The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar* 7

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN





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"It's peaceful here. Yuu-kun, you don't have to fight anymore."
THE "MASTER," NOW FAR FROM THE WAR-TORN OTHER WORLD,
"Ah...! ...Yeah, that's true. I'm home now, so I don't have to... do anything violent or bloody anymore, do I..."


"Please tell Father this on my behalf. Tell him that Sigrún fought valiantly, to the end."
AND THOSE TO WHOM HIS THOUGHTS REACH OUT.
"But now that Big Brother has been sent back to his world, if the Wolf Clan troops were to lose you, too, then...!"



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS
AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE


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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

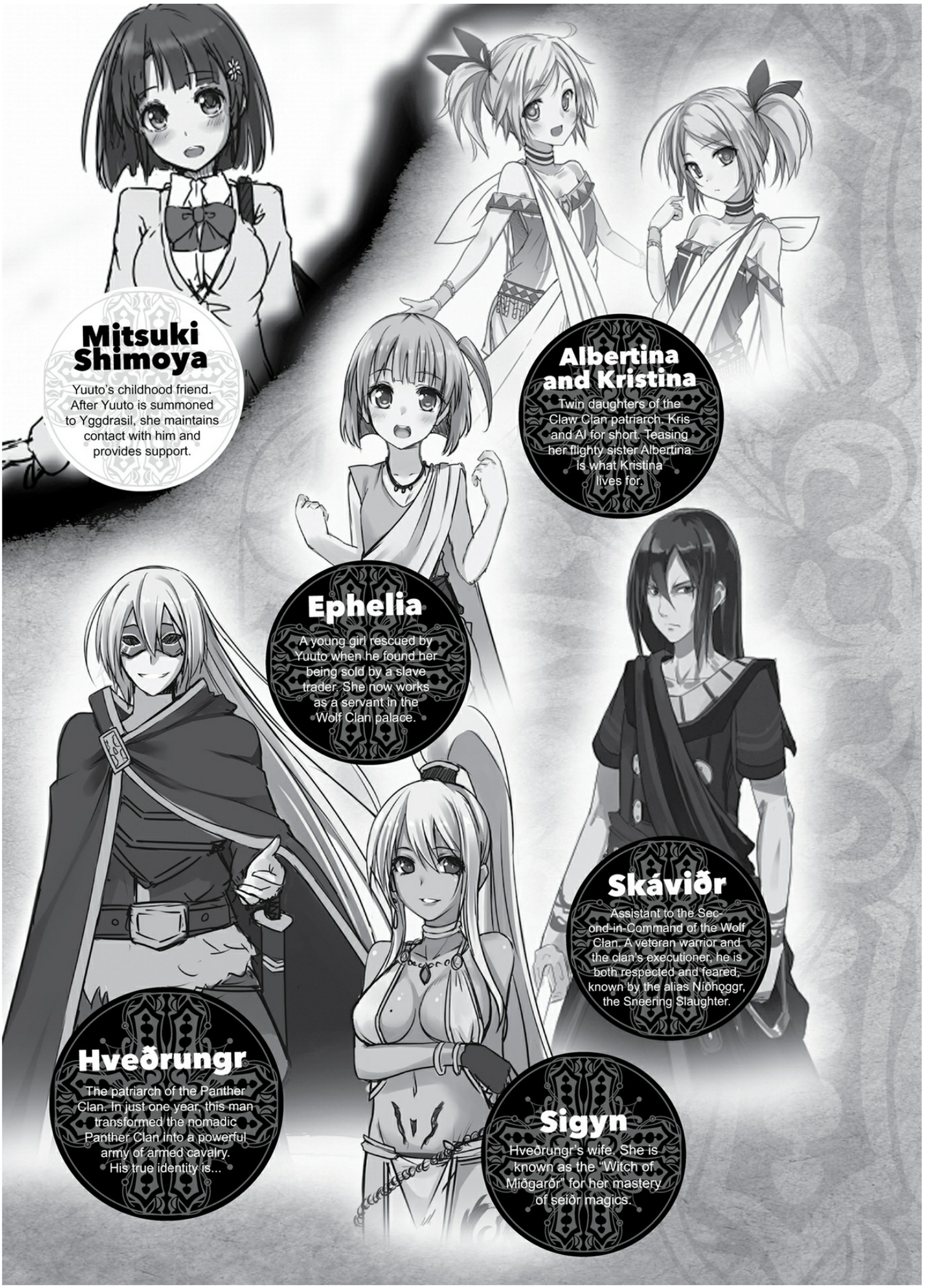
A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. In the space of only two years, he has risen to become the sovereign, or "patriarch," of the Wolf Clan.

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 Ivaldi, 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.
Skáviðr
Assistant to the Second-in-Command of the Wolf Clan. A veteran warrior and the clan's executioner, he is both respected and feared, known by the alias Niðhoggr, the Sneering Slaughter.
Hveðrungr
The patriarch of the Panther Clan. In just one year, this man transformed the nomadic Panther Clan into a powerful army of armed cavalry. His true identity is...
Sigyn
Hveðrungr's wife. She is known as the "Witch of Miðgarðr" for her mastery of seiðr magics.

PROLOGUE

“I think it was supposed to start today. I wonder if he’s fighting right now?” Mitsuki tapped the screen of her smartphone, displaying a full-screen image of her childhood friend Yuuto.

It was a picture he’d taken of himself in winter, a few months ago.

Compared to the Yuuto of three years ago in Mitsuki’s memories, the young man in the picture had slightly darker skin and a more intense, masculine face. He looked so much more mature to her, though perhaps that was because of the hardships he’d endured.

Yuuto sent Mitsuki pictures like this periodically. It gave her a glimpse of the Yuuto of right now, and she felt grateful for that.

But still, pictures were nothing more than pictures.

She couldn’t tell, for instance, how much taller Yuuto had gotten just from looking at them. He always wore the same facial expression in each picture; she longed to see more of him than that.

More than anything, there was the wry smile Yuuto would make when Mitsuki acted a little selfish and spoiled with him, as if to say, “I guess I’ve got no choice.” She loved that smile most of all.

And now her beloved childhood friend was heading off to war. It had been about ten days now since he’d departed for the battlefield.

Each one of those days felt interminably long.

She had acted cheerful over the phone with him, so that she could send him off without burdening him any further, but in truth, she really didn’t want him to go off to fight at all.

She knew, of course, that Yuuto’s Wolf Clan army was undefeated, winning battle after battle thanks to Yuuto’s use of knowledge from the modern era. But some research on the internet also showed her that even the greatest generals in history never won 100% of their battles.

Even Takeda Shingen, the famous warlord of Sengoku Period Japan, had won less than 70% percent of the time. In fact, in a lifetime total of seventy-two battles, three had ended in catastrophic defeat.

And what happened to Takeda's ally Imagawa Yoshimoto at the Battle of Okehazama served as a reminder that any single defeat could spell the end. There was no guarantee of survival.

If, by chance, Mitsuki never heard back from Yuuto again, then... Such terrible thoughts sprang to her imagination, and left her so scared she could hardly stand it.

"Hurry back, Yuu-kun," Mitsuki whispered, and tapped the surface of the divine mirror on her desk with a finger.

The mirror was bathed in the light of the full moon coming in through the window, and giving off a phosphorescent glow of its own. It was truly a strange object.

According to Yuuto, it was probably made of a material known in the world of Yggdrasil as álfkipfer, or "elven copper." The mystery was why such a thing would be in Japan, not to mention passed down through Mitsuki's family. The mysteries surrounding its origin were as deep as ever.

"...Huh?"

Mitsuki suddenly noticed something different about the cloudy surface of the mirror — there was something black in the middle of it, like a tiny stain.

"Was this here before?"

This mirror was the terrible object that had sent Yuuto across worlds to Yggdrasil and away from her, but it was also the means by which the two of them could still communicate, making it precious to her.

She tried to use a wet tissue to wipe at the mirror's surface.

"It's... getting larger?" Mitsuki found herself questioning what she was seeing.

As she stood there blinking in surprise, the dark stain grew larger and larger, and finally started to take on the shape of a human form.

"Wait, this... this couldn't be...!"

It all happened in an instant, before she could say any more.

There was a loud *thump!* from behind her, as if something heavy had fallen.

The only thing that should be behind Mitsuki right now was her bed. There was nothing hanging on the wall, so there was nothing that could possibly fall down, other than the roof itself. But she had definitely heard that noise right behind her.

Mitsuki panicked and turned around, wondering just what was going on.

“Huh?! Y-Yuu-kun?!” she cried.

The childhood friend that had filled her thoughts just a moment ago was now standing right there.

ACT 1

“Mitsuki... it’s you, right?” Yuuto asked hesitantly, staring intently at the face of the girl before him, a girl who looked somewhat older and more mature than the one in his memories.

He already knew what Mitsuki’s current face should look like, having seen it himself in the pictures she’d sent him. However, he got a completely different impression from the face of the girl in front of him now than from the one in those pictures.

Perhaps she just wasn’t very photogenic. Either way, seeing her in person like this for the first time in three years, she was far more beautiful than Yuuto had even imagined. She was so pretty that it was like she was a different person, though she still looked familiar to him.

“Yeah... it’s me. It’s Mitsuki. Is that... really you, Yuu-kun?” Large teardrops welled up in the corners of Mitsuki’s eyes.

That crying face perfectly lined up with the Mitsuki in Yuuto’s memories. She was unmistakably the girl he had grown up with.

“Yeah, it’s me! It’s Yuuto!” he cried.

“Ah...!” Mitsuki flung herself into Yuuto’s arms as soon as he answered her.

The feeling of her against him, her warmth that reached him even through their clothes, brought it home to him that this was real, and not some dream or illusion.

“I missed you! I’ve wanted to see you for so long, Yuu-kun!” she sobbed.

“Me too! I did too...” Yuuto trailed off. The two of them were so overcome with emotion that they couldn’t say any more.

Ever since Yuuto had been transported to the world of Yggdrasil, not a day had gone by that he hadn’t thought of Mitsuki.

He had waited so, so long for the day when he could finally be reunited with her.

Memories from those lonely, painful days rushed through his mind in a torrent, and the feelings all seemed to hit him at once.

He wanted to feel her even more. Circling his arms around her back, he clutched Mitsuki to himself in a tight, desperate embrace. As if in answer, he felt Mitsuki's hands against his chest grasp his shirt tighter.

They passed a moment in silence like that, basking in the feeling of confirming each other's existence. Eventually, Mitsuki spoke up.

"Since you were able to come back, does that mean you found somebody able to cast the spell Fimbulvetr?"

"Yeah, I... I really have made it back home, huh?"

It was only at this moment that Yuuto fully began to digest the fact that he had returned to the world he was originally from. He'd been so overcome at the reunion with his childhood friend that he hadn't been able to spare a thought for anything else.

"Was this your idea of a surprise?" Mitsuki demanded. "That's horrible. You could have just told me. You told me you were heading off to war, so I was worried this whole time..."

"Ah! That's right! The fighting wasn't over!" Yuuto gasped and went wide-eyed.

His brain had been thrown into confusion by the sudden turn of events, but now it spun into high gear, and his memories from just before his return came back to him.

He had somehow managed to drive off the allied armies of the Panther Clan and Lightning Clan, but then Sigyn of the Panther Clan, known as the "Witch of Miðgarðr," had cast the spell Fimbulvetr on him from afar. This powerful spell, known as a seiðr ("secret art"), had caused whatever supernatural force was holding him in the world of Yggdrasil to break away.

Instantly, the world around him had wavered and fallen away, and then suddenly Mitsuki had been right in front of him.

He didn't think it at all likely that Sigyn, his enemy, would cast Fimbulvetr on

him and send him home for his own sake. Obviously, what she'd done had been for the sake of the Panther Clan.

And it was clear as day what her objective was.

He was the commander-in-chief of his army, and he had suddenly disappeared in the middle of a war. The Wolf Clan troops would likely fall into disarray. And since Sigyn had caused it, naturally the Panther Clan would be aware of this. Right now the Wolf Clan army was in danger, possibly even at risk of total destruction.

"Mitsuki! I need your phone!" Yuuto exclaimed.

"Uh, o-okay."

Mitsuki seemed to infer the dire situation from Yuuto's desperate tone. She hurriedly broke away from him and took her smartphone from where it had been charging by her pillow, and handed it to Yuuto.

"Thanks!"

Yuuto took it from her and opened her address book, tapping the entry that read "Yuu-kun."

Just as he was being sent back home, Yuuto had handed his own smartphone to Felicia. He was trying to contact that phone now.

A monotone, robotic woman's voice came through over the speaker. "The call could not be completed as dialed. The recipient phone may be in an area without reception or have its power turned off."

"Tch, damn, so it won't work after all, huh?" Clicking his tongue in irritation, Yuuto lowered the smartphone and tapped the "Call End" button.

In order to make calls connect between this world and Yggdrasil, the phone on that side needed to be in the Wolf Clan city of Iárnviðr, near the divine mirror housed in the city's sacred tower Hliðskjálf.

Right now Felicia and the others were at the western edge of Wolf Clan territory, near Fort Gashina.

Yuuto had known this meant the call likely wouldn't connect, of course. Still, he couldn't just stand there and not attempt it.

“Please be safe, everyone...” Yuuto’s hand tightly clenched Mitsuki’s smartphone, just as the feelings of uneasiness were tightly gripping his heart. He couldn’t shake the horrible possibilities he was imagining.

“Y-Yuu-kun, are you okay? You’re sweating like crazy,” Mitsuki said.

“Yeah, I... I’m okay, but...”

“I probably don’t have to guess, but does this mean you came back right when things were really bad over there?”

Yuuto said nothing, but nodded once.

He *was* happy about the fact that he’d finally been able to come back home. He’d been longing for the day he could return to the modern world for what seemed like forever.

However, this was literally the worst possible timing for it. Yuuto found himself wracked by mixed feelings, unable to simply let himself be happy about this.

“I see,” Mitsuki pondered. “Even still...”

She drew in a small breath, then walked over to Yuuto and placed a hand against his cheek, smiling.

“Welcome home, Yuu-kun. Being able to see you again like this, touch you like this... I’m so, so happy.”

“Yeah... I’m home, Mitsuki.”

As he exchanged those simple words, Yuuto felt something incredibly warm well up within him.

Mitsuki’s body heat against him, her sweet scent that tickled his nose, everything about her was so familiar, so comfortable.

“Let me get a better look at your face.” Mitsuki leaned in very close, looking up at his face through teary eyes.

Yuuto felt something like a shiver run up his back, and his heartbeat sped up so much that it felt like it hurt.

This was cheating. The creature known as man is, by its nature, vulnerable to

the tears of a woman. That goes doubly so for a woman the man has fallen for.

“Mm-hm, you look more manly and mature, but the old you is still in there. But compared to your pictures, you look a lot cooler... wha?!” Suddenly, Mitsuki cut herself off with a cry of surprise.

Yuuto was bringing his face even closer to hers.

For three years, he had been thinking of her, and now she was right next to him. There was no longer anything that could physically come between them. In a word, he was at the limits of his ability to restrain himself.

Naturally, if Mitsuki gave any indication that she was uncomfortable, he intended to stop himself. But though he could feel Mitsuki’s body tense up against him, she didn’t turn her face away, and softly closed her eyes.

“Yuu...kun...” Her voice a quiet whisper, but choked with emotion, she called his name.

The last thread of restraint holding Yuuto back unraveled. “Mitsuki...”

Yuuto closed his eyes, and slowly brought his face down to meet hers—

Bam bam bam!

“Mitsuki! I heard what sounded like a boy’s voice coming from in there! Open this door!”

The sudden, loud banging on the bedroom door, followed by a deep-voiced man’s panicked and angry shouts, was enough to make the two of them jump away from each other.

The living room of Mitsuki’s house was exactly how Yuuto remembered it from the last time he’d been here, almost three years ago.

There was the cupboard for plates and a rectangular dining table, both made of brightly-textured wood, and four chairs which sat around the table. Off to the left sat a large fifty-inch LCD television.

Yuuto had been over here many times through the years, and when his mother was absent to do errands or work, he’d sat at this table and eaten Mitsuki’s mother’s home cooking.

It was all so familiar to him, and once again he was filled with the realization that he was back in modern Japan.

Yuuto was brought out of his sentiment by a sharp voice.

“You really are Yuuto-kun, right?” Across the table from him, a middle-aged, stocky but well-built man with glasses sat glaring harshly at him, his arms crossed.

This was Shigeru Shimoya, Mitsuki’s father.

Shigeru had the kind of job that kept him at work all day, so Yuuto hadn’t had the chance to get acquainted with him, but according to Mitsuki he was a kind, gentle father, always smiling.

Well, right now, he was staring down Yuuto with a face like an angry god.

It was the kind of pressure that would normally cause a young man of Yuuto’s age to tremble and shrink meekly into himself. And the Yuuto before being sent to Yggdrasil would have done just that.

But Yuuto gave the man a polite greeting and bow, with no indication that he was intimidated. “I am. It’s been a long time, Mister Shimoya.”

Since becoming a clan patriarch in Yggdrasil, he had often been forced to go through difficult negotiations with people scary enough to send a yakuza running. A situation like this was no longer enough to disturb his composure. Indeed, he carried himself with confidence.

However, that same calm sense of confidence was like pouring gasoline on the fire for Shigeru, who was already nearly in a fit of anger. “Don’t you ‘It’s been a long time’ me, you...! Why were you in my daughter’s room?! And in the middle of the night!”

With a *bam!* Shigeru slammed his fist violently down onto the table and shouted. It was a perfectly natural reaction for a father with a teenage daughter.

“Well, you ask me ‘why,’ but...” Yuuto struggled to find a good answer.

The reason he’d appeared in Mitsuki’s bedroom when returning to this world was probably because of the divine mirror she kept with her, taken from its

original shrine in the woods. But even if he said that, he didn't see any chance Shigeru would believe him.

"I've heard about you from my wife," Shigeru snarled. "Just where have you been off wasting your life for these last three years, eh? If you think I'd *ever* allow a delinquent like you to be in a relationship with my daughter, you can..."

"All right, that's enough." A middle-aged woman with eyes that much resembled Mitsuki's cut Shigeru off, pressing a finger against his cheek to quiet his rant. "You're getting too heated up, dear."

"Aunt Miyo..." Yuuto knew this woman very well.

She was Miyo Shimoya, Mitsuki's mother and a woman who was like a second mother figure to him. When Yuuto was small, she had taken care of him in place of his physically frail late mother.

"Oh, my, Yuu-kun, you have certainly grown into quite the dashing young man when I wasn't looking," Miyo said. "If I were only twenty years younger, I don't think I could leave you alone, mm-hm."

"You...?!"

"Mom?!"

Her husband and daughter both cried out at the same time, looking flustered.

Miyo smiled and gave a high-pitched chuckle, apparently highly amused by their reactions. "Both of you get way too worked up, and over such a cliché joke, too. Really, like father like daughter."

"Ngh..." This time, both Shigeru and Mitsuki went red in the face, and glared at Miyo.

Yuuto could understand their feelings a bit. The last time he'd met Miyo was three years ago, but she hadn't changed a bit since then. She should be at least around forty, but she still looked like she was in her mid-to-late twenties, beautiful and young-looking enough that she stood the chance of being mistaken for Mitsuki's older sister.

"Come on now, dear," Miyo said. "Have some tea and calm yourself down, all right?"

“...Hmph!” Shigeru scoffed with displeasure, but took the teacup offered to him roughly in his hands and began sipping at it. It seemed that, at the least, that exchange had taken the poisonous tension out of the air.

Next, Miyo gave both Yuuto and Mitsuki some tea as well, then sat down next to Shigeru.

In sharp contrast to her gentle, somewhat silly tone up until now, Miyo looked Yuuto in the eyes with a very serious expression. “Now then, I’m not going to jump down your throat like this person here, but I am going to have you tell me what you’ve been doing up until now, all right?”

She looked calm on the surface, but he could feel waves of quiet anger coming off of her.

To Yuuto, she was frankly a much more formidable enemy to deal with than Shigeru. She was someone who had looked after him over the years starting as far back as he could remember, and his feelings of respect made it hard for him not to see her as above him.

Yuuto swallowed. “Umm, I’m sure you have heard the story from Mitsuki, but...”

“Ahh, that’s right, she said you were transported to some other world.” Miyo clapped her hands as she said this, as if she were just remembering it. “So, are those clothes supposed to be an outfit from that world? You really came prepared. That’s, ah, ‘cosplay,’ they call it, right?”

As Miyo spoke, the pressure from her gaze didn’t waver one bit. Her eyes seemed to be shouting at him, *Don’t think you can get off making fun of your elders!*

As he suspected, Yuuto wasn’t going to be able to get anyone to believe him that easily. And he wasn’t lying or omitting the truth in any way, which made this doubly hard to deal with.

How can I explain this in a way that they’ll understand I’m telling the truth? No, to begin with, is that even possible? Yuuto was at a loss, and as he tapped a finger to his brow in thought, he felt a cold, hard sensation against his finger.

“Oh, right. Here, would you be willing to take a look at this?” Yuuto hurriedly

removed his ornamental metal headband and held it out to Miyo.

It glittered golden as it caught the white light from the electric indoor lights.

“Oh, how pretty. It looks so well-made...”

“It happens to be made of pure gold.”

“P-pure?!” The look in Miyo’s eyes changed. As expected, as a woman, she held a strong interest in such ornamental accessories.

“Please feel free to examine it,” Yuuto told her.

“Y-you say that, b-but I’m not a professional appraiser, so I can’t be sure how to tell whether it’s real or a fake.”

“I don’t mind if you take it to a professional, or a pawn shop, and have it examined there.”

“This is really pure gold?” Miyo gulped. She seemed to have gleaned from Yuuto’s straightforward confidence that he wasn’t lying. She began handling the ornamental headband much more gingerly.

It was at least 300 grams or so, clearly heavier than the average smartphone model. That much pure gold, even as raw material, would normally go for around a million yen.

Added to that was the fact that it was the type of ornament typically worn by a sovereign lord. The surface of it was worked in intricate detail. If one tried to purchase something of similar make in modern-day Japan, it would easily cost at least several million yen.

The Shimoya family was a normal, middle-class household. Faced with such a valuable item in one’s hands, it wasn’t so unreasonable to be struck with a bit of trepidation at the thought of accidentally damaging it.

Yuuto pressed on. “I was a runaway child who hadn’t even graduated from middle school, with no real job, yes? In just under three years, do you really think I would be able to get ahold of something like this while also living anything like a normal life?”

“...No, I don’t think so,” Miyo said slowly. “You would be hard-pressed just to survive. You would never have the kind of leeway to afford something like this.

Especially with the economy being what it is lately.”

Miyo gave a long sigh. She didn’t seem like she was ready to believe everything yet, but she was no longer set on denying the premise completely anymore.

With that, Yuuto had passed the first major hurdle.

“So then, what were you doing in that other world?” she demanded.

“Um, I guess I was basically like a king...” As soon as the words left his mouth, Yuuto grimaced.

He’d only just managed to get someone to start listening to him seriously, and he’d said something that sounded so unrealistic on its face, he might as well be back where he started.

It would have been much more realistic-sounding if he’d just said he used knowledge from 21st century Japan to make himself rich in a world without that knowledge. It wouldn’t even technically be lying.

“Hmm, that sounds pretty outlandish, and normally I wouldn’t even think of believing it...”

“...Yeah...”

“But, well, I’ve known you since you were little, Yuu-kun, and you wouldn’t be stupid enough to try to fool me with such a silly-sounding lie. If you were going to lie, you’d go with a better one, right?”

“Yes, you’re right,” Yuuto said. “I would say I had been making a living in a foreign country, or something.”

“Right, I thought so.” Miyo put a hand to her cheek and gave a long sigh.

As physical evidence, the ornamental headband was far too much effort for his story to be a simple lie. On the other hand, the story itself was too far-fetched to take as true.

If Yuuto had been in her position, he would certainly have been just as troubled by how to handle this.

“I have to say that I just can’t believe your whole story yet,” Miyo said, then

let slip a little smile. The intensity had vanished from her expression, and she was back to the gentle, kind woman Yuuto knew. “But I’ll say it again: You’ve become a fine man, Yuu-kun. Earlier you stayed calm while my husband lost his temper at you, and you handled yourself well at answering my questions, too. You were splendid. I can tell, just from that, that you must have been through a lot of hardship in these last three years. You’ve really worked hard, haven’t you?”

As Yuuto received those words of praise from Miyo, he felt his eyes getting hot from emotion. “...Yes.”

He’d been thrown out into an undeveloped world, and been forced to survive with a frenzied desperation.

By death, he had been forced to part with the previous patriarch, whom he’d truly loved and respected. By betrayal, he had been forced to part with his sworn brother, whom he’d considered himself indebted to. And he’d been forced to take on the pressure of leading a nation as its patriarch. All of it was a heavy burden for a young man still partway through his teenage years. Those days had really been cruel.

That someone had recognized that for him, even if it was only in words, filled his heart with happiness and warmth.

Ding dong!

Suddenly, the doorbell chime rang, and broke through the intimate atmosphere that had formed in the room.

“Oh, it looks like he’s here.” Miyo stood up and headed towards the front entrance.

Clearly she already knew who was going to be at the door. Looking over at the wall clock, Yuuto saw that it was just past nine o’clock at night.

Just who would it be at this hour? Yuuto wondered suspiciously.

“Please pardon me for visiting at such a late hour.” As the distant voice from the entrance reached Yuuto’s ears, he shuddered, and his eyes went wide.

He knew that man’s voice.

Even after three long years, there was no way he could mistake it for another. It was, after all, a voice he'd heard in his everyday life for more than ten years.

"Dad...!"

It was unmistakably the voice of the man Yuuto resented and despised most.

Standing at the front entrance was a man dressed in simple, linen work clothes and a kerchief tied around his head, which he lowered as he spoke.

"Thank you very much for contacting me. It would seem my fool of a son has caused trouble for you and your family. I will be sure to visit again at a later date in order to offer a more proper show of thanks and apology."

His name was Tetsuhito Suoh — but he was also known by his inherited trade name, Tesshin Suoh.

Though still in his forties, he was already praised as a master katana craftsman, the finest in his generation. In this modern era, where traditional Japanese swords were treated more as works of art rather than practical weapons, he stoically pursued an ideal of "functional beauty," his designs focused on elegant simplicity. This had earned him an extremely high reputation amongst *nihontou* aficionados.

Although his face didn't resemble Yuuto's all that much, he was most definitely the young man's father by blood.

"Oh, my, it's fine, don't worry yourself about it," Miyo said. "He came to stay overnight here plenty of times when he was little, after all. Well, even if he does happen to cause a real incident here, as long as you agree that we can solve that at the altar..."

"Miyo?!" Shigeru yelped.

"Mom?!" Mitsuki squeaked.

"You really never change, Miyo-san," Tetsuhito said, raising his head with a wry grin as Miyo chortled at her husband and daughter's reactions.

Tetsuhito's thin cheeks were covered in heavy stubble, his work clothes were full of heavy wrinkles, and the hair poking out from under the kerchief on his head was disheveled and oily. Overall, he gave off a dull, slovenly impression.

This was different from the man in Yuuto's memories, who was more sharp and put-together.

Miyo, apparently, was thinking exactly the same thing. "You *have* changed, though. Haven't you let yourself get a bit too thin? Are you eating properly?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

"I am eating well enough." Tetsuhito gave Miyo a bland, ambiguous smile. "It's very late at night, so if you will excuse me we'll be going. Let's go, Yuuto."

With a jerk of his chin, he motioned to Yuuto to follow him. He then turned around and began walking off immediately.

This left Yuuto dumbfounded. *He didn't even wait for my response, that damned selfish man!*

Normally, Yuuto was not the type of petty man who would let himself get irritated over just that. In fact, he was normally tolerant enough to laugh things off and forgive little slights like that. But for some reason, when it came to his father, his antagonistic feelings always leapt in front of his ability to reason.

That being said, he couldn't just stay here in Mitsuki's house any longer and impose on her family. And he didn't have anywhere else he could go, either.

"...Tch." With a single, irritated click of his tongue and body language that clearly displayed his unwillingness to obey, Yuuto slowly began walking after his father.



He thought for a moment about the possibility of stubbornly refusing to go home and instead choosing to sleep on the streets, as it were, but he couldn't call that a realistic plan.

He'd been a missing person for almost three years, and this was a small town. It wouldn't benefit him to do something that would attract the attention of people in the community and make him the subject of gossip, or worse.

He was fully aware of that in his head, of course, his feelings wouldn't play along and acknowledge that, and he steadfastly stoked his temper.

The two of them walked along the road in silence for a while, but eventually the one who couldn't stand it anymore and spoke first was Yuuto.

"So, you're not going to ask me anything?"

At about halfway home, he threw that question bluntly at the figure of his father's back, moving slowly ahead of him in darkness lit only by the light of the full moon.

At this, his father finally stopped walking and turned to face him.

Standing face-to-face with his father for the first time in so long, Yuuto could see that the man looked somewhat more thin and haggard. But the thin line of his mouth and his slightly dour expression fit perfectly with the father from Yuuto's memories. That stone-faced look made it hard to tell what he was thinking.

Yuuto's father looked straight at him, then said, "Hm. Have you been keeping yourself healthy?"

"*That's* what you ask?" Yuuto spat out.

After all, one glance at Yuuto should be enough for his father to tell that he was physically healthy.

This man's son had just come home after being gone for three years, his whereabouts completely unknown.

The man could buffet him with tough questions about where he'd been, or angrily reprimand him along with a solid punch for good measure, or even rush to embrace him with tears in his eyes. Weren't those the sorts of things a

normal parent should do?

At the very least, this dull and detached attitude wasn't normal.

"Well, 'course, if you suddenly tried to act all model-dad on me, it would just be disgusting, anyway," Yuuto said with a scoff.

This was the man who had abandoned Yuuto's mother — his own wife! — by choosing to prioritize his swordmaking work rather than come and be at her side when she was on her deathbed.

Yuuto wasn't expecting in the least anything resembling regular human feelings out of him. No, he didn't expect anything.

"...Is that so?"

"Ngh...!"

Yuuto gritted his teeth hard and struggled to control himself as his father simply agreed with him and backed off without any response.

To Yuuto, this father of his was the man he despised most of all in this world.

So, if this man he hated so much was indifferent towards him, why did he even have to care at this point? In fact, shouldn't that be refreshing rather than infuriating?

But despite that logic in his head, Yuuto was beset by the angry emotions swirling deep within him.

"This place has really gone to crap, huh?" Yuuto muttered to himself in frustration, looking up at his old home for the first time in three years.

It was the archetypal Japanese-style house still pretty common out in the country, two stories tall with classic clay-tiled roofing. But, it was a bit off from the house in Yuuto's memories.

The vegetable garden his mother had once tended as a hobby was now completely overgrown with weeds, and the metal rack for drying laundry out in the yard had rusted away into nothing more than a piece of metal junk.

The mail slot and post box at the front entrance were both overflowing with bundles of papers that looked like they could spill out any second.

Still, the edifice itself was just the same as always.

“I guess... I’m really home,” he murmured.

Ever since the death of his mother, this house had been unbearably unpleasant for him. He’d wanted to run away and go somewhere else as soon as he could.

Forced to keep depending on the man he hated for survival, he had been constantly irritated at his own powerlessness.

And yet now, he couldn’t help feeling waves of nostalgia come over him. The memories he’d made living here came back to him, one after another, and he felt the corners of his eyes getting hot.

However run-down it might become, this was the one and only home Yuuto had been raised in.

“I kept your room the way you left it. Go ahead and use it,” his father said curtly as he turned the key in the front door.

At least tell me “Welcome home,” Yuuto thought in irritation, but as the door opened in front of him, those feelings were blown away in an instant.

It was because a sharp and unpleasant smell had wafted out to him.

It was difficult to pin down, but the base of it was probably tar from tobacco smoke. It was a little bit like how he remembered his father’s car smelling. But there was something like the stench of old sweat and alcohol mixed in, too.

In a word, it stank like the home of a man.

With Yuuto standing stock still and not moving to enter the house, his father called back to him with suspicion. “What is it?”

“Don’t give me that,” Yuuto snarled. “What the hell is up with this smell?”

“Smell?” Tetsuhito took a few sniffs, but didn’t seem to notice anything in particular. As it so often happens, the smell that comes from a person living in a place isn’t readily noticeable by that person themselves.

“Right...” Yuuto gave a long sigh. Back when his mother was alive, this place had smelled so much cleaner, with the light scent of flowers in the air. It being

reduced to this was just deplorable.

Just how much does this man want to denigrate his own home?!

“Forget it,” Yuuto muttered. The thought of continuing talk on the subject any further suddenly seemed like a huge pain, so he broke off the conversation quickly.

He’d spent all day today from morning until evening commanding an army on the battlefield, which had worn him down mentally. And just when he’d thought it was over, he’d been brought back to the 21st century, reunited with Mitsuki, interrogated by her family, and then forced to see his father again.

So much had happened today that honestly he felt too exhausted to want to do or think about anything else.

Seeing his old home had finally undone the tension that had been holding him up thus far.

“I’m going to bed. If you wanna talk about anything, save it for tomorrow,” he said wearily, running his fingers through his hair, and then stepped into the house.

The smell was unpleasant, but he could put up with it. After a while, he would probably get used to it enough that it wouldn’t register anymore.

That thought, of course, was also unpleasant in its own way, but right now he just wanted to lie down.

“All right. Rest well.”

“Yeah...”

His father’s words were a bit atypically kind, but Yuuto gave them an offhand response and headed for his room on the second floor. As he did, he was newly disheartened at the sight of a thick layer of dust on the stairs.

His father’s room was on the first floor, so there was likely nobody even going up to the second floor anymore.

“At least clean the damn place on New Year’s or something,” Yuuto muttered.

Similar to spring cleaning, the new year was one of the traditional times for

cleaning a family home in Japanese culture. However, this level of dust wasn't something that would happen over only a few months. This place clearly hadn't been cleaned in *years*.

This level of slovenliness was just unbelievable.

The father in Yuuto's memories was always a strict man, but an amazing one, someone who could create katanas with skill that no one else could replicate.

That was exactly why Yuuto had admired him in his younger days, and decided early on that he wanted to be a swordsmith too.

"Was he really such a hopeless and pathetic guy all along...?" Yuuto muttered.

It seemed like the man couldn't do anything around the house now that his wife was gone, not even the slightest bit of cleaning.

In truth, it felt a bit vindicating, like it served him right.

That said, Yuuto also hated the thought of his stoic father wearing a cleaning apron and running a vacuum cleaner. He could tell there was a part of himself that didn't want that to happen.

"Tch, what the hell is with me?" Yuuto could only click his tongue and mutter in frustration as he stomped up the stairs.

He didn't understand his own heart. The fact that he didn't understand it only made the irritated feelings within him worse.

And so Yuuto decided he would stop thinking about his feelings for now.

He really was more exhausted than anything else.

Right now, he didn't want to think about anything.

"All right, I'll just sleep!" As soon as he opened the door to his room, he dived immediately into bed.

◆◆◆

"F-Father has returned to the land beyond the heavens?! How can that be?!" Sigrún's shouting voice was strained, and she slammed a fist on the table in a fit of emotion.

She was a beautiful girl with long, silver hair tied roughly behind her in a long

braid.

Normally she wasn't the type to display strong emotions openly, to the point that she was known among some by the nickname "icy flower." But now the confusion and worry were plastered all over her face for everyone to see.

This was the world of Yggdrasil, and she was sitting in the temporary headquarters set up in the camp of the Wolf Clan army's main formation, close to Fort Gashina on the western border of Wolf Clan territory.

Every one of the other major Wolf Clan generals taking part in this campaign were present as well, all of them gathered together around a table in a space barely 40 elle (20 meters) wide on either side, curtained off from the outside.

Today they had all fought a fierce succession of battles unlike anything they'd fought before, against both the Lightning and Panther Clans. Their faces, illuminated by torchlight, were clouded with the dark shades of their fatigue.

"Shh, you mustn't speak so loudly, Rún," Felicia said. "What if the soldiers outside were to hear you?"

"Ah." Sigrún winced painfully at Felicia's rebuke, and went silent.

If news of the absence of their army's commander-in-chief were to spread, the troops might fall into terrible confusion. Sigrún understood well just how dangerous that sort of thing would be in this current situation.

"I'm sorry," Sigrún said in a lower voice, her face intense. "But I found it difficult to take quietly."

Normally she would never have made that kind of elementary mistake. It was a testament to just how much the news from Felicia had flipped her world upside-down.

A man of around forty, but with streaks of white in his brown hair, spoke up, his face grim. "It's just as Sigrún says, Aunt Felicia. We need you to give us a full explanation."

His name was Olof, and he was the fourth-ranking officer of the Wolf Clan.

He wasn't a flashy warrior on the battlefield like Sigrún the Mánagarmr, or like Skáviðr, the man known as the Sneering Slaughter, Níðhǫggr. Even so, since

the days of the previous clan patriarch, Olof had taken on task after difficult task and delivered solid results each time, slowly building up his achievements and status in the clan.

He was also skilled at politics and administration, and was currently the governor of the city and territory of Gimlé, a crucial mission because that area had become the breadbasket of the Wolf Clan nowadays.

He was the sort of rare man who was good with command both on the battlefield and behind a desk, and so he had fittingly risen to become a figure of authority in the Wolf Clan.

Apparently the other generals present were of exactly the same mindset as Olof. They all turned to Felicia for a full explanation, with expressions filled with unrest and worry.

“Of course, I understand.” Felicia nodded once, her expression stiff.

The hard and serious look in her eyes was such that the gathered generals could tell for sure that the things she was going to tell them would contain no falsehood.

“As you all know, Big Brother arrived here in Yggdrasil three years ago, when I was performing the ritual for the seiðr Gleipnir,” she said.

“Mm, right.” Olof nodded, as did the other generals.

It was on that day that the fate of the Wolf Clan had changed, beginning its rise to prosperity.

At the time, the clan had been small and weak, on the verge of destruction. In only three years, it had grown into a large and powerful nation on par with the central Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and everyone understood that it was because of Yuuto.

Indeed, that was why everyone around this table now wore such dire expressions.

To the Wolf Clan, Yuuto was now viewed as absolutely necessary; he had become a symbol of the Wolf Clan’s glory and prosperity in the minds of everyone, their pillar of mental support.

To suddenly just lose someone so important, without any prior warning, was something that should not have been allowed to come to pass.

“The seiðr magic Gleipnir is a spell that captures things of supernatural origin, binds them, and seals them,” Felicia said. “As an effect of that spell, Big Brother, who is a resident of the world beyond the heavens — in other words, someone whose existence is not natural here — was bound to this world. That magical binding was undone, and the perpetrator was Sigyn, the woman known as the Witch of Miðgarðr.”

“Sigyn...?!” The name fell from Olof’s lips in a gasp of shock.

Just as her alias suggested, Sigyn was one of the very few people in Yggdrasil to have mastered the use of the ritual magic known as seiðr.

She was also the previous patriarch of the Panther Clan, the very enemy they were at war with right now, and she was the wife of its current patriarch Hveðrungr.

“In other words,” Olof said, “you’re saying that *the enemy* was the one who sent Father back to the land beyond the heavens... this is terrible. This is just too terrible.”

Olof furrowed his brow and grimaced as bitterly as if he’d just bitten down on a bug.

The others present here were all veteran soldiers, and so they knew exactly what Olof’s words meant.

To begin with, this was a crisis situation, with their commander-in-chief suddenly missing from the front, right in the middle of a series of battles.

In addition, that fact was sensitive information that mustn’t get out, yet the enemy surely already had full knowledge of it. That was the worst combination possible.

Felicia gave a heavy nod at Olof’s statement, and continued.

“Yes, so while I fully understand how much everyone here must be upset by Big Brother’s sudden return to his world, right now our Wolf Clan is in a terrible state of danger. It is likely that as soon as tomorrow, the enemy will take

advantage of this opportunity to launch a fierce assault on us.”

The air around the table was tense, but no one spoke, though there was the sound of a few people gulping nervously.

As if by natural habit, each of their gazes found their way to a single spot.

It was the raised seat just to the right of Felicia.

However, the brave and wise young man, who had always guided them out of danger and toward victory and glory, was no longer sitting there.

Olof crossed his arms and thought to himself for a moment, then spoke. “Aunt Felicia, are you unable to once again summon Father from the world he has returned to?”

“Ohh, yes, that’s right!” Another clan general spoke up loudly at this, followed by several others who chimed in.

“Right, you succeeded at summoning him here once. There’s no harm in trying it again.”

“Aunt Felicia, can you do it?!”

As the other generals grew more excited, they all directed their eyes to Felicia with anticipation, and after a pause, she answered...

...with a shake of her head.

“It is impossible. For one, we do not have the divine mirror here.”

“So we need that, then?” Olof frowned. “It’s true that when Father communicated with his home world, he needed to be close to that mirror, or it wouldn’t work. Hmm... However, if that’s the case, we’re going to have to do something about this urgent situation all on our own...”

Even on a fast horse, it would take three days to reach the Wolf Clan capital Iárnviðr from here. If one factored in the return trip as well, there was no way it would be in time to help.

Yuuto was known as undefeatable, a god of war, and if he went unseen for too long, the soldiers would soon grow anxious. Their morale would start to fall apart if that happened.

The enemy would without a doubt try to strike them and shake them up even more.

Right now, the Wolf Clan was in no good shape to continue fighting this campaign.

Olof gave a long, deep sigh, and then turning his gaze to each of the other generals in turn, he spoke solemnly. “I think that right now, we should begin organizing ourselves to withdraw from the area.”

The others present listened. In truth, Olof’s judgment here was likely the most reasonable call to make.

However...

A small girl suddenly dropped into their gathering from directly overhead, her panicked voice shouting. “This is bad, this is baaad!”

The strange and sudden direction of her entrance sent the gathered generals into wide-eyed shock.

Apparently she had jumped down from a tree overhead after swinging from branch to branch through the trees like a monkey. It was as if she had been raised in the wild, but it was also an incredible display of physical skill.

“Albertina! Why do you always enter like that?!” Sigrún snapped. “For a split second, I thought you might be an attacker, and I was going to cut you down!”

“There’s no time to talk about that, Big Sis Rún! The Panther Clan, the Panther Clan are on the move! They’re headed this way super fast!”

“What?!” Sigrún cried out.

A visible shudder passed through everyone in the headquarters meeting.

A group of armed riders galloped through the wilds, cutting their way through the black night like a sharp knife.

At the head of the pack rode a man with long, golden hair: the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr. The upper half of his face was covered by an iron mask which glinted with a dull luster, and so he was feared by those in the region by the alias Grímnir, the Masked Lord.

“We’ll attack them straight away and without stopping! Hurry! Even the slightest delay will mean the difference between victory and defeat!” Hveðrungr shouted to his underlings behind him, spurring his own horse on.

He had learned from his wife Sigyn, the preeminent wielder of seiðr in all of Miðgarðr, that she had banished the Wolf Clan patriarch back to the world he had once come from.

Hearing this, he had of course been not only surprised but furious at his wife for doing such a thing without his orders and behind his back.

If, for example, the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr had been in his shoes and felt those same emotions, Steinþórr would have unmistakably reacted by executing Sigyn himself on the spot, and then would have lost any further desire to fight in this war. However, Hveðrungr was a much more logical, more pragmatic man.

The battle that had been waged throughout that day had been a battle that was meant to be a guaranteed victory, planned carefully and timed so that there could be no chance of failure. And yet his army had been repelled, anyway.

His plan and the element of surprise were now both lost to the enemy, and if they had continued fighting, his chances of victory had been low. Internally, he had been at his wit’s end over that conclusion.

And that was when this unexpected opportunity had dropped into his lap.

The enemy commander, Yuuto, had disappeared. Even a fool would know that this information would be enough to send the Wolf Clan army into disarray.

Regardless of his feelings as an individual, as a commander of his army, Hveðrungr could not let this opportunity to defeat his enemy slip by; doing that was not an option.

Once that had been decided, there was naught but to take action swiftly.

He should not give the enemy any time to come up with a plan of response. If he was to attack, then the earlier the better.

By serendipity — or fate, perhaps — the moon was full tonight.

The nomads of his clan were used to living on wide open grassland steppes, and boasted better eyesight than the settled peoples of this region. And, though horses were not nocturnal animals, they had good vision in the dark.

It was no trouble navigating through the darkness, even without having torches out. One could call these the perfect conditions for launching a surprise assault on the enemy.

“Keh heh! Those Wolf Clan fools, they seem to be occupied with taking a long rest,” Hveðrungr sneered mockingly as he watched the trails of white smoke rising up in the distance.

Were they cooking, or perhaps just gathered around the fire for warmth? Either way, they had to be idly enjoying themselves, basking wearily in the victory from their fierce battle earlier today.

“Oh?” he murmured.

Upon making it closer to the camp, he could tell that things were noisy, with sounds like rapid footsteps and orders being shouted.

Hveðrungr clicked his tongue in irritation. “Tch, so they’ve already noticed us? But... it’s already too late!”

He spun around to the men behind him.

Everyone was already perched on their horses with their weapons at the ready.

More than anything, their faces were taut with determination; they were no longer the faces of simple nomadic clansmen, but of dependable and powerful warriors of the steppes.

With a wide, satisfied grin, Hveðrungr raised a hand and called out to them.

“Attack! We’ll pay them back right now for everything they’ve done thus far!”

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack! The Panther Clan has launched a surprise assault under the cover of darkness!” A Wolf Clan soldier ran in and shouted his report breathlessly.

“Kh, they’re too fast!!” Olof’s reply was practically a scream itself.

It had only been a few scarce moments since Albertina had delivered her own report on the Panther Clan’s movements.

Olof had quickly sent out orders to all troops to prepare for a sudden assault, but this was nowhere near enough time for them to prepare.

“Just how good are these devils at popping up out of nowhere?!” Olof scowled and spit out his words with disdain.

Even thinking back to the Battle of Náströnd last year, the Panther Clan army had suddenly appeared from seemingly out of nowhere to surround them with ten thousand soldiers, and had even managed to break through their ironclad “wagon wall” defense tactic.

Not only that, during the battle today, the sudden appearance of the Panther Clan in this region and on this battlefield had been completely unanticipated.

To Olof, this enemy was one that was far, far more threatening than even the Lightning Clan and their one man army Steinþórr, absurdly strong though he may be.

Steinþórr’s power and military prowess were certainly a real threat, but he was the kind of person who always attacked head-on, and one could anticipate and prepare for that.

Preparing clever tactics to defeat such a man might be beyond Olof, but Yuuto was able to make Steinþórr practically dance in the palm of his hand.

By contrast, the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr had the ability to be as elusive as he wanted, appearing and disappearing like some magic trick. And so, in dealing with him, one was always reacting one step behind.

Of the two men, Hveðrungr was the one who had always pushed the Wolf Clan closest to the brink of loss, including today.

“For now I’ll run out to engage them and buy some more time,” Sigrún said. “Big Brother Olof! You’re the eldest here. You should take command of the army!”

Sensing that every second counted, she ran out of the meeting room as soon

as she finished shouting.

One could expect nothing less of the woman who headed the Múspell Unit, the group of the most elite fighters in the entire clan. In this urgent moment, she had made a split-second decision that was clear and precise.

After watching her run off, Olof turned to the other gathered generals. “Is everyone else all right with it being me?”

The other generals voiced their thoughts, nodding in agreement.

“Yes, Olof would be best for the role.”

“Hmm... I suppose there’s no choice.”

“The Mánagarmr gave him her support, so...”

Among them there were a few who clearly didn’t fully go along with the idea, judging by their responses, but any time spent in debate here would just give the enemy more of an advantage, and they all knew that.

Olof began to hand out orders in rapid succession.

“Right, then send an emergency message to all troops: ‘Do not panic, and engage the enemy!’ To my brothers here, I ask that you each quickly return to your units, and quell the panic among them. We’ll fend off this assault, while looking for an opening in which to pull back into the narrow mountain pass. We’ll set up the wagon wall fortress defense there, and then begin our counterattack in earnest!”

Naturally, with the narrow pass between the two steep mountains nearby, there were limited routes of entrance and exit. If they set up their fortress wall of iron wagon carriages there, according to past experience, the cavalry riders of the Panther Clan shouldn’t be able to attack carelessly anymore.

If the enemy did choose to assault, the Wolf Clan crossbowmen would need only unleash a rain of arrows on them from behind their defense.

Considering the desperate situation the Wolf Clan was in now, Olof’s formulation of a strategy on the fly could indeed be called a good piece of work.

This was the sort of thing one should expect from the veteran general so well-respected within the clan.

“Though Father may have gone back to his home, the Wolf Clan still has all of the many things that he gave to us. Do not think things will go your way so easily, Panther Clan!”

Clenching his fists tightly, Olof glared sternly out towards the direction of the attacking Panther Clan riders.

“Hoh!” With a sharp exhale to focus his spirit, Hveðrungr released the fingers from his bowstring.

As he did, the *two arrows* that were simultaneously released each flew on their own arcs, piercing through the throat and chest of a Wolf Clan soldier as if they had been sucked into their targets.

This was the prized technique of Váli, the Panther Clan general who had died during the battle earlier that day.

Hveðrungr’s rune Alþiófr, the Jester of a Thousand Illusions, granted him the power to steal any technique for himself.

That was true whether it was a combat technique or the technique of how to create something, or even complicated magical techniques such as seiðr spells.

“...and bring forth the chaos of calamity... Fimbulvetr!!” Hveðrungr finished weaving the magical energy together, releasing it along with the words of power.

Instantly, the Panther Clan riders behind him had their bodies engulfed it an eerie, phosphorescent light, and their expressions twisted and changed.

Fimbulvetr. This seiðr spell carried the power to break any and all bindings and restraints, and it was the very spell that Sigyn, Witch of Miðgarðr, had used to banish Yuuto back to the heavenly realm he’d originated from.

The effect of it now was to remove the bindings of natural fear from the hearts of his men, and also to release their inner bestial nature from the restraints of rational thought.

Sigyn had used the spell for those effects before, and so Hveðrungr only needed to imitate that.

As expected, its power could not equal the effect when cast by Sigyn herself,

but it was still more than effective enough.

His cavalry was completely converted into berserkers, and the soldiers poured into the Wolf Clan troop formation like an avalanche.

“Rrraaaaaghh!”

“Kill, kill, kill!”

“Reveeenge! Revenge for my comrades!”

To the Wolf Clan soldiers, already offset and harried by the sudden attack, this whirlwind of feral rage charging into them was more than sufficient to whip them into an even greater panic.

“Uwaaah!”

“Eeek!”

“S-spare me, please!”

In mere moments, the Wolf Clan soldiers were falling into a state of confused terror, and some of them began shrieking and begging pathetically for their lives. They were no longer in any condition to seriously fight back.

And the Panther Clan berserkers, their inner beasts unleashed, set about murdering their prey with savage glee.

Just as it seemed the battle would be a one-sided massacre...

“Enough! I won’t allow your butchery to continue!”

A glint of silver light cut two sharp arcs through the moonlit night, and two riders simultaneously fell from their mounts, screaming.

“Gwargh!”

“Gyaaargh!”

“Ohh, it’s Lady Sigrún!” cried a Wolf Clan soldier.

“Lady Sigrún has arrived! And she’s brought the Múspell Unit with her!”

“W-we’re saved!”

The Wolf Clan soldiers raised their voices and cheered as soon as they caught sight of the silver-haired maiden of battle.

Though at a glance she might appear thin, even delicate, this girl was currently the most distinguished warrior in the Wolf Clan army, a living legend among the troops.

So great was their faith in her that there were even some among the rank and file who whispered that perhaps she was also sent from the heavens to protect their leader Suoh-Yuuto, the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg.

Watching the Wolf Clan soldiers regain their will to fight, Hveðrungr clicked his tongue with contempt. “Tch, what a celebrity you are.”

Back when he had been the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command, Sigrún’s cool beauty coupled with her blunt and unsparing personality had left her feared by others, but certainly not loved by them.

As far as he could remember, the only person who had gotten along with the girl was his own younger sister Felicia. And now this girl was the center of such looks of admiration.

Things certainly had a way of changing.

“They do say the biggest catch is the one that got away...” Hveðrungr said aloud.

Back in his former life, he’d been extra friendly to Sigrún and given her special attention, thinking that she might make a useful pawn for him. He could see now that her growth had exceeded even his expectations.

He would have loved to recruit her to his side even now, but the peerless loyalty of the Wolf Clan’s “Strongest Silver Wolf,” the Mánagarmr, was well-known throughout western Yggdrasil. He was certain she would not be swayed.

With a spirited shout, the silver-haired she-wolf turned and headed his way.

“That mask!” Sigrún called. “I recognize you. You’re the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr! I shall have your head!”

Amidst the chaotic night battle, she had managed to pick out Hveðrungr’s figure among the other riders, an impressive feat.

She had always been especially sharp-nosed when it came to that sort of thing. That was likely part of the reason for her incredible record of

accomplishments in the Wolf Clan.

“It really is a shame.” Hveðrungr threw aside his bow and readied his spear to meet Sigrún’s attack with his own. “A seed I spent so much time watering, and now I must uproot it with my own hands!”

With Yuuto gone, she was clearly the greatest pillar of spiritual support for the Wolf Clan.

Flipping that statement on its head, if he could kill her here, he could deal a shocking blow to the heart of every soldier in the Wolf Clan army.

“Haah!”

“Rragh!”

Their war cries rang out as the two spears met and clashed.

Each of them had put every bit of their full strength behind the first attack... and the one who lost that contest of power was Hveðrungr.

“There!” Seeing an opportunity in her victory in that clash, Sigrún quickly moved in with a follow-up attack.

“Hah!” Without faltering, Hveðrungr tilted his neck slightly, moving his head out of the way with ease. He then responded with his own attack.

Sigrún was able to block it, but Hveðrungr piled on a second, then third strike in quick succession.

“Kuh! Hah! Gah!”

Sigrún found herself completely on the defensive.

Of course, she *was* the Wolf Clan’s strongest fighter, the Mánagarmr. So she aimed for the narrow gaps between Hveðrungr’s furious attacks, and tried to counter him.

However, Hveðrungr read her initial movements each time, and attacked to break her movements before she could complete them, preventing her from having any space at all to launch an attack of her own.

“He’s... completely reading my movements?!” Sigrún felt a shudder run through her.

“Heh heh heh.” Hveðrungr smiled with absolute confidence.

This girl was someone he had trained personally, along with Felicia, ever since she was little. Compared to the last time he’d trained her, she had of course grown physically, and her attacks were both much quicker and heavier, her technique more refined. However, the idiosyncrasy, the unique “quirk” of her fighting style, hadn’t changed at all.

Perhaps because of the intense trials she’d gone through over these three years, that quirk stood out much less, and it would be harder for an opponent to pick out. But it hadn’t been erased completely.

And for Hveðrungr, understanding that slight remaining quirk was enough for him to see through her movements and predict her actions.

And furthermore... in this exchange of blows between them, he’d become certain of one thing: She was definitely not fighting in top form.

“What’s wrong?” he taunted. “Your movements are distracted. Don’t tell me: I bet the Wolf Clan’s ‘frozen flower’ has melted into a puddle of her own tears now that her beloved father is gone.”

“You... bastard!” Sigrún screamed in anger.

That anger seemed to add even more strength to her spear’s attacks.

However...

“How naive!” Hveðrungr used the hilt of his spear to parry Sigrún’s angry strikes, and by adding force at just the right moment, he made them “slip” to the side.

Sigrún was pulled off balance as the momentum of her spear was sent in an unexpected direction.

Hveðrungr didn’t waste the opportunity, and whirled his spear blade down towards her from above.

“Khh!” Sigrún managed to block that attack somehow, but her expression was full of shock.

Hveðrungr knew exactly the reason for that shock.

It was because of the “Willow Technique” he had just used on her.

The Willow Technique was a dexterous fighting technique developed and used by Skáviðr, the previous Mánagarmr. It would of course come as a shock to see someone from another clan using Skáviðr’s specialty.

“Heh heh! Well then, how about this? ᛈᚺᚨᛏᛟᛞ!” Hveðrungr sang a strange melody, at odds with a battlefield, as he made his next spear thrust.

“Ah!” Sigrún gasped, her eyes wide.

That was a natural reaction. Her opponent’s speartip had suddenly appeared to blur and shift, and in a pitched duel, that made for a terrible threat.

Even so, she amazingly managed to discern the true speartip and deflect it, as expected of the one currently holding the title of Mánagarmr.

However, it seemed the experience had still made her blood run cold.

“You used the ‘Glamour’ galdr...?!” Sigrún’s face was twisted with shock, her voice strained.

Hveðrungr’s own mouth twisted into a triumphant, gleeful grin. “And I can also do this.”

He launched into a powerful, over-the-shoulder slash attack from a high stance.

The attack itself was nothing extraordinary, just a strong diagonal downward swing.

“Wha?!” For the third time in this fight, Sigrún’s face was awash in shock.

For someone as experienced in the martial arts as her, it must have been easy to tell whom that attack was imitating. Indeed, it was Sigrún herself, a perfect replication of her signature attacking motion.

Next, Hveðrungr attacked with the fighting style of Jörgen, the Wolf Clan second-in-command. Then he used an attack from Mundilfäri, the now-dead warrior of the Claw Clan.

“Khh! Hah! Guh!”

Hveðrungr’s attacks kept coming, ever-changing, living up to the namesake of

his rune Alþiófr, the Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Sigrún was completely pushed into a defensive fight.

With every strike, Hveðrungr was attacking as a different person. Undoubtedly she was having trouble dealing with him.

“That voice, and the inconsistency of those attacks... You... you’re Loptr!” she shouted.

“Ha! I threw away that name long ago!” As he shouted those words, Hveðrungr finally landed a damaging blow against the back of Sigrún’s right hand with the butt of his spear.

“Guaah!” Sigrún cried out in pain and dropped her weapon.

She moved reflexively to grab the sword at her waist, but could not pull it free, perhaps still reeling from the damage of that last attack.

“It’s over, girl!” Hveðrungr was not going to let this perfect chance go to waste.

He thrust his spear forward in a killing blow...

Thwip!

Suddenly, something wrapped itself around Hveðrungr’s arm and pulled it.

Hveðrungr’s spear veered off-course, and did nothing more than make a shallow cut into Sigrún’s left shoulder.

“Who goes there... Felicia?!”

“Phew... I am so glad I made it in time.” The golden-haired young woman breathed a sigh of relief as she slackened the tension in her whip and retrieved it.

Sigrún had been spared by a hair’s breadth. If Felicia had arrived even a second later, Hveðrungr’s spearhead would have pierced through her heart.

“Sorry. I owe you one, Felicia,” Sigrún said.

“Oh, it’s fine, Rún. More importantly, you’ve bought plenty of time. Let’s withdraw.”

“But the enemy commander is right here in front of us...”

“What are you even saying with your hand like that! I don’t care how tough you are, you at the very least have a fracture!”

“Rghh... tch, all right.”

Sigrún responded to Felicia’s remarks with a glower and a click of her tongue, but still reluctantly agreed. Apparently, she’d determined she couldn’t win the fight with her main weapon hand injured.

Just as you might expect from the girl Hveðrungr had, in his previous life, called “blessed with the talent for battle.”

Though her heart was full of a warrior’s pride, she was able to suppress those emotions and retreat when it was time to retreat. Even as an enemy, Hveðrungr mentally applauded that decision-making ability.

“I’ll definitely pay you back for this!” Sigrún turned her horse and tossed that remark over her shoulder, a parting shot as she retreated.

The two of them thus began to flee, but Hveðrungr had no reason to just let them go.

Concerning his blood-related sister Felicia in particular, he felt that he needed to do whatever it took to capture her and bring her to his side. The fact that she’d come to him like this worked in his favor.

“Felicia, wait!” Hveðrungr kicked his horse into a run and tried to circle in front of the two girls.

All of a sudden, his eyes went wide as a volley of countless arrows came whistling towards him.

“Huh?!”

The arrows weren’t high-speed enough to be any real problem. He easily predicted their trajectory and deflected the dangerous ones with his gauntlet.

“Over here, over heeere!” A small girl’s voice reached his ears, eerily out of place on a tense battlefield.

It was so out of place and so sudden that he reflexively turned to look in the direction it came from.

In that instant, Hveðrungr felt a terrifying presence from right behind him.

He immediately leaned his body down against the back of his horse, and another arrow shot right through the spot where his head had just been.

“Hmph, one of those Claw Clan twins using a little sleight of hand, is it?”

He’d received reports on them both. They were young, but both Einherjar, and one had the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, the other Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds.

This was likely the power of Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds at work. She was using the wind to throw her voice and make it seem to come from another direction.

It was an interesting use of diversion tactics, but in the end, it amounted to nothing more than child’s play. It wasn’t enough to take him down...

“Tch! Damn it all.”

As Hveðrungr pulled himself back up, he realized what had happened and clicked his tongue. In the slight moment he’d broken line of sight with them, Sigrún and Felicia had completely vanished.

The two of them both had appearances that stood out normally, but in this darkness, it would be hard to find them.

The darkness had been working in the Panther Clan’s favor so far, but in this moment, it had given the Wolf Clan an opening.

“Hmph! Well, I suppose this is no time to be chasing after some girls, anyway,” Hveðrungr muttered to himself, and pulled on the reins, bringing his horse to a stop.

He was the patriarch of the Panther Clan, and had a duty to lead and command them. He could not afford to go off on his own to pursue the enemy.

A battle launched from a surprise attack was a fight against time. If he made errors in his command here, the golden chance that had fallen into his lap would go to waste.

Even among the meritocratic culture of Yggdrasil where practical strength ruled, the nomadic Panther Clan was especially extreme in that regard.

They'd already been forced twice in a row to suffer the humiliation of loss to the Wolf Clan. If this continued any further, there might be those who sought to oust Hveðrungr from his position.

He couldn't let the seat of clan patriarch slip through his fingers a second time. He had to avoid that outcome, no matter what.

Politically, Hveðrungr was backed into a corner of his own, and he couldn't turn back.

The battle had already transitioned into its pursuit phase.

Hveðrungr looked out at the battlefield and muttered to himself, "Well, that's an impressive retreat."

The fleeing Wolf Clan troops showed no large signs of confusion. It was a well-ordered retreat march. Which meant the chain of command was still firmly in place.

That meant Hveðrungr wouldn't likely be able to inflict any great damage to them anymore.

Hveðrungr had been aiming to attack them during the weak moments when the army was in confusion and disarray due to the sudden disappearance of their commander-in-chief. In that sense, he'd missed his chance.

Judging by how quickly their troops had regained order, one could tell that whoever had taken over command in place of Yuuto had great potential as a leader.

"Their new commander... hmm, it's probably Olof," he muttered.

If it were the second-in-command Jörgen, they would probably be a bit more loose in formation as they retreated, to lure the enemy.

If it were the assistant to the second, Skáviðr, the rearguard would launch a vicious retaliatory strike as they retreated, to stop his army's pursuit.

By that logic, this swift and thorough retreat without any wasted energy had to be the orders of that man with speckled white in his hair, Olof.

He wasn't one for showy moves, but he used solid tactics. He never won big victories, but he never fought losing battles.

“And that means they’re planning to lock themselves up like turtles behind that wagon wall fortress again. Hmph! Don’t assume that repeating the same trick over and over means it will keep working on me.”

Hveðrungr spat out those words with heartfelt contempt.

That wagon wall formation was definitely a real threat to the armed riders of the Panther Clan. However, as great a tactic as it was, it wasn’t *new* anymore.

Over the course of the past winter, there had been plenty of time to think of countermeasures against it. For one thing, it wasn’t as if Steinþórr’s incredible brute force was the only move the man had. He’d just used it because it was the most certain to work.

Hveðrungr’s mouth twisted into an evil grin, and he cackled.

“I’ll show you some sleight-of-hand of my own, then — something worthy of the name Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.”

“Good grief, today took five years off the end of my life.” Olof, the newly appointed commander-in-chief of the Wolf Clan army, rubbed a hand against his sharply aching stomach.

The area all around him was busy and noisy, with soldiers working to set up the pavilion tents and fires for their new headquarters within the central army formation.

They had fended off the first wave of the Panther Clan’s nighttime sneak attack, and moved their forces into the narrow mountain pass leading to Fort Gashina.

Suddenly, the ground rumbled with the thunder of countless horses’ hooves.

“They’re already here?!” Olof shouted, with the force of a curse.

They were literally being given not a moment to rest.

According to what he’d heard from his sworn brothers, Yuuto had always been in the habit of saying, “Speed is the essence of war.” It seemed like the Panther Clan truly was the embodiment of that saying.

It was a terrible opponent to go up against because of that. Even a slight delay in decision-making meant falling behind in reacting to them.

“But we’ve managed to pull ourselves together. Now we’ll send them packing!”

Olof smirked as he looked out at the defensive wall of iron-plated wagons lined up together at the entrance to the mountain pass. This iron wall had repelled the Panther Clan’s ferocious assaults many times now.

Despite being taken completely by surprise in the earlier attack, in this short span of time, Olof had managed to get his army formed up defensively and ready to counter the enemy. It was a testament to his extraordinary level of skill. An average general might have already been overwhelmed by now, and allowed the ranks to collapse and scatter. But not Olof.

This speedy troop organization was the work of the man who was respected throughout the clan as a great general.

“All right, crossbowmen, ready! We’ll fill them full of holes...”

All of a sudden, there came a string of loud cries and shouts from among the wagon carriages, some angry, some surprised. There was the sound of weapons clashing.

“Gwaagh!”

“Gyaah!”

“You bastards, what are you...?!”

“What is this?! What’s going on?!” Olof shouted angrily.

But no, Olof already knew what was happening, it was just something so undesirable that his mind rejected it for a split second.

It was mutiny.

In this most important moment of crisis, the Wolf Clan soldiers manning the wagon wall defense line were fighting among themselves.

There weren’t that many of them in terms of sheer numbers, but the fact that it was unexpected worked to great effect, and in moments, one section of the wagon wall was overtaken.

Of course, thanks to the stark difference in numbers, the takeover could only

last for a short time. However, that brief period of time was all that they needed.

The mutineering soldiers quickly pushed their wagons outward from the formation line, one after the other.

The special wagons used in the wagon wall formation were modified so that the connected formation could withstand impacts and pressure from the outside, but they weren't expected to need to resist being pushed out from *inside* the formation.

A gap appeared in the formation, and the Panther Clan forged their way through it, as if they had been waiting for the chance.

It was as if they knew from the start that part of the formation would come apart!

Hveðrungr laughed uproariously from atop his horse, as he cut down the Wolf Clan soldiers around him. "Muah ha ha! It looks like walls made to protect from without are fragile to attacks from within!"

This was the secret anti-wagon-wall strategy he had been concealing.

In the interests of preserving the honor of the Wolf Clan soldiers, it should be noted that none of them had, in fact, betrayed their clan. Every one of them was loyal and dutiful to Yuuto.

What had broken the wagon wall from the inside was actually Panther Clan soldiers, disguised as Wolf Clan soldiers.

The former second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, Loptr, had complete knowledge of Wolf Clan clothes, customs, and dialect. Anticipating this sort of situation, he'd prepared a group of disguised soldiers ahead of time.

Of course, *completely* disguising oneself as an enemy soldier is incredibly difficult, but this was the middle of the night. When the Wolf Clan had still been in disarray earlier, it had been easy to have his infiltrators mix themselves in during the confusion.

With this, the majority of the battle had been decided.

If the extremely careful and thorough Yuuto had still been in command, he

would have a second backup tactic for when the wagon wall defense was breached, and a third backup tactic after that. But after just having struggled to pull the army back together in the midst of such an emergency, it would perhaps be cruel to expect that much of Olof.

Even so, Olof did his best to rally the troops and push the momentum of battle back into his favor, but within an hour, the Wolf Clan defenses were all overrun by the Panther Clan’s powerful charge assaults...

...and their army collapsed.

ACT 2

Chirp chirp! Chirp chirp!

“Nn... Mmhh...”

The chirping of sparrows on the power lines outside, and the soft light of the sun coming in through the window, slowly woke Yuuto from his slumber.

“Huaaagh... morning, huh.”

He stretched and yawned, then sat up in bed. With eyes still half-asleep and blurry, he slowly looked around the room.

On the wall in front of him was a calendar with a picture of vividly-colored fireworks against the night sky, and hanging next to it was a middle school uniform in a plastic bag from the dry cleaner’s.

To his left was a wooden bookshelf lined mostly with manga, and a wooden study desk in the same color and texture. Both of those had been bought for him around the same time, when he’d entered elementary school.

It was familiar, all too familiar. He’d dived straight into bed in the dark last night without even turning on a light to check, but this was definitely the bedroom he’d always known.

“I... really have come back home,” Yuuto whispered, unsure how many times he’d done this now.

Three years was a long time, after all. He’d always dreamed of coming back home to Japan, but now that it had actually happened, he had trouble feeling like it was real.

It was like he couldn’t shake the doubt that maybe this was just a dream he was seeing because of how much he wanted to go home, and his body was still in Yggdrasil.

But when Yuuto pulled his own cheek, the pain told him that this was definitely reality. “Ow!”

As that sank in, he abruptly became worried for his comrades, the family he’d

left back in Yggdrasil.

“I wonder if they’re doing okay...”

Yesterday, Felicia must have explained to the major generals that he had been sent back to 21st century Japan.

That would definitely cause a lot of confusion for everyone.

They had been right in the middle of a war, on the battlefield, and now their commander had suddenly vanished, after all.

“I can only hope they figure out some way to deal with it...” Yuuto murmured.

The Wolf Clan army had his adjutant Felicia, whom Yuuto trusted completely, Sigrún the Mánagarmr, the clan’s greatest warrior, and Olof, a reliable general with exceptional skill at decision-making and directing troop movements. Those were just a few of the slew of strong and talented officers under his banner.

Yuuto wanted to believe that with them working together, they should definitely be able to do something. But on the other hand, the Battle-Hungry Tiger Steinþórr and the Masked Lord Hveðrungr had joined forces against them. Knowing that, Yuuto couldn’t just shake the feelings of worry.

What concerned him especially was the behavior of the Panther Clan; they knew about Yuuto’s disappearance, after all. It wouldn’t be odd at all if they’d attacked immediately last night.

“Dammit! This is frustrating,” Yuuto said, punching the pillow on his bed.

He wanted some sort of information on what was going on over there. And, if possible, some way to give his army instructions.

For right now, there was no way to contact them, though.

“I wonder if this is how it felt for Mitsuki, every time I left for battle...” he murmured.

It was frightening, so frightening that he could hardly stand it. It felt like his heart was being crushed by anxiety and worry.

Suddenly his stomach growled loudly. *Grlrlrlrl.*

My own stomach sure doesn’t know how to be considerate of my feelings, he

grumbled to himself, but the truth was that, despite everything that had happened yesterday, he hadn't had anything to eat except a bit of bread that morning.

He was only human, so of course his stomach was going to be empty and growling at this point.

"I guess I should get something to eat, for now..." he sighed.

An empty stomach would only put his mind on edge. Plus, considering travel time, it would be at least three to four days before someone in Yggdrasil would be able to make contact with him. He couldn't very well just wait around that long without having a meal.

In fact, it was exactly at times like this that he should prioritize getting some food in his stomach, so that he could recharge his body and mind in preparation for when he'd need to use them.

"Still... what am I gonna do?" Yuuto scratched the back of his head, troubled.

He still felt utterly averse to even sleeping in this house, and he couldn't stand the idea of being dependent on his father any more than this.

However, a bit of cash was a necessity in order to do anything in modern-day Japan.

"Oh! That's right!" Yuuto rushed over to his study desk and opened the second drawer from the top. Taking out the object he'd just remembered, he held it up to check its contents, and exhaled in relief.

It was the bankbook he kept for a savings account in his name, and the most recent balance was about 70,000 yen. Growing up, whenever Yuuto had received allowances and gift money from holidays, his late mother had always half-forced him to put a portion of it into savings.

Back then, he'd been unsatisfied with that, thinking, *Let me use it however I want,* but now he was sincerely grateful for how thoughtful she had been.

"No sense wasting time! I've just gotta go withdraw it, and..."

He took out the personalized bank stamp used as an ID and was about to leave his room, when he suddenly realized how he was dressed.

He was still wearing his outfit from Yggdrasil. It might not be an issue out alone on the road at night, but of course in town in the middle of the day, these clothes would definitely draw all sorts of attention.

If he were in a big city like Tokyo, the passersby might assume it was some sort of cosplay and ignore him, but this was a small town out in the countryside.

“I don’t think there’s anything I can really change into, either,” Yuuto said with a sigh as he opened his dresser.

He went ahead and picked out something at random, but when he held it up to check, it was clearly too small for him.

He’d even gotten these clothes a bit large way back when, anticipating that he’d grow, but of course three whole years was too long for that to be enough.

“Sigh... Guess I’ll call Mitsuki.”

Whether it was in Yggdrasil, or back in modern Japan, Yuuto found himself consistently relying on his childhood friend.

“Sorry. I really do always end up making you do stuff like this for me. Thanks.” With that, Yuuto put down the phone’s receiver.

He no longer had his trusty smartphone with him, so he was using the wired telephone in his house’s living room.

It was something that had been part of this home since before Yuuto was born, and, to his relief, it still worked without any issues. It was completely covered in dust, and when he first saw it, he’d been seriously concerned about whether it would work at all.

“Still, I can’t really invite Mitsuki into the house with it like *this*.” Turning away from the phone, Yuuto took in the scene and sighed deeply, at a loss.

At least a third of the space on the dining table was covered in empty bottles of liquor, and the ashtray was overflowing with cigarette butts.

The garbage can was so full that the lid wasn’t able to close all the way, and there was something poking out that looked like an empty box for a convenience store *bento*.

The biggest problem of all was that the place didn’t look like it had been

vacuumed, dusted, or wiped down in the last three years, and the whole room was covered with dust.

The TV and miniature alcohol fridge sitting nearby were turned completely white from the dust, and one could see particles of it floating in the air with the naked eye.

This was immediately recognizable as the typical kind of room one would expect of a widower.

“Guess I’ll tidy up a bit,” Yuuto muttered.

He had been having trouble accepting the idea of staying in this house for free anyway, so this would work out. He could pay for borrowing a room to sleep in by doing a bit of manual labor in exchange. That should make things even enough.

Plus, moving his body and doing physical work would help keep his thoughts from dwelling on things that he couldn’t do anything about.

“First things first...” Yuuto headed to the kitchen sink and got out the box of cleaning supplies and a fresh cloth from underneath it, as well as a bucket.

Three years may have gone by, but this was still his home, and he knew it well.

He filled the bucket with water and headed to the front entrance hallway.

“Heh,” he chuckled. “Ephy or Rún might faint if they saw me doing something like this.”

The patriarch of the Wolf Clan, lord of a domain counting more than 100,000 citizens (if one included the subsidiary clans), was doing the type of menial cleaning work that back in Yggdrasil would be delegated to servants.

Even Yuuto was a bit amazed at how much his status had changed overnight.

“All right, then! Let’s do this!” Yuuto got into position at the end of the hallway. “Readyyyy, go!”

Taking off from a crouching start, he pushed the cloth across the floor from one end of the hallway to the other. With just that one pass, the white cloth was stained completely black.

He flipped the cloth over and did it again. The other side ended up fully blackened, too.

He threw it into the bucket and wrung it out a few times, causing the water to noticeably darken.

“This looks like it’s gonna be quite a bit of work...”

Muttering this to himself, Yuuto found that even now, he couldn’t help but reflect on how much appreciation his late mother deserved for always taking care of all of the housework and cleaning. She had kept this big house sparkling clean all by herself.

“I really should have helped her out a bit more.”

He couldn’t help thinking of the old saying, *By the time a child wants to pay back his parents, they’re already gone,* and of how true it was.

“Ah, that’s right, I forgot the most important thing.” Yuuto grimaced at his mistake, and looked over at the entrance to the room on his left, which had a traditional paper sliding door.

He tossed the cloth onto the rim of the bucket and headed into that room. The unpleasant smell that permeated the rest of the first floor was not present here, and instead, there was the faint scent of burned incense in the air.

He stood in front of the household’s Buddhist altar in the back of the room, and opened the thick, stately dark brown doors on its front to reveal the well-polished golden statue within.

Next to the statue was a picture stand holding the black-and-white picture of a smiling, refined-looking lady.

“Hi, Mom. I’m home.”

It felt a bit strange for Yuuto, but after saying those words aloud, he sat down quietly on his legs in the formal *seiza* position, facing the picture.

It was strangely moving to see his mother’s face again this way. After all, Yuuto didn’t have any pictures of her stored in his smartphone.

“Thank you for looking out for me all this time. Thanks to you, I came back home in one piece.”

With a small, slightly bittersweet smile, Yuuto reached out and rang the family altar's bell twice, then put his hands together in prayer.

In his heart, he recounted to his mother everything that had happened.

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but soon the doorbell rang.

"Oh, crap." Yuuto grimaced. He still hadn't gotten any cleaning done. He'd planned to clean at least the path from the front entrance to his room.

"Excuse me!" called a familiar voice. Then came the sound of the front door being opened.

"Oh, hell, Dad! At least remember to lock the stupid door!" Yuuto got up and hurried toward the front entrance.

As soon as Mitsuki caught sight of Yuuto, she broke into a wide smile, like a flower blossoming before his eyes, and for a second, Yuuto was transfixed. "Oh... Good morning, Yuu-kun!"

He'd seen her smiling plenty of times in the pictures she'd sent him, whether it was selfies she'd taken trying to look pretty or pictures of her having fun with friends. But, it really had been a long while since he'd seen this bashful, truly happy smile of hers.

He'd also always talked with her at night, so he got a little bit of extra delight out of just being able to exchange a morning greeting with her like this. Especially since it was her real, live, voice — not her voice over a phone line.

Until three years ago, this had been just one more normal part of his everyday life. But now, this sort of casual, ordinary thing made him incredibly happy.

"Wh-what's wrong, Yuu-kun?!" Mitsuki exclaimed, looking worried.

That brought Yuuto back to his senses. "Hm? Oh, uh, nothing. G-good morning."

Mitsuki responded with an even wider, giggling grin. "Hee hee! It's been three years since we've been able to exchange greetings in the morning like this, huh? It feels kind of nostalgic, but also kind of new."

"...I was just thinking the same thing."

“I see. Even though it shouldn’t seem like a big deal, it really makes me happy.”

“I was thinking that, too.”

“Oh. Ahaha, um, I guess we think alike.”

“Y-yeah, it seems that way.”

Mitsuki’s face was turning red as an apple, and she was looking down. Yuuto found himself acting more awkwardly, as well.

He’d only thought of it as admitting to feeling happy at first, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that by describing their happiness, they’d basically made passing reference to their feelings for each other.

Yuuto suddenly felt incredibly embarrassed.

“S-sorry, you know, about calling you over here first thing in the morning.” He tried to change the subject, unable to deal with this sort of atmosphere.

“No, it’s fine. It’s spring break, after all. Well, Dad did glare at me pretty hard on the way out.”

“Oh, ha ha.” Yuuto found himself laughing dryly at that.

A normal father of a girl Mitsuki’s age would, of course, have a problem with any unwanted pests, *i.e.* boys, getting too attached to her. That was particularly true of someone like Yuuto. He’d gone missing in his second year of middle school, and was pretty much a dropout from society at this point. From her father’s position, it wouldn’t be strange to want to stop her from even being friends with him.

“Huh?” Mitsuki said. “Hey, Yuu-kun, take a look at that down at your feet!”

“Hm?” Yuuto looked down to see that there was a thick vertical envelope that looked to have been tossed carelessly onto the entrance mat.

On the center of the envelope was “to Yuuto” written in penmanship that he recognized.

This was from his father.

He stared at it wordlessly.

At last, frowning slightly, Yuuto silently picked up the envelope and checked its contents.

It contained a stack of 10,000 yen bills.

Next to him, Mitsuki shouted in surprise. “Whoa, wow! That has to be at least two hundred thousand, right?”

But Yuuto continued to stare coldly at the contents of the envelope.

He opened up the folded piece of paper which had been included with the money. Written in the same penmanship, it read, “Use it however you like,” nothing more.

“Ahh, this means today you can treat me to sushi, and... that’s not happening, I guess.” Mitsuki’s excited voice fell quickly after she saw the expression on Yuuto’s face.

“No, I’d like you to let me treat you. You’ve done so much to take care of me all this time. But I’m not planning to use one yen of this money.” Yuuto pushed the money back into the envelope, his tone indicating that his decision was final.

He would have preferred to throw the money back in his father’s face directly, but a look at the space for shoes in the entrance told him that the man had already gone out to work at his atelier.

Mitsuki looked at Yuuto sadly for a moment, then said, “You still haven’t forgiven your father, huh, Yuu-kun?”

“No, I guess not.” Yuuto replied as if he were talking about somebody else, but his hand gripped the envelope of money tightly.

It was the kind of situation where some might say his father had understood Yuuto’s circumstances and tried in his clumsy way to show kindness... but he couldn’t see it that way. It made him so sick to his stomach that he couldn’t stand it.

There was the dissatisfaction of feeling like his father could see through him, and the anger with himself for being powerless right now; those two feelings were swirling within Yuuto, but the thing he couldn’t forgive most of all was the

way his father seemed detached and unwilling to face his own son directly.

Dammit, it's like I'm a stupid kid throwing a fit!

Yuuto could tell that part of him wanted his father to leave him alone completely. But then when he *was* left alone, he felt furious at the man for not living up to his role as a father.

If he had been the Yuuto of three years ago, he wouldn't have been able to face the fact that those feelings within himself were contradictory. He wouldn't have been able to face them at all, and that would have just turned it all into bottled-up rage that he'd have directed towards his father.

But he was different now.

"What, then...?" he muttered. "Just what do I *want* from Dad, then, I wonder?"

Did he want the man to apologize, or to be ruined? Did he want him to show an interest in him as a father, or leave him alone?

Looking up at the ceiling with those thoughts in his head, it all seemed so complex that anything could be the right answer, but everything also seemed wrong.

He didn't think he could come up with an answer as he was right now.

After breakfast, Yuuto and Mitsuki went shopping at a department store.

In preparation for their trip, Yuuto had Mitsuki borrow some of her father's clothes for him to wear. It made him feel bad to ask that of her, but he wasn't in any mood to borrow his own father's clothes.

That being said, there was no way he could keep doing this, so the first thing they did at the store was go to check out some clothes.

Mitsuki was quite enthusiastic. "Hey, Yuu-kun, Yuu-kun! I think this would look good on you!"

"Hmm... sure, that does look good, but... gah! That's expensive!"

Yuuto's eyes went wide as soon as he saw the price tag. It was just shy of five digits.

“I’m really fine with something cheaper, okay?” he said hastily. “Something I can just grab a bunch of.”

“How can the great patriarch of the Wolf Clan say something like that?” Mitsuki scolded. “If you do that, your lessers won’t have any respect for you, you know.”

“Shut up! In this world, I’m nothing more than a guy who’s poor and jobless!”

With that parting shot at Mitsuki, who was still laughing, Yuuto walked over towards a sales corner with a sign that read “On Sale, 2000 Yen.”

Before coming here, he’d stopped by a bank and withdrawn his savings, so he *could* buy something expensive if he wanted to, but he knew there’d be more expenses to come. He wanted to make sure he avoided wasting money here as much as possible.

“Hm, here we go. I’ll just take this and this, and...”

“Ugh, of *course* you go for all black.” Mitsuki immediately shot down his choices. “Come on, pick out some brighter colors—!”

“Geez, why don’t you go pick out your own clothes?”

“I can’t. I’m broke.”

“Well, then I’ll buy you some while we’re at it. It’s fine if it’s a bit pricey, too.”

“Wha?!” Mitsuki let out a startled cry. She must not have expected this; her gaze darted to and fro. “B-but that wouldn’t feel right. You don’t have that much money, right? You don’t have to.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’ve been relying on you for all sorts of help for three years now. Let me pay you back a bit.”

“...Is it really okay?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. In fact, you’re the number one priority on this little shopping trip.”

“Oh, I see... I’m number one, huh? ...Thank you.” Mitsuki put both hands on her cheeks as her expression melted into a bashful, giggling smile.

Just seeing her that happy made Yuuto feel rewarded enough for offering to

buy her something.

“I wonder what I should get,” Mitsuki chattered, quickly lost in thought. “There was that one thing I wanted. Oh, but then there was that other thing...”

Watching her like this, seeing her expressions change so quickly, really brought home how much different this was from a mere phone call or pictures. He could never get tired of looking at her.

Eventually, she seemed to hit on something, and held up a finger. “Okay, so then, how about this!”

She ran over to Yuuto with bouncing steps, like a puppy, and leaned in close to look up towards his face with upturned eyes.

That move was enough to set Yuuto’s heart racing. “Wh-what, did you pick something already?”

“No, I want you to pick it out, Yuu-kun!”



“Excuse me?!” Yuuto let out a startled cry.

If a boy and girl going out together like this was what defined a “date,” then this sort of development was pretty normal for a date.

However, though Yuuto may have brought gritless bread and worked glass and many more wonders into the world of Yggdrasil, he had no inkling of what constituted trends or fashion in modern Japan.

In the 21st century, what was “in” changed radically in less than a year. He didn’t even have a guess as to how much styles had changed in the three years he’d been gone.

“I-if you let me choose, I’ll just end up picking out something ridiculous,” he stumbled.

“That’s fine. I don’t care if you pick out a bald wig for a costume party, I’ll still treasure it.”

“Seriously?! You’d seriously still be satisfied with something like that?!”

“I’ll make it my family heirloom. A gift bequeathed directly to me from the great lord patriarch of the Wolf Clan! Oh, I’ll need to put it on the family altar.”

“Cut. That. Out. But seriously, if I’m gonna buy you a present, I want it to be something you’ll actually use, so I’d rather you pick out something you like.”

“Whaaaat? ...Fine, then I’ll take the bald wig.”

“Did you actually *want* that?!”

“Heh heh, if you let me pick, then that’s what it’s going to be, all right? Is that okay? You really okay with that?”

“What the heck kind of threat is that?!”

“So, in other words, if you don’t like that, then pick me something out.”

Yuuto sighed heavily. “Fine... fine, I get it. I just have to pick, right?”

He shook his head in resignation with a wry grin, as Mitsuki giggled mischievously.

When it came to war, Yuuto was known as undefeated on the battlefield, but

he didn't think he stood a chance against his childhood friend.

Put in more extreme terms, perhaps it is just that a man is a creature who cannot hope to win against a woman...

"Okay, so at least tell me what *kind* of thing you'd like," he said. "Otherwise, I don't have a clue where to start."

"Oh, well, then I'd like a hair accessory." In an undertone he couldn't quite catch, she whispered, "That way, I can always have it on me."

"So in the end it's not even clothes?" he asked in exasperation. "Well, whatever. Then let's look at some after I add these up."

"Wait, you're still going to go with those black clothes?!" Mitsuki stared wide-eyed in disbelief at Yuuto.

"What's wrong with these? Look, as long as they fit, I'm fine with whatever."

"No, that's not okay! Honestly! Yuu-kun, you're good-looking, but you don't put any thought into your appearance!"

Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks in irritation.

"Here, start with this, and this. You can go try them on over there."

She handed him the clothes she'd been holding and pointed sharply in the direction of the fitting rooms.

Judging by her expression, he wasn't going to accomplish anything by talking back to her except waste time.

Well, I guess there's no harm in going along with her for a little bit, he thought, and headed towards the fitting rooms.

It goes without saying that afterwards, Yuuto was Mitsuki's dress-up mannequin for quite a while.

"Ughh, so tired. Somehow, I feel dead tired." Yuuto sat down on the long bench on the side of the department store walkway, leaning back with a long sigh.

He felt fully exhausted in both body and mind.

His outfit was completely new. The boy who'd been wearing plain clothes,

making him seem uninteresting, now sported a casual look that made him look downright fashionable.

Of course, his current drooped posture and expression put all of that to waste.

“What are you saying?” Mitsuki asked. “You’re acting so lazy; all we did was pick out some clothes for a little while.”

“It wasn’t a ‘little’ while at all. That was at least an hour, just looking at clothes.”

“Huh? Isn’t that normal, though? Actually, I’d say we got that done pretty quickly.” Mitsuki looked back at him with a puzzled expression.

That sent a shudder up Yuuto’s back. “That was... ‘quickly’...?!”

“Mm-hm. When I come here with Mom or my friends, we take two or three hours, easily.”

“Ughhhh...” Yuuto had heard stories to the effect that girls took a long time shopping, but he hadn’t expected that his childhood friend would be no exception to that.

Thinking back, though, he couldn’t remember having actually gone on a shopping trip together with Mitsuki before. In that case, it was perhaps only natural that he didn’t know about this, but... realizing that now made him realize anew how much he’d missed in these past three years, and it filled him with regret.

And hunger. Perhaps due to his frustration, his stomach felt even emptier than before.

“Man, I’m starved. Sushi! I wanna eat sushi!”

“Hey now, we haven’t even bought my present yet,” Mitsuki complained. “I thought I was supposed to be number one?”

“Quiet, you. Let me eat some rice already. Bring on the rice. Give me rice!”

“Whoa, you sound like some kind of rice addict!”

“Keep any Japanese person from eating rice for three years, and that’s what

happens. Seriously.”

The rice ball that Mitsuki had brought him for breakfast that morning had been so, so delicious that it had ‘hit him emotionally’.

In all seriousness, it had moved him almost to tears.

If Mitsuki hadn’t been right there in front of him, he might have broken down crying on the spot.

Sushi was Yuuto’s favorite dish, so he couldn’t help but wonder just how delicious that was going to be. He was already drooling uncontrollably.

“All right, then! Let’s hurry and grab that hair accessory and then go eat,” he declared. “Which way?”

“Oh, uh. It’s that way. Ughh, now the mood is all ruined...”

“That way, right? Got it.”

Without even listening to Mitsuki’s complaint, Yuuto grabbed the shopping bags with clothes and stood up.

As he started walking in the direction Mitsuki had pointed, his path was suddenly blocked.

What stood in front of him was a man in a dark blue uniform. At first, he looked like he might be a security guard.

“I think you know what this means,” the uniformed man said, holding out a small ID badge with a telltale sakura police insignia on it. “You’re Suoh Yuuto, right?”

It looked like Yuuto’s long-awaited reunion with sushi was going to have to wait for another day.

◆ ◆ ◆

Glaðsheimr.

This city was the capital of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and the largest city in all of Yggdrasil. It was known far and wide as the birthplace of many artistic and cultural trends.

“So, I have finally arrived...” Rífa let out a depressed sigh, her body swaying

slightly along with the rocking of her horse-drawn carriage.

Around the same time as Yuuto returning home, Divine Empress Sigrdrífa of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire had completed the journey back to the land of her birth, as well.

Her arrival signified the end of her freedom, so it could hardly be helped that it sent her into a melancholy mood. However, that wasn't the only cause.

"I see the city's unpleasant atmosphere has not changed," she muttered.

Tents were set up lining the city's large main street, packed full of various and sundry products from all across Yggdrasil.

Just a minute before, back at the walled city's gate, there had been a great line of people such as traveling merchants waiting their turn to request permission to enter the city proper.

This was all indicative of a bustling city culture full of life; however, Rífa of all people knew most of all that was only on the surface.

For sure, there were more than a few beautifully dressed customers happily perusing the wares. However, that was only a very small fraction of people.

The majority of the people who could be seen walking up and down these crowded streets, who had been born in this city and now made their living here, wore clothes with no extravagance or color. Their faces carried dark expressions thick with weariness and lacking vitality.

If one peered more carefully into the city's edges and corners, there were also a large number of beggars in tattered clothes and rags, crouched and pleading for the grace of passersby.

The unsightly truth became clear to the observant: A select few were enriching themselves while siphoning away the wealth of much of the citizenry.

"Well, it's not as if I have any right to speak on the matter," Rífa muttered.

She herself sat at the pinnacle of that exploitative system. She wore clothes more beautiful than anyone else's, ate the most delicious foods, and lived in a palace more clean and luxurious than any other person's home.

If she were asked whether she did any work that make her deserving of that

lifestyle, she would honestly have to answer, “None at all.”

That was all the more true after she’d seen how vigorously that black-haired young man applied himself to politics. Even during her short stay with him, he had introduced policies and inventions one after the other in order to enrich his citizens as a whole.

She felt a powerful envy towards him in that regard. Was there no way for her, too, to do something in service to her land and people?

Those thoughts were especially strong in Rífa’s mind as she looked out at the city.

“Whew. Truly, the long-winded speeches of old men are something I cannot bear.” Rífa sighed with utter exhaustion.

The higher-ups in the imperial administration had finally finished lecturing her at length.

Of course, Rífa was completely at fault for this whole incident, so she had quietly listened to them go on and on with their little speeches. But over four hours of that had really worn down her mind, already tired from the long journey.

Now, all that was left was to return to her room and sleep.

With weary, unsteady steps, she began to make her way there...

“Oh, Your Majesty! You are safe! Thank goodness!” A figure ran up to her, shouting, then kneeled at her side.

As he ran towards her, she had instantly recognized him by his long, golden hair, tied in back and swaying like a horse’s tail.

Rífa’s face broke into a nostalgic smile as she looked upon her faithful vassal for the first time in almost four months. “Ahh, Fagrahvél! It has been quite a while, hasn’t it?”

Still on one knee, Fagrahvél raised his head to look at her. “Yes. Your Majesty has been dearly missed. Are you in good health?”

She could see tears trickling down his handsome face, communicating his heartfelt concern for her and relief at their reunion.

Ríf a could not help but feel a warmth kindle within her own chest, as well. “Hee hee! You are the only one who would ever consider worrying about my health.”

“Your Majesty, that is not...”

“No, it is the truth,” Ríf a said in a cynical tone, her shoulders slumping.

The high state officials had reprimanded her for causing problems to so many people by being absent from her public duties, and scolded her for her lack of self-awareness of her position as the þjóðann. These topics had passed their lips many times, like an ever-differently-worded refrain. But she had heard not one word spoken showing concern for her.

All that they had use for was the dignity and authority of the þjóðann, and the *vessel* for that authority, not Ríf a herself.

That was something she’d always understood, but the experience still left her with a sharp pain in her chest.

Suddenly, a raspy voice called from behind Ríf a. “Welcome home, Your Majesty.”

It was a voice that inspired dread in her. Her face twisted bitterly, as if she’d swallowed a bug.

She managed to muster her remaining mental strength and put on a social face, turning around. The man standing there was exactly whom she’d expected: A withered, skinny old man with white hair, leaning on a cane.

“Were you able to enjoy your time living with the Wolf Clan, then?” he asked.

“Hmph! So you already know all about where I’ve been and what I’ve been doing, then.”

“Why, yes, of course I have. You are my future bride, after all.” The old man, Hárbarth, let out an amused snicker.

Ríf a, on the other hand, only scowled in further displeasure. The word “bride” upset her.

Ríf a glared directly at the old man again, looking him up and down.

His long hair and long beard were both just as white as her own hair. She'd heard he was already well over sixty.

His face was creased with multiple layers of wrinkles, and the hands peeking out from the sleeves of his robes were nothing but skin and bones.

The thought that *this* was going to be her future husband was enough to make her feel sick.

Even so, she could do nothing to avoid this marriage. Rífa had a duty as the þjóðann to pass on and preserve her royal bloodline.

And so, this repulsive old man was the only option left to her; all others had been eliminated.

At a glance, Valaskjálf Palace was a gorgeous place. That was true, and that was exactly why an enormous budget was necessary to maintain that level of splendor. The standards of living had grown too high, and it would not be an easy task to reduce them again.

At this point, the central empire's finances were so desperate that it could no longer make ends meet without the support of Hárbarth and his Spear Clan.

Indeed, things were so desperate that everyone knew how wrong and mismatched this wedding was, and yet nobody could raise a voice to say so.

In blunt terms, for the sake of sustaining the empire, Rífa had been sold off to that despicable old man, as a vessel.

She was going to bear a new þjóðann carrying his blood.

And the dreaded day of that wedding ceremony had already drawn quite close.

"Ugh...!" Sigrún grunted. "Felicia, be a little more gentle with that. ...Ngh!"

"I *am* being gentle," Felicia said, her brow furrowed. "Really, you were so reckless fighting with your hand like this!" She carefully continued to apply her homemade medical ointment to the back of Sigrún's hand.

They were in a room in Fort Gashina, a fortress on the border of Wolf Clan and Lightning Clan territory.

During the previous nighttime battle, the Wolf Clan army had suffered a major defeat, only barely managing to survive by fleeing into this nearby fortress.

A look out the window showed a scene filled with the wounded. No one had survived uninjured. All of their faces were exhausted and clouded with worry.

It was safe to say the Wolf Clan army was in tatters.

Still, the fact was that this many of them had made it here alive, very likely thanks to one person.

“There was nothing I could do about that. I had no choice,” Sigrún replied coolly. “The duty of the Mánagarmr is to always fight at the front line, protecting the other soldiers.”

Sigrún had taken on the role of leading the rearguard, fighting tooth and nail with incredible valor as the army retreated. Without her efforts, only half, or perhaps even a third as many, people would have survived to reach the fortress.

But the price she’d paid for it was high.

“Even still, you did not have to... look, do not blame me if this hand doesn’t work properly anymore,” Felicia said.

“That would be a real issue. There’s still a lot of work left for this hand to do. ...Urgh.” As Sigrún tried to clench her right hand into a fist, she let out a grunt and grimaced.

This girl was known for being stone-faced in most situations, and yet her expression twisted with pain. It went to show how intense the pain had to be.

That stood to reason, for even after suffering the wound to her right hand by Hveðrungr during their duel, she had continued to use and abuse that hand regardless. The wound and swelling had worsened horribly; Sigrún’s battered right hand was now swollen to almost twice its normal size.

“What are you even saying, in your condition?” Felicia replied as if chiding a stubborn child. “You just rest and heal for a while.”

It actually looked like that hand would have difficulty even lightly grasping

anything. Heading out into battle with one's main weapon hand in this condition would be nothing short of suicidal.

It was thus perfectly natural to stop her in this situation, but...

"You can't expect me to sit around at this critical moment when our lives are on the line," Sigrún shot back.

"But now that Big Brother has been sent back to his world, if the Wolf Clan troops were to lose you, too, then...!"

"That's exactly why. If I disappear from my place on the battlefield, morale won't hold." Sigrún stood up in a way that said the conversation was over, and she donned the fur mantle that had been hanging on the wall nearby. It was the item that signified the Mánagarmr, passed down from one bearer of the title to the next.

Apparently, she had a deep awareness of the responsibility and weight that came with it. That was exactly why she was so resolute in her intention not to retreat from the fight.

Felicia gave a small sigh, realizing the futility of any further persuasion. "Ohhh, you really do only listen to Big Brother and no one else, don't you?"

Still, even as she said that, she recognized the validity of Sigrún's point. She had no choice but to acknowledge that.

Their army's precious defensive tactic, the "wagon wall," had been easily defeated, and the Wolf Clan army had suffered their first major military defeat in recent years.

And as for Fort Gashina, it had only just recently been attacked and captured by the Lightning Clan, sustaining severe damage at the time, and so its ability to function as a defensive stronghold was greatly reduced.

If the Panther Clan joined with the Lightning Clan and attacked together, the fortress likely wouldn't hold.

And despite this crisis, Yuuto, the commander-in-chief whom the soldiers all revered, was not appearing before them. The pretext given was that Yuuto was recovering from his own injuries.

It would be a tall order to ask the soldiers to ignore their anxiety at this point.

And so if Sigrún the Mánagarmr were to disappear from the front lines due to injury, the men would see no hope of victory for the Wolf Clan. Falling into despair, they would begin to break down and flee, or surrender to the enemy; that outcome was as clear as day.

In the Wolf Clan army's current state, a small trigger would be like a crack in a layer of thin ice, and lead to total collapse.

"That reminds me, Felicia." Sigrún turned to her with a very serious look. "There's something I have to tell you about, and this is a good chance."

"What is it? Is it something good, or something bad?"

"I can't say. That's not something I can decide. It's about that masked man, the one who's probably the patriarch of the Panther Clan... Umm, just, try to stay calm when you hear this, all right?"

For someone who normally got straight to the point and never minced words, Sigrún was speaking in a strange, very hesitant way.

That was enough for Felicia to infer what Sigrún was trying to tell her.

"You are talking about my brother, right?" she said, with a bit of a smirk.

"Wha... You knew?!"

"Yes, though Big Brother decided I should keep silent about it. I apologize."

If word spread in public that the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr was actually Loptr, the former Wolf Clan second-in-command, the Wolf Clan would be forced to do everything possible in order to kill him.

That man had killed his sworn father, the most unforgivable crime. If the Wolf Clan were to let a kinslayer go unpunished, it would besmirch the clan's honor, and weaken its authority both domestically and abroad.

Upon discovering that fact, Yuuto had felt he had no choice but to keep it secret because he hated war and wished to find a way to forge peaceful relations with the Panther Clan.

Even after the two clans had gone to war, he had chosen to keep the secret

known to only a few select people, in order to preserve the possibility of a peaceful end to the conflict, and to keep from being forced into sustaining a continuous war.

"You don't have to apologize," Sigrún said, shaking her head slightly. "If that's what Father decided, then there was nothing you could do."

She seemed to accept that explanation as a matter of course, without any further personal feelings on that matter.

She wasn't wasting a single thought on any foolish worries like whether she hadn't been told because she wasn't trusted.

That candid and detached aspect of Sigrún was a little dazzling to someone like Felicia, who focused quite a lot on worries and details.

Of course, it was that aspect of Felicia's personality, that consideration to details, that allowed her to support Yuuto as well as she did, and indeed Sigrún was envious of her for it.

"Still," Sigrún said, "although I don't like putting it this way in front of you, that man is a terrible problem as an enemy..."

She looked down at the injured hand Felicia was now wrapping in bandages, her face vexed and bitter.

It might well be said that a soldier always lived with both victory and defeat, but for the woman with the heavy title of Mánagarmr, the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior, it had to be incredibly frustrating.

"I'd thought that the man's power was his ability to steal techniques from his enemies and make them his own, but that was completely wrong." Sigrún spit out the words bitterly. "His real, most terrifying power is that in the midst of a fight, he can *read his opponents completely,* identify their tendencies and quirks, and see their weaknesses."

Felicia was Hveðrungr's — Loptr's — younger sister by birth, and she knew the truth of Sigrún's words well.

To use and master a technique stolen from an opponent meant *also fully understanding how that technique can be overcome.*

And that principle also carried through to his strategic abilities as a commander.

“Indeed, for him to be able to think up not one, but several methods to break through the wagon wall defense... with no flattery as his sister, I find his talent terrifying.”

“And he’s got that monster Steinþórr waiting at his back, the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir,” Sigrún said bitterly. “I have to say this is a pretty terrible situation to be in without Father here.”

“If we can hold out for a little while, we should be able to receive directions from Big Brother, though.”

Last night, the Claw Clan twins had been sent off riding for Iárnviðr with Yuuto’s smartphone in their possession. Those two would surely be able to make it safely back to the city without being captured by the enemy.

And Ingrid had been taught how to use the device by Yuuto, so she should be able to contact him.

“I see. That’s reassuring to hear, but... frankly, it’s questionable whether we can hold out that long.” Sigrún’s expression was still grim.

Even with the twins’ great speed, it would still take at least two days to reach Iárnviðr from Fort Gashina. Communication had to take place at night as well, so it would be five days in total.

Against a normal enemy, barricading themselves in the fortress would easily buy them at least that much time, but...

“The enemy has that, what was it called, tu, t-ture, torebset? The thing that launches rocks?”

“The trebuchet, yes.”

“Ahh, that’s it. Against that, this fortress won’t hold up at all.” With a deep sigh, Sigrún shook her head in resignation.

That machine could launch large rocks, bigger in size than two full-grown men, with incredible speed and force. Its destructive power was something Sigrún knew well, for she had seen it used against the fortresses of the Claw and

Horn Clans in the past.

It was a reliable weapon to have on their side, but terrible and vexing once it was being used against them.

At present, they had no way to defend against it.

Sigrún breathed deeply, then gave a long exhale. “Hahhhhh... Looks like I’m just going to have to steel myself.” She spoke with meaningful resolve in her voice.

That determined look in her eyes gave Felicia a terrible feeling.

As it turned out, she was right to feel that way.

“I wanted to at least hear Father’s voice one more time before the end, but there’s no helping it. Please tell Father this on my behalf. Tell him that Sigrún fought valiantly, to the end.”

ACT 3

“So, where exactly have you been all this time, hm?” The police officer asking Yuuto this question was middle-aged and seemed mild-mannered, sitting across from Yuuto with his elbows on the desk and his hands folded together.

His way of speaking was non-threatening, but there was something in his voice that indicated he wasn’t taking silence for an answer. Perhaps this was the sort of aura a veteran cop projected.

As for Yuuto’s current location, an interrogation room with grey, oppressive walls... was not where he was at all. Instead, he was in a place with furniture like you might find in some normal business building, mass-produced cheap work desks and chairs. He sat in a reception sofa chair over set up over in a corner of the room.

Yuuto hadn’t really committed any real crimes in particular, so he’d been handed over to the custody of the Hachio Police Department’s Community Safety Bureau, Juvenile Division.

Apparently, Yuuto’s initial disappearance had been big enough news at the time to get on local broadcast TV and into the newspaper. Of course, the modern era being what it was, the story had soon faded from the trending news and been forgotten. But by some strange coincidence, one of the employees at the department store had recognized Yuuto’s face, and called the police.

One could certainly call that the act of a good-hearted model citizen, but for Yuuto, honestly, that goodwill was nothing but trouble.

“It’s not something I really need to hide, and I’m certainly willing to talk about it, but to be frank, I don’t really think you’re going to believe me, sir,” Yuuto said, sipping his tea.

It was just your average, cheap green *matcha* tea, but the taste gave him a rush of nostalgia.

“That’s something that we can be the judge of,” the officer said. “For now, why don’t you just tell us everything you can?”

“Mmm, in that case... Well, the thing is, I was off in another world.”

“Another world?”

“Yes, a different world from this one, called Yggdrasil.”

As Yuuto finished that statement, he considered whether it would have been better to say that he’d experienced a “time slip” into the world of the past, but concluded that “another world” was best.

Even if he said it was the past, he didn’t know the exact date or location. If he were questioned for details on that point, he wouldn’t be able to answer, and it would make it easy for them to call his story a lie.

Of course, “I went to another world” was just as easy to call a lie in its own right.

“Ahh, I know about that, that *isekai* genre that’s popular in novels right now. Hey, I read them too, sometimes. How about that?” The middle-aged officer nodded to himself.

As expected, he didn’t believe Yuuto at all.

“Ha ha, well, that *is* the normal reaction.” Yuuto gave a small, self-deprecating laugh, and shrugged. In truth, this result was within his expectations.

“Uh huh. We do this for a living, after all. Now, I’d really like to hear the real story from you. You can just tell us, no need to hold back out of pride or something. That’ll make things easier for us, and you can go home quickly without having to sit here and have this boring discussion with us anymore. You see, that would work out just awesome for both of us.”

“Yes, I agree with you all the way, sir,” Yuuto said. “That’s why I told you the truth, but as it so happens, I find myself thinking now that it would have been a lot faster if I had lied. Like, I was off wandering across some foreign country for a while — that story is a lot more believable, right?”

“Hey, cut that out! Make light of the police, and you won’t like what happens!” That sudden outburst came from a younger police officer sitting next to the first one. He had been quiet until now, but suddenly raised his voice threateningly.

According to normal society, Yuuto had been a runaway from home, whereabouts unknown, for almost three years. It might not make him a criminal, but it certainly meant he wasn't going to be treated as a normal, law-abiding citizen.

For the time being, I'm glad that I was at least able to calm Mitsuki down and get her to go home. Thinking this, Yuuto smiled softly.

That girl got pretty reckless and daring when it came to Yuuto, so if she'd been here to witness this scene, she might have tried to interject and make things more complicated.

Unfortunately, Yuuto's little smile to himself struck a nerve with the younger police officer.

"What's so funny?! Are you trying to make a joke out of officers of the law?!" The officer slammed the palms of his hands loudly on the desk, and his face grew even more intensely angry.

He was strongly built, as if perhaps he practiced some sort of martial arts or combat sports, and his muscular arms were twice as thick as Yuuto's.

Naturally, this man must have confidence in his physical strength; it was written all over his face.

However...

Hmm... unarmed, Felicia would be stronger. Yuuto made a calm analysis of the officer's combat potential.

His muscles themselves were big, but Yuuto didn't feel that certain aura of strength particular to the strongest warriors he'd met in Yggdrasil.

Yuuto himself wouldn't be able to take the man down in a straightforward fight, of course. But on the other hand, *in an "anything goes" situation,* Yuuto doubted he would lose.

"Come on now, Saki! Don't scare the boy!" The middle-aged officer held up a hand to subdue his furious, younger cohort.

"Rgh, if you say so, Asamiya-san..." The younger officer reluctantly sat back down on the opposing sofa.

Having done this, the older officer turned back to Yuuto with a smile. “Sorry about that, Suoh-kun. Do me a favor and don’t provoke this guy too much. He’s got a bit of a short temper. Anyway, it’s lunchtime and you must be hungry, right? Do you want anything to eat? My treat.”

The middle-aged officer’s smile was friendly, but Yuuto’s sharp senses drew him to the man’s eyes, which weren’t really smiling at all.

From deep within those eyes, narrowed from the man’s feigned smile, Yuuto could sense him watching his every little movement, not missing a thing, plumbing him for information.

This was a real pro.

In a way, this man reminded Yuuto a little bit of the Claw Clan patriarch, Botvid. Of course, the latter was more skilled by several degrees.

I see, Yuuto thought. *So this is what the real “Good Cop, Bad Cop” routine looks like in action.*

It was the same negotiating technique that Yuuto had used against the Horn Clan patriarch Linnea during their first meeting.

Now that he was having it used on himself, he could see just how easily he might have been pushed into being manipulated by the kind behavior of the “good cop” if he hadn’t known about the technique beforehand.

“Hmm... then, can I get a *katsudon*?” Yuuto made his request without any reservations. “I haven’t had anything with rice in such a long time, I’ve really got a craving for it now.”

He’d already had to take a rain check on eating his favorite food after three long years of waiting. At this point, he was sure he could be forgiven for playing along with their little act and getting a meal out of it.

“...You sure do seem calm, kid,” said the older officer. “You know, normally, when someone your age gets dragged in by the police, they curl up into a tiny ball, or they put on a big show of acting tough. One of those two.”

As he said this, he gestured with his thumb at the younger officer sitting next to him.

“You’ve even got this fierce-looking guy getting in your face, to boot. And yet you didn’t react one bit. You’re sitting there calmly like nothing’s wrong. You’ve got some nerves of steel, don’t you?”

“Huh?” Yuuto said. “No, it’s not that at all, really. It’s probably just because I simply haven’t done anything bad.”

...In this world, anyway, Yuuto added in his head, a bit bitterly.

However indirectly it may have happened, he was aware of the fact that he now had blood on his hands. He didn’t regret it, though, since without going down that path, he wouldn’t have been able to protect his allies, his *family*.

“I think running off and causing your parents to be worried sick is hardly good as far as normal society is concerned, don’t you?” the officer asked archly.

“Oh, and do the police nowadays make it their business to stick their noses into a person’s private family affairs?” Yuuto replied with a smile, but his voice was ice cold.

He knew that it *was* indeed part of their job, but he also didn’t want any outsiders barging in on that part of his life.

“So you finally show a reaction, and *this* is what I get, huh?” For some reason, the older officer’s friendly smile froze stiff, and large beads of sweat began to appear on his face. He actually looked a little pale too, like he was sick.

The younger officer visibly shuddered, and looked around, muttering, “Is the thermostat busted or something?”

Yuuto didn’t feel anything strange, though.

As Yuuto sat there confused, a female officer came around from behind the partitioning screen sectioning off the little corner they were in.

“Please excuse me. This boy’s ride is here to pick him up.”

“My ride?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes, your father.”

“...I see.”

He *had* technically been a missing person for around three years. It was

natural enough that they'd put in a call to his family in this situation. He couldn't exactly blame them for that.

Even so, he couldn't stop from thinking, *You had no business doing that.*

"Well, it seems like your guardian is here, and *for now* it doesn't seem like there's anything criminal about your case." The middle-aged officer put extra emphasis on the "for now" part for some reason, but he waved his hand at Yuuto, dismissing him. "You're free to go. Go on home, and make sure to have a nice long private talk about things, just like you wanted to."

While the officer was back to his earlier casual smile, Yuuto thought he seemed a bit more tense than before. He got the sense that the man was being a lot more wary of him.

"Right, well, then..." Yuuto lightly bowed his head, then stood up.

He wouldn't get anything out of staying here and talking in circles with these people.

He decided to quickly take his leave, though it was annoying that he could only do so thanks to his father.

Once Yuuto was out of sight, the younger of the pair, Officer Saki, slammed his hands on the table in hot-blooded fashion. "Sure was a cheeky little smartass, wasn't he?"

He practically spat out the words.

Back in his college days, he'd belonged to a championship Judo club, and he'd been terrifying as a demon in his role as captain, striking fear into his own junior club members.

Even now, whenever he ran into his former clubmates, they took defensive postures before he even said a word.

And yet that boy hadn't shown even the slightest bit of fear towards Saki, which had left him feeling less than amused, to say the least.

"Cheeky? That came off as *cheeky* to you?" His middle-aged counterpart, Officer Asamiya, was looking totally exhausted by contrast, slumped heavily into the office sofa and sipping at some fresh tea one of the office ladies had

poured for him.

“Of course it did. What other word would you use to describe that kind of attitude?!”

Asamiya lowered his teacup and gave a long sigh before speaking. “Hahh. Saki, you said you’re aiming for the C.I. 1st Division, right?”

A police department’s 1st Division was a section of their Criminal Investigation Bureau, and the one that handled investigation of the worst, most serious crimes: murder, armed robbery, assault, kidnapping, and so on. For a cop aiming to make detective, it was the perfect stage to perform on.

“Ah. Yes, sir,” Saki said. “I want to make good use of the strength I’ve built up until now.”

“Heh! Those rough fights and chases you see in detective dramas don’t actually happen all that much, you know. Well, that said, it’s true that it’s still dangerous work.”

“Yessir.”

“In that case, work on improving your ability to sense danger some more.” Asamiya punctuated this with a glare at Saki. Unlike the friendly eyes he’d directed towards Yuuto earlier, this was a sharp glare that seemed to pierce right through his target.

Saki gulped once before replying. “What exactly do you mean, sir? Was that young boy really that dangerous?”

“Yeah. Don’t be fooled by appearances. That kid was bad news, no mistake about it.” Asamiya rolled up his right sleeve. The sharp tone of his arm muscles stood out immediately, even through his somewhat thick arm hair.

And there was something else that stood out.

“Take a good look. My goosebumps *still* haven’t died down. That little punk let just a bit of his anger slip out, and this is what happened. You felt something too, didn’t you? A sudden chill?”

“O-oh, that. I... I thought that maybe the office’s heat had gone on the fritz or something.”

“You idiot!” Asamiya poked Saki in the forehead with a finger. “That’s why I said you need to work on your senses!”

The older officer shook his head, exasperated.

“Sure, I might be working here in Community Safety now, have been for awhile. But you’re talking to a man who spent twenty years in C.I. 4th Division, dealing with organized crime. I’ve had more than my share meetings with yakuza bosses, face-to-face. But that kid... he made even those big shots feel like small fry by comparison.”

“Th-that much...?” Saki couldn’t really bring himself to believe that.

Part of him held on to the idea that maybe Asamiya’s instincts were off.

But on the other hand, Asamiya was, in fact, a long-time veteran of the Criminal Investigation Bureau’s 4th Division. (Though, nowadays, the division had branched off into its own department, and the official name had been changed to the Organized Crime Control Bureau) His group had specialized in dealing with criminal organizations, and his skill had been such that even yakuza patriarchs with subordinates numbering in the hundreds had taken careful notice of him.

If a man like that was being so firm in his assessment, Saki couldn’t just deny it outright.

Asamiya shuddered, remembering the earlier scene. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen anyone with eyes like that. Just what sort of hell did that punk have to crawl through to get like that at so young an age?”

“Sorry, I know this is cutting into your *valuable work time*.” Yuuto put a pretty obvious emphasis on those last words, adding a sneer.

He didn’t actually feel even a bit sorry; he was just using the chance to rub in the fact that while his late mother had been lying in critical condition, his father had prioritized his work.

He was conscious of just how childish he was being right now, but in front of his father, he couldn’t stop himself from taking on this hostile attitude.

His father, by contrast, said no more than those few words and gestured

towards the truck. “It’s not a problem. Get in. We’re going home.”

It was the same small, white truck as three years ago.

Just the thought of sitting in that small cab space alone with his father made Yuuto feel like he was going to suffocate.

“No, I’m good. I’ll walk home.”

“Just get in. There’s a bit we need to talk about.”

“Talk?”

This was rather unexpected. Yuuto had figured his father wasn’t interested in him — or really, in the concept of family at all.

“...Fine.” Yuuto nodded and got into the passenger seat.

His father got in, as well, and the truck set off.

Yuuto didn’t look in his father’s direction, instead looking out the window. “So, what is it? What’s the talk?”

“It’s about what’s going to happen next,” his father said. “What are you planning to do? Are you going to go back to school?”

“...Oh. Um.” Honestly, he hadn’t been thinking about that at all.

Back in Yggdrasil, his thoughts had been focused entirely on trying to get back home. What he would do after that had felt so far away, it had never really entered the picture.

“Entrance exam season is long past already,” his father said. “If you want to start classes right away, you’ll need to do it somewhere like a part-time night school.”

“.....” Yuuto said nothing. Suddenly, reality had been thrown in his face.

He’d had a vague plan at some point in the back of his mind to start attending the same school Mitsuki went to. But now, really thinking about it, if he hadn’t been sent to Yggdrasil, he’d be in his second year of high school.

There was the problem of his lost years of education, the gap in his studies, and the difference in age. It was too late for someone like him to ever go back to leading a typical student life.

Once again, he felt the weight of the three years of time that had passed.

“Or will you start working instead?” his father asked.

“That might actually be a good idea.”

Attending school would mean having to be financially dependent on his father for as long as he was a student. He would prefer to avoid that.

If he was going to put becoming self-sufficient as his first priority, then getting a job and an income was the fastest way forward.

“But there aren’t going to be good jobs out there for someone who hasn’t even graduated from middle school.” His father’s words once again shoved reality into his face.

That was entirely correct, too; there was no room for Yuuto to argue back.

So he answered in an almost indifferent tone. “Well, it’ll work out somehow.”

“Society’s a lot harsher than you think it is.”

“I’m sure it is. But I’ll be all right.”

It was true that the circumstances surrounding him were, in a word, tough. It might also be true that he was seeing things a bit naively.

But Yuuto had been thrown headfirst into a primitive world where the strong crushed the weak, where he didn’t speak the language, and he had still survived.

With that experience backing him, he had a confidence and pride that told him he’d overcome any adversity.

“Still, what’s with this all of a sudden?” Yuuto added. “You sound almost like a parent. That’s out of character for you.”

“Well, I *am* technically your parent.”

“Hmph! Mom was my parent. So was a guy who took good care of me in the place I was in for three years, a leader I ended up calling ‘Dad.’ Those were my only two parents. Not you, the man who abandoned Mom.”

“...I see.”

The conversation ground to a halt.

The only sound was the engine noise reverberating through the cab of the truck.

They reached the house soon after that; it wasn't that long of a trip.

As Yuuto got out of the truck, his father said he'd be heading back to work and left. Yuuto clicked his tongue as he glared at the truck driving away, and cursed, spitting out his words.

"At least come back with some kind of excuse, you shitty excuse for a dad."

Once Yuuto got home, he called Mitsuki to let her know he was back from the police station, since she would be worried about him. She told him to come meet her at a nearby chain restaurant.

This was perfect for Yuuto, who still hadn't had lunch yet, so he headed straight over. However...

Mitsuki, you little rat, you tricked me! Yuuto aimed a rueful glare at his childhood friend, sitting next to him with her hands clasped together in an apologetic gesture.

With her was another girl, now sitting across from Yuuto.

"Heh! Oho! Hmm..." The girl was eyeing him up and down like she was appraising some product. He couldn't help but feel incredibly uncomfortable.

The girl's name was Ruri Takao, and Mitsuki had introduced her as her best friend since middle school.

As it happened, she had spotted Yuuto and Mitsuki together in the department store, and while Yuuto was getting hauled off to the police station, she had hauled Mitsuki off to this restaurant and had been giving her the third degree in the meantime.

Apparently Yuuto had called during the middle of that. For Ruri, that had surely been the perfect chance to get Yuuto to walk right into her trap.

Thinking back on it now, Mitsuki *had* been acting a little strange during the call. He'd noticed that and come rushing over here out of concern, only for it to backfire like this.

“So this is the boyfriend I’ve heard so much about,” Ruri announced.

“W-wait, we’re not going out yet, so—”

“Ohh, not *yet*, right. Not *yet*!” Ruri repeated herself with an evil, evil grin.

“Uuuuuugh...” Mitsuki whimpered, her face bright red, and shrunk into herself.

She was already overwhelmed at this point, so Yuuto couldn’t count on any help from her in this situation.

Ruri smirked. “Hee hee hee, I’ve heard allllll sorts of things about you from Mitsuki.”

“Oh, is that so.” Yuuto’s reply was completely deadpan.

Inside, he was curious about just what sort of things had been said about him, but his instincts forged on the battlefield were ringing out like alarm bells, telling him that he shouldn’t react to her.

“So, how do you feel about Mitsuki?” Ruri demanded, pressing forward anyway.

The question was so sudden and straightforward that even Yuuto flinched.

“How...? That’s, um...” Yuuto stumbled on his words, and stole a glance at Mitsuki.

Having his first declaration of his true feelings to her be right in front of a third party was out of the question, even as a joke.

“Geez, Ruri-chan!” Mitsuki shouted. “This is your first time even meeting him! What are you saying, all of a sudden?!”

Mitsuki’s face was as red as an apple, and her eyes were welling up with tears. Still, Ruri paid her no mind.

“Well you know, after making you wait for three whole years, it’s only right to make him come out and say these ow-ow-ow-ow!”

All of a sudden, Ruri was interrupted by a blonde-haired woman who came up from behind her and pulled sharply at her ears.

“Sorry about that. This one was pretty impolite, wasn’t she?” While still

pulling on Ruri's ears, the blonde woman smiled sweetly.

She looked to be around twenty, give or take. She was a slender beauty who looked just like an older version of Ruri.

"Ow, ow! Saya! I'm sorry! I was wrong, okay? Just let me go!"

"I'm not the one you need to be apologizing to."

"Uuugh... Mitsuki, Suoh-san, I'm sorry," Ruri groaned.

"Good." Saya nodded with satisfaction and finally released Ruri's ears, then sat down next to her.

Ruri put her hands over her ears, muttering, "Ughh, it hurts..." to herself with tears in her eyes. Even for a family member, that treatment was pretty merciless.

The beautiful older girl shrugged, then gestured to Ruri as she introduced herself. "Oh, I'm Saya Takao, her cousin. Pleased to meet you."

"Um, you are... the person who's experienced with archaeology, right?" Yuuto asked. "I'm Yuuto Suoh. Please allow me to thank you for your assistance last time. It was very helpful."

"Hey, you certainly know your manners. I wish my little cousins could learn a thing or two from you."

"Ahaha..." Unsure how to respond to that, Yuuto could only let out a dry laugh.

"I've always wanted to have a chance to talk with you directly. It's spring break right now, so I was back home, and it turns out you returned at the same time, you know? I thought this was a good chance. That's not a problem, I hope?"

"No, it's actually the opposite," Yuuto said. "I'd wanted the chance to talk with you, as well."

"Hm. You have a really composed air about you for someone your age. And even though you're calm, there is a certain 'weight' I feel from you. I suppose that is the sort of bearing that should be expected from someone who commands tens of thousands of people below him." With a hand to her chin,

Saya nodded as if confirming her thoughts.

Yuuto couldn't help but shrug and give a wry chuckle. "I think what you're feeling is something more like the placebo effect, actually."

"Hmm, really? Well, we'll just leave it at that, then. Oh. I'm paying for the meal, so just order whatever you like. Don't hold back; I may not look like it, but it so happens that I make a good living."

"Ah, okay." At Saya's urging, Yuuto opened the menu.

Ruri had come at him so fast earlier that he still hadn't had time to place an order.

He wasn't exactly keen on the idea of people paying for him, but with an adult and a lady making that statement, as the younger person, it would actually be rude of him to decline. So Yuuto decided to take advantage of her kindness in this case.

As he went ahead and ordered something random off of the lunch menu, Saya popped open her laptop.

"Now then, will you tell me your story?" she asked right away. It looked like she was completely prepared for a long talk.

Yuuto nodded. "I'm okay with talking about it, but I'm not sure where to start."

"It's fine if you start from the very beginning."

"All right, then..."

With some oolong tea from the restaurant drink bar on hand to quench his throat, Yuuto started retelling everything from the beginning.

"Right after I got called there, I really didn't have a clue what was going on. But I still remember clearly the cold feeling of Sigrún's sword blade against my throat. My very blood ran cold, as they say."

"Mm-hm, yes. As expected, this is much more real coming directly from you rather than secondhand." Saya made small remarks as she listened attentively, all while tapping away at her laptop's keyboard. Naturally, she was a touch-typist.

Yuuto did have a desktop computer at his own house, but for someone like him who almost exclusively used a smartphone, seeing someone type so quickly and cleanly up close was honestly impressive.

“Hmm... the divergence from mythology is on the whole pretty much as I predicted in advance, but the most vital part being the most contradictory is what really concerns me.” Saya’s fingers stopped typing and began tapping rhythmically on the table.

“The most vital part, you say?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes, when you were summoned to that world... that is, in terms of Norse mythology, the time when Fenrir was captured and bound by Gleipnir.”

“Okay...?”

“In the myths, the gods of Ásgarðr decide to imprison Fenrir, who is prophesied to bring disaster upon them. They use an iron chain called Læðingr, but it gets ripped apart. After that, they prepare a chain that’s twice as strong as Læðingr, called Drómi, but Fenrir easily rips that one apart too.”

“Sounds like an uncontrollable, rampaging beast.”

“We happen to be talking about you, though,” Saya said. “Right, mister ‘Infamous Wolf Hróðvitnir?’”

Saya giggled a bit at this, but for Yuuto, it didn’t really feel like this story had any relation to him at all, so the joke fell flat.

She went on. “So, what this means is we can interpret that as describing that several attempts were made to perform a summoning ritual, but you weren’t successfully summoned before.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“And so the gods, having reached the end of their patience, fashioned a magical cord made entirely from ingredients *that don’t exist in this world*, and they called it Gleipnir. More specifically, it was prepared under the direction of the god Frey’s servant, Skírnir.”

“Wait, Skírnir is...!” Yuuto’s eyes went wide upon hearing that familiar word.

“That’s right, it’s the rune wielded by your adjutant Felicia. There are some

who theorize that Skírnir was a spy working for Surt, as well, but perhaps we can just say that things weren't too close *or* too far off."

"Hey, she's not any kind of spy." Yuuto's response was a bit sullen. "She's been at my side this whole time."

Felicia had been completely kind and loyal to him ever since the time when he'd been helpless and useless, mocked by everyone else as "Sköll, Devourer of Blessings." Naturally, he didn't take kindly to any talk of her being some kind of spy.

"Well, on that point, we could bring the Hoof Clan's Yngvi into the equation and come up with some temporary theories," Saya said, "but that would just take us off track, so let's leave it aside for now."

"Hearing you say that just makes me think about it even more, though."

"For now, just let me continue talking about Gleipnir."

"...Right." Reluctantly, Yuuto nodded.

"So with Gleipnir, the Norse gods finally manage to seal up Fenrir. And you were also bound successfully to the world of Yggdrasil. It's fine up until this point, but at least from what I've heard from you, one big element that's absolutely necessary to the story is missing."

"An element that's absolutely necessary?"

"Exactly. The war god, Tyr. There's an episode in the myths in which, in order to capture Fenrir, he ends up sacrificing his own right arm. But in your story, there's nothing to match up to that."

"Could Dad... I mean, could the previous patriarch Fárbauti be that? His second-in-command, or in other words his right-hand-man, Loptr, was..."

"Mm-hm, I thought of that possibility too, but it just doesn't seem to fit. Tyr is the highest-tier god in the Norse pantheon, okay? And, sorry if this is rude, but your patriarch predecessor was, at best, the chief of a small regional clan, right?"

"Highest-tier? Wasn't Odin the chief god of Norse mythology?" Yuuto wasn't incredibly familiar with the mythology, but even he knew that much.

“Yes, he is in the version of Norse mythology that’s passed on *today.* But in the earliest period of the mythology’s history, Tyr was the god of law, prosperity, and peace, the highest god. After that, there was a long era of fierce warfare, and in the middle of that, a majority of the faith switched over to Odin, the god of warfare. Tyr was reduced to a lesser war god, a god of soldiers.”

“The world of the gods sounds like a tough society,” Yuuto said, grimacing.

And because he’d mentioned the name earlier, he couldn’t help but recall it again: Loptr was originally supposed to have captured the title and position of Eighth Patriarch of the Wolf Clan. But the one who’d forced him out from that destiny was Yuuto.

“You’re right,” said Saya. “In the end, the gods are something humans made up, so you could say they suffer the same faults and consequences as in the human world.”

The conversation went on for a long while.

Yuuto finally finished his narrative.

“...And so, when this Sigyn woman used the seiðr Fimbulvetr on me, before you knew it, I was in Mitsuki’s room, and that’s how I ended up here. Well, that’s about all of it.”

Having finished speaking, Yuuto took a breath and exhaled deeply.

He’d tried to tell his story in a summarized fashion, but even so, it had been more than four hours since he’d started. He was understandably worn out.

“Hm, thank you,” Saya said. “That was all so fascinating.”

Finishing her typing with one loud *clack!* of her ring finger on the enter key, Saya reached her arms up and stretched.

“No, thank you for taking the time to listen to me.” Yuuto bowed his head to her deeply.

“I went to another world and was living as something like a king” was a completely ridiculous story, and she had taken him seriously, listening to the whole thing and taking notes the whole time. He was incredibly grateful to her.

“You’ve got nothing to thank me for,” Saya said. “In the end, even after

hearing all of that, I still can't pinpoint where or when you were." She put a hand to her mouth, frowning thoughtfully.

"If you couldn't figure it out, then..." Yuuto sighed, feeling a little depressed at that conclusion.

He really wanted to know exactly where he had been and at what point in time. Of course, that was because he couldn't stop thinking about what would come afterwards in history.

He wanted everyone in the Wolf Clan to be able to live peaceful lives.

If that were possible, that is... but if they were following the thread of Norse mythology, then in the near future, a great war equivalent to the end of the world was going to happen. Anxiety kept growing within him.

"Going by their race, language, spiritual beliefs, clothing and the like, I would have assumed it was somewhere in Eastern Europe area, but that region's geography is clearly different." Saya started typing again.

She tilted her laptop screen so that Yuuto and the others could see it. She had a map of the European continent on display.

Yuuto had stared at maps like this one many a time on his smartphone, but seeing it on a larger computer monitor made it a lot easier to read.

Yuuto started tracing the 53 degrees latitude line from left to right. "That's right. There should be three very large mountain ranges, but..."

"But there's definitely not a single one in the area, right?"

"Right..." The area he traced his finger over was a wide patch of green.

There was none of the dark brown color used to indicate high mountain ranges.

"If we go as far east as China, then the race of the people doesn't match up, and if we go to North America, there are mountains, but the ocean is directly west of them," he pondered. "In the world I was in, west of the mountain ranges was a large land area with regions like Álfheimr and Vanaheimr."

"As much a mystery as ever," Saya agreed. "This is a bit of a basic question, but do you think you miscalculated when you were figuring out your latitude?"

“I suspected that as well, and researched it over and over.”

“Hmm...”

“I mean, if we go to the 45 degrees latitude line, there are the Alps, maybe.”

“No, from what you told me, the topography of the Alps is clearly different... hm?” Saya froze up.

Suddenly, she stared at him with her eyes narrowed, so intensely that Yuuto took a step back, but it was like she wasn’t even seeing him.

“Alps... ‘álfkipfer’... so that’s it. So that’s what it is. It’s all come together. If we think of it not as 9,000 years but as 900 years, then that way ends up fitting more naturally with the era.”

Saya was mumbling to herself and seemingly agreeing with her own hypotheses, but Yuuto and the others were completely left out.

“Um, Saya-san?” Yuuto asked.

“Ah!” Saya gasped and whirled around to her laptop, and began to type at a feverish speed as if possessed. And just as quickly she slammed the laptop shut and stood up.

“There’s something I have to go check out, so I’ll be going! Here’s the payment! Bye!”

She pulled out a bill from her wallet and slammed it onto the table, then walked past the register and out of the restaurant.

It was exactly the kind of erratic, “marching to the beat of my own drum” type of behavior one might expect of a genius.

◆◆◆

“What?! Last night the Panther Clan launched a nighttime assault on the Wolf Clan... and *broke them*?!” Steinþórr exclaimed.

The Lightning Clan patriarch couldn’t help but repeat back in shock the news his trusted man Þjálfi had just brought to him, for it was as surprising as a bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky.

Steinþórr was a man of around twenty years, with an appearance and

behavior that was still a bit immature and rough around the edges, but in spite of that, this Einherjar was one of only two people in all of Yggdrasil to have two runes. And in all the land, there were none who could compare to his strength and valor on the battlefield. He was feared as a warrior-general who could take on an army himself.

But even this fearsome warrior known as Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, had been easily turned aside by a certain man, and even with the Panther Clan fighting alongside him, that man had just barely rebuffed his assault again.

“For Suoh-Yuuto to really be defeated so easily... are you sure this isn’t some kind of lie?!”

In the previous battle, both clans worked together to attack the Wolf Clan, and even struck them when they least expected it, and still hadn’t been able to defeat them. It was hard to believe that the Wolf Clan which had withstood that would be defeated by the Panther Clan acting alone.

“Yes, I also wondered if it might be disinformation, but it seems there’s no mistaking it,” Þjálfi said.

“You’re kidding me... Suoh-Yuuto should have been wary of a nighttime assault. How were they still able to get him?”

Hveðrungr was a great general; that was true. He was the type who could strike at any small weakness the second you revealed it, and had an obsession with victory that Steinþórr lacked, along with a logical mind and no scruples. He was a man you couldn’t let down your guard around.

Even still, Steinþórr couldn’t understand it.

He knew in his head that both victory and defeat were a matter of course in war, that no commander could ever win one hundred percent of their battles, but...

Þjálfi said, “There is something the Panther Clan soldiers have been making a huge fuss about. It might be relevant.”

“What? Tell me.” Steinþórr impatiently gestured with his chin.

“Right. ‘Suoh-Yuuto is gone. Without their commander-in-chief, we have

nothing more to fear from the Wolf Clan.’”

“Gone?” Steinþórr repeated. “What does that mean?”

“Sadly, I do not know.”

“Damned mask-wearing brother of mine! He’d better not have pulled an assassination.” Steinþórr spat out the words, and cracked his knuckles.

Certainly, with Yuuto gone, it would be understandable to think that the Wolf Clan might suffer a huge defeat afterward. However, even though things like this were known to occur in war, this was such an incredible let-down.

“So then, what shall we do from here on?” Þjálfi asked.

“We’ll join in the attack on Gashina,” Steinþórr growled. “We can’t just let the Panther Clan do it themselves, after all.”

Fort Gashina had originally been under control of the Lightning Clan. They couldn’t go back to their clan capital Bilskírnir without at least recapturing that.

Yuuto often referred to Steinþórr as simply “that idiot,” but in reality, he wasn’t *just* a fool. When it came to these matters of war, Steinþórr understood the essentials.

Steinþórr scratched his head, then sighed and muttered to himself half-heartedly.

“But, to be honest, I don’t actually feel excited about this anymore.”

Meanwhile, in the commander’s room in Fort Gashina, Olof was racking his brains over what to do next. He had been appointed to succeed the absent Yuuto as commander-in-chief of the Wolf Clan Army, but this situation had him at a loss.

The huge loss from their last battle had left them with a great number of casualties, and troop morale was hopelessly low.

In addition to that, the structure of Fort Gashina itself had been damaged in places during an earlier battle with the Lightning Clan for control of the fortress, and its ability to function as a defensive stronghold was dramatically reduced.

The food supplies in storage here had also all been taken by the enemy back

then.

The Wolf Clan army had been transporting food along with their formation, but even most of that had been seized by the enemy in the chaos after their defeat on the field. What was left couldn't be expected to last long.

They definitely couldn't wage a long siege defense like this.

Of course, the Lightning Clan had Steinþórr and his rune Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer, and the Panther Clan had the trebuchet. With destructive weapons like that in the enemy armies, Olof didn't imagine he could hold out for long against them, either way.

"Should we abandon Gashina and flee, then?" Olof muttered to himself with a troubled expression.

The Panther Clan had already set up formations in the nearby narrow mountain pass, but there was still a long detour route around the mountains, which the Wolf Clan had used during their "lure the tiger off its mountain lair" strategy. The Panther Clan hadn't yet finished surrounding them with troops in that direction, so they could try to escape using that route.

However...

"*Could* we even flee successfully?" Olof added with a groan.

The Wolf Clan's forces were mainly comprised of infantry. Meanwhile, the Panther Clan forces were made up entirely of cavalry. The difference in their armies' mobility was enormous.

In other words, even if they made a break for it, the enemy could catch up to them.

It was well known that most kills in a battle came from *after* an initial exchange had been decided, by launching follow-up attacks against the loser of the contest as they pull back. By this same token, an army in war suffered its greatest casualties when attacked while fleeing.

"Would it be better if we commit to making our stand here instead, and dealing more losses to our enemies?" Olof wondered aloud. "Would that be the better thing to do for the Wolf Clan in the long run?"

However, that brought him back to the fact that the Wolf Clan army was full of injured right now, and emptied of morale, in no shape to fight effectively.

Either choice seemed to promise only a hellish outcome, and Olof had been trapped going in circles on this for an hour now.

But time was limited; he needed to make this decision and get it over with.

Just then, a voice called out to him.

“Big Brother Olof, do you have a minute?”

“Oh, Sigrún,” he said. “What is it?”

With an expression and tone of voice that were both clearly completely exhausted, Olof motioned to invite the silver-haired girl into the room.

Sigrún stood before him and bowed once. As she raised her head, he saw her lips were pressed tightly together in an expression of grim resolve.

“...Hm.” Olof sensed that this was no ordinary matter, and straightened himself in his chair, indicating that she continue.

Sigrún took a small breath. “Big Brother, the Múspell Unit and I will remain in this fortress and keep the enemy in check here. Please use that opening to lead the main force of the army out of here and escape.”

“Wha—?!” Olof raised his voice, but her sudden request had left him at a loss for words.

Sigrún’s Múspell Special Forces, or Múspell Unit, was a group comprised of the clan’s most elite fighters, but it only numbered around three hundred soldiers. There were trainees as well, but even including them, it was still fewer than five hundred in total.

Going up against both the Lightning and Panther Clan armies with just that number wasn’t just unreasonable; it was thoughtlessly absurd.

In other words, this was...

“You... you mean to sacrifice yourself, then.”

“My job is to fight at the head of the pack, to lead the fight in order to protect everyone,” Sigrún said. “That’s the duty handed down to each Mánagarmr

through the generations. It's going to be all right. Whatever it takes, I'll definitely secure you enough time for everyone to get away."

"Urrgh..." Olof growled, and put a hand to his mouth in thought.

It did certainly seem like that was the only good move.

In that scenario, while the main body of the Wolf Clan army fled, the Panther Clan forces definitely would not simply charge past Fort Gashina in order to chase them.

If they were to ignore and pass by a fortress with their enemies still inside, they would be making themselves potential targets of a perfect pincer attack from the back and front. From what Olof had observed so far, Hveðrungr was not the sort of foolish commander who would do that.

Put another way, this meant that until the Panther Clan finished capturing Fort Gashina, the Wolf Clan's main force could flee without taking any attacks from them.

And if facing the enemy on the front line to protect everyone was the duty of the Mánagarmr, then it was likewise the commander-in-chief's duty to make necessary sacrifices to protect the greater army — to be the one to make those decisions and give the order.

Olof took a long, long breath, then let it out slowly. Standing up, he walked briskly over to Sigrún's side and clapped a hand onto her left shoulder.

"I'm sorry, and thank you. Then, we'll leave the rest... to *me*!"

Thwack! Suddenly, Olof struck Sigrún with his fist.

Sigrún reacted to the attack in an instant by reflexively blocking it with her right arm. "What are you...?! Augh!!"

Her injury felt the force of the impact, and her face twisted in pain.

Olof did not overlook that opening that gave him. Rather, his attack had been calculated to create it.

"How did you even plan on fighting with your sword arm in that shape?" he demanded. "Hah!"

“Gugh—!” Sigrún let out a wordless grunt as Olof’s follow-up struck her right in the solar plexus. He had hit her with every ounce of his strength behind the attack.

“Olof... you...” Even Sigrún couldn’t remain standing after that. She fell to her knees, then collapsed onto the floor, where she lay unmoving.

Apparently she had lost consciousness.

“Heh. Thanks to you, I’ve made up my mind.” Olof said, looking down at her. “This defeat is my responsibility to bear. How could I run off shamelessly and leave my sworn little sister to clean up my mess?”

As he spoke, his expression bore no more signs of doubt; it was the face of a man who had found his resolve.

ACT 4

The view was filled with countless cherry blossoms, in the glory of their full bloom.

Yuuto found himself simply overwhelmed by their bright, vibrant beauty.

Of course, this wasn't his first time seeing something like this. But there really was a certain *something* about cherry blossoms, something that pulled on the strings of a Japanese heart.

It had now been three days since his return from Yggdrasil.

He still hadn't received any contact from Felicia, and Mitsuki had taken the chance to invite him, halfway forcing him really, to come along with her to a flower viewing event.

"Just as crazy crowded as always, I see," he murmured.

The many cherry blossom trees were arranged surrounding a pond. At the base of the trees, the visitors had spread out picnic sheets and blankets, and had set out things like boxed lunches and alcohol. There wasn't a single tree left with open space beneath it.

Because of the elegant way the cherry blossoms were reflected on the surface of the lake, Hachio Park was famous in this region as a great place for flower viewing.

The weather was clear, and it was a Sunday to boot, so the huge crowds were only to be expected.

"Hey, I don't think we're gonna find a spot, at this point," Yuuto put in.

"Don't worry about that part," Mitsuki said, looking this way and that. "Let's see... oh! There she is. Heeey, Ruri-chan!"

Mitsuki called out and waved her hand in the air vigorously.

That seemed to be enough to get the other girl's attention.

"Oh, Mitsuki! Over here, over here!" She was standing in a spot under the third tree straight ahead of them, with her hair done up in a ponytail, and was

already munching on some sweet *dango* dumplings. She waved them over towards her.

Smiling, Mitsuki ran over to her and they exchanged a high-five. “Thanks for getting the spot for us! It wasn’t too bad, I hope?”

“Naw, not in the least. How about it? Isn’t this pretty much the best spot?”

“Yeah, way to go, Ruri-chan!”

The two of them giggled and chatted happily with each other. In stark contrast, Yuuto scrunched up his face with displeasure.

It was only yesterday that he’d had to face that girl’s judgmental stares and teasing.

“Suoh-san, come *on*, don’t make that face,” Ruri said. “I already apologized for yesterday, right?”

“What about Saya-san? She’s not with you today?” For now, Yuuto ignored Ruri and looked around, trying to spot her older cousin.

Saya was valuable as one of the few people who could tighten the leash on the cheeky and outspoken girl in front of him, of course, but Yuuto was also concerned about the fact that yesterday, she had realized something important related to the world of Yggdrasil.

“If you’re looking for Saya, she’s been busy reading over some difficult-looking book ever since yesterday. *Tima*-something, I think she called it. And another one called *Cri*-something.”

“What do you mean, ‘something’...?”

“Ahh, well, I can’t ever remember Western style names and stuff, ahaha,” Ruri said with a laugh.

Yuuto could only give a sigh in response.

It was probably some important key clue towards unraveling the mystery of Yggdrasil, but this way he didn’t have any idea what it was.

“Look, Saya said that once she’d figured something out, she’ll get in touch, okay?”

Ruri's words were a little too unconcerned to be reassuring, but Yuuto agreed with her. "Ah, yeah, I guess that's true."

He might have actually experienced living and working in a B.C. era, but he was still a complete layman when it came to archaeology, without even knowledge of the basics.

It would be best to leave the expert to handle the investigation. *"Leave bread to the bakers,"* as the saying went.

"Anyway, more importantly..." Turning her gaze to the neatly-wrapped bundle in Yuuto's hands, Ruri licked her lips.

Seeing this, Mitsuki let out a small giggle. "Hee hee, can't wait any longer? I'll get it ready right away."

"Yaaay!" Ruri threw up her arms in celebration as Mitsuki took the bundle from Yuuto and began to untie the cloth wrapping.

Inside was a heavy, dark black box, made of four stacked layers. Mitsuki separated the layers one by one, and laid them out atop the picnic blanket.

"Whoooaa! It looks so good!" Ruri was so impressed that she let out what was practically a deep bellow.

Do you have to throw being ladylike out the window that much? Yuuto thought with a bit of worry, but it wasn't like he didn't understand her reaction.

The layered trays of the box were filled with things like hamburg steak, fried chicken, and sweet grilled amberjack, all Yuuto's favorites.

Everything even looked good visually, to the point where it could pretty much be considered something right out of a delicious-looking picture from a cookbook.

"Did your mom make this?" Yuuto asked.

"No, I made it," Mitsuki replied matter-of-factly.

Yuuto's eyes went wide. "Wait, is this edible?"

"Wha... that's terrible! I'm pretty confident in my cooking skills, you know!"

"Yeah, you say that, but I remember the time when I almost had to eat one of

your mud pies.”

“Why are you bringing up something from that long ago?!”

“Hey, Suoh-san, Suoh-san.” Ruri tugged at Yuuto’s sleeve. “Mitsuki’s cooking is seri ously good. So good that if I was a guy, I’d have proposed.”

She said that with a completely straight face.

“What, seriously?” Yuuto was astonished. “This is the same Mitsuki who brought in a handmade ‘chocolate’ on Valentine’s Day one time that was full of weird pockmarks and bubbles, like some kind of poisoned...”

“Again, why are you talking about something from that long ago?! Okay, fine then. I’m not giving you any, Yuu-kun. Ruri-chan, let’s eat, just the two of us.” With that, Mitsuki pulled away the portion that had been set in front of Yuuto, and moved it over to the space in front of Ruri.

“All riiight!”

“Wait, no, Mitsuki, don’t do this to me now! That would be heartless,” Yuuto protested. “It was a joke, a joke, okay?”

With everything that had happened, Yuuto still hadn’t had a chance to eat well since coming back to the modern era.

Additionally, this was the home cooking of the girl he loved.

Frankly speaking, he wanted to eat it really, really badly. Just one glance at the food had set his mouth watering like a faucet.

Of course, there wouldn’t have been a problem if he had just refrained from teasing her, but this sort of behavior was like an old, unconscious habit at this point.

“I mean it,” he pleaded. “I was wrong. I apologize, so please just feed me something here.”

He practically prostrated himself in apology.

Mitsuki, however, puffed out her cheek and turned away from him. “Sorry, no.”

It looked like she was actually mad at him.

Yuuto started wracking his brain, trying to think of what to do, when Ruri spoke up.

“Wooow, that’s so *bold*. You begged Mitsuki to *feed you*, huh?”

“Whaaaaat?!” Mitsuki let out a panicked cry. Apparently Ruri’s well-timed explosive statement had successfully blasted the anger right out of her mind.

“Ah, wait, no.” Flustered, Yuuto started to attempt to explain himself. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Y-Yuu-kun, do you... want me to feed you?” Mitsuki was bright red and fidgeting, but she still looked right at Yuuto with intensity in her eyes.

“Uh. Umm...” Yuuto lost all capacity for words.

“Th-then... all right, Yuu-kun, here’s some of the fried chicken you like... s-say, ‘Ahh.’” Without even waiting for Yuuto’s answer, Mitsuki used her chopsticks to pluck a small piece of crispy, breaded chicken from the box and held it up towards Yuuto.

Yuuto honestly felt like he wanted to lunge forward and bite down, but he couldn’t get his mind off of the leering, entertained stare coming from the other girl next to him.

“Y-you won’t eat it?” she asked tremulously.

“Ah, n-no, that’s, it’s—” Stealing glances in Ruri’s direction, Yuuto tried to communicate with silent body language that the girl was in the way and making things awkward.

However, Ruri didn’t seem to understand that at all.

“Even though you let Felicia-san and Sigrún-san feed you!” Mitsuki cried.

“Wha?!”

“Even though you let Ingrid-san and Linnea-san take care of you, too!”

“You — how can you bring that up at a time like...?”

“(Heh heh heh...)” Ruri’s smirking face was really getting to Yuuto. If she had been a guy, he would absolutely have decked her at this point.

“And you’ve been looking at Ruri-chan this whole time, geez!” Mitsuki yelled.

“What? You want Ruri-chan to feed you?!”

“No! And hey, Mitsuki, you’re getting way too worked up...”

“Y-you really don’t want *me* to feed you, that much...?” Now she was starting to cry.

It didn’t seem like words would get through to her at this point.

This was it; Yuuto had to give up.

The saying *“a woman’s tears are the most powerful weapon”* was a pretty apt one. That was all the more so when it was a woman one had feelings for.

Yuuto had no choice but to swallow his pride and accept defeat.

“All *right*, already.” Steeling his nerves, Yuuto leaned forward and took the piece of fried chicken in his mouth.

Click! There was a small sound, a camera shutter. As if she’d been aiming for this exact moment the whole time, Ruri had her smartphone at the ready, and snapped a picture.



“Thanks for the meal! It was really delicious!” Yuuto clapped his hands together and expressed his appreciation, then patted his stomach with great satisfaction.

All four layers of the stacked lunch box were now completely empty.

Just as Ruri had said, Mitsuki really was a magnificent cook. Added to that was the fact that it had been three whole years since Yuuto had eaten real Japanese home cooking. The nostalgic flavor of home had been the best spice of all.

Yuuto’s chopsticks in particular had moved with a ravenous speed — when it was all over, he realized he’d taken care of more than half of the food himself. It was no wonder he’d gotten this completely full.

“Thank you, it was nothing, really,” Mitsuki replied politely. “Here, have some tea.”

Mitsuki took out a tall canteen and cup, and poured out some for him. Apparently it was a well-insulated thermos; a little bit of steam drifted up from the still-hot tea.

“Oh, thanks.” Yuuto accepted the cup and took a sip, then let out a relaxed breath.

He gazed out at the scenery around them, not looking at anything in particular, just taking it all in.

“It’s the very image of peaceful,” he muttered to himself.

Above all, everything was so prosperous and convenient.

It was about an hour’s walk from his house to this park, but he’d gotten here in practically no time, thanks to the bus.

He didn’t have to go to a river to get water to drink; there were automated vending machines everywhere where he could get any one of a variety of drinks.

This was a world where “room temperature” wasn’t fixed to the weather; one could freely make it hotter or colder anytime.

There were kids out in the park wearing baseball gloves and playing catch, or

kicking a soccer ball back and forth, or sitting around playing games on their phones.

Three years ago, all of this had just been normal to him. But now, he felt an odd sensation, as if things were out of place. He could no longer accept this ordinary world as it was and take it for granted.

It was because he'd come to know the life lived by the people of Yggdrasil.

This scene playing out around him now was so much more precious, had so much more value.

"Yeah, it's peaceful here," Mitsuki agreed. "Yuu-kun, you don't have to fight anymore."

"Ah...!" Yuuto tensed up. "...Yeah, that's true. I'm home now, so I don't have to... do anything violent or bloody anymore, do I..."

He whispered this to himself as if he'd only just now realized it.

"Yuu-kun, you've already worked so hard and done so much for everyone in the Wolf Clan up until now." Mitsuki grasped Yuuto's hand in hers. "So, you don't need to anymore."

It was as if she were trying to grasp ahold of Yuuto and physically connect him to this world.

"Y-yeah. You're... right, yeah." Even as Yuuto felt comfort from Mitsuki's body heat flowing into his hand, his words were unsure.

He absolutely hated having to fight someone with death on the line; he'd had enough of that. If he could get by without having to fight, that was best. He'd always thought that way.

However, the thought of just him being here in this peaceful world gave him a strange feeling of guilt.

Right now his comrades were fighting, risking their very lives in battle, while only he got to be here eating delicious food, sitting around looking at cherry blossoms, rejoicing in this peace. Was that really okay?

"Yuu-kun, come with me!" Mitsuki exclaimed.

“Huh? Whoa—”

Mitsuki’s hand had released his, only to grab him by the wrist and pull him to his feet.

“Have a good tiiime!” Ruri called. “I’ll be here keeping an eye on everyone’s stuff, okay?”

Ruri waved goodbye and sent them off cheerily. Yuuto found himself being taken, somewhat forcefully, over towards the nearby street.

The street was lined with various stalls and stands, all topped by tents of bright yellow fabric. Exuberant voices called out, everyone trying their best to attract customers.

Mitsuki spotted one booth in particular, a shooting gallery, and headed towards it. “Hi, mister! One game, please.”

“You got it,” he said. “You can take up to three shots, all right?”

“Here you go, Yuu-kun.” With that, Mitsuki took the cork gun from the booth operator and handed it over to Yuuto. “Yuu-kun, you know, I really want that dog plushie up there.”

She pointed to a stuffed animal sitting on the second platform from the top, a rather odd-looking one with funny eyebrows that looked kind of like the swirly depictions of departed souls in manga and anime.

To Yuuto, at first glance it looked more like a cat, but Mitsuki said it was a dog, so that had to be what it was.

“Uh... um...”

Mitsuki’s rather forceful behavior had left Yuuto at a loss, and he stood there dumbfounded, looking back and forth between Mitsuki and the cork gun.

“Come on, let’s have *fun*, Yuu-kun. You’ve got to make up for what you’ve been missing out on. You’re not even seventeen yet, you know that?”

“...Oh. Yeah, you’re right. I’m still only sixteen.”

Yuuto nodded, and then he held up the cork gun and took aim.

He was here at a big, festive flower viewing event at the park, after all. He

couldn’t be blamed if, just for today, he put difficult things out of his head and had a little fun.

Actually, Mitsuki had gone through the trouble of inviting him out here, even cooking him all that food herself. Fully enjoying himself here was the only proper way to respond to her efforts.

“Make sure you aim carefully!” Mitsuki called. “I’ve been wanting that thing for a long time now.”

“Okay, okay.” Yuuto centered the gun’s sights on Mitsuki’s chosen dog plushie, and tightened the gun against his armpit and shoulder to keep it steady, then pulled the trigger.

With a *pop*, the cork flew out of the barrel. It lost speed just before completing the distance to the target, and fell into the space between the second and third platforms.

“Ohh, you missed!” she moaned.

“Ah ha ha, you’ve still got two shots left though,” laughed the booth operator. “Come on, son, gotta look good in front of your girlfriend there.”

“Huuuh?! G-girlfriend, that’s, well...” Mitsuki’s face flushed red, and she bashfully put both hands on her cheeks, making a fuss.

However, Yuuto was already so focused on the task of shooting that he didn’t hear the other two talking.

Judging by the first shot, the gas pressure in the gun was set to be pretty weak. The game operator had a friendly face, but this was definitely a business. It wasn’t going to be easy to knock that target down.

“Well, guess I’ll just do what I can.”

Yuuto fixed his sights on the space a bit directly above the stuffed animal, and fired. However, the cork still ended up flying through the space under the toy.

“Ahh, Yuu-kun, you’re so bad at thiiis,” Mitsuki complained. “You need to aim more properly.”

Yuuto ignored that and aimed even higher, firing his third shot.

The cork traced a smooth parabola up and through the air, then came down to smack against the target stuffed animal's head.

"Ohhhh, you did it!" Mitsuki cried out and raised both fists victoriously into the air as the stuffed animal wobbled, then fell off of its platform.

"Ohh. You've got a good shooting arm, there, kid," the booth operator said, holding out the stuffed animal prize. "Looks like I lose."

"Ha ha, just a lucky shot," Yuuto responded with a shrug.

He had been lucky, in that the first shot had been at exactly the right horizontal trajectory. All he'd needed to do after that was adjust his vertical angle over the next two shots. If he'd had to start with both the horizontal and vertical being off target on the first shot, three shots surely wouldn't have been enough.

"Here." Yuuto took the plushie the man had given him and casually tossed it over at Mitsuki.

"W-w-whoa! Hey, don't throw it at me!" Mitsuki struggled to catch the thing without dropping it, then puffed out her cheeks. But as soon as she held up the plushie and looked at it, her face broke into a wide smile once more.

"What, did you really want that thing that badly?" Yuuto asked.

"I *did* want it, of course, just, um, it's not just that."

"Hm? What, then?" Yuuto grew suspicious at Mitsuki's vague, hesitant language.

Mitsuki's eyes darted this way and that, and she looked as if she was hesitating about whether to say what came next. "Y-Yuu-kun, it's also because *you* got it for me."

She looked up at him, clutching the stuffed animal to her chest as if she were clutching the courage she needed to say those words.

"O-oh, so that's why."

"Y-yeah, that's why."

The two of them said only that much before both going silent, looking at each

other as their cheeks grew bright red.

This was so embarrassing.

It was so incredibly awkward.

But, at the same time, it didn't feel bad, either.

"Hey there, you two," said the booth man. "It's fine that you're in full bloom and all, but you're getting in the way of business by standing right there, so if you're not going to do any more shooting, could you maybe run off somewhere else together?"

"W-we're so very sorry—!!"

The two of them suddenly remembered that they were out in public, and ran off, embarrassed, at top speed.

As Mitsuki and Yuuto walked along the road home in the darkening light, Mitsuki spoke with a lingering sigh. "The cherry blossoms were really pretty, weren't they? I know I see them every year, but I don't ever get tired of them."

Time flies while having fun, as is often said. After the shooting gallery, they had gone around to check out the other stalls and booths, strolled aimlessly around the inside of the park, joined back up with Ruri and lounged around, and even played badminton together. Before they'd realized it, it had grown quite late.

"Yeah, you're right," Yuuto said.

From Yuuto's perspective, Mitsuki's happy, smiling face was even more pretty, and cuter too, but though that thought came to mind, he held back from saying it aloud, and simply nodded.

That kind of statement seemed too affected, too cheesy, too embarrassing. But it was also how he really felt.

"Still, I wish we could've stayed to enjoy the nighttime flowers too." Mitsuki closed her eyes and smiled, as if she were looking at a picture from within her memories.

At Hachio Park, the cherry blossoms were lit up by spotlights at night, creating a beautiful scene that was quite different from during the day.

Or so Yuuto had heard. He himself had never seen it. It was one of those cases where, growing up as a local resident, he hadn't gone to the tourist spots in his own area that often.

Seeing how dejected Mitsuki was at missing the chance made Yuuto really want to see the nighttime cherry blossoms himself.

"Hey, there's nothing we can do about that," he said gently. "You've got a curfew."

"Uuuugh, yeah, I know, buuut..."

"And besides, it might not have been on purpose, but the other night, I showed up in your bedroom in the middle of the night. After something like that, if I made you late for your curfew, your family would seriously think the worst of me."

There was no way the parents of a teenage girl would have any kind of a good impression of a boy who'd suddenly barged into their daughter's room late at night. Yuuto was just lucky he hadn't been reported to the police right then and there.

"I don't think they'd think much worse of you, though," Mitsuki said.

"So they already pretty much think the worst of me, then?!"

"No, no. Mom's always wanted to have a son, and she always says stuff like, 'If only someone like Yuu-kun could be part of my family,' and things like that."

"Yeah, but that was three years ago."

"It's no different now. Actually, I think her opinion of you's gotten better. She even complimented you, saying you 'grew into a real fine man.'"

"Uh... I'm pretty sure I'm not all that attractive, though... does your mom like guys with my type of face or something?"

"Hee hee, maybe that's it. She is my mom, after all. Ah..." Once the words were out, Mitsuki stopped and put her hands over her mouth.

Apparently she had just realized that she had also said, indirectly, that Yuuto was her type, too.

Yuuto was sure that Mitsuki would quickly follow up with something to divert attention or change the subject, but instead she bit her lower lip, and as if she'd decided on something important, turned to look up at Yuuto.

"Hey, that question Ruri-chan asked you back during lunch at the restaurant? Could you tell me your answer, now?"

"Huh?" For a brief second, Yuuto didn't understand what she meant, but right away his mind went straight to the only question that fit.

How do you feel about Mitsuki?

"Hey... give me your answer," Mitsuki pled in a weak voice, then softly closed her eyes.

Yuuto understood what that meant; he wasn't fool enough to miss it.

How did he feel about Mitsuki?

He didn't even need to think about the answer. He'd always loved her, since even before he'd gone to Yggdrasil.

It was just that he'd sworn to himself, in his heart, that he could never say that out loud to her until he made it properly back to the modern world.

He placed a hand gently on Mitsuki's shoulder. She shuddered slightly; that told him just how tense she was right now.

And it was a something he could only know because he was here with her now, touching her.

There were no more barriers of space and time between them.

There was no more need for him to restrain himself any longer.

Then, why? Why was it that he hesitated now? Yuuto shook his head, trying to banish the weak-willed part of himself.

"Mitsuki..."

He made up his mind, and he spoke the beloved name of the girl in his heart aloud, as if to spur that heart onward. Yuuto moved his lips closer to hers...

Beep! Delelee! Deedeleleeee! ♪

Just when their lips were about to touch, suddenly, Mitsuki's smartphone began ringing, and the two of them flinched and jumped apart from each other.

"Um, um, er..." Mitsuki was panicking.

"...Just go ahead and answer for now," Yuuto murmured, gesturing for her to do so.

"O-okay."

She clumsily took the smartphone out of her bag. As Yuuto watched from right next to her, he took a huge breath.

He felt his heart still racing.

His emotions were running high, and he couldn't calm down, but even that wasn't a bad feeling.

However, his time enjoying those complicated feelings came to a crashing halt at Mitsuki's next words.

"Yuu-kun. I don't know what they're saying, but it sounds like they're calling for you. They keep saying, 'Yuuto! Yuuto!'"

Yuuto gasped. "Felicia! Is it Felicia?!"

He grabbed the smartphone roughly out of Mitsuki's hands when she held it out to him, and cried out the name of the person to whom he had given his own smartphone.

"That voice! Yuuto! Is that you, Yuuto?!"

"Ingrid?!" The voice over the phone was not his golden-haired adjutant, but instead was the red-haired girl who had been his trusted partner in the forge. "Why are you the one who's..."

"Ohh, that's 'cause the twins brought the thing to me."

"...Ah. I see now." That bit of information was enough for Yuuto to get a rough grasp of the situation.

Since time was of the utmost essence, they had sent the phone with the twins, the fastest two people in the Wolf Clan, back to Iárnviðr to deliver to Ingrid.

For Yuuto, who had felt like every moment was an eternity while waiting to hear from them, that was an excellent decision. He could expect no less from his adjutant Felicia, in whom he'd placed his absolute trust.

"Okay, then! Tell me, what's the situation right now?! What happened at Gashina?!"

Yuuto was also curious how things were in Iárnviðr now that they surely knew he was gone, but of course the most important thing on his mind was how events had developed with the armies near Fort Gashina.

It would have become known to everyone that he, the commander-in-chief, was absent, while the army was smack in the middle of the battlefield. There was no more precarious situation for them than that.

As Yuuto anxiously swallowed, Ingrid gave a small sigh, then spoke. "They lost. There was a sudden attack at night, and the wagon wall defense was broken..."

"Agh! Th-then, what about everyone in the army?! What happened to Rún, and Felicia?!"

"For now, it sounds like they were able to flee into the fortress, and survived."

"I... I see." Yuuto started to sigh in relief.

"But that was two days ago. As for right now, I don't know..."

"Ah...!"

That's right, Yuuto realized. Unlike the modern era, in Yggdrasil there was no way to transmit information instantly in real time.

And the Panther Clan had use of the trebuchet, and the Lightning Clan had Steinþórr and his destructive rune Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer.

A small fortress like Gashina would hardly be an obstacle to such powerful foes.

The more he thought about it, the more Yuuto's anxiety grew. He wanted more than anything to rush to their aid right now.

However...

Yuuto turned his gaze to what was right in front of him now.

Standing there was the girl he had wanted to meet for so long, had wished to touch again for so long, and she was looking at him with worry in her eyes.

◆◆◆

WHAM! Rumble, clatter clatter...

The huge rock fell down from the sky and slammed into the wall of Fort Gashina, which crumbled easily at the impact.

This was followed by the fevered screams of the Panther Clan and Lightning Clan soldiers, who all at once began to charge into the interior of the fortress.

“Uooooooghhh! Attaaaaack!”

“Kill them all!!”

“So they’re here!” Olof called.

From atop the overlooking terrace balcony, Olof gave a quick sweeping glance of his surroundings and smacked his weapon loudly against his well-worn armor.

Right now, the allied Panther and Lightning clan soldiers surrounding the Fort Gashina numbered fifteen thousand strong. Against them, there were five hundred Wolf Clan soldiers left to defend the fortress.

It was often said that the defensive side in a siege could afford to face an attacking force five or ten times its size, but against an army *thirty times* their size, they could not hope to put up an even fight.

That was all the more true because their enemy had the trebuchet, a siege weapon from a far more advanced era.

This was in every respects a losing battle, without the slightest chance of victory for the Wolf Clan.

Yet the soldiers were still trying.

“Attack, attack, attack!”

“Don’t let them take a single step further!”

“Oh, goddess Angrboða! Give me strength!”

“We’ll show you just how strong the soldiers of the Wolf Clan really are!”

Despite the situation at hand, the Wolf Clan soldiers protecting the fortress were at the peak of their morale.

That was only natural, for they were the soldiers that had stayed behind in this place of certain death of their own accord.

They were the heroes who had volunteered for this suicide corps, who were willing to pay with their own lives in order to protect the main body of the Wolf Clan army in its retreat.

They weren’t about to turn coward now just because defeat was the only outcome, because that was something they had understood from the very beginning.

In fact, they were emboldened by the will to fight in order to buy even just a little bit more time for their comrades to escape. A numbers disadvantage was meaningless, and with abandon, they attacked the enemies who entered the fortress, one after another.

“Heh heh, this reminds me of the Siege of Iárnviðr two years ago.” Olof smirked as he gazed down nostalgically at his men below, fighting at their best and most desperate.

Back in that battle, things had been just as hopeless as they were now. Naturally, Olof himself had taken part in that battle.

When it seemed like everyone else was ready to give up, Yuuto alone had refused to abandon hope, and used the “miracle” created by the solar eclipse, as well as the use of the trebuchet, to deliver an incredible victory.

Thinking back to that victory gave Olof chills, even now. Starting with that victory, the Wolf Clan had begun to thrive and prosper.

“If Father were here, he would likely have turned even this grim situation around somehow,” Olof murmured to himself.

Right now, his soldiers were overpowering the enemy with their sheer ferocity, but their strength, born of conviction and readiness for death, still had a limit. It would not last long.

He could already see that sooner rather than later, they would no longer be able to hold back the enemy's momentum.

A mere man like himself was nothing like the Gleipsieg Yuuto, the "Child of Victory" who had been sent to them by the gods; he could not produce miracles like Yuuto could.

"But even I have my pride and honor," he said aloud. "I cannot die just yet, not when I still have the shame of my earlier defeat. Take heed, Panther Clan. Do not think you will take us down easily just because we are a small force. We'll fight, and struggle, and tear at you until the very end."

"Fools, why are you taking so long?! The enemy is only a few hundred men!" Within the Panther Clan main formation, Hveðrungr raised his voice in irritation, for the fortress had still not fallen into his hands.

At this rate, he would lose his chance to catch up to the main body of the Wolf Clan forces.

In order to make this a true and perfect victory, and in order to make his future conquest of the Wolf Clan go smoothly, he needed to be able to hit them as hard as he could now, while he had the opportunity.

"Perhaps I should have left capturing the fortress to the Lightning Clan alone, and headed immediately after the Wolf Clan," he muttered.

Hveðrungr had assumed he would take a small fortress like this quickly and easily, but he had miscalculated.

At this point, the battlefield victory for the allied Panther and Lightning Clans was already set, and so he had switched to acting with standard, reliable tactics, but that had backfired on him here.

Even so, complaining about that at this point would change nothing, and was meaningless.

"Tch, if my red-haired 'brother' had charged in, this would have ended in a flash." Hveðrungr hatefully spat out the words.

The Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr had apparently decided to simply watch how things played out, and had left commanding his army to his right-

hand man, his assistant-second-in-command Þjálfi.

The man was truly a fickle one, through and through.

If he were the man's sworn younger sibling or child subordinate, he could have ordered the man out onto the front lines as he wished, but the Oath of the Chalice sworn between them had been an even one, fifty-fifty. He could not give outright commands to another patriarch with ostensibly equal authority to himself.

That was all the more true because the Lightning Clan troops were indeed participating in the attack on the fortress.

As a result, he had no trump card to play here, and had fallen into this situation of failing to fully capture the objective.

However, he wasn't about to give up on attacking just because of that.

"Engineers, I want you to throw even more rocks at them, and widen the spaces we can break in through," Hveðrungr ordered. "We're going to pile attacks on top of each other. Know that no reward awaits you if you take much longer!"

At this urging from Hveðrungr, the Panther Clan fighters forced their way into Fort Gashina with an even greater, desperate momentum.

Even still, the Wolf Clan fighters within the fortress held on.

They continued to hold on.

The siege had been launched on the fortress along with the rising of the sun that morning, and even as that sun began to stain the western sky with red, they still kept up their resistance.

If one were to consider an enemy force thirty times greater in strength, along with advanced siege weapons, it is clear what an astounding display of tenacity this was.

And yet, even with that, the Panther Clan eventually seized control of all sections of the fortress, until all that was left was to take the commander's chambers and the head of the commander barricaded inside.

Hveðrungr and some of his men dispatched the Wolf Clan soldiers who

guarded the entrance, and he burst into the room.

“Kyeaaaagh!!”

In that instant, with an ear-splitting cry, a man with long hair leapt at them and swung his sword in a powerful downward strike from a high stance, cutting down one of the Panther Clan men.

The man whirled his sword around in a storm of bold, powerful attacks, striking at the squad of Panther Clan fighters.

The man’s body was already riddled with wounds.

There was blood seeping out from under bandages wrapped around his head and abdomen. There were countless cuts and chinks all over his armor, telling the story of just how fiercely he had fought until now.

His face was pale, and he looked to be about at his last breath, but his eyes were not dead yet. Even in this situation he was aflame with the spirit of battle.

Overcome by the man’s intensity of spirit, another, then another Panther Clan fighter fell at his hands.

It was enough to make one question just how such a man so wounded could still be so full of such strength.

However, in the end, he was still one man against a great number.

As he cut down one more Panther Clan soldier, a second one leapt onto him and grappled him. Another leapt onto him after that, and they forced him to the ground.

“You certainly made me waste a lot of time, didn’t you?” Hveðrungr looked down at the man — at Olof — and spat those words at him mockingly.

Thanks to this man, the main segment of the Wolf Clan army had completely escaped. Even if he chased them now, he would never catch up. It was incredibly irritating.

“Still, it was quite the impressive feat for you to hold out this long against such numbers, with only a few hundred at your command,” Hveðrungr said. “Enemy though you are, I shall praise your magnificent work. How about it, then? Would you join me, and fight under my banner?”

“That voice... you’re Loptr, aren’t you?” Olof said slowly. “That would explain why the Panther Clan had something like the trebuchet.”

Glaring up as if the man were his worst enemy — which, as it so happened, was true in this case — Olof shot daggers of animosity at Hveðrungr with his eyes.

“Who can really say?” Hveðrungr gave a twisted smile. “I’ve long since forgotten whatever names I held before.”

He was aware that right now, his subordinates were seeing and hearing this. He couldn’t very well admit to being a kinslayer, perpetrator of the greatest crime in Yggdrasil.

However, he’d known Olof for a long time, and the man seemed to be sure of the true identity behind Hveðrungr’s mask.

“I knew you weren’t the kind of man who would die in a ditch somewhere, but to think you’d become patriarch of the Panther Clan,” Olof spat.

“Heh heh heh, I’ve no intention to talk about the distant past. I’ll ask again. Olof... are you unwilling to swear to me the Oath of the Chalice?”

Olof gaped at him. “What?”

“I’ve had a high opinion of you since long ago. I think that I could even entrust the position of assistant-second-in-command to someone of your caliber. Well?” Hveðrungr squatted down and peered into his face.

The Panther Clan were nomads who made their living while migrating across the land. Perhaps because of this, they were not well versed when it came to the art of governing cities.

For the Panther Clan, who had rapidly expanded their controlled territory into agricultural lands, a talented administrator like Olof was someone they were dying to recruit.

However, in response to Hveðrungr’s offer...

...Olof spat on him.

Hveðrungr clenched his teeth so hard they made a sound, but still did not immediately give up on his invitation.

“You should really think about this. If you refuse, all that awaits you is death.”

“Fine by me,” Olof snapped. “If you’re going to kill me, then do it. I have only one sworn father, the greatest hero in the land, Suoh-Yuuto! I have received the Oath of the Chalice directly from him, and there is no greater honor, so why would I have cause to swear on the Chalice of a petty low life such as you? Save your idiotic ramblings for when you mumble in your sleep.”

“Hmph! I’m impressed that you can bark so loudly at the end!” Hveðrungr drew the sword at his waist and in a single stroke, lopped off Olof’s head.

He hadn’t killed the man because he wanted to. He’d been spat on in full view of his subordinates, and then taunted in such a fashion afterward. If he had not executed Olof, he would have lost face as a patriarch, and so he’d been left with no other choice.

Hveðrungr looked down at the severed head as it rolled across the ground, and shot it a parting remark.

“Watch, then, from Valhalla. Watch as I burn Iárnviðr to the ground!”

“Ah!” Regaining consciousness, Sigrún bolted upright and checked her surroundings.

She seemed to have been sleeping atop a horse-drawn wagon.

There were soldiers marching in rank on all sides, stretching in front of and behind her. Their faces were all clouded over with incredible fatigue, and they walked with their heads hung down.

Looking further into the distance, she saw a wide expanse of plains, and further beyond that was the hazy outline of a mountain range.

“Where is this...?” she muttered.

A familiar voice reached her ears. “Oh, my. So you’re finally awake.”

Sigrún turned to find Felicia sitting in the wagon covered in a blanket, leaning against the side of the cart. She was clutching a bundle of papers in her hands, and seemed to have been writing.

Felicia set the papers aside, and continued. “You were asleep for a full day, unmoving as if dead. You must have really built up a great deal of fatigue from

all of your fighting. You really shouldn't push yourself to the limit so much, you know?"

"An entire day?! Then what about the Panther Clan?! What did Big Brother Olof do?!"

"Lord Olof took on responsibility for our defeat, and elected to stay behind with a small number of fighters at Fort Gashina as the rearguard so that we could escape." Felicia paused, and directed her gaze off in a particular direction.

When Sigrún followed suit, she saw, in one place amongst the colors of the evening sky, an incredible number of birds swarming about.

It was difficult to tell at this distance, but they were likely crows. They were birds that were drawn to the stench of blood on the battlefield, and fed on the bodies of the dead.

"Until just a few moments ago, I could hear the sounds of the rocks from the trebuchet crashing into the fortress walls, and the battle cries of soldiers, but all that has grown quiet. It seems the battle is over. I would assume that by now..."

"...!" Sigrún said nothing, but there was a loud *thud!* as she pounded her left fist against the wagon cart.

It was a straightforward expression of the depths of her anger; the impact was enough to make the cart rock for a moment.

She had not been particularly close to Olof. Even so, he was her sworn brother, with their loyalty pledged to the same parent. That meant he was family.

Sigrún was sometimes called the "frozen flower," but she was not so cold as to feel nothing about that man's death.

"Lord Olof entrusted me with a message to give to you," Felicia said.

"...What is it?"

"He said only, 'I leave the rest to you now.'"

"...I see." Sigrún said no more, and unsheathed her sword.

She brought its hilt up even with her eyes, the blade pointed up towards the

heavens.

A warrior needed no words.

She had only to offer her silent respect to the great man who had gone to rest before her, and pray silently for his peace in the afterlife.

And thus, the curtain drew to a close on this series of battles between the Wolf Clan and the allied Panther and Lightning Clans, known afterward as the Battle of Gashina, having ended with the Wolf Clan's terrible defeat.

News of the Wolf Clan's massive military defeat sent shockwaves through the subsidiary clans that were under its protection.

In the Horn Clan capital, Fólkvangr: "Is that really the truth?!" Linnea shot back at the messenger who brought her the report, unable to believe it.

Her outward appearance was that of a charming young girl, but she was the proud patriarch of the Horn Clan, which held the large swath of fertile territories in the river basin between the Körmt and Örmt Rivers.

"Yes, ma'am!" the messenger informed her. "The Wolf Clan troops engaged the allied Panther and Lightning Clan forces near Fort Gashina, and were defeated!"

"To think that the Panther Clan had made their way down there, as well..." Linnea frowned bitterly.

The Horn Clan had been victims of attacks by that Panther Clan's cavalry, and she knew the threat they posed all too well. Their mobility and force in a charging assault was overwhelming.

And as for the Lightning Clan, even a combined attack by seven Einherjar had been easily brushed aside by Steinþórr's wild strength, a memory that was still fresh in her mind even now.

If those two clans had combined forces, then even for Yuuto, who was lauded as a war god incarnate, it might not be helped that he couldn't take care of both foes at the same time.

"Th-then... is Big Brother safe?!" she asked desperately.

Linnea's concern was not born simply out of the fact that he was her sworn

brother by the Chalice. To her, Yuuto was someone who had saved the Horn Clan from danger several times, and to whom she owed a great debt. He was someone she felt she could respect from the bottom of her heart for his wisdom. And he was also the man that she had fallen in love with.

His safety and whereabouts were the most important thing to Linnea.

“A-about that... the report is that Lord Yuuto was killed in the battle.”

“What?!” All of the color drained from Linnea’s face. Her teeth began chattering, and she stumbled a step backwards, then another. “Th-that’s a lie! B-Big Brother came to us from the land beyond the heavens. There is no way he could possibly have died!”

“H-however, that is the only reasonable conclusion here.”

“It’s a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie!” Linnea could do nothing but shout those words, repeating them over and over. Her mind refused to accept the idea.

“Princess, please get ahold of yourself! You are the patriarch, you must not act this way!” The one who cut in angrily to snap her out of it was a white-haired, older man who had been standing at her side.

His name was Rasmus, and he was a high official in the Horn Clan, who had formerly served as its second-in-command. He had retired from the position after being severely wounded in the Horn Clan’s last war with the Lightning Clan, and now he served as an advisor to Linnea. To Linnea, he was rather like a father figure.

“B-but...” she stuttered. “This claim that Big Brother died is just...”

“I do understand how you feel, but please remain calm! You will not be able to protect the Horn Clan otherwise!”

“Ugh...” A little bit of composure returned to Linnea’s eyes after hearing Rasmus’s words.

For her, protecting the clan which she had inherited from her father and bringing prosperity to its people was a duty that had to be her first priority. She now managed to remember that again.

“Y-you’re right,” she swallowed. “If... if we’re just supposing that Big Brother

has really passed away, then...”

“Yes. There will be unavoidable chaos that follows, I think. We must decide how to overcome this crisis, and we must do it in all haste.”

“...Right.” Linnea nodded, furrowing her brow.

Beginning with the Horn Clan, the clans which had pledged their allegiance to the Wolf Clan as its subsidiaries were only staying loyal in large part due to the influence of the hero who had turned a small and weak clan into a great and prosperous nation in less than a generation, the man known as Suoh-Yuuto.

The man currently viewed as the likely successor to Yuuto, the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command Jörgen, was a talented man and by no means unworthy of authority, but it was a different story on the matter of rallying various other clan patriarchs under his leadership as well. One could not help but doubt he could be capable of that.

“Princess, this might actually be an opportunity for the Horn Clan,” Rasmus said.

“What?”

“I know that our Horn Clan is currently in the position of younger sister clan to the Wolf Clan, but as a nation, we are no less powerful than them. And our Oath of the Chalice with Jörgen was on equal, fifty-fifty terms. We have no more obligation to stand beneath them. We could use this opportunity to take back the leadership role in our alliance, and we could even take over the Wolf Clan itself...”

“You would repay our debt to them with betrayal?! Do you think I could ever do something so disloyal?!” Linnea shouted at Rasmus with a furious, burning anger, but Rasmus maintained a serious expression and continued.

“Princess, one cannot govern a nation on platitudes. I am not suggesting that we destroy the Wolf Clan, or anything of that sort. The strong rule, and the weak serve the strong. That is the natural order of things. What happens next will determine the future of the Horn Clan. Please, think long and carefully about this.”

“.....” Linnea couldn’t say anything in response.

At about the same time that Linnea was receiving her report, the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid was getting a report from a messenger sent by his own daughter, Kristina.

Having inferred the major details of the situation, he was deep in thought. “Hm, so Big Bro Yuuto has returned to his realm beyond the heavens...”

Even for a man such as him, with a reputation as a great plotter and schemer, this event was completely outside of his predictions.

Frankly, he didn’t think the Wolf Clan stood a chance at resisting the combined might of the Panther and Lightning Clans without Yuuto. He needed to abide by his Oath of the Chalice if possible, but he was also in no mood to go down with a sinking ship.

He would thus need to take into consideration the possibility of switching allegiances to the Panther Clan or Lightning Clan in the future.

After all, the only way for a nation as small and weak as the Claw Clan to survive in this chaotic and war-torn world was to be shrewd.

“Now, then... how should I play this one, I wonder?” Rolling up the message, Botvid tapped his desk with a finger, and he thought to himself.

Under the surface, Yuuto’s absence had already begun to shake the foundation holding up the Wolf Clan.

ACT 5

“Look, like I’m saying!” Yuuto shouted. “Jörgen, *you* become the patriarch. You’ve got the dignity for the position, and you’d do a much, much better job at it than I ever have.”

“Father, you are the only one who would say that!!”

Without missing a beat, an angry shout came back through the phone that was loud enough to make Yuuto’s head hurt. He grimaced.

It was the third day since he’d regained contact with Yggdrasil. Right now he was speaking with Jörgen, the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command.

The clan system of Yggdrasil was such that a clan governed over an area of territory, and was based on a family for its structure, with the patriarch at its top. The second-in-command was the “eldest child” of the patriarch’s child subordinates, and in the event of something befalling his sworn father, he had a duty to succeed as the next patriarch of the clan.

For Yuuto, this was the perfect chance to hand over the position to Jörgen, and so he had been making that suggestion for over a day now, but he kept receiving the same intense opposition.

“N-no, look, it can’t be just me,” Yuuto said. He tried his best to argue back with the first reasonable thought that came to mind. “All of the clan elders, didn’t they put in for you to succeed me?”

“No! Uncle Bruno, and Uncle Hokan, and Uncle Helge, they all wish for you to return to us, Father!” Jörgen shot back.

“Those guys... didn’t they all oppose me becoming patriarch and refuse to swear the Oath of the Chalice with me?”

“Why are you talking about something from so long ago?! As I have made clear to you several times now, Father, *everyone* wishes that you would return to us, from the elders to the ranked clan officers. Everyone has arrived at the same conclusion!”

“Everyone’s just putting me up on a pedestal,” Yuuto said. “It’s going to be all

right. Jörgen, you'll definitely do a way better job at being patriarch than someone like me ever could."

From Yuuto's way of thinking, the very concept of some young brat like himself ruling over a nation as its sovereign was outlandish in the first place.

All while he'd been living in Yggdrasil, he had seen that there were already people with more practical experience, like Jörgen or Skáviðr, and had noted they would be much more fitting for the position.

He'd been trying to get that point across casually, but...

"Father... the fact that you do not let yourself become conceited, and always maintain a humble heart, is something that is wonderful about you, that draws people to you," Jörgen said. "But..."

"Hm?"

"In every single situation, you always undervalue your own worth!!"

The scream that came out from the phone this time was much louder even than before, and Yuuto reflexively pulled his head away from the receiver.

"Whoa!"

Yuuto almost let himself respond with a complaint, but he could hear heavy breathing from the other end, like the heaving of a raging bull, and he decided to hold off.

Jörgen took a deep breath, and let out a long sigh. "Someone of my mere talents would most certainly not be able to make the subsidiary clans maintain their obedience. Aunt Linnea's heart is loyal and noble, and so she might fight at our side, but as for the Claw Clan's Botvid, and the Wheat, Mountain Dog, and Ash Clans... they will certainly break away."

"...Break away?" Yuuto repeated. "But we had them all exchange the Oath of the Chalice with you in order to prevent that."

"Yes, and that is why they will not oppose or attack us on the surface. However, they will surely also not act as we wish them to. In this situation, we cannot hope to fight the Panther and Lightning Clans."

"Hmm..." Yuuto scratched the back of his head.

The Lightning and Panther Clan alliance...

This was the root of the problem, the core of his dilemma.

According to Yuuto's assessment, Jörgen had always taken care of things handily in Iárnviðr when Yuuto was away, and so he was plenty worthy of becoming patriarch. That was exactly why Yuuto had chosen him as second-in-command.

However, if they would be facing the Panther and Lightning Clans, two powerful foes at the same time, it was certainly true that he wasn't sure how things would turn out.

It wasn't an issue with Jörgen's worthiness as patriarch; rather, it was that the patriarchs of the enemy clans boasted abilities that were ridiculously broken.

Steinþórr had his overwhelming brute fighting strength, and Hveðrungr's eye for strategy was a terrible threat.

In truth, the news that the wagon wall defensive tactic had been defeated had made his blood run cold. He never would have thought that a military strategy from over three thousand years ahead of that era would be so easily conquered.

The tactic his enemy had used was akin to the famous "Trojan Horse," and so that particular move wouldn't work over and over without being seen through, but there was ample possibility that the man had thought up several more techniques to defeat the wagon wall.

In order to counter the Panther Clan, the wagon wall would not be enough, it seemed.

Yuuto recalled something that he had hesitated on, and ultimately refrained from using, because of the terrible repercussions that might occur afterward.

Should I have them use that? No, but that would...

He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"Father! ...Father!" Jörgen shouted.

"Y-yeah. Sorry, I'm here. I was just thinking."

“Ohh, so you are considering returning to us after all, then!”

“Ah, um, no.”

“I beg you! Father, I know that you have always wished to return to your realm beyond the heavens. So, I would not ask you to be here with us in the Wolf Clan forever. Just three more years! Please, give us three more years!”

“Even if you say that...” Yuuto furrowed his brow, and sighed.

The Wolf Clan had become something like a second home to Yuuto, and through the Oath of the Chalice, the clan had become like his family. And so, of course, Yuuto wanted to find a way to do whatever he could.

However, right now, his only method for returning to this world was via the magic of Sigyn, of the Panther Clan.

Jörgen might be asking for only for three years, but even if Yuuto were able to go back to Yggdrasil somehow, there was no guarantee he’d be able to return home again.

Beeep-beep! Beeep-beep!

“Ahh, it sounds like we are out of time,” Jörgen said rapidly. “In any case! Aunt Felicia will be returning to the city tomorrow. Please, please! Please return to us...”

Jörgen’s voice cut off.

Click. Beep, beep, beep.

With the call ended, there was only the mechanical beeping in Yuuto’s ears.

Back when he was in Yggdrasil, Yuuto had come to resent those heartless sounds that accompanied the end of his calls. But today, he actually found himself feeling like they’d come to his rescue.

Mitsuki had been watching him carry on his discussion with worry in her eyes. “Good job getting through that, Yuu-kun. It sounded like it was really hard for you... are you okay?”

Her question didn’t come to him through a phone receiver; his childhood friend’s voice was loud and clear, right here next to him.

Yuuto stared at her face intently.

“Huh? What is it?” Mitsuki tilted her head slightly.

He wasn’t looking at a picture of her; right now he could see her form, her living movements, with his own two eyes.

Such things could be an ordinary part of his life here, but to return to Yggdrasil would be to throw them away.

It would mean leaving behind this girl who had already waited faithfully for him for three years.

He couldn’t bring himself to do that.

However, he didn’t want to abandon the Wolf Clan, either.

He didn’t know what he should do.

However much he thought about it, he just didn’t know what to do.

In the living room, Mitsuki’s mother, Miyo, sipped from her tea, then let out a long sigh. “Haaahhh... after hearing something like that, it starts to feel like his story about going to another world isn’t entirely a lie, doesn’t it?”

She might not have given birth to him herself, but Yuuto was like family to her, the precious child left behind by her late best friend. It really pained her heart that he’d been a runaway for three years.

On top of that, this was the very boy her beloved daughter had been attached to and pined after since grade school.

There were quite a few things Miyo was curious about, and she had invited him over for dinner tonight intending to grill him for more details, but the situation had taken a turn for the interesting.

With the TV turned off in the living room, conversations in the nearby hallway carried right through the wall. A bit of eavesdropping in this situation was only human nature.

“Hmph, don’t be ridiculous. Don’t tell me you’re buying that idiotic crap.” Her husband, Shigeru, practically spat out those words in irritation, punctuating them with the crunch of metal as he crushed the empty beer can in his hand.

It seemed he couldn't stomach the idea of this boy being so close to his adorable daughter.

Miyo had explained to him that she'd known Yuuto since he was small, and that he was a good boy, but Shigeru wasn't interested in listening.

"But that clearly wasn't Japanese he was speaking," Miyo said. "It wasn't English, either."

"Hmph, that just means it was some more minor foreign language."

"Even then, it means he's perfectly mastered speaking such a language, so that's pretty impressive."

"Ggh..." Shigeru grit his teeth and grunted in frustration.

Even he had been able to tell it was a real foreign language, and not just some foreign-sounding words of the sort grade school children made-up during their games of pretend.

"And by the way, about that metal headband?" Miyo said. "Today I took it to that secondhand shop for brand-name goods in the department store, and had them examine it. They said it really is made of pure gold."

"Is that really true?!"

"What would I get by lying to you about that?"

"Urgh..."

"Isn't it about time you just admitted it?" Miyo said. "At the very least, your daughter knows a good man when she sees one."

Her husband turned his face away and thrust out his drinking cup towards her. "Hmph! Bring me another!"

"Right, right. Just this once, dear."

Miyo shrugged her shoulders as if to say, *What am I going to do with you?* and made her way to the fridge to grab her husband's second drink of the night.

As Yuuto was on his way out the front door, he turned and bowed politely. "Thank you for dinner. It was wonderful."

"Oh, you're too kind. Please come and eat with us again. We'd love to have

you," Miyo replied, flashing a broad smile.

It wasn't the sort of social smile that accompanied polite flattery. Yuuto could tell that it was from the heart.

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you very much." Yuuto bowed his head again holding onto the renewed sense of gratitude in his heart.

"Yuu-kun, see you again soon," Mitsuki said.

"Yeah, catch you later." Yuuto returned Mitsuki's wave of farewell, and exited the Shimoya home.

Outside it was fully dark, his way home illuminated only by the spots of light from the street lamps along the road.

There wasn't another soul around, perhaps as was fitting for such a countryside town.

Yuuto was visited by a strange sense of loneliness. Perhaps that just showed how warm and happy it had felt at Mitsuki's home.

"Considering the position I'm in right now, it's a little too good for someone like me." Yuuto looked up at the starless, cloud-covered sky and sighed.

Currently Yuuto hadn't finished middle school, nor was he attending high school, and he wasn't working, either.

And Mitsuki's family had accepted someone like him, if not as Mitsuki's official boyfriend yet, at least as her male friend. Yuuto didn't think he'd ever be able to fully express his gratitude for that.

The meal had been unbelievably delicious, too. When he'd taken his first bites of the freshly steamed rice and first sips of the hot miso soup, it had brought tears to his eyes.

If he continued his life here in the modern world, these ordinary, peaceful and happy days would surely continue.

Of course, Yuuto had already learned by now that life wasn't all a bed of roses.

Eventually, he would be faced with obstacles and struggles due to the fact

that he hadn't gotten a standard education.

But, at the very least, he wouldn't have to kill or be killed over it. He would not have to stain his hands or his heart with the blood of others. This was the kind of world he'd wished to return to, for so, so long.

But... in the back of his mind, a voice whispered to him: Are you going to forsake your family for your own personal happiness?

Isn't that exactly the same as your father, the man you despise the most?

This was the source of the feelings of guilt which continued to plague Yuuto in the modern world, surfacing whenever he allowed himself to enjoy how peaceful it was here.

He kept trying to stay positive, telling himself that even without him in the other world things would work out somehow, but he couldn't avert his eyes like that any longer.

"Dammit!!" There was a dull *thud!* as Yuuto slammed his fist into a nearby telephone pole.

It hurt, naturally. It hurt like hell.

Even so, he struck with his fist a second, a third time, unable to do anything about the horrible swirling feelings in his chest except take them out on the closest thing nearby.

It was the following night.

As soon as the call connected, a voice familiar to Yuuto's ears came through the receiver. "Big Brother!"

There was no need to wonder who it might be; there were few girls who called Yuuto "Big Brother," and only one with Felicia's sweet, gentle voice.

He felt his heart welling up with joy.

He'd already known she was safe. However, there was a big difference between receiving that information and the feeling that came from actually hearing her voice for himself.

"Thank goodness," he said with relief. "So you really did make it out safely!"

“Yes! Likewise, Big Brother, it is so wonderful that you are all right! I had faith that you’d returned safely to your country beyond the heavens, but hearing your voice like this truly brings me relief.” On the other end of the call, Felicia let out a sigh of relief.

Certainly, thinking about it from Felicia’s perspective, Yuuto had suddenly vanished before her eyes. Even if she’d had faith in his safety, she must surely have been anxious.

“Well, I’m fit as a fiddle,” Yuuto assured her. “What about you guys? I heard Rún got injured.”

“Ah, then I’ll let Rún speak to you. She’s been saying, ‘Hurry up and give it to me!’ and making a fuss this whole time. Here.”

“F-Father!”

“Ah, hey, Rún,” Yuuto said. “Is your hand injury doing all right?”

“Yes, Father. It is nothing serious. More importantly, I must apologize. Not only did I lose Fort Gashina to the enemy, we lost many of our soldiers and officers...” Sigrún’s voice was choked with bitter frustration. The Mánagarmr surely felt a grave sense of responsibility for the defeat.

“It’s not something you should brood over,” Yuuto comforted her. “This all happened because I suddenly vanished like I did. You did a good job holding out as long as you did in that situation.”

“No, I didn’t. It is Big Brother Olof who deserves your praise. If he had not stayed behind in Gashina and held back the enemy, then... I think Felicia and I might not be here speaking with you right now.”

“...I see.” Yuuto said only that, then paused, his lips pressed tightly together.

He’d learned about Olof in an earlier report; there was almost no chance the man had survived.

“Then the fact that I can talk to you both now is because of him,” Yuuto said in a quiet voice. “We really owe him our thanks.”

“Yes...” Sigrún agreed softly.

Olof’s death had been a huge shock to Yuuto.

This was the man he'd trusted enough to put in charge of governing what had become the Wolf Clan's breadbasket, the city and province of Gimlé. Yuuto himself had often personally relied on Olof in various affairs.

And, back when he'd first become the patriarch, when many had looked down on him as an arrogant young upstart and the clan elders had been plotting behind the scenes to unseat him, Olof had become his sworn child subordinate and served him faithfully.

The man hadn't performed flashy acts of military prowess on the battlefield like Sigrún or Skáviðr, but applied himself to any mission assigned to him, providing steady and solid results. He was an unsung hero, and long, difficult tasks had always been safe in his hands.

Yuuto had had fewer opportunities to meet and speak with him in recent days, due in part to his post being far away from the capital. Still, in Yuuto's heart, he had remained a trusted and reliable member of his family, someone Yuuto cherished and who respected him in return.

Not only would they never meet again, but Yuuto would never even hear his voice again. That feeling of loss was like a hole was being ripped open in his chest.

Yuuto held back the tears that had been forming in the corners of his eyes. "...Rún, could you put Felicia back on?"

"Yes, Father. Hey, Felicia, Father said to give it back to you."

"Yes, Big Brother, I'm here," said Felicia.

"Hey, Felicia, there's... one thing I want to ask you."

Why would you even ask her this? shouted a voice of reason, somewhere in the back of his thoughts.

It wasn't something he should ask aloud.

It wasn't something he should consider asking.

He knew that, but he couldn't keep himself from asking her, either.

"If you followed the same steps, the same ritual, as before, would you be able to summon me to Yggdrasil again?"

“Ah...!” On the other end of the line, Yuuto could hear Felicia gasp.

She paused, swallowing, and then spoke her answer very carefully.

“In all honesty, I cannot be sure. The fact that I was able to summon you here in the first place was something akin to a miracle, after all. However...”

“However?”

“At most, all I would be capable of is calling you to this world. I cannot send you back.”

“Oh... Yeah, that’s true, isn’t it.” Those words were all that Yuuto managed to squeeze out in reply.

Indeed, if Felicia were capable of it, she would have been able to send him back to the modern era long ago, even back when he’d first arrived three years ago.

At present, the only person who had a method for returning Yuuto from Yggdrasil was Sigyn of the Panther Clan.

However, she was the wife of the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr. It didn’t take much to imagine just how impossibly difficult it would be to capture her and get her to do as they asked.

In other words, if Yuuto were to return to Yggdrasil once more, there was a good chance he might never be able to return home again.

“Big Brother, if it is still your wish regardless, I shall perform the summoning rituals, as many times as you require,” Felicia said. “What is your decision?”

“.....” Yuuto was silent, unable to answer.

It wasn’t something he could easily agree to.

He felt a sense of self-loathing for having asked about it in the first place when he wasn’t mentally prepared to make this decision.

All it did was fill the others with hopeful expectations.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Big Brother?” Felicia suddenly called to Yuuto, in a voice that seemed to wrap softly around his heart, even through the phone like this.

“What is it?”

“No matter what you may decide to do, I will abide by it. Even if, for instance, you decide not to return to this world.”

“...Are you really okay with that, though?”

“As a Wolf Clan high officer and the leader of your sibling subordinates, perhaps it is wrong for me to say this, but for me personally, before any of that, I am your younger sister, Big Brother Yuuto. As a younger sister, I wish for my older brother’s happiness.”

“Oy, Felicia, what are you saying?!” a voice shouted in the background.

“Oh, my, it seems good Jörgen has lost his temper.” Felicia’s tone was jovial and joking, and Yuuto could hear the sounds of running around, and something being knocked over.

It would seem that Felicia was running around to evade Jörgen, who was trying to take the phone away from her.

Between breaths, Felicia continued. “Thankfully, there is still time before the next full moon. Please, do take your time and think on it. You do not... want to regret your choice. Well then, good night!”

“Heh...” Yuuto stifled a wry laugh. “All right, and thank you, Felicia.”

Yuuto’s voice was flooded with a mixture of emotions as he gave her his thanks and ended the call.

Good grief... as always, that adjutant of mine is too good for me, he thought with a sigh.

No matter the time or situation, Felicia always put Yuuto first and foremost. That had been true ever since the first moments after he’d arrived in Yggdrasil, a powerless child who couldn’t do anything. She had always devoted herself to him with selfless loyalty.

That was precisely why he couldn’t bear to forsake her.

Yuuto’s dilemma only grew deeper.

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Her back to the wall, Felicia nonchalantly held out the smartphone to her pursuer. “It’s already finished, Jörgen.”

Jörgen moved to snatch it roughly from her, but then he slowed himself and took it gingerly into his own hands.

At the last second, his rational mind must have kicked in and told him he couldn’t take the slightest risk of accidentally breaking the thing.

His anger, however, had far from subsided.

“Aunt Felicia! This is no matter to joke about. I cannot believe you took it upon yourself to say such things! This is a matter that concerns the very fate of the Wolf Clan itself, and you must not forget that!”

“Please accept my apologies. However, it is just as I said to him a moment ago: I may be a high officer of the Wolf Clan, but before that, I am a woman who fell for Big Brother Yuuto, and I pledged myself to *him* when I exchanged the Oath of the Chalice.”

“Grh...! If that’s true, then it is all the more reason you should devote yourself to him *at his side!*”

With those parting words, Jörgen stomped his way out of the hörgr, the Wolf Clan’s religious sanctuary hall.

He would surely be returning to his administration duties. With the huge defeat at Fort Gashina, the threat from the Panther and Lightning Clans was encroaching ever closer.

Right now, Jörgen was entrusted with all of the authority and rights of the patriarch, and he surely had a mountain of work piled up.

“You shouldn’t be too reckless either, you know,” Sigrún cut in with a wry grin. “If you’re not careful, things like that could land you in prison.”

The current crisis threatened the clan’s very existence, and her actions could be construed as preventing the arrival of someone who could save them; it would not be amiss for some to suspect her treachery.

Considering what her biological older brother had done, that was all the more of a danger.

“Oh, but you are not mad at me?” Felicia asked.

“I respect Father’s wishes, and I abide by them. I’m fine with what you said. I see nothing I should be mad about.”

“Oh. Well, I did not expect anyone to take my side, so that makes me happy.”

“Hmph. He *did* wish fervently to return to his homeland this whole time, after all. If he is happy in his peaceful world in the heavens, I could hardly bear to call him back here and force him back into the throes of war again. ...Still, it will be lonely without him.”

“Yes, it will. It will be... quite lonely.”

Felicia felt the corners of her eyes grow hot, and turned her face upward to look at the ceiling. She knew that her face would run with tears if she did not do so.

During the phone call, she had wished for Yuuto’s happiness first, and said as much, but the thought that she might not see his face again filled her with sadness.

She might hear his voice through that phone, but it felt somehow muffled and distant.

More than anything, her sorrow was over thinking that she would be unable to touch him again, to feel the warmth of his body.

Someday, she had always told herself, trying to be emotionally prepared. But now that it was actually happening, it was like a hole had been opened in her heart; whenever she thought of Yuuto, she felt she might start to tear up.

“Tch.” Sigrún clicked her tongue in irritation, and grabbed Felicia’s head, roughly pulling it against her own chest.

“What?! What are you doing all of a sudden?” Felicia sputtered.

“You were trying to act brave and cheerful for Father this whole time. I’ll pay you back for that. You can lean on me.”

“...Thank you.”

Felicia was aware of the fact that she wasn’t really strong at heart. She

whispered her thanks, and then buried her face into her dear friend's chest.

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Ding dong... ding dong...

From somewhere, Yuuto heard the sound of a doorbell.

He was sitting at the desk in his room, with his head on his hands, staring blankly out the window.

His gaze was lingering on a sparrow perched on top of the electrical lines outside, but though he was looking right at it, he wasn't really watching it.

"Sheesh, I *thought* you were up here!"

Suddenly Mitsuki's face filled his vision. Yuuto shouted and lurched backwards.

"Whoa!"

He almost tumbled backwards onto the floor, chair and all, but he managed to stop himself and regain his balance.

"D-don't come in here without knocking! And at least ring the doorbell first. Why would you just go into someone's house without..."

"I *did* knock! I rang the doorbell, too, and your dad said I could come in!"

"...Seriously?"

"Yes, *seriously.*" Mitsuki nodded, standing tall with her arms sternly crossed. It seemed she was telling the truth.

"Sorry about that," Yuuto said ruefully. "I was just... thinking."

"Thinking about Yggdrasil again?"

"Yeah." Yuuto nodded, grimacing bitterly as if he'd swallowed a bug. He'd spent the whole night thinking, and thinking, and before he'd realized it, daylight had come. Despite agonizing over it that much, he didn't have an answer to the problem at all.

"If you worry yourself too much, it's gonna ruin your health, you know," Mitsuki said. "Shouldn't you get some rest? Just sleep for a little bit, okay?"

“You’re right.” Yuuto sighed. “I’m not gonna come up with anything good if I’m too tired to think. Actually, why did you even come here so early in the morning?”

“Mmph... So you don’t notice?”

“Notice what?”

“Jeez!” Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks in exasperation, then did an elegant spin in place, her skirt fluttering.

Now Yuuto was even more lost than before. “Huh?”

“My *school uniform!* Starting today, I’m a high-schooler! I just wanted to show it to you as early as I could, Yuu-kun.”

“Ohhh...” Now that he got a good look at her, Yuuto saw that her blazer was different, something he’d never seen her wear before. It did ring a bell; he’d often seen it on school uniforms around this area. It had a clean and pure sort of atmosphere to it, and Mitsuki looked wonderful in it.

“...!” Suddenly, Yuuto felt his chest tighten with an intense feeling of loneliness and isolation.

While he’d been gone, Mitsuki had worked hard, continued her education, and now she was in high school.

She was even incredibly skilled at cooking now. For a girl with her great qualities, surely more boys had fallen for her than you could count on both hands.

She truly was too good for someone like him.

He’d often heard that long-distance relationships didn’t last.

If Yuuto were to leave again, this time for sure she would reach the limits of her patience, her love for him, and another man would snatch her away from him.

“What’s wrong? Oh, was it that you were captivated by me?” Mitsuki asked.

“Yeah, I was. You look really cute.”

“Whoa, whoa, you just came out straight and said it! I think this is the first

time you've said something like that to me, Yuu-kun! ...Ah! I see, you're gonna follow it up with an insult, right?!"

"No, I'm not. I just said that because that's what I was thinking."

"Ah...!" Mitsuki's face flushed a bright red. That aspect of her was also something Yuuto found charming, and precious.

He couldn't stand the thought of some other man being by her side.

He wanted to be the one to protect her, with his own two hands.

He didn't want to even consider parting with her again, possibly never seeing her again.

"...is... and because it is... and so... thus..."

The principal, a large man just into his golden years, stood on a platform at one end of the school gymnasium, giving a prepared speech that was transmitted through loudspeakers.

It was a speech aimed at the new students, instructions and advice based on the experience of decades of experience as a teacher, and the content was all probably quite useful and something to be grateful for. But none of it stuck into Mitsuki's head at all.

Right now, her head was filled only with thoughts of Yuuto.

Ever since they'd been able to get back in contact with Yggdrasil, he'd been clearly acting strange.

Of course, ever since coming back home, he'd been thinking of the people he left behind in that world, and he'd been a bit out of sorts with worry for them for a while now, but it felt like recently, that had grown much more severe and serious.

He had bags under his eyes this morning, like he hadn't gotten any sleep at all. I'm worried about him.

Mitsuki had made sure to tell Yuuto to get some rest, but she was unsure he would be able to follow through on that.

Honestly, she wanted to run right out of this entrance ceremony and rush to

his side to check on him.

The people of the Wolf Clan really, really need Yuu-kun, don't they...?

She hadn't asked him for too many details, but this was the childhood friend she'd known for as long as she could remember. She could tell just from his behavior pretty much what was going on.

All of a sudden, Yuuto had come here and left the Wolf Clan behind, and that had caused a whole bunch of problems.

And they were problems that Yuuto couldn't fix just by giving orders or advice over the phone; she could understand that much.

After all, if the problems weren't more serious than that, he wouldn't be so torn up.

Yuuto was kind. After he'd lived with and fought with his comrades in that world, surely he couldn't bear to just leave them to their fate. That was why he was suffering.

"High school is not part of this country's mandatory education," the principal said proudly. "In the past, boys and girls of your age would undergo a coming-of-age called the *genpuku*, and be regarded as full-fledged adults. That's right! None of you are really children anymore. You're now at an age where an appropriate level of self-awareness and sense of responsibility will be expected and demanded of you. You must stand on your own two feet, think with your own mind, and head towards your futures, each and every one of you!"

The principal seemed to have gotten to the climax of his speech, and was speaking more powerfully.

The speech itself still didn't really stick in her head, except for the phrase *your futures,* which strangely seemed to ring in her ears.

Her future...

If Mitsuki were asked what she wanted to be in the future, she could answer that she wanted to be Yuuto's wife.

If she were asked what she wanted to *do* in the future, the answer that fit best to her was that she wanted to be useful to Yuuto.

If someone were to tell her that her answers lacked any sense of independence, then she didn't really have a good response to that. But it was how Mitsuki sincerely felt, with no lies or half-truths, so that was that.

"What is it that I can do for Yuu-kun's sake...?" she murmured. "I wonder, what would be the thing that would be best for him...?"

Mitsuki continued to ponder over those questions for the remainder of the entrance ceremony.

When Yuuto came to, he was standing in a familiar place, on a floor made from sun-dried bricks.

"Huh? Where is this?"

It was a space about the size of a small school gymnasium, with a somewhat solemn atmosphere. He couldn't sense the presence of any people.

In the back of the room was an altar, and resting on its highest shelf was the divine mirror, the light of the nearby torches reflected on its surface with a mysterious, wavering glow.

"I'm in the hörgr? Did I come back to Yggdrasil?"

Unable to understand the situation, Yuuto left the sanctuary and descended the stairs of the Hliðskjálf, the clan's sacred tower.

As he did, he gasped.

The area was littered with innumerable bodies, and the once-grand Wolf Clan palace was a ruin of its former self, smashed in places, covered with bloodstains in others.

Yuuto reached the palace gates and found...

"Rún?!"

Sigrún was completely drenched in blood, dead where she stood, held upright by a spear that was pierced straight through her chest.

"N-no... how could this..." Yuuto felt his body shaking violently, and he took one step back, then another.

"Ah! That's right! Felicia! Felicia!" Screaming her name, Yuuto ran to his

office.

The room was wrecked completely, and slumped on top of her usual chair was...

“Agh...!”

Felicia’s body was still. A large pool of blood surrounded her, and her blank face was ghastly pale, without any hint of life remaining.

“Ah... aghh... AAUUUGHHH!!” Yuuto screamed, his emotions unable to be put into words, and he raced out of the room.

He ran blindly through the halls of the palace, looking for anyone alive.

However...

“Uuugh... agh... ngh...!”

The more he searched, the more bodies he found.

Ingrid, Linnea, Albertina, Kristina, Jörgen, Skáviðr. All of them were bloody corpses.

“Someone! Anyone! Is there anyone here?!”

“Master!” The voice that answered Yuuto’s cries was that of a very young girl.

“Ephy?! Ephy, you’re safe!” As Yuuto turned around, he saw his servant Ephelia, running towards him and crying.

As Yuuto made to run towards her, suddenly an armed man on horseback appeared directly behind her. Yuuto felt his body tremble.

The armed rider held a spear in one hand, which he raised up, and then brought down its sharp blade on Ephelia— “NOOOOOOO!!” Yuuto awoke with a start at his desk, screaming.

Directly in front of him was the wall of the room, a light beige color that was easy on the eyes. There were no bloodstains anywhere. Everything was clean.

Looking down, he saw the student desk made of brightly colored wood. No bloodstains anywhere here. No smell of blood, either.

Actually, thinking back, even as he had run through all of those grisly scenes,

Yuuto didn’t remember smelling blood then, either.

In other words, everything he had just seen was...

“So... it was a dream.” Relieved, Yuuto let out a long, long breath, then sat back down in his chair.

Apparently he’d fallen asleep sitting here. And then he’d seen that nightmare because he’d been thinking about Yggdrasil all this time.

“I should get something to drink.” Partially because of that harrowing nightmare, Yuuto’s throat was parched.

He got up and went downstairs, heading for the kitchen. After a glass of cold water, Yuuto was on his way back when he saw a light, and stopped.

If that light had been coming from the living room, or his father’s bedroom, Yuuto would have ignored it and gone back up the stairs without a second thought. But the light was coming from the altar room, where his family’s Buddhist altar and his mother’s memorial portrait were kept.

As if compelled, Yuuto moved to the room’s entrance, and opened the sliding screen door.

He found himself looking down at his father, who was silently praying to the Buddhist figure with his hands together and eyes closed.

“Well, that’s unexpected,” Yuuto scoffed out loud. “I didn’t think *you’d* pray at the altar.”

It seemed that Yuuto couldn’t help but be provocative like this whenever he spoke with his father.

Thanks to the state his mind was in now, he was even less able to control that than usual.

His father slowly opened his eyes, and turned to face him. “It’s because it’s the anniversary of her death.”

“Ah...” Yuuto remembered as soon as he heard the words, and was filled with self-loathing.

Indeed, his mother had passed away exactly three years ago today.

And this man, who surely didn't really treasure Yuuto's mother at all, had properly remembered her death anniversary while Yuuto, who *should* have been the one to remember, had forgotten.

Even if he'd had a lot on his mind lately, it didn't change the facts.

Yuuto glanced at the altar.

There wasn't a speck of dust on it, and the Buddhist figure enshrined there was as well-polished as ever, showing that the altar had been carefully maintained.

By the time Yuuto realized what was happening, it was already too late. All the feelings he'd kept within himself bubbled up like magma, out of his control.

"...Hey. So why *didn't* you come, back then?" he demanded.

It was a question so vague that, without any prior context, there would be no way to tell what he was asking about. But the meaning of the question came through loud and clear to his father.

"I thought I told you as much back then," the man said. "I had work to do in the forge."

"Is making swords *that* important to you?! That you'd just blow off Mom when she was on her deathbed?! It that all Mom was worth to you?!"

All this time, Yuuto had decided the truth of things on his own, and had never questioned his father about it. He'd rejected his father, reviled him, and sealed those feelings away in his heart.

Now the lid was off, and three year's worth of unresolved emotions came out of him, the questions thrown against the man in front of him.

And they were also questions thrown at *himself*, using his father as a mirror.

His father sat there, accepting Yuuto's withering glare, then got up quietly, and reached behind the Buddha statue to pull out a very small sheathed blade, the size of a *tanto*-style knife.

"What is that...?" Yuuto asked slowly.

"It's the blade I was forging while your mother was on her deathbed."

Tetsuhito handed the knife out to Yuuto.

Yuuto took it and pulled the blade from its sheath.

It was short, but the body of the wave-patterned blade was beautifully done. Yuuto could tell this was possibly one of the greatest pieces of his father's many works.

Etched deeply into the side of the blade were the characters for *Begone, Spirits of Disease.*

"I'm a man who makes swords," Tetsuhito said. "That's the only thing I was ever good for. So, I thought this was maybe the only thing I could do for her. Of course, in the end, it didn't help at all, did it?"

Yuuto's father chuckled with a tinge of bitter self-derision, and looked up at the ceiling.

Swords had a long history in Japan as religious and spiritual objects, from being sanctified in Shinto shrines to being forged along with the birth of a baby as a protective charm. It was said that a properly forged blade could hold within it the power to dispel evil.

Yuuto's father had gambled on that spiritual tradition.

By attempting to put his thoughts and his soul into the blade as he forged it, he had attempted to cure his dying wife's illness by exorcising the spirit of disease.

"Why...?!" Yuuto cried in a strangled voice. "Why didn't you ever tell me that?! If you'd just told me, I wouldn't have..."

"All that matters are the results. When she died, I wasn't there for her at her side. That fact doesn't change. It's only right for you to hate me." His father was saying these things in his usual detached way, but his voice was wavering slightly.

That was when Yuuto finally understood.

His father had been blaming himself this whole time for not being able to save his wife, and for not having been there at her side in the end.

By continuing to accept Yuuto's hatred and scorn, he'd been punishing

himself.

“Ha... ha ha ha... you... you’re such an idiot...” A dry, cracked laugh escaped from Yuuto’s throat.

To put it bluntly, his father’s actions back then had been nothing short of idiotic. Relying on that sort of superstition would never have healed a terminal illness. If it could have, the world wouldn’t be as rough as it was.

Still, even still, Tetsuhito had done his best, within his own abilities, for Yuuto’s mother.

Looking at the magnificent blade in his hands, Yuuto could see the strength of the feelings that had forged it.

“Everything I’ve felt up until now... it was all pointless...” Yuuto whispered.

Yuuto already understood how childish he still was; that had been made painfully clear to him two years ago. But now, he was nearly sick to his stomach at realizing just how much of an idiot he had been.

His father had never abandoned his mother in the first place; he’d loved her, and tried to save her. He’d placed his faith in a miracle and tried to make it happen, right up until the very end.

By contrast, Yuuto himself had given up on his mother’s hope of survival as soon as the doctors had said there was no saving her.

He’d been averting his eyes from the fact that he was powerless.

He’d made a scapegoat out of his father, and made everything out to be his fault.

Just how much of a spoiled little brat was he?

“Heh, and look where I am, turning into exactly the kind of person I’d always told myself I hated,” Yuuto said bitterly. “The world sure is funny.”

No matter what happens, never abandon your family. That was the vow Yuuto had made to himself after his mother died.

But the reality had turned out differently.

The Wolf Clan, who were as good as family to him, were in danger, and he

was stuck between them and his feelings for Mitsuki.

If his absolute vow came first, then he shouldn't hesitate to go to rescue his family first.

"Is... there something you're having trouble deciding?" Yuuto's father asked, looking him in the eyes.

"...Yeah. Frankly, I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do. There are two things that are both important to me, and I can't give up either of them. What would you do in that situation?"

"Hmm... I see..." Yuuto's father folded his arms and closed his eyes.

After a few moments in thought, he opened his eyes and looked directly at Yuuto again.

"Why don't you try putting yourself right up on the edge of the cliff?"

"The edge... of the cliff?" Yuuto hadn't expected this kind of response.

"Make a choice that you won't regret." Or, *"Think long and hard about it."* Those were the sort of normal responses he would have expected from his father.

As Yuuto parroted his father's words back, Tetsuhito chuckled softly to himself. "The guys who act tough and talk big and loud about their ideals... when the going gets tough, they're the first ones gone. This world is full of people like that. Young people who tell themselves they'll be satisfied as long as they lived to fifty, and then once they get that age, they start thinking they'd really like to live on to seventy, that sort of thing. That's the funny thing about people. Pride and image get in their way, and they don't end up seeing even their own true feelings. At least, not until they're pushed to the very limit."

Yuuto found himself agreeing fully with what he was hearing.

As a clan patriarch, he'd seen plenty of men who bragged about their valor during peacetime, only to turn coward when it came time to actually go to war.

Yuuto's father turned his gaze to the side, as if staring at something far away. "I was the same..."

He was looking right at the memorial picture of Yuuto's mother.

“I always thought, as long as I could make swords, I’d be a happy man,” he went on. “I thought that... for such a long time.”

Tetsuhito trailed off. In other words, he now felt differently.

What had been the true source of his happiness? There was, of course, no need to ask him.

Looking at him more closely, Yuuto could see that he was much thinner and more haggard than the man from his memories. There was more white in his hair; he looked like he’d aged a lot in a short time.

The father he remembered from three years ago had been a hated figure to him, but also impressive and imposing. This man seemed so much smaller and weaker to Yuuto’s eyes.

That must have been just how badly his wife’s death had hit him.

Thinking back, Yuuto must have also been just as important to him.

At Mitsuki’s house, and at the police station, he’d rushed over as soon as he was called.

During their ride in the truck, he’d tried to talk with Yuuto about his future.

Even right now, he was seriously listening to Yuuto’s problems and trying to give a sincere response.

Yuuto’s perspective had just been clouded over from his hateful bias; his father had always loved his family and tried to protect them. His father was a man worthy of respect. He was just clumsy, and terrible with expressing his feelings in words.

“Okay,” Yuuto said quietly. “I think I’m starting to see what I should do. Thanks... Dad.”

Without even thinking, Yuuto addressed his father normally once more. It had come naturally to him.

The ill feelings in his heart were completely gone.

“So this is it... where it all started...” Yuuto muttered nostalgically. He stood facing a small, run down old shrine in the woods.

This was Tsukimiya Shrine. The very place where, on that fated day, Yuuto had come with Mitsuki on a test of courage, and where the divine mirror that summoned him to Yggdrasil had once been enshrined.

Back then, if I only hadn't gotten that crazy idea into my head...

Those were words he'd repeated to himself over and over many times now, always blaming himself for that choice.

But at some point, that had changed...

Yes, right around the time he'd become patriarch.

He'd stopped thinking too much about that night.

In fact, he hadn't really *had* the time to think about it. The weight of the lives of everyone in the Wolf Clan had come to rest squarely on his shoulders.

He'd spent three years working, and striving, and pushing himself like crazy.

The thought that he had to get home had always driven him.

He'd been longing to see Mitsuki again. Of course, he'd also reflected on the inconsiderate and thoughtless way he had acted back then.

However, now he realized something new. It was that he no longer felt regret for actually having gone to Yggdrasil.

Life in that world was inconvenient and harsh.

There was no heating or cooling by air conditioner; summers were hot, and winters were freezing.

Back when he'd first arrived there, he'd been sick to his stomach so many times that it had nearly broken him.

Every day it was only bread for meals, and he'd constantly longed for the taste of rice.

Things like television, or comics, the symbols of modern entertainment, were nowhere to be found.

He'd had some access to the modern internet thanks to his smartphone, but only for about thirty minutes a day.

But, even still...

Reflecting on all of it, his days living in Yggdrasil had been full of a sense of fulfillment he'd never experienced during his life in the modern world before that.

He'd worked hard for the sake of the people around him, researching, planning, and creating things. It had been difficult, but it had also actually been fun.

Working together with everyone to accomplish a goal, sharing in the feeling of success as they completed it — it was a feeling greater than anything he'd ever gotten from clearing a video game.

When he saw the joyful faces of his comrades, heard their words of thanks, it filled him with great pride.

It felt pretty good to be useful, to be needed that way.

He'd made friends, true companions.

They weren't the kind of social, shallow friendships he'd made in the modern world. They were relationships born of shared joy and suffering, and at times the shared danger to their lives. They were people he could call both his comrades and his family.

Perhaps that was why, then.

Even though, for three years, he'd always wanted and wished so badly to come back home...

Even though he'd finally made it back home...

Somewhere in his heart, he *missed* that world.

"Yuu-kun, sorry for the wait."

From behind him, Yuuto heard the voice of his childhood friend.

Usually her voice would make his heart jump for joy, but now it made his chest tighten painfully.

Yuuto took a few deep breaths, then readied himself and turned to face her.

"No worries," he said. "I just got here, too. Sorry for calling you out here this

late.”

Yuuto tried to act as normal as he could.

But Mitsuki had known him for as long as each of them could remember, and she already seemed to have picked up on things.

Mitsuki smiled at him gently. “You’ve decided to go back to Yggdrasil, right?”

“...You really do see right through me, don’t you?”

“I do when it comes to you, Yuu-kun.”

“Okay.” Yuuto felt a wave of pain go through his chest.

She knew him this well, this completely. She cared about him this much. And he still couldn’t reciprocate her love. He was a good-for-nothing piece of garbage, and he hated himself for it.

“Just answer me one thing,” Mitsuki said. “Are you going back because it’s your duty? Because you’re the patriarch? Because you feel responsible for everyone there?”

Yuuto considered her questions carefully.

It was true that he felt a sense of duty, of responsibility. But that wasn’t the biggest reason for him. Right now, the feeling in Yuuto’s heart that drove his decision was a much simpler and purer one.

He shook his head. “No. It’s because I love them. They’re important to me. I want to protect them.”

Seeing a dream in which they’d all been slaughtered had made him forcibly aware of his feelings.

To Yuuto right now, the people of the Wolf Clan were just as important to his life as even Mitsuki; he couldn’t put one of them ahead of the other.

For a long time he’d tried not to think about those feelings, had kept them locked away. But now, he couldn’t fool himself any longer.

It wasn’t that he *had* to protect them.

He *wanted* to protect them.

He didn’t want to lose them.

They were his precious family.

“...Okay,” Mitsuki said. “Well, I’m not gonna wait for you. I’m not doing that for you anymore.”

“Gh...!” Yuuto felt his face wrench, and he knew he must look pathetic.

He’d been prepared for this ever since he’d asked her to meet him out here. In fact, he’d even intended to say, “I want you to forget about me.”

Mitsuki was important to him too, naturally. He didn’t want to give her up to any other man.

But he could withstand that, if it meant she would be happy.

It hurt when he thought about it, made him go crazy, but it was still better than a future where his family members in the Wolf Clan were killed.

As long as Mitsuki was alive, happy and smiling, it didn’t have to be at his side...

At least, that was what he’d convinced himself he’d accepted, but now that he was hearing it straight from her, it sent shockwaves through his heart anyway.

“Ha ha... yeah, of course,” he said weakly. “You’ve already spent three whole years waiting on me; there’s no way I could ask you to wait again.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at how comical it was; he hadn’t actually let go.

Some part of him had still hoped that, even now, Mitsuki might still agree to keep waiting for him.

He’d been naive.

He’d been conceited.

Of *course* she wouldn’t do that.

It was stupid. A fantasy.

Here was a guy who’d finally made it back home to this peaceful, abundant, beautiful world, and then he turned around and said he wanted to go back to a

treacherous world where death could come at any moment. What sort of saint, indeed, would choose to wait for a such a tremendous fool?

“Guess that’s it. I’ve been rejected,” Yuuto said sadly.

Still, in this situation, maybe she was doing him a favor by rejecting him. Doing so would let him cut off his attachments to this world.

It would give him the push he needed to leave.

He’d be able to go to Yggdrasil without any lingering feelings holding him back.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” In sharp contrast to her serious expression up until now, Mitsuki looked at him with confusion and curiosity in her eyes.

“Eh? Uh... but... you... you just said that you won’t...”

“Yes, I said I’m not gonna wait here for you. I’m going with you to Yggdrasil.”

“...*Huh?*” Yuuto’s voice cracked from the surprise. For an instant, he couldn’t comprehend what Mitsuki was saying.

As he looked at her dumbfounded, Mitsuki smiled at him affectionately. It was a kind, almost motherly smile.

“I don’t mean to sound conceited about this, but... Yuu-kun, the reason you wanted to come back to this world, and the reason you’ve been so hesitant to go back there until just now... it’s because I’m here, right?”

To Yuuto, she wasn’t being conceited at all. She was perfectly right.

Oh, it wasn’t like Yuuto himself was some saint, concerned only with his love. He was attached to this world for its technology too, the electricity, and gas, and clean running water.

During his time in Yggdrasil, Japanese food, specifically white rice, had always been on his mind. His first mouthful of the stuff after coming back had brought him to tears.

There were all the fun and games here, too. He could look at stuff on the internet all he wanted, use it whenever he wanted.

And yet, none of those had been the clincher for Yuuto. They were all things he could make himself endure living without, if he put his mind to it.

What truly tied Yuuto to the modern world and kept him connected to it was Mitsuki, and nothing else.

“So, if I go with you to Yggdrasil, then you won’t have to worry yourself over this anymore, right?” Mitsuki said. “You can go save everyone in the Wolf Clan without any hesitation, right?”

“You idi... I mean, you know you can’t do something like that!”

“Why not? You went there once already, Yuu-kun,” she said. “And you’re going to try to go again. If you can go there again, I should be able to come along with you.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, here! Mitsuki, don’t you get it?! Once you go there, there’s no telling when you’ll be able to come back! You might not even *be* able to come back!”

“Yeah, I know that. That’s *why* I’m going with you. I can’t stay here waiting.”

“You idiot!” Yuuto shouted at her angrily now. “You’ve got a family, don’t you?! What about Ruri-chan? What about your other friends?! You won’t be able to see any of them anymore!”

After spending that happy night having dinner at Mitsuki’s home, Yuuto knew that, unlike him, her family was still healthy and happy.

And she seemed to get along really close with Ruri, too. She probably had other good friends at school.

It would be madness for her to throw all of that away just for Yuuto’s sake alone.

“Yeah, but I could call them by phone. There’s also social media.” Mitsuki spoke as if the weight of the situation didn’t bother her at all. “Of course it’ll be lonely, and sad, knowing that I won’t be able to see everybody in person anymore. I’m sure once I get to the other world, I might even get really homesick.”

“Then why...” Yuuto started.

“*But*,” Mitsuki cut him off, “that’s nothing compared to how I felt when I couldn’t see you, Yuu-kun. It was horrible. I don’t ever want to be separated from you again, ever. Because, I... because I love you so much, Yuu-kun.”

Her gaze was fixed on Yuuto as she said those words. Her eyes were serious, and Yuuto could see the deep strength of her feelings in them.

Yuuto hadn’t been prepared for the strength behind that gaze. Reflexively, his eyes averted themselves from hers.

“...How can you say that? You didn’t see me for three years.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she said. “Three whole years went by, and my feelings never faded a bit. Actually, I just started loving you more and more.”

“Idiot,” he mumbled. “What did I even do for you for those whole three years? Nothing but make you work, and worry and suffer, that’s what.”

“And I still love you anyway, hopelessly, so really, what can I do at this point?”

“Just... you need to think about this more. This choice is gonna affect your whole life!”

“I *have* thought about it. I’ve thought about it as much as I could. But no matter how much time I spend thinking, I can’t imagine a future without you, Yuu-kun. Living in a different world from you, falling in love with someone who isn’t you, getting married and having the child of someone who isn’t you... I can’t picture that kind of future for myself. ...No, that’s wrong. I’d *hate* that sort of future.”

“.....”

Yuuto was quiet. It was true for him, too; he passionately hated the idea of that sort of future. But it was also the future he’d tried to resign himself to, thinking there was nothing he could do about it.

“Yeah, I definitely hate the idea of that future,” Mitsuki continued. “I want you next to me, Yuu-kun, always. I don’t want anyone else.”

“There’s no electricity there, you know. No gas, no running water.”

“But you’d be there, Yuu-kun.”

“You’ll have to do the sort of work you’d never have to deal with here in the modern world.”

“I’d be happy to, if it means I can be together with you.”

“You *really* are an idiot, you know that...?”

“Quit calling me an idiot already. I mean, it’s not like I don’t know. *More importantly!* Are you gonna give me your answer now, or aren’t you?”

Mitsuki put her hands on Yuuto’s cheeks, and forced him to look at her.

As always, the strength of will from within her eyes was overwhelming, but with her locking his head in place, he couldn’t look away. He had to accept it.

I’ve really gone and fallen for one hell of a woman, he thought to himself, though it was admittedly pretty late to be realizing that.

Yuuto gave a sigh of resigned defeat, but also with the hint of a smile.

“...All right. I’ll take you with me.” Yuuto stopped, then started over. “No... that’s not right. Mitsuki, I *want* you to come with me. Please, come with me.”

“...No, Yuu-kun. That wasn’t what I meant.” Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks slightly.

“Uh?” Yuuto didn’t really understand. He’d agreed to take her with him, so why was she upset?

“This isn’t about going along, or bringing along, or any of that. Isn’t there something more important?” she demanded.

“Um...?”

“Yuu-kun, I told you I loved you, didn’t I? How do you feel about me?”

“I-I’ve pretty much already said it at this point, haven’t I?”

“No, *I’m* pretty sure I haven’t heard one clear word of it.” Mitsuki mercilessly shook her head side to side.

“Wh-when I said, ‘Please come with me,’ that’s pretty much what I meant. You get that, right?!”

“No, I didn’t understand anything from that. I need to hear it clearly from you,

okay?” There was a tinge of mischievousness in Mitsuki’s eyes. She knew exactly what she was doing.

Even this part of her was something he found cute, though. It was true what they say about love being blind.

That being said, it would bug him to just say the words like she wanted, playing into her little game... and more than that, it would be embarrassing.

However, it also looked like he was going to have to steel his resolve here.

Wait a minute... if I’m going to have to take the plunge here anyway, then...

A flash of inspiration struck him. It was an ingenious idea.

“Mitsuki.”

“Yes? What is it?” Mitsuki wore a soft, satisfied smile. She had likely seen in Yuuto’s expression that he’d made up his mind to say his feelings aloud, and she was already happily waiting to hear it.

With how everything had gone up until this point, logically, it was already obvious what he felt, and what his reply to her would be.

And so, he was going to deliberately one-up her.

“Mitsuki, please be my wife.”

“Eh?! Your wi... WHAAAAT?!” Mitsuki cried out as if the world was ending.

As expected, she hadn’t anticipated things to leap one step further so quickly.

However, from Yuuto’s perspective, if he was going to take Mitsuki to a world she might not come back from, if he was going to upend her life here completely, then this was also a perfectly natural proposal.

“I can’t in good conscience ask my girlfriend to throw everything away and come with me to that remote, dangerous world. Not my girlfriend. But if it’s my *wife*, I can say it decisively, and clearly: ‘Come with me.’”

Yuuto held out his hand to Mitsuki.

“Ah... oh...”

Mitsuki’s face turned the deepest shade of red he’d seen so far, and her eyes

darted back and forth between Yuuto's face and his outstretched hand for a moment, but at last she placed her hand over his.

"...Yes. Yuu-kun... please make me your wi—eek?!"

Mitsuki's quiet, delicate whisper of a reply turned abruptly into a squeal, for Yuuto hadn't waited for her to fully finish before he pulled her arm, bringing her body to his, and embraced her.

His emotions were overflowing, and he couldn't wait a second longer.

"Now that you've said it, I'll never let go of you again," he whispered.

"Good. Don't let go." Mitsuki looked up at Yuuto, and as their gazes locked, she softly closed her eyes.

Of course, Yuuto wasn't dense enough to miss the cue.

He closed his eyes, and slowly brought his face to hers.

In the darkness of the night, their silhouettes were outlined by the light of the moon.



Epilogue

“Yep, the more I look into this angle, the more the pieces fit together. This is the only way I can think of it now.”

In her hotel room, Saya Takao sat staring at her computer screen, one hand covering her mouth and chin, and frowning in deep thought.

She had solved the mystery of Yggdrasil.

It wasn’t at the level where she could publish the proof in a scientific journal or at an academic conference yet; there was still too little physical evidence for that. But internally, she was pretty much certain she could declare her answer correct.

But this answer would hardly be good news for that boy, Yuuto.

Actually, it was unmistakably quite the opposite.

“It might be better not to tell him about this,” Saya muttered, leaning against the back of her chair with a *creak* and looking up at the ceiling.

This was something he would surely be happier not knowing.

Even if he learned about it, there was still nothing to be done. This was clearly something a normal person couldn’t do anything about, something that was completely impossible to avoid. And that wouldn’t change, no matter how much modern knowledge Yuuto might have at his command.

If this hypothesis was correct...

“Yggdrasil’s fate is to be completely destroyed.”

To be continued.

Afterword This was rough.

This time, it was really rough.

The last time I struggled this hard was in volume 2 of my previous series; it's been over ten whole books since things were this bad.

Even so, thankfully, I still managed to get it done and out there, to you all.

Good evening. It's been a while. I'm Seiichi Takayama.

Well, as for the reason for my struggle, it's because I was trying to do two different story themes in a single volume. I realized what I was doing, and after whittling things down into a single theme, things went a lot smoother.

This volume is different from the usual style of *The Master of Ragnarok*, though maybe not in a very outstanding way, but as a writer I think sometimes plot developments like this are pretty good, too. What do you think?

I hope it was something you enjoyed.

After what happened in this volume, Yuuto-kun has taken one more step towards growing up, so please look forward to seeing what he does going forward.

There are likely some of you that have already read it, but the comic version of *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar* has started publication through the Hobby Japan official website.

Er, actually, as of my writing this afterword, I currently still haven't read the final version yet. (LOL) So even ol' Takayama himself still has that to look forward to. I really am looking forward to it a lot.

For those of you who haven't read it yet, please head right over to the HJ homepage!

Additionally, there's new a section on the site called "Read it! HJ Bunko" that starts up on the 6th of February, where I've contributed my own *Master of Ragnarok* short comic.

It's a single-page comic, and chronologically speaking, it takes place during

volume 6, around the time of the New Year's Festival.

It's available to read for free, so I hope you read it and enjoy it.

Now then, beginning this year, I, Takayama, have started my fifth year as a light novel author.

It's not as if I'm doing this in commemoration of that or anything, but starting on the 1st of March when this volume goes on sale, I will also begin uploading a new series to the website *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* ("Let's Become a Novelist," a free website where users upload their own novels).

The title of my new series is *Ryuu to Shoujo to Amakakeru Kishi* ("The Dragon, the Girl, and the Soaring Knight"). You can find it there.

As a writer, I really think this one's turning out well, and interestingly, too! Well, that's what I think (my editor M-san also seems to really like it), but there are one or two reasons why it might be tough to put out through normal commercial publishing, and so it had been shelved.

I didn't really like the idea of it never seeing the light of day, and recently the light novel industry has been seeing a boom with stories coming out of the *Narō* website, so I thought, "All right, why don't I go ahead and jump into the pool with these guys, too?"

And so, if you might have the time to spare, or if you happen to be a Takayama fan (you wonderful person you), it's free to read there, so it would make me happy if you go check it out.

To my editor, please accept my humble apologies for making even more problems for you than usual.

To Yukisan-sensei as well, I am very sorry for the trouble. Thank you for the cool and beautiful illustrations you always provide.

To Chany-san, thank you very much for taking on the comics version of this series. I look forward to working well with you.

My sincere thanks goes out to all of the many other people involved in the production of this volume who've helped make it happen.

And most of all, to you readers who are holding this book in your hands right

now, I offer you my deepest thanks.

With that, I leave you with the wish that we might see each other again, in volume 8.

Seiichi Takayama

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 7

by Seiichi Takayama

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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