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

9

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN





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"Good morning, Yuu-kun."
A slightly embarrassed-sounding voice came from right beside him. Yuuto turned and saw Mitsuki, using a blanket to cover everything up to the bottom half of her face, looking at him bashfully.



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Characters



Felicia

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

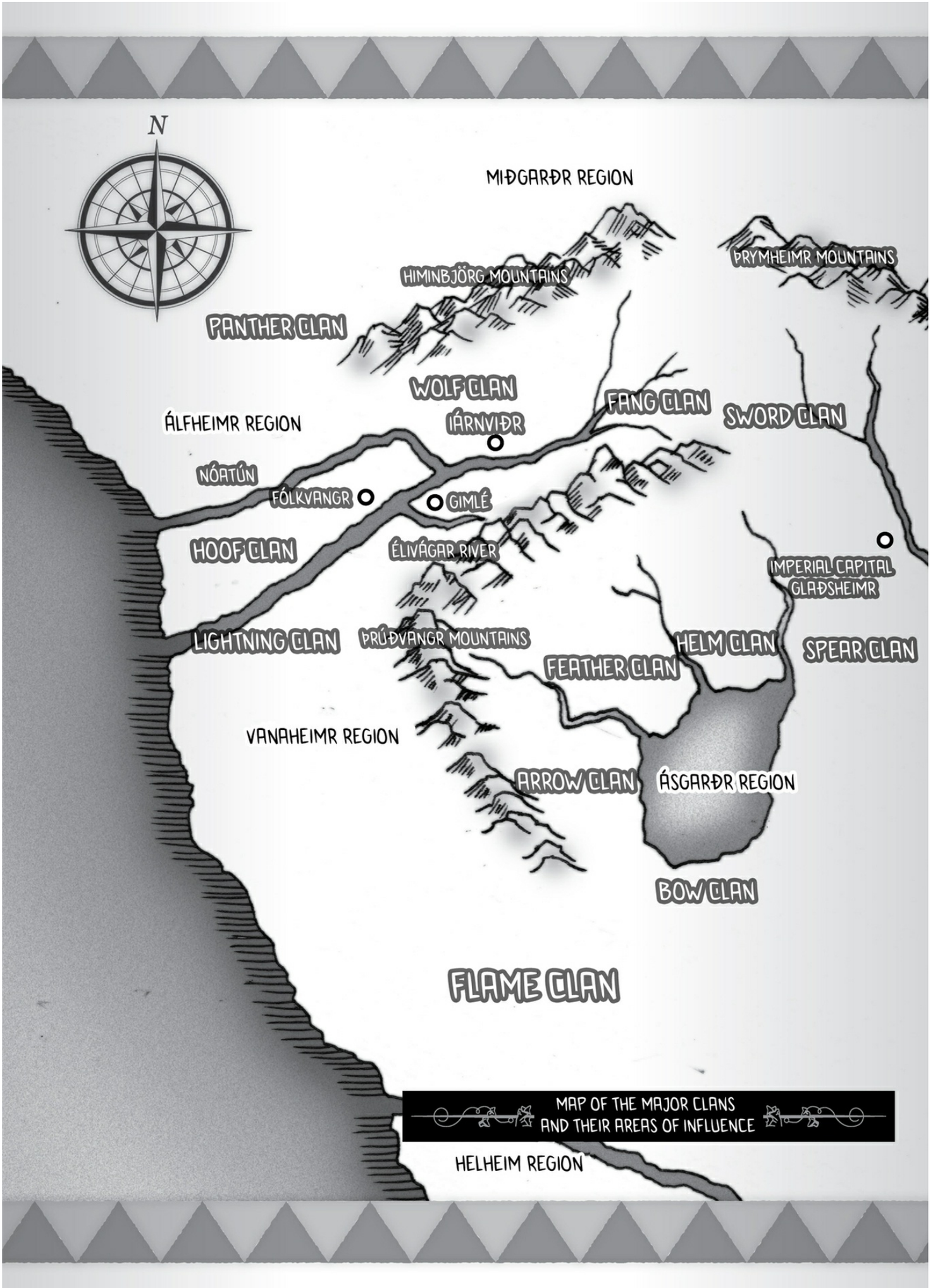
Linnea

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 and beloved. She made up her mind that she would live together with Yuuto, and thanks to Felicia's summoning ritual, she is now a resident of Yggdrasil.
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.
Sigrdrífa
The Divine Empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, 13th of her line. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also looks just like Mitsuki.
Hveðrungr
The masked patriarch of the Panther Clan, his true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth. He is an Einherjar with the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.
Steinþórr
Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar in possession of two runes. It is said there are only a few such people in all of Yggdrasil.



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS
AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

Prologue

This was a dream.

Skáviðr realized that fact immediately.

He was having a dream of a day long ago, a dream born from his feelings of regret.

“Gotcha!” With a spirited shout, a golden-haired young man swung a wooden sword to meet the attack of his opponent, another boy his age. His swing made the other boy’s sword slip off-course.

By applying force at an angle perpendicular to the vector of his opponent’s attack, he elegantly turned it aside.

It was the willow technique, which Skáviðr had spent ten years devising and mastering on his own. Yet this young man of only fifteen or so had been able to mimic it so easily.

It was astonishing to see such talent in someone his age.

And martial arts weren’t the only area the young man excelled in. He was able to absorb any and all knowledge and techniques from other people and make them his own, without any difficulty.

Eventually, he had begun to demonstrate extraordinary ability in political, military, and religious studies, as well as various other fields. It hadn’t taken long for Skáviðr to see the young prodigy as the future hope of the Wolf Clan.

And so Skáviðr did not hold himself back from hammering his own knowledge and techniques, everything he knew, into the boy.

And he did so while telling him, “You will be the one who saves the Wolf Clan in these difficult times.”

But looking back on it now, there were much more important things that he should have taught him.

Rather than teaching the boy a wide assortment of things because he could easily learn them all, he should have focused much more time on teaching him

the fundamentals that should underpin them.

And more than anything else, he should have striven to train the young man's heart.

If only he had done that, perhaps both of them would now be living in a very different present.

ACT 1

Jörgen, the Wolf Clan's second-in-command, raised a distressed cry of protest. "Please stop, Mother! One such as you need not trouble yourself personally like this! If you gave orders to some of the workers, I am sure they would help you in any way possible..."

He felt dizzy just looking at the scene before him.

This was Iárnviðr, capital of the Wolf Clan, a nation which had grown powerful enough to exert control over much of the western part of Yggdrasil.

In the rear garden of the palace, the young woman who was going to become the clan ruler's only wife was using a small sickle to weed the garden herself.

It was enough to nearly knock Jörgen off his feet.

"Huh?" the young woman asked. "But is it really okay for me to give orders like that? Everyone already has work they're busy doing, so interrupting them for this would be a little..."

Her reply was incredibly humble and completely missed the point. It was as if she had no self-awareness of her status as the clan patriarch's wife.

"Please, do not worry of such things, and feel free to give any orders you like," Jörgen said faintly.

"Hmm... I don't know. I still think that might not be a good thing. If I start freely interrupting other people's work like that, just because I'm the patriarch's wife, that could affect their ability to perform their own duties. If I acted selfishly, it would eventually come back to harm Yuu-kun's reputation."

"...!" Jörgen caught his breath, his astonishment even greater than before.

Her remarks were something he wished he could play back for the wives of the other high-ranked clan captains, who gave orders to the people around them as if it were a matter of course.

Jörgen had been assuming she had no awareness of her status as the patriarch's wife, but it was Jörgen himself who had been mistaken.

“I believe that is a wonderful way of thinking,” he said at last. “Then, how about this? I will use my position as second-in-command to place a request for people who are currently unoccupied, and temporarily lend you their services. How does that sound?”

The second-in-command was charged with bearing all of the responsibilities and authority of clan ruler when the patriarch could not be present.

If someone of his position gave an official order to his soldiers, then it maintained the chain of command, and there would be no issues in terms of interrupting their duties.

“Um, is that really okay?” The young woman still looked as if she were hesitantly thinking it over.

It was unbelievable how modest she was.

Jörgen couldn’t help but give a little chuckle. “Surely there are those who would find it strange and unconscionable for the wife of the lord patriarch to be covered in dirt and sweat. That might also come to affect Father’s symbolic dignity. Please, I ask that you grant my request and make use of my men.”

Jörgen figured that by re-phrasing it as a request on his own behalf, she would be more likely to assent. It was a calculation that came from his bounty of life experience.

“Ah! All right, I understand!” Mitsuki said with relief. “To be honest, that would really help. It was looking like this job was too big for one girl to finish on her own.”

“Oh, no, I should be thanking you for agreeing to grant my request. By the way, just what is...”

Bang-bang! Ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!

Jörgen’s question was cut off when incredibly loud noises erupted, resounding loudly everywhere across the palace.

The noises were so incredibly loud, they continued to echo for seconds afterwards.

From one part of the palace rose a billowing plume of black smoke.

“Wh-what’s going on?!” Jörgen shouted in alarm.

It was early summer of the year 205 of the imperial calendar of Yggdrasil, and the Horn Clan and Panther Clan were at war. The three thousand soldiers of the Horn Clan were opposing the ten thousand soldiers of the Panther Clan, with the Körmt River between them.

After staring each other down for some time, the Panther Clan made the first move.

Their patriarch, Hveðrungr, personally took three thousand riders and led them as a detached unit, crossing the river at a different location, and then assaulted the Horn Clan forces from their flank.

It was a surprise attack, but it failed to defeat the Horn Clan forces, whose advance preparations allowed them to employ the “wagon wall” defense. However, Hveðrungr wasn’t one to sit on his hands in the face of such a small setback.

He led his detached unit to surround the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr, and thus cut off the supply route of his enemy, in a plan to starve them.

Meanwhile, the Horn Clan, their supplies cut off and their food dwindling, were running out of options.

“...And that is how things stand.” The Horn Clan army commander Haugspori finished his explanation of the present situation, and bowed his head deeply. “I am so very sorry for this situation.”

He was normally a man with a very informal and breezy attitude, even going so far as to maintain his wisecracking demeanor with his patriarch, Linnea. But now his brow was knitted and his face was quite serious and troubled.

After all, it would be no exaggeration to say that this conflict would determine the very fate of the Horn Clan.

And yet, it seemed there was no good course of action he could take. With that pressure weighing on him so heavily, he didn’t have the composure to spare for acting glib.

“No, you did quite well in holding out against them this long without

breaking,” the black-haired young man sitting across from Haugspori said. “Thanks to that, I managed to make it here in time.”

And he let out a long sigh of relief.

This was the Wolf Clan’s patriarch, Suoh Yuuto.

He’d become patriarch at the young age of fifteen, and in just two short years had rebuilt the Wolf Clan from its state of near destruction into one of the most powerful nations in all of Yggdrasil. He was a rare and phenomenal man, a great hero.

For the last two months, no one had seen him, and there had been rumors of his death. But here he was, alive and in the flesh, looking perfectly fine.

Haugspori’s sworn mother, the Horn Clan patriarch Linnea, would surely be overjoyed to hear the news.

“All right, then...” Yuuto looked the man straight in the eyes. “Haugspori, sorry, but would you let me take command of your forces?”

According to the hierarchy established by the Oath of the Chalice, Haugspori was the sworn child of Linnea, who was the sworn younger sister of Yuuto. So Yuuto would be like his uncle.

This meant that Yuuto was someone above him in status whom he should respect, but he was also from a different clan — “family,” but not his family.

The only one who Haugspori had actually sworn his vows of allegiance to was his patriarch Linnea, and she had personally entrusted him with command of this army. Asking him to just hand over that command was unreasonable, and he had no good reason to comply.

Still...

“All right.” Haugspori assented without any hesitation.

His clan’s very survival was endangered; he was not fool enough to cling to thoughts of his reputation or saving face in this sort of crisis.

Most of all, this was a rare chance to see this incredible man direct an army up close — the skilled commander who had overturned the odds in many a battle where he’d been at a serious numbers disadvantage.

As one who lived on the battlefield, it was an option Haugspori couldn't very well pass up.

"So then, what is it you plan to do?" he went on.

"Mm? Oh, right," Yuuto said. "I should tell you and the soldiers about this, too... Felicia."

"Yes, Big Brother, what is it?" Yuuto's adjutant, who was standing nearby, replied in a voice full of reverence.

Haugspori had carried out numerous affairs with countless beautiful women; he was the Horn Clan's greatest philanderer by reputation, and also by his own admission. And yet the sight of this woman took him so off-guard that he swallowed nervously. She was a woman of sensual and alluring beauty beyond compare.

And her gaze towards Yuuto was filled with a passion and heat — one could tell at a glance how strongly she felt for him.

"Can you bring me one of the long strings with the red sticks tied to them from our luggage?" Yuuto asked.

"Yes, right away!" the voluptuous woman replied briskly and ran over to one of their horses, returning with the item in question. "Here you are, Big Brother."

"Mm, thank you."

"Tee hee! ♥" She responded to this simple word of thanks by giggling bashfully, looking positively delighted.

Felicia of the Wolf Clan was an Einherjar warrior wielding the rune Skírnir, the Expressionless Servant. She was skilled on the battlefield and off, and even able to use seiðr magic spells. Her talents were well known, even to the people of the Horn Clan.

Such a distinguished woman had just been given an order that would better befit a common servant. Yet, rather than look dissatisfied, she seemed positively overjoyed to obey.

With just that small exchange, Haugspori could tell just how great a lord this Yuuto was.

“What is that?” Haugspori asked, looking at the string of red sticks.

“This happens to be something I brought back here from my homeland — my secret weapon to use against the Panther Clan. For starters, we’re going to use this against their forces on the river’s opposite bank. We’re going to annihilate them.”

“Ah...!” Haugspori gasped and felt a shiver run down his spine at Yuuto’s quiet but firm statement. He clenched his teeth to prevent them from chattering.

At first glance, he just looks like some weak boy, he reflected.

Yuuto was tall and lanky; he just didn’t look very strong.

Someone as experienced as Haugspori could tell just from looking at a person’s gait what level of fighting ability they had achieved. Even being generous, this young man looked only a little bit stronger than a novice.

And yet...

I’m so scared, my mouth is dry. So this is the aura of the one they call the “Lion”! Haugspori found this boy, so much younger than him, to be unbearably frightening.

It wasn’t as if there was any hostile intent pointed at him directly, either. All the young man had done was show a little glimpse of his “fangs,” so to speak, and it felt as if the surrounding temperature had dropped two or three degrees.

Haugspori had met the young man once before, during the previous winter, while accompanying Linnea. Compared to back then, it seemed like the aura that surrounded him was much heavier, and honed to a far finer edge.

In other words, he was still growing.

That was a pretty scary thought.

“I have a report, ma’am. The Horn Clan forces camped on the opposite bank have begun to withdraw.”

“Have they, now?” Sigyn replied to the news from her lookout with a cold smile. “Yes, I figured it was about time they would.”

Sigyn was the wife of the current Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr. She was

also their previous ruler, a female patriarch who had managed to hold together and control a clan of rough and rowdy men, which was a testament to her greatness as a leader.

Due to the incident in which Yuuto had been sent back to his homeland beyond the heavens, her marital relationship with Hveðrungr was pretty much cold and dead. However, her capacity as a leader and the respect she held from the Panther Clan members was such that even now she had been given command over all seven thousand men of the Panther Clan's main army.

"I knew that was the option they'd pick," she remarked under her breath.

With the Horn Clan's supplies from their capital cut off, all that awaited them if they stayed put was death by starvation.

There were generally two courses they could take in this situation to get ahold of more food. The first was to drive away the detached unit of Panther Clan troops that was surrounding their capital, allowing them to resupply there. The second was to commandeer food and supplies from nearby villages.

If they had gone with the latter, they would not have broken their formation, since they could have sent small parties of soldiers to procure the goods. The fact that their whole force was moving meant that they'd chosen the former.

Their patriarch was a woman who thought dearly of her citizens. That information had reached even as far as Sigyn's ears.

The Horn Clan army commander was likely acting out of respect for that stance.

The enemy really was acting exactly according to Sigyn's predictions and doing just what she wanted.

Sigyn stood up, her long, silky silver hair swaying, and shouted the command to her troops. "Okay, this is our chance! We're going to cross the river all at once!"

Crossing a large river was one of the most dangerous situations to be in, militarily.

Now that the Horn Clan forces had pulled out, she could bring her army

across the river and into their territory without suffering any casualties.

There was no way she could overlook this chance.

However, that was because she could not possibly imagine that her thinking right now was exactly what Yuuto intended.

“Ahh, hello, hello, this is Kristina. Father, can you hear me?” Kristina’s voice called.

“Yeah, loud and clear,” Yuuto replied with satisfaction. “Sounds perfect.”

The voice of Yuuto’s sworn daughter Kristina was coming out of a handheld transceiver, or “walkie-talkie,” which he was holding to his ear.

It was one of the many tools he’d brought with him when returning to Yggdrasil from the modern world.

Naturally, he’d bought a large stock of batteries for them, as well as solar-powered battery rechargers.

Thanks to these things, it was now possible for him to contact people over a pretty long distance.

Incidentally, they were a model not made in Japan. In Japan, it was strictly forbidden under the law for ordinary people to use these things, but there wasn’t any such restriction in the laws Yuuto had set for his own nation.

“The Panther Clan army has begun crossing the river,” Kristina reported.

“I see. Keep watching them closely. Contact me again right when about three-fourths of them have crossed.”

“Understood.” Kristina’s voice cut off with an unpleasant, staticky sound.

“Hahah... this thing is way too convenient.” Bringing the walkie-talkie down from his ear, Yuuto let out a dry laugh.

In the world of Yggdrasil, the most common methods of communicating information on the battlefield were either sending a messenger or sounding a gong or warhorn.

A messenger could relay fine details, but there was no getting around the time it took.

Using sound signals to communicate was pretty close to real-time in speed, but there was a sharp limit on the volume of information you could send, and it was also communicated to the enemy.

However, with a tool like this portable transceiver, it was now possible to give detailed information to someone far away, immediately, and to do it secretly.

Yuuto was young, but he'd lived through his share of battles. He knew just how much of a frightening advantage this tool gave him, and even as the one who had brought it here, he found himself shuddering at the implications.

"Still, I'm glad. It looks like we lured them out just fine." Yuuto gave a sigh of relief.

If, by chance, the enemy hadn't started moving within the day, things would have gotten much stickier.

Yuuto knew that once the Panther Clan learned of his return to this world, and of the Lightning Clan's retreat from Gimlé, they would naturally be much more guarded and wary.

However, the Panther Clan's current fastest method of transmitting information was a message hand-delivered by one of their mounted soldiers.

They didn't have a postal system in place that they could use. Therefore, taking the total distance into account, valuable information would take until tomorrow at the earliest to reach their troops.

In other words, the current retreat looked to the Panther Clan as if the Horn Clan was out of options, playing right into their plans, but that ruse would only be effective today.

Standing nearby, Haugspori exhaled in admiration, and began nodding to himself thoughtfully. "So by deliberately acting according to the plans of our enemy, we can in turn make them respond just as we predict. This is very educational, sir."

"I'm just following basic principles, that's all," Yuuto replied, staring out into the distance in the direction of the Körmt River.

Indeed, from Yuuto's perspective, his strategy was textbook — right out of a

textbook in fact. He didn't consider it particularly amazing or clever.

One line of Sun Tzu's was: "With gain, move them; with men, await them."

In more modern language, it meant that by dangling the prospect of a clear gain or advantage, one could entice the enemy into action, and once they moved, one should be ready and waiting with soldiers to attack them.

In summary, by deliberately pulling his forces away from the Körmt River, Yuuto had held out "bait" to the Panther Clan in the form of stark advantages: They could now cross the great river without suffering casualties, and they could chase down the retreating Horn Clan troops and attack them from behind.

"Okay, what's left is... Felicia, you finished getting the soldiers in place, right?"

"Yes, Big Brother, just as you ordered."

"Still, is this choice of troop placement really going to be all right?" Haugspori asked, deep furrows in his brow. "One might say it leaves your main formation with a worrying lack of protection... oh, but I don't mean to imply that I'm doubting your judgment, Uncle."

This was a battle with the Horn Clan's fate on the line. The man had faith in Yuuto, but of course that wouldn't be enough to erase his apprehension.

"You can rest assured," Yuuto replied firmly. "'Many calculations lead to victory, and few calculations to defeat.' I don't start a fight unless I have a winning plan."

He seemed to have a great deal of confidence.

"Hee hee," Felicia giggled.

"Hm? What is it, Felicia?" Yuuto glanced suspiciously at her.

Felicia shrugged slightly and replied, "Oh, it was just that... I was thinking, it's been so long since I've felt this sense of security."

"Ohhh, I know just what you mean, Felicia," Sigrún chimed in, nodding. "Just by Father being here with us, it feels like we can't lose."

Felicia's face broke into a wide grin at hearing her own feelings confirmed so

exactly. “Yes, yes, exactly! By contrast, when Big Brother disappeared at Gashina, it felt as if the very ground had given way beneath my feet...”

“Indeed. And now we face a force of cavalry with more than twice our numbers, and yet they feel like no threat at all.”

“Hey, come on, you two, that’s getting way too complacent,” Yuuto objected. “I’m nothing special or amazing, so don’t get carried away. No letting your guard down!”

He frowned as he sharply admonished the two girls.

This was a pivotal moment just before launching their attack, and they were far too lacking in the necessary tension. A single moment’s lapse in vigilance could be fatal on the battlefield. As their commander, he needed to remind them of that.

The two of them were both veteran fighters. Yuuto figured that a quick remark would be enough and that they would pull themselves together right away.

However, they instead seemed to miss the point of his remark and reacted to another part of it.

“No, Big Brother, saying you are nothing special is simply not right!” Felicia cried. “As I am always telling you, you are a man of surpassing greatness. These last two months were the most painful reminder of that.”

“I am loathe to go against your words, Father, but I must agree with Felicia on this. I would think that you, Father, are the only one in all the land who could have made that Steinþórr retreat with nothing more than a single gesture. Whereas I could not stop him, even when fighting him with everything I had.”

“Ahh, yes... I remember my body trembling when that happened,” Felicia sighed.

“Mine did as well,” Sigrún agreed. “I was so overcome with emotion, at knowing I had the honor of calling this man Father, that I dropped to my knees and lowered my head.”

Both girls closed their eyes and seemed to be absorbed in replaying scenes

from the event in their mind.

Too late, Yuuto remembered that both of them had this bad habit of being unable to stop praising him once they got started.

And it seemed like it was twice as bad as usual today. Maybe their urge to praise him had been building up while he'd been away from Yggdrasil for two months.

It was something he could just treat as the usual antics if they were back in Wolf Clan territory, but they were here in another clan's lands on business. This was starting to get embarrassing.

"Hey. Both of you..." Yuuto made to stop them more forcefully, but he was interrupted by Haugspori.

"You turned away the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir, with... a single gesture...?!" Haugspori stared at Yuuto agape, eyes wide in shock, as if he'd just been struck on the head with a hammer. He was trembling.

"No, it wasn't me, it was this trick I used called the 'Empty Fortress.' It wasn't like I scared that idiot away by glaring at him or anything."

"However, that still means you caused him to retreat, correct?"

"Um, well, yeah, I guess," Yuuto said. "If I hadn't, I wouldn't exactly be here helping you right now."

"You have confronted that monster and won three times now, and that is more than amazing enough of a feat to speak for itself. And it sounds as if the third time was an easy victory."

"...Ughh, it would just be a pain to try to explain it better at this point." Yuuto heaved a sigh in resignation.

The "Empty Fortress Strategy" was a high-level act of psychological deception, and pulling it off was nowhere near as easy as Haugspori clearly believed. But right now the Panther Clan forces were advancing on their position, and there was no time to spare on explaining things that bore no relation to the battle at hand.

Haugspori continued. "And more than anything, the famed 'Mánagarmr' and

‘Gullviðrúlfr,’ the Strongest Silver Wolf and the Wisest Golden Wolf, show you such complete admiration. It seems I have nothing to worry about after all. Ha ha ha!”

“No, listen, you really need to keep your head,” Yuuto protested. “We’re about to go to battle, here.”

Haugspori only continued to laugh loudly, and Yuuto slumped his shoulders dejectedly. He wondered if it would be better for him to yell at them seriously and make sure they understood.

Just as he was considering that, a burst of static came from the speaker on the walkie-talkie.

“Father,” Kristina’s voice said. “I believe it is time.”

When it came to intel, speed was everything. That was all the more true on the field of battle.

As expected, Kristina understood that. Normally, she was the type who loved a bit of banter before getting to the point, but in times like these, she kept everything brief.

“All right!” Yuuto called. “All troops, reverse course! We’re going to wipe out the Panther Clan!”

“Oh, my, looks like they’ve already lost all sense of good judgment,” Sigyn muttered to herself with a mix of amazement, disdain, and pity as she caught sight of the enemy reemerging in front of her.

Her forces had already completed their crossing of the Körmt River.

If the enemy had wanted to attack her, then they should have done it while her troops were in the middle of crossing. If they’d wanted to get away from her, then they should have kept fleeing at full speed.

Attacking her after she’d crossed was the absolute height of foolishness.

Perhaps, in the midst of retreating, they’d reconsidered and decided that they simply couldn’t allow her to get her forces onto their side of the river. It was an example of indecisiveness, the hallmark of a stupid commander.

Haugspori of the Horn Clan was well known even in the Panther Clan for his

great mastery of the bow, and he had worked his way up to the position of assistant to the second-in-command while still only in his thirties, so he was supposed to be someone remarkable. Apparently there was no use trusting in hearsay.

People revealed their true worth most clearly when they were backed into a corner. More than likely, this Haugspori had been mentally worn down by the harsh conditions he had endured thus far.

In the end, this was the extent of his nerve.

“Hm... now then, what shall I do?” Sigyn pondered for a moment.

The enemy might be acting confused, but they still had that powerful wagon fortress tactic at their disposal. Judging by past results, if she were to charge at them carelessly, she would only end up taking on larger casualties.

“The more auspicious thing to do here is to withdraw and meet up with Rungr’s group,” she decided.

Getting seven thousand riders into Horn Clan territory unharmed was an excellent accomplishment already, after all.

For a normal infantry army, withdrawing from the field with the enemy right in front of them was incredibly dangerous, for it meant a high chance of the enemy attacking in pursuit. But the Panther Clan army was composed, to a man, of skilled cavalry, their speed and mobility the greatest in all of Yggdrasil.

Furthermore, they could fire backwards with their bows, attacking at range while retreating.They would surely escape the area with ease.

“Lady Sigyn, enemy forces also spotted on both the left and right!” a messenger called.

“Oh my, I didn’t expect that.” In contrast to her words, Sigyn’s tone was still full of confidence.

She’d already confirmed that the enemy had fewer than half her numbers in total. They were already a smaller force, and they had further divided their strength into three groups. It was enough to make her question their sanity.

Even their planned ambush had failed, since she had learned of their locations

before they had a chance to launch an attack.

It was a completely shoddy display.

Sigyn focused her gaze on the enemy group on the right as she spoke. “We’ll start by crushing the ambush groups one at a time, then... huuuh?!” She let out a cry in surprise.

But it was only for a second.

Sigyn’s expression returned to normal, and then she confirmed the state of the enemy group to her left as well.

After a few seconds, she put a hand to her mouth. “Pfft. Heheheh... Ahahahaha!”

Sitting atop her horse, Sigyn burst out into loud laughter. It was such a hilarious sight to her eyes.

The enemy groups on each side of her were using the wagon wall, each group’s defense arranged facing forward towards her troops.

There were probably only five hundred wagons total, but their reinforced carriages provided incredible defensive power. There was no breaking through those fortifications with any normal attacks.

There were wagon walls set to Sigyn’s left and right, behind her was the Körmt River, and in front of her was the main force of the Horn Clan — at a glance, it looked like the Panther Clan had lost all chance of escape.

However...

“So how are you going to protect your main force, then?” Sigyn said with a smirk.

The enemy had divided up their carriages to bolster the defenses of the detached groups to her left and right. There was no doubt that meant they’d left their main force with far fewer carriages protecting them.

If they weren’t fully equipped to defend against cavalry, then a measly two thousand infantry troops were no match for her seven thousand Panther Clan riders.

What's more, the wagon fortress tactic was fundamentally about holding one's ground against the enemy and shooting at them as they attacked.

In other words, even if the Panther Clan was surrounded now, there was no chance of the groups to her left and right closing in to attack. That would require sacrificing the defenses provided by the carriages when they were locked in place, after all. There was nothing to fear.

"Looks like they really are confused," Sigyn muttered.

The enemy had been so concerned with trying to take away her side's means of escape, they'd forgotten about the most important part: They needed to be able to actually defeat her.

Perhaps they'd convinced themselves they were chosen by the gods to be victorious in this battle. If the gods were on their side, then of course there was no way they'd be defeated.

Certainly, the only thing that would overturn the Horn Clan's desperate and hopeless situation right now would be a divine miracle.

However, as a practitioner of seiðr magic, Sigyn could be certain of one thing. The gods were not so kind as to show such favor to humans.

Miracles were the rare, rare, unknowable whimsy of the gods. That was why they were miracles.

Sigyn threw out one hand, and shouted to her warriors. "All troops, charge! Attack the Horn Clan troops to our front, and tear them apart!"

She was full of confidence in that moment, absolutely assured of her victory.

Of course, she had no way in that moment of knowing the truth.

Deep in the commanding ranks of the Horn Clan army, there lurked a young man who was akin to a god of war in the reverential minds of his people.

As the battle began, the air grew noisy with the whistling of a massive volume of arrows cutting through the air, fired from the Horn Clan troops.

Haugspori was, after all, a master archer. It stood to reason that he had assembled quite a few other talented archers as ranking subordinates in his army.

The Panther Clan riders were also excellent archers, but the smaller-sized bows they used from horseback couldn't reach the enemy from this distance. Indeed, it would be an astounding feat if they could.

That said, the mass of arrows lost a great deal of speed crossing such a long distance. The elite fighters of the Panther Clan could use their gauntlets or short swords to easily deflect them.

In fact, this was all in line with Sigyn's predictions. There were no real casualties to speak of.

Or rather, there hadn't been until that moment.

Bang! Ba-bang! Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!!

All of a sudden, she was surrounded by a noise that she had never heard before, a terrible sound that made her ears ache.

It wasn't only noise, either.

All throughout the Panther Clan ranks, there were bits and bursts of fire, flying this way and that.

The horses all began screaming, and so did the Panther Clan soldiers.

"Ow, it burns! Wh-what is this?! Uwaah!!"

"Wh-whoaaa, c-calm down! Calm down, girl! Eeek!"

"Snakes made of fire?! No, stay away, stay away! Whoa! Guaagh!"

What looked like bright red snakes coiled around arrow shafts landed among the Panther Clan and began spitting out bright light, fire, and noise, flailing wildly and wrapping around the legs of the horses.

Horses are, by nature, very easily frightened creatures. And, naturally, these terrifying things that spat fire and light and sound were something none of the horses had ever encountered before.

Even the magnificent steeds bred on the vast plains of Miðgarðr, renowned for their greater-than-average courage, could not help but be driven into a panicked frenzy.

They were rearing, throwing their riders off.

Even worse, they were desperately trying to flee from the spot, smashing into each other in their panic.

They were also colliding with the dismounted soldiers, sending them flying.

In just a few dozen seconds after the first arrows were launched, the Panther Clan troops had descended into a state of utter pandemonium.

And that wasn't the end of it.

Just as it seemed the snakes of fire were starting to settle down, as if calculated for that moment, a second wave of arrows landed in their midst.

Bang! Ba-bang! Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!!

The explosive noises and flashes of light and bursts of fire all began again without remorse, spurring the soldiers and horses into further chaos.

"Rrrraaaaaggghhh!!" It was then that the Horn Clan troops let out a tremendous war cry, and charged.

The Panther Clan army, horses and riders alike, were already stricken with fear at this strange devilry that they'd never encountered before, and they were in no state of mind to be able to fight.

Even if they wanted to flee, the wagon walls blocked off both flanks, and the Körmt River was at their backs.

Realizing they had nowhere to run only further stoked the fear in the hearts of the Panther Clan fighters.

"What is this?! What is happening?!" Sigyn's confidence had vanished, and she was pale as a ghost, glancing hurriedly this way and that.

She was so perplexed by the unfathomable situation unfolding around her that she'd forgotten to continue giving out commands to her troops.

Of course, even if she had tried to do so, no one would have responded to them.

This was no longer a battle between two armies.

The massacre of the Panther Clan army had begun.

The firecracker: A primitive type of firework made by sealing an incendiary

mixture, such as gunpowder, inside a small, hollow tube made of bamboo, thick paper, or similar materials, which can then be lit with a fuse and made to explode in a burst of light and sound.

This was one of the items that Yuuto had brought back to Yggdrasil from the modern world.

Firecrackers in Japan were items meant for amusement, and so while they could do a bit of harm, they didn't have any serious lethal force like a weapon would.

However, unlike other types of fireworks, instead of creating a pretty burst of bright color, they were meant to make an incredibly loud noise.

To put it bluntly, they wouldn't serve as anything greater than a bluff.

But that being said, one could still point to the Japanese historical example in the famous Battle of Nagashino: There was a theory that the real cause of Oda Nobunaga's victory was not his use of three-layered volley fire with the guns he had. Rather, the theory was that instead of the bullets themselves, the terrible sound produced by the guns terrified the enemy's horses, and that was the cause of their defeat.

It is said that during the Mongol invasions of Japan, the defending samurai and their horses were terribly surprised and frightened by the gunpowder weaponry used by the Mongols.

Of course, the earliest form of gunpowder had been invented in 9th century China, so by Yggdrasil's standards, it was still something from over two thousand years in the future.

There was simply no chance for these people to have had prior knowledge of explosives, and so a large volume of firecrackers flung into their midst would spark confusion that not even a skilled, charismatic general could possibly quell.

That went doubly for the Panther Clan army, composed entirely of fighters on horseback.

"Sound all the war gongs, and keep banging!" Yuuto raised his voice, barking out orders in rapid succession. "Tell every unit I want all of them shouting louder! We're going to seize this momentum and sweep in on them all at

once!”

With five hundred soldiers each sent out to flank the enemy on the left and right, the Horn Clan’s main formation currently had two thousand men.

The Panther Clan army in front of them numbered seven thousand, more than three times their strength.

Right now, the Horn Clan forces had an overwhelming advantage, thanks to the fear and panic gripping their enemies, but they would quickly be pushed back if the Panther Clan troops regained control of themselves, thanks to that difference in numbers.

In order to prevent that, the Horn Clan needed to put as much pressure on the enemy as possible, thoroughly robbing them of any chance they might have to catch their breath and come to their senses.

If this was not settled immediately, in one fell swoop, then the Horn Clan would have no way to achieve victory.

At the young age of sixteen, Yuuto had already lived through a great number of battles and grown into a veteran commander. He was not going to miss such a clearly critical moment.

“Uurrraaaaaaghhh!!” The Horn Clan troops let out an even greater, bellowing roar, and tore into the Panther Clan.

From atop his speeding chariot (repurposed from one of the wagon wall carriages), Yuuto could see the dead bodies of Panther Clan soldiers scattered on the ground below.

Looking at the dead soldiers’ faces, one could tell their state of mind in their final moments.

Not one of those faces was that of a warrior. Every one of them was frozen in a twisted expression of fear.

Those faces laid bare the reality that, even though the soldiers of the Panther Clan were a skilled force, considered among the strongest in all of Yggdrasil, right now they were nothing more than an unruly mob who had forgotten how to use their weapons and horses.

In contrast, the Horn Clan under Yuuto's command was an army moving with a single united will. It no longer mattered if this enemy force was three times their number or ten; it was no longer a threat to them.

As the Panther Clan soldiers ran this way and that, attempting to flee, they were slaughtered by the Horn Clan in a completely one-sided fashion. This continued for a while.

By the time they fully came to the realization that their only real chance at survival was to throw down their weapons and hold up their empty hands in a show of surrender, more than half of their number had already been lost.

"All right, how am I gonna deal with them?" Yuuto muttered to himself. Resting his chin in his hand with his elbow on the rim of the wagon carriage, he gave a large sigh.

He hadn't gotten an account of the exact numbers yet, but it was obvious that his captured prisoners outnumbered his own troops. This was an unusual case for him, and he was a bit perplexed on how best to handle it.

He'd made sure to be on guard against the possibility that they might be feigning surrender in order to launch a sneak attack. But, looking at their ghostly pale faces and lifeless eyes, it was clear they were mere shells of their former selves, emptied of any will to fight, and so he'd decided to take them into captivity.

A smaller group trying to take a much larger group as prisoners meant that there were any number of chances for some of them to run away, but no one had attempted to escape, even as they were all being tied up. That just went to show how completely worn-down the Panther Clan fighters were.

"I'd certainly prefer to avoid killing them, but..." Yuuto trailed off, frowning deeply.

All of these captives were fighters of incredible skill, masters of horse riding techniques that no other clan in Yggdrasil could match, surpassing even the Wolf Clan's greatest soldiers, the elite Múspell Special Forces Unit led by Sigrún. If he could get them on his side, they'd be his strongest, most dependable allies.

Of course, not many would forgive those who had drawn the sword against

their homeland and people.

Even if some of them did agree to become subservient to Yuuto's clan, he couldn't be sure they wouldn't betray him, and so he was afraid to integrate a large number of them into his combat forces.

On the other hand, it just wasn't realistic to try and move around with a group of captives that outnumbered his own forces, let alone attempting to fight the enemy in that state.

Even now, the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr was still surrounded by the enemy, and he needed to hurry there as soon as possible, so he certainly couldn't afford to take his time bringing the prisoners back to Wolf Clan territory first.

That left killing them off. It didn't have to be all of them, but enough to bring their numbers down to something he could reasonably manage and control. It was a valid choice, in a sense, for it was a practice that had been taking place since time immemorial.

More than anything, there was the severe shortage of food supplies to consider. Things were already stretched thin as it is, and now they had twice as many mouths to feed. That would make things much worse.

"Tch, is there really no other way?" Yuuto clicked his tongue in frustration, clenching his fists tightly as he stared out with a grim expression.

When he'd made his decision to come back to this world, he'd also resigned himself to be ready to become as fierce and merciless as a demon if he needed to. But he hadn't expected to have to make a choice like this so soon after his return.

"Am I being tested? By fate, or by something else?" Yuuto clenched his teeth together so tightly that his molars began to hurt.

If he were the Yuuto from before being sent back to the modern world, he could never have allowed himself to consider the option of killing prisoners, people who weren't fighting back.

But now...

Now that he knew the truth about Yggdrasil...

“Father, good news, good news!” A cheerful young voice suddenly called out, sweet and out of place on a battlefield, destroying the tension of the moment in an instant.

“Huh?!” Surprised, Yuuto whirled around.

A smiling face as bright as a sunflower, also quite out of place for a battlefield, sprang into view. It was an adorable-looking young girl, perhaps only twelve or thirteen, with her hair tied into a side ponytail on the right.

The girl’s name was Albertina, and she was the older twin sister of Kristina, the girl out on the scouting mission who had been communicating to Yuuto on the transceiver.

Albertina was an Einherjar with the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, and she had a natural talent for assassination, but normally she was an innocent, carefree little girl.

“What’s the good news?” Yuuto asked, though in his mind, he already assumed it was something petty, like that she’d found some of her favorite food in the supplies taken off of the Panther Clan troops.

He found his expectations subverted, in a good way.

“My dad from the Claw Clan is headed this way with fifteen hundred of his soldiers. It looks like he’ll be able to meet up with us by sometime tomorrow.”

“Ah! Seriously?!” Yuuto gasped, and grabbed Albertina’s shoulders as he questioned her, excitedly shaking her back and forth.

“Yeah, seriously. Seriously... Oooghh!” Albertina repeated her answer back to Yuuto, growing dizzy from having her head shaken.

Yuuto realized he must have lost his composure at such great news and shaken her with his full strength.

He chided himself on not having been more gentle with her. She was physically attuned to move at great speeds, her specialty, but other than that, she had the body of a typical girl of her age.

“Oh, but why are you the one here, Al?” Felicia asked, tilting her head to one side quizzically.

It was almost always Kristina's role to bring these sorts of intelligence reports to Yuuto.

"Kris is out working right now, so I came in her place."

"Ahh, right," Yuuto replied with a nod.

Kristina was in the middle of a reconnaissance mission — in other words, she was currently using her ability to erase her presence, and it would be nearly impossible for anyone to find her. Even Kristina's own spy subordinates would surely have judged it easier to go find Albertina among the Horn Clan army ranks.

"Still, it's surprising that Botvid would send reinforcements this quickly," Sigrún remarked.

The Claw Clan patriarch, Botvid, was well known as a shrewd and cunning snake, so much so that he had come to be called the Viper of Bifröst.

Yuuto had heard stories of the time before he was the Wolf Clan's patriarch, when they had tasted quite a bit of suffering at Botvid's hands.

Yuuto had assumed that the careful, calculating Botvid wouldn't make a move to help him while the Wolf Clan still appeared to be at a disadvantage.

He would never have figured that the man would come to his aid now, even before the news reached him of the great victory that had just occurred. It was a happy miscalculation.

"True, but... if the Claw Clan is coming, then things will work out." Yuuto clenched his fists again, but this time it was with a feeling of triumph.

If he entrusted the Claw Clan troops with escorting the prisoners back to Wolf Clan territory, he could take the whole Horn Clan force with him to go liberate Fólkvangr.

Botvid was the same man who had originally deceived the previous Wolf Clan patriarch and stolen a great deal of Wolf Clan territory, and then later coaxed several of the surrounding smaller clans into coming to his aid and fighting for him. In other words, he had an incredible knack for using others to his benefit.

This was a huge number of prisoners, and so there was a reasonable enough

chance that problems could arise while they were being transported. It would be a difficult task, but there were few men more suited to it.

And, just as bad news rarely arrives alone, such would prove to be the same for good news, as well.

“Uncle, we’ve found somebody really important among the prisoners!” Haugspori, who had been put in charge of securing and supervising the prisoners, raced back to Yuuto’s side looking very excited.

“Important?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes. It’s the wife of the Panther Clan’s current patriarch Hveðrungr, and also their previous patriarch: Sigyn.”

Yuuto couldn’t help staring wide-eyed at the beautiful woman who was brought before him.

In Yuuto’s mind, when it came to beauty, Sigrún and Felicia were the two pinnacles out of all the people he knew, but this woman was actually on par with them.

Similarly to Felicia, the woman wore an outfit that revealed a lot of skin and seemed quite provocative.

Perhaps it had something to do with them both being a practitioner of seiðr magic.

Her body was even more voluptuous than Felicia’s, and her arms being tightly bound behind her back made her seem even more erotic.

Haugspori and the various Horn Clan captains that were subordinate to him were also gathered in the large pavilion tent.

A ripple of murmurs and motion spread through them the moment the woman was brought in, and one could see that several of the men were blushing.

However, that had nothing to do with Yuuto’s wide-eyed stare.

It was much simpler than that: He knew her face.

This was the first time he’d seen her in person, but he had “seen” her twice

now, in the moments just before the spell Fimbulvetr had affected him.

She had looked then exactly as she looked now.

“Feh. So you really did come back, did you?” The beautiful woman, Sigyn, spat out the words bitterly as she caught sight of Yuuto.

Her tone of voice was much coarser than one might guess from her appearance.

Considering that she’d been the previous patriarch of the Panther Clan, she would need to be a leader capable of keeping a handle on the wild, rowdy men of her clan. Of course she would have to be much more than a pretty face.

“So what sorta trick did you use, huh?” she demanded. “After all, there’s no way in the world that girlie over there would ever be able to break my spell.”

As she said this, Sigyn glanced pointedly at Felicia, who was standing at Yuuto’s side.

In fact, it was just as she was saying: Felicia’s casting of Gleipnir had been easily repelled by Sigyn’s Fimbulvetr.

“I happened to get a little help from a seiðr user with twin runes,” Yuuto said coolly.

“...Wha?!” The response left Sigyn temporarily stunned.

That was only natural, of course. There was only one person in Yggdrasil known to have two runes other than Steinþórr, and that was the þjóðann, the Divine Empress.

The idea of such a vaunted figure getting personally involved in this was completely outside of Sigyn’s expectations.

“Wow, to think you had connections like that, huh?” she said at last. “You are one scary guy. But are you really okay with this? You went and broke through my spell by brute force. I’d say that means you’ll probably never be able to go back to your homeland again.”

“I was prepared to accept that,” Yuuto replied without any hesitation.

Indeed, it was something he had dealt with back when he’d made the

decision to return to this world. At this point, it was no longer anything his mind needed to dwell on, even a little.

“Oh, okay,” she said. “So, what’re you gonna do with me? Gonna try to leverage me as a hostage against Rungr? Sorry to break it to you, but right now, me and him are on the outs. I’m not gonna be any use to your negotiations.”

Sigyn glared at Yuuto sharply, then gave a taunting “heh,” laughing at him through her nose.

Yuuto stared back at her, blank-faced and blinking, as if puzzled. He then gave a small burst of laughter.

“What’s so funny, huh?” she demanded.

“Ah, no, my apologies.” Yuuto hurriedly suppressed his laughter.

It was just as Sigyn had said. She was, after all, the previous patriarch, and both the wife and sworn Chalice parent of the current one. It was only natural to first consider her potential value as a hostage.

But while that might be natural, from Yuuto’s perspective, that thinking was completely off-base.

She was someone capable of undoing Felicia’s Gleipnir, and that made her a trump card Yuuto wanted in his back pocket if the time ever came. And so it would be completely absurd to consider using her as a bargaining chip, eventually returning her to the Panther Clan.

Yuuto turned and gave a command. “Treat this woman with care and respect, and escort her back to Iárnviðr. Proper care and respect, mind you.”

“Wha... what?! Say that again! Say that one more time!” Hveðrungr’s voice rose to a shout from the surprise, and his body was shaking.

It wasn’t that he’d failed to hear what had just been reported to him. Rather, the report seemed impossible, far too impossible to be true, and his mind was trying to reject it.

However, reality was a cruel and uncaring mistress.

“Y-yes, sir,” said the nervous Panther Clan soldier. “Th-the main formation of seven thousand men under Lady Sigyn’s command was attacked by the Horn

Clan using snakes made of fire, and they were w-wiped out, sir.”

“I’m afraid I can’t have heard you right, after all. Wiped out?! What do you mean, wiped out?!” Hveðrungr screamed in white-hot rage at the soldier in front of him.

This cowering Panther Clan soldier looked to be completely beaten up, with self-treated injuries all over his body, and one might call it cruel to interrogate him in such a harsh way, but in this particular situation, little could be done to avoid that.

“E-exactly that, sir, wiped out,” he said, trembling. “Including myself, I think that fewer than a hundred of us managed to escape.”

“Rgh...! Then why did things end up in such an idiotic state?!” Hveðrungr pressed.

If his clan had simply lost the battle, that would at least be within the realm of understanding.

A field battle was all about momentum. Once things were strongly trending in one side’s favor, the contest was essentially over, and the losing side would quickly retreat.

It was because of this practice that, even in suffering a large defeat, one would only lose around twenty to thirty percent of one’s forces, and even if casualties were much, much worse than average, they would still only be in the range of fifty to sixty percent, at most.

Hveðrungr had never heard of a side losing more than ninety percent of its men in a single battle.

“The enemy blocked off our left and right sides with their ‘wagon walls,’ and used the Körmt River behind us to cut off our retreat. Once we had nowhere to run, they threw these snakes of fire at us, and we couldn’t even try to fight back at that point.”

“What does that even mean?! What are these ‘snakes of fire’?!” Hveðrungr’s screams grew shrill.

He was not a very patient man to begin with. Nothing he’d heard thus far had

made any sense, and it had just about driven him mad at this point.

“Th-they were some sort of sticks tied together that made a terrible sound and light and fire, sir. They moved and writhed along the ground just like snakes, and the horses were so terrified that we couldn’t control them at all...”

“Grrrgh, so they had something like that with them... but where did they get it?!”

“Um, sir, about that, it might have just been my seeing things, but when the Horn Clan troops came charging at us, I saw a kid with black hair among them.”

“Wha?!” Hveðrungr was struck speechless. But at the same time, everything seemed to make sense.

This situation that seemed to defy all worldly logic — it was something that could never happen, unless he was involved.

Those so-called fire snakes were just like something that man would use.

“Why?! Just how much do you plan to stand in the way of my conquest, Yuuto?!” Hveðrungr cried out in a voice soaked with resentment, and clenched his teeth tightly together.

Yuuto was Hveðrungr’s accursed nemesis, for whom it felt like all the hate in his heart still wasn’t enough. Hveðrungr had long desired, above all else, the chance to wring Yuuto’s neck with his own two hands.

Upon learning that Sigyn had forced Yuuto back to his own era, Hveðrungr had been furious, and had even pondered whether he could find some way of bringing the young man back to this world.

After learning that it would be impossible, he’d given up and resigned himself to a secondary goal: He would conquer and rule over all the lands of the Myrkviðr and Álfheimr regions.

And he’d been so close, truly only a few steps away from that goal, only to have it torn away from him so completely and utterly!

Even worse, he couldn’t accept the fact that it had happened out of his sight, under someone else’s command.

No, there was no way he could accept that this conflict had already been

decided before he even had the chance to fight his enemy directly.

“What shall we do now, Father?” Narfi, standing at Hveðrungr’s side, broached the question with a troubled look.

Narfi was one of the Panther Clan’s veteran generals, an Einherjar with the rune Skinfaxi, the Shining Mane.

The ferocious warrior-general Váli had been killed in action, and now that Sigyn’s status was unknown, Narfi was Hveðrungr’s only remaining close advisor.

“Now that they have defeated Lady Sigyn’s division, the Horn Clan army will surely continue their momentum and press the attack,” the man went on. “And if they possess such a fearsome new weapon, then I regret to say our chance of victory against them is...”

“Shut up!” Hveðrungr lost his temper and cut off Narfi with an angry shout. Right now, his trusted general’s words were only grating to his ears.

He stood there for a while, struggling to suppress his anger, with deep, heaving breaths like the panting of some agitated wild beast.

At last, he seemed to regain some amount of composure, and replied in a strained voice, “I know! Of course I know that much!”

He clenched his mask-covered face in one hand as he spoke.

It was a difficult situation for him to accept, but right now, he couldn’t afford to lose himself to his emotions.

“...We’re retreating,” Hveðrungr said at last.

It was a bitter decision to make, after coming so far against the Horn Clan.

However, just as Narfi had said, the enemy’s mysterious new weapon was fearsome, having allowed them to eradicate a force of seven thousand Panther troops.

Hveðrungr’s detached division had only three thousand.

He still didn’t know the details of this “fire snakes” weapon, and on top of that, the enemy still had their wagon wall tactic, an ironclad defense against

cavalry like his.

While Hveðrungr did occasionally lose himself to his violent emotions concerning Yuuto, at his core, he was a calculating person who valued solid logic.

In the end, he wasn't reckless enough to press his luck in a situation like this.

Pshht.

As Yuuto rode with his forces towards Fólkvangr, the handheld transceiver next to him suddenly let out a telltale burst of static.

He raised it to his ear. "What is it, Kris? Is the Panther Clan up to something?"

Yuuto had tasked Kristina with continuing her reconnaissance, this time in the area around Fólkvangr.

She had complained a bit, saying, You shouldn't work a child so harshly. But sneaking in among the ranks of an army of such elite, horse-mounted fighters was hardly something any ordinary spy could do.

She was the Einherjar of Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds, able to make herself practically invisible. There was no one alive better suited to the task than her.

"Yes, Father," Kristina replied over the transceiver. "The Panther Clan forces have begun moving south. They likely aim to cross the Körmt River and retreat into Lightning Clan territory."

"So they're running. Well, that's what I expected." Yuuto leaned back against the rim of the wagon carriage.

Yuuto knew Hveðrungr — or rather, Loptr — as a man who was mild-mannered and spoke kindly, but who was very shrewd and calculating behind the scenes.

He just wasn't the type to learn the terrible news about losing an entire force, seven thousand of his men, and then put himself and the rest of his army into further danger.

"That makes this a complete, undisputed victory for us," Kristina said. "Impressive as always, Father."

“No, we’re not done yet,” Yuuto responded to the praise with a firm denial.

Up until this point, the Panther Clan army had boasted not only superior mobility as a whole, but also their ability to use their signature technique, the Parthian Shot, to kill their pursuers while retreating safely. For that reason, Yuuto had done no more than drive them off each time, keeping himself from pursuing them afterwards.

Perhaps there had been another factor: Deep down, Yuuto had wanted to avoid fighting the sworn older brother he had once respected so much. However, he could no longer afford the luxury of such feelings.

“If we go on letting them attack us whenever they want, they’ll wear us down,” Yuuto said. “This time, we’re taking the fight to them.”

ACT 2

“Seven days left until the next full moon...”

In the heart of Fólkvangr, Sessrúmnir Palace, the dawn found Linnea in her office, at the end of a night without sleep.

She was around fifteen years old, still a young girl, but she was also the patriarch of the Horn Clan, ruler of her nation and the head of the clan family formed by the bonds of the Oath of the Chalice.

And despite the inexperience her youth might suggest, she had true political and administrative skill, and was filled with a genuine love for her people. The citizens of Fólkvangr praised her as a truly great and benevolent ruler.

Her beautiful appearance was an additional factor in her popularity, but this morning found her with dark bags under her eyes, and less color in her countenance.

She clasped her hands together on the desk and frowned bitterly. “This is so pathetic,” she muttered to herself. “I’m so sick of my own lack of nerve.”

It had been a week since the Panther Clan had established their formation surrounding the city of Fólkvangr.

Almost all of her available men had already been sent to fight in the Battle of Körmt River, and so there were only five hundred or so regular troops left in the city.

That being said, Fólkvangr was a fortress city protected by high, thick walls, and she had the cooperation of many volunteer soldiers from among the people of the city. An enemy force of only three thousand wouldn’t be capable of doing any serious harm to them right away.

As for the weapon known as the “trebuchet” that had wrought such destruction against Horn Clan cities during the war half a year ago, there was no fear of it being constructed here, for the plains around Fólkvangr lacked the necessary lumber resources to build them.

The wheat harvest had just finished as well, meaning there was more than

enough food stockpiled to feed every citizen for three months.

In short, there was no need to worry about the city itself falling.

Yet despite that, Linnea found herself on edge, unable to get any sleep.

Siege warfare was fundamentally a long battle of waiting, a battle to wear down the enemy's mind. As much as she understood the problem, Linnea had still fallen into a vicious cycle, where the more she felt the pressure that she had to sleep, the more difficult it was for her to fall asleep.

"I'm such a mess; I could never face Big Brother like this," she muttered to herself.

Her sworn older brother was normally easygoing, and seemed somewhat unreliable, but when push came to shove, he displayed incredible grit and courageous spirit.

If he were here, he would surely be able to withstand this situation with no problem, humming all the while. Linnea couldn't help but compare herself to him, and then felt humbled and inferior.

"Well, if I may speak as a fellow woman, I would certainly agree that your face, as it is right now, is not something you would want to show Father."

"Huh?!" Linnea looked up, startled by the sudden voice. There shouldn't have been anyone else in the office right now.

Standing in front of her, as if she had appeared out of thin air, was a familiar young girl, who giggled and shot Linnea a boastful grin.

"Kristina?!" Linnea cried.

Linnea had met this girl many times now, in both Gimlé and Iárnviðr. She was the daughter by birth of Botvid, the Claw Clan patriarch, and had become a direct subordinate of Yuuto, serving as the head of his spies.

"How did you get in here?! The city is completely surrounded by the Panther..."

"Oh, that has already been taken care of. I am sure you will get a report about it any second now."

As if on cue, a palace guard ran into the office from his nearby post to hurriedly deliver the news. “Lady Patriarch! The Panther Clan has begun to retreat!”

Linnea found herself letting out a sigh.

It was a little sad that another clan’s spy had just brought her an update more quickly than her own messengers.

Bringing a report from the lookouts on Fólkvangr’s outer walls to Linnea in her office required passing it to multiple intermediaries along the way.

That was because allowing a low-ranked member of the clan to simply barge in to see the patriarch on a whim would be disrespectful, and possibly reflect poorly on the dignity of the position.

Linnea understood that these sorts of ceremonial methods were part of the reason that high offices maintained their symbolic power, but when faced with a wartime situation in which every moment counted, she could see how problematic it was that her messages were arriving so slowly.

There was some room for improvement in that system, but for now, Linnea put it aside and focused on the importance of the report’s details.

“Why are they retreating? Tell me what happened.”

“Yes, ma’am. While the details are still unclear as to why, what we know for certain is that the Panther Clan forces surrounding the city have broken off and started moving south.”

“It’s because the main force of seven thousand Panther Clan troops was wiped out,” Kristina put in. “I am sure, at this point, they realized they stood no chance of winning.”

“Seven thousand... wiped out?!” Linnea could only parrot back Kristina’s words.

This was unbelievable, a total bolt from the blue.

Once the enemy had surrounded her city, Linnea had lost all contact with the three thousand Horn Clan troops she’d sent off to the north shore of the Körmt River, and she hadn’t had any idea of what was happening to them.

She had been informed in advance that the Panther Clan was invading with ten thousand troops, and the detached force surrounding Fólkvangr was about three thousand, so she had assumed that her army was still engaged in battle with the main enemy body of seven thousand. She had, of course, been worried for them.

Linnea had assumed that the eradication of the enemy meant her own troops were safe, at least for now, and allowed herself to feel a sense of relief.

But this...

If that huge force of seven thousand had somehow been forced to retreat, that would be one thing, but wiped out? It was completely beyond the bounds of common sense...

“It can’t be!” A jolt ran through Linnea’s mind, something akin to a flash of inspiration. Her brain, clouded from her long lack of sleep, began racing frantically.

She knew of someone, someone who always seemed to do things outside the bounds of common sense with ease, who performed the impossible.

And there was another vital clue.

When Kristina had entered the room, she had said, “I would certainly agree that your face, as it is right now, is not something you would want to show Father.”

“Big Brother has returned, hasn’t he?!” Linnea slammed her hands against the desk as she stood up with a start.

She phrased it as a question, but her voice betrayed that she was already mostly certain of the answer.

Of course, she had already gotten word of Yuuto’s plan to return to Yggdrasil, knowing that it was supposed to happen on the night of the next full moon at the very earliest.

But, again, he was someone who made a habit of breaking the rules of common sense. He must have done something to bend the rules in his favor.

“Yes,” Kristina replied with a firm nod, and also a genuinely happy smile that

was a little rare for her.

“Ah...!” Linnea gasped, and felt an intense heat welling up in her chest.

The heat spread to her eyes in an instant, and she burst out in tears.

“Ah, ahhh... I s-see! So B-Big Brother, he... he came back!”

Linnea was barely able to form the words through her sobbing.

Crying in front of other people like this was a display of vulnerability and weakness, something that a patriarch should never do.

However, the tears just kept coming, and she couldn’t do anything to stop them.

“Oh, honestly, won’t sobbing like that only make your face look even worse?” Kristina asked.

“S-shut up! Ngh... B-Big Brother, is he in good health?” Linnea added, sniffling, but with her voice slightly more under control.

“Yes, he is quite well. In fact, I would say he has only grown stronger and more imposing than he was before.”

“...I see!” A smile broke across Linnea’s face like a flower blooming in the sun, and she nodded happily to herself several times.

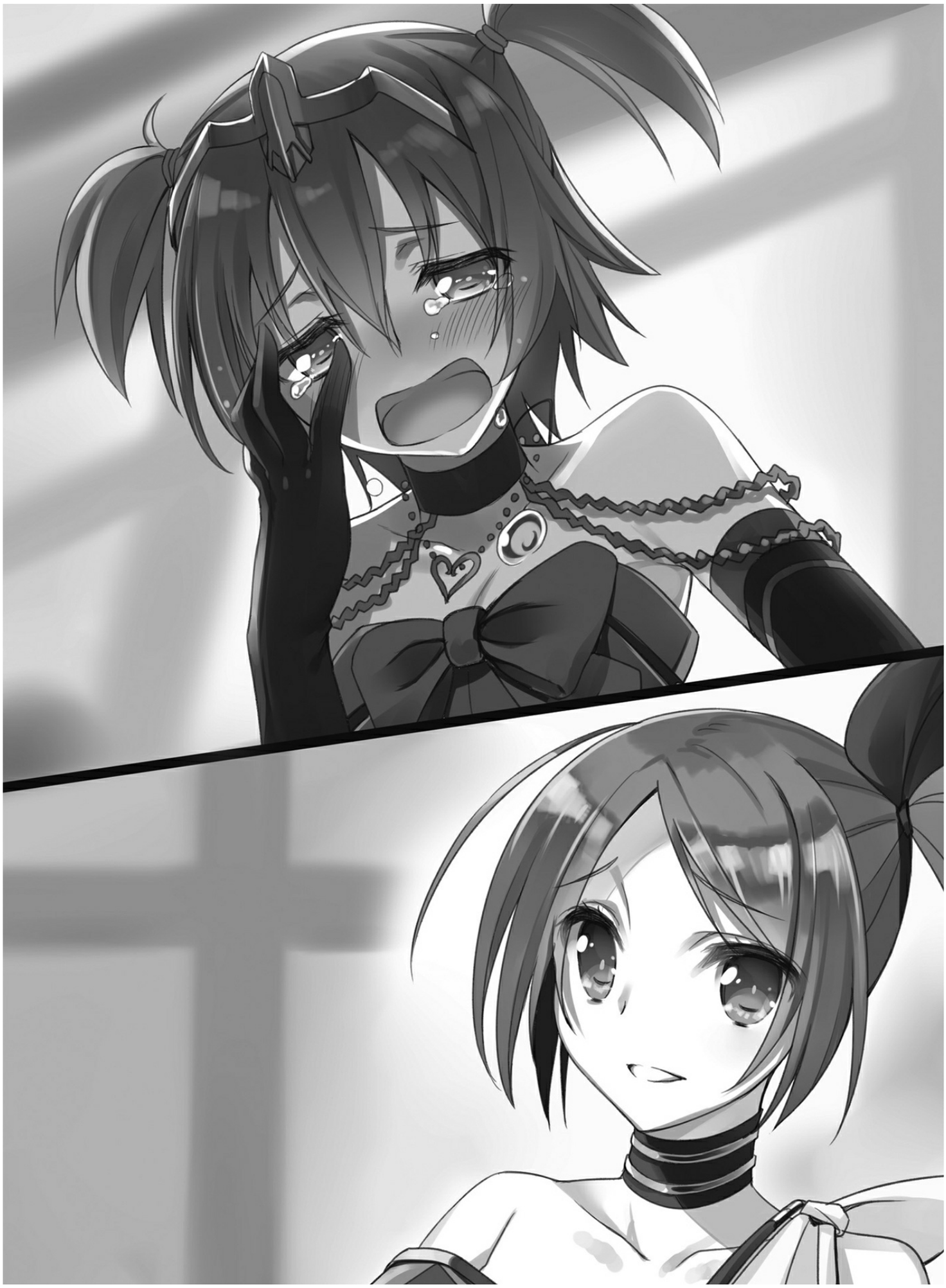
It would be a lie to say that there hadn’t been some part of her, deep down, that suspected that Yuuto had actually died, whispering those doubts to her mind in her weakest moments.

Of course, she had always stubbornly denied those doubts, but she had been constantly, constantly worried for him regardless.

If he was not only alive but well, then there could be no more joyous news for her.

“I’m glad. I’m so, so glad.” Once again, huge tears began to rain from Linnea’s eyes.

This time, Kristina did not make any teasing remarks.



“Must you return directly home, Uncle?” Haugspori pleaded. “Could you perhaps not come to our city first, even for just a little bit? Princess... that is, Lady Linnea has been so worried for you, and I’m sure she would be overjoyed to see you.”

Yuuto gave a wry smile at the man’s attempts to plead with him, but he shook his head slowly. “Hey, I’d love to see her again, too. But I left Iárnviðr immediately after I got back to this world, without giving anyone there the time of day. I need to get back and greet my people properly, as soon as possible.”

Yuuto had made the decision to go on a campaign against the whole Panther Clan, and that was all well and good, but if he set out against them now, without the proper preparations, he could easily see them turning the tables on him.

That being the case, he definitely needed to return to Iárnviðr first.

Besides, there were many people waiting longingly in Iárnviðr for Yuuto’s return.

Yuuto cared for Linnea as his sworn younger sister, and he had meant it when he said that he wanted to see her, but she was of another clan.

As difficult as it was at times, placing his own immediate clan family first was one of the necessary aspects of his position.

Haugspori seemed to sense Yuuto’s firm resolve on the matter, for he sighed deeply and seemed to back off. “I see. That is a shame.”

“Sorry, man. But I’ll be sure to invite her to Iárnviðr in the near future. Please tell her that I look forward to spending some real time talking with her then.”

“Yes, sir. I will make absolutely sure to tell her so.”

“All right, then. Be seeing you.” Yuuto casually waved a hand goodbye.

Felicia, who was sharing a saddle with him, took the cue and turned their horse around to depart.

“Sir, once again, let me thank you for saving the Horn Clan!” Haugspori shouted after them. “I was able to see up close for myself the command skills of a real-life god of war, and I shall carry that memory with pride for the rest of my

days! Please, take care on the roads home!”

His voice was excited, and he held a clenched fist to his chest, as if he were even now looking back on his memories.

Haugspori wasn’t a very serious man, and so this manner was a bit rare for him.

Perhaps that showed just how striking an impression the previous battle had left in him.

After Yuuto and Felicia had been on the road for a little bit, she spoke up.

“It looks like even Haugspori has come to admire you deeply, Big Brother.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure his image of me would be shattered if he knew I can’t even ride a horse,” Yuuto said, and gave a short, self-derisive chuckle.

Yuuto still wasn’t capable of riding a horse on his own, and so he was sharing a horse with Felicia, which she controlled.

It felt about as far as one could get from the image of a dignified commander.

However, Felicia seemed to have quite a different opinion. “Oh, that is hardly the case! Such a trivial thing would hardly make any difference at this point, I should think. Why, no one other than you could possibly have managed such a feat as completely wiping out a force of seven thousand expert fighters.”

“That was pretty much entirely thanks to the firecrackers, though.”

“You are far too modest, Big Brother. After all, was it not you who brought those items here with you?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like I invented, or even made them. And besides... if I’d only had the resolve to do this earlier, I wouldn’t have needed to bring any with me at all.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean the gunpowder... that’s what we call it where I come from, the stuff inside the firecrackers that causes the explosion. You see, I already know what you need in order to make it, and even secured the raw materials about a year ago.” Yuuto frowned. “But I’ve never had it mixed and used to make weapons. I

couldn’t go through with it,” he finished bitterly.

To Yuuto’s mind, the word “gunpowder” immediately brought to mind images of firearms.

He already knew that Yggdrasil was a place on Earth, sometime in the distant past. That was exactly why he had been so hesitant: He was resistant to the idea of introducing such terrible weapons even earlier in his world’s history.

If he was planning to leave this era behind one day, would he be all right with leaving behind the terrible legacy of having introduced gun-based warfare?

Those thoughts were what had made him hesitate.

Considering that he had already introduced multiple history-changing future technologies into this world, perhaps that reasoning might have seemed a little hypocritical. But even so, gunpowder was one of the last lines he had been unwilling to cross.

“If I’d just given Ingrid orders to manufacture gunpowder earlier on, we wouldn’t have gotten into this sort of situation to begin with,” Yuuto continued.

Once he’d come to the final decision that he and Mitsuki would both go to Yggdrasil for good, he had immediately given Ingrid the order to begin production. But even for a genius craftsman like Ingrid, just one month wasn’t going to be enough to nail down the production and manufacture of both gunpowder itself and the weapons that would use it.

The result of that delay was that the Wolf Clan had faced the greatest threat to its safety since Yuuto had first taken power. They had lost a great many precious lives in that struggle, including Olof, Gimlé’s governor and fourth-ranked officer in the clan.

And it was all because Yuuto had hesitated to use gunpowder. Because he had lacked resolve.

His regret was immeasurable.

“Big Brother, you are too hard on yourself,” Felicia said. “It is our fault we found ourselves in such a crisis, because we lacked the strength to protect ourselves. And because of that, we even had to summon you back to this world

to save us...”

“Hey. Don’t be stupid.” Yuuto gave Felicia a light chop on the back of her head with one hand. “I wanted to come back to this world. Sure, part of that was because you all were in danger, but it was also because I wanted to be with you all again. ...Oh, that reminds me. There was something I wanted to say to you specifically, once I got back.”

“To me?” Felicia tilted her head slightly.

Yuuto had been able to communicate with Felicia using his smartphone, even during the time that he was in the modern world.

Felicia seemed to be puzzled about what exactly he would have to say that had needed to wait until now, of all times. It seemed like she hadn’t any clue what it could be.

Yuuto couldn’t help but find that a little humorous, and he grinned. Then, he leaned forward and laid his forehead against Felicia’s back.

“Felicia, thank you for bringing me to this world. I’m grateful to you, from the bottom of my heart.”

“...Huh?” For a moment, Felicia seemed dumbstruck, as if she didn’t understand the words she’d heard, but she soon grasped their real meaning. Tears welled up in her eyes, then began to fall.

Yuuto usually had a tendency to panic at the sight of a girl crying, but Felicia was someone who had been by his side for three years now. He had fully expected this reaction.

And so, Yuuto placed a hand gently on her head, and kept speaking. “It’s been something that’s been hurting you all this time, right? Listen, you don’t have anything to feel guilty about anymore, okay?”

“...Okay! Th-thank you, thank you very much...!”

“Hey, I’m the one thanking you, here.”

“Right...”

For a while afterwards, until Felicia settled down and her tears stopped, Yuuto continued to gently stroke her head in silence.

“Oh, the water’s going to come in through there, so please open that part up!” Mitsuki called.

“Yes, ma’am!” The workers gave hearty, full-throated replies to her directions.

Thanks to the power of people working in numbers, the courtyard garden had been plucked clean of all of the weeds which had once overgrown it, leaving it looking remarkably different.

Now, in an area about the size of a large pond, ten or so laborers were working as one to turn up the soil and pack it into banks, surrounding it on four sides.

“Ohh...” Mitsuki heard a man’s voice from behind her, seemingly impressed at the work.

She turned around to see a tough-looking bear of a man standing there, watching the process.

It was Jörgen, the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command.

Mitsuki had come to learn that he was the type of man who was scary-looking on the outside, but once you got to know him, he was pretty kind-mannered and good at looking out for others.

So that was why, upon seeing him, Mitsuki immediately smiled and greeted him cheerfully.

“Oh, Jörgen, hello! How about that scare we had yesterday, huh?”

“Yes, indeed,” Jörgen replied. “That blasted Ingrid, she really gave me a shock.” He shook his head and sighed.

The two of them were referring to the events of the day before, when a loud explosion had interrupted their conversation.

At first there had been worries that it was an enemy attack, or that a part of the palace structure had collapsed. The palace grounds were in a panic for a bit, only for it to turn out to have been nothing more than a failed experiment by one of their own. It had been one hell of a false alarm.

“So, how are things going with your project here?” Jörgen asked.

“Oh, it’s going really well. Thanks to you providing me with so many great workers to help, it’s coming along really fast! Thank you very much.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. I am just happy that I can be of help to you.”

“You really have been a big help. By the way, were you here to ask me about something, perhaps?”

“Ha ha ha, nothing major, really,” he said. “As the person who gave you these men, I just wanted to come by to check and make sure they were doing proper work, and get in a nice walk while I was at it.”

“Everyone’s doing a great job! They’re working really, really hard!” Mitsuki leaned forward and clenched both fists in front of her to emphasize the point, almost frantically.

All of the people working for her right now were lower-ranking members of Jörgen’s faction of the clan. If he gained a good opinion of them here, it might bode well for their future prospects in the clan.

This project was already taking shape within just a single day, and that was all thanks to how dedicated and diligently these men had worked, so Mitsuki wanted to do right by them, as best she could.

Seeing that intense response from Mitsuki, Jörgen’s eyes widened, and then he smiled warmly at her. “Is that so? That’s wonderful to hear. It sounds like everything is well.”

“It is!” Mitsuki placed a hand on her chest and sighed in relief. If Jörgen was smiling, then that meant he didn’t have a bad opinion of the workers.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Jörgen said offhandedly, gazing at the worked earth. “I wanted to ask you yesterday, but never got the chance. What exactly are you making here?”

“It’s a paddy field,” Mitsuki said.

“A ‘paddy field,’ is it?” Jörgen replied, then paused for a second. “Hm... I see, so you plan to create a pool of water to play in, then?”

Jörgen’s response was so surprising that Mitsuki couldn’t help but stare at him round-eyed for a moment. “Huh?”

She then burst out in waves of laughter.

“Pfft! Ahahaha! Jörgen, you always have such a stern-looking face, but you’re actually quite the joker, aren’t you?”

“A joker?” Jörgen repeated. “I assure you that I was being entirely serious, but I gather I must have been a great deal off the mark.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed like that.” Mitsuki hurriedly bowed her head deeply in apology.

She realized what had happened. She had let herself forget the fact that this was the world of Yggdrasil. On the whole, Yggdrasil did not receive a particularly substantial amount of rainfall. It was hardly the type of place well-suited for rice farming. And so, it was understandable that Jörgen didn’t know what a paddy field was.

Mitsuki also understood why he might have come up with an idea that it was a pool of water to play in.

She couldn’t speak the language of Yggdrasil, and she covered for that by using galdr song magic. The spell known as “Connections” made conversation possible between two people speaking different languages.

It was a very convenient spell, but it worked by transmitting the image held in the speaker’s mind corresponding to the words they were saying.

When Mitsuki had said “paddy field” a moment ago, the image in her mind had been of a paddy freshly plowed and flooded, before the rice plants had been planted and grown.

If someone with no relevant knowledge were to see that image, then it would certainly make sense that they might interpret it as a pool for recreation. Or rather, that might well be the only reasonable conclusion to make.

It really brought home the feeling to Mitsuki that this place was quite different from Japan in many ways.

“Please don’t worry about it,” Jörgen said. “Living in an unfamiliar land must be trying at times. If my remark was able to make you laugh, then it was well worth making.”

Jörgen's words seemed to be from the heart, without any irony.

This man was indeed very different from what his tough exterior suggested: he was a caring and thoughtful person. Mitsuki felt like she could understand why Yuuto had entrusted him with the position of second-in-command.

"Now then," Jörgen continued, "if I may take us back to the original topic, what exactly is this going to be used for?"

"Oh, um, it's used to grow 'rice,'" Mitsuki answered. "Yuu-kun is Japanese, after all, so I thought maybe he'd want to eat rice. I mean, I feel like eating it too sometimes."

"Ahh, now that you mention it, that was something Father complained about from time to time," Jörgen said. "He'd mutter things like, 'I wanna eat rice so bad...!'"

Mitsuki nodded. "Yes, and when he came back to Japan, all he could talk about was how delicious it was."

In fact, Yuuto had been so emotionally moved by a rice ball from a convenience store that it had been a little shocking for her.

It was often said that rice was part of the soul of the Japanese people, but perhaps that actually wasn't too far off.

"I see, and so that is why you wanted this built," Jörgen said.

"Right. I'd also like to find a way to make miso soup and soy sauce. After all, I'm the only one who knows the flavors of Yuu-kun's homeland. If I want him to taste them, then it's up to me to make it happen." Mitsuki punctuated her statement by pounding a fist to her chest.

Yuuto was going to carry on as patriarch, a ruler who must shoulder the burden of the lives and futures of so many people. That was surely going to be very hard on him.

Food was the foundation for everything else in life. If you could eat delicious food, that would give you strength.

"Bwa hah hah hah!" Jörgen let out a big, hearty laugh, then nodded with satisfaction. "Father is surely the happiest man in all of Yggdrasil, to be blessed

with such a generous and devoted wife. Why, I'd even wish to trade my own wife for you!"

"Oh really, now? You do realize that if you say things like that, your wife is going to kill you? And I think my own husband wouldn't like hearing that, either." Mitsuki chuckled.

"Ahh, now, that's far too frightening for me. I'll give up on such talk right away, then." Jörgen gave an affected shrug.

It was evident that the two of them had become fully comfortable and open with each other.

At that point, a soldier ran onto the scene, shouting. "Second-in-Command! Second-in-Command, sir! Oh, and my Lady is here, as well. It's good that I should find you both together."

Since Jörgen was out of his office, the man must have come searching for him.

"What is it?" Jörgen asked.

The soldier caught his breath before continuing. "Just now, we received a messenger pigeon from Fólkvangr. Father completely destroyed the main army of seven thousand soldiers of the Panther Clan who were camped along the Körmt River! He captured three thousand of them alive as prisoners!"

"Ohhh!! Just as expected of Father!" Jörgen exclaimed with a sigh of admiration.

He was clearly joyful at the news, and without the slightest trace of doubt that it was all true. He clearly believed it only a matter of course that Yuuto could accomplish such a feat.

It gave Mitsuki a little glimpse at just how highly Yuuto was thought of in this world.

The soldier continued. "There's more: As a result of that victory, the force of three thousand Panther Clan soldiers who had been surrounding Fólkvangr began retreating."

"Oh-ho, then that means the remaining threat to the Wolf Clan's safety has been taken care of at last." Jörgen took a deep breath and let out a long, long

exhale in relief.

He was the one to whom it had fallen to lead the Wolf Clan as its commander-in-chief while Yuuto was absent. The pressure from that responsibility must have been weighing heavily on him.

“Er, then, does that mean Yuu-kun is safe, and he’s coming back to Iárnviðr?” Mitsuki asked.

“Yes,” Jörgen replied. “Of course he is. After all, Father is the one and only true lord of Iárnviðr.”

“Oh, okay. Thank goodness...” Mitsuki placed a hand to her chest and sighed in relief.

After three long years apart, she had finally been reunited with her childhood friend, only to be separated from him by the barriers of time and space once more. And, when she had finally managed to overcome those, the battlefield had taken him away from her again.

Not only that, he had left the city in a great hurry, which meant that the war situation had been really bad.

Unlike Jörgen, Mitsuki didn’t know anything about the Yuuto of Yggdrasil, except through bits of hearsay and secondhand tales. At times she had seen things which gave her a little glimpse, but for the most part, the image of him within her was of her childhood friend, a “perfectly normal boy.” So, she had been worried sick about him.

“Then that takes care of one of my biggest worries, I guess,” she said. “But...”

Mitsuki was now left all the more concerned with one of her other biggest worries:

The absence of the girl who had provided the guidance and contributed enormous effort to enable Yuuto’s return, and who looked just like Mitsuki in appearance: Sigrdrífa, the Holy Ásgarðr Empire’s þjóðann, or “divine empress.”

She and Mitsuki shared a mysterious connection, allowing them to speak with one another in their dreams. But ever since the summoning ritual that brought Yuuto back, Mitsuki hadn’t been able to do that anymore.

During the ritual itself, Mitsuki had witnessed something peculiar happen to her: The right arm of her spirit form had dissolved like mist into thin air.

Mitsuki could only hope that she was all right.

Right now, that was really all she could do.

In the deep darkness of night, Hárbarth walked alone down a silent corridor.

His right eye was closed, and an old battle scar ran down the eyelid in a distinct vertical line. His face was creased with several layers of deep wrinkles, which spoke to his long and storied life, and his hair and the long beard on his chin were both completely white.

He was at least in his seventies, perhaps even his eighties, but his back was completely straight, and he walked with vigor in his step.

This man was currently the patriarch of the Spear Clan, one of the ten most powerful nations of Yggdrasil, and at the same time, he held the position of high priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, placing a truly enormous amount of political power in his hands alone.

He was indeed the very image of the phrase: “thriving in old age.”

“This situation was a bit outside my expectations,” Hárbarth muttered to himself, and passed through a door at the back of the holy sanctuary, the hörgr, into the room beyond.

This was the sleeping quarters of the master of the hörgr — indeed, the very ruler of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. It was thus not a place even the high priest of the empire could be allowed to enter so casually, but the old man paid no mind to that.

That was because there was no one left in the imperial government who would dare to challenge him.

“Now then, what exactly to do about you...” the old man muttered as he looked down at the white-haired girl laying at his feet.

She was dressed in a luxurious, ornamented outfit.

Her white hair was different from Hárbarth’s, being her natural color instead of the faded product of age. Hers was beautifully silken and looked almost

translucent.

Her skin, too, was pure white like snow, and her features were quite lovely. Even her quiet, sleeping figure looked somehow divine.

Sigrdrífa, the divine empress.

Officially, she was the ruler of the empire, the rightful ruler over all of the lands of Yggdrasil. And she was Hárbarth's betrothed, scheduled to marry him in the autumn of this year.

His future wife had apparently succumbed to some sort of illness, and had been in a coma for the last three days.

She had been a sickly girl to begin with, and being laid up in bed hadn't been a rare occurrence for her, but not waking up for three days straight was certainly a first.

"After all it took to get here, it would be a problem if she went and died on me now," Hárbarth said to himself, frowning.

He might be marrying her, but there wasn't any love involved at all. It was nothing more than a political marriage, and to Hárbarth this girl was no more than something he needed to achieve his ambitions.

He could even replace her, after a fashion.

The essential factor that signified the þjóðann was the twin runes that were inherited through the imperial bloodline, borne by only one person at a time. Hárbarth had conducted extensive research into the lineage and history of the previous divine emperors and empresses, and had managed to discover the true nature of how the twin runes were passed on.

The first rule was that the current bearer of the runes could grant them directly to a successor. As long as their relationship by blood wasn't too distant, the exchange could take place without problems. This had been proven by the þjóðann of six generations ago.

The second rule regarded what happened when the current bearer of the twin runes left this world without picking a successor.

When that happened, the runes would appear in the youngest person out of

those who were closest in blood relation to the previous holder.

In other words, if the worst were to happen to this girl Rífa, the runes should logically pass to her younger cousin Tiwaz, the current head of House Jarl, one of the three great noble families of the empire.

Hárbarth had long since schemed his way into control of House Jarl at this point, so if Tiwaz were to take the throne as the next Divine Emperor, Hárbarth should have no problems moving in to manipulate the boy as his puppet.

He was supposed to be an extremely quiet, weak-willed boy, and would likely be much easier to control than Rífa, who was tomboyish and often rebelled against Hárbarth's will.

Indeed, there would be no immediate problems with that arrangement. However...

"If I'm going to have a vessel for my will, I would rather it be someone carrying my blood, after all."

Hárbarth had given birth to two sons and one daughter, but he had already lost both of his sons, one to illness and the other to war.

As for his remaining daughter, he had wedded her to the second-in-command of the Spear Clan, and she had blessed him with four grandchildren, but all of them were boys. Unfortunately, that left him with no female blood heir he could have married to Tiwaz.

If he was to create a future þjóðann carrying his bloodline, he needed Rífa.

That being said, if she remained in this comatose state, it was clear that she would soon waste away and perish.

As Hárbarth stood pondering his options, a voice interrupted, echoing in his head.

"Sir."

It was the voice of the imperial priest Alexis, who was Hárbarth's "eye" on the outside.

Alexis was an Einherjar of the rune Gnævar, Traveler of the Skies, which allowed him to converse instantly with someone else over any distance, by

making use of special paired mirrors.

“What is it?” Hárbarth asked, seeming to question the empty air.

“Sir, er, this is a little unpleasant to report, but the ‘Black One’ has returned to the Wolf Clan.”

“What?!” Hárbarth’s one good eye shot open wide.

Sigyn was known as the Witch of Miðgarðr, one of the three greatest users of seiðr magic spells in all the land of Yggdrasil.

It was hard to imagine there was anyone in this world who could have broken Sigyn’s spell, one which she had poured every ounce of her vitality and spirit into.

And yet, lying here right in front of Hárbarth was perhaps the only girl who could have.

“Is that the cause of this, perhaps?” he asked himself aloud.

If that were the case, quite a few things would make sense.

Rífa had secretly left the imperial capital to travel during the previous winter, and had stayed in Iárnviðr for a time. Hárbarth had heard that she’d become quite intimate friends with Yuuto.

Perhaps her connection with him had given her cause to lend her powers to aid in his return.

“Time after time, you never cease to cause me trouble.” Hárbarth spat the words out bitterly.

He had worked so hard to preserve the glory of the empire, making plans in secret, plans that had been succeeding, only for the divine empress herself to dash them to pieces.

At the time of her secret escape and travels, Hárbarth had decided to look the other way and let her go to allow her one last bout of selfishness before marriage. She was, in the worst case scenario, replaceable. But to now see that she had repaid his graciousness in such a way made his stomach churn with anger.

“Sir, what shall we do?”

“Hahhh...” His brow deeply furrowed, Hárbarth let out a great, long sigh.

The boy’s return was of course beyond his predictions, but even more surprising was what had happened with the Lightning and Panther Clans. Both clans were themselves counted among the ten greatest nations of Yggdrasil, and yet even after they had formed an alliance, both of them had been easily turned aside from their invasion campaign. It was an outcome he could never have imagined, even in his dreams.

It seemed that the “Black One” had amassed power far greater than even Hárbarth had imagined.

At last, he had become too powerful to control.

Apprehensive about what effect his actions might have on trust in the authority of the empire, until this point Hárbarth had sought to progress his plans to erase the boy in secret. But now it seemed there was no room left to care about keeping up appearances.

“Hmm, yes...” Hárbarth glanced down at the girl lying unconscious below him, and the corners of his mouth curled upwards in a sneer.

“I suppose the girl being this way is just what we need. Let us make full use of her.”

ACT 3

“Sieg Patriarch!!!”

As Yuuto’s group passed through the gates, the noise of the cheering slammed into them, reverberating to their very bones.

It was like a shockwave, a wall of sound, and it nearly knocked them off of their horses.

They worked to keep their postures upright as they moved onto the main street leading to the palace, which was packed to overflowing with people.

“Welcome home, Lord Patriarch!”

“I had faith you would come home to us!”

“As long as you are our ruler, the Wolf Clan is secure!”

“Oh, thank you, oh, thank the heavens above...”

Various individual cries reached their ears, and all the while the shouts of “Sieg Patriarch!” from all sides continued.

Looking down from horseback, there were people red-faced from shouting at the top of their lungs, people fully wet-faced with weeping, people waving Wolf Clan banners with fervor, people with their hands clasped together in prayer.

The one thing they all had in common was that they were awash with pure joy from the bottom of their hearts.

“It’s always been pretty crazy when I come back after a battle,” Yuuto said, “but today it’s on a whole new level.”

Still, his experience with this situation came into play. He made sure to suppress and conceal his unease, and played the part of a lord brimming with confidence to spare, smiling and waving at the crowd.

“Naturally,” Felicia said, “for we were pressed back by our enemies all that time. Surely, the citizens must have been terribly anxious about what would happen to them.”

She also maintained her smile and waved to the noisy crowd.

It was certainly true that, while the Wolf Clan's upper ranks had tried to control the flow of information, one could sooner stop a wildfire than a rumor, and bad news had spread via merchants and entertainers, as well as other travelers, across the land.

Ever since Yuuto had vanished at the Battle of Gashina, the Wolf Clan forces had been forced into a conflict that was very much not in their favor, and that knowledge had surely reached the people of Iárnviðr.

As soon as the palace had reported to the people that Yuuto had returned from his "land beyond the heavens," it was only a scant few days before reports came in of his victories, one after the other.

Considering that, the feverish jubilation of the citizens stood to reason.

As for Yuuto, he would have liked to run full speed back to the palace, but he needed to show the people their ruler was alive and well; confidently project to them that the Wolf Clan was going to be alright, washing away their remaining anxieties. That was his duty as the patriarch.

Yuuto's group slowly made their way up the main thoroughfare, responding to the cheers and waving to the crowd until, after some time, they reached the palace gates.

Standing there was a familiar girl, someone Yuuto had known from his earliest days.

"Welcome home, Yuu-kun," said Mitsuki.

The sight of her was so familiar to him, and yet, somehow, seeing her felt new and different.

He could already feel a great heat welling up within his chest.

"Hey, Mitsuki, I'm home. It's good to be back."

"Mm-hm! ♪"

It was a normal, simple greeting. But they were together, looking each other in the eyes, exchanging that greeting in person.

Right now, that was the greatest happiness in the world for him.

“Over the past two months, I know my absence put an extraordinary burden on you all,” Yuuto said. “I’m truly sorry about that. But, at the same time, I feel so proud. Well done, all of you! When the going was tough, you held out strong. Our victory this time was only possible because of how hard you fought. Tonight, we celebrate. Forget the formalities. Drink, shout, sing, and dance the night away!”

“Yeaaaah!!” The sanctuary hall at the top of the sacred tower Hliðskjálf erupted with noisy cheers.

As was usual for Yuuto’s return from a war campaign, it was a feast to celebrate the clan’s victory.

Yuuto was exhausted after having done so much traveling back and forth in such a short period of time, and honestly he wanted to get back to his private quarters and just sleep like a rock for the first time in two months. But that would be ignoring the important people in his clan gathered here today, who had spent every day waiting for his return, so he couldn’t do that.

He was pushing himself to ignore his fatigue and attend the party.

Yuuto raised his glass. “Now, then! Let us raise our cups to toast the Wolf Clan’s victory. Chee—”

“No, no, Father, that just won’t do at all,” Jörgen interjected hastily, the second-in-command’s chiding cutting Yuuto off just as he was about to finish his toast.

Huh? Yuuto thought to himself, and cast a glance out to the crowd gathered in the sanctuary hall, only to see that many of them were nodding in seeming agreement with Jörgen.

He wondered just what he might have done wrong, but he couldn’t come up with the answer.

After a moment, Jörgen added, “Then, by your leave, sir, I shall take care of this.”

He cleared his throat, stepped forward to stand next to Yuuto, and addressed the crowd.

“A toast! To the Wolf Clan’s victory, but first and foremost, to the return of our great and beloved hero and patriarch, Lord Suoh-Yuuto! ...Cheers!”

“Cheers!!” With that shout in unison, countless cups were raised high, and the sound of their clinking together rang throughout the hall.

Ah, I see, I forgot to celebrate my own homecoming. Yuuto finally understood. He had developed the habit of ignoring himself as an individual in order to prioritize his public role as lord of the clan, and so he hadn’t realized he’d left that part out.

I just had my big toast pulled right out from under me, he thought with a wry laugh, but at the same time, it made him really happy to realize that everyone was just that happy to see he’d returned.

To Yuuto, it really did feel like Iárnviðr, not Japan, had become his place to return to, his true home.

As Yuuto sat down in his seat after finishing his ceremonial role, Mitsuki leaned over to speak to him, giggling. “Good job out there! Tee hee, pretty cool speech you gave.”

Yuuto’s shoulders drooped. “Is that sarcasm? Jörgen had to take over the show at the end there.”

“At the end, yeah. But I think I got to see a little of what ‘Yuu-kun the patriarch’ looks like. I meant it when I said you looked cool. I... um. It made me fall in love with you all over again.”

“Oh, really? Okay. Well, Mitsuki, you should know you look pretty amazing in that outfit.”

“Eh, really? Eheheh! Thanks.” A light blush colored Mitsuki’s cheeks, and she giggled bashfully.

In Iárnviðr, clothes from Japan would stand out as far too strange. As the saying goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

Mitsuki was wearing a new outfit now, and if one had to pick an example for comparison, out of all the other girls, it most closely resembled the outfit that Ingrid wore.

It was the sort of clothing worn by most of the women of Yggdrasil, with a simple design similar to a tunic or poncho.

Naturally, since it was worn by the wife of the patriarch, the quality of the stitching and the materials used were of a level far above that of the standard cheap outfit. And in particular, the cardigan-like piece that adorned her shoulders was beautifully embroidered with gold thread.

Yuuto's words were not empty praise; he really did think she looked beautiful in it. Seeing the girl he loved in a new look for the first time like this was a treat for the eyes.

"Ohh, if you stare at me that much you're gonna make me embarrassed." Mitsuki giggled. "Oh, that's right! I remembered there was something I wanted to give you as a reward, Yuu-kun, for making it back home safe."

"A reward?"

"Yeah, hold on just a minute, okay?" With that, Mitsuki reached over and picked up an object that had been sitting next to her: a slightly long, oval-shaped, black metal container.

At first Yuuto thought it might be a Japanese-style lunch box, but then again, it was much too unrefined and plain-looking for a girl like Mitsuki.

As Yuuto stared at it wondering just what this could be, Mitsuki used a cloth to pull the lid off of the container.

"Whoaaa!!" Yuuto shouted with amazement the instant he saw what was inside, completely forgetting that he was in public.

The inside of the container was filled with countless tiny, white grains, from which fresh steam was rising.

It was rice. Any way you looked at it, it was rice.

"Mi-Mitsuki, y-you, this..."

"Yeah, I brought just a little bit of white rice here with me. You won't be able to eat it every day or anything, but you can at least on special occasions like today. Go on, eat up! ♥"

Mitsuki used a wooden spoon to scoop out some of the rice into a small,

white porcelain rice bowl that she must have also brought with her from Japan. She handed the bowl to Yuuto.

Yuuto instinctively gulped with anticipation.

“Thank you. Itadakimasu!” Yuuto was still holding the rice bowl in his left hand, so he performed the prayer a bit informally with just his right, and then he dug in straight away, shoveling the fresh, hot rice into his mouth with his chopsticks.

The taste spread throughout his mouth, the nostalgic taste that he’d always known since childhood.

“Ahhhhh! I knew it, a Japanese man’s gotta eat some of this stuff, or life just isn’t the same!” Yuuto exclaimed, talking with his mouth full and slapping his free arm against his thigh.

He was a machine, wolfing down a mouthful of rice, then grabbing some of the side dishes with his chopsticks, then scooping more rice into his mouth.

Yuuto’s bowl was empty in practically the blink of an eye, and it was only at this point that a question arose in his mind.

“But hey, how did you even cook this stuff? It’s not like you can use a rice cooker here.”

“I used the pot from a mess kit — you know, the ones used in outdoor camping. Before I came to this world, I secretly spent time learning how to cook rice over a campfire outside my house. I practiced a lot.”

“Whoa, thanks so much!”

“And also, right now I’ve got some of Jörgen’s subordinates helping me to set up a paddy field. I brought a few rice plant seedlings over with me, too.”

“Seriously?!” Yuuto couldn’t help but lean in towards Mitsuki with excitement.

“Yeah. It really is just a few, though. And the climate here doesn’t have a lot of rainfall, it seems, so I don’t think we’ll be able to grow anything major.”

“But I’d be grateful for even a little bit!”

This meant that, even if it was only every once in a while, Yuuto could look forward to eating rice from now on, as well.

But the surprises didn't stop there.

"And I also brought some kōji base with me too, so I'm going to try making soy sauce and miso at some point."

"Mitsuki! You're the best!!" Unable to hold himself back any more, Yuuto embraced her.

He was so happy, he thought he might tear up.

Mitsuki was great at cooking, after all. There was no doubt in Yuuto's mind that she would be able to recreate the beloved flavors of his old homeland for him here in this world, one after the other.

It was often said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and it was now that he realized just how wise and true that saying was.

At the very least, Yuuto felt like he could never again leave Mitsuki's side. She'd firmly grasped his stomach, and his heart.

"But if you were planning all of that, you could have told me while we were still both in Japan," Yuuto said.

"Hee hee, I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you definitely did that."

During their preparations in Japan, Yuuto had, for the most part, decided on a totally hands-off policy with regards to what Mitsuki decided to pack.

It was often said that women overbuy and overpack, and besides, there would surely be underwear and feminine products that she might not want a guy to see.

Yuuto himself had been totally focused on bringing things that would be useful for aiding the Wolf Clan in the future, and so even though he'd really wanted to eat rice, he had put those personal desires last.

Having resigned himself to never being able to taste rice again, that made it all the more joyous that he could savor the foods of his homeland here in

Yggdrasil after all.

This was just what he could expect from Mitsuki, who knew him better than anyone. Right now, she had given him the happiest gift he could ever receive.

“Nice to see you two getting along so well!” a sullen-sounding voice called down from above the two of them.

Looking up, Yuuto saw Ingrid, with a sullen-looking face to match her voice, glaring at him with her cheek puffed out.

He didn’t really understand. This was a happy occasion, so why did she look so upset?

“Yo, Ingrid, long time no see,” he said.

“Sure, right back at you.”

“What’s with you? You’re sure acting sour. Aren’t you even happy to see your old friend after two long months? I’m certainly happy to see you, at least.”

“W-w-well, yeah, I’m happy to see you, sure. It’s just damned hard to watch you making kissy eyes with another girl like this!”

“Hm? What was that? You’re mumbling. Speak up, I can’t...”

Mitsuki cut him off. “All right, Yuu-kun, you can’t torment a girl like that.”

“Ow! Ow-ow-ow!” Yuuto shouted in pain as Mitsuki suddenly grabbed his earlobe and yanked him downwards.

But Mitsuki didn’t seem to pay any attention to Yuuto, and instead spoke to Ingrid. “I meant what I said before. I really don’t mind, okay?”

“I don’t think I stand a chance,” Ingrid muttered. “Not against you.”

“Well, of course I’m not planning on giving up the position of number one.” Mitsuki gave a kind, almost motherly smile.

However, for some reason, when Yuuto saw that expression on her face, he felt a chill run down his spine.

“Ha ha, all right, then,” Ingrid said more contentedly. “I guess I’ll set my sights on being third or fourth.”

“Isn’t that a little modest?” Mitsuki asked.

“Ahaha! Well, to me it looks like the fight for second place is gonna be red-hot, you see.” Ingrid gave a wry grin and shrugged her shoulders.

Meanwhile, Yuuto didn’t have a clue what the two of them were talking about.

He felt like he was the only one being left out of the loop, and it bothered him. It sounded almost like they were talking about him, so he decided to ask...

“Uh? Just what are you two ta—aaauugh! Ow-ow-ow!!” He was forcefully driven back to crying in pain when Mitsuki pulled him down by the ear even stronger.

Mitsuki sighed, placing her free hand against her cheek. “Honestly, Yuu-kun, you really are clueless when it comes to this stuff.”

Even as she chided him, she didn’t let up one bit on the force pulling Yuuto’s ear.

“What do you mean, ‘this stuff’? ...Ohh! Wait, is this about that whole officially-recognized concubine stuff?!” At long last, Yuuto’s brain finally put the pieces together.

As he connected them, that suddenly gave him another realization. He glanced in Ingrid’s direction.

As his eyes met Ingrid’s, her face flushed beet red in an instant.

Yuuto was pretty ignorant when it came to male-female relationships, something he was well aware of. But even Yuuto wasn’t clueless enough to miss what this meant.

“Uh, s-so, does that mean, you, uh, you know?” Yuuto tried to ask her directly.

He made his phrasing very vague and indirect, as a safety measure. He couldn’t help but do that instinctively. To Yuuto, Ingrid was a good friend, and he didn’t want to destroy the relationship they had.

Ingrid hesitated for a moment, then seemed to gather her resolve, and answered him. “...Yeah, it does. Sorry, okay?!”

She did so while looking the other way, her face still red as a beet.

“O-oh,” Yuuto said. “N-no, I’m the one who’s at fault. I, uh, didn’t notice.”

“N-no, look, it’s fine. I know, it’s just a n-nuisance, for someone like me to...”

“N-no, it’s not a nuisance at all, it’s just, well, I have Mitsuki, and...”

“Yuu-kun, you really don’t have to worry about me on this, okay?” Mitsuki asked.

“No, but it’s not...”

“H-hey, I get that this isn’t fair to you, either, Yuuto, springing this on you all of a sudden,” Ingrid burst out. “S-so now that you know that that’s how it is, let’s just leave it at that for now! Oh, and by the way, I finished making the thing we discussed. S-see you later!”

After saying that last part quickly and without taking a breath, Ingrid ran off like the wind, leaving a whoosh! in her wake.

She was already a very bashful girl to begin with. She must have been unable to take the romance-tinged atmosphere any longer.

“Uhh, so... what am I supposed to do about this?” Yuuto ventured.

“I think you shouldn’t be asking me that question, don’t you?” Mitsuki asked.

“Y-yeah, you’re right.” A bit of cold sweat ran down Yuuto’s cheek.

It might be that he was supposed to chase after Ingrid in this situation, but with Mitsuki right there beside him, actually doing that would be more than a little difficult.

And he still hadn’t properly spoken to most of the guests at the party. As patriarch, it would be irresponsible for a central figure like him to run out of the celebration.

He felt really guilty about it, but he decided that the safest choice of action was to wait and patch things up with her later.



“Everyone, please listen!” After the party had been in full swing for a while, Yuuto stood up from his seat and raised his voice to call out to the guests.

With just those three words, the rowdy noise that filled the hörgr fell silent immediately, as if time had been stopped.

Yuuto waited until everyone’s eyes were gathered on him before opening his mouth again.

“Tonight’s celebration will be wrapping up soon, and to finish, there’s something I want to say to all of you.”

He spoke in a solemn tone. This was something he absolutely had to announce in public, one way he would draw a clear line between the past and the future.

Gathered in this hall were all of the Wolf Clan ranking officers and other major figures.

It was just the right opportunity to do this.

“As all of you already know, I’m not from this world,” Yuuto said. “I came here from the country of Japan, a place far, far away.”

This sounds ridiculous even to my own ears, Yuuto thought, but there wasn’t any chatter among the crowd gathered in the hörgr.

Even though all of them had been drinking, they all stood there listening to Yuuto with their serious and full attention.

“If I’m being honest with you, I spent most of the last three years wishing the whole time that I could go back to the world I came from,” Yuuto went on. “I didn’t come to Yggdrasil because I wanted to. And I didn’t become your patriarch because I wanted to. I was just pulled along by the course of events. It never happened by my own will.”

Sitting on the opposite side of him from Mitsuki, Felicia posed a question to Yuuto, smiling gently. “And now, it has?”

She was one of the people to whom he’d already given the answer.

She knew the answer, and was choosing to interject with the question at this

precise moment. As expected of his trusted adjutant, it accented his speech with perfect timing.

Yuuto nodded once, a sharp and willful light shining in his eyes.

“That’s right! Everything is different now. I have come here of my own free will! I’ve come here for good, to live and die alongside you all!”

“Yeaaaahhh!!” A storm of boisterous cheers erupted.

Looking around, Yuuto saw that even though Felicia had known this beforehand, she was crying while smiling.

Sigrún, too, had tears silently falling from her closed eyes.

Jörgen was tilting his head back to take a long draught from his cup. There were small tears visible in the corners of his eyes.

Even old Bruno, the chief of the clan elders, who had once been so opposed to Yuuto’s taking the throne, was looking on with a full-faced smile, and shaking his fists in the air excitedly.

Yuuto waited for everyone to settle back down, then began to speak again.

“During the two months I was gone, the lives of many members of our family were taken from us. As the father of my people, I cannot forgive this. Your enemies are mine, and my enemies are yours.”

Yuuto paused there, and softly closed his eyes.

He took a deep breath, and then opened his eyes wide, using his right hand to flourish the mantle hanging from his shoulders.

He summoned his spirit from within him, a commanding aura that welled up around him as he shouted, “And so, let it be known here and now, I declare that we shall subjugate the Panther Clan!”

“You were like a totally different person back there! It was a little bit scary!” Mitsuki said excitedly, staring into space in front of her as if re-picturing the scene from earlier.

The sun was already fully down, the party at a close, but the bomb Yuuto had dropped with his speech at the end had thrown the ritual hall into rowdy chaos.

Even now, Yuuto could hear bits of the voices of the people still up there, discussing the conquest of the Panther Clan with great fervor.

Despite wanting to, Yuuto hadn't had it in him to stay with everyone any later, so he'd quickly taken his leave.

Now he was walking together with Mitsuki down one of the palace hallways.

Sigrún was ahead of them, and Felicia was following behind them, so they were protected against any would-be assailants.

"It's best to just give in and go all the way when it comes to that sort of thing," Yuuto said. "Besides, it's not like any of it was untrue."

Indeed, though none of them were connected to Yuuto by blood, he did feel anger at having the lives of his sworn children and grandchildren taken. In that way, though his speech might have been a bit militant, it was also understandable why.

"Well, that 'giving in and going all the way' part is what's hard, though," Mitsuki said. "At least, for normal people."

"I don't know... it seems to me like you've done some going all the way yourself, though maybe in a different way than me."

"What, no, that's not truuue! I'm normal, totally normal!"

"What kind of joke is that, calling yourself normal?" Yuuto demanded.

"Hmph! You're the only person who would say that, Yuu-kun."

"I've heard everyone else saying you're a 'woman truly fit to be the wife of a lord,' you know."

Indeed, Yuuto had been honestly quite surprised to see how many people at the party were showing such clear respect towards Mitsuki in their interactions with her.

Of course, anyone would need to treat the wife of a patriarch with civility, at least on the surface. However, Yuuto had built up enough experience by this point to be able to tell when someone was only being polite and respectful just for show.

As far as Yuuto could see, everyone seemed to have genuine admiration for Mitsuki.

The fact that she was known to possess twin runes, that rarest of rare supernatural gifts, probably played some part in it, but it was still quite impressive for her to command so much respect after having been here for only a month.

Yuuto's reputation had dropped like a rock during his own first month in Yggdrasil, and he'd gone from being called the Child of Victory, Gleipsieg, to being called Sköll, Devourer of Blessings. Yuuto couldn't help but feel a little jealous at the difference.

"Father, Mother." Sigrún emerged from Felicia's room, then stood straight at attention and addressed Yuuto and Mitsuki. "I have finished checking your bedroom, as well as Felicia's. There were no intruders. Please be at ease, and have a good night's rest."

"Uh?" A dumbfounded sound escaped Yuuto's lips.

He felt like he'd just heard something off in what she'd said, something he shouldn't ignore.

"Now then, I shall take my leave." But before Yuuto could voice his suspicions, Sigrún bowed her head and walked away at a brisk pace.

Yuuto and Mitsuki stood there, a strange silence between them.

Yuuto couldn't let that go on forever. "The only two bedrooms past here are Felicia's and mine, actually. Where is yours, by the way?"

He pinned his last remaining hope on that question.

"Well, I'm your wife," said Mitsuki. "It's normal that we'd share a room and sleep together."

Yuuto had anticipated that response, but it still struck him speechless.

Sure, his bed was unnecessarily wide; a clan patriarch couldn't afford to have meager furnishings. It could fit not just two, but three people comfortably.

However, that definitely wasn't the issue here.

“Okay, look,” Yuuto said. “I’m a man, and you’re a woman. You get that, right?”

“Yuu-kun, what are you even saying? That’s why we could get married in the first place.”

“No, listen! Do you understand what it means for a man and a woman to share the same bed?!”

Yuuto was a young man in his teens, after all.

He was characterized by his iron-willed self-restraint, but if he were to share a bedroom with this girl he loved, even he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep himself off of her.

“I... I know that.” Mitsuki spoke haltingly while looking down, her face as red as an apple. “That’s... that’s why I came here with you.”

“Ah...!” As slow as Yuuto was in this area, even he was able to pick up on Mitsuki’s resolve.

True, the two of them were to be husband and wife from now on. There was nothing strange at all about the two of them sleeping together.

Yuuto was also prepared to take on the responsibility that entailed. He’d been ready for that ever since the moment he’d decided to bring her with him to this uncivilized land with no chance of returning to Japan.

But even so, Yuuto had constantly been telling himself that he needed to take things with her seriously, and so he’d thought he should try to keep things between them pure at least until they’d had their official wedding ceremony.

But now that Mitsuki had gone this far, shaming her by turning her down would in turn be the death of his honor as a man.

“You’re... really sure about this?” he said slowly.

“...Yes.” With a nod, Mitsuki squeezed Yuuto’s hand slightly.

And, in a tiny, barely-audible voice, she added, “I may be inexperienced, but please take good care of me, now and forevermore.”

Chirp chirp. Chirp chirp chirp.

Yuuto was awakened by the sound of chirping sparrows coming in through the sunlit window.

“Morning, huh...” he muttered, and sat up.

His upper body was naked.

With multiple days’ worth of travel fatigue, and then using up the last of his strength last night, he must have fallen asleep right afterward, in a state of blissful emptiness.

“Good morning, Yuu-kun.” A slightly embarrassed-sounding voice came from right beside him.

Yuuto turned and saw Mitsuki, using a blanket to cover everything up to the bottom half of her face, looking at him bashfully.

Seeing her brought it home all over again that this was real. So last night wasn’t just a dream.

“Hey, good morning,” he said. “So, uh... are you... all right?”

“So childbirth is...” Mitsuki began.

“Childbirth?!” Yuuto couldn’t keep from cutting her off with a shout, his voice cracking.

Of course, he couldn’t say it was completely unrelated to the conversation, but it was still so out of the blue to bring that up now, that of course he would be startled.

“Yeah, apparently childbirth is as bad as trying to pass a watermelon through one of your nostrils.”

“Um? Okay...” Yuuto nodded for her to continue, but he didn’t really grasp where she was going with this.

“Last night hurt about as much as an apple.”

“I am so, so sorry!!” Yuuto leapt up, and then knelt in apology with his head down, right there on the spot.

The experience had been nothing but pleasure for him, so naturally he was filled with guilt.

“Um, I’m sorry about that,” he said desperately.

“It still feels like there’s something in there.”

“Ughh... I really am sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. It’s more like, ‘Yuu-kun really was here.’ That sort of feeling. It hurts, but it also makes me kind of happy.”

“I... I see,” Yuuto stammered.

“So don’t apologize.” Smiling gently, Mitsuki reached a hand out and stroked Yuuto’s chin.

Her face looked so beautiful to him, so sweet and lovely, that he felt himself pulling towards her again...

A voice like a bell and a light knock at their door interrupted them. “Big Brother, Big Sister Mitsuki, is it all right if I come in now?”

In the blink of an eye, Yuuto and Mitsuki were pulled out of their own little world and back into reality.

“Hold on just a minute!” Yuuto shouted. “Mitsuki, clothes!”

“O-okay!”

The two of them hurriedly retrieved their scattered clothing from the night before and started to dress, but they were so flustered that they had a hard time of it.

By the time they were done and Yuuto opened the door to let Felicia into the room, both Yuuto and Mitsuki looked completely worn out.

Seeing this, Felicia let slip a little smile, but she quickly resumed her serious expression, and addressed them.

“While it pains me to have to come between the two of you right now, there is a mountain of work waiting to be done.”

Yuuto returned to his usual office desk for the first time in two months, to find it practically buried under stacks of paperwork.

And, sadly, it was indeed all paper. If it had been clay tablets, stacks of this size wouldn’t be an especially intimidating volume of work. It was plain to see

this wasn't going to get finished in a day, and that made it a little overwhelming.

"Well, all of that can wait for now," he sighed. "There's something else we have to deal with first."

"Regarding the subjugation of the Panther Clan, correct?" Felicia asked with a stiff expression.

The patriarch of the Panther Clan was a man called Hveðrungr, but his true name was Loptr, and he had once been the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan. He was also Felicia's biological older brother. It was surely complicated for her.

"Yeah." Yuuto nodded, and made his way with wide strides to the desk, where he sat down in his familiar chair.

That chair was one he'd had built by one of the Wolf Clan's best craftsmen, but frankly speaking, the cheap chair he'd used in the modern era was still more comfortable.

Even so, he'd used this one for two whole years. He was attached to it at this point. Just by sitting in it, Yuuto felt himself naturally able to switch himself over to the mindset of a clan patriarch.

"Okay," he began. "First, a written proclamation to the patriarchs of the clans under our sphere of protection, to press them into joining the campaign."

The Panther Clan might have lost seven thousand soldiers at Körmt River, but even conservative estimates put them as still having five thousand or so elite fighting cavalry at their disposal.

It didn't feel very secure for the Wolf Clan to go after them all on its own.

After the Wolf Clan's huge defeat at Gashina, all of their subsidiary clans except for the Horn Clan had stood silently on the sidelines, waiting to see which way the wind blew, as it were. But with Yuuto's return and with the string of recent victories, those clans should now be inclined to show their allegiance once again.

"Right. I shall prepare a clay tablet," Felicia said. She took a container from a

shelf nearby and opened it up.

Inside was a bunch of soft clay.

Even in modern Japan, there were many people who viewed documents written by hand as more authentic and valuable than those produced by typing on a computer. And in earlier decades, official forms couldn't be written with a ballpoint pen. Only writing with a fountain pen was recognized as valid.

Paper had been introduced to Yggdrasil, but less than two years ago. The previous customs still had their roots strongly in place, so for an official document, only a clay tablet would be seen as proper and authentic. And not just a sun-dried tablet, but one baked in a proper kiln, and sealed inside a second baked clay container.

"All right, just knead it like so, and..." Felicia took the soft tablet she had retrieved and, with quick motions, molded it into the proper rectangular shape and length.

"All right," Felicia said, speaking aloud as she wrote. "'Inform your lord patriarch. I, Wolf Clan patriarch Suoh-Yuuto, speak thus'..."

Felicia's stylus flowed smoothly as she inscribed the letters into the tablet. Her experience and familiarity with this work showed in how her hands moved with an incredible level of dexterity and skill.

She finished, and looked at Yuuto. "All right, the tablet is prepared. Please go ahead."

"Good. Let's see... 'One month from now, we of the Wolf Clan shall conduct a campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan. And so, I ask you all to send soldiers, as well.'"

"All right." Felicia inscribed the words, finishing with, "...'send soldiers, as well.' It is done. Is there more to add?"

"Hm, and also... right, in the message to Linnea, tell her to come to Iárnviðr right away. For everyone else, add on something like, 'You forsook your Chalice vows, and I choose to forgive you just this once. But let me make clear that it will not happen a second time.'"

As he dictated the final part, the corners of Yuuto's mouth turned up in a slightly roguish smile.

If one could see Yuuto's expression and know nothing else, it would surely seem typical of a young man his age. However, the content and meaning of his words were quite removed from the impression that smile alone would suggest.

Felicia's own expression stiffened.

"That is... quite the stern message," she remarked.

"According to Machiavelli's The Prince, what a great ruler should fear most of all is being looked down on by others. A lack of respect. It's best for him to be feared, but not enough so that he's despised. Think about the kind of guy who would slack off because he's got a kind boss. That same guy would definitely do what he was told if someone who was scary when they were mad gave him an order, right?"

"...Yes, you are right. And such an argument is quite persuasive when it comes from someone who is truly terrifying when angry."

"Excuse me? You wouldn't be talking about me, would you?" Yuuto shot back, as if truly upset by her words.

That elicited an amused laugh from Felicia. "I always find myself thinking, Big Brother, that you do not see yourself for what you are."

"No, no, I'm just playing my role. Acting! You should know that by now."

"Big Brother, if what you do is acting, then that would make you a deceiver who puts even Botvid to shame."

"...Heh. You talk back now, I see." Yuuto gave a wry chuckle, and a small sigh.

It felt like Felicia wasn't being reserved at all with him, which was pretty rare by her standards.

Until now, Felicia had always put a small bit of emotional distance between herself and Yuuto, perhaps because of the feelings of guilt she had harbored for initially summoning him to Yggdrasil.

But now that those feelings were resolved, her naturally playful side had become more prominent. That was a good development.

“Um...? What is it, Big Brother?” Felicia asked. “Why are you staring at my face and grinning, all of a sudden?”

“Hm? Oh, just thinking to myself again about what a beauty you are,” Yuuto said, having decided to throw a few playful remarks back at her.

“If you say things like that to me, I’ll tell Big Sister Mitsuki on you.”

“That’s fine. As it happens, my wife’s pretty broad-minded.”

“Oh, my! I’m jealous. ...Actually, I really am jealous.”

“Huh?”

Before Yuuto could react, his head had been pulled into an embrace.

The feeling of Felicia’s soft, voluptuous body assaulted his senses.

“Wait, Felicia?!”

“I am happy for you and Lady Mitsuki, and I wish you blessings from the bottom of my heart, but I do feel some... no, quite a bit... of ‘frustration,’ you know? Even I get a little jealous, seeing the two of you that happy together.”

As if to symbolize the strength of her feelings, Felicia’s arms squeezed Yuuto more tightly against her.

“Uhh... umm...” Yuuto was lost for any kind of coherent response.

Felicia giggled, her voice trickling down to Yuuto’s ears. “Tee hee. Just a little joke.”

“It sure didn’t sound like a joke to me!”

“Who can say? Well, in any case, Big Brother, I will relinquish to Lady Mitsuki the privilege of standing at your side in public. But I hope you understand that the right to be at your side on the battlefield, and in this office, is something I will never give up.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Yuuto replied, smiling. “And I’m not planning on ever having anyone other than you as my adjutant. Speaking of which, I have something I need to ask your advice on, as my most trusted confidant.”

He placed his elbows on the desk, his hands folded together. His words implied it was something important. And his eyes were completely serious.

Felicia resumed her proper position standing at his side, and replied, “Please, go ahead.”

“I’ve determined that we need to strengthen the connections, the cooperation between us and the subsidiary clans, a bit more. What’s happening now is a good example of that. It’s still just an idea in my head, but...”

Over the course of writing out a number of important documents (through dictation to Felicia, who was the one who actually wrote them), calling people into his office, and giving them orders, the morning flew by in no time.

Despite the fact that Yuuto was working as diligently as he ever had, the mountain of papers on his desk hadn’t gotten smaller at all. It was a bit disheartening.

Still, in a way, there was no helping it.

All of the work Yuuto had done through the morning was related to preparations for the campaign to take down the Panther Clan, and the stacks of documents still waiting in front of him had absolutely nothing to do with that.

“Well, at least this puts our anti-Panther-Clan strategies in order for the time being,” he sighed. “There’s still the problem of the Lightning Clan, though.”

Leaning his weight against the back of his chair, Yuuto let out a long exhale and looked up, staring into the empty space above him.

Half a year ago, the Wolf Clan army had used the “wagon wall” tactic to beat the Panther Clan forces at the Battle of Náströnd. But while preparing to pursue their retreating foe, they’d learned that the Lightning Clan seemed to be getting its own army ready to move, putting the Wolf Clan in a situation where they had no choice but to pull back.

If they were to send their full force after the Panther Clan this time around, there was definitely a high chance that the Lightning Clan would seize that opening to invade.

That said, if they devoted too many troops to countering the Lightning Clan, they’d run short on force to use in the campaign against the Panther Clan.

Probably the least risky way to do things was for Yuuto to put himself in Gimlé

to keep Steinþórr in check, while leaving command of the invasion force to either Sigrún or Skáviðr... but, in the end, Yuuto also felt like he wanted to settle things with his sworn brother personally.

“Going through the prisoners we captured from the Panther Clan and hiring some of them as mercenaries to fight against the Lightning Clan doesn’t seem like a bad idea,” he said.

They couldn’t be brought along to subjugate the Panther Clan, since it would be trouble if they switched sides again, but using them against the Lightning Clan was a realistic enough choice.

Nomadic clans tended to have people driven by rationalist principles, and there had been many cases of the agriculturally settled clans hiring people from nomadic clans as mercenaries to use against each other.

There were surely many who would agree to be hired, as long as the rewards were satisfactory enough.

Their prisoners left nothing to be desired in terms of strength and skill on the field, but the real unknown factor was in just how many of them would actually swear their loyalty to the Wolf Clan.

Muttering to himself, Yuuto stood up and walked over to one wall of the room, which was completely covered by maps. “While we’re attacking the Panther Clan, if the Hoof Clan or the Wind Clan were to take up the Lightning Clan’s attention, that would make things a lot easier...”

The Lightning Clan shared borders with the Hoof Clan and the Wolf Clan on its north side, as well as the Wind Clan to the south.

To the west was the sea, and its eastern side was bordered by the Þrúðvangr Mountains, which prevented enemy invasions from that direction.

Thus, though the Lightning Clan was expansive in terms of the total territory it controlled, it could focus its military power just in the north and south. The geography made it easy for them to invade others, and also easy to protect themselves.

And unfortunately, things weren’t so optimistic regarding the Hoof and Wind Clans. Both of them had once been counted among the ten most powerful

nations in the land, but the Hoof Clan had recently had over half of its territory ripped away by the Panther Clan.

And as for the Wind Clan, Yuuto knew it had been forced into a rather poor situation due to an invasion by its neighbor further to the south, the Flame Clan, and its strength had weakened considerably.

It didn't seem like those two clans would be strong enough to match the Lightning Clan.

"Oh, there was something I forgot to tell you about, Big Brother," Felicia said. "A month ago, the Wind Clan was completely overrun and destroyed by the Flame Clan's invasion."

"What?!" Yuuto spun around to face her.

The most recent thing he had heard was that the Flame Clan and Wind Clan were at war, and that the Flame Clan had the advantage in the conflict. He hadn't heard a single thing about the Wind Clan's destruction.

However, in a way, this was one more thing that couldn't be helped.

During Yuuto's time in Japan, his only option for communicating with Yggdrasil had been with Felicia, using the smartphone he'd left behind.

The solar battery it used could only power it for about thirty minutes each day at most, and with the constant danger his clan was in, of course the vast majority of that communication had necessarily been discussing the Panther and Lightning Clans.

Still, to think that such a huge incident had occurred unbeknownst to him...

It was a complete shock.

"We ourselves only learned of the fact about a week ago," Felicia said. "We checked for confirmation with a number of traveling merchants who came here from the south, so we can assume it's true."

"I see." Yuuto put a hand to his mouth, and silently pondered for a moment.

One of the ten great nations of Yggdrasil, the Flame Clan, had just crushed an equally powerful neighbor and taken all of its territory. That meant it was now a clan with national strength higher than the Wolf Clan's. Perhaps it was now

even among the strongest three nations in the realm.

One could hardly ask for a better opponent for the peerless warrior Steinþórr.

“All right, let’s send an envoy to the Flame Clan, with the message that I would most definitely like to swear the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with their patriarch, at an even fifty-fifty split,” Yuuto said. “Thirty-Six Stratagems, number twenty-three: ‘Befriend a distant state, strike a neighboring one.’”

Tap! Tap!

“Coming,” Felicia replied to the light knock at her door, and opened it.

In the darkness outside her doorway, the light of her lamp’s fame illuminated the face of her visitor.

It was Sigrún.

“Welcome,” Felicia said. “I am sorry for calling you out here in the middle of the night this way.”

“It’s not a problem. You mentioned this was about Father, after all. No matter the time or place, I will always rush to help.”

“Thank you. Please, come in.”

“Sure.”

At Sigrún’s curt response, Felicia moved aside and brought her into the room.

Sigrún had been invited here many times before, and she strode over to the bed at the center of the room and sat down with as much familiarity as if it were her own room.

“Oh, Big Brother and Big Sister are currently busy with creating an heir in the next room, so we’ll need to be quiet,” Felicia added.

“Hm. Understood.”

“...Does that give you something to think about?”

“It does. I’m sure that if it’s Father’s child, it will be quite healthy and talented. It’s another thing in the future to look forward to.” Sigrún nodded several times, clearly certain of herself.

“Erm, that wasn’t what I meant. I mean... you haven’t had a tight, painful feeling in your chest?”

“No, not really. I’m not suffering from any illness that I know of. What, do I look out of sorts to you?”

“No. No, you seem perfectly the same as always.” Felicia let out a long sigh.

She had no doubts that Sigrún’s feelings for Yuuto were pure and true.

What Felicia was wondering was whether those feelings might not be merely those of a loyal warrior, but also those of a woman towards a man. Her statements had been a way of fishing for the answer. But judging by Sigrún’s reaction, Felicia was completely off the mark.

Honestly, she found it to be a bit underwhelming.

“Still, I am quite envious of Mother,” Sigrún said. “I, too, would like to bear one of Father’s children, eventually.”

“Wh...?!” Felicia’s eyes nearly popped out of her head as she heard this. It was as if she had watched an attack miss her, only to learn it was a feint after the true blow struck her in the back of the head.

Sigrún must have noticed the strange expression on her face, because she was staring blankly back at Felicia, puzzled and blinking.

“Hm? Was what I said really that strange? Oh, of course, we’ll have the issue of the campaign against the Panther Clan for a while, and my becoming unable to fight would be a real problem, so I plan to wait until things have settled down a bit more first.”

“...Since when have you wanted children? You never seemed like you had any interest in that.”

“Well, yes, I don’t have any interest in marriage or the like, but I would certainly love to bear Father’s child. Mother has already stated that she will allow that, after all.”

“...I see. It must be nice for someone simple like you.” Felicia’s head drooped, and she placed a palm against her forehead.

Sigrún was so plain and simple at heart that it made Felicia jealous.

Sure, Mitsuki had said she would tolerate other women being in the picture, but only tolerate; didn't that mean that in her heart she found the idea unpleasant? And considering how singular Yuuto was in his love for Mitsuki, wouldn't making a move only cause him trouble?

These were the sorts of complicated questions that Felicia had been wrapped up in, and now she felt as if she looked like an idiot for being so concerned with them.

"Still, you have a point," she said to Sigrún at last. "Perhaps simply following these feelings in my heart is best, isn't it?"

"I don't really get what you mean, but is that what you wanted to discuss?" Sigrún asked bluntly.

"Ah, no, I'm afraid we got off track," Felicia replied. "I'll talk about it now. But before I begin, would you like some tea?"

"No. Just hurry up and get to the point."

"Fine." Felicia nodded, and then sat down next to Sigrún.

She didn't meet Sigrún's eyes, instead gazing up into empty space.

"Tell me, what is your impression of Big Brother since he came back to us?"

"My impression?"

"I get the feeling that there is something about him that is different from before. Don't you feel it, too?"

Sigrún was silent, with a difficult, thoughtful look on her face. Perhaps the question did bring something to mind for her.

"It's true, it's as if the air that surrounds him is much heavier and sharper than it was before," she said at last. "I thought that was because of his new resolve, his conviction to live and die with the Wolf Clan... but it seems you have a different idea."

"I think you're right, too, of course," Felicia said. "But it also looks to me like desperation, as if something was forcing him to act with great haste."

"Hmm."

“This campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan is a particularly striking example,” Felicia said. “The Big Brother I’ve known up until now would not possibly choose to begin just one month from now. At the very least, he would prepare for half a year, making doubly sure of his preparations and ensuring we were on absolutely solid footing first.”

“I see what you mean,” Sigrún said. “Now that you mention it, there’s also what we did in our last battle against the Panther Clan: We cut off any means of escape first before completely eradicating them. At the time, I was simply overcome with admiration, thinking, ‘I can’t believe the “fisher and bandit” tactic could be applied this way!’ But up until now, even if Father thought up such tactics, I don’t think he ever would have chosen to employ them.”

“Yes. Before now, Big Brother would not have wanted unnecessary killing, and so I believe he would have been fine with just being able to drive them off.”

“Hmm...”

“Until now, Big Brother has fought only with the foremost goal of defending us,” Felicia said. “But now, since his return, it seems to me that he is ready to proactively attack others.”

“Couldn’t it just be that committing himself to live in Yggdrasil has also awakened Father’s ambition? He does house an incredible conqueror’s spirit within him, after all.”

“I would be glad if that was all it was.” Felicia exhaled deeply.

There would be nothing better than to know her worries were unwarranted.

“However,” she continued, “if this feeling I have is not mistaken, then I cannot help but wonder just what could be placing such pressure on Big Brother, forcing him to hurry so.”

“What, so in other words, you’re hurt that even though you’re Father’s most trusted confidant, he hasn’t talked with you about whatever it is?”

“N-no, that isn’t true!” Felicia gasped. “Umm, well, no, I suppose it is true that his graciously calling me his closest confidant and then keeping this secret might have made me feel just a bit unhappy — just a bit, mind you! But really, I am mainly just worried about him!”

“In that case, all we have to do is keep supporting him. If he hasn’t told us about the issue, then it’s because we aren’t reliable enough yet to be worthy of that. If we support him loyally as best we can, he is sure to fill us in eventually.” Sigrún finished speaking and laughed a bit.

Faced with such an argument made so easily and confidently, Felicia couldn’t help but respond with a smile of her own.

Some things truly never changed...

“It must be nice to be simple like you.”

ACT 4

“You’re going to establish a new clan?” Linnea repeated the words back to Yuuto with a puzzled look on her face.

She was in a room in the palace of Iárnviðr together with a group that could be called Yuuto’s trusted inner circle: Jörgen, Skáviðr, Felicia, Sigrún, Ingrid, Albertina, and Kristina.

After being called here from the Horn Clan, she’d only been able to exchange a quick greeting with Yuuto before being led to this room. Linnea had been hoping to have more of a heartfelt reunion with him, so personally she was feeling a bit let down.

Still, he was right here, speaking to her in person.

That in itself was enough to make Linnea unbelievably happy.

Except for Felicia, everyone else in the room was also openly surprised at Yuuto’s statement. Apparently, it was their first time hearing about this, too.

Yuuto nodded from his position on a raised seat at the head of the table. “Yeah, I figure we’ll need to do something like that if we want to forge a stronger sense of unity between the Wolf Clan and its subsidiary allies.”

He went on:

“If we stay as we are, with just the Wolf Clan, there’s no getting rid of the feeling that we’re all separate. To each clan, they’re just going along with us because they have no choice; in the end, they’re still the Claw Clan, the Ash Clan, and so on. And just like what happened this time around, when things go south, they’ll put their own individual clans first. I can’t have that happening all the time.”

“That is true.” Jörgen nodded heavily at Yuuto’s point.

Indeed, the one who had felt the pain of that situation most keenly within the Wolf Clan was, without a shadow of a doubt, Jörgen, the second-in-command who had borne all of Yuuto’s responsibilities in his absence.

If there had been support and reinforcements from the other clans, the

military situation would have been at least a little bit more favorable.

His words were simple words, but they carried the weight of the feelings from that experience.

“And that’s exactly why, by taking this group of clans, what you might now call the Wolf Clan Alliance, and reforming it under a new name, we can give it a greater sense of unity. That’s my thinking.”

“I see,” Linnea said. She put a hand to her mouth and frowned. “Still, isn’t that simply changing the name and nothing more? Even if the Wolf Clan names itself something else, I’m doubtful of whether that will engender any sense of loyalty or community from the others.”

From Linnea’s personal perspective, she felt an incredible debt to the Wolf Clan, and was ready and willing to take orders from them. But if asked what her true clan was, she would have to answer that it was the Horn Clan. There would be no changing that feeling just because the Wolf Clan changed to some less-familiar name.

The Wolf Clan had been in sharp decline in the period before Yuuto came to power, but in the past, the Wolf Clan had once been a mighty nation which ruled all of the Bifröst region.

Thinking of it that way, one could say that a name change could only weaken the respect and fear inspired by the original name.

“Ah, no, no,” Yuuto said. “I’m not going to change the name of the Wolf Clan. I’m only going to create a new clan.”

“Right...” Linnea didn’t fully grasp the point, and gave only a vague response.

The act of “establishing a new clan” ordinarily meant creating a smaller branch clan that was subsidiary to the main clan. That didn’t seem like it bore any connection to a plan to make the Wolf Clan and its current allies more unified.

Before Linnea could figure out the answer, Yuuto continued speaking.

“And, that brings me to you, Linnea. I want to ask you to be the second-in-command of that new clan.”

“Eh? Huuuuuh?!” Linnea couldn’t help but let out a startled cry. “N-no, but, in my role as patriarch of the Horn Clan, I...”

She had heartfelt respect and admiration for Yuuto, and she was also very happy that he’d made the offer, but of course she couldn’t choose a path that would mean abandoning her own clan.

Yuuto dismissed her remark with a wave of his hand and a wry chuckle.

“No, you don’t have to stop what you’re doing. It’s fine if you stay on as patriarch of the Horn Clan too. Oh, right, Jörgen, I want you to be the clan’s assistant-second, by the way. Ah, and I’ll have you take over as patriarch of the Wolf Clan, too.”

“What?! What did you saaaay?!” Jörgen’s surprise led him to burst out shouting. His jaw looked like it was about to fall off; he was staring at Yuuto as if the whole world had suddenly gone topsy-turvy.

That reaction could hardly be helped, however. The Wolf Clan was nothing without Yuuto right now. The most recent crisis had only served to prove that.

There was no way that his abdicating the throne could possibly be a good idea.

Jörgen and Sigrún stood up from their seats and shouted so wildly that spittle flew, pleading to convince Yuuto.

“F-Father! It is still too soon for you to retire!” Jörgen cried desperately. “You have not even reached twenty yet!”

“Y-yes, that’s right, Father! You must keep leading the Wolf Clan for another thirty years!” Sigrún shouted.

Nearby, Felicia let slip a smile and a few giggles — she seemed to find this amusing.

Felicia was Yuuto’s closest and most loyal advisor. The woman who should logically be pleading with him to reconsider wasn’t speaking up.

With that, Linnea put it together.

“In other words,” she put in, “you’re not planning to create a branch clan beneath the Wolf Clan, but a main clan above it? And you, Big Brother, will be

the patriarch of that new clan, I take it.”

“Correct.” The corners of Yuuto’s mouth curled up in a grin.

Kris spoke up next. “Then, should I assume that its officers in top positions will be patriarchs from our subsidiary clans?”

“Excellent, Kris,” Yuuto said, slapping his leg. “As expected, you catch on quickly.”

The two of them were both exemplary thinkers to be able to grasp his intentions in that short amount of time.

“I see... so that is what’s going on.” A look of understanding spread across Skáviðr’s face.

Meanwhile, in contrast to the three of them, Jörgen’s brow still remained furrowed with suspicion. “So, what does this mean, exactly?”

Jörgen was of course not a talentless man, far from it; however, likely due to his age, he was a bit narrow in his thinking, and had difficulty following a discussion about completely new concepts.

Kris raised a finger and explained. “What it means is that, rather than award the number two position in the new clan to a high-valued member of the old Wolf Clan like you, Jörgen, Linnea will be put there instead. The aim is to fill the majority of the top positions with people from the subsidiary clans. That means that the Wolf Clan itself won’t be able to be as controlling towards the other branch clans as it has been up until now.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound good to my ears,” Jörgen replied.

“But that would increase their feeling of belonging to the new clan,” Kristina replied. “By setting Lady Linnea up as the second-in-command, members of other clans will likely think, ‘Lord Suoh-Yuuto doesn’t just put the Wolf Clan first; he also grants his favor to people from other clans in accordance to their merits.’ In order to gain status and power for themselves in the new clan, they will instinctively act with much more loyalty towards us.”

“Hmm.” Jörgen pondered. “I see. This whole issue is finally starting to make sense to me.” Still frowning, Jörgen turned his gaze to Yuuto. “Still, won’t that

mean that members of the Wolf Clan will have difficulty accepting this?”

Taken as a whole, it did seem like this plan would lead to a greater feeling of both competition and unity within the new clan. But bold, revolutionary policies of this sort were sure to garner resentment from those who already had a monopoly on status and power with the status quo.

In other words, the people of the Wolf Clan had been able to feel like they were superior to people from the other clans, and so they wouldn’t like a change away from that. There would likely be many who protested, asking why people from other clans were being treated better than themselves.

Yuuto nodded. “Yeah, well, I was hoping to balance things out some by naming many of my direct child subordinates from among members of the Wolf Clan. For starters, that includes all of you here now.”

“I see. That is why you called them here as well,” Jörgen said, glancing over to one side of the room.

Sigrún, Ingrid, and Albertina, noticing that Jörgen was looking at them, stared back with wide-eyed puzzlement.

The three of them were completely oblivious when it came to politics. They’d been listening quietly through the conversation, but it was nothing but gibberish to them.

“Yeah, thankfully my kids in this clan have lots of accomplishments to their names already.” Yuuto gave a mischievous grin. “I’m pretty sure it won’t come off like I’m being too partial.”

Jörgen responded with a deep breath, followed by a sigh of resignation. “I understand, Father. I think that there will still be dissatisfaction in the Wolf Clan, but I will do what I can to keep it under control.”

“Ha ha! Sorry that I always give you the toughest work. But I knew you’d say yes. Actually, it’s because of you that I figured I could propose enacting this plan in the first place.”

“My, my,” Jörgen said with a sigh, “it seems that experience has only made you better at flattering people into serving your ends, Father.”

“Hey, now, it’s how I really feel.” Yuuto shrugged and gave a wry smile.

It might be hard to tell because of Jörgen’s fearsome-looking face and build, but he was actually a man quite attentive to detail and considerate to the needs of others.

The reason Yuuto had been able to put so many revolutionary new reforms in place in the Wolf Clan was because Jörgen was always acting behind the scenes, smoothing things out with the parties involved and ensuring their buy-in.

Yuuto fully believed that this man would be able to make things work out as they set out on the new, unsteady course in front of them.

“Well then, Father, what do you plan to call your new clan?” Jörgen asked, seeming to realize only now that they’d gotten this far without hearing the name.

Yuuto’s mouth curled into a grin.

He’d only ever had one potential name in mind. There was no more fitting name he could give to his clan.

With an affected, stately air, he spoke the name aloud.

“The Steel Clan.”

As soon as the meeting ended, Yuuto called out to one of the twins as she made to leave.

“Kristina, just a second.”

The side ponytail on the left side of her head spun a circle in the air as she twirled around to face him. Even that simple motion carried an air of elegance to it. That was likely because she’d received extensive training as the daughter by birth of the Claw Clan patriarch.

Yuuto decided not to think about the other twin.

“What is it, Father?” Kristina asked. “Oh, if it’s about the intelligence reports from the time you were absent, I’ve compiled them and left them on your desk.”

“I’ll give those a look later, then. What I was in a hurry to talk to you about is

the Vindálfs. How is our merry band coming along?”

“Ahh, them.” Kristina raised her eyebrows and flashed Yuuto an impish grin. “For now, I would say around ten of them are at the point where they can put on a satisfying performance in front of a crowd.”

“Hmm, ten...”

“It has only been half a year since we established them, after all. Most of them still aren’t trained enough to use yet.”

“Well, ten should actually be enough for my purposes. I’d like to put them to work.”

“Are you going to have them perform some dances at your army’s departure ceremony?”

The Vindálfs’ name meant “the Band of Wind Elves” in the language of Yggdrasil. They were a troupe of trained performers, an organization Yuuto had ordered Kristina to create around the same time that he’d established the school facilities known as the “House of Tablets.”

The troupe was mainly comprised of widows, war orphans, and the like. Currently the focus was on teaching them various performance skills, and eventually the plan was to have them perform at the great circular amphitheater currently under construction in one section of the city.

It was a policy that would help a group of people in severe poverty, while also providing a new source of entertainment for the citizens; two birds with one stone.

Of course, that was the public reason for their existence.

“No, not that,” Yuuto said. “I want to request the other kind of work.”

“Oh, really?” A dangerous light sparkled in Kristina’s eyes. “Where shall I send them?”

The true purpose of the Vindálfs was to send them into other countries, to secretly gather information.

He had gotten the idea from a legend from Japan’s own history. It was said that, during the Sengoku Period, the famous lord and general Takeda Shingen

ordered the creation of a secret band of female spies known as the aruki miko, or “wandering shrine maidens.” Yuuto had implemented a Yggdrasil-style spin on that old tale.

Kristina’s talents needed no mentioning, of course, and her direct underlings were all quite exceptional spies as well, but her group was pulled from a small faction of the Claw Clan, which was a small clan to begin with. In terms of numbers, there just weren’t enough of them to travel through and investigate all of the Wolf Clan’s neighboring countries.

The old maxim was ever true: He who controls information, controls conflict.

The performance troupe could be used as a front to greatly expand Yuuto’s intelligence-gathering network. He’d been working on this plan for quite some time now.

“To the imperial capital, Glaðsheimr,” Yuuto said. “I want them to investigate Rífa as soon as possible. It’s extremely urgent.”

Just the previous night, Mitsuki had told him about how, ever since the summoning ritual that brought Yuuto back, she had lost all contact with Rífa.

Mitsuki seemed to be seriously worried that something bad might have happened to her.

In addition to Mitsuki’s worries, Yuuto owed Rífa a great personal debt for bringing him back to Yggdrasil. He couldn’t ignore this.

“Of course, this is important enough that I’d much rather send you in there yourself, if I could,” Yuuto added.

However, with the start of the big campaign against the Panther Clan fast approaching, he couldn’t afford to send Kristina away.

There would be tens of thousands of lives on the line in the battles to come. He had to put that first.

“I am very sorry to betray your expectations of me, Father, but even I would rather not attempt to sneak into Valaskjálf Palace.” Kristina made this statement very flatly, and it left Yuuto blinking in surprise.

“I never would have expected a ball of pure curiosity like yourself to say

something like that,” he said.

The girl had a strong sense of pride in herself as an expert in intelligence gathering.

Her giving up on a challenge without even trying was so out of character, Yuuto wondered if he should expect a summer snowstorm tomorrow.

Kristina picked up on his incredulity, and drooped her shoulders as she explained.

“The imperial high priest Hárbarth lives in the capital, and he is so well known for his keen eye that it’s earned him the alias Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High. Once in the past, I only barely escaped from him with my life.” Kristina muttered the last part with quite the look of displeasure on her face; it seemed this was a memory she didn’t want to recall.

“Wow...” Yuuto murmured with awe.

Kristina was the Einherjar of Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds, and there was no one better than her at concealing her presence. If she applied her full power to escaping unnoticed, then tracking her was impossible even for the Wolf Clan’s former and current Mánagarmr, experts at sensing a person’s presence.

This high priest had to be a real dangerous one if he had been able to get someone like Kristina on the ropes.

Yuuto heaved a large sigh. “Haaah, this world is just full of overpowered monsters!”

“And I am certain you are among their number, perhaps in the top three,” Kristina replied, with a look of exasperation.

The remark stung Yuuto a little, as he felt it was undeserved, but if he argued about that now, they’d surely get sidetracked.

“Well if that place is so dangerous, maybe sending the Vindálfs might be a bad idea.”

The members in question had become skilled enough to deploy in less than half a year, so they were surely very talented, but they also definitely weren’t anywhere close to as good as the little fox in front of him.

If Kristina had only barely gotten away from that place with her life, he would practically be sending the others to their deaths.

“On the contrary, I think this might be just the sort of job the Band is geared toward. If the target is difficult to infiltrate, one need only enter properly through the front doors.”

Yuuto got her meaning, and snapped his fingers. “Aha! I see what you mean.”

He’d had the Vindálfs trained to perform songs, dances, and magic tricks from modern-era Japan. They were all things one couldn’t find anywhere else, and were bound to pull in attention and curiosity.

Yuuto was plenty sure he could expect some imperial official to grow fond of them and officially invite them into the palace as guests.

“All right then, I’m counting on you to make it happen.”

“Understood. It will be done.” With a small bow, Kristina left the room.

After watching her leave, Yuuto stood alone, his fists clenching and unclenching.

“Please, please be safe, Rífa...”

What awaited Yuuto afterwards was nothing but a steady stream of deskwork.

Ordinarily, his second-in-command Jörgen took care of his patriarch work during times he needed to be absent, but of course there were some decisions that only the actual patriarch was fit to make, or procedures that the patriarch at least needed to check over personally, and other paperwork of that sort.

Since he’d been absent for two months, that had built up into an unthinkably huge volume of work.

He’d have Felicia read him document after document aloud, after which he’d apply his stamp and get her to read the next one, apply his stamp, and so on. If there were any spots that seemed unclear or questionable, he would send for the person responsible so he could discuss the matter with them before making his decision.

This continued, day after day.

Once that backlog had finally been dealt with, he still had his daily deskwork, with the addition of the planning and organizing work for the creation of the Steel Clan. There was just no end of work that had to be done.

As the work drove Yuuto through his days, he began to lose his proper sense of time... until one day, a visitor arrived.

Guests and visitors arrived to see Patriarch Yuuto every day, of course.

However, when this visitor arrived, Yuuto jumped up from his chair so quickly he nearly knocked it over.

“Olof?!” Yuuto shouted.

Indeed, his visitor looked remarkably like Olof, Yuuto’s once-great general and governor, who had died honorably in battle at Gashina.

However, though the resemblance was there, this was a completely different person.

For starters, his age was clearly different. Olof had been a middle-aged man who appeared to be in his early forties at first glance. (In truth, he had only been in his thirties. It was one indication of how hard the man had worked himself.) But the man in front of Yuuto now was probably only around twenty or so.

However, he could still see Olof’s features strongly in this man’s face.

The young man introduced himself, standing rod-straight at attention. “My lord, I am Olof’s son by birth, Sviðurr.”

His voice was strongly reminiscent of Olof’s, too. It seemed the family traits ran strong between father and son.

“I see... Olof’s boy.” Yuuto felt the corners of his eyes growing hot.

“Yes, Lord Patriarch. I have just been selected as the captain of the Olof Family, so I came to introduce myself to you, as is proper.”

“Really now,” Yuuto said, reacting with interest. He almost said, “Pretty impressive for one so young,” but swallowed the words rather than say them aloud. He himself was even younger, after all.

Still, it really was an impressive achievement.

The Olof Family was one of the factions of the Wolf Clan, and in terms of sheer numbers, it was second only to the Jörgen Family. Of course, with so many men, there would necessarily be plenty of promising talent in its ranks. So for a young man of only twenty or so to be selected as its captain spoke a great deal about his skill and potential.

Perhaps his father's great talent had also been passed down to him.

"I see." Yuuto nodded. "I hope you give your all, then."

"Yes, sir! I'll work myself down to the bone, and pick up the burden my father left behind."

"Right. I'll look forward to that." Yuuto paused for a moment. "...Hey, Sviðurr."

"Yes, sir?"

"Your father — he acted without fear for himself, and in doing so, protected the lives of so many of our fellow Wolf Clan. He was a true hero. But even before that... he wasn't the type who shone in flashy combat on the battlefield, but he always stepped up to do the difficult work that other men would have refused or neglected. To me, he was always a powerful man, and one rarely found in this world."

Yuuto's words weren't meant to praise Olof for the sake of his son. They were truly what Yuuto felt about him.

That fact must have reached Sviðurr, for the young man's face twisted as he struggled to suppress the urge to cry.

The young man angled his head up to hide his eyes, and he shouted, "Sir! I believe my father must surely be rejoicing at his seat in Valhalla, on hearing those words from his patriarch!"

"I see," Yuuto said softly.

In fact, Yuuto had resolved himself to receive condemnation from Olof's surviving son. He could have blamed Yuuto, saying that if only he hadn't vanished in the middle of an important battle, Olof might still be alive.

Instead, Yuuto felt like with this, he'd gained a little peace of mind.

He placed a hand on Sviðurr's shoulder. "Become as great a man as your father was. I've got high expectations for you."

"Yes, sir!" Sviðurr's response was immediate, his voice clear.

Olof had been a very reserved, composed sort of man, but it seemed like his son was full of youthful passion and vigor.

Perhaps Olof had simply become the man Yuuto knew after years of experience had mellowed him out, and he had been this sort of fiery man in his youth.

In that case, there was a lot to look forward to in this young man's future.

"Haaaah... Hah!!" With a spirited cry, Yuuto delivered a rapid strike with his blade.

The wooden sword in his hands flew in a downward arc, his full strength behind the blow.

His opponent was a slender, ominous-looking man, with thin cheeks and a piercing light in his eyes.

If an ignorant outsider were to come across this scene, they might perhaps misunderstand it as the Wolf Clan patriarch defending himself against a sinister assassin.

Of course, the man was no assassin, but a proud member of the Wolf Clan, the assistant second-in-command, in fact.

He was also the previous holder of the title belonging to the strongest of the Wolf Clan: Mánagarmr.

At present, he was charged with being the governor of the city and region of Gimlé, but today he was in Iárnviðr on business, so Yuuto had asked him to accompany him in sword practice.

With a quick little step, Skáviðr brought his leg back and rotated his body sideways, cleanly dodging Yuuto's downward strike.

"Hup! ...Ah!" Yuuto had begun to follow through with a sweeping horizontal

strike, but suddenly brought his movement to a complete halt.

The blade of Skáviðr's wooden sword was up against his neck.

"Haah..." Yuuto sighed. "So that's ten complete losses in a row. Man, Skáviðr, you really are strong." He gave a short, dry laugh and dropped to sit on the ground.

Lately Yuuto had been completely absorbed in nothing but deskwork, but he was the type who liked to do physical activities like this. Sitting at a desk all the time was suffocating for him.

Getting fully active like this, and working up a real sweat now and then, felt refreshing.

"You have also improved greatly, Master," Skáviðr said. "As you are now, I think you would stand little chance of losing to an average soldier. In particular, that last strike of yours was very good."

"Ah, really? Well, if you say so, then I'll believe it. Everyone else always avoids fighting me seriously." Yuuto chuckled again, slumping his shoulders.

Because of his position as the patriarch, whenever it came to combat training, others held back against him.

His most trusted confidant was the most prominent example. "Even if it's only a wooden sword, I could never bear a weapon against you, Big Brother!" Felicia would shout.

Fighters like Sigrún and Jörgen were much the same, though. They considered how Yuuto would get frustrated if he lost, and though they didn't outright stand there and hand the match to him, they also didn't make a serious effort to attack him.

Thanks to that, Yuuto couldn't figure out where his current levels of strength and skill were at.

That's why he'd singled out this man to help him. Skáviðr was known for showing no mercy, and for not mincing words, good or bad.

"But I still have a long way to go, I guess," Yuuto continued. "At the end there, I couldn't even see your attack coming."

Skáviðr's sword had been against his neck before he'd even realized it.

That was despite the fact that he'd been completely focused on Skáviðr's every movement, so as not to miss anything.

"Yes, well, in this case, it can't be helped. In fact, I would say the fact that you couldn't see the attack coming is proof that you've grown."

"Huh?" Yuuto said.

"Rather than explaining it with words, it would be better to demonstrate it for you. Aunt Felicia, if you would."

"Ah, y-yes!" Felicia was surprised to be called upon so suddenly, and responded with a shrill voice.

"Face me in a few matches," Skáviðr said. "This should be a good learning experience for you, too."

With such a request, directly from the former Mánagarmr, Felicia could hardly say no.

She took up her own wooden practice sword and faced off against Skáviðr.

The results of their matches were stark: In all five, Skáviðr secured victory smoothly. Not only that, it was without even allowing her to trade multiple blows with him. Every match was settled in the first strike.

"Ohh... ohh..." Felicia was on her hands and knees, hanging her head in misery. "This is utterly shameful... I am supposed to be Big Brother's protector..."

Expressionless, Skáviðr rested his wooden sword against his shoulder and spoke down to her. "That's true. Your body has grown weaker since the last time I saw you fight. Helping Master with his work is certainly important, but so is your mission to guard him physically. Don't neglect your routine training."

"Y-yes, I will do my best to improve..." Felicia responded with a tight, frustrated tone to her voice, her fists clenched.

It seemed that her devastating losses to him had stained her pride as Yuuto's bodyguard.

Skáviðr nodded once, then turned his gaze back to Yuuto. “Master, as you saw, even Aunt Felicia could barely see any of the attacks, so there is no need to feel too upset about it.”

To Yuuto, it looked like in exchange for making him feel better, this had made Felicia feel terribly upset instead, but he decided not to press that issue further.

There was no point in arguing about what had already taken place.

“Still, just what kind of trick did you use to pull that off?” Yuuto asked.

Skáviðr’s attacks were definitely fast, but Yuuto was still able to follow them with his eyes while watching the fights. They weren’t too fast to see. In terms of pure speed, Sigrún’s attacks were even faster.

And Felicia was an Einherjar, far from a weak fighter. In fact, she was the fifth strongest fighter in the Wolf Clan at present.

So it was hard to imagine that not even she could react at all to the speed of Skáviðr’s attacks.

After all, Felicia could even last through five or ten exchanges of blows with Sigrún in a sparring match. And yet still, right there in front of his eyes, her responses to Skáviðr’s attacks had all been late.

Rather than his strikes being too fast, it was more like Felicia’s ability to fight him had been disrupted.

It was just like a magic trick.

However, Skáviðr shook his head. “It isn’t a trick. There is no secret, no deception at play.”

“How can you say that there’s no trick at all?!” Felicia protested, standing back up.

She’d experienced such utter defeat during their matches, she likely couldn’t accept the fact that there was no hidden trick to explain it.

“I can say there isn’t because there isn’t. In fact, it’s because there’s no gimmick that you can’t perceive the attacks.”

“What?” Felicia tilted her head to one side, as if she’d just heard a riddle.

“Honestly, Aunt Felicia,” Skáviðr said. “You have a great deal of talent, but because of that, you tend to neglect your fundamentals. ‘Practice complete obedience to the Way, break from it, leave it behind, but forget not its origin.’”

“Ah,” Yuuto spoke up, recognizing the quote. “You’re talking about the ‘obey, break, transcend’ stages of mastery.”

He found himself recalling how, once before, he had brought up the subject and the poem to Skáviðr while the two of them were enjoying some conversation or other.

“Obey, break, transcend” was a Japanese philosophical concept known as shu-ha-ri in Yuuto’s language, and this three-stage way of thinking was applied to martial arts, as well as many other areas where a student worked towards mastery.

In the first stage, the student was required to obey the teachings of the master and the art, accepting the rigid “forms” and rules without question and striving to fully reproduce the techniques that were being taught.

Though it was the first stage, it was also considered to be the hardest.

Every person has their own opinions and way of thinking, after all, and they may not find certain aspects of the teaching satisfactory. What was most important was that the student should empty their mind of such things, and simply take in the teachings.

The next stage, “break,” referred to the act of breaking out of the rigid forms, diverging from the rules as written.

Each person’s mind works in a different way. There are differences in physical build, the environment one is living in, the person’s strong and weak areas. Each of these plays a part. The “break” stage was about changing things about the practice of their art, experimenting with how to better match the student’s individual self.

The third stage, “transcend,” was about not stopping simply at experimenting with straying from proper form; it was about leaving rules and form behind entirely. The student transcends to the next level of understanding, where their practice of the art leads to the development of a completely new, organic style.

It was said that whoever reaches this stage can appropriately be called a master in their own right.

After receiving a brief explanation of the concept from Yuuto, Felicia nodded vigorously, as if she'd had a revelation. "I see. As expected of you, Big Brother. You know so much!"

Yuuto continued, returning to the subject of the poem Skáviðr had quoted. "And so, at the end of the poem, it tells you that even after reaching the 'transcend' stage where you leave everything behind you, you should never forget the 'origin' — in other words, the fundamentals. The poem was left behind by one of history's great masters of his art, and it's really applicable."

Incidentally, the original poem Yuuto had learned was attributed to Sen no Rikyu, the great master credited with perfecting the Japanese art of the tea ceremony.

"I found the words to have incredible depth of meaning," Skáviðr said. "The technique I used earlier, the one that you called a 'trick,' is something I was able to master only after reflecting on their message."

Skáviðr crossed his arms, nodding to himself.

Yuuto honestly didn't have any idea how the old Japanese poem, wise as it was, could be connected to this new technique.

Perhaps it was one of those things that only a fellow master of the sword would understand.

Yuuto decided to just think of it that way for now.

"Yuuto is still alive, is he?" Hveðrungr muttered in a cool voice, sitting at the table with his head propped on one arm.

He was in the Lightning Clan capital of Bilskírnir, in a room in the patriarch's palace.

After his Panther Clan forces had withdrawn from the Fólkvangr region, they'd crossed back over the Körmt River, and now the troops were quartered in this city.

In contrast, the red-haired young man sitting across the table from him

replied somewhat cheerfully. “Yeah, I saw him with my own eyes. No mistake; it was him, all right.”

This was Steinþórr, the Lightning Clan patriarch.

A warrior of peerless strength and a commander of fearless courage, he was feared both within his own borders and in the lands beyond by his other name: Dólgþrasir, the “Battle-Hungry Tiger.”

He had sworn a fifty-fifty oath of brotherhood with Hveðrungr.

“You’re sure it wasn’t someone else?” Hveðrungr demanded.

“The second I saw him, I got a shiver down my spine. I don’t think some dressed-up impostor could ever have that level of powerful presence about him.”

“Ha!” Hveðrungr let slip a laugh, along with a rather derisive sneer.

Sensing that disrespect, Steinþórr’s cheerful demeanor turned darker.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

“‘The Dólgþrasir isn’t what he used to be. One sharp glance from Suoh-Yuuto was all it took to send him slinking away.’ Those aren’t my words, you know. Right now, it’s all the people of Bilskírnir are talking about.”

“...Ah, right, that.” Steinþórr gave a bitter sigh. It was rare to see such an expression from him. “I bet the rumors started among the soldiers. Well, I can’t help it if that’s what it looked like to them.”

“What happened?” Hveðrungr asked.

“He showed up on top of the city walls, and then the city gates opened up, like he was just asking us to go right on in. No matter how you look at it, clearly a trap, right?”

“He opened the gates?” Hveðrungr asked incredulously.

It did indeed seem utterly suspicious. For a city under attack by an enemy army, such an action would normally be nothing short of suicidal.

“Yeah,” Steinþórr said. “I didn’t have the brains to figure out what he was actually plotting, but even now, I don’t think my choice back then was a

mistake. You see, after we pulled back to Gashina and waited there for a bit, reports came in that a force of seven thousand Panther Clan troops got totally crushed to pieces at the Körmt River. If I'd charged into that city, that could've happened to my guys."

As he finished his sentence, Steinþórr leaned back and downed his cup of wine in one swig. He slammed the silver cup down on the table with a bang, and wiped his mouth roughly with his other hand.

"Anyway," he continued, "that seemed like the right time to quit, and so I came back here to the capital. And that was when I got wind of a rumor going around."

"Oh?"

"Word is, the Wolf Clan is going to go to war in force, in order to subjugate the Panther Clan."

"Hmph, surely nothing more than a rumor," Hveðrungr sneered. "As if they could even spare the strength for such a thing."

Hveðrungr may have scoffed and spoke boldly, but he did not realize that his own voice was wavering slightly.

He would surely never have admitted it, but at that moment, he was frightened.

Frightened that Yuuto was coming for him.

Although Steinþórr did not sense Hveðrungr's inner fear, his next words were nonetheless reassuring.

"Well, you and I are Chalice brothers now, and allies who've fought against the same enemy, too. Plus, I owe you for all the aid you gave me before. If that rumor does turn out to be true, I can at least provide you with some reinforcements when you need it."

The phrasing was so obviously fishing for Hveðrungr's gratitude that his first urge was to reject the offer. But he decided to simply accept it.

"...You have my thanks."

Right now, the Wolf Clan was far too ominous a threat.

Even worse, he'd just lost seven thousand of his elite soldiers.

The strength of this red-headed warrior, who by himself was worth a thousand men on the field of battle, was a strength Hveðrungr knew he could depend on.

However, Hveðrungr was unaware of a certain fact:

Elsewhere, Yuuto had already begun taking steps to tie Steinþórr's hands.

Blíkjanda-Böl.

This was the name of the capital city of the Flame Clan, the powerful nation that controlled the vast lands along the great Gjöll River, which divided the Vanaheimr and Helheim regions.

In the heart of the city was the Flame Clan palace, where their patriarch resided.

For the Wolf Clan and its surrounding nations, it was standard to build the capital's palace from kiln-fired bricks. But perhaps because of the abundant lumber resources of this region, the palace here was constructed mainly of wood.

Its outer walls were covered with a layer of hardened plaster which gave it a brilliant, beautiful white color.

"Now then, I wonder just what sort of man the Flame Clan patriarch is," Ginnar said, as he awaited the patriarch's arrival in the audience chamber.

Ginnar was a former merchant trader who had traveled to lands all throughout the empire. Yuuto had seen the value in his experience, and taken him into the Wolf Clan as his sworn child subordinate.

Though he was a recent addition to the Wolf Clan, his shrewdness in matters of economics and finance had provided good results, and he was beginning to distinguish himself as a rising talent in the ranks of the clan.

Additionally, thanks to his past career experience, he was skilled both in eloquent conversation and the nuances of reading between the lines, and so it wasn't rare for him to be sent to other clans as a diplomatic envoy, as was the case now.

“Even if he doesn’t match up to Father, I at least hope he’s someone impressive enough to be worthy of all this. Well, we’ll see, I guess.” Ginnar kept his face downcast and said all this to himself under his breath, so that no one could hear.

Of course, the man he was referring to was the patriarch of the great Flame Clan, one of the ten strongest clans in the realm, and who had successfully destroyed the Wind Clan, formerly a clan among those same ranks. Naturally, he could be no mere ordinary fellow.

However, this mission was all about getting him to agree to counter the strength of the peerless warrior Steinþórr. “More than ordinary” wasn’t going to be enough to match the task.

A young man with an incredibly beautiful appearance emerged from the back of the hall, and raised his voice, crying, “Our Lord Patriarch now graces you with his presence!”

Upon hearing the boy’s pronouncement, Ginnar knelt forward and thrust both fists against the ground, then prostrated himself.

This wasn’t something he was used to doing, but he knew that in the Flame Clan, it was the proper way of showing respect to those of highest authority, and so he obeyed the custom.

“So he’s finally making his entrance,” Ginnar whispered to himself. His head was down, so he couldn’t see, but ahead of him he could hear the taps of footsteps on the wooden floorboards.

He felt the presence of someone quietly walking across the space in front of him.

In that instant, suddenly Ginnar’s face broke out in a cold sweat that felt like it was pouring out of him.

As a traveling merchant, he’d seen his fair share of sticky situations. He would need more than just one hand to count the number of times he had seriously thought his life might end. He’d also met personally with a number of clan patriarchs aside from Yuuto. He wasn’t the type of man who would tense up in fear at this kind of situation.

And yet despite all that, his body shook uncontrollably and wouldn't stop.

His teeth chattered loudly, and wouldn't stop.

Why is this happening?! Ginnar screamed inwardly, and as the confusion swirled in his mind, he heard a heavy sound from nearby.

It seemed that the Flame Clan patriarch had taken his seat on the throne.

"I hear you are an envoy from the Wolf Clan," the man said. "You have traveled far, then. Well met."

In the instant Ginnar heard the man's voice, a great shiver ran through him, a terrible sensation as if all the blood in his body had turned to ice.

The man's voice was quiet and calm. There was no anger in its tone, no sharpness. In fact, one could even say it was kind.

And yet.

And yet, that voice carried such an intimidating pressure and weight, equivalent to the voice of Ginnar's sworn father, Yuuto, in his moments of anger.

"Y-yes, my lord," Ginnar stammered. "I am Ginnar, sworn son of the Wolf Clan patriarch, Lord Suoh-Yuuto."

Ginnar did not raise his head as he spoke — nay, he was so frightened that he could not do so. He could only stare down at the growing puddle of his own sweat on the floor as he introduced himself, his voice quivering.

"Hm, is that so?" The patriarch's reply was curt and disinterested.

Of course, right now, the Flame Clan was in the midst of a great expansion of its already formidable power. It was only natural that the lord of such a nation would not be interested in the name of one mere man from a far off foreign clan.

But Ginnar could hardly serve as a diplomat if such treatment were all it took to dissuade him from his mission.

He summoned his willpower, and delivered his prepared statement.

"I-it is a great honor, and I am truly grateful to receive this audience despite

the sudden nature of my arrival. In place of my father, I have come bearing gifts for the patriarch of the Flame Clan. P-please, grant me the favor of examining them for yourself."

Still without raising his head, Ginnar reached over to a large wooden box next to him, and slid it forward.

"Hm, is that so? You." The patriarch seemed to address someone directly.

"Yes, my lord!" a young voice responded. Was it the boy who had announced the patriarch's arrival a moment ago?

The youth ran over to Ginnar's side and took the box.

Ginnar then heard the sound of the box being opened.

"Oh, these are vessels made of biidoro. It is my first time seeing such things in this place."

The Flame Clan patriarch at last seemed to be expressing a bit of interest in his voice. However, the gift hadn't moved him anywhere near as much Ginnar had been hoping for.

Also, the items he was examining were glasswares, not biidoro, whatever that was, but Ginnar didn't have the courage to speak up and correct him.

"Hm? The curve of this blade, could it be... Ohhh! It really is a katana! And quite well-made, at that. I would never have dreamed I might see something like this in these lands!"

Apparently the next item the patriarch had taken into his hands was one of the special swords known as a nihontou.

Yuuto absolutely wanted to exchange an Oath of the Chalice with the Flame Clan, for the sake of their future plans. He didn't want to hold back in expressing respect to the other party, and so he had opted to include that sword, as well.

That decision looked to have been the right one.

The glasswares had been somewhat novel to the patriarch, but had not swayed his heart beyond that. Yet he seemed to be quite excited about the nihontou.

“I have received a truly fine gift,” the patriarch said. “Tell your father that I give him my thanks. Now, then, having brought such fine items with you, what are you here to request? You came for the purpose of making a request, yes?”

“Yes, my lord. My father wishes to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with you, on equal footing. I humbly request that you consider it.”

Normally Ginnar would not immediately go straight to the request in these situations. Instead, he would enjoy the exchange of diplomatic banter as he attempted to draw out more favorable conditions for the arrangement. However, he didn’t have the capacity for such talk at all right now.

The instincts he’d honed over the years were telling him not to bother.

They told him that, against this man, any attempts at clever negotiation would only blow up in his face.

“Hm, is that so?” the patriarch mused. “Ran, what do you think?”

A young man’s voice responded to the patriarch’s query. “Sir, the Wolf Clan is planning to set out on a campaign to conquer the great western nation, the Panther Clan. During that time, they will need some way to restrict the movements of the Lightning Clan, which is bound by an oath of brotherhood to the Panther Clan. I would presume he wants to borrow our strength to that end.”

“Yes, that sounds right,” the patriarch agreed. “How about it?” he added, and Ginnar felt the man’s gaze fall on him.

He felt like a frog being glared at by a snake; he couldn’t move, couldn’t speak.

They had completely seen through the Wolf Clan’s intentions.

And that wasn’t all.

The official announcement of the campaign against the Panther Clan had been made the day before Ginnar left Iárnviðr.

In order to enter Flame Clan territory, one first had to travel through the Lightning Clan’s territory, so Ginnar had traveled on foot to avoid attracting attention, but even then, it had only been ten days since the announcement.

It would be one thing if these people had advanced technology like the Wolf Clan, but assuming they didn't have that, how could they have possibly obtained information about the far-off Wolf Clan in such a short span of time?

Despite how uninterested he had seemed at first, this patriarch was clearly quite the wily fellow.

"It seems you don't disagree, then," the patriarch said. "Hmm, well, so be it. The enemy of the enemy is my ally, and this will be beneficial to us, as well."

"Th-then you will...!"

"Yes. Consider it thanks for such a nostalgic gift. Once you've all set out to conquer the Panther Clan, we will send our own soldiers to draw the attention of the Lightning Clan. I am also willing to consider exchanging the Oath of the Chalice, but... I should like to decide its balance after meeting him for myself."

"Meeting him yourself, my lord?" Ginnar asked.

"Indeed. I shall see for myself if he is worthy of sharing an oath on equal terms with me."

Suddenly, the air seemed to grow much heavier. It pressed down on Ginnar, as heavy as lead.

His forehead was forced down against the floor.

He couldn't breathe normally, as if his lungs wouldn't take the air.

The pressure and sheer presence Ginnar had felt from the Flame Clan patriarch up to this point had already been so terrifying, yet the instant he'd made that spirited final remark, all of it had seemed to multiply in strength.

And despite all of the power he was exuding now, it still felt as if he had much more within him. It was like gazing into a bottomless, unknowable well.

"Is that all you needed, then?" the patriarch asked. "This was a fruitful exchange. Tell the Wolf Clan patriarch that I look forward to our relations from now on."

After ending the audience with the envoy, the Flame Clan patriarch was making his way back towards his quarters when a voice called out to him from behind.

“Master.”

“Ran,” the patriarch responded without turning around, or slowing the pace of his walk. “I suppose you want to ask about the matter of the Chalice?”

“Yes, sir. It is exactly as you surmise.” The young man known as Ran fell into step behind his patriarch.

He was a man in his late twenties, and so fair in appearance, many would mistake him for a woman.

Whether it was coincidence or due to the personal tastes of the patriarch, the young page boy from earlier had also been quite beautiful, but Ran’s beauty was on another level entirely.

“Yes, I suppose as my second-in-command, you would be concerned, wouldn’t you?” the patriarch asked.

“Yes. If I am not mistaken, our plans were to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with the Lightning Clan, not the Wolf Clan. What prompted you to do what you did?”

Ran had kept silent during the exchange, as it would not have been right to disagree with his patriarch in public, but in truth, the Flame Clan had little to benefit from agreeing to fight the Lightning Clan.

They had no need of the lands on the western edge of the continent at this point. They could exchange the Chalice oath with the Lightning Clan to prevent invasion, and with that fear of attack from their rear eliminated, they could advance towards the central region of Yggdrasil, and thus take the reins of this realm as a whole.

That had been the outline of their plans.

And so, having seen those plans bent in half thanks to a whim, any second-in-command would be hard-pressed to resist questioning the choice.

The Flame Clan patriarch shook with gleeful laughter. “Keh heh heh, it only means I, too, am a fickle child of Man.”

He took in his hands the sword the Wolf Clan envoy had given to him. Unsheathing it, he held its blade up to the light, staring at it with a nostalgic

smile.

“Putting the whole Chalice affair aside, I simply thought I’d like to share a drink with this Wolf Clan patriarch. ’Tis all but a dream, in the end. Why not take a detour and enjoy a bit of fun? After all, it sounds like I may get to talk with him about our homeland, too.”

ACT 5

Thanks to the harried rush to keep up with each day's work, a month flew by in no time.

At last, the Wolf Clan's campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan would begin tomorrow. In the city of Gimlé, a large group was gathered together in the religious sanctuary, the hörgr. They included top officers of the Wolf Clan such as Jörgen and Skáviðr, as well as patriarchs such as Linnea and Botvid from subsidiary clans.

They were all dressed in ceremonial outfits much different than the ones they wore to battle. It was quite a magnificent sight.

Yuuto was also wearing a completely different outfit, newly created for this ceremony.

As always, it made great use of the color black, but also included a bright design on the chest area of two swords crossed, which was the symbol of the Steel Clan.

His cape incorporated the fur pelt from the great garmr that Sigrún had defeated during the winter season, making it a fitting item for the lord who would rule over six clans.

Mitsuki, sitting next to him, was wearing an outfit of stunning beauty.

Apparently she had also been wearing it during the ritual to summon Yuuto back to Yggdrasil, but back then, he'd been so pressed for time that he'd needed to run out of the hörgr immediately to set out for Gimlé, and so he didn't really remember it.

Looking at her now, she looked like a princess out of a storybook. Though, in actuality, she was pretty much a queen now.

It was a bit belated, but Yuuto took in the form of his dearest love, dressed to the nines, and felt satisfied just to look at her like this...

It was then that a large, middle-aged man with a short beard spoke, beginning the ceremony.

“Everyone, I am sorry to have kept you waiting. I hereby announce to all who have gathered in attendance that I shall now have the honor of conducting the first Chalice Ceremony of the Steel Clan, the ceremony which binds parent, child, and sibling, through the sacred Oath of the Chalice. I am Alexis, and I shall serve the role of mediator for this rite. I am most grateful to make your acquaintance, and I humbly offer myself into your care.”

He was a familiar man to everyone here, as he was the imperial priest and representative for the western region of Yggdrasil.

“I most humbly ask of everyone in attendance that, until these rites of bonding between parent, child, and sibling are safely and fully concluded, you all please provide your full cooperation and understanding. ...Now, then, let us begin the Chalice Ceremony.”

Alexis’s voice echoed throughout the silent air of the sanctuary hall.

As expected of someone who was well-practiced in this ceremony, he progressed smoothly through his difficult speech without stuttering or stumbling once.

“I announce to all in attendance: While I know it is unnecessary, I will check the sacred wine once more.”

Alexis smoothly lifted a silver pitcher into the air, made a gesture as if cutting off the top of the pitcher with his hand, and then poured the alcohol from it into two containers.

One of them was a standard drinking cup, but the other was a huge chalice that looked large enough that its mouth would cover most of a person’s face if you drank from it.

Alexis picked up the smaller cup and placed it to his mouth.

“Indeed, it is a fine liquor. Now then, I address Lord Suoh-Yuuto, who shall become the parent.”

Alexis placed the now-empty small cup back on the small stand, and turned to call to Yuuto.

The tension in the air grew stronger.

There were audible gulps from some people, perhaps a result of the heavy pressure taking its toll.

In his first days, Yuuto himself had once found this solemn atmosphere painfully difficult to bear. However, it didn't affect him at all anymore.

"Yes," he replied naturally and easily.

In earlier days, he would have tried to respond in a deep voice, in an attempt to project authority and not embarrass himself. But now there was no need for that sort of thing. He was comfortable with himself as he was.

"In sharing the Chalice with each of these persons, you will become their parent, or their older brother, in the sight of the gods above," Alexis intoned. "If it is truly your will that you both watch over each other in times of wellness as in times of illness, in times of joy as in times of sorrow, in times of wealth as in times of poverty, then please drink deeply of this Chalice. Show to those who would become your children and younger siblings the sacred wine that they shall drink. You may proceed!"

Yuuto smiled wryly at the priest's affected speech.

As always, it just sounded so much like the speech given during vows at a Japanese wedding.

He cast a quick glance over to Mitsuki, and saw that she was making a shocked face that seemed to say, "Whaaat?!"

He smiled a bit at that, and then picked up the large chalice with both hands. As expected, it was pretty heavy.

He sipped one mouthful, and returned it to the stand.

"I shall now receive the Chalice from you, and divide its contents." Alexis reached over to a second stand which held a great number of small cups, and one by one, he dipped them into the large chalice to fill them with the alcohol from within it.

Alexis's subordinates then gathered the filled cups and took them to hand out to the group of people who stood in a line in the center of the hörgr.

Once Alexis confirmed that all of the cups were handed out, he took a deep

breath, then continued.

“As mediator, I offer these words to those who now hold the Chalice. The moment you drink from that Chalice, you become the subordinate of Lord Suoh-Yuuto, the first patriarch of the Steel Clan. You will become his sworn child, or younger sibling. From that moment onward, your father, or your older brother, and you must serve him and his clan loyally and without fail. If you have truly prepared yourself for this vow, then demonstrate your resolve. Drink the remaining contents of your Chalice, and let that resolve forever thrive within. ...You may proceed!”

At Alexis’s signal, everyone in the line lifted their cups and drank the contents in one swig.

And so it was that Yggdrasil saw the birth of a new clan, the Steel Clan, with Gimlé as its capital.

Not long afterward, the citizens of its territories began to refer to the Steel Clan’s ruler by a new term, in order to symbolically distinguish him from the clan patriarchs below him.

They began to call him the “Great Lord,” Leginák.

“Phew! Well, that takes care of that, at least.” In a small room off to the side of the sanctuary hall, Yuuto pulled his cape off and roughly threw it aside.

It was already getting close to the start of the summer season. The garmr fur made for a splendid cape, but it was just too hot.

“You did wonderfully, Big Brother.” Catching the fur cape in her arms, Felicia offered some kind words in recognition of Yuuto’s effort.

“About that,” Yuuto said.

“Pardon?”

“Are you really okay with staying as a younger sister?”

The current hierarchy of the Steel Clan was as follows:

Patriarch, Suoh Yuuto

Mother of the Clan, Shimoya Mitsuki

Leader of Subordinates, Felicia

First Rank, Second-in-Command, Horn Clan patriarch Linnea

Second Rank, Assistant-Second-in-Command, Wolf Clan patriarch Jörgen

Third Rank, Claw Clan patriarch Botvid

Fourth Rank, Ash Clan patriarch Douglas

Fifth Rank, Mountain Dog Clan patriarch Fundinn

Sixth Rank, Wheat Clan patriarch Lágastaf

Seventh Rank, Leader of Junior Officers, Skáviðr

Eighth Rank, Junior Officer, Ingrid

Ninth Rank, Junior Officer, Sigrún

Tenth Rank, Junior Officer, Albertina

Tenth Rank, Junior Officer, Kristina

Technically, as Leader of Subordinates, Felicia was “above” the child subordinates of the clan in terms of the deference they had to show her, but she also had no actual political authority in that position. One could call it an honorary rank, one removed from the actual ladder of power.

In Yggdrasil’s clan system, succession and rank essentially revolved around the parent and sworn children.

As the sworn younger sister of the patriarch, Felicia was affiliated with him but had no right to be a candidate for succession, and so she had no “future” to aim for.

Back when they were still in the Wolf Clan, she had kept herself as a younger sister because of her feelings of guilt, both for summoning Yuuto into Yggdrasil against his will, and because her biological brother Loptr had killed the previous Wolf Clan patriarch, Fárbauti.

But now, Yuuto was back in Yggdrasil of his own volition, and the incident with Loptr was over two years in the past.

Yuuto thought that Felicia had done more than enough to atone for her guilt,

and so when forming the Steel Clan, he had tried to make her his sworn daughter.

“If I become your sworn child I’ll get too important for my own good, I would fail in my duties as your adjutant, Big Brother.” With those words, she had flatly refused his offer.

“Seriously, I can’t believe you. I was all set to reward you for everything you’ve done, and I’d even planned to have you lead your own clan in the future.” Yuuto sulked a bit, obviously a bit down that his plans had been thrown awry.

Felicia giggled. “Big Brother, if I may be so bold, those are favors I never really asked for or needed.”

“You really have learned to talk back.”

“I have only one wish, the same as always. That is to always be by your side, Big Brother. I do not ask for anything else.”

“Haah, okay, fine,” Yuuto said with a sigh. He slumped back against his chair and rested his chin on one arm.

She really was completely free of ambition.

“I think that your will in this matter is absolutely a noble thing, Aunt Felicia.” Kristina piped up with those complimentary words, placing a hand on her chest as if moved.

Going by this girl’s usual standards, in situations like these, she was planning on saying or doing something unpleasant next.

Felicia looked a bit uncomfortable, wearing a guarded expression.

However, the next words out of Kristina’s mouth were still enough to pierce through Felicia’s guard completely.

“After all, the people of the Wolf Clan will be calling you ‘Great Aunt Felicia’ from now on!”

Felicia was so taken by surprise that the breath she’d been unconsciously holding burst out with a loud, “Pffft!”

Apparently, she hadn't even considered that aspect of things. For someone like Felicia, who cared about her age, such a form of address could be considered unfairly cruel.

"Don't tease her too much with it, Kris, all right?" Yuuto patted Kristina once on the head, giving her that soft warning, just in case.

If Felicia got in a sour mood, things could get problematic really quick.

As someone who spent so much time together with her, Yuuto wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"F-Father!" Linnea looked bashful as she tried calling out to Yuuto. "W-well, it certainly feels different to address you that way."

Linnea, too, was dressed and made-up for the occasion, and looked incredibly pretty.

"Yeah, but now we're not just relatives," Yuuto replied. "We're real family. Let's do our best."

Before, Linnea had always been technically an "outside sibling" due to her being from another clan.

But now, with the new oaths that had been taken in this ceremony, she was part of the same Steel Clan as Yuuto.

Personally, Yuuto had already considered her as close as immediate family, so he was happy things had worked out this way.

"As far as plans for the city, we can use the existing fortress as a headquarters for now, but we of course need to get to work on building a clan palace quickly," Linnea went on. "As-is, I think this is far too plain of a headquarters for a clan that rules over six other clans. And our Hliðskjálf tower should be at least twice as tall as this current one."

As Linnea spoke, she moved next to the window and looked up at the sacred tower nearby.

Yuuto had proclaimed Gimlé as the Steel Clan capital at the same time that the clan was officially formed.

Iárnviðr was a city Yuuto had spent three years in now, ever since arriving in

Yggdrasil, so he had a lot of attachment to it. But Iárnviðr was the Wolf Clan's capital. There would be a variety of problems if he declared the same city to be the Steel Clan capital, so he'd reluctantly forced himself to choose someplace else.

At present, Gimlé was a larger and more populous city than Iárnviðr.

It was also at the center of a large region of fertile farming lands, known locally as Iðavöllr, "the Shining Fields."

It was quite a fitting capital for a great nation like the Steel Clan, which would hold jurisdiction over a wide territory.

Yuuto scratched the back of his head, a little wary of the idea. "We don't really have to make things that extravagant, though. Besides, it's expensive to do."

At heart, he was a man who prided himself on plain and simple effectiveness.

If there was enough money to spend on appearances, then he would rather spend it on improving the country's productivity.

"Of course, we won't need to make anything more showy than it needs to be," Linnea said. "However, with things in their present state, it will be cramped enough that it will affect people's daily work. And as for the Hliðskjálf, leaving it too short will affect the level of trust and reverence people have for the Steel Clan."

"Okay, I get it," Yuuto said, waving his hand at her. "All right, I'll leave that stuff to you, then."

Linnea had administrative skills that outclassed even Jörgen. If she was saying something was necessary, then it was best to trust her judgment.

Halfway-talented people tend to have difficulty leaving tasks to others, and prefer to take care of things themselves. That sort of attitude might work in a very small organization, but on a much larger scale, it breaks down.

Yuuto understood the concept of using the right person for the right task — and of truly trusting them to take care of it on their own.

It wasn't a flashy skill; in fact, some might call it a very ordinary, unimpressive

part of the organization. But as the chief of a very large-scale organization, it was essential to Yuuto's role that he already had such a skill.

"Do phones connect here, too?" Mitsuki asked, looking a bit worried.

She used her phone to stay in contact with her parents, so for her that was one of the most necessary points.

It was for Yuuto, as well. Being able to access information and do research on the internet was literally a lifeline at times, and so he couldn't afford to let that advantage go, either.

"Yeah, there's no problem with it," he said.

About half a month earlier, Yuuto had taken the divine mirror from Iárnviðr to the Hliðskjálf tower in Gimlé, and conducted an experiment there. He'd been able to connect to the internet normally and make calls too.

It seemed like regardless of physical location here, the key factor to communication was in having the "paired mirror" to the divine mirror back in modern-era Japan.

"Okay, then," Mitsuki said. "I'm gonna go ahead and try it out tonight."

"All right, make sure to give my best to your folks."

"I will, and I'll tell them we're getting along well, too."

"...Was that supposed to be a dig at me?"

"Huh? How would it be?" Mitsuki stared blankly at Yuuto.

It seemed she really didn't get the meaning of his question.

Yuuto laughed weakly for a moment before explaining.

"Ha ha ha... You know, this past month, I've been so busy that I haven't been able to spend much time with you. And starting tomorrow, I've gotta head off to go conquer the Panther Clan. I was just thinking how I've been doing wrong by you."

"No, it's okay. Yuu-kun, I understand that you're busy right now." Mitsuki laughed, waving a hand at Yuuto playfully.

She really was an amazing wife.

For Yuuto's sake, she'd been willing to give up her homeland, part from her family, and come here with him, and yet he still ended up leaving her alone at times. He felt so guilty about it.

And so, he made a firm decision.

"When this campaign is over, and I get back... let's have a proper wedding ceremony."

"Huh?" Once again, Mitsuki looked at him with a blank, puzzled expression.

But that was only for an instant, after which she broke out into a wide smile, filled with joy.

"Okay!" With big tears falling down her smiling cheeks, Mitsuki embraced Yuuto.

It was the day after the ceremony to formally establish the Steel Clan. In front of the Gimlé city gates, six thousand soldiers were gathered, all waiting with bated breath for the order to move out.

Another force of four thousand was expected to join them at Fólkvangr, and then another three thousand would join them from the western border city of Myrkviðr, where they were currently.

All told, it would be a giant army of thirteen thousand. Despite Yuuto's forces having suffered a fair number of casualties over the past two months, they had managed to surpass even the numbers they'd brought to the Battle of Gashina.

During the Second Battle of Élivágar River a month ago, a single glare from Yuuto had turned aside the Battle-Hungry Tiger's invasion, and then there had been his victory at the Körmt River, so one-sided that it was a historical first.

In no time at all, the excited tales had spread from person to person, and now the clans in the greater region all knew that Suoh-Yuuto the "war god" was alive and well.

And so, to gain back the honor they had lost in their previous failure to send aid, or to gain Yuuto's favor for the future, or to gain greater status within the new Steel Clan, the various subsidiary clans had all sent Yuuto plenty of soldiers.

Furthermore, since the campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan had been

announced quite publicly and widely, there were also a great deal of individual fighters flowing in from all around, requesting to join the Steel Clan in the hopes of making it rich or making a name for themselves under a winning banner.

Most of the applicants were the usual unremarkable riff-raff, but there were a few promising exceptions.

For example, an Einherjar who had once led a gang of bandits camped on the slopes of Mount Éljúðnir.

“Huh, so you’re actually alive,” Sigrún greeted him.

“Heh heh. It’s been a long time, Lady Sigrún. Forgive me for back then. I’ve gone and changed my ways, honestly.”

The former bandit leader squared his shoulders and continued.

“My name is Hildegard, from Zaltz Village! Th-this spring, I was blessed by our mother goddess Angrboða with the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin, and so I have come here to use my powers to their fullest under the banner of our great lord, Leginák Suoh-Yuuto!”

The former bandit leader wasn’t the only promising new recruit: there was also a young girl who had just awakened to her runic abilities as an Einherjar.

The stream of people applying to join still showed no signs of stopping, and so there was a strong possibility that the total size of the army would swell even further after the campaign started.

Yuuto would have been satisfied just to reach a benchmark of ten thousand, so he was happy to find out that the number exceeded his estimates.

“It is all due to your prestige, Father,” Linnea had explained to him.

To protect the borders of his territory, he’d assigned the new Wolf Clan patriarch Jörgen and the Horn Clan’s leader of subordinates Rasmus two thousand soldiers apiece. After that, he’d hired two thousand Panther Clan riders from out of the prisoners he’d captured, to use as reserves.

Yesterday, he’d received a message from Ginnar by messenger pigeon, stating that the Flame Clan had moved their troops to the border with the Lightning Clan.

With that, the preparations to handle the Lightning Clan were complete.

As for the domestic affairs of his clan while he was out at war, Yuuto had Linnea and Jörgen to take care of things, so he had nothing to worry about.

There was nothing holding him back; he could now focus all of his thoughts solely on the fight against the Panther Clan.

“All right, then. I’ll be going now.” Yuuto waved his hand casually, as if he were just going out for a short errand.

Mitsuki’s face, however, remained serious.

There was no doubt she was worried about him. That was why Yuuto had tried to pass things off as no big deal, but it looked like it hadn’t had any effect.

Mitsuki looked up at him, tears beginning welling in her eyes.

“Take... care of yourself, okay?” she said, getting a little choked up.

“I will. Don’t worry,” Yuuto assured her. “Over here I’m known as... a god of war, you know?”

Yuuto made a show of winking as his mouth curled up into a smirk, and he caught the air with his cape as he turned to climb the raised platform behind him.

He swept his gaze over the mass of warriors gathered in before him.

They all looked psyched up and ready to go. Yuuto could tell that they all believed they couldn’t lose. They were ready to go out there and grasp victory with their own two hands; it was written all over their faces.

Yuuto took in a long, deep breath, and then raised his voice to call out to them.

“Elite warriors of the Steel Clan! I am your patriarch, Suoh Yuuto!”

“Yeeaaaaahhh!!” A chorus of cheers erupted from the crowd.

The waves of sound rushed through Yuuto’s body, reverberating into his very core. He held up his left arm, and made a lowering motion with his hand. It was a gesture asking for silence.

The din of the crowd quickly quieted, and Yuuto continued.

“No longer are we divided by our individual clans. Under the banner of this Steel Clan, we are now joined as one! From this day forth, we must move forward in solidarity, working to support each other. The battles we face now are the greatest opportunity to deepen the bonds of this new union! Let us fight together, back-to-back, and eradicate our enemies!”

Yuuto paused and lifted up his right hand, which held a staff with its head modeled after a garmr.

The head of the staff swept downwards, pointing out ahead, and Yuuto cried out at the top of his lungs.

“All troops, move out!!”

“S-sir, I have a report!” the Panther Clan messenger cried, barging in to interrupt his patriarch’s dinner. “The Wolf Clan army has begun marching west! We’re getting word that soldiers are also gathering together at Fólkvangr and Myrkviðr, and estimates are that they total more than ten thousand all together!”

“Ten...?!” Hveðrungr was so shocked that he let the spoon drop right out of his hand. “D-don’t be absurd! How could they possibly have managed to gather that many troops?!”

As far as Hveðrungr knew, the Wolf Clan had suffered greatly from its huge defeat at the Battle of Gashina, as well as the losses from its defeat and retreat at the Second Battle of Élivágar River.

He had estimated that the army in this anti-Panther Clan campaign would only number around six or seven thousand, and that they definitely wouldn’t exceed eight thousand, in any case.

The news that they were coming for him with almost twice the number he had expected left Hveðrungr shaken.

“Grrrgggh...!” Hveðrungr growled, and bit down hard on his thumbnail in frustration.

The loss of seven thousand elite Panther Clan fighters during the previous battle at the Körmt River was a big issue. He’d sent for reinforcements from the Miðgarðr region, but even with those, he only had six thousand riders in total.

In addition to this huge difference in numbers, the enemy had their wagon wall tactic, as well as that new weapon, the “fire snakes.”

With such a large army, the enemy would surely have issues maintaining their supply lines, so holing up in the city and defending against a siege would normally be an option.

But the enemy also had the means to use that trump card of siege weaponry, the incredibly destructive trebuchet.

Myrkviðr, the city at the western edge of Horn Clan territory, was surrounded by abundant forests, and so there would be no shortage of usable lumber for them.

Hveðrungr had to admit that this situation was not looking good for him.

The messenger continued his report. “In addition, a few days ago, the Wolf Clan patriarch Suoh-Yuuto gave the position of patriarch to his former second-in-command, Jörgen, and...”

“What?!” Hveðrungr shouted.

People are creatures that often fail to completely comprehend what has been said to them if it is too far beyond what they are ready to hear.

Such was the case with Hveðrungr in that moment.

“The report says that he established his own new clan, the Steel Clan, with himself as its patriarch, and placed all of his affiliated clans, including his own former Wolf Clan, as child subsidiaries beneath him!” the messenger went on.

“The ‘Steel Clan,’ you say?” Beneath his mask, Hveðrungr’s brow furrowed.

As he recalled, steel was the key component in the nihontou.

It was also the first thing Yuuto had created after coming to Yggdrasil, and one of the driving forces behind the Wolf Clan’s advancement to where it was now.

I see, Hveðrungr pondered. In that sense, it is perhaps the most fitting name for the boy’s own clan.

“Throne-robbing rat,” Hveðrungr spat with irritation. “So you’ve finally shown

your true, greedy colors have you?”

The Wolf Clan was a clan with over a hundred years of proud history. Its name carried meaning and prestige. And yet this child, this nobody, was taking that precious name he’d inherited from his predecessor, and placing it beneath his own new creation. Perhaps it was the boy’s desire for personal fame, but it was a shameful display of arrogance.

Jörgen and Skáviðr had both degraded themselves, too, by forgiving such a despotic act. Apparently, their clan was Wolf in name only, for they had sunk to become no more than Yuuto’s domesticated dogs. To Hveðrungr, it was deplorable.

Sigyn was at fault here, too. He’d left seven thousand elite soldiers under her care, and she’d lost them. Now, thanks to her, here he was in this situation. He could kill her a hundred times and it wouldn’t be enough.

In this way, Hveðrungr dwelled upon one hateful target after another, cursing them all with heartfelt resentment.

He had to keep doing that, or else he would hear the whisper at the back of his mind. The devil’s voice that said:

The previous Wolf Clan patriarch Fárbauti’s choice was right, after all.

Someone like you doesn’t have what it takes to defeat Yuuto.

He’s much greater than you are.

He could never, never acknowledge such things.

If he acknowledged them, it would repudiate everything he’d done so far, everything he was.

And so he had to cover it up with hatred.

With the light of madness ablaze in his eyes, as if he were calling out to himself to push onwards, Hveðrungr cried out in a voice like a howl:

“Don’t think you can stay so full of yourself for long, Yuuto! Go ahead and come; I’ll strike you down when you do. This time I’ll win, and when I do, I’ll prove that I was right all along!”

ACT 6

Ten days had passed since the Steel Clan army's departure from Gimlé.

They had finished joining with the force of three thousand at Myrkviðr, and were now camped out in the open plateau lands a bit further to the west.

In front of them were high, sheer cliffs, through the middle of which ran a narrow pass.

Up until now, that pass through the cliffs had been the buffer zone between the Wolf and Panther Clans.

War was fundamentally fought with the strength of numbers.

It was difficult to take a large army through such a narrow pass, and if the enemy were to be ready and waiting at the other side's entrance, one would effectively be outnumbered, no matter what.

Neither side had a way to clinch things, and so they had been in a stalemate.

"Well, now that we've got those firecrackers, this is going to be a breeze!" Haugspori declared, with a carefree attitude.

As the time to meet the enemy was drawing close, the commanders had convened a war council meeting to decide which strategic course to take.

"Uhh..." Yuuto trailed off awkwardly.

He did understand why Haugspori would feel that way. After all, the firecrackers had thrown seven thousand enemy troops into panic in a mere instant, leading his forces to a grand victory the likes of which had never before been seen.

After that, anyone might think that using them was basically the same as guaranteeing a win.

Yuuto didn't like the idea of throwing cold water on his optimism, but it was something he had to speak up about.

"We actually have barely any of those left anymore."

"Huh?" Haugspori's jaw fell open.

It seemed that he'd so counted on having them that, for a moment, he couldn't understand what Yuuto had just said.

After a beat, it finally clicked, and he shouted, "Whaaaat?! Wh-wh-why is that?!"

"We didn't make those things here," Yuuto answered. "I brought them here with me from my homeland, Japan. So there was only a limited number of them, you see, and we used most of them up back at the Körmt River."

In order to panic seven thousand soldiers, it took an appropriately large amount of firecrackers to do the job.

He had layered three large plastic bags together and then stuffed them full with as many as he could before returning, so there had been a fair amount. But, if he had only used them sparingly, that would have risked allowing the enemy to regain some of their composure. And so he had decided it was better to err on the side of excess in putting them to use.

"The design for them is pretty simple, but without modern materials, we'd need bamboo, and that's not something we can get ahold of in Steel Clan lands."

"Wait, then what are we going to do?!" Haugspori yelped.

"Don't worry, I've got something else prepared that we can use instead. Felicia."

"Right!" Yuuto's beautiful adjutant responded as if she were ready and waiting for his signal, and softly placed an earthenware object on the table.

It was round, and a little bigger than a man's fist.

There was one spot on the round object where it looked like there was a hole sealed over with paper mixed with clay, with a string running out of it.

"We're using ceramic shells instead of bamboo, but otherwise the basic process for making the things is pretty much the same as with firecrackers, and we can use them the same way, too," Yuuto said. "My people named this weapon the tetsuhau when they first encountered it. It's a type of weapon called a bomb."

It was a tetsuhau — the Japanese name for a centuries-old explosive weapon, written with the Chinese characters for “burning” and “iron.”

The pronunciation of this name, and the Chinese characters used, both bore a strong resemblance to the Japanese name for early matchlock firearms, but their usage and designs were different.

Japan learned of this explosive weapon during the time of the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century.

The Mongols and Chinese had called them zhèntiānléi, a name often translated into English as “thunder crash bomb.”

They were a kind of pre-modern grenade, created by taking a round ceramic shell about twenty centimeters in diameter and filling it with gunpowder, along with sharp bits of iron and glass shrapnel. One then simply lit the fuse and threw it at the enemy.

Their basic function was to use the loud noise of the explosion to create fear and shock in the enemy soldiers and their horses, and they didn’t have a huge amount of lethal force. However, they still had enough of it to be considered a dangerous weapon in that sense, too.

The incident with the explosive noises that had created such a stir in Iárnviðr a month prior had been caused by a series of experiments with these bombs.

“There was no shortage of raw materials, so we managed to prepare a pretty good amount of these things,” Yuuto said.

Gunpowder required three ingredients: charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter.

Charcoal and sulfur were relatively easy to get ahold of in the mountainous territory of the Wolf Clan.

The biggest hurdle was saltpeter, but as it happened, the Japanese method of artificially producing the stuff (invented around the end of the Sengoku Period) was already known to the people of Yggdrasil.

Saltpeter was already in wide use here — as a medicinal ointment.

Traditionally, the ointment was made by mixing saltpeter with other medicinally recognized ingredients such as milk, powdered snake’s skin or

turtle’s shell, cinnamon, myrtle, thyme, willow bark, figs, pears, dates, or wine.

Apparently it was also sometimes mixed into beer and taken as an oral medicine.

Normally, producing a batch of artificial saltpeter was a process that took about two years, but thanks to its widespread availability here, they’d been able to gather enough of it to suit their needs for this campaign.

Seriously, that ointment really was amazing.

Haugspori slowly, timidly picked up the bomb, still seemingly afraid it might explode unexpectedly. “Hmm... Still, won’t these be a bit too heavy?”

He cradled it in one hand and tested its weight.

“If you tried to get close enough to the enemy to throw this and hit them, you’d get arrows pouring down on you the whole time.”

The firecrackers had been much smaller and lighter, and their shape made them easy to attach to arrows.

Haugspori’s men were all masters with the bow and so, even with the added weight on the arrows, they’d been able to shoot them at the enemy from a good range.

However, something like this couldn’t be tied to an arrow, naturally, and even if it somehow could, its weight would make the arrows fly at a far shorter range than the enemy’s.

“I’ve already got a plan for that, too,” Yuuto said. “That’s why I made these bombs as small as they are. If I didn’t, they wouldn’t fit.”

Haugspori looked at Yuuto quizzically. “Fit, sir? Fit on what?”

Yuuto’s lips curled into a mischievous grin.

“On our other new weapon.”

Once the strategy meeting ended, the Steel Clan forces resumed their westward march.

As the army began to move through the narrow pass between the cliffs, Sigrún’s mounted special forces unit led the way, at the very head of the

formation.

Yuuto had predicted that the remaining Panther Clan forces would have less than half the number of his own, and the intel from Kristina's reports seemed to back that up.

However, fighting in a narrow environment would put a limit on the number of soldiers who could engage the enemy at once.

Furthermore, the Panther Clan riders were all skilled and mighty warriors.

That would make this narrow pass the perfect topography for their smaller force to fight the Steel Clan's more massive army.

"Do you think they'll come?" Bömburr asked.

"They'll come," Sigrún responded curtly to her vice-captain.

The Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr was actually Felicia's biological older brother, Loptr. As Sigrún and Felicia had been thick as thieves since childhood, Sigrún had gotten to know the man.

He'd often come off as carefree and even a little silly at times, but he was exceptionally skilled at discerning the weaknesses of his opponents, and he would strike those weaknesses without fail.

He wasn't the type of person who would let the Steel Clan just waltz right through this narrow pass unhindered.

"And that means we'll be the ones earning the title of 'First Spear' for being the first in the Steel Clan to meet the enemy in this war," she went on. "One could ask for no greater honor."

Sigrún's cheeks were slightly flushed as she said this, a bit of a rarity for someone who was usually quite stone-faced.

"Oh... I see." Bömburr sighed, a troubled look on his face.

Bömburr was still in his mid-thirties, but his hairline had already receded to the top of his skull, and his body lacked the lean, muscular build of some of his peers, so he looked just like any dull and unremarkable middle-aged man. That physical appearance only seemed to amplify the air of melancholy coming off of him now.

“What, are you scared of them?” Sigrún asked.

“Yes, I’d say I am.” Bömburr brought his horse closer to Sigrún’s and lowered his voice so only she could hear him. “I mean, they’re all better than us with the bow and with horses, aren’t they?”

“True,” Sigrún acknowledged without hesitation.

She and her unit had moved from the Wolf Clan to the Steel Clan, but they knew themselves to be the strongest fighters in this new clan as well, and took pride in it.

In all likelihood, they were the only ones in the Steel Clan who could fight head-to-head with the top-notch soldiers of the Panther Clan and stand a real chance of winning.

However, a real chance was still the most they would have.

If, for example, one of the average Panther Clan soldiers and one of the Múspell special forces were to fight one-on-one, the chances for the special forces soldier winning were around one in five. That was how big the difference in fighting expertise was between them.

“But that won’t be an issue,” Sigrún went on. “We have these.”

With that, she held up a crossbow, one of the weapons which had served the Wolf Clan well through many a battle.

There were a couple of key differences between this crossbow and the ones they had used before.

First, it was quite a bit larger.

Second — and this was the biggest difference — the ammunition fixed to the crossbow stock was not a standard arrowhead bolt, but a miniaturized version of the new gunpowder bomb.

“I assume everyone’s gotten the hang of using them?” Sigrún asked.

“Well, yes, they have,” Bömburr replied. “It wasn’t very difficult, after all.”

He made that statement nonchalantly, despite the fact that, normally, a bow of that size should require so much strength to pull the string back that even

Sigrún would struggle with it.

“Apparently these things were really difficult to make, though,” Sigrún said. “In fact, it was these rather than the gunpowder that took the most ti—”

Suddenly Sigrún cut herself off, readied her crossbow, and shouted, “Everyone, prepare for battle! The Panther Clan is here!”

She had spotted the figures of a few dozen riders in the distance ahead, lined up in five columns and charging this way.

With only that limited number, they definitely weren’t attacking with the aim of defeating Sigrún’s forces outright.

They would use their exceptionally speedy horses to conduct a preemptive assault, then switch nimbly to a retreat before their opponents could recover and counter. They would then turn around and fire arrows backwards at any enemies who chased them.

That was surely their intended move. As a clan of nomadic horse-riders, hit-and-run tactics were their specialty.

Sigrún herself had practiced the same strategy against the Hoof Clan army, under the code name “Pattern B: Mongol.”

“Hmph, so they really thought such a worn-out tactic would keep working, not only against us, but against Father?” she asked derisively. “Cranequin squad! Light fuses!”

As Sigrún shouted the order, and she lit her own bomb’s fuse... using a modern lighter.

The fuse burned quickly, and with a hiss, the fire transferred to the flammable paper clay on the bomb.

“Fire!!” she shouted and pulled the trigger lever of her crossbow. The latch dropped down, and the string fired, launching the bomb with incredible force.

She was still far outside of the arrow range of her enemies, those proven masters of the bow, the Panther Clan. And yet, her bomb easily flew the distance and reached its target.

Bang!

It burst into fragments with an ear-splitting concussive sound.

There were shrill cries from the enemies' horses, and several of them reared up on their hind legs or began jumping this way and that, thrown into a state of utter terror.

A short second later, the volley of bombs loosed by Sigrún's men also hit, and the chaos spread rapidly.

In addition to the terrible sound, fragments of metal and glass packed into the bombs were driven into the horses' flesh. It wasn't enough to create fatal wounds, but it did cause incredible pain, so it naturally drove them even further out of control.

The Panther Clan were the greatest in Yggdrasil when it came to handling horses, but even they couldn't do anything to calm the animals in this state.

"Chaaarge!" Sigrún hollered.

And that was when her special forces, still in formation and in perfect coordination, charged forward in an assault.

This was no longer even a real contest.

In the blink of an eye, her fighters felled most of the enemy, except for a scant few who managed to flee for their lives. It was unquestionably a full victory.

However, Sigrún did not even flash a smile, and instead turned to address her soldiers sternly.

"Don't let your guard down. This could be followed by a second and third wave of attacks. Reload your weapons!"

As she shouted this, she placed another explosive onto her crossbow stock.

She then reached into the tool bag fastened to the back of her horse and pulled out a flat, circular object made of iron, with jagged notches all the way around its edge.

She affixed it to a spot on the butt of the stock, then pulled out a second flat iron object, thin and long, but with the same sort of jagged notches on its edge. She hooked one end of it onto the crossbow string, and fit the notches on its other end into the notches of the metal disc on the stock.

With this, the setup was complete.

Sigrún grabbed the handle attached to the disc and cranked it ’round and ’round, rotating the disc in the same fashion as one might do with a small millstone.

As soon as the disc began rotating, the long metal plate attached to it began pulling back the crossbow string with ease.

This was despite the fact that the string looked so heavy that even a grown man might fail to pull it back.

This was the cranequin crossbow, which had been widely used in Europe during the thirteenth century.

The notched disc was a gear, and it formed a set with the longer metal plate, known as a “rack and pinion.” By using them in tandem, one could take advantage of the principle of mechanical leverage, and pull back a bowstring with a very heavy draw weight while only using a small amount of force.

In the world of Yggdrasil, where simple bows were still the norm, this technology provided an overwhelming advantage in projectile force and range.

It even enabled the use of ammunition like these mini-bombs based on the tetsuhau, much heavier than standard arrows or bolts, and they could still be fired from outside the enemy’s range.

These crossbows had just one disadvantage, a crippling one, which was that it took around fifty seconds to prepare and fire a shot. In that time, one of the Panther Clan archers could fire off ten arrows from his standard bow.

However, one could also have their first crossbow shot pre-loaded and ready before a battle began. When combined with the explosive ammunition that served to panic and confuse the enemy, the two weapons covered for each other’s shortcomings, while boosting each other’s strengths. It was the perfect combination.

This was the true form of the anti-Panther Clan secret weapon Yuuto had tasked Ingrid with preparing.

“I see, so that’s it...” Hveðrungr muttered bitterly as he looked down upon

this scene from atop one of the high cliffs, where he had watched the battle from beginning to end.

When he had first received a report about the so-called “fire snakes” crushing a force of seven thousand Panther Clan fighters, he hadn’t been able to quite picture just what they were. And so, he had decided to see for himself using a few disposable pawns: He’d picked out some soldiers known for having problems with insubordination, and had thrown them at the enemy to see what happened.

Standing at Hveðrungr’s side, Narfi gulped. “A fearsome weapon... more so than I ever could have imagined,” he said, his voice shaking.

He was the type who always made it a point to present himself as calm and unflappable, but his handsome face was pulled taut with visible fear.

“It is.” Hveðrungr was forced to agree, however much he hated doing so.

Based only on what he’d heard secondhand, the reports had sounded so absurd that he hadn’t been able to dismiss the suspicion that things had been greatly exaggerated out of fear.

However, now that he’d seen this for himself, it really was a weapon just as terrifying as he’d been told.

The description of a snake made of fire writhing along the ground still didn’t make sense, but likely that was because the weapon had been changed and improved even further over the past month.

“Wh-what shall we do, sir?” Narfi stammered. “We can’t even fight with a weapon like that being used against us.”

“Grrrhh...” A pained growl was all that escaped Hveðrungr’s lips.

Hveðrungr was a man with great powers of observation, who could ascertain his adversary’s weakness on the spot, and yet even he could not think up a suitable counter-strategy in this situation.

Human soldiers could be informed about the properties of the weapon, and so it should be possible to suppress its ability to cause panic in people.

But such explanations would be lost on horses.

They might possibly be trained to gradually become accustomed to it over time, but to do that, he'd need his own supply of the weapon, which he didn't have.

Even worse, it could fire ammunition from far outside the range of his own clan's arrows.

To put it bluntly, it was far beyond his ability to deal with.

If there was anyone who could flip this desperate situation on its head, it was Hveðrungr's sworn brother Steinþórr, the monster known as the Battle-Hungry Tiger, who always managed to defy common sense.

But Steinþórr was currently occupied dealing with the Flame Clan, which had moved its soldiers to the Lightning Clan's border.

"That fool said he would send me reinforcements, and yet when the time comes, it turns out he's completely useless," Hveðrungr spat with contempt.

He had supplied the Lightning Clan with war funds as well as processed iron, cooperating with them and helping to greatly strengthen their military, and yet their patriarch was proving to be such an ungrateful, unfaithful man.

What should he care about the enemy to the south? Steinþórr should have ignored something unimportant like that, and come to rescue his sworn brother. Wasn't that the entire point of the Oath of the Chalice?!

But all of Hveðrungr's self-centered cursing of others would do nothing to change the situation on the ground here.

At this rate, he could do nothing except wait for his enemy to close in on him.

He couldn't bear the thought of that.

Losing to Yuuto without even being able to fight back was the one thing his pride couldn't allow. There had to be something! Something that would work!

Hveðrungr desperately racked his thoughts for an answer...

"Ah...!"

And like a flash of lightning through his brain, it came to him.

It was an idea that truly was akin to the whisper of a devil.

An unforgivable, beastly and loathsome strategy.

However, Hveðrungr did not flinch back from it.

The eyes behind his mask filled with a dark madness, and he gave it voice.

“Burn them.”

“What? B-burn what, sir?” Narfi asked, his voice trembling.

He was unclear what his patriarch meant by that, but he sensed an uncanny feeling of danger in Hveðrungr’s voice.

Hveðrungr’s lips curled into a cruel, sneering grin. “Burn down the villages, towns, and forts within our territory, all of them. Burn everything other than the people!”

“We finally made it through, huh?” As Yuuto exited the mountain pass, he gave a sigh of relief, but then frowned. “I’d like to say this means we can relax for the moment, but the fact that there was only one attack is actually pretty unsettling.”

That narrow pass had been the perfect terrain for the Panther Clan to fight without worrying about their numbers disadvantage. Being allowed to pass through it so easily made Yuuto suspect that something was up.

“Perhaps it simply shows that the bombs were just that effective?” Felicia suggested.

“Hmm...” Yuuto continued to look troubled.

There was the empty fortress strategy at Gimlé, the use of firecrackers at the Körmt River, the secret agreement with the powerful Flame Clan to the south, the successful formation of the Steel Clan, the coordination of this campaign against the Panther Clan, and now this relatively safe passage through the cliffs at the border. Everything seemed to be going far too well.

Misfortune rarely arrives alone, and likewise, when things are going your way, good things tend to pile one on top of the other. That sort of momentum was part of life.

So, perhaps after all of the pain and struggles that had come before, this was the pendulum swinging the other way.

However, Yuuto couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had.

Going by his past experiences, whenever things were clearly going his way, it meant that there was an unexpected pitfall waiting somewhere right in front of him.

Such had been the case once upon a time, when he’d gotten so caught up in his own success, without concerning himself with the emotions of those around him, that he’d driven Loptr into jealousy, madness, and murder.

bsssh!

There was a burst of static noise from his handheld transceiver, followed by a familiar voice.

“Father... this is Kristina.”

Her voice was shaking slightly.

“What’s wrong?!” Yuuto demanded, his face already changing color.

Kristina was a girl who always put on airs, and never let others read her true feelings. In other words, something must have happened to shake her up enough to be openly emotional.

“The village... where we had been planning to set up camp today... is on fire!”

“This is...!” Faced with the scene in front of him, Yuuto couldn’t find any more words. He simply stood, staring.

Felicia was covering her mouth with both hands and shaking, large tears welling up in her eyes. “S-such cruelty... what have you done, my brother...”

The huge, billowing flames of the blaze were swaying, giving off waves of heat that burned the skin.

It wasn’t a mere one or two buildings; the entire village was burning.

And that wasn’t all. Fires had been set to all of the fields and forests surrounding the village, as well.

The wildly rampaging fires looked almost alive, like a writhing serpent made of flames.

“It isn’t just here,” Kristina reported, scowling. “All of the villages in this

region have been set on fire in the same way.”

Yuuto could see that even she had gone pale.

She was human, after all. There was no way witnessing such a ghastly scene firsthand wouldn’t be shocking for her.

“I myself once burned down a village, so I know I don’t have room to talk,” Yuuto said. “But even still, this is horrible.”

“That isn’t true, Big Brother!” Felicia exclaimed. “This is completely different from the Vánagandr. You gave the people of that village your protection and care, did you not?”

Felicia cast a pained glance over at some of the people who had escaped from the burning village.

One of them was completely covered in soot, while another had burns all over his body. A mother stood clutching her baby, both of them crying.

Yuuto could hear the sounds of wailing and crying coming from all around, and it felt like it was piercing his chest.

He didn’t think he’d be able to forget these agonizing cries anytime soon.

This truly was like a proverbial scene out of hell.

“Looting and destruction in enemy territory is something I could at least understand.” Skáviðr’s voice shook with fury. “But how could he do this to the people of his own nation, those whom he had a duty to protect?!”

Skáviðr was always so cold and detached in everything he dealt with; this was the first time Yuuto had ever seen him so openly angry.

This was the man who had become the enforcer of capital punishment, taking on a role that would make him hated, all for the sake of protecting peace and order in his nation.

And when Hveðrungr had still been known as Loptr, Skáviðr had been his teacher in the martial arts.

But perhaps those things made this all the more impossible for him to forgive.

“Has he finally lost his mind?!” Skáviðr shouted, and slammed his fist into the

ground, as if unable to express his indignation any other way.

Yuuto felt just as deeply affected as the others. But more than anger, he was shot through by a feeling of cold disgust.

“No, he’s not crazy,” Yuuto said. “In fact, I’m impressed with him... though it makes me sick. The bastard saw right through to my weakness, and hit me there perfectly.”

“What... do you mean?” Skáviðr asked.

Yuuto made a disgusted face, and replied, “Now these people have nowhere to live. Nothing to eat. Their fields, and even the forests, were all burned; there’s nothing they can do. The other nearby villages are all the same. That means we’re the only ones who can save them.”

“Ah...! That was his objective...?” Skáviðr’s face had been flushed with anger, but now it quickly drained of color.

“Yeah, most likely,” Yuuto answered.

When setting out to fight a war, one extremely important challenge was whether and how an army could secure enough food for themselves.

Transporting supplies from home all the way into enemy territory cost a lot of time and effort. Because Yuuto didn’t want to cause harm to the local residents, even in enemy territory, he always stockpiled a sufficient amount of food before going to war. But for most of Yggdrasil, standard practice during a war of invasion was to procure food locally from the land and people.

If Yuuto was to save these people, he would have to do exactly the opposite: handing out the food supplies he’d brought with him.

Yuuto groaned and bit his lower lip in frustration. “If we go around helping every refugee, then there’s no way we’ll have enough food left.”

Back when he had heard the truth from Saya Takao, Yuuto had resolved himself to become a cold-hearted demon if necessary, with no mercy for his enemies.

However, faced with these innocent people who’d lost their homes and had nothing to eat, he just couldn’t bring himself to abandon them to their fates,

even if they weren't his own countrymen.

Hveðrungr had understood that about Yuuto, and thus chosen this violent course of action.

"He's gone too far," Skáviðr said. "Does he not care at all about how people will view such despicable acts?"

"But it's also effective," Yuuto replied flatly.

It was the so-called "scorched earth" strategy.

A nation defending itself against invasion could opt to burn down and destroy its own villages and towns, pastures, forests, wells, and food stores — anything that could be utilized by the enemy. In doing so, they would leave the advancing invaders with no ability to obtain food, fuel, or lodging.

The Steel Clan army had brought their own food supplies with them on the march, but for other supplies like firewood, they'd planned to procure them from the local area.

Without campfires, they wouldn't be able to cook the food they'd brought.

Water was another thing they'd expected to be able to replenish locally as they traveled, but considering this situation, Yuuto couldn't discount the chance that the wells had all been poisoned.

Without buildings, they'd all have to camp outside, and they'd have to do it without trees.

Trees would have given them a minimum amount of protection against the elements, but with those gone, the soldiers would see a sharp increase in fatigue.

And then there were the refugees. In all likelihood, the further the Steel Clan advanced, the more their enemies would destroy their own country, displacing even more people.

That would place a heavier and heavier burden on the Steel Clan's resources.

There was no doubt it would slow down their advance, too.

Exhale... inhale... exhale... Yuuto took several long, deep breaths.

The Yuuto of several months prior would have decided to take these refugees and withdraw, preventing more destruction.

But the Yuuto here now had a reason why he couldn't afford to back down.

"Okay, then, Big Brother," Yuuto said. "Bring it on. I'll play your game. Felicia, give these villagers some food, and tell them to head for Myrkviðr. And then send out a message by carrier pigeon to Linnea! Tell her to keep sending food this way, by the cartload!"

"Keh heh heh, you naive little child." Hveðrungr chuckled with satisfaction at the report that the Steel Clan was distributing food to the displaced.

That was just what he'd expected.

One who stood above others as their lord must, at times, make cold-hearted decisions.

Allowing one's mind to be swayed by compassion could lead to a decision which killed five or ten times as many people as it saved.

And likewise, there were actions which would seem barbaric and cruel to the vast majority of people, yet would lead to an outcome where the greatest number of lives were protected.

Hveðrungr's scorched earth strategy had come about because, after much deliberation, it was the strategy which would lead to the least number of casualties among his own soldiers, and the only one which granted him a chance at victory.

It was also a course of action that Yuuto would surely never have been able to imitate if he were in Hveðrungr's position. He would have remained stuck, unable to cross such a line.

Even with all of his knowledge pulled from the land beyond the heavens, that was Yuuto's limit as a man.

"Yet you continue to advance," Hveðrungr murmured. "That, at least, is a bit unexpected."

The Yuuto that Hveðrungr knew would have likely pulled back after realizing that advancing further would lead to more victims among the populace.

Showing concern for even the enemy's subjects was a ridiculous level of kindness, but that was just the kind of man he was.

The fact that he was continuing to march forward instead meant that perhaps two years of serving as a patriarch had finally started to rub off on him a bit.

"Well, luckily for me, that happens to work exactly in my favor." Hveðrungr cackled.

If Yuuto had withdrawn, the immediate threat to Hveðrungr would have passed, but he still would have been left with nothing but heavy losses to his side.

He needed to at least deal some damage back in kind, or none of this would be worth it.

The Steel Clan continued their advance.

And without any qualms, Hveðrungr continued his dispassionate strategy of burning all of the villages ahead of the Steel Clan's invasion route.

The Steel Clan, likewise, continued taking in the refugees.

Even after distributing food to everyone, the invading army still managed to sustain itself, which showed just how thoroughly they'd prepared their supplies before launching their campaign.

According to intel from Hveðrungr's spies, the one in charge of logistics was the Horn Clan patriarch, Linnea, who had also become the Steel Clan second-in-command.

Among the Wolf Clan, Jörgen was the most talented in this area, but even he must have had difficulty preparing everything himself in just one month. This girl Linnea was quite impressive for one so young.

At last, the Steel Clan closed in to within two days' march from Hveðrungr's stronghold in the city of Nóatún, the former Hoof Clan capital.

That was when a very auspicious report arrived at Hveðrungr's desk, via his general, Narfi.

"We have new information from one of our undercover spies, sir," Narfi said. "Today, a very large shipment of supplies was shipped out from Myrkviðr by

wagon caravan.”

“Heh, and there it is. I knew that if they kept handing out their own food like party favors, they would reach the limit of their stock.”

Hveðrungr clenched his fist triumphantly.

By mixing in several of his spies among the refugees, he’d managed to get them embedded within the Steel Clan encampment.

“You seem quite happy, sir,” Narfi commented.

“Oh, I am. With this, I can deal a decisive blow to the Steel Clan.”

“Er... sir? If they receive more supplies, won’t they encroach upon us even further? Do you perhaps plan to burn down Nóatún as well?”

Narfi’s expression was stiff as he asked this. He likely hadn’t been able to come to terms with his doubts about the concept of setting fire to his own clan’s territory.

Narfi was known as one of the sharper minds within the Panther Clan, and so Hveðrungr had come to rely on him for much, but apparently this was the limit of his thinking. Apparently he had no real understanding of strategy.

Still, if even this man was ready to express his doubts, that meant there must already be quite a few within the Panther Clan rank and file who were coming forward with misgivings about Hveðrungr. He would need to settle this conflict sooner rather than later.

“Your report means things have fallen into place before I ended up needing to burn the city. That’s why I’m relieved.”

“I don’t understand, sir,” Narfi said. “Why does the Steel Clan resupplying mean that we can deal a decisive blow to them?”

“Hmph. Why do you think I held off on fighting them for so long, dragging us backwards and pulling them so far into our lands? It was to stretch out their supply lines.”

Indeed, everything had been in order to create this situation.

This operation would likely lower Hveðrungr’s support within the Panther

Clan. However, he didn't care.

With this, he could score a blow against Yuuto.

That was the only thought in Hveðrungr's mind right now.

He pointed to a spot on the map spread out on his desk, and then traced a line west from that point.

"Their supply line stretches across Panther Clan lands, with no cities or forts to serve as safe checkpoints. We have the territorial advantage, as well. Striking at their weakest point will be a trifling matter."

"Oh! I see now!" At last, understanding dawned in Narfi's eyes.

Idiot, Hveðrungr thought bitterly.

But in truth, it would have been unfair to blame Narfi for his ignorance.

Hveðrungr had no way of knowing this, but in recorded history, the first use of the scorched earth strategy had been by the Scythians in the sixth century B.C.E., against the invading armies of Darius I, the fourth Persian king of the Achaemenid Empire.

Rather than Narfi being dense, Hveðrungr's strategic vision was so great that he had employed a military strategy from nearly a thousand years ahead of his time.

"If we seize their incoming supplies now, they'll be left isolated in enemy territory with nothing left for their soldiers," Hveðrungr sneered. "Their ten thousand strong army far outnumbers us, but now those great numbers will become a noose around their own necks!"

People needed to eat in order to survive. The more people there were, the more food was needed to supply them.

So, then, what would happen if the enemy's stores of food hit bottom? First, there would unmistakably be small outbreaks of fighting over what little remained.

Those would eventually grow more violent and riotous, and the chain of command would break down, stripping them of their power as a unified army.

If the Panther Clan attacked at that moment, crushing them would be as easy as taking candy from a baby.

Certainly, they'd have no chance at winning a head-on battle right now, thanks to the Steel Clan's wagon wall defense and their fire-snakes weapons.

However, there were other strategies available.

Hveðrungr could weaken his adversary's army without ever fighting them directly.

"Now, let us be off, Narfi," he said with satisfaction. "We're about to give those fools a taste of living hell!"

"They're here," Hveðrungr whispered to himself under his breath. He was crouched in a thicket, holding perfectly still.

The Steel Clan had already passed through this area, and so it was under their control. On the other hand, since any forts and other structures had been burned down beforehand, there were no guarded watch posts. It hadn't been that difficult to infiltrate the area with a small force.

It was another move made possible by the high mobility of the Panther Clan riders.

At present, though, Hveðrungr was dismounted, his unit's horses being kept out of sight a short distance away.

He stared out from his hiding place. Far ahead of him, a bunch of armed soldiers were walking along in an orderly formation.

Another man hidden in the thicket next to Hveðrungr spoke up.

"Sir, I recognize the man at the very front," he said, squinting at the distant soldiers. "He was leading the Horn Clan forces at the Körmt River. I believe his name is Haugspori."

At this distance, Hveðrungr couldn't tell those men apart at all.

The Panther Clan soldier next to him right now was just an ordinary fighter from the ranks, without any particularly remarkable achievements. But even so, like the rest of his nomad brethren, he had spent his life growing up on the wide grassland steppes, countless thousands of mornings and evenings spent

watching the sun rise and set on a distant, unimpeded horizon.

His long-range vision was something that Hveðrungr, born and raised in a city, could never hope to match.

If this man said the enemy soldier at the front of the line was Haugspori, then it had to be so.

“Oho, then it appears we’ve got the right target,” Hveðrungr smirked.

He knew from previous intel that the Horn Clan patriarch was the person in charge of directing the Steel Clan’s logistics.

There was a pretty good chance that Haugspori, the Horn Clan assistant second-in-command, had been put in charge of the soldiers guarding the wagon supply train.

In fact, he could see from here that these Horn Clan soldiers were acting very cautious, scanning the area around them as they walked.

“There it is, sir, the supply train of pack horses. There’s quite a lot of them!”

“I see! Then it’s just as our intelligence said. All right, go and send a message to Narfi right away!” Hveðrungr ordered.

“Yes, sir!” Still crouching, the Panther Clan soldier quickly but quietly moved away through the brush.

Hveðrungr stayed crouched low, holding still and waiting. After a short while, things went into motion.

“Enemy attack! Enemy attaaaaack!” Shouts rang out in the Horn Clan ranks, and tension rippled through them like a blast of wind.

The soldiers readied their crossbows. Hveðrungr turned to look in the direction they were aiming, and saw a squad of several hundred riders headed their way, kicking up dust as their horses charged forward.

Naturally, this squad was led by Narfi, who had received the message Hveðrungr sent just earlier.

“Don’t panic, men!” Haugspori called. “The Panther Clan isn’t a threat to us anymore. Cranequin units, at the ready! Light fuses!”

At Haugspori's command, his soldiers produced small, handheld objects, which they seemed to press with their thumbs — producing a flame instantly.

Hveðrungr had no idea what had just happened.

During the previous battle, he had been so focused on watching what was happening to his own soldiers that he hadn't noticed it happening then.

It was common knowledge that starting a fire meant first creating an ember, which required the correct tools and a bit of time. Being able to create fire out of nothing just with a press of the thumb seemed like no less than witchcraft.

Without a doubt, that had to be something from Yuuto.

If only I had a tool like his, that would let me access such an unlimited store of knowledge like he does...

Hveðrungr felt like he was going mad from jealousy.

"Firrrrrrre!"

One after another, the soldiers' crossbows fired off their round, ceramic ammunition.

The projectiles flew over a terrifyingly long distance, reaching Narfi's riders while they were still very far away.

Bang! Ban-ban-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-bang!

They exploded in rapid succession, producing an echoing cacophony that seemed to rip the air apart.

It was unbearably loud to Hveðrungr's ears even from a great distance away, so he knew it had to be much worse for the people dealing with it up close.

Indeed, it was enough to make Narfi's charge come to a complete halt.

The horses were throwing off their riders, or trying to break off and run in random directions. It was a shameful sight to behold.

"The enemy's confused!" Haugspori called. "Melee fighters, charrrrrrge!"

"Yaaaaahhh!!" The Horn Clan foot soldiers shouted a war cry, readied their spears, and ran forward.

At the Körmt River and in the border pass, this tactic had left the Panther Clan riders powerless to fight back, but now they knew ahead of time that the fire-snakes would make their horses unusable. They also knew that the fire-snakes weren't powerful enough to cause lethal wounds.

By sharing that knowledge, they'd ensured that the riders themselves no longer went into a panic.

Narfi's band of riders all quickly dismounted, readied their bows, and fired. The arrows whooshed sharply through the air.

"Gwah!"

"Gyaahh!"

Several Horn Clan soldiers cried out as the arrows found their marks.

However, this was still a battle with vastly uneven numbers.

The Horn Clan supply escort had at least a thousand men. The Panther Clan squad, on the other hand, only had around two hundred, as they'd needed to keep their numbers small to avoid detection before their surprise attack.

The Horn Clan fighters pressed forward, ignoring the arrows raining down on them, and the Panther Clan fighters hurriedly turned and began to flee.

"Chase them! Chase them!"

"Do it! Take them down!"

"Kill them!!"

The Horn Clan soldiers started shouting vigorously, goading each other on, and they began to give chase.

When the promise of victory clouded one's vision, the first instinct was to chase after a fleeing enemy. It was an extremely common occurrence on the battlefield.

Everything was going according to plan.

Hveðrungr was impressed by the Panther Clan soldiers. Even without their horses, they still had an excellent knack for hit-and-run tactics.

By all appearances, they looked like they were simply fleeing because they

were overwhelmed by the strength of their enemy. It was a fine performance.

“All right, the time has come! Everyone, follow me!” Hveðrungr shouted and stood up from his hiding place in the thicket, and ran forward.

Running right behind him on foot were three hundred of his best hand-picked soldiers.

If they couldn’t use their horses, they could simply fight without them. As had been demonstrated just a moment ago, the Panther Clan were fighters of masterful skill, and being on foot didn’t change that.

The sound of Haugspori’s frantic shouts echoed from far away. “Gah! An ambush?! Everyone, come back! Get back here!”

It was already too late.

Once a tight formation of soldiers got moving at full momentum, it wasn’t easy to stop them. Worse, they still had enemies fleeing right in front of them. They were still driven by the urge to keep up the chase.

Looking panicked, the soldiers who’d been left behind hurriedly readied their swords to protect the horses.

However, almost everyone had gone chasing after Narfi’s group, and they were clearly undermanned now.

“W-waaugh!”

“Grh! Protect the horses and carts!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Out of my way!” Hveðrungr guffawed.

As he delivered those words, he cut down the defenders with one stroke of his blade apiece, and he and his attack squad made contact with the supply train.

He quickly moved on the crossbowmen from before too, killing them and taking their fire-snakes. If he could bring these back and study them, he could reproduce the technology and make it his own.

“All right, set the fire!” he shouted, giving the order to his attendant.

With such a large amount of cargo, stealing it all would naturally be too

difficult to manage. In particular, Haugspori would come back and catch up to them while they were attempting to transport it.

So, in that case, the only option was to burn it up.

Food was a precious resource in the world of Yggdrasil, and so destroying it was a sacrilegious act, but Hveðrungr was resolute.

He sniggered loudly. “Ha ha ha ha ha! I’ve gotten you this time, Yuuto. This is my victory!”

All that was left to do was light several fires within the cargo. With their supplies destroyed, the Steel Clan army would be stranded deep in enemy territory. Then Hveðrungr would only need to watch and wait for them to destroy themselves.

Hveðrungr’s attendant pulled out the wooden rod and bow used for lighting an ember, wrapped the string around the rod, and got to work.

Hveðrungr stood over the man as he labored, keeping a watchful eye on his surroundings... and suddenly, he felt a strange chill.

It came from the sixth sense that he’d honed by surviving so many brushes with death.

He felt someone’s killing intent, and he hurriedly turned to face the direction he sensed it from.

There was the sound of fabric whipping against air, as the large cloth sheet covering the horse and cart flew off and into the air.

The next two things Hveðrungr saw were bright silver hair catching the light of the sun, and the silver flash of light reflecting off of a blade as it swung down at him.

“Nrrgh!” With a grunt, Hveðrungr moved reflexively in that split second, blocking the attack with his own nihontou blade.

“Gwaah!”

“Gyaah!”

Dying screams rang out from right next to him.

Some of his men had been struck down, unable to react in time to the other members of Sigrún's special forces unit that leapt out of hiding along with her.

"You predicted I would do this?!" Hveðrungr screamed.

Locked sword-to-sword with Sigrún's, his face close to hers, Hveðrungr shouted at her, his mouth twisting wildly in rage.

"Of course we did," Sigrún said coolly. "Let me tell you what Father said about you: 'Hveðrungr immediately finds his opponent's weakness, and he never fails to strike at it.'"

"Grrrghh!!"

"Now, then! It's about time I repaid you for the shame I suffered in our last battle!"

"The Panther Clan attacked just as you predicted, Father," Kristina reported over the transceiver. "Currently, the Múspell special forces are engaged in combat with them. I have also confirmed that a masked man is present. I believe it is the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr!"

Yuuto clenched his fists. "I see! All right, then! We'll hurry that way, too!"

It seemed that Rungr had fallen for his trap.

"With gain outheld, move them; with readied men, await them."

That was the line from Sun Tzu which Yuuto had applied in his battle at the Körmt River, and it described the type of strategy he was best at.

On that day two years ago, when Loptr committed his horrible crime, Yuuto had learned in the most painful way possible how important it was to consider the feelings of others, and the consequences of not doing so.

The experience of bitter regret in the beginning of his growth into a young man would forever remain in his heart as a force of self-discipline.

Ever since, he had made it a habit to always try to imagine himself in other people's positions, and to consider things from their perspectives.

As he'd continued to practice this with diligent effort over the course of the following two years, it hadn't just helped train his sense of balancing people's

needs and wants as an administrator and statesman. It had also made him grow in skill as a military commander, cultivating within him the power to predict the thoughts and motivations of his adversaries at an astounding level.

If one uses the scorched earth strategy against an invading enemy and they still continue their advance, the proper next move against that enemy would be to cut off their stretched-out supply lines and starve them. That was standard military theory, gleaned from examples in history.

In the example of Darius I invading the Scythians in Europe, this strategy had led to Darius I being forced to halt his invasion and withdraw, despite having an army tens of times more numerous than that of the Scythians'.

Yuuto had quickly drawn the conclusion that Hveðrungr would be aiming for the same result.

If he understood what his opponent wanted to do, and what they wished to gain, then the rest was simple. Just like in Sun Tzu's teachings, all he had to do was lay a trap there, and wait.

In this instance, his enemy would be going after the train of supplies, so Yuuto had ordered Sigrún and her special forces to hide among the horses and cargo.

Of course, if you want to deceive your enemies, you have to start by deceiving your allies.

Yuuto had leaked false information (not too widely, so that it wouldn't be too obvious) that pointed to that train of horses as being the one with the food. He'd done this so that the false information would fall into the hands of the spies that he figured had to be mixed in with the refugees.

He was just grateful that it seemed like they'd taken the bait.

"Still, to think the commander-in-chief would personally participate in such a dangerous mission... I am amazed he would do that." Kristina's voice over the transceiver was astounded, but not impressed.

Both her biological father and her sworn father were clan patriarchs, and both of them were men who calmly issued orders from the rear.

As for herself, while Kristina did venture into enemy territory on her missions,

if she felt she was in danger, then she pulled out immediately, and she didn't attempt infiltrations she judged to be impossible.

So, for her, Hveðrungr's choice of action in this case must have seemed quite reckless. After all, he could have entrusted the attack entirely to his subordinates.

"Being able to lead from the front lines yourself is also an important quality in a commander," Yuuto said. "Though, well, in his case, it's more because at the end of the day, he can't put his trust in other people."

This was another area where he and Yuuto were complete contrasts to each other.

Upon Yuuto's original arrival in Yggdrasil, he hadn't been able to do anything. And so he had learned to not have issues with paying respect to others who could do what he couldn't, or with relying on them to help him.

On the other hand, Hveðrungr was a man who could do pretty much anything. No matter what it was, he could figure out how to do it better than most other people.

Because of that, he had gotten used to the idea that the outcome would always be more reliable if he did something himself rather than leave it to others. That way of thinking was now ingrained in him and so, the more important the task was to him, the more he felt compelled to do it himself.

That was why, when Yuuto had been made patriarch, Loptr had flown into such a rage.

That was why, at the Battle of Náströnd, he had personally led the small group of only a few dozen riders to breach Yuuto's defenses.

That was why, at the recent Battle of Körmt River, he had led the smaller force that crossed the river to attack the Horn Clan's flank.

That was why, when surrounding the city of Fólkvangr, he had personally led the force doing it.

And so, this time...

"This battle will determine the flow of the war, so I knew he'd definitely join

the attack himself," Yuuto said. "Now then, Big Brother, it's checkmate!"

"Sei!" Sigrún shouted.

"Khh!" Hveðrungr managed to catch her diagonal sword strike with his own blade. The impact sent a stinging sensation through his hands.

"Haaaaah!"

Sigrún followed up with an attack so swift, to his eyes it seemed to leave afterimages of silver light in its wake.

"Graaagh!"

Hveðrungr managed to defend against it, but he couldn't conceal the distress he felt.

She was so fast. Fast, and yet each and every attack was heavy and powerful.

Most of all, her swordsmanship lacked hesitation. Each strike was committed and true.

She seemed like a completely different person from when he'd last fought her.

Hveðrungr had assisted Sigrún in her sword training plenty of times when she was younger. He had a thorough knowledge of her swordsmanship style, not to mention the quirks in her form that were particular to her.

Yet, even despite that, he was the one being overpowered right now.

Thinking back on it now, at Gashina, they had fought each other right after Yuuto was forcibly banished to his home world. Sigrún must have been terribly shaken.

Perhaps he hadn't faced her at her full strength.

He had never imagined that the girl would grow into such a powerful fighter!

"Hah!" Hveðrungr shifted the center of force behind his swing, attempting to make Sigrún's own attack slip off-course.

"Hmph!" Sigrún sensed the change, and masterfully adjusted the angle of power behind her swing, attempting to push Hveðrungr off-balance instead.

Even when he tried to use the Willow Technique on her, she countered him.

“Rrrgh, damn you, you stupid little girl! Don’t get cocky!” Hveðrungr screamed.

If he remained on the defensive, she would corner him, so he risked throwing himself into full offense.

He unleashed a furious string of four attacks.

The first strike was Skáviðr’s.

The second strike was from Váli, the former Panther Clan general.

The third was Jörgen’s.

The fourth was from Narfi, his capable general and aide.

This was Hveðrungr’s ultimate technique, the Sword of a Thousand Illusions. With each strike, he transformed his swordsmanship into that of a different person, replicating their styles and personal quirks. This could perplex an opponent and create an opening in their guard.

It was a spectacular feat, and one only made possible because of his ability to shamelessly steal the techniques of others, provided that he’d seen them at least once.

He’d used this on Sigrún in their previous battle, and it had allowed him to deliver a wound to her hand.

It was working this time, too. Even with how impressive Sigrún had become, she was having difficulty keeping up with swordsmanship that transformed itself with each attack. It was taking everything she could muster to defend against his attacks, and the momentum of their fight was reversing itself.

However, Hveðrungr knew he couldn’t take his time on this. If he was in a trap set by his enemies, then he needed to get out of here right away. He didn’t have the luxury of time to fight to his heart’s content; he had to end things now.

“This is it! ᛈᚺᚠᚾᛏᛟᛞ!” Hveðrungr cast the galdr spell “Glamour” as he lunged at her with a full-strength thrusting attack.

That spell would affect Sigrún's senses, making his sword tip appear to blur and split into two.

In that moment, Hveðrungr's attention was suddenly drawn to Sigrún's eyes, which narrowed slightly.

Instantly he felt every hair on his body stand on end.

With just a quick tilt of her head, Sigrún easily dodged the lethal attack, completely ignoring the illusion created by Glamour, and lunged forward.

"Khh!" Without thinking, Hveðrungr leapt backwards.

He didn't do it because he knew what was coming. He was just obeying the sixth sense within him, for it was sounding the alarm louder than ever.

"Haaah!!" The silver light of Sigrún's blade shot forward.

It was at a speed incomparable to anything before.

Skilled as he was, Hveðrungr could not react in time.

"Agh...?!" Hveðrungr felt a streak of pain shoot across his chest.

But it was only a bit of pain. Somehow, he had gotten off with just a grazing. If he had been even the slightest bit slower in jumping backwards, he would surely be in two pieces right now.

He saw that Sigrún had already finished her sword stroke, and was bringing her hand around to unleash a second.

"Damn it!!" With no thought for honor or shame, Hveðrungr turned on his heels and broke into a run.

Right now, there was something abnormal about Sigrún. The air around her was as sharp as a beast's fang — no, as sharp as the edge of a nihontou, an edge that could cut through iron. If he continued fighting her, he was going to lose.

He was certain of that.

"Ah! Stop!" Sigrún shouted, and chased after him.

However, Hveðrungr was not about to stop for her just because she demanded it. In fact, right now the most important course of action for him was

not killing Sigrún, but escaping from this location.

“This is a trap! Withdraw! Withdraw!!” Rungr shouted to his men as he ran.

The Horn Clan soldiers who appeared to block his path quickly fell to his blade, and he didn’t stop running.

“I won’t let you escape!” Sigrún shouted, running after Hveðrungr with incredible speed.

As expected of an Einherjar with abilities all specializing in combat, she was definitely more physically capable than he was. At this rate, she was going to catch up to him in no time.

Hveðrungr quickly reached into the bag at his hip, and pulled out the fire-snake weapon that he’d collected earlier for research.

He turned around and threw it at Sigrún.

Had he been thinking rationally, he would have remembered that it needed to have fire set to it first, but perhaps the image of the things exploding had made too strong of an impression on him.

And yet, it turned out that luck was on his side.

Sigrún knew what was being thrown at her, and she reacted by hurriedly leaping backwards away from it. It seemed she, too, had been ingrained with a strong impression from seeing the explosions.

The other fortunate thing for Hveðrungr was that he had not thrown it at her directly, but at the ground at her feet. He had only done so because he was in such haste, he didn’t have time to aim carefully at her.

Bang! As it slammed against the ground, the force of the impact and the heat of friction caused the fire-snake to explode.

Sigrún had leapt out of the way, so she was uninjured, but it stopped her temporarily.

In the bit of time that granted him, Hveðrungr managed to make it to the spot where he’d put his horse, and thus escaped from the battlefield with his life that day.

“I see...” Yuuto said. “So Hveðrungr got away, then.”

“F-Father, please forgive me! It is all because I was not strong enough...” Sigrún’s dismayed voice was coming through over the transceiver.

Apparently she had been close to defeating Hveðrungr, only for him to slip through her fingers.

It was extremely disappointing, but it was also an outcome that fell within the range of Yuuto’s predictions.

“No, it’s okay. He’s not an easy guy to beat, after all, even for you. Don’t feel bad about it.”

“B-but...”

“Don’t worry. We’re definitely going to get him. If we let him make his way back to base, he might start burning more towns and villages, after all.” Yuuto’s voice grew low and cold, and the light of resolve burned in his eyes.

The pressure coming off of him was so great that Sigrún could even feel it over the transceiver, and she gulped.

“Rún, take the special forces and continue hunting for Hveðrungr,” Yuuto ordered.

“Yes, Father! It shall be done!” With that lively response, Sigrún ended the communication.

Yuuto quickly turned to his adjutant. “Felicia! You heard the situation. Seal off all of the roads leading to Nóatún. I take it the manhunt squads are already put together? We’re going to go over this whole area, searching every nook and cranny. We’re bringing this to an end right here!”

Hveðrungr could hear the angry shouts of pursuing soldiers coming from behind him.

“It’s Hveðrungr! After him! After himmm!”

“If we catch him, we can have anything we want as a reward!”

“Stop right there—!”

He had been trying to return to Nóatún with his small squad of riders when

they'd encountered one of the Steel Clan patrols, and had been forced to reverse course and race back along the way they came.

This was already the fifth time they'd run into an enemy patrol.

The Panther Clan riders had greater mobility, and so they'd been able to outrun their enemies. But now they were all out of arrows, and as they'd continued running, their initial three hundred riders had gotten split up and scattered; Hveðrungr's group was now only perhaps a tenth of that size.

"That wretched man, has he been making me dance to his tune this whole time...?!" Hveðrungr spat out the words, quaking with indignant fury.

The network of search patrols hunting for him had shown up way too quickly. It was obvious that they had been prepared ahead of time.

That could only mean that Hveðrungr's plans had been predicted completely.

Yuuto only ever won against Hveðrungr because of the knowledge from his world beyond the heavens — that was what Hveðrungr had always thought.

And yet Hveðrungr, who should be superior when it came to military strategy, had been completely outclassed. He'd been playing into Yuuto's hands the whole time.

And now, he was running and hiding pathetically.

There could be no greater humiliation.

"Ah...! I've found you, Hveðrungr!" A silver-haired warrior maiden appeared on horseback ahead of him.

"Tch, damn it! It's Sigrún!" Hveðrungr pulled his reins and turned his horse sharply to the right.

He spurred the horse at a full-speed run, but she stayed right on his tail, refusing to fall behind.

All of the soldiers he'd run into so far had been on foot, so it hadn't been too difficult to get away from them, but her horse put her on equal footing with him.

She was the most troublesome person who could have spotted him.

“Grrgh, not yet! I have not lost yet! I’ll figure out a way to slip through this net, and turn things around!”

As he shouted those words to encourage himself, Hveðrungr kept spurring on his horse, focused only on the single thought of escape.

Glug, glug, glug! “Phew!” Hveðrungr thrust his face into the flowing waters of the stream, drinking his fill, then sat back on the ground and wiped his mouth with an arm.

Hveðrungr’s scorched earth strategy had backfired on him. He’d gone through quite a bit of difficulty just trying to reach a source of drinkable water.

This place was far distant from the Steel Clan’s original invasion route, and Hveðrungr had been forced to come almost the whole way here without anything to eat or drink.

His thirst quenched, he took out the last two slices of dried meat he’d been saving, and wolfed them down.

“I should finally have a moment’s peace now.” Hveðrungr patted his stomach, no longer empty, and stood up.

There was no one else around.

No enemy pursuers, and no fellow Panther Clan. He was alone.

A group traveling together would just stand out, and in particular, the people from the nomadic Panther Clan dressed in a unique way that made them even more recognizable. Having determined that his allies would get in the way of his escape, Hveðrungr had abandoned them.

As for his horse, it would also make him stand out, and so he’d gotten rid of it, too.

In the Álfheimr region, people who could ride horses were few and far between. Being seen on horseback would be leaving behind evidence that made it easier to track him down.

He’d removed his iron mask, given a spare mask to one of his subordinates, and sent that man in a different direction to serve as a decoy.

He’d finally broken completely free of his pursuers, and he’d done it by

discarding everything that made him the patriarch of the Panther Clan. It was quite ironic.

“Now then, time to be off.” Hveðrungr began walking northeast.

The routes to the west, back towards the Panther Clan stronghold in Nóatún, were all closed off. If he were to stay in the area nearby, watching for an opening to slip through the net of patrols, they would close in on him over time, and he’d just end up captured.

But they shouldn’t yet have been able to completely surround the area that lay in the opposite direction. That was what drove Hveðrungr’s decision to head east.

As it happened, he’d seen no pursuers since yesterday.

It would be a very long, indirect route, but he should be able to keep going until he could reach the Himinbjörg Mountains, then cross over the mountains north into the Panther Clan homeland.

Trying to cross through the mountains in the rough country, away from any roads, was a difficult and arduous task, but he’d already been through that once before, when fleeing the Wolf Clan after killing its previous patriarch, Fárbauti. It wasn’t going to be anything to worry about.

“Heh! Heh heh heh! It looks like you weren’t able to predict this! That’s right, yes, in the end, what happened before was just a...”

Before Hveðrungr could say any more, he spotted a figure ahead of him, and trailed off.

It was a man who, if you were to describe his appearance in a word, would be best suited by the word “ominous.”

He was tall, but bony and thin, with sunken cheeks and a face that looked pale and unwell. And yet the man’s eyes gave off a sharp light, his piercing stare like a hawk’s.

He gave off a dangerous and sinister air, as if the grim reaper had put on some clothes to take a stroll in the world of the living.

Hveðrungr knew this man.

Indeed, he knew him all too well.

This was the very man who had once taught Hveðrungr the very fundamentals of combat.

He was someone whose strength Hveðrungr had once admired, and strived for.

“Skáviðr...” he whispered.

It was the man once hailed as the strongest warrior in all of the Wolf Clan, the former holder of the title Mánagarmr.



“How... did you know I was here?” Hveðrungr rasped.

As he asked this, he pulled out his iron mask and placed it back on his face.

He wasn’t doing this to hide his identity, of course. Indeed, doing this was the same as revealing it.

However, this mask was important to Hveðrungr, as a symbol of who he was now. It was proof that he was not the same man as the gullible fool who had once trusted Yuuto, and been utterly deceived.

As Hveðrungr, he had thrown away the name Loptr, and the face that went with it. He was not about to wear Loptr’s face in front of someone from the Wolf Clan, of all people.

“I knew that this was the most likely path you would take in order to try to return to the Panther Clan,” Skáviðr said.

Hveðrungr clicked his tongue bitterly. “Tch. I see. I guess I should expect no less from my old teacher.”

As Skáviðr’s sworn younger brother, and as his student, Hveðrungr had shared a roof and meals with him for three whole years. After that, when he had started to distinguish himself and move up the ranks, they had fought together as friends and comrades, entrusting their backs to each other in battle as they fought for the sake of the Wolf Clan.

They knew each other well enough to understand how the other might think and act.

“Heh, as always, your sense of righteousness doesn’t match those looks of yours,” Hveðrungr said. “I take it the reason you didn’t bring any men and came here alone is because you want to be the one to ‘take care of’ your disappointing student, with your own two hands?”

“That’s right.” Skáviðr slid his sword out of the scabbard at his waist. “It’s my responsibility as your former teacher. I’m here to give you a proper lesson.”

Hveðrungr scoffed. “Hmph. But can you do it? I think I’ll beat you down the same way I did at Náströnd.”

Grinning, he unsheathed and readied his own blade.

Immediately, their surroundings were filled with the tension of their fighting spirit, the air having grown thick and heavy with it.

Perhaps because they sensed that tension, the birds in the surrounding trees all suddenly took flight at once.

And, as if that were the signal to begin...

Kiiiin! Two flashes of silver light flickered as the two metal blades came together.

In the space between the two men, their swords flew this way and that, clashing and dancing several times in the blink of an eye.

But after ten exchanges, the scales of the battle were clearly tipped in one side's favor.

It was Skáviðr who was winning.

"Ngh! Rrgh?! What is this uncanny feeling?!" Pushed onto the back foot, Hveðrungr grunted in frustration.

He couldn't understand it at all.

His guard was perfect, and he was completely focused on his opponent, but couldn't get a read on the initial motions of his opponent's attacks. He wasn't seeing them, somehow.

Because of that, his reactions to those attacks were all slightly delayed, and he was constantly behind in the initiative.

However... after ten more exchanges, Hveðrungr managed to find the answer.

"So that's what it is!" he shouted.

Such was only to be expected of Hveðrungr, whose powers of keen observation were greater than most.

A novice fighter tends to watch and focus on the opponent's weapon. But when facing foes beyond a certain level of skill, it becomes impossible to keep fighting that way.

If one only reacts after seeing the movement of the enemy's sword, a human's reflexes just aren't fast enough to respond in time.

Thus, one learns to read the foe's killing intent, their eyes, their breathing, the movement of their shoulders and feet, and many other subtle clues. All of these are things that occur before the movement of the weapon.

Reading those initial or preparatory motions, and responding to them, was what defined a battle between experienced fighters.

And so, what was surprising about Skáviðr was that his movements did not contain those initial tells.

More precisely speaking, they weren't all eliminated completely. But they were extremely subtle, and few. That was why Hveðrungr had been unable to read the startups to his attacks.

But even though Hveðrungr now knew the secret to it, he still couldn't counter it. It was such an aggravating technique to go up against.

So aggravating, in fact, that it was worth taking and using for himself.

"Now that I've figured it out, it belongs to me!" As Hveðrungr shouted this, he began perfectly mimicking Skáviðr's sword style.

Hveðrungr's rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions, had the ability to steal other people's techniques.

Now we're on equal footing, Hveðrungr thought with a twisted grin, but it was only a moment later that his smiling face froze in shock.

"Hoh!" With a sharp exhale, Skáviðr used the Willow Technique to make Hveðrungr's attack veer off-course.

Hveðrungr managed to notice it was happening and react at the last second, releasing the force behind his attack to prevent his upper body from being pushed off-balance. But the sweeping slash that followed nearly caught him, and made his blood run cold.

He quickly dropped low and avoided the attack, but it sliced off a few strands of his hair.

"Then how about this!" Hveðrungr copied Skáviðr's sword style once more, using an exact duplicate of the sweeping strike that had just been used against him.

Skáviðr easily dodged.

The sweeping attack also created a tiny opening, and he was countered. Hveðrungr felt a flash of hot pain in his left shoulder.

It was only a shallow cut, not enough to affect his ability to fight, but his mind was quite agitated and confused.

As if able to read that mental state, Skáviðr scoffed at him. “Even with your ability, you can’t steal this from me.”

“What?!” Hveðrungr was baffled by this claim. But, in fact, Skáviðr had managed to see through every one of Hveðrungr’s attacks.

If Hveðrungr had been copying the technique perfectly, then even a master of the sword like Skáviðr should have showed a drop in his reaction speed. But he hadn’t, at all.

“I’m sure you have already figured it out, but this technique is nothing more than erasing one’s initial motions before an attack,” Skáviðr said. “After I lost to you half a year ago, I spent my time standing in front of a mirror, watching myself swing the sword, finding the tells and working to eliminate them, over and over.”

Skáviðr said all this as if it were simple, but in reality, it must have been work that required an awesome level of perseverance.

The “quirks” of one’s fighting style persisted precisely because they were so difficult to get rid of.

If one focused only on eliminating a quirk in a half-hearted manner, all that would do is create a new, different one. It would become an endless game of cat and mouse.

Of course, if one dedicated careful time and effort to eliminating them gradually over time, they would certainly decrease. But that was an effort that would take ages.

Just how many times would it have taken Skáviðr swinging the sword in front of the mirror, in order for him to reach that state? It was impossible to even imagine.

“My fighting style is something that I’ve developed, and it is attuned to my own body,” Skáviðr said. “You and I are different heights, have different builds. Even if you mimic the same movements I make, that won’t be enough to erase your own initial motions. Not until you attune the movements into an ideal form that matches your own body, that is.”

His lecture finished, Skáviðr brought his sword to the ready in front of him.

The two men would have no way of knowing this, but in the older traditional Japanese schools of martial arts, what Skáviðr had described was known by such terms as mubyoushi (“void of rhythm”) or shukuchi (“shrinking the earth”), and it was one of the highest classes of esoteric technique.

It was something one could only achieve by practicing the fundamentals over and over, an ultimate technique that was, at its heart, an application of the basics.

“Grhh! In that case, take this!” Hveðrungr screamed, swinging his sword again.

Pushed into a corner like this, all he had left to rely on was his own signature technique: the Sword of a Thousand Illusions.

He would unleash the sword styles of every person he’d stolen from, a concept completely the opposite of Skáviðr’s technique.

With each use of the ability, he shuffled the order in which he brought out the copied attacks.

It was like an ever-changing illusion at his command, something that should have been impossible to predict. However, such was not the case.

Skáviðr snorted. “Hmph, maybe that will confuse someone young and less experienced, like Sigrún, but you should know how many battles I’ve survived, how many times I’ve cheated death. A petty trick like that will not work on me.”

And just as he’d asserted, he easily dealt with each of Hveðrungr’s attacks.

He knocked them aside. He deflected them. He evaded them.

He even saw through the sword strike combined with the Glamour spell, and at last stepped in close to Hveðrungr.

Skáviðr's waist turned, the power in his muscles twisting into form, unleashing one final, horizontal slash.

I'm going to die now.

That thought echoed in the bottom of Hveðrungr's heart, and he believed it.

However, Skáviðr's attack suddenly began to look slower.

The color seemed to disappear from Hveðrungr's vision, everything becoming grey like ash.

He had once heard that when a person is on the brink of their death, the world appears to slow down for them.

He figured that was what was happening now.

However, at the same time, he also realized it was an opportunity.

Death awaited him if he did nothing. But if he could take advantage of this slowly-moving time, perhaps there was something he could do.

As a test, Hveðrungr attempted to move his blade to intercept the path of Skáviðr's attack, to slide it off its course.

His body didn't move like he wanted it to.

It felt heavy and sluggish, like he was trying to move underwater or in mud.

But he was still moving faster than Skáviðr.

Clang!

The sound of metal on metal rang out, and the two blades repelled each other.

Hveðrungr had snatched back his life from the jaws of death.

Still, the danger hadn't passed.

Skáviðr renewed his sword grip and moved to strike with a powerful overhead blow.

Slowly, Hveðrungr moved his own sword to line up with the attack, and deflected it.

"Ghh...?!" Skáviðr gasped, and looked at him in shock.

After all, the only way Hveðrungr could possibly be deflecting his attacks was if he were able to read them.

The calm confidence from a moment earlier had completely vanished.

For Hveðrungr, seeing Skáviðr looking this way felt wonderful. A wild laughter bubbled up from deep within him.

“Keh heh heh! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! I can see them! I can read your attacks like the back of my hand!”

Hveðrungr’s rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions, could steal any technique.

What he was using now was Sigrún’s technique: the Realm of Godspeed.

“Hah!” Skáviðr lunged forward, unleashing a powerful thrust attack.

Watching it in slow motion, Hveðrungr couldn’t help but be impressed at the sight of it.

It wasn’t just the sword thrust itself, but the motions of the lunge, too; even in his current state, Hveðrungr could hardly see the initial movements before them.

However, that wasn’t a problem at all now.

As he was, he could now react to the attacks after the sword was moving, and still make it in time.

Hveðrungr turned sideways to dodge the thrust, and took a large step forward, bringing him into close range with his foe. This was something he could only do because he could read all of Skáviðr’s moves now.

“Hoh!” he exhaled, and slid his sword through the heavy air of the slowed time, as if guiding it through water.

From Hveðrungr’s perspective, his movements looked sluggish too, but that wasn’t true at all.

In fact, this attack was probably the fastest movement Hveðrungr had ever performed in his life.

“Khh!” Skáviðr grimaced and made a desperate leap backwards.

Hveðrungr felt resistance on the tip of his sword, but it was only slight. Apparently he had only managed to give Skáviðr a shallow cut.

Honestly, Skáviðr was amazing to even be able to react in time at all to Hveðrungr in this state. It seemed that “Mánagarmr“ was more than just a title for show.

Glowering, Skáviðr clicked his tongue and addressed Hveðrungr. “Tch, your reaction time and movements got much faster all of a sudden. I see, so this must be that technique of Sigrún’s, the one she called the ‘Realm of Godspeed.’” He spat out the words in frustration.

“Hmm.” Hearing that, the pieces finally fit together for Hveðrungr.

Thinking back to the previous day’s battle, Sigrún had also displayed an abnormal increase in speed.

She must have entered the same state that he was in now.

He never would have guessed that his rune Alþiófr could steal her technique without his even being conscious of it. He silently gave it his thanks.

“Heh heh, my own talents frighten me sometimes,” Hveðrungr smirked.

“...That’s true. They are frightening indeed. It would have been better for me to be more wary of them.”

“It’s too late for that now!” Hveðrungr shouted, and kicking the ground, he lunged forward, unleashing a sweeping horizontal slash.

Skáviðr could only manage to block it; it seemed it had been too fast for him to react in time to use the Willow Technique.

Hveðrungr brought his blade around to follow up with a diagonal strike from above.

Again, Skáviðr barely managed to deflect it.

This left Skáviðr’s stomach open, so Hveðrungr mixed in a kick.

Skáviðr reacted by using his elbow to block, but the kick was stronger. He was pushed back, losing his solid footing as he lurched backwards.

Hveðrungr followed up with another horizontal strike.

Skáviðr held his sword vertically, and barely managed to stop the blow head-on.

“Heh heh heh! You’re pretty tough to kill! But how long will you hold out?!” With mocking laughter, Hveðrungr continued his attacks without pause.

A downward strike from high overhead, and another horizontal sweep.

An upwards diagonal strike from his left side, curving into another arcing slash from over the shoulder.

Yet despite this furious torrent of attacks assaulting him, Skáviðr laughed right back at him.

“Heh. And I wonder how long you can hold out? I heard something interesting from Sigrún. Apparently your body can’t handle moving at that speed for very long.”

“Wha?!” Hveðrungr had been too excited by the ability to notice before, but indeed each time he swung his sword, there was pain in his arms and back.

His body itself was unable to keep up with the speed he was forcing on it, and it was wearing out.

It seemed he’d have to settle this fight right away.

“Haaaaaah!” With a loud cry, Hveðrungr unleashed the Sword of a Thousand Illusions, moving as fast as the Realm of Godspeed would allow.

One! Two! Three!

Four! Five! Six!

Seven! Eight! Nine!

It was a nine-strike combination with every ounce of his strength and focus behind each blow, delivered at a speed even greater than anything he had done thus far.

“Ngh! Hah! Khh! Hoh! Toh!” Skáviðr, however, managed to block every one of them.

“How?!” Hveðrungr screamed, incredulous.

That was impossible!

Skáviðr wasn't in the Realm of Godspeed, that much was clear. So how had he been able to react to all of the attacks?!

"It's true, you are fast right now," Skáviðr said. "But you're still not as terrifyingly fast as the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir."

It was true that, once you get used to seeing something moving at an incredible speed, then afterwards, even something moving very fast doesn't feel as overwhelming. That seemed to be the phenomenon Skáviðr was describing.

Hveðrungr understood the logic, but even so, there should be a limit to what his foe could handle. He was overwhelmingly faster right now, so it just didn't make sense that the slower Skáviðr would keep being able to block his attacks.

"And one more thing: You're skilled at striking the gaps in people's defenses, their weaknesses," Skáviðr said. "But you haven't honed your own core, your own personal strength. The way you move your body in battle, the way you swing your sword, all of it is still green. You're wasting that incredible speed you have. You're not going to be able to best me."

"Grrh!"

"Those with natural talents can learn to do things easily, so they also have a habit of not practicing their fundamentals," Skáviðr said. "Your talents are indeed frightening. And you are the one who should have been more wary of them."

"Shut up!!" Hveðrungr screamed in a shrill voice, and swung his blade.

But Skáviðr effortlessly dodged the blow. "Bring your arms in tighter on the sides!"

"Gaagh!" Grunting, Hveðrungr put all of his strength behind another overhead swing.

Kiiin! The ring of metal echoed in the air.

"You haven't trained your lower body enough! That's why your strikes don't have enough power!"

"Khh...!" Hveðrungr stumbled backwards. When his attack was blocked, it had

felt as if he were striking a solid boulder.

Even with the Realm of Godspeed, this was all he could do.

Could he never hope to match up to this man, no matter what he did?

That doubt began to consume him.

At times like this, it was the diligent, daily training of the fundamentals which supported a swordsman's heart most of all.

The efficiency trained by how often he'd practiced his swings every day. The stamina he'd built up by exercise. These were what made the difference when everything else was useless.

But Hveðrungr didn't have those things to support him. Everything he had was taken from someone else.

The doubt grew in him and gave rise to hesitation, and that hesitation disrupted his focus.

"Ngh?!" Suddenly, Hveðrungr's entire body felt like it was as heavy as stone.

The Realm of Godspeed had given way.

Being pushed to the brink of death had forced his focus beyond its limits and opened the way for him to enter that state. But with his focus disrupted by doubt, he could no longer maintain it.

"Ngh... ugh..."

The price for the incredible increase in his speed was intense pain and a loss of strength in his whole body, all of which overtook him at once. His legs shook and he couldn't remain standing, dropping down onto his knees.

Even then, he couldn't hold himself up, and he fell forward onto his arms.

With his enemy right in front of him, he knew that this was beyond dangerous. He tried to force himself to stand back up, but his body wouldn't respond.

And at that point, Hveðrungr understood that this was the end for him.

"So, in the end, the power I stole from others was nothing more than a cheap fake..." he murmured.

Stubborn as he was, even Hveðrungr couldn't help but think that way now.

In just two short years, the boy Yuuto, who hadn't known the first thing about military strategy, had grown to surpass him completely, and now all of the skills he'd accumulated with the sword had been mercilessly overpowered.

Skáviðr lightly shook his head.

"Imitating other people isn't in itself a bad thing. In fact, for a beginner, it's the most important thing to do. But what you did was satisfy yourself with just that. You neglected to take what you'd copied and make it a part of yourself, using it to add to who you are and make you stronger. That is what makes you different from Master Yuuto, and that is why you lost."

"Hmph, I don't need to hear you lecture. Hurry up and kill me."

"...Right. I would like to say, 'May we meet again in Valhalla,' but with the sins you've committed, you won't be going there."

"Hah! Adding insult to injury I see." Hveðrungr gave a tired, self-derisive chuckle.

Looking down on him, Skáviðr raised his blade high into the air.

"Farewell, my disappointing student," he said in a cold, detached tone, and brought down the sword—

Clap clap clap! "All right, that's enough now!"

He was interrupted by a young girl's voice and clapping. It was a childish voice that seemed out of place on a battlefield.

Skáviðr's blade stopped just before reaching Hveðrungr's neck.

"Kristina." Without moving, and holding his sword exactly where it stopped, Skáviðr's eyes alone turned to glare at the young girl who had arrived.

Behind her were several dozen soldiers.

Apparently, the fact that Hveðrungr was heading for the mountains was something Yuuto had also known. This really was a total defeat.

"'You may take him dead or alive. However, if it's possible, bring him back to me alive.' I believe those were Father's orders, yes?"

“...Yes, they were.”

The girl held up a finger and pointed at Skáviðr. “And for someone like you who is the very face of the law, turning your back on Father’s orders would certainly cause problems for you, would it not?”

“Tch.” Skáviðr clicked his tongue in irritation, and pulled his sword away from Hveðrungr’s neck. However, even as he did, Hveðrungr could feel the man’s focus directed towards him, ready to react if he did anything.

That level of mastery even outside of combat was as impressive as ever.

“Now then, everyone, if you would.” The girl snapped her fingers, and the soldiers behind her ran over and latched onto Hveðrungr in a group.

They forced him roughly to the ground and began tying him up.

He no longer had any strength left in him to fight back, but they still kept five men on him.

While this was going on, Hveðrungr picked up on the conversation between Skáviðr and the girl, their voices carried over to him by the wind.

“You owe me for this one, all right?”

“...For stopping me from killing him?” Skáviðr asked.

“No. For allowing you to do something as reckless as go after him by yourself.”

“You’re right. I owe you one, then.”

“Hey, get up!” Someone shook Hveðrungr’s body violently, and he opened his eyes. He must have lost consciousness at some point. Perhaps it was a side effect of the intense strain put on his body by using the Realm of Godspeed.

Apparently, after being bound up, he’d been thrown onto a horse-drawn wagon.

As the Panther Clan patriarch, he’d spent his nights sleeping in a luxurious and gorgeously decorated bed, and yet a few days later, this was how far he’d fallen. Hveðrungr couldn’t help but laugh at himself.

“What are you laughing at?” the soldier shouted. “Go on, stand up!”

“Ghh...” As the soldier forced him upright, intense pain shot through Hveðrungr’s whole body. This, too, must be the aftereffects of the Realm of Godspeed.

So then, while it certainly granted a drastic increase in combat abilities, it seemed one had to pay a fitting price for it.

“Get off here,” the soldier ordered. “The patriarch is waiting for you.”

Hveðrungr did as he was told, dragging his legs off the open back edge of the wagon, and dropping down onto the ground.

He could move his body a little now, perhaps thanks to the fact that he’d gotten some sleep. However, it was only a little bit; he was in no shape to fight.

Besides, his upper body was completely bound up in layers of rope.

Steel Clan soldiers were also all around him, all with their eyes trained on him.

Hveðrungr wasn’t fool enough to think of trying to put up any resistance.

The soldier yanked on the rope tied around him, pulling him towards a large pavilion tent, covered and surrounded by large sheets of white cloth.

One of the sheets was pulled up, and he passed under it and into the tent, where a bunch of men were gathered, all of them clearly more distinguished and fearsome than the average soldier.

They were likely the generals of the Steel Clan army.

Several of them had faces Hveðrungr recognized.

At the back of the crowd, seated on a chair with his chin resting against one hand, there sat a young man with black hair, staring his way.

The instant Hveðrungr’s eyes met his, he felt his body shudder uncontrollably.

Even though he was younger than anyone else here, the young man had an overpowering presence and intimidating air that dwarfed all of them.

Hveðrungr couldn’t hide his surprise at the realization that this was Yuuto.

“So, you are Hveðrungr?” Yuuto said, in a low, chilly voice, staring right down at him.

There’s no way you wouldn’t know that. Why are you even asking? That question popped into Hveðrungr’s mind, but he was so overwhelmed by the difference in Yuuto that he couldn’t speak.

Yuuto lifted his chin from his hand. Sitting up straight, he held up three fingers.

“You have committed three great sins. The first: ravaging the fair lands of my subordinate clan, the Horn Clan. The second: killing my son Olof at Gashina, along with many other members of my family. The third: setting fire to your own lands, burning down that which you were meant to protect.”

As Yuuto listed each accusation, he closed one finger, until there were none left.

He then stared down at Hveðrungr with cold fire in his eyes, and proclaimed:

“The price for your sins is death.”

“Ah!” A beautiful, golden-haired woman standing nearby gasped, and her face went pale.

It was Felicia, Hveðrungr’s biological younger sister. It seemed the shock of hearing her own flesh and blood receive the death sentence was difficult to withstand.

However, she did not protest against it. Biting her lower lip, she quietly averted her face from looking at Hveðrungr. It seemed she had prepared herself for this.

Hveðrungr felt great disappointment that the last time he saw her face would be in sadness. However, he was still glad he’d been able to see her once more before he died.

In that moment, Hveðrungr prepared his heart for death.

Yuuto unfurled his index finger, holding it up again. “That is what I would prefer to say, but you are more useful to me alive.”

“Hmph! Are you feeling swayed by compassion for an old friend?” Hveðrungr sneered. “I was thinking you’d grown somewhat, but you’re still, soft after all.”

“Old friend? I don’t know what you mean.”

Yuuto ignored Hveðrungr's words, and instead looked over to his right.

"Skáviðr!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir!"

"You did well in capturing him alive. I'll reward you now for it, as well as for all of the loyal work you have done thus far. I shall grant you the Panther Clan."

Skáviðr gasped in surprise, his eyes wide. "You would install me as their patriarch?"

Skáviðr was normally a very calm and unflappable person, so judging by his reaction, Yuuto must not have told him about this beforehand.

"That's right," Yuuto said. "As luck would have it, we have the current Panther Clan patriarch right here, and we have his predecessor back in Gimlé. That should be enough to make a legitimate claim to the position, right?"

Yuuto's mouth curled up into a devilish smirk as he said this.

If one killed a patriarch to take their place, that was usurpation by murder. It didn't serve as proof of rightful rule, and the members of the clan would surely be reluctant to obey the claim of the new patriarch.

However, if one kept the patriarch alive and took the clan from him, that was a forced abdication.

Of course, it was still being taken by force, and there would still be clan members who opposed it, claiming that the Oath of the Chalice that granted the new patriarch the position was null and void. But this method was still a great deal more politically legitimate than the former one.

If the previous patriarch of the Panther Clan was in Steel Clan captivity as well, that would make it even more effective.

Yuuto held up a fist, clenching it tightly.

"What I need right now is power. Enough power to rule over all of Yggdrasil. The mounted fighters of the Panther Clan are a step towards that purpose, and I must have them for myself."

"...!!" There were wordless gasps throughout the room, as if a shockwave had

run through the people gathered there.

That was perfectly understandable, for in that moment, Yuuto had just proclaimed his intention to conquer the realm.

“Keh! Keh heh heh! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!” Hveðrungr couldn’t stop himself from bursting out in laughter.

His voice echoed far beyond the walls of the tent.

“What are you laughing at?! What’s so funny, huh?!” one of the generals in the crowd shouted, but Hveðrungr paid him no mind.

How could he not laugh at this?

Yuuto’s statement was big talk, enough so that one could only consider it an unrealistic boast. And yet, Hveðrungr had also sensed the sheer resolve in his words, indicating that he had the willingness to take on the difficulty and responsibility that his proclamation would surely bring him.

He now had the dignified bearing of a just and rightful lord, and also the fearsome aura of a conqueror. With both of those qualities in balance, his was the commanding presence of a supreme ruler over all.

This was the same person as that useless, naive little boy from before?

He was a totally different person.

In just two years, he had grown so much. Hveðrungr wondered just how much time he must have spent working to improve himself in body, mind, and spirit over that time.

Compared to Hveðrungr, who had clung to borrowed strength without ever making it his own, Yuuto was on a different level as a person.

All this time, Hveðrungr had thought of him as a conniving little thief. No, he had forced himself to think of Yuuto that way.

But it seemed that the stray cat his little sister had brought home had turned out to be a bona fide lion.

At long last, that truth finally sank in for him.

No matter how much he’d struggled, he’d never been able to match up to

Yuuto. And now, Hveðrungr realized that he wanted to watch and witness just how much further this young man could go.

“All right, then, I’ll give you the Panther Clan,” Hveðrungr announced. “Use it as you see fit.”

He said this with an expression that looked almost refreshed, as if an evil possessing spirit had finally left him.

He was smiling, but it was a cheerful smile, the same as the one the man known as Loptr had used to wear.

Epilogue

The Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr had been captured.

And the Steel Clan had installed its patriarch's child subordinate, Skáviðr, as the Panther Clan's new patriarch.

The news spread quickly all across the Álfheimr region.

Because of this, the Panther Clan split into two factions.

The first faction was centered around Narfi, agreeing to pledge their allegiance to Skáviðr and to the Steel Clan above him.

The second faction declared that they would not pledge themselves to a usurper, and left to head back to their homeland in Miðgarðr.

The former Hoof Clan capital, Nóatún, was liberated without bloodshed.

With that, Yuuto finally felt like things would settle down for a moment, but just as he was thinking that, Skáviðr approached him and asked, "Master, would you be willing to share a drink with me, to celebrate my becoming patriarch?"

Yuuto couldn't rightly refuse him.

"Congratulations on the new position," Yuuto said. "You've done so much for me over the years. I'm glad I was finally able to give you a proper reward for it."

"Ha ha! Two years serving as patriarch has certainly taught you how to joke, master. I think trying to hold together the wild ruffians of the Panther Clan is going to be an ordeal. Not to mention that the rebuilding of the burned-down villages in their territory is going to be a lot of work."

"Hey, I know you'll be able to do it. If I didn't think that, I wouldn't have picked you."

"Jörgen said as much before, but you really have become a talented flatterer."

"It's how I really feel," Yuuto chuckled.

Having finished the small talk, Skáviðr finally broached the topic he really wanted to talk about.

“By the way, I hear that you are going to place Aunt Felicia in charge of watching over Loptr.”

Yuuto gave a long sigh, then stared pointedly at Skáviðr and said, “Don’t use that name.”

They were in the patriarch’s sleeping quarters, and there was no one there except for the two of them, but the fact that Hveðrungr was Loptr was top secret. There was no harm in being as careful as humanly possible.

“Thus, does that mean the murder of our... excuse me, of the Wolf Clan’s previous patriarch Fárbauti... is not a crime he will be made to answer for?” Skáviðr stared straight into Yuuto’s eyes.

The Wolf Clan patriarch before Yuuto, Fárbauti, had been the only person Yuuto had ever agreed to pledge his loyalty to as a sworn parent. He had been Skáviðr’s sworn father, as well.

By the customs of the Chalice of Allegiance, murdering one’s sworn parent was the greatest crime of all, and unforgivable. To quietly allow that crime to go unpunished would go against the honor and justice demanded from them as his sworn children.

Yuuto’s shoulders drooped. “No, please don’t hold him accountable for it. That was what my predecessor... what Dad requested from me in his final breath. We can’t just ignore the final wishes of the departed, can we? And besides... these last three years, a certain adjutant has always been right by my side, and I don’t want to make her cry.”

“Heh, you have grown much in the months I was away, but it looks like that soft-hearted part of you is still intact. I’m a little relieved.” Skáviðr gave him a small, warm smile.

Yuuto responded with a wry chuckle and asked, “Are you sure you’re relieved about that?”

“Yes,” Skáviðr answered, “I am rather fond of that part of you, after all.”

“I’ll just add this just so we’re clear,” Yuuto said, “but the biggest reason really is because I need those Panther Clan cavalry, all right? I need power more than anything else right now.”

Yuuto averted his eyes from Skáviðr, and he stared into the distance.

A memory was resurfacing in his mind, a memory from the period when he was stuck in Japan, and he'd held a conversation with Saya Takao. It was a conversation he could never forget, even if he wanted to.

It was a conversation where he'd learned the truth about Yggdrasil.

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"No... that can't be..." Yuuto's voice shook. He couldn't bring himself to believe what Saya had just told him about what Yggdrasil really was.

The name she had given him was a name he'd heard many times before.

And he also knew of its fate.

"What's your proof?!" Yuuto shouted. "Do you have anything conclusive to prove this is true?!"

Yuuto couldn't keep himself from raising his voice as he questioned her. He wanted to find a way to deny her claim.

He couldn't let himself believe this without questioning it. No, he didn't want to believe it.

If what Saya said was true, then Yggdrasil was fated to...

Saya interrupted his racing thoughts. "Well, it's conjecture based on testimony from you and from Mitsuki-chan, so it's hardly good enough to call conclusive evidence, but..."

"Then there's a possibility you're wrong!" Yuuto exploded.

"Of course there's a chance; I can't deny that. However, if we go with this theory, it explains so much. Like why the positions of the stars show you where somewhere on Earth is in the past, but the topography of the land didn't match any maps. And why, despite the fact that you brought so much future info and technology into the past, none of it ever spread to other parts of the world."

Yuuto said nothing. Of course, that last part was something that had been on his mind for a long while.

After being sent back to the modern era, he'd searched the internet for info

on all of the future tech he'd developed in Yggdrasil.

The iron-refining process, the glassblowing techniques, the phalanx and the stirrup. The Norfolk crop rotation system and the trebuchet. But for every example, nothing had changed from the time when he'd first accessed the information on his smartphone in Yggdrasil.

If Yggdrasil really was somewhere on Earth in a past era, then when Yuuto had brought such future knowledge into the past, it should have caused some sort of change to history.

But if Saya's theory was correct, it would explain that contradiction. And it would explain why there was no matching geography on a modern map.

"I'll explain it all in order, okay?" Saya said. "Do you remember back when I was talking to you guys before, and suddenly I realized something and ran out of the diner?"

"Y-yes, I do. If I remember, you were saying something about the Alps..."

"That's right, the Alps ended up being an important key to solving the mystery of Yggdrasil."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Yuuto was confused. He already knew from checking maps that the geography of Yggdrasil didn't match up with any areas in the region of the Alps.

And, going by Saya's claim about Yggdrasil's true nature, the Alps were physically far away, as well. In fact, there should be an ocean between them.

"In old Celtic languages, the word 'alp' means 'mountain,'" Saya said. "Now, there's another word in the language of Yggdrasil that I'm pretty sure is related to it. Can you think of any words with similar sounds?"

Yuuto thought for a moment. "Similar? ...Is it 'Álf,' maybe?"

That was his best guess, but he wasn't that confident.

It maybe sounded a little similar, but he also didn't think it was that close. But he also couldn't think of any other words that were.

Saya nodded. "Correct. And there's that special, rare metal called 'álfkipfer,' right? The one that translates to 'elven copper,' and can only be mined from the

three big mountain ranges called the ‘Roof of Yggdrasil,’ right? And then there are the elves we see all the time in fantasy games and the like. There’s a theory that the word ‘elf,’ or ‘álf’ before it, might have descended from the word ‘alp.’”

Yuuto nodded, still not following.

“So, what that means is, the name ‘álfkipfer’ might have traveled across the land, becoming distorted as it traveled over time, into a word that means ‘mountain copper’ elsewhere. I think there’s a decent possibility that’s what happened.”

“...Became distorted as it traveled?” Yuuto parroted the words back to Saya as a question, and she nodded.

“Yes, I’ve never heard the word ‘álfkipfer’ before now, but there’s a word I do know that means ‘mountain copper,’ one that’s recorded in ancient Greek texts. It’s oreikhalkos.”

“Okay...” Yuuto said. He couldn’t offer anything other than that vague response. The discussion was getting more and more academic, and he wasn’t sure his mind was going to be able to keep up for much longer.

He didn’t recognize the word oreikhalkos, either.

However, he went wide-eyed at what Saya said next.

“Well, there’s a more modern version of that word that a modern-day Japanese person like you would probably be a lot more familiar with: orichalcum.”

“Huh?!” Of course, Yuuto had heard that word before. It showed up in plenty of fantasy-themed games, books, and comics.

In most of the stories that it appeared in, it was a legendary ore, rare and powerful.

“The ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote about it in his work Critias. He wrote, ‘All that is left of it now is its name, but at the time, it was far more than a name, for it could be mined all throughout the island. And it was called oreikhalkos, and in that era it was the most valuable metal of all, next to gold.’ I’m paraphrasing, but you get it. And he gave a name to that island country, as

you know...”

Saya stopped, and took a small breath.

She stared straight into Yuuto’s eyes, and then she spoke its name.

The name of the island that, according to legend, was destroyed in one night and sank into the sea in a terrible natural disaster—

“Atlantis.”

To Be Continued...

Afterword

On October 22nd of this year, HJ Novels will be publishing my novel *Maou-goroshi no Ryuu-kishi (The Dragon Knight Who Slew the Demon Lord)*.

And, the comic version of volume 1 of *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar* is also on sale now, to rave reviews, so for those of you who have not purchased it, it would be wonderful if you honored me by doing so.

I think there will probably be an ad page after this afterword with the appropriate information, so please check the details there.

...And so I started out my afterword by trying to push more sales on you, but there you go. Hello, it's been a while. Seiichi Takayama here.

I know how it sounds coming from me, but I think this ninth volume has a lot of good scenes in it, so I really hope my readers enjoy it.

From my perspective, volumes 1 to 3 were like the first part or act of the overall plot, and volumes 4 through 9 are the second act, so I'm excited that I finally got to this point.

Starting next volume, it's the third act! Please look forward to it! That's how I feel.

Now then, I don't actually have many pages this time, so I'll move on to the thanks and acknowledgements.

To my new editor U-sama. I didn't have to start our very first meeting by yelling, "I'm so sorry the manuscript is laaaaaaaate!"

...I'm really glad you were nice about that. I look forward to working with you from here on.

Yukisan-sensei, thank you very much for the new version of Yuuto's design. It looks so cool!

My sincere thanks go out to the many people involved in the production of this volume, who helped make it happen.

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 10.

Seiichi Takayama

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 9

by Seiichi Takayama

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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