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

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

23



The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

23



The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 23 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10

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

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

23



Prologue

The largest nature reserve in Europe was Doñana National Park in modern Andalusia, an autonomous community in the southern region of Spain. It was a veritable paradise for the 500,000 migratory birds and waterfowl that visited every winter. Its abundant, fertile grounds made it a wonderful environment for a variety of plants and animals. Thanks to these qualities, it would eventually find itself designated as a biosphere reserve in the modern era.

According to legend, it was also said to be the location of the kingdom of Tartessos between the ninth and sixth century BCE. In fact, an analysis of aerial and satellite photos taken in 2010 revealed a number of circular impressions of various sizes, leading theorists to speculate that the ruins could've been those of the legendary Atlantis. However, its status as a nature and ecosystem reserve meant that any serious attempts to excavate the ruins had been denied As a result, to this day, little is known about the area.

When Yuuto first learned that fact, it made him want to do a little jig. Before coming to the New World, he had been adamant about not carelessly messing with history. The Yggdrasillians emigrating to the New World numbered over one million. He had no idea what would happen if he accidentally changed history and ended up creating a time paradox. In the worst case, every single one of those lives could be wiped from existence permanently. He had to avoid that at all costs, but with a million immigrants now looking to settle in this place, there was no helping the fact that they would inevitably leave some sort of trace. If the land had hardly been excavated, however, then most of those traces could be concealed within history's shadows. In other words, it was a perfect place for Yuuto to make his base.

It was here that the curtain rose on Yuuto and his family's new life.

ACT 1

“Wow, only half a year and it’s this developed?” The first surprise that greeted Yuuto upon disembarking the ship was the sheer number of brick houses lining the territory. Of course, without construction equipment, there were not nearly enough homes for everyone just yet, but even so, the settlement was looking more and more like a proper town in its own right.

“Well, you know. Our people can really buckle down and get things done when they absolutely have to.” The large man next to Yuuto—Jörgen—smirked, his face as intimidating as ever with scars adorning his cheeks, eyebrows, and bald head. He had served as one of Yuuto’s closest confidants ever since the young lad has risen to power as the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. Jörgen possessed a natural talent for handling political matters and was able to easily empathize with the common folk. He was currently tasked with leading the development of the New World as Yuuto’s representative.

“True enough,” Yuuto agreed with a shrug. Indeed, humans were, for the most part, lazy creatures until necessity lit a fire under their rears and made them achieve more than they ever thought possible. In this case, the immigrants, probably sick of not having a place to live, had worked fervently to create housing.

“Unfortunately, this is but a mere fraction of the housing we’ll need to provide adequate shelter to all of the immigrants. As we initially expected, the majority will likely have to move to a different location. That might not be so simple though...” Jörgen’s voice trailed off as a crease formed between his brows.

Yuuto nodded. “Yeah, I heard. Trouble’s brewing between the New World’s residents and the immigrants we’ve brought here, right?”

“Exactly. I’ve been racking my brain over how to peacefully resolve the situation, but though it brings me great shame, it appears that I just don’t have the skills to do so.”

“Just by looking at the progress this town has made, it’s evident you’ve done

plenty already. If this is a problem you can't solve, then it may well just be impossible." Yuuto let out a sigh. Since no writing system had existed back in the fifteenth century BCE, it was impossible to know the details, but humanity had flourished in southern Spain just like anywhere else. While the residents of the New World lived out their daily lives, they must've seen Yuuto and the others as outsiders encroaching upon their territory. The cultural and language differences between the two parties were vast—they were only barely able to communicate their intentions through body language. With that in mind, conflict was bound to arise sooner or later.

"If only we could somehow get the villages scattered here and there to accept and assimilate into our culture..." Yuuto mused.

"That'd be a tall ask when we're the unwelcome guests," Jörgen replied. "We could've resolved this peacefully if it'd just ended with a refusal, but a number of people have already been killed. We can't just put this behind us anymore."

At first, they had tried to build rapport and amicable relations through bartering and the like, but apparently, something went south among some hotblooded youths, and a slugfest had ensued. Rather than trying to defuse the incident, both camps instigated it, eventually leading to a number of deaths. Jörgen, for his part, had tried to stay friendly by offering heartfelt apologies and sympathy goods, but in recent times there had been a number of violent outbursts from the natives.

"I've managed to keep them at bay for now, but there is a faction within our military who have been rallying everyone around them to "eradicate the savages," so I believe it's only a matter of time before that bomb goes off," Jörgen explained.

"Savages, huh." Yuuto responded with a bitter half-smile. According to the reports he'd read, the natives wore face paint drawn in strange patterns as some sort of good-luck charm and their weapons and tools were almost entirely made of stone, meaning they were very far behind Yggdrasil technologically. It was commonplace during any era, and probably human nature, to deride cultures far behind one's own as "savage," but as someone who had learned from history, Yuuto knew that not only was that type of thinking the height of arrogance, it led to repulsive discriminatory outcomes like slave trading,

exploitation, and genocide. Those were the last things he wanted the country he ruled to be associated with.

At the same time, his subjects were already dealing with the stress of an unfamiliar land. If he wasn't smart about quelling their dissatisfaction, it could easily blow up into something much worse.

"Now then, what to do." Just when all his major work ended and he thought he could take a breather at last, one new problem came after another. Though he'd pretty much expected it, it didn't make it any less annoying. And as if driving the point home—

"Sir Jörgen! Sir Jörgen! We have an emergency!" A soldier that Yuuto assumed must've been a messenger came running toward them in a panic. Yuuto knew this could mean nothing good.

"W-Wait, huh?! Lord Reginarch?! M-My apologies!"

"Don't worry about it. Now, what news do you bring?" The messenger appeared to be shocked by Yuuto's presence, but Yuuto urged him on. He was so used to this treatment that he ignored it, but not concerning himself with formalities or appearances at times like these was in fact one of the chief reasons why Yuuto had attained his lofty position at such a young age. He knew from experience that such things were completely useless in an emergency.

"Yes, My Lord! A huge army is invading from the north! They appear to be fielding over twenty thousand soldiers!"

Both Yuuto and Jörgen froze, their expressions tense. Although Nobunaga's gigantic army of a hundred thousand had desensitized them to large armies for the most part, provisions were still hard to come by in this era, so armies of over ten thousand were exceedingly rare. In fact, the Battle of Kadesh, said to be the largest battle recorded in ancient history, still only had less than twenty thousand participants altogether, counting both sides.

"That's quite the showing of military might. I wasn't aware a large enough nation existed nearby..." As far as Yuuto had researched, there was no nation with an army that large anywhere in Spain during this time period.

But at the same time, it was within his expectations. According to the reports

he'd read, the natives had *no writing system.* They did not adapt with the times. It wasn't unheard of: the nomadic tribes didn't traditionally leave any written records behind no matter how the times progressed, so much of their exploits were shrouded in mystery. Even in Japan, records of the Yamatai Kingdom were only found in Chinese historical accounts, and it remained unknown even in the present day where in Japan it was even located. In other words, it was entirely possible for there to be some nation with a large military that Yuuto didn't know about.

"Seriously? We've barely even touched down in the New World and we're already being invaded? I really must've been born under an unlucky star or something." Yuuto scratched his head in frustration as he scowled. If things were going to be the same as they had in Yggdrasil, he would've at least liked to take it easy for a bit before the going got rough again.

"If you ask me, I think it shows just how much you're favored by the gods. I couldn't be more jealous," Jörgen responded.

"I'd say they enjoy making my life miserable, to be honest." Yuuto smiled bitterly and shrugged. "Well, perhaps this is actually a good opportunity. Let's crush them and take their land," he said coldly, narrowing his eyes.

If he had still been the same Yuuto that had just come to Yggdrasil, he likely would've hesitated, wondering if it would be excessive self-defense, but after living through countless life-or-death situations, he was no longer that same naïve boy. Naturally, invading and usurping someone else's territory for his own gain would've left a bad taste in his mouth, but he had no obligation to feel sorry for an army that had attacked his land of their own volition.

"Jörgen, how many soldiers can we mobilize right now?" Yuuto asked.

"Ten thousand...no, probably closer to eight thousand, I'd say," Jörgen replied.

"I figured it'd be somewhere around there." It wasn't a lot to work with. Upon moving to the New World, they'd needed to prioritize agricultural productivity. A portion of their iron weapons had been melted down to make farm tools. Though around fifty thousand of the Steel Clan settlers had probably received military training, there simply weren't nearly enough weapons and provisions to

go around.

“So it would seem that they have around two and a half times the men we do. Well normally I’d be worried, but with you here, Father, I expect that won’t be much of an issue,” Jörgen stated confidently.

“Whoa, whoa, you overestimate me. Numbers win battles. That’s a fundamental rule of war.”

Defeating a large army with a small one might be good material for the legend of a hero, but strategically it was a dangerous gamble.

“And yet you’ve overturned that fundamental rule many times over.” Jörgen chuckled, in seemingly high spirits from teasing Yuuto. He clearly understood what Yuuto was saying, but chose to make the comment anyway. Yuuto sighed.

“Well, true, I guess it doesn’t mean much coming from me.” He had no choice but to admit it. But he also knew that was precisely why he had to eliminate that line of thinking from his brain. He knew his knowledge of the modern world—his cheat code—wasn’t something that should be passed on and should be left to be buried within the annals of history.

“King Labarna! We’ve spotted the enemy! They’ve made camp in the swamp up ahead and are planning to ambush us. There’s probably about ten thousand of them.”

“Oh? As I thought, they have quite the army at their disposal.” Tahurwaili, the king of the savages, chuckled to himself and grinned. He’d received reports of foreigners reaching the southern coast about half a year ago. At first, he’d ignored it because it was only several hundred men, but they started arriving one after another until that number became a hundred thousand in no time at all. At that point, the problem became something he could no longer ignore. The reports said that they had no intention of invading and that they were an amicable sort, but Tahurwaili didn’t believe that for a second. They would need enough land to house that many people, so it was easy to imagine that one day they would bare their fangs toward the natives.

“We should eliminate them while they’re still getting settled!” he had urged, calling everyone under his jurisdiction to arms—and now he saw that it had

been the right decision.

“That’s our king for you. Nothing gets by him.”

“If we leave them to settle completely unopposed, they’ll definitely become Tarshish’s biggest threat.”

“They seem to have a lot of large ships too. If we were to steal them, we’d be able to bolster our forces even more!”

“This is the perfect time to attack. They have no fortress walls to protect them. We should be able to wipe them out without any trouble.”

The Four Heavenly Kings under Tahurwaili each gave their opinion. Each of them were seasoned warriors who had crossed many life-or-death tightropes and were trusted generals besides. They were also his close friends from back during the country’s foundation, and would not hesitate to say what they thought. The fact that none of them disagreed made him certain he was making the right decision.

“Then it’s settled!” Tahurwaili slapped his knees and stood up. “All units, to your positions! Pulverize those foreigners until there’s nothing left! Be so thorough they’ll never even think about opposing us again!” he shouted. His words were filled with the authority of a king, and those who heard them were all in awe of their majesty.

In truth, the kingdom that Tahurwaili commanded, Tarshish, already had over a hundred tribes underneath them, including the smaller ones. Thanks to that massive influence, they were able to field an army of over twenty thousand—currently the largest in all of Europe.

Tahurwaili was the peerless champion that had built all of it from the ground up in a single generation. Known as the “Golden Spear-Bearer,” he had not lost in a single battle to date, and even his subordinates were seasoned veterans without peer. Meanwhile, his opponents were vagabonds who were likely seeking refuge from an enemy. They had insufficient defenses and man power. There were no absolutes in war, but Tahurwaili couldn’t see a single element that might cause them to lose.

And yet...

A noise none of the Tarshish generals would have expected to hear at that moment filled the air.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Along with the sound of air being sliced, a massive volley of arrows descended upon Tahurwaili's camp.

"Huh?! A surprise attack?! From where?!" Tahurwaili shouted. It was a reasonable assumption. Though they'd discovered the enemy's position ahead of their current location, they were still quite a distance away, so it would stand to reason to think an ambush had been staged nearby.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Down came another hail of arrows. This time he didn't miss it.

"Huh...?!" Which was why his mouth dropped open in shock. The arrows were definitely being loosed from the camp ahead of them—there were no enemy soldiers nearby.

"B-But that's impossible... There's no way their arrows would be able to reach from that distance!" The distance between the two camps was far too great for an arrow to reach. In legends and fiction battles were fought with swords and spears, but in reality, the weapon that claimed the most lives was the bow and arrow. In other words, the bow was the most prized weapon on the battlefield. For them to be able to fire from that distance meant...

"Fighting them head-on is going to be a problem, huh." Gritting his teeth, Tahurwaili acknowledged that he was at a disadvantage. Just thinking about how many he would have to sacrifice to even get within striking distance with their own bows made him shudder. Even if they did get within range, there was no question that the other side's bows were overwhelmingly more powerful. It was clear as day that what awaited them then was a war of attrition.

"Advance! Show them that we're not afraid!" Still, Tahurwaili did not falter in his commands. If they continued on like this, his vanguard would likely suffer major casualties. Perhaps they might even be wiped out entirely. But that was fine. As a matter of fact, that would work out in his favor.

"Give the other units the orders to retreat the moment I give the signal!"

"What?! No way!"

“A Lion Hunt?!” Tahurwaili’s next orders surprised his close associates, as they could no doubt guess what he was planning.

A Lion Hunt—when your side intentionally runs away in order to lure the enemy to a place where your allies lay in ambush. As it was a foolproof way to surround and eliminate an enemy, it was a rather popular tactic with hunters. Though Tahurwaili came from a family of hunters, he had not been taught this tactic by anyone. He had learned it during his many hunts. Recently his army had gotten so big that he’d been unable to use it, but back when Tahurwaili was the head of a smaller tribe it had gotten him great results and was one of the main factors that had allowed him to get to the position he currently held.

“I honestly don’t think they’re worth using it on...” One of his generals voiced his dissatisfaction as he frowned. This order was essentially the same as cruelly telling his allies that made up the vanguard to die a noble death. Of course, from an emotional perspective, it would stand to reason that he would be opposed, but he was severely underestimating the situation they were in.

“If we simply rush forward and attack, there’ll be even more casualties. If we don’t play our cards right the entire army could even be put to rout,” the king responded. He could say with conviction that this was the most correct course of action. A mere general would probably need some time to recognize that.

“What?! The great king of Tarshish’s army has never lost! There’s no way we’ll be defeated by a mere ten thousand men!”

“Yes, even weighing all the possible outcomes I have to agree...”

Despite what was occurring right before their eyes, his generals couldn’t sense any danger, even going as far as to claim this to be an easy victory. They weren’t talentless by any means; as a matter of fact, each had received many accolades for their military prowess up until now.

The difference in the range of each side’s archers was too great. From just that information alone, Tahurwaili could see the outcome of this skirmish. That was how outstanding of a leader he was. However, the battle was still ongoing. There was no time to explain.

“My decision is final. Do as I say and we shall emerge victorious!” He purposefully spoke in the noblest voice he could muster. What was necessary

for a leader was not the ability to cooperate, but stubbornness. Instincts had taught him that. Humans had an innate desire to be subservient. He knew that humans felt safest and most prosperous when they were blindly following a great leader, rather than making decisions of their own.

He would be the arrogant king they desired.

“Yes! We will do just as you say!”

“We will serve you with all our being!”

His generals bowed their heads and followed his orders, saying nothing further.

There was no doubt or hesitation in their eyes. That was because they all knew Tahurwaili was an unparalleled hero. If they just did as he said, they would surely win. After all, Tahurwaili had never once given them any reason to think otherwise.

Tahurwaili was born in a village of hunters and farmers in a region far to the east of Spain that we now know as Iran. The village was host to a small tribe of around one hundred people. From a young age, Tahurwaili was larger than all the other residents and boasted uncontested strength to match. He could even take down the adults in a fight. By the time he turned fifteen, he had grown sick of village life. The hunting provided a bit of sport, but deer, birds, and boars alike were no match for him in the end.

“It’s no use. I’ll rot if I stay here.” He had, after all, been born stronger than everyone else. Therefore, he wanted to test the limits of how far he could go. Three months later, Tahurwaili abandoned the village and became a mercenary for the kingdom of Hattusa, which had long since been the strongest power in the “Land of Four Directions” (which was what the people of the times called the Ancient Orient). He’d heard that Egypt, Babylonia, and Mitanni were all embroiled in a war over the rights to that land, and figured it’d be a perfect opportunity to test his might.

And so, five years on from the day he made the fateful decision to leave...

“Oh, my son, you’re back! I hear you made quite the name for yourself on this battlefield as well!”

Tahurwaili’s peerless strength was acknowledged, and he was welcomed as the son-in-law of Zulu, perhaps the strongest guard in the kingdom. He went from place to place, quashing rebellions before they escalated.

“Tahurwaili’s spear is worth its weight in gold.” Praised by even King Huzzjia I, there was not a single person in the kingdom of Hattusa that didn’t know his name.

“With you here, I can rest assured that our family is in good hands. Even after I die, I’m counting on you, my son,” Zulu stated proudly.

“Yes, I know.” He nodded at his father-in-law Zulu’s words, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He was grateful to Zulu, that much was true. Zulu had taught him how to fight, giving him the knowledge he needed to command a unit. If it hadn’t been for Zulu, there was a good chance he would’ve ended his life as a mere private soldier. But still...

“Is this really enough?” In order to take the throne or position of elite guard, one needed to have noble blood running through their veins. It was something Tahurwaili would never be able to achieve no matter how much he yearned for it.

“But what if I take it by force? Hmm... No, I’d inevitably be branded as a traitor.” At present, he held great favor with Huzzjia I. The royal family had put an end to the territorial dispute and even pacified the kingdom of Hattusa after a civil war, not to mention they’d reformed many of the kingdom’s less-than-savory qualities. His father-in-law Zulu, the elite guard, had also pledged allegiance to Huzzjia I, and was well known as a master of combat. He didn’t have a good reason to go against them, and even if he was to somehow win, he felt that a throne where he was going to be looked upon unfavorably was not a proper one for him.

“I suppose it’s time, then.” Just like that, Tahurwaili made the decision to abandon his country. He had just turned twenty—still young with his whole life ahead of him. He’d be damned if he was going to continue to be someone’s lapdog for the rest of his life. The prospect of fleeing the Land of Four Directions and focusing on ascending to a throne somewhere else was much more enticing.

In most cases, the decision to abandon wealth, status, and honor unprompted and start from square one in an unknown land was not a sane one. He would probably be ridiculed. They’d probably use it as an excuse to look down on ordinary people as a whole, saying they all had a screw loose and the royals were the only ones that had any sense. But Tahurwaili had been born as a man and as such, he had a duty to aim for greatness. A duty to make everyone else submit to him as king.

As it would turn out, after a mere ten years, he would succeed in that goal in the land of Europe. Having usurped over one hundred separate tribes, Tahurwaili became its ruler. It had not been an easy road by any means—in fact, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that the moment he’d thrown his hat in the ring, it had been but one hardship after another. His life had been in danger more times than he could count on his fingers. Even so, Tahurwaili overcame all odds to stand at the top as a king.

“I knew the gods favored me!” Of the fact he just stated, he was certain. However, it had been a busy ten years—and now there would be threats like heavy bows and large ships in his way, but he’d be able to manage them without worry. After all, he was the man chosen by the gods to conquer this world. These challenges would only serve to decorate the legend of Tahurwaili further. He believed that from the bottom of his heart, without a shred of doubt or hesitation. He may have been a dreamer with lofty aspirations, but that was precisely the quality that made heroes. Tahurwaili believed without a doubt that he possessed the ability and charisma to bring those aspirations to fruition. Perhaps he would have if he hadn’t had the misfortune to come across a man whose very existence was foul play.

“Report from the vanguard! The enemy is charging forward without any regard for our arrows!”

“They’re braver than I thought, then.” Yuuto’s eyes widened in surprise when he heard Kristina’s report. It was common in this era for the majority of soldiers to be plucked from farms and such, so he figured that by scaring them a little he could get them to retreat. He hadn’t been able to use this tactic thus far as he was always facing off against ridiculously charismatic individuals like Nobunaga, Steinþórr, and Fagrahvél, but a volley of arrows fired from an overwhelming distance should’ve been plenty intimidating enough to make the soldiers cower.

“Well, it certainly would’ve been easier for us if they’d lost their will to fight, though.” His voice was tinged with the reluctance he was feeling. He’d stained his hands with the blood of others countless times because he’d told himself there’d been no other option, but it wasn’t like he was a bloodthirsty tyrant. He didn’t want to take a life if he didn’t have to. However, if they continued to display fighting spirit then Yuuto wasn’t going to let his guard down or hold back.

“Tell our archers not to let up their fire! Let the crossbow unit know that they are to open fire as soon as they see the enemy enter their range! Do not let the enemy get near!” Yuuto thrust his hand out in front of him as he gave his orders. A little while later—

“The enemy vanguard has been completely wiped out!” Kristina came back with another report, its contents just as Yuuto had expected. The Steel Clan

boasted ranged weaponry several thousand years ahead of its time, so he'd been aware of the overwhelming gap between him and his enemy from the start, and he hadn't hesitated to use it to his advantage. By spreading out in a W formation, the enemy could be fired upon from all directions (here, he took a cue from the star-shaped design of the Goryokaku Tower in Japan). Not to mention that while the arrows from the archers were coming from above, the crossbow unit's arrows came flying in from the side, meaning that the enemy soldiers were surely having a hard time trying to determine how best to protect themselves from the onslaught of projectiles.

He also drew inspiration from the Battle of Crecy, which took place during the Hundred Years' War between England and France. Though the French army had been nearly four times larger, England had clinched a one-sided victory by using longbows with superior range and digging pit traps. Of course, Yuuto hadn't had any time to dig pit traps, but...

"By leading them toward the swamp, we were able to slow their advance, and by using our bows' superior range, we made short work of the enemy. Your plan worked like a charm, I'd say."

"Yeah, I'm honestly relieved it did. I wouldn't want this to turn into a close-quarters fight this time."

"Yes. Our vanguard unit, the Maidens of the Waves, is no more, after all, and both Aunt Felicia and Big Sis Sigrún are on maternity leave."

"Yeah, and Linnea's out of commission for the same reason."

"Far be it from me to question the duties of the þjóðann, but don't you think you overdid it? Your libido has cost us over half of our military strength. You don't have to build a dynasty overnight, you know."

"Oh, hush. I was giving them my blessing, so I had no choice." His tone was casual when he replied, but inside he was a bit embarrassed, to tell the truth. Many of his most capable subordinates had been lost, and just as Kristina had said, their military strength had dwindled. Specifically, the military's response to Yuuto's commands was dull and unorganized, as though they had no idea what they were supposed to be doing. A nation's lifeblood depended on its military wins and losses, so Yuuto swore to himself that in the future he wouldn't make

the same mistake again.

“Besides, Father, you’re...ah, excuse me.” Kristina was about to say more, but suddenly held up a hand, holding the transceiver to her ear and nodding periodically before she spoke once more. “More news from the front lines. The enemy has begun to retreat.”

“Hm, seems like they’ve realized that continuing to fumble around in the dark is only going to result in more losses on their end.” The enemy vanguard had collapsed without even being able to deliver a single blow to the Steel Clan’s forces, so it was a sound decision.

“Should we pursue?”

“Hmm, maybe... Wait, don’t!” Yuuto was about to nod when a realization came to him. He quickly gave the order to stand by. He had a bad feeling about all of this.

“Father?”

“Right now, alarm bells are ringing in my head at max volume. My instincts are telling me that if we pursue them now, it’ll be bad news.” By all accounts, making such a decision based solely on his instinct was questionable, but something told Yuuto that this was nothing to sneeze at. According to a book he’d read long ago, instinct was the result of the brain subconsciously compiling in an instant all it had experienced and formulating a course of action based on that. It definitely wasn’t something he could ignore.

“Looks like now’s the time to use it.” After a small sigh, Yuuto shut his eyes and brought his consciousness inward. He delved deeper and deeper into his psyche until he came across a giant ball of light restrained in chains. After taking hold of it, he forcefully dragged it up to the surface. The human presence he’d felt around him expanded instantaneously. The presence was so strong that he knew exactly where they were without even opening his eyes.

“Yep, I knew it. The enemy vanguard’s resolve hasn’t wavered one bit.” This was likely the source of Yuuto’s bad feeling. If they had just been frightened away by arrows, the soldiers would’ve had more fear or confusion in their body language. However, they were completely composed, which meant—

“It couldn’t be! The retreat was fake?!” Kristina yelled in shock.

“Yeah. They were likely trying to get us to follow them. They’ve got rearguard units lying in ambush on either side, it seems.” Yuuto spoke casually, but of course, a regular human being wouldn’t be able to figure out that much. He had used the power of Hervör, Guardian of the Host, one of the twin runes he’d inherited from the previous þjóðann Sigrdrífa. It allowed Yuuto to sense the presence and will of others, which at a glance might’ve seemed like a rather run-of-the-mill power. However...

“To be able to understand the battlefield in more detail than what my information network can provide... It’s like you’re not even human anymore, Father. Or rather, in your vernacular, you’re ‘overpowered,’ correct?” There was exasperation in Kristina’s voice even as she slathered on the sarcasm. In war, it was vital to know the positions and movements of the enemy. Naturally, Kristina knew this well—it was exactly what she and her subordinates had been desperately scrambling to achieve all this time. In order to cope with the fact that someone in her own clan was able to merely sense all that information with pinpoint accuracy, she’d probably felt compelled to get in a jab or two about how all her efforts were for nothing.

“It’s nothing so powerful as that,” Yuuto replied with a half-smile. This ability had originally been sealed away by multiple Gleipnir spells—all he’d done was drag it to the surface. Every time he used it, it took a huge chunk out of him, both physically and mentally, so he couldn’t rely on it whenever he wanted. In that sense, Kristina had no need to worry—she was just as important to the clan as ever.

“Hm? Yuuto can also sense the enemy’s positions?” The petite black-haired girl standing next to him looked up at him with curious eyes. Her name was Oda Homura, and she was the daughter of Oda Nobunaga of the Flame Clan—a bearer of twin runes, and an entity who had given Yuuto and the rest of the Steel Clan quite a lot of grief previously.

“By ‘also,’ that must mean you can sense them too, Homura?” Yuuto replied, surprised. He’d heard the runes she possessed allowed her to invigorate and even manipulate the life force of others, but...

“Of course. Such is child’s play for the great Homura!” Pounding her nonexistent chest, Homura snorted with pride. This behavior only served to make her look even more childish, but Yuuto couldn’t afford to ignore the contents of her words. That would certainly explain why during their battles against the Flame Clan, the enemy always seemed to know where the Steel Clan Army was positioned.

“How about not keeping stuff like that to yourself?” Yuuto muttered in annoyance. If only he’d known she possessed that sort of power, he would’ve already proactively utilized it. Of course, he didn’t expect such forthrightness from a child like her anyway.

“Why? It’s not like you told me about your power either,” Homura replied, annoyed by his tone.

“Ugh... Guess I can’t argue with that,” Yuuto conceded.

“Never mind that! Does that mean there are others who can sense it?” she asked excitedly. She probably wanted to make friends who were like her.

“You’re the only one, of course. If there were others, we wouldn’t be able to function as a unit,” Kristina chimed in with a sarcastic smile.

“What are you talking about, Kristina? I can also sense when enemies are nearby. It’s like the wind tells me where they are, or something!” Albertina chimed in. The sibling who was supposed to be the family member Kristina was closest to had inadvertently betrayed her.

“Hmph.” Kristina curled her lips into a pout. It probably rankled her that her twin sister was able to do something she couldn’t.

“Don’t forget me! I may not be able to tell exactly where they are, but I can hear and smell them just fine!” As if providing the coup de grâce, a red-haired girl butted in with a smug grin.

It was Hildegard—the commander of Centauros, formerly known as the Múspell Unit. Never silver-tongued enough to win verbal disagreements against Kristina, she must’ve seen this as her opportunity to finally get revenge.



“The Steel Clan really is like a hive for freaks of nature, isn’t it?” Fagrahvél commented in exasperation.

“No kiiidding. With our roster, staging a surprise attack or ambush against us would be compleeetely impossible,” Bára added. The pair gave strained smiles, completely unaware that their abilities were just as freakish. Fagrahvél’s Gjallarhorn was powerful enough to be known as the Rune of Kings and could temporarily transform an entire unit into a throng of bloodthirsty warriors unafraid of death. Bára was the Steel Clan’s tactician, and though her rune was nothing of note, her strategic wit was unparalleled. She often pinpointed and eliminated holes in Yuuto’s strategies and tactics to ensure they were successful.

“...Honestly, it’s enough to almost make you feel sorry for our enemies,” Kristina said with a sigh. She looked exasperated, but the look on her face showed a clear determination to not lose to any of them.

“I agree, honestly.” Though Yuuto didn’t want to come off as arrogant, he couldn’t help but feel sympathetic. The enemy this time was strong, without a doubt. They had managed to amass an army of over twenty thousand in this early of an era. They’d made the cruel yet logical decision to intentionally sacrifice their front lines to bait their opponent, a call Yuuto could never have made. They also had enough charisma and leadership to stage a false retreat, which was incredibly difficult to pull off in an orderly fashion. Both feats were something a typical commander wouldn’t ordinarily be able to accomplish. It probably wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that their leader was probably someone with the qualifications to shape history itself.

Yuuto had ceased production of their trump card, gunpowder, because he was afraid of the effect it might have on history. Even so, he was confident that he wouldn’t lose. In fact—

“Really, this is probably gonna be overkill.”

A messenger approached Tahurwaili with a report. “Your Majesty Labarna, I bring a report from General Lambda leading the rearguard. The enemy chose to pursue them and they are now engaged in combat.”

“Heh... So they took the bait.” Once Tahurwaili heard the messenger’s report, he couldn’t help but smirk. Lambda was one of Tahurwaili’s Four Heavenly Kings, and was especially proficient in staging retreats—in other words, there

was no better man suited for this strategy. He was confident Lambda would be able to lead the enemy to the specified point without raising suspicion.

Recomposing himself, Tahurwaili spoke once more. “And what about the unit in wing formation on either side?”

“They are all in position and ready to go, Your Majesty. They only await your orders now,” the messenger responded.

“I see, I see. Very good.” Tahurwaili gave a satisfied nod. Positioned on the left and right sides of the designated point were his tank units—the most elite and cutting-edge in his whole army. Comprising horse-drawn carriages each carrying a coachman, a warrior, and an archer, they were powerful enough to conquer any battlefield of this era. The sheer number they owned was said to be the country’s entire military might itself—over two thousand had been positioned on either side. It couldn’t be a more perfect formation.

“Heh, so this is what they mean by ‘moths to the flame.’ They’re so drunk on their victory that they’ll follow us right to the plains. But that’s when their luck will run out.”

They couldn’t be used in the swamp, but once the enemy chased them to the plains they could mobilize as many of their tank units as they wished. The enemy may have had the advantage when it came to ranged weaponry, but the movement and destructive capabilities of the tank units that would be coming at them from both sides ensured that they were going to be wiped out.

“Do your worst, fools! Come to me!” Baring a carnivorous grin that might as well have been dripping saliva, Tahurwaili waited with bated breath for that moment. Never in his wildest dreams would he have suspected that the enemy had seen through his false retreat from the start and was merely pretending to be baited. His heart danced with the anticipation of victory.

After a short period of suspense...

“Y-Your Majesty Labarna, they’re here!”

“Finally! It is time!” Tahurwaili shouted out in excitement at the arrival of his prey. But the messenger’s next words sent him into a spiral of confusion.

“Y-You won’t believe this, but the enemy is charging toward us—on

horseback! Th-There's over a thousand of them!"

"...Huh?" For an instant, Tahurwaili couldn't comprehend what his messenger had just told him. Of course, even Tahurwaili knew about mounted units. But that was exactly why he understood that horses like that couldn't be trained to charge in a mere day, let alone trot in formation. It required a great deal of time and effort to get the horses to behave as desired. And the enemy had over one thousand of those horses?!

"I-It's a bluff! They're just trying to scare us! Those horses are mere decoration, there's no way they can actually fi—" But that was as far as he got before he saw something truly unbelievable. Arrows were raining down from the sky toward their camp. Of course, they were coming from the horseback soldiers charging directly at them.

"I-Inconceivable! They're firing while on horseback?!" Tahurwaili shouted out in disbelief, betraying his concern. Naturally, one needed both hands to fire an arrow, so that meant that they weren't grabbing onto the horses' manes. Yet they were charging at full speed! "How are they not falling from their horses?!"

If it was just one or two soldiers who were especially proficient at riding horses he'd be able to understand, but there were over a thousand here—that was a different story entirely. That wasn't even the worst of it...

"Th-They're firing from outside our range again!" the messenger yelled in a panic.

"I can see that without you having to tell me, fool!" he shouted back angrily, unable to maintain his composure. It seemed like the horseback unit before him was not only made up of master riders, but master archers as well. After all, arrows were being fired from an extraordinary range at frightening speeds without pause. There was no other conclusion he could draw.

"But how?!" Tahurwaili was stunned by one impossibility after another.

However, he was a peerless hero all the same. "Raise the smoke signals for the tank units waiting in the wings! Let the front lines know to hold out until the tank units arrive!" Immediately regaining his cool, he fired off order after order, and those orders were successfully carried out. To Tahurwaili's troops, the tank unit was emblematic of their strength. They had seen it trample enemy after

enemy. They had seen how pathetically their enemies all ran away afterward. It didn't matter how incomprehensible the enemy's fighting style was because they could never win against the invincible tank unit. All it had to do was charge, and they'd win! It was that belief that kept the soldiers at ease so that they could hold out.

"Ugh, what a despicable bunch!" Tahurwaili muttered under his breath as he bit his lip hard enough to puncture it. The enemy had halted their advance, stopping right where their opponent's arrows couldn't reach, and switched to ranged combat. At this rate, Tahurwaili's side would once again be subjected to a one-sided attack.

"Not again... Not again!" If he carelessly retreated here, it would be construed as weakness, and the negative mood would spread across the entire army. If that happened, even Tahurwaili wouldn't be able to recover from it easily. However, it was too early to attack. They'd definitely suffer losses going up against such an elite unit. The best option was to time their attack with the tank units standing by in wing formation and surround the enemy. Therefore, all he could do now was wait.

Every moment that passed felt like an eternity, until cries of elation could be heard roaring from the front lines, along with the sound of heavy hooves and whinnies. Those sounds resounded in Tahurwaili's core like music to his ears.

"Finally... Finally!" The time had finally come, and the long-awaited tank unit was finally here.

"The time has come! Everyone, you did well in holding the line, but now we stage our counterattack! All units, charge! Let them suffer ten times as much as we have!" Tahurwaili stood up and shouted regally. Watching their leader overflowing with confidence gave all who witnessed it courage, spreading across the army in no time.

Booming voices arose and the ground trembled as the Tarshish army encroached upon the enemy cavalry. All the anger they'd been holding in until now exploded at once. Giving off an almost demonic aura, the soldiers threatened to swallow up everything like a tumultuous, stormy sea.

"The enemy's retreating!"

“Looks like our spirit scared them off!” Tahurwaili’s entourage also let out cries of jubilation. No matter how much that cavalry unit defied description, there were only about a thousand of them. Faced with twenty thousand soldiers mad with fury, the enemy probably had no other option but to retreat with their tail between their legs.

“Look! The enemy’s running away! They’ve cowed to our overwhelming strength! Now to finish the job and...huh?!” Riding the high of victory, Tahurwaili was about to invigorate the army further when a chill suddenly ran up his spine, giving him pause. Something was wrong. His chest stirred. Something within him was vehemently rejecting the notion to urge the troops any further. Perhaps this was the “sixth sense” that only fabled heroes possessed.

“No! It can’t be!”

“No way no way no way no way.”

“Impossible. Absolutely impossible.”

And yet, it was the only possibility he could come up with.

“Stop them immediately! Send an emergency order to the vanguard telling them to halt! It’s a trap! The enemy is staging a Lion Hunt against *us*!”

All the information at his disposal indicated that it was so. Currently, there was only the enemy cavalry unit in front of them. There were no other foot soldiers to be seen. One might think that was because the cavalry unit had arrived much faster due to being on horseback, but that wasn’t the case. The cavalry unit was a *decoy*, designed to bait Tahurwaili’s army instead! Both the main unit and the wing units to the left and right had completely been ensnared in the trap.

“Stooop! Stop, dammit!” Tahurwaili screamed, but his words fell on deaf ears. There was an inevitable time lag between his orders and the messengers racing on horseback to deliver them. Furthermore, after finally having an opportunity to let out some of the frustration of relentlessly being on the receiving end of the enemy’s attacks, his troops were hungry for revenge. When the enemy retreated, it was a one-in-a-million chance for payback. That was how the enemy cavalry unit had managed to lure his forces to them, gathering them all

in one place.

But they wouldn't be able to catch up. It was impossible. It didn't matter what type of mobility the tank unit possessed, if it was between a horse with only a rider on its back and a horse-drawn carriage pulling a carrier with three people, it was clear who was faster. Unfortunately, troops ensnared by the prospect of victory and their own bloodlust wouldn't understand such things. As long as they were driven forward by their own zeal, the soldiers' rampage couldn't be stopped.

Almost as though it was a given at this point, the whooshing of arrows sailing past once again came from both sides of the camp, cascading upon them like rain. The Tarshish army, already charging forward at full throttle, had no way of avoiding it.

"Is the enemy commander some kind of demon?!" Tahurwaili's voice shook as he trembled in fear. The enemy had seen through Tahurwaili's ruse instantaneously and even turned the tables on him and had done so more cleverly than he would ever be able to manage. Their commander was likely on another level entirely.

"N...Ngghhh!" A pathetic groan escaped Tahurwaili's mouth. He bit his lip and clenched his fists so hard that blood trickled from his hands and mouth. Not only was he unable to eliminate the enemy, but he had also ended up completely in the palm of their hands. In the thirty-four years he'd been on this earth, he had never felt such humiliation.

"Huff...huff...huff..." Tahurwaili was running through the dim forest as fast as his legs could carry him. His bronze armor, once shiny, was covered in mud. His face too, no longer full of the confidence and vigor he was known for, was covered in sweat, and the signs of exhaustion and frustration were clear to see for anyone who gazed upon him. He looked like a different person altogether. Mere moments ago, he would have never imagined himself in this position. By all rights, he should've been admiring the enemy commander's head on a pike and sipping his victory wine right about now, but instead it was the complete opposite. Even so, it wasn't over just yet.

"Haa... Haa... You bastaaaard!" His eyes alone had not yet lost their light.

Consumed by the flames of anger, he refused to give up. “I will never forget how you humiliated me! Huff...huff... Just you wait! I’ll pay you back for this in spades a few years from now!” Running for so long was beginning to take its toll on his body and he was reaching his limit, but he converted that humiliation, fury, and thirst for vengeance into energy and pressed onward. He’d lost many things during this battle, but he still had people and soldiers that loved and respected him if he returned to his country. He would gather power and influence for a few more years, and then definitely have his revenge.

“Ah, demon spotted!” Suddenly, he heard a childish-sounding voice that seemed wholly unsuited for the battlefield coming from above him. When he looked up in surprise, he saw a black-haired girl of about ten or so grinning proudly.

“This time it’s the great Homura’s win! Take that, Hilda!” Nodding happily, she leaped down from the trees and landed in front of Tahurwaili.

“Is she a child from a nearby village? Wait, no...” He immediately discarded that initial thought. He was certain that there was no village near here. A child loitering around in the forest like this was unnatural, and the clothes she was wearing were unusual, the likes of which he’d never seen before. Above all—

“You’re pretty good yourself, though. You may have lost pitifully to Yuuto, but you’ve got *presence.* That’s why I was able to spot you from far away.”

Her words implied that she’d been looking for him. But what did she mean by “from far away?” If that was true, then he had nowhere to run. She may have looked like an innocent, petite ten-year-old girl, but he could tell she was dangerous.

“Who are you, little girl? You certainly don’t seem human,” Tahurwaili spoke in a tense voice as he unsheathed the sword at his hip. His senses were telling them that he was face-to-face with the type of terrible monster that only existed in myths and legends. He knew he wouldn’t be able to win. Tahurwaili had faced off against bears and even soldiers five times stronger than him, and yet he’d never felt so powerless.

“Hm? Well, you’re right about that. The great Homura isn’t a normal girl. I’m a twin-runed Einherjar!”

“Twin... Ein...?” He was confused by the unfamiliar words. Was it some kind of ancient, divine language?

“Oh, I guess people over here wouldn’t know about Einherjar. Oh well, doesn’t matter.” In the next instant, the girl disappeared from his vision, and almost simultaneously he felt a sharp impact strike his solar plexus.

“Gaah!” With a cry of anguish, Tahurwaili crumpled to the ground. He felt more frustration than pain. That frustration permeated his entire body until it was all he could feel.

“Hm... The rules of our game were to capture you without killing you, so I’ll let you live! Good for you,” Homura said cheerfully.

Unable to breathe properly, Tahurwaili’s throat emitted only strange noises. The enemy was right in front of him—he had to stand up and fight, yet he was paralyzed with sheer pain. With one hit—yes, just a single hit—he’d been rendered unable to fight.

“Impossible...! True, I haven’t been participating in battles as much recently, so I may be a bit rusty, but I’m the Golden Spear-Bearer, dammit!” It was obvious that despite her appearance the girl possessed unprecedented, unmatched strength, but Tahurwaili prided himself on his own strength. By his estimation, he was probably one of the three strongest fighters in the entire world. In fact, he could count on one hand the number of men he’d faced that were able to hold their own against him, and he’d claimed victory against them all. That was how he was able to ascend to his current status, so how was he defeated so easily?!

“It can’t...it can’t end like this!” He hadn’t held back even one iota. He’d approached her with the utmost caution, focusing on her every move, and yet...!

“Tee hee. I can already imagine the look on Hildegard’s sore loser face.”

And to top it all off, his opponent *wasn’t even concerned with him.* She was focused on a battle with someone else! How was just one group of invaders able to get under his skin this much?! There was nothing he could do. He could barely even move a finger. In no time at all the little girl had him rolled up in a bamboo mat and hoisted away.

“Heave, ho...” Her speed was that of a horse running at full tilt, even while carrying him.

“I must be dreaming... This is all just a bad dream... Ha ha ha...” Faced with such a surreal turn of events, even Tahurwaili was compelled to detach from reality. Of course, unfortunate as it was for him, this was no dream.

Tahurwaili was taken to the enemy camp, where his expression stiffened with shock and fear. He was surrounded by drop-dead gorgeous women, the likes of which he’d have no qualms about spending a night with. At first, he had assumed these girls were the commander’s captives and that he must be quite the womanizer, and felt shame at losing to such an indulgent man. But that thought lasted for only an instant, blasted away into the ether.

“Th-They’re all insanely strong!”

He had painstakingly climbed his way up to royal status on his own merits. One of the reasons he was able to do that was his keen eye for people. Just as he’d instantly discerned how powerful the girl named Homura had been, Tahurwaili’s eye was not easily deceived by appearances. He could tell—everyone here was freakishly powerful! Each and every one of them had the qualifications and presence to become king of their own nation if they so desired it.

“So you were the one that got him first. Nice, Homura! Looks like you win the game.” But the most peculiar of them all was the black-haired boy mingling with them. He looked to be about twenty, or perhaps younger. There was nothing remarkable about him in the slightest, and he didn’t look particularly strong. Tahurwaili had no doubt he could take him in a one-on-one fight. But he immediately realized.

“This is the ringleader of this den of monsters!”

First, the way in which he carried himself was different from all the others—the generals that were a dime a dozen around these parts would likely look harmless compared to this man. Just how much experience did one have to have to give off such a monstrous aura at such a young age?!

“So this is the enemy commander, huh?” the black-haired boy remarked.

The moment the boy glared at him, he felt his heart leap up into his throat. His spine shivered and his body trembled as though he'd been thrown into a basin of ice. Having come this far, Tahurwaili was not afraid of death. Even during the encounter with Homura earlier he'd only been frazzled with nervousness. He'd never been paralyzed with fear until now. Before he even realized it himself, he had averted his eyes from the boy. The great king Tahurwaili had been unable to withstand the pressure of a gaze from a boy of no more than twenty!

The boy snickered. "No need to be so afraid. We have no intention of taking your life." When he saw the boy grin, Tahurwaili unconsciously relaxed. However, that was even more humiliating.

"My name is Suoh Yuuto. I would like to hear yours as well," the boy said calmly.

"...Tahurwaili." He felt that hiding it at this point would only serve to degrade him further, so he answered honestly.

The boy named Suohyuuto nodded. "Tahurwaili, is it? You may be my enemy, but I have to commend you for your outstanding skill."

"Tch! Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?" He couldn't stop himself from clicking his tongue at the remark. There was a limit to the amount of lip service you could give before it became an insult. After all, this boy had kicked Tahurwaili to the curb easier than taking candy from a baby. This was nothing like hunting rabbits or lions—this time he'd been crushed by a presence far greater.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose it'd make sense if you'd take it that way, but I'm being serious, you know?" Suohyuuto gave a half-smile. It was as if he was pitying Tahurwaili from the bottom of his heart.

"That's just how little of a threat he sees me as!"

"You retreated the moment we started firing our arrows, you tried to lure us in with a false retreat, and you immediately noticed when we tried the same thing on you. Those things take real skill." It seemed he was trying to laud Tahurwaili as an opponent, but his words only humiliated Tahurwaili practically to the point of tears. The boy had grasped his actions and thoughts back then as

easily as grasping an apple. As he thought, he was merely dancing on the palm of this boy's hand the whole time. Whether or not the boy could see through Tahurwaili's heart even now he couldn't tell, but Suohyuuto patted him on the shoulder and said, "In the end, you were just, y'know, unlucky."

ACT 2

From a young age, Albertina had been special. She could see and hear things that others couldn't. She couldn't understand why that was the case, nor what it was like to be unable to experience those things. Many things she considered normal and boring were wildly unusual to many others. Things she believed to be easily understood were utterly foreign to others, and vice versa.

At first, she'd tried to think like everyone else, but she simply couldn't do it. In the end, she stopped thinking altogether.

"Yaaawn... Another day of waking up to nothing but ocean as far as the eye can see." Yuuto emerged from his cabin onto the deck, forcing a smile. The view itself was magnificent, but he'd been on this ship for a whole month now, having departed from the Steel Clan's newly acquired capital, Tarshish. He never wanted to see the ocean again after this. "Shouldn't we be there by now?" he asked.

Yuuto and company were currently heading east—far east—across the Mediterranean Sea. They were headed toward what we now know as the Middle East, or the "land of four directions" in this era. As a result of their victory against Tahurwaili the Steel Clan had expanded their territory greatly, but it wasn't like Yuuto was going to massacre the previous inhabitants for their land and this version of Europe wasn't as large as its modern counterpart. They needed more space. A lot more.

A good metric to gauge the efficiency of a harvest was to measure the amount of wheat you could yield from a single seed. Back home in Yggdrasil, he'd made a point to implement the Norfolk crop rotation system—a decision that led to yields that were over ten times the harvest. Here in Europe, their harvests were only providing yields of three to four times, however. This was not nearly enough food to feed around a million Yggdrasillians.

By all accounts, if he were to use the Norfolk system in the Ancient Orient, he could bump up the size of their harvests significantly with great ease, but he'd decided not to on account of potentially rewriting history. Fortunately, Yuuto

had discovered a solution—Mediterranean trade. If they had no food, then why not simply import it from places that did?

With that decision made, Yuuto had set out on a voyage to inspect those goods. It also served as a relaxing cruise trip, something he desperately needed given recent events.

“Father, Father! I sense a town ahead!”

“Oh, looks like we’ve finally arrived then.” Yuuto turned around when he heard Albertina’s excited voice. He still saw only the ocean in front of him, but he trusted Albertina, the Einherjar who bore the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds. If she said there was a town ahead, he certainly had no reason to doubt her.

“Finally time to get off this prison of a boat,” he said, stretching his arms out.

“Prison? But we’re able to go anywhere we want!” she responded, somewhat confused by his statement.

“You only feel that way ’cause you’re the captain, Al. Sorry to put a damper on things, but being cooped up here with nothing to do and nowhere to flee makes this more or less a floating prison to me.” He shrugged his shoulders and smiled bitterly. It had been a month at sea, so he’d already gotten bored of all the games he’d brought with him, and the constant lulling back and forth of the ship every day made him seasick. If he was being honest, he was desperate to be back on land.

“If you’re bored, Father, you just gotta perk up your ears and listen to the wind! The wind has a different tone with each place we visit, you know? Yggdrasil, Tarshish, even right here—they all sound completely different! Can there be anything more exciting than that?!”

“Maybe I would find it exciting if I was able to hear it, but I can’t.”

“Aw, that’s a real shame... Kris and Hilda can’t either, but I really wish they could. It’s so interesting.” Albertina drooped her shoulders in disappointment. Though Yuuto felt bad for her, expecting him to be able to do something even Kristina and Hildegard couldn’t was simply asking too much. He promptly steered away from the topic and moved the conversation on.

“But I do think it’s pretty amazing, you being able to hear the wind and all. It’s thanks to you that we made it here so quickly and in one piece.” Of course, this was not flattery—it was Yuuto’s honest opinion. The seas were fraught with dangers like typhoons, rocky reefs, and storms—a fact that would not change even three thousand years from now in the Age of Discovery—yet Albertina was able to sense and circumvent those perils with one hundred percent accuracy. In addition, by reading the winds accordingly she was able to get her vessel to her destination faster than others would be able to. When it came to the high seas, Albertina was practically a deity.

“Ehehe...” When she heard Yuuto’s praise, Albertina rubbed the back of her head and grinned happily. She hadn’t even realized that Yuuto had deflected the topic. Ruminating on how her sister never would have let such a thing go unnoticed, Yuuto found Albertina’s naïveté kind of cute.

“Anyway, keep up the good work.” Yuuto petted her head.

In the next instant, he felt an intense chill run down his spine, the likes of which he’d never before experienced even when facing off against Steinþórr or Fagrahvél. The alarm bells inside his head were ringing like crazy—his intuition was screaming that he was in grave danger. He whipped around in a panic, and what he saw terrified him. He shrank back in fear, letting a pathetic yelp escape him. Yuuto, who had gone head-to-head against the legendary Nobunaga, had never been so intimidated in all his life. Because there, across the deck, was the crew of the ship, glaring daggers at him. Having gained enormous strength from their rigorous daily work, just one of them alone could probably tear Yuuto apart with their bare hands. They were all gathered around, watching him like a hawk.

“Th-They’re terrifying!” Yuuto thought to himself.

The glint in their eyes was abnormally menacing. Compared to Yuuto, they were the low men on the totem pole. Mere underlings. The gap between his position as þjóðann and theirs was much like the divide between heaven and earth. They would never say anything untoward to Yuuto’s face, let alone lay their hands on him.

But that was exactly why it was scary.

Because they couldn’t do anything on the surface, he could tell their resentment was building within, their anger twisting and bending their emotions into malicious, cruel intent. He could see in their eyes a terrifying madness that threatened to explode at any given moment.

“A-Ah, I just remembered that Felicia asked me to do something.” Of course, she hadn’t, but even lies could be convenient in the right circumstances. Regardless of the era, there was nothing more frightening than crazed devotees. Sometimes discretion really was the better part of valor.

“What are you doing over there, Kris?” Retreating to his cabin, he saw Kristina leaning against the wall like she had nothing better to do, not budging even an inch. Normally she doted on her big sister to the point where they were inseparable during their free time, so this wasn’t like her. “Did you guys get into another argument?”

“It wasn’t like it was an argument to begin with. I just...” Kristina stole a glance over at the cabin window. When Yuuto followed her gaze, he saw Albertina surrounded by a number of the crew members, laughing and enjoying herself. “I just didn’t want to ruin her good time, is all.”

“Hmm, reeeally?” he replied. The look on Kristina’s face told Yuuto her line of thinking wasn’t so commendable as that, and he couldn’t stop a smug grin from spreading across his face. That apparently irritated her, because she asked curtly, “What?”

“Nooothing.” Avoiding her glare, Yuuto played dumb. Since he was always on the receiving end of Kristina’s teasing, he enjoyed giving her a taste of her own medicine every once in a while.

“Well, you don’t need to keep pouting over it.”

“Who’s pouting?” Kristina said as she puffed up her cheeks. Yuuto couldn’t help but snicker. If that wasn’t a pout, then what was?

“...What?” she demanded again.

“Ah, it’s nothing, really. Don’t worry about it.” Even so, Yuuto valued his life. He knew if he teased a cunning vixen like her any further, he would come to regret it. Sensing it was about time for him to make his retreat, Yuuto shrugged

his shoulders and made himself scarce. A supreme commander had to pick their battles wisely.

The island of Arvad was on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, around where Syria could be found in the modern era, and was known as a hub for commerce as far back as 2000 BCE. If Yuuto's hypothesis was correct and the current year was somewhere around 1500 BCE, then the Hiitites of Mittani, Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt all should've been crowded together in the "land of four directions." Though he'd read up on it beforehand, three thousand five hundred years was a long time. The records for around that time were few and far between, so he hadn't a clue what the situation would actually be like until he actually got there.

While Arvad was a tiny island, it was also an independent nation that was naturally protected by the sea. In other words, it was a perfect place to gather information without provoking the larger countries.

"Aunt Felicia, I'm reminded of just how *convenient* you are. No wonder Father puts you in such high esteem," Kristina said earnestly.

It went without saying, but there was a language barrier between the people of the "land of four directions" and those who once lived in Yggdrasil. As one would expect, if they couldn't understand each other's language then neither side would be able to communicate their intent. However, Felicia was uniquely equipped for this exact type of occasion. She could make use of her negotiation galdr, as well as a few other galdrs suited for the situation, such as one that gave the target a sense of relief, one that raised the target's spirits, as well as several other similar galdrs that she could use at will. Thanks to these, information-gathering was able to proceed smoothly even in completely foreign territory. Felicia herself was adamant in downplaying her skills, implying that she was a jack of all trades but a master of none, but Kristina truly felt that there was no clan member more convenient at times like these.

"It's an honor to receive such praise from you, Kris, even if it is just flattery," Felicia replied.

"It's not flattery when I tell you I'd honestly like you to come join my team

instead," Kristina said frankly.

"I do apologize, but my place is with Big Brother Yuuto."

"Then maybe I should try and strike a deal to borrow you for maybe a year or so." Felicia's galdrs would most certainly be immeasurably useful, especially when it came to deciphering the language of the locals. No skill was more fundamental when it came to gathering information. Kristina had to wonder how many years it'd take for her team to do it themselves. Just the ability to skip all that alone would make Felicia worth whatever price she had to pay.

"My powers aren't that great, if I'm being honest. For instance, the negotiation galdr has a side effect," Felicia explained.

"A side effect?"

"Yes. It makes the magic within words stronger, but at the same time the words lose their nuance and subtlety."

"Hmm, that would be pretty annoying." Someone whose thoughts were easily read from their expression and tone of voice wouldn't be suited to negotiation. If your opponent knew what you were thinking you could easily get the rug pulled out from under you. Yet ironically, the galdr was called "Negotiation." Well, it had probably been intended as a communication tool used to bridge the gap between languages even before the time of Jean Bodin.

"Guess there's no other option but to learn their language the hard way," Kristina replied, sounding somewhat deflated.

"I suppose not."

"A real shame. Well then, how about I use you just for today? Oh look, there just happens to be a tavern nearby. What good timing! Let's head there." Kristina pointed to a building ahead of them. The galdr didn't let the user read foreign characters, but there were chairs lined up outside occupied by a throng of men making a scene with earthenware mugs in their hands. Even if the language and culture differed, taverns were the same everywhere, it seemed. As they approached the tavern, a noisy din she couldn't make heads nor tails of reached their ears. Kristina was about to chalk this up to the standard behavior of taverngoers when she noticed something.

“Is that... Al?”

For some reason, her older sister Albertina was smack-dab in the middle of the throng of men. Around her were sailors she recognized, probably having a group drinking party now that they were ashore. That in itself was fine, but there were also men with clearly different outfits and behaviors mixed in—likely the natives. But they didn’t look like they were fighting.

“○×△◆？”

“Huh? That’s my little sister Kristina you’re talking about!”

“×▽◇◆？”

“Miss Felicia? No, you can’t! She’s taken!”

On the contrary, she looked like she was leisurely conversing with them. The galdr had already worn off, so Kristina had no idea what the natives were saying.

“Al, you can understand what these guys are saying?” Kristina asked.

“More or less? Just from their body language and behavior and stuff.”

“Th-That’s an awfully vague explanation...”

“Well, don’t sweat the small stuff. Okay, everyone! Tonight’s my treat so drink up!”

When Albertina raised her glass of ale, full to the brim, high in the air, the men around her raised their glasses in response and shouted out joyously.

“◆▽▲×”

“○◆□▽？”

“Ah ha ha! What? I don’t really understand but okay! Okay!”

So she couldn’t really comprehend their language after all. But at least she was in high spirits.

“Kris, come drink! Let’s drink together!”

“I’m working, Al.”

“Aw c’mon, don’t be such a stick in the mud. Just a little won’t hurt, will it?”

“Unlike you, I’m busy.”

“Aw... Your big sis has been busy lately too, y’know. I’m way busier on the ship than you, at least.”

“That’s true. Well, you go ahead and let loose then. I have work to do since we’re on land right now,” she said coldly as she turned on her heel and left the tavern.

Of course, she knew how contradictory she was being. Gathering information was her job, and yet she’d just left a tavern, a treasure trove of intel, without investigating anything. She was aware she wasn’t thinking straight, but every time she saw Albertina now she couldn’t help but feel irritated. At first, she thought it was because they hadn’t seen each other in a while due to one primarily being on sea and one on land, and that they’d be able to go back to how they were soon enough. But no matter how much time passed, that feeling remained—no, her anger and dissatisfaction toward her sister had only intensified, in fact. She wanted to scream out, “that’s not the Big Sis Al I know!” She’d get so upset and irritated that she’d either lash out at Albertina or walk away as she had just now, unable to stand even being in the same space as her. Things had been that way for almost an entire year now.

“I see. So she’s still ignoring you, huh?” When Yuuto heard what Albertina had to say the next day, he scratched his head in vexation. Ever since Albertina started commandeering the ship, she and Kristina had grown further and further apart. It was getting so bad that even Yuuto had started to notice their relationship was on the rocks. He’d figured this recent voyage would be a good opportunity for the two of them to spend more time together and make up, but it didn’t seem to be going well.

“D-Do you think I’ve done something to make her hate me after all?” Albertina asked, tears brimming in her eyes. She’d noticed Kristina’s odd behavior up till now, but apparently she’d figured it was just her imagination, or perhaps she’d believed it was something minor and they’d be able to work out during the course of the voyage. Kristina’s attitude yesterday had been too much for her to ignore, however, and she too had begun to realize something was seriously wrong.

“Waaah! If Kris starts hating me for real I won’t be able to go on living!” Albertina sputtered through a face full of tears. Since this morning Albertina had been a sobbing mess. Naturally, letting the captain commandeer the boat in this state was much too dangerous, so he’d listened to what she had to say. But...

“Boy, Kristina sure is being real difficult,” Yuuto said as he held his head in frustration. That was really all he could say about it. Even from a bystander’s perspective, it was clear that Kristina was the one in the wrong here. What’s more, the reason was completely ridiculous.

“She’s, well, mad that you’ve become so popular,” Yuuto explained to Albertina.

Yes. In a nutshell, that was it, like how a dog refuses to eat when it sulks. It really was completely stupid. One was the captain of a ship that held the very future of the Steel Clan in the balance. The other was the leader of the Steel Clan’s intelligence division, practically the clan’s lifeblood. As the þjóðann, Yuuto simply couldn’t leave this matter alone—especially in the case of Kristina, who was letting it affect her work.

“Aww... When you first told me that I even kept telling her that she was the most important person in my life...”

“Huh, really?”

“Yeah. But she just stayed all pouty.”

“That’s probably because you’re not just *her* Al anymore. You’re everyone’s Al now.” Yuuto smiled bitterly, remembering the scene on the deck yesterday. Truthfully, Albertina had her fair share of fans throughout the nation. She was popular, and even when she returned to Tarshish she was always being sought after by various groups.

“Huh? But isn’t that a good thing?” she said with a beaming smile. She was a good girl, Yuuto thought.

“Yeah, you’re right about that, but...”

“Perhaps it’s a bit difficult for someone like you to understand, Al,” Felicia chimed in with a wistful smile. “You see, I understand how Kris is feeling, just a

little.”

“Really?!” Albertina jumped at that. Felicia nodded.

“You’ve been acknowledged and accepted by others, and your world has expanded as a result. As you say, Al, that is a wonderful thing, and something to be proud of.”

“I agree!”

“But there’s a reverse to that.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Imagine if you weren’t acknowledged or accepted by anyone, and your worldview stayed narrow. You might believe you could monopolize someone. You might think, ‘if that person is abandoned by everyone else and has no one else to be around, then that person will have to trust, love, and rely on me and me alone.’”

“Whaaaa?!” Albertina shouted, apparently taken completely by surprise. Perhaps a girl as bright and cheery as her couldn’t fathom such negative emotions. In truth, on a fundamental level, Yuuto’s values were closer to Albertina’s and he didn’t really understand such feelings himself, but his experiences as the þjóðann had at least made him realize that some people saw the world completely differently. Albertina, on the other hand, had probably never realized such people existed.

“However, I believe that’s an incorrect, twisted way of thinking. It’s merely prioritizing yourself over the happiness of others.” Perhaps realizing her words reflected a part of her she wished to leave in the past, Felicia gave a small shrug of her shoulders. Just as there were people like Albertina who would be shocked at such a mindset, there were also those who wanted to monopolize the ones they loved. Perhaps it was even part of human nature to feel that way.

“So, basically, if I quit being captain and return to how I used to be, then Kris will do the same?” Albertina tilted her head, sounding unsure.

Indeed, that was the crux of this problem. Yuuto sighed. “Yeah, probably. But that wouldn’t be healthy for you, and as the Steel Clan’s þjóðann I simply won’t allow it.”

“I figured...” she replied.

“But let’s forget about that right now,” Yuuto stated. The frankness of that statement caught Albertina by surprise. Even so, Yuuto continued. “Although I’m probably a failure of a þjóðann for what I’m about to say, what’s really important, Al, is how *you* feel.” Yuuto jabbed his own chest and grinned.

“How I feel...?”

“Right. What do *you* want to do? Continue being the captain, or quit?” he asked.

“I wanna continue!” Her reply was immediate. Of course, it was the reply Yuuto expected. “But... I don’t wanna fight with Kris anymore either...” Albertina drooped her shoulders in sadness.

If one became happy, the other would become unhappy. It was quite the vexing conundrum.

“Why did it have to be like this? All I wanted was to be a big sister Kris could be proud of...” she mumbled, clearly down in the dumps. Her usual smile, radiant like the sun, was nowhere to be seen. Just watching her made Yuuto depressed.

She hadn’t done anything wrong.

She’d only wanted to move forward.

“Come to think of it, you said something similar back when you’d first decided to board the ship, didn’t you?” Yuuto asked, suddenly reminiscing on that time. Back then, the flagship *Noah* had just been finished, and during the course of its inspection, Ingrid had asked Yuuto to lend her Albertina. For Albertina to say the same things as she did back then must’ve meant that it truly was important to her.

“Yeah. That’s why if I go back to the old Albertina, I’ll only drag Kris down.”

“...You know that’s not how she feels at all, right?”

“Yeah, of course. She’s too nice to think something like that. That’s exactly why I’d end up chaining her down.” She let out a hollow laugh, one that sounded equal parts troubled and melancholy. “It’s always been that way, after

all.”

It might seem obvious at this point, but Albertina and Kristina were inseparable from the time they were born. They had the same face, and were the same age and height. Each of them thought of the other as their other self. They could also both hear the wind.

“She is me, and I am her.” Just like that, they could feel each other as if they were one. Albertina remembered that feeling well.

“But around the time when our dad started tutoring us, something changed,” Albertina explained.

Kristina had soaked up new information like a sponge and had excelled at her studies. Meanwhile, Albertina had struggled to remember characters, let alone read books.

“Al, you never cease to amaze. It’s just one mystery after another with you,” Yuuto mused. Albertina might’ve been universally recognized as a dunce, but it wasn’t like she had a bad memory. As a matter of fact, her memory was excellent. When she was sent to the battlefield for reconnaissance, she was able to recall the scene vividly, and she remembered the route the ship had taken in staggering detail. So why was someone with such a good memory unable to remember characters?

“No one believes me when I tell them this, but when I look at characters, I just see a garbled mess. That’s why I can’t recognize their shapes...”

“A garbled mess? What, do you have astigmatism or something? Do other things look blurry to you?”

“Nope, just the characters.”

“Hm, it might be dyslexia then.”

“Dys...?”

“Ah, that’s what they call having a hard time reading characters for some reason or another.” When Albertina frowned at the unfamiliar term, Yuuto followed up gently. There were a number of other conditions besides dyslexia that caused people to see characters as blurry, but Yuuto had read something

once that said ten to twenty percent of Europeans and Americans that couldn't read had been diagnosed as dyslexic.

"Wow, really? Well, that's probably what I have then," she said nonchalantly, as though it didn't concern her.

"Well, it's only a possibility. I'm not a doctor, so there's no way for me to know for sure."

"Hee hee, whatever it is isn't important. As long as you believe me, that's all that matters."

"...I see." Hearing Albertina's somewhat philosophical-sounding opinion, Yuuto felt a twinge of sadness. Indeed, it must've seemed like a lie or excuse to most people if she claimed she was unable to read characters but did everything else perfectly. Perhaps it even frustrated some people—no, judging by her earlier statement, he got the feeling it had frustrated almost everyone. She was being completely serious, and yet that was how she was treated. Yuuto couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

"But well, I didn't want Kris to leave me behind or anything either. We must always be one and the same, so I tried my absolute hardest to catch up," Al said with conviction.

"I don't doubt that," he replied. Albertina wasn't the type of girl to lie about something like that. She was, at her core, a good, honest girl. If she said she'd tried her hardest, then she must've put a desperate amount of effort in.

But then she smiled languidly. "But no matter how hard I tried, the characters didn't become any more readable. In fact, the harder I tried the more of a mess they became."

"That...must be tough." She'd probably stressed out over it so much she'd ended up aggravating her condition. He didn't want to jump to conclusions, but he'd certainly heard of such cases. She was, fundamentally, an innocent, free spirit. There was probably no one less suited to being chained down to a desk and forced to study.

"In the meantime, Kris became more and more amazing, while I was still stuck at square one. Around that time I started hearing people call us stuff like the

‘smart twin’ and the ‘stupid twin.’”

That made Yuuto so angry he unconsciously bit his lip. So what if she couldn’t read characters? She had a ton of other amazing qualities and talents to make up for that.

“But one day I started thinking, ‘maybe it’s better to be the stupid one.’”

“Huh?” Unable to comprehend her meaning, Yuuto was dumbfounded.

“Kris is amazing, y’see. Super amazing.”

“Oh yeah, I know how amazing she is. There’s no one as sharp as her.”

“I know, right?!” she responded, nodding emphatically with pride and joy. Despite having some complicated feelings about her sister, there was no question that Albertina loved Kristina more than anything else in the world. “I was convinced that she was definitely, absolutely going to succeed my dad and become the patriarch of the Claw Clan.”

“Well, that evaluation wasn’t wrong.” As the reginarch of the Steel Clan he had a good grasp of the talent the Claw Clan possessed, and when it came to political prowess, information acquisition, tactical skill, and ability to win people over, there was no one more suited for the patriarch position than Kristina. She excelled in every single category—no one else could even compare.

“Right? And so that’s why I decided to be an idiot.”

“...Uh, sorry, back up a bit. I’m not sure how that relates.” Every now and then Albertina would say things that didn’t really make sense, but he felt like he couldn’t dismiss these words so easily. She was someone who lived by her emotions rather than logic, and Yuuto knew from experience that one in tune with their emotions was sometimes wiser than the most esteemed philosophers—much like the “voice of the wind” that the girl was always referencing.

“Well, big sisters are supposed to be the amazing ones, you know? But I figured that if I became an idiot, Kris would become even more amazing.”

Though Albertina said it nonchalantly, Yuuto’s eyes widened in surprise. He was reminded of how he shouldn’t underestimate those with sharp intuition.

Yggdrasil had been a meritocracy, but there had also been value in building rapport with previous patriarchs. Considering that, if Yuuto took the daughter of a patriarch as his wife, it would help to solidify her position as successor of her clan. However, whichever twin he married would naturally have a much higher social standing than the other. Regardless of what they themselves desired, they were beholden to the world of politics. They couldn't both shine, or they'd risk dividing the clan. Yuuto understood this well, now that he was a father himself. Whether a patriarch or a king, certain things were expected of a daughter of one in power.

"You intentionally played the fool so that Kris could become the patriarch?"

"Ah ha ha, well, I ended up becoming a real idiot in the process, though."

"...Al, you're no idiot. In fact, I've thought you were a genius for a while now."

"Aha, c'mon, that's enough," Al replied. She apparently thought Yuuto was joking, but he couldn't have been more serious. Where normal people had to construct theories to arrive at a conclusion, geniuses were able to reach the same conclusion through pure intuition. Albertina was able to do exactly that. She probably wouldn't be able to explain her methods—hell, she probably didn't even understand how she did it in the first place. She just somehow *knew.*

"But well, from time to time I even wondered why I'm here, and what I'm doing. Even though I became an idiot to not get in Kris's way, I'm bothering her by being an idiot. In the end, what purpose do I even serve? Something like that," Albertina said, trying to explain.

"I'll say it as many times as I need to. She would never think even for a second that you're a burden or nuisance," he declared. He could say it with absolute confidence—there was no little sister out there that adored their big sister more than Kristina adored hers.

"Ah ha ha... Yeah, I don't think so either. That's why I stopped thinking that way pretty quickly." As twins who'd been together since birth, there was no way she wouldn't know exactly how Kristina felt about her. "But you know, I still didn't want to end up dragging Kristina down. So I decided to come to you, Father."

“To me?”

“Yeah. I figured that if I left the Claw Clan, Kristina would be free of her chains and be able to fly as high as she wanted. But she’s still worrying herself over me. I know I might not be the most reliable big sister, but still...” Albertina pursed her lips in a pout. In response, Yuuto couldn’t help but smile wistfully. He could guarantee that the reason Kristina continued to accompany Albertina wasn’t that she thought her older sister was unreliable. He would even bet money on it—it was because Kristina couldn’t stand to be away from her.

“Even after we joined the Wolf Clan, she was always worrying about me. See, we even ended up the same rank even though I hadn’t done anything.”

“Ah...” Yuuto remembered the rankings back during the Steel Clan’s inauguration. Kristina and Albertina had both taken tenth place. But it was just like Albertina had said—any way you looked at it most of those merits had been Kristina’s.

“Kristina got you to change it, didn’t she?” he asked.

“Well, that might have happened.” In actuality, Kristina had thrown a fit and said that if she and Albertina didn’t get the same rank she wouldn’t accept her promotion. Even at that time, Kristina’s information network had practically been his lifeblood, so he had no choice but to comply even if he found the request strikingly odd.

“I knew it. If she hadn’t dragged me up the rankings, she would’ve been much higher up, wouldn’t she?”

“Not necessarily, but well, I won’t deny that it may have been easier for her to rise up the ranks afterward.” Even after joining the Steel Clan, Kristina had continued to gain accolades as Yuuto’s right-hand woman, including forming the Vindálfs unit, but her rank had stayed the same. Because he’d fudged Albertina’s ranking, he’d refrained from promoting Kristina any further out of consideration for everyone else, and Kristina had agreed. But from Albertina’s perspective it probably just seemed like her little sister was coddling her, and that couldn’t have been a good feeling. He’d assumed that the constantly happy-go-lucky Albertina wouldn’t mind, but now he realized just how shallow he’d been.

“Actually, the guys at the palace were saying it too. That if I wasn’t around, Kristina would be much higher up. That she could’ve become the Claw Clan’s patriarch.”

“Yeah, that was around the time of the battle against the Sword Clan, wasn’t it?” He recalled Albertina running to the office in tears. At the time, he’d wondered what could’ve happened to make a girl as nonchalant as her cry like that, but now he understood. To a girl whose little sister was their very world, their words had been the most effective land mine.

“That’s when I decided that I wanted to be the type of big sister that would be okay even if Kris didn’t look after me. I wanted to be a big sister she’d be proud of!” She gripped her fist tightly. Of course this seemed to contradict her earlier desire to be an idiot, but thanks to Kristina the Claw Clan had already been assimilated into the Steel Clan and their territory had expanded. Perhaps Albertina had naturally sensed that the scale had grown way larger than just the Claw Clan, and decided to change her aim accordingly.

“But in the end, I was still an idiot. I told myself I’d try hard, but I wasn’t able to do anything.” She slumped her shoulders in sadness again, but then her expression changed. Yuuto had a feeling he knew what her next words were going to be.

“But then I met *Noah!*” she exclaimed as if describing meeting the person of her dreams. “And after that things started happening, I became useful to you, Father, and I was able to lend a hand in saving everyone!”

“You didn’t just ‘lend a hand,’ Al. You were the MVP.” If he were to be asked who he thought the star player in the mass migration project was, Linnea and Jörgen’s names might be expected to come up, but Yuuto would personally nominate Albertina. Truthfully, if she hadn’t been present, there was a good chance the fleet would already have been sucked into a storm and at the bottom of the sea by now. The navigation technology of this age was woefully primitive. Without her, they’d have been practically fumbling in the dark, and despite the knowledge he had access to, Yuuto had no means of reliably solving that problem. Albertina’s godlike ability had made up for that lack of technology —to Yuuto, she was his goddess.

“You’ve already won enough respect and merit in my book. You’re definitely a big sister that Kris can be proud of.” Honestly, without Albertina, he was unsure where the Steel Clan would even be right now. They might well have been at the bottom of the ocean after coming across a storm while migrating to the New World. Even during Yuuto’s current trade voyage, Albertina’s talents had been indispensable. It probably wouldn’t be wrong to say that without her, the Steel Clan wouldn’t even be able to exist right now. That was how valuable she was to the clan.

“Yeah. I think so too...” Her expression clouded over. “In the end, I’m just an idiot, so maybe I’m actually wrong about that.”

“You’re absolutely not wrong, Al. I’m certain of that,” Yuuto declared. Kristina and Albertina both loved each other, but they differed in one fundamental way. One’s worldview kept expanding, and the other kept retreating further and further into her shell. But while he understood the reason behind the latter’s actions, he knew it was wrong. He knew there was no future in such a lifestyle.

“Thanks for listening, Father! I feel sooo much better now!”

“No problem, Al. If you ever need anything else, I’m all ears. Come see me anytime.”

“Will do!” With a radiant smile, Albertina dashed out of Yuuto’s cabin and onto the deck. Though he wasn’t completely convinced he’d laid all her anxieties to rest, she had at least regained some of her cheerfulness, and that was good enough for now. The real problem was—

“You’re here somewhere, aren’t you, Kris?” Yuuto called out to her, confident he would get a response.

“I’m surprised you realized, Father. Even Al was completely oblivious.” Kristina opened the door to the cabin and strode in. He’d figured she was eavesdropping from somewhere, but he’d been unable to sense her presence. Yuuto possessed twin runes that enhanced his perception and Felicia was a top-class warrior, but neither of them had noticed her despite her close proximity. Kristina was truly a master of her craft.

“Having you listen in was part of my plan all along,” Yuuto replied with an amused snort. In truth, the only way Yuuto could see a resolution to this was to have the two of them talk it out, but knowing Kristina’s twisted personality, she wouldn’t lay bare her feelings that easily. With that in mind, after receiving Felicia’s report yesterday, Yuuto had devised a plan. He’d summoned Albertina to his cabin alone knowing Kristina wouldn’t be able to resist eavesdropping from the shadows.

“In other words, Father, you mean to say I fell for your trap hook, line, and sinker?” Kristina asked.

“The fact that you weren’t able to see through such an obvious scheme proves you’re not at the top of your game,” he replied.

Kristina fell silent.

“You’ve lost your composure, Kris. I can’t have you leading my intelligence division like that.”

“Hmph.” Unable to argue back, she simply pouted. He couldn’t deny it felt

good to render a cheeky girl like Kristina speechless, but it was also somewhat unsatisfying. Normally she'd bite back more than that.

"So after hearing how Al feels, what do you think?"

"...Al's just as hopeless as ever. A total idiot. Honestly, she couldn't be more off-base."

"Kris! How dare you!" Felicia scolded Kristina for her cruel, dismissive reply, but Yuuto held up a hand to stop her. Kristina was twisted at her core. If they continued to take her words at face value, they'd never reach the truth.

"Status? Admiration? Who wants crap like that? That girl doesn't understand me at all. She's a failure of an older sister. Really, I ought to have a long talk with her." Her words were caustic, but her voice was trembling. As Yuuto had expected, she wasn't being honest. But perhaps taking that into consideration was part of the generosity expected of a parent.

"Yeah, you really ought to. In fact, you two really need to spend some time having it out with each other," Yuuto replied.

"Yes, it...seems that she needs a good talking-to, so I'm off." She earnestly agreed and exited the cabin. Al's confession must've really shaken Kristina if she was willing to use a flimsy pretext like scolding Al as an excuse to swallow her pride and go see her. But Yuuto knew how much they still cared for each other. He was sure they'd be able to make up.

Once Kristina had gone, Felicia sighed and finally spoke up. "Well, that certainly was surprising. Kris may seem like the older of the two at a glance, but I suppose Al's the more mature one after all."

Yuuto couldn't agree more with that statement if he tried.

"Father, Fatherrr!"

"Gaaah!" The next morning, Yuuto's tranquil slumber was cut short when Albertina leaped on top of him. Still half-asleep in his cabin bed, the impact was even more jarring than if he'd been wide awake. Normally this would be grounds for scolding her, but...

"Listen, listen! Kris and I talked *allll* night last night, and guess what? We

made up!”

Seeing the thousand-watt smile on her face, he decided to let it slide. That radiant expression of hers suited her best, after all. Having the normal Albertina back was all that really mattered.

“And it’s all thanks to you, Father!”

“Nah, I didn’t really do anything...”

“Yes you did! Kris told me all about how you tricked her!”

“‘Tricked’ is an awfully strong word...”

“Well, you did, didn’t you?” Kristina interjected from across the room, her back against the door. “I certainly wouldn’t call hiding your intentions from me fair.”

“You, caring about what’s fair? That’s a new one. Well, everyone made up in the end, so let’s let bygones be bygones,” Yuuto replied.

Most of the goods had already been inspected, negotiations had concluded, and it looked like the trading relationship was going to be quite fruitful. Now that the twins had reconciled and all of the Steel Clan’s problems were solved, they could live happily ever after.

“Thank you so much, Father! I love you!”

Smooch.

“Eh?”

“Ah!” At the same time that Yuuto let out a bewildered utterance, a cry of surprise escaped Kristina’s lips. It had only been an instant, so he wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but hadn’t Albertina’s lips lightly touched his?

“Excuse me, Father? Can I discuss something with you for *juuust* a second?” Visibly shaking, Kristina inched closer to Yuuto with a beaming smile.

“Oh shit. This is where I die.” Those were Yuuto’s honest thoughts. Getting the two to make up had been a mere skirmish—Yuuto’s fight for his life truly began here and now.

ACT 3

“Unbelievable... How’d it turn out like this?!” Within her workshop, Ingrid had hit upon a shocking revelation, the likes of which made her shudder just thinking about it. It had now been an entire year since she’d made her home in the New World, and yet her relationship with Yuuto had progressed...

“Zilch! Nada! Not even one iota! Forget kissin’, it’s been a whole year and we haven’t even held hands!”

“Everyone else is freakin’ pregnant already! Hell, Felicia’s on her *second* child! But I haven’t gotten to do it with Yuuto even once!” she yelled at herself.

Well, there was probably no helping it, though. After all, shortly after migrating here to the new capital of Tarshish a war with the Tarsisi had ensued, after which he’d gone on an eight-month expedition, and no sooner than he’d returned home he’d set off again for the “land of four directions” on an inspection voyage. They’d had no time for physical contact.

That being said, it wasn’t like *nothing* had happened. In truth, Yuuto had taken time out of his busy schedule on several occasions to go see Ingrid. This had made her ridiculously happy; however, the things that came out of her mouth during those meetups had been, well...

“Nonono! That’s not really what I was...!”

“N-N-Nothing! It’s nothing, okay?!”

“What’d you say?! You’re dead to me, Yuuto!”

Since she tended to get embarrassed, freak out, and get all haughty when anything even vaguely relating to their relationship came up, she couldn’t deny that it *might’ve* just been her own fault those rare opportunities had gone to waste. Naturally, she’d always regretted what she’d said and/or done after the fact, but it wasn’t like she could turn back time either.

“W-Well, y’know, it’s not good to rush things like this, right?! The mood’s gotta be right, and stuff!” she told herself. They’d already confirmed how they felt about each other, so the mood was sure to strike sooner or later.

Tomboyish though she was, she *was* a girl. A girl's first time was special, and she wanted it to be the best possible experience it could be.

"But enough of that. Back to work." Continuing to occupy her mind with frivolous thoughts would only depress her further. It was time to focus on inventing. By concentrating on her work, she could forget all the unpleasant stuff. "Now then, what's on the ol' agenda for today?" she said, picking up the order form on her desk, but then she heard a knock on the door.

"Terribly sorry to disturb you, Miss Ingrid, but I have an urgent request." Ingrid was so surprised to see Fagrahvél enter her shop that she unconsciously did a double take.

"Huh? Fagrahvél?" It was the first time the patriarch of the Sword Clan had graced her doors. Her stiff, dignified-looking face and slender body gave off a somewhat androgynous impression, yet Ingrid's keen eye for detail discerned her build as feminine with a single glance.

Was it just Ingrid's imagination, or had Fagrahvél put on some weight since the last time she saw her? Of course, it would be rude for her to say such a thing to Fagrahvél directly, but she couldn't help but wonder.

"So what do you need?"

"I need you to forge me a sword of protection."

"A sword of...hold up, are you pregnant?"

"W-Well, more or less..." Fagrahvél looked bashful but happy. To Ingrid's eyes, her expression couldn't be more befitting of a woman.

"Well damn, congrats! Who's the lucky guy?" Her tone was casual as she wondered, *"Wait, is she even married?"* She was genuinely curious about what kind of man could possibly be able to steal the heart of a prodigy like her. Haugspori, perhaps? *"They're pretty much the same age, after all,"* she thought with a grin.

"Uh, well... It's Father."

"...Eh?" Ingrid's pupils shrank in shock at the unexpected response. *"Father? In other words, Fagrahvél's sworn parent? That could only be one person in the*

Steel Clan...”

“You couldn’t mean... Yuuto?!” she yelled, clearly shocked.

“I-Indeed. I do apologize, I was hesitant in speaking his name, but...yes,” Fagrahvél replied.

“I-Is that so...” In a daze, it was all Ingrid could do to formulate that meager response. *“Talk about a bolt from the blue...wait, didn’t Fagrahvél and Yuuto meet only two years ago? I’ve known him for six, dammit!”*

While she understood time wasn’t always a factor when it came to love, when the hell did a girl that he’d known for four years less get the jump on her?! It was at that moment Ingrid realized she’d become far too complacent. If she continued to miss her shot, it was entirely possible that Yuuto could end up forgetting about her entirely! There were, after all, a bevy of beautiful girls around him, no doubt all eager to bear the child of a reginarch. With that thought fresh in her mind...

“I-I’d better get my ass in gear!” The fire under her rear sufficiently lit, Ingrid dashed out of the workshop, a scorching trail of determination in her wake.

“Save me, Feliciaaa!”

In the same way a certain boy often relied on a certain robot cat to solve all his problems, Ingrid’s grand plan was to run to none other than her crush’s adjutant. Since it was late, Ingrid figured Felicia would’ve already finished her work and retired to her room. She felt bad intruding when Felicia was no doubt tired, but this was an emergency.

When Ingrid barged in, Felicia, who was already entertaining a guest, Yuuto’s formal wife Mitsuki, was somewhat confused by the sudden visitor. “Oh, Ingrid? What’re you doing here?”

Ingrid knew that the two were close despite sharing the same husband, so Mitsuki being here wasn’t particularly surprising to her.

“Might something have happened at the shop? Your face is rather pale,” Felicia asked with a hint of surprise. Ingrid couldn’t help but feel envious of the sultry way her golden locks naturally cascaded down her body. As the only one out of Yuuto’s wives so far who’d been impregnated twice, Ingrid wondered if

that allure of hers had ended up ensnaring Yuuto's heart.

"No, nothin' like that... I just had somethin' personal I needed to discuss..." Eyes glued to the floor, Ingrid fiddled with her fingers nervously. She'd run here with courage and determination, but actually coming out with it was requiring more guts than she'd thought.

"Umm... Perhaps I should leave, then?" asked Mitsuki, seeming to read the room, but Ingrid shook her head. In fact, it was more convenient this way. As Yuuto's childhood friend, Mitsuki was the one who understood Yuuto the best, and in a different way than Felicia. With her here, Ingrid could save herself the embarrassment of having to confess twice.

"It's okay, Mitsuki. You can stay," Ingrid said amicably. Like Yuuto, Mitsuki let Ingrid speak to her without any regard for formality. At first of course she'd been hesitant to do so, but as someone bad with formalities in the first place, she ended up speaking casually to Mitsuki before she even realized it. "The thing is..." Steeling her resolve, she detailed to the two of them everything that had happened up until now. When she'd finished, Felicia and Mitsuki's reactions were polar opposites of each other.

"So you haven't done it yet after all. I had the feeling something was going on between you two just by looking, though..." Felicia rested her hand on her cheek and let out a troubled sigh.

"Wha?! You knew, Felicia?! I had no idea!" Meanwhile, Mitsuki was taken completely by surprise. Perhaps the observational skills Felicia had honed as Yuuto's adjutant and bodyguard had helped her realize.

"So anyway, after hearing just now that Fagrahvél was expectin', I guess I just kinda panicked, y'know..." Ingrid said glumly.

"Ah, come to think of it, that sounds a lot like the conversation I had with Fagrahvél about a year or so ago," Mitsuki said thoughtfully, recalling that time.

"A-A year?!" Ingrid shouted out despite herself. It was a long enough span of time for her to once again realize just what a late bloomer she'd been.

"Yeah, back then she was really adamant about fulfilling Rífa's final wish."

"Lady Rífa?"

“Yeah. Rífa wanted Fagrahvél to bear and raise a child. Yuu-kun’s child, if possible.”

“I see...” Ingrid had heard that Fagrahvél and Sigrdrífa, Yuuto’s late wife, had been milk-sisters, said to have possessed a bond transcending both blood and servitude. In Yggdrasil it’d been relatively common for a husband to take his late wife’s sister as his next wife, so perhaps it made sense.

“I advised Fagrahvél that it didn’t necessarily have to be Yuu-kun and that Rífa would definitely be happier if she got together with someone she truly loved instead, but oh well.” Mitsuki shrugged and shook her head.

Ingrid felt it was strange to use the word “definitely.” She’d heard that in Yuuto and Mitsuki’s world marriage was the greatest expression of a couple’s love for each other, but of course in Yggdrasil that hadn’t been the case. For the aristocracy especially, it had been a given to prioritize whatever benefited the family the most over personal feelings. So how was Mitsuki so certain?

“It did feel good to know that she thought enough of Rífa to be dead set on fulfilling her wish, though...”

“It felt good? Why?”

“A-Ah, sorry, never mind. I was just thinking out loud is all.” With a face like she’d let something slip that she shouldn’t have, Mitsuki waved her hands in a panic. Sigrdrífa and Mitsuki had been identical enough in appearance to even surprise Mitsuki’s childhood friend Yuuto, so perhaps Mitsuki felt some sort of sisterly bond between her and Rífa due to that. “But well, it may not be head-over-heels or anything, but apparently Fagrahvél actually does love Yuu-kun, so I kind of feel like I want to cheer her on...”

“Magnanimous as always, eh Mitsuki?” Though Ingrid had to respect her for her generosity, a hint of exasperation creeped into her voice. There was no way Ingrid would ever be able to do that. While there was nothing she could do about Yuuto’s fraternization with other women, she’d never be able to actively root for him to be with someone else, even if it was her best friend. In fact, several of Ingrid’s friends had asked her to introduce them to Yuuto, and she’d turned them all down.

“Of course not. You guys are just special, is all. Of course, you have my

blessing as well, Ingrid," Mitsuki said with a suggestive grin.

Now that Ingrid thought about it, everyone she'd given her blessing to and actively rooted for were all those who'd been in Yuuto's service for quite some time now. Perhaps that was out of thanks for aiding Yuuto when he'd first arrived in Yggdrasil, but even so Ingrid couldn't say she understood. She wasn't omnipotent, so she had no way of knowing that Mitsuki had been influenced by the memories and royal values from her previous life as Sigrdrífa.

If she was being honest, it didn't really sit right with her, but having the blessing of Yuuto's formal wife meant she didn't have to give up, and she was glad for that.

"...Um, well, I'll gladly take it. Then, I realize I'm askin' a lot, but I wanna hear your opinions. How do you think I should approach him?" Ingrid asked timidly.

"*What the hell am I doin', asking married women how to steal their husband?!"* As strange as she thought it was, though, she couldn't back down now that she'd gotten this far.

Mitsuki and Yuuto had known each other practically all their lives, and even now whenever Yuuto had free time most of it was spent with Mitsuki. Felicia, on the other hand, never left Yuuto's side during work hours as his adjutant. In other words, they had spent the most time with him and knew him better than anyone else did—including what turned him on. In fact, Fagrahvél had succeeded thanks to Mitsuki's support. There was no one better equipped to offer advice on the topic.

"Hmm, let's see..."

"Good question..."

After thinking for a bit, the two surprisingly spoke the exact same words at the same time.

"You just gotta attack him!"

"Attack...?" Ingrid cocked her head in confusion. Certainly, she'd heard that there were indeed people out there with...*eclectic* tastes that enjoyed being hit, but...

“I never would’ve pegged him for one of *those*...” It was a shocking revelation. She’d known him for nearly six years now and never even realized.

But well, nobody was perfect. Everybody had one or two shortcomings. At this point, her feelings had become too strong to be shaken by something like that.

“W-Well, if he likes that sort of thing, I don’t mind every once in a while...”

“Pfft, ha ha ha! No, not like that. That’s not what I mean.” Mitsuki laughed so hard that tears came out, and Felicia was also suppressing a giggle with her hand.

“D-Dammit.”

“I’m not really sure how to explain this... You know that expression, ‘men are wolves?’”

“Huh? Oh, I know ‘men are beasts,’ is it similar to that?”

“Ah, yeah, they do say that instead in Yggdrasil, don’t they? Well anyway, most beasts are always hungry for prey, but in Yuu-kun’s case, he’d be a beast who’s already had his fill,” Mitsuki explained, raising an index finger. Felicia seemed to agree, because she snickered and nodded.

“Had his fill?” Ingrid asked, confused.

“Yeah. I mean, his prey flocks to him of their own volition every single day, begging him to eat them. It’s to the point where Felicia and I have to spice things up to keep him from getting bored,” Mitsuki replied.

“S-Spice things up?!” Ingrid responded with a yelp.

“Yeah, for instance when he and Felicia are alone, sometimes she’ll take Yuu-kun’s...*you know...*and...”

“His *what now*?!”



“Well, that’s... I’ll leave that up to your imagination...”

“Indeed, saying it outright is a bit...” The two became hesitant as they

blushed.

“So it really is that, *then?! It’s got to be, right?!”* From the flow of the conversation, Ingrid could see no other possibility. It had to be *that.* But as a late bloomer, Ingrid didn’t know any of the details. What exactly was Felicia doing to Yuuto when the two of them were alone?!

“W-Well, we’ve gotten off topic.” Mitsuki cleared her throat. “In other words, Yuu-kun never has to worry about his next meal. In fact, it’s like an all-you-can-eat buffet.” Her expression became serious.

Felicia gravely nodded as well. “Quite. Rún’s a bona fide beauty, Miss Linnea is as cute as a button, and now Miss Fagrahvél is even in the mix.”

Having the cruel truth spelled out for her, Ingrid belatedly realized the seriousness of the situation and shuddered. Even as a woman, Ingrid could acknowledge that every single one of them were bewitchingly beautiful, and they were all vying for Yuuto’s attention. It was true—Yuuto was never going to go hungry.

“That’s why you can’t just rest on your laurels and wait for it to happen! You’ve gotta get in there and snag him for yourself!” Mitsuki explained.

The logic was sound. She was unable to argue back. To begin with, Yuuto worked himself to death day in and day out, and when he finally came home to relax, the women all came to him. Therefore, he had no reason to go out hunting for one on his own. If Ingrid didn’t do the hunting instead, she’d never even get an opportunity!

“In addition, who knows what the future holds,” Felicia said solemnly. “Kris and Big Brother have a lot in common, and they get along well. The way they’re able to discuss difficult topics on a level even I don’t understand honestly makes me a bit jealous.”

“Guh!”

“Al may be naïve, but she’s honest with herself. I’ve heard her say that when Big Brother’s by her side she’s able to forget all the unpleasant things.”

“Gah!”

“Ephy’s been taking care of Big Brother’s children, and they’ve taken quite a liking to her. Because of that, I hear he holds her in *very* high regard.”

“Geh!” Pummeled by one clean hit after another, it was a total knockout. While she’d been taking it easy, the newcomers were leaving her in the dust!

“O-Okay, okay, I get it, the situation’s direr than I thought! It’s now or never, right? Fine! I’ll bust my ass and conquer Yuuto for myself!” Ingrid declared, gripping her fists tightly. However—

“Getting fired up is all well and good, but the truth is you’re unfamiliar with these things, and putting it bluntly, you’re scared, right?”

“Guh!”

“When the opportunity comes, you’d probably clam up and get cold feet.”

“Gah!”

“And when you’re that nervous and uncertain, men find it hard to approach. In Big Brother’s case especially, since he’s so good-natured.”

“Geh!”

“When push came to shove, you’d end up freaking out and lashing out at him before you could stop yourself.”

“H-Have you been watching me?!”

“No, that was just a guess, but I suppose that confirms it.”

Ingrid had had enough. Subjected to a storm of critical hits, her health bar had already been depleted. Her heart couldn’t take any more!

“By my own estimation, I doubt you’ll make any progress if you don’t change *something* soon,” Felicia stated.

“Th-Then what should I do?!” Ingrid practically screamed, tears brimming in her eyes. Was she fated to never be with Yuuto, to live the rest of her life as a lonely old woman?! The possibility was real enough that she could definitely see it happening.

That was when Felicia grinned and raised a finger. “Tee hee. Never fear. I have a secret plan!”

“A hot springs trip?”

“Yes. When we investigated the Tarsisi land now in our possession, we discovered one. We thought it might be nice to all go together, under the pretext of inspecting the land,” Felicia answered with a nod.

Come to think of it, Ingrid recalled Yuuto mentioning that he’d like to go to the hot springs with everyone once everything had settled down. Though a lot of time had passed, it seemed that idea was now coming to fruition.

“Oh, I see! A new location means a different mood. I’ll use that to my advantage and attack!” Honestly, she thought it was a great plan. She knew all too well that she was inexperienced when it came to romance. Despite her determination, going on the offensive all of a sudden was a tall ask for her. Pathetic though she thought it was, she needed some sort of aid, and a hot springs trip would be the perfect panacea.

“Yes, but keep in mind that this is only setting the stage. Judging by your lack of progress with Big Brother so far, we’re going to need to take measures that are a little more *drastic*,” Felicia explained.

“D-Drastic, you say?” She’d figured a trip like this would be more than plenty, yet they were going to go even further?! Ingrid unconsciously gulped.

“Ingrid.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but might the reason you cannot maintain your composure when the opportunity strikes be because you lack confidence as a woman?”

“Gack!” Felicia had hit the nail on the head once more. It was true, somewhere in her subconscious she had always felt inferior. Just as Felicia had said earlier, Yuuto was surrounded by beautiful women. While she would probably put herself somewhere slightly above average, she would never call herself a beauty by any means. Not to mention, there was no way Yuuto would ever be satisfied with a rough-around-the-edges tomboy like her. Fearful that perhaps that was the reason Yuuto had never made a move on her in the first

place, that thought had crossed her mind no small number of times.

“Big Brother has a saying I often hear. ‘Know the enemy and know thyself, and you shall not fear a hundred battles,’” said Felicia.

“O-Okay...?” It wasn’t something she could understand just by having it thrust upon her, so she gave an uncertain reply. She may have been a pro at forging a variety of the Steel Clan’s weaponry, but she was a complete novice when it came to battle tactics and strategy.

“Well, *enemy* might not be the right term in this case, but... Big Brother loves breasts. He cannot get enough of them. He’s crazy about them!” Felicia declared, placing a hand on her own chest. Mitsuki nodded emphatically beside her.

Already sound asleep in his room, Yuuto never would’ve imagined in a million years that right here, at this moment, his proclivities were being aired out to dry.

“And Ingrid, you’re a member of the big breast brigade as well! While perhaps not as well-endowed as us, you’ve got quite the assets of your own!” Felicia added.

“Huh?!” Ingrid unconsciously looked down at her own chest. True, hers were comparatively larger than the average woman’s.

To think she had this kind of weapon all along!

“I will show you how to use those assets effectively, and other tricks of the trade of womanhood!”

Ingrid let slip a sharp gasp.

“Then you will feel confident enough about yourself to not falter at the critical moment with Big Brother!”

“Oooh, I see! All right then, Teach! Hit me with your best shot!”

Ingrid’s mother died when Ingrid was very young, and she didn’t have any sisters or aunts around to teach her how to conduct herself as a woman. But she’d also felt like it was something she couldn’t ask anyone about at this stage in her life, and she couldn’t deny it had only fed into her insecurities. If she

could use this opportunity to finally learn, she couldn't be more grateful.

"But be warned. Our training regimen is not for the faint of heart," Felicia said.

"No prob! Bring it on! Wait... As a woman it's probably not good to be so gung-ho, is it?" Right out of the gate, she became depressed. Why did every aspect of her have to be so damn manly?!

"No, I think that part of you is just fine, actually. Perhaps from a general societal perspective it'd be a minus, but I believe Big Brother finds that aspect of you rather charming," Felicia replied.

"R-Really?!"

"Yes, so let's focus on honing those good points to compensate for the qualities you lack."

"Then hell yeah! Let's do it! I'm gonna crush this shit!"

The hot springs trip was just ten days away. Ingrid's rigorous bridal training regimen had begun.

“Man... My neck’s sore as all hell...” As she walked through the streets of the town, Ingrid rubbed her neck, still aching from the techniques Mitsuki and Felicia had drilled into her over the past week.

*“Taking a guy’s...*thing *in between my breasts and licking it... To think that the women of the world were all doing such a thing!”* (Note: Most weren’t.)

“Ha ha, yeah, your neck does get awfully tired,” Mitsuki replied with a chuckle.

“But he likes this sort of thing?”

“Loves it.”

“Then I’ll do it,” Ingrid said with a firm nod.

As someone who was yet to have her first time, she couldn’t deny she was a bit anxious, but when she’d thought of this new technique as another weapon in her arsenal, much of her anxiety had fizzled away. While the experiences Mitsuki and Felicia had recounted had been rather shocking at first, once Ingrid knew specifically what she was supposed to do, her fear pretty much vanished. In addition, the two women had only provided general instruction rather than explaining every step in intimate detail in order to build her confidence up enough so that she was less likely to freak out when the time came. By all accounts, Ingrid felt like she’d gained a lot of confidence this week. With Mitsuki and Felicia’s support, she was sure that her next meeting with Yuuto would go well.

“Looks like the market’s just as busy as ever,” Ingrid said. Tarshish’s bazaars carried items from all over, and their shelves were filled to the brim with Orient goods they’d acquired through trade. Throngs of prospective buyers lined the streets. Thanks to Yuuto and company’s efforts, the Steel Clan had recently been able to remedy their food shortage problem through these bazaars. Of course, rations were still limited, and much still depended on the efforts of the populace, but they were now projected to have enough food to last the winter, which was a huge deal.

“So Mitsuki, where are we goin’ anyway?” The moment she had awoken, Mitsuki had dragged her here. She’d barely even had time to get dressed, but

she still hadn't heard what exactly they were there to buy. The bazaar was enormous. If they continued wandering around aimlessly, it would be dark before they knew it. Incidentally, Felicia was preoccupied with work, as always, and was unable to join them today.

"Over here! There's a neat store I found." Mitsuki grabbed Ingrid by the hand, pulling her forward. She seemed familiar with the place, like she'd been here many times before.

"As the þjóðann's formal wife, is it really okay for you to stroll around here like you're on vacation?" Ingrid asked.

"Well, I'm currently not dressed like royalty, and I've got a bodyguard with me, so it's perfectly fine." Mitsuki glanced to her side, where a brown-haired woman gave a curt, silent bow.

"Oh, that's an Einherjar." Ingrid realized immediately. As the bearer of the rune Ívaldi, she possessed outstanding intuition. Even if she couldn't explain how she knew in words, she could just tell. It made sense though—it would be a huge deal if Mitsuki were somehow kidnapped. Someone serving as her bodyguard would need the strength of an Einherjar to do their job properly, so it made sense really.

"Ah, this is it. I saw this store last time I was here." Mitsuki pointed to a shop with countless earthenware pots lining its shelves, their shapes and designs ornate, meticulous, and to Ingrid's eye, adorable.

"Clay pots? Am I supposed to decorate my room with them or somethin'?" Now that she thought about it, her room was rather drab. She'd chosen her furniture to prioritize function over form, so it had none of the glamour that a woman's room usually had. Was Mitsuki suggesting that by placing these feminine items in her room, she in turn would become more feminine?

"Ha ha, no, no. This isn't an earthenware shop. It sells perfume!" the elderly woman at the counter said with a grin.

"Perfume?" Ingrid cocked her head, unfamiliar with the word. That came as no surprise—while Yggdrasil was home to several varieties of aromatic trees, there had been no such thing as perfume.

“It’s a product imported from the east, you see. Even though it only came in recently, it’s been practically flying off the shelves.” The woman’s testimony was wholly unsurprising. In fact, by around 1850 BCE, several perfume manufacturers had already cropped up on the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea, using local plants like pine, almond, anise, bergamot, and coriander. Just from the sheer volume of customers in the store, it was clearly a hot commodity, and no doubt worth whatever it cost to import it.

“Wanna give one a smell, ladies? This here’s called kyphi. It’s our most popular item.”

“Uh, sure... Oh wow!” Ingrid let out an involuntary gasp at the fragrance emanating from the vase the lady held. She was bewitched by how good it smelled. She’d never smelled anything like it before, that was for certain.

But this was Ingrid, after all.

“Hmm...this has got a lot of stuff mixed in. Honey, wine, resin, pine...those are just the ones I can recognize, but I can tell there’s a bunch of other stuff in there, too!” She was able to parse those ingredients in an instant, living up to her reputation of “genius inventor.”

“Wow! You can tell all that, ma’am?” the elderly shopkeep asked.

“Just some of the ingredients, not all of ’em,” Ingrid replied.

“I mean, that’s still quite the accomplishment.”

“It’s pretty incredible that you’re able to mix all that stuff to create a completely new fragrance!” Ingrid was moved by this innovation. At least, she never would’ve thought of such a thing. It reminded her that she still had a long way to go as an inventor.

“Yuu-kun really likes this fragrance,” Mitsuki said as she brought a new perfume forward for Ingrid to smell—and when she did, she frowned in doubt. It wasn’t that the smell was unpleasant, but...

“Hm, that one doesn’t really hit like the other one.” Ingrid was the type of girl to not pull any punches when it came to assessments like these. While it smelled decent enough, it didn’t have much presence compared to the first one.

“That’s because Yuu-kun doesn’t really like strong-smelling perfume.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently strong scents remind him of the mixture of perfumes in the shoe locker area during parents’ day at school.”

“I-I see.” Ingrid didn’t have a clue what she was talking about, so she gave a noncommittal reply. Every now and then Mitsuki would use words Ingrid didn’t understand, which meant she was probably referring to the world she and Yuuto had lived in previously. While Yuuto had a tendency to break down these terms so that the listener could understand them, Mitsuki was the type of person who said whatever came to her mind without much consideration. Of course, by now Ingrid was used to it, so she let it slide. “So you’re telling me Yuuto doesn’t like strong-smelling stuff, basically?”

“Exactly. He prefers it subtle.”

“That so? Sounds just like him, honestly.” At a glance, Yuuto may have seemed like an unpredictable man who took unprecedented actions and created unbelievable things out of the blue, but the real Yuuto was just an average guy who valued what was inside one’s heart over outward appearances. That was what made Ingrid fall for him in the first place. It made her honestly wonder if he could really be swayed by a little trick like putting on perfume.

“If he doesn’t care for strong smells, is perfume really necessary?” Ingrid asked.

“Not so fast, my dear Ingrid.” Mitsuki wagged a finger admonishingly. “True, perfume alone isn’t going to be enough to defeat him. But he really does like how this perfume smells.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, you know how for us women, even when you want a man it’s kinda embarrassing to come right out and say it?”

“Yeah, totally!” In fact, that was precisely why she’d agonized over it enough to discuss it with Felicia and Mitsuki.

Mitsuki nodded emphatically. “You want him to realize. You wish he could just tell by reading the mood. You want him to sense how you’re feeling, and approach you of his own accord.”

“Yes! That’s it exactly!” Ingrid nodded multiple times. She had lots of tomboyish qualities, but there were parts of her that were perhaps more feminine than anyone else. She, too, dreamed of an encounter where the man was the one approaching her.

“But you know, you don’t want him to approach you when you’re not in the mood either. If he did, it’d just tick you off.”

“Right!” Honestly, even she thought it was unreasonable. But as a woman herself, she knew firsthand just how unreasonable women could be. She wanted men to notice the subtle changes in her heart—not through words, but through atmosphere. And that went double for a man she liked.

“But men are really dense when it comes to that sort of thing. So if we don’t want to explain it in words, we need some kind of sign they can easily understand!”

“Uh-huh...”

“That being said, for me, using something like a yes/no pillow would be far too obvious, so I came up with another idea!”

Yet another unfamiliar term came from Mitsuki’s mouth. What the hell was a yes/no pillow? Well, it sounded like something pretty nonsensical, so she decided not to comment on it. Besides, she was far more interested in Mitsuki’s idea.

“I thought, ‘What if I communicated my current mood through smell?’ For instance, I’d put Yuu-kun’s favorite perfume on when I was feeling up to it, and when I wasn’t I’d choose a perfume that induced restful sleep!”

“Ahh!” Ingrid practically let out a shout of admiration upon hearing Mitsuki’s ingenious idea. With this method, she could keep it subtle! All she would be doing was changing her perfume to fit her mood. It wouldn’t be like she was actively inviting Yuuto or anything!

“As it happens, Felicia and I have already put this into practice.”

“O-Oh, you don’t say?”

“If you put on Yuu-kun’s favorite perfume the day we go to the springs, even someone as dense as him will surely notice!”

It was a perfect, foolproof plan. And after having everything all neatly laid out for her, she’d be a failure of a woman if she didn’t give it her all.

The decisive day was now three days away.

“We’ve arrived, My Lord. It’s just over there.”

“Ah, finally. Man, I’m beat...” As his guide gestured over to the hot spring, Yuuto wiped the sweat from his brow and surveyed the area. The Archena Hot Springs were located where the autonomous region of Murcia had been back in modern Spain—in the Ricote Valley along the Segura River. It actually had quite a storied history, having been used since ancient Roman times. Naturally, in the twenty-first century, it was reduced to ruins, but this was the fifteenth century BCE, so things were, obviously, still very much intact. What stood before Yuuto was nature untouched by human hands, and it extended as far as the eye could see.

“I sure wish cars were a thing right about now,” Yuuto muttered. Even though it had been the closest spring to Tarshish, it had taken them days to get here. They’d transferred from boat to horse-drawn carriage and finally hiked a mountain. If they’d had a car, they could have pushed through the entire journey in a day. It made Yuuto once again realize the convenience of modern civilization.

“But the longer and harder the journey, the better those hot springs are going to feel, right?” Mitsuki chimed in.

“Can’t deny that.” Yuuto chuckled at Mitsuki’s optimism. True, the more tired you were, the more enjoyable a bath was. It was a fact as simple as one plus one equals two.

“We’re going to get to work setting up camp, so please go on ahead, My Lord.” The Múspell Unit vice-captain Bömburr urged him on. He may have been one of the duller entities in the sea of dazzling stars that was the Múspell Unit, but that didn’t mean Yuuto had a low opinion of him. In fact, it was just the

opposite. With so many outstanding players, it was difficult to keep the organization intact, and Bömburr was the glue that held the Múspell Unit together from behind the scenes. He and fifty other Múspell members were all tagging along today as bodyguards and pack mules.

"Sweet, I'll take you up on that. Thanks for your hard work, everyone. I'm gonna go take a dip." With a wave, Yuuto threw his towel up on his shoulder with a *snap* and headed to the hot spring. Leaving his subordinates to do all the work did make him feel a tad guilty, but at the same time he knew they wouldn't dare go before him no matter how much he urged them on, so there was nothing for it.

"A hot spring, huh? Can't wait. I wonder how it'll feel?" Mitsuki wondered aloud.

"It sure has been a while. Really takes me back," Ingrid said, recalling their hot springs trip many years back when they were still part of the Wolf Clan.

"Hm, if it really does have healing properties it might be good to soak for a bit," Sigrún stated.

"My, Rún, you sure are taking it easy. I'm a little jealous," Felicia replied.

"Lady Rún has been working harder than any of us. If she can take this opportunity to rejuvenate herself and regain her energy, there's nothing wrong with that," Linnea replied.

"It's just as our second-in-command says, Mother Rún. If we can get your arm back to normal it would benefit us greatly," Hildegard added.

"Wowww, it's a hot spring! A hot spring!" Albertina yelled excitedly.

"Gonna feel good to wash this sweat off," Homura said.

The gaggle of girls trailed behind Yuuto as they made their way to the hot springs. Incidentally, Fagrahvél was advised to stay behind because of her pregnancy, and could not join them on this trip. Bára, Erna, and Hrönn also remained in the capital to tend to her needs. Ephelia, too, was staying home to babysit the children while their mothers were away relaxing. Yuuto hoped they'd all be able to come on a return trip someday.

“What’s this? All these girls are around, yet Father’s totally calm and collected? It’s like you’re a completely different person from before,” Kristina teased. He’d noticed she hadn’t been in the mix, but that was apparently because she’d chosen to erase her presence and sneak up on him from the shadows instead. As always, she loved taking others by surprise. “When I recall just how panicked you were back then...heh heh heh.”

“Tch.” Making a face like he’d just bit down on a persimmon, Yuuto clucked his tongue as Kristina continued to laugh obscenely. By “back then,” she was likely referring to the last time they’d all gone on a hot spring retreat, back when Yuuto was still the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. “Man, I really was put through the wringer back then, huh?”

“Oh dear, are you sure it wasn’t a good experience for you?” Felicia chimed in with an impish grin, apparently having heard the conversation up until now. Yuuto merely smiled weakly and shrugged.

“Look, I’m not going to deny that the man in me did somewhat enjoy the situation. But back then, I had way too much on my mind to really appreciate it,” Yuuto rebutted.

At the time, he’d only been thinking of Mitsuki and hadn’t yet developed any immunity toward women whatsoever. All he could recall from the trip was how confused, anxious, frightened, and embarrassed he’d been. In the end, he’d been so overwhelmed that he’d gotten a nosebleed and fainted (although in actuality, he’d simply gotten light-headed from staying in the hot water too long), but the old phrase “shameful is he who spurns a woman’s invitation” had also weighed on his mind, and he’d felt like a failure for not being able to reciprocate.

Overall, the entire episode was a scene from his past he’d rather not recall. To be totally honest, he’d love to seal it away for eternity.

“Finally I get a chance to make up for that embarrassment. I’m not the kid I used to be.” Yuuto had garnered a wealth of experience as an adult—one could even say he was a battle-hardened veteran now when it came to the opposite sex.

“Well, that’s no fun. Now it doesn’t feel worth it to tease you anymore,”

Kristina pouted.

“That’s right, so you better get ready. This time, I’m gonna really take the time to appreciate every one of you.”

“H-How bold... Good grief, I’m finding myself longing for the pure-hearted Father to return.” Kristina raised her palms in resignation and shrugged.

The Múspell men that were ordered to stay behind and set up camp gazed longingly at the backs of Yuuto and company as they departed. In that group were some of the most beautiful women in the entire Steel Clan, and they were all going to be fully nude. With that sort of banquet so close to them, could they possibly resist fantasizing about it?

The answer? No, they could not. Any man would absolutely want to take a peek.

“You best quit thinking like that, guys. It’s gonna get you killed.” Their lascivious thoughts were interrupted by an icy voice from behind, causing them to cower. It belonged to the Múspell second-in-command, Bömburr. Hearing his warning, the men all came to their senses...except for one.

“Damn it... I-If I should have the opportunity to catch even a glimpse of Valhalla, I shall gladly welcome death!” A single brave soul cried out—Babel, a young, promising member of the Múspell unit. While his gung-ho personality was a bit excessive at times, he had awakened to a rune of his own and become an Einherjar, and had fought valiantly in the battle against the Tarsisi. He was expected to be a great boon to the Steel Clan in the future.

“Did I stutter? Give it up.”

“Do not try to stop me, sir! If you want to punish me afterward, I shall take it with aplomb!”

When Babel refused to budge, cries of admiration rose among the men. Naturally, everyone in the Múspell Unit knew firsthand just how terrifying Sigrún could be. Although the deed itself wasn’t exactly honorable, having the bravery to face Sigrún’s wrath was worthy of respect.

But Bömburr slowly shook his head. “You won’t even get the chance to look. Former Mother Sigrún is incredibly adept at sensing the presence of intruders,

as are His Majesty and Lady Homura. Furthermore, you know as well as I do how keen Mother Hildegard's nose and ears are. You'll die a dog's death before you even catch a glimpse of the gates of Valhalla."

The valiant Babel bit his lip in anguish, knowing what Bömburr said was true. Young as he was, he was one of the most elite in the entire unit. He knew when he was outmatched. It would likely turn out just as Bömburr had described.

"Dammit! But Valhalla is right there, within reach, so how can I just...!" Babel attempted to mitigate his mounting frustration by punching the ground repeatedly. His words had contained no falsehoods; he really, really wanted to peek. "One day I too will rise to the position of patriarch, and then I'll build a harem of my own!" His shout to the heavens was like the lament of his very soul.

Incidentally, the man's jealousy would one day bring about a catastrophic event that would shake the very foundation of the Steel Clan, but that is a story for another time.

"Splendiferous nature as far as the eye can see! The alluring bodies of buxom women before me! And the booze is great, too! Ha ha ha!" In extremely high spirits, Yuuto's cackling resounded across the valley. He had his arms around Sigrún and Linnea, who were snuggled up to either side of him, while Kristina and Albertina took turns serving him drinks. He couldn't be more satisfied.

When he'd first become a patriarch, the concept of a girl casually entering the bath to join him had freaked him out, but it seemed that people really were capable of change.

"Y-Your Majesty, please allow me to...serve you...as well..." Hildegard said as she held a bottle out toward him. According to Sigrún, since Hildegard had become the current captain of the Múspell Unit she'd become more courageous and more confident in herself...but he could see the hand holding the bottle was trembling pitifully. And as one might guess...

"Ah! I-I'm sorry!" The alcohol ended up spilling from the bottle, causing her to bow her head repeatedly in apology. She was totally frazzled.

"I let you come after you begged and pleaded, but I knew things would turn out like this," Sigrún, her elder sister in spirit, gave an exasperated smile as she

looked on. “As always, you lack foresight.”

“B-B-But I-I’m completely naked!” Hildegard protested.

“And what kind of bath would you not be naked in?” Sigrún replied.

“Y-You’ve got a point... But still...!”

“Did you not want to get closer to Father?”

“I-I thought I did, but...!”

“Then it seems that you lack the necessary mental fortitude.”

“Waaahh!” Hildegard burst into tears. Apparently she’d been fine with coming to the hot spring, but her and Yuuto together in the nude had made her nervous and caused her to panic.

“I know exactly how you feel, Hilda!” Upon seeing Hildegard’s reaction, Ingrid nodded in solidarity. She was pretty embarrassed herself right now, so she really felt for the girl.

“What, you want to get closer with me, Hilda? Then first off, drink up! Here!” Yuuto passed Hildegard a cup and poured a gracious amount in.

“W-Well then, b-bottoms up!” Hildegard said nervously and downed the drink.

“Hey, hey, no need to be so stiff! We’re keeping it casual today! Just enjoy yourself to your heart’s content! Ha ha!” Yuuto smacked Hildegard on the shoulder and cackled once more.

Something about Yuuto was definitely different than before. He was keeping it casual all right—*too* casual.

“H-Hey, Felicia, Yuuto couldn’t be...*drunk*, could he?” Finding his behavior a tad suspicious, Ingrid spoke up to Felicia, who was relaxing beside her.

“Why yes, he’s quite drunk, as a matter of fact,” she replied.

“But I thought he wasn’t much of a drinker?”

Of course, as a patriarch Yuuto had to drink during ceremonious and celebratory occasions, but it was never to the point where he had a red face or was staggering around. During those times he’d never had more than a couple

of cups' worth.

"Ah, yes, well, he's very adamant about not showing his drunkenness in public."

"I see. And because he's among family now, he's lettin' loose."

"Correct. See how he's more jovial and mischievous than usual? He's drunk just enough so that he remains of sound mind and can remember what happened afterward. It's honestly a wonderful way to imbibe, wouldn't you agree?"

"For sure." Ingrid found herself nodding. During her work hours, she'd seen countless subordinates of hers get absolutely drunk off their asses, and their extreme mood swings were always a real nuisance to deal with. Compared to them, Yuuto's cheerful and playful attitude was much more tolerable. In fact, given the situation, it was actually suitable.

If his mind and memories were intact, then he likely wouldn't try anything untoward either. Honestly, it was the optimal way to enjoy alcohol.

"That was how Yuu-kun used to act back in elementary school, actually." Apparently having followed the conversation, Mitsuki cut in.

"Oh, really? Actually, now that you mention it, I think you did say that he was quite the joker when he first arrived in Yggdrasil." When she thought about it, Ingrid did recall a little bit of that before he became the Wolf Clan's patriarch. Then Loptr's rebellion and Fárbauti's death happened, and Yuuto suddenly had to shoulder all the responsibility of being a patriarch. Those experiences had likely shaped Yuuto into what he was now.

"So this is the real Yuuto, huh?" Ingrid asked.

"Yep. Absolutely."

"Then I can't help but feel a little happy." Even if he was under the influence of alcohol, this was a side of Yuuto he only showed to those he trusted the most. Knowing that made Ingrid feel special.

"Now then, that aside, Miss Ingrid."

"Y-Yeah?" Noticing the abrupt change in Felicia's tone, Ingrid responded a bit

nervously.

“Big Brother is the type of person who likes to have fun with everyone, so we’ve made today a party day. But tomorrow his schedule is completely free,” Felicia explained.

Ingrid’s heart leapt up into her throat. Of course, she’d already resolved to get it done, so to speak, long before coming here, but now that the moment was nigh, she couldn’t help but feel anxious.

“We’ve also already made arrangements for everyone else to be temporarily indisposed,” she added.

“H-How the hell’d you do that?” Practically all the guests here were women infatuated with Yuuto. Well, in Kristina and Albertina’s case, she was unsure whether or not the twins saw him as a man or merely a dear friend, but nonetheless, she didn’t doubt that they loved him. This hot springs trip was special, and she was sure most of them would want to spend their time with Yuuto, so how in the world did Felicia manage to get Yuuto for Ingrid exclusively?

“Well, let’s just call that the power of an adjutant,” Felicia replied with a sly grin as she flexed and tapped the muscles in her right arm. Indeed, as Yuuto’s adjutant, she had coordinated plans against a number of clever opponents, spotting safe points of compromise. Such tactics were her bread and butter—with Mitsuki and Felicia on the case, Yuuto’s harem was little more than a game board whose pieces the two of them could freely manipulate.

“But be warned: tomorrow will be your only chance,” she added, her expression deadly serious.

“...I gotcha.” Ingrid nodded. She had one shot—if she didn’t make her move tomorrow, there would be no second chances. She couldn’t deny that the pressure was on, but at the same time, she was more fired up than ever.

Everyone else was relinquishing their own precious time with Yuuto on this hot springs trip so that Ingrid could have him all to herself. In other words, everything had been neatly laid out for her, so she’d be a failure of a woman not to give it her all.

With a large yawn, Yuuto stumbled out of his tent. The sun was already high in the sky—it seemed that he'd slept in quite considerably.

"Well, considering that yesterday's shindig lasted until late at night, makes sense." By the time the festivities had concluded, he'd noticed the sky to the east was beginning to brighten. But that just went to show how much fun they'd had, and how reluctant they'd been to end it.

"It kinda feels like a huge weight's been lifted off my shoulders." Sure, he'd hosted a variety of parties as a patriarch, but he'd never once let himself dropped his regal facade during those. However, since he was surrounded by women he trusted, there was no need for him to pretend. Thanks to the help of a copious amount of liquid courage, he felt like he'd finally been able to alleviate the stress of pretending to be someone he wasn't—something that had been bothering him constantly.

"Now then, what to do today? Hey, you over there. Gazel, was it? Any idea what everyone else is up to?" He decided to ask a nearby Múspell Unit member where everyone else was.

"Yes, My Lord. Lady Mitsuki and Lady Felicia, as well as the two Claw Clan twins all went to go see the autumn leaves. Since we're on a mountain, they apparently wanted to take the opportunity to go sightseeing."

"I see. I imagine the view is quite nice up here. But that's pretty cold of them. Why didn't they invite me?" he asked.

"You were sleeping soundly, so they didn't want to wake you," the Múspell member replied.

"Oh, I see. So they were actually being considerate of me, then..." The two of them knew how hard Yuuto worked himself on a daily basis. He'd mentioned previously during work that if he was ever able to go on a vacation he'd like to soak in a hot spring and take it easy, and the two of them had probably taken his words to heart.

"Well then, don't want their consideration to go to waste. I guess I'll take it easy today." After all, hot springs were all about rejuvenation from the daily grind.

Although, just soaking in the hot spring by himself would be a little lonely. “What’s Rún up to? Wasn’t she going to try to soak her arm some?”

“Former Mother Sigrún and Mother Hildegard have both gone boar hunting in the mountains.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. They were saying they wanted to prepare you a nourishing meal tonight.”

“Well, that’s awfully nice of them.” Both Sigrún and Hildegard’s ability to sense prey was practically superhuman, and their skills with a bow were top-notch. They would definitely bring back an outstanding feast. “So tonight’s gonna be barbecue then? Hell yeah, I can’t wait.” Just imagining it made his mouth water. Boar meat contained the same amount of calories as pig meat, but it had a ton more vitamin B and iron, so it was also the perfect sustenance for a tired body.

“Anyway, with those three out, that only leaves Ingrid, huh...” Well, it was the perfect opportunity—he’d been so busy that he hadn’t gotten to further his relationship with her like he’d wanted.

“Hmm, should I try being a little more forward? Nah, probably not a great idea.” Recalling the bruises the girl’s iron fist had given him in the past, he instinctively recoiled in fear. While the rune she bore wasn’t combat-related, she could still bring the hammer down if she wanted to. She might have looked weak, but that arm of hers was no joke—it could probably take down a number of men in the Steel Clan. Suoh Yuuto may have been a war hero, but he was a flesh-and-blood human nonetheless. He balked at being on the receiving end of an unreserved, full-power punch of hers.

“That being said, it’s already been two years. This discussion’s been long overdue.” He’d already had children with several other women in the Steel Clan, and Felicia was on her second, yet he had never done anything with Ingrid. It’d be one thing if she wasn’t interested in him, but he knew that wasn’t the case. He could acutely sense her affection toward him, so it was high time they took that next step.

“Oh, finally awake, sleepyhead?” As if on cue, Ingrid appeared.

“Yep. Mornin’.”

“Damn, you’re not a morning person, are ya? Everyone’s already headed out. Here, breakfast.” She thrust a plate out toward him, piled high with bread, dried meat, and vegetables.

“Wow, thanks. Appreciate it.” Because he’d been snoozing for so long, he was honestly quite hungry.

“I haven’t eaten yet either, so mind if I join you?” she said, sidling up next to Yuuto.

“Huh?” Something was a bit off. Normally she preferred to sit facing him. This was the first time she’d ever been so close.

At the same time, a familiar fragrance tickled his nostrils. “*What? Could this be...”* If he wasn’t mistaken, it was the same perfume Mitsuki used. When she wore it, it signified a certain something...and he’d heard Mitsuki and Ingrid had been spending a lot of time together lately...

In other words, the intent behind Ingrid wearing the same perfume was...

Gulp. Yuuto swallowed hard when he realized what kind of situation he was now in.

“So now, the question is how to approach.” Even if Ingrid really was up for that—and he was 99% sure she was—he couldn’t just ask her point-blank, “wanna do it?” At a glance, she may have seemed tomboyish, but Yuuto had realized by now that the heart of a pure maiden beat within her. If he didn’t handle this with delicacy and tact, he’d inadvertently end up stepping on a land mine, just as he had countless times previously.

“But with her, it’s difficult to gauge what exactly I can say or do...” Fundamentally, Yuuto was one to make swift decisions and take quick actions. When presented with a knotty problem, he would simply sever the knot. He was never particularly good with subtlety and had managed on that front so far by essentially winging it, but for that reason, he’d never been able to discern the subtleties of a woman’s heart. He was unsure when yes actually meant no, and no actually meant yes.

“S-So, now that we’ve finished breakfast...what do we do now?” Ingrid asked

him with upturned eyes. Her face was slightly flushed red. Honestly, she looked so cute that Yuuto wanted to embrace her right then and there, but he was afraid he might be the recipient of a patented Ingrid Punch if he did so.

“R-Right, well... Since we’re at a hot spring, I thought it might be nice to, uh, take a morning dip...maybe...” His voice trailed off. The instant the words left his mouth, he knew he’d messed up, but it’d been hard for him to directly invite her to join when she was in such a bashful state. By the same token, she would probably find it hard to say she wanted to join him. It was a complete misfire right out of the gate.

“O-Oh, really? What a coincidence, I-I was thinkin’ the same thing actually!”

“Huh?” For a split second, Yuuto couldn’t believe his ears. *“For real? For like, really real?”*

“S-S-So since we’re both headin’ that way, h-h-how about we go togedder?” She ended up biting her tongue on the last word.

“Pfft.” Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a laugh. At the same time he thought, *“Dammit, I screwed up!”*

He found the hilarious little flub kind of cute but was immediately concerned that she’d think he was making fun of her.



Despite her tomboyish nature Ingrid had a tendency to get shy around certain topics, but in Yuuto’s eyes that just made her all the more adorable. Granted, there had been times when that shyness had led to some turbulent episodes,

but that too had been part of what he liked about her so much. He loved seeing her sheepish side, in part because it was a facet of her that she never showed to anyone else. Therefore, he'd ended up laughing without meaning to.

Unfortunately, Ingrid had no way of knowing what Yuuto was thinking. Her face gradually became redder and redder until its color resembled an apple, and clearly unable to bear being anywhere near him any longer, she jumped up and stomped away.

"Shit." Yuuto covered his face with his hand. Even though it was his own fault, he couldn't help but feel disappointed at how it managed to turn out just like it always did, except—

With a sudden twirl, Ingrid did an about-face, strode back over to Yuuto, and plunked down next to him once more. But she seemed to still be ashamed, as she had her face turned away from him.

"S-So, your answer?" she asked. He couldn't see her expression, but her ears were beet red. It appeared that this time, Ingrid was determined. That made her appear even more lovely to Yuuto, as her dogged perseverance to be with him truly touched his heart. He almost chuckled again but forced himself to hold back this time.

"Let's see... Yeah, let's go in together." He'd tried to say it as normally as possible, but in the end, he couldn't stop his voice from cracking a little.

“It’s not like me to be this nervous,” Yuuto muttered to himself, having entered the spring first and chosen a rock to lean his back against. He knew women required more time to prepare for things like this, but being left with his thoughts in the meanwhile was making him anxious.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Wow, that was fast.” Turning around at the sound of her voice, he saw Ingrid standing there, her body wrapped in a towel. The towel was covering all the important bits, but to Yuuto that made it even more stimulating. Just the sight of her exposed, flushed skin was incredibly alluring.

“D-Don’t stare so much, okay?”

“S-Sorry.” True, it was rude to stare. When he looked away, he heard the dull sound of the towel dropping to the floor, followed by a small splash. Before he knew it, their shoulders were touching in the water. Both of them were fully grown adults, and yet Yuuto couldn’t keep his heart from beating out of his chest.

“I-I’m in now...”

“Y-Yeah.” After they exchanged greetings, nearly thirty seconds of silence passed.

“Yeah, this is a bit awkward,” Yuuto thought.

“Nice view, huh?” He decided to break the ice by choosing the first topic that came to mind. Not only was the vivid scenery of the mountains in the distance breathtaking, but the rugged rock surface surrounding the spring roused a man’s innate desire to explore. The therapeutic qualities of the water also seemed to be quite remarkable—Yuuto could feel his tiredness evaporating as he continued to soak in the spring. He understood now why this had been such a popular spot for the bigwigs in ancient Rome.

“Y-Yeah. It’d be nice to come here again sometime.” Ingrid agreed, but there was still a note of stiffness in her speech. Continuing talking to her casually would probably ease the tension—for both of them.

“Sure would. I was thinking maybe during New Year’s,” Yuuto suggested.

“Maybe it’d be way too cold then though? What with it being winter and all.”

“Yeah, a mountain valley like this would be hard to get through too,” Ingrid replied.

The mountain trails during the winter would be quite difficult to traverse, and dangerous to boot.

“You’re always saying the true worth of a hot spring can only be realized during winter, though, so I kinda want to try it,” she added.

“It’s true. Your face remains cold, but the rest of your body feels warm. It’s a feeling you’ve got to experience to understand,” Yuuto explained.

“You’ve said that so many times at this point I’ve lost count.”

“Oh, really?” Of course, he already knew that, but Yuuto played dumb. By intentionally giving Ingrid a chance to retort, he hoped to smoothen the flow of the conversation.

“Yeah, I’m practically sick of it by now! You’re always goin’ on about ‘hot springs vacation’ this, ‘hot springs vacation’ that!” Ingrid replied with a raised voice, apparently wanting to chide Yuuto.

Yuuto was lost for words at this sudden outburst.

“And yet for three whole years, you never even made an effort to go! Three freakin’ years, you workaholic!” she continued, clearly not letting off the gas just yet.

“It’s not like I work because I want to or anything. I’d rather take it easy,” Yuuto replied in protest.

“That’s what all workaholics say!” Ingrid rebutted.

Yuuto had no comeback to that comment. Ingrid’s tone was becoming more and more casual. She was finally starting to sound like her regular self. Saying whatever came to her mind without any regard for Yuuto’s position was one of her best qualities, so he was glad.

“Now that I think about it, I suppose that we’ll never get to visit that particular hot spring ever again...” Yuuto muttered in sad realization.

Around three months ago, when Yuuto had first arrived back in town after his voyage to the Mediterranean Sea, he had received reports of a massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami that had occurred a few days prior on the eastern shore of the Iberian Peninsula. Fearing the worst, a month after the earthquake, he'd sent Albertina and her crew out to Yggdrasil to investigate, but no matter how thoroughly they searched, there was no longer any landmass to be found. It seemed that true to legend, Yggdrasil, or rather Atlantis, really had sunk into the sea without a trace.

"Huh?! What'd I do?!" Noticing that Ingrid was scowling at him, he quickly brought himself back to reality. She puffed her cheeks up in a small pout.

"You had that serious patriarch-y expression on your face again," Ingrid explained.

"Ah, sorry." He tended to let his thoughts wander back to Yggdrasil now and again. Felicia would say it was because he had a strong sense of responsibility, but indeed, it'd be rude to Ingrid to let his mind go elsewhere when he was all alone with her.

Despite that, Ingrid smiled, not seeming particularly bothered. "It's fine, it's fine. I know all too well by now you can't help but worry about everyone else. I don't dislike that sincere side of you, y' know."

"Th-That so?" Yuuto replied.

"Of course. What could be more cool than the profile of a man concentrating on his work?" she said warmly.

"I-I suppose." His reply was noncommittal, but he let slip a small, sheepish grin. She definitely was behaving a little differently than before, but he didn't dislike it. Rather than simply buttering him up or fawning over him, he knew she was truly speaking from her heart.

"Well, let's forget about work. Today we relax. We're at a hot spring, after all... All alone... J-Just the two of us." Quietly, she wrapped her arms around him. Of course, that meant her bare chest was pressed against his. Her face was beet red. She wasn't used to this sort of thing, so Yuuto could tell that she was really pushing herself. The fact that she was trying so hard for his sake made him incredibly happy.

“Yeah, it’s just the two of us, huh?” Yuuto grasped her shoulders and hugged her tight. Ingrid flinched in surprise, but she didn’t reject him.

It’s a go! When the war god Suoh Yuuto saw a chance of victory, he would not let it slip by. A bit forcefully, he stole Ingrid’s lips and pushed her down against the rock surface. Her body, which had been submerged in hot water up until now, became fully exposed, her healthy brown skin slightly flushed by the heat. While her body was more delicate than Felicia’s or Mitsuki’s, she was still well-built. More than any of that, though, what really heated Yuuto up were Ingrid’s moist eyes gazing right at him.

“Ingrid...”

“Yuuto...”

Their gazes were fixed upon one another. No more words were needed between them. Once more, their lips drew close—

KER-THUNK!

The abrupt sound of something heavy falling and hitting the ground made them freeze in place.

They’d gotten this far... Should they just ignore it? Yuuto certainly wanted to, and if he could’ve, he probably would’ve. But unfortunately...

“Ha ha! Didja see that, Homura?! Didja see the finishing blow I gave that beast?!” A carefree voice resounded through the spring. It had to be Hildegard. Come to think of it, that Múspell member had mentioned she and Homura were going boar-hunting. “That means it’s my win! Chalk one up for ol’ Hildegard! Do you think His Majesty will praise me?! Do you?!”

“Uh, but the boar fell off the cliff,” Homura replied.

“Then we just gotta go get it! With you and me it’ll be a cinch...” Then, from atop the cliff face, Hildegard’s eyes met Yuuto’s. He was still frozen in place after having pushed Ingrid down on the rocks.

Apparently not immature enough to not know what was going on, Hildegard’s face went taut. Yuuto could see her change in expression even from afar. Then she looked away, and after not meeting his gaze for a while, she timidly spoke.

“Ah... Um... I’ve messed up again, haven’t I?”

Even after that unfortunate event, Ingrid didn’t give up. She tried her best, pushing herself to the limit time and again.

Through the course of chatting near his tent, they’d gotten in the mood once more, only to be shut down by several nearby Múspell members having a heated argument over who was supposed to be on lunch duty. When that failed, they’d had a drinking date in the forest, only to be interrupted at the worst possible moment by a wandering bear. Finally, with all her other options exhausted, she decided to just sneak into Yuuto’s tent at night, only to find that Homura had already beaten her to the punch (apparently she tended to crawl into Yuuto’s bed from time to time while sleepwalking). In the end, a week had gone by, and Ingrid reluctantly returned home no closer to Yuuto than she was before.

At this point, she had to assume her rotten luck was the handiwork of an evil god or demon. In a moment of weakness, she even began to wonder if she and Yuuto were just not fated to be together. But...

“Screw it! I’ll just have to kick fate to the curb!”

With defiance and tenacity, she continued to stage attack after fierce attack. Every single one was thwarted by fate, but still she refused to give up. After more tries than she could count, her so-called demon could no longer stop her from achieving her goal. Her perseverance finally won out. At long last, she managed to become one with Yuuto, and she successfully gave birth a year later.

ACT 4

“Ephy! P-Please marry me!”

“...Huh?”

It happened during the children’s naptime. While Ephelia was busy in the inner palace tending to the needs of Yuuto’s children like always, Nozomu approached her, looking awfully nervous, and dropped a bombshell of a request.

For an instant, she was shocked. However, her expression quickly turned into a smile. “Tee hee. Your feelings are appreciated, Lord Nozomu, but you can’t get married unless you’re an adult. Ask me again once you’re a little older.” She bent down, meeting him at eye level.

“I-I see, so I have to be an adult first...” His downcast face looked adorable to Ephelia, and she had to restrain herself from embracing him right then.

He was still only eight years old. Still in his cute stage.

“It’s a shame, but yes,” she said, adopting the most disappointed expression and tone she could muster, but she was honestly so overcome with joy that it was quite difficult to maintain. Although to Nozomu, it seemed to be a serious matter, so it would be rude to laugh.

“Then I’ll ask again when I’m an adult!” he proclaimed.

“Yes, I’ll be waiting,” she replied warmly.

“Then it’s a promise! You’ve already promised to marry me now, Ephy, so you better not marry anyone else in the meantime!”

“Pfft. Yes, I understand.” He was so adorable that she ended up snickering. Could anything be more cute and lovable?! Embracing him was no longer enough, now she was compelled to kiss him on the cheek.

“Pinky promise,” Nozomu said, holding out his little finger.

Ephelia was confused. “Huh?”

“What, do you not know what a pinky promise is?” Nozomu asked her.

“F-Forgive me, I don’t,” she replied.

“Dad and Mom do it when they promise something to each other,” he explained.

“Ah, I see.” Ephelia nodded as though she understood. If it was something those two did, it had to be a custom from the land beyond the heavens, not here or Yggdrasil.

“Well, what do I need to do? Could you teach me?” she asked.

“Hold out your pinky like me, Ephy,” he replied.

“Okay.” When she did so, Nozomu wrapped his little finger around hers, then bounced it up and down while saying in a singsong voice, “Pinky promise, whoever lies will swallow a thousand needles!”

“A thousand?!” Ephelia was shocked at the sudden, decidedly un-kid-friendly direction the promise had taken. Of course, if you were Japanese you knew it was just a figure of speech, but Ephelia hadn’t been raised within that culture.

“Th-The land beyond the heavens sure is frightening!” She shivered in fear at the resolve needed to form a promise there. Now she understood why Yuuto went to such lengths to make good on his promises.

“U-Um, about the ‘thousand needles’...”

“We already shook on it with our pinkies, so now we have to keep our promise!” When Ephelia timidly inquired about the contents of the promise, Nozomu made that declaration and crawled underneath the covers of the futon, as if to say the decision was final and no further amendments would be acknowledged. She couldn’t help but feel like she just made a deal with the devil.

“Well, he’ll probably forget about it soon enough,” she thought to herself. It was common enough for a young boy to look up to an older girl and propose, mistaking their admiration for love. The fact that Nozomu thought so fondly of her made her remarkably happy. But those feelings of his were nothing more than a temporary delusion. She was sure he’d forget about it when he got

older. He might even be embarrassed to recall he ever did such a thing.

To begin with, she was a former slave, and even though she'd pledged her loyalty to Mitsuki she was but a lady-in-waiting. Nozomu, on the other hand, was the son of the divine being that had been sent from the heavens to rescue the citizens of Yggdrasil and had inherited the position of þjóðann from Sigrdrífa. Though he was young and innocent now, he would one day inherit the position of þjóðann from his father, so he was held in high esteem.

In addition, Ephelia was nineteen, and he was eight. The gap between their social statuses and age was far too great. No doubt everyone around them would disapprove. Nozomu's promise could never come to be. In the future, it would merely become a distant reminder of when the boy was still young and impressionable. Deciding to consider it an honor that Nozomu had chosen her, she locked it away within her heart. Perhaps one day over drinks or idle conversation she would recount the tale and have a good laugh.

Or so she thought.

"Ephy! My coming-of-age ceremony's over now!"

"Yes, congratulations! Your formal wear looks so good on you, Lord Nozomu. Very dignified. You've really grown into a fine young man..." Ephelia said, speaking from the bottom of her heart.

Six years had passed. The boy she'd looked after all this time as a wet nurse had become fully grown. While their social statuses were as different as heaven and earth, she'd come to think of Nozomu as her little brother, or even her own son. There was no way she wouldn't be beside herself with emotion.

"A man, huh? Then does that mean I'm finally an adult in your eyes?" Nozomu asked.

"Yes, Lord Nozomu. You've become a wonderful adult." Tears brimming in her eyes, Ephelia nodded emphatically. Of course, she would be lying if she said she wouldn't feel lonely now that it was time for him to leave the nest and walk his own path, but she felt more joy than sadness. Normally she didn't drink, but since today was a special occasion maybe she'd enjoy a glass of wine all to herself in her room.

“Really?!” Nozomu broke into a grin. The way he smiled and his facial features were the spitting image of his father Yuuto. It was enough to make her believe that a younger version of Yuuto had somehow appeared before her.

“Then it’s time to fulfill our promise, wouldn’t you say?”

“Pro...mise?” For a second, she didn’t know what he was referring to, but then that precious scene of yesteryear that she’d locked away in her treasure chest of memories came to her mind’s surface.

“It couldn’t be...? No, no way,” she thought.

That verbal promise back then had only been a child’s whimsy, a mere bubble fated to pop with the passage of time—

“Marry me, Ephy,” Nozomu proclaimed boldly.

“So? What’d you say?” the pretty young woman in front of Ephelia asked, munching on a biscuit and getting crumbs everywhere. Her unconcerned tone and expression communicated that she had no actual interest in the affairs of others. But even though such an attitude would typically be a detriment, she couldn’t deny that the woman was a beauty in her own right. In fact, she even had a bewitching air about her. *“Her beauty is so genuine she doesn’t even have to work at it,”* Ephelia idly thought.

The woman in question was Kristina, and she’d been Ephelia’s longtime friend since they were schoolmates at the vaxt many years ago.

“I politely turned him down,” Ephelia replied.

“What?! Why’d you do that? Lord Nozomu’s a good kid! He’s cool too, like his dad!” Kristina’s older sibling Albertina shouted. In appearance they were identical, but the way they expressed themselves made it easy to tell them apart.

“Well, I have to agree it’s a bit of a waste. You could’ve married into royalty, you know? Lived the good life.” Kristina smirked, resting her chin in her hands. Though she hadn’t shown much interest previously, she now looked like she was enjoying herself. *“Typical Kristina,”* Ephelia thought. *“You haven’t changed a bit.”*

“I mean, I’m almost double his age!” Ephelia argued.

“But he said that didn’t matter to him, right? So what’s the problem?” Kristina replied.

“Yeah, yeah! There’s no problem at all!” Albertina added.

“There’s a big problem! An old woman like me is wholly unsuited to be Lord Nozomu’s bride!” Ephelia smacked the table as she made her appeal. She was already going to be twenty-six this year. In twenty-first-century Japan that would’ve been a suitable age, perhaps even considered a bit young for marriage, but sadly this was the fifteenth century BCE. Here, she was considered much too old to still be single.

“I mean, you’re plenty attractive, Ephy, and popular within the royal court too. Even if you couldn’t be his formal wife, I don’t really see a problem with you being Lord Nozomu’s concubine, at the very least.”

“I could never... Someone like me could never...”

“Okay, if you give me any more of that nonsense I’m going to get upset.”

“Huh?”

“Do you think I don’t know? Advisor Jörgen’s grandson Gendo, who’s well on his way to becoming a government official. The late Rasmus’s grandson Mustafa, who’s rapidly making a name for himself as the Horn Clan’s second-in-command. Lady Fagrahvél’s cousin Barr, who just got assigned to lead a newly formed tank unit.”

Ephelia’s face stiffened when she heard those names.

“Oh yeah, and recently there’s also been Babel, who was, surprisingly enough, promoted to frontier commander, right?”

“H-How did you know they...” The names of those four were all familiar to her. Each and every one of them had proposed to Ephelia. She hadn’t told a soul about any of them. She didn’t want it to affect their honor, so she thought she’d kept it secret.

“Hee hee, there’s nothing I don’t know about the royal court,” Kristina said with a smug grin.

She wasn't just blowing smoke. While she was a bit callous at times and did things her own way, Kristina was a dear friend of Ephelia's. They'd known each other for so long that Ephelia felt she could talk to her about anything. Because of that, it was easy for her to forget that Kristina was a genius that held the entire nation's intelligence network in the palm of her hand.

"Wooow, she's even more popular than I thought!" Albertina remarked in surprise.

"Yes, she's popular indeed, this woman. So popular, in fact, that if she continues to assert that 'someone like her' could never amount to anything, the ladies of the royal court might end up burning her at the stake," Kristina said.

"Urk... But what about you and Al? Aren't you two awfully popular as well?!" From a young age, the twins had already possessed looks that made people's heads turn, and now that they were adults that beauty had only blossomed. Currently, they enjoyed massive popularity as the most beautiful twins in the entire nation, and were known by many as "The Sun and Moon that Illuminate Steel."

"Well, in our case, we belong to Father. All they can do is admire us from afar. No one in their right mind would ever hit on us," Kristina said with a seductive smile. True, one would need to be quite foolhardy to hit on one of the þjóðann's concubines. Incidentally, Albertina had given birth to a boy and a girl by now. Kristina had no children, but she didn't seem to mind, as she loved her older sister's children like her own.

Kristina still had more to say. "On the other hand, you, Ephy, belong to no one as of yet. You're attractive, have a good personality, and have plenty of experience as the caretaker of Father's children. You're the ideal catch for just about any man."

All Ephelia could manage in response was a pained groan.

"And, you're already really really popular! Like, people even ask me to introduce them to you!" Albertina added.

Cornered by the twins' coordinated advance, Ephelia could only moan. She had no rebuttal.

“This topic’s never come up before now so I’ve let it slide, but now that Lord Nozomu’s involved I just have to ask,” Kristina said before clearing her throat in preparation for her next comment.

“Yes...?” Ephelia replied, equal parts concerned and curious.

“Why exactly have you not accepted any of those proposals?” Kristina asked. “All of those men have good social standing, and have promising careers ahead of them,” she added.

“...Because I used to be a slave,” Ephelia replied frankly.

“I knew it.” Apparently expecting that answer, Kristina let out a small sigh. “That was over ten years ago, Ephy. You’re in such high regard with everyone because of how well you’ve taken care of the children, and that’s still bothering you?”

Kristina cut straight to the heart of the matter without hesitation. While Ephelia admired Kristina for that unreserved personality of hers, at times like these it’d be nice if she was a bit more delicate. On the other hand, some part of her wanted to let it all out. To finally tell her story to someone.

“...Of course it is.” Gripping her right shoulder tightly, her voice was so strained it came out in a whisper. On that shoulder was the incontrovertible proof that she’d been a slave—proof that would never disappear for all eternity.

Ephelia was born far north of where the Wolf Clan’s home, Iárnviðr, had been, in a town called Isa belonging to a small nobility known as the Fur Clan. Built on the edge of a lake, Isa was a small town that enjoyed prosperity as a trade hub for merchants and nomads. Her memory was hazy, but Ephelia thought she recalled her father being an authority within the town. She remembered her house being full of people she assumed were servants. Being a woman, Ephelia herself was usually at the town’s local vaxt.

Her mother and father were both incredibly kind, and she could vividly recall every day being fun.

It was not to last, however. In a single night, her happy everyday life was shattered into pieces.

A neighboring nomadic tribe had staged an attack against them.

“D-Daddy?!”

At first Ephelia didn’t realize that the disembodied head before her was her own father’s.

“Ephy, no! Why didn’t you stay inside like I asked?!” Her mother was pinned to the ground by a strong-looking man she didn’t know. Her clothes had been torn open at the front, exposing the skin underneath.

“B-Because I heard you crying, Mommy...”

In fact, her mother had let out a shriek unlike anything she’d ever heard before. She’d screamed her husband’s name so loud her vocal cords had surely torn—a scream of absolute terror.

Ephelia knew she’d been told to hide, but after hearing something like that she couldn’t help but be concerned, and had to check on her.

“Oh, so you had a daughter too? Heh, she’ll grow up to be quite the beauty. Takes after you, doesn’t she?” the man said and grinned obscenely. Even now, fifteen years later, she could still vividly recall that smile. Every time she did, she recoiled in fear.

“Grab ’er!” Responding to the man pinning her mother down, another man who’d been lurking in the shadows of the room approached Ephelia, letting out a peal of indecent laughter. Ephelia shrieked.

“Stop! Please don’t touch my daughter!”

“What? We wouldn’t do anything to your daughter. We’re not that heartless.”

“R-Really?!”

“Yeah, she’ll grow up to be a fine young woman. In that case, she’ll fetch a high price as a slave!”

“No! Ephy! Run away! Run!” her mother screamed in anguish. Unfortunately, she would do no such thing. Ephelia was frozen with fear.

“No! I’m scared! Mommy—gah?!” In no time at all, she was snatched up, and her mouth was crammed full of cloth.

“Mmmpphh! Mmmpph?!” Unable to let out a sound, she was then bound with her hands behind her back and pinned to the floor. She tried to resist, but she was no match for the strength of the adult men and was unable to budge even an inch.

“Hehee, now then, it’s study time, little girl. You just sit there and observe your mother’s charming figure for a bit.”

Ephelia then watched as they rode her mother, one by one. Each time they thrust forward, her mother screamed. At the time she had no idea what was going on, but now she was certain. They’d violated her.

“Stop it! Don’t bully Mommy!” Ephelia pleaded with tears in her eyes, but of course, that request fell on deaf ears, and her mother’s screams echoed throughout the house for a few more hours.

The days that followed were a veritable hell for Ephelia. With her arms and neck bound with rope, she was dragged along like cattle to a town she didn’t recognize—if memory served, it was the Ash Clan capital—where she and her mother were taken to the clan leaders. Without any idea what was happening, she was stripped naked and every inch of her was examined, even her delicate parts. Once that was over...

“Ahhhhh! It hurrrrts! Mommy, it hurrrrrts!”

...she received a brand on her right shoulder.

It was proof that she was now someone’s property.

Shortly afterward, her life as a slave began.

It was like hell on earth. From sun up to sun down every day, her new family worked her to the bone. Her primary jobs were laundry and housekeeping. Even during winter, she was forbidden to use hot water—the water was so freezing cold that her fingers would go numb as she washed the clothes. If she spoke up, she was beaten. Her diet consisted mainly of moldy bread and foul-smelling vegetables, and the portions were so tiny that she felt sure she would starve as long as she remained with this family.

To make matters worse, the family had a young boy around the same age as Ephelia who often pulled her hair and kicked her in the back. He bullied her

constantly.

“You belong to me. Dad said that when I’m an adult, you’ll be mine.”

Just remembering those words made her shudder to this day.

“I’m sorry... Ephy, I’m so sorry...” She was only able to meet with her mother during bedtime, but when they were together, all she ever did was apologize. She sounded like some sort of broken toy.

Finally, after around a year of suffering, something changed. The head of the family fell ill and passed away, and she and her mother were sold back to the slave market. Naturally, there was no way his actual wife would want to continue sheltering other women her husband had been with. It didn’t matter whether she’d actually loved her husband or not—as a woman, she’d lost to the likes of a slave. There’d probably been no greater blow to her pride, so she’d disposed of the unsightly women without a trace.

Finally, after two months of being dragged around from town to town by the slave traders—she’d arrived in Iárnviðr, where Yuuto had taken her in.

Truthfully, she didn’t have high hopes at first. It didn’t matter where she went, slaves were always going to be treated like property, not people. She’d learned that well from everyone she’d met over the past year.

But when she’d gotten to the palace, everyone was so kind. It was like she’d arrived in Valhalla. She began to realize exactly how much she missed being treated well. Warmth began to seep its way back into her heart. Gradually, little by little, she could feel the friendly, inviting atmosphere begin to heal and dissolve her trauma.

But even so, it couldn’t be completely wiped away. There had been so much built up over the past year that some remained imprinted in the depths of her heart, in the nooks and crannies of her body. And, above all, there was still the brand etched into her right shoulder. The despicable insignia that marked her as a slave. As long as that remained, she wouldn’t be able to forget. She’d always recall the fact that she’d been a slave. The fact that her worth was below that of a human’s.

“So yeah... That’s why I’ve been scared of men in general, honestly.”

Having finished her whole story, Ephelia let out a large sigh. It was the first time she'd ever told it to anyone. It was kind of a downer, so she'd kept it to herself up until now, but now that she'd gotten it off of her chest she honestly felt much better. Somewhere within her, she'd probably hated keeping it all bottled up inside and wanted to tell it to someone all along.

"Ephy... I had no idea... That's so saaaad!" Tears were pouring from Albertina's eyes as she sobbed. Meanwhile, Kristina remained composed but frowned as though she were deep in thought.

"As far as I can tell, you've been able to interact with men just fine, haven't you?" Kristina asked.

"Well, as long as it's part of my job I can manage. But when they start seeing me as a woman, all bets are off," Ephelia explained.

She was now able to manage a friendly rapport on the surface, but back when Yuuto had first purchased her she hadn't even been able to do that. She'd been like a frightened rabbit, timid and cowering, and she'd gotten over a lot of that. However, whenever she was approached as a member of the opposite sex, that image always flashed through her mind—the image of the man pinning her mother to the ground as he violated her. The image of the man grinning obscenely as he reached toward her. The face of the man lasciviously sneering at her as he told her she belonged to him. It was a reflex—she couldn't help it.

"In fact, those with status and authority are especially difficult for me to handle," Ephelia added.

"Because they inevitably remind you of the time when you were a slave," Kristina stated.

"Yes..."

"And that's why you've turned down proposal after proposal." Kristina nodded as though she finally understood.

Of course, she didn't think all of the men that had confessed to her were bad people. Some were probably quite nice. They may have even been able to give her an even more blessed life than she had now. But her fear stood in the way. When men looked at her as a woman, she couldn't help but feel sick to her

stomach.

“Hm, okay. Since we’ve come this far, I’m going to ask something a bit intrusive. You’ve had a bit of a crush on Father since you were a teenager, haven’t you?” Kristina asked.

“Huh?!” Taken completely by surprise, Ephelia practically let out a yelp. She thought she’d hidden it so well all this time...!

“Huh?! Really?!” Albertina seemed just as surprised.

“Yes, while it’s true she hid it rather well, there’s no doubt.”

“Uggghh...”

“And the reason you never confessed to him is of course because you were a slave, correct?” Kristina asked.

“Yes, I was too afraid,” Ephelia replied.

“I see.”

“Ah, but it wasn’t His Majesty I was afraid of.”

“Huh?”

“I was afraid of...myself. Afraid that I might become scared and end up rejecting him,” Ephelia explained.

To Ephelia, Yuuto was the hero who’d rescued her from the depths of hell—someone who had always been incredibly kind to her with no regard for her status or her past. She owed everything to him.

But that was precisely why she was afraid.

Even though he’d done so much for her—even though she knew how kind he was by always observing him from nearby—she was afraid that she might still end up doing something terrible to him. That she might one day feel sick to her stomach in his presence. If that happened, she’d never be able to forgive herself. She’d rather die.

“So...I put a lid on those feelings,” Ephelia continued.

If it meant avoiding that from ever becoming a reality, then she’d much prefer being his “little sister” forever. After all, she was already surrounded by kind

people, and she was already plenty blessed, more than she honestly deserved. As a slave, it was wrong for her to wish for anything more.

She knew it was spineless. She knew she was a coward. But in the end, her fear would always win out.

“But it’s fine. I’ve already come to terms with it, and I now think of him as family.” Ephelia’s final remarks were warm-hearted, but who could truly know how she was feeling at that moment?

True, there had been a time when she’d seen Yuuto in a romantic light. But rather than a man to pursue a relationship with, Ephelia now saw him as a doting big brother. The husband of her big sisters. The father of the children she adored.

“I see. By the way, did you feel sick when Lord Nozomu confessed to you?” Kristina asked.

“Huh?!” She hadn’t expected that question. “Of course not! He is the eldest son of His Majesty, the man to whom I owe everything! I’ve taken care of him since she was a baby! He’s so adorable I simply can’t take my eyes off him, and...huh?”

Having gotten that far, Ephelia finally realized.

“The likes of a former slave being Lord Nozomu’s bride is the height of discourtesy!”

“Such a thing would never be allowed! Before that, I’d *never allow it!”*

Reflexively, she denied her own feelings. But...

“I suppose...I didn’t feel sick...”

When Nozomu had asked her to marry him, she hadn’t felt an ounce of the fear she normally felt. If anything, it was the rebuking stares and cold gazes she’d received after turning him down that had really been scary. The thought of meeting him again after the fact was awkward and unpleasant. But she had never felt fear toward Nozomu himself.

Was that because she’d watched over him since he was a baby and knew his disposition better than anyone else?

Was it because she believed from the bottom of her heart that he'd never do anything like those men had done?

"Then why don't you seriously think about taking Lord Nozomu as your husband?" Kristina stated bluntly.

Ephelia instinctively, vehemently shook her head. "What?! N-No way! That would be far too degrading for Lord Nozomu!"

"True, if you were the one actively pursuing him I might tell you to act within your station. But Lord Nozomu himself desires it, so I see no problem."

"...You think it'd be okay?"

"Yes, it'd probably be much more complicated if you were to be his formal wife, but as a concubine, it should pose no problems."

"Yeah, go for it!" Albertina chimed in.

"...I see." When she thought about it, the twins were right. While royalty taking a commoner or a slave as their formal wife was indeed unheard of, it was rather common to take such women as mistresses. In fact, Ephelia's former master had had several slave mistresses. There were also cases where nobility would purchase prostitutes to take as their mistresses. While it may be frowned upon in the twenty-first century, in this era it was regarded as a respectable, resourceful way to make a living.

The only thing Ephelia wanted out of a legal wife of Nozomu's was for them to love and cherish him from the bottom of their heart. As long as they could do that, it didn't matter if they were a commoner or a slave. As long as Nozomu truly loved that person, Ephelia would give them her blessing.

...She would?

"Well, um... I've never really seen Lord Nozomu that way..." While she obviously didn't hate or feel revulsion toward him, it was true that she harbored no romantic feelings for him. She saw him not as a man, but as a cute little brother. The fact that she'd readily give another woman her blessing was probably proof of that.

"That shouldn't be a problem either. Women are fundamentally creatures

that want to be loved and desired, and there are all sorts of cases where women come to realize they like someone only after being confessed to," Kristina explained.

"...Really?" Ephelia replied.

"Is that really true, Kris?" Albertina tagged on.

"Yes, it's a known fact. So how about using this as an opportunity to really take your time and test it?"

"Test it...?"

Test what? What—or who—could she be talking about? There were so many possibilities it made her head spin, and she couldn't come up with an answer.

"Whether or not you're able to see Lord Nozomu as a member of the opposite sex, of course."

Ephelia let out a shocked gasp in response.

"I think this is a good chance for you to find out, no?" Kristina said, unable to suppress a snicker.

"Easy for you to say when this is all just entertainment for you!" Ephelia thought, but while it was clear from Kristina's expression that she was being teased, she also detected a hint of kindness in her eyes.

Kristina had one last point to make, however. "Although, Lord Nozomu's a bona fide prince. Whoever he marries, it's going to be a political affair. It's not something he'll be able to decide on his own. So how about you discuss it with Father and see what he has to say?"

While the girls were having their conversation, something was unfolding in the palace...

“I can’t believe it! I didn’t think there was any way I’d get turned down!” Nozomu yelled as he writhed in (mental) agony on his bed.

Now fifteen years old, he had sleek black hair like his parents and, whether due to genetics or simply from being well-fed, was taller than the average boy from this era. He was also well-built and muscular, thanks in no small part to the martial arts training he’d received from Sigrún ever since he was young. In fact, he’d already earned Sigrún’s seal of approval—according to her, he was already skilled enough to join the Múspell Unit, making the sight of him flailing his legs and crying into his pillow all the more surreal.

“And you were so sure she’d accept too,” Nozomu’s little brother Rungr snickered. Younger than Nozomu by one year, he was the son of Yuuto and Felicia. He shared his name with the clan’s now-deceased sibling subordinate—a hero who’d rescued the Steel Clan from grave peril in the midst of a tumultuous war waged on the western side of the lost continent of Yggdrasil.

“What was it you said again? ‘The only reason Ephy won’t marry me is that she’s staying true to our promise and waiting for me to become an adult’?” Rungr teased.

“Grr! I’ll kill you!” Nozomu leapt at his brother from the bed. Rungr jumped backward to avoid him, but despite being only a year apart the difference in their physical abilities was too great. In no time at all, Nozomu had Rungr in a headlock, his fist grinding into Rungr’s temple.

“Ow ow! Ow, that really hurts! Sorry! I’m sorry for teasing you, so stop already!” Rungr pleaded.

“Hmph.” Since he’d apologized, Nozomu decided to forgive him and released him.

“That was mean! Why’d you get mad at me when all I was doing was stating facts?” Rungr complained, straightening his golden locks. His handsome face made even his scowl look dignified. Perhaps those good looks were why he was so popular with the ladies of the court. That pissed Nozomu off even more

because it made him wonder if maybe even Ephelia preferred Rungr over himself.

“So, what are you gonna do? Give up?” his twin sister Mirai asked disinterestedly as she munched on a piece of fruit. Despite being twins, however, Nozomu looked more like their father and Mirai like their mother—they didn’t resemble one another in the least. Their personalities, too, were polar opposites: Nozomu was hot-blooded and reckless, often acting on impulse, while Mirai leisurely took things at her own pace, preferring to laze around the house.

“Like hell I’ll give up!” Nozomu’s reply was immediate. He couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t wanted Ephy’s hand in marriage. If one rejection was enough for him to throw in the towel, he would have long since abandoned his dream.

A silver-haired girl named Wiz spoke up. “Then we need to devise a plan, Brother Nozomu. According to Sun Tzu, war is won by many tactics, not few.” She was Nozomu’s younger sister by two years, and her name had apparently come from one of her mother’s martial arts instructors. “Failure just means you were ill-prepared,” she added.

“That only applies to war, Wiz. Love and war are two different things,” Nozomu replied.

“Not true. Dad says that Sun Tzu’s teachings apply to all aspects of life,” Wiz explained.

Nozomu simply groaned in response.

“Sun Tzu also says that if you know the enemy and you know yourself you need not fear even a hundred battles. ‘Enemy’ might not be a suitable word in this case, but you didn’t even take the time to consider how Ephy feels, or how she views you,” Wiz continued.

Nozomu groaned, this time louder than the previous.

Clearly not content with what Nozomu could only feel was an attack against his psyche, Wiz spoke up once more. “From my perspective, I’d say Miss Ephy sees you as more of a little brother than a man.”

The unreserved blade of her merciless words caused Nozomu to moan in agony. Unlike with Rungr, there was no hint of joking or teasing here, and often, it was the truth that cut the deepest. That frankness of hers was just like her mother Sigrún, but as far as Nozomu was concerned, he wished she'd only inherited her mother's beauty and left it at that.

"Now, now, that's enough. Look, Big Brother's already down for the count," Rungr cut in with a bitter smile. Truth be told, Nozomu was grateful for Rungr's assistance. He had an uncanny sense of when to step in and mediate an argument—perhaps he got that from his mother.

"You're too soft on him, Brother Rungr," Wiz replied. "Brother Nozomu is going to succeed Father one day to become þjóðann. If he can't even overcome something like this, we're doomed."

"It's not like I *have* to succeed him. Father has plenty of children, right? You could do it, Rungr, or even you, Wiz. Actually, that's brilliant! Why didn't I think of that before? You certainly act the part." Nozomu nodded emphatically as if he'd hit upon a wonderful idea.

While most would probably give their right arm to become the þjóðann, Nozomu felt that his duty to succeed his father was nothing more than a nuisance. He'd seen Yuuto work from morning to night without even a moment's rest, handling one important duty after another. He'd seen his father's frowning, stressed expression more times than he could count, even when they had family time together and were supposed to be relaxing. He was always thinking of his subjects, always trying so hard, and yet except for a small portion of his retainers, his approval rating was at *rock bottom.* Nozomu wanted no part of that. If he could hand the position over to anyone else, he would in a heartbeat.

"Hmm, the þjóðann, huh?" Rungr mused. "Perhaps I could. I think I'd be much more suited to an advisory position, though."

"Enough nonsense, Brother Rungr. The only one who officially shares the blood of the former þjóðann Sigrdrífa is you, Brother Nozomu, which means you can't switch out with any of your other siblings."

Yuuto was the þjóðann, but he didn't have royal blood within him. He had

simply inherited the position by being the husband of the former þjóðann, Sigrdrífa. As far as anyone was aware, the only one who possessed that blood was Nozomu.

"Except I don't have that blood either," Nozomu muttered, pursing his lips. It'd been announced that he'd been born from Sigrdrífa, but that was largely only because it'd been more convenient from a political standpoint. His mother was Mitsuki, not some woman named Sigrdrífa whom he'd never even met or seen! What's more, because of a stupid reason like that, he'd had the annoyingly heavy responsibility of succeeding the throne foisted upon him!

"Wasn't the leader of the Steel Clan and the Oath of the Chalice supposed to be decided by merit?!"

"I'd rather rise up the ranks through my own achievements, not by riding on my dad's coattails!"

"Do I have no choice but to walk the path my dad's already laid out for me?!"

"All the rest of my siblings are basically allowed to decide on whatever path they like, so why can't I?!"

"My dream was always to master the blade and become Mánagarmr, the Strongest Silver Wolf, yet I've never even gotten a chance to try!"

Those feelings had always plagued Nozomu's heart.

"I bet that's the reason Ephy rejected me, isn't it?! Because I'm slated to become þjóðann! Dammit!" Nozomu yelled.

"Nah, I don't think so. Marrying the þjóðann means you're set for life, so it's a good thing." Mirai said, her mouth full of biscuit this time. Nozomu had never seen her without some sort of food item in her mouth. It was a complete mystery how she'd managed to keep such a nice figure.

"You might think that'd be the case, but Ephy's oddly self-conscious about that sort of thing." He'd heard through the grapevine that Ephelia had been a former slave, and even though she'd already long since purchased her own freedom using her wages from the palace, many within the royal court still looked down upon her for that reason. It was plausible, then, that the difference in their status could be the reason for her refusal. At least, he hoped

that was all it was.

“Well, it’s true that it’d be problematic in more ways than one if Ephy became your formal wife, considering her age and origin,” Rungr said, nodding.

“Yeah, I know...” Nozomu agreed.

“But you only have eyes for Ephy, right, Brother Nozomu?” Rungr asked.

“Yep,” he replied without hesitation. Although he didn’t want to brag, Nozomu had to admit he was popular. When he walked through the palace, gaggles of girls always waved and called out to him, and his retainers had also introduced him to more of their daughters and granddaughters than he cared to count.

But that was entirely because of his status as a prince. They were only seeing the authority and wealth behind him, not Nozomu himself. Ephelia, however, was different. She alone saw Nozomu for who he really was, and she wasn’t afraid to tell him off if necessary. Aside from his father’s wives, she was the only one who did. The other caretakers were too intimidated by the shadow of his father behind him and kept quiet. Whether he wanted it or not, he was going to come into incredible authority and power sooner or later, so he at least wanted his partner to be able to keep him in line. He was afraid that if he didn’t have that, he might end up going rogue without even realizing it.

One thing was more important to him than any of that, however.

“I love Ephy. In my mind, there’s no one else,” Nozomu stated bluntly.

That’s right. It had nothing to do with logic. He had *always* loved her. From the time he was a child, he’d never wanted to hand her over to anyone else, not even to his own brothers. That was how possessive he was of her. He wanted her to stay with him forever.

Of course, that didn’t mean he wanted to dominate or exert his authority over her. She was the most important person to him in the world, so he wanted her to live a happier life than anyone else in the world. He wanted to make her happy. So it wouldn’t work if she didn’t choose him of her own accord.

“Proposing fresh out of his coming-of-age ceremony, huh? That’s my boy, all right.” Those were the first words out of Yuuto’s mouth when he heard what

Ephelia had to say. He didn't seem troubled by the course of events. If anything, he seemed to find it rather amusing. It even felt like he was implicitly praising his son. "I've known for a while that kid's been interested in you. It's as plain as day to see. Although, I didn't think he'd go as far as to propose to you right out of the gate."

"I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?" Mitsuki grinned. She didn't look upset either; on the contrary, she looked to be in high spirits. It honestly confused Ephelia. She thought for sure they'd be opposed to it, or perhaps at least show a stern face or two.

"Um, but, isn't marriage to the crown prince a political affair? Someone like me couldn't possibly..."

"Nah, doesn't bother me. Of course, that only hinges on whether someone like him is good enough for you."

To her surprise, Yuuto replied to Ephelia's timid question with swift approval. Not to mention he'd taken her "someone like me" and twisted it around on her. Wasn't *she* supposed to be the one unsuited for this marriage?

"RReally?! There's no problem whatsoever?!"

"'No problem whatsoever' is probably going too far, but it wouldn't be any big deal, at least. If it's for the sake of my cute son and little sister, I'll take care of anything. Not to mention, the timing couldn't be better." He grinned with confidence, as though he was saying *"Leave it to me."* This was, after all, the man who'd already weathered a myriad of ridiculously dangerous and difficult situations. Now that he was in his thirties and a full-fledged king, a problem on this small of a scale was probably nothing to him.

"That's right, just leave it to Yuu-kun. He'll take care of it. What's important is how you two...no, Nozomu's already made his decision, so it's how *you* feel, Ephy." Mitsuki agreed, looking at Ephelia with a smile as if waiting for her answer.

"How...*I* feel?"

"That's right. If you don't see him as a man, then go ahead and turn him down. It's not like I'm going to fire you if you do, and if you're worried about

feeling awkward around him after the fact I'll just change where you're stationed. So don't worry about us; do what you feel in your heart is right."

"O-Okay..." Honestly, she didn't understand at all. This was the þjóðann, the þjóðann's formal wife, and the crown prince—any way she looked at it, she was practically at the bottom of the societal totem pole. So why were they leaving such an important decision up to *her?*

"Why...would you go this far for me?" Ephelia asked.

"Well, that's obvious. I want you to be happy just as much as I want Nozomu to," Yuuto immediately replied.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Mitsuki agreed, giving an emphatic nod.

"Your Majesty... Lady Mitsuki..." She was so overcome with emotion at that moment that tears began to spill from her eyes. *"I truly am fortunate to be blessed with such caring employers. They treat me so well—more than I could ever deserve," she thought to herself.*

"Sigh... What should I do...?" After leaving Yuuto's room, Ephelia walked back to her own in a daze, completely at a loss.

She truly was glad the two felt the way they did. She even got the impression that her marriage to Nozomu was exactly what they wanted, so part of her wanted to respond to their expectations just to appease them. But they had told her to choose in the end. That was what made it so difficult.

Just what did she really want to do, anyway? How did she really see Nozomu? She had no clue. After all, up until now, she'd never thought about it even once.

"I wish they'd just decide for me..." As pathetic as it was, that was all she could think. Then she could just comply with whatever they decided. Yuuto had said it was no big deal, but wasn't a prince's marriage a huge event that concerned the future of the kingdom? Wasn't putting that decision in the hands of a lowly maid like her illegal or something?!

"In the first place, what do I want our relationship to be?" Truthfully, she would've been fine with things staying just the way they were. Keeping their current status as "siblings" or perhaps even childhood friends with just a bit of an age gap would've suited her just fine.

But that wouldn’t work anymore.

Everything about her relationship with Nozomu had changed irreversibly. If she accepted his proposal, they’d obviously become husband and wife, but even if she rejected him, it’d be too awkward to go back to the way things were. Either way, the pair had passed the point of no return, so to speak.

“If only I could turn back time,” she wished fervently. But unfortunately, time only flowed forward.

“Should I turn him down, then...?” Naturally, she felt that becoming the formal wife of the future þjóðann was too heavy a burden for her to bear. It wasn’t as simple as just taking care of your husband. You needed to be aware of the þjóðann’s consort, and have the tolerance to govern it. What’s more, you also needed the management and hospitality skills to welcome and entertain bigwigs from foreign countries and their retainers. Mitsuki was quite adept at this and was able to do so not just competently, but outstandingly. It was almost like she was born to be a queen.

“Yes, I think I’ll pass.” When she considered all this, she steeled herself and made her decision. That was all far beyond her capacity. While she doubted they’d be on Mitsuki’s level, she was certain there were plenty of other suitable candidates for Nozomu. Letting that person take the position instead would, in the end, benefit the country and Nozomu much more.

“But... Doesn’t that mean I won’t get to speak with Lord Nozomu in the same way I have up until now?” The instant she’d made her decision, anxiety began to creep into her heart. She knew it was selfish, but she didn’t want that either. After all, he was the special person that Ephelia wouldn’t have found her purpose in life without.

Ever since being bought by Yuuto, Ephelia had always felt inadequate.

She was infinitely grateful to Yuuto for rescuing her and her mother, and would never forget that kindness. But on the other hand, she was convinced she had nothing to give in return. There were a number of women around Yuuto who’d rescued him from countless deadly situations with their overwhelming strength. Compared to them, all she could do was help cook, clean, set the table, do the shopping, and take care of the children. Each of

those were things that the rest of the women could already do. Rather, they were jobs that *anyone* could do. On top of that, even though they were menial tasks, Yuuto paid her handsomely for performing those services.

At this rate, she'd never be able to repay her debt. Compared to what she was always receiving, she wouldn't be able to balance it out.

When she asked herself what else she was able to do, the answer was nothing—not even wait on Yuuto in the bedroom. At the time, she was still a child and her body was small. Compared to the rest of the buxom adult women around Yuuto, her looks were average and her body was wispy. She was sure he'd never be satisfied with that.

She really, truly had nothing. If only she could be so brazen as to say she'd pay him back someday when the opportunity struck, but Ephelia was too diligent of a girl to do even that. Instead, she was crushed further and further under the weight of her own mounting guilt.

Things didn't change until she was eighteen—nearly six years after moving to the New World.

"Hi-yah!"

"Kyaa!"

One day, Nozomu had swiftly kicked one of his maids in the rear. Despite being only seven at the time, his large body was still able to deliver a powerful kick that sent the maid crumpling to the floor. But Nozomu wasn't finished. He jumped on top of her back, riding her like a horse.

"Giddyup, horsey! Giddyup!" He slapped the maid's rear with his palm.

"Y-Yes, my lord." The maid did as she was told and let Nozomu ride her, walking around the room on all fours.

"Too slow! Go faster! You're a horse, aren't you?!" He slapped her rear several more times.

"Y-Yes, my lord."

"Horses don't talk! Give me a whinny!"

"N-Neeigh!"

It was a pitiful scene. The maid was already in tears from embarrassment.

Including Ephelia there were five maids in the room at the time, yet no one even made an effort to tell him off. That came as little surprise—he was the crown prince after all. They were all afraid of what might happen if they ended up invoking his ire, so they diligently went along with whatever he commanded.

Children were surprisingly sharp when it came to certain things. By now, he surely realized that he only got scolded when Yuuto and Mitsuki were around, but not when they were absent. Furthermore, since his reasoning was still undeveloped, he was only guided by his desires. With no adults to set him straight, he felt he was higher and mightier than anyone else, which meant he was prone to running amok.

Normally something of this caliber could probably be laughed off as a mere child's prank, but today was different.

"Meh, I'm bored now. And hungry. Hey you, bring me something to eat." After riding the maid around the room a number of times, Nozomu leapt off of her back and issued orders to another maid nearby. The maid hurriedly brought forth a plate of fruit. Unfortunately, however, the maid was still new and hadn't yet learned Nozomu's preferences.

"Are you stupid?! Do you not know that I hate grapes?!" Immediately incensed, Nozomu threw the plate right at the maid's face. The maid ducked just in time to avoid coming to any harm, but the plate hit the wall and shattered.

"Why'd you avoid it?!" Her insubordination only served to stoke his anger further, and he picked up a nearby toy block next. The moment Ephelia saw that, her former master and his son's repulsive grins flashed through her mind. At this rate, Nozomu would undoubtedly become like them. With that thought, her body moved instinctively.

"Lord Nozomu." She spoke his name, and before he could react in any meaningful manner...

Slap!

While the other maids were paralyzed with horror, Ephelia walked over to

Nozomu and struck him in the face with all her strength...well, maybe not all, but a good deal of it. For an instant, Nozomu looked dumbfounded, but then his eyes began to fill up with tears.

“Uwaaaah!” He began to wail. When his parents were away he was always spoiled, could do no wrong, and was never scolded once, so this was the first time someone had ever raised their hand to him. Considering the shock of being hit had probably been just as great as the pain itself, it was no wonder he was sobbing so hard.

After some hesitation the other maids in the room tried to run over to him, but Ephy raised a hand to keep them back. “I’ll take responsibility for this. For now, don’t get near.” Her assertion was firm. Now was the time to repay back what she owed, she thought. The others were unable to scold him because they were afraid of his status, but that wasn’t going to help him grow at all. He might end up hating her for this. She might even be sent to the gallows for humiliating a member of royalty. But she didn’t care. She had nothing to offer but her own life anyway, and right now, Nozomu needed to be scolded by someone. If he was left to continue down the path he was treading, he would surely end up miserable.

“Did that hurt, Lord Nozomu?” After five straight minutes of crying and sobbing, Nozomu finally began to calm down. Ephelia knelt down in front of him, meeting his eyes. He nodded without a word.

“Well, if that plate had hit that woman, she would’ve been in a lot more pain than you. It might have even left a scar on her face for the rest of her life,” she explained.

“More pain...than this?” he replied sheepishly.

“Yes, much more.” Ephelia picked up a nearby toy block and dashed it against a nearby desk with all her might. Pain ran through her hand from the impact, but she endured. Intentionally keeping a composed expression, she continued.

“Would you like to see just how much?”

“N-No, I’m good!” Nozomu shook his head from side to side animatedly. Ephelia nodded.

“And that’s because it’s not very fun to be in pain, right?”

He nodded emphatically several times.

“Well, you’re not the only one who doesn’t like getting hurt. In fact, no one likes getting hurt.”

Nozomu looked shocked. Because he was a child, his ability to empathize with others was still quite underdeveloped. With that example, he finally was able to understand others’ pain.

“That’s why it’s not good to bully your maids. If you continue to hurt someone, they’ll end up disliking you. I don’t want you to grow up to be someone everyone hates, Lord Nozomu.”

“...Okay.”

Nozomu nodded earnestly. *“It’s going to be all right now,”* Ephelia thought.

Afterward, Ephelia was summoned to Yuuto’s chambers. He’d apparently heard about the whole thing from Nozomu.

“I’m so grateful that you put him in his place, Ephy. I can’t even begin to thank you enough.” Yuuto bowed to her—an unthinkable act by all accounts. She’d raised a hand to the crown prince. It was an action that she honestly wouldn’t have been surprised to lose her life for, so seeing her king doing something like this was the last thing she’d expected.

“B-But, Your Majesty, I...”

“I put Kristina on the case immediately to ask around and see what all he’d done, and it turned out that he’d been quite the terror. I’m sorry for all the trouble that brat’s caused.” He bowed to her again, deeply. He was the þjóðann, the most important and most powerful person in the country, and yet he was bowing down to her. He was just as much of an enigma to her as always.

“This is in part due to my negligence, but there’s also another issue. I thought it might happen, but everyone’s really holding back toward him.” Yuuto sighed and smiled wistfully, looking both exhausted and apologetic.

“Yes... It seems so,” she replied.

“He probably feels lonely because of that. That’s why he acts up around

everyone. Of course, that's no excuse for his behavior, but it's not like I don't understand how he feels." Yuuto gave a small smile as if he were gazing at something from a distance. As the þjóðann, Yuuto was also in a special position that drew a line between him and everyone else. Perhaps because he knew the pain of being in that position, he understood his son's pain as well.

"But you can't choose the family you were born into. Whether he wants it or not, he's going to have to live life as my son," Yuuto added.

"That's...true." People couldn't become anyone else but themselves. No matter how much they wished for it, they would never be able to change that fact.

"So I feel grateful having someone like you by his side," he said cheerfully.

His last comment took her completely by surprise. She was the type of commoner you could find anywhere. There was absolutely nothing special about her whatsoever, so she never would have imagined Yuuto would feel that way.

"I want you to be Nozomu's full-time nanny," Yuuto said to her. "If he does anything else stupid from here on out, absolutely let him have it. Of course, we'll do our part to set him straight as well, but children often need someone other than their parents to guide them in life. That goes for Nozomu especially," he explained.

"I...I understand!" Ephelia replied nervously.

After their chat, Yuuto communicated to the rest of the caretakers that they were also free to scold the children for any wrongdoing, but no one else seemed to have the guts to tell off the þjóðann's kids in the end. In fact, perhaps because of the earlier incident, they always handed off that role to Ephelia. Her coworkers would always apologize for giving her such a bothersome task, but Ephelia didn't mind. On the contrary, she was glad to do it.

This was something only she could do. It was a special role just for her. She could, at long last, repay Yuuto for all he'd done! She'd always worried about whether or not someone like her had any business being in a palace. But now she understood. She belonged here to take care of Nozomu. At that moment,

Ephelia finally found a purpose in life.

"I wonder if I've managed to pay him back a bit now," Ephelia muttered, sitting on a bench in the palace courtyard and looking up at the sky. From the moment Yuuto asked her to be Nozomu's caretaker, Ephelia had always adopted a strict, nagging persona toward Nozomu. Even if this made him dislike her, or if it drove a rift between them, or if he ended up resenting her, she was resolved to do her duty. Curiously enough, however, Ephelia ended up becoming Nozomu's favorite caretaker. Perhaps her sincerity and devotion had gotten through to him and touched his heart.

Ever since Ephelia had slapped him, Nozomu had done an about-face and became kind and gentle toward others, He was always the first to volunteer to help take care of his other siblings. Nozomu's first proposal may have taken Ephelia by surprise, but she'd also been thrilled that he'd grown enough to open his heart to others.

Much time had passed since then, filled with sad things, painful things, and major incidents. It was always hectic and there was never a dull moment. Things may have been hard at times, but all things considered...

"It was fun." Put succinctly, that was how she'd evaluate her time here so far. All the children had their quirks, but they had all grown up to be wonderful human beings. Watching the adorable Nozomu grow day by day had been therapeutic and fulfilling. Somewhere along the line, she found she'd completely forgotten about her original goal of repaying Yuuto. All she wanted now was to be together with the children. She unconsciously found herself wishing time would freeze so she could be with them always.

"But I know it can't be this way forever," she mused.

Time only moved in one direction, and it couldn't be stopped.

Nozomu's coming-of-age ceremony was over, and he was now an adult. He'd recently been praised by Linnea for showing promise in politics and agriculture, and even Sigrún held his swordsmanship and combat ability in high esteem. Of course, he still tended to let his ego get the better of him and bite off more than he could chew, but that was just because he was young, and could certainly be remedied. All the retainers evaluated him highly as well. This made

Ephelia extremely happy and gave her a sense of accomplishment. Seeing Nozomu grow up well had moved her to her core.

At the same time, she couldn't help but feel a bit empty and melancholy. With this, her role was over. Up until now, Nozomu's growth had been her sole purpose in life. Now that he was an adult, it was like a gaping hole resided in her heart.

"But in the end, I can't help it. I still want to stay by his side." However, this desire was probably different from romantic feelings between a man and a woman. This wasn't the burning desire that drove people crazy that she'd heard so much about. There was no fuzzy feeling in her heart like she'd felt with Yuuto. When she was with Nozomu her heart didn't skip a beat, nor did she feel like the world was more colorful.

In the end, it was probably because something that had been within her for so long had disappeared, and anxiety and loneliness had moved in to take its place.

"Could Lord Nozomu be feeling the same way I am?" If so, then maybe what he was feeling also wasn't love. It was dependence. Both she and Nozomu needed to graduate from each other, she thought.

Maybe she should let Yuuto know that it'd be best for the both of them if they stayed apart for a while. She could work for Botvid for a bit. She'd gotten to make his acquaintance through being friendly with his twin daughters, so it wasn't like they'd be complete strangers.

"Ephy! I've been looking all over for you!" Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Nozomu appearing before her, out of breath as though he'd been running all around the palace.

"Good grief," she thought. Behavior like that just made him seem more immature than he was. *"He still needs my help."*

But perhaps she should make this her last service toward him.

"You can't do that, Lord Nozomu. Running around the palace in a panic is unbecoming of a crown prince. You have the dignity of the royal family to uphold," Ephelia chided him, raising an index finger. She'd heard from Yuuto on

occasion that a supreme commander had to remain composed and mindful of their position at all times. Any signs of weakness would make the public uneasy. Even if she chalked it up to behavior expected of his age, Ephelia couldn't help but be concerned.

"Oh, hush. Who cares about that? This is probably the most important event in my life. I can't just rest on my laurels, or my chance will slip away. If Wiz were here, she'd probably say 'swift action brings success,' or something."

"W-Well, that may be true on the battlefield, but..."

"Love is a type of battlefield. And Ephy, you're much more important to me than anything those stuffy old retainers think." Nozomu stared straight at her. The earnestness in his eyes made her chest flutter.

"A-As a crown prince, prioritizing a woman over your duties as royalty could seriously affect the wellbeing of the country..." Despite her words, however, even she could tell her heart was hopelessly pounding. After all, there was no woman on earth who wouldn't be thrilled to be thought of so highly.

"It's the opposite. Without you by my side, the country's as good as doomed. If hypothetically I end up heading in a bad direction, you'll be there to slap me across the face and correct me, right?"

"Lord Nozomu... I think you need to correct your reasoning."

"Really? Dad says that the woman I choose should at least be able to do that. There are apparently women like that all around him, but in my case I only have you."

"Only me? But...we don't need to necessarily get married for me to guide you down the right path, right? If it's what you want, I shall stand by as your advisor from now on."

"It's not advice I want, Ephy. Agghh, I'm getting the order of things all mixed up here! In the end, none of that really matters!" After nearly tearing his hair out in frustration, he took several deep breaths to calm himself down and looked right into Ephelia's eyes once more.

"It's you that I want. I love you, Ephelia. I love you so much that I don't want anyone else to have you, so please marry me."

It was such a straightforward confession that it rendered Ephelia at a loss for words. She blushed furiously.

“I see...so Lord Nozomu is a man as well...”

Of course, she’d already known that, but up until now it was something she’d understood only with her head, not her heart. In her heart, she’d still seen him as a boy. At this moment, for the first time, she saw him not as family, but as a member of the opposite sex.

“But, I guess that settles it. I really don’t feel sick around Lord Nozomu.” Even though she was desired as a woman, she didn’t feel one bit uneasy. After all, he was her pride and joy, the boy she’d taken great pains to raise. She knew better than anyone else that he would never do anything untoward to her, so how could she be afraid?

“And, well... We’ve already been together for fifteen years now, but I’ve never gotten tired of you once, Ephy. In fact, I want you to be by my side forever.”

“I-I see.” Her heart was pounding out of her chest so hard that it hurt. Even though she’d never seen him that way until now, every word of his was making her feel like the happiest woman in the world.

“Yep. If you marry me, I can be together with you until the day I die. And, if it’s you, I’m confident we’ll always get along.” He smiled a radiant smile.

It was true what they said: love completely changes your perception of someone. She’d always thought he was adorable, but seeing his grin, she now found him incredibly handsome and cool. Since a bit ago, her heartbeat had only gotten faster and faster, with no sign of slowing down.

“When I first proposed, my feelings didn’t get through to you at all. But I still wanted you to know how I really feel. It may seem like I’m just being a sore loser after being turned down, but...I really didn’t want to give up.”

“...You love me that much?” Ephy timidly asked, desperately trying to suppress the thumping of her heart.

“Yes, Ephy. I love you that much.”

“Oh, Lord Nozomu!” The immediacy and certainty of his response pushed her over the edge. She now had no choice but to admit it. Selfish though it was, she too had ended up falling in love. It was just as Kristina had said. Having such earnest and straightforward feelings lobbed at her, she couldn’t help it. After all, she’d already been affectionate toward him from the start.

“I think this would be a good opportunity for you to find out.” Remembering Kristina’s words, Ephelia realized she’d been absolutely right. Yuuto, too, had already given her his blessing.

After swallowing hard and letting her heart calm down a little, she spoke.

“I...I see. I...love you too, Lord Nozomu.” She said it slowly, as if processing every word. Saying it out loud made her truly realize that she meant it romantically this time.

For an instant, Nozomu’s eyes went wide with surprise. “RReally?! Not as a little brother, or as family?!” He stepped toward her and seized her shoulders. However, she wasn’t afraid. She knew that with Nozomu, it would be all right. In fact, seeing Nozomu’s elated expression made her even happier.

“Yes, up until now, I had seen you that way, I’ll admit.”

“I knew it.” Nozomu slumped his shoulders in disappointment. However, she wasn’t finished, and wanted him to listen till the end.

“But right now, I see you as a man, Lord Nozomu. My heart’s practically beating out of my chest right now, I’ll have you know.”

“RReally?! Then you’ll accept my proposal?!” Practically falling over himself with excitement, Nozomu beamed.

Ephy gave a troubled smile. “To be honest...I don’t think I’m prepared for that quite yet.”

“Gah!” Let down once again, Nozomu staggered as if he’d just been hit.

She felt horrible, but at the same time, it was also Nozomu’s fault for getting his hopes up before letting her finish. She wanted him to hear exactly how she felt before giving his reaction.

“I just feel like marriage will be an issue, considering the difference in our

ages and positions.”

“Th-That won’t be a problem at all! If anyone says anything, I’ll protect you! I promise!” Nozomu hit his chest and spoke with confidence. At times like these, he was so much like his father, Ephelia thought. Perhaps she saw Nozomu as a man now because she was actually looking at the shadow of Yuuto within him?

She thought that for an instant, but then quickly denied it. After all, thinking about Yuuto no longer made her heart race, but when she thought about Nozomu her heart started hopelessly throbbing.

“Well, I guess I have to admit that I’ve been beaten here.” How was she supposed to resist a surging maelstrom? No, the truth was she didn’t want to resist. She wanted the waves to sweep her up. She wanted them to conquer her. And by the time she thought that, there was no going back.

EPILOGUE

Nozomu could honestly say that he was on cloud nine right now. After an entire month of persuasion, Ephelia had agreed to marry him at last. Since she was still concerned about the difference in age and social status between them, it was merely as a concubine. Still, he'd managed to achieve something he'd dreamed about since childhood—the woman he cared about the most was now his. *"With this, I can die happy,"* he thought.

"You finally made Ephy your wife, huh? Way to go, Nozomu." His father Yuuto clapped him on the back.

"I'm surprised. I knew you weren't opposed, but I didn't think you'd go as far as to congratulate me."

"Why would I not? I've known Ephy since she was a little kid. She's a good girl."

"Hmph."

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"It pisses me off that you've known her longer than I have."

By the time Nozomu had gotten to know her, Ephelia was already an adult. He didn't know what she'd been like as a child, and yet there was a man right in front of him who did. He simply couldn't let that stand—even if that man was his own father.

"Ha ha ha! C'mon now, there's no need to be jealous!" his father guffawed, whacking him on the back repeatedly. "There are plenty of things about Ephy only you know about, right? Relax!"

"I don't like the fact that another man is calling my wife 'Ephy' either."

"Oh, give me a break. You've heard me call her that all this time, but now that you've claimed her it's a no-go? You're pettier than I thought."

"Well, excuse me," Nozomu replied with a scowl. *"Sorry I can't be as generous as you,"* he added silently.

Conversing with his father like this often reminded him of how inferior he was in comparison. He couldn't understand how his father managed to carry himself with such dignity, be so open-minded, and remain so composed regardless of what may lay before him. Though he knew in his heart his father was someone he *should* emulate, he didn't think for a second that he could. They may have been close with each other at a glance, but in reality, they were worlds apart—somewhere Nozomu could never reach.

"...Hey, dad. How can I be more like you?" Nozomu asked.

"What, you just got married and you're already wanting advice on how to build a harem?" Yuuto replied.

"Hell no! There's no one for me but Ephy! I'm not a womanizer like you!" The fact that his father didn't understand only stoked his anger further. Really though, this was most likely just another example of his father's open-mindedness, but that didn't matter right now. "As much as I hate to admit it, I still have a hard time keeping my cool. The slightest thing rattles me, and I'm aware that I'm quick to jump the gun. I know that if I don't change, it'll be bad for me down the line."

"I see." His father's jovial, carefree expression instantly became serious. After taking a bit to think it over, he spoke again. "I suppose you *are* getting to that point in life where you start questioning yourself. I did too when I was your age."

"Really? I can't imagine that."

"Well, a lot's happened, let's just say." His father gave a bitter smile and shrugged.

"Then tell me all of it. I need to know, as the future þjóðann."

"Nozomu, I've told you before, you don't have to succeed me if you don't want to." His father's face clouded over, becoming apologetic. It was the same face he adopted whenever this topic came up—the face of one not wanting to saddle their child with their own burdens. Indeed, Nozomu found it irritating that he was fated to inherit the pressure of being the þjóðann, but despite his complaints, he'd already resigned himself to it.

“It’s not like I want to, but I’m the only one who can, right? If I don’t, there’s probably gonna be a war.”

“...I suppose.” After a pause, his father reluctantly agreed.

Back when his thoughts were only occupied with marrying Ephelia, he’d talked about having one of his siblings take the position instead, but the truth was he’d always known that it could be no one but him. None of the others possessed the blood of the þjóðann, after all.

“But are you really okay with that?” his father asked.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m okay with it or not. I’m your eldest son, and I don’t want to see my younger brothers and sisters getting into a bloodbath with each other.”

At the moment, all his siblings got along. However, power could distort people. He wasn’t naïve enough to think that when it was time for him to succeed his father ase þjóðann, their relations would remain just as they always had. And even if none of his siblings had any interest, their peers could still manipulate them into making their claims to the throne. That was the one thing he wanted to avoid above all else.

“I see. I’m always saddling burden after burden upon you. For that, I’m truly sorry.”

“Saying stuff like that is why you’re weird, dad. Anyone else would say I should be happy to become þjóðann.”

“If it was as easy as just throwing your weight around, perhaps I would.” With a dry laugh, his father smiled wearily. The public regarded and feared him as a tyrant and he was known as a peerless war god on the battlefield, but right now Nozomu couldn’t see a trace of that in his father.

Just then, an out-of-breath soldier burst into the room. The situation was clearly abnormal. Kneeling on the spot, the soldier shouted. “Y-Your Majesty, we’ve got trouble!”

“Frontier commander Babel has gone rogue! He’s amassed an army and means to overthrow Your Majesty!” he continued.

“Huh?!”

In direct contrast with Nozomu’s shocked yelp, his father’s eyes only narrowed slightly. As he thought, there was no way he’d ever be able to emulate that level of composure.

“Wh-What’s more, Adviser Jörgen has turned coat! He has chosen to fight alongside Babel’s men!” the soldier further explained.

“Wh-Whaaaat?!” The shock of this new development made Nozomu shout out without any regard for appearances. There was no way that could be true—wasn’t Jorgen supposed to be one of his father’s most trusted and loyal retainers since the days of the Wolf Clan?! The very same person who’d often regaled Nozomu himself with tales of his father’s exploits?!

“Jörgen did, huh? That happened sooner than I’d expected,” Yuuto said coolly.

Even in the face of such grim news, his father didn’t even so much as flinch, instead giving a small sigh. His face expressionless, he spoke in a cold voice.

“Gather the troops. We’ll crush Babel and Jörgen’s rebellion into dust.”

To be continued...

Side Story: The Sworn Einherjar

On the day following the new year, The Horn Clan patriarch Linnea had paid a visit to Iárnviðr in order to greet her sworn brother Suoh Yuuto, as well as undergo the Oath of the Chalice with fellow clans also under the Wolf Clan. With these tasks already complete, no one would've admonished her for heading back home, but for all her acumen as a patriarch, she was still a young maiden. After making the long journey all the way to Iárnviðr it would've been much too lonesome to leave without saying a few words to her unrequited crush.

With that in mind, she made her way to his office chambers. Right before she entered...

"Ah, come to think of it, what should I do about the tasks?"

The current patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Suoh Yuuto, was a legend who'd transformed the once-diminutive clan quaintly situated in a mountain valley into one of the very few large nations of Yggdrasil in a mere three-and-a-half-year span. Despite still being young, it was no exaggeration to say he was the main force behind the clan's revival. On the battlefield he was undefeated, stringing together victories and defying the odds even when he was outmatched, causing no small number of Wolf Clan members and soldiers to genuinely believe he was the reincarnation of a god of war.

During the conflict with the Claw Clan, he'd razed the village of Van to the ground and made sure there were no survivors, and when he'd faced off against the Lightning Clan he'd caused a flood in which several thousand soldiers had drowned. Merciless and fierce toward anyone who dared raise a blade against him, he became acknowledged and feared by neighboring clans as Hróðvitnir, the Infamous Wolf.

"Oh, Linnea, you're here! Come right in!" Once she'd been guided inside, the owner of the room greeted her with a smile so amiable and childlike it was hard to believe he was the enforcer of the military rule spread among the populace.

Linnea felt her heart throb within her chest. Thanks to Haugspori's earlier

teasing, she'd probably become more conscious of her feelings toward him.

"Yes, it's been a while, Big Brother. I do hope you are well." Suppressing the unrest within her heart, Linnea feigned composure, lifted the hem of her skirt, and gave an elegant bow.

"It must've been difficult to make the journey all the way here in the cold. Here, stick your feet under this. It's super warm." Yuuto tapped the peculiar contraption enshrined before her eyes—a rectangular box covered by a large blanket. Rather than sitting at his usual desk, today he had his feet stuck within the blanket, seemingly performing his duties here instead.

"Please, go right ahead, Big Sis Linnea. It should do wonders to warm you up." Across from Yuuto, Felicia had her feet underneath the blanket as well as she waved Linnea over. While she normally wore a businesslike smile, today she seemed to be in exceedingly high spirits, as though she was experiencing pure bliss.

"Hmm... At a glance, it seems inefficient, but okay..." Linnea also often covered her lap with a blanket when at her desk during winter, and couldn't help but think it'd be warmer to cover herself with the whole blanket instead of the box. However, when she tried putting her feet inside, she was met with a shocking revelation. Warm air instantly enveloped her legs and feet, evoking the same feeling of sitting at a campfire.

"Wh-Whooaaa..." Linnea let out an involuntary sigh of ecstasy. The heat was the perfect panacea after being in the freezing cold for so long. "Big Brother, just what is this incredible box?!"

"Heh heh, I'm glad you asked! This is the most beloved artifact from my birthplace, Japan! Our pride and joy, the ultimate heating device, the kotatsu! It uses charcoal as its heat source! What do you think? Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Y-Yes, how should I put this... It feels dangerously good. I dare say that if I stayed under here too long I might never want to get out..."

"Yep. That's what we call being put under the kotatsu's spell." Normally Yuuto looked troubled whenever someone praised his homeland's technology, but today he folded his arms and nodded in a rare display of pride. This "kotatsu" device seemed to be something he was quite fond of, and humans were, after

all, creatures that became happy when someone praised something they liked. “Back in my homeland, we used this thing during spring, summer, fall, winter, you name it. Also...”

“Lord Yuuto, forgive me for intruding, but there is something I must discuss with you...” Yuuto’s kotatsu tale was interrupted by a gruff-sounding voice, and a middle-aged man entered the room. Linnea recognized him as Bruno, head of the Wolf Clan’s elders. She remembered him so well because he’d previously quarreled with the Second-in-Command of the Horn Clan, Rasmus.

“O-Oh, Lady Linnea, you’re here too, I see...” When Bruno noticed Linnea’s presence, he bowed in apparent embarrassment. He was probably wracked with guilt for pushing to abandon the Horn Clan back during the advance of the Hoof Clan. “I’m terribly sorry to disturb your leisurely talk, Lord Yuuto. I shall come again at a later time.”

“Okay, sure. I’m sorry that I’m currently preoccupied,” Yuuto replied.

“Think nothing of it. Now, I shall take my leave.” There was a servile glint in Bruno’s eyes as he bowed his head and slunk out of the room. Though he had no real power to speak of, he was still Yuuto’s senior and effectively his uncle on paper, yet he debased himself in Yuuto’s presence. If memory served, at least half a year ago Linnea recalled him being a tad more critical of Yuuto’s actions.

“That’s just like you, Big Brother, to skillfully hold the reins to even leaders of the clan many years your senior.” With a sigh of admiration, Linnea gazed upon Yuuto with respect. It wasn’t just Bruno just now—before the hot springs trip even the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, Jörgen, had apparently had nothing but praise and adoration for Yuuto, a boy young enough to be his grandson.

“Compared to him, I’m nothing...” Linnea inevitably found herself recalling her earlier conversation with Haugspori. The reason her subordinates ended up teasing her was probably due to her lack of commanding presence. All the bigwigs in the Horn Clan from the previous patriarch’s rule, including Second-in-Command Rasmus, always referred to her as “princess,” never “mother.” Of course, she knew they called her that out of affection, but she couldn’t help but

feel it was also evidence that they didn't truly recognize her as an actual patriarch. True, sometimes even *she* didn't feel like an actual patriarch, but she strongly felt the need to change how her subjects perceived her.

"What do you mean, 'nothing'? You're already doing plenty, and doing it well. What about the rebuilding of Sylgr and Myrkviðr? Aren't those proceeding well ahead of schedule?" Yuuto rebutted.

"Well, if it weren't for my own negligence we wouldn't have had to rebuild them in the first place. I foolishly left a gap in my defenses for the enemy to enter. If I'd just been more capable, the citizens wouldn't have to suffer so," Linnea replied, her voice tinged with self-disappointment.

"Well, the Panther Clan is one hell of an enemy to face off against. I'd say you just had a bad matchup," Yuuto replied. scratching his head in vexation.

"You say that, but you were strong enough to wipe them all out, Big Brother."

"That wasn't a one-man show though. It was only possible thanks to the combined efforts of everyone. Including you, Linnea," Yuuto said frankly.

"Me? But how? I didn't even participate in the battle!"

"You need to stop devaluing yourself. Here's how I see it: I wouldn't have been able to relax and focus on the enemy in front of me if I didn't have someone reliable like you supporting me from the rear." Yuuto stretched his hand out and ruffled Linnea's hair. She couldn't deny it felt incredibly good, but at the same time, it depressed her because it felt like she was still under her big brother's protection. She was the Claw Clan's patriarch. She couldn't let her brother coddle her forever. Sooner or later, she had to take the lead and protect her own clan.

She would need to grow much more before she was able to do that. Right now, she lacked the strength necessary.

As Yuuto continued to rub her head, Linnea looked up at him with upturned eyes. Before her was the ultimate example of what she wanted to achieve, and she believed learning by example was the quickest path to growth.



Linnea’s Answer

“Uh... I know the kotatsu’s comfortable, but aren’t you bored already?” Seemingly reaching a stopping point in his work, Yuuto raised his head from his desk and asked warily.

The evening sun coming through the glass window dyed the interior of the office scarlet red. For nearly two hours now, Linnea had done nothing but intently watch Yuuto as he became absorbed in his work, and it was starting to bother him.

“No, not at all. I’m learning so much...yaaaawn.” The moment she said it she let out a huge yawn. Yuuto gave a small smile.

“See, you *are* bored.”

“Th-That was just because the kotatsu’s too comfortable! I’m not bored or anything, honest!” she asserted, shaking her head in denial. In fact, Linnea was far from bored—she was enjoying herself so much that she could say she was truly happy. After all, she could never tire of watching the face of the person she loved concentrating so hard on his work. To her, there was nothing cooler.

“Yes, it certainly does invite sleepiness,” Felicia agreed with a knowing smile. As someone who shared the same feelings as Linnea, she must have sensed the affection within Linnea’s gaze.

“That being said, Big Brother’s ability to concentrate on his work really is outstanding,” Linnea said.

“Well, I’ve had a lot of experience with a kotatsu, so I’ve built up my resistance,” he responded.

“Not only that, I’ve never seen you take a break. Every day you’re always working hard from morning to night. I truly cannot hold a candle to your work ethic,” Linnea replied.

The generally understood work schedule in Yggdrasil was that by the time the sun rose in the morning you were supposed to be at work, and when the sun reached the apex of its climb it was time to go home. In other words, Yuuto was a workaholic. It’s said that children learn by watching their parents. Linnea viewed the people of Iárnviðr as diligent and hardworking, and that was no doubt due in large part to their patriarch Yuuto going above and beyond on a

daily basis.

Linnea quickly urged herself to take notes and learn from him, but Yuuto himself just shrugged his shoulders in self-deprecation. “Ha ha, these work hours are nothing compared to what passes as normal in my home country.”

“Really?! So everyone in the land beyond the heavens works even harder than you do?!” Her eyes widened in surprise, but at the same time, she thought it made sense. After all, their technology was much more advanced than Yggdrasil’s. It seemed that no matter how far up you climbed, there was always someone above you. She still had a long way to go, so she resolved in her heart to put in even more effort than usual from now on.

Felicia’s Answer

That night, Linnea visited Felicia’s room. Linnea was the patriarch of the Horn Clan, so she didn’t get many chances to visit Iárnviðr. What’s more, she wasn’t a part of the Wolf Clan’s inner circle, merely a sworn sister to the patriarch. There was much Linnea was unable to see from her own perspective. However, currently what Linnea wanted to learn about the most was Yuuto himself. In that respect, since Felicia, as Yuuto’s adjutant, was always with him all hours of the day, there was no better person to ask.

“Sorry for intruding so late at night. I just had something I wanted to ask, is that okay?” she said, currently standing in the doorway.

“Yes, come on in.” Felicia had already changed into her nightgown, but she ushered Linnea into the room cheerfully. Linnea followed her lead and sat down on a chair positioned in the center of the room. Warm air was emanating from an earthenware pot beside her. Inside, ash had been laid at the bottom, and the orange light of burning charcoal leaked out of the pot, illuminating the room in a dim glow.

The room itself was quite small, more so than Linnea expected considering Felicia’s status, and quaint. This was also the only room that directly connected to Yuuto’s bedchambers. Perhaps, among other purposes, it was so Felicia could protect him from harm at a moment’s notice.

“One second,” Felicia said, heading to the corner of the room. “Please take this as well.” She handed Linnea a fur coat that had been hanging on the wall. Because it was situated within a mountain valley, the nights of Iárnviðr were much chillier than what Linnea was used to back in Fólkvangr. A mere hand-warming pot wasn’t enough to keep one’s body fully warm.

“Thank you.” Linnea gratefully accepted Felicia’s gesture of goodwill and put the coat on. When she was done, Felicia spoke.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Her voice was sweet and gentle. Just by hearing that voice, Linnea felt her tension melt away. It was the kind of voice that one could only come by naturally. Though she was honestly jealous, Linnea kept her composure and responded.

“Let me start by saying that just from what I see, you seem like a woman who has such a keen sense of loyalty that you’ve even abandoned your personal desires to devote your heart and soul to Big Brother.”

“Why, what a compliment. But, as his younger sister under the Oath of the Chalice, I’m only doing what’s natural,” Felicia replied.

“Sure, the oath specifies that’s what you *should* do, but very few people are actually capable of pulling off such a feat. Please tell me the secret to devoting yourself wholeheartedly to Big Brother.” Gripping her fists tightly atop her lap, she leaned forward in Felicia’s direction. Seeing how desperate she was, Felicia looked a bit at a loss.

“You put me in much too high esteem, but thank you. However, I’m not as disciplined in that regard as you might think. I merely had to up my game to keep up with Big Brother. He’s the truly exceptional one.”

“Which is why I’m here asking you this question.” Linnea replied.

“Come again?” Felicia seemed genuinely confused by Linnea’s response. Thankfully for her, clarity was soon to follow.

“I also believe Big Brother was born to become a patriarch. In fact, I expect he’ll become something even greater. While it’d be the height of disrespect to wish to be his equal, as someone who also carries the responsibility of many citizens on their shoulders, I feel like there’s a lot I can learn from him. I wish to

be closer to his level, if only a little.”

“Why, what a noble, respectable goal.”

“Thank you. To that end, I realize you’re probably tired, but I’d love for you to tell me what you feel are some of Big Brother’s good points and things you respect about him.”

“Everything.” Her response was immediate. No pauses, no hesitation. She didn’t have to think about it. This stunned Linnea, of course, but she quickly regained her composure.

“Ah, well, can you give some specific examples, please? I can’t learn from it if it’s too vague, you understand.” She gave a bitter smile, but at the same time she thought, *“That’s just like Big Brother.”* Truthfully, if she was asked the same question she probably would’ve responded the same way. And for Felicia to respond immediately not out of fear but with her own will only renewed Linnea’s resolve to learn as much as she could from Yuuto.

Sensing Linnea’s heated, determined gaze, Felicia gave it a bit of thought as though she’d been inspired by Linnea’s will. “Let’s see. If I have to give an example... His open-mindedness, for sure.”

“Hmm... I see. True, one standing above others must be open-minded and generous!” Linnea nodded emphatically and began to take notes on the paper she’d brought with her.

“Originally, I was not the type of woman fit to stand by Big Brother’s side.”

“Eh?” Hearing the abrupt drop in Felicia’s tone, Linnea stopped writing and looked up in surprise at Felicia’s face. As previously mentioned, Felicia had an admirable degree of loyalty toward Yuuto, and that coupled with her other feminine charms honestly made Linnea jealous. If Felicia wasn’t fit to be by Yuuto’s side, she couldn’t imagine who was.

Seemingly understanding the meaning of Linnea’s stare, she smiled self-deprecatingly, a smile illuminated by the evening light. “Big Sister Linnea, you know of Lady Mitsuki, right?”

“Y-Yes. The woman Big Brother loves.”

“If I hadn’t summoned Big Brother, instead of fighting war after bloody war, he’d still be living a peaceful life with her in the land beyond the heavens, a place where the words we’re speaking now wouldn’t even be understood.”

“Um, but considering the situation back then...”

“That’s right. The Wolf Clan wouldn’t have been able to survive if I hadn’t done what I did. However, that doesn’t change the fact that I placed an enormous burden on Big Brother,” Felicia said, with a face that looked wracked with torment. Linnea recalled what Yuuto had said before—that he was looked down upon for being useless when he’d first come to Yggdrasil. As someone who was always by his side, Felicia must’ve witnessed the whole thing firsthand and likely felt responsible and guilty for what Yuuto had to go through.

“However, Big Brother forgave me, and even made me his adjutant. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

“Hmm...” Linnea began to think. Even though Felicia had put Yuuto in a bad position, he’d recognized that she was capable and trustworthy. He’d let bygones be bygones and entrusted her with an important role. Perhaps that was natural behavior for one who stood above others, but it was easier said than done. It was easy to let personal feelings get in the way.

When she thought about it further, Linnea and Yuuto had also been enemies at the start, but Yuuto had always glossed over that and approached Linnea amicably, even going so far as to accommodate her needs. It was precisely because he was that way that Linnea put her trust in him, and furthermore, the reason she tried so hard for his sake.

“I see, that generosity and open-mindedness is indeed a page I need to take from his book. I feel like I learned something.” Satisfied with what she learned, she nodded. And once she learned something good from someone else, it was human nature to want to learn even more from many different people.

Sigrún’s Answer

“I-In the last battle, you were a-amazing, Miss Sigrún! Y-You did an

outstanding job of wiping out the enemy general even though he'd gotten all the way to our base! B-But I suppose that's the Strongest Silver Wolf for you, ha ha!"

"No, I'm afraid I still have a long way to go."

"Ssurely you jest. I-I can't count the number of times I've wished for someone of your caliber to be among my ranks in the Horn Clan."

"Is Haugspori not satisfactory?"

"Y-You're just as skilled with a sword as you are beautiful, so much so that I c-can't help but be jealous as a woman. Your clear, pure presence is like that of a flower formed from ice...oh no, what am I saying..."

"...Thank you. I appreciate it."

The next day, Linnea caught Sigrún on her break from training and invited her to the common room to chat. As she tried to hold a conversation with her, however, she found herself becoming tongue-tied. During her talks with Yuuto, Linnea had gotten to know Felicia as Yuuto's adjutant and bodyguard, but she hadn't had much interaction with Sigrún at all, and found it difficult to speak in her presence. Asking point-blank what Sigrún thought of her patriarch might be allowed if it was a friend or family member, but from Linnea, it might be construed as trying to gather information on the clan as a whole. She didn't want to be thought of as suspicious, so she had first tried to make small talk and create an amicable atmosphere. However, as it turned out, she didn't have a leg to stand on.

"Is that all you wanted to tell me? If so, I will take my leave and continue training."

"A-Ah, w-wait!" Seeing Sigrún stand up with a polite bow, Linnea realized she was going to miss her chance.

"Is there something else?"

When Sigrún turned around to face her with a stern voice, Linnea reflexively flinched. She knew that Sigrún wasn't being brusque or disagreeable—in fact, considering how she normally was Linnea was being treated politely as a fellow neighboring patriarch.

Sweat started to drip down Linnea's face. It seemed that no matter how she tried, she simply had a hard time interacting with Sigrún. The image of the silver wolf wiping out her soldiers and capturing her half a year earlier still remained fresh in her mind. Back when Linnea had been taken prisoner and made to stand before Yuuto as his enemy, Sigrún had also broken the desk in the room with her bare hand and intimidated her. She knew in her heart Sigrún wasn't an enemy anymore, but she still carried that instinctive fear with her, so much so that the woman's mere gaze nearly made her cower.

"Aunt Linnea?" Sigrún, seeming to sense something was up, frowned slightly.

"I've got to fix this," Linnea roused herself. Strongest Silver Wolf or not, she was Linnea's niece now. Getting scared of someone with lower status than her would surely affect her credibility as a patriarch. Yes, that was right—she was supposed to be the superior here, so what in the world was she holding back for? She should just cut to the chase.

"I-I want to ask you...about Big Brother!" Steeling herself, Linnea managed to get her request through. She slightly stumbled on her words at the start, but she could just gloss that off as part of her charm.

"A-About Father?! D-Did something happen?!" In contrast, Sigrún seemed to take Linnea's suspicious behavior as an indication that Yuuto had done something to her. Right now, her usual calm, composed demeanor was nowhere to be seen.

"U-Uh, no, nothing happened, but I was just wondering if you might tell me what you respect about Big Brother."

"Everything." She gave the exact same answer as Felicia. Their personalities and preferences were worlds apart, and yet they were in total agreement on their assessment of Yuuto. Finding that rather amusing, Linnea smiled despite herself. When she did, she felt the tension in the air loosen for some reason.

"Do you mind being a bit more specific? Tell me some of his good points."

The moment Linnea said that, Sigrún dashed over to Linnea and grabbed her hands in glee. "Oh! So you want to know more about how wonderful Father is!" Her eyes seemed to twinkle as she stared right at Linnea. It was like she was a completely different person now.

“H-Huh?!” Linnea was taken aback. Even though she’d showered praise onto Sigrún she hadn’t changed her demeanor one bit, and yet where Yuuto was concerned her personality had done a complete about-face.

“First off would have to be his strength!”

“That’s true, he is called a war god on the battlefield after all.”

“There’s that too, of course, but that’s not all. How should I put it... Father’s strength is like, really big.”

“His strength is...really big...?” She found herself repeating Sigrún’s words, not at all able to understand what they were supposed to mean.

“Ah, that doesn’t make sense, does it? Sorry, I’m not very good with words so let me get my thoughts together.” Holding up a hand indicating for Linnea to wait, Sigrún thought for a bit, nodding to herself. It seemed that her speech skills weren’t as polished as her talent with a sword, perhaps due to always having only the martial arts on her mind. The fact that she still wanted to talk despite that communicated to Linnea just how highly Sigrún thought of Yuuto.

“Okay, I got it. My strength is essentially just the strength of one person, right?”

“Yes...”

“If I’m surrounded by fifty or even a hundred enemies, I’ll be cut down in no time. I’m limited in what I can protect with my strength alone.”

“I see.”

“But Father’s different! He has the strength to protect and carry the burden of the entirety of the Wolf Clan, no, even the Claw and Horn Clans as well, on his shoulders!” Making up for her poor speech with hand and body gestures, Sigrún desperately tried to communicate Yuuto’s greatness to Linnea. It would be rude to a warrior like her so she refrained from saying it out loud, but she honestly thought it was adorable. She was beginning to understand the reason why Yuuto and Felicia would sometimes say she resembled a dog.

Ingrid’s Answer

“I found you, Miss Ingrid!”

“Huh? L-Lady Linnea? What are you doing here?” The red-haired girl whipped her head around when she heard her name being called out, only to blink in surprise when she saw who it belonged to.

The two were on the outer perimeter of the wall fortifying the Iárnviðr settlement. Pebbles and large rocks were strewn across the ground and weeds grew everywhere here—it was an unkempt wasteland. A line of nearby tents dotted the landscape, and shirtless muscled men were carrying off large rocks and stray sticks with a “heave-ho!” while the women picked up the pebbles and plucked the weeds, depositing them in their baskets as they chatted noisily.

“I was looking all over for you, Miss Ingrid. What are you up to?” Linnea asked, though quickly observing that Ingrid seemed preoccupied. “Oh, if you’re too busy to talk, I can come at a later time.”

“Ah, well, as you can see, because the population keeps increasin’, we’re starting to outgrow Iárnviðr’s walls. So we’re gonna be addin’ a new district in this area, and I’m here to check it out,” Ingrid explained.

“So you’re adding ‘city planner’ to your long list of specialties too, I suppose?” Linnea said jokingly.

“Ha ha! Don’t be silly, the planning’s Yuuto’s...I mean, Father’s job, not mine.” Ingrid let out a cheerful laugh at Linnea’s lighthearted remark, but then her grin went stiff. Suddenly, she slapped herself across the face and bowed her head in shame.

“Damn it, I did it again, and in front of a patriarch, no less... I won’t be able to talk my way out of this one,” she began to mutter almost inaudibly. She seemed to be blaming herself for her mistake of referring to her own patriarch by his name instead of his formal title. If Yngvi from the Hoof Clan had still been around and heard that, Ingrid’s head probably would’ve been on a pike right about now.

Linnea, on the other hand, felt a strange sense of camaraderie toward Ingrid's treatment of Yuuto. It reminded her of how casually Haugspori treated her. While she, Felicia, and Sigrún had all agreed that everything about Yuuto was worthy of respect, sometimes she couldn't deny that he seemed *too* perfect, like there was a distance between them she couldn't cross.

"You seem to be rather amicable with Big Brother, Miss Ingrid," Linnea said. She chose her words carefully. She was about to say 'close' but stopped herself, feeling that was too strong a word. But just why did Ingrid act so casually with Yuuto? If she could figure that out, she might be able to apply it to her own situation.

"Mm, well, that's because I've known Yu...Father from back when people were still calling him 'Sköll, Devourer of Blessings,'" Ingrid replied.

"Oh, that's interesting. If you wouldn't mind, can you tell me a little bit about what Big Brother was like during that time?" She'd heard bits and pieces of the story while at Gimlé. Yuuto had told her that he'd merely used his knowledge to ascend the ranks, but she'd figured there was more to it than that. After all, he tended to downplay his own achievements, and smarts alone weren't enough to be a leader. There had to be some other factor at play. Hearing the story from someone other than Yuuto might give Linnea the answer she sought.

"Yeeeah, I'd rather not... I'm sorry..." She spoke normally at first, but her voice quickly became quieter as she continued. "after all, I'm pretty sure I only hurled insults at him... Stuff like 'weakling' and 'dumbass'..."

By the time she'd finished, Ingrid was merely muttering to herself, scratching her head as if remembering something unpleasant. However, Linnea couldn't back down here.

"That's precisely what I want to hear! I want to learn the whole story of how Big Brother went from being derided as useless to becoming the clan patriarch! That way I might learn how to be a better patriarch for my own clan!"

"Eh?! B-But I can't just..." When Linnea closed in on Ingrid, wearing a serious expression, Ingrid faltered, taking a step backward, then another. When she did, Linnea closed the distance between them with the same amount of steps forward. Sensing she wouldn't be able to escape, Ingrid sighed in resignation.

“Mm, okay... You wanted to know about his good points? Let’s see here... Good points, good points...aha! He’s got guts, for one!” Ingrid declared confidently, raising a finger. Usually having to search for good points about someone meant they didn’t think of the person in question very highly, but Ingrid didn’t seem to realize that. Linnea, too, pretended not to notice and urged Ingrid on with her eyes.

“Y’see, back then he could hardly speak our language, had soft, weak hands that would blister with so much as a swing of an axe, and well, yeah, he had a rough time of it both physically and mentally,” she explained.

“...I’m sure,” Linnea replied.

To say he’d had it rough was surely an understatement. Linnea had learned to speak this world’s language at a young age, so she couldn’t even begin to imagine how detrimental it’d be to not be able to communicate, especially as (what Yggdrasil considered to be, anyway) an adult. It had to have been lonely and frustrating to not understand others or be understood. She had to wonder what she’d do if she’d have been put in that situation. Would she just wither and rot away?

“But despite all that, he always put his best foot forward and never gave up. That’s not something just anyone can do, y’know. Also, let’s see...he’s pretty damn reliable when he needs to be.” Apparently the dam had burst because Ingrid was now rattling off one compliment after another. It was a little rough around the edges, but it was clear to Linnea that Ingrid’s admiration and respect for Yuuto was the real deal, at least. Courtesy was ultimately surface-level—what really mattered were the feelings within.

“He never breaks, he never bends, and he just gets sharper every time. Really, he’s just like a nihontou...” she continued. “w-wait, don’t tell him I said that! Keep it a secret between us, okay?!” She yelled out, having realized she’d said something that would be rather embarrassing for Yuuto to find out.

The Twins’ Answers

After talking to Ingrid, Linnea was on her way back to the settlement when

she spotted the Claw Clan twins in front of the gates. Just like her, Kristina and Albertina were princesses—clan royalty who had come to be under the umbrella of the Wolf Clan. She'd always been interested in how the two of them felt about Yuuto.

"Miss Albertina! Miss Kristina!" Seeing a perfect opportunity, Linnea increased the speed of her pace and called out to them.

She caught a sudden whiff of pomade. Upon closer observation, their cheeks were tinged with blush, their hairstyle was different than usual, and curiously enough, she could sense moisture in the air even though it hadn't rained recently.

"Why, Aunt Linnea, what a pleasure."

"Whoooa, it's Linnea! 'Sup?"

The twins had the same face and the same voice, but their greetings were as different as night and day. Kristina's was polite and mannerly, but it put Linnea on guard for some reason. She felt like a snake had coiled around her and started hissing at her throat. Kristina's father Botvid was often compared to a viper, so perhaps the girl came by it naturally.

Meanwhile, her older sister Albertina's contained no trace of courtesy or respect. In fact, under normal circumstances, Linnea would have been upset. But for some reason, she wasn't. When she looked at that innocent, carefree smile of Albertina's, such things felt trivial. It was like she had some sort of personal magnetism about her.

"Hm?" There was a girl on standby behind the two of them, seemingly a maid of some sort. She bowed to Linnea without a word, likely afraid of intruding on the conversation. The twins were the biological daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch, as well as two of the current Wolf Clan patriarch Yuuto's immediate daughters by Chalice, so it wouldn't be unusual for them to be accompanied by one or two servants. Normally it wouldn't even register in her consciousness, except she recognized the maid's face from somewhere.

"Oh! You're the girl that accompanied us during the hot springs trip!" Linnea said in realization. "I thought perhaps you served Big Brother, but it's these two instead, I take it?" she asked.

“No, she’s Father’s. I suppose you could say that us twins and Ephy are like...old schoolmates, so to speak,” Kristina said with a shrug. She then began to explain the circumstances behind the vaxt, including how Yuuto came up with the idea of making the school free of charge, how Ephelia, a slave, enrolled in the school first as a trial run, how Kristina was appointed as an observer, and how Albertina, well...ended up having to redo her studies from scratch.

“A vaxt with free tuition? A bold move indeed, but genius.” At one point Yuuto had explained to Linnea how he valued his subjects with a phrase from his country: *“The people are my castles, my stone barriers, and my moats. We show compassion for our allies, and vengeance for our enemies.”* In this regard, Yuuto’s foresight never ceased to impress. While it would probably seem like an unnecessary expenditure for the first five years, educating and strengthening the populace would be a great boon to the clan ten to twenty years down the line. By that time, the vaxt would’ve mass-produced educated personnel fully capable of carrying the Wolf Clan into the future.

“I thought I was being clever by thinking maybe two or three years ahead, but there’s always someone above you, it seems.” After letting out a long sigh of admiration, Linnea shook her head. It may have only been possible due to the revenue from cutting-edge technology like glass, gravel-free bread, and paper, but rather than squandering those profits, Yuuto had wisely used them to invest in the future.

It was so obvious it went without saying, but power could be a poison with terrifying consequences if left unchecked. The fact that Yuuto had the tenacity and mental fortitude to restrain himself and act for the good of the clan rather than his own interests impressed Linnea to no end.

“So did you want something?” Kristina asked, dragging Linnea back up from the depths of her own thoughts.

“A-Ah, yes, I did, as a matter of fact.” Realizing she’d accidentally become engrossed in the business particulars of Yuuto’s venture, she remembered the main topic lay elsewhere. Explaining to them everything that had happened so far, she asked each of them what they respected about Yuuto.

“The fact that he created yummy bread without gravel in it!” Albertina’s hand

shot up in the air as she answered. For someone who loved to eat as much as she did, it was a predictable answer.

“Well, it’s certainly true that his inventiveness and resourcefulness are part of his charm.” Kristina’s answer was more...useful to Linnea—not wholly unexpected given what the other sister had just had to say.

“Also how he gives me snacks all the time!” Another food-related response from Albertina.

As much as Linnea appreciated Albertina’s answers, she was hoping for something a bit more...substantial.

“And how he can give us milk to drink even in the winter!” Apparently deciding to change things up, Albertina shifted the topic to drinks.

“Yes, that’s due to the Norfolk system he employs,” Kristina explained.

Yuuto had implemented an agricultural system where every year they would rotate out the crops they grew in the following order: barley, clover, wheat, then turnips. Before he’d come along, they’d had to slaughter the excess livestock before the winter came and dried up the grass that served as animal feed. In most cases, the slaughtered animals became preserved rations like dried meat and sausage that, along with the harvested grains, were meant to last the humans through the winter. With the Norfolk system, however, there was enough clover to also keep the livestock fed through winter, meaning the Wolf Clan and the Horn Clan’s amount of surviving livestock greatly surpassed that of any other clan. This was especially important because it meant that right at the start of spring they had the valuable resource of cows, who were stronger than humans and able to bear the brunt of the physical labor of farming.

“Ha ha, it’s just like you to only think about food, Albertina,” Linnea said with a laugh.

“Aw c’mon, I don’t only think about food! But you know, when you eat a lot of different good food, it makes you happy! That’s why I love Father Yuuto!”

“Huh... I see. I apologize. Perhaps there’s more to your words than I initially thought.” She recalled the wise Claw Clan patriarch Botvid teaching her

something similar: *“The people must not starve. As long as their bellies are full, they can put up with a bit of discontent.”* While it may have seemed like Albertina had answered without thinking too deeply about it, she had in fact responded in a way that cut right to the heart of the matter. Linnea was impressed—nothing less from a daughter of the infamously sly Botvid. It seemed that not only had she been gravely mistaken, but she’d also underestimated Albertina greatly.

“What about you, Miss Kristina?” Next, she asked the younger sister, who was eyeing Linnea with an uncomfortably warm gaze. She got the feeling she was being belittled, but she ignored it. She did, however, brace herself. Her instincts were telling her that she couldn’t let her guard down for a second around this girl.

“What, me? Let’s see... I like how soft and naïve he can be at times.” With a snicker, she declined to answer seriously. But that was pretty much what Linnea had expected. People like her wouldn’t reveal their true feelings so easily. “That makes teasing him all the more fun.”

“You’d say that about a parent who gave you his Chalice?” Linnea grimaced. However, deep down she was gripping her fist tightly, trying to hold back. She remembered someone else who’d been cheeky enough to tease their sworn father. In fact, their attitude had been the catalyst for Linnea to start asking this question to everyone in the first place. Perhaps if she listened earnestly to what Kristina had to say, she’d learn something. But she couldn’t let her intentions show. Linnea had been groomed to be a ruler from a very young age. Concealing her emotions diplomatically would be a piece of ca—

“After all, in my eyes, Father still has a lot to learn,” Kristina said bluntly.

Linnea felt something inside her snap.

Naturally, she knew that this girl was one of Yuuto’s favorites. Even during this stay at Iárnviðr, she’d seen the two of them conversing with each other on multiple occasions. She also definitely had the skill necessary for Yuuto to value her highly. Linnea had read her detailed reports on the battles of the Lightning Clan and the Hoof Clan.

But that didn’t mean Linnea had to be fond of her.

“Forgive me, but blowing your nose on Big Brother’s goodwill and generosity doesn’t seem very appropriate for one of your position. Might you be the one who has a lot to learn about his heart?” Linnea replied, her annoyance clear in her tone.

“Indeed, I still have much to learn. That way I can tease him more effectively.” Kristina opted to ignore Linnea’s reaction and instead double down.

Linnea bristled with anger. Her expression became icy. A vein began to throb in her temple. She knew Kristina was making fun of her, which meant that reacting like this was probably exactly what she wanted. She understood that, but Linnea had a limit on what she could tolerate.

“Hmph, well, just take care not to fall out of Big Brother’s good graces acting like that. Though, he already has someone he’s in love with, doesn’t he?” The moment those words left her mouth, she regretted it. She’d intended to get back at Kristina, but those words were like a double-edged sword that pierced her own heart as well.

Kristina’s comeback was swift and cruel. “Tee hee, it seems so. Better work hard if you want to catch up.”

“Rrrrgh!” Even the last-ditch attack she’d gouged her own heart to deliver was repelled coolly. Linnea bit her lip in frustration. Even though she was supposed to be older, it felt like she was dancing in the palm of Kristina’s hand no matter what she did!

“Do you mean to say you’re just using Big Brother for all he’s worth and have no respect for him whatsoever?!” She knew it wasn’t good to wear her emotions on her sleeve like this, but she couldn’t help but ask.

In response, Kristina just gave a leisurely grin. “Well, I won’t deny I’m using him, but I do respect him.”

“Hmph. It certainly doesn’t seem like it.” Linnea crossed her arms and averted her gaze. Because of that, she didn’t see the tender smile on Kristina’s face—a smile she almost never showed to anyone other than her older sister.

“I truly respect him for being able to look directly into the abyss of self-interest, greed, and evil that comes with being a patriarch and remain so

naïvely optimistic," Kristina replied.

"That doesn't sound like praise at all." Though Kristina's answer was entirely genuine, Linnea remained unconvinced.

"Oh? I thought I was giving the highest praise possible. It's been quite a sight to see how tenaciously he sticks to that frame of mind." Kristina chuckled maliciously. Her persistently aloof demeanor ensured that she was impossible to read.

It wasn't like Linnea hadn't studied the art of negotiation. She was a patriarch, after all. However, honesty and integrity were what she mainly brought to the table. In contrast, her opponent was a natural-born vixen. For as long as she was unable to see through Kristina's schemes, she'd never stand a chance against her. And unfortunately for Linnea, good-natured people like her were who Kristina loved to tease the most. Put simply, the two couldn't be more incompatible.

"Geez, I feel like I got bewitched by a fox at the end there." Upon returning to the palace guestroom she was using during her stay in Iárnviðr, Linnea shrugged emphatically. She felt newfound respect for Yuuto for having to put up with that witch on a daily basis. That was something she was sure she'd never be capable of.

But in the end, she'd heard from many of Yuuto's acquaintances, and it'd been rather enlightening. Thanks to that, her conviction to become an even greater patriarch than she currently was grew all the stronger. Just as she'd renewed her resolve—

"Oh? You're back awfully late. You were with Uncle, I presume?" Right out of the gate, Haugspori began teasing Linnea with a snicker. But it didn't upset her in the least. On the contrary, she found it somewhat endearing how tame it was. Perhaps that was because she'd come face-to-face with *the real demon* just a bit ago.

What's more, as a patriarch it was necessary to have the generosity to laugh something like this off. Compared to all the trials and tribulations Yuuto had weathered and overcome, this was nothing. Continuing to concern herself with

something so small would ensure she'd never accomplish anything big.

With her spirits lifted, she laughed in response. "I'm getting hungry. How about we get some dinner? I'll tell you everything afterward."

Side Story: Hildegard's Adventure

Hildegard hummed to herself as she stuffed her belongings into a leather bag. Aged about fifteen, she was a cute girl whose defining characteristics were her pigtails and the determined look in her eyes. They gave her an air of innocence, but surprisingly enough, she was an Einherjar bearing the rune Úlfhéðinn and was one of the strongest in the Steel Clan's elite Múspell Unit. Due to that strength, she'd been called upon today to protect the Steel Clan reginarch Suoh Yuuto from harm during his talks with Oda Nobunaga, patriarch of the Flame Clan.

"Heh heh, this is gonna be a perfect opportunity to show our Lord Reginarch just what I'm capable of!" As she muttered to herself, Hildegard realized she couldn't stop smiling. Ever since witnessing that fighting spirit, that *vigor* of Yuuto's, she'd fallen completely head over heels for him. In order to get in his good graces, she would continue to serve him diligently. If all went well, perhaps she could even become one of his favorite mistresses one day!

"'*Oh, Hilda, you're so wonderful...become mine at once!'* Oh man, if he said that to me...he he he he—agh! Ouch!" She yelped as she felt a sudden sharp pain run through her skull. The attack had been strong enough to reduce her to tears with a single blow. She knew the sensation all too well—after all, she'd been on its receiving end more times than she could count.

"Wh-Why'd you hit me all of a sudden, Mother Sigrún?!" She turned around to see the chief of the Múspell Unit, her sworn older sister Sigrún, looking down on her with a cold gaze. Every ounce of the determination she'd had earlier drained from her in an instant, and she cowered down in fear.

"D-Did I, by any chance, mess something up again?" The timidness in her voice was practically a reflex by now. While Hildegard was confident enough in her strength, she had learned from experience that she couldn't hold a candle to Sigrún, and defying her would only result in pain and regret.

"As a matter of fact, you did. Just now. You should've noticed my presence before I hit you. You're still inexperienced," Sigrún replied.

Against such blunt criticism, Hildegard's face went taut. She wanted to point out how unreasonable it was to expect her to notice Sigrún when she was already a master of erasing her presence, and she'd approached from a blind spot, no less, but she was worried Sigrún might take her off the mission if she complained. After all, the reason she'd been allowed to accompany Yuuto to the negotiation table in the first place was her exceptional ability to sense such things.

She had no choice but to bite her tongue and remain silent.

"Are you really going to be okay on this mission?" Sigrún gave a heavy sigh. She was known just as much for her unwavering loyalty to Yuuto as she was for her valor. As the only one capable of commanding the Steel Clan's army in Yuuto's absence, she had to sit out this mission, but she was clearly beside herself with worry.

"I told you, it'll be fine! The only reason I didn't notice was that it was you, Mother. I'm sure I'll be okay when it comes to the real thing!"

"That misplaced confidence of yours is what worries me the most." Sigrún held her forehead like she had a headache and gave a second heavy sigh. "Hilda, you and I are replaceable, but Father is not. He is indispensable for the Steel Clan's survival."

"...I know." While she agreed that the Steel Clan couldn't lose him, she felt a bit perturbed at being called replaceable. However, since Sigrún was indisputably stronger than her, she had no choice but to reluctantly nod.

"It seems like you're in such a hurry to prove yourself that you end up making clumsy mistakes," Sigrún stated.

Those words struck deep into Hildegard's chest.

"I can easily see you being so focused on showing off to Father that you don't notice the enemy attacking," Sigrún continued.

"Th-That won't happen!" she said, but deep down, she knew it was entirely possible. After all, just a bit ago she'd been blind to Sigrún's approach because her mind had been preoccupied with that very thing. Her confidence began to waver.

Naturally, Sigrún wasn't so lenient of an instructor to miss this. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, zeroing onto Hildegard like a hawk. "Listen up. This conference with the Flame Clan will literally determine the fate of the Steel Clan going forward. Do not let Father be distracted with anything else. If there is a threat, you must eliminate it before he notices. Keeping Father comfortable during this trip is your most important duty. Understand?"

"P-Pleased to meet you once more! In case you forgot, I am Hildegard, sworn younger sister of Sigrún, chief of the Múspell Unit. I'm still new and still have a lot to learn, but I hope we get along!"

The next morning upon seeing Yuuto, the first thing she did was re-introduce herself and give an exaggerated bow. Considering that she'd wet herself upon their first meeting, it had probably been the worst impression she could possibly make. Even if it meant being overly polite, she wanted to erase that impression at all costs.

"Yeah, good to see you again. I'm hopeless with a sword so you'll have your work cut out for you, but I'll be counting on you regardless."

"L-Leave it to me!" At Yuuto's reply, Hildegard stood up straight and gave a confident shout. His tone and expression were both carefree and casual, but Hildegard could clearly sense a backbone, a composed and dignified core, within him. Perhaps that presence he commanded was what had allowed him to rapidly transform the nondescript Wolf Clan into one of Yggdrasil's very few powerhouse clans in a mere two-year span.

"I've heard about you from Rún, Miss Hildegard. She says she has high hopes for you in the future, and I'll be counting on you as well." A blonde-haired girl next to Yuuto gave a gentle smile and stuck out her hand for a handshake. It was Yuuto's bodyguard and adjutant, Felicia. With golden locks and blue eyes, her beauty gave Sigrún a run for her money. However, while Sigrún possessed a beauty much like icy, transparent snow, Felicia's was more like the warm rays of the sun.

"I-It'll be a pleasure working with you." Shaking her hand, Hildegard was starstruck. She had a degree of confidence in her looks as well but faced with

someone as magnificent as Felicia, she couldn't help but second-guess her own beauty.

As one might expect of a reginarch. Yuuto was surrounded by a number of incredibly beautiful women, not to mention his formal wife, Mitsuki.

"It's okay! I'm still in my growing phase! One day I too will look like them!" With newfound determination, Hildegard's fighting spirit was ignited when...

"'Sup, everyone!"

"Good morning, everyone." Kristina and Albertina joined them, the older twin Albertina with a bright, carefree smile and the younger twin Kristina looking composed, but unfriendly. They were the biological daughters of Botvid of the Claw Clan, one of the clans under the umbrella of the Steel Clan. They were also younger than Hildegard—in other words, they too were budding women—yet both possessed incredible beauty that was sure to only blossom further in the future.

"Good morning, Big Sis Albertina, Big Sis Kristina." Responding politely, Hildegard gave an elegant bow. When she did, Albertina's eyes sparkled with joy.

"Whoa, it's Hil-Hil! Come to think of it, I heard you're going on this trip too!"

"Yes. I'm still a newcomer and inexperienced in many ways, but I'll do my very best to perform my duty and not drag you all down." Being called a diminutive nickname like "Hil-Hil" honestly ticked her off, but she managed to keep her composure as she replied.

The twins and Sigrún both had Yuuto as a sworn father, in other words, they were sworn siblings. And since Hildegard was Sigrún's sworn sibling, that essentially made the twins Hildegard's siblings as well. However, even though they were younger, the twins had already received the reginarch Suoh Yuuto's direct Chalice, putting them in higher social standing. That meant Hildegard had to be careful about what she said.

"Tee hee. My, so lively this early in the morning. You had better preserve some of that energy, or you'll end up unable to move from exhaustion when you need it most," said Kristina with a grin.

“...Yes, I’ll keep that in mind.” Hildegard gave a small bow. She wanted to retort that her training wasn’t so lenient that she’d tire out from something like that, but once again held her tongue since Kristina was above her in rank.

“Yes, you should have a nice, tall, glass of water and relax...oh, sorry, on second thought, maybe you shouldn’t.”

Seeing Kristina uncomfortably avert her eyes, Hildegard unconsciously bit her lip in frustration. Naturally, since this was Kristina, whose twisted personality was practically infamous at this point, Hildegard didn’t think for a second the apology had been sincere. She knew it had merely been a vehicle to tease her about her incontinence episode.

But once again, Kristina was above her in rank. There was nothing she could do except endure. That was the harsh reality of being an underling.

“Endure it, Hilda, endure it. Just do a good job on this mission and you’ll be one step closer. Take it one step at a time and then...Waagh!” Suddenly, she felt an enormous presence from behind that made her hair stand on end—one she was familiar with. This was a frightening entity on par with Sigrún, the person she’d been afraid of ever since she’d joined the Múspell Unit.

It was Hildólfr, a gigantic, fierce Garmr that had made its stronghold high in the Himinbjörg Mountains. She’d heard that it’d been tamed to not attack humans, but that didn’t make it any less frightening. It was a true monster that even the beast sleeping within Hildegard balked in the presence of.

“Oho, looks like our secret weapon’s arrived. I’ll be counting on you during this conference too, Hildólfr.” Yuuto bent down and stroked his head.

Hildólfr closed his eyes, looking blissful as he let Yuuto pet him.

“Whoa!” After a while, Hildólfr responded in kind by licking Yuuto in the face. Yuuto grinned, but Hildegard shuddered at the scene. That beast could crush his head with a single chomp if it wanted. Hildegard didn’t possess the level of courage to grin right before a maw that large. *“So this is the bravery of a man who built a clan practically from the ground up,”* she thought.

“Oh, you want to be petted here too? All right, there you go.” Once Hildólfr had rolled over on his back, Yuuto began rubbing his belly. In the wide world of

Yggdrasil, this black-haired boy was probably the only human to get a legendary giant wolf to submit and obey him without question.

“...Does he even need a bodyguard?”

It made Hildegard question why she was even here in the first place.

“Yaawn.” After nearly two hours of traveling toward Stórk where the conference was to be held, Hildegard was so bored that she accidentally let out a yawn.

She was really, really, really bored.

The grassy plains were spread out before her, but the scenery never changed. Some people would probably be in awe of the towering Þrúðvangr Mountains in the distance, but Hildegard had no interest. She’d thought maybe she could get closer to Yuuto during the journey, but he was sheltered in a covered horse-drawn carriage trailing behind her. Hildegard had been recruited on this mission for her ability to scout, so naturally she was positioned in the front. However, that meant she couldn’t converse with Yuuto. She’d turned around to try to catch a glimpse of him, but because the carriage was covered she was unable to see him.

She knew she should probably concentrate on her scouting duties instead, but truthfully, she was already sick of it.

“Man, I wish an enemy would come attack us or something.” In fact, she was so ridiculously bored that she ended up uttering something a bodyguard should never utter.

“My my, I might have to report that comment to Father.” Naturally, it didn’t go unnoticed by Kristina, who was walking beside her. Seeing her bright smile, Hildegard belatedly realized she’d messed up.

“Miss Hildegard, the reason you were assigned to this mission was to scout out enemies *before* they appear. If you do your job correctly there shouldn’t be an attack, right?”

“Y...Yes...”

“And I believe Big Sister Sigrún also ordered you not to let Father run into any trouble?”

“H-How do you—?!”

“Tee hee. Because I am Father’s eyes and ears. If you don’t approach your job with the due diligence it requires, I’m afraid promotion will remain just a dream for you,” she replied (in Hildegard’s eyes at least) menacingly.

“Guh...n-noted.” Faced with Kristina’s watertight retort, Hildegard bowed her head gloomily. However, she didn’t miss the fact that while Kristina remained expressionless, the look in her eyes was one of pure ecstasy. If it had been a regular warning out of the goodness of her heart Hildegard might’ve been able to endure, but she was clearly berating Hildegard for the sake of her own amusement.

Kristina was an Einherjar bearing the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds. The reason she was in the front with Hildegard was apparently due to her rune’s ability, which allowed her to calm adverse winds. Conversely, Albertina’s ability did the opposite and created favorable winds, and was positioned at the rear. Perhaps the reason Kristina was so intent on targeting Hildegard was to mitigate her mounting frustration at having to be apart from her sister.

Hildegard understood the reason she was such prime prey for Kristina was her own inexperience, but even so, she couldn’t let it stand.

“Besides, Miss Hildegard, you’re—”

“Hey, everyone! Let’s break for lunch!” Kristina was just about to unleash another attack when Yuuto’s voice resounded from behind them. Hildegard unconsciously let out a sigh of relief. If she was to be subjected to Kristina’s venom any longer, it might seriously affect her mentality enough to affect the mission.

“I-I’m gonna go help the underlings set up the...huh?” Suddenly, a strange smell reached Hildegard’s nostrils. Her rune Úlfhéðinn gave her almost animalistic abilities similar to those of a wolf, including a sharpened sense of smell. That sense of hers had detected the unmistakable scent of another group nearby.

Straining her ears, she could hear the voices of people in the distance, although she was unable to make out exactly what they were saying.

“Big Sister Kristina, I’m going to go pick some flowers. Also, there’s something I have to *take care of* along the way,” Hildegard stated coldly.

“One, two, three...five in all, huh? They don’t seem like typical traveling merchants either.” Hiding behind a large rock, Hildegard counted the suspicious figures from afar. From her location, they looked like tiny specks, but with her extraordinary eyesight, she could make them out as plain as day.

“Hey, is this really the place?”

“Yeah. According to our sources, the reginarch of the Steel Clan and the patriarch of the Flame Clan are gonna meet each other in Stórk.”

“Hm, that means they’ll have to come through here, then.”

And with her superb hearing, even from this distance, she was able to clearly pick up what they were saying.

Because she was always so focused on distinguishing herself as a warrior, she didn’t realize that she was practically born for scouting missions like these.

“Hm, seems they’re up to no good...Wha?!” Hearing sudden footsteps right behind her, she whipped around in a panic—and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw who it was. “Oh, it’s just you, Big Sis Albertina. Don’t scare me like that!”

“Heh, sorry...” Albertina giggled innocently at Hildegard’s moment of panic. Hildegard was actually quite astonished that Albertina had gotten so close without her realizing—though she didn’t let it show. With her keen senses, Hildegard had been able to pick up on Kristina’s ambush, but she’d not noticed Albertina at all. She acted like an airhead, but it seemed that Albertina’s sneaking skills were actually superior to her sister’s. Hildegard was beginning to see why Sigrún called Albertina a natural-born assassin. Thinking back, she couldn’t recall a single time in the past where Hildegard had let anyone approach her unnoticed while her senses were honed.

“Hm, those guys look weird. I don’t think they’re traveling merchants.” Using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun, Albertina carefully observed the men. Like Hildegard, she’d probably sensed something fishy using her ability and had come to investigate.

“I agree. I’ve been eavesdropping on their conversation a bit and it seems they’re a suspicious bunch,” Hildegard replied.

“Whoooa... You can hear them all the way from here? That’d be hard even for me...”

“Ah, well, you know...” Hildegard felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile. Since she’d been taken completely by surprise (seemingly effortlessly) earlier, it felt good to get one up on Albertina. “Anyway, they know our Lord Reginarch is on his way to Stórk.”

“Hm? Why’s that unusual?” Albertina asked.

“Wha?” It was such an unexpected response that a dumbfounded utterance escaped her. At present, the existence of the Stórk conference was supposed to be highly classified information for the Steel Clan’s ears only. It absolutely could not get out that the reginarch was traveling to the enemy camp virtually unattended. However, even though the Flame Clan’s letter had only arrived yesterday, these men somehow knew. If that wasn’t suspicious, what was?

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Hildegard peered into Albertina’s face, unblinking, but the older twin just tilted her head, looking confused. “Huh? What’s wrong?” Albertina asked.

An expression like hers couldn’t be an act—Albertina really had no clue why such a thing would be suspicious.

“Why does this idiot have His Majesty’s direct Chalice and not me?!” she shouted in her heart, but unfortunately for Hildegard, her troubles were just beginning.

“Kriiis, it seems like they know Father’s heading to Stórk,” Albertina muttered to herself.

Hildegard scanned the area just to be safe, but Kristina was nowhere to be found, nor anything resembling her presence. Hildegard seriously wondered if this girl had brain damage.

“Okay, got it. Then I’ll do as you say and take care of them,” Albertina muttered once more. Immediately afterward, Albertina dashed toward the men like a gale.

“She’s fast!” Hildegard thought. She was confident that she beat everyone else out when it came to speed, but Albertina’s was certainly on par.

“Rrgh!” Tousling her hair in frustration, Hildegard chased after Albertina.

Hildegard was technically still on a scouting mission. If she spotted an enemy, she was supposed to return to the others and report her findings. But Albertina, perhaps because of her happy-go-lucky attitude, was well-loved by all the higher-ups of the Steel Clan, including Yuuto. If Hildegard returned without her and the worst were to befall Albertina as a result, she could kiss her chances of promotion goodbye.

“Urk...! Wh-Wha...”

Albertina snuck up on one of the men from behind and used her knife to stab him in the heart. For her to approach so quickly and have none of the five notice, her talent for stealth was truly formidable.

“M-Muska?! A-A kid?! Guh!”

The moment the enemy spotted her, Albertina leaned slightly to the right in a feint and then dashed to the left at lightning speed. To the men, it probably looked like she’d vanished into thin air. She then kicked off the ground, changing her direction once more, and as if guided by an unseen force, the knife she held headed straight for one of the men’s necks—

Ting! A sharp metallic sound rang out as the man repelled the knife with his sword.

“No way?!” This seemed to come as a surprise to Albertina, whose eyes went wide with shock.

Hildegard didn’t blame her. Even from where she was watching she could tell Albertina’s technique had been impeccable. She wasn’t quite sure how a mere man was able to see through movements like those, let alone defend against them. In other words, he wasn’t simply your run-of-the-mill thug.

“Hyah!”

“Whoa!” The man struck back at Albertina in retaliation. Albertina leapt backward to dodge it.

“You’re gonna regret killing Muska, little girl!” One of the other men, this one wearing a black hood, rushed forward to attack her. His swordsmanship was

even more nuanced than the previous man.

Albertina let out a cry of panic, but nonetheless crouched down and cleanly evaded the strike. The hooded man saw that and mercilessly delivered a swift kick while she was down on the ground. Hopping to the side like a rabbit, she was able to avoid that attack as well.

"She really is outstanding," Hildegard idly thought.

"Watch yer asses, you guys. This ain't no ordinary girl!" the hooded man spat. However, this in fact couldn't be more convenient for Hildegard.

There were two reasons for this. First, this tipped her off as to who the leader might be. Second, it meant that all the men would now be focused on Albertina and her extraordinary movements. All things considered, it was likely they wouldn't even notice the existence of a second foe. Hildegard silently unsheathed the dagger at her hip and threw it, aiming right for the back of the enemy's head.

"Gah?!"

It was a direct hit. Coming from a blind spot, the dagger pierced right through the man's head without him even noticing.

"The hell?! There's another one?! Grk!" The men's attention now inevitably gravitated toward Hildegard. Albertina didn't let that opportunity slip by. Without missing a beat, she leapt toward the closest enemy and pierced his heart with an eagerness that betrayed the innocent-looking face she wore.

"That makes two against two. Big Sis Albertina, you take that one. I'll deal with the hooded guy," Hildegard suggested.

"Aw, whaaat? But that one looks stronger and more fun!" Albertina protested.

"He's probably the leader of this bunch. In that case, subduing him is gonna take more muscle, which means it's in my wheelhouse," Hildegard explained.

"Mmmgh... Okay, I understand." She frowned in a bit of a pout but agreed nonetheless. Hildegard stuck out her tongue teasingly. Albertina may have possessed godlike reflexes, but her physical strength didn't differ much from

that of a normal child. While Hildegard hadn't necessarily lied to her, she hadn't told the whole truth.

"Heh heh heh...if I bag the leader, I'll get that promotion for sure!"

Hildegard was quick to resort to dirty tactics. However, her dirty tactics tended to backfire on her.

Ting! Ting! Ting!

The hooded man's flurry of attacks forced Hildegard back one step. From just that single exchange, Hildegard could tell. While she had the upper hand when it came to the speed and strength of her attacks, the enemy's technique was far and away more polished.

"Wh-Who the hell is this guy?!" Hildegard was by no means a weakling. On the contrary, outside of Sigrún no one else in the Steel Clan's elite Múspell Unit could hold a candle to her. It was unthinkable for a non-Einherjar to be able to keep her at bay.

"Heh heh... Don't think I'll go easy on you just 'cause you're a kid." The corner of the hooded man's mouth turned up in a sneer as he unleashed yet another attack.

"Wh-What the...gh...ugh...ha!" Determined to not fall behind, Hildegard met him with a whirlwind of strikes, but each individual blow paled in comparison to the hooded man's, and she found herself on the defensive in no time. Hildegard's attacks were faster and stronger, but the man was able to *combo* one attack into another with frightening speed. Due to that, Hildegard was at a distinct disadvantage.

Eventually, the tip of the hooded man's sword sliced into Hildegard's left shoulder. Fortunately, the cut was shallow and she could still fight, but the fact that she'd been hit at all caused her to start panicking. Her thoughts became jumbled, and she was unable to come up with a countermeasure as a result.

"Hn! Ha! Hyah!"

"Uwah! Hup! Hyaa?!"

As the battle went on, the hooded man's attacks became more and more

relentless, rendering Hildegard helpless.

“C-Crap! If this goes on I’ll...uugh, if only I could use my beast form...!”

By unleashing the beast within her, Hildegard could boost her physical abilities exponentially. However, it came at a price. In exchange, she lost her ability to think rationally, something that had caused her to fail time and time again. Thanks to that, she’d resolved not to use the ability if she could help it.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t a situation where she could afford to be picky. She’d all but resigned herself to using the ability when the hooded man suddenly halted his barrage of attacks and took a big leap backward. A beat later, a knife sliced through the air where the man had been.

Albertina had thrown said knife. The man she’d been battling earlier lay in a collapsed heap at her feet.

“Tch, useless lackeys. Two against one’s gonna be tough.” The man cursed, turned on his heel, and dashed away.

“Wai...” Hildegard wanted to chase after him, but her legs wouldn’t move.

In terms of sheer leg strength, Hildegard had a clear advantage. However, even if she caught up there wasn’t much she could do against him. The last battle had taught her that.

“Rrraaagh! Dammit!” Overcome with frustration, all she could do was stomp on the ground and roar to the heavens, entirely unaware that her cry had more in common with a whimpering dog than a ferocious beast.

“Hm, so you let the leader get away, then.” Kristina, having arrived late to the scene, shook her head and let out an exasperated sigh. She took her sweet time getting here yet immediately pinned the blame on Hildegard. That infuriated her, but of course, Kristina had received Yuuto’s Chalice and was higher in rank, so Hildegard couldn’t say a word.

“Hil-Hil said she could take him, so I left it to her,” said Albertina nonchalantly, leaning back with her hands behind her head.

“Urk...” Hildegard made a face like she’d swallowed something bitter. It was

in fact the truth, so she had no rebuttal.

“Well, this wasn’t a total write-off. We got one of his goons, after all.” Her sadistic streak apparently sated from seeing Hildegard’s reaction, she gave one final snicker and crouched down in front of the captured lackey. “Now then, what group do you belong to? How did you know that Father was headed to Stórk?”

The man spits in her direction. However, Kristina expertly dodged it as if she’d anticipated that response...

“Gaah?!”

...and the wad of spit hit Hildegard’s skirt instead. She’d been slow to react since Kristina had been in front of her, blocking her view. *“This is not my day,”* she thought.

“Heh, you’ve got some guts to try that on me. I’ll have you know I lead an intelligence unit, and I’m well-versed in ways of making people talk,” Kristina said.

“Ha! Torture, is it? Bring it on. I’m used to pain. A mosquito bite’ll hurt more than anything a brat like you could do,” the lackey replied.

“Is that so? Then a mosquito bite it is,” Kristina replied, producing a bird’s feather from out of nowhere. Hildegard didn’t know anything about birds so she couldn’t tell what it belonged to, but it must’ve been rather large considering the feather’s size.

“Hil-Hil, take off his shoe,” Albertina asked.

“Huh?! ...O-Okay.” Naturally, as a fourteen-year-old maiden, she felt some trepidation at being asked to remove the shoe of an adult man, but again, she had to obey her superiors. She removed the shoe just as she was told. It stunk.

“Now then, you were talking about torture through inflicting pain? Get with the times. That’s such an antiquated method,” Kristina said.

“Huh? So what, you’re gonna tickle me? Like hell I’d talk from somethin’ like —snk—I’d never—hya hya hya! S-Stop, that’s e—ha ha ha!” Each time Kristina gently rubbed the feather against the sole of the man’s foot, the man burst out

laughing like he couldn’t resist. Tied tightly to a tree with rope, he couldn’t even move a muscle as he continued to suffer in agony.

The tricks kids had up their sleeves were not to be underestimated. Tickling was considered a valid method of torture all throughout the world. It was even used by prostitutes in Japan during the Edo period. At first, the tickling sensation itself was the worst, but gradually—

“Hya ha ha ha! Snort...grk! Ha ha ha! Haa...haa...gaahh...I’m...gonna die...gyah ha ha!”

The man began to exhibit strange behavior aside from merely laughing. His face began to turn blue, and his lips took on a shade of purple. He was laughing so hard that he was having difficulty breathing.

“Haa...haa...haa...”

After about three hundred seconds of nonstop tickling, Kristina finally stopped her attack. Waving the feather in front of the man as if taunting him, she spoke. “So, feel like talking yet?”

“Heh... Y-You think I’m gonna squeal with just that?” he replied through labored breaths.

“Oh, that so? Then let’s continue,” she said coldly.

The torture resumed. After two whole hours of tickling (with occasional pauses in between), the man finally broke.

“Ha ha ha ha... Okay, I’ll talk! I’ll talk, so stop already!” His eyes were already ruined with tears and his expression was somewhere between grim and exhausted. His voice was tinged with desperation. He looked like he’d been through absolute hell.

“Hm, well, as long as you’ve decided to become honest.” Seeing Kristina nod coolly, the man let out a breath of relief. Even if he had felt guilty for selling out his comrades, it was buried deep behind the tranquil expression the man currently wore from having his life spared.

“But unfortunately, I don’t trust you. So let’s make you a little more trustworthy, shall we? I think another hour ought to do it.”

“Huh?” The man’s face blanched. It was the very picture of a man finally admitted to heaven suddenly being thrown back into hell.

“Heh heh heh...” Meanwhile, Kristina couldn’t hide her glee as she brandished the feather and approached the man once more with an evil grin. Hildegard found herself unconsciously raising her head to the sky and offering a moment of silence in his honor.

The man’s laughter could be heard throughout the entire mountain range.

“Once again, what group are you with? By the way, I can sniff out lies. If you lie to me, it’s more tickling for you.” After one more hour of torture, Kristina asked the man once more with a big grin. The man was already at his limit, collapsed on the ground and bereft of any more energy to resist. With a bitter, self-deprecating grin, the man spoke in a hoarse voice.

“We’re called... ‘Dvergr,’” he explained.

When she heard that name, even Hildegard could see the color leave Kristina’s face in an instant. She knew the reason all too well. This man belonged to the Cult of Dvergr—one of the religious cults native to the Bifröst Belt since long ago.

After the Holy Ásgarðr Empire’s sudden rise to power, followed by the Wolf Clan making their home within its walls, the Angrboðan faith had flourished, causing faith in Dvergr to wane. However, even now the cult was still quite prominent, boasting several thousand followers.

“So that’s it. I suppose it wouldn’t be so strange for a cult that large to have followers even among our own soldiers.” Kristina shook her head and sighed. The Steel Clan that Yuuto led had officially designated Angrboða as their guardian deity, but the citizens weren’t forced to believe any certain way—Yuuto had figured it best to not interfere with people’s beliefs. However, there were consequences for such magnanimity.

“So what did you plan to accomplish by ambushing our Lord Reginarch?” Kristina asked.

“W-Well, that’s...” The man still seemed to possess a modicum of loyalty

toward his group, because he stammered in hesitation.

“So that’s how it has to be, huh.”

“Uwah! Wait, wait! I’ll talk! I’ll talk, so put down that feather!” Once Kristina brandished the feather, the man immediately started to tremble. It was almost as if Kristina’s tickling invoked a Pavlovian response within him—either she was used to this or she’d practiced it, because her technique must have been quite hellish.

“We were doing recon...in preparation to assassinate the reginarch,” the man said reluctantly.

“Oh? That’s not something I can take lightly.” In general, Kristina almost always adopted a cold tone, but it now dropped several more degrees. Hearing the ice in her voice made even Hildegard shudder.

“Really? But why would you go after Father? I thought he made everyone happy. Your god should be happy about that too, shouldn’t he?” Albertina cocked her head in confusion.

It was true—under Yuuto, the people of the Wolf Clan had enjoyed great prosperity. The production of food had explosively increased, and fewer and fewer people were dying of starvation. By all rights, it didn’t make sense for a religious cult to want him dead.

However...

“That’s exactly what they don’t like,” Kristina said, not even trying to hide the scorn in her voice, and even let out a snort for good measure. Hildegard knew how she felt—she, too, knew exactly how their cult worked, and that to them Yuuto was nothing but a hindrance to their goal. “The Dvergr don’t like change. They want the world to go back to before the Empire’s founding—when the virtuous king Fleur still ruled and everyone was happy and at peace. That’s the kind of cult they are,” Kristina explained.

“Was Fleur’s rule really that great?” Albertina asked.

“So they say, but people tend to look at the past with rose-tinted glasses. Regardless, I doubt it even begins to compare to the benevolence of Father’s rule,” Kristina replied.

“I know, right?! Thanks to Father we can eat bread without gravel in it!” Albertina grinned and nodded emphatically.

Of course, even Hildegard thought gravel-free bread was a molehill compared to the mountain of other issues the Steel Clan had to face, but she could at least recognize that calling her out on it would be boorish.

“Al’s nonsense aside...” Kristina began.

“N-Nonsense?!”

“Yes, everything out of your mouth is nonsense.”

“Waaah! You actually said it!”

“I’ve heard that more and more people are beginning to have doubts about Dvergr’s teachings and leave the faith. In that case, it makes sense that Father’s existence would be a thorn in their side. Am I right?” She cast a sidelong glance at the man on the ground. It was clear from the expression on his face that Kristina was correct.

“In other words, they put the cart before the horse and got their priorities all mixed up,” Hildegard said with a wistful smile. The cult was trying to return the world to a time when everyone was happy, so the end goal should’ve been to make everyone happier than they currently were. At some point, however, it became more about returning to the past than actually bringing prosperity to the people, to the point that they were willing to assassinate the man that had made their lives so much better in the first place. The means had become the end goal.

“But... That hooded man earlier was much too skilled to be the kind of idiot who wouldn’t realize that,” Hildegard continued. Just recalling his technique sent a shudder down her spine. Truthfully, she didn’t think she’d be able to take him in a fair fight. His subordinates hadn’t exactly been novices either. It seemed like in the time leading up to the conference, Hildegard would have her work cut out for her.

“Looks like they’re in that forest.” Sniffing the air around her, Hildegard pointed to the forest spread out to the southeast. She’d traced the hooded

man’s scent to this location—child’s play for one who possessed the keen senses of a beast. During their prayers, the Dvergr had a custom of burning incense, so it was in fact quite easy to track them down.

“Wow, Hil-Hil, that’s amazing. I can’t even smell anything like that.” Albertina patted Hildegard on the head. Honestly, it felt good to receive earnest praise for a change.

“Although... It was your fault they got away in the first place, ‘Hil-Hil.’ You’re gonna have to work a little bit harder if you want to clear your good name,” Kristina responded mockingly. She was just as toxic as ever. Hildegard honestly wished she would take a page from her older sister’s book and be just a tad nicer.

“How many are there?” Kristina asked curtly.

“Give me a minute,” Hildegard replied. She took a deep breath and strained her ears. She unleashed a portion of the beast within, improving her hearing ability significantly. When she released it during combat her animalistic instincts overwrote her ability to reason, but since this wasn’t a combat situation she was able to draw upon a fraction of its power and retain her composure in the process. Naturally, she couldn’t discern what they were saying, but she was able to make out many *distinct* voices. Diligently counting each one...

“From just the ones I can hear, there are forty-six of them,” Hildegard stated. “How should we proceed?”

In order to avoid provoking the Flame Clan, the Steel Clan had brought a skeleton crew of just ten people along on this trip. To say their forces were spread thin was an understatement—with the enemy outnumbering them by more than four to one, even the might of the Múspell Unit and all the Einherjar at their disposal wouldn’t be sufficient enough to ensure Yuuto’s safety.

“Hm, if they staged an attack with that many, we wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.” Kristina was apparently thinking along the same lines. Her hand resting on her chin, she thought for a bit before speaking once more.

“We’ll simply have to stage an ambush with just the three of us,” she stated.

“What?!” Hildegard’s eyes bugged out of her head at how casually she

declared something that was far easier said than done. There were forty-six enemies and only three of them—they would be going up against an army fifteen times their size. Taking the cultists out would have been difficult enough with ten of them, so when she heard Kristina's idea she honestly thought Kristina had miscalculated somehow.

"I know we're Einherjar and all, but don't you think that's a bit too reckless?" Hildegard asked.

"Yes. At least, under normal circumstances anyway," Kristina replied. "However, I have a secret, foolproof plan," she said, raising a finger and grinning confidently.

Somehow seeing that grin didn't do anything to make Hildegard any less anxious.

"Ugh, damn, it's cold. Far too cold to take a piss...urk!" Apparently about to relieve himself, one of the men had just undone his belt buckle when Hildegard launched an arrow at his forehead.

Surprisingly enough, the most lethal weapon during war was not a sword or a spear—it was a bow and arrow. Since awakening as an Einherjar, Hildegard had also honed her skills as an archer. Even though the man was a fair distance away, it was practically point-blank range for Hildegard. Scoring a direct hit was a piece of cake.

"Th-The hell?!" Noticing something was wrong, several more men drew closer, their weapons raised. Hildegard fired a volley of subsequent arrows that whistled through the air before striking their targets.

One was dodged, one was deflected by the target's sword, and one struck its target cleanly. Unfortunately, things didn't end there though.

"Over there!" Naturally, the enemy was able to deduce her location from the direction the arrows had come from.

"A kid?! How weak do they think we are?!"

"Don't move, brat!"

“We’ll rip those pretty clothes off ya and mess ya up good!” With vulgar shouts, ten or so men formed an ominous mob and rushed toward her.

In a one-on-one fight, she wouldn’t lose against any of them. However, with this many, it would be tough for her to eke out a victory. Tough for Hildegard alone, that is. She spun around and turned tail immediately.

“Get back here, dammit!”

“Don’t think you’ll get away from us so easily after what you did!” The men chased after her, but their speed was no match for Hildegard’s. She shook them off in no time at all.

“Shit! Where’d she go?!”

“She couldn’t have gotten that far. Start searchin’.”

As the men began to comb the area, Hildegard watched from behind a nearby tree. When they passed her unknowingly, she attacked from behind.

“Gah!”

“Wh-What the—Guah!” Taken completely by surprise, the men were unable to put up a fight as Hildegard mercilessly cut them down one by one.

“There she is!”

“Over there!”

Once more of them began to spot her, she turned on her heel once more, cleverly using the environment to disappear from the men’s sight.

“Guah!”

“Gyaah!” From a short distance away, she heard the screams of more men—likely the work of either Albertina or Kristina.

This was the crux of Kristina’s grand plan. It didn’t matter how strong they were as Einherjar, three of them wouldn’t be able to win against forty-six men in a fair fight. However, among the Steel Clan members, Kristina, Albertina, and Hildegard were the cream of the crop when it came to sensing others’ presences and erasing their own. This dim forest was the optimal environment to use those talents of theirs to the fullest. While the enemy would quickly lose

sight of them, they could sense the enemy with ease.

“Ooh, that’s two fewer presences I feel. I’d better work hard on my end too, or I’ll get shown up!” Hiding behind another tree, Hildegard grinned mischievously. Sure, they’d received Yuuto’s direct Chalices, but that was all. She was still older and more capable. It didn’t matter how many enemies there were, they were no match for her. She’d cut them all down!

Suddenly, a chill ran down her spine. Following her gut instinct, she leapt out of the way. In the next instant, two daggers pierced the tree she’d just been hiding behind. When she turned to look in the direction the daggers had come from, her face froze in terror. The hooded man she’d had been helpless against earlier was staring right at her, his piercing gaze like a hawk. She already knew his name from the man they’d taken prisoner: Mótsognir, the strongest assassin of the Dvergr—also known as the “Reaper in Black.”

“So you followed me here, did you? Hmph, perhaps I should commend you for escaping my notice for so long.” The black-hooded man Mótsognir unsheathed his sword. At a glance, his stance looked full of openings, but in reality, there were none. The sharpness of the bloodlust directed toward her made Hildegard unconsciously gulp.

“H-Heh...heh heh... It wasn’t that hard.” She hadn’t followed him. She’d merely tracked his scent—but he didn’t need to know that. Hildegard was the type of girl to take any praise she could get, even if it was based on a misunderstanding.

“I-I saw right through your plan all along. Y-You better surrender r-right now if you know what’s good for you.” There was no hope of victory for her in a fair fight. Even if it was a bluff, she would usurp her enemy’s will to fight through intimidation.

“Heh heh... Doesn’t sound very convincing when your voice is shaking like a leaf,” he replied mockingly.

“Urk.” Well, so much for that plan. She hated how her lack of courage made her cowardice obvious to the enemy.

“Then again, you *have* managed to take out a number of my men I trained personally... Thanks to that, I’m gonna have to revise my plans. Rest assured,

you'll pay the price for those losses with your own blood." With that, Mótsognir dashed forward with a wide swing.

Ting! Hildegard quickly unsheathed her own sword and parried the attack.

Ting! Ting! Ting! "Ha! Whoa! Agh!" Despite her own panic, she managed to block the continuous barrage of attacks that followed. Like before, the pauses between were almost nonexistent—each attack magnificently flowed into one another. There was no more doubt—he was far more skilled than Hildegard. Once again, she was immediately put on the defensive.

However, something was strange.

"Huh? He seems...a bit weaker than before?" she thought to herself.

In their last battle, she'd been completely overwhelmed. Now, however, he didn't seem nearly as intimidating. By carefully observing his movements, Hildegard was able to predict what moves he'd make next. In other words, even though this was only the second time they'd encountered each other, she was getting used to his fighting style. Such was the breadth of the talent Hildegard possessed.

"I've figured you out!" With all her might, Hildegard parried a downward swing she'd already seen coming. The man may have been more experienced, but Hildegard was stronger. Even with skills as tempered as his, Mótsognir was unable to deflect an attack that powerful, and his sword hand was thrown off-kilter.

"I got you now!" Seeing her chance, Hildegard stepped forward and prepared to deliver a sideways slash to his now-unguarded abdomen—

"Pbbt!"

"Gah?!"

As she was about to land her blow, something flew from Mótsognir's mouth and struck Hildegard in the head. Her vision swam for an instant before noticing the object in the corner of her eye. A rock. When had he had time to put it in his mouth?!

"Buh!" In that moment of shock, she'd let her guard down. The next instant

she felt a massive impact to her left flank. With a cry of pain, she went flying. She saw Mótsognir had his leg raised, so she deduced she must've been kicked.

Before she could topple to the ground, she managed to land on both feet. However, that did nothing to quell the intense pain in her side. It was clear Mótsognir had far more tricks up his sleeve than Hildegard did. He was in another league entirely.

"Hmph, I sense even less of my men than before. Looks like you're not acting alone. That means I don't have time to play with the likes of you. Time to end this," Mótsognir said coldly.

"Ha. Just try it!" Hildegard retorted as she turned her back on him and dashed away.

"Rgh! Wait!" he yelled to Hildegard.

"Who in the hell would wait for you, idiot?!" She increased her speed. She wasn't the kind of person to want to sacrifice herself for the good of the clan or anything like that. Honestly, if she couldn't win a fight head-on, she'd consider merely surviving its own kind of victory.

"Phew, did I lose him?" After zigzagging through the trees for a while, Hildegard took a breather and scanned the area. She determined he must've been far behind by now. After slapping the sides of her face to pull herself together, she shimmied up a nearby tree. She couldn't stay at the bottom forever. She was going to ambush Mótsognir from the treetops.

"Ah, here he comes." Sensing his presence, she readied her bow and arrow. Once she spotted him passing below her, she licked her lips in anticipation. He even had his back turned. Perfect.

There was no such thing as "fair and square" in Hildegard's vocabulary. She would do whatever it took to win.

"You're mine!" After lining up her aim, she fired the fatal arrow. As if following a predetermined path, it struck Mótsognir right in the back. He staggered a few steps forward before collapsing to the ground.

"Yesss!" Hildegard let out a triumphant cry, gripping her fist tightly. She

couldn’t deny it had been a tad anticlimactic, but even the strongest warriors were powerless against attacks they couldn’t see coming.

“And since I took care of the leader, the glory will be all mine!” Hopping down to admire her handiwork, she hummed to herself as she approached the motionless Mótsognir—

—and in the next moment, a hand grabbed her arm. She found herself, in but an instant, staring at the sky.

“Huh?”

Her arm was twisted behind her back, and the enemy’s other hand wrapped around her neck. She’d been pinned to the ground before she’d even had time to react. She’d been completely unable to resist. Truly the work of an expert.

“G-Gah! H-How...?!” As she struggled to breathe, Hildegard managed to eke out the question. Her arrow had definitely pierced Mótsognir through the heart. She was sure of it. Even an Einherjar wouldn’t be able to survive that. So how?

“I got tired of playing hide-and-seek, you see. So I resorted to another method,” he explained.

“M-Method...? Ah!” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a log with an arrow sticking out of it. He’d probably anticipated Hildegard’s plan and had concealed a log within his cloak to guard against her attack. Then he’d played dead and led Hildegard right to him. She’d been had, one hundred percent.

“Sorry, little girl. Compared to the hell I’ve been through, little tricks like yours are child’s play. But, well, it’s nothing personal.” It was the voice of someone who knew they’d won. As he spoke, his fingers tightened around her throat. She couldn’t breathe. It seemed he was going to strangle her to death. The fear of encroaching death squeezed Hildegard’s heart.

“...Sorry to say this after you’ve made your victory speech and everything, but you’re the one who’s trapped.” Hildegard had been pinned down, but her left hand remained free. Hildegard grabbed Mótsognir’s wrist and grinned. Everything up until this point had been one unfortunate event after another. But here at the final hour, it seemed the luck of the devil was on her side.

To think she'd be put in such an *advantageous position!*

Offering silent words of gratitude for her good fortune, Hildegard unleashed the beast within her.

"Oh yeah? What could you possibly do in your—guaahh!" Suddenly, Mótsognir let out a cry of anguish. At the same time, the grip around Hildegard's neck weakened.

In beast form, Hildegard's grip strength far surpassed that of a normal human's. The bones in Mótsognir's wrist began to emit an unpleasant noise.

"Y-You... Wh-What are you...? Huh?!" His voice was seething with hatred, but he froze when he saw the glint in Hildegard's eyes. That was when he realized. He wasn't dealing with a mere human. He was up against a beast. And he'd already become that beast's prey.

"Hm? Oh, looks like I survived."

Hildegard suddenly came to. The first thing she felt was relief that she wasn't dead. Because she lost consciousness when she entered her beast form, it was always a toss-up whether or not she'd survive. In the worst case, the second right before she entered it could be the very last second she was conscious.

"Mm...Uwah!" Seeing the pile of blood and guts at her feet, she recoiled in disgust. There was no longer anything that looked even vaguely human, but when she saw the black cloak and hood lying there, she realized they were Mótsognir's remains.

"Gross."

Even if it was her handiwork, didn't she overdo it? She reconfirmed in her mind that beast form was only to be used as a last resort.

"Looks like the others are taken care of too." There were no more hostile presences within the forest, only the thick stench of blood. That was likely Albertina's doing. She was just as skilled as ever.

"Wow, took care of him by yourself, huh? I'm honestly impressed." Kristina appeared from within the cluster of trees, clapping in mock applause. She didn't

look the least bit winded, and there wasn't a drop of blood on her. Hildegard knew that Kristina's strengths lay in tactics and not actual combat, but she still couldn't help but feel it was unfair for her to not participate.

"Heh heh, that's what happens when you leave it to ol' Hildegard!" She puffed out her chest proudly. She'd taken down the leader of a troupe of enemy assassins. There was no way anyone could dispute her achievement this time. Imagining the praise she was about to receive, Hildegard grinned smugly.

However, for some reason, Kristina gave her a look of pity.

"I truly am sorry to rain on your parade, but..." She tapped her crotch area as if indicating something. The moment she did, Hildegard felt a paralyzing, *unpleasant* sense of déjà vu. Feeling an uncomfortably damp sensation in her nether regions, her face paled as though her earlier bravado had been but an illusion.

"It can't... It can't be..."

Gingerly, she checked the area in question.

There was a wet spot.

"Not agaaaain! Noooo!"

The piercing scream of Hildegard's soul resounded throughout the forest. No matter how far she came, perhaps she was always fated to trip at the very end.

Even so, she had felled a formidable opponent all the same. That victory planted a seed of confidence within her. However, as fate would have it, the forthcoming encounter against Oda Nobunaga and the Flame Clan the very next day would utterly destroy that confidence, and she would end up wetting herself once more. Truly, Hildegard was born under an unlucky star.

Afterword

Long time no see. It's me, Takayama, once again.

This was Volume 1 of the after story, the so-called "fan disc," for *The Master of Ragnarok*. I have more room than I expected for this afterword, so I'd like to go into the concepts for each part of this volume.

Act 1. Concept: "Overkill."

After the main adventure is over and the hero has reached level 99, what if he went back and fought the first boss? That was the idea that birthed this story. Well, I say "first boss," but all things considered, he ended up being an accomplished hero in his own right. Honestly, when writing this boss I started to seriously feel sorry for him. That said, that didn't stop my pen in the least!

By the way, he's a real historical figure who actually existed—although to tell the truth I based him more on Xin Li from *Kingdom*, ha ha.

Act 2. Concept: "A story centered around Albertina."

This was the chapter I struggled with the most in this volume. Ironically enough, Albertina turned out to be one of the hardest characters for me to write. On the other hand, her counterpart Kristina was probably the easiest out of all the heroines. Thanks to that, even though they were supposed to have equal screen time, Kristina ended up showing up more and more on her own. With that in mind, I resolved to give Albertina her own chapter here, but I couldn't decide on what it would be about. It seemed that she truly was a weak spot of mine. I loved the character, but I couldn't figure out how to use her. In the end, even though I still didn't have a clear idea of where I was going, I just started writing and eventually settled on the "Which one of the twins is truly the mature one?" theme. They say admiration is the feeling furthest away from understanding, and I certainly felt that here.

Act 3. Concept: "A lighthearted romcom scenario with a slight twist."

Ingrid's turn at last. Though she didn't have many appearances in the end either, my problems with her were the opposite of Albertina's—she actually

was very easy to write, and felt I could always utilize her effectively. She lives life only doing what she wants to do, is naturally candid and easygoing, and is somewhat antisocial—a lot like me, I suppose, which explains a lot. I'd always wanted to give her more appearances because she was such a necessary character to the plot, but I was never able to fit her in like I wanted in the main story.

However, my friends and my editor all told me "If you're doing a collection of side stories, you've got to have Ingrid in there," so maybe she ended up more deeply rooted in people's hearts than I thought?

Act 4. Concept: "What about Yuuto's children?"

Because *The Master of Ragnarok* is a chronicle of Yuuto's legacy and I wanted to depict a warm, lively family scenario within this work, I decided to write a story about Yuuto's family after the main story is long over. I wanted Nozomu to be the only one to resemble Yuuto, and the rest to all mostly inherit traits from their mothers. Felicia's son Rungr was meant to be the spitting image of Loptr as a child. Mirai, Nozomu's twin, was supposed to be just like Mitsuki, and Sigrún's daughter Wiz was supposed to resemble Sigrún as a child. As for the rest of the heroines' children, you might see them here and there in the next volume...

Oh dear, I got so caught up in talking about the kids that I forgot about the main heroine of this chapter!

From a young age, I was always left alone in the house and often dreamed of having a kind older sister that would teach me about the ways of the world. In fact, out of all of Yuuto's children, Nozomu is probably the one most like me, so I thought a kid like him would probably want a nice older sister character as well. Thus, Ephelia.

Aren't beautiful, kind childhood friend older sister characters just wonderful?!

Side Story 1: "The Sworn Einherjar." Concept: "Show how each heroine views Yuuto."

This was something I wrote for Hobby Japan's free-access novel site, somewhere around the fifth volume. However, for multiple reasons, it was shelved and never saw the light of day, so I remade it for this volume. That's

why this particular story takes place around Volume 5.

Side Story 2: “Hildegard’s Adventure.” Concept: “A very ‘Hildegard-like’ tale.”

This takes place around the eleventh volume, when the Steel Clan goes to meet Nobunaga. I also wrote this with the intent of publishing it on Hobby Japan’s site, but I honestly don’t remember what compelled me to write it in the first place. Why *did* I write this, hm? Well, Hildegard’s also a very Takayama-like character so maybe that’s it. I actually modeled her on one of my close acquaintances, so I was able to write her as if she’d leapt off the page!

I love when characters write themselves. The pen just starts moving and the pages are filled in no time at all!

In the story, nothing ever really goes right for her, but to me, that’s what makes her so endearing. Although, in the anime world it’s practically a staple for the author’s favorite characters to suffer the most!

Well, let’s leave it at that for now. I’ve gone on for much too long, so let’s get right to the acknowledgments. Chief Editors U-sama and A-sama, as always, thank you for everything you do. Illustrator Yukisan-sensei, thank you so much. To everyone else who had a hand in putting this book out in the world, you have my heartfelt gratitude. Above all, my ultimate gratitude goes to you, readers, for picking up this book!

Only one more volume remains. Much of the conflict may be over, but please look forward to seeing what kind of happy ending the characters reach once their stories have concluded.

Seiichi Takayama