The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

17





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"Heh. Yes, I suppose it can be hard to notice your own faults."
Sigrún covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled.


Homura's eyes narrowed as she looked upon him.
"Hey, Ran? Didn't I tell you before? Don't use difficult words with me!"



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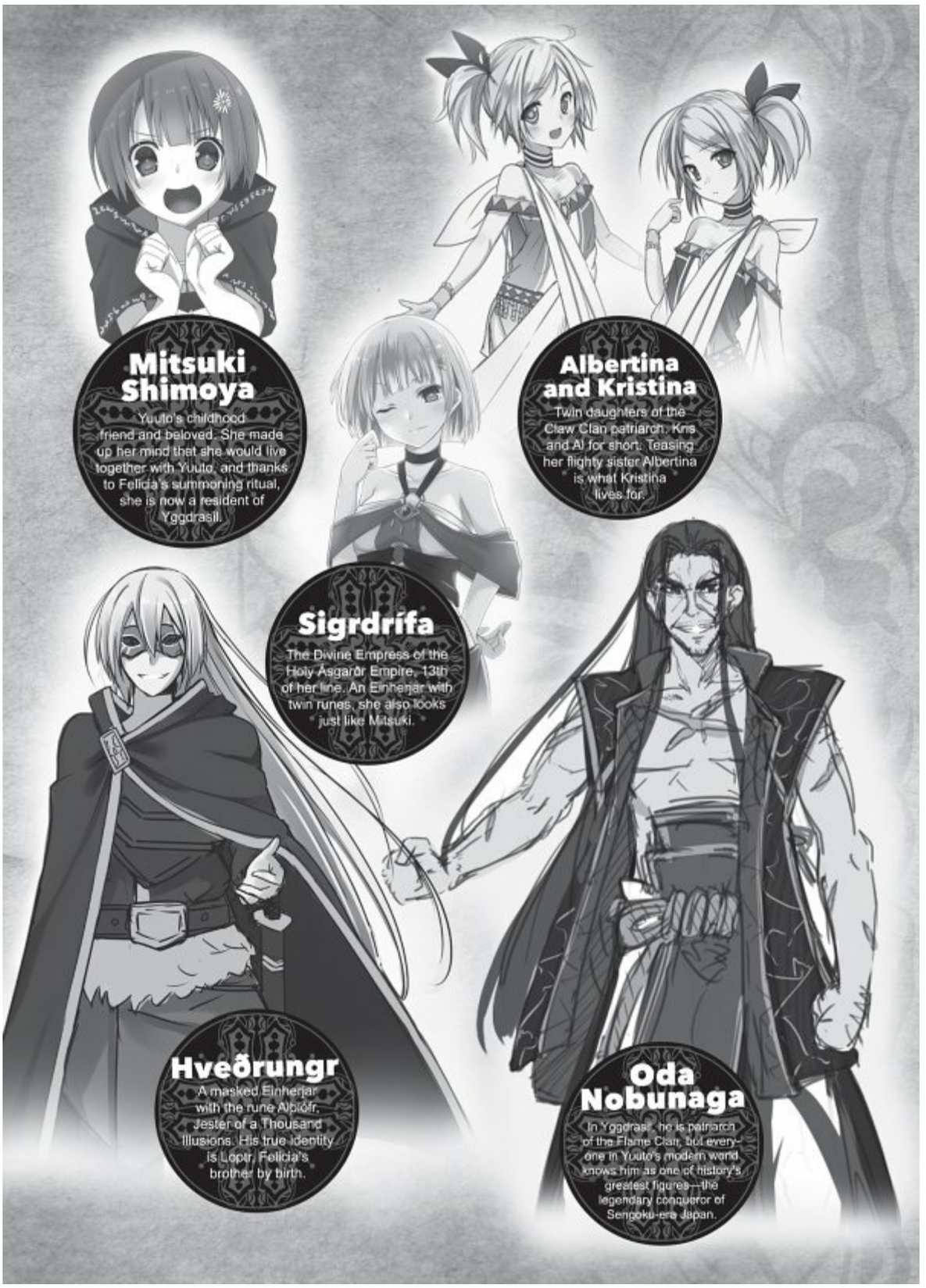
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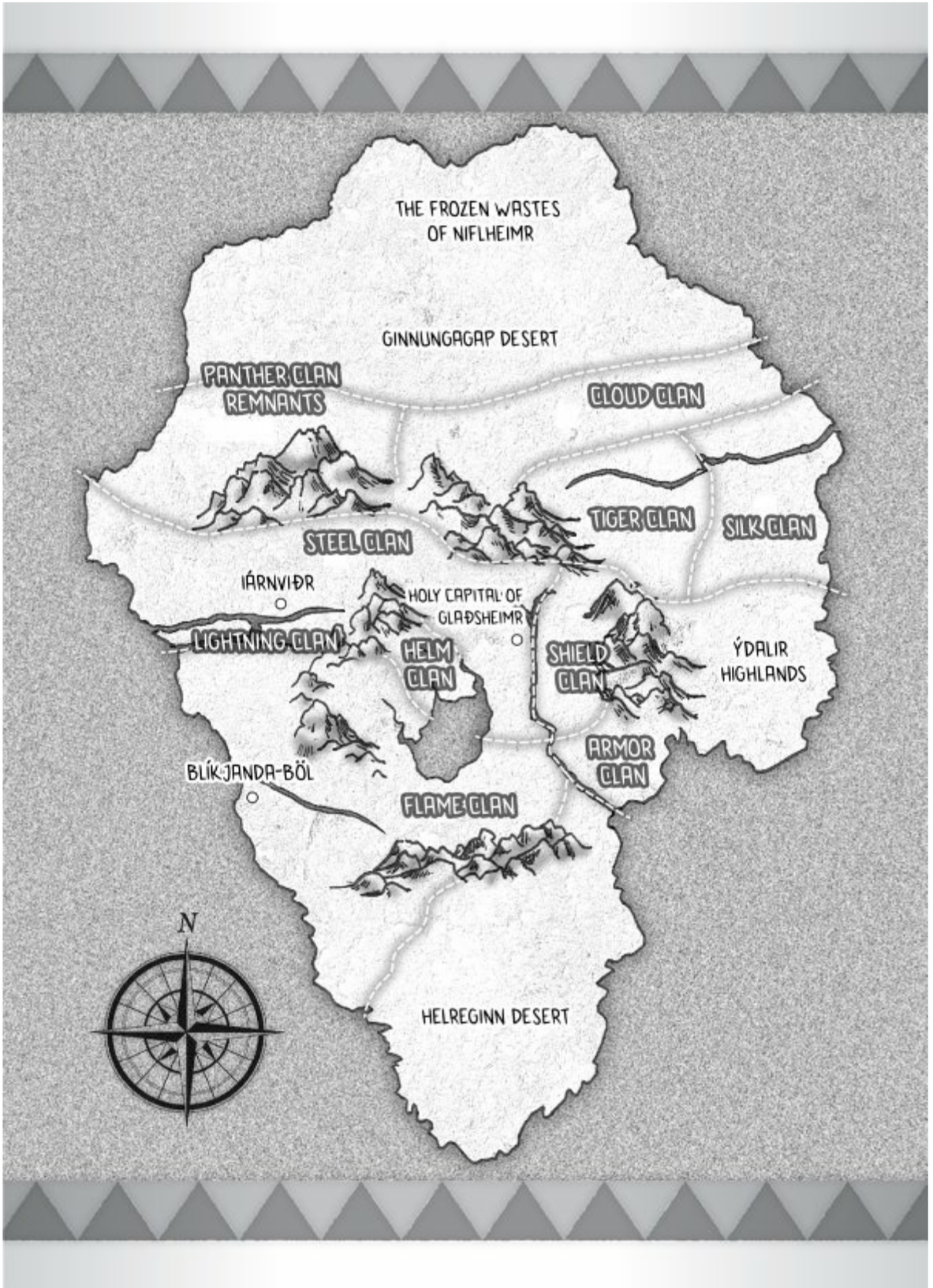
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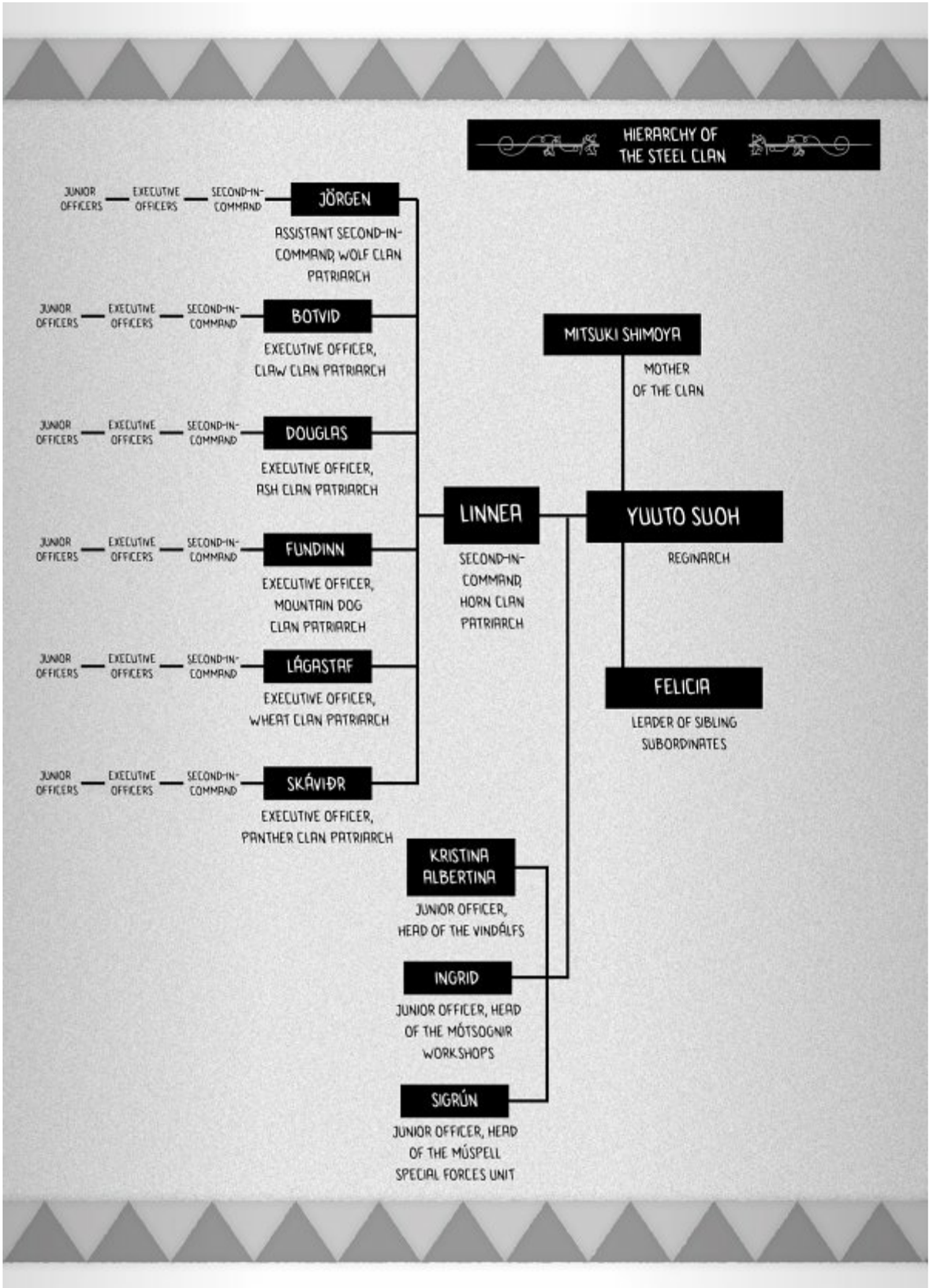
INTERLUDE

AFTERWORD


Characters
Felicia
Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.
Sigrún
Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Mánagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.
Yuuto Suoh
A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. 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 Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.


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


THE FROZEN WASTES
OF NIFLHEIMR
GINNUNGAGAP DESERT
PANTHER CLAN
REMNANTS
CLOUD CLAN
TIGER CLAN
SILK CLAN
STEEL CLAN
IÁRNVIÐR
HOLY CAPITAL OF
GLAÐSHEIMR
LIGHTNING CLAN
HELM
CLAN
SHIELD
CLAN
ÝDALIR
HIGHLANDS
ARMOR
CLAN
BLÍKJANDA-BÖL
FLAME CLAN
N
HELREGINN DESERT


HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN
JUNIOR OFFICERS
EXECUTIVE OFFICERS
SECOND-IN-COMMAND
JÖRGEN
ASSISTANT SECOND-IN-COMMAND, WOLF CLAN PATRIARCH
BOTVID
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CLAW CLAN PATRIARCH
DOUGLAS
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ASH CLAN PATRIARCH
FUNDINN
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, MOUNTAIN DOG CLAN PATRIARCH
LÁGASTAF
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, WHEAT CLAN PATRIARCH
SKÁVIÐR
EXECUTIVE OFFICER, PANTHER CLAN PATRIARCH
MITSUKI SHIMOYA
MOTHER OF THE CLAN
LINNEA
SECOND-IN-COMMAND, HORN CLAN PATRIARCH
YUUTO SUOH
REGINARCH
FELICIA
LEADER OF SIBLING SUBORDINATES
KRISTINA ALBERTINA
JUNIOR OFFICER, HEAD OF THE VINDÁLFS
INGRID
JUNIOR OFFICER, HEAD OF THE MÓTSOGNIR WORKSHOPS
SIGRÚN
JUNIOR OFFICER, HEAD OF THE MÚSPELL SPECIAL FORCES UNIT

PROLOGUE

“What a joyous occasion! The time has come! It’s finally happened?!” Rasmus shouted excitedly, leaning in close upon hearing the news Linnea had shared with him.

“W-Well, um, yes. It seems like that’s the case.” Linnea nodded with a faint smile as she backed away from his rather intense presence. Although she was a bit intimidated at having him loom above her, she was still extremely happy to see his reaction.

“Sniff... Congratulations! I’m truly happy to hear it! No doubt your late father is rejoicing in Valhalla!” Rasmus wiped the tears from his eyes with his arm, voice trembling as he offered his felicitations.

Linnea felt a warmth in her heart as she gently stroked her stomach. It was an extremely wonderful feeling to know there was someone so happy to learn of this child’s conception. For it to be the man who had practically raised her made it all the more meaningful. There was no way Linnea *wouldn’t* be overwhelmed with joy.

“Thanks, Rasmus. For what it’s worth, I think you’re right. I’m sure my father would be pleased.”

“Of course. You’re bearing the child of Yggdrasil’s greatest hero!”

“Oh, um... Well... Honestly, that part’s not that important.”

“Why is that?”

“Even if there was a greater hero than Father... Not that anyone like that exists, but, even if hypothetically there was someone like that... Even then, I would only want to have Father’s children.”

“My! Such love! If only my wife would speak that lovingly of me!”

“Heh, then perhaps you need to show her some vulnerability from time to time.”

“Why would I do something so humiliating...?”

“You can only get your feelings across to others if you actually express them. If the person you love seems like they’re so strong that they’ve got no weaknesses, well, it’s hard to feel needed.”

“O-Oh, I see... Do you truly think that’s the case?”

Rasmus seemed skeptical even as he nodded to Linnea’s observation. It was probably a difficult concept for a man to understand. In particular, it was hard for a man like Rasmus, a talented individual who had been serving as an important member of the Horn Clan since his youth and had always been blessed with having numerous other talented people to support and train himself against.

“Father is a man who feels the pain of his subjects more deeply than anyone, who struggles, who agonizes over every decision, and yet doesn’t let those things break him, and instead pushes forward to do what must be done. Which is exactly why I love him so much and want to be as much solace to him as I can.” Linnea clutched her hand to her chest and gently quirked her lips into a smile. She felt her heart overflow with warmth just thinking about her beloved. Linnea basked in the swathe of wonderful feelings that requited love brought with it.

“It’s hard to believe that a legendary hero like His Majesty would have such struggles... It feels like His Majesty can do whatever he wants, whenever he wants.” Rasmus crossed his arms across his chest and tilted his head, brow furrowed in doubt. A chuckle spilled from Linnea’s lips.

Rasmus’s view was probably the way most people saw Yuuto, which was why no one understood the struggles he went through. No one could sympathize with them or share them. Linnea was proud of the fact that she was one of the few people who could help ease his isolation and lift even the slightest bit of weight off his shoulders. That was just one of the reasons why she loved him. She wanted him to be with her, and she wanted to stand by him.

When she eventually spoke, she decided to chide Rasmus instead.

“Now, now, Rasmus. You sure you’re not treating your wife the same way?”

“Eh? No, no, my wife’s not anything as skilled...”

“That’s not what I mean. You probably think she’s got nothing she struggles with.”

“Well, of course. I’ve done everything I can to make sure she doesn’t have to. I’ve long served as the Second of the Horn Clan and tried to give her everything she needs.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” Linnea shrugged her shoulders, letting out an exaggerated sigh with a wry smile.

Rasmus had fallen into the trap of believing that a luxurious life meant no struggles. Women weren’t as materialistic as men often believed. They needed to feel loved, and they needed to feel needed, otherwise they wound up lonely and anguished even if they lived in the lap of luxury. It was those types of struggles that they wanted the person they loved to understand.

“I’m sure your wife has had her share of struggles, and no doubt she’s done quite a bit for you over the years. Make sure you show her your appreciation from time to time.”

“U-Uh... Certainly. That said, we’ve been together so long that I feel that doing something like that could be awkward... And she might find it suspicious if I suddenly started speaking to her like that...” Rasmus said, scratching at his cheek. He clearly wasn’t enthusiastic about the proposal.

Linnea chuckled with a tone of exasperation. “This is an order from your patriarch. Make sure you do it.”

She made certain to phrase it as an order. Rank had its privileges, and this was the right time for her to make use of them.

ACT 1

Hildegard happily hummed a tune as she groomed her beloved horse. She appeared to be thoroughly enjoying this routine task. There was, of course, a good reason for her jolly mood.

“You seem quite pleased with yourself.”

“Heh, of course! I’m about to be a direct vassal to His Majesty!” Hildegard perkily responded as Sigrún called over to her in passing.

Thanks to her immense contributions to the mountain crossing operations during the Steel Clan’s conquest of the Silk Clan, Sigrún, her mentor, had put in the recommendation needed for Hildegard to achieve her long-held ambition.

“Just do me a favor and don’t let your happiness cloud your judgment. Remember that any blunders on your part reflect on all of the Múspells.”

“Yes ma’am, I knooow!”

“I’m not so sure.” Sigrún sighed and pressed her left palm against her forehead. Her right hand was currently bandaged with a medicinal poultice.

“Oh, does that still hurt?”

“Mm? It’s mostly fine now. It only hurts when I try to move it.” Sigrún glared with irritation as she looked upon her bandaged hand. She had injured her right hand in the final battle with the Silk Clan. When facing off against the enemy patriarch, a horse had run amok, catching Sigrún’s hand in the process. Fortunately, it seemed to have only been a strain, rather than a broken bone, but it had still swelled up painfully when she had first injured it.

“Okay. It’s probably best that you get a little more rest then. Oh, such a pity. I feel like I’m going to be out of practice without you to train against, Mother Rún.” In sharp contrast to her words, Hildegard’s tone was light and joyful. She had, after all, suffered a hellishly difficult training regimen under Sigrún over

the past year, and because she was an Einherjar, she was forced to spar solely against Sigrún, piling up loss after loss in a humiliating string of defeats.



However, with Sigrún out with an injury, the training regimen had eased up somewhat, and on top of that, she was able to overwhelm her replacement sparring partners. It was a good time to be in Hildegard's shoes, and that happy period was evidently going to last a while longer. Hildegard was extremely pleased with the combination of a lighter training schedule and the fact she was going to receive Yuuto's direct Chalice. However...

"I see. Then that's perfect. Come train with me."

"Huh? B-But... Mother Rún, you can't hold a sword with that hand."

"That's exactly why I need to train," Sigrún said with a tone of unshakable conviction and grabbed Hildegard by the collar, dragging her along.

"Wha?! Whaaaaaa?!"

Hildegard's happy days were short-lived.

"Phew. Seems like we've finally gotten things settled." Yuuto let out a loud sigh as he sat on the throne in the former Tiger Clan capital of Gastropnir.

It had been fortunate that they had captured the Silk Clan patriarch in the recent border battle. Had she escaped and made it back to the Silk Clan's territory, it would have complicated matters immensely.

"It'd be nice if they'd just surrender now, but..."

In Yggdrasil's clan system, the Second would assume control of the clan when the patriarch was no longer present. The current Silk Clan patriarch, Utgarda, had garnered a reputation as a tyrannical and cruel leader. He could easily imagine her Second finding a suitable excuse to banish her and assume the reins.

"What do you think? I want your opinion." Yuuto glanced over at the young woman standing in the corner of the room. She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen years of age, and she was notable for her blazing crimson hair.

Though she was dressed in the simple garb of a commoner, she had extremely beautiful facial features, and there was a faint air of elegance and

refinement to her bearing. However, in stark contrast to that, there was a collar around her neck with a rope attached to it, and there were also iron weighted shackles around both of her ankles to prevent her from escaping or putting up any form of resistance.

This young woman was none other than Utgarda herself, the very same patriarch that the Steel Clan had captured in their recent battle with the Silk Clan.

“None of the leadership of the clan, starting with the Vizier Velde, as well as any of his underlings, have any amount of courage, Your...Majesty. We believe... Pardon... I believe they’ll quickly cave to any demands for their surrender.” Utgarda spoke awkwardly, catching herself as she struggled to maintain a respectful tone. She had been born a princess, so it was rather unlikely that she had ever needed to address someone above her own station. She could, perhaps, be forgiven for her slipup, but her *master* had other ideas.

“Watch your tone!”

Smack!

“Eeep!” The crack of Kristina’s whip against her bottom elicited an oddly cute squeak out of Utgarda.

“Father. I apologize for not properly disciplining my slave.”

“Grr!”

Utgarda bit down on her lip, tears welling in her eyes as she rubbed the mark on her sore rear, as Kristina bowed her head apologetically to Yuuto. By order of the þjóðann, Utgarda had already been stripped of her title of patriarch and been reduced to her current position as Kristina’s slave.



Based on her expression and demeanor, she was clearly not happy with her treatment, but evidently, she really dreaded the notion of being executed, so for the moment she was at least pretending to be a respectful slave.

“Don’t overdo it. Her status as a slave is temporary,” Yuuto surreptitiously whispered to Kristina in a tone too soft for Utgarda to hear. Kristina chuckled at Yuuto’s comment.

“You’re so compassionate, Father. I think this is a worthy punishment for her.”

“Well, yeah, but...” Yuuto shrugged with a dry laugh.

As far as the Steel Clan leadership understood it, Utgarda had often vented her frustrations on her sworn children with her whip at the slightest provocation and even occasionally lashed out at innocent subordinates just to sate her sadistic whims. In that sense, her current status was karmic justice.

Yuuto wasn’t usually a fan of taking measures such as this act of forced servitude, or of slavery in general for that matter, but he made the decision to enslave Utgarda in the hope of reforming her. She was still young, after all. He hoped that by experiencing the life of the very people she had abused and subjected to unjust treatment, she might regret her own excesses and find a sense of humility and compassion.

“Ah! A chance!” Suddenly, Utgarda’s gaze took on a supernatural gleam, and she leaped at Yuuto with cat-like agility. She moved so quickly it was hard to believe she had weighted shackles on her ankles. It was all going so well, until...

With an exasperated look, Kristina yanked at the leash in her hand.

“Guh!” The sudden tug at the collar around her throat killed Utgarda’s momentum, and she croaked like a toad that someone had stepped on.

“Yah!”

“Oof!”

Felicia quickly grabbed Utgarda’s arm, circled behind her, and wrestled her to the ground. It all unfolded in the blink of an eye.

While Felicia ordinarily dealt with paperwork as Yuuto's adjutant, she was still an Einherjar, and given that she was also tasked with serving as Yuuto's bodyguard, she maintained a strict training regimen to stay in shape. It was easy to forget about her strength given the sheer quantity of accomplished Einherjars serving the Steel Clan, but Felicia was a powerful warrior in her own right.

"You dare attempt to attack Big Brother. That's overstepping just a little too much."

"Aaaaaaagh!"

Utgarda let out a shrill scream of pain as Felicia bent the arm in her grip into an unnatural angle. Felicia seemed unconcerned by Utgarda's scream, however, and her lips curled into a cold smile.

"Oh boy..." Yuuto covered his face with his hand and sighed.

Felicia was usually calm and friendly, but she was ruthless in dealing with people who insulted or tried to harm Yuuto.

"That reminds me. I'm told you ordered your soldiers to constantly spew insults about Big Brother."

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts! Please forgive me! I couldn't help myself!" Utgarda's screams continued to echo throughout the office. The screams that rang out from behind the closed door made those who approached the door with matters for the þjóðann turn straight around and wait for a more peaceful moment.

"So, why did you attack Father?" Kristina asked as she knelt in front of the pinned Utgarda. She spoke calmly, but that calmness exuded a cold, mechanical detachment that was unnerving.

"Erm..." Utgarda turned away awkwardly. It was obvious she had acted on little more than a whim, but Kristina wasn't one to simply let it rest at that.

"Okay then, let me give you the proper motivation. Here."

"Ahahahahahahahaha! I-It t-tickles! Ahahahahahaha! S-Stop! Please stop!"

With her arm held down by Felicia, Utgarda's flank was wide open. Kristina mercilessly exploited that opening, and Utgarda began to squirm while letting out a tortured laugh. Evidently, she was extremely ticklish. However, with Felicia pinning her down, she could do nothing to escape the torrent of tickling.

"I'll talk! I'll talk! I'll talk, so please stop!"

"Right then. Go ahead and speak."

"...Y-You won't be angry if I do?"

"I won't be angry."

"R-Really?"

"Yes."

Kristina smiled gently down at Utgarda. People who knew Kristina well could tell at a glance that there wasn't a trace of sincerity behind that smile, but Utgarda hadn't known Kristina long enough to see through the facade. It didn't help that Utgarda was probably desperate to cling to even the faintest glimmer of hope either. She gave in immediately.

"I-I couldn't handle being a slave anymore... S-So I was going to take him...err, I mean, His Majesty, hostage, and thought that maybe I could use him as a shield to escape. I mean, he was wide open and I've heard he goes easy on women, so I thought maybe if I failed, he wouldn't kill me."

Utgarda confessed everything. Yuuto let out a breath of admiration. He'd thought that her actions were extremely reckless and rash given how badly she had clung to life, but he was impressed by how well-thought-out her plan had been.

"For such stupid reasons...?!"

"Aaaaaaagh! Y-You said you wouldn't be mad!"

"I did, yes, but I said nothing about Aunt Felicia."

"Y-You fooled... Agghaaaaah! It hurts! It hurts! You're going to break my arm! My arm won't bend that way!"

"Let's go ahead and break this naughty arm of yours, shall we?" Felicia said

with a cold smile.

Yuuto felt that her expression at that moment resembled that of her brother, Hveðrungr, but Yuuto kept that observation to himself. It was a wise decision.

“Now, now, Aunt Felicia, I understand your anger, but I ask for your forgiveness. Can you let her go? I’ll handle it from here.”

“...Very well.”

Felicia and Kristina exchanged glances, and after a moment, Felicia appeared to have read something in Kristina’s gaze and hesitantly let go of Utgarda.

“Phew. That was awful.” Utgarda let out a sigh of relief and stood up, rubbing her sore arm.

“Now, let’s be off,” Kristina said as she tugged on the leash attached to Utgarda’s collar.

“Huh? To where?”

“To give you a lesson, of course. It’s a master’s duty to discipline her slave.”

“Huh?! B-But you said you wouldn’t be angry...”

“I’m not angry at all. But, see, I need to punish a disobedient slave as an example to the others. Surely you understand this? Don’t worry. I’ll be gentle in disciplining you.”

“Noooo! Please don’t discipline me anymore! Please, no more! I beg you!”

Utgarda trembled in terror. Yuuto was morbidly curious just what disciplining Utgarda would entail, but there were some things that were best left unknown.

“Hehehe. You know, you attacked Father, so ordinarily, the punishment would be death. Do you realize that?”

“Urrgh... But, but... I still don’t want that! Noooooo! Please! Somebody! Help me!”

Utgarda’s screams grew fainter as Kristina dragged her off by her leash. Yuuto put his hands together in prayer as she vanished out of sight. There was a part of him that pitied her ever so slightly.

“She deserves everything she’s getting!”

“Heh. Well, yeah, I guess rehabilitation is still a ways off.”

Felicia was right and Yuuto could only offer a dry laugh in response.

“I doubt that *brat* can understand the value and depth of your compassion, Big Brother. No doubt she’ll try something like this again. We should execute her and get it over with!” Felicia said as she puffed out her cheeks in frustration. It appeared that she was still rather angry.

“Maybe. But let’s let it play out for a while longer. I know I’m going easy on her, but, well...” Yuuto shrugged with a self-deprecating snort. People don’t change that easily—he was well aware of that. Still, he couldn’t help but see a part of himself in Utgarda, and he wanted to give her a chance to reform. He knew he was simply indulging in sentimentality, but...

“If that’s what you wish, Big Brother.” Felicia finally backed down, albeit with a reluctantly sour look.

While the pair were ordinarily polar opposites in terms of personality, Felicia and Sigrún were similar in that respect. Sigrún, too, had been enraged at the insults hurled at Yuuto by the Silk Clan.

“Let’s leave Utgarda to Kris and get back to the subject at hand.” With that, Yuuto returned his attention to the map in front of him. He was focused on the shoreline that made up the Silk Clan’s eastern border.

“Our real objective isn’t the absorption or conquest of the Silk Clan in particular, but rather to secure this area in general.”

Yuuto needed ports on the eastern coast of Yggdrasil to successfully execute his Europe Emigration Plan. Winning the war, capturing the enemy patriarch, and expanding his territories were all meaningless if he couldn’t secure that coast.

“Utgarda made it sound like they’ll accept our calls for surrender, but considering the threat of the Flame Clan, even the slightest delay can be costly.”

“Yes, true.” Felicia nodded with a tense expression. Given that she had served alongside Yuuto as his adjutant in their battles against the Flame Clan, she understood the threat posed by them.

“I want to advance as quickly as possible. It’ll put more pressure on the Silk Clan leadership. I know it’ll be more work for you, but can I leave it in your hands?”

“For your sake, Big Brother, I would happily do so.” Felicia pressed her hand to her chest and smiled. Her expression said it all. There was no trace of reluctance in her features, just happiness that she could be of use to Yuuto.

“Oh, but...” Felicia pressed her index finger to her lips and paused as if in thought.

“Mm, what?” Yuuto tensed as he wondered if there were obstacles he hadn’t foreseen. Every minute was precious. He was willing to make whatever concessions he needed to accomplish his task.

“You will reward me later, yes?” With that, Felicia gave Yuuto a suggestive gaze. Yuuto knew full well what she meant, which was why he decided to make that concession right then and there.

“We’ve gotten word from the spy we sent to investigate the Jötunheimr region. The Steel Clan Army has resumed its eastward advance.”

“I see.” Upon hearing the report from his Second, Ran, the man nodded while resting his head in his palm. He was a rather rare specimen in Yggdrasil—a man with black hair and black eyes. The countless scars that crisscrossed his body spoke of the battlefields he had seen throughout his life. Despite being over sixty years of age, his voice and his gaze were full of life, and a casual observer would be forgiven for thinking he was still in his mid-forties.

The man’s name was Oda Nobunaga. This was the very same revolutionary hero who had blazed a trail of conquest during Japan’s Warring States Period, and after arriving in Yggdrasil through a strange twist of fate, had risen to become the patriarch of the Flame Clan, a clan that under his leadership had grown into a mighty behemoth that was rivaled only by the Steel Clan in size and influence.

“So it would appear that he’ll be occupied over there for quite some time.”

“Yes. No doubt he believes we cannot act until our autumn harvest.”

“That’s a reasonable stance to take. Ordinarily, that *would* be the case.” With that comment, Nobunaga quirked his lips into a grin. After all, he had already figured out how to resolve his issues surrounding supplies. Of course, it wasn’t due to his own cunning, but rather thanks to his daughter Homura’s abilities. No matter how strange the idea, how supernatural the concept, or how unnerving the source, Nobunaga would take advantage of it if it was useful. That flexible mind lay at the very core of who Oda Nobunaga was.

“Then we move. We’ll start by taking down the lightly defended western regions of their territory.” Nobunaga slapped his folded fan against a point on the map. The runic script on the map described the location as Gimlé—the capital of the Steel Clan.

“Heh. Sure, that young lad’s known for being as quick as lightning, but will he make it back in time, I wonder...?”

A foundational pillar of military strategy was to make certain to exploit an opponent’s weaknesses. Ordinarily, it would take at least two months to bring an army from Jötunheimr back to Álfheimr. There was no reason for the Flame Clan to wait for Yuuto to do so. If Yuuto couldn’t make it back in time, then Nobunaga fully intended to take that opportunity to conquer Gimlé.

Nobunaga already considered the young man his equal; a powerful rival that he couldn’t afford to underestimate in the slightest. Nobunaga bared his canines in a predatory grin. “No holds barred this time. I’ll crush you beneath the weight of my armies, Yuuto!”

The city of Bilskírnir was once the thriving capital of the Lightning Clan. Now, however, the city was home to the Flame Clan’s Fifth Division. The head of this garrison was Kuuga, a man who occupied the fifth-highest ranked position within the Flame Clan.

“Father! We’ve received a letter from the Great Lord!”

“...I see.”

Facing the letter brought by his child, Kuuga furrowed his brow and felt his stomach twist into knots. The sight of the rolled-up correspondence before him reminded him of the blisteringly angry letter he had received after the recent

Battle of Glaðsheimr.

Summarized, the letter read:

Why did you not attack the western territories of the Steel Clan, starting with their capital of Gimlé, even though their forces had been sent to reinforce Glaðsheimr?!

As commander of the Fifth Division, you should have the ability to judge the situation appropriately!

Just what in the blazes were you doing? Were you blind?!

The sheer rage that radiated from the page in front of him was enough to make Kuuga tremble in his boots. “I hope it’s not another dressing down...”

With a sigh, Kuuga took the letter and opened it. To him, Nobunaga was a figure of dread. He constantly demanded the highest standards from his generals, and if the general failed to produce the desired results, he was quick to demote the offending general. Even in the meritocratic society of Yggdrasil, Nobunaga prized ability and results above all else.

In the Flame Clan’s recent campaign against the Steel Clan, Kuuga had only been following his strict orders to protect the Vanaheimr region at all costs, but that had resulted in him being chastised for his inaction. However, he couldn’t move his forces as he was deathly afraid of disobeying Nobunaga’s strict orders. Despite that, Nobunaga demanded the flexibility to adapt to a situation as it unfolded. For Kuuga, who sought nothing more than stability and peace of mind, Nobunaga was a difficult father who kept him in a constant state of tension.

“What word comes from the Great Lord?” Kuuga’s child asked after his father had read through the letter.

Kuuga shrugged his shoulders helplessly and said, “We’ve been ordered to attack Gimlé in concert with Shiba.”

“I see. So the time is finally here!”

“Yes... So it seems,” Kuuga said with a nod, but he appeared less than enthusiastic about the demand. He had already been given advance notice of

the invasion of Gimlé and his forces were ready. Despite this, though, Kuuga felt responsibility weighing heavily on his shoulders. Upon noticing his downcast demeanor, his child offered a dry laugh.

“Father, let’s consider this a fresh start. If anything, it’s a great chance to rebuild your reputation.”

“True. But the thought of fighting alongside *him* just...” Kuuga spat out bitterly.

“Oh, right...” his child responded, following up with a nod of understanding.

The second-ranked Flame Clan general and Assistant Second, Shiba, was Kuuga’s younger brother by blood. In terms of their position as sworn children of Nobunaga, Shiba, the younger brother by ten years, was ranked above Kuuga, and as a result, Kuuga had to treat him as the older sibling. It was well known within the Flame Clan that Kuuga found the arrangement uncomfortable and depressing.

“The mere thought of having to bow my head to him and follow his orders...! Ugh, it makes me sick to my stomach!” Kuuga’s voice was filled with bitterness as his face twisted into a scowl. He then began to chew on his thumbnail.

“I certainly understand how you feel, Father, but we don’t exactly have any real choice in the matter since it comes as an order from the Great Lord himself.”

“I know that! But I still don’t want to do it! Damn it all! I despise serving under him!”

“In that case... Why not just finish things before Uncle Shiba even gets here?” the sworn child suggested.

“Wait... What did you just say?!” Kuuga turned back to his child with an expression of shock, as though the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “D-Don’t be ridiculous. The Great Lord ordered us to attack alongside Shiba...”

“But you were chastised by him for following his orders to the letter and focusing solely on defense, right?”

“Well, that’s...”

“I’ve never met the Great Lord myself, but it’s said that so long as you produce results, he’ll overlook most things.”

Kuuga fell into a troubled silence as the words struck a chord with him. His brother Shiba, for example, would often address Nobunaga as though he was his equal, and there were plenty of times in which Shiba was late for war council meetings because he was so caught up in his training. In response, Nobunaga simply laughed off Shiba’s seeming disrespect and even gave him the position of Assistant Second. Following this, he ordered Kuuga, the one who had always acted respectfully around Nobunaga, to accept Shiba as his superior and sworn older brother. The reason for that was because Shiba was the most decorated of the Flame Clan’s generals.

“Most of the Steel Clan’s army and their best commanders are off in the east, right? Then by all accounts, we don’t need any assistance from Uncle Shiba’s forces. We can handle this ourselves.”

“...You’re right.” Kuuga rubbed his chin and fell into thought.

The Flame Clan’s Fifth Division stationed in Bilskírnir numbered about thirteen thousand, so he could spare perhaps ten thousand for an offensive. That would be enough to take down Gimlé if he played his cards right.

“I probably need to show some results soon, or I might be in trouble.” Kuuga’s expression twitched and he murmured to himself with a tense voice. Kuuga had yet to produce any worthwhile results on the battlefield. In the campaign against the Lightning Clan, he had been forced to retreat in the face of Steinþórr’s powerful assault. Then, during the Glaðsheimr campaign, he had been ordered to protect the home front, and by focusing entirely on defense, he had earned Nobunaga’s displeasure.

It bore repeating that Nobunaga put results above all else. He had no hesitation about getting rid of those who couldn’t produce them.

If Kuuga simply waited for Shiba’s arrival like in his orders, then Shiba, the so-called Berserker General, was likely to take all of the credit for any success. In that case, Kuuga’s position as army commander would be at risk. There was a strong chance that he’d be recalled due to his lack of accomplishments as a commander. In truth, there had been plenty of Flame Clan generals who had

been relieved under those circumstances, having been judged incompetent. Kuuga swallowed to get rid of the lump that had formed in his throat.

“The Great Lord has always said that in war, reckless haste is all-important. This may be the moment of truth for me.”

Yes, Kuuga couldn’t help but think that this was the exact situation that called for that sort of judgment. After all, they needed to settle the matter before the Steel Clan Army’s main body arrived. If anything, the faster they took Gimlé, the better. Kuuga had made his decision.

“Very well! The Fifth Division will advance! We’ll finish this before Shiba even gets here!”

“...So what Father dreaded has come to pass,” Linnea murmured to herself, folding her hands together in front of her mouth.

While she was only seventeen years old and still had traces of girlish youth to her appearance, she had been groomed in the ways of governing by her birth father from a young age, and she was reputed as a master of the art of politics with few equals. Yuuto had valued her talents to the point where he had appointed her as the Second of the Steel Clan, and she was currently governing the Steel Clan territories from the capital of Gimlé in his stead.

“The Flame Clan was supposed to be short on food. Just how did they get around that shortage?” Linnea sighed as she gazed down at a single sheet of paper on her desk. The report sitting there noted that a Flame Clan Army force of around ten thousand had set off from Bilskírnir and began its march eastward.

The Flame Clan Army had suffered a massive loss of foodstuffs during the Glaðsheimr campaign thanks to the Múspell Unit, led by Sigrún, taking the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl in a blitzkrieg and making off with their recent harvest. They shouldn’t have been able to conduct any sort of large-scale military operations.

“Perhaps they’ve attacked out of desperation and in the hope of pillaging for supplies?” the older man sitting across from her on the other side of the desk answered. His name was Rasmus. He was a man who had once served as the

Horn Clan's Second, and now, after retiring from the frontlines due to his age and accumulated injuries, supported Linnea as her Leader of Subordinates and senior adviser.

"It would be nice if that were the case," Linnea said with a dry laugh.

Throughout the ages, it had been common for a starving country to invade a neighbor to try to plunder enough food to survive. The Steel Clan had already assigned troops to the fortresses along the Flame Clan border and had reinforced those fortresses to ward off any raiding Flame Clan forces. Of course, given that the bulk of the Steel Clan Army was currently in Jötunheimr, the garrisons currently stationed in the forts were hardly ideal. Even so, they were prepared enough to withstand a Flame Clan attack for at least a month if they focused entirely upon defense. If Rasmus was correct, the enemy would run out of food during their assault, and their soldiers would either start dying of starvation or desert, and their army would quickly collapse under its own weight.

"But the enemy, like Father, is a man from the land beyond the heavens. Underestimating him is a very dangerous thing to do."

"And by that, you mean to say that you believe they also have a significant stockpile of food themselves."

"Yeah. I don't think we lose anything with that assumption." Linnea nodded with a tense expression.

Overestimating their enemy might lead to wasted effort and money, and sure, that would be a costly mistake to make in itself. After all, those resources could have been spent more efficiently elsewhere. However, the damage from underestimating the enemy could be catastrophic by comparison. They were facing an opponent who had repelled Suoh-Yuuto, the god of war. If it turned out that they ended up overestimating the enemy's forces and wasted their effort and money as a result, it was a low price to pay to buy some peace of mind.

"Heh. You've certainly grown into the role," Rasmus said with a pleased smile. His gaze was gentle, as though he were looking at a young relative.

"Hrmph. Flattery won't get you anything." Linnea snorted and turned her

eyes back to her paperwork. One could, however, notice a faint blush to her cheeks.

Rasmus had known Linnea since she was still growing in her mother's womb, and after the death of her father Hrungnir, he had been her caretaker and guardian. She appreciated, trusted, and respected him from the bottom of her heart. Having someone like him praise her growth was something that made Linnea's heart almost burst with joy, but she was a bit too shy to honestly say that aloud.

"There is certainly no point in offering you flattery, Princess. It's how I honestly feel. You've truly grown into a great leader."

"If you really think that, then maybe you can stop calling me 'Princess'?" Linnea said as she glared at Rasmus.

In the past, she had resented him for addressing her in that way. It made her feel as though he was treating her like a child. She knew he meant it lovingly, but that didn't change the fact that she found it irritating.

"Hahaha. I'm afraid this is something I cannot change."

"Why are you all so stubborn about this one thing?! You and Haugspori both!"

"Well, I'm afraid it's because you are our princess, Princess."

"What does that even mean...?" Linnea slumped her shoulders with a sigh. She couldn't understand their fixation with calling her that.

"Heh, very well. Once your child is born, we'll think of a new way of addressing you, Princess. After all, calling your daughter 'Princess' as well would be quite confusing."

"Hold on! Does that mean if I have a son, you'll still call me 'Princess'?!"

Upon hearing Linnea's comment, Rasmus burst into rambunctious laughter.

"At least deny it!"

"Well, that just means you should have many children," Rasmus retorted.

"You make it sound so simple. I mean, sure, I'd like to have lots of children with Father, but..."

“Hahaha, it’s good to see that you have such a loving relationship. Then, for the sake of you having more children, we’ll have to do something about this Flame Clan invasion, won’t we?”

“Certainly.” Linnea nodded in agreement.

The future Rasmus wanted was also one that Linnea hoped for. But that future wouldn’t arrive until the current crisis was averted.

“However, with so many of our clan’s troops occupied in the east, things here could get rather difficult.”

“Well, Father left behind a contingency plan just in case. We’ll use that,” Linnea said tensely after swallowing the lump in her throat.

Rasmus widened his eyes. “Oh? From His Majesty? Well, that *is* like him. It comes as no surprise he would have foreseen this possibility. Well, based on your expression, Princess, it would seem it’s another wild scheme like when we dealt with Steinþórr.”

“Yeah, Father’s plans are always ridiculous, but this one is even more so than usual.” Linnea nodded with a dry laugh and began describing the contingency plan. The contents of the contingency plan were such that even with Linnea’s warning, Rasmus found himself in complete, shocked silence upon hearing it.

ACT 2

The Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr was the capital of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire and the largest city in Yggdrasil, boasting a population of over one hundred thousand people. While the authority of the Empire itself had waned over the preceding two centuries, the city had remained the center of Yggdrasil's culture. However, it was also a city with a shadowy underbelly, where those who sought to lay claim to the authority of the þjóðann for their own ends engaged in a constant web of schemes and conspiracies. Further, it had also been the object of desire for the Arms and Armor Clans, with the blood of countless soldiers spilled in efforts to control the city. Currently, the man with the responsibility to protect this city—the crown jewel of the empire—was Jörgen, the Steel Clan's Assistant Second and the current Wolf Clan patriarch.

"The Flame Clan is back at its old tricks, it seems," Jörgen, sitting at the head of the round table, spat out bitterly as he scratched at his bald head. He was already well past the age of forty, but he was still quite the physical specimen, with a large, muscular physique. Jörgen also bore scars on his brow and cheek, and he appeared every bit the part of the burly, uncouth warrior. In stark contrast to his appearance, however, he was known as a caring, thoughtful leader and was well-liked by his subordinates, which was why Yuuto had tapped him to serve as governor of the city in his absence.

"A Flame Clan force numbering around ten thousand has started to advance eastward from Bilskírnir in the west. Their target is probably Gimlé itself. Additionally, reports are coming from the old Spear Clan capital of Mímir that suggest that there is a constant stream of supplies flowing into the city."

The picture that the available information painted was clear. The Flame Clan had somehow managed to solve their food shortage, which meant it was only a matter of time before the Flame Clan Army once again advanced upon the Holy Capital.

“How did they manage it...? I can’t even begin to think of what they must have done to pull that off.”

“His Majesty’s foresight in anticipating this development is also impressive,” Fagrahvél, the Patriarch of the Sword Clan and the general tasked to assist Jörgen in the defense of Glaðsheimr, said in response. She possessed the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—the Rune of Kings—and along with her reputation as a skilled general, she was one of Jörgen’s most trusted lieutenants at this juncture.

“Of coooourse, he alsoooo said that he would haaaave preferrred to be wrooong,” Bára, the Sword Clan’s Assistant Second and strategist, said in her languid lilt. She was another of the generals Yuuto had tasked with the defense of Glaðsheimr, and though it was hard to imagine given her demeanor, she was one of the three greatest military minds in all of Yggdrasil.

“Well, in my experience, it’s usually when you’ve got a bad feeling something might happen that it actually does. Nothing to do about it now that it’s happened. Complaining won’t change the reality. May as well come up with measures to deal with it.”

“That would be the best course of action.”

“Agreeeed.”

Fagrahvél and Bára nodded their agreement with Jörgen’s observation.

Most people tended to try to look away from unpleasant truths through some desperate desire to keep bad news hidden. That behavior wasn’t simply limited to the simpleminded or the incompetent—even those with exceptional abilities could easily fall into the same trap.

However, these three had long since moved past that impulse. They had quickly accepted the reality of their situation and moved on to looking for a solution. No doubt that was partly helped by their experience interacting with someone like Yuuto, who left the shattered remnants of conventional wisdom in his wake. The truth of the matter was that they were used to the unexpected by now.

“Shall we be executing *that* contingency plan?” Fagrahvél asked tersely. Her

expression was tense, her brows knitted in concern.

“Yes, that’s the idea. This danger is, viewed another way, an excellent opportunity.”

“It’s as you say... However...” From the tone she spoke in, Fagrahvél apparently remained unconvinced. Jörgen looked at her sympathetically and sighed.

“I understand your reservations, but this is all following Father’s orders.”

“...Yes sir.”

Jörgen’s blunt declaration appeared to have settled the matter for Fagrahvél. Instead of the concern that was just previously upon it, her face took on an expression tinged with sadness.

“This is certainly quite the troublesome situation to find ourselves in. Those two men from the land beyond the heavens seem to take a perverse pleasure in overturning all our expectations.”

“Quite! But it’s nothing new.” Jörgen nodded sympathetically, then laughed it off.

He had supported Yuuto ever since the young boy had been the Wolf Clan patriarch. It was no stretch of the imagination to believe that he had regularly been forced to go along with Yuuto’s often outlandish thought processes. He was probably the one most used to the ridiculous developments he brought about within the Steel Clan. He was, in that sense, the most dependable man to have in charge in a situation where so much seemed to be unreadable.

“A-A-Achoo!”

“Oh dear, Big Brother. Have you caught a cold? I’m told summer colds can linger. Allow me to prepare—”

“Oh, it’s fine. Just something in my nose, I think.” Yuuto waved off Felicia’s note of concern. He didn’t feel any particular congestion or any other symptoms that would indicate that he had come down with a cold. It was probably just dust or something similar.

“Never mind that. If anything, it’s pretty damn hot.” Yuuto furrowed his brow as he fanned himself with his hand. It was now the middle of summer in Yggdrasil, and the sticky humidity in the heated air was extremely uncomfortable.

“Yes, it’s certainly gotten hot.”

“It’s almost lunch. Why don’t we take a break?”

“Yes, I believe that would be best.” Felicia nodded and sent word to the soldiers outside of the covered wagon.

Currently, the Steel Clan Army led by Yuuto was advancing from the Tiger Clan capital of Gastropnir to the Silk Clan capital of Útgarðar. However, Yuuto still had a nagging feeling that the Flame Clan might be up to something. He wanted to hurry his advance along, but if he forced his soldiers to march and had them collapse through exhaustion as a result of the current heat, he would just be shooting himself in the foot. Haste makes waste indeed.

“Pardon me for interrupting your rest, Father.” As Yuuto got off his wagon and stretched to get the cramps out of his sore body, Sigrún called to him from behind.

Sigrún’s Múspell Unit was one of the rare units in Yggdrasil that was made up entirely of mounted cavalry. They were assigned to serve as scouts when the army was on the march to take full advantage of their impressive mobility. He turned to face her, thinking she was presenting a scouting report, but his eyes widened in surprise at what he saw instead.

“Wha?! What happened, Rún?!”

“Hm? Oh, this?” Sigrún tilted her head quizzically for a moment in confusion before she placed her hand against the bandage on her forehead. There wasn’t a hint of tension in her demeanor. If anything, she seemed a little ashamed at the bandage.

“I didn’t quite block properly when sparring with Hilda. As Múspell commander, I’m embarrassed to say that it’s just a training wound.”

“A-And how badly are you hurt?!”

“It’s nothing worthy of note.”

“I see. Phew. Damn, you had me scared there for a moment. You being hurt is one thing, but I thought that we’d been attacked or something.” Yuuto let out a sigh of relief. Given that he had been nervous that they’d encountered an enemy, and an enemy that was skilled enough to wound Sigrún—the Steel Clan’s greatest warrior—no less, his relief was palpable.

“Ah, rest assured, Father, there’s no sign of any enemies around here.”

“I see. Well, that’s good, but try not to worry me too much. I mean, I know training is important, but...” Yuuto said with a dry laugh.

Sigrún wasn’t just one of his direct Chalice children. Yuuto had known her ever since he first arrived in Yggdrasil, and while she was initially skeptical of him, from the time since he had become patriarch, she had been one of his most loyal retainers and a woman that loved him. Even though he understood that fighting was her chosen way of life, he never enjoyed sending her off to fight for him, which was why it had come as such a shock to him to see her injury. He had already lost numerous people close to him. He knew it was all a part of war, but he wanted to avoid losing anyone else close to him if at all possible.

“My apologies. But it really is a trifling wound, so please rest assured.”

“Fine, that’s all well and good the—Mm? Wait, Rún. Didn’t you injure your right hand?!” Yuuto shouted as though the thought had just occurred to him. It had completely slipped his mind upon seeing the wound on Sigrún’s forehead, but Sigrún’s right hand was in no shape to be holding weapons. Physical training was one thing, but sparring should have been totally off-limits.

“Yes. Which is why I was using my left hand. Unfortunately, it’s a lot more difficult than I’d like.”

“Well, yeah. It’s not your dominant hand.”

Sigrún glared at her left hand, prompting a dry laugh from Yuuto. At the same time, though, he understood. The reason she had made such a name for herself as a warrior in Yggdrasil despite her youth had nothing to do with the gifts of her rune. No matter how great the gem, if left unpolished it was just a rock. She

was as strong as she was because she had constantly put in the effort to get stronger every day.

“I know you’re hard on yourself and stoic in the face of pain—almost to a fault, in fact—but there are times when you should rest, and this is one of them.”

“I see. Then once the Ark Project is completed, I would like to spend some time relaxing.”

“Huh? No, no, I don’t mean that far off in the future. I’m just saying that you should at least rest while you’re hurt,” Yuuto waved his hand and said lightly.

“Begging your pardon, but I don’t believe we have that luxury. No doubt we’ll face the Flame Clan again soon. As I am right now, I won’t be able to defeat Shiba,” she said in a rather despondent tone.

Up until now, he’d been content to simply watch over her efforts much like a loving father would, but given her proclivity for taking her stoicism to the extremes, it appeared that things might have been more serious than he’d initially believed.

“Mm.”

Yuuto nodded to re-center his thoughts and looked carefully at Sigrún’s expression. Generally, Sigrún never showed much emotion and was somewhat difficult to read, but Yuuto had known her for four years now. He was able to read the subtle changes in her expression. As he did so, Yuuto let out a small sigh.

“I understand how you’re feeling, but aren’t you putting too much on your shoulders?” he asked worriedly.

Yuuto understood the need to deal with a problem on his own. In particular, when he had returned to Yggdrasil after a brief trip to the present, he had taken everything upon himself to protect the others from the harsh truths of their world. Things had ended without any real problems thanks to the kindness of the people around him—people like Mitsuki, Felicia, and Linnea—but without them, he probably would have been crushed under the weight of the responsibility he felt bearing down upon him at the time. He couldn’t help but

see much of that version of himself in Sigrún's current expression.

"Am I really taking too much upon my shoulders?" No doubt she had no real awareness of it herself. Sigrún looked at him curiously.

"I agree with Big Brother, Rún. Given that he was able to overpower you, no doubt this Shiba is a very powerful opponent. But he alone won't decide the outcome of a battle."

"Yeah, Felicia's right. Setting aside the occasional exception like Steinþórr, there's a limit to the power of an individual. If you can't beat him alone, then it's fine to send a group after him."

War wasn't a sport. It was a fight to the death. There was no point in adhering to principles of fair play or misguided notions of honor and getting yourself and your companions killed as a result. If the worst came to pass, they could end up losing the war entirely. It may not be the honorable thing to do, but tactics sometimes required less than honorable conduct.

"I do understand that is the case," said Sigrún as she nodded in agreement.

"Okay. In that case, take some time to heal. If you injure yourself further and we're unable to have you, the Mánagarmr, on the frontlines, that'll hurt our army's morale. That would be completely self-defeating."

While it was certainly true that a single individual couldn't change the tide of a battle on their own, Sigrún's presence on the battlefield was indispensable to the Steel Clan Army. She was a beautiful, delicate-looking young woman, resembling one of the sprites from myth, and she had defeated countless warriors of repute on the battlefield. She was, in a way, the Steel Clan's very own Joan of Arc. Just her presence on the battlefield gave a massive boost to the army's morale.

"I see. My apologies for troubling you. As you say, Father, if I overwork myself in training and can't fight, that would cause more problems than it would solve." Sigrún nodded as though in understanding. It seemed that this matter had been settled. However...

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

“Oh, Rún.”

That night, Yuuto and Felicia couldn’t help but worry about Sigrún and made their way to the Múspell Unit’s camp to find exactly the sight that they dreaded they would find.

“Hah, mrmph, grmph!”

“Yah, hrmph, hyah!”

Sigrún and Hildegard were sparring with wooden swords lit by the moon and the campfires. Hildegard appeared to have the advantage. Ordinarily, Sigrún was almost certainly more skilled than Hildegard, but it seemed the fact that she was fighting with her weaker hand meant that she couldn’t quite wield her wooden sword as effectively as she would have liked. Hildegard continued to press her advantage.

“And stop!” Yuuto couldn’t bear it any longer and gave the order for them to stop.

Hildegard’s expression was set in a look of intense concentration. She had a tendency to lose herself in whatever she was doing and would struggle to think clearly as a result. If the match had continued, Yuuto felt Sigrún might very well get injured again.

“Father?”

“Your Majesty?!”

At the chastisement of the highest-ranking holder of the Chalice, the two of them stopped their match and turned to face him.

“Why are you here so late? Do you have a new assignment?” Sigrún asked in her usual tone, wiping the sweat from her brow. Even Yuuto couldn’t help but twist his face into a grimace.

“I told you to rest when you can, didn’t I? Didn’t you agree with me?” he said with a harsher tone than usual. It wasn’t that he was angry that she had ignored his advice, he was simply concerned for her safety. To Sigrún, however, she felt she was being chastised and slumped her shoulders as a result of the telling-off.

“M-My apologies. I misunderstood what you said. I thought you meant I

should continue training while being careful not to get hurt."

"Oh, okay, I get it now... Can't you just focus on physical training for now, at least until your hand heals?"

"If you command it, Father, then I'll obey. However..." Sigrún's expression belied her words; she seemed unhappy at the prospect.

"You don't seem to be fully convinced. If something is bothering you, tell me."

"No, I understand that what you're saying is correct, Father."

"Come on, out with it. You always place me on a pedestal, but I'm just a normal human being. There's plenty of things I miss."

"Oh, um, well, then... I understand that you're speaking out of concern for me, Father, but if I stay away from fighting for too long, I feel it would end up dulling my battle instincts..." Sigrún said hesitantly as she glanced around awkwardly. She was fiercely loyal to Yuuto. She appeared to be struggling immensely with the idea of going against his wishes.

"Hrm." Yuuto rubbed his chin in thought.

Sigrún was always on the front lines, spear in hand. The thing that made the biggest difference between life and death on the battlefield was those battle instincts she had just mentioned. He understood why she wanted to keep her senses sharp in that regard.

"It's tricky to deal with, isn't it?" Yuuto scratched at his head as he furrowed his brow in thought.

The type of training he'd just witnessed seemed a little bit too risky given Sigrún's current state. The bandage around her head bothered him more than he wanted to admit. However, he also didn't want to lose her just because he'd forced her to set aside her training. It was hard for him to decide what the right call was under the circumstances.

"Okay then. Please just make sure you don't get hurt. Be really careful about that." In the end, it was Yuuto who gave in. While he had some training in fighting for self-defense, he wasn't much better than any other novice warrior. By contrast, Sigrún was the greatest warrior in the Steel Clan. An amateur

telling a professional what to do would just confuse the matter. That was how he had reached his decision, but he would immediately regret making that call.

“See? See? Hey, daddy, what should I do next?” the girl asked Nobunaga as she looked up at him eagerly. She looked to be about ten years of age. She was a cute, innocent-looking girl with black hair and black eyes.

“Hah! That is a good question. You’re quite the hard worker, Homura.”

“Hehe! Thanks, daddy.”

Nobunaga patted her on the head, and the girl’s expression lit up in a happy smile. Her name was Homura. She was the daughter of Nobunaga and a local woman whom Nobunaga had met after he arrived in Yggdrasil.

“Remarkable... The wheat has actually fully grown in just two months... It’s truly unbelievable no matter how many times I look at it.”

Ran shook his head as he gazed out at the field of grain stretching out well off into the horizon. He understood well that it was pointless to deny the sight before him. However, Ran was the man who had come to Yggdrasil with Nobunaga and had spent the past decade or so as Nobunaga’s right-hand man, handling the governing of the Flame Clan as his Second. The conventional wisdom he had built up over the years made it difficult for him to accept what he saw before him. After all, the grain had grown to maturity in less than half the usual time. It should have been impossible. Even his master, Nobunaga, the revolutionary mind that had ended the Warring States Period, couldn’t have accomplished it on his own. What had made it possible was—

“Hehe! Is it amazing? It’s amazing, right?!”

—the power of this seemingly innocent smiling girl.



Her gaze held not only hopes of praise from her father, but a pattern that looked like a flower. She was a twin-runed Einherjar. She was one of the rare individuals who had been blessed with two runes, one of perhaps only three to possess such powers in all of Yggdrasil. Ran had always heard stories of how extraordinary the powers of those with twin runes might be, and it forced him to accept that the sight of the golden grain stretching out over the horizon was real. Her powers were far beyond that of ordinary human beings.

“Yes. I, Ran, am extraordinarily impressed by your accomplishment.”

“Extra...ordinar...ily?” Homura furrowed her brow quizzically. Ran immediately understood that he had slipped up, but it was too late. Homura’s eyes narrowed as she looked upon him.

“Hey, Ran? Didn’t I tell you before? Don’t use difficult words with me!”

“Ah! M-My apologies!” Ran sucked in a breath at the chilling gaze that she directed at him. It was a glare that felt completely out of place from a child of her age. He reflexively bowed his head in apology. He couldn’t help but do so. The intimidating glare was just like that of his master, Nobunaga. While it wasn’t quite at his level, it was more than enough to send a cold shiver up Ran’s spine. She had a remarkable presence given that she wasn’t even ten years old.

“Mm, good.” Homura nodded, her expression returning to the bright, innocent smile from a moment earlier. Ran sighed in relief. However—

“But don’t make me too mad, okay? I don’t want to kill one of daddy’s favorites.” He froze at the words she murmured after. While Ran had recently been caught under the weight of all the administrative work he needed to do in Nobunaga’s stead, he had originally been one of Nobunaga’s closest retainers, and he was quite skilled in battle in his own right. Even he couldn’t dismiss Homura’s words as a mere child’s jest though. The girl in front of him had the power to actually execute the threat she had voiced.

“Yes... I... I’ll be more careful in the future.”

Ran was about to say he would cautiously bear that in mind before he corrected himself with simpler words. It was a wise decision. The girl had the

ruthlessness of her father. She had no reservations about killing people, doing so as though she were toying with an insect. While Nobunaga's accumulated experience had given him the ability to tame that ruthlessness, Homura was still a child and lacked that self-control.

He needed to be remarkably cautious when dealing with her.

"I suppose this does make for an interesting twist of fate," Ran couldn't help thinking to himself.

While, yes, he certainly feared her, there was a part of Ran that was ecstatic. Though Nobunaga was still rather spry for now, he was over sixty years old and quickly coming into his late years. For his most loyal retainer, the presence of someone who could become the next ruler was a fact worth celebrating. The ability to make cold, ruthless decisions and act on them was a trait necessary for a ruler. While Nobunaga had over twenty children in the land of the Rising Sun, Ran felt that they were all, at best, average in ability. Nobunaga's eldest son, Nobutada, had the character and ability to serve as Nobunaga's successor, but he was still lacking when compared to his father. Ran had never expected that a worthy successor to his master would be born in this far-off land. A successor who had Nobunaga's conqueror's aura and power.

"Yup, be careful."

"Now, now, don't be so mean to Ran."

"Okaaay, daddy. Sorry, Ran." Homura let out a dry laugh at her father's chiding, but she quickly returned to her bright smile as she apologized to Ran.

Her moods changed on a dime, but that was very much expected of a child of her age, and she dearly loved her father.

"So, it's about time to go. There's enough grain, but I still have things I need you to do," Nobunaga said as he gestured with his chin. Homura's powers weren't restricted to just making plants grow at an extraordinary rate. She had one more rune, and Nobunaga intended to make the best use of it.

"The Great Lord is the one who's truly impressive," Ran thought to himself.

Yes, Homura was remarkable. She had great promise, especially because of her twin runes. After all, the powers of the Einherjar were all supernatural and

difficult to understand, similar indeed to the powers of demons and spirits, but her power was far beyond that of those ordinary Einherjar. At times, she seemed like a monstrous being to Ran.

A part of him felt that including such a being into one's strategies was an act of madness. In reality, though, it was very much in character for Nobunaga, who had famously incorporated the culture of the Christian padres into his strategies when he viewed them to be logical and useful, tossing aside the conventional wisdom of his era. The fact that he could continue to incorporate such oddities into his thinking despite being past the age of sixty was beyond impressive.

Ordinarily, the older one got, the easier it became to be fixed in one's ways. It often became harder for them to accept new ideas. Nobunaga, however, was a man who seemed to grow wiser and more innovative with age. It would almost be apt to describe him as aging like a fine wine. Ran couldn't stop his lips from turning up into a smile.

"Let us get our revenge for our frustrations at Honno-ji this time, My Great Lord," Ran murmured as though to remind himself, gripping his hand into a tight fist.

"Our preparations are complete."

"Good to know."

Shiba nodded with his arms still crossed as he listened to his adjutant Masa's report. His reply sounded somewhat half-hearted, though this was likely because his gaze was firmly fixed on the horizon to the north of their current location. His mind was already far away in the Steel Clan lands that would soon become his next battlefield.

"This'll let us finally pay them back for last time." Shiba's lips twisted up into a predatory smile as he dug his index fingers into his biceps.

During the Siege of Glaðsheimr, the Flame Clan had held the advantage over the Steel Clan from start to finish, but the Flame Clan had been forced to retreat just as they were on the cusp of victory when the Steel Clan pulled a rabbit out of its hat. They'd used their galleons—which, by all rights, shouldn't have existed in this era—to conquer the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl.

Shiba had fought against the unit that had attacked the clan capital and had even had the upper hand in his duel with the Steel Clan's great Sigrún, but she and her forces had, in the end, eluded his grasp.

The Flame Clan, despite spending considerable resources on their previous campaign, had almost nothing to show for it. On top of that, they had suffered the humiliation of having their clan capital conquered and having lost an enormous amount of supplies to the enemy. It was a humiliating strategic loss, and a rather heavy one at that. However, they now had an opportunity to avenge that loss. It was impossible for Shiba not to be motivated.

"Heh. I'm looking forward to this."

"You're getting far too ahead of yourself."

"Mm?!"

As he noticed the sound of an object cutting through the air behind him, Shiba reflexively leaped away from the spot he currently stood in. Even if his mind was elsewhere, his body reacted without a moment's hesitation at the first sign of danger. It was a result of years and years of intense training.

"Hrmph. A shame you merely dodged it."

Shiba turned to face his attacker to see an old man snorting at him with a look of boredom upon his features. The man was more than seventy years old and was completely bald, save for a bushy white beard adorning his features. His back had been bent by the burden of his years, and he walked with the help of a cane. His face was covered with wrinkles, but his eyes were as sharp as any younger man's.

"Uncle. Please stop with your frightening jests."

"Ho hoh, you're far too skilled for this to be a threat to you," the old man stated as he laughed in amusement. His name was Salk, and he served as the Flame Clan's Leader of Subordinates. He was a warrior whose name had been known within the Flame Clan since he was but a lad, and he continued to wield his mastery of war as one of the five division commanders of the Flame Clan.

"Seems you're ready to depart."

“That’s correct. We intend to depart as soon as possible. I’ll leave the defense of the capital in your hands.”

“Sure, leave it to me,” Old Man Salk responded, and nodded firmly.

“Heh, it’s reassuring to know you’ll be here, Uncle,” Shiba returned with a laugh.

As a result of his experiences in countless past wars, Salk was known for the complicated tactics he employed in battle. He had been left with a force of around five thousand to defend the clan’s capital. It would be all but impossible for their enemy to capture the capital from under them once again. This meant that Shiba could fight without any consideration for what was occurring back home.

“So the lad I once knew as little more than a snotty brat has finally learned how to flatter, it appears? No wonder I feel so old.”

“I mean it, Uncle.” Shiba shrugged his shoulders with a dry laugh. There was something faintly embarrassing about having one’s childhood indiscretions brought up when one was now in their mid-thirties. While Shiba didn’t dislike this old man—in fact, he even held a certain fondness for him—he still found it hard to deal with someone who had known him since he was but a child.

“Hrmph, hard to be sure. Oh, that reminds me, you’ll be fighting alongside Kuuga this time, I believe?”

“Well, about that...”

“An unlucky man he is. If he didn’t have a younger brother like you, he’d have a little more confidence in himself.”

“Heh...” Once again, a dry laugh escaped Shiba’s lips. There really was something uncomfortable about dealing with a man who was so familiar with him.

“People all have their strengths and weaknesses. There’s plenty of things Brother Kuuga can do that I’m not capable of.” Shiba shrugged his shoulders with a sigh. He truly believed what he had just said.

It was certainly true that in terms of raw combat skill and in reading

opportunities that appeared on the battlefield, he, as an Einherjar, was superior to his older brother. However, that didn't mean he could definitively state he was better than his older brother. While Kuuga lacked the spirit that Nobunaga or Shiba possessed, he was a man who had steadily built up his position and had gotten results through steady effort. Nobunaga himself held Kuuga's abilities as a governor in high regard, and it was precisely because of the balance between his high skill as an administrator and as a general that Nobunaga had placed Kuuga in charge of the old Lightning Clan territories. Shiba even admired his older brother for that.

"Those are the words of the strong; you know that, yes?" Salk smirked with a chuckle and cut right through Shiba's observations. Shiba had nothing he could say to that retort. He had been an Einherjar for as long as he could remember, meaning that Shiba had been born as one of the strong.

"The strong can never understand how it feels to be weak. That's the greatest weakness of the strong."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm talking about dark feelings like envy, despair, cowardice, doubt, delusion, persecution—to find yourself looking down rather than up to vent your frustrations..."

"Huh? None of those sound like admirable things." Shiba furrowed his brow skeptically. He didn't say it out loud, but Shiba believed that being fixated on such things was why the weak stayed weak. Rather than being beholden to such useless emotions, shouldn't they just focus entirely on achieving what they want? It was much more useful to focus on the positive, after all. That was how they'd actually achieve what they were seeking.

"Heh. You're still young, aren't you, Shiba?"

"Well, I haven't even lived half your years, Uncle..." Shiba felt a stir of irritation at being described as young, but Salk outranked him. As a man who was more of a warrior than an intellectual, he also had no confidence in being able to win a war of words with this cunning old man. It was simplest for him to avoid giving offense and refrain from offering a counterargument.

"Heh. The weak have their own way of fighting. In fact, it's a tale as old as

time. The strong often underestimate the weak and end up being defeated as a result. Do watch yourself."

"I've always prided myself on avoiding underestimating my enemy, but I thank you for your warning." The old man's words didn't really ring true to him, but Shiba nodded in agreement anyway. While there were times when the old man's teasing was an irritant to Shiba, he knew that the vast experience Salk had accumulated over the years made his advice hard to ignore. The least he could do was to remember his words, even if it was only in the back of his mind.

"I believe I'll study how the weak fight by observing my brother this time."

"Hrmph, that's why I say you're one of the strong," Old Man Salk said with a snort.

Shiba's best effort at respect got him a derisive snort in response. Just how was he supposed to respond to him? Shiba couldn't figure out how to deal with this old codger.

"So they're here," Rasmus said in disgust as he stood atop a watchtower and watched the Flame Clan Army appear from over the horizon. According to his scouts, the enemy force numbered around ten thousand. The garrison at Fort Gashina currently housed a bit less than two thousand men. The gap between the two armies was large enough that the Steel Clan garrison stood no chance in open battle.

"The enemy's commanded by one of the Flame Clan's five division commanders, eh? Kuuga, I think his name was."

The reports from Kristina's Vindálfs suggested that Kuuga was quite a cunning commander. To their understanding, Kuuga wasn't an Einherjar, nor was he a particularly skilled combatant on his own. However, intelligence was a more difficult trait to deal with than individual strength when it came to mass warfare. Indeed, Kuuga had made his mark among the Flame Clan's generals in his clan's campaigns against the Wind and Lightning Clans, two of the Ten Great Clans, by bringing down several fortresses. This man was an enemy that needed to be taken seriously.

"A talented commander who is commanding ten thousand troops. Reminds

me of the Hoof Clan invasion from two years ago," Rasmus said with a nostalgic smile. He remembered that invasion as though it were yesterday. His master, who had still seemed out of her depth at that time, had grown wonderfully into her role since. It made Rasmus acutely aware of the passage of time.

"Heh, yeah, I honestly remember thinking that was the end," Grer said in response. He was the man who had been appointed to head the garrison in Fort Gashina by Linnea. He was in his mid-twenties and was a muscular man who looked the part of a warrior. He was also one of the Brísingamen, the four great Einherjar of the Horn Clan.

"I don't recall being particularly worried at the time," Rasmus quipped with a faint snort as his lips twisted up into a grin. Grer looked at Rasmus, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Hm? Really?"

"I had already seen His Majesty's immense conqueror's aura in action by that point."

"Ah, *that*," Grer said with a tense smile as Rasmus's comment triggered a memory.

"Yes, that." Rasmus nodded in agreement. It was easy enough to imagine what Grer was thinking back upon. It was the time they had faced off against the Lightning Clan's Dólgþrasir, Steinþórr. Rasmus couldn't recall ever being more frightened in his fifty-something years of life. It was a harrowing experience to think about even now.

"That could only have been described as the air of a conqueror. Not to mention the fact that he then conquered the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr and became þjóðann just two years after."

"We truly are blessed to be born in this age as members of the same clan as such an extraordinary heroic figure."

"Bad for the heart, though."

"Heheh, yes, that is certainly true. Especially since mine hasn't much life left in it!" Rasmus laughed dryly, shrugging his shoulders. In Yggdrasil, living into one's fifties was a mark of a long life. Rasmus was already in that age range. He

was at an age where he could quite literally drop dead at any moment.

“You say that, but you seem quite hale and healthy to me.”

“Despite appearances, my body’s rattled by all sorts of aches and pains,” Rasmus said as he rubbed his right shoulder. It was the spot where he had been injured in the battle against Steinþórr. While it wasn’t a life-threatening injury, he had been unable to wield a sword ever since. That injury was why he had abdicated his position as the Horn Clan’s Second and gone into semi-retirement to serve as the clan’s Leader of Subordinates.

“Putting aside your shoulder, the rest of you looks fine. If anything, I feel like you’ll still be around to see the princess’s grandchildren, Uncle.”

“The princess’s grandchildren, eh? I certainly do want to see them. They’ll be adorable for sure! So, to protect that future, we need to put in the effort here, don’t we?”

“Indeed, sir!”

As Grer energetically nodded in agreement, Rasmus looked rather sourly at him.

“Mm? What is it?”

“Well. It’s a bit hard to tell you, but... You should head back to the princess.”

“Wha?! Wh-What are you talking about?! Isn’t whether or not we can hold this fortress the key to this entire campaign?!” Grer protested. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was a natural reaction. As a warrior, being told to retreat from the front lines and back to the clan capital on the eve of a major battle was hugely humiliating. He couldn’t describe it any other way.

“Can you tell me the reason, at least? If you can’t give me something good, then I just can’t follow those orders, even if they come from you, dear Uncle.” Grer continued his protest, drawing closer to Rasmus to drive home his point.

For Grer, who was still young and hadn’t yet achieved any great victories, this was a chance to prove himself. No doubt he had been burning with motivation, and Rasmus’s words felt like a splash of ice-cold water. It was even harder for Rasmus to give those orders as he understood exactly how Grer was feeling, but

they were the words he needed to say.

“It’s on the express orders of the princess.”

“Mmph... I see...” Grer slumped his shoulders with a bitter frown. In Yggdrasil, orders from one’s Chalice parent were absolute. And if those were express orders, then no matter how difficult they were to follow, a child had to follow his parent’s orders.

“But why though...?”

“Not a clue. I wasn’t told the reason.”

That was a lie. In fact, Grer’s dismissal was actually Rasmus’s idea.

As previously mentioned, the enemy this time was a powerful foe who possessed an overwhelming advantage in numbers and was led by a skilled commander. While Grer had shown flashes of potential, it was still a heavy burden to place on a young and inexperienced commander like him. Not to mention that Grer still had a long and bright future ahead of him. Rasmus needed Grer to support Linnea over the next several decades alongside Haugspori, the Horn Clan’s Assistant Second. He wasn’t an asset that could be risked in a battle like this. Of course, the young man wouldn’t accept such a reason, even if Rasmus explained it to him in those terms, which was why he had convinced Linnea to issue express orders for him to return to Gimlé.

“Besides, you and I are the only Einherjar present from the Horn Clan. Given that we don’t know what will happen, at least one of us should be there to support Her Highness.” Rasmus shrugged his shoulders and uttered the words he’d prepared beforehand. He hoped they sounded convincing. The words weren’t a lie, however.

Although they called themselves the Brísingamen—the Four Flames—two of them had already been killed in the war against the Lightning Clan two years ago, and Haugspori, known as one of the greatest archers in Yggdrasil, was away with the Steel Clan Army in the east.

“Well, I understand that, but aren’t you better suited for a role like that, Uncle Rasmus?”

“I can’t hold a sword and I’m old. I’m a bit lacking in terms of the strength

needed to protect Her Highness. Especially so when you consider there's another to protect in the princess's belly."

"I see..."

While he wasn't completely satisfied with the reasoning, it seemed Grer at least understood the orders. Rasmus silently apologized to Grer, but at the same time let out a sigh of relief. He had been worried Grer would obstinately insist on staying.

"Anyway, leave this to me. While I may not have the ability to fight toe-to-toe these days, I still have the wisdom and experiences I've gathered over my fifty years of life. When it comes to defending against a siege, that's far more important than individual valor. I doubt there's anyone better suited to the task than me at present," Rasmus stated.

That was precisely the reason he had pushed his ailing body to come to the front lines.

"So this is Fort Gashina..." Kuuga furrowed his brow as he looked up at the towering wall. Gashina had been strategically placed. It was a fortress that needed to be captured in order to be able to invade the Horn Clan capital of Fólkvangr or the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé.

"Tch, I had heard that this would be a difficult nut to crack, but actually looking at it makes it even worse. This'll be trouble," Kuuga spat with a click of his tongue.

While the mountains that surrounded the fortress weren't particularly high, they were significant enough to make it difficult to deploy a large army. To make things worse, it was widely understood that during a siege, the attacking force required five to ten times as many troops as the defending force in order to capture a fortress. With all that in mind, taking down Fort Gashina would be rather challenging.

"It certainly looks impregnable, but I believe that this fortress has changed hands several times over the past two years. Perhaps there's some hidden path or some other weakness that can be exploited?"

“None of the previous sieges are of any use to us.” Kuuga furrowed his brow, a sour expression on his face as he responded to his child.

“Is that true...?”

“Yes. The Wolf Clan took over a mostly empty fortress after crushing their opponent in a field battle. While the Lightning Clan’s Dólgþrasir, Steinþórr, used his powers as a twin-runed Einherjar to tear open the gates by hand, that’s something only he can manage. When the Panther Clan took it, they used a monstrous catapult that threw boulders that needed several grown men to carry. These are all things we lack.”

“A-Ah... I hadn’t realized you had already looked into those battles.”

“I can never rest easy before a campaign if I don’t gather all the information I can ahead of time. After all, I don’t have much in the way of talent or courage.” Kuuga replied to his child’s admiration with a dismissive chuckle. Having been compared to his immensely talented younger brother throughout his entire life, Kuuga was well aware that he was a painfully average man. He knew that he wouldn’t always succeed; that he’d eventually fail at some point or other. He understood that reality very well and recognized it more than he’d ever wanted to. However, if he knew that failure was a distinct possibility, then he could take the measures necessary to deal with those missteps. Gathering as much information as possible was one of the ways he could reduce the chances of his defeat.

“If we had time, we could just surround them and wait until they run out of supplies and surrender,” Kuuga said bitterly, chewing on his right thumbnail. It was an act he engaged in when he was faced with a difficult problem. He was aware of it, and he wanted to kick the habit, but since it was something he did subconsciously, he tended to do it without realizing it.

“If we dally here, Shiba will arrive before we know it.”

If that happened, there would have been no point in deciding to strike out early. Even if they conquered the fortress with Shiba’s forces, that glory would be split between the two of them. No, if anything, there was a very real possibility that Shiba’s overwhelming presence on the battlefield would overshadow the groundwork he had done to allow for their victory, and Shiba

might very well end up with the lion's share of the credit.

It could end up worse than that, in fact. Shiba could make use of his talent for charging headfirst and force his way into the fortress. If that happened, he'd once again just be a foil that made his younger brother's star shine that much brighter. That was the situation he wanted to avoid no matter what, even if it could cost him his life.

"Then what shall we do?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. I was hoping I'd come up with something when we actually got here," Kuuga said with a deep sigh, scratching at his head. He knew all of this coming into this siege, but the world didn't work that conveniently, especially for him.

"Well, then, I suppose we have no choice but to try each tactic one by one. We'll be cautious even as we're quick. We should be able to find at least one weakness in the process," Kuuga muttered to himself, before giving orders to his subordinates. This was the only way he could fight.

"Damn. Curse my lack of talent," Kuuga murmured to himself, shaking his head. However, the truth of the matter was that the Flame Clan leadership's evaluation of Kuuga was the exact opposite of his self-appraisal. Kuuga never relied upon outlandish tactics or reckless risks—using plain but certain steps—and slowly cornered his enemies as though strangling them with a silk rope. He was always cautious and on guard, considering countless possibilities in his tactics, never leaving an opening for his enemy. He was perhaps one of the most difficult enemies to ever have to deal with. Kuuga was more than capable as far as Nobunaga was concerned, and he was a man who valued merit above all else. That view was made perfectly clear by his decision to appoint him an army division commander.

"Sigh... I despise the naturally gifted. Damned bastards!"

Of course, Kuuga himself had no awareness of that fact.

ACT 3

“Our forces are in position.”

“Very good.”

Kuuga gazed down at his dependable army, nodding at his subordinate’s report. The day after arriving at Fort Gashina, the Fifth Division of the Flame Clan Army led by Kuuga was about to begin its efforts to conquer the fortress. He had been a bit concerned by the possibility of fatigue among his soldiers due to the relatively quick pace of their march, but after a night’s rest, so far as he could tell, the soldiers were fresh and motivated.

“Well then... Send in the siege chariot!”

“Yes sir!”

Upon Kuuga’s orders, the cavalryman serving as a messenger galloped off to give the word. A few moments later, a triangular-roofed hut with wheels attached to its sides appeared on the battlefield. There was a log attached to its front, which ended up looking very much like a pig’s snout poking out from within it.

“Heh, I can just imagine the panic among the Steel Clan’s ranks,” Kuuga said as he smiled sadistically.

In Yggdrasil, the most common siege weapon was the battering ram—a fancy name for a giant log. That was considered the most effective tactic and was the cutting edge in siege weaponry. However, the act of carrying a giant log with several soldiers to the enemy gate meant that, unless the defenders were utterly incompetent, the battering ram became the target of focused arrow fire and stone-throwing.

Because of this, Nobunaga had developed this siege chariot. It was a simple weapon—little more than a battering ram loaded onto a wheeled wagon and

covered by a wooden roof—and there were countless variations of such covered rams in later years, but it was a revolutionary design given Yggdrasil's current technology level. While it hadn't seen use in the Siege of Glaðsheimr because Nobunaga had instead used siege castles, the siege chariot had been one of the driving forces behind the Flame Clan's rapid expansion and conquest of countless enemy fortresses.

With a powerful war cry, the siege chariot charged toward the gate. Of course, the Steel Clan soldiers stationed on Fort Gashina's walls responded with a hail of arrow fire.

"Heh, such pointless resistance." Kuuga watched the hail of arrows rain down with a smugly confident smile. A moment later, the arrows landed on the siege chariot's roof, making it appear like a pincushion.

The siege chariot showed no signs of slowing. That was completely natural, since all of the attacks by the defenders had been stopped by the chariot's roof, and not a single arrow had reached the soldiers inside.

"Will they respond with their catapult? Though it's not likely, they could hit the chariot."

So far as Kuuga could tell based on his intelligence reports, the enemy's catapults, while powerful, had a limited rate of fire and weren't accurate enough to hit a moving target. Would they resort to explosives, then? That, too, wasn't a problem. The siege chariot's roof and walls were armored with iron plates. They could withstand most handheld explosives.

"It's only a matter of time before the gate falls..."

It happened just as Kuuga was planning his next step...

Fwip! Fwip! Fwip!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"Wh-What was that?!" Kuuga turned his gaze back to the fortress, his attention drawn by a set of completely new, but unsettlingly heavy noises coming from that direction. Kuuga's main force was located some distance away from Fort Gashina. The fact that the noises carried this far meant they

must have been much louder at their source.

“Wha?!” Kuuga fell mute at the sight unfolding before him. The invincible siege chariot’s roof had three gaping holes torn into it.

“Just what are they...”

Fwip! Fwip! Fwip!

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The unsettlingly large sounds rang out again, followed by a blur of black objects hurtling toward the siege chariot, shattering its roof and walls with ease. The defending archers followed up with a second volley of arrows. With the walls and roof no longer serving any defensive function, the arrows plunged into the siege chariot, and it lurched to a halt.

“Th-That’s impossible! Wh-What in the blazes are those?!”

Casting his gaze in the direction of where the loud noises had come from, Kuuga saw that there were several wooden objects stationed along Fort Gashina’s walls. They were impressively large and gave off an ominous air. No doubt those were a new weapon that Kuuga had never encountered, but given they had easily pierced the iron-plated siege chariot, they must be incredibly powerful.

“Seems I’ll have to redo the plan from scratch,” Kuuga said irritably, scratching at his head. The fact the siege chariot had been so easily destroyed had thrown his plans into complete disarray.

“Well, I suppose this is just how it always goes,” Kuuga said with an exasperated sigh.

For him, this was indeed business as usual. Nothing ever went the way it should. There was always some unexpected wrinkle that sent his plans awry. It was something he had become very used to by this point. It was nothing to panic about, nor did it have much impact on his morale. All he had to do was keep trying until he succeeded.

“Sigh, such a bother,” Kuuga murmured in frustration and began plotting his next step.

“Lord Rasmus! The enemy is withdrawing.”

“Seems they’ve been scared off by the power of the ballistae.”

As the soldier on top of the rampart pointed at the retreating Flame Clan forces, Rasmus smiled with a look of triumph and patted the giant weapon next to him.

The ballista was essentially a giant crossbow. Several had been set up as permanent defensive weapons atop Fort Gashina’s walls. These devices had already been in use around the 4th century BCE, but the ballistae the Steel Clan had built used the same modern winding mechanism as the windlass crossbows that were wielded by the Steel Clan’s arbalest units. They had enormous draw weight that required the use of levers and winding wheels for a person to draw, and it was substantially more powerful than the portable arbalests wielded by infantry. Tests with the prototype had easily penetrated a steel shield.

Fort Gashina was a vital defensive fortification on the Flame Clan border. Sensing that they would be needed sooner than later, it had received the first allotment of ballistae.

“It would be nice if they’d give up after this,” Garve, the Second of Rasmus’s group, said with a shrug.

Garve was the most loyal of Rasmus’s followers. He had refused Linnea’s direct Chalice when Rasmus had tried to transfer him to Linnea after he retired as the Horn Clan’s Second. “You’re the only father for me,” Garve had said at the time.

“It won’t be that easy. According to Lady Kristina’s reports, the enemy general’s extremely tenacious and never backs down in the face of failure or bad circumstances. That’s the hardest type of enemy to fight.”

“Heh. It might be rude to state it this way, but that description sounds like the princess,” Garve said with a dry laugh. Even Rasmus couldn’t help but blink in surprise at his comment.

“Aha! That would explain why I felt like this’d be such a bothersome opponent!” Rasmus nodded in understanding and burst out laughing. He knew

something about this opponent had felt familiar to him. That was because Rasmus had a large amount of firsthand experience with their exact sort of personality. It was identical to that of their 'Princess,' the girl who had faced countless failures and reverses, but had continually used them as lessons to learn from, and had eventually grown into one of the greatest patriarchs in all of Yggdrasil. He knew how dependable and strong such a presence could be as an ally, which was why it was easy for him to understand how frightening such a person could be as an enemy.

"Then we'll have to put all our effort into this." Rasmus nodded with renewed determination. The battle had just begun. If anything, this initial engagement was just the opening act.

It was just as the Steel Clan had crossed the Silk Clan border...

"Rún's collapsed?!"

Yuuto was caught completely by surprise by the report. Given that he had thought Sigrún was the least likely individual in this world to collapse as a result of exhaustion, the news had come like a bolt out of the blue.

"All forces halt! We'll take a rest here. Felicia, we're going to see Rún."

"Y-Yes, Big Brother!"

Yuuto, with Felicia in tow, hurriedly made his way toward Sigrún. When he arrived, he found Sigrún's protégé Hildegard in a panic.

"Hilda! Where's Rún?"

"Your Majesty! Mother Rún is over there..." Yuuto turned his gaze in the direction Hildegard was pointing and saw a wagon parked in the shade of a tree. Running over to the wagon, he found Sigrún with her cheeks flushed from heat exhaustion and struggling to breathe. Yuuto felt a sharp pain in his chest when he saw her in that state.

"Rún, are you okay?"

"F-Father?! I-I apologize for making an embarrassment of myself like this..."

"Oh, don't get up. Lie down." Yuuto took Sigrún by the shoulders and pushed

her back down as she tried to sit up to greet him. He was shocked at how easily he was able to set her down. Ordinarily, Yuuto couldn't budge her an inch. Her skin felt hot to the touch. Had she caught a cold?

"Tch. If I'd forced her to rest, this wouldn't have..."

Yuuto was gripped with regret. He had noticed she was carrying far too much weight on her slender shoulders. She hadn't quite been herself recently, so if he'd just been a little more careful, he felt he could have avoided this situation.

"That's all in hindsight, Big Brother. I've known Sigrún for a long time, but this is the first time I've ever seen her collapse."

"Y-Yes, Father, this is all my responsibility for neglecting my..."

"That's it. What's gotten you in such a panic? There must be something serious going on for you to forget to take care of yourself," Yuuto asked as he gazed intently into Sigrún's eyes. For a warrior, training was important, but just as vital was taking proper care of one's health. This was particularly true given that the army was marching toward the Silk Clan's territory. Although the Silk Clan patriarch Utgarda claimed that there weren't any leaders left in the Silk Clan with any spirit, it was still possible they would refuse to surrender, and it would escalate into war. For a general to push themselves too hard in such circumstances and fall ill was an incredibly grave mistake. Sigrún had a stoic and rough-hewn personality, but she wasn't a reckless warrior who took unnecessary risks. It was completely out of character for her.

"Well... Erm... I don't really understand it either. It's just... I feel uneasy when I'm not swinging my sword... And by the time I realize what's happened, it's been several hours..." Sigrún said hesitantly and apologetically. She had always had an almost puppy-like demeanor, but right now she looked very much the part of a chided puppy, slumping and curling her tail up.

"Sorry. It sounded like I was interrogating you, didn't it? I'm not angry. I'm just worried."

"I-I understand. I'm sorry for causing you concern."

Yuuto patted Sigrún's head and spoke to her reassuringly, but Sigrún tensed even further and her frown deepened. She was always hard on herself, and the

circumstances meant she blamed herself all the more. Even Yuuto's words of reassurance had the opposite of their intended effect. She was in a bad state. Not physically, but mentally. Then, just as Yuuto fell silent in thought, Kristina appeared before him.

"Father, there's a messenger for you from the Silk Clan," she reported. Yuuto had to restrain himself from clicking his tongue in irritation, but he eventually suppressed the urge and managed to maintain his composure. His reaction could very well have made Sigrún blame herself even further.

"...I see. Then I'll have to go attend to that. Felicia, take a look at Rún, will you?" With that, he added a nod and gestured to Felicia with his eyes.

Felicia was a generalist Einherjar with a good knowledge of medicine and who also wielded a galdr that calmed the spirit. She was also one of Sigrún's oldest friends. Felicia was the one best suited to treat Sigrún and coax out what had been bothering her.

"Certainly. Leave her to me." Felicia nodded firmly. The fact that she added a wink to her nod seemed to indicate she understood what he wanted to tell her. She was an extremely reliable adjutant.

"Ah, so you, the Silk Clan, intend to surrender to us, the Steel Clan?" Yuuto said coolly to the messenger prostrated before him. He rested his face on his hand and looked upon the messenger with boredom, but that was a calculated act on his part. Currently, the Steel Clan was facing the threat of the Flame Clan from the rear, and the key to their army, Sigrún, was unwell both physically and mentally, which left her unable to wield a sword or even command her forces. Yuuto wanted to avoid fighting as much as possible under the circumstances, and he was more than happy to accept the Silk Clan's surrender, but in negotiations, he couldn't afford to let them see how pleased he was at the prospect.

"Y-Yes. H-However, we would require that you guarantee the lives of the leadership of the Silk Clan, and while we don't ask for the same ranks as before, we would like to play a meaningful role within the Steel Clan and be granted fair ranks in its leadership."

“I see...” Yuuto said with an uninterested look as he went over the possibilities in his head. The messenger’s requests were well within the range of outcomes he had anticipated. If anything, it was *exactly* what he was expecting.

“U-Um... If you can guarantee those two things, we of the Silk Clan will happily serve under you, Your Majesty.”

It seemed that the messenger was unnerved by Yuuto’s demeanor as he attempted to provide reassurance with a trembling voice. A heavy silence descended upon the meeting. The messenger was clearly thoroughly shaken. Yuuto gave the messenger plenty of time to squirm under his scrutiny before speaking.

“I’m not unwilling to accept your surrender, but I’d like to add a few conditions of my own.”

He felt a bit sorry for the messenger, but psychologically wearing down the opponent and dulling their judgment was a key part of negotiations. While Yuuto himself would have liked nothing more than to quickly settle the matter and return to Sigrún’s side, the fates of many people hung in the balance in negotiations at this level. More than anything, it was vital to the Ark Project for him to properly place the Silk Clan’s territories under his control. He couldn’t afford to loosen the reins in the slightest.

“I’m currently planning to make one of my most trusted children, Ingrid, the patriarch of the Silk Clan.”

This was something he had decided long in advance. To successfully execute his plan to emigrate to Europe, it was most rational to mass-produce galleons in the Silk Clan’s territory. That would proceed much more smoothly if he gave Ingrid, who would oversee that production, as much authority as possible in that particular location.

“I intend to fill the leadership with members of the Steel Clan as well. I promote based on merit. I’ll prepare roles for those with a certain amount of ability, but for the others, they’ll be starting out as Ingrid’s subordinates.”

This was also a necessary step for the Ark Project. Ordinarily, the Steel Clan tended to respect local traditions, only telling subordinate clans to follow broad-strokes policies and leaving the details to local leaders, but as the plan

progressed, Yuuto knew there would be a great deal of confusion and chaos. It was far too risky to place newcomers that he couldn't fully trust in important roles. Of course, he also couldn't afford to simply jettison them and have them potentially lead rebellions against him. It would be simplest to make the old Silk Clan leaders direct children of the new patriarch. While it wasn't a leadership role, the position would at least guarantee their livelihoods.

"Is that enough in terms of a 'meaningful role'?" Yuuto asked, his tone cold as he gazed intently at the messenger. By taking an intimidating stance, he was trying to convince the messenger that he had no choice but to accept Yuuto's terms. It would be troublesome to have the Silk Clan leaders complain afterward. It was necessary to set the conditions in stone.

"Y... Yes, Your Majesty! M-More than enough! I-I thank you for your merciful treatment!" The messenger bowed his head, pressing his forehead against the floor as he let out words of gratitude. There was a strong note of relief in his voice. It seemed he had expected Yuuto to press far more onerous terms upon him.

"Seems Utgarda was right. Not anyone with a spine left," Yuuto murmured to himself in a tone that the messenger couldn't hear.

In their most recent battle, the Steel Clan had decimated the Silk Clan Army and captured the clan's patriarch, Utgarda, in an overwhelming victory, but a clan as powerful as the Silk Clan should still have had a fair amount of strength left in reserve. Strangely, however, the remaining leadership was only concerned with saving their own hides and were willing to essentially sell out their clan in exchange. It was, frankly, anticlimactic. He felt like a fool for having tricked himself into thinking this was some sort of key moment that he'd needed to steel himself for, and had ended up setting aside his concern for Sigrún's well-being to prepare himself for it. That said, things had gone well. Perhaps that was worthy of celebration, at least.

"Then, just to be certain, we'll be carving these terms into tablets and will archive them as official documents. I don't want any disputes about the terms later."

"Yes. That would be fine. That would be a great relief to us as well," the

messenger said brightly in agreement.

Yuuto's secretary quickly prepared the tablet with the terms. Yuuto and the messenger then stamped the seals of their clans into the tablet, making everything official. The Silk Clan had now become a subordinate clan of the Steel Clan, and the Steel Clan had finally acquired the eastern ports that had been its long-standing goal.

"Gasp, wheeze..."

Immediately after settling the treaty with the Silk Clan, Yuuto ran breathlessly to the Múspell Unit's camp. His expression was tense, and he seemed like a completely different person from the conqueror that had so breezily dealt with the Silk Clan's messenger moments earlier. Such was his concern for Sigrún that, during the negotiations, the right hand he had rested his face upon had been clenched tightly in a fist, and his left hand, resting on his knee at a glance, was gripping his knee so tightly that he had dug his nails into his leg.

The cold and calculating conqueror was part of his personality, but another part of it—the young man known as Suoh Yuuto—was his extremely strong attachment to his family.

"Felicia! Rún... Gasp... How is she?!" Yuuto asked between labored breaths as soon as he caught sight of his adjutant. Felicia's eyes narrowed into a smile as though she were gazing at a particularly bright object, and she spoke gently to him. "It seems her anxiety was keeping her from sleeping. I was finally able to get her to sleep using a soothing galdr."

"I see... Well done... Thank god," Yuuto said, letting out a great sigh of relief. He was familiar with those particular kinds of feelings himself. Anxiety made it harder to sleep, and whatever sleep he could get when he was anxious was fitful. That wasn't enough to properly rest a person's body and soul. Right now, what Sigrún needed more than anything was rest.

"So where is she?"

"She's inside that tent."

Yuuto nodded before running over to the tent at the end of Felicia's pointing

finger and peering into it. In the dimly lit tent, Sigrún was breathing softly, her chest rising and falling as she slept. It seemed she was sleeping peacefully, and Yuuto felt a deep sense of relief. He didn't want to risk waking her from her slumber, so he turned away from the tent and looked at Felicia.

"So, did you figure it out? What's got Rún so troubled?"

At this rate, it was likely the same thing would happen again. Losing one of the army's pillars in Sigrún would be a heavy blow to the Steel Clan, but more than anything, Yuuto was concerned about her personal well-being.

Felicia glanced around before lowering her voice. "As for that... Shall we find someplace a bit more private?"

It was an understandable request. There were plenty of Sigrún's children—the Múspells—around the camp, after all. It was likely something that they shouldn't hear.

"Sure. Let's head back to the main camp."

"Yes. I apologize for making you come and go."

"That's fine. Rún's recovery comes first," Yuuto said simply. If it was for Sigrún, Yuuto was more than prepared to walk as far as he needed to, even if he walked his soles to a bloody mess in the process. That would be a price he'd be more than willing to pay if it meant Sigrún would get better.

After returning to the main camp and dismissing everyone around them, Felicia spoke hesitantly. "This isn't something I wanted to tell you, Big Brother, but..."

Her expression and tone were both heavy, and it was easy for Yuuto to tell that she was being honest when she said she didn't want to bring up the subject. Yuuto steeled himself for what she might say.

"Rún isn't originally from the Wolf Clan. She was born far off in northern Miðgarðr."

"Huh, is that so?" Yuuto blinked in surprise. This was the first he'd ever heard of that. Sigrún had known Felicia from a very young age, so Yuuto had thought she had been born and raised in the Wolf Clan. However, now that Felicia

mentioned it, it occurred to him that Sigrún's appearance—from her hair color to her skin tone—was unique among the Wolf Clan's members. That all made sense if she was actually from a different region.

"Yes. And, um... Rún was originally a slave purchased by my father."

"Wha?!" Yuuto was thoroughly shocked by this next revelation. While he had experienced the horrors of countless battlefields and had been inured to most surprises, he was caught so thoroughly off guard that he briefly froze in place, left utterly dumbstruck with shock. For now, he encouraged Felicia to continue with a glance.

"I wasn't aware of it at the time, but from what my brother told me later, it seems my father treated her quite harshly," Felicia said sadly, her brow furrowed in pain. The two were close friends, despite their dissimilar personalities. It seemed Felicia was blaming herself for not noticing how her birth father had treated the young Sigrún.

"...I see," Yuuto said after a pained silence. He was angry to discover that someone had once abused his dear daughter, but learning that it was Felicia's birth father made it all the more difficult for him to process.

"But things changed when she turned ten years of age. A rune appeared on her right hand." Felicia's voice brightened as she mentioned the rune. It was clear she recalled that memory fondly.

"Your predecessor, Lord Fárbauti, heard about her rune and immediately exchanged a Chalice with Rún, freeing her from bondage."

"Hrmph! So that old coot could be useful after all." Yuuto couldn't help but smile at the memory of his unconventional sworn father.

Those that were blessed with a rune often showed remarkable talents as an Einherjar. It was much better for a clan to liberate and elevate an Einherjar to a position as one of its full members, rather than oppress that Einherjar and risk having them turn against the clan at a later date. While Fárbauti tended to value harmony and wasn't one to force through his opinions, an Einherjar was a precious talent that could benefit the entire clan. It must have been easy for him to overcome any objections to his decision.

“Sigrún blossomed under Skáviðr’s and my brother’s instruction and became one of the most powerful warriors in the clan. She got so good that my father, who had once been her master and was serving as the clan’s Second at the time, came to regret his past actions and formally apologized to her.”

“I see. So that’s what’s behind Sigrún’s personality.” Yuuto nodded in understanding, but his smile was bitter. He had never really questioned why, but Sigrún’s personality and values were on the extreme end of the spectrum, even in the anarchic and power-based society of Yggdrasil. When she decided Yuuto had little in the way of physical skill, she steadfastly refused to accept that he was the Gleipsieg—the Child of Victory—who had been sent by the gods. When he showed his ability, however, she had sworn absolute loyalty to him. Her extreme personality and changes in attitude made perfect sense given her background. She had escaped slavery by way of her ability, and she had obtained her current position and respect through improving upon it. To her, ability was everything.

“Yeah, I can see why she’d be anxious.”

She had been shown the gulf in ability between her and the Flame Clan’s warrior general Shiba, and with her dominant arm injured, she couldn’t fight, meaning she had temporarily lost that all-important thing. Even if, objectively, that loss was temporary, to Sigrún it was like the very foundation of her being had been taken away from under her. It was perhaps unavoidable that she’d be in a panic. No matter how stoic and calm she appeared—and although she was by far the most famous and powerful member of the Steel Clan—she was still only twenty years old by Yggdrasil’s reckoning, which in modern-day measurements meant she was just nineteen.

“Okay then. Now that I know the reason, let’s head back to Rún.” Yuuto scratched his head and then stood up. He didn’t know what he could do if he went to her. Still, he wanted to be near her.

“Mm... Mm? F-Father?!” When Sigrún woke, Yuuto sat dozing at the head of her bed. Evidently, he had come to watch over her and had dozed off in the process. A part of her was happy to see him go to the trouble of visiting her, but her sense of guilt for making Yuuto, who was extremely busy, set aside his

duties because of her overshadowed that happiness.

“Mm? Ah, Rún, you’re awake.” Yuuto had apparently only been dozing. He sat up, a happy, reassuring smile on his lips.

Sigrún felt another swirl of emotions in her chest. Happiness, affection, and guilt.

“I sincerely thank you for coming to visit me, Father, but I’m all better now...”

“You’re not convincing anyone with a face like that.”

“Is that...so? I don’t really understand it myself,” Sigrún said as she patted her face in an attempt to confirm what Yuuto was saying. She didn’t think there was anything odd with her face. While there was still a bit of lethargy in her body, she felt much better than when she had collapsed. As far as she was concerned, there wasn’t anything particularly wrong with her.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t know it yourself. It’s easy to be the last one to notice when it comes to your own health. Even when it’s obvious to everyone else.” Yuuto shrugged and let out a chuckle. Sigrún knew at once that Yuuto was referring both to herself and, with a self-deprecating note, to his own history.

“Do I really seem that off to everyone at the moment? I admit that I’ve been a little out of sorts.”

“Yes, you’re definitely off. Anyone can see it.”

“I... I see.” Sigrún dropped her gaze as Yuuto replied without a trace of hesitation. She felt another swirl of emotions building up within her. Sigrún’s heart ached at the fact that she had lost some of Yuuto’s respect. More than anything, though, what she felt was anxiety. Given that she was broken, would Yuuto want to use her anymore? Would he even bother to keep her by his side if she could no longer fight? She couldn’t bear to continue sitting still and tried to stand. Yuuto reached out and firmly grabbed her by the wrist.

“That’s exactly what I mean when I say you’re off. I keep telling you. You need to rest.”

“...Yes, Father.” With Yuuto’s hand on her shoulder, Sigrún slumped back and laid down on the bed without any resistance. It was true, he had told her that

several times. Tears welled up in her eyes as she admonished herself. Why couldn't she follow such a simple command?

"Felicia told me about your past."

"Mine?"

"Yes. You were a slave, weren't you? Oh, don't blame Felicia; I forced her to tell me."

"Yes, I was... And blame Felicia? For what?" Sigrún tilted her head quizzically, blinking in confusion. She couldn't think of why she'd blame Felicia for anything.

"Ah, I guess I didn't need to worry about that. Well, I thought it was something you didn't want to tell me."

"Ah, I see. So that's what you meant." Sigrún nodded as though she finally understood.

"Now that you mention it, Father, it certainly is true that I never told you about it. But I wasn't trying to hide anything. It's just that I thought something from so long ago wasn't even worth mentioning."

"Is that so? I was really happy to hear about your past, Rún."

"O-Oh? I see... I don't think it's all that interesting."

"You're wrong there. It told me more about you, Rún. Like why you're so focused on strength and ability," Yuuto stated.

Sigrún once again tilted her head, as she couldn't quite follow where Yuuto was going. She had no conscious awareness that she was focused on strength or ability. The weak are oppressed and the strong take what they wish—that was the law of nature, so far as she understood it. Without strength, without ability, one couldn't gain anything—one couldn't protect anything. That was why she needed to be strong. To her, it was a natural rule of law, something as obvious as the fact that it was necessary to kill other living things in order to survive.

"Is there something off about how I think?"

"No, no. I have no intention of denying your values or your thoughts. That's who you are, Rún. I've been saved by your strength countless times. I appreciate your focus on strength."

“I’m relieved to hear that. I’m glad to be of use to you, Father.”

“Yep, in that sense, you’ve been really useful to me. Enough to make me want to pat your head for three days and nights straight,” Yuuto said with a joking smile, patting Sigrún’s head. His hand was extremely gentle and reassuring. His touch was enough to dispel the fog of anxiety swirling in her heart. Though at the same time, she also felt a hurried need bloom within her—a need to hurry up and recover so that she could regain Yuuto’s confidence and have him pat her head again.

“Tsk. You’re beating yourself up again, aren’t you?”

Sigrún had no words to offer as Yuuto’s observation had hit the mark. Yet, at the same time, she was curious.

“How could you tell?”

It was true that Yuuto had all sorts of knowledge that no one else on Yggdrasil had. He also had the smarts to make use of that knowledge, but even he shouldn’t be able to read people’s minds.

“Well, that’s simple. I can see it in your face.”

“My face? I’m often told by people that I’m not really that expressive and that I’m hard to read. Even Felicia points that out.”

“Even Felicia, huh? That’s unexpected. Well, sure, you’re harder to read than most people, but it’s just a matter of watching you more closely.”

Yuuto furrowed his brow and tilted his head, as though to say that he couldn’t understand why others couldn’t see Sigrún’s emotions in her expression. Sigrún once again found herself thinking that was part of the reason he made such a great ruler. He always watched people carefully. He had probably developed that skill after he regretted being unable to see the darkness that had been eating away at his trusted big brother, Loptr.

“Well, anyway. I’m just trying to say one thing: try to relax a bit more.”

“You mentioned that before. Not to shoulder everything myself.” Even Sigrún herself could tell that her tone fell in disappointment as she said those words. She had started to notice that her tendency to shoulder every burden wasn’t a

good thing based on Yuuto's comments, but she just couldn't help it. Her heart wouldn't listen to her. She couldn't control it. She was embarrassed and ashamed of the fact that she couldn't do what she was told to do. Yuuto once again patted her head.

"Yeah, true. It wouldn't be such a big deal if you could just relax when you were told to relax, right? I was the same way not too long ago," Yuuto said with a self-deprecating chuckle. The laugh was familiar. Yuuto had laughed in a similar way at the beginning of their conversation.

"If protecting the people closest to you means putting yourself on the line, then of course you're gonna do it."

"Are you referring to the time when you had just returned from the land beyond the heavens?"

"Yep, that's it. I see you noticed it back then."

"Yes, you always seemed so worried. Lady Mitsuki, Felicia, Ingrid, and the others were all concerned for you."

"So it seems. In that, I really do feel bad about making you all worry," Yuuto said with a tone of embarrassment as he scratched at his head. While she knew it was disrespectful, Sigrún thought it was cute of him. Of course, she wasn't ever going to say something like that out loud and instead chose to say something else.

"There was a time like that for you, too, Father."

"If anything, that's more the default for me, I think."

"Yes, true."

Now that he mentioned it, Sigrún had to agree. While Yuuto had been overly hard on himself when he returned from the present, he had always shouldered as much of the burden as possible, pushing himself over his four years in Yggdrasil. Sigrún and the others around him had always worried he'd push himself too far.

"You know, it kind of hurts to have you state that so clearly."

"Oh. M-My apolo..."

“Oh quiet, I’m kidding. It’s a joke. I’m not so easily hurt.” Yuuto ruffled Sigrún’s hair.

It was true. Sigrún felt that Yuuto had changed in that regard. While she still felt his intense dedication to protecting his people, his sense of responsibility, and his sheer determination to succeed every day, he was also able to laugh at his own expense, look after others, and even engage in a little self-mockery to get his point across. It was at that moment that Sigrún felt a weight lift from her shoulders. Even her great father, a man whom she respected and even worshipped, had taken four years to reach that state. She honestly felt it couldn’t be helped that she wasn’t there yet either.

“Besides, you can tell by my tone, can’t you? I mean, my voice was pretty exaggerated, wasn’t it?”

“I-I’m afraid I’m not quite that socially observant...”

“C’mon, even a child would notice.”

Sigrún couldn’t find a response to Yuuto’s comment. It was true that, upon reflection, Yuuto’s tone was clearly in jest. She felt like screaming at her past self for not noticing.

“See? When someone’s shouldering too much of a burden, they find themselves missing the things going on around them. They can even become blind to stuff that’d normally be totally obvious to them.”

“...I see.” Sigrún nodded, her jaw half-slack with shock. She hadn’t realized it, but it definitely seemed she had lost sight of her surroundings.

“Of course, there are times when people have to put all their effort into something. That also leads to growth, after all. That said, if you run into a wall and can’t find any way around it, then sometimes it’s good to relax and take a look around.”

“...Take a look around?”

“Yep. And it’s at those times that you often find that the answer might have been right in front of you the whole time.” Yuuto closed one eye in a wink. “Mm? What is it? Was I too vague?” Yuuto asked worriedly at Sigrún’s mute stare. Sigrún hurriedly shook her head in denial.

“No, I was just overcome with emotion.” There was no lie to her words. It was as though she had suddenly had a veil lifted from her eyes. Sigrún was moved by Yuuto’s words.

“It’s as you say, Father. Even though I had the greatest possible teacher in front of me, I couldn’t see it. What a fool I must be.”

“Ah, are you talking about Ská? Yeah, he really was a great teacher.” Yuuto nodded along in agreement. For a moment Sigrún thought he was joking, but it seemed he meant it. Suoh Yuuto was a young man who, despite his usual sharp senses and keen observational skills, would often miss the most obvious of hints in situations like these.

“Father, you really do watch others around you very carefully, but respectfully, I believe you should pay more attention to yourself.”

“Huh?! Am I really that oblivious about myself?!” he responded with concern, prompting Sigrún to nod gravely.

“Yes, at times. On very particular subjects, most certainly.”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean?! Now *that’s* going to keep me up all night!”

“Heh. Yes, I suppose it can be hard to notice your own faults.” Sigrún covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled. That reminded her that she hadn’t laughed in some time. Sigrún realized at that moment what it truly meant to relax and take a look around. She felt her heart relax, and she was able to see her surroundings more clearly. Even if she couldn’t find the way over the wall she found placed before her, it at least felt like she now had some idea of how she could overcome it.

“Hey, stop laughing and tell me.”

“It’s a secret. When I think about it, that’s one of the things that I really love about you, Father.” Sigrún placed her index finger over her lips and smiled shyly. She would have never believed she could take this sort of tone with her beloved father, but she didn’t dislike this aspect of her own personality. Thanks to this conversation, she understood herself a lot better now. She could see that Yuuto wouldn’t get angry or stop loving her because of such things. Not

only that, she now knew full well that Yuuto would, if anything, smile happily at her giving him those sorts of responses, much like he was doing right now.

“Well, it seems like you’re feeling a lot better if you can tease me like that.”



“Well done, Father.” Yuuto was greeted with gentle words of thanks as he left Sigrún’s tent. When he turned back, his trusted and beloved adjutant was smiling at him. Yuuto scrunched his face up in a frown. Ordinarily, he felt relief when he saw her, but this time was a notable exception.

“I knew you had many talents, but I never knew eavesdropping was one of them,” Yuuto noted sarcastically and glared at Felicia. The things he had just told Sigrún were an embarrassing part of his own history, and the one who had been listening from outside the tent was one of the people who had been worried sick during that time. He was embarrassed and bashful and felt the need to lash out with a little bit of venom.

“Oh, well, I *am* your adjutant and bodyguard, Big Brother, so of course I’m always somewhere nearby,” Felicia said breezily without a trace of remorse.

She *did* have a point. He had been so worried about Sigrún that he had forgotten that fact. Despite all of his lecturing to Sigrún to watch her surroundings, he had fallen into the same trap. This was what it meant to be so embarrassed that he wanted to crawl into a hole and hide.

“Besides... Whatever else she might be, Rún is a precious friend of mine. Of course I’d be worried.”

“Hrmph.” Yuuto snorted in displeasure and began rapidly walking away. He couldn’t complain or needle her now that she had said those words. Yuuto wasn’t happy about the fact that he’d have to let her go on the eavesdropping, so he decided to offer a token bit of resistance by hurrying off.

“Oh! Please wait, Big Brother!”

“No.”

“Heh. Even when you’re blushing and pouting, you’re adorable. I love that part of you as well.”

“Tch!”

Yuuto felt his cheeks flush with heat. Felicia had seen right through him. He had just dug himself deeper into his hole. He couldn’t help but turn and glare at

her. As he turned around, however, he noticed Felicia's head was bowed so deeply that her forehead could have touched her knees.

"Thank you so very much for saving Rún." Her voice was filled with gratitude. Though the two often squabbled, Sigrún was her best friend. Felicia had stated as much earlier. Indeed, considering Sigrún's upbringing as a slave in Felicia's household, they were more like sisters than friends. Yuuto scratched his head for a moment and sighed before turning his back on Felicia.

"You don't need to thank me for it. Besides, Rún's precious to me too."

"Even so... Thank you. I really couldn't bear to watch her lately."

"...Agreed." Yuuto nodded, and although he didn't turn back to face Felicia, he agreed with her sentiment. It had been hard to watch Sigrún struggle. When he considered that he had once made others feel the same way about him, he felt even greater shame over his past behavior.

"You're as impressive as always, Big Brother, to have so easily melted that stubborn Rún's heart."

"And like always, you're vastly overstating my efforts."

"Such modesty."

"No, it really was just luck. I'd made the same mistake before her. That's all."

When he had been stuck under the crushing weight of responsibility—a weight that was too much for him to bear—the fact that there were people around him to support him was the greatest gift to him even as he struggled to find his way in the darkness. That experience was why he could empathize with Sigrún's struggles and offer his support to her in turn. That's really all it was.

"If anything, you all are the ones who saved Rún."

"Hm? What do you mean?" Felicia tilted her head quizzically, as though she wasn't sure who Yuuto was referring to. Yuuto chuckled as he realized there was no way for her to understand what he meant.

"What does—" Felicia's question was cut off by a sharp call.

"Father!" Kristina appeared at the end of that voice. It was easy to tell based on her tone and expression that she brought bad news. Unfortunately, Yuuto's

observation was indeed accurate.

“We’ve just gotten word from Gimlé. The Flame Clan is on the move.”

“Tch. It would have been ideal if they’d stayed put until autumn, but they came after all.” Yuuto couldn’t help but click his tongue in frustration. He had suspected something like this would happen and had prepared several contingency plans just in case, but he had still hoped that the Flame Clan would have waited. However, it seemed that it was his fate to face off against the Demon King of the Warring States Period.

ACT 4

“I’m sorry to gather you all this late at night, but we have an emergency,” Yuuto said grimly as he looked over the assembled commanders. It was late enough that many of them had needed awakening from their slumber, but not a single person present appeared bleary-eyed. They were all warriors who had survived throughout this age of war. All of them were used to unexpected emergencies.

“Ten thousand soldiers of the Flame Clan’s Fifth Division have set out from the old Lightning Clan capital and advanced upon Fort Gashina. The siege has probably already started. Additionally, there are reports that soldiers are converging upon the old Spear Clan capital of Mímir.”

“What?!” Even for the veterans assembled in the room, the news came as a shock. Given that the Flame Clan had lost most of their grain stores in their most recent campaign against the Steel Clan, almost all of them expected the Flame Clan to wait until the autumn harvest to resume its campaign. To add to the problem, the Steel Clan Army was currently in the middle of campaigning in the east and was currently in central Jötunheimr. While they were caught off on the eastern end of Yggdrasil, the enemy was advancing upon them from behind. The generals had friends and family that they’d left behind in the Steel Clan realms. It would have been stranger if they didn’t feel any anxiety over the news.

“I understand your shock and your worry. However, everything will be fine. As I noted before this campaign began, I’ve already planned for such a possibility,” Yuuto said with a deliberately calm tone. He understood why the generals would be unnerved, but that was exactly why he had to project an aura of calm during a time like this. Anxiety at the top infects those serving under them.

“I-I see. Yes, I do remember that you had mentioned it.”

“I hadn’t expected it would actually happen...”

“As always, your foresight is impressive, Father.”

As they each noticed Yuuto’s calm demeanor, the generals also began to pull themselves together. Confidence on the part of the commander helped reassure their generals. While Yuuto was young, he had experienced and survived countless difficult situations. Projecting an aura of calm during emergencies had become second nature to him.

“As I’ve already mentioned, the Silk Clan will be joining our ranks. As such, our army will be turning around to relieve both Gimlé and Glaðsheimr.”

A particular general chose this moment to offer his observation. “That may be so. However, no doubt part of why they swallowed all of our terms was because of the presence of this army on their doorstep. If we withdraw here, they could very well turn around and go against the agreed-upon terms.”

The man’s name was Botvid—the patriarch of the Claw Clan. He was a pudgy man who looked slow and uninspiring, but he had a sharp mind—a trait he had passed on to his birth daughter, Kristina.

Yuuto nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I’m concerned about that possibility.”

It was necessary to hold the eastern ports to evacuate the population of Yggdrasil. Given that they had taken an enormous risk to secure those ports, to lose them at the last moment would defeat the whole purpose of this campaign. That was the outcome Yuuto wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Botvid, I’m going to name you acting patriarch of the Silk Clan and leave you a garrison of five thousand precisely for that reason.”

“Oh? Me?” Botvid’s lips twisted upward into an amused smile. It was a scheming smile that clearly implied he was up to no good. “Are you certain you wish to grant me even temporary control of a powerful clan like the Silk Clan?”

In the past, Botvid had betrayed Yuuto’s predecessor, Fárbauti, setting aside an alliance to take territory from the Wolf Clan. No doubt that past behavior was what Botvid was referring to.

“Scheming is best done in silence. If you really intended to do anything, you

wouldn't have mentioned it."

"Oh, but perhaps I'm telling you to lull you into a false sense of security."

"You wouldn't mention that if that was your intent."

"Even if I don't intend to do it now, perhaps I'll give in to the temptations offered by ruling such a large territory."

"What? Do you *want* me to suspect you of disloyalty?" Yuuto narrowed his eyes and asked, directing a glare in Botvid's direction. While Botvid himself probably intended it as a joke, given his personality, the subject was one that was a little too close to plausible to be funny. The assembled generals, too, looked upon him with distrust. Yuuto couldn't grasp Botvid's reason for raising the subject in this matter.

"Oh my, haha... I feel I've caused a bit of an issue here." Botvid seemed to have realized something, slapping at his balding pate with an expression of embarrassment.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you could say it's the cost of spending so long acting two-faced. I wanted to point out that I had no ulterior motives, but it seems all I've done is made people suspect me."

"Hah! You always make everything harder than it needs to be!" Even Yuuto had to laugh at the remark. It seemed that, given his history, Botvid wanted to make note of all the possible ways he could be scheming to dismiss that possibility of his betrayal out of hand. It must have seemed more dishonest for a habitual schemer like Botvid to simply and loyally state that he'd accept the appointment without comment. After all, it was easy enough to overturn any gestures of loyalty later.

"Yeah, okay, I get what you're trying to say. I'm leaving it in your hands, Botvid."

Just as he was about to fully entrust Botvid with the appointment, Kristina stood up and objected.

"Hold on, Father. That's how he always disarms his opponents. You can't let

him fool you.”

Yuuto’s expression tensed and he looked over to her.

“What?! Is that so?!”

“Yes. Do be careful.”

“Hey now, Kris. That’s a little too harsh. And please, Father, don’t play along with her.”

The assembled generals couldn’t hold back their laughter and snorted at Botvid’s troubled demeanor. The distrust that had fogged the room had been blown clear away. Yuuto himself had burst out openly in laughter, but...

“Mm?”

He caught Botvid and Kristina exchanging impish glances out of the corner of his eye.



At that moment he felt a chill run up his spine. It seemed this had all been a calculated charade on their part. No doubt it was true that Botvid had no intention of betraying him. After all, without that, Kristina wouldn't cooperate with him. What shocked him was just how Botvid had made the others trust him despite his penchant for deceptive behavior.

"Well, no wonder why the Wolf Clan folks were wary of him," Yuuto said to himself.

He felt like he had gotten a glimpse into the man who, despite lacking the blessings of a rune, and despite lacking the remarkable fighting abilities of an Einherjar, had still risen to become the patriarch of the Claw Clan, and then later risen to a leadership position within the great Steel Clan, solely on the strength of his mind and wit.

"Well, still, I'm glad he's on my side."

Governing a foreign territory was often difficult. There were differences in traditions, systems, and even values to navigate. Even without those obstacles, all manners of scheming creatures tended to gather around politics and governance, which was precisely why a crafty old fox like Botvid was perfect for dealing with all the difficulties associated with the position. With Botvid at his back, it meant Yuuto could focus completely on the fight against Nobunaga.

"Father!"

Someone called out to Yuuto from behind as he was about to return to his tent after the war council. While it was a familiar voice that he knew as well as his own, he couldn't help but frown when he heard it.

"Rún... What are you doing?! You should be slee..." He turned around to chide her, only to trail off and gape in surprise. Yes, Sigrún was behind him, but she was being carried on her protégé Hildegard's back.

"I'm following your orders and refraining from pushing myself, so please have mercy."

“Well, okay, I guess that’s fair.”

Yuuto had felt it would be a problem for her to be out and about so soon after collapsing, but after seeing the sight of Sigrún being carried on Hildegard’s back, he swallowed his lecture. Up until recently, Sigrún would probably have forced herself to walk here on her own two feet. The fact that she was having someone else carry her was probably an improvement. Yuuto supposed he had to give her credit for that.

“So, what is it?”

“Right. Father, I had heard the Flame Clan had resumed its advance, so I couldn’t bear to sit still... I judged that I wouldn’t be able to get any sleep, so I came to hear about the situation.”

“...I suppose I can’t blame you for that.” Yuuto scratched at his head and sighed. Sigrún bore the heavy burden of being the Mánagarmr of the Steel Clan Army, and she was extremely proud of that role. It was easy for Yuuto to understand that being excluded from the discussions would just deepen her anxiety.

“Yeah, that’s right. The Flame Clan is on the move again. In the west, one of the Flame Clan’s five division commanders, Kuuga of the Fifth Division, has started advancing to the east, while in the center, they’ve already gathered over fifty thousand soldiers in the old Spear Clan capital of Mímir, with more on the way.”

“Their last campaign was impressive, but they’re managing to surpass even that...” Even Sigrún had to suck in a breath in astonishment. The scale of the last Flame Clan campaign was enough to drive the Steel Clan into dire straits. It was natural that she’d find this situation alarming.

“Yeah, that old man is ridiculous,” Yuuto said and shrugged with a bitter laugh. He had a vague feeling that Nobunaga would move before the autumn harvest, but the scale of this move was far beyond even his expectations. Nobunaga was always a man who regularly and thoroughly made Yuuto reconsider what could even be considered possible. For Yuuto, who preferred to fight after planning for any and all possibilities, Nobunaga was an incredibly frustrating opponent.

Sigrún glanced around before settling on her course of action and spoke with steely determination. “...Father! I have a request!”

Yuuto couldn’t help but have a bad feeling about what she was about to say, but he nodded for her to continue. Sigrún nodded and gazed into Yuuto’s eyes as she spoke.

“Allow me to take the Múspells ahead of the main army.”

“Thought so.”

Yuuto couldn’t help but place his palm to his forehead. He knew that was what she would say. In truth, her proposal would be extremely useful under the circumstances. With her unit’s incredible mobility, they could quickly make their way to the war zone, and they could harry the enemy using their Parthian Shot tactics. It would be extremely useful to have the Múspells skirmishing with the enemy, and ordinarily, he would have immediately given his approval, but...

“You say that, but are you sure you’re ready to go yet?” It was just last evening that Sigrún had collapsed while training. It hadn’t even been half a day since then. He didn’t want her pushing herself.

“Yes. Please rest assured. I intend to have Bömburr handle leading the unit itself, while I’ll follow in a carriage, taking two days to get enough rest on the way.”

“Huh.” Yuuto’s eyes went wide as he let out a note of pleased surprise. Up until now, Sigrún would have said something along the lines of being able to handle a short journey on horseback, or that she’d force herself to get better through sheer force of will. It seemed that something had, in fact, changed within her. She had relaxed, in a good way, and there was none of the recklessness that had plagued her until recently.

“Yeah, I think you can handle this.” Yuuto nodded his assent. She had grown as a person and as a leader, and while perhaps it wasn’t exactly an appropriate compliment to offer a woman, she had become a much more sturdy person he could lean on. He could let her go without worry.

“That reminds me. There was something else I needed you to hurry ahead to do for me.”

“Something for me to do? Of course! I’ll do whatever you order!” Sigrún nodded intently.

It didn’t seem like she was putting any undue pressure on herself. Her voice was confident, but it didn’t give off an impression that she was trying to take on more than she could handle. Yuuto nodded and curled his lips into a grin.

“Yeah, it’s an important mission that I can only leave in your hands.”

Soldiers continued to pour into the former Spear Clan capital of Mímir from all over the Flame Clan’s territories. Given that they were being gathered from the recently conquered Wind, Lightning, and Spear Clans, the total number had quickly swelled into a vast army. There were already seventy thousand soldiers in the city, but the army was still growing. Of course, they were hastily assembled, so they weren’t particularly well-trained, but in battle, quantity had a quality all its own. A force of overwhelming numbers could swallow up anything in its path.

“What a beautiful sight.”

Nobunaga smiled from his vantage point at the hörgr atop the Hliðskjálf, pleased with the sight that was unfolding before him. Even in the Land of the Rising Sun, he had never assembled a force of this size in a single place. While he had far more men under his command in total at the time, he had needed to fight multiple opponents across the islands, so he had been forced to divide his forces into smaller divisions. Right now, however, the only opponent he needed to face was the Steel Clan, which meant he could commit the entirety of the Flame Clan’s forces to them rather than worry about anyone else. Imagining the march of such a mighty army stirred an excitement he had thought he’d long outgrown.

“Heh, ’tis an effort to restrain my urge to hurry on ahead.” Nobunaga bared his fangs in a predatory grin.

Parceling out forces in dribs and drabs was the height of foolishness. Although he had committed fifty thousand troops during the Siege of Glaðsheimr, he had failed to take the city. He couldn’t stand the prospect of losing a second battle to the same opponent. So for that reason, he had to keep a tight leash on his

urges and advance only when all of his preparations had been completed.

Ran, his Second, approached, his face flushed with urgency. It seemed something had happened.

“My Great Lord!”

“What?”

“Lord Kuuga has reportedly advanced upon Gimlé without waiting for Lord Shiba to join him.”

“Oh? That spineless coward has actually moved without my express permission?” Nobunaga blinked in surprise. The Kuuga he knew was so cautious that he would chip a stone bridge into pebbles by checking it with a hammer trying to make certain it was safe to cross. Even Nobunaga hadn’t expected such a paragon of caution to ignore his order to fight alongside Shiba and decide to move his forces of his own volition.

“Heh, it seems my words had their intended effect,” Nobunaga chuckled with amusement.

While he was ordinarily thought of as a dictator who would not stand for even the slightest hint of dissent or for the disobeying of his orders, in reality, Nobunaga’s least favorite subordinates were the ones who could *only* follow orders.

“Tasks are something one should find for themselves.

Opportunities are things one makes for themselves.

Those who can only do what they’re told are mere soldiers, not generals.”

Those words encapsulated his attitude toward his generals. What he desired most from his subordinates was the initiative to make their own decisions and produce their own results.

“What shall we do? Would it not be prudent to order him to retreat for the moment and wait until Lord Shiba has joined him?”

Nobunaga casually waved away Ran’s recommendation.

“No, no. Let it be. He’s Shiba’s blood brother; he’s a useful man in his own

right. He's got ten thousand under his command. His actions won't have any major effects on my overall strategy. Let's look forward to what he can do when he's cornered and has no choice but to fight like a madman."

Some decisions were better made on the field. Nobunaga was more than willing to overlook this sort of disobedience so long as the general in question produced results. Of course, if he couldn't produce results, then Nobunaga had no use for him. Another aspect of Oda Nobunaga was his willingness to mercilessly discard those who failed him.

"Blast, so this is what they mean by a tough nut to crack. Damned thing."

The man Nobunaga had been discussing was currently sitting cross-legged with his face propped up against his arm and was muttering bitterly to himself. It had been two weeks since he had started his siege of Fort Gashina. There had been no progress in that time.

"He'll be at Bilskírnir about now. I'm running out of time," Kuuga said anxiously, chewing on his thumbnail. Ordinarily, Kuuga would breezily accept the situation, simply noting that sieges took time, but he had disobeyed orders explicitly for the purpose of stealing the spotlight from Shiba. He had to finish the siege before Shiba arrived at all costs. If not, he would have ended up disobeying Nobunaga's orders for no reason.

"Father, you won't find any good solutions in a hurry."

"I know that, dammit!" Kuuga spat back angrily at his child's attempt to soothe him. He was fully aware that he was just venting his frustration at someone who didn't deserve it, but there was nowhere else for his pent-up anger to go.

"Those damned archers are what we need to deal with first."

Kuuga glared at the archers atop the fort's walls as though they were responsible for all of the ills in the world. The giant projectile weapons that had destroyed the siege chariot had remarkable range and destructive power, but they were limited in number. They could easily be overwhelmed with a large enough force. However, the archers on the fort's walls made laying siege to the fortress substantially more difficult.

“Indeed. That said, with so many of them, we can’t approach the fort carelessly. How did they manage to gather that many skilled archers?” the subordinate said with an exasperated sigh.

It required a certain amount of time to train a competent archer. The Steel Clan’s arrows came in from such distances and with such accuracy that the Flame Clan soldiers could only throw their hands up in astonishment. Just how much training had those archers required before they had reached that level of proficiency?

Because Kuuga was aware of how hard it was to train archers, he responded with a sigh. “Fool. There can’t be that many skilled archers in their ranks. It’s a difference in weapons. They’re called crossbows, I believe.”

“Crossbows, Father?”

“Yes. It takes a while to fire an arrow using one, but they’re substantially more powerful in terms of range and power than our bows. The most frightening part about them is that it only takes minimal training to make someone proficient in their use.”

“A-Amazing...”

The subordinate’s eyes went wide with surprise and his voice quavered as he looked at Kuuga. That, too, irritated Kuuga to no end.

“You’re supposed to be one of my commanders. You should know the bare minimum of what our enemies possess.”

“M-My apologies.”

“Hrmph.” Kuuga snorted in annoyance and turned his gaze back to Fort Gashina. He had learned about the Steel Clan’s crossbows through his reports, but there was a significant difference between seeing them described on paper and actually witnessing them in action. The most unexpected surprise was their rate of fire.

“Aren’t they supposed to take three to five times longer to reload...?” Kuuga couldn’t help but mutter the complaint to himself. The enemy continued to rain down arrows upon them without pause. They had sprung that rate of fire on him completely without warning.

“I might be out of options here.”

Siege chariots couldn’t approach the gate because of the monstrous bows, and trying to put ladders against the wall to scale it would result in immense casualties for his forces. Even trying to pressure the enemy into surrendering by surrounding their fortress was having little effect, given how easily they were fending off his efforts to raze the fort.

He tried to make it appear as though he had lowered his guard and was open to a counterattack, but it seemed the enemy either saw through his ruses or were simply cowardly, as they made no indication that they planned to move any of their forces beyond the walls of their fort.

At this point, Kuuga was essentially stuck between a rock and a hard place. The only hand available to him at this point was to surround the castle and starve it into submission by cutting off the enemy’s lines of supply. The enemy couldn’t maintain resistance forever if they ran out of food and arrows. However, a drawn-out siege like that wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Nobunaga. There was a good chance that he’d be interrogated about why he had disobeyed orders and be dismissed from his post. Just imagining the look of pity Shiba might direct his way when that happened was humiliating enough to make Kuuga keel over in rage.

“Surely there’s something...” Kuuga furrowed his brow desperately in thought. He considered what the best course of action would be, all the while stamping out the tiny rational voice in his mind that informed him that there was no such thing as a simple solution to the mess he currently found himself in. His tenacity was the one thing that he had in greater abundance than his talented younger brother, and it was the one thing he clung to as he tried to will the fortress gates open with his mind. At times, tenacity and obsessive focus can cause miracles. Such was the case this time.

“Lord Kuuga! There’s a messenger approaching from Bilskírnir!”

“What? Has Shiba arrived?”

“No, this is what’s arrived.”

“Mm? Th-This is...” As he skimmed through the letter before him, Kuuga’s eyes went wide with surprise. Soon after, his lips curled up into a Machiavellian

grin.

“Heheh. It’s worth trying everything, isn’t it? Looks like I might eke this one out after all.”

The sun set into the mountains and dyed the western skies a dull crimson. The echoing cries of crows made the whole scene seem strangely empty.

“Seems they’re not moving again today,” Garve, Rasmus’s Second, said with a sigh of relief. While he had steeled himself to fight, it wasn’t as though he had a death wish. He was simply happy that he had survived to see another day. However...

“Hrmph, there’s something eerie about how quiet they’ve been. Just what are they plotting?” His parent, Rasmus, gnawed on his evening bread and directed a suspicious gaze at the Flame Clan Army encamped a short distance away from Fort Gashina. The Flame Clan Army had aggressively sought out openings to attack during the first days of the siege, taking actions such as sending in a covered battering ram and feinting attacks to put pressure on the defenders. However, in the week since, they hadn’t made any obvious moves. They had formed a cordon around the fortress right outside of the range of the Steel Clan’s crossbows and sat waiting.

“Hahah, I’m sure they can’t find any opening in your tactics, Father.”

“I wouldn’t say that’s my doing. It’s thanks to the many weapons that were given to me by His Majesty. Things would turn out the same regardless of who was in command.”

“Not at all. His Majesty’s inventions are indeed all wonderful weapons, but you’re being far too modest in stating anyone could command this defense.”

“I’ve told you a dozen times, Garve—there’s no need to flatter me at this point.”

“I don’t have any memory of ever flattering you,” Garve said with a completely sober and serious expression.

In truth, Rasmus’s tactics were impressive and needed no embellishment. He never panicked in the face of an attacking enemy, always choosing to initially

stand back and wait. He allowed the enemy to approach, prepared his own men, and attacked only when the moment was right. It seemed easy enough when described, but it was actually extremely difficult to put into practice.

On the battlefield, people fought over the right to take each other's lives. They tended to reflexively react too hastily, wanting to rid themselves of the threats as quickly as possible. To use modern terms to describe it, many people placed in those kinds of situations usually ended up becoming rather trigger-happy. However, when one was too quick on the trigger, it was hard to do much damage to the enemy. If anything, it often wasted energy and ammunition before the battle was at a critical juncture.

Rasmus's predecessor as garrison commander, Grer, was still young and lacked experience, so there was a good chance he would pull the trigger early. This kind of defense was one where experience counted for everything.

"That aside, we can't be overconfident here. I'm told the enemy general is a tenacious snake of a man. No doubt he'll try something else soon. It's safe to assume he's already preparing his next hand." With that, Rasmus gazed over at the enemy like a grizzled hawk tracking its prey. It was the look of a veteran warrior who had fought on countless battlefields.

"Grrr... I'm already out of bread." Rasmus then thinned his lips into a sad pout as he realized he had eaten all but the final piece of his bread. He then tossed that final piece into his mouth and chewed.

"This isn't nearly enough... Hrmph." He let out a long, deep sigh.

Rasmus was particularly fond of the new bread—made with pure, sandless flour—that had taken over the food supply in the Steel Clan over the past two years. He had spent nearly fifty years of his life carefully chewing on his bread, never certain if his next bite would present him with a pebble or lump of sand that would only serve to wear down his teeth. Rasmus had been moved beyond words when he had been able to freely enjoy a loaf of bread—to be able to savor its flavor without the constant fear of cracking his teeth on debris. He loved this new bread, and it wasn't an exaggeration to say he was practically addicted to it.

As far as Garve was concerned, that was totally fine. He felt that simple

pleasures like these were necessary in life. He, too, had spent nearly forty years eating the same sandy bread that Rasmus so despised. Garve could empathize with his love of the soft, sandless bread. That said, the almost infantile pout on Rasmus's face at the realization he had run out of bread wasn't something Garve ever wanted the common soldiers, who loved and respected their commander, to see. No doubt they'd be disillusioned at the sight of such a childish expression.

"Shall I tell the kitchen servants to prepare more?"

"...No need." Rasmus deeply furrowed his brow and shook his head with a look of intense sorrow. Given there was a pause before his response, it was fairly obvious that he had wrestled with the temptation.

"We don't know how long this siege will last. I can't very well be living high on the hog while the soldiers do without." It seemed his conscience as a general had come out on top in the end. There was still plenty of foodstuffs in the fort's storehouses, but there was no telling how long the siege would continue. The most important consideration during a protracted siege was how to make limited supplies last as long as possible. If Rasmus was a man who would use his position to enjoy luxuries for himself while ordering his subordinates to do without, no one would follow him into battle.

"If anything, make sure that the sentries get extra to eat. Give them some wine as well. They did well despite the heat today." Garve's expression twisted into a smile at those words. It was this part of Rasmus's personality that had drawn Garve to him and had made Garve want his Chalice. This old man, Rasmus, was, at his core, a compassionate human being.

"I respect your decision to stoically refrain from luxury yourself while instead treating your men. You are a shining example, Father." Garve's words came from the bottom of his heart. However...

"Stop with that sort of nonsense. If you have time to ramble like that, then give me your bread instead!" With that, Rasmus reached over to try and forcefully yank the loaf out of Garve's hand. Garve hurriedly jumped away from Rasmus's grasping paw.

"W-Wait. Y-You're not serious, are you?!" Garve objected as he hid the loaf

behind his back. Rasmus's eyes showed that he was dead serious. They were a deathly "I will kill you for that bread" sort of serious, in fact. He looked like a hawk stalking its prey.

"Quiet! Surely a child should do without so that his father can have enough to eat!"

It was a statement that was far removed from the image of a compassionate leader that Rasmus had presented just a few moments earlier. Garve couldn't help but shoot back.

"Pardon?! If anything, it's a parent's job to go out of his way to give his own food to his children!"

"Hrmph! I have no interest in what you think of me at this point!"

"That's awful! That's not something you say to a child who rejected a direct Chalice from the patriarch to stay by your side!"

"Hey, I never asked you to do that," Rasmus said with a thoroughly infuriated tone, picking at his nose with his pinky. Even Garve couldn't help but grit his teeth in anger.

"Y-You old coot! I might very well leave you!"

"Yeah? Go ahead! If you don't want to be here, give me back your Chalice and go to the princess. It'd be great to be rid of you."

Rasmus waved his hand as though shooing away a dog. Garve felt his temper rising further, and he was about to yell out even louder when he realized that this was *exactly* what Rasmus wanted. Rasmus wanted to somehow reward the child that had stuck by his side over the years. He was playing up a charade to get him to leave, which was precisely why Garve wouldn't, or rather, *couldn't* leave him.

"Tch... You really are something, you know."

He couldn't help but feel that Rasmus needed him, at the very least, by his side.

"Well, if you're sick of me..."

"If I were to get sick of you this easily, I would've left you a long time ago!

Here. You can have half, so stop pouting, please.” Garve tore his loaf in half and tossed a part at Rasmus. Rasmus caught it but didn’t look pleased. If anything, his frown deepened.

“I haven’t fallen so far as to take handouts from my sworn son.” He snorted with distaste and tossed the bread back at Garve.

“Hey! That’s no way to treat a gift from someone!”

“Silence! You’ve no place to talk when you don’t understand how I’m feeling!”

“I could say the same about you and what your children think of...”

Just as the argument threatened to devolve again, a deafeningly loud sound thundered in the air and the ground shook beneath them. Garve immediately wondered if lightning had struck nearby, but the sky was already dark. He would have noticed if there had been a flash of lightning. In fact, there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky. It couldn’t have been a thunderclap. Garve couldn’t shake the feeling of dread building up in his chest. He was familiar with that sound. There was no way he could forget it. He remembered the sheer dread he’d felt when he had heard that same sound two years ago.

“C-Could they have...”

Right as Garve was about to put his worst fears into words, something whistled through the air as it hurtled toward them. Then, in the very next moment, another crash reverberated through the air and ground, shaking him to his core, and he heard the sound of collapsing stone as the fortress walls came down.

“Blast it! They have a trebuchet! They brought it in under the cover of darkness so we wouldn’t notice! Crafty bastards!” Rasmus spat with a loud click of his tongue. It was a weapon that Yuuto used as a core part of his siege warfare strategies.

A war cry erupted from the enemy formation. The cry was followed by the rumble of thousands of men running toward the fortress. It seemed the Flame Clan general felt this was the perfect opening and had launched a full-on assault.

“Hrmph, the sly bastards!”

The panic passed quickly. The playful, greedy old man of a few moments earlier had vanished. In his place was a grizzled old warrior, his lips warped into an amused smile as he gazed out at the enemy with a predatory gleam.

“Ring the gongs! Time to intercept them, Garve!”

The war cry of the Flame Clan soldiers echoed through the night air. Kuuga had already informed the soldiers they would be storming the fortress at nightfall. They had taken the time to rest and morale was high. The sheer volume of their cries would be enough to unnerve him if they were coming from the enemy, but there was nothing more reassuring to hear from his own men. With the momentum behind this charge, Kuuga felt like he could overwhelm any enemy in the world. Kuuga couldn’t contain the laughter that welled up from deep within him.

“Heheh, it was a bad idea to show those things in front of foreigners.”

The Steel Clan had utilized trebuchets in their conquest of Blíkjanda-Böl. They had completely removed any traces of them on their retreat, but they hadn’t been able to erase the memories of those who had seen the trebuchets in action. By having someone with a talent for art draw a reproduction based on their memories, it was easy enough to get a general sense of their design. It was also obvious that they relied upon leverage. With that much information, it wasn’t particularly difficult to create a copy. Of course, what made Kuuga extraordinary as a strategist was that he had come up with the idea of reproducing a siege weapon with just illustrations and an understanding of their mechanics, but to him, it seemed perfectly natural.

“Having their fortress walls taken down by their own invention must feel quite terrible.”

Kuuga’s mind was currently filled with malicious glee. He believed that creating something completely from scratch was a feat reserved for the chosen geniuses of the world. There was nothing more satisfying to him than to have managed to go toe-to-toe with that sort of genius.

“Hahaha! Charge! Charge! Shove aside those Steel Clan soldiers! Haaahahaha!” He couldn’t withhold his laughter even as he issued his orders. It

had been three frustrating weeks of seeing every single one of his plans foiled by the enemy. But now, his own planning had created an opportunity to win. It was understandable that he was riding high on an adrenaline rush. However, that high didn't last long.

"Gah!"

"Gyah!"

"Goomph!"

Mixed in with the war cries came yelps of pain from his soldiers. Having noticed the Flame Clan's charge, the Steel Clan soldiers had responded with arrows from the fortress walls. That was fine. It was perfectly normal for the enemy to respond with ranged weapons when an army approached. There was a significant issue, however...

"Blast! There are no walls to stand in our way! What's taking you lot so long?!"

The army appeared to be making no visible progress. They had become mired by their own numbers, and the charge he had spent a week preparing for had stopped in its tracks.

"I-It seems the enemy has plugged the hole in the walls with wagons."

"Wha?! Then just go ahead and break them down, you fools!" Kuuga responded irritably at the messenger's report. He had accounted for the possibility that the enemy would try to fill the breach in the wall with some sort of makeshift barrier, which was why he had equipped the first wave of his forces with weapons like hand axes for destroying such barricades. They should have been more than enough to break through any wagons blocking the way.

"W-Well, it appears they've placed iron plates inside the wagon walls..."

"Tch! I'd forgotten they had that." Kuuga clucked his tongue in agitation. Given that he had dismissed those wagons as a tool for field battles, it had taken him a moment to connect the pieces in his head. However, now that he thought about it, they were suited perfectly for situations like this one. With wheeled wagons, the enemy could quickly plug any openings in their walls.

“Grrr. So they’ve already prepared for us having a trebuchet...” Kuuga bit down on his lip in frustration. The fact that the enemy had responded so quickly with their wagons meant that they had already planned for this contingency. He’d heard that the patriarch of the Steel Clan came from the same land as his lord, Nobunaga. When Kuuga took that into account, it wasn’t all that strange for him to believe that the Steel Clan had planned for the possibility that the Flame Clan would use trebuchets of their own.

“Damn. At this rate, we’ll just be fodder for their arrows.”

The perfect opportunity had suddenly turned into a dangerous situation for his army. He had thought he’d gotten the better of his opponent, only to have ended up blundering straight into their trap. With the front line stopped, and the forces behind them jamming them in place, his soldiers were in a very precarious position. Arrows were now raining down upon his soldiers. They were somehow managing to avoid the worst of the arrow fire with their shields, but they couldn’t stop all of the projectiles. If they remained where they were, they would eventually take heavy losses. Kuuga felt his determination waver...

“I can’t turn back now!” he shouted, trying to force himself to retain his composure. If he withdrew here, then the only thing that awaited him was Nobunaga’s anger and a demotion. That was a fate worse than death for him. All that remained for him to do was continue to push forward.

“Surely there’s something... Anything...!” Kuuga chewed on his thumbnail as he grunted in thought. He had deployed his ace in the hole, sure of his victory, only to end up in an extremely dangerous position. An ordinary commander would fall into a panicked confusion and find themselves unable to think of any solutions. Kuuga, however, was used to being in situations like these. That experience now proved decisive. He came up with a sudden solution and issued his orders.

“Send a messenger to the front line! Place our fallen into a pile and use them as a staircase! Don’t let their sacrifice be in vain!”

Telling his own soldiers to just use their fallen allies as a step to climb upon would probably be bad for morale, so he tried to phrase it as tactfully as possible. He wanted to pat himself on the back for adding the bit about not

letting their sacrifice be wasted. It was also an excellent way to comfort the soldiers into not feeling guilty for using their own comrades as a platform. So long as it was phrased in an eloquent way, people could be made to happily do all sorts of ruthless things. Kuuga was well aware of that. He was also aware of how best to take advantage of that.

“Heh, I suppose it’s still a pretty awful thing to order, but I can’t afford to lose here.”

While the wagon walls armored with iron plates might be tough, they couldn’t be all that tall. It was surely possible to climb over them. Trusting in that possibility, Kuuga let out a loud guffaw. Even if he had to condemn his soul to the hells, he’d win this battle. The expression upon his face was that of a demonically determined man who was capable of anything.

Meanwhile, inside Fort Gashina, Rasmus knit his brow in thought as he considered the situation that was unfolding before him. It was true that he currently had the enemy exactly where he wanted them—right in the middle of his trap.

“They’re certainly tough. They’re still hanging on somehow.”

The enemy’s momentum had been blunted by the wagon wall, and the Steel Clan defenders were now raining down arrows on them from above. It was starting to appear like it would be a one-sided massacre. However, the Steel Clan forces were near their limit, and they didn’t have much in the way of reserves.

“Tch. The troops are starting to look tired too.”

Fort Gashina’s garrison numbered two thousand. Half of them were assigned as crossbowmen on the walls, leaving only a thousand on the front line to hold back the enemy infantry. They were doing a good job of blocking the enemy’s advance, but the human body could only endure so much. In particular, not knowing when the battle would end only added to the strain and fatigue.

“However, the same holds true for the enemy.”

The Flame Clan forces had repeatedly been pushed back as they tried to scale

the wagon wall. During every one of their attempts, arrows continued to rain down on them from above. It should have been a matter of time before their morale broke. Once some of them broke, the panic would ripple through the enemy lines and would quickly lead to their collapse.

“I suppose it’s a matter of endurance. How fun! All of you, tighten your helm straps! If you can hold out, there’s plenty of rewards waiting for you after!” Rasmus shouted out in a voice mighty enough to wake the dead. He knew this was the key moment, and so had placed his effort into urging on his troops. Rasmus’s encouragement had its intended effect, and the tired troops looked reenergized. The Steel Clan soldiers let out a war cry to steel themselves, but then...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Their cry was quickly drowned out by a staccato of explosions. In the darkness of night, flames burst forth on a gust of wind and began raging out of control.

“Wha?! Tetsuhaus?!” Rasmus blinked at the sight.

“Gah!”

“Urk!”

“Grph!”

Cries of pain sounded from the midst of the Steel Clan’s ranks. Even the brave heroes of the Steel Clan armies were intimidated by the explosions. It was only for the briefest of moments, but the strength of the Steel Clan shield wall faltered, and that moment was enough to decide the battle. Flame Clan soldiers began pouring over the wagon wall and entered the fortress. Of course, the Steel Clan soldiers tried to push them back, but as they struggled with the intruders, the enemy was able to remove the wagon walls, and more enemy soldiers poured in through the breach.

“Lovely. Seems we’re done here.” Rasmus let out a long sigh. At this point, there was nothing to be done. Their enemy simply had overwhelming numbers. To try to turn the tide here would be impossible, even for the greatest of generals.

“All of you! Time to retreat! We need to withdraw and regroup!”

An important part of the general's job was to quickly make the decision to retreat the moment he determined that he couldn't win, and this was one of those times.

ACT 5

“Phew. Let’s call it a day here, yeah?”

Yuuto glanced up at the faintly visible moon that seemed to shimmer in the dusky sky like a distant mirage and stopped his horse. He wasn’t a good enough rider to continue riding in the darkness. Yuuto had been on horseback from dawn to dusk, and both he and his mount were at the limit of their endurance.

“Damn, my crotch hurts...” The moment he stepped off his horse, Yuuto furrowed his brow in pain. While he had oiled the saddle as a precaution against chafing, the length of the ride meant that even that wasn’t enough to prevent some damage to his thighs. It had been a necessary hardship to bear, however.

Yuuto had left the main body of the Steel Clan Army under Hveðrungr’s command and had ridden ahead with Felicia, Kristina, the Sword Clan’s Maidens of the Waves, and other elites of the army, making his way as quickly as possible toward the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

The Flame Clan had started its grand advance. Yuuto had decided it would be better for the supreme commander of the Steel Clan’s forces to return as quickly as possible to Glaðsheimr. Compared to the importance of the task before him, a little chafing was a small price to pay.

“Oh crap... I can’t stay on my feet.” While it hadn’t quite hit him while he was still on horseback, the moment he felt the tension break, fatigue washed over him and Yuuto sprawled out in place. Many believed that horseback riding wasn’t particularly tiring, under the impression that it was the horse that was doing all of the work, but that wasn’t the case at all. Because horses were living animals, their backs were constantly in motion. That was particularly true when they were galloping. Staying atop a moving beast all day without losing one’s balance was quite labor-intensive.

“Hehe, but you’ve gotten much better at it.” Felicia sat down gently next to Yuuto as she said so and placed Yuuto’s head on her thighs. It was a smooth, practiced movement without a hint of hesitation.

“Of course, it’s a mixed blessing for me.” Felicia’s golden hair spilled from over her shoulder as she looked down at Yuuto with a teasing smile. She was probably referring to the vacation they had taken two years ago to the hot springs at Surtsey Volcano. At the time, Yuuto had been unable to ride a horse on his own and had no choice but to ride with Felicia on hers.

“It was lovely to take a journey in your embrace, Big Brother,” Felicia said, letting out a happy chuckle as she recalled the distant memory. She looked extremely happy and amused. Yuuto felt his cheeks flush. It wasn’t a bad feeling, though, as he could feel her love for him in her gaze.

“In that case... Let’s take a ride together once things have settled down,” Yuuto closed his eyes and said as nonchalantly as possible. He was a little too embarrassed to say it while maintaining direct eye contact with her. Still, the words had a great effect on Felicia.

“Oh my! You just promised! You can’t take it back now! Heh, I’m looking forward to it,” Felicia leaned forward and said in an excited tone. It seemed she really wanted to go riding.

“Sure, sure. Man, that sure brings back memories though. It’s already been two years since then, hasn’t it? When things have settled down, it’d be nice to go with everyone to the hot springs and...” Yuuto realized his mistake after the words had left his lips. He hesitantly opened his eyes and looked up at Felicia’s expression and saw that she had puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Oh, for the love of the gods! You really don’t understand women, Big Brother!”

“Ow ow ow! Sorry, my bad!”

Felicia pinched his cheek, and Yuuto immediately apologized profusely. Yuuto had realized Felicia had meant going on a trip alone, and he had stepped on a land mine by talking about going on a trip with everyone. That was a clear misread of the mood on his part.



“Heh, just kidding. I’m not actually angry.”

Felicia placed her hand over her mouth and laughed off Yuuto’s offense. She then gently brushed her fingers through Yuuto’s hair.

“But yes, you’re right. It would be nice to go there with everyone again.”

She then gazed up wistfully at the starlit sky. Even a simple thing like a vacation seemed as far away as the stars above. There was a pile of things that needed to be dealt with before they could consider doing something so frivolous. Even the future itself was uncertain at this moment in time.

“Once everything’s taken care of, let’s go again with everyone that went last time.”

Even with everything going on, Yuuto couldn’t stop himself from making that promise.

“So we’ve somehow managed to win.”

Despite his words, Kuuga’s expression was sour. It was true that in the recent assault, the Flame Clan Army had taken most of Fort Gashina. They had also captured quite a few members of the enemy garrison. Looking solely at the results of the battle, it was a victory, but he couldn’t really celebrate. Kuuga sighed and looked up at the sky. The summer sky was cloudless and clear—in sharp contrast to the gloom that lingered in Kuuga’s heart.

“Yeesh. With this many losses, I doubt the Great Lord will forgive me,” he scratched at his head and said with a heavy sigh.

The Flame Clan Army had paid a steep price to conquer Fort Gashina. By the current counts, at least a thousand of his soldiers had died. As for the injured, there were at least three times that number. The casualties were so heavy that it was completely possible that his forces could have collapsed entirely. If he had fought along with Shiba as per his orders, he might have avoided the current situation he found himself in. The results weren’t nearly good enough to justify him disobeying his orders.

“They’ve really done a number on me.” Kuuga glared angrily at the Hliðskjálf at the center of the fort. The remaining members of the fort’s Steel Clan garrison were currently holed up in the Hliðskjálf. This particular structure was much smaller than the ones that often towered over the various cities across the continent, but it would still be a tough nut to crack. After all, the only way to attack it was through the stairs at the front. Taking down the last defenders in the Hliðskjálf, while perhaps easier than breaching the fortress walls, would be quite the task. After some thought, Kuuga turned to address his assembled commanders.

“How are the troops?”

He did not need to wait for their reply; their faces told him everything he needed to know.

“Honestly, they’re not doing well. I have many wounded, and the rest are exhausted from fighting through the night.”

“Same for us. They’re all completely worn out. They’re in no state to fight.”

“Likewise. They’re depleted both in terms of body and spirit. They’re no use as soldiers at the moment.”

His commanders all shook their heads ruefully. It reminded Kuuga of just how close he had come to losing this battle. If he hadn’t thought to use the explosives at the end, it would have been the Flame Clan Army that had collapsed. He had won the battle by the skin of his teeth.

“I see. We’ll hold off on assaulting the Hliðskjálf until the day after tomorrow. Allow the soldiers to rest in shifts until then,” Kuuga said with a resigned sigh, issuing the orders almost like an afterthought. In truth, he would have wanted to attack the Hliðskjálf right then and there, but since his forces didn’t have the strength left to do so, he had no choice but to wait. Since they had gotten through the fortress walls and conquered most of the fort, there was no need to hurry. It would be best to rest his soldiers for the next battle. He couldn’t afford to take any further losses.

“Hrmph. Guess I can give them time to say goodbye to this world.” Kuuga spat out the words and leaned his head against his hand when a messenger approached. “Lord Kuuga! There’s someone who wishes to have an audience

with you!”

“Oh? A prisoner?!”

Upon hearing the messenger’s report, Kuuga leaned forward with interest. It wasn’t unusual for someone to sell out their side to save their own hide. Kuuga, who was at his wit’s end, was desperately looking for something to solve his problems.

“Sadly, no. The messenger claims to be a priest by the name of Alexis.”

“What?”

Upon hearing the unexpected name, Kuuga furrowed his brow in suspicion. He had heard the name before. Alexis had served as the previous þjóðann’s representative, working to tie together the clans of the Álfheimr and Vanaheimr regions with Chalice oaths. Using the information Kuuga had collected on his own, he had learned that Alexis was someone who had close ties to the late Hárbarth, patriarch of the Spear Clan and the Empire’s former high priest. Kuuga’s lips curled into a grin.

“Heh, interesting. Very well, let him pass. I’d very much like to hear what a man in his current position has to offer me.”

“The enemy has gathered their forces around the entrance but haven’t shown any sign of attacking. I think we can assume they’ve chosen to rest up for the time being.”

“Well, it was one intense fight after another. No doubt they, too, are a bit tired after that.”

Rasmus chuckled in response to Garve’s report, but there was no life behind that laughter. Given the circumstances, that was, perhaps, not all too surprising.

“Garve, we’ve got, what, a thousand or so troops left here in the Hliðskjálf?”

“Yes, that’s about it.”

“So we’ve lost about half of our men.”

Rasmus’s expression was clouded with pain. It was his fault. His lack of ability had cost his soldiers their lives. While he was well aware that winning and

losing battles was a part of war and that it was nearly impossible to win every single battle, he couldn't help but feel responsible for those losses.

"You lot, thank you for sticking with me to this point," Rasmus said with a deflated expression. Almost all of those currently assembled in the hörgr of the Hliðskjálf were Rasmus's direct children. They were all idiots who had refused the opportunity to swear a direct Chalice with Linnea and instead had chosen to remain at his side.

"We probably won't be able to hold off the next attack."

Neither Garve nor the other children disputed his conclusion. They all knew this. The Hliðskjálf wasn't designed as a particularly defensible location, after all. Its only advantages were the fact that it had a single entrance and that it was located on high ground. They also knew that with the sheer gulf in numbers, they wouldn't be able to hold out against the enemy for much longer.

"While I intend to fulfill the duty the princess has given me to protect this fortress to the very end, you don't have to follow me in that. All of you, go surrender. There's no need to throw away your lives for nothing. Tell the same to the troops outside."

"Very well. I'll tell them, Father."

"Yes, I'm sorry to leave that task to you. I've grown old, it seems. I can't stand up right now," Rasmus said with a dry, self-deprecating laugh. Even if he was an Einherjar, Rasmus was an elderly man of well over fifty years of age. He had commanded the troops defending the walls through the entire day, then defended the fortress throughout the night against the Flame Clan assault, and also fought as they'd retreated into the Hliðskjálf. It would have been stranger if Rasmus hadn't been worn out by all that activity.

"So, I suppose it's time for me to sleep. Goodbye. I was proud to be your Chalice father. We'll see each other again in Val...halla..." Rasmus dozed off before he could finish, his body being well past its limit. He let go of his consciousness and drifted off into the darkness.

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“Mm...mrrph?” Rasmus slowly opened his eyes to the sound of amused conversation. His hazy mind still thought it was daytime, but a glance outside told him the sun had set while he slept. The short nap had turned into full-fledged sleep. That wasn’t the issue, however.

“What are you lot doing here?”

His children were still in the hörgr, drinking wine as they chatted. When they noticed that Rasmus had awoken, they smiled triumphantly and almost impishly in response to his confusion. Garve, as their representative, spoke up with a sheepish grin. “What are we doing? Well, obviously, we’re waiting to fight at your side, Father.”

“Whaaat?! I told you not to do that!”

“Oh c’mon, Father! What a sad thing to say. The whole point of the Chalice is to swear an oath to a man you’re happy to give your life for, right? We wouldn’t be able to live with ourselves if we just left our sworn father here alone.” Garve’s lips quirked into a wider grin, and the other children spoke up in agreement.

“Tch!”

Rasmus felt his eyes sting at the sudden flood of emotions and quickly covered his face. He tried desperately to stop the tears from flowing, but it seemed he had been too late.

“Why are you crying, Father?”

“Because he’s moved by the fact he’s got such loyal sons, of course!”

“Yep, yep. Got a good story to take with me to Valhalla.”

“Pretty rare to see Father cry.”

“Sh-Shut up, you damned insensitive brats! You’re wasting all of my efforts!” Rasmus shouted at his children as they teasingly quipped at his tears. However, there was a tremor in his voice and his shout had none of the usual force or authority behind it. It did nothing to silence his children. If anything, it only made them smirk in satisfaction.

“Ah, dammit! This is total madness. I’m done. If you’re going to insist, then

you’re all coming with me to Valhalla!” Rasmus shouted with exasperation. Of course, that exasperation was an act. His lips had already twisted up into a faint smile.

“Heh, you should’ve asked us to do that from the start.”

“We’ve got Father’s permission! Huzzah!”

“We can fight in peace now!”

The children let out cries of happiness and encouraged one another. They all had the expressions of men who had steeled themselves for whatever would come next. Rasmus sincerely felt that they were far better children than he deserved, but there was no need to voice that now.

“Right then, you lot! Let’s show those Flame Clan bastards how the men of the Horn Clan fight!”

“Hell yeah!”

Upon hearing Rasmus’s call, the children held up their fists and cheered. Unfortunately, despite their determination, the Hliðskjálf fell to the Flame Clan a mere two days later thanks to the schemes of a new advisor who had joined Kuuga’s ranks...

“Yo, Brother. Seems you’ve had a difficult time here.”

“Hrmph, of course that’s how you’d greet me.”

Kuuga glared at Shiba, making his dislike evident. It had been two days since the conquest of Fort Gashina. While Kuuga had been occupied with the post-conquest work of treating the wounded, burying the dead, and reorganizing his forces, his blood brother, the man he detested more than anyone in the world, had appeared. Of course he would be in a bad mood.

“I imagine you’re going to say it would’ve gone smoother if I’d waited for you, mm?”

“No, I wasn’t trying to say anything of the sort. Don’t read too much into it.” Shiba shrugged his shoulders with a dry chuckle.

Every little thing Shiba did just added to Kuuga’s irritation. Shiba had clear

certainty in his own ability, a sort of smugness from being one of the strong. It was something that Kuuga wanted more than anything in the world, but could never attain for himself.

“The Steel Clan’s a completely different beast compared to any of the enemies we’ve fought to date. They got one over on me too. I understand why even you’d struggle, Brother.”

“Hrmph. So you want to say that because they’re an enemy that’s even beaten you, there’s no way someone like me could fight them without struggling, is that it?”

“Come on, please stop reading malice where there isn’t any. That’s not my intention.”

Shiba’s smile twitched ever so slightly at Kuuga’s remark. Kuuga himself understood that his accusations had no merit. But this wasn’t about reason. It was about the fact that he just couldn’t stand the man standing in front of him.

“If anything, I’m impressed. I only caught a glimpse of it, but that thing’s one of the giant catapults the Steel Clan used at Blíkjanda-Böl, right? Being able to recreate it without even seeing the real thing is pretty damned impressive.”

“It’s not my accomplishment. It’s all thanks to the efforts of the engineers in Bilskírnir.”

“Now hold on. You’re the one who told them to make it, right, Brother? That’s your insight, not theirs.”

“Hrmph. If I had anything resembling good insight, I wouldn’t be in the place I’m in now!” Kuuga spat out bitterly, his face flushed with anger. While Shiba was his younger brother by blood, in terms of the Chalice, Shiba outranked him. Kuuga was being disrespectful, but he didn’t care. “I don’t need your consolation. I ignored the Great Lord’s orders and took huge losses to take down a single fortress. I’m sure my demotion’s already assured.”

“SSurely it’s not a certainty just yet. The Great Lord knows that the Steel Clan’s a powerful foe.”

“Hrmph, then all the more reason. I can already see him yelling at me for not waiting for you to arrive,” Kuuga said and snorted derisively.

He understood that rationally speaking, if he had waited for Shiba, things wouldn't have turned out as badly as they had. At the very least, if he'd had the strength of Shiba's Second Division when assaulting the fortress, then their losses would have been far less severe. Kuuga's empty pride—his vanity, his envy—had created the losses they'd suffered. There was nothing more to it. Nobunaga would certainly judge him harshly.

"Well, that might be true, but the war's not over yet. You've still got plenty of opportunities to get good enough results to turn it around if you put some effort into it."

"Effort, eh? You make it sound so easy." Kuuga couldn't help but click his tongue in annoyance. True, his talented brother might be able to easily turn things around if he put a little effort into it, but Kuuga had no confidence that he could do it. He had made a complete mess of taking down a single fortress. No doubt the strategic centers like Gimlé and Fólkvangr were going to be even more heavily defended. It didn't even bear mentioning that his talented brother was going to be next to him when he attacked those cities, so how exactly was he supposed to show results that would be enough to erase his mistakes while also trying to find some way of overshadowing his brother's accomplishments? That sounded next to impossible.

"Seems like I can't do anything but annoy you, Brother."

"If you know that, then hurry up and get out of my sight."

"Fine then, I'm going," Shiba said with a dry laugh and turned around as though in surrender. His laugh that suggested a sort of exasperation with Kuuga's attitude did nothing but further anger Kuuga.

"He's always looking down on me...!" Kuuga spat both figuratively and literally at Shiba's back as he disappeared into the distance. He understood that Shiba wasn't trying to look down on him. Kuuga knew better than anyone. He also understood that Shiba didn't regard him as any sort of threat, either to his position or to his rank. That was why Kuuga found him so irritating. The hatred, the loathing... It was enough to rekindle the flames of ambition in Kuuga's heart that had threatened to fizzle out after the battle.

"Just you watch, Shiba...! I won't let my journey end at a place like this. I *can't*

let it end here. I'm going to make you bow down in front of me someday! I swear it!"

"I see... So Fort Gashina's fallen..." Linnea, dealing with the work of governing the Steel Clan in Gimlé, said with a heavy sigh as she heard the report, before falling back into her chair and leaning heavily against it. She showed no sign of panic, and it was clear from her demeanor that she had already expected and prepared herself for this particular outcome. Still, it looked like the news came as a shock to her. She stared up at the ceiling for a long moment. After about thirty seconds of gazing up listlessly, she turned her attention back to the subordinate in front of her.

"Sorry about that. So, what actually happened to the garrison at Fort Gashina?"

"My lady, they all fought hard but were overwhelmed by the enemy's sheer numbers in the end, and nearly half of them were slain in battle as a result. Additionally, many of our men were taken prisoner."

Her subordinate, Grer, furrowed his brow and struggled to continue his report. He was one of the Brísingamen, the four great Einherjar of the Horn Clan, and Fort Gashina had originally been under his command. No doubt he knew many of the soldiers who had fought and died there. It was easy enough to imagine what he was feeling.

"I see..." Linnea looked down with a pained expression.

Death was a constant companion in war, and as a ruler, she knew she needed to be able to accept any losses, but she couldn't help but feel a pang in her heart over the news she'd just received.

"We'll set up negotiations for a prisoner exchange later."

Even during war, prisoner exchanges were a common occurrence. Clans would either exchange prisoners for other prisoners, or at times, prisoners for silver. Prisoners of war were loyal soldiers who had fought hard for their clan. Many of them had families waiting for them at home. Certainly, a good amount of it was dependent on the opponent's demands, but she wanted to do whatever she could to free them.

“A-And what of Rasmus...?” Linnea tried to maintain a facade of calm, but she had clearly failed in the effort. Even she could hear the tremor in her voice.

“A-As for Lord Rasmus...” Grer trailed off, but quickly steeled himself into continuing, aware that the news was important.

“From the soldiers who somehow made it out of the fortress, even after the Flame Clan forces had breached the walls, Lord Rasmus had retreated to the Hliðskjálf and made preparations to fight to the end.”

“...I see.” Linnea had struggled to even say those words. Grer’s report meant there was basically no chance that Rasmus had been able to escape the fortress and retreat. There was a possibility he had been taken prisoner, but it was more likely that he had been killed in battle.

“D-Dang it. I thought I’d prepared myself for this when I sent him out...”

Linnea’s teeth began to chatter as her body trembled. She was afraid. She was so frightened she could barely manage to speak. While in terms of their Chalice oaths, Rasmus was Linnea’s little brother, he had effectively been her caretaker and was someone who had been at her side since she was but a baby. She now had to consider the thought that she might never see him again, that she’d never see his face or hear his voice ever again. The anxiety and fear threatened to tear her heart out of her chest.



“Princess, I understand your feelings, but...”

“I-I know... I know!” Linnea gritted her teeth, stopping the tears that threatened to flood out along with her heartbreak, and eked out a strong tone of voice. She was the patriarch of the Horn Clan and the Second of the Steel Clan. She carried the burden of hundreds of thousands of lives upon her slender shoulders. She could lose herself in her grief some other time. Right now, she had something more important to do.

“Rasmus has fulfilled his duty. He’s put the finishing touches on the process. He did it as perfectly as anyone could have asked of him. Now it’s up to me to carry things on from here,” Linnea gripped her hands into fists and swore to herself. She did so with the belief that this would be the best way to repay all that she owed to a man who had been like a second father to her.

ACT 6

“Ah, Father! You’ve finally returned!”

Jörgen, the patriarch of the Wolf Clan and commander of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr’s garrison, welcomed Yuuto back to the capital with a look of relief painted across his face. Jörgen looked rather paler than usual, and there were visible bags under his eyes. It was clear he had found himself under a substantial amount of pressure. Yuuto steeled himself and spoke. “How’s the situation?!”

“My Lord... A Flame Clan force of around one hundred thousand men began advancing from Mímir toward Glaðsheimr this morning.”

“A h-hundred thousand?! Seriously...?” Even Yuuto’s voice broke in surprise at the news. The numbers far exceeded his pre-war estimates. It was clear evidence of just how hard it was to gauge the true depths of Nobunaga’s strength.

“Additionally, we’ve gotten reports that Fort Gashina in the west has fallen. Rasmus, the commander, is also missing in action. Which probably means...”

“What did you just say? I-Is Rasmus...?!” Yuuto couldn’t help but question what he’d just heard. While he had only ever exchanged a handful of conversations with Rasmus, Yuuto was aware that he was practically a father to Linnea. He felt a pain squeeze his chest as he imagined what she would be going through.

“Still hurts to lose this many people I know in such quick succession...”

Of course, Yuuto felt guilty every time he heard of losses among the Steel Clan’s soldiers, but there was a difference in his reaction when it came to learning of the death of his rank-and-file troops, as opposed to people he knew personally and may have even been close with. However, they were at war. Death could come for anyone, and at any moment. If anything, that was the

natural and expected outcome. Despite that knowledge, he couldn't help but wonder if his decisions had caused the deaths of those under his command.

"I know it's of little consolation, but he didn't die in vain. Thanks to his sacrifice, I'm told our plans are proceeding unexpectedly smoothly."

"Ah, I see... So that's what he was after." Understanding Rasmus's intent, Yuuto let out a heavy sigh. While there was a part of him that was angry at Rasmus for throwing away his life, as a ruler, he couldn't help but admit that his actions had been effective. He couldn't afford to waste Rasmus's sacrifice. Yuuto tightened his expression and spoke. "Very well. Let's put our own plans in motion. This is an opportunity we can't afford to waste."

"So that's the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé, eh? Pretty nice place." Shiba let out a sigh of admiration as he looked over the terrain around Gimlé, rather than the city itself. What caught his eye were the endless fields of grain that stretched off into the horizon. Unfortunately, it seemed they had already completed their harvest, and only the stalks near the roots remained, but it was still an impressive sight all the same.

"Yeah, pretty nice place. But there's something eerie about the fact that the enemy hasn't made any effort to fend us off." In sharp contrast, Kuuga furrowed his brow suspiciously as he looked around his surroundings. After conquering Fort Gashina, the Second and Fifth Divisions of the Flame Clan Army had set their sights on Gimlé and advanced upon the Steel Clan capital. Currently, the two division commanders and their generals had assembled to discuss how to attack the city as they gazed upon its walls from afar.

"Mm, yes, that's been on my mind as well." Shiba, too, furrowed his brow. While it was true that the Steel Clan Army had sent a great deal of its forces eastward as part of its conquest of Jötunheimr, there was something *very* off about the fact that there were absolutely no troops stationed near the clan capital, especially considering its proximity to enemy territory.

"They had clearly been quite prepared for our invasion at Fort Gashina. I'm told the Steel Clan patriarch is quite the schemer. I doubt this will go all that smoothly," Shiba said with pep in his voice as his lips curled up into a happy

smile. Kuuga glared at him critically from beside him.

“You sound like you want something to happen.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But it wouldn’t be fun if things went too easily, no?”

“I’d much rather win easily if that option’s on the table.”

“But doesn’t that lack a sense of accomplishment? Pretty anticlimactic.”

“I don’t need anything like that. All I want is one thing: results. The best outcome is getting results without needing to make any real effort.”

“Now now, both of you, shall we move on? The real question is what the enemy’s actually got waiting for us,” Shiba’s adjutant, Masa, said with a tense smile. Evidently, he’d decided the two would only end up in a circular discussion if they were left uninterrupted. He was entirely correct.

“No doubt they’ve got some traps set for us.”

“If anything, it’d be stranger if they didn’t. It should be safe to assume they’ve got something waiting,” Shiba said before Kuuga nodded his quick agreement.

“Of course, I don’t have any clue what those traps might be. What about you, Brother?”

“I don’t have the faintest clue either. What’s for certain, though, is that it’ll be a tougher nut to crack than Gashina.”

“Indeed. There’s no such thing as excessive caution at this point.”

“Quite. We should progress with the utmost care and attention.”

Whatever their differences, the two were still extremely capable tacticians. They were in agreement over the best approach to take.

“To me, the issue is the massive range of their bows.”

“Yeah, I learned about those the hard way.”

“In that case, our first move should be to bring in our giant catapult outside of the enemy’s line of sight, just like we did at Gashina, and see how they respond. How does that sound?”

“Sure. No objections from me.”

The discussion proceeded unexpectedly smoothly, and their intended strategy was formulated without a moment's delay or an ounce of hesitation.

The trebuchet was quickly assembled, and the day after their war council, the Flame Clan Army had started launching boulders at Gimlé's walls. Implementing the lessons learned at Gashina, the Flame Clan refrained from assaulting the breaches for the moment and focused on bombarding Gimlé as heavily as possible. The next morning, as the sky began to lighten, there was nothing left of the city's walls and the Flame Clan soldiers could see the city of Gimlé beyond the rubble.

"This is odd..." Shiba murmured with a tense expression.

Certainly, there was no other word for it but odd. He had heard that at Fort Gashina, the Steel Clan had plugged the breaches in its walls using wagons. Nothing of the sort had happened here. It was as though they were inviting the Flame Clan to push their attack.

"They're clearly trying to draw us in," Kuuga spat bitterly as he stood beside Shiba. It seemed he was remembering how he'd walked right into the Steel Clan's trap during the recent battle at Fort Gashina.

"So, what do we do, Brother? If you want the honor of taking the city, I'll let you have it. I'm sure if you conquer the enemy capital, that'll make up for your mistakes at Gashina."

"No thanks. I have no intention of walking into such an obvious trap."

"Figured. Still, we won't get much done just twiddling our thumbs out here," Shiba said with an exasperated sigh.

Gimlé was the enemy clan capital and the main target of this campaign. They had no choice but to attack and capture the city, even if they knew there was a trap waiting for them within.

"I suppose the simplest thing to do for now is send some scouts ahead to see what's going on."

Quickly arriving at that conclusion, Shiba immediately set out to give the necessary orders. He wasn't exactly happy with the fact that he was sending his

subordinates into danger, but it was a general's job to sacrifice the needs of the few to accomplish the greater goal.

The Flame Clan scout companies headed into Gimlé and returned two hours later completely unscathed. However, none of them appeared pleased at accomplishing their objective; instead, they seemed disturbed by the strange sight they'd found within the city limits.

"What is it? Just what did you find there?"

"Well, it's just that... There's no one there..."

"What do you mean there's no one there...?" Shiba asked the scout commander skeptically.

Was the scout suggesting that the Steel Clan's capital had been left completely undefended? Given that the scouts had been able to reconnoiter the city without harm, it was probably true, no matter how hard it was to believe. Could it be that the garrison had abandoned the city they were tasked to defend out of fear of the Flame Clan Army? Was that even possible? Shiba tilted his head skeptically, but the reality turned out to be even more improbable.

"There isn't a single person in the city. It's completely abandoned! Not a soul in sight!"

"Excuse me...?" Shiba said with a look of complete puzzlement.

Gimlé was the clan capital of the great Steel Clan. They'd heard of its prosperity from as far away as Blíkjanda-Böl. There was no way it could be completely abandoned...

"Th-There really isn't anyone here! J-Just what in the blazes is going on here?!" Shiba had advanced into Gimlé, wary of a trap, and couldn't help but rub his eyes in disbelief as he found Gimlé was, in fact, a ghost town. Although the scouting reports had already told him that was the case, he still couldn't believe his eyes. Shiba shuddered and swallowed nervously.

He had just captured an enemy clan capital without losing a single man. He couldn't remember any examples of taking an important enemy fortification this easily. That was what made it so unnerving. Something that was far beyond

his ability to imagine was going on, that much was clear.

“Princess. The evacuations of Gimlé and Fólkvangr, along with their surrounding areas, are complete.”

“I see. Looks like we were able to get our job done.”

At around the same time that Shiba and Kuuga were entering the abandoned Gimlé, Linnea let out a breath of relief upon hearing Grer’s report in the Wolf Clan capital of Iárnviðr. Her features were tense with fatigue, but at the same time, her expression was lit up in satisfaction at fulfilling her duty, as well as a sense of liberation. Grer also chuckled, half impressed, half exasperated at the turn of events.

“His Majesty certainly comes up with remarkable plans. Making use of the Flame Clan Army to move the residents of those cities was a magnificent idea...”

“Indeed. The Flame Clan’s the reason we were able to convince the people to leave,” Linnea said with a soft chuckle. This had been a plan she had secretly been working on with Yuuto before he had set off for Jötunheimr. It was extremely difficult to convince people to leave the lands of their ancestors. Of course, it was possible to force the issue by using the authority of the patriarch, but while that was perhaps possible when convincing a small group, it would have been all but impossible to restrain the objections to such orders when evacuating the entire clan’s population. Even when bringing up the recent great earthquake, the idea that Yggdrasil was going to sink into the sea was still a difficult story to sell to the populace, and it wasn’t realistic to expect them to obey simply based on that fact alone. For that reason, Yuuto, in his desperation, had decided to exaggerate the threat and ruthlessness of the Flame Clan Army and make the residents evacuate through fear for their lives.

“Heh, it was well worth planting people to fan the flames over the past few months.”

“Yes. And I suppose His Majesty’s loss at Glaðsheimr helped.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Linnea nodded.

Yuuto, who had conquered nearly half of Yggdrasil in just three years despite

starting out with a minor clan that was on the verge of ruin, was well known as a heroic, almost mythical figure within the Steel Clan. In particular, the regions he had first conquered in the Bifröst and Álfheimr regions had seen the fruits of not only his efforts on the battlefield, but also of the improvements he had made to their standard of living. Many of the residents worshipped him as a servant of the gods. Linnea was among them. Linnea herself had felt the certainties of her world collapse when she heard that the god of war who had won battle after battle without loss had been defeated by the enemy's Demon Lord, and no doubt that sentiment was shared by the people of the Steel Clan territories.

"And then Rasmus had put the finishing touches on it..." Linnea managed to get the words out without her voice cracking.

"So that's why he came to Gashina in the first place. Dammit, such an awesome and theatrical thing to do. Blasted Uncle... Sniff..." Grer's expression twisted with sadness as he choked on his words. Grer, as the youngest member of the Brísingamen, had been taught quite a few things from Rasmus, the oldest of the four, and Linnea knew that Grer had quite admired Rasmus. It seemed the emotions that were welling up were too much for him.

"Yeah... Rasmus really did put on too much of a show..." Linnea said with her brow furrowed in pain and glanced outside the window, her vision blurred by her tears. Linnea could still clearly recall the conversation with Rasmus. A conversation that had happened over a month ago when news of the Flame Clan Army's Fifth Division's advance had come...

"U-Using the Flame Clan Army to make the residents evacuate?!" Rasmus said with a high-pitched cry of surprise upon hearing Linnea's explanation of their plan.

It had already been two years since the Horn Clan had joined Yuuto's ranks. Rasmus had thought he had gotten used to the strange, imaginative creations, governing improvements, tactics, new technologies, and products that the brilliant young reginarch had produced, but this new plan went far above what he could have ever imagined.

“Yes. Father always seems to think of the most ridiculous things,” Linnea said with a teasing smile. She, too, had been shocked when she had first heard the plan. She had been hoping to see someone else reel from the shock of learning the truth. She felt a moment of smug satisfaction upon witnessing Rasmus’s reaction.

“He really does. I’m blown away by his idea to use a seemingly invincible enemy as a means toward his ultimate ends... These plans of his come from a place I may never truly understand.”

“Father had said modestly that it wasn’t an idea he’d come up with on his own. In Father’s world, a general named Liu Bei apparently used a plan much like this one to evacuate his people southward to a place called Xinye.”

“Oh?”

“This Liu Bei went around spreading rumors that the enemy general, Cao Cao, was a ruthless and barbaric man, and threatening the ills that would befall the people if Cao Cao was victorious. He was able to make use of those rumors to get several hundred thousand of his people to accompany him on that journey.”

“Ah, ha. I see, so he used that as a starting point.”

“Yes. Though, from what I hear, those residents were used as a shield to avoid pursuit from Cao Cao’s armies.”

“Hrm... Well that makes this Liu Bei fellow sound like quite the evil manipulator,” Rasmus said with a displeased expression.

“That it does.” Linnea nodded quickly in agreement.

Given that a ruler was there to protect their people, the pair couldn’t help but feel anger toward a man who instead used his people as fodder to save his own skin.

“Still, I must admit it’s a useful scheme given our current situation,” Rasmus said with a conflicted expression, finally accepting the validity of the plan with a touch of hesitation. It seemed like he wasn’t particularly happy with the idea of borrowing a plan from such a cowardly cur. Linnea agreed with him—she felt the same way.

“Yes. Frankly, I think this is our only option, as much as I hate to admit it,” Linnea said with a chuckle that was both self-deprecating and accepting at the same time. People were animals that wouldn’t move without having a fire lit under them. Fire was a metaphor for danger. It was only when they felt danger that they would react.

“I see, I see. Given the whispers spreading around the city, I was worried the enemy was conducting subversion to undermine our morale, but now that I’m learning that it was our own people and not our enemies, that makes more sense, especially given how quickly word seemed to be spreading.” Rasmus nodded repeatedly, as though something had finally clicked for him. Rumors about the Flame Clan’s atrocities had been spread around the Steel Clan territories by Botvid and Kristina’s subordinates. No doubt that was what Rasmus was referring to.

“Oh dear, it seems I’ve been completely had. Thinking back on it, then, was the loss at Glaðsheimr also part of this plan?”

“That’s overthinking it. Sometimes things don’t go as expected, even for Father.”

Linnea corrected him with a dry chuckle.

When viewed simply from the standpoint of results, the loss at Glaðsheimr had become a key component of this plan. After all, the defeat of Suoh-Yuuto, God of War, had been a shock to the people and had helped raise their anxiety. It was understandable that Rasmus would think it might have been part of the plan from the start, especially after hearing about Yuuto’s overall evacuation plan. Rasmus’s lips curled up into a grin.

“I still can’t believe that to be the case. He lost, but he didn’t lose too badly. He won in a strategic sense, even if he lost tactically, and forced the enemy to retreat. It was a feat worthy of a god of war.”

“No, it’s really not like that...”

“Heh, well, I’m sure there are various nuances to it. I’ll take your word for it for now.”

“No, Rasmus, it really isn’t...”

“But that’s not enough.”

“Huh?!” Linnea’s expression froze in surprise. The truth about the defeat at Glaðsheimr immediately lost any importance in her mind. The Steel Clan’s fate rested upon the outcome of their current plan. She couldn’t just leave his comment unaddressed.

“What do you mean it’s not enough?” Linnea asked Rasmus with a stern expression.

“The sense of danger. Glaðsheimr is a distant land. To the people here, it’s just something that happened to someone else,” Rasmus said flatly and returned Linnea’s gaze.

“Mm, I suppose you have a point there.” Linnea nodded in agreement.

In the end, Glaðsheimr was so distant that a loss there was simply news, rather than something the people in the Steel Clan’s realms felt and were affected by personally. Most people generally did not acknowledge danger unless they were exposed to it themselves.

“If that’s the case, then wouldn’t the people have a sense of urgency when the Flame Clan Army actually begins its advance?”

“By that time, the impact of His Majesty’s loss might have faded among them. After all, the past ages and ebbs away with each passing day.”

Linnea had no response to that observation. Even when people experience a painful event, they often forget about it in time and make the same mistake again. That, too, was just human nature, which was why it was important in war to grasp timing so closely. Gauging the moment when an army had maximum momentum was important in making the most of an opportunity. Put another way, mistiming an opportunity could result in a loss of momentum and result in the force being left at a substantial disadvantage.

“Our current plans allow no room for failure. We could use one more push to make the people feel a true sense of danger and urgency.”

“Mm, I understand what you’re trying to say. But what specifically do you propose to do? You’re not going to say you’re pointing this out without anything to back it, are you?” Linnea looked up at her advisor with a critical

gaze. While he had retired from the front lines after suffering his injury in battle against the Lightning Clan, Rasmus was still a renowned warrior within the Horn Clan. He was also the man Linnea trusted most. She was certain he wouldn't have pointed out the flaw in her plans without a proposal of his own. Rasmus's lips twisted up into a confident grin.

"Simple. I just need to die at Gashina."

"...Huh? Whaaaat?!" It took Linnea a moment to understand just what he was proposing. The moment she processed what he had suggested, her eyes went wide with shock. Rasmus had made the comment so casually, as though he were asking for a snack because he was hungry, that Linnea had briefly suspected he was kidding, but a look at his expression showed he was dead serious.

"Wh-What are you going on about?!"

"Eh? I don't believe I said anything particularly odd."

Linnea slammed her palms against her desk and stood up, but Rasmus replied without so much as a twitch of his brow.

"How can you possibly talk about dying so calmly?! How do you not consider that odd?!"

"Heh, I'm already over fifty years old. I doubt I have much time left. Now is as good a time as any to make the best use of my remaining life."

Linnea couldn't find the words to respond to his sad, determined statement, and simply sucked in a breath. The rational part of her brain understood what he was proposing, both the meaning of his proposed sacrifice and its effect, which was why she wanted to put a lid on it. No doubt Rasmus was aware of what Linnea was thinking given her silence, but he continued nonchalantly.

"I don't mean to brag, but I've served the Horn Clan through three generations of patriarchs, and I've worked for many years as the Second, not to mention that I'm well known for my exploits as a warrior as head of the Brísingamen."

"...I know."

In terms of Chalice oaths, Rasmus should have been the one to take the throne as Horn Clan patriarch rather than Linnea. After all, he carried a storied history and impressive reputation as a result of his endeavors. He was well known not only within the Horn Clan, but throughout Bifröst and Álfheimr as a mighty warrior.

“The fact that even I couldn’t stop them and fell in battle against the Flame Clan, especially when combined with the fall of the impregnable Fort Gashina, would certainly drive home the danger the Flame Clan’s advance represents. Each item in itself is enough to cause panic among the masses, but the combination of them would remind them of His Majesty’s loss as well, and no doubt it would reverberate through the people’s consciousness.”

“Mrrrgh!”

Linnea could only let out a note of despair. Everything Rasmus said was perfectly on the mark. Rationally, she understood he was right, but even then...

“No... I... I can’t... I won’t let you do that!” Linnea managed to squeeze out her rejection of his plan. She couldn’t accept his proposal. She couldn’t admit that it was necessary.

“No, no, no! I won’t allow it! I... I don’t want you to die!” Linnea swung her arms in circles, as though she were a child throwing a tantrum. She couldn’t stop the flood of emotions that were quickly overcoming her.

“You... You wanted to see my child, right?! I want to show you too! Don’t... Don’t say you’re going to die!”

She trailed off into sobs. She knew exactly how this conversation would end. She knew there was no way for her to stop Rasmus. Linnea had been raised from childhood to take the reins of the clan, educated in the ways of governing from birth.

“Heh, that’s my only regret,” Rasmus said and smiled sadly. He gazed at Linnea with a gentle, loving expression. Even with that, however...

“That’s all the more reason for me to give what little is left of my life for those who will come after me.”

He showed no sign of wavering in his determination. His expression was that

of a man who had completely accepted his fate.

“Why...? It might not be long, but you should live out the rest of your life in peace. You’ve done plenty for the Horn Clan until now. You should just retire and spend your days relaxing in the sun with my children on your lap.”

“Indeed, I would like to do that, but there’s an order to things. It’d be cruel to leave this role to young Grer, and more than anything, he’s lacking in the necessary stature. There’s no one better suited for this task than I.”

“...You’re right, there’s no one else,” Linnea said with a sigh after a long, long pause. With the bulk of the Steel Clan’s notable warriors and generals off on the Jötunheimr campaign, there was no one with Rasmus’s reputation or stature left in Bifröst or Álfheimr.

“I’ve always told you that a patriarch must always be prepared to sacrifice the few for the sake of the many. No doubt you’re already aware that this is the time to do exactly that.”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you...?”

If they proceeded with Rasmus’s proposal, no doubt it would sow enough fear among the populace to make them abandon their city. It would exponentially increase the number of lives that would be saved as part of this plan, and all it would cost was the life of an old man nearing the end of his time. As patriarch, the choice was obvious.

“Yes. I realize it’s rather cruel to you, Princess, but you are our patriarch. There are times you must harden your heart and do what’s required of you. I would like this to be my final lesson to you.”

“Despite your sweet nature, you can really be a stern teacher sometimes...” Linnea said with a sad, wistful smile. She remembered countless examples of his lessons from the past. While Rasmus was ordinarily sweet and gentle to her, when it came to his lessons on politics and war, she recalled he was harsh enough to drive the fear of the gods into her young psyche. She also knew that was what he considered his duty. After all, countless lives rested on the shoulders of a patriarch. He had been the one who had taught her that lesson and carved that belief into her soul. She felt nothing but gratitude for his teachings. The best way she could repay him now was to show him she was

determined to do her duty as patriarch.

“Fine. Rasmus, you are hereby assigned to command the defense of Fort Gashina. Leave the rest in my hands.”

“Thank you very much, Big Sister...”

“Ah! Th-That’s not fair! You can’t go calling me that *now*!”

Emotions welled up in Linnea’s chest, and she felt her eyes sting.

“You’re someone whose character I’ve admired from the bottom of my heart. Surely there’s no sin in calling you that at least once.” Rasmus chuckled teasingly, but his eyes were faintly moist with tears. While he was doing his best not to let it show to Linnea, he, too, had his struggles. It would have been odder if he’d had none. He had raised Linnea as though she was his own daughter. Of course he felt profound sadness at the thought of leaving her side.

“I’ll be off, then. Ah, but before I go, I’ll follow your instructions, Princess, and show my wife how much I appreciate her.”

Still, the man was setting off to his death, all in the name of fulfilling his duty. Linnea would remember the sight of his broad shoulders leaving her office for the rest of her life.

“Princess! Princess!”

“Mm?! O-Oh!” Linnea snapped back to the present upon hearing Grer’s voice. She hadn’t finished processing her emotions. She had let her thoughts wander back to Rasmus. She shook her head in an effort to regain her composure.

“Sorry. I didn’t hear you. Can you say that again?”

“How unusual for you, Princess. Are you sure you’re not tired? It’s an important time; perhaps you should take care of your body.”

“I’m fine. If anything, doing something will be a welcome distraction.”

She had often found herself unable to get a proper night’s rest due to her anxiety. While she managed to force herself to sleep eventually, knowing that a long-term plan like the one she was engaged in required plenty of physical and mental energy, she still couldn’t keep her thoughts from racing while she lay in

bed at night. In the end, Linnea had decided the best way to deal with her pent-up stress was to forge ahead with her work. It was perfectly in character for her, given her strong sense of responsibility.

“Very well, then allow me to repeat myself. It seems the Flame Clan Army has entered Gimlé. Reports indicate they’re quite confused by finding the city empty.”

“Hah, no doubt. If I were the enemy general, I’d be in a confused panic,” Linnea said with a self-deprecating laugh. She was well aware that she wasn’t good at dealing with unexpected developments. She had, for example, found herself emotionally overwhelmed when dealing with her recent discussion with Rasmus. She knew she had to be calmer in the face of uncertainty, but it was a hard habit to break after so many years.

“Heheh, i-indeed. I can just imagine how adorable you would be in your panic, Princess.”

“Now hold on. That’s a bit disrespectful to your parent, isn’t it?”

“I’m fully capable of judging when the time for such comments is appropriate, ma’am.”

“Sounds like you’re saying now’s the right moment.” Linnea glared at Grer. Of course, she wasn’t actually angry, and her glare had a rather theatrical quality to it. Grer narrowed his eyes in a nostalgic smile.

“I am. Two years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to make such a jest to you, Princess.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Indeed. I believe you would have adamantly insisted that wouldn’t have been the case back then.”

“Mmph.”

Linnea was aware that was probably true and fell silent. Certainly, at the time, she had felt she needed to put up a constant facade of strength as patriarch. She couldn’t accept her own weakness and needed to do everything to hide it from the world. She felt that if she didn’t, she’d lose everything and be unable

to even stand. That sense of constant fear had plagued her every thought.

“That’s probably true.”

She thought back to that time and felt a bitter tinge color her feelings. It was clear to her now that the adults around her had seen right through her facade. Indeed, even Grer, who was still in his twenties, had done the very same. The older members of her inner circle no doubt found her attempts painfully awkward, in fact.

“Yes, thinking back on it, I really was still a child.”

She was desperate to become strong—to become a proper patriarch. She had been trying with all her might to deny her weakness, to reject it outright. Not all of her efforts were wrong, however. There were plenty of things she’d gained along the way, things she had learned as a result of those efforts. Those things were precious assets to Linnea. But that sort of strength was brittle. It would easily snap when put under strain.

At the time, Linnea had been frustrated by the lack of trust shown to her by her retainers, but in hindsight, it was perfectly understandable that they didn’t want to live in such a house—one that could collapse at any moment. She couldn’t blame them in the slightest.

“Heh, but you’ve grown quite a bit in the past two years. There’s a certain flexibility that’s been added to your strength.”

“That’s all thanks to Father. Steel forged in persistent fires.”

The words he had given her two years ago were still fresh in her memory. She needed to face her own weakness and admit to her failings. Only then could she rise above them and use those failures as lessons to become stronger. Yuuto had taught her all about how that was the source of true strength.

“I’m well aware that I’m not good with unexpected events. In that case, what I need to do is come up with dozens, even hundreds of potential scenarios in my head ahead of time and come up with solutions to all of them. If I can’t, then I can entrust the situation to a commander who’s good at coming up with solutions on the fly. That’s all there is to it,” Linnea said casually, without a trace of tension. By accepting her own weakness and admitting that was who she

was, she could come up with plenty of solutions on how to deal with it. If she didn't admit to her own weakness, all she would do is repeat her own mistakes. It sounded simple, but it had been hard for her to do back then. But now, she had learned how to do it. It was at that moment that she remembered the scheme she had put into place.

"We're getting off track. Let's get back on topic. It'll still take quite a bit of time until our people cross through Bifröst, yes?"

"Yes. Especially considering that the people of the Panther and Hoof Clans west of the Horn Clan also need to be moved."

"I see. Then we'll need the Flame Clan Army to stay in Gimlé a while longer."

Linnea's lips curled up into a smile.

Certainly, she wasn't a particularly good general. She didn't have the ability to deal with two accomplished division commanders. She wouldn't be able to defeat them in battle with a weapon in hand, but Linnea had weapons of her own and her own way of fighting.

"Tch. They got us. Our soldiers are going to be useless for a while." Shiba sighed as he roughly scratched at his scalp.

Finding Gimlé abandoned had been so strange that he had sent his soldiers to carefully search the city looking for traps. Having found a few elderly people who had stayed behind in the city, the men had reported that the Steel Clan garrison and the city's residents had fled the city in fear when they had learned of the Flame Clan's approach. It wasn't enough to allay Shiba's suspicions, so he had ordered his soldiers to search the city more carefully. That had been a mistake.

"They're all caught up in looking for loot," Masa, his adjutant, said with an exasperated sigh. Scattered around every nook and cranny of Gimlé had been caches of gold, silver, gems, and glass objects. Gimlé was, after all, the clan capital of the great Steel Clan. While the loot was scattered in small quantities around the city, altogether it added up to a substantial amount of wealth. There were items that, for a common soldier, constituted a greater wealth than many of them would see in a lifetime. All they had to do was search the empty

houses. Even the professional soldiers of the Flame Clan Army couldn't resist the lure of such lucre. All of them became desperate to search out the loot, and those who found it had lost any desire to risk their lives in battle. By the time Shiba had realized what was happening, that poison had spread through his soldiers and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Morale's collapsed, and if we tried to force them to march, we'd see a lot of deserters."

"Indeed. Many of the soldiers just want to take their loot and go home to their families."

"But I can't go around confiscating it either," Shiba said with a sigh of despair and gazed up at the ceiling.

In Yggdrasil, looting was the right of every soldier who risked their life in battle. While Nobunaga's strict orders forbade any abuse of Gimlé's residents, the loot the soldiers had found had been abandoned by their owners. There was nothing keeping the soldiers from claiming it as their own. The loot now belonged to the individual soldiers, and if Shiba tried to confiscate it without providing proper compensation, he wouldn't be able to avoid the ire of his soldiers.

"If only they'd just left it all in a single treasure vault."

"This was probably on purpose. To avoid our pursuit."

"Yes, but it's still an impressive display of resolve," Shiba spat bitterly.

While he had no way of knowing, this was a variation of the tactic Yuuto had used when staging a fake retreat against the Lightning Clan. The Steel Clan had spent lavishly to ensure confusion would spread among the Flame Clan ranks. The most important priorities when relocating to a new land were the people and foodstuffs. While precious metals and gems were indeed valuable, they weren't necessary to live. They were low on the priority list of items to take, meaning they would be far better spent in the manner they had been—aiding as a form of bait that allowed them to more safely move the civilians. It was a small price to pay to buy enough time to evacuate the people of the Steel Clan territories.

Still, the items were, in fact, quite valuable. Making the call to so easily abandon them, and thus leaving them to the enemy, wasn't something that could be done on a whim. Even if she wasn't good with dealing with unexpected developments, with enough time and a good rationale, Linnea was capable of taking bold action. That had been true when she had implemented the Norfolk Crop Rotation system. It was what made Linnea such a remarkable and talented ruler.

"The Flame Clan invasion has started! They'll soon be at the walls of Glaðsheimr itself!"

While the events at Iárnviðr and Gimlé were unfolding, Yuuto was giving a spirited speech in the central plaza of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. Beside him stood Fagrahvél, patriarch of the Sword Clan. She was an Einherjar blessed with the Rune of Kings—Gjallarhorn, the Call to War. With it, Fagrahvél could make use of a seiðr that allowed her to amplify someone's voice across great distances. Given that Yuuto needed as many people as possible to hear him, she was an extremely valuable asset for this particular task.

"Their army numbers a massive two hundred thousand!"

When those words rang out, an unprecedented murmur of panic rippled through the assembled crowd. All of their faces were twisted into expressions of fear and anxiety. That reaction was perfectly understandable, though. In the entire continent of Yggdrasil, there were less than ten clans who could mobilize an army of ten thousand, and the Holy Capital, the largest city in Yggdrasil, only boasted a population of a hundred thousand. The army Yuuto had declared was heading this way was twice that, even. It was an unfathomably large number.

"*Well, of course, the army's actual size is a hundred thousand,"* Yuuto reflected to himself, mentally biting his tongue to maintain his white lie. There were times it was important to exaggerate a threat to get people to move as needed, and this was one such time.

"They're frighteningly strong. Last time they attacked, they only fielded a force of around fifty thousand, and even then, I was able to do nothing against their onslaught." With that comment, Yuuto's expression took on a look of intense pain. It was partially an act, but there was also an element of truth to

what he had said. He could still clearly remember the despair and shock he'd felt when he'd been taken completely by surprise by Nobunaga's tactics, and had ended up losing his trusted general Skáviðr as a result.

"This time they've got four times that number. Regretfully, I must admit there's nothing I can do against them." The murmuring among the people jumped in volume at his admission. He had already tasked Jörgen and Fagrahvél with appealing to the city's residents to flee, which had already had some positive effects. However, there was a world of difference in the weight of the words when it came from the þjóðann rather than his generals.

"Last time, they retreated because they had run out of foodstuffs, but we can't expect the same this time. Glaðsheimr will fall to the hands of the Sixth Demon King." Yuuto chose the strongest words he could to describe the outcome. He needed to fan the fear and anxiety that had taken root in the people's minds. His conscience ached at the need to do so, but he had no other choice.

"The Flame Clan's patriarch, Oda Nobunaga, is a ruthless and brutal man. When a hörgr named Enryaku defied him, I'm told he massacred every man, woman, and child in their lands."

He referred to the infamous Burning of Hieizan. Of course, modern archaeological research has suggested that calling it a massacre was a massive exaggeration, but that was beside the point.

"On top of that, in the land of Nagashima, he trapped twenty thousand men, women, and children into a fortress and burned it to the ground with them inside."

This referred to the Nagashima Ikkou Ikki Rebellion. It was an extremely brutal reprisal, but Nobunaga had his reasons at the time. While he was generally known as a ruthless man, Nobunaga was extremely fond of and close to his family members. The Nagashima Rebellion had cost him his trusted brother Oda Nobutomo, as well as several other close relatives. It was easy to imagine Nobunaga's rage at losing his own family members to that rebellion.

"There are countless other tales of his brutality and barbarism. No doubt many among you have heard of them."

Those rumors, too, had been spread by Yuuto's people. This was essentially a staged crisis, but it had been extremely effective. The citizens gathered in front of Yuuto quickly paled as they trembled in terror.

"No doubt they'll do terrible things to the people of Glaðsheimr. They'll rape all of the women, enslave all of the children, and Glaðsheimr will become a living hell."

As he shouted out the words, Yuuto couldn't help but mock himself. There wasn't a shred of truth to his claims. Nobunaga was a man who forbade pillaging and looting when he captured important cities. Of course, it was true that he prohibited those things because those same cities would become important centers for his future campaigns. However, while Nobunaga was strict and unforgiving to his subordinates, he was a compassionate and gentle ruler to his people, and as such, would never allow such grim circumstances to befall them by his own hand.

In all honesty, Yuuto didn't enjoy painting this monstrous caricature of Nobunaga, but he had no choice but to continue in order to fulfill his own duty.

"I want to do anything I can to avoid that fate becoming a reality, my people. I understand how difficult it must be to leave the city of your birth, but I ask of you, hurry and leave this city," Yuuto said, sincerely pleading with the people assembled before him. The area fell silent for a moment as everyone processed his words before the murmuring and buzz of the assembled people started up again. Almost all of the voices spoke in tones of discontent and anger.

"Where are we supposed to run to?!"

"Are we supposed to hunt beasts in the mountains to survive like mere savages?!"

"You're basically telling us to go die on the road!"

The voices quickly spread through the gathered people. It had started a mass panic. At this point, it was nearly impossible to stop them.

"I've prepared a sanctuary and enough food for you to survive there! I'll also have soldiers escort you on the journey!"

Their response was very different from how the people of the Wolf and Horn

Clans would have reacted to this very same speech. The people of those two clans had already experienced improved standards of living under Yuuto's rule. That had led to a deep-rooted trust among them towards him, as well as Linnea, his chosen representative. They would have obeyed, knowing they had no choice given the desperation in Yuuto's tone. The people of Glaðsheimr were a different matter, however. They had received little benefit from Yuuto's rule. If anything, he could be considered responsible for their current quandary...

"The heavens are clearly angered by your actions!"

"Yes, that must be it! There was that earthquake not long ago, and now this! You've brought nothing but death and disaster upon the empire!"

"That's right! That must be why all of these terrible things are happening!"

The criticism began targeting Yuuto himself. Ordinarily, they wouldn't be able to speak disrespectful words to the þjóðann that they worshipped as a living god, but with this many people in the square, it was impossible to see who had actually said a particular thing. The safety of anonymity among the sea of people made them bolder.

"Everyone, listen to me!"

Yuuto's desperate plea, even with the help of the seiðr's amplification, couldn't overcome the sea of angry shouts. His words were swallowed by the cacophonous sounds of the mob. Their anxiety, their anger—all of their negative emotions—began to collect like a giant snowball rolling downhill. It seemed like it would only be a matter of time before this discontent erupted into a full-scale riot.



A gentle, lilting song rang across the square. The people who heard the song felt their panic, anxiety, and anger ebb away as they listened. It was a song Yuuto was familiar with as well—the galdr of calming. The mood of the people in the square quickly relaxed. They were no longer teetering on the border of becoming a riotous mob. They simply stood there calmly, wistfully listening to the oh-so-familiar song they were currently hearing.

“Lady Rífa!”

“It’s Her Majesty!”

“Oh my! Your Majesty, please guide us!”

The people raised their hands up in greeting, begging for guidance from the young woman who had appeared next to Yuuto. Her features, her snow-white hair—the woman standing there was, to every viewer, Sigrdrífa, Yuuto’s predecessor as þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. However, it was impossible for her to really have been here. While they could hide her hair with a wig, a more discerning eye would see that her irises were black.

The people of Glaðsheimr were passionately attached to Sigrdrífa, who had sung with a voice gifted from the gods themselves to soothe the hearts of the people who were recovering from the shock of the great earthquake. While Yuuto felt guilty about taking advantage of his departed wife’s popularity, he was out of options. He had Mitsuki, who looked identical to Sigrdrífa, dress up as her to persuade the populace. He needed to use her to give the people of Glaðsheimr the last push needed to get them to flee.

“Hear me! Citizens of the Holy Capital!”

“Huh?!”

The moment she spoke, Yuuto fell mute in shock. Her voice wasn’t that of Mitsuki’s, his loving wife that he was so intimately familiar with. Of course, it was the same in terms of pitch, but there was an authority, a presence, behind her words. It had an immediate effect. The murmuring in the square stopped in the blink of an eye. Everyone gathered had shut their mouths in order to hear every word of Sigrdrífa’s royal address. It was at that moment that Yuuto once

again realized just how popular Rífa was among the people of Glaðsheimr.

“Why the confusion, my beloved people? I told you at my wedding ceremony, did I not? We face an unprecedented threat. I also made it very clear that my chosen husband and successor, Yuuto, was brought to us by the heavens.”

Her calm, dignified voice rang through the city as every one of the city’s residents in attendance held their breath. The people who had completely rejected Yuuto’s words nodded along to her address. While the people had heard she had refrained from appearing in public due to health complications resulting from her recent childbirth, it had caused no ill effect upon the faith her subjects had in their empress.

“My dear people, I am pleased that you all value and love me. But if you do respect and love me as you so claim, then I ask that you trust the man that I trust with our fates! Please, my people, I beg of you!”

With that, she deeply bowed her head. The citizens gathered below were caught completely off guard by the gesture and began to panic. To the people of the Holy Capital, the þjóðann was a living god—someone to worship and to respect.

And yet she had bowed her head to ask something of them.

To them, it was a completely unprecedented, shocking event.

“P-Please raise your head, Your Majesty!”

“We’ll trust him! We swear we’ll trust him!”

“If it’s by your word, then we’ll listen to anything you tell us to do!”

The tide had shifted. The appeals of the young woman who had waded into the midst of her people and continually sang a galdr of calming for them began to stir their hearts. Yuuto felt his eyes sting. Rífa’s efforts—her sincerity, the work she had put in for her people at the cost of her life—had taken root in the hearts of the people of the city. Rífa’s efforts had not been in vain, and he felt a deep flood of joy at that realization.

“What are you crying for? I’ve come all the way out here to set the stage for you. Go and do your job. Such a troublesome husband you are.”

“...Pardon?”

“Juuust kidding. I’m pretty sure that’s what Rífa would’ve said, though.” Mitsuki then teasingly winked at Yuuto. Her voice and expression had returned to that of the childhood love he had known for most of his life. However, her oration and the words she had spoken in the moments before were those of Rífa, not Mitsuki.

“Now, go on.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Mitsuki then smacked him on the back. Yuuto wobbled as he stepped forward. When he raised his face, he saw the faces of the city’s people. There wasn’t a trace of the distrust they had directed toward him just moments earlier. As a man—and as their ruler—he couldn’t afford to just stand there gaping after she’d put in that much effort to set the stage for him.

“Phew. Somehow managed to pull off one of the things I promised I’d do for Rífa.” Yuuto let out a long sigh of relief as he departed the city square in his carriage.

It took an immense amount of energy to move something that was stationary. That said, once that thing started moving, the laws of momentum would take over, and it would keep moving on its own. The same was true of people’s hearts as well. The most difficult thing was getting them to take that first step.

Moving his people out of Yggdrasil was one of Yuuto’s most fervent wishes—one he had spent the past year working toward—and among the cities of Yggdrasil, he had expected Glaðsheimr would be one of the most difficult to convince given its large population and his short tenure as their leader. He had been struggling to figure out how to deal with that most difficult obstacle, but the process had gone much more smoothly than expected. His sense of relief at accomplishing the task was profound.

“It really was thanks to you, Mitsuki. Honestly, you were so much like Rífa that I almost had a heart attack,” Yuuto said with unstinting praise for his wife, who was currently sitting across from him. While Mitsuki and Rífa had been identical in appearance, their personalities were extremely different. The same

was true of their demeanor and aura. Despite that, when Mitsuki gave her speech, she appeared to be much like Rífa.

“Heh, well, I’d spent the past few months practicing, with Fagrahvél’s help, of course.”

“No, you had no need for my help. You knew Lady Rífa better than I did,” Fagrahvél said with a mix of emotions on her face. On one hand, she was clearly happy that her beloved little sister had a friend that knew her that well, but on the other, she was struggling internally with the fact that someone else knew Rífa better.

“That’s not true! I mean, yeah, I look similar, but it’s still a different body, and I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you, Fagrahvél, since you knew who I used to be.”

“Mm? Who you used to be?”

“Oh! Uh... I meant Rífa. I was caught up in the role.”

“Oh, I see.”

Yuuto had heard that there were method actors who got so absorbed in their roles that the line separating their acting and their true personality often became blurred. It was the sort of acting where one became engulfed in the role—where they could practically become possessed by the character. Even Yuuto, who had known Mitsuki since childhood, hadn’t realized that she had such a potent hidden talent.

“Well, anyway, you really did save me out there. I wouldn’t have been able to deal with it by myself.”

“Tee hee. It’s a wife’s job to support her husband from the shadows, after all!”

“I really am blessed to have such a wonderful wife.”

He sincerely felt that way. It wasn’t just Mitsuki either. While he couldn’t bring himself to say it in front of his formal wife, without the support of the women in his life like Rífa, Felicia, Sigrún, Linnea, and Ingrid, he felt he would’ve already been crushed under the weight of his countless burdens, and he likely

wouldn’t be sitting here today. For that reason, he needed to steel himself now and do everything he could to pay them back for their support. As a man, he felt that it was his duty to do so.

“Everything else from here on is my job. You take the kids and head to Útgarðar.”

“Yuu-kun... You’re staying here?”

“At least until the people of Álfheimr get to Jötunheimr.”

Yuuto shrugged with a dry laugh.

He had also considered a journey that took a northern route around the Þrymheimr Mountains and going to Jötunheimr through the Miðgarðr region, but the climate of Miðgarðr was unpredictable. It was also the territory of nomadic clans such as the remnants of the Panther Clan and the Cloud Clan, meaning it was extremely likely that the people passing through would face raids by those clans along the way. Because of those matters, there was no choice but to go through the Ásgarðr region. In order to succeed in that effort, it was necessary to hold the enemy here at Glaðsheimr for a while longer.

“Are you sure it’ll be okay? I mean, you’re facing *the* Oda Nobunaga, right?” Mitsuki asked with a worried expression.

She was from Japan as well, so while she only knew of his reputation, even she could tell that Oda Nobunaga, who had swiftly brought a hundred years of civil war to an end, was a remarkable man and difficult opponent. Yuuto had also lost to him in battle. It would have been stranger if she wasn’t concerned for his well-being.

“I mean, if it was at all possible, I’d rather not fight him either. That old man’s pretty damned scary.”

Yuuto believed that he, more than anyone in Yggdrasil, knew just how frightening an opponent Oda Nobunaga was. After all, he had learned everything he could about the man’s history, his life, and his values in order to survive here in Yggdrasil. To Yuuto, Nobunaga was a mentor and a teacher. Yuuto had further realized just how remarkable the man was in the flesh rather than on paper by actually facing him. He was wholly unconvinced that he’d be

able to truly beat him. He felt that some of that subconscious fear had led to his defeat in the last campaign. He had been overawed by his opponent before he even fought him.

“Well, I’ll do something about it. He’s a monstrously devious old man, but I’m starting to spot some of his weaknesses.”

“Weaknesses?”

“Yeah, and this is his greatest one of all.”

With that, Yuuto took an object out of his fob. It was an old, battered mirror. Mitsuki tilted her head curiously at the sight.

“That’s his weakness?”

“Well, not this itself, but yeah.”

Yuuto peered into the mirror and smiled. The mirror’s surface was blurred and didn’t show anything. Even so, it seemed Yuuto saw something in that mirror.

“Oh? Gimlé’s abandoned, is it?” Upon hearing the report from his western forces, Nobunaga raised his brows. Even he hadn’t foreseen this as a possibility. What immediately came to mind was his talk with Yuuto at Stórk.

“Hrmph. Seems he really does intend to evacuate his people from Yggdrasil.”

“Our scouts report that he’s in the process of moving the citizens out of Glaðsheimr, as well,” Ran responded.

“Heh. Interesting indeed...” Nobunaga said as a smile began to form upon his features.

Unusually for a Warring States Period warlord, Nobunaga had moved his castle of residence, complete with his retainers and the people of the castle’s surrounding city, with him several times. It was part of his effort to separate his samurai from their attachment to their lands and create a fully professional army he could move as he wished, but it was enough to give him experience with just how difficult it was to move a large population out of their settled lands.

“I’m impressed that he’s managed to move this many at once.”

Nobunaga always praised those who produced results, even if they happened to be an enemy. In fact, it was precisely because they were enemies that he would evaluate them properly instead of underestimating them.

“If we just stand by and let them move on, we can probably obtain Glaðsheimr without a fight. What do you wish to do, My Lord?” Ran asked in confirmation. They were the words of a man who stuck largely to rational considerations and disliked any wasted effort.

The Flame Clan Army numbered one hundred thousand. It wasn’t that he doubted its ability to win, but Ran probably wanted to suggest that it would still be better to win without fighting if that was an option. Understanding what his Second meant, Nobunaga bared his teeth in a predatory grin.

“Well, we’ll crush them, of course.”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

Ran sighed with a tired and resigned expression. He had known Nobunaga for a long time. He was entirely aware of what Nobunaga’s answer was going to be.

“I can’t very well call myself the conqueror of the known world by picking up my enemy’s leavings. That’s a humiliation of the worst sort. You know my way! If I want something, I will obtain it with my own efforts!”

Nobunaga gripped his hand into a fist. His conqueror’s aura flowed from his body, and he made his desire to fight evident. He had been calm and settled since he had arrived in Yggdrasil, but the existence of a powerful opponent at this late juncture had revealed his true, aggressive nature.

INTERLUDE

The palace in the center of the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé was quite simple and humble for such a large clan. Some of that probably stemmed from the fact that it had only been a year or so since Gimlé was chosen as the clan capital, but even setting that aside, Kuuga felt that it wasn't a building worthy of one of the largest clans in Yggdrasil.

"I see. So this whole thing was planned out after all," Kuuga murmured to himself and stopped mid-stride. His gaze was fixed upon a brick building in front of him. He greeted the guards standing at the entrance with a glance, then quietly opened the gate and stepped inside. There were perhaps a dozen people at the back of the room.

"How are you finding your accommodations?"

Upon hearing the question, the man lying on the floor sat up languidly. It seemed he'd been sleeping, and the man's expression was sour as he looked up at Kuuga. Well, that wasn't the only reason, of course.

"Hrmph. I can't say I like the decor." Rasmus snorted and rapped his knuckles against the iron bars that separated him from Kuuga. This was a prison. The prisoners being held here were the men captured at Fort Gashina.

"Good grief. Nothing good ever comes from failing to die. How pitiful of me to allow myself to be exposed to such humiliation. Given all I said to the princess, I can't bear to face her."

"Well, sorry to hear that. But I'm sure you'll find some solace in being alive."

"Hrmph."

While Kuuga actually meant those words, it seemed Rasmus had taken them as an insult. Rasmus glared at Kuuga with distaste. It was understandable, but...

"I know it's a bit cramped, but you'll have to deal with these accommodations

for a while longer," Kuuga said with a chuckle.

He had blundered in his conquest of Fort Gashina. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to avoid demotion. Kuuga was determined not to have Shiba look upon him with pity. He needed to do anything he could to show his brother what he was capable of achieving. Kuuga was prepared to do anything he needed to make that happen, and these prisoners were important pieces in his scheme.

To be continued...

Afterword

It may be somewhat belated, but Happy New Year. It's been a while. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. It is I, Seiichi Takayama!

I'm looking forward to this coming year. Last year was a busy one, especially with the airing of the anime. While a lot happened last year, I feel it was a good learning experience for me. I'd like to do my best to make sure that there'll be another adaptation in the future.

Now, this volume is a Sigrún volume. We had an important revelation about her past! This wasn't something I added later but was actually a part of her original character background going all the way back to the first volume. I've just never had an opportunity to reveal it until this point. I'm glad I was able to find a good place to introduce it in the narrative.

Now, I'd like to move on to the thanks. Firstly, to my editor, U-sama. You were truly a great help during 2018. I hope to continue our partnership into 2019 too. Next, to my illustrator, Yukisan-sensei. Thank you for all your hard work on the anime-related illustrations. It'd be nice to go drinking together again sometime.

A big thanks also to the anime production staff! Thank you for all of your hard work! It was a very warm and fun production environment, and it's a memory I'll cherish. I would definitely welcome another opportunity to work with you in the future.

And last, but certainly not least, a huge thank-you to my readers. While the anime has ended, the novels are still working their way toward their climax. Please follow along with me until the very end!

Here's hoping we'll see each other in the next volume!

Seiichi Takayama

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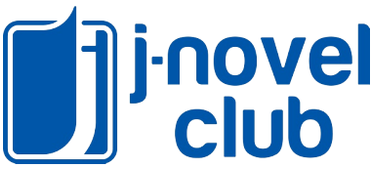
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 17

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Noboru Akimoto Edited by Aaron Brown

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