacred Oath of the Chalice. He’d traveled far and wide, so the fact that he hadn’t heard of them meant that, at the very least, they couldn’t be found in any of the neighboring nations in the regions near the Wolf Clan.

The *mikan* was a variety of mandarin orange, said to be descended from a fruit that was originally native to what is now India. It had supposedly been brought into Chinese lands and cultivated there by around the 22nd century B.C., but had not appeared in Europe for several more centuries.

Yuuto didn’t know for sure exactly where geographically the world of Yggdrasil actually was, but unfortunately, it was a fact that the *mikan* orange hadn’t shown up here yet.

“Well, that’s enough slacking off,” he said at last. “We should go ahead and get to work...”

“Zzz...”

“Wha... you’re asleep already?” Yuuto stared in surprise at Felicia, who had nodded off into a peaceful slumber sitting up.

Actually, thinking about it, this was the first time he’d ever seen her sleeping face. The girl was one of the strongest and most capable warriors of the Wolf Clan, and she didn’t leave herself vulnerable or unguarded around people. But even with supernatural powers and magic that set her above normal humans, it seemed she couldn’t match the irresistible magic power of a *kotatsu*.

As Yuuto’s adjutant and most trusted advisor, she always got up before him, and her day was filled with her responsibilities of providing him with support and protection. The recent incident had to have been a large strain on her emotionally, as well. It wouldn’t be odd to think she’d been building up a lot of pent up fatigue with everything she had to deal with.

Yuuto placed his chin in his hand, and smiled a little as he took in the sight of Felicia’s sleeping face, which somehow seemed quite a bit more young and innocent than normal.

There was a lot he had to think about right now.

The Lightning Clan’s patriarch Steinþórr had recovered from his injuries, and that country was once again acting suspiciously.

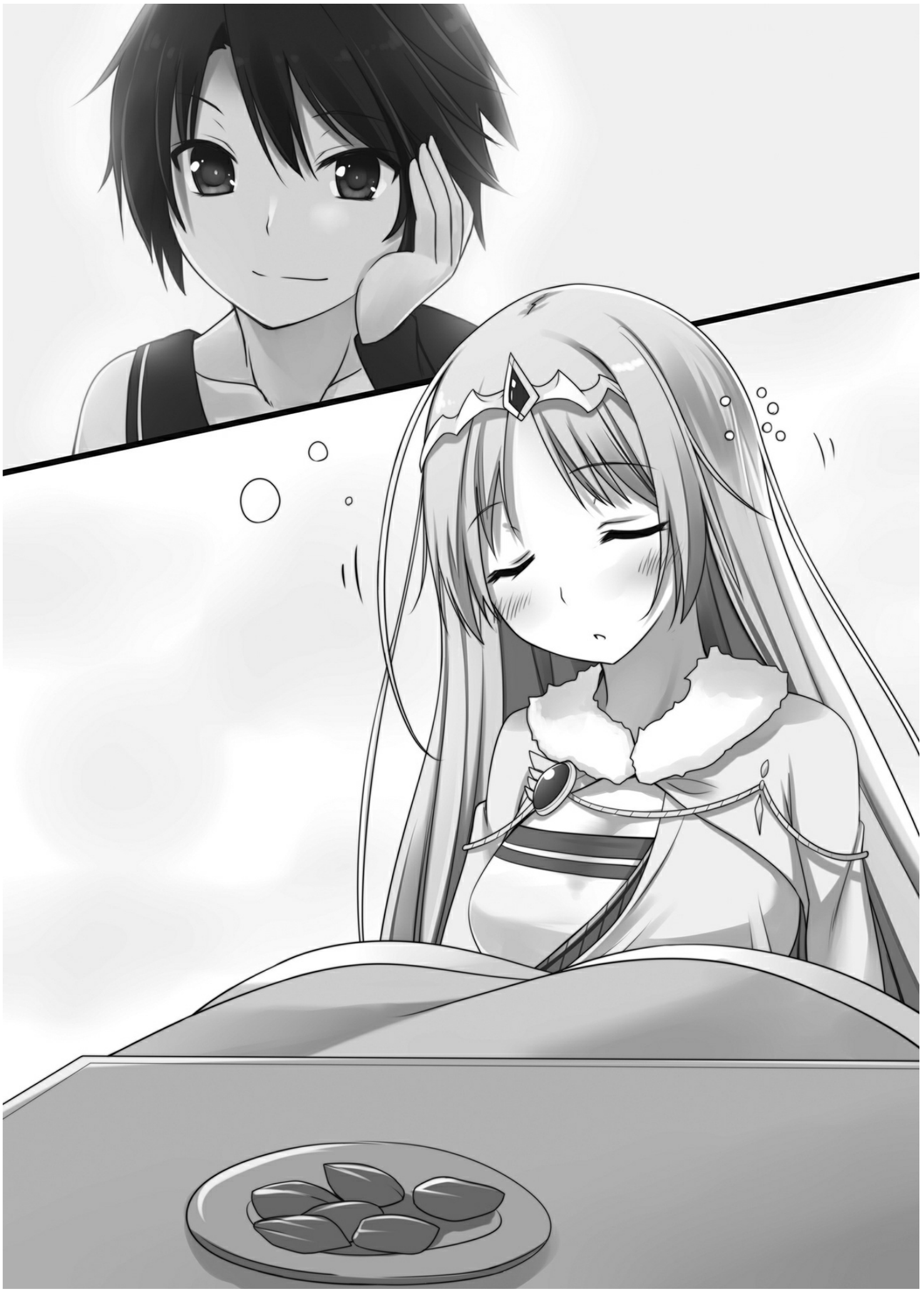
The Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr was surely biding his time and waiting for an opportunity to invade again.

And most importantly, there was the question of how he might be able to return home to 21st century Japan, where his childhood friend was waiting for him.

A strange phenomenon had occurred during the last battle with the Panther Clan, in which the power binding Yuuto’s body to this world had weakened for a moment. That was surely a major hint to the answer.

Still...

“Well, I guess it’s fine if there are days like this too, from time to time,” he murmured.



Interlude 1

In Glaðsheimr, capital of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, stood Valaskjálf Palace.

It was the seat of power for the þjóðann, or divine emperor, the ruler of all of Yggdrasil.

Even with the work of tens of thousands of slaves, it had taken twenty years to finish the palace's construction, and it was so large that even a small town would fit within its walls.

From deep within its interior rose a great castle keep, so tall that it seemed to be reaching for the heavens.

Although, to be more precise, it wasn't a traditional castle keep at all. It held no residential or ceremonial rooms within its interior; it was simply a tower of bricks stacked upon bricks.

This was the building known as the Hliðskjálf, or "sacred tower."

It was constructed to allow sacred rites to be performed as close to the sky — and thus, the gods — as possible, and so there were similar towers in many of Yggdrasil's major cities. However, to the people of Glaðsheimr, the tower here was the only true Hliðskjálf, and the ones in other cities were nothing more than fakes, pathetic imitations of the real thing.

The sacred tower of Glaðsheimr was indeed markedly larger and much taller than its counterparts elsewhere. But like its counterparts, at its apex was a sacred sanctuary, or hörgr. It was here that the divine emperor herself was seated, awaiting her visitor.

Fagrahvél entered the hörgr and slowly made his way towards her.

Each of his steps was accompanied by the stiff, clicking sounds of the plates of his golden armor and the heavily decorated sword at his waist. He had long, golden hair that flowed down in a ponytail from the nape of his neck, and swayed in place as he walked.

His features were stern but very beautiful, and the ladies-in-waiting he passed by were always so struck by his gallant figure that they let out sighs of wonder.

“Your Majesty, by your command, I, Patriarch Fagrahvél of the Sword Clan, have arrived,” he announced. “I am at your service.”

Fagrahvél deftly dropped to his knee and bowed low. His movements were refined, evidently well-practiced.

A soft, clear voice replied to him from behind a dividing screen. “Ahh, well met. We are glad to see you again.”

This was the voice of the divine emperor of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, Sigrdrífa. This girl was bearer of the noblest and most sacred bloodline in the world of Yggdrasil.

“And I as well, Your Majesty. In what way might I serve you?”

“Mm. As Our foster brother with whom We were raised and nursed, We have a special trust in you, and a request. Come closer.”

ACT 1: The Little Foxes in the House of Tablets

“And so, the monstrous flood Lord Yuuto created, known as the Jörmungandr, swallowed up the Lightning Clan army and swept it away.”

In a building in the eastern district of Iárnviðr, fifty children sat in a classroom at six long wooden desks arranged in rows, listening fervently to the words of their teacher.

They were in a vaxt, a type of school also known as a “house of tablets,” where in exchange for a sizable fee, well-off families could send their children to learn how to read, write, and do simple arithmetic.

“The Lightning Clan’s patriarch was hailed as undefeatable in battle, renowned as the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir. But powerful though he was, even he could not resist the floodwaters, and the battle ended in an overwhelming victory for us, the Wolf Clan!”

As the teacher finished his recitation, he reached for a nearby cup of tea to quench his tired throat.

He paused and took a deep breath before saying, “That will be all for today’s lesson. Make sure you review everything at home as well.”

With that, the teacher briskly left the classroom.

The children all sat in silence for a moment, watching him leave, then erupted into shouted conversation all at once. “Woooow, Lord Yuuto is incredible!!”

Some of the children, not content with just shouting, stood up from their seats and jumped up and down, cheering.

“Even a whole group of Einherjar together couldn’t beat the Dólgþrasir, but he was nothing to Lord Yuuto!”

“And just the other day he went and totally beat up some guys called the Panther Clan, right?”

“When I grow up, I’m *definitely* gonna exchange the Oath of the Chalice with Lord Yuuto!”

“Oh, me too, me too! It’d be a dream come true to fight for the Wolf Clan under him!”

“They say Lord Yuuto was the one who invented gritless bread, too.”

“I heard he came up with a way to make all sorts of things out of glass, like containers or ornaments that look like animals.”

“Oh, I saw some of those when I was in the palace courtyard with my father! The sunlight was shining through them, and they glittered with all the colors of the rainbow!”

The children all excitedly chatted about their patriarch, their eyes shining. To each and every one of them, he was a symbol of admiration, a hero.

“Wow, Master Yuuto really is amazing...” Ephelia muttered this to herself as she watched the chattering children from a little distance away in a corner of the classroom.

She was an adorable little girl of around ten, with a short bob of chestnut hair. However, she looked a bit different compared to the other children. To phrase it politely, her clothes and appearance were more simple. To phrase it rudely, she looked shabby and poor by comparison.

But there wasn’t much she could do about that. After all, this vaxt was normally a place only attended by children from the wealthiest families in Iárnviðr. But Ephelia was a slave, at the lowest rung of society in this city, and her lifestyle and appearance were nowhere close to that of those other children.

“U-um... Goodbye!” Ephelia stood up and gave her classmates a polite farewell before leaving. But the boys only paused for half a second to glance in her direction before returning to their conversations, and all of the girls ignored her completely.

No, on a second look, there was one girl who did turn to face Ephelia, smiling. But even that girl did not reply to Ephelia’s farewell.

Ephelia had known this would happen.

It made her feel miserable and pathetic, and honestly, she hadn't wanted to say anything to them. However, the teacher had told all of them that one must always say a polite goodbye when leaving to return home.

She was being allowed to attend the vaxt as a special case at Patriarch Yuuto's wishes, so she didn't want to break any rules or act improperly. If she did, it would bring shame on Yuuto, to whom she owed so much. She couldn't let that happen, no matter what.

She'd done all she needed to do for today. Ephelia gave a short, polite bow to her classmates, and left the classroom.

As she left, she allowed herself to steal one last, envious glance in their direction.

Ephelia was greeted by one of the guards as she approached the front gates to the palace at the center of Iárnviðr. At all times of the day and night, there were always at least a dozen soldiers posted here from the royal guard and special forces unit known as the Múspell Unit.

"Oh, you're back, huh?" the palace guard said. "Good work out there, little lady."

"Oh, th-thank you! Um, th-thank you all as well for your hard work today!"

"Ha ha ha, much appreciated."

Ephelia had been passing through this gate on her way to and from school every day for a month now, and so hers was a familiar face to the palace guards.

"W-well then, have a good evening," she said, bowing her head, and quickly making her way through the gate.

She knew that those soldiers were trying to be kind to her by interacting with her, but she couldn't help her body's reflexive impulse to shrink away from them when they spoke to her.

Ephelia had trouble dealing with big, strong men like them. Despite that, she had no problem with a girl like their captain Sigrún, even though Sigrún was

even stronger.

The last day she could remember living peacefully in her old homeland had ended with a bunch of large, strange men breaking down the door to her house and barging their way in, pushing her mother down to the ground and stuffing Ephelia into a sack.

When she spoke to the soldiers, she couldn't help it; the memories of that scene always came flooding back to her. Of course, she knew they were different from the bad men who'd kidnapped her, but...

Disappointed in herself for her reaction, Ephelia quietly grew more and more depressed, when suddenly she heard a voice from above her.

"Mm? Oh, heeey, it's Ephy. Did you just get back from the vaxt?" The bright, friendly voice was calling her name.

Ephelia looked up to see another girl, only slightly older than her, sitting cross-legged on top of a date tree and peeling one of its fruits.

Just the sight of her pushed the sad feelings out of Ephelia's mind, and she felt the spring returning to her step already.

Ephelia smiled up at the girl, not a fake, polite smile, but a sincere one from the bottom of her heart. "Yes, Lady Albertina. I've just now returned!"

"Oh, then welcome hooome!" Albertina greeted Ephelia in her usual merry, sing-song tone, and started chewing on the delicious-looking fruit.

The way Albertina moved and the way she was sitting, not to mention the fact she was on top of a tree in the first place, all gave off the impression of a wild girl from the forest without a speck of etiquette. But despite her mannerisms, she was a princess of the neighboring Claw Clan, a daughter by birth of its patriarch.

She was also Patriarch Yuuto's direct child subordinate, and one of the Wolf Clan's officers.

"Oh, right, here Ephy, I'll split this with youuu." Without warning, Albertina tossed one of the dates down in Ephelia's direction.

"Wh-whoa!" Ephelia hurriedly grabbed the hem of her skirt and held it out to

catch the falling fruit.

It was a bit embarrassing to do something like that in public, but food was incredibly precious, and she couldn't allow any to go to waste. That was more important to her than worrying about appearances.

Ephelia knew that a slow, clumsy girl like herself would likely have failed to catch it if she had used her hands. She let out a long breath, relieved that she'd at least managed to avoid letting it splatter against the ground and be ruined.

"It's reeeally goood, Ephy! You've gotta try it!"

"Thank you, but... still, I..." Taking the fruit into her hands, Ephelia felt her mouth begin to water despite herself. But at the same time, she was trapped by her self-restraint, worried if it was really all right for a slave girl like herself to eat this.

The fruits of the date tree were cheaper than grains on the market, and so they weren't expensive or anything like that, but this date tree was on the palace grounds, making the dates the personal property of the patriarch. She couldn't bring herself to just eat something like that without permission.

"Aw, come onnn, what are you doing?" Growing impatient with Ephelia's hesitation, Albertina swiftly slid down from the tree.

From what Ephelia had heard, Albertina was an Einherjar with a rune called Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, and could move at speeds even faster than Sigrún. Everything about Albertina's effortlessly nimble movements suggested it was true.

Albertina said to herself, "Ahh, hold on, Kris told me, 'Just say this to Ephy if she's being difficult.' Uhhh, now how did it go? Oh, right! 'Hey what's your *deal* girlie, you sayin' you won't eat my fruit, is that it, *huuuuuh*?!'"

But this is the patriarch's fruit, not yours! Ephelia thought reflexively in response. Still, she wisely managed to hold herself back from actually saying it out loud.

"Kris" was Albertina's twin sister Kristina.

Ephelia found herself giggling a bit at the situation, impressed at Kristina's

talent.

Just as always, Lady Kristina knows exactly how to exploit other people's weaknesses, she reflected. If a lady of higher status told her so forcefully to eat something, Ephelia couldn't very well refuse outright.

"In that case, I'll gratefully accept it," she said. "Thank you very much."

"Yeah, eat it, eat it! Well, is it good?"

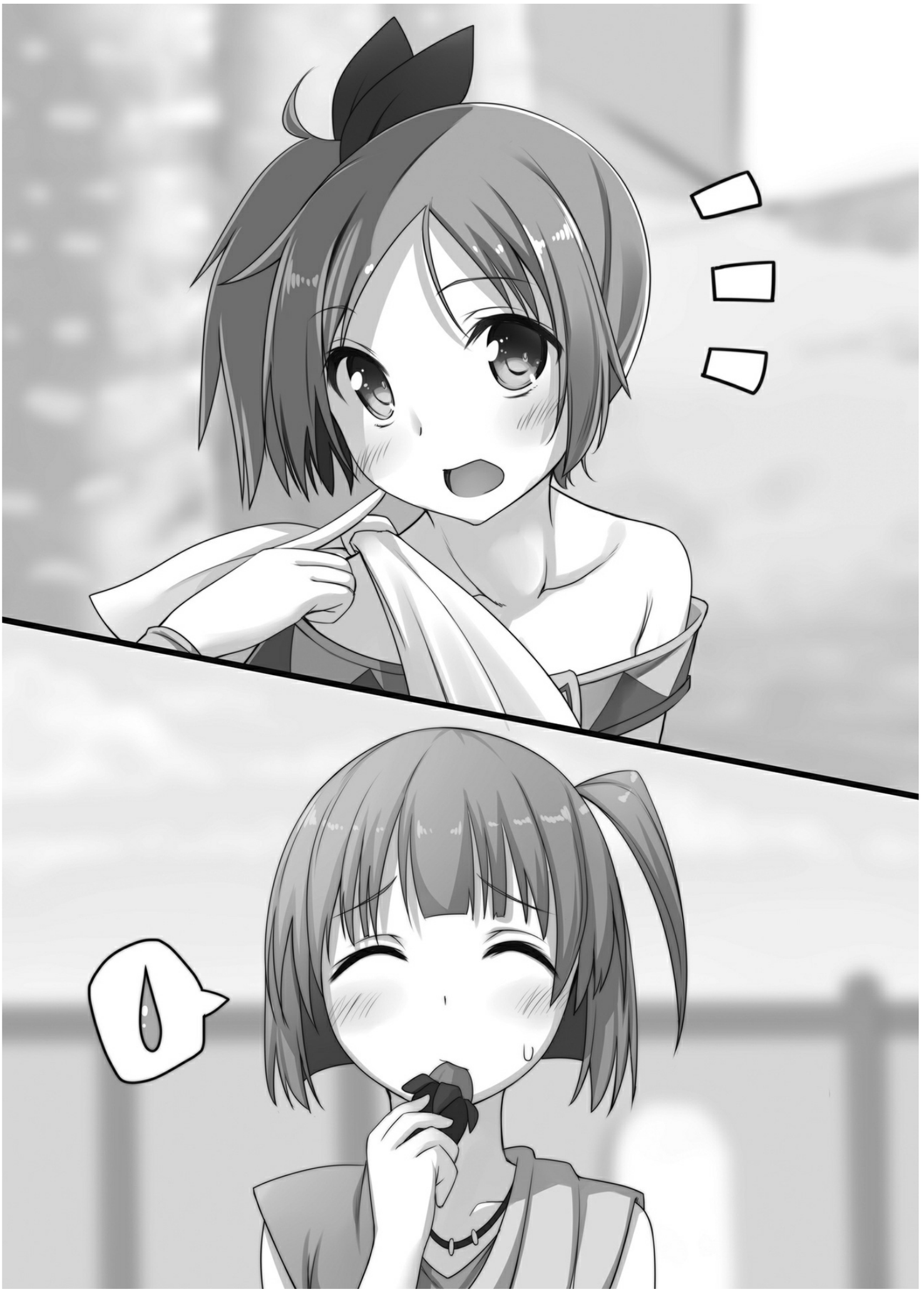
"I haven't even taken a bite yet, Lady Albertina." Giggling at Albertina's behavior, Ephelia peeled the skin from the date and bit into it.

The sweet juice from the fruit filled her mouth, and its incredibly delicious flavor was enough to give her shivers. The fruits of the date tree were not only sweet, but contained a lot of nutrients as well, and so were widely loved by the people of Yggdrasil. Ephelia was no exception, and sweet dates were one of her favorite foods.

Incidentally, Yuuto had once said the flavor reminded him "of a sweet persimmon," whatever that was.

"It's very delicious," she said. "Thank you again, Lady Albertina."

"Heh heh! I seeee, good, good! When I tried one, it was sooo good that I just thought, 'I have to get Kris and Ephy to try one too!'" Albertina flashed Ephelia a wide grin full of innocent pride.



“Oookay then, I’m gonna go give this one to Kris now!”

The instant she said that, a burst of wind rose up behind her, and she suddenly vanished from Ephelia’s field of vision.

Surprised, Ephelia looked around, and as she turned to face the palace proper, she saw Albertina already far off in the distance.

Ephelia bowed deeply in the direction of the departing figure.

She was working in the palace, so naturally she mainly dealt with adults, and the only other people her age coming in and out of the palace other than her were the two Claw Clan girls.

Perhaps that was why Albertina had made a point of always calling out to her, and with the girl’s relaxed manner, they had soon become quite friendly with each other.

Perhaps from Albertina’s perspective, Ephelia was simply someone the same age she could talk with, but Ephelia was incredibly grateful to know someone like her.

Ephelia had no idea where her old friends from her homeland had ended up, or even if they were still alive.

For her, Albertina was the only person her age that she had left to be friends with.

“Hello, everyone! I’m back!” Ephelia called.

In the southern block of the palace grounds was a large waiting room reserved for the female servants, who mainly took care of things like kitchen work, cleaning, and doing the laundry.

All of the slaves purchased by Yuuto were usually assigned to work here in the palace first, Ephelia being no exception.

Lessons at the vaxt usually finished up before noon, so Ephelia would come here afterwards and spend the afternoon hours reviewing and practicing the material from class, while also helping out the other servants with their work whenever they needed a hand.

“Oh, hey, Ephy. Welcome back!”

“Welcome back, Ephy! Ohh, come here and let me give you a hug!”

“Ah! Me too, me too!”

“Ohh, Ephy, hugging you just takes the stress right out of me!”

“Ohhhh...” Ephelia was powerless to resist as, one after another, the women crowded in around her and took turns embracing her.

She was already an adorable-looking child, and she was also a hard worker despite her age, who diligently strove to help the adults around her. Those qualities alone were more than enough to make all of her seniors at work love her dearly.

And recently, there was a new reason, as well.

“Ah, that’s right,” one worker exclaimed. “You came back at the perfect time. Take this to the patriarch in his office!”

“Ah! Yes, ma’am!”

“Ephy, hon, bring us back some treats today too, won’t you?”

“Ahh, just looking forward to those is enough to get me through the day, you know. We’re counting on you, dear!”

Whenever Ephelia received candy or other snacks from the patriarch, she always shared them with everyone instead of eating them by herself. Because of that, they were doting on her more than ever.

No matter the era, women have always loved sweet foods, and so throughout history, they have served as valuable tools in social intercourse.

And so it was that whenever it came time to take tea or refreshments to the patriarch, Ephelia was given the job even if there was someone else available.

“B-but you know I’m not always going to receive something, right?” Ephelia spoke anxiously, afraid of not being able to meet their expectations, but the older servants laughed and dismissed such a possibility with a wave of their hands.

“No, no, not to worry. You’re Lord Yuuto’s favorite, after all.”

“Right, exactly. So go on, then, dear.”

“Ohhh...” Ephelia let out a small whimper, but didn’t argue further. Taking the tray and pitcher in hand, she headed for the patriarch’s office.

Moments like this really brought home to her how truly bright and cheerful everyone here was. She honestly wondered if there even was another clan in Yggdrasil that treated its slaves as well as the Wolf Clan did.

The chores were difficult work, to be sure (especially now, during the winter season), but women who were ordinary citizens had to do the same sort of work in their own households, so it wasn’t like they had it particularly worse in that respect.

The number of daily hours they had to work weren’t any higher than an average citizen, either, and they were given proper breaks.

They weren’t screamed at or taunted, nor was there physical abuse like punching, kicking, or the whip.

They received proper meals every day, and though it wasn’t a lot, every month they received wages in copper coins.

Really, it was gracious treatment that left nothing to be desired.

Technically, slaves could buy their freedom and become citizens if they raised enough money to pay their own purchase price, but none of Ephelia’s fellow servants were saving up their wages, likely because they were just that satisfied with their current circumstances.

“It’s so different here from how it was in the Swallow Clan,” Ephelia whispered to herself, thinking back to the now-hazy memories of her lost homeland.

Back then, she had been the one being attended to by slave servants. It had only been a year since then, but it felt like so long ago now.

In the Swallow Clan, the slaves were all treated cruelly, enough so that it had left a terribly strong impression on her young heart that she never wanted to wind up as a slave.

Of course, she actually had wound up as one, which just went to show how

unpredictable life really was.

As those thoughts ran through Ephelia's mind, she arrived at the door to the patriarch's office.

She immediately felt nervous. She fully understood that Yuuto was a kind person at heart, but the patriarch was still the patriarch. He was a figure with whom incompetence or even an errant mistake was an insolence that must never be allowed.

The very first time she had met him after becoming his servant, she had shamefully spilled tea all over his clothes. Ordinarily, such a thing would be grounds for at least a whipping, or in the worst case execution.

Ephelia's mother was prone to worry about her greatly, which all the more reason Ephelia had vowed to never let something like that happen again.

She used her increasing tension to focus her mind, took one last deep breath, and called through the door: "Pardon me, I've brought some fresh tea."

"Mm? Oh, hey, it's Ephy." A young man's voice, warm and clear, called back to her. "Come on in."

When Ephelia opened the door to enter, she saw the owner of the voice, a black-haired young man, seated at some sort of box-like table covered with a blanket, his legs sticking under it. He was hunched over the table and rolling a cylinder back and forth across a clay tablet.

He wasn't being idle or goofing off; he was in the middle of attaching his seal to a message. As he slowly rolled the cylinder, it pressed into the soft clay the image of a wolf between the sun and moon, and the name "Yuuto Suoh" in Norse letters.

Indeed, this young man was the very same ruler recorded in the historical documents she read in her lessons, the great invincible hero the children all looked up to.

The beautiful, golden-haired woman sitting across from Yuuto — Felicia, she was called — took the clay tablet from him and set it carefully down beside herself. "Perfect. Thank you very much."

Since the patriarch's insignia was on the tablet, it had to be an important document of some kind, so instead of air-drying, it would likely soon be sent for firing in an oven so it could be quickly sent off to wherever it needed to go.

"Well then, Big Brother, since Ephy is here, shall we take a short break?" Felicia asked.

"Good idea." Yuuto nodded at Felicia's suggestion, and, with a long, deep sigh, he stretched his back out onto the floor.

"Here, Master. You are always working so very hard." Ephelia offered those words of appreciation as she carefully, carefully poured the tea into his favorite silver drinking cup.

Apparently, Yuuto had had a terrible experience involving earthenware cups and bowls, and now stubbornly avoided using them whenever possible. In Iárnviðr, the average man's pay for a month of manual labor was only around two bygg (approximately sixteen grams) of silver, so that silver cup was an incredibly expensive treasure.

Considering the amount of wealth and prosperity Yuuto had brought the Wolf Clan, no one would fault him for having a luxury item or two like that. However, from Ephelia's perspective, it was so expensive that she was afraid to even touch it.

"Ah, thanks, Ephy. Ughhh, my aching shoulders..." Yuuto complained to no one in particular, still lazily sprawled out on the floor.

Seeing him like this, he looked to Ephelia more leisurely and carefree than even the boys she went to school with, far from the sort of person one would picture fighting on the battlefield.

She knew that in some of the surrounding regions he was also quite feared, and called the Infamous Wolf Hróðvitnir, but to her that somehow just didn't seem to fit him.

Rather, though Ephelia was often afraid around Yuuto because of his status, to her he seemed most like an always-kind, older brother figure.

"That reminds me, Ephy," he said. "It's been about a month now since you started attending the vaxt. How are things going?"

Even now, despite the fact that Yuuto must be tired, he was asking her about her life.

Ephelia answered him while carefully pouring tea into Felicia's teacup. "Oh, right. There was an exam the other day, and I received excellent marks."

"Nice! Way to go! All right, then. As a reward, I'll give you these dried dates." Yuuto sat back up and picked up a small basket that was sitting on the table, and held it out to Ephelia.

Inside were a bunch of wrinkled, red dried dates, at least ten of them.

Dates were a sweet fruit to begin with, but drying them made them even sweeter, and they were popular this way paired together with tea.

"Thank you very much, Master," she said. "I'll be sure to enjoy them later, along with my coworkers."

"You're such a good kid, Ephy."

"It's the least I can do, because they're always so good to me," Ephelia replied, relieved that she'd managed to get something sweet to share with them today.

Of course, on days when she came back empty-handed, they would laugh and tell her it was fine so she wouldn't feel bad. But she still greatly preferred seeing their happy faces.

"Then I'm glad to hear you're getting along with the people here so well," he said. "What about the ones at the vaxt?"

"The... teacher praises me a lot, and treats me very well." Ephelia's reply was a bit slow, but she managed to speak in a clear, firm voice. She hadn't told any lies. She couldn't say that she was getting along with the other children in her class, but she didn't think she was being bullied, either. "I'm not having any real problems."

From Ephelia's perspective, this wasn't a lie, either. Her time at the vaxt felt a little lonely and sad, but that was only for a few hours in the morning. A warm, happy place was waiting for her back at the palace. All she needed each day was a little bit of patience to endure the morning, and things were fine.

Yuuto had already done so much for her, and was busy with his work as the patriarch. She didn't want to bother him, or be a burden.

And, with Yuuto having put his expectations in her, she also didn't want to be weak or pitiful in front of him.

Yuuto stared at her in silence for a moment, looking like he wanted to say something. But in the end, the only thing he said was, "Hm, I see," in a voice no louder than a whisper.

"I must say, Father," Kristina remarked with a bemused smirk, "you do have a bit of an overprotective streak, don't you? Actually, quite a lot more than a bit."

It was the following day, and Yuuto was at the vaxt in the eastern district of Iárnviðr, pressed up against the window and peering inside the classroom.

Standing right next to him and holding his left hand was Kristina, who was now looking at him with a slightly exasperated expression.

Her basic appearance was of course quite similar to that of her twin Albertina, but where her sister had a cheery, guileless innocence, Kristina's eyes seemed to see right through everyone and everything, and she had a cynical and cocky aura about her.

Kristina smirked. "When the day finally comes and Ephy's suitor comes calling, I can picture you flying into a rage and shouting something trite like, 'I'll never give my little girl over to the likes of you!' Heh heh."

"Don't you worry," Yuuto shot back. "When it's your turn, I'll send you off with two 'hips' and a 'hooray.'"

"And yet you are so cold and indifferent when it comes to your real daughter."

"My *sworn* daughter, you mean. And I don't think there's a man out there big-hearted enough to take someone with your personality as his wife, anyway."

"That *is* true. Why, you're the only man that springs to mind, Father."

"Fine with staying a parent, thanks."

"Oh, you're no fun."

“Right. Anyway, Ephy’s more important right now.”

“You really are no fun at all, Father. In the end, I suppose to you I’m just another convenient woman to use.”

“That’s right, convenient and handy to have around. Your power is, anyway.”

“Oh, you won’t even deny it!” With an anguished, tearful expression, Kristina lifted her free hand to cover her crying eyes. No doubt it was all an act, of course.

Another thing she shared with her sister Albertina was that Kristina was also an Einherjar. She bore the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds. It gave her powers that allowed her to conceal her presence, and by traveling with her and holding her hand, Yuuto could sneak around and avoid drawing attention despite his black hair and other foreign features.

He’d decided to utilize her power to secretly come observe Ephelia at her classes today.

None of the children at the vaxt had noticed Yuuto at all; they were focused only on inscribing letters into their clay tablets with sharp styluses. They were all working seriously, for if they didn’t, they risked the teacher smacking them with the switch he was carrying.

Back in modern-day Japan, corporal punishment in schools had long since been abolished, but it was quite normal and commonplace here in Yggdrasil, where the concept of things like human rights were pretty much nonexistent.

“Good, it looks like you’ve all finished.” The elderly teacher nodded to himself, satisfied, then raised his voice. “That will be all for today’s lesson!” he loudly declared, and promptly left the classroom.

In the next instant, the children all sprang out of their seats and began to talk excitedly, or run around the room and play. Yuuto smiled to himself. This, at least, was a scene no different than one in the world he had come from.

“I am the Infamous Wolf Hróðvitnir! Hear my name and tremble!” a boy called.

“Gh...!” Yuuto tensed up.

“Take this! Overwhelming Floodwaters Attack!”

“.....” Yuuto found himself sinking to the ground as if he had been struck, his face beet red.

What the hell is this?

He already knew, though. He knew, but his mind was trying to refuse to process it. Meanwhile, his face felt like it was on fire from embarrassment.

“My, my, they certainly seem to be having fun,” Kristina said, in a tone and with a glance that were both deliberate. And the smirk, oh, the satisfied smirk on her face was detestable. “It must be so nice, being so popular with all the children. I’m envious.”

“C-come on, don’t make a big deal out of it.” Yuuto somehow recovered from his wincing long enough to respond to her.

Meanwhile, the children’s game of pretend continued, and two new shouting voices appeared.

“Distant foes, hear my voice! Those nearby, come and look upon me! I am the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir!”

“And I am the Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf! On your guard, Dólgþrasir!”

“Look, see?” Yuuto eagerly pointed at the two boys. “They’re pretending to be Steinþórr and Rún, too. It’s not just me.”

It was too embarrassing for Yuuto to take when it was just himself, but it wasn’t quite as bad once some of the other people he knew were part of it, as well.

“Hmmm, are you sure it’s really Big Sister Sigrún? It’s a boy playing the role.”

“Ah, good point. And the title of Mánagarmr *is* passed down from person to person, after all.” Yuuto finally recovered enough of his composure to make that sort of analysis. “Maybe he’s pretending that he’s grown up and inherited it from Rún.”

Now that he had a moment to think about it more calmly, he wondered if he shouldn’t feel honored instead of embarrassed that he was showing up in

children's games of make-believe like this. After all, it was proof that the population really liked him.

In a way, perhaps things like this were the greatest blessing he could wish for as the ruler of a state.

"How about this? Be crushed by the might of Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer!"

"Mwah ha ha! Thanks to the power of my cheats, your attacks can do nothing against me!"

As the boys continued to shout, Yuuto nearly choked on his own saliva.

No, this was unbearably embarrassing, after all. It was bad enough that he was starting to wonder if he would rather crawl into a hole and die than stay here and keep listening to this.

"My goodness, Father, must you react so loudly?" Kristina smirked. "It isn't a big deal, after all. ...Heh."

"Oy. Did you just laugh at me?"

"What? I haven't the slightest idea what you mean. ...Pfffheheheh."

"Yeah, keep laughing... I'll make sure you cry later, dammit!"

"Eeek, noooo—" Kristina gave an impressively wooden cry of fear.

She was completely making a fool of him.

Machiavelli had written in his treatise *The Prince* that a true ruler must never allow his retainers to belittle or mock him. Perhaps this situation required Yuuto to act more serious and intimidating in his role as sworn father. But just as he was thinking that, Kristina spoke again in a more serious tone.

"Well, I suppose that's enough joking around. Back to our original objective... Look there, Father."

"Hm? ...Tch, damn it." As Yuuto looked in the direction Kristina was pointing, he glowered and clicked his tongue at what he saw.

It was Ephelia, who was sitting by herself, completely apart from all of the other children, in solitude.

"G-goodbye!" She stood up and politely wished the other children farewell,

but none of them responded to her. None of the girls even looked in her direction.

“Looks like the bad feeling I had was right on the money,” Yuuto said gravely.

Kristina, for her part, seemed to take a rather detached view of it. “Really? It doesn’t seem like they’re bullying her, so doesn’t that mean there’s no problem?”

She already looked like she’d lost interest in Ephelia, and was staring over at the cluster of girls who were happily making small talk with each other. The corner of her mouth turned up into an impish grin.

This was a girl who had no shame about publicly declaring and displaying a pretty twisted form of love for her sister, and she was always going on about how she disliked men so much that she didn’t want to hold Yuuto’s hand. Perhaps someone in the group of girls had caught her eye.

Well, Yuuto couldn’t afford to be as nonchalant as she was about the situation. “Hey, ostracism is bullying too. And that kind of thing leaves scars on the inside that hurt way more than anything physical.”

“Oh hoh?”

“*What*, Kris?”

Yuuto had been completely serious and meant what he said, so when Kristina responded by shooting him another smirking glance, it rubbed him the wrong way and he got testy with her.

Yuuto wasn’t a saint. Just because he was used to Kristina’s usual personality and behavior, that didn’t mean he could just overlook how uncaring she was acting after seeing what was happening to Ephelia.

“It’s just that you really are a kind man, Father. It’s really sinking in just now how much you fooled me with the ‘Tragedy of Van’ affair.”

“Hmph. Yeah, well, I’m well aware how soft-hearted and weak I am.”

Yggdrasil wasn’t a kind world. It was a place where the strong conquered the weak. And for someone who would stand above others and rule, there were times that required the strength to coldly, even cruelly, cast someone aside for

the greater good, however close they might be.

He'd suffered the cost of lacking that strength during the most recent war, and was still self-conscious about it.

Even so, a person's nature wasn't something that was easy to change.

"Still, what am I gonna do about this situation...?" he muttered.

It would be simple enough to lean on his authority as the patriarch and order the children to be nice to her, but that had to be an absolute last resort. If he was too heavy-handed, the pressure would instead only put more distance between them.

"Hmm, actually, I just might have a wonderful idea," Kristina said. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Go on."

"Oh, but I cannot just give it away for *free*. The secret to the process of refining iron..."

"Wha—"

"...is what I would love to say, but perhaps you might be more willing to trade the knowledge of how to produce paper?"

She had started with a high demand to gauge his reaction, then immediately switched it for another one to gauge him again. She really was a wily little fox.

Yuuto paused to think. The Wolf Clan had recently begun manufacturing various items made from glass, and the profit from those far outstripped what they'd been making off of paper. It was no longer necessary for national security reasons to treat paper production with the same level of secrecy as something like the method for refining iron. Technically there was no problem accommodating a subordinate clan with access to the knowledge. However...

"That's a pretty steep request to make, Kristina," Yuuto chose to say out loud.

Though it might not sound nice to say, it was still an overly exorbitant price to pay in exchange for nothing more than improvement in the quality of life for a single slave. Kristina had taken advantage of Yuuto's favoritism towards Ephelia to bargain for the highest price she could get in this situation.

He went on. “Get too greedy with me, and you might end up losing more than you gain.”

“Oh? Even though you were just thinking to yourself that my terms were within reason?”

“...Dammit. All right, fine. You really are way too dirty for your own good, you know.”

“Heh heh, you flatter me,” Kristina replied, wriggling her body in a flirty pose and blowing a kiss.

Yuuto just wearily stared back at her. “Yeah, no. I didn’t mean dirty in *that* way, and that wasn’t even a little bit sexy.”

“Whaaaaat?! I was fairly confident in that pose!” Kristina reacted dramatically, her eyes wide with surprise.

Yuuto could only chuckle wryly to himself, unsure how much of her surprise was real, if any.

She really is a little fox, he thought.

Of course, he was only referring to her shrewd cunning. She was still a child, after all.

“These are Lady Kristina and Lady Albertina, and beginning today, they will be attending classes here together with you all,” the teacher said. “Though they may be young, they have already exchanged the Oath of the Chalice directly with our great patriarch, Lord Yuuto, and they are also the daughters by blood of Botvid, patriarch of our neighbor the Claw Clan. Everyone, mind your manners with them.”

It was the following morning, and the twins stood smiling at the podium at the head of Ephelia’s classroom as the teacher introduced them to the class. Normally, the necessary procedures and paperwork would have taken one to two weeks, but this was the sort of situation where Yuuto’s authority was quite useful.

Ephelia was stunned, mouth agape. She hadn’t been told anything.

“Hi, I’m Albertina. Nice to meet youuu.” Albertina greeted the room with the

bright, cheerful and innocent smile she always wore.

She wasn't the least bit bashful in front of a room full of strangers.

And, as for Kristina...

"Well, she may say that, but actually this girl is my personal attendant. She won't be coming here as a student."

"Huuuh?! No, I'm attending the school! I really am!" Albertina began to shout in panicked protest.

Kristina shot her a cold glare. "Don't tell me... Do you honestly think you're ready to attend a vaxt, with *your* brains?"

"Uh, well, umm...!"

"Let's have a test, then. Read these letters for me, Al." Kristina pulled out a small clay tablet that she'd prepared in advance, and thrust it in front of her sister's eyes.

"Guh... I... I can't read it..." Albertina's face fell and her reply was practically a moan of sadness.

Kristina sighed and shook her head as if to say *good grief*, then pointed to the letters. "It says 'Albertina' here. To think you can't even read your own name... how pathetic."

"No, that's not true! That's not what it says! Even I can tell that!"

"Tch, so even you managed to learn to read your own name."

Albertina laughed boastfully. "Heh hehhh, of course I did! You shouldn't underestimate your own sister!"

"By the way, the word was actually 'Botvid.'"

"I'm so sorry Papa—!!" Albertina faced east and screamed an apology to her distant father, bowing over and over.

She was the princess of the Claw Clan, after all. The fact that she couldn't read the name of its patriarch and her own biological father was more than a little problematic.

However, it was also pretty much par for the course with her.

“Ahh... Al, you’re as adorably hopeless as ever...” Kristina gazed at her sister with an expression of ecstasy.

This, too, was business as usual.

“Ah, er... ahem.” The elderly teacher in charge of the class had been swept up in the rapid pace of the twins’ conversation until now, but he finally broke out of his daze and tried to smooth things over. “Lady Albertina, please do not fret. You only need to work hard and study here.”

“B-but, but is it really okay for someone as stupid as me to be here?” Albertina looked up at the teacher with tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

The teacher responded with a smile filled with affection, as if he’d been waiting for her to ask him that. “It is why the house of tablets exists, and why I am here. Please, rest assured, it will be fine.” He spoke with full confidence, and perhaps the pride of over twenty years spent teaching.

“This is the state she’s in after over five full years taking lessons from a private tutor, by the way,” Kristina cut in.

The teacher’s expression froze. Her one remark was enough to quickly make him regret speaking and acting so optimistically.

Kristina took in the teacher’s stiff and troubled expression with satisfaction like the little bully that she was, then turned to face the other children and gave a graceful curtsy.

“My apologies for the delay in introducing myself. I am Kristina, daughter by blood of Patriarch Botvid of the Claw Clan, and sworn daughter of our Wolf Clan’s own great patriarch, Lord Yuuto Suoh. Everyone, I do hope we get along well.”

As she raised her head to meet their eyes again, she wore a sweet smile that was every bit the image of a noble lady.

The motions of her formal greeting were so smooth and practiced that even the teacher let out a quiet “ohh,” impressed with her poise.

However, if Yuuto had been in the room, he would assuredly have shaken his head and chuckled wryly to himself.

Because he knew that when this little fox wore her cutest and most sociable smile, she was unmistakably up to no good.

“Ephy, knead my clay for me, would you? Al’s, too!”

The first part of the day’s classes had finished, and the children were taking a short break, when Kristina loudly called Ephelia over and began giving her orders. She sat with her legs crossed and her cheek resting on one hand, looking like a queen on her throne.

“Um, r-right! Right away, Lady Kristina!” Ephelia dashed over to Kristina’s desk right away and began using both hands to knead the soft clay.

The standard practice at the vaxt was to recycle the clay tablets, re-kneading them into blank tablets for each new lesson. Normally, they would not preserve any permanent record of their lessons; the volume of tablets would quickly get out of hand, for one thing.

Albertina was a bit surprised at her sister’s demand, and tried to refuse. “Huh?! N-no, you don’t need to do mine, Ephy. I’ll take care of my own!”

“No, Al. This is Ephy’s job.” Kristina looked her square in the eye and responded flatly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“B-but...”

“No, Lady Albertina, you don’t need to do such work. Please, let me do it for you!” Ephelia’s eyes shone with eager motivation.

Time passed, and they entered their next break.

“Ephy, my throat is dry,” Kristina ordered. “Go fetch some water.”

“Right away, Lady Kristina!”

A few hours later, classes had wrapped up for the day.

“Oh, Ephy, my shoulders are sore. Massage them for me.”

“You mean, like this?”

After class, the three of them made their way back along the main street.

As they passed by a bakery that had recently become popular, the woman running it noticed Ephelia and called out to her.

“Oh, hey there little girl. I recognize you; you’re the girl I saw riding in the patriarch’s carriage before. Perfect timing! Here. This is some of my best bread. I’m pretty confident in the flavor. It’s freshly baked! Be a dear and give it to Lord Yuuto, would you?”

“Oh, r-right. I understand. I’ll make sure to deliver it to him.”

“Right. I’m counting on you.”

“Oh! Freshly-baked bread!” Albertina cried. “It looks so good... Yoink!”

“L-Lady Albertina?!” Ephelia squeaked.

“Mm, hua, Ehhy?”

“Oh, ohhh... wh-what should I do? That was a delivery meant for Master Yuuto...”

“And that concludes my report of the first day, Father,” Kristina said.

“Wh-why the hell did *you* start bullying her?!”

Later that afternoon, as Yuuto listened to the report from Kristina he’d spent all day waiting for, he couldn’t help the first lines out of his mouth being an angry retort. He’d sent her out to solve the problem, and instead she’d become part of it.

As for the lost gift of bread, it seemed Albertina had felt bad after seeing Ephelia worried and depressed, and had bought more bread with her own money as a replacement, so all was right in the end.

Yuuto was eating some of said bread now, and indeed, it was quite good.

“That is quite the unexpected claim,” Kristina said coldly. “I am doing nothing of the sort.”

“If it’s not bullying, then what the hell would you call it?!”

“Um...? I would say that I was making a point of expressing my favor for her.”

Kristina had a love of teasing people and getting a rise out of them, but normally she didn’t easily let others see what she herself was really thinking or feeling. However, this time she cocked her head to one side and genuinely looked puzzled. She really didn’t seem to understand what Yuuto was talking

about.

“How could you call that... ah. So that’s how it is.” Yuuto was just about to continue his emotionally charged argument when he realized his mistake.

Going by the norms of 21st century Japan and viewing all of the children as “equal classmates,” Kristina was forcing Ephelia to be her own personal gofer. But as a “servant,” Ephelia wasn’t being treated poorly at all.

Ephelia was Yuuto’s slave and serving girl. Kristina must have only seen it as treating her appropriately according to her station.

Actually, the act of specifically relying only on Ephelia could be seen as a show of affection and favor for a servant, just as Kristina herself had said.

“Hmm, is it because Ephy is your property, Father? Was I wrong to use her without your permission?”

“Ah, er... It’d be a pain to explain it, so let’s just go with that.”

Even if he were to try to explain things from his perspective, he didn’t think a 21st century Japanese’s view on human rights would make any sense to her. And even if he took the time to try to bridge that gap, he wouldn’t stand to gain anything by it.

Figuring out what to do to help Ephelia was far more important right now.

“In that case, I will make it a formal request,” Kristina said. “Will you lend Ephelia to me for a few days? That should be all it takes.”

“...Do you have to do it this way?”

Kristina gave a deep, affected sigh. “They say great men have an even greater fondness for women, but you, Father, seem to lack any understanding of them.”

“Oh, shut up.” It was certainly true he didn’t know the first thing about them, but having it said straight to his face like this cut too sharply into his pride as a man approaching adulthood.

Kristina giggled at Yuuto’s sullen expression. “Very well, then. I shall explain my plan from the beginning.”

“Please do.”

“First, boys of that age and girls of that age do not readily make friends with each other to begin with. They mostly stick to their own.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, that’s true,” Yuuto said, nodding.

Thinking back to his own childhood, from around the middle of elementary school to just before graduating from to middle school, he had only hung out with other boys, as far as he could remember.

The fact that he was a boy had been a very strong part of his consciousness, and the idea of playing with or spending time with a girl had been intensely embarrassing.

Because of that, he had begun acting cold and standoffish towards his childhood friend Mitsuki, and to Yuuto now, that was a part of his past he sorely regretted and wished he could take back. On the other hand, all the other boys his age had been the same, so what Kristina said made sense to him. It was just the way things were.

“And so, I planned to leave the boys out of this from the start,” Kristina said.

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense, since there’s nothing we can do about them.”

The boys weren’t deliberately bullying Ephelia; it was just that age for them.

And besides... Ephelia was still only eleven. It was too early for her to have a boyfriend. What Yuuto most wanted for her was for her to quickly make some female friends.

Kristina nodded and continued. “‘Then what about the girls?’ you might ask. Actually, I hit on what was going on the from the very first time I laid eyes on them.”

“Ohh, nice,” Yuuto said eagerly.

“The girls have a leader, a ‘queen,’ and she is ordering the other girls to ignore Ephelia and shut her out.”

“Hmm.”

That was a pattern of bullying present even in 21st century Japan, so it didn’t upend Yuuto’s expectations.

Actually, the fact that this sort of thing remained unchanged over thousands of years and multiple cultural eras left him feeling like he'd got a sense of humanity's nature as a species, its karma.

"So, in other words, you wanted to enroll at the vaxt so you could sniff out the culprit, right?" Yuuto asked.

"No, Father, as I said, I understood everything the first time I laid eyes on them. I already know who it is."

"Seriously, during that first trip? I'm amazed you figured it out in such a short time."

"Oh, it was sooo easy, Father. I recognized her right away. After all, we are birds of a feather." Kristina snickered to herself, her eyes cold and indifferent and her mouth twisted into a mocking sneer.

For a second, she looked to Yuuto far more mature than her age. A chill ran down his spine.

"Do you remember when Ephy said goodbye and left the classroom that day?" Kristina said. "There was one girl who smiled at her. Yes, just one girl. Smiling in victory at Ephelia's shame, and basking in her own feeling of superiority."

"That's... pretty twisted," Yuuto said slowly. "If she's attending the same class as Ephy and the other kids, she can't be more than twelve or so."

"Girls mature emotionally more quickly than boys, Father."

"Ah, I *have* heard that said a lot, true." Yuuto could remember hearing comments to that effect now and then from the idle chatter and gossip of his mother and her friends.

Back then, he'd been eager to hurry and grow up, to prove he wasn't a kid anymore. So whenever he'd heard them say things like that, it had felt like he was somehow losing to girls, and made him angry. He could still remember that feeling pretty well. Perhaps another one of the reasons he'd started giving Mitsuki the cold shoulder back then was as a reaction against those adults.

...Which, no matter how you thought about it, was exactly the way a stupid

little kid acts.

“Hee hee,” Kristina giggled. “While little boys long for heart-pounding adventures, of winning glory through hunting and battle, the hearts of little girls throb as they dream of the day when a splendid, handsome man will appear before them and whisk them off their feet.”

“Hrm... So that’s how it is, huh?”

At first, that didn’t really strike Yuuto as feeling definitively true. But then he thought back to when he’d last visited Mitsuki’s room. She’d just started her first year of middle school at the time, and all the girls’ manga in her room had seemed like it was that kind of romantic fantasy.

Perhaps this was another example of a part of human nature that remained unchanged over thousands of years.

However, Yuuto had trouble agreeing with the implied premise that falling in love somehow signified becoming an adult.

He was quietly pondering to himself over this when Kristina brought him back on topic.

“I don’t see how you can act like this does not involve you. The queen of the class who ordered everyone to ignore Ephy did so because you are the one she’s in love with, Father.”

“Whaaat?!” Yuuto was completely blindsided by this.

In fact, he wasn’t sure he fully understood what she’d just told him.

“But... have that girl and I ever even met?!”

“Yes, you have. It was when you came on your inspection visit to the vaxt.”

“So that’s when! ...Er, wait, but I don’t remember speaking with any of the kids! So how?!”

Yuuto was bewildered by this. That day, he’d observed classes for a short while, then spoken directly with the teacher in a separate room. After that, he’d headed straight back to the palace.

He didn’t recall doing a single thing that would make someone pay attention

to him, much less fall in love with him.

“As always, you grossly underestimate your own charisma,” Kristina smirked. “Well, putting that aside for now, I can conclude that that girl is making the others ignore Ephy because she’s jealous.”

“Hrm. Really...”

“Today, while I was having Ephy do all sorts of tasks for me, I used that time to ask a few unassuming questions. Indirectly, of course. Why, wouldn’t you know it, back during that inspection, it seems like you smiled so sweetly at Ephelia, patted her head so gently, almost like you were doing it *deliberately*. Do you remember that, Father?”

“Yes, I remember doing that,” Yuuto reluctantly admitted, with a bitter sigh.

For his part, he had been trying to do what he could to prevent Ephelia from being bullied. None would dare torment someone clearly favored by the patriarch, or so he’d thought.

And actually thinking about it rationally in terms of loss and gain, bullying Ephelia would only carry the risk of earning Yuuto’s displeasure when he found out. There was no return; none that he could think of. And conversely, if one made sure to become friends with her, there was the possibility they might benefit in a number of ways from a relationship with someone close to the patriarch.

But instead, the result had been his actions backfiring entirely.

Yuuto was once again awed by how difficult it was dealing with other people’s emotions. Then again, the girl in question was still just a child, so there was no point in harping on the subject of rational judgments of risk and reward.

“Thus, she ruins Ephy’s social life at school, and can bask in the feeling of superiority it gives her. ‘I’m so much better than her. I’m the one more worthy of Lord Yuuto’s love,’ is likely what she’s thinking to herself. Of course, considering you already have women like Aunt Felicia and Elder Sister Sigrún around you, one would not be wrong to call it shallow thinking only fitting for a child.”

Kristina capped her insult with a nasty, derisive snicker at the girl’s expense. It

was a pretty caustic assessment.

Yuuto's voice grew cold. "All right, what do we do, then? I just need to order that queen girl expelled from the vaxt, right?"

The lion that slept within his heart had very slightly begun to rouse itself.

Normally he was the epitome of mild-mannered, enough so that he never batted an eye at Kristina's constant antics, which were disrespectful and impudent towards her sworn father however polite her speech might be. But despite the fact that she hadn't exchanged any Chalice oaths with him, he still considered Ephelia a precious younger member of his family, and she was being hurt. He wasn't kind enough to laugh that sort of thing off.

He knew it was bad form for parents to get personally involved in the conflicts of their children, but at the same time, he had a responsibility to her as the one who made her attend classes, and he had no intention of hesitating if it came to that.

"There is no need to make this into a major incident, Father," Kristina said, shrugging her shoulders. Her expression was a little bit more tense than before. It seemed that even for the daughter and prized intelligence agent of Botvid of the Claw Clan, she felt her blood run a little cold when dealing with Yuuto in this state. "The point is that the other girls have no choice but to shun Ephy because they're being ordered to by their queen."

"Yeah, well, true."

"So, naturally, I simply need to rise up and become the new queen of the class." Kristina said this casually and offhandedly, with the same tone one might imagine for the famous quote, "If they have no bread then let them eat cake."

"...Huh?" Even the famous commander renowned amongst ally and foe for his strange and unexpected strategies found himself taken aback and dumbfounded.

Kristina paid his surprise no mind and continued, holding up her index finger to emphasize her point. "When that happens, the hierarchy will make a complete reversal. After all, I've made it a point to show off to everyone that Ephy is my loyal follower."

“...I see. So that’s why you started off by making her your gofer.”

“Is that the term in your world for showing favoritism to one’s underling, Father?”

“Uh, sure, let’s just go with that.” As usual, Yuuto countered a tough question by settling for easy misinformation. He was already groaning to himself over something more pressing.

He’d been studying up on how to become a better patriarch by reading articles on leadership and group formation, and he’d learned about the caste-like hierarchy of cliques found in schools in the United States.

At the top of school society for the girls was the “queen bee,” followed by her clique of “sidekicks,” and below them the hangers-on called “pleasers.” Those groups formed the upper half of the social pyramid.

It wasn’t as open and visible at Japanese schools as it was in American ones, but there was a pretty similar phenomenon of social caste behind the scenes there, too. It had to be the same here in the vaxts of Yggdrasil, and Yuuto had just been unable to see it.

No matter how many millenia might pass, people were still people. Humanity couldn’t escape from their essential nature as a species.

“But even still, to solve the problem by usurping the queen yourself... that’s definitely a ‘Yggdrasil’ way to tackle the problem,” Yuuto said, with a wry smile.

It seemed like such a brute force approach. But at the same time, there was something Yuuto could respect about that.

After all, applying outside pressure with his authority as patriarch was just as much a brute force approach, but could have unpleasant repercussions, while her approach would be equivalent to building a new order from within.

And it would mean that the matter would be settled among the kids themselves, which was much healthier in the long term.

Of course, ideally, he’d want Ephelia to be able to solve the problem with her own power. But she was still young, far too young and inexperienced. She didn’t need to be able to solve this herself yet. She just needed to keep learning, and

bit by bit, learn how to handle this sort of problem.

Indeed, that was exactly the reason why he was having her attend school.

According to Kristina's plan, if she became the new queen bee of the vaxt in the eastern district, then in the new order, Ephelia would automatically become one of her sidekicks, part of the upper social ranks. At the very least, no one would shun her anymore.

What sort of friendships she'd be able to make from that point on would be entirely up to her.

"All right, I'll leave the rest to you, Kris." Yuuto waved Kristina off with one hand. It would be crass to interrogate her any more at this point.

The current queen bee had succeeded in unifying at least a dozen girls under her control, and that was worthy of respect even if she was only twelve or so.

She seemed to have a problem with her personality, but viewing her with the calculating eyes of a patriarch, Yuuto could see she might have a promising future ahead of her. The sort of sly and underhanded behavior she'd demonstrated was, at times, necessary for those who would lead others. However, in the end, her craftiness was only that of a little fox.

The girl standing in front of Yuuto right now, with her thin, cold smile of anticipation, was something else. She was like a *kyuubi*, the nine-tailed fox beast of Japanese myth, a creature of bottomless evil and wiles.

It would be rude for Yuuto to question Kristina further because she was leagues apart from her opponent.

It would be no contest.

After class had ended for the day, Kristina spoke up in a bright voice, clapping her hands together. "Everyone, how about we all go to the bathhouse today? Father asked that I go inspect the baths before they officially open, to try them out and give him my impressions. And so I asked him, 'I want to invite my friends to come, as well. After all, the more feedback, the better, right? Pretty please?' And wouldn't you know it, he happily consented!"

Of course, it went without saying that Kristina's actual request to Yuuto had

been nothing like the cute way in which she portrayed it.

It had already been a week since the twin princesses of the Claw Clan had started attending lessons at the vaxt.

At Kristina's announcement, the girls gathered around her began buzzing with excitement.

"T-truly, Lady Kristina?!"

"Oh, I am just so happy I was able to make friends with you, Lady Kristina!"

"I'll follow you for the rest of my life, Big Sister Kristina!"

Rumors had been spreading about the new bathhouse built on the outskirts of the city that would be open to the public, and it had become the hottest topic among the women of Iárnviðr, young and old.

Until now, the only places in the city with large baths had been the interior of the palace and the hörgr, the sanctuary at the top of the sacred tower Hliðskjálf. In other words, the only ones with access to them had been a subset of people in the upper echelons of the clan.

For ordinary citizens, it was most common to either bathe in the river or to wash and rinse oneself using a large bucket filled with water.

But it was winter now, and there was no one silly enough to suggest a dip in the river this time of year. And it was the nature of a woman's heart to want to find a way to keep clean and pretty, no matter the season. Thus, there was heavy interest in the new public bathhouse.

"Well, then, let's be off," Kristina said.

She stood up to leave, the gaggle of girls following close behind her.

But then she stopped and turned to look back for just a moment, directing her gaze to a particular spot in the corner of the room. Her eyes were cold and uninterested, as if she were only glancing at a pebble on the side of the road.

A single girl remained sitting, one who had not been chatting together with the other girls around Kristina. She sat there alone, silently looking down, her clenched fists trembling, her lips pressed into a thin line.

It was the former “queen” of this classroom, the same girl who had ordered the others to ostracize Ephelia.

In the animal kingdom, once the leader of a herd of animals with a strong hierarchy is supplanted by a new, younger leader, the old leader either falls to the bottom of the hierarchy, or is driven from the herd entirely. In other words, that very thing had happened to her.

None of that mattered to Kristina. Not that girl, nor the fawning group of girls behind her with their noisy prattling, busying themselves kissing up to her. They were all equally worthless in her eyes.

“For all their talk of friendship, this is how people really are,” she whispered to herself in a voice no one could hear. She flipped a bit of her hair back with one hand as she turned to resume walking toward the door.

She was the born daughter of Botvid, a man who had used every scheme and plot, betrayed people and made them betray each other, all so he could at last rise to the position of ruler of their nation.

Children learn by watching their parents.

From the time Kristina first became aware of the world around her, she’d watched the way her father did things, and seen in great detail just how greedy and selfish people were, how quickly they were willing to betray each other.

“So happy to be friends with you?” she thought, sneering. *“I’ll follow you for the rest of my life?” What an absolute joke.*

Kristina knew they were the words of people who readily tossed aside the person they’d been loyally following until just the other day.

If Kristina fell from grace, they would forget those words and abandon her for whoever rose to the top next, without a doubt. She would be willing to bet her rank, even her life on it.

And people say children are pure and innocent. Just under the surface, they’re all like this. Ugly. Ahhhh, it’s so, so ugly.

What possible value was there in such shallow, superficial creatures?

“Honestly, Father is such a naive dreamer,” she muttered. Then she added,

with a derisive smirk, “Though I suppose that is one of his cute points.”

Kristina couldn’t bring herself to believe in anything “clean and pure,” because she knew the extent of humanity’s ugliness and filth.

At the same time, she had an endless yearning for something truly clean and pure, because she knew the extent of humanity’s ugliness and filth.

And so, that purity needed to be tested.

Kristina longed for the sort of pure beauty that retained its shine even if you tried to dirty and defile it over and over. In her mind, that was what *real* beauty was. If it lost its luster just from being dipped in filth, then it was fake, nothing more.

“Oh, Al, my sweet sister, you truly are the best,” Kristina murmured to herself blissfully, dwelling on the mental image of her twin.

Albertina was truly the embodiment of Kristina’s ideal.

She was such a foolish and simple-minded girl, almost like an animal in some respects. And so, none of Kristina’s acts of trickery or humiliation could stain her. She remained innocent and clean, however much she was dirtied by her tainted sister.

Albertina was so dear, so precious! Kristina often wondered just how it was that such a person could be at her side.

Kristina had accepted Botvid and his ways, but perhaps Albertina had rejected them on an unconscious level.

“Um, would you like to come, too?” The familiar voice faintly reached Kristina’s ears, and she spun around to look back into the classroom. The surprise showed on her face, a rarity for her.

Ephelia was smiling and holding her hand out to the former queen.

If her smiling face or tone of voice had carried a sense of smug superiority, or the satisfaction found in revenge, then Kristina wouldn’t have given it a second thought.

She would have simply dismissed Ephelia in her mind as another worthless fake, and seen her as nothing more than a potentially useful tool for currying

favor with Yuuto.

But Ephelia’s smile was from the heart, real and filled with kindness.

“Why... why would you ask me...?” The former queen looked up at Ephelia, disbelieving.

It was a natural reaction. Kristina stood still and listened in attentively.

Ephelia paused for a moment before slowly replying. “Well...”

Ephelia might have been only eleven, but she was still a girl.

She had known that this person hated her. And it would be a lie to say that she hadn’t felt any resentment at all over the way the girl had tried to exclude and humiliate her.

But Ephy also understood.

As a slave, she knew how painful it felt to have others look down on you.

How sad and lonely it felt to be treated like you weren’t even human.

That despair was a hopeless darkness without a single ray of light.

And someone had saved her.

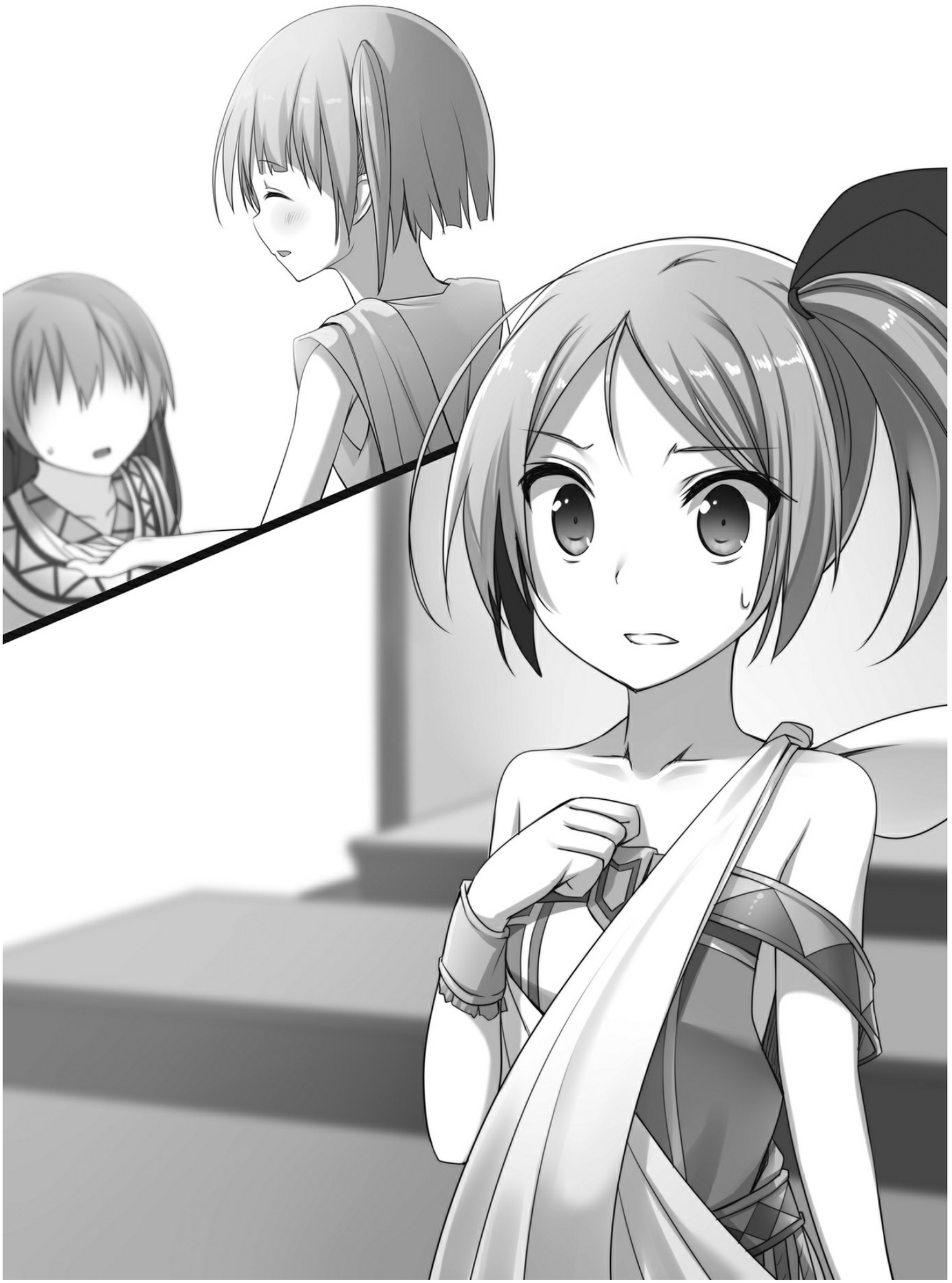
Someone who smiled at her with kindness and warmth.

That smile had been her heart’s salvation.

She wanted to be more like that person.

And so, she smiled from her own heart. She did her best to give the girl the same kind of smile that person had given her.

“Well... after all, isn’t it more fun with all of us together?”



Interlude 2

“Ohh! So this is where the common folk live.” The young girl’s voice was brimming with energy as she slightly parted the canopy covering the carriage, and looked out through the gap at the streets of Glaðsheimr.

The horse-drawn carriage she rode in was a fair bit larger than the ones merchant traders usually used, and far more sturdy. The cabin was both spacious and quite comfortable.

It was still extremely narrow and cramped compared to the halls and rooms of the palace, but the girl didn’t seem to mind that at all. She looked ecstatic, like she was experiencing a feeling of liberation she’d never had before.

“Your Ma— Lady Rífa,” Fagrahvél said. “I would ask that you refrain from unnecessarily revealing your countenance to the outside.”

“H-hey, Fagrahvél, are those people all right?! They’re red-faced and staggering about.”

“You need not worry. They are merely drunk.”

“Ohhh, so those are the ‘drunkards’ We’ve heard tales of!”

“More importantly, Lady Rífa, you mustn’t be visible yet. We cannot be sure who might see you. Please, you only need to endure this for just a bit longer.”

“Yes, yes, We know. You— Ohhh, that’s the Ífingr River. We’ve never seen it this close! It’s quite large.”

Rífa was completely absorbed in all the sights she was seeing for the first time, and Fagrahvél’s admonishment went in one ear and out the other.

Fagrahvél couldn’t speak more forcefully with her, and was troubling himself over just what to do when another voice spoke to him more quietly.

“Sir...”

“Hm, what is it?” he asked.

Fagrahvél’s personal attendant was also sitting in the cabin with them, and he had leaned over to speak to his master in a voice Rífa couldn’t hear. “Is this

really all right? If it's discovered that we took Her Majesty out of the palace, that one-eyed old man will surely not sit quietly aside. Will this not give him an opportunity to get an advantage over us?"

"If that happens, so be it. If he wants to raise an issue with me, we need only settle it through battle."

Fagrahvél spoke as if unconcerned with the consequences. Then he slumped his shoulders and looked down with a self-deprecating smile.

"All she wants is to see the outside world just once in her life. The two of us were nursed at the same breast. If I cannot even grant that small wish of hers, how can I call myself a righteous man?"

ACT 2: Wolf of Battle

Wham!

Sigrún could do nothing to prevent the oncoming attack from slamming into her, sending her flying backwards. She'd just barely managed to block it, but her hands were numb from the impact.

She locked eyes with her foe. A fierce fighting spirit burned in the eyes that met hers, along with a savage murderous intent. Then the enemy leapt at her once again.

"Kh...!!" Somehow, she managed to catch the attack with the haft of her spear.

Sigrún was an Einherjar who carried the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. In spite of her slender frame, her physical strength was easily in the top three even within the elite warriors of the Wolf Clan.

"This power... it's on par with the Dólgþrasir!" she cried.

The name of the strongest foe she'd ever faced crossed her lips as she found herself being clearly overpowered and pressed backward by the strength of the enemy before her.

Her ears picked up the sound of something creaking under physical stress, and she hurriedly dropped her grip on the spear and threw herself backwards.

Snap!

In the next instant, the spear's haft made a thin, cold sound as it was broken in two. Had her decision come even a split second later, she would have been in mortal danger.

"GRRRAAAAAAGGGHHH!!"

But her enemy did not relent, and charged with incredible speed, with a bellowing howl that reverberated to Sigrún's very core.

Sigrún's eyes gleamed with a keen light.

"Hah!!"

Unsheathing one of the two curved swords at her waist, she put all of her strength behind a sweeping strike that cut a thin, perfectly horizontal line in front of her.

The sharp, steel blade, which could hack through even iron, sliced fruitlessly through empty air.

Her enemy suddenly changed direction to just barely outside the range of her attack, leaping to the side.

As Sigrún's eyes went wide in astonishment, her foe kicked off the ground into another leaping attack, from her flank this time.

"Ghh!"

Sigrún tried to react by jumping backwards again, but wasn't quite fast enough. The attack came down upon her at an angle that tore a slash across her thigh. Bright red blood sprayed from the open wound, and a sharp sensation that was more like intense heat than pain raced through her.

Through sheer force of willpower, she planted her feet and managed to remain standing.

"To think you'd be this strong..." Sigrún muttered to herself in awe. She had met a foe perhaps stronger than anyone she'd ever faced before, and she was completely driven into a corner.

It had all begun two days ago.

"Everyone, listen up!"

There was a sharp *thunk!* as Sigrún planted the tip of her sword's scabbard into the ground. She surveyed the attentive faces of her subordinates as she spoke.

"We'll be heading to Gnipahellir. Prepare for departure at once."

About two hours' march from the city of Iárnviðr, in an area of wide grasslands, was the territory and training grounds of the Sigrún family. It was surrounded by open snowfields in all directions, dotted with a few hundred domesticated sheep and horses freely grazing or playfully running about.

There were countless tents lining the tops of the small hills nearby, which

gave an easy view of the surrounding area. The young rank and file of the Sigrún family stood assembled in a cleared space in front of the largest tent, about 300 in all.

The Sigrún family had a total membership of almost 500 fighters, and within the Wolf Clan, they had a reputation as the most battle-ready and militaristic faction.

In service to that name and reputation, they spent their days devoted to harsh, even grueling military training, without ever complaining or slacking off. But this time in particular, upon hearing Sigrún's orders, some of the young men wore expressions not of duty and determination but of bewilderment and hesitation.

That was, in a way, an understandable reaction.

The Gnipahellir region was far, at least two full days' march away. Even now, the snow was falling heavily, and a bitterly cold wind blew wild and unceasingly around them, making their teeth chatter uncontrollably as they stood in rank.

Even for the bravest warriors of the Múspell unit, when faced with the order to march in that weather for two full days, it was frankly only human to be reluctant. That was going to be even more true for the new trainees who would be accompanying them. However, their captain and commander was often described as a frozen flower, and she looked to have no interest in accommodating those feelings.

"What's with those faces, men? You don't want to go?" Sigrún spoke in a tone more icy than even the frigid winter air around them, and the faces of the young men of the Sigrún family all tensed up as one.

They knew most of all how truly terrifying this girl could be.

With her sworn father, she was overprotective and prone to worry, showing panicked concern over even the slightest scratch. But with her own clan subordinates, her sworn children and grandchildren, she was mercilessly strict.

During combat training, she struck them down with a wooden sword without any hesitation. Naturally, she always held back just enough so that they wouldn't sustain any major injuries, but they would still wind up hunched over

on the ground in pain for a while each time.

“A bit of pain here and there will make you more desperate to train hard and get stronger,” she would say calmly. She was a veritable demon as an instructor.

In particular, after she’d witnessed the expert riding skills of the Panther Clan soldiers in battle, she had made their training even more intense. The soldiers did not protest out loud, but their faces had told of their unspoken feelings, that they couldn’t take much more of this.

The young soldiers were shivering now, not from the cold, but from the grueling march followed by more hellish training that was surely looming on the horizon.

At this point, one man stepped resolutely forward out of rank and addressed Sigrún. “Mother, why must we head out for a remote area like Gnipahellir? Without being given any explanation in conditions like this, I fear everyone’s hesitation is unavoidable.”

It was Bömburr, deputy commander of the Múspell unit and also the second-in-command of the Sigrún family.

At his words, several of the other men nodded vigorously, for he had said just what was on their minds.

Bömburr was a man in his mid-thirties, and among the throngs of lean and brawny fighters in the Sigrún family, he stood out for being a slightly rounder man.

He wasn’t so stout as to be fat, but he was wide and not all that tall, with a round face and a slightly flabby chin.

In a word, he wasn’t a very attractive man, and he lacked a fierce presence.

“Huh.” Sigrún frowned to herself, as if reflecting on what he’d said.

Normally, Sigrún spent her days serving Yuuto in the palace, and so Bömburr stood in for her here, managing the administration of the territory and the training and instruction of the soldiers. He was a central pillar of Sigrún’s clan family, and stern though she was, she did not take his words lightly.

“You’re right.” Having considered Bömburr’s advice, Sigrún apologized frankly for her earlier rashness. “I got a little ahead of myself. Everyone, I’m sorry.”

She was known for her one-track devotion to combat and the martial arts, but Sigrún was not at all foolish. If anything, she demonstrated excellence in her decision-making as a field commander.

And if she believed she was at fault in something, she was willing to bow her head in apology even to her subordinates.

That upright and honest integrity of hers meant that even though she was at times cold and harsh to her men, she had garnered a great deal of trust from them.

“The matter is, I just received a message from Father,” she said. “It was an order to exterminate some mountain bandits that have been appearing in the Gnipahellir region.”

“Ahh, I see.” Bömburr nodded deeply in understanding, and indeed, so did the other men.

Sigrún was unbelievably calm and composed for a girl of her age, but from time to time she acted out in strange or even silly ways. This almost always had to do with matters relating to her sworn father the patriarch, and every one of her soldiers knew that.

For the mother of their clan family who was always so hard-headed and resolute, it was the one area in which she showed a cute side. The Sigrún family soldiers found it charming, and did their best to support her. After all, it was the duty of children to do what would make their mother happy.

“That area was the site of conflict between the Wolf and Claw Clans for quite a while, after all,” Sigrún explained. “It seems that some refugees driven off of their lands, as well as some deserters from the army, have joined up into a gang and are raiding the villages in the area.”

It was common in war for local farmlands or villages to meet with theft or destruction, or be seized entirely. And then there were those who fled from the front line in battle, committing the grave crime of desertion. The former group had lost their homes, and the latter could not return to their homeland; quite

often, those sorts of people stole weapons and turned to a life of banditry.

“Hm, and after exchanging the new Oath of the Chalice with the Claw Clan, there are not as many soldiers stationed at the fortress out there, either.” Bömburr frowned and rubbed his chin.

Recently the Wolf Clan had been exclusively concerned with threats from the west, and so it hadn’t been able to avoid deploying the majority of its border defense soldiers on that side. So the more unseemly types had taken advantage of that weaker presence to infest the hinterlands to the east.

“Yes, and that’s why we of the Sigrún family were called to action,” Sigrún declared. “Father wishes for us to act quickly, before there are any more new casualties.”

“Understood, ma’am. That calls for the Múspell unit, yes?”

Within the Sigrún family was an elite special forces unit called the Múspell unit. It consisted of 200 heavily trained cavalry fighters, and their mobility was greatest in all of the Wolf Clan. For a destination two full days’ march away, they would be able to arrive in less than a day.

“That’s right,” Sigrún said. “And also, this time I want to bring along any trainees who can sit on a horse. There’s no better training than actual combat, after all.”

“We will be leaving behind the men who are currently tasked with guarding the capital, correct?” Bömburr asked.

“Of course. We can’t run the risk of letting anything happen to Father.”

“Understood. Then I will begin the preparations right away. Can you give me two hours?”

“Do it in one.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Bömburr didn’t blink an eye at Sigrún’s excessively strict demand. He reverently bowed his head.

In the next instant, before he even gave any commands, the young men of the Sigrún family cleanly broke rank and began briskly moving to make the necessary preparations to depart.

And so, in mere moments, they organized a combined squadron consisting of one hundred elite Múspell cavalry fighters and one hundred cavalry trainees.

And true to Bömburr's word, in one hour they were off at top speed, flying like an arrow towards Gnipahellir.

"Whew. It's been a long time since I last came this way; I'm glad we made it here before dark." Sigrún nimbly dismounted from her horse in a fluid motion that resembled a dancer's leap, and paused for a second to look up at Fort Gnipahellir.

It was a place she had not actually visited very many times, but it held important memories for her, and she had a certain connection to it.

The previous holder of the Mánagarmr title had long been stationed here as a general and commander of the Wolf Clan's eastern defense. When the fortress had been taken by the Claw Clan, the battle to recapture it had been her beloved sworn father's very first military operation.

The outer brick wall surrounding the fortress still bore the scars of that battle. It had been utterly destroyed in one place, and the gap was now filled in with stacked-up piles of stones as a token replacement.

"Ahh... right here is where we broke through, and then we charged in to take this fortress back from the Claw Clan. I still remember that moment so vividly," Bömburr spoke nostalgically, patting the pile of stones.

That battle had also been the first for the newly-formed Múspell cavalry unit, ending with their first victory, so it was no doubt moving for him to be back here again.

Sigrún, on the other hand, was utterly dispassionate. "Save the sentimentality for later. Taking out the bandits comes first. Let's start by hearing the details from the men stationed here at the fort."

She signaled to the lookout, who recognized who she was at a glance by her uniquely beautiful features. He opened the gate, and she quickly strode inside.

To Sigrún, the past was the past, and in the present there was nothing more important than accomplishing the mission her father had given her.

Bömburr sighed. “At least let me rest for a moment...”

He knew muttering such complaints to himself was pointless, but he couldn’t help himself. His hair and beard were frozen over stiff with a layer of frost, and his lips were purple from the cold. It was a telling picture of the difficult journey he’d had to endure.

But even though Sigrún had covered the same distance under the same conditions, she was completely fine and full of energy.

“All right, men, once you’ve tied up your horses, you may rest inside the fort.” Bömburr gave instructions to his subordinates, then followed after Sigrún.

A minute later, he managed to catch up to her just outside the commander’s room.

As they entered, a man in his mid-twenties with a tough, masculine face greeted them, respectfully bowing his head low. “Elder Sister Sigrún, you have my humble thanks for making the long trek here in the midst of such bitter cold.”

This was Alrekr, the officer currently entrusted with command of Fort Gnipahellir, and fourteenth-ranked in the Wolf Clan hierarchy.

Considering that two years ago the man in charge at the time, Skáviðr, had been the fourth-ranked officer and the Mánagarmr to boot, it would not be amiss to say the status of the Gnipahellir command had fallen quite a bit.

Thanks to the peace process between the Wolf and Claw Clans brought on by the exchange of the Oath of the Chalice between their patriarchs, the strategic importance of the fortress had dropped significantly.

“Ohhh, so this is it, the fur mantle said to be handed down from generation to generation along with the title of Mánagarmr!” Alrekr cried. “It’s made from the pelt of a garmr, yes? This is my first time seeing it so up close. It really is magnificent. Why, I remember when I was a child, I dreamed of one day donning that mantle, and practiced sword swings until I collapsed.”

“You can skip the flattery,” Sigrún said. “Hurry up and tell me about the bandits.”

She cast aside Alrekr's polite chatter with a single, terse remark, and plunked herself down into one of the guest chairs.

It seemed she had no interest whatsoever in deepening the bonds between clan siblings through even a little bit of pleasant small talk.

"Ah, r-right," Alrekr stammered.

In Yggdrasil, relative age was meaningless compared to the weight of seniority established by the Chalice. But even so, Sigrún's attitude was so brusque and abrupt that Alrekr worried if he might have offended her. He looked over at Bömburr with the question in his eyes.

Bömburr shrugged his shoulders and gave a wry smile in return, from which Alrekr could infer that this was just how she normally was.

Alrekr cleared his throat and walked briskly over to a large, cloth map set against the wall of the room. He tapped on three locations in sequence with his finger. "It began perhaps two weeks ago, when they began targeting and attacking these local villages."

"Right." Sigrún had already heard as much from Yuuto. She nodded, signaling for Alrekr to continue.

"Judging by the locations of the villages that were attacked, and by the direction the bandits went as they left each time, we figure that their hideout should be somewhere around this area." Alrekr used his index finger to trace a circle around one spot on the map. It was north of Fort Gnipahellir, in the vicinity of Mount Éljúðnir.

Sigrún replied without looking at Alrekr, her eyes still focused on the map. "If you know that much, couldn't you have just sent out a punitive force right away?"

"Believe me, that's what we'd like to do. However..." Grimacing, Alrekr dragged his finger to the right on the map, pointing out an area to the east.

It was an area of territory within the Wolf Clan's sphere of influence, but not under the clan's direct control and governance.

"Hmm. Botvid?" Sigrún's brow furrowed, and she took on an

uncharacteristically gloomy expression.

The Claw Clan patriarch, Botvid, was a conniving man known as “the Pit Viper” among the other clans in the region. And, of course, he was also the biological father of the twins Albertina and Kristina.

Alrekr nodded meekly. “Yes. I might just be overthinking this, but I still wonder if he might be connected to these brigands behind the scenes. I cannot shake the worry that this is a ploy, and the instant our garrison troops leave the fort behind to go after the bandits, it might be taken from us again...”

The Wolf and Claw Clans had established an alliance via the Chalice of Allegiance, and in Yggdrasil, the Oath of the Chalice was an absolute vow.

Additionally, Yuuto and Botvid had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice under the mediation of the goði Alexis, a representative of the divine emperor. Their ceremony had been of the highest formality and gravity.

Under normal circumstances, breaking that oath and invading one’s sworn ally was something completely unthinkable. But that was just how untrustworthy Alrekr found Botvid to be as a person.

And that perception wasn’t limited to just Alrekr; it was a common opinion among the people of the Wolf Clan.

It was a natural reaction, for Botvid had stolen away Wolf Clan territory by deceiving the previous patriarch Fárbauti, and then had secretly forged a three-clan alliance, using their allied army to push the Wolf Clan to the brink of destruction in what had become the Siege of Iárnviðr.

Those two incidents in succession had etched Botvid into the memories of everyone in the Wolf Clan, to the point where the name Botvid had become synonymous with “someone who can’t be trusted.”

“I see. And so that’s why you requested Father send you reinforcements.” Sigrún nodded, satisfied with Alrekr’s explanation.

According to what she’d heard from Yuuto, the bandits were organized, and there was likely a sizable quantity of them.

There were only about one hundred soldiers permanently stationed at Fort

Gnipahellir, which was indeed not enough to go after them and still take the potential threat from the Claw Clan into account.

“Right, I understand,” she said. “The Múspell Special Forces Unit will take care of the bandit affair. You and your men stay here, and focus on the defense of the fort.”

“We will now begin the investigation of the area around Mount Éljúðnir! Search for the bandit hideout!” Sigrún mounted her horse and gave the command with a forward wave of her hand.

“Yes, ma’am!!” Her mounted soldiers replied loudly and with vigor, then split off in all directions.

“Around Mount Éljúðnir” was actually quite a wide area to cover, so Sigrún had her troops split into four main groups, then split up the search area among themselves.

Each group was about fifty men, and according to testimony from the villagers who were attacked, the bandits had raided in groups of about thirty. So, there should be more than enough soldiers to handle anything they ran into.

The climate had also turned in their favor. The snow that had been falling since the day before yesterday had finally stopped that morning, and the sky above was a pure, clear blue, with the sunlight shining softly down on the area. It was the perfect day for a hunt.

“All right, we should get going, too.” Sigrún looked around at the remaining soldiers that surrounded her.

The group she led was composed mainly of trainees, and was full of young faces.

Because Sigrún’s primary mission was to be responsible for maintaining security in the palace back in the capital, normally the training and guidance for rookies was always left up to her deputy commander Bömburr. So this was as good a chance as any. She could see for herself the base skill level of these trainees, something it behooved her to know as their commander.

“We’ll be in charge of the area partway up the slope of Mount Éljúðnir,” she said. “It’s the likeliest candidate location for the enemy hideout, so there’s an

extremely high chance we'll see combat. Stay sharp at all times. On the battlefield, those who let their guard down die first!"

"Yes, ma'am!!"

The voices that shouted back to Sigrún were tense, but brimming with youthful energy that was straightforward and honest.

She nodded satisfactorily in response, then pulled on the reins and spun her horse around.

"Sigrún Unit, move out!"

Mount Éljúðnir was located about half a day's march north on foot from Fort Gnipahellir, and was one of the peaks that made up the range known as the Himinbjörg Mountains.

The Sigrún Unit made it to the foot of the mountain in about two hours on horseback. Further up, the steep slope of Mount Éljúðnir was thickly crowded with the skeletons of trees that had dropped their leaves, with barely an animal trail winding between them. It didn't look feasible to ascend the mountain on their horses.

So they left their horses, along with some silver, with a village at the foot of the mountain, and hired someone familiar with the mountain's terrain as a guide.

"Bandits? Ohhh yeah, that group that's been living on the mountain since around summertime," said their guide. "They just showed up and started saying things like, 'This is our turf!' and hogging all of the mountain's resources for themselves. They're causing us no end of trouble, you know."

"Sounds like we hit the mark," Sigrún said. "All right, then, take us to where they sleep."

"Aye!"

Sigrún and her group of trainees followed their young guide as he led them toward the bandit hideout.

As they walked, he explained that until recently, the mountain bandits had been sustaining themselves by hunting game and eating the fruits and wild

plants that grew there. But once autumn passed and winter set in, perhaps the lack of food had pushed them towards starting to raid the nearby villages.

It was actually a very common occurrence in Yggdrasil. Still, that didn't mean it could be ignored or forgiven.

"It's over there," their guide said.

Around the time the sun had started its westward descent, the young village guide stopped and pointed ahead. Away and down below, on a section of slope that was more gently angled, there were a couple of small huts lined up together in a sort of settlement.

Sigrún's extraordinary eyesight was able to pick out a number of people who looked to be residents. It seemed that she'd gotten lucky; they weren't out attacking some other village at the moment.

"We can get them all in one fell swoop. Wonderful."

As the Strongest Silver Wolf set her sights on the prey she'd been hunting, she whispered those words in a voice that was both calm and deadly fierce.

Suddenly and without warning, a beautiful and gallant voice rang out through the settlement like a peal of thunder.

"Hear me, bandit scum! I am Sigrún, the sworn daughter of the great Lord Yuuto and commander of his Múspell Special Forces!"

The startled bandits turned in the direction of the voice to see a girl of unmatched beauty, long silver hair tied roughly behind her, standing at the head of a formation of soldiers.

They instantly erupted into a chaotic commotion.

"Wh-what... what's going on?!"

"D-did she just say her name was Sigrún? Then doesn't that mean... she's the Mánagarmr?!"

"No way, th-then, those guys behind her, could they be the Múspell Unit?!"

"Idiot, she just said they were!"

"Whoa, whoa, wait, what the hell is the strongest group in the whole Wolf

Clan doing out here?!”

The bandits were completely panicked. And that was only natural.

The Mánagarmr Sigrún and her special cavalry unit were feared and famous for their elite skills. In the past, they had easily routed Claw Clan forces led by Botvid, captured the Horn Clan patriarch Linnea, defeated and killed the Hoof Clan patriarch Yngvi, and driven off the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr.

The bandits had gotten their share of practice with the bow and spear hunting the beasts of the mountain for their survival over the past half a year. They were confident that they might be able to go toe-to-toe with the soldiers currently stationed in Fort Gnipahellir.

However, none of them had dared imagine that a division of troops that was practically a legend would come find them *here*, halfway up a mountain in the middle of nowhere.

“If you throw down your weapons immediately, then in accordance with the laws set by my father, your lives will be spared,” Sigrún declared. “But if you resist, I will show no mercy. I will cut every single one of you down!”

She finished with another shout that shook the air, her voice beautiful yet sharp, just like a blade.

“Wh-what do we do, huh?!”

“Sh-she said if we give up now, she’ll let us live, right?”

As the frightened and agitated bandits began to consider surrender, there was one man who didn’t lose composure, who stood firm and sneering.

“Hmph! It’s only one little girl! What are you all so scared of?”

He was huge. He was at least a head or two taller than every other bandit there. He still looked young, perhaps in his early twenties, and he had the face of a man who wasn’t afraid of anything. Actually, he looked quite comfortable in this situation.

“B-Boss!” one of the bandits shouted.

“Y-you say that, Boss, but how are we supposed to win against them?”

“Yeah, that’s the Wolf Clan special forces, Boss, the Múspell Unit!”

“Ha! What a load of bull. Take a closer look!”

The huge man the others had called their boss pointed a finger at Sigrún, then at the soldiers behind her.

“Look at ’em. They’re all just kids. Even their faces look stiff, like they’re fresh meat. Do those really look like elite soldiers to you?”

“N-now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“And that silver-haired girl in charge of them looks all slender, too,” another bandit put in. “She doesn’t look built for combat at all.”

“Right?” the boss sneered. “And besides, even if they *are* the Múspell Unit, wasn’t our objective from the start always to take down the Wolf Clan? We were gonna end up fighting these guys eventually, either way. It was just a matter of whether it happened sooner or later! So don’t stand there shaking in your boots!”

With a shout, the bandits’ boss slammed his fist into the wall of the hut with all his might.

With that one strike, cracks burst out in all directions along the side of the wall, followed by a strained creaking sound, until at last, the whole building toppled in on itself. It was an incredible strength beyond what should be capable of a normal human.

“A-amazing!” exclaimed one bandit.

“Y-yeah, that’s right, we’ve got the Boss with us!”

“Yeah, there’s nobody in the world who could win against the Boss!”

“And now that I look at ’em, they’ve got about the same number of people as we do!”

“Right! Plus we’ve got the Boss on our side. There’s no way we can’t win this!”

The pale expressions of fear vanished from the bandits’ faces, abruptly replaced by anticipation and excitement.

As they grew more confident and excited, shouting at each other to raise their fighting spirits, their Boss looked at them with a confident and satisfied grin.

On his right shoulder, a red symbol shined brightly.

“Oh? Seems like they intend to fight back.”

Sigrún’s eyes widened, and she did not conceal her slight surprise as she watched the bandits scramble around inside the fence-enclosed settlement, assuming defensive positions and pulling out their bows.

She had been sure they would surrender to her... and she was happy to learn she’d miscalculated.

“Rejoice, greenhorns, for the time for battle has come!” she called. “I will show you all firsthand how to fight as a knight of the Múspell Unit!”

“Yeaahhhhh!!” A unified cheer rose up from the ranks of her soldiers.

They were all hot-blooded types to begin with, the kind who would aspire to join the ranks of the Sigrún family, the most militant faction of the Wolf Clan. And after having been made to march through snow and wind all day yesterday, then made to climb halfway up this frozen mountain today, they’d built up plenty of stress along with their fatigue.

This was the perfect place to run wild and blow off that pent-up frustration, just what they had all been longing for.

“Raise your shields,” Sigrún ordered. “Keep your eyes wide open. Don’t be afraid. Remember what you practiced every day. Right now, all of you *are* the Múspell Unit. Show me a battle that won’t disgrace that name. I won’t forgive anything less.”

Sigrún looked her trainees in the eyes and spoke to them in the simple, matter-of-fact tone she always used with them. That flat, unchanging attitude was what made her such a dependable leader to them. It demonstrated just how undaunted and resolute she was as a general on the field.

She was like a beautiful valkyrie out of a myth, and in the past year, she had achieved so many incredible victories in succession.

The young soldiers could believe that, as long as she commanded them, there

was no way they could lose.

And so, they could charge into the enemy without any hesitation.

“Good eyes. You look ready.” Sigrún raised her arm and took a deep breath. “Múspell Unit, charge!”

“Yeaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!!”

With a loud war cry, the Múspell soldiers surged downhill from their position at a full run, then up the opposing slope toward the bandit settlement.

The bandits took advantage of that critical moment, and let fly a volley of arrows all at once.

They fired again. And again, and again.

But the Múspell Unit did not falter.

They pressed on singlemindedly. They blocked some of the incoming arrows with their shields, still others they cut aside with their swords, and those few they failed to parry deflected off of their light iron armor.

A mere moment later they had made it through the downpour of arrows, and rushed like an uphill avalanche toward the collection of bandit huts.

Everything had gone well until that point, but soon the charging soldiers lost their momentum.

It was because of the deep ditch and tall fence surrounding the settlement proper. It limited the possible entryways, bottlenecking them so that only the few in front could clash with the enemy directly.

“Forward! Keep pressing forward!” Sigrún shouted at her fighters from the rear ranks, urging them on.

In a normal battle, Sigrún would have been at the head of the charge, cutting a path into the enemy. But this time, she felt that training the recruits with the experience of a real battle was more important, and so she was focusing on giving them tactical commands.

Still, the enemy was just a rabble of measly mountain bandits.

Her soldiers might be trainees, and they might be young. But, in preparation

for the life of a soldier fighting day after day, they had devoted themselves to intensive drills and training day after day.

She had been certain they'd quickly force their way through the bottleneck and secure the entranceway to the base. However, that didn't seem to be the case at all.

"What's going on?! Why are you struggling against mere bandits?!" Sigrún shouted in a mix of admonition and confusion.

"Geh ha ha ha! *These* are supposed to be the fierce Múspell knights?! You're as tough as a loaf of soggy bread!" A thick, throaty laugh boomed from the crowded melee at the settlement's entrance.

In the next moment, Sigrún saw two of her soldiers get launched upwards into the air by someone's attack.

It would take an unbelievable amount of physical strength to send two armored, full-grown men flying like that. At the very least, there was no one in the Wolf Clan now, not even Sigrún, who could perform such a feat of pure strength.

To think there was someone like this among the bandits... for Sigrún, this was an unhappy miscalculation.

"This is a little too much for the rookies to handle," Sigrún muttered, and began to push aside her subordinates and move forward. "Move aside!"

She pushed her way through to the front, wondering all the while what sort of foe was waiting there.

Standing in the middle of the entryway was a huge, muscular man of a towering height. Something around his neck immediately caught her attention: a metal necklace that seemed to glow faintly, emitting an eerie, phosphorescent light.

It had to be made from the magical metal, álfkipfer. That would mark it as something incredibly rare and valuable. Sigrún wondered where he could have gotten it, or rather, where he'd stolen it from.

The next thing she noticed was the glowing rune on the huge man's right

shoulder, and she snorted in mild surprise.

“Heh. I never would have guessed I’d run into one of my own kind out in a desolate place like this.”

“So the general finally makes her appearance!” the man called. “Ha! I don’t care if you’re a woman! If you face me in battle, I won’t hold anything back!”

The towering man raised high the axe in his right hand, then brought it down with incredible force, enough to slice audibly through the air as it plummeted towards Sigrún. It was obviously much harder and sharper than the weapons of the other bandits.

“Haah!!” Sigrún whirled her spear around, swinging upwards to meet his attack.

Their weapons clashed and were both deflected, having seemingly met with equal power behind them.

A downward strike channeled power more easily than an upward one. However, Sigrún was wielding her weapon with both arms, while her opponent was only using the one. It did indeed look like there was an undeniable gap in physical strength between them.

Without pausing, the bandit boss followed up with an axe in his left hand, swinging at her in a wide, horizontal arc.

Sigrún leapt backwards and dodged the sweeping blade, but her back collided with one of her soldiers.

A more experienced member of her forces would have already known what to do in this situation, but these trainees were still beginners in that respect.

“Men, fall back a bit,” she ordered. “This one’s too much for you cubs to handle. I’ll deal with him.”

“Oy, you boys back off, too. I’m taking care of her myself.” The hulking Einherjar bandit waved away his compatriots as well, having seemingly acknowledged Sigrún’s strength.

The fewer they are in number, the greater the presence of the truly strong sets them apart from others.

On one side was a group of Múspell special forces that was almost entirely trainees.

On the other, a group of cowardly bandits who had only trained themselves against the animals of the mountains.

One could say the two Einherjar and their combat prowess stood out far too much by comparison.

They had only crossed blades in one exchange. But that one exchange had been plenty.

“So instead of dual swords, you use dual axes,” Sigrún commented. “Interesting.”



“So you’re the Mánagarmr,” the man said. “Looks like the rumors aren’t crap, after all. Didn’t think a slender little thing like you would be able to parry one of my attacks.”

The two of them had quickly ascertained each other’s strength, and both had chosen to pull back their troops in order to minimize casualties while they faced each other one-on-one. It was, in some ways, the inevitable outcome.

“Take that, and that, and that!!”

“Mgh! Khh! Hah!”

The battle between the two of them began with a very one-sided exchange.

The towering Einherjar unloaded consecutive, pummeling blows with his two axes, and Sigrún did nothing but defend against them as best she could.

Each individual strike was massively powerful on its own, and they assaulted her rapidly and without pause. It was no wonder that even the holder of the title of Strongest Silver Wolf was forced into a fully defensive state, and all who were witnessing her battle concluded as much.

“Impressive,” Sigrún said, as she parried an axe slash arcing towards her from the right. “I never thought I’d find a man as strong as you out here by yourself, and on Wolf Clan territory.”

The huge Einherjar attacking her scoffed confidently. “What, are you so impressed you’re giving up already? I haven’t even used half of my full strength, you know!”

“Oh? Then I think you’d better hurry up and show me all of it. You wouldn’t want to regret losing the opportunity.”

“You impudent...! Urraaaaahhh!!” As the man howled, his wild attacks grew even faster.

“Oof! Whoa!” The attacks flew at her like a violent storm, and Sigrún’s eyes widened in amazement. “...But you’ve still got a ways to go.”

Clink! Sigrún timed her spear strike to *add* its force to the momentum of the axe, pulling her foe’s upper body off-balance.

She followed through with the spin of her spear, whirling it around to slam the butt of the haft hard into the big man's stomach.

"Ghh...!" He buckled over from the blow.

"Hmm, so that's how it works." Feeling the technique connect correctly, Sigrún nodded to herself in satisfaction.

It was the "willow technique," which the previous Mánagarmr had completed after many long years of practice. Thanks to Sigrún's amazing, even terrifying, talent in the martial arts, she had managed to perform the technique herself by imitating what she'd seen him do.

She whirled her spear around to point its deadly tip at the bandit leader. "Normally I'd finish you off right here, but it would be a bit of a shame to just kill off someone of your skill. Would you consider working for Father... for Patriarch Yuuto of the Wolf Clan?"

The man coughed a few more times, holding a hand to his stomach in pain, then snorted in laughter and picked himself up. "Haaa... Ha! You want me to work for a skinny little weak-looking man like that? I'll pass."

The faint trace of warmth that had been in Sigrún's expression vanished. A chilling aura poured forth from her, seeming to freeze the very air around them.

"Very well... In that case, I will give you a glimpse of what Father's strength looks like. It will be your parting gift to take to Valhalla."

Sigrún put a hand to the longer of the two curved swords at her waist, slowly pulling it free of its scabbard.

"Don't go getting cocky over one lucky hit!" The hulking Einherjar raised both arms up over his head.

He wasn't raising them in surrender, of course; he gripped an axe in each hand. The veins on his arms bulged as he summoned what must be an incredible amount of raw strength for the attack.

"GRRRAAAAAAGHHHHHH!!"

With a cry of fury he channeled all of his muscle strength, and all of his weight, into a downward, intersecting swing with both axes at once.

The attack was by far the fastest and strongest of anything he'd unleashed thus far.

But as the axe heads swung down toward Sigrún, her eyes no longer held any emotion, except perhaps something resembling boredom. She cut a single line with her blade, side to side quick as a flash, as if merely aiming at a target.

Just that one motion.

There was the unique sound of something sharp tumbling through the air, followed by a heavy *thunk* as it landed, sticking itself into the hard ground.

Those with especially discerning ears might have been able to tell that it was actually the sound of *two* objects hitting the ground, nearly simultaneously.

Both of the bandit leader's axes had been cut in two, sliced clean off at the head. They were now as useless as sticks, unable to threaten her.

"Hmph. You rely too much on raw muscle strength," Sigrún said with a smirk. "Your stance is too wide, and you use big motions for your attacks. That's fine if you're fighting small fry, but it's not going to work against someone with good practice and technique."

This man had dared to publicly insult her beloved sworn father. She needed to put him in his place.

"And this, right here, is one of the many weapons created by my father Lord Yuuto Suoh, who you so foolishly mocked. It is the *nihontou*, a sword which can cut through even iron. Your iron axes are nothing but trinkets by comparison."

She brought the curved blade back around and thrust it toward the large man, angled so that it glimmered in the sunlight.

Technically speaking, Yuuto himself had not forged that blade. It was a replacement Ingrid had forged for her when she had lost her first one during the climax of her fight with the Lightning Clan patriarch, Steinþórr.

Still, even though she'd only just begun using it, it already felt familiar, and seemed to fit her hand perfectly.

One could expect no less from the famed master craftsman Ingrid, wielder of the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades. She had indeed poured every ounce of her

strength and spirit into forging it for Sigrún. It was a blade for her, and only her.

“Grrr... Tch!” With a vexed click of his tongue, the bandit leader turned on his heels and began to flee.

He moved with a quickness that would be hard to imagine from just looking at his bulky build. It seemed that even this overconfident braggart of a man wasn’t arrogant enough to think himself capable of beating Sigrún without a weapon.

“Hmph, now it’s time I showed you the Múspell Unit’s signature tactic!” Sigrún raised her hand and shouted, “Fire the signal arrow!”

Immediately, in practiced response to her command, a soldier behind her fired an arrow that emitted a loud, screeching whistle as it flew off to the right hand side of the settlement.

“Raaaaaaaghhh!!” A war cry rose up from within the trees in that direction.

Suddenly, twenty or so lightly-armored soldiers emerged, charging towards the settlement at top speed. But the bandits had all clustered themselves close to the main entrance to meet the initial assault, and so they didn’t have anyone near the other gateway.

It was the Hammer and Anvil tactic, the Wolf Clan’s winning strategy. An attack by well-armored infantry was used to pull the attention and attacks of the enemy forward in response, leaving them open to an attack from the flanks or rear by another, more highly mobile group.

“All right, men, forward!” Sigrún called. “We’ll break through, as well!”

“Yeaaahhhhhh!!”

Sigrún raised her sword up high, and her frontal assault team responded to her shout with a war cry of their own.

In a battle between large groups, the most important determiner of victory or defeat was morale.

In other words, winning was also a question of how to elevate the morale of one’s own fighters while tearing down that of the enemy.

The bandits had seen the towering Einherjar who was their commander suffer a clear defeat, unable to fight back any further, and now a surprise attack from

another group of Wolf Clan soldiers had left them without any route of retreat.

They quickly fell into a state of abject panic. They were now nothing more than a disorderly mob.

The scales of the battle tipped decisively, and Múspell soldiers poured through the fence and into the settlement, securing the exits and subduing the bandits.

At last, Sigrún and her soldiers cornered the defeated Einherjar at one end of the bandit encampment.

“That’s as far as you go,” she declared.

Behind the man was a steep precipice plunging down for a great distance.

“I’ll give you one last chance. Surrender.”

“Khh...” Gritting his teeth, the man took one step backward. As he did, his foot brushed a small rock over the edge, and it went tumbling down the nearly vertical cliff face with a dry clatter.

Half of his back foot was already hanging over thin air.

“If you apologize sincerely for insulting my father, I might be inclined to spare you.”

“Heh! I’m not gonna bow my head to anyone!” With that boastful declaration, the hulking man kicked off the ground and leapt into the air...

...backward.

He hung in mid-air for only an instant, as the laws of nature ran their course, and he quickly plummeted downwards.

“Ah!” For the first time since arriving at this mountain, Sigrún grimaced bitterly at her mistake, and she ran to the edge of the cliff and looked down.

Partway down, the man had grabbed the branch of a small tree growing out of the steep cliffside, but it soon snapped under his weight, and he fell again.

Still, that was enough reduce the momentum of his fall by a decent amount, and though his body slammed hard into the ground below, he was able to get unsteadily to his feet after a moment, and he started to stagger away.

“Tch! I can’t afford to let him escape,” Sigrún muttered.

That huge oaf of an Einherjar was still immature as a fighter because he was too caught up in doing everything his own way. But she could tell he had plenty of innate talent and potential. With time and the right experiences, he might transform into something incredible.

If she allowed him to make his escape as he was now, still holding a deep grudge, then eventually he might become a true threat to the Wolf Clan.

And more than anything, Yuuto had ordered her to eradicate the bandits. Allowing their commander, the most crucial of these criminals, to escape was an absolutely inexcusable failure. There was no way she could bear to return to Yuuto with such a report.

“Give me a spear!” she called.

Sigrún had dropped her own spear earlier during the duel at the entrance, so she grabbed one somewhat forcefully from one of the trainees. Then she flung herself over the cliff’s edge.

“Ahhhh!!” screamed one of her soldiers.

“Commander?!”

The trainees shouted in surprise bordering on fright, but Sigrún could spot the few places on the cliffside where jutting rock could serve as footholds, and she kicked off of them as she dropped down, reducing her momentum.

It was one more impressive feat by the prodigy who had seized the title of Mánagarmr at her young age.

She ended the descent by thrusting the spear into the ground to kill the rest of her momentum, then righted herself and dropped lightly to the ground.

“Whaaat?!”

The fleeing Einherjar was downright pitiable. He surely hadn’t thought this woman would actually pursue him off a cliff. His face was all shock and awe.

And that wasn’t all. He had jumped off in an all-or-nothing gamble, resolving to receive injuries and even risk death, but she had made it down without so much as a bump or scratch.

The man’s pride finally crumbled. He despaired, wondering how he could have acted so tough before. There was no way he could win against a monster like her!

“A-ahh... Aaaagghhhh!” He screamed in terror and took off running, with no trace of shame or honor.

Sigrún was not one of the knights of the Middle Ages, with their codes of chivalry that demanded only fighting an opponent head-on.

She was a warrior — in essence, someone who survived on the battlefield.

And on the battlefield, one did not show mercy to an enemy just because he was facing the other way.

No, actually, that was the best chance to pursue and attack them from behind. Letting such a chance go to waste would be absurd.

Her enemy had already sustained some injuries from his fall. Catching up to him was easy.

“Ha!” Once she had him within range, she slashed once, cutting down diagonally from his right shoulder, then cycled into a follow-up slash from above his left shoulder, striking him down.

“Guah!” With an anguished cry, his large body toppled. His feet slipped out from under him, and he rolled away from her down the steep mountain slope.

After a moment there was a loud splash, telling Sigrún that the man’s body must have tumbled into the river below.

“Tch. Damn.” As the river came into view, Sigrún looked down and could see the bright red “X” shaped wound on the man’s back just above the surface of the water, as the river current carried him away. “I’m... not going to be able to catch up with him now.”

She could see how fast and fierce the river’s current was. In the space of only a few seconds, the bandit leader’s body grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

She’d managed to deal him a heavy wound, and he’d fallen into the water in this freezing weather. It was safe to say there was almost no real possibility that

he would survive. But the inconclusive way things had ended still bothered her.

Sigrún sighed. “I suppose I also have a long way to go.”

Reflecting on this, she sheathed her sword and returned to the landing point where the spear was still stuck in the ground.

“Commander! Are you all right?!” The voice of one of the trainees called to her from far above.

Looking up, she could see the tiny faces of her soldiers huddled over the cliff edge, looking down at her worriedly.

She pulled the spear out of the earth and shouted back up to them. “Yeah, I’m fine, no problems. More importantly, even I won’t be able to climb all the way back up this cliff by myself. Take some of the bandits’ blankets or clothes, and use them to make a rope long enough to lower down here.”

“Understood, ma’am!” The people above moved into action.

Sigrún took a long, deep breath.

And that was when it happened.

Every single hair on her body stood on end, and before Sigrún could think, she had already taken a fighting stance, spear raised and at the ready.

Slowly, ploddingly, its figure emerged from behind the trees.

“GRRRRRR...!!” The force of the figure’s deep growl reverberated to Sigrún’s very core.

The first thing she took notice of were its bright, crimson eyes, which seemed to glow like embers blazing with wild and murderous intent.

Next, she noticed its ash-grey fur.

It was exactly the same color as the fur mantle she wore, the one handed down to each successive bearer of the title Mánagarmr, “The Strongest Silver Wolf.”

She took in its massive size, large enough to equal a full-grown lion or tiger.

“It’s a garmr!” she yelled.

“GRR... GHAAAAAAGGHHH!!”

And with a roar that made Sigrún shudder, the giant wolf leapt towards her.

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“To think you’d be this strong...” Sigrún muttered.

This beast which had managed to completely corner her was known as a garmr. Its name roughly meant “greatest among wolves” in the language of Yggdrasil, and it was a species of giant wolf that was among the largest known predators on the continent, said to only inhabit the Himinbjörg Mountains.

A full-grown adult could weigh well over 300 barr, or 150 kilograms, and boasted unequaled strength, enough to damage and knock over trees. Despite that, it could also dash and maneuver with extreme agility that seemed unimaginable for a creature so large.

Defeating one of these ferocious beasts was considered one of the highest marks of honor for a warrior of Yggdrasil. And that high honor reflected just how difficult a feat it was to accomplish.

The standard practice was to bring along a group of a few dozen soldiers for the hunt, beginning by launching arrows or spears from a distance, and only move in to fight once it had been weakened.

Fighting an unharmed garmr one-on-one would be considered absurd, even suicidal.

However, by accident, that was exactly the hopeless situation Sigrún was now in.

“GRRR...”

With slow, heavy steps, the garmr paced a circle around Sigrún, and she slowly rotated her own body to keep facing it.

Suddenly, the garmr quickly jumped in the opposite direction.

Sigrún’s eyes had grown accustomed to following its slower movements, so it seemed all the more fast by comparison. Her reaction lagged by just a bit.

She hurriedly turned and slashed with her sword in that direction at the same time. She swung before even seeing if the garmr was there.

She would have been too late if she had relied on following it with her eyes. So she had followed her gut, thanks to the extraordinary intuition bestowed upon her by her rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon.

Still, the garmr evaded even this counter with split-second timing by jumping over it, and came down at her in yet another leap attack.

“Kh!” With a grunt, Sigrún quickly leapt to the side and let the initial attack pass her by, then retreated a pace while throwing out another countering slash as a deterrent.

The garmr, which had already begun its next attack, used its powerful front legs to bring itself to a sudden stop.

“Haah!” Seeing this brief pause as an opportunity, Sigrún darted forward and unleashed a powerful vertical slash from a high overhead stance.

It was a serious attack with all of her strength behind it, executed with perfect form.

But the garmr was far swifter.

With lightning speed, it hopped to the side and evaded the downward swing, then took advantage of the brief opening and lunged at Sigrún once more.

She just barely managed to catch its oncoming claws with the flat of her blade, but the incredible momentum and weight behind the attack was too much for even Sigrún’s strength.

At this rate, she would be pushed to the ground, and that would be the end.

“Hup!” She managed to redirect the force with her willow technique, then immediately followed up with a wide horizontal slash.

But even that didn’t so much as graze the beast. In a flash, the garmr leapt backwards out of Sigrún’s range.

“At this rate, I’m just going to get worn down bit by bit,” she muttered gravely. There was just too much of a difference in their overall physical abilities.

It honestly felt like fighting the man known as the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

Her foe was not only terrifyingly fast in its movements, but could react to her attacks with unbelievable quickness, perhaps owing to wild instinct. The result was that Sigrún had yet to land even a single attack on the garmr.

The injury to her thigh she'd sustained in the first exchange was also painful for her, though not in the literal sense.

The wound itself wasn't that deep, and posed no threat to her life on its own. She could easily tolerate the physical pain, but the injury hindered her movement, which was far more difficult to bear. Against this beast, even a tiny delay in movement could potentially prove fatal.

She was managing to evade its attacks by a hair's breadth right now, but she honestly wasn't confident she could keep that up much longer.

"But even so, I can't afford to die here," Sigrún whispered to herself, then calmed herself and focused on her breathing.

In moments of greatest crisis, one must keep the mind cold and sharp, like a honed blade. An agitated mind will only lose sight of the path to survival. That was the wisdom of the warrior that she could always turn to.

"I'm still only partway through my training in this, but I suppose it's all I've got."

Sigrún jumped backwards and put some more distance between her and the great wolf. Then she deftly returned the *nihontou* to its scabbard, and lowered herself slightly with her sword hand still on the hilt.

It was the stance of *iai*, a uniquely Japanese traditional sword style seen nowhere else in the world.

"GRR..."

With heavy steps, the garmr began to close the distance.

It was only a beast, after all. It had seen Sigrún's sheathing of her weapon as a simple opportunity to attack.

It continued to approach, and stepped at last within the range of her strike—

—and immediately took a great leap backward.

“Heh, so you were able to sense my lethal intent in your own beastly way, eh?” The corner of Sigrún’s mouth pulled upward in a fierce smirk, her face beading with sweat from the tension.

If the beast had continued to step forward into her range, she’d had every intention of unleashing a fatal attack that truly was as quick as a flash of lightning.

And it seemed that the garmr had been able to sense that from her somehow. It now began to quickly make weaving jumps left and right, back and forth, feeling Sigrún out for an opening.

It did all of this just outside of her attack reach.

But however swiftly the monster maneuvered, it was doing so in a fixed circle around her at a distance. All she had to do was keep turning to face it head-on, and she wouldn’t lose sight of it.

Sigrún breathed, long and deep. Quietly, deliberately, she refined and sharpened the killing intent within herself, the blade in her heart and mind, and through her silent glare, she thrust its tip at the garmr.

“GURR! GAAGHHH!” The great wolf roared back at her in a clearly threatening manner.

In other words, it now felt threatened *by* Sigrún. It was unable to make itself attack her, and completely unsure of what to do.

That was exactly what she was aiming for.

Iai was not a technique for killing the enemy.

It was a technique that relied on the power of an indomitable mind and soul, refined and tempered a hundred times over, to intimidate and overpower the enemy with sheer presence and drive them away without having to fight.

Back around the time when Yuuto had been arranging to formally ally with the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid and take him as a sworn younger brother, Sigrún had humbly but clearly expressed her opposition to the idea. It was then that Yuuto had taught her this core mystery of *iai*.

“I’m sure you don’t understand human words,” Sigrún said to the beast, in a low, chilly tone, “but... if you leave now, I won’t follow you.”

She bore no grudge against the animal. Certainly, defeating a garmr in battle was an achievement of the highest order for a warrior, but she held no particular interest in such things.

Her sword, her Chalice oath, her body and heart, everything she was, she had already pledged to Yuuto, her sworn father.

She had carried out her father’s orders and eradicated the bandits. So her utmost priority now was to make it off this mountain alive and in one piece.

Putting it the other way around, even if she defeated the garmr and gained glory, if doing so cost her an injury somewhere on her body that hindered her future ability to be useful to her father in battle, that would be the same as utter defeat for her.

Thus, there would be no greater victory for her right now than to avoid further combat by getting this beast to leave her alone.

However, it seemed like that wouldn’t be so easy.

“GRRR! GRRRRRGH!”

The garmr lowered its head and bent forward with its back raised, indicating it had no intention whatsoever of backing down.

Just what was driving the beast so fiercely? Was it hunger? Its pride and honor as a great wolf, the apex predator? Or was it merely conceit, a stubborn insistence even now that it could surely defeat Sigrún with ease?

“There’s no point in thinking about it now,” Sigrún muttered dispassionately. If the creature would not back down, she had no other choice but to fight.

The garmr, greatest among wolves, and the Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf. Only one of them would leave here alive.

In which case, all that was left was for her to put everything into this one strike.

For a few moments, the two wolves simply continued to glare at each other.

“...!” Suddenly, Sigrún’s sixth sense picked up on something, a rising tension from the garmr. In the next instant, the creature kicked off with its back legs into a charge.

Sigrún felt the instinctive urge to unsheathe her blade, and resisted it with all her might.

Not yet. It was too soon. If she didn’t wait for it to draw closer, it would be able to dodge out of the way again with its incredible reaction speed.

The great beast’s open jaw, its pointed fangs, grew ever closer.

Strangely, they seemed to be approaching almost in slow motion.

In reality, it was an interval less than a single second.

But to Sigrún, it felt maddeningly long.

At long last, the garmr’s enormous frame moved fully within the range of her technique, her domain.

“*Hah!!*” With a shout that carried the full destructive spirit of her all-or-nothing attack, Sigrún set free her blade.

Something felt different, different than anything before.

Her body didn’t feel like it was moving as it usually did. It felt slow, sluggish.

The air around her felt thick and heavy.

It was almost like she was moving through water.

However, contrary to her perception, in reality Sigrún wasn’t moving slowly at all. Indeed, as she struck, her body moved faster than it ever had before.

Sigrún’s intense concentration, sharpened and focused to a fine point, had caused her mind’s perception of time to speed up dramatically.

At last, she felt the edge of her sword meet with greater resistance.

It was cutting through the flesh of the garmr, the creature she had until now been unable to scratch.

Sigrún put just a little bit more power into the hand gripping the sword. Just a little bit more, not too much.

More than raw force, she focused all of her consciousness on cutting cleanly at the correct angle, her sword's tip tracing the path of the ideal arc through and beyond her target.

Precisely, without the slightest waver in angle, deliberately, carefully, carefully.

The instant she fully completed the stroke, Sigrún's consciousness reverted from its quickened state, and the time around her sped up to normal.

A red line streaked across the garmr's chest, then hot red blood sprayed violently from the newly opened wound.

I did it.

For an instant, Sigrún was certain of her victory.

"GRRAAAAAAAUUUGHHH!!"

"Wha—?!" Sigrún was shocked.

She had felt her blade strike true. Despite that, the garmr was still alive and breathing, and as it let out a furious roar, its sharp claws plunged toward her.

Once again, Sigrún's consciousness sped up. However, her physical body did not speed up to match.

She was wide open after a full swing of her sword, and wouldn't be able to pull the blade back for a returning slash in time.

Images flashed through the back of her mind, various memories of Yuuto smiling—

No, I can't die here!

Her heart screamed those words, and without thinking, Sigrún's left hand darted to the other sword at her waist and drew it.

It was the blade that had saved her life many times now, the very *nihontou* that Yuuto had forged for her himself!

And now, that sword ended up protecting her once again.

There was a hard, loud *clang!* as the sword of her father, still only halfway out of its scabbard, intercepted the garmr's claws.

The impact nearly threw Sigrún backward, but she managed to plant her feet and hold steady.

It seemed the *iai* strike had significantly weakened her foe. If that attack had been at the creature's full strength, she would have surely been thrown backward, just as she had been at the beginning of the fight.

"Haaaaaaaah!!"

Summoning the remainder of her strength, Sigrún let out a howling cry and brought back her right arm to strike down with the sword forged by Ingrid, right into the great wolf's skull—

—and with that, the beast breathed its last.

"Haah... haah... haah..." Her breathing ragged, Sigrún kept her sword held at the ready as she looked down at the fallen garmr.

The most important thing in battle was to maintain the mind's awareness and readiness, even in victory.

The garmr's head lay sideways on the ground right in front of her, its fur stained deeply red. There was no longer any light in its eyes.

"Whew..." Finally fully sure the beast was dead, Sigrún exhaled and dropped out of her combat stance, and returned her weapon to its scabbard.

A second later, fatigue washed over her whole body like a wave. If one only considered the time that had elapsed, the fight hadn't lasted all that long. But the terror of death, and the extreme level of mental focus required, had extracted a heavy cost on her body and mind.

"Somehow, I managed to survive..." she murmured, half in wonder herself. It had truly been a narrow victory, decided at the very last second. Even a tiny mistake or slip up at any point would have led to Sigrún's body lying lifeless in the snow instead.

She had only won due to good luck. That, and...

Sigrún slowly unsheathed the sword forged by Yuuto, and held it up to reflect the sunlight. "Once again, Father saved me."

The blade had been with her through so many intense battles, and yet still

remained so beautiful and pristine that looking at it gave her goosebumps.

Of course, that was in part because she sharpened it and fully maintained it after every battle, but even so, she was awed by the strength and hardness of the steel.

She found herself to be so unrefined and incomplete by comparison.

“Iai means not cutting down others and not being cut down by others;

Know that not having to act is victory.

Iai means not cutting down others and not being cut down by others;

Victory by killing another means you have lost.

Iai means not cutting down others and not being cut down by others;

Hold yourself to account, that you may walk a peaceful road.

Iai is like a scrubbing sponge, porous and empty.

If you have drawn, then kill, if not, then do not;

That the sword is meant only to kill is what is important.”

Yuuto had taught Sigrún this poem which spelled out the teachings of *iai*.

She had failed to take control of the situation without fighting, and thus she was still lacking.

If her beloved father Yuuto had been in the same situation, he would have used his unique and incredibly powerful spirit to overpower the garmr’s will and force it to yield to him.

If it had been Steinþórr, he would have demonstrated to the garmr through battle the overwhelming difference in strength between it and the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir. The great wolf would perhaps have fled, seeing no possible chance of victory.

In other words, Sigrún was still not on the same level as either of them.

Additionally, according to the principles of *iai*, once she had drawn her blade to strike, she was supposed to kill her foe in one blow, and she had failed to do that, as well.

She was still quite far from achieving the ideals of that style.

“However, thanks to you, I believe I was able to grow stronger by a step.” She faced the body of the garmr and bowed her head deeply. “Now I will be that much more useful to Father. You have my thanks. At the very least, may you rest in peace.”

Sigrún always paid her utmost respects to warriors that had fought with great bravery and strength, regardless of if they were friend or foe. That was part of her way of life.

That her foe had not been human did not make a difference.

She concluded her silent prayer, and scanned the area around her. “Now then, for the moment I should look for somewhere safe to rest.”

She had no way of knowing how long it would take for the others to rescue her, and she was also reaching the limits of her stamina. At minimum, she needed to find some shelter from the elements.

Luckily, there was a cave in one part of the rocky cliff nearby. She would be able to rest there, and would still be nearby and able to react easily when help came.

Her body heavy, Sigrún dragged herself over to the cave entrance and took a step inside.

As she did, she heard a faint, cute, whimpering sound, like that of a puppy, echoing off of the cave walls. The whimpering cries sounded feeble.

“I see... so that’s what it was,” she murmured.

This was the garmr’s den. There were five or so infant garmr puppies, their bodies huddled together.

Only one of them was whimpering; the rest weren’t moving at all.

They looked asleep... but looking closer, they weren’t breathing. They had most likely starved.

“Uuuu!” The last remaining puppy noticed the presence of someone other than its parent and let out a tiny, panicked growl, like a squeak.

A sour feeling spread through Sigrún’s heart. “I’m sorry. It was kill or be killed, but still... I’m sorry.”



She knelt down and scooped up the infant garmr in her arms, her eyes filled with pity and pained regret.

The puppy tried to resist her, but it lacked any strength to do so, partly because it was still an infant, but mainly because it was weak from starvation.

“Here... It’s not much, but it’s all I have.”

Sigrún unfastened the sheep’s stomach canteen from her belt and held it up to the baby garmr’s mouth.

The canteen contained goat’s milk, which was more nutritious than cow’s milk. More importantly, it was easy to digest, so it would be gentle enough for the puppy’s body to handle.

As the baby garmr cradled at her chest hungrily gulped down the milk, Sigrún felt a strange, inexplicable emotion within herself.

She had to protect this child. It was her responsibility as the one who had taken the life of its parent.

If she had been stronger, she would have been able to resolve the situation without killing, and the baby garmr would not have been left alone.

No, she thought, shaking her head. *In the end, that fight was unavoidable. The adult garmr was fighting for the life of its child, to feed it. It could never have chosen to yield.*

And no matter what the case, Sigrún wasn’t going to let herself be killed. There was nothing that could have been done.

But even with that knowledge, she was unable to completely put it behind her. The feeling in her heart would not disappear.

The baby garmr emptied the last of the milk from the canteen, and with a whimper it licked Sigrún’s cheek, as if asking for more. “Kuuuuun.”

Apparently by feeding it she had alleviated some of its fear, and it had developed some small attachment to her. That, too, triggered a feeling of tightness in her chest, as if her heart was being squeezed.

“Your parent was a splendid warrior,” she said. “So you need to grow up to be

one too, just as strong and as proud. Until you do, I'll look after you."

She held the puppy under the shoulders of both front legs, and held it up in front of her.

Apparently, it was a boy.

Sigrún smiled, the kind of smile one makes while holding back tears.

"I guess I should give you a name. Hmm... how about Hildólfr? How does that sound?"

Interlude 3

After the carriage had passed out of Glaðsheimr's main city gates and traveled for some distance, it stopped, and Fagrahvél got out. He turned and bowed to the girl who now looked at him with a lonely sadness, in complete contrast to her earlier carefree excitement.

"Well, then, I shall take my leave," Fagrahvél said. "I wish you a safe journey, Lady Rífa."

"Y-you are sure you cannot come along?"

"I am sorry, Lady Rífa, but there are many things I must remain here to do, in order to conceal the truth of your absence."

"Y-yes, of course. Then there is nothing for it."

"Please rest assured, I will have Erna and Thír travel with you and guard you in my stead. Both women are capable Einherjar, so please feel free to ask anything of them that you might wish."

"Ohh, you have truly thought of everything... I shall never forget this debt of gratitude, Fagrahvél." Rífa was momentarily overcome with emotion, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I am unworthy of such kind words," he answered. "I only did what was natural and just as your retainer."

Rífa hesitated for a long moment before replying. "Please come to the wedding ceremony. The seat of highest honor will be reserved for you."

"Of course, Lady Rífa. I am sure you will look so beautiful in your bridal gown that even the gods in the heavens above would be smitten. There could be no greater prize than the honor of seeing that in person."

"If it were possible, I would have liked to take you as my groom, though."

"Please do not jest so," Fagrahvél reproved her. "Surely you know that I am not qualified to take your hand."

"Even so, compared to *that*, you are far more worthy."

Ríf a glowered hatefully as she nearly spit out the veiled reference to her groom-to-be. It was a moment of vulgarity unbecoming of a woman of such noble standing, and an indication of just how much disdain she held for her future husband.

Even so, she could not refuse this marriage, and it did not matter how she felt about it.

It was a political marriage.

“Well, though that one may well stake his claim to the sacred bloodline of the þjóðann this way, he must lay with such an ugly, worthless failure in order to do so, so we are equal in our misfortune,” Ríf a chuckled disdainfully.

“L-Lady Ríf a, that is not true! You are very much a woman of beauty and purity!” Fagrahvél raised his voice in protest.

Ríf a looked at Fagrahvél with both affection and envy in her eyes, and said, “Hearing those words from you only upsets me further. Well then, thank you for looking after me. Goodbye.”

ACT 3: Fly Me to the Moon

“All right, talk to you later, Mitsuki,” Yuuto said.

“Goodnight, Yuu-kun.” In a voice as soft as a whisper, Mitsuki Shimoya said goodbye to her childhood friend, and tapped the End Call icon on her smartphone’s touchscreen.

The room filled with silence, which gripped her heart with an inexpressible feeling of loneliness.

Mitsuki’s bedroom was cute and clean, with beige walls and pink curtains on the windows. Several stuffed animals, all cute wolves, sat in prominent positions on her bed and dresser.

There was one item in the room at odds with the otherwise feminine atmosphere: On top of her study desk lay an old, rusted antique mirror.

It was the divine mirror that had been enshrined in the altar of the Tsukimiya Shrine in the forest, the catalyst for Yuuto’s transportation to Yggdrasil.

Most parents wouldn’t allow a girl in middle school to go out late at night, and Mitsuki’s parents were no exception, but she had wanted to be able to stay in contact with Yuuto. So, she had borrowed the divine mirror from the shrine instead.

Of course, she hadn’t stolen it or anything like that.

“It really is a strange coincidence,” she murmured to herself, picking up the mirror.

Mitsuki had tried to track down the person in charge of the shrine, intending to beg them to lend her the mirror, only to find out it was her own grandfather.

As it turned out, the Shimoya family line had a long history in the area as a family of high standing and honor, in charge of administering the local Shinto rituals for a long very long. So for generation after generation, a Shimoya had been the manager and head priest of the Tsukimiya Shrine.

This fact had been a complete surprise to Mitsuki. Her father was a completely normal office worker who worked long hours day and night, and

had never hinted at that sort of family background.

According to her grandfather, the shrine had already been in decline by his generation. In the chaotic period after the end of the Second World War, he hadn't been able to make ends meet, and had been forced to close it down.

Still, that didn't change the fact that he was the right and lawful owner of the mirror. And as a grandfather with only one granddaughter to dote on, he was willing to grant her request without question.

"And it really is made from álfkipfer, too..." she murmured.

She'd already confirmed that when exposed to moonlight, the mirror surrounded itself with a very faint glow. It was imperceptible right now due to the lights in her room being on, but if she were to turn them off, she would be able to see it.

That lined up with the description of items made from álfkipfer, the magical metal Yuuto had told her about.

"Awww, I can't stop wondering where it came from!" she cried.

She set the mirror down and returned to her bed, where she vented her frustration by grabbing a pillow and hitting it against the mattress a few times.

Even her grandfather had no idea how the mirror had come to be owned by the Shimoya family, only that it had been passed down through the family line for ages.

That mirror was made from a material that otherwise couldn't be found anywhere on modern-day Earth, a material that seemed to only exist in Yggdrasil, where Yuuto was now.

How had something like that ended up in Japan, passed down for generations at the Tsukimiya Shrine?

Wouldn't solving that riddle go a long way towards revealing the truth behind the mysterious world of Yggdrasil, whose actual era and location were still shrouded in doubt?

Mitsuki had no solid proof that was the case, but those thoughts and questions were on her mind a lot these days.

Mitsuki Shimoya was a third-year student at Hachio Municipal Middle School.

Height: 155 centimeters. Weight: 46 kilograms.

She didn't belong to any school clubs, and both her academic and athletic performance were barely above the mean. There was nothing particularly special or redeeming about her; she was just a perfectly plain, ordinary girl you might find anywhere.

Or so she believed.

"Oh come on, you're the only one who thinks you're plain!"

It was lunch break, and the girl sitting across from Mitsuki made an exasperated face. She punctuated her objection with a flat-handed horizontal chop, aimed right at Mitsuki's ample chest.

"Kh! It bounced... right off?! Mitsuki, what a terrifying girl you are!"

"Geez, don't do that, Ruri-chan!" Mitsuki held a hand to her chest, blushing, while her friend made an exaggerated pose like she had been thrown backwards.

The girl's name was Ruri Takao. She and Mitsuki had been inseparable friends since their third year of elementary school.

She was flat-chested.

Totally, unreasonably flat.

So flat that the meaner boys at school teased her for it, calling her heartless nicknames like "Little Boobs on the Prairie."

Ruri had an older female cousin she looked up to and adored, who was blessed with everything: surpassing intellect, superior athletic talent, and exceptional good looks — but even she was lacking in that one area, apparently. It was likely just one of those things that runs in the family.

"Grrr, it's not fair! Hand 'em over! Come on, I only need a little! Just give... me... some!" Ruri suddenly lunged at Mitsuki's breasts, grabbing and rubbing them forcefully.

"Wha— Ruri-chan, sto— ahh!"



Mitsuki pushed Ruri off of her and hurriedly crossed both arms over her chest to guard it as best she could.

She knew that Ruri had only meant it as just a harmless joke, but she could tell that all the boys in class were staring right at her. She was so flushed with embarrassment it felt like her face was on fire.

Ruri noticed the stares too, and apologized, awkwardly scratching the back of her head with one hand. “...Ah. Sorry. I couldn’t help myself.”

She wasn’t a bad girl or anything, but from time to time she had a habit of acting in the moment without thinking. According to Ruri herself, that personality trait was exactly like another cousin of hers, an older boy.

Mitsuki found herself thinking that it wasn’t good to excuse every trait as being due to family genetics.

“No, it’s okay, Ruri,” Mitsuki said kindly. “But... it’s not really all that great, you know? The looks I get from boys at times like right now are really uncomfortable, and my back and shoulders get stiff and achy.”

“Even so! Even so...! Please, this is the desperate wish of my people!” Ruri slammed her hands on the table top to punctuate her fervent petition.

“You have a people?!” Unsure how to react, Mitsuki could only manage a dry, nervous laugh.

It was true that Ruri didn’t have breasts, but she was still good-looking, with a pretty face and a bright, friendly, and easy-to-talk-to manner that made her pretty popular with the boys. As far as Mitsuki knew, Ruri had already been on the receiving end of several love confessions.

Mitsuki didn’t think it was something Ruri should be so concerned over. Then again, perhaps Ruri was watching the bodies of all the girls around her starting to mature and was starting to feel like she was being left behind. Maybe that was what was getting her so worked up.

“So please tell me, what’s the secret to getting them so big?! Please, I implore you, Mitsuki my goddess!”

The other girls eating lunch around the table chimed in. “Oh, tell me too!”

“Yeah, me too, me too.”

They were, after all, girls in their final year of middle school. This was a topic any girl of their age would be interested in.

“You all say that, but... I haven’t really done anything special,” Mitsuki said, perplexed.

Ruri, however, didn’t appear to accept that. “Objection!!”

She pointed dramatically at Mitsuki with her chopsticks.

“We’re in our third year of junior high, so I can’t consider it to be just because of good genes! That’s when the thought hit me: People always say we are what we eat, right?”

“Er, um, right.”

“So on that note... Yoink!”

“Ahh—!”

It was over before Mitsuki could even voice a reaction. With movements as quick as lightning, Ruri’s chopsticks snatched away one of the omelette rolls from her lunch box.

Ruri took her time chewing her ill-gotten gains, savoring the flavor, and then with her eyes closed gave a long, enchanted sigh.

“Ahh, Mitsuki’s lunches really are the most delicious! You’ve gotten even better, too.”

“Oooh, really? Let me have a taste.”

“Ah, I wanna try it too.”

“Me too, me too!”

“Wha— Wait, everyone, what are you...?!”

As three more pairs of chopsticks reached in from different directions all at once, Mitsuki couldn’t do anything except watch, teary-eyed, as all of her side dishes were stolen away.

“Mmm, you’re right, she *is* getting better.”

“Whoa, what is this?! I’ve never tried Mitsuki’s before, but this is so good!”

“It really is crazy good. Mitsuki, you made this yourself, right? Not your mom?”

“Eh, u-um, y-yes, that’s right. Eheheh, is it really that tasty?” Mitsuki stammered, smiling bashfully.

Whatever else, hearing them praise the food she’d made and call it delicious was a pretty good feeling.

Just hearing that alone was more than enough for her to forgive losing a few side dishes from her lunch, though even she thought that was probably a little too soft of her. But she also knew that afterwards, each of these girls would pay her back with some of the side dishes from their own box lunches.

Ruri nodded to herself knowingly. “Yeah, I can tell, this is the power of a young girl in love. Mitsuki, what a terrifying girl you are!”

“Wha— Ruri-chan?!” Mitsuki exclaimed.

The other classmates leaned forward eagerly.

“Ohhh, that childhood friend I’ve heard rumors about? You must really like him.”

“He’s a year older, right?”

“You’re working this hard for the sake of a boy who’s gone so far away... Hee hee, Mitsuki, you really are the faithful and devoted sort, aren’t you?”

“Nnnh...”

As the praise turned into playful teasing, Mitsuki’s face turned bright red and she looked down, embarrassed and unable to speak.

A short distance away behind her, there were more than a dozen male classmates of hers burning with the murderous flames of jealousy, at this childhood friend of hers they’d never even met. But that subject is a story for another time.

“Ruri-chan, I’ve told you before! Please don’t talk about Yuu-kun at school.” Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks in frustration as she took exception with her

friend.

Classes were over, and they were on the road home from school. It was still only just past four in the afternoon, but the sun had already begun to set. Now that it was December, evening came quickly each day.

As the sun sank into the western horizon, it painted with a reddish tint the wide fields and the tile roofs of old-fashioned Japanese-style homes. It was scenery typical of the rural countryside.

That said, one could see the signs of encroaching modern life here and there: The roads were all fully paved with asphalt, many of the homes had personal cars and trucks parked outside, and the houses themselves had air-conditioning units and satellite antennas.

“Ruri-chan, you know it’ll cause problems for me if they ask for more details,” Mitsuki continued, her anger quickly giving way to unease.

Her childhood friend, Yuuto Suoh, had been transported to an alternate world known as Yggdrasil, where he was now ruling as some sort of lord.

Of course, one mention of that would be enough for the others at school to see her as one of those cringeworthy, delusional types who believed her own fantasies, that much was clear. It had already been made painfully apparent to her two and a half years ago.

Life for girls centered around maintaining a good image and reputation among one’s peer group, much more so than for the boys. Mitsuki had already gotten her fill of having to endure strange looks from the people around her.

“Umm, so about Tama-chan, did you know she’s got a thing for Ikeda-kun?” Ruri asked.

“Huh?” Mitsuki tilted her head. “Why did you change the subject? By Ikeda-kun, do you mean the one in our class?”

There was a boy with the last name of Ikeda in their class, and Tama-chan was the nickname of one of the girls in their group of friends. Mitsuki was a bit confused by the seemingly unrelated topic.

“Yup, that’s the one,” Ruri replied.

“Wooow, really? I didn’t know. Huh... Well, I’m rooting for her, then!”

“But, as it turns out, Ikeda-kun’s got a thing for you, Mitsuki.”

“Wha— Huh?! Eeeeehhhhh?! That’s a problem! That’s a huge problem!”

“Yeah, it is, so that’s why I took the initiative and made sure everyone heard that there’s already someone you have feelings for.”

“Oh...” The dots finally connected in Mitsuki’s head.

So that was why, during that conversation at lunchtime, Tama-chan had been the one talking the loudest, saying things like, *“Ohhh, that childhood friend I’ve heard rumors about? You must really like him!”* and *“You’re working this hard for the sake of a boy who’s gone so far away... Hee hee, Mitsuki, you really are the faithful and devoted sort, aren’t you?”*

She’d done it so she could make sure Ikeda-kun would hear that, and hopefully give up on Mitsuki.

Ruri went on, “You’re kind of oblivious sometimes when it comes to stuff like this, Mitsuki. I was really worried about you.”

“...Thanks, Ruri-chan.”

“You’re welcome. No one likes being rejected, but I know having to reject someone feels awful, too.”

“Yeah.” Mitsuki nodded meekly. She understood that wasn’t all that this had been about.

Ruri hadn’t just been protecting Mitsuki from having to deal with Ikeda-kun’s feelings, but from *Tama-chan’s,* as well. By extension, she had been protecting the harmony of their whole group.

If Ikeda-kun had actually gone on to confess his feelings to Mitsuki, it wouldn’t have mattered whether she accepted or rejected him; it still would have worsened Tama-chan’s impression of her, and might even have ruined the atmosphere within their circle.

Mitsuki shuddered at the realization that she had been walking on a social minefield without even realizing it.

There was nothing as fragile and unreliable as a woman's friendship when matters of love were involved.

"Honestly, I can't believe that guy, just leaving such a cute, kind, and lovable childhood friend in the lurch like this," Ruri said indignantly. "Like, hurry up and get your ass back here already!" Ruri slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand.

She hadn't mentioned him by name, but it went without saying who she was talking about. From her body language, she looked more than ready to belt him one if he did make it back.

"Hey, Yuu-kun's doing everything he can to find a way back home, so don't say things like that!" Mitsuki exclaimed.

"Yeah, well, I'm not so sure. Looks to me more like he's living it up surrounded by a bunch of cute girls hanging all over him. Hmph!" With that, Ruri turned up her nose in contempt.

Ruri was the one and only person with whom Mitsuki was sharing information on Yuuto's current situation. Back when the incident had first happened, none of the adults would believe Mitsuki's story, but Ruri had listened to her seriously and trusted that she was telling the truth.

From that point on, Ruri had become Mitsuki's closest and most trusted friend.

"Ah ha ha... I had him send me pictures of everyone, and... it's true, they really are all pretty, you know." After a bit of a dry laugh, Mitsuki sunk down with a gloomy expression.

Yuuto was always insisting that they were nothing more than his sworn siblings and daughters within the clan, but to a young maiden in love, it was still a source of worry.

"B-but... I believe in Yuu-kun!" Mitsuki added quickly.

"Even though the two of you haven't actually confessed to each other?"

"Urk!"

Mitsuki's words stuck in her throat, as Ruri had struck a sore spot.

For better or worse, Ruri was the kind of girl who always spoke exactly what was on her mind at the moment.

“W-well, that’s... that’s because he’s going to tell me when he makes it back home... I’m pretty sure of it.”

Even just by talking to Yuuto over the phone, Mitsuki had come to realize how he truly felt for her. And she could also tell that he was holding back, deliberately avoiding saying anything definitive on that subject.

He was her childhood friend; she knew how strong his sense of responsibility was. He was probably holding back for her sake, not wanting to tie her down when he had no guarantee that he’d be able to come back to her world.

She knew that was his way of doing what he thought was the right and responsible thing, but it also left her feeling frustrated and impatient.

“*Is* he going to tell you, though?” Ruri shot Mitsuki a doubtful look. “That guy’s got a real old-fashioned type of mindset, right? Old-fashioned Japanese men are, like, super bashful and shy when it comes to their feelings. Take my late grandpa, for example. Apparently he only ever told my grandma he loved her the one time, and that was on his deathbed.”

“Well, I still think that sounds like they were a really happy couple in their own way, though,” Mitsuki replied. From her perspective, the fact that they’d stayed together for decades, still able to love each other right to the very end, was wonderful and romantic.

“I don’t know. Even now, my grandma still complains about it a lot. Like, ‘If you were going to say it after all, then say it earlier, too!’ Stuff like that.”

“O-oh, I see.” Mitsuki tensed up, unable to say much else.

In the end, reality wasn’t such a neat and tidy thing.

On the other hand, since Ruri’s grandmother wished her husband had told her he loved her more, one could interpret that as meaning she’d always loved him, so in the end they still really were a happy couple.

“Then there’s that really famous story about the author Natsume Sōseki, where one of his students translated the English phrase ‘I love you’ directly into

Japanese, and he...”

“Ohh, I know that one! He told the student to translate it as ‘The moon is beautiful,’ right?”

“Right, right. He was basically saying, ‘You think a Japanese person would ever say such an embarrassing thing directly?!’”

“Ughhh, now I’m starting to get the feeling Yuu-kun’s not going to confess to me, after all...” Once more, Mitsuki’s face was overshadowed by gloom and her shoulders drooped depressingly.

“In that case, why don’t you just tell him first?” Ruri asked.

“Wh-whaaaat?!”

“Is it something to act that surprised over? Christmas is the day after tomorrow. This is the perfect opportunity, right?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, you’re right, but, um...” Mitsuki began to stumble over her words, looking down as her face turned beet red.

Now that the shoe was on the other foot, she found herself wondering whether it was all right for her to tie Yuuto down when it wasn’t certain whether they would ever meet again. And she wondered if girls like Felicia and Linnea, who could actually be there with him, would be a better match for him anyway. Those intrusive thoughts brought her heart to a standstill.

As befitting childhood friends who’d grown up together, this was one of the ways in which Yuuto and Mitsuki were much the same at heart.

“Good grief. If that’s how you are, I think the both of us are going to end up having a lonely Christmas this year,” Ruri said with a bitter smile.

“Both of us? But Ruri-chan, you’re popular. You could have a boyfriend if you wanted.”

“Mm, yeah, but I don’t really find the boys our age to be all that attractive, so...” With a pensive finger on her lip, Ruri’s gaze drifted into space, as if looking at something in her mind’s eye.

Those words and that body language were enough to clue Mitsuki in.

Mitsuki stepped close to Ruri and leaned in front of her, turning to look up at her with a mischievous little grin. “Hmmmmm. I see.”

“Wh-what?!”

“You have someone you like already. Someone older.”

“Urk.” Now it was Ruri’s turn to have her voice catch in her throat. *Crap, she figured it out!* was written all over her face.

It was human nature to want to press for more details in a situation like this. All over the world, in times past and present, talking about love and relationships was a favorite activity for girls, and Mitsuki was no exception.

“I never knew you had someone like that in your life, Ruri-chan,” Mitsuki teased.

“I-it doesn’t matter! Forget about me! Right now we’re talking about you, so __”

“Aww, don’t be like that. We’re friends, aren’t we? I wish you’d tell me more.”

“Look, it’s not interesting enough to even be worth telling you about, okay?”

“I can decide that *after* you tell me.”

“Urgh...” Ruri was unable to bear the pressure from Mitsuki’s persistent stare, and as she struggled to think of an excuse to get out of talking, she took one step back, and then another.

Without missing a beat, Mitsuki stepped forward each time.

Realizing she couldn’t win, Ruri averted her gaze and spoke in a hesitant murmur. “...It’s my older cousin.”

“Ohh, so that’s who it is. But I don’t see why you’d have to keep it a secret. Cousins can get married in Japan, after all.”

“He’s already got a girlfriend. A real pretty one.”

“Oh, I see. So you’re sort of stuck carrying a torch right now.”

“...Yeah.”

“Well, um, you know, Ruri-chan, you always hear me out when I’m feeling down or need to complain about things. So if you ever need to get something off your chest, just talk to me, okay? I’ll be here to listen.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks.” Ruri smiled, but it was a lonely smile in contrast to the bright, energetic girl that she usually was.

The air between the two girls grew heavy and they both trailed off into silence for a while, the only sound being their footsteps on the pavement.

Suddenly, Ruri threw both arms straight up and shouted towards the sky. “Arrrghh! This kind of depressing attitude is way too out of character for me!”

She whirled around to face Mitsuki and yelled, “Mitsuki! You’re free for Christmas, right?!”

“Er, uh, yeah, I am. I don’t have anyone to be with, after all.”

“All right, then, come over to my place!”

“Huh?”

“Big Sis Saya... that is, my older cousin Saya is coming back home from overseas for the first time in a year. And since it’s just in time for Christmas and all, we’re planning to go all-out with a big party. So you should come, too!”

“Um, b-but if it’s a gathering for your family, I’m not sure it’d be proper for me to...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Big Sis Saya is bringing some friends of hers, too. Come on! The more, the merrier!”

“Hmm, but, umm...” Mitsuki hesitated, deliberating over what to do.

She wasn’t a particularly socially outgoing girl to begin with. Being surrounded by a bunch of strangers at a party felt like something that would wear her out.

I’m grateful for the invitation, but... Mitsuki had already thought up a polite way to decline the offer, but just as she was about to speak the words, a stray thought came to mind, not unlike a flash of inspiration.

“H-hey, Ruri-chan. That cousin Saya of yours, she’s the one who’s really smart, right?”

“Er, yeah, that’s right. She’s unbelievably crazy smart!”

“So, um, I was just wondering, but, would she happen to know anything about, like, archeology or ancient history?”

Mitsuki didn’t have any particular logic or belief driving her question. It was just that the previous night, she had been wondering about the origin of the divine mirror from the Tsukimiya Shrine, and it was still on her mind a bit, so she figured she might as well ask.

But perhaps the word “fateful” had been coined for exactly this sort of instinctive action.

For, as it so happened, this unassuming question would come to greatly shape the destinies of both Mitsuki and Yuuto.

The following morning, Mitsuki was already on her way to visit the Takao family home.

She’d figured that there wouldn’t be much chance for a long, serious talk in the middle of a Christmas party. But today was the perfect opportunity. It was December 23rd, a public national holiday celebrating the Emperor’s birthday.

When Mitsuki was led into the living room, a beautiful woman with blonde hair and blue eyes greeted her with a friendly wave. Her appearance was quite at odds with the room, which was decorated in a classic Japanese Showa Era style.

“Welcome to our home, Mitsuki-chan,” the woman said. “I’m Saya Takao. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She was Ruri’s blood relative, so naturally her facial features were quite similar to her cousin’s, but as expected of a woman seven years older, there was an aura of adult allure about her, one that a younger girl could never hope to imitate. She was just the kind of woman the term “cool beauty” was meant for.

“U-um, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Mitsuki said hesitantly. “I’m Mitsuki Shimoya. Thank you for seeing me today.”

A little nervous, Mitsuki bowed her head politely.

“You must be cold. Please, get in the kotatsu and make yourself comfortable.”

“Y-yes, thank you.”

Accepting Saya’s hospitality, Mitsuki removed and folded up her coat, then sat down and put her legs under the kotatsu blanket.

Saya looked at Mitsuki quietly for a moment, eyes sparkling with interest, before saying, almost casually, “So, I hear your childhood friend got sent to an alternate world back in time?”

“Ngh...!” Mitsuki hadn’t expected this, and she instinctively turned to look at Ruri, who was sitting next to her.

Ruri shrugged, with a bit of a guilty laugh. It seemed that she’d already told Saya some of the story already.

“You don’t believe me, right?” Mitsuki said, sighing dejectedly.

She knew it was grasping at straws, but the possibility of getting a clue had convinced her to screw up her courage and come here today. Yet that courage was already on the verge of cracking.

Looks like the one she was getting now, eyes that were *looking at something interesting*... she’d experienced them many times since that day two and a half years ago, but she’d never gotten used to them. In her experience, a look like that meant the other person wasn’t going to take her seriously, and in the end she’d only have her feelings hurt.

“Ahhh, no, no, don’t jump to conclusions,” Saya said quickly.

“No, it’s all right. Even I know how absurd it sounds.”

After these two and a half years, Mitsuki *was* used to the knowledge that no one would believe her. The police, the adults at her school, her classmates, her parents and grandparents... none of them would take her seriously. Ruri, and one other person, were the only exceptions.

Asking someone to believe the story of some girl they’d only just met was completely unreasonable; Mitsuki understood as much herself.

“No, you’ve really got it all wrong,” Saya said. “It’s just that I was thinking to myself, ‘Ahh, I must have an affinity for getting involved in this sort of thing...’

That’s the only reason I reacted that way.”

“An... affinity for getting involved?” Mitsuki stared blankly at Saya, who giggled to herself as if remembering something from long ago.

“Yes, it was about four years ago now... Well, a whole lot happened.”

“Um, I see...”

“Anyway, my story isn’t important right now. We’re here to talk about this friend of yours stuck in the past, right? So, have you ever heard the term ‘OOPArts’ before?”

Mitsuki nodded. “Yes, it’s a name used to describe objects that don’t match the civilization of the era they’re supposed to be from. They should have been impossible to create using the knowledge or technology of the culture at the time. Things like those famous crystal skulls. OOPArts is an abbreviation of the English name ‘out-of-place artifacts,’ right?”

Ever since Yuuto had been sent to Yggdrasil, Mitsuki had done some amount of research of her own. This was one subject she definitely knew about.

After all, Yuuto had been, and still was, continuously creating just such a phenomenon in that world of the past.

“Mm-hm, that’s right,” said Saya. “That’s exactly right. So, surprisingly enough, in archeology, those things are a lot more common than you might think. Take the Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia as an example. It’s like they appeared out of nowhere, only to create a high-level civilization that was oddly way more advanced than the standard for that era. It’s one of the greatest mysteries in archeology today. Of course, if a person from further in the future had somehow been spirited away to the past, that would make things consistent.”

“So, you’ll believe me?”

“I can’t guarantee that just yet; that would be dishonest. But I can tell you right now that I’m not going to just stubbornly reject your story out of hand, just because the premise doesn’t sound scientifically feasible.” Saya’s voice was serious and genuine, and she looked Mitsuki straight in the eye as she continued. “So, could you tell me about it in full detail? I don’t think I got all the

relevant information just hearing about it secondhand from Ruri. After I've heard the whole story from you, then I'll decide whether I can believe it or not."

"Thank you... thank you very much," Mitsuki said. Saya's sincere and honest response had made a good impression on her.

If Saya had easily proclaimed she believed the story, then Mitsuki would have assumed, based on her past experiences, that Saya was just saying that to get the talk over with. Of course, Mitsuki did know it was unfair of her to think like that.

"Okay, so first... Hmm, yes," Saya said. "Start by telling me about what happened that first night, when you did that test of courage."

"Okay. That night..."

"Hmm, a world in the Bronze Age, called Yggdrasil. Hmmmmm..." Saya muttered to herself deep in thought, one hand on her chin.

As for Ruri, she was snoozing away, with a floor cushion for a pillow and her lower half under the warm kotatsu.

It had been just past noon when Mitsuki arrived at the Takao residence, but the blue sky outside was already turning a darker shade of blue.

True to her word, for several hours Saya had listened to Mitsuki's whole story seriously — enthusiastically, even. Several times she stopped her to ask questions or request more details.

For Mitsuki, that alone was enough to move her almost to tears.

Mitsuki swore to herself that even if she didn't find the clue she was looking for, she would properly thank this woman. Not just in words, but with something well-thought-out that properly expressed her feelings of gratitude.

"This is too detailed and fleshed out for just a story made up by a middle-schooler," Saya said. "That's especially true for all of the minor details about daily life for the people in that world."

Right after swearing gratitude in her heart, Mitsuki suddenly felt like she'd been dropped off a cliff. "I — I didn't make it up! It's true, so please believe me!" she pled with tears in her eyes.

Saya chuckled at this and shrugged her shoulders. “Yes, I know. I’m saying I believe you *didn’t* make it up.”

“Oh... Thank you so much!!” Joy spread across Mitsuki’s face, and she bowed her head to Saya over and over. Emotionally speaking, she was ready to start calling her “Big Sister.”

“But... I’m sorry,” Saya continued in a remorseful tone. “I still can’t say I have any idea just where or when your childhood friend got sent to.”

“Oh, I see,” Mitsuki said, her shoulders drooping. It felt like this day was just a constant roller-coaster of being elated and disappointed.

Saya thoughtfully tapped her finger on the kotatsu’s table top. “Hmm, there were quite a few words that show up in ancient Norse mythology, but in lots of places it’s quite ‘off’ from the Norse mythology I know.”

“Yuu-kun said the same thing to me. He said that when he tried researching that, it wasn’t useful at all as a reference.”

“Right, but still, there are a few things that stick out to me.”

“Stick out?”

“Yes. For example, this friend of yours is called Hróðvitnir, meaning ‘Infamous Wolf,’ as a sort of alias, right?”

“Um, yes, that’s right. Is there something important about that?”

“That’s one of the alternate names for Fenrir.”

“...Huh?!” Even Mitsuki had heard of that name. It was the monstrous wolf who was foretold to one day devour the leader of the Norse gods, Odin. It was one of the most well-known big names in Norse mythology.

“And then, there’s that ruler of the Lightning Clan, who has runes called Megingjörð and Mjǫlnir, the ‘Belt of Strength’ and ‘Shatterer,’ respectively. He absolutely evokes the Norse god of battle, Thor. Your friend defeated him with a flash flood by using the old Chinese ‘sandbag’ strategy, right?”

“Umm, I think that’s it. At least, I remember he said he caused a big flood in order to beat him.” Mitsuki remembered the basic details of the tactic, but not its historical name.

“In Norse mythology, there’s a giant serpent called Jörmungandr who fights Thor three times. In Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, there’s a tale about how at the end times of the world, Ragnarök, Jörmungandr covers the land with a great flood of seawater.”

“Wh-whaaat?!” Mitsuki went wide-eyed at the mention of yet another famous name.

In her mind, it was so hard to connect the childhood friend she’d known forever to tales of such mythical gods and monsters. It didn’t feel real.

“Ah, that reminds me, you never told me his full name, did you?” Saya asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Mitsuki realized that she hadn’t referred to him as anything other than “Yuu-kun.”

Before the flustered girl could say another word, Saya held up a hand to stop her, and smiled mischievously. “Hold on. I’ll make a little prediction. Just a guess, but in Japanese order, family name first, does it start with an ‘S’ syllable and end with a ‘T’ syllable?”

“Huh?! Y-yes, that’s right, it’s ‘Suoh Yuuto,’ but, h-how did you know that?”

“Ahhh, yes, that’s just the kind of name it would be.” Saya nodded to herself in satisfaction.

“Um...?”

“Oh, it’s just that with Fenrir and Jörmungandr and Ragnarök on the table, I figured that might be the next sort of name that showed up.”

“Er, what do you mean?” Mitsuki felt like she had been left completely behind.

“Well, Yuuto-kun’s Japanese, right? So unless he’s a half-Japanese like me or something like that, it means he’s got black hair and black eyes.”

“Okay...” Mitsuki tilted her head, not entirely sure how this all fit together.

Saya chuckled. “So, according to Norse mythology, in the end times of Ragnarök, there’s a certain giant who shows up, with a name that means ‘the Black One.’”

“Oh! What sort of giant is it? I-is it one of the more famous names?”

“Yes, it is. It’s about as famous as they come, I think. According to prophecy, during Ragnarök, he’ll arrive leading the armies of Múspell on horseback, crossing the bridge across the heavens known as the Bifröst, invading the domain of the gods, Asgard, and going on set ablaze all of the Nine Worlds...”

“Ah... ahhh!” At last, Mitsuki recalled the giant’s name, as well. It was a mythical figure even greater and more powerful than Fenrir or Jörmungandr.

Seeing the recognition in Mitsuki’s eyes, Saya nodded solemnly, and spoke the name aloud.

“That’s right. It’s Surtr.”

“Perhaps over time, the name ‘Suoh Yuuto’ got mispronounced or corrupted in the retelling, and became Surtr,” Saya said. “Hmm, and by that same token, Mitsuki-chan’s family name Shimoya bears a resemblance to the name of Surtr’s wife Sinmara, at least in its alternate spelling of Sinmora. Thinking along that track, some of the lines from the poem *Fjölsvinnsmál* are pretty interesting. ‘Lævatein is there, that Loptr with runes once made by the doors of death; In Laegjarn’s chest by Sinmora lies it, and nine locks fasten it firm.’ Should we assume that ‘Lævatein’ refers to a sword, the *nihontou*, or is it more metaphorically referring to the knowledge of modern science itself?”

Saya was muttering to herself endlessly, working her way through a few different theories.

She was very much like a typical scholar, in that once she got immersed in her own thoughts, she seemed to ignore everyone and everything around her.

Which wasn’t going to help Mitsuki any.

“E-excuse me!” she called to Saya, her voice more than a little troubled.

“O-oh, sorry about that. What is it?” Saya seemed to come back to her senses, and looked up.

“So, um, this is all a bit confusing, and I’m not sure I totally understand what’s going on,” Mitsuki confessed. “Are you saying that Yuu-kun is, like... living out the story of Norse mythology?”

Frankly speaking, this was all out of left field for her.

Unfortunately, she couldn't deny that she had neglected to do more detailed research into Norse mythology. After all, the initial discovery had been that there were large differences between things in the world of Yggdrasil and in things in Norse mythology, and that had made an impression on her.

And then there was the fact that Mitsuki's time was pretty limited to begin with.

In order to get permission to work her part-time job delivering newspapers, one of the conditions she had to meet was to make sure her grades stayed high and never dropped. And as a third-year, she had high school entrance exams to study for in addition to her normal homework. It was all she could manage to just look up the things Yuuto specifically needed in order to support him.

Yuuto had even less time, at most thirty minutes each day. In order for him to survive in that harsh other world, both of them had to focus on the most practical matters with their limited time.

"Mm... it's not quite that," Saya said. "You could say it's more like he's creating the original thing, the events those myths and poems were later based on."

"The original...?"

"The prevailing theory right now is that Norse mythology as we know it developed in northern Europe sometime between 1000 B.C. and the birth of Christ. Now then, what era did you say Yuuto-kun was sent to?"

"Um, we're not certain, but he said it was probably sometime around 1500 B.C., give or take... oh. That's way before the myths were formed..."

Mitsuki realized that this had been another blind spot for her. Myths and legends carried an image of being from very ancient times, despite still being present in the modern day as knowledge and as part of pop culture. They just felt like something that had always been there, so she hadn't thought too deeply about their origin.

"There are quite a few cases where myths and fairy tales have had real historical events or people as the basis for elements of their story," Saya said.

“One of the most famous examples is the legendary city of Troy, which appears in Greek mythology. And in Japanese folklore, there’s the story of Momotaro, right? If you trace it back, there’s one theory that it’s based on events during the Yamato Period, when the Yamato administration fought with and subjugated its rival the Kingdom of Kibi.”

“W-wow, really?!” It was astonishing to think that the classic fairy tale of Momotaro had that sort of history behind it.

For some reason, Mitsuki recalled a time back when Yuuto had just entered middle school. He’d said to her, “You know the story of Momotaro from back in the Edo Period? He wasn’t born out of a peach, he was born when the old man and woman ate a peach and did the hustle, if you know what I mean.”

She could still remember vividly how embarrassed she’d gotten, and how Yuuto had enjoyed making her blush like that.

“Hmm, it’s just as likely to be coincidence, but I see some similarities between that story and what’s happening with Yuuto-kun now,” Saya said. “You see, there’s this hypothesis about the basis for the *oni* in the story of Momotaro: Those ogres he goes off to fight might be based on foreigners from overseas who settled in the region and shared with the people of the Kingdom of Kibi advanced technologies like iron weapons and shipbuilding. As evidence, in the area that used to be Kibi Province — today that would be in Okayama Prefecture — there are places where Ura, the king of the *oni* from the tale, is a venerated figure.”

“W-wow, really? Th-that’s true, it does sort of resemble—” Mitsuki suddenly stopped, as the realization hit her: The *oni* had all been defeated in the end. That was how it went in the fairy tales... and in the history they were based on.

In an instant, Mitsuki’s teeth began chattering, and she clasped her arms around her own body to try to suppress her terror.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Mitsuki-chan?!”

“F-Fenrir and Jörmungandr, don’t they both get k-killed in the end?!” Mitsuki couldn’t recall how they’d died or who killed them, but she did remember that at the very least, they weren’t among the survivors after Ragnarök.

Panicked, she turned on her smartphone and did an online search for “Surtr.” In the account of Ragnarök detailed in the poem *Gylfaginning*, his name was not among the list of those who survived.

Reading that caused her body’s uncontrollable shuddering to grow even worse.

“H-he’s going to die! Yuu-kun’s going to die at this rate! I — I have to help him! I have to do something...!”

With a shout, Mitsuki stood up, unable to sit still anymore in her panic. But once she was up, she realized she had no idea what to do, and stood there, frozen in place.

Waves of fear continued to rush through her, and unable to withstand it, she began to clutch and pull at her own hair.

“M-Mitsuki-chan, calm down!” Saya cried.

“B-b-but... but...! But he’s...!”

“Calm down! You said it yourself earlier, didn’t you?! There are huge differences between the myths and reality!”

“Ah... th-that’s right! That’s right, it’s not like it’s set in stone that Yuu-kun will die! Yeah, it’s not set in stone. It’s not set in stone. It’s not set in stone...” Mitsuki continued to repeat those words over and over, attempting to reassure herself.

But the anxiety that had wrapped itself around her heart showed no signs of disappearing.

“Hey, I’m really sorry.” Saya bowed her head to Mitsuki in apology. “I was supposed to be helping you, but it looks like I only gave you more to worry about.”

The sun had set while they were deep in conversation. Outside the house it was completely dark, save for the small area illuminated by the entrance lights and the bit of light coming out of the living room window.

“So, um, look,” Saya said. “Norse mythology was mainly an oral tradition, so almost all the written records we have about it today can only be traced back

about as far as the 13th century. And what's more, starting around the 11th century, there was a widespread conversion to Christianity in the region, and that affected everything a lot. There are all sorts of things that have changed over time, and what we have now can't match up with whatever the original was, right? Nobody can know for sure what's right and what's wrong anymore. That's why you shouldn't give up hope."

"You're right," Mitsuki said gratefully. "Thank you very much."

"When the myths talk about Ragnarök, they say that it's a time where all seals, shackles, and bindings will disappear, and those who have been restrained or imprisoned will be set free. One could interpret that to mean that he escapes, and comes back home."

"...Right." Mitsuki nodded deeply, taking those words to heart.

She knew that those words were in large part aimed at consoling her, but she also understood that none of it was a lie, either. Just as Saya was saying, there was still hope. Mitsuki tried to hold onto that and buoy her spirits.

It was true that her worries had grown, and that now the shivers that troubled her were from more than just the cold of December, but she was still glad for what she'd heard today, from the bottom of her heart.

Knowing what might occur in the future was better, for it would become easier to plan accordingly.

It was quite likely that in the near future, in Yuuto's future, a dangerous crisis awaited him unlike anything he'd faced so far. However, knowing about that now would give Yuuto time to come up with some sort of countermeasure, and being mentally prepared for the crisis should improve his ability to react and adapt to it.

"I'll look into some things on my end, too," Saya said. "After all, we still don't know his exact location or time period."

"I appreciate it."

"Mm-hm. Well, then, be careful on your way home, okay?"

"I will. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me until so late at

night.” Mitsuki bowed deeply, and turned to leave the Takao residence.

“Ah, wait, Mitsuki!” Ruri cried. “I’ll go with you part of the way. I wanna talk with you a bit.”

Ruri hurriedly followed after Mitsuki.

Side by side, the two of them walked along the dark nighttime road.

Out here in the countryside, the evenings were full of noise from insects during the spring and fall, and from frogs in the summer. But in winter, it was much more silent. The only interruption to the quiet was the occasional, faint cry of a nighttime bird from the nearby mountain forests.

“I can see why you brag so much about her, Ruri-chan,” Mitsuki said, breaking the silence. “Saya-san is incredible. Talking to her was really helpful.”

“Er, yeah, isn’t she though?” Ruri smiled, but in a way that seemed somewhat awkward and stiff.

She had supposedly been fast asleep the whole time and missed Mitsuki and Saya’s conversation, but apparently she’d been able to gather from the atmosphere between them that it wasn’t a happy one.

“Mm? Oh...” Mitsuki felt something cold touch her cheek, and as she looked up, she saw innumerable, fluffy white flakes fluttering down from the darkness above, a majestic sight as far as the eye could see. “It’s snowing...”

“Whoa, you’re right. At this rate, this might be the third year in a row we get a white Christmas.” Ruri giggled and held out her hand to catch some of the flakes.

In the past, the area had gotten a lot of snow in the winter, but perhaps because of the changing global climate, snowfall had grown markedly less frequent in recent years.

Ruri added, “Oh, and speaking of Christmas, I just got a text from Tama-chan.”

“Oh?”

“She confessed to Ikeda-kun and asked him out, and he said yes.”

“Huuuhhh?!” Mitsuki couldn’t help but be surprised.

Tama-chan was her friend, so of course the success of her romance was something Mitsuki wanted to sincerely celebrate.

However, she had been told only yesterday that Ikeda-kun had feelings for her. Wasn't this too quick and easy for such a change of heart?

She didn't have any feelings for Ikeda-kun, of course. In fact, with this, her impression of him took a nosedive. But were feelings of affection towards somebody really something that could change so easily? Mitsuki was left with that lingering doubt hanging like a cloud in the back of her mind.

"Subtly make sure he hears that Mitsuki's already got someone she likes, then right when he's heartbroken and vulnerable you slide in and make your move. You're a real woman, Tama-chan." By contrast, Ruri seemed preoccupied with feelings of admiration. "Yeah! You know, love is all about timing!"

Ruri clenched her fist to emphasize her point. More than likely, it was a line she'd gotten from a magazine, or heard from one of her friends. After all, she'd never had a boyfriend.

Still, it rang true to Mitsuki.

"Yeah... you're right." With a hand on her heart, Mitsuki nodded slowly, as if turning over the words carefully in her mind. "I think so, too."

Mitsuki had already become aware of her feelings around the time she'd entered middle school. And Yuuto was her childhood friend, someone she'd been together with for as long as she could remember; she also had an idea of his feelings for her.

She'd assumed that there would be no surprising or dramatic events like in a TV show or manga. Instead, their warm affections would develop slowly and naturally, and they would end up together. Gradually, things would progress, until before she knew it, she would end up as Yuuto's bride.

That was the dull, uneventful but peaceful future Mitsuki had hoped for, and on that one fateful night, it had shattered, and vanished into thin air.

The two of them were now separated by an impossible distance, able only to hear each other's voices, and their relationship was frozen, stuck in a state of more than friends and less than lovers.

“Timing...” she murmured. “It’s true. I shouldn’t let an opportunity pass me by.”

“Merry Christmas, Yuu-kun,” Mitsuki said into the phone.

“It’s Christmas Eve, though.” Yuuto’s voice on the other end of the receiver was quite sleepy.

It was currently midnight, and the date had just changed to the 24th. It went without saying that Yuuto had been asleep until a moment ago.

Mitsuki felt a little bad for waking him up, but she also felt that tonight of all nights she deserved to be forgiven for that. After all...

“Yuu-kun, you’re too picky about details.”

“No, I’m not,” he said. “This is important.”

“Ohhh, it is, huh? Okay.”

Apparently he understood, too. Even as she tried to keep her voice sounding unconcerned, she could tell that the corners of her lips were turning upward.

She didn’t know how it was in Western countries, but in Japan, Christmas Day was a day usually spent with one’s family, while Christmas Eve was considered a holiday specifically for spending time with a lover.

That was why she had been the one to call him tonight.

Yuuto only had a very limited amount of battery time to use his phone, so normally Mitsuki always waited for him to call her, so that she didn’t get in the way of what he needed to do.

But this time, even if it meant causing him a bit of trouble, Mitsuki wanted to make sure she was the first person Yuuto spoke with on Christmas Eve. She didn’t want to give up that spot to anyone else, no matter what.

“So, what is it?” Yuuto asked. “You’re not gonna tell me you called and woke me up in the middle of the night just so you could say that, are you?”

“Weeeell, as a matter of fact...”

“Hey!” He shouted in a voice that sounded a bit angry, but the tone underneath wasn’t angry at all.

Mitsuki could read these delicate nuances like the back of her hand.

“That reminds me, tonight — ah, guess it’s last night, now — last night, I called you but it didn’t go through.”

“Ah, I went to my friend’s house for a while, so I had my phone off.”

“...That friend’s a girl, right?”

“Uh huh, Ruri-chan. I hung out with her and her older cousin, and we ended up getting really into our conversation till late at night.”

“...And this cousin is a girl too, right?”

“Her cousin’s so cool, Yuu-kun! And really smart, too.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Mitsuki.”

Beeep-beep! Beeep-beep! Through the receiver, Mitsuki could faintly hear the sound coming from Yuuto’s phone — a heartlessly cold mechanical warning tone.

“Tch, out of battery already,” Yuuto growled. “Dammit. It’s ’cause I looked up too much stuff last night. Hey, Mitsuki, hurry up and just tell me whether this cousin person’s a guy or a girl!” There was something about the franticness in his voice that was hopelessly comforting.

Mitsuki suddenly felt an incredible tightness in her chest. Perhaps it was also in part because of what she’d talked about with Saya earlier.

She wanted to see him so badly.

She wanted to embrace him.

She wanted to be embraced by him.

She wanted to kiss him.

She wanted him to kiss her.

The feelings welled up within her, overflowing.

But... they still couldn’t overcome the hesitation that held her back from telling him. No matter what, she didn’t want herself and her feelings to become a burden on him.

And so, Mitsuki gently kissed the LCD screen of her phone, and whispered into the microphone, “You know, Yuu-kun: ‘The moon sure is beautiful.’”

“Mm? Yeah, it’s really pretty over here, too. The winter sky makes the air really clear. ...Hey, more importantly—!”

It seemed Yuuto didn’t know.

Of course, he’d never been very interested in reading or literature even before entering middle school, so it was no wonder he didn’t know. And for these past two and a half years, he’d spent every moment of his limited time to study on learning only about things that would be practically useful to him in Yggdrasil, so he wouldn’t have had any chance to learn about it.

Mitsuki knew that. She knew that, but even so...

“Stuuupid. Stupid-stupid-stuuupid.”

“Wh-what the hell, Mitsuki?! What’s your deal?!”

“My deal is that you’re stupid, so that’s why I’m calling you stupid, stuuupid.”

“You...! We’ve only got a couple seconds left! How many are you gonna waste calling me stu—” His voice was suddenly cut off.

Beep, beep, beep...

There was nothing left but the sound indicating an inability to connect.

His phone must have finally run out of battery. She’d seen that coming, of course.

“I’m always, always worrying about you,” she whispered. “All the time. So I’ve got every right to say it. I can’t deal with these feelings if I don’t... You stupid idiot!”

Her voice quiet, and choking back tears, she muttered those last words at the silent phone, then picked up the sacred mirror from the shrine, the source of the connection between her and Yuuto.

One after another, her teardrops fell onto the mirror’s surface. As they did, the sacred mirror began to give off a very faint, phosphorescent glow, like the light of a firefly.

Still, the mirror was clouded over with rust, and so it could not show Mitsuki her reflection.

That was why she didn’t notice it.

As if in response to the soft glow of the mirror, small but distinct golden symbols shaped vaguely like birds were glowing in both of her eyes.



Interlude 4

“Ahh, so this is Iárnviðr.” Rífa couldn’t help but vocalize her admiration at the cityscape.

This was the seat of power of the so-called “Black One,” and so she had always wanted to visit it at least once.

And she’d also always wanted to get a look at the face of the man himself. It didn’t have to be in person; she’d be content with just a peek from far away.

According to rumor, in these parts he was called Hróðvitnir, the Infamous Wolf, by some. He was supposed to be near the same age as she was, but he surely had a face like a man-eating ogre, to earn an alias like that.

But more than such matters, her first priority at the moment was to take in the sights scrolling by outside her carriage window, and enjoy them to the fullest.

“It certainly appears to be quite different from Glaðsheimr,” she commented.

As the Wolf Clan was going through a period of rapid progress and development, this city was also clearly lively and flourishing, but in terms of scale, it still bore no comparison to Glaðsheimr, one of the largest and greatest cities in Yggdrasil.

Most of the buildings in Glaðsheimr were built from bricks, while the majority of the ones here in Iárnviðr were made primarily of wood. The clothes of the people here were simple and without much ornamentation; they were, in a word, unsophisticated.

And perhaps because of its location in the mountain highlands, the air here was much colder than in Glaðsheimr, with a sort of tense hardness to its chill.

To think that a simple change in location could yield such a different environment! Rífa was intensely moved by this, and trembled with excitement.

However, one more thing also constantly drew her attention.

“The faces of the people here, they are filled with life and energy.”

That was what stood out to her most of all.

To her eyes, the people of Glaðsheimr all seemed to be overtaken in some way or another by a sort of shadow of cynicism.

Even as they all sang the praises of their own prosperity, there was no promise of anything greater in the future. The system resulting from their long history had merely calcified, with those who had already established wealth and power increasing their hold, while the young held no hopes or dreams.

Everyone surely felt the very slow, gradual collapse that was taking place, but unable to do anything, they merely resigned themselves to living day to day.

Perhaps that was why, wealthy as it was, the city of Glaðsheimr as a whole felt gloomy and stagnant to her.

Compared to that, Iárnviðr was so different. There was hope in the eyes of the citizens here. They believed, without a doubt, that things would only get better from here, that there were opportunities all around to improve their station in life, and to make their future even more splendid than their present.

The girl felt a sharp pain, an ache in her heart, and with a hollow, lonely chuckle, she whispered to herself, “Perhaps the empire really is fated to perish, after all...”

ACT 4: The Bellows Pumping in Vain It's often said that children take after their parents. In the Wolf Clan, much like the patriarch who led it, there were many whose outward appearance did not seem to match their rank and status.

One could say that Ingrid was a prime example of this.

Ingrid was a young girl, with tan skin that suggested the blood of the southern peoples ran strong in her family, and unruly red hair that tended to stick out to the sides. Her slightly upturned and strong-willed eyes were somewhat reminiscent of a cat.

The clothes she wore were simple, and often visibly dirty in places.

At first glance, she looked for all the world like a girl from town who had lost her way and accidentally wandered into the palace, but Ingrid was seventh-ranked in the Wolf Clan and one of its top officers, a person of undeniable rank and standing.

Indeed, she had played a central role in bringing about the Wolf Clan's many victories and immense rise to prosperity, and so her reputation preceded her even among the many other exalted and heroic figures in the clan. Even those technically above her in rank, such as the second-in-command and the assistant to the second, treated her with a certain deference.

"Hey... what are you doing here huddled up under the kotatsu?" Ingrid demanded.

Although all of those factors didn't exactly justify it, this girl Ingrid took a strong tone with everyone, even her patriarch, that would be considered quite insolent. But everyone passed it off with a wry smile and tacit acceptance.

Still, it would be one thing if her sworn father were a hopeless and feebleminded fool, but this patriarch was the hero held in esteem as the greatest ruler in Wolf Clan history.

“You certainly look like you’re sitting pretty, you jerk,” she snapped.

In fact, it seemed she was perhaps more arrogant and bossy with the patriarch than with anyone else.

“Oh, hey, Ingrid. This thing really came out well. You want to sit down and join us?” As for Yuuto, the patriarch in question, he didn’t seem to pay it any particular notice. He responded to Ingrid with a casual greeting and an easygoing tone.

Hearing this, Ingrid’s disgruntled scowl grew more intense. “Judging by that, it looks like you really *did* forget.”

“Huh? Forget what?”

“Ohhh... okay, then...”

“Gah! Ow-ow—hey! You can’t just grind your fists on a person’s temples like that!”

“Not another word out of you!”

“Gwaahhh! Y-you little... I *am* your patriarch, you know!”

“Hmph, like I give a damn.”

“Wai— no, seriously, that hurts! That hurts! Stop!”

“Truly, the two of you are so wonderfully close.” Just next to them, Yuuto’s adjutant Felicia continued calmly sipping her tea, as if completely detached from the situation.

“Wait, now hold on, Felicia!” Yuuto protested. “How can you look at what’s going on here and get that sort of impression?!”

“Th-that’s right!” Ingrid exclaimed. “Felicia, are your eyes messed up or something?!”

“Messed up, you say...?”

Felicia paused and took a moment to once again look the two over — Ingrid with both of her fists pressed into both sides of Yuuto’s temples, Yuuto grabbing at Ingrid’s wrists with a desperate and pained expression — and giggled.

“Tee hee, but whatever you might say, that is just what it looks like.”

“Are you sure your eyes are okay, Felicia?!”

“Oh, yes, and I have full confidence in my perception, if I do say so myself.” Felicia delivered her assertion with a sweet smile.

She had her proof in the fact that though Yuuto might look unhappy at first glance, she could tell he was also somewhat enjoying himself. The two of them might not see it themselves, but an observer like Felicia could tell that they were giving each other grief in an intimate way that only close friends could. Thus, she had determined it would be uncouth to interfere.

It was a decision that showed her ability to grasp the true state of her master’s heart, a shining example of what a competent adjutant should be.

Until about half a year prior, she had often admonished Ingrid for the way she spoke and acted towards Yuuto, but recently that had stopped completely.

That was in large part because originally, those warnings had been intended to make sure Ingrid’s manner towards him did not damage his dignity and ability to command respect as a new ruler. Now that he had obtained massive support from the people as their lord and hero, Felicia had that much less reason to be concerned.

“Ngh...! Ahh, whatever,” Ingrid muttered. “I don’t really care anymore. I’ll let you off easy this time.”

Unable to withstand Felicia’s warm, admiring gaze any longer, Ingrid made a rushed excuse and let Yuuto go.

Finally released from Ingrid’s fists, Yuuto rubbed his temples and looked up at her quizzically. “Let me off...? Come on, what did I even do?”

“Who was it that came begging me to spend today teaching him how to make glass ornaments?”

“Huh?! ...Oh, crap, that was today?!”

“Yeah, it was! And I’ve been waiting for you to show up since this morning, while you sat here all warm lounging in your damn kotatsu!”

“Urk... I-I’m sorry, Ingrid...” Yuuto hung his head with shame and apologized.

He hadn't exactly been lounging around when she'd arrived just now, but the fact remained that he had broken his promise to her.

And Ingrid had a busy schedule of her own as the head of the Wolf Clan's Mótsognir Workshop. He'd asked her to part with some of that valuable time for his sake, and then forgotten all about it. It was disgraceful, and he had no excuse.

"Oh? I was not aware you had such an appointment scheduled for today, though..." Puzzled, Felicia began to flip through the bundle of papers on the table.

At this, Yuuto hurriedly stood up from the kotatsu. Today was even colder than average, enough to have made him hunker over shivering when making his last trip to the toilet, but now he seemed unbothered by the cold at all.

"A-anyway, I really did promise her. S-so, I've got to go for a little bit. I'll leave everything in your hands while I'm gone! And it's the workshop, so I won't need protection!"

"Huh?! Um, yes, all right." Still puzzled and still sitting in the kotatsu, Felicia gave a somewhat absentminded response.

That was enough for Yuuto. "Okay, then. You heard her, Ingrid. Let's go."

"H-hey, what gives?!" Thrown off balance and unsure what was going on, Ingrid stood there blinking, but Yuuto pushed her from behind, and quickly made his way out of the office with her.

Ingrid's current workshop had been constructed as an extension from the outer wall of the palace.

It was surrounded by a tall brick wall, outside of which members of the Múspell Special Forces Unit took turns guarding it ceaselessly.

The security was very strict. One could only enter from inside the palace grounds, by passing through two checkpoints manned by the elite Múspell guards. Even the famed "little fox" Kristina had given up on infiltrating the place.

In order to enter, a special permit signed by Yuuto (in clay tablet form only)

was required; no one was allowed in without one, no matter who they might be. And upon leaving, one's pockets and belongings were searched thoroughly.

Even powerful figures in the clan like Jörgen and Felicia were not excepted from these rules and procedures.

Additionally, once a person set foot into the place, they were considered to be under the jurisdiction and control of the Wolf Clan from that point forward.

These were severe measures, but absolutely necessary.

This workshop was chock full of items whose value dwarfed that of gold or silver, and it continued to produce even more new treasures all the time.

"Hey, there. Keep up the good work," Yuuto said to the guards as he passed them.

"Good work," Ingrid nodded.

But even with such a rigid system and strict security, Yuuto and Ingrid were two people whom it was possible to let in on sight. Of course, one was the man who actually issued the entry permits, and the other was the chief of the workshop herself, so it was only natural.

"Huh, it's kinda quiet in here today." As they walked through the entry passage, Yuuto tilted his head slightly in curiosity.

The last time he'd visited, the din from the hammers on metal and workers shouting had been loud enough to carry all the way back through the passageway to where he was now.

Ingrid sighed and gave an exasperated shrug of her shoulders. "Well, yeah, obviously. Today's the day off for everyone at my workshop."

"Ohhh, yeah... I think I remember you mentioning that now."

Back when Yuuto had first told Ingrid he wanted to make something out of glass, she'd told him that he'd get in the way of her workers, so she would teach him when the workshop had a day off.

She was going through all the trouble to teach him personally on what was supposed to be her day off, and here he was, only just having remembered that fact after forgetting the appointment entirely and standing her up... On

reflection, he'd really done wrong by her.

"Hey, I really am sorry," he said. "For taking up your day off, and everything."

"Ahh, forget it already. You've got a busy life too, right?"

As Yuuto tried to apologize to her again, Ingrid brushed him off with a confident grin, her lips parting to reveal the canine that stuck out a bit on one side, like a little fang.

Yuuto had failed to meet his obligation to her, but it seemed like she had decided to put that completely behind her. It was such a laid-back attitude, and a great relief for Yuuto.

"As always, you've got a ma— a majorly big-sister type of attitude. It's really cool." He'd almost slipped and said "manly," but caught himself at the last second and chose a better compliment.

It was truly a wise decision on his part. After all, if you're trying to put out a fire, the last thing you want to do is throw in more fuel.

"Yeah, well, I should, considering nowadays I've got about a hundred apprentices to look after. So? You gonna tell me why it is you wanted me to teach you how to work glass all of a sudden?"

Yuuto nodded. "Right, well, you know how Felicia and Sigrún's birthday is coming up soon. So I thought I'd like to give them something handmade."

"Oh, I see. So you came to me, and asked me to spend my day off here, for something like *that*?"

It bears repeating, but when you're trying to put out a fire, the last thing you want to do is throw in more fuel.

"Wha—?!" Yuuto began to panic as Ingrid's face grew visibly more upset by the second.

The air around them was cold and dry, but Yuuto thought he could see rippling waves of heat that seemed to come off of Ingrid. Perhaps it was only his imagination.

That said, Yuuto had to speak up, for those words had crossed a line for him. "Wh-what do you mean, 'something like *that*?' That's uncalled for. Those two

always do so much for me. This is important! Yeah, I get that it's not directly related to you, and I *am* sorry for making you spend your day off helping me, but still."

"Ngh... No, I..." Frustrated, Ingrid ran her fingers roughly through her hair. "...Look, I shouldn't have said that. I was wrong, okay?"

She still didn't look satisfied with the situation as it was, but even so, she was the type of girl who could give a clear apology when she felt she'd done something wrong. That was one of her charms.

"Still, why does that mean I have to spend my only time off helping you make a present for another girl? What did I do to deserve that, huh?"

Ingrid kept on muttering to herself under her breath, too quiet for Yuuto to hear, but it was clear that this situation had crossed a line for her, as well.

"Ah, kinda feels like it's been a long time since I got to do this kind of work," Yuuto said, with a nostalgic look in his eyes, and jammed his shovel into the huge pile of black rocks. He then lifted up a shovelful and heaved it into the blazing brick furnace.

Though the procedure differed slightly, he'd spent countless hours on end doing this kind of work in order to refine iron, back in the days before becoming the patriarch.

Perhaps the winter season had something to do with it, but the hot air blowing against him felt comforting.

Incidentally, the building they were currently using, Ingrid's third official workshop, was constructed similar to a square pavilion, with four big pillars supporting the roof and thin wooden walls made out of sliding wood panels. The wood panel walls could be slid open or even removed entirely, and right now, two of the sides were removed, so there was proper air ventilation for running the furnace.

Of course, the workshop grounds were surrounded by the aforementioned high defensive walls, so the site didn't exactly have great airflow, either. It was just fine during the winter, but apparently a real nightmare in the summer.

Thump, thump, thump!

Next to Yuuto, Ingrid was keeping a close watch on the strength and color of the flame in a second furnace, steadily pumping the bellows with her foot.

In total silence.

With a strangely excessive amount of force.

As if she were stomping on the face of her worst enemy.

Yuuto was adding fuel to the furnace which would be used for processing and treating the glass, while Ingrid was monitoring the glass melting furnace — the crucible.

A young apprentice craftsman had been manning the melting furnace until a few moments ago, and Ingrid had taken over.

In order to create good quality glass, one needed to melt it thoroughly for a long period of time, at a steady 1,400 degrees Celsius. Because of that, this furnace was constantly manned by the workshop craftsmen in shifts, and apparently it had only been allowed to go cold once in the past half year.

“Ugh, I hate to say it, but I’ve gotten weaker,” Yuuto said, doing his best to strike up casual conversation. “Guess it really is bad for your strength if you don’t move your body every so often.”

In actuality, it was true; he could already feel his muscles starting to cry out. He was definitely going to be in for some muscle pain tomorrow.

If Ingrid were her usual self, she would probably respond with something like, “Yeah, obviously. What did you expect? You’re always stuck to your damn desk. Get some exercise once in a while. You’re gonna end up getting sick if you don’t.”

That was her style, with a harsh and pushy tone, but with considerate thoughts behind the words she gave him.

But right now Ingrid wasn’t responding. Still seemingly in a bad mood, she just kept stomping down on the bellows. She didn’t say a word.

“Haahh...” Wiping the sweat from his brow, Yuuto let out a long, despondent sigh.

It had been like this since the moment they’d entered the workshop.

The young apprentice who had been on shift until a few moments ago had also manned the glass furnace overnight, and so they'd sent him home, not wanting to wear him out any further. But thanks to that, the atmosphere had gotten pretty uncomfortable.

Almost certainly, the conversation they'd had in the passageway earlier was the cause. However, it wasn't clear to Yuuto exactly what Ingrid was mad at him about.

He thought it was only right and natural to want to give something back to the people who had done so much for him, and Ingrid herself was the type of person who should have understood and respected that feeling of moral obligation.

For Yuuto, this situation just left him bewildered.

And, as it so happened, it was the very fact that he *didn't* understand that was the most aggravating thing of all for Ingrid, and so he couldn't do much about it.

That said, he knew this was also no kind of environment to be trying to create something in.

Making something by hand was an act in which the mental state of the craftsman was often borne out in the final product. Yuuto didn't want to give the two girls presents that had been created in this uncomfortable, depressing mood.

"Hey, Ingrid." Yuuto made up his mind, and called out to her seriously.

"What?" Ingrid gave a terse response. It seemed she wasn't determined to go as far as ignoring him even if he called her by name.

She stepped off of the bellows for a moment, and picked up a shovel instead.

"Look, I know I did some things that upset you, and it was wrong of me. But please, stop acting like this."

It's not like you, was the next phrase that sprung to his mind, but he held his tongue.

Two years ago, he would have undoubtedly said it. In that sense, Yuuto had matured at least somewhat.

In particular, this was good because the shovel in Ingrid's hands was a potentially dangerous weapon.

"Then tell me how I'm supposed to act, since you've got such an eloquent way with words," Ingrid snapped, shoving the tip of the shovel into the pile of black rocks with a loud *shiik!* that seemed to perfectly represent her current feelings. It was violent, and a little frightening.

However, whether or not their glassmaking would turn out well or not hinged on Ingrid's feelings. Yuuto couldn't afford to back down here.

"Look, I really am sorry. Just, please."

"Hmph!" Ingrid turned her head the other way.

Undiscouraged, Yuuto ran around to her other side and put both his hands together in a gesture of humility.

"Come on, I'm begging you. This sort of mood is horrible for both of us, right? Especially since it's just the two of us right now."

"Wha?!" Suddenly, Ingrid's face turned completely red.

Yuuto flinched, thinking, *Crap, did I say something dumb again and make her even angrier?!*

"W-well, y-yeah, that's true. With the two of us a-alone together, it's rough if the mood is bad." Ingrid let go of the shovel and placed her fingers together, awkwardly fidgeting while looking down.

Aha. So that's it, Yuuto thought. *She's wanted to make up and move on this whole time, too. But she missed the right timing to do it and couldn't bring herself to bring it up afterward. Heh heh, she's always such a bashful girl.*

Inwardly, Yuuto was grinning at Ingrid's charming clumsiness, though in reality, he was completely off the mark.

With her head still facing down, Ingrid began muttering too quietly for Yuuto to hear, apparently talking to herself. "Yeah, that's right, I went to the trouble of picking a holiday in the first place so my apprentices would be out and we could be alone together."

It was a little bit frightening to watch.

Still, Yuuto knew that this sort of eccentricity was common enough among artists and creators.

In fact, Yuuto's father had been like that. Suddenly, a new idea would fall upon him like a revelation, and he'd become completely absorbed in that and nothing else. At times like this, it was better for both parties to not try and prompt the person with conversation, but let them be.

Yuuto patiently watched Ingrid as she continued to mutter quietly to herself, nodding occasionally.

"He and I are both busy people," she muttered, too quietly for him to hear. "We couldn't often get a chance like this, even if we tried. I can't let any more of this time go to waste. This idiot keeps treating me like a guy, so first things first, I've gotta get him to recognize and see me as a woman!"

Ingrid suddenly smacked her fist into the palm of her other hand. It would seem she had finished working through her thoughts, and returned to the real world.

"S-still, you know what?" she said out loud to Yuuto. "H-hearing you say 'just the two of us' like that, it's kind of embarrassing!"

Ingrid fanned her face with her hands while saying this, but something about that and her tone seemed a bit unnatural and forced. Especially the way she put extra emphasis on the words "just the two of us."

By contrast, Yuuto's response was completely nonchalant. "Really? I'm actually pretty glad it's just the two of us alone."

"Whaaah?!" Ingrid's already-red face flushed an even brighter shade. "Wh-what d-did you just say...?" She inquired in a stammering voice.

She was acting very strange, one hand clutched to her chest as if she were having trouble breathing. But her eyes were locked onto Yuuto with a passionate stare that seemed to be trying to drill the answer out of him.

Something about this abnormal state of hers made Yuuto pull back a bit, but he still answered her. "I mean, I can't afford to show off how bad I am at this stuff in front of your apprentices, right? I'm the patriarch."

"...Right, right. Of *course* that's what it is. I figured as much."

"Oh, that and there's also, you know. I really can't afford to let them see you chewing me out like a lame novice, either."

"Hmph, must be tough for the great Lord Patriarch, always having to think about keeping up his image." With that bit of sarcasm, Ingrid once again turned away from Yuuto.

She reached for the shovel again, and began to lift a full scoop of black rocks towards the glass furnace.

Visibly upset, she once again began muttering inaudibly to herself, with her back turned to Yuuto. "Argh, I got all nervous and excited for nothing. That's how he always is, I know that. He really doesn't think anything of me."

Yuuto spoke to her again, though, in his typical unassuming and casual manner. "But thinking about it, now that I'm the patriarch, you're the only one left still willing to be strict and yell at me. Just you. Thank you, Ingrid."

"Whewat?! What do you—?!" Shouting with surprise, Ingrid whirled around to face him. Because she'd given up hope once, she was completely taken off guard.

Their eyes met.

In that instant, Ingrid's face was a mix of both surprise and a beautifully sweet look of expectation, yearning. It would be appropriate to say it was like a flower in the midst of blooming.

For the first time since he stepped foot in the workshop, Yuuto looked at her and his expression grew flustered— "Gaaaghhh!"

—and cried out in anguish as a shower of hard black rocks slammed into him.

Of course, if one spins around quickly with a shovel full of rocks in hand, such an outcome is natural.

"Uugh... That's bruised, all right." Loosening the protective cloth wrapped around his midriff, Yuuto grimaced as he inspected the damage.

By Yggdrasil standards, Yuuto was still on the weaker side of the scale, but he did plenty of walking every day, and got in a share of training with the sword

when he could. His abdominal muscles were tight and well defined.

“S-sorry about that.” Ingrid seemed pretty guilty about the incident, but Yuuto dismissed it with a wave.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Even monkeys fall from trees.”

“Are you calling me a monkey?! Ahh, whatever, I guess I get your meaning.”

“Ah, sorry,” said Yuuto. “The only other saying that came to mind was ‘Even Kōbō Daishi’s handwriting contains mistakes,’ and I’m pretty sure that one definitely would have gotten lost in translation.”

“Huh. Well, in either case, it’s a small mercy none of it hit you in the face. Sigrún and Felicia would have seriously killed me.”

“Nah, even those two wouldn’t get that angry over something like this.”

“Yeah, let’s hope. Those two are so fiercely devoted when it comes to you, sometimes it’s downright scary.”

“Ha ha ha.” Yuuto laughed dryly, but soon grew serious again. “But you know, for someone like me, that’s something to be incredibly grateful for. That’s why I at least wanted to give something back to them for their birthday.”

“Hey, don’t talk like you’re worthless. That’s disrespectful to their feelings. And you know their devotion to you can make them downright scary sometimes.” Ingrid rephrased her earlier line, smirking.

There was no longer any ill feeling between Yuuto and Ingrid regarding making the presents for the other two girls, at least.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Yuuto said.

In the end, Yuuto still wondered why Ingrid had been upset with him, but he decided it was better to let sleeping dogs lie at this point.

“All right, then,” Ingrid said. “Hm, looks like it just needs a little bit more.”

Closely watching the fire in the glass processing furnace, Ingrid pumped the foot bellows and sent in more air.

Seeing the utterly serious, focused look in Ingrid’s eyes made Yuuto’s pulse quicken. The sight of a person genuinely applying themselves to a work with all

of their mind and spirit can, at times, be more beautiful and alluring than if they were covered in the most gorgeous garments.

Of course, that sort of thing was way too embarrassing to say out loud.

So instead, Yuuto went with the next question that had popped into his head. “Oh, yeah. How is the coke working out as fuel?”

This was the name for the black rocks the two of them had been shoveling into the furnaces, a fuel made by baking coal in the absence of air to refine it.

Humans had a long history with coal, with records of it being used in forges in ancient Greece as far back as 315 B.C. There was archaeological evidence of it being used in ancient China during around the same era, as well.

However, coal’s use had remained rather limited for a long time, with wood-based fuels remaining most common until closer to the modern day. Coal’s utilization and popularity had finally exploded during the British Industrial Revolution in the 18th century.

“It’s working pretty well,” Ingrid said. “It’s got so much more heat potential that I was hesitant at first, though.”

“All right. In that case, let’s do our best to switch to using that for our glass manufacturing where we can. We’re also refining iron, so we shouldn’t rely too heavily on wood fuels if we can help it.”

Yuuto sat and stared at the furnace, his chin propped up on one hand.

The production of glass required very large amounts of fuel.

From ancient times until the Middle Ages, workshops for producing glass had been built in the middle of forests, which were then completely exhausted of their trees for fuel. Production would then move to a different section of forest and continue this pattern, even moving across all the forested areas of a region.

Even the Japanese tatara-style furnaces the Wolf Clan used needed to a great amount of wood for fuel. The Wolf Clan was blessed with plentiful woodlands in their territory, but even with that, it was easy to imagine that they could end up depleting all those resources quickly.

Fortunately, back when Yuuto had made his hot springs trip to Mount Surtsey,

he had discovered a layer of coal (called a coal bed) within one of the rifts in the earth caused by the active fault in the area. He had immediately decided that it should be mined and put to use.

At the time, Ingrid had gotten exasperated and yelled at him, “We came all this way here so you can relax! Don’t you damn start trying to work again now!”

Well, back in the present, that part hadn’t changed.

“Oh, good grief, stop trying to find ways to think about your patriarch work every damn second!” she snapped. “We’re here right now to make birthday presents, aren’t we?”

Then she lightly poked him on the head with her fist.

For some reason, it was a comforting feeling.

“Right. Okay then, guide me if you need to, scold me if you need to. I’m in your hands. Let’s do this together, chief!” Yuuto grinned, energetically addressing his teacher in the same way her apprentices would.

“Chief! If we’re making glass, why did you give me this paper and reed pen?” Yuuto found himself raising his hand and voicing his discontent.

Even though he’d come here to make and work glass, he had been sat down at a desk with pen and paper as if he was back in his office. And he was far away from the furnace, so with the removed walls of the workshop, it was terribly freezing! That combination was enough to make him want to start asking questions about this setup.

“Stuuupid,” Ingrid sneered. “First thing you’ve gotta do is decide exactly what you want to make, or we’ve got nothing to start with.”

“Ohhh...”

Yuuto had a vague idea in his head of what he wanted to make. However, glasswork wasn’t easy enough that you could simply make what you wanted after a day or two.

Practically speaking, even for a genius like Ingrid, it took at least a month of hard work before she could produce something good enough to sell. For her apprentices, it took over half a year.

In other words, without Ingrid's help every step of the way, there was no way Yuuto would be able to create what he wanted. So, she certainly needed detailed information on exactly what it was he wanted to make.

"I've got some sample pieces laid out over there," Ingrid said. "Use them as a guide, imagine what you want to make, and draw it on the paper."

"Hmm... okay, got it!"

There was something similar to the image in his mind among the samples, so he was able to smoothly draw up an illustration of his ideas on the paper.

Yuuto wasn't blessed with the amount of natural genius that his biological father and Ingrid had, but he was still fairly skilled with his hands. His illustration was pretty finely detailed.

"This one's for Felicia, and this is the one for Rún," he said, pointing at the paper.

"Hmm, so it'll be a single-flower vase for Felicia. And for Sigrún... what is this? That thing won't hold water, you know?" Ingrid furrowed her brow as she studied the drawing.

Yuuto was pleased with himself that he managed to put that confused expression on her face. The corner of his mouth twitched up as he explained.

"It's a type of ornament called a wind chime. Well, in my homeland, we call glass ones like these a *furin*, meaning 'wind bell.' This stick-shaped part catches the wind and taps the bell... and it makes this really soft, pretty ringing tone."

Yuuto just couldn't picture giving Sigrún a glass flower vase or cup; they didn't match her personality well. When the idea for the wind chime had struck him, he'd clenched his fists in triumph.

Normally it was a seasonal decoration for the summer months in Japan, but something about the clear and beautiful sound it made seemed to match Sigrún well.

Ingrid nodded, impressed. "Huh. I see. Pretty interesting. I bet the nobles from Glaðsheimr would line up in droves to buy this thing."

"Hey, you got on my case for thinking about work, so don't you go thinking

about business plans right now!”

“Tch, shut up. It’s fine if I do it.” Ingrid tossed that remark over her shoulder, then continued to study the drawing, muttering to herself. “If I take that and... then do that with... hrm...”

“Uhh, I pretty much just drew what was in my mind without thinking too much about it, but do you think we can make it?”

“Yeah, no problem. All right, the furnace is about ready, too. Let’s get to work making them.”

“So for the glassblowing method, the main tool we’ll be using is this iron blowpipe.” Ingrid pulled the long iron rod from out of its place in a tall, water-filled bucket, and handed it to Yuuto. It was about as thick as his thumb and very long, about as long as Ephelia or the Claw Clan twins were tall.

“You blow in this end, where it’s narrower. The other end’s where we’ll stick the molten glass, and this end, we’ll be sticking into the furnace. You’ll notice it’s all black.” Ingrid pointed to the way the metal was charred.

“Uh huh, okay,” Yuuto nodded.

“It gets pretty hot, so hold it as close to the end as you can.”

“Got it.”

“And use your fingers to keep the blowpipe turning. Don’t stop.”

“Hm, like this?” Yuuto tried rotating the pipe with his thumbs and forefingers.

Ingrid gave a single nod in the affirmative. “Mm-hm, like that. All right, I’m gonna go check the crucible.”

Ingrid gestured with her thumb toward the melting furnace filled with burning coke and the fired clay container inside containing the raw glass — the crucible — and briskly walked over to it.

Using a large, charred-black set of long iron tweezers, she opened the lid of the crucible and peered in through the round hole at the molten glass inside, which gave off a brightly shining orange color.

“Good, it’s ready. All right, take the blowpipe and stick it into the hole, then

turn it to gather a bit of glass around the tip. Keep it spinning just like I told you, okay?”

“Aye-aye!”

“Looking good, looking good... er, I mean, yeah, that’s about right. Okay, next, bring that over to the processing furnace.”

“G-got it.” Somewhat gingerly, Yuuto pulled the blowpipe from the first furnace and carried it over to the one next to it. This was the furnace he’d lit and shoveled coke into himself to set the flame.

“Come on now, you already forgot to keep it turning.” Closing the lid to the crucible, Ingrid scolded Yuuto. She was grinning a bit impishly too, like she was enjoying it.

“Oh...!” Panicking, Yuuto started rotating the blowpipe again, but the seed of glass on the end had already started to be pulled downward by gravity, and its once-clean round outline had grown oblong and warped.

“O-oh crap, did I screw it up?”

“Ha ha ha, well, don’t worry, it happens to everyone at first. Give it here.”

Ingrid snatched the blowpipe from Yuuto’s hands, and kept it spinning while inserting it into the processing furnace. Next she set it against the top of the sheet of iron covering a table next to the furnace, and deftly spun the rod, changing its angle against the iron sheet with slight movements. She then put it back in the processing furnace to reheat, then spun it against the iron sheet again, and repeated this process several times.

“See, there you go, nice and rounded,” she said.

“Oooh...” Yuuto was so impressed that he unwittingly found himself applauding.

To him, Ingrid’s skilled motions already looked like those of a total master of the craft. This despite the fact that she’d only been trying out glassworking for less than half a year.

Those hands of hers had the “gift,” and there was no other way to describe it. It was almost magical.

Even when it came to producing Japanese-style swords like the *nihontou*, Ingrid had quickly picked up all of the necessary knowledge and techniques from Yuuto while working with him, and now her skill at making them had already far surpassed his.

For Yuuto, who had spent so much time helping his father with that work since he was an elementary schooler, this really brought home how much impact a difference in natural talent could make.

“Okay, we’re going to blow air into the glass now,” Ingrid directed. “Go on, blow. As hard as you can.”

“Pfff—!”

“Not hard enough. Look, it’s not expanding at all.”

“Phfff!!”

“Not enough! Do it harder! Harder!” Ingrid yelled.

Seriously?! Yuuto couldn’t keep his inner thoughts from showing on his face.

He’d been blowing with all his strength, as far as he could tell. But the blob of glass hadn’t swelled up one bit.

“Ugh, you really are slow in the head, you know that?” Ingrid groaned. “You’re the first one I’ve seen who couldn’t do this part right.”

“Ngh...”

That’s because the only people who get to work with you are apprentices whose talent you’ve already personally judged and found worthy, Miss Natural Genius... Yuuto thought resentfully, but he stayed quiet and kept that bit of backtalk firmly in his head. He felt like if he said it aloud, it would only make him sound pathetic.

“Here, give it to me again for a sec.” Ingrid took the blowpipe away from him again, and blew into it as a demonstration.

She didn’t appear to be blowing all that hard. However, the glass blob was clearly swelling as a bubble of air formed inside it.

“That’s how you do it.”

Yuuto wasn't finding this all that enjoyable. But there was nothing he had any right to complain about with what she was doing. So, instead...

"Hey, Ingrid?"

"Hm?"

"You shouldn't do that kind of thing so easily, okay?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, you know I put my lips on that blowpipe, too."

"Ghh!" Ingrid's breath caught in her throat, and for the third time that day, her face turned a bright shade of red. However, since she was standing right next to the furnace, it only looked to Yuuto like she was catching the light and heat from the flames inside it.

"You're technically a girl, you know," Yuuto added.

"Technically?! What the hell do you mean, technically?!"

"I'm just worried about you as your friend."

"As my friend, huh..."

"I really do think of you as an important friend, and partner. We make the best team! So I don't really care about it, but..."

Ingrid looked down, and muttered under her breath, "I *want* you to care about it."

Yuuto continued, unable to hear her. "But there might be people who see it and get the wrong idea in their heads."

"Get that idea yourself," Ingrid muttered.

"Stuff like that, it's... you know, you should only do that with the person you like, okay?"

Ingrid muttered more fiercely than ever, "Yeah, and I've only done it with you...!"

"Hey, what the hell, Ingrid? Why are you just muttering under your breath?" Yuuto asked. "Whatever it is, say it to my face. And if you can't, that doesn't

give you an excuse to act that way.”

The two of them were the same age, but Yuuto was admonishing her in the way an older brother might.

Ingrid took a deep breath, then motioned with her finger for him to come closer.

There was plenty of background noise from the roaring flames in the furnaces. Perhaps it was only that he hadn’t heard her well because of that noise, and she had just been speaking more softly. If so, then he’d been the rude one for having misunderstood her attitude. With that thought in mind, Yuuto moved closer to her.

Carelessly.

As soon as he was within her reach, Ingrid grabbed him by the ear and pulled him close, and screamed right into his ear.

“I said, DON’T WORRY, BECAUSE THERE’S NO ONE IN MY WORKSHOP AS TACTLESS AND STUPID AS YOU!!”

Spinning the iron blowpipe end in the furnace, Ingrid growled to herself furiously. “That bastard. I already knew it, but he really doesn’t think of me as a woman at *all*!”

Yuuto was sitting in a stool at a workbench some distance away. That was where they’d be using handheld iron tools like scraping spatulas and long, chopstick-like tongs to shape the glass in finer detail. That wasn’t something a beginner could be trusted with, however, so for now she was just letting Yuuto get experience handling the tools.

Of course, none of that really mattered to Ingrid right now.

“It looks like at least in his head he gets that I’m a girl, but... ‘technically,’ urggh. He seriously doesn’t see me as a potential romantic interest at all.”

She’d gotten so absorbed in the act of making glass together that she’d forgotten, but now that she thought about it carefully again, the whole point of her arranging for the two of them to be alone together had been so that she could get him to see her as a woman.

“I can see now, that bastard’s never gonna change his thinking if I only use half-measures. Th-this calls for more drastic measures.” Ingrid hardened her resolve. She would just have to put up with the embarrassment for a bit.

If she couldn’t do that much, their relationship would never progress one step further. She couldn’t afford to worry about details anymore.

Turning around, Ingrid called out to Yuuto and gestured with her chin to the work station. “All right, Yuuto. You see that special dark black paper over there?”

“Yeah, there’s a whole bunch of it stacked up.”

“Grab some of it, and hold it spread out in one hand.”

He obeyed. “Whoa, it’s soaking wet.”

“Yeah, ’cause if it weren’t, you’d get burned.”

Ingrid carefully lowered the end of the blowpipe, setting the red-hot glass on top of the thick wet paper. Continuing to rotate the blowpipe with her right hand, she placed her left hand under the paper, overtop Yuuto’s.

She squeezed Yuuto’s hand with her own, guiding it to shape the glass with the paper.

H-how’s that?!

“Ohh! Cool, I think sparks flew off the glass just now!”

Dammit! He’s not paying attention at all!

However, even this result was within Ingrid’s expectations. That had just been a warm-up. Next it was time for the real deal.

“Okay, now I gather another layer of glass on the seed, and... All right, Yuuto, this time you’re going to hold the blowpipe and shape the glass at the same time.”

“Wh-whaat?! You think I can do that?! It seems super hard.”

“Some things you’ve just gotta learn by doing them. You know that much.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right!” At first Yuuto sounded a bit lacking in confidence, but at last he nodded firmly, the corners of his mouth pulling up in a grin.

There were the iron refining process, the rotary quern, the watermill, and of course the *nihontou*. In each case, in the beginning, the results had been horrible failures.

But Yuuto and Ingrid always worked together, through failure after failure, and through trial and error they always finally figured out how to make the project right.

Nothing ever went perfectly on the first attempt. But Yuuto understood that nothing worthwhile could be accomplished without taking that first, uncertain step.

“Do your best, Yuuto,” Ingrid said. “I know you can do it.”

“Aaall right, then! I’ll give it a shot!” With gusto, Yuuto took the blowpipe from Ingrid.

Nowadays, Yuuto’s tendency to be deliberate and farsighted was what stood out to people, but that was thanks to a certain traumatic incident and his experience ruling as patriarch afterward. At his core, Yuuto was actually a very passionate and excitable man, one who loved the act of making things.

With just a bit of a push, she’d ignited that passion in him.

Yuuto took a deep breath...

“Khh, come on!”

That said, passion alone couldn’t do much to help him on a task like this.

Even the apprentices trained in the workshop by Ingrid had so much passion for the work that they often ignored sleep and meals when they got absorbed in their tasks, and they still needed over half a year before they could make something good enough to sell.

For a beginner like Yuuto, however focused and careful he might be, the result was practically a foregone conclusion. The shape of the glass in his hands began to warp and break down before his eyes.

“Th-this is how you do it.” Ingrid reached over and grasped the blowpipe, demonstrating how to turn it. She did this over his shoulder, from right up against his back.

Ingrid's chest was by no means small. Certainly, it wasn't anywhere near the level of Felicia's, but Ingrid was confident that it was at least average-sized or better. She pressed up to his back hard enough for her breasts to fully change shape against it.

Breasts were the part of the body that was the very symbol of womanhood, so Ingrid was certain that if she did this, Yuuto would have to start thinking of her as a woman. She peered at Yuuto's face, looking for his reaction.

"L-like this?! Uuurgh! This is so hard. Ngh!" Yuuto's face was the very picture of earnest focus on a singular task. He grunted and muttered to himself, completely absorbed in trying to properly shape the glass.

It seemed like he wasn't even aware of the sensation against his back.

If he were Ingrid's apprentice, she'd want to praise him to the stars for such magnificent concentration, but instead Ingrid lightly knocked him upside the head.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?!" Coming back to his senses, Yuuto started complaining.

Ingrid ignored him.

As far as she was concerned, he should be grateful she hadn't used the hot glass on him like a branding iron.

"All riiight! We're finished!" Yuuto hollered, thrusting both arms triumphantly toward the ceiling.

The design of Felicia's flower vase was accented by bits of jade melted into the glass to create an ascending, pale green spiral, surrounded by tiny flakes of gold dust.

Sigrún's wind chime had a bit of cobalt melted into its glass to create a flowing, deep blue pattern across its surface, surrounded by tiny flakes of silver dust.

The tiny glass clapper for the bell had been made separately, and was hollow through its center. This was accomplished by using an old glassmaking trick, whereby pushing together two pieces of still-forming glass creates a hole

between them.

Gold and silver were quite rare and valuable in Yggdrasil, but Yuuto had decided to splurge and use them because it truly seemed to match the image of the two girls. Looking at the finished products, he was glad he'd done so.

"Both of them came out pretty well, huh?" he said.

"Heh, well, I did most of the work making them, so that should be no surprise." Ingrid turned away and tossed out that remark with a scornful tone.

After her first few failures, she had continued to try various different ways to get Yuuto to notice her as a girl, but all of them had ended in vain, so the fact that she was irritated and sulking right now was only natural.

"Ugh... that's true," Yuuto admitted. "In that case, I guess it'd be more fair to call these your creation than mine."

Yuuto's shoulders slumped and his face fell, a complete 180 from his excitement a moment ago. He, of course, still didn't have the slightest clue of the reason for Ingrid's current attitude.

And as irritated as Ingrid was, she couldn't ignore seeing someone actually feeling down about themselves like that. Despite herself, she was kind at heart.

"You idiot," she said. "I was just messing with you. You were the one who came up with the design for both of those, including the shape and the surface patterns. You did your best to help make them, be it blowing air into the glass or trying to fine-tune the shape. You put your heart into this. That's what's most important, right?"

"...Yeah. I hope so, at least." Yuuto nodded slowly, and glanced over at the kiln containing the two finished pieces.

Finished glassworks couldn't be left exposed to the outside air right away, or they might crack from cooling too quickly. Instead, they were put into a special furnace set at a lower heat, and slowly and gradually cooled over time. Finishing the process would take several more days.

"Phew...! Well, good job to the both of us, then." Ingrid gave a long stretch, and grabbed the front of her top, flapping it to try and let in the air and cool

down.

She wouldn't normally do this sort of thing, but the embarrassment and shame from her attempts at seduction had left her body unbearably flushed with heat. There was also the fact that she'd gotten much more relaxed around Yuuto.

However...

"Ingrid! What the hell are you doing?!" Yuuto exclaimed.

"Huh?"

Wondering what it was she'd done, Ingrid turned to face Yuuto, and found him looking strangely flustered and covering his eyes with his hands.

Incidentally, there was clearly an open gap between his fingers.

Ingrid got what was happening right away. "Hmm, what's wrong? I thought you 'didn't really care,' wasn't that right?"

A mischievous grin spread wide across her face, and she slowly inched her way up to Yuuto. Naturally, she did so while leaning forward in a way that emphasized her cleavage.

"Y-yeah, I did, but that doesn't mean...!" Red-faced, Yuuto attempted to argue back, but he was too flustered to find the words.

Yuuto had been completely focused on the task at hand while he was working, but it seemed that now that work was done, his attention was once again up for grabs.

"Hmm-hm-hmm! ♪" Humming to herself, Ingrid grabbed Yuuto's arm, and in a smooth motion wrapped her arms around it and leaned her body against his.

Naturally, doing so meant he could feel the sensation of her full, round chest pressing against his arm.

Under normal circumstances, Ingrid would never do something like this; her sense of shame would have gotten in the way. But everything she'd gone through today had worn out such senses, and right now she had nothing left to hold her back.

“Wh-what are you—”

“What gives?” she asked. “You and I are partners, right? So this sort of thing should be fine.”

As Yuuto devolved into more of a panic, Ingrid grew more satisfied, and thought to herself, *It serves you right.*

After failing to get a reaction from him despite everything she’d tried so far, her confidence in her appeal as a woman was on the verge of being shot to pieces. At the very least, making him lose his head like this would restore some of her self-confidence.

Now then, what should I do next— “Ingrid!!” Yuuto burst out, grasping her by both shoulders. His grip was considerably strong.

C-crap! Fearing she’d gone too far, Ingrid braced herself.

He said, “There’s something I’ve always thought I should tell you, and I need to make it clear...”

“Ah...”

Those words sent a sweet sensation like pins and needles through her, and she felt the tension drain from her muscles.

Instead, her heart began to beat so fast that it hurt.

Does this mean... he also feels the same way toward me? We did spend almost half a year in each other’s constant company, after all.

But didn’t this guy already have a girl he liked back in his homeland?

Well, for a guy as great as him, I suppose there’s no need to restrict him to just one girl.

Various thoughts raced in circles through Ingrid’s mind in those few seconds. Even so, she already knew what response she wanted to give him.

And so, she made up her mind to ask him to tell her. “Wh-what is it?”

Yuuto’s lips slowly parted, and then he said, “You’re just way too careless about yourself.”

“...Huh?”

“Like, earlier you had no problem putting your mouth on the same thing I did.”

“Uh, er, that’s...”

“And now that I really think back on it, didn’t you end up pressing your chest and stuff up against me when we were working, too?”

“Y-yeah, and that’s because...”

“No, listen! You need to try to be more aware of the fact that you’re a girl!”

.....

.....

A furious heat burst out of Ingrid, like an intense explosion of steam.

“You, of all people...!”

Ingrid’s left foot slammed hard into the stone flooring. That power traveled up through her waist as it twisted forward, and into her clenched fist. She unleashed that power along with a scream that came from the depths of her soul.

“You’ve got no right to say that to meeeeee!!”

Ker-pow!

Ingrid poured everything into her fist — all of her body’s tension and recoil, all of the strength in her left arm, and all of the divine power granted to her by the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades — and that fist slammed square into Yuuto’s jaw.



Yuuto's feet left the floor as her uppercut sent him two and a half meters into the air. It was a truly beautiful hit, the sort that would be a critical hit in an RPG.

"Hmph! I'm going to go fetch the next man for furnace duty!" Ingrid snarled. "In the meantime, you can just stay here and clean the place up!"

Sparing not a glance towards Yuuto incapacitated and sprawled out on the floor, Ingrid stamped her way out of the workshop with long, angry strides.

Even the elite Múspell guards shuddered and silently stepped out of her path when they saw her approaching, so intense and visible was the anger pouring off of her.

"Gah...! If you act like that, don't expect anyone to wanna marry you!" Back in the empty workshop, Yuuto held a hand to his aching jaw and slowly staggered to his feet.

As he did, something nearby caught his eye.

It was a large bucket haphazardly filled with glass items. Each of them was cracked or broken in some way. They looked to be failures from different stages of the production process. The glass itself could be broken down and melted again into new pieces, so it was stored like this until it could be recycled.

Unexpectedly, a thought flashed across Yuuto's mind.

"Hm, looks like I'm gonna need to get serious and lend her a hand myself."

The next morning, Yuuto caught up with Ingrid heading down the passage leading to the workshop, and greeted her with a wide grin.

"Morning, Ingrid. Sure is nice weather this morning!"

Ingrid, however, only responded with an intense scowl, as if she were disgusted. She was clearly still in the foulest of moods, and hadn't gotten over what had happened the day before.

She jerked her head to the side and refused to return his greeting, and tried to walk past him.

"Hey, hey, wait up." Yuuto hurriedly tried to stop her by putting a hand on her shoulder.

“...Hmph!” Ingrid forcefully threw off his arm and kept moving.

It looked like her attitude was dire indeed.

Yuuto saw that things were heading in a poor direction, both from his position as a friend and from his position as patriarch of the clan.

Ingrid was an indispensable person to the future development of the Wolf Clan. If she grew so fed up with her patriarch that she were to leave, the loss to the clan would be incalculable.

So Yuuto didn’t give up, and ran around in front of Ingrid. “Look! Just hold up a second!”

He spread his arms and legs wide in the narrow hallway, completely intent on preventing her from going further.

Ingrid’s glower grew worse, but at last she gave a long sigh. “What is it? What do you want with me?”

“It seems like I made you mad yesterday. So I wanted to apologize for that, and—”

“Well, I already accepted that yesterday.” Ingrid waved a hand dismissively at Yuuto, with every indication that they were done talking here.

Indeed, yesterday Yuuto had gone to personally apologize to her before the day was out. However, Yuuto could tell by her attitude right now that she clearly still hadn’t forgiven him.

“No, I figured an apology with words alone would just be, you know...”

“Hmph, so you’re gonna try to buy my feelings, eh?” she snapped. “Ohh, *this* oughta be good. Of course, you’ve got something good enough to impress the world-famous Ingrid, I’m sure? Like a masterwork from the great Völundr of Glaðsheimr, or from the genius brothers Brokkr and Eitri of Miðgarðr.”

“You think there’s any way I could get something like that in a day?” Yuuto sighed and shook his head, his shoulders drooping.

Those were all names of master smiths and artisans said to be the greatest in all of Yggdrasil. That said, Yuuto didn’t doubt that the girl standing here in front of him was likely one or two levels of talent above every one of them.

And that was exactly why simply giving her something made by them was no guarantee she'd change her mood for the better. In fact, it might only serve to make her mad again.

"The most important thing is the heart put into it... right?" Yuuto held out his closed hand to Ingrid, and opened it in front of her eyes.

Resting in his palm was a round glass item, like a bead.

However, rather than a normal spherical shape, it was slightly flatter on the sides and had a sort of curved "tail" that was somewhat reminiscent of the shape of a firefly.

It was transparent in color, but perhaps because Yuuto had mixed various different impurities into the glass, when it caught the light, it sparkled with many different colors, one after the other.

"It's called a *magatama* back where I come from, and... I made it myself."

There was an ancient glasswork method that was still in use in the 21st century, known as lampworking. The concept of glass-making dated back to possibly as early as around 4,000 B.C., and during its early history, the lampworking method was used to make beads and other small, simple ornaments.

Yuuto had used a thin stick of glass from out of the pile of failed products, thin enough that he could melt it over the same type of iron brazier that was used to heat the air in the kotatsu. As the glass melted, he had poured it into a hollow clay mold, and then slowly cooled it overnight.

Because it was such a primitive method, even an amateur like Yuuto could make something reasonably decent with it.

"I also put a cord through it, so you can wear it around your neck." Yuuto proudly pointed to the larger part of the magatama, where there was a small hole all the way through it. He'd used a very thin iron rod wrapped with a slip made from grass, pushed in and out of the glass while it was still very hot in order to pull open a hole in the center. "I know I shouldn't be saying this right after I made you mad yesterday. But, you've just gotta think a little more about how you look. After all, uh, you know. You're good-looking to begin with."

Yuuto turned his head to look away as he spoke. He was too bashful to look her in the face while saying something like that.

“W-well, of course I can’t guarantee any results if you wear some cheap-quality thing I made, but you know!” he added.

He couldn’t help but throw in a self-deprecating joke, as well. If he didn’t, he was sure his face would catch fire from how hot it had become.

“...Hmph!” Ingrid sniffed, and quickly moved to snatch the item from Yuuto’s hand. But as her hand reached his, it stopped. She slowly and carefully took the magatama into her hands, clutching it gingerly. And, tying the cord behind her neck, she presented herself to him with a blushing, bashful look. “H-how do I look?”

“G-good. It looks good on you. Now you’re sure to be more popular!” Yuuto was still struck with a strange sense of embarrassment himself, and awkwardly gave Ingrid a thumbs-up.

For some reason, something felt weird and different between them. It was like the bashful girl in front of him was a different person from the one he thought he’d known, and it was throwing him off.

“You know, it’s not like I’m really interested in becoming popular, though.”

And yet, the words out of her mouth were still unromantic.

That attitude was such a total waste. As her sworn parent, Yuuto felt he needed to give her a bit more of a push.

“Oh, come on, now, don’t say that. You’re already at that age. You can’t afford to keep living your life just focused on making things, you—”

“It’s fine. That’s the kind of girl I am. I’m devoted to what I love.”

Grasping the magatama in her hand, Ingrid smiled. It was a bright, truly lively smile that showed off the little protruding canine that was one of her charm points.

“All right then, I guess it’s time for me to get on with the day’s work!”

Interlude 5

“Aaaaah... This is so comfortable,” Rífa said with a wide, slack-jawed smile that was quite slovenly for someone of her station.

It was something that Erna and Thír, the servants assigned to her by Fagrahvél, should normally have pointed out to her, but the two of them were likewise lounging comfortably, with similar dreamy expressions of pleasure.

The three of them were together in a private room in the new high-class inn that had recently been built in the eastern district of Iárnviðr. They were now in this state because of putting their feet into the warm kotatsu set up in the center of their room.

“We would love to just stay curled up here forever...” Rífa said dreamily, and yawned. “...No, that won’t do! We said the same thing yesterday, and the day before that. To spend any more of our limited time resting would be an insult to Fagrahvél, who went through so much trouble for our sake.”

“Ah...!” Erna cried.

“Y-yes, quite right!”

Upon hearing their beloved patriarch’s name, Erna and Thír both returned to their senses.

Rífa gave them a satisfied nod, and continued. “Right, then let us go to one of these so-called taverns tonight.”

“You mustn’t!”

Rífa scrunched her face up in a disgruntled scowl as her two servants rejected her demand without a second’s pause, and in perfect unison to boot. She was a girl whose mood and expressions changed easily and often.

“Explain why,” she demanded. “We’ve heard that information naturally gathers at such places. We have only so much time left. There could be no more suitable location than this to begin with, if we wish to become more informed.”

“That is of course true, but taverns are also places where many men gather,” Erna said. “Such men are often drunk, and without their inhibitions. I believe

that three women entering such a place would inevitably find themselves in an unsavory situation, eventually."

"Yes, that's right," Thír agreed. "I think at least a few drunken patrons would approach us out of curiosity alone."

"Then you two only need to protect us. We just want to go see what it's like!"

Despite their attempts to persuade her, Rífa stubbornly refused to accept their words.

We might never again have such a chance to see places in the outside world on our own.

If Rífa simply gave in here, she would surely carry the regret with her forever, and she didn't want that at all.

However, these two girls were charged by Fagrahvél with ensuring her safety. It would seem they weren't planning to follow her orders when it came to things that might endanger that.

"No, even for Einherjar like us, it's uncertain if we could protect you properly if we were largely outnumbered," Erna objected. "It's too dangerous."

"Yes, we can't allow it!" Thír cried. "Lady Rífa, you are the one who carries on the most sacred and noble bloodline in all of Yggdrasil. Please, endure the disappointment of not going."

"Mmmph...! So, even though we asked you this earnestly, it's still no good?" Rífa puffed out her cheeks and pouted, then asked her two attendants again, in confirmation.

Silently, they both nodded firmly in response.

"Very well, then..." Rífa's shoulders dropped, and she hunched over, seemingly disheartened—

"Læðingr!"

—and in that instant, she reached out to place a hand on each of her servants' chests, and spoke a word of power.

"What?!" They barely had time to raise their voices in surprise, and their

bodies collapsed weakly onto the tabletop of the kotatsu.

They had fallen prey to a seiðr magic that restricted the body's freedom of movement.

"Ghh...! We were careless!" Erna cried.

"But this isn't... enough to..."

Erna and Thír still resisted with all their strength, and grasped the kotatsu rim, desperately pushing themselves back upright.

"Ohhh, impressive, just as expected from the Einherjar that good Fagrahvél chose," Rífa smirked. "We struck you directly on the skin with Læðingr, and yet you are still able to move. Well, then... how about this? Gleipnir!"

"Gnh?!"

All of a sudden, the remaining strength in their arms vanished, and the two Einherjar only managed a grunt as their upper bodies again collapsed onto the kotatsu. This time, they weren't able to push themselves up again.

Gleipnir was a power to bind and contain supernatural forces. It was a seiðr mainly used for apprehending and restricting Einherjar.

Rífa exhaled. "Whew, that was quite tiring. Activating two seiðr in succession without any rituals or incantations does take its toll."

She looked down at Erna and Thír as she wiped the sweat from her forehead and bangs.

In that moment, the two faces looking back up at her were overcome with shock.

"Th-that... that's...!"

"It can't be...!" Thír exclaimed.

"Mm? What, surely the two of you were aware?" Rífa chuckled, as if amused by their surprise.

Her two eyes, staring haughtily down at them, each contained a shining, golden rune.

ACT EXTRA: Þjálfi's Daily Ordeals "Now then, everyone, let us end this sacred ritual in celebration," Alexis said. "Lend me your hands, and your voices. Together, now..."

"Congratulations!!" Following the lead of the goði Alexis, the attendees cheered in unison, and a smattering of applause echoed in the ritual hall.

Today was the day when the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr and the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr were fortifying their bond as newly sworn brothers, with the ceremony of the Oath of the Chalice.

Each of their respective clans was among the most powerful in Yggdrasil. As such, usually before such an important ceremony, messengers would be sent out in all directions, gathering guests and visitors from across the region. The citizens would receive gifts of alcohol in commemoration, and turning the day into a great national festival would not be uncommon.

However, the citizens in town were currently going about their daily business, entirely unaware that this event was taking place. In the ritual hall, there were fewer than ten people in attendance.

If one were to consider the authority and influence of those involved, it was a sad excuse for a ceremony.

However, one might also say that it could hardly be helped. After all, this particular ceremony could not afford to be made public yet.

As the ceremony concluded, the masked man known as Hveðrungr stood up and held out his hand to Steinþórr. "I'll be counting on you from now on, Brother."

In Yggdrasil, the Chalice ceremony was a sacred and inviolable ritual. At the very least, they had each officially declared a stance of mutual recognition and respect, or else it couldn't take place.

The act of participating while still concealing one's true face with a mask was

unmistakably an offense. In truth, though none said so openly, in secret there had been quite a bit of protest about that from the attendees from the Lightning Clan.

However, such matters of formality and appearance were, as usual, trivial to Steinþórr. “Who cares about the details” had been his response. There was only one thing that was important to him.

“Yeah, same here.” The red-haired young man smiled mischievously and took Hveðrungr’s hand, squeezing it.

“Ngh!” Instantly, Hveðrungr’s confident smile vanished. The force in the hand clasping his was far too great to be construed as anything friendly.

Hmph! This is likely his way of “greeting” me, Hveðrungr thought to himself coolly.

The two of them had become sworn brothers of equal standing to each other, but today was also the first time they’d met. The oath between them was mostly political in nature, an alliance based on the principal of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Likely, the Lightning Clan patriarch wanted to test him, and see just what sort of man his new ally was. Steinþórr was said to have the heart of a tiger, but to Hveðrungr, this was the move of the sort of dullard who had muscles for brains.

Still, this was also a rare chance for Hveðrungr to get a firsthand experience of just how powerful the man known as the strongest in Yggdrasil truly was. He squeezed back with every ounce of his own power. He held back nothing, pouring his strength into his grip with every intent of crushing Steinþórr’s hand, an act at odds with such a diplomatic ceremony. However...

“Hmm... that’s all you’ve got, huh?” Steinþórr muttered in a bored tone, quietly enough so that only Hveðrungr could hear.

It didn’t seem to be a taunt or bluff; he was genuinely disappointed.

Damn it! I’ve no hope of coming close to him in physical strength, after all.

Hveðrungr was leagues stronger than a normal human, but a bit below average when compared to other powerful Einherjar.

He wasn't the mightiest in terms of pure physical strength, but he had incredible abilities that more than compensated for that, thanks to his rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.

And so, personally, Hveðrungr didn't particularly mind that he'd lost this sort of simple contest of pure strength. But there was another factor at play.

As a patriarch, I can't allow anyone else to look down on me.

If he were to be taken lightly because he was "weaker," it could potentially cause problems in future military strategies involving the two clans.

Hveðrungr concentrated his whole mind, focused it on his hand, and exhaled.

"Mm? Whoa?!" Suddenly, Steinþórr lost his balance and stumbled in place.

"Oh, is something wrong, my red-haired brother? Dizziness from standing up too fast, maybe?" Hveðrungr smiled coldly down at Steinþórr, who had lost his footing and almost dropped to a knee.

Steinþórr looked back up at him and blinked a few times, seemingly unaware of what had just happened. However, after a moment, his mouth curled up into a vicious smirk, and he let go of Hveðrungr's hand, clapping him heartily on the shoulder instead.

"Hey, that was a pretty neat trick you pulled, my masked brother. You know, I remember the last guy who did something like that to me, a skinny guy who looked like a sick, scraggly wolf."

"I'm not sure what you mean." Hveðrungr had an idea who that "scraggly wolf" might be, but he chose to shrug his shoulders and play dumb about both that person and the technique he'd just used.

There was no way he could one-up a monster like this in terms of pure power. So he'd used the willow tree technique, which he'd stolen from his former teacher, the previous Mánagarmr of the Wolf Clan. Hveðrungr had deftly and subtly redirected the flow of force and manipulated Steinþórr's center of gravity.

"Now, then. I'm reluctant to have to part with my new brother already, but I'm afraid the long journey here has left me quite tired," Hveðrungr said. "I shall

take my leave for today.”

Spinning on his heel in a way that caused his cloak to flap behind him, Hveðrungr turned his back to Steinþórr and left the room.

After walking for a while, he checked to make sure there were no people around, and then muttered to himself, “Hmph, I’d heard rumors about him, but he really is a monster in every sense of the word. I never suspected he was that strong...”

He stared down resentfully at his right hand, which was still throbbing with intense pain.

He’d used his special technique to get one over on Steinþórr, but in the end, that had only worked because the young man’s guard had been down.

The instant Steinþórr had grasped his hand, he’d viscerally felt the overwhelming gulf in strength between them. It had only been a moment of entertainment for the Lightning Clan patriarch. He likely hadn’t been using even half of his actual strength.

If he’d wanted, the Lightning Clan patriarch could have crushed all the bones in Hveðrungr’s hand and wrist, without granting him any time to attempt any clever tricks.

To Hveðrungr, it really felt as if his hand had been held in the open jaws of a tiger.

On the other hand, this experience had also been beneficial; it had granted him a feeling of absolute certainty.

“For someone like him, breaking through that vexing carriage wall defense should be a simple matter.” Hveðrungr smiled to himself.

In the previous war with the Wolf Clan, he’d finally managed to jump some of his horses over the wall of wagons by borrowing the magic power of a seiðr, but that method could only work for at most a few dozen riders. That wasn’t enough to win with, and now that he’d used it once and made it known, such a risky tactic would not likely work again.

And that was exactly why his nemesis, that little brat, surely did not suspect

that the Panther Clan had already found a new tactic in such a short amount of time.

That was also why today's Oath of the Chalice ceremony had been conducted behind closed doors and kept secret. It was all so that the brat would have no chance to come up with some bizarre counter-strategy.

"Keh heh heh... spring cannot come soon enough."

If it were possible, he would have liked to launch a new invasion right away, but both the Panther Clan and the Lightning Clan had sustained significant damage to their forces in their most recent wars. And so, they planned to spend the rest of this winter focusing on healing their wounds and recovering their strength.

And once they'd recovered to full strength again, they would attack. This time, that despicable little brat would finally breathe his last.

"Enjoy this brief moment of peace while you have it, Yuuto. Heh heh! Ahahaha!"

"You picked a fight with him right after swearing the Oath of the Chalice to become his brother! What in the world were you thinking?!" Þjálfi exclaimed.

"L-look, I said I'm sorry."

The delegation from the Panther Clan had been properly seen off. Now, alone with Steinþórr in a room in Bilskírnir's palace, Þjálfi was laying into him with a stern lecture.

A patriarch was the sovereign of both his clan and the citizens of his territory, a singular figure of absolute and unquestionable authority.

If the sworn parent of the clan claimed that white was black, then that became the understood truth; if he commanded it, then his child subordinates would have to charge ahead even if it was into certain death. That was the weight of the Oath of the Chalice.

In the Lightning Clan, however, the patriarch being scolded and lectured by his sworn child was a rather everyday occurrence.

"Honestly... It'd be one thing if you were just picking a fight with someone out

of nowhere, but why do you have to take it all the way to physical violence?!”

“Uhh... er... I guess, because I thought it’d be fun?”

“Hauughhhhhh...” Þjálfi let out a very long and pained sigh that was almost a groan. He pinched the upper bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, shaking his head lightly side to side.

He was still only in his mid-twenties, but he already had deep wrinkles on his brow that wouldn’t go away, and the mental exhaustion from constantly dealing with his patriarch was undoubtedly the cause.

“He really hasn’t changed a bit since the day I met him...” Muttering those words ruefully to himself, Þjálfi’s mind journeyed back into his memories of the past.

In a way, it was a momentary escape from the present reality.

It all started seven years prior.

The Lightning Clan was in a state of war with its close neighbor, the Snake Clan, and Þjálfi was the general charged with commanding the fortress at the border between the two countries.

There was a Snake Clan fortress across from them on the other side of a river. Neither side had a definitive advantage, so there were constant small skirmishes, but they were keeping each other in check. This situation continued day after day for about a year, until one day, a single young man was transferred in from the capital.

Years later, Þjálfi would still be able to remember that day as clearly as if it were yesterday.

“Hey there, you’re Þjálfi, the head of the fort, right? I’m Steinþórr. Good to meet ya!”

It went without saying, but the young man created a horrible first impression.

Þjálfi was barely eighteen, but he had already set himself apart from others, both with the great valor in battle typical of an Einherjar, and also with his attentiveness and a talent for management that was at odds with his large and hearty frame. Because of this, he was well respected within the clan, and had

already gained a seat at the foot of the table of the high officers.

As for Steinþórr, there were great hopes for his future, but he had still not received the Oath of the Chalice from anyone. In other words, he wasn't officially a full member of the Lightning Clan yet.

"Boy, it seems like you don't know how to treat the people above you with respect." Þjálfi glared down at the insolent red-headed young man, and spoke with a heated edge to his tone.

Þjálfi was a man of huge build, one of the largest and most muscular one might find in all of Yggdrasil, and Steinþórr was only a boy of thirteen, still only partway through his growth spurt. The stark physical difference between them was truly that of man and child.

An average boy with a normal mind would have been overwhelmed to the point of shaking by this huge, threatening presence looming over him. But the red-haired boy simply replied, without any fear or fervor, "Above me? But strength means everything in this world, right? Are you stronger than me, then?" He sounded indifferent.

Þjálfi had already heard from several sources about this boy, that he was a "child prodigy" possessing not one but two runes. But he hadn't known the boy would be such an unbearably insolent little twerp.

I see how it is, Þjálfi thought with annoyance. More than likely, growing up with the adults around him constantly spoiling him with attention had led to him becoming this arrogant.

"Well, how about we find out?" Þjálfi decided he would respond to the boy's petty provocations.

Arrogant brats like this one needed to have a few painful experiences early on, to learn what the harsh real world was like, for the sake of their futures.

And more than that, as the leader of his own clan faction with several hundred subordinates, Þjálfi couldn't afford to let a little brat like this talk down to him, or it would set a bad example for his men.

"Ah, really?!" Steinþórr looked up at him with an expression full of excitement and curiosity.

That part of him really was like a typical young boy, like a precocious little rascal who still hadn't outgrown his penchant for mischief.

"That's right. However, we're only using these." Þjálfi held out his clenched fists towards Steinþórr.

By now, when it came to martial prowess, Þjálfi was among the top three in the Lightning Clan, and he had rock-solid confidence that he couldn't lose to a mere boy whose body hadn't even finished growing.

That said, his opponent was a rare twin-rune Einherjar, said to be one of only three in the world. He wasn't sure whether he could afford to go easy on him or not yet.

But there was also the fact that this boy was known as the clan's "treasure," entrusted to him by his patriarch. He couldn't allow for the risk of accidentally killing him in the fight. Thus, he was insisting on barehanded combat.

Reflecting on this much later, Þjálfi would lament the incredible stupidity of the assumptions his past self had made. Indeed, his past self had been so stupid, it would make him want to cradle his head in his hands.

After all, he had chosen to fight barehanded against a ferocious beast in the guise of a human. There was nothing as reckless and stupid as that.

"...Gah!" When Þjálfi next regained consciousness, he was looking up at an earthen-colored ceiling.

He recognized the pattern of it, the little discolored spots. This was his own room, the fortress commander's quarters. Apparently he'd been fast asleep.

"Was that a dream? ...Ghh!" As he tried to sit up, an intense pain sprang from his back and the back of his head, and he nearly fainted again.

That pain brought back the memories of before he'd lost consciousness, as vivid as they were unpleasant.

He had been completely and utterly beaten. Just like a wild beast, his quick and agile opponent had dodged every attack.

Seeing this, Þjálfi had used taunts to try to provoke the boy into a head-on contest of strength, but he'd lost in that grapple just as easily, and in the end,

he'd been casually tossed through the air by a child less than half his weight.

He had no memory of anything after that.

"Oh, are you awake?" A girl opened the door and entered, and on seeing him awake, her eyes widened very slightly.

She had wavy, golden hair that flowed down to her waist, and wore a reserved smile that spoke of elegance and refinement. She was a girl whose appearance fit the image of a proper lady.

"I heard you lost a fight in a rather unsightly fashion, Big Brother," she said. "And to a child no older than me. Everyone in the fortress is talking about it, you know."

He could feel the sting in each of her words. And above her gentle smile, the light in her eyes was cold.

"Did you come here to finish me off with insults, Röskva?" Þjálfi glowered back at her wearily.

She was his younger sister by blood, but Þjálfi had a hard time dealing with her. There was something about her he couldn't fully understand, and it made her vaguely frightening to him.

"Please allow me an insult or two," she said. "Because of an unreliable and disappointing brother, my plans have suffered a large and wholly unnecessary setback." She gave a soft sigh.

Each motion of her body language was perfectly noble and graceful, but instead of compassion, there was nothing but acrid contempt behind every word she spoke.

Þjálfi couldn't help but lament to himself, *What a horrible and twisted personality this girl has.*

"You're talking about your plan to make me into the next patriarch, right?" he said. "I keep telling you, I don't have what it takes for the position."

Þjálfi slumped his shoulders and smiled bitterly.

It was already a constant struggle for him just leading and managing the five hundred soldiers stationed in the fortress. The idea of shouldering the burden

of leading the entire clan felt to him like a weight far too great for his shoulders.

"You tend to undervalue yourself, Big Brother." With a troubled expression, Röskva tilted her head to the side and supported it with one hand. "You are surpassingly strong and brave on the field, and despite your young age, you are prudent and attentive, earning you popularity and trust from those beneath you. If you carry on as you are, you will without a doubt be considered one of the future candidates for successor... or, you would have been..."

Þjálfi wasn't boneheaded enough to miss what she was saying. In other words, his blunder had pushed that timetable back.

Of course, these were expectations that had been selfishly thrust on him by someone else, and so having her berate him for betraying those expectations only left him feeling offended instead of guilty.

"Well then, why don't you just become the patriarch yourself?" he demanded. "Without using me."

"I cannot, since I lack the sort of disposition that makes one well-liked by others." Röskva's reply was immediate, and dispassionate.

So you're aware of it yourself! Þjálfi almost laughed, but kept control of himself.

However, Röskva seemed to see straight through him anyway. "What's so amusing? I happen to think that I understand myself quite well. I am more fit for the position of second-in-command or assistant to the second, from where I can use the authority of a respected patriarch to allow me to use my talents and acumen as I see fit."

Seven years in the future, under Steinþórr as patriarch, her words would be a reality — it would indeed be Röskva who singlehandedly controlled domestic affairs as the Lightning Clan's second-in-command. But right now, Þjálfi was a mere mortal with no idea of the future, and so he just laughed at her.

"Heh, that's pretty big talk from a thirteen-year-old little girl."

"Oh? And who was the one who was helplessly beaten by a thirteen-year-old little boy?"

“Ugh!” Þjálfi choked on his words.

She had said what would cut him the most deeply. It was one more example of how clever his little sister was.

She was an Einherjar like her brother, bearing the rune known as Tanngnjóstr, the Teeth-Grinder. But somehow Þjálfi always found himself to be the one grinding his teeth in frustration around her.

“I cannot believe it... even if he is a child, you should not have let your guard down so much,” Röskva said sternly.

“I didn’t let my guard down, not one bit!”

“...What?”

“That boy’s a real and genuine monster in terms of power. He was just way too much for me to handle... heh.” Þjálfi chuckled a bit sadly, laughing at himself.

He, the man praised as one of the three strongest fighters of his whole clan, had fought a child of thirteen who was going easy on *him*, and still lost. It was downright comical.

“Oh, hey! You’re finally up!” And speak of the devil, the boy in question called out in a cheery voice and entered the room. “Looks like I was the stronger one after all!”

His wide grin was cocky but innocent, like the bully among a group of small children who ends up becoming their leader.

“That means I get to do whatever I want with this place, okay?” Steinþórr said eagerly.

“...No, I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“Huuuuh?! Hey now, hey now, I won, remember?!”

“Yes, that fight was entirely your victory. But just because it was, that doesn’t mean I can just let you do whatever you want here,” Þjálfi stated firmly. “It would set a bad example for the men. The chain of command would break down, and everyone would lose morale. I can’t just sit by and let something like that happen. So as long as you’re in this fortress, I need you to follow my

orders.”

Þjálfi was excruciatingly well aware that saying this after having taken the boy up on his challenge and lost was an act of poor form.

Even so, he had been entrusted with this fortress by his patriarch, and there was no telling when the enemy might attack. He had a responsibility to maintain the forces here in a state of perfect readiness.

If they suffered a military defeat, it wouldn’t just endanger the lives of the five hundred soldiers here, but all of the local villages along the border, as well. He was in no position to worry about a little loss of face.

That was the amount of thought and personal responsibility behind Þjálfi’s words to Steinþórr.

But none of that seemed to reach the red-haired boy. “Uhh... I don’t really get it, but, eh, who cares about the little details,” he said dismissively.

“It’s really, really not a little detail at all, though...” Þjálfi replied, his shoulders drooping. From his perspective, it was a grave matter concerning every person in the fortress. He’d only just woken up, but he already felt incredibly exhausted.

“Well, I mean, isn’t it simple? All I have to do is capture that Snake Clan fortress, right?” Steinþórr confidently gestured out the nearby window with his thumb, at the enemy fortress visible in the distance.

Þjálfi was respected by many for his generosity and patience, but this attitude finally got him to snap. “Quit screwing around! Everyone in this fortress is my sworn child or grandchild, my family! I don’t care if you’re physically strong; you’re an amateur who’s never been through a real battle! I’m not gonna lend even one of them to someone like you!”

This was behavior that went far beyond mere disrespect and into total ignorance of authority.

What the hell are those idiot clan captains in the capital thinking?! Þjálfi’s indignation led him to curse more than just the boy himself.

Sure, the boy was incredibly strong in terms of fighting ability, but he was so

spoiled, it was ridiculous.

Seeing Þjálfi so angry that a blue vein was standing out on his forehead, Steinþórr widened his eyes in puzzlement for a moment, then laughed wryly and waved and casually waved a hand at him.

“Huh? No, no, you’ve got it wrong. I’m not gonna take any of your men. I’ll rephrase it. I’m going to go take out that fortress, *all by myself*.”

With the thumb he’d gestured at the fortress, the red-haired boy pointed to himself, and smiled broadly. It was a fearless and savage smile.

Crunch munch. Munch munch.

One by one, the various foods covering the table in front of Steinþórr vanished into the pit of his stomach. The bread surely contained some grit, as usual, but Steinþórr didn’t spit anything out.

Of the boy’s two runes, one was Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer. Thanks to that, crushing some tiny bits of stone between his teeth was apparently no trouble at all.

“Phew! That was a good meal,” the boy grinned. “But it’s not a real meal unless I finish it off with this.”

He reached out and grabbed hold of a 1-ell-tall pitcher, filled to the brim with cow’s milk. (Equivalent to 51.72 cm or 20.36 inches, the ell was a standard measurement in Yggdrasil based off of the length from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger of the first divine emperor, Wotan.) He brought the whole pitcher to his lips and leaned back, heartily gulping it down.

After downing the pitcher’s contents all at once, he wiped his mouth roughly with his arm.

“All right, guess I’ll set out now! This’ll be a good post-meal workout.”

Tossing the empty pitcher to one of the serving women, Steinþórr stood up as if to leave.

“Set out? Where are you going?” Þjálfi asked.

He was so taken aback by the incredible voracity (or perhaps gluttony) of the young man’s consumption of the table of food, he found himself asking the

question without thinking.

“Where? I told you earlier, didn’t I? I’m gonna go capture that Snake Clan fort.”

“All by yourself?” Þjálfi asked.

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“Heh heh, you’re gonna have to wait and see!” Steinþórr laughed fearlessly, and made a show of tapping his shoulder with the scabbard of his large, two-handed sword. He was completely sure of himself.

Þjálfi, on the other hand, couldn’t see anyone taking down a fortress singlehandedly as anything more than a flight of fancy.

Still, he’d also just finished learning firsthand that common sense didn’t apply to this boy. He couldn’t shake a growing sense of expectation, a sense that perhaps Steinþórr had some clever scheme he would use in conjunction with his incredible skill, and would actually accomplish the task.

“I see,” said Þjálfi. “Even though you’re going alone, I’m sure you need to make some sort of preparations. Is there anything you want me to have ready for you?”

“Hm? Huh. Well then, I’d like a large cut log, about as big as you.”

“A log? That’s all you need?”

“Yeah, that’ll be enough.”

“Understood. Give me a moment.”

Þjálfi passed an order along to his subordinates, and quickly had the requested item brought to them.

It was an essential siege weapon used in attacks on the other fortress, so they only to needed bring one from the nearby storehouse.

“So, where do you want to have this taken?” Þjálfi asked.

“You don’t hafta take it anywhere. I’ll take it from here.”

“What do you mean, you’ll take it? You can’t possibly carry it by...”

Before Þjálfi could finish, Steinþórr picked up the heavy siege log with one hand, hefting it onto his shoulder.

Þjálfi and everyone else in the room stood there, blinking in silence. That log had taken four fit soldiers working together to carry into the room.

“Right then, see ya. Be back soon,” the red-headed boy said.

And Steinþórr walked out, turning his head for a moment to wave a casual goodbye to the people behind him.

Þjálfi and his men could only stand there dumbfounded as they watched him leave.

Once he returned to his senses, Þjálfi hurriedly went with his sister Röskva to climb one of the lookout towers on the outer fortress wall, so that he might follow the young man’s movements.

As the commander of his fortress, Þjálfi had more important work he needed to be doing, and the time he’d wasted lying unconscious thanks to his foolishness had put him that much more behind schedule. However, he was filled with curiosity.

What was this abnormal young man planning to do, and what would come about as a result? That curiosity won out over Þjálfi’s sense of duty.

“Where is he...?” Þjálfi squinted and scanned the area.

Þjálfi had been a shepherd in his youth, and part of that lifestyle was protecting livestock from predators, which meant he had needed to be constantly scanning the distance for signs of those. Because of that, his eyesight was among the most exceptional in the Lightning Clan.

Even in the world of the 21st century, the nomad Massai people of Africa looked after livestock in a similar fashion, and were famous for incredible long-distance eyesight three to eight times better than the average person.

It took only a moment for Þjálfi to spot Steinþórr. “There he is.”

The red-haired young man was just about to start across the Gjálp River.

The Gjálp River was one of the smaller tributaries of the great Körmt River which nourished both the Álfheimr and Vanaheimr regions. It was also currently the effective border between the controlled territory of the Lightning and Snake Clans.

Steinþórr walked straight into the river, unfazed by the prospect of being soaked.

“Oh, come on, now. He might as well be shouting at them to spot him,” Þjálfi remarked.

The area on the far bank of the river was being patrolled by Snake Clan soldiers, and under the watch of the enemy fortress watchtower besides. A man carrying a huge log on his shoulders wasn’t exactly going to remain unnoticed.

Before long, more than a dozen Snake Clan soldiers gathered on the bank, unleashing a volley of arrows upon Steinþórr just as he reached the middle of the river.

He was carrying that heavy log while his legs were busy fighting the current of the river. In that state, both guarding and dodging would be impossible. It seemed to Þjálfi like a desperate situation...

Whoosh, whoosh! Steinþórr swung the log around, swatting away all of the oncoming arrows.

“Wh-what incredible physical strength...” Þjálfi could only stare agape at this display.

It had taken four large men working together to haul in that thing, but this young man was swinging it around as freely as if it were a stick. Þjálfi was seeing it with his own eyes, and yet still couldn’t really believe it.

It was enough to make the Snake Clan soldiers stand stock still, as well.

With a mighty heave, Steinþórr launched the log forward at them. It caught five soldiers as it landed, instantly crushing them underneath.

And that was the final straw.

The Snake Clan soldiers saw that the one in front of them, however human in

appearance, was clearly some sort of otherworldly monster or beast. Overcome with fear, some of them threw their weapons down and fled, while others fell weakly to the ground, unable to stand back up.

Steinþórr leisurely strode the rest of the way across the river.

“Hmm. He’s still an insolent little brat, but I must admit he’s incredible,” Þjálfi muttered to himself, impressed.

It was a splendid, almost enchanting display of strength and skill. Having fought the boy once, Þjálfi had already gotten a taste of that strength himself, but this was still far above and beyond what he’d imagined.

Currently, Steinþórr’s older brother by birth, Vingeþórr, was lauded as the strongest in the Lightning Clan. But clearly, this abnormal young man was even stronger still.

And that surpassingly strong young warrior had just barely ago declared in full confidence that he could topple the enemy fortress by himself. Surely, he had to have some sort of equally impressive tactic for doing so. Þjálfi’s expectations intensified.

But...

“Wh-why are you just attacking the main gate head-on?!” Þjálfi couldn’t help shouting.

It seemed that this young man continuously did things that betrayed his expectations.

There was no room to doubt Steinþórr’s impressive strength and valor. However, this was too bold and foolish a move to make, even for him.

Certainly, compared to the towering, thick brick walls of a major city, the Snake Clan fortress defenses were smaller and less fortified.

Still, it was a walled fortress hosting several hundred soldiers. Naturally, archers were lined up against the battlements atop the walls, and they began to rain arrows down at Steinþórr from the gaps in the parapets.

Even if he could swing around that huge log, it wouldn’t be enough to defend against such an enormous torrent of arrows all at once. At last, this seemed to

Þjálfi like a truly desperate situation, but...

“Wha...?! Is he *actually* some kind of wild animal?!” Þjálfi shouted.

Steinþórr’s legs were now proving to be just as inhuman as his arms. He hopped nimbly left and right as he advanced through the rain of arrows, dodging them all. Not a single arrow even so much as grazed him.

His movements were fast as lightning, so much so that the Snake Clan archers couldn’t seem to follow him well enough to aim true. And he was doing all of this while still carrying that huge log.

Just how agile would he be without it, then? Just thinking about it was vaguely frightening.

But there was no time to think.

WHAM!

The sound of a tremendous impact rang out, loud and deep, and echoed several times, as if it were in the mountains.

Steinþórr had slammed the log against the main gate of the Snake Clan fortress.

That part made sense. It made sense, but once again Þjálfi doubted his eyes.

He’d always been confident in his vision, and he’d never had cause to question his eyesight until today.

The imposing fortress gate, itself built solidly out of thick logs, had been smashed into splinters by a single strike.

Along with that gate, the common sense of Þjálfi and the soldiers of the Snake Clan was similarly smashed into pieces.

It was certainly true that heavy logs were commonly used as a siege weapon, smashed against the gate of a wall in order to break through it. But ordinarily it took many dozens of blows in order to break down a gate in that way. Attackers were forced to endure one-sided attacks from the defending enemy during that time, meaning serious casualties were a given. And that, in turn, was why a head-on assault on a well-armed city or fortress was considered a poor strategy.

“He... he’s absurd!” This was the definition of jaw-dropping, and Þjálfi couldn’t find any more words.

This young man was doing no less than flipping all of siege warfare strategy on its head.

Seven years in the future, the Wolf Clan patriarch Yuuto Suoh would utilize an advanced weapon known as the trebuchet to do much the same thing, but the red-haired young boy known as Steinþórr was accomplishing it here with just the strength of his own two arms.

“Hurry, men, hurry! We can’t afford to let that kid die!” Þjálfi shouted as he raced across the field, leading five hundred men behind him.

They hurried across the Gjálp River without incident, and were nearing the Snake Clan fortress.

Capturing the fortress and its territory across the river had been a desperate goal of the Lightning Clan for a quite a long time now. It was no misstatement to say that their goal was finally within reach.

However, at that moment what flowed through Þjálfi’s heart was not waves of excitement, but of regret.

“Who the hell would just charge in through the gate?! Seriously, is he just a dumb animal?!” Þjálfi spat contemptuously as he ran.

Just destroying the gate was more than enough of an accomplishment. All the young man should have done at that point was to fall back and wait for Þjálfi’s soldiers to arrive, but it seemed that “charge forward” were the only two words the fool boy knew.

Officially, that red-headed kid was the precious “treasure of the clan,” entrusted to Þjálfi’s care by his patriarch. If he died here, it was possible every bit of honor and standing Þjálfi had built up over his life would at once crumble into dust.

He would surely be spoken of in rumors as a low and petty man, so resentful over losing a fight that he had sent the boy alone to die in enemy territory. Such gossip would be inevitable. After all, in the struggle for power and standing in the clan, there were those who ruthlessly used such things in their efforts.

Whatever the truth might be, people like those would not be so foolish as to let such a sweet chance pass them by.

His younger sister by birth, Röskva, was talented at manipulating things behind the scenes, but even she wouldn't be able to cover up such a serious incident as this.

Still, such concern for himself was not the source of Þjálfi's regret. More than that, what consumed his heart was the feeling that this young man's death would be a huge and terrible loss for the Lightning Clan as a whole.

The boy was still young, wild and undisciplined. But after gaining more experience and the ability to think with discretion, surely he would one day become a great general, reliable and worthy of carrying the future of the Lightning Clan on his shoulders.

"Please, let me make it in time..." Þjálfi muttered to himself under his breath.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have had no hope of making it on time. But, just in case, he had taken the precaution of telling Röskva beforehand to round up his soldiers and have them ready to launch an assault. Thanks to that, he'd been able to assemble and lead his troops here in less than two hours.

That being said, however monstrously strong the red-haired boy was, it was unthinkable that he could have survived for two hours fighting while completely surrounded by several hundred enemy soldiers.

It was unthinkable, and yet...

Þjálfi found himself smiling in satisfaction. "Of all the damned places you'd end up..."

There wasn't a trace of surprise on his face this time.

That was only natural.

After his predictions and assumptions had proven wrong again and again, at last he saw exactly what he'd come to expect.

In the center of the fortress, atop the highest platform, a flag was billowing in the wind.

Two hours ago, it had been the flag of the Snake Clan, but now it was a flag with the symbol of the Lightning Clan. It had been made from a large white cloth, likely grabbed from somewhere inside the fortress, and the runic symbol of the Lightning Clan was painted on it with human blood.

Þjálfi strained his eyes and scanned the interior of the fortress through the open gateway, and saw innumerable bodies strewn about, along with some survivors curled up on the ground, ghastly pale and completely unwilling to fight.

“Hey, there! So, how about it? I said I’d do it myself, didn’t I?” A familiar voice called down to Þjálfi as he and his men finally reached the entrance to the fortress.

It had only been a few hours since he’d last heard it, but Þjálfi found it strangely nostalgic.

Looking up, he saw the boy sitting above him with an arrogant smile on his face. He wasn’t just red-haired; his entire body was stained red. He grinned down at them, boasting in a way that was indeed quite childish. Even so, Steinþórr’s face was dripping with sweat and he was breathing heavily, his shoulders heaving. As expected, even he was worn out. Still, he looked healthy.

Apparently most of that blood must just have come from his enemies, and he didn’t have any major injuries.

“Heh. Damned monster.” Þjálfi sighed and repeated the words he’d already spoken many times that day. But this time, it was with a wry smile.

He’d finally come to the point that whatever this young man did, it would no longer surprise him.



...Or rather, he was sure he'd reached that point at that moment in time seven years ago, but time would of course go on to prove him still naive.

Even in the immediate aftermath of that incident at the fortress, he threw his hands up and shouted, "In Týr's name, give me a break!" when it was discovered that Steinþórr actually hadn't suffered even so much as a single scratch.

Þjálfi could indeed remember all of it as clearly as if it just happened yesterday, so it was astonishing to reflect that seven years had passed already.

Every morning, Steinþórr got up and drank milk before eating breakfast, then sortied to battle; he washed down his lunch with milk and then sortied to battle; he topped off his dinner with milk and then sortied to battle.

Somewhere along the way, that young man had risen to become the Lightning Clan patriarch, and Þjálfi had become the assistant to his second-in-command, and thus the third most powerful figure in the clan.

Looking back on it all, the past seven years had full of crazy happenings.

Once, back when the previous patriarch was still in power, during a huge all-out battle with the Snake Clan, the Lightning Clan forces were defeated and nearly wiped out. In that moment of despair, some suicidal fool volunteered to serve with Þjálfi as the rear guard and buy time for the retreat. That fool then held off the advancing enemy and even drove them back, returning home safely from the field.

Another time, the Hoof Clan to their north launched an invasion, and the enemy boats tried to cross south across the Körmt River. As that was happening, Þjálfi watched as someone climbed onto one of the boats and sank it, then quickly leapt straight from there onto another boat and sank it, and so on for all the boats.

Yet another time, during the Lightning Clan's final, decisive battle with their longtime nemesis the Snake Clan, an absurd and reckless fool shouted, "If a deer or goat can do it, I should be able to, too!" and then tried to jump his way down the face of an almost sheer vertical rocky cliff.

Of course, all of those people were Steinþórr.

“Haaaaaahhhhh...” Þjálfi found himself letting out a very long, deeply weary sigh.

It would seem that he was fated to have to put up with Steinþórr’s reckless antics. He was probably just born under that sort of unlucky star.

And at some point, it had mostly become his role to have to clean up the messes afterward, as well. Thanks to that, he was already dealing with his share of stomach pain and ulcers, despite the fact that he was only in his twenties.

“Mm? What is it?” Steinþórr frowned suspiciously at Þjálfi’s long sigh.

Þjálfi turned and stared hard at the young man who had at one point been his sworn younger brother, and who was now his patriarch and sworn father. He smiled mischievously as he replied, “Ah, well, it’s just that I was reminiscing about the past, and started to feel like I want to kill you, but I’m just not sure how I’d go about it, is all.”

He was talking to the man who had walked right into the Horn Clan capital by himself to taunt his enemy nation’s patriarchs, who had been surrounded in battle by a team of seven Einherjar and then swept away by a raging flood, and who had still found his way back home alive, saying, “Oh man, that was a close one.”

Seriously speaking, Þjálfi actually couldn’t imagine any feasible way of doing him in.

“Ha ha, my bad,” Steinþórr laughed. “I guess I am always causing you trouble.”

“If you are aware of that, Father, then I would be grateful if you would listen to my warnings and advice a bit more.”

“Hey, I listen to you sometimes.”

“Yes, that you do. And it really is only from time to time,” Þjálfi said flatly.

It was true that his long years of being involved and playing the part of a protective guardian had achieved results; lately, even this free-spirited young man had shown himself willing to follow some of Þjálfi’s guidance. But it was only sometimes, and at most, it only happened once in a while.

However much Þjálfi might lecture and direct the man, Steinþórr would always choose to go against instructions and cause trouble in some way, if it struck him as the interesting choice.

At the end of the day, this young man was a punk kid down to his core. More than likely, he'd be that way for his whole life.

"Well, who cares about the details?" Steinþórr shrugged.

"Ah, I see..." Faced with the man's oft-repeated catchphrase, Þjálfi's shoulders drooped.

It would seem that his daily ordeals would continue for the time being. On the other hand, he couldn't deny the truth that being at this young man's side also lit a fire in his soul.

During the Lightning Clan's last war, they'd been taken out by a raging floodwater, an astounding and ingenious tactic, but one which would never work on them again. And, thanks to the gifts they'd received from the Panther Clan, the Lightning Clan's soldiers had become much more powerful.

Thinking ahead to the prospects of the next war, Þjálfi flashed a vicious grin that much resembled his sworn father's. "Heh. Oh patriarch of the Wolf, if you think you can turn aside this monster as he charges you a second time, then you are more than welcome to try."

EPILOGUE

“Mm...? Oh, good timing,” Yuuto called, spotting a convenient Einherjar. He was on his way back from finishing a call with Mitsuki in the Hliðskjálf, and now he was looking at the girl with the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds. “I want to take a nighttime walk through the city for a bit, so could you accompany me?”

Kristina objected, “But this is the hour when good little children should be getting along to bed.”

“Then you should be just fine.” Yuuto gestured with a jerk of his chin for her to come along, and began to walk toward the gate to the city.

Kristina rolled her eyes and moved to walk alongside him. “Well, as for me, I would prefer to be in bed myself, cherishing the good little girl who’s already asleep there.”

“Don’t be like that. Now come on.” This was a more forceful manner than Yuuto normally displayed. He was such a serious person, so patient and self-denying, that his subordinates often worried about him because of it. But even for him, there were days where he needed to be a little selfish and take a break like this, or he wouldn’t be able to function.

Today, Mitsuki had told him what she’d learned, and it had given him quite a shock. There was the possibility he was somehow Fenrir, Jörmungandr, and even the great black fire giant Surtr who would burn down all of Yggdrasil. It was so preposterous that he had a hard time taking it seriously.

For starters, he didn’t have the slightest ambition or intention of setting the land of Yggdrasil on fire.

So he was trying not to worry about it, but the thoughts were still stuck in his head, and he couldn’t dismiss them.

Now that he’d heard it described, it did seem true that the path he’d taken so far was the one that led to the mythical end of the world, to Ragnarök.

At this rate, eventually he might lead the world of Yggdrasil into a fate of destruction and despair.

In other words, that also meant he'd no longer have a way to get home to the 21st century.

And that wasn't all.

Mitsuki had been purposefully vague about it, but Yuuto knew that the fate of the creatures who cause the end of the world in Norse myth was not a happy one.

In other words, it seemed the future held in store for him was that of a tragic death.

"Brrr, it really is a cold one tonight." Yuuto's body was shivering. He wasn't sure if it was merely from the cold.

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched, yapping bark.

"Mm? Oh hey, if it isn't Hildólfr," he said.

The wolf puppy ran up and began to lovingly brush up against his legs. Yuuto broke into a smile and reached down to pat its head.

When Sigrún had gone out on a mission to take care of some mountain bandits, she'd brought back this garmr cub with her. Right now it was still the same cute size as any other normal puppy, but apparently it would eventually grow to be just as big as a lion or tiger.

Yuuto knew of an ancient canine species called the dire wolf, said to have gone extinct 100,000 years before the modern day. An adult of the species was said to be huge, capable of weighing as much as 360 kilograms. Perhaps the garmr was some subspecies or descendant of the dire wolf.

In the 21st century, there had been a buzz in the news for a while when a hunter in Canada claimed to have found and shot an abnormally huge wolf weighing over 100 kilograms. But to think that wolves even larger that were just living normally in Yggdrasil... it was astonishing.

Whether it was the strange wildlife, the Einherjar, or the magical "elven copper" known as álfkipfer, the world of Yggdrasil just wasn't normal.

"All right, since you're here, why don't you join us on our night walk?" Yuuto asked the puppy.

Arf!

Hildólfr couldn't possibly understand Yuuto's words, but he barked happily and followed, running in circles around Kristina and Yuuto as they continued on.

Seeing that brought to Yuuto's mind the phrase "the dog is running around the yard with joy," a lyric from one of the old Japanese nursery rhymes he'd grown up with.

"Heh, but it's amazing how friendly you are with people, little guy," Yuuto commented.

Looking at the creature now, it was hard for him to believe that until just recently, it had been living in the wild. Perhaps that was because Sigrún and many other humans had been treating it kindly and with affection.

Even if it was eventually going to become a predator the size of a lion or tiger, for now it was a cute little puppy. That was all that was necessary for it to now be popular and loved among the people in the palace.

As the saying went in 21st century Japan, "Cuteness is Justice."

As they exited through the outer palace gate, Yuuto looked out at the moonlit city and spoke solemnly. "You know, it always gets me how the city is so loud and lively during the day, but at night, it's so quiet."

The main street that had been so packed with people was now completely empty. There wasn't any light from any of the houses or buildings, as if he was wandering into a ghost town.

"It's nighttime, so that is only normal, isn't it?" Kristina replied indifferently. The still, silent cityscape didn't inspire any emotion or opinion in her at all.

"Well, no, in the country I came from, there are cities and towns that are pretty bright even at night."

"Well, that sounds like quite the grand and luxurious country. Perhaps I should have expected as much from Father's beloved homeland?"

"Huh... Well, I suppose it's true that even globally speaking, my country was pretty advanced and wealthy."

This unimportant small talk continued as the two humans and one puppy

ambled aimlessly down the city streets.

I was right. At times like this, I just need to talk to someone, Yuuto reflected. If he were all alone, his mind would just be racing in circles with negative thoughts. And he enjoyed talking with Kristina; the witty banter between them always naturally left him with a little smile.

A bit of smiles and laughter was the best medicine for the heart at times like this.

“Gwagh!” a man’s voice called.

Thud! Wham!

The sounds of a deep-voiced man crying out in pain and the loud sounds of something crashing violently cut through the quiet night air.

“It is coming from the tavern ahead of us that way,” Kristina said, pointing to a narrow side street branching from the left-hand side of the main street. “What shall we do?”

A fight in a tavern wasn’t that unusual. It wasn’t something the patriarch of the clan should stick his nose into. It was likely that his involvement would just turn it into more of an incident. For right now, it would be best to leave things be, and— “Do not presume to touch us, lout!” a girl’s voice shouted.

“Whaaat?!” the man yelled.

“Honestly, this is more horrible than the tales we’d heard. No one is here but you tawdry, vulgar lot.”

“Huuuh?! I don’t know who you think you are, but you’ve gotta lotta nerve talkin’ like that, bitch!”

As further voices reached him, Yuuto realized it wouldn’t be so simple. He was definitely hearing a girl’s voice in the mix now. And it was the voice of someone fairly young, and also fairly full of pride.

With that attitude, the conflict had no hope of settling down peacefully.

No, far from it — the girl seemed to be *trying* to provoke a fight with the rest of the patrons.

He couldn’t let the situation go now, or he wouldn’t be able to go to sleep in good conscience tonight. Actually, he probably would be so concerned about the incident that he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep in the first place.

“Tch. Looks like fate brought us here for a reason. Kris, let’s go.” With an irritated click of his tongue, Yuuto ran towards the direction of the voices.

Before long, the bright flame of a torch caught his eye, along with the telltale sign on the building indicating a bar and tavern. There was a gaggle of around ten people gathered together out in front of the building.

Angry shouts flew back and forth, and it looked like the situation was about to erupt into a full-on brawl at any second.

“Wait, wait! Everyone calm down!” Yuuto grabbed the shoulder of the person closest to him and tried to make himself heard.

“Haaah?! What the hell do you want?!”

“If you’re tryin’ to get in our way, we’re gonna start with you!”

The men who turned around shouted at him with intense, threatening voices.

Yuuto was now a man with tens of thousands of soldiers under his command. This sort of threat wasn’t enough to scare him or make him flinch, but he could tell that the men were already well overheated with anger.

Just as he was wondering how to solve this problem, Kristina snapped from beside him, “Be silent. Does no one recognize who stands before you now?! Behold, the august lord of our Wolf Clan, the eighth patriarch Yuuto Suoh!”

“Haaah? Don’t be stupid!”

“Yeah, you think our lord patriarch would be out here at some run-down tavern in the middle of the... gaah?!”

“Oh! Ohhh! It’s...!”

The red faces of the drunken men all drained of their color on the spot.

For anyone in the Wolf Clan, even if they happened to be unfamiliar with their patriarch’s exact face, they knew his basic characteristics. Right now, illuminated by the brightly flickering flame of the torch, not one of those men

could mistake his dark black hair and black eyes.

The men all seemed to jolt out of their drunken stupor, and they all began to shake with fear.

Kristina confirmed this herself before continuing with her haughty, dramatic speech.

“You stand before your lord and patriarch,” she proclaimed. “All of you show insolence. Kneel! Kneel, and bow your heads!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!!”

Every one of the men shouted in obedient response, their voices nearly in unison, and they dropped to their knees, slamming their foreheads to the ground and prostrating themselves.

Okay, you don’t have to go that *far,* Yuuto thought, and he almost protested the same thing to Kristina, but he was distracted by another person there. One of the people in front of him hadn’t dropped to their knees or bowed, and simply stood there.

It was a girl.

“Wha...?!” The moment Yuuto saw the girl’s face, his expression froze in shock.

She was a young girl with bright crimson eyes, like the color of blood. Her hair was as pure white as the snow that fell from the sky that night.

These were very rare traits, even in Yggdrasil. At the very least, Yuuto had never seen anyone with them before.

But that was not what had shocked him.

It was her face. Staring aghast at the young girl’s face, Yuuto spoke in almost a whisper, his voice wavering.

“Mitsuki...?”

Her hair and eye color were different. But besides that, everything else...

This girl was the absolute mirror image of Yuuto’s childhood friend.



EPILOGUE II

The room echoed with the crackling and popping sounds of kindling from the central fire pit.

A frigid wind blew into the room from the ornamental window.

“Tonight’s a real cold one. Feels even colder than usual,” an old man murmured in a withered voice, staring up at the crescent moon through the window.

His thin face was covered in layers of wrinkles, and a long, pure white beard trailed from his cheeks and chin all the way down to the front of his chest. His left eye was shut, and a visible scar ran vertically across it, seemingly made by a blade. However, his right eye was open, and it contained a wild light as vibrant as a blazing flame.

“Ah, the cold really does a number on my old bones.”

The old man would have preferred to board up the window in this kind of weather, but that wasn’t really an option right now.

“This might be a convenience, but it comes with a bothersome drawback,” he muttered, fetching a palm-sized mirror from his pocket.

It was made with álfkipfer, a metal which at first glance seemed much like normal copper. However, álfkipfer contained a mysterious power within it, the divine power known as ásmegin. Whether it was the supernatural powers of the Einherjar and their runes, the galdr song magics, or the secret ritual magics known as seiðr, all were believed to be able to exist only because of the presence of this mysterious metal.

Bathing álfkipfer in the light of the moon increased the power of the ásmegin held within it.

As the mirror in the old man’s hand caught the moon’s light, a thin glow surrounded it and began to emanate from it.

“Alexis, how are things progressing on your end?” the old man asked the mirror.

There was no person in that firelit room aside from himself.

There were a few men standing guard outside the room, near the door, but they were on the other side of the wall, and the old man spoke quietly enough that they would not hear him. To an outside observer, he would appear to be talking to thin air.

A throaty, deep voice spoke directly into the old man's mind. *"Sir, everything is proceeding without a hitch."*

The voice's owner was Alexis, an imperial priest known as a goði who served as a representative of the divine emperor in outland provinces. Currently, he was serving far to the west in the region of Álfheimr.

It was being kept a secret from everyone else, but Alexis was an Einherjar with the rune Gnævar, Traveler of the Skies. One of his runic powers was the ability to communicate his thoughts with others across any distance, via the use of mirrors like this one.

The old man had long since lost the sight in his left eye, but Alexis served as a more-than-ample replacement. Thanks to Alexis, his sight reached as far as it ever had. This was why the old man was feared by many, and whispered of by the alias of "Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High."

"The two clans will spend the remainder of this winter making their preparations, and estimates are that they will be at full strength and readiness when the war begins. I humbly believe that this time, I will be able to produce results that match your expectations, sir."

"Hm, that is splendid to hear," the old man replied.

Until little more than a year ago or so, the Wolf Clan had been unimportant to him, little more than a tiny clan weak enough that a defeat could have wiped it off the map. But before he'd realized it, in the span of mere months, they had defeated and subjugated their neighboring clans and now grown to become one of the ten largest and most powerful clans on the continent.

This was a truly alarming situation. If he didn't do something about it now, soon things might get out of his ability to control.

The Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr was a great warrior as strong as a

thousand men, and there were none in the wide world of Yggdrasil who could match his skill and valor in pure combat. Then there was the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr. He had grown power and influence of the Panther Clan with a speed no less impressive than that of the Wolf Clan.

According to reports from Alexis, every one of Hveðrungr's soldiers, down to the rank and file, could ride a horse skillfully, even fight on horseback, and they were all experts at using the bow.

In terms of military power, both of these two clans were equal to or stronger than the Wolf Clan. Even if one were to consider the idea that the young man leading the Wolf Clan was actually some great hero and genius, marvelous enough to exceed the likes of the first divine emperor Wotan, it was still hard to think he'd be able to overcome the crisis presented by the threat of both of those enemy clans working together.

However, the old man was cautious at heart, and meticulous. With an issue this dire and important, one needed to be as sure as possible.

"And how are things going with the *other matter*?" he asked.

"As I said before, sir, everything is proceeding without a hitch. She readily gave her consent."

"I see, I see. As always, you work quickly," the old man said, satisfied, and stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

There was now nothing to be concerned about. The Black One would, without a doubt, soon be gone from this world.

A dry cackle fell from the old man's lips. "Keh heh, keh heh heh, if I'm to fulfill my dearest wish, then I can't let this empire fall just yet. I'm afraid any interlopers will be forced to leave quickly... and permanently."

To Be Continued...

Afterword Yuuto: “*The Master of Ragnarok and the Blesser of Einherjar,* volume 5, move out!”

Skáviðr: “Excuse me, Master. It seems that a ‘drama CD’ will also be taking place in the sortie.”

Felicia: “The limited edition first run will come with a special bonus CD that will let you go to sleep with me.”

Sigrún: “And the standard version will have a bonus CD that will let you go to sleep with me, it seems.”

Ingrid: “What, just the two of you? That’s some discrimination right there! I’m a proud Einherjar of the Wolf Clan too, and just as much a — a v-valuable r-right hand to Yuuto as anyone else!”

Mitsuki: “Ah... if you’re going to say that, then what about me?”

Kristina: “Now, now. The two of you still have it much better than the two of us, don’t you think? We’re still on the enemy side for this story, after all.”

Albertina: “Yeah, ’cause it’s from when the Wolf and Claw Clans were still at war, right?”

Yuuto: “Mm, well, with all that said...”

Everyone: “The new drama CD is on sale alongside volume 5! Please give it a look!”

Hello, it’s been a while. This is Seiichi Takayama.

As my characters explained above, the first *Master of Ragnarok* drama CD is on sale alongside the release of volume 5 of the light novel.

It deals with a part of the backstory not touched on in the main novels: the conflict with the Claw Clan after the Siege of Iárnviðr that occurred in volume 3, with a script written by yours truly. I would be so grateful if you choose to purchase it.

And with that said... it was a good opportunity, so I went to sit in on some of the recording.

I know it's sort of a cliche thing to say, but hearing the voice actors breathe life into the characters I created was incredible; it was enough to give me goosebumps.

I had the chance to talk for a bit with Nobunaga Shimazaki, who's doing the voice for Yuuto, and it's not just his voice that's pretty; everything about him, from his face to his personality, was attractive and cool! He's a fine young man without any faults, just like one of those *ikemen* ("hot guy") characters out of a manga or anime.

So anyway, I got asked about that experience by my lovely daughter. (Yes, I really do have one. And yes, it really is the best. She's the kind of cute daughter who's willing to say, "I love you, Papa!") Beloved Daughter: "You met the person who does the voice for the main character? What was he like?"

Takayama: "He was an *ikemen*, a total *ikemen*! Everything about him was totally *ikemen*!"

Beloved Daughter: "I wish someone like that could have been my Papa..."

In other words...

I love you, Papa. (※Good-looking guys only)

That stupid rule is here too!! AAARRGHHHHH!! Dammit, dammit! I'm an *ikumen* ("guy involved in parenting"), so that should be good enough!

But I digress. I'm almost out of afterword pages, so let's talk for a bit about the contents of this volume.

Personally, I'm really glad I got to write a lot of scenes with Mitsuki and Ingrid this time. The two of them couldn't really catch a break until now.

As for the youngest kids in the cast, a lot of that was informed by what I'm keenly familiar with in my day-to-day now: Once they get to be that age, you can't underestimate them just because they're children.

Regarding Miss Ruri Takao from Act 3, she's actually shown up before, her name appearing briefly during one of Mitsuki's conversations in volume 1.

Actually, she also shows up as a character in the second volume of my previous series, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki.*

Back then, she was just a sub-character, but she still got featured in one of the illustrations, which is pretty special treatment. This time around, she got a color illustration, as well. In my next series, perhaps she'll have graduated to main heroine status. Well, not like I'm planning on that or anything.

As for a certain red-haired idiot, it's like he alone is living in a completely different type of story, isn't it? (laughs) Who else... Well, there's one person who always seems to get the short end of the stick, both in this volume and in the drama CD, but maybe that's just my imagination. Sure, I'll go with that.

Now then, as always, I'll finish with thanks and acknowledgments.

To my editor, M. I am so sorry for always bringing things right up to the deadline, time and time again. B-but your author Takayama is doing his absolute best.

For instance, on the day before the drama CD recording session, I had plans to go out to a drinking party, but I canceled them in order to write!

I remember when I reported that to you in person. The way you quietly muttered, "You think I'd *let* you get away with going out right now?" while tightly clenching your fists is a sight I won't soon forget.

To the great Yukisan-sensei! Thank you for once again providing such cool and cute illustrations! I was so glad to finally get to meet you in person, too!

My sincere thanks goes out to all of the many people involved in the production of this volume, who worked hard to make it happen.

My deep thanks as well to the producer Saitoh_P and everyone else who helped make the release of the drama CD a reality.

And most of all, my greatest thanks goes to you readers who are holding this book in your hands!

The flow of the story this volume was a little bit different than usual, but I hope you enjoyed it.

And with that, I hope that I can see you all again within the year, in volume 6!

Seiichi Takayama


Bring it on!
Drama CD
Congrats on the release of the Ragnarok drama CD!!
What an intense performance! It was as if life were being breathed into the characters right before my eyes. I hope everyone else will please listen to it as well.
Aug 2014, yukisan

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 5

by Seiichi Takayama

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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