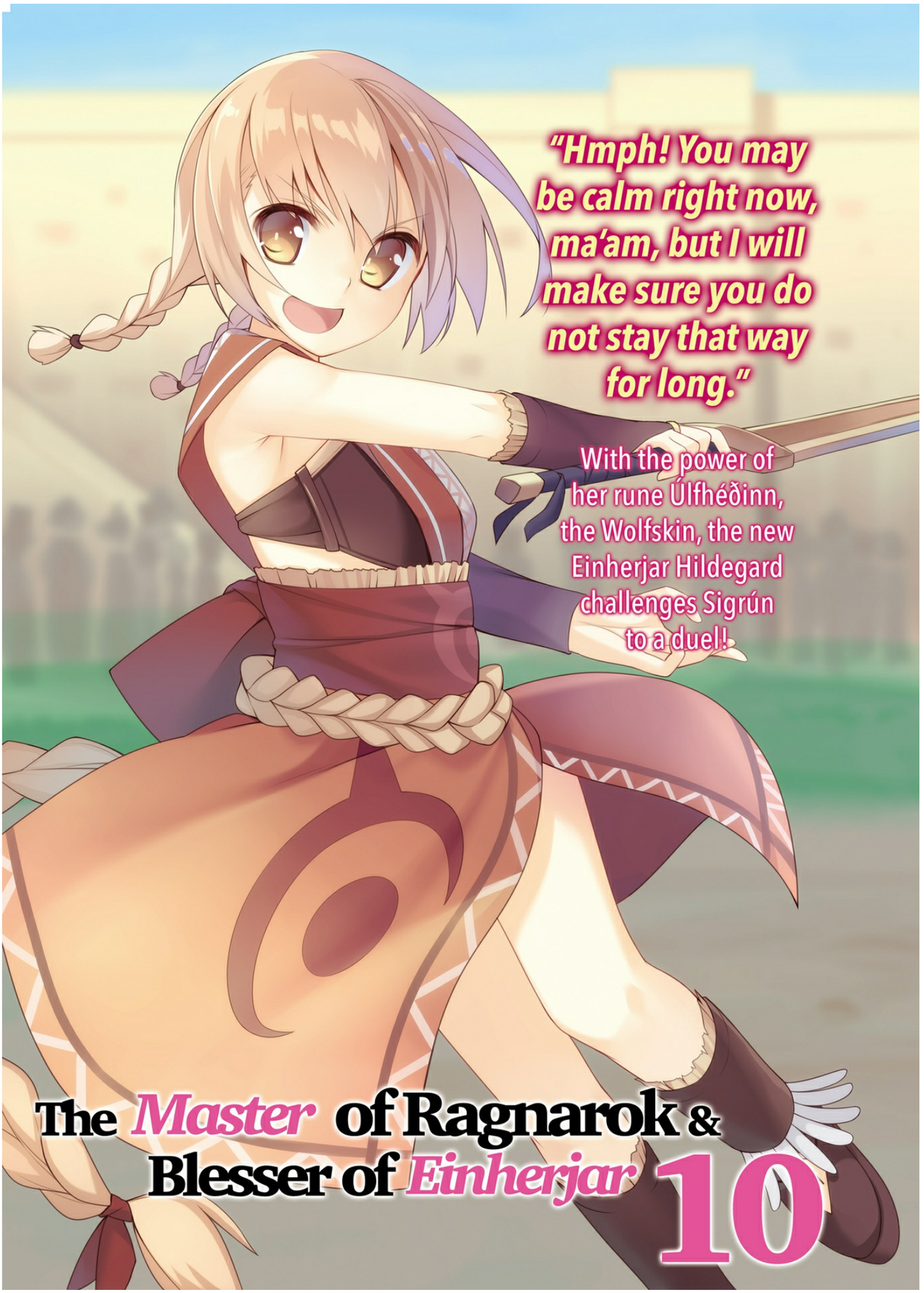
The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

10

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN





The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar 10



The Flame Clan patriarch had set up his core formation on a tall hill about two hours' march south from Fort Waganea. From there, he gazed down to his distant front lines, where a young man with fiery red hair was plowing right through his defenses. As he spoke, the pitch of his voice rebounded with excitement.


FELICIA
Torn between her own powerful feelings for Yuuto, and her acknowledgement of Mitsuki as his bride, Felicia found her heartache increasing by the day...

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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.

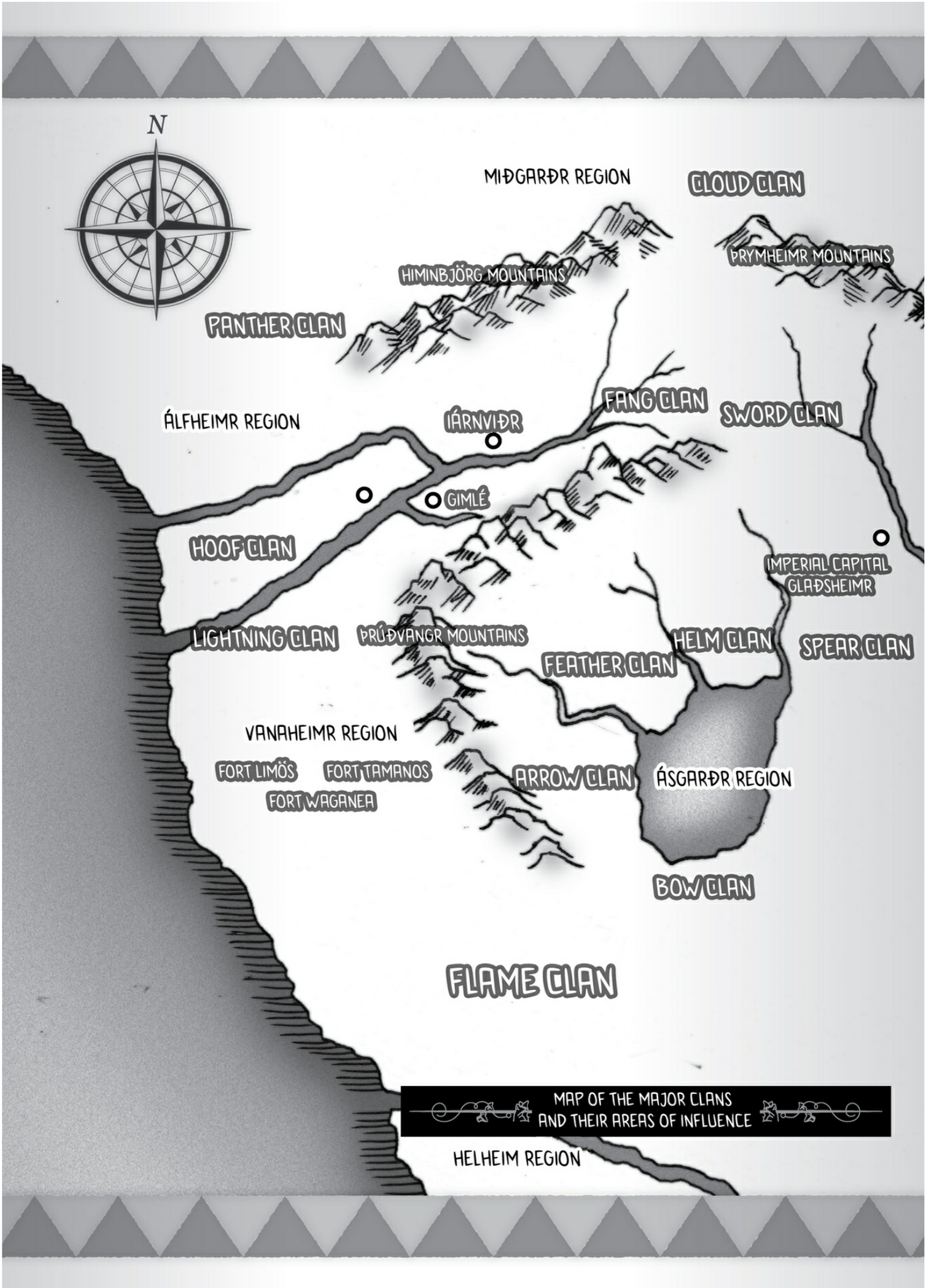
Linnea

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

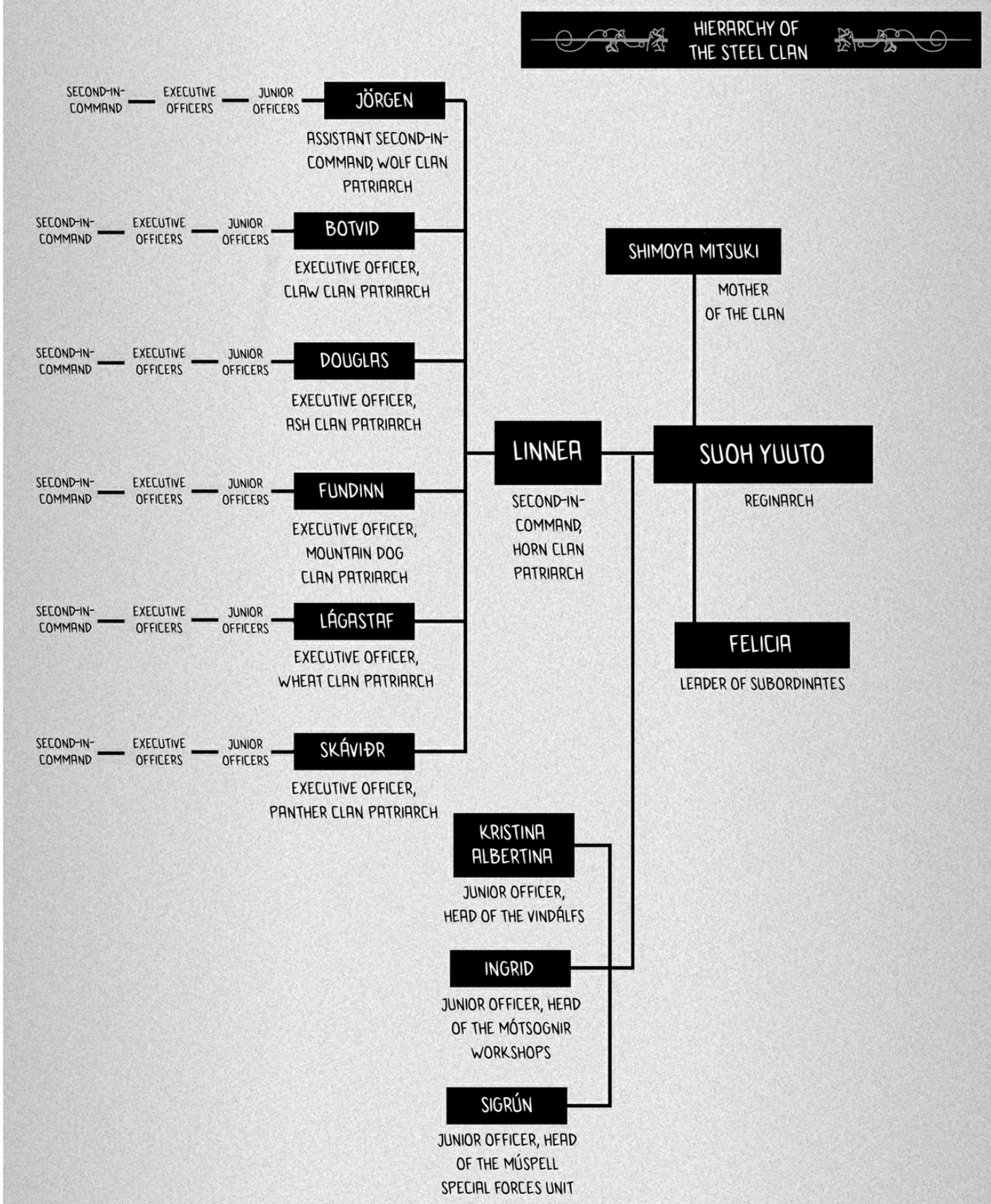
Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.


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

HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



Prologue I

“When does Atlantis sink into the ocean?” Yuuto whispered, barely able to force out the words.

Honestly, he wasn’t prepared to accept the idea. His heart was aching to deny it, to shout that this couldn’t be true.

At the same time, he couldn’t fully dismiss the possibility.

If Yggdrasil was actually the legendary Atlantis, the land said to have sunk into the ocean, that would explain so much: why the geography of Yggdrasil didn’t appear on modern maps, and why the future knowledge that Yuuto brought into the past had never spread to other lands and changed history.

The most definitive link between them was the existence of álkipfer, “elven copper” — in other words, orichalcum, a rare metal not present in the modern age.

And however Yuuto felt, he had a *responsibility* to ask Saya for details. He carried the weight of tens of thousands of lives on his shoulders.

“If we’re going by exactly what’s written in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*,” Saya said, “then it’s sometime after 9560 B.C. that it’ll sink... maybe.”

“Excuse me? Wait, that’s clearly wrong, isn’t it?” Yuuto couldn’t help but challenge that claim. The numbers she was giving didn’t make any sense.

Because the Earth underwent a process called axial precession, the North Star changed depending on the era.

Yuuto had learned that the North Star in Yggdrasil was a star known in modern times as Beta Ursae Minoris, also called Kochab.

Kochab was the North Star for the era spanning approximately 1500 B.C. to A.D. 500 in the Gregorian calendar.

In other words, the Yggdrasil that Yuuto traveled to existed somewhere within that time frame.

9500 B.C. was so far back that the North Star would be Vega, a full two stars

prior. That was way too far off.

Saya gave a wry grin, and nodded. “You’re right. 9500 B.C. is just way too far in the past. I mean, that’s before humanity had even developed their first written languages, you know? That’s why there’s a theory that, when Plato wrote the dialogues, he got the number wrong by one digit.”

“One digit?” Yuuto repeated. “So then, 956 B.C.?”

If that was the case, then Yggdrasil’s sinking into the sea would be fated to happen several hundred of years in the future from Yuuto’s perspective, and that meant at least the people he knew personally would be free of danger from it.

Just as he began to relax a little, Saya waved her hands and said, “Ahh, no, no. The dialogues of *Timaeus* and *Critias* are written records of conversations that supposedly took place around 560 B.C. or so. They refer to a great war between Atlantis and the ancient Mediterranean nations, and mention that it’s been 9,000 years since then. And if nine thousand years was actually nine *hundred*...”

In other words, that would put the date as nine hundred years before 560 B.C.

Yuuto gasped. “...1460 B.C.!” The time period lined up perfectly.

Saya nodded. “Right. That’s right around the time period we think you were in. At the very least, we can say Atlantis existed around then, too.”

“But when does it sink?! What do the records say about when it actually sank?!” Yuuto shouted, and he nearly jumped up from the sofa.

Yuuto didn’t actually know for sure what year he had been traveling to, but Kochab had been the North Star starting from around 1500 B.C. And in Yggdrasil, the use of that star as the North Star was widely established, so it was safe to assume a fair amount of time had passed since then.

In other words, the year 1460 B.C. might already be close at hand. In fact, it might have already passed.

Yuuto felt the anxiety pushing at him from the inside, and he couldn’t sit still anymore.

“Mm, that’s the problem, you see,” Saya said. “The *Critias* was supposed to

have more details about the history of Atlantis, but it was left incomplete. Unfortunately, there's nothing written down about when it sank. All there is is a sort of brief summary in the *Timaeus*. It says that after the great war with the Mediterranean nations, a bizarrely powerful series of earthquakes and floods occurred, and the land disappeared into the ocean."

"Bizarre earthquakes and floods..." Yuuto muttered to himself, and then placed a hand on his chest and let out a breath.

During his own three years living in that world, he hadn't experienced any large earthquakes.

As far as floods went, he didn't recall any at all other than the man-made ones he'd caused as part of military strategy.

It wasn't as if he could completely let his guard down, but at least this didn't seem like an immediate threat, and that eased his heart.

"I feel bad for spoiling your relief, but I'm pretty sure you don't actually have that much time," Saya said. "If we're going by what we know from Norse mythology, then you've already gone through Fimbulvetr... the three years of harsh winter. You've defeated the god of bountiful harvests, Frey, and you've fought the god of battle Thor three times."

As Saya recounted the myths, she ticked them off on her fingers. And then she looked Yuuto straight in the eyes, pity in her gaze.

"You're already in the end times. Ragnarök has already begun..."

Prologue II

“They sure picked a damned annoying time to move up here,” the red-haired young man cursed, gazing out into the distance at the army of the Flame Clan, camped in formation with the mountains at their backs.

On the back of each of the young man’s hands was a symbol that glowed with a faint light.

Those symbols were known as runes, and they granted great powers to their bearers, chosen warriors who were called Einherjar.

Normally, only around one in ten thousand people or so possessed a rune. And it was said that in all of the lands of Yggdrasil, there were only two Einherjar who had two of them.

One of those people was the þjóðann, the Divine Empress and ruler of all the realm. And the other was this young man, Steinþórr, the patriarch of the Lightning Clan nation that controlled the northern stretches of Vanaheimr.

He was more bold and fearless than normal men, and widely known as a warrior without equal.

“Thanks to that, I’ve lost my chance to go up against *him*!” Steinþórr grumbled.

The “him” Steinþórr was referring to was the man he knew by the name Suoh-Yuuto, the patriarch of the Steel Clan. It had now been a month and a half since Suoh-Yuuto had publicly announced his military campaign to chase down and conquer the Panther Clan.

Just as Steinþórr had been preparing to go after him in order to at last deal his rival a crushing blow, he’d gotten a report that the Flame Clan to the south had moved its troops right up to the Lightning Clan border, concentrating them around Fort Waganea.

According to the intel, even conservative estimates put the number of enemy troops at the fortress at around twenty thousand, an outrageously large force. It would be far too foolhardy to ignore such a dangerous threat in order to try

to pursue battle with the Steel Clan.

In order to intercept the threat from the south, Steinþórr had been forced to bring eight thousand soldiers with him to his southern border.

“Father, I understand how you must feel, but for now, please focus on the enemy right in front of you,” Þjálfi, the Lightning Clan’s assistant-second-in-command, admonished him politely. “They are not a foe we can afford to let our guard down with.”

Steinþórr wasn’t a small man, and Þjálfi was even larger still. But in contrast to his size, Þjálfi had an attention to details and particulars which made him a good complement and supporter to Steinþórr, whose motto was, “Who cares about the details?”

“Yeah, yeah, I *get* it.” Steinþórr’s response was annoyed and moody, but even he was very much aware that the Flame Clan was no ordinary foe.

The Flame Clan had for many years now been counted as one of the ten most powerful nations in Yggdrasil. And a few months ago, they had invaded, defeated, and absorbed their neighbor the Wind Clan, which had once been another superpower among those same ten.

Just in simple terms of military strength, they were likely more than twice as powerful as the Lightning Clan. That much was also made visibly clear by their force of twenty thousand, an army larger than any Steinþórr had ever seen.

Still, even with that intimidating sight in front of him, Steinþórr’s confident grin remained firmly planted on his face.

In fact, he was enjoying himself.

His eyes were lit up with excitement, for they had spotted the weapons of the enemy front line: abnormally long spears, bristling like a wall of spikes as they pointed up towards the heavens.

He couldn’t help but be reminded of the Wolf Clan’s signature tactic, the tightly-packed longspear infantry formation called a phalanx.

At first glance, spears of that length seemed too heavy and unwieldy to use in a melee battle, but used with the tight formation, they became incredibly

effective, as Steinþórr had experienced for himself.

This enemy could come up with the same ideas as *that man*.

Steinþórr couldn't help but get excited.

"All right, then! Let's see what they've got! Everyone, follow me!"

As Steinþórr shouted to his soldiers, he kicked the sides of his horse, and charged straight towards the enemy's formation.

And in that moment, the match was struck. The battle between the Lightning and Flame Clan armies began.

ACT 1

Yuuto concluded his campaign against the Panther Clan, and returned home in triumph to Gimlé, his capital.

By this time, the heat from the sun's rays was growing stronger by the day, and it seemed that the summer season was just about to begin.

"Sieg Reginarch!! Sieg Reginarch!!" The citizens all cheered fervently, their voices reverberating throughout the city of Gimlé.

One could feel the very air quivering with each cheer.

It was so loud, it was enough to wonder if every single person in the whole city was shouting at the same time.

Mitsuki was standing at the entrance to the palace, waiting eagerly in anticipation of Yuuto's return.

"Oh, it sounds like he's back," she said happily. "Yuu-kun really is loved by the people of this world, isn't he?"

Mitsuki had black hair, an incredibly rare trait in Yggdrasil. But that was only natural, for she was Japanese, born and raised.

At first glance, Mitsuki seemed like a meek and mild-mannered girl, but in order to be together with the boy she loved, she'd been willing to come with him across time and space to the world of Yggdrasil. She had quite a bit of backbone.

Standing next to Mitsuki, a little girl responded with zealous pride. "Oh, he really is! At school, everyone is always talking about how their dream is to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with Master Yuuto!"

This adorable young girl of twelve with hair cropped just above her shoulders was Ephelia.

She had originally been captured and sold as a slave, but Yuuto had purchased her, and now she served as Mitsuki's personal lady-in-waiting.

"Wow, really?" Mitsuki asked. "Oh, by the way, have you gotten used to your

new school?”

Thanks to Yuuto’s fondness for her, and his desire to have a test case for a new mandatory education system for children, Ephelia had been attending a school in Iárnviðr. After Gimlé had been designated as the capital of the new Steel Clan, she had transferred to a new school here.

Yuuto had told Ephelia that it was fine to stay with her biological mother back in Iárnviðr, but the usually-timid girl had insisted on coming with them.

She was close in age with the twin girls from the Claw Clan and seemed to get along particularly well with them, as Mitsuki often saw them playing together. Perhaps Ephelia hadn’t wanted to be separated from them, either.

“Yes! Everyone has been so kind to me!” Ephelia smiled widely and nodded.



Mitsuki had heard from Yuuto that the girl had encountered some light bullying at her previous school, but looking at her bright expression now, it seemed there was no need for worry on that front.

“I see. That’s good to hear,” Mitsuki replied.

She had also come to be very fond of this honest, diligent girl, and cared for her a great deal, so it was a relief.

“Oh! It looks like he has arrived!” Ephelia shouted.

“Huh?” Mitsuki turned to look towards the palace gates, where a single chariot had appeared, pulled by two dark brown horses. It was noticeably more extravagant than a normal chariot, embellished in various places with pure gold.

The black-haired young man riding in that chariot car dismounted, and as he did so, the dozens of people waiting at the palace entrance to meet him all dropped to one knee.

The only one left standing was Mitsuki, and her eyes met his.

The young man—Yuuto Suoh—casually waved to her.

“Hey, Mitsuki, I’m back! I know it’s been almost two months. Sorry for being away for so long.”

“No, it’s all right,” Mitsuki replied. “I understand how it is. Good work out there, and welcome home, Yuu-kun.”

“Thanks.” Yuuto smiled happily.

At first glance, Yuuto gave off the impression of a cheery, mild-mannered person, but there was also something more: a heavy, commanding presence about him.

It wasn’t as if he’d become a completely different person. His features were still those of the boy she’d always known. And yet...

Why’d you have to go and grow up so fast on your own? Mitsuki thought.

Yuuto had become so much cooler, and now it felt like everything he did sent her pulse racing. It seemed unfair.

“Oh, that’s right,” Yuuto said. “You remember that promise from before?”

“Huh?”

“The one about having a proper wedding when I got back.”

Mitsuki’s face went red, and she gave a small nod. “...Yes, I remember.”

Yuuto stopped smiling, and with a serious expression, he took Mitsuki’s hand and got down on one knee.

“I’ll ask once more. Mitsuki Shimoya, will you marry me?”

As he finished speaking, he gave a mischievous little wink.

That jogged Mitsuki’s memory. Thinking back on it now, she’d once told him a long time ago that she really loved this sort of dramatic proposal style.

He must have made sure to remember that, all this time.

Yuuto really was unfair.

This was all far, far too wonderful.

She was overwhelmed as feelings of happiness, love, and *nausea* welled up within her.

“Sorry, so—mmph!” Unable to suppress it, Mitsuki flung off Yuuto’s hand and pressed her own hands over her mouth, dashing away at breakneck speed.

Yuuto and all the other people left behind could only watch, dumbfounded, as she ran off.

Suffice it to say, the fact that the Reginarch’s marriage proposal had been outright rejected was the hottest topic of discussion throughout the palace that day.

“Ohh... oh, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I brought shame on you, Yuu-kun...”

Lying in bed, Mitsuki repeated her apologies over and over, large tears in her eyes.

Don’t become a burden to Yuuto. She had sworn that to herself deep in her heart, but now she had humiliated him in a very public way. She just couldn’t forgive herself.

Yuuto, on the other hand, just waved a hand dismissively. “Ah, really, it’s fine, okay? You’re sick, so there wasn’t anything you could do about it.”

He didn’t seem to care about what happened in the slightest.

What a big-hearted husband I have... Mitsuki found herself falling in love all over again.

“Well, more importantly—oh, uh, I’m not talking about you being sick, I mean the bringing-shame-on-me stuff,” Yuuto said. “Anyway, the more important thing for me is your *answer* to my proposal, you know?”

“Of course it’s ‘Yes!’ If you’re really okay with having me, then please let me marry you!”

“Okay.” Yuuto smiled gently, and stroked Mitsuki’s head. “Then first, you’ve gotta rest and get better.”

A feeling of warmth, of security, spread throughout her.

“Ooh... mmph!”

And yet, as if to spite those warm feelings, a wave of nausea overtook her, and she had to cover her mouth again.

“Hey, you all right?!” Yuuto shouted, and quickly held out an earthenware pot.

Mitsuki was grateful for the gesture, but the idea of vomiting right in front of the boy she loved was something her pride as a girl just wouldn’t allow.

Thankfully, she was able to hold it back this time, and the queasiness eventually subsided.

“Maybe you ate something that didn’t agree with you,” Yuuto said, furrowing his brow with a pained expression.

He probably felt a personal connection to this situation, since he’d suffered a lot from digestive troubles back when he’d first come to Yggdrasil.

“Mm, is that what it is, I wonder?” Mitsuki murmured. “My stomach doesn’t really hurt, though.”

“Hmm.” Yuuto tilted his head, seemingly deep in thought. Then he put his

hand on Mitsuki's forehead. His hand was a little cold, which felt good. "You've got a bit of a fever. Well, I'm sure you probably just caught a cold or something."

"Ahh, that might be it." Mitsuki nodded. "It happens a lot when the seasons change, after all."

"Right, so then, make sure you eat something nutritious and get plenty of sleep. That's the best thing for a cold."

"True."

Mitsuki had no objections, and so she decided to take Yuuto's advice and devote some time to rest.

Though she was sick, her symptoms weren't all that major, and so both she and Yuuto assumed she'd get better right away. However, in spite of both their expectations, after three days her condition hadn't shown any signs of improving.

Her light fever continued, and if anything, the frequency of her bouts of nausea only increased.

She had no appetite, and couldn't even keep most food down.

Naturally, at this point, it seemed like it could be something more serious, and Yuuto grew worried. Disconcerted, he called on Felicia for help.

This was a world where everyone believed that illnesses were caused by things like possession by evil spirits.

Priests and faith healers were the ones who filled the role of doctors.

Felicia was a priestess who could use galdr song magic and even seiðr, the more complicated ritual spells, and she also had a wide knowledge of medicinal herbs and their applications. In this world, she was as prestigious and effective a faith healer as one could ask for.

In the past, she had regularly gone on trips to visit the sick in their homes. She had personally taken care of Yuuto when he was sick many times, as well.

Of course, as Yuuto was a person from the modern world, he'd always been slightly reluctant to rely on her for medical issues because her practice was not

based in science, but this was no longer a situation where he could afford to be like that.

Felicia measured the strength of Mitsuki's fever, checked the back of her throat, and asked her some questions.

When she was finished, she turned to Yuuto, and with a radiant smile, said, "Congratulations, Big Brother! As your younger sister, and as a member of the Steel Clan, it is my heartfelt honor to be able to celebrate this with you."

Mitsuki knew those words could only have one meaning. She reflexively placed a hand to her abdomen.

Meanwhile, Yuuto hadn't put it together yet.

"Huh? What do you mean? Does that mean she's not sick, then?"

Of course, he'd been summoned from the modern world to Yggdrasil during his second year of middle school, right in the middle of a very sensitive period of learning for young boys. Mitsuki realized he likely hadn't had much exposure to knowledge about sex and related topics, either.

Felicia laughed, and shook her head. "Tee hee! Oh, you may rest assured of that. Rather, this is an occasion for rejoicing! I cannot declare it with absolute certainty yet, but I believe that Big Sister Mitsuki is with child."

Back in their bedroom, Mitsuki held up the pregnancy test kit to show Yuuto the "positive" indicator. "Yeah, it looks like I really *am* pregnant."

Back in Japan, her mother Miyo had secretly taken her aside and given it to her, telling her she'd need it eventually. Mitsuki had never imagined she would end up using it this early, though.

Yggdrasil's medical standards were less than great, especially when compared to the modern world.

After all, this was a world where the commonly accepted way of thinking was that evil spirits caused illness.

When Felicia had pronounced her pregnant earlier, even that couldn't have been considered much more than an educated guess on her part. But this was different.

“By the way,” Mitsuki added, “I heard the accuracy of a positive result is around ninety-nine percent.”

If a test from modern Japan confirmed it, then it was pretty much safe to assume it was for certain.

“...I see,” Yuuto replied. Sitting on the bed, he looked like he wasn’t totally there.

That stirred up feelings of anxiety in Mitsuki. “Um, could it be that, maybe, you didn’t want children?”

“N-no, of course not,” Yuuto stumbled. “I’ve always wanted to have some, someday. It’s just... I always thought of it as something much farther down the road, and I never really got myself ready for it, like, in terms of resolve, or, you know.”

Yuuto was now the ruling lord of many clans as the Reginarch, and known for his unflappable character, so his stumbling response right now was a bit of a rarity.

Apparently, this really was out of left field for him.

“I mean,” Yuuto fumbled, “I’m just some stupid kid only barely about to turn seventeen next month—is it really all right for someone like me to become a parent? Can I really be a good father? It’s like, I can’t stop worrying about that now.”

Yuuto’s face looked so intensely serious that Mitsuki could barely keep herself from laughing. “Pfft!”

“What the hell?! What about that is funny?!”

“But, think about it, Yuu-kun, you’ve already got dozens of children, right? You’re already a successful parent!”

“Hey, that’s a completely different thing, and you know it! And you know how they say, ‘Children are raised by parents, but they belong to society.’ If I’m gonna be a father, I’ve got this, like, real serious responsibility, a *duty* to make sure the kid grows up to be a good person.”

“Ahaha!” Mitsuki couldn’t hold back the laughter anymore.

It seemed Yuuto wasn't opposed to having this child, to say the least. In fact, he sounded like he was totally ready to raise one. That fact alone made her gleefully happy.

"Hey, quit laughing already!" Yuuto's expression grew more and more sour.

He often came across so much more grown-up nowadays, but this expression of his was still somewhat childlike.

Knowing that it was a side he only showed to her made it all the more adorable.

Mitsuki raised one hand to gently cradle Yuuto's cheek, and she looked into his eyes. "Yuu-kun, you're thinking too hard about this! It's all way more simple than that. It's about whether you can love this child or not. That's what's important."

"...Is that really how it is?" Yuuto asked haltingly. He seemed to have trouble finding the confidence to believe her.

Until quite recently, Yuuto and his biological father, Tetsuhito, had been trapped in the worst sort of relationship, and for a long time.

That past of his was probably what was filling him with so much anxiety and doubt.

And so, Mitsuki nodded strongly, and said, "Yeah, that's really how it is, Yuu-kun. In truth, there's also the problem of whether you can support a child financially, but in your case, there are no problems there. So, there's only the one question. So? Can you love this child?"

"Of course I can!" Yuuto shouted his answer immediately, without any hesitation.

That was enough for Mitsuki.

She wanted to offer her new child all the love she had to give, and she wanted Yuuto to love it, too. That wish was now granted, so Mitsuki's worries vanished.

"Thank you," she beamed. "I love you, Yuu-kun! ♥"

"Me, too." He smiled.

“The fact that you didn’t say the words yourself is so very like you, Yuu-kun.” Mitsuki pouted, making her dissatisfaction very clear.

“Oh, shut up. It’s embarrassing!”

“Bzzt! Wrong answer. You need to *say it*. I said it, didn’t I?”

“Ugh, give me a *break*. You’re gonna have to settle for this!” Yuuto grabbed the back of Mitsuki’s head, and pulled her to him.

He kissed her, barely more than a peck on the lips, and then turned his face away.

He was beet red.

“...Okay, I’ll settle for that,” Mitsuki replied softly, looking down with her own face flushing a bright red.

He’d managed to shut her up with a kiss.

Yuuto really is unfair, she thought.



The next day, Mitsuki was out taking the garmr puppy Hildólfr for a walk. Just as she was passing by the inner courtyard, a loud voice startled her.

“Hey, what are you doing out walking around like that?!” The voice was calling down from above, reprimanding her.

Of course, there was only one person living in this city allowed to speak to Mitsuki in such an unreserved, rough tone.

She glanced up to see Yuuto leaning over the terrace railing, looking down at her with a very worried expression.

“It’s not just your body anymore, Mitsuki,” he insisted. “Moving around so much is...”

“Ahaha! You’re worrying *waaay* too much. This isn’t an illness, okay? And I’ve heard from my mom that walking around is actually recommended.”

“R-really?!”

“Yep, really. Plus, the air outside is more refreshing, and it’s keeping my nausea from flaring up as much.”

“W-well, okay then, but don’t push yourself too hard, all right?” Yuuto relented, but he was in full “worry-mode” at this point.

Mitsuki smiled to herself. He was definitely going to be one of those fathers obsessed with the safety of his child.

She called up to him, “Oh, more importantly, Yuu-kun, are you done with work for the moment? If you are, do you want to come down here and spend your break with me? We can eat together.”

Mitsuki understood well just how incredibly busy Yuuto was due to the responsibilities of his position. That was why she tried not to get in the way of his work.

Despite how much she longed to see him during the day, she didn’t barge in on him in his office. But if he was out on the terrace overlooking the courtyard, she figured he must be taking his lunch break.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Yuuto nodded. “All right, I’ll have everything

brought down there.”

“Great. Then I’ll be waiting for you!” Mitsuki waved to him, and he disappeared back into the building.

“Now then,” she said, turning to Hildólfr, “how about we play for a bit until Yuu-kun gets here?”

She took out a dog toy made from a rope, one she’d hand-fashioned herself.

The young garmr’s tail began wagging furiously. Lately, playing with this had become Hildólfr’s favorite thing to do.

Mitsuki held the rope toy up, pulled back her arm, and shouted, “Go get it!” Then she hurled it with all her might.

Hildólfr kicked the ground with great force, and dashed off after the toy. He ran with incredible speed.

In practically the blink of an eye, he had already fetched the toy and was bringing it back.

He dropped it at Mitsuki’s feet, and then sat down obediently to wait.

“Good boy. You did such a good job.” As Mitsuki praised him, she gave him a treat, some chicken meat she’d gotten from the kitchen beforehand.

She waited to make sure he was finished eating it before she picked the toy up again, and gave it another throw.

This time, the pup caught it in mid-air, and was practically prancing as he brought it back.

“Wow, you’re so amazing! Here you go, your treat.”

“Woof!” Hildólfr barked happily in response.

Even though his species was feared throughout the Bifröst region as ferocious, predatory beasts, he was completely tame and friendly to humans.

This was surely owed to the pup’s foster mother Sigrún, and to the thorough obedience training she had put him through.

“Okay! One more time!” Mitsuki picked up the toy and gave it another throw.

Hildólfr dashed after the toy as before, but then abruptly took a sharp ninety-degree turn, running in another direction entirely.

Yuuto was now in the courtyard, and Hildólfr raced over to him, running in circles around his legs.

“Mm? Hey, hey, cut it out already,” Yuuto objected. “You’re making it hard to walk.”

The pup stopped in front of Yuuto and lay down on his back, showing his belly.

It was a pose of submission.

Aside from his foster mother Sigrún, Yuuto was the only person Hildólfr had ever done this for.

The term “lone wolf” might be part of popular culture, but in actuality, wolves were by their nature pack animals with a strong instinctive sense of hierarchy.

Hildólfr had picked up on everyone else’s behavior towards Yuuto, accurately recognizing him as the leader of their “pack.”

Mitsuki found herself feeling a little jealous.

“Fine, fine, I just have to pet you, right?” Despite his supposed grumbling, Yuuto was smiling kindly as he crouched down and began rubbing the pup’s belly.

Hildólfr’s eyes closed in an expression that seemed positively filled with joy.

After about twenty seconds of this, Hildólfr suddenly got up and, as if in payback, leapt up onto Yuuto and began licking his cheek.

“Uwah, hey! Don—ugh! Hey, c’mon!” Yuuto began to sputter in protest.

Despite being a puppy, Hildólfr was already around the size of a fully-grown large dog. Yuuto couldn’t stay on his feet, and toppled backwards. This apparently brought him into a better position, as Hildólfr eagerly began licking him all over the face, tail wagging all the while.

Clearly, the garmr loved Yuuto a lot.

By the time Yuuto finally got free, his face was all wet and sticky.

“Uugh... that was horrible,” he moaned.

“Tee hee, but you never once commanded him ‘Off,’ did you, Big Brother?” Felicia teased him with a knowing giggle.

Hildólfr was extremely well-trained to follow standard commands.

He would have backed off immediately if Yuuto had said “Off” in the correct tone.

The fact that he *hadn’t* showed that, regardless of Yuuto’s grumbling, he’d enjoyed the bonding and affection.

It was so sweet that Mitsuki giggled.

“Ma-Master, please take this.” Ephelia handed Yuuto a wet towel.

The young girl was out of breath. Apparently she had foreseen this situation during Hildólfr’s first jump upon Yuuto, and she’d run as fast as she could to go get a towel for him.

“Ah, thanks, Ephy.” Yuuto took the towel and began wiping off his face. “You’re so thoughtful, as always.”

“Oh, not at all,” Ephelia said, embarrassed. “I’ve been a serving girl for about a year now, so I need be able to do this much as a matter of course.”

“Huh, that’s right. It’s only been a year since then. Wow, it feels like so much longer...”

Passing the used towel back to Ephelia, Yuuto seemed a little emotional as he murmured thoughtfully to himself.

Mitsuki hadn’t heard about everything that happened, but knew the basic details. Yuuto had fought war after war, with the Horn Clan, then the Hoof Clan, then the Lightning Clan, then the Panther Clan. Then, right in the middle of fighting the Lightning-Panther Alliance, he’d been forcefully sent back to modern Japan, and as soon as he managed to make his way back to Yggdrasil, he had to go straight into fighting the Lightning-Panther Alliance again as they invaded. And after *that*, he’d been out fighting a campaign to track down and subjugate the Panther Clan, until just a few days ago.

It had been a year filled with constant war, and for Yuuto, it must have been

the longest year of his life.

“Hee hee, indeed, a lot has happened, hasn’t it?” Felicia said, and cast a meaningful glance at Mitsuki.

More specifically, at Mitsuki’s belly.

“And now, we are truly blessed, for Big Sister Mitsuki is with child!”

“Urk!” Simultaneously, Yuuto and Mitsuki both tensed up.

In Yggdrasil, pregnancy before the age of twenty wasn’t rare at all; it was pretty normal, in fact. However, from the standards of modern Japan, common sense said that it was way too early.

It wasn’t easy for either of them to brush off the norms and values they’d been raised with. And so, they’d both reflexively felt shame when the subject was brought up.

“Oh, it is truly so wonderful!” Felicia rhapsodized. “Now the future of the Steel Clan is assured!”

“You’re getting way too ahead of yourself,” Yuuto insisted. “Besides, Yggdrasil doesn’t do passing on power through bloodlines.”

“Oh, but this is Big Brother and Big Sister’s child we are talking about. There is no chance at all such a child will not be talented!” Felicia seemed strangely filled with confidence as she declared this.

This is one of those situations where the aunt is more obsessively supportive than the kid’s own parents, Yuuto thought with a wry smile.

“All *right* already, geez,” he said aloud, changing the subject. He gestured to the table nearby, which servants had covered with an array of food. “Forget about that for now, and let’s eat something.”

Mitsuki loved cooking, but she loved eating other people’s cooking just as much.

She happily ran over to the table, exclaiming, “Wow, it looks so delici... mmph!”

Unfortunately, as the scent of the fresh bread hit her, she was forced to cut

herself off and put her hands over her mouth, turning away and putting some distance between herself and the table.

Once she couldn't smell the food anymore, the nausea settled down.

"Hey, you okay?" Worried, Yuuto ran over to her side.

"Uhh, y-yeah. It's just that I couldn't handle the smell of the bread, for some reason."

"Wait, what? But you *love* freshly baked bread!"

"I know that, but... ooh... right now it's just no good." Mitsuki shook her head vigorously.

It wasn't just that she didn't like the smell. It was as if at the moment the scent reached her her whole body started rejecting it. An intense nausea welled up each time.

And this was with the smell of something she'd always loved.

Yuuto stopped and pondered, looking up into empty space as if trying to remember something. "Ohh, wait, I think I've read about this—during pregnancy, your preferences and sense of taste can change, or something like that."

Even though Yuuto's schedule kept him constantly busy, apparently he'd wasted no time in trying to do some research for her benefit, likely sometime late last night. It made Mitsuki really happy knowing that she was so important to him.

Yuuto addressed the servants. "I'm really sorry after the work you've done, but please take away all the bread. Feel free to share it among yourselves and with the other staff."

"Whaaat?! B-but, that's not fair to you..." Mitsuki was initially a bit taken aback, but Yuuto shook his head.

"I'm not here to eat bread. I'm here to share a meal with *you*."

A line like that left her with nothing to say in response. She quietly nodded.

"How about this soup, then?" Yuuto started to pass her some stewed meat

and vegetable soup.

The fragrant, savory smell reached her nostrils. Mitsuki frantically began waving her hands at him to take it away. “Ugh, sorry, that garlic smell really makes me feel sick!”

“Garlic’s no good either, huh?” Yuuto furrowed his brow more seriously this time. “That’s gonna make things a bit rough.”

Mitsuki had spent three months living in Yggdrasil now, so she understood what Yuuto meant.

To the people of the Wolf Clan and Horn Clan, garlic was as much a part of everyday food culture as miso and soy sauce were to the Japanese. It was used in most of their recipes.

If Mitsuki couldn’t handle garlic now, that would make her unable to eat quite a lot of the food here.

“Umm, do we have anything that’s sour?” Mitsuki ventured. “I feel like I might be able to eat that.”

“Ohh, I remember reading something about that on the internet, too. But still, *sour* foods, huh... There aren’t really a lot of those here. Japanese-style pickled plums are out of the question, obviously. Sour citrus fruits aren’t really a thing here, after all.”

“Oohh...” Mitsuki whimpered.

Pregnancy was a simple thing, but also so complicating.

It was something that had been experienced and overcome by innumerable women through the ages, since the dawn of humankind. And yet the sacred act of bringing new life into this world was not something that came easily or cheaply.

Joy wasn’t the only thing it was going to add to her life.

Mitsuki was now quickly coming to grips with that truth, in the hard way.

“The sun is pretty strong today,” Mitsuki said. “It really feels like summer’s here. Oh, Ephy, what’s the word in your language for the sun?”

Yuuto and Felicia had returned to their work, and so Mitsuki was taking Hildólfr for a walk with Ephelia, who had returned from her daily classes.

Lately, Mitsuki had taken to asking Ephelia the Yggdrasil names for different things as part of her daily routine.

“Sól, my lady,” Ephelia replied.

“Hmm, sól, I see... there we go.” Mitsuki quickly jotted down the word and its meaning on a sheet of memo paper she carried around with her.

Mitsuki possessed the ability to cast galdr song magic, and with the galdr spell Connections, she could speak to and understand the people here without any difficulty from the language barrier. However, casting the spell many times in one day was pretty draining.

There were also times when, as a side effect of the spell, things she was thinking to herself but intended to leave unsaid were also communicated along with her words, which caused its own problems.

And so, Mitsuki had decided to start studying in her spare time so that she could learn the Yggdrasil language as quickly as possible.

“Then, how about the moon?” Mitsuki asked.

“That would be máni.”

“Máni, I see. And if I remember right, ‘beautiful’ is fagr or fagra. So since my name means ‘beautiful moon,’ in your language it would be Fagramáni, then. Heh, that sounds a little weird.”

“Not at all, my lady. I think it is a lovely name.”

“Hee hee, thank you.”

As the two of them continued this light conversation, they spotted a familiar face as they passed by the courtyard.

It was a red-haired girl with upturned, willful eyes. She was wearing a leather sack at her waist that seemed to be loaded down with something.

“Hey there, Ingrid!” Mitsuki shouted.

When Ingrid realized who was calling to her, she responded casually with a

wave of her own. “Ohh, it’s the missus. Good to see ya.”

The two of them had seen plenty of chances to talk, and whenever they exchanged old stories about Yuuto, they really found a kindred spirit in each other. So at this point, they exchanged greetings and spoke to each other easily, like old friends.

“What are you doing out here?” Mitsuki asked. “Are you on break?”

“Yes. There was this design diagram Yuuto showed me, you see. He showed me a copy on that thing—it’s called a ‘smartphone,’ right? Well, on the smartphone the picture’s pretty small, and it makes my eyes hurt.” Ingrid sighed, massaging her temples with her fingers.

At first glance, Ingrid looked like any normal girl you might see living in town. But she was actually an Einherjar of the rune Ívaldi, the Birther of Blades, and a certifiable genius when it came to designing and creating things.

She was the one who always took the ideas and inventions Yuuto came up with, and then turned them into the physical tools and weapons the clan used.

Yuuto was now praised as a legendary ruler, even a god of war, but none of that would have come to pass without this girl’s diligent work. She was as indispensable to Yuuto as his own right arm.

“Ahaha! The screen size is just something you have to get used to, I think,” Mitsuki said.

She was honestly pretty curious about this new design Ingrid had mentioned, but she wisely chose to let it pass without comment.

She’d heard from Yuuto that the things Ingrid was in charge of were all top-secret.

She would just be causing trouble for the girl if she started asking questions about them.

“Oh, by the way, I heard you’re expecting?” Ingrid added. “Congratulations!”

“Thank you.” Mitsuki lightly bowed her head.

“I’ll make sure and forge a small blade for you as a protective charm.”

“Really?” Mitsuki perked up. “I’d love that! I’ll make sure and get you a nice present too, when it’s your turn!”

“Wh-whaaat?! M-me? I... I’m not really...”

“What? Wait, are things still awkward between you and Yuu-kun?”

“.....Yes.” After a long pause, Ingrid nodded once, her face crimson.

Yuuto and Ingrid had spent the last three years as friends, treating each other no differently than two guy friends might do.

In Ingrid’s case, she’d developed romantic feelings for Yuuto pretty early on, but Yuuto had been too oblivious to catch on to that.

Plus, Ingrid had always known that Yuuto was in love with someone else, and she was also afraid of ruining their friendship by trying to push things further, so she’d always kept her feelings suppressed.

...That was, until about three months ago, when an offhand conversation had led to everything being revealed to Yuuto.

“Even today, I saw him for the first time in forever, and I was so embarrassed, I couldn’t even look the guy in the eye...” Ingrid admitted. “I was so tense, I was stiff as a board, and I couldn’t talk or act normally at all. I mean, I know things can’t go on like this, but... ughh...” She trailed off into something between a sigh and a groan.

It seemed things hadn’t improved this whole time.

Ingrid would always get flustered, and then couldn’t even hold a conversation with him.

As previously mentioned, Ingrid was the one who had made it possible for Yuuto to introduce his future technology into Yggdrasil, and she was an absolutely vital and irreplaceable part of the clan.

If the two of them continued on in this fashion, unable to interact properly, then it would be no exaggeration to say it might endanger the prosperity and safety of the Steel Clan as a whole.

Mitsuki was the mother of the Steel Clan now, and she couldn’t leave this problem unaddressed.

She decided she was going to have to be the one to step out of her comfort zone a bit, and went with the first idea that came to mind.

“Umm, I know it kind of can’t be helped, since you deal with a lot of classified stuff, but maybe the problem is that being alone with him is what’s making you so tense? Why don’t you include me next time, and the three of us could just relax and spend some time together?”

If the two of them alone ended in awkward silence, then a third person might help bridge the gap in conversation.

In the end, that might be something they just had to learn to get used to, just like with the smartphone screen.

“Ah...! Please do!” Ingrid jumped at Mitsuki’s offer without a second’s pause. Her desperation was enough to make Mitsuki flinch back a little, but she kept her composure.

“All right,” Mitsuki said. “Then I’ll set up a date as soon as I can, okay?”

“Thank youuuu!” Ingrid was already tearing up as she took Mitsuki’s hands and squeezed them tightly. She must have been struggling even more than Mitsuki had imagined.

I’ve got to do something about this! Mitsuki told herself with renewed resolve.

“Still, Yuu-kun is so clueless,” Mitsuki said. “Treating you no differently than a male friend all this time. I can’t believe him!”

“Right? Right? I mean, in the first place, he...”

For a while after that, the two girls enjoyed some heated conversation at Yuuto’s expense.

After parting ways with Ingrid and starting on her walk back to her room, Mitsuki soon spotted a short, cute girl, her hair faintly tinged with red.

“Oh, it’s Linnea,” she said.

The girl was indeed as young as she looked, but she was also the patriarch of the Horn Clan, and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan, a talented individual of considerable status.

Mitsuki hadn't had much contact with Linnea until now, and so they had rarely spoken. But she'd heard from Yuuto about her incredible skills in planning, organization, and domestic politics.

During the Steel Clan's recent campaign against the Panther Clan, she had single-handedly directed and organized all of the logistics. And when the enemy had begun a scorched-earth strategy of burning their own villages, her efforts had ensured food for the refugees in addition to the Steel Clan armies.

Right now, her accomplishments were a hot topic within the walls of the palace in Gimlé.

Even now, she seemed to be busy giving instructions to some laborers.

Mitsuki figured it would be a bad idea to interrupt her work, but walking past her without even a proper greeting would be rude in itself. So she tried to be unobtrusive.

"Good day," Mitsuki offered, trying to be nonchalant.

"Huh? O-oh, Mother!" Linnea suddenly looked at Mitsuki in surprise, and gave a polite bow. It seemed she hadn't noticed Mitsuki approaching her at all. "It is fine to see you on this day. I have heard the news from Aunt Felicia that you carry Father's child. As his sworn daughter, I humbly offer you my most heartfelt congratulations."

Linnea's greeting and her congratulations were stiff and formal, portraying a sense of distance.

That was perhaps understandable, considering the circumstances.

Linnea was another girl who had fallen in love with Yuuto. When faced with the woman pregnant with the child of the man she loved, it was hard to imagine that she could be relaxed or friendly with her.

"Huh?" Suddenly, Mitsuki was distracted from these thoughts by the scene in front of her. By how *familiar* it was.

Within a wooden partition, the laborers were using shovels to fill the space with a gray, mud-like mixture.

Then they were using a tool with a flat bottom like an iron, smoothing out the

surface of the mixture until it was flat and level.

“Is that... concrete?” Mitsuki asked incredulously.

Around ten years ago, a rather large earthquake had struck Mitsuki and Yuuto’s hometown of Hachio, and for a while afterwards, workers mixing fresh concrete for repairs had been a frequent sight. That was why Mitsuki recognized what she was seeing now.

“Ah, so you are familiar with this as well, Mother?” Linnea asked, intrigued. “Is a vast array of knowledge common to all of the people from the land beyond the heavens, then?”

“Umm, I’m really not that knowledgeable, so I’d rather you don’t get your hopes up,” Mitsuki said. “I can tell that it’s concrete, but I’ve got no idea how it’s actually made or anything.”

“It is actually a rather simple process. We need only take finely-ground limestone and volcanic ash, and mix in water and gravel in the right proportions.”

“Ohh, so *that’s* what the ingredients are,” Mitsuki said, impressed. “I never knew.”

Incidentally, the ingredients and process Linnea was describing was not that of modern-era concrete, but something known today as “Roman concrete.”

Roman concrete is tremendously superior to modern concrete: Not only is it twice as strong, but compared to modern concrete’s average lifespan of fifty to a hundred years, Roman concrete lasts for *several thousand.*

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this material is the very fact that it was indeed being created and used as far back as ancient Rome.

“Hm, then what about the Norfolk crop system and the iron-refining process?” Linnea asked.

“Hey, I said don’t get your hopes up!” Mitsuki exclaimed. “Pretty much the only subject I know my way around is Japanese cooking.”

“I see... So then, even in the heavenly realm you hail from, Father is a special case.” Linnea was nodding to herself in satisfaction, as if her conclusion only

stood to reason.

“Umm, I don’t know, I think he was actually pretty ordinary,” Mitsuki answered.

“Ordinary?!” Linnea’s eyes went wide. “Someone as great as Father?!” It was as if Mitsuki’s remark had shocked her to the core.

“Uh huh,” Mitsuki said. “Though of course he’s always been special to me. But he was never especially good at schoolwork or studying, or anything like that.”

As she said this, Mitsuki found herself thinking back to old times, and growing a little nostalgic.

Indeed, Yuuto had once been a completely ordinary boy.

And now, he was effectively a king: a great hero who had led a small nation on the brink of destruction to become an influential superpower.

Mitsuki had been living here in Yggdrasil for almost four months now, and she still wasn’t used to that discrepancy.

“I cannot believe it...” Linnea murmured, dumbfounded.

It seemed that she, like Felicia and Sigrún, was an ardent believer in Yuuto as something larger than life.

“Well, that’s because I’m only talking about what Yuu-kun was like before he came to this world,” Mitsuki said.

“Huh?”

“During these last three years, Yuu-kun has worked so hard. He really has.”

Whenever Yuuto had purchased a digital book, he had done so using Mitsuki’s account, so naturally Mitsuki had seen what he was buying.

It was a long, steady line-up of difficult-looking books.

Thinking of how he would have had to read those texts over and over in order to fully understand them, she had nothing but respect for him.

“When I finally got to see him in person again, and watch him as he worked, it felt like I hardly recognized him,” Mitsuki said. “He’s grown up so, so much! It made me feel left behind, in fact.”

“Ha ha ha, it *is* true that Father’s growth as a leader is remarkable,” Linnea chuckled. “I have been desperately trying my hardest to catch up to him, and I also feel as if I have been left behind. It also seems as if he grasped upon some new strength during the two months he was back in the land beyond the heavens. His dignified air and commanding presence have reached new heights.”

“Mm... you know, there’s something about that that bothers me, though,” Mitsuki said. “It’s like, he’s got this resolve, but it seems... I don’t know, tragic, or something.”

“Tragic, you say?”

“Yeah...” Mitsuki nodded, frowning.

Considering Yuuto’s current power and his nation’s growth, this comment seemed completely out of place.

Mitsuki was worried for him, about what burden he might be shouldering in secret, but she didn’t intend to interrogate him about it herself.

Mitsuki looked Linnea straight in the eyes and smiled. “I’d like for you to keep that in mind, okay? And if it’s possible, please be there for him and give him the support he needs.”

For a moment, Linnea was dumbstruck, caught totally off-guard.

But she soon replied, “Forgive my rudeness, but isn’t it your role as his wife to support him in that way?”

Her tone was a bit sullen, and a little sharp around the edges.

“Oh, I’d like to do that more than anything,” Mitsuki replied. “But if we’re talking about his burdens as Reginarch Yuuto, I don’t think it’s going to be possible for me.” With a wry smile, she shrugged her shoulders.

Frankly, Yuuto in his role as a ruler of nations was too difficult for Mitsuki to deal with.

Of course, she accepted that aspect of Yuuto and loved him all the same. But it was an aspect of him that she couldn’t fully understand—that she *shouldn’t* fully understand, in her mind.

She felt that if she ever came to see things just as he did, it would mean losing something about herself that was precious and irreplaceable to him.

“I can cook delicious food for him, and always be there for him with a smile,” she said. “That’s about all I can do. But I think there are times when that’s exactly what he needs—to be able to stop being Reginarch Suoh-Yuuto, and go back to being just Yuuto, the boy from Japan.”

Politics and military affairs could be a dirty business. Even Mitsuki knew that much.

And she knew that Yuuto didn’t like having to deal with the bloody side of his duty.

Eventually, there would be a limit to how much tension he could handle.

She wanted to be able to help him forget about such things, even if it was only for a few moments at a time.

And she also firmly believed that she was the only person who could do that for him.

Mitsuki looked Linnea straight in the eyes, her gaze containing the conviction of that belief.

After a few moments of the two staring each other down, it was Linnea who broke the silence with a long sigh.

“...I understand what you mean. There are times when I, too, am weighed down by my responsibilities as a patriarch, and wish I could return to being just an ordinary girl.”

“I see...” Mitsuki nodded. “So that’s how it is for you too, then.”

“However, Father in his role as the reginarch is still Father! To rule is to know loneliness. If you, as his wife, cannot understand his hardship, then I feel sorry for Father.”

“Yes, I think you’re exactly right. And that’s why I’m telling you that I want *you* to be there for him.” Mitsuki looked meaningfully at Linnea, with a lonely smile.

Linnea gasped, and then asked, very hesitantly, “Are you saying... that you will *give* me Father, in his role as the reginarch?”

“Yes, I am. As a patriarch, you would be far better than I would at seeing things from Yuu-kun’s perspective, understanding what troubles him, and supporting him the way he needs.”

Just as there were times when one wished to forget working life, there were times when one needed someone who could truly understand the difficulty and pain of that work. Unfortunately, Mitsuki believed she just wasn’t capable of the latter. She was still too new to this world, and too ignorant.

Linnea swallowed, and then asked, “...Are you truly all right with that?”

Mitsuki gave a wry chuckle, and scratched the back of her head. “I mean, I’m not *really* that okay with it... but the burdens Yuu-kun has to bear, they’re way too big for someone like me to be able to support him by myself. Oh... actually, maybe even with you and me together, it still might be a little too much to handle?”

“That is true.” Linnea nodded slowly. “I don’t think I alone am enough to support Father through his burdens as the reginarch. Perhaps Aunt Felicia would also be a fitting person for the role?”

“Right. I think she might be absolutely necessary, in fact,” Mitsuki said, nodding.

Felicia more than anyone knew and understood Yuuto’s schedule, and she accompanied him everywhere.

Naturally, she was always the first to notice when he was tired or in poor health.

Mitsuki absolutely wanted to make sure she formed an “alliance” with Felicia going forward.

“If I may be frank,” Linnea said suddenly, “I have only ever known you from the pictures Father showed me, and I have always been jealous of you. But I’ve never felt as jealous as I have today.”

Mitsuki couldn’t think of anything to say in response. It felt like it would be wrong to apologize, or express sympathy.

Linnea stared hard at Mitsuki’s face for a moment, then broke out into a

bright smile. “But now I understand that there could be no one more suited than you to be Father’s true wife.”

“Ah...! Thank you very much!” Mitsuki quickly bowed her head in gratitude.

Linnea was the second-in-command of the Steel Clan. She was the leader of Yuuto’s child subordinates, and central organizer of the affairs of the clan. Being judged worthy by someone like her made Mitsuki sincerely happy.

“Mother, your way of thinking on this matter has left me with nothing but heartfelt respect for you,” Linnea said. “And so, would you please consider exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with me?”

“...Hwuh?”

“Huh, and so now you’re going to be exchanging the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with Linnea?” Yuuto asked.

The sun was setting low in the western sky, and Mitsuki was relaying the events of her day to Yuuto, who had come back from work.

The events of her day were all trifling things compared to the work of the reginarch, nothing he would have reason to care about.

He was so busy, and he surely had to be tired, but he still listened to her stories with interest, actually paying attention and chiming in here and there.

It was unimportant, idle conversation, but to Mitsuki, it was the most enjoyable and most important time of all.

This was the time when she had Yuuto all to herself.

“Uh huh.” Mitsuki nodded. “She said we’ll have a proper assembly for the ceremony, and that she’d arrange for it soon.”

“Wooow, you are seriously making your way up the social ladder, you know...” Yuuto sighed, shaking his head. He seemed genuinely impressed. “Linnea’s great at knowing how to use people’s talents, and she’s also a great judge of character. For her to acknowledge somebody as worthy of respect after such a short time, that’s a pretty big deal.”

Mitsuki giggled. “Are you boasting about me, or about yourself, Mister Suoh-Yuuto? Linnea’s eyes are always glittering with admiration when she looks at

you.”

“Hey, in my case it’s only ’cause of the cheats I use!”

The two of them continued on like this, joking and teasing each other a bit, until there was a knock at the door, and a voice called out, “My lord, we have brought your supper.”

Several female servants, Ephelia among them, entered the room, carrying in the food.

“Ngh...” As the food was laid out in front of Mitsuki, she once again felt the waves of nausea welling up, and she turned away.

For tonight’s supper, she’d arranged to have some easy-to-digest rice porridge, made using some of the white rice she’d brought with her from Japan. But it seemed her body was going to reject even that.

At this point, this was starting to feel like a serious illness.

“I know it’s gotta be tough, but if you don’t at least eat a little, your body’s not going to hold out,” Yuuto said, worry in his voice.

Mitsuki felt just as much the same, but no matter what, it was like her body was rejecting everything.

Still, food was a precious commodity in Yggdrasil. She couldn’t allow herself to be wasteful. She resolved herself to force some of it into her mouth, if she had to. But just as she was about to...

Knock, knock.

There was another knock at the door.

“Big Brother, Big Sister, may I come in?”

“Oh, Felicia,” Yuuto said. “What is it?”

Felicia entered. “I was hoping to give these to Big Sister Mitsuki, if it is all right,” she said, and deposited a dish in front of Mitsuki that held what looked like a mountain of small red grains or seeds.

They didn’t look like anything Mitsuki recognized.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It is pomegranate.”

“Ohh, so this is what pomegranate looks like.”

She had heard the name of the fruit before, but it was her first time seeing it. That was normal for a modern-day Japanese girl, even one raised in a rural town. She wasn’t familiar with foods that you wouldn’t find on the shelves of a typical Japanese grocery store.

“The actual fruit is larger, similar in size and shape to a red onion,” Felicia said. “These are the edible seeds inside it that have been cut out and prepared.”

“Huh, really!”

“I was speaking to an acquaintance who has children, and she mentioned that many of the women of this region eat pomegranate during pregnancy. Normally, they are harvested later in the year, but it so happened that, by coincidence, I saw some southern-grown pomegranate for sale as I was walking around the bazaar.”

There’s no way that sort of thing happened by coincidence! Mitsuki thought, but she kept quiet.

Mitsuki knew what must have happened, even without asking. Having heard that pomegranates were good for pregnant women, Felicia must have scoured the marketplaces all over, searching for some. That thoughtfulness filled her heart with happiness.

“Thank you very much, really,” Mitsuki said, and scooped up some of the pomegranate seeds with a spoon. She tentatively placed the spoonful in her mouth.

“Ngh! Mmm...!” Mitsuki couldn’t help squeezing her eyes shut and waving her free hand.

It was intensely sour.

But right now, that was exactly what she needed.

It wasn’t the citrus-like sour of a lemon, but an incredibly tart taste, like a sour berry.

“It’s so good! This is really, really delicious, Felicia!” Mitsuki exclaimed.

“That is so wonderful to hear!” With an elegant smile, Felicia gave a little bow of her head to Mitsuki. Every one of her movements and expressions was beautiful.

To Mitsuki, who was aware that she was still very much a kid in many ways, Felicia seemed like such an adult. She found herself feeling a little envious.

“Thanks for going to all the trouble, Felicia,” Yuuto said with gratitude. “You really helped us out. I knew I could count on you.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I am not worthy of such praise.” Felicia reacted to Yuuto’s praise with a smile that was so full of pure joy it was practically bewitching. She looked as if she might start humming a little tune any second now.

She’d had such a grown-up air just a second ago, and that had all been washed away like nothing.

All from a single remark from Yuuto.

I knew it, Mitsuki thought. *Felicia really does love Yuu-kun from the bottom of her heart.*

One look at the woman’s smile was enough to make that all too clear.

Just as Mitsuki was starting to feel a small pang of anxiety in her chest, Felicia spoke up, breaking her out of her thoughts.

“Oh, and I brought these dates as well. Please try some, Big Sister.”

Felicia held out a second dish. This one held a pile of fruit that looked to Mitsuki like raisins, only much larger.

“These are made by drying out the fruits from the date palm trees that grow around here, right?” Mitsuki asked.

“Yes,” Felicia replied. “And, since olden times, it has been said that if a woman eats six of them every day, she will give birth to a healthy child.”

“Ohh, interesting. Six a day, huh?” Mitsuki grabbed one of the fruits and took a bite out of it.

It had a sweet flavor that seemed to spread throughout her mouth, reminiscent of the dried sweet persimmons she had eaten back in Japan. The sweetness was a little too strong for her taste, but thankfully it wasn't enough to cause any nausea.

"Ah, it doesn't go down as easily as the pomegranate, but I think I can eat this, too," Mitsuki said. "I am sooo glad we finally found something I can eat!"

Mitsuki gave a long sigh of relief.

The situation had been getting so hopeless for her as of late, that the thought that she might possibly end up starving to death had even crossed her mind once or twice.

"Hee hee! I am grateful that I could be of service to you. ...Ah, Big Sister. If it is all right with you, might I be permitted to touch your belly?"

"Oh!" Mitsuki smiled, and nodded. "Yes, of course you can!"

She giggled to herself, remembering that just last night, Yuuto had made the same request.

Even in a totally different place and era, it seemed that the questions asked of a newly-expectant mother were pretty much the same.

The baby hadn't started moving or kicking at all yet, but apparently people still wanted to feel her belly anyway.

"Inside here is Big Brother's..." Felicia murmured to herself. She gently, tenderly stroked Mitsuki's belly.

For Mitsuki, it was as if she could also feel Felicia's love for Yuuto communicated through that touch.

Suddenly, Felicia stood up, her eyes blazing with determination, and she announced, "I have made my decision! From today onwards, I shall begin training to become a midwife!"

She grasped Mitsuki's hand, squeezing it tightly, and continued.

"Big Sister! I implore you, please allow me to be the one to deliver your child!"

“U-umm...” Mitsuki couldn’t respond at first. It was such a sudden jump in the conversation that it left her struggling to catch up.

Felicia seemed to draw a hasty conclusion from that, for she immediately slumped her shoulders sadly, as if she’d been forcefully pulled out of a happy dream back into reality. “No...? ...Ah, right, of course, it is your first childbirth, after all. Rather than someone like myself, of course you would rather have a midwife with much more experience...”

She must have *really* wanted to be the one to do it.

“No, it’s not that,” Mitsuki interjected hastily, shaking her head. “I was just a little surprised, that’s all. In fact, I’d love to ask you to be the midwife. If I could choose anyone to do it, I’d want it to be you, Felicia.”

“T-truly?!”

“Yes.”

“Thank you so very much!” Felicia’s bright smile returned, and she let out a giggle. “Tee hee hee! Oh, I am so looking forward to it now. I wonder what sort of face the baby will have? Will it be a boy, or a girl, I wonder? If it is a boy, it will surely look just like Big Brother. Ohh, I can hardly wait until the day we meet...”

Felicia was fully back in high spirits and talking excitedly, caught up in a dream-like reverie as her imagination ran away with her.

It was clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was indeed truly joyful from the bottom of her heart that Yuuto was having a child.

“Hee hee, it’s much too early to get so excited, Felicia,” Mitsuki said, with a wry smile. She quietly sighed to herself in relief.

Felicia wasn’t just Yuuto’s adjutant. She was more than that to him.

From the very first days of Yuuto’s life in this place, when everyone else was calling him useless, she had always supported him with devotion, doing everything she could for him. She was someone precious to him, someone special.

She was precious to Mitsuki, as well. For that first month after Mitsuki came

to Yggdrasil, Felicia had been a lifesaver, an irreplaceable ally and friend who had taken care of her and helped her in so many ways.

Perhaps Felicia had only been doing all of that for Yuuto's sake. But even if that were true, she had been that kind and caring to the lover of the man she longed for—something few people in this world were capable of.

And so, Mitsuki loved Felicia.

If possible, she wanted for them to become close friends; true friends.

More than anything, she was filled with a simple happiness knowing that Felicia gave her full blessing to this pregnancy and was truly happy for her.

Mitsuki gently placed a hand on her own belly, and whispered softly, "You have nothing to worry about, little one. Everyone here is waiting for you with open arms."

"My lord, regarding Fort Waganea... it came under a fierce assault by the Lightning Clan, and has been seized! The commander of the forces there, Lord Kurtz, is said to have been killed in the fighting."

"Hm, is that so?" The Flame Clan patriarch's response to his messenger's panicked announcement was cool and detached. He remained calmly seated, his chin resting idly against one hand.

The patriarch looked to be somewhere in his late thirties, a man in the prime of his life. He also had dark black hair, an extremely rare trait in Yggdrasil.

His voice was low and quiet, dispassionate, even. But when he spoke, it was as if the air in the room around him froze over instantly with tension.

All of the other people gathered here were among the highest-ranking captains and officials in the Flame Clan, but even all of those fierce veterans went pale, and beads of cold sweat began running down their faces. They could only stand there in silence, swallowing silently, their eyes locked on their lord and master's every little movement.

Murmuring to himself, the Flame Clan patriarch slowly raised his chin from his hand, and sat up straight. "That Lightning Clan child... He has managed quite the showing."

He had acted in accordance with the agreement made with the Steel Clan, using his forces to draw the Lightning Clan army's attention to the border and keep them occupied while the Steel Clan was conducting its campaign against the Panther Clan. He had only intended to hold his forces here to keep the Lightning Clan in check. But the Lightning Clan army had not only charged right into a defending force twice its size, they'd actually managed to win. It was admittedly a little surprising.

"So," the patriarch mused, "his reputation as a warrior without equal is, it seems, no mere exaggeration."

The soldiers of the Flame Clan army were not conscripts from the families of peasant farmers. They were all experienced, *career* soldiers who had undergone extensive training, and who were always in either active or reserve duty.

And Kurtz, the commander who had been in charge of the army at the border fortress, was a renowned general, perhaps even among the five strongest in the clan. He had provided enormous, impressive results on the field during the war with the Wind Clan.

And yet in spite of those things, *this* was the result.

Happy over the nostalgic gifts he had received, the Flame Clan patriarch had acceded to this alliance on a whim, but it had now ended up being quite the expensive exchange for him.

"The Steel Clan has already concluded their campaign against the Panther Clan, and so our part has been played. And, yet, I find myself simply unable to abide an injury unanswered..." One corner of the Flame Clan patriarch's mouth curled slowly upward, forming a bemused smirk.

This man had so far destroyed and annexed three whole clans and their territories, the Wind Clan among them. However, from his perspective, this world's civilization felt quite primitive, its people's weapons and military strategies far behind those of his homeland. Frankly, conquest had felt boring.

And now this unexpectedly fierce opponent had appeared; someone who had been able to completely break through the Flame Clan front lines, whom thier patriarch had equipped with longspears of terrifying length to create an impassable barrier of death. Someone had defeated his "Wall of Spears"

strategy, and from the perspective of his position as patriarch, it was horrible news... but the Flame Clan patriarch instead felt his heart begin to pound with excitement.

There was a *bam!* as the Flame Clan patriarch stood up with such sudden force that his foot slammed against the wooden floorboards.

“Send the call to all armies to assemble!” he shouted. “We shall hunt this tiger! And I will command the troops myself!”

ACT 2

“Now then, what to do about this...” Linnea frowned, staring hard at the documents in her hands.

She was seated in a room in Gimlé’s central fortress that had been set up for her as a temporary office. Compared to her office in the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr, it was extremely plain and bare-bones. With just her work desk and a pair of chairs for guests, it already felt cramped.

“It’s clear as day: We don’t have enough food,” she murmured.

In the course of the military campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan, the enemy had employed a scorched-earth strategy, burning their own lands. Because of that, right now the Steel Clan was dealing with refugees numbering in the tens of thousands, people who had lost everything—their homes, wealth, and jobs.

Additionally, the Steel Clan had become famous for having easily repelled the invading armies of the Lightning and Panther Clan, and then absorbing the Panther Clan’s former territory in Álfheimr. That fame had drawn a great many fortune-seekers from other nations in the region, all flooding into Steel Clan territory in search of work.

In terms of absolute numbers, the production of food had gone through a huge increase, thanks to Yuuto’s revolutionary farming techniques and the additional guidance he’d provided. However, even with that boost, at this rate the clan would run through all of its food stores before the autumn harvest.

Food was absolutely essential. Everyone had to eat, after all.

Linnea’s biological father, the previous Horn Clan patriarch, had often told her: *“As long as they don’t go hungry, the people will remain calm, and attend to their own work.”*

Flipping that statement on its head, that meant that if a ruler let the people go hungry, public order would begin to break down.

Not much time had passed since her clan had joined together with six others

as one under the banner of the Steel Clan.

During this early, difficult period for the new clan, they absolutely had to avoid a situation that caused the people to lose trust in their rulers.

“We can fill the gap by slaughtering our livestock, but that needs to be the last resort,” Linnea murmured.

Originally, most livestock had been slaughtered before winter, in order to secure their meat as part of winter food stocks. This was in line with the common practice elsewhere in Yggdrasil. However, once the Wolf Clan and Horn Clan began using the Norfolk crop rotation system, they’d accumulated a great deal more animal feed. And so, this year’s summer season found both clans with a much larger livestock population, carried over from previous years.

What was important to remember, however, was that those livestock were also an essential part of the system for growing more crops. They needed to be able to roam over the wide-ranging fields, grazing and fertilizing the land.

If they were killed for their meat now, the increase in food production over time would slow and fail to meet the demands of the increasing population. It was easy to picture that by next year, they’d be in dire straits again.

That would just put them into a gradual, downward spiral.

The slightly elderly-looking man standing next to Linnea leaned in to offer a suggestion: “For the time being, before doing anything else, perhaps we could discuss this issue with the other six clans?”

This man was Rasmus, a high-ranking Horn Clan member who had been part of the clan administration since the days of Linnea’s predecessor.

For many long years, he had been an active leader of the clan as its second-in-command, but as of late, he had retired from that position and from active military duty, and had renewed his Oath of the Chalice to Linnea as her clan’s leader of subordinates. Now he mostly served as Linnea’s personal advisor.

“You’re right.” Linnea nodded. “It would be absurd for us to have to bear the burden of this dilemma on our own, anyway.”

At present, the food supplies being redistributed as emergency aid and

support were coming almost entirely from the Horn and Wolf Clans.

That was, of course, because those two clans were the ones that had seen huge leaps in production and generated huge surpluses thanks to Yuuto's guidance and reforms.

But each of the subordinate clans were equal members of the Steel Clan; in terms of traditional honor, it should be only right for the other clans to contribute, as well.

"Well," Linnea said, "maybe this is also a good opportunity for me."

She had met the other clan patriarchs at the formal ceremony establishing the Steel Clan, but she'd yet to speak to any of them privately at length.

They were each other's sworn siblings now. As their sister, and for the sake of her duties as the second-in-command of the Steel Clan, she needed to learn more about what sort of people they were—and about the current state of their clans' domestic affairs.

"Whatever else they may be, they're all people who made their way into the position of clan patriarch," Linnea said with a grim look. "They're all bound to be sly and cunning. I imagine this is going to be a very tiring process."

The first person Linnea visited was the Steel Clan's assistant second-in-command, and current patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Jörgen. By good fortune, he was currently staying in Gimlé, which made him an easy first choice.

"Oh, Second-in-Command," he said. "It is a pleasure to see you, ma'am."

He was a tall, solidly-built, and muscular man. He was in a room the same size as Linnea's office, but it felt even smaller with him inside it.

With scars from a bladed weapon on one cheek and across one of his eyebrows, his face was fierce-looking and intimidating, but Linnea knew him well enough to know that this appearance was deceiving. He had a sincere, caring personality and was good at looking after people, and so he was well-loved and respected by his subordinates.

His clan and hers had been bound as sibling clans for a while now, and he had first been the second-in-command of his clan before becoming its new

patriarch. They'd had many fruitful discussions thus far, the first of which had been right before her group leisure trip with Yuuto to a hot spring.

She was on good terms with him, and so she could speak with him without any excess tension. He was the perfect choice as the first target for her negotiations.

"This is good timing, as I was just about to go and see you myself," Jörgen went on.

"Hm? You had business with me?" Linnea replied to him with a familiar, slightly less formal tone than he was using. He was a couple of decades older than her, but by the Oath of the Chalice, she was above him in rank.

Incidentally, back during the period when Yuuto had first become a clan patriarch, he'd had a great deal of difficulty training himself to speak informally and plainly to people older than himself. However, Linnea had no such issues; she had been a "princess" her whole life.

Her biological father had been the previous Horn Clan patriarch, and from a young age, he had worked to give her the education befitting of a future ruler. He had hammered an important principle into her: Those who would stand above others must never allow those lower in rank to treat them flippantly or with disrespect. And so for her, behavior and social cues in accordance with that principle came naturally.

Jörgen, of course, took no offense to this tone of address, and merely nodded.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, "Father has ordered me to be in charge of planning his wedding ceremony. But considering this is *Father's* wedding, the ceremony will of course be a large-scale, national event. And so, I needed to come see you and get your approval on the budget. Though, I imagine that this couldn't be a very pleasant topic for you to deal with at the moment..."

He scratched the back of his head with one hand, looking a little apologetic.

Jörgen was well aware that Linnea was deeply in love with Yuuto, so he was probably feeling a bit guilty about bringing this subject up with her.

Linnea held up one hand. "I deeply appreciate your concern, Jörgen, but you

don’t need to worry on my account.”

It would be a lie to say she didn’t feel any heartache at all about this situation, but after her talk with Mitsuki the other day, she’d managed to straighten out her feelings a little bit better.

Especially since, while Mitsuki would be Yuuto’s only wife and queen, she had expressed her acceptance of other women as his concubines. Linnea’s heart had already switched to a new goal: She just needed to work her hardest to become Yuuto’s second-or third-ranked mistress.

Linnea placed one elbow on the armrest of her chair, and continued. “Now then, my sworn brother. I think I can guess what issue prompted you to want to come and see *me*. It’s problems with the budget, isn’t it?” She let out a heavy sigh.

“Yes, ma’am.” Jörgen nodded, his expression growing clouded. “As you know, the Steel Clan’s finances are in a rather difficult state at the moment.”

The Panther Clan’s scorched-earth strategy had cast a heavy shadow over the Steel Clan’s finances as well as its food supply.

Everything had been burned, aside from the people themselves, across a wide swath of the country.

Rebuilding and restoration of those areas would require much, much more than just food. Just the thought of the great volume of resources and capital that would be necessary was enough to give Linnea a headache.

And at the same time that was going on, the Steel Clan also needed to construct a Hliðskjálf tower in Gimlé, its capital. The sacred Hliðskjálf tower was essential for a clan’s religious rites as well as symbolic authority.

Of course, there was also the current state of Linnea and Jörgen’s temporary offices. They were so small that they affected work productivity, and aside from that, they affected the ability to project the power and dignity of their positions when receiving envoys from other nations.

On top of that, the Steel Clan had hired a great number of mercenaries for their most recent campaign, including two thousand Panther Clan riders from among the prisoners taken from a previous battle. The accumulation of monthly

salaries for all of those fighters was nothing to sneeze at, either.

Frankly speaking, the current Steel Clan was already stretched thin financially, and didn't have enough reserves to spare for yet another large-scale expense.

"Still," Linnea said, "even so, we can't very well allow Father's wedding ceremony to be a small, cheap event, can we?"

Jörgen nodded. "Just so, ma'am. Father isn't a very showy man, and he even said that 'Just something plain and simple is fine.' However... we cannot allow that."

"Yes, you're exactly right," Linnea agreed.

This wasn't only an issue of national honor, either.

Yuuto seemed to always underestimate his own value and impact. The reality was that there had been a sudden and shocking national decline during his two-month absence, followed by a complete turnaround immediately after his return. These dramatic events meant that the people's love of Yuuto and their faith in him had only grown stronger.

His new moniker of reginarch, "the Great Lord," had immediately taken root among the people without needing any prompting from leaders like Linnea or Jörgen. And when Yuuto finally returned to Gimlé after the end of his campaign, the cheers of the populace had literally shaken the entire city. It was obvious from that just how overwhelmingly popular he had become.

Meanwhile, Mitsuki, the woman who had captured the heart of this great hero-king, was herself gathering fame and goodwill among the people.

According to Kristina's reports, everyone in Gimlé was eagerly talking about how much they wanted to catch just one glimpse of her.

And so, if the wedding ceremony were held as a small affair with only Yuuto's closest associates in attendance, the masses would never accept it.

Linnea leaned back against her chair, and stared up into empty space. "And yet, there's the autumn harvest festival coming up in just two months. We just had the Steel Clan's founding ceremony the month before last, and this month we had the victory celebration for the military campaign. If these large events

keep coming in succession, we're going to have trouble."

Of course, in most respects, having so many celebrations in a row was still something to be grateful for.

However, as the person in charge of organizing the clan's finances, such a string of happy events also presented a problem she couldn't ignore.

As previously mentioned, the clan was already reeling from the expenses necessary to deal with the reconstruction and recovery in the lands the Panther Clan had torched.

Jörgen nodded, a troubled expression on his face. "Indeed. I had thought we might perhaps be able to re-use some of the resources we had been preparing for the harvest festival, but that would mean using what amounted to hand-me-downs, which would be an insult to Father's dignity."

"True," Linnea agreed. "Father would probably not mind too much, but that would be no excuse. ...Hm? Wait! That's it, of course!" Linnea stood up with a shout. "We don't need to 're-use' resources meant for the autumn harvest festival. We could simply *combine* the wedding ceremony and harvest festival into one event!"

"Combine them into one event?" Jörgen repeated, with a puzzled frown.

"Yes. By the good grace of the gods, Mother is newly pregnant. At the conclusion of the harvest festival, we could have her act as a symbolic standin for the goddess of fertility, with Father in his role as the symbol of the Steel Clan itself. And so their marriage ceremony would also be the climax of the harvest festival. In fact, doing it this way should increase the impact of both celebrations, don't you think? And it would greatly reduce the necessary expenses."

"Ohhh, I see!" Jörgen nodded vigorously, at last understanding the concept. "Hmm. I should have expected nothing less of the woman Father selected as his second-in-command. I am glad I came to you for advice."

"It was just a lucky idea," Linnea smiled. "Now then, please use that as the base for your plans going forward."

"Understood, ma'am." Jörgen gripped Linnea's outstretched hand tightly in

his, and they shook on the matter.

Linnea had heard that in recent years, Jörgen had been spending all of his time taking care of administrative affairs in the Wolf Clan capital Iárnviðr, but his grip still had the telltale strength of a veteran warrior; it was like shaking hands with a rock.

“Ah, that reminds me,” Jörgen said. “We have been discussing my own issue this whole time, but Second-in-Command, you wanted to see me about one, as well. What was it?”

“If I said my problem was a lot like yours, would you be able to guess?” Linnea asked.

Jörgen narrowed his eyes. “Does it have to do with the stock of food supplies?” he asked, in a much lower tone.

That show of caution was as expected for a political leader of his caliber.

If rumors of food shortages were to get out and spread, then various parties might begin buying up or hoarding what was available on the market. That would only cause the situation to get worse.

Linnea nodded at the correct guess. “Yes, it does.”

She decided to skip straight to point.

“I’ll simply ask you right out: As things stand now, is the Wolf Clan going to be able to continue providing food supplies as aid?”

Jörgen’s shoulders slumped, and he shook his head wearily. “At this point, we would have no options left other than slaughtering our livestock. If providing aid is what Father orders, then we would of course have to do so. But speaking honestly, I would love to get the chance to beg to be released from that burden.”

With the new knowledge and instructions from Yuuto, the Wolf Clan had greatly improved their irrigation technology, thereby greatly increasing the amount of farmable land in their territory.

Furthermore, cows and horses were many times stronger than the average human.

Using extra livestock to assist in farm work greatly increased productivity—and by the same note, losing that livestock would have a severe impact.

At present, the Wolf Clan's food production was such that they had more than enough to feed their own current population. Of course, no ruler would want to take actions that slowed or stalled his own nation's growth.

"Things are much the same for us in the Horn Clan," Linnea sighed. "All right, I understand. I'll do everything I can to try and get the other five clans to start contributing more of their resources, and I'll try to adjust things going forward."

"Ahh, truly? If you would, that would be wonderful. Thank you." Jörgen's fierce expression broke into a wide grin, and once more he gripped Linnea's hand in his.

Even though he was probably only using a fraction of his strength, it was still an incredibly powerful grip. It actually hurt more than a bit.

However, Linnea didn't let the pain show on her face, and instead broached her next topic.

"Right then. In preparation for that, I wanted to learn more about Lord Botvid, and so I was hoping you might tell me..."

Upon hearing the name of the Claw Clan patriarch, Jörgen's demeanor changed completely. "*Botvid?*" he repeated, cutting Linnea off. His voice was low and chilly, and his grip on her hand grew much stronger.

"Ow!" This time, Linnea couldn't keep from shouting in pain.

"Ah... ahh, please forgive me, ma'am." Flustered, Jörgen quickly apologized and released Linnea's hand, but his expression remained grim. It seemed he had a deep-seated grudge against the Claw Clan patriarch.

The air about him practically seethed with a quiet anger. It made him seem like an entirely different person from the big-hearted Jörgen Linnea knew. A more weak-willed person would probably go weak in the knees if faced with such intense, intimidating pressure.

It was, without a doubt, the force of presence befitting a patriarch.

Linnea swallowed nervously. *I underestimated this man. He has been*

overshadowed by people like Sigrún and Skáviðr, but Jörgen is a monster in his own right.

In retrospect, that only made sense, for this was the person Yuuto had chosen to be his successor in leadership of his old clan. Of *course* he wouldn't be someone ordinary.

Someone as great and powerful as this had served Yuuto faithfully for years, without ever holding any ambitions to power of his own.

With that realization, Linnea was once again made painfully aware of just how incredible Yuuto's power as a ruler was.

"Hmm, so in summary, you are saying, 'Give us your food supplies as tribute,' then? That is a bit..." The middle-aged man gave a tired sigh, and scratched the back of his head. "Hahh, I am really at a loss here."

Appearance-wise, he looked to be just over forty. His front hairline had receded quite a bit, and he already had some white hairs. His build was a little overweight and lumpy, and his face was affixed with an affable, but insincere-looking smile, like a mask.

"Naturally, I understand things must be hard for the Claw Clan, Brother Botvid," Linnea said. "But surely you've heard of the terrible conditions the Panther Clan is facing right now? Helping each other out in times like these is what proper family is all about."

Linnea managed to speak the words in a confident and resolute manner, but the inside of her mouth was completely dry.

No matter how much this person might look like nothing more than a tired, unremarkable old man, he was Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan.

He was notorious for his wicked cunning among his neighbors, who referred to him as the "Pit Viper." And in the years before Yuuto had become patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Botvid and his schemes had driven them to the brink of destruction.

Jörgen had reflexively changed his demeanor the moment he'd heard Botvid's name, showing just how wary he was of the man. She couldn't let her guard down with him, even for a moment.

“Oh, but... you see, we of the Claw Clan live high among the mountains, and our lands are poor in resources,” Botvid told her. “We are not blessed with vast expanses of fertile land, as the Horn Clan is, you see.”

“And that’s precisely why the Horn Clan is shouldering the great majority of the burden of providing aid. We’re *all* struggling right now.”

“But even if you say that, I cannot give you what I do not have. We are struggling just to ration our supplies to feed our own population, you see...”

“Funny, I’ve heard your clan has been racking up quite a lot of profits from trade,” Linnea responded coolly, a hint of questioning in her tone.

She’d gotten the information from Jörgen.

The Horn Clan didn’t share any borders with the Claw Clan, and so with the modest distance between their nations, Linnea didn’t have a strong grasp of its internal situation.

On that point, the Wolf Clan had a bit more of an advantage, and so she’d sought out Jörgen to learn what she could.

Linnea had intended her remark to be a critical blow to her adversary’s defenses, making him vulnerable, but such was not the case.

Botvid shook his head sadly, his expression seemingly overflowing with sorrow. “Umm... well, actually, as of late we have seen none of that business at all, really. Father has products like the paper, you see, and the gritless bread, and the glasswares, and many others. Because of that, the merchants have simply lost interest in stopping to trade with our little clan. In these past two years, our capital city has declined so much... why, it’s practically a ghost town now.”

It didn’t seem like this was a *total* lie; however, Linnea also sensed that he wasn’t telling the whole truth, either.

He was definitely hiding something.

That was what Linnea’s intuition as a politician told her.

However, the reason he was giving was legitimate enough, without any contradictions. There was nothing in it to catch him with.

It's just like I heard. He's a wily old fox, she thought.

At first glance, he seemed like an inconspicuous, even timid sort of man. But throughout their interaction, his vague and noncommittal responses kept letting him sidestep her every attempt to make demands of him, while not giving her anything concrete for her to grab onto and use as leverage against him.

He was probably also working with the full understanding that, since the Steel Clan was still newly formed, no one would have good knowledge of the inner affairs of the other clans yet.

If possible, Linnea had wanted to settle this with nothing more than a proper, congenial discussion, but there wouldn't be any progress at this rate.

She decided to pull out a tried and tested weapon.

"Brother Botvid, let me be clear," she said in a colder, firmer tone. "I didn't come all the way here to make a *request* of you. I am giving you an order as the second-in-command of the Steel Clan."

Linnea let her statement sink in, and she waited.

She knew well enough that not every issue could be resolved just through discussion.

She wasn't fond of using her authority in such a blunt fashion, but she wasn't so soft as to let herself hesitate when the situation really called for it.

However, not even this maneuver was able to put a crack in Botvid's gracious, smiling expression. "Hmm, well, if this is a matter of the Steel Clan's policies going forward, then I would most certainly love to hear Father's opinion on the matter, you see."

Linnea felt the side of one of her own temples twitch slightly.

Botvid's statement meant, basically, *"There's no point in discussing this with a little girl like you.* I'll only discuss it directly with Yuuto."

He had quite a lot of nerve to show her that kind of disrespect.

"So that means you won't listen to my orders, then?" Linnea shot back.

“Oh, no, no, of course that’s not it at all,” Botvid protested. “However, you see, it is still the case that my clan is only just barely managing to feed ourselves. And so, you see, I thought that perhaps Father, in all his knowledge, might come up with some clever solution that the two of us might never think of ourselves.”

Ahh... so that’s what it is. Linnea gave a bitter sigh... but only in her mind.

Botvid’s aim had finally risen to the surface. In exchange for contributing some food supplies, he was after some of Yuuto’s knowledge—in other words, demanding she hand over one of his inventions.

When it came to Yuuto’s inventions—whether it was the process for refining iron, or the formula behind the Norfolk crop rotation system, or any of the others—even just one of them held the potential to multiply a nation’s prosperity, and its political strength.

And that was precisely why Yuuto put such a strong and deliberate emphasis on keeping the techniques behind them a secret. In fact, ever since the period he’d spent back in his homeland beyond the heavens, it felt as if he’d gotten even more serious about that policy.

Botvid must have seen this as the best chance he would ever get to obtain one of those precious inventions. It was a shrewd move, to be sure. But one would have to be at least that shrewd in order to serve as a clan patriarch.

Linnea mulled over her options. *If I bring Father into this now, things should resolve themselves smoothly... but dealing with the domestic affairs of the Steel Clan is my job as the second in command.*

Besides, Botvid had challenged Linnea’s authority directly. He was picking a fight with *her*.

He might deny it, but between the lines, he’d done all but say aloud, *I won’t obey the orders of a little girl like you.*

They were both sworn child subordinates of Yuuto. And in a fight between siblings, there was nothing more shameful than calling in the parent to intervene. Indeed, it might only lead to her being looked down upon as nothing more than a child who was overly dependent on Yuuto to solve her problems.

“Father is a busy man, and I have no intention of troubling him by bringing him in to deal with such a *trifling* little issue.” Linnea made extra sure Botvid could hear her emphasis on the word *trifling.*

In other words, she was saying, *Merely dealing with someone like you is nothing special.*

Naturally, seasoned veteran that he was, the sly old fox’s plastered-on smile didn’t falter. However, Linnea’s eyes caught a little tell: Botvid’s hands, graciously clasped together, tensed up just a little bit.

He was probably a little irked at being spoken down to by this young girl, someone he inwardly considered to be beneath him.

“All right, then, fine, I understand,” Linnea said. “If the Claw Clan is truly in such a difficult situation, I will just look elsewhere for support. And I also won’t be coming to you to request any other assistance going forward, so please don’t worry about that.”

Linnea ended her statement with a smile, and then she stood up with every intention to leave.

“W-wait! Please wait!” Botvid hurriedly held out a hand, in an attempt to stop her.

Got you, Linnea thought deep down. But while inwardly she was smirking, on the surface, she feigned puzzlement. “Hm? What else is there to discuss?”

“Well, we of the Claw Clan are just as much members of the Steel Clan, you see. We cannot simply refuse to do anything at all to help, as that would be...”

“No, I’m perfectly fine with that,” Linnea said bluntly, cutting off Botvid. “I’m not going to ask you to put undue strain on your clan for our sake. Just focus on taking good care of yourselves.”

It was an act—she had planned all of this beforehand.

When he’d first heard about the demand for food aid, Botvid must have sized up his and Linnea’s relative needs, and concluded that this was an opportunity to try to score some extra benefits for himself.

It would be hard to predict the exact outcome of the negotiations, and there

would probably be some compromises on his part, but he had surely calculated that no matter what, he would still come out with something to show for it.

But now he was in danger of getting absolutely nothing, and furthermore, facing the possibility that other more obedient clans would get preferential treatment rather than his own clan in future affairs. That would naturally push him into a bit of a panic.

Of course, Linnea also stood to lose out just as badly if she failed to get any aid from Botvid at all. Inwardly, she had been incredibly nervous about enacting the ploy, but she hadn't let a hint of that show.

Botvid had dismissed her as nothing more than a naive little girl. That was what had sealed his fate.

Linnea had grown up as the daughter of a patriarch, strictly educated on the fundamentals of being a ruler.

She was still a bit unaccustomed to directing troops in battle on the field, but when it came to the push and pull of diplomatic struggles like these, she'd been through more than her share of difficult battles.

"I have other matters to attend to, so I'll take my leave now." Turning on her heels, Linnea made to exit the room.

Just as she reached the door, she heard a heavy sigh from behind her.

"...Actually, I just remembered. It so happens that we have a small amount of old food stocks in reserve, left over from a previous year's harvest. If we use those, it should add up to a modest contribution of aid."

"Ohh! Is that true?!" Linnea exclaimed.

Deep down, she thought, *I knew you were hiding some,* but she didn't let those words get anywhere close to crossing her lips.

She acted as if she were genuinely shocked at the news.

"I will give them up, if it is for the good of the Steel Clan," Botvid said quickly. "However, this is my clan's emergency reserve, incredibly precious, and so I would humbly wish for some small compensation in return."

"Ahh, but of course! Then, how about this: In exchange for every one hundred

sheaves of wheat, the Horn Clan shall give the Claw Clan one of our armored wagons, which we use as part of the defensive tactic known as the Wagon Wall."

Linnea had the option to push harder here with the weight of her authority, but instead, she made a clear offer.

And rather than trying to be stingy, she used a valuable item to make the bid.

Thanks to Yuuto's introduction of the iron-refining process, the price of iron had gone down somewhat, but it was still worth at least as much as gold on the open market. The wagons used in the Wagon Wall were covered in iron plates.

That made them extremely valuable; something Botvid would want desperately.

Linnea's choice of this item for her offer was more proof of her good political sense.

Once it was clear she would win the exchange, she then took care not to win by *too* much, and made sure the other party gained in the exchange as well. She created a win-win situation.

Machiavelli famously wrote in his essays that a ruler should inspire fear, but should work hard to avoid being despised.

That was the best path to forging good political relations over the long term. And it was something that Linnea understood intuitively.

"Ah...!" Botvid's eyes went wide. "Do you speak of that invention which you have used time and again to successfully repel the attacks of the Panther Clan riders?!"

Even though Botvid's nation was far away from the lands where the battles in question had taken place, it seemed he knew all about them. This was despite the fact that there had been great efforts made to keep the exact details behind those victories a secret, since if information got out about the Wagon Wall, someone might be able to try copying the design.

In that respect, it seemed the apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. Botvid was very much like his biological daughter Kristina, the leader of the Steel Clan's spy

network.

“A-are you really all right with giving us those?!” Botvid exclaimed.

“Yes, I am. Now that the threat of the Panther Clan has passed, those weapons will serve the Steel Clan just as well if they are in possession of the Claw Clan.”

Now that the Steel Clan had annexed the Panther Clan, the two non-allied nations bordering the Horn Clan were the Hoof Clan and the Lightning Clan.

The Hoof Clan had been trapped in a trend of steady decline after losing their charismatic ruler, the great warrior Yngvi. And at the Battle of Gashina, it had been made clear that the Wagon Wall tactic was completely useless against the Lightning Clan, as long as they had the monstrously powerful Steinþórr leading them.

In conclusion, the armored wagons were of little use to the Horn Clan at this point, while also being a source of wasteful maintenance costs.

Naturally, they were still valuable military weapons, and having powerful military resources ready in reserve was not something Linnea took for granted. However, there should be no problem with selling off a small number of them.

More than anything, there was the fact that during the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr’s sentencing, Yuuto had said he intended to “rule over all of Yggdrasil.”

Since he had finished conquering most of the lands up to the western coast of Yggdrasil, that could only mean that he eventually intended to invade eastward, towards the central region of the empire.

Since the Claw Clan controlled the territory on what was currently the Steel Clan’s eastern side, then giving them military resources made perfect sense from the perspective of the Steel Clan as a whole.

The logic made sense, at least, but even so, giving one’s own limited military resources away to another nation was not an easy thing to do.

Linnea, however, was decisive and acted without hesitation in these situations. That was one of the remarkable things about her.

Later on, Botvid remarked the following to his biological daughter, Kristina: “I took her for nothing more than a little girl, but she was more than I gave her credit for. In particular, there was the fact that I found it *difficult to view her as my enemy.* She’s mastered the art of making allies and winning at negotiation, and all at such a young age. It’s frightfully impressive.”

And with a knowing grin, Kristina said the following in response: “Why are you only realizing this just now? You should already know that while Father is surrounded by beautiful girls, the only time they are ‘cute’ is when they are dealing with him.”

“All right, I’ve managed to secure something from everyone, at least.” Linnea leaned back into her chair and took a long, deep breath.

She had just concluded her meeting with Lágastaf, the patriarch of the Wheat Clan. With that, she’d finished negotiations with the patriarchs of five out of the six sibling clans. Only the Panther Clan was left.

So far, the results of those negotiations had been pretty great, or as great as one could hope for.

Just as with Botvid of the Claw Clan, each meeting had started with the other party showing that they didn’t think much of her, but that had changed as the discussions proceeded and Linnea got to work on them.

She’d variously coaxed them with offers, or allayed their concerns, or threatened them, all the while working to ascertain what it was they each most wanted or needed. At last, she had made sure that by the end, they wound up arriving at exactly the sort of arrangement that both parties could accept.

She would never gain too much at the other person’s expense, nor allow them to do the same; she would get what she wanted from the deal while letting them win something, too.

In each case, she had found that line and struck that perfect balance.

That was why, even though each of her fellow patriarchs had ended up pledging to donate some of their food supplies, they’d all left her office with satisfied faces.

“But,” Linnea murmured, “this still isn’t nearly enough.”

The other clans she'd negotiated with were fellow subsidiaries of the Steel Clan, but they had originally been small, weak provincial clans. They didn't really have all that much to spare.

It definitely wasn't going to be enough to feed tens of thousands of people all the way up until the autumn harvest.

Knock knock! Linnea's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden and unexpected knock at her door.

"Second-in-Command, I heard that you wished to have a word with me. Is now a good time?" The voice that called from the other side of the door was passionless and carried an eerie chill that could make a person's blood run cold.

"Ah, Brother Skáviðr," Linnea said. "Yes, come in."

"Thank you, ma'am."

The man who entered had thin cheeks and a pale, sickly color, yet his eyes gleamed with a sharp and piercing light, and he had a dangerous, sinister-seeming air about him.

If she hadn't already known him well, she might have easily mistaken him for a hired assassin and called for the guards.

This man, Skáviðr, was one of Yuuto's most trusted advisors. He had once been the Wolf Clan's assistant second-in-command, but had recently become the new patriarch of the Panther Clan in Álfheimr, which had sworn allegiance to Yuuto and the Steel Clan.

"It's good to see you after so long," Linnea said. She addressed him in a friendly manner, without formal airs. "You've been in good health, I hope?"

A year ago, Skáviðr had been sent on a mission to the Horn Clan's western border region, put in charge of defending the walled city of Myrkviðr and the surrounding area. That had given Linnea a chance to interact with him regularly and get to know him.

She'd learned that, in spite of what his appearance might suggest, Skáviðr was completely loyal to Yuuto, and cared about his subordinates as well as about the lives of the citizenry. She'd grown quite fond of him as a result.

“Yes, thankfully I am well,” Skáviðr said. “I’m happy to see that you seem to have kept in good health yourself, ma’am.”

“Please, have a seat and make yourself comfortable.”

“I appreciate it. Thank you.” Skáviðr gave a small nod, and settled himself into one of the guest chairs.

Linnea sat down across from him, and set about preparing for the important discussion to come by starting off with some more standard small talk.

“So, it’s been a month now since you were made a patriarch. Tell me, how’s it going?”

“I cannot honestly say that it’s going well,” Skáviðr admitted. “I am a simple, boorish man who has spent his whole life as a soldier, focused solely on battle. This is a role completely outside of my experience, so I often feel as if I’m fumbling in the dark.”

“Is there anything in particular you’re having problems with? I know I might not seem that reliable because I’m young, but I do have more experience than you as a clan patriarch. You can consult with me about things.”

Linnea felt that she owed Skáviðr a debt of gratitude for what he’d done to protect Myrkviðr and its people. He had personally gone out on dangerous patrols in the surrounding lands, and he had put a great deal of effort into managing the city’s reconstruction efforts.

Linnea wasn’t lording her experience over Skáviðr, but rather trying to repay him.

Fortunately, he seemed to understand that. “Thank you very much, ma’am. In that case... the most prominent problem is, I would say, the great difficulty in trying to get two peoples with very different cultures and values to live together peacefully.”

“Ah...” Linnea nodded. “True, that does seem like it would be a real pain to try and deal with. After all, they’ve got a lot of enmity built up between them.”

Currently, Skáviðr’s Panther Clan was controlling territory that had formerly been under the rule of the Hoof Clan. In other words, the former Hoof Clan

citizens who farmed those lands were now living side-by-side with the Panther Clan nomads who had originally invaded from the Miðgarðr region to the north.

From the perspective of the former Hoof Clan people, the Panther Clan were foreigners that had suddenly invaded, pillaged and destroyed their farms and villages, seized their food, and kidnapped their women, and then treated their lands and people as disposable after subjugating their capital.

And as for the Panther Clan, it was a clan of nomads with a long history of being scorned and mocked as barbarians by the people of settled agricultural clans.

It wasn't as simple as saying, *"All right, you're all one clan now. Forget all of your grudges, and work together at getting along so the nation as a whole can prosper."*

"There seems to be no end to the antagonism, outright fights keep breaking out between the two groups," Skáviðr said. "The fact that we have strict, consistently enforced laws is barely holding things together at the moment, but I cannot help but wonder how much longer that will last."

Linnea thought for a moment. "Hmm... well, how about the idea of just accepting that they can't live together?"

"What do you mean by that, ma'am?"

"The former Hoof Clan people lost members of their families, and were oppressed under the Panther Clan's rule," Linnea said. "The anger from that is going to take many decades to fade away, at the very least. Flipping that around, that means you just need to decide that trying to make the two peoples live together in peace is going to be impossible for the next several decades, and that's that."

"Urm..." Skáviðr frowned ever so slightly. "However, this duty is something that my liege and master entrusted me with. Giving up on that so quickly would be..."

He trailed off. Clearly he wasn't comfortable with the idea.

"Brother Skáviðr, listen to me," Linnea responded bluntly. "You mustn't get your priorities mixed up. Your job as a patriarch is not uniting two different

peoples into one. It's ensuring that the people you rule over can live in safety and prosperity. As long as you do that, you don't have any obligation to unite them culturally beyond that."

Skáviðr seemed a bit puzzled. "Erm...? But, ma'am, if they are constantly in conflict with each other, how could I say that they are living in safety?"

"That will only be true if they all have to live together in one place," Linnea said. "Thankfully, the Panther Clan's territory is large. You could just go ahead and divide up the lands, cleanly split between the two peoples, and make it so that they don't have to associate with each other any more than is strictly necessary. And if you're going to do that, now's the best time to do it, while reconstruction's only just gotten started."

Skáviðr was stunned for a moment, then let out an impressed laugh. "Ha ha ha! You really are very decisive in your thinking."

Linnea tilted her head. "Really? But don't you agree that it would just be a waste to pour effort and resources into something that you know won't work out?"

Linnea made her argument as if she hadn't said anything particularly special, but in fact, people were ordinarily not capable of being so decisive.

And, as it happened, Linnea's reasoning had touched sharply upon a truth about the way the world works.

Far, far in the future, there would be the United States of America, for example. Even in the country known as a multiracial "melting pot," people of different races and ethnicities would still form their own separate, homogeneous neighborhoods and communities, and though there would be exceptions on an individual, personal level, on the whole, they would not associate deeply with each other.

Then there were the nations of Japan, China, and South Korea in the same era: even though seventy years had passed since the end of the Second World War, there would still be a deep gulf between them regarding their wartime history.

Linnea was someone who believed in ideals, but at the same time, she could

look at the reality of a situation from a dry, objective angle, and make firm decisions based on that.

This was one of her outstanding abilities as a ruler and policymaker.

“I cannot make my final decision right away, but I think I will strongly consider using what you have taught me today,” Skáviðr said.

“Okay, then.” Linnea nodded. “Well, keep in mind that it was merely my personal take on it. It’s your clan, Brother Skáviðr. You should govern them the way you think is best.”

“Thank you very much, ma’am.”

“Ah, right, one more thing,” Linnea added. “Just in case you end up going with my idea, there are probably going to be some people from the nomads that hold a grudge against you for making them leave the towns and cities they were occupying. There might even be quite a few of them, so I think you’ll want to make sure you ready some sort of benefits or incentives for them to compensate for that, and to keep them from staying disgruntled.”

“Ha... ha ha ha!”

“Huh? What’s wrong? Did I really say something that strange?”

“Ah, no, ma’am, it’s just that I remembered something that Master Yuuto said.” Skáviðr chuckled. “He once told me that, if we had been living in an era of peace, you would surely be known as one of the greatest rulers of our time. I now see that he was absolutely right.”

“Wha?! F-Father said something like that about me...?” Linnea couldn’t keep herself from breaking into a giddy smile.

This was supposed to be an important discussion between fellow patriarchs, which demanded a certain dignity, but she couldn’t suppress the powerful feeling of happiness welling up within her.

If Yuuto had praised her like that directly, she might have assumed it was polite flattery, but hearing it from someone else secondhand like this, she could accept that it was his honest opinion.

“D-did he say anything else about me?” The question was out of Linnea’s

mouth before she could restrain herself.

She had meant to use this meeting to learn the domestic situation of the Panther Clan, but now things had moved completely off-track. But even as she thought that, she couldn't stop herself.

"A-anything is fine, any small remark," she added quickly. "I don't mind if it's something negative, either. I can always use that as a base to work on improving myself."

"Hm... I have never heard any negative remarks about you from him," Skáviðr said. "On the contrary: during the campaign against the Panther Clan, when we began providing shipments of food supplies for the refugees, he remarked that it was only because of you that he could deal with such an impossible task. It seems like he truly relies on you."

"I... I see. So he thinks that highly of me!" Linnea's voice rose in pitch as she grew excited.

It filled her with a renewed desire to work even harder to live up to Yuuto's expectations. But just as she was thinking that, Skáviðr spoke up again.

"Ah, actually, there was something else..."

"Th-there's more?! Tell me?!"

"He said that he adored you as much as if you truly were his little sister."

"A-as his little sister..." Linnea could feel herself tense up, her smile freezing taut.

She'd been prepared to happily accept any criticism or complaint Yuuto had about her, but this left her with more mixed feelings.

Naturally, she was happy to know that he cared about her.

She was happy for that, but his seeing her as a *little sister* was a problem.

Of course, she *had* been his sworn younger sister for some time, but as a woman, she just couldn't be satisfied with that sort of platonic relationship.

"Aside from that... I am sorry," Skáviðr added. "I cannot remember anything else specifically. However, in any case, Master Yuuto most definitely holds a

deep affection for you in his heart, ma'am."

"I... I see." Linnea's mouth felt dry. "But... as his sister, right? W-well, that's something I already knew. ...Ah, forgive me. Our discussion got off-track. Right now, the current status of the Panther Clan is more important. Are there any other problems you're having?"

"Other problems... It would have to be the shortage of food, I would say," Skáviðr said. "The aid we are receiving from the Steel Clan is helping a lot, and I am truly grateful for it, but if I must be honest, it still is not enough. And so, while I know exactly how shameless it is to make this request, would it be possible to increase the amount you give us? As it stands, we do not have enough to supply everyone, and in the outskirts of the clan, there are already more than a few who are starving..."

"I knew it..." Linnea gave a bitter sigh, slumped over, and rested her chin on one arm. She'd had a bad feeling that this might be the case.

Naturally, by Linnea's calculations, she had been sending the Panther Clan more than enough to cover what they needed. In fact, there had even been a bit of a positive margin included.

However, humans were selfish creatures. It was inevitable that there'd be some who would greedily take more than their fair share from the supplies as they were being distributed, stealing from what should have gone to others.

Back when Linnea had been in charge of directing the reconstruction of Myrkviðr, she had seen that ugly reality for herself.

"Well, I'm sorry to say I can't live up to your expectations this time," Linnea said. "In fact, aid shipments are more likely to get smaller going forward. I've already met with the other patriarchs and struck deals to get them to contribute some of their own food, but even then..."

"I see... so you were already acting to try to solve the problem. And even then, the aid is still going to shrink. Hmm." Skáviðr's brow furrowed worriedly.

He was likely picturing just how much more desperate things would become for his people if their already-insufficient food supplies dwindled even further.

It was possible there would be a sizable number of deaths by starvation.

This was a man who was always ready to sacrifice himself for the peace and safety of his people. As someone with the same mindset, Linnea deeply understood the bitter distress he must be feeling now.

“Of course, I plan to discuss this with Father too, but it would be best not to expect too much,” Linnea added.

“...Yes, you are right.” Skáviðr sighed. “Even someone as great and wise as Master Yuuto cannot simply create something from nothing, after all.”

Food stocks were consumed between harvests. They never increased.

This problem was about how intelligently they could distribute the food from the supplies that they had. And the absolute amount of that supply was far too low for the demand.

There was a limit to what they could buy on the market from other surrounding clans, too. They were in a tough financial situation at the moment, and they didn’t have much capital to spare.

“Even so,” Linnea added, “I still can’t help but imagine he might come up with some idea that fixes this all. That is what’s so frightening about him.”

“Ha ha! That is certainly true.” Skáviðr gave a wry chuckle.

Linnea and Skáviðr’s liege lord, Suoh-Yuuto, was someone who had overcome a number of seemingly impossible trials.

In just two years, he’d gone from leading one of the smallest, weakest clans in Yggdrasil to ruling over what had become its third-largest superpower. And even though they had witnessed it firsthand, it was still almost too incredible to believe.

No matter what the situation, he might instantly come up with a way to eliminate the problem. That was the extent of the trust which they found themselves placing in him.

“Even on the issue of uniting the nomads and the former Hoof Clan people they conquered, I told you I didn’t think it was possible, but it’s still possible that Father could find some solution that I couldn’t... Hm? Wait, that’s it!” Linnea cried.

“What is it?” Skáviðr asked.

“The nomads! We’ve never had any need to feed them in the first place!”

“Huh?” Skáviðr’s puzzled reaction was an incredibly rare moment for him. “I beg your pardon, ma’am?”

Linnea’s words must have truly caught him off guard.

That was only natural, for even if the nomads of the Panther Clan were his former adversaries in war, the idea of not giving them any food would still seem like far too cruel of a suggestion.

“Here’s what I mean: You shouldn’t be making them do unfamiliar work assisting in the reconstruction of villages and towns; you could be having them *hunt for their own food.* They’re originally from the wild grasslands far to the north, where they mainly hunted for food, right?”

“Ah! I see now!” Skáviðr’s eyes lit up with understanding.

A standard bow required a great deal of training and time to master. The same was true of the experience needed to learn how to track wild game, and stalk it without being detected.

That was why, even in this food shortage situation, the idea of increasing the number of wild game hunters would ordinarily have no practical application. However, it was completely different if they already had a large population of fully trained, experienced hunters on hand.

In fact, making a group with such important skills do any other type of work in such a food crisis would be absolutely foolish.

Furthermore, if the nomads weren’t being forced to work on construction projects side-by-side with the former Hoof Clan citizens, that would cut down on the conflicts that were breaking out between the two groups. It would be killing two birds with one stone.

“Wait...” Linnea suddenly grew excited as another flash of inspiration hit. “We also have a great deal of crossbows still sitting in storage, unused. Those don’t require nearly as much time to master as a normal bow. We could order soldiers from the Wolf and Horn Clans to go into the mountains and hunt wild

game with the crossbows, officially stating that it's extra military training."

"Ohh, that is a good idea!"

"Yes... yes, this could work," Linnea said excitedly. "There's no way to tell unless we actually try it, but it might work. I'll contact Assistant Second Jörgen right away! Brother Skáviðr, I leave the rest to you!"

Linnea stood up, bristling with energy, and dashed out of the room.

Once she arrived at an idea, she immediately took action; that, too, was proof of her ability.

One week passed, and Yuuto was visiting Linnea in her office.

"Hey, Linnea," he said. "I was just looking at the data in these reports, and it looks like we've got a pretty crazy number of refugees and immigrants coming in from the surrounding clans. Do we have enough food to cover everybody? If it comes down to it, you can go ahead and order the slaughter of some of the livestock, okay?"

Linnea gently set down her pen, and flashed Yuuto a bright smile.

"It's all right, Father. There won't be any problems. I have already taken care of it."

The region surrounding Fort Waganea had no rivers and saw little rainfall. The land around the fortress was a wasteland covered mostly with gravel and sand, stretching out towards the horizon in all directions.

A few small shrubs grew out of the rocky soil here and there, but it was completely unfit for farming. Holding land in this area gave little material benefits, so for a long time it had been a sort of buffer zone between the controlled territories of the Lightning and Wind Clans.

For at least the past one hundred years, this useless stretch of wasteland lying between the two clans of northern and southern Vanaheimr had been the reason they hadn't gone to war with each other.

But now, suddenly, this place had become the setting of a large-scale war between the Lightning and Flame Clans.

The Flame Clan patriarch had set up his core formation on a tall hill about two

hours' march south from Fort Waganea. From there, he gazed down to his distant front lines, where a young man with fiery red hair was plowing right through his defenses.

"Oho!" he exclaimed, the pitch of his voice rebounding with excitement. "So, he is the one spoken of as the 'Battle-Hungry Tiger,' is he? Enemy though he be, I can only call it splendid. See how he merely crosses through my formation, and splits them straight in two! I had taken him for little more than a man among the mice of this land, but how mistaken I was. Even in the land of the rising sun, there was never a warrior of such fearful strength. Why, he might even surpass the likes of Lü Bu and Xiang Yu!"

Standing next to the patriarch was his second-in-command, Ran, who swallowed as he watched the same scene with a tense expression.

"Is he... truly human, my liege? It still seems impossible to me that the strength and valor of one man alone could so overcome a force more than twice the size of his own."

The Flame Clan had twenty thousand troops on the field opposing the Lightning Clan's eight hundred.

The difference would not be so stark if the Lightning Clan were using some advantageous tactics, but they were charging right into the Flame Clan formation from the front, and still managing to overwhelm their foe's superior numbers. It made absolutely no sense. It went against military logic.

"Decry it as impossible, but you still cannot banish the reality before you," the Flame Clan patriarch said. "There is naught to do but accept it. And since you must see it, pay attention. This is a spectacle you shall have few chances to see in your lifetime."

"My liege, I would think this might not be something to enjoy so much," Ran said hesitantly. "It is our forces which are being pressed back."

"Ah, so it is. I would have liked to watch him fight for a while longer, but now is not the time. Very well, begin the retreat. If we continue to face that fellow head-on... While we will not see defeat, I would ill wish to see the losses among our men."

The Flame Clan army soldiers were elite fighters that had been trained up for many years to serve their lord's desire for conquest of the realm. They were a prized national resource. It would be an utter waste to sacrifice them to a battle here in such a worthless province.

Furthermore, this entire situation was something the Flame Clan patriarch had predicted beforehand.

He had previously heard many tales of the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr's unequaled strength in battle.

According to one story, he had captured a fortress single-handedly, killing every defender himself.

According to another, he had fought as the rearguard himself while his army retreated, with only a few dozen men at his side, and personally repelled the enemy army as it tried to pursue his.

Another story claimed he had been ambushed and surrounded by seven Einherjar, and completely defeated them all on his own.

Each and every tale seemed beyond all credibility.

And so, the Flame Clan patriarch had not been fool enough to go to war with such a monster without any strategy to defeat him.

The Flame Clan patriarch smiled. "If a forward assault cannot stop him, then we need only proceed as planned, and attack where he is weakest."

"...Something's off here." Steinþórr brought his horse to an abrupt halt. "Their retreat is *too* well-organized."

He'd secured a win in the battle against the Flame Clan troops, and had been just about to seize the momentum and lead his men after them to launch a pursuit attack.

But not only was the retreat too organized, there were those abnormally long spears that the Flame Clan infantry had been using. It all gave him an unsettling feeling that wouldn't go away, like a bad premonition.

He couldn't help but be reminded of the first time he had faced off against Yuuto, at the Battle of Élivágar River.

Back then, he'd chased after the enemy as they were withdrawing, chasing them too far. As a result, he'd wound up cut off from his men and surrounded by seven enemy Einherjar, then swallowed up in a man-made flood that had nearly killed him.

Something about the situation right now bore too much of a resemblance to back then.

"In which case, I bet he's going for an ambush," Steinþórr muttered to himself. "Another group waiting to strike. ...But where?"

Now that he'd guessed his enemy's aim, he imagined a map of the region, picturing the layout of opposing forces.

That quickly led him to the answer.

Memories from the Battle of Gashina flashed through his mind.

There was a position that had become the most thinly defended after the other side had drawn out his forces. And it was the position that would cause him the most logistical problems if it were captured.

"Ah!" he shouted. "Everyone, we're returning to base immediately! The enemy's after Fort Waganea!"

"My lord, the Lightning Clan army is pulling back!" called a soldier.

"Oh, is that so?" The Flame Clan patriarch brought his horse to a stop. "Keh heh heh, so he recognized what I was after, did he? The hearsay painted him to be a foolhardy man who knew only how to charge blindly ahead, but see? Why, he shows himself to have quite the working intelligence, as well. Splendid, truly splendid. I would most like to have him as my own subordinate."

The Flame Clan patriarch clapped his hands, then spread them out wide.

It was a gesture of genuine appreciation, praise without reservation.

He was a man who hated incompetence, and loved those who were talented and capable.

Whether it was an ally or enemy made no difference. Even in the world he'd originally came from, he had always given his respect to those who were truly strong.

The patriarch's eyes narrowed. "However," he murmured in a lower tone, "great though you may be, young man, alone you lack the strength to defeat me as I am now. You may have figured out the trap at Waganea, but what about the *other two locations,* I wonder?"

In the Flame Clan patriarch's strategy, even ambushing Fort Waganea was nothing more than another decoy.

Upon discovering an adversary's hidden plan or trick, most people had a tendency to stop thinking any further.

Thus, all one needed to do was make that "answer" the bluff for a second layer of deception.

The Flame Clan patriarch had used his personally-led force of twenty thousand to draw out the Lightning Clan army, while his remaining thirty thousand troops were split into three independent groups to advance past them along separate routes.

Even if he failed to seize Fort Waganea, the other two thinly-defended fortresses would fall to him.

Furthermore, he'd sent a missive to the Steel Clan patriarch, urging him to mobilize more of his own soldiers in support.

No matter how powerful Steinþórr was, he wouldn't be able to deal with all of this.

By odd coincidence, it was a strikingly similar sort of strategy to the one Skáviðr had used against Steinþórr at the Second Battle of Élivágar River. However, the Flame Clan patriarch was conducting it on a much, much larger scale, across a wider area.

Naturally, if he had been attempting this with an army the same size as his adversary's, each of his divided forces would only end up destroyed, one by one. The patriarch was able to make use of this strategy because the Flame Clan could mobilize fifty thousand troops, a number far and away above the norm for the nations of Yggdrasil.

Assemble enough soldiers to completely overwhelm the enemy. Carefully organize the supply lines. Place strong and competent officers in charge of each

division. Create the conditions for victory, so that victory without difficulty was a matter of course. This was the foundation of the Flame Clan's military strategy.

There was nothing surprising or even especially exciting about it.

In the Flame Clan patriarch's younger days, he had once led a mere two thousand soldiers to launch a surprise attack against a force of twenty-five thousand, and had managed to take the enemy general's head in a stunning victory. However, he didn't take undue pride in that. Instead, he'd endeavored to never fight such a risky battle again, and thereafter had always sought to gather more soldiers than his enemy before heading into battle.

That was what made this man so terrifying.

He wasn't tempted by the glory of victory itself; he continuously worked in pursuit of the most logical means to attain it.

And that was why he had no weaknesses; he was simply and truly strong.

"I shall have him in check in about, oh, three more moves, I think." Stroking his chin, the Flame Clan patriarch smirked.

As for the division he'd sent to attack Fort Waganea, he'd given them orders to withdraw immediately if Steinþórr returned.

If Steinþórr gave chase, the Flame Clan patriarch's main force would move in, seize Fort Waganea, and have the Lightning Clan in a pincer.

If Steinþórr chose to stay and defend the fortress, the other two detached divisions would invade further, ravaging Lightning Clan territory.

If the Lightning Clan patriarch tried to divide his forces in an attempt to prevent that, all the better. The Flame Clan would crush whichever division didn't have Steinþórr leading it.

There was no longer any path for the Lightning Clan army that led to survival.

"Hmm." The Flame Clan patriarch frowned to himself. "Still, I cannot help but find it regrettable that I should have to kill such a great man."

ACT 3

The girl called Hildegard swallowed once, then dropped into a low, squatting position, holding out one hand palm-upwards. She began to speak in a loud voice.

“I come to call upon your honorable house, and though it may presume upon you, I ask that you please allow me to introduce myself.”

She was a young girl with hair tied into two short braids, and though her willful and determined eyes made a strong impression, her overall appearance was still rather cute.

She was also dressed rather well, suggesting that she came from an affluent background.

“First, I am grateful for your time, and that you would agree to hear me,” Hildegard went on. She proceeded to recite the rest of the ceremonial greeting she had memorized, making sure to enunciate each word clearly. “As I am clumsy and uncouth, I most humbly ask that you would forgive me should I show a lapse in displaying the courtesy rightly due to you. I understand that this is the first time I have had the honor of meeting you, good sir.”

The first impression was always essential.

If she could display her ability to perform this formal greeting without mistakes, it should quickly improve her image as exemplary among the superiors of this organization.

She couldn’t afford to make any mistakes.

“I hail from the territory of the Claw Clan, from the village of Zaltz at the base of the Himinbjörg Mountains,” she said. “I am called Hildegard, and I am fourteen years of age. Last year, when I journeyed to visit the sacred Hliðskjálf tower, I received the blessing of the goddess Angrboða, and her gift of the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin. Realizing it was my destiny, I joined in the campaign to subjugate the Panther Clan. However, I have still yet to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with anyone. I am a novice warrior, a child without a sworn parent.”

The man standing opposite Hildegard went wide-eyed at that last line.

Of course you would, she thought, snickering in the depths of her heart.

Because Einherjar were blessed by the gods with the power and protection of runes, they possessed combat abilities that set them far apart from the ordinary people without them.

In this era of constant warfare, any clan would surely be desperate to get their hands on such a powerful warrior, as would any faction family within a clan.

In fact, Hildegard had already received proposals from two other factions, asking her to become a child subordinate with them.

But the Oath of the Chalice was a firm and sacred pledge, and once it was exchanged, one could not easily discard it. That being the case, if Hildegard was going to swear the Oath of the Chalice with someone, she figured it'd be best to pick someone from a family that was rising in power, which would lead to better opportunities for her own career.

And that was why she had chosen to come here.

"I had the good fortune of staying for some time as a guest of Lord David, assistant second-in-command of the Jörgen Family," she said. "However, if I should only be able to pledge my Oath of the Chalice to one parent in this life, I would wish more than anything to swear myself to the Mánagarmr, Lady Sigrún, the warrior whose name rings throughout the land. And so I have come, though I know the request be brazen. I hope that you might think well of me."

Inwardly, Hildegard sighed in relief. She'd managed to finish reciting the whole thing without messing up once.

Since she'd grown up far out in the country, these kinds of formal greetings were really difficult for her. But at least the first hurdle was cleared now.

"I appreciate your kind and courteous greeting," the other man replied. "Please, forgive my delay in introducing myself. I am Bömburr, second-in-command of the Sigrún Family."

"...!" Hildegard suppressed herself from gasping in shock, but her eyes went

wide.

That was only natural, for she knew exactly who this man was. She'd done some cursory research on this faction, since she was planning to swear her Oath of the Chalice with them.

In addition to being the Sigrún Family's second-in-command, Bömburr was also the vice-captain of the force of elite soldiers known as the Múspell Special Forces Unit.

This was completely unexpected; she'd never figured she would end up meeting face to face with such a hugely important figure in the family.

But, this might be a stroke of good luck, Hildegard thought. Her mind raced.

Straightening her posture, she once again bowed her head in respect. "I am most honored to make the acquaintance of someone so renowned. I have heard much about your glorious achievements."

Of course, she was only going through the motions.

Honestly, she'd never heard Bömburr's name until doing her research on the Sigrún Family. And even when she had learned about him, he hadn't had any glorious kills to his name at all. His accomplishments were all boring and run-of-the-mill.

And seeing him now, he was short and a bit stout—he looked a little sluggish for a warrior. He didn't have any intimidating presence. He just seemed like a boring old middle-aged man.

Hildegard could only assume he'd made it into his current position in Sigrún's faction by sucking up to her.

Still, this was the head of the child subordinates in the family Hildegard was trying to get into. Considering her future career, there was no harm in making sure he thought well of her.

"Ha ha ha!" Bömburr chuckled. "I know it's just empty flattery, but it still feels pretty good to get praise like that from a young woman like yourself."

"Oh, no, I promise it isn't empty flattery at all..." Hildegard protested.

Even though that's exactly what it is, she added in her heart with a sneer.

Of course, Bömburr had no way of hearing the girl's inner voice, and so he responded only to her spoken words.

"Oh, please," he said with a chuckle. "Really, there's no need for that. Anyway, you wanted to enter our family, right?"

"Y-yes, sir!" Hildegard was grateful the man had moved the conversation along; she'd been worried she might not be able to keep up the polite act.

"I'm sure you probably know this already, but we're one of the more militaristic factions in the clan," Bömburr said. "Our daily training regimen is very strict, and there's a much higher chance of dying in battle, too. You still want in, despite that?"

"That only means we have more opportunities to make a name for ourselves in the field, does it not?" Hildegard asked, the corner of her mouth curling upward.

She'd studied the basic etiquette and manners she'd need to get in good with the higher-ups in the family, but she didn't intend to act like a well-behaved girl, either.

This was a world where strength meant everything. If she came off as merely polite and obedient, she'd only end up being used and abused. She needed to show that she also had some teeth.

"Heh. Okay, then," said Bömburr. "It looks like you're just the kind of person our family is known for. And I'd certainly like nothing more than for us to get a strong Einherjar in our ranks. Let me welcome you with open arms, Hildegard." Bömburr held out a hand.

Hildegard grasped it, and the two shook hands.

And so began Hildegard's one-way ticket to success and status.

...At least, that was what Hildegard imagined it was, but the reality turned out to be much less rosy.

"Why do *I* have to do this kind of work?!" She angrily slammed her hoe against the ground.

As an Einherjar warrior, she should be wielding a sword, spear, or bow.

And yet, she'd been forced to wake up before the sun was even out and sent over to these stinking stables, where she was supposed to do dirty work like cleaning up horse dung.

It didn't make any sense at all.

This was work meant for mediocre people, not a hero chosen by the gods like herself.

"What do you mean, 'why'?!" a bearded man who looked to be around twenty shouted back at her. "It's 'cause you're a trainee who just joined the other day. Don't go whining and complaining on your first day of chores. Just shut up and get to work!"

"Rrgh." Hildegard immediately felt furiously irritated with this man.

She had received an offer to swear the Oath of the Chalice directly with Jörgen's assistant second-in-command, one of the high-ranking officers of the Wolf Clan.

What business did this man have talking to her like he was *above* her? He was still a low-ranking member of the family despite already being twenty, after all.

It was so offensive, it sickened her.

"Maybe you should watch how you talk to me, if you know what's good for you." Hildegard crossed her arms and raised her chin defiantly, shooting the man a threatening glare as she spat the words at him. "I'm an Einherjar of the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin. I'll be rising through the upper ranks in no time."

As expected of a mere novice, apparently her words frightened him a little. She was able to sniff out his fear with her incredibly perceptive sense of smell.

Her lips curling into a wicked grin, she kicked the hoe at her feet over to him.

"Wh-what the hell are you doing?!" he shouted.

"I've decided *you* can do this stupid work," Hildegard said. "Who knows? If you prove yourself useful, maybe in the future I'll consider throwing you a bone or two."

"Ngh...!" The bearded man couldn't even form words in response.

That was, perhaps, only natural. It would be far more odd for him not to be furious after being so thoroughly insulted by some fresh recruit, someone below him in rank.

“You...! How *dare* you!” The man clenched his fists tightly, then lunged at her.

It seemed like he was quick to anger, and quick to throw a punch, fitting for the family he was part of. Hildegard also got the sense that he had some experience fighting.

However, from her perspective, he was so slow that it was almost boring.

She easily caught his oncoming fist in the palm of her own hand, then squeezed, hard enough for his bones to make noise.

“Gaagh! St-stop that! Stop it! Let me go! Aaauughh!” The man started shouting and crying out in pain. It was pathetic; she hadn’t even applied half of her strength yet.

Hildegard stared right into the wailing man’s eyes, and spoke in an icy tone. “‘Stop it’? ‘Let me go’? Maybe you don’t understand the position you’re in right now?”

“Ugh... P-please let me go. Please, I’m begging you.”

“Hee hee, yes, that’s right.” Hildegard smiled, a smile that showed exactly how much contempt she had for him. “You need to realize exactly where you stand.”

In that instant, the man pulled himself back up, his face bright red, and he brought his other arm up to strike at her... but then he let out a breath, and lowered it back down.

“I see you’re not stupid, at least,” Hildegard said with a sneer.

“Ngh...!” The man clenched his teeth, and didn’t respond.

He was surely angry and frustrated, but after that single attack, he’d come to terms with the fact that he stood no chance of winning against her in a fight.

“Gah!”

The bearded man cried out in pain again as, suddenly and without remorse,

Hildegard thrust her other hand into his rib cage, digging in with her fingernails. He grasped at his stomach and collapsed to his knees.

Hildegard looked down at him. “And what are you waiting for?” she asked in a sharp, threatening tone? “Quit loafing around and start cleaning.”

She then turned her back on him, as if she’d completely lost all interest.

Even if he did decide to try and attack her from behind, she could handle someone of his level. That was what she was making thoroughly clear: The stark difference in their strength.

Eventually, she heard the sound of the man picking up the hoe. Then the sound of it being thrust into the hay.

It seemed that the man had decided it was better to submit to Hildegard than to try and stand against her.

Hildegard grinned. Finally, now she was freed of that annoying grunt work.

“Hey now, what’s all this?” a familiar voice called out. “Taking care of the stables was Hildegard’s job, wasn’t it? You need to make sure she does it.”

Surprised, Hildegard whirled around. It was the second-in-command, Bömburr. As always, he looked too relaxed for someone in his position, an idiotic grin plastered on his face.

Back when she’d first laid eyes on him, it had made him seem dull and boring, but now it felt a little unsettling.

“Ah, uh, but...” The other rookie soldier looked timidly back and forth between Hildegard and Bömburr.

Hildegard let out a sigh. She wasn’t going to be able to talk her way out of this.

“This sort of work doesn’t suit someone like me, sir. So I gave it to someone more fitting.” She spoke without a hint of shame, as if she’d done nothing wrong.

Bömburr gave a long, weary sigh, and scratched the back of his head.

“It’s not really about who’s more ‘fitting’ for it, though. New members start

off doing the hard chores. That's how we do things in this family."

"For the family known as the most powerful and militaristic faction within the Steel Clan, everyone seems pretty hung up on manners and formality," Hildegard sneered. "Lord David was willing to make me his sworn little sister, and told me that eventually he would have me swear the Oath of the Chalice directly with Lord Jörgen. Considering I gave all that up to come and join this family, this sort of treatment is just terrible."

Indeed, Hildegard couldn't accept any of this. She was a chosen Einherjar of the gods; she was *gracing* them with her membership, and yet they'd dared to make her do chores like any other lowly newbie.

She couldn't take them seriously.

"Oh, no, no, you need to trust me when I say that I actually consider you to be very valuable, okay? And besides, if we're talking about the Sigrún Family, then we're talking about the Múspell Special Forces, right? Don't you think that getting the chance to work a lot with horses is going to come in handy for your career going forward?"

"Ha! In that case, start teaching me horse riding techniques. I came to this family because I want to get out on the battlefield and earn some glory, and make my way up the ladder as quickly as possible. I didn't come here to do chores."

Hildegard spoke bluntly, laying it all out. At this point, she didn't really care if they kicked her out.

Fortunately, she hadn't exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with anyone yet. She could still join another faction.

For an Einherjar like herself, there were surely plenty of people eager to have her as a sworn child. She didn't feel any sense of attachment to this family, given how they'd treated her.

She was honestly expecting Bömburr to tell her to get out right then and there. Instead, he laughed.

"Heh heh! Heh heh heh!" He laughed as if he were enjoying himself, without a trace of anger. It was completely opposite to what Hildegard had been

expecting.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded.

“Ah, sorry. Didn’t mean to be rude. We are a family of strong-willed warrior-types, after all. So we actually get a lot of kids like you coming through the door. Not many of them are so bad they start acting out on their very first day, of course.”

“Khh...!” Hildegard felt her teeth grinding together in anger.

Bömburr had just insinuated that she was no different from any of the mediocre peons in the rank and file. It was a humiliating insult.

As if to make light of how angry she clearly was, Bömburr just kept on talking, the grin still on his face.

“So then, why don’t we settle the matter of your treatment in this family with a Yggdrasil custom, a one-on-one duel? Strength is everything, and the strong shall rule over the weak. That’s how this world works. And that fits in with your own style, too, doesn’t it?”

“Perfect,” Hildegard said. “I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

She licked her lips, and her fighting spirit welled up through her body and into the air around her.

Whatever he looked like, the man in front of her was the second-in-command of the Múspell Special Forces.

Even she could tell that he had to be hiding strength that didn’t show at a simple glance. However, even taking that into consideration, she was still absolutely certain that she was much stronger than him.

“Okay, so when do you want to do it?” she asked. “I’m ready to start right now, if you are.”

“We can’t do it right away,” Bömburr replied. “Your opponent’s not even here.”

“What? You mean you’re *not* the one who’s going to fight me?” Hildegard asked, a bit let down.

She made clear from her tone that she was also saying, *“So, you’re scared of fighting your own new recruit?”*

However, her attempt at an insult failed to put the slightest crack in the Múspell vice-captain’s unconcerned demeanor.

“Well, you’ve got a problem with how our family does things. So, it’s only right that you settle that by fighting the representative of that family, don’t you think?”

“Ah...! Then, my opponent will be...”

“That’s right. The mother of our family, captain of the Múspell Unit, and strongest warrior in the Steel Clan: Lady Sigrún.” Bömburr’s lips curled into a grin.

Hildegard guessed that he had probably been expecting her to shudder with fear upon hearing Sigrún’s name.

Certainly, that made sense considering how famous Sigrún was for her strength and skill.

She was a fierce, veteran warrior, responsible for killing many powerful foes, not least of which was Yngvi of the Hoof Clan.

Thinking about it normally, she wasn’t someone a fourteen-year-old novice could ever hope to win against, even with the powers of an Einherjar.

But... for the young Hildegard, the title of Mánagarmr, “Strongest Silver Wolf,” was also one of her goals.

Taking her low rank into account, she had figured it would probably take some time before she would get the opportunity to challenge Sigrún to a fight. She’d never imagined it would drop into her lap this easily.

“Like I said before, I couldn’t have asked for anything better,” Hildegard said.

The smile spreading across her face was that of a savage beast.

Three days later, Hildegard found herself in the inner courtyard of the Gimlé citadel, standing face-to-face with a living legend.

“So, you’re Hildegard?” the silver-haired woman asked.

“Yes. Thank you very much for agreeing to fight me today.”

At first glance, Sigrún looked like a young woman with a slender, even delicate build, with bright silver hair tied roughly into a single, long braid. She had an icy, hard beauty, reminiscent of the pretty glass artworks that were currently so popular.

However, in contrast to that pretty physical appearance, Hildegard’s animal-like senses were telling her this was the most dangerous creature she had ever faced.

Even just standing across from her like this, she could sense a terrifying power.

And even though Sigrún was standing still, without seeming to be guarding or at the ready for combat, she had no openings whatsoever.

She had an aura of profound strength, borne of countless time spent honing and cultivating her skills. The weight of that power pressed down on Hildegard, threatening to crush her beneath it.

So this is the Mánagarmr, Sigrún! She had to admit to herself that she’d grossly underestimated this person.

But even so, she couldn’t let herself get defeated in spirit before the fight had even begun. If she did that, she’d lose whatever chance for victory she had.

Hildegard tensed up, concentrating her energy in her stomach, and glared at the woman.

Sigrún’s eyes widened a bit. She seemed slightly more interested now. “Well, now. You definitely look ready for a fight.”

“Hmph! You may be calm right now, ma’am, but I will make sure you do not stay that way for long,” Hildegard replied.

Sigrún nodded. “I look forward to that. Bömburr, give us the signal to start.” She threw a quick glance to her vice-captain, and gestured with her jaw.

As if ready and waiting for that command, Bömburr raised his right hand up high, then brought it down, shouting, “Begin!”

As soon as his voice rang out, Hildegard used her full strength to kick off the

ground and leap directly to her left.

The rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin, as its name suggested, gave Hildegard increased physical abilities on par with a ferocious wolf.

Her initial move was made with every ounce of speed available to her, and to a normal person, it would have seemed as if she'd literally disappeared from sight.

Her feet kicked hard against the ground once more, and she changed direction, leaping forward to attack Sigrún from the side.

"Haah!!" She struck, bringing down her sword with all her might.

It was a blow so powerful it would have instantly killed a full-grown boar, but Sigrún caught it easily with her own wooden sword.

"You're quick. You move about as well as Albertina. Of course, the really scary thing about that girl is that she doesn't project any killing intent."

"Grrh. Seyah!" With a growl and a spirited shout, Hildegard launched into her next attack.

She'd known right from the start that she wasn't going to win against Sigrún after only one strike.

She refused to back down, and let loose with a relentless barrage of sword strikes.

What's more, they were full-strength attacks without any restraint or regard for her opponent. She was fighting for real.

Her opponent, however...

"Hmm. You're not just swinging blindly, either. It looks like you know your fundamentals. You must have been blessed with a good instructor."

Sigrún gave a thoughtful, dry analysis of Hildegard's power and skill, even as she continued to deftly turn aside all of her sword strikes.

She was deliberately remaining on the defensive, not making any attacks of her own.

If Sigrún wanted to, she could have already long since ended this match with

ease. Hildegard, fighting her head-on, understood that more than anyone else watching.

Don't underestimate me!

Hildegard unleashed everything she had. She used her powerful leg strength to leap this way and that, quickly changing her position, mixing in false starts and feints to try and misdirect her foe.

"Gah...!" she cried out in exasperation, for she couldn't even land a single hit.

No, it was worse: She couldn't even get the icy expression on Sigrún's face to waver even the slightest bit.

"All right, I'm going to attack too," Sigrún said coolly.

"Ah...!"

With a *whoosh*, Sigrún's wooden sword cut through the air, timed perfectly between Hildegard's own attacks.

Hildegard barely managed to block the blow, but if she hadn't been warned of the attack beforehand, she wouldn't have been able to react in time.

That fact only injured Hildegard's pride even more.

"How about this?" Sigrún called.

"Khh! Grrh...!"

Now that Sigrún was attacking, the balance had shifted completely.

In no time, Hildegard was completely on the back foot, doing everything she could just to fend off Sigrún's attacks.

And what was most frustrating of all was that her opponent still wasn't fighting seriously. She could feel it from the impact of the clashing swords: Sigrún was holding back, so that she could stop her sword just before a clean hit at any time.

"Compared to your attacks, your defense still needs work." Sigrún kept on going, dryly evaluating Hildegard while maintaining the offensive.

She wasn't trying to *win*, just trying to measure Hildegard.

It was like she was being completely *toyed* with.

“Hmm, so that’s all you’ve got,” Sigrún added. “All right, I got a good understanding of your skill. Time to end this.”

When she heard those words, Hildegard felt like she heard a sound from inside herself, as if something within her snapped and gave way. “Rgh...!”

As the daughter of the village chief, she’d lived her life with others serving at her beck and call.

Even when she’d been with the David Family as their guest, there had been nobody else capable of standing up to her in a fight. She had always been on top, looking down at others. She couldn’t stand having someone taking her so lightly, looking down on her like this. It was unforgivable.

“‘That’s all you’ve got’?” Hildegard roared. “All right, then. I’ll show you what I can *really* do!”

“Really, now? If you’ve got more to show, hurry up and do it. You don’t need to hold back.”

“Don’t blame me if you regret it, all right?” As she said this, Hildegard let go of her rational mind, and gave herself over to the creature in the depths of her heart, the Beast.

Ever since the moment she’d awakened to her rune, Hildegard had felt the presence of the Beast that had also begun dwelling within her body.

Let me fight. Let me feed. Let me kill. The Beast growled those demands from within her, but until now, she’d managed to keep it suppressed with her rational mind.

But now, for the first time, she let the Beast run free.

“Wha...!” Suddenly, Sigrún jumped backward, having felt a powerful aura from Hildegard. It seemed to burst out from her, like a shockwave.

A sixth sense for danger was one of the abilities granted to her by her rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. And right now, that sixth sense was screaming at her.

As her eyes met Hildegard’s, Sigrún felt a cold shiver run down her back.

By her evaluation, Hildegard had surpassing physical strength and dexterity for someone her age, but mentally she was still weak, and too full of herself. Still a novice as a warrior. That was what their fight just now had revealed.

However, the person in front of her right now seemed like someone completely different.

Or rather, it was like some*thing*, a creature with Hildegard's appearance.

"GRAAH!" Hildegard screamed, and leapt forward to attack.

In complete contrast to earlier, now her attacks were large, imprecise, heavy swings like those of a complete amateur. However, they were coming at a ridiculous speed, much faster than before.

"Khh!" Sigrún quickly blocked, but felt the sting of the impact run through her hand. It wasn't just the speed; each attack carried much more force behind it, too.

"GRRR.... GRAAAAAH!" Hildegard snarled and bellowed as she unleashed one attack after another.

There were wild punches and kicks mixed in with the sword strikes now.

There was no form or pattern whatsoever. The attacks were inconsistent and irregular.

They seemed like nothing more than unthinking, random strikes that relied on nothing more than pure physical strength.

"Hrgh!" Sigrún grit her teeth. Young though she might be, she was also a veteran fighter who had honed her skill through the crucible of countless battles, against a slew of powerful foes.

The increased speed and power had thrown her off a bit at first, but she regained her composure, and used the Willow Technique against one of Hildegard's wild swings.

Hildegard's weight was shifted, her body thrown off balance.

"Sei!" With a spirited cry, Sigrún unleashed a powerful strike directly into her opponent's exposed back.

Hildegard was sent flying, and nearly hit the ground face first. But at the last second, she planted her hands on the ground and flipped around as deftly as a cat, and landed safely.

“As far as the match goes, that would have been my victory, but...” Sigrún trailed off. Indeed, that had been a clean hit against her opponent’s back.

If this had been a real fight, it would have been fatal, and so was enough to call the match. However...

“URRUUGHH!”

The eyes that glared at Sigrún across from across the courtyard were burning even hotter with rage.

Clearly this wasn’t over, by a long shot.

In fact, Sigrún wasn’t even sure if Hildegard could hear or understand her right now.

“Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin,” she commented. “It lives up to the name.”

“GRRHH!” Snarling, Hildegard lunged forward again, not even remembering to pick up the wooden sword she’d dropped and instead attacking with her bare hands.

She really was nothing more than a wild beast right now.

It would be easy enough for Sigrún to fend her off with her own wooden sword, but it didn’t seem like she’d be able to stop the girl while holding back on using her full strength.

And if Sigrún did use her full strength, she might end up gravely injuring a promising new member of her faction, which was something she wanted to avoid.

“Good grief...” Sigrún at last tossed aside her own wooden sword. As a punch came flying at her, she grabbed Hildegard’s right wrist.

She pulled her opponent towards her by the arm, and then did a sweeping kick to take her legs out from under her.

As her opponent fell face down, Sigrún quickly circled behind and pulled the

arm up while kneeling on her back.

“GRAAAAH! AAAAAH!” Of course, Hildegard screamed and flailed, but Sigrún kept the girl’s right arm in a lock, and pulled it up more.

There was the muffled sound of Hildegard’s joints being strained...

“GWAAGH!” Hildegard cried out from the intense pain.

Sigrún resolved to hold her in this position for a while and see if she calmed down. However...

“GRUHH... URAAAAH!” Suddenly, Hildegard used purely brute strength to push Sigrún bodily off of her.

“What?!”

Sigrún had a slender build, but she was physically quite strong, at the very least in the upper tier in terms of pure power among the known Einherjar.

Hildegard had been locked in a disadvantageous position that made it difficult for her to leverage her own strength against Sigrún.

Yet, despite both of those factors, Hildegard had overpowered her. Sigrún went wide-eyed at that revelation.

“GRRAH!”

“Damn!”

Even as Sigrún was recovering from her surprise, Hildegard righted herself, and she wildly swung a fist down at Sigrún.

Sigrún tilted her neck and dodged it at the last minute, but a kick quickly followed.

She blocked it with both arms, but it was powerful enough to send her flying.

She hit the ground rolling, and used the momentum to regain her footing and stand up.

Hildegard stood watching her, panting heavily and snorting.

She still looked eager to keep on fighting.

Sigrún didn’t feel like she was in any danger of losing if this continued, but she

no longer felt like she could stop this girl's rampage without hurting her.

"Good grief... You're quite the fighter indeed. You're not going to stop until I break one or two of your bones, at least." Sigrún let out a small sigh, and then she switched her perception.

This was not a match. This was a *battle.*

"...!" This time it was Hildegard who leapt backwards, putting distance between them.

Her heightened, primal senses must have picked up on the aggressive energy coming off of Sigrún.

For each step forward Sigrún took, Hildegard took a step back.

It was at that moment that, unexpectedly, Sigrún heard a very familiar voice.

"Hey, Rún!" Yuuto called.

In that instant, Hildegard's body sprang into motion.

It appeared to be a purely reflexive action, without any thought.

Her wild instincts had told her that she couldn't possibly win against Sigrún, and so she was taking advantage of that brief moment when Sigrún's attention was diverted in order to try to escape from the area as quickly as possible.

However, she had tried to escape in the absolute worst direction possible.

"An enemy atta—Eek?!" Felicia had instinctively moved in front of Yuuto and started to draw her sword, but she wasn't fast enough, and she cried out as she was kicked aside.

"Father!" Sigrún's master, the young man who was her object of love and loyalty, was in danger. She ran to him as quickly as she could.

She no longer had any options.

She placed a hand to the hilt of the real sword at her hip. But what happened next surprised her.

"...!" With a gasp, Hildegard leapt back away from Yuuto.

Hildegard's face was running with a cold sweat, and her whole body was

shaking.

Sigrún felt the air around them *change*, and her expression grew taut.

“An assassin? Who sent you?” Yuuto addressed the beastly girl in a cold, deadly tone. Her body shuddered violently.

There was visible anger in Yuuto’s eyes. That was perhaps only natural, for he had just watched his precious adjutant get attacked right in front of him.

Hildegard started making pitiful, whimpering noises like a dog, as if she couldn’t withstand Yuuto’s hard glare. She rolled over onto her back, with her arms and legs bent, exposing her belly.

Indeed, she was assuming the same position as that of a dog supplicating itself before its master.

“Wah?!” When Hildegard’s mind returned, she was lying on the ground, looking up at the sky.

She didn’t have any clear memories of what happened after she’d unleashed the Beast within her.

The one exception was a fuzzy memory of experiencing a powerful terror, more powerful than any fear she’d felt before in her life. All of her muscles and joints ached terribly.

“Ow, ow... Big Brother! Big Brother, are you unharmed?!” a woman cried.

“I’m fine,” said a man’s voice. “What about you, Felicia? Are you okay?”

Hildegard turned her gaze over in the direction of the voices, and saw the unfamiliar man and woman in question. They seemed to be talking with each other.

The woman had golden hair, and was unbelievably beautiful.

The man was young-looking, and had dark black hair.

Wait, black hair?! Hildegard’s mind reeled.

She leapt up from her back, repositioned herself so that she was kneeling, and hanging her head low, shouted, “P-please, forgive my insolence!”

There was only one man she knew in the Steel Clan who had dark black hair:

Suoh-Yuuto, the reginarch himself.

“Don’t bother trying to act your way out of this,” Yuuto said coldly. “It’s too late. I’ll ask you once more: Who sent you?”

The reginarch’s voice was quiet, but it carried the unmistakable message that she *would* answer him.

He stared right into her eyes, his icy glare piercing through her, and she couldn’t move her body.

Her pride, her standards of not letting others look down on her... none of that mattered anymore to her.

All she could think or feel was how afraid she was of the young man in front of her right now.

When she had faced off against Sigrún for their duel, she had felt enormous pressure from the silver-haired warrior, but to put it bluntly, this was on an entirely different level.

She could hear her own teeth chattering.

“Answer the question.”

“Ah... awawah...” Hildegard could barely breathe. She didn’t have it in her to form any words.

What’s more, she didn’t know what sort of answer she was supposed to give him.

Just what had the Beast done while it was free?

All she wanted to do was run far, far away.

But the air around her felt as heavy as stone, pushing down on her, and her legs felt like they were rooted to the ground.

The fear was so overwhelming, that she thought she might lose her mind.

“Whoa?!” Suddenly, the black-haired young man let out a shout, as if something had surprised him.

In that brief moment, it felt as if the bindings on her body and mind were loosened a little bit.

She hastily opened her mouth, desperate to say something, anything, before the young man's gaze fell on her once more and rendered her unable to speak again.

"I... I am... Hildegard, my lord, a n-new... a new recruit in the Sigrún Family. I deeply regret any r-rudeness I may have shown earlier. P-please, I ask for your forgiveness." Her forehead pressed against the ground, she was only able to get a few stammering words out at a time.

She didn't fully understand the situation, but what was most important right now was to keep her head on the ground and express her apology, and obtain forgiveness for whatever might have happened.

That was all she could think of at this point.

"Hildegard?" the reginarch said. "Ah, right, you're the Einherjar that I heard joined the David Family. So you've switched to Rún's family, then?"

"Yes, Father," replied Sigrún's voice. "About four days ago."

It seemed Sigrún was standing close nearby, too. Hildegard didn't lift her head to look.

"Father, attacking you is an inexcusable offense," Sigrún declared. "I deeply apologize for what my new recruit has done."

"Ngh?!" Hildegard could feel all of the blood start to drain from her face.

She'd *attacked the reginarch?* That was a crime punishable by death on the first offense!

That's it. My life is over... she thought. She was overcome with abject despair.

Sigrún continued. "While I understand that ordinarily it is a crime that might demand the death sentence, the truth of the matter is that fault lies with me as her superior, for being unable to supervise and control her properly. If anyone is to be punished, it should be me."

Shocked, Hildegard lifted her head to look at Sigrún.

Even Hildegard would admit that she had acted terribly towards the family she had just joined, but even still, now the head of that family was trying to save her.

Hildegard remained on the ground, touched by that act of compassion. Yuuto, too, seemed impressed. He gave a small sigh.

“You know I can’t punish you for that. Look, I don’t really get what happened, but the point is that this girl’s not an enemy, right?”

“Yes, Father. You can be certain of that.”

“Okay. Then in that case, I’ll leave you in charge of her.”

“I am grateful for your benevolent decision, Father.”

“But then, why did she go and attack me in the first place?”

“In order to test her abilities, I had been working her over a little in a mock duel. However, apparently when she attempts to use her rune’s maximum power, it causes her to forget herself.”

“*Seriously?* That’s a real pain of a rune if you ask me.”

“Indeed,” Sigrún nodded. “However, her incredible physical strength and speed are very impressive. If she could learn to control herself better, she could become as strong as me, or perhaps even much stronger.”

“Huh, really? Well, Rún, if you’re praising her that much, she must really be something.” Yuuto glanced over at Hildegard, his gaze now filled with interest.

There was no more of the crushing pressure or piercing sensation that she’d felt before.

However, there was still an undeniable presence about him, a powerful charisma befitting the hero who had gone from leading a single weak, tiny clan to ruling a superpower that held multiple clans under its sway.

“Hey, don’t worry about what happened anymore,” Yuuto said, addressing Hildegard. “Everybody makes mistakes. I’ve already forgotten about it.”

He placed a hand on Hildegard’s head, and ruffled her hair a bit.

If anyone else had done something like this to her, she would have been absolutely furious with them, but for some strange reason, she didn’t feel the slightest bit of annoyance when he did it.

In fact, she could feel a warmth spreading in her heart, like a sense of

security.

“Do your best, okay?” Yuuto added. “I’m expecting great things from you.”

“Y-y-yes, my lord!” Hildegard cried out her reply in a stammering, shrill voice.

The reginarch looked a little startled by that, but then he gave her a little smile, and in that moment she felt her heart pound a single beat like a hammer.

A feeling she didn’t quite understand began to well up within her, and she looked up at Yuuto with an expression of pure bliss.

“Um... You’re free to leave now, okay?” The reginarch looked a little troubled, and averted his gaze a bit.

“Huh?! Oh! A-apologies, my lord, for taking up your valuable time!”

“Uh, no, that’s not what I mean. Um, you know. You probably want to go change out of those clothes, right?”

“Huh...?” At this, Hildegard finally looked down and noticed the wet stain on the crotch area of her pants.

She then noticed that there was a small puddle around her feet.

That could only mean one thing...

Thinking back, when Yuuto had been interrogating her, and she’d felt overwhelmed by the pressure, there was that moment where he’d been surprised. Was that when...?

Hildegard turned to look to her right.

She saw the faces of the Múspell soldiers who had all gathered.

She looked to the left.

Again, there were Múspell soldiers lined up and watching.

The blood that had drained from her face in her moment of despair now rose back up all at once.

“P-please excuse me!” Unable to remain still any longer, Hildegard dashed away as fast as her legs could carry her, speeding out of the courtyard like a fleeing rabbit.

Hildegard stood atop Gimlé's sacred Hliðskjálf tower, gazing out at the twilit cityscape.

The only sound was the cawing of the crows. They sounded oddly forlorn to her ears.

She had changed into some fresh clothes, but couldn't take sitting alone in her tiny room with only her thoughts. After wandering around aimlessly for a while, she'd ultimately found herself here.

"I could just jump off," she murmured. "Perhaps that would at least end my suffering..."

She contemplated for a moment.

"But no, if I did that, I would just be known as some woman who wet herself in front of a public audience, and then killed herself because she couldn't suffer the shame. I'd be that and nothing more."

The scene rose unbidden to her mind's eye again: the wet puddle on the ground between her legs. It was too much to take, and she began wildly stamping both feet and pulling at her hair.

"In front of the lord reginarch of all people, how could I do something so... so...! Aaaahhh! Aaaahhh! Aaaahhh!" Unable to continue, she simply yelled wordlessly into the void. She couldn't stop herself.

Each time the memory and image came back, she howled and flailed about. She'd been repeating that cycle ever since arriving at the tower.

"I know! I'll go on a journey. I'll travel to a land where nobody knows who I am, and try starting over. Yes, that's the best thing to do."

"No, no it isn't," a voice from behind interjected.

When Hildegard turned around, she saw a familiar, silver-haired girl.

"Lady Sigrún..."

Sigrún nodded once, then came over next to Hildegard, sitting against the low roof wall. "So this is where you were. I've been looking for you."

"You would have been better off not looking, ma'am," Hildegard replied.

Sigrún shook her head. “That’s not an option. Not when it concerns such a promising new recruit in my family.”

“I do not need any consolation,” Hildegard said, puffing out her cheeks and turning her head to one side.

“I’m not trying to console you,” Sigrún said. “I don’t do flattery. I can’t, really.” Her expression was stern, and she spoke in her usual cool, laconic manner.

True, it was hard for Hildegard to imagine someone this blunt going out of their way to compliment her just to make her feel better. However, it was still praise she couldn’t accept.

“But I didn’t even manage to lay a finger on you!” she cried.

As far as she could recall from the memories she retained, throughout the duel she’d been completely at Sigrún’s mercy. The silver-haired warrior had swatted away her every attack as easily as if brushing away an insect.

Hildegard hadn’t even been enough of a challenge to make Sigrún bat an eye.

“That’s not true.” Sigrún held out one arm, covered by a leather glove and gauntlet that ran all the way up to almost her elbow. She removed the armor to reveal a deep blue bruise right in the middle of her forearm.

“I got this when you kicked me,” she said.

“I-I’m sorry...” Hildegard quickly apologized, but she didn’t actually remember doing it. It must have happened after she’d let the Beast take over.

She wanted to bury her face in her hands. It was supposed to have been a duel with wooden swords; what pride was there in kicking her opponent?

“You have nothing to apologize for,” said Sigrún. “Injuries during training are a normal, everyday issue. In fact, you are the very first person in my family who was able to injure me at *all*. You should be proud.”

Sigrún put a hand on Hildegard’s head and tousled her hair a bit.



“P-please stop that.” Instinctively, Hildegard pulled away from Sigrún’s hand.

Sigrún looked confused. She tilted her head slightly, her hand still resting in the empty space where Hildegard’s head had been.

“Hm? You didn’t like that? Whenever Father praises me, it feels good when he strokes my head in that way, so I was trying to do the same.”

“Y-you are right, it did feel wonderful when the lord reginarch pet me on the head... but just now, that felt unpleasant, like I was being treated like a little child.”

“Hmm. It’s harder than it looks.” Squinting at her own empty hand, Sigrún nodded to herself, as if impressed. “Even when it comes to a pat on the head, Father is truly an amazing man.”

Hildegard couldn’t hold back a laugh.

With anyone except Yuuto, this woman was cold and unsociable, brusque and unyielding. She was famous for it, known as the “frozen flower.” Someone like that taking something as trivial as a head pat and puzzling over it so *seriously* looked a bit comical.

“Hm? Did I say something strange?” Sigrún asked.

“Ah, no, I was just thinking to myself how happy I am. Putting a bruise on the current Mánagarmr is a glorious achievement.”

Hildegard couldn’t very well give the true reason for her laughter, so she looked down, and quickly came up with an excuse.

Still, what she said wasn’t a lie, either.

She really was proud of herself for having accomplished something that no one else had been able to.

“Yes, it is,” said Sigrún. “You really are promising. And that’s why I can’t afford to let any other family have you. I can’t promise it’ll happen very soon, but I think that eventually, I could arrange things to have you exchange the Oath of the Chalice directly with Father.”

“D-do you truly mean that?!” Hildegard’s head whipped around to look back

at Sigrún so fast she almost pulled a muscle.

“Yes. I don’t lie,” Sigrún replied matter-of-factly.

“Woww...” Hildegard let out a long, emotional sigh.

Swearing the Oath of the Chalice directly with Suoh-Yuuto, the reginarch... that level of status would put her alongside the patriarchs of the branch clans. It was an unthinkably huge leap upwards.

She’d certainly never get the opportunity for that sort of promotion in any other clan faction.

And then there was the reginarch himself. In person, he had been so dashing, so gallant and commanding.

Deep in her heart, Hildegard swore to herself that she could endure a little shame, if it meant she might eventually be able to serve him as his direct subordinate.

“A-all right, I understand,” she said at last. “Lady Sigrún, I would like to stay in your family. I will do my very best, so please take care of me!”

“I see. That’s good to hear.” Sigrún nodded. She then held up one finger and said, “However, there’s a separate issue we have to deal with.”

Her tone changed. It was clear this next subject was not up for negotiation.

“You attacked Father, and you need to atone for that crime, and for the crime of hurting Felicia, as well.”

“Hey, Hilda! Go fetch some water!”

“Y-yes, sir, right away!” Hildegard shouted that reply as she ran out of the guard station.

She ran until she reached the nearest well, then hoisted up a bucketful of water. Transferring the water to a bucket she’d brought with her, she returned to the guard station.

She scooped the water out with an earthenware cup, placed it in front of one of her fellow Sigrún Family soldiers, then got another cup and repeated the process until everyone had some water.

Once she had finished distributing the water, one of the soldiers said, “And Hilda, make sure you clean the stables properly. The toilets, too. Got it, piss girl?”

“Kh...! ...Y-yes, sir, I understand.” Her face flushed a deep red from the humiliation, but she clenched her fists and endured it.

Piss girl.

In the span of a single day, that nickname had spread throughout the Sigrún Family. That was only natural, though, after so many of them had witnessed what happened. Most all of the principal members had been there as an audience for the duel.

Just you wait, Hildegard thought, grinding her teeth. *One day I’ll show you. All of you...!*

With the fires of indignation burning in her heart, Hildegard kept at her eyes fixed on her dream of a rosier future, one with power and status... and pushed ahead through another day of doing filthy grunt work.

“Your Majesty, I am most pleased to see you again after so long!” Fagrahvél gave his greeting from one knee, with one fist planted on the floor. “I was worried for your health, as I had heard you were troubled with an illness. However, it is a great relief to see that you appear to be in better spirits again.”

Fagrahvél was the patriarch of the Sword Clan, the powerful nation which served as the northern guardian of the imperial capital, Glaðsheimr.

As for his relation to Sigrdrífa, the current divine empress, he was her “milk brother,” meaning that he had been raised by the same wet nurse as she was. They shared a firm, familial bond, and in all of Yggdrasil, there was no one more loyal to her, or to the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

His appearance was so stunningly beautiful that all who saw him caught their breath, and despite what such unblemished beauty might suggest, on the battlefield he led his armies with furious strength and adept command, and so he was known as “The Shining Sword.”

It was a name that held a reputation on par with the Battle-Hungry Tiger out in the western lands, and the two men were often referenced together.

“Yes, well met,” said the divine empress. “You have done well in making the long journey here.”

Sigrdrífa’s—Rífa’s—face was hidden from him by a dividing screen, but out of the corner of his eye, Fagrahvél could see her silhouette as she nodded.

However, there was something about her voice that felt slightly off.

It was Rífa’s voice, without a doubt. They had grown up together as children; there was no chance he would mistake her voice for another.

However, the way she addressed him was strangely distant. Like she was a different person.

“Ah, if it pleases you, there was another matter I wished to ask about,” Fagrahvél began. “I have heard that your upcoming marriage to Lord Hárbarth had to be postponed...”

“Yes, unfortunately, my body has still not fully regained its strength, so it had to be done.”

“...?!” Fagrahvél kept his head bowed, but he furrowed his brow suspiciously.

Just now, Rífa’s voice had sounded *disappointed.*

She had always hated the idea of her planned marriage to Hárbarth.

She hated Hárbarth himself—despised him completely.

Postponing the marriage was something that should have overjoyed Rífa, not disappointed her.

“More importantly, it seems that the situation is quite lively in the lands to the west of your clan, is it not?” she added.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Fagrahvél. “Recently, the Steel Clan has been increasing in strength at an incredible rate.”

“Yes, and what a terrible annoyance they have become.”

“...Yes, ma’am.” Fagrahvél hesitated for only a moment, then chose to nod and voice his agreement.

His suspicions had grown to the point that now he was sure something was wrong.

He knew about the events that had occurred in Iárnviðr, thanks to reports from his subordinates.

He knew that Rífa cared deeply for the patriarch of the Steel Clan, Suoh-Yuuto.

What, then, had happened to those feelings?!

“If things continue at this rate, they stand to become a great threat to our beloved empire,” Rífa said coldly. “There is no longer any time to hesitate. We must act, and act now. Do you not agree?”

ACT 4

From the time the boy had first appeared suddenly in front of Felicia, she felt something towards him, felt he was special.

It wasn't something that could be explained rationally.

Back then, he couldn't speak; he couldn't fight; he was weak and frail, constantly sick in bed.

Even as the people around them started to laugh at the boy, mocking him and calling him Sköll, Devourer of Blessings, Felicia's feelings had never wavered, not even slightly.

It wasn't something she could admit to other people, but thinking back now, there were times when she almost preferred those early days.

At least back in those days, she could have Yuuto all to herself.

Back then, she had also had a kind older brother, whom she was proud of.

Thinking back on it now, those might possibly have been the happiest days of her life.

However, those peaceful days hadn't lasted for long.

The boy everyone had scorned as good for nothing had quickly risen in rank, one day suddenly becoming the patriarch of their clan. And just as suddenly, Felicia had become the younger sister of a kinslayer.

Following that incident, many eyes were on her... gazes filled with disdain, with silent, mocking laughter, with pity, with suspicion.

Rumors began to circulate that she had seduced Yuuto to gain her status in the clan, that she served at his side because she was serving his needs in the bedroom. *If only that were actually the case!*

However, even with all of those challenges, even those difficult days had not been unhappy ones for Felicia.

Indeed, as Yuuto's adjutant, she was almost always by his side always closest to him.

Eventually, an enemy's magic spell had forcefully sent Yuuto back to the land beyond the heavens, suddenly parting her from him. But then he had chosen her world over his own, returning to her.

And this time, he had brought his childhood friend with him. (Though she was actually the first to arrive.)

The girl from Yuuto's world was adorable, and charming.

In addition, she possessed a good heart, and the caliber of a true queen.

Felicia could acknowledge that about her.

She could smile in the girl's presence.

She could treat the girl with kindness.

And when she'd learned that the girl was pregnant with Yuuto's child, she had been able to be genuinely happy for them.

She had prepared herself for this outcome.

She had resigned herself to the fact that she wasn't good enough.

She believed that, someday, the terrible pain in her chest would lessen and subside.

However, with each passing day, it only seemed to hurt worse.

In the morning, Felicia was just getting herself dressed and ready for the day when her patriarch's voice called out to her from his bedroom next door.

"Felicia, can you come in here?"

This was a lot earlier than usual for him.

A bit surprised, Felicia set down her comb and called back, "Good morning, Big Brother. Is something the matter?"

"It looks like Mitsuki's got a bit of a fever. Could you take a look at her?"

"Ah...! Yes, of course." Felicia hurried to the door and entered Yuuto and Mitsuki's room, still in her nightclothes.

This concerned the health of her master's betrothed, and the child she carried. Felicia didn't have time to be concerned with her appearance.

Mitsuki sat on the bed. Her cheeks were flushed and her breathing seemed a bit labored.

“Oh... Felicia, good morning to you. I’m sorry to trouble you so early in the morning,” she said.



“Please, think nothing of it. Sickness is something we all must deal with.” Felicia hurried over to Mitsuki’s side, and placed a hand to her forehead.

She was quite hot.

Felicia knew that a woman’s body temperature often increased during pregnancy, but this was far too hot even after taking that into consideration.

“If I may, I will begin the examination.” After confirming that she had permission, Felicia closed her eyes, and used her mind’s eye to read the flow of ásmegin within Mitsuki.

At the very least, she didn’t sense any other ásmegin from another person.

Actually, there *was* still the lingering aura from Felicia’s own Gleipnir spell. But aside from that, there was no trace of any curses, or other seiðr magic cast by a third party.

“Lady Mitsuki, answering with just a slight nod is all right: Do you currently feel pain in your throat? And in your head, as well?”

“...!” Mitsuki made no sound, but Felicia saw a look of shock pass over her face for a brief second.

Mitsuki nodded. The question, *How did you know?* was written all over her face.

“I was able to see a disruption in the flow of ásmegin in your head and throat,” Felicia explained.

Ásmegin was the divine energy that was the source of an Einherjar’s supernatural runic abilities, but it was also life energy, part of what defined the existence of living beings.

An Einherjar was host to a remarkably large quantity of ásmegin, an effect which had dramatic results. However, as living creatures, all ordinary people carried a tiny amount of it within themselves, as well.

If the flow of ásmegin within the body got disrupted somewhere, then that part of the body would see poor health.

“Wow, you can figure that kind of thing out from sensing ásmegin...” Mitsuki

blinked several times, clearly impressed.

Mitsuki herself was a twin rune Einherjar, and while she was still lacking in experience in skill, she was capable of casting seiðr magic.

She was probably quite curious about all the potential applications ásmegin might have.

“It is likely that something is causing a bit of mischief in your body,” Felicia said. “However, it does not appear to be too serious, and I think you should recover in two to three days.”

“Something’s ‘causing mischief’?” Mitsuki asked with trepidation. “That sounds scary. What could it be?”

“Ha ha, don’t worry about it,” Yuuto laughed. “Felicia says it’s nothing serious. It’s probably just a normal cold virus or something.”

“Ohh, now I see. So that’s what it is.” Mitsuki accepted Yuuto’s explanation, and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Felicia had also heard about that so-called “virus” before, from Yuuto. He had once explained to her that they were tiny, tiny life forms, too small for the eye to see, and that they caused illnesses when they invaded the body and disrupted things.

That explanation had shocked Felicia at the time, for until that point she had always believed that illnesses were the work of evil spirits.

“I think I understand the nature of the symptoms now,” she told Mitsuki. “I will go prepare some medicine for you right away.”

Felicia was well-versed in every area, but she was particularly knowledgeable when it came to medicinal herbs.

That was because she had wanted to prepare herself for if Yuuto ever became seriously ill, or if he were ever struck by a weapon coated with poison. She had collected all of the clay tablets she could find with relevant information, and researched them whenever she had a moment of free time.

Judging by Mitsuki’s symptoms, an infusion made with dried mulberry root bark should be an effective treatment. Felicia already had the necessary

ingredients in her medicine case in her room.

She immediately began to head for the door, when Mitsuki called out, “W-wait! Please, wait!”

Felicia stopped. “Yes?” she asked.

“If possible, um, I’d prefer not to take any medicines.” As she said this, she placed one hand protectively on her belly.

Once again, Felicia felt a twinge of pain in her heart. But even stronger was the admiration she felt for Mitsuki, for putting the safety of Yuuto’s unborn child ahead of her own relief from pain.

“I see,” Felicia replied. “It is true that medicines meant for adults can sometimes be too strong for a baby.”

“Right,” said Mitsuki, nodding. “I know I might just be worrying too much, though.”

Felicia shook her head. “No, I understand your feelings perfectly well. In that case, we shall limit the treatment to directed prayer.”

“Huh?” Mitsuki gave Felicia a puzzled look. She then turned to look at Yuuto, as if appealing to him for help.

Yuuto gave a wry chuckle, and shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, I know how you feel,” he said. “But, think about it. You’ve seen the power of galdr and seiðr magic for yourself. There’s nothing bogus about this stuff, so you can relax. It actually works really good for pain.” He patted his own stomach with a hand. “Trust me, I would know.”

When Yuuto had first come to Yggdrasil, he had come down with severe stomach illnesses and diarrhea over and over, and each time, Felicia had tended to him, including with directed prayer.

This was the reason that Yuuto often said that without Felicia’s help, he would have died during that time.

“U-um, well, okay. Please go ahead, then.” Mitsuki reluctantly gave Felicia her permission. She probably still didn’t trust in it herself, but she trusted Yuuto when he said that it would work.

Felicia smiled slightly. It brought back memories of Yuuto in those first days. At first, he had been very suspicious of the use of prayer, too.

Felicia returned to Mitsuki's side. "My lady, please relax your body as much as possible. Try to keep your muscles limp, and your heart calm." Felicia placed her hands on Mitsuki's head and throat.

The disruption in the flow of ásmegin in a part of the body was leading to pain and abnormalities developing there.

Therefore, one needed to redirect the ásmegin there into its proper flow. While that might not physically remove a virus from the body, it would at least subdue the pain in those areas.

"Oh Ymir, father to us all. Oh Angrboða, mother to us all." As Felicia recited the words of the prayer, she began to synchronize her own ásmegin to Mitsuki's. "Return purity to the flow of... ngh?!"

Suddenly, she stopped and physically leapt backwards away from Mitsuki, panting.

"Haahh... haahh... haahh... haahh..."

"Wh-what's wrong, Felicia?!" Yuuto shouted. "You look white as a sheet... I-is it a more serious sickness than you originally thought?!"

"N-no, no, it is not that, please do not worry. It is just... Big Sister Mitsuki's ásmegin was so powerful that it overwhelmed me, and I was almost swallowed up by it..."

It had actually been a very close call just now.

Inexperienced though she was, Mitsuki was still a twin rune Einherjar. The amount of ásmegin energy flowing within her body was incalculably massive.

When Felicia had tried to synchronize with it, it was as if she'd been suddenly swept up into a torrential flood, and in that instant she'd feared that her mind itself would be swept away.

In fact, she suspected that if she had been one second late in disconnecting from Mitsuki, that was exactly what would have happened.

"I am very sorry, Big Brother," Felicia said ruefully. "It appears that with my

meager powers, I cannot help.”

Sigh... Felicia looked down at the ground.

“Hey, how many sighs is that now?” Yuuto asked. “Don’t beat yourself up about it. She’s a twin rune Einherjar, right? There’s nothing you can do about that.”

“I... do know that is the case, but...” Felicia felt grateful for Yuuto’s words, but it wasn’t enough to clear the dark clouds from her heart.

Nowadays, she was constantly being reminded of just how much power she lacked compared to others.

First, she had failed in her attempts to re-summon Yuuto to Yggdrasil with her magic. Then, after his return, she had failed to even put up the slightest real resistance against Skáviðr in a swordfight. Even if it was a mock battle, it had been a humiliating defeat for her as a fighter.

Then, just the other day, she had been taken by surprise and knocked aside by a sudden attack from a newbie Einherjar. And now this morning, she’d failed to even relieve a sick person’s pain, something she could normally do without difficulty.

Felicia was well aware of her strengths and weaknesses as a “jack of all trades, master of none” Einherjar. She understood that her broad skills and knowledge necessarily meant that she would fail to measure up to a true master specialist in any one particular area.

But even so, she’d believed that she’d at least developed herself to a decent level of skill and expertise in the things she could do. Having that confidence broken over and over left her with a feeling of self-loathing that wouldn’t go away.

“Let’s just focus on getting our work done today, okay?” Yuuto asked. “That’s what Mitsuki told us to do.”

“...Right.”

Mitsuki had chastised them both, saying, *“If Yuu-kun takes the day off, it’ll cause trouble for a lot of people, right? Go on.”* She’d halfway kicked the two of

them out of the room.

Ephelia was still in morning classes. Another female servant would be attending to Mitsuki in the meantime, but it was hard not to worry about her.

“Okay! Let us do our best.” Felicia slapped herself on the cheeks a few times to psyche herself up, and then began working through the clay tablets on the desk.

There were a lot of messages that arrived addressed to Yuuto every day.

Reading through them and checking their contents, and then describing the contents to Yuuto, was part of Felicia’s job as his adjutant.

“This one is a missive from the Flame Clan patriarch,” she said.

“Ahh, that’s right, while we were out chasing down the Panther Clan, he was stirring things up with the Lightning Clan.” A slight crease formed in Yuuto’s brow.

According to the reports that had come in previously, the result of that battle had been the Lightning Clan’s victory, and they’d seized Fort Waganea from the Flame Clan.

Yuuto was a dutiful man, true to his word. He felt a bit guilty that his arrangement with the Flame Clan had caused them to pay such a heavy price, considering that all he had given them were a few material gifts.

“I will read the message as written,” said Felicia. “‘We will soon make war with the Lightning Clan. When that happens, we would like you to move in with your own troops, as well. Even just fielding enough to occupy the enemy is enough. No need to actually engage with them in full combat. Signed, Flame Clan patriarch.’ ...Erm, I wonder how this is supposed to be read?”

“Hm, what’s up? Is the writing too sloppy to read?”

“No, it isn’t that, but more like... some sort of strangely-designed seal instead of the name. A personal symbol, perhaps? The format of the message in general was also very odd. It seems this Flame Clan patriarch is the type who loves to stand out.”

“Ohh, right, now that you mention it, the message doesn’t have that formal,

‘Inform so-and-so, I am so-and-so’ part at the beginning,” Yuuto said.

“Yes,” Felicia said. “And if I may speak frankly, I think it is written *far* too disrespectfully.” She made her displeasure clear, turning aside with a pouting frown.

Yuuto was known as the reginarch, or “great lord,” to many, and in fact controlled multiple nations, which should command respect from other leaders. Sending a message to him with such informal wording was akin to making a fool of him.

Felicia was normally moderate and polite, but right now she was pretty angry about this.

“Hey, hey, it’s no big deal,” Yuuto said. “And we do owe the Flame Clan a favor on this one.”

Whatever her feelings, he didn’t seem to care at all about the lack of ceremony in the document, preferring to get right to focusing on its contents.

That tolerance was one quality that marked him as a truly great ruler in Felicia’s eyes, but it also made her even more angry at the Flame Clan patriarch.

“All right, this is an important matter,” Yuuto said. “Felicia, call together the Steel Clan high officers who are currently in Gimlé for a meeting. We’ll discuss what to do.”

Once Yuuto finished describing the Flame Clan’s message and their request for reinforcements, it was Sigrún who responded first.

“Attacking the Lightning Clan along with the Flame Clan, you say. That sounds just fine, Father. I’m eager to put my skills to work for you.”

During the most recent war with the Lightning Clan, Yuuto had used the “empty fortress” strategy against them successfully at first, fending off any further invasion. But the Lightning Clan had still recaptured all of the territory the Wolf Clan had taken from them after the First Battle of Élivágar River.

If one looked just at the results, the enemy had invaded territory all the way up close to Gimlé, pillaging the surrounding lands. One could say that Yuuto’s side had lost more resources.

For Sigrún in particular, she had faced Steinþórr in combat three times now, and suffered an unquestionable and total defeat each time.

She wanted the chance to avenge her grudge against him, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Yuuto said. “I’m getting pretty sick and tired of always having to go to war with that idiot. I’m thinking maybe this might be the chance we need to shut him up for good...”

Yuuto was nodding in agreement with Sigrún, but then he hesitated. He looked over to his second-in-command, Linnea.

Everyone else in the room turned their gazes toward her, as well.

Linnea thought silently for a moment, staring at a single point on the table in front of her, with a very grave expression.

At last, she looked up at Yuuto and said, “I have to say I’m against it. Right now, the Steel Clan is dealing with a serious food shortage, and a large-scale military campaign will put severe additional strain on the citizens.”

“So it’ll have really painful results, then?” Yuuto asked.

“Yes,” Linnea replied. “Even right now, we are barely scraping by. We would have to start buying up the food on the open market to supply the campaign, and if we did that, we will see more and more people suffering from starvation. Even from a financial standpoint, it is honestly questionable if it’s possible.”

“Yeah, that makes sense, since we’ve been fighting constantly for a while.” Yuuto let out a pained sigh.

They’d need equipment and food supplies, of course, but then there was payment. The soldiers they took to war needed to be compensated fairly for risking their lives in battle. Making war demanded huge expenses.

Since the start of spring this year, they had fought three large-scale military campaigns in a very short period of time. And they hadn’t gained all that much wealth to show for it.

Technically, the Steel Clan had captured a large swath of territory in the western Álfheimr region, but because of their enemy’s scorched-earth strategy,

they were currently stuck with even more strain financing its restoration.

The Steel Clan might make a hefty profit from glasswares, paper, and other proprietary products and technologies, but there was an upper limit to what that could cover, and they'd reached it.

"Hmm." Jörgen frowned. "Still, it would be a waste to let such a great opportunity as this just pass us by." He crossed his arms and furrowed his brow.

Ever since Yuuto became patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Jörgen had been his dependable right-hand man, using his considerable political and leadership skills to make things work smoothly in the Wolf Clan capital. And he was still lending his expertise to Yuuto now, as the assistant second-in-command of the Steel Clan.

Just like Linnea, Jörgen was fully aware of the difficult situation facing the Wolf Clan and the other clans, but even then, he couldn't let go of how tempting this chance seemed.

"...Yeah, you're right." Yuuto sighed, and rested his chin on one hand.

On the battlefield, Steinþórr was an undefeatable warrior. It was an exercise in futility to try to take that monster head-on.

And so, the best path was to attack Steinþórr's army from multiple directions, pull his forces out so they were spread over a wide area, and thus reduce the Lightning Clan patriarch's ability to influence the battle with his own individual strength.

That was the basic strategy for countering the Lightning Clan.

And a cooperative attack with the Flame Clan fit quite neatly into those conditions.

"I beg your pardon for interrupting your meeting!" A young soldier shouted nervously as he hastened into the room.

He made a beeline for Felicia, and handed her a scrap of paper, gave a quick bow to the room, then left.

"Ah...!" As Felicia scanned the message, her eyes went wide.

"What does it say?" Yuuto asked, sitting up straight again.

The air around him grew heavier, and sharper. He could tell from her reaction that it was something major.

“It is a message from Ginnar, who is currently traveling and staying with the Flame Clan,” Felicia said. “He reports that they have launched another incursion against the Lightning Clan.”

“Pff! Ahaha!” Yuuto’s eyes widened, but then he burst out laughing. “Well it looks like someone’s a little too impatient to wait for a reply!”

Across the table, Jörgen was furious. “It is not a laughing matter, Father! He sent us the request, and then advanced his troops without even bothering to wait for our response! He is showing us disrespect!”

Felicia nodded sternly at Jörgen’s words.

Combined with the unceremonious language in the message the Flame Clan patriarch had sent, this was downright offensive.

“Hey now, just calm down, Jörgen,” Yuuto said.

“How can I be calm about this, Father?! This is the honor of the Steel Clan we are talking about here!”

“No, I still think you should calm down and think about this again. He didn’t wait for our reply to his request before advancing his troops. That means he was never even counting on our assistance to begin with.”

“Yes, Father, that is exactly it. They are taking us lightly...” Jörgen began, but Yuuto held up a hand.

“Look, the Flame Clan has already fought the Lightning Clan once. In other words, they’ve seen firsthand the ridiculous power possessed by that idiot Steinþórr. And despite that, *they still decided that they didn’t need our help.*”

“Ah...!” Jörgen gasped, his eyes wide.

The room went quiet, except for the sounds of several people swallowing nervously.

Felicia slowly raised a hand. “Perhaps this... and the disrespectful tone of their message... simply means that they overestimate their own strength, and underestimate that of the Battle-Hungry Tiger, Dólgþrasir. Could that not be the

case?”

Felicia had fought Steinþórr firsthand on the battlefield, and she knew all too well how superhuman his power was.

Along with both the current and previous Mánagarmr, she had been one of the seven Einherjar who had tried to surround Steinþórr and fight him all at once. He’d repelled them easily, and it was almost a traumatic memory for her.

It was simply too hard to imagine that a monster like that would be defeated on the field by anyone *other* than Yuuto.

“I can’t deny that possibility,” Yuuto said in response. “But, fortunately, the request says all we have to do is put in enough troops to help divert and occupy the enemy’s forces. That would be enough to satisfy the debt we owe the Flame Clan. Whether the Flame Clan wins their battle or not, the Lightning Clan will suffer losses for certain. That’s plenty good for us.” Yuuto’s lips curled into a grin.

Ordinarily, Yuuto was a kind, and warm person who wanted to avoid war as much as possible. But from time to time, he showed this more ruthless side of himself.

Of course, if he hadn’t had that aspect of himself from the beginning, he wouldn’t have been able to conquer the lands from Bifröst all the way to the Álfheimr coast.

“Linnea!” Yuuto called.

“Yes, sir!”

“How many soldiers could you feasibly mobilize before it becomes untenable?”

“Umm... let’s see.” Linnea thought for a moment, doing calculations in her head. “Two thousand... no, we could put three thousand into play, I think.”

Felicia didn’t react aloud, but inwardly she was astonished by this.

She’d gone over the majority of the data related to the food supply issue, and had an understanding of the situation. Rather than “scraping by” as Linnea said, it seemed more to Felicia like they were already at the point where they didn’t

have enough to get by.

And now Linnea was saying that even in this situation, she could find the resources to mobilize a force of three thousand soldiers. Honestly, it didn't sound believable at all.

But this girl didn't make empty or dishonest boasts. If she was saying she could do it, then she could do it.

"All right, then. Rún!"

"Yes, Father!"

"You'll lead the three thousand into Lightning Clan territory. But remember, you're only trying to distract the enemy. Don't go in too deep or fully engage. And especially if that idiot shows up, you get out of there immediately."

"Yes, sir!" Sigrún's response was brisk as ever, but Felicia's keen senses still noticed the very tiniest hint of a delay.

It wasn't that Sigrún didn't understand the difference in strength between herself and her enemy. She surely knew better than anyone that she couldn't defeat Steinþórr.

But although she *knew* that fact, it wasn't the same as being able to accept it.

She'd just heard Yuuto, of all people, basically tell her that she couldn't win against Steinþórr. Sigrún had sworn herself to Yuuto as his sword, and it must feel shameful to be unable to strike down his enemy.

Yuuto, for his part, seemed to see through to what Sigrún must be feeling, for he came close to her and put a hand on her head, stroking it gently.

"It's not that I don't believe in your strength. In fact, it's because I do rely on you so much that I don't want to take the chance of losing you in this petty little battle. Okay?"

"Yes, Father!" Sigrún shouted her reply with all of her energy.

A bystander might not see anything different in Sigrún's appearance, for she had her usual stone-faced expression. But Felicia knew her well, and she could tell that the girl had completely regained her spirits.



Doesn't take more than a little reward to motivate her, does it? Felicia thought.

Of course, Felicia herself often found her happiness and disappointment hanging on Yuuto's remarks just as often, so she had no room to criticize.

Suddenly, Linnea spoke up, her voice shrill and quavering a bit. "U-um, Big Bro—I mean, Father!"

"Hm? What is it?" Yuuto asked.

"U-um, getting the supplies necessary for three thousand soldiers is actually a pretty hard thing to do."

"Oh. Hm, then should we reduce our force to two thousand, then?"

"Ah, no! Um, what I mean to say is, I am going to work really hard!"

"Yeah, thanks. I know it's going to be hard for you, but give it your best, all right?"

"...Right." Linnea seemed to wilt, her shoulders drooping.

Yuuto tilted his head, confused at why she looked so disappointed.

Chuckling, Felicia decided to speak up. "Big Brother. Lady Linnea is hoping that you will pat her head, too."

"Huh?" Yuuto paused, then looked back at Linnea.

Linnea's face started getting redder and redder, and she looked down bashfully.

But after a moment, she seemed to gather her resolve, and looked up again, meeting Yuuto's eyes.

"Y-yes, if you would, please!" she shouted.

"U-uh, right. Well, I mean, fine with me. But if you want to ask for a favor, there are better things you can ask for, you know." Yuuto seemed mystified by this situation, but he walked over to Linnea, and stroked her head, gently ruffling her hair.

Yuuto couldn't see Linnea's face under his hand, but Felicia could. She looked

as happy as she could ever be.

“I suppose this is just more proof of the quality of Big Brother’s character,” Felicia mused to herself, smiling gently at the scene.

Linnea and Sigrún were the clan’s strongest masters of martial combat and administration, respectively. But they were willing to give everything of themselves for the promise of a pat on the head.

Ordinarily, high-performing officers would receive expensive material rewards, or land, or special titles and privileges. But the Steel Clan was enjoying the benefits of great talent at quite the bargain price.

Once the meeting was over, Yuuto had some spare time, so he and Felicia went to check on Mitsuki together.

Felicia opened the door ever-so-slowly, and looked for any movement coming from the bed. If Mitsuki was sleeping, she wanted to do what she could to not wake her up.

The bedroom was dark, but one of Felicia’s abilities as an Einherjar was impressive night vision.

“It would seem she is asleep,” Felicia said.

“Okay, then. Let’s make sure we’re quiet,” Yuuto whispered, as he also peeked into the room.

Sleep was one of the best medicines for most illnesses.

If the two of them accidentally woke Mitsuki up, they’d be doing her more harm than good.

“...?” The servant watching over Mitsuki seemed to sense Yuuto and Felicia. Perhaps she had heard them whispering. She turned to face them, and bowed.

She was a woman who looked to be in her late twenties, with a very calm demeanor. She was also quite beautiful.

Yuuto made his way quietly over to her, and whispered, “Hey, Raphina. How’s Mitsuki looking?”

“She still has a high fever. She finished her supper and went to sleep just a

short while ago.”

“I see. Have you been with her the whole time? Thanks for taking care of her.”

“Oh, no, Lady Mitsuki has been so kind as to give my daughter such special treatment, and I owe her so much in gratitude. This is the least I can do.”

Looking at Raphina’s face, Felicia noted how she bore a strong resemblance to her daughter Ephelia. Or, rather, it would be more appropriate to say that it was Ephelia who strongly resembled her mother.

If Ephelia was going to grow up to be just as beautiful as this woman in another ten years... it was almost a scary prospect.

“Good, it sounds like she was able to eat, at least,” Yuuto whispered. He was looking over at a side table, which held a small, empty bowl.

Just as Raphina said, it looked like Mitsuki had only just finished her meal. The empty bowl was still slightly wet.

Mitsuki had really been struggling with trying to eat for a while, but now she was back to eating somewhat normal portions.

Raphina nodded. “Yes, although it seems that cold food has not been very enjoyable for her, either.”

“Well, that’s a given.” Yuuto shrugged his shoulders, a bitter smile on his face.

After experimenting with a variety of different foods, they’d finally hit upon the main trigger for Mitsuki’s nausea attacks. Apparently it was heat and steam.

The humidity and scent of hot, freshly-cooked food seemed to be the cause.

And so, Mitsuki was forced to eat only food that had gone cold.

There was nothing they could really do about it except deal with it, and she was making sure to eat what she was given. But Mitsuki was a girl who loved to cook. By extension, she also loved the taste of good cooking, and warm meals were one of the highlights of her day. So not being able to eat any hot, freshly-cooked food was really stressful for her.

“If we were in Japan, there’d be a lot of food I could get for her that’s really

tasty even if it's chilled. Because of me, she's having to go through some real hard times, huh?" Yuuto gave a sad smile, and knelt down beside Mitsuki. He stared at her face with worry in his eyes, and then he gently stroked her head.

In that instance, Felicia felt a sharp pain lance her heart.

Patting someone on the head was a habit of Yuuto's. It was his natural way of showing that he appreciated someone and cared for them.

It was something Felicia saw all the time. There shouldn't be anything strange about it. Why, just a short while ago, he'd done it to Sigrún and Linnea.

But while Felicia had felt nothing unpleasant watching it happen with those two, right now, she felt a deep and agonizing pain.

For these past three years, Felicia had been the closest person to Yuuto, always at his side. And so, that was why she could tell how this was different.

The way he stroked her hair, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face... they were all a different sort of love than the kind he showed to anyone else.

"Why am I not good enough...?" she whispered.

"Huh?" Yuuto turned to look at Felicia. With a start, Felicia came back to her senses.

She'd just whispered her feelings out loud. What was she doing?!

She hurriedly did the best she could to come up with an excuse. "O-oh, no, erm. I was just frustrated that I am not powerful enough to do something to alleviate her pain."

It was a terrible lie.

She hadn't been thinking anything of the sort.

"Are you still going on about that?" Yuuto asked. "Look, a few days of rest and she'll be fine. You don't need to worry about it."

She'd been lying, which was why she wished he wouldn't respond by smiling at her so kindly.

She also wished he wouldn't pat her gently on the head like this. It just made the difference between them even more clear.

The thoughts that she was always trying to drive away began circling in her mind again.

Why wasn't she good enough? Why couldn't it be her instead?

She knew Yuuto better than Mitsuki did, anyway.

She was more useful to Yuuto than Mitsuki.

She could love Yuuto more, could devote herself to him more completely.

Felicia shook her head, tried to shake those terrible thoughts from her mind, but they wouldn't disappear.

She shuddered at herself, at how shallow and petty she was being.

Her mind understood the truth of the situation.

She understood that for the whole three years, Yuuto had constantly devoted his love to Mitsuki, and her only.

She wanted to wish the two of them happiness. She intended to do so. She thought she had succeeded.

But now, every time she watched Yuuto interact with Mitsuki, it felt like it was tearing at her heart.

Under the light of a single torch, Felicia climbed the dark stairwell.

This place, Nari Tower, was tucked away in a far corner of the northern end of Gimlé's palace grounds. It was a prison tower reserved especially for those of high status.

Handling a prisoner of high rank or status too roughly or with disrespect would reflect poorly on a clan's honor. Because of that, this prison was supplied with higher-quality food and furnishings than could be found in the home of an average citizen.

Of course, entering and leaving the tower and its cells was another matter. Security was extremely tight.

Felicia reached the third story, the top floor, where *he* was waiting.

"Hi, Felicia. Good job on your work today," the masked man called out nonchalantly to Felicia from the other side of the heavy wooden bars of his cell.

This was Rungr, the previous patriarch of the Panther Clan.

For years, he had nurtured a grudge against Yuuto's and the Wolf Clan, and had worked to destroy them. Now, he spent his days locked away in this tower.

His original name had been Loptr, and he was Felicia's biological older brother.

When Felicia finished all of her work, she would come up here at night to check on him. It had become something of a nightly routine of late.

"The inside of a cell is quite boring, so I always look forward to seeing your face," Rungr said cheerfully.

It was the same kind, jovial tone of voice she remembered from when he had been the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan so long ago.

She looked at his eyes, staring out from inside his iron mask. When she had encountered him on the swampy fields of Náströnd, those eyes had been bloodshot and filled with a sick anger. But now, they looked calm, as if whatever demon that had possessed him had left.

That, in and of itself, really irritated her.

"I see. Well, I do not look forward to it one bit." Felicia spat the words at him coldly, scowling.

All because of her brother's jealous and selfish acts, she had suffered so much, borne such a heavy burden.

Because of her brother, Yuuto had spent his days painfully regretting the past, tormenting himself over it.

And despite all that, here he was sitting comfortably in this cell, grinning. Of course it upset her.

"But you still come and see me," Rungr said.

"You're the only living family I have left, even if you're awful. I don't really have a choice but to look after you, now do I?"

"Hm? You know, you seem a tad more on edge than usual today. You don't look too well, either. Did something happen today that upset you?"

“No, nothing at all happened!” Felicia reflexively denied it, but her voice was too emotionally charged. It was the same as admitting she was lying.

This was her brother, the man who had lived with her for fifteen years. Naturally, he would pick up on it.

“It’s got to be something about Yuuto, right?” Rungr asked. “He’s a devoted man, and that might sound good, but he was never good at dealing with how other people feel about him, after all.”

“Don’t you dare insult Big Brother, or I won’t forgive you, you hear?!”

“Ohh, scary. But I’m also right, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re wrong. Really wrong.” Felicia turned aside with a mocking “Hmph!”

Indeed, her brother *was* wrong. He had it backwards, even.

“It’s got nothing to do with Big Brother Yuuto,” she insisted. “It’s a problem with me.”

“Hm, a problem with you yourself. That would mean, in summary, you haven’t been able to accept the wife he brought back from his home world. And your own shallowness and jealousy is so ugly that you can’t stand it. Does that sound about right?”

“Wha?!” Felicia was dumbstruck. The guess wasn’t just correct, it was precise, too.

She should have expected nothing less of him, though. Yuuto had often said: *“His ability to ascertain a person’s weakness and strike at it is phenomenal.”* It was an ability that he could use just as well outside of the battlefield.

Felicia couldn’t say anything back to him; her mouth opened and closed like that of a fish out of water.

Sensing he’d won, Rungr laughed. “Heh heh, it looks like I’ve guessed correctly, then. If I could maybe give you some advice, as someone who’s been down a similar path: Don’t go too far trying to seal away those feelings inside, and trying to act like a good person.”

“I’m not trying to...”

“But you *are,* aren’t you? You can’t forgive yourself for having dark or ugly feelings, and so you refuse to acknowledge them. You try to pretend they’re not there.”

“Ngh...!” Felicia tried to respond, but she couldn’t say anything.

It was because, again, he was right.

“Keep doing that, and nothing good is going to come out of it, trust me,” said Rungr. “Those impure feelings will just stagnate even more deeply inside you, and eventually they’ll rot you from the inside out. You need to be honest with yourself about your feelings.”

“What are you trying to do here?” Felicia asked in a strangled voice. “Let me guess, you want to get inside my head, get me thinking how you want, and then trick me into helping you escape this place. Is that it?”

“Huh? I’ve never even considered doing something like that. This place is perfect for me.”

“Just a moment ago, you said it was boring here.”

“Yes, and that’s what also makes this the perfect place to reexamine myself. There’s nothing else for me to do, after all.” With a wry chuckle, Rungr shrugged.

Trying to argue with this man was like trying to wrestle the wind.

Even back in his days as Loptr, he’d been well known as someone with a personality that was hard to pin down. A man whom you couldn’t tell what he was really thinking. But Felicia had known that her older brother also had ambition burning inside him.

But now, it was like all of that fire was gone. He had the presence of an old hermit, or someone who’d discarded the world.

“We are siblings, after all,” said Rungr. “I can tell. Right now, you resemble how I was back then.”

“I would never, never betray Big Brother Yuuto, the way you did!”

“Of course not. But the one you’re so jealous of isn’t Yuuto, is it?”

“Ugh...!” For the third time in a row, Felicia’s inner heart was exposed, and she couldn’t say anything in response.

She couldn’t help but realize that it was the truth.

And despite it being so simple, she had tried not to see it, had tried to change the subject and make it about Yuuto, or something else. She’d unconsciously been trying not to think about Mitsuki.

She might as well have been trying to tie her heart into a knot.

It was vexing to admit, but it was just as Rungr said.

If she kept going as she was now, the gap between reality and her twisted perception of it would get greater and greater, and at some point, she’d fall apart.

“Well, if my own bitter experiences can teach you anything, it’s that you should actually talk about these things,” said Rungr. “Your feelings get distorted because you lock them up. Sometimes you need to let them air out. You understand what I mean?”

“...I may keep what you said in mind.” Felicia couldn’t just accept this advice from him openly. It felt wrong. So she ended up giving him a response that was less positive, and less honest.

But this was her brother. He was perceptive.

She was sure that he would be able to see right through her, anyway.

Felicia suddenly realized that she’d returned to her room.

She’d come back here without even thinking. Her daily routine had come in handy, at least.

She walked over to her bed as if pulled to it, and sat down.

“He says ‘talk about it,’ but that’s easier said than done.” Felicia stared listlessly up into space.

Ever since Yuuto returned from the land beyond the heavens, he seemed to be shouldering some sort of heavy burden.

Telling Yuuto about these feelings of hers would mean placing even more of a

burden on him in addition to that.

Mitsuki had given her permission for Yuuto to have concubines, but once that actually happened, she would certainly find it unpleasant.

And being early in her pregnancy meant this was an important time for her health. She shouldn't be dealing with any extra, undue stress.

Indeed, if Felicia was going to confess her feelings, she would be better off waiting until a more appropriate time.

"I'm just making silly excuses for myself," she sighed. "At this rate, it won't matter how much time passes. I won't ever be able to say it. In the end, I'm just indecisive and selfish." Felicia gave a small, dry chuckle at her own expense.

She was afraid.

Afraid that she would lose the relationship with Yuuto that she had now.

If she could continue to hide and suppress her unpleasant feelings, then she could always stay as Yuuto's adjutant, as his closest confidant. She could stay at his side.

If she came out and spoke to him honestly, and things got awkward or ugly, then she wouldn't be able to stay close to him anymore. She might not even be allowed to interact with him anymore.

But even so, it was painful to watch Yuuto and Mitsuki being so intimate with each other.

It felt like her heart was being torn in two from the pain, and she also felt the dark emotions churning deep down within her as well, growing worse by the day.

If she kept quiet, then sooner or later, she wouldn't be able to stay close to Yuuto, anyway.

"What am I supposed to do...?!" Felicia spat out the words in bitter frustration. She was usually a very calm woman. It was unlike her to act like this.

She already knew the answer.

It was just as her brother had said. She needed to open up about her feelings, and then have a serious discussion with them about what to do from here on.

But still, she was afraid of losing their relationship.

She couldn't screw up the courage to move forward.

She wanted to maintain this lukewarm relationship if she could, as disappointing as it was sometimes.

She just wanted to be together with Yuuto.

She didn't want to have to leave him.

Her thoughts spun in circles... and then, she heard a voice.

"Oh, Felicia, you're back?" The door to the room next door opened, and Mitsuki peeked through. She was wearing only her nightclothes.

"Yes, just a moment ago," Felicia said. "How are you feeling? A little better?"

"Yes, thankfully. I'm back up to full strength." Mitsuki held up both arms and flexed, giggling cheerfully.

It was just as she said; the heated red tinge had faded from her face, and she looked much healthier.

That happy, carefree smile of Mitsuki's irked Felicia. But of course, she didn't let it show.

"Did you need something from me?" Felicia asked politely.

"Yeah, can you come with me for a second? I need you to help me get Yuu-kun into bed."

"Big Brother?" Felicia furrowed her brow, but stood up to follow.

Mitsuki didn't seem to be acting like it was an emergency, but this was about Yuuto, Felicia's beloved sworn brother. Helping him always came first.

Wondering what could be the matter, Felicia entered Yuuto's bedroom to find him sitting in a chair next to the bed, slumped forward with his face down on the bed, fast asleep and snoring.

Most likely, he had been sitting by Mitsuki's side, watching over her, and had

fallen asleep that way.

“If he stays like this, I’m worried he might pull a muscle or something, you know?” Mitsuki said. “But I couldn’t bring myself to wake him up.”

“I see.” Felicia nodded and gently righted Yuuto’s torso, then put an arm under his legs and lifted him up off of the chair.

She picked him up in her arms as easily as if she were picking up a cat.

Felicia was slender, but she was an Einherjar. Her physical strength was much greater than that of the average person.

“Pfff! Ahaha! You’re carrying him like a princess!” Mitsuki burst out laughing, and then took out her smartphone and began operating it. It started making some clicking noises.

If Felicia’s memory served, that was the noise it made when it was taking “photographs,” still images of a frozen moment in time, forever preserved.

She was busying herself preserving images of her lover being held in the arms of another woman... Felicia truly did not understand this girl.

“I’ll go ahead and lay him down now,” Felicia said.

“Ah, right, please and thank you.” Mitsuki hurriedly put the smartphone away, and then pulled aside the blankets for Felicia.

Felicia gently set Yuuto down into the open space, and Mitsuki put the blanket back over him.

“He didn’t wake up at all, huh?” Mitsuki commented.

“He must surely be very tired. He has always been very devoted to his work, but more recently he has been especially driven, I should think.”

“You think so too, huh, Felicia?”

“Do you mean to say that you do not know the reason either, Big Sister Mitsuki?” Felicia was a bit surprised by this.

She had been sure that Yuuto would have at least told Mitsuki about whatever secret was burdening him.

“Nope,” said Mitsuki. “He won’t tell me anything. Yuu-kun, he has a strong

sense of responsibility. But you know him. He also always tends to try to take everything onto himself."

Mitsuki pouted as she said this and playfully poked Yuuto's cheek with a finger.

It was a little gesture that should have symbolized how close the two of them were, a sign of intimacy.

But despite that, seeing it made something in Felicia snap.

This was an important issue, wasn't it?

It wasn't something Mitsuki should be able to simply joke about.

"If you can't even share your concerns with each other, then how can you call yourselves husband and wife?!" It was only after Felicia shouted the words that she realized what she'd done.

Normally, she should have been able to respond to Mitsuki with a smile, and follow with some vaguely supportive statement of her own.

But after having that frustrating conversation with her brother in the tower, it was as if she'd lost some of the ability to rein in her emotions.

She needed to apologize, right now. She needed to say, "Please forgive me for saying something so impertinent." She knew that, but the next words out of her mouth were completely the opposite.

"You are supposed to be supporting him," Felicia snarled. "If you can't do that right, then I can't entrust my Big Brother to someone like you!"

Felicia was saying this to the wife of the reginarch. Mitsuki was someone far above Felicia in station. Speaking to her as if she had a right to decide these things was beyond offensive. It was unforgivable.

And yet... Mitsuki humbly lowered her head to Felicia, bowing deeply.

"Thank you, Felicia. You are truly a kind person. I will take your advice to heart."

When Mitsuki raised her head back up to look at Felicia, her eyes were full of genuine respect.

Felicia's conscience burned. She wasn't anything like the kind person Mitsuki said she was. Her words hadn't come from kindness or concern. They had come from jealousy. From the feelings within her that shouted, *You had the honor of being chosen by Yuuto, and you're not worthy!*

"W-well, as long as you understand, then." Ashamed, Felicia averted her eyes.

But Mitsuki gripped her hand. "Ever since I came to this world, you've always looked out for me."

"N-no, no, I didn't really..."

"No, you *did!* From helping me speak the language, to understanding ásmegin, to teaching me all sorts of little things necessary in daily life. And when I couldn't eat, you went out of your way to find something that I could keep down. And you even scolded me like this, trying to help me be better. No one else could ever do for me what you've done. I can never thank you enough."

"P-please, stop. You do not need to thank me," Felicia pleaded. But the words were not spoken out of humility. They were her honest feelings.

Indeed, she had done nothing worthy of Mitsuki's gratitude.

She'd done none of it for Mitsuki, after all. It had all been for Yuuto's sake.

"No, that's unacceptable," said Mitsuki. "If there's anything I can do for you in return, I'll do it, no matter what it is. So you just need to tell me. After all, it's pretty much thanks to you that Yuu-kun and I could finally be together."

"Ngh...!" In that moment, the dam in Felicia's heart broke.

It was the thought that she had spent all of this time trying to help the man she loved, only to help him end up with another woman. She was a fool. A joke.

And she was hearing the confirmation of it from her rival for his heart. There was nothing so humiliating.

"All right, then," Felicia snarled. "I want you to give me Big Brother Yuuto."

"Huh?"

"What I want is Big Brother Yuuto. He is all I want. As long as I can have him, I

don’t need anything else. And yet, and yet you...! You are the only one that is in his heart. It’s unfair. I love him, too! In fact, I am sure I love him at least as much as you do, Big Sister Mitsuki!”

Felicia was aware the things she was saying were pretty far gone.

But, for some reason, her heart felt refreshed instead of guilty.

She felt like she had finally gotten out all of the things that had been suffocating her.

She was being honest. Speaking from the heart.

Whatever punishment awaited her for it, Felicia was now willing to face it.

“I’m... sorry.” The apology didn’t come from Mitsuki, but from below.

Felicia’s eyes went wide, and she looked down. Yuuto’s gaze met hers.

“B-Big Brother, you were awake?!” Felicia cried.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure anyone would wake up with someone screaming next to their pillow.” Yuuto scratched his head, then sat up.

“I... I am so terribly sorry. I interrupted your rest...”

“No, I need to apologize here,” said Yuuto. “I knew about your feelings for me. I’ve known for a long time now. And even though I knew, I could never return them; I was selfish. I wanted you to stay with me. So I let things drag on, unresolved. I was being too dependent on you. I’m the one who was being unfair.”

“Yeah. You are unfair,” Mitsuki cut in coldly. “You’re an idiot, through and through. A disgrace to men everywhere.”

She folded her arms and nodded to herself, as if egging on his apology.

Mitsuki added, “And what could you possibly have to be unsatisfied about with someone as beautiful as her? She loves you this much. You need to return her feelings properly.”

“Why the hell are *you* saying something like that?!” Yuuto shouted.

“It’s important *because* I’m the one saying it! I’m saying she’s got your wife’s full approval!”

“You know, I’ve known you since forever, but lately, it’s like I don’t understand you at all...” Yuuto put his head in his hands.

He was about to get married next month, and his bride-to-be was telling him to cheat on her.

And this wasn’t a political marriage, but a romantic one.

It was only natural that he’d be confused.

“Is it truly all right with you, Big Sister?” Felicia managed to ask, still half-stunned.

To Felicia, her love for Yuuto was something that she had thought would never be accepted, and definitely never be reciprocated.

She wasn’t in any position to complain about being the second or the third girl in line, as long as she could be his.

Mitsuki giggled. “Yeah. It’s okay. I’ve been saying it for a while now, haven’t I? Oh, but, I do have one big condition.”

“What is it?!” Felicia asked desperately.

If her love could bear fruit, then she was willing to accept any condition to make it so.

Mitsuki held out her hand. “I want you to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with me, and become my sworn sister. Is that all right?”

“Eh?”

“If I’m being honest, Felicia... you’re the woman I’ve always been the most afraid of,” Mitsuki said. “Whenever Yuu-kun talked about you, I was always worried that you would be the one that stole him away from me. I was always afraid of that. And once I met you in person, that fear only got stronger. I can’t compete with you at all.”

“What are you even saying?” Felicia stared at Mitsuki, dumbfounded.

What could there possibly be about Felicia that would make Mitsuki afraid of her?

Mitsuki had the advantage of knowing Yuuto since they were children, and

besides, he had devoted his heart only to her. Felicia had never felt there was any room for her to come in and change that.

“There is no way that someone such as I could ever hope to compete against you, Big Sister Mitsuki, can’t you see that?!” Felicia cried.

“Do you even understand what you’re saying? You’re absolutely beautiful, and sexy to boot, and you’re kind, and you’re able to support Yuu-kun both in work and in private. Yuu-kun is surrounded by lots of cute girls, but there’s no scarier opponent than you. And besides, you might not be able to tell, but I can. Yuu-kun’s heart really has wavered about it.”

“Wavered... Big Brother’s heart wavered towards loving me?!” This was completely a bolt from the blue. Felicia would have never imagined it.

Felicia knew more than anyone else just how strong Yuuto’s devotion was to Mitsuki. She couldn’t really believe what she was hearing.

“I was always worried,” Mitsuki said. “Worried that, sure, maybe he loves me now, but maybe at some point you’d finally win him over.”

“Even... even you were worried?” Felicia had always considered Mitsuki to be a fitting queen for a great lord such as Yuuto.

And that was why she’d always assumed she never had a chance against Mitsuki. It was why she was so jealous.

But, at long last, now she understood. Mitsuki was just another girl in love.

“I was... always afraid of you, too, Big Sister Mitsuki.” Felicia followed Mitsuki’s lead, and came clean with her fears. “I was always afraid that one day, you would take Big Brother away from me completely. I was so jealous of you, sometimes I even wished that you never existed.”

This was, in essence, a ritual.

A ritual that would forge these two girls into true comrades.

“Tee hee. Still...” With a snicker, Felicia smiled sweetly at Mitsuki.

Everything she had said up until now had been true.

And what she was about to say next, was also true. She could be proud of

that, if nothing else.

“Despite it all, I was never actually able to hate you, Big Sister Mitsuki.”

“I could never hate you either, Felicia,” said Mitsuki. “All I want is for Yuu-kun to be happy. And on that point, I don’t think there’s anything that separates us. And I think that I could fight off anyone else, as long as you’re my ally.”

“Yes, I was also thinking that you, Big Sister, are the very last person I would ever want to make my enemy. Each of us is the greatest threat to the other. In which case, it only makes sense for us to join hands.”

“Right? And if we team up, we can take on anybody. All the girls out there put together wouldn’t scare me!” Mitsuki gave a mischievous little grin.

Felicia found herself unable to hold down a burst of laughter. “Pff! Ahaha, you are quite right. All right, then. Let us exchange the Oath of the Chalice.” Felicia took Mitsuki’s hand.

She felt Mitsuki’s hand squeeze hers tightly in return.

“Okay, I gotta say I feel like I’ve been left completely out of the loop on this,” Yuuto finally interjected. “Am I wrong for thinking that?”

His face was bright red. Apparently, this whole conversation had made him embarrassed.

Mitsuki’s grin grew even wider, as if she’d just gotten a clever idea.

“All right then, Yuu-kun, I’ll involve you. And I’ll give you a very important role to play. Right here, right now, you’re going to be the mediator for our Chalice ceremony.”

“Wait, me?” Yuuto asked.

“Yup. Don’t you think you’re the best one suited for it?” Mitsuki looked to Felicia, who nodded in agreement.

This was an alliance formed to protect Yuuto, after all.

Yuuto let out a long sigh. “All right! All right, then. But Mitsuki, you’re pregnant, so no alcohol, yeah?”

“Ahh, that’s true. But in that case, we just have to substitute something else.”

“Okay. So should I go fetch us some water, then?”

“That’s no good. All right, Yuu-kun! Close your eyes!” Mitsuki commanded.

“What?” Completely confused, Yuuto couldn’t keep up.

“Just do it already!”

“What, is this something I can’t see?”

“Yeah. It’s a special secret between two girls. Now hurry up and shut your eyes!”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. What the hell’s your deal...” Trailing off into mumbling complaints, Yuuto finally closed his eyes.

Once Mitsuki confirmed this, she looked over at Felicia, touched her index finger meaningfully to her lips a few times, then gave a wink.

“Uhh... this can’t be what I think it is, can it?” Yuuto asked.

“Oh yeah, it is. After all, there isn’t any better sacred Chalice more fitting for the two of us to exchange our vow, now is there?”

“You are absolutely right,” Felicia said, unable to keep from grinning.

Felicia knelt down on the bed, and leaned in towards the face of the person she loved most in this world.

Her heart was pounding loudly in her ears, so loudly she worried Yuuto might be able to hear it. But he didn’t seem to notice.

She gave one final glance in Mitsuki’s direction.

Mitsuki nodded once, firmly.

There was no turning back. Felicia placed her lips against Yuuto’s.

“Mm?! Mmmph?!” Shocked, Yuuto’s eyes flew open.

His body reflexively tried to pull back, but Felicia wrapped her arms around the back of his head and pulled him to her. She pressed her lips even more strongly against his.

“Mnn?!?!”

After at least thirty seconds of savoring the feeling of his lips against hers,

Felicia slowly released him.

“Wha... but... huh...?!” Yuuto’s eyes were blinking rapidly in confusion. It looked like he still didn’t fully understand the situation.

And the sight of him was so adorable to her, she could feel her love for him building up from inside her chest, overflowing. She kissed his cheeks, his forehead, his nose, all over his face in a torrent she could not stop.

And still, her feelings weren’t sated in the least. She wanted to touch him more, be even closer to him, so badly she couldn’t stand it.

She’d been enduring these urges for three whole years, day after day. She was at her limit. She was beyond it.

“Big Brother, I want all of your love. I wish for you to make love to me as you have with Big Sister Mitsuki.”

“Wha, whaaaat?! No, wait, hold on, Felicia, wh-why are you pulling my pants off?!”

“All right, Yuu-kun, it’s about time you give it up. You’ve already come this far.” Mitsuki was suddenly behind Yuuto, and she grabbed both of his arms and pinned him down.

“Mitsuki, you—wha, what are you doing?! Mmph—” Before Yuuto could say any more, Mitsuki silenced him by covering his lips with her own.

She didn’t stop there; she forced her tongue into his mouth, and stroked it against his.

“Phew! All right then, I think that makes the Sibling Chalice official.” Mitsuki giggled seductively. A string of saliva ran between her mouth and his.

Ba-dump. Right in front of Felicia’s eyes, Yuuto’s manhood throbbed, and stretched larger.

The air in the room changed, as if something pulled taut had finally snapped.

“...Okay. *Fine.* You asked for it,” Yuuto’s voice bellowed. It was rough and powerful, without any hesitation. “I’ve been holding myself back all this time. But if you’re going to go that far with me, I’m not holding back any more!”

That night, Felicia's moans and cries echoed countless times off of the walls of the patriarch's sleeping quarters.

And so, Mitsuki and Felicia became sworn sisters that night.

"Nnn... mmm..." Felicia was awakened by the light of the morning sun coming in through the bedroom window.

She slowly opened her eyes. Yuuto and Mitsuki were lying right next to her. They both seemed to be sleeping comfortably.

Felicia then felt a sharp pain in her lower abdomen. She took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh of relief.

"It wasn't a dream..." She whispered the words to herself, as if trying to convince herself of it. She reached out to touch Yuuto, softly stroking his hair.

Of course she could clearly remember everything that had happened last night.

It was just that it had been so wonderful, *too* wonderful. It was, indeed, what she had always dreamed of. It was hard to think that it could be real.

"Big Brother... I love you with all of my heart." She slowly moved her head closer to his, and closing her eyes, gently touched her lips to his cheek.

From now on, she would not need to restrain herself. She could be open in her love for him.

That knowledge filled her with joy.

She suddenly sensed someone's eyes watching her. She looked over and saw Mitsuki's eyes open.

Felicia immediately fell into a panic. "B-Big Sister?! You were awake?!"

"Yeah, though I only woke up a second ago. Good morning."

"G-good morning th—agh!" Felicia was so flustered she couldn't even finish returning the greeting without biting her tongue. She held a hand over her mouth, wincing in pain as tears formed in her eyes.

"A-are you okay?!" Mitsuki asked.

"Y-yes, I am fine!" Felicia replied. "But more importantly, is everything all

right with you, Big Sister?!”

Mitsuki looked confused. “Me? I’m feeling just fine. Why?”

“No, what I mean is...” Felicia struggled to find the right words. “Last night, my greatest wish was granted. It was wonderful for me, but, um... I was worried that it might not have been so for you.”

Last night, Felicia had acted boldly, pushed forward by her emotions in the moment. But now that it was a new day and her mind had calmed down a bit, anxiety about what she had done returned.

There might still be consequences awaiting her. Her heart pounded as she waited for Mitsuki’s response, feeling like a prisoner waiting to hear their final sentence.

“U-Um, well,” Mitsuki said, hesitating at first. “Well, yeah, there’s a part of me that didn’t really feel good about it. But I love you, Felicia, and I wanted you to be happy. And I knew that Yuu-kun is the one who will make you happy. So, I figured, that’s just the way it’s gotta be, you know? Ahaha.”

Felicia felt a tightness in her chest. She had been letting her petty jealousy eat away at her from inside, while Mitsuki had been willing to care this much for her despite that.

It was no wonder she could never defeat a woman like that.

Felicia was filled with admiration for Mitsuki’s benevolence, her greatness of character. She got up off of the bed and kneeled down on the spot, placed her hands on the floor in front of her and prostrated herself.

She had already sworn her body, heart, and soul to Yuuto, back when she had sworn the Oath of the Chalice with him.

But she swore another firm vow in her heart in this moment: She would fully devote herself to Mitsuki as well, serving her with love and loyalty.

“Thank you so very much,” she vowed. “Big Sister Mitsuki, I love you too!”

The Lightning Clan messenger arrived. “Sir, we’ve received reports that both Fort Tamanos to the east and Fort Limös to the west have fallen to the Flame Clan! Estimates are that the enemy attacked both locations with ten thousand

men apiece!”

“That’s impossible!” The Lightning Clan’s assistant second-in-command, Þjálfi, shouted back. “They’ve already got a host of thirty thousand surrounding us here at Fort Waganea! Even that is absurd on its face, and now you’re saying they’ve got twenty thousand more?!” He ran his fingers wildly through his hair. “How is it possible for him to mobilize such a ridiculous number of troops?!”

As the Steinþórr’s right-hand man, Þjálfi was the one who always had to deal personally with his patriarch’s free-wheeling attitude and the neverending difficulties it caused. Constantly doing so had made it so that he hardly batted an eye when faced with what normal people would find stressful. But now he spat out his words, unable to hide his panic and irritation.

Of course, that was only natural. Steinþórr’s policy was always, *“Who cares about the details?”* And so Þjálfi was the one who set rules and maintained order in the Lightning Clan army, developed its military plans and strategies, and gave detailed instructions to the generals. Though Steinþórr led the charge, Þjálfi was the one who ran the army.

Because of that, he knew just how extremely difficult it would be to mobilize and transport an army of fifty thousand.

“Where are they even getting the food they would need for that many people?!” he shouted.

The Körmt River bordered the Lightning Clan on their north, and so they received some of its benefits. But even then, they could only produce enough to support an army of eight thousand.

The Steel Clan had absorbed the Panther Clan and the vast stretch of western territory it controlled, but even they shouldn’t be able to supply twenty thousand men.

On top of that, most of the lands between the Lightning Clan and the Flame Clan were sparse, arid wasteland. It shouldn’t be workable to gather supplies in the field.

“And then there are the soldiers themselves,” Þjálfi continued. “They’re not peasant farmers pressed into service; they’re *all* well-trained career soldiers. It

doesn’t make any sense...”

Just two battles against the Flame Clan was enough for Þjálfi to have gauged their skill, and frankly, it left him astonished.

In a previous war with the Wolf Clan, he’d been impressed with how well-disciplined and under control Yuuto’s forces were. But this army surpassed even them.

Sure, the Lightning Clan had managed to fend off two attacks by those soldiers, but that had been entirely thanks to their invincible warrior and hero, Steinþórr.

“I... I honestly don’t know what we should do!” Frustrated, Þjálfi bit down on his lower lip.

There were three enemy hosts now: Center, East, and West. And each one of them was too powerful to deal with unless Steinþórr was leading on the field.

Meanwhile, there was only one of Steinþórr. Whichever enemy host they chose to send him after, the other two would move further in and ravage the Lightning Clan lands.

And then there was the fact that they’d only just barely learned the Steel Clan was on the move. It honestly felt like there was nothing left he could do.

“A-Assistant Second!” Another messenger ran into the room. “An envoy from the Flame Clan has arrived!”

Þjálfi’s brow furrowed. “...Show him in,” he growled in a low voice.

After a moment, the envoy appeared. He was a frail, white-haired old man with a bent back, who looked to be at least sixty.

The first words out of the old man’s mouth were, “I have come with an offer for the terms of your surrender.”

“Tch.” Þjálfi clicked his tongue bitterly.

This was such a brazen act of disrespect. It was humiliating, and he felt the urge to run over and cut the envoy’s head off right then and there, But he restrained himself, determined to at least let the old man finish his statement before taking action.

Depending on the conditions offered, he was potentially willing to agree to them. That was just how backed into a corner the Lightning Clan was right now.

At the very least, they couldn't avoid giving up a good amount of land at this point. Swearing the Oath of the Sibling Chalice would also be on the table.

Steinþórr would surely oppose becoming someone's sworn younger brother, but Þjálfi believed that if it came to that, the best thing for the clan would be to convince him to go along with it for now, and then focus on building up their national strength again.

"My master and patriarch has been deeply moved by Lord Steinþórr's strength and valor, and wishes to have him as a sworn child," the envoy said.

"As his *child*?!" Þjálfi could feel the veins popping out on his temple.

Swearing the vow to become another's child subordinate was no different from agreeing to become a slave to them.

In Yggdrasil, the word of a sworn parent was absolute. A child had to obey any command from his or her sworn parent, regardless of what it might be.

If your sworn parent commanded you to die, you were fully expected to end your own life.

Agreeing to become a sworn younger sibling was one thing, but taking the oath of a sworn child was absolutely unacceptable as a condition.

The old man nodded. "Yes, as his sworn child. And if you agree to this, my lord patriarch promises that Lord Steinþórr will be given the honor of becoming one of the high officers in the Flame Clan, and..."

Before the envoy could say any more, he was cut off by a wild burst of laughter.

"Heh! Heh heh! AHAHAHAHA!!" The laughter reverberated in the air, filling the room.

It was coming from a red-haired young man, reclining lazily on the throne at the center of the room. As he finished laughing, he slowly raised himself up. "I've gotta say, this is a lifetime first for me. Nobody's ever treated me like this before."

Steinþórr walked up to the Flame Clan envoy, stopped, and then raised one foot.

BAM! With a sound like a clap of thunder, Steinþórr's foot slammed down into the hard brick floor with such force that a web of cracks shot out from it in concentric circles.

The old man had been tasked with coming all the way into the heart of enemy land to deliver his message, so he would necessarily have to be someone with a calm head on his shoulders. But this sudden scare was too much for him; he dropped to the ground like a rock, landing on his backside.

"Ha! Does he think this is all it takes to deal with me?" Steinþórr howled. "Does he think he's got me *captured?* He can go ahead and have his soldiers do whatever the hell they like in my lands, then. But no matter how much damage they do, and no matter how long it takes, I'm gonna hunt every last one of them down and tear their god damned throats out!"

The air around him billowed as his fighting spirit surged out of him, an energy that overwhelmed everyone in the room.

It was a fitting declaration from the man known as the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

The old envoy looked up at Steinþórr, quaking with fear, his teeth chattering. Steinþórr looked down at him with a face like a hungry, savage beast. He leaned down close, and continued.

"You go back to the Flame Clan patriarch and tell him this: I don't care how many dogs you've got at your heel. I am the Tiger of Vanaheimr, and you will never tame me!"

And with that, the negotiations were over.

When the envoy returned to the Flame Clan, and a messenger relayed those events to the patriarch, he responded thus: "Is that so? It cannot be helped, then. So it goes."

ACT 5

“Urrghh...”

The ruler of the Steel Clan, reginarch Suoh-Yuuto, was revered. His skills at commanding an army on the battlefield were so great that he was rumored to be a reincarnated god of war, and on the domestic front, he had enacted numerous innovative policies that marked him as a genius far wiser than any other.

He had won his first battle in the Wolf Clan, making true on the legend that he was the Gleipsieg, the “Child of Victory.” And ever since then, his record of accomplishments had continued. He had fought off enemy after enemy, leading his people through crisis after crisis.

Yet now, this living legend was sitting at his desk groaning, deeply troubled.

“There’s no other way of looking at it. I cheated on her...” Yuuto sat with his elbows on the desk, his hands clasped together, his forehead resting on them. He stared down, sighing.

He’d already gotten his fiancée pregnant, and their wedding ceremony was right around the corner, and yet he’d gone so far as to have relations with another woman. As an adult, and as a man, how could that be forgivable?

At the very least, until the events of the previous night, if you had asked Yuuto that question, his answer would have been immediate and clear: He had a duty to treat his betrothed as the most precious thing in his life. Lying with another woman was despicable, and completely out of the question.

However, this issue wasn’t that simple.

The one who had pushed him into cheating was his betrothed, Mitsuki herself.

It didn’t make any sense to him.

“Big Brother?” A familiar voice reached Yuuto’s ears, a voice filled with sadness. It startled him back to his senses, and he lifted his head.

Felicia was there next to him, looking like she was about to cry. “Big Brother,

do you regret what happened last night? I... it is all because I could not restrain my feelings, and acted so selfishly...”

“No! No, this isn’t your fault!” Yuuto hurriedly shouted.

Indeed, this wasn’t Felicia’s fault at all.

If anyone had been the instigator, it was Mitsuki. Though even she had done nothing more than make the first move.

As much as he had been pushed into the situation by the two girls, in the end, he had made love to Felicia of his own free will.

And he was aware that, deep down, part of him was truly happy that he had finally been able to be with her in that way.

That only served to amplify his self-loathing.

“Can I really go ahead and get married like this?” Yuuto mourned. “Do I deserve to?”

He’d heard of getting cold feet, but that label couldn’t really describe the complex feelings he was having now.

What Mitsuki had said to him that evening didn’t make things any simpler for him.

“Ah, sorry, Yuu-kun,” Mitsuki broke in. “I’m going to be sleeping with Felicia in her room tonight.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a girls-only sleepover. No boys allowed, and that means no eavesdropping either, got it?”

As Mitsuki made her way out of their bedroom, humming a little tune to herself, Yuuto threw up his hands and shouted, “Is it me?! Am I the crazy one here?!”

His doubts and confusion only grew deeper.

When Mitsuki returned to Yuuto the following morning, these were the first words out of her mouth: “So, you wanna know what Felicia and I talked about last night? Sorry, that’s a secret. Right, Felicia?”

She seemed pleased with herself.

And because she was speaking to him in Japanese, he noticed that she'd now stopped using *-san* with Felicia's name. It was something she didn't do even when talking about Ruri, her closest friend in Japan. Just how intimate had she become with Felicia in only one night?

As for Yuuto, all through the night he'd been kept up by his thoughts, and he'd hardly gotten any sleep. Seeing them acting so happy and close frankly irked him a bit.

Of course, he knew that the two of them getting along well was a good thing. But for some reason, it still bothered him.

"I do apologize, Big Brother," Felicia said. "But as she said, it is a secret I cannot tell even you." She placed one hand on her chest, blushing a little.

This was coming from Felicia, the girl who had sworn absolute fealty to Yuuto. He couldn't help being curious about just what they could have talked about.

"Oh, but let me tell you just one thing, though," Mitsuki added.

"Oh?!" Yuuto didn't bother to hide his curiosity.

"Try not to act so awkward with Felicia, okay? She's actually pretty affected by that."

"B-Big Sister, you don't have to..." Felicia fumbled.

Mitsuki held up her pointer finger. "No, this is something that needs to be said. You're with him all day at work, after all."

Yuuto had to admit that she was absolutely right to bring that up.

After what had happened between him and Felicia, the whole next day at work, he'd been practically unable to talk with her. Even when trying to do so, he'd been stiff and distant, completely unlike how things normally were.

He was the lord of the great Steel Clan, and she was his adjutant. The relationship between them at work was pivotal.

He couldn't say that they'd made anything resembling good progress at work yesterday.

Bringing private affairs to the office and letting them interfere with his duties would just cause problems for everybody. He needed to do whatever he could to avoid that.

“All right,” Yuuto said. “I’ll try and do better.”

“Felicia’s the type of girl who smiles in public and cries in private, so you need to pay more attention to her needs, okay?” Mitsuki added.

“Big Sister, please leave it there for now,” Felicia pleaded. “Any more would just trouble Big Brother.”

She seemed a little worried for Yuuto.

And, in fact, Yuuto *was* pretty troubled at the moment.

His fiancée had just told him he needed to pay more attention to another woman. How was he supposed to respond to that?

“Oh!” Mitsuki added. “Isn’t it about time for both of you to get going?”

“Yes, you are right,” said Felicia. “Well then, Big Sister, I will be borrowing Big Brother for the day.”

“Sure, I’m counting on you to take good care of him!”

“Of course. He is in good hands.”

“Glad to see you’re so good at sharing,” Yuuto said with a weary sigh.

“Well, of course we are. We’re sisters, after all.”

“Yes.”

The two girls smiled sweetly at each other. Yuuto felt oddly left out.

It was still the early morning, but for some reason he already felt worn out.

As the day went on, Yuuto still couldn’t get over his worry. After sending Felicia away on an errand that would take some time, he had made his way alone to Jörgen’s room to ask for his advice.

Jörgen was not exactly sympathetic.

“Hm. And what exactly is the problem?”

Jörgen had multiple wives, and was quite sharp when it came to interpersonal

relations. Yuuto had hoped that he of all people would be able to provide some good advice for dealing with the issue, but Jörgen's response was to question if there was a problem in the first place.

"The two women are getting along happily," the man said. "That is a wonderful thing, is it not? Why, I am always struggling with trying to keep my wives happy with me and each other. I am quite envious of you."

"Yeah, they're getting along *too* well, and that's what scares me," Yuuto replied. And it was only after the words were out of his mouth that he realized how he felt.

This was what was at the heart of his anxiety.

Just as Jörgen had said, the current situation was great for Yuuto. In fact, it was way too convenient for him. Yuuto was used to struggle, and so he couldn't help but think that there was some kind of catch, some huge pitfall waiting for him just around the corner.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Could it be that maybe Mitsuki doesn't even love me all that much in the first place?!"

Normally, if you saw the person you loved getting along well with another romantic interest, you would feel jealous.

Yuuto, at least, believed that was normal.

Back when he was struggling with the choice of whether to stay in the modern world or return to Yggdrasil, he'd imagined the possibility of breaking things off with Mitsuki... and the mere thought of her loving another man had upset him.

And yet after what he'd done, did Mitsuki really feel nothing like that?

"Pff! Ha ha!" Suddenly, Jörgen burst out in laughter.

Yuuto glared at him angrily. Here he was sharing his serious problems, and Jörgen was laughing at him.

"What's so funny?"

"Ah, Father, forgive my rudeness. I just could not help but laugh at how the person being loved is often the least able to realize it."

“Excuse me?”

“Beginning with Mother’s project to build a rice paddy, I have had many opportunities to speak with her. I can say for certain that you are always at the center of her thoughts, Father.”

“R-really?”

Jörgen folded his arms and nodded several times. “Yes. Whenever she started a project or made a decision, it always seemed to be with you in mind, and whenever the two of us conversed, she was always much more excited to talk about you than about any other topic.”

It didn’t seem to Yuuto like he was lying.

The issue with Felicia had gotten Yuuto so confused that he’d started to doubt everything. But thinking back again now, Mitsuki had always treated him as someone she loved. And even just this morning, she had seen him off to work with a wide, cheery smile.

He didn’t think there was any reason to doubt that smile was genuine.

“Well,” Jörgen continued, “If you still find your heart troubled by how things are, then you should have a good talk with her about it. That is what a husband and wife do, right?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s the only thing I can do.” Yuuto nodded. He decided that, for now, he should go ahead and trust in the advice of someone with more life experience.

As soon as Yuuto got back to his room after finishing work, he wasted no time in getting right to the point. “Mitsuki, I’m back! Okay, I need you to answer something honestly for me!”

For the past two days, his worries about this issue had pretty much clouded his mind, so he’d struggled to get any real work done.

And if Yuuto’s desk work as the patriarch suffered, then the Steel Clan’s administration would face delays. And the result of that would be problems for a huge number of people.

This issue needed to be resolved as soon as humanly possible.

“Okay? What’s with you, all of a sudden?” Mitsuki looked up at Yuuto in confusion.

She was holding a tablet computer, so she must have been in the middle of reading a digital book.

With long strides, Yuuto marched over to Mitsuki and looked her straight in the eyes, his face serious.

“Is there anything you’ve got pent up, anything you’re upset about? If there is, I want you to tell me.”

“Huh? Uh, no, not especially. Umm... if I had to come up with something, maybe... I really want to eat pickled plums. Lately I’ve just had this intense craving for them, but of course we don’t have any...”

Mitsuki chuckled as she said this, and then swallowed, as if remembering it had caused her mouth to water.

Yuuto sighed. It looked like he wasn’t going to get anywhere asking her about it obliquely.

“No, that’s not what I mean. Look, I’m talking about the whole thing with Felicia. Are you really okay with this?”

“Ohh, so that’s what this is about.” Mitsuki smiled knowingly. “Well, sure, I think that normally, I’d either get super jealous of her, or instead try to keep my distance from so I didn’t have to think about her.”

“Right, yeah. But instead, you’re getting along with her so well, and that didn’t make any sense to me at all.”

“Yeah, I don’t really understand it either.” Mitsuki shrugged.

“Okay, *seriously?!*”

Mitsuki couldn’t help laughing at Yuuto’s dramatic reaction. “Ahaha! I mean, it’s not like I don’t have any negative feelings about it at all, you know? I do wish I could have you all to myself, Yuu-kun.”

“...Right.” Yuuto nodded. Inwardly, he was relieved.

If Mitsuki had told him that she wasn’t jealous at all, that she didn’t want to

have him all to herself at all, then that would mean she didn't really love him.

"But... there's something about Felicia," Mitsuki said. "There's this feeling, like I've known her for a really, really long time. Maybe that's the reason. If I saw any of the female servants or officials trying to flirt with you, it would get to me, but with her, for some reason, I can be okay with it."

"Huh. What, so like a sort of deja-vu feeling?"

"Yeah, I guess? Something like that. And it's not just with Felicia. Sigrún, and Ingrid, and Linnea too. When I think about them, there's this oddly nostalgic feeling. Seeing them be friendly and close with you doesn't make me all that jealous."

"A nostalgic feeling..." As Yuuto repeated Mitsuki's words, a memory surfaced. It was the girl who shared her face, Rífa. Or rather, the þjóðann Sigrdrífa, divine empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

All of the girls Mitsuki had just named had something in common—they had all shared a dinner table with Rífa one night, making merry around the warmth of a hotpot.

It was only one night out of many, but Rífa had told Yuuto that it was the most precious memory of her entire life.

So precious, in fact, that she had been moved to tears just by recalling it.

"You know, maybe Rífa is your past incarnation, or something like that," Yuuto mused.

"Oh, like a previous life? I actually kind of got that feeling, too. I always felt like we were connected, not just two strangers who looked alike. But lately, I haven't been able to contact her at all, and it's really got me worried." Mitsuki looked down, her expression clouding over.

There was some sort of mystical connection between Mitsuki and Rífa, and thanks to that, the two of them could contact each other in their dreams.

That had ended up being the catalyst for the process that had brought Yuuto back to Yggdrasil.

However, ever since the summoning ritual that brought him back, Mitsuki had

been unable to visit Rífa's dreams.

"It seems like she's still alive, though, at least," Yuuto told her. "We haven't gotten a formal notice announcing the end of her reign. I also sent the Vindálfs into the imperial capital, and word from them is that more than a couple of people have gotten audiences with her, and even heard her voice."

The Vindálfs, whose name meant "Band of Wind Elves," was an organization of spies disguised as traveling performers.

Yuuto received regular reports from the Vindálfs agents, so it was almost certain that Rífa was still alive.

Yuuto did his best to act confident as he reassured Mitsuki. "I'm sure she probably just made herself ill from using too much of her ásmegin. Any night now she'll pop back up in your dreams again." He was also trying to reassure himself.

Mitsuki probably sensed that, and so she responded with a bright, energetic smile.

"Yeah, you're right. I hope she's doing better now."

The next day, during a momentary break from work, Yuuto told Felicia about what he'd discussed with Mitsuki the previous night.

When he did, she nodded and said, "Oh, now that you mention it, she did bring that up to me when we were together the night before last."

Yuuto was still a little embarrassed with Felicia, but now he was at the point of being able to talk with her normally again.

He couldn't help thinking he was pretty shameless to be able to treat this as normal so quickly.

"I also had the same doubts," Felicia continued, "thinking that Big Sister Mitsuki was far too kind towards me, and so I asked her about it myself. She told me much the same as what she told you."

In Yggdrasil, it was considered morally acceptable for a man to have multiple wives or mistresses, as long as he was of worthy character and able to provide for them. The people here accepted it as a perfectly natural thing.

Felicia had been born and raised in this world, and so her sense of right and wrong in this area was completely different from Yuuto's.

But even for Felicia, it had felt a bit strange that Mitsuki didn't seem to act with any jealousy.

"It could very well be that your hypothesis is correct, and that she is Lady Rífa's reincarnation," Felicia went on.

Yuuto nodded. "Yeah, although I've never really been a big believer in that sort of thing. But in this situation..."

It couldn't just be a coincidental resemblance. They looked far too identical for that. Even Yuuto, who'd known Mitsuki since they were little children, wouldn't have been able to tell them apart if it weren't for the difference in the color of their hair and eyes.

The fact that they were both twin rune Einherjar was another strange point in common. A rune was already rare in Yggdrasil—one person in ten thousand—and twin runes were so rare that there were supposedly only two people in the whole realm with them: Rífa, and Steinþórr.

And then there was their ability to visit each other in dreams. This was very reminiscent of the power of the "paired mirrors" effect, which allowed communication between Yggdrasil and the modern era.

There had to be *something* important connecting the two girls.

"But if that is the case, then I must say it is absolutely wonderful!" Felicia exclaimed.

"Huh? Wonderful?" Yuuto repeated. He didn't understand what she meant.

Felicia stared dreamily off into space, her eyes sparkling. "Why, think about it! After falling in love with someone from another world, in her next life she was reborn alongside him so that she could be with him, and at last she was able to make that wish come true! Oh, it is such an epic romance!"

"Uhh... you know, when you put it like that, it actually sounds less real," Yuuto admitted.

To Yuuto, Mitsuki was someone he'd always known, his childhood friend.

Having their relationship embellished with drama didn't feel right. They'd just always been together, and their love had grown from that.

"But Big Brother, it is true that Big Sister's love for you *is* that deep."

"I-it is, huh?" Yuuto asked, scratching the back of his head. These days, he really had trouble being confident about that.

"Without a shadow of a doubt. I feel as if I understand her much better after talking with her so much the night before last. You can trust me!"

"Okay, but I mean, *I've* known her since longer than I can even remember, so..."

"Tee hee!" Felicia giggled. "You know, it is often said that lovers can be the most in the dark when it comes to each other."

Yuuto gave a long sigh. "Yeah. As a matter of fact, Jörgen said something really similar to me the other day."

Yuuto still didn't fully understand everything, but at the very least, other people were pretty certain that Mitsuki's love for him was the real thing.

Maybe this was something he shouldn't need to be too anxious about.

Yuuto had a whole lot else to keep him busy right now, so he couldn't afford to keep spending time dwelling on it, either.

And so he got back to work. As he focused on his duties, the days flew by... and before he'd had the time to get his feelings truly sorted out, the morning of his wedding arrived.

"Father," Jörgen called. "It is time..."

"Right." As Yuuto turned around, his mantle caught the air. It was fur, made from the pelt of a garmr.

On his chest was the emblem of the Steel Clan—two crossed Japanese swords, sewn into the fabric with gold thread.

On his arms, he wore black iron gauntlets that glinted in the light, and on his head he wore a golden crown. His appearance was indeed befitting of the lord of the third most powerful nation in Yggdrasil.

“You look splendid, Father.” Jörgen got a little choked up, and wiped his eyes with one arm. “You truly have become a great man. I am sure that our predecessor is looking down on you with joy from his seat in Valhalla.”

Jörgen spoke of Fárbauti, the Wolf Clan patriarch before Yuuto, and the only person Yuuto had ever accepted as his sworn parent by the Oath of the Chalice.

During Yuuto’s first days in Yggdrasil, when others had mocked him and called him Sköll, the Devourer of Blessings, Fárbauti had done so much for him. At times lecturing him harshly, at other times giving him warm encouragement or sage advice, the old patriarch had always helped guide him toward what was right.

Yuuto looked up into empty space and whispered, “I can only hope so,” as solemnly as if he were speaking before a grave.

Fárbauti had been struck down by a blade meant for Yuuto. His sworn father had died protecting him.

Back then, if Yuuto had been better at understanding the feelings of others, then maybe things might have gone differently. Maybe the old man could have been here today, attending this wedding.

That thought made his chest hurt a bit.

Jörgen spoke again. “Father, the weather today is sunny and clear, with not a cloud in the sky. The gods who rule the heavens have chosen to bless this special day.”

Yuuto nodded. “I see. I’m really glad to hear that.”

So many people had worked hard, sacrificing their days and nights, to complete the preparations for this ceremony.

No one would be happy if a surprise storm put all of that time and effort to waste.

And Yuuto also knew that the path he would be walking from now on would be far from sunny. There were already terrible storms waiting for him in the near future.

And so, on this day that signified the beginning of a new chapter of his own

life, he was glad that it was sunny and clear. He wanted something that would make him believe that a part of his future was bright.

Jörgen raised his voice, and shouted, “Make way! Make way for the Steel Clan reginarch, Lord Suoh-Yuuto!”

The road leading between the palace gate and the sacred Hliðskjálf tower was lined on either side by soldiers, their spears angled so that they crossed each other and blocked the path.

As soon as Yuuto appeared at the palace entrance, they began pulling back their spears, repositioning them to point straight up. There was a cascade of sounds, the loud *shing!* of the metal spearheads, and the *clack!* as the spear butts hit the ground, two by two. In no time at all, the path had been opened.

Yuuto did not react to this with any surprise or hesitation. He strode forward, his face a picture of dauntless authority.

As Yuuto moved down the path, the metal *shing!* of crossing spears began to echo again.

Two by two, the pairs of spears crossed behind him, closing the path once more.

Today, only Yuuto was permitted to walk this road.

Yuuto soon arrived at the tower, where the stairs, too, were lined on both sides by his loyal soldiers.

He ascended the staircase slowly, step by step, as if each footfall carried a weighty importance.

He reached the top of the tower, and entered into its ritual hall and sanctuary, the hörgr. It was a large chamber approximately the size of a modern Japanese school gymnasium. There were around a hundred people seated inside, waiting for him.

“Ha ha... now this is a real sight,” Yuuto muttered to himself under his breath.

Directly to his right sat the Wolf Clan’s fourth-ranked officer, David, and next to him was Sveigðir, son of the late Olof, and newly appointed leader of the Olof Family.

Over on the left side was the Horn Clan's assistant second-in-command, Haugspori, and sitting next to him was its former second-in-command Rasmus.

They were all important figures in their respective clans, and the people seated around them were likewise holders of significant rank or status. It was a real gathering of VIPs.

And what's more, these people were the ones furthest from the ceremonial altar, seated at the back of the chamber. For a second, Yuuto found himself thinking how crazy it was that things had come this far.

He made his way down the aisle between the seated attendees, and arrived in front of the altar. Felicia was there waiting for him, as the priestess tasked with conducting the ceremonial prayers.

Instead of one of her usual, more revealing outfits, Felicia wore a more modest, slightly loose-fitting robe. Beautiful gold accessories decorated her hair, neck, and wrists.

"Hey there. That kind of outfit looks good on you too, you know," Yuuto whispered playfully. He made sure he was quiet enough that no one else could hear.

"Thank you very much," Felicia whispered back. "But for today, I think you should save all such praise for Big Sister Mitsuki."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Yuuto said, and the two of them exchanged grins.

There was a roar of cheering from outside the tower.

Mitsuki, his bride, had made her appearance before the public.

Yuuto had been running around all morning taking care of last-minute preparations, so he hadn't seen a glimpse of Mitsuki since they'd gotten up first thing in the morning.

He wondered just how more beautiful she must look now.

Judging by the sounds of the crowds outside, he could keep his expectations high.

At last, he began to hear gasps of amazement from people inside the hörgr. It seemed his bride-to-be had arrived.

Yuuto slowly turned around... and stood there, blinking.

“W-wow...” was all he could say. The girl standing in front of him was nothing like the childhood friend he was so used to.

He’d known Mitsuki for as long as he could remember. He was pretty sure he knew her well, and even accounting for his bias as the man who loved her, he knew she was fairly beautiful.

But he’d had no idea she was *this* beautiful.

The ill-defined uncertainty he’d felt in his heart was blown away.

He stared blankly at her, transfixed, as she slowly made her way to stand beside him.

“Yuu-kun. Yuu-kun.”

“Wha?”

“What are you zoning out for? Turn and face forward.”

“O-oh, right.” A bit flustered, Yuuto turned to face the altar.

“What, are you nervous?” Mitsuki asked.

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuto saw the profile of her face, outlined by the pure white silk hood of her gown. She was more beautiful than any girl he’d seen in his life. But her voice just now was the same one he’d always known.

It slowly hit home—the girl here next to him really was his beloved childhood friend.

“Not nervous, just blown away by how you look,” he whispered.

Mitsuki giggled. “So I look pretty?”

“Yeah, you do.”

Perhaps because of his relationship with Mitsuki growing up, Yuuto had a tendency to avoid directly expressing things like this to her. But today, that wasn’t an issue.

“If I may please have the attention and silence of everyone in attendance!” Felicia’s voice rang out, sweet and clear as a bell. Immediately, the ritual hall fell

quiet.

The only sound was the crackling of the ornamental torches, which seemed loud against the silence.

Felicia then knelt in front of the altar, and began the ritual prayer. “Oh, great mother Angrboða, goddess of the Steel Clan!”

Bathed in the light of the torches, the divine mirror on the altar glimmered a faint red.

This mirror was where it had all started.

Yuuto had spent so many days wishing only to go home. He could have never imagined back then that he would be getting married to Mitsuki here in this world. He started to get a lump in his throat.

Felicia turned around to face Yuuto once more, and placed her hand upon his chest, closing her eyes. “Oh, grant your blessings to our lord reginarch, Suoh-Yuuto.”

Next, she placed a hand on Mitsuki’s chest, and called out, “Oh, grant your blessings to his bride, Shimoya-Mitsuki.”

With both appeals concluded, Felicia then spread her arms wide, as if re-introducing them to the audience.

“By the name of the most holy Angrboða... I hereby recognize this marriage between Suoh-Yuuto and Shimoya-Mitsuki!”

As Felicia finished her pronouncement, everyone in the chamber burst into loud applause.

Right on cue, Albertina, Kristina, and Ephelia appeared, throwing handfuls of flower petals into the air.

“Congratulations!”

“Long live the reginarch!”

“Long live Lady Mitsuki!”

Cheers and cries of congratulations came from every direction.

As the celebratory mood in the hall reached its zenith, Yuuto turned to

Mitsuki and said, “Mitsuki, give me your hand.”

“Huh?” Mitsuki turned back from the crowd to look at Yuuto.

As she did, he fished in his pants pocket, and then pulled out a beautiful ring with a ruby at its center.

It was another masterwork forged by Ingrid, made in secret so that he could surprise Mitsuki with it today.

In Yggdrasil, there was no custom of exchanging or wearing wedding rings. However, as a man, Yuuto wanted to do what he could to make this wedding closer to the one Mitsuki had always dreamed of.

“Oh... right.” Mitsuki held out her left hand to Yuuto.

Yuuto slowly fit the ring onto Mitsuki’s finger.

“Yuu-kun, thank you. I love you!” There were tears falling from Mitsuki’s eyes, but she was smiling. She looked like the happiest she had ever been.

Yuuto felt his own heart filling with a poignant joy.

It was at that moment that a man ran into the chamber.

“P-please allow me to report!” he shouted.

He was completely out of breath, and his voice was shrill. It was completely at odds with the atmosphere in the room.

As the seated attendees began to murmur nervously, Jörgen angrily shouted at the intruder, “Can’t you tell we’re in the middle of a celebration?! Let it wait until later!”

Jörgen was the man in charge of organizing and directing the overall ceremony.

Having the celebration disturbed in such a manner would reflect upon his honor and pride.

“Wait!” Yuuto shouted in a fierce voice. “Let him speak.” He looked directly at the man, a soldier, and demanded, “What is it?!”

Yuuto’s face was no longer that of a groom at his wedding, but that of a veteran army commander. One look at this soldier’s harried, panicked state told

him that this was an urgent matter.

“Th-the þjóðann has...”

“Lady Rífa?! What’s happened to her?!” Yuuto shouted, his voice growing sharper.

He had a strange, uneasy feeling.

His mind quickly raced to consider the worst possibility, that she had died.

As it happened, that thought was completely off the mark. However, the next words out of the soldier’s mouth were, perhaps, far worse for the Steel Clan.

“The þjóðann has declared the Steel Clan to be an enemy of the empire, and has issued an order for our destruction!!”

“...?!” A wave of gasps swept through the crowd.

The Steel Clan had now become the enemy of every single other clan in Yggdrasil.

“Keh heh heh. Even this late in the game, he chooses a direct assault as his final move. What a truly splendid man.” The Flame Clan patriarch continued to chuckle as he looked through his telescope, watching the formation of Lightning Clan soldiers charging out of Fort Waganea.

The Flame Clan had thirty thousand troops in place, almost four times the Lightning Clan’s eight thousand.

Attempting a frontal assault at such a disadvantage was nothing but sheer recklessness.

If this were merely the act of a man drunk on his own valor, charging forward without thinking of anything other than glory, then the Flame Clan patriarch would not praise it so.

But he knew this was different.

The young tiger leading the charge truly intended to attack head-on and destroy his foe.

“Heh heh, perhaps if I were not your opponent, you might have succeeded, as well,” he added.

The Flame Clan patriarch was almost sixty years old now.

He had spent most of his life at war.

He had stood on the field in over a hundred battles.

He understood the flow of battle intimately now, like he knew his own breathing.

To be sure, the young leader of the Lightning Clan was a warrior-general perhaps without peer in this world, but the Flame Clan patriarch was also solidly convinced that he would be no trouble to deal with.

“I suppose it might be amusing to surround him, wound and weaken him, and then capture him. But even doing so will offer no certainty of him becoming my subordinate.”

He was not about to sacrifice several thousand of his own soldiers’ lives for such an uncertain promise of gain.

On the battlefield, a moment’s hesitation could lead directly to death.

The Flame Clan patriarch stared out at his enemy. His warrior’s spirit began to rise up within him, burning away any remaining attachment he had to the prospect of Steinþórr as a sworn child.

“It cannot be helped, then. So it goes. At the very least, you will die gloriously.”

The weapons needed to kill the tiger had already been prepared.

Against these weapons, it didn’t matter how strong or skilled of a fighter one was.

They had killed Baba Nobuharu, Takeda Shingen’s general who had made it through seventy battles without a single wound. They had killed members of the feared band of crimson samurai, the red-armored soldiers rumored to be undefeatable.

This red-haired warrior, though he might be more powerful than any other man alive, would be no exception.

The Flame Clan patriarch inhaled deeply, and shouted his command. “Take

aim! Your target is the one with red hair at the front of the formation! Do not bother with anyone else. Firrrrre!”

There was a cascade of ear splitting concussive blasts, and the entire battlefield and its surroundings were filled with the echoing.

“Ngh?!” Steinþórr felt a terrible chill run down his spine, and his whole body tensed.

In the very next instant, his superhuman eyesight locked on to the mass of tiny black objects flying towards him, moving at an incredible speed.

They were the size of small pebbles, or maybe a little smaller, and perfectly round. But despite their small size, Steinþórr’s instincts told him they were a terrible threat to his life.

And they were moving so *fast*, far faster than arrows. Anyone other than Steinþórr would surely have been unable to react in time.

Realizing that he couldn’t hope to knock them all away individually, he immediately began spinning his hammer around in front of him at high speed.

Ting-ting-ting-ting-ting-ting! Steinþórr’s hammer deflected a great deal of the projectiles. But they were just too fast, and too small, and too numerous.

“Grh...!” Steinþórr grunted in pain, and his horse let out a shrill scream.

Several of the projectiles had made it past his hammer, piercing him through the left shoulder, right thigh, and the right side of his ribs.

His horse was even less fortunate. With nothing to guard it, it had been riddled with innumerable wounds by the mysterious projectiles, and it collapsed to the ground on the spot, throwing Steinþórr off.

“Tch! Argh...! What the hell was that?!” Steinþórr hit the ground rolling, but quickly returned to his feet.

A sudden dizziness hit him, and he nearly lost his balance.

His wounds felt like they were burning on the inside, and blood gushed out of them.

These were serious wounds. If Steinþórr didn’t get treatment for them right

away, then his life would be in danger.

“H-how could I be wounded that easily...?!”

He couldn’t process what was going on. He was supposed to be invincible on the battlefield, after all.

But the situation didn’t give Steinþórr time to think about such things any longer.

Zaaa! He suddenly felt every hair on his body stand on end.

He directed his gaze to the front lines of the Flame Clan army formation. The soldiers were all holding what looked like black sticks, and as he watched, they pointed the ends of those sticks in his direction.

He didn’t understand what they were, but he knew in his gut that they were the greatest threat to his life that he had ever faced so far.

Panicking, he tried to get away, but the wound on his right leg made it hard to run.

“Firrrrre!!”

Bang! Bang!

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-baang!!

There was another cacophony of explosive sound, and another mass of those black projectiles came flying at Steinþórr.

“Raaaagh!!” Forcing himself to ignore the searing pain in his left shoulder, Steinþórr once again spun his hammer in front of him.

He deflected the projectiles, over and over, too many to count.

For the ones that slipped through his defenses, he used his incredible eyesight to trace their paths, and his beast-like reflexes to bend his body out of the way.

It was the full power of fight or flight, a man with miraculous physical strength pushed to perform a feat of godlike dexterity.

But he still couldn’t escape them all.

“Gahh...!” One of them pierced through Steinþórr’s right arm, and he cried

out in pain.

He managed to keep from dropping his warhammer, but his arms had lost their strength.

“Third rank! Firrrrre!”

Bang! Bang!

Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-baang!!

Without any mercy or pause, there was another series of explosions, like a thunderclap sweeping across the battlefield.

Without any way to defend against them, Steinþórr was hit by the barrage of black projectiles, and they pierced his body all over.

Epilogue

Faced with the sight of their hero, the Dólgþrasir, falling over onto the ground, covered in bloody wounds, the Lightning Clan soldiers began screaming.

“Lord Steinþórr has been killed?! Aaaaauugh!”

“It can’t be! How could *he* be killed?!”

“Wh-what the hell are those weapons?! Are they using witchcraft?!”

“Th-there’s no way we can win against them!”

“Run! Run for your lives!!”

The morale of the Lighting Clan army was built around the faith the men had in Steinþórr and his superhuman strength and skills.

That absolute symbol of strength had seemingly been killed with ease. In the blink of an eye, terror spread like wildfire through the ranks.

They scattered like ants, running for their lives in all directions.

The Flame Clan patriarch watched this and scoffed. “Abandoning their fallen patriarch, are they? What a display of... hm?”

He stopped short, for among the fleeing men, there was one who ran *towards* the front lines, and upon reaching the fallen Steinþórr, proceeded to pick him up.

The Flame Clan patriarch smiled. “Heh. So, there was one loyal man among them, eh? Admirable. However, I am not about to hand over my prize to him.”

He turned and called out to one of his pages, “Bring me a *tanegashima.*”

“Yes, sir!” The attendant stepped forward, holding a tube-like object made of black iron.

“Prepare a round.”

“Yes, sir!” The page used a torch to light a small piece of rope attached to the rear end of the tube.

Next, he poured a black powder and a bullet into the tube, and used a rod to pack them in tightly.

After a few more minor steps, the process was complete, and the page held out the device to his patriarch.

“My lord, it is ready.”

“Good. Now then, let us make sure the tiger does not make his final journey alone.” The Flame Clan patriarch held the iron tube up in front of him, parallel with the ground, and pulled the trigger attached to its underside.

There was a loud *Bang!* and a puff of smoke.

The matchlock arquebus: One of the early examples of a handheld long gun, and the forerunner to the musket. In Japan, it was often called a *tanegashima,* due to the fact that the model widely produced in Japan was based on prototypes designed on the island of Tanegashima.

Said to have been invented in Europe in the 15th century, it was technology that was three thousand years ahead of the weaponry of Yggdrasil. It was something that should never have existed here.

The bullets it fired carried enough power to punch through the iron and steel of plate mail armor.

The Flame Clan patriarch’s shot struck true. One shot was all it took for the man holding Steinþórr to crumple to the ground.

But, rather than try to escape, the man held himself on the ground with his back facing the enemy, covering Steinþórr from any more fire.

He was placing his master before himself.

“Oh, bravo!” the Flame Clan patriarch shouted. “Now, that is how a proper soldier should behave. Now then, we at least owe those two defeated heroes a parting prayer. Ran, come with me.”

Handing off his gun to his page, he gestured for his second-in-command to follow him.

“Yes, sir,” said Ran.

The two of them walked forward across the battlefield.

When they reached Steinþórr's body, the Flame Clan patriarch placed his hands together.

"Your name was Steinþórr, was it not? Your battle was a splendid sight to behold. You may depart to your Valhalla with pride in your heart."

"...I'm taking you with me, bastard." A low voice echoed up from the Flame Clan patriarch's feet, as if echoing up from the depths of hell, and Steinþórr's hands grasped hold of his legs.

Steinþórr slowly began to pull his body upward.

After being hit with so many lead bullets, it was a shock that he was even still breathing, much less capable of movement.

"My lord?! You filthy monster, stay away from him!" Ran shouted.

"No. Stand back." The Flame Clan patriarch held up a hand to stop Ran from drawing his sword.

Steinþórr's seeming refusal to die was surprising, but it did not seem to unsettle the patriarch. In fact, he burst out into laughter.

"Gah hah hah hah! So you *still* draw breath! What incredible tenacity. There is no one in this world who could equal your strength and valor. Nor anyone in ages past... nor in the future to come."

As he spoke, he drew the sword from the scabbard at his waist.

It was the blade he had received as a gift from the Steel Clan, the masterwork personally forged by the genius craftsman Ingrid.

The Flame Clan patriarch raised the blade above his head, pointing upwards. "I would think it a waste to let anyone else have the honor of killing you. And so I shall take your life myself. Know that you die by the hand of the Demon King, Oda Nobunaga, descendant of the Taira."

As he gave his name, Nobunaga turned the blade so that it was facing downwards, then brought it down on Steinþórr in a vertical thrust aimed at his heart.



Steinþórr was too weak from his wounds. He no longer had the strength to move out of the way.

The blade found its mark. It pierced through Steinþórr's body in a fluid motion.

"Gagh!" Steinþórr grunted in pain. As his strength left him, he wheezed, struggling to speak.

"No... not in a... place like this... Suoh-Yuuto... I still haven't... settled things with..."

Those were the final words of the man known as Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

Nobunaga crouched down and, carefully and respectfully, pulled Steinþórr's fingers off of his legs, one by one. He then reached out and passed his hand over Steinþórr's face, closing the dead man's eyes.

He clapped his hands together once and held them, offering a silent prayer.

After a long moment, Nobunaga turned to his second-in-command Ran and said, "Give him an honorable burial."

He then pulled his blade from Steinþórr's body, flung off the blood, and looked out into the distance, across the flat wasteland.

Towards the northern horizon.

Nobunaga smiled. "Keh heh heh... I see. 'Suoh-Yuuto.' To think that name would be what crossed the lips of such a great warrior in his final breaths... I look forward to meeting him all the more, now."

To Be Continued

Afterword It’s done! Ten whole volumes completed!!

This was only possible because of the support and encouragement from readers like you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The plot of this series is going to start picking up the pace even more. I hope that you continue to support it going forward.

So, with that out of the way... Hello again! Seiichi Takayama here. It’s been a while. Good to see you again.

...Crap, I’m already completely out of stuff to write here. (Sweating.) Uh, Happy New Year? It’s going to be all the way in March by the time this book hits the shelves, though, so that doesn’t seem right.

The thing is, when you live out in a rural area, nothing interesting ever happens, really. At least, not interesting enough to put into the afterword of a book.

Oh, wait! That’s right, there is one thing.

I live in Nagasaki Prefecture now, and the other day, there was a heavy snowfall that apparently broke all historical records for the area.

That said, it was only 15 centimeters or so.

I grew up in a place where snow piling up a whole meter deep isn’t all that rare in the winter. So despite it being big local news, for me it didn’t even feel like *enough* snow. It melted away in only one day, too. I was all, “Come on, that was nothing!”

But!

The kids at my daughter’s elementary school, they were going nuts about it. This was a lifetime first for them.

I heard that some of the other schools in the region even had temporary closings.

In my neighborhood they were broadcasting this announcement in the street

for everyone to hear: *“There have been several incidents of pipes and water mains rupturing, so please exercise caution.”*

The supermarkets got flooded with people rushing in to buy up essentials, and Twitter was full of pictures of empty shelves.

I’m sure that it must have been a difficult situation for everyone, considering they’re so unused to snow.

I mean, I do understand that, you know? It’s just...

I just can’t help thinking: *All that over 15 centimeters?*

Man, that experience really made me understand just how vastly different the experience of snowy weather is for people in different parts of Japan.

My daughter and I were the odd ones out, completely unable to relate to the mood of everyone around us.

All right, I managed to get through the page requirement for the afterword, so now I’ll move on to the last part.

To my editor, U-sama.

The manuscript and other things ended up being delayed, and I am truly sorry for that.

To Yukisan-sensei, thank you so much for the many beautiful and cute illustrations.

My sincere thanks goes 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 gratitude.

With that, I leave you with the wish that we might see each other again, in volume 11.

Seiichi Takayama

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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 10

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Curtis Teal

Edited by Emily Sorensen

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