The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

15





The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar* 15

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN


"This is... a ship?!"
To them, ships and boats were small craft–things like canoes carved out of logs, and at the most, rafts constructed out of logs lashed together with rope, sealed with bees-wax and driven using a small sail. Such craft were more than enough to cross rivers or carry cargo down them. This, however, was a fundamentally different thing altogether. First of all, it was enormous. It was effectively a floating castle.
"Heh, this is *Noah*, the first of our fledgling fleet of Galleon-class ships."


Yuuto's words were meant as heartfelt thanks, but he got a deep sigh from Ingrid in response. A deep, profoundly exasperated sigh at that.
"So, I'm just a friend to you, huh?"

contents

PROLOGUE
ACT 1
ACT 2
ACT 3
ACT 4
ACT 5
EPILOGUE
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

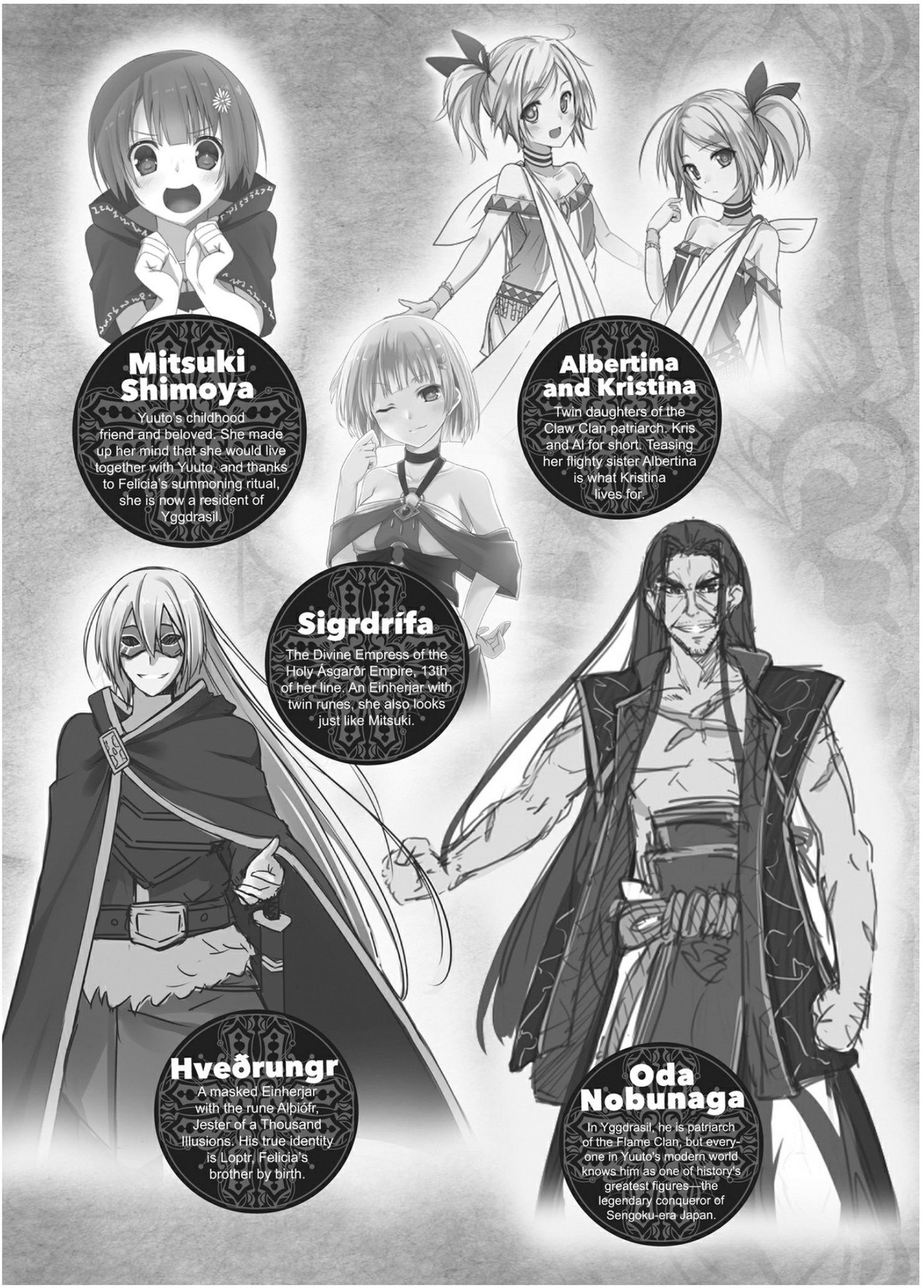
A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."

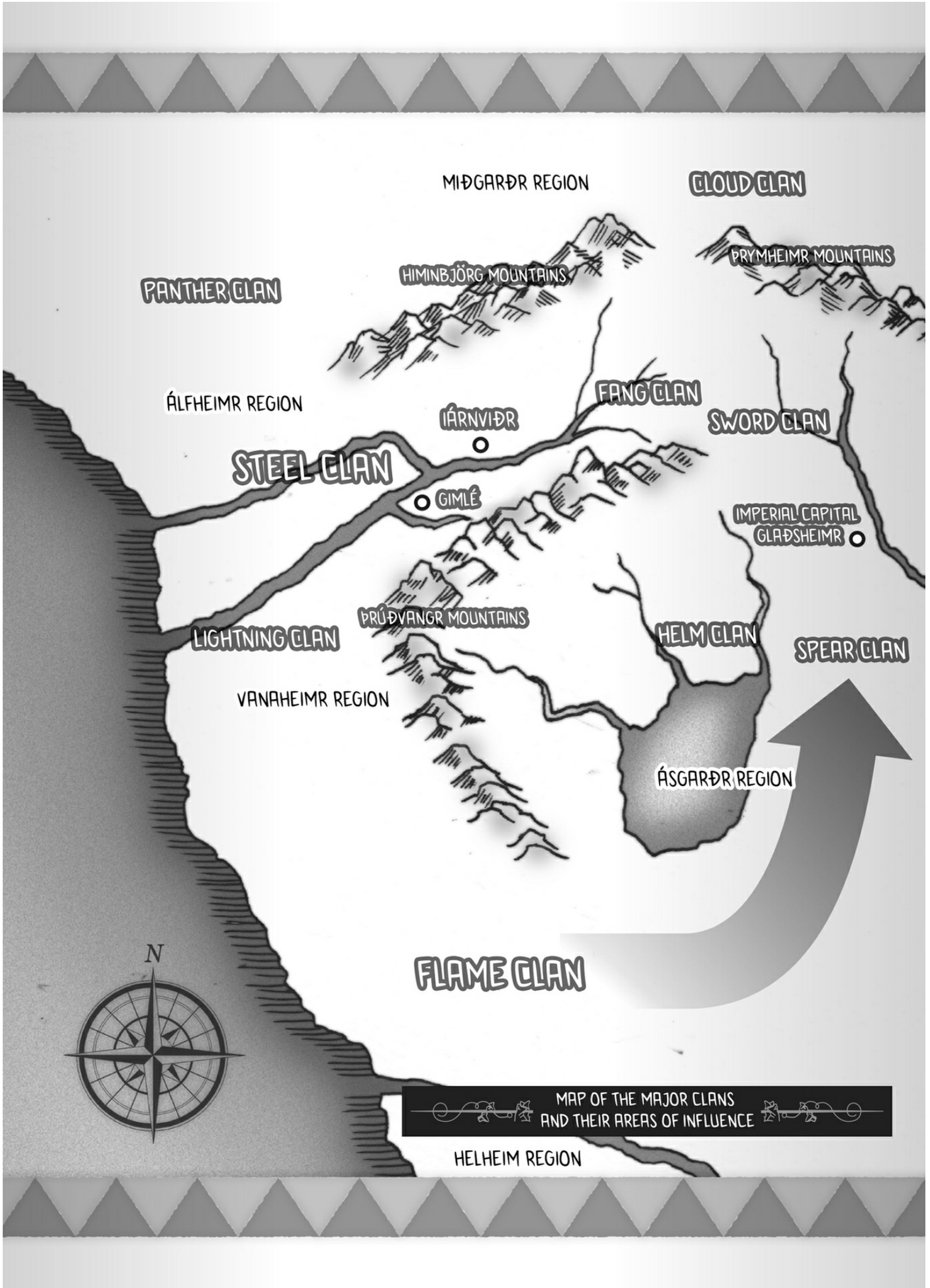
Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan, and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter, and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.

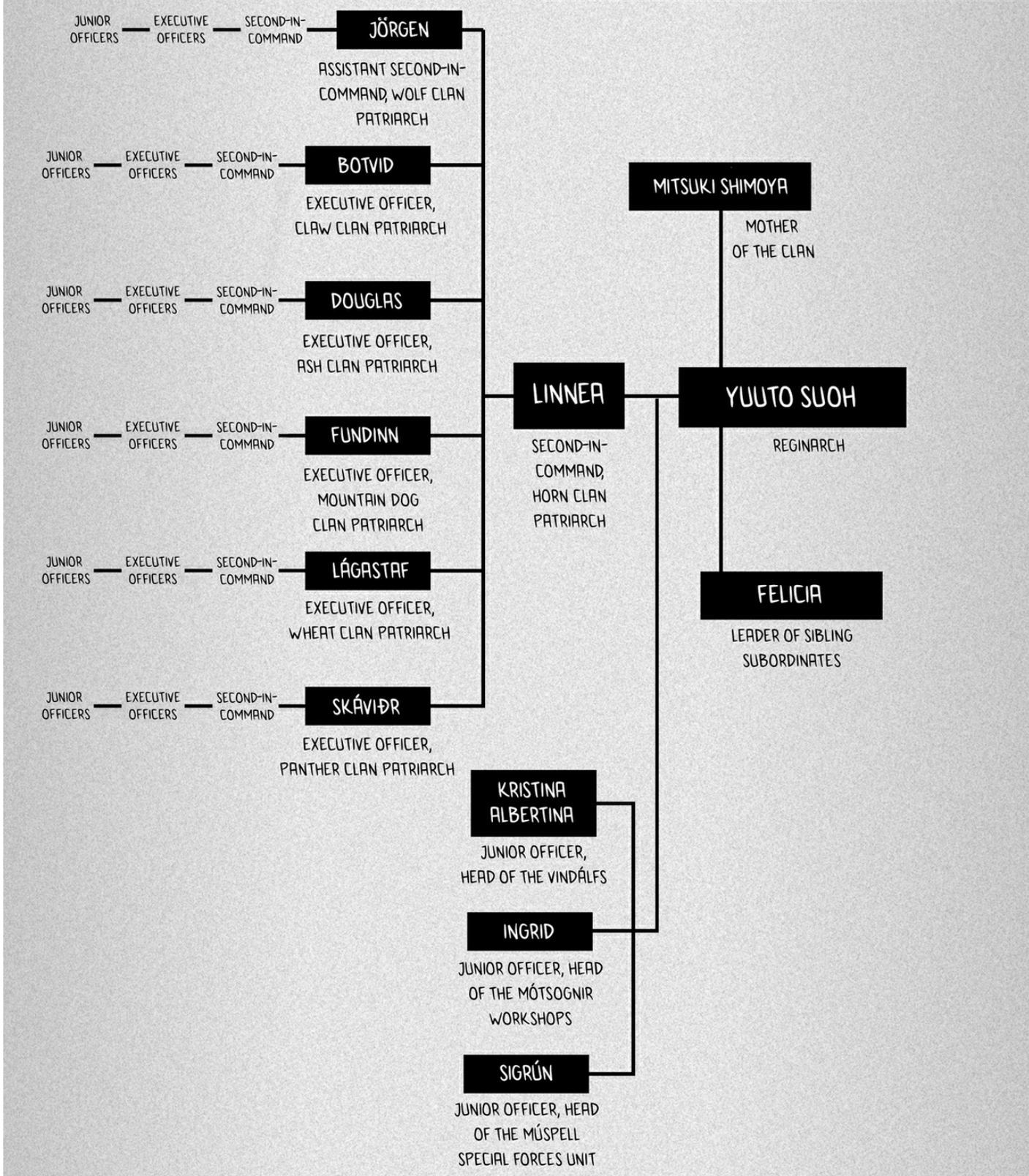
Ingrid

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 childhood friend and beloved. She made up her mind that she would live together with Yuuto, and thanks to Felicia's summoning ritual, she is now a resident of Yggdrasil.
Albertina and Kristina
Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.
Sigrdrífa
The Divine Empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, 13th of her line. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also looks just like Mitsuki.
Hveðrungr
A masked Einherjar with the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. His true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth.
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.


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

HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

“F-Father has finally become þjóðann... What a remarkable time to be alive...”

Jörgen took another pull from his drink, his voice choked with emotion.

He was a bear of a man in his mid-forties.

He was tall and extremely muscular with a shaved head and scars from sword wounds on his brow and cheek. His face was carved with grim features that would make most recruits run and hide at the most casual glance.

In spite of that ferocious visage, however, Jörgen was weeping into his drink with joy. It was an odd scene to say the least.

“Brother Jörgen, it may be time to call it an evening. You’ve perhaps had a drink too many.”

The advice for moderation came from his wraith-like companion.

The man who sat with Jörgen had sunken cheeks and pale skin. In stark contrast to his pallid features, he had a sharp, predatory glint in his eyes. With his ever-grim expression, he seemed like a personification of death itself.

“Don’t be such a killjoy on such a wonderful occasion! Why must you always be such a downer, Brother Ská? We’re drinking in celebration! Isn’t that what life is all about?”

If Jörgen minded Skáviðr’s words, he made no indication of it. He instead offered a lecture of his own to his drinking companion, then gulped down his stein of beer and loosed a boozy belch in Skáviðr’s face.

Jörgen was pretty much the picture of an obnoxious drunk, but given the occasion, it was perhaps understandable that he’d be three sheets to the wind.

The man that Jörgen sincerely respected and admired above all others had ascended to the throne of þjóðann of Yggdrasil.

“I seem to recall you noting the other day after a particularly nasty hangover that you were done with drinking. And given your age, surely it’s not good to indulge so freely.”

“Hrmph! I’d have no regrets even if I died tomorrow. Father’s committed himself to living in these lands and has even become þjóðann. The Steel Clan’s future is assured! I could die in peace!”

“Please don’t say such things. The Steel Clan still needs you for a long time yet, Brother Jörgen.”

“Hah! Never thought I’d hear something so kind from you! Bahahahahahaha!”

Jörgen burst out in raucous laughter and smacked Skáviðr’s back. He held nothing back from those blows, and even the stoic Skáviðr winced at the onslaught.

“I’ve no intention of dying anytime soon. I haven’t even seen the face of Father’s child, after all. I need to see my daughter’s wedding day too.”

“Exactly.”

“So Brother Ská, what about you?”

“What about me, exactly?”

“You know what I mean. This, of course.”

Jörgen stuck up his pinky and grinned salaciously.

Long ago Skáviðr had lost his beloved wife and son. The scars from that trauma had evidently never healed, and Skáviðr had remained a widower, not taking any companions after.

“It’s been ten years, Brother. Surely you can move on.”

“Heh, no, I’ve had enough of losing loved ones to last me one lifetime.”

Letting out a soft chuckle, Skáviðr took a small sip of his drink.

“Besides, being alone with nothing to lose makes things easier in the worst of cases.”

“Hrmph! Don’t try to sound so wise, you whippersnapper.”

“Hah! I didn’t think I’d be called a whippersnapper after passing the age of thirty.”

“Bahahahaha! From my perspective you’re still a mere stripling, lad! Besides,

you've got the order wrong."

"The order...?"

"I'm going first. That should be the way of the world no? The old dying before the young."

Jörgen's face suddenly took on a melancholy expression as he let out a dry, oddly sad laugh.

They lived in an age of war. No doubt Jörgen had witnessed many men and women much younger than himself die long before they rightfully should. Even those he had cared for. He had his own share of losses, and his own thoughts on the matter.

"That's the way it should be..."

With those words Jörgen then took another long pull from his drink.

ACT I

“I’m sorry that we can’t do more than this,” Yuuto said apologetically, his brow furrowed in pain.

He was a black-haired, black-eyed young man; an uncommon sight in Yggdrasil.

Yuuto was a great conqueror, who at the tender age of seventeen had already climbed from being the patriarch of the lowly Wolf Clan to become þjóðann of Yggdrasil, a leader with an aura that would make even the greatest warriors on both land and sea cower and shrink back by merely being in his vicinity.

Today, however, it was hard to imagine him radiating that kind of presence.

Under the circumstances, Yuuto’s lack of spirit was perfectly understandable.

There was a casket set out in front of him, where a young girl lay in repose, shrouded by flowers.

The girl’s name had been Sigrdrífa.

She had been his second formal wife, and she had passed shortly after they had concluded their wedding ceremony.

There were about twenty mourners attending this small memorial service held in a quiet corner of the Valaskjálf Palace. It was, by any standard, far too small of a funeral service for someone who had been þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

“It is what it is, unfortunately. If word were to get out that she had passed immediately after the wedding, there’d be no way to prevent rumors and speculation. It would damage your reputation, Father, and I doubt Lady Rífa would have wanted that,” Fagrahvél said calmly, her voice hardened to keep out any trace of emotion.

Even so, Yuuto still noticed the faint quaver in Fagrahvél’s voice as she spoke. He couldn’t blame her. After all, he too was struggling to process his grief.

Fagrahvél had cared for Rífa, her milk-sister, as though she were her actual

younger sister. It was rather easy for him to imagine the heartache that Fagrahvél was feeling.

“I know that, but still...”

Yuuto nodded, but his words still felt heavy in his throat.

As þjóðann, Sigrdrífa was well acquainted with the treacherous game known as politics and she had labored until her final breath to protect Yuuto from any whispered insults and slights.

Further, the idea of a small, secret memorial service attended only by those close to her had been what Rífa herself had wanted. She had even made a number of plans to ensure that there wouldn’t be any confusion after her death.

Those decisions were a magnificent display of the skills she had honed as a woman who had been born into politics as an imperial princess and lived her entire life in the court of the þjóðann.

Yuuto knew that she had saved him from all sorts of pitfalls, and he did sincerely appreciate all the efforts she had made on his behalf.

But that was precisely why he felt an immense guilt in the midst of his grief.

“She did so much for me, but I couldn’t do anything for her... And to see her off like this...”

Yuuto wasn’t able to put the rest into words. He bit down on his lower lip.

He felt he owed Sigrdrífa an enormous debt. The greatest of which was the fact that she had put her very being on the line to resummon him after he had been thrown back into the present, and then soon afterward, she had swiftly passed on the title of þjóðann to him, and finally, after the great earthquake, she had soothed the hearts of Glaðsheimr’s residents with her song.

Without Rífa, the rise of the Steel Clan would have never happened, and it was more than possible that the Steel Clan’s people would have already been wiped out.

What had Yuuto been able to do for the woman he owed so much to?

Rífa had told him that she was happy at having the chance to live and interact

with him and the other members of the Steel Clan, but Yuuto couldn't help but feel that was far too small a payment for what he owed her.

"Try not to let it bother you, Father. I believe Lady Rífa would much prefer this sort of small memorial to a great funerary procession."

"You really think so?" Yuuto asked, almost pleading.

Fagrahvél gave him a firm nod and responded. "Yes. If she's to set off to Valhalla, I think she would say she'd much rather be sent off with the tears of those she loved than a pompous procession driven by empty rituals."

Yuuto felt a slight weight lift from his heart at those words from Rífa's milk-sister and most loyal retainer.

Certainly, not all of his regrets or guilt had gone away, but they felt lighter—they started to seem almost bearable.

Yuuto quietly vowed to Rífa at that moment. He swore that he would save Yggdrasil's people.

After the moment of silence, Yuuto turned on his heel and spoke.

"Felicia, gather the generals in the throne room. And make it quick."

The young man who had been wallowing in grief and sadness only moments ago was no more. In his place stood a warlord who had fought his way through countless battles—a leader with the unmistakable aura of a conqueror.

For Felicia, who had spent the last four years at his side in both public and private, and was now one of his consorts, it was clear as day to see that he was pushing himself through his pain.

"Big Brother, at least take today to rest..."

"I'm fine."

"But..."

"If anything I could use the distraction."

"...Very well."

Felicia could only nod her head in agreement at those words.

Shortly after the summons, the Steel Clan army's senior commanders had gathered in the Valaskjálf Palace's throne room.

Yesterday had been a day of great celebration for them. Yuuto, the man they had taken as their father, had finally risen to become the rightful ruler of Yggdrasil, the þjóðann.

Outside of the handful that knew of what had transpired after the wedding ceremony, most of those who had assembled in the throne room had entered in a state of nervous euphoria.

"I've gathered you here to discuss a matter of great importance. Specifically the unprecedented disaster that threatens Yggdrasil that Rífa mentioned during the ceremony."

At Yuuto's opening words, the assembled generals fell into a shocked silence.

True, they remembered that Rífa had said something along those lines at the ceremony, but given that the mood at the time hadn't been particularly solemn, they had forgotten about it in the subsequent revelry and drinking.

"It was no lie or exaggeration. Great disasters that make the most recent earthquake seem like a mere tremor will soon engulf these lands, and Yggdrasil will be swallowed by the sea. That's already fated to happen."

"What?!"

A wave of confusion washed over the assembled commanders. What Yuuto had said was far too much to immediately process.

The whole thing was hard to believe. Had it not been Yuuto who had said it, they would have likely dismissed the entire story as mere fantasy.

"May we hear the details, then?"

The one who eventually spoke up was Jörgen, Assistant to the Second-in-Command of the Steel Clan.

Jörgen was one of Yuuto's oldest and most loyal children, having served as Second to Yuuto from his days as patriarch of the Wolf Clan, and supporting Yuuto primarily in political roles.

"As you and the others from the Wolf Clan know, I'm not a man from

Yggdrasil. I've come from the realm of the gods."

"S-Surely not..."

"So said the rumors, but..."

"I don't mean to question you, Father, but..."

Murmurs rippled through the commanders who belonged to clans outside of the Wolf Clan.

Everyone present was aware that Yuuto had invented all sorts of strange and revolutionary items and tactics.

Still, for Yuuto himself to come out and declare that he came from beyond Yggdrasil came as a shock to those other than the members of the Wolf Clan who had actually seen the ritual that summoned him.

"I know it's difficult to believe, but it's the truth," Yuuto stated simply as though to press home the point.

Technically he had come from around 3,500 years in the future, but since clarifying that would only bring about further confusion, he chose to go with the story of his origins that had spread through his territories.

Given the extent to which religion and the gods permeated the daily lives of this era's inhabitants, it was also a story that was easier for them to grasp.

In a way, this was the truth from a certain point of view.

"There is no deception in Father's words. I saw it with my own eyes."

"I as well. I'll happily swear upon my chalice and the title of Mánagarmr."

"I, too, will swear upon my chalice and the name of patriarch of the Wolf Clan."

Jörgen and Sigrún chimed in to support Yuuto's claim.

Jörgen had gained the trust of the commanders through his loyal efforts in support of the Steel Clan's forces from the rear, while Sigrún was known as something of a stubbornly proud warrior who was incapable of lying.

That those two would swear upon their chalices and their titles, the most precious things to any denizen of Yggdrasil, had an immediate effect upon the

others.

“If you two insist.”

“We have no choice but to believe you.”

“Not that we had any notion of doubting you, Your Majesty.”

While they couldn’t fully believe Yuuto’s claim, they had to accept it, at least for the moment.

After confirming that they had done that much, Yuuto continued.

“Now, in the realm of the gods, a vast amount of knowledge that doesn’t exist on Yggdrasil is readily available to all. Steel smelting, glass blowing, stirrups.”

“Ahhh, I seeeee. No woooonder we couldn’t wiiiin. After aaaall, we were facing up against the knowledge of the goooooods,” Bára—the Sword Clan’s strategist—chimed in with her languid, leisurely tone.

Despite outward appearances, she had been one of the primary forces behind the rise of the Sword Clan from an old, weakened clan to one of the greatest powers on the continent. She was reputed to be one of the three smartest individuals in all of Yggdrasil, and she had served as the strategist for the Alliance Army that had been assembled against the Steel Clan.

“I taaaake it that you also leaaaarned that Yggdraaaasil will faaaaall into the seaaaa from that knowledge?”

When Yuuto nodded in confirmation of Bára’s words, another murmur rippled through the commanders.

Their new divine ruler coming from the realm of the gods, Yggdrasil falling into the sea... Neither of those were stories that could be considered at all believable.

Even so, Yuuto, their parent that they had sworn their chalices to, was not the sort of man to joke in this sort of situation. Certainly not one with such gravity or urgency as this.

Further, he was a man who made good upon his word. No matter how ridiculous his words might have seemed at the moment he said them, Yuuto had followed through and made them a reality.

All of the commanders who were assembled here knew that from experience.

“I see. So that’s what Priestess Völva’s prophecy referred to,” Fagrahvél muttered to herself, as though she had come to a realization.

Völva had been a priestess and one of the companions of Wotan, the first þjóðann and founder of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. It was said that she was an oracle with the ability to see the future, and her prophecies were said to have always been accurate.

Fagrahvél’s words about Völva’s prophecy were something no one in the room dared to dismiss.

“J-Just what was said in Völva’s prophecy?” Jörgen asked, clearly anxious.

Völva’s prophecies were some of the greatest secrets held by the empire, only known to a select few in the halls of power.

For that reason, Fagrahvél hesitated for a moment before she finally spoke.

“‘At the time of Ragnarok, the Wolf will consume the Sun, and the stars will fall from the heavens. The Black One, wielding the sword of victory forged from the flames, will arrive on horseback across the heavenly bridge.’ It was the final prophecy left by the oracle Völva.”

It seemed Fagrahvél had decided there was no point in keeping the prophecy from the others at this point.

“Ah, the Black One. That must be a reference to Father,” Jörgen said in reply as he cast a glance toward Yuuto.

The prophecy’s words essentially described Yuuto’s history upon this world. More than anything, there were practically no people in Yggdrasil with black hair and black eyes.

There was no one but Yuuto who could fit that description.

“We had believed that Ragnarok—the end times—meant the end of the empire, but...”

“But it actually referred to the end of Yggdrasil itself,” Jörgen stated bluntly as he finished Fagrahvél’s statement and furrowed his brow.

The other commanders also had their brows furrowed in thought.

With the addition of the legendary oracle Völva's prophecy, they had no choice but to believe what Yuuto had told them.

However, natural disasters were an area that went beyond the knowledge of the men of this era. Everyone present could only wonder just what there was for them to do in the face of such powerful forces and wallow in that despair.

"B-But, yes, surely, Father, you've already come up with a solution, have you not?" Jörgen asked Yuuto, as though clinging to a single thread of hope.

Yuuto nodded.

"Indeed. I have no intention of twiddling my thumbs and waiting."

"A-As to be expected from you, Father. What is your solution?"

"I have ordered Ingrid to build a fleet of very large ships. We'll produce a large number of them and travel toward the east of Yggdrasil, to the continent of Europe."

"Huh... Wha..."

Jörgen was at a complete loss for words, unable to articulate his shock, as though his jaw had stopped working.

Jörgen was a skilled politician, serving alongside Linnea, the Steel Clan's Second, to deal with the logistics and governance issues that the Steel Clan faced. No doubt Jörgen could easily imagine the sheer cost, effort, and potential problems that awaited a plan of this scale.

Yuuto himself was aware of just how enormous an undertaking he was proposing, but given that he couldn't stop Yggdrasil's destruction, there was no other path forward.

"To accomplish this task, the first thing we need to do is unify Yggdrasil as quickly as possible. I'm certain that you won't disappoint me."

"Please take a breather, Big Brother. It seems everyone was quite shocked by the news."

Felicia placed a cup of tea in front of Yuuto and chuckled softly.

The meeting had been adjourned for the time being. The subject under discussion was far too large in scope to finish digesting over a single round of discussion.

Unifying Yggdrasil itself had been an undertaking that had only been accomplished by one man in history—the great first þjóðann, Wotan.

What Yuuto was proposing went far beyond that. Not only did he plan to unify the people of Yggdrasil, he intended to move them to a new, safe homeland.

It was difficult to process the scale of what he proposed on both an intellectual and emotional level.

Yuuto had decided that the others needed some time to fully comprehend what he had told them.

“Seems like it. As for me, while I feel a little guilty for saying this, I have to admit the burden on my shoulders feels lighter now that I’ve told everyone.”

True to his words, Yuuto looked as though he’d been freed of a significant burden as he lightly shrugged his shoulders.

The destruction of Yggdrasil was far too heavy a truth for a handful of people to shoulder on their own. Yuuto was surprised at just how much lighter the burden seemed now that he’d shared that knowledge with everyone else.

“That said, it doesn’t change the fact we’ve still got a whole lot of stuff to get done.”

Yuuto let out a heavy sigh as he glanced down at the map of Yggdrasil spread out on the desk before him. It was a map they had taken from Valaskjálf Palace’s archives.

Yuuto’s eyes naturally drifted eastward on the map, away from the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr and toward the Jötunheimr region.

“There’s still so much out there...”

In terms of size, Jötunheimr was about as massive as Álfheimr. Conquering it would probably be quite the task.

“Kris, what’s the situation in Jötunheimr?”

Yuuto turned his gaze to the girl with a side-tail standing next to him—Kristina.

She was young, perhaps all of twelve or thirteen years of age.

Given her youth she looked more like a lady-in-waiting in training, but she was, in fact, the brilliant young mind in charge of the Vindálfs, the Steel Clan's spy organization, which reported directly to Yuuto.

"Currently there are four clans in Jötunheimr: Armor, Shield, Silk, and Tiger, and they are all roughly equal in strength," Kristina explained as she pointed to each clan's name on the map.

"In terms of scale, the Silk Clan is noticeably larger than the other clans of Jötunheimr—similar in size to the Hoof Clan. As for the other three, they're all around the same size—comparable to perhaps the Fang or Cloud Clans. All of them generally use bronze weaponry and their militaries are largely made up of chariots."

"Oh, is that all?"

Yuuto blinked as though he found the report anticlimactic. He immediately realized, however, that it was his own sense of what constituted normal that was off.

Thinking back on it, Yuuto realized that he had grown accustomed to fighting extraordinarily powerful opponents like the Lightning Clan, the Panther Clan, and the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance.

Rather than being the norm, those enemies were all far more powerful than the vast majority of opponents one would meet elsewhere on the continent. The clans of the Jötunheimr region were more in line with what you could consider the 'average' clan in Yggdrasil.

"All right. Certainly, I shouldn't ever underestimate them, but they're no match for the current Steel Clan forces."

The Steel Clan was already roughly ten times the size of the Fang or Cloud Clans.

The difference in strength would become even more pronounced with the use

of phalanxes fully outfitted with steel weaponry, stirrup-equipped cavalry, and trebuchets. The conquest of Jötunheimr would be unlikely to take much time at all.

As had been the case against the Hoof Clan and the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, when the difference in weapons technology was this extreme, there was no way for any amount of guile or strategy to overcome that difference.

Steinþórr's ability to overcome that handicap with his individual skill was an extreme exception to that rule, and surely there weren't two monsters of that scale in this world.

"Meaning the problem isn't the east but... the south."

Yuuto turned his eyes to the central Ásgarðr region on the map.

Listed upon the map were the names of now-extinct clans such as the Bow Clan, the Feather Clan, and the Arrow Clan.

They had all been wiped out in the last two months.

The Flame Clan, under the command of Oda Nobunaga, Demon King of the Warring States period, had simply rolled over them.

"Indeed. Currently the Flame Clan is at war with one of the Ten Great Clans, the Spear Clan. Several days ago they fought a large field battle along their border where the Flame Clan defeated and killed the Spear Clan's greatest general and Second, Hermóðr. The Flame Clan is currently advancing upon the Spear Clan capital."

"They're moving far faster than I expected. That's in spite of the fact that we pushed our forces pretty hard to move up the timeline..."

Yuuto's cheek twitched in an irritated grimace at Kristina's report.

Yuuto had originally planned to conquer the Jötunheimr region and make preparations to head into Europe while the Flame Clan was busy fighting the other clans of the Ásgarðr region, but it would be extremely dangerous to send his armies east under the current circumstances.

While there was an unofficial non-aggression pact with the Flame Clan, it was an oral promise, not an actual treaty.

Yuuto recalled what Nobunaga had said to him at the end of their meeting—

“Engrave these words on your heart. If anyone stands in the way of my conquest of the realm... I will show them no mercy.”

A shudder ran up Yuuto’s spine at the memory of that statement.

Yuuto now held the title of þjóðann and controlled the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

As part of his goal of total conquest, Nobunaga would seek those two things. There was no way for Yuuto to avoid direct conflict unless he gave them up voluntarily.

He could hardly sit back and wait to see how things played out either, though, so for that reason...

“It appears that we’ll need to move first.”

It was the day after the great reveal. Yuuto was currently traveling by carriage. The gentle rocking of its wheels brought Yuuto a comfortable sense of lethargy.

His destination was Gimlé, the capital of the Steel Clan.

Almost four months had passed since he had departed Gimlé to face the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army.

This had been the longest Yuuto had been away from his clan capital. With a lack of pressing issues on his plate, he had decided that this would be a good opportunity to make an appearance in Gimlé.

“Wow, spring really is in the air, isn’t it?”

Yuuto pushed aside one of the flaps and took a glance outside. The snow had already melted, and green shoots had started coming up out of the ground. While the wind was still chilly, it also brought the faint scent of plants and flowers in its wake.

“Ahh... I finally feel like I can breathe.”

Yuuto took a deep breath and quirked his lips into a smile.

While he was residing within Valaskjálf Palace, there was no avoiding his work

or responsibilities, not to mention the people who came to worship him as the þjóðann. There was a certain oppressive stuffiness to life in the palace.

Leaving all of that behind and traveling with his trusted companions helped relieve some of that weight from his shoulders.

He was still nursing the wounds from Rífa's passing, often withdrawing within himself. In that sense this trip was a necessary respite for Yuuto.

"I'm glad to hear that. Lately you've been taking on a bit too much, Big Brother," Felicia, who sat next to him, said with a sigh of relief.

"Sorry for always putting the burden on you."

"Indeed. Which is why..."

Slender arms gently grasped Yuuto around the shoulders and pulled him backward.

Though caught off guard, Yuuto offered no resistance and felt the back of his head press against a supple warmth. He didn't need to guess what his head was resting against. The feeling was something he was well acquainted with.

"Do take this opportunity to get some rest," Felicia said with a loving expression as she gazed down tenderly at Yuuto's face.

He couldn't help but stare affectionately back at her.

He'd heard the old saying about how love made women more beautiful, and Felicia of late was the very epitome of that adage.

Feeling a bit self-conscious at her gaze, Yuuto rolled over to face away.

"Ah, certainly. I'll clean your ears, Big Brother," Felicia said with a happy chuckle.

Yuuto hadn't intended for her to do so, but it was true that he hadn't had time to indulge in that recently. Presented with this perfect opportunity, he decided to seize it.

"Then I'll get started now."

With that, Felicia leaned forward.

Several strands of her golden hair spilled down in front of his eyes and a

sweet scent tickled at his senses. At the same time, he felt a hard object enter his ear.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it, Big Brother?”

“No, it’s perfect.”

“Just lay back and relax.”

“Okay.”

Humming happily to herself, Felicia continued cleaning Yuuto’s ear. Yuuto felt another wave of calm wash over him.

Felicia was humming a galdr, a song of soothing that she was particularly skilled at. She really was spoiling him.

“Mm?”

“What is it?”

“Um, well. I can feel this odd *something* in your voice.”

“An odd something?”

“I don’t know how to explain it. It’s the first time I’ve felt it. It’s like there’s some sort of will, like a heat in your voice... What is this?”

“Oh?! That’s... Um, Big Brother, can you see this?”

Felicia gently cupped her hands in front of her chest as though she were scooping up water. Yuuto could see a flow of light pooling in her hands.

“There’s something glowing there.”

“Yes, that’s it! Big Brother, you’re able to see ásmegin!”

“Mm? Ásmegin... That’s the power used for things like seiðrs and galdrs, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Why would I suddenly... Oh, right... Rífa’s parting gift.”

It was at this late moment that Yuuto remembered the twin runes that Rífa had bestowed upon him. Until now, he really hadn’t had the mental bandwidth to even think about it.

“I wonder what sort of powers they bring.”

The moment he murmured those words, two names appeared in his mind.

They were words he had never seen in his life, but he grasped intuitively what they meant.

“It seems they’re called Hervör, the Guardian of the Host and Herfjötur, Fetter of the Host.”

“The names certainly sound like runes suited to you, Big Brother.”

Felicia looked upon him with a curious gaze.

“As for the powers... Hm... It’s almost like there’s some sort of fog obscuring them, so I can’t really tell. Is there some sort of training I have to do?”

“Wait, what?! That shouldn’t be the case at all... If they’re active, then the runes should tell the wielder what their powers are.”

“Is that so?”

“Certainly. So why are they... Oh, right! Gleipnir!” Felicia exclaimed, having suddenly come to an important realization.

“Oh, now I get it. That’s the seiðr originally designed to bind the unnatural, right?”

While Yuuto was generally ignorant of matters concerning runes because it was outside of his expertise, the seiðr Gleipnir was something that had seared itself into his memory.

That was, after all, the seiðr that had summoned him to Yggdrasil.

“Yes. Currently there are three Gleipnirs—two from Lady Rífa and one from me—placed upon you. I believe those are preventing you from drawing upon your power.”

“Meaning I can’t use my runes.”

“Yes, unfortunately...”

Felicia glanced away with an apologetic look, but as for Yuuto himself—

“Ah well. That’s fine.”

—He seemed completely unfazed.

Felicia's eyes widened in surprise.

"I'm a little shocked that you're taking that news so well. It was, after all, the power that you wanted so long ago."

She was probably referring to when he had first been summoned here.

It was true that, at the time, Yuuto had nothing to distinguish himself, and he had clung to the hope that he would someday awaken to some sort of extraordinary power.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed."

He would certainly like to be able to wield powers from runes if he could have them.

He was only human, and like any other person, found himself admiring and envying Einherjar for their powers, but there was no point in obsessing over something he didn't have.

More than anything, Yuuto was well aware of the danger of relying upon power that wasn't his own.

To him, the powers of the runes weren't important. The most important thing was that a memento of Rífa had taken root inside him.

For Yuuto, that knowledge was enough.

"Man, it's so cold..."

Shivering, Yuuto rushed across the ground and jumped into the rock bath in front of him.

He was currently in a palace belonging to the patriarch of the Ash Clan, a facility that had been built as a hot spring resort.

Even with the post station system, it was difficult to travel between the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr and Gimlé in a single day, so they had chosen to spend the night in this palace.

While it was now spring according to the calendar, here in a land surrounded by the three great mountain ranges of Yggdrasil, the temperature remained

quite chilly, with scattered snow drifts still littering the ground.

But that was what made this experience worthwhile!

“So warm! I can feel my whole body coming back to life!”

As the hot water brought warmth back into his limbs, Yuuto couldn’t stop himself from letting out a sigh of pleasure.

The colder it was outside of the bath, the more enjoyable it was to jump in and escape that cold.

Yuuto couldn’t help but bask in that joy.

“Heh, Big Brother, you’re like a child.”

“Father, the ground is slippery, please don’t run.”

Felicia and Sigrún were walking toward him. They were both completely naked.

Their state allowed Yuuto a full view of their lovely figures.

Felicia had curves in all the right places—a figure that would drive any hot-blooded male into a frenzy.

Sigrún meanwhile had a tight, slender athlete’s body—a figure that had an almost artistic beauty.

“Heh, you seem to have gotten quite used to seeing women naked. I would have never imagined that from you way back then.”

Felicia let out a nostalgic chuckle.

She was probably referring to the hot springs trip they had taken two years ago.

“I’ve had some good help along the way,” Yuuto said casually and without a hint of embarrassment as he continued to gaze admiringly at the two.

It was true that two years ago he hadn’t *known* women and that had made him unbearably nervous around them.

The Yuuto of today was now very well-acquainted with women, however. He was no longer the shy boy he had been back then.

“Your shyness back then was adorable in its own way, though, Big Brother,” Felicia said as she slid into the water next to Yuuto.

“Oh, were you really thinking such a thing about Father? How disrespectful,” Sigrún retorted as she herself took a seat on Yuuto’s other side.

It was the sort of exchange that he’d seen countless times before.

“I don’t find it disrespectful personally, but I don’t know of many men who like being called adorable.”

“Hrmph, see?”

As Yuuto gave his initial observation, Sigrún snorted in triumph, but Felicia seemed unmoved, smiling gently.

“But Big Brother, a woman calling a man ‘adorable’ is one of the greatest signs of affection a woman can show.”

“Oh?”

“After all, it means that she loves not only the impressive parts of him, but even loves the parts that he might find embarrassing. She loves him enough to love him in his entirety.”

Even Yuuto couldn’t help but blush as she said those words with a cloyingly sweet smile.

Felicia was Yuuto’s adjutant, a practiced warrior who had seen dozens of battles. She wasn’t one to miss an opening—even a brief one.

“Of course, there’s many other examples of your adorableness. Like when you fall asleep while working and you startle awake when your head slips off your hand. Or when you were restless with excitement when Lady Mitsuki said she was making sukiyaki. And you’re so adorable when you’re burying your face in my bosom in bed! And then there’s...”

“Stop, stop! Please no more!”

Unable to stand it any further, Yuuto moved to stop her. He felt his cheeks flush with heat.

It was only natural for a person to want to only show their admirable side and

hide their less flattering aspects. That was particularly true for a man and the woman that he loves.

There was no avoiding the fact that, like anyone else, Yuuto would want to keep them from becoming disillusioned with him.



But, almost to spite that, those aspects of Yuuto were evidently very dear to Felicia.

There was nothing he could do in the face of that sort of compliment.

“Heheh, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you turn that red, Big Brother. You’re certainly adorable.”

“...It’s ’coz of the hot springs.”

“Yes, of course. If you say so.”

“Dammit!”

Yuuto turned and slammed his palm against the rock next to Felicia’s face.

In 21st-century Japan, this was often described as a “kabe-don”—the act of slamming your hand into a wall or other similar backing object and using both that and your body to pin the other person in place. It was a move often used to make someone flustered, which would then be taken advantage of to make a confession more effective.

“Surely you don’t think you can get away with that attitude, do you?” Yuuto lowered his voice and spoke in an intentionally threatening manner.

It was, of course, an act, and it went without saying that Felicia was aware of that.

“Hehe, and just what sort of punishment should I expect?” She said in a teasing, taunting tone.

Yuuto felt a shiver run up his spine as excitement built up inside him. This sort of situational role-playing was also important to keep a relationship fresh.

Further, so long as he appeared to be enjoying it, Felicia could continue to ignore the fact that Yuuto was making an effort to hide the pain he was still nursing.

“Hrmph...”

Meanwhile, Sigrún watched the exchange with a pout.

It was an understandable reaction given that Yuuto had initially seemed to agree with her, only to end up with Felicia turning the tables and blanketing the

atmosphere with a syrupy sweetness.

“F-Father! I-I, too, couldn’t help but think you look a-adorable when I’m licking you and you look like you’re enjoying it! Please, punish me as well!”

At Sigrún’s almost panicked confession, Yuuto and Felicia exchanged glances then burst out laughing.

“You’re just adorable, Rún. What am I going to do with you?” Yuuto said exasperatingly, then continued.

“In that case, why don’t I take the two of you and—”

“My apologies for interrupting your fun, Father, but Brother Douglas has arrived with the new Fang Clan patriarch, Lord Sven. He is seeking an audience. What shall I tell him?”

Right as Yuuto was preparing to make his move, Kristina’s voice coolly broke in to interrupt them.

Douglas was the patriarch of the Ash Clan, a subordinate clan to the Steel Clan.

The Fang Clan had been one of the members of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army—a collection of clans that had taken up arms against Yuuto and his Steel Clan.

However, at this point in time, the Alliance Army had completely collapsed, and the Fang Clan’s land was surrounded by the Steel Clan’s various territories.

The fate of the Fang Clan now rested upon Yuuto’s whim.

It seemed that under those dire circumstances, the new patriarch had chosen to bet his clan’s future on negotiations with the Steel Clan, asking his neighbor, Douglas, to serve as the intermediary.

Yuuto thoroughly approved of the sentiment and he was rather fond of leaders who could make that sort of decision.

Strategically, the Fang Clan was positioned in a way that they could cause significant trouble if they chose to side with the Flame Clan in the upcoming clash.

They were a clan that Yuuto needed to either incorporate or ally with at this point, and the patriarch was someone he had to set aside everything else to meet with.

That said, as a man, he couldn't help but grumble in this particular moment.

"Damn, that was certainly some terrible timing on his part..."

"Well... Now comes the hard part..."

Sven, the patriarch of the Fang Clan let out a long sigh in an attempt to calm his nerves.

He had turned fifty-seven this year. When taking into consideration that simply living to the age of fifty was a sign of longevity in Yggdrasil, it wasn't unreasonable to call Sven an old man.

Many thought him to be a living encyclopedia of the Fang Clan, especially due to the fact that he was a highly-skilled general who had served the last three patriarchs, including the late Sígismund.

"To think that you would become the patriarch at this late hour, Lord Sven," Douglas said as he chuckled and thought back to the past.

He and Sven had known each other a long time—at times fighting side by side, at times facing off on the battlefield.

"Quite! I never expected it to come down to me," Sven replied, and nodded firmly as though in agreement.

In terms of chalice position, Sven was the great uncle of Sígismund, the previous patriarch, meaning he was a member of a clan faction and thus was ineligible to become patriarch.

As for why Sven had wound up the new patriarch—it was simply because there was no one else capable of taking the job.

"Well, given how little time I have left, I suppose I'm the right one for it."

The Fang Clan no longer had the strength or ability to fight the Steel Clan. If they remained an enemy of the Steel Clan, it was obvious that the only fate awaiting them was destruction.

The Fang Clan had no choice but to make peace with the Steel Clan. There was no other way for the Fang Clan to survive. Everyone in the clan was aware of this reality. There was little they could do besides face that harsh truth.

That said, the Steel Clan was also the hated enemy that had killed Sígismund, their last patriarch and father. Meeting with that opponent to beg for mercy was a grave act of disloyalty toward their late parent.

It was certain that whoever made such a move would lose their standing and influence within the Fang Clan. Because of that, there weren't many who were willing to put themselves on the line.

With all that in mind, and additionally including the fact that Sven—who was the eldest member of the clan—had already withdrawn to an advisory role within the clan, it made perfect sense to choose him to be their sacrificial lamb.

Their plan was to let Sven take all of the dishonor and disrepute upon himself in his reign as patriarch so that the clan could move forward with a clean slate.

Sven, essentially, was meant to act as their scapegoat—to be an interim leader.

"It's not as though I have many years left. I may as well use what's left of my life to repay the clan that's done so much for me. This would be a great opportunity to accomplish some of my last goals in life... or so I'd like to say."

Sven's expression twisted from one of sadness into a rogue-like grin.

Fate had played a strange trick and granted him the position of patriarch that he had long sought but given up as impossible.

Sven had no intention of simply letting go of the position—he planned to cling to the title with all his might.

"Hrmph. As I thought, you were never one for that sort of display of virtue."

"Luck has finally smiled upon me. Why would I give up now?"

The fact that Suoh-Yuuto had ascended to the throne as þjóðann was a golden opportunity for Sven. He felt that fate was on his side for the first time in his life.

Although it was only in name in the current age, all patriarchs in Yggdrasil

were representatives of the þjóðann governing in the name of the crown. That meant they were all retainers of the þjóðann.

By Sven's own reasoning, it was perfectly natural, perhaps even logical, for him to swear allegiance to the þjóðann.

Though it was little more than a formality, it was an appropriate course of action, and if the þjóðann would bless Sven's rulership, it would give him legitimacy in the role, which would provide Sven with a powerful foundation for his future as a ruler that he currently lacked.

Sure, Suoh-Yuuto was a great hero who was soundly defeating all those who challenged him, but he was still just a seventeen-year-old boy. Sven had no doubt in his mind that he could bring him around to his way of thinking.

"His Majesty will see you."

A girl with pigtails appeared, timing her appearance as the pair finished their conversation.

She was perhaps in her mid-teens, a good looking young woman who would likely be quite the beauty in a few years. But based on how she carried herself she appeared to be quite the warrior as well.

"This way, please. Follow me."

"Very well."

"Lord Sven."

Douglas called to Sven as he moved to follow the girl out of the room.

"It's fine to be ambitious, but be careful. Facing off against His Majesty is quite draining. Given your age, be careful you don't keel over talking to him, mm?"

"Mmph."

Sven let out a snort of annoyance at Douglas' parting warning.

Sven had known Douglas long enough to understand that the man was cautious, and that it should never be mistaken for cowardice. He was a man who was capable of making bold decisions when the situation called for it.

Sven was also well aware that Suoh-Yuuto was a man who had defeated every enemy that challenged him. Even so, to make a man like Douglas this cautious... He couldn’t help but have his curiosity piqued.

“Please enter. His Majesty awaits inside.”

The girl opened the door at the end of the hallway and gestured for him to enter.

At the end of the room sat a young man with a golden-haired beauty to one side and a silver-haired one to the other. It appeared that the young man was none other than Suoh-Yuuto, the reginarch of the Steel Clan and the new þjóðann.

Sven had wondered just how impressive a man he would be given his history of winning battle after battle, but he had to admit the sight of him, a slight youth, was rather underwhelming.

Even Sven, nearing sixty himself, felt he could grapple him to the ground in a one-on-one encounter.

Just what was Douglas so afraid of? Sven had no intention of underestimating Suoh-Yuuto, but he couldn’t hide his sense of anticlimax.

Still, the young man before him was the þjóðann. Sven bent down on one knee and bowed his head in respect.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty. I am Sven, the patriarch of the Fang Clan. Thank you for taking time from your rest to honor me with an audience.”

“Ah, so you’re Sven of the Fang Clan. Your reputation precedes you. Just what brings you all the way out here to see me?” Suoh-Yuuto replied, looking over at Sven with curiosity.

He clearly knew the reason for Sven’s visit and was playing coy. It was obvious that the þjóðann meant to keep his hand close to his chest and force Sven to make the first move. That was to be expected of a man of his reputation.

“I have come here today to offer my felicitations on your marriage and ascension to the throne as a loyal servant of the empire.”

“Oh? As a servant of the empire... I see.”

Suoh-Yuuto’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes. We the Fang Clan did side against Your Majesty at the Battle of Vígríðr upon the orders of Her Majesty, Sigrdrífa, but now that you have married Her Majesty and ascended to the throne, you are now our rightful liege.”

Sven smoothly recited the words he had prepared beforehand.

“I see. We the Steel Clan are the ones who killed your parent, Sígismund, yet you still wish to bend the knee to me?”

This was a question he had anticipated answering.

Sven nodded without the slightest hesitation.

“Yes, indeed. The Fang Clan have long been loyal servants of the empire.”

It was, of course, a convenient fiction, but in diplomacy, form mattered as much as function.

“I see. A rather skillful bit of justification,” Suoh-Yuuto said with a chuckle.

Even with his youth, he was still indisputably a conqueror. He was well-acquainted with the mixture of truth and artful deployment of deception that negotiations required.

“Very well. If you are willing to let go of the fact that we killed your predecessor, then far be it for me to hold any grudges over the fact that you took up arms against me. You and your clan will be welcomed back into the fold.”

Suoh-Yuuto nodded magnanimously.

The fact that his tone had changed between his initial greeting and the follow-up meant he had accepted Sven as one of his subordinates.

“M-My sincere thanks, Your Majesty.”

Sven quickly bowed before him. He felt a heartfelt relief course through him.

This meant that the Fang Clan would survive.

However, Suoh-Yuuto’s next statement plunged Sven into the pit of despair.

“Okay... Felicia, why don’t we put him under you,” Suoh-Yuuto said casually as he turned to the blonde beauty next to him.

“U-Under Lady Felicia?”

Even Sven knew that his voice was quavering.

Given that the Fang Clan wasn’t a great clan like the Sword Clan, he hadn’t expected a direct chalice from Suoh-Yuuto as a newcomer, but being given this kind of treatment was something else entirely.

“Oh? Do you have a problem with this arrangement?”

“Well... It’s, uh...”

He couldn’t say it aloud, but yes, there was a problem.

Sven was well aware of who Felicia was.

She was Suoh-Yuuto’s adjutant and one of the most important members of the Steel Clan. He had no intention of underestimating her, nor did he have a problem with taking the chalice from a woman.

The issue was that Felicia was Suoh-Yuuto’s younger sister.

Clans were operated by the sworn children of its leader. This meant that siblings were all leaders of their own clan factions, and so long as one was placed under a patriarch’s sibling, they had no chance for advancement.

Sven understood that reality all too well from his own bitter experiences.

He had finally become patriarch. He wasn’t going to end up being on the outside looking in again.

“Oh dear, it appears he would rather have someone else.”

“Oh, no! It’s not that I wouldn’t be honored to serve under you, but the chalice...”

“Yes, I understand. Then... Rún, how about placing him under you?”

“Mm?”

The silver-haired beauty twitched a brow as Felicia turned the matter to her.

Sven fought the urge to cradle his head in his hands. Of course, he had the

discipline not to actually do it.

This course of action presented a problem too.

Yes, Sigrún was a sworn child subordinate of Suoh-Yuuto, and she was an accomplished warrior with countless accolades. Serving under her would likely bring great accomplishments and opportunities for advancement within the Steel Clan.

However, she was the one who had killed his predecessor, Sígismund, by her own hand. He knew there would be enormous anger if he were to be placed under her within the clan.

“Oh, yes, that’d be a great idea. It’s about time I gave Rún her own clan. With this arrangement, she wouldn’t have to leave my side.”

“Oh! I see!”

Sigrún, who initially appeared uninterested in the proposal, suddenly perked up.

“I-If I may speak. A ch-chalice ought to be pledged to one whose character one has become enamored with. For my part, I should like to take the chalice of Lord Jörgen, who is well known as a wise and thoughtful leader.”

Unable to stay silent, Sven spoke up.

He didn’t want the fate of the Fang Clan, himself included, to be left to the whims of youths who hadn’t even seen twenty years of life.

“...Jörgen, mm? Well, perhaps that’s the right call.”

After a brief moment of pondering, Suoh-Yuuto nodded his assent.

“Th-Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Feeling an enormous weight lifted from his shoulders—and feeling utterly exhausted from the ordeal—Sven somehow managed to stammer out his thanks.

So this was what Douglas meant by it being draining. It was completely different from what he had imagined.

He had thought Suoh-Yuuto would be an intimidating, frightening figure, but

in the end, it was a bit of an anticlimax.

True, Suoh-Yuuto's ability to create revolutionary ideas was a form of genius, but he seemed to have a lot of growing left to do.

That's fine. That makes it easier to curry favor with him.

Sven quickly changed over his way of thinking. He now intended to squeeze everything he could out of him.

Just as he was thinking that, Suoh-Yuuto's lips quirked into a teasing smile.

"Now, that makes your explanation easier, doesn't it?"

"Pardon, Your Majesty?"

Sven couldn't grasp his meaning at first, but after a moment's pause, a shudder ran up Sven's spine.

Sven came to the realization that he had been dancing to Suoh-Yuuto's tune the whole time.

The whole exchange up to this point had been a play to give Sven a 'gift' that he could take back to the Fang Clan. That gift being him winning a concession from Suoh-Yuuto and avoiding the unreasonable demands that had been directed his way.

But if Suoh-Yuuto had simply handed him that concession, Sven might very well underestimate him in the future. That was the reason the þjóðann had put on this charade.

His little game still gave Sven his concession while also driving home the point that Suoh-Yuuto wasn't a man to be trifled with. It was a masterful act of negotiation.

"Heh... Hahaha! I see! You've put one over on me this time!"

Sven couldn't hold back his laughter.

Douglas was right. He could still have all the vigor he did in his youth and he'd still be utterly drained from dealing with a man like this one.

That aside, though, Sven felt that he was the right man to put in charge of the Fang Clan's fate.

“Sieg þjóðann!”

“Long live His Majesty, Suoh-Yuuto!”

“Long live the Steel Clan!”

The next day, a thunderous cheer from the crowd welcomed Yuuto back into Gimlé.

The people of the city were well aware that it was Yuuto who had made their lives more prosperous and protected them from external enemies.

The reginarch that they all sincerely respected and loved had finally become the legitimate ruler of Yggdrasil as its þjóðann. There was no greater news for the people of Gimlé.

“Welcome home, Father!”

After navigating the main street that was overflowing with people and entering the palace, Yuuto was greeted cheerfully by Linnea who ran over to him.

In her mid-teens, she was still more a girl than a young woman, but she was, in fact, the Second-in-Command of the Steel Clan.

Linnea had extremely sharp political instincts and magnificent management skills, and she was an extremely talented individual that Yuuto felt made the growth of the Steel Clan possible through her masterful management of the clan’s logistics.

Not to mention that in a private capacity, she was one of his consorts.

“I’m home. It’s been a while, Linnea.”

“Yes, indeed it has. I’m glad to see you seem to be doing well.”

Evidently overcome with emotion, Linnea’s eyes glistened with tears.

Currently, she was dealing not only with her ordinary duties as Second, but also with keeping the Steel Clan Army occupying the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr fully supplied, the reconstruction efforts rooting from the damage caused by the great earthquake, and not least of all, managing the logistics of Yuuto’s mass migration plan.

Because of all that, she had been unable to attend Yuuto and Sigrdrífa's wedding. This was the first time she had seen him in four months.

While they had stayed in touch by exchanging letters, long-distance relationships were difficult, especially so when compared to the 21st century where they had the benefit of smartphones. Yuuto couldn't help but be moved by the sheer love that she directed to him.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well too. I toured some of the cities on the way here, and it seemed they were pretty much all back to normal. That was a pleasant surprise."

The reports had stated that various parts of the Steel Clan's territory had suffered significant damage as a result of the earthquake.

However, aside from a few lingering scars, all of the debris had been cleared, houses had been rebuilt, and the people had appeared to have recovered from their trauma and seemed to be in good spirits once more. It was almost as if there had been no earthquake at all.

The actual impact should have been worse in the Bifröst region, but from what Yuuto had seen, it seemed that the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr had taken more damage.

"It's all thanks to you, Father. We knew there would be earthquakes, so we were able to make preparations such as emergency housing and surplus food stockpiles, as well as buying clothing from other clans, setting up anti-fire measures, and practicing evacuation drills."

Linnea made it all sound so simple, but there hadn't been a particularly long period of time between him informing her and the earthquake occurring. As a governor himself, Yuuto knew full well just how much work had gone into making all those preparations.

"If anything, the speed of the response has increased the trust from the populace. I believe this will make the mass migration plan that much easier to execute."

"I'm so glad you're on my side."

He couldn't imagine trying to save the population of Yggdrasil from the

coming disaster without this rare talent by his side. Yuuto couldn't help but thank the gods for his fortune.

"I-I'm also blessed that I can serve you, Father."

The fact that she blushed as she said this was more than he could bear. The pair spent the rest of that day making up for the four-month absence.

Once they were sated, Yuuto stared up at the ceiling with Linnea's head resting on his arm.

"We might be going to war with the Flame Clan soon."

"Oh! I... see."

Linnea's expression quickly turned from a satisfied stupor to something much tenser.

As a patriarch of one of its neighboring clans, Linnea was well aware of the monstrous ability that Steinþórr, the late patriarch of Lightning Clan, had at his command. The Flame Clan was the clan that had easily defeated that very same beast of a man.

She seemed to instinctively sense that this coming war would be far tougher than any that had come before it.

"I think the main battlefield will be the Ásgarðr region, but I'll need you to deal with logistics. Be ready."

"...Understood."

Linnea nodded, but her voice was subdued.

She wasn't the sort to be dismayed by a challenge. If anything, she usually drew great motivation from attempting to overcome something difficult, which was why her reaction bothered Yuuto greatly.

"What is it?"

"Well... It's just that you'll be leaving again..."

"...I'm sorry."

With the bulk of the Flame Clan's forces in Ásgarðr, Yuuto couldn't afford to spend long in Gimlé.

Being from Japan, Yuuto knew the threat posed by the Flame Clan's patriarch better than anyone.

He didn't wish to brag, but he knew it wouldn't be possible to win without his participation. After all, their patriarch was a man known for both his quick and decisive decision-making as well as his highly-effective strategies.

Yuuto needed to return to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr as soon as his business here was complete.

"No, I understand. I pray that fortune smiles upon you."

"So little to do."

The man in question let out a sigh of boredom and rested his head against his hand.

He was a man with black hair and black eyes—an extremely unusual sight in Yggdrasil. His body was crisscrossed with scars, as though they wove a tapestry of his history as a warrior.

He was almost sixty years of age, but he was so lively and full of energy that he looked no older than forty.

His name was Oda Nobunaga. He was the patriarch of the Flame Clan, a clan whose influence upon Yggdrasil was comparable to that of the Steel Clan.

"So all that remains of the Spear Clan is their capital, Mímir," Nobunaga muttered idly, pulling out a tuft of nose hair in the process.

After starting his northern advance to secure control of Yggdrasil, he had won battle after battle, with hardly a challenge in sight. There had been no need for him to get involved directly, and he had been reduced to issuing orders from his castle in the rear. He was, frankly, bored.

In the Land of the Rising Sun, his life had been one challenge after another. He couldn't help but feel dissatisfied with how easy things had been for him here.

"My Lord, there is a messenger from the Steel Clan."

"Oh? Send them in."

Nobunaga quirked his lips in an amused smile.

The Steel Clan's Suoh-Yuuto was the only man that Nobunaga had met in Yggdrasil that he considered "interesting."

He felt a surge of anticipation.

"Thank you for the audience. I am Boris of the Wolf Clan—member of the Steel Clan. I come bearing a letter from His Majesty the þjóðann for you, Lord Nobunaga."

The messenger bowed then produced his letter from a leather pouch, passing it to a nearby Flame Clan retainer.

The retainer approached Nobunaga and read the letter aloud.

"Inform Oda Nobunaga, the patriarch of the Flame Clan. I am Suoh-Yuuto, þjóðann of the Holy Ásgardr Empire and reginarch of the Steel Clan," it began.

He paused for a short moment before continuing.

"By order of the þjóðann, you are to immediately cease your conflict with the Spear Clan. You are hereby summoned to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, where I, the þjóðann, shall listen to your claims to territory and determine the proper borders between your two clans. If you do not obey this summons, you will be considered an enemy of the peace and be eliminated as such. Consider your course carefully."

The retainer's voice steadily grew softer as he read the letter, eventually trembling with fear as he reached the end. That was because the retainer was intimately aware of how frightening his liege Nobunaga could be when he was angry.

Nobunaga, however, in stark contrast to his retainer's perceived concerns, appeared wholly unaffected by the report. If anything, he seemed entertained by it. His lips twisted into a smile.

"Heh... So the lad's decided to make the first move."

Nobunaga was a man who had both seen and fought in countless wars. He had immediately gleaned Yuuto's intentions.

Yuuto himself had no illusions that Nobunaga, seeking to conquer the known world, had any intention of ceasing his invasions at his command.

However, if Nobunaga were to disobey the þjóðann's direct command, he would become a rebel defying the rightful ruler of Yggdrasil. Yuuto could then simply issue a subjugation order against the Flame Clan.

Similar to the encirclement employed against the Steel Clan, there would then be an encirclement of the Flame Clan.

On the other hand, if Nobunaga were to obey Yuuto's command, it would mean he had accepted Yuuto's authority as þjóðann. Further, as the Flame Clan stood idle, the Steel Clan could absorb the surrounding clans and strengthen its position.

It was an effective course of action that would work in the Steel Clan's favor no matter which option Nobunaga chose.

"Things are finally becoming interesting. You there! Boris, was it?"

Nobunaga called over the Steel Clan's messenger.

He then bared his teeth in a feral grin.

"Tell that usurper Suoh-Yuuto that my conquest of the Spear Clan will continue, that I don't consider him to be the þjóðann, and that if he doesn't like it, he can very well come tell me himself!"

ACT 2

After spending three busy days in Gimlé, Yuuto was once again on the road, but he was heading westward, rather than eastward back to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

Traveling two full days by carriage, he had arrived at the western edge of Álfheimr, at the port city of Njǫrðr at the western edge of Yggdrasil.

It was a distance that would easily take a month on foot. It was only thanks to the post station system that it had only taken two days.

“Wow, you can really smell the salt in the air. Brings back memories.”

Hopping off the carriage, Yuuto sniffed the air and smiled.

In a few months, he’d have been in Yggdrasil for four full years, though he had never visited the ocean once during that time. It went without saying that the sight and smell of the ocean would be rather nostalgic to him by now.

“Wha... Wha... What is this?!”

Felicia let out a cry of surprise.

“Oh... Oh my...”

Even Sigrún, known as the Frozen Flower due to her stoicism, was drawn in by the scene before her.

Glancing around, Yuuto noticed that it was also true of the rest of the Múspell Unit that had accompanied him as his escort.

“Ah, right. None of you have seen this before, have you? This is the sea.”

“I-I had heard stories, but...”

“So this is... the sea.”

People tended to be struck dumb with awe when they encountered something that vastly exceeded their own experiences and imagination.

Yuuto found it hard to empathize, but it seemed that the pair were completely blown away by the sheer scale of the ocean that spread out before

them.

Even in modern times, there were plenty of people who lived in land-locked countries who had never seen the ocean. He'd heard that those people were all shocked when they saw the ocean for the first time.

He supposed it was something similar to that.

"Anyway, we can do some sightseeing later. Let's get our business here taken care of first."

Yuuto clapped his hands together, bringing the pair back to reality.

"Oh... M-My apologies, Big Brother."

"My sincere apologies. For me to lose myself..."

He felt a bit sorry as the two of them looked apologetically to him, but he hadn't come to this backward port city to indulge in tourism. It was no exaggeration to say that the future of the Steel Clan rested upon this inspection.

"There you are. I thought the city was oddly abuzz."

He heard a familiar voice call out from behind. This was another voice he hadn't heard in four months.

"Hey Ingrid. Long time no..."

Yuuto's lips turned up into a smile as he turned to face the voice, but he instead found himself blinking in surprise.

"Yep, been a while, Yuuto!" Ingrid said and beamed a radiant smile at him, but Yuuto's attention was drawn not to her attractive smile, but to something else...

"Y-Your hair..."

"Mm? Oh, right."

From that little fragment, Ingrid appeared to catch Yuuto's drift. She ran her fingers through her hair and swept it backward.

"I've been letting it grow out since I got here. What do you think? I look a bit more womanly now, don't I?"

Ingrid looked up at him as she spoke, her expression a mix of hope and anxiety.



Yuuto felt his heart skip a beat.

As she noted, the longer hair did indeed make her look far more feminine.

“Yeah, honestly it looks really good on you.”

“O-Oh? That’s good.”

Upon hearing Yuuto’s comment, Ingrid’s cheeks flushed red.

He would have preferred if she didn’t blush at something she brought up herself.

Yuuto felt a certain shyness set upon him as well.

“A-Anyway... I’ve heard that you’ve finished the project. Care to show us how it turned out?”

Unable to stand the awkward atmosphere, Yuuto quickly changed the subject.

While at a glance, Ingrid looked like little more than a cute common city girl, she was an enormously important member of the Steel Clan.

Steel, stirrups, tetsuhau, water wheels. She had been the one who had turned Yuuto’s ideas into reality—she was the primary force driving the Steel Clan’s remarkable progress.

Ingrid, possibly the most important of Yuuto’s advisers, had left the capital of Gimlé and made her way this far out into the backwater of Yggdrasil to work on a particular project.

“Oh, that! Heh, you wanna see it? I’m sure you do. Well, this one was a bit of a hassle, you know.”

The moment Yuuto broached the subject, Ingrid happily latched on to the conversation.

The embarrassment from the awkward exchange that had occurred just a moment ago was completely forgotten, replaced with a passion and enthusiasm that was clear to see from the expression upon her face.

She was the kind of person who eagerly latched on to a subject—especially so when it came to the art of manufacturing.

“You always just give me vague descriptions, so it can be really hard to take that idea and turn it into reality, you know.”

“I know. I really do appreciate all you do.”

“Oh really? In spite of all that you seem to always give me all sorts of difficult projects to tackle. I mean, even this took damned near half a year to finish.”

“But you still got it done anyway. Only thing I can do is thank the gods for your presence every day.”

“Always the flatterer.”

Ingrid let out a sigh as though in faint exasperation, then she firmly gazed at Yuuto’s face and furrowed her brow in suspicion.

“Hey, why are you smirking when I’m complaining to you?”

“Mm? Am I smirking?”

“Yeah, you are. It’s a little creepy.”

“Creepy, huh? Heh. I guess I just like talking to you.”

“...You hit your head while you were away?”

Unable to hold back any longer, Yuuto burst out in laughter.

It had been a good four months since he’d been teased like this. That wasn’t to say that he’d suddenly acquired a taste for masochism, though. It was just that there was a certain loneliness to having everyone bow and scrape at your every move, practically walking on eggshells in your presence.

It was, in fact, rather frightening to have everyone simply voice praise and agreement at everything you say.

Yuuto felt that the tendency for his subordinates to do so had grown since he had become þjóðann.

Under those circumstances, Ingrid was pretty much the only one who would freely speak her mind to him, which was why he couldn’t help but feel a certain relief at being with her again.

“Th-This...”

“This is... a ship?!”

The object the party of Steel Clan members found themselves in front of was perhaps even more shocking to them than the ocean had been.

To them, ships and boats were small craft—things like canoes carved out of logs, and at the most, rafts constructed out of logs lashed together with rope, sealed with beeswax and driven using a small sail.

Such craft were more than enough to cross rivers or carry cargo down them.

This, however, was a fundamentally different thing altogether.

First of all, it was enormous. It was effectively a floating castle.

“Heh, this is *Noah*, the first of our fledgling fleet of *Galleon*-class ships.”

Gesturing at the ship tied up on the pier, Ingrid confidently introduced the vessel by name.

Galleons were a type of sailing ship that saw active service during the 16th to 18th centuries.

The first vessels that Yuuto thought of when considering moving to a new continent were the ships used by Christopher Columbus during his voyage to the Americas.

His ship at the time, the *Santa Maria*, was a type of ship known as a carrack. These vessels helped kickstart the age of discovery. The galleon was essentially an evolution upon the design of the carrack.

It was difficult to obtain schematics online or from e-books, but when he was briefly back in modern-day Japan, he was able to get his hands on a set of plans through his connections.

If not for those plans, even a brilliant industrialist like Ingrid wouldn’t have been able to complete the galleon in so short a time.

“So, shall we climb aboard?”

“Yep, sure.”

Yuuto accepted Ingrid’s invitation without a moment’s hesitation.

He had already received word through her reports that the sea trials had been

successful, but the ship was essential to his future plans. He wanted to experience being on deck for himself.

By contrast, the members of the Múspell Unit looked extremely apprehensive about the notion.

“U-Um, does that include us as well?” Hildegard asked worriedly.

Given that they were his bodyguards, it went without saying that they needed to accompany him. It wasn’t a question that needed to be asked.

However, the question had made obvious the feelings they were all currently harboring.

They were, of course, all aware that wood floated in water—but they also knew that heavy objects sank.

Could something as big as this ship actually float?

They could see that the bottom of the ship had already sunk under its own weight. The idea of putting another hundred people on it sounded like utter madness.

Yes, they were certainly aware of Ingrid and Yuuto’s accomplishments to date, but they couldn’t help but to believe that the ship would sink.

In spite of that, however— “Of course. It wouldn’t be much of a test if we didn’t have everyone aboard.”

Their lord made it sound so simple.

Hildegard felt a bit faint at the prospect of letting herself board what she could only consider to be a threat to her life.

She looked to her elder sister and commander Sigrún with a faint glimmer of hope, but Sigrún didn’t seem particularly worried. She casually boarded the ship across the gang plank, followed soon after by Felicia and Ingrid.

It seemed that the leaders of the great Steel Clan also had nerves of steel.

Hildegard sighed and slumped her shoulders in defeat. It appeared she had no choice but to go along with them.

Before that, though— “Um... May I go to the outhouse before I climb

aboard?”

“Man, this breeze feels amazing!”

Yuuto shivered with excitement as he stood upon the bow of the ship and stared out into the endless expanse of the ocean.

Sailing the ocean and going on adventures were the sort of things young boys dreamt about.

To call a single day’s voyage—a shakedown cruise at that—an adventure was certainly something of an exaggeration, but Yuuto couldn’t help but feel excited.

Kristina, on the other hand, was reacting far differently in response to what was currently occurring.

“J-Just what sort of magic did you use on this?!” Kristina asked, her eyes wide in surprise.

It was an extremely rare expression to see in the girl known for her calm and unflappable demeanor.

Felicia and the others, evidently, had yet to notice just how *wrong* the situation was.

“H-How are we moving forward *against* the wind?!” Kristina continued, clearly at a loss over what she was witnessing.

Her voice came out as a high-pitched squeak—highly unusual for her.

She was an Einherjar who bore the rune Veðrfölnir, the Silencer of Winds. It was precisely because she was well-acquainted with the wind and could manipulate it that she was the first to notice the impossibility of what she was witnessing.

“O-Oh, you’re right...” Felicia murmured as though she’d suddenly realized it herself.

The same was true of the members of the Múspell Unit. They all looked flabbergasted.

It seemed they had finally noticed that the *Noah* was a sailing ship, meaning

she was propelled solely by the wind, without a single oar being used to drive her forward.

However, in spite of that fact, she continued to make progress sailing against the wind.

For them, there was no other way to describe what they were seeing than as unbelievable—as something beyond their understanding.

“Heheh, *this* is the secret that makes it possible!” Ingrid said as she pointed to a triangular sail set near the foremast.

“Um, that still doesn’t explain anything...”

“It’s called a fore-and-aft rig. I’ll skip the specific mechanics, but in exchange for being slower sailing with the wind compared to a square sail, it allows a ship to change course just by changing the angle of the sail, or even sailing against the wind like we are now. In the world I’m from, this invention kicked off a huge leap in bluewater sailing.”

Yuuto gave a simplified explanation along with a dry laugh. If he left it to Ingrid she’d go into a long-winded technical explanation.

“Oh! I see! So you’re using the difference in wind speed across the surface and back of the sail.”

This casual observation, shockingly, came from Kristina’s twin sister, Albertina.

“Wait, what? You understand how it works?!”

It was now Yuuto’s turn to be surprised.

The mechanics behind the fore-and-aft sail could be described using Bernoulli’s principle, but even Yuuto couldn’t make heads nor tails of the physics behind it.

Of course, it was hard to believe that Albertina understood the mathematical concepts behind lift given that she struggled with basic math on her clay tablets, but it seemed she had instinctually grasped how the sail worked. It was a feat worthy of an Einherjar who bore the rune of Hræsvelgr, the Provoker of Winds.

“Wait, Al? Seriously? What do you mean?!” Kristina said as she managed little more than to blink in confusion.

Despite being an Einherjar who controlled the wind like her sister, it seemed that explanation had eluded her grasp.

“Yup. The air on the surface is fast, so it’s lighter. The back is slower, so it’s a little heavier. And so the heavier air pushes the lighter air and moves the ship. I think,” Albertina explained in a vague, instinctual way.

Upon hearing the way she had explained it, Yuuto recalled reading a similar explanation in a book. It seemed she really did understand how it worked.

“Oh, okay! So that’s how it works.”

It seemed Albertina’s words were enough to nudge Kristina in the right direction.

“Wait? Do you mean you didn’t get it, Kris?”

“Guh!”

Kristina let out an audible yelp as she realized she’d finally lost some ground to her sister.

“I see! Heh. What do you think of me now?” Albertina asked, visibly proud of herself.

“I can’t believe that Al managed to grasp something like this before me...”

Kristina, by this point, was practically despairing. Albertina wasn’t about to let up, however.

“You were overthinking it, Kris.”

“And now she’s lecturing me about it?!”

“You need to feel it as it is instead of trying to think about it. The wind will tell you if you do. See?”

“She’s even talking down to me! I think this is the most humiliating moment in my life...”

The sight of Albertina proudly pointing out Kristina’s failings as the latter ground her teeth together in frustration was a rare sight indeed.

Of course, Albertina was usually the one being lectured by Kristina, so this turnabout was perhaps long overdue.

“Dang, seriously? Hey, Yuuto, can I borrow her for a bit?”

Ingrid wrapped her arm around Albertina’s shoulder and yanked her over.

“Having someone who can read the wind this well is worth her weight in silver... no, her weight in gold.”

“Hm. You’re right.”

Yuuto immediately understood what Ingrid meant.

It bears repeating, but sailing ships were driven solely by the power of the wind. They could go substantially faster if there was someone aboard who could read the wind and find the optimal configuration for the sails.

The reality was that while the ships were nearing completion, the crews that would operate them were still greatly inexperienced.

Bluewater sailing included the constant risk of storms and rough seas. Albertina, with her ability to read the wind, would probably be able to detect those dangers long before any ordinary sailor could.

Considering just how important the ships were to his future plans, letting Ingrid borrow Albertina was a no-brainer.

“I don’t have any objections. In fact, I’m more than happy to do so, but...” Yuuto said noncommittally as he glanced over at Kristina.

The younger twin’s presence was the biggest obstacle to this plan.

Having Kristina, the head of his intelligence agency, here in a place so far from Glaðsheimr simply wasn’t an option given that war with the Flame Clan was looming on the horizon.

The only solution to that issue would be to split the twins up. The problem was, however, that Kristina loved her older sister with a level of possessiveness that could be considered unhealthy. Convincing her to be apart from Albertina for so long seemed like a tall order.

Just as Yuuto began to ponder how he would convince Kristina to let that

happen...

“I’d like to try it!” Albertina yelled out as she enthusiastically raised her hand.

She was clearly excited. Her eyes were glittering in excitement and expectation.

“Al, you shouldn’t be so quick to...”

“Nope! I’m doing this no matter what!”

Showing an uncharacteristic amount of unease, Kristina tried to change her sister’s mind, but Albertina was determined.

“Hey, Father. Our future’s riding on this ship, right?” Albertina asked.

“Not just this one ship, but yeah,” Yuuto replied.

“And my ability to read the wind is useful, right?”

Upon hearing this, Ingrid butted into the conversation.

“Yep, no doubt about it. Your power is the ultimate skill to have at sea,” she said, firmly adding her seal of approval.

Given that Ingrid had already done several test cruises of her own, she was speaking from hard-won experience about the value of Albertina’s skill.

“I’m certain you’ll be able to protect a lot of people from danger using your rune’s power,” Yuuto added, signaling his agreement with Ingrid’s statement.

Currently, the only completed galleon was the *Noah*—their prototype. However, since there were no major problems with her design, construction efforts on the second and third ships were proceeding without delay.

The plan was to eventually construct a large flotilla of ships. The larger the fleet, the more important Albertina’s ability would become. If they could start early and get Albertina used to ocean voyages, then it would definitely improve the odds that his plan for mass migration—the Ark Project—would be successful.

Yuuto felt Kristina practically staring daggers at his back, but this wasn’t the time for reservations and half-measures.

“Hehe, I’m glad.”

After finally processing the unstinting praise she'd gotten from Yuuto and Ingrid, Albertina broke into a self-conscious, but contented smile.

"Al, you know it's not going to be easy. You'll have a lot of things to learn, and you really don't like studying."

"E-Erm, sure, but I'll still do my best!"

Albertina was a little intimidated for a moment, but soon responded thus.

Given how much she hated studying, the fact that she was this motivated spoke to her level of determination.

"Y-You want to do this that badly?"

Kristina was, instead, finding herself intimidated by Albertina's enthusiasm. She was clearly at a loss. That, too, was an extremely rare sight.

"Yeah," Albertina confirmed, before continuing. "I'm not that clever, you know. Everyone needs you, Kris. You're the smart one. I've always just been like a sidekick of yours."

"That's not...!"

"I've never had anyone need me like this, so I wanna give it a try. I think it'll be really fulfilling to do."

Kristina pouted, unhappy with the situation.

Yuuto figured she had reacted to Albertina's observation that no one had needed her.

If anything, the reality was that no one needed Albertina more than Kristina did.

While at a glance it seemed like Albertina was dependent on Kristina, the truth was that emotionally, Kristina was the one who was more dependent on her twin. She was too proud to actually say that to her sister, though. Her personality made dealing with this sort of situation more complicated and difficult than it needed to be.

"More than anything, while I'm proud to be your sister, Kris, I want you to be proud of me, too. If it means being someone you'll be proud of, then nothing's

too big of a challenge.”

“Oh!”

That was the clincher.

Whatever she might say, Kristina deeply loved her older sister. There was no way she wouldn’t be elated at learning Albertina wanted to tackle a challenge for her sake.

She spun on her heel and turned to Yuuto.

“Father! I’d like to stay here and learn about ships with Al,” Kristina said sweetly as if offering her final shred of resistance.

“Not possible. I can’t afford to leave you here.”

“I guess that’s true...”

Yuuto immediately shot down her request, leaving Kristina crestfallen.

She didn’t push the argument further because she, with her keen intelligence, knew that she needed to return to Glaðsheimr with Yuuto. In spite of that, she had wanted to at least try one last thing in an attempt to stay with her sister.

“I understand... Then I’ll respect Al’s wishes. With everything that’s going on right now, there’s not really much choice.”

With a long, slow sigh, Kristina made a show of reluctantly accepting the situation.

“Well, it’s a good chance for you to become a little more independent from your sister,” Yuuto said, gently patting Kristina’s head.

But Kristina snorted in response.

“You mean it’s a good chance for Al to learn to become a little more independent.”

“If that’s how you want to look at it, sure.”

Yuuto then, in turn, made a show of taking off his cloak and used it to cover Kristina’s head.

“Hey... What was that for?”

“You looked cold. You can borrow it for a minute.”

“...You’re right. It’s cold. I’ll borrow it from you,” Kristina replied from beneath the cloak covering her head, making no effort to remove it.

Yuuto heard the faint tremor in Kristina’s voice, but he glanced away, pretending not to notice.



The only sound that filled the air was the surf breaking against the shore.

Everything around Yuuto was engulfed in darkness, with only the moon and the stars providing a faint glimmer of light.

“Dammit, I can’t sleep.”

Yuuto let out a dry laugh as he sat on the ship’s deck and gazed up at the night sky.

They had finished the trial cruise and returned to port, but the tiny port city didn’t have enough lodging to house over a hundred additional people.

Yuuto had decided that it was a good opportunity to spend a night aboard the Noah, but he had been unable to sleep, so he had climbed out of his hammock in the captain’s cabin and wandered onto the deck.

Despite appearances, he knew the reason behind the restlessness he was feeling.

“Things are finally coming together. It sure took a while, though...”

Yuuto let out a deep sigh.

After learning of Yggdrasil’s fate, Yuuto had decided to set in motion his plan to move its people to the European continent over a year ago. That past year, however, had been one filled with constant anxiety and uncertainty over whether or not it would even manage to come to fruition.

The day’s voyage, though only a short daytime cruise around the port, finally made Yuuto believe that this massive project of his could actually succeed.

He had been overwhelmed with the emotions that came flooding out in the wake of that realization and unable to sleep.

“What are you doing out here in the dark? Sulking?” A flippant voice asked from behind him.

Yuuto knew who it was without needing to turn around.

“Sulking? I’m out here having a celebratory drink.”

“Yeah yeah. Sure you are,” Ingrid answered half-heartedly as she settled down on deck next to him and looked up at the night sky.

“Felicia told me. About why you wanted me to build this ship.”

“I see,” Yuuto replied while keeping his eyes fixed at the sky.

He had initially explained to Ingrid that he had wanted the galleons as part of an effort to expand trade.

“Why’d you feel the need to lie to me?” Ingrid said as she gently rapped her knuckles against his head.

“Sorry. I know it sounds like an excuse, but I wanted to keep the number of people who knew the truth down to a minimum until I’d made decent progress toward realizing the whole plan. That and you don’t have much of a poker face.”

“Right.”

Ingrid pouted with a faint snort.

That said, she hadn’t attempted to make any sort of retort to his last comment, so it seemed that she was well aware of that shortcoming herself.

“Ah well, that’s all water under the bridge. There’s something else I wanted to ask.”

“Mm? What is it?”

“You’re þjóðann now, you’ve got a ship, and your plan’s gotten far enough along that you can announce the news. So why are you looking so depressed?”

“Mm? What are you talking about? I’m super excited right now,” Yuuto replied as he did his best to play dumb. Ingrid was having none of it, however. She furrowed her brow.

“I’ve known you for how many years now? I know full well when you’re pretending everything’s fine,” she responded matter-of-factly.

Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a soft grunt. He had thought he’d been doing a pretty good job of hiding it.

“Do I really look that down to you?”

“Yep. You’ve got the same look that you had when Fárbauti died.”

“...Damn, I really can’t hide anything from you.”

Yuuto shrugged and sighed.

She had pierced his facade so precisely that he had no choice but to drop the act.

“...Did someone pass away?”

“Yeah, that’s about the gist of it.”

“Gotcha. I know there’s not much that can be said to make it any better. Having someone close to you die is always rough,” she said, making an attempt to comfort him somewhat.

Ingrid didn’t ask who had died. She appeared to have noticed that Yuuto had been vague in his response.

Despite her rough demeanor, Ingrid was a woman who stepped carefully and provided little acts of thoughtful kindness in situations like this.

“Yeah, it’s rough. It really is rough.”

This wasn’t the first time Yuuto had lost someone close to him.

His mother. Fárbauti. Olof. And now Rífa.

It was the fourth time this had happened, but the grief felt as raw as it did the first time. If anything, Rífa’s youth and her sudden passing made her loss all the more shocking.

There was a huge gaping hole in his heart, and the cold air passing through it threatened to freeze his emotions. He felt a deep loneliness, and at night he needed the comforting warmth of another person.

Yuuto felt guilty about sleeping with Felicia and the others to take his mind off that sadness, but without that touch he felt like his heart would break all over again.

“I know in my head that I don’t have time to get depressed—that it’s time for me to get over it and move forward... My heart seems to have other ideas, though...” Yuuto said, trying to maintain his composure.

“That’s how it goes. Everyone might call you a hero or some reincarnated war god, but in the end you’re as human as the rest of us.”

“You’re right. I guess I am just human. But given all the responsibilities on my shoulders, I can’t use that as an excuse.”

“It’s not something you can move on from that quickly.”

“Yeah, no kidding...”

As soon as he’d started putting his feelings into words, he could no longer hold it back—all of his bottled-up sadness and grief was flooding out of his mouth.

“Sometimes just talking about it makes it easier to bear, but for you in particular, you also have your role as a leader to keep in mind.”

“Yeah... I can’t show too much weakness to those below me.”

Yuuto couldn’t help but feel hesitant to show weakness to people like Felicia, Sigrún, and Linnea—those around him who had a tendency to have an inflated opinion of him.

Contrary to many others, Ingrid was well aware of Yuuto’s frailty. In fact, she was someone whose attitude hadn’t changed as he went from being a mere guest to patriarch, from patriarch to reginarch, and now from reginarch to þjóðann.

Because of that, he felt he could talk to her without playing any role and he tended to just spill out his unfiltered thoughts and feelings.

“So, uh, thanks for listening. It’s helped a bit.”

“Man, your whole stoic act is so annoying.”

Ingrid sighed, then balled her hand into a fist and suddenly jabbed Yuuto’s cheek.

“Ow!”

The blow was heavy enough that it snapped Yuuto’s head around ninety-degrees.

Though her abilities might not have been useful for combat, she was still an Einherjar and possessed a great deal of physical strength—easily as much as any shipwright or carpenter on Yggdrasil.

“I-Ingrid! Wh-What the hell was that for?!”

Yuuto was ordinarily known for his gentle demeanor, but he wasn’t so magnanimous that he’d take a random punch without complaint. He angrily demanded an explanation from Ingrid, but she replied with a casual shrug of her shoulders.

“Did that hurt?”

“Duh! I thought my head was going to come off my shoulders!”

“Yeah? It hurts, right?”

Ingrid’s words were very gentle and full of compassion, making it clear that she wasn’t talking about the punch she’d just landed.

It was then that Yuuto realized what Ingrid was doing. She had given him an excuse to continue his complaining.

“Yeah, it really hurts.”

Yuuto placed his palm not against his stinging cheek but against his chest and sighed.

Ingrid had certainly noticed, but she made no indication of it as she continued.

“Heh. It was a pretty solid punch, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It hurts so much that I can’t help but cry.”

“Really? Well then, take this chance to get it off your chest.”

“No way! A guy can’t just cry!”

Ingrid wasn’t about to let up just yet. This time she delivered a punch to his gut.

It hurt, but it was much lighter than the previous jab.

Still, it was enough to break the dam that had been holding back Yuuto’s tears.

“Dammit... I’ll remember this.”

The tears began to spill down Yuuto’s cheeks. With them came the emotions

that he had kept locked away deep inside. Those feelings engulfed Yuuto's heart and added to the tears flowing from his eyes.

"There you go. You're finally letting it out. You bottle things up way too much."

Ingrid smiled sympathetically, lightly tugging Yuuto's head to her chest.

A supple warmth engulfed Yuuto's head.

"I'll lend you a shoulder to cry on at least, so let it all out. You lost someone close to you, right? It's okay to cry at a time like this, you hear?"

Yuuto choked out the occasional sob as he wept. Ingrid continued to gently pat his head as he cried.

By the time his tear ducts ran dry, the pool of negative emotions in his heart seemed to have abated somewhat.

"...Thanks, Ingrid. I'm fine now."

Yuuto sat up, his expression softer. It was as though a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest.

He recalled reading once that crying was useful for stress relief. It certainly felt that way to him in that moment.

"You're welcome. Feel better now?"

"Yeah, thanks to you. You really are a great friend."

Yuuto's words were meant as heartfelt thanks, but he got a deep sigh from Ingrid in response.

A deep, profoundly exasperated sigh at that.

"So, I'm just a friend to you, huh?"

"What do you... Oh!"

With Ingrid's words, Yuuto realized his mistake.

Before he set off to defeat the Panther Clan, Ingrid had more or less confessed her love for him. To call someone who had professed those sorts of feelings to him a 'friend' was the height of insensitivity.

“Is it that hard to look at me as a woman? I mean, I even grew out my hair for you.”

“No, that’s not it at—”

“You don’t need to flatter me. You’ve got so many beautiful women around you like Felicia and Sigrún. I can understand why I wouldn’t even register.”

“No, no, that’s not it at all! You’re plenty cute!”

“You don’t need to lie.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

Yuuto raised his voice with his declaration.

While Ingrid may not be quite as stunning in terms of her facial features as, say, Felicia and Sigrún, she was still plenty beautiful by any reasonable standard. More than that, Ingrid had charms of her own that set her apart from the others.

“I mean, sure, it’s hard to see sometimes because you talk so roughly and you’ve got the bearing of a blacksmith... and yeah, you also hide it by the fact that you’re pretty quick to throw a punch, but you’re still as gentle and feminine as any woman I know.”

Yuuto’s words contained nothing but the truth.

Back when Yuuto had first arrived on Yggdrasil—when he was still known as Sköll, the Devourer of Blessings and had nothing more than a string of embarrassing failures to his name—Ingrid had been there supporting him. She may have been tough on him in doing so, but she had watched over and looked after him earnestly.

Even when Yuuto had been sulking over his lack of success, she would drag him out to dinner and listen to his complaints.

And finally, right now she was lending him her bosom to cry and vent on.

No matter how desperately he struggled, she had always been near, offering him a mix of kindness and teasing—encouraging him by telling him that they would accomplish great things together. There weren’t many women who could be as kind as she had been.

“Th-Then prove it,” Ingrid said and tilted her face upward. Her eyes were closed shut and her cheeks were flushed a deep shade of crimson.

Yuuto wasn’t so dense that he didn’t understand what she was asking. He closed his own eyes and pressed his lips to hers.

Soon after that, however—

“Wha?! Yuuto, just what the hell are you doing?!” Ingrid squealed.

“Doing? Well I figured it’d be you...”

“Whoa, hold on! Please wait! Just gimme a second!”

“I can’t.”

“Hey! Where are you touching?! Wait wait wait!”

“You’re so soft.”

“Whoa! Dammit, I’m telling you to wait!”

Following that, Ingrid gave Yuuto a smack of such vigor that he’d not soon forget it.

“You know, this sort of thing should be done gradually... The mood’s important and so is making sure we’re both on the same page.”

Yuuto seemed to be keeping quiet, however.

“Hey! Wake up! Stop pretending to sleep and listen!”

It seemed it would be a while yet before they’d actually consummate their feelings.

ACT 3

“So it would appear that the Flame Clan has rejected our overtures.”

Completing his inspection, Yuuto had quickly returned to Glaðsheimr to find Oda Nobunaga’s message waiting for him. Nobunaga had declared war upon him in all but name.

The Flame Clan had continued with their invasion of the Spear Clan.

Yuuto had already received reports that the Flame Clan had surrounded and laid siege to the Spear Clan’s Hliðskjálf in their capital of Mímir. It was only a matter of time before the city fell to the Flame Clan.

As Nobunaga made clear in his message, he had no intention of following the orders Yuuto had issued as þjóðann.

“Yes, and evidently he went so far as to call you a usurper, Big Brother.”

“Well, that was to be expected.”

Yuuto nodded as he let out a dry laugh.

He had been under no illusions that the infamous Oda Nobunaga would listen to his orders and fall into line.

Yuuto had issued the directive as part of the process to justify his own actions moving forward.

“How have the other clans responded?”

The edict forbidding combat between clans wasn’t restricted solely to the conflict between the Flame and Spear Clans. He had issued the decree to all of the clans in Yggdrasil.

The Steel Clan already stood head and shoulders above the other clans in terms of power, and its leader had been bestowed the title of þjóðann by its previous holder, Rífa.

Yuuto had wagered that other clans would follow in the footsteps of the Fang Clan and fall in line.

“The Armor, Shield, and Helm Clans have indicated their intention to obey the

decree you issued. Their patriarchs intend to come to the capital in the coming days and have requested an audience to pay their respects."

"I see."

Yuuto smiled in amusement. Things were proceeding as he hoped.

"It appears the title of þjóðann still holds a lot of weight."

It was likely things would not have happened this easily had he merely remained the Steel Clan's reginarch.

The clans named after weapons and armor such as Fagrahvél's Sword Clan and Hárbarth's Spear Clan dated their founding back to the beginning of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and they had maintained close ties to the empire ever since. Those ties to the empire had made it easier for them to maintain their authority.

This was similar to the clans descended from high-level Muromachi Bakufu retainers such as the Hosokawa, Yamana, and Hatakeyama Clans of the Warring States Period who had maintained their territories near the former capital and had sheltered various Ashikaga Shoguns to strengthen their authority.

But because of that historical background, they remained retainers of the empire. This meant that they couldn't afford to go against the wishes of Yuuto —the man who had officially been granted the title of þjóðann by Rífa herself.

"Of course, I don't know how far we can actually trust their show of loyalty," Yuuto said bluntly, perhaps stating the obvious.

Because patriarchs in Yggdrasil acquired their positions on the basis of their ability, all of them were quite formidable in their own ways.

They were bending the knee to Yuuto because they sensed it was the best way to survive in this age of conflict.

There was also an element of fear in their obedience, as they'd watched the Flame Clan defeat and absorb the clans surrounding it to fuel its rapid expansion.

Put another way, if Yuuto's strength began to wane or if it appeared he was on the losing side of the conflict, it was probably safe to assume they'd

hurriedly switch sides.

“Still, it means we’re ready to set up a cordon. Okay, Felicia, issue the Flame Clan subjugation order!” Yuuto declared.

“Very well. I shall prepare the tablets immediately.”

Just as Felicia opened the urn containing the clay—

“Father, I bring urgent news!” Kristina yelled as she dashed into the room.

Her expression and voice were tense.

There had been many times in the past where Kristina, as head of intelligence, had hurriedly brought in a report.

However, almost all of those reports had been providing information that turned out to be events that ultimately unfolded within the range of expected outcomes that either she or Yuuto had foreseen.

Historically, even the most urgent of reports had been delivered calmly.

This time, however, she was clearly anxious as she delivered her news. It was a rare occurrence.

“The Flame Clan has conquered the Spear Clan capital of Mímir...”

That part came as no surprise. It was a bit earlier than Yuuto’s initial estimate, but it wasn’t completely unexpected.

It was at that moment that Yuuto felt an uneasiness creep into his mind as a problematic possibility quietly presented itself to him.

“And after doing so, they continued their advance and are making their way toward the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr!”

“Seriously?!”

For a moment Yuuto couldn’t believe his ears.

Ordinarily, there were a number of issues to settle after conquering a clan.

Rewarding those who had accomplished the most, allowing the troops to rest, securing supplies—there was a long list of things that needed to be done.

Then there was the issue of the remnants of the defeated army.

Some would inevitably end up as bandits of some sort, or even go to ground in the hopes of rebelling in the future, making the political situation in the conquered territories tenuous at best.

Such an unstable situation would make it difficult to secure enough fodder and supplies to re-equip the conquering army.

By all accounts, it was typical to focus upon securing the conquered territory, and Yuuto had expected Nobunaga to do just that with the Spear Clan's territories.

The Steel Clan was clearly on a different level in terms of scale compared to the clans that the Flame Clan had absorbed up until that point.

They were also known for their continual string of victories, which was why Yuuto assumed the Flame Clan would need at least some time to prepare before staging their advance upon the Holy Capital. He certainly hadn't imagined that Nobunaga would move this quickly.

"Stupid haste is preferable to wise deliberation. I suppose. Damn."

As the phrase indicated, it was the observation that it was better to be fast and less tactically refined than to be slow with refined tactics.

It was a maxim that had its roots in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* where he observed that "*Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.*"

This was certainly a good situation to put that very principle into practice.

Time favored the Steel Clan, so for the Flame Clan it was better to move early than to wait.

"That's absurdly fast, isn't it? I've heard the Flame Clan's forces number over fifty thousand. Surely they'll overstretch themselves and end up failing as a result."

Felicia's observation seemed perfectly logical.

It was certainly possible to move quickly with a small force, but a rapid advance with a large army would mean insufficient supplies and a large number of deserters.

“No, I doubt that’ll happen,” Yuuto said flatly and shook his head from side to side.

While he might have been overshadowed by Hideyoshi’s Great Chugoku Return March, rapid advances were Oda Nobunaga’s specialty.

There were countless anecdotes about his ability to move his armies with speed, so it was best to assume Nobunaga had taken this course because he was confident in his own success.

“I knew this could have happened and he still managed to catch me by surprise... Dammit.”

Yuuto sourly bit down on his lower lip.

Oda Nobunaga was a man who would almost always put himself in a position where he could assure victory before engaging in battle.

Conversely, he was also capable of taking great risks and throwing himself into the fray if the situation called for it.

During the Honkoku-ji Incident of 1569, he had personally led his reinforcements through the snow in a forced march to cover three days of marching in just two days to rescue the besieged Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiaki.

There was also the Battle of Tenno-ji, where he had determined that allowing his allies to perish in front of him would cost him prestige in the eyes of the world and led a charge with a mere three thousand men against the Hongan-ji Army, which numbered around fifteen thousand, and secured victory in spite of the odds.

Ordinarily though, both of those accomplishments should have been impossible.

Oda Nobunaga was a man who made the impossible seem routine.

“Well, I guess this is going to be a hard one.”

Yuuto let out a bitter, dry laugh.

Yuuto had yet to experience the true danger presented by Oda Nobunaga, however...

“F-Fifty thousand?!”

“I had heard rumors, but...”

“Impossible... Even the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army made up of five clans could only muster thirty thousand.”

The news of the Flame Clan’s impending advance upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr was a shock to the generals of the Steel Clan assembled in the throne room.

Unlike Yuuto, their surprise stemmed not from the speed of the advance, but by the sheer numbers being reported.

It was an understandable reaction.

In Yggdrasil, battles were generally fought between armies with thousands of soldiers, and even the Ten Great Clans could muster, at most, ten thousand or so per army. Fifty thousand was an unbelievable number by those standards.

“Is there any possibility that this is misinformation...?”

The question came from the Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél.

It was a common tactic throughout the ages to inflate the numbers of one’s army in official reports.

Making the numbers larger made one’s own troops feel more confident in victory, and also affected the morale of enemy troops too.

“The number fifty thousand comes from the reports my agents have provided me. The official number they’re claiming is a hundred thousand,” Kristina replied matter-of-factly.

“Thooose are the saaaame numbers that I’ve beeeen given.”

The Sword Clan strategist, Bára, indicated her agreement, giving Kristina’s figure more weight.

Fagrahvél sighed deeply and shook her head from side to side.

“If the two of you say as much then I have no intention of doubting you, but it’s still a number that’s difficult to comprehend. How did a single southern clan gather a force that large? Just how are they keeping them fed?”

“We’ve received reports that their food production is extremely high. That the grain yields are many times the number of what they used to be. Further, they’ve tripled their farmlands over the last ten years.”

“Whaaa?! How the hell did they do that?! Does the Flame Clan have access to the same divine knowledge from the land beyond the heavens as Father does?!”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Pardon?!”

At Yuuto’s words, Fagrahvél let out a cry of surprise.

Fagrahvél’s statement was meant rhetorically. She couldn’t possibly have imagined that it would actually be the answer.

“The Flame Clan’s patriarch is from the same country as I am.”

“O-Oh my...”

“The reason the yields are huge is probably because of fertilizer. As for expansion of the farmland, that’s probably from irrigation and iron farming tools. He might very well have done things that I don’t know about. When it comes to this particular area of knowledge, that man’s repertoire far exceeds mine.”

“Wait, he knows even more than you do, Big Brother?”

Felicia tensed as she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat.

She had watched Yuuto’s knowledge bring about revolutionary advances up close, so it was hard for her to imagine someone having more knowledge than him.

“Yeah, without a doubt.”

This was Yuuto’s frank assessment. He had no intention of frightening his audience.

It was true that Yuuto had been born over four hundred years after Nobunaga.

That said, the age Yuuto was born in was one where many things had been

automated through mechanization. There were quite a few things that were simply too different from the pre-industrial age Nobunaga came from.

Yuuto also had absolutely no practical experience with agriculture.

By contrast, Nobunaga had lived in an era where manpower was the primary source of labor. On top of that, it was an era in which agriculture was a critical pillar of a country's economy and the primary concern of the ruling class.

Nobunaga had become the ruler of the Oda Clan at the age of eighteen and had governed his territories until his 'death' at the age of forty-nine. He had some thirty years of experience as a ruler and all the first-hand knowledge he had acquired in the process.

Certainly, while growing grain here in Yggdrasil was a different beast to rice back in his homeland, Nobunaga's knowledge of agriculture was still vastly superior in many ways to Yuuto's.

"Mm, so you mean the current situation is that much more slanted against us."

The one who casually made that observation was the strange man clad in a black mask—Hveðrungr.

He had previously been the patriarch of the Panther Clan, but was now a member of the Steel Clan and the current leader of the Independent Cavalry Regiment which consisted of cavalry forces recruited from the Panther Clan.

"The Steel Clan forces in Glaðsheimr number roughly twenty thousand. While up to this point, Big Brother Yuuto has overcome differences in forces using his knowledge from the land beyond the heavens, this is an enemy who possesses the same knowledge. I suppose we cannot rely on such things this time?" Hveðrungr said and turned his gaze toward Yuuto.

While several generals of the Steel Clan frowned in displeasure at Hveðrungr's dry, rhetorical statement, Yuuto felt it was perfectly in character.

That was, after all, the reason why Hveðrungr, as Loptr, the Second of the Wolf Clan, had not accepted Yuuto's ascension to patriarch of the Wolf Clan.

Hveðrungr was essentially telling Yuuto to show his actual substance, not just

the flashy exterior.

“Yeah. It’s as my brother Rungr says. It’s pretty much a given that the enemy’s going to have steel weapons and use phalanxes equipped with long spears. They’re the original, after all. Not only that, it’s almost certain that they also have stirrups and gunpowder.”

As Yuuto concluded his statement of agreement, a ripple of uneasy murmurs spread through the generals.

The items Yuuto had named were the weapons that had enabled the Steel Clan’s explosive growth.

If the equipment between the armies was equal, then it would be numbers that would settle the matter.

As it currently stood, the Flame Clan outnumbered them by nearly two and a half times.

It was also worth mentioning that the Steel Clan’s forces had recently been reinforced, meaning that while the forces were properly equipped, nearly half the army had less than three months of training in wielding long spears in phalanx formations.

It was therefore understandable that there would be an undercurrent of anxiety among them.

“And for that reason...!”

Yuuto raised his voice as though he had already foreseen this reaction.

War was looming on the horizon.

It was important to make his subordinates understand the current situation, but it would be the height of folly to adjourn with them demoralized by the harsh realities of what was occurring. He had always intended to start with the bad news then bolster their morale with the good news.

As the generals looked upon him expectantly, Yuuto quirked his lips in a confident grin.

“I know precisely what that man doesn’t know. I also possess things that he doesn’t.”

“The Second Division was attacked by the enemy.”

“Oh?”

At his Second Ran’s report, Nobunaga gazed around from atop his horse.

It had been two days since they’d conquered the Spear Clan.

It was a bit too early for the remnants of the clan to break out in rebellion, and it was hard to imagine bandits going out of their way to attack an army as large as his, so Nobunaga wanted to know what foolhardy soul had made such a decision.

“The enemy was a force that consisted entirely of cavalry. They arrived like the wind, rained down a torrent of arrows, then immediately retreated before our forces could regroup.”

“Mm, cavalry alone, was it?”

Nobunaga furrowed his brow in thought.

There had been mounted warriors in his era, but he had never seen forces that consisted entirely of cavalry.

To him, cavalry consisted of mixed units formed around a single mounted warrior and several retainers on foot.

At the very least, there had been no units that consisted entirely of mounted warriors in the Land of the Rising Sun.

“Yes. The enemy forces numbered roughly two thousand. Further, they were highly trained elites, all of them capable of skillfully manipulating their mounts while firing their bows.”

“Ah ha.”

It further piqued Nobunaga’s curiosity.

In the Land of the Rising Sun, mounted warriors generally were armed with spears and employed as a charging unit. There were only a handful of people who were capable of doing something as advanced as firing bows from horseback.

It was bordering upon sheer fantasy in Nobunaga’s mind for a unit of two

thousand such cavalrymen to exist.

That very unit was one of the things that Yuuto had referred to—a tactical formation that Nobunaga had no knowledge of.

Nobunaga may have read about such forces in histories, but Yuuto had been relatively certain that Nobunaga had never fought such units despite his long history in war.

There were no nomadic horse tribes in Japan. No groups that spent all day, every day, every season upon horseback, wielding their bows from atop their horses.

“If I recall correctly, the Panther Clan that the lad was fighting used those sorts of tactics, no?” Nobunaga said as he rubbed the bristles of his bearded chin.

Yes, the reason he wasn’t surprised upon hearing about the Steel Clan’s use of a unit consisting entirely of mounted troops was because he was already aware that there were such units in Yggdrasil.

A man as great as Nobunaga knew the value of information, and he had already sent out agents to the far reaches of Yggdrasil to gather intel about the fighting on the continent.

Nobunaga also knew that the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr, had joined the Steel Clan.

“Merely having them described to me makes them sound like a difficult opponent to deal with.”

Nobunaga was aware from his studies that Genghis Khan had used similar forces to conquer the Asian continent.

He had also read that three hundred years prior to his own era, the Mongol forces of the Yuan utilizing such tactics had caused no end of trouble for Japan’s samurai.

Indeed, those same histories had suggested that without the Kamikaze—the Divine Wind—the Yuan might very well have conquered the Land of the Rising Sun.

“Heheh.”

A chuckle spilled from Nobunaga’s lips.

This was an opponent he would be facing for the first time, who used a tactic he had never encountered before—there was no way he could hold back the excitement from such a challenge.

“How entertaining. I suppose I’ll see just how much of a fight they put up.”

Nobunaga grinned, a predatory gleam in his eye as he roused himself to battle.

“That man’s asking us to do far too much,” Hveðrungr muttered to himself as he rode astride his favorite horse.

For the Battle of Vígríðr, he and his men had also been employed as skirmishers, sent ahead of the main body to buy time for the Steel Clan army to arrive. Once again, they were being employed in much the same way.

With there being no difference in equipment, there was nothing to be done in the face of such a massive disparity in troop numbers.

That disparity was exactly why Yuuto had resorted to issuing the Flame Clan subjugation order. This was another of the things that the Steel Clan possessed but the Flame Clan did not.

Essentially, Yuuto intended to use the authority of the þjóðann to have the surrounding clans encircle the Flame Clan and defeat it. The role of Hveðrungr and his forces was to buy enough time for the reinforcements to arrive.

“Well, we’re the fastest force in the Steel Clan, after all.”

“Yep, nothing to do about that.”

“I mean, they’ve given us plenty of silver. We may as well do our jobs.”

Hveðrungr’s subordinates, riding alongside him, quipped with the occasional chuckle.

Their attitude was playful without a shred of tension in their voices. It may have seemed irreverent, but it was also a sign of their confidence. To joke in the face of battle was something that took a certain amount of nerve.

Hveðrungr decided he needed to rein in his men with a warning.

“Don’t be too cocky. The Flame Clan evidently has gunpowder as well.”

“Oh, that...”

“Yeah, that was a hell of a thing to deal with.”

All of Hveðrungr’s men had tense smiles on their faces upon hearing those words. They all had vivid images of the nightmarish battle they had experienced.

The battle where the tetsuhau unleashed by the Steel Clan had caused the horses to panic, completely destroying their ability to fight back. They had then watched helplessly as their allies were slaughtered.

“Well, the secret is to just avoid getting too close,” Hveðrungr said with a teasing quirk of his lips.

“Yep, we have these, after all.”

One of his troopers pointed his thumb to the bow that was slung across his mount’s back.

It was the Steel Clan’s new composite bow.

These composite bows had an immense advantage in terms of range compared to the self bows and rudimentary composite bows found around Yggdrasil.

Tetsuhau were relatively heavy and were difficult to throw a long distance. These bows made it possible for them to engage at distances beyond the effective range of tetsuhau.

“Our role is just to distress the enemy and slow their advance. Focus on your own survival more than killing the enemy. Don’t even think of overextending your positions.”

“Heh, we know, we know. We’ve learned our lesson on that part,” one of his troopers responded.

“Yep.”

“Never wanna go through that again.”

The others around him nodded their agreement.

They were talking about when they had charged into a trap laid by the Sword Clan strategist Bára at the Battle of Vígríðr, where they had suffered as a result of being too aggressive.

Suffering was one of the best teachers, which was why they had all learned that lesson—that it was dangerous to recklessly charge in.

Hveðrungr was reassured by the presence of the troopers around him. The fact that they had suffered several defeats had made them a tighter, more skilled elite unit.

One of the troopers pointed forward and yelled.

“Boss! There’s Flame Clan banners up ahead!”

Hveðrungr couldn’t see the banners yet himself, but he trusted his trooper’s eyesight.

The troopers had grown up on the plains of Miðgarðr and had far keener eyesight than the city-born Hveðrungr.

Put another way, the enemy had yet to notice their approach. It was a perfect opportunity for an ambush.

“Everyone! Prepare for battle! On me! Charge!”

“So they got away again, did they?”

As he listened to his messenger’s report, Nobunaga closed his eyes and rubbed his bearded chin.

This had been the seventh attack upon his forces, including the initial ambush at night, but his forces had been unable to mount an effective counterattack. In fact, they hadn’t been able to do much to catch their opponent at all.

While there had only been forty to fifty men killed, there were at least ten times that number who had been wounded.

Another problem was the damage to morale. It was demoralizing to spend time chasing after an enemy only to have them escape without a single casualty. There was nothing that was more exhausting than wasted effort.

“Quite impressive. While the Takeda were strong, they were never a problem. An elite unit of that skill is something I’ve never seen, not even in the Land of the Rising Sun.”

Nobunaga couldn’t help but utter those words of praise.

While the generals of the Flame Clan had called the enemy’s refusal to stand and fight cowardice, Nobunaga hadn’t shared that opinion. Nobunaga was interested only in results.

To defeat the enemy without suffering a single loss in turn... It was similar in concept to the use of pike squares equipped with long spears three-and-a-half ken—or 5 to 6 meters—in length that he had come up with, and Nobunaga found a certain beauty in the sheer effectiveness of the tactics.

“My Great Lord, this is hardly the time to be impressed by their tactics. If we leave them be, no doubt our losses will continue to mount,” Ran, Nobunaga’s Second, said to his lord, his brow furrowed in frustration.

Of course, Ran had a point.

They had taken this much damage in a single day, and it would take another eight days yet to reach the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

If these attacks continued at the current rate, then that would mean that, at the very least, several hundred would be killed, and there would likely be several thousand wounded. Even the soldiers who hadn’t sustained injury would still be completely worn out from chasing the enemy.

If they continued to let the enemy escape, fatigue would build and morale would plummet.

It took a heavy mental toll on the soldiers to be attacked regardless of whether it was night or day. Within several days there would be those who deserted out of sheer terror. For every one soldier who deserted there would be another two or three that would decide to do the same.

Nobunaga could easily imagine that his army would be in no state to fight by the time it arrived in Glaðsheimr. He needed to take action to prevent that outcome.

“Hmm... What approach would be best to handle this?”

Even to Oda Nobunaga, the conqueror of the Warring States Period, this was a difficult problem to solve.

He could now understand why the emperors on the continent had built structures such as the Great Wall of China. Fighting this sort of enemy on their own terms was a recipe for disaster.

While the Flame Clan army housed a fair number of cavalry, there was an enormous gap in terms of riding ability. Nobunaga had no confidence that his cavalry could catch the enemy.

As for bows, the Japanese bows that Nobunaga had known had been made of bamboo, and with no bamboo available on Yggdrasil, he couldn’t recreate that specific weapon.

In spite of that, Nobunaga had done his best to innovate, creating a bow that was much more powerful and was much longer ranged than the standard bows found on Yggdrasil, but the bows the enemy cavalry raiders had were clearly superior in performance.

And while he had roughly three hundred Tanegashima at his disposal, with how mobile and unpredictable the enemy was, there was no way to deploy the arquebusiers in the right location.

There was no way to hit the enemy with attacks when they had both greater mobility and longer range.

“If the bird won’t sing, then I shall make it sing... Was it?”

After a few moments in thought, Nobunaga grinned impishly, as though he were a child that had just come up with a prank.

It was a haiku poem that he had heard from Yuuto, a poem that had been used to describe the personality of his subordinate, Hideyoshi.

Nobunaga himself didn’t much like that set of haiku.

It was because the one ascribed to him was “If the bird won’t sing, then kill it and be done with it.”

While Yuuto had speculated that haiku had been ascribed to Nobunaga

because of his ruthlessness—perhaps best displayed in acts such as the Burning of Enryaku-ji—had left a powerful impression, Nobunaga felt that those that had come after him fundamentally misunderstood his personality.

Killing the bird indicated an acceptance of failure.

Nobunaga considered himself to be the man who made things that others considered impossible or unrealistic into reality.

He would do so once again, against this enemy.

“If our attacks won’t land, then we’ll force them to land.”

“Mm?! What is that?!”

It was right as Hveðrungr was about to issue the call to retreat after completing their tenth assault.

Hveðrungr felt a remarkable presence and turned to face it.

Standing there was an older man with long, unkempt hair. His hair was the exact same black as Yuuto’s. He rode upon horseback and with his retainers at his side was charging toward Hveðrungr and his troopers.

“...So that’s Oda Nobunaga.”

Hveðrungr swallowed.

He knew who it was at a glance.

Nobunaga had a terrifyingly large presence even from afar.

His rare black hair had nothing to do with it. The overwhelming pressure, the sheer presence he exuded, felt heavy enough to crush Hveðrungr even from this distance.

“But for the commander-in-chief himself to come charging in... Seems he’s just as Yuuto described.”

It was the sort of action that seemed more reckless than brave, but Hveðrungr had no intention of underestimating his opponent.

According to Yuuto, Nobunaga had risen from a mere regional lord to almost conquering the land beyond the heavens, while here in Yggdrasil, Nobunaga had created a great clan in a mere decade.

With that in mind, there was no way this was simply a reckless charge.

Most important was the fact that Nobunaga had survived to nearly the age of sixty despite repeatedly taking similar reckless actions.

“It would seem discretion’s the better part of valor here.”

While it was regrettable that he’d have to retreat with the enemy’s commander in front of him, now that Hveðrungr had a good look at him, Nobunaga didn’t seem the sort who would be easy to kill.

There was also the possibility this was a trap. He couldn’t bring himself to just charge in headfirst.

“All of you! Time to go!”

At Hveðrungr’s order, the Independent Cavalry Regiment began its retreat.

Of course, they weren’t fleeing at full speed.

They maintained a speed that made the enemy believe they could catch them, drawing the enemy along.

It was the same logic as gambling.

When people feel they could have won, that they could reverse their losses with just one more win... That was when they were most in danger. That sort of psychological belief that they could still salvage their losses was what dragged people into an endless cycle of losing.

It was the tactic that made nomadic horse riders so infamous: The Parthian Shot.

“...They’re still following? Surely they know they can’t catch us at that pace.”

Hveðrungr furrowed his brow in suspicion under his mask.

They had already retreated quite a distance, but the group led by Nobunaga continued to relentlessly chase after Hveðrungr.

That was in spite of the fact that Hveðrungr and his troopers had fired several salvos of arrows in their direction.

Further, over the previous nine attacks, surely they had learned at least part of the logic behind Hveðrungr’s tactics.

And yet they continued to charge blindly ahead, as though playing completely by Hveðrungr's playbook. There was something creepy, something disconcerting about the whole thing.

"I'm almost certain this is a trap of some sort... At least, it seems like it. Just what are they after...?"

Even Hveðrungr couldn't tell.

Despite the fact that it couldn't possibly be so, Nobunaga's charge just seemed like a reckless pursuit.

"Well, fine. All there is to do is perform to the best of our abilities."

With that, Hveðrungr divided the Independent Cavalry Regiment into two groups and had them turn around.

The group led by Nobunaga had already broken ahead of the main body and was somewhat isolated from the Flame Clan's main force.

Hveðrungr had no idea what Nobunaga was planning, but whatever it was, Nobunaga would have to face an encirclement and a barrage of arrows to accomplish it.

The two groups of the Independent Cavalry Regiment began to arc their way toward Nobunaga's flank, and they faced no resistance as they took up their flanking position.

This can't be right. This is going far too well. There's no way he'd be this easily cornered.

Alarm bells began to ring out in Hveðrungr's head, but at the same time, it was too late for him to just flee without engaging them.

The enemy's commander was right in front of him, and he had managed to encircle him.

Further, they had done so at a distance where their bows were in range, but the enemy's bows would not be.

To retreat from a situation when he had this great of an advantage was something that he, as a general, couldn't do.

Even if they escaped and got away with no losses, he would lose the trust of his subordinates as he would appear to be a coward who let a perfect opportunity slip away.

“No point in worrying. Open fir...”

Just as Hveðrungr was about to give the order to fire—

A large collective shout suddenly rose from his left.

When Hveðrungr hurriedly turned to look, he found a group of cavalry with spear-armed retainers charging into his forces.

Then came additional cries from the front and from the rear.

“Wh-What?! An ambush?!” Hveðrungr said with a cry of shock.

It was impossible.

To read where the random attacks of the Independent Cavalry Regiment would come was a feat only someone like the late Imperial High Priest Hárbarth was capable of performing.

Hveðrungr couldn’t possibly believe there would be two men with similar abilities.

No... If they knew where the enemy would appear there would be no reason for the commander to put himself at risk.

As Hveðrungr considered the decisions Nobunaga had made up until this point, he came to a shocking realization.

“Surely not...?! Did they draw us into the trap?!”

If that was the case, then all of Nobunaga’s strange actions suddenly made sense.

If the enemy’s commander-in-chief was on the field, then it was only natural to want to attack that part of the army.

As a rule, the Independent Cavalry Regiment retreated by matching their retreat speed to the enemy’s marching speed in order to maintain a set distance. This meant their speed was reliant upon how quickly their opponents were moving.

So, by deliberately slowing their chase, they could slow down Hveðrungr's forces as enemy troops that were more mobile advanced ahead and completed their encirclement.

Nobunaga had thought as far ahead as to know that Hveðrungr would move to encircle him if he was ahead of the main body.

Hveðrungr had thought he had drawn Nobunaga in a trap, only to have ended up in the trap instead.

"So *this* is Oda Nobunaga!" Hveðrungr said with a cry of shock.

He had intuitively felt there was something wrong. The extra sense that he'd developed over his years of battle had warned him.

Yes, he had been aware there was something off.

If it hadn't been Nobunaga that had charged in, Hveðrungr would have been wary of the approaching main force and ended the chase at an appropriate time, switching to a full retreat.

Further, his subordinates would have accepted such a decision.

However, he had been forced into a situation where he had no choice but to remain committed.

By making himself the bait, Nobunaga had forced Hveðrungr into making a different decision.

Now that the trap had been sprung, the logic was simple, but it was still a remarkable trap.

It shouldn't have been possible. The leader of a great clan putting himself into that much danger.

While Nobunaga's personal guard had done a good job of protecting him, it was still entirely possible that an arrow or two from Hveðrungr's forces could very well have hit him.

Frankly, it was impossible to understand.

According to Yuuto, this sort of risk was something Nobunaga had taken many times. Hveðrungr couldn't help but wonder just how Nobunaga had survived to

that age.

“So he’s a man that the fates love that much...”

Hveðrungr couldn’t help but let out a dry, bitter laugh.

Nobunaga was a terrifying enemy. No matter how well tactics and strategy were employed, in the end, luck and fate were what mattered.

Along with everything else, Nobunaga was blessed by fate. He was beloved by the gods or by something similar to them.

There was no other conclusion that Hveðrungr could draw.

“Damn...! We’re charging through!” Hveðrungr shouted as he drew his katana.

The battle had already been decided. The Independent Cavalry Regiment had lost.

Hveðrungr now had no choice but to look for a glimmer of hope by charging into the enemy’s midst.

ACT 4

“Brother, are you all right?!”

Felicia anxiously approached Hveðrungr, who had returned to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. He had bandages wrapped around much of his body and blood had seeped into the fabric, staining them red.

His breathing was labored, and he appeared exhausted.

Even the faintly sarcastic smirk that always played upon his lips had faded in the face of his fatigue.

“For him to so easily beat your Independent Cavalry Regiment...” Yuuto spat out bitterly, his expression dark.

Only about half of the Independent Cavalry Regiment had managed to return to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. Among the survivors there wasn’t a single man—Hveðrungr included—who wasn’t injured in some fashion.

This effectively meant the Independent Cavalry Regiment was out of commission for the foreseeable future.

The regiment had been thoroughly decimated.

“Just what happened?”

Yuuto couldn’t help but ask the question.

Hveðrungr was not a poor general by any definition.

He was a highly capable leader, turning the Panther Clan into a great clan in under a year and coming up with numerous impressive strategies in his war with the Wolf Clan.

It was true that Hveðrungr had recently suffered a series of defeats between the conquest of the Panther Clan and the Battle of Vígríðr.

However, he had been defeated on those occasions because the enemy was effectively armed with cheat abilities—the tetsuhau wielded by the Wolf Clan during the Panther Clan conquest and Hárbarth’s Eye of Heaven at the Battle of Vígríðr. It was through no fault of his own that he suffered those defeats.

As an army commander, Hveðrungr was more capable than the twin pillars of the Steel Clan, Skáviðr and Sigrún. In particular, Hveðrungr's ability to detect danger, which stemmed from his keen observations of the world around him, was second to none.

The Independent Cavalry Regiment was an elite unit that boasted the greatest mobility and some of the best fighting prowess that Yggdrasil had to offer. Yuuto honestly still struggled to process the fact that Nobunaga had thoroughly routed that unit.

"It was as you said. That man is a monster."

Hveðrungr prefaced his explanation with those comments then launched into a description of what had transpired. Once Hveðrungr had finished his explanation, Yuuto's face bore a tired wintry smile.

"The Battle of Jaxartes River..."

It was the battle where Alexander the Great of Macedon had defeated the nomadic horsemen of the Saka.

The Saka cavalry had leveraged the classic nomadic tactic of using their mobility to flank their opponent, raining down arrows, and retreating if the Macedonians attempted to close the distance, only to have Alexander the Great use himself as bait as Nobunaga had done, drawing the Saka forces in and defeating them with the reserves he had hidden from the enemy.

"There's no way he knew about that battle, so he must have come up with that on the spot."

Yuuto could only marvel at the genius tactician of the Warring States Period.

Nomadic tribes were one of the greatest challenges faced by countless great generals and heroes throughout history.

Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty that had defeated Xiang Yu, one of the greatest generals in Chinese history, had been trounced by the Xiongnu and forced to sign a humiliating peace treaty where he provided them with tribute.

There was also the example of Darius the Great, conqueror of Egypt in the west and Asia Minor to the Indus River in the east—the architect of the golden

age of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. He was perhaps one of the greatest kings in history according to later historians, and yet he had still failed in his attempt to conquer the nomadic tribes of the Scythians.

Darius had lost against the Scythians despite having an army of over seven hundred thousand under his command.

Meanwhile the Mongol Empire created by the nomadic tribes of the Mongolian steppe had resulted in the formation of the largest empire in human history and they had, at their peak, controlled nearly a quarter of all land on Earth.

That was just how powerful nomadic horsemen were—and how difficult they could be to defeat without any special tactics.

In spite of that, Nobunaga had easily found a way to defeat such a force over the last day or two and executed it to perfection. Without using any cheat abilities, no less.

Yuuto felt his blood run cold at the realization that he had to fight a monster on that level.

“So, what are you planning to do about it? In a few days he’s going to lay siege to the Holy Capital.”

“...Oh, that’s right.”

Hveðrungr’s words pulled Yuuto back to the present. There was no point in dwelling over what had already happened.

The enemy wasn’t going to wait. He needed to move on to his next response.

“I think the only choice we have is to hole up and defend.”

After a long moment of thought, Yuuto grunted out those words with a tense expression.

Yuuto typically believed that attack was the best form of defense and disliked ceding the initiative to the enemy, but as things stood he didn’t have much of a choice.

The difference in forces was fifty thousand against twenty thousand, and they were basically equal in terms of equipment. The Flame Clan likely also held an

advantage in terms of troop training.

Lastly, when considering the ability and experience of the two clans' commanders, the Flame Clan definitely came out on top.

There was simply too low a chance of victory if they just stood and fought the Flame Clan as things currently were.

"We need to at least close the gap in troop numbers somewhat before we do anything else. With the surrounding clans joining our banner, we should be able to pull in another fifteen thousand or so."

Yuuto came up with an estimate by checking his mental map of the region.

The situation was substantially different than it had been around the Battle of Vígríðr.

The Hoof Clan capital had been conquered and the clan brought to heel, and the Panther Clan remnants had been forced back to Miðgarðr. The Sword, Fang, and Cloud Clans had indicated their willingness to submit to his authority.

Because of that, he could call upon the forces that had been defending against those threats to reinforce his position in Glaðsheimr.

That wouldn't change the fact that he'd still be outnumbered fifty thousand to thirty-five thousand, though.

"Then the question becomes just how much the newly submissive clans are willing to move. If they move on the Flame Clan, the situation would become a lot better."

As he said this, Yuuto snorted self-deprecatingly.

It was true that if the Armor, Shield, and Helm Clans obeyed Yuuto's Flame Clan subjugation order, the Flame Clan Encirclement would be complete and they would be more than equal in terms of troops—turning the tables greatly in their favor as the Flame Clan would have to deal with threats on multiple fronts.

He was skeptical that things would proceed that smoothly, however.

"Hrmph! To cling to things that might not even happen. You've lost your edge."

“Older brother! How dare you talk to Big Brother that way!”

“And what of you, Big Sister? Are you so flustered that you’ve forgotten which chalices you’ve sworn?”

“Ah!”

Felicia was unable to muster a response to Hveðrungr’s quip, flushing red with embarrassment and biting down on her lower lip.

The fact that Hveðrungr was Felicia’s older brother, Loptr, was one of the most closely-held secrets in the Steel Clan.

Felicia could only bite her lip in frustration.



“Now now. I don’t mind it.”

Yuuto laughed dryly as he tried to calm the situation.

“Even if you don’t mind it, Big Brother, I do! Given that you of all people, Hveðrungr, should be in a position to appreciate Big Brother’s mercy!”

“Why don’t we just let those bygones be bygones. What do you say?”

“Certainly not! I still need to drill proper manners into my older brother!”

“Hey, you’re calling me ‘older brother’ again.”

“Quiet!”

Felicia quickly brought down the hammer against Hveðrungr.

Given that she was never this childish or angry toward him, Yuuto found her current anger amusing.

Felicia was generally friendly and polite, but even she tended to let her guard down when dealing with a member of her birth family.

Given that he was stressed over the situation, Yuuto was honestly thankful for the bit of levity. He knew just how dangerously narrow his perspective could get when he was backed into a corner.

Thanks to the siblings, he had come up with a good response.

“Anyway... I suppose we should do what we can with what we have on hand.”

“Hole up in defense, Father?” Fagrahvél furrowed her brow and said with a faint edge in her voice.

To Fagrahvél, the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr was the city of her beloved adopted sister and liege Sigrdrífa, and the place where Sigrdrífa had been laid to rest. Clearly the idea of exposing such a sacred place to enemy attack upset her.

“Weeell, I agreeee that it’s probably the best cooourse of action.”

Bára patted Fagrahvél on the back reassuringly, noting her agreement in her languid lilt.

The fact that Bára was so quick to agree meant that she likely had a grasp of the situation as a strategist.

Despite her seemingly languid demeanor, she was still a sharp and tough woman.

“You two know the Holy Capital well, right? Since we’ll be holing up here, I need your frank assessment of our prospects,” Yuuto inquired as he rested his elbows on his desk and knitted his fingers together.

This was why he had called this meeting in his office.

“I see, so that’s why I’ve also been summoned.”

With that remark, the fourth occupant in the room, the Panther Clan patriarch, Skáviðr, nodded his understanding.

During his days as a member of the Wolf Clan, Skáviðr had been the general commanding the defense of Fort Gnipahellir where he had skillfully repelled countless Claw Clan attacks.

While Yuuto had participated in his fair share of field battles, this would only be his second defensive siege and the first since his very first battle. He wanted insights from those with more experience than him.

“Mm.”

Fagrahvél fell briefly into thought.

“The most notable characteristic of the Holy Capital as a defensive fortification is, as you well know, Father, that it is far, far too large.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Yuuto let out a soft chuckle as though in agreement.

The Valaskjálf Palace alone was the size of a small city in terms of area.

The entire Holy Capital was, without exaggeration, roughly ten times the area of the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé.

“That, of course, means that defending it requires a substantial number of soldiers. At the same time, because of its sheer size, it’s also difficult for the enemy to surround. That particular aspect should function to our advantage this time.”

“Aaaalso... There’s the heeeight of the waaalls. They’re about twiiice the

height of a normal ciiiity's."

"Right, I was hoping to make use of that."

Yuuto nodded.

There was currently a Steel Clan army of twenty thousand garrisoning within the Holy Capital, so he had enough troops.

Because the city was so large in outer circumference, if the enemy planned to encircle the city, their forces would be spread incredibly thin and there would be a large number of gaps in their encirclement.

The longer the siege lasted, the more important this detail would become in terms of coordinating with other fortifications, carrying in supplies, and the like.

Higher walls also meant a substantial advantage because of the fact that their height would make it more difficult to scale them and would protect from ranged attacks by the enemy while providing a higher platform for the defenders to fire from.

"So I understand full well it's a tough nut to crack, but if you could, could you tell me its weaknesses as well?"

"Hm, weaknesses, Father? I don't think there are any that come to mind... It would be quite the problem for the seat of the þjóðann to have any obvious weaknesses."

"I suppose you're right."

Yuuto was about to agree with Fagrahvél when he was interrupted.

"The Holy Capital's greatest weakness is the sheer size of its population."

"Oh?"

Yuuto turned to look intently at Skáviðr.

"When a well-defended castle falls, it's almost always not from external attack, but from collapses within it," he stated, expanding upon his previous comment.

"Ah, I see. Yes, it'd be quite difficult to control a population this big."

Yuuto let out a dry, tired chuckle at the thought.

The population of the city, numbering a hundred thousand, was an enormous risk.

A siege of a city represented a massive burden to the city's denizens.

While people can generally endure hardships when they know they'll eventually pass, they're much less capable of handling hardships that have no definitive end.

People were fragile creatures. The longer a siege lasted, the greater their discontent and fear would become. Moreover, desperate people tended to take desperate measures.

With a population of a hundred thousand people, the risk was even greater. Even if just a few dozen of those people decided they'd had enough and turned, they could open a gate to allow the Flame Clan entry and bring the entire defensive position crashing down.

"Thanks, Skáviðr. I honestly was underestimating just how hard it'd be to defend this place," Yuuto swallowed to clear the lump in his throat and said with a tense expression.

Before this discussion, there had been a part of Yuuto that had convinced himself that holding out in the city until the arrival of Steel Clan reinforcements would be easy. After all, no matter how much of a genius he was, Nobunaga wouldn't have any knowledge of siege weapons like trebuchets.

Yuuto felt a chill run up his spine at how he had taken the defense of the city for granted.

This wasn't going to be that easy.

The most dangerous enemy in a defensive siege wasn't the one outside the walls, it was the one within.

It was an eye-opening moment for Yuuto.

"So he's holed himself up inside the city. Looking at his history, I thought he'd charge out and fight us head on," Nobunaga said with amusement as he gazed up at the walls of the Holy Capital of the Glaðsheimr.

It had been twelve days since he'd left the Spear Clan's capital.

While the attacks from the cavalry unit had initially slowed his progress, there had been little resistance since he'd defeated them. He had arrived at Glaðsheimr roughly on schedule.

"The thought that even the god of war was afraid of a force numbering fifty thousand... is probably wishful thinking, yes?"

"Heh, yeah. That lad's not so easily frightened," Nobunaga responded, chuckling at his Second's observation.

Yuuto was a real man who had shrugged off Nobunaga's attempts at intimidation and had issued a threat to him face-to-face. He was also a general who had often fought and defeated armies that were well over twice the size of his own. There was no way that he'd suddenly cower in the face of a larger army.

"He understands well that time is his ally. He's using not just tactics on the battlefield, but his diplomatic resources outside of it. He's quite the promising leader in spite of his youth."

Nobunaga nodded, impressed with his rival.

"He's waiting for reinforcements, I suppose," Ran said bitterly, frowning.

The Flame Clan leadership was already aware that Yuuto had issued the Flame Clan subjugation order to the surrounding clans.

"Things might have gotten a bit troublesome if we had waited to move."

The sight of the decree issued by the þjóðann brought back a bitter memory for Nobunaga—The encirclement of his territories that had been orchestrated by the 15th Muromachi Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiaki, had been the moment of greatest danger in his lifetime.

Nobunaga believed that the fact that he had needed to deal with multiple problems in multiple directions had been the reason his conquest of Japan had been delayed.

There was a part of him that wanted to fight Yuuto after he had gained some more strength, but Nobunaga was now sixty years old. He had no desire to face the same setback to his ambitions that he had earlier in his life.

Further, he felt it would be disrespectful to his opponent to underestimate him so badly as to give him time to bring in reinforcements.

“Yes. By taking advantage of our opportunity and advancing quickly to the Holy Capital, I believe we have succeeded in intimidating the surrounding clans.”

Ran nodded as well.

People tended to side with the winner. There weren’t many who were foolish enough to side with the underdog.

By surrounding the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr with an army of fifty thousand, the Flame Clan had been able to indicate to the surrounding clans that it would be risky to side with Suoh-Yuuto, þjóðann or no.

“Yes, well... I doubt all the clans will stand by and watch.”

The people of Yggdrasil held the þjóðann in surprisingly high regard.

While there would be clans who would be cowed into inaction by the Steel Clan being at a disadvantage, there would be clans who would side with Yuuto between the combination of his authority as þjóðann and his past accomplishments.

There was also the possibility of reinforcements from the Bifröst and Álfheimr regions.

“And this isn’t the sort of city that we can bring down in a single day.”

Nobunaga scratched his head and let out a dry chuckle.

Up until now he had been able to wield the fact that he controlled an army of fifty thousand men, an enormous number by Yggdrasil’s standards, to break the will of defenders within any particular fortification and conquer them by brute force.

That wasn’t going to be possible this time around, though.

The enemy had a talisman in the form of Suoh-Yuuto. The castle walls were extremely high and they were quite tough. Further, the city was enormous.

If he tried to encircle the city, he could very well end up having his forces

defeated piecemeal.

“It seems we’ll have to buckle down and do this properly, huh...”

“Father, the Flame Clan appears to be building proper fortifications near the southern and western gates,” Kristina reported as she stepped into the office.

It had been five days since the arrival of the Flame Clan army.

During a siege, it was typical to start by building trenches and shelters for rest, but they were usually temporary structures that are only used during the siege.

They were, after all, going to be torn down after the siege.

It was rare for a besieging army to take their time and build proper, permanent fortifications, but Yuuto nodded, not particularly surprised.

“Siege castles, huh? I figured he’d end up doing that.”

It was a common tactic that Nobunaga had used in sieges.

While Nobunaga was described with the haiku of “*If the bird won’t sing, then kill it and be done with it*,” the truth was that he had rarely tried to bring down fortifications through brute force.

Most of the time he had built siege castles—fortifications that served as launching pads for his attacks—around an enemy castle and forced the enemy to surrender through a slow battle of attrition.

“Shall we try to interrupt their building efforts?”

“No, no. I’m sure he’s taken steps against that. If there’s an opening it’s probably a trap.”

Yuuto waved away Felicia’s proposal.

For *the* Oda Nobunaga to make such an elementary mistake at this point was pretty much as likely as winged pigs flying past his window.

“What’s more important is to make sure the troops don’t get complacent just because it looks like the enemy’s settling in for a long siege. Our opponent is one of the greatest generals in history, if he sees an opening he’ll take it.”

Yuuto felt a chill run up his spine at his own words and swallowed.

He felt that even the slightest opening would turn that statement into a reality.

He knew what he needed to focus on at the moment, but he had something else that was occupying his mind.

That was because—

“Your Majesty!”

Mitsuki’s lady-in-waiting Ephelia burst into the room, breathing raggedly.

“Is the baby born?!” Yuuto asked in a shout as he shot out of his chair.

“Y-Yes! Both mother and...”

“Ah!”

Before Ephelia could finish her report, Yuuto rushed out of the office.

This was also Yuuto’s first child.

He had wanted to be present for the birth, but because the Steel Clan was currently at war, he had far too much on his plate to be able to sit around and wait while Mitsuki was in labor. It had still occupied his thoughts, of course. The fact that it had taken longer than expected had also made him all that more nervous.

Now that the birth was over, he had no intention of waiting. He wanted to see both Mitsuki and his child.

He burst through the door where he heard the sound of a baby crying.

“Mitsuki!”

“Oh, hi Yuu-kun.”

As he entered the room he saw an exhausted, drained, but deeply satisfied-looking Mitsuki smiling at him.

At that moment Yuuto almost felt his knees give out from under him. The unexpectedly long labor had him substantially more on edge than he’d thought.

This was an age where the typical maternal fatality rate was in the range of 15 to 20 percent. While it was too early to say that she was totally in the clear,

seeing Mitsuki doing well was enough to send relief flooding through his body.

But it wasn't time for him to fall over just yet.

"Well done! You did great! So where's the baby?!"

He heard the baby's cry, but the baby wasn't with Mitsuki.

The sheer volume of the cries made the sound echo throughout the room and he couldn't figure out where the baby was.

Yuuto looked around the room curiously.

"Your Majesty, your child is here. Gods be praised. It's a boy."

An older midwife of around fifty approached him carrying the baby wrapped in clean, white linen.

The words were meant to celebrate the birth of an Imperial heir. For Yuuto, the sex of the baby didn't matter at all though. He was content that the baby had been born safely and healthy.

"Can I hold him?" he asked.

"Yes, but his neck hasn't set yet, so please be careful."

"S-So what should I do?" Yuuto asked nervously.

He had already looked up how to hold a baby using the internet, but as he quickly realized in that moment, there was a big difference between reading about it and then seeing it and doing it for himself. He was paralyzed by the fear that he could do something that harmed this precious, delicate life.

There was no room for error. Yuuto was as nervous in this moment as he had ever been on the battlefield.

"Then if you will allow me..."

The midwife smiled warmly in amusement as she placed the baby's neck on Yuuto's arm.

"Now, use your other arm to hold the bottom. There. You're a natural, Your Majesty."

"R-Really...?" Yuuto answered half-heartedly, nervously peering into the face

of his son.

His first thought was that the baby's face was wrinkly. He knew it was a rather awful thing to think at that moment, but he couldn't help it.

For Yuuto, babies were the soft, plump children who were peacefully asleep in TV ads and the like, but the bawling and crying son that he held in his arms right now had spent the last nine months suspended in fluid in the womb, and his water-logged skin was completely wrinkled.

And yet—

"H-He's so cute!"

Yuuto felt his expression soften and his cheeks quirk in a goofy smile.

He knew, intellectually, that viewed objectively, the babies in the TV ads were cuter than the son in his arms.

He knew that, and yet...

His son was a hundred, no, a thousand times cuter than those babies.

"I'm your dad. Can you hear me, Nozomu?"

He called to his son using the name that he and Mitsuki had decided upon ahead of time.

Yuuto prayed that the child's future would be bright and filled with hope, though it may have been a bit superstitious—and perhaps befitting of his son's chosen name. After all, the name Nozomu came from the Japanese word used when wishing for something.

"Heh, you're completely taken by Master Nozomu, Big Brother."

"Yep. I had no idea that my kid would be this cute."

"Heheh. I certainly agree though, he really is adorable."

Felicia gazed into the baby's face and broke into a goofy grin of her own.

"Right? Right?!"

"He has your nose, Big Brother."

"Oh, really?"

He didn’t quite grasp the similarity himself, but it tickled him to hear that there was a resemblance.

The child was adorable, precious, and cute, and just holding him made Yuuto’s heart melt with happiness.

He swore to himself that he would make the Ark Project succeed for this child’s sake.

At that very moment, he noticed something...

“It’s just occurred to me but there’s another baby crying, isn’t there?” Yuuto murmured before focusing his mind on his hearing.

Yes, there were two babies crying. His son in his arms, and another voice that came from the room beyond.

“Ah... Well, that’s, um, how do I put it...” the midwife said vaguely, as though she found it hard to explain.

Her attitude made Yuuto all the more curious.

“What is it? I won’t blame you for it. Just tell me.”

“Y-Yes. That is. U-Um... Y-Your wife has had twins.”

“Twins?!”

Yuuto let out a shout at the surprising news. He hadn’t even considered that possibility.

“Y-Yes. Unfortunately...” she said sadly, looking troubled by the news she had to deliver.

Yuuto felt his blood run cold at her expression.

“W-Was there something wrong with the other baby?!”

The moment he put those thoughts into words, Yuuto felt a vise grip his heart. His anxiety threatened to drown him.

“Huh?! N-No, the problem is that she was born at all...”

It was the midwife’s turn to be confused at Yuuto’s question.

Yuuto gaped for a moment, unable to process what she was saying.

Then after a heartbeat, Yuuto replayed the midwife's words in his head and finally understood.

"Oh! That's what you meant! Oh, don't scare me like that!"

Yuuto let out a long sigh of relief.

He could have sworn that his body was going to give out for good this time.

Of course, he was carrying his son, so he forced himself to stay upright.

"Y-Your Majesty?" The midwife asked, deeply concerned.

To her Yuuto was an almost heavenly presence. It was understandable for her to be on edge after being interrogated by such a personage. No doubt she was terrified.

Of course, that attitude was what had made Yuuto so anxious to begin with, but now that he understood, it was something he could simply laugh off.

"Haha, no, don't worry about it. Twins are fine by me. No, if anything I'm happy about it."

Yuuto smiled reassuringly at the midwife.

However... Twins were considered to be cursed.

It was something that had completely escaped Yuuto's mind given that he was born in modern Japan, but from ancient times and even up until the recent past, both in the eastern and western hemispheres, there were many regions where twins were considered cursed children.

In Japan, for example, from the Heian to Edo Era, women that gave birth to twins were derided as having "Beast Wombs" (with the justification being that animals gave birth to multiple young), and in almost all of those cases, one of the children would be killed, given up for adoption, or placed at a shrine.

Some historians even believed that Tokugawa Ieyasu hated his second son Hideyasu simply because he had been born alongside a twin brother.

In Yggdrasil twins were also treated in a similar fashion. There were, in fact, many who treated the twins from the Claw Clan with distaste for that reason.

No doubt there were many reasons for this treatment—the rarity of multiple

births, the sheer danger to the mother, the fact that they often had health problems after birth, but for Yuuto, so long as mother and children were fine, he had no use for that sort of superstition.

“Could you bring that baby over as well? I’d like to hold her.”

“Y-Yes. As you command!”

The midwife hurriedly ran to the other room.

Just as Yuuto waited expectantly, wondering what the other baby was like...

“U-Um, Your Majesty. Lady Mitsuki wanted me to inform you that she’d like to hold Master Nozomu,” Ephelia approached and told him apologetically.

When Yuuto turned to Mitsuki, he saw her gazing at him with a thoroughly envious expression.

“Sorry, sorry. Of course you want to hold him too.”

“Sniff. That’s not fair. I did all the work! And then you end up holding him first, Yuu-kun!”

As Yuuto carried the baby over to her, she quipped in a faintly venomous tone.

There was certainly no arguing the fact that she had done the hard work and that she was perfectly justified in wanting to be the first to hold their baby.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? Here, can you sit up?”

“Noooo waaaay. My body feels like jelly,” Mitsuki said in a thoroughly disappointed tone, her eyes tearing up.

It seemed that giving birth to twins had put quite a strain on her body. Mitsuki was so exhausted that she couldn’t sit up.

“Here, Big Sister, I’ll help you.”

Felicia circled around behind Mitsuki and helped her up.

Ordinarily it took a fair amount of strength to help a person up, but Felicia was an Einherjar and she did it with ease.

“Mm, thanks.”

“No problem at all.”

“Okay, good. Here. Just be careful,” Yuuto said before handing Nozomu to Mitsuki.

Mitsuki evidently understood her lack of strength. She gently placed the baby on her thigh and cradled just his head upon her arm.

“You really are adorable. Nozomu. I’m your mommy. Heh. You’re right, Felicia. He’s got his dad’s nose.”

Mitsuki cooed happily, beaming down with a compassionate smile at the baby.

Yuuto considered the scene before him to be almost divine in its beauty. He could swear there was a light shining down upon Mitsuki.

He blinked, and it was then that he realized that tears had started spilling from his eyes. For some reason just gazing upon mother and child was deeply moving.

“I have brought the other child. A healthy girl.”

The midwife then appeared from the other room, carrying a baby wrapped in a light pink linen.

“Oh. Thank you.”

He’d gotten lost in his emotions a little too early. There was, after all, the other twin as well.

Yuuto wiped his tears with his arm and was about to approach the other baby when...

“No, bad Yuu-kun. I’m going to be the first one to hold her.”

Mitsuki directed a frightening glare in his direction.

It was a sharp contrast to the compassionate, holy expression she had given the baby a moment earlier, but such was the strength behind Mitsuki’s gaze that Yuuto’s instincts told him it was unwise to argue.

Silly as it may sound, there were warning bells ringing in his head.

This wasn’t someone to trifle with.

It was an instinct that had served war-god Yuuto quite well so far. He knew when to pull back, and he ceded the joy of being the first to hold their daughter to his wife.



“Huh? C-Could you repeat that?!” Yuuto blinked his eyes in surprise and asked Mitsuki for confirmation.

He had heard what she had said, but her statement was such a surprising one that he couldn’t believe what he’d heard.

“Okay. Can we make it so Nozomu is recorded as being Rífa’s son?”

“...Uh, are you serious?” Yuuto’s eyes darted around the room and he asked Mitsuki again with a befuddled expression.

It seemed he had heard it correctly, but that only confused him all the more.

The twins were now deeply precious to Yuuto. He felt he could do anything for them.

He wanted to teach his son about all of the experiences and knowledge he had acquired over the years, while as for his daughter, he could easily imagine him throwing hot tea and chasing off the man who came to ask for her hand in marriage.

Yuuto couldn’t understand why Mitsuki would propose making one of those beloved children, at least in name, a child of another house.

“Ah, yes, that’s an excellent proposal.”

“Kris?!”

As the girl clapped her hands together in agreement, Yuuto turned to her in surprise.

“I do think it’s a good idea, but surely it wouldn’t work? There’s a problem with the dates,” Felicia, while indicating her agreement, noted her skepticism.

It was widely understood that it took ten months and ten days from conception to birth, but it was, in actuality, closer to two hundred and eighty days—a little over nine months.

Barely a month had passed since he’d married Rífa. There was simply no way that a child could be born in that time.

However, Kristina countered without missing a beat or so much as twitching a brow.

“As for that, we can make use of Father’s reputation as a womanizer to make the timeline work. In terms of whether or not she was showing at the time of the wedding, if we delay the birth announcement by two months, it should work.”

“A-Ah, I agree.”

“F-Felicia?!”

Having even his most trusted adjutant nod in agreement, Yuuto couldn’t help but voice his panic. He had suddenly found himself isolated and surrounded on all sides.

“Mm, seems Father isn’t in agreement with this proposal, but surely he understands just how useful this proposal would be politically.”

“...Legitimacy, right?” Yuuto made his distaste evident with a frown then spat out the reason.

Kristina nodded once.

“Yes. Father, you don’t have a drop of blood from the previous dynasty that ruled the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. Your legitimacy as þjóðann stems from the fact that you are the husband of the previous þjóðann, Lady Sigrdrífa, and that she gave the throne to you. Frankly, your claim to the throne is quite weak.”

“You’re right.”

Yuuto nodded as well. He had no argument there.

“However, if Master Nozomu was born to Lady Rífa, the previous þjóðann, and you, Father, the current þjóðann, then his claim to the throne would be unassailable.”

“Well, sure.”

Yuuto nodded again, though this time with a look of hesitation.

In all honesty, Yuuto had no desire to make his son the þjóðann. He had no desire to push such a troublesome, burdensome, and stressful job upon his beloved son.

Yuuto’s frank opinion was that the most capable person among those who

wanted the job should get it.

“Now, more importantly, if we announce that Master Nozomu is Lady Rífa’s child and the rightful heir to the throne, then you, Father, become a temporary regent until Master Nozomu becomes þjóðann, while reinforcing your political position as the father to the rightful heir,” Kristina continued to explain.

“...Yeah. To go further, by making that announcement, we can also make things difficult for the Flame Clan Army by spreading that news to their soldiers currently surrounding the capital. Right?” Yuuto responded, evidently on the same page by this point.

“It’s as you say.”

In contrast to Kristina’s calm, Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a heavy sigh.

It was true that justifications were vital in war.

The Flame Clan was operating under the justification of defeating the usurper Yuuto. Even if it wasn’t a perfect counter-argument, the fact that they could damage Nobunaga’s justification could lead to desertions in his army.

They were facing *the* Oda Nobunaga. There was no such thing as having too many arrows in the quiver when facing him.

“And it would also give us a reason for Lady Rífa’s passing.”

“...I see. Yes, that’s true.”

At the time of the wedding, they had to conceal Rífa’s death to protect Yuuto’s legitimacy as þjóðann.

But as was noted earlier, given the high maternal mortality rate, it wasn’t rare for a mother to die giving birth to a child.

If they announced that the child of the deceased þjóðann would be the heir, it would make for the sort of tragic tale that the common people loved, and as Kris noted earlier, it would reinforce Yuuto’s claim to the throne and minimize the political damage from Rífa’s death.

Further, it would reduce the burden on Mitsuki in terms of serving as Rífa’s double, and more importantly, was extremely attractive from the point of view that it would make it irrelevant whether or not the ruse would hold.

“Damn, being a king is a cursed business.”

Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a sardonic laugh.

He needed to laugh at himself, at the fact that he could make such calculations so quickly, that he needed to use the birth of his children and his wife as political tools, lest he linger in self-hatred.

“Putting aside my opinion as an individual, as a public figure, I have no choice but to take this proposal. But, are you sure about this, Mitsuki?”

Yuuto gazed intently at Mitsuki as if to get final approval.

“Yeah. If anything I want to do it. Rífa was me. So I want to make her wish come true,” Mitsuki said with a sentimental smile.

For a moment Yuuto wondered if she was putting on a show for Yuuto or for politics’ sake, but it didn’t appear to be that way to him.

“Because Rífa was you, huh?”

It was true that Rífa and Mitsuki looked exactly alike.

It wasn’t just a matter of appearance. They had other strange connections—they were both twin-runed Einherjar, they were able to speak in their dreams when their runes resonated with each other—something had tied them together.

Rífa had, before her passing, referred to Mitsuki as her soul twin.

Perhaps there was a sense of empathy, a connection that only the two of them understood and shared.

“All right, I understand. Nozomu will be Rífa’s son, then.”

That day it was announced that Mitsuki, the first formal wife of the þjóðann, had given birth to a girl. Her name was Miku.

Her name, which meant “future,” was named in combination with her twin Nozomu, as a wish that there would be hope in the future.

“Congratulations on the birth of your children.”

In contrast to his felicitations, the man who uttered the words was pale as a ghost, and his voice was brooding and dry.

Yuuto thought at that moment that there were few men who were less suited to offering felicitations than Skáviðr, the man who stood in front of him.

He was a good man, but his appearance and his demeanor tended to bring about misunderstandings with others. That was just the sort of man that Skáviðr was.

“Thanks. Though... I admit I have a headache from all the bothersome details,” Yuuto said with a dry smile and proceeded to explain the events from earlier to Skáviðr.

The information was top secret, but Yuuto implicitly trusted Skáviðr’s discretion.

Skáviðr would carry whatever secret Yuuto told him to his grave. Yuuto could speak to him in confidence.

“I see. Yes, that certainly is quite the bother.”

As he listened Skáviðr widened his eyes briefly in surprise, but by the end appeared to have understood the reasoning behind the decision and nodded.

Skáviðr was a man who had been responsible for carrying out the law and maintaining adherence to military law within the ranks. He had always taken on the roles that others didn’t want to take.

Skáviðr was well aware of the dirtier sides of the world, and he, perhaps more than Yuuto, understood why such things were necessary.

“It’s hard. I feel like I’m making my own son into a political tool.”

“Heh, I feel that’s as you should be, My Lord.”

“You think I’m being soft?”

“Perhaps, yes. That’s exactly why you have men like me, though. My Lord, I would have you continue to walk brightly in the sun while men like me deal with the shadows.”

“...You know, I think it’s past time that you thought about your own happiness.”

Skáviðr suddenly burst out laughing.

“Heh... Beg my pardon.”

“What is it?” Yuuto asked suspiciously.

While Skáviðr would at times laugh mockingly at an opponent, it was rare for him to break out in jovial laughter in front of Yuuto.

“Oh, well... Lord Jörgen said something similar to me the other day.”

“Oh, Jörgen said the same thing, did he?”

“Yes. He wondered why I hadn’t remarried.”

“You know, I agree with him. I think you should. I want you to be happy.”

“Hah. I believe I’m rather content as I am.”

Skáviðr smiled not with his usual sardonic smile, but a cool, contented smile.

It seemed he truly felt that way.

Still, Yuuto felt that response to be a bit frustrating. He felt that he owed a debt to this man that he could never quite repay.

Although it had been Skáviðr himself who had volunteered, Yuuto had pushed all the dangerous, difficult, and dirty work upon his shoulders.

Yuuto felt guilty over that fact, but such people were necessary when running an organization, and he couldn’t help but lean on Skáviðr to fulfill those roles.

That was why he had given Skáviðr the title of patriarch of the Panther Clan. Even in spite of that, he still felt he hadn’t repaid the debt that he owed Skáviðr.

“I suppose this is something I should talk to Jörgen about.”

Yuuto nodded in agreement with Skáviðr’s idea.

It would be a challenge to find someone who could properly understand and support this taciturn man, but he wanted to find a woman who could do it.

After leaving Yuuto’s office, rather than returning to his own room, Skáviðr set off to a different room.

The people he passed by in the halls gladly yielded the path to him.

It was not because he was the patriarch of the Panther Clan. It was because his demeanor had disturbed them.

Skáviðr, however, seemed to take no notice of those passing faces and walked through the palace, until eventually he stopped in front of a door and knocked upon it.

“Yes, who is it?”

“It’s me.”

As a young woman called out from behind the door, Skáviðr responded without bothering to give his name. That didn’t seem to be an issue though, as the person in the room knew who waited on the other side.

“Please, come in, Brother Skáviðr.”

“Thank you.”

With that Skáviðr entered the room to be greeted by Kristina laying down on her sofa.

It looked like Kristina was shirking her responsibilities, but Skáviðr was well aware that the appearance was an act.

People tended to let their guard down around seemingly foolish people. The illusion also made it easier to gather information.

The fact that Kristina would openly tease her sister Albertina in public might also be a way to make others underestimate her as a mere trickster... Or not.

“What do we do about the midwife?” The moment he closed the door, Skáviðr asked bluntly.

Kristina immediately grasped what he was after.

“Thank you, Brother Skáviðr, you always catch on quickly!”

“Do we kill her?” Skáviðr asked as though he were casually asking what they should have for dinner the next day.

The identity of Nozomu’s mother, if revealed, was a dangerous piece of information that could very well threaten the Steel Clan’s future. It was best to limit the number of people who knew the truth.

It was simply asking too much to trust the Steel Clan’s future to the discretion of a midwife who had been hired solely for her experience in her field.

“Yes. I believe that would be best.”

“You’re right. It’s a small price to pay—the life of an elderly midwife to rid ourselves of a danger to the future of the Steel Clan,” Skáviðr said calmly, maintaining his level expression.

He knew that to run an organization as massive as the Steel Clan had now become, there was a need for operatives that worked in the shadows.

Skáviðr was well aware that without such operatives there would be more blood spilt and more people who suffered.

“But I doubt His Lordship or Her Ladyship would approve.”

“Yes, that’s the biggest issue.”

The idea of making Nozomu Rífa’s son was evidently Mitsuki’s proposal.

No doubt she hadn’t even imagined that her proposal would get someone killed, never mind it being the midwife who had done so much to bring her children into the world.

There was no need to tell her though. Skáviðr could shoulder that sin himself.

“Can you handle it?”

“I... am probably not going to Valhalla when I die. Heh. Well, I suppose I’m more suited to swinging a sword in hell.”

Skáviðr placed his hand against the pommel of his sword and smiled self-deprecatingly.

ACT 5

Taking a good look at the Holy Capital from his position atop one of his siege castles, Nobunaga scratched at the side of his cheek and sighed.

“Good grief, this city is going to be more of a pain than I thought. Capturing it will take quite some time.”

A whole month had already passed since the Flame Clan had begun their attack on the Holy Capital.

In that time, they’d launched only intermittent attacks. With the intent of boosting morale among the soldiers, they’d tried every single conventional siege tactic—but they had very little to show for their efforts.

After all—

“This city is just too damn big!”

This, at least, everyone agreed on, and was the root of all their problems.

Their first problem was that since the castle walls were so tall—and the Steel Clan’s projectiles were more powerful than the Flame Clan’s—if Nobunaga’s forces approached the city walls without taking excessive precautions, they’d stand to lose some of their own soldiers without being able to take out any of the enemy’s. They weren’t going to make any forward progress that way.

Their second problem was that since they couldn’t get close to the walls, and the city buildings inside were so spread out, they weren’t going to be able to rely on clamoring yells of soldiers outside the walls causing mental distress to the residents inside the city.

Their third problem was that they couldn’t allow their soldiers to surround the entirety of the city; if they had done so, their forces would have been spread too thinly to repel a concentrated attack from the defending forces.

This last problem was especially obvious when the great Ífingr River, which flowed into the east side of the city, was freely being used by the residents of the city. Nobunaga’s forces didn’t have the strength to put in place a formal blockade on the waters of the river, so the residents had been able to receive

boatloads of food and weapons from ships passing through the city walls, just as they might have done before the siege started.

It was almost as if the city weren't under siege at all.

The patrol guards walking atop the city walls looked just as healthy and lively as ever, showing no signs of worry or sleeplessness, despite the enemy soldiers waiting just beyond their walls.

"Well, the true battle is yet to come. We have merely completed preparations with our efforts so far."

The point of constructing siege castles in front of the south and west gates had been to cut off additional regiments of enemy soldiers from arriving from their outposts in the Múspelheim region. Essentially, the siege castles had been built not to attack the city but rather to defend Nobunaga's forces and their positions around the gates.

Second-in-Command Ran came over to give his report.

"Lord Nobunaga, Steel Clan reinforcements are now arriving from Gimlé. They are approximately ten thousand in number."

It was almost exactly what Nobunaga had predicted. He calmly nodded his head, and then said, "Is that indeed the case? Very well. Let us ready the encampment at the north gate and lie in wait for them there, shall we?"

It was perhaps an obvious point to make, but should one control an ideal position from which to attack enemy forces, it is possible for the defending force to hold out against a more numerous enemy.

And with that surplus of soldiers resulting from the careful rationing of their force to the north gate, they would be able to easily proceed with their next attack.

This was Nobunaga's strategy. This was the strategy of a man from the Land of the Rising Sun.

"The main forces of the Flame Clan have begun moving towards the north walls of the Holy Capital. They are around thirty thousand in number."

"So they intend to prevent us from rendezvousing with our reinforcements?

Geez, this feels like I'm just locked into an Eternal Card Pull by Nobunaga. 'It's my turn! My turn again! And again!'"

Yuuto snorted out of exasperation and disgust at the contents of Kristina's report.

In turn-based games, one can only attack on one's turn—but, if you can manage to have it always be your turn, then you have an Eternal Card Pull (or so it had been referred to online when discussing a particular manga).

"Man, those are some pretty heavy-duty siege castles they've got out there. If there are ten thousand troops inside each of them, we'd never be able to take control of them with the forces we have now."

Even if they decided to attack a single one of the siege castles, they wouldn't be able to knock it down before the Flame Clan host moving north would arrive to pull off a pincer attack on Yuuto's forces.

Yuuto could hardly command his soldiers to charge headfirst into such danger.

"In that case, what if we just attacked the main band of soldiers? We'll be able to coordinate with our own reinforcements and perform a pincer attack on them. We'll be evenly matched, I think, and perhaps even be strong enough to secure a victory," suggested Kristina.

"That sounds scary to consider, too. It's as if that's what they're planning for us to do," Yuuto responded.

Yuuto looked back north. If they sent their units to pull off such a pincer attack, Nobunaga would surely be prepared for that eventuality and fight them off. No matter which way they moved them, in fact, Nobunaga would have something planned for a counterattack, based on past experience.

At the moment, it was too optimistic to hope that the Steel Clan would be able to overwhelm the Flame Clan, given the quality of their weapons, the sophisticated training of their soldiers, and the abilities of the general leading them.

In the meantime, while they were all huddled down inside the city thinking about what was going on, they were just getting surrounded by the Flame Clan

reinforcements coming up from the south and west.

They had nothing else they could do but suck their thumbs and watch as the Flame Clan maneuvered around the city walls. Even then, though, the Flame Clan would merely come up to the north gate and build another siege castle while they tried to address the problems arising on other fronts. The whole situation was just getting worse and worse, caught in the negative cycle as they were.

“Geez, whoever was it that said ‘if the bird doesn’t sing, kill it’? They were completely wrong about that whole idea.” Yuuto spat in disgust.

Nobunaga’s strategy was tricky, careful, and extremely logical. He’d used sophisticated methods to get into his current position, and by doing so he’d forced Yuuto into his current quandary—but Nobunaga didn’t appear to be struggling out there at all.

In the ten years since he’d showed up in Yggdrasil, he’d been careful, oh so careful, in preparing his troops to conquer the world. He hadn’t wasted a single bit of effort.

Sun Tzu did say that “A victorious soldier seeks to first win and then seeks battle; a defeated soldier shall first fight and then seek victory.”

And he was entirely correct.

Yuuto was painfully aware of the truth of his words.

It was absolutely necessary to create the circumstances for victory before the battle even started.

Even when it came to siege battles, it was obvious that it was still important to make such preparations for victory. No one would argue against that. But still, usually one’s preparations would be limited by the amount of money and availability of other resources.

The fact that Nobunaga had made all these arrangements possible despite the limitations put upon him showed the true terror of his abilities.

What he had done, the revolution he had led, the country he had made great—all of that had required his ingenuity. And he had pulled it off in just ten

years!

Nobunaga had clearly surpassed all that Yuuto had once known him to be.

He had taken his experience and experienced even more, increasing in ability and strength to reach his full power in time.

“When it came down to it, he really was able to move his forces both quickly and decisively. Surprisingly so, in fact.”

Finding himself placed in sudden and unexpected danger, Yuuto was reminded of the time he had surrounded the Flame Clan himself, and all his careful, precise preparations were made for naught as he found himself forced to push hard to gain the upper hand on his opponent.

At the very least, when the Flame Clan was fighting the Spear Clan, the Steel Clan certainly had one ace up their sleeve, one that put them high above the rest: they had the þjóðann.

At some point, however, that advantage had been flipped back against them and had discouraged others from allying themselves with the Steel Clan.

It was a clever plan, to be sure.

“‘Strike hard against any sign of weakness, but remain prepared for the harshest attacks.’ Surreal that he’s pulled it off so well that he’s left no opening for an attack.”

Yuuto honestly had nothing to do but click his tongue at how marvelously he had been overwhelmed.

Even so, it was something he had to overcome.

He didn’t have the slightest intention of sitting by quietly while his enemies surrounded him.

“Oho! It’s been a while since I’ve been in an atmosphere so positively stinging.”

Jörgen, in the middle of the camp enclosure, folded his arms as he sat in his seat, trembling with excitement for the battle to come. As the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, which was the central force of the greater Steel Clan, he had been tasked with leading ten thousand troops to Glaðsheimr by the Second-in-

Command, Linnea.

“Well now, aren’t we getting a little overexcited? Are you sure you’re going to be okay? You’ve been leaving all the fighting to the young folk recently and commanding from the rear, but that doesn’t really seem like you at all.”

The man who stood next to him was teasing him.

It was Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan, the birth father of both Albertina and Kristina.

The hair on his head was thinning and had receded well past his forehead. He was forcing a smile on his face against this poor joke, contrasting with his generally dark and sullen demeanor. This middle-aged man was none other than the fourth-highest ranked in the hierarchy of the Steel Clan, a true mover and shaker. He was highly regarded as an ingenious leader of the armed forces.

In the past, he had originally been the one to bring the Ash and Fang clans together in secret to secure their cooperation and defeat Hveðrungr, the man who previously went by the name of Loptr—once the Second of the Wolf Clan. Successes such as those were part of the reason why he had been named second-in-command of the reinforcement force.

“Hmph! They should know well not to underestimate me. Sure, I have indeed led from afar these past three years, but my spear still moves far faster than those held by those old fools! I’m yet young!”

“Oho! Truly, I feel not the slightest aura of decrepitness emanating from you. Why, the last time I saw you on the battlefield was a mere five years ago, was it not? You seem livelier now than you ever did then!”

Botvid’s eyes were half-way closed, as if he was caught up in some fond memory.

Back when the Wolf Clan and the Claw Clan were still enemies, the two of them had met on the battlefield several times—or had been forced to confront each other over the negotiating table.

Now, however, they fought side by side. Life could be truly strange.

“Haha! With Father around, I do feel a bit younger... Though I must say, I feel

like my lifespan has gotten a good deal shorter too."

"Hah! Hear, hear! I can certainly imagine why you'd feel that way."

"Right? They say it is the doing that is truly everything—which is just common sense—but I do wish he'd do a bit more preparing before he got on with the doing."

Jörgen sounded amused as he said this.

He had not worked so hard that he expected some great reward or sense of satisfaction from his efforts.

"But we've come quite far, and at quite a rapid pace, thanks to him. Until he became patriarch, we had at most two thousand in our ranks, but now Father controls twenty thousand troops in the main force, and once we join him, his ranks shall swell to thirty thousand! In just four years, he increased his forces by an order of magnitude."

"The world has changed, certainly."

Botvid nodded his head deeply in agreement.

Back when he had facilitated the aforementioned cooperation between the Ash and Fang Clan forces, he had heard that the cost of doing so had been quite high.

During that period, the Flame Clan had so far only managed to muster a force of around five thousand troops—a mere tenth of what they now possessed.

"Come on, it's about time you came back to the present. There'll be time for your war tales later."

The one who (gently) threw a wet blanket on their reminiscing was the Assistant Second of the reinforcement force, the Ash Clan patriarch, Douglas.

And he was quite right. This was no time to be thinking about "the old days" and telling stories from back then.

"Haha! Pardon me. Now then, back to the matter at hand..."

With a quick laugh to hide his distracted state of mind, Jörgen looked back down at the map spread out on the table beneath him. It was a map of the area

surrounding the castle. A clay figurine, representing the position of the Steel Clan's main forces, stood atop where the map indicated the Holy Capital stood.

To the Capital's south and west were markers indicating the presence of siege castles, and on top of them were laid clay figurines bearing the symbol of the Flame Clan.

The size of the figurines indicated how strong the forces were at any given place on the map.

"Those two siege castles are each manned by ten thousand troops, and on the north side, the Flame Clan patriarch is leading a force of thirty thousand troops. His troops are really in quite awful positions for us, tactically speaking."

Jörgen frowned deeply and groaned.

"Indeed they are," Botvid said, nodding.

The Flame Clan's forces had taken up positions in wide, undeveloped fields, full of wild grasses and flowers—the perfect terrain from which one could see far and wide.

There wasn't any better place for a large army to make its encampment.

They were able to commit all their troops to battle with ease, without wasting a single soldier to territorial inefficiencies.

On the other hand, there were a great number of disadvantages to fighting on such terrain if you had fewer troops than your enemy did.

The more enemies that fought, the more easily they would be able to surround your forces due to how easily the terrain facilitated troop movements. Because of how flat and visible the surrounding area was on such terrain, it would be also hard to create any sort of opening using an ambush or some other clever tactic.

"Do they show any signs of moving yet?"

"No, no movement at all. Our enemy must know the advantages they possess."

"Our enemy is a most troublesome one, indeed," Jörgen said, letting out a long sigh.

Based on the tendencies of troop movements that he had observed over the past month, if they made no further movements with their own troops, the Flame Clan forces would undoubtedly sense this as an opportunity to construct another siege castle.

If they did that, the Holy Capital would be completely cut off, and Jörgen's forces would find it even more difficult to rendezvous with the main Steel Clan force inside the city.

But at the same time, even if they attempted to breach the enemy forces massing outside the Holy Capital right now, they'd be crushed in a single battle. Anyone could see that.

"...Hm. What of the movements of the other surrounding clans? Have they done nothing?"

Jörgen's eyes flicked to Botvid as he asked him this question.

Botvid was Kristina's birth father, and it was he who had thoroughly taught her how to analyze and make use of strategic information.

It was because he had built up his own intelligence network that he had been selected to be promoted to Second-in-Command.

"They show absolutely no signs of making a move. The Armor, Shield, and Helmet Clans have each rallied their forces, but they still haven't actually made any attempt to march them beyond the borders of their territories yet."

All three of those clans had pledged their fealty to the þjóðann, Yuuto.

They'd already been urged to join in the battle to protect the Holy Capital several times by now, but they had been biding their time, waiting for the "opportune moment," or some other weakness to appear in the Flame Clan's forces. Excuses to do nothing, essentially.

Jörgen let out a snort of ridicule.

"Waiting for a clear, sunny day, are they? How the mighty have fallen. Did they not once pride themselves on being highly honored warriors?"

Yes, they had gone around claiming very proudly about the fact that they had gained hereditary positions as retainers for the empire, but who were they to

be proud when they could not rise to assist the þjóðann when he was in danger? A despicable lot, all of them.

They were merely waiting to see which side would appear to be victorious before entering the battle.

At the moment, it looked as though the Flame Clan might be the ones to gain the upper hand. It was unlikely any of them would choose to join forces with the Steel Clan if it looked to be in a particularly disadvantageous position.

After all, if any clan chose to fight alongside the Steel Clan, they could very possibly become the Flame Clan's next target for attack.

"Yes, we are indeed in quite the predicament. Should those other three clans join us, then the numbers would be on our side and we would very likely win, but until it looks like we are already likely to win, they will not join us! Truly, a dilemma indeed."

"You're quite right. Let's leave that problem for Father to resolve."

And without a moment's hesitation, Jörgen stopped thinking about the issue entirely.

Their opponent was someone powerful enough to defeat the monster that was Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, a man who could slay scores of his enemies without a second thought. With someone of that caliber up against them, it was important for the Steel Clan to match their opponent like-for-like. At least, that was what Jörgen believed as he considered the situation the Steel Clan currently found itself in.

"In any case, let us do the job that we've been given."

"They still haven't moved against us."

Inside the encampment built for the patriarch (a temporary hut, really), Nobunaga was sitting cross-legged, looking bored as he rested his head on his hand.

Approximately two weeks had passed since the Steel Clan's reinforcements had arrived. In that time, both the reinforcements and the main forces of the Steel Clan inside the city had merely watched Nobunaga's armies, showing not

the slightest indication that they were about to attack.

“Perhaps they simply will not move, no matter what?”

“They certainly have aligned their forces to be facing right at us, but it would appear that they do, indeed, have no intent to move upon us.”

To Ran’s question, Nobunaga gave his somewhat assured reply.

He knew his opponent was definitely not going to sit by and wait patiently for death to come to him, however.

Even as he was having this conversation, Nobunaga knew that his opponent was watching the movements of his own forces with an eagle eye, waiting for the opportune moment.

He was also aware that Yuuto knew that he knew this—that if they were to make a move now, it would result in their sound defeat.

“Is that how it is? Our opponent is quite capable of holding himself back, isn’t he?”

“Indeed he is. What a terrible brat, waiting like that until the end times.”

The more time that went by, the more his opponent was sure to know that it would place him at a greater tactical disadvantage.

The great unease caused by drawing things out this long, the anxiety induced by such waiting—it was impossible to describe.

Anxiety tended to narrow one’s field of view, it urged one to act rashly, impulsively.

That said, it would have been an utter failure on the part of his opponent to wait for such carelessness to manifest itself in Nobunaga.

Nobunaga would stand strong against the encroaching despair, push back against the impatience creeping up his spine, and believe his opportune moment would come. He would steady his quick breathing, preserve his power, and submit himself to waiting for the right time to act.

Nobunaga knew himself well enough to know that what his opponent was waiting for was, essentially, a miracle.

“He may wait,” Nobunaga said, “but that brat shall not find a single chink in my armor through which to slip.”

Nobunaga bared his canines, allowing a most lurid smile to creep across his face.

His was the face of a man who had come of age almost fifty years ago. It was the face of a man who had fought and fought and fought. It was the face of a god of war.

“The loser in this battle shall be the one who panics first, indeed.”

The Flame Clan was, at the moment, maintaining its dominant strategic position—but one could hardly say that Nobunaga’s current position would be an easy one to hold indefinitely.

The overall balance of forces present in the greater battlefield of the city, its walls, and the surrounding fields was yet to be determined. It was for that very reason that just as his enemy could not easily maneuver his forces in the face of such uncertainty, neither could Nobunaga.

From the current position of the Flame Clan’s forces, Nobunaga would be able to move them to the siege castle near the west gate in around six hours, or over to the south gate within half a day.

In order to reach the southernmost siege castle held by the Sword Clan, which was allied with the Steel Clan, it would take approximately a full day to get there from their current position.

A two-day round trip.

There was also, of course, the unknown number of days it would require in order to take control of the siege castle itself.

If, during that time, either of the southern or western Flame Clan siege castles were taken by their Steel clan opponents, the Flame Clan’s supply lines would be cut off and their main force would be isolated away from their support forces. The various allied forces of the Steel Clan who had been biding their time would surely move in to take advantage of this situation if it were to occur.

In other words, the strategic balance of the battlefield would lean towards

the Steel Clan, and the Flame Clan would be the ones who found themselves in danger.

Siege castles do not traditionally fall to enemy forces within the span of just a few days, but it was said that the Steel Clan possessed powerful siege weapons. Nobunaga couldn't let his guard down for any reason.

However, if either the Steel Clan's main forces or their reinforcements grew impatient and decided to be the first ones to launch an attack, the Flame Clan would almost certainly come out the victors.

"We are so close to achieving the dream we were denied in the Land of the Rising Sun. We shall not repeat our earlier failure. Now then, young brat, let us see who shall win this test of endurance!"

It was at this moment, however, that Nobunaga failed to realize something.

Yuuto had, in fact, predicted that Nobunaga would act precisely as he had done so far, and had already made preparations for the current state of affairs.

The longer a siege went on, the better the situation would become for the besieging forces—the Flame Clan, in this instance. He knew that very well from his own success with the technique.

Ironically, it was that false promise of success that blinded Nobunaga to the true facts of the matter: Yuuto's goal was not to outlast Nobunaga, but merely to buy time for his greater strategy.

"Just a little while longer and then the wind direction will change! It'll come from that direction," Albertina said confidently, informing the crew.

"Right then! You heard 'er, sailors! The wind's changin' to north-north-west. Reset the sails! Tell the other two ships to do the same!" barked the ship's captain.

"Aye-aye!"

At the young woman's order, the men all started dashing around to do as she said. Moments later, the ship had accelerated to the point where one could feel it in their body.

It was all because they had adjusted the ship's square sails to take full

advantage of the tailwinds.

“Aunt Albertina, you are really quite something.”

“Oh, you think so? I’m not doing much. The captain’s the one who actually gives the real directions, as well as the sailors who are actually adjusting the sails,” Albertina said this, perhaps looking a bit bashful, but not entirely displeased by the compliment. She was scratching the back of her head as if she were shyly grateful.

“Oho! You got some real nice things to say, don’t you, Miss Admiral!”

“Ah, if it’s for Miss Admiral here, I’ll do anything!”

“For sure! It’s because Miss Admiral’s here that we’re able to be here too.”

The sailors cheered as loud as their lungs would allow them.

As the commander of the Steel Clan’s navy, Albertina had been granted the rank of “Admiral,” but due to her personality, most of the crew had taken to calling her “Miss Admiral” instead.

“Oi! I’ve told you louts this every time, but you’d best be addressing her properly! It’s ‘Admiral’ to you lot!”

The Captain’s red-faced yelling did little to change their ways, however.

“What’s with that super formal attitude, Captain?”

“Y’gotta know that callin’ her ‘Miss Admiral’ means we love and respect ‘er, right?”

“Damn right! I ain’t goin’ to be dyin’ for you, Cap’n, but for Miss Admiral, I’d give my life!”

“Yeah! I’m with ya on that for sure!”

The crew members showed no signs of guilt as they called out “Miss Admiral! Miss Admiral!” over and over, joking and laughing as they did so.

They may have been making light of the situation, but they were not taking Albertina or the authority of her station lightly.

The day may have just begun, but they were on a ship. They were all keenly aware of just how important it was to take advantage of a favorable wind.

Someone like the Admiral who could read the changing of the winds was worthy of their worship—made yet easier by the fact that the object of their affection was a charming, cheerful, and cute girl.

Long journeys at sea could become quite boring, but the crew felt different when she was around.

In the past month that they'd been out at sea, she'd become something of a pop idol amongst their ranks.



“Good grief... The honorable Admiral has the privilege of being an adopted child of His Majesty Suoh-Yuuto, and yet they treat her like this...”

The captain was the only one aboard who couldn’t accept this “improper” manner of address. He complained away, heedless of the cheering around him.

Unlike the other crew members who had been hired for this expedition, he was a sworn child of Skáviðr from the Panther Clan and had been brought up to pay strict attention to the hierarchy of rank.

“No need to get yourself all worked up, Captain. I don’t mind being called ‘Miss Admiral’ at all.”

“It is not a problem of whether you mind, ma’am. Now then, as for the punishment for such disrespect...”

The captain was absolutely refusing to let go of the issue.

“It’s not like I don’t understand how you feel about the nickname, Captain, but surely it is nothing so problematic as to merit any punishment.”

“Wh-Why, if it isn’t Aunt Sigrún!”

The captain stood sharp at attention upon the sudden appearance of the silver-haired young lady.

She and her Múspell bodyguards had boarded the ship on Yuuto’s orders.

Behind Sigrún was another young woman with her hair up in pigtails, leaning over the ship’s railing and puking her guts out, feeding the frenzied fish in the waters below—but everyone was pretending not to see her doing so at all. It was rude to draw attention to a lady who had been forced to succumb to an indignity such as seasickness.

“Look, everyone is so lively as they work! If they can fulfill their duties like that, well, there’s no reason to get hung up on formalities like proper forms of address now is there?”

“Yes ma’am! If that is your opinion on the issue, I understand completely.”

Or so the captain said, his face red with embarrassment.

Sigrún was one of the few sworn children of the þjóðann, Suoh-Yuuto. She

was one of the greatest warriors of the Steel Clan who had achieved many impressive military gains in the name of her sworn father.

She had also inherited the title of Mánagarmr—the Strongest Silver Wolf—from the man who was now the patriarch of the Panther Clan, Skáviðr.

While he may have been a sworn child of Skáviðr, he was still relatively low down the hierarchical totem pole. Being confronted by a child of the þjóðann like Sigrún was much like a heavenly being sent down to him from on high.

“Boo! Even if I tell the captain I don’t mind being called that, he still won’t call me ‘Miss Admiral’ himself...”

“Ah, ma’am, that is not—that was not my—well...”

Albertina puffed out her cheeks with dissatisfaction at the captain’s hesitance to call her by the more familiar form of address. The captain, realizing that his commanding officer was displeased with his conduct, was shocked back to reality by that fact and searched for some good excuse as to why he couldn’t do so—but ended up just silently cringing at the admiral’s reproach.

“Yeah! You’re being mean to her, Captain!”

“Maybe the captain actually looks down upon Miss Admiral?”

“Apologize to Miss Admiral!”

“Take back your awful words, Mister Big Nose!”

The entire crew suddenly erupted in a storm of jeers as they sensed this opportunity to correct a perceived slight of their beloved Miss Admiral.

Well, perhaps “jeering” wasn’t quite the right word for what they were doing—they all had smiles on their faces.

Everyone knew that without the coordination skills of the captain, the ship would never function properly. He, too, was a target of the crew’s affection—in a different way.

“Oi! Who’s the fool who said that last thing about my nose! I can overlook everything else you sailors have said, but I shall *not* allow anyone to make such comments about things I’m self-conscious about!”

“A-Ah! Shit!”

“Sorry for interrupting you in the middle of all this.”

“Eeep! Wh-Whatever might you need, ma’am?”

The captain had rolled up his sleeves and was seizing crew members left and right, hoisting them up by their collars—but upon being addressed by Sigrún, he quickly released the crew members, whirled around, and stammered out a reply.

Sigrún didn’t seem particularly perturbed by this unprofessional display and merely returned to the topic at hand—

“How much longer until we arrive at Helheim?”

Helheim was the southernmost region of Yggdrasil.

It enjoyed a fairly temperate climate, and was known in the northern regions of the Vana-Kvísl river basin as a place “fertile from time immemorial.” Thanks to the reforms put in place by Oda Nobunaga, it had gained renown as the best grain-producing region of all of Yggdrasil by a rather impressive margin.

It was, in other words, the stronghold of the Flame Clan.

“So this is Helheim, hm? Just as warm as the stories say.”

Erna disembarked from the ship. As she walked on the solid ground of their destination, she looked around at the new landscape with interest.

Her shoulder-length hair hung down freely to her collar, flowing and loose—a perfect symbol of the cheerful, beautiful young woman that she was.

Around her waist, however, was belted a sheath, carrying her sword.

“It would have taken us half a month to arrive here on foot, but here we are, just three days later... It’s hard to believe that they’re making these kinds of things...”

Next to Erna stood Bára, who let out a long, deep sigh.

Before arriving, they’d passed by public bathing houses, water wheels, houses made of clay, post stations loaded up with horses, and countless other revolutionary inventions that had changed civilization. The long sigh had come

from Bára being overwhelmed by the countless innovations she was witnessing.

Once she learned that all these things had been proposed by Yuuto, she immediately fell into a deep, self-hating slump.

“In Yggdrasil, they call me one of the three wisest people in the world... and yet I’ve been made to look like some conceited braggart in the face of all this... I’m really just... nothing... not even small fry. More like a mosquito, or maybe a dragonfly...”

“Don’t say such things about yourself! His Majesty comes from the heavens, does he not? You, a human, need not trouble yourself if you do not measure up to him.”

“Big Sister Thír, thank you...”

Bára had turned around to face a beautiful young woman, in the prime of her youth, who had long silver hair that fell to her waist.

She was a delicate, graceful woman who exuded a calming aura. Behind her were another six maidens, all in their teens or twenties, each with weapons strapped to their person. They disembarked from the boat, one after the other.

In the midst of such a large group of coarse, uncultured men, they carried with them a radiant sweetness that stood out from the others around them.

Sweet and cute though they may have been, every one of them were also Einherjar. They may currently have been exuding a calm aura, but they also were very clearly not individuals to be taken lightly.

Together, they were the pride and joy of the Sword Clan; they were the nine elite Einherjar, the Maidens of the Waves.

“Focus on the matter at hand, Bára. We’re in enemy territory.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

Bára cringed at Thír’s cold, hard tone and nodded meekly in acceptance.

At first glance, Thír looked to be in her mid-twenties, but she was actually already past forty years old. She was the “Ogre” leader who had taught her Maidens of the Waves the ins-and-outs of fighting.

Bára knew, of course, just how terrifying Thír could be, and also knew that she was in no mood for jokes or idle chatter.

Bára was, in this sense, much more perceptive when it came to social cues than Erna or the others were.

“We must redeem ourselves for our failures in Vígríðr, no matter what the cost.”

At the word “Vígríðr,” a flash of petrifying anxiety swept over the faces of all of the Maidens of the Waves.

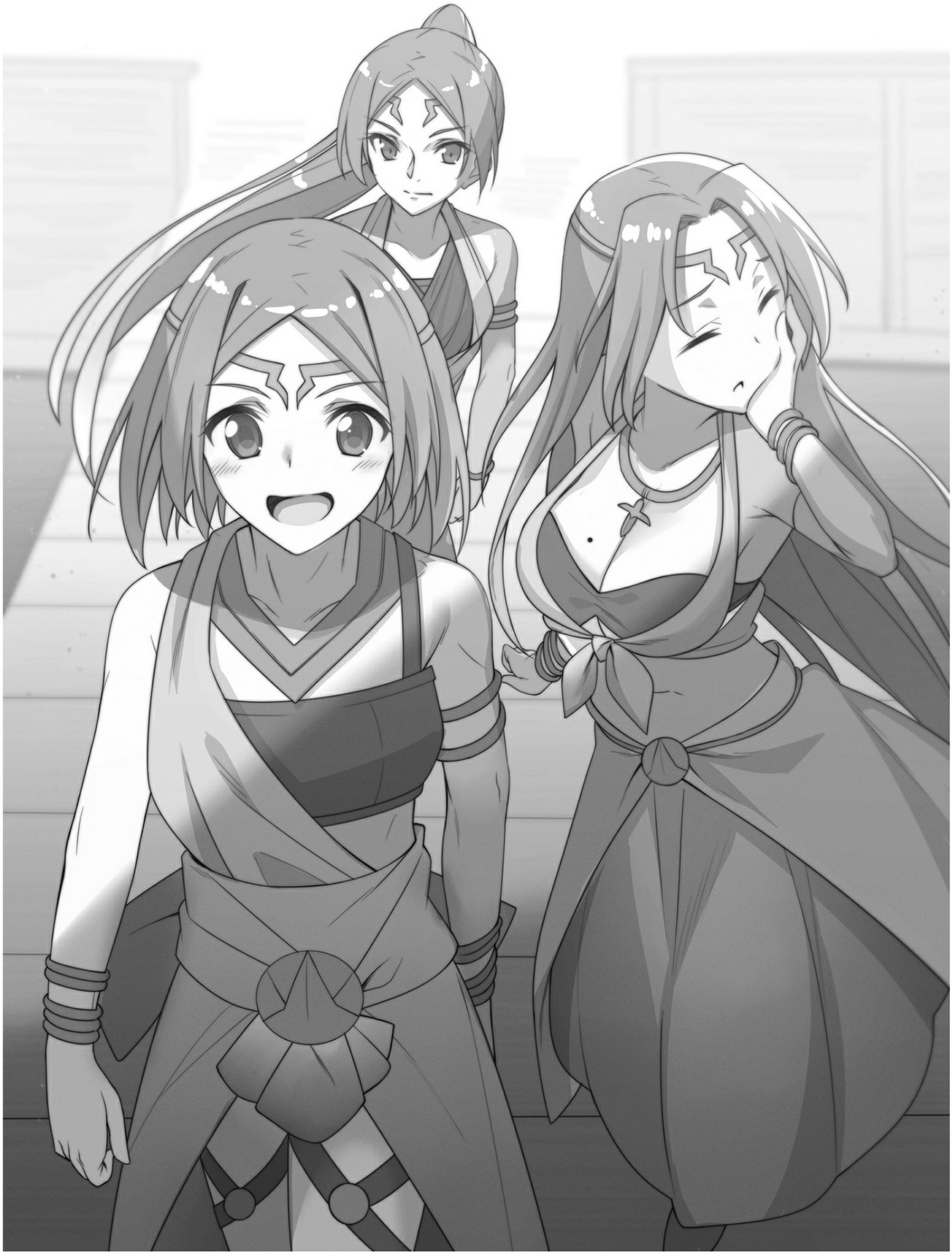
That word was, to them, the root of a grave and bitter trauma they all shared.

Despite the fact that they had achieved renown far and wide as one of the strongest bands of Einherjar, they were, after all, just human—visibly so, in the manner which their fear gripped them.

Even Bára, known widely to be a brilliant strategist, could not match Yuuto in a battle of intellect.

In the battle the Maidens of the Waves had fought against him, the once-proud name of their band had been crushed into the ground.

“This calling of the banners is the perfect opportunity for us to regain our honor as Einherjar!”



Reluctant as they may have been to do so, all of the nine elites nodded their heads at these words from Thír, docile and unresisting.

Each one of them knew well the particulars of the situation they were in, after all.

The three galleon ships would be able to carry, at most, fifteen hundred.

Subtracting the number of noncombatant sailors, that left only a little more than thirteen hundred fighters.

Only their band, the corps of the elite, had been chosen to go to face this enemy arriving by sea.

If they were not able to meet the expectations of those who had sent them here to fight, the “Maidens of the Waves” would never see a restoration to their former glory.

“Alright then, everyone, we’re heading out! Let’s show these ‘Steel Clan’ folk the *true* strength of the Maidens of the Waves, once and for all!”

“Yes, ma’am!” They all said, as one.

On the day when Maripas was representing his lord in Blíkjanda-Böl, he heard a great crash and rumble that shook him to his core. Something had collapsed, and the sound had woken him up.

“What was that?! An earthquake?!”

He leapt out of his bed and looked left and right for the source of the commotion.

It was not unreasonable for him to think that the great din had erupted from some earthquake. After all, the memory of that *other* earthquake was still fresh in his mind.

However, neither the equipment nor furniture in his room was shaken in the slightest. Right when he was about to go back to sleep, dismissing the noise as something he had dreamt up—it happened again.

Once more, a terrifying *roar* pierced his eardrums, leaving them ringing. It was so loud that he was almost led to believe that meteors were falling upon the

city, but Maripas had never heard of meteors falling in the same place twice.

“Hail! Hail! Does anyone hear me?”

“Yes, over here!”

“What monstrous commotion was that?!”

“I shall go inspect the source of the noise at once!”

In a panic, Maripas summoned one of his attendants and sent him scurrying off to find out more.

But before the attendant could return with more news, he heard a great battle cry reverberate through his chambers.

Maripas, stunned by this completely unexpected turn of events, was left slack-jawed. He was utterly incapable of understanding the sudden and unbelievable situation he found himself in.

“Ouch. Why did that hurt?”

Maripas tried pinching his cheeks, but it hurt, just like normal.

In other words—this was not a dream.

Even so, the reality of everything happening before him was simply too *unreal* to believe.

“Lord Maripas, we’re in danger! An enemy is attacking! The city is under attack!”

While Maripas was struggling to take everything in, the attendant he’d sent off in search of more information had finally returned.

With the report of an enemy attack presented to him, Maripas was finally able to accept everything that was going on as being very much real. Someone—something—had attacked the Flame Clan’s capital city of Blíkjanda-Böl.

“Hmph. Are they mountain bandits or some other band of ruffians? They are foolish to think that *now* is the perfect opportunity for them to attack our city.”

Due to the ongoing campaign against the Holy Capital, almost all of the soldiers in Blíkjanda-Böl were gone from the city.

In order to preserve peace and order in the city, as well as to ensure all governmental functions continued without disruption, only one thousand soldiers were currently stationed within the city walls.

They may have only been one thousand strong, but these men had been thoroughly trained in the tactics of mass combat and would be far more skilled than a bunch of untrained bandits. The distinction in their skills was stark as can be.

While Maripas was thinking this through, pushing aside his earlier anxiety about the explosions, and feeling the exalt of a *bloodlust* run through his veins, he heard something else: “They’re Steel Clan fighters! It’s the Múspell Special Forces, led by Sigrún!”

“Whaaaaaat?!”

Maripas’ eyes bulged out of his sockets as he yelled in surprise.

The names of Sigrún, Mánagarmr and the “Strongest Silver Wolf,” as well as the Múspell Special Forces, were known far and wide, even in Blíkjanda-Böl.

According to the stories, they formed the core of the Steel Clan’s quickly moving advance forces.

Other stories told that Sigrún had defeated Yngvi of the Hoof Clan and Sígismund of the Fang Clan, as well as several other renowned generals. She led the most powerful group of calvary knights in Yggdrasil, or so it went.

“This can’t be! There’s no way they can be out there? Where could they have possibly come from?!” Maripas screamed in a high-pitched voice, sounding as though he, a grown man, was about to have a temper tantrum.

He had reason to be upset. The Flame Clan’s capital was far away from enemy territory. Not in a million years should an enemy have come to attack them in their home!

“I-I am unaware of their manner of approach—they simply *appeared*, suddenly, out of the darkness of the night...”

“What foolishness! In any case, get the city guard to defend their posts! Send out riders to Lord Nobunaga and the surrounding villages, at once! Call for aid!”

It was in times like these that one understood why Nobunaga had left Maripas in command of the clan's capital while he was gone. Even in completely unimaginable situations like this, he was able to regain his composure in short order and issue the proper commands to his subordinates. He was a man worthy of admiration.

Even with his back up against a wall, he was able to exercise good judgment.

He did so as if it were simply second nature to him, when it was, in fact, a most difficult thing to do.

"They may be the Múspell Special Forces, but the city walls of Blíkjanda-Böl shall not be breached so easily! It shan't be so difficult to hold out until our reinforcements arrive..."

"S-Sir, the castle walls... have already been breached."

"Wha—?!"

Maripas was struck speechless. He stared at the attendant with utter astonishment on his face. This situation was not only unimaginable, it was *impossible.* He was just now receiving his first report of the attack.

In other words, less than one hour ago, the enemy *started* attacking the city.

Despite how brief the period of time that had passed since their attack had begun, the walls of Blíkjanda-Böl had already been breached. Maripas couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Is there a traitor in our midst?!"

That was the only answer he could think of. A traitor who had snuck through the dark shadows of the night, opened the castle gates, and guided the enemy inside.

That idea was certainly the most logical explanation of what had occurred, but the possibility was completely negated by the fact that— "No, sir. The enemy broke through the city walls and attacked us that way!"

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!"

Maripas' jaw dropped so quickly and so sharply, it might as well have fallen off his face entirely.

“Preposterous! The enemy broke through the city walls?!”

“Y-Yes. The earlier commotion seems to have been related to their assault on the walls...”

But how in the world could someone, mere humans, break through those massive walls in an instant as they had?

The very idea was unthinkable.

This time, the noise was much closer.

The very ground under Maripas’ feet shook with the force of the assault.

“Wh-What are those brutes doing to our city?!” Maripas screamed with a panicked edge to his voice.

People are, after all, afraid of the unknown.

And right then, something *unknowable* was definitely happening. Something that was most certainly *extremely bad* for the whole city.

Bad though it may have been, they were still completely unaware of *what*, exactly, was happening.

With no thought as to how his behavior might look to his subordinates, he let the fear he felt rising deep within him shake him. He could not stop the tremors.

“I-I have news to report!”

A new soldier hastened inside his chambers.

“What is it this time?!”

“The palace walls have been breached!”

Not only had the outer walls which guarded the city itself been destroyed, but the walls guarding the palace had, too, been broken through.

It was all happening too quickly.

“How did they do this?!”

“Th-The enemies have hurled massive boulders at the walls! They pulverized them, leaving not even a trace of our defenses still standing.”

“Massive boulders?! Do our enemies have the mountain giants of legend among their ranks?!”

“W-We do not know. But... it’s true, thrown boulders did pulverize our city!”

“Oh no...”

Maripas held his head in his hands.

The situation unfolding was particularly unfortunate for him. He had been selected by Nobunaga for his skills as an administrator, not as a military leader.

It made sense, given the fact he had been given control over territory that was far removed from the threat of any feasible enemy attack.

His master, Nobunaga, had only asked that he ensure the capital’s government functioned smoothly while he was away, that he assessed the proper taxes on all crops, and that he continued to send weapons and provisions to the main Flame Clan forces while they were out on their campaign.

It was because he was a politician—a civilian leader, as opposed to a military one—that he hadn’t been made privy to information concerning the boulder-throwing siege weapons the Steel Clan had invented.

And yet, while Maripas was panicking about this new development, a new tumult of noise grew louder and louder.

The enemy, it would seem, had infiltrated the palace proper.

In the blink of an eye, the enemy had gotten closer and closer to where he stood.

“A-Assemble all soldiers in the great hall, at once! We shall engage the enemy there!”

The flustered Maripas gave his orders, and his attendants ran off to see them fulfilled.

However, it was already far too late for any such action.

It was only a few moments later when— “Sto—!”

“Y-You shall not pa—”

“Th-They’re too strong...!”

“What are these... monsters?! Gah!”

The final cries of the soldiers in the moments before they died began echoing through the doors of Maripas’ chamber.

The enemy had made their way up to the palace’s most inner sanctum.

With a loud bang, the chamber’s doors were kicked down, and through them came a band of fair and beautiful women.

The entire sequence of events was too insane for Maripas to possibly comprehend.

“Hah! This is clearly just a dream... Nothing more than a nightmareee!”

Those were his last words.

“Blíkjanda-Böl has fallen, you say?!”

It had been a little over two months since the siege of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr had begun.

Nobunaga could hardly believe his ears upon hearing the report and let out a cry of surprise.

He had certainly not expected this. Not at all.

Despite just how experienced a warrior he was, he was still taken aback by this turn of events.

It was a development that absolutely could not be allowed to happen. Nobunaga had done everything in his power to prevent it from occurring—or so he thought.

“Impossible! What was Kuuga doing while this happened?!”

In order to go from the Álfheimr region, where the Steel Clan was based, to the Múspelheim region, the home of the Flame Clan, it was necessary to pass through the Vanaheimr region.

It was for this very reason that Nobunaga had deployed ten thousand troops to the northern reaches of Vanaheimr well before he had begun his siege on the Holy Capital. These troops were led by generals he trusted and were currently

patrolling the former territory of the Lightning Clan, ready to prevent any attempt at a surprise assault on his home city by the enemy.

Nobunaga, however, had not received any reports of these forces being defeated by the Wolf Clan, let alone any news of an attack by the Steel Clan. With the former Lightning Clan territory acting as a natural barrier between the Flame Clan lands and those of its enemies, there was certainly no way a force powerful enough to raze his capital could have made it through undetected.

Yet in the midst of all this silence, he had received this report—that Blíkjanda-Böl had fallen.

Truly, a bolt from the blue.

“I don’t understand how this could happen. Just three days ago, Lord Kuuga sent word that nothing was out of the ordinary. What in the world could have happened since then...”

Standing next to him, Ran was also frowning, his brow furrowed.

Nobunaga was a man who firmly believed it was important to be quick to act.

Naturally, he too employed a post station system much the same as Yuuto’s. The letter he’d received from Kuuga was dated as being written seven days ago.

It took approximately two days to reach Nobunaga’s current location from Blíkjanda-Böl.

In other words, if Bilskírnir had truly fallen, the Wolf Clan’s forces had marched across Vanaheimr and taken Blíkjanda-Böl in a mere five days.

“There’s clearly something very strange about all this,” Nobunaga put a hand over his mouth, muttering to himself.

The amount of information it could transmit was limited, but the Flame Clan also maintained a network of smoke signal fires that could be used to warn of such an attack. Word of an assault on Bilskírnir should have reached his ears by now.

And yet, he’d heard nothing.

Based on just the information he had at his disposal, he was able to deduce this: the Steel Clan’s forces had not passed through Vanaheimr, but had still

somehow appeared quite suddenly at Blíkjanda-Böl.

It was then that Nobunaga realized what had happened.

“That’s it! They traveled by sea!”

Nobunaga clapped a hand to his forehead.

At this point, he was simply unable to imagine any other possibility.

“That’s right—at that meeting, they said something about moving to a ‘new land,’ didn’t they? They were secretly preparing for this all along, then. Damn, we’ve been had.”

This was an age in which it took centuries for technologies like steelmaking and vehicular transport to be transmitted from one country to the next.

Nobunaga had sent spies to the major cities of Gimlé, Iárnviðr, and Fólkvangr, but had no steady source of news from the other cities of his enemy’s realm.

In all the battles the Steel Clan had fought up until now, they’d never used boats to transport their troops, or so the reports had claimed. There hadn’t even been any news of the Steel Clan constructing ships, for that matter.

It was precisely because of this preconceived notion that such troop movements weren’t possible for them to pull off that he hadn’t prepared for this possibility, and that failure of imagination had been thoroughly exploited by his enemy.

“Now I understand... Basically, those reinforcements were just a decoy designed to get us to direct our attention to Ásgarðr.”

“So it would seem.”

Ran spat in disgust, while Nobunaga merely nodded—his silent appreciation for the logic behind the strategy.

When the Steel Clan’s reinforcements had simply failed to appear on the battlefield, Nobunaga had found the situation particularly suspicious.

He knew that there was something off in the way the battle was—or rather, wasn’t—proceeding.

Yuuto’s goal appeared not to be protecting the Holy Capital, but perhaps

something else entirely.

That had been the reason for the Steel Clan reinforcements' presence out beyond the horizon—they had been there to reassure him that Yuuto was massing his troops around the Holy Capital, and also to prevent him from sending some of his own troops back to Blíkjanda-Böl in order to aid with its defense.

The reason neither the forces inside the city nor the reinforcements stationed on the plains had moved, then, was not that they had been waiting for the opportune moment to strike. They had merely been placed there to buy time for the other operations going on simultaneously.

In this siege, the more time that passed, the more advantageous the Flame Clan's situation should become. That assumption had been so deeply buried into his mindset that Nobunaga hadn't realized that he'd been lured into thinking precisely the way Yuuto wanted him to think.

"That cheeky little brat!"

Nobunaga was forced to admit that, once again, the tides of battle had been turned against him.

The Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl was, after all, the most important base of support for the fifty thousand Flame Clan soldiers currently attacking the Holy Capital.

Surrounding Blíkjanda-Böl was the great grain-producing region that Nobunaga had spent ten years cultivating. The most recent winter wheat crop was almost ready to be harvested, in fact. If that land and its resources had been taken from him, it would be no exaggeration to say that the foundation of his army had been broken.

Were the Flame Clan forces to continue their siege, the army that would starve first would not be the Steel Clan's, but the Flame Clan's.

"Our next move is obvious. We must retreat for now."

His decision was immediate.

Regardless of how favorable their current position may be, if they had lost the

war, they needed to accept that reality without delay and act accordingly.

It was, of course, easy to say as much, but it is human nature to be indecisive. Humans do tend to be worrywarts.

In spite of that, Nobunaga was quick to cut through any hesitation he may have felt and made the quick, correct decision. This ability of Oda Nobunaga's was truly his greatest and most fearsome quality.

"Father, the Flame Clan's troops have begun their retreat."

"Finally."

Yuuto heaved a drawn-out sigh upon hearing Kristina's report.

Even for someone who'd already been through as much as Yuuto, these past two months had been particularly stressful for him. There was no telling when Yggdrasil would meet its end, after all.

Despite how stressful the waiting had been, Yuuto hadn't been able to think of any other way he could win. The constant unease and the weight of the practical decisions he had to make every day had threatened to drive him mad.

"Looks like they've heard the news about the fall of Blíkjanda-Böl."

Yuuto had already heard about it himself via a carrier pigeon report sent from Sigrún.

He'd been well prepared for dealing with the Flame Clan once they'd heard the news as well.

All they had needed to do once the preparations were done, then, was to wait.

"Kristina!"

"Yes, Father?"

"Inform the Vindálfs concealing themselves in the nearby clans that we've taken Blíkjanda-Böl and that the Flame Clan's armies are retreating! Let Jörgen know that he is to make his move immediately."

"Very well, Father."

Quick and light as a breeze, Kristina vanished. Her disappearance was, of

course, merely an illusion caused by her suppressing her presence, but it was a skillful shift all the same.

“Felicia!”

“Yes, Big Brother!”

“Our troops are already in position, yes?”

“Yes, Big Brother! All Steel Clan troops have gathered at the western gate, just as you ordered.”

“Perfect!”

Yuuto stood up so quickly that his seat almost tipped over, making his way out the door so rapidly his cloak flapped in the air.

Exiting the palace, he boarded his favorite chariot and rode down the main street that led toward the western gate. Just as Felicia had said, standing there in tight formation were his twenty thousand troops, ready to carry out his commands at a moment’s notice.

“Well done, men! You’ve endured the stresses of these past two months with grace!”

Using the power of Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, which he had borrowed from Fagrahvél, the Sword Clan’s patriarch, to magnify his voice, Yuuto addressed his troops.

While the power to magnify one’s voice was useful in its own way, this same rune’s power was used by Fagrahvél herself at the Battle of Vígríðr to turn the soldiers of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army into fearless berserkers—an utterly terrifying prospect to be certain. There was little wonder that Gjallarhorn had come to be known as the Rune of Kings.

“As I’m sure you’ve already heard, the Múspell Special Forces Unit, commanded by the Mánagarmr, Sigrún, has taken the capital of the Flame Clan, Blíkjanda-Böl!”

“Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!”

The cheers of the troops broke out in waves.

They already knew what to expect for the battle to come. If they were going to have to fight anyway, they'd much rather win the battle and come home triumphant.

Any news that would lighten their spirits before battle was welcomed by them with open arms.

"The enemy has heard this news as well. Even now, they tremble with panic, and have begun their retreat! If we are to crush them, the time is now!"

The cheers only grew louder as Yuuto continued to speak.

"Lastly, I have a bit of personal news to share with you all... On this day, my second formal wife, Sigrdrífa, has given birth to our longed-for baby boy! This can be nothing but a good omen for the battle to come!"

"Sieg þjóðann! Sieg þjóðann!"

The troops were positively electric with excitement.

It had been announced beforehand that should a boy be born, then that would be the day the troops moved out to face the enemy on the field.

Using the sex of the newborn child as a method for deciding that sort of thing was rather like deciding one's future by divining it from the cracks in a turtle's shell when thrown into the fire, but no one could fault them for doing so—this was an era in which politics and religion were merely two sides of the same coin.

Just before the battle began, the long-awaited successor of the empire's ruler had been born. There could be no better sign of their good fortune.

It pained Yuuto to involve his children in political machinations, but there was no margin for error in his battle with Nobunaga. Were he to fall, he now had a boy of his own blood to take the throne.

"Men of the Steel Clan! We are marching out! Take all your anger and frustration at having been trapped within these walls these past two months and throw it all at the enemy!"

"Smoke signal confirmed. The Steel Clan Army has emerged from behind their city walls."

“That was fast, indeed. The lad is certainly of a different caliber than the peace-addled Asakura Yoshikage was,” Nobunaga said, letting slip words of admiration.

He was, at that moment, recalling the battle at Kanegasaki.

If I’m recalling this correctly, I was rather proud of how speedily and orderly we’d retreated from the battlefield, but our losses were surprisingly few not because of the discipline of our troops, but because the Asakura army had been so caught up in internal strife that they’d been slow to pursue us.

Yoshikage hadn’t responded to Yoshiaki’s request for him to come to Kyoto, nor had he made any sort of decisive move in the siege. In any and every case, he was a man unable to act even when an opportunity presented itself.

Nobunaga had, in one sense, been saved by this indecisiveness.

If Takeda Shingen or Uesugi Kenshin had been on that battlefield on Echizen, at that point in the conflict, Nobunaga might very well have been brought to his knees before even establishing the siege.

It wasn’t appropriate to compare Yuuto to a fool like Yoshikage, but relative to the latter’s indecisiveness, the young lad’s actions had been truly swift.

Too swift, almost.

“Smoke signals from the north, confirmed. The Sword Clan fort that ten thousand of the Steel Clan’s troops had been occupying appears to be showing signs of movement as well,” Ran said matter-of-factly, much like a receptionist might perhaps have spoken.

Ran was a man that could remain calm and think clearly even under the most extreme stresses. That was why Nobunaga had been sure to keep him close by, and why he had taken such good care of him. There was no other person he could rely upon as thoroughly in a time of need like this.

“I-Is that so? So their scheme is to trap us in a pincer attack, indeed...”

“Judging from how obvious their movements are, he’s likely already requested assistance from the surrounding clans,” Ran stated, nary missing a beat in spite of his lord’s comments.

“Likely indeed. In other words, he’s cornered us,” Nobunaga said, making obvious what the two both already knew at this point.

“Yes, sir. Of course, Suoh Yuuto must be thinking the same,” Ran replied.

“Just so. And there, Ran, is our opening for an attack.”

The corners of Nobunaga’s mouth were upturned as a most fierce smile snaked its way across his lips.

Nobunaga knew from experience that opportunity lurks in the midst of crisis. As the old saying went, “even in death, life can be found.”

He had grasped the truth of this saying, and it was because of this that he’d been almost able to unite all of Japan under his rule.

“Oho?”

He looked down at what had fallen into the palm of his hand and laughed.

It seemed that the heavens still counted Nobunaga as an ally.

“This is a good omen indeed. We have already lost a good deal of ground, but now it is our turn to make a move of our own.”

Normally, the Flame Clan would be forced to retreat, given the circumstances. There was simply nothing else they could do.

Anyone who understood even the basics of military strategy would agree.

And it is precisely because of the overpowering strength of those preconceptions concerning his next move that Nobunaga would be able to turn the tables.

“Keh heh heh... Suoh Yuuto! You shall behold the power of the Demon King, Oda Nobunaga!”

Chill water broke in droplets against Yuuto’s cheeks as his forces advanced. He put one hand against his cheek, looked up, and saw the sky completely full of dark clouds.

No sooner had he done this did another drop of water bead across his face.

“Rain, huh...”

Watching the droplets fall onto the palm of his hand, Yuuto frowned in disgust.

His was the face of a man who had been to war dozens of times before. He had both marched and fought in downpours. He wasn't about to mind getting wet at this point.

The rain itself was of no particular concern to him—he was bothered about something else entirely.

"Dammit, it's really started to fall. It doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon, either."

In mere moments, the rain was falling everywhere, as far as the eye could see. It had become quite the rainstorm.

"The timing couldn't possibly be any worse. This'll cause some real havoc for our pursuit."

Heavy rain often made it much harder to see, garments and armor would become wet and chilly, and it also became much more likely for troops to come down with some form of illness.

There'd been a theory that, rather than enemy soldiers, it had been disease that had killed most troops throughout ancient and medieval history.

With weather like this, Yuuto would usually have his troops set up tarps to shelter them from the rain and have them gather close together to conserve their body heat—but if he had them do that now, they'd very likely miss their chance to crush the Flame Clan.

"Big Brother, how shall we proceed?"

"I feel bad for the troops, but we can't let up our pursuit. We're up against Nobunaga, after all. If we don't hit him hard here and now, we may never get another opportunity to do so."

Yuuto's plan had worked well, but he was in no mood to be smug.

Nine times out of ten, Nobunaga would beat him on the battlefield.

He just happened to have gotten lucky that this time was the rare case in which he'd won—or so he thought.

That's why he wanted to beat Nobunaga quite decisively here, so that no further battles with the man would soon be forced upon him.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure it rained at Okehazama as well, didn't it?"

Perhaps because his opponent was Oda Nobunaga, Yuuto happened to recall that bit of history.

Oda Nobunaga had crushed the twenty-five thousand strong army of Imagawa Yoshimoto, who was said to be the greatest general in all of Tokaido, with a mere three thousand troops. The battle was one of the three most famous ambushes in Japanese history.

It had been this victory that had raised the name of Oda Nobunaga to national prominence. Using the outcome as an opportunity for yet more conquest, Nobunaga had launched his invasions of Mino and Ise, rapidly expanding the range of his territory.

"This time, however, we'll be the ones launching a surprise attack on you, Nobunaga," said Yuuto, chuckling.

From that point of view, it was actually lucky that the rain was falling. After all, that meant the Flame Clan's many tanegashima couldn't be used.

Yuuto honestly believed that the gods had granted him their blessings.

Unfortunately for him, however, he didn't yet know the truth.

He had studied a good number of Nobunaga's philosophies on various subjects such as tactics, politics, diplomacy, and logical thinking. He hadn't, however, studied anything relating to Nobunaga's interest in the occult.

A certain novelist had once given Nobunaga a special name, considering that whenever there was a turning point in his battles, it had always been raining. Yuuto, of course, had been born in a time where few read this novelist anymore so he couldn't possibly have known, but the name had been thus: "The General of the Rainy Season."

If he had known of this, he might have sensed the foreboding outcome that awaited him on the battlefield and given up his pursuit, instead returning to the Holy Capital. It was also possible that he might have been unable to completely

rid himself of the suspicion that this sudden rainstorm hadn't been coincidental at all.

Even so, presented with an opportunity like this, the correct course of action was to pursue his enemy. It would be stupid not to.

For that reason, Yuuto made the unfortunate decision to follow through with his original plan. He had been forced to do so by how inviting the opportunity was.

The rain fell harder...

Some time had passed since he had decided to continue his pursuit. The transceiver in his hand buzzed.

"Father, we're in trouble. We must prepare for battle immediately! The main Flame Clan force is charging straight toward us!"

"Wha—?!"

The report he'd just received from Kristina, who was currently acting as one of his scouts, left him utterly stunned.

Rain may have been falling all around him, but this was, truly, a bolt from the blue.

"It's not just their rear guard charging, is it?!"

"Not at all! It's the entire army!"

"No way... That's impossible...!"

The Flame Clan's army should be collapsing with the weight of their loss of their capital, Blíkjanda-Böl.

Now that the scales had tipped in the Steel Clan's favor, the surrounding clans would also join the Steel Clan's offensive against the Flame Clan's army. Anyone could see that. They clearly needed to retreat from the battlefield as soon as possible in order to return to their capital.

And yet, despite all that had occurred, the Flame Clan's army had reoriented to face the pursuing Steel Clan forces and had begun charging right at them. It was nothing short of madness.

If Yuuto didn’t deal with this appropriately, the Steel Clan forces were in serious danger of being surrounded and thus annihilated.

It was precisely because the Flame Clan’s actions were borderline insane that Yuuto had been rendered speechless by the unexpected development.

“Please hurry. Not only was my discovery delayed by the rain, but the enemy is moving fast!” Kristina yelled in a panicked tone over the transceiver.

“Damn! All soldiers, assume battle formations at once! The enemy is coming!”

Yuuto clicked his tongue in frustration and hastily gave orders.

However, commanding his men to do something did not necessarily mean that they were in a state to follow those orders.

The long columns of marching troops had essentially formed a snaking queue to make their way onto the battlefield. Getting that line of troops to maneuver themselves into an adequate battle formation would take a fair amount of time.

If this had been the Steel Clan Army that had fought at the Battle of Vígríðr, they might have just barely gotten into formation in time, but more than half the soldiers in the current Steel Clan Army had troops from newer clans mixed in. They hadn’t progressed very far in their training in the short time since they’d joined.

“Yes, Reginarch!”

Still unprepared for the onslaught of enemy soldiers, a battle cry was heard ringing out ahead of them. It was here and now that the curtain would finally fall on the battle between the Steel and Flame clans.

The Flame Clan forces that the Steel Clan Army found itself presented with wielded long spears of an unusual size and their forces were lined up such that not a single gap could be found even in their flanks.

The Steel Clan soldiers were trying to hide themselves behind their shields, but there were simply too many enemy spearmen.

Several of the soldiers’ shields were inevitably pierced through, leaving the men wounded or worse—they fell to the ground and sunk into the swampy mud below them.

“Damn, I really didn’t expect them to give us this much trouble as enemies.”

Skáviðr, who was commanding the troops at the front line, unconsciously cursed the events unfolding around him.

The use of long spears to create a phalanx formation had been a unique specialty of the Steel Clan’s.

Now, however, the hearts of the Steel Clan’s soldiers were full of unease, their ranks were in disarray, and their movements were uneven.

All this made it impossible for them to stand together as one. As such, they were getting crushed left and right.

“Don’t give into panic! Get into your formations! If we keep our heads, we Steel Clan soldiers cannot lose!”

Skáviðr gave his orders and attempted to invigorate his troops, but his words had little effect.

His words, after all, were those of the Steel Clan’s very own “reaper of death”, Níðhǫggr, the Sneering Slaughter.

His troops would normally quake with fear and obey his commands, but today it seemed that his scolds were falling on deaf ears.

“Gahh!”

“Aghh!”

“Ahhh!”

While Skáviðr stood by watching, screams of fatal agony arose from his troops.

“Damn... This is bad.”

Low enough so that no one else could hear, Skáviðr cursed once again.

This unexpected charge by the Flame Clan was extremely unwelcome.

Wars are won and lost by momentum. If the Steel Clan kept getting pushed back like this, the literal movements of the troops would turn the tides of the battle.

Once that happened, troop morale would fall off a cliff, and it would be impossible to reverse their losses. Not even Yuuto, who seemed to come up with one god-like tactic after another, would be able to think of a way out of this.

“If this rain continues as it is, then there’s no way we’ll be able to use our firearms, or even our bows, for that matter.”

Skáviðr glared up at the sky as it continued to pelt him with rain.

Before the battle, Yuuto had said that the Steel Clan’s advantage over the Flame Clan had been their bows.

Because of the current storm, however, bows, strings, and arrow feathers had been soaked through, leading to a much different turn of events than Yuuto had planned for.

Everything they carried and wore had become heavy, and the streaks of pouring rain threatened to drown soldiers with each new shower that fell.

The rains reduced the range of their bows considerably, in addition to throwing off their aim.

Setting Yuuto aside for the moment—if he were to take command over all Steel Clan forces, how would he get the troops to regroup?

Right as he was considering that idea— “Huh?!”

His spirits were suddenly uplifted, and he felt strength welling up from somewhere deep inside his body.

At first he thought it was merely the crazed energy of a fool caught inside a fire, but it wasn’t quite like that. It was almost as if something outside of him had lifted his spirits. He couldn’t shake the feeling that his feelings weren’t entirely his own.

A fierce, animal-like roar erupted from the army.

The soldiers, who had just a moment ago appeared ready to be swallowed up by the enemy, now had bloodshot eyes, looking like cannibalistic fiends as they charged fearlessly into the Flame Clan forces.

The crisis had been averted, but something strange was clearly happening.

Still, that was no reason not to take advantage of the opportunity that had presented itself to him.

“Right, we’re pushing them back! All units, attack!”

“Whew. Guess we’ll manage to hold out against them... for now.”

At the encampment that had been set up for the main Steel Clan forces, Yuuto slumped down onto the ground and let out a long sigh.

To be perfectly honest, they’d been in a rather tight situation just now.

If it hadn’t been for her, he wouldn’t have been able to do anything at all, and his forces would have been swept away by a landslide of Flame Clan soldiers.

“It’s times like these that I remember just how terrifying war can be. You really helped me out there, Fagrahvél.”

Yuuto turned around to face the blonde beauty behind him and thanked her from the depths of his heart.

The rune Fagrahvél bore—Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—boosted the morale of one’s troops and was also capable of bringing out their latent abilities.

The fact that using it had resulted in being able to instantly turn the tide of battle showed that its effectiveness on the battlefield was truly awesome.

Honestly, still having her as an opponent would be utterly terrifying. I’m so glad that she’s one of my most reliable allies now. It’s no wonder everyone called her rune the Rune of Kings... Yuuto thought to himself.

“I am... just glad to hear... that my power... was useful...”

Or so Fagrahvél tried to say, her lungs heaving as she spoke with a strained voice.

Her forehead was covered with beads of sweat, and she looked to be struggling immensely to do even as much as speak.

“Ah—don’t force yourself to talk. Focus on the spell.”

Yuuto panicked a bit once he’d realized how distracting he’d been, flailing his arms around as if to wave away the conversation.

Fagrahvél’s rune was overwhelmingly powerful, but it wasn’t without its

weakness.

The more soldiers in one army, the more intensely using the rune drained its bearer of all stamina; it was a double-edged sword.

Placing its effects upon all twenty thousand troops in the Steel Clan's main force seemed like it would be quite impossible, just as he'd expected.

"Ah... About that... To be honest... I've already... hit my limit... Just one moment... is all I can manage without preparing..."

"That so? Two hours... huh."

This application of her rune's powers had lasted a much shorter amount of time than when she had used it against Yuuto atVígríðr, and the difference had shocked him—but all the same, he understood why that was.

The ritual that had allowed Yuuto to be summoned to Yggdrasil using the seiðr Gleipnir required special offerings, as well as magical tools to channel one's ásmegin into a more concentrated form.

Additionally, the casters of the seiðr—Felicia and Mitsuki—had spent much time carrying out ritual purification and also partook in meditation sessions in an attempt to hone their powers of concentration to the extreme.

All that preparation was done in order to cast that one spell.

In a situation like this, where he'd asked for her to use her rune's power quite suddenly, there would of course be limits as to how effective the spell could be.

"In those two hours, we'll have to regroup and gain whatever advantage we can."

He looked out at the Flame Clan army in the distance and balled up his fists tightly.

Without Fagrahvél's cheat ability, they wouldn't have made it out alive.

In other words, even though he'd been blessed with the good fortune of a brutal rainstorm—as a general, Yuuto had lost to Nobunaga.

Completely and utterly.

"He's one hell of an old man, that's for sure."

A man who had almost succeeded in uniting all of Japan under his rule was of course going to be an altogether different type of person.

“To be a soldier is to be deceptive.”

Yuuto felt as though he’d been shown the truth of that saying.

It was precisely because he had done something so unexpected that the enemy had been able to outsmart him.

Knowing how something was done, however, was very different from doing it yourself.

He had learned that lesson quite thoroughly in the do-or-die situation he’d scraped through just moments ago.

He couldn’t help but be amazed at the boldness of his enemy.

The Steel Clan had managed to survive the onslaught of the first attack, but that hadn’t changed the fact that they were at a disadvantage on the battlefield.

He had to pull his troops together and get them to face the enemy once more, as soldiers.

Watching the Steel Clan Army making a comeback, Nobunaga’s eyes widened. He let out a sigh of admiration as he watched the battle progress.

“Oho, not as much as a pushover as I’d thought. The boy can fight.”

Nobunaga had almost perfectly been able to hit the Steel Clan at their weakest point.

Just a few moments ago, the Steel Clan soldiers had been quaking in their boots in the face of the oncoming Flame Clan soldiers—they had been in absolutely no condition to fight.

Even for Nobunaga, getting his soldiers to recover from that state of mind would have been extremely difficult.

“There’s something that feels a bit strange about the sudden shift in their attitudes. Based on the reports, it seems like the Steel Clan soldiers are behaving rather unusually. The whole situation reeks of that divine power

unique to this world—ásmegin. How abhorrent.”

Nobunaga’s Second-in-Command, Ran, frowned and spat as he said this.

As a practical and rational man, he despised galdr, alchemy, and all other sorts of suspect mysticism.

Nobunaga let out a harsh laugh at Ran’s obvious disgust.

“Obstinate as always, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one who too easily lends your ear to stories of such magics, my lord. Without those odd spells, victory would be ours already.”

“Haha! Such trouble is unavoidable. It is pointless to deny that which exists.”

“But sir...”

“In order to win, one must use everything at one’s disposal, no? That impudent brat has played the ace up his sleeve, nothing more. The wisdom he and I share is unusual in this world, is it not? We come to the battlefield with the same advantages,” Nobunaga said in a very matter-of-fact manner.

It was this conversation that truly showed the difference in life experience between Ran, who had only come to serve the Nobunaga family after almost all its enemies had been vanquished, and Nobunaga himself, who had made it through many dangerous situations in which he’d been at serious risk of losing everything.

Victory wins all, and defeat loses everything.

It was for this very reason that a general must win by any means necessary, no matter the consequences. Even if that meant him being called a dog, a swine, or worse for the methods he employed.

Nobunaga knew this well.

“My lord! I carry a message from Lord Shiba! The enemy’s advance is pushing further into our ranks, and he requests immediate assistance!”

“Oh my! Even the brave Shiba cannot stop their advance! Keh... This is what I’ve longed for. A war hasn’t truly begun until you can feel the tension of battle sting your spine!”

With a ferocious grin on his face, bloodlust began to steam out of Nobunaga's every pore.

"Only by surviving each day by the skin of one's teeth can the light of meaning shine through."

At least, that was Nobunaga's philosophy.

And now, he'd finally found the opponent that would actually force him to "survive by the skin of his teeth."

Of course he was going to get excited about this prospect.

"Ran! I'm heading out! Soldiers, follow me!"

Nobunaga jumped onto his horse's saddle and whipped the horse to urge it forward.

His movements were completely fluid, agile even—he showed no signs of being over sixty years old.

Nobunaga headed towards the place where Shiba's unit was under attack.

While he installed some of his fiercest generals at the front lines of the army, he was driving his horse in and out of the ranks of his main host, rousing his fighting troops, moving the army as if they were his own arms and legs.

It was terribly dangerous for him to do so (and Nobunaga had actually suffered a not-insignificant number of injuries when carrying out this practice), but the risks involved in a clan's patriarch getting that close to the front lines were worth the reward: his presence had a tremendous effect on the morale of his troops. He was also able to receive detailed information and give specific orders concerning further troop movements.

Oddly enough, it was said that Alexander the Great had also preferred to fight on the frontlines to encourage his troops. A great ruler *should* fight alongside his men, after all.

An hour had quickly passed by since the opening of hostilities.

During that time, the Steel and Flame Clan armies had each alternated between attacking and defending—the tides of battle moved one side to advance, the other to retreat, and back again, on and on.

Currently, the ones pressing the attack were the Steel Clan soldiers. Even so, Yuuto's heart was full of unease at the way the battle was progressing.

"Damn, that old man is a real monster...!"

A patriarch must not show weakness in front of his men. He knew that, but he was still unable to refrain from spitting in disgust at the latest enemy maneuvers.

"Our troops are a whole lot stronger, that's for sure."

The reason for that? They had used the power of Fagrahvél's rune—Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—to turn them into fearless war heroes. He'd basically had his own soldiers drugged to enhance their abilities.

"Our units should be much quicker to coordinate and react to developments on the battlefield now."

Not to mention the fact that he was quite frankly cheating by coordinating with his subordinates via his transceiver. His enemies certainly didn't have those at their disposal.

In spite of all those advantages though, the Steel Clan still wasn't able to completely overwhelm the Flame Clan forces.

Even against the Steel Clan soldiers, who were filled with a crazed bloodlust, the Flame Clan's men still held firm and fought just as hard as before.

They followed Nobunaga's orders to the letter, and did so without hesitation.

The difference between their two armies illustrated the difference between an army made of conscripted farmers versus one composed of professional soldiers.

Then there was Nobunaga himself—he truly embodied the old words used to describe a capable commander: "Better quick and rough than slow and careful."

If pushed, pull back; if your formations were near collapse, reinforce them with additional soldiers and go back on the offensive.

He saw every weakness in the Steel Clan's front lines and immediately sent his soldiers to penetrate those weaknesses.

Not only was he “quick and rough,” but he moved his forces so quickly it was almost as if he had the gift of true foresight—every move he made was precisely the right one.

Most likely, his skills as a commander came from the fact that he brought decades of experience with him on the battlefield. All those fights had surely sharpened his intuition to the point where it was practically god-like.

To put it bluntly, Yuuto wasn’t able to say he had claimed the high ground in this battle. He had just pushed his troops forward, and they were being pushed back just as hard. At best, he could describe the current situation as one where they were evenly matched.

“It’s gonna end pretty badly at this rate...”

There was the two-hour time limit on the effects of Gjallarhorn, and once its magic wore off, who knew what would happen then...

Just thinking about it gave Yuuto the shivers.

“What do I do... What do I do...?!”

Yuuto’s mind raced as he tried to think of a good idea, but he came up with absolutely nothing.

In times like these, he often used his elite band of raiders to turn the tide of battle. With their ability to quickly move around the battlefield, they were able to disrupt the enemy before they had time to react.

But the Múspell Special Forces Unit was currently in Helheim, far away from Ásgarðr. The Independent Cavalry Regiment led by Hveðrungr had been nearly destroyed in the previous battle, and Hveðrungr himself still bore serious, unhealed wounds on his arms and legs. Yuuto had had no choice but to leave him back in the Holy Capital.

“Oh! That’s right! Jörgen! I’ve got Jörgen’s units too!”

Yuuto was suddenly reminded of the existence of his reinforcement units, and he clenched his fists with anticipation.

Upon marching out of the Holy Capital, he had already given the order to Jörgen that he was to attack the Flame Clan forces.

The original plan had been for Yuuto to take the brunt of the enemy attack using the main host, while the reinforcements led by Jörgen assaulted the Flame Clan forces from the rear.

He had felt so cornered by everything that had been going on that he had forgotten his own plans.

The sheer pressure induced by having to face off against a man as great as Nobunaga was completely overwhelming him.

“Even if we can’t beat him ourselves, as long as we maintain our front lines, Jörgen will eventually be able to hit them from behind. We’ve just got to hold out until then...”

Unexpectedly, Yuuto heard a burst of static erupt from the transceiver fixed to his waist.

For some reason, he had a bad feeling about what was going to happen next, and his gut was usually right about these sorts of things.

“Þjóðann, we’re in trouble!”

A panicked voice pierced his ears with its urgency.

Though the voice was shrill, it sounded familiar.

It belonged to Rikka, one of Kristina’s spies who had been assigned to handle communications between units on the left flank.

“The enemy reinforcements are coming right for us! In huge numbers!”

“Wh-What?! It can’t be...!”

Upon hearing those words, Yuuto finally realized that he had been gravely mistaken.

Nobunaga had initially been forced to retreat because Yuuto had assaulted Blíkjanda-Böl. Yuuto had thought that this sudden shifting in positions and subsequent attack by Nobunaga had been motivated by a desire to make the retreat as successful as possible.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

Nobunaga hadn’t retreated at all.

He had pretended to act just as Yuuto had planned for him to, and lured him out onto the battlefield.

That was the only explanation for the situation. There was no other way that enemy reinforcements could have arrived at the western gate this early in the battle otherwise.

Nobunaga had ordered the soldiers who had been stationed within the siege castle near the western gate not to retreat, but rather to assault the Steel Clan soldiers emerging from behind the city walls.

“Just as Sun Tzu said, ‘The most important way to get the enemy to move in the way you want is by making their leader think they have the advantage. The most important way to get the enemy to stop in their tracks is by making them think they are at a disadvantage.’”

The words of Sun Tzu echoed faintly in the back of Yuuto’s mind.

“The man who makes an enemy go in a certain direction has done so because he has shown the enemy can profit from such a move,” is what those words meant.

Yuuto had taken the bait offered by Nobunaga.

He knew the trick.

He had known all too well, but still...

“This is way too crazy of a move, even for him!”

Full of indignation, Yuuto slammed his fists against the edge of the chariot.

The enemy had few provisions remaining after their long siege of the Holy Capital, not to mention the stemmed flow as a result of the capture of their own capital. If Yuuto hadn’t led the charge into battle, they would have been surrounded by the other clans’ forces and cut off from their supply chains.

If they had made even one wrong move, they would have risked utter annihilation.

On the other hand, Yuuto had known that in the situation he had been presented with, he would have always chosen to press the attack.

Nobunaga must've known that too. That was why he had chosen to undertake such a risky maneuver.

"Ugh! This is awful! A total defeat! Damn it all!"

Yuuto scratched the back of his head in irritation and kicked the edge of the chariot.

Ever since he had left the Holy Capital, all the way up until now, he had acted exactly as Nobunaga had wanted him to.

"B-Big Brother?!"

"There's only one option left to us now," Yuuto stated calmly, in stark contrast to the nearby Felicia who was in a complete panic.

The fact that he had been so thoroughly played by Nobunaga had actually invigorated him and allowed him to cut away from his anxiety and doubt entirely.

The overall momentum of the battle had been decided. The possibility of a Steel Clan victory was nearly zero.

With that in mind, there was only one order any good leader could give his men: "Discretion is the better part of valor—we're running away!"

"Whew, we somehow managed to win."

Nobunaga let out a long sigh as he watched the Steel Clan forces make their retreat. The burning bloodlust in his heart slowly fizzled away.

If you were to simply look at how things had turned out, Nobunaga had clearly won this battle—but he'd been pushed to his absolute limit to pull off that victory, and it had certainly not been easy.

In all actuality, he'd won by only the thinnest of margins.

"He's a fighter that lives up to his reputation. Who knows how this battle might have turned out if we had commanded the same number of soldiers."

The Steel Clan's standing army was made up of twenty thousand troops, while the main Flame Clan force that Nobunaga commanded was thirty-thousand strong, but if the reinforcements stationed at the siege castle outside the Holy

Capital's western gate—a force numbering ten thousand itself—were included too, then his force was easily twice the size of his enemy's.

The most striking moment of the whole battle had been the sudden surge from the Steel Clan forces as they took the offensive.

Not only had they suddenly gained huge momentum, but their movements had been perfectly accurate.

It was only because the Flame Clan's troop numbers had been overwhelmingly larger that they'd been able to endure the attack.

Even so, war was no game.

A commander had to use everything at their disposal in order to seize victory—in order to win the deathmatch that was war.

There was nothing cowardly in doing so.

The whole point was to send more soldiers out into the battlefield than your enemy did. It was the most basic tenet of strategy.

"He was quick to retreat as well, wasn't he? Almost *too* quick, don't you think?"

His Second-in-Command, Ran, sounded disappointed as he glared after the retreating Steel Clan forces.

If they had delayed their retreat just a few moments more, the Flame Clan reinforcements at the western gate would have assaulted the Steel Clan's flank, ensuring a total collapse of their forces.

"One of the characteristics necessary to become a great general is the ability to make quick and accurate judgments. The boy continues to amuse me, indeed."

They had hit the Steel Clan's army quite hard... but even so, they had themselves avoided a fatal blow by only the slimmest of margins.

That was how Nobunaga would have described the current battle.

That "slim margin," however, made all the difference. The contrast between those who could win a battle and those who could not was as stark as the

distinction between day and night. This was true and present wherever one fought.

In other words, Nobunaga had confirmed in this battle that Suoh Yuuto had that special quality—he was one of the winners.

“But I’m not kind enough to just let you run away like that, lad! Ran! Command all units to press the attack! I shall grant a kingdom to the soldier who brings me the lad’s head!”

“That’s extremely generous of you, sir.”

Ran’s eyes opened wide at Nobunaga’s order.

Sure, capturing the enemy commander would be quite a glorious achievement, but a whole kingdom? Surely that was too much.

“If we let him slip away from us here, we shall find ourselves in danger again before long.”

Ran went pale and shivered when he heard the ice in Nobunaga’s tone.

It was truly just as he had said.

The Flame Clan forces were still surrounded by the warriors of the surrounding clans. Nothing had changed about that.

As long as they remained unable to control the þjóðann, they wouldn’t be able to solve their other problems. The future of the Flame Clan very much rested on whether they were going to be able to capture Suoh Yuuto or not. His fate would decide their own.

Even with the stakes being what they were, and in the midst of all the fighting, Nobunaga never forgot his sense of humor or lost his nerve.

His face lifted into a smile as he said, “Now then! It’s time for a game of tag!”

From behind him rung out the agonizing cries and shouts from his soldiers.

The pain they felt was palpable. Yuuto, too, could feel it. He bit his lower lip in frustration and his heart tightened with every scream.

“I’m sorry, everyone...”

The guilt washed over him in waves.

He felt as though each anguished cry he heard was the result of a personal mistake he had made on the battlefield.

“Big Brother, don’t let it trouble you so deeply. Both victory and defeat are constant companions of all those who venture into war.”

“I know that, but I just can’t help but feel solely responsible for this...”

“Not a single one of the great generals died undefeated—did you not tell me that yourself, all those years ago?”

“Well, sure, that’s true, but still...”

“There was simply nothing else you could do this time around.”

“.....”

Yuuto was glad to have Felicia there to comfort him, but her words did not reach his heart.

He could *understand* the truth of what she was saying, but that didn’t change how he felt.

He’d been able to remain calm when deciding to issue the order for the Steel Clan’s retreat, but the screams of his wounded soldiers were tearing him up inside.

Shoulda, woulda, coulda.

If only I had done this, if only I had done that— I might have saved all those people.

They might have left this battlefield alive.

Yuuto couldn’t stop those regrets from circling about his mind, from haunting his heart.

“Right... Um... Big Brother, forgive me.”

“Hm?”

Right around the time when Yuuto was wondering *why* Felicia’s voice sounded unusually low and stern, it happened...

Bam!

For a moment, he had no idea what had just happened.

Very soon, he felt the stinging pain surge through his left cheek. Belatedly, he realized that he'd just been slapped across the face.

"Fe...licia...?"

His mind a complete blank, Yuuto called out her name.

Felicia glared at him with a stern expression on her face.

"Get a grip, Big Brother! This is war! We have no time for regrets or sorrows! Don't you have *other things* you should be thinking about right now?!" she yelled.

"—!"

Yuuto was completely caught off guard by her sharp words.

He started to feel embarrassed about how *stupid* he was being. He clenched his fists and, without further ado, punched his own forehead.

"Big Brother?!"

Felicia let out a cry of concern.

Her earlier sternness had completely disappeared, and now she looked flustered and worried. Yuuto couldn't help but sputter in surprise.

With a tone that sounded more relieved than anything else, he said, "Thanks, Felicia. You really brought me back to my senses. I needed that."

She was totally right. There would be time for regrets and sorrows later on. There was something else he had to do right now.

His forehead and cheek were still throbbing with pain, but his mind had cleared. That slap had batted away many of the feelings he'd allowed to distract him.

"The first problem we need to deal with is this rain. Let's get off this chariot and switch to our horses."



Yuuto stroked his chin with his hand as he went into overdrive trying to think of the best way to proceed.

Since the ground was so completely soaked by the rain, the chariot wasn't able to move very quickly at all. If anything, it ran a very real risk of getting stuck in the mud.

He'd been using it ever since he became patriarch. He *was* rather attached to it, but it wasn't as if he valued it more than his life.

"Fortunately enough for us, I suppose, is the fact that the Holy Capital isn't that far away. If we manage to retreat back to the castle, we'll be able to regroup into our battle formations. The problem *there*, however, is the fact that the Flame Clan's equipment is lighter than the Steel Clan's. Because of that, they're a bit faster on foot than we are. Hm, what to do..."

"Back to the Yuuto I know and love, I see," Felicia said warmly.

"All thanks to you. Still, I've gotta admit... I sure never thought you, of all people, would hit me like that."

"Oh dear, have you lost your affection for me?"

"Nah, I've fallen in love with you all over again. You're the perfect adjutant, and the *best* woman."

"Ah... I see..."

Felicia had a reputation to uphold, and she was lost as to how to respond to these overly affectionate comments that Yuuto was laying upon her. She found herself unable to do much more than mumble and blush at the compliments.

She was so cute that he wanted to hold her in his arms right then and there, but that would have to wait until they both made it home—alive.

A certain man was, at this moment, at the very rear of the line of fleeing Steel Clan soldiers.

He'd been fighting at the front lines, so it only made sense that he ended up being at the back when they began their retreat.

The man was, thankfully, accompanied by his faithful equine partner. If he

were to mount his horse, he would have been able to flee far faster than the others.

He elected, however, not to do so.

It was perhaps worth noting that the enemy was unusually quick in their pursuit.

The man had participated in a feigned retreat back when he'd been fighting against the Lightning Clan Army, but the Flame Clan's pursuit was much faster than theirs had been.

He'd felt it while fighting these Flame Clan soldiers—they'd gone through fairly rigorous training.

However, when he'd done battle with the Lightning Clan, they'd left a vast amount of highly valuable iron weapons lying on the ground to distract the enemy soldiers as they made their retreat.

They didn't have expensive weapons they could just drop at the enemy's feet this time, though. At this rate, the Steel Clan's losses would end up being quite significant.

If nothing changed, their plans for uniting all the clans under the rule of the Þjóðann might very well become impossible.

If things went *really* bad, his liege might end up in the hands of those pursuing them right now.

Someone, somehow, *absolutely needed* to stop the enemy's advance, and he'd made up his mind quite some time ago that the one to do so would be him.

That choice had been made from the day that the boy had miraculously saved Iárnviðr. He'd determined that his life was meant to be lived in service of his liege.

The man being described was none other than Skáviðr. He looked down at his subordinates below and asked them a life-changing question.

"Suicide Squad! Are you ready to die?"

The Suicide Squad was a unit that he had formed in secret, without Yuuto's

knowledge.

They were approximately five hundred in number. Not many, to be sure, but he had hand-picked them. They were the cream of the crop.

“Yes, sir!”

The soldiers responded in perfect unison.

Just as their voices were united, so were their hearts—not a single individual showed even the slightest trace of fear.

This much was to be expected. After all, the criteria for joining the Suicide Squad had been not the strength of their arms, but the fierceness of their hearts.

Would they be willing to, with a smile on their faces, die for their comrades?

Yes. These soldiers would.

Should their army be thrust into a perilous situation, they would throw their own lives away in service of their lord.

And now, that time had come.

At no point did Skáviðr doubt Yuuto’s abilities as a commander.

Even if the Steel Clan were to suffer a complete defeat, Skáviðr’s faith in and admiration of Yuuto would remain absolutely unshakeable and undiminished.

Skáviðr had experienced it for himself, after all. When people take the seeds of failure and plant them, they are most capable of growth.

Skáviðr also knew that the boy’s spirit was immensely strong, that he possessed a great amount of ambition and strived to improve himself, and most importantly, that a defeat like this one would only serve to fuel his desire to become *even stronger*.

Yuuto was not the sort of young man whose brilliance would vanish with a single defeat. His strength was not so fragile.

From the seeds of this defeat, the boy would become stronger in body, mind, and spirit. He would grow greatly from this experience, of that there was no doubt.

With all that in mind, he knew there was but one thing for him to do... He had to become the shield for that boy so that this defeat would not result in his life being taken as well.

He needed to sacrifice himself for the people of the Steel Clan—no, for *all* the peoples of Yggdrasil. He also needed to save the lives of as many of Yuuto's soldiers as he could.

It was with this determination that Skáviðr had formed the Suicide Squad, in the unlikely event it would be necessary.

Skáviðr slid his sword from his sheath and yelled, "Suicide Squad, hear me! Now is the time for you to give your lives for the Steel Clan! You must throw away your humanity! You must become slaughtering gods of death! Attack!"

"Gahh!"

"Ahh!"

"Gwahh!"

"Th-Three soldiers, all at the same time...?! This bastard's *way* too strong—ngh!"

"Wh-What's this guy's deal—gah!"

Standing before the panicked Flame Clan soldiers was a man who could only be described as some kind of God of Death.

His skin was a pale whitish-blue, giving him the appearance of a ghost.

He was too thin, his cheeks were hollow, and all those who looked upon him shivered with fear.

Only his eyes looked alive. They were as sharp as a hawk's, and the aura he possessed was that of someone looking to cause some trouble.

In every sense, it felt as though his very presence was rather ominous indeed.

He wasn't just going to stand there being foreboding, though...

"Ha—!"

"Uwa—!"

Another, then another, felled by the sword of the God of Death. The lives of Flame Clan soldiers were being taken at an incredible pace.

It was also very clear to any observer that this guy was *strong*. He was an Einherjar, after all.

If anything, it would have been too strange if he wasn't one. Even so, he was much stronger than your average Einherjar.

The man let out an animalistic roar as he led his bloodthirsty soldiers into battle, not a single one of them fearing death.

To put it bluntly, there was no stopping them.

"Take care not to let them get too close! Spears at the ready! Impale them! Let none live!"

The apparent commander of the unit shouted out his orders.

The Flame Clan soldiers quickly returned to their senses upon hearing their commander call out.

Even the lowest infantry units of the Flame Clan Army had been trained rigorously to keep their heads in the face of such danger.

"Yes, sir!"

They shouted in unison as they stabbed their spearheads into the enemy flanks, like a hedgehog who had finally decided to needle its attacker.

No matter how monstrous, no one should have been able to avoid their attack.

No one should have been able to defend against it.

No one *should* have.

But the bloodthirsty enemy soldiers threw themselves upon their spears and became human skewers lurching forward on the battlefield.

The "God of Death," however—the core of their assault force—he was different. He used his arms, his elbows, his knees, and every other part of his body in a most clever and adroit way as he ever-so-slightly diverted the spears, before he finally slipped through the cracks of the phalanx and pressed the

attack.

At this point, it didn't matter how long the spears were—they were just useless *sticks* when up against someone as powerful as this so-called "God."

"Gahh!"

"Gwahh!"

"Ughh!"

Having lost the ability to defend themselves, the Flame Clan soldiers became yet more lives for the God of Death to harvest. Three more of them were cut down in quick succession.

"Th-This guy... he isn't human!"

"He's a m-monster...!"

"No, he's a *god...* a God of Death...!"

Even the highly-trained Flame Clan soldiers found themselves unable to stay calm in the face of such a terror.

The bloodthirsty soldiers were easier—fatally wound them and they'd be dead soon enough, although they might snap their jaws for a few moments before finally letting out a death rattle. They could be defeated.

However, the "God of Death" wouldn't be quite so simple to vanquish. He managed to slip through the forest of sharp spears that were the pride of the Flame Clan like they were mere weeds to be pushed aside along his path.

Just how in the world were they supposed to defeat an opponent as mighty as him?!

"F-F-Fear not, men! Look at him! Look at his clothing! Look at his arms and legs!" the unit commander shouted in a shrill voice as he pointed at the God of Death.

It was then that the soldiers let out gasps of surprise.

The God of Death's clothes were covered in gashes and tears, dozens—possibly hundreds. Not only that, but blood was seeping out from many of the wounds that could be seen all over his body.

His hands, his feet, even his knees. None of the injuries were anything close to life-threatening, but it certainly couldn't be said that he was "unharmed."

Furthermore, it was plain to see that the blood that flowed through his veins was red—crimson, even.

He was human, just like them. He could be defeated.

That realization allowed the Flame Clan soldiers to regain their fighting spirit.

"Attack!"

Once more, they stabbed their spears at the God of Death.

The God avoided them once more, and another three Flame Clan soldiers fell dead into the mud. And yet, the God's wounds were more numerous than before.

"Look! That bastard's human too. If we injure him some more and get him to bleed, he won't be able to move as quickly! Continue pressing the attack!"

"...You know, you're really starting to get on my nerves."

The God of Death glared sharply at the commander shouting these orders.

A chill raced down the commander's spine.

"Kill him! Kill him now!"

"Yes, sir!"

Three, four, *five* times—over and over again—the soldiers stabbed their spears at their enemy at the commander's shrill urging.

Each time, however, the God of Death slipped this way and that as he wove skilfully through the thicket of spears and took life after life from the Flame Clan Army.

Then, finally...

"E-Eeep! Don't get any closer! Go away! S-Someone, kill this—"

At last, the God of Death's blade sliced through the commander's throat.

Slowly, the God reassumed his fighting stance, held his sword at the ready, and glared at Flame Clan soldiers.

Without even realizing what they were doing, every single one of them gulped in fear.

In all likelihood, the man covered in blood who stood before them with his blade in his hands must have looked like a demon sent directly from the depths of hell.

The number of fighters *this fierce* in all of Yggdrasil could be counted on one hand.

And yet even so, in the face of so many tightly gathered spears, the enemy fighter had wounds all over his body.

If you attack a single man with an entire unit, he will eventually fall—no matter how powerful he may be.

The soldiers understood that, but they still couldn't shake the dark thoughts intruding their minds.

Things such as: *We won the war. I don't want to die now!* and *If I fight this man, I shall surely die...*

The soldiers were frozen with fear.

"Lord Takiasu has fallen in battle!"

"...Killed by that so-called 'God of Death,' I assume?"

"Yes!"

"Is that so? Very well. Thank you for the report. At ease, soldier."

After hearing the news, Nobunaga rested his face against his hand and let out a long sigh.

Even without knowing anything more about this "God of Death," it was clear that he served the commander of the Steel Clan Army.

Having this horde of soldiers possessed with a maddening bloodlust appear right in front of his pursuit unit was a slap to the face, literally. Not only had his pursuit unit faced resistance, but they'd been so terrified of the enemy soldiers that they'd frozen in place or begun retreating themselves.

In the time since he'd given the order to retreat, several of his bravest

warriors and one of his generals had been killed. It was for that reason that his pursuit unit was failing to make any forward progress in a timely manner.

Though they may have been Nobunaga's enemies, he couldn't, by any measure, disparage their movements. They had been frighteningly effective.

"Hmph. That brat has gathered together some rather fine fighters to be his subordinates, indeed."

For one, he was the commander of the highly-skilled warrior who, with just a small force, had taken the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl—the Mánagarmr, Sigrún.

Then there had been that masked man who'd led the cavalry, as well as that magic user who'd whipped the entire Steel Clan Army into a frenzied bloodlust.

Then, finally, there was this "God of Death."

All of them seemed likely to be Einherjar, but it was clear that they weren't your run-of-the-mill Einherjar. Nobunaga would have very much liked to have one, just *one* of them working for him instead.

If that had been the case, he would have undoubtedly been able to pull off a decisive victory here.

"Ah," he sighed, "no use thinking of such things."

Nobunaga let out a snort and shook his head at just how foolish he'd been.

Being able to attract qualified generals was a necessary quality of those who wished to become rulers.

That *brat* had been blessed with that very quality, obviously.

"Tsk! I've let him slip away already, haven't I? This time, the loss is mine."

Technically speaking, Nobunaga *had* won the battle.

But that had only been a tactical victory, a *tactical* victory. Nothing more.

In the end, not only had he failed to take the Holy Capital, but he had also failed to claim the head of the þjóðann. Furthermore, his most important base of military operations, his clan's capital, had been stolen from him.

The Flame Clan Army, in other words, had no choice this time but to make a

full retreat from the territory surrounding the Holy Capital.

In this sense, strategically speaking, it was clear that the true winner was the Steel Clan.

“They got us this time, but you won’t have it easy next we fight, brat. Or should I say, Suoh Yuuto.”

Nobunaga had rated Yuuto’s talents quite highly, but there had been a part of him that didn’t consider the young ruler to be much of a threat.

It was perhaps inevitable he’d think that way.

Even if Yuuto was much like a lion cub, Nobunaga’s attention focused on the cub, not the lion.

Given that he was a fully-grown lion, he couldn’t help but underestimate a mere cub’s attempts to establish some form of superiority over him.

Still, it reflected poorly upon him to insult an opponent who had beaten him on the battlefield by calling him a “brat.” He’d felt the strength of his opponent’s hand in this little bout of theirs—the boy was strong, indeed. Nobunaga could not deny that fact. He was forced to view his opponent in a new light—Yuuto was no child. He could not simply *amuse* himself with battling him any longer.

The lad was in no way inferior to any of the opponents Nobunaga had faced in the past—in fact, he might be an even *more* formidable opponent. Yuuto was undoubtedly a powerful adversary.

“We’re the... only ones... left alive...?”

Skáviðr looked around him. He had a wry, ironic grin on his face as he asked this.

At a glance, there looked to be only thirteen of his soldiers left.

It was likely that a portion of the remaining enemy soldiers had managed to escape. At the very least, he couldn’t see any more Flame Clan troops chasing after them.

They’d done a truly *excellent* job.

“Yes, Lord Skáviðr. It is all thanks to how hard you fought.”

“Haha! The opposite, really. I drove you members of the Suicide Squad right to death’s door! The only reason we survived was—*cough cough*—wasn’t because of me... but because we were lucky. That’s all.”

Leaning on the shoulders of one of his sworn children, Skáviðr coughed as he said this, smiling all the while.

He truly believed they’d all been extremely lucky to have survived this far, given how they’d been through battle after battle. It wouldn’t have been strange at all for them to have been killed by now.

They certainly had no obligation to thank him for still being alive.

“Well, you know, the rest...”

Bzzap!

Right as he’d begun to speak, the transceiver at his waist chirped loudly.

Yuuto had given him this precious device himself. No matter how injured he may have been, he had done all in his power to guard the device with his life.

“—! I finally got through! Ská, are you there? Ská?!”

The voice he most wanted to hear right now sputtered out from the transceiver.

“Yes I am, my lord. Have you fared well in the battle? I was concerned for you.”

“You dumb bastard! *I* was the one worrying about *you*! But really, I’m glad to hear that you’re alive. Just what I’d expect from the immortal Skáviðr.”

“Hah...”

Skáviðr couldn’t help but let a laugh slip out when he heard Yuuto’s words.

“I’m back at the Holy Capital already. You hurry up and get yourself back here too.”

“My apologies, my lord—ngh!—I’m afraid that might not be possible...”

“Whoa, hold on there, what was that sound you just made?! Are you injured

or something?!”

There was a strong note of panic in Yuuto’s voice.

Skáviðr tended to pretend he was always fine, especially when he really wasn’t. Yuuto knew he was that sort of man. It was for that reason that he’d realized that something was wrong.

If Skáviðr was letting his pain creep into his voice—something was *really* wrong with him.

“Er, well... It’s embarrassing to say, but my side’s basically been cut open.”

Pressing down on the cut arcing up the left side of his torso, Skáviðr’s face twisted with pain, but also managed to contort into a self-mocking smile.

Surely there was no more shameful way for a warrior to behave.

Regardless of the fact that he’d been in battle after battle today, despite the bleeding and injuries that had left him feeling shaky—he’d never believed that he’d be done in by some cowardly soldier.

“Your side?! Cut open?! Hey! Are you gonna be okay?!”

“It’s a fatal wound, I’m afraid. At the moment, I’m pressing cotton against my flank in an attempt to stanch the bleeding, but—gah!—I don’t think I have much longer...”

“N-No! Don’t give up! Come on back here! You’re supposed to be immortal! If we get you patched up, then...”

“Too late for that, I’m afraid. I think I’ve spilled just a little too much blood... Just remaining conscious has become... quite difficult...”

“We’ll send out a rescue unit right away—”

“No you shall not!”

His sudden shout pained his side, but even so, he gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue speaking.

“You cannot send the uninjured into danger in order to save those who are already dying. It’ll mean all our sacrifices were for *nothing*.”

“But, still—!”

“Hah! To be able to hear your voice in my last moments, my lord, and know that you are safe... That is enough for me to be satisfied. I have no regrets.”

“That’s ridiculous! Don’t say things like that! It’s like you’re telling me goodbye!”

The voice emitting from the transceiver became a bit harder to understand. It sounded as though Yuuto was crying as he spoke.

He, the sworn father he loved from the bottom of his heart, was crying for Skáviðr’s sake. Skáviðr was at peace with that knowledge.

Which was why he could say, with a smile on his face that truly reflected his heart— “Yes, this is indeed goodbye. I have been sincerely glad to have been able to serve you, my lord. Being your sworn brother... was my life’s greatest honor.”

There was not the slightest shred of a lie in these words.

Skáviðr honestly believed that he had been blessed to have served under Yuuto. He felt that he had been extraordinarily lucky to have lived in the same age as him, to have fought alongside him.

Most importantly, he had died protecting his lord—that was the greatest privilege any warrior could ask for.

He could wish for no more.

Filled with emotion, Skáviðr spoke his last words...

“Farewell, my lord. May you be fortunate in the battles to come!”

With that, Skáviðr switched off the transceiver. He did not wish for someone as kind as Yuuto to accompany him all the way unto his death, even if it was only via the device. His pride would never allow for that.

“Return this to Lord Yuuto.”

He handed the transceiver to one of his children.

He had done all that he was meant to. He felt that he could die with no regrets.

“Haha, you came after all... Elín, Iarl. I never thought I’d see you two again.

There’s so much I have to tell you.”

Whispering the names of his beloved wife and child, Skáviðr closed his eyes softly.

Wearing the garments that had earned him the nickname “Death in a Cloak,” on the dead man’s face was a bright, satisfied smile—the smile of a man who had died happy.



EPILOGUE

“Sir, the Flame Clan’s forces have begun retreating again.”

“That so?”

Yuuto replied to Kristina’s report in a voice that sounded nothing like him.

This time, surely, they were *actually* retreating—but the Steel Clan soldiers, who’d just spent a good while *running for their lives*—they no longer possessed the strength to pursue them.

“This was a total defeat, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all, sir. I believe that, strategically speaking, we came out victorious.”

Kristina was quick to shake her head in disagreement at Yuuto’s mumbles of despair.

From an objective perspective, yes, she was probably correct, but Yuuto had lost too much in this fight to accept the outcome of the battle as “victory.”

“Thanks to the efforts of Lord Skáviðr, our losses were slight.”

“Yeah.”

Yuuto’s hands clenched around the katana sheath he was holding.

This was all he had to remember Skáviðr by. One of his children had brought it to him after the battle.

His very soft last words had somehow felt *satisfied*, and somehow, that made Yuuto feel just a little bit better.

Looking back, Yuuto felt that man had been looking for a place to die. In his own way, he’d found himself an appropriate place to meet his end.

Whether or not Yuuto would be able to accept him dying like that, however, was an entirely different story.

“That dumb bastard. Why’d he have to go off and die?! There was still so much I wanted him to teach me...”

To have another person he’d been close to die, right after Rífa had died...

Yuuto bit down hard on his lower lip.

He'd wanted her—he'd wanted *him*—to live.

Even if it turned out he'd never be able to fight again, he'd wanted him to come home, alive.

But that was just a wish that would never be granted. He'd never hear his gloomy voice ever again, and it was all because Yuuto had been *weak*.

If Yuuto had been stronger, none of this would have happened.

"I... I'm going to get stronger! A *lot* stronger!" Yuuto shouted from the bottom of his heart, loud enough to convince even himself.

He'd become strong enough to win against Oda Nobunaga.

Strong enough to bear the weight of knowing that Skáviðr had been willing to *die* for someone like him.

And last of all, but perhaps most importantly, he'd become strong enough to never lose anyone he held dear ever again.

To be continued...

Afterword Hello everyone!

The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar is getting an anime! This calls for a celebration!

I certainly never thought I'd be approached about turning this series into an anime upon the publication of volume fifteen.

Having one of my stories adapted into an anime series was a dream I've had since I first became a light novelist. To see it become a reality is truly moving.

It's all thanks to the continued support of my readers.

Thank you very much!

Anyway, like I said, *The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar* is going to become an anime, and we'll finally get to see Yuuto, Felicia, and Sigrún in action.

After speaking with the anime's production staff, I felt like they were truly passionate about the project and enjoyed the novels upon which the anime will be based.

Be sure not to miss it! I can't wait to see it!

This time around, I'd like to talk about the events of this volume, unusually enough.

I basically never write the actual volume according to the plot outline I've created ahead of time, but I also never deviate from having the story end up where I originally planned it to.

Well, perhaps that's a really obvious thing to say.

It's *because* I want to write a specific climax and ending that I plot in reverse from that desired moment back to the beginning of the volume.

The ending of volume fourteen left us with a girl named Rífa and Mitsuki becoming like two peas in a pod, and I'd practically decided all the parts of that ending of her story at around volume five of the series.

On the other hand, the ending of the current volume became something quite

different from what I had originally imagined.

I'd planned a very different ending for this volume, but a certain character told me that "this is the man I am" and wouldn't stop doing whatever he wanted. What he was doing was pretty cool, however, so I just gave in and wrote him as he wanted.

As such, the events in the volume were quite unexpected, even for me, the author. On the other hand, I actually ended up *exceeding* even my own expectations for how the plot might develop, so I actually ended up liking this entry in the series quite a lot.

We've finally entered the climax of this story.

There's already been *fifteen volumes* of this series—can you believe it? I originally thought up *The Master of Ragnarok* back in January of 2013. It's been five years since then.

Just as one might expect, in order to be a professional novelist, you have to write things that *sell*. It's necessary to strike a balance between writing what you *want* to write and writing things that you know will *sell.* That said, I've got to say that I've pretty much been writing this series almost entirely how I personally would want it to be.

"I want to do this! I want to write that!" I forced myself to put the other series I was writing on hold—*Maou Goroshi no Ryuu Kishi (The Dragon Knight Who Slayed the Demon Lord)*—in order to start writing this one.

I haven't made any compromises here at all for the sake of sales-worthiness—I've filled this series with characters and tropes I enjoy, and I'm quite happy to see the story develop to the point where it's being turned into an anime.

Surely there's not much else than can make a novelist happier, right?

Even now, I tend to think of my debut series, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki (Me, and that Girl's Pandora Box)*, as one that was quite faithful to the established tropes and styles of the time, but I think of *The Master of Ragnarok* as a series that pays even more homage to the novelists that have come before me.

My current plans have me finishing up this story in three more volumes (but it

could go longer), and then after that, one or two extra side story volumes might come out as well.

I'd be very happy for my readers to follow Yuuto to the very end of his story.

Now then, some acknowledgments: To my editors, thank you for all your patience and support. The beef tongue meal you treated me to in Tokyo was delicious!

To Yukisan-sensei, thank you again! It's because *The Master of Ragnarok* had your beautiful illustrations that it was able to be turned into an anime!

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those who worked so hard on the publication of this book as well as its anime adaptation.

Most of all, I am most grateful to you, the reader, for having picked up this book!

Having one's work turned into an anime series is one of the greatest dreams of a light novelist.

Again, the only reason that dream was made possible was because I've had so much support from all of you, my readers. Thank you very much!

I hope you will continue to support me and *The Master of Ragnarok*.

Until then! I hope we may meet again in the next volume.

Seiichi Takayama


Anime adaptation coming!
Thanks for all your support!
-Yukisan
The Master of Ragnarok &
Blesser of Einherjar

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Character Introduction

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

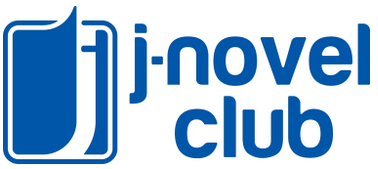
ACT 5

EPILOGUE

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 16 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 15

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Noboru Akimoto & Roko Mobius

Edited by Aaron Brown

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 Seiichi Takayama

Illustrations Copyright © 2018 Yukisan

Cover illustration by Yukisan

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: April 2021

The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

15

