The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar* 12

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN



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"I can't believe he is able to sleep so soundly in this situation… I suppose this is what I should expect from someone so great; 'unflappable' is one way to put it, I guess?"
As the three-horse carriage rolled through the arid waste-land, the Great Lord who had created the Steel Clan was comfortably asleep, using the body of a giant white wolf as his pillow.


"Waaaah! Father, Faaatheeeer!"
I figured Kris was picking on her again, but–



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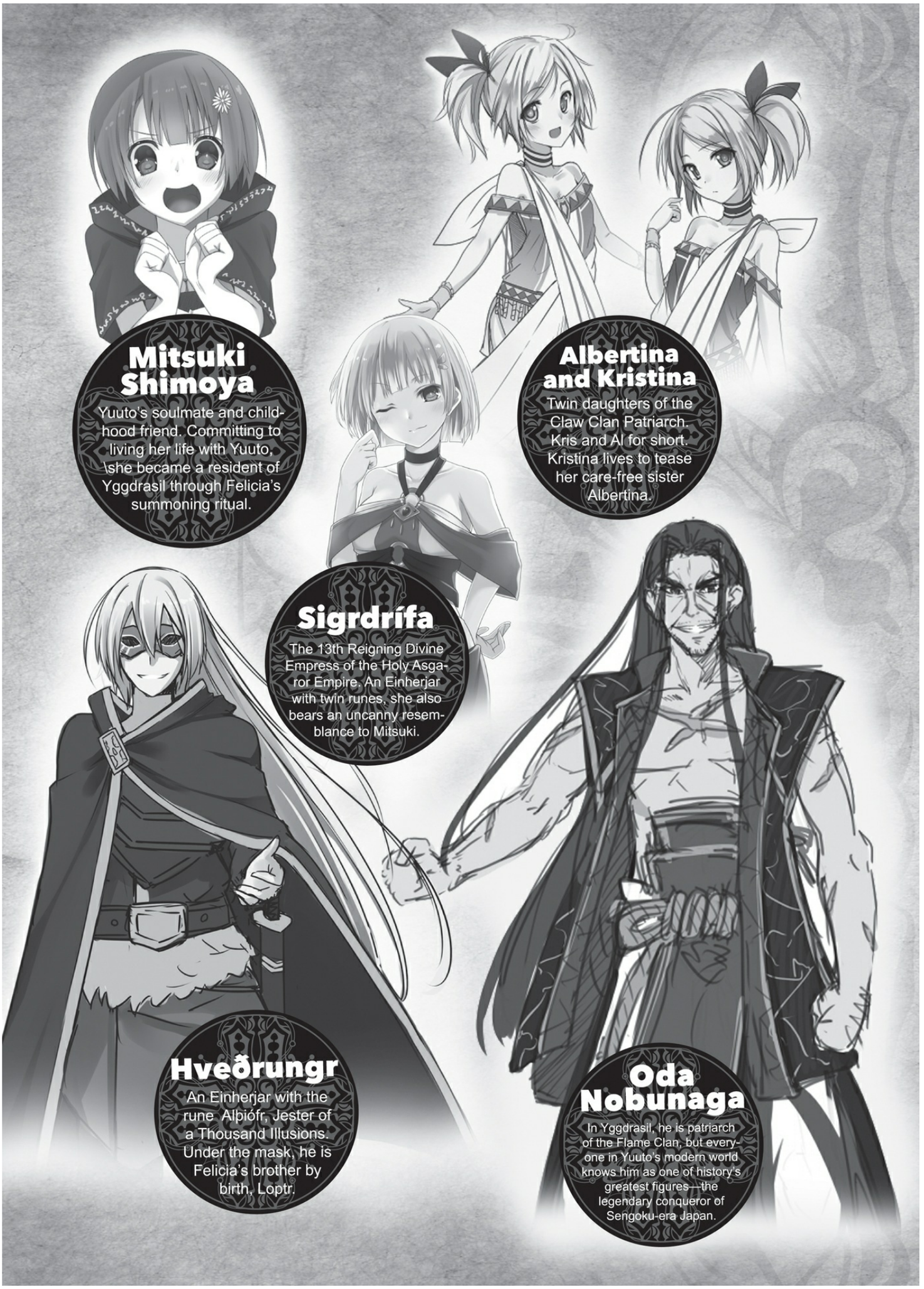
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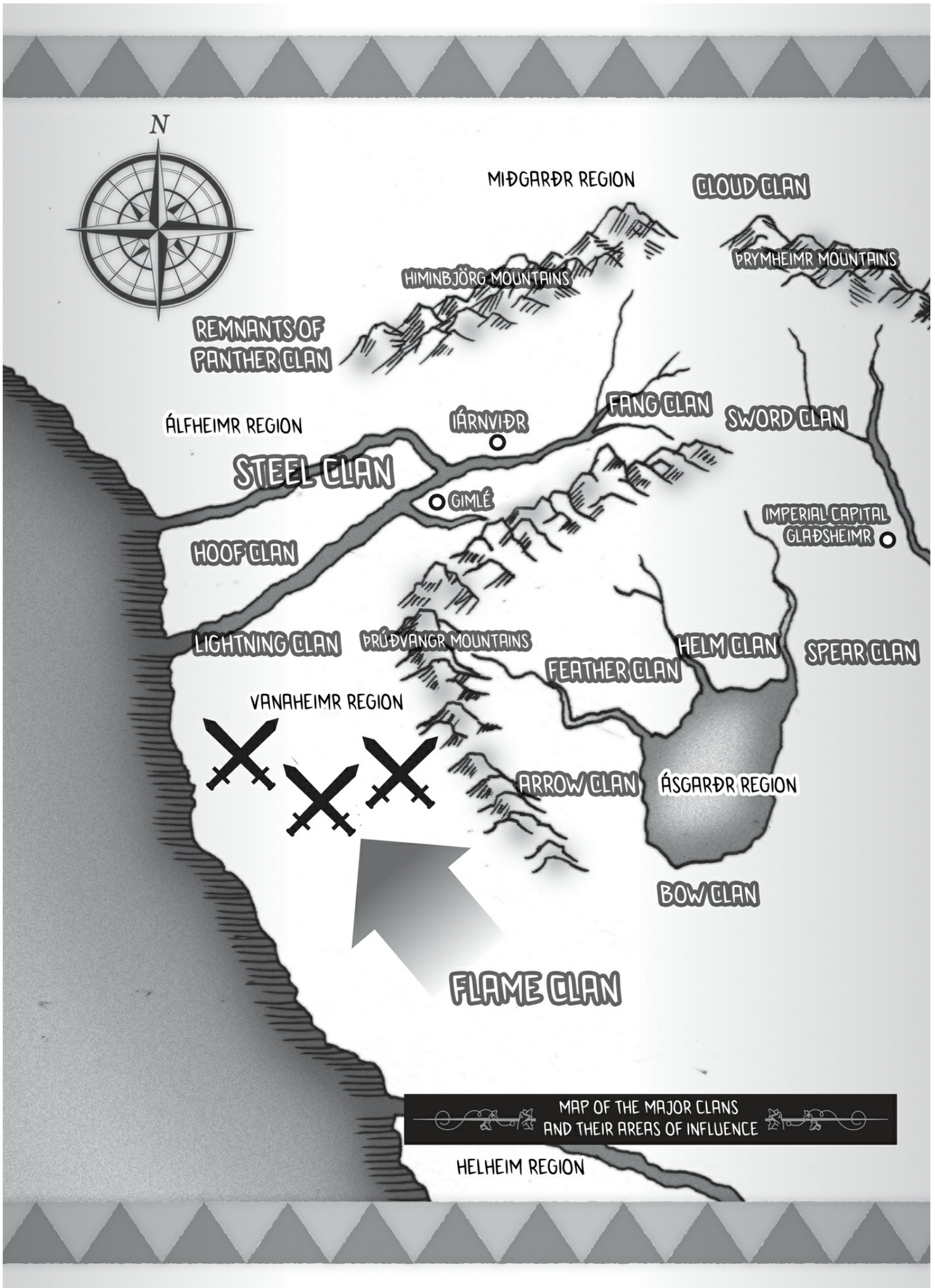
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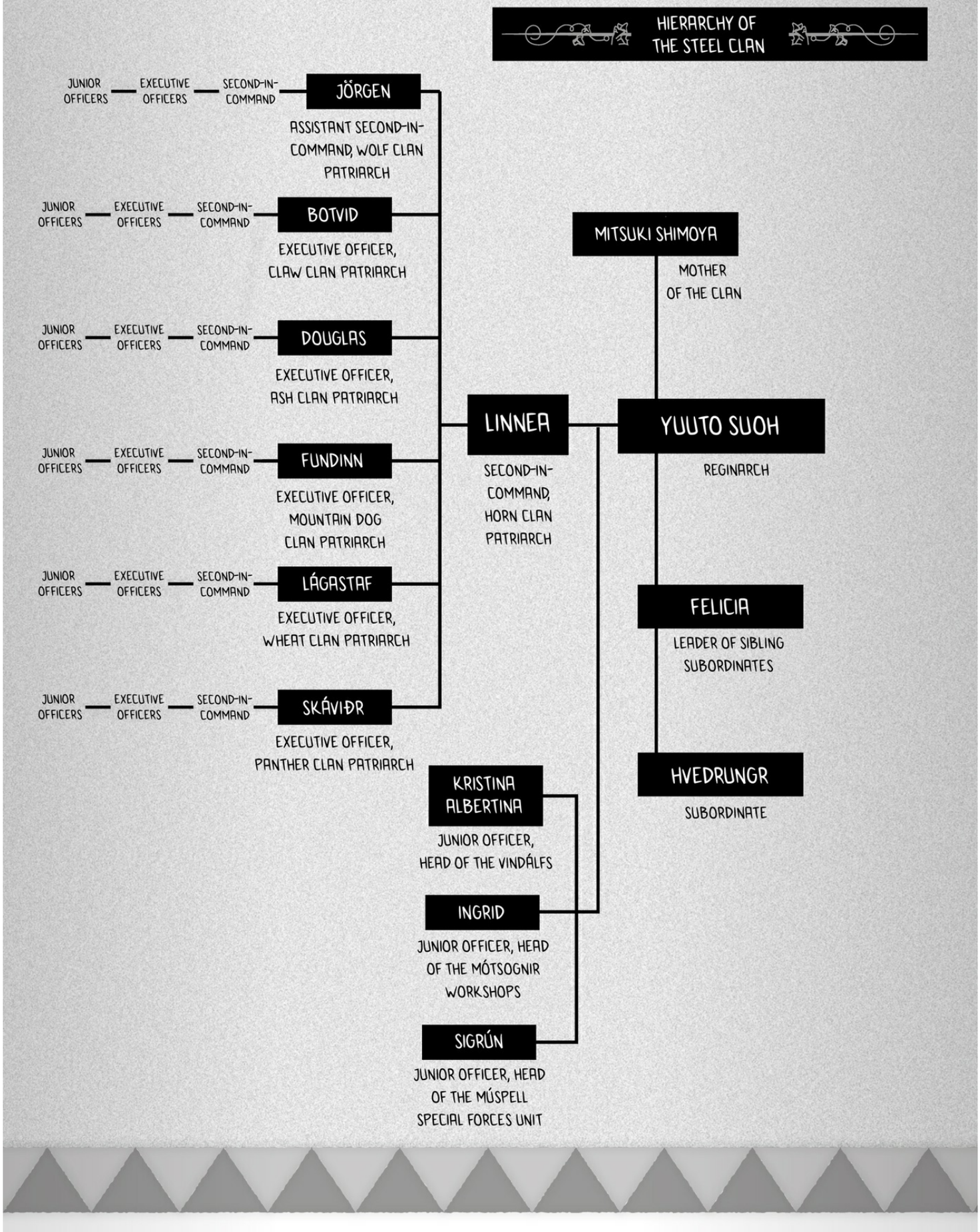
AFTERWORD


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. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."
Linnea
The patriarch of the Horn Clan and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.
Ingrid
Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.


Mitsuki Shimoya
Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.
Albertina and Kristina
Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.
Sigrdrífa
The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgaror Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.
Hveðrungr
An Einherjar with the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.
Oda Nobunaga
In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.


N
MIÐGARÐR REGION
CLOUD CLAN
HIMINBJÖRG MOUNTAINS
ÞRYMHEIMR MOUNTAINS
REMNANTS OF PANTHER CLAN
ÁLFHEIMR REGION
IÁRNVIÐR
FANG CLAN
SWORD CLAN
STEEL CLAN
GIMLÉ
IMPERIAL CAPITAL GLAÐSHEIMR
HOOF CLAN
LIGHTNING CLAN
ÞRÚÐVANGR MOUNTAINS
HELM CLAN
SPEAR CLAN
FEATHER CLAN
VANAHEIMR REGION
ARROW CLAN
ÁSGARÐR REGION
BOW CLAN
FLAME CLAN
MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE
HELHEIM REGION

HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

Fagrahvél was eight years old upon first meeting Sigrdrífa.

It had been the first time Fagrahvél visited Valaskjálf Palace, and the memory of how overwhelming its majesty and grandeur had been back then was still just as fresh today.

Sigrdrífa had been a newborn at the time, only about two weeks old or so.

“Mother, who is that?” asked the young Fagrahvél, peering at the baby cradled in her arms. “It’s not Ríg, is it?”

It was immediately obvious that this wasn’t Ríg, Fagrahvél’s biological younger brother, who had been born two weeks ago—and had died three days ago.

Indeed, while all babies looked much the same to Fagrahvél, this one was very clearly different.

Its hair and skin were both pure white, with a strange translucence that seemed almost magical.

Maybe she’s an angel sent from the gods.

That was the thought that ran through Fagrahvél’s young mind—that first impression was something else that remained a vivid memory even as an adult.

“You’re right, it’s not Ríg. This is the most holy child of the þjóðann.”

“The þjóðann?!” Taken aback, Fagrahvél could only repeat those words.

Eight years old was old enough to have gotten a basic grasp of certain things about the world their family lived in.

Fagrahvél was the child of a low-level official, and understood very well that their family was of a different social status than the people in glittering attire who lived in this gorgeous palace.

Fagrahvél also understood that the þjóðann was the most noble and powerful

of all the people in the imperial court, someone so far above Fagrahvél's own position that meeting them would normally be impossible.

Fagrahvél's mother quickly cleared this up. "I was given the order to be this child's wet nurse, starting today."

"What's a wetnurse?" For an eight-year-old not born into an upper-class family, it was an unfamiliar word.

"It means someone who gives a baby milk in place of its mother."

"Oh, okay. Why can't this baby's mother give it milk herself, though? Did she die?"

"No, she is alive." Fagrahvél's mother said, with an awkward smile.

There was a custom passed down through many generations in which mothers in noble families would hand their newborn children over to a wetnurse to be raised through their infancies, rather than raising the child themselves. An eight-year-old might find this particular explanation hard to understand, though...

"There were some issues, so now I'm going to be raising her instead. You make sure that you care for her like she's your own sister, all right? Like you would have done... for Ríg..." Her voice started to choke up.

She had lost her beloved newborn son only three days ago, so her reaction was only natural.

"For Ríg?" The young Fagrahvél repeated quizzically, and looked at the baby once again.

As stated previously, this baby didn't resemble Fagrahvél's late younger brother in the slightest.

And yet...

The baby smiled brightly, and in that instant, Fagrahvél's whole body shuddered.

"...!"

It seemed so adorable, so *precious*.

“Okay!” Fagrahvél said with a nod. There was not a trace of hesitation or uncertainty in that response.

Fagrahvél had been helpless in regard to preventing Ríg’s death, but this child was going to be kept safe no matter what.

That new oath resounded strongly in the young Fagrahvél’s heart—and even years later, in the present day, it still continued to live on.



ACT 1

“What...?! Y-You’re sure of that?!”

Upon receiving the report from his messenger, the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas’ eyes went wide as saucers, and he raised his voice in a panic with no regard for his image.

He was someone who ruled over an entire clan, and naturally, that meant he was a man of strong nerves.

And yet, even he could not keep himself from shuddering at the number he’d just heard.

“Thirty thousand?! Where did that absurd number come from?! Where could they even possibly *get* that many soldiers from in the first place?!”

“Banners were spotted signifying the Cloud, Fang, Sword, Spear, and Helm Clans. The enemy force appears to be the combined armies of five clans, my lord!”

“Rrgh...” Douglas groaned and bit his lower lip. “I assumed the Sword Clan would be invading, but not the Spear Clan and the Helm Clan too...”

Even after scrounging up every available soldier in the nation, he only had about four thousand total. Hearing that he was up against an enemy almost eight times that, Douglas could feel the color draining from him.

The messenger continued. “My lord, the enemy is currently marching towards Dauwe Castle! It’s estimated they will reach it in around two more days.”

Dauwe Castle was a very heavily-walled fortress that had been built on the Ash Clan territory’s eastern end to guard against the threat from the powerful Cloud and Fang Clans.

Over the long years spanning successive generations, it had seen a steady accumulation of defensive reinforcements and improvements, and now it was one of the strongest fortresses in the whole Bifröst region.

Additionally, because Yuuto had predicted that several of their neighboring nations would stage a combined invasion attempt, they'd taken appropriate countermeasures in advance.

A full garrison of three thousand—almost eighty percent of the Ash Clan's available fighters—were stationed in the fortress, along with a large volume of weapons, food, and supplies. Additionally, the fortress was being commanded by Hrymr, the Ash Clan's most capable general. It was without a doubt the best lineup of defensive preparations they could have come up with.

However, their foes being this incredibly numerous was still something way outside of any of their predictions.

"Are we going to be able to hold out until reinforcements from Father arrive...?!"

Douglas gulped nervously.

The curtain was now rising on a new battle, one on a scale far beyond anything ever seen in the history of Yggdrasil.

"Fa... Father! There's an urgent message from the Ash Clan. They are pleading for immediate reinforcements!"

When the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid's child subordinate burst into his office with the news, Botvid's first response was a bitter grin.

"Hmph, so it's finally happening then. For now, calm yourself down. Go on, drink some water." He gestured with his chin, directing the panicked man towards the pitcher of water on his desk.

He was completely composed.

He knew already from earlier discussions with Yuuto that several of the nearby clans were going to attempt to wage war on the Steel Clan in tandem. And from his own independent intelligence network, he'd gotten reports that the Sword, Fang, and Cloud Clans had gone through a reconciliation ceremony, swearing a new alliance with each other.

As such, this situation was one he knew full well was coming, and he had no

reason to lose his cool head because of it now.

Due to his ability to present himself as unflappable and in control during situations just like these, he garnered the support and reverence of his subordinates.

It was an example of Botvid's shrewdness, and that shrewdness is what he'd used to climb his way to power.

"Now then, how large are the enemy forces?"

Botvid broached the question after waiting a moment for his subordinate to catch his breath.

It was something he'd already had his spies investigate.

The enemy would probably be fielding around fifteen thousand men.

By comparison, the Ash Clan wouldn't be able to pull together even five thousand.

With those numbers, it was going to be a tough battle ahead...

"Th-Thirty thousand."

"What?! That's absurd, what are you saying?! I haven't heard anything about an army that size! You're sure that figure's not just a bluff in order to hit our morale?!"

Botvid completely forgot the mental calculations he'd been doing and leaned in to interrogate his subordinate.

Taken by surprise with a number twice what he'd been expecting, the man known far and wide as the Viper of Bifröst lost the very self-control he was known for.

"I can't say I know for certain, my lord... However, the information is coming from the Ash Clan, and I do not think they would deliberately tell a lie that risks demoralizing us, their ally."

"Hrmh..." Botvid furrowed his brow.

There was already a sworn arrangement in place with the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas to send reinforcements once the enemy invaded.

However, right now, the most the Claw Clan could send was around three thousand, and even by the most generous estimates, the Ash Clan still wasn't going to have even five thousand soldiers mobilized.

"Against thirty thousand, it's doubtful whether we'd even be able to hold out long enough for reinforcements from the main Steel Clan army to arrive," Botvid muttered in frustration.

In his prior estimates with an enemy of fifteen thousand, the famously impregnable Dauwe Castle was something they could count on.

He'd figured that holing up in the fortress and waiting out a siege would buy enough time for them. But now...

"...It looks like, for the first time in a good while, I'm going to be stuck fighting an uphill battle."

The Steel Clan Encirclement coalition's large-scale invasion was getting underway on the west side of the Steel Clan's territory as well.

The stage for that particular battle was Fort Kisaganeka, located on the northern end of Panther Clan territory.

"My lord, a large number of riders have appeared on the horizon! We've confirmed their banners—they're forces belonging to the false patriarch!"

"So they're here." The man in command simply muttered those words in response to the report in a detached-sounding voice, without even raising an eyebrow.

At first glance, there was something unsettling, even sinister, about this man.

His face was deathly pale and his cheeks sunken, almost as if he were suffering from some sort of illness. Yet his eyes were like a hawk's, gleaming with a keen light.

His name was Skáviðr.

Originally, he had been the assistant second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, but Yuuto had recognized him for both his loyalty and his great many achievements, and had awarded him the position of patriarch of the Panther

Clan, which controlled a swath of territory in western Álfheimr.

“Heh, I see that even after being so thoroughly defeated by my liege, they still refuse to learn,” Skáviðr said, and flashed a venomous grin that sent chills through any who saw it.

The attackers were the remnants of the old Panther Clan, who had fled back north when the Steel Clan conquered and absorbed them. Naturally, they did not recognize Skáviðr or the Steel Clan’s subsidiary Panther Clan as legitimate.

They had selected their own new patriarch and proclaimed themselves to be the true Panther Clan. However, Skáviðr had officially received the right of succession from the Panther Clan’s previous patriarch, Hveðrungr. And, as the patriarch of his new Panther Clan, of course Skáviðr couldn’t afford to grant any validity to the old Panther Clan remnants.

In order to delegitimize them, he referred to them dismissively as “the false patriarch and his allies.”

Honestly, though, it seemed like the sort of transparent move that wouldn’t fool anyone, and it wasn’t his style, either. But this was how politics went.

“This is the perfect opportunity for us. If we wipe them out here and now, I can call myself the Panther Clan patriarch with no more opposition. What’s more, it will eliminate the threat to our north, and make rebuilding our territory a much smoother process.”

Skáviðr’s hand moved to the hilt of the sword at his waist, and the wooden chair squeaked as he slowly stood up.

Terms like “remnants” or “the false patriarch and his allies” created the image that the remaining old Panther Clan were no more than a small rebel group, but the truth of the matter was that they were still numerous enough to function as a full clan, and they controlled a wide stretch of territory in western Miðgarðr. They were still very much an enemy nation.

In the space of less than one year, the Panther Clan had gone from being just one of many nomadic clans in Miðgarðr to controlling the largest area of any clan in Yggdrasil. That was all due to the incredible skill of their elite armed cavalry. Their total numbers may have been reduced, but the riders that still

remained were certainly a formidable threat as an enemy.

They could not be underestimated.

"Kill the traitor Lágastaf!"

"Give the honorless bastards the justice they deserve!"

"Strike them down on behalf of the gods! They turned against Her Majesty the þjóðann!"

Vicious, angry shouts and curses flew through the air from all directions.

This was a small castle fortress in the western outskirts of the Wheat Clan's territory. Invading Hoof Clan soldiers had completely surrounded it.

"My, they are certainly full of energy."

In the central hall of the fortress sat a captivatingly beautiful woman who chuckled to herself playfully as if she gave no regard whatsoever to the tense air enveloping the place.

She was the Wheat Clan patriarch, Lágastaf, the very woman whose blood the soldiers outside were calling for.

The Wheat Clan had formerly been a younger sibling subsidiary of the Hoof Clan. When the previous Hoof Clan patriarch, Yngvi, died in battle, though, they'd quickly switched to an alliance with Yuuto's Wolf Clan, the ones who had killed him.

To the people of the Hoof Clan, this was a betrayal of the Wheat Clan's Oath of the Chalice, an unforgivable offense of disloyalty.

Of course, the Hoof Clan soldiers weren't out there screaming like that *just* because they were angry.

With the validation of a just motive on their side, they screamed to increase their own fighting morale and wear down their enemy's will to fight back. This was, in fact, a standard tactic used during a siege offensive.

"Give us Lágastaf! Give her to us and we'll spare the rest of your lives!"

"She's a filthy harlot who opened her legs to her sworn brother's enemy!"

“If she wants a man so bad, we’ll all be *real* glad to give her what she wants!”

“Hee heh heh, we’ll play with her ’til she breaks!”

The taunts and screams started getting more and more vulgar.

This was an era when, after the capture of cities and towns, it was normal for invading soldiers to pillage to their heart’s content.

In Yggdrasil, pillaging after victory in battle was customary, seen practically as a right. Such acts were considered a just reward for soldiers who risked their lives on the battlefield.

Lágastaf’s sensual beauty was well-known even in the Hoof Clan, and the soldiers outside were apparently excited to take her as part of their reward.

“Oh, my, I simply can’t listen to this any longer.”

Lágastaf placed a hand against her cheek and smiled, not seeming like she’d actually been damaged by any of the things she was hearing.

This was a woman who held the honorable position of patriarch, lord of a clan. Mild-mannered though she was, she was also clearly someone with extraordinary nerves.

And the sight of her incredible composure made her seem reliable and strong to the people around her.

“Your calm composure is as reassuring as ever, Mother. Even in a situation as dire as this, you are the same as always.”

“I fear we men were the ones allowing ourselves to panic. I am ashamed.”

“Yes, we must take after your example.”

Thoroughly impressed, the executive clan officers all nodded in agreement.

However, deep in her heart, Lágastaf could not dismiss the growing hopelessness she felt.

While she appeared to be quite young, perhaps in her mid-twenties at the oldest, she was actually over forty.

In Yggdrasil, the standards for health, nutrition, and medical knowledge were abysmal compared to the modern era. In other words, Lágastaf was already at

an age where it wouldn't be unusual for her to die.

Furthermore, as a woman she faced plenty of extra difficulties in uniting and controlling the men of the clan.

She wanted nothing more than to retire as patriarch and leave the position in the hands of a successor, but her problem was that finding a man that could meet the high standards she had set was nigh-impossible.

I know that a man with as dignified a spirit and presence as Lord Yuuto is unbelievably rare, and I wouldn't be so unfair as to ask for the same. But... if only one of these men here had even just half of the greatness in them that he does...

Her sworn father Yuuto had started as patriarch of the Wolf Clan, and the Wolf Clan had once been a small clan just like hers. And yet, Yuuto's Wolf Clan had been blessed by an assortment of powerful, clever, and talented leaders. Why was her Wheat Clan so lacking in good talent?

Lágastaf stole another glance at the faces of her officers, and while being careful not to let them notice, she let out a tiny disappointed sigh.

I feel bad for my late husband, but I wonder if I should just ask Father if he could grant me even just his seed for an heir.

She knew full well that this wasn't the time, but as she sat there, she still found herself somewhat seriously mulling it over.

Gimlé.

It was a city built near the intersection of the Körmt and Élivágar Rivers.

This fertile river basin area was called Iðavöllr, a name meaning "the Shining Fields," and it was one of the few grain-producing regions of such large scale in all of Yggdrasil. Gimlé had already long been prosperous thanks to being in this particular location, but since becoming the capital of the Steel Clan, a nation which was growing at a tremendous pace, the city had seen a surge in traffic and was flourishing as it never had before.

Long lines snaked out from the outer wall's entrance gates, with merchants

and travelers alike all waiting to enter the city, and the main thoroughfare was lined with stalls selling all kinds of wares, packed so tightly there was no space left between them.

Indeed, the streets of the Steel Clan capital were overflowing with energy and life—by contrast, the faces of the clan's highest administrative officers currently gathered together in the heart of the city were all rather grim.

"Father had explained things to me beforehand, and so I thought I had prepared myself to confront this situation, but seeing it actually unfold like this is still a shock..."

Jörgen let out a distressed sigh as he stared at the contents of the three messages he held in his hands.

He was a man with an incredibly fierce-looking face, with scars on his cheek and across one eyebrow, and he had the sort of commanding, intimidating presence that would send the average street ruffian fleeing in fear.

He had the rank to match that appearance, as well: He was patriarch of the Wolf Clan, the clan widely considered to be the most distinguished branch family within the Steel Clan. Additionally, he was the Steel Clan's assistant second-in-command, the clan administration's third-highest ranking member.

Across from Jörgen, Linnea furrowed her brow. "Yes, and all of those areas are seeing a worse situation than we'd anticipated. Perhaps it's proof of just how much our enemies view us as a threat, that they're pouring all of their resources into the fight in order not to waste this opportunity."

Linnea's appearance gave off the impression that she was nothing but an adorable little girl, but she was in fact Jörgen's superior, the Steel Clan's second-in-command.

From Jörgen's perspective, the girl was practically a child as far as her age went, but he did not allow himself to underestimate her in the slightest because of her appearance.

For one thing, he had no intention to doubt the judgment of Yuuto, who had specifically selected her for the position, and for another, he had seen for himself how she'd personally managed all of the administrative affairs of a large

nation like the Steel Clan, and he fully acknowledged her incredible acumen.

“Have we taken steps to inform Father?” Jörgen asked.

“I’ve already had copies of those made and sent off by horseback,” Linnea replied. “We’ve also gotten basic provisionary post stations constructed along the route to Gashina. The reports should get there sometime between today and tomorrow.”

“That is some quick work.” Jörgen’s lips curled up into a grin.

Until just a few days ago, Fort Gashina and its surroundings were Lightning Clan territory, so they couldn’t send information there by carrier pigeon. The reason for that was because the carrier pigeon system leveraged the birds’ homing instincts to send them to their destinations, and the Steel Clan didn’t have any pigeons taken from a coop set up in Fort Gashina yet.

That meant that sending a messenger on horseback was the best remaining option, but horses were living creatures, too, and couldn’t handle being forced to run continuously over great distances.

The solution to this was to place post stations at fixed intervals along a route—in other words, to have replacement horses ready and waiting at each of those stations. That way, information could be sent along by horseback messenger quickly over long distances. This was known as the post station system.

Yuuto had come up with the idea of setting up this system throughout Steel Clan territory in preparation for emergencies much like the one occurring now, and presently most of the routes between the major Steel Clan cities were linked by post stations. However, it was quite a surprise to Jörgen to hear that posts had already been set up linking them to Gashina, an area they’d only captured a scant few days ago.

“Time is of the essence right now,” Linnea said. “The earlier we can get this information to Father, the more additional lives will likely be saved.”

“Indeed, it is just as you say.” Jörgen nodded deeply, with a humble, reverent expression. “Father is a war god reborn, after all. I have no doubt that even this unprecedented crisis is something he will be able to brush aside.”

Yuuto was already akin to a divine being in Jörgen's eyes. He truly believed the young man had been sent by the goddess Angrboða to save his people.

"Yes," said Linnea, "I'm certain of that as well... However, if we simply leave everything for Father to resolve, then what purpose was there in him bestowing these immensely honorable and high-ranking positions upon us in the first place?"

"Ha ha ha, that is true. It will take four more days at least for Father to travel back to Gimlé. We should do everything we can in that time."

"Yes, and I'd much appreciate it if you could educate me appropriately."

"Pardon?" Jörgen furrowed his brow suspiciously.

The remark seemed strange to him. Taking the previous discussion of the provisional relay posts as just one example, this girl's competence was clear as day. What need would she have for him to teach her anything at this point?

"Jörgen, I've heard the stories of the many times you led troops on the battlefield in your younger days. Until Father returns to the capital, I'm commander-in-chief of the Steel Clan military in his stead, but to my shame, I must admit I've no confidence at all when it comes to battlefield strategy."

For a second, Jörgen hadn't understood what he'd just heard. Once he did, he couldn't hold back a laugh. "...Pffhaha, that is quite the thing to say aloud!"

The relationship between a clan's second-in-command and assistant second-in-command was not a simple one.

As the second-and third-ranked members of a nation's administration, they were political rivals for the position of succeeding the patriarch, and fighting for power behind the scenes was a common story in many clans.

Of course, Jörgen wasn't as ambitious as most in that regard—for one thing, due to his age, he was almost certainly going to be passing on long before Yuuto did—but he still held some desire for the position of second-in-command, for it also granted him the honor of being the "eldest child" of the sworn father he loved and respected.

Showing weakness to him could hardly be called a wise move on Linnea's

part.

But Linnea had been raised with an education in politics and leadership from her earliest years. There was no way she could be unaware of the messy dynamic that came with their positions.

In other words, he could assume that Linnea knew perfectly well how foolish it was to show him weakness, and still chose to do so in order to ask for his expertise.

More than likely—no, without a doubt—it was because she wanted to make the best decisions for the good of the Steel Clan, and she put that before anything else.

Hahah, I'm no match for her, Jörgen thought to himself. He'd just seen evidence of the difference in their character... and part of him found it refreshing.

Yuuto and Linnea were both still so young, only in their teens.

More than any jealousy, by far the strongest feeling in Jörgen's heart was one of relief. He knew that he could entrust the future of the Steel Clan to them.

While Jörgen was reflecting on those emotions, Linnea continued. "...To begin with, I was thinking that I should immediately send the standby Horn Clan forces to the Panther Clan and Wheat Clan territories. Are there any issues with that choice of strategy??"

Jörgen couldn't pick out any meaningful flaws with it, at least.

Actually, if he were forced to criticize it in some manner, he could say that it was perhaps *too* problem-free, *too* predictably safe, but that was Linnea's strong point in a sense.

Yuuto was the sort to come up with incredible ideas that flew beyond common sense, and so someone like her was surely the best type of person to support him.

"I believe that would be a good plan. I am sure they are waiting to receive reinforcements as quickly as we can send them."

"All right, in that case..."

“I have a bit of an issue with that.” Just as Linnea and Jörgen seemed to have reached a consensus, a third voice cut in from the direction of the nearby wall.

“Ngh...” Jörgen’s face twisted in an obvious display of loathing, and he turned to glare at the man leaning against the wall—a man wearing a black mask that concealed the upper half of his face, which gave him a suspicious-looking appearance.

“What is the issue, Uncle Hveðrungr?” Linnea asked, with no apparent ill will in her question.

Hveðrungr was the former patriarch of the old Panther Clan, a man who had taken control of the tribe of northern nomads and turned their clan into a powerful conquering nation under his rule. And, after being defeated by Yuuto in war, he was now part of the Steel Clan, Yuuto’s sworn younger brother and commander of the Independent Cavalry Regiment.

However, whenever Jörgen looked at Hveðrungr, he could not help but be reminded of a certain other man.

The man who had years ago once served as the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, trusted and respected by everyone, only to lose himself in jealousy as Yuuto quickly climbed the ranks. The man who, in the end, slew his own sworn father, the former Wolf Clan patriarch Fárbauti, a crime that could never be forgiven.

“Is there something inadequate about my strategy as it is now?” Linnea asked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say inadequate, exactly, just that perhaps you don’t need to split up your forces in the first place.”

Hveðrungr spoke in a pleasant, easygoing tone.

This was the man who had overseen a total massacre in the Hoof Clan capital Nóatún, and directed a scorched-earth strategy on his own captured territory when the Steel Clan invaded. He was infamous for his violence and cruelty, and his conquest had left the people of western Yggdrasil shaken. Not to mention, there was his suspicious appearance. That nonchalance of his was a bit off-putting in contrast. However, at the same time, it was very *familiar* to Jörgen.

He really does resemble Loptr...

It was hard to chalk it up to just a coincidental resemblance. There were too many similarities.

Still, Yuuto had sworn the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with this man. Jörgen couldn't just come out and ask him if he was the kinslayer who'd fled the Wolf Clan.

He needed some more solid evidence first.

"The Panther Clan patriarch Skáviðr is among the Steel Clan's greatest veteran commanders," Hveðrungr continued. "In particular, he excels at defensive battle. Furthermore, he has armored wagons ready to use for the Wagon Wall tactic. Even if you sent him no reinforcements, I doubt the enemy will have any luck in breaking him."

"Hm."

"On the other hand, the Wheat Clan is smaller and weaker. I haven't heard stories of any especially talented generals among their ranks, either. As I see it, if we don't prioritize adequately backing them up, chances are high that they'll be defeated and their territory will be seized from us. Also, looking at this from the Steel Clan's greater strategic perspective, the Wheat Clan's territory is part of our grain-producing breadbasket, while the Panther Clan's territory has only just barely begun reconstruction and recovery from the last war. I would say it's clear which of the two would deal us a harder blow if it were captured, wouldn't you?"

"Hmm..." Linnea frowned.

By Jörgen's assessment, Linnea was similar to Yuuto in that she was a kind person. Too kind, in fact, for someone in charge of ruling a clan.

Many people in Panther Clan territory had lost their homes and livelihoods in the last war, and she was surely loath to make a decision that would allow even more misery to pile on top of the suffering those people had already endured.

However, at times, one needed to sacrifice the needs of the few for the sake of many. That was part of the responsibility of one who ruled a clan as patriarch.

The region of northwestern Álfheimr currently being raided by the old Panther Clan remnants was a wide swath of land in terms of size, but it was far away from major rivers and didn't hold much promise for food production.

When considering each option with regard only for the Steel Clan's possible gains or losses, Hveðrungr's assessment was correct, and their obvious priority should be to assist the Wheat Clan.

And, no matter how kind Linnea was, she was not the sort of leader who would allow personal sentiment to steer her wrong on a crucial decision.

"...All right. I'll send all of the Horn Clan troops to assist the Wheat Clan. Are you all right with that as well, Jörgen?"

"Yes, I am. I would say that is our best course of action at present."

Jörgen had no issues with the decision itself.

There was another point that bothered him, though.

"By the way, Uncle Hveðrungr. I was surprised you knew so much about Brother Ská's skill in defensive warfare."

Trying to mask his remark as nothing more than normal conversation, Jörgen tried to pull the thread.

This man had supposedly clashed with Skáviðr only twice, first at the Battle of Náströnd and then again during the Steel Clan's most recent campaign to defeat the old Panther Clan.

How could he know that Skáviðr was a master of defensive warfare from just those two battles?

Hveðrungr responded with a cheery laugh. "Well, he *was* the general in charge of defending Myrkviðr, wasn't he? When my forces tried to lure him out of the city, he never took the bait, yet he always seemed to do just what was needed to maintain the city's defense. He was the worst sort of foe we could face."

He didn't look like he'd been fazed by the question.

Of course, if he really was Loptr, a mere question like that wouldn't have been enough to make him slip up, either. He wasn't an easy man to get the better of.

“In any case, this means that the Panther Clan and the Wheat Clan are covered for the time being, but the remaining problem is the Ash Clan.”

Hveðrungr had smoothly changed the subject.

Though, in truth, Jörgen had originally taken them off-track with his sudden question, and Hveðrungr was bringing them back on-topic, so his actions weren’t particularly unusual in this case.

Jörgen reluctantly nodded in acknowledgment and allowed the discussion to continue. The fact of the matter was that this wasn’t the time to be wasting his thoughts on anything else.

“True,” Linnea said. “I intend to have the nearby Claw Clan send troops to reinforce them, but even then, I can’t be sure they’ll be able to hold out until help from the main force arrives.”

The Steel Clan’s planning had accounted for the Sword Clan invading, but the additional participation of the Spear and Helm Clans had been unexpected.

The number of troops they had—thirty thousand—was outrageous, enough to make Jörgen’s head spin.

Previously, the old Panther Clan and the Lightning Clan had joined forces to attack the Wolf Clan, and at the time, their numbers had driven the Wolf Clan to the very brink, but even then, it had been less than twenty thousand.

And this time, in addition to the massive invasion from the east, there were the old Panther Clan remnants attacking from the north and the Hoof Clan attacking from the west, forcing the Steel Clan to split their forces in order to respond.

The Steel Clan had so much more economic and military strength than the Wolf Clan alone had during that time, but even then, just adding up the numbers, this was an even more desperate crisis.

“I’m planning to take the Independent Cavalry Regiment and go to their aid as well. The attack-and-retreat tactics of my cavalry are difficult to counter for someone who’s never faced them before. It should buy us some time.”

“...Right.” There was a slight delay in Jörgen’s response, born of distrust.

Jörgen had been running administrative affairs during the wars with the old Panther Clan, and so he hadn't seen them in battle with his own eyes, but he'd heard plenty of stories about how horrible their cavalry were to face as an enemy.

They would make for the greatest sort of asset as allies, then.

A force of three thousand of those nomadic riders was better than he could hope to ask for in terms of reinforcements... and yet, he still couldn't shake his suspicions that this man might in fact be Loptr.

"Erm... I understand that this will be rude of me, but could you consider granting me one request?"

"Hm?"

Jörgen steeled his resolve and made his move. "Would you be willing to show me the face under that mask? I apologize for asking, but we are allies in war, and I just can't entrust my life to someone whose face I don't even know."

On the battlefield, the fear of death was one more enemy one had to fight continuously.

There was already the enormous pressure that came from their huge numerical disadvantage. If he had to deal with the fear of betrayal on top of that, his heart wouldn't be able to take it.

Jörgen's question carried the implication of life-or-death importance, but...

"Then you simply don't need to entrust your life to me, yes?"

Hveðrungr curtly shot him down.



“Do you have some large wound you conceal? I am a veteran of many battles, you know. I’ve seen my share of ghastly wounds from both combat and torture. I can promise you at least that I won’t stare at you strangely. Could you please show me your face?”

“It’s not really a matter of what you promise...” Hveðrungr scratched the back of his head with one hand, as if a bit annoyed at the trouble of dealing with him.

His speech and body language were bereft of any sort of real sincerity, almost as though he saw others as lesser beings. That sort of flippant edge to all of his mannerisms was, again, a match for the man in Jörgen’s memories.

In fact, everything up until this point had only served to solidify Jörgen’s suspicions into firm belief.

“Even after pleading with you this much, you still can’t?”

“Hmm, let’s see. If you really want to see my face, then take it up with Big Brother. If he orders me to show you, I’ll consider it.”

The only person Hveðrungr could refer to as “Big Brother” was Yuuto.

In other words, he was saying that without a direct command from the reginarch, he wasn’t going to take off his mask for anyone.

It was at this moment that Jörgen had a sudden realization.

Yuuto had been willing to directly swear the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with this man. It was hard to imagine that Yuuto didn’t know who he really was.

“...Does Father know what your face looks like, then?”

“Oh, I should think he does.”

“Kh...!” Hveðrungr’s immediate answer was telling, and Jörgen responded with a wordless grunt.

Yuuto was *complicit* in this affair.

I thought I had finally gotten used to the reckless actions that Father often likes to take, but this particular one has to be among the most reckless of them all.

The implications of this situation made Jörgen’s head hurt. He lowered his

face and massaged his fingers against his temples.

Matters of the Chalice were central to the clan society of Yggdrasil, and killing one's sworn parent was among the greatest acts of sin. Yuuto had chosen to ignore that crime and, furthermore, granted the perpetrator an appointment to a key position of power. This was a huge departure from accepted norms.

Still, it is true that our current situation is not one in which being picky with our resources is an option. Right now, what the Steel Clan needs isn't people with pure hearts and clean hands. It's people with power and skill.

This man's skill with the sword was on par with that of Sigrún and Skáviðr, the two greatest fighters in the Steel Clan. As for his abilities as a commander, he'd taken the Panther Clan from being no more than a minor clan among the steppes of Miðgarðr to being one of the strongest nations in Yggdrasil during his rule. His exceptional achievements as a leader were second only to Yuuto's.

With the Steel Clan surrounded by enemies, he was exactly the sort of talent they were desperate to have on their side.

"Hrrgh..." Jörgen let out a long, groaning sigh and glowered at Hveðrungr. "If *that* is how it is, then I have nothing more to say on the matter," he exclaimed bitterly.

The former Wolf Clan patriarch whom Loptr had murdered, Fárbauti, had been Jörgen's first sworn father, and someone with whom he'd shared the joys and sorrows of almost twenty years.

He was someone Jörgen had looked up to with respect, adoration, and a great deal of gratitude.

And now, his killer was standing right here, and Jörgen had to let him go unpunished. Nothing could be more frustrating for him, even though he knew why he had to stay his hand.

"...Actually, there is one thing I should say to you. If you visit Iárnviðr, I would advise you not to stay too long. I cannot guarantee your safety there."

"Heh. Understood." With a smirk, Hveðrungr nodded.

That fearless, cocky response was enough to make Jörgen's temple twitch in

irritation. Jörgen clenched his fists tightly, unable to completely suppress his anger.

“I have troop preparations to see to, so I’ll be taking my leave.” With only those curt parting words, Jörgen quickly left the room, the unspoken indignation written on his face.

Linnea watched Jörgen leave, the anger seething out of him in his heavy footsteps and coarse body language. Once he was gone, she turned to Hveðrungr.

“Is there some sort of personal grudge between you and Jörgen?” she asked.

The Jörgen Linnea knew was a man whose fierce looks belied a kind and sincere personality, and an affinity for taking care of others.

She had only seen him openly express this sort of anger once before: when she’d brought up the subject of Botvid, the Claw Clan patriarch. However, he’d seemed even more furious than back then this time around.

Jörgen and Hveðrungr were about to go to war together, fighting against the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance’s invasion force of thirty thousand attacking from the east. She had just cause to be anxious about whether they would be all right.

“Heh heh, it seems like he’s mistaken me with someone else,” Hveðrungr said, playing dumb in such an obvious way that it was practically insulting.

His rather shameless obfuscation was particularly fitting for a man who hid his face behind an iron mask.

However, after he’d made such a direct denial, there was little Linnea could do to interrogate him further.

Linnea let out a small sigh. “Very well, then. Please do your best to get along with him, though. I would ask you not to forget what a critical time this is for us.”

She decided that it would be best to leave the matter alone for now. Without understanding exactly what was going on between them, sticking her nose into the middle of it might just aggravate them further, and she couldn’t stand to

risk that.

“Maybe you should tell that to Jörgen,” Hveðrungr said, his lips curling into a sarcastic grin. “Now then, I’ll be going, too.” He turned and left the room.

Linnea waited until he was gone, then shook her head and said to herself, “I suppose I’ve no choice but to ask Father about it later. Honestly, that man...”

She had already told him time and time again that he needed to be open with her, his second-in-command, about everything important that was going on, whether it was political or personal. Yet here was one more secret just waiting to explode violently like one of those tetsuhau bombs.

Because of her position, Linnea would be the one responsible for shouldering the lion’s share of the work involved with managing the fallout that would occur as a result of things like this.

“I’ll need to make sure he gives me *plenty* of attention later to make up for it. It’s only fair,” she said, nodding to herself.

Back in the Horn Clan, her Leader of Sibling Subordinates, Rasmus, was the closest thing she’d had to a father figure after her biological father died... but Rasmus was already very old. He didn’t have many years left, and Linnea wanted to be able to give him the gift of seeing her children.

Even more than that, she wanted to have the children of the man she loved.

She would have held back and put those desires aside if Yuuto’s wife Mitsuki were still childless, but she was already pregnant, so there was no issue there.

“Though, I guess in these circumstances, I shouldn’t be thinking about such things.”

After a few moments with her thoughts, she proceeded to stand up, walk over to the window, and gaze outside.

Even just looking down at the city like this, one could sense its energy, its prosperity.

It was flourishing on a scale incomparable to how it had been only a mere two years ago.

And that was *frightening*.

Just like with the city of Gimlé, the Steel Clan had grown at a tremendous speed—and it had grown too large, too quickly.

When people from differing cultures with different basic values came together, they needed a certain measure of time before they could learn to live together in relative harmony.

Right now, the people of no less than seven different clans were chaotically mixing together as the Steel Clan, and the results could hardly be called unity.

Even a warm and friendly man such as Jörgen held on to his own enmity for the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid, and the commander of the Independent Cavalry Regiment, Hveðrungr.

Surely there were many more such problems hiding away just under the surface.

Linnea knew that worrying too much was a bad habit of hers, but she felt the uneasiness slowly building up inside her.

The Independent Cavalry Regiment had its main headquarters on a high, grassy plateau about an hour's ride southeast of Gimlé.

Currently, Gimlé was still seeing a strong and steady influx of new residents, and with the increasing population, it just wasn't possible to make suitable arrangements for the appropriate facilities to house three thousand cavalrymen and their horses.

Furthermore, the plateau was, logically, a more fitting choice for their headquarters when it came to procuring food, conducting drills, and training the horses.

Compared to the flatlands near the river closer to Gimlé, the plateau was much colder and the air much thinner, but to these men who'd grown up as nomads in the highland steppes of Miðgarðr, that was no problem.

Rather, the climate felt closer to that of their original homeland, and many of them felt more comfortable and at home here than they would living in a city.

"Welcome back, Father."

As Hveðrungr rode into the base, he was greeted by a young man with clean, noble-looking features, a rarity among the wild, rugged faces of the northern nomads.

“Ah, Narfi, how are sortie preparations going?” Hveðrungr wasted no time, asking the question without even dismounting.

Narfi was an Einherjar carrying the rune Skinfaxi, the Shining Mane, and he had been Hveðrungr’s trusted general and confidant since the days when Hveðrungr had been patriarch of the Panther Clan.

Narfi had been captured during the Steel Clan’s campaign against the Panther Clan, and had spent a while in prison afterwards. However, just like had been the case with Hveðrungr, Narfi had been given a pardon and released as part of the commemoration of the reginarch Yuuto’s marriage.

After that, he’d been selected as vice-commander of the newly-formed Independent Cavalry Regiment, which is how he’d wound up here.

“We are fully prepared and ready to move out, sir. We can mobilize at a moment’s notice. But if I may ask, who are those people behind you?”

Narfi’s gaze shifted to the armed riders lined up behind Hveðrungr.

They were on horseback, but their clothes and demeanor were both clearly very different from those of the nomadic people who made up the Regiment.

“Ah, right. It would seem that some members of the Múspell Special Forces are so generous that they’re going through all the trouble of serving as my personal escort and guard.”

Hveðrungr gave an affected shrug of his shoulders.

Of course, there was no way they were just here on guard duty. They were there to monitor him.

They’d be closely observing anything he did, waiting for him to make any moves or give any orders that seemed suspicious.

It was a bit annoying having them around, but considering what he’d done in the past, he understood it was something they had to do.

If Yuuto were naïve enough to send him out *without* anyone surveilling him,

Hveðrungr would have been disappointed instead.

“This is quite the thorny situation, though,” he said, letting slip a wry chuckle.

The incident with Jörgen earlier was telling. It was going to be a long and hard road trying to win any trust from the others in the clan.

Of course, it wasn’t as if he’d actually started caring what anyone else thought of him. However, he’d certainly wish for nothing more than to rid himself from the rather stifling position he was in thanks to that distrust.

“Well, I suppose this is a perfect opportunity. I’ll add some victories to my credit and improve my future status.” Hveðrungr then raised his voice, calling the attention of his men. “All right, then! Independent Cavalry Regiment, mount up and move out!”

“My lord, our men are ready and in formation! We can move out on your orders!”

“I see, good.”

The Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél gave a slight nod in response to the soldier’s report, then turned back to face the other figures around the table.

Across and to the right sat the Cloud Clan patriarch Gerhard and the Spear Clan assistant second-in-command Hermóðr, while across to the left were the Fang Clan patriarch Sígismund and the Helm Clan second-in-command Ollerus.

This was the field headquarters at the center of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance army, set up north of Víðríðr Castle.

It was of very simple construction—four wooden posts hammered into the earth, holding up a tent made from sheep’s wool felt—but it was enough to block out the elements, and any soldier would say it was much better than nothing.

Of course, that didn’t necessarily mean a rank-and-file soldier would be able to be at ease in this space.

All of the people gathered here in council were leaders of incredible stature, after all. And what’s more, they weren’t really here in fellowship. Each of them

was here for the sake of his own nation's interests, and despite their alliance, they were making various moves behind the scenes, sussing each other out.

That delicate set of relationships was reflected in the atmosphere inside this tent. There was a heavy, almost painful tension, as if violence could erupt at any moment.

"The... ah..." The soldier fell silent and started to freeze up, apparently overwhelmed by the intense pressure coming from the people around the table.

Fagrahvél addressed him in a soft voice. "What of the enemy's soldiers? How did they look to you?"

That appeared to snap the soldier out of it and make him remember his duty, and he duly resumed his report. "The enemy looks to be thoroughly prepared for a prolonged siege defense, my lord. By my assessment, their soldiers also seemed to have high morale."

"Well, now," said Fagrahvél, eyes narrowing slightly, with a tone of voice that was clearly rather impressed. "So they're maintaining high morale despite surely knowing the situation they're in."

The spies that Fagrahvél had sent out ahead of time had come back with rough estimates that Dauwe Castle was housing just over three thousand soldiers; certainly nowhere near four thousand even by the highest of estimates.

The soldiers at Dauwe Castle were thus facing an attacking army of almost ten times their number. Maintaining morale in such a hopeless situation would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible.

Ordinarily, such stacked odds would crush one's will to fight, and it wouldn't be unusual for some soldiers to defy orders and pledge their surrender.

"It seems the rumors are true, and the fortress commander is quite the skilled general," Fagrahvél said. "He's worthy of his post at such a strategically important stronghold."

Fagrahvél had done no more than speak frankly, remaining true to a personal policy of treating talented and capable people with due respect, ally and enemy

alike.

“Yeah, skilled enough to be a pain in my ass. Damn that Hrymr!” Gerhard spat out the words with loathing.

“Yes, I’ve been forced to suffer shame a great many times because of him.” Sígismund chimed in to agree, deep lines forming in his knit brow.

These two were the patriarchs of the clans adjacent to the Ash Clan, and from the looks of it, they’d both gone to battle with this enemy general and had gotten nothing but bitter memories to show for it.

Fagrahvél had personal knowledge of their strengths as patriarchs, for the Sword Clan had been warring with them for many years. There was no doubt regarding their capabilities.

So, if the Ash Clan general could elicit these reactions from both of them, then he was certainly a formidable foe.

“Hm. Now that I think about it some more, I have had his name mentioned to me once before.”

Fagrahvél searched through a sea of memories, but couldn’t recall any particular details, just that the name Hrymr was familiar. So, he was just talented enough of a general for his name to have reached Fagrahvél’s ears, but nothing more.

Technically, the Sword Clan also shared part of their border with the Ash Clan, but that still wouldn’t have garnered much importance for Hrymr’s name. Fagrahvél was focused mainly on the affairs and politics of central Yggdrasil, and simply considered a small clan like the Ash Clan to be of little threat. After all, they were hardly likely to do something as foolish as attack a powerful nation like the Sword Clan and earn their wrath.

“What sort of man is Hrymr?” Fagrahvél asked bluntly, addressing the two patriarchs. “I’d like more concrete details of what he’s like as a general.”

Warfare, especially long-term siege warfare, was often akin to a psychological battle.

Each commander had particular strengths and weaknesses, or tactics they

preferred or shunned, and knowing these things about the enemy could greatly change one's best strategy.

These two men had actually fought against Hrymr, and so Fagrahvél had every reason to ask them for what they knew.

"Sure," Gerhard responded. "I know I'm repeating myself, but he's a real pain in the ass to fight. Other than that, I actually don't really know much." Gerhard slumped his shoulders.

"You don't know?" Fagrahvél repeated.

"Yeah. Or, rather, I don't really get him. If I had to put it into words, it's like his style is that he doesn't *have* a particular style. He's skilled at both offensive and defensive fighting, so there's nowhere to exploit. He might start by trying to attack your flanks and weak spots, only to switch to a forceful, head-on attack right after. Depending on the circumstances, he switches at will between fundamental, reliable tactics and novel but risky ones."

"I see," said Fagrahvél with a wry smile. "That certainly *is* a pain to fight against."

People had a natural tendency to try and reproduce their past successes by relying on the same methods they'd used before. And so, they'd *repeat* their winning strategies on the battlefield.

No matter how formidable an enemy's strategy might be, knowing exactly what was coming opened the door to devising any number of counter-strategies. However, it appeared that Fagrahvél's opponent this time was an exception to that particular rule.

There was no way to know in advance what he might try, but it was at least certain that whichever strategy he decided to use would be executed with great proficiency.

He was going to be quite the difficult foe, indeed.

Fagrahvél rested both elbows on the table and looked thoughtful for a moment, face partially hidden behind clasped hands, then, at last, muttered in a low voice, "Be that as it may, we cannot afford to waste any time dawdling here."

“Yes, that’s truuue. If we take too much tiiime, and we cannot capture their stronghold before their main army gets heeere, I think even we might find things a little haaard.”

From beside Fagrahvél came a flighty voice, speaking in an unusual, lilting manner that seemed to stretch out every few words. It was quite out of place when considering the tense atmosphere that was suffocating this military tent.

The voice belonged to a woman named Bára, one of the high officers of the Sword Clan and Fagrahvél’s close confidante and right hand. Her keen intellect and cunning were known to those both inside and outside of the administration, and some had taken to calling her “the Stiletto.”

“If the soldiers in the castle see reinforcements arriving, they’ll know the main army’s come to their rescue in time, and their huge boost in morale will make capturing the place even harder, right?”

“Oh, myyy, Erna, that was actually pretty intelligent for youuu.”

“What do you mean, ‘for me’?!”

On Fagrahvél’s opposite side, the other young woman—Erna—raised her voice in protest.

She was still young, and her youthful appearance combined with the way she reacted made her seem at first glance to be less than dependable for a clan officer, but the reality was that she was a skilled general and powerful fighter. Like Bára, Erna was one of the Maidens of the Waves, an elite unit of nine Einherjar that served directly under Fagrahvél as both a personal guard and special forces unit, and rumor had it that Erna’s skill with the sword placed her as perhaps the strongest among its members.

“Weeell, putting that aside, what are you going to do, my lord?” Bára asked Fagrahvél, completely ignoring Erna’s ire.

Erna looked like she had a lot more she wanted to say, but she was aware of where they were, and so she bit her lip and remained silent.

Of course, that was likely exactly how Bára planned for things to happen. Bára talked in a gentle and relaxed manner, but she actually had a fairly sadistic streak to her.

“Well, more than anything, we need to capture Dauwe Castle before the enemy’s reinforcements arrive,” Fagrahvél said.

“But we don’t have much time left to do thaaat.”

Bára had a good point.

Messages warning of their attack were surely already racing towards the Steel Clan capital Gimlé.

The distance between Dauwe to Gimlé was around two hundred leagues (approximately four hundred kilometers), and the average army march covered about ten leagues in one day.

The main body of the Steel Clan army was currently outside of their borders, in Lightning Clan territory. Considering that, it would take around thirty days, give or take, for their force to arrive in this area.

Dauwe Castle was renowned as an impregnable fortress, and even with an army thirty thousand strong, capturing it in under one month wasn’t going to be easy by any means.

“It might be early, but I’m going to use my trump card now.”

“...Judging by those eyyyes, I can’t persuade you otherwise, caaan I?”

“Indeed. I’ve made my decision.”

“Buuut, if you use that with thirty thousand soldiers, you could diiie, you knooow?”

There was concern in Bára’s voice. However, Fagrahvél simply chuckled and shrugged unconcernedly.

“Heh. I relinquished my life long ago when I dedicated it to the service of Her Majesty. And besides, my foe in this war is supposedly the reincarnation of a war god, isn’t he? In that case, I can not afford to hold back from using everything I have.”

“Father! The enemy is attacking! It looks like they’re going to try and take us through brute force!”

“Oh, really?”

The old man’s eyes opened. He’d been dozing off sitting in his chair.

His body was thin and scraggly, his hair was completely white, and his face and hands were covered with wrinkles.

“I can’t even catch a nap,” he grumbled to himself. He used a cane to help pull himself up to his feet.

Once he’d hit seventy, the muscles in his legs and back had started growing weaker, and now he needed his cane just to walk steadily.

He was sure that when people got their first look at him, their impression was probably something along the lines of “He’s shorter than I expected.” He’d been a short man to begin with, and now that his back was often hunched over, he looked even smaller still.

However, this feeble-looking old man was in fact the general who struck fear into the hearts of the Cloud and Fang Clan patriarchs, his fame such that all in the Bifröst region knew his name—Hrymr.

“I’m amazed you can even sleep at a time like this, Father. I can’t even keep my food down.”

“Hmm? How can you say something so pathetic? You’re the one that’s going to be taking my spot one day, and it’ll be your job to protect this stronghold. I fear for the future if you’re talking like that.”

“Forgive me, Father. But shameful as it is, after I saw that huge army of theirs...”

“Hoh hoh hoh!” The old man cackled. “It doesn’t matter if they have thirty thousand men or fifty thousand. They’re not taking Dauwe Castle.”

Starting when he was thirty, Hrymr had been protecting this place for forty years now, driving off those who threatened it countless times.

Dauwe Castle was situated between several natural barriers. Invasion from the south was stymied by rivers with powerful, violent currents, and to the north towered the steep Himinbjörg Mountains, their peaks so high they were widely known as the “Roof of Yggdrasil.”

Since the area to the west was Ash Clan territory, attacking from the east was the only avenue left for invaders—and that restriction meant a massive army could not leverage its size.

Meanwhile, the Ash Clan could concentrate all of their forces into defending their eastern side.

No matter how strong this enemy army might be, Hrymr saw no need to fear them.

“Send a message to the archers. Tell them to rain a hail of arrows upon our foes, every one of them! There’s no better opportunity than now to test the power of those ‘composite bows’ the Steel Clan supplied us with,” he added with a satisfied grin.

It was known well in advance that Dauwe Castle would become a battleground when the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance attacked, so they’d been able to make all the preparations they needed.

“Now then, I suppose I’ll go have a look for myself.” Leaning on his cane, Hrymr headed for the ramparts with slow, deliberate steps.

When one got to be his age, climbing stairs was a rather arduous task in itself.

Still, he managed to make his way all the way up, and as he stood on the ramparts and swept his gaze out over the advancing enemy soldiers, an impressed gasp escaped his lips.

“Well, look at that! They *do* shoot a whole lot farther!” He exclaimed, his voice giddy in a manner at odds for what was expected of a man his age.

As explained previously, he had spent forty years of his life protecting this stronghold. The distance that arrows would travel when shot out from atop these ramparts was something that had long since been permanently etched into his memory.

The arrows launched by these new model bows were easily flying far past that range.

“We’ve gotten our hands on something really good, here.” Hrymr stroked his beard, nodding to himself and smiling with satisfaction. “In case these are just

on loan, we'd best pinch one of them, so we can break it down and learn how to make them ourselves."

Doing that would permanently upgrade the weapons of the soldiers here, making Dauwe Castle even more impervious to attack.

As Hrymr mulled over those plans, the Dauwe Castle archers continued firing volleys of arrows into the mass of oncoming enemy infantry.

However, even as the soldiers were struck dead by arrows and fell, one after another after another, the ones who were still standing simply trampled over the fresh corpses of their allies and continued their charge unabated.

"What's this? I'd assumed this charge was nothing more than a simple opening move to test the waters with us... Could it be they really *are* going to try to break in for real, right from the start?"

Dauwe was in a region surrounded by portions of the Roof of Yggdrasil, the three tallest mountain ranges in the realm. The geography here was harsh and complex, full of mountains and valleys. At present, if one wanted to enter the western Bifröst region from Ásgarðr or Miðgarðr, it could only be done by passing through the passage guarded by this stronghold.

In other words, there was no way for the enemy army to circle around and reach the western side of Dauwe Castle, and thus no way to surround them and cut them off. Dauwe could count on being free to receive supplies from allied territory.

The spot was hard to attack, easy to defend, and established long-term siege strategies weren't effective here.

That was what made this an impregnable fortress. Indeed, if one asked why a small nation like the Ash Clan had to this day always escaped destruction by the hands of its powerful neighbors the Sword, Fang, and Cloud Clans, it was, of course, in part because of Hrymr's leadership and tireless efforts, but by far the greater part of its continued survival was due to the incredible benefits afforded by its geographical location.

"Well, I'm sure that, from their perspective, they're desperate to take control of this place before reinforcements from the Steel Clan arrive. So, they don't

have much time left to spare. Still, it shows they've really underestimated me."

Hrymr's eyes opened wide, and his face was suddenly different. His was the look of a fierce-hearted general, veteran of innumerable battles.

The light shining in his eyes didn't show any signs of having dimmed with age. Indeed, it was the light of a canny intelligence of the kind that only accumulated over years of experience.

The good-natured old man from just a few moments ago was now nowhere to be seen.

"Lord Hrymr!" One of the archers shouted at the top of his voice. "They've brought out a battering ram!"

In Yggdrasil, the battering ram was a very widely-used siege weapon.

Of course, calling it a "siege weapon" was perhaps a bit much for something that was ultimately extremely primitive—in truth, it was nothing more than a large log cut from a tree trunk.

A team of people would carry the battering ram up to a fortification's gate and break it open by slamming the ram into it with as much momentum as possible.

Naturally, in such a situation, the defending side would never sit back and allow such a thing to happen, and this meant the people carrying the battering ram would receive a barrage of attacks concentrated directly on them. It was no mean feat to try and carry such a heavy object while also withstanding such attacks.

"Don't you let them get anywhere near us!" Hrymr shouted.

One by one, the enemy soldiers carrying the battering ram were pierced by arrows and collapsed.

"Don't worry about how many arrows you've got left, just keep firing! Keep firing!" Hrymr's voice boomed at a volume one would never expect to come out of an old man.

The goal for his side in this battle was not to completely defeat the opposing forces, nor was it to drive their army into withdrawing, either. Hrymr's true goal

was to retain control of Dauwe Castle until reinforcements from the Steel Clan main army arrived.

However, instead of holding back in order to ration his resources for the future, he intended to stage this counterattack using everything he had. Doing so would send a message to the enemy that for every assault they attempted, they would receive the same fierce response, and with the fear of that planted into their minds, they'd be less eager to launch such attacks going forward. At least, that was what he'd expected to happen... However...

"Nnghh...!" Deep creases formed in Hrymr's furrowed brow, and he was unable to stifle a groan.

For every person supporting the battering ram who was struck down, another quickly stepped in to take his place. They were steadily making their way closer to the gate.

However, what Hrymr found so shocking about this scene wasn't their continued advance.

"By the gods... Those soldiers...!"

Something was very clearly abnormal about them.

As anyone would know, wanting to avoid death was a basic part of human nature.

Even for soldiers on the battlefield, a person willing to charge forward into what he knew to be certain death was rare indeed.

In fact, the majority of field battles ended with fewer than ten percent dead on either side. Once the momentum of battle clearly favored one side enough to mark them as the eventual winner, fighters on the losing side would turn and run, wanting no part in what would inevitably result in them throwing their own lives away.

And yet, the soldiers Hrymr was looking down at now were completely different.

Even though they were being assailed by an endless rain of arrows, even though they were seeing their comrades fall dead around them one after

another after another, they all pressed on towards the castle gate without even faltering for a second.

It was something that would ordinarily be considered impossible.

Normally, even if their commander ordered them to keep advancing, there would be soldiers who wouldn't follow such a reckless order, and trying to force them would risk mutiny.

"Rrraaaghh!!!"

And yet, here these men were charging forward while raising their voices in booming war cries, overflowing with the will to fight, practically racing each other to be the one in front.

Hrymr gulped and felt a shudder race through him.

He was a veteran of over fifty years of combat, and this was the first time he'd ever seen such unsettling opponents.

Wham!

The distance had been closed. The battering ram sounded its first, heavy strike against the gate. The force of the impact traveled all the way up to where Hrymr was standing.

Naturally, the gate of this fortress wasn't so weak as to break from only one or two hits from a battering ram.

However, thick as it was, the main gate was still made of wood. If it were repeatedly struck in the same spot more than twenty or thirty times, it was certain to crack, and then break apart.

"Fine, then! Get our spearmen assembled in front of the gate! Archers are to keep firing! Don't let up! Have the soldiers from the supply squads keep bringing more arrows for the archers! Now go, and hurry!"

Hrymr barked out orders to his subordinates in quick succession.

Even when thrust into a situation that defied common sense, he was able to make swift and cool-headed decisions.

Perhaps one might say that was something very basic for a man in his

position, but in truth, it was something that few could follow through on. It was one reason why he was recognized so widely as a skilled general.

After several dozen uninterrupted strikes from the battering ram, one of the many impacts was accompanied by a terrible sound, a sound which told the soldiers of the castle that the worst-case scenario had come to pass—the sound of the thick wood of the gate being split apart as a long crack ran through it.

Wham! Crack!

With the next hit, the wood around the crack splintered and broke away, leaving a hole.

After that, the rest happened fast. The next couple of strikes smashed the gate completely into rubble, and the Anti-Steel Clan troops began pouring through with incredible energy, as if empowered by the promise of vengeance in this moment for the attacks they'd endured until now...

...But, they were immediately met by spearmen who were ready and waiting, lined up to attack them from the front, as well as from both sides.

"Gwahh!"

"Gyaah!"

"Guagh...!"

One after another, soldiers from the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance army screamed their last.

Fundamentally, an army squad formation is designed to attack and defeat the enemies directly in front of it, and is particularly vulnerable to attacks directly from the sides.

And, the factor that determines momentum in an army battle, above all else, is the difference in numbers.

In this case, the attackers were entering the stronghold through the gate, a narrow bottleneck that only a limited number of them could pass through at once. Taking advantage of that, the defenders had arranged themselves in the wider space surrounding the entrance, creating a situation in which they were surrounding their enemy on three sides.

And so, in this specific location, the “numbers” imbalance between the defending Ash Clan and the attacking Anti-Steel Clan Alliance was completely reversed.

“Hmph, don’t get full of yourselves just because you managed to break down the... What?!”

It happened before Hrymr could even finish his boast.

The enemy soldiers who had just been stabbed by his spearmen *didn’t go down*. With both hands, they grabbed tightly onto the spears piercing through their bodies, holding them still.

The castle soldiers hurriedly tried to pull back their spears, but they wouldn’t budge an inch, and by extension, the spearmen couldn’t move, either.

And in that moment of delay, a second wave of invaders rushed into the castle and began cutting down the castle spearmen with their swords.

At first, Hrymr disbelieved his eyes. Then he doubted his sanity. Finally, he began to wonder if perhaps this might not be reality at all, but rather some sort of bad dream.

“Wh-What the hell *are* they?!”

It was like they were possessed by vengeful spirits of the dead—that was the only way he could possibly rationalize it. The enemies he was fighting just didn’t seem human to him anymore.

In no time at all, the invaders had secured control over the area around the entrance.

At this point, there was little recourse for the defenders, who were at an absolutely overwhelming numerical disadvantage.

And so, this day marked the end of the legend of Dauwe Castle as an impregnable fortress.

“Sieg þjóðann! Sieg þjóðann!”

Dauwe Castle was decorated everywhere with countless banners of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance, and the walls resounded with their cries of victory.

The smell of blood was still thick in the air, evidence of the fierce fighting that had only ended a short time ago.

“To think they’d actually break their way in with a frontal assault...” The Cloud Clan patriarch Gerhard muttered to himself, frowning, as he surveyed the aftermath.

Gerhard had made a number of attempts on this place over the course of the last ten years, and each time he’d been repelled—he understood more than anyone how resistant to capture Dauwe Castle was.

The Cloud Clan was a nation of nomads that controlled a large swath of the eastern part of the Miðgarðr region.

They grew up learning to survive in Miðgarðr’s harsh natural environment, and their two main sources of livelihood were hunting game and plundering the lands of others. They were a clan of born-and-bred warriors, and it was said that even their women and children could wield swords and bows with great skill.

Their ruler Gerhard was also known both within the clan and without as a truly great leader. He had completely defeated two rival clans so far, growing his nation’s sphere of influence far beyond where it had been in the time of his predecessor.

And yet, even a hero like Gerhard leading an army of such elite Cloud Clan warriors had never been able to make any headway at all against Dauwe Castle.

Fagrahvél had taken it in only half a day.

Certainly, it had been done using an army that was among the largest in Yggdrasil’s history.

However, the stronghold was situated in a place where the geography nullified the advantages of a large army.

In fact, it forced their side into a situation where their attacking troops were outnumbered by the defenders.

And despite such an overwhelming disadvantage, Fagrahvél’s troops had been the ones to completely overwhelm the enemy instead.

“So this is the power of the so-called rune of kings... Gjallarhorn, the Call to War. I’ve heard that the first divine emperor Wotan also possessed it. With that sort of power, I can see how he was able to unite Yggdrasil under his rule.”

With that rune’s power, men who were little more than rank and file soldiers of scant value had been instantly transformed into powerful and courageous warriors, each and every one of them a valiant hero who fought with incredible vigor and tenacity.

Even though Gerhard had watched it all happen, it had been so incredible that he still couldn’t shake the doubt that perhaps he had simply dreamt it all up.

“Though, given what’s going on right now, it doesn’t seem like it’s a power that can be used too freely.”

Gerhard turned around to look back at the largest interior building in the center of the castle grounds.

Fagrahvél, the commander-in-chief of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance army, was currently laid up in bed after having seen a terrible decline in physical health.

Einherjar or not, harnessing such a vast amount of power was still too far beyond the limits of what a single person should be capable of. Evidently, using that power came at a significant cost.

After all, if that weren’t the case, the Cloud and Fang Clans would have surely long since been conquered and absorbed by the Sword Clan.

“Hmph, the Steel Clan might be my enemy, but I feel sorry for them,” Gerhard muttered.

Fagrahvél had not hesitated to use the power of Gjallarhorn during this initial battle. It was also intended to be used during the decisive battle against Yuuto and the bulk of the Steel Clan Army.

The only possible issue with that was that it didn’t look like it could be used successively within a short period of time, but there was still plenty of time left before the Steel Clan’s forces arrived.

Fagrahvél would have factored in how long it would take to recover enough strength and made the decision to use it believing there was enough time to do

so.

“I don’t care if they call him ‘Lion-Heart,’ or a war god, or any other nonsense. That boy’s winning streak is going to end right here.”

Gerhard’s words did not come from mere confidence. He was simply stating what he now believed to be certain.

It was true that, up to this point, the Steel Clan had grown in size and power at a rapid speed.

The Steel Clan army forces were likely a force to be reckoned with, too.

However, in the end, it was an army made up of people—of ordinary humans.

No matter how strong they might be, it was impossible to imagine that the Steel Clan would be able to stand up to troops that had been transformed into fearless, powerful killing machines.

ACT 2

Cla-Clack, Cla-Clack...

The carriage's wheels clacked and clunked in semi-rhythm as it rolled quickly through the arid wasteland, pulled by a team of three horses.

The surrounding landscape was littered with rocks, large and small, not the kind of route a horse-drawn cart would normally be able to take. But though the carriage swayed this way and that, the wheels held together and kept on rolling.

They were iron wheels, much more hard and resilient than their wooden counterparts, so a bit of bad ground didn't really present much of a problem for them.

However, in this particular era of history, there were only a very small handful of nations in the world with the ability to refine iron.

One was the Hittite empire of central Asia, supposedly the earliest civilization in history to develop iron-refining technology.

Aside from that, perhaps the only others were the Steel Clan and Flame Clan of Yggdrasil, both nations ruled by clan patriarchs who were travelers from far in the future.

"Zzz..."

And as for the ruler of the Steel Clan, the person addressed by the title of Reginarch ("Great Lord") by his subjects, he was comfortably asleep, using the body of a giant white wolf as his pillow.

He was a young man with smooth, dark black hair and a face that still retained a bit of boyish youth in its features.

Looking at his sleeping face, one might be hard-pressed to believe that he was a conquering hero-king, who within the span of two years had built up the foundations of a superpower nation that ruled the lands from Bifröst in the east

to Álfheimr in the west.

“I can’t believe he is able to sleep so soundly in this situation... There are so few people traveling with him for protection.”

The girl who whispered those words half in exasperation, half in admiration, was Hildegard.

A young girl with her hair tied in cute braided pigtails, she was an Einherjar bearing the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin.

She was a new member of the Múspell Special Forces, the Steel Clan’s most elite fighting force which served directly under Yuuto. Not many days had passed since she’d been admitted to the Múspell, and so she was very much a rookie, but she’d been picked to be part of Yuuto’s escort this time on account of her extraordinary senses of smell and hearing.

“I suppose this is what I should expect from someone so great; ‘unflappable’ is one way to put it, I guess? Though, that’s also why he was able to stand toe-to-toe with that monster back then.”

Hildegard shivered at the recollection.

The “monster” she spoke of was the patriarch of the Flame Clan, Nobunaga—that is, *the* Oda Nobunaga, who had been summoned to Yggdrasil from Japan’s Sengoku period.

His aura had been so overwhelmingly powerful that even just thinking back on it now sent a chill of terror down her spine and threatened to loosen her bladder.

Currently, Yuuto’s entourage was traveling back home to Steel Clan territory after Yuuto’s meeting and negotiations with Nobunaga.

“He truly was a man of unthinkable strength,” Felicia replied, a bitter smile touching her lips as she drooped her shoulders. “For now, at least, I am honestly just relieved that we were able to prevent making him our enemy.”

Felicia was a woman in her prime with golden hair and bright blue eyes, and such was her alluring beauty that even Hildegard, a fellow woman, had gasped upon first seeing her.

And not only that, Felicia had extensive knowledge in a wide variety of subjects, and no one else seemed to come close to measuring up to her combination of intelligence and beauty. Besides her position as one of the Steel Clan's highest ranking officers, she was also Yuuto's adjutant, someone he personally trusted a great deal.

To Hildegard, Felicia was someone so far above her, in so many ways, she might as well be living in a different world. And yet, even *she* had been stricken with a deep fear in response to Nobunaga's overwhelming presence.

"Still, because of the imperial subjugation order that was issued against the Steel Clan, our neighboring nations have already begun to take action as the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance. We cannot afford to be optimistic in this situation..."

"Lord Reginarch! Lord Reginarch!"

Just as Felicia's worry for the future had begun to cloud over her expression, a messenger soldier on a horse rode up to them, as if to confirm her feelings then and there.

Judging by his panicked body language, there was no mistake that his report was something urgent.

"I take it somebody finally made their move?" Yuuto said, sitting up. Apparently he had sensed that something was amiss.

The traces of innocent youth that could be seen on his sleeping face mere moments earlier had vanished, leaving only the face of an army commander.

"M-M-My lord, it's an emergency situation!" The messenger stammered, his voice shrill and cracking. "We've received word that the surrounding clans have all made formal declarations of war against us and started invasions, and that they all did so simultaneously, as if they'd prearranged it with each other!"

He seemed to have really lost his composure, but that was quite understandable.

Yuuto's prediction that the surrounding clans would conspire to attack the Steel Clan all at once was something he'd only shared with the executive officers in his administration, so there was no way a soldier at the bottom of the chain of command would know anything about it.

For someone without that foreknowledge, suddenly encountering this situation with no time to mentally prepare for it and not losing one's cool whatsoever would be far stranger.

"I see." Yuuto was, by contrast, utterly calm.

And that was, perhaps, only natural.

After all, to begin with, the punitive campaign into Lightning Clan territory was in fact a trap Yuuto had set with the aim of luring his enemies into open action. There wasn't a single thing surprising to him about this news.

However, from the perspective of the young soldier serving as messenger, the fact that such a terrible and unprecedented crisis did absolutely nothing to disturb Yuuto's composure was proof anew of his greatness as the reginarch.

The messenger was filled with a sense of great reverence for his lord, and his eyes were sparkling as he continued making his report. "At present, the Panther, Wheat, and Ash Clans are under attack. In particular, the Ash Clan is being invaded by a massive combined army made up of soldiers from the Sword, Fang, Cloud, Helm, and Spear Clans. They number thirty thousand!"

"Really, now?" Yuuto's eyes widened slightly. "It sounds like our bait pulled in quite the big catch."

It greatly exceeded his initial predictions, which had estimated a force of at most twenty thousand or so.

He'd been hoping that one or two clans would fail to coordinate well with the others, but it seemed that had been little more than wishful thinking.

Even still, before this all started, Yuuto had originally been planning to invade the imperial capital, Glaðsheimr, by the year's end. These were all opponents he would have eventually had to fight anyway.

He was certain that there wasn't much time left before Yggdrasil began to sink into the ocean, so getting the chance to eliminate these obstacles now worked just fine for him.

"This contains all of the particulars, my lord." The messenger held out a document to Yuuto.

“Ah, please allow me,” Felicia interjected. “I shall read it aloud.”

“Thanks. Please do,” Yuuto said.

In truth, Yuuto had been joining in on Mitsuki’s study sessions, and he’d already reached the point where he could read and write the language of Yggdrasil—that was in large part thanks to the fact that Yggdrasilian used phonetic characters in its writing—but he knew that Felicia enjoyed doing things like this for him, and he didn’t want to take that away from her.

And so, he’d decided not to say anything, and let her continue reading and writing for him.

“‘Inform Lord Yuuto, reginarch of the Steel Clan. I am Hrymr, Leader of Sibling Subordinates of the Ash Clan and the master of Dauwe Castle.’” Felicia began to recite aloud the contents of the report.

The size and composition of the enemy’s army, the state of morale in Hrymr’s soldiers, and other pertinent aspects of the military situation were all recorded in great detail.

The report was dated from two days ago.

In this era, the standard for speedy delivery of detailed information across long distances was still a messenger driving a horse-drawn cart—which would have taken at least ten full days to bring him this same document. Taking that into consideration, two days was exceptionally fast. Abnormally so, in fact.

However, two days old was still two days old.

Yuuto was only human, and thus he had no way of knowing that, at that very moment, Dauwe Castle had fallen to the enemy.

Yuuto quickly made his way back to the main formation of his army, where Sigrún’s delighted voice was one of the first things that greeted him.

“Ah...! Welcome back, Father!”

She was a woman possessed of such surpassing beauty that it left those who saw her breathless, a beauty that could rightly be called one-of-a-kind.

Her figure was slim and elegant, and her slender arms looked so beautifully

delicate that one might assume she would have difficulty even holding a sword, but she was in fact the Steel Clan's most powerful warrior, and one of its most valiant generals.

"I am sure you must have already heard the news from one of my men, but..."

"Yeah, our enemies have all started their invasions, at exactly the same time."

"Indeed, it is just as you predicted, Father. I never cease to be amazed by how keenly and wisely you perceive things."

"That's enough flattery. More importantly, how are preparations coming along? Are we ready to begin the return trip?"

"Yes, Father. Also, I took the liberty of ordering the rear guard and support units to march early, so they are already on the move."

"Nice! You did a great job." Yuuto patted Sigrún on the head, ruffling her hair.

Dauwe Castle was being threatened by a massive army thirty thousand strong, so reinforcements needed to reach them as quickly as possible.

Every minute of time saved was precious.

"I did nothing special," said Sigrún. However, in spite of her words, she was smiling happily.

To Sigrún, there was no greater reward than a pat on the head from Yuuto.

As Yuuto's hand finally pulled back, Sigrún looked sad for a short moment, then quickly assumed a more serious expression and asked, "So, then, what of the request to swear the Oath of the Chalice with the Flame Clan patriarch? How did the negotiations go?"

"Hm? Oh, right. We didn't end up swearing the Oath of the Chalice, but I was at least able to get him to agree to mutual non-aggression with us for the time being."

"That is good to hear." Sigrún let out a small sigh of relief.

Sigrún may well have been young in her years, but she was, in fact, a very highly accomplished military general—a hardened veteran of many, many violent conflicts.

There was no way she wouldn’t know exactly how dangerous it would be for the Steel Clan right now, beset by invasions on three fronts, if the powerful Flame Clan were to become their enemy too.

A retreat march in particular was one of the most dangerous times for an army on the move. She must surely have been relieved to learn that they wouldn’t have to worry about being attacked from behind while they were making their way back home.

“By the way, what sort of person was the Flame Clan patriarch?”

Sigrún wasn’t one to mince her words, and she rarely made any conversation beyond what was necessary. This sort of question was rare from her. Ordinarily for her, hearing about the promise of non-aggression would have been enough to satisfy her on the subject.

However, the Flame Clan patriarch had been responsible for the death of the peerless warrior Steinþórr, the Battle-Hungry Tiger. She was interested in what sort of person could have possibly dispatched the Dólgþrasir with such ease.

“In a word, unbelievable. I absolutely do not want to make that guy our enemy.” Yuuto’s words came straight from his heart, unqualified and unembellished.

He truly was the man who had risen above all others during the Sengoku period of Japan, a time and place in history awash with legendary figures, and who had nearly brought all of Japan together under his rule. He was different from ordinary people. Just the mere force of his presence had been titanic; practically overwhelming.

“He must truly be incredible to inspire words like that from you, Father.”

“Yeah. Even just imagining what would’ve happened if the Flame Clan were against us, too... It makes my blood run cold. Honestly, I think that would be the end for us.”

“Even so, I am sure you still would find some way to save us, Father.”

“And I’m sure you give me way too much credit.”

With a wry grin, Yuuto shrugged.

Sigrún had always had a tendency to overestimate Yuuto's ability, but recently, Yuuto got the feeling it was getting even more extreme.

He felt such a large gap between that and his own assessment of himself that it was honestly a little disorienting.

"Well, either way, we may have avoided the absolute worst-case scenario, but that doesn't change the fact that this is a pretty bad situation for us."

With a severe expression, Sigrún nodded. "Yes. I myself doubted my ears when I first heard the number thirty thousand."

The Steel Clan had mobilized a total of sixteen thousand soldiers for the campaign against the Lightning Clan—the largest number they'd ever managed so far—but the enemy still had almost twice that number.

And that was just the army attacking from the east. Currently, their western territories were under attack from two other clan armies: the Hoof Clan and the Northern Panther Clan.

While the absolute worst potential situation had been avoided, there was no question that this was still the most dangerous and threatening scenario Yuuto had ever faced, even including his early days as patriarch of the Wolf Clan.

"Yeah, Dauwe Castle might be famous for being impossible to capture, but against a force that size, it's possible they might not last very long. And on that note, there's an important mission I'd like to assign to you, Rún."

"Yes, Father! Just name your orders! Would I be correct in assuming you will have me ride ahead of everyone else, and perform hit-and-run disturbance operations on the enemy?"

"Disturbance operations" consisted of racing on horseback past enemy lookout patrols to launch surprise attacks on their camp before the lookouts could alert them, then fleeing quick as the wind right as the enemy soldiers regained order and prepared their counterattack.

This was just one of the battlefield tactics Sigrún's Múspell Special Forces were proficient in, and it had been used to great effect during the war against the Hoof Clan a year ago, sowing chaos among the enemy army and delaying their advance.

As the situation right now bore some similarities to back then, it was reasonable that she'd assumed that would be her mission.

However, Yuuto shook his head. "No, the mission I have for you this time doesn't involve battle."

"Huh?" Sigrún stared back at him in stark puzzlement, her eyes wide.

She wasn't someone who often let her emotions show on her face, often looking as expressionless as a statue, so it was a rare sight from her.



The Múspell Special Forces were acknowledged from both within and without as the Steel Clan's strongest elite battlefield unit, and they always fought on the front lines.

Sigrún hadn't imagined they would be given a mission that didn't involve riding into battle.

"This is something that only you guys can do. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that the outcome of this war completely depends on whether you'll be able to get this done."

Yuuto's lips curled up into a mischievous grin.

It was the face he always made when he had come up with a particularly clever scheme.

"D-Dauwe Castle has fallen?!"

Upon receiving the terrible news, the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas momentarily forgot that he was in the middle of formally hosting a guest in his capacity as patriarch and raised his voice in a panicked shout, with no sense of shame or propriety.

The enemy was attacking with a massive army of thirty thousand. He had of course considered the possibility that, at worst, the fortress might get captured. However...

"No matter how you look at it, it happened way too quickly!"

It was only two days ago that he'd learned that the enemy was approaching the stronghold.

Even with the use of messenger pigeons and deliverymen on horseback between post stations, rapid communication methods unavailable to other nations, that report would only just now have traveled far enough to reach the Steel Clan's main army.

From Gimlé to the Ash Clan capital Vígríðr, standard travel by horse-drawn wagon would take ten days. For marching infantry loaded down by the added weight of weapons and armor, it would take twice as long.

Not to mention, the main body of the Steel Clan army was currently over the border within Lightning Clan territory, even further west than Gimlé.

In other words, a normal estimate of how long it would take for reinforcements to arrive would be somewhere around thirty days.

Now that the protection of Dauwe Castle was gone, that was a number that evoked only feelings of hopelessness.

“What in the world happened?! Just what sort of scheme did the enemy use to do this?!”

Jumping up from his chair, Douglas grabbed the shoulders of the soldier who’d brought the message and began shaking him as he interrogated him.

Douglas knew all about Dauwe Castle’s resilience, and he also knew just how skilled and respected Hrymr was—a hero to his men, and a force to be reckoned with as a strategist.

He couldn’t imagine that either of them could be defeated by anything resembling normal, rational methods of warfare.

“They used a head-on frontal assault, my lord.”

“Whaaat?!” Douglas’ jaw dropped.

After another moment, his whole body began to tremble, and he screamed, “Don’t be ridiculous! Even if they *did* have thirty thousand men, there’s no way that would work against that fortress, and especially not against old Hrymr!”

“Yes. It would be one thing if they had that contraption Father invented, the... it was called the ‘trebuchet,’ I think? But I find it hard to believe you if you say they toppled Dauwe without anything of that sort.”

The voice that cut into the conversation came from a slightly portly man with a puzzled frown, seated across the table from where Douglas had been sitting.

He was Botvid, the patriarch of the Ash Clan’s neighboring nation, the Claw Clan.

In accordance with an arrangement they’d made beforehand, once the attack began, Botvid had come here along with three thousand troops as reinforcements for the Ash Clan.

“Th-That may be the case, but this is the truth of the matter... No matter how many volleys of arrows we rained down on them; even after we surrounded them on three sides and skewered them with our spears... they just wouldn’t stop. Even after sustaining what should have been fatal wounds, they threw themselves at us and slaughtered everyone. It was like they didn’t fear death, or even care—like they were an army of men possessed by spirits, or an army of the dead... they pushed forward with such vigor that we were simply overwhelmed...”

The soldier’s face drained of color, and he began shaking—he was probably flashing back to what he’d witnessed when the fortress was captured.

Apparently, it had been quite a frightening experience.

“Hmm... Brother Douglas, it doesn’t look to me like he’s lying.”

“So it would seem. Still, an ‘army of the dead,’ is it? That phrase has quite the terrifying ring to it.”

“Hmm,” Botvid thought to himself for a second. “Hearing his description, I cannot help but be reminded of that man.”

“‘That man’?” Douglas asked, unaware of to whom Botvid was referring.

Botvid gave a wry chuckle and shrugged his shoulders. “I mean the Dólgþrasir, Steinþórr.”

“Ah, the late Lightning Clan patriarch who was killed in battle some days ago?”

Douglas had never met Steinþórr face-to-face, much less faced him on the battlefield, but he was all too familiar with the name.

Steinþórr had been a man of such absurd strength that no one else, however great a warrior, could ever hope to match him in combat, and on the battlefield, he was regarded as invincible.

It was said that when Steinþórr led a charge, nothing could stop it.

And also...

“Right, it was said that the soldiers led by the Dólgþrasir would turn into a pack of battle-crazed berserkers,” Douglas recalled. “Hm, I see, there certainly is

a similarity.”

“Yes. Though I get the sense that there’s an even more powerful zealotry at work behind these soldiers. The problem is, if our foes have turned into such monsters, there’s little we can do to stop them between the two of us.”

“Nngrh...” Douglas’ face scrunched up in a glower, and he let out a frustrated growl like a cornered beast.

He had stationed most of his soldiers in Dauwe Castle, so he only had around one thousand men remaining at his disposal. With the three thousand from the Claw Clan, they were barely scraping a grand total of four thousand.

He assumed that eventually some of the survivors who escaped Dauwe Castle would make their way back to him. But the messenger soldier just now was an example as such, and going by how deeply the fear and trauma from his experiences had penetrated him to his core, it was questionable whether any of the other survivors would be useful in battle going forward.

If his soldiers couldn’t match up to the enemy in terms of individual strength, and he also couldn’t come close to matching his enemy’s numbers, then it wasn’t just a problem of not being able to defeat them. It was going to be nearly impossible to even merely hold out until Yuuto and the main army arrived.

But just as the feelings of despair had started to swallow up his heart, another man’s voice slipped its way into their conversation from the direction of the room’s entrance.

“Heh. So, I heard you need some extra soldiers?”

Douglas and Botvid turned towards the owner of the voice and saw a man they had never seen before. However, he was also someone they both recognized instantly.

“Ohh, Uncle Hveðrungr!” Douglas stood up from his chair again and threw open his arms wide in a gesture of welcome.

The massacre he committed at Nóatún, and the scorched-earth strategy he used to ravage his own lands... this man’s reputation was built upon acts that could hardly be called good.

However, that same reputation also came from his successes. He had taken the Panther Clan and transformed it from nothing more than a smallish nomadic clan into one of the most powerful clans in the realm in the space of one year. And, at the Battle of Gashina, he had managed to corner Suoh-Yuuto, the “war god” himself, and had come close to completely defeating and wiping out Yuuto’s forces.

The nomadic riders who fought as armed cavalry under Hveðrungr were also said to be high-quality, expert fighters on par with the Steel Clan’s elite Múspell Special Forces.

In a situation like this one, there was no more reliable ally one could hope to ask for.

“It seems that the gods have decided to give us the perfect opportunity to show what we’re capable of!”

Upon returning to the Regiment’s encampment, Hveðrungr fired off those excited words to his subordinates.

However, no one answered him. Despite the fact that their leader had returned, none of his men even rose to greet him. They were all lying on the ground, flat on their backs, their chests rising and falling in a slow rhythm.

Ordinarily, Hveðrungr would have never forgiven such a lack of respect from subordinates towards their master, but in today’s case, he made a special exception.

They had all ridden straight here from Gimlé non-stop, with nearly zero sleep or breaks to rest.

Even for the highly-trained, elite riders of the Independent Cavalry Regiment, it stood to reason that such a high-speed forced march would completely deplete their stamina.

Actually, one could instead say that it was only because they were so strong that they had been able to force themselves to ride all the way here in just three days.

“I’ll explain the current situation. You can keep resting, but listen well, and

pay close attention.”

Hveðrungr proceeded to tell his men what he’d learned from Douglas and Botvid.

They were all originally from lands far away from here, in the western half of the northern Miðgarðr region, so they couldn’t really understand how significant it was that Dauwe Castle had fallen. However, when he described enemy soldiers who fought like the living dead, he could see they’d all taken interest, and several of them started to speak up.

“I’ve seen something like that before.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. Back at Gashina, when Lord Yuuto the Lion-Heart rode out onto the Wolf Clan’s front lines, the Wolf Clan soldiers got like that, right?”

“Right, right, exactly. I remember how they were fighting with that crazy strength, like they’d been possessed, and it spooked me.”

“Actually, yeah, me too.”

As the nomads all began confirming their experiences with each other, they grimaced as they recalled those unpleasant moments.

Soldiers who could get pierced by arrows, or slashed with a sword, and they’d still keep coming after you, unconcerned with anything else other than ending your life.

No one wanted to fight against foes like that a second time, but they were settling on the conclusion that the people they were going to be fighting here were much the same.

“No, apparently the ones this time are even *more* crazed,” Hveðrungr added, refusing to spare his men from the cruel truth.

“You’re kidding...”

“Well, that sure sends a chill down my spine.”

The nomads grimaced again, fear and loathing written all over their faces. Hveðrungr, on the other hand, was smiling broadly, his teeth showing.

His lips were twisted into a confident, evil sneer, in fact.

“What are you all saying? That just means they’ll serve all the better as our prey.”

It was deep in the dead of night when a loud rumbling began to sound throughout the area surrounding Dauwe Castle. It was so loud, and so sudden, that the Anti-Steel Clan army soldiers camped in the area were forcibly roused from their sleep.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Is it an enemy attack?”

Fwip-fwip-fwip!

A huge number of arrows began falling from the sky, despite the fact that nobody had ordered them to prepare for any battle.

“Uwagh!”

“Aagh?!”

“An attack out of nowhere?! No one’s sounded any of the warning gongs!”

“Damn it! What the hell are the lookouts doing?!”

Panicked screams and confused shouting rose up all around them.

And their torment only continued to increase. Shadowy figures were racing towards their camp at a frightening speed, firing a hail of arrows all the while.

“What? H-H-Horses?!”

“Oh no, they’re coming so fast! W-Wait, wait-wait-wait!”

“I’m not ready to—gyaghh!”

“N-No, I don’t want to die... ggh...!”

“Save me... gaah!”

Before the soldiers had been given the chance to do anything more than panic, the man leading the band of armed horsemen charged right into them, mercilessly striking them down left and right with the blade of his spear.

He was a strange and sinister-looking man, half of his face obscured by a jet-black mask.

“Perfect, they’ve been swept completely off their feet!” the masked man shouted. “Now don’t waste this opportunity—ravage them!” He raised his spear, dripping with blood, high into the air.

“Rraaaaghh!” The riders behind him bellowed a war cry and charged past him on either side.

They were like a pack of ferocious beasts.

For what it was worth, the Anti-Steel Clan soldiers had been told that there was a unit of soldiers within the Steel Clan who could fight while riding on horseback, so they had known they needed to be mentally prepared to fight them.

However, now that they were facing such riders in the flesh, that sense of preparedness was swiftly crushed underfoot.

For one thing, they were all so big.

With the combined height and weight of the horse and rider, they made for a truly sizable foe. It was like being attacked by the members of the race of giants from right out of the old stories about the time the world was made.

And yet something so large was coming at them at more than twice the speed a human could run.

And what was even worse, they even had weapons that were strange and frightening.

They were able to break a man’s sword in a single blow, or pierce right through his shield and armor as easily as skewering cheese.

How was someone supposed to fight against something like this?!

Faced with an absolutely overwhelming difference in power, the Anti-Steel Clan army soldiers felt their hearts being crushed by despair.

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack!”

The shrill cries filled the air, along with the loud, metallic sound of bronze war gongs.

“Hm... Huh? What’s thiiis?”

Bára, who had been sleeping in her chair, slowly opened her eyes and, like always, spoke with a tone that conveyed no tension at all.

No matter the situation, she never seemed to falter from this overly easygoing attitude.

Put another way, it meant that no matter what happened, she never panicked.

That aspect of her personality was something the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél had recognized in her, and was part of why she had been entrusted with the important positions of adjutant and chief military advisor.

“An enemy attack? ...Ngh!”

Lying in bed nearby, Fagrahvél realized what was happening and immediately tried to get up, but lacked the strength to remain standing and collapsed to the floor...

...Or would have, if not for the fact that Bára had already predicted this exact turn of events occurring and quickly moved in to catch Fagrahvél in one flowing motion.

“Now, nooow, no pushing yourself. You need to stay in beeed.” Bára spoke as if gently chiding a small child.

Bára was often troubled by the fact that her patriarch had a bad habit of taking on so much responsibility alone that it often ended up being too much to handle.

“We’re being attacked right now. I’m the commander of this army—how could I be absent?”

Fagrahvél’s words were steadfast and courageous, but the lamplight showed a face that was still sickly and pale, clearly still exhausted from the strain incurred during the last battle.

“Who do you think you’re fooling with that taaalk? You can’t even stand on

your own two feet right nooow.”

“Ngh, no, this is nothing...”

Fagrahvél pushed Bára’s body away and tried to stand unassisted.

However, that only led to another fall, backwards this time, and another graceful catch from Bára.

“There you gooo. See, you can’t do it at aaall.”

“Kh... Such a trifling bit of fatigue, and yet my body won’t do as I say... Such weakness...!” Fagrahvél spat bitterly.

“What are you saaaying, it wasn’t ‘trifling’ at aaall.” Bára gave a wry chuckle at Fagrahvél’s reaction.

Fagrahvél’s rune, Gjallarhorn, had the power to raise an ally’s morale to its absolute limit and draw out the full latent strength that person possessed.

One could certainly say that it was the strongest possible rune in the hands of a talented commander, but it also came with one powerful and unavoidable drawback.

The larger the number of people its power was applied to, the more valuable the effect was, but the physical toll it extracted from its user increased in proportion.

Until now, Fagrahvél would normally use it only on the soldiers of the Sword Clan Army, who numbered around ten thousand. Even that was enough to drain Fagrahvél to the point of being barely able to stand for a while. This time, the target for the effect had been an army three times that size.

Fagrahvél was lucky to even have the remaining strength to be conscious right now.

“You just sit baaack, and leave this to the rest of us, okaaay?”

“B-But, that’s—”

“Just relaaax. Hárbarth said that when we started our attaaack, the Steel Clan was still at Gashina, remeeember? In other wooords, this can’t be their armyyy.”

“W-Well, now that you mention it...”

Fagrahvél’s eyes widened at the realization that Bára was right.

Ordinarily, something like that would not have escaped the Sword Clan patriarch’s thinking. Fagrahvél really was completely drained in body and mind.

“Our real enemy in this war is the ‘war god’ Suoh-Yuuto, riiight? You need to save your strength for the time when you face hiiim. In the meantime, leave cleaning up the battlefield to meee.”

“...Right.”

At last, Fagrahvél seemed to accept this and nodded in assent.

Bára carried Fagrahvél back to bed, then left the room. Once she was outside, she placed her pointer finger thoughtfully on her lip and, nonchalantly as always, whispered to herself.

“I hear the Steel Clan has a group of people who fight on horsebaaack. These must be theeem. Now, I wonder if Erna is taking care of things like she was ordered tooo?”

“Now, this is odd.”

From atop his horse, Hveðrungr looked down at the enemy soldiers fleeing in all directions in utter desperation, suspicion in his eyes.

According to the briefing he’d been given, these men were supposed to be strong foes, indomitable and without fear of death... but they’d broken easily.

Far too easily, in fact.

By comparison, even the soldiers of the Hoof Clan army he’d once defeated had put up a far stronger resistance than this.

With the way things were going now, it seemed as if he and the Regiment would be able to completely rout them here with no assistance whatsoever.

“A trap, then?”

The first thing he suspected was that this was a ploy: Feign weakness to make one’s enemy overconfident and tempt them to move in too deep, then

surround them completely and wipe them out.

With the powers of observation that Yuuto so highly valued, Hveðrungr's eyes scanned the battle playing out around him.

However, he saw no signs that such a tactic was currently being employed.

If it were, there would be a bit more consistency in the movements and actions of the individual soldiers. Their expressions of total fear were unmistakably the real thing.

"That being said, the fact remains that they captured this castle in the space of a single day. We can't let our guard down."

As the area west of Dauwe Castle was Ash Clan territory, there were no defensive structures on this side, which made infiltrating the enemy camp out here rather easy. But in the event they'd been behind those high castle walls, even Hveðrungr would have been stopped dead in his tracks.

The account of soldiers who fought like the living dead was probably exaggerated to an extent, but he found it hard to believe it a complete lie.

"Pushing further into their ranks would be a bit dangerous, then. But letting go of such a good opportunity is also—?!"

All of a sudden, Hveðrungr sensed an intense feeling of murderous intent coming from his right, and immediately afterward a flurry of arrows came flying at him.

He turned and swung his spear around to deflect them, and in the opening created by that action, a small figure darted in close to him, moving low as if sliding along the ground.

"Got you!" Hveðrungr quickly twirled his spear in midair and thrust downwards at the shadowy figure.

But the figure easily dodged his attack, came all the way up to his horse and, without a second's pause, sliced right through its front leg.

With the support of one of its legs suddenly gone, the horse collapsed, and Hveðrungr was carried along with it, colliding violently with the ground.

"Khh!" A shockwave of pain rushed through his body, but he didn't have a

moment to spare thinking about that.

A blade swung down at him from overhead, which he managed to dodge by rolling to the side.

He used the momentum of his roll to bring himself back onto his feet, and as he stood up, he got a good look at his foe.

It was a woman, and a rather young one at that.

However, the intensity of the air around her, the pressure he felt coming off of her, and above all, the skillful movements she'd displayed just a second ago —all of it told him that she was anything but ordinary.

"Take heed! I am Erna, commander of the Sword Clan's Special Assault Force! You are the leader of these forces, aren't you?! I shall now take your head!"

As she finished announcing herself, she kicked off the ground and dashed towards him.

"What?!" Hveðrungr yelled in astonishment, his eyes going wide.

She was so *fast!* Her leg strength and footwork were extraordinary.

He'd faced other Einherjar in battle a number of times before, but this was the first time he'd ever seen an opponent close in towards him in such a sharp, swift motion.



“Haaah!”

“Gh...!”

She unleashed a slashing attack aimed right at his neck, and he felt his blood run cold.

He didn’t have enough time to block it.

The knowledge of his coming death shot through his mind. However, his enemy’s attack suddenly slowed.

No. The enemy hadn’t gotten slower.

His own mind was *speeding up*.

By focusing on the threat of impending death, he had opened the door to the Realm of Godspeed, the ultimate technique he’d stolen from Sigrún.

“Grrggh!”

Hveðrungr forced his body to move through air that felt as heavy as if he was underwater. He directed the blade of his weapon to slip into the trajectory of his foe’s sword.

With his sense of time slowed, his own movements felt incredibly sluggish in a way that made him anxious and impatient, but even so, his opponent was even slower.

He felt a small twinge of pain as her sword was forced to a halt.

He’d just barely blocked the attack in time.

“Wha?!”

This time, it was his opponent’s turn to be astonished.

Erna stared blankly as a crack formed and ran its way down the blade she held in her hand. In the next instant, it split clean in two.

Hveðrungr’s sword was a *nihontou*, with a blade made from iron that had been refined by adding just the right amount of processed carbon, and tempered over and over until it had been forged into steel.

The strength and hardness of that steel was such that the ordinary bronze

weapons and armor of this era could not even begin to compare to it. By striking it with as much force as she had, it was only reasonable that her sword would break in the way that it did.

Of course, even though it was only reasonable, there was no way that *she* could have known that.

Her sword was a weapon she knew well and had entrusted her life to. For it to suddenly break apart in the midst of combat was something that should never happen.

For just a split second, she froze up from the shock.

Hveðrungr was not the sort of man who would miss such an opening.

“Hhn!”

He counterattacked with an overhead diagonal strike, aimed at his foe’s right shoulder.

I’ve got you! He thought, certain of his victory. However...

“Khh!”

His foe kicked the ground with all her strength and leapt backwards.

Despite his opponent’s attempts at evasion, Hveðrungr followed through on his swing, and soon after...

He felt the telltale resistance of his blade connecting with and slicing through something hard. He’d put a deep gash into her chest armor—but there was no blood spurting out.

“Tch. Too shallow.”

Clicking his tongue in irritation, Hveðrungr stepped in towards her and launched a follow-up thrust attack.

However, his opponent leapt backwards once again, and his blade didn’t even graze her.

Hveðdrungr’s string of attacks just now had all been made in the Realm of Godspeed, a heightened state which allowed him to exceed the usual limits of his body. By his judgment, they were the fastest and most powerful attacks he

had made in his entire life.

And his enemy's movement had still easily surpassed them.

"I'd say that means she's an Einherjar with powers focused on enhancing the strength of her legs."

The arm strength she'd displayed thus far hadn't been anything unusually special, but her leg strength was possibly even on par with that monster Steinþórr, the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

If Hveðrungr hadn't possessed the Realm of Godspeed, he would most certainly be a corpse right now.

She was without a doubt a powerful foe.

"Yeaaaaah! The Maidens of the Waves are here!"

"We're saved! The Maidens of the Waves are worth a hundred soldiers! No, a thousand!"

"Everyone, attack at once and drive them back!"

All of a sudden, jubilant cheers began to rise up from the enemy troops around him. It was as if life and energy had suddenly returned to them.

Hveðrungr watched, wide-eyed, as one of his riders was pierced by a spear and toppled from his horse, then another, and another.

He chuckled bitterly to himself. "Keh-heh, I have to admit, thinking we could take all of them out ourselves truly was underestimating them."

He searched through the data he'd meticulously filed away in his brain, pulling up the relevant information.

The Maidens of the Waves... If he recalled correctly, they were nine elite Einherjar warriors, the pride of the Sword Clan.

Judging by the fact that they were on foot, taking down cavalry that should have a massive advantage over them from fighting mounted, their reputation was deserved.

He heard the shrill scream of a horse from his left side, along with the heavy dull thud of its large body falling to the ground.

“Oho, here’s someone I haven’t seen in a while.”

The owner of the voice appeared, a man with wild features, dressed in gray furs made from the pelts of wolves.

He had a large, muscular frame, but there was also a sense of toned balance and symmetry to his physique. A single glance was enough to tell that this man had both impressive muscle strength and honed agility.

He looked perhaps a bit past his prime, somewhere from in his latter thirties to forty or so, but he carried a huge spear longer than his own height, wielding it with apparent ease. It didn’t seem that age had dampened his strength.

“True, it has been some time, Gerhard.”

“Hmph, I thought you’d died after your defeat at the hands of that Steel Clan brat, and now I find out you actually bowed your head to him and became his loyal dog instead. Looks like you’ve come a long way—down, that is!”

The Cloud Clan patriarch sneered.

However, Hveðrungr wasn’t about to fall for such a cheap taunt. He calmly assessed his current situation.

The enemy had pulled themselves out of their state of panic and had regained their will to fight.

At this point, even if the members of the Independent Cavalry Regiment had an overwhelming advantage over them in terms of individual combat skill, the difference in numbers was too great.

Now was the time to withdraw.

“Father!”

“Heh, you’ve come at the perfect time.”

Hveðrungr’s subordinate had hurriedly ridden up to him on horseback. Hveðrungr grabbed his outstretched hand, kicked off the ground, and deftly pulled himself up onto the horse behind him.

“We’re retreating, Narfi!”

“Yes, sir!”

Narfi gave him a brisk reply and pulled back on the reins, turning the horse around in place.

It was magnificent horsemanship, enough to impress even Hveðrungr—but it was also an opening, one the Cloud Clan patriarch wasn't so green as to overlook.

"I don't think so!" he yelled, and unleashed a thrusting attack aimed at the horse's side with the force of a lightning bolt.

But Hveðrungr had seen that coming.

His blade cut through the air quick as a flash and sliced through the tip of the incoming spear.

"Ngh?!"

Gerhard was dumbstruck as he saw his beloved weapon broken with apparent ease.

Hveðrungr sneered down at him from his seat atop the horse, returning the attitude he'd been subjected to just a moment ago.

"Heh heh, you'll be bowing to that Steel Clan brat yourself, sooner than you think. I look forward to when next we meet! Farewell! Now, Narfi, go!"

"Yes, sir!"

Narfi kicked the sides of his horse, and it broke into a run.

At the same time, Hveðrungr grabbed the war horn he kept strapped at his waist and sounded a loud note.

It was the signal for his men to retreat.

The elite soldiers of the Independent Cavalry Regiment responded immediately, breaking from combat and fleeing the battlefield at top speed.

It was truly a splendid example of a well-practiced and cohesive withdrawal.

"I won't let you get away!"

"Don't think we'll just stand by and let you run off after everything you did to us!"

Of course, the Anti-Steel Clan army soldiers who'd been so thoroughly tormented by the surprise attack were livid, and they quickly pursued the Regiment riders, their faces twisted with murderous rage.

"Heh, just like moths to a flame," Hveðrungr chuckled. He raised his hand. "Now!"

While still driving their horses onward at a gallop, the Regiment riders turned their upper bodies around and began launching arrows back at the enemy soldiers chasing them.

The arrows struck home, and a number of pursuing foot soldiers flailed and toppled over face down in the dirt.

This only served to fan the flames of anger in the rest of the Anti-Steel Clan soldiers, who continued the chase.

"Kill them! KILL THEM!" They screamed in fury as they charged forward, at which Hveðrungr found himself letting out a wry chuckle.

"Well, men," he shouted, "it looks like these fellows are hungry for another round of arrows! Better let them have it!"

"Aye, sir!" His men shouted back in a vigorous chorus.

With wild hoots and hollers, the riders opened up a second volley.

This was the Parthian Shot: a technique in which one shoots backwards at pursuers while retreating from them on horseback.

It was the prized archery technique of several horse-riding nomadic warrior clans throughout history—future history, that is.

Ordinarily, a formation of soldiers who were this motivated by anger were extremely strong, and it was better to avoid engaging them in combat. But for the Regiment riders, who could use the Parthian Shot, such soldiers who kept on pursuing no matter how many of them were shot down made for the perfect prey.

Indeed, that was how it should have been...

Without warning, the horse Hveðrungr was on came to a sudden stop.

“What’s going on?!”

“My lord, it’s...”

Narfi was staring ahead, his face frozen in shock. As Hveðrungr directed his gaze in that same area, he saw that a barrier of thick wooden posts had been erected. They were lined up in rows of twenty, blocking their path.

Additionally, the ends of the posts were sharpened like speartips, angled with those tips pointed directly at them in a rather vicious arrangement.

The posts weren’t all that high, but there were a lot of them. And they’d surely been placed here with the understanding that horses by instinct were averse to trying to jump over fences, even low ones.

“When did they do this?! And how could they put in place such a bold counter to cavalry when they’ve never even *seen* us before?!”

Hveðrungr spat out the words bitterly.

The enemy hadn’t used these barriers to *defend* against an attack from mounted soldiers, but instead had baited the attack and then placed them on the escape route. It showed they had every intent to trap his riders and wipe them out completely.

Apparently they had a strategist of fearsome cunning on their side.

If he were leading a retreat of infantry, it wouldn’t be difficult to move the barriers out of the way, but since they were mounted, they’d first need to dismount before anything else.

And, of course, they didn’t exactly have the time to spare for that.

Their pursuers were catching up, and farther past the barriers were more soldiers waiting for them—presumably the ones who set these up—already nocking their arrows.

“Damn it! I didn’t think I’d be forced to use my trump card this early...”

Spitting the words out bitterly, Hveðrungr reached into his pocket and pulled out several small objects—tetsuhau bombs.

Yuuto had given these to him to use in case of an emergency, as a last resort.

He used his lighter to light the fuses of five of them, and threw them all at once.

They exploded in quick succession, the loud concussive sound from the blasts filling the air.

Thankfully, the barrier posts weren't buried in the earth, but merely sitting on the ground itself.

As you would expect from barriers made to stop horses, they were constructed solidly enough that they were scorched by the blast, but held mostly together. However, the force of the shockwave from the explosions was enough to blow them off the ground and out of the way.

The group of soldiers who'd set up the barrier were so startled by the sudden, ear-splitting noise that they stood there in a daze, having forgotten to attack.

The path was open. If they were going to escape, it had to be right now.

Hveðrungr frowned to himself. "Hmph. Good grief, I can't believe I've already ended up owing him one. That's not what I was hoping for."

And so, the Independent Cavalry Regiment came close to meeting its end, but narrowly made their escape.

ACT 3

At around the same time the Independent Cavalry Regiment was decorating its young history with its first victory, Yuuto was arriving at the Steel Clan capital Gimlé on horseback.

He had been traveling at full speed day and night, and reached Gimlé just before his soldiers did.

It was in the middle of the night, and so despite the fact that the reginarch who ruled over seven clans had made his homecoming, there was no one waiting to greet him. The guards at the city gate had been wide-eyed with shock at his sudden, unexpected arrival.

Of course, one could say that was only natural, for Yuuto had arrived ahead of any messengers that would announce his return.

Yuuto had been keeping up with his daily physical training, but the majority of his time was still spent on deskwork.

After forcing himself to travel in a day and a half over a distance that would take infantry seven days' march to cover, he was completely worn out. Despite that, he used his willpower to keep himself going, and after dismounting, he and Felicia hurried into the palace.

"L-Lord Reginarch?!"

"P-Please wait, my lord. Mother is currently asleep..."

"It's urgent, and there's no time. Let me through!"

Yuuto didn't have time to explain or answer questions.

He pushed his way past the guards at the door and entered the bedroom.

"Linnea!"

"Zzz... Zzz..."

Even when he shouted her name, her gentle breathing was the only response.

Every day, she woke up earlier than most to begin her work, and stayed up later than most each night as well. It only made sense she'd be a deep sleeper.

Yuuto would have liked nothing more than to let her rest peacefully, but he didn't have that luxury right now.

"Sorry, Linnea, you've gotta wake up."

He grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

"Nn. Nn..."

"You awake now?"

"Mm... Hehe, Father... Oh, I love you so very much."

"Bwuh?"

The romantic confession was so abrupt that it stunned Yuuto, and for a short moment he forgot the reason that he was in such a hurry.

He felt his face flush with heat.

Of course, it wasn't as if Linnea's feelings for him were a surprise. Her attraction to him was something he already understood all too well.

But the fact that she was murmuring this while half-asleep told him just how deeply and fully she held those feelings in her heart, and it was a lot to take in.

"Hmph..." Next to him, Felicia sullenly puffed out her cheeks. "Just so you know, Big Brother, I am always thinking of you when I am asleep, too!"

Why are you acting like that when you're the one who set me and Linnea up? Yuuto thought to himself. Apparently, she'd felt the need to get competitive after seeing Yuuto's face turning bashfully red in reaction to Linnea.

"W-We don't have time for that kind of talk right now! Hey, Linnea, wake up already!"

Unable to stand the embarrassment, Yuuto hurriedly started shaking Linnea again.

At last, it seemed to pay off, for Linnea slowly opened her eyes.

"Nn... Father...?"

“Hey, sorry to wake you up. The thing is—mmph?!”

The moment his eyes met hers, she pulled him into an embrace and covered his lips with hers.

And once she’d released his lips, this time she began nuzzling her cheek against his.

“Hehe. Father... ♥”

Apparently, she was *still* half-asleep.

In a way, this was a lot harder to take than the confession.

With the soft sensation of her body against his... the way it communicated her feelings of adoration for him... he couldn’t keep his body from reacting.

“Hmph! Well, if you are going to show off like that right in front of me, then I will just have to join in myself and show you that—”

“This isn’t a competition!”



Unfortunately for Yuuto, he was stuck in a losing battle, one that continued for a while until Linnea was, finally, fully awake.

“P-Please forgive me, Father. I was so certain that I was still dreaming, and...!”

Linnea prostrated herself towards Yuuto in apology.

Yuuto held out a hand to stop her. “No, it’s—it’s fine. I’m the one at fault for barging in here and waking you up in the middle of the night like this. But more importantly, what’s the war situation like?!” His voice grew urgent again as he went right to the subject he’d come here to discuss.

He’d already lost some time over what just happened. He didn’t intend to waste one second more on anything else.

Linnea had a bit of difficulty dealing with unexpected surprises, but her mind worked incredibly fast. In no time flat, her expression changed from that of a normal girl to that of a national leader, the young woman who ran the administration of a powerful nation.

“Dauwe Castle has fallen,” she answered frankly.

“Wha?! Wait, seriously?! That happened way too fast!”

Upon hearing such horrible news, even Yuuto couldn’t keep from expressing open shock at it.

The campaign he’d been conducting against the Lightning Clan had been part of a plan to draw out his enemies, and the fortress at Dauwe had been the cornerstone of that plan.

“What were the enemy numbers, and what methods did they use?”

The first questions that came to Yuuto’s mind were the same that the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas had asked. After all, Dauwe Castle’s reputation as a solid, impregnable fortress was something Yuuto had heard often.

Just before holding his wedding ceremony, he’d secretly taken a trip there to get a good look at it for himself.

“While I find it hard to believe, the account is that it was captured by force alone, through a frontal assault.”

“...Hmm. But even if they’ve got a huge army, that wasn’t the kind of fortress they should have been able to capture so easily.”

Dauwe Castle was constructed making full use of the geography of the land it was on, such that even an extremely large army shouldn’t have been able to leverage the advantage their numbers gave them.

It was so well fortified that if Yuuto were tasked with capturing it without the use of the trebuchet, he’d honestly throw up his hands and call it a lost cause.

That was exactly why he had been counting on it as part of his plan. Knowing that the group of Anti-Steel Clan forces attacking from the east would be the largest, he’d presumed that Dauwe would be able to hold them in place for a good while.

That it would fall to the enemy in the span of only a few days was something he ordinarily would never have considered.

In other words, looking at this situation from the other end, there was something beyond the ordinary at work here.

“So it looks like they’re not going to be an easy bunch to deal with after all, huh? ...What about the strongholds in other areas?”

The east border wasn’t the only area under attack.

He’d learned that the western territories were being attacked by the remnants of the old Panther Clan, as well as the Hoof Clan army. He wanted to find out more about that, too.

“The Wheat Clan looks to be in a very difficult situation as well. They’ve sent a message pleading for aid as soon as possible. Currently, I’ve sent the Horn Clan assistant second-in-command Haugspori in their direction with reinforcements.”

“I see. That was a good call.” Yuuto nodded.

Haugspori was known to be a bit flighty in terms of personality, and an unrepentant playboy when it came to women, but he was perhaps the most fitting choice for this sort of case.

The main objective here in the short term was not driving off the enemy, but

holding out against them.

Putting a more hot-blooded man in charge of the troops could lead to a situation where he impatiently pushed for an advantage, only to suffer unnecessary casualties in the process. In contrast, Haugspori could be counted on to make cool-headed decisions.

“As for Brother Ská, I’ve received a message from him that read, ‘You need not worry about the Panther Clan. Send soldiers to other areas that need them.’”

“Heh. Sounds like him, all right.”

After a steady string of intelligence that spoke only of the difficulties they faced, getting a message that sounded so dependable made Yuuto naturally crack a smile.

Skáviðr was the patriarch of the current Panther Clan under the rule of the Steel Clan, and while his strength and accomplishments as a warrior were many, he was mainly known throughout the Bifröst region as someone who excelled at defensive warfare.

In his previous service as the general in charge of protecting the western city of Myrkviðr, he’d also become accustomed to fighting against armed cavalry. If that man said there was no reason to worry, then it should be fine to leave things to him and focus attention elsewhere.

“In which case, we end up coming back to the eastern problem. Hmm...” Yuuto frowned.

The loss of Dauwe Castle was a really painful blow—there were no two ways about it.

It was said that Einherjar were as rare as one in ten thousand. And right now, just on the eastern front, the armies of the Sword, Cloud, Fang, Helm, and Spear Clans were all working in tandem. It wasn’t hard to imagine that, in addition to the combined number of their normal soldiers, they would surely have a number of powerful Einherjar in proportion to that.

It was probable that among them was an Einherjar with powers that Yuuto didn’t know about, something equivalent to the unstoppable strength that

Steinþórr had.

However, they weren't the only ones with power that defied the ordinary. The Steel Clan could match them in that respect.

"I'm counting on you, Brother. You've got to hold things down until I make it there."

From Hveðrungr's perspective, finding out he'd fallen for an enemy's deception had meant his first battle as commander of the Regiment had ended as a bitter experience for him.

However, from the perspective of the Anti-Steel Clan army, it had been much the same.

The riders that attacked them had run roughshod through their ranks, and then had easily broken through the trap that had been set for them, escaping completely.

The army camp had suffered casualties numbering several hundreds, with only a couple dozen for the enemy. Any way you looked at it, this was a total defeat.

One could say that frustration over the events of the battle was much higher on this side, as well.

"This is completely beyond what I'd imaaagined..."

It was the morning after the attack, and Bára was crouched down examining one of the charred barricades, grumbling to herself in disappointment.

This sort of barrier was something horses should not have been able to get past, but the enemy had used some type of unknown weapon to blow the barriers out of the way. That truly was something she couldn't have imagined.

Even though her ploy had worked as intended and initially trapped the enemy, they'd turned the tables on her anyway. This was a first for her.

"I see nooow. This really is a serious threeeat."

However, she wasn't talking about the strange weapon, which had made a terrible sound like thunder and produced enough force to blow these posts

aside.

Of course, the weapon itself *was* indeed a threat in its own right. But once she learned about it, she'd be able to counter it.

The most terrifying threat was the fact that the enemy was steadily creating novel weapons like this.

"It's true, theeen. If we don't crush them sooon, they'll be too strong for us to haaandle."

This time alone, there had been armed cavalry that trampled their way across the battlefield, and the strange iron blade that had broken Erna's favored sword, and then these so-called "thunder bombs," tiny but destructive projectile weapons. Any one of those was enough on its own to sway the tide of a battle.

Did the Steel Clan have even more than this at their disposal, too?

Just as Yuuto had felt the threat of the unknown in the power that had toppled Dauwe Castle, so too did Bára feel a great fear when she considered just what Yuuto might have in store for their future battles...

"I'm sorry, Bára. If only I'd been able to kill their general back then...!"

Erna apologized profusely, her face scrunched up as if her anger at herself put her in terrible pain.

Bára waved a hand, dismissing the apology. "Don't be sorry about thaaat. That's not your fauuult. After all, the person you fought was also really strong, riiight?"

Erna was not as bright as Bára would prefer her to be, but when it came to combat ability, she was, without a doubt, the most capable among the Maidens of the Waves.

The rune Erna carried channeled all of her divine power—her ásmegin—into her legs, so that when she dashed forward to attack, it was like lightning streaking across the sky. It was no easy matter to dodge a sword strike delivered on the edge of such swift footwork.

Bára was an Einherjar as well, and certainly more talented with the sword

than an average soldier, but she'd never managed to block such an attack from Erna even once.

Not only had this enemy leader seen through and then blocked Erna's initial attack, he'd done so in his very first encounter with her. Enemy or not, that was worthy of praise.

"Actually, about that, there was something odd I noticed."

"Hmm?"

"From what we knew, the general commanding the enemy cavalry was supposed to be a woman with silver hair, and an icy personality. However, the one actually giving the orders was a man wearing a strange mask. And the soldiers on horseback were wearing clothing made from soft leather and fur pelts... They looked a lot like nomads, I guess."

"A maaask?" Bára asked suspiciously, tilting her head to one side.

If one were talking about a masked man together with nomads, the first man who sprang to mind was the former patriarch of the Panther Clan, Hveðrungr—the man known as Grímnir, the Masked Lord.

However, she'd heard that he'd been captured and imprisoned by the Steel Clan during their previous campaign against the Panther Clan...

"And to begin with, the Steel Clan's mounted fighters, the Múspell, were only supposed to have around five hundred men in their ranks at most, but the riders who attacked us this time definitely numbered at least two thousand."

"I think I have an idea about what's up with that." A third voice cut into their conversation.

It was the Cloud Clan patriarch, Gerhard.

"Ah, yes, that reminds me, Lord Gerhard, you seemed as if you were acquainted with that masked man..."

"I am. He's the former Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr. A little over a year ago, I met him in person once, when the two of us got together to swear a non-aggression pact."

"Ohh, so it waaas hiiim. I see nooow." Bára placed one hand on her cheek and

let out a sigh.

It seemed that her bad premonition had been on the mark. In short, the Steel Clan's Múspell Special Forces Unit, their strongest warriors, were totally separate from the ones who attacked the previous night.

This battle had been enough to showcase all too well just how much of an overwhelming combat advantage mounted fighters had. And now it was confirmed the enemy had five times more of those cavalry than the initial estimates.

And then, of course, there was that weapon the enemy had used.

"This might turn out to be real trouble for uuus."

It would not be long before Bára's words became reality.

And so, the following day...

"Ha ha ha! Steel Clan cowards. To think you'd run from me without even putting up a fight. How pathetic."

...

.....

"So, you've come back. Haven't learned your lesson, have you? Now, don't turn your tails and run from me this time, all right?"

...

.....

"Dammit, they got away *again*!"

Erna spat out the words in bitter frustration as she stamped the ground hard.

The impact was heavy enough to send shockwaves through the ground, as if a giant bear was on a rampage. The soldiers in the area around her all reflexively tensed up.

"Erna, just calm dooown." said Bára gently.

"How can I be calm about this?!" Erna howled furiously in response.

It wasn’t as if Bára didn’t understand her feelings.

Over the course of yesterday and today, that same group of cavalry had come and attacked them a number of times now, and each time, they’d gotten away again.

What’s more, yesterday the army had at least managed to deal some amount of damage to them, but today all of the casualties were on this side alone. It was a real mess.

And the reason for that was singular.

“Damn them, damn those filthy cowards! They fire arrows at us from farther away than we can shoot back, and then when we try to approach them, they run away while shooting us even more. I can’t *stand* it!”

“And this time, I was so *close* to catching them! Curse them... I swear it, next time I’ll catch them for sure and pay them back for everything they’ve done!”

Erna slammed her clenched fist into the palm of her other hand, positively burning with fighting spirit.

It seemed she’d let that fire go to her head completely.

Bára poked her sharply with a finger.

“Like I saaaid, you need to calm dooown. Erna, don’t you seee, you’re falling right into the enemy’s traaap?”

“Huuh?!”

Erna turned to Bára, looking astonished.

Bára shrugged her shoulders. “Thinking about it normally, people running on foot could never catch up to horses at full speed. That’s even with people riding them, riiight?”

“Huh... Yeah, now that you mention it...” Erna sounded as if she’d only realized this just now.

The fact was that with this girl in particular, catching up might actually be possible, so she’d probably failed to consider it.

“They’ve been slowing dooown, and letting you get close on puuurpose.

That’s so they can shoot lots of arrooows, and also so they can tire our soldiers ooout.”

The most effective way to thoroughly exhaust someone was to get them to spend their energy in wasted effort.

If the enemy riders fled too quickly, the Anti-Steel Clan army soldiers wouldn’t chase them in the first place. But instead, the army soldiers were tricked into always feeling like they were just about to catch up, then were forced to run on and on at that pace, only to fail to defeat a single enemy rider and stagger their way back to camp completely drained.

If this kept up for several more days, the Anti-Steel Clan army troops would be exhausted in both body and spirit, and rendered worthless as battlefield assets before the main body of the Steel Clan army arrived for their decisive battle.

“Dammit!” Erna shouted again. “In that case, I should just run out ahead of everyone and try to stop the enemy from—”

Bára gave a pained smile at Erna’s attitude and vigor, but cut her off. “I know how strong you aaare, but you’d be too far outnumbered to surviiive.”

Erna was one of the important pillars of the Sword Clan. Bára couldn’t allow her to go out and die such a wasteful, inglorious death.

“But at this rate, we’ll keep losing men and morale thanks to their dirty tricks!”

Bára folded her arms and frowned. “Mm, that’s truuue. I wonder what we should dooo. This is troubliiing.”

Her “stretched” way of talking made it seem like she wasn’t troubled by anything in the slightest, but she was in fact mulling over this issue quite seriously.

Even just approaching these enemies was impossibly hard. Even though Bára was known throughout the nations in her region as a genius strategist, frankly speaking, she couldn’t see a solution.

Up to this point, the Sword Clan had been invincible on the battlefield thanks

to Fagrahvél's trump card—the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, which imbued soldiers with the power to overtake any foe, no matter how strong.

However, that power would likely prove futile against these particular opponents.

Honestly, she was still struck with amazement at the novelty of waging battle the way they did.

The one counter-strategy she could be sure of was to build earthen ditches and embankments, along with more anti-horse wooden barriers, so that the horses couldn't approach in the first place.

But her side was the one conducting an invasion; hardening their defenses and digging in here went against that objective entirely.

And it would take far longer than another day and night to build those sorts of defenses anyway, during which she was sure they'd be the victims of further attacks and sabotage.

Either way, the men would be driven to exhaustion eventually, at which point the Steel Clan army proper would arrive. That was something she couldn't allow to happen.

"It really makes me realiiize just how much it hurts uuus that we couldn't kill that man the first niiight."

Thanks to that failure, the enemy general had learned to be more wary of her and no longer launched attacks without ample precaution.

Even if she were to deliberately show an opening, they most surely wouldn't take the bait again.

They weren't going to try and deal her side any heavy damage in one attack anymore. Instead, they were going to stick to dealing them modest casualties from long range, over and over.

"Uugh. I'm sorry."

"Ohh, that's not what I meeeant. I wasn't blaming youuu."

"But still..."

“Hm, it looks like something is troubling you.”

As the two of them brooded together, an altogether sunny and confident voice broke in on them.

It belonged to a slightly pudgy man with a rather impressive beard, wearing clothes made from rare silken thread that indicated he was someone of rather high status.

“It’s yooou...” Bára began.

“Lord Alexis!” Erna finished.

The imperial priest, Alexis—a man whom both of them knew well, and the man whom both of them were most wary around.

On the surface, he was a goði, a priest who also served as an official representative of the authority of the þjóðann. He traveled on diplomatic missions to many different clans, serving as the mediator for their most important Oath of the Chalice rituals.

However, they’d discovered that, behind the scenes, he was connected directly to the Spear Clan patriarch Hárbarth.

Alexis was accompanying the Anti-Steel Clan army on its campaign, serving as Hárbarth’s “eyes” here.

“What business do you have with us?”

“Hee hee, oh, I wish you wouldn’t be so hostile with me. After all, I’m here with some information I think you’ll find quite welcome to hear.”

“Informatiooon?” Bára narrowed her eyes at Alexis.

This man was the loyal servant of Hárbarth, the man who had been jockeying for political control of the empire behind the scenes for some time now. It was only fair to suspect there was an ulterior motive at play here.

Alexis seemed to silently acknowledge that aspect of the situation, maintaining his friendly smile and allowing her overt suspicion to slide off of him rather than protest.

“Yes, that’s right. Lord Hárbarth would like to offer you his cooperation.”

“You came to the wrong place. You’ll find nothing to feed on here.”

Hveðrungr’s remarks were addressed to the crows trotting about through the dew-soaked grass at his feet.

Crows were carrion birds—scavengers that fed on the flesh of the dead—a familiar sight on the fields of war.

Drawn by the scent of blood, they would gather at the sites of battles, often coming from seemingly out of nowhere.

Because of this, they were viewed as harbingers of misfortune and regarded with loathing. However, Hveðrungr found little to dislike about such shrewd, opportunistic creatures.

After all, were those not attributes considered most essential in patriarchs and generals?

He spent a few moments mulling these thoughts over, telling himself that he wanted to be known and feared for those same traits, just as the crows were.

As he was doing so, however, a scout he had sent out arrived back at the Regiment’s forward camp looking rather worse for wear.

“Father!” he shouted. “The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance troops camped around Dauwe Castle have formed up and begun marching west!”

“So, that’s the choice they made...” Hveðrungr nodded thoughtfully, placing a hand to his chin. “It seems they really do have a sharp mind among them.”

Hveðrungr had calculated that, in response to his cavalry’s hit-and-run tactics, his enemy would most likely take one of two courses of action.

Either they would fortify themselves over time so that they could be ready to receive and retaliate against the Regiment’s attacks at maximum strength, or they would advance, eventually drawing him and his riders out by creating a situation where they would have *no choice* but to attack.

The former option would have been the more convenient of the two for Hveðrungr’s needs.

His objective was not to defeat and drive off the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, but rather to obstruct their advance, holding them in this area for however much time it took for the Steel Clan's main army to arrive, making their best effort to wear them down in the meanwhile.

If the enemy army had instead chosen to dig in here and prepare themselves to better counter his attacks, that would have been far more ideal.

Learning of and then taking the course of action one's enemy would *least* want was a core principle of warfare. In that sense, Hveðrungr's opponent had made an excellent decision.

"Naturally, they've got to be headed for Vígríðr."

Vígríðr was the Ash Clan capital. If one counted the many small farming villages surrounding it, there were tens of thousands of people living in the area.

The enemy strategist had likely surmised that if the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army were to attack there, the cavalry that had thus far tormented them with repeated hit-and-run attacks would instead be forced to fight them without the option to flee.

All things considered, that line of thought was by and large correct.

The clan system of Yggdrasil's society was built on the bonds formed by the Oath of the Chalice.

A child subordinate swore an oath of absolute loyalty to a sworn parent, and in exchange, the parent swore to provide support and protection to their sworn children.

If the Ash Clan capital Vígríðr fell to the enemy, the Steel Clan would have failed to uphold its vow to protect its subordinate child clan, and would suffer a great blow to its honor.

"This is turning into something of a headache," Hveðrungr muttered.

It was three days' march on foot from Dauwe to Vígríðr, and even if he kept up the Regiment's hit-and-run tactics to slow them down, he could likely only double that at most. Meanwhile, it'd still be at least twenty days until the Steel

Clan’s main army arrived.

These were also the forces that captured the famously-impregnable Dauwe Castle in the course of one day. By any normal estimation, there was no way he could hold them back long enough.

“Still, I suppose I have no choice other than to make it happen, somehow...”

Hveðrungr had his own personal reasons for needing to prevent the capture of Vígríðr.

It wasn’t out of concern for the people. This man had once set fire to his own lands, burning the homes of his subjects to delay his own defeat—He didn’t care in the slightest about what happened to some region he’d only set foot in a scant few days ago.

However, right now he wanted to do everything possible to avoid allowing anything to occur that would lower his reputation within the ranks of the Steel Clan.

He wasn’t going to retire and spend the rest of his days living a modest, quiet life. He was still young. He wanted to take advantage of the freedom that came with his new rank and status.

He also wanted to witness the path taken by the man who had defeated and surpassed him.

“Heh... All I can do right now is give this everything I’ve got.”

Hveðrungr stood up, his cape catching the air as he turned.

He still had time left to think of something, and there was no harm in slowing the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army’s movements as much as possible in the meantime.

“All right, men! We’re moving out!”

As Hveðrungr shouted the order, he mounted his own horse and spurred it into a gallop. The rest of the Independent Cavalry Regiment followed behind him.

After an hour of riding, they spotted the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army on the march.

...And as soon as they did, the high-pitched sound of bronze war gongs came echoing from that direction. It seemed that, after the numerous attacks they'd suffered over the past several days, the enemy were wary enough of surprise attacks now to spot the Regiment coming.

However, that didn't present any major problem.

"Fire all arrows!"

At Hveðrungr's command, the Regiment riders all unleashed their arrows at once.

The Steel Clan had supplied them with composite bows, the same new models also used by the Múspell Special Forces.

The new bows had a far greater firing range than the ordinary bows these men had been using up until now. As a result, they could now fire their arrows from outside the range of the enemy's archers. In other words, they could deliver a completely one-sided attack.

The volley of arrows were launched high up into the sky, where they traced a tall, long arc, at last raining down onto the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance soldiers.

"Hm?!" Hveðrungr grunted in surprise as he watched what happened next.

With a satisfying thunk, the rain of arrows embedded themselves into the wooden shields being held up by the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance soldiers.

Despite being made with iron, the arrows hadn't pierced through the shields completely. They would have to be very thick shields for that to happen.

"...That's odd." Behind his mask, Hveðrungr's brow furrowed.

Until just the day before, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance soldiers were using much thinner shields—the kind that were cheap, but still enough to defend against simple arrows with sharpened wooden tips or stone arrowheads.

Hveðrungr didn't think that they could have distributed thicker shields like these across their entire army of thirty thousand in such a short space of time.

This combined army was made up of squads assembled from the individual armies of multiple different clans. Taking that into account, it was hard to imagine they'd all be carrying the same type of equipment. So then, he'd just

happened to run into a formation armed with heavy shields this time.

That was a reasonable conclusion he could make, but he suddenly had a terrible feeling about this.

...And, that was when it happened.

“Rrraaaaaaggghhh!”

“Rrroooooogggghhh!”

War cries rose up from behind him, on both his left and right rear flanks.

“What?! What’s happening?!”

Wide-eyed, Hveðrungr whirled around to look behind him.

For a short moment, he had no idea what was going on.

Ordinarily, the answer should have required no thought. It was obvious.

However, even for someone as clever as Hveðrungr, it took a few seconds for his mind to reach the truth.

That was because this was something he’d assumed couldn’t possibly happen to him.

“An ambush?!”

The two large groups of soldiers were flying the banners of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army. The ground rumbled loudly, and they kicked up large clouds of dust as they charged toward the Regiment’s formation.

“Inconceivable! How can this be?!”

If they’d set up an ambush for him, that meant that they knew exactly where in their formation he’d been planning to attack.

If this had been an ambush after a feigned retreat, in which they drew him to follow them along into their trap, that would still make some sense.

Likewise if their scouts had spotted him far in advance, which would have given them time to maneuver into place.

However, neither of those things had happened here.

Rather than a false retreat, the enemy had been conducting a normal march,

advancing in a long, snaking formation. They should have had no way of knowing at what point along their marching column he would strike—not to mention whether he'd do so from their left or right side.

Had their scouts spotted and tracked him?

No, that definitely couldn't have happened.

The incredible speed and mobility of the Independent Cavalry Regiment was one of its defining features.

Even if spotted by scouts, the Regiment could reach the enemy army formation before the scouts could make it back on foot to report them.

Even if Hveðrungr did allow for the possibility that scouts had somehow managed to alert them of his presence, it still shouldn't have given them enough time to prepare a trap as elaborate as this.

"Grrh, this doesn't make any sense!" Hveðrungr growled. "But I guess there's no point dwelling on that right now."

As he spoke, the enemy ambush had already cut off the direction his men had come from—in other words, their escape route. They were surrounded.

At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before they were wiped out.

He didn't have any time to waste hesitating.

"All troops, forward charge! We're going to break right through them!"

Hveðrungr unsheathed the blade strapped at his waist, and riding to lead his formation from the front, he plunged into the enemy forces head-on.

If death is certain, then I shall at least die with valor. ...Naturally, such heroic and resigned thinking could not have been further from Hveðrungr's mind.

He'd made this decision precisely because he saw this as the only chance for his survival.

His opponent was a massive army.

Just as there were frontline commanders with true talent and skill among its ranks, there were those without it.

Yggdrasil was a meritocratic society centered around rule by the strong, so

appointments of people without any ability to positions of authority was certainly infrequent. Of course, every person had their own strong and weak areas.

Someone who climbed the ranks thanks to their skill in combat would not necessarily have the ability to command others efficiently.

Not to mention, this army was formed by hastily combining the soldiers of several different clans.

There would be difficulties in communication and coordination between the squads from different nations.

The signs of those weaknesses were only visible in very subtle details, such as tiny irregularities in the movements of the soldiers. Those tells were something that any ordinary person would miss—that even someone with experience and training would miss—but Hveðrungr was able to seek out and spot them with precision.

Indeed, this was only possible through the incredible powers of perception that Yuuto had such high regard for.

His riders attacked using the arrowhead formation, focusing all of their energy into a narrow point, and that likely tipped the scale.

After a fierce battle, the Independent Cavalry Regiment broke through the enemy lines to the other side and subsequently made their escape.

Once they were no longer surrounded, they could move however they wished. Utilizing the mobility provided by their horses, they easily outpaced any attempts at pursuit, and though they had suffered some casualties, they'd succeeded in cutting their way free of a deadly trap.

Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of the terror that would befall them, as they would soon come to learn.

"Pheew! That was horrible!"

"Gah! Every sip I try to take of this kumis makes my damned wounds hurt even more."

“So stop drinking it, then.”

“Shut the hell up! You think I can go without a drink after all that?”

Deep in the forest in the dead of night, the men of the Independent Cavalry Regiment were gathered around tiny campfires, arguing and joking in their usual boisterous manner.

They spoke rather crudely to one another, but it was all in good spirits.

After barely escaping the battle that morning, the Regiment had gone back into hiding in the thick forests near Dauwe Castle, where they were currently resting in order to heal up from that ordeal.

“Hey, keep in mind you’ve got to fight tomorrow too. Don’t go too wild tonight.”

The one who threw cold water on their revelry was, of course, their commander Hveðrungr.

“Heh heh, don’t worry sir, we know.”

“Hah, this doesn’t even count as ‘drinking’ for me.”

“Plus, c’mon, when it’s this chilly out, without a little drink or two to heat up the blood, a guy could catch a cold and end up in even worse shape to fight in the morning!”

The harvest season had passed, and it was well into the middle of the autumn months.

It was already the time of year when the cold started to make it difficult to sleep outside at night, and to add to that, they were camping in the highlands of eastern Bifröst, where it got even colder still.

They couldn’t make large bonfires due to the risk of revealing their location to the enemy, either. And so, Hveðrungr had decided to permit his men to drink a small amount of alcohol to help them cope.

“They sure do respect you a great deal,” a man remarked, walking up beside Hveðrungr.

He was Bömburr, the deputy commander of the Múspell Special Forces, who

had been assigned as a ‘watchdog’ to monitor him during this mission.

He wasn’t anything extraordinary when it came to combat ability, but his main role within the Special Forces was in keeping them organized and coordinated, and as such, he was good at paying close attention to people. It would be safe to assume that even Hveðrungr wouldn’t be able to plot anything treacherous under his watchful eye.

Of course, Hveðrungr had no intention of doing so. At least, not right now, anyway.

“Speaking frankly, Lord Hveðrungr, I’d been a little worried about whether the Regiment members would follow your orders, but it would seem my anxiety was misplaced.”

“Hmph,” Hveðrungr snorted dismissively, and took a small drink from his own cup.

It wasn’t as if Bömburr’s doubt was something he couldn’t understand.

Soldiers fought with their lives on the line. They wouldn’t be expected to follow someone into battle who lacked the strength of character to prove themselves worthy of commanding them.

Hveðrungr had always lost battle after battle against Yuuto: the Battle of Náströnd, the Battle of Körmt River, and then the battles during the final Steel Clan invasion campaign against them. All told, his side had suffered quite a large number of wounded and dead.

He’d been outfoxed by the enemy this time, too, and it wouldn’t have been odd at all if some of the men began to resent the idea of following his orders.

“Haha! You’ve got nothin’ to worry about there!”

“That’s right. We know exactly how great this guy is because we’ve fought so long at his side.”

“Yeah, he conquered all of western Miðgarðr in just one year. Man, that sure was somethin’ else.”

“As for the battles against the Steel Clan... well, he just ended up with the worst enemy possible. That’s the only way I can put it.”

“Yeah, true. They used those walls made of wagons, and those exploding thunder balls—nobody could win against stuff like that!”

“But even still, this guy worked out a bunch of different ways to counter them. Can you believe it?”

“He really is amazing.”

The Regiment members all took turns singing Hveðrungr’s praises.

Hveðrungr let slip a wry chuckle.

“Heh heh, it’s no use; I can tell exactly what you’re all thinking. Even if you flatter me, I’m not giving you any extra alcohol.”

“Damn! You’re no fun, Father!”

“Ugh, shows what I get for praising you!”

“All right, then, how ’bout we don’t follow your orders unless you give us more to drink?”

“Yeah, there’s an idea!”

And with that, the atmosphere around the Regiment camp grew even rowdier.

It was a scene that left Bömburr, as well as the other Múspell members present, completely taken aback.

The Wolf Clan under Yuuto had been a nation of rule by law, and that had continued on into the new reign of the Steel Clan. The Steel Clan was very harsh when it came to discipline in the military, and that was even more true of the culture of the Múspell Special Forces, owing to the personality of its commander, Sigrún.

From their perspective, the idea of soldiers taking this sort of attitude with their commander and the former ruler of their nation was absolutely unforgivable.

“They, ah... that’s certainly a very informal culture in your ranks.”

“Heh, that’s because the men of Miðgarðr are rough and wild, and ‘etiquette’ is a foreign concept to them.”

“Ah, I see...” Bömburr could only respond with a vague nod.

Apparently even the deputy commander of the Múspell Special Forces had been thrown off by the difference in cultures.

“Still, they *are* loyal to their orders,” Hveðrungr continued. “There won’t be any... hm?”

Hveðrungr cut himself off when he heard an unexpected sound: a large group of birds all taking flight at once. He peered suspiciously up at the night sky.

Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have allowed himself to dwell on it, quickly returning to the conversation.

However, after the incident earlier that day, there was a strange uneasiness within him, something he couldn’t explain.

There were, of course, some birds that moved around at night, but for the most part, birds flew only during the day.

“Hey, all of you, get yourselves ready to move out. Leki, Skola, go search in the direction those birds came from.”

“Got it.”

“Aye-aye, sir.”

The two men he’d given the orders to mounted their horses and set off in the direction Hveðrungr indicated.

Birds were easily startled by small disturbances and reacted to each other, so that if one took off in surprise, the whole flock did so as well. The usual causes were a predatory bird or beast moving nearby. In all likelihood, that was all it had been this time as well.

However, there was nothing to lose by choosing to be extra cautious here.

As it would turn out, that choice determined the fate of the Independent Cavalry Regiment that night.

A short while passed, and then—

“Father! It’s the enemy! They’re coming this way, and there’s a whole lot of them!”

The men he'd sent out as scouts came rushing back to camp yelling about news of an impending attack.

"Rrrgh, damn it all!" Hveðrungr spat out bitterly. "How is it they know where we are?!"

After he'd led his men free of the enemy ambush and away from the battle area, he'd made doubly sure to confirm that no one was still chasing them. On top of that, once all of the enemy soldiers were completely out of sight, he'd even gone to the trouble of changing up the Regiment's travel route as well.

Just as his foes had predicted both the time and location of his surprise attack that morning, this too seemed completely nonsensical.

"Either way, we're pulling out, now!"

Shouting that order, Hveðrungr mounted his own steed and spurred it into a run.

Thanks to his earlier orders, the men of the Regiment were fully prepared, and they quickly fell in line riding behind him.

The value of these initial actions cannot be understated.

If, for instance, Hveðrungr had ignored the sound of the birds, he would undoubtedly have been hit directly by his enemy's surprise assault, and the Regiment would have sustained terrible losses.

However, the struggles for the Regiment did not end there.

Whenever they tried to conduct their sudden attacks, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army was ready and waiting with fully-prepared ambushes that seemed tailor-made for each situation.

No matter where they tried to run off to afterwards, the enemy easily discovered their location, and launched surprise attacks of their own.

"What sort of mastermind is behind this?! How could anyone see through us *this* clearly?!"

At the risk of stating the obvious, Hveðrungr lived in an era of history before things like aircraft and transceivers were invented. Searching for people was primarily dependent on manpower.

Though the Ash Clan was a small nation in relation to others, it was still a vast area to cover on foot.

The fact that his location and movements could be uncovered over and over like this was unthinkable within the bounds of common sense.

“It would be one thing for the gods who can look down on us from the heavens above, but humans are creatures who walk the earth. How could human eyes seek us out like this?!”

Hveðrungr felt a terrible, cold shiver run down his spine.

Heh heh heh, he has good intuition. Though, I’m sure he himself has no idea he gave the answer to his own question.

A small figure was looking down at Hveðrungr from up in the sky.

Spreading its wings out wide, it boldly followed right behind the man as he fled.

If that figure had been human—nay, if it had at least been anything following him over land—Hveðrungr, with his skills of perception, might have taken notice.

But the black feathers of a crow made it hard to spot against the sky in the dark of night. And right now, the man was being chased by his enemies, so he had no time to scan the sky for oddities in the first place.

And that was why he couldn’t have noticed.

This small creature had *always* been watching him.

It’s certainly true that you lot are the swiftest military unit in Yggdrasil, faster than anyone else in the realm by far. But even so, you aren’t fast enough to escape the all-seeing eye of the Watcher From on High.

The red eyes of the crow—Hárbarth’s eyes—betrayed a subtle hint of joy, twinkling faintly with a sinister light.

This was Hárbarth’s power: His spirit could possess and control the bodies of other living creatures.

However, that power still had limits. Generally, he could only take control of lesser creatures that lacked complex intelligence or a strong will.

When it came to other humans, it was basically impossible unless they were sleeping or otherwise unconscious, and even then, the instant the target's consciousness returned, his mind would be forcefully ejected. In that sense, his power was weak, imperfect.

However, the value of any tool lay in how one used it.

By projecting himself into small creatures like mice and squirrels, he could see into every nook and cranny of the imperial palace. By projecting himself into birds, he could monitor his enemies unseen from the skies above them, much like he was doing now.

It was the information he'd gathered using his power in this way that had facilitated his rise to his current position.

He'd exposed the secrets of his political enemies and robbed them of their public support, while leading foreign enemies to fall into his traps and adding to his military accomplishments. Over the long years, he'd accumulated and greatly expanded his authority.

Nowadays, Hárbarth's vast capacity for obtaining any and all information was well known to all, such that there was hardly anyone left in the core of the empire who would dare speak ill of him.

The þjóðann Sigrdrífa and the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél were perhaps the only exceptions to that. Of course, even the two of them were now his pawns, moving according to his will.

Heh heh heh, what a sight it was to behold. The power of Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, is magnificent indeed.

He had watched the battle play out at Dauwe Castle from beginning to end. Fagrahvél's rune could act upon an entire army at once, and in terms of swaying the momentum of an entire large-scale battle, no one else held power that could compare—except for Hárbarth himself, with his ability to monitor all of the enemy's troop positions and movements from the skies.

Either one of them alone was already a most terrible threat, and now the

both of them had joined forces.

Furthermore, they could make the most of their powers thanks to the array of competent generals leading their armies.

The preparations for this had been flawless.

Keh heh heh, everything is set. At last, the Black One will meet his end here.

The cawing of a crow resounded in the darkness of the forest, echoing loudly.

To the fleeing members of the Independent Cavalry Regiment, it was an ominous sound—like the laughter of a harbinger of their misfortune.

ACT 4

Across the world and throughout history, there has been a certain tradition in the noble households of many cultures: After giving birth, rather than nursing her newborn child herself, the mother would give over the baby to be nursed by another woman who had also recently given birth.

Through this process, a familial relationship would be formed between children who, while not strictly related by blood, had been raised through infancy by the same woman and nursed at the same breast. These were known as “milk siblings,” and as their families were frequently linked through the hierarchy of the nobility, they would often go on to spend their lives together, one in service to the other, and they shared a close, special bond between them that was as powerful as that of true brothers and sisters.

Fagrahvél was Sigrdrífa’s milk sibling and truly loved her as a sister, despite understanding that such feelings were improper to hold towards someone so much higher in status.

Furthermore, Sigrdrífa had been born cursed with a body that could not be exposed to direct sunlight, which gave her no end of difficulties.

I will protect her.

Fagrahvél had first sworn that as a young child. Deep down, some part of Fagrahvél believed that that moment, and the path that led out from it, had been destined to occur from the very beginning.

The turning point of that destiny had come later—six years ago, now...

“Fate is strange, isn’t it? I, the worthless failure, am now the þjóðann.”

The previous þjóðann had died unexpectedly, and Fagrahvél’s milk sister Sigrdrífa suddenly became the successor to the throne.

Under ordinary circumstances, her biological older brother should have been next in the line of proper succession.

However, by whatever trick of fate, the twin runes of Ásgarðr—symbols of the right to rule over the Holy Ásgarðr Empire and proof of the þjóðann's true successor—had appeared in Sigrdrífa's eyes instead.

"Such is the wisdom of the great Ymir, Your Majesty. He must have understood your deep heart and extraordinary strength of character."

It was not flattery, but what Fagrahvél truly believed.

True, Sigrdrífa was weak in body and spent many days unable to leave her bed.

However, her intellect was strong to make up for that, and she was an avid learner.

In her first ten years of life, she had educated herself in politics and governance, religious rites, history, and the complicated spells of seiðr magic. The breadth and depth of her knowledge was enough to amaze Fagrahvél, seven years her senior.

Her biological brother, on the other hand, was completely different.

He held no interest in government, nor did he devote any effort to his studies. He merely used his authority and influence as a member of the imperial family to serve his own selfish desires, filling his days with parties, drink, and women.

There was no need to even compare the two of them. It was clear who was more deserving to become the þjóðann.

Sigrdrífa might not be able to charge across the fields of battle, leading armies to victory, but by ruling the empire with sound and wise governance, she could bring its citizens an age of peace and stability.

Fagrahvél absolutely believed her to be capable of that, even if perhaps that came from a place of bias as her milk sibling. Fagrahvél held a sense of pride in her... as an older sister would.

Sigrdrífa, however, responded with a dry laugh, full of what seemed like a grim sense of resignation.

"Ha ha... Character is of little relevance for a decorative figurehead."

"Your Majesty, that's..."

“Hmph, that is the reality, whatever language you might try to dress it in. True authority over this empire is no longer held by the þjóðann. It is held by that hideous, despicable old man.”

Sigrdrífa spat out the words with bitter loathing in her voice.

The Spear Clan patriarch, Hárbarth.

The average lifespan in Yggdrasil was around fifty years, but that old man was well on his way to reaching eighty, and he was still somehow as cunning and full of energy as ever. It seemed almost supernatural.

Over the past twenty years, Hárbarth had expanded his influence within the imperial court and government, and only a few days ago, he had obtained the position of Imperial High Priest, unprecedented and unusual for someone who was already a vassal lord.

The Imperial High Priest wielded the greatest religious authority and responsibility over the empire’s sacred rites of worship to the gods. As the Holy Ásgarðr Empire was a theocracy, that meant that he also held the position of highest political authority within the imperial government.

And the fact that Hárbarth’s brazen power grab had been allowed in the first place was a testament to how overwhelming his influence within the empire had finally grown—and to how much the real authority of the þjóðann had waned.

“So, have you heard? That old man is putting *himself* forward as a candidate to be my husband, and trying to force the decision through.”

“Wha—?!” Fagrahvél was stunned speechless.

This was completely out of the blue.

“But he is old enough to be your great grandfather...”

“Yes. Well, that is one issue with it that’s serving to stall his efforts a bit, but in the end, I still expect things will go his way.”

Sigrdrífa sighed, staring off into the distance.

There was no light in her eyes. It was as if she’d already given up on life.



Why is it that she is always plagued by misfortune?!

Fagrahvél's teeth clenched tightly in indignation.

Sickly from the day she was born. Unable to walk outside in the sunlight. Shunned even by her own biological parents because of her peculiar appearance. Avoided by members of the imperial court due to her reputation as a shunned child. And now, forced to marry such a horrible old man. This was too much. It was unjust.

"Well, we are talking about six years from now, when I come of age. I am sure that old man will do us a favor and die off before then, and the issue will be moot."

Sigrdrífa said this with a playful tone, perhaps in response to how grim Fagrahvél's expression had become.

But that did not clear the clouds from over Fagrahvél's heart.

It was true that Hárbarth was very old.

Common sense would hold that it was more likely than not that he would pass away sometime over the next six years.

However, he'd already accomplished something miraculous just by having lived to his current age.

Fagrahvél couldn't imagine a future where that strange, creepy old man died so easily.

"...Your Majesty."

"Mm? What is it? You're making a scary face."

"I would like to request some time away from your service."

"Wha?! Wh-What's with you all of a sudden?!"

Up until this point, Sigrdrífa's expression had been cold and unchanging, but now she was flustered, and raising her voice.

She didn't want Fagrahvél to leave her side.

That emotion was communicated so clearly with her reaction, and it filled

Fagrahvél with both happiness and a sense of pride.

That was precisely why Fagrahvél *needed* to be apart from her now.

“As I am now, I lack the power I need to oppose that old man in any effective way. During these next six years, I shall obtain that power without fail. A power that will protect you from any and all who would do you ill.”

Afterwards, through the political connections of Fagrahvél’s father, Fagrahvél was able to be sworn in as a new member of the Sword Clan and spent the following months and years striving desperately to earn military achievements that would grant an elevated status within the clan.

Finally, the year before last, Fagrahvél ascended to the position of patriarch of the Sword Clan and made a triumphant return to the imperial capital.

All of it had been for the sake of protecting Fagrahvél’s precious little sister.

And so, more time passed...

“The ruler of the Steel Clan, Suoh-Yuuto. The one calling himself the ‘reginarch.’ He is actually... the Black One of prophecy.”

“Wha?!”

Fagrahvél was so shocked that at first she doubted her ears. She then found herself cursing the great god Ymir for shouldering her little sister with such a cruel destiny.

The Black One.

It was an enigmatic name which first emerged when the first þjóðann, Wotan, had requested of the oracle and priestess Völva that she divine the empire’s future. It was suggested in her prophecy that the Black One would cause the destruction of the empire.

The first man for whom Fagrahvél’s little sister had held romantic feelings in her tender heart—he, of all people, was the ultimate nemesis who threatened the empire!

Fagrahvél had prayed that this was all some sort of mistake.

However, in the records of Völva’s prophecy left behind, there were too many

lines that matched up perfectly with the history and actions of the lord of the Steel Clan.

The terrible weight of that knowledge on Sigrdrífa was probably the reason that her behavior lately was so strange, too, as if she'd become a different person...

"I am so sorry for the pain you are going through, Lady Rífa... Ah!"

Fagrahvél was awakened by the sound of her own voice, crying out in her sleep.

She was in a small, dark, cramped space.

She could hear the rumbling and clacking sounds of wagon wheels, and feel the vibrations from the bumps in the ground.

Apparently, she was in a covered horse-drawn carriage.

"Oooh, you are finally awaaake?"

Sitting next to Fagrahvél, Bára flashed a bright smile.

"It seems I was having a dream of days long past," Fagrahvél whispered, looking up at the carriage ceiling.

The change in the level of sluggishness in her body served to inform her of how many days had passed. It seemed she had been asleep for more than just one or two days.

She felt guilty for having made Bára and her other child subordinates worry about her.

However, she had also been able to reaffirm her life's mission.

She would eliminate anyone who would cause harm or suffering to her little sister.

It mattered not whether that person was the conquering lord of a rising superpower nation like Suoh-Yuuto, or an old man who ruled the empire from the shadows with strange, monstrous powers, like Hárbarth.

Fagrahvél would accomplish her mission, even if it cost her life in exchange for it.

With that oath sworn in her heart anew, Fagrahvél held out her hand in front of her and clenched it tightly into a fist.

“Such fearsome foes... Why didn’t you wake me up sooner?!”

That reproachful shout was the first and immediate reaction Fagrahvél had once Bára had finished explaining the state of their troops, and the events that had taken place while Fagrahvél was unconscious.

She had previously heard rumors of warriors within the Steel Clan that fought from on horseback, and that their army had a unit made up entirely of those mounted fighters, but she could not suppress a frightful shudder at actually hearing about the results of facing them in battle.

And while such a difficult foe had been attacking, the commander of the army had been asleep. It was an inexcusable dereliction of duty.

She felt so guilty towards her sworn children, and their sworn children, all of whom had entrusted their lives to her.

“Oh, it’s fiiine. After all, even if you had been awaaake, there would have been nothing really for you to dooo.”

“Ngh.” Fagrahvél was not amused by such a blunt remark from Bára and let slip a sullen grunt.

As always, Fagrahvél’s sworn daughter was far too unrestrained and familiar in the way she spoke to her sworn parent.

Bára was Fagrahvél’s childhood friend. They had grown up together, even studying together at the same desk at a school in the imperial capital, Glaðsheimr.

Even after swearing the Oath of the Chalice as parent and child, that relationship hadn’t really changed.

Of course, Fagrahvél was actually quite happy that Bára had remained this way, treating Fagrahvél as she always had.

For a clan patriarch, a figure of absolute authority, having someone like Bára around who didn’t mince words was essential for being able to properly reflect

on one's actions, but people like her were rare.

"Hmph, w-well, from what you describe, it might be true that my rune would have been a bit of a poor match against foes like that." Begrudgingly, Fagrahvél conceded Bára's point.

Honestly, upon hearing the description of these riders luring soldiers to chase them as they fled, then turning around to shoot backwards at them, it had sent a chill down Fagrahvél's spine.

Against opponents like that, no matter how much one magically enhanced the morale of the troops, it wouldn't have mattered one bit. No, in fact, it would only have pushed them to chase the riders further, leading to even greater casualties.

As if she'd picked up on Fagrahvél's feelings, Bára offered another gentle smile.

"A 'bit' of a poor match?" she said, without mercy.

"Oh, be quiet already!" Fagrahvél yelled.

Fagrahvél was normally a very rational and controlled person, who rarely if ever yelled, even at subordinates. But she let her guard down around this one person, her trusted childhood friend.

"If I couldn't be of use to everyone before, then I'll just make up for that starting now!" Fagrahvél shouted confidently.

Fagrahvél and Bára had been rivals since they were children, competing over grades and the like. Maybe because talking like this with Bára brought back memories of that time, it also brought out the competitive streak in Fagrahvél from back then, too.

"Tee hee, oh, I'm looking forward to thaaat. Sooo, how is your body feeliiing?"

"Hm? Well, it still feels a little heavy, so I can't exactly say I'm back on form, but I'm already much better than I was before. I shouldn't have any problems taking command."

"Okaaay, then you still need to take it easy and reeest. I'll fill in for yooou."

“No, that’s not going to work. If the commander of the army is constantly stuck in bed, the troops aren’t going to...”

Before Fagrahvél could finish that line of argument, Bára’s finger gently pressed against her lips.

“You really are too serious for your own goood. Weeell, I know that’s one of the qualities that draws people to you, but just this once, I want you to compromise on that just a little bit for me, okaaay?”

“Nggh...”

“The most important job for the commander of the army is to win the waaar. There’s nothing more important than thaaat.”

The commander of the army was someone who had a great number of lives entrusted to their care.

And so, their job was to claim victory by any method necessary. The loftiest goals and most honorable character amounted to nothing in the event of defeat.

Fagrahvél understood that on a rational level.

“Yes, you’re right.”

“And in order to do thaaat, your highest priority is to reeest, so that you are back in good health before the Steel Clan arriiives. That power of yours is our greatest weapon, riiight? It’s fine if we end up not having to use iiit. But this is Suoh-Yuuto we’re facing, riiight?”

“...All right.”

After a few more moments of hesitation, at last Fagrahvél nodded, her brow furrowed, and a look of consternation washed over her face.

Honestly, she couldn’t say she’d fully accepted it on an emotional level, but just as Bára had said, their opponent was who he was. And there was the oath she’d sworn anew to herself. It was true that facing him fully prepared and at full strength was the right thing to do.

“Tee hee hee, weeell, you can just leave it to me to prepare the stage for youuu. Before the Steel Clan army arrives, we’ll capture Vígríðr even without

youuu.”

Four days after departing from Dauwe Castle, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army reached the Ash Clan capital Vígríðr and steadily began surrounding it.

Everything was unfolding right on schedule.

Starting from the second day onward, the sudden assaults from the enemy cavalry unit had died down. After they’d started running into a perfectly-arranged ambush every time they attacked, it seemed they’d learned their lesson.

According to a report from Alexis, they were currently camped in an area far to the rear, back in the direction the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army had come from.

The great distance they’d put between the army and themselves spoke to how wary they were of them now.

It didn’t exactly feel good to know that an enemy force was situated to the army’s rear, but for now there was no choice but to leave them be.

The enemy cavalry were, above all else, extremely fast when they needed to run away. Sending a detached unit to go after them was possible, but chances were that they would only come up empty-handed after a fruitless chase.

Besides, as soon as they moved from that spot, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army would know about it.

The smartest thing to do, then, was to leave them alone unless they made a move, and then simply react with the appropriate counter.

And so, the most important order of business was to capture the city of Vígríðr.

If the Steel Clan’s main army marched all the way up here just to protect the Ash Clan, only to find that their capital had already fallen, that would certainly deliver a shocking blow to Steel Clan troop morale and worsen their exhaustion.

That drop in morale would then work very well in the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army’s favor during the decisive showdown. It was thus important to capture

this city by any means necessary.

“Thinking nooormally, it should take around another fifteen days until the Steel Clan’s main army arriiives. Still, that patriarch of theirs is known for defying common sense, so maybe we should work off a deadline of half of that tiiime.”

Muttering to herself, Bára attempted to organize her thoughts.

“Then that meeeans... another seven or eight daaays. Hmm, the patriarch should be fully recovered by theeen. Okaaay, the only remaining question iiis... just how should we capture this cityyy?”

Staring out at the towering walls of the city in the distance, Bára mulled over the problem.

She’d made a show of telling Fagrahvél to rest easy and leave things to her, but in truth, she didn’t have a particular plan in mind for conquering the city.

She’d just assumed that once she got here and took a look at the city, some idea or another would surely come to her, and she’d staked her confident assertions on that.

Put another way, that meant that this way of thinking hadn’t caused problems for her before, because in most situations, she *did* come up with some idea that worked.

This time was no exception.

She suddenly clapped her hands together.

“Now that I think about iiit, there are some people perfect for thiiis. We might as well wipe them all out at ooonce.”

“Father! The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army has broken up their formation encircling Vígríðr, and they’re headed back towards Dauwe!”

“What?! What are they doing?!”

Hveðrungr responded with shock and suspicion to his scout’s report.

His clothes were torn in several places, most likely by bladed weapons, and

beneath those tears one could spot bandages that, presumably, were stained with blood.

Thanks to Hveðrungr's extraordinary skills of perception and the Independent Cavalry Regiment's ability to direct its attack power effectively in a mounted charge, they had now broken free of enemy forces that completely encircled them no less than three times. However, they hadn't done so unscathed.

The three thousand elite mounted warriors were already reduced to two thousand, and though Hveðrungr himself did not have wounds that put his life at risk, he was in no shape to fight with his usual strength.

"I don't got a clue, sir... Maybe they decided they couldn't capture Vígríðr, and gave up on it?"

"No, that's not possible. The army that captured Dauwe Castle in a day isn't going to shrink back from the challenge of conquering Vígríðr."

"Huh... Then, maybe something major happened back in their homeland?"

"Hm." Hveðrungr paused.

That wasn't completely out of the question.

Hveðrungr himself had heard of an instance where a clan's invading army had been fighting well, one step away from total conquest over their foes, only to stop and head back to their own borders upon receiving the news that their patriarch had suddenly passed away.

Could it perhaps be that good fortune had visited that sort of rare emergency upon his enemies now?

That seemed far too optimistic a way to look at it.

"Continue to monitor them carefully. And stay vigilant. If you notice any changes, let me know right away."

"Yessir."

"All right, what are they planning this time?"

Hveðrungr muttered to himself as he looked up into the sky.

From what he'd seen so far, he knew that this foe preferred using wily

strategy.

He still had no concrete idea what their newest scheme was, but he was practically certain that the enemy troop movements now were a part of it.

The next change occurred the following day.

“The enemy’s split their forces in two! It looks like one half of them’s going to try to circle around behind us.”

“I see now. So when they first headed toward Dauwe, that was to keep us from realizing they were going to do this.”

If the enemy came after the Regiment head-on, all the Regiment had to do was flee.

The enemy would be fully aware of that as well.

So, they’d initially set out on a route towards Dauwe Castle as a feint so they could move behind the position of the Regiment’s camp, and now they were splitting into two groups so that they could also cut off any escape route.

“Tch!” Hveðrungr clicked his tongue bitterly in frustration. “And it confirms they still have access to knowledge of our exact position.”

In other words, even at this very moment, they were somehow watching Hveðrungr and his men from somewhere.

It was discomforting enough to know that, but even worse, Hveðrungr was frustrated with himself over the fact that he couldn’t discern where they were watching from.

“At this rate, we’re constantly reacting one step behind them. If only we could find some sort of clue as to how to counter them effectively...”

“All squads, are you in your positions? Then begin the attack!”

“Yeaaaaahhhh!”

As Fagrahvél gave the command and gestured with one hand, a chorus of exuberant war cries rose up and filled the air, and the soldiers took off running, the ground rumbling beneath them.

After watching them go, Fagrahvél let out a long breath and sat down in a chair.

“Good jooob. Sorry about thiiis. If I was the only one giving the orders, the Sword Clan soldiers might be fiiine, but the ones from other clans might start complaaaining.”

As she said this, Bára offered Fagrahvél a cup of hot milk.

Assumedly, the meaning behind it was, *Okay, you’ve done what you needed to, now drink this and get back to bed!* ...or something to that effect.

Fagrahvél couldn’t help feeling that Bára was increasingly overprotective lately.

Perhaps she’d grown worried about the added strain caused by using the power of Gjallarhorn on an army of thirty thousand.

“No, it’s no trouble for me at all,” Fagrahvél replied. “Actually, being able to do some amount of work is better at helping me relax.”

It wasn’t a remark made to justify forcing herself—it was how Fagrahvél sincerely felt.

When doing nothing except lying still in bed, she ended up unable to calm down, and thus unable to get good rest.

This was the kind of thing that made Bára and the other child subordinates always chide her with remarks like, “You’re far too serious!”

“So, do you think it will work?”

“Weeell, we did everything we coooould. All that’s left is to see how it turns ooout.”

“My lord! The enemy is fleeing!”

A messenger quickly arrived with a report.

“Hm, just as you said they would.”

“It seems sooo. Though, seeing as they’re running away without even trying to turn around and shoot at uuus, it shows just how cautious they are of us nooow.”

They'd fallen into one trap after another and suffered for it.

They knew their movements were also an open book the whole time.

In a situation like that, they'd surely figured the last thing they wanted was to attack again and fall into yet another painful trap that weakened them further. It was a perfectly natural reaction.

"Then we'll keep things on schedule. All troops, continue the advance!"

"It's no good. Father! That route's been blockaded by enemy soldiers!"

"Father! This one's cut off too!"

"Heh, I can't even bother to be surprised at this point..." Hveðrungr said, looking up at the sky with a grin, as if he found his own situation comical.

The Ash Clan was a nation in the ravine-filled mountain highlands.

Naturally, that meant there were a finite number of routes through which one could lead a formation of two thousand soldiers. With the abundant manpower of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, sealing all of them would be no difficult task.

At least, that would be true if this wasn't enemy territory for them.

"What a truly uncanny foe. So, they somehow have a thorough understanding of the entire geography of a foreign nation."

Hveðrungr would perhaps not have found that incredulous if, for example, this invasion had been carefully planned over a span of ten or more years, but the reality was that not even a month had passed since the issuing of the empire's subjugation order against the Steel Clan.

And while the Cloud and Fang Clans had long warred for territory with the Ash Clan, invading anything west of Dauwe would require them to capture Dauwe Castle first, something which they hadn't been able to do until now. It would be strange, then, for them to have obtained any detailed strategic information about the territory beyond that point.

"Well, ironically enough, thanks to this I can tell exactly what our foe is up to."

There was exactly one route that had been left untouched—the main road leading directly to the city of Vígríðr.

The strength of a cavalry unit was foremost in its mobility.

It was precisely because of that superior mobility that, despite the overwhelming disadvantage of the enemy having full knowledge of their position and movements, the Regiment had still been able to escape one close call after another.

However, if they were driven behind the city walls of Vígríðr, they wouldn't be able to make full use of that strength, and they'd also be left with nowhere to escape to.

The enemy must have come to the conclusion that the Regiment cavalry would then be trapped like rats, and could be wiped out along with the Vígríðr troops when the city fell.

"Still, the other routes are hardly an option."

Assaulting the soldiers that were blocking off one of the other viable routes and trying to force a path through *was* technically an option, but it was likely that other Anti-Steel Clan Alliance forces would quickly reach their current position during the fight.

After all, as stated previously, the Regiment's movements were completely visible to the enemy.

There was a very high chance that no matter which of the alternate routes Hveðrungr chose, the soldiers blockading that particular one would be heavily reinforced by the time he reached them.

And that wasn't all... If the main force of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army was able to close in behind them while his men struggled in combat, they could be trapped completely in a pincer without any way to escape.

As Hveðrungr thought more on this, he suddenly smiled and snapped his fingers.

"Heh! In that case, perhaps I'll give them exactly what they want. That should be real fun..."

“Phew, fiiinally, that troublesome little grouuup is forced into the cage with the rest of theeem. What a relief that iiis.”

Bára watched the enemy cavalry unit entering the walls of Vígríðr with a full-faced grin, nodding to herself in satisfaction.

In truth, for Bára, taking care of the problem posed by these cavalry soldiers before the Steel Clan’s main army arrived was even more important than capturing Vígríðr.

Even with the assistance of Hárbarth’s “eyes,” those mounted warriors still presented an enormous threat thanks to their high mobility and powerful assaults.

In particular, there was the potential scenario where, while the Anti-Steel Clan Army was occupied in full-scale combat with the Steel Clan Army, the riders rushed in to attack from the rear. Even if Bára’s allies knew they were coming beforehand, there was a good chance the soldiers on the field still wouldn’t be able to react in time.

That’s why she had wanted to crush them now and eliminate any worries of a threat from behind.

“So, things have gone well so far.”

Beside her, Fagrahvél stared out at the walls of Vígríðr with a grim expression.

Her unease and agitation were plain as day.

Bára placed a hand on Fagrahvél’s shoulder. “Erna and the others will succeed,” she said. “I’m sure of it.”

Indeed, Bára’s scheme did not end here.

In fact, the crux of it was only just beginning to unfold.

In Vígríðr, the night air was filled with the crackling sound of burning wood.

As the city was in the middle of a defensive siege during a war, there were torches everywhere, such that the city was brightly lit even at night.

The city streets and the walkways atop the outer walls were patrolled by soldiers non-stop, bringing about an imposing atmosphere that made the once-lively city seem like a different place entirely.

In the midst of all that, three figures moved quietly among the shadows.

They kept hidden in the pockets of darkness, timing their movements to the moments when they would be in the blind spots of the nearby soldiers, and moving from cover to cover without making a sound.

“There really is no one like Bára when it comes to thinking up sneaky little operations like this.” Once she’d entered into an alleyway and confirmed that no soldiers were nearby, one of those figures, Erna, whispered this to no one in particular.

She was cloaked in an outfit that was very different from usual, made with deerskins and ornamented with bird feathers.

It was one of several she’d “borrowed” off of the enemy cavalry she’d defeated over the course of several battles with them.

With it, she’d been able to slip in amongst the cavalry soldiers who were making their way towards the city, allowing her to enter Vígríðr, where she had silently bided her time, until now.

“Are you sure you want to say something like thaaat? I could always tell on yooou.”

“Wha—Hrönn, whose side are you on exactly?!”

“With all due respect, Erna, Bára is way scarier than you are,” Hrönn quipped bluntly and without a second’s pause.

Her hair was tied in two bunches to the left and right, and her face still retained small hints of childishness in its features, but she was an Einherjar and a full-fledged member of the Maidens of the Waves.

A third voice, low and chilly, cut in. “Both of you, no unnecessary conversation. We’re in the middle of a sneaking mission.”

Erna and Hrönn both hurriedly covered their mouths and nodded several times.

The owner of that cold voice stepped forward out of the darkness, revealing herself to the other two. She was an older woman in the prime of her beauty, with long, silver hair down to her waist that made a strong visual impression.

However, in contrast to the allure of her slender, gorgeous figure, the reaction of the other two women to her made it clear that she was frightening to them.

And it was only natural that she would be, for she was the fierce leader of the Maidens of the Waves, and the one who had taught the art of combat to Erna and Hrönn. She was Thír, the Icy Beauty.

She had previously been assigned to act as guard and escort for the þjóðann Sigrdrífa, showing just how much Fagrahvél trusted in her skill.

Incidentally, she was the oldest member of the Maidens of the Waves by a longshot, at least forty years old, but anyone would tell you she looked very much like she was still in her mid-twenties.

After a moment, she let out a sigh. “I wonder if you two may have been the wrong choice for this mission,” she said, staring at both of them intently.

Right now the three of them were conducting a top-secret mission given to them by Bára.

Their objective was to open the city gate, allowing their allies to enter.

It would be too difficult to plant more than a small number of saboteurs among the soldiers entering the city, so Thír’s two juniors had been singled out for the mission by virtue of their combat abilities, which were top class even compared to the other members of the Maidens of the Waves. However, they were both clearly unsuited to stealth operations.

“Well, complaining now won’t change anything. Both of you, let’s go.”

“Right.” Erna and Hrönn responded in unison.

“At least you both know how to give a prompt response,” Thír said, shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head.

The next moment, she had vanished from sight without making a sound.

She had suppressed her presence and blended in with the darkness.

“She’s as incredible as ever. I can’t tell where she is at all,” Hrönn said, glancing all around her.

“Stop lazing about. Do you want me to leave you behind?”

“CComing!”

Hrönn shuddered at the voice coming from out of seemingly nowhere and moved into action.

Even with the enhanced sensory perception of an Einherjar, she couldn’t sense Thír’s presence at all.

Erna and Hrönn were strong and full of youthful passion, but this was the skill of a master, something they couldn’t yet attain for themselves.

“...Hm, just as I thought. It’s relatively unguarded.”

Upon reaching the area in front of the main city gate, Thír stopped and calmly scanned her surroundings.

There looked to be only a few people standing close to the gate; five that she could see.

Meanwhile, high up on top of the wall, she could make out the silhouettes of a far larger number of people.

As she calmly continued to focus on the people above, she was able to discern that they were all facing the same way—outwards, towards the direction of the invading Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army. They weren’t directing any of their attention inside the walls.

Of course, that particular decision was the natural one to make. After all, an enemy attack would normally be coming from outside.

Keeping a squad of soldiers at the ready in the area in front of the gate even when there wasn’t any recorded enemy movement would just wear them down, and eventually, they’d be too fatigued to be useful when the time finally came for them to fight.

One of the core principles of siege defense was to make sure soldiers were given adequate rest when the situation permitted it.

Bára's plan was to take advantage of that and use it against them.

"All right, we're beginning the operation. Let's go."

Leaving those quiet words behind, Thír's figure once again melted into the darkness.

And, mere seconds later...

"I seriously can't catch a break here. I mean, I'm supposed to be getting married next month, you know? I wonder if we're even going to be able to have the ceremony with all this going on."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Huh? Who's—gakh?!"

Before the gate lookout could even turn around to locate the source of Thír's words, she had slit his throat with her dagger.

"Wh-Who goes... gaugh...!"

The soldier that the now-dead man had been speaking with, standing right across from him, reacted immediately, trying to draw his sword. But before he could complete the motion, he froze and grunted his last, a blade with a dull, silvery sheen now planted firmly in his chest.

It was an iron sword, another piece of equipment that Erna had seized from one of the cavalry.

"Ghh, an enemy attack?! E-Everyo—"

One of the other soldiers realized what was happening and attempted to shout, but Thír got to him first.

"You'll cause us problems if you're too loud, so how about you just stay silent?"

Blending into the darkness, she had circled around behind him, covered his mouth with one hand, and then slit his throat using the other.

"Aaaaugh, wh-what *are* these people?!"

"Th-They're way too strong!"

The faces of the remaining two lookouts were stretched taut with sheer terror. They both hurriedly began to flee.

“Deserting in the face of the enemy? Just pathetic.”

Erna darted forward, catching up to them in the blink of an eye, and the two of them both fell to her blade unceremoniously.

From beginning to end, Erna’s well-choreographed one-woman act of slaughter had played out in fewer than ten seconds.

“Wh... why couldn’t you leave anything for *me* to do?” Hrönn whined.

“You really think we had the time to spare for that?” Erna scolded back. “If they managed to call for backup, we’d be finished before we could even get started.”

“As it happens, the backup is here anyway, though.”

Out of nowhere, the man’s voice cut into their exchange like a knife, and they spun around, wide-eyed with shock.

The man standing there was someone Erna knew well. A strange man with his face hidden behind a dark mask.

“Hveðrungr...!”

“I’m so honored to find out the brave hero of the Sword Clan knows my name. Ah, did you learn it from Gerhard, perhaps?”

He addressed them in a smooth, very friendly tone.

That just made him all the more unsettling.

If she were being completely frank about it, there was something she sensed from him that was just like Bára.

As it turned out, that instinct was right on the mark.

“I owe you all *so much* for everything that’s happened over the past several days. And I’d love nothing more than to pay you back.”

Hveðrungr raised his right hand, and with that signal, a large number of soldiers began quietly filing out from the shadows.

There were at least a hundred of them!

“There were this many people hiding nearby and I couldn’t sense them... I was careless.” Thír seemed absolutely vexed by her failure.

“Heh heh... Well, the men of Miðgarðr make their livelihoods hunting wild game on the wide-open steppes,” Hveðrungr responded. He sounded as if he was enjoying himself quite a bit. “Concealing one’s presence is one of many skills they make their own. And the ones you see here are the best of the best even among their number. Why, it’s no wonder you couldn’t detect them.”

“Tch! Erna, Hrönn, withdraw for now!” Thír shouted the order, and the three Einherjar all took off running.

The enemy had been fully hidden until just moments ago, concealing their presences. Because of that, they hadn’t been able to completely encircle Thír’s group yet. Small openings still remained.

The three of them swiftly and deftly wove their way through those openings, escaping the net.

“Don’t think I’ll let you get away! Men, after them!”

At Hveðrungr’s command, his soldiers all quickly gave chase.

Even though they weren’t mounted on horseback, all of them possessed impressive leg strength, and they gave chase at high speed.

Thír and Hrönn were both Einherjar, but they did not have the superhuman leg strength that Erna had.

They couldn’t completely break free of their pursuers, and as they ran further and further, their lack of familiarity with the city’s layout was their undoing.

“Ah! A dead end?!”

One of the roads they turned down led right up to a solid wall.

The way they came was already packed with soldiers blocking their path, so backtracking to the last intersection wasn’t an option.

“Are we done playing our little game of tag now?”

The masked man wove his way through the soldiers blocking the three

Einherjar in and stepped out in front of them.

“Yes... it seems we are.”

Thír answered slowly, working to re-steady her breathing and replenish a bit of stamina.

Strive at all times to place yourself in the best, most prepared condition possible.

That was the warrior’s creed that Thír followed, and that she had taught to Erna and her other students.

“I am... impressed that you realized our plan. You knew we’d hidden ourselves among you and snuck into the city, and that we’d try to open the gate.”

“Heh heh, it’s because I’ve learned that the person commanding your armies has quite the taste for cunning strategy and tricks. I realized that simply gathering us here with everyone else in Vígríðr was too simple—it lacked any elegant twist. And that is when it hit me. You see, I once used this same plan myself at Gashina.”

“I see.”

And so, Hveðrungr had used that knowledge to set up an ambush, an act of revenge that deliberately mirrored what he’d suffered so far.

He had a real twisted personality to him.

“Oh, by the way, if you ever get the chance, I’d like you to pass along a message to that person for me. Tell them that there’s an amusing saying from a faraway country that goes: ‘The clever schemer falls prey to his own snare.’ Well, that’s assuming you do ever get the chance, of course.”

“...I’ll remember it, just in case.”

“Now, then, I think we’ve had enough banter. I don’t suppose you’d feel like giving yourselves up? I’m sure that restraining you three will be a real struggle for me, and I certainly don’t want to lose good men in the process. That would just be stupid. I can promise you that if you surrender now, you will be treated quite graciously. What do you think?”

Hveðrungr spread his arms out wide and practically whispered those final words with a cheerful smile.

His affected kindness just made him even more off-putting.

If he was aiming for that effect on purpose, then he really *did* have a twisted personality. Thír got the impression more and more that this man would probably enjoy conversing with Bára.

“However, if you should choose to fight back... In that case, oh, I do hope you’re prepared for pain. After all, there’s so many secrets we need to get out of you... for instance, just how you were able to track the position and movements of me and my men.”

The masked man showed his true colors at last, his lips curling up into a sneer. He was little more than a masked demon now.

“So, that is what you’re after.”

Knowing that the enemy was infiltrating the city, and allowing them to do so anyway, was making a fairly serious and risky wager. In other words, he must have considered it worth taking on that risk in order to unravel the mystery that frustrated him.

And, in fact, he was largely right in his judgment.

Without doing something to mitigate the advantage of that “power,” the Steel Clan surely had no chance of victory.

This man was intellectually sharp, forward-thinking, brave, strong in a fight, and bold to boot.

Even as his enemy, Thír found him impressive.

However, she also knew that when it came to truly sharp and cunning intellect, there was a demon even more fearsome than he.

“Heh heh, I apologize for interrupting you while you’re busy congratulating yourself, but are you really sure it’s all right for you to be *here* right now?”

“What?” Hveðrungr glared at her with suspicion.

That was when it happened.

The loud, metallic clanging of brass war gongs resounded through the air.

“No... it can’t be...”

It seemed this man really was a sharp one.

In a matter of seconds, he’d already started to grasp what was happening right now.

Seeing that, Thír decided she would speak and prove his assumption correct.

“Yes, that’s right. We three were a *diversion*. Our orders were to try to open the gate ourselves if we could, and if we failed, to draw enemy forces away from the gate, allowing someone else to open it.”

“Grrgh...”

The masked man bit his lower lip in what seemed like painful frustration.

Seeing this sort of expression on a man who had been filled with absolute confidence in his own power was quite the treat.

And so, Thír decided to twist the knife a little further for her own enjoyment.

“The very moment you discovered us and became sure you’d read everything we were planning, that you’d outdone us and won... that was exactly when you lost to us. Oh, that’s right. Recently, I learned a handy phrase from someone to describe just such a situation. What was it...? Oh, ‘The clever schemer falls prey to his own snare.’ I think that was how it goes?”

It was an intense bit of mockery.

This sadistic streak of Thír’s was why Erna and Hrönn were so deeply afraid of her.

It was because she knew how to say things that cut right into a person’s heart.

“Khh...! *Kill them!* Kill them to the last, and make sure they suffer!”

Hveðrungr screamed in fury, once again showing his true self.

Thír had been enjoying herself plenty tormenting him, but now she considered that maybe she’d gone a bit too far.

The aura of pure wickedness billowing off of him was actually rather

incredible.

This was indeed the man who had previously built up a clan of nomads into a powerful nation that controlled the lands from western Miðgarðr all the way to western Álfheimr.

His presence was intimidating enough that even a veteran like Thír winced.

It looked like Erna was holding herself together as well, but the younger, less experienced Hrönn was overwhelmed by the pressure and looked utterly terrified.

They'd already accomplished their role. It should be fine to use their trump card now.

"Erna!"

"Ah... Right!"

As soon as Thír called out her name, Erna threw one arm around Thír's waist, and the other around Hrönn's...

And she took off into the air.

Of course, Erna was no bird. She didn't have the ability to fly.

However, "taking off" was the only way the onlookers could have described it, for that was exactly what it looked like when she leapt into the air using the superhuman leg strength afforded to her by her rune.

"Wha?!"

Even Hveðrungr was completely taken aback by the sight.

And it was only natural that he would be.

Jumping from the street all the way up to the roof of a building while also carrying two people was an astounding feat, something that a human being shouldn't be able to do.

Even in the wide world of Yggdrasil, likely the only two people who could ever accomplish such a thing were Erna and the late Steinþórr, the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

Even with that masked man's talent for strategy, he would never have been

able to predict such an escape method.

The reason Thír's group had boldly gone ahead with this infiltration plan was precisely because they knew that they had this method to use in an emergency.

"Well, see you again sometime, Mister Masked Man."

Thír waved, then ran across the roof of the building and jumped down to street level on the other side.

Naturally, no one managed to catch up with her after that.

The sounds of bronze war gongs echoed in the distance.

"That's the signaaal. It looks like everyone who snuck in managed to do their parts just fiiine."

Speaking in an exuberant voice, Bára turned around to look at Fagrahvél, who responded with a single nod.

"Another successful mission for the Maidens of the Waves. Now then, attention, all troops!" Fagrahvél stood up from her chair, unsheathed her sword, and pointed it at Vígríðr.

"Advance on Vígríðr! Chaaarge!"

Fagrahvél's beautiful features and noble appearance, which had earned her the alias Lord of Beauty, were coupled with her glittering golden armor, and as she brandished her sword and gave the command, it was a picturesque sight indeed.

This was the sort of atmosphere and image that inspired reverence from her soldiers.

"Yeeeaaaahhhh!"

The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army troops erupted in jubilant war cries and rushed towards Vígríðr, where combat soon broke out with the soldiers defending the city.

The sounds of field commands being barked out and the clanging of metal weapons reverberated loudly, reaching all the way to the commander's

formation further back in the middle of the army.

“Hmm, it looks like they’re putting up quite a fiiight.”

Bára had been assuming that once the gates were opened, the city would fall easily, so this was a little bit unexpected for her.

Those cavalry were terribly strong and skilled.

Perhaps they were delaying things by putting up an especially hard fight.

But in the end, that shouldn’t last long.

Humans suffered fatigue like any other living creature, and they certainly had their limits.

The defending side had no choice but to fight continuously without rest, while the attacking side could switch out their attacking soldiers in alternating waves.

It was clear as day which one of them held the upper hand here.

The ebb and flow of the fighting continued through the night, until eventually the sun rose.

This was most likely around the point where the defending soldiers should reach the limits of their strength, especially after fighting ceaselessly through the night.

It was only a matter of time now before Vígríðr’s defenses would fall, and the city would be theirs.

Both Fagrahvél and Bára were completely convinced of that.

And, that was when it happened.

“Th-This is an emergency!”

The imperial priest Alexis made his way through the commander’s formation, practically sprinting, shouting in a shrill voice.

This was someone who was always composed and sure of himself, in a way that made it difficult to grasp his motives. It was the first time Bára or Fagrahvél had ever seen him acting like this.

Just what had happened?

“The main army of the Steel Clan is... it’s already almost here!”

“Wh... Wha... What...?!”

“H-Huuuuh?!”

Faced with what should be an outright impossible situation, both Fagrahvél and Bára were lost for words.

Back when the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army first made its declaration of war against the Steel Clan and began the invasion, Hárbarth had confirmed through the use of his powers that the main bulk of the Steel Clan Army was down in Lightning Clan territory, around the Gashina area.

It should have taken them at least another fifteen days to travel the distance from there to here. Fagrahvél shuddered, and whispered aloud, “Just what have you done, War God?! What sort of magic did you use?!”

ACT 5

To explain this miraculous act better, let us rewind the clock somewhat.

“Linnea, are those preparations I asked for finished yet?!”

Yuuto strode through the palace halls particularly briskly, calling out his question to Linnea without even looking back.

Dauwe Castle, the key defensive point he’d been relying on, had fallen.

He couldn’t afford to waste even a precious few seconds by walking to his destination at a normal pace.

“Yes! They were able to prepare a sufficient number of them in time.”

“I see. What about weapons and armor?”

“Those have already been prepared as well, as you ordered.”

“Good. The soldiers should start arriving sometime tomorrow morning.”

“In that case, allow me to call in everyone from the kitchens and have them prepare meals now. Food that can be carried while traveling is preferable, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Understood. Please leave everything else to me.”

Linnea responded to Yuuto’s every question promptly and satisfactorily. It was actually a pretty great feeling.

Once she was fully awake, she really was, by far, the most outstanding of his officers when it came to this sort of thing.

The plan this time was going to be a bit of a wild and risky one, and the reason he could put it together was in large part thanks to her.

Even if Yuuto himself came up with a clever concept to begin with, figuring out how to make it work on a concrete level, and working out the necessary details needed to put it in motion were just as important. Without that, it might

as well just be a bunch of haphazard scribbles on scrap paper.

Yuuto abruptly stopped in his tracks and turned around to face Linnea.

He stared deeply into Linnea's eyes, which looked up at him in puzzlement at his sudden halt.

"Thank you for everything, Linnea. I'll be going now."

"...Of course. I wish you good fortune in battle."

Linnea wished him farewell, her words clearly filled with more emotion than she could express, and bowed deeply to him.

With her well wishes a wind at his back, Yuuto once more set out walking for the palace entrance.

Just as he reached the gate separating the palace grounds from the city proper, he spotted a familiar face.

"Mitsuki?"

"Don't you 'Mitsuki?' me! You just got back from a war, and you're really going to turn right back around and head out again without even seeing your wife's face?! What's with that?!"

"Urk."

His wife's angry look dug into him. Yuuto's expression had been resolute and stern until a second ago, but now he winced and flinched back from her.

"I have Felicia to thank for being considerate enough to tell me that you were here. You could at least let me wish you goodbye."

"...Sorry."

Yuuto looked guiltily down at his feet, scratching the back of his head.

"It's just that I get really agitated whenever I'm about to go off to war, and I didn't really like the idea of you seeing me when I'm... scary, like that. Especially now that you've got our kid inside you."

"As it so happens, that kid just told me a minute ago that it wants to see its father off, with a kick."

“Wha... it’s already kicking?!”

Yuuto reflexively placed a hand on Mitsuki’s belly.

“Well, not that frequently yet, but... Oh.”

“Oh!”

It was just for an instant, but Yuuto’s hand had felt the force of a tiny, tiny impact.

“That was a kick. That was a kick just now, right?”

“Hee hee. It looks like your baby can recognize its father.”

“I see. So it can tell... Babies are amazing.”

If he’d stopped to think about it rationally, it couldn’t have been anything more than a coincidence. But even so, Yuuto felt as if his yet-unseen child was speaking to him, seeing him off.

There was no greater encouragement in the world for him.



The following day—

Yuuto could be seen striding the halls of the patriarch's palace in the capital city of the Claw Clan, far away from Gimlé.

It was a distance that would take at least fifteen days to travel on foot even by the very shortest estimation, so by the standards of this era, this situation defied all common sense. However, Gimlé and the other major cities of the Steel Clan were already connected by a network of post stations with fresh horses to facilitate rapid transport of messengers. Yuuto had begun setting up that system between himself and his allies since back when he was still patriarch of the Wolf Clan.

Even travel over this distance was now possible by using the stations and riding nonstop for a full day and night, with no issues to speak of.

"Ggh...!"

Or rather, no issues to speak of except for one in particular: saddle sores.

"I apologize, Big Brother. Did that hurt?"

Kneeling down between his legs, Felicia looked up at him with teary eyes full of concern.

She was applying an ointment to the inside of his legs that was supposed to work well on saddle sores.

The sores being, well, where they were, he'd needed to take off his pants, and though he'd stubbornly told her, "It's fine, I can apply it myself!" a dozen times in the past, at this point, it almost felt meaningless to put up resistance anymore.

That said, Yuuto's and Felicia's relative positions and his current state of undress meant Yuuto couldn't entirely shake the feeling they were doing something indecent.

Plus, there was the dignity and standing of the reginarch to think about. Yuuto could only pray that until she was done applying the treatment, no one would enter this room and walk in on them like this.



Of course, the idea that someone in the Steel Clan would even consider entering the living quarters of the reginarch without permission was—

“Waaaah! Father, Faaatheeeer!”

—absolutely worth considering.

There was one person who would, at least. A young, free-spirited child who acted on her whims and went where she pleased, paying no mind to the unspoken expectations of other people.

Her name was Albertina, and she was a girl of around twelve or thirteen years old with hair in an adorable side ponytail.

Despite her innocent appearance, she was an Einherjar of the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, and when it came to lightning-fast agility, there was no one in the Steel Clan who could outclass her.

Her rune gave her the power to create and control winds in the immediate air around her, and her combat style utilized that in order to allow her to move and maneuver with the speed of a whirlwind. Even Sigrún, the clan’s strongest warrior and inheritor of the title Mánagarmr, which served as proof of that strength, considered her a fighter with incredible potential...

“Uwaaah! Uuugh...!”

...Or at least, that was the reputation she had garnered, but the child sobbing and crying huge tears in front of Yuuto right now didn’t seem to live up to any of those claims whatsoever.

“What’s wrong? Was Kris picking on you again?”

Albertina’s younger twin sister, Kristina, was a devilish little girl whose only true enjoyment in life was teasing and tormenting her beloved sister Albertina.

Yuuto had thought that had been the cause of Albertina’s tears this time too, but Albertina shook her head no.

“Uuugh... It was the people in the palace, they, they were talking, and I heard them. Uuuugh, they said I was worthless and everyone would be better off if I wasn’t around, that way Kris could be the next Claw Clan patriarch without any trouble!”

“Ngh.”

Yuuto’s expression darkened.

He’d assumed that the cause of this outburst would probably be something suitably childish and silly, but what she was describing wasn’t exactly a trivial conversation that he could just dismiss.

“Nngh... Am, am I really worthless? Would it really be better for, for Kris if I wasn’t around?”

“No, that’s absolutely not true!” Yuuto shot back firmly, unable to stand hearing her talk like that about herself any longer.

Yuuto knew very well that for Kristina, Albertina was the most important thing in her life.

“Listen. I know that Kris is thankful from the bottom of her heart that you’re around.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, really!”

Kristina told her share of lies and half-truths, and she enjoyed teasing people, and it was often hard to tell what she truly felt or thought. But even so, Yuuto could be sure he wasn’t mistaken in this.

Upon hearing Yuuto’s words, Albertina’s face seemed to blossom with joy once more... but that joy was short-lived.

“B-But, I’m not smart at all compared to Kris, and I don’t really do anything that helps you out, Father...”

She went right back to tearing into herself.

This was quite out of the ordinary for Albertina.

It was like she’d completely lost any confidence in herself. There must have been some more really unpleasant things in that conversation she’d overheard.

“You help me out plenty, though.”

Yuuto wasn’t just saying that to her to be nice. He really did believe it sincerely.

At the very least, her sunny, carefree, cheerful attitude was something that often healed Yuuto's heart. It was the same for his wife Mitsuki, and for the young servant girl Ephelia, who Yuuto treated like an adopted little sister.

It was true that Kristina earned glory within the clan by pulling in all sorts of useful intelligence—information that was far more valuable than gold—and Albertina couldn't do anything like that. But thanks to her own abilities, Albertina could easily apprehend spies or bandits that occasionally snuck into the palace grounds. And during wartime, she could use her incredible agility to carry messages between different parts of the army at incredible speed, which meant that she was indeed contributing to Yuuto and the Steel Clan.

However...

"You don't have to say nice things just to make me feel better! I know more than anybody else that I'm stupid and no good for anything at all!"

It was like she couldn't let herself believe him.

At this rate, it didn't matter how much Yuuto argued, he wasn't going to have much chance of convincing her.

Yuuto pondered for a while over how to best approach this problem, when suddenly he hit on an idea.

"...Hm. Then, how about this? In this upcoming battle, you just have to get results that prove your worth, and force the people who said those things about you to shut up."

"Huh? B-But, I can't..."

"Heh heh, you can, and I've got something that'll help, something that's just perfect for you. Felicia, bring me my pack, please."

Yuuto turned to his adjutant and gestured to the back of the room.

In the back was a very large backpack. It was filled with things Yuuto had brought back from the modern era when he was summoned to Yggdrasil for the second time.

Among them were quite a few items that should come in handy during this current conflict and in the upcoming battle.

Yuuto took the pack from Felicia and right away began rummaging through its contents until he found one item in particular.

“Here.”

He handed it to Albertina.

It was a cylindrical object, made of metal that shined with a dull luster. Both its shape and design were completely out of place for this era.

“What is this?”

“A weapon. And out of everybody in the Steel Clan, you’re probably the one best suited to use it.”

“Huh? But I don’t even know how to use it. I don’t even know what it *is*.”

“Oh it’s simple. You just push this part here. Oh, but don’t push it right now, though!”

“Father, might I ask that you refrain from handing such dangerous items to my dear sister?”

Suddenly, another voice came from behind Yuuto, one that bore a strong resemblance to Albertina’s.

Yuuto knew who it was even without turning around to see.

“How long have you been there, Kris?”

“How long? Perhaps as far back as when Al came in here sobbing.”

Kristina smiled. Yuuto could feel himself tensing up.

Yuuto was now the most powerful conquering lord of the lands of western Yggdrasil, in both name and fact, but even he felt a terrible chill at that smile.

“K-Kris? You’re kind of scary right now.”

Albertina had completely stopped crying by now, but she was shivering a bit as she addressed her twin sister.

“Oh? But I am no different from usual.”

That’s a lie, Yuuto thought, but he kept it to himself.

Kristina was a girl who normally maintained a neutral expression and didn’t

show her true feelings on her face. She wasn't showing it visibly right now, but it was clear to Yuuto that she was in a dangerous mood right now.

She was *furious*.

Knowing her sister had been belittled and driven to tears had made her angrier than Yuuto had ever seen her before.

Kristina made it her personal hobby to tease and torment her sister herself, but in spite of that, she didn't forgive anyone else for making a fool of Albertina.

She was also a master of gathering information. She'd likely have the people who hurt Albertina's feelings identified and tracked down within the day.

After that, who was to say what sort of revenge she might exact upon them...

Yuuto almost found himself feeling sorry for the poor saps that earned her ire, but then he remembered again that they'd hurt a pure and innocent girl like Albertina.

He decided that maybe it was better after all if they got taught a lesson for what they did.

"...Hey, just don't go too hard on them, okay?"

"Oh, whatever could you be talking about?"

Kristina feigned complete ignorance.

In other words, at least in regards to this incident, she was going to go *very* hard on them.

"More importantly, what's the current situation?"

Deciding that it was wisest not to involve himself in that matter any further, Yuuto changed the subject.

A wise man keeps away from danger, as the saying went.

And besides, this was what he needed to talk about with Kristina anyway.

The use of carrier pigeons to send messages was an outstanding improvement in communication speed by the previous standards of this era, but it required physically having pigeons nesting in strategic locations, so they couldn't be used whenever one wished. Their use was limited to truly urgent communications.

In the end, the best way to receive large amounts of information with as little time lag as possible was to physically get closer to the source.

That was precisely why Yuuto had personally been in such a hurry to travel here, to the point where he even left his army behind to get here as soon as possible.

This time, his enemy far outclassed him in size.

He wasn't going to be able to win against them by simply fighting haphazardly.

He who controls information controls the battle.

Thanks to his experiences up to this point, Yuuto knew that all too well.

Meanwhile...

"Y'know, I've been an army man since the days when Lord Fárbauti was patriarch of the Wolf Clan, and this is a first for me. What a strange way to conduct a march."

"Hah, what are you saying, old man? Ever since Lord Yuuto came to power, it's been nothing but one 'first' after another, hasn't it?"

"I mean, yeah, that's true enough."

"Well, hey, it's not like I don't get what you mean, though. I certainly never imagined there'd come a day I got orders to head off towards the front line without a single weapon in hand."

Soldiers in the Steel Clan Army rank and file chatted amongst one another as they moved in formation down the road.

They were all walking with light, unburdened steps.

One could say that was only natural, however, since not one of them was wearing or carrying weapons, armor, or provisions of any kind—all things that soldiers would usually be carrying during a more traditional march.

This not only allowed them to walk at a faster pace, but reduced their rate of fatigue, making it possible for them to march for more hours in a day.

Of course, they couldn't very well go into battle without any weapons, but that wasn't of any concern, because...

"We're supposed to be getting our weapons and the like when we reach the Claw Clan, right?"

"Yeah. Everyone's saying that apparently they were being shipped up there in secret since before the campaign against the Lightning Clan even got started, right? Which means Lord Yuuto knew all this would happen even back then."

"Damn, that's Lord Yuuto for you."

Such was the procedure currently in place.

Moving a large number of soldiers at once would draw the attention of surrounding nations and put them on alert, so during the period between Yuuto's wedding ceremony and the beginning of the Lightning Clan campaign, Yuuto had arranged for small splinter groups to transport the supplies bit by bit.

At first, Yuuto's intention had been to move the advance supplies into the Ash Clan capital, Vígríðr. However, the Ash Clan patriarch Douglas had shown hesitation after the issuing of the imperial subjugation order, and taking into consideration that he might waver in his loyalty, Yuuto had changed the destination to the Claw Clan instead.

Now that Dauwe Castle had fallen, and even Vígríðr itself faced possible capture by the enemy, that early change in plans had turned out to be an unexpectedly fortuitous one.

Incidentally, the contents of the shipments were all listed as wheat on public records—explained as paying back the Claw Clan for the food supplies they contributed during the shortage crisis back in the summer. This disguise was just one more precaution against the possible discovery of his plan.

The great strategist Sun Tzu stated in his writings that it was best of all to procure supplies locally—in the region where the battle would take place, or along the way.

There was also the historical example of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was able to move his army across long distances at great speeds, which he accomplished through his practice of acquiring supplies locally.

Of course, relying too much on local procurement could be dangerous, as there was the risk that actual numbers could fall short of estimates, leaving the army short on supplies. However, in this case, Yuuto's troops would be moving through allied territory, and the person in charge of organizing logistics and support was none other than Linnea, an expert in that field.

There would be no problems at all on the supply front.

"Oh, that reminds me, did you get to ride in one of the carriages yet?"

"Yeah, I did!"

"It was like getting a taste of how the upper crust lives, huh?"

"I actually got a little queasy from the ride."

This was another part of the plan, one more factor in increasing the speed of the march.

In this era in history, riding atop chariots and horse-drawn carriages was permissible only for a chosen upper-class, those of high birth or rank.

Riding a vehicle was a visible mark of status, and conferring the privilege to military officers was used as a way of reinforcing their authority.

Letting ordinary soldiers ride in carriages would be completely out of the question, going by normal values.

However, Yuuto's thinking wasn't held back by those fixed customs.

To Yuuto, vehicles were something the common masses used. Cars, trains, airplanes... all of them were something anybody and everybody could ride normally.

Thanks to heavy production of the armor-plated wagons intended for use in the Wagon Wall tactic, there were a bunch of wagon carriages on hand. There was no way he wouldn't make use of them here.

He didn't have so many of them that he could put the whole army on wheels, of course, but he could put groups of soldiers on the carriages in shifts, reducing their fatigue by a whole lot. That is, *he could move his army while simultaneously allowing his troops to rest.*

And, after the sun set...

The sides of the road were brightly lit by countless torches.

They were being held by local residents, who had gathered along the road from the surrounding villages.

“Everyone, do your best!”

“Hang in there!”

“We’re all rooting for you!”

High-pitched cheers poured out from both sides of the road.

The truth was that all of these people were paid to be there, though.

The Múspell Special Forces had made use of their high mobility as a cavalry unit and had ridden ahead of the rest of the army column, stopping at villages along the travel route, and they’d offered decent amounts of coin to every young woman they could find, enlisting them to play this role.

The Múspell Special Forces was the most well-known and celebrated part of the Steel Clan’s military, and their commander was a woman too, so they enjoyed a great deal of popularity and trust from the populace.

No one balked at the request. In fact, they were all happy to help out.

“Here’s some fresh bread. Make sure you eat it, okay?”

“And here’s some water.”

“Here’s some meat, too. You’ll need your strength.”

They were even personally handing food to the soldiers, food that they could eat while they walked.

Men are, on the whole, very simple creatures.

They can’t bring themselves to look feeble or pathetic in front of women.

They want to show off; to look strong and impressive.

Though the Steel Clan soldiers had been taking breaks along the way, they were still worn out from the strenuous routine of walking from morning ’til night each day—but now this encouragement saw them reinvigorated to great

effect.

It was a plan that combined the act of securing food supplies from the local area with a boost to soldier morale, killing two birds with one stone. In the Sengoku period, Toyotomi Hideyoshi had used a similar strategy during a lightning-fast forced march known as the “Great Chugoku Return March,” and Yuuto had taken that famous example and tweaked it to fit his own purposes.

Yuuto didn’t fight battles he couldn’t win. That was his policy.

The reason he’d chosen to go ahead with a plan as risky as this one—using a campaign against the Lightning Clan as bait to lure in his enemies—was precisely because he’d arranged for these particular preparations well in advance of that.

Taking into consideration the reputation of Dauwe Castle as an impregnable fortress, originally his calculations projected that he would arrive with plenty of time to spare.

And so, as a result of all that planning, the Steel Clan Army successfully conducted what would have ordinarily been at least a twenty-day forced march in the span of only seven days, and with almost no losses from exhaustion or desertion along the way.

“I know it was a tough march, but you all endured it well! Let me express thanks from the bottom of my heart. Great work, men!”

Yuuto raised his voice to call out to the ten thousand elite soldiers gathered before him, now that they had finally reached the area near the border between Claw Clan and Ash Clan territory.

The faces of his men were awash with pride upon hearing his words.

Naturally, they too were aware of just how much effort they had put into what they’d accomplished.

Their lord, the reginarch, had noticed that and was giving them proper recognition for it. They had every reason to be happy.

“When Dauwe Castle fell, there was a point where I prepared myself for the

possibility we might lose Vígríðr as well. But, thanks to all of you, we've made it in time to stop that! Vígríðr yet fights on!"

"Yeeeaaahhh!"

A chorus of cheers shook the very air.

A long labor that ends in futility leaves a person even more exhausted in their despondence. But the sense of accomplishment that comes from success can make a person forget their fatigue, and even charge their body and spirit with renewed strength.

Yuuto paused for a moment, waiting for the cheers to die down, then continued.

"Now, everyone, take up your weapons! Our foes are great in number indeed, but we have nothing to fear from them! In all the realm, there is only *one* army with soldiers so strong and resilient, they crossed from Vanaheimr to Bifröst in only seven days! *We* are that army! Isn't that right?!"

"Yeeeaaahhh! Sieg Iárn! Sieg Iárn!"

The morale of the Steel Clan soldiers soared, and their cries of "Sieg Iárn"—"Glory to the Steel Clan"—spoke to the great pride they felt in themselves and their nation.

When a person overcomes a very difficult obstacle, it becomes the foundation for great personal confidence.

The words of the reginarch of the Steel Clan rang true to his men.

Indeed, where else in the world could one find an army that had accomplished something so incredible?

They were the only ones who had done it.

They couldn't possibly be defeated here.

The Steel Clan soldiers were completely convinced of that now.

"Now, let us go forth and save Vígríðr! All troops... advance—!"

The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army was filled with the most profoundly

accomplished generals selected from each clan's respective forces.

And right now, the group of people gathered here in the headquarters inside the main formation were the greatest still from among those, all fearsomely talented and experienced veterans whose names were well known among the nations of their respective regions.

The news that the main body of the Steel Clan Army had arrived made even them shudder.

"I-Is that really true?!"

The first to open his mouth was the Cloud Clan patriarch, Gerhard.

He appeared to be considerably shocked.

It only made sense that he would be, though.

The Cloud Clan was a nation of nomads who roamed the lands of eastern Miðgarðr. They were capable of overland travel at a pace the peoples of settled agricultural societies could not match.

However, even for them, racing the whole distance from Lightning Clan territory to here in such a short span of time was completely impossible under any circumstances.

"I am terribly sorry to inform you that it is, in fact, the truth."

The imperial priest Alexis responded, looking utterly ashamed and seeming to have to force himself to speak.

These words were coming from the man who had been telling them the position and movements of the enemy's armed cavalry unit with perfect accuracy up until now. There was no one present who would doubt the reliability of this information coming from him.

"Rrrrghh, but then why was Lord Hárbarth not able to notice them until they were this close?! Isn't he supposed to be able to see *everything*?!"

That charged question came from Sígismund, the Fang Clan patriarch.

Ordinarily, the idea of someone having such complete perception of everything would be the stranger one. However, based on the results everyone

had seen thus far, it was a reasonable question.

“I would ask you not to have unreasonable expectations. Even Lord Hárbarth is only human. It’s not as if he can be watching a multitude of different places at once.”

“So in other wooords, does that mean he can only see one location at a tiiime?”

Bára posed the question normally, acting as if she was just asking for a small clarification.

Alexis winced for a second, and his expression grew very tense.

All of the people gathered here were only temporary allies. Once they’d defeated the Steel Clan, their relationships would return to what they had been before.

It was reasonable to consider that any of them might wage war with the Spear Clan in the future.

In particular, the Sword Clan was the Spear Clan’s fiercest political enemy, and had been fighting with them behind the scenes for control over the imperial government.

For Alexis, letting slip to them details about his master’s power—specifically, its limitations—was nothing short of a terrible gaffe.

“Ah, that is, er...”

Alexis scrambled to find an excuse to refute Bára’s guess with, but he couldn’t come up with anything suitable.

Effectively, it amounted to a confession that she was correct.

“Hm, I see. So then, because he was focused on observing the area around Vígríðr, he ended up missing the chance to observe the Steel Clan Army.”

Fagrahvél summarized things in a calm tone, her hands clasped thoughtfully together in front of her chin.

Alexis’ expression grew increasingly pained, like he’d swallowed a bug, but Fagrahvél felt no obligation to hold back on account of his feelings.

“Well, I cannot fault Lord Hárbarth for that. Not one of us could have predicted that the Steel Clan forces would reach us this quickly. The focus of this war was on Vígríðr, where actual fighting is still going on right now. Directing his observations there was not only the natural choice; under ordinary circumstances, it would absolutely be the correct one.”

“That’s truuue. At this poooint we just have to accept that they’re already heeere. I would say the problem to consider now iiis... how we should deal with theeem.”

“Yes. I am sure our capture of the city is imminent, though. If we can follow through with that now, I would prefer to do so...”

Trailing off, Fagrahvél turned to look toward the city of Vígríðr.

“Sieg Reginarch! Sieg Reginarch!”

Even without straining one’s ears, the voices of the people zealously praising their lord could be heard echoing across the distance.

Despite the fact that their city was completely surrounded and cut off, they somehow seemed to have learned that the Steel Clan’s main force had arrived to rescue them.

“I think that miiight be a difficult task nooow. The city’s soldieeers have completely regained their energyyy.”

“...Indeed.”

Fagrahvél exhaled sharply, seeming somewhat impressed, and then nodded.

In a prolonged siege, there was often no telling how long the defending side would have to hold out under heavy lockdown.

Those conditions would make it much easier to break their spirits.

However, if they knew that all they had to do was hold out for half a day longer, then one could be sure they’d accomplish that by resisting until that moment with every ounce of strength they could summon.

It was no easy task to break that spirit through pure force alone.

Indeed, if such a thing were possible, there was only one way to accomplish it

now...

“What about the power of your rune? If you used it like you did at Dauwe, would that change things?”

Sígismund addressed the question to Fagrahvél carefully, with eyes that seemed to be searching for information from her response.

The Fang Clan and Sword Clan shared a border. Though one might call such actions a bit premature in this situation, this was a bit of preparation on his part for the future, after the defeat of the Steel Clan.

It was certainly opportunistic, which was fitting, for he was the ruler of a nation, after all.

“It is certainly true that if I use my rune, we can take Vígríðr. However, its power drains an excessive amount of energy with each use. If I use it now, you can be sure I will not be able to use it during the crucial battle with the Steel Clan Army.”

Fagrahvél made no attempt to hide her own weakness, readily revealing it to all of them right then and there.

Bára couldn’t keep from rolling her eyes in exasperation, but she knew that this was just the kind of person Fagrahvél was.

The order from the þjóðann Sigrdrífa was to subjugate the Steel Clan, and Fagrahvél would carry out that order.

Right now, there was surely nothing else in her mind.

Fagrahvél was always honest, always serious in her efforts, and always refused to engage in pretense.

And that’s exactly why I have to stay by her side and support her, Bára thought to herself with a little chuckle.

“As your strategiiist, I would like to offer that rather than prepare for the battle heeere, I think it would be better to launch our attack against them nooow.”

“What do you mean?” Sígismund asked, pressure behind his glare.

He had probably still wanted to get a little more information about Fagrahvél's power.

"It is true that, even for meee, the Steel Clan Army arriving here was unexpecteeed. Howeveeer, if they traveled here as fast as they diiid, that also means they would have to be exhausted from the maaarch."

"Mm, yes, that is only reasonable to assume." Fagrahvél agreed, nodding.

"Rather than allowing them a chance to reeest, I suggest we should strike at them now while they're still weeeary."

"That makes perfect sense. I'm inclined to take her advice here. Are there any objections to that?"

Fagrahvél glanced left and right at the faces of the gathered generals.

Once again, it was Sígismund who spoke up.

"What about Vígríðr? If we ignore them, they could end up catching us in a pincer."

"If we leave about five thousand soldiers to keep them occupied, I don't belieeeeve they will be a probleeem."

"In that case, I'll take on that role."

The Cloud Clan patriarch Gerhard raised his hand.

"That masked man, Hveðrungr... He and I have a bit of a history. I think now's a good time to finally show him who's the real top dog of Miðgarðr."

"I believe the task will be safe in your hands," Fagrahvél said. "Lord Sígismund, are you fine with that arrangement as well?"

"...Sure."

"Are there any other objections? ...It would seem not."

With that confirmation, Fagrahvél stood up.

Throwing out one hand, she declared in a loud voice, "We shall now move our forces to strike the Steel Clan Army! This will be our most crucial battle. I'm counting on all of you to fight valiantly with everything you have!"

“A mass of soldiers has been spotted approaching from directly ahead! Estimated to number approximately ten thousand! They’re thought to be the main body of the Steel Clan Army!”

“So, just as Alexis’ information said. Ten thousand...”

Ignoring the messenger’s hoarse shouting, Fagrahvél mulled over the meaning of the information without opening her eyes.

In terms of sheer troop numbers, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance still had an overwhelming advantage.

However, their foes, the Steel Clan, had a long history of triumphing over armies with numbers superior to theirs. The Hoof Clan, the Lightning Clan, the Panther Clan... They had expanded their power and influence through victories that overturned such disadvantages.

They were by no means an enemy that could be taken lightly.

Inhale... exhale. Inhale... exhale.

Fagrahvél focused on her breathing, calming her mind.

She was entrusted with the lives of her soldiers. She needed to maintain a calm mind, or she risked allowing a winnable battle to be lost.

Whether the coming battle ended in victory or defeat would be decided by the orders she gave as the commander of this army.

“All right, let’s begin according to plan. Deploy troops in the bird formation!”

Moments later, the armies of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance and Steel Clan came together and engaged on the fields just east of the city of Vígríðr.

The side that gained the initial momentum was the Steel Clan.

“It’s just like how it was with those cavalry fighteeers. They’re shooting arrows that can reach us from outside our own raaange. They are just so annoyiiiing.”

“Indeed they are,” Fagrahvél agreed, glowering.

There was nothing they could really do about it, but even still, being attacked in this way, having no meaningful counter available to them, and only being

able to grit their teeth as their men were mowed down was quite the unpleasant experience.

“However, that’s something we’ve already accounted for. Continue the advance!”

If they could close the distance and begin close-range combat, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance would have the advantage by a massive fifteen thousand men.

They would be able to turn things in their favor then...

...At least, that’s what should have happened, but as Fagrahvél’s troops endured the one-sided attacks, and the two armies at last reached within range for melee combat, it was again the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance troops that found themselves being pushed back.

“I see nooow. By using those absurdly long spears together with that tightly packed formatiooon, they can still deal one-sided damage without allowing their opponents to get clooose. That’s really cleveeer.”

Bára nodded to herself, impressed.

It was the Macedonian phalanx longspear formation, which Yuuto had derived from his study of military history. While it was true that during Yuuto’s wars with the Lightning Clan and the Panther Clan it hadn’t been as effective, it was still a tactic from over a thousand years in the future compared to this era. Those weapons and close-knit formations were revolutionary on the battlefields here.

By contrast, the soldiers of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance were still mostly outfitted with bronze weapons and armor, and they weren’t trained to fight as part of a tight, coordinated formation. Once in melee, their soldiers instead each fought individually as they saw fit.

Regardless of any superiority in numbers, the difference in *combat power* alone between the two sides was plain to see.

“I see. That is powerful. But, with how long and unwieldy those spears are, they’ll surely have trouble turning and changing directions.”

In just a few brief moments of observation, Fagrahvél had analyzed both the

strengths and weaknesses of her enemy's tactics.

Fagrahvél's abilities were, naturally, hardly limited to the power she wielded through Gjallarhorn. She was extremely capable as a commander, as her quick observations had proven.

She immediately moved to give her next command.

"All right, sound the gongs and signal the right and left wings to begin their attack!"

The "bird formation"—it was a novel formation Bára had devised, which utilized the strength of a large army.

The army was split into three groups, with fifteen thousand in the center, and five thousand each in "wing" formations out on the left and right, angled like the sides of a triangle pointing backwards.

The left and right wings were to carefully move into position without being noticed, and then quietly wait for the enemy forces to advance past them and engage with the soldiers in the center group.

Then, while the enemy was being held in place, the left and right wings would move into action and attack from behind, descending upon their left and right rear flanks, trapping them so they could be easily wiped out.

As the left and right groups closed in to attack, their trajectories gave off the appearance of a bird flapping its wings, hence the name of this particular formation.

Thanks to Hárbarth's "sight," Bára could get constant, detailed information on the exact position and route of her foes, which is what made it possible for her to split up and utilize an army of such immense scale so effectively. It was, in a word, a strategy that guaranteed victory.

In later eras of history, there were examples of tactics using similar formations, such as Takenaka Hanbei's "Ambush From Ten Sides," and the Fisher and Bandit tactic that was devised and expertly used by Shimazu Yoshihisa and the Shimazu clan, which controlled the Satsuma region. However, it could certainly be said to be an extremely advanced and novel tactic by the standards of Yggdrasil's era.

However, unfortunately for Bára, the foe she was up against far outclassed even that kind of incredible wit.

Thanks to Bömburr, the vice captain of the Múspell Special Forces, the Steel Clan's patriarch Suoh-Yuuto had already received a report informing him of the fact that the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance had some method of knowing the precise position and movements of their enemies.

He'd already guessed that they would set up an ambush for his forces using that information, just as they had against the Independent Cavalry Regiment.

And, more than anything, Yuuto was a man with knowledge of military strategies from far into the future.

He'd already prepared solid countermeasures.

As Bára continued contemplating her options, the low rumble of the Steel Clan's wagons could be heard far in the distance, along with a large number of loud bangs. Those, in particular, were an unusual sound here in Yggdrasil.

"A-A message just came in from the left wing! The enemy has assembled groups of wagons in circles, forming a wall with the carriages! They're also using some sort of witchcraft that throws out fire and makes a terrible noise! W-We can't get close to them!"

"There's a similar report coming in from the right wing!"

"Ohhh, so they're using that thiiing..." Bára groaned, furrowing her brow.

"I assume it's that weapon the horseback fighters used the night you first fought them—the one that forced aside the road barriers." Fagrahvél added bitterly.

It was one strange and unknown weapon after another with these foes, as if they were putting on an exhibition.

And what's more, each of them was powerful in its own right.

"We can't halt the enemy's momentum! A-At this rate, we're going to...!" The panicked messenger trailed off, unable to bring himself to finish his sentence.

While this very conversation was going on, they were pushing farther and farther into the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance's central formation.

The power behind that forward charge was terrifying.

The elite fighters of the Sword Clan couldn't even slow them down.

At the rate things were going, it would only be a matter of time before they cut their way through to the commander's formation.

"Th-The bird formation was a flawless tactiiic, but they defeated it so easilyyy..."

"Even with such a stark difference in numbers, we can hardly put up any resistance..."

The strength of their foe was so overwhelming that even Fagrahvél and Bára felt the urge to throw up their hands in incredulity.

It was akin to a fight between an adult and a small child.

No, it was perhaps even more pitiful than that. They had attacked from three sides, after all.

And, even if three small children tried together to attack a grown man, it still wouldn't make for much of a contest.

It didn't matter if they could pinpoint their enemy's movements, and it didn't matter if they came up with a clever tactic to use—winning would still be impossible.

The difference in *strength* between them was too great.

A child couldn't defeat an adult bare-handed.

Not without something like a bladed weapon—not without something to even the odds.

"Master, I really didn't want you to have to use your power when you still haven't fully heeealed," Bára said, regret clear in her voice. "But I'm afraid it looks like we don't have that luxury anymooore."

Fagrahvél nodded. "Yes, I know that!"

So this was the power of the Black One.

The things the prophecy spoke of seemed all that much more believable in light of the events currently unfolding.

Indeed, with this much power, there was no doubt he could conquer all of Yggdrasil.

“I cannot allow him to destroy the empire! Her Highness... I will protect her!”

She let out an almost-guttural rallying cry as she summoned all of the power she could possibly muster.

“Hear me, soldiers of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army! Hear me, and answer my call to war! Gjallarhorn!”

“It’s going well... so far.”

Yuuto muttered to himself as he looked out at the current state of the battle.

At this moment in time, it looked like everything had gotten done that needed to be, and the results were all turning out fine.

The imperial subjugation order against the Steel Clan had turned all of its surrounding neighbors against it overnight, and *after* dividing up his military to defend against threats on multiple other fronts, Yuuto was now having to take on a combined army formed from the alliance of five powerful clans, using only what he had left over.

Even Yuuto had been shaking with fear in the lead-up to this battle.

But once things had finally gotten going, the foes he was up against felt like little more than pests in terms of the resistance they offered.

This was exactly what the phrase “beating someone hands-down” referred to.

“When things go this well, it almost feels anticlimactic, doesn’t it?” Felicia remarked. It seemed she’d gotten the same impression.

Thinking back, it had been more than two years now since Yuuto came to power as a clan patriarch. In that time, he’d continuously thought up and designed new weapons and tactics, implementing them into his army and strengthening his military power.

Against the Steel Clan, which fought with such advanced, novel, and logically sound tactics and equipment, there was simply no reason that an army from this era still fighting with bronze weapons and chariots as their most advanced

technology could ever hope to compare.

One could say the results of such a conflict should only be obvious, but—

“I’d be happy if this did turn out to be an easy win for us, but I’d say the odds are nine out of ten that it’s not going to work out like that.”

Yuuto didn’t relax his guard in the slightest.

With a stern expression, Felicia nodded in agreement.

“Soldiers that lack any fear of death and ignore their wounds, every one of them fighting with the fierce strength of the greatest warrior... or like members of an army of the living dead. That is what still worries you, yes?”

“Right. Our opponent hasn’t shown their whole hand just yet.”

As part of the information gathering he’d done leading up to his arrival, he’d gone through reports of what happened during the battle at Dauwe Castle, and also during the battles the Independent Cavalry Regiment had fought afterwards.

He was sure there was no way this fight would end without incident.

“...!” Yuuto tensed. “The air just changed.”

Felicia nodded slowly and seriously. “...Yes, you are right. It did indeed change just now.”

They weren’t talking about something as simple as a change in the direction of the wind.

It was more as if the *energy* that permeated the air of the battlefield—the killing intent and fighting spirit of the combatants, things of that nature—had changed, swelling up and becoming much heavier.

“Still, I am impressed that you could perceive that, Big Brother. Due to my proficiency in galdr and seiðr magics, I am sensitive to such changes in energy, but... please forgive my rudeness, Big Brother, but seeing as you are not an Einherjar, I did not think you would be able to sense something like this.”

“Huh? I felt it pretty clearly, though. It was like... all of a sudden all my hair stood on end, almost like goosebumps.”

People of a certain level of skill in a particular field are known to develop a certain “intuition” or gut feeling that sometimes comes into play.

It is far more significant than mere guesswork based on emotion.

Such “intuition” is a function of that person’s experience.

In Yuuto’s case, despite his young age, he had accumulated a vast amount of battlefield experience.

Perhaps it was also partially because of the latent potential he already held, but that experience had allowed him to sense a subtle change in the atmosphere that an ordinary person could not have picked up on.

“Send a warning to the front line telling them not to let down their guards. Tell them the real fight begins now!”

It would be only moments later that Yuuto’s “intuition” would be shown to have been right on the mark.

Meanwhile, on the front lines...

“Hah! These guys are barely putting up a fight!”

“Yeah, but you know, didn’t it used to be like this back in the beginning, too?”

“Huh? Yeah, now that you mention it. I guess it’s more like all our more recent battles were the odd ones!”

“Right. I mean, we went up against Steinþórr, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, and his army of berserkers. What a monster... Then it was that Grímnir, the Masked Lord, and his band of armed riders that appeared and disappeared whenever they wanted.”

“Hey! Chatterboxes! We’re in the middle of a *battle*, here! Shut your damn mouths and focus!”

“Oh, crap!”

Chewed out by their squad leader, the two talkative soldiers turned their focus back to the work in front of them—thrusting their longspears forward towards the enemy.

They were fighting with their lives on the line. There was no excuse for slacking off.

Of course, only a very tiny portion of the Steel Clan soldiers were as relaxed as those two were about this. Even so, the fact that some of them could even afford to fall into that attitude showed just how pervasive the anticipation of an easy victory was among their ranks.

However, that soon changed completely.

Despite the fact that their bodies had just been skewered, the frontmost soldiers of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army all lurched forward again without flinching from the pain, and grasped tightly onto the hafts of the longspears.

They did this in defiance of obviously fatal wounds, or even in the best case, wounds so numerous and painful that they should have been unable to do anything more than writhe on the ground in pain.

Something was very clearly *wrong* here.

“Ggh... I, I can’t move my spear!”

“Wha... oh, oh crap!”

“N-No, no don’t come any closer! Guaah!”

Now that the longspears were immobilized, the other Anti-Steel Clan Alliance soldiers pushed forward through the gaps between them, closing the remaining distance. At last, they got within striking range and thrust their spears into the Steel Clan soldiers.

“D-Damn you...!”

One of the Steel Clan spearmen in the next row back cursed aloud and plunged his longspear through the chest of an Alliance soldier, taking vengeance for the death of his comrade.

However...

That soldier completely ignored the spear that had been thrust clean through his torso and ran forward, thrusting his own spear into that Steel Clan soldier’s neck, taking revenge for his own death in the final seconds before it claimed him.

“Wh-What *are* these people?!”

“They’re just like those berserkers from the Lightning Clan!”

“No, these guys are even more insane!”

Even in defeat, they used unseen strength to seal the movements of their Steel Clan attackers, or even to kill them outright in a sort of equivalent exchange of life.

Against foes like these, even fighting for your life was useless.

The Steel Clan soldiers gulped hard as a deep, unfathomable fear began to take hold of them.

“Haah... haah... khh!”

Fagrahvél’s body threatened to topple over, but she barely managed to stay on her feet by planting her scabbard on the ground and leaning on it heavily.

Like a gourd bottle with a hole suddenly cut in the bottom, she could feel the strength draining out of her with terrible speed.

Though it had been five thousand fewer than last time, she had still used Gjallarhorn’s power to force the courage and morale of twenty-five thousand soldiers to a fever pitch, drawing out all of their latent strength. By nature, that was simply too powerful a work of magic to be fueled by the ásmegin of a single person.

“Fagra... Master, are you all riiight?”

Bára rushed over to Fagrahvél and offered her shoulder.

Just now, she’d almost addressed Fagrahvél by name, the way she used to back when they were children in school together. Such a clumsy slip was unlike her. Perhaps that was an indication of just how grim Fagrahvél’s condition appeared to her.

Fagrahvél herself could tell all too well how powerful the feedback was this time.

She’d used her power again before having the chance to completely recover

from the effects of its last usage.

If she were to relax her grip on consciousness for even a split second right now, she'd surely lose herself to the white fog that was threatening to swallow her mind.

If she was being honest, even using her scabbard as a cane to support herself was quickly becoming too painful to keep up.



If she just let Bára support her, she wouldn't have to use her own dimming strength to stay on her feet, and that would relieve a lot of the pain.

However, Fagrahvél clenched her teeth and pushed Bára aside.

"I don't need that...! Who would follow in the service of a commander... haah... hahh... who's so weak they can't even stand on their own two feet without leaning on someone else's shoulder?!"

Gasping for breath, Fagrahvél struggled to get the words out.

This helped nothing. It was only to satisfy her own ego.

She knew that.

The soldiers had already had their morale raised past all sensible limits thanks to the power of Gjallarhorn, the Call to War. Something like this wouldn't affect them in the slightest, either positively or negatively.

She knew that.

But even still, she had been the one to *force* that surge of morale within them, sending them forward to fight fearlessly in a situation that meant certain death for many of them. How could the one who did that to them be allowed to take the easy way out?!

"Honestlyyy... you are so, sooo stubborn. That pride of yours is going to kill you, you knooow."

"Heh, if I die staying true to my pride, I'll be satisfied... ngh!"

She understood that it was one of the more unpleasant parts of her disposition.

However, she didn't have it in her to live life compromising on who she was, either. She just wasn't a flexible person.

"Weeell, maybe that stubbornness came in handy this tiiime. It looks like the soldiers stopped the enemy from moving in any furtheeer. They should be able to hold out for a little whiiile."

"Haha, even after using this power... hahh... it's all they can do just to hold on for a bit. The Steel Clan truly is... a terrifying foe...!"

It seemed that the power gap between the two forces' soldiers was simply too great to be overcome.

The truth was that, before this, part of Fagrahvél had believed that perhaps there was no one else in this world capable of defeating her.

She had Bára as her military strategist, and soldiers that had no weaknesses in battle. The Sword Clan seemed to boast the strongest army in all of Yggdrasil, and Fagrahvél had not seen fit to doubt that.

That pride had been mercilessly torn to shreds with this war.

The hit-and-run tactics of the Steel Clan's cavalry unit had left her with no recourse but to rely on the power of her hated enemy Hárbarth for support.

And even in this current battle, the soldiers empowered by Gjallarhorn were holding back the enemy, but if it had just been the soldiers from the Sword Clan Army alone, they would have been completely overrun by now.

As an individual general, she had completely lost to her opponent.

However, right now Fagrahvél was in command of an *alliance*, a combined army from five nations.

The most simple principle of warfare was at play here; that most fundamental of fundamentals.

The greatest influencing factor on a battle's momentum was the difference in numbers.

"Here it comes here it comes here it comes—!"

Erna, chief of the Sword Clan's Special Assault Squad, who had been put in charge of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army's right wing, leaned back and shouted to the heavens.

She felt a powerful fighting spirit welling up within her heart.

She felt an overflowing strength in every inch of her body.

She felt like she could win against anyone right now.

"Woooo! Ernaaa! I'm ready to go too!"

Hrönn howled with excitement as well and thrust her weapon into the air—a giant spear that didn't match her small size at all.

There was no longer any trace of childishness about her. Right now, she looked just like a hungry beast ready to find and devour its prey.

"Both of you are as simple-minded as ever. You always lose yourself in Master's power."

Thír put a hand to her cheek and let out a disappointed sigh.

However, despite what she said, her eyes also housed a dangerous, almost violently hungry light.

Her tongue darted out, licking her upper lip.

"Just remember, this power is a double-edged sword for its user. That's why we need to finish things here as quickly as possible. Come on, you two!"

"Right!"

The three Einherjar led the right wing into a charge, and, like a wave, they came crashing down towards the left flank of the Steel Clan Army.

"Hm, it feels like my heart is buoyed by a powerful excitement. I feel physically energized too, as if I have access to a bottomless well of strength. But, honestly, I don't like it."

At the same time, over in the left wing, Sígismund stared down at his clenched fist, his expression twisted in annoyance.

He was the patriarch of the Fang Clan, the proud ruler of his nation.

He was meant to make people serve him, not follow someone else's orders.

And yet, here was a power acting upon his heart, urging him to fight irrespective of his own free will.

He could think of nothing more vexing than that.

Thanks to Sígismund's iron will and unshakeable pride in himself as a clan patriarch, he was able to maintain a cool head, but the same could not be said of the soldiers under his command.

“Whoaaaah! Hurry up and let me fiiiight!”

“Kill, kill, kill!”

“I’m gonna kill every last one of the Steel Clan!”

It was no longer simple fighting spirit that filled them, but a violent bloodlust that seemed to erupt from them.

It was hard to believe these were the same men who, just moments ago, were trembling in fear of the thunder bombs the Steel Clan was throwing at them.

They were, by all accounts, a different army entirely right now.

That, too, grated on Sígismund’s nerves.

These were his sworn children, and their sworn children.

As their patriarch, seeing their hearts so easily manipulated by an outside power was anything but enjoyable.

“Still, it’s undeniable that our chances of victory are incredibly slim without relying on the effects of this ludicrous ‘power.’ Tch... I hate every damn thing about this.”

Sígismund cursed bitterly and clicked his tongue in frustration.

While he didn’t admit as much out loud, he was also incredibly annoyed at how he’d been made to see, thanks to this war, just how much he’d overestimated his importance through his own ignorance.

The Steel Clan reginarch, Suoh-Yuuto.

The Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél.

Compared to them, Sígismund was insignificant.

That thought kept creeping up to the surface of his mind, despite his best efforts to try to bury it away.

He shook his head violently to clear his mind and shouted to his men.

“All right men, all of you, pay attention! We’re going to show the Steel Clan just how terrifying the warriors of the Fang Clan truly are!”

“Yeeeaaaaaahhhh!”

As if they’d been waiting for just those words, the Fang Clan soldiers erupted in a chorus of war cries and launched themselves towards the flank of the Steel Clan forces.

An arrow flew out from the Steel Clan lines, carrying a thunder bomb that exploded as it neared them.

Several people caught near the heart of the explosion were thrown off their feet by the blast, suffering painful burns.

However, that was all the damage they suffered. At this point, that was nothing to them.

The other soldiers didn’t show any concern and continued rushing forward, surging like a wave towards the Steel Clan lines.

The sound of another volley filled the air. This time, a multitude of arrows came flying directly at them.

They were arrows with such powerful penetrating power that they could pass all the way through wooden shields with little resistance.

Those terribly destructive arrows were fired on them without pause.

However, even as those arrows pierced their bodies in several places, the soldiers kept up their charge without so much as flinching.

Of course, the ones who suffered mortal wounds couldn’t keep running for very long. Eventually, they collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

However, until that very last instant, they spent the last of their energy serving as human shields for the soldiers running behind them.

Once they were through the storm of arrows, the soldiers were then confronted with a wall made of dark metal that shimmered dully in the light.

The fact that their foes had prepared such an incredible thing was a little awe-inspiring, but even so, this barrier wasn’t high at all compared to the walls of Dauwe Castle.

The Fang Clan soldiers ran right up to it and used the backs of the men in

front of them as a foothold to climb up and grasp the upper rim. One after another, they scaled the metal wall.

The instant one of them pulled his body up on top of the rim, a spear shot out from behind the wall, stabbing him and sending him tumbling back down to the ground.

For the Fang Clan soldiers of a few minutes ago, after being so thoroughly rebuffed by these ironclad defenses, they would have wondered how they could possibly get past, and likely would have had their spirits broken.

However, at this moment, not one of them showed an ounce of hesitation or doubt.

The Fang Clan ceaselessly continued their assault.

"Ugh... Okay, this could be a little bad."

Yuuto furrowed his brow and groaned.

Technically, the Steel Clan Army was still pushing their way forward, dominating the contest between the two sides... but something felt very odd here.

In warfare, victory and loss were determined by a battle's momentum.

Paying no heed to losses or overwhelming odds—refusing to surrender and fighting bravely down to the very last man—those sorts of situations just didn't really occur on a real battlefield.

Most soldiers in a clan's army were drafted from the various farming villages and towns within its territory.

The loyalty of such draftees didn't really run all that deep. If it became apparent to them that their side was going to lose, they would abruptly turn and flee in an effort to save their own skins, scattering like dandelion seeds on the wind.

That's what felt strange here—those conventions didn't seem to apply at all.

The enemy's ranks were showing no signs of breaking whatsoever.

The difference in power between the two sides was clear as day. Even the least-experienced men among their rank and file would have quickly realized that they stood no chance of winning this. But not one of them was turning to run.

“Dammit, they’re actually fighting back even *harder* than before...!”

Yuuto was quickly receiving more and more reports from his frontline squads that claimed the enemy troops had “changed” in some way. They were fighting as if they’d been possessed by some kind of vengeful spirit.

It made them seem like they weren’t even human anymore. Even just hearing about it secondhand, the image was uncanny in a way that gave Yuuto the creeps.

However, right now it didn’t matter whether Yuuto found them disturbing or not. They were a definite threat like this, and needed to be dealt with quickly.

No matter how many of them were killed, they’d never stop coming.

Something like that would easily wear down a person’s spirit if left unchecked.

To begin with, the Steel Clan Army was already fighting through all of the fatigue they’d built up over the course of their forced march.

The encouragement they’d received had boosted their morale and gone some ways toward making them forget that, but it was like they were being held up by a cord that had been stretched taut. There was more than a small chance of that morale coming crashing back down the instant something in this battle pushed them just a little too hard.

And, as if timed perfectly to add on to that pressure, two more reports came in with very unwelcome news.

“Lord Reginarch! The detached right wing of the enemy’s forces has launched a second assault on our flank. Even the explosives haven’t been able to stop them this time!”

“It’s the same with their left wing, my lord. They’ve already pressed in all the way up to the Wagon Wall, and I’m told we won’t be able to hold them back for

much longer if this continues!”

“Tch. So it’s turning out exactly like I was afraid it would,” Yuuto said, clicking his tongue in frustration.

The greatest weakness of fighting with phalanx formations was that they were vulnerable to attacks from the back and sides.

In order to mitigate that weakness, Yuuto had made the decision to protect his army’s rear flanks using Wagon Wall barricades, manned with soldiers at their rims throwing tetsuhau bombs to frighten and stun the enemy, while crossbowmen behind them launched arrows continuously using three-rank volley fire.

That setup was intended to make it so that just a small allocation of his men could serve to keep enemy soldiers from closing in on his flanks, but it was beginning to seem uncertain as to just how long they’d be able to maintain that.

At the very least, at the rate things were going, there was a very high probability that the Steel Clan formation would be encircled—and subsequently crushed—long before they could push through the enemy’s central defensive line.

“Big Brother, if this carries on in this way, we are done for! What should we... Ah?!”

Before Felicia could finish voicing her question, she stopped and gasped.

The aura around Yuuto had transformed.

Each time Felicia witnessed this change and felt the overwhelming force of presence and incredible pressure he projected, she always found herself unable to keep from shuddering—half from fear and half from delight.

The roaring lion within his heart had awakened. Here stood the destined conqueror of this world.

“It appears I’ve no choice left but to get serious with them, too.”

“Wonderful news! It would appear that Hrönn’s squad on the right wing has at last successfully passed beyond the enemy’s barricade of carriages and is

pushing further into their formation as we speak!”

“I... I see... So Hrönn succeeded... in her mission.”

Alexis delivered his report with excitement, and while Fagrahvél could only respond between gasps, it was with a faint smile.

Hrönn was the youngest member of the Maidens of the Waves, but even among the many strong and brave warriors of the Sword Clan, she was, at the least, among its top three in terms of her valor in battle.

While Erna was an Einherjar whose powers were concentrated on enhancing the strength in her legs, Hrönn was an Einherjar whose powers were concentrated in her arms.

It was highly likely that she’d used those incredibly powerful arms of hers to pull open a gap in the enemy’s wall of carriages.

The fortifications were made from carriages; naturally, those carriages had been brought in on wheels.

They were mobile, so there was no way a girl as strong as her wouldn’t be able to move them by force.

“No matter how sturdy the fabric, unravel one seam and the whole thing starts to come apaaart. That is just the nature of thiings. Well, weeell, we somehow managed to—”

Before Bára could even finish expressing her relief, her words were cut off.

“What?! An enemy cavalry unit is closing in on Hrönn’s squad from their rear!” Alexis reported, his voice filled with tension.

“So now is when they chose to make their mooove.” Bára motioned to a messenger soldier nearby. “Relay a message to Erna’s squad. Tell her to head over and reinforce Hrönn’s squad, understooood?”

This was a different cavalry unit than the one in Vígríðr, which meant they would have to be the Múspell Unit, known as the Steel Clan’s strongest fighters.

That also meant they’d be headed up by their leader, Sigrún, who was herself known for holding the title of strongest warrior in all of the Steel Clan—the Mánagarmr.

In that case, there was no choice for Bára but for her to send their own strongest against them.

“Yes, ma’am!” The messenger said, and hurriedly ran off as fast as he could. However, Alexis’ worried expression remained unchanged.

“U-Unfortunately, as the enemy unit is on horseback, they are moving much faster than we can. Hrönn’s squad has been caught by surprise from behind, and the attack is causing them quite some trouble...”

“Khh...! We couldn’t react in time...”

Fagrahvél spit out the words bitterly, overcome with frustration.

Even with Hárbarth’s power allowing him to know every detail of the Steel Clan Army’s movements, the only one he could communicate that information to directly was Alexis.

Once Bára and Fagrahvél received the information from Alexis, they would then have to use standard military messengers to send out orders to the appropriate places. Naturally, those messengers were on foot. There was no avoiding the time it took for them to deliver those messages.

“Oh, no!” Alexis exclaimed in a pained voice, placing both hands fretfully against his cheeks.

“What... is it now?!”

“It appears that, because of the sudden attack from behind, our forces suffered a momentary lull in their own assault, and the enemy exploited that opening. They were on the verge of breaking moments ago, but they’ve reinforced their numbers, pushed our forces back outside of their barricade, and rebuilt the breached section.”

“Are you seriooous?” Bára’s shoulders slumped. “They are just too resilieeent.”

For just a moment, Alliance forces had finally broken the enemy’s defenses, and she’d become convinced that victory was soon at hand. That made this sudden reversal feel all the more disappointing.

However, after another few moments, Alexis suddenly perked up with

excitement.

“Oh, ohh! Now it appears that Sígismund’s forces in our left wing have pushed their way past a part of the carriage wall and into the enemy’s flank!”

“Oh, goood!”

Bára’s own voice was brighter, too. But, once again, her joy was short-lived.

“What?! How?!”

“What is it this tiiime?”

From the shocked tone in Alexis’ voice, Bára could already tell it was something she wouldn’t like to hear, but she had to ask anyway.

“I-It would appear that the Fang Clan soldiers are now being attacked from their flank by the cavalry unit from before!”

“Whaaat?! Weren’t those cavalry still in combat with Hrönn’s squad from the *right* wiiing?!”

“A-Apparently, the enemy cavalry has already disengaged from combat there and, using their superior mobility, swiftly moved to aid the area being attacked by Sígismund’s forces.”

“Excuuuuse me?!” Bára shouted. “Regardless of the circumstances, that reaction is far too faaaast!” She raked the fingers of both hands wildly through her own hair.

Even Fagrahvél, who had known Bára for more than fifteen years now, had never seen her worked up to the point of losing her composure like this.

However, Fagrahvél herself felt exactly the same way and merely lacked the energy to be capable of expressing it.

Just like before, the enemy cavalry unit’s fierce attack caused the Alliance Army’s assault to falter, and during that time, the Steel Clan Army plugged the hole in their defensive line.

It was tempting at first to think of it as an unfortunate coincidence, but that pattern continued to repeat itself many times afterward, as well.

The Steel Clan Army’s defenses seemed breachable, but never actually broke

for good.

“There is... clearly something strange about this... Far too... strange...” Fagrahvél said between haggard breaths.

That much was easy to understand, even with how hard it was to think through the fog in her mind right now.

No commander, no matter how talented or experienced, could fully know the status of all of the troops of an entire army. That was especially true for an army numbering more than ten thousand. In fact, it was categorically impossible.

“The enemy has broken through defenses on our flank.”

That information would first need to be relayed by a soldier to the commander, and running that distance would take a certain amount of time.

The commander would then send out an order to troops to go aid the endangered section, and once again, it would take time for that order to reach the intended squads.

However, the most important point was something else.

The Steel Clan Army’s cavalry unit was *detached*, moving around and fighting independently of the main body of their army. It would be one thing if they were communicating only the most basic information using simple signals, but in this case, the orders sent out to the cavalry would need to include details on the exact location that was being breached.

How in the world could they possibly do that?!

It didn’t make any sense.

It was the Alliance Army who were the ones using supernatural power to do what should normally be impossible, observing everything about the layout and movements of their foes, and moving their own troops accordingly.

But those foes were reacting even *faster* than that! And by a wide margin, no less!

“Do they have... the ability to see the future...?!”

Indeed, it was as if the enemy commander knew which section was going to be overrun next and had sent out orders well in advance. That was the only way to possibly rationalize it.

And each of those orders was so precise!

Steel Clan troops moved in to strengthen those areas that had just begun to weaken, and they moved without hesitation to attack any tiny vulnerable spots in the Alliance Army formation the second they presented themselves.

When the Alliance Army forces prepared to launch a counterattack, their foes immediately pulled back and avoided taking losses.

Fagrahvél had been told that the ruler of the Steel Clan was a young man still in his teens, but his performance as a commander was more in line with that of a cunning old veteran with many years of experience.

His command was a perfect mixture of rigid force and flexibility, as if he'd lived on the battlefield for so long that all of its many intricacies came as easily to him as breathing.

"Is this really... the work of a human...?! It couldn't be... Is he... Is this Suoh-Yuuto actually the incarnation of a war god after all...?!"

"This is Kris. The Klaes Squad has had its section of the wall breached."

"Got it. In that case... Okay, have the Sveigðir Squad move to support them!"

"Understood."

"Sigrún! Did you get all that?!"

"Yes, Father!"

"I'm sure you're all worn out from fighting back to back like this, but can you keep it up?!"

"That will not be an issue! My fighters are not so weak that this level of work would tire them out. I trained them hard enough to make sure of that!"

"Okay, then I'm counting on you! But make sure that confidence doesn't mislead you—give them some rest whenever you get the chance to!"

“Yes, Father! Now, if you will excuse me!”

“Al! How are things on your end?! No problems yet?!”

“Nooope, right now everything’s just fine!”

“Okay, if anything happens, let me know right away.”

After barking out one order after another in rapid succession, Yuuto at last let out a long, deep breath, and lowered the transceiver from his ear.

“...Phew, I guess that’s it for now.”

He’d made use of transceivers once before, back during the Battle of Körmt River, by sending someone out to spy on the enemy’s movements and using that information to determine the timing for his strategy.

However, he’d originally brought them with him from modern Japan to Yggdrasil in order to use them more like he was now—for high-speed communication and coordination between the units in his army *active on the field*.

It was because he’d meant them for that purpose that he’d brought so many of them—fifteen in total.

He’d allocated thirteen of them to Kristina, Albertina, and their subordinates in the intelligence division they led, and by spreading them all out, he could get updates about the condition of his entire army almost in real time.

As soon as some part of his defenses started to break down, or a vulnerability was found in the enemy forces, he could immediately send out orders to one or more of his agents, who could then run quickly to the appropriate commanding officer close by.

With one transceiver for himself, he’d given the last one to Sigrún, so that he could send her mobile cavalry unit to the places most in danger and have her hit the attacking enemy to weaken their momentum.

By using this method, Yuuto had access to fourteen separate points of observation, and it became possible for him to move around the various parts of his massive ten-thousand strong army as seamlessly as if they were his own arms and legs.

Indeed, his control over them was *so* fluid and seamless that, from the perspective of someone for whom messages between army units could only be conveyed on foot, what he was doing could only be explained as the ability to see into the future!

However, that control alone wouldn't be enough to put a stop to the fierce attacks by the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, whose soldiers fought on ceaselessly as if possessed.

A vast amount of useful information was still useless without someone in command with the capability to properly process, organize, and act upon it.

Even if orders could be sent out to their recipients with lightning speed, if the orders given weren't the correct decision for each situation, the troops would end up overrun by these fearsome foes in no time at all.

As it so happened, the Steel Clan did indeed have someone capable of doing just that, sending out exactly the right order in each instance with surgical precision.

Humans are creatures capable of growth, and it is the young among them who hold the greatest potential for that growth.

It had been just over two years now since he'd become a patriarch. He'd been through several wars and seen numerous individual battles on the field, surviving hard-fought struggles against one powerful foe after another.

That had been his life from the age of fifteen to seventeen.

Those two years, the most impressionable of many young men's lives, had been packed with countless important and enriching experiences, and it was those experiences that had unlocked a great potential sleeping within him. It was a gift he'd been born with, but would never have seen use in the world of 21st-century Japan—the talent of a battlefield commander.



“Oh, this is baaad.”

As Bára focused on the current battle situation, she seemed unaware that she was biting down hard on her own thumb in an obvious display of both nervousness and frustration.

She was a woman who had built up a reputation for always being unflappable and seemingly carefree no matter the situation, but right now her anxiety was written all over her face.

It had already been six hours since this battle had first gotten underway.

The fighting had only grown steadily more and more intense during that time, and while the battle lines had repeatedly pushed forward and back in what seemed like a continuous loop, at last, the overall trend had become apparent. Little by little, gradually but obviously, the scales were tipping to one side.

That is, towards the Steel Clan.

“Haah... haah...” Fagrahvél stood in front of Bára, panting with exhaustion but saying nothing.

Suddenly, Fagrahvél’s body tipped over backwards and started falling towards the ground, as if she’d been pulled down by an invisible cord.

Bára gasped in shock and hurriedly rushed over to her side, managing to catch her just before she hit the ground.

“A-Are you all riiight?”

“...I am.”

She could tell right away that Fagrahvél was lying.

Her complexion was already as pale as a corpse’s. Bára could hardly sense any semblance of vitality from her.

There was no way a person in such a state could possibly be fine.

“Hey, Fagrahvél, can you see thiiis?”

Bára held her index finger in front of Fagrahvél’s eyes.

“...Mm? ...Three? Three... what? What does that... mean?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about iiit.”

Bára replied with the same nonchalant voice she always used, though her expression was as pained and bitter as if she’d bitten down on a bug.

She’d noticed that Fagrahvél’s eyes had looked like they weren’t focusing, and her little visual test had proven that fear true.

She’d also just addressed Fagrahvél, her sworn parent, by name, and Fagrahvél hadn’t noticed that either.

Normally, Fagrahvél would absolutely have noticed and made some sort of comment, regardless of fatigue.

It meant her consciousness was so dim at this point that her mind wasn’t capable of paying any attention to that.

She had pushed her body completely past its limits.

“Don’t... concern yourself... with me. I can still...!”

Even as she continued to struggle to speak between feeble breaths, Fagrahvél tried to stand again.

No doubt, because she felt that it was her duty as her army’s commander.

“Khh... ngh...!”

However, apparently the strength of her will could no longer force her body to obey.

As she put her feet against the ground, her legs shook violently, but she couldn’t stand on them. There was no longer enough strength in her body for even that much.

She’d expended every last ounce of her vitality, to the point that the fact that she could still remain conscious at all was nothing short of a miracle.

After all, even at this very moment, her rune Gjallarhorn was still draining energy from her to maintain the effects of its power upon the troops of the Alliance Army.

“I can’t stop yet! I won’t stop... until the Steel Clan is defeated...!”

Those words spilled from Fagrahvél’s lips in a weak, delirious voice, as if she

were muttering in her sleep.

She was hardly even capable of coherent thought right now, and yet she was hanging on as if driven by subconscious instinct.

Right now, if she were to lose consciousness, the power of Gjallarhorn would be cut off, and the Alliance Army soldiers would lose the strength they needed to hold back the Steel Clan. They'd be crushed in minutes.

Thanks to her experience as a commander, Fagrahvél understood that fact on an instinctive level.

And the cruel reality was, that understanding was correct.

"Her Majesty... my little sister... I must protect her...!"

That singular will seemed to be the only thing tying her mind to the waking world now.

Fagrahvél's mental strength was something Bára sincerely respected, but in her current state, even that would likely not hold out for much longer.

She wasn't just on the edge of consciousness—Fagrahvél was approaching the edge of life and death.

"I've never really liked gambliiing, but it looks like there's no other choice but to take a risky, all-or-nothing beeet."

"Failed again... Damn it all!"

The one spitting out those words in loathing was none other than Erna, member of the Sword Clan's Maidens of the Waves, and leader of its army's Special Assault Force.

Her squad, along with the squads of her fellow Maidens of the Waves members Thír and Hrönn, had been attacking the Steel Clan formation in alternating waves, stacking consistent force against them, but every time it seemed like things were about to break in their favor, they were pushed back again at the last minute.

"This is getting nowhere. At this rate, we'll...!"

As the feelings of anxiousness surged through her, she clenched her teeth tightly.

When the battle had first gotten underway, the sun had been at its zenith in the sky.

Now, it was beginning to sink behind the tall peaks of the Himinbjörg Mountains, and the evening light was painting the sky bright red.

It was proof a significant number of hours had passed, and Erna was worried for the health of her master and patriarch, Fagrahvél.

“Now is no time for such weak thoughts, Erna. There’s no time left for them, either.”

“Huh?!”

Surprised at hearing the voice of someone who shouldn’t be here with her, Erna whirled around, wide-eyed.

“Thír?! And... and all the rest of you, too?! Why are you all here?!”

Standing before Erna were *all* of the other members of the Maidens of the Waves, aside from Bára. Seven Einherjar, the strongest and most elite warriors of the Sword Clan.

By Erna’s understanding, all of them were supposed to have been working separately, each leading their own squad of soldiers.

The fact that they were all here now would mean they’d abandoned those orders to come here.

It was a behavior that made no sense for such senior officers.

“We’re here on Bára’s orders. This is our last big chance to turn the tables.”

“Our ‘last’ chance... I see.”

Even Erna immediately grasped the meaning behind those words.

It meant Fagrahvél was already nearly depleted of any remaining stamina.

Thír nodded slowly.

“That’s right. We Maidens of the Waves will use all of our strength combined,

and see if we can't spear our way through the Steel Clan Army's thick hide."

"All of our strength... That is quite a bold and aggressive move for Bára."

Honestly, it was pretty surprising.

Bára was cunning and calculating by nature. Her style was to set things up in such a way as to create a winning scenario before beginning the fight.

It was certainly true that if the Einherjar who made up the Maidens of the Waves attacked as a single concentrated unit, they could assault their foes with tremendous power. On the other hand, they were also valuable to their own army in their capacity as skilled field officers. Their absences from those key positions would considerably weaken the rest of the Alliance Army.

In a situation like this, where their side was already desperately struggling, such a shift in strength could risk weakening their troops enough for them to become overwhelmed by the enemy's momentum, and subsequently crushed. It was an extremely dangerous bet to take.

"That just shows how much our backs are up against the wall right now. Bára said that she'd make sure the rest of our forces held out in the meantime, but I doubt they'll last long."

"....."

Gulping, Erna said nothing.

She was painfully aware that resting on their shoulders right now were the fates of the Sword Clan Army, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, and perhaps even the empire itself.

"We're going to do this, Erna. Let's show the Steel Clan what it means when the Maidens of the Waves fight together."

"Right!" Erna shouted. That brisk response was her only option.

The battle had, at last, moved into its final act.

"Haaaaaah!"

Thír, swinging her sword with both hands, repelled the hail of arrows that fell

towards her as she charged forward.

The Steel Clan had fortified their flank defenses with archers wielding crossbows, which fired arrows that traveled far faster than any bow from this era, but despite that, Thír could still see and track every one of them with total ease.

In terms of pure physical ability, she was a step or two below Erna and Hrönn, but thanks to the great many battles that Thír had fought in, her combat experience vastly outstripped theirs.

The direction of the enemy soldiers' eyes, the relative intensity of the killing intent she sensed from them, the flow of the air currents—using all of that and more to read and predict the attacks of her foes was a skill at which no one could compare to her.

She easily reached the wall made up of linked wagon carriages, at which point a smaller figure darted out from directly behind her.

Hrönn was small in stature, but she had the Sword Clan's strongest pair of arms.

She stuck both hands into the gap between two carriages, and pulled.

"Hrrngh!"

Despite the added weight of the archers standing inside them, she easily pried the two carriages apart with nothing more than brute force.

Such strength could hardly be considered human; it was much more akin to that of a large bear's.

As soon as Hrönn pried open a gap in the barrier, Erna shot forward through it.

The swiftness of her dash was downright supernatural. The Steel Clan soldiers close by weren't even able to *see* her.

"Gwah! H-Huh...?"

"Wha?! Wh-When did she—"

"Uagh... blood... I'm bleeding..."

All at once, before any of them realized what was happening, their lives were brought to an end.

A beat later, their bodies crumpled, splaying lifelessly.

Incredible feats like this made it all but impossible to deny that “specialized” Einherjar with powers completely focused into one aspect were nothing short of superhuman in those particular areas.

“That’s our Erna! Fastest feet in the Special Assault Force!”

“You better leave room for the rest of us to shine, too!”

“Yeah, we all want the chance to give our bodies some exercise with some real fighting.”

With those excited comments, the other seven Einherjar followed after Erna through the opening in the Wagon Wall.

They were only the eight of them, now deep in the midst of their enemy’s ranks.

By any normal standards, they were hopelessly outnumbered.

However...

“Th-They’re too strong!”

“What the hell *are* they?!”

“Every one of them is as strong as Lady Sigrún!”

It was the Maidens of the Waves who held the advantage.

They were receiving the power of Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, which drew out their latent abilities and forcefully boosted them to their limits.

Their combat strength right now far surpassed even that of a normal Einherjar.

And, that wasn’t all.

The eight of them also had a bond formed by their long history of fighting together. They were comrades-in-arms.

They each had a full understanding of the others’ abilities, personalities, and

fighting styles. Rather than getting in each others' ways, they were instead able to fight in manners that complemented each other well.

These eight women fighting together now were not merely eight Einherjar.

True to their namesake, they were united as a single, powerful wave, and they swept through the ranks of the Steel Clan Army.

"Father, Father! We've got a huge problem!"

"What's happened, Al?"

The voice coming in over the transceiver was panicked, but Yuuto replied in a calm tone.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Albertina's word that there really was a significant problem, or anything like that. Rather, Yuuto always tried to stay true to a policy of keeping calm on the battlefield at all times.

"The spot I'm in charge of watching over is getting attacked right now, but the people leading the charge... six... seven... there's eight of them, but all of them are incredibly strong! They broke through the Wagon Wall in no time at all! I think they're probably all Einherjar!"

"...Hmm."

Yuuto's expression grew more severe, and he put a hand to his chin and thought for a moment.

"So, it looks like they've decided to bet everything on one last gambit."

It was true that bringing eight Einherjar together to attack one location would likely be enough to break past the Wagon Wall's barricade without much difficulty.

That was just due to the nature of Einherjar, who as a rule possessed combat abilities much greater than those of normal humans.

What's more, there was a high likelihood that these weren't just normal Einherjar, but the Sword Clan's most elite Einherjar warriors, the "Maidens of the Waves."

Even if Yuuto moved troops to reinforce the area under attack in the way he'd been doing so far, the reinforcements might themselves end up swept aside by the overwhelming strength of these particular foes.

And, frankly speaking, right now the Steel Clan Army didn't have comparable Einherjar available to send against them.

Including Sigrún, there were three combat-oriented Einherjar in the Múspell Special Forces, but currently, they were in the middle of providing aid to an area on the army's opposite flank, and it would take a non-trivial amount of time to send them over to where Albertina currently was.

He couldn't move Hveðrungr out of Vígríðr, and Skáviðr was far away in the Álfheimr region, protecting the front there.

As for the four Horn Clan Einherjar known as the Brísingamen, one of them had perished in the Battle of Élivágar River; Rasmus had suffered a heavy wound that had basically forced him into retirement; Haugspori was unavailable, as he'd been sent as leader of the reinforcements for the Wheat Clan; and the final member was key to the defense of the army's right flank and couldn't be moved either.

The twin girls from the Claw Clan were both Einherjar, but their abilities weren't geared towards open combat on the field like this.

That meant Felicia was pretty much his only remaining candidate, but sending her in alone would be placing her against hopeless odds.

That was the situation Yuuto found himself in right now.

Yuuto finished thinking, and moved his hand away from his chin, revealing his mouth... the corners of which had curled up into a wide grin.

"So... the few enemy troops that can cause me real trouble are all gathered up in one spot, then. I couldn't ask for anything better."

"Begone!"

Erna cut down the Steel Clan soldier attacking her. Then, with a practiced flick of her arm, she flung the blood from her sword's iron blade.

She'd previously taken the weapon from the corpse of one of the Steel Clan's Independent Cavalry Regiment men, and that had proven to be a good decision.

Her foes right now were also wielding iron weapons.

If she'd been fighting with the type of bronze sword she'd always used before, then by now its blade would surely have been broken into pieces, leaving her in no shape to fight.

But with an iron sword like this one, the blade might suffer a few nicks, but it didn't crack. She could keep fighting!

"We can do this! We can do this!"

The Steel Clan Army had completely outclassed the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army in terms of the combat strength of their troops. But those same Steel Clan soldiers were no match for the power of eight Einherjar.

At this rate, they would be able to change the flow of this battle before Fagrahvél's strength reached its last.

Erna got the sensation that a path to victory was nearly within reach.

That was when it happened. Abruptly, the *wind stopped*.

A change in the wind currents during a battle wasn't unusual. It was fairly common.

However, something about this felt off. For some reason, Erna felt a terrible sense of foreboding about it.

From within the ranks of the Steel Clan's soldiers, something was tossed out in her direction.

It was some sort of small object, slightly long and cylindrical, and though it was darkly colored, it glinted strangely in the light.

If, in that split second, Erna had used the flat of her sword to hit the object and send it flying back in the direction it came from, perhaps her future would have held a very different outcome.

However, she didn't have the faintest idea what the object even was.

And so, she was too late to react to it.

Without warning, white-colored smoke erupted from the unknown object.

In the span of a few seconds, it engulfed the area around Erna.

“Wh-What’s happening?! Ghagh!”

“My eyes! My eeeyes!”

“Khak khagh... My throat...! It’s on fire!”

“What *is* this?!”

One after another, Erna’s comrades, the elite warriors who had each fought with such unmatched prowess that none of the Steel Clan soldiers could hope to stand against them, now cried out in pain.

This small, cylindrical, smoke-releasing object they had fallen victim to was none other than the tear gas grenade.

In the modern era Yuuto came from, it was a non-lethal chemical weapon used mainly in the suppression of riots.

It was also being sold over the internet as “security equipment,” readily available for the price of five to six thousand yen apiece.

Einherjar might be stronger and faster than normal humans, but even the Maidens of the Waves weren’t fast enough to evade the pressurized smoke that instantly expanded to fill the air around them.

Their eyes, noses, and throats were assaulted by a violent, burning sensation, and they flailed in pain.

“La, la, lala...”

Their ears, however, picked up an odd sound—a young girl’s voice, singing a little melody in a carefree manner that seemed completely out of place on the battlefield.

Immediately following that, a sudden breeze picked up.

It wasn’t a very strong breeze, really, only just enough to blow a person’s hair a bit.

However, because the wind had been completely stopped in this area, that breeze alone was enough to push the white smoke in the direction of the

attacking Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army soldiers.

“Gyaagh! It burns! Why does it burn?!”

“My eyes are on fire!”

“Khagh, ugghh, I can’t—I can’t breathe!”

Their screams multiplied, turning into a total uproar.

The smoke itself would momentarily clear, but the effects of the tear gas would continue, keeping them all in agony for at least fifteen minutes.

Unstoppable coughing fits and the searing pain in their eyes and throats would practically paralyze them.

Even simply breathing was a struggle for them at the moment.

In that sort of state, it didn’t matter if they were powerful Einherjar or soldiers who fought like an army of the living dead. They *couldn’t* put up a fight right now.

Steel Clan reinforcements arrived, and one by one, the Maidens of the Waves were pinned to the ground and tied up.

“I got them all!”

“All riiight! You did great, Al!”

Yuuto cheered for Albertina, pumping his clenched fist in the air.

This plan was something he’d originally devised to use against Steinþórr, but it had saved him here instead.

“To think the day would come when Al would actually make herself useful on the battlefield...”

Her twin sister Kristina’s voice over the transceiver sounded decidedly more mixed. For her, Albertina’s hopelessness was what made her adorable.

“Why, I half expect it might snow tomorrow,” she muttered. “Or perhaps it will hail. Spears.”

“Wha?! Kris, that’s so meeean!” Albertina whined indignantly, ignorant of her

sister's feelings, which prompted a laugh from Yuuto.

"Ha ha ha! So, how did you like using the gas grenade? It's the perfect weapon for the girl who wields Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, wouldn't you say?"

One of Albertina's powers was the power to "provoke the wind," just as the namesake of her rune suggested.

However, the truth was that until now there hadn't really been much practical use for that power.

The winds she could create were weak, so they couldn't be used for something major like boosting the strength of archer volleys.

The most they'd been good for was creating a localized tailwind to slightly boost the traveling speed of a wagon, or a nice breeze to help cool off in the heat of summer.

No one would have suspected they'd be what she used to defeat eight Einherjar all by herself!

Without Albertina's power to rely on, Yuuto would have had no choice but to leave this plan on the shelf. Using gas weapons with only the natural air currents in place was leaving things up to nature, which was leaving them up to chance—there was the risk the wind could end up blowing the tear gas back at his own troops, and then he'd have done himself in.

There was no questioning that the greatest accomplishment in this battle had been won by Albertina's hand.

"Yeah, it worked really well," Albertina said. "I'm so glad Kris spent all that time having me practice over and over how to use it. It really paid off!"

That prompted another laugh from Yuuto.

Of *course* she'd done that.

Much as could be expected of Kristina, no matter how insulting her words were, at heart she'd also wanted nothing more than to help give her sister a chance to accomplish something for herself.

Also, she'd secretly assisted Albertina on the battlefield as well. Kristina had

used her rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds, to still the air currents before Albertina took action. Of course, she'd *never* admit that openly.

She really was twisted when it came to the way she acted towards her beloved sister.

"Okay, so now that's set... Hm?"

Yuuto stopped short, feeling something change in the air. He turned to look in the direction of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army.

The heavy, almost painfully uncomfortable pressure that he'd been sensing coming from their soldiers quickly began to vanish, like mist evaporating in the sun.

"Well, now... It looks like the clock's struck midnight, and their magic has run out. All right, we're going to hit them all at once with everything we've got!"

"The Maidens of the Waves... all defeated...?!"

When the news reached Fagrahvél, it was the final straw. Long after passing what should have been her physical limits, she'd still been barely holding on to consciousness with what could only be called a death-defying determination, but it was as if her spirit broke in two.

As Fagrahvél collapsed, Bára caught her in her arms.

Bára looked up at the sky, almost in a daze, and whispered, "So against Suoh-Yuuto the war god, even eight Einherjar are no more than a trifling challenge..."

Bára's assessment of the Maidens of the Waves was not affected by personal affiliation. They simply were the best of the best.

In particular, Thír, Erna, and Hrönn were strong enough that any of them should have made for an even match with the Steel Clan's famous warrior Sigrún.

They'd been enhanced by the power of Gjallarhorn, the Call to War.

No one would be capable of stopping them. Bára had felt absolutely certain of it.

But instead, it turned out that all eight of them were easily defeated and captured.

It was all she could do not to laugh.

“Utter defeat. There’s no other word for iiit.”

With the effects of Gjallarhorn’s power gone, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army no longer had the strength nor the courage to stand against the Steel Clan Army, and the soldiers had already started to flee for their lives.

Bára had made thorough preparations before this battle, doing absolutely everything that was necessary to place things in her favor. In fact, she might go so far as to say her preparations had been perfect. Despite that, her foes had fought her head-on and overpowered her with their strength.

“Victory and defeat are often decided by fortune.” It was a common saying, but it rang hollow to her.

She’d been made to feel like the difference in their strengths was so overwhelming that she could face this foe a hundred times and would still lose every time.

“This is the limit of what we can do here. Send the order for all troops to begin the retreeeat.”

The remainder of what happened from then on was decided in that moment.

“Sieg Iárn! Sieg Reginarch!”

The victorious cries of the Steel Clan echoed over the fields of Vígríðr.

EPILOGUE

Valaskjálf Palace—

The central seat of power for the Holy Ásgarðr Empire was built to display the authority and grandeur of the þjóðann, and twenty years were spent on its construction. It was so large and expansive that a modestly-sized city would fit neatly within the scope of the palace grounds.

In the innermost section of the palace towered the sacred tower known as Hliðskjálf, at the pinnacle of which was the most holy hörgr sanctuary in all of the empire. Within that sanctuary sat the ruler of the empire herself, the þjóðann, Sigrdrífa.

Her body was still, her eyes closed, her head tilted listlessly downward, not moving a muscle.

She seemed so lifeless one might have mistaken her for dead, but suddenly her eyes popped open wide and she roused herself to her feet.

“Damn that accursed Black One. I’d no intention of underestimating his power in the slightest, but even then he’s exceeded anything I could’ve imagined.”

Her voice was bitter and spiteful.

If Sigrdrífa’s milk sibling Fagrahvél had been present to hear those words, perhaps she would have noticed that this was completely unlike the way Sigrdrífa spoke. That, in fact, it was much more like another person Fagrahvél knew very well.

And, perhaps, that realization might have led her to put together all of the disconcerting clues she’d seen and heard thus far, arriving at the answer as to who was really speaking.

The Divine Empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, Fagrahvél’s beloved little sister, was being *inhabited* by her most hated nemesis.

“And this after all the trouble I went through controlling this vessel and

putting on that ridiculous act, just to make everything perfect. Thwarted with sheer strength in battle... I can scarcely believe it.”

Hárbarth, patriarch of the Spear Clan and High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, had the power to send his spirit to possess the bodies of other living creatures and manipulate them.

That power was somewhat lacking in strength, and so when it came to other humans, the most he could do was take them over when they were sleeping or otherwise completely unconscious.

During the ritual that summoned the Black One to Yggdrasil for the second time, Sigrdrífa had lost consciousness, and she’d remained that way. For Hárbarth, that made her the ideal puppet. Possessing her body, he could use her authority to further his own agenda.

“He’s quickly become too powerful for anyone to contain...”

With the imperial subjugation order, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance, and the encirclement strategy, Hárbarth had used every bit of the authority available to him to form his scheme, accounting for every possibility he could think of. It had been his ultimate creation.

He’d brought together clans from Ásgarðr, Bifröst, Miðgarðr, Álfheimr—their armies numbering forty thousand all told.

He’d had them invade the Steel Clan from three sides simultaneously.

And, finally, added to the strength of those armies had been the power of Fagrahvél’s rune Gjallarhorn to grant enhanced strength and morale to the troops, and Hárbarth’s own ability to gather information as Skilfingr, the Watcher From on High. The two of them in particular had powers which gained incomparable value when applied to strategic warfare.

There hadn’t been a doubt in his mind that this alliance would be a threat to the Steel Clan unlike any other—indeed, far greater than even the danger the Steel Clan had faced in their previous war against the alliance of the Panther Clan and Lightning Clan.

And yet, instead, the threat he’d orchestrated had been defeated with barely any struggle...

“What a truly terrifying man he is. However, I won’t give up when I am so close to fulfilling my deepest-held wishes. Until I do, I cannot allow the empire to be destroyed. Now, the question is what to do next.”

Hárbarth thought quietly for a few moments, arms folded.

Despite everything he’d done thus far to set things up favorably, he still hadn’t been able to win. Perhaps it was impossible to defeat the Black One on the field of war.

In which case, the only option was to find some other vulnerability to exploit.

At last, Hárbarth hit on an idea.

The corners of Sigrdrífa’s mouth curled up into a sinister smile.

“Hm, perhaps using this body would be the most interesting method.”

To be continued...

Afterword

Hello, it’s been a while. Takayama here.

When I went to the doctor for my summer health checkup, my cholesterol numbers were a little on the scary side, so for the sake of cleaning up my bloodstream, lately I’ve been on a serious diet plan, but... I’m the kind of writer who can’t concentrate on writing if I’m even a little bit hungry, you see.

Up until now, I’d give in and eat, telling myself, *“Hey, there’s nothing you can do, you’ve gotta meet those strict deadlines after all.”* This time I really couldn’t let myself do that anymore, so I was working on this book while enduring the pangs of an empty stomach.

What’s more, right as everything was coming to a head with this volume, I had a bunch of real-life issues I had to take care of piling up on top of that, and that seriously made things tough. Thank goodness I somehow got it all done in time!

And, on that note, I would like to express my thanks to everyone involved in the production of this book, and to all of you dear readers. I hope I can see you again in the next volume!

Seiichi Takayama

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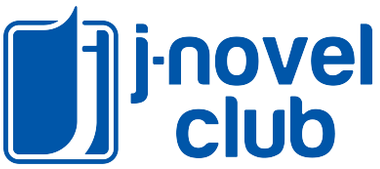
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 12

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Curtis Teal Edited by Aaron Brown

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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020