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

18

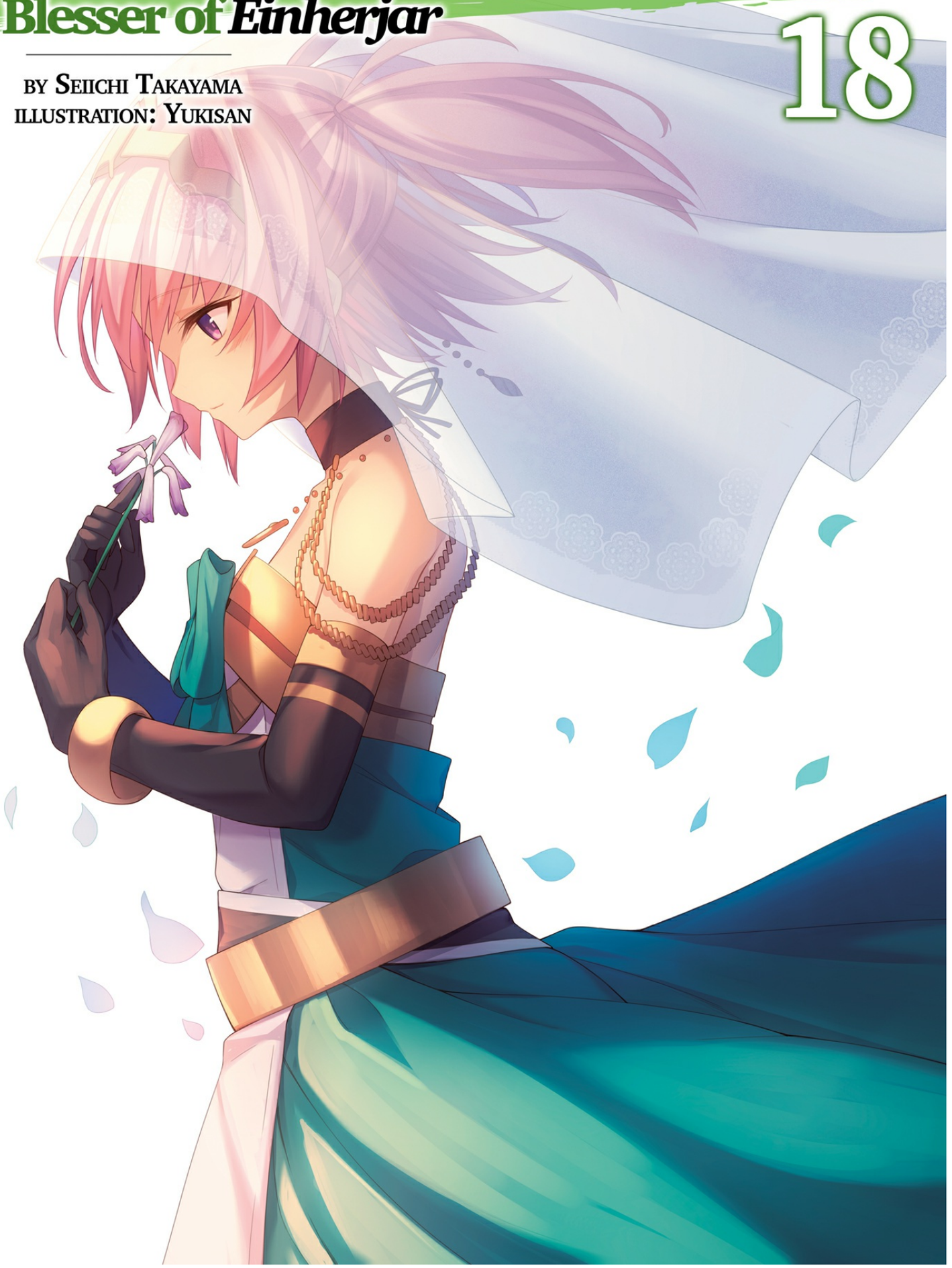
BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN



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Ephy, now in the middle of her growth spurt, was becoming quite the beautiful young woman.

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar* 18

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN


Sigrún looked down at her and sighed.
"I'm sorry... I concede. I concede! Can we stop now?!"


"If we can hold out until then, we'll win! Buckle down, everyone!"
"Sieg láirn!"



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Characters



Felicia

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

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Mánagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

Yuuto Suoh

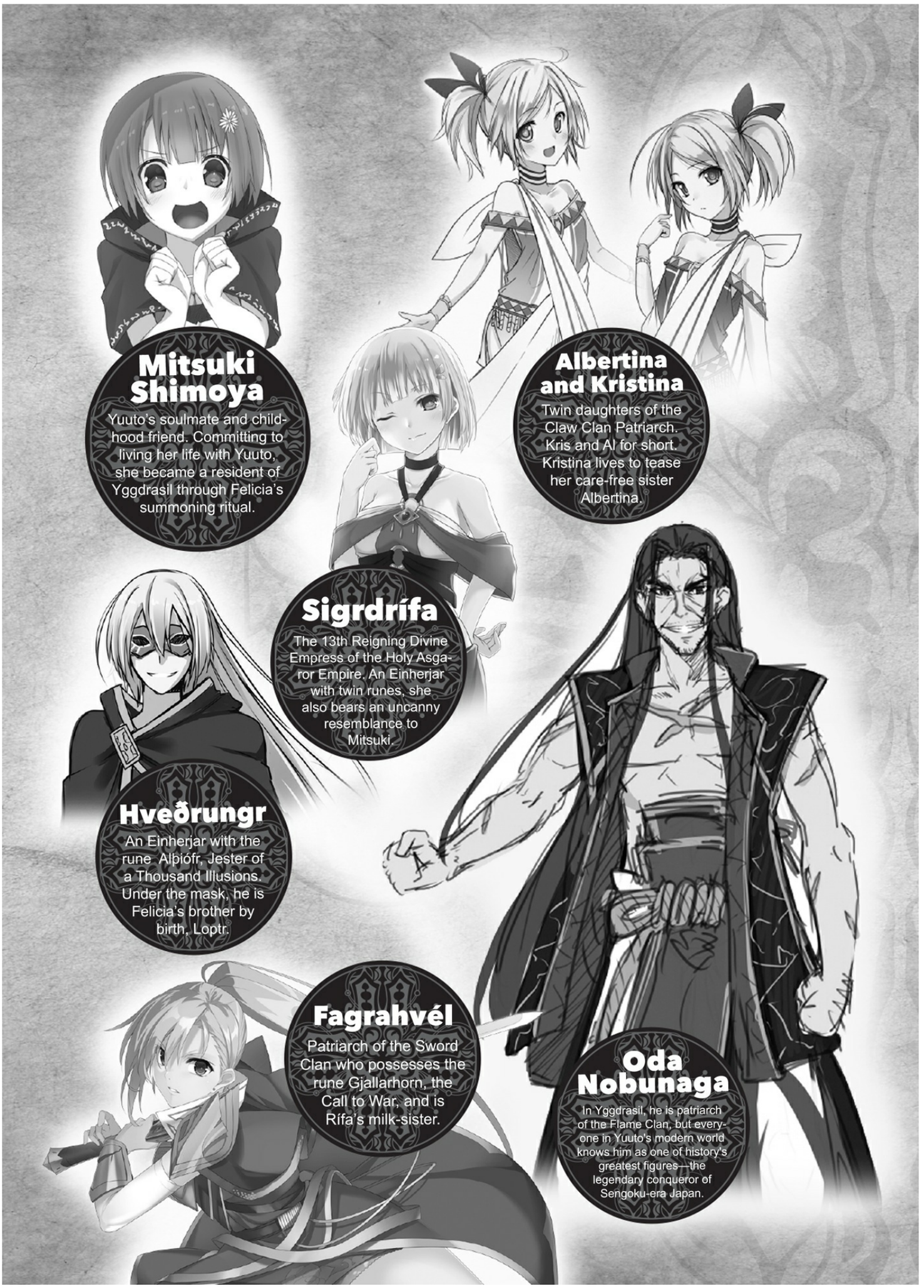
A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."

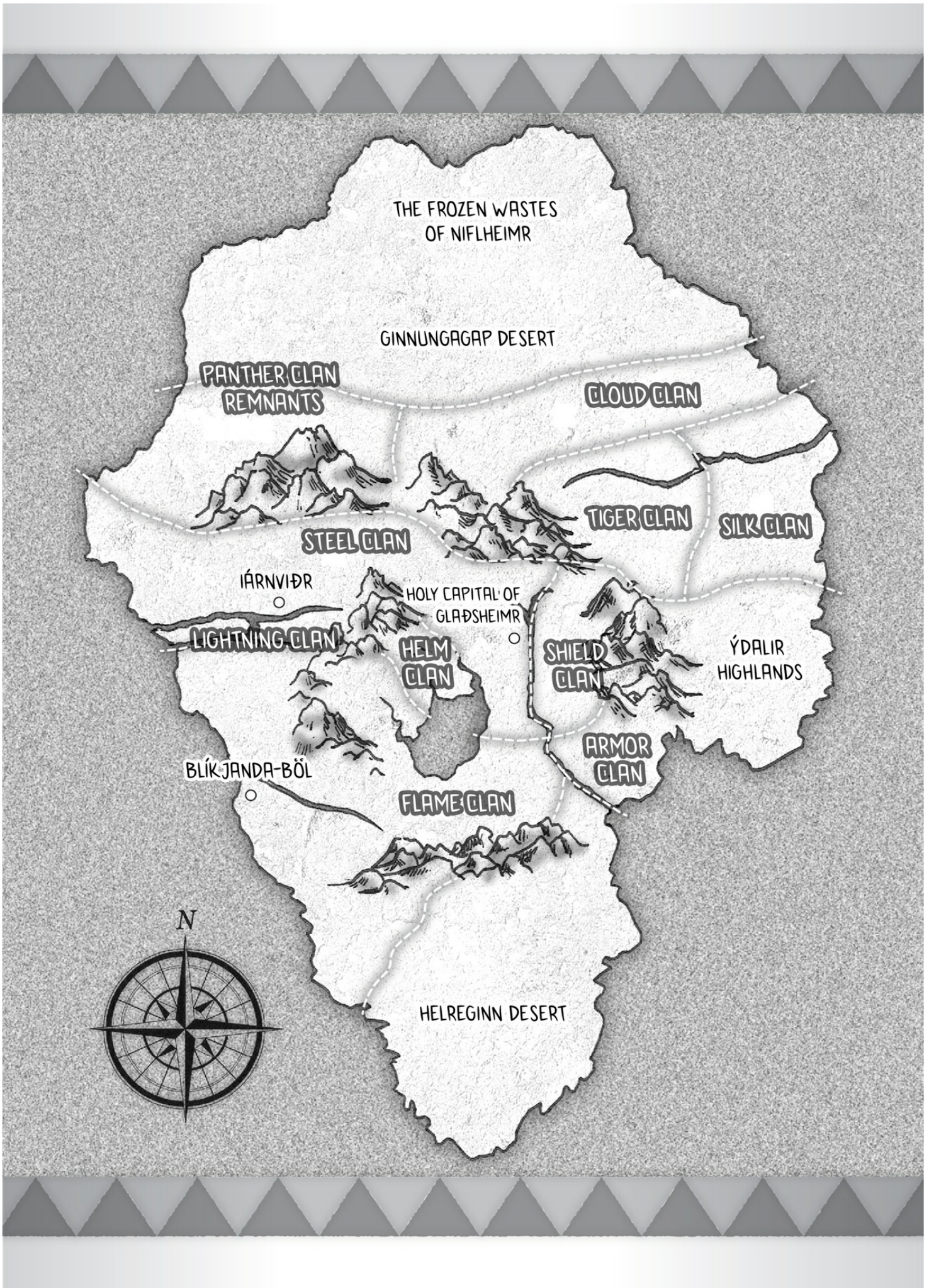
Linnea

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

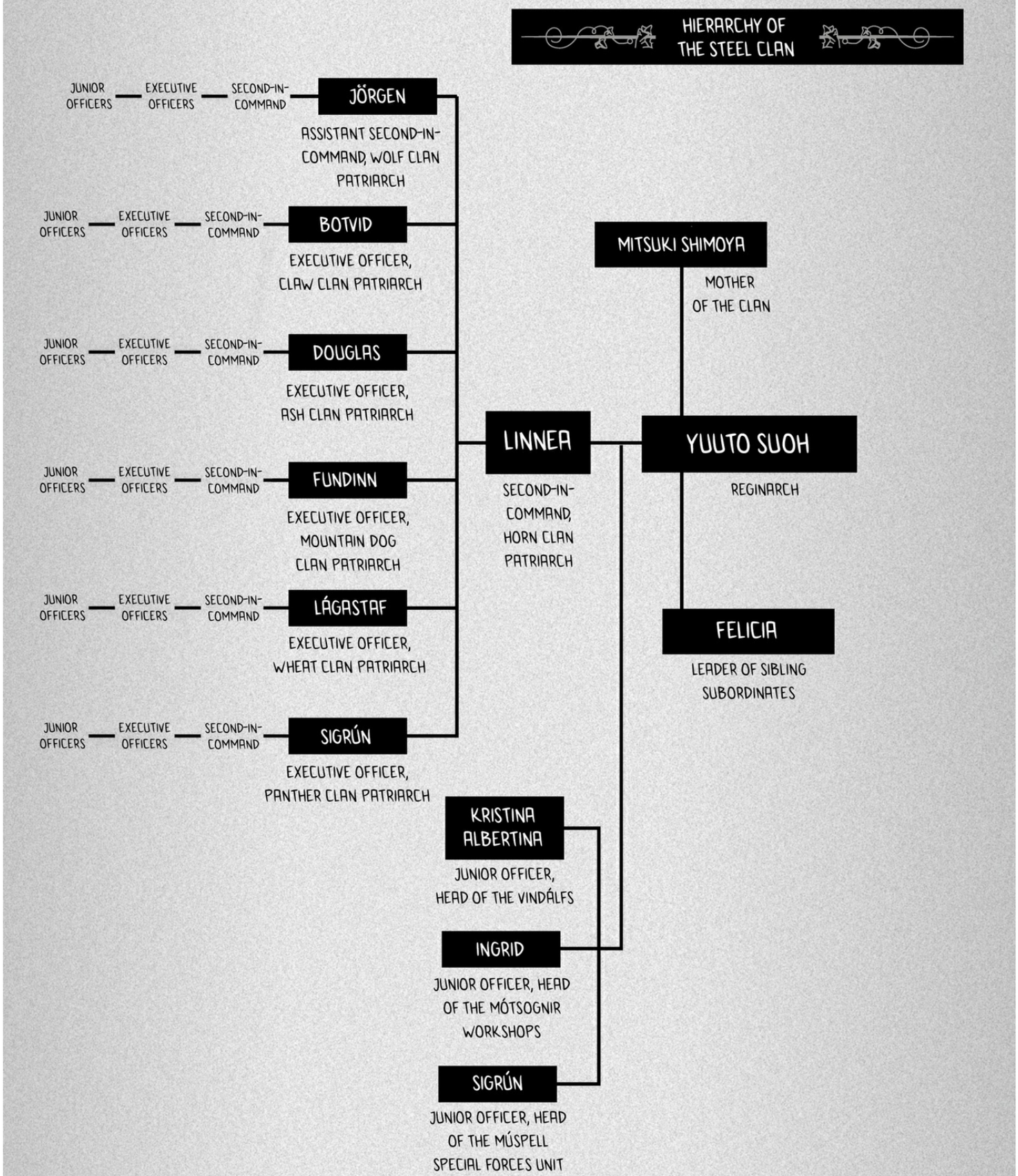
Ingrid

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


Mitsuki Shimoya
Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.
Albertina and Kristina
Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.
Sigrdrífa
The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgaror Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.
Hveðrungr
An Einherjar with the rune Alþiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.
Fagrahvél
Patriarch of the Sword Clan who possesses the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, and is Rífa's milk-sister.
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



PROLOGUE

It was June 2, 1582. That night, Nobunaga's eyes snapped open from his slumber, alerted by a feeling of hostility in his immediate vicinity. The air was heavy with a tension that couldn't be explained by the presence of just one or two opponents. It needed several thousand warriors, perhaps even as many as ten thousand, to reach a level like this. Honno-ji Temple, where he was currently staying, was far from enemy territory, meaning the tension had to come from something other than an enemy army.

"Treachery! Just who is behind this?!" Nobunaga asked in a roar as his squire ran into his room. His squire was a good-looking young man in his mid-teens. The young man's name was Mori Naritoshi. Nobunaga still called him Ran, however, coming from his childhood name of Ranmaru. Ran was a son of the late Mori Yoshinari, one of Nobunaga's most loyal retainers, and he was blessed with a sharp mind. Nobunaga had recently begun to view him as one of his most promising retainers.

"My Lord, based upon the banners, I believe it is the armies of Akechi Koretou Hyuga no Kami!"

"Ah, is it him? Perhaps this is fate, then."

Upon hearing Ran's answer, Nobunaga realized his fate was sealed. His enemy's forces numbered over ten thousand, and he had, at most, a hundred soldiers on his side. Certainly, Nobunaga had defeated enemies despite being badly outnumbered countless times before, but given the sheer gulf in numbers and the fact that he was surrounded, there was virtually no chance of him seizing victory here.

The best thing to do under the circumstances would be to run, but Honno-ji Temple wasn't his castle; it had simply been a convenient stop on his journey, meaning there were no hidden escape routes. His only option would be to force his way through the envelopment to escape, but among the Five Great Oda Clan Generals, Akechi Koretou Hyuga no Kami Mitsuhide was the one Nobunaga

rated the most highly. Mitsuhide was perhaps the perfect warlord; he was a supremely capable diplomat, governor, and general. He skillfully took care of whatever issue was placed before him and had no real weaknesses to speak of.

While Nobunaga had no intention of giving up without a fight, Mitsuhide had taken an extremely risky gamble. More than anything, he would try to secure Nobunaga's head. Nobunaga knew deep down that he had almost no chance of escape.

"Tch. I let my guard down thinking I was in my own territory." Nobunaga clicked his tongue bitterly as he picked up the bow and spear against the wall. With his supremacy secured, he had assumed that no one would dare resist him. This was the result of that arrogance.

"Seems I've grown feeble." He sneered self-deprecatingly at himself. Had this unfolded in his youth, when he was constantly on guard for assassins, he would have likely realized the danger before Mitsuhide's armies could surround him and would have easily made his escape. It was an awful thing, getting old.

"I'm not letting you mere underlings take my head!" With a roar of defiance, Nobunaga rapidly shot off arrows from the temple's entrance. Over the years, Nobunaga had continued to hone his fighting abilities. His arrows quickly struck down the ashigaru that charged toward him. However, there were far too many enemies for him to handle. Every time he shot down one, ten times that number would take their place, sensing the opportunity to take a valuable head.

"Back, you damned cur!"

His enemies had finally reached his melee range, forcing Nobunaga to discard his bow and pick up his spear. He quickly beat down the ashigaru that lunged at him. More men continued to surge forward, and Nobunaga kept cutting them down as they approached. He swept them away and struck them down. However, he was but one man facing off against thousands. The drawn-out fighting sapped at his strength. He began to accumulate more and more small wounds...

Bang!

A gunshot rang out, and the ball pierced Nobunaga's right arm.

“Guh!”

In response to the intense pain and the force of the impact, Nobunaga dropped his spear. The spears of the ashigaru tried to follow up, thrusting toward Nobunaga...

“Great Lord!”

However, Ranmaru’s spear swept aside the enemy spears. The spear points all were knocked off target, never managing to quite reach Nobunaga’s body. Still, it had been quite the close call.

“We can’t hold them here. Pull back, Ran!” Nobunaga ordered.

“Yes, my lord!” Ranmaru replied, his body already drenched with the blood of his enemies. Even so, he was still steady upon his feet, and as they continued their retreat, he cut down any enemies that gave chase.

“Heh. Impressive skill with that spear. It reminds me of your old man.”

Despite the current circumstances, Nobunaga bared his teeth in a grin. Ranmaru’s father, Mori Yoshinari, had been a master of the jyumonji spear, and had been known by the alias of “Sanza the Berserker.” Ranmaru had clearly inherited his father’s skill with the spear.

“I’m extremely honored by your praise. However, if things continue like this...”

“Mm, yes. Things are looking grim...” Nobunaga bitterly spat out the words. Far from finding a solution to his current predicament, things were clearly getting worse. Nobunaga was already severely wounded and was finding it difficult to move. It appeared that he had exhausted his options.

“Then this, too, is fate!” With that, Nobunaga kicked down two of the braziers that had lit the room. The fire quickly jumped to the floorboards, and the wooden floor began to burn in the dimly lit gloom.

“M-My Great Lord?!”

“Hrmph. I won’t allow that traitorous cur to have the honor of claiming my head!” With that remark, Nobunaga ran into the nearest room. Ranmaru followed after him, and soon after, a wall of flame blocked off the entrance. At

the very least, this would buy them some time.

“Phew, at least we can take a brief rest.” Nobunaga plopped down in place with a sigh. This level of exertion was a bit much for a man who was nearing his fiftieth birthday.

“Perhaps this is a fitting end... Having invaded and burned all before me like a raging fire, for the flames to consume my body in the end would be rather poetic,” Nobunaga murmured as he stared out into space. Even the great Nobunaga could do nothing but accept his fate.

“A damned shame. To be a step away from conquering all, only to be tripped up by my own retainer...”

Had he fallen to a powerful enemy—someone the likes of Takeda, Uesugi, Hojo, Mori, or Honganji—he would have been able to accept his fate, though certainly, he would have still felt some measure of disappointment. Even if he knew that betrayal was a common fate to befall lords of the Warring States Period, dying in this way meant that the flame of ambition burning in his body would forever remain unfulfilled.

“Thirty years of work... It was all so close to coming to fruition. I was so close!”

Nobunaga had sworn that when he came of age, he would seek to conquer all beneath the heavens. In the thirty years since, he had focused single-mindedly upon that goal and charged through the world of the Warring States Period. He had been the pathfinder, paving the road toward reunification. Just as he was about to achieve his long-stated goal, someone had come to snatch it out of his hands. It wasn’t something he could forgive.

“It’s mine. This is my conquest. I won’t give it to anyone—not to this traitorous swine, and not even to my son! I’m the one who will be known as the conqueror!” Just as Nobunaga spat out the words in an almost mad spate of rage, the strange bronze mirror sitting in the corner of the room began to glow with an eerie light.

When Nobunaga came to, he found himself in an unknown land. He knew nothing about the language or the culture, but that meant nothing to him. He had overcome countless obstacles in the past. This was just another new

challenge for him, which was why he would do here as he had always done. The oath he had sworn to himself in his youth hadn’t changed. All he would do in this new world was surge forward toward that goal. He would once again be the conqueror. Here, in the land of Yggdrasil.

ACT I

“I’m leaving the kids in your care, Mitsuki.” Yuuto did his best to sound cheerful as his wife boarded the carriage. He was about to set off to stop the forces of Nobunaga’s Flame Clan. Mitsuki had no doubt already heard that the Flame Clan was fielding an army of over a hundred thousand men, which was why Yuuto had put on a false air of nonchalance in an attempt to reassure her.

“Mmhm. Be careful out there, Yuu-kun. Make sure you come home alive.”

“Well, you’re the one setting off, you know.” Yuuto smiled teasingly and nitpicked at Mitsuki’s comment.

Mitsuki and the children would be departing from the Holy Capital with its residents and make their way toward the Silk Clan capital of Útgarðar. While she had no abilities that were of use in war, she had a vital role to play as a body-double for the late Sigrdrífa. While the people of the capital had, for the moment, accepted the need to evacuate, there was a high probability that some of them would be overcome with a longing for home and change their minds on the way. The presence of Sigrdrífa, who was beloved—even worshipped—by the people of Glaðsheimr, was the most effective measure to ensure that they continued on their journey.

“Hey! Don’t tease me when I’m being serious! I’m saying you need to come back to us!” Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks in a pout. Though she was now a mother of two, she still had a tendency to become flustered from even the slightest of prodding. It was precisely because Yuuto wanted to see her react like she was that he couldn’t help but tease her. He found that urge to be particularly strong when he was about to set off for war, perhaps because her expression was what brought him a sense of normalcy.

“Yeah, I’ll be coming back to you. I know how hard it is to be left behind.”

The losses of many people close to him, such as his own mother, Sigrdrífa, and Skáviðr, had left their scars on Yuuto’s psyche. He wanted to do everything he could to prevent his wife, children, and sworn family from experiencing that

same pain.

“Do you swear?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

Mitsuki stretched her arm out from the carriage window and held up her pinky. Yuuto nodded and hooked his own pinky to hers.

“That’s a pinky swear, and if you break your promise, then you’ll have to swallow a thousand needles...” Mitsuki had been shaking her arm in tune with the little song, but her words caught in her throat at the end. Her eyes had filled with tears. No doubt she was worried about his safety and didn’t want to leave his side. Yuuto felt the same way.

“I promised, so I’ll make sure to keep it. Have I ever broken a promise?” Yuuto asked, squeezing Mitsuki’s pinky with his own.

“Lots of times.”

“Wha?! Wait!” Yuuto felt a sense of panic well up inside him upon receiving an unexpected answer. Yuuto thought he had done a pretty good job of keeping the promises he’d sworn to Mitsuki.

“You were always late when we were supposed to meet somewhere. I suddenly lost touch with you too. I was really worried about you...”

“Well, um, uh...” Yuuto knew he was at a disadvantage and mumbled nervously. As a patriarch, there were plenty of times when he couldn’t set aside his responsibilities to contact her. When things had gotten truly desperate, he had gone off to war without telling her. Since Yggdrasil was a land where one could never know what would happen in a conflict, no doubt those who had to wait on the sidelines were overwhelmed with concern.

“You’ve always kept the important promises though. You came home safely like you said, after all.” She was likely referring to that particular promise in the past tense because she was talking about how he had returned to Japan—to her side—after he had been transported to Yggdrasil.

“Which is why I’m going to trust you again, Yuu-kun... I believe in you, okay?”

“Yeah.” This time, Yuuto nodded solemnly.

“Okay.” Mitsuki finally seemed to have sorted out her own feelings on the matter and let go of his pinky. Still, there was a hint of anxiety on her features.



“It’ll be fine, Big Sister Mitsuki. He has an Einherjar at his side. In the worst case, I’ll pick up Big Brother and carry him to safety,” Felicia said reassuringly, patting her generous bust.

“Don’t carry me. I can run on my own,” Yuuto retorted, his brow furrowed. There was something embarrassing about the thought of being carried around by a woman. It had already been four years since he’d come to Yggdrasil, and he had trained every day over those four years. Even if he wasn’t at an Einherjar’s level, he at least felt he was more fit than your average soldier.

“I’ll leave him in your care, Felicia,” Mitsuki said, squeezing Felicia’s hand for emphasis.

“Rest assured that I’ll keep him safe,” Felicia replied, returning the squeeze with a look of determination. It seemed Yuuto’s unnecessary little remark had escaped the pair’s notice.

With an apologetic clearing of his throat, Jörgen, the Steel Clan’s Assistant Second and Wolf Clan patriarch, addressed the three: “Ahem. Father, Mother, it’s about time we departed.”

He had been serving as the commander of the city’s garrison in Yuuto’s absence, but now that Yuuto had returned, Jörgen was now in command of the migrant caravan. It had been a choice made based on Jörgen’s remarkable abilities in coordinating logistics and administration.

“Ah, right. Sorry about that.”

Most of the migrant caravan had already set off. Without Sigrdrífa’s carriage among them, no doubt the people might start to wonder if they’d been duped.

“I’ll catch you later, Mitsuki.”

“Yup. See you later, Yuu-kun.”

“Ephy, I’m counting on you to take care of Mitsuki and the kids.”

“Yes, leave them to me.” Ephelia, who was aboard the carriage as Mitsuki’s lady-in-waiting, nodded respectfully.

It had been two years since he had found her in the slave market of Iárnviðr, and she was now in the middle of her growth spurt. With her greater height and

longer hair, she was starting to become quite the beautiful young woman. She also showed a level of calm and resourcefulness that belied her delicate appearance. The various hardships she had experienced throughout her early life likely contributed to this. She was also very close to Mitsuki. Yuuto couldn't think of a better lady-in-waiting for her.

"Right then, off you go."

Yuuto called to the carriage driver. In response, the driver cracked his whip and the carriage set off. He watched the carriage grow smaller until he could no longer see it. Once the carriage was out of sight, Yuuto looked down at his pinky and murmured, "You'll always be the place I want to go home to. I've always been able to do my best because I was always wanting to make it back to you. That feeling hasn't changed. Not then, and not now."

He was about to face the infamous Oda Nobunaga. He was certain that the journeys that lay ahead of him would be arduous. Even then, Yuuto felt he would be able to bear it because of the promise he had just made to Mitsuki.

"Still, over a hundred thousand... He's blown my estimates clear out of the water."

After seeing Mitsuki off, Yuuto returned to his office in the Valaskjálf Palace to determine how best to deal with Nobunaga. He had no idea how Nobunaga had pulled off the feat of gathering, arming, feeding, and supplying such an enormous army, but there was no use denying reality. The simple fact was that Nobunaga had those forces at his disposal. He needed to base his strategy formation around that.

"Tch. All we can muster is a mere thirty thousand..."

While he would have been able to match Nobunaga in sheer numbers if he had conscripted civilians to fight for him, Yuuto had consciously ruled out that option. The Steel Clan's army was a standing army—a professional force made up of trained, full-time soldiers. Even when he had incorporated forces from the clans the Steel Clan had absorbed, he had taken only those with combat experience or those who wished to become soldiers and given them the requisite training.

This wasn't a choice driven by sentimental concerns such as not wanting to

send farmers off to war, but rather because the Steel Clan Army was supported by a number of overly advanced technologies, both in terms of tactics and in terms of equipment. Compared to a largely untrained peasant army, a force filled with professional soldiers was vastly superior in terms of combat ability, speed, and organizational discipline—the last of which was key to taking full advantage of Yuuto's complicated tactics. On top of that, because a peasant militia was traditionally sent home after every war, he couldn't avoid having some of that information and technology leak out into the world; something he needed to prevent at all costs. These concerns had led Yuuto to decide to field a more restrictive standing army instead.

It was true that numbers were an important aspect of war, but Yuuto had overcome numerical disadvantages countless times by making the most of his modern knowledge. He had executed risky—even reckless—tactics countless times, and in his experience, Yuuto preferred to have a smaller, dependable force of professional soldiers who could be counted upon to execute his orders. There was little merit, in his eyes, to having a larger but more unpredictable force filled with peasant soldiers. Even if he chose to start using conscripted peasant soldiers at this point, it was likely he wouldn't be able to give them much in the way of training, and their introduction would simply throw his current army into chaos, ruining the advantages held by the Steel Clan's forces.

"On the other hand, it seems like he's gone ahead and gathered numbers, even if it meant throwing away the advantages of fielding an army exclusively made up of professional soldiers."

It was simply not possible for all one hundred thousand of Nobunaga's soldiers to be properly trained professional soldiers. That was clear from the fact that it had taken Nobunaga's army a long time to move from their staging ground, the former Spear Clan Capital of Mímir. Nobunaga had probably spent that time instilling the bare minimum discipline and training required for the conscripts to function as a military unit. The reports from the Vindálf operatives who had infiltrated Mímir had indicated as much.

"Last time was overwhelming enough... This time, however, they outnumber us by more than three to one. It's quite a daunting difference," Felicia stated and furrowed her brow in thought.

Yuuto could initially only muster a dry laugh at the comment, but he responded soon after. “If they were only at Yggdrasil’s technology level, I’d have ways to deal with them.”

Unfortunately, Nobunaga’s knowledge enabled the Flame Clan to use technology and tactics several thousand years ahead of the typical clan of Yggdrasil, albeit the Flame Clan were still not as advanced as the Steel Clan. They had steel, stirrups, proper discipline, tactics, and even farming technology.

When it came to military matters, Yuuto was well aware that Nobunaga’s superior experience as a warlord dwarfed his own abilities. Yuuto wasn’t such a blind optimist that he believed he could defeat the conqueror of the Warring States Period while being outnumbered so significantly.

“I suppose we won’t have any choice but to hole up again like last time.”

Since this was an opponent he couldn’t defeat in an open field battle, his only other option was to retreat into a fortification and force a siege. It would take a little over two months for the migrants heading from the Holy Capital to the Silk Clan Capital of Útgarðar to make their way through Álfheimr. He thought he should be able to hold out for at least that long.

“Which I suppose means it’s time to make use of *that* place,” Felicia said as though the thought had just occurred to her. While Yuuto had been busy with his eastern campaign in the three months since his defeat at the Holy Capital, it wasn’t as though he hadn’t taken any measures against Nobunaga. If anything, since he knew just how powerful an opponent Nobunaga truly was, Yuuto had Jörgen, the garrison commander in the Holy Capital, prepare something while he had been away in the east.

Yuuto’s lips curled up into a playful smile. “I haven’t seen it for myself, but Jörgen says it’s quite the impressive place. Heh, I bet even Nobunaga’s going to be taken aback when he sees it.”

“Oh, there was no need for me to come myself,” Sigrún murmured with a note of disappointment as she gazed over the giant procession of people stretching eastward from the city. She was currently in Nóatún, the clan capital of the Panther Clan, which she now served as the patriarch of. This also just

happened to be the first time she'd ever visited the city.

"Father said the people would need my persuasion, so I had prepared myself, but..." She let out a dry laugh. Sigrún had no real awareness of the fact, but as Mánagarmr, Sigrún was perhaps the most famous and admired member of the Steel Clan other than Yuuto. She had been sent to these lands to convince the population to evacuate by leveraging her immense popularity. Yuuto had declared it to be a critical mission, and Sigrún, fully aware of her own shortcomings as an orator, had spent the journey to the city seriously considering the best way to persuade the populace. For that reason, the sight of the people already making their way out of the city had been rather anticlimactic for her.

"I'm impressed with your work as always, Bömburr. Well done."

"Heh, it's not as though it were my doing, ma'am."

Sigrún offered her praise to Bömburr, second-in-command of the Múspell Unit, only for him to respond with a dry chuckle and a shrug of his shoulders.

Bömburr was an oddly portly man, perhaps not someone most would consider to be a member of a hardened group of veterans like the Múspells at first glance. His combat ability was, at best, average among the unit, but no one in the Múspells questioned his right to serve as Sigrún's second.

Army units were a gathering of people, which meant that administrative and management abilities were an important part of keeping them operating. Bömburr was one of the few, if not the only one of Sigrún's subordinates, who was more brains than brawn. In times of war, he oversaw the unit's supplies and logistics, while in times of peace, he managed the unit's tasks and made sure there were no scheduling conflicts. Without him, the Múspell Unit wouldn't have functioned anywhere near as effectively as it did. He was, by all accounts, one of the underlying foundations of the unit, and he was one of Sigrún's most trusted subordinates.

"I just played up the threat of the Flame Clan a little, and they responded quite quickly. The people of this region are well acquainted with raiding nomadic clans. I suppose the threat seemed more real to them."

Sigrún nodded in understanding. "I see. So foreign invaders are something

they're already quite used to."

The city had once been heavily pillaged by the Panther Clan, and after being conquered, they had been treated like slaves by the conquering nomads. When the Steel Clan invaded their territory, the Panther Clan leadership had instituted a scorched earth policy, which resulted in their farms being burned to the ground, and during the Steel Clan Encirclement, they had been raided by northern nomadic clans and fallen victim to pillaging once again. Predation by outside enemies was a real, tangible threat in the lives of the people of the Panther Clan, and the rumors about the Flame Clan's imminent incursion were enough to reopen the old wounds of their collective trauma.

"It also bears remembering that the Steel Clan were the saviors that liberated them from the oppressive rule of the nomadic clans. They have good reason to listen to us," Hildegard observed as she rubbed her index finger under her nose.

Hildegard, Sigrún's protégé, was an Einherjar who possessed the rune Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin, and despite her youth, she was second only to Sigrún in the Múspell Unit in terms of fighting ability. She had been given Yuuto's chalice and was now one of his direct children, but because things were still desperate, she had not yet started her own group, instead staying with the Múspells for the time being.

"Is that so? That's an unexpected boon, then. I had honestly thought this would be quite a difficult task." Sigrún smiled as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. While she was capable of motivating and urging on her own soldiers, dealing with civilians was a completely different matter. Yuuto had told her that she was the only one who could do the job, but Sigrún had been unsure if she could actually fulfill that role. She was honestly relieved to see that the people of the Panther Clan had already started evacuating on their own.

"Hmm... I feel like you've changed a bit, Mother Rún." Hildegard furrowed her brow for a moment as she looked up at Sigrún's face.

"Mm?"

"Well, you've gotten more expressive, I guess...? You were always a bit dryer in the past."

“Oh? Yes, Felicia said something similar to me before I left. I can’t tell the difference myself,” Sigrún replied as she patted down her own face.

“Yeah, you’ve definitely changed. I’ve started to learn how to read your expressions. I mean, it used to be that I really couldn’t tell what you were thinking.”

“Oh, you can read me now? That’s a serious problem,” Sigrún murmured solemnly as she rubbed her chin.

“Huh? Really?” Hildegard blinked, as though she couldn’t quite grasp what Sigrún meant. Sigrún mentally shook her head at the fact that Hildegard didn’t understand the significance. Thinking back on it, though, that was perhaps one of Hildegard’s biggest weaknesses.

“If an enemy manages to read my intentions in the middle of battle, then that could mean the difference between life and death in a close match. You’re a good example. I can tell when you’re plotting something.”

“Huh?! Really?!”

“Ah, you really hadn’t noticed?” Sigrún let out an exasperated sigh and grabbed Hildegard by the sleeve.

“Well, this is a good opportunity. It’ll take a while longer for all the people to leave the city. I could use a refresher after all my rest. I’ll give you a little lesson.”

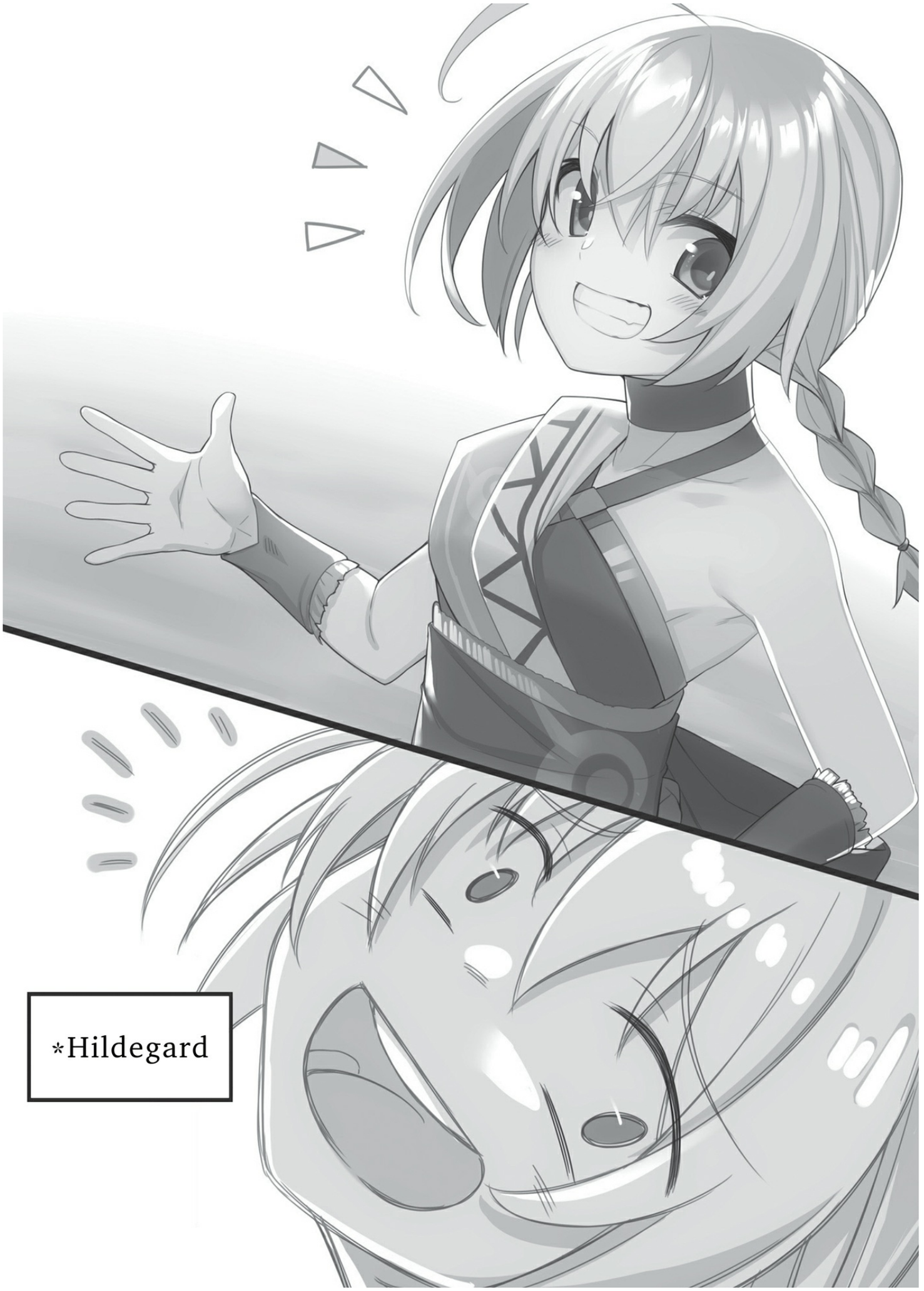
“Oh? Of course! I’m happy to accept!” Hildegard replied in a taunting tone, her eyes gleaming.

“That’s a first. You usually don’t like training with me.”

“Hehe. Well, when I landed that blow on you, Mother Rún, I felt like I’d finally made some real progress. I’ve been feeling really good lately.”

“Oh? Well, that’s something to look forward to.”

“Don’t come crying to me when you lose. Your era’s over, Mother Rún.”


*Hildegard

An hour later...

“I’m sorry... I concede. I concede! Can we stop now?!” Hildegard pleaded with tears in her eyes. Sigrún looked down at her and sighed.

“You said you’d made progress, but if anything, you’ve gotten weaker.”

“No! It’s just that you’ve gotten way stronger, Mother Rún! You’re way faster than before!”

“Am I? Hmm... I suppose so. Despite having taken time off, my body feels oddly light, and my movements feel sharper.”

While Sigrún hadn’t noticed it during the sparring, now that she was taking the time to ponder it, it definitely was an odd phenomenon. In the last two weeks, she hadn’t done much in the way of training. That should have meant she would be rusty, but instead, she had been able to move exactly as she had intended—no, better than she had expected. It shouldn’t have been possible.

“You’re way sharper than you were before. Did you maybe figure something out while you were recovering?” Hildegard asked as she blew on her aching palms.

“Am I really that much better? I did figure something out, yes, but it had nothing to do with fighting.”

Sigrún couldn’t help but feel perplexed. Generally, people’s skills didn’t grow exponentially, but rather they grew gradually, in steps. Now, it was certainly possible to come to some sudden realization and for things to comfortably fall into place, but no matter how much she thought about it, Sigrún couldn’t think of anything that would cause such an epiphany for her.

“Considering how much you’ve changed, then that thing’s gotta be what’s triggered it, right?”

“Well, what I realized was that it’s okay to let go of some of my built-up stress occasionally... Ah, now I get it. Because of that discovery, I’ve stopped putting too much effort into my movements.” Sigrún nodded in sudden understanding.

Even her mentor, Skáviðr, had told her, “You’re far too serious. While that is a form of strength itself, if you’re always putting your all into your fighting, then

there will come times when you won't be able to harness your abilities to their full potential. If anything, you need to learn to relax until you truly need your full strength."

It was something that he had repeatedly tried to teach her. At the time, she hadn't quite understood what he meant, but now she felt like she grasped what he had been trying to tell her. Sigrún, due to her overly serious personality, had probably been in a state of nervous tension in battle, and when she truly needed to harness her abilities, had dulled her movements due to the excess tension.

"I bet you can beat that Shiba now!" Hildegard said casually, but Sigrún remained skeptical as she glanced down at her hand. "I'm still not totally certain that I could."

It was true that she had overcome one of her own barriers and grown in strength. However, Shiba was still a little bit beyond her. Sigrún was certain of that.

"Hilda, practice with me a while longer. There are a few things I'd like to try."

Of course, Sigrún wasn't the sort to just accept that gap in ability. She had her pride as the Mánagarmr, the Steel Clan's greatest warrior, after all. Even if she wasn't at his level just yet, she could still catch him if she tried hard enough.

"N-N-NoooooOooooOooo!"

It was worth noting that Sigrún's newfound enthusiasm was nothing but a curse for Hildegard, who was the one who had to deal with it.

"It's gotten so quiet here..." Bruno mumbled to himself as he looked down upon the city of Iárnviðr from the fortress wall. He was a man in his mid-fifties, the sworn younger brother of the late Wolf Clan patriarch Fárbauti, and was currently serving as the head elder of the clan.

"It may as well be a ruin," Bruno said as tears welled in his eyes. Even though the sun was high in the sky, the main street that connected the city gate to the palace was empty, save for a smattering of soldiers. Not a single resident could be seen. Just one month ago, this same street had been filled with people, and

their market stalls had lined each side.

“It was a mistake to make that man patriarch,” Bruno spat bitterly. He had always considered the man untrustworthy from the moment he laid eyes upon him.

It’s that cursed black hair!

Bruno suspected he was some sort of demon. Everything that man proposed was mysterious and new—and very suspicious—in Bruno’s eyes. All of his proposals were innovative and brought wealth and strength to the Wolf Clan, but that was what made them seem all the more questionable to him.

It had been more than fifty years since Bruno had been born into this world. In that time, Bruno had learned through bitter experience that everything always came with a catch. That had turned out to be true once again.

“They’ve all been fooled by that conman.”

It was completely unacceptable. The people of the Wolf Clan had been seduced by the sweet nectar of that brat’s creations and had been convinced to abandon their ancestral lands. Shameful was the only word that came to his mind.

“It’s up to me to stand up to him. I’m the only one who can protect the Wolf Clan—who can protect Iárnviðr!”

He couldn’t leave it up to someone like Jörgen. Bruno cared not a whit about the Oath of the Chalice. For that matter, Bruno had never exchanged Chalices with Suoh-Yuuto or Jörgen. His oath had been to Fárbauti. He had no reason—no duty, in fact—to listen to them.

“Head Elder, the Steel Clan’s Second is calling for you,” one of his subordinates came to him and said apologetically. The subordinate knew that Bruno couldn’t stand her. While Bruno found it incredibly irritating to have to follow the orders of some girl from another clan, the enemy would soon be upon them.

“Tell her I’ll be right over,” Bruno spat out the bitter words and quickly turned to depart. He walked with the grim determination of a man who had steeled himself for the inevitable.

“Princess. The people from Fólkvangr have arrived.”

“I see. That’s a relief.” Linnea let out a sigh upon hearing the report from Cler, one of the Brísingamen. While she knew it wasn’t something she ought to feel as the Second of the Steel Clan, the people of the Horn Clan still held a special place in Linnea’s heart. She was extremely glad to hear that her people had reached the safety of Iárnviðr.

“However, we might have overdone it in playing up the reputation of the Flame Clan. It appears they pushed themselves rather hard on their journey, and they all appear to be quite tired.”

“Ah, yes. While we had no choice in the matter, we *did* put them into a bit of a panic. I suppose we’re paying the price for that decision now.”

“Yes. I believe so.”

After a moment’s thought, Linnea turned to speak to the man in his mid-fifties that sat across from her at the round table. “Lord Bruno.”

Jörgen was currently stationed at the Holy Capital, leaving Bruno as the Wolf Clan’s representative.

“Yes, what is it?”

“As we agreed upon earlier, we’ll borrow the city’s empty houses to allow them to rest.”

“Yes, I am well aware,” Bruno replied with a frown. He made no attempt to hide his displeasure, making it clear he was only cooperating because he was forced to.

“How dare you! The princess is the Second of the Steel Clan. Even if you are the head elder of His Majesty’s Clan, you’re being far too disrespectful!” Goaded beyond his limit, Cler stood up and shouted at Bruno.

“Please, save me the theatrics. We acknowledged your request. We will ignore the fact that another clan’s people are going to be making a mess of our houses,” Bruno responded, clearly irritated.

“Wha?! You dare to imply the people of the Horn Clan are mere criminals?!”

“Cler, enough!” Linnea immediately stepped in to douse the flames of Cler’s rapidly growing anger. “My apologies for my child’s disrespect. You have my sincere apologies as his parent.” She stood and bowed her head to Bruno.

“Wha?! Princess?! There’s no reason for you to bow your head...”

“Of course he’s not pleased with having another clan’s people making use of his city. If I were in his place, I would feel the same way.”

“That’s... But this is an emergency!”

“Yes, and the Steel Clan doesn’t have the luxury of wasting time infighting during it,” Linnea said flatly.

While most of the people of Iárnviðr had already evacuated and were heading eastward, not everyone had left the city. There were a fair number of people who simply couldn’t bear to abandon the city of their birth. Bruno was essentially the man who was in charge of those remaining. Many of the soldiers present in Iárnviðr also wished to stay put, meaning that currently, Bruno enjoyed high levels of support and authority with the remaining people of the Wolf Clan. Any conflict with Bruno would mean friction with the Wolf Clan members left in the city. The Flame Clan Army was just days away, so she wanted to avoid any internal conflict if it was at all possible.

“...I understand. I accept your reasoning, Princess. You have my apologies, Lord Bruno.” Cler turned to Bruno and lowered his head. It was clear from Cler’s body language, however, that he was doing so reluctantly.

“Hrmph, you stripling. You should learn that hollow apologies will simply irritate the person you’ve offended even further.”

“Wha?! I just... Ngh!”

“No matter. Do as you please with the houses,” Bruno said dismissively and stood to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To get some fresh air. It’s a bit stifling in here.” Bruno then left the room without so much as turning back.

Of course, Cler wasn’t pleased with that exit. “That attitude! How dare he!”

The moment Bruno's footfall was out of earshot, Cler let out an angry growl, slamming his fist against the desk. With his strength as an Einherjar, the table cracked under the blow. It was a fitting expression of his anger.

"There's nothing to do about it. We were enemies until a few years ago. There still remain some who can't accept the new status quo."

While the Wolf and Horn Clans were now the closest of allies, until Yuuto had appeared, they had long been sworn enemies, constantly fighting for territory along their respective borders. For someone like Bruno, the Horn Clan had been his enemy for most of his life. No doubt he'd lost friends and subordinates to the Horn Clan in those border wars. Even if he understood intellectually that they were now allies, it would be hard for him to accept that fact on an emotional level.

Linnea quickly dismissed Bruno from her mind and switched to the next topic at hand. "Anyway, he approved our request concerning the housing. That's all that matters, yes? Put that trifle aside and move on. How are things with the Panther and Hoof Clan's people?" There was a bit of venom in her choice of words, and evidently, that struck a chord with Cler. He chuckled.

"You're right. We don't have time to be dealing with trifles."

"Yes, exactly."

"Regarding the Panther Clan, we just received a letter noting that their people have agreed to begin evacuations."

"Oh? Wonderful!" Linnea's façade of calm broke, and she spoke with a bright voice. Even if the news of the Horn Clan's people hadn't arrived yet, she was still happy to hear that things were going as planned.

"However, matters are not progressing as well with the Hoof Clan."

"I see..." Linnea's expression quickly clouded, and she furrowed her brow.

"It hasn't been long since the Hoof Clan came under Steel Clan control. They're proving difficult to convince."

"...I doubt their patriarch has any intention of persuading his people," Linnea said with a bitter chuckle, as she recalled the Hoof Clan patriarch's expression

when she explained the plan.

Not everyone under the Steel Clan's influence was on board with Yuuto's plans to emigrate. The Hoof Clan were particularly against it. They still regarded Yuuto as the man who had killed their great patriarch, Yngvi, and had caused their decline in power as a result. While they obeyed the Steel Clan due to the sheer gulf in strength, it was easy to imagine that they still harbored conflicting feelings about the arrangement. Children had to follow their parent as per the Oath of the Chalice, but there were still limits. No doubt they planned to pretend to obey and leave things in limbo. In fact, their patriarch might very well be scheming to take over the Steel Clan's territories once they had left.

"Some people are hopeless." Linnea sighed and leaned back in her chair. The fact of the matter, though, was that she couldn't think of any other hands to play. The post station system had already ceased functioning because of the great migration. The only remaining method of communication was a limited number of carrier pigeons. The migration required tracking the movements of hundreds of thousands of people. Even with Linnea's skills as an administrator, she had her hands full running and managing the situation, and she still had to deal with the Flame Clan Army that was currently in Gimlé.

"Send them a letter urging them to hurry. If they won't move, then we have no choice. We'll just have to leave them behind," Linnea said with resignation and bit down on her lower lip. She wanted to save them, and she was frustrated at the lack of progress they were showing. She also felt guilty about the fact that she might have to leave them behind.

There was only so much she could do, though. If she tried to save everyone, she could very well end up putting them all at risk instead. Rulers had to be prepared to make ruthless sacrifices at times. That was the harsh lesson that Rasmus had used his life to teach her.

"For the moment, let's deal with the Panther Clan since they've already started moving. It'll take them at least two weeks to get here. The most pressing issue is the Flame Clan Army that's occupying Gimlé."

"They've yet to move."

"I see. That's convenient for us, but they're certainly taking their time."

Linnea furrowed her brow in suspicion. It was true that she was the one behind the plan to slow down the enemy army by turning Gimlé into a place for treasure hunting, but they should have long since finished gathering the treasure that had been scattered around the city. She couldn't understand why they were still there. "The enemy general, Shiba, is known for his lightning-fast offensives. I expected him to use the momentum from taking Gimlé and force his armies forward to Iárnviðr."

Given that she had devoted so much of her time to trying to figure out how to deal with that offensive, she was grateful for the breathing room, but things were going *too* well. It left her anxious. Her underlying stress showed in her concern.

Cler chuckled at Linnea's expression. "Well, I'm sure he would have loved to have done so, but it seems your scheme had an effect that you weren't anticipating, Princess." He then began to describe what was occurring at Gimlé.

"They really got us this time." Shiba sighed as he looked at the letters piled up on his desk. They all dealt with the issues that currently plagued the Flame Clan Army. The reason the Flame Clan Army was still in Gimlé despite Nobunaga's orders to conquer the west was in fact almost entirely due to these issues.

"Big Brother, we've got our first reports of deserters."

"I see... I knew it was going to come soon." Shiba massaged the bridge of his nose as he listened to his adjutant Masa's report.

This was all happening because of the treasure hunt that the Steel Clan had sprung upon them. The soldiers who were now unexpectedly rich had started to ask to return home. It was a completely understandable reaction. The reason soldiers fought was that they needed to earn a living. However, they had now acquired enough wealth for their families to live comfortably for years or, in some cases, even decades. If they died in battle, that wealth would vanish. It made complete sense for them to decide that they would prefer to go home and share their newfound wealth with their families rather than head off to a dangerous battlefield. Over half of the army's soldiers had requested to return home. Shiba couldn't possibly disregard the issue when the numbers were that

high. Then, to make matters worse...

“What of the fighting among the soldiers?”

“No real changes to speak of. Eleven incidents, of which three resulted in murders. We’ve already arrested the murderers and thrown them in jail.”

“...I see.” Shiba sighed with a bitter expression on his face.

The soldiers were all participating in the same war. For fighting to break out between those who had acquired wealth and those that hadn’t was only natural. Currently, the Flame Clan force that was occupying Gimlé was rife with fighting between soldiers who demanded a share of the wealth and those who refused to share, which eventually escalated to physical altercations, and in some cases even resulted in cold-blooded murder. While he had repeatedly issued directives banning fighting between the soldiers, they hadn’t had any noticeable effects. The soldiers were all wary of one another, and the tension in the camp was nearing a dangerous breaking point.

“What can we do to resolve this...?” Shiba scratched at his scalp with some vigor.

Leading an army like this into battle would be suicide. Morale had cratered, and there were constant fights among the soldiers, not to mention outright desertions. It was very likely the unit would completely collapse before they could even engage their enemy.

“They did all of this expecting this outcome, I’d imagine. Frighteningly clever.” In fact, Linnea hadn’t expected her plan to be quite this effective, but Shiba had no way of knowing that. Shiba was increasingly convinced that he would stand no chance against such an intelligent general with his army in this state.

“I don’t think we have any choice but to return home for the moment.”

As he listened to Masa’s recommendation, Shiba agreed with a bitter click of his tongue. “Tch. Yeah, we might have to. Frankly, I misjudged this.”

He had overestimated just how disciplined his army was. It was understandable, given how hard he had drilled and trained them and how well they had followed orders. However, the reality had been far from what he had anticipated. Shiba had expected that he would be able to restore order even if

the looting threw the army into temporary disarray, but it had gotten worse with each passing day and was now at a crisis point. It was a rare and painful mistake for him.

“I see now... So this is the weakness of the strong, huh?” Shiba mused.

“Pardon? What does that even mean?”

“Before we set off, Old Man Salk mentioned that to me. He told me that I’m strong—too strong, in fact. Because of that, I supposedly don’t understand how the weak think, and that would eventually catch me off guard. Our current situation is proving to be a perfect example of that.”

“Ah, I see.” Masa nodded at Shiba’s brief explanation. Even Masa, after his long years of serving Shiba, must have noticed that his sworn father was indeed somewhat like that. Evidently, it was something Shiba had missed in himself. He knew that to be true, but he wasn’t sure what he could have done to have noticed or understood it without previously being in the situation he now found himself in. That was extremely frustrating for him.

“That reminds me. Brother Kuuga had insisted we immediately retreat. I should have tried listening to him.” Shiba remembered when he had brushed aside Kuuga’s proposal five days earlier and sighed. At the time, Shiba had thought Kuuga was simply demoralized from his failure at Fort Gashina, but the situation had unfolded exactly as he had warned. Shiba could do nothing but admire his brother’s foresight, and even felt some regret at passing such a harsh judgment on him. “If I order a retreat now, I’m sure I won’t hear the end of it from him,” Shiba said with a scowl.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to bear that.”

“Moreover, even if I did apologize, he wouldn’t forgive me.”

“I could imagine that would be true, yes. Based on his personality, there’s a good chance that he’d hold a grudge over the fact that you used your authority as a reason to override his proposal.”

“Exactly, yeah.” Shiba sighed deeply. Still, he had to tell Kuuga of his decision. He trudged heavily toward Kuuga’s office, but when he finally delivered his message...

“Ah, I see. I do hold the opinion that your delay ended up wasting valuable time, but the situation is still salvageable, if only just barely,” Kuuga replied. There was no sign of blame in his response. If anything, it more closely resembled forgiveness. This reaction seemed utterly impossible to Shiba. For a moment, Shiba couldn’t understand what he had just heard and suspected that he was hearing things.

“Brother, what are you planning? You’re not one to forgive that easily.”

“Oh? Did you want me to insult you? I have no problem spending the next two hours picking apart your arrogance.”

“No, I’ll pass. But I do find your reaction a touch unsettling.”

“Hrmph. Then let me relieve you of that suspicion. I have three requests for you.”

“You want something from me, you say?” Shiba couldn’t help but stare in surprise. This was truly a strange day. By all accounts, he had thought that Kuuga, who resented him with the intensity of a thousand scorned women, would never ask a favor of him.

“Yes. Honestly, I’m at a loss as to how to deal with it. I’m not so foolish as to insult a man I’m about to ask for help from.”

“Makes sense.”

Certainly, Kuuga had made a spectacular error in the siege of Fort Gashina, ignoring Nobunaga’s orders and suffering massive losses as a result. Nobunaga was a harsh but just liege lord, one who would always reward accomplishments and punish mistakes. While Nobunaga was willing to forgive defeats as part of the uncertainty of war, he was extremely harsh when dealing with insubordination. It also bore mentioning that this was a war that would decide who would rule Yggdrasil. There would be some sort of punishment for Kuuga, that much was certain. When viewed objectively, it was very possible that Nobunaga would even consider ordering Kuuga to take his own life as penance. Shiba could understand why someone in such a dire situation would cling to even the faintest glimmer of hope.

“Very well. Tell me of your request, Brother. I’ll do whatever I can.” Shiba smacked his own chest with his fist. He was dealing with a man who had always looked upon him with hate and resentment. While he honestly had little in the way of affection for Kuuga, their parents had long since departed for Valhalla, and Kuuga was his only living relative. Shiba wanted to do whatever he could to have a cordial relationship with him.

“So, what do I need to do?”

“Well...” Kuuga began to explain his plan, carefully concealing the burning flames of his ambition as he did so.

ACT 2

Sleipnir was the name given to the eight great highways that Wotan, the first þjóðann and founder of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, had laid down across Yggdrasil two hundred years ago. The name of the road network made it sound grander than it was—they were unpaved and had simply been cleared of any vegetation and large boulders. Of course, even something this simple was an enormous improvement for the merchants at the time. They were the main arteries for trade across Yggdrasil. The reason why Yuuto was able to so quickly establish his post station system in his territories was because of the work of his predecessors. Without Sleipnir, even establishing a useful network of post stations between Bifröst and Álfheimr would have been a massive undertaking requiring anything from five to ten years. Among the eight major highways of the Sleipnir, the most well-traveled and best protected was Gjallarbrú, the road linking the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr and southern Ásgarðr. This was partly due to the influence of the late Hárbarth, former patriarch of the Spear Clan and High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

“Huh, it looks pretty good.”

Yuuto was currently visiting one of the main hubs along the Gjallarbrú. It was surrounded by steep mountains, and though they were smaller than the Three Great Mountain Ranges, they were still formidable mountains in their own right. To the east stretched the great woods known as the Fensalir, and to the west were the treacherous Great Fjörgyn Marshes. These obstacles were the very reason why this was the route typically taken when going to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr from the Ásgarðr region or Helheim region. So, for that reason...

“Yes. We were able to block it off quite effectively,” Fagrahvél, the Sword Clan patriarch, replied to Yuuto’s comment. While the planning and management of this project had been conducted by Jörgen, she had been the one who had directed the construction on the ground. Her expression was confident and showed a great sense of accomplishment. That was natural; her work was just

that exceptional.

“What in the blazes is this...?!” Even Hveðrungr, who was intimately familiar with Yuuto’s absurd accomplishments, spent a good couple of minutes staring in shock before letting out a cry of surprise. Yuuto had constructed a fortified wall that stretched for six kilometers, towered ten meters above the ground, and was five meters thick. He had completely blocked off the Gjallarbrú highway.



Yuuto's objective wasn't to defeat the Flame Clan Army; all he wanted to do was hold them off long enough to finish his migration, which was why he had come up with the idea of physically blocking off their advance.

"Th-That wasn't here during the last campaign! Y-Yuuto, h-h-how did you build something this big in just three months?!"

"Big Brother, we're in public..."

"Huh? Oh, right... Sorry."

Observing Felicia's anxious reaction, Hveðrungr hurriedly lowered his voice. That said, the fact that he was still speaking in so casual a tone showed just how much the sight had shaken him.

This was an age where manual labor was necessary to construct something of this size. The sheer scale of something like this would ordinarily require years of labor. As Hveðrungr noted, it should have been impossible to build something of this size in just three months.

"So, how did you prepare something of this size and bring it here?"

"I couldn't have done it from scratch. This has always been a hub for transportation, so there was already a fortress here, and I imagine Nobunaga considered it a major supply route. He'd left two siege castles in his wake, so I just decided to connect them together to form this wall."

It was the same way that the Great Wall of China had been built. However, Hveðrungr wasn't satisfied with that explanation. "I see. Still, that's not enough to make the timeline work. How in the world did you manage to bring this many bricks to this place?!"

Hveðrungr's question was perfectly understandable. Given that this region was originally woodland, the soil was rich and absorbed water well, meaning it wasn't well suited for crafting bricks. The bricks had to be brought in from a region rich in clay earth.

"Ah, as for that... Well, look over there." Yuuto's lips curled up into a grin, and he pointed at a wheelbarrow sitting nearby.

Wheelbarrows were an invention that Yuuto had brought about relatively

early in his stint as patriarch in order to improve the efficiency and carrying ability of supply companies, but he had spent the last year steadily mass-producing them in preparation for this mass migration. Given their ubiquity and their simplicity, most modern people tended to assume that wheelbarrows were an ancient invention, but they were actually a relatively recent innovation, having first been created in 1921, and modern wheelbarrows were a revolutionary product that were completely different from handcarts.

Traditional carts fitted with wooden wheels required them to be frequently replaced. Making the wheels out of iron contributed greatly to increased durability and also ended up reducing the weight of the cart. Further, by wrapping the wheels in rubber tires, the tires absorbed shocks from the ground and reduced the amount of damage to the wheels while also reducing vibrations, dramatically increasing the lifespan of the cart itself as a result.

Another innovation was to make the cart itself out of metal, simplifying the construction and lightening the weight of the cart as a whole. Additionally, putting independent wheels on either side of the cart allowed the cart to have a lower center of gravity, which provided more stability, greater carrying capability, and a substantial increase in maneuverability. Then there was the implementation of bearings in the wheels. This reduced the amount of force required to move the cart and made it much easier to pull. The modern wheelbarrow was a marvelous innovation that had been improved upon time and time again.

Of course, it was difficult to reproduce all of those improvements using Yggdrasil's level of technology, and there were quite a few that Yuuto had left out of his final design. For example, mass-producing metal frames was impossible using Yggdrasil's technology, so the carts themselves were still made of wood, while the lack of rubber trees in Yggdrasil made rubber tires a non-starter. Factice made a decent substitute, particularly since it was easy to make a rubbery material out of vegetable oil, ash, and sulfur, but it was noticeably inferior to rubber in terms of quality. As a result, the wheelbarrows Yuuto had created were only a facsimile of a modern wheelbarrow. However, they were still several thousand years ahead of the technology level of Yggdrasil, and they were an enormous improvement over existing products designed to serve a

similar purpose.

“I see. So they’re easier to move, can carry more, the wheels are tougher, and they’re maneuverable. I can see how that’d vastly improve carrying ability,” Hveðrungr commented in apparent understanding.

“Indeed, they were like a gift from the gods themselves. Frankly, without them, it wouldn’t have been possible to complete this fortification in time,” Fagrahvél responded and nodded in agreement. Given that she had been in charge of the work done here, she was well aware of just how useful the wheelbarrows had been in the construction effort.

“Nah, even if they’re really useful, they’re still just tools. The reason we got this up in time is mostly thanks to you and Jörgen. Well done, Fagrahvél.” With that, Yuuto gently patted Fagrahvél on the shoulder. There was no trace of flattery in his words—he meant everything he’d just said. “In particular, the shift system must have taken a lot of trial and error.”

“No, Lord Jörgen dealt with most of those issues. All I did was follow his directions.” While Fagrahvél shook her head modestly, this construction project had required the services of around twenty thousand workers from the various Steel Clan territories. Even if Jörgen had made the necessary preparations, directing that many people and implementing a shift system that was, until this point, foreign to Yggdrasil must have required an enormous amount of effort. There was no doubt that without Fagrahvél’s skill and charisma as a leader, it wouldn’t have been possible to complete the project. It was a testament to her ability that had made her patriarch of one of the Ten Great Clans and the commander of the former Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army.

“While I hate to ruin the mood, a fortification is rather pointless if the enemy has trebuchets, no? The reports from Gashina indicate they’ve got their own now.” Hveðrungr snorted a bit sourly. It was perfectly in character for him, and his critique was accurate. Walls made of piled brick wouldn’t be able to withstand bombardment by trebuchets. Yuuto had already accounted for that, though.

“Everything’ll be fine. I’ve already taken steps against that. Major ones, in fact.” Yuuto grinned confidently. It was immediately afterward they received

news of the Flame Clan Army's arrival.

"Hrm. That didn't exist last time we were here, did it?" As he gazed upon the walls that stretched out before him, even Nobunaga couldn't help but be flabbergasted. During his last campaign against Glaðsheimr, he had passed through this region. He had previously received reports that the Steel Clan was engaged in a massive building project here. He had assumed they wouldn't be able to produce much in a few months and hadn't dug any deeper given the extreme security around it, but... "Just how far does this run?"

"According to the scouts, it's completely blocked off the Gjallarbrú Pass."

"Oh? A bit like Liu Bang's entry into Guanzhong," Nobunaga said with amusement as he rubbed his chin. When he was young, Nobunaga had been educated on the broad history of China by his tutor Takugen Souon. He still recalled the excitement of learning about the conflict between Xiang Yu and Liu Bang as they fought to claim the title of king by being the first to enter Guanzhong.

"I suppose this is my version of the Hangu Pass of the East, eh?" Nobunaga referred to the great gate fortress that had blocked the entrance to Guanzhong. Even Liu Bang, the man who had founded the great Han Dynasty, had given up on trying to bring down that fortress.

"Then shall we take a lesson from the past and go around it as well?" Ran, his Second, asked. Liu Bang had gone around the Hangu Pass and instead had bought off the commander of the Wu Pass in order to gain entry to Guanzhong. Instead of razing this enormous structure, they had the option of either going around through Jötunheimr in the east or circling around Lake Hvergelmir to get to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. That was what Ran was suggesting.

"Indeed. That would be the wise choice," Nobunaga replied and nodded in agreement.

It was easy to tell that this pass would be difficult to traverse, not to mention that this was something constructed by the Steel Clan reginarch, a man who possessed knowledge from a period far beyond Nobunaga's own era. There was a high probability that it included all sorts of innovations that he couldn't even

begin to imagine. As Ran said, instead of attacking such a powerful fortification, it would be better to travel via a different route or to divide his army in three and attack from three directions. That would definitely be the safer option.

However, Nobunaga quickly shot down Ran's proposal. "No, Ran. That's the way a general or a regional lord might think. It's not the way of a conqueror."

"A conqueror, My Lord?"

"Yes. One must prove to any and all who will witness them that one is a true conqueror. Doing things in the shadows like a thief damages one's credibility."

"I-I see." While Ran nodded at his comment, it seemed he didn't quite grasp what Nobunaga meant.

"A conqueror must act the part. He may use whatever underhanded methods he wishes beneath the surface, but he cannot afford to do that at the pivotal moment. Otherwise, it leaves questions about his worthiness."

"You mean others will resent him for it?"

Upon hearing Ran's response, Nobunaga couldn't help but let out a dry chuckle. It seemed Ran had completely misinterpreted him. However, he had no intention of chastising him. After all, Ran was an extremely capable man. He was quick-witted and capable of understanding Nobunaga's intentions, making the necessary preparations behind the scenes. Ran was also an extremely competent administrator, worthy of being tasked with dealing with governing the Flame Clan as its Second. In the end, though, he was one who served. A man whose character made him a great general, but not a ruler. It was understandable why he couldn't grasp Nobunaga's meaning.

"No. Simply put, no one will accept that man as the ruler of all under heaven."

While Liu Bang had entered Guanzhong by bribing the fortress commander, he would eventually be laid low by Xiang Yu's superior military strength, and he had been forced to kowtow to Xiang Yu at the Feast of the Swan Goose Gate and beg for his life. Then, soon after he had thrown aside the terms of the truce he had sealed with Xiang Yu and became conqueror by catching Xiang Yu off guard, Liu Bang had continually been plagued by rebellions by his own generals.

According to Suoh Yuuto, Akechi Mitsuhide, the man who had attacked

Nobunaga at Honno-ji Temple and had claimed the title of conqueror, had been abandoned by his allies and been slain by Hideyoshi. Hideyoshi had then gone on to establish himself as conqueror with an army of two hundred thousand in his conquest of Odawara, while Ieyasu had secured his place as conqueror by winning the great battle of Sekigahara. Nobunaga went on at length about those points to Ran, then gripped his hand into a tight fist.

"Do you understand, Ran? If a conqueror doesn't adequately prove his strength, he can't maintain a hold over his conquest."

"I... I see... Now I understand, My Great Lord. The extent of your foresight is truly moving. For you to be considering not only this current war but all matters that come after it? You plainly are the only one worthy of ruling this land, My Great Lord." Ran knelt on one knee and trembled with emotion. Nobunaga simply snorted without amusement.

"Hrmph. No, that's not true. Suoh Yuuto seems to be of the same mind."

"Pardon?!"

As he watched Ran recoil in shock, Nobunaga chuckled. "He wouldn't think to build this ludicrous thing if he wasn't certain I wouldn't bother going around it."

"It's rather unlikely that he didn't consider the possibility of you doing so, My Great Lord."

"Indeed. No doubt he had learned that I wouldn't make a decision like that."

"Then you'll accept his challenge?"

"Yes. I'll take down his impregnable fortress with a frontal attack. That'll show the people of this land that I'm the true master, the one true conqueror. If I can't, then that just means that I've reached my limit as a man."

He was going to make hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of lives, obey the whims of his ego. It was a dangerous sort of pride, the sort that could very well destroy his own clan. Nobunaga believed that was an acceptable risk. A ruler needed a certain amount of arrogance; that was the only way they could carry the burden of the countless lives that they were responsible for. Those without that arrogance would be crushed under the weight of the lives in their grasp. Not only that, but a ruler needed to be one who could maintain that

arrogance at all times. Only the most foolish would be able to maintain that sort of hubris. But it was only that sort of great fool who could accomplish great deeds.

Nobunaga grinned and made his pronouncement. “Let us get started, Ran! This is truly the battle that will determine the fate of this land! Make certain you’re aware of it!”

“It seems the Flame Clan Army will be focusing all of their forces on this fortress.”

“Thank goodness for that. Looks like our bet’s paid off for the moment.”

As he listened to Kristina’s report, Yuuto let out a sigh of relief. While he had been almost certain his plan would work, there was still the faint chance it wouldn’t go as he had intended. So far so good, at least.

“Events have unfolded as you expected, Father,” she continued. “However, I’m having trouble believing it even after seeing it for myself. According to my information, Oda Nobunaga is an extreme pragmatist who prefers to do whatever is most effective at any given moment.”

“That describes him pretty well.” Yuuto had no intention of denying that fact. Few rulers in Japan’s history had been such thorough pragmatists and realists when it came to their policies.

“It’s obviously far more efficient for him to divide his forces between the western and eastern passes as opposed to marching the entire army on a fortress like this one,” Kristina said, working through it mentally.

“That’s true. It’s definitely more efficient—if you only consider this particular campaign, that is,” Yuuto said with a dry laugh. Certainly, it was much better for Nobunaga to divide his forces in three directions and use his overwhelming numbers to his advantage. The Flame Clan Army had, in fact, used that exact strategy when cutting apart the Lightning Clan. “The only great powers left on Yggdrasil are the Steel and Flame Clans. Because of that, he’ll most likely move in a way that’s more effective in the long run rather than just for this war.”

“But this war will be the one that decides the conqueror of this continent,

no?”

“That’s exactly why he’s moving the way he is.”

Even when he was back in the Land of the Rising Sun, Nobunaga had started to carry himself in a manner worthy of a man who was to become the conqueror of the entire country right around the time he began his support of Ashikaga Yoshiaki. As part of that, he had forbidden his forces from taking part in any form of looting or pillaging when he took Kyoto from the Miyoshi Clan. In the past, he had permitted his forces to go on looting sprees after other wars, and in his own first battle, Nobunaga had burned Kiyosu Castle to the ground. Additionally, he had constructed Azuchi Castle not only as a military fortification, but also to serve as a symbol of his clan’s political and economic might.

In the final battle that would decide the conqueror of Yggdrasil, Nobunaga would be focused on making sure he won in such a way that made his military superiority so clear that no one else in the land would dare resist him. This was the same approach he had taken back in his homeland. To Yuuto, that seemed perfectly rational and pragmatic. However...

“Hrm.” It seemed Kristina couldn’t accept that thought process.

Her own argument was logically sound. In most cases, people who were concerned with form would lose to those who would do anything to achieve their ends. However, Yuuto had grasped instinctively that only people who could flip such accepted wisdom on its head were the ones capable of conquering an entire land. It just struck him as an obvious truth. While he had no awareness of it himself, that insight was what marked him as someone worthy of being a conqueror as well. It was exactly why a clash between Yuuto and Nobunaga was inevitable. Just as there couldn’t be two suns in the sky, a single land couldn’t have two conquerors.



“It’s rather peaceful, isn’t it?” Shiba looked upon the soldiers spread out below him and curled his lips into a grin. They were properly assembled in formation and were quietly awaiting orders from their commanders. This was the first time since their conquest of Gimlé that they had managed to do something as simple as that.

Recently, such gatherings had typically degenerated into scuffles among the men. They initially began with a handful of soldiers asking for permission to return home, and those men would then be joined by others who held the same desires. Those soldiers would be insulted and taunted by their more bloodthirsty peers, and the situation would quickly escalate into an all-out brawl. No matter how much he leveraged his authority as general to clamp down on such conflicts, a single spark was all it would take to reignite the flames of chaos. That was the state his army had fallen into.

At long last, things were back to normal. The soldiers were gathered at attention, and not a single one uttered an unnecessary word. None of them were demotivated or broken—they all had a powerful determination in their eyes, and their renewed will to fight added a pleasant tension to the air which tickled at Shiba’s skin.

“Heh. I can do plenty of fighting with troops like these,” Shiba said with a look of great satisfaction. While he had more numbers at his disposal in the past, there was no coordination or discipline among them. There had been a constant stream of problems that plagued his army, and every time it set out for battle, it was at risk of complete organizational collapse. Now, however, the soldiers were all surprisingly motivated to fight. There was no longer any conflict among them, and if anything, they had come together as a single unit, viewing each other as precious companions and comrades. They were quick to follow his orders. The Flame Clan Army had finally stopped acting like a glorified mob and was functioning as a proper army once again. “This is all thanks to Brother Kuuga taking all the troublemakers with him.”

Kuuga’s first request had been simple. He had asked to lead all of the soldiers who wanted to return home—that is, all of the men who had come into great wealth as a result of their looting—back to the current base of the Flame Clan Army’s Fifth Division, the old Lightning Clan capital of Bilskírnir. The request had

made an immediate impact.

Currently, the only soldiers left in Gimlé were the ones who had, through bad luck, missed out on the treasures that had been scattered around the city. When they had seen other soldiers rejoicing over the treasure they'd found, those soldiers couldn't help but focus upon their own misfortune and their jealousy toward their newly wealthy companions. Because of that, the best solution was to remove all the soldiers who had struck it rich. Once that had happened, the avaricious gaze of the remaining soldiers would switch from their fellow soldiers to the next target—the remaining cities of the Steel Clan.

Next time, *they* would be the ones to find and obtain treasure. The remaining Flame Clan soldiers in Gimlé had rallied around that simple desire.

"Yes, but there's still something off. It just doesn't seem in character for him." It was Shiba's adjutant Masa who voiced that concern, his brows knitted in suspicion.

"Indeed. It's an unusually bold step for my brother to take."

Certainly, morale had improved dramatically, and discipline had returned to the army, but in exchange for that, Shiba now only had around five thousand men left. At one point, he had over twenty thousand under his command, so his forces were now a quarter of their original strength.

Numbers were all important in war. Even if it was sometimes necessary to take a hatchet to an army to get it to function again, it still took a certain amount of nerve to take such decisive action. Furthermore, the current invasion was on Nobunaga's direct orders. Taking the majority of the invading forces and retreating despite those orders risked being handed down a severe punishment such as ritual suicide or banishment. Kuuga had never been a man with the nerve to take such decisive action under that level of pressure, even if he was driven to it by necessity. Ordinarily, he would have steadily tried various measures to see if there wasn't some way to maintain his current force structure. That was more in character for him.

"Still, I'm the one who's responsible for this scheme."

The proposal and the execution should all be done in Shiba's name. That had been Kuuga's second request. Kuuga had already piled up a large number of

mistakes during this campaign, and he couldn't afford to draw any more of Nobunaga's ire. However, that seemed to be the point that made the least sense to Masa. "It's quite a strange choice to make. It *is* rather prudent of him to want to avoid any further blame, but he may as well be giving all of the credit for this campaign's further success to you, Big Brother."

"Well, yeah." Shiba shrugged his shoulders with a dry chuckle. Though he was now down to an army of five thousand, Shiba was still considered the most ferocious of the Flame Clan's generals. He would easily be able to overwhelm the hesitant forces of the Steel Clan, even with this hamstrung army of his. "But that's already been accounted for. He's asked me to get the Great Lord's forgiveness in exchange for that success."

"That's the part that I can't understand. He would never ask you for a favor like that, even if the world flipped over on its head," Masa said with an expression of clear skepticism. That was something that had bugged Shiba as well. Regardless, Masa continued. "I mean, sure, that's the most realistic and pragmatic solution. However, I know full well that he thoroughly despises and resents you, Big Brother."

"That's not something to say to someone about their sole living relative, you know," Shiba replied.

"Eh, you're not the sort to get hurt by something like that, Big Brother."

"That's very true." Once again, Shiba shrugged with a dry laugh.

Ordinarily, it should have been an unpleasant prospect to be hated and despised by one's only living relative, even if that relative was someone that individual didn't even like to begin with. However, the key phrase there was "should have been." Shiba was wholly unaffected by the idea of that hatred; it was simply a fact that he had to deal with. Most people were hurt when harsh truths like that were laid bare before them. Shiba honestly couldn't understand why that was, given that clinging onto lies wouldn't do a thing to change reality. He also couldn't understand why the soldiers had wanted to go home so badly. Certainly, he understood the logical reasoning, but the emotional aspect of their request had entirely failed to resonate with him.

According to their spies, the Horn Clan capital of Fólkvangr was also

practically abandoned. While the residents had fled and left it an empty shell, there was a fair chance that there would be treasure scattered within it, just like Gimlé. So long as the soldiers followed his orders, if they invaded the abandoned Horn Clan capital, they'd be able to revel in another looting spree. However, they'd abandoned that opportunity because they were so fixated on going home with their current gains. Shiba couldn't begin to understand why they had made that decision. This sort of thing was probably why Old Man Salk had told him that he couldn't understand the feelings or motivations of the weak.

"In my brother's eyes, his current situation was probably rather dire. After all, the Great Lord regards him as having a sharp eye for taking decisive action when cornered."

It was true that Kuuga hated Shiba and sometimes took irrational actions as a result of that. His rushed assault upon Fort Gashina was perhaps the epitome of that sort of reckless irrationality. However, at the same time, Kuuga was extremely smart and strongly concerned with self-preservation.

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. But I just can't shake the feeling that something is off."

"Hrmph." Shiba rubbed his chin and grunted. In truth, like Masa, he felt there was something strange about everything that was going on. The intuition that had seen him through countless dangerous situations was screaming out to him that something was wrong. However, he had subconsciously silenced that warning bell because he simply didn't believe there was any possibility of something else brewing.

In the end, people would always make the rational choice. They'd take the course of action that gave them the greatest advantage. At the very least, he was convinced that people with a bare minimum of intelligence would behave that way. That was because Shiba himself was that way.

This was exactly what blinded him, however. He knew on a hypothetical level as a result of his own research that there were people who prioritized their feelings first and foremost and would happily throw away rational actions even in times of crisis, but he simply could not understand why people would actually

do such things. The idea of someone following their passions and abandoning any calculations of their own gains and losses was completely nonsensical to him. Because of Shiba's strength, the entire concept was simply far too removed from his own experiences.

"Princess, I bring good news! I'm told the Flame Clan Army has started its withdrawal."

"Oh? Good!"

Linnea's expression lit up as Cler barged into her office to give her the news. She had heard the invading force had fallen into internal squabbling as a result of the treasure she had seeded in Gimlé, and that was probably why the Flame Clan forces were retreating.

"This should give us a good opportunity to sort out the migration of the people of western Álfheimr."

"Definitely," Linnea said, nodding in agreement. It was only yesterday that they'd been given word that the Panther Clan's people had started their migration.

This was an era with no cars. Also, not everyone had a carriage. There would be many who would be carrying rather heavy loads with them as they walked the path eastward. It went without saying that these things would slow them down considerably. It would take a substantial amount of time for the people of western Álfheimr to make their way to Iárnviðr. Thankfully, it now appeared that they would be able to buy enough time to allow the migrants to reach Iárnviðr. That was the best possible news she could have received.

"While I'm glad the plan worked, I can't shake some lingering anxiety about all of this," Linnea said with a furrowed brow.

"Anxiety? Is there something that stands out to you as a risk?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I guess it's just habit at this point." Linnea shrugged with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Despite her youth, Linnea was a skilled ruler who had long dealt with the perils of governing, first as patriarch of the Horn Clan and then as Second of the

Steel Clan. She had been reminded countless times that things never proceeded according to plan. No matter how detailed and precise the planning, there would always be unexpected problems that cropped up, and the timeline would continually be pushed back to accommodate those problems. But in this case, while there had been an unexpected development, rather than make the situation worse, it had made things substantially better. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was off, however.

"It's just too different from usual. I can't help but think that the other sandal might drop at any moment," she admitted.

"Ah ha, I see. While I believe that cautiousness is one of your great virtues, too much worry is bad for the child in your womb, ma'am."

"I know that, but..."

"Princess, you have spent much of your life sacrificing for the sake of your people. No doubt the gods above have been watching all of your efforts. Perhaps this is a gift from them."

"Heh. I hope that's what it is." Linnea's smile twitched for a moment before she let out a soft chuckle.

Cler was rather pious, perhaps because as an Einherjar he felt the gods as a presence in his life. Given that in Yggdrasil it was still common to conduct trials by throwing a person in a river and determining their guilt by whether or not they drowned, the belief that the gods were heavily involved with fate was, if anything, what passed for common sense.

However, Linnea couldn't believe that the gods were all that interested in what happened in this world. They weren't so merciful that they'd reward people who had done good deeds. Gods were capricious and didn't care about humans. If they truly cared about humanity, the world wouldn't be so full of suffering. That was the reality that Linnea had seen in her relatively brief life.

And this time, her views were about to be vindicated. The news of the arrival of the Flame Clan's invading army, a revelation that would send shockwaves through the people in Iárnviðr, would come just three days after this conversation.

“I’m sure you’re already aware, but the Flame Clan Army that had been occupying Gimlé have resumed their march upon us. Based on the direction of their advance, their objective is probably here, in Iárnviðr,” Linnea said solemnly to the faces assembled around the round table. While there were a few who were currently occupied at the Holy Capital, such as the Wolf Clan patriarch, Jörgen, and the Horn Clan Second and master archer, Haugspori, most of the important members of the two clans, such as Cler of the Brísingamen and the Wolf Clan’s head elder, Bruno, were present. Their expressions were all tense.

“According to reports from our spies, the Flame Clan Army numbers a bit under five thousand. While we currently have roughly the same number of soldiers here in Iárnviðr, the enemy is being led by Shiba, reputed to be one of their greatest generals. A direct battle will almost certainly end in our defeat.”

No one argued with Linnea’s grim assessment of the situation. Even the young Cler, confident and aggressive about combat because of his youth, remained silent.

But that was understandable. Shiba’s reputation as a warrior was well known in the Steel Clan from his accomplishments during the Flame Clan’s conquest of the Lightning and Wind Clans, and while the report that he had thoroughly overwhelmed Sigrún, the Steel Clan’s greatest warrior and Mánagarmr, had been classified, everyone present who had access to that level of information was aware of what had transpired between them. The only people who could confidently state that they could defeat such a monster were either the very best warriors in all of Yggdrasil or the most foolish of ignoramuses. However, neither of those were currently seated around the table. Whether this was a good or bad thing was hard to determine.

After noting that her words had adequately reached the assembled council, Linnea opened her mouth and continued. “Though that may be the case, we still need to protect Iárnviðr at all costs. In fact, we have to do more than that. We must do everything we can to drive them off. If we can’t, the people of western Álfheimr will have no place to go.”

The Wolf Clan capital of Iárnviðr that Linnea and the others currently occupied was a key city that served as the gateway into the Bifröst region. If the

Flame Clan took control of the city and closed off the pass eastward, a large number of people would have their access to the Holy Capital cut off completely.

That wasn't even the worst of it. While the Steel Clan strictly prohibited it among its ranks, in this era, enemy civilians were often subjected to pillaging and rape at the hands of a conquering army. According to Yuuto, Nobunaga had enforced discipline among his armies near the Holy Capital with the understanding that it would damage his ability to govern after his conquest, but it was questionable whether or not that discipline was enforced this far west of the Holy Capital. Linnea's skepticism was perfectly warranted: given that they had already seen their companions strike it rich, the remaining soldiers of the invading Flame Clan Army were essentially a pack of slavering wolves.

"You had anticipated they would go to Fólkvangr first, Lady Linnea, but it appears they've chosen a different path," Bruno, the Wolf Clan's head elder, said with a faint note of bitterness. While his words were polite enough, there wasn't a hint of respect in his tone. His attitude as he sat with his arms crossed made his disdain clear. He was openly displaying his flagrant disrespect and insubordination for all present to witness.

"You are correct. With regards to that, I can only admit that I was too optimistic."

"P-Princess?" As Linnea admitted to her painful error, Cler let out an exclamation of surprise. That was because in politics, admitting to mistakes would provide an opening to one's enemies. It was always better to avoid taking responsibility and to leave the blame for such developments vague. Though the concept was utterly ridiculous to her, Linnea was well aware of its necessity in the world of politics—a place rife with backstabbing and infested with wretched schemers. Even knowing that, she had outright admitted to her error because she had no interest in wasting time or playing blame games at such a critical juncture.

"That is why I've asked you all to gather here. Given my lack of ability, I can't think of a way to get us out of this situation. I ask for your intelligence and strength in this time of need." With that, Linnea deeply bowed her head.

A murmur rippled through the assembled commanders. While all of the people present held positions of authority, those positions were within subordinate organizations such as the Wolf and Horn Clans. By contrast, Linnea was the Second-in-Command for the entirety of the Steel Clan. The fact that someone of that importance had accepted responsibility for her mistake and admitted her lack of strength to solve this problem shocked the members of the Wolf Clan present, while those of the Horn Clan wanted to tell her that it wasn't necessary for her to abase herself to this extent. However, sincerity and honesty can, at times, produce results that even the most cunning mind couldn't accomplish. This was such a time.

"Please, raise your head, Lady Linnea."

"Indeed. Please raise your head. We've been strictly ordered by Father to obey your orders, Aunt Linnea."

"Exactly. We'll happily lend whatever strength we have to give."

The members of the Wolf Clan quickly spoke up in support of Linnea. Given that just a handful of years ago they had been sworn blood enemies, it was a remarkable event. While it was an extreme example, had the Claw Clan's Botvid done the same as Linnea, the Wolf Clan members wouldn't have believed him, and even if they had, they would have likely used the opportunity to push demands on him that would work to their advantage. The difference in response here, though partly due to her gender and appearance, was largely because of Linnea's serious commitment to the people of the Steel Clan and her sincere, hard-working personality.

"Th-Thank you. I appreciate your assistance," Linnea said, her voice quavering with her emotions. There were tears in her eyes as she bowed her head again. It was the moment that two clans who had long been enemies came together as one.

"Hrmph. You're letting your emotions get the better of you. No matter how many plain fools we gather, it won't change a blasted thing." Bruno splashed cold water on the room's conciliatory mood with a derisive snort. It went without saying that all eyes in the room glared at him critically. Bruno made no sign of noticing or being bothered by the critical gazes, however, and continued.

“In the first place, why must we risk our lives for the Panther Clan? What obligation do we have to them?” he said simply.

Linnea felt a strong sense of déjà vu upon hearing that. Her sharp mind quickly figured out the reason. It had been two years ago when the Hoof Clan had invaded the Horn Clan. At the time, Bruno had said something similar and insisted that the Wolf Clan simply abandon the Horn Clan.

“Lord Bruno. The patriarch of the Panther Clan is Lady Sigrún, someone you know well. Her predecessor as patriarch was another former member of the Wolf Clan, Lord Skáviðr. The people of the Panther Clan are their children and their grandchildren. They have close ties to the Wolf Clan. Do you truly think you can get away with abandoning them?” Linnea spoke firmly, with no trace of hesitation or fear in her voice.

It was understandable to value your own clan’s people. Linnea felt the same way about the people of the Horn Clan. As far as she was concerned, a clan’s leadership was obligated to place their lives on the line in service of their people. After all, they collected exorbitant taxes from their subjects and often lived much better lives than the average citizen as a result of those gains. Essentially, the reason for the Steel Clan Army’s existence was to protect the people of the Steel Clan. Whether they were part of the Horn Clan or the Wolf Clan was irrelevant.

“I see. You are certainly correct. Those two and their direct subordinates are connected to the Wolf Clan, and by all accounts, I feel no hesitation about helping them. However, I still don’t see why my people should bleed for the sake of the people of the Panther Clan.” Bruno showed no shame in his statement and even had a faint smirk on his features. In his mind, clans other than the Wolf Clan were of no consequence to him.

Perhaps it was understandable. Having spent most of his life as a member of the Wolf Clan, it was probably impossible for him to consider the Steel Clan to be his home. No, it went further than that. From what Linnea had heard, after Yuuto had become patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Bruno had refused to bend his knee to Yuuto. He had refused his Chalice and instead chose to become an elder, and he continued to object to Yuuto’s rule.

As people aged, they tended to become less comfortable with change and become increasingly reactionary. For Bruno, time had stopped during the time of Fárbauti's rule, and he hadn't adapted to anything that had happened since.

"Head Elder, surely that's going too far."

"The Panther Clan, like us, are members of the Steel Clan. It would be dishonorable to abandon them here."

Even members of the Wolf Clan began to criticize Bruno. It seemed they couldn't contain their distaste for Bruno's insistence toward treating the Panther Clan as a foreign clan. Those who raised the objections appeared to be in their mid-twenties to their early thirties. Judging by the things they said about the Steel Clan, it was clear they considered themselves part of and dearly loved the Steel Clan.

"The Wolf Clan has already provided our housing to people of another clan free of charge. We will also protect Iárnviðr, the key gateway to the east, to our last breath. We are doing plenty to honor our commitments. You lot need to calm down. If you act recklessly for the sake of another clan, that would defeat the whole point of our presence."

"Mrrmph."

"Grrrm."

The Wolf Clan officers who had criticized Bruno frowned. Linnea couldn't help but seriously consider his words as well. His argument was completely sound.

"So, are you suggesting that we should hole up in Iárnviðr and reinforce our defenses?" an officer asked.

"I daresay we have no other option. Fortunately, the walls of Iárnviðr are specially constructed. They should be able to withstand bombardment by trebuchets for some time. There is no reason not to make use of them," Bruno responded.

"Mm."

"Ah, so that's what he meant," thought Linnea. Iárnviðr was smaller in scale compared to Gimlé or Fólkvangr, but it was also the city that Yuuto had lived in

for the longest amount of time. When he had first inherited the Wolf Clan, he was at constant risk of invasion by the Horn and Claw Clans. Because of that, he had made the decision to outfit Iárnviðr with various defensive upgrades. It was likely better defensively equipped than even the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé.

"True. Given that we're already at a disadvantage, there's no point in throwing away what advantages we do have."

"Indeed. I don't know if he's a ferocious general or a feral general, but surely Iárnviðr, the jewel of our clan, will easily repel him. At least, so long as we don't get too greedy."

"Ngh."

Even Linnea couldn't help but react to his barbed remark. And yet, Bruno showed no sign of concern as he continued his lecture. "Besides, there's no reason that we have to deal with this alone. The people of the Panther Clan are being escorted by the Múspell Unit, the very elite of our Wolf Clan. If we're to defeat the invaders, then it would be most effective to do so in cooperation with them. There is value in holding tight and waiting for the right opportunity. Perhaps that sort of patience is hard for the young to understand." Bruno finished up his remarks with another barb and added a faintly derisive snort.

Claiming the Múspells as the elite of the Wolf Clan was faintly irritating, but what he said was perfectly rational. Even based on this meeting and the fact that he maintained his calm and wasn't affected by the mood in the room showed that, if anything, Bruno was an extremely competent individual. Whatever else he might have been, he was still the man who had been valued by Fárbauti as his right hand. He was a dependable presence to have on their side in this time of crisis. Even so, she still couldn't bring herself to like him. Bruno was narrow-minded, reactionary, focused solely on his own clan, and had the air of a man who had been left behind by the times. He was far from likable, but he was at least competent.

"Ah, so this is Iárnviðr. I'd read about it, but those are some odd walls," Shiba said cautiously as he gazed up at the city walls. In Yggdrasil, fortress and city walls were generally constructed of brick. However, these walls were clearly

different. They looked like they had been built using stone instead. Even with that in mind, there was still something unusual about them.

“Hm, well, I guess we’ll know if it’s a paper tiger soon enough. Seems the enemy’s ready for a fight too.”

To him, the oddness of the defensive walls was a minor detail. Shiba bared his teeth in a predatory grin as he felt the pinpricks of hostility from the enemies stationed on the walls. With his level of experience, he didn’t even need to see the enemy to get a feel for the number of soldiers he faced. This feeling of hostility was clearly not something that was coming from a few dozen men, or even a few hundred. There were at least several thousand out to kill him.

“Gimlé really did turn out to be a disappointment.”

“Yep. I’m getting a bit rusty after being stuck doing nothing but paperwork afterward,” his adjutant Masa said with a dry chuckle, and Shiba nodded in agreement, rolling his arms to stretch his shoulders.

The reason Shiba followed Nobunaga was largely due to the fact that so long as he was at Nobunaga’s side, there would be wars for him to fight in. Given that he had been looking forward to a fight of unprecedented scale during this war, the fact that he hadn’t fought a single battle to date had annoyed Shiba greatly. Considering how much he had been anticipating the fights, it had been extremely frustrating for him.

“It’s quite something for you to ignore the abandoned Fólkvangr. You must really want to fight. Big Brother, your love of war is unmatched.”

“Well, it’s like I always say...”

“I know, I know. It’s not the war you love, right?” Masa quipped.

“Exactly. It’s not like I’m drunk on the bloodletting or sense of danger,” Shiba declared flatly.

There were plenty of warriors who could only truly feel alive in the excitement of battle, or those who derived great pleasure from the sense of release from the fear of death in the midst of war. But Shiba didn’t feel that he was driven by such base motives. What he sought was to master the art of battle. Of course, he was well aware that he needed to engage in constant

training to achieve those heights, but there were many things that could only be found through the experience of facing life and death at the height of battle. The reason he fought was for the sake of achieving that level of mastery.

“Even so, Big Brother, it still appears as though you take joy in fighting, you know,” his closest advisor replied, coolly dismissing his argument, much to Shiba’s chagrin. It was quite the insult. However, Masa’s verbal lashing continued. “Besides, you’ve been all aflutter waiting for your opportunity to fight the Mánagarmr again.”

“Well, of course. It’s been ten years since I faced someone who could keep up with me quite like she did. I could feel my movements getting sharper in that fight. I still get a smile on my face when I think about it.” Shiba closed his eyes and recalled that last encounter, his expression softening into a look of pure bliss. When contrasted to the joy of how quickly he felt his skills being sharpened in that fight, all of the titles, wealth, and beautiful women in the world felt dull and lackluster. In the end, he had fallen completely for the enemy’s scheme, and he had felt intense dissatisfaction with that outcome, but even that had taught him he still had more to learn. It also meant that he could still get stronger. Without exaggeration, that fight was probably the best experience in his entire life.

“No matter how you phrase that, those are the words of a fighting addict.”

“Wha?! Hold on, hold on. Were you actually listening to me? Don’t lump me in with those blood-lusting beasts or those consumed by darkness.”

“Well, I’m sure it feels different to you, Big Brother.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Still, it looks the same from the outside.”

“Impossible... I can’t accept that.”

“It doesn’t matter if you can accept it or not, it’s the truth. For the love of the gods, accept that you’re a pervert with a weird fetish.”

“Calling your sworn big brother a pervert... Anyone else would have disowned you for that!”

“I wouldn’t speak this way to anyone else, Big Brother. Besides, you’d be the one in trouble if you ended our relationship. Do you have any other subordinates to whom you can push all the administrative work that you so hate onto?”

“Tch. You got me there.”

With that comment, Masa’s expression formed into a teasing smirk. In response, Shiba clicked his tongue and furrowed his brow. Of course, none of this was meant to be taken seriously. The banter was a sign of their mutual trust.

“Now, putting all that aside, while I understand your battle fetish, I feel bad for the soldiers who get dragged around by it. I mean, if we’d gone to Fólkvangr, we could’ve easily conquered it, and they might have been able to get their share of loot this time,” Masa said with an exasperated sigh. It seemed he was sympathizing with the soldiers who hadn’t found any treasure and had instead been sent to a battlefield.

“Oh, you were operating under that misunderstanding? Huh, that just shows you’re not suited to be a general. You’re too gentle,” Shiba said with a faintly furrowed brow and dry chuckle. Masa was Shiba’s most trusted retainer, and he had more than enough ability and character to lead in his own right, but the reason Shiba hadn’t made him his Second and kept him as his leader of subordinates with no inheritance rights was that he was simply too gentle. “You are right that if we had gone to Fólkvangr, we’d probably be able to occupy it without any effort. However, if they’d set a trap there like the one in Gimlé, then we’d have had huge issues moving our troops from there. We’ve finally gotten rid of the soldiers that’d grown fat from looting that city and have the freedom to move, so it would’ve been pointless to get rid of them if we then decided to go there. We can take that city later.”

From the perspective of compassion, Masa’s words were perfectly just. Most of the soldiers had already made themselves rich, and since the remaining soldiers had seen similarly dangerous battlefields, they, too, probably had the right to acquire wealth of their own. The soldiers who had been lucky enough to loot their riches had been given the chance to go home and rest on their laurels with their families, while those who were left had to risk life and limb on a

dangerous battlefield. It would have been one thing had that wealth reflected individual efforts, but the wealth had been a product of luck. That made the whole situation completely unfair.

If it could be corrected, then yes, it should be corrected. However, a general, at times, needed to throw away their emotions and their compassion, and instead focus on ruthlessly pursuing their objectives. It was not a general's duty to provide those of his men who had not yet tasted victory with some hollow version of it solely because he felt sorry for them. Doing such things would make them useless as soldiers and defeated the purpose of having an army in the first place.

"Besides, the Steel Clan is trying to abandon these lands and move their people away. There's no point in acquiring land with no one to work it. It's more important to take Iárnviðr first and put a lid on their movements. That's my strategic decision."

"O-Oh, I-I beg your pardon. I didn't imagine there was that much thought behind your decision..." Masa hurriedly bowed his head. His face was flushed. It seemed he had been left rather embarrassed as a result of their recent banter.

"Heh, that's fine. People have their strengths and weaknesses. If anything, you're likely to be more skilled at things during peacetime, while I can do things in times of emergency that you can't. That's all it is."

"Thank you for your consideration."

With a dry chuckle, Masa raised his head, but a glance at his face showed that he was grappling with self-loathing. It was hard to say that he was happy with himself at the moment. The fact that he tended to linger on emotions like this, instead of moving on, was another major weakness.

"*That reminds me, the commander of the western region is Linnea, their Second. I'm told she's much like Masa: good at administrative tasks, but second-rate as a general due to her softness*," Shiba thought to himself. With his mind on the enemy commander, he looked once again to the walls and thought about the battle to come. He hoped that Linnea would prove her reputation wrong and give him a good fight. Struggle was the thing that helped people grow more than any other experience.

“Right then. Masa, now that we’re done chatting, start prepping that monster catapult.”

“Yes sir!”

Masa’s demeanor changed from that of Shiba’s friend to his subordinate, and he hurried off to give the order. Watching him depart, Shiba murmured to himself. “So, let’s see what you’ve got.”

ACT 3

“Ah, so these are the schematics for the monster catapult.”

Unfurling the scroll he had received, Nobunaga smiled as he looked over its contents with interest. He was a man who always enjoyed being able to experience new things. It was no surprise that he would be excited to look over the schematics for a weapon he had never seen before.

“Kuuga sure is something to have been able to recreate something like this with only people’s memories to go by.”

“Indeed, My Lord. I was surprised to see it as well.” As he listened to Nobunaga’s praise of Kuuga, Ran nodded his agreement. He was probably voicing his sincere opinion, rather than simply humoring his liege. It had taken several years for native Japanese craftsmen to recreate the arquebuses they’d acquired from the Portuguese. By contrast, while the design of the trebuchet was somewhat simpler than a firearm, it was still an impressive feat of innovation to be able to reproduce an enemy siege weapon to the point that it could be used in battle after just three months.

“Even so, this isn’t enough to make up for his insubordination.” Once he had taken a single look at the design, Nobunaga tossed aside the scroll as though he had lost interest in it. Certainly, a trebuchet was an extremely powerful weapon on Yggdrasil, where the arsenal of siege equipment was made up almost entirely of battering rams and hooked rope used for scaling walls. Had it been a year ago, Nobunaga would have dropped everything to heap praise on Kuuga and would have used him as an example for the rest of his retainers to follow. But that was then. He no longer had any need for a trebuchet.

“Ran, are the new province destroyers ready?!”

“Yes, they’re all prepared and can be deployed on your orders, My Lord.”

“Heh, good. I can already picture the surprised looks on our enemies’ faces,” Nobunaga said with a confident smirk.

This “province destroyer” being described was a siege weapon Nobunaga had been developing in secret for years, and while its name might have suggested to some that it used large arrows of some sort, it was, in fact, a completely different beast. The object that appeared, pushed along by three large men, was so heavy that its wheels groaned under its weight. It was a black cylinder roughly in the shape of a gourd. The hole on one end of the cylinder was roughly the size of a person’s fist. The cylinder would be packed with a bag of gunpowder and a three-kilogram lead ball, after which a matchlock would be used to set off the gunpowder. The resulting explosion propelled the ball at the target. It was essentially a cannon. Three of them were gathered in front of Nobunaga.

“You seem to be taking a significant risk by deciding to implement features of the tanegashima into the old province destroyer designs, My Lord.”

“Hrmph. The old version was simply not good enough,” Nobunaga responded.

The “old version” of the weapon that they were referring to was the Frankish cannons. They were the breech-loading swivel guns that had been the first cannons to be used in Japan. It was said that Otomo Sorin was the first to introduce them into his armies, and Nobunaga had used them aboard his ships in his battle with the Mori Clan’s naval forces, who themselves were also armed with the same cannons at the time. The cannons had a relatively high rate of fire, so they were useful to a certain extent. However, because the cannonball and the gunpowder were loaded from the back, along with the fact that the technology of the time didn’t allow effective sealing of the breech, it wasted a great deal of the gunpowder’s explosive energy, leading to a substantial decrease in striking power and range.

In an effort to improve the devices, Nobunaga had decided to implement the muzzle-loading method employed by Tanegashima arquebuses on a larger scale, which had meant sealing the cylinder entirely by casting it as a single piece. Historically, in Japan, similar weapons were invented several years after the Honno-ji Temple incident, during the reigns of Hideyoshi and Ieyasu. It was a testament to Nobunaga’s own innovative thought process that he had come up with the concept on his own, several years ahead of actual history.

“Heh. Sure, the new-style province destroyers can’t fire as quickly, but they’re

far more lethal and capable of hitting at much greater ranges. Mere brick walls won't last long in the face of their firepower," Nobunaga claimed proudly. Soon after, he gave the order to his forces to begin the attack. "Right then! Fire! Remind the Steel Clan that they ought to fear the might of the Flame Clan!"

"Yes, My Lord!" The gun captain used a matchlock to ignite the first cannon. The soldiers near the cannons all placed their hands over their ears. Then, a moment later, three loud booms reverberated through the air, sending a shock through the assembled soldiers even through their improvised earmuffs. The powerful shots were loud enough to echo as they whizzed toward their target. A heartbeat later, the sounds of heavy objects striking one another rang through the air, and shattered bricks flew off the wall.

However, Nobunaga was left staring wide-eyed in shock. Behind the brick wall emerged an ash-colored stone wall. Judging by what he could see, the bricks had absorbed some of the impact from the cannonballs, and the newly emerged walls were only faintly dented by the barrage. "Tch. I see. He had already planned for the possibility that we'd copy his catapults." Nobunaga couldn't help but click his tongue in frustration. The reports from Fort Gashina had indicated that the walls had collapsed easily after being bombarded with Steel Clan-style catapults, and in his last campaign, Nobunaga hadn't utilized any sort of siege weaponry. As such, Nobunaga had thought Yuuto would have designed this fortification with the assumption that the Flame Clan possessed no siege weaponry. It seemed he had underestimated the young lad. "Hrmph. Then let us test what is superior: my new and improved province destroyers, or your walls. Focus your fire! Unload more rounds into the damaged section!"

"Yes, My Lord!" the gun captain responded.

Over the next two hours, the Flame Clan continued its cannonade against the Steel Clan's fortress wall. While Nobunaga would have liked to precisely target all of his shots into the parts of the wall where the bricks had been destroyed and the underlying wall was exposed, this was an age where there was no method to calculate projectile trajectories, never mind anything as complicated as a computer with target correction software. It was extremely difficult to hit a desired location with a cannonball with any amount of consistency. That said, Nobunaga's cannons made up for what they lacked in accuracy with sheer

volume. They fired endlessly over the course of two hours and had easily blasted over fifty shots into the wall in that time. With that amount of cannon fire, several of the shots had managed to hit the exposed sections of the stone wall. The wall showed no signs of giving way to the fusillade, however.

“Well, that’s certainly an irritatingly strong wall,” Nobunaga said more with exasperation than admiration. The walls weren’t undamaged; in fact, there were countless impact craters scattered along them. By all accounts, the surface appeared to be completely ruined, but in the end, it was barely anything more than cosmetic damage. There wasn’t a single opening that indicated they’d made an actual breach in the wall, nor did it appear that it would collapse under the weight of the force directed at it. Considering how little damage they had done with their bombardment, it would take an enormous amount of cannon fire to create an opening large enough for an army to pass through. It was clear that the Flame Clan would run out of gunpowder and cannonballs long before they could manage such a thing. Nobunaga let out a long sigh and ruffled his hair. “Great. What do we do...? This is going to take much more effort than I had expected. Then again, it wouldn’t be anywhere near as enjoyable if that wasn’t the case.”

“Phew. They’ve finally stopped.”

Stationed a short distance away at Gjallarbrú Fortress, Yuuto let out a sigh of relief. Given that trebuchets operated on fairly simple principles, he had anticipated the possibility that the enemy would create their own versions, which was why he had taken measures against them in the fortress design. However, cannons hadn’t been part of the Flame Clan’s various invasion campaigns, nor were they used during the Siege of Glaðsheimr. The existence of those cannons had caught him completely by surprise.

“Kris! Hurry and gather damage reports on the wall. Also, check on the mental state of the soldiers.”

“Huh? O-Oh, yes, of course!” Kristina said as though roused from a daze, hurriedly replying to Yuuto’s instructions. It was hard to believe that she, who was always calm and even showed an air of studied impudence at all times, would be caught in a daze in the middle of battle. But Yuuto couldn’t bring

himself to blame her. She wasn't the only one. Everyone around him had gone pale with fear.

"This is frightening in a different way from the tetsuhau," Felicia said with a faint tremor present in her voice. Yuuto nodded to signify his agreement.

"Yeah, honestly, I was scared out of my wits."

Tetsuhau were the small bombs frequently employed by the Steel Clan Army in battle. While they exploded with an extremely loud concussion sound, they weren't particularly lethal, and their basic use in battle was to confuse and disorient the enemy. By contrast, the enemy's cannons, though relatively quiet when they were fired, produced an enormous impact when the cannonballs slammed against the fortress walls. It was the first time Yuuto had experienced it himself, and each impact felt like a thunderclap had struck through his body. The giant fortress walls visibly shook after each impact. And it wasn't just one impact. The shots came one after the other. Yuuto himself had nearly fallen into a panic as he considered the possibility that the fortress walls would collapse under the barrage.

"Father, according to my scouts, the walls facing the enemy are shattered or cracked and badly damaged. However, there's no sign that the enemy has breached them."

"Good, then that's within expectations. What about the interior? Are there any cracks or the like?"

"While I've received reports of some bricks being knocked off, no one has reported anything of that sort for the moment."

"I see." Once again, Yuuto let out a sigh of relief. Considering the vicious thunderclaps of each impact, he was anxious about the state of the fortress itself. "Man, I'm glad I had the workers pour in Roman concrete. Had this been a standard brick wall, we would've been screwed." He felt a cold shiver run up his spine as he imagined the alternative.

Roman concrete was a special kind of concrete utilized by the Roman Empire during its heyday from the 8th century BCE to the 5th century CE. The concrete consisted primarily of volcanic ash, and it was a different animal from modern concrete. However, despite its antiquity, it was nearly twice as tough as modern

concrete. That wasn't its only advantage, though. Roman concrete hardened faster than modern concrete, and it was an extremely useful material that was being implemented on a trial basis in the modern world.

Fortunately, the Steel Clan had the Three Great Mountain Ranges within its borders. It made the acquisition of volcanic ash easy, so there was no reason not to make the best of that resource.

"This is all thanks to you and your rune Gjallarhorn, Fagrahvél."

While the production method of concrete itself wasn't particularly complicated—only requiring that the ingredients be mixed in the right order—the lack of machinery in Yggdrasil meant that the entire process of mixing, carrying, and pouring concrete had to be done by hand. Although they had effective transportation tools like the improved wheelbarrows, it was only thanks to her ability to bring out the fullest abilities of those under her command that they had been able to produce these walls in time.

"In hindsight, it's pretty clear I was asking a lot. Thanks for making it happen," Yuuto said with sincere appreciation, but Fagrahvél bowed her head and responded without so much as a flicker of expression crossing her features. "You honor me, Your Majesty."

While Fagrahvél tended to wear her emotions on her sleeve when it involved her milk-sibling Sigrdrífa, in all other circumstances, she was rather more cool and collected. That was probably just how much Sigrdrífa had meant to her.

"For the moment, it looks like we'll be able to buy some time with this." He'd heard the Panther Clan's subjects had already started their migration. If he could hold off the enemy here for about a month, all of their people would finish their migrations. He could probably manage to fend Nobunaga off for a month. He believed it was *probably* possible, but...

"It won't be easy to hold that monstrous old demon back. If anything, the hard part is gonna come after we've finished stalling them, I think."

"Oh, come on, this is ridiculous! Just how tough are these walls?" A week later, on the western side of Yggdrasil, Shiba, like his master Nobunaga, was at a loss as to how to deal with the concrete fortress wall that stood before him. He

had launched boulder after boulder with their giant catapult, but there was no sign of it collapsing under the assault.

“Just what in the blazes is that thing?” The more he looked at it, the more he was convinced it was stone of some sort. However, unlike a standard stone wall, there were no seams. As far as he could tell, it was essentially one giant rock, but that was impossible; there was no such thing as a rock that big. Even if one did exist, it wouldn’t be possible to carry it with mere human strength. “Well, no use denying what’s actually in front of me. How do I deal with it, though...?”

Whether it be brick or stone, a wall constructed by piling up those materials would collapse with enough of an impact. This wall, however, showed no sign of falling even after being bombarded by boulders that required several large men to load into the catapult. Even if they continued like this, they weren’t going to make any progress.

“First the Great Lord’s weird inventions, and now this. This is ridiculous.” Shiba ruffled his hair in frustration. If there was no way he could breach the fortress walls, he would have to wait for the next opportunity to fight in a melee. Shiba couldn’t hide the fact that he was incredibly disappointed that he was finding no opportunities to fight and show his skill during this campaign.

“What do you wish to do? Shall we bring out the siege chariot?”

The siege chariot, which consisted of a wheeled battering ram that was protected by iron-plated walls, had been one of the siege weapons that had enabled the Flame Clan’s rapid subjugation of its enemies. However...

“No, don’t bother. Brother Kuuga already tried using one at Gashina, but I heard they crushed it without the faintest problem. It’d be a waste to even try.”

It was clear at a glance that the fortress walls of Iárnviðr were packed full with the giant bows that had dotted Fort Gashina’s walls, and there were also soldiers armed with tanegashimas stationed along it. They numbered approximately five thousand, meaning they were on equal footing with the Flame Clan forces. Trying to forcefully take the city would just mean taking massive losses.

“What do you propose, sir?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out right now. This is the sort of situation where it would be useful to have Brother Kuuga here.”

When faced with an obstacle, Shiba had a tendency to brute force his way through the problem, while Kuuga, by contrast, would often find unexpected and surprisingly effective solutions out of nowhere.

“He’s probably back in Bilskírnir by now.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem.” Shiba sighed with a sour expression on his face. Frankly, he couldn’t think of anything. Just as he was starting to believe that he might not find a solution to his problem...

“I bring word of a new weapon from the clan capital!”

“Oh?”

As he listened to the messenger’s report, Shiba showed great interest in the news he had divulged. New weapons for the Flame Clan meant additional powerful weapons like the tanegashima—weapons that completely changed the face of warfare, and were often very different from anything that existed previously in Yggdrasil. It was the single ray of hope for Shiba as he was faced with an untenable situation. However, the news he had received was not quite the saving grace he had hoped for...

“The province destroyer has a good name, but unfortunately, its bite’s not anywhere near as strong as its bark.” Shiba let his disappointment show as he sighed. They had tried firing five shots into the fortress walls, and while they had done some damage, it was nothing close to what they would need to actually raze the fortification. It was extremely difficult to hit the same place twice, and it looked like it would be impossible to completely destroy the wall and create an opening large enough for his soldiers to pass through.

“Big Brother, I think you’re being a bit harsh. The power, range, and accuracy are all superior to the Steel Clan’s catapults. Had those been conventional brick walls, we would have easily breached them.”

“So you’re saying we’ve found ourselves against the wrong opponent?” Shiba shrugged with a dry laugh. Even though they had just acquired a new weapon, they were back to square one. “I guess we’ll just have to prepare ourselves for a

long siege...”

Just as Shiba was about to switch his approach to sieging the fortress, something caught Shiba’s eye. It was something that the Gjallarbrú Fortress lacked, but it existed at Iárnviðr. Shiba’s lips curled upward into a grin.

“Masa! Tell the gunners to aim for the gate!”

“Oh! Of course!” Upon hearing Shiba’s proposal, Masa widened his eyes in realization and nodded. Iárnviðr’s gate was about the height of two grown men and was just wide enough for a carriage to pass through. It would be extremely difficult to target it with an arcing weapon like a trebuchet. Even if its boulder did hit the gate, the boulder would only end up acting as an obstacle. It was also worth mentioning that Yggdrasil’s gates were usually double-layered—consisting of an inner and outer gate. Hitting the inner wall with a catapult was extremely difficult, and so Shiba had completely put aside the possibility of attacking the gate with the trebuchets. However, with the province destroyers, they might actually be able to land several shots on the gate. And if they could hit the gates, then their wooden foundations would be easily shattered by the projectile. The projectiles themselves were only the size of a person’s fist, and so wouldn’t become obstacles like the trebuchet’s boulders would. At the very least, it was worth a try.

“The gunners report that they’re ready. Shall I issue the order?”

“No, wait! Not yet.” Shiba closed his eyes and held up his hand to calm the excited Masa.

“Big Brother?”

“We don’t exactly have an endless supply of ammunition. I’ll read the wind.” With that, Shiba focused his consciousness, sharpening his senses. As he tightened his focus and heightened his awareness, the world around him went quiet. There wasn’t a sound in the world. Masa’s voice, the soldiers’ voices, the rustling of the leaves—none of it reached him. Shiba understood that he had reached the Realm of the Gods. That said, unlike in his battle with Sigrún, he hadn’t accelerated his mind as well. That was something he could only do during the extreme conditions of a life or death encounter, and even if he could do it on demand, it was simply too taxing to use so liberally. Even so, as a

master of the God Realm, he could use the same foundational technique to sharpen his senses far beyond the norm. Shiba continued to sharpen his senses, and then, all of a sudden, the wind appeared in the darkness of his mind's eye.

"There, I see it."

No one would understand him if he had said it aloud. Even Nobunaga, his Great Lord, would never have understood. Of course, with his eyes closed, Shiba wasn't literally seeing the wind. In that sense, it was probably more accurate to say that he felt it. Exactly how it worked was irrelevant, in the end. He had grasped where the wind was, and that was what mattered at that moment.

"*It's still a bit strong...*"

That meant it would be difficult for the gunners to land their shots on target. The timing wasn't right to give the order to fire just yet. And so, time continued to pass...

Just how long had he waited? When in the God Realm, there was a tendency for time to feel like it had slowed down, even if it wasn't to the same extent that it seemed like during battle. He couldn't tell precisely how long it had been, though it had probably been less than an hour. Shiba finally grasped the right opportunity to strike.

"Gunners! The wind will die down briefly. Fire! Fire everything you've got at that gate!"

Bang!

Craaash!

"Whooa! What in the blazes?! They just destroyed the inner gate!"

"They broke through it with this tiny ball?!"

"Bring the wagons over here! We'll seal the entrance!"

"Hurry! Form up before the enemy charges in!"

Loud shouts from Steel Clan soldiers echoed through the city. Linnea was too

far away to hear what exactly the soldiers were saying, but she was aware that there was a stir near the city gates. Even after a few moments had passed, the chatter showed no signs of dying down. There was also the enormous noise and impacts that had ceased just moments earlier. All of that combined was more than enough information to allow her to make a safe guess as to what was going on. Then came the loud clatter of gongs that soon rang throughout the city.

"Tch. Seems like they've broken through both gates," Linnea spat sourly, furrowing her brow.

If the enemy only had catapults, they would have been able to hold out, thanks to the resilience of Iárnviðr's roman concrete walls. However, in the short time before Iárnviðr's defensive duties were going to be taken over by Sigrún and the Múspell Unit, the enemy had pulled an enormous rabbit out of their hat.

"Before anything, we need to head to the front line!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Accompanied by Cler, her bodyguard, Linnea jumped atop her chariot and rapidly made her way to the city gate. She was currently the commander in chief of all forces in Iárnviðr. She needed to see the situation for herself. As they approached the gates, she began to hear the clamor of the soldiers and the sound of dozens of men running around. She also heard the distant cheer of the enemy forces.

"Fire!"

A tense voice shouted out atop the walls, and the sharp crack of ballistae firing their bolts followed a moment later. It seemed the battle had already started.

"This isn't good." The moment she arrived at the front, Linnea frowned bitterly. The situation there was unfolding as one would expect, but unfortunately, things were turning out to be worse than she had predicted.

"Not good? So far as I can see, it seems like they're moving according to their drills," Cler observed with a raised brow.

By all accounts, he wasn't wrong. The defending soldiers had already surrounded the area around the city gate with wagons, and they were already gathered behind them, their spears and crossbows ready to welcome the enemy. The sound of bolts cutting through the air rang from atop the walls, and they could hear the pained cries of the Flame Clan attackers as the men were struck by them.

"You're right, they *are* moving as they've been instructed. Look closely at their faces though."

"Huh? They look like they're all focused and fully committed to me."

"Yeah, they're committed. But they also look like they're on the back foot."

Cler's eyes widened and he took another look at the soldiers. While Cler's skill as a warrior and Einherjar was fairly impressive, the fact that he wasn't able to read the atmosphere was the main reason he was considered a tier or two below Rasmus or Haugspori among the Brísingamen. To put it more harshly, while he was a great warrior, he didn't have what it took to be a general.

"It's probably because of the enemy's new weapon and the fact that they easily punched through the city gates using them. There's a great deal of fear on all of their faces. They're currently committed because they don't want to die, but it won't take much to break them. It's a dangerous situation," Linnea explained.

"I see! That's certainly not good!"

"Indeed. I made the right choice in coming here."

She needed to be on the front lines to actually see the faces of her soldiers. Linnea understood well that she still had much to learn as a general. She had no intention of keeping things that way, though, which was why she was willing to do whatever she needed in order to make herself a better general. She sucked in a deep breath.

"Calm down, all of you!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, her throat aching from the effort. The soldiers' gazes all naturally gathered to her.

"Huzzah!"

“It’s Lady Linnea!”

“Lady Linnea is here!”

A cheer rippled through the soldiers. Their general had appeared on the front lines. That alone was enough to boost their faltering morale. That was something she had learned from Yuuto and Rasmus. Of course, knowing that the battle would end if the general were slain, she understood that she needed to avoid putting herself at needless risk. However, wars couldn’t be won by simply sitting safely behind friendly lines and relying on messengers to receive intel and send out orders to the soldiers in the field. War wasn’t some kind of game played with inanimate pieces like the shogi or chess that Yuuto had created to pass the time, but rather something conducted between real people with emotions of their own.

Linnea confirmed that the soldiers had regained their composure before she slowly continued. “They’ve only broken our gates. They haven’t breached the walls. The only way they can get in is through the narrow opening the gates provide. If we surround them and hammer them, there’s no way we’ll lose!” Her voice, though still sounding a touch childish, rang confidently through the air, cutting through the sounds of battle echoing around them. That was something she had been born with. It was one of the traits that marked her as a leader. “Sigrún and the Múspells are heading in our direction. They’ll be here in a few days. If we can hold out until then, we’ll win! Buckle down, everyone! Sieg Iárn!”

Those words had a dramatic effect. The soldiers present were all from the Wolf, Horn, and Claw Clans. They all knew very well just how powerful Sigrún and the Múspell Unit were, and just how many heroes they had defeated. They had all heard about the countless victories the Múspells had brought the Steel Clan over the years.

“Sieg Iárn! Sieg Iárn!” the soldiers cried out in unison. There wasn’t a trace of fear left in their voices. Instead, their cries were full of confidence and determination. They were going to drive back their enemies and win this day.

“Remarkable. Impressive as always, Princess! No doubt Lord Rasmus would have been overjoyed to see you now!” After she finished her speech, Cler

praised her, his voice trembling with emotion. There were also tears in his eyes. It seemed he had been moved by her speech, but Linnea felt shyness more than joy upon hearing his praise.

“No, I’ve still got a long way to go. My voice trembled a bit. I feel like I was hurrying through my words. Father or Rasmus would have been able to speak more slowly and with more confidence. And I forgot to mention the star fort.” Linnea let out a soft sigh and critiqued her own performance. While she was extremely kind to others, she was almost equally as hard on herself in turn. But the fact that she was her harshest critic and learned from even the smallest of mistakes was why she had grown into such a capable leader.

“You go to all that trouble and then almost ruin it all by showing the soldiers your crestfallen expression. You still let down your guard too early.” A cold, gravelly voice struck at her ears and heart. That was because the criticism it directed at her was absolutely valid. That didn’t make it any easier to deal with the malice behind the comment, however. She knew who it was without needing to turn to face the newcomer.

“Thank you for your critique. I’ll be sure to watch myself next time, Lord Bruno.” Linnea wiped the emotion from her face and put on a polite smile, faintly bowing her head. Despite her youth, she was still a skilled politician, and she could handle this level of criticism with tact.

“Yes, please do. Anxiety on the part of the army’s leader will quickly find its way into the hearts of the rank and file.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Of course. You did well otherwise. I would say you handled the situation acceptably, to be honest.”

“Huh?” Linnea couldn’t contain the faint squeak of surprise. Even in her wildest dreams, she wouldn’t have imagined he’d praise her.

“We’ve managed to reinforce their morale. Thank you.”

“A-Ah, of course,” Linnea said with a blank look of surprise.

This prompted a skeptical look from Bruno. “Is something wrong...?”

She struggled to process her thoughts for a moment, but she quickly came to a decision. They were fighting side by side, so it was best to clear the air between them. “Well, I was just surprised to be praised and thanked by you. Honestly, I’ve always felt you didn’t like me.”

“That is true. I’m not particularly fond of you,” Bruno responded with a snort, his expression one of lingering distaste. “Still, without you, the soldiers might not have regained their composure, and our city might have fallen as a result. Setting aside my personal feelings, I’m obliged to thank you,” he said in a rapid flow of words before turning away. When she looked closely at his face, she saw his cheeks were faintly flushed. It seemed as though he was feeling a little shy.

“Pfft.” Linnea couldn’t hold back her laughter.

This man was the head of those who had wanted to remain. She had blithely written him off as someone who continued to stubbornly defy Yuuto, but all those theatrics were his way of displaying his love for the city of Iárnviðr and the Wolf Clan. Protecting the Wolf Clan and Iárnviðr was everything to him, and that one directive was the basis of all of his decisions. She finally felt like she was beginning to understand him. While he was dismissive of other clans, she didn’t dislike his patriotism to his own clan.

Linnea nodded. “It’s as you say. I have many fond memories of this city as well. Let’s protect it together.” She made a fist with her hand and held it out in front of him. It was Bruno’s turn to stare in shock. However, he immediately understood what she wanted to do, and he curled his lips into a grin. “Of course. I have no intention of giving our city over to those ruffians.”

The two bumped fists.

Simultaneous with the events occurring inside the walls, Shiba was rapidly giving orders and urging on his troops as the Flame Clan Army continued its assault.

“Push! Puuush! Don’t give them time to regroup! Shout as loudly as your lungs will let you! Make as much noise as you can!”

While it was pointless to raise one’s voice in a one-on-one battle, the effect it

had in large-scale combat was something else entirely. Huge battles like these weren't always about defeating or killing the enemy. The key to winning these kinds of engagements was breaking the enemy's morale. Raising a loud cheer showed an army's morale and momentum, and if it was leveraged properly, it could lead the enemy to believe they couldn't win, which could cause their ranks to collapse.

Shiba could tell with a single glance at the soldiers atop the walls that the repeated barrages from the province destroyers were having a powerful effect on the morale of those stationed there. Their fear of this new and mysterious weapon had clearly taken them aback, not to mention the destruction of their city's gates. The murmurs among the defenders seemed to grow louder. Seeing an opportunity to bring the battle to a close, Shiba prepared to order his forces to charge. As he began to speak, a cheer rose from the men within the city.

"Sieg Iárn! Sieg Iárn!"

There was no trace of fear in their voices, and they were clearly prepared to fight.

"Tch. They've already rallied themselves. We're done for now. Signal our retreat. We'll try again later." Shiba clicked his tongue in frustration, but quickly issued orders to withdraw. While he was known as an aggressive general for the strength of his charges, he wasn't reckless or bullheaded. He would not hesitate to charge forward to make the best of an opportunity, but when he knew he had lost his chance for victory, he was able to put aside any notion of making up for losses and would quickly withdraw. Most generals would hesitate from fully committing even when the odds of success were overwhelmingly in their favor, while in turn trapping themselves into some form of sunk cost fallacy once their chances of victory had faded. Even as it remained obvious to a discerning eye that all hope was lost, the desperate generals would continue trying to piece together a positive result of some kind to make their efforts seem worthwhile. Being able to coolly and accurately make the decision to attack or withdraw, while not flashy, was Shiba's greatest trait as a general and what made him such a difficult opponent to face.

"Our enemy is rather skilled. It's quite an impressive feat to be able to restore an army's morale so quickly."

While it was easy enough to describe, it was quite difficult to actually pull off. Simply trying to copy what accomplished generals said or did would never produce the expected results. There were many factors that contributed toward success. These ranged from things such as the commander's character, their accumulated history, and even the timbre of their voice and their body language. It was far too impractical in a battle to systematically determine which of these factors would best fit the situation and how best to leverage them. Hence, it was unavoidable for there to be an element of inborn talent in that style of leadership. All this meant that, just based on the opening stages of this battle, it was clear to Shiba the enemy's commander had the requisite character to be a great general or even a king.

"Having someone like that hole up in such a tough fortress? That's a damned hard nut to crack."

The one thing Shiba had learned during his initial attack was that this was an extremely difficult city to attack. The walls that surrounded Iárnviðr were odd in that they were made of a seamless stone, but there was another reason they were different from a normal fortress city. Ordinarily, fortress walls, while perhaps off by a degree or two, were perpendicular to the gates. However, that wasn't the case with Iárnviðr. The walls jutted out at an angle. He had inspected the city before the battle and had discovered that there were five sharp protrusions jutting out from the city. Since he hadn't seen them from above, he couldn't be certain, but if he was imagining it correctly, Iárnviðr's walls had five sharp points that formed an angular flower shape. While he hadn't understood the reason for that shape at first, he was given a painful lesson in why they had been built that way when he tried attacking.

The five "petals" of the flower were essentially giant bastions that formed kill zones. The edges of the petals had fixed ballistae mounted upon them, while the areas near the gate were filled with ordinary archers and crossbowmen, and the moment the enemy approached the gate, they would simultaneously unleash a barrage of arrows. It was a simple enough mechanism. While perpendicular walls had a limit of how much arrow fire they could direct at an enemy as they approached the gates, this shape allowed the defenders to rain down a greater volume of fire with a larger number of soldiers. Had the enemy

not been caught off guard by the province destroyers, he would have taken significant losses from those defenses. On top of that, the city walls were tough enough to withstand bombardment by the province destroyers. He could only describe Iárnviðr as a frightening city to attack.

"We can't waste too much more time here," Shiba said as he started scratching at his scalp. According to his scouts, the Múspell Unit was heading in their direction. If nothing changed, his forces would be caught between the Múspells and the city. That was the last thing he needed.

"One of the important military lessons the Great Lord taught us was to defeat the enemy in detail in situations like these."

If the enemy split their forces, Nobunaga had taught his generals to follow Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and simply destroy the enemy in detail—a process that involved taking out the divided parts of the enemy army before they could coordinate their efforts and flank his forces. If he was to follow that tactic, then he'd need to decide whether to take down the Múspell Unit or Iárnviðr first. In the end, he'd concluded that it would be extremely difficult to break through this city's immensely tough fortifications in such a short amount of time.

"Then shall we take down the Múspell Unit first? I believe their numbers are around two thousand, so we have an overwhelming advantage in that regard. If we wait at Fort Horn, we can have the river on either flank and face their cavalry head-on," Masa said as though he were casually listing off administrative matters.

Shiba was impressed at the fact that, as always, Masa not only considered the size of the enemy force, but also the local terrain. Shiba had a habit of quickly disregarding matters that he wasn't particularly interested in, so while Masa may have lacked the talent to be a general, he was extremely valuable to Shiba for his ability to process and retain information.

"Sigrún, the Múspell commander, is an extremely experienced general. I doubt she'd be so easily drawn into that sort of battle."

From Sigrún's perspective, there wasn't much reason for her to take out Shiba's forces on her own. Given that she was known as by far the greatest general in the Steel Clan, he was certain she wouldn't do something as foolish

as lead a forward charge against a force with much larger numbers, nor would she rush to get results as Kuuga had done at Fort Gashina. Realistically speaking, it was likely that she'd coordinate with the Iárnviðr garrison and guarantee they could field a much larger force capable of completely surrounding the Flame Clan Army before committing to battle.

"We could purposefully draw her out," Masa suggested.

The greatest opportunities were also the times of greatest vulnerability. If the Steel Clan's forces were going to attack the Flame Clan Army from two sides, that would mean the city's defenders would need to leave the safety of their nigh-impenetrable fortifications. He would wait for that moment to come, and when it did, he would commit all of his strength to taking down those units. Once that was done, he would use the momentum of that victory to capture Iárnviðr and face off against the Múspells using the newly captured city. Its walls should be able to hold off even the Múspells.

"That would be too risky," Shiba responded. It was far too dependent on chance. It was unrealistic to expect to be able to quickly defeat an enemy force of equal size. On top of that, the success of the strategy hinged on whether or not the Steel Clan would commit their entire defensive force to the attack. "Still, the idea of drawing them out into the open in order to defeat them isn't a bad one. If we could make it just a little more reliable, I feel like it'd be a wise strategy to employ..."

"Pardon me, My Lord. Lord Kuuga has sent a messenger!"

"What?! Let him through!" Shiba barked.

This was the very definition of good timing. The messenger who appeared before him was a plump old man with a rather unique bushy white mustache. Shiba had never seen him before, but he had an odd aura of authority to him. The old man bowed his head and introduced himself. "A pleasure to meet you, Lord Shiba. I am Lord Kuuga's messenger. My name is Alexis."

ACT 4

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“The enemy is attacking! I repeat, the enemy is attacking!”

“Ugh... Again?”

Yuuto was yanked out of his slumber and back to the waking world by the clangor of gongs and shouts. The room in front of him was still dark. He grabbed his smartphone from next to his pillow and activated it with the fingerprint sensor. It was 1:12 a.m. He had gone to bed around 11 p.m., so he had gotten perhaps two hours of sleep.

“They really won’t let us rest, will they?” Felicia, who had been sleeping next to him, said with a mix of fatigue, resignation, and resentment. Her current state of mind was understandable. Over the past week, the Flame Clan Army had bombarded the walls in irregular intervals during the day, and at night, they had mixed in sapper units as well as feints that involved false battle cries. All of these things piled more and more pressure onto the defenders and robbed them of any opportunity to sleep. Although Yuuto was aware that these were commonly employed siege tactics, it didn’t make it any easier to deal with. Yuuto quickly jumped out of his tent and headed to the command center a short walk away. Fagrahvél and Bára were already there, as they had been placed in command as he tried to rest.



“What’s the situation?!” Yuuto asked.

“Your Majesty?! I thought you were going to leave things to us and get some rest.”

“Well, I’m far too awake now to go back to sleep. Fill me in.” Yuuto waved off Fagrahvél’s concerned question and instead encouraged her to answer his question.

“They’re attacking the west wall this time. Our archers responded quickly, and the enemy immediately retreated.”

“And the damage?”

“They’re still checking, but based on what could be heard, there were likely only around a hundred or so men. I don’t believe they would have accomplished much.”

“I see. But even a stream can eventually wear down a mountain.”

The Gjallarbrú Fortress was built to stop the Flame Clan Army’s advance. It was constructed entirely out of concrete and had been built without a single entrance on the far side. All concerns about blocking a major artery in Yggdrasil’s road network had been completely disregarded. However, the focused fire of the cannons was slowly chipping away at the fortress walls. On top of that, sappers would approach the walls under the cover of darkness and use axes and hammers to make the breaches larger. Had they been focusing on a single point, the Steel Clan could have stationed their defenders on that point, but Nobunaga was aware of that and was attacking multiple locations at once, and completely at random, to prevent the defenders from being able to predict his next move.

“It would have been better if we could have had kill holes for arrows or spears, but...” Fagrahvél said and furrowed her brow in disappointment.

Yggdrasil had nothing in the way of electrical lighting. At night, bonfires and torches were needed to create adequate visibility, and there were limits to how much light they gave off, particularly when they could only realistically be placed on the top of the wall. Yuuto agreed with Fagrahvél in that he would have liked to have a method to look out for the enemy lower down on the wall.

However...

“Stop blaming yourself. There would have been no way to finish the wall in time if we had included anything like that. I’ve said it several times now, but you did an amazing job.”

The fact that they were able to create such a long wall in such a short time was because it was built in an extremely simple manner: two adobe walls made of brick with concrete poured in between them. As for the wall’s appearance, there were spots along it where the concrete had seeped out between the bricks, and the entire thing was sloppily constructed in a way that resembled a child’s art project. Even by cutting corners and utilizing Fagrahvél’s Rune of Kings, they had just barely completed the wall in time. Had they tried to add in kill holes for spears and archers, they probably wouldn’t have managed to finish even half of the wall. In that sense, they were in a much better situation than they would have been in otherwise.

“You honor me more than I deserve. However, the fact of the matter is that we’re still on the back foot against the enemy here.”

“Yeah, true.” Yuuto’s features twisted into a frown.

They usually only noticed an enemy attack when the Flame Clan soldiers started to hammer away at the wall. Because of the head start this gave the enemy troops, the attackers were able to get in several blows against the wall before the defending Steel Clan soldiers could respond appropriately, and because this was all occurring under the cover of darkness, the defenders were unable to accurately hit the enemy attackers, meaning they were able to get away unscathed. Even so, they couldn’t just leave the enemy to continue to chip away at their walls. Right now, they were letting the Flame Clan get the better of them.

“That said, I don’t intend to just sit back and let them get away with it. I’ve already taken steps against it,” Yuuto said as his lips curled up into a grin. He wasn’t so confident in his ability to improvise that he thought he could deal with the situation as it developed. His way of doing things was to prepare his measures in advance. “Lord Nobunaga is, frankly, an all-around genius. His strategies are extremely logical, his ideas are sharp and innovative, and he has

the power and charisma to shatter existing concepts. He's a ridiculously capable warlord, whether he's leading field battles or sieges. Of course, it's not like he has no weaknesses at all."

"He has a weakness?" Fagrahvél leaned forward to ask.

"Oh? I find it hard to believe that monster has anything of the sort," Hveðrungr, who had kept his silence until that point, also inquired with great interest. He had actually crossed swords with Nobunaga in his last campaign and knew from experience just how dangerous an opponent the man was. The ludicrously powerful aura of intimidation Nobunaga radiated was something that had to be experienced to be believed.

"And that weakness is?"

"Oh, that's... Mm?" Yuuto paused mid-sentence and turned around, glaring at a single point.

"An enemy attack?" Fagrahvél sighed out the question.

Yuuto nodded. "I think so. I felt malice. The center, I think."

"Very well. Messenger, it's as His Majesty said. Hurry and send word to the defenders in the center!" Fagrahvél issued the order to a nearby soldier, who quickly ran off to communicate his message. She then quickly issued additional orders, and the command center was lit up with activity.

"Lately, you've been almost godlike, Big Brother. It's quite the feat to have been able to feel an enemy's presence from such a vast distance," Felicia said with a note of admiration. Over the past week, Yuuto had somehow detected the enemy's attacks several times despite being at the command center, which was located some distance away from the front lines. He was able to feel the enemy's malice and hostility. At first, he thought it was just his imagination, but he felt a strange surge of anxiety and sent his soldiers in the direction that he felt the hostility radiating from, and each time, there had been an enemy presence there.

"It's not something that I should be given credit for. Given that it keeps happening, it's probably from the power of the twin runes that Rífa left me." Yuuto smiled a sad, affectionate smile. During his recent war with the Silk Clan,

he had suddenly been able to see the locations of both his and the enemy armies in his mind. At that moment, Yuuto had felt his twin runes awaken, though not to their full potential.

“I see. It’s similar to the power you described back then. That would make sense,” Felicia responded.

“Not quite. It feels a bit different from that. Hey, remember when I checked my powers? I found out that my runes were Hervör, Guardian of the Host, and Herfjötur, Fetter of the Host, right?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just a hunch, but I’m pretty sure the ability to locate the armies is thanks to Herfjötur, and this ability to sense intent is due to Hervör.”

“Oh, really? It seems to me that they’re the same ability.” Felicia tilted her head quizzically.

She had a point. At a glance, they seemed very similar, but Yuuto knew in his own mind that they were clearly different abilities.

“It’s all a bit nebulous, but being able to grasp where the armies are is like looking at the battlefield from above. I can just see them, it’s as simple as that. As far as the ability to sense intent goes, that’s something I literally feel on my skin. It’s a hot sensation if I sense their will to fight, and if that intent is malicious, it becomes an uncomfortable, creepy feeling.”

Masters of combat are said to be able to feel an enemy’s intent when facing off against an opponent and can feel that intent faster than the enemy can move. Felicia hadn’t reached that level just yet, but Sigrún, Skáviðr, and Hildegard could, evidently, clearly sense these things when facing off against their opponents. Yuuto was sure that what they experienced was something close to the feeling that he felt.

“I see. It does make sense. You’re very good at reading people’s emotions, after all, Big Brother. That’s probably been strengthened by the power of the twin runes.”

“Yeah, that’s probably what it is.”

The greatest trauma that Yuuto had suffered in his life was the death of his sworn father, Fárbauti, and the subsequent banishment of his sworn brother Loptr, both events having occurred because he had been oblivious to how others were feeling. In the aftermath of that, he had sworn to himself that he would make a conscious effort to observe and pay attention to the emotions of others, and his new position as patriarch had forced him to develop that skill set very quickly. It definitely felt like that ability, one he had spent the past few years honing, had indeed been strengthened by his twin runes.

"However, it's strange when I think about it. Your runes are supposed to be sealed by the Gleipnir that was used to summon you back here, are they not?"

"Yeah. Even when I look at them now, they're still sealed. When I was able to use Hervör, I felt Rífa's presence."

"Yes, I recall you mentioning that."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say she's probably doing what she can to lend me her strength."

Yuuto thought of his late wife affectionately and offered her a silent thanks. He had no proof, and there was no way to be certain either. Regardless of that, though, he was strangely certain that she was right there with him.

"My Great Lord, it appears that our attack on the wall's center failed. The enemy had been anticipating the arrival of our men."

"So it would seem. Given how many times this has happened, it cannot be shrugged off as mere coincidence."

As he listened to Ran's report, Nobunaga casually yanked out a few nose hairs and snorted. It was quite eerie for an enemy to detect his sappers, especially so when they had approached the walls under the cover of darkness and had been dressed entirely in black, as well as not wearing armor to avoid making any noise during their approach. However, this world was home to many Einherjar —people who were gifted with supernatural powers. On top of that, the young Suoh Yuuto possessed several mysterious technologies that even Nobunaga had no knowledge or understanding of. In Nobunaga's mind, this wasn't a particularly surprising development.

“The fact that the sappers managed to succeed on occasion and catch the enemy unawares means it’s not some strange technology from the lad’s era that’s detecting them. With that in mind, the most likely culprit is the power of an Einherjar.”

“I agree,” Ran replied and nodded. Were it some kind of mechanical detection method, the sentries would be taking advantage of it, and every attempt by the sappers to reach the wall would have failed as a result. By contrast, if the reason for their failures was due to an Einherjar’s ability, it wouldn’t matter how powerful they were; they were still human after all, and at some point, the rune’s wielder would need to sleep. In line with that reasoning, the sappers’ successful approaches had indeed occurred when the Einherjar responsible was asleep.

“What of our losses?”

“I’m told four were hit by arrows and require treatment. None of our men were killed.”

“Ah, as expected. The defenders may well be able to tell our men are making their move, but their archers can’t actually see our forces approaching the wall.” With that, Nobunaga flicked his nose hairs into the wind. Had the enemy archers been able to see their sappers, they would have taken much greater casualties. As things stood, the enemy was simply making guesses as to the general location of the enemy units and was firing projectiles blindly in that direction. That, too, helped Nobunaga eliminate something technological as the reason for the enemy’s capability to detect the Flame Clan’s sappers ahead of their attacks. Thanks to those deductions, he knew there was nothing to fear. “Have our men continue the cannon barrages during the day and sapping attacks at night, as per our existing plans.”

“Yes, My Lord. We’ll continue to grind away at both the wall and the enemy’s morale.”

That was a foundational tactic in siege warfare. A lack of sleep would rob the enemy of physical strength, awareness, and intelligence. What the Flame Clan needed to do was steadily weaken their enemy by maintaining the pressure against them.

“A lion will use all its strength even when hunting a hare. And Suoh Yuuto is no hare; he is a lion like me. If we underestimate him, he might very well tear out my throat.”

Nobunaga wasn’t one to gamble on the outcome of a battle. Ever since the Battle of Okehazama, where he had faced ruin at the hands of an enemy with overwhelming numerical superiority, he had made certain to always secure more soldiers than his enemy, create the circumstances needed for victory, and secure that victory before even the first shot was fired.

He was still in the preparation phase of his campaign. He knew that he needed to use brute force to defeat his enemy to demonstrate his strength to the world, but Nobunaga wasn’t so naive to believe that he needed to face his enemy on equal terms and win a direct battle to achieve that outcome. What he needed to do was create the appearance of him winning an equal battle. Even if the enemy had been mentally and physically drained, so long as he defeated them in a frontal clash, the people of the world would accept that Nobunaga had defeated the old order fair and square. Nobunaga already viewed Yuuto as his equal, which was why he had no intention of holding back against him. After all, the stakes in this clash were the authority over and existence of their respective clans.

“Oh, My Great Lord! Good morning to you!”

The next morning, Nobunaga was taking a stroll when a soldier called over to him. Nobunaga turned to the soldier, smiling as he waved jauntily.

“Hello there, sentry. Good work. I’m impressed you noticed me. It means you’ve been doing your job well. Allow me to praise you.”

“Th...Thank you very much!” The soldier’s face was flushed with pleasure, and he replied with enthusiasm, bowing his head to Nobunaga. To the soldier, Nobunaga was the very epitome of a great liege lord. Nobunaga had suddenly appeared at the doors of the Flame Clan, immediately seized the title of patriarch, implemented countless reforms that improved the lives of the people, and expanded the Flame Clan’s territories by several times their original size. He was a great hero who had brought prosperity to the clan. To be

thanked for his work and praised by such a man was perhaps the greatest joy that a soldier might ever experience.

“Keep up the good work.” Nobunaga gently patted the soldier on the shoulder and walked off.

Continuing his walk, Nobunaga cheerfully called out to the soldiers he encountered along the way.

“Ah, training, are you? Hard at work, I see! Do your best!”

“Hey, you. You look pale. Cut your training short and rest.”

“How are your injuries? I’m glad to see you’ve returned to us alive.”

While Nobunaga treated the upper echelons of his forces sternly and without mercy, he was also a man who had a softer side. He often interacted casually and cheerfully with his rank-and-file troops, as well as those who were dismissed as inferior by the rest of society.

The primary literary sources from the Warring States Period, titles such as Luis Frois’s *Historia de Japon*, noted that Nobunaga spoke casually with even the lowest ranking of his subordinates, while the *Shincho Koki (The Chronicles of Nobunaga)* brought up examples of Nobunaga participating in festivals and dancing alongside commoners. He would even partake in activities like wiping the sweat off their bodies. There also existed an anecdote of him telling the people of a particular village that he would like them to build a hut and feed a man born with a deformity that had resulted in the people of the village treating him like a mountain monkey. He also obliged them to provide the man with cotton. While he was known as a merciless and frightening figure among those who broke the law or those who disobeyed him, those particular traits were not wielded against the common people who lived their lives peacefully under his rule. It was because of examples like these that records often noted that Nobunaga was extremely popular and admired by the common people within his realms. The same held true in Yggdrasil.

“The Great Lord is such a wonderful man.”

“He cares about even us lowly soldiers and speaks to us as though we were his children.”

“For sure. He’s nothing like the arrogant and overbearing lords who oppress us.”

“Yeah! He is the man most suited to be þjóðann.”

The common soldiers were all full of praise for their lord. Due to the widespread conscription that Nobunaga had conducted, the bulk of the Flame Clan Army was now mainly made up of peasant farmers rather than professional soldiers. Conscripted soldiers often suffered from low morale, and this issue was often exacerbated if a war dragged on. However, that common wisdom didn’t apply to the Flame Clan Army. If anything, their morale rose with each passing day, and they were becoming more unified as an army. Nobunaga’s ability to achieve such things was one of the many things that marked him as the great man that had brought an end to one hundred years of civil war back in his homeland.

“Rot! Rot! Keep rotting!”

“I see you’re hard at work.”

Having arrived at his destination, Nobunaga called out to the girl who was dancing around a row of huts while chanting a rather ominous song. Her black hair, black eyes, and ivory skin set her apart from others here in Yggdrasil. Her name was Homura. She was the beloved daughter of Nobunaga, born to him and a local woman here in Yggdrasil.

“Oh, daddy!” Noticing Nobunaga’s arrival, Homura stopped her dance, her face breaking out in a happy smile as she dashed over to him. “Homura’s been working hard like you said, daddy!”

“Wonderful. You’re a very good girl, Homura.”

“Hehe!”

When Nobunaga patted her head, Homura giggled with a shy smile. Nobunaga found her reaction adorable and lightly ruffled her hair.

“Tee hee! More, more!”

“Heh. Very well.”

After thoroughly petting and ruffling her hair, Nobunaga turned his attention to a nearby wooden box. His lips curled up into a pleased smile. “Great results today, I see. Brilliant as always.”

White stones were piled high inside the wooden box. Those white stones were saltpeter. It was one of the ingredients necessary for the production of black powder, and it was the most difficult material to procure—a strategic resource that was of critical importance in the gunpowder era. The nearby huts were essentially the assembly line of an enormous saltpeter production factory.

Traditional Japanese saltpeter production was a process that involved soaking wormwood root in horse urine, then keeping that mixture stored at a particular temperature over a period of several years. The process created a large quantity (for the time) of saltpeter, and it had been an extremely important military secret for the Satsuma Clan and Hongan-ji Temple. Nobunaga had learned of the techniques required for its manufacture during his conflict with Hongan-ji Temple, and he had set up a secret production facility in a place called Gokayama. He had repeated that process here in Yggdrasil.

“Hehe... Is Homura a good girl?”

“But of course! You are a great girl! It’s thanks to you that two of the army’s biggest supply problems have been solved. It is no exaggeration to say that you’re the one who’s done the most for the Flame Clan in this war.” With that, Nobunaga once again patted her head.

He was telling the truth. The current advantage the Flame Clan enjoyed was largely due to the twin runes that Homura possessed. The first rune held the power to accelerate the growth of plants. Using that, she had solved the Flame Clan Army’s food supply problem. The second rune gave her the ability to control animals other than herself, and similarly to her first rune’s ability, allowed her to strengthen them. That said, it was difficult to make use of that ability on intelligent animals such as humans. She was only able to dominate lesser animals—ones that weren’t very smart. At first, Nobunaga had treated that ability as a useful tool for training horses, but one day she achieved a remarkable feat using it. She had managed to shorten the time it took to produce saltpeter.

According to Homura, the piles that produced the saltpeter were filled with tiny animals that they couldn't see with the naked eye. Manipulating and strengthening those animals dramatically sped up the saltpeter production process. Given that Homura was still a child and her explanation was rather vague, Nobunaga wasn't quite certain what the mechanism behind this process was, but what mattered to him was the fact that she had managed to shorten the process of creating saltpeter from a lengthy two years to less than two weeks. That meant that Nobunaga could use tanegashimas and province destroyers without worrying about his powder supply. That gave the Flame Clan an enormous advantage in many respects.

"I believe that only a few moves remain until we finally force the checkmate. So, Suoh Yuuto, if you have a way to flip this board over, go ahead and try it," Nobunaga said with a wry grin growing upon his features. He bared his canine teeth in a predatory smile.

He knew that his own feelings were at odds with one another. Nobunaga's most basic strategy in any war was to gather more soldiers than his enemy, sap the enemy's strength, create an advantageous situation for himself, then win after securing certain victory through those preparations. In essence, Nobunaga's style of warfare was to win with as little resistance as possible. Despite that, however, his heart was longing for his enemy to fulfill his expectations. There was a part of him that wanted nothing more than for his worst-case scenarios to come to fruition. He wanted desperately for Suoh Yuuto to be a man who could face him as an equal and rival as a commander. He wanted Yuuto to be the one opponent that could challenge him head on.

Meanwhile, far away from Gjallarbrú, in the city of Iárnviðr, Linnea let out a big yawn. It was extremely unusual for the exceedingly serious young woman to let something like that happen in public, but it was also perfectly understandable given recent events.

By all accounts, Iárnviðr was nearly impregnable. Its walls were arranged in the style of a star fort, and the entire city was surrounded by a moat. There had only been one actual assault by the enemy, but they had continued bombarding the city with their cannons all day and all night. She was never particularly

brave, and if anything, was of a nervous disposition. Linnea had bags under her eyes, and it was clear she hadn't been getting enough sleep.

"If you're tired, perhaps you ought to get some rest? We can handle everything here," Bruno said, snorting with a faint chuckle. While the words on their own were gentle, his expression and tone were both full of condescension and disdain. Linnea had thought they'd settled some of their differences during the recent Flame Clan assault, but it seemed she had underestimated just how twisted the man's personality actually was. He may have had no problem fighting alongside Linnea, but he evidently had no intention of handing her the initiative. She could understand his feelings to some extent, but it still made him a bothersome man to deal with.

"I'm fine. We're getting into the tougher stuff now. As the commander in chief, I can't very well be asleep while everyone's fighting."

"If you say so. Shall we continue our discussion, then?"

"I believe the time has come for us to go on the offensive," Linnea declared confidently, without a trace of hesitation.

It had been an hour since a messenger pigeon from the Múspell Unit had arrived, informing those within the city that they were in the vicinity and were awaiting orders from their garrison at Fort Horn. The reinforcements they had been holding out for had finally arrived. The Steel Clan now clearly had a numerical advantage, and they were in a position to catch the enemy between their two forces. The enemy had plenty of foodstuffs and gunpowder, meaning there was little possibility that they'd retreat due to a lack of supplies. The Steel Clan needed to deal with the Flame Clan Army sitting in front of Iárnviðr if they were going to move the Panther Clan civilians safely toward the east. In fact, if they didn't do so quickly, those civilians would run out of supplies. There was no other option for them but to begin their attack.

"Mm, I agree. Then allow me to lead the first wave—the vanguard." Bruno nodded with a faintly sour smile. Linnea looked somewhat surprised and blinked as she looked at Bruno. While she'd only worn her shocked expression for the briefest of moments and hadn't moved much...

"What, exactly, are you implying with that expression?" Bruno had caught her

surprise and looked at her with displeasure.

Linnea felt a tinge of anxiety in her heart, but she immediately pushed it down and put on her best diplomatic smile. “No, I was just a little surprised. I had thought you would be the most difficult to persuade under these circumstances. So to have you volunteer to lead the first wave was, well...”

From what she had heard, Bruno wasn’t much of a fighter. She still vividly remembered that Bruno had originally proposed simply abandoning the Wolf Clan’s sister clan, the Horn Clan, in the face of the Hoof Clan’s invasion of the Horn Clan’s territory. She’d also heard that he had suggested surrender during the early stages of the Siege of Iárnviðr, having written off the war as lost. That was Yuuto’s very first battle and was the battle that had established his reputation among the neighboring clans.

One of Linnea’s highest priorities at that particular moment was to welcome the Panther Clan caravan into the city as quickly as possible. In contrast, Bruno cared little about the citizens of other clans, his only imperative being to defend Iárnviðr at all costs. She hadn’t expected him to so easily agree with her proposal to charge out from the city and attack the Flame Clan Army head on.

“Hrmph. I suppose that you perceive me to be some sort of coward when the going gets tough; that I can only make bold decisions during peacetime when mine and others’ lives are not on the line.”

“No, that thought had never occurred to me.” Linnea tilted her head and blinked as though she had never once considered him to be like that, but, of course, she was lying. The truth was that she had faintly—no, had thoroughly—suspected that was the case. The anecdote of Bruno’s knees giving out from under him and him soiling himself when faced with Yuuto’s conqueror’s aura was an open secret among the Wolf Clan’s leadership, and Linnea, who had close ties with those people, had heard the story herself.

“I somehow doubt that. I am indeed a hopeless coward. The reason my Big Brother made me Leader of Subordinates rather than Second was likely because I often lost my composure during intense situations and was unable to steel myself to make difficult decisions,” he said self-deprecatingly with a dismissive snort. While the Leader of Subordinates, on paper, was a high-ranking position

within many clans, it also permanently disqualified the occupant of that position from becoming patriarch of their clan. The only conclusion one could draw from this was that his beloved big brother, Fárbauti, had declared that Bruno was unsuited to the role of patriarch. It was easy to imagine the pain and despair that Bruno must have felt at the time.

"It only happens when those situations come on suddenly, though! I've had plenty of time to steel myself for this!" With that, Bruno confidently patted his own stomach. There wasn't a trace of fear in his eyes. Instead, a strong will and determination burned within them.

That determination would have been obvious to anyone who had given it a moment's reflection. Being so intimidated that he'd fallen on his rear and soiled himself was an enormously embarrassing mistake that could very well have cost him his position in the dog-eat-dog world of Yggdrasil. And yet, Bruno had somehow maintained his position as the head of the conservative faction within the Wolf Clan. Looking at it another way, that meant he had enough people that supported and admired him despite that humiliating incident, making it clear that he had the charisma and the character necessary to maintain his reputation despite everything.

"Besides, it would be a pity to not take part in what we already know is a winning battle." With that, Bruno's lips twisted into a malevolent smirk.

"I see. While I hate to admit it, it seems we're rather alike," Linnea said with a dry chuckle. She could understand Bruno's feelings and thought processes like she could her own. She, too, often took time to reach a decision because she was too busy considering all the potential complications and consequences. Because of this, however, once she had come to a decision, she never wavered from it. She could remain steadfast in her choice because she had already thoroughly considered all the alternatives and possibilities.

"Very well. Lord Bruno, I leave the command of the vanguard to you. You'll depart tomorrow morning! Go and show them what we're made of!" Linnea ordered with a low, confident voice.

"Of course. I accept the honor of leading the charge," Bruno responded in an unusually formal tone and bowed his head. That atmosphere only lasted for a

brief moment, however. Soon after, both of them burst out in laughter.

“Heh. I see that you have finally arrived, Sigrún.” Shiba chuckled with pleasure as he read through the note brought to him by one of his spies. He had been the one who had perhaps been most anticipating this news.

“So, it begins soon.”

“Yeah. At long last. My beloved blade is crying out for action,” Shiba replied as he placed his hand on the hilt of the sword sheathed upon his hip.

Tradition had it that a weapon crafted by a master swordsmith was imbued with a soul of its own. The soul that made its home in his blade urged Shiba to hurry up—to provide an opportunity for it to fight. It yearned to be unleashed upon the world. It might very well have been just an illusion. It was also possible it was just him projecting his own wishes upon his sword. In Shiba’s mind, however, he had no doubt that it was the sword calling out to him.

“You’re determined to act?” Masa asked with a solemn expression.

It wasn’t that Shiba couldn’t understand what Masa was feeling, but...

“You don’t seem to be on board with this plan.”

“Of course not. Honestly, I don’t believe that it’s worth it.”

“Well, yeah. I know. This is the best option we have, though.”

“Do you truly believe that? Are you convinced that this decision isn’t being influenced by your emotions?”

“Yeah. This plan holds the greatest chance of succeeding.”

“Very well.” While it was with a great deal of reluctance, Masa finally nodded his assent. It seemed the exchange had let him make peace with the plan. He let out a soft sigh before returning to his usual frank and administrative tone of voice. “Our preparations are already complete. The only question is whether or not we can lure them in.”

“They’ll come. After all, the bait will be far too good to resist.” The corners of Shiba’s lips curled into a cocky grin.

While it may have sounded rather like he was singing his own praises, outside of Nobunaga, Shiba was the best known of the Flame Clan's generals. Defeating him would remove a major threat and would substantially boost Steel Clan morale while simultaneously damaging Flame Clan morale immensely—a combination of boons that would be difficult to ignore. It was a rare and irresistible opportunity for the enemy.

"Right then. Masa, make sure the soldiers get plenty to eat tonight. I'll even permit a mug of wine to go with it."

"To all of them?" Unusually for him, Masa seemed to have concerns about following Shiba's orders. After a moment's hesitation, Masa decided to plainly voice his concerns. "Are you sure that's a good idea? If all of them get a drink, then we'll be defenseless if they attack us during the night..."

"Heh, that won't happen. Though that's just my intuition talking." Shiba laughed, but he was absolutely certain about that. His voice carried a self-assurance that bordered on arrogance. "First of all, they have no reason to attack us when they've already got powerful reinforcements on the way."

"Well, yes, but there's still the one-in-a-thousand possibility that..." Masa interjected.

"That's certainly true. In the end, it's all about those one-in-a-thousand possibilities. Even if it does come to pass, however, it won't have any impact on our plan," Shiba responded plainly.

At most, it would mean a few more losses on their side. Those who would die were simply unlucky. They would have to accept their fate. The strong survive, and the weak perish; that was the fundamental law that governed everything in Yggdrasil. The weak had nothing else to pin the blame on but their own powerlessness.

"With that in mind, isn't it better to have the soldiers face tomorrow's battle with full stomachs, plenty of rest, and high morale, rather than having them fitfully spend the night watching for an ambush?"

"I-I suppose so..." Masa said with a tone of admiration.

On the battlefield, half-hearted commitments were perhaps the most deadly.

For that reason, generals were required to have the clarity of judgment and firm decisiveness to toss aside one thing and focus on a particular strength during an emergency. That was, of course, much easier said than done.

“If I had to explain my reasons for my decision, that probably sums it up.” Shiba nodded as though he was satisfied with his explanation.

Putting his decisions into easily understandable words was one of Shiba’s greatest strengths. Most people tended to make decisions based on vague feelings that told them it was the right choice. Of course, since they were only vague feelings, those decisions were often misguided. Dissecting, analyzing, and correcting those vague feelings each and every day—converting them from vague notions to actual reasons—was a process that Shiba had spent years, even decades, refining.

Eventually, his decision-making abilities had overtaken his mind in how he processed information. What this meant was that once he had made a decision, he could then come up with many reasons as to why it was the right course of action. In short, Shiba now subconsciously sorted and processed all of those reasons and arrived at his decision. It was essentially subconscious intuition fueled by rational thought. It was because of this ability that Shiba was able to correctly make split-second decisions in the heat of battle.

“With all that said, I’m going to get some sleep.” He then rolled over onto his back. A moment later, Shiba began to snore. The sheer nerve that let him sleep without any anxiety about the coming battle was part of what made him such a successful general.

Some time had passed, and then...

“Ah!”

Shiba immediately sat up from his slumber. How long had he slept? There was a clear tension in the air. It was the smell of battle—a scent that was as familiar to him as his own home.

“The gods are on our side for this war! All forces, charge!”

Bruno drew the sword from his hip and shouted out orders, prompting a

cheer to erupt from the Steel Clan forces. They were burning with anger. The soldiers had been looking for an opportunity to vent their frustrations.

“Excellent. Begin your charge in...”

Bang! *Bang*! *Bang*!

“Gah!”

“Ngh!”

“Argh!”

A series of loud bangs rang through the air, and several Steel Clan soldiers collapsed. They were being fired upon by arquebuses.

Bang! *Bang*! *Bang*!

“Guh!”

“Urgh!”

“Ack!”

Perhaps twenty seconds later, another volley cut through the air, and more soldiers collapsed under the fusillade.

“Confound it! They read our approach!” Bruno clicked his tongue with a look of annoyance.

With a single loader, an arquebus usually took over sixty seconds to prepare and load. By dividing the labor between loaders and gunners, it was possible to substantially shorten the reloading time. This was something the Steel Clan Army had implemented as well, but it was a difficult system to maintain under the chaos of a sudden assault. The fact that the Flame Clan troops were firing so rapidly meant that they had already been prepared for the Steel Clan’s approach. “I can see how he was able to overwhelm Sigrún in battle.”

Even in a one-on-one duel, no matter how fast and powerful a strike, if the defender was aware that it would be a strike from a high stance coming down at him ten seconds later, even an amateur was capable of dodging that attack. That was why the outcomes of battles depended on determining and gauging timing more than anything else. By that measure, the truly great generals were

immensely sharp individuals who could, at times, read ten or even twenty steps ahead of their opponent. It seemed that the decisions of politicians like Linnea or Bruno were extremely easy for a highly experienced general like Shiba to read.

Gongs echoed from behind the vanguard forces. “There’s the signal! All forces halt! Great shield companies, forward march!” Bruno curled his lips into a smirk as he translated the orders from the gongs for his men. Neither Linnea nor Bruno were particularly skilled tacticians, but they were well aware that life never went as planned. It would have been best if their ambush had succeeded, but they had already planned for the possibility of its failure.

Bang! *Bang*! *Bang*!

No screams could be heard in the wake of the third barrage of gunfire. The orders issued earlier meant that the front line was being protected by the great shield companies, infantry units who had been equipped with thick steel shields specially designed to resist gunfire. By crouching behind their shields and holding them out in the right manner, they created a wall that the enemy arquebuses were unable to penetrate.

“There’s nothing to fear! Slowly but surely, we shall close the distance with the enemy!”

Having regrouped and reorganized their lines, the Steel Clan forces resumed their slow advance toward the enemy. While the Flame Clan troops continued to unleash more and more volleys into the Steel Clan ranks during their advance, it did nothing to stop their forward progress.

They had essentially implemented techniques used by riot police in their charges. It was a tactic that came from the 21st century. While bows could be fired upward and rain down arrow fire from an angle that would go over the shield line, it was an extremely effective formation against firearms that were only effective when used as direct-fire weapons. Of course, here in Yggdrasil it was impossible to create ballistic shields as light as the duralumin shields used by modern riot police, so these shield companies tended to be much slower than standard infantry.

“So, how will you respond next, Flame General?”

Neither Linnea nor Bruno actually wanted to defeat Shiba by their own hand. They were, in the end, a decoy to make it easier for Sigrún's Múspell Unit to attack the enemy from behind. Given that the Flame Clan Army had noticed the attack from the force that had emerged from the safety of Iárnviðr's walls, they were probably also aware that the Múspell Unit was now close by, which meant...

A loud roar that shook the very air on the battlefield bellowed out from the Flame Clan troops standing before them, and it was followed by the rumble of footsteps as they shook the ground underfoot with their sheer numbers. A weak-willed individual might very well have turned and ran from such a mob, but Bruno's face was lit by a bright smile.

"Heh. Of course that's what they'd do."

From the moment they'd caught the Flame Clan Army between the two forces, the advantage shifted to the Steel Clan Army, and that advantage would only continue to grow as the battle dragged on. So, for the Flame Clan, their only option for survival was to quickly close the gap with the force that had made their way out from Iárnviðr and defeat it before the two Steel Clan units could complete their envelopment of the Flame Clan forces.

As far as the Múspell Unit was concerned, it was an extremely mobile unit that would be nearly impossible for the current Flame Clan forces to wipe out. It was also abundantly clear that if the Múspells were to be defeated, the unit that had left the safety of the city would simply retreat back into Iárnviðr and hole up behind its formidable walls once more. That would be an extremely troublesome situation for the Flame Clan to find itself in.

With all that in mind, their only feasible target was the force that had come out to face them, given that it provided them with an opportunity to break their ranks and take over Iárnviðr itself.

Once again, orders came from the gongs in the rear for all forces to halt.

"Heh, I was told she wasn't much of a tactician, but I can see why she's the Second of the Steel Clan despite her age. She's got a good eye for seeing the big picture," Bruno said with a soft chuckle. It was, in fact, extremely good timing. It would have been less than desirable to have the Flame Clan believe that he had

ordered the vanguard to stop early.

“Archers! Gunners! Present arms!” Bruno issued the orders without hesitation. He and Linnea were both extremely cautious people. They were the sort who had preplanned solutions ready for any possible developments in battle. While they weren’t so good at dealing with the unexpected, the current situation was something they had already anticipated.

“Arquebuses are a weapon best suited for defense. Not much chance of firing multiple volleys while charging.”

It was something Yuuto had explained in the past, and since he had actually handled them as a defender, Bruno was well aware of that characteristic of arquebuses. In an extreme sense, bows could be fired while on the run, as the archer could draw arrows from the quivers on their backs, but with arquebuses, it was necessary to stop and kneel down to properly load them. This meant that the Flame Clan Army wouldn’t be able to use their matchlocks once they had gone on the offensive and begun their advance. If they did, they would manage to fire off a single volley at best. Simultaneously, now that the Steel Clan Army was stationary, they now had the time to prepare and aim their arquebuses at the approaching enemy.

“Now it’s your turn to be subjected to a fusillade... Mm?” Bruno noticed out of the corner of his eye that the Flame Clan had released something red into the air. They were still barely at effective bowshot distance, meaning something that could be seen clearly from their current position had to be quite large. Three such objects were launched in rapid succession at his forces.
“Trebuchets! All forces, beware of boulders from above!”

They had already confirmed that the Flame Clan had used trebuchets at the Siege of Fort Gashina as well as during the opening stages of the Siege of Iárnviðr. With that said, trebuchets weren’t nearly as great a threat in a field battle as they were in a siege. They were easy to see from a distance, and they weren’t capable of sustaining a high rate of fire. It was also very easy to avoid their attacks. “They intend to disrupt our lines before they charge, do they? What a futile effort,” Bruno stated confidently.

However, his eyes went wide with shock as he saw what it was that was

actually flying toward them. He quickly barked out new orders. “Gunners! Fire at those water urns!” The urns that had launched in their direction clearly had something inside. What was also clear was that whatever those urns contained would likely harm the Steel Clan Army in some way. If those urns contained gunpowder, then they were essentially giant tetsuhau, and if those were to burst within his ranks, they wouldn’t be able to avoid taking massive losses. He needed to destroy them before they landed. For Bruno to reach that conclusion was perfectly understandable, but in the end, it would only serve to work against him.

Bang! *Ba...Splash*!

“What?! W-Water?!” As water sprayed down upon them, Bruno realized his mistake. Because they had destroyed the urns in mid-flight, it had scattered water droplets over a wide area. It went without saying that rain, which could extinguish the matchlock, was the arquebus’s greatest enemy. Of course, this had been little more than a momentary squall. At most, it would just snuff out the matches of the soldiers who had reacted too slowly to shield their matchlocks. The Steel Clan Army was also equipped with lighters, so they only needed to relight their matches. It wasn’t a particularly serious problem. Or rather, it wouldn’t have been one, if the enemy hadn’t been charging at them at that very moment.

The Steel Clan had just fired a volley at the water urns. Those wasted shots gave the Flame Clan troops ample time to close the distance. Seeing this, the gunners had begun to fall into a panic. They felt an incredible urge to hurry and reload as quickly as possible. The panic that washed over them as they realized that this situation was quickly becoming one that could decide their fates caused every member of the firing lines to fumble and mishandle their weapons. The delay had been all of twenty seconds at most, but that was a lethal delay here on the battlefield. Along with a roar of rage, the sound of metal clashing against metal echoed across the battlefield. The melee had begun.

“I am Shiba of the Flame Clan! Only those who wish to die should stand before me!” With a shout, Shiba readied his halberd and charged into the

enemy ranks. The enemy's front line was a dense wall of heavy shield bearers. Although a man on horseback had several times the charging power of a man on foot, trying to charge headlong into a formation where the shields were braced by more than one person would ordinarily result in the charging warrior bouncing harmlessly off the wall.

"You went out of your way to harden your line, but it's still far too porous to deal with me!" With that remark, Shiba forced his halberd into an opening between the shields, twisted his wrist, and swept his arm sideways.

"Gah!"

His halberd tore through the throat of a Steel Clan soldier, and the victim let out a death cry as he collapsed. The weapon in Shiba's hand combined the thrusting blade of a traditional spear with a side blade for slashing. It was one of the primary weapons used in chariot warfare in Yggdrasil. While he hadn't picked it up with the intention of using it against the wall of great shields, it just happened to be the perfect weapon to pry their defensive line open. Of course, that was true only when it was held in Shiba's hands.

"Argh!"

"What in the blazes is he?! He keeps getting through the smallest openings!"

"And he's absurdly fast! Just how are we supposed to sto—aaagh!"

Screams and angry shouts continued to rise from the throng of Steel Clan soldiers as Shiba cut through their ranks. For the average soldier, a polearm was a difficult weapon to wield with any measure of precision. However, Shiba's skill with his halberd made it seem as though the weapon was an extension of his limbs. That wasn't all there was to it, though. The real mark of his skill was displayed in the precision with which he wielded it—he was akin to a highly practiced artisan dealing with the smallest of carvings. On top of all that, he was moving at a speed that was almost impossible for the naked eye to follow. Frankly, he wasn't an opponent that the rank-and-file soldiers of the Steel Clan Army could possibly handle. It took little time for the supposedly impenetrable line of great shields to collapse under his assault.

"Right then, you mongrels! Follow me!" Shiba held his halberd high into the air and urged on his soldiers, who erupted in an excited cheer in response. The

soldiers on the field had just witnessed the commanding general himself breaking through the enemy's defenses. The morale of the Flame Clan soldiers had reached a fever pitch, and they had worked themselves up into a frenzy of excitement.

"So that's the great general Shiba, eh? He's just as powerful as the rumors say." Deeper within the Steel Clan lines, Bruno watched the red mounted warrior rampage through his forces, and his face twisted into a grimace. The mere presence of that man gave the enemy momentum, while his own forces shrank back from him in fear. Shiba had completely taken the initiative away from him. "We can't allow him to continue like that. The confusion should have settled by now. Have the gunners take him down," Bruno quickly instructed his subordinates.

While he quite frankly didn't like the objects created with technology from the land beyond the heavens, he was pragmatic enough to make use of anything that would give him an advantage. The Wolf Clan soldiers on the battlefield were clan members who would be vital in rebuilding the clan. Each one had an incalculable value to him and the future of the Wolf Clan. He had heard that the Flame Clan had used a volley from the matchlocks to take down Steinþórr, the Dólgþrasir. No matter how powerful Shiba was, he wasn't at the level of that monster, which meant that the arquebuses should be able to take him down too.

"Father! The gunners are ready."

"Good! Fire!"

Bruno swept the sword in his hand in Shiba's direction, and a moment later, the staccato burst of gunfire echoed across the battlefield. Soon after, Shiba had vanished from atop his horse. It seemed his beloved mount had also been caught in the volley, and it wobbled before collapsing in place.

"Heh, we've won. It was foolish for their oh-so-mighty general to lead from the front..."

"Agh!"

"Urgh!"

“He’s alive?! He’s still alive!”

“Surround him! Surround him and kill him!”

Angry shouts rose from the Steel Clan ranks. As he heard the contents of the shouts, Bruno bit down bitterly on his thumbnail. “We missed him. He’s a sharp one.”

Soldiers who had survived countless battlefields were sensitive to the scent of approaching death. Sigrún, for example, was able to easily identify anything that had been poisoned. It was probably that sort of intuition that had let Shiba avoid that fusillade.

“Dismount, all of you! The enemy still has their tanegashimas! Being on horseback just makes you a bigger target!” The authoritative bass could be heard clearly over the chaos of battle. That was likely Shiba’s voice. Following the voice’s commands, the enemy soldiers began dismounting.

“Tch. This makes our guns useless.”

The enemy commander was now in the middle of the Steel Clan’s infantry lines. Certainly, that wasn’t a bad problem to have. It meant that the enemy general was in reach of his soldiers’ blades, after all. The current situation was still to Bruno’s advantage.

“He may be the most powerful warrior in the Flame Clan, but surely he’s not as outrageously powerful as Steinþórr.” That monster with the heart of a tiger would have been able to use his brute strength to effortlessly sweep aside the soldiers in front of him. At the very least, he hadn’t yet seen that bizarre sight unfolding before him, meaning, however powerful he might be, Shiba’s skills were still within the realm of common sensibility. Even Sigrún, the bearer of the title of Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf—by far the greatest warrior in the Steel Clan—wouldn’t be able to survive being surrounded by a hundred enemy soldiers. Skáviðr, Sigrún’s predecessor as Mánagarmr, hadn’t been slain in single combat against a warrior of renown but had fallen to a nameless soldier while fighting alone against overwhelming odds. The sheer weight of numbers could overwhelm even the strongest warrior.

Despite that, however, they hadn’t been able to take Shiba’s head. Bruno shouted in frustration. “Why?! Why can’t we take him down?!” He had ordered

his soldiers to target Shiba first and foremost. Shiba had continued fighting against those odds, deflecting and avoiding the attacks from the common soldiers over the last half hour. The Steel Clan soldiers hadn't managed to wound him at all over that period. If anything, they were on the back foot, with Shiba forcing his way through their formation.

"How is he still going after fighting for this long?! Doesn't he only have a single rune?!" He couldn't understand what was happening. The longest a person could fight at full strength was, at most, ten minutes. For the average fighter, the fear and tension on a battlefield would eat away at the endurance of a combatant and would reduce that fighting time further. And yet, Shiba showed no sign of slowing down and continued to dominate the battlefield.

"Blast it! He's just putting on a brave face. Only a little bit longer... Just a little longer, and he's ours!" Bruno ordered his soldiers to continue fighting. Over the last half hour, he had spent the precious lives of many of his own Wolf Clan soldiers in an effort to kill Shiba. If they were to let him go now, those deaths would have been for nothing. That was an unacceptable outcome for Bruno. On top of that, the enemy general was currently fighting on the front line. An enormous prize had been dangled in front of Bruno. There weren't that many people who could just turn around and let an opportunity like this pass. It was simple human psychology. It was a classic case of the sunk cost fallacy, in which a person continues to invest in a venture after facing setbacks in an effort to make up for the losses they'd suffered in the process. The tantalizing prospect that he could turn it all around with just a little bit of effort would draw him in and pin him into place. Shiba's almost reckless charge had been predicated on that bit of human psychology.

Bruno was already caught in Shiba's web. Had this been Jörgen or Sigrún, or even the late Skáviðr, they would have been able to set aside any hypothetical arguments, accept what was happening in front of them, and made the ruthless call to pull back. Bruno, however, couldn't bring himself to make the decision to cut his losses. He had missed his opportunity to withdraw.

ACT 5

“Pathetic! Come now, is this the best you can do?! Does the Steel Clan have no warriors of note?!”

Shiba easily deflected the spear thrust at him and used the momentum from that action to slam the butt of his halberd against the side of a different enemy soldier. Then, in a fluid motion leading on from the previous blow, Shiba swept his halberd at a low angle, cutting open the throat of an enemy that had tried to thrust a spear into his mount. He felt the presence of an enemy behind him and used his thumb to flick a lead pellet he held in his left hand directly at them. It had little in the way of impact or range, but it was still painful to take a hit from. He could also carry at least a dozen in his hand, and it took minimal effort to flick the pellets with his thumb, so it was an extremely useful weapon to have in a situation like this. This technique would come to be known as “finger bullets” in later Chinese martial arts, but of course, Shiba had no way of knowing anything about that.

“Is he really human?!”

“He’s been fighting all this time, but he’s not slowing down...”

“He’s not even short of breath!”

He heard the fear in the Steel Clan soldiers’ voices. Shiba couldn’t help but snort out a laugh. “How rude! You dare to disregard your own ineptitude and call *me* the monster?! The fact of the matter is that you all are simply too weak!”

Shiba himself was only mortal. If he were to utilize his full strength, he would be reduced to gasping and panting in mere minutes. So why, then, was he still breathing normally? Human bodies were odd in that, while they could only tolerate operating at full strength for several minutes, they were more than capable of running for well over two hours at about sixty percent exertion. Shiba himself hadn’t even been fighting at sixty percent—it had been closer to fifty percent, in all honesty. If anything, the amount of effort he’d put forth had

been just enough to serve as a warm-up exercise. His body felt light, and he was ready for more. He still had at least an hour left in him, by his own reckoning.

“This is why I hate fighting weaklings like you. There’s nothing to be gained from it.”

Because he found it so easy to win—to survive—he failed to see any of his own shortcomings. Since he felt no risk to his life, and the thought of his own death was but a fleeting concern to him, he couldn’t even bring himself to concentrate. Of course, this didn’t mean that he had let down his guard, but there was no sense, in his mind, that he was nearing his own limits, and therefore he wasn’t going to exceed them.

“Good grief... This would be much more engaging if they’d bring out an Einherjar or two... Mm?” Just as he was muttering to himself while dispatching yet another soldier with a well-placed thrust to the chest, Shiba saw something out of the corner of his eye and curled his lips into a predatory grin. He tugged at his reins to turn his mount, then he spurred it onward to accelerate. “Your appearance... I see you must be a warrior of note. Your life is mine!” What had caught his eye was a man of around fifty years of age riding in a chariot. While he had a faintly fragile air to him, he still had more authority and gravitas than the soldiers around him. He appeared to be one of the front-line commanders. Killing him would add confusion to the enemy’s chain of command, giving the Flame Clan a further advantage in this battle. What he was most concerned about, however, was that the men stationed with him were likely to be somewhat stronger than the mere cannon fodder he had been cutting down so far. Shiba was thoroughly bored of fighting common soldiers by this point.

Clang!

“Oh?”

Someone had blocked the blow from his halberd, and Shiba’s eyes widened with interest. The next moment, a spear thrust came at him from a different direction, and Shiba twisted his body to avoid the blow. This attack had been on a completely different level than the spear thrusts from the common soldiers he’d dealt with until now.

“Finally, an Einherjar.” Shiba’s heart rejoiced at the appearance of a strong

opponent. Standing in front of him were two young men with similar facial features. He could feel the powerful flow of ásmegin emanating from their bodies. There was no doubt in his mind that the pair were Einherjar.

“My name is Askr! Askr of the Wind Clan! I will claim your life in the name of the parents and siblings you killed!”

“I am Embla! By the Oath of the Chalice, I shall strike you down for your part in the deaths of my family!”

“The Wind Clan, you say? I see now. You joined the Steel Clan to get your revenge.” Shiba snorted derisively at the pair. It was common for generals from defeated clans to be welcomed by other clans as honored guests. Askr and Embla were Wind Clan warriors of some renown. At the very least, they were warriors of sufficient repute that Shiba was familiar with their names. No doubt the Steel Clan Army had welcomed them with open arms.

“Say what you wish! We’ve already seen through your movements!”

“...Oh?”

“You’re quite impressive, but you’re not a match for the two—omph!”

Shiba’s halberd lashed out in the middle of Embla’s boast and struck him through the mouth.

“E-Embla?!” Askr stammered out his friend’s name as he stared in shock. It came too late, however. Embla’s eyes simply stared off into the distance, devoid of life.

“R-Ridiculous... I-I couldn’t even see the attack!”

“Tch... I was afraid they’d be duds...” Shiba spat out the words with a bitter and disappointed expression, then slashed at Askr with his halberd. Blood sprayed from Askr’s chest. Given that he made no effort to block the attack, it appeared that Askr hadn’t even been able to react to Shiba’s blow. Shiba had only been fighting at maybe eighty percent of his full strength against the pair, meaning that they hadn’t been anywhere near his level. Shiba had feared that would be the case when they boasted that they’d seen through his movements.

“I would have at least hoped you could block something as simple as this.”

It was a pretty common fault shared among Einherjar. Because they were blessed with a certain amount of latent talent, they developed a false sense of confidence in their abilities and could often become too lazy to train. Worse, even, was that they had no awareness of the fact that they were lazy. Such Einherjar weren't even worth Shiba making the effort to test their abilities. They were the type of opponent Shiba found the least interesting.

"S-So this is it... I-If only I had twin runes...I would have... I'm sorry... I'm so..." Askr coughed up blood as he wept bitterly. He then dropped to his knees, and soon after, he collapsed to the ground, dead. While the Flame Clan soldiers let out a breath of admiration for the warrior who had remained loyal to the Wind Clan to his last breath, Shiba stared at the body with cold indifference.

"This is why weaklings like you are worthless." His voice dripped with disapproval. Runes were simply powers that the gods granted on a whim. The potency of the powers granted by those runes themselves were, of course, a reflection of an Einherjar's own ability, but what use was it to plead for powers that they didn't have? "If you really wanted to avenge your clan, then why didn't you dedicate yourself to your training?" It was clear to Shiba that neither Askr nor Embla had made any attempt to practice. They had never encountered any hardships or faced any struggles. They had made no effort to refine their craft. They believed they could win simply because they were both Einherjar. It showed an immensely pathetic lack of awareness.

"I haven't forgotten you. You're just as worthless. The weak should know their place and run when they can. It's precisely because you don't know when to withdraw that you're so weak." Shiba glared at the enemy general. The general's face was frozen in an expression of pure fear. Despite the fact that a general's fear would quickly infect the men below him, the enemy general made his emotions clear. He truly was hopelessly weak.

"Don't come any closer!"

"Stay away! Get away!"

As the frightened soldiers tried to ward him off with their spears, Shiba swung his halberd with an almost bored expression, cutting them down as though he were scything through grain. "Why do you struggle to do the obvious? To do

what's required of you?" Shiba asked.

It wasn't long before he had reached the enemy general, a task that had required very little effort. This had been a rather anticlimactic venture, all in all. As he had expected, fighting such weaklings wouldn't bring him anywhere close to the answers he sought. He still had his true objective, Sigrún, waiting for him. He had no time to waste on such pathetic opponents. Shiba decided to quickly settle the matter.

"Why?! Why am I the one being driven back?!" Bruno shouted with a trembling voice, his teeth chattering uncontrollably. There was no one to answer his question. Everyone around him had been intimidated by the blood-spattered god of death looming in front of them; they were too busy trembling in fear.

"This... This wasn't how..." Bruno muttered bitterly to himself. This was supposed to be a battle where his victory was assured. War was far from his specialty, but even an amateur would have been able to tell that he had prepared a perfect plan. That was why he had volunteered to lead the vanguard, after all. He was going to secure victory here, gain renown as the Wolf Clan officer the clansmen should rally behind, and from there, quickly establish himself as patriarch after Yuuto and the others had left the continent. The enemy commander had charged in, fighting on the front lines, meaning that Bruno's scheme had been nine-tenths of the way to completion. However, when it had all played out, he was the one who was left on the brink of defeat.

"Why? That's simple. This happened this way because you were weak." Shiba snorted derisively and casually swung his halberd.

Clang!

"Guh!"

Bruno somehow blocked the blow with his shield, but it was a hard blow for his wizened, slender body to take. He quickly lost his footing, and he found himself thrown backward.

"Tch. Die already." Shiba clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Frankly, Bruno had been lucky. It wasn't that he had seen the blow coming for him, he'd simply guessed correctly. He had no confidence he could stop a second blow.

"N-No! Stop! S-Stay away! Get away from me!" Bruno shouted as he backed away. His voice and knees were both trembling. His crotch felt grossly warm. Evidently, he had wet himself. "I-I'll surrender! S-So please, spare my life..." He tossed aside his weapons and raised both hands. It was at this point that Bruno had to face the harsh truth: he lacked the strength of character to be a general, let alone a ruler.

"You're so afraid to die that you're willing to throw away your pride? Pathetic worm." Shiba's face twisted in contempt as he thrust out his halberd. It was a careless blow, as though he had lost interest in even killing Bruno. At that moment, Bruno's eyes regained their fire.

"Graaaah!"

Bruno let out a roar as he charged at Shiba. He felt the halberd tear into his flank, but it hardly bothered him. Bruno quickly raised his sword and lunged at Shiba.

"Pointless."

But even that blow, unleashed with all his strength, did nothing to Shiba. He contemptuously batted aside the blow with his vambrace, and Bruno felt a heavy blow punch through his gut. Shiba had kneed him in the torso.

"Ngh!"

Bruno coughed up blood and began to crumple to the ground, where he then wrapped both of his arms around Shiba's legs.

"What?!" Shiba said with a look of shock. This had been Bruno's plan from the start. Bruno was a cowardly man. Despite the fact that he had thought he'd prepared himself for the worst, the moment he actually faced death, he had humiliated himself yet again. Bruno felt a deep self-hatred welling up within himself. It had only been when there was no avoiding his inevitable end that he had actually steeled himself. By that point, it was too late for any further regrets. With that in mind, he decided that he couldn't just let things end like

this. He needed to show some spirit, some amount of courage, at the very end. Otherwise, how could he possibly face all of the Wolf Clan soldiers that he had led to their deaths?

“Now! Kill him, even if you have to go through me to do it! If I can serve the Wolf Clan in death, that would be a fitting use of my life!” Those words could barely escape Bruno’s lips. The injuries to his flank and his stomach made speech a painful task to accomplish. Even so, it seemed that his will—his intent—had gotten through to the soldiers around him. The Wolf Clan soldiers swarmed Shiba with a loud war cry. With his right leg held down by Bruno, Shiba had no way of avoiding them.

“Well done.”

The moment he heard those words, Bruno felt a sharp pain run through his right shoulder. It was but a heartbeat later that Bruno realized Shiba had lopped off his arm at the shoulder. With Bruno’s grip on him weakened, Shiba was easily able to kick Bruno away and release himself from the hold he had previously been locked in. However, with attacks closing in from every direction, those two actions should have left Shiba fatally exposed. By all accounts, that was how things *should* have been.

“Phew. I wasn’t expecting to need to enter the Realm of the Gods. Allow me to apologize for calling you a pathetic worm.” Shiba was the last man standing after the storm of spear thrusts. All of the soldiers that had attacked him lay dead at his feet.

“Even this... Even this couldn’t reach him...” Bruno said as he wept, the tears coursing down his cheeks. He was embarrassed at his own failure, by the fact that he couldn’t even inflict a single injury on Shiba despite the sheer number of Wolf Clan lives that had been wasted on this battlefield.

“No, you reached me. It was the strength of your will.” With that, Shiba showed the outside of his left hand to Bruno. There was a single spear wound on Shiba’s hand, and the blood from the wound dripped onto Bruno’s cheek.

“The price was too high...for such a minor...*hack*...wound...”

“That is certainly true.” Shiba nodded in agreement as he lifted his sword up above him. “I could leave you here, but you won’t live long with those wounds.

As a reward for inflicting an injury upon me, allow me to send you to Valhalla." Then, just as Shiba was about to finish off Bruno...

"Graaaaah!"

Bruno heard a cheer rising from in front of him, far off in the distance. The Flame Clan Army was in front of him, so beyond that would be—

"Heheheh, so they've finally arrived. This is the end for you!" Bruno said triumphantly, pointing his remaining hand's index finger at Shiba.

The Flame Clan troops were currently busy charging the Wolf Clan forces under Bruno's command. Armies, in general, were extremely vulnerable to attacks from every direction besides the front. Now, the Wolf Clan's most powerful and elite unit, the Múspell Unit, had been unleashed on the unprotected rear of the Flame Clan forces. The only way the Flame Clan Army could have won this battle was if they had defeated the enemy to their front and taken Iárnviðr before the Múspell Unit could arrive. Though the Steel Clan forces under Bruno's command had been decimated, there were still four thousand fresh soldiers under Linnea's command stationed right behind them, meaning the Steel Clan had managed to survive Shiba's last-ditch effort to break them. Despite that, however, there wasn't a hint of anxiety or confusion on Shiba's face. His expression only showed pity.

"If you were hoping for the Múspells to save you, I'm afraid to inform you that we're not the ones caught in a trap. You have fallen into ours," Shiba coldly informed him.

"Tch. We're definitely late." Sigrún clicked her tongue softly as she heard angry shouts and the clangor of metal striking metal far off in front of her. The original idea had been for the two detachments to attack the Flame Clan force simultaneously, but given that the battle had already started, it meant the enemy must have known what the Steel Clan had been planning to do.

"It appears I rushed in too carelessly," Sigrún said with a deep sigh. They had only taken a short rest after their arrival, choosing to head into the battle soon after. If they had carefully watched for enemy scouts, they may well have been able to prevent this outcome. Furthermore, if the enemy was aware of the

Múspell Unit's arrival, then this would be the moment they were most on guard.

In battle, the best choice wasn't always the one that led to the most effective results. If anything, it was more common for those choices to instead produce the worst outcomes. This happened because it was easy for an enemy to infer what the optimal choices for any given situation would be. If they hadn't needed to contend with the problem of food supplies for the refugees, they would have had the option to delay their deployment by several days to catch the enemy off guard.

"No good ever comes from allowing anxiety to lead your decision-making..." she remarked curtly, evidently rather frustrated by having made such a poor choice.

"You're too hard on yourself, Mother Rún. The enemy's just delaying the inevitable," Hildegard said with a confident chuckle. Sigrún lightly smacked Hildegard's head with the haft of her spear. "Ow! What the heck?!"

"You've gotten into trouble in the past for underestimating the enemy like that. It's long past time you learned from it."

"Well, uh..." It seemed Hildegard was aware of that fact, and she frowned sourly.

"You're not wrong. The current situation is to our overwhelming advantage. However, you would do well to remember that the enemy is led by Shiba. If we let down our guard for even a moment, he'll be the one tearing into us." As she mentioned this, Sigrún's mind drifted back to the duel she had fought against Shiba at the Flame Clan capital. She was reminded once again of the sheer number of techniques he had at his disposal and the staggering quality of every one of his moves. What was especially gobsmacking about him was how quick and accurate his decisions were in the heat of battle. These things combined had left her speechless.

"All of you, don't let your guard down as Hilda has. You never know what will happen in battle!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

As they heeded Sigrún's warning, the other members of the Múspell Unit answered in unison with renewed determination. There wasn't a trace of Hildegard's overconfidence in their responses. That was one of the benefits of commanding a unit of experienced, elite veterans. Sigrún looked fondly at her trusted subordinates and raised her spear into the air. "Right then! Let me really hear you! Múspells! Charge!"

With a shout that made the air itself tremble, the Múspell Unit kicked up a dust cloud as they charged into the Flame Clan Army's rear. They were like a pack of wolves attacking their prey on the plains. They lunged at their prey, the Flame Clan Army, with verve. However, just as they were about to make contact with the Flame Clan forces, roars erupted from their flanks, and countless war banners went up.

"Can you hear that? Do you see now? We're not the ones caught in the vise. It's your precious Múspell Unit," Shiba said plainly as he looked down at Bruno, not a trace of triumph or mockery present in his voice or on his features.

He was a warrior to the core. While he was coldly dismissive to those who were without skill or those he considered to be foolish, he paid respect to whoever proved their mettle as warriors in his eyes—regardless of whether they were an ally or an enemy. The man lying before him had gone to the trouble of humiliating himself in front of his own men to make Shiba lower his guard and then attempted to sacrifice himself in an effort to take down Shiba. He might have been an enemy, but Shiba was impressed. Shiba believed that he owed such an enemy the greatest possible respect.

"It's when they're certain of victory that people are most vulnerable," Shiba continued. "Meaning it's those moments where the greatest caution is necessary. Well, I suppose this is useless advice to you, given you're about to head to Valhalla..."

Shiba saw that Bruno had already suffered fatal injuries. Bruno's stomach had been split open, and he had also lost his right arm. He was bleeding profusely, and Shiba wasn't certain if his words even reached the gravely injured man below him. Still, the least he could do was explain why the Steel Clan had lost this battle.

“Heh...heh...ahahahahaha!” Suddenly, Bruno burst out into maniacal laughter. He was laughing so loudly that Shiba wondered how he was mustering that much strength in his current state.

“I see you’ve realized that you’ve been utterly defeated.”

People often were angry or frustrated at a close defeat, but against an overwhelming defeat, often the most they could do was laugh in response. Shiba had faced such circumstances several times himself.

“You’re right, this is a devastating loss. Those are the only words I can think of to describe it. You, who I could do nothing against, have been played by a man who wasn’t even here.”

“What?!” Shiba’s expression tensed when he heard Bruno utter those words. For a moment, he thought that Bruno was putting on a show, one last theatrical display in some effort to unnerve him, but that thought dissipated in the blink of an eye. That was because Bruno’s expression was full of confidence in victory and spite.

“The forces you see on either flank... They’re the Flame Clan Army’s Fifth Division, a unit which serves under Kuuga, are they not? Allow me to reveal who brought this plan to us. It was Kuuga himself!”

“Wha...?!” Shiba’s eyes widened in shock. It was true that Kuuga had disobeyed Nobunaga’s orders and had suffered a humiliating setback as a result. There was no way he would be able to avoid some sort of punishment for that mistake. But even so, never in his worst nightmares had Shiba ever expected Kuuga to betray the Flame Clan as a result. “It’s pointless to try to confuse me. My brother knows well enough that if he crushes the Múspell Unit in this battle, the Great Lord’s anger will be assuaged. More than that, he knows that the only fate that awaits him if he rebels against the Great Lord is death. He wouldn’t do anything so foolish.”

He would have understood had it been someone who was foolishly true to their desires, willing to risk everything so long as they had a chance of achieving their aims. He would think it inevitable were it some incompetent fool without a shred of intelligence. It would at least be somewhat understandable if it were an ordinary man who couldn’t read the broad direction of unfolding events.

Kuuga was none of those things, though. He was extremely passionate about protecting his own hide, and he was cautious almost to the point of cowardice. He was smarter than anyone else in the Flame Clan Army, and he was willing to flatter and play the fool to the strong. More than anything, he was a man who had used those traits to rise to his current rank of division commander. There was no way that someone like him would ever act in such a foolish manner. Despite that certainty—that conviction—there was a faint tremor in Shiba's voice. That was an extremely rare occurrence.

"Heheh... You really don't understand men, do you, young man? That's why even your blood brother betrays you." Bruno's lips curled into a thoroughly malicious and pleased smirk. The color had drained from Bruno's face, and he was as pale as a wraith, which made the expression all that much eerier. "Men don't move solely based on profit or advantage. If anything, they're driven by emotion. No matter how great the benefits you bring someone, or how much you reward them, those who can't understand—those who can't empathize with human weakness—will, in the end, lose the hearts of the people serving under them. All men like them will eventually find themselves being betrayed and abandoned. That is the ironclad law of man! Heheh. Hahaha. Hahahahahahaha...ha...ha..." Bruno's cackling gradually faded until it stopped entirely. He had died, having the last word and the last laugh.

Shiba stood wordlessly as he gazed down at Bruno's corpse. Ordinarily, he would have dismissed comments like those as the ramblings of a desperate weakling. However, given the current situation, as well as the fact that Bruno's words echoed the warning Old Man Salk had given him before he had set off on this campaign, Shiba found himself feeling rather shaken. A part of Shiba already knew that the enemy general's words were true. He had no evidence, but his intuition at times like this was never wrong. Whether or not he could accept that fact was another matter, however.

"What does it mean to understand, to empathize...?"

Shiba had thought he had treated the weak well, in his own way. He never gave them tasks that were beyond their ability, and when they were struggling, he often lent them a hand. That had been true this time as well. He had let his older brother have the place of honor. He had volunteered to lead the vanguard

and absorb the enemy's attacks, all so that Kuuga could have the glory of defeating the enemy. It made no sense to him. He couldn't understand what he had done wrong. However, what would come next brutally revealed the reality of what was unfolding before him.

"Big Brother! This is bad! That bastard Kuuga's started attacking us! That son of a bitch has betrayed us and led us right into a trap!" Masa shouted as he ran over to Shiba, his face red with anger. Ordinarily, the words would have provoked a burning rage within Shiba's breast, but for some reason, he didn't feel a thing. It was a strange feeling, an odd numbness that surprised even him. It was as though he were merely watching this happen to someone else.

"I see..." With those words, Shiba glanced up at the heavens. His mind played back memories of when Shiba was still a child and Kuuga had been his gentle older brother. It was in the distant past, to be sure. It was almost impossible to believe they were once like that, given their current relationship, but it was a reality once upon a time. Shiba then cut away those memories and tossed them aside. He quickly changed over his mindset and immediately came to a decision. "We've lost this battle. It's time to retreat!"

He made the decision solely based on a cold calculation of the situation. He refused to allow his emotions to cloud his judgment. That was one of the things that marked Shiba as both a man and a general. Despite his stoicism, however, he was also a tragic figure. This was the only way he knew how to respond to a situation as cruel as this one.

"Your Majesty. I bear good tidings. Lord Kuuga has joined our side as promised and has surrounded the Flame Clan Army."

"I see! Well done! Very well done, Alexis!" As a sudden voice echoed in his head, Yuuto let out a shout of happiness. To any who may have been present around him, he likely appeared to be on the verge of breaking out into dance. He had already received word that Alexis had reached a secret agreement with Kuuga to betray Nobunaga, but he wasn't able to shake the suspicion that it was all a ploy to deceive him. He was also uncertain about whether Kuuga, who had claimed he was totally intent on swapping sides, would instead flip on that decision after realizing that the Steel Clan was at a disadvantage. It was a

dangerous tightrope that he had been walking, and with it came a great deal of anxiety.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?" Fagrahvél asked with a look of concern. They had been in the middle of a war council, and when Yuuto looked around, he found the other generals looking at him in confusion. It was at that moment that Yuuto realized his blunder. He had apparently gotten a bit too excited upon hearing the news he had long been waiting to hear. He had completely forgotten that the only person who could hear Alexis's voice was the person holding the matching mirror that Alexis had left in their possession.

Yuuto coughed briefly into his hand and turned to address his generals. "All of you, rejoice. I've received excellent news. The Flame Clan Fifth Division's commander, Kuuga, has turned against Nobunaga and allied with the Steel Clan."

A murmur spread among the assembled generals. However, the reaction was a bit different from what Yuuto had expected.

"Your Majesty, perhaps you should go get some rest..." After briefly glancing at the generals present, Fagrahvél advised him with a serious look of concern. While the others remained silent, their expressions showed that they agreed with her.

"Wha—oh..." Yuuto finally grasped why the mood in the room was somewhat strange. In their eyes, he likely appeared to be so sleep-deprived that he had confused a daydream with reality. A cringeworthy way to be viewed, for certain. Given the circumstances, it was understandable that they'd draw such a conclusion, but he needed to make sure that he cleared up the misunderstanding. "This is neither a delusion nor a dream. It's reality. I'm sure many of you are familiar with Alexis, the Holy Emissary and goði."

"Ah, *him*," Hveðrungr said curtly, venom dripping from every word. When Hveðrungr was patriarch of the Panther Clan, Alexis had been the one who had arranged for the Oath of the Chalice that had made him a sworn brother of Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan. Alexis had been behind several other plots during that time, and he had been the one who had convinced Hveðrungr's wife, Sigyn, to send Yuuto back to the present by luring her with false promises.

It was understandable that Hveðrungr disliked the man, having felt like he had been manipulated like a pawn on his board.

“It does make sense. The goði is also a representative of the þjóðann. He had always been a somewhat shady character whose true allegiances were hard to discern, but I suppose that as you are þjóðann, he is now your direct subordinate,” Hveðrungr said tactfully, given the current company. The sheer formality of Hveðrungr’s tone left Yuuto feeling strangely uncomfortable—ticklish, even. That said, Yuuto wasn’t so foolish as to draw attention to the faint tones of sarcasm lurking in Hveðrungr’s words and make the situation more complicated. He somehow managed to contain his urge to burst out laughing and nodded solemnly with the gravitas appropriate to the occasion.

“Yes, exactly.”

In reality, the relationship between the two was a bit more complicated than that. According to Kristina’s reports, Alexis had been closely tied to the previous Imperial High Priest and Spear Clan patriarch, Hárbarth. He had been responsible for putting Hárbarth’s schemes into action and had been conspiring to remove Yuuto, “The Black One,” from this world. After Hárbarth’s fall, however, Alexis had remained in the position of Holy Emissary, as though he had been completely uninvolved in Hárbarth’s plotting.

While Yuuto had known exactly what kind of person Alexis was for a very long time now, he still found himself marveling at the man’s sheer audacity. With all of that information in hand, and aware of Alexis’s character, Yuuto had not only pardoned him for his actions, but he had even promoted him. He had done so because Alexis had a powerful ability that made him unique and irreplaceable in Yggdrasil.

“Alexis is an Einherjar with a very unique power. He’s capable of communicating over long distances using mirrors made of álfkipfer.” With that, Yuuto retrieved a hand mirror out of his pocket and showed it to the assembled generals as though it were a mark of office. Thanks to Alexis’s ability, Yuuto was able to keep close tabs on the situation in western Yggdrasil. Of course, he had been somewhat irritated to learn that Alexis had been conspiring to kill him, but his ability was so valuable as a strategic asset that it was well worth the price to pardon him.

Finally understanding what had made her late opponent Hárbarth quite so formidable, Fagrahvél had something to say on the matter. “I see, so that’s what it was. That sheds light on quite a few things. The reason Hárbarth was known as the Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High, was not because of his own power, but because he had Alexis working for him.” She then smacked her left fist into her right palm with a slightly flustered expression. Yuuto had heard that she had been outmaneuvered by her political rival Hárbarth on countless occasions due to his superior grasp of information. She probably had a lot of undigested anger lingering from those experiences.

“I seeeeee, so that explaains Alexis, buuuut, how did you maaanage to get a Flame Clan Division Commaaander to turn traaaitor?” Bára, the Steel Clan’s strategist, asked in her uniquely languid cadence.

Her question was perfectly reasonable. In general, because the Oath of the Chalice was considered sacred and inviolable on Yggdrasil, betrayal was a rare occurrence. Considering just how much of a disadvantage the Steel Clan currently found itself in, for a distinguished enemy general to turn traitor was almost inconceivable. However, that is exactly what had happened.

“That’s Oda Nobunaga’s greatest weakness,” Yuuto said as he curled his lips into a grin.

No one with Nobunaga’s level of success and momentum had ever been betrayed as often as he had been throughout his career. At the very least, as far as Yuuto was aware, he was far and away the warlord who had been betrayed most in Japanese history. The most well-known example was Akechi Mitsuhide’s betrayal that led to the Honno-ji Temple incident, but he had also been betrayed by his brother Oda Nobuyuki. Additionally, Shibata Katsuie, the most distinguished of the Five Great Oda Clan Generals, and Hayashi Hidesada, the man who had been appointed the head of his privy council by his father Nobuhide, had initially sided against him and taken Nobuyuki’s side in the brief civil war. Oda Nobuhiro, Matsunaga Hisahide, Mirashige Araki—the list included a veritable who’s who of Nobunaga’s retainers. Hashiba Hideyoshi, later known as Toyotomi Hideyoshi, also found a place on this list. This was despite the fact that he had been raised from a mere farmer to a regional lord by Nobunaga. After his liege’s death, he had orchestrated a takeover of the Oda Clan and

driven Nobutaka, Nobunaga's third son, to suicide.

"In the land beyond the heavens, my homeland, he had been betrayed over fifty times. Those who had betrayed him included both allied lords and even his own retainers and blood relatives." Even in the anarchic and shifting world of the Warring States Period, this number was a total outlier. It was far too many for it to be mere coincidence; that is to say, there was something about Nobunaga that forced those under him to feel they had to betray him.

"It's difficult to believe that someone who inspires so little loyalty could create as large a clan as he has," Fagrahvél observed, furrowing her brow skeptically as she pointed out a rather obvious contradiction. It seemed that everyone in the room agreed with her, and Yuuto saw the other generals nodding along to her observation.

"I'm told that while many betrayed him, he also had countless retainers who swore absolute loyalty to him. Basically, for good or for ill, he has an extremely powerful and unique personality."

People with strong personalities were often loved or even worshipped by those who resonated with them, but at the same time, such people could also engender enormous amounts of hatred toward themselves. Simply put, strong personalities were also extremely polarizing.

That was true of Nobunaga as well. It was said that Nobunaga in particular was an arch-pragmatist, and he had no use for excuses or complaints. People tended to feel cut off or rejected by personalities that showed no understanding of human frailty. Without a sense of empathy, of fellowship, it didn't matter how much material reward was heaped on a person; that person still felt a strong sense of anxiety, and often that anxiety drove them to desperate actions. Of course, that didn't mean that everyone reacted that way, but most people at least tended to feel those feelings to some extent. The reason divorce had become so common in older couples in modern Japan was probably related to this fact. The more pragmatic the person, the more likely they were to fall into that trap.

"I seeeee. So you looked for the individual mooost likely to betray him and gooooaded him into iiiit," Bára clapped her hands together and said as though

impressed at the thought.

While he knew that she meant it as a compliment, the way it was phrased made Yuuto feel like a terrible villain, and he felt her words sting his conscience. Then again, it was also the simple truth.

“Yeah, basically.” Yuuto shrugged his shoulders with a self-deprecating chuckle. He had chosen the strategy of divide and conquer. It was underhanded and it left a bitter aftertaste, but it had destroyed countless countries throughout history, and it was a plan that played at the darkness that lurked in human hearts, a scheme that would exist so long as human beings remained fallible.

As the conversation between the Steel Clan officers was unfolding, Kuuga was joyously urging his soldiers onward. “Have at it! Kill Shiba! He is but a rebel who dared challenge His Majesty, the þjóðann!” This was, without exaggeration, the most enjoyable moment of Kuuga’s life. The man who had caused him naught but pain—who had been a constant reminder of his own shortcomings—was now at his mercy. Better still, it was as a result of a scheme he himself had concocted!

“I wonder what he’s thinking right now. My only regret is not being able to see his face.” Kuuga hurriedly covered his mouth as his lips threatened to break out into a grin. Although the outcome of the battle was all but decided at this point, it was still raging around him. It would be bad for morale for the general to let down his guard in the heat of battle. He was well aware of that fact. However...

“Heh... He was thrown into the depths of despair at the very moment that he was convinced that he had won. I wonder how he feels now... Imagining that arrogant scumbag’s face twisted in sheer rage and hatred directed wholly at me... Hah! It’s just too much! Bahahaha!” Kuuga simply wasn’t able to contain his laughter.

It wasn’t that they had hated each other from childhood. If anything, Kuuga was someone who took care of those who served under him, and given how busy their parents had been, Kuuga had ended up practically raising Shiba

himself. Swordsmanship, strategy, basic scholarship... Kuuga had been the one who taught Shiba all of these things. Of course, Shiba quickly overtook Kuuga in each of them. Certainly, Shiba had put forward a great deal of effort, but Kuuga never felt that he had tried any less than his brother. He also firmly believed that he had struggled far more than his brother and had used those struggles as fuel to drive himself to further heights. Reality was a harsh mistress.

Kuuga was, in terms of rank and reputation, inferior to his brother, who was a decade his junior. Why wasn't he blessed with talent like Shiba? They had been born to the same parents, after all.

Had they been complete strangers, or if Shiba had realized what Kuuga felt when he had begun to distance himself from Shiba, then perhaps Kuuga's resentment wouldn't have been twisted into the ugly hatred that now drove him. Every time Shiba approached Kuuga to make amends—to be kind to him or to praise him—it only reminded Kuuga of the unbridgeable gap between them. Kuuga was constantly forced to reflect upon himself. All he saw was the ugly person he had become—a man that was consumed by jealousy, a pathetic and petty man who was unable to muster the strength of character to celebrate his brother's achievements. He was a horrible human being who wanted to kill his own brother. Being forced to confront that side of himself over and over for well over a decade had eroded away any familial affection he had once felt for his blood brother, and it had left nothing but hatred in its wake. Now, however, he had an opportunity to rid himself of the mirror that kept showing him the reflection he loathed. Even a decent man would have struggled to contain his glee.

"Such smirking is unbecoming of the Second of the Lightning Clan. What sort of example does it send to the men?" A dismissively arrogant voice splashed cold water on Kuuga's excitement. When Kuuga turned to face the voice, he found an alluring woman in her twenties whose gaze hinted at a complex, difficult personality lurking beneath.

"Ah, Lady Röskva. Or should I call you Mother? I appreciate your advice." While Kuuga was internally irate, he put on a diplomatic smile and responded politely. She was an important figurehead. He needed to show her respect, at least for now.

Röskva was the former Second of the Lightning Clan. After the fall of Bilskírnir, she had escaped the Flame Clan forces who had pursued her and had hidden away safely, but Alexis had somehow found her and brought her to see Kuuga. Röskva, as Second—that is, the chosen successor of the Lightning Clan patriarch, Steinþórr—had served as a rallying point for those who opposed the Flame Clan's rule. Even with the justification of following the þjóðann's divine edicts, as well as an Oath of the Chalice sworn to Röskva, there weren't many who truly wished to follow a traitor like Kuuga. On top of that, it wasn't wise for him to be such a public part of his own scheme. For that reason, he had chosen her to serve as his figurehead, having lured her in with the promise of resurrecting the Lightning Clan, as well as giving her shelter.

Röskva was arrogant, and even the most loyal of her followers wouldn't say she had a pleasant personality, but she was still much easier to handle than Nobunaga. While he had betrayed Nobunaga, Kuuga himself bore his former liege lord no particular ill will. In fact, he even felt some gratitude for the fact that Nobunaga had promoted him.

At odds with his current actions, Kuuga actually considered Nobunaga an ideal ruler for a number of reasons, such as his ability to see the bigger picture, his sense of fairness, and his ability to inspire his subordinates to share in his dreams of conquest. But that was exactly why he was such an oppressive man to serve. Nobunaga constantly demanded that those who served him produced results that justified their position. The moment they stopped producing those results, he would demote them with no consideration for their past accomplishments, and in the most extreme cases, Nobunaga had even exiled those former subordinates from the Flame Clan entirely.

In a sense, that was the right thing to do. Perhaps it was even the ideal way for a ruler to act. However, Kuuga was only human. Given all the effort he had put in when he was younger, he wanted to enjoy the fruits of his labor. If he ever decided to relax, or if he ever let himself grow complacent, Nobunaga would quickly confiscate his title, his rank, his reputation, and his wealth—everything he had worked so hard to achieve.

Under Nobunaga's rule, Kuuga had lived in a constant state of fear. Every day, he felt the lining of his stomach wearing thinner and thinner. Nobunaga showed

no regard for that sort of weakness, or perhaps he simply couldn't understand it. He would nonchalantly dismiss Kuuga's fears as weakness and yell at him, chastising him to be stronger. That was a logical and rational point of view, by most accounts. However, at times, logical and rational arguments could be quite damaging to a person's psyche. No human could constantly maintain the kind of pragmatic perfection that Nobunaga demanded. They had desires they needed to fulfill.

Kuuga had felt that his body and mind would both eventually be crushed under the weight of Nobunaga's expectations. In comparison to that, he was now in paradise. He had been released of all his responsibilities, and his heart felt lighter than it had in many years. Of course, he would likely eventually die at Nobunaga's hand. He had no illusions that he could defeat that monster. Even so, he knew that he wouldn't regret this decision. Being killed by Nobunaga someday was a small price to pay for his newfound emotional freedom and for the opportunity for revenge—for victory against the blood brother he so despised.

As this was occurring, Linnea was reeling in the wake of an unexpected reunion.

"You're alive...? You're really alive?"

The moment a certain individual arrived at her headquarters, tears streamed from Linnea's eyes. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Ignoring the fact that there were plenty of onlookers, Linnea dashed over and embraced him. Certainly, it was problematic for Linnea, the þjóðann's third wife, to be seen embracing someone other than Yuuto, but none present were so boorish as to point out that fact.

"I am indeed, as you can very well see. Though I'm a tad embarrassed, given the brave façade I had put on prior to my departure."

"Th-There's nothing to be embarrassed about, Rasmus! Thank the gods! Thank the gods you're alive! Waaaaaaah!" Her emotions overwhelmed her at that moment. She clung tightly to Rasmus and began bawling like a child. Rasmus looked at a loss for how to respond, but he supposed he would be

forgiven, at least for today, and returned the embrace, gently stroking Linnea's hair. "I'm home, Princess."

"Yes, you are! Thank the gods you've returned! I'm glad... I'm so glad! Waaaahhhhhh! Rasmus! Rasmus! Waaaaaaaah!" She repeated the same words over and over and began bawling again. At that particular moment, she had practically reverted to her more childlike ways. She appeared to be a completely different person from the woman that so ably governed the Steel Clan as its Second.

Linnea was well aware of how important it was to maintain appearances and her authority as Second. However, Rasmus was so important to her—and she was so overcome with emotion in the wake of his safe return—that she couldn't maintain her composure well enough to keep up her image as a ruler, even here, in public.

"I thought... I thought I'd never see you again... Sniff..."

"Princess... I, too, am happy to see you again..."

It seemed Rasmus, too, was overcome with emotion, and he choked on his words. The generals around them had completely forgotten they were currently on the battlefield, and many wiped tears from their eyes, touched by the sight before them.

After about five minutes of crying, Linnea had managed to calm down. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. "Sheesh... Father is always full of surprises. I never would have thought to send Alexis as a messenger and secretly secure Lord Kuuga's defection," she said calmly in her usual confident tone. It was as though the last five minutes had never happened. That said, her cheeks were still faintly red, and it was obvious she was just trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Yes, I was quite surprised as well. We were cooped up in the Hliðskjálf when Lord Alexis suddenly appeared and told me that Lord Kuuga was actually an ally. I have to admit I thought it was some sort of sick joke."

"Haha, Lord Rasmus was extremely stubborn, and it took quite an effort to convince him I was telling the truth," the portly man with a full beard standing next to Rasmus said with a dry chuckle. He was the man of the hour, Alexis, the

Holy Emissary of the þjóðann and goði of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. He was also the man who had brought Rasmus and his subordinates, who had previously been Kuuga's prisoners, safely to Linnea's camp. "Even when I showed him a letter written by His Majesty's own hand, he kept insisting that he needed to die there."

"Please don't mention that... At the time, I had resolved myself to be ready to die in that battle..." Rasmus scratched at his head with an embarrassed expression plastered across his face.

Based upon this exchange, it was clear to Linnea that it had been quite the struggle to get Rasmus to finally believe what Alexis had come to tell him. She quickly turned to Alexis and took his hand. "Thank you so much! Thank you, truly, from the bottom of my heart, Lord Alexis! You did so very well to convince this utter numbskull to listen to you!" She bowed her head so low that she was practically pressing her forehead to his hand. Linnea knew from life experience just how committed, pigheaded, and difficult it was to move Rasmus once he had made up his mind.

"Hah... Well, my silver tongue is my only real weapon, after all," Alexis said casually. He had spent years as the Holy Emissary negotiating ceasefires in conflicts between clans and serving as a mediator for alliance negotiations. The reason Yuuto had pardoned him and recruited him despite his history of participating in schemes against him was not simply due to his ability as an Einherjar, but largely because he wished to leverage the persuasive powers he had developed and cultivated over his many years of duty. Yuuto had believed Alexis would be the key to orchestrating this defection, and he had been vindicated in that belief.

"Well, I had no choice but to bend, since he explained that if I didn't, His Majesty's plans would come to naught and the Steel Clan itself might very well collapse," mentioned a mildly flustered Rasmus.

"That's fair. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't want to work with the general who killed you," Linnea replied.

As she listened to Rasmus, Linnea nodded in agreement. Even if it had been Yuuto's plan, if the man who had killed Rasmus, who was practically a surrogate

father to her, had come to her wanting to defect to the Steel Clan, she knew that her heart would have driven her to reject that offer. She would have either rejected the offer outright as unbelievable, or she would have prejudged the situation as a trap and then searched for reasons that would prove to her that it was, in fact, a trap. The reason she was able to accept fighting alongside Kuuga in these circumstances was that Rasmus and his subordinates had returned to her alive.

Between the plan's success and Rasmus's return, the tension had completely left the headquarters. However, soon after this, a messenger entered and quickly shattered the illusion of calm that had been present in the room. "I-I bring a report! The Wolf Clan's head elder, Lord Bruno, has been slain in battle!" Linnea's expression darkened. Even if she understood that losing people was part of war, learning of Bruno's death immediately after victory had been assured left a painful feeling in her heart. The world was still a harsh place where good things never lasted for any appreciable amount of time.

"I see... We lost a great man today." Her first impression upon meeting him had been awful, and he was a difficult person to deal with, but as she had gotten to know him better, Linnea's dislike of the man had started to fade. As a fellow ruler, she had even started to respect the love he had for his own people. She felt a profound sadness upon learning of his death, and she felt the loss all the more keenly since she sincerely believed he would have been the ideal person to leave in charge of the people who chose to remain in Yggdrasil after everyone else had left. Linnea closed her eyes, thought back to her interactions with Bruno, and murmured, "You'll be avenged. Please wait for us until we meet again in Valhalla."

"Guh!"

"Aagh!"

Shiba swept across the battlefield as he continued to cut down enemy soldiers. Having been surrounded on four sides, the Flame Clan Army no longer had any chance of victory, and the enemy had already shifted to eliminating the remaining Flame Clan forces. But, contrary to Kuuga's hopes, Shiba's expression showed not even the slightest trace of panic. In fact, despite everything, his

face was actually lit with a thoroughly happy smile.

“Sometimes losing isn’t so bad, is it? There’s no end to the enemies I must cut down!”

“You’re about the only one who can enjoy being in this situation, Big Brother!”

Next to him, his adjutant, Masa, let out an exasperated shout as he cut down an enemy trying to exploit an opening in Shiba’s flank. While Masa’s duties were largely clerical, meaning he was often overwhelmed by paperwork, he was still a powerful warrior in his own right. In fact, thanks to having trained at Shiba’s side for many years, his skill as a warrior was nearly equal to that of an Einherjar. The pair were fighting together with perfect coordination. They were able to cut down the endless stream of Steel Clan and Lightning Clan soldiers attempting to kill them, and after some time, they had finally slashed a bloody path through the enemy forces.

“Masa, I’ve got an idea! If you use your arm to...”

“Later, please!”

Shiba tried to describe his new scheme, but Masa dismissed him out of hand. Frankly, he wasn’t in any state to hold a conversation. Even if he *was* as strong as an Einherjar, they were still up against overwhelming odds. They were being assaulted from all sides every few seconds. The tension and fear that came with constantly facing death were wearing upon Masa’s body and spirit.

“Masa, hold fast. Your movements are slowing.”

“Easier said than done. I’m not the same monster you are!”

“You need only put your mind to it to become as strong as I!”

“You never change... Even your brain is made of muscle!”

“Yeah, and that’s why I need you.”

“I’m well aware, which is why I wished to accompany you to the very end, but it seems the time I have left is becoming rather short...” Masa suddenly collapsed to one knee mid-speech. On the battlefield, such a thing was tantamount to suicide.

“Masa!” Shiba immediately swung his halberd and cut down the enemy soldiers lunging at Masa. He took the opportunity to examine Masa’s legs, but he couldn’t find any visible wounds. Despite that, Masa wasn’t getting back on his feet—he no longer could.

“Hah... Seems like I pulled something.”

“...I see.” Shiba’s voice was as calm as it ever was, but there was a faint pause before he spoke. Masa had been his constant companion in war for over a decade, and he was also his sworn younger brother. Even Shiba felt a profound sadness as he began to realize that they would soon be separated for all eternity.

“May the gods favor you!”

“You served me well! Thank you for your many years of loyal service!”

They exchanged glances and spoke a single sentence each before Shiba resumed his run. Shiba, despite his nearly superhuman abilities, wouldn’t have been able to carry a person on his back and manage to escape this encirclement alive. He had no choice but to leave Masa behind. He didn’t bother to steal a glance backward; even that could create a life-threatening opening.

Shiba always, whatever the situation, immediately and calmly made the right decision. That was the root of Shiba’s strength. Even so, there was a trickle of blood flowing from his lips where he had bit down hard to force himself forward.

“Shiba! I’ve found you at last!” A silver-haired Einherjar and her cavalry appeared before him. That Einherjar was Sigrún, the greatest warrior of the Steel Clan and holder of the title of Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf.

“You managed to find me in this melee. You are quite sharp-witted indeed!” He was impressed. It was an act worthy of the warrior he looked forward to facing again. While he would have liked to fight and defeat her at that very moment, the current circumstances were not in his favor. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t have the time to fight you right now!” Shiba said dismissively, blocking a sweep from Sigrún’s spear and using the momentum from her swing to leap into the air. He then cut down the Múspell trooper in front of him and took the slain man’s horse. It might have been one thing for a soldier of small

stature to pull off this maneuver, but Shiba was a stout mountain of a man. For someone of his size to have pulled it off was a feat worthy of renown. He tugged at the horse's reins, spurring it on with his legs as he attempted to leave the area.

"Ah! Hold it!" Sigrún set off in pursuit.

This was exactly the outcome he had hoped for. There was no way he could face her in single combat so long as they stood in the midst of the Steel and Lightning Clan forces. If they were going to fight, he wanted to do it in a place where no one could interrupt them. If his intuition served him right, he was getting close to such a location.

"Found it!" Having pushed through the enemy formation, he caught sight of the glimmering water ahead. It was the Körmt River—the great river that divided the Álfheimr and Vanaheimr regions. He would easily be able to shake most of his pursuers if he could make it across the river. If Sigrún decided to follow him across, then he'd gladly take her on. They would resume their duel once they had crossed the river. Just as his lips began to curl into a smile, the loud retort of gunfire echoed through the air.

"Heh, it's just like you to have defied all common sensibilities and managed to survive this long. No surprises there, eh, Shiba?" Kuuga smiled maliciously as he shouldered a tanegashima. Black smoke rose from the weapon. This situation was unfolding exactly as he had expected—no, as he had hoped. He knew that Shiba would be able to make it through the overwhelming forces that had been closing in on him. Ordinarily, something like that should have been impossible, but Kuuga hadn't doubted that Shiba would succeed in his escape and reach this point for even a moment. For that reason, he had assembled a unit armed with tanegashimas and stationed them here to await his arrival. "Yes, I need to kill you myself."

This had all been done in the name of accomplishing this small act of vengeance. Things were going exactly as he had hoped, and even he was a bit frightened by the sheer sharpness of his intuition. He trembled in sheer joy as he realized his goal was finally coming to fruition.

“Impressive, Brother. You can tell everything about me.” Shiba, who Kuuga had thought he’d taken down with the barrage, casually stood up. It appeared he had jumped from his mount a split-second before the fusillade and avoided the hail of gunfire.

“Tch, you’re still alive. Nothing gets past that blasted intuition of yours.” Kuuga clicked his tongue and glared angrily in Shiba’s direction. Despite the fact that Kuuga wanted to erase him from this world as quickly as possible, Shiba clung to life like a cockroach.

“You hate me so much you want to kill me, do you, Brother?”

“Yes, so much so that even killing you a hundred times over wouldn’t satisfy me.”

“I see. What a coincidence. I feel the same way. Masa is dead because of you.”

“Heh, that’s it! That’s the face I wanted to see, Shiba!” Kuuga’s mouth twisted into an evil grin, thoroughly enjoying the current situation. It was such a twisted expression that the people around him trembled at the sight, amazed that the human face could show so much malice in a smile. None of this bothered Kuuga in the slightest though.

Shiba gazed at him with hatred in his eyes, an intense rage burning within them. It had been a long time—over twenty years, in fact—since Shiba had properly directed his gaze toward Kuuga. He didn’t see him as an inferior who wasn’t worthy of his time, but rather as a hated enemy to kill.

“I’d like to enjoy the view a bit longer, but I’m not going to underestimate you in the slightest. I certainly won’t be giving you a chance to escape either.” Kuuga quietly lifted his right hand. The soldiers to either side of him immediately shouldered their tanegashimas. Kuuga had already considered the possibility that the first volley wouldn’t kill Shiba, so he had immediately ordered his soldiers to prepare a second volley. Kuuga would never underestimate Shiba—would never let his guard down around his blood brother—because he knew better than anyone that Shiba was a man who would take the slightest opening and use it to cut open a path to his own survival.

However, this truly was the end for Shiba. Even if he was the greatest warrior

on Yggdrasil, he had no way of resisting a salvo of gunfire aimed directly at him. “Perfect! Fire!”

Just as Kuuga had issued the order he had waited to issue for decades, the ground began to tremble violently. Kuuga lost his footing as a result of the titanic tremors and fell to his knees. This was an earthquake—one that was substantially stronger than even the most recent earthquake had been. Kuuga caught sight of Shiba dashing off in the direction of the Körmt River despite his violently shifting vision. Even amid this profound natural disaster, Shiba had found a path to survival. “You’re not getting away!” Kuuga aimed the tanegashima in his hand at Shiba. There was no way he was going to let him escape.

If he were to let him get away here, he would never again have the opportunity to kill the man he so despised. Kuuga was wholeheartedly convinced of that fact.

However, it would seem that lady luck had abandoned him once again. The sheer intensity of the quake made a large amount of water skip out of the river, and a splash landed squarely on his tanegashima. The matchlock was extinguished, and the empty click of the firelock mechanism rang hollowly in Kuuga’s ear. Sadly for him, that wasn’t the end of his misfortunes. The ground beneath Kuuga’s feet split asunder and swallowed him whole. He stopped after falling several meters, but he was wedged in so firmly that he couldn’t get himself out of the crevice. The quakes subsided soon after, but of course, Kuuga was practically blind with rage as a result of this sequence of events.

“Blast you, gods! Why are you constantly on his side?!” Why did the heavens bless Shiba so?! There was no way he could forgive such clear favoritism.

“Damn you! Damn you and your dumb luck! I *will* get you, Shibaaaa!” The roar of hatred that tore at his vocal cords was immediately swallowed by the sound of rushing water. The sound brought Kuuga back to his senses. It reminded him of something that always happened after an earthquake. He remembered that he was right next to the Körmt River. An enormous rush of water immediately swallowed the entire area.

EPILOGUE

“Oof... Seems like it’s finally over.” Having confirmed that the tremors had subsided, Yuuto let out a sigh of relief. The earthquake had been absurdly powerful. He had felt a rush of panic, not able to shake the feeling that he had been too late to save the people of Yggdrasil... But for now, the continent had yet to sink into the ocean.

“Felicia, are you okay?”

“I-I’m more concerned about you, Big Brother! Is your back all right?!”

Felicia let out a cry of alarm as she lay beneath Yuuto. The moment the earthquake had happened, Yuuto had reflexively jumped on top of her. Immediately after, the tent had collapsed, and currently, the pair were trapped beneath it.

“Heh, well, it hurts a little, but I’m fine. It’s not all that heavy anyway,” Yuuto said with a forced chuckle. The truth was that it hurt a lot more than he let on, but, well, he was a man, so he certainly wasn’t going to show any weakness in front of her.

“My apologies. It’s my job to protect you, Big Brother.”

“Don’t worry about it, it was my choice to do it.”

“Oh, for the love of... Do take better care of yourself. But thank you. While the order of things here is rather improper, being protected by the man I love did make my heart flutter.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one always protecting me. It’s really not so bad to be the one protecting you for a change,” Yuuto said with a chuckle of amusement as he stood up. The tent was lightly constructed, made of a light wooden frame and fabric, so even Yuuto’s strength was enough to lift it off of them. He navigated through the debris with his hands and pushed his way out.

“Your Majesty! Are you okay?!”

“I am. Thanks, Fagrahvél. I’m glad to see you’re doing just fine too. Get our men to compile a damage report immediately!”

“Y-Your Majesty... I-If you look over there...” As she said that, Yuuto turned to look in the direction that her trembling finger was pointing at, and his eyes went wide with shock. The damage caused by this enormous earthquake had just become very apparent. It was perhaps unavoidable, but even though he knew that, he could still feel the blood draining from his face. The Gjallarbrú Fortress, the vital defensive line that had kept the Flame Clan Army advance in check, had completely collapsed.

EPILOGUE II

“Phew, I somehow made it out alive...”

Sigrún crawled out of the water and looked around. She had approached the Körmt River in pursuit of Shiba, but when the earthquake hit, she had been swallowed up by the flood that had arrived in its wake. She immediately grabbed hold of a tree that had been nearby and made it out unscathed, but it felt as though she’d been washed quite a distance downstream.

“Where exactly am I?” Her surroundings had been thoroughly soaked by the flooding, and the newly formed fissures and crags had completely changed the terrain, meaning that she couldn’t ascertain her current location. “I wonder if everyone’s okay... They should be, given that Hilda was with them.”

As the bearer of the wolf’s rune, she had incredibly good hearing. She should have been able to hear the rush of water long before it arrived and gotten the Múspells to safety. Sigrún drilled that thought deeper and deeper into her mind as she began walking upstream. She walked in the hope that she’d find her companions in that direction.

The earthquake had been enormously powerful. She was worried about the state of Iárnviðr, and she was also greatly concerned for the welfare of the people that had been waiting a short distance away from the battlefield. She suddenly heard the sound of grass being shoved aside behind her. Even Sigrún felt a certain amount of anxiety under the circumstances. It was understandable, given the sheer abnormality of the situation. She turned around with a faint smile of happiness upon learning there was a fellow survivor, but as she caught sight of the person, she immediately tensed up. “Shiba...!”

The person who stood before her was indeed the man reputed to be the greatest general of the Flame Clan. It seemed he had noticed her presence, and his expression soon warped to show the aggressive grin of a predator that had just found its prey. “It really is you, Sigrún? Heheh... It seems that the heavens

are going to grant my wish.” With that, he drew the sword on his hip. “This is perfect. Let us settle the score here and now.”

To be continued...



Afterword

Good evening, everyone. It certainly has been a while. It is I, Takayama, and I bring you volume 18. The plan had originally been to settle a bunch of plot points in this volume, but I wasn't even able to get through half of the planned plot here... Whoops...

This is the first time since volume 7 that I've so thoroughly misjudged the amount of work that it would take. Still, I'm pleased with the final product in terms of content. I hope that you, the reader, will enjoy it as well.

Now, I'm writing this afterword just as we're entering a new era in the Japanese calendar. There's something strange about knowing that the Heisei era was coming to an end. The era had changed from Showa to Heisei when I was just ten years old, and it's been thirty years since then. A lot has happened in those thirty years. No, really, so many things have gone on in that time. If I told my twenty-ish-year-old self that I'd be a light novel author at this point, he probably wouldn't have believed me. Even more so if I'd told him that I'd even have an anime adaptation to go along with it! You really never know what'll happen in life. Oh, but I suppose I'd want to urge myself to hurry up and work on becoming a light novel author. I still feel that I'm not all that talented and that everything that has happened thus far is the result of a huge accumulation of my hard work. At the very least, though, I'd want to tell my younger self that this is something I can put all my heart and soul into.

Until I was twenty-nine or so, I believed that I had no talent at all and didn't even put in the effort to write anything. When I was in my twenties, I had recently failed my college entrance exams and couldn't even hold down a job. I was just going from one random gig to the next and felt like I had nothing to be proud of. If I'd only had the courage to write a bad novel at that age and stepped forward, maybe I would have gotten where I am ten years faster... No, maybe that's going a little too far. Certainly, if not ten, then maybe I might have gotten to be a light novel author five years earlier than I did. It's entirely

possible that if I had been in that state, I would've been able to make *Ragnarok* a much better product. This series has been very kind to me, and with all that's happened, I'm very attached to it.

It's been six years since I started on this series. I've noticed a lot over the years I've been working on it, and I've grown a lot as a writer as a result. While I have always put all my effort into writing these books, if I had been able to start the series with my current skill... Well, I can't help but daydream about that every once in a while. Of course, there was a certain charm given to the early volumes as a result of my sheer rawness as an author, which gave me a lot more momentum, so it's hard to say things would have definitely been better.

Oh, c'mon, I've still got more pages to fill?

They gave me six pages for this afterword (~~I don't need that many~~), so I'd like to touch a little bit on the actual story while avoiding spoilers. I actually run a creative writing class (while I still have much to learn myself, there are many things I can teach people), and from around volume 14 onward, I started modeling characters in my books after my students. One of those characters is Hildegard, actually. When the student read it, he got really mad at me and yelled that it was nothing like him, LOL. Given that I didn't tell him he was the model for the character, seeing him figure it out through just reading her parts gave me a lot of satisfaction as an author. Oh, Kuuga's also modeled on this student. The fact that the same person can be the model for two completely different characters says a lot of interesting things about human beings, I think. Meanwhile, Shiba is modeled both after my past self and another one of my students.

To go on a different tangent... Someone once said that I was like a bear. I guess they meant that if I tried to be nice to people and pet them, I'd end up mauling people because I was a bear. Heheh. Heh... I would like to think I've gotten better at being nice to people since then. As for my student, he's gotten a lot more relaxed and playful. I'm a little jealous of him.

The two students previously mentioned are now professional authors themselves, and there's not a shadow of the striplings they had once been left in them. They're now valuable peers that I can bounce ideas and debate writing styles with. I was really happy when they came all the way out to Kanazawa to

celebrate my birthday this year too. Thanks again! Oh, speaking of which, I took them to a revolving sushi shop at the time, but for some reason, they were absurdly moved at the specific place I took them to. I guess it's hard for a local to understand, but sushi in Ishikawa Prefecture is evidently really good. I was shocked to hear one of them say that it was the first time they'd actually thought that squid was delicious. I mean, I'm pretty sure squid is always delicious, right?

Oh, wait, I've gotten completely off topic... Well, we'll say that it's the publisher's fault for giving me six pages for this. That said, it looks like I'm pretty much done filling the pages, so I'd like to move on to acknowledgments.

To my editor, U-sama, I'm sorry for my manuscript being late like usual! I always try to get things done early as a writer, but, well... I really am sorry that you had to go to work even during Golden Week.

To Yukisan-sensei, our wonderful illustrator. Thank you for the beautiful illustrations once again! I'm extremely pleased to be able to see a grown-up Ephy, LOL.

My sincere thanks go out to everyone who was involved in getting this book finished.

And last, but certainly not least, I offer my sincerest gratitude to all the readers who picked up this book!

The story is now reaching its climax, and I'd like to dash through it at full strength, so please stay with me to the end. I hope that we'll see each other in the next volume.

Seiichi Takayama

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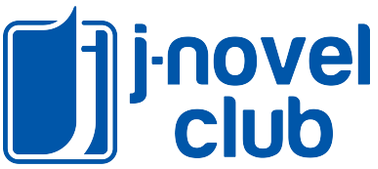
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 18

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Noboru Akimoto Edited by Aaron Brown

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