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

24

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 24 [Complete]

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PROLOGUE

“Suoh-Yuuto has been slain!”

From within the raging flames, one man’s triumphant voice rang out. Clutching the disembodied head of a black-haired man, he held it up proudly for everyone to see.

Suoh-Yuuto had been sent to Yggdrasil from the land beyond the heavens to bring glory to the Wolf Clan—a small, unassuming clan that made its home in the Bifröst Region. He had even ascended to the position of þjóðann before eventually absconding and making his home in the New World. This legendary hero had finally met his end, the curtain falling at last on his epic tale.

However, there was no functional writing system in place in the New World, meaning no historical records would be left behind. In other words, the tales of Suoh-Yuuto and his companions would only be passed down by word-of-mouth, where they were inevitably embellished and amended as they spread from region to region. Eventually, they became the stuff of legend, and even now, their stories can be heard throughout Europe as an established part of European folklore.

ACT 1

“Well, it certainly looks like him, but it’s someone else.”

Looking down at the severed head on the table before him, Jörgen smiled bitterly. He was in the middle of inspecting the head to verify its authenticity. Jörgen had known Yuuto for nearly twenty years now—if anyone could tell whether the head truly did belong to the great Suoh-Yuuto, it’d be him. For that reason, if he announced that the head really was Yuuto’s there could be no greater proof—*which had been the plan all along.*

“Father sure has given me a hell of a job this time.” With an exhausted sigh, Jörgen shook his head from side to side.

He recalled the events that had transpired half a year ago—

“You’re *retiring*?!”

One day, upon being summoned to Yuuto’s office, Jörgen had responded in an incredulous tone after hearing some shocking news. His surprise was understandable—Yuuto was only a little over thirty, an age said by some to be the prime of one’s life when it came to mental and physical prowess.

“Yeah, I’ve been here ten years, and now that the food situation’s finally stabilized I’d say it’s about time for me to take my leave.” His elbows on the desk and head resting on his palms, Yuuto gave a small shrug. Despite his face still retaining the youth of someone in their mid-twenties, he exuded an aura of dignity and majesty, doubtless due to the sheer number of gory battles he’d overcome. Jörgen understood why so many of the greenhorn soldiers cowered and became tongue-tied in his presence. Naturally, it had never been Yuuto’s intent to frighten his subjects, but he was now such a prominent figure that his very existence was unavoidably imposing, automatically intimidating those under his rule. However, as one who’d served under Yuuto for many years now,

Jörgen was of course immune to this.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early for you to retire? Unlike an old codger like me, you still have many, many prosperous years ahead of you!” Jörgen replied.

“And it’s precisely because I have ‘many, many prosperous years ahead of me’ that I want to be free from this burden already,” Yuuto explained. A bitter half-smile appeared on his lips.

“I see. Come to think of it, you didn’t exactly become a ruler because you wanted to, did you?” Jörgen recalled the first time they’d met. Yuuto was such a natural-born leader that it was easy to forget, but he’d never aspired to be a king in the first place. He was completely uninterested in attaining wealth, power, or status.

“That’s right, and now that we’ve weathered the storm and are finally on track to prosperity, I think I’ve done enough.”

“Indeed, you’ve done an incredible amount of work.” Jörgen nodded sagely. After becoming the patriarch of the quaint mountain-valley clan known as the Wolf Clan, he’d made half of Yggdrasil his in the span of only a few years and rescued over a million Yggdrasilians from an unprecedented calamity. Even upon migrating to the New World, he had done everything in his power to prevent his subjects from starving, and did so without making use of any of his knowledge from the land beyond the heavens whatsoever. It wasn’t simply flattery—Jörgen honestly believed that Yuuto was an incredible man.

“So I’ve been thinking, shouldn’t I just go ahead and let my successor take the reins already? After all...” Yuuto paused, a grin of self-deprecation appearing on his face. “I’m not gaining any more popularity with my subjects by sticking around, am I?”

“...I suppose not.” After a small pause of his own, Jörgen reluctantly agreed. Ever since moving to the New World, Yuuto’s approval rating hadn’t exactly been favorable. As a matter of fact, it was the lowest it had ever been. Upon touching down on the New World, Yuuto had forbidden himself from using any of his modern-era knowledge, including letters and characters. That was because he was afraid that if he carelessly changed the future, he might inadvertently cause a time paradox and make it so that their great escape from

Yggdrasil never happened.

However, the lack of advanced technology meant a decreased standard of living for his subjects. Naturally, the public were unsatisfied with being forced to live under conditions that were clearly more inconvenient and harrowing than Yggdrasil's had been, but faced with Yuuto's overwhelming military might, they were unable to resist.

Yuuto's approval among the people had plummeted—in fact, it was currently at rock bottom. They now saw "Suoh-Yuuto" as a demonic tyrant that struck fear in the hearts of all his subjects.

On the other hand, Jörgen didn't think a change in rulership was going to do anything to improve the people's living conditions. Still, he understood the necessity of at least temporarily quelling their dissatisfaction.

"Then who do you propose as your successor? Your son Nozomu?" Jörgen asked.

Hereditary ties hadn't meant much under Yggdrasil's Chalice system, but it was a different story when it came to the þjóðann. Regardless of the actual circumstances, Nozomu was the only child of Yuuto's that carried the blood of the previous þjóðann Sigrdrífa, which meant that he was automatically the most suitable successor to the throne. However, Yuuto didn't seem to be too keen on the idea.

"It'd be too cruel to force this burden onto a mere fourteen-year-old."

"*You* certainly managed it, didn't you?"

"I'm not the sort of parent that wants their kid to go through the same crap they did." Yuuto shrugged his shoulders in apparent self-derision. It seemed he really did consider the throne nothing more than a nuisance.

"Then I suppose the next choice would be Linnea, your second-in-command?" Going by the Chalice system, the second-in-command was next in line to inherit the position of patriarch. What's more, Linnea's potential was so great that even Jörgen could recognize it. In addition to her business acumen and high popularity, she had a gentle heart and was always looking out for her clan's people—in some respects, she was the optimal candidate to lead the Steel Clan

as the next reginarch.

Despite this, Yuuto shook his head. “As far as her potential as a ruler goes, there’s no one better, it’s true. But if I’m going to take all my other wives with me, I can’t just leave her here in the lurch. It’d be too sad.” He scratched his cheek embarrassedly. Jörgen felt the corners of his mouth loosen in amusement.

“Popular as always, eh? After being your most trusted advisor for over ten years now I would’ve thought that you would have at least divulged some of your techniques to me.”

“If I had any techniques to speak of, I would. If I’m being honest, I have no idea why they’re all so fond of someone like me. That’s the biggest mystery of all in my eyes.”

“There you go again with the whole ‘someone like me’ schtick. Humility is in your nature, it seems.” Yuuto had ascended to the rank of reginarch in a matter of years, and was always surrounded by a bevy of women. However, in Jörgen’s opinion, while Yuuto certainly had spirit and ambition, he still had aspects that were lacking, especially when it came to his personal life and taking care of himself. *“Perhaps his unreliability in those areas stoked the girls’ maternal instincts, and they felt like they simply couldn’t leave him alone,”* Jörgen thought. The fact that Yuuto was able to attract them like a magnet without even trying couldn’t have made Jörgen more envious.

“At any rate, looks like we’ve gotten off topic. I trust Sigrún and Kristina will be joining you as well?”

“Yeah, I asked them and it seems like they want to follow me wherever I go.”

“My, you would take all the suitable candidates for reginarch with you and leave us high and dry?”

“In my opinion, I think you’d be the most suitable candidate of all, Jörgen.”

“Are you serious? What could an old fart like me accomplish?” Jörgen gave a wry smile. He was already pushing sixty. At this stage he’d quit being the advisor to the Steel Clan, relinquished the position of patriarch of the Wolf Clan to his successor, and was now taking it easy in retirement. He had already tied

up all the loose ends in his life and had neither the desire nor the stamina to take the stage once more.

“I figured you’d say that. Well, who would you nominate, then? No need to hold back, give your honest opinion.”

“Lady Homura, I’d say. With the blood of Nobunaga running through her veins, I believe she’s got what it takes.”

“Homura’s a no-go. She doesn’t have my Chalice, first off. And if she became the reginarch, she wouldn’t hesitate to use gunpowder and steel weaponry.”

“I suppose you’re right. Well, that leaves only three more that I can think of. Mustafa, Barr, or perhaps Babel...” Over the past ten years, each of them had shown great promise, at least.

Yuuto gave a small smile. “I noticed you didn’t include Gendo.”

“Regrettably, my grandson has a long, long way to go before he’d be reginarch material,” Jörgen explained.

“Now who’s the humble one?” Yuuto replied teasingly.

“No, I’m being serious,” Jörgen said solemnly. From an objective, unbiased standpoint, he could at least acknowledge that his grandson Gendo had an uncanny knack for politics, a talent perhaps inherited from Jörgen himself. Unfortunately, however, he lacked the necessary grit. Jörgen’s honest assessment was that he might do well under a capable patriarch, but he just didn’t have the qualities to shine brightly enough to become the sun itself.

“I see. So who do you think is the most capable out of those three?” Yuuto asked.

“Probably Babel. He’s got some work to do on the political side of things, but he’s got the fighting spirit and drive for sure. He’s also an Einherjar, so that puts him at the head of the pack,” Jörgen replied.

“...Hmm.” Yuuto crossed his arms in thought, seemingly unconvinced.

“Is there a problem?” Jörgen asked.

“Well, it’s just that he can be a bit...ambitious. That concerns me,” Yuuto replied.

“Is ambition not a necessary trait for a king? I would think that makes him even more of a mark for the position. In fact, unselfish rulers like you are few and far between,” Jörgen said.

Indeed, kings such as Yuuto were rare. Botvid of the Claw Clan, Yngvi of the Hoof Clan, Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan, Hveðrungr of the Panther Clan, Hárbarth of the Spear Clan, and Oda Nobunaga of the Flame Clan had all been possessed by the burning ambition within their hearts to dominate and conquer Yggdrasil. Anyone without that ambition was simply unfit to lead their people.

“The previous patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Fárbauti, was a kind and benevolent man. However, I daresay that generosity of his made him too soft,” Jörgen noted.

Yuuto had no rebuttal to that point. He understood all too well...

Jörgen continued, “For that reason, he had his territory usurped by other clans until the Wolf Clan was nearly extinct. More than generosity, strength is necessary to stand above others, and ambition is what fuels that strength.”

“...I can’t argue with that.” Letting out a sigh, Yuuto gazed up at the ceiling. It seemed he still had some reservations, but he understood that Jörgen had the right of it. That was likely the cause of his hesitation. However, it was a ruler’s duty to make swift decisions. “When I look into those determined eyes of his, I can’t help but feel concerned. However, it’s as you say—the Steel Clan needs a harsh but powerful ruler more than a gentle but weak one.”

“I’ve announced that there’s no doubt the severed head belongs to Suoh-Yuuto, just as you ordered.” Jörgen said.

“Sweet, thanks,” Yuuto replied cheerfully. He and his entourage had gathered at a harbor located far to the east of the Steel Clan’s new home Tarshish. Every single one of his wives and children were present, with none left behind.

“That was a bold move, though, I must say,” Jörgen said, half-exasperated and half-impressed.

“Well, I figured that setting Babel up as my killer would give him the credibility and approval he needs to make his transition to king easier.” Yuuto

grinned mischievously, like a kid up to no good.

In other words, the entire coup d'état had been a ruse from start to finish.

After filling the palace with criminals who were already slated for execution, Yuuto had ordered Babel to storm it. The troops guarding the palace, too, had all received Yuuto's Chalice and were made up of a select few that Yuuto felt he could trust. Thus the truth of the matter would be hidden within darkness forever, leaving only what the people were able to witness with their own eyes, which was that Babel had felled the demonic tyrant Suoh-Yuuto.

"Sorry to leave you with the cleanup, but be sure to watch over him for me. Make sure he doesn't use anything from Yggdrasil or make a writing system," Yuuto said.

"Rest assured, I'll take care of it. I had to drill the same thing into Gendo, so I'm practically an expert at this point," Jörgen replied.

"That so? Man... Now that I think about it, ever since becoming the patriarch of the Wolf Clan I've always saddled you with the troublesome stuff, haven't I? I'm really sorry for that, honestly." Yuuto bowed his head in apology.

"Ha ha ha, don't you worry about that." Jörgen just laughed it off. "I'm proud to be able to support the great Suoh-Yuuto."

"Well, that makes me feel better. Honestly, I'm proud to be thought of so highly by such an incredible man."

"Wh-What...?! I don't deserve that kind of praise! I'll be taking that compliment with me all the way to Valhalla, I hope you know!" Clearly beside himself with emotion, Jörgen scrunched up his face as if to hold back the tears in his eyes.

"Whoa, whoa, don't talk like you're gonna kick the bucket," Yuuto said hastily. "You've still got plenty of life in you, so go on and enjoy yourself for a bunch more years."

Even though his original role had been to keep an eye on Yuuto, Jörgen had been Yuuto's companion for nearly twenty years. They'd rarely fought alongside each other on the battlefield, but had weathered countless battles together within the mystifying world of politics, so Yuuto had always wanted to give

Jörgen his due.

“Ha ha, I suppose you’re right. I’ve got to live long enough to gaze upon Lord Nozomu’s child, at least.”

“Please do, by all means.”

“Father...” Jörgen straightened up suddenly and unsheathed the sword at his hip. Pointing the tip of the blade toward the sky, he held the hilt of the sword in front of his chest.

The Offering of the Sword—one of Yggdrasil’s customary displays of respect, much like a military salute.

“I thank you for your tireless twenty years of service to the Wolf Clan. While you’re still a bit young to say you dedicated your entire life to us, you’ve finally been relieved of duty. I wish you good health and freedom in the hereafter.”

None of Jörgen’s words were mere formalities. He was being completely earnest from the bottom of his heart. As all the memories of the past flashed through his mind, Yuuto felt his chest grow hot.

But he couldn’t cry here. That went against his own creed. Instead, he gave an impish grin and raised his hand in farewell.

“Yeah. You take care too, Jörgen.”

Noah, the flagship galleon that had served as Yuuto's personal vessel ever since he'd fled Yggdrasil, ended up being the only possession he took with him after abdicating from his position as the Steel Clan's reginarch. Officially it was said to be set aflame during the coup d'état, but that was merely a lie, fabricated to make the ship's absence less conspicuous.

Yuuto and his entourage had all gathered in one of the ship's cabins. His formal wife Mitsuki, her son Nozomu and his betrothed Ephelia, Nozomu's sister Mirai, Felicia, her son Rungr and daughter Lia, Sigrún and her daughter Wiz, Linnea and her son Arness, and Fagrahvél and her son Sigurd were all present as well as Ingrid, Albertina, Kristina, Hildegard, and Homura, making for a grand total of nineteen in the room. Ingrid and Albertina also had children with Yuuto and several more of his kids were also on the ship, but they were too young to join the meeting and thus not currently present.

"First off, once again... Thank you all for going along with this." Yuuto began with an apologetic bow. Everyone present was either one of the Steel Clan's most important members or one of their children. If they'd remained within the Steel Clan they would've no doubt come into great wealth, ensuring they'd be able to live comfortably for the rest of their lives. Yuuto was also initially torn on the decision to relinquish his position as reginarch, wondering if continuing to rule would be more beneficial for his family in the long run, but his desire to be free won out in the end. When all was said and done, he'd already done more than enough for the clan. Those were his honest feelings on the matter.

Though this whole scheme was the height of selfishness, everyone currently present had unequivocally supported Yuuto's decision, agreeing to join him on this brand-new voyage. He couldn't be more grateful.

"So the plan right now is to make our base the island we're currently heading to, where we're gonna live at our own pace as merchants. I suspect we'll have to deal with quite a few hardships before our venture starts to bear fruit, so I'll need all of your support until then," Yuuto explained.

A life of freedom sounded good on paper, but if they wanted to eat, they were going to have to make money somehow. Truthfully, Yuuto hadn't been beyond wanting to withdraw a retirement fund from the Steel Clan's coffers,

but the clan's finances had taken a hefty hit as the quality of Europe's soil had been woefully poor compared to the richness of the Fertile Crescent—a stretch of land spanning from northern Egypt, in the crescent shape it was so named for, through parts of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel before finally ending between the borders of southern Iraq and Iran. With that in mind, Yuuto decided, in the end, to leave that money behind to aid his successors, turn *Noah* into a trading vessel, and dabble in mercantilism instead.

"Well, I won't deny that, but I gotta say, Dad, I wish you'd discussed this with me sooner," grumbled Nozomu, his hand resting on his cheek. "After all, you made me think all this time that I was gonna be the þjóðann."

"I thought you didn't want to?" Yuuto replied.

"Well, you could have at least told me, dammit! Yeah, I didn't want to do it, but don't you think this is a bit too important for you to just go ahead and decide on your own?! I mean, this is a big deal concerning my future!" Nozomu yelled in response.

"Yeah, you're right. You're already of age and married besides. I probably should've at least talked about it with you first," Yuuto conceded.

"'Probably,' my ass! Quit treating me like a little kid, Dad!" Nozomu pursed his lips in a pout, ready to argue with his father. Next to him, his wife Ephelia wore a flustered expression. Perhaps she thought Yuuto would scold Nozomu for his insubordination. But Yuuto wasn't upset. On the contrary...

"Heh heh heh..." He let out a chuckle. After all, Nozomu was asserting that he was already a fully grown adult—just like a kid would. Yuuto had done the very same thing in his youth, so he couldn't help but find it amusing. However, it seemed Yuuto's behavior only served to stoke Nozomu's ire further.

"Wh-What's so funny?!" an incensed Nozomu barked.

"Nothin'. Just reflecting on how much you've grown," Yuuto said with a snicker.

"Sure seems to me like you're just making fun of me!"

"I didn't mean to. Okay, fine, I get it. I'll discuss things like that with you properly from now on—pfft."

“Quit laughing! Nothing about this is funny!” Apparently under the impression that his father was teasing him, Nozomu’s anger flared up even more, but that made the entire situation even more hilarious to Yuuto. Of course, Yuuto was aware he was in the wrong and that pissing off his son wouldn’t accomplish anything, but he found the whole thing so pleasantly charming that he couldn’t help but chuckle once more.

“Rrrggh! I said, what’s so funny?! Answer me! You lookin’ for a fight, dad?!”

“No, sorry, for real this time. I don’t want to get into it with you, Nozomu, and I didn’t mean to upset you like that either. I apologize, so enough with the intimidation.” He managed to stop himself from laughing and gave an earnest apology. That was because even though he knew it’d be rude to his son, if Nozomu sent any more “threats” like that his way he might seriously burst out laughing.

“Tch, what’s with you, anyway? You’re such an idiot,” Nozomu grumbled. Apparently realizing anything further would be a waste of effort, he averted his gaze with a huff. He didn’t seem satisfied in the least, but for now, it appeared he’d put down his spear.

“Lord Nozomu, I’m sure I need not remind you that your father has survived countless gruesome battles and gone up against many legendarily powerful foes. Forgive my impertinence, but the level of threat you pose to him is akin to a puppy yapping at his heels.” Just when Yuuto had thought he’d extinguished the flame, Sigrún unhesitatingly doused it in oil once more. The air seemed to freeze over almost instantaneously. In truth, that had been exactly what Yuuto was thinking, but even he had the sense not to say it out loud.

When Yuuto cautiously looked over at Nozomu, his face was red and his whole body was shaking, as if he were a bomb about to explode. It seemed that his pride as a man had been severely wounded.

“Y...” Nozomu was clearly about to roar in anger, but then he glanced at the face of Ephelia beside him and managed to suppress the outburst. After taking a deep breath...

“Then I guess I still have a long way to go before I can even hold a candle to my dad, huh?!” he spat hatefully. Truthfully, it wasn’t a good look for him, but

Yuuto's eyes opened in surprise.

"*So it seems he's beginning to acknowledge his own weakness,"* Yuuto thought. It seemed like a simple thing on the surface, but it was easier said than done since pride often got in the way. For Nozomu to realize his own shortcomings was an honest step forward in the right direction, and proof that he had indeed grown. Judging from how he'd stopped himself just now, that was in no small part due to his marriage to Ephelia. *"Well, if that's the case, I suppose I really should quit treating him like a kid so often."*

It was easy for parents to continue to dote on their children as thought they were still young, but they weren't going to remain kids forever just because you wanted them to. Eventually, they were going to grow up and leave the nest. At the very least, it was clear to Yuuto that Nozomu was currently in the process of stretching his wings and preparing to fly.



“Guess I’m getting old,” Yuuto thought wistfully.

Two weeks later, Yuuto and his entourage touched down on one of the islands that were known collectively as the Cyclades back in the twenty-first century, located within the Aegean Sea. He could see the sun-dried mudbrick buildings populating the rolling hills in the distance.

“Well guys, this is it. Our new home,” Yuuto pronounced proudly.

“Wow, looks like things are really taking shape here,” Mitsuki said, looking impressed.

“Makes sense. We did kick things off a year ago after all,” Yuuto replied, the corner of his mouth turning up in a sly grin. When he’d sent a crew to investigate last year, he’d learned that there had been a massive volcanic eruption during the time of the residents’ grandparents’ grandparents. Apparently quite destructive, it had wiped out much of the central Cyclades where there had been a large island previously. After a session of internet searches, Yuuto had determined that it was most likely what was now known in modern times as the great Minoan eruption of 1628 BCE. One theory even suggested that the calamity, which had affected the entire Aegean Sea, had been the original basis for Plato’s Atlantis theory. “*This too must be fate,”* Yuuto had thought at the time.

After the eruption, the islands of Cyclades had been largely abandoned, and he knew until 197 BCE the volcano would remain dormant. In addition, it didn’t rain very often in the Cyclades—its annual rain density was less than 400 milliliters—so it was the optimal climate to use the sun-dried bricks he was used to. In other words, there was no better location to call home.

“Lord Reginarch, it’s been a while! Welcome back!”

“Lord Reginarch, thanks for all your hard work!”

“All hail Lord Reginarch!” The moment that Yuuto exited the ship and touched down on land, an eager mob of over two hundred, consisting of his most devout followers and their families, ran to greet him. They’d all known about Yuuto’s plan to retire beforehand and had asked to come along. In truth, nearly a thousand of his subjects had expressed interest in joining Yuuto, but he’d had to narrow it down to two hundred in the end, as taking all one thousand along simply wasn’t feasible. Many of them were veteran Múspell unit members

who'd kept Yuuto and his family safe for many years now as royal guards, but the sworn children, sisters, and brothers underneath his other wives were also in the mix. Yuuto had sent them all to the island a year ago to prepare adequate housing—both in terms of quantity and quality.

"Hey guys." Yuuto raised a hand to greet them back. "I can't thank you enough for all your hard work. You've sure got things looking good here!" With a limited amount of personnel on the island, he honestly hadn't anticipated that they'd be able to make this much progress in only a year. Just by looking at how much they'd already accomplished, it was clear how much effort had gone into it. As their superior, it was his duty to recognize and reward those efforts—the moment he thought that, he chided himself for thinking so snobbishly.

"Lord Reginarch, welcome back. It's been a while, hasn't it?" An elderly man approached him.

"Oh, hey, Ginnar! I haven't seen you in forever!" Yuuto's reply was as if he'd come across an old friend.

Upon taking the old adage "start with the small things" to heart, Yuuto had brought Ginnar into his service back when he'd still been patriarch of the Wolf Clan. Even after becoming reginarch of the Steel Clan Yuuto had continued to use Ginnar's wealth of experience as a merchant to maintain diplomatic relations with the clans all across Yggdrasil, and upon migrating to the New World his knowledge of commerce had been key in supplying goods and opening up new markets. Put simply, he was a reliable, influential man who had always had the Steel Clan's back.

"Let me thank you once more for coming along," Yuuto began.

"Ha, after such a fervent invitation from our Lord Reginarch, how was I supposed to refuse?" Ginnar interjected with a wistful grin, followed by a shrug.

While everyone else had taken Yuuto's hand without even a moment's hesitation, Ginnar's circumstances were a bit different. While it was true that Yuuto had decided to become a merchant, he was a complete novice in that department, and trying to cultivate a society of two hundred without even knowing the tricks of the trade would have been tantamount to sentencing them all to death. As such, he needed an old hat like Ginnar at his disposal who

could navigate the world of mercantilism, so Yuuto had forcibly recruited him.

“I really do appreciate it, though. By the way, I’m not the reginarch anymore, so keep that in mind, okay?” He spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. Truthfully, hearing everyone say “Lord Reginarch, Lord Reginarch” had bothered him. After finally laying down that burden, being referred to by that name felt unpleasant.

“Then what would you like to be called?” Ginnar asked.

“How about my name? I’d probably prefer that the most,” Yuuto replied.

“Oh, I could never...!”

“It isn’t that big of a deal, is it?” Yuuto scratched his head in vexation. He was no longer the reginarch or anything special like that, so he’d prefer to be approached frankly, like a normal human. It seemed that was a tall ask for his followers, however. Glancing around, he saw everyone shaking their heads no vehemently.

“Dammit, looks like they can’t help but treat me like some sort of deity.” While Yuuto didn’t value himself that highly, if one looked at his accomplishments through an objective lens it was probably no wonder they felt that way. In fact, if Yuuto were in their shoes he’d probably wither in his own presence as well.

“Hrm... Then what should I get you guys to call me?” he asked the crowd before him.

“‘Former Reginarch,’ perhaps? Or ‘Your Former Majesty’?” one replied.

“Mm, that seems kind of silly since I’m still working to found a new society as we speak. Also, both of those make me sound like I’m at least a hundred years old.” Yuuto scrunched up his face in displeasure. While those monikers certainly did honor the status Yuuto had held, he was still only in his midthirties. He didn’t want one that made him sound like an old fart.

“Then how about just a standard ‘Boss’?” Mitsuki struck her palm with her fist as though she’d hit upon something brilliant.

“Ah yeah, that’s a great idea!” Yuuto snapped his fingers. “That works, since I’m gonna be the head of a trading firm! Then, from now on you can address me

as the boss of Iárnviðr Trading Company!”

“Boss, is it? All right, I understand. Then that will be how I’ll refer to you from now on. But... You said ‘Iárnviðr Trading Company’ just now, did you not?” Ginnar’s eyes softened as if reminiscing on a fond memory. Perhaps he was recalling the familiar scenery of the town that had long since sunk beneath the ocean waves. Yuuto, too, gave a solemn nod.

“That’s like my second home, after all. I have a lot of memories there. It’s the least I can do to name my company after it in its honor,” Yuuto replied.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea.” The elderly man approved.

“Sweet! All right then, you guys, this moment marks the birth of the Iárnviðr Trading Company!” Yuuto thrust his fist in the air triumphantly.

“Yeaaaah!” When he did, everyone else followed suit, letting out cries of vigor and excitement as they thrust their fists upwards. *“With this level of hot-bloodedness it feels more like we’re going to war than founding a trading company,”* Ginnar thought, but wisely kept that comment to himself.

The lives of the newly retired Yuuto and his crew had finally begun.

ACT 2

Egypt—one of the four great civilizations of the world. People were already settling and growing crops there as early as 5000 BCE. While much of it was dominated by infertile desert, every summer the inundation of the Nile River moisturized the ground, creating rich soil. The area they cultivated with this boon came to be known as “Kemet,” meaning “the black lands,” which referred to the dark soil the Nile blessed them with annually. The land would not be known as
“Egypt” until much later on. Time continued to pass, and civilizations within the land continued to rise and fall until finally, in 3500 BCE, the land was consolidated into two main regions: Upper Egypt, dominated by the upper basin of the Nile, and Lower Egypt, occupied by the Nile’s lower basin. And in 3150 BCE, the pharaoh Narmer of Upper Egypt conquered Lower Egypt, bringing it under his rule and unifying the two Egypts in the process, giving rise to what is now known as the First Dynasty of Egypt. Several other dynasties subsequently rose up and crumbled until 16 BCE, when Ahmose I expelled the Hyksos from Lower Egypt and unified the country once more, ushering in the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt...

“Tch, Mother understands nothing!” Within a room of the Great Temple of Amen, a young man spat vitriol. Looking to be in his midtwenties, he possessed piercing eyes, a muscular build, and a dominating presence that called to mind that of a lion or tiger. From that alone, there was little doubt that this man was destined for greatness. His name was Thutmose III, and he currently stood at the apex of Kemet as its pharaoh. However, ever since his infancy his stepmother Hatshepsut had in fact held all the power, relegating his status to a mere figurehead.

“Why must we settle things calmly? Peacefully? Amicably? Nonsense. Those Mittani barbarians formed an alliance to bring Kemet to its knees, took back the city of Megiddo, erased the hegemony of the Four Regions Kibratim Arba’im, and you’re still going on about *peace?!*” Unable to find another outlet for his anger, he slammed his fist on top of a nearby desk. Half of that anger was

directed toward himself. Despite the severity of the situation, he was simply too powerless to usurp authority from his mother. While her blunders concerning the Four Regions were egregious indeed, Kemet itself was currently at peace and its citizens were living in the lap of luxury, so she had many supporters.

"The barbarians will have a hard time invading thanks to Kemet's geography. All we need to do is hold the line."

"We have the blessing of Mother Nile on our side, after all."

"What else could we possibly require?"

Each was an excuse or deflection Thutmose III had heard time and again from those in the royal palace whenever the idea to change the status quo had cropped up.

"Cowards, all of them! Have we as a society all forgotten the humiliation our predecessors suffered at the hands of the Hyksos?!" Kemet's geography may have made it difficult for outsiders to invade, but Thutmose III had learned enough from history to know that wasn't an absolute. Kemet wasn't infallible, nor impenetrable. After taking Megiddo with so little resistance, no doubt that fact had become clear to the anti-Kemet alliance as well. At this rate, there was nothing stopping them from coming after the Nile's blessing next.

"By the time that happens, it will be too late. We must reclaim Megiddo first, and show them the true might of Kemet!" Thutmose III gripped his fist tightly, determination burning within his heart. Though currently a pharaoh in name only, this was the man who would one day go on to conquer the most territory in all of Egypt's history and gain a reputation as the "Egyptian Napoleon."

"I see, so this is Megiddo." Muttering to himself, Thutmose III gazed up curiously at the towering fortress wall before him. There was nothing like this in Kemet—being surrounded by a desert was enough of a defense on its own. Well, "nothing" was saying a bit much—there were a few fortifications here and there, but it was the first time he'd ever laid eyes on one this majestic.

"Ph-Pharaoh, forgive my impertinence, but we shouldn't be here. We'll only put ourselves at risk with these insufficient numbers." The young man cowering behind him, his foster brother and trusted confidant, spoke timidly. His name

was Radames, and was serving as Thutmose's bodyguard today. He was certainly loyal and knew his way around a sword; however...

"Fool, don't call me pharaoh here. Doing so places us at great risk of discovery." For all his strength, Radames was a coward and a dunce, marring an otherwise shining jewel.

"H-Huh?! F-Forgive me, Lord Thut!"

"You're forgiven. Just be careful, and calm down, will you? You're going to make us seem suspicious."

"F-Forgive me!" Seeing Radames retreat further and further into himself, Thutmose let out an exasperated sigh. He could be the ultimate bodyguard if he just had a bit more constitution to him—although he acknowledged people couldn't change overnight.

"Well, be at ease for now. I highly doubt anyone suspects that I came here to snoop around." A wide, mischievous grin appeared on his lips. They had come to Megiddo for reconnaissance. By staking out the city, Thutmose hoped to piece together some sort of strategy for a counterattack. Naturally, it was bold and reckless for a pharaoh to take it upon himself to do grunt work like this, but failure was absolutely no longer an option. He had to see it with his own eyes to make absolutely certain. As it happened, he'd already learned much. Particularly valuable was a greater understanding of the geography of the city of Megiddo. There was only so much one could learn from hearsay alone.

"Seems like a direct attack will be more difficult than I anticipated." The towering Carmel Mountain Range to the west would be particularly problematic. They would have to either circle around the mountains to the north or south, but either option would involve a time-consuming detour. In war, pincer attacks were usually the quickest path to victory, but with the mountain in the way it would be difficult to coordinate. Their logistics would be stretched thin. What's more, if they chose to circle the mountain the enemy would have already deduced the Kemet army had only two options and already planned a suitable counterattack. No matter how he looked at it, it was too risky.

"Next!"

“Oh, looks like it’s my...no, *our* turn.” Once the guardsman at the gate called for the next person in line, they paid the entry fee and passed through the gates.

“Whoa!” Thutmose III let out a cry of amazement as he marveled at the scenery of the city spread out before his eyes. The bricks used to build the city were the same sun-dried ones they used in Kemet, but perhaps because this was a different location, they gave off a different impression. It made him realize he really was in the Four Regions. The uniqueness of the temple he spotted in the distance was particularly striking. While Kemet’s pyramids were made of limestone and were impeccably triangular, Megiddo’s ziggurats consisted of brick and didn’t resemble triangles at all, thus lacking beauty and finesse.

“Well, it seems they’re no match for us when it comes to aesthetics, at least.” Thutmose III said with a scornful laugh. This city prided itself on these ziggurats—from just that fact alone, the crudeness of their technology was more than apparent. If he had to guess, he’d say Kemet’s technology was probably a hundred, no, perhaps even two hundred years ahead.

“So our true enemy is Hattusa, then,” Thutmose III decided. The Kingdom of Hattusa’s army further north was more coordinated and powerful than Kemet’s could ever hope to manage. Rumor had it that they employed the use of a “divine metal,” and as improbable as it sounded, it was apparently the truth.

“Take note, their king, Tahurwaili, is not to be underestimated,” Radames explained.

Tahurwaili—the current ruler of Hattusa. Known as one of the strongest warriors around, his name had even traveled as far as Kemet. Having quashed one rebellion in Hattusa after another no sooner than they had cropped up, King Huzzjia I, the king at the time, had this to say of his ability: *“Tahurwaili’s spear is worth its weight in gold.”*

Though he’d left Hattusa around twenty years ago, he had suddenly returned ten years later, built up an army in the several years that followed, and usurped the throne. There was no doubt he was just as formidable as the rumors suggested.

“And yet, because of the way he stole the throne, it seems his tenure as king is on shaky ground.” The corner of Thutmose III’s mouth turned up into a sly grin. The biggest threat in the anti-Kemet alliance was unable to make a move. In other words, there was no better time to act. Therefore, he wanted to make this reconnaissance mission a success at any cost.

“Now, now, Lord Thut. Let’s leave the complicated political talk for later and wet our whistles with a stiff drink first. It’s been a long journey, so don’t you think we should take a breather for a bit?” With an ingratiating smile, Radames pointed to a sign indicating a tavern and offered to lead the way. *“Wimp,”* Thutmose III almost said out loud, but then reminded himself that it was also a leader’s duty to keep his soldiers content. “All right, I suppose,” he said with a nod, and they made their way to the tavern.

Thutmose III was hard on others just as much as he was hard on himself. However, toughness alone didn’t get people to follow you. Radames might’ve been a hopeless coward, but as much as that upset him, his timidness also functioned as a good indicator of when he was being too strict.

“Welcome, welcome!” The middle-aged man at the counter, likely the owner, waved them in with a gruff voice. However, that greeting went in one of Thutmose III’s ears and out the other. That was because there was a single area within the tavern that had immediately grabbed his attention.

Thutmose III was, by his own estimation, one of the three greatest warriors in the entirety of Egypt. Seasoned warriors such as he were able to roughly gauge the strength of their opponent at a perfunctory glance. That was why he could tell.

“Who in the world are *they*?!” he blurted out. On the surface, they appeared to be a group of delicate, incredibly gorgeous women. But the alarm bells that had gone off in his head the moment he’d entered the tavern told him otherwise. He had walked into a den of monsters.

“We made quite a profit this time, didn’t we?” Feeling the hefty weight of the leather bag tied to his waist, Nozomu gave a sly grin. Half a year had passed since starting their trade venture, and he felt he was finally beginning to get the hang of merchant life.

“I’m not a puppy yapping at my dad’s heels anymore, Miss Sigrún. Now this dog has teeth!” he muttered to himself. He hadn’t forgotten what Sigrún had said to him six months ago, and at the time, no one had denied it. Even his own father Yuuto had merely looked away awkwardly. In other words, they had all agreed with Sigrún’s assessment. At the height of his anger, he’d wanted to retaliate, *“You’ll regret underestimating me!”* However, in the end, he’d realized that nothing he could say would change their opinions and that he’d have to prove them wrong with actions, not words. Perhaps fueled by spite, he’d put his nose to the grindstone and fervently studied to become a merchant. Fortunately, judging by this latest transaction it seemed he had some innate talent already. At this pace, he figured, it wouldn’t be long before the name “Iárnviðr Trading Company” was known throughout the entire Orient.

“Tee hee, indeed. With this, even Lady Sigrún will surely see you in a new light, Nozomu.” Ephelia, the woman he’d looked up to like an older sister from an early age, who’d gone on to become his crush, and who had officially become his wife three months ago following a ceremony held on the island that was their base, was practically beaming sitting beside him. Just seeing her gentle smile was enough to set Nozomu’s heart aflutter. Bashful, he turned away from her. However, she was the entire reason he’d tried so hard to become a merchant in the first place. Outside of wanting to be acknowledged by his father, a part of him also wanted to gain the means necessary to provide for his woman on his own merits.

“Not just Miss Sigrún, but my good-for-nothing dad too. I’ll show them all,” Nozomu spat as he made a fist. After retiring, his father Suoh Yuuto had started to take it easy—too easy, in fact. He’d left all of the actual management of the company to Linnea and spent every hour of every day goofing off with his children, fishing, playing Othello or shogi with his wives, and currently had taken an interest in sugoroku, essentially a Japanese version of Parcheesi. In the six months since they’d touched down on the island, Yuuto hadn’t done

anything even resembling work.

“Goodness, ‘good-for-nothing’ is a bit much, wouldn’t you say? After all, he worked himself to the bone for twenty years. Don’t you think he deserves a bit of a break?”

“I think you’re all too soft on my dad.” When Ephelia tried to smooth it over, Nozomu mercilessly cut her words down. Yuuto was still only a little over thirty. He still had so much life in him, so why was he already acting like a retired old codger? What kind of man lazes around and lets others do all his work for him?!

“I’m being serious here, Ephy. I never wanted to see Dad be this...*lame.*” Everyone always put Yuuto on a pedestal, gushing over how cool he was, but Nozomu didn’t get what was so cool about having a lazy father. Truthfully, he was disappointed in him, and it upset him even more that his wives allowed him to conduct himself in that manner. He fervently wished that just once, one of them would give his father a swift kick in the rear.

“If I show him that he’s not even on my radar anymore, I’m hoping I can get him to wake up and see sense.” If that managed to rouse him, that would be great. If it didn’t and he continued to laze around, then that would just prove he was never worth looking up to to begin with. Above all, though, he wanted Ephelia to see how pathetic his father was for herself. For whatever reason, she currently held Yuuto in incredibly high esteem. Whenever they were together, she often had nothing but words of gratitude and respect for him, which rubbed Nozomu the wrong way. He wanted to show Ephelia that he was much cooler than his dad ever was.

“Young master, forgive me, but it seems some suspicious individuals are at the tavern entrance,” his escort Hildegard said in hushed tones.

“Huh?” He cast a glance over at the entrance to the tavern and saw what looked like a group of travelers, all staring in his direction openmouthed, as if in shock.

“What’s up with them?” he asked, only to be answered by another woman.

“My, my, seems you still have a long way to go, young master.” It was Kristina. She’d come along with them as an intelligence gatherer and adviser. She was as knowledgeable as she was beautiful, but her cold, unfriendly aura and acid

tongue were often hard for Nozomu to deal with.

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Nozomu replied.

“Those guys are all super strong,” Albertina answered, stuffing her face with a meat kebab. As Kristina’s older sister, she was no less beautiful, but perhaps because of the gentle expression she usually wore, she exuded a warm, fuzzy aura that made her feel much more approachable in comparison.

“Really?” Homura tilted her head in apparent confusion. Though she was already such an outlier when it came to physical strength that she probably wasn’t a good judge in the first place.

At any rate, if those three said the suspicious travelers were that skilled, then there was no doubt.

“Hm...” Nozomu observed the group more carefully. He was Sigrún’s beloved pupil, after all—despite not having a rune of his own, his sword skills were such that he’d already earned Sigrún’s approval to join the Múspell unit. As such, he could roughly gauge an opponent’s strength by observing their posture.

“I see now. They certainly do seem to be rather impressive fighters. Much too skilled to be mere bodyguards for a merchant cabal,” Nozomu observed.

“Oh come on, young master, please tell me you know better than to just keep staring—” It seemed that Kristina’s warning came too late. The man in front of the group—likely the leader—locked eyes with Nozomu. And in the next instant, a deathly chill ran down Nozomu’s spine. His body started trembling from its very core, and his teeth began to chatter.

“Heh. I was merely returning the favor since it’s rude to stare, but perhaps I laid it on too thick,” the leader of the bunch said as he approached him with a sneer. Nozomu didn’t even dare to retort back. He wasn’t sure why, but he couldn’t help but be terrified of this man. “In that sense, I have to commend the rest of you. Rather than being intimidated by me in the least, you just leisurely went on enjoying your meal.”

Nozomu looked to his left and right. Neither Hildegard, Kristina, or Albertina had changed expression in the slightest. As for Homura, she was too busy chowing down on her meal to care about what was happening. Either it didn’t

interest her, or she was just really hungry. Ephelia's expression was tense, but she didn't seem to be anywhere near as frightened as Nozomu. He alone had been completely taken in by this man. Realizing that, he was suddenly overcome by a wave of shame.

"I—I wasn't sca—"

"Hm?"

Nozomu tried to retort, but the second the man's eyes trained on him, his words left him. He felt like a frog being stared down by a snake. Was it the man's presence that was so overwhelming? At any rate, it felt like it was gnawing at his heart, causing him to cower almost out of instinct.

"I have no use for the likes of you. Weaklings can just sit down and shut up," the man spat.

Unable to do anything but stay silent, Nozomu drooped his head in shame.

"Wh-Who the hell is this?!" If he had to compare it to anything, it was similar to the bloodlust Sigrún exuded when she faced off against him. But Nozomu was able to handle something of that level by now. He didn't think this man was stronger than Sigrún, so why was he so helplessly rooted to the spot by his overwhelming presence?

"My, did I just hear you calling our young master a weakling? I can't let that slide, I'm afraid." Kristina responded with an icy grin.

"Why are you provoking him?!" Nozomu wanted to shout in panic. Nothing good could come of getting in a fight with this guy, so why was she egging him on?!

"Keh heh heh..." But contrary to Nozomu's expectations, the man just snickered in amusement. What was going on? "You're the first woman that's ever stood up to me, save for my stepmother. Interesting. Give me your name," he demanded.

"Isn't it common etiquette for you to give your own name first? I believe even a child knows that," Kristina responded.

"Hoh?" The man let out a scoff. The moment he did, the air grew dense with

his intimidating aura, so thick that Nozomu could barely breathe. Despite the warmth inside the tavern, he felt like his body had frozen over.

“It’s even more pathetic that you have to intimidate a woman into telling you her name,” Kristina continued.

“Heh... I suppose it’s as you say.” The moment he snickered, the pressure in the air immediately let up. Finally able to breathe again, Nozomu sighed in relief. He was saved. If that pressure had lasted any longer he might’ve seriously died of asphyxiation.

“My name is Thutmose, Pharaoh of Kemet. Thutmose III, to be exact.” The man—Thutmose—finally gave his name. He’d also informed then that he was from Kemet—the large country to the southwest of Megiddo, if Nozomu recalled correctly. If he really was the ruler of that land, that would certainly explain why he gave off such a commanding presence.

“I-Is it really okay for you to reveal yourself in a place like this?!” one of his entourage stammered.

“Silence. I am greeting my future wife for the first time. It’s only proper that I display my sincerity,” Thutmose replied.

“Huh?! Future wife?!” While he didn’t let out a cry of surprise, Nozomu was completely baffled. One thing was snowballing into another, and unable to follow the conversation, his confusion grew with each passing moment. Just what had prompted this sudden turn of events?

“Now then, beautiful, strong-willed woman. May I have your name?”

“Kristina.”

“Kristina, is it? What a lovely name. Your spirit has captured my heart, and you possess the qualities necessary for a wife of mine. Please, stay beside me and...”

“Sorry.” Kristina cut Thutmose off before he could say anything further. *“Serves you right!”* thought Nozomu, but he certainly knew better than to say that out loud. He wouldn’t dare.

“Don’t tell me it’s because you’re already betrothed to *him?*” Thutmose

jabbed a thumb over at Nozomu. That pissed Nozomu off, but he didn't have the guts to say so.

"No, the one I love is elsewhere," Kristina replied.

"Oh? Then I'm rather jealous of that person. But I wonder if they have the capacity to handle you?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. That person accepts all that I am, and I've devoted my life solely to them."

"Is that so? Then that makes me even more envious."

"Huh? You have someone like that, Kris?!" Her older sister Albertina went wide-eyed as though it was news to her. Of course, the one that Kristina loved more than anybody else was Albertina herself, but Albertina seemed to be the only one that wasn't aware. "No way... It can't be Father, right?! You've been holding back because of me?!"

"No, Al. You're only making the conversation more complicated, so settle down and eat your meal."

"Eh?! Then, will you tell me afterward?!"

"Sorry. It's a secret."

"Aww!"

"Now, now, settle down. You've got some soup on your face."

"Huh?! Where?!"

"Right here." Kristina brushed her finger along Albertina's cheek and stuck it in her own mouth. The expression on her face was gentle, a far cry from her usual icy demeanor. It was as plain as day who the one she loved really was.

"How unproductive." Thutmose, apparently having realized what Kristina was getting at, gave a bitter half-smile.

"That's my call to make," Kristina replied icily.

"It's a waste of a good woman such as yourself. I ought to show you how much better being with a man can be," he said with a grin. His voice was full of confidence, as though he was certain he could get anyone to do his bidding. But

he wasn't putting on airs either. He had a mysterious charisma to him that backed up those words of his, that could get anyone to follow him if he so desired.

Those charismatic powers of his didn't work on Kristina, it seemed. "I'll pass on that. I've met plenty of men better than you, at least." She cut him down without hesitation.

"Does this woman not know fear?!" Nozomu, barely managing to contain himself, yelled internally. In fact, save for Hildegard, Albertina, and Homura, the other soldiers tasked with protecting Nozomu were also overwhelmed by Thutmose's presence and were wincing in fear. The four women who maintained calm expressions were actually the odd ones out.

"Hoh, better men than me? Then, by all means, bring them here." He seemed to be amused, but Thutmose's voice became fierce, and the tension in the room thickened once more.

"Again?! Does this guy not have any restraint?! Gimme a break! Get me outta here!" Nozomu screamed in his heart, when...

"Oh, there you are. Yo, did I make you wait a while?"

The completely out-of-place, leisurely voice of his father echoed through the tavern.

"Who is this man coming from nowhere all of a sudden?!" was Thutmose's initial thought. There was a silver-haired and blonde-haired woman to the left and right of the man as well, but they barely even registered within his consciousness. The man looked to be anywhere from his late twenties to his mid-thirties and seemed to not have a care in the world. In other words, weak, by Thutmose's standards. His impression of the unknown man quickly shifted, however. Something about him was strangely frightening. For some reason, Thutmose got the feeling he was on the edge of a sheer precipice, staring down into an endless abyss.

"Oh look, perfect timing. Here's someone who's far more of a man than you'll ever be." Kristina snickered as though she could see through Thutmose's fear.

He could not show weakness in front of the woman he'd fallen for. He glared at the man who'd appeared out of nowhere and released his aura of intimidation that had caused so many to kneel before him. Despite Thutmose's best efforts, however, the man just blinked in confusion, as though he didn't know why he was being pressured in the first place. He didn't look intimidated or frightened in the least.

"Heh heh...interesting!" Thutmose thought. Kristina had said this man was more of a man than he was, so there was no need to hold back. With a carnivorous grin, he turned the pressure up to max.

"Yikes!"

"What the?!"

Even the other tavern patrons let out yelps of shock and fear. Thutmose had called forth a magnitude of presence only a great king could manifest to intimidate everyone in the building.

"So, uh, did my son do something to upset you by any chance?" Even after taking Thutmose's full-powered aura at point-blank range, the man showed no sign of nervousness. He wasn't pretending to be unfazed either—Thutmose's aura was simply like a light breeze to him.

"Hm, well, as a parent it'd be intrusive of me to get involved in a fight between children, but it looks like this might be a little hard for Nozomu to handle on his own. All right, then, I'll settle this." As he said it, a mischievous grin appeared on the man's face, and in the next instant...

"Whoooaaa?!"

A chill of terror like nothing he'd ever felt before in his life ran down Thutmose's spine. Sweat began to pour from his face in an instant. Even his stepmother Hatshepsut, the queen of Kemet who held ultimate power over him, had never inspired such raw fear.



The strength in his knees left him, and unable to keep upright, he fell to the ground helplessly on his rear.

“So with that said, would the face I pulled just now get you to forgive the kid?” The man slapped him on the shoulder. He was being completely looked down upon, he knew. But in truth, Thutmose’s body and spirit had completely folded to the man’s terrifying aura. Overcome with embarrassment, his face grew hot.

“All right, now that that’s settled, let’s eat! Which of these is the tastiest, Al?” Even more irritating was the fact that the man had already lost interest in Thutmose and was now focused on the tavern’s food offerings. He wasn’t even on the man’s radar anymore. That made Thutmose tremble with rage.

“H-Hey, you bastard! Get back here!”

“Oh? Looks like you still have enough fight left to bark, at least. You’ve got a promising future ahead of you.” Taking his seat, the man grinned amusedly. That was when Thutmose realized—the man probably wasn’t even aware he was looking down on him.

“T-Tell me your name!” Thutmose had no intention of letting it end like this. The grin on the man’s face only grew larger.

“Me? I’m Suoh Yuuto,” he replied coolly.

That nonchalant attitude of his ticked Thutmose off. There was only room in the sky for one sun to shine down on the people. Thutmose swore in his heart right then—he would definitely crush this man into oblivion.

“...Seriously?” Nozomu watched Thutmose’s retreating figure in a daze, unable to fully process what just happened between Thutmose and Yuuto. However, he at least understood that the moment Thutmose had gone up against Yuuto, all that arrogance and bravado had gone out the window and he’d been reduced to a sniveling coward. The lion he’d once been had been tamed like a pet cat.

“Hilda, you’re Nozomu’s bodyguard today, are you not? What do you think you’re doing, leisurely enjoying your meal while letting a squabble like that happen?” Sigrún glared daggers at Hildegard. Nozomu couldn’t help but feel fear at the words, “a squabble like that.” It meant that the threat Thutmose had posed hadn’t intimidated Sigrún in the least.

“Ah, well, about that, Kris told me to hold off. She said this would be a good opportunity for our young master to learn about the outside world...” Hildegard explained.

“Ah, I see. Yeah, that guy just now was a good example of what you can encounter out there,” Sigrún said, seemingly agreeing with Kristina’s earlier decision.

“A good example?! What exactly was good about that guy?!” Nozomu wanted to blurt out, but it seemed that Yuuto didn’t think anything more of the man than that.

“Come to think of it, who was that guy? He didn’t seem to be your average vagabond,” Yuuto asked.

“He called himself Thutmose III. Pharaoh of Kemet, or something,” Kristina replied.

“Pbbt!” Yuuto spat out the grape wine he’d been drinking, spraying it all over Nozomu in front of him.

“Dad?!”

“S-Sorry about that. But did you say ‘Thutmose III?’” Clearing his throat, he asked Kristina for confirmation.

“Yes. Someone you know?” Kristina asked.

“Yeah, you could say that. He was known everywhere, as the ‘Napoleon of Egypt.’ In the history I’m familiar with, he was a famous legend. A hero who seized enough territory to make Egypt the largest it’d ever been,” Yuuto explained.

“Egy...huh?” Of course, in the current era, the nation of Egypt did not yet exist, so Kristina’s confusion was unsurprising.

“In other words, he was a great enough man to still be known even 2500 years from now,” she muttered thoughtfully, her expression a bit more stern. Nozomu, too, had heard the story of how his father Yuuto and mother Mitsuki had come from 2500 years in the future. Truthfully, it sounded like a tall tale, but Kristina, Bára, Fagrahvél, Felicia, and the rest of the Steel Clan elites seemed

to believe it wholeheartedly. For so many of them to go along with this ridiculous story, they likely had some reason to believe it, something that unequivocally backed up that claim.

“Yeah. In that case, maybe he’s too monstrous of an opponent to use as an example for Nozomu after all.”

“The fact that you just shut a man like that up with a single glance proves that you’re even more of a monster, Father,” Kristina replied.

“...Well, at this point, the guy’s still young. I have more years on him,” Yuuto explained.

“Is that so? I seem to recall you being even more of a threat when you were his age, though?”

“Well, you know, it’s easy to glorify the past by misremembering, and all that.”

“Glorify the past, huh? Al, Hilda, and I all brushed off that Thutmose guy’s aura like it was nothing, you know.”

“R-Really?”

“Compared to the commanding aura you and Nobunaga created during the Stórk conference a few years back, that was like a warm breeze. It was all thanks to you, Father,” Kristina said, somewhat ironically. Yuuto only gave a bashful smile at that.

Nozomu, however, wasn’t concerned with his father’s reaction so much as what Kristina had said. Thutmose’s aura had been like a warm breeze to them?! In that case, just what kind of hell had transpired at the Stórk conference?! Just imagining it made him shudder.

After their meal, they made their way back to the ship. Nozomu was unsteady on his feet, downtrodden and still shell-shocked from earlier.

“Now have you started to realize how great your father is?” Kristina asked him, matching his pace. Nozomu felt his face growing hot from overwhelming embarrassment. He knew all too well now. He was still just a little kid that

didn’t know his place. However, he had to accept that truth. Trying to deny it now would make him look even more pathetic than he already was.

“Miss Rún once told me something. She said, ‘realizing the strength of your opponent is strength in itself,’” Nozomu said.

“Oh?”

“At the time, I took that to mean if you didn’t estimate the strength of your opponent before a battle, you’d regret it. But now I see that interpretation was wrong.”

“Hm, how so?”

“Sometimes an opponent is so far beyond your level that it’s impossible to tell how powerful they are. I now realize that that’s the gap between me and Dad.” Nozomu gritted his teeth. With a single glare from Thutmose III, he’d been rendered as immobile as if he’d been bound by rope. Yet that very same person had been unable to withstand Yuuto’s aura. That was the harsh reality. The memory of boasting about surpassing his father earlier now brought him great shame. To Yuuto, those words would probably sound like the mewlings of a kitten.

“Tee hee. Well, no need to get all down over it. Your dad is just a monster, that’s all,” Kristina snickered. Nozomu honestly agreed. Who else but a monster could treat someone whose name still remained in history after 2500 years like a little kid?

“But even if that’s true, how can I ever come into my own as a man if I can’t find a way to escape from his shadow?” Nozomu spat hatefully. If he was being honest with himself, the height of the wall he had to scale was enough to make him despair. He was almost ready to give up right this instant if he could have allowed himself to.

In the midst of his angst, he stole a glance at his wife Ephelia.

“Her first love...was Father, apparently.” He remembered hearing that way back when. Knowing that, he couldn’t admit defeat so easily. As a man and as Ephelia’s husband, he couldn’t bear to keep losing to his rival in love. He wanted Ephelia to be proud of choosing him. He didn’t want her to wish that

she'd chosen Yuuto instead. He had no choice but to keep chasing after his father's back with everything he had.

"Your heart's in the right place, but you know it's going to be a hard, steep climb ahead, right?" said Kristina. At times like these, he was grateful for her honest, unvarnished assessment.

"Oh yeah. I learned that all too well today." Just when he thought he was about to catch up to his father, it turned out to be a mere mirage, dissipating in the wind. That goal seemed to always be out of reach, far beyond the horizon. He was completely and utterly at a loss. With each passing moment, it became more apparent that having such a gifted father was more of a curse than a blessing.

"Yet you still don't plan on giving up, I see. Hee hee, seems like you're finally becoming a bit more of a man," Kristina replied, perhaps somewhat mockingly.

"A *bit* more, huh? I probably don't wanna know how you thought of me before, then," Nozomu retorted.

"Well, I'll just say I certainly wanted you to grow into your own a bit more before taking a dear friend of mine as your wife," Kristina jabbed playfully.

"Oh, so that's how it is." He'd thought that Kristina had been especially hard on him as of late, but now he understood why. Albertina was in a class all of her own when it came to Kristina's favorites, of course, but he'd often seen Kristina with Ephelia as well, enjoying leisurely chats. Ephelia also saw Kristina as a reliable older sister, he'd heard. In other words, Kristina had likely determined that Nozomu didn't yet meet the qualifications to be a suitable husband for Ephelia.

"Is that why you stopped Hilda back there, then?"

"Does that upset you?"

"Nah, I'm actually grateful you did." It was called a comfort zone for a reason, but refusing to step out of it would mean denying oneself any chance at growth. Nozomu's fervent wish was for everyone to acknowledge him as Ephelia's husband, and to become a man Ephelia would be proud to have married. Getting her close friend Kristina to acknowledge him would be a huge first step

toward that goal.

“Well then, I’ll continue to test you from now on.”

“I’d like to ask you to go easy on me, but that wouldn’t be very manly. Hit me with all you got. Don’t hold back, and feel free to point out any areas where I fall short.”

“Tee hee, I like your resolve. But I won’t let you take back those words now, so be prepared.”

“Yeah, I know.” Nozomu nodded, but inside he gulped in fear. He knew firsthand just how sharp Kristina’s tongue was, and he’d just given it free rein to lash out. That freaked him out a bit, but if he wanted to get any closer to his father’s level, he knew he couldn’t complain.

“Hmm... Miss Kristina’s being awfully nice.”

“Hee hee, that’s right. Kris is always nice!”

“Huh? She’s clearly just enjoying bullying him. You guys are giving her too much credit.”

“My, my.” Kristina turned around, wholly unsurprised at the three presences mouthing off behind her. She hadn’t noticed their approach, but that was hardly anything new considering how skilled they each were in their own right. “Don’t you all know it’s rude to eavesdrop? Homura, Al, Hilda?” She walked away without a single glance backward.

“We weren’t necessarily eavesdropping. We can just hear voices even from far away. Right, Hilda?”

“Right, Homura!”

“The wind told me!” However, the three didn’t seem to mind and trailed behind her. Starting from when they’d first arrived in the New World, the four of them (and Felicia) often spent time together, perhaps because they were similar in age. Their skill levels and personalities were all over the place, but perhaps that unexpectedly balanced them out, as they rarely got into any arguments and had become quite close with each other.

“You guys couldn’t be more off the mark. This is all part of the job. Young master Nozomu is going to inherit the Iárnviðr Trading Company one day, and Ephy’s the perfect bait to get his ass in gear. That’s all,” Kristina stated.

“Hmmm?” Albertina peered directly into Kristina’s face, looking unconvinced.

“How annoying. Don’t think you can figure me out just because you’re the older one.” She returned Albertina’s gaze with a level gaze of her own. “Why would I lie?” she said.

“Mm, I don’t think you’re *lying,* but you’re not telling the whole truth,” Homura replied.

“Yeah, I agree. That’s what it seems like to me too,” agreed Hildegard.

She was cornered by their doubtful stares. They were all skilled enough to where they could sniff out even the slightest emotional shift in someone, even if it wasn’t obvious from their expression or tone. In other words, a troublesome bunch for someone like Kristina.

“Why are you so intent on playing the bad guy?” Homura asked.

“Pfft, at your age, it’s frankly embarrassing,” Hildegard teased.

“That’s just something that Kris does. She’s a good girl at heart, honest,” Albertina explained.

Kristina neither confirmed nor denied their accusations. *“Even if you’ve realized, at least have the common decency not to say it out loud*.*”* Really, they were such nuisances. Good for nothing but making her uncomfortable. And yet, for some reason, she didn’t dislike it when they were all together. If she really thought they were so annoying, she could just refuse to hang out with them. But for some reason, she always tagged along. Almost as though some part of her didn’t find their company that unpleasant. How strange.

“Ggghhh...mgghhh...dammit! Damn it all!” At a guard post a short distance away from Megiddo, Thutmose III was beside himself with rage. The scene at the tavern a short while ago continued to replay in his mind. He had been completely overwhelmed, swallowed whole by that man’s monstrous presence. In the moment, his instincts told him plain as day that he had no chance of

victory against him. However, now that some time had passed and he'd been able to collect his thoughts, he could no longer keep making excuses for his cowardice.

"I'm a pharaoh, dammit! I'm the king among kings who will rule this entire world one day!" Thutmose III believed that with every ounce of his being. He was confident he had the strength and the capability to make it happen. That hubris of his had been completely uprooted just now, but the pride he'd built up over so many years wasn't so easily erased. For all the humiliation he felt, he was ten times as furious, and that anger consumed every inch of his heart.

"Forgive me, my king, but our investigation on Suohyuuto has turned up some results."

"Speak!"

"Yes, my king. We've heard from multiple merchants that this Suohyuuto shares the name of the king far to the west of Ahhiyawa."

"Far to the west of Ahhiyawa, you say?" Thutmose's brow raised.

The merchants of the land of Ahhiyawa, known as Greece in the twenty-first century, would occasionally visit the Orient and Kemet, but this was the first Thutmose had ever heard of there being a land even further west. Normally Thutmose would have no interest in an unknown land that far away, but if this Suohyuuto person was the king of that land it was a different story. Someone commanding that level of presence would undoubtedly set their sights on the Orient next. The reason he was here was probably the same reason Thutmose was—in other words, to invade and make this land his.

"We can't let this territory slip out of our grasp," Thutmose said, biting his thumbnail. His instincts as a warrior told him that in order to bring Suohyuuto down they would need to have five, no, ten times more men than the enemy. In that case, now was the perfect opportunity. He had concealed his identity and status to stealthily observe the area, and there was no sign of Suohyuuto heading up a large army here. If he didn't nip the man in the bud here, he would undoubtedly become Thutmose's greatest threat and swallow up the entire Orient. There was no longer any room for hesitation—now was the time to act.

“West of Ahhiyawa, was it? Then our enemy’s ship is likely docked near the Kishon River. We will chase them down.”

Currently, Thutmose III had an army of around one thousand. Although they were from a different country, his stepmother Hatshepsut had forged an alliance between Kemet and Megiddo, and those soldiers were currently serving as Thutmose’s bodyguards. The enemy, on the other hand, only had around a paltry fifty men at most. His victory was all but assured. This was no time to worry about honor and pride. They didn’t currently have that luxury. As the future conqueror of the world, he couldn’t allow a monster like Suohyuuto to run rampant any longer.

Once they'd departed Megiddo and were on their way back to the ship, Nozomu let out an exhausted sigh. "Man, I feel like I just got thrown from Valhalla into hell."

The disappointment of having severely underestimated the distance to his goal had taken its toll. It was like scaling a mountain, only to look back and realize he'd only climbed as far as the base. Not to mention the peak was so high up that it was obscured by clouds, making it impossible to tell just how much further he had to go. It was enough to make him despair to the point that he was at a loss on how to proceed.

"N-Nozomu, are you all right? Th-The fact that you gave it all you had was so admirable! I'm not just saying that—it really was!" Gripping her fist tightly, his wife Ephelia adamantly supported him. He was grateful for her kindness and knew she was speaking from her heart, but he couldn't in good faith accept her praise. Compared to Thutmose and his father, he was a wimp of a man. Now that he'd realized that fact, it had lodged itself in his heart like a thorn he couldn't remove.

"I appreciate it, Ephy. But it wasn't enough. *I'm* not enough." He bit his lip. He'd tried hard, sure. But it hadn't even been close to sufficient. "I have to give it more than my all. Otherwise, I'll never be able to reach their level."

"...There's nothing that says you have to reach their level, you know."

"Of course there is."

"And what would that be?"

"Everything!" Nozomu shouted. With that sudden outburst, Nozomu ended the conversation. There was no way he could say it out loud—that he wanted to be the type of husband Ephelia could brag about. That he didn't want to lose to the first man his wife had fallen for. If he confessed these feelings to the one he loved, he'd die of embarrassment. Some things needed to stay secret—no matter how much seeing Ephelia's downcast expression hurt his heart.

"Hey, Nozomu, Ephy!" Suddenly Yuuto, who was walking ahead of them, whipped around to face them. His expression was stern. However, he didn't seem upset—rather, he looked anxious about something.

“What’s wrong, dad?”

“There’s a bad aura headed toward us. You guys go on ahead to the ship.”

“Oh, really?” Nozomu scanned the area, trying to sense it for himself, but to no avail. He had no idea what his father was talking about. The sky was clear and blue, and the scenery couldn’t be more peaceful. However, when he glanced over at Albertina, Kristina, Hildegard, and Sigrún, each one of them wore grim expressions. It seemed Yuuto wasn’t just blowing smoke.

“Judging from the strength of the aura, it’s probably Thutmose again. He’s got...around a thousand men with him this time, by my estimation,” Yuuto explained.

“The accuracy of those senses of yours never ceases to amaze, Father,” Kristina said in an exasperated tone.

Yuuto just gave a casual shrug. “It sure is handy at times like these. I wish I could give Rífa my thanks.”

“Then just thank Big Sis Mitsuki.”

“Ha, I suppose. Guess even after all these years, it still hasn’t fully sunken in for me yet that she’s Rífa’s reincarnation.”

Even as the enemy army drew closer, Yuuto and Kristina continued their leisurely chat. As odd as that seemed to Nozomu, it was also reassuring. Then he felt another pang of inferiority within his chest. Rather than having to give his all in every battle, his father was strong enough to be reliable only when it counted and could afford to goof off. That stoked the flames of his jealousy once more.

“Well, at any rate. Nozomu, Ephy, you two get back to the ship. It’s dangerous to stay here.”

“What are the rest of you gonna do?”

“Hm? Well, there’ll be a bit of a scuffle, I expect. We’ve got to at least show ’em that nothing good will come from picking a fight with us,” Yuuto said with an impish grin, as though he was enjoying this from the bottom of his heart. As though he was confident he’d win, even with only seventeen men currently at

his disposal.

Nozomu steeled his resolve and spoke. “...Ephy, I’m sorry, but you go on. I’m staying here.”

“Huh?!” She looked shocked.

“Hm? What’s the meaning of this, Nozomu?” Yuuto asked in a suspicious tone.

Truthfully, the idea of war frightened him. The idea of dying frightened him even more. But fear be damned—he had something he wanted to accomplish at all costs. “I’ll...fight too. I want to see the way you fight with my own eyes, dad.”

It was the perfect opportunity to witness it for himself—the strength of Suoh Yuuto, the man lauded as a god of war. The size of the mountain he had to scale. There were some things in this world that had to be experienced firsthand to be understood.

“Mm, I don’t think it’ll be as entertaining as you’re expecting...” Yuuto scratched his head in vexation. He didn’t seem too keen on the idea.

“Oh, it’ll be fine, won’t it? The boy just wants to see how cool his father is for himself.” Kristina threw Nozomu a bone.

“I mean, I get that much, and I’d like to show him how cool I can be in other ways...just not this one.” Yuuto heaved a sigh.

For Nozomu, however, he had already seen more than enough of that in his lifetime. His dad hunched over his desk, looking serious. His dad issuing orders to men older and more dignified than him. It was why he’d been so disappointed in his father for abdicating the throne and choosing to laze around instead—and why he wanted to take this opportunity to see his dad truly in action—even if it would show once and for all the disparate gulf between them.

“Ah, well. This’ll be another good lesson for you in the end. If it’s just a little peek, your old dad can show you how it’s done.”

He was going to finally see the true face of the hero he’d looked up to and idolized for so long!

“Kristina, make sure Ephy gets back safe,” Nozomu asked sincerely.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry. Even without you telling me to, I would never let anyone harm so much as a hair on this girl’s head.” With that, Kristina kicked the sides of her horse and took off toward the northeast. As he watched her go, Nozomu felt his stomach tighten. From here on out, he was going to war—and a hopeless war, considering it would be fifteen against a thousand. It would be stranger to *not* be nervous, and yet, as soon as Kristina returned...

“Jeez, why does a pacifist retiree like me have to get involved in a skirmish like this?” Yuuto complained.

“Probably because you’re looking down on them,” Kristina replied.

“Looking down on them? How so, Kris? I just put them in their place a little, is all.”

“That’s exactly what looking down on them is.”

“Huh? If they’re mad about something like that, they’re never gonna get anywhere.”

“Spoken like someone who has no one to answer to.”

“Huh? That’s not true. Mitsuki wears the pants in our family.”

“And considering her magnanimity when it comes to your concubines, that’s certainly good for you. But to most others, a superior is someone who forces others to do their bidding.”

“Hrmph.” Yuuto frowned.

Nozomu couldn’t believe what he was witnessing. They were enjoying a leisurely conversation without any hint of tension. Their complete lack of concern only served to make him more anxious.

“What should I do, dad?” Unlike everyone else present, who had weathered many of Yggdrasil’s toughest battles and by this point didn’t need to be told what to do, Nozomu was a complete novice and wanted at least some direction.

“You? Hmm, there’s nothing in particular I want you to...oh, actually never mind, there is. Don’t do anything,” he answered.

“Huh?!” That angered Nozomu, and his face went taut. Sure, to Yuuto he probably seemed like an immature child, but he’d received years of training from Sigrún and become well-rounded in the martial arts, even earning her approval to join the upper ranks of the Múspell unit. He knew he wasn’t *that* useless.

“Ah, just to clarify, it’s not like I doubt your ability or anything,” Yuuto explained. “It’s just that since this is your inaugural battle, it’s much better for you to simply observe.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, I mean, I’m sure the tension of being a hair’s breadth away from death is weighing down on you pretty hard right now.”

“Oh, I already get that all the time when training with Miss Sigrún, so I’m used to it.” During Sigrún’s lessons, there were more than a few times he’d thought he was seriously going to die. He wasn’t going to be scared off by something like that now.

Listening to Nozomu’s response, Yuuto merely smiled. “I know that, of course. It’s just that, well, a mock battle is completely different from experiencing the real thing, and above all...” Yuuto paused, then smiled once again, though this one was filled with self-loathing. “The first time you kill someone...it gets to you.”

Hearing the ice in his father’s voice, Nozomu was shocked into silence. True, he was experienced in combat, but he had not yet taken a life. He wanted to say it’d be fine, that he’d be able to handle it, but when it came right down to it, he didn’t have the confidence to definitively declare that it wouldn’t shake him up.

“Hm, it seems you’re not trying to contest me or assert your strength. That’s good. If you had, I’d have you sent back to the ship immediately,” Yuuto said.

“So that was a test?”

“Of course it was. This is war, after all. Being useless is one thing, but I have

no need for those who are just going to get in my way." Yuuto's words pulled no punches. His usually warm, easygoing demeanor had become cold and unforgiving. "Rún, I know it's going to be a bother but can I ask you to watch over him? I have an army to command."

"At once, Father," Sigrún replied dutifully.

"Nozomu, you listen to everything Sigrún says. If you disobey her even once, don't think I'll let you off easy because you're my son."

"R-Right. I understand, dad." Under the intensity of his father's glare, Nozomu swallowed and nodded obediently. His authority brooked no argument. *"So this is the true face of the war god...!"* He knew it wasn't the time or the place for it, but he couldn't hold back his excitement at seeing this facet of his father for the first time. For so many years he'd longed to catch even a glimpse of the Yuuto who commanded such respect and fear!

Truthfully, Nozomu was terrified. His father was even more intimidating than the prospect of the upcoming war. The aura Yuuto exuded made Nozomu tremble and nearly wet himself in fear. Even so, he idolized his father. That peerless strength, that majestic and terrifying presence—it was exactly what Nozomu wanted to possess when he grew up.

"Hm, for the time being, let's size up the enemy and see what they've got." With a smirk on his face, Yuuto looked out over the area. Megiddo was situated atop several hills, and they'd taken up camp on a particularly steep one where they could get a good view of the entire town. There, before Yuuto's eyes, was...

"Yo, pretty impressive of you to have gathered this many troops in so short a time. But don't you think this is a bit ostentatious?"

"Mgh." Hearing a familiar voice above him, Thutmose III jerked his head up. There, before him, was the man he couldn't forget even if he tried, standing there with a smug smile on his face. He had a number of troops behind him, some of them women, but there was no sign of any other forces in the area. Thutmose grinned in satisfaction.

"Suoh Yuuto! I've come to absolve my earlier humiliation!"

“In other words, you couldn’t win alone so you had to get help? That’s pretty lame.”

“Say whatever you like! It will not matter, because I will erase you here and now!”

“I don’t recall doing anything to deserve such treatment.”

“Do not play dumb! You are here to conquer the Orient, are you not?!”

“Nope. I just came here on merchant business.”

“Who would believe such drivel?!”

“But I’m telling the truth...”

“What a stubborn man. It seems negotiation is pointless. All troops, charge!” Thutmose unsheathed his sword and pointed the tip of his blade at Suoh Yuuto as his troops bellowed with vigor, charging up the steep hill. Assured of his victory, Thutmose grinned up at Suoh Yuuto, but the man simply let out an exasperated sigh. Perhaps Yuuto had thought he could use his silver tongue to weasel his way out of this situation, but Thutmose wouldn’t let him off that easily. This was a man who needed beheading right here, right now, or he was going to cause trouble for Thutmose further down the line.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! A hail of arrows came from the sky. However, Thutmose’s guard unit was made up of elite soldiers that he himself had taken great pains to cultivate. They were well-prepared for such an attack, handily blocking the volley with their leather shields.

“Gah?!”

“Gyah?!”

Or at least, that’s what they had thought. Pained cries could be heard from one soldier after another. Unbelievably, the arrows had pierced through the leather and right into their chests.

“Impossible. From that distance?!” The distance between Thutmose’s army and Yuuto’s was roughly two khet, an ancient unit of measurement equivalent to approximately 50 meters each. At that distance, it wasn’t guaranteed an arrow would even reach its target, so how were they able to fire arrows with

such force?!

“They must be using incredibly powerful bows. Hmph. Repel those arrows! Do not let them hit you! It shouldn’t be too hard; we heavily outnumber them. Do not be afraid—charge!” Coming to a swift and rational decision nonetheless, he issued one order after another. A future conqueror of the world had to be able to do that much.

Thutmose’s army began to charge up the hill, not letting up their momentum in the slightest. In response, Yuuto quickly leaped atop a horse-drawn carriage and turned tail, heading in the opposite direction. Had he scared him off? If so, that was awfully anticlimactic, or perhaps Yuuto simply had the sense to know when he’d been outmatched. Either way, Thutmose didn’t intend to let him escape.

“Radames! Take half the troops and circle around from the left! We’ll get him in a pincer attack!” Thutmose barked.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” After he’d given the order and divided his troops appropriately, he assumed command of the remaining soldiers and headed after Yuuto. Arrows occasionally rained down upon them, wounding some, but that was no concern of Thutmose’s. Finally, as if the enemy had exhausted their supply, the hail of arrows ceased. Before long, they could no longer see hide nor hair of the enemy army.

“Hmph, don’t think you can get away that easily!” Thutmose licked his lips, his tongue like that of a snake’s. Thutmose’s purpose in this land had been planning the invasion of Megiddo, so naturally, he already had a good grasp on the geography of the area. If Yuuto was heading toward the Kishon River, they’d be able to get the jump on him if they circled around from the left, even considering the speed of the carriage. He’d be trapped like a rat.

Or so he thought.

“Tch! Nothing?!” When they’d finally caught up to him, only the carriage that had been attached to the horse remained. Neither the horse nor Yuuto or any of his men were anywhere to be found. It was as if he and his army had realized Thutmose would catch up and abandoned the horse carriage posthaste, choosing to ride on horseback instead. That was probably because they were

out of options and had no other choice, but he was surprised at how comfortable Yuuto's army seemed to be with riding horses. That was because, from Thutmose's perspective, horseback riding was a remarkably high-level technique.

"Seems like I really can't underestimate him. All the more reason why I have to kill him here." With his resolve renewed, he advanced his army further.

"Huh?!" But when they got to their destination, it wasn't Yuuto or any of his army that they found. It was the elite unit he'd just entrusted to Radames. Apparently, they hadn't even seen Yuuto in the area. That was when he realized he'd screwed up. He belatedly remembered that the enemy had abandoned the carriage. It was true that this route was the only one horse-drawn carriages could pass through, but if they were on horseback there were a number of other paths they could traverse. They'd probably used one of those to avoid getting pincered.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! The all-too-familiar sound of whistling through the wind accompanied a hail of arrows, and from all directions, no less. At some point, Thutmose's army had become surrounded. However, by his own count, there were still only fifteen or so enemies. That was far too few for an effective encirclement. He knew that, but...

"Rrgh, how frustrating!" Thutmose spat with hatred. Even though their own arrows couldn't cover the distance, the enemies' arrows not only reached their target but were quite deadly. They'd realized that and came to attack. "We won't get anywhere at this rate. We need to get closer."

He angrily urged his army forward, but each time he did, the enemy army pulled back an equal distance. The hail of arrows continued to fall, As he gave it more thought, he realized that a mere foot soldier was no match for the speed of one on horseback. The casualties on his side continued to rise.

"I was in the palm of the enemy's hand the whole time?! Fortify your defenses! They've got to run out of arrows sometime! That's when we'll strike back!" Even if each of them had fifty arrows, that would still only be 750 arrows —far less manpower than Thutmose had at his disposal. What's more, only one in five of those were likely to hit their mark, even a direct hit didn't guarantee a

fatality. At some point, the enemy would have to let up.

“Huh?! Ha ha ha! They must’ve already run out, because now they’re charging at us. Perhaps they think we’re worn out from chasing them down? Sorry to disappoint, but we have plenty of stamina to spare. That’s why we’re going to win.” Convinced of his victory, Thutmose let out a loud cackle. Even though their weapons didn’t reach the enemy, the enemy had always seemed to find their mark. If this happened to a normal unit, they might panic, unable to tell right from left in their confusion, but Thutmose’s army was made up of highly skilled battle-hardened professionals paid handsomely for their services. Thutmose himself had built rapport with each one and earned their loyalty. If he gave the order for them to kill themselves, they would do so in a heartbeat. That unwavering devotion was just another factor that made them the strongest unit around, Thutmose’s pride and joy.

“Fight back!” he shouted, but his order was suddenly drowned out by a rumbling from within the elite guard unit. Thutmose had no idea what had happened—it seemed like the enemy had thrown some sort of spherical object. The soldiers had dodged it, but in the next instant, a roar split the air like thunder and the surrounding soldiers all went flying, their uniforms and skin burnt black. A second explosion followed, causing more of Thutmose’s soldiers to fly through the air. The enemy soldiers then charged forward on horseback. Each of them seemed to have mastered the art of horseback riding. Thutmose’s bodyguards may have been the cream of the crop, but that fact alone caused them to panic.

“D-Don’t be fooled! The enemy is few in number! If we maintain our composure, we’ll surely win!”

“Ha ha, unfortunately for you, the great Homura and her friends aren’t so generous as to let the enemy rest up.”

“Huh?! Gahhh!” Suddenly, he heard a female voice from behind, and the next thing he knew, he felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck. The last thing he saw before his consciousness left him was the face of a stunningly beautiful girl with long, flowing black hair.

“One Thutmose III, captured alive, as requested!” Hearing Homura’s cheery voice, Nozomu breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed his shoulders—

Thonk! Which got him a whack on the head. “Fool. Don’t let your guard down just because we’ve won. Did I not teach you that one should always be prepared for a counterattack?” his instructor Sigrún said with a sigh. It was true—capturing the enemy army’s commander did not prevent their men from staging an attempt to rescue him. The fight was not yet over for them. He’d been too quick to relax.

“Now then, to all enemy soldiers. Lay down your weapons, get on your knees, and put your hands behind your back. Obey me, and I guarantee the life of your pharaoh!” Yuuto’s voice, amplified with a megaphone, echoed throughout the battlefield. As if on cue, the enemy soldiers, apparently realizing there was no other way out, immediately tossed their weapons aside and got down on the ground as instructed.

“Is anyone wounded?” Sigrún asked. Replies of “nope” and “not at all” came from here and there. Apparently, there had been no casualties on Yuuto’s side, which was even more unbelievable to Nozomu. *“It was fifteen against one thousand, and no one was even hurt?!”* He felt like he was dreaming, but honestly, he wouldn’t have believed it even in his wildest dreams.

Yuuto then appeared before him, back to his usual nonchalant tone. “Oh, Nozomu. Looks like you’re unharmed. Thank goodness.” He’d just achieved a victory worthy of being recorded in history books, and was acting like it was no big deal. He wasn’t whooping, hollering, or celebrating—that fact in itself was perhaps the scariest thing of all.

“Wow, dad, that was incredible. You made it look so easy.”

“Oh, that? That wasn’t anything special. If you look at history, others have used horses to stage landslide victories without anyone getting injured as well, one even being two thousand against seventeen. Not to mention I’ve got the technology of the future on my side, as well as a multitude of Einherjar, and my own special power.” Yuuto waved it off like it was nothing, but Nozomu couldn’t see it as anything but remarkable. *“It’s like he really is a war god...”* Plenty of people had explained his father’s peerlessness to him, but it had

always seemed like a fairy tale—a story with only a grain of truth, embellished to facilitate the management of the nation. He'd never dreamed he'd be shown a divine feat even more amazing than the ones in the stories!

"Well, you know how it is. Use one cheat after another and you're sure to win," his father humbly said, but even Nozomu could tell there was more to it than that. His sense of timing and distance had been perfect—he'd always had the horse-drawn carriage precisely where only his side was able to attack, yet not far away enough that the enemy thought they couldn't catch up. Then when he'd seen his opportunity he'd abandoned the carriage and encircled the enemy on horseback, taking them by complete surprise. Even after that he'd maintained enough distance to constantly rain arrows down on the enemy, threw the enemy's men into a panic using tetsuhaus, and subsequently took that opportunity to charge forward, putting the enemy commander right in Homura's clutches.

It certainly sounded simple enough when put into words, and he knew that his father had merely made use of tactics like the "Parthian Shot" and "Fisher and Bandit," but the fact that he'd had the skill to implement them practically and gotten real people to dance to his tune as a result was more than impressive. It was almost as if he was always able to see the battlefield, and the positions of both ally and enemy, from overhead. A greenhorn like Nozomu had a hard time putting it into words, and perhaps because he'd had a front-row seat to witness the spectacle, he was so entranced by the magic of his dad's military prowess that he wouldn't have been able to anyway.

"At any rate, if there's anything I want you to learn from this experience, it's that there's no such thing as fairness in war. Do whatever it takes to win. If you don't, you'll die." His father's words were cold, harsh, and clearly spoken from experience. Nozomu gulped without meaning to.

Come to think of it, he'd heard his knowledgeable sister Wiz quote a famous commander one time: "It matters not if a warrior becomes a lapdog or a brute, as long as they claim victory in the end." Perhaps that was what Yuuto was getting at.

"Tee hee, you may say that, but you're just about the softest person I know, Big Brother." Felicia appeared from behind Yuuto with a snicker.

Yuuto frowned in disapproval. “Hey now, I’m trying to teach my son something very important here, so don’t ruin the moment.”

“Yes sir, as you say, sir,” Felicia teased, clearly insincere, and stuck her tongue out for good measure before retreating. Felicia loved Yuuto and had eyes for no one but him, so perhaps it was her way of making sure that Nozomu didn’t misunderstand and make his father out to be some coldhearted tyrant.

“Anyway, I know you don’t want to hear some long lecture so I’ll finish with only this. If you, your siblings, or your friends are ever in a life-or-death situation, do not allow pleasantries, appearance, or honor to cloud your judgment. Okay?” Yuuto stared straight into Nozomu’s eyes, deadly serious.

Felicia’s brother, Sigrún’s instructor, and even his own mother (on paper, at least) Sigrdrífa—Nozomu had heard that Yuuto had lost many people dear to him back in Yggdrasil, which gave those words even more weight.

“...Yeah.” Though he felt like he was somewhat forced to answer that way, he also understood. He was the eldest son and had a duty to protect his siblings. Nozomu etched those words of Yuuto’s into his heart so that he would never forget them, going over each syllable twice for good measure.

“Well, just file that away in your head for now. More importantly, are you all right?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” asked Nozomu, not understanding the meaning of his father’s question. He’d already said he was fine—no injuries or anything.

“You killed someone, didn’t you? With your own hands.”

In the next instant, the sensation of piercing flesh he’d felt through his spear ran through his hands once more, and the pained expression on the enemy soldier’s face manifested in the back of his mind—

Before he knew it, he’d emptied the entire contents of his stomach onto the ground. He’d been so focused during combat he hadn’t had time to worry over it and had been on such an adrenaline rush afterward that it had completely slipped his mind, but the instant he recalled it, he was hit with a wave of revulsion.

He’d thought he’d been prepared, yet actually taking someone’s life had

affected him far more than he'd ever imagined. He felt sick. Even the thought of murder was enough to make him vomit once more.

"Ugh...haa... I'm so pathetic. I can't believe I can't even handle this mu—bleeaghh!"

"You're not pathetic, son. After killing someone for the first time, that's the correct reaction to have," Yuuto said gently, patting Nozomu's back. Nozomu was shocked at the guilt in his father's voice. He was said to have been a god of war, so there was no telling how many he'd killed, either directly or indirectly. Just how many sins did he carry behind that carefree expression of his? When he thought about how much Yuuto must be suffering even now, it honestly frightened him.

"Obviously I'd like for you to live a peaceful life and get by without killing anyone if I can help it, but these are the times we live in. That's why I figured it'd be best for you to experience it here, so you can be prepared when the time comes." There was no sign of his father's devil-may-care attitude anymore. All that remained was a man heaving a sigh of regret and bitterness. Even though he understood it was necessary, his heart couldn't accept it—that was the feeling Nozomu got.

"Thanks for watching over him, Rún. You're the reason my son's still in one piece right now."

"I'm relieved as well. Many end up dying in their inaugural battle."

"Yeah," Yuuto agreed. Nozomu detected a hint of relief in his voice. He may have been seen as some god of war, but he was just a regular guy. Sending his own son off to battle had to have been tough for him. He'd probably been beside himself with worry the whole time.

"It's said that a lion drops its own cub off a cliff to prepare it for adulthood, but it's not so easy when it's your own son, I guess," said Yuuto with a sigh.

"But in this case, our preparations were sufficient and there was no cliff anywhere in the area to speak of." Sigrún flatly denied Yuuto's musings to himself.

"I was speaking in terms of feelings, Rún."

“Tee hee, again, that just shows how soft you are, Big Brother.” Felicia had returned, another grin on her face. Perhaps neither of them intended to be that way, but Nozomu felt that they were both kicking him while he was down. It was becoming more and more apparent just how sheltered Nozomu had been up until now, and how far he had to go to catch up to his father. He felt like every amount of effort in the world wouldn’t be enough. And yet...

He was made well aware that he couldn’t continue to be the pathetic wimp he was now. He would take that frustration he felt toward himself and use it as fuel to grow and mature. Nozomu swore in his heart—one day, he’d be a man even his father would have to tip his hat to.



“Now then, what to do with you?” Yuuto sighed, his hand resting on his chin. Before him was Thutmose III, made to sit on the hard ground and hands tied behind his back with rope.

“Do what you please.” Thutmose was almost defiant in his reply. Despite having the military might he did, he had suffered a humiliatingly thorough defeat. Yuuto couldn’t help but feel for the guy, but he wasn’t lenient enough to just let someone who attacked him go either.

However, this was the Napoleon of Egypt, a man that had made his mark in history with his greatness. If Yuuto killed him, he might end up seriously altering the course of history. He didn’t want to risk it.

“In that case... How about a trade agreement and peace treaty between us and Kemet?”

“Wha...huh...? A peace...treaty?” Thutmose looked confused. His lack of understanding was written all over his face. “What are you scheming?!”

“Is it that unusual? All I ever wanted was to live in peace. Nothing more.”

“I know all about you! You’re the king of the land to the west of Ahhiyawa, are you not?! You came here to conquer this land!”

“I *was* the king. Now I’m retired.”

“...Huh?”

“I gave my crown to someone else, and now I’m living the good life.”

“Y-You expect me to believe that?! You’re probably still manipulating that king you installed from the shadows, making him your puppet!”

“That sounds like a major pain. Why would I want to do that when I’ve already had enough of being king?” Yuuto screwed up his face in displeasure just imagining it and waved his hand in dismissal. Perhaps Yuuto’s feelings finally got through, because Thutmose stared hard at Yuuto’s face for a while in disbelief, as though he was trying to bore a hole through it. Finally...

“You’re...telling the truth?”

“Yep. All I want is to live a relaxing, happy life with my family.”

“...For one that possesses such power, you are strangely unselfish.”

“I get that a lot, yeah.” Yuuto gave an impish grin. Unselfish—many others besides Thutmose had called him that, but the truth was, all he wanted was

peace for his friends and family. Nothing more, nothing less. “So, do you think you could just leave me alone and let me be?”

“You ask for the impossible. I cannot let a presence like yours simply roam free. However, I understand the difference in our power at present, so there is no other option.”

“I’m glad you’re so quick on the uptake. Also, try not to take your resentment of us to the grave.”

“Do not worry. I don’t intend for my descendants to inherit this shame.” Thutmose snorted, unamused, and with that, a trade agreement and peace treaty between the Iárnviðr Trading Company and Kemet were forged.

In the following years, Thutmose III swiftly made the rest of the Orient his (though perhaps he’d learned something from his defeat, as he proceeded more carefully this time) and made Egypt the largest it had ever been. Furthermore, as he had promised, Thutmose didn’t take his resentment to the grave, but the soldiers who’d survived that battle did tell tales about what they’d experienced, often at the peak of their drunkenness. They said that the battle was despair incarnate, that it was like facing off against a mythological demon, and as a result the hill in Megiddo that had been the site of the battle came to be known as “Har Megiddo” in their native Hebrew—in other words, Armageddon, prophesied by the Bible to be the location of the final battle to take place during the end times.

ACT 3

Jörgen, former patriarch of the Wolf Clan and peerless advisor to the reginarch of the Steel Clan, was not skilled in combat by any means, but the fact that Yuuto would often leave him in charge in his absence showed how capable he was nonetheless. He was particularly adept when it came to politics. From the days of the Wolf Clan to arriving in the New World, he had continued to support Yuuto from the shadows—truly the unsung hero of the clan.

That same hero, now over sixty, had recently hung up his advisor hat for good, preferring instead to spend his days warmly watching over his grandsons as they frolicked in the park. One day, he was doing exactly that when he heard a voice.

“Long time no see, Big Bro.” A familiar face to match the voice appeared before him.

Jörgen sighed and gave a small shrug. “No matter how much time passes, I doubt I’ll ever get used to you calling me that. How many years has it been, I wonder? Little Bro.”

“Yeesh. Calling an old geezer like me ‘Little Bro’ is way worse, if you ask men.” The wispy-haired elderly man had a crooked grin on his face as he spoke. He was hunched over and his face had far more wrinkles, typical of a man his age, but the wily glint in his foxlike eyes was unmistakable, and just as sharp as ever. His name was Botvid. He was the patriarch of the Claw Clan—one of the clans under the Steel Clan’s umbrella—as well as the Steel Clan’s current leader of subordinates.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure? I doubt you’re here to enlist my aid because something happened at Tarshish. I’ve long since stepped off that stage, and we never had that kind of relationship in the first place, did we?” Jörgen said with a smirk. Since joining the Steel Clan, the Wolf Clan and Claw Clan had become family, but there had been a time where the two sides fought one another as mortal enemies. Their relationship within the Steel Clan hadn’t been all rosy either—while they both deferred to the Steel Clan as fellow allies,

they'd remained ruthless rivals from a political standpoint. If Botvid had gone out of his way to see him in the twilight of his retirement, there had to be a good reason, but Jörgen couldn't imagine what.

"I suppose not," Botvid said with a grin. "Would you believe me if I said I just wanted to wax sentimental about the good old days?"

"The good old days?" Jörgen parroted, not sure what Botvid was getting at. "Why?"

Botvid's grin became wistful. "Well, you see, at my age, all my other conversation partners have long since passed on."

"...Right." Jörgen sighed and nodded. In this era, even living much beyond around fifty years was considered quite fortunate. Out of the friends he'd made that were similar in age, hardly any remained. Even Rasmus had passed away unexpectedly last year. He still recalled the tranquil expression on the old man's face—no doubt one of satisfaction, having lived long enough to see his grandchildren and Linnea grow and mature to adulthood. "So, I suppose I'm the only one left then?"

"Indeed, as I am no doubt the only one left for you to reminisce about those days."

"Ha ha, so it seems." Jörgen let out a humorless laugh. It was just as Botvid said—everyone else he'd known in the days of the Wolf Clan had long since passed.

"Maybe it's just my old age getting to me," Botvid began, "but lately my mind seems preoccupied with those days—back before Father descended upon Yggdrasil, and I was still young and spry."

"What a coincidence. Me too. Though I seem to remember differently—I only recall you being a huge pain in the ass," Jörgen replied.

"That's funny, because I remember the same about you. But, well, I've been finding myself looking upon even those memories with fondness nowadays. I've no idea why that is..." Botvid sighed, his smile tinged with melancholy.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Jörgen said. Yuuto's arrival in Yggdrasil and subsequent exploits had been tumultuous and thrilling in ways that made

Jörgen feel like he was a kid again, but young folk in general gave Jörgen's hard work purpose. He'd always felt it was his role to support the youth from the shadows—and he was confident that during his tenure as advisor of the Steel Clan, he'd done so with aplomb. Yet, though he was satisfied, he had merely been a spectator watching a legend unfold from the sidelines. He was not the hero of this tale—Suoh Yuuto, the young man who'd saved Yggdrasil from a terrible fate, was the real main character. Jörgen had been young once too, and used to have loftier aspirations. Back when Fárbauti, Bruno, Olof and Skáviðr were still alive, Jörgen had been confident that *he* would be the legendary hero who'd rescue the Wolf Clan from ruin...

Jörgen was born in a quaint village on the base of the Himinbjörg Mountains just north of Iárnviðr. It was a village of hunters, so during his youth he spent most of his days racing around the mountains, chasing rabbits and deer with his minuscule bow in hand. When he wasn't doing that he trained with a wooden sword, sparring with the local kids his age. Thinking back on it now, those experiences had been precious—since he didn't possess a rune, without all that mock fighting and training he might never have grown strong enough to rival an Einherjar. When he turned fourteen, everything changed, however.

"We've gotten word that the Horn Clan Army is headed our way," the envoy from Iárnviðr had said. "We need you to join the fight."

That in itself wasn't anything unusual. Even in the times before Yuuto's arrival, it was common knowledge that bows were the most useful weapons on the battlefield, surpassing even swords or spears, and Jörgen's village was full of hunters whose archery skills were second to none. The Wolf Clan patriarch would pay handsomely for their work besides, and by selling the weapons and armor they looted from their enemies, they'd make even more of a profit. The villagers figured it'd be a perfect opportunity to reap rather handsome rewards.

"I want to join the fight too, dad!" Equally raring to go, the young Jörgen expressed his desire to tag along to his father, the village chief. His father nodded with enthusiasm.

"Well said, son. Your eagerness and bravery make me proud. Just make sure you have the skills in combat to back it up. I won't have you staining my honor

and good name with a shameful display.”

“I understand, dad.”

“That said, I doubt there will be any reason to worry about you,” his father said with a grin. By now Jörgen was already a head taller than most of the village boys his age, and far more muscular to boot. His skill with a bow put some of the full-grown adults he knew to shame—he was probably the third best in the entire village and within a few more years, would likely surpass even the chief himself to become the number one archer. Unsurprisingly, in his inaugural battle Jörgen performed just as outstandingly as expected.

“That must be their commander.” Looking down on the approaching Horn Clan Army from the treetops, Jörgen identified the leader immediately. He was the only one atop a horse-drawn carriage, so it was easy to tell him apart.

When participating in their first real battles, most young folk were often devoured by the horrors of war and rendered unable to think properly or even stand on their own two feet, but not Jörgen. Where the average person would be quick to prove themselves and let loose a hail of arrows without reserve, inadvertently giving away their location to the enemy in the process, Jörgen kept his distance and waited for the right moment to strike.

“There!” Fortune must have also smiled upon him, because the decisive arrow he finally loosed pierced straight through the enemy commander’s temple—a bull’s-eye.

“All right!” Having witnessed the outstanding shot with his own eyes, Jörgen pumped his fist. With the enemy commander down, the army lost their chain of command and collapsed into ruin in no time, making them sitting ducks for the Wolf Clan Army. It was no exaggeration to say that the battle was decided the moment Jörgen had fired that arrow, and thanks to his heroic efforts during that inaugural battle, the name “Jörgen of Nazir Village” soon began to spread throughout the Wolf Clan like wildfire.

A majestic palace stood in the heart of Iárnviðr. Jörgen had gazed upon it from afar many a time whenever his father brought him here, but naturally, this was his first time actually entering. After being guided to one of the rooms, he

saw a man with graying hair who had to be at least in his forties sitting at the throne with one hand resting on his cheek. He stared hard at Jörgen. It was as if the man's gaze saw through every inch of him.

"So you're Jörgen, are you? You've got a fearless expression on your face. I like it." The man stroked his graying beard as if in thought. The gruff authority in his voice made Jörgen feel as though a great weight had fallen on his shoulders.

"It's truly an honor, Your Majesty," Jörgen replied with a polite bow. *"So this is Lord Fárbauti, our patriarch."* Raising his head and facing the man once more, he swallowed hard—he understood immediately why the Wolf Clan patriarch's name was known throughout all of Bifröst. Though at first glance the man appeared frail, he exuded an unmistakably intense aura. Jörgen wouldn't have been surprised if the man was a seasoned warrior in his own right. At the same time, however, he recognized that this was the level he would eventually have to surpass. He was still at the age where he was full of vim and vigor, with ambition burning bright in his heart.

"Heh heh, I hear you're the one who took out the Horn Clan's commander. Considering that was the first time you'd ever been in an actual battle, that's quite the accomplishment. Though I would expect no less from Jigen's son."

"Heh, that was child's play compared to what I'm really capable of."

"Oh? How reliable, and confident to boot."

"I know, right? So how about making me one of your sworn children? You won't regret it," Jörgen declared, pointing to himself with his thumb.

Of course, toward one with as much authority as Fárbauti, his cheeky attitude could be considered the height of disrespect. Perhaps one could chalk it up to being young, but there was only so much that his youth could excuse—regardless of Jörgen's accomplishments, no one would've so much as batted an eye if he'd been thrown in the dungeon for his insubordination.

"Know your place, brat! How dare you behave that way in the presence of our patriarch!" In fact, one of the middle-aged men standing beside the throne roared in anger. Judging from his gray beard and the deep wrinkles in his forehead, he seemed to be rather high-strung. "You are speaking to the leader of the Wolf Clan, our sworn father, so show some respect! Normally the likes of

you would not even be allowed to speak in his presence!”

“Oh, shut up already, old man. You guys were the ones who brought me here, weren’t you? Besides, this conversation is between him and me, so buzz off.” As the man continued to lecture him, Jörgen cursed him in his thoughts. Naturally he at least had the sense to not voice his opinion out loud, but again, perhaps because he was still young, the man’s attitude ticked him off all the same.

“Enough, Bruno.” Fárbauti silenced his subordinate with a dismissive wave of his hand and a placid smile, as though Jörgen’s impudence hadn’t bothered him in the slightest—as though he dealt with people like him on a regular basis. His broad-mindedness honestly impressed Jörgen.

“Meanwhile, this dude over here has a stick up his ass, just as the rumors said.” In his heart, Jörgen smirked, though he didn’t let it show. He’d heard all sorts of things about the man named Bruno—none of them particularly flattering. In short, they’d said he was a petty, obstinate man who talked a big game but didn’t have the stuff to back it up. There were also those who said he was wholly unsuited to serve as the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command. On either count, Jörgen couldn’t agree more.

“F-Father! I cannot very well sit idly by and let some ingrate besmirch your good name...”

“Get too stubborn, Bruno, and you become unable to hear anyone but yourself,” Fárbauti said sternly. “It’s good for youth like him to have some fire in them, and if my good name was something so easily besmirched I wouldn’t be in this position in the first place, correct?” With a cackle, he threw a knowing glance in Jörgen’s direction.

“This guy knows what he’s talking about. He’s the real deal. Patriarchs really do have to be on a different level, I guess.” Jörgen continued to be impressed by the man’s wisdom.

What Jörgen hadn’t realized at the time, however, was that at that point he’d already been ensnared in Fárbauti and Bruno’s trap. It had all been an elaborate act—they had intentionally played the stubborn fool and generous leader in order to get Jörgen on Fárbauti’s side, but in his inexperience Jörgen had failed to notice.

“At any rate, we didn’t call you here to lecture you on your etiquette,” Fárbauti began. “We’re here to commend this battle’s most valuable player. Fine work, Jörgen. On behalf of the entire Wolf Clan, I thank you.”

“Thank you very much, sir!”

“For your exemplary deeds, I would like to reward you. Anything you want, anything at all, just let me know. If it’s something within my power, consider it done.”

“Then I’ll take you up on that offer. I do not yet possess a Chalice. Please, Lord Fárbauti, offer me yours!” Jörgen stared straight into Fárbauti’s eyes, his gaze unwavering as he divulged his request. From the moment he’d met him, Jörgen knew. This was a man worthy of devoting his entire life to.

“You overstep your bounds, ingrate!” Bruno cut in, roaring with anger. His face had gone red, so it had likely been a genuine reaction. “You may have proved yourself in this battle, but don’t think the patriarch of the Wolf Clan’s Chalice comes so cheaply! Know your station!”

Fárbauti held up a hand and spoke. “Now, now, there’s no need to get so riled up, Bruno. I told him it could be anything.”

“Ah, b-but Father, even if you say so, there are limits! If you just let any child that asks for it have your Chalice, it will devalue in worth! I’m saying this not for my own sake, but for the good of the clan!”

“Hm, I suppose you have a point. His lack of discipline also needs to be sorted out... How about this, then? Bruno, offer him *your* Chalice. You’ll drill into him manners and etiquette. From the ground up.”

“Huh?” Jörgen’s mouth fell open when he heard Fárbauti’s decision. Of course, he also received a nasty glare from Bruno.

“What’s wrong? Unsatisfied?” Fárbauti trained his eyes on Jörgen. His gaze seemed to miss nothing. Of course he was unsatisfied. Naturally, he hadn’t thought it’d be that easy to gain Fárbauti’s Chalice in the first place, but just from the few minutes he’d known him, Bruno wasn’t exactly on his list of favorite people.

“Heh, it’s written all over your face. Seems you’ve still got some growing to

do," Fárbauti teased. Jörgen froze. As if sensing that he'd been rattled, Fárbauti chuckled once more. "Well, no need to pout. This guy's my right-hand man, and the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan. For a pup like you, the Chalice of a real wolf should be honor enough."

"W-Well, I guess..." If the patriarch of the clan said so, he had no choice but to agree. But he could also see there was truth in Fárbauti's words. Normally someone like him would spend their entire lives at the bottom rung, living and dying in obscurity. The second-in-command was always personally appointed by the patriarch, and earning his Chalice would certainly bolster his future prospects of taking over the clan. Looking at it objectively, the arrangement was entirely to his benefit, rather than his detriment.

"You see, Bruno has a wealth of experience when it comes to whipping young ones into shape. You'll learn discipline from him, and when I see that you've finally grown some horns, you may have my Chalice. So right now, what I want from you is diligence."

"...Yes, sir." Truthfully, he couldn't be more dissatisfied, but once again, a cheeky brat like Jörgen had no room for argument against a patriarch.

"Truthfully I don't think I'll ever be able to get along with that jerk, but oh well," Jörgen thought. He couldn't help feeling like he'd had no choice in the matter to start with, but nonetheless Jörgen began his new life under Bruno.

Three years passed since that day, during which Bruno drilled both academics and etiquette into the young Jörgen, now his sworn son. He also made Jörgen cook, clean, and chop firewood, among other odd jobs. It was a far cry from the days he'd spent chasing prey throughout the mountains and sparring with his friends.

"Dammit! He's not gonna use me any longer!" Seeing the list of tasks Bruno had allotted to him for the day, Jörgen exploded, tousling his own hair in frustration. Put simply, he was as bored as could be. The days seemed to get longer and longer, with no reprieve in sight. He was a warrior by trade, and his sword and archery skills were diminishing with every moment he wasted on nonsense like this.

“At this rate, I’ll never bear a rune of my own!” Overcome with equal parts irritation and impatience, Jörgen bit his lip. He’d heard that runes only manifested in one’s teenage years, with fourteen through sixteen being the most likely. “I’m already seventeen, dammit! I don’t have time for this crap!”

Runes were said to be blessings from the gods, offered only to those whose efforts they acknowledged. He had no idea if that was actually true or just some horseshit someone made up, but right now it was all he had to go on. That was why instead of wasting his time with these menial domestic tasks, he truly believed that he ought to be out polishing his combat skills and currying favor with a god of war! The frustration was driving him mad.

“I really should’ve declined Father’s Chalice back then, and tried to persuade Uncle Helblindi to offer me his instead.” Helblindi was one of the Wolf Clan’s most elite warriors, having racked up accolade after accolade against the ever-persistent Horn Clan, and despite being an outsider from far to the west, had risen through the ranks to become an importast adviser to the Wolf Clan. If Jörgen had been under him instead, he was sure he would’ve also gained accolades and notoriety, and probably would’ve earned Fárbauti’s Chalice by now. Yet the harsh reality was that under Bruno, he didn’t even have a specific position—he was just a gopher. He didn’t feel like his talents were being utilized at all. *“My place isn’t here, under Bruno’s thumb! At this rate, I’m going to waste away, and everyone else is gonna leave me in the dust!”*

And as it turned out, Jörgen’s fears were not unfounded. Because one day...

“Jörgen, come here.”

“Yes? How can I be of assistance, Father?” The moment Bruno called for him, Jörgen quashed the mounting dissatisfaction in his heart and responded as politely as he could muster. Seeing that, Bruno gave a satisfied grin.

“Heh heh, looks like you’ve finally learned some manners.”

“Thanks to you, Father,” Jörgen replied. *“Really... Even a monkey could pick this stuff up if they were subjected to what I’ve been put through the last three years,”* the young man thought to himself. Of course, he took great care not to allow his expression to change as he did so. By now he’d learned the subtleties of body language, and how it could often communicate more than words.

“We’ve got a newcomer. I want you to show him the ropes.” Bruno patted the shoulder of the young boy beside him.

“You want *me* to?” Jörgen asked incredulously as he sized up the boy. He looked to be around twelve or thirteen, perhaps. He was skinny and didn’t look like much, but his sharp eyes were unmistakably those of a wolf.

“That’s right. His name’s Skáviðr, and he’s the first Einherjar the Wolf Clan’s been blessed with in ten years,” Bruno replied.

Jörgen’s eyes went wide. This boy was clearly much younger than him, and yet he’d already awakened to a rune?! He wouldn’t have believed it—were it not for the faint, yet undeniable aura of a warrior emanating from the boy. It had to be the truth.

At the time, even if someone had explained to the young Jörgen the emotion he’d felt in his heart right then, he would’ve vehemently denied it. But now in his twilight years, Jörgen smiled as he recalled that moment—he’d felt burning jealousy toward the boy who’d become an Einherjar at such a young age, and fear and anxiety at that boy surpassing him.

“It’s nice to meet you, Big Brother Jörgen. I look forward to your guidance from here on out.” The boy named Skáviðr bowed his head once more.

“Sure,” Jörgen replied dismissively. He didn’t know why, but he was getting more and more irritated by the minute. His pride wouldn’t allow him to let it show, of course, but his aggravation had already mounted to the point that he could barely contain it. This boy seemed to rouse an instinctive response within Jörgen.

“You said you were an Einherjar?” Jörgen muttered.

“Yes sir, I received ‘Dáinsleif, The Bloody Blade’ from Angrboða.”

“That so? Dáinsleif... Then you’re probably pretty good with a sword, I reckon.” An Einherjar’s area of expertise depended on the rune they received, but with a name like that, there was no doubt that it was combat-oriented.

“Well, more or less,” Skáviðr answered.

“Really now? Then to commemorate your induction, how about we head over there, and you can show me exactly how good.” Jörgen jabbed a finger over at the courtyard nearby. He wanted to see that one-in-a-million power for himself—no, truthfully he just wanted to beat this annoying kid senseless. That was it, really.

“That’s perfect. I’ve actually been wanting to spar with you ever since I first saw you, you know.” The corners of Skáviðr’s mouth turned up in a daring grin. That pissed Jörgen off even more. Was he insinuating that he didn’t even see the runeless Jörgen as a threat?! Perhaps he intended to assert his superiority once and for all by defeating his so-called “big brother” right here.

“You little shit!” Of course, Jörgen had the exact same intention, but this child was looking down on him as the kind of weakling he could easily beat. To Jörgen, there was no greater humiliation—and no greater justification to make him kneel.

“Then it’s decided. Follow me.” With a jerk of his chin, Jörgen headed to the courtyard.

Bruno’s mansion was just as spacious as his position might suggest, and his gardens were no exception. When they reached the courtyard, several of his subordinates had just finished sweeping up the fallen leaves strewn on the ground.

“Yo, Jörgen,” said one of his sworn older brothers, Brimir, as soon as he approached. “This the newbie?”

“Yeah, his name’s Skáviðr, and he’s an Einherjar, apparently,” Jörgen replied with a shrug. If he had to evaluate Brimir honestly, he was an ordinary man whose intelligence was just as lacking as his swordsmanship, but he’d received Bruno’s Chalice half a year before Jörgen had, and thus Jörgen had to call him “Big Brother” even though they were in fact the same age. *“Under the Chalice, shouldn’t ability take precedence over everything else?!”* he wanted to argue, but he knew if he didn’t comply he’d get an earful, so he begrudgingly went along with it. Being in Bruno’s Chalice family was more trouble than it was worth.

“Whoaaa! An Einherjar?! Oh yeah, come to think of it, I did hear something

through the grapevine," Brimir replied in a shocked tone.

"Oh yeah?" Jörgen was always polishing up his sword and bow techniques whenever he had a spare moment, so he didn't concern himself with gossip.

"You didn't know?! Well, it's just a rumor, but the palace is all abuzz. They say he's our first Einherjar in ten years!"

"Interesting," Jörgen lied.

"I was sure that he'd be assigned to Uncle Helblindi's family instead of here!"

"You'd normally think that, wouldn't you?" On this point alone, Jörgen was in agreement. Talented warriors ought to be sent to the battlefield instead—someone like himself. It was a waste of precious resources to keep them relegated to the sidelines. It even made him wonder if perhaps Fárbauti just didn't know how to use his subordinates efficiently, disrespectful a notion as it was.

"So what are you doing leading around the Einherjar, little bro? Showing him around the mansion?"

"Nah, I figured I'd give Mister Einherjar here a chance to show what he's made of."

"Oooh..." Brimir's eyes sparkled with excitement. The other subordinates on cleanup duty also wore similar expressions. They were all impressionable young men, so naturally they'd want to see an Einherjar in action.

"The strongest of our group against a young Einherjar, huh? Now that sounds like fun. Hey, you guys, go call everyone else over here! An event like this needs a bigger crowd than just us!"

"R-Roger!" The subordinates lowest on the totem pole scattered to spread the word, and in no time at all the courtyard was filled to the brim with spectators. For Jörgen, that was just perfect. It didn't matter whether this kid was an Einherjar or not—the more people that witnessed Jörgen pound him into the ground, the better. Everyone, even the gods above, would finally see his true potential!

"You ready?" Jörgen asked, taking a few practice swings with his wooden

sword. It was the sword he always practiced with, so it was like an extension of his own arm.

"Whenever you are." In contrast, Skáviðr picked up a wooden short sword at random and held it at the ready. He'd heard the boy was only twelve years old, but his stance was that of a seasoned warrior beyond his years.

"...Damn, he's strong!" Once a warrior became experienced enough, they could gauge the strength of their opponent just by their stance, and since last year Jörgen had gained experience facing off against full-grown adults within Bruno's Chalice family. The fact that this boy was still a preteen sent a chill down Jörgen's spine, even more so than his wolflike eyes.

"So this is an Einherjar..." Jörgen swallowed nervously. *"But like hell I'm gonna lose!"* Being five years older could make all the difference. Jörgen was taller, and more muscular. He had an overwhelming advantage already, so he just needed to focus on winning—and not on how shameful it'd be if he lost.

"What's wrong? Got cold feet?" Jörgen taunted with a confident grin. His pride wouldn't allow himself to strike first, since he was the older one. He was the teacher here, and Skáviðr was the student.

"If you say so!" Skáviðr kicked off the ground.

"Holy shit, he's fast!" But not fast enough that Jörgen couldn't react. *Clack!* With a smooth movement, he returned Skáviðr's downward strike.

"Guh?!" Skáviðr was thrown off-balance. Not missing that opportunity, Jörgen swung his wooden sword toward Skáviðr's unguarded torso.

"Tch!" Skáviðr managed to block the attack at the last second with his own wooden sword...

"Ha!"

"Wha?!" But Jörgen didn't let up, continuing to press his wooden sword into Skáviðr until the boy lost his footing and fell to the ground. Jörgen then pointed the tip of his wooden sword at Skáviðr's nose.

"What's wrong? Is this all an Einherjar's capable of?" His voice was low and icy.

“Whoooa!” The crowd surged with excitement and surprise. Perhaps they hadn’t thought the battle would be decided so quickly. Jörgen hadn’t either—truthfully, the outcome had been so anticlimactic that it upset him. He’d expected more of a struggle than this.

“A weakling like you isn’t even worth training,” he said with a disappointed sigh. He felt like a fool for sensing strength within the boy, for getting nervous.

“L-Let me try again! O-One more round!” Skáviðr protested.

“Fine. Now come at me!” Jörgen replied with vigor.

“Okay!” Skáviðr leaped up from the ground and delivered blow after blow. Jörgen had stoked the fires of desperation in the boy, but...

“Not good enough,” Jörgen spat coldly after effortlessly blocking about twenty of Skáviðr’s blows. For a twelve-year-old, his defense and offense were indeed well above average—outstandingly so, in fact. But only for a twelve-year-old. In the end, a boy with a small build couldn’t hold a candle to Jörgen, who was used to fighting full-grown adults. His fighting style was also too by-the-books, and he trusted his opponent too much. Perhaps he’d have no equal among children his age, but he was going to have to come into his own a bit more before he’d ever be a match for Jörgen.

“*This* is how you use a sword.” After using the direction of his eyes and the movement of his shoulders to perform a feint, tricking the boy into guarding his head, he swung the sword with all his strength at the boy’s thigh.

“Gah?!” Slow to react, Skáviðr took the brunt of the attack at full force and was knocked off his feet. He did a somersault in the air before crashing to the ground.

“Is this all an Einherjar is capable of...?” Jörgen muttered, lightly smacking the boy on the head with his sword. Honestly, he couldn’t be more disappointed. Why was this boy chosen and not him? At the time, he had no idea. But a year later, Jörgen finally learned the true strength of an Einherjar firsthand.

“Haaaa!”

“Hooohh!”

The clacking of wood against wood seemed to continue without end. Having sparred close to fifty times now, Jörgen had been on the offensive from start to finish. One could even say it was a one-sided game. But he could never deliver the deciding blow.

“Haa!”

“Hup!”

Even if he struck with all his strength, he was always intercepted with perfect timing before the attack could muster any real weight. When they were locking swords and he tried to clinch the battle with sheer force, the boy always slipped away like a snake. If he tried to attack the boy with a flurry of blows during his retreat to get him to stay put, he always avoided it with masterful footwork.

“Damn!” Furthermore, every time he slipped away, a sharp strike would follow. Even if Jörgen managed to block it, the boy always took that opportunity to gain some distance, making it impossible for Jörgen to get a bead on him. For the past few battles, that pattern had repeated itself.

“Haa...haa...” But Skáviðr’s breathing was starting to become labored. Even though Jörgen had been the one exerting all the stamina, it had probably exhausted Skáviðr’s concentration and nerves to keep up with such a strong opponent for so long.

“Haa!” But Jörgen had no obligation to let him rest. He sent strike after lightning-fast strike toward the boy.

Skáviðr kept dodging until his posture suddenly crumbled. It wasn’t because he’d been hit—he’d slipped on a fallen leaf. Naturally, Jörgen didn’t let that opportunity slip by.

“Gotcha!” With all his might, Jörgen sent his wooden sword downward. Skáviðr tried to block with his own wooden sword, but with his posture compromised, he was unable to.

“This is it! You’re done for!” Jörgen thought. But in the next instant, he was proven wrong. Suddenly, his sword began to move in a direction he didn’t intend. The weight of his own attack dragged him with it, sending him off-balance. *“What in the hell?!”*

In the height of his confusion, he saw Skáviðr rear up to strike from the corner of his eye. *“Shit!”* It was already too late to react. A searing pain shot across his left flank, and he fell to one knee.

“Yes!” Skáviðr pumped his fist. He’d never been one to show much emotion, so it was often hard to tell what he was thinking. This was the first time Jörgen had ever seen him exhibit something resembling elation. Perhaps after losing so many times over the past year, he was just happy to finally clinch a victory.

“Tch, you finally got one over on me, huh? What was that last thing you did, anyway? It was like my sword was moving on its own,” Jörgen asked him. He almost added, *“Don’t get so carried away over a mere fluke,”* but held his tongue. He didn’t want to sound like a sore loser, and he was genuinely curious what could’ve possibly compromised his posture like that.

“Instead of taking the strength of your blow head-on, I simply diverted it in another direction. Of course, that doesn’t work with just any attack, so I lured you into taking a big downward swing,” Skáviðr explained.

“What?! You mean you slipped on that leaf on purpose?!”

“Yes.”

“Huh. I see.” Jörgen scratched his head. In other words, he’d taken the bait Skáviðr had laid out. The straightforward Skáviðr of last year never would’ve attempted something like that. Of course, Jörgen wouldn’t let that work on him next time, but in actual combat there were no “next times.” Begrudgingly, he had to admit that the boy had beaten him not through sheer luck or random happenstance, but on his own merit. Jörgen had lost.

“Hmph, not bad, Einherjar.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Big Brother Jörgen. After so many battles against someone I couldn’t win against with sheer strength alone, I started strategizing and finally had a revelation. If I’d continued to only fight people my own age, I might’ve been so stuck in my own ways that I’d never have improved.” He said with a grin.

At this point he was still green and had much more growing to do, but in the distant future, this meeting would inspire the boy to create the “Willow

Technique” and one day pass it down to a pupil of his named Sigrun, who would in turn pass it down to a pupil of hers named Hildegard. That secret technique of Skáviðr’s would later go on to be the thread that always kept the girls alive in the face of certain death.

“By the way, my name’s not ‘Einherjar.’ It’s Skáviðr.”

“Ah, right.” Jörgen belatedly realized that up until now, he hadn’t once called Skáviðr by his proper name, probably something he’d unconsciously done in petty retaliation against the boy for earning a rune quicker than he had. However, now that he’d fought him, he could sense a toughness and dogged determination to win, a strength completely independent from what his rune had granted him.

“You’ve gotten strong, Skáviðr.” With a small smirk, Jörgen finally called the boy by his name. Reluctant as he was to do so, he acknowledged Skáviðr as a fellow warrior. Suddenly, he heard applause from behind. Jörgen turned around —and immediately bent his knee.

“F-Father?! My apologies for showing you such a pathetic display.” He greeted Bruno by kneeling before him. Beside Jörgen, Skáviðr did the same.

“Pathetic? That was one of the finest battles I’ve witnessed. I came to praise you, not berate you,” Bruno said.

“I-I am not worthy of your words. Thank you.” Jörgen bowed his head.

“And you, Skáviðr.” Bruno then turned to face Skáviðr. “To claim victory against the strongest member of our family is quite the accomplishment, especially at such a young age.”

“Thank you, Father,” Skáviðr replied.

“However, you can’t get by in this world on strength alone. Be sure to listen to your brothers and treat them with respect as you learn more and more. Remember, diligence is key,” Bruno explained.

“Yes, Father. I understand.” Skáviðr nodded.

“Now then, Jörgen, I have another matter to discuss with you. Come with me.” Gesturing with his chin for him to follow, Bruno walked away. His demeanor and tone had seemed a bit more stern just now. *“What’s with him? Did I mess up somehow without realizing it?”* However, Bruno was his sworn father, and his father’s word was absolute. Silently, he trailed after Bruno.

“How many years has it been since you came here?” Once they’d reached the

pond in the corner of the garden, Bruno spoke. He did not turn around to face Jörgen.

“As of last month, it’s been four years, I believe,” Jörgen replied.

“That long, huh? Well, I suppose given that much time, even a boorish monkey like you would learn some manners.”

“That’s all thanks to your thorough discipline, Father.” Jörgen bowed his head, returning the insult with ready wit. He was being sarcastic, but it was also true—over the past four years, etiquette had been thoroughly drilled into him. Acting improperly would result in no dinner or even corporal punishment. Bruno had the right of it—under that environment, even a monkey would’ve learned.

“Seems like you’ve also excelled at the work I’ve given you. Everyone always talks about your attention to detail.”

“It’s an honor to hear that.” In truth, however, he felt no joy at being praised. After completing his three-year etiquette course, Jörgen had spent the last year doing work for Bruno’s faction—although his share involved boring behind-the-scenes work like collecting the annual taxes from the townsfolk, overseeing the transportation of weapons and rations to the front lines, and managing the upkeep of the town. Of course, he approached all these duties with diligence and care, but hearing his work praised in these areas did nothing for him. To a warrior, such things were trivial.

“So I was thinking since you’ve done so well, it might be time for you to finally receive Father’s Chalice,” Bruno said.

“Huh?!” Jörgen wasn’t expecting that. Seeing Jörgen’s surprise, Bruno grinned.

“That *was* the arrangement originally, wasn’t it?” he said.

“Well, yes, but...” Jörgen was at a loss for words. Truthfully, he’d been convinced that Bruno had only used the prospect of Fárbauti’s Chalice as bait, a promise that was never meant to be fulfilled. He’d been sure that the only way to actually receive the patriarch’s Chalice was to accomplish something great, and that as long as he was in Bruno’s family he’d be stuck doing menial work

anyone could do. So why was Bruno offering Fárbauti's Chalice now?

"The last four years under me have been boring and miserable, haven't they?" Bruno said knowingly.

"Of course not, Father, any time under you would never..." He quickly tried to deny it, but Bruno had hit the nail on the head. How many times had he longed to nullify the his oath with Bruno and move to another family? He'd lost count.

"But no matter how mundane the task, you were always diligent and gave it your all. That's not something just anyone can do."

Jörgen blinked in surprise. He hadn't imagined Bruno would ever say something so thoughtful. He'd been sure that Bruno was just a stubborn old man who cared about outward appearances and formalities more than what was actually inside, so his assessment came as a shock.

Bruno's assessment continued. "Young folk tend to only be focused on accomplishing great things. However, in a clan like ours, there are inevitably times when you'll be forced to do things you don't necessarily want to. Times when things don't go the way you want them to, or when you'll have to say something's white when it's clearly black. When that happens, you require the composure and wit to be able to keep your head down."

"So you've been testing me all this time? Is that what you're telling me?" Jörgen asked.

"You catch on quick," Bruno replied. "Not just a test, though. I wanted to give you some experience. So that even during the rough times, you'll be able to hang in there a bit longer."

"True. I'm pretty sure I could handle anything, especially after the hell you put me through."

"I know, right?" Bruno let out a despicable chuckle. It had been a hellish environment—on top of being boring and restrictive, Bruno would deprive him of food and beat him if his speech and manners didn't meet his exacting standards. But just as Bruno had said, that had toughened Jörgen up into someone who wouldn't fold when faced with the average hardship.

"I said this to Skáviðr too," Bruno went on, "but strength alone isn't enough

to make it in a clan like this. It may seem like nothing more than formality at a glance, but etiquette and discipline prevent unnecessary conflicts from popping up, and they keep you from tripping up when it really counts."

"I...see." Jörgen had now matured enough to understand the significance behind Bruno's lessons. At first, he'd been convinced that formalities and proper conduct were little more than pointless lip service, but now he realized that people were more receptive to him and kinder when he kept up those formalities.

"As you are now, I don't have any qualms about letting you have Father's Chalice," Bruno said. "Diligence is key, remember that."

Suddenly, Jörgen felt tears welling up in his eyes. If he were being brutally honest,, he despised Bruno. He'd lost count of the times the old bastard had yelled at him and beaten him. Jörgen thought he'd never be able to respect a man like that, and though he kept such thoughts very much to himself, he'd looked down on him as a stubborn old man stuck in his ways, someone every bit as narrow-minded as the rumors said.

Truthfully? He was mostly right. But now, he'd come to realize that there was more to Bruno than he'd thought. Given everything he'd seen and learned, Jörgen finally realized that Bruno's lofty position as second-in-command of the Wolf Clan hadn't been for show.

Jörgen bowed to Bruno's back, deeply enough that his head reached his knees, and shouted his reply. "Yes, Father! From the bottom of my heart, thank you for your guidance, and for whipping me into shape these past few years!"

The years that followed flew by Jörgen in a flash. His workload became mountainous, and after clearing it all, his status within the clan rose. With that elevated status came further increased responsibility within the clan, which meant *even more* work. That cycle continued as he worked as hard as he could, and before he knew it he was over thirty, ranked sixth within the clan, had started a family, and had become the Wolf Clan's permanent adviser. He had taken two women as his wives and had children with each. He couldn't be more satisfied with his current life.

“In the end, without your instruction, I never would’ve gotten this far, second-in-command,” Jörgen admitted. Those were his true feelings. If he’d still been the cheeky upstart he used to be, he was sure he never would’ve risen to his current position. He had to admit that Bruno’s lessons in conduct and etiquette, and perhaps most importantly, those relating to improving his social skills, had been a huge boon for Jörgen when it had come to making a living within the clan.

“Heh, stop that. I’m not second-in-command anymore,” Bruno said with a wistful half-smile. Moments ago, there had been a ceremony to amend the Oath of the Chalice, and Bruno had stepped down from his position as the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, becoming its leader of subordinates instead. As far as anyone was concerned, it was billed as a promotion, but under the Chalice system a patriarch’s successor was chosen from among his sworn children—there was no precedent for a successor to be chosen from among a subordinate. In other words, Bruno had lost the qualifications to lead the Wolf Clan as Fárbauti’s successor.

As much as Fárbauti was fond of Bruno, the truth was that for the past ten years, Bruno hadn’t accomplished anything of merit, and simply couldn’t compete with the rising stars of the clan. Jörgen owed a lot to Bruno so he did find it a shame, but well, such was the passage of time. The strong rose to the top, and when they grew weak, they were demoted to the lower ranks and replaced by someone stronger. That was the way of the world in Yggdrasil.

“Hey, Uncle, congratulations. You’ve done some fine work up until now,” said a cheerful voice. When he turned to look, he saw a blond-haired, blue-eyed man in his mid-forties, wearing his trademark grin as usual. It was someone Jörgen knew well, a man who was highly respected within the Wolf Clan. But from his prolonged exposure to the man, Jörgen knew that behind that smile lurked a coolheadedness that was almost inhuman.

That being said, Jörgen didn’t dislike that side of him. It was thanks to the man’s levelheaded judgment that the Wolf Clan’s casualties had been kept to a minimum in their ongoing feud with the Horn Clan and had been able to prevent their advances. Thanks to him, the Wolf Clan had enjoyed peace for the last ten years.

The mystery man was none other than Helblindi—an outsider whose skills had enabled him to take Bruno's place and become the new second-in-command of the Wolf Clan.

"What do you want, Helblindi?" Bruno said hatefully with a glare. In response, Helblindi casually shrugged his shoulders, perhaps because he was confident he was the stronger one.

"My business isn't with you, Uncle," Helblindi replied. "You just relax and rest those tired bones. I'm here for Jörgen."

"Me?" Jörgen raised his eyebrows in suspicion. Helblindi's grin seemed to become wider.

"That's right. How'd you like to join my family instead, Jörgen? Uncle's done for, I'm afraid. Sticking around him isn't gonna do you any favors, let alone snag you any promotions."

"That's a rude thing to say when the man himself is right here," Jörgen growled.

"See, that's what I mean. Always a stickler for formalities. Hey. Uncle. Give up Jörgen and Skáviðr to me already. You wouldn't want to see the boys you spent so much time and effort raising fall into obscurity, would you?"

"Why you...!"

"Stand down, Jörgen!" Before Jörgen could explode with rage, Bruno raised a hand to stop him. "I thank you for being so considerate, Helblindi. Indeed, I would hate to see Jörgen and Skáviðr's talents go to waste. Please take care of them for me." Bruno bowed reverently to Helblindi—to his archenemy who'd usurped his position.

"You're too soft, Uncle." There was only a thin line between being gentle and being weak. Both Fárbauti and Bruno had a tendency to cross that line—so focused on the big picture that they were often far too lenient with those around them. However, in order to survive in this world, there were times when you had to stand your ground or risk being walked all over. Now was one of those times. Naturally, Jörgen knew that Bruno was acting in the best interests of his sworn children. But Bruno was being far too servile. It was so pathetic

that Jörgen couldn't stand it.

"Well, now that I have Uncle's permission, you'll be under me starting tomorrow," Helblindi stated. "I've taken quite a liking to that persistent loyalty you've shown toward Uncle, you know."

"So you can use me as a tool without having to worry, I presume?" Jörgen shot back.

"Hmph, you're smarter than you look. Yes, you and Skáviðr will be incredibly useful tools. However, I won't use you to the point of breaking, at least. You will be rewarded with promotions and the like for your efforts." Helblindi acknowledged it immediately—he didn't even try to hide it. He would use anything as long as it was useful—that was the sort of matter-of-fact logic Helblindi was known for, and likely also the reason he continued to achieve results. He was a bastard, but Jörgen had to admit the guy had talent.

"Next, I'd like for our newly appointed second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, Lord Helblindi, to detail our plan for the clan going forward." As the ceremony chairman moved on to the next topic, cries of excitement and enthusiasm arose from all around the assembly hall.

"Oh, looks like I'm up." With a casual wave of his hand, Helblindi turned on his heel and stepped up to the podium.

"I'll begin by introducing myself. My name is Helblindi." There was confidence and authority in his voice as he greeted the crowd. He spent the next few minutes outlining what actions he planned to take from here on. Then, once the speech had reached a stopping point...

"Loptr, come here."

"Yes, dad." Helblindi summoned his own son to the podium—a boy of delicate build, with the same blond hair and blue eyes as his father. While their faces weren't very alike, the glint in the boy's eyes was the spitting image of his father's—the cold, condescending gaze of someone who viewed others as disposable tools.

"Let me introduce a certain young boy next. This is Loptr, my son, and as most of you already know, an Einherjar," Helblindi explained.

The mention of an Einherjar caused a commotion within the crowd. Naturally, Jörgen had also heard of Loptr—the “all-rounder prodigy,” as he had come to be known. The boy had an uncanny ability to pick up and absorb any technique, no matter the category, as easily as sand soaks up water—and that wasn’t even taking his Einherjar powers into account. Some even said that the real reason Helblindi was able to snag the seat of second-in-command was that he had a son like Loptr.

“In recent years,” Helblindi continued, “the number of Einherjar within the Wolf Clan has drastically increased. As it happens, my daughter, Felicia has also recently been blessed with a rune of her own.”

The commotion from the crowd was louder this time. *“Not just the older one, but the younger one too, huh?”* Jörgen clicked his tongue in frustration. *“Must be nice to have such superior genes.”* It made him so jealous he could barely stand it.

“Just the other day, Sigrún, who despite her young age has already received our patriarch’s Chalice, also came into a rune of her own. Looking to the west, the Hoof Clan’s forces grow larger by the day, suppressing ever-growing portions of the Horn Clan’s territory. This, I believe, is Angrboða’s guidance at work.” With his hand on his heart and his gaze to the heavens, Helblindi spoke in a reverent tone.



It seemed strange to Jörgen for a realist like Helblindi to speak the goddess's name, but on the other hand, he found himself in agreement. Back when Jörgen had first joined the Wolf Clan, the outsider Helblindi had been the only

Einherjar, and now there were five. In addition, an even greater threat had appeared to antagonize their sworn enemy with perfect timing. If that wasn't the providence of the gods, then what was?

"Thus, I propose that now is the time to strike back at the Horn Clan, our sworn foes who have set their sights on our land and plagued us for years, and wipe them off the map once and for all! We will take their main base, Fort Horn, and secure peace and prosperity for the Wolf Clan at last! Sieg Úlfr!"

"Sieg Úlfr!" the crowd bellowed in unison. Helblindi's spirited speech had certainly riled up the assembly hall. Jörgen stole a furtive glance in Fárbauti's direction. The patriarch was wearing a bitter expression. It seemed he was opposed to Helblindi's plan, but did he have the strength to get someone like Helblindi to stand down?

Jörgen swallowed nervously. The skirmishes and scuffles the Wolf and Horn Clans had engaged in up until now were a thing of the past. This would be an all-out war that demanded the strength of the entire clan.

The Wolf Clan soldiers charged toward the enemy camp, their war cries echoing across the battlefield. The air quickly filled with the clinks of traded blows and the cries of death.

The Wolf Clan was clearly advancing further than the Horn Clan. *"Makes sense,"* Jörgen thought. After all, Helblindi, Skáviðr, and Loptr, the clan's three strongest Einherjar, were all on the front lines. In addition, while the Horn Clan Army was technically more powerful than the Wolf Clan's, the threats of the Hoof Clan to the west and the Snake Clan to the south had divided their forces. The Horn Clan had about three thousand soldiers currently at their disposal, while the Wolf Clan had around four thousand. The Wolf Clan's victory was all but assured.

"That said, we still can't afford to let our guard down," Jörgen said with a wry grin, as though chiding his past self. He focused once more on the battle at hand. At this point in life, he'd learned all too well that in war, nothing could be taken for granted. The moments in which victory seemed most clear were when one had to be the most careful.

“Hey, Father! We’ve basically already won, right? We’re going on ahead! If we’re too late to the party, we’ll miss out on all the glory!” One of his sworn children, still wet behind the ears, seemed all too eager to rush into battle. It had only been a matter of days since he’d joined Jörgen’s family, so Jörgen understood why he was so keen to prove himself.

In response, Jörgen shook his head with a small smile. “Not yet. Wait a bit longer. For now, focus on resting up and saving your strength.” The best time to distinguish oneself wasn’t in the heat of the main battle, it was afterward, once things had begun to wind down and the pursuit had begun. It was entirely possible something could happen that would turn the battle on its head. If any of his men expended their strength now, they might not have the stamina to perform when it really counted. Being able to recognize when to act and when to rest on your laurels was one of the key skills needed to become a truly great warrior.

“But man, they sure are stubborn,” Jörgen muttered. It had already been two hours since the battle began, and despite the Wolf Clan’s strong offense throughout, the Horn Clan Army showed no sign of collapse. But it was probably only a matter of time—eventually, they’d fall. Even the legendary Horn Clan commander Hrungnir wouldn’t be able to turn the tide of this battle.

Suddenly, a gong rang out incessantly. At first, Jörgen thought it was the enemy retreating at last, but then he realized his mistake. The gong wasn’t ringing from the Horn Clan side—it was coming from the Wolf Clan.

“The *Wolf Clan* is retreating?! Right when we’re about to win?!” Jörgen couldn’t believe his ears. They had this victory in the bag—retreating here after they’d come this far would just be foolish.

“Helblindi is no fool. This surely serves a greater purpose.” Over the past ten years, Helblindi had been the Wolf Clan’s most valuable asset. He had taken the lead in this advance against the Horn Clan as well. For him to retreat meant something must’ve come up. Something big. At the same time, he heard a surge of victorious cheers rising from the Horn Clan ranks. There was no way that could be a coincidence.

“What the hell’s happening over there?!” Jörgen growled. He didn’t know, but

he was sure of one thing, at least: the Wolf Clan had lost this battle.

That night, the commanders of the Wolf Clan Army gathered at a camp a short distance away from the battlefield, all wearing haggard, irritated expressions. Considering they'd suddenly been ordered to withdraw on the cusp of victory, hardly anyone could blame them. Invigorated by the Wolf Clan's retreat, the Horn Clan Army had gained a second wind and chased the Wolf Clan Army away, causing them to suffer many more casualties.

"So, second-in-command, mind explaining to us what that order was all about?" Jörgen rounded on Helblindi the moment he approached. He knew full well he was being coarse toward a superior, but he couldn't care less. He was so filled with rage that it was all the same to him right now. He'd lost several of his sworn children thanks to Helblindi's sudden order, so Jörgen hoped the man had a damn good reason.

Helblindi let out a frustrated sigh. "The Claw Clan betrayed us," he said simply.

The sudden revelation sent ripples of shock through the gathering of commanders. After all, the Claw Clan was supposed to be a branch family of the Wolf Clan. The current patriarch was said to have received the Chalice of Fárbauti and become his sworn brother, so they should've been under the umbrella of the Wolf Clan.

"They probably saw now as a golden opportunity since all of our forces are currently preoccupied here in the west. We received a declaration of war stating that they intend to take back everything that was stolen from them," Helblindi stated grimly.

"What?! Preposterous! They mean to nullify the sacred and inviolable Oath of the Chalice?!" Jörgen shouted.

"Apparently they pulled the old switcheroo on us. The current patriarch of the clan, Botvid, wasn't the one that received Fárbauti's Chalice. Therefore, they didn't actually nullify anything."

"Sophistry!" In his rage, Jörgen kicked the trunk of a nearby tree. The most infuriating thing was that the trick the Claw Clan had pulled was logically sound.

Even if it was exploiting a loophole, as long as it was logical it was fair game—that was the Yggdrasillian way.

"We don't know who served as Botvid's stand-in either. Damn that sly fox! He fooled us completely!" Helblindi seemed to seethe with hatred. He had to be feeling just as mortified as Jörgen—his grand ambition to wipe the Horn Clan from existence had been completely upended at the moment of victory, after all.

"It's very likely that the Claw Clan and Horn Clan are in cahoots." Helblindi audibly ground his teeth. Jörgen agreed with the observation. That would definitely explain why the Horn Clan had been so tenacious despite having a long history of losing to the Wolf Clan, and why they'd been so unusually intent on going on the defensive. They knew that in the end, the Wolf Clan would get stabbed in the back and have no choice but to retreat.

"We've lost this war already. All we can do now is focus on sending as many soldiers as we can back home to Iárnviðr safe and sound." Jörgen agreed on that point as well. With all of the Wolf Clan's gathered in the west, the clan's eastern territory would be a free-for-all if they didn't hurry back as soon as possible.

"Jörgen, I'm sorry, but would you mind bringing up the rear as we make our retreat?" Helblindi asked.

"...Me?" He hesitated to answer right away, swallowing hard. The rear guard was one of the most honorable positions a warrior could ever be offered, but at the same time, the most dangerous and deadly. Jörgen had two wives and three kids at home. It wasn't a decision he could make lightly.

"You are calm in the face of danger, and tough enough that you had the guts to stand up against me. No one's better suited to the role," Helblindi explained.

"In other words, a scapegoat," Jörgen thought. Jörgen had joined Helblindi's family because Bruno had retired from being second-in-command, but that didn't mean he was loyal to Helblindi. In fact, Jörgen could even pose a latent threat to Helblindi's position and become one of his worst enemies. In that case, when it came time to decide who was expendable it only stood to reason that Helblindi would choose a potential future foe like Jörgen over an actual

member of his Chalice family.

“I understand. In case the worst befalls me, please take care of my wife, children, and sworn children.” Steeling his resolve, Jörgen gave his answer. Truthfully he couldn’t think of anything he’d like to do less, but it was an order from the commander of his clan’s army. It’d be hard to refuse, and they needed a strong rear guard to ensure that many more lives weren’t lost. If he was going to die, he at least wanted to make his death an honorable one.

Concealed in the shadows, Jörgen loosed several rapid-fire arrows in succession. As if matching his rhythm, several of his sworn children fired arrows of his own. Two enemy soldiers went down.

“Shit, an ambush?! Kill ’em!” one of them shouted.

“There aren’t that many. Surround them!” said another.

“That one in the middle’s mine. That’s a nice blade he’s got. Fine workmanship,” said yet another.

The enemy soldiers were all fired up as they charged forward. Even though two of their comrades had already been killed, they weren’t fazed in the slightest. But that made sense, considering that to the Horn Clan Army, the battle was already as good as won.

“Men! Swords at the ready! Whatever you do, do not let them pass any further!” Jörgen barked.

“Yes, Father!” they shouted in unison. In no time at all, the air was filled with the frenzied clinks of metal against metal. The Jörgen faction was around three hundred in number. That was small compared to the enemy army, but they were currently on a narrow path sandwiched between a forest and a river. The most either side was able to deploy here was around a hundred total, so the difference really didn’t matter. Jörgen was also out swinging his sword on the front lines, cutting down enemy after enemy. His bravery motivated his sworn children, renewing their morale.

“Damn, these guys won’t quit!” one of Jörgen’s sworn children exclaimed. Two hours had passed, and the Horn Clan Army was beginning to get restless as

their prey, the main forces of the Wolf Clan, slipped further and further away. They were probably getting real anxious right about now.

“Stand your ground, troops! Remember your daily training!” Jörgen barked, raising his sword high and boosting his allies’ morale. In truth, though, he knew that was a tough ask. As a faction, they’d split into three units and periodically swapped out soldiers on the front lines so that they could let each other rest, but it didn’t change the fact that they were fighting to the death. Anxiety threatened to sap the soldiers’ stamina. However, their battle spirit had not yet died out, and so the Jörgen faction continued to put up a valiant fight.

Finally, sunset came, and the Horn Clan Army backed off at last. The Jörgen faction had somehow succeeded in holding out. But that had been the easy part.

“Haa...haa... All right guys, I know this’ll be tough, but now we need to get a move on and put as much distance between us and the enemy as possible,” Jörgen ordered.

Under the cover of darkness, the Jörgen faction began their retreat. They’d ended up buying a whole days’ worth of distance for the rest of the army, which was plenty. Now it was time to ensure their own safety as they made their way back home. However, that was easier said than done.

“Shit, my body feels like a sack full of stones,” a soldier complained. The Jörgen faction had been fighting all day, and they were all ready to collapse. But they had no choice but to press on. Tonight would be the only chance they had to flee.

“Looks like they’ve all been run ragged,” Jörgen remarked to himself. As the unit continued to put one foot in front of the other, one step at a time, the sun began to rise. In the dim glow of the sunlight, Jörgen looked back at his faction and grimaced. They had been traveling this path in the dead of the night, with no light whatsoever. Jörgen himself had lost count of the times he’d lost his footing and tripped. Their clothes were completely ruined and riddled with holes, and they had scratches and cuts everywhere.

Even so, they were alive—*alive!* Two hundred and fifty of them had managed not to fall behind. Considering the fierceness of that battle and the strictness of

the schedule they'd had to adhere to, that was nothing short of a miracle.

"Well, now that we've come this far I think we can take a breather. Everyone, let's rest for a bit and—oh shit, you've got to be kidding me..." Jörgen's knees almost buckled unconsciously when he saw something in the distance. The moment he thought they were safe, he was thrown back into the abyss of despair—because right before his eyes was the Horn Clan flag, flapping in the breeze as proudly as ever.

"They must've circled around the perimeter," Jörgen said with a sigh. Perhaps after dealing with the Jörgen faction yesterday, they'd determined that breaking through the enemy lines normally would be too difficult and circled around in secret while Jörgen's unit was still preoccupied with the task before them.

"It's over," Jörgen muttered glumly. The only way to get back home to Iárnviðr was to break through the Horn Clan Army blocking their path, but there were over five hundred Horn Clan soldiers in their way—double that of the Jörgen faction, not to mention they'd just spent an entire day yesterday fighting and been on the move all night. They were utterly exhausted, and the enemy wouldn't be kind enough to wait around and let them rest. Even if they did, it would only be long enough for the Horn Clan's main army to approach from behind and catch the Jörgen faction in a pincer attack.

"Heh. If we're gonna die either way, we might as well proceed onward." Jörgen grinned fiercely. Waiting around would only make the situation worse, and besides, it was more fitting for a warrior to go out in a blaze of glory. Perhaps by taking out a few enemy soldiers, he could create a gap to where at least some of his children would be able to make it back to Iárnviðr safely. Then if those survivors passed down the tale of how bravely he'd fought to his wife and children, they might be able to live with their heads held high and without shame.

"Everyone made their peace?" He looked around at his sworn children. They all wore determined faces as they nodded. They would follow him dutifully to the grave. He wanted to apologize, but at the same time, their unwavering loyalty warmed his heart.

“All right boys, this is our last stand! Let’s fight until the very end, and drink together once more when we meet in Valhalla!”

The entire faction erupted in vigorous cries and charged toward the enemy lines.

“Your head’s mine!” Jörgen roared as he immediately cut down the nearest enemy.

“Haa!”

“Guh!”

After taking out several more, he cursed inwardly. His body practically refused to listen to his commands. His bronze sword, normally so light in his hands, felt several times heavier.

“Haa...ugh...” He’d hardly even begun, and he was already winded. His exhaustion was reaching its peak. His stamina was at its limit. He was running purely on a combat high at this point.

“Out of the way, grunts.” A man who looked to be around forty shoved an enemy soldier aside and stepped up to the front lines. “You guys are only good for building a wall of corpses.”

One glance and Jörgen knew that he was no pushover. The aura he exuded dwarfed all the other enemy soldiers present. There was only one man Jörgen knew of who could give off such a presence.

“Commander of the Three Flames, Rasmus...” He was the strongest of the three Einherjar the Horn Clan possessed, known collectively as the “Three Flames.” He was also the person Jörgen least wanted to encounter right now.

“Oh, so you’ve heard of me, have you?” The moment those words left Rasmus’s mouth, his figure vanished from Jörgen’s vision.

Ting!

It was entirely due to luck that Jörgen managed to block the attack. He’d chosen to guard his neck based on pure instinct, and it just happened to be the correct move. If Rasmus had gone for his torso instead, Jörgen would’ve been making his way to Valhalla right about now. Rasmus’s approach had been

terrifyingly fast.

“Not bad. Then how about this?” A flurry of attacks came without a moment’s reprieve, one after another. Every one of them was blindingly fast. It didn’t just seem that way due to Jörgen’s exhaustion—each of the attacks really were on a level he’d never experienced. Not to mention...

“Damn, they’re powerful too!” Each of Rasmus’s blows was strong enough to make Jörgen’s hands go numb, leaving him barely able to maintain a grip on his sword. He’d managed to block them by focusing solely on the trajectory of the sword, but his shot nerves wouldn’t allow him to keep that up for much longer.

“Gaah!” Finally, Rasmus’s sword grazed Jörgen’s right brow. The wound itself wasn’t deep, but its location couldn’t be worse—the blood flowing from the wound got in his eyes, rendering him unable to see. For an opponent as strong as Rasmus, that made all the difference between life and death.

“Hmph, you’ve put up quite the fight against me so far. Are you the ‘Skáviðr’ I’ve heard so much about?” Rasmus grinned in amusement as he held his sword at the ready once more. Jörgen merely spat in disgust, partly from how casually his opponent was treating him, and above all, from being mistaken for that boy. It felt like he was seriously being underestimated.

“Jörgen. That’s my name.”

“Jörgen? Ah, the sixth-ranked. For you to possess that level of skill without a rune, I’m impressed.” His surprise seemed genuine enough, and maybe he thought that was a compliment, but all it did was irritate him further.

“How dare you look down on me! I’ll wipe that grin off your face!” Fueled by his anger, Jörgen roused his tired body to action. He probably only had one more attack left in him, but he’d be damned if he wasn’t going to make that one attack count.

“I like the fire in your eyes. It lets me know that now I can get serious.” Rasmus narrowed his eyes like a beast.

“Give me a break,” Jörgen thought. *“You’re telling me he’s just as impenetrable mentally as he is physically? How am I supposed to fight against someone with no openings?!”*

“Here I come!” Rasmus approached. Once again, his advance was so fast Jörgen didn’t have time to think of a plan.

Ting! Ting! Tingtingting!

Just like last time, Jörgen was forced on the defensive instantly. But he couldn’t give up.

“Dammit!” Cursing and gritting his teeth in desperation, he withstood the onslaught of attacks. Though Jörgen was loathe to admit it, Rasmus was more skilled. However, there were no absolutes in war, and there was no guarantee that the strongest would always win. Jörgen had learned that firsthand in his battle with Skáviðr ten years ago.

A strike from Rasmus repelled Jörgen’s sword, and Rasmus prepared a follow-up strike while Jörgen was open. It was the same technique he’d used to graze Jörgen’s eyebrow earlier, so it was probably a signature move of his. Out of all Rasmus’s practiced movements, it was also the sharpest—he executed it with perfect timing.

“I can’t avoid it—but what if I take it on purpose?!”

Slish!

Severe pain shot through his left shoulder as the sword stabbed through him. Contrary to expectation, however, he ignored it and sliced at Rasmus with all his might. An eye for an eye—against an as overwhelmingly powerful as Rasmus, the only way to win was to strike at the same time he did.

“Wha?!”

“Agh?!” Rasmus quickly let go of the hilt of his sword and crouched down on the spot, evading Jörgen’s last-ditch attack. If he’d taken the time to yank the sword out of Jörgen’s shoulder first, he would’ve been too late. However, the decision to let go of his lifeline during a life-or-death battle wasn’t likely one a normal person would’ve been able to make.

Slish!

“Gahh?!” A shock ran through his solar plexus, rendering him unable to breathe. Pain didn’t even begin to describe the sensation. It was pure agony.

Unable to stand any longer, Jörgen crumpled to the ground.

“Ha ha... You surprised me there for a moment, Jörgen.” Rasmus’s voice came from above. Jörgen couldn’t budge an inch. But he had no regrets. He’d staked everything he had on that last attack, and if that didn’t do the trick then that was just the gulf between them. Dying at the hands of such a powerful opponent was honestly all a warrior could ever ask for.

“Hmph.” Jörgen’s response was indignant.

Rasmus forcefully yanked out the sword lodged in Jörgen’s shoulder and sent a powerful kick to his jaw, flipping him over on his back. “Any last words?” he asked.

“None. Just get it over with.”

“Then let us meet again in Valhalla. Farewell.” With those cold parting words, Rasmus brought his sword down on top of Jörgen.

Just before he was run through, something sliced through the air. A single arrow pierced through the space where Rasmus had just been. A second, then a third arrow followed.

“Tch!” Clucking his tongue, Rasmus leaped backward. Jörgen could see a Wolf Clan flag flying atop the nearby cliff, and underneath that flag stood a young blond-haired, blue-eyed boy. Several hundred soldiers were gathered behind him.

“Shit. Looks like we’ve got company. All right, Jörgen, I’ll concede victory to you this time. Let’s meet again on the battlefield soon.” With that, Rasmus and the Horn Clan Army were gone as quickly as they had arrived. It seemed he’d immediately realized he was outmatched and made a swift decision—with a sizable Wolf Clan force joining in from the side and having the high ground, the Horn Clan Army was at a clear disadvantage. However, that ability to judge the situation quickly only proved how formidable an opponent he was. If he’d taken but a moment later to make his decision, the Horn Clan Army might have suffered many more casualties. As would be expected from the Commander of the Three Flames, his judgment was as sharp as his skill with a sword.

Jörgen had lost this battle on all counts. But he wasn’t the type to mope

about his losses either.

"One day, I'll return the favor, Rasmus." Looking up at the sky, he swore to himself that he would get his revenge. He would never have imagined in his wildest dreams that later, the two would become amicable rivals, crossing blades not only on the battlefield but in the world of politics, and eventually they'd become drinking buddies who laughed and joked about the past they'd shared.

"I'm glad to see you safe and sound, Uncle Jörgen." Once the battle was over and his shoulder had been tended to, the boy from earlier, Loptr, came over and spoke to Jörgen. As far as Jörgen had heard, Loptr was still only eighteen—but a young lad, by all accounts. His face still retained traces of his boyhood, but deep in his eyes Jörgen felt a chill, as if the boy was observing every move he made.

"Yeah, thanks for your help back there. But Loptr, why are you here, anyway?" The Wolf Clan Army should've all been on their way back to Iárnviðr right now, so it was odd for him to be here instead.

"I got permission from dad to stay here for just today. Upon calculating your thought patterns, Uncle Jörgen, and the likely thought patterns of Rasmus, of whom I've heard many stories, I determined that there would likely be a battle in this area."

"What the...?!" Jörgen sat there openmouthed, unable to speak. Loptr might've said it like it was no big deal, but it was preposterous. That would mean that all this time, both Jörgen and Rasmus had been dancing on the palm of this boy's hand...no, not just him and Rasmus, but the Horn Clan Army supreme commander and patriarch Hrungnir as well! If that were true, the boy possessed a frightening tactical eye.

"No matter how good you think someone is, there's always someone better." Jörgen heaved a sigh. Back in his youth, he hadn't doubted for a single second that he had the stuff to be a hero of legend. But by now, he'd encountered so many freakishly powerful people that his pride was already in tatters.

"So this is the true strength of an Einherjar." Every day seemed to hammer

home the point further that he was just a regular guy. Unlike the Einherjar, he could never be a flower that bloomed on the battlefield, no matter how hard he tried. Reluctant as he was to admit it, he knew it all too well.

Having performed splendidly as rear guard, allowing the Wolf Clan Army to beat a safe retreat, he came back to Iárnviðr that day as a hero. However, ironically enough, that was also the day that he gave up on being a hero for good.

The days and years that followed were one hardship after another. The territory the Wolf Clan possessed dwindled to a third of its original size. Oppressed on both the east and west flanks, the Wolf Clan's flame was all but snuffed out. Though no one dared say so, everyone was despairing in their hearts, convinced that the Wolf Clan was finished and that they'd be wiped off the map soon enough.

Just as things were looking their worst, a savior appeared before them. He was the true hero. When Jörgen watched him in action, he felt the excitement he'd felt back in his youth. Even now, Jörgen was convinced that he'd been put on this earth to support this savior. He was also now grateful to Bruno from the bottom of his heart. Without those days of harsh guidance and discipline, he would've been ill-prepared for the days that were to come.

But now, even those days were far behind him. Fárbauti, Bruno, Skáviðr, Rasmus—and most likely Loptr as well—had all already made their journey to Valhalla. He alone remained, idly wasting away the days. Part of him still wished he could've gone out in a blaze of glory like them. But the longer he lived, the more stories he'd have under his belt. That was why when it was finally his time, he wouldn't be afraid. He'd look forward to sharing all those stories with his comrades in Valhalla when they reunited once more.

ACT 4

“So today marks five years since the Battle of Megiddo, huh? Man, time sure flies,” Nozomu mused to himself, sitting in the captain’s cabin of the Iárnviðr Trading Company’s flagship galleon *Noah*. So much had happened since then—lots of good things, of course, but a fair amount of hardships as well. Even so, they were all valuable experiences for Nozomu. That said, none of them were quite so precious and fulfilling as the birth of his child with Ephelia.

“I’d like to think I’ve grown up at least a bit since then, but I’ve still got a long way to go.” He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. He’d worked himself to the bone the past few years and could tell that he’d made great strides in his growth, but his father’s shadow seemed just as out of reach as before. It was as if the more he grew, the more obvious the gulf between them became.

By the age of fourteen, his father had already saved the Wolf Clan from extinction, and at seventeen he’d grown it into one of the few great powers of Yggdrasil. Nozomu was already twenty and hadn’t even come close to catching up to where his father had been when he was fourteen. As for the things his father had done by seventeen, he’d already given up on achieving anything like that within his lifetime. He resented his own powerlessness more and more with each passing day.

“You’re always so hard on yourself, Big Bro,” said Arness, his younger brother by one year, with a sour look on his face. He was the son of Yuuto and Linnea, and was currently displaying his business acumen as Iárnviðr Trading Company’s treasurer—in fact, the reason he’d come to Nozomu’s cabin had originally been to discuss business. “If you ask me, that part of you’s *exactly* like Father.”

“I would rather have inherited his smarts and broad perspective like you did,” Nozomu said with an envious glare and sighed once more. Arness had a weak physical constitution and no athletic ability whatsoever, but his quick-wittedness more than made up for it. That part of his father was what Nozomu would have most liked to possess, so the fact that his little brother had instead been blessed with those qualities made him stew with jealousy.

“I get how you feel, Big Brother. You know the saying ‘a black hen lays white eggs’? Well, we’re like the black eggs a white hen laid,” Wiz interjected and nodded in agreement. She was their younger sister and served as second adviser for the company. Her mother Sigrún, Mánagarmr of two generations prior, was a legend who’d felled countless warriors back in the wars of Yggdrasil, but Wiz’s reflexes were merely average at best. No, considering how much effort she’d had to put into her training when she was young, they were probably worse than that. “We may be Father’s children, but we’re not Father. You have your own good qualities about you, Nozomu.”

“You think I have good qualities? Like what?” Nozomu asked.

“...Well, you’re well-liked by everyone?” Wiz offered.

“Yeah, that’s right, Big Bro. Everyone loves you,” Arness chimed in.

“You mean they don’t see me as a real leader,” Nozomu said with a scowl and pursed his lips in dissatisfaction. Everyone always treated him so casually—even his younger brothers and those beneath him in status. He knew why, of course—he wasn’t intimidating or imposing enough. Everyone always followed his younger brothers Arness and Sigurd’s commands to the letter, but they never seemed to treat any of Nozomu’s orders with the same gravitas. As someone who was meant to lead others, he couldn’t see that as anything but a flaw.

“I’m sorry, but the way you can’t take praise at face value is honestly irritating at times,” Wiz said exasperatedly.

“That’s right, Big Bro, it’s super irritating. It’s a compliment, so just accept it already,” Arness added, looking equally weary. They both let out a sigh at the same time. Truthfully, Nozomu also found that part of himself irritating, but it was in his nature, it seemed, and he couldn’t help it.

“Hmm... Big Bro, have you ever considered taking a breather every once in a while?”

“Seriously? I barely have the time to do something like...”

“A breather’s not something you *have* time for. It’s something you *make* time for.” Arness cut Nozomu off before he could finish. “These past five years, we’ve all seen you try your damnedest to catch up to Father. In doing so, you’ve

gotten a bit too entrenched in your work, I'd say."

"I agree," Wiz said with a nod.

"Are you two serious right now? If I can't handle this much work I'll never..." Nozomu began before cutting himself off, having noticed Wiz was up to something. "Hey Wiz, what are you writing over there?"

"Just look at this, will you?" Wiz thrust a piece of papyrus in front of Nozomu's face.

"How am I supposed to read it if you shove it right in my face?" Nozomu grumbled. Snatching the papyrus from Wiz, he read its contents.

Fools see naught in front of them but a pig's rear.

"You trying to pick a fight with me?!" He tried to hurl the papyrus to the ground, but it met with resistance in the air and fluttered down instead, which only upset him further.

"Oh, looks like you were able to read it after all," Wiz replied calmly. Her maintained composure was also getting on his nerves.

"Look, I may not be as smart as you guys, but I do at least know how to read," Nozomu snapped.

"But just now you said you couldn't read it. What gives?" Wiz rebutted.

"Just now? What are you going on about?!" Nozomu growled back.

"When I put it in front of your face," Wiz explained.

"That's because it was too close!"

"Right. And that's the point I'm trying to make."

"Huh...?" Nozomu was dumbstruck. Every now and then Wiz would say things so abstruse that he had no idea what she meant. With a small smile, Arness tried to explain.

"'Too close'... What I believe she's trying to do is make you realize that if you focus too closely on anything, it narrows your field of view."

"Precisely." Wiz nodded, seemingly satisfied with Arness's explanation. While Nozomu was impressed that Arness could figure it out despite its obtuseness,

he sighed in exasperation.

“How on earth was something like that supposed to make me understand? Just say what you mean.”

“I thought a visual demonstration might be easier to understand.”

“Well, you’d be wrong, because it made no sense to me at all.”

“But you experienced exactly what Arness described to you, did you not?”

“Huh? Well, I can’t really say that I didn’t...” he reluctantly admitted. Indeed, even if Wiz had said from the start what Arness had explained, Nozomu probably would’ve denied it and refused to listen. However, having been confronted, through a practical example, with exactly what she’d (however abstractly) explained, he had little room to argue back.

“I really can’t hold a candle to her either.” On the surface, she came off as aloof and a tad eccentric, but her keen eye for seeing through to the heart of things was second to none. In fact, that was precisely why she often seemed to be on another wavelength entirely—she’d simply arrived at the truth of the matter before anyone else. She may not have received the physical ability of her parents, but there was no question she’d inherited their intelligence and wisdom.

“Meanwhile, there’s nothing special about me whatsoever.” Put simply, Nozomu was a jack of all trades and a master of none. Unlike his other siblings, there was nothing he especially excelled at. He knew he wouldn’t gain anything from dwelling on it, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was inferior to the rest of his brothers and sisters.

“Look, you’re closing yourself off again,” Wiz declared, grinding her index finger into the space between Nozomu’s eyebrows. He’d apparently let his emotions show on his face. *“For one meant to lead others, that’s inexcusable...no, Wiz is right. I need to stop this negativity loop. It’s not doing me any favors.”*

While Nozomu lost himself in thought, Arness dropped his fist into his palm as though he’d had an idea. “Now that I think about it, we might actually have a perfect opportunity, Big Bro.”

“Huh? What do you mean by that?” Nozomu asked.

“I mean, didn’t Father say he wanted you to head to Tarshish on your next inspection voyage?”

“Ah, yeah, I guess he did, didn’t he?” It had been five years since the night they’d all made their grand escape from Tarshish. His father was supposed to be dead, so he couldn’t exactly go there whenever he pleased. However, it had been his hometown ever since he could remember. He had friends and schoolmates there. Not to mention, it was the nation he was supposed to have ruled over in place of his father. He’d always been curious about how things were going there.

“Once we get home and have had some time to relax, how about we all go to Tarshish together and see how things are going? Not for work purposes, but as tourists,” Arness suggested.

“I mean, if it’s not for work purposes I’m not really sure if—”

“Big Brother, you can be so bullheaded at times like this,” Wiz interjected.

Nozomu merely pouted in response.

“Some things in this world can only be truly understood by letting go of the reins. As the great Bruce Lee once said, ‘Don’t think, feel.’”

“Now that’s a deep saying if I’ve ever heard one.” Arness nodded his approval at Wiz’s aphorism. Nozomu thought that it was an odd saying for someone as meticulous as Arness to agree with, but Nozomu also had a revelation when he heard it. *“I see. Yeah, I guess I do have a tendency to overthink things.”* His elders, including his father, were always telling him to let off the gas a little after all. There had to be some amount of truth to it.

“Maybe I do need to take a breather every now and then after all,” Nozomu replied, deciding it was about time to concede the point. “I suppose I could give myself a little vacation, as a treat.”

Thus, Nozomu and the rest of Yuuto’s children decided to head to their childhood home of Tarshish for the first time in many years. What they didn’t know was that, whether by fate or coincidence, the trip would greatly change the trajectories of their lives going forward.

Tarshish, located on the southernmost tip of what is now known as the Iberian Peninsula in the twenty-first century, had been the Steel Clan's base of operations ever since Yuuto had led them to the New World. As always, houses of sun-dried brick lined the streets. Tarshish was located within the wetlands, so it was easy for the townsfolk to gather the mud needed to build them, just like they'd done in Yggdrasil and the Orient. Five years ago the town had been bustling and full of life, but now...

"Everyone looks so gloomy," Nozomu muttered with a frown as he walked the streets. Within the Steel Clan, he was known to have long since perished, so he'd donned a fake beard and wig to disguise his appearance.

"No kidding. What the hell is that Babel bastard doing?" Walking beside him, a golden-haired boy with an intense-looking face wore a sour expression as he blamed the sights before them on the Steel Clan's current reginarch. His name was Sigurd—Nozomu's younger brother, as well as Faghrahvél's son. Despite being only sixteen, he'd already been made vice-captain of the Múspell Unit, displaying outstanding talent as both a commander and a swordsman. The prevailing rumor was that Sigurd had already been selected to succeed Hildegard and become captain. Sigurd's was yet another presence that stoked Nozomu's feelings of inferiority, but Nozomu tried not to think about that right now.

"Isn't that a Hliðskjálf over there?" Sigurd inquired.

"Sure looks like it. Why are they still building new ones?" Nozomu said with a frown. Before him was a massive building clearly still under construction, as the top half was uneven and incomplete.

Hliðskjálf, or ziggurats in local parlance, were towering structures originally built so that the people could get closer to heaven as they worshipped; however, they also served to display the dignity of their respective nations to their subjects and visitors from other countries. Even during Yuuto's rule, small ziggurats continued to be built to support the faiths of the townsfolk, but this one was clearly several times more imposing, even in its incomplete stage.

"That's not all... What's with this ugly statue? Someone's got bad taste."

Sigurd looked up at a gigantic bronze statue three times his size in apparent disgust. It held a spear in its right hand, and a severed human head in its left—a grotesque display indeed. “This is supposed to be Babel, right?”

“Yeah, and the head he’s holding is supposed to be...dad’s,” Nozomu replied.

“I get that the point’s to make the lie of his own accomplishment more believable, but still, I can’t say it makes me feel very good,” Sigurd grumbled.

“You said it.” Nozomu and Sigurd grimaced in unison, the disgust clear on both of their faces. They understood the reason and knew it had to be that way, but it didn’t change the fact that seeing their father disgraced like this deeply disturbed them.

Screwing up his face, Sigurd practically spat out his next words. “It’d be one thing if he could at least rule his clan correctly, but he’s clearly just focused on stroking his own ego!” Even among Nozomu’s siblings, there was no follower of the war god Suoh-Yuuto more devout than the warrior Sigurd. Seeing his father’s honor besmirched must’ve caused the blood to rush to his head. “All right, Nozomu. Let’s kill him.”

“Whoa, whoa!” Seeing Sigurd exude a dangerous aura as he expressed violent intent, Nozomu quickly tried to restrain him, grabbing him from under the arms. However, it wasn’t enough to stop him, and Felicia’s son Rungr had to assist by pushing on Sigurd from the front. As always, when it came to his father, Sigurd had no brakes.

“Honestly, when he gets like this, he’s more like my mom than I am,” Wiz said with a chuckle. Her mother Sigrún was reserved when it came to nearly everything, but when Yuuto was involved her boiling point was exceedingly low.

“Isn’t it a pupil’s duty to strive to think like their instructor?” Sigurd shot back, his face deadly serious even though Wiz’s comment had been partly in jest. His inability to sense sarcasm was, ironically enough, also just like his instructor Sigrún.

“Well, it’s not like I don’t understand how you feel, but calm down. Let’s not rush in headlong without thinking about the consequences first. If we just kill their ruler on impulse, the people will be the ones to suffer in the end.”

“Hmph.” Hearing Nozomu’s sound logic, Sigurd stopped resisting. He seemed to be coming to his senses. Nozomu let out a breath of relief without meaning to. If he hadn’t been able to persuade Sigurd, even he and Rungr would’ve honestly had a rough time getting him to submit.

“For now, let’s wait until we hear the details from Jörgen,” Rungr suggested.

“Good idea. I was just thinking I’d like to pop in and say hi anyway,” Nozomu agreed. Jörgen had been the adviser of the previous reginarch, Yuuto. He’d been too old to make his escape with Yuuto and his family, but by staying behind he’d agreed to advise and keep a close eye on Babel during his rule.

Nozomu and the others were now outsiders here. Making a decision based solely on their own opinions would be far too rash. He wanted to hear the opinion of someone like Jörgen, who was intimately familiar with the goings-on within Tarshish and the Steel Clan, before taking any action.

“Do my eyes deceive me? Lord Nozomu! Lord Rungr! Lady Wiz! Lord Arness! And Lord Sigurd! It’s been so long!”After leaving Tarshish and walking eastward for a while, they reached the mansion of the former Wolf Clan patriarch, Jörgen. Jörgen was taking a walk in the garden when he spotted Nozomu and his siblings and immediately broke into a grin.

“Jörgen! Still alive and kicking, I see!” With an equally big grin, Nozomu ran to Jörgen and embraced him. Jörgen would be sixty-five this year, but his back was not yet hunched over, and he seemed to still have plenty of life in him yet. That alone made Nozomu glad beyond words.

“Mister Jörgen, it’s been a while,” Rungr said.

“Long time no see,” Wiz added.

“I am glad to see you are well, Mister Jörgen,” Arness said with a courteous bow.

“What a relief. You’re just as healthy as ever,” Sigurd said.

Nozomu and his siblings were all grinning from ear to ear. Naturally—neither Yuuto nor Mitsuki had parents in this world, so to Yuuto’s children, Jörgen might as well have been their grandfather.

“Yes, it’s so good to see you all. My, how you’ve grown! I’m overjoyed to have my earnest wish realized and be able to see you all as fine young adults. Now I can head to Valhalla without any regrets,” Jörgen replied cheerfully.

“Whoa whoa, it’s way too soon to be talking about any of that!” Nozomu said hurriedly. “What if I told you I have a kid of my own now? Would that instill a regret or two in you?”

“Wh-What?! Where?! Let me see!”

“Ah, well, actually, he’s still a bit young to go on a trip like this so I left him at home. But when he gets bigger I’ll bring him, so you gotta at least hold out until then, okay?”

“Pfft. Ha ha ha! Well, if that’s the case, I suppose I can’t die just yet, can I?” Jörgen grinned in amusement. People his age had this strange tendency to just up and die at the point where they felt most satisfied with life. Nozomu wasn’t going to let Jörgen die just yet. As long as Jörgen still had a reason to live, that was all that mattered.

“By the by, where’s Father at? I don’t see him.” Jörgen asked as he scanned the area. The only one Jörgen ever called “Father” was none other than Suoh Yuuto.

“Oh, he’s currently attending the wedding of Thutmose III, pharaoh of Kemet,” Nozomu said with a shrug. His father had received a formal invitation from the Orient the other day and had decided to attend, saying it’d be rude to refuse. In truth, Yuuto was about to let Nozomu handle that matter as well and send him in his stead, but Nozomu had rejected that proposal, stating that he didn’t feel he was quite ready to handle something like that yet.

“I see, I see. Well, it’s a shame that Father’s not here, but sending Lord Nozomu as his representative is a most welcome surprise. And so soon after I sent out the missive!”

“Missive?” Nozomu parroted in bewilderment. “What missive?” This was the first he’d heard of it. He stole a quick glance at Rungr, but Rungr just shook his head. He didn’t know either.

“What? You didn’t hear? Oh... I see. Most likely, Father wanted you to look at

this situation from an unbiased perspective."

"An unbiased...ah, yeah, wouldn't put it past him. Dad can be a real jerk like that sometimes," Nozomu replied with a cluck of his tongue.

Going into a situation with a preconceived notion could be surprisingly dangerous. For instance, if you were told that an art piece was valued at a hundred gold coins, you might end up seeing a mere kid's drawing as the work of a genius. Conversely, if it was said to be valued at only a single gold coin, you could accidentally write off a genuine masterpiece as worthless trash. Most likely, Yuuto wanted his children to see the current state of Tarshish for themselves, without any preconceptions.

"So, what did you think?" Jörgen asked. "I'm sure you took a look before coming here."

"Yeah, we did. In the five years since we left, it's completely gone to seed. What happened, anyway?" Nozomu asked, a stern expression on his face. Whatever it was, it was nothing as simple as a famine or a breakdown of trade negotiations. The government had chosen to prioritize their own interests over the safety of the people.

"This isn't the nation our dad founded anymore," Nozomu spat in disgust. He didn't believe a king should necessarily devote himself selflessly to the people and should be able to indulge in a bit of luxury every once in a while. It wasn't realistic to hope for a utopia, and doing so would only serve to distort the monarchy. Even so, what he'd witnessed at Tarshish was just despotic—-that was the only word for it, really.

"Well said. And unfortunately, all of it is due to my own shortcomings and lack of foresight." Jörgen bowed deeply. His regret and guilt were practically written on his downcast face. Then, after raising his head, he began to explain. "It all started about three years ago..."

The rule of the second reginarch of the Steel Clan, Babel, had gone without a hitch for the first year. The people had rejoiced from the bottom of their hearts at the defeat of the demonic tyrant Suoh Yuuto and had welcomed the hero Babel with open arms as their new king. Babel, for his part, had listened intently

to his advisor Jörgen's advice and worked tirelessly to perform his duties. Jörgen had thought things would go just as swimmingly from here on out, but at the start of the second year, the wheels began to come off.

According to Jörgen, Babel had tried as hard as he could to make everything work. But his subjects eventually began to voice their displeasure at their unimproved living conditions. In turn, Babel became disappointed with his subjects, which turned to dissatisfaction and eventually hatred. By the third year, Babel had started to distance himself from Jörgen's incessant nagging and scolding, instead surrounding himself with yes men whose words were always positive and made him comfortable.

"Looking back on it now, that was when I should've alerted Father to what was going on," Jörgen muttered as he looked up at the ceiling, no doubt chiding himself for his past actions. Back when he was in Yggdrasil, Jörgen had seen the strength of youth overcome hardship and beget outstanding growth more times than he could count. He'd probably realized that in his old age, he couldn't continue to advise the monarchy forever, and had naïvely hoped that he could leave everything up to the youth without issue.

Unfortunately, as a result of that decision, things only went from bad to worse. Babel began extorting his subjects, distributing the wealth not among the collective people, but solely between him and his entourage as he became richer and richer. He began building statues of himself throughout the land as if boasting to the public about the authority he held and worked his subjects to the bone to construct massive ziggurats in his own honor.

By this point, Jörgen had realized Babel was not fit to rule, and the "kingly quality" Jörgen had mistaken Babel's ambitiousness for had been nothing more than an illusion. The truth was that Babel had no business being a king.

"Of course, these old bones didn't have the power to rescind Babel's inauguration as reginarch. Shameful and pathetic as it was, especially for one entrusted with the clan's future, I finally decided to write to Father asking for aid."

"I see now. I'm sorry that you had to shoulder that entire burden by yourself. Allow me to apologize on behalf of my dad." Seeing Jörgen lower his head once

more, Nozomu also bowed deeply in apology. Truthfully, Jörgen was at the age where he should've used the transfer of power as an opportunity to retire. But without anyone else to entrust the prosperity of the clan to, Jörgen had been saddled with a task beyond his capability. Nozomu wanted to reward Jörgen's efforts, rather than chastise them.

"Lord Nozomu, your kind words are wasted on the likes of me."

"I believe I understand the situation now. I'll report this to my dad as soon as possible and get him to come up with a plan to fix this." Nozomu assured Jörgen that he would take it from here. He didn't think for a second that Yuuto would leave his former country high and dry, but even if he attempted to, Nozomu would do something about it. Such was the level of resolve with which Nozomu spoke those words.

"So that's the situation, is it? We can't just leave it be, then." Once Nozomu and his siblings had returned home to their base of operations in the Cyclades and reported the news to Yuuto, Yuuto brought his hand to his chin and muttered with a troubled expression. He was already pushing forty by this point, but his face had retained enough of its youthful vigor that he could pass for someone in his twenties. Perhaps abdicating the throne and leading a life of leisure had a hand in that.

"Yeah, we can't let Babel have his way with the Steel Clan any longer. I'll do all I can to help, Dad. Please let me help you!" Nozomu clung to Yuuto in desperation. He couldn't bear to see his hometown sullied like this, and his righteous indignation was rousing him to action.

"Hmm... You're right in that the longer we leave this be, the worse it's going to become. We need to take care of it as soon as possible. But simply defeating Babel won't be enough to take care of the problem."

"Yeah. By defeating him, we'd needlessly throw the country into unrest, right?" Nozomu asked. Yuuto nodded. Babel was a tyrant, there was no doubt about that. The people would never be able to live in peace under his rule. However, he was also strong enough that he didn't need to rely on others. At present he was the youngest to have been blessed with a rune—in other words,

he was the last Einherjar. He was capable enough in battle to be called a mighty warrior, boasting valor that went unparalleled. As a king, he kept the nation together by using that strength to instill fear in his subjects. If Babel was removed from the picture, no doubt the patriarchs of each land would be lining up to try to become the next reginarch, throwing the nation into an era of chaos and bloodshed. That would be a far more potent source of misfortune for the people than remaining under the thumb of a tyrant. If it was only going to lead to the death of more innocents in the end, there was no point. Nozomu wasn't a kid anymore. Even he could understand that much.

"What if...I became the reginarch?" The moment he uttered those words, he was surprised at himself. *"What the hell are you saying?!"* Without meaning to, the words had come out of his mouth before he could stop himself. *"You think someone as inexperienced as you could become a king? How ridiculous. You ought to know your own place by now."* He berated himself with one insult after another in his head.

Yuuto, on the other hand, just stared at Nozomu in shock. He was probably thinking along the same lines, appalled at the hubris of his own son. Nozomu was overcome with embarrassment.

"L-Look, I know already. I know I'm not ready. I know I lack the strength!" Quickly, he began to try to smooth it over, not knowing what else to do. He was so ashamed that he wished there was a hole nearby he could crawl into. And yet...

"But I still want to be able to do something... I want to do all I possibly can!" His mouth was practically running on its own by this point. "I know I don't have the strength. But I'll make up for that with effort! I'll work myself to the bone!" He knew he was just rambling like a child by now, but his mouth kept going, as if a dam had burst and all his thoughts and feelings were spilling out.

He'd already given up once because he'd convinced himself that he had no choice but to abandon that dream. At the time, he'd lacked the strength to make it happen. But looking at the current state of Tarshish, those feelings that he thought had sunken into the abyss came rising up once more.

Nozomu was no longer the kid he'd been back then. He was now the second-

in-command of the Iárnviðr Trading Company, and as such had learned how to use people to his advantage, had acquired a deep understanding of the nuances of the human heart, and learned how to conduct himself like a leader. He knew he still lacked many qualities. He knew that he hadn't even reached Linnea's level yet, let alone his father's. But even so, he was confident on one point alone: he could at least rule the Steel Clan better than Babel had.

"Please, Father. I beg of you. Entrust the future of the Steel Clan to me." Staring directly into Yuuto's eyes, Nozomu made an earnest plea. He was done lying to himself. He didn't want to leave it to anyone else—he wanted to protect the country he grew up in, the country his dad built, with his own hands.

"Seems like you're serious," Yuuto said with a chuckle, which then became a small, bitter smile. He scratched his head as if he was at a loss. "Man, for you to willingly take it upon yourself to shoulder such a burden, I guess you're just as crazy as I am. You sure you don't want to head up the trading company instead? It'd be a lot easier." However, Yuuto sighed as if he already knew Nozomu's answer. Seeing his father's reaction, Nozomu could only smile wryly.

To his father Yuuto, taking the throne was something he'd begrudgingly done because he hadn't had a choice, despite having a genius-level aptitude for it. Even the position of patriarch was something that had been forced on him, nothing more than a burden he'd wanted to relieve himself of as soon as possible. Now that he was free of the responsibility of the throne, the bags under Yuuto's eyes had disappeared and he'd become much cheerier, able to now truly enjoy every day from the bottom of his heart. To Yuuto, seeing his son pick up the very same responsibility of his own volition no doubt seemed strange.

"But even so, I'd always wanted to be like you, Dad." It was so embarrassing he'd never be able to say it out loud, but that was how Nozomu felt from the bottom of his heart. Ever since he was a child, his father had looked so cool working in his office every day. He had unconsciously set his sights on growing up to be just like his father and had continued to chase after him. As he focused on his father's distant back, he trained and trained, hoping to one day be as great of a man.

“...Am I not good enough? Do I not have the stuff for it yet?” The moment those words left his mouth, he felt his heart tighten up as if in a vise. He was afraid to hear Yuuto’s answer. He didn’t want his father to reject him, and above all else, he wanted to be recognized finally.

“Hm...” Yuuto quietly set down the glass in his hand, looked directly at Nozomu, and—

Bam!

In the next instant, the air froze over. It was as if gravity had increased tenfold. Nozomu swallowed in fear. His father seemed like some sort of towering giant within the room, an indomitable presence.

“This is Suoh Yuuto the war god, the one who conquered half of Yggdrasil.” The aspect of Yuuto that he’d never once shown to any of his children before. Terrifying didn’t even begin to describe it—the murderous aura Sigrún gave off during training seemed almost cute in comparison. If he had to compare it to something he’d witnessed before, perhaps the intensity Thutmose had exuded—but no, something like this was still on a whole other level!

He felt like his father’s majesty was crushing him underfoot. Sweat started to eke from every pore in his body. Honestly, he would’ve liked to run out of the room right then.

“But if I can’t handle this much, I’ll never be able to become a monarch. That’s what you’re trying to tell me, right dad?!” With every ounce of his will, Nozomu stared right back at Yuuto. Back when Nozomu had been fifteen, he’d never have been able to do that. He found himself grateful from the bottom of his heart that he’d encountered Thutmose. It was only because he’d felt that humiliation that he’d realized how far he still had to go to reach Yuuto’s level. That meeting had encouraged Nozomu to put his nose to the grindstone and dedicate every ounce of effort into catching up to his father. Those days of training and self-improvement had, in the end, bestowed upon Nozomu the strength to withstand this heinous aura.

“Hm, well, I think you’re ready for the challenge, at least.” Yuuto’s rigid mouth loosened into a grin. The overwhelming pressure in the air disappeared in an instant, as though it had never been there in the first place.

It seemed that Nozomu had passed the test. However, judging from his father’s words, the real challenge was yet to come.

“Welcome back, dear.” Upon returning home to his mansion and entering the bedroom, Nozomu’s wife Ephelia greeted him with a smile. Their baby, just a year old, cooed innocently in her arms. The child’s name was Sinmara, and she was their only daughter.

“Welcome back,” a stunningly beautiful black-haired girl crouched before Ephelia greeted him, though she didn’t turn around as her undivided attention was on Sinmara. Her name was Oda Homura. She was one of Ephelia’s closest friends and an Einherjar bearing twin runes. She was likely the strongest one remaining at this point.

“Peekaboo... I see you! Peekaboo... I see you!” As Homura played peekaboo with Sinmara, covering and uncovering her own face with her hands, the baby squealed with laughter. Homura was quite partial to children, having also spent much time playing with Nozomu and his siblings during their youth, and was now absolutely infatuated with Sinmara. In fact, she had spent the majority of her time in this very room ever since the baby had been born.

“If she likes kids so much, why doesn’t she just have one of her own?” Nozomu wondered, but when he’d asked her about that she’d simply replied “None of the men are any good.” It seemed that she had no interest in a partner that didn’t at least measure up to her father, Oda Nobunaga. Aside from his father Yuuto, he didn’t think she’d find someone like that even if she scoured the world over, but according to Homura, Yuuto already had a multitude of wives and her pride would not let her settle for being just another member of Yuuto’s harem. Perhaps that was why, then, she doted on all of Yuuto’s children as if they were her own brothers and sisters. And as the child of her beloved brother and her dear friend, it was little wonder Homura was so smitten with Sinmara.

“You have such a pretty smile, yes you do!” Homura cooed with a grin, gently prodding the infant’s cheek with her finger. “You’re gonna grow up to be beautiful like Ephy, I know it!” It was a side of herself she rarely showed to anyone, which proved just how hopelessly attached she was to Sinmara.

“Yeah, judging by how cute she is even now, I don’t think we have anything to worry about in that department,” Nozomu agreed, grinning as well. Truthfully, as the most average-looking of all of his siblings, Nozomu had been a bit

anxious at first that the baby might take after him instead, but to his relief, it seemed like those fears had gone unfounded. “But above all, I’m just glad to see Sinmara and Ephy doing so well.”

The good health of his wife and child had been what had given him the most relief upon his return. It wasn’t uncommon at all for a mother to die during childbirth or even during the recovery period afterward, and a high percentage of children ended up passing away before they made it to the age of seven. He was thankful beyond words that the two of them were still hale and healthy.

“Nozomu, might something have happened on the journey here?” Ephelia asked without warning, staring directly into Nozomu’s eyes.

“Huh/?! Wh-What makes you think that?” Nozomu stammered in his surprise at being seen right through.

“Your face says that you want to talk to me about something,” Ephelia replied.

“I-It does?”

“Yes.” Her bright, gentle smile was like that of a goddess’s. She had, after all, known him since before he could even remember. He could never get anything past her.



“Whoa, nothing gets by you, huh, Ephy? I also kinda sensed something was up, but I couldn’t tell that much.” Homura’s eyes widened in surprise. Apparently, Homura had also noticed. He couldn’t hide anything from these

two, it seemed.

“All right, you got me,” he admitted.

“Hee hee. So, what’s wrong, dear?”

“Well, actually, what happened was...”

“Wait, don’t tell me, Nozomu! The great Homura already knows!” Right when Nozomu had mustered up the resolve to come out with it, Homura interrupted, thrusting her hand out. Then, pointing her finger squaret in Nozomu’s flabbergasted face, she proclaimed, “You’ve been with another woman! Even though you already have Ephy!”

“Wh-Whaaaat?!” Dumbstruck, an incredulous shout escaped Nozomu when he heard Homura’s out-of-nowhere conclusion.

However, Homura nodded as if she was sure of herself. “You’re *his* son, after all, so I figured you’d start getting interested in other women sooner or later!”

“Nozomu...?”

“N-No way! Th-That’s not it at all! I’d never do that, Ephy! I’m not like my dad!” Under Ephelia’s glare, Nozomu panicked as he hurriedly denied it. He’d never even considered doing such a thing. He wouldn’t dream of it—to him, Ephy was the most important person in his life. He had to make sure there was no room for any doubt about that. Yet, despite his assertions...

“Awfully quick to deny it, aren’t you? *Veeery* suspicious,” Homura rebutted.

“I agree, you seem awfully nervous, dear,” Ephelia added.

“N-No...!”

“See, he did it again.”

“He did.”

“E-Ephy’s the only one for me forever and always!” he shouted out much louder than he intended. The moment he did, he realized. He looked at the expression on the two women’s faces. Homura wore a smug grin of amusement, and Ephelia, while blushing furiously, looked just as happy as she was embarrassed. The two of them had been in cahoots.

“I’ve been had...” He dropped his head in defeat. Though it was only due to the breadth of his love for Ephelia, he did have a tendency, or rather a weakness, to respond vehemently whenever his loyalty to her was called into question (which was at times exploited by the likes of Kristina and Hildegard for their own personal amusement), causing him to blurt his embarrassing yet honest feelings in public. This was the first time Homura had done it, though, so he’d been caught off guard. He glared at Ephelia as if to say, “Do I really deserve this?”...

“Sorry, sorry. But you know, your response really did make me happy.” She replied, then stuck out her tongue teasingly. He was so captivated by that cute gesture that Nozomu forgave her immediately. He decided to drop the issue, but he had to show at least a little bit of dissatisfaction or he couldn’t save face...

“Man, now I don’t even feel like discussing my problem,” he said.

“But at least you’ve loosened up a bit now, right?” Homura grinned mischievously.

Nozomu shot her a hateful glare and spat back, “Yeah, thanks to you!”

Still, he knew he had to tell Ephelia what was on his mind. Facing her, he looked right into her eyes and spoke. “I’ve decided to become the reginarch of the Steel Clan.”

Ephelia considered that for a few moments. “Umm... Are you trying to get back at me for just now?” She seemed unsure of how to respond. Nozomu didn’t really blame her—normally it’d be an unthinkable development—so he decided to explain what had happened from the very beginning.

“I see. To think something like that would occur...” By the time he’d finished, Ephelia’s expression had clouded over.

“No kidding? Looks like some interesting stuff’s gone down in the last five years.” In contrast, Homura looked almost enthused.

“It’s my hometown, Ephy. I can’t just sit here and do nothing. But I know it’s only going to burden you and Sinmara in the e—” Before he could finish his sentence, his mouth was sealed shut. Ephelia had pressed her finger to his lips.



With a gentle, loving smile, as if she'd already accepted Nozomu's decision, she spoke. "Don't worry about us. We'll be fine. Do what you need to do." Nozomu could tell she wasn't forcing herself in the least. She was speaking from

the bottom of her heart. It made him once again realize how amazing of a wife she was.

As always, once the course of action had been decided, Yuuto was quick to act. He withdrew the entirety of the fortune he'd amassed up until now, using it to hire around a thousand Orient mercenaries, then immediately set off for the Iberian Peninsula, where he captured a nearby fortress with hardly any enemy resistance on the very same day he touched down on land. Of course, Nozomu had already seen his father's monstrous strength with his own eyes, but the battle was over so quickly that it had ended before he even knew what was going on.

"I guess it's one of those things where a master's techniques just seem like magic to the average person," he muttered in exasperation. He remembered thinking something similar when he'd first witnessed Sigrún and Hildegard in action. It was just more proof that he was still worlds apart from his father.

"At this rate, we'll take Tarshish in no time." Nozomu was convinced the end was near, when...

"All right, that about does it for me. The rest is up to you, Nozomu." His father lobbed a curveball right at him.

"Eh?" Nozomu let out a weak, dumbfounded noise. This was news to him. "What do you mean, dad?!"

"Exactly what I said. You said you wanted to be the reginarch, right? *You* said it, not me." Yuuto pointed right at Nozomu. "Then the task of taking back the country should fall to you. You get me?"

It made sense, sure. There was no problem with the logic. But anxiety still bubbled up within him. He'd dealt with his fair share of bandits and pirates these past five years, but didn't know the first thing about how to deal with an army! How was a complete amateur going to usurp an entire nation—let alone contend with a battle-hardened tyrant like Babel?!

"I mean, I'd like to if I could. But there's no telling how many casualties we'll suffer with me at the helm. One wrong move and the entire army could even be wiped out. I understand that ideally I should be the one to lead this charge, but

the situation’s dire enough that we can’t afford to chase ideals.” He’d learned from traveling all over the world as a merchant these past several years the value of a sound argument, but of course, there were limits to what man could accomplish. A life lost could never be regained, for instance, and there was nothing sound in wagering the lives of a thousand men—or so Nozomu thought.

“No, I’d say now is exactly the right time to step up.” His father’s assertion squashed Nozomu’s line of thinking.

“H-Huh?! No, that can’t be right!” But Nozomu wasn’t convinced and argued back.

“You can’t be a king in name only. You’re going to need strength of your own. Especially in times like these. If you keep borrowing my strength every time you run into a problem, your rule won’t last very long.”

“Ugh...” Nozomu grimaced. Somewhere in his heart he was probably still thinking he would always have his dad’s strength to fall back on, that if he ran into trouble Yuuto would always be there to do something about it.

“Did you think you could just get me to clean up all your messes? I’m already retired, you know?”

“W-Well...” Nozomu could say nothing further. Even though he’d never desired power in the first place, Yuuto had spent nearly twenty years of his life shouldering the burden of being a patriarch, and now spent his days in leisure as the boss of the Iárnviðr Trading Company. How could Nozomu be so selfish to call his father back to the bloodthirsty, cutthroat world he’d once left? Realizing his dependence on Yuuto had been so transparent, he felt a wave of embarrassment.

“And besides,” Yuuto went on, “if you can’t manage this much without my help anyway, the nation will definitely descend into chaos, and the people will suffer.”

Faced with Yuuto’s cold gaze and tone, Nozomu could only stand there, lost for words. His father was absolutely right. The Steel Clan still followed the Chalice system of Yggdrasil, meaning that an individual’s merit took precedence over blood ties. If Nozomu didn’t display his strength, no one would follow him anyway. Hiding in Yuuto’s shadow temporarily wouldn’t work either, because

Yuuto had been dethroned and as such, lost the cohesive power to unify the country. If Nozomu didn't step up to the plate and show he had the necessary strength to rule, the Steel Clan would be torn asunder, leaving the remaining powers to fight amongst each other and ushering in a new era of chaos and bloodshed much worse than even the current situation. That was what Nozomu wanted to avoid most of all.

"As a parting gift, I'm going to give this fort to you. That's probably already being too generous, but, well, you're my son, and I figure I can give you a bit of a head start. However, from here on out, I'm hands-off. And no asking my wives for help either. They're mine, not yours." Yuuto's tone was cold and final.

All of Yuuto's wives were Einherjar, each incredibly capable in their own right. Sigrún and Fagrahvél especially would've been a great boon on the battlefield. Not having them in his service would hurt Nozomu greatly. In addition, he only had close to a thousand soldiers, not even a tenth of what the enemy boasted. He felt cornered already. Part of him wanted to yell at his dad for being so cruel, but on the other hand, he wasn't dumb enough to fail to realize what his father was trying to do.

"So what will you do now? Still have the resolve to become reginarch? It's not too late to back out," Yuuto asked, peering into Nozomu's eyes intently.

"I knew it," thought Nozomu. *"This is the 'real trial' he was talking about."* The elven copper that was the basis for an Einherjar's strength was only able to be harvested in Yggdrasil, meaning that power would be sealed off for good. Yuuto's knowledge of the modern world also had to be kept under wraps, for the sake of the future. Nozomu had to rule the Steel Clan without relying on either, and the outcome of this battle would determine if he was capable of doing so. Nozomu glared right back at his father, and with determination, said:

"I'll do it. And without relying on a cheat like you."

"Well then, I pray for your success in battle. Good luck, guys." With a dismissive wave of his hand, Yuuto boarded the flagship *Noah.* He felt the stares of his children on his back, but he had resolved to not turn around. He was leaving his own children behind—of course he was worried. But worry was

contagious, and there were some here that were about to face their first battle ever. *“Best to save face ’til the very end.”*

“Good work out there, Father. I must say, you’re taking quite the gamble, leaving Lord Nozomu and your other children alone like that.” When Yuuto returned to the private area inside the ship designated for the Suoh family, Fagrahvél was there to greet him. Yuuto just snorted derisively in response.

“Yeah, a real gamble. I had Kris do some investigating to make sure it was a battle Nozomu and the others could actually win on their own before I sent them out.” He was well aware he was being overprotective, but Yuuto just didn’t have it in him to send his own sons and daughters out to a battle they had no hope of winning. That was too cruel, even for him.

“Heh... This is reminiscent of how lions raise their cubs,” Fagrahvél chuckled.

“Hm? How?” Yuuto frowned, not understanding. He’d heard that lions drop their cubs down ravines to get them used to the world, the exact opposite of Yuuto’s careful approach.

Fagrahvél opened her eyes wide in surprise. “Huh? You didn’t know? Lions, and other carnivores too, intentionally weaken their prey without killing it before teaching their young to hunt.”

“Really? Ah, actually, I have heard that, now that you mention it.”

“And in your case, you thought a nation already teetering on the edge of collapse was the perfect prey for your children, didn’t you?”

“Well, I won’t say it didn’t cross my mind. Heh, thanks, Fagrahvél.” With a slight grin, Yuuto gave words of gratitude. Many things were required to become king. Quite a lot was demanded of you. For that reason, Yuuto knew he had to push Nozomu out of the nest, but he was unable to follow through completely in the end. That had been weighing on his mind, so Yuuto was grateful to Fagrahvél for easing the burden in his heart a little.

“But well, war is war. And war is dangerous. So I’m sorry, you guys. I know it must be hard.” Yuuto bowed down, looking apologetic, in front of his other wives in the room. If he’d just done it himself, everything would’ve been wrapped up in no time, and he wouldn’t have had to put his children in danger.

Perhaps if he'd lent Nozomu Sigrún or Fagrahvél, Yuuto could've lowered the difficulty of the task ahead of Nozomu. Perhaps fewer soldiers would perish on the battlefield. But doing so wouldn't benefit the country or his children in the end. Overprotectiveness would only weaken Nozomu, and for someone about to become reginarch that was absolutely inexcusable.

"Do not worry, Father. Everyone understands." Fagrahvél glanced back at Yuuto's wives, who all nodded confidently. Of course, every one of them was anxious. More than a few of them wore tense expressions. However, it was equally clear from the women's faces that they had accepted the reality of the situation. Perhaps that toughness of theirs had been forged back in the fires of the dog-eat-dog world of Yggdrasil. This wasn't the twenty-first century, where death seemed so far removed from normal life. In this era, death was always close by.

"Ha ha, looks like you're all more prepared for this than I am," Yuuto said with a chuckle.

"I believe that just shows the depth of your compassion, Father," Fagrahvél offered.

"More like I'm just too soft."

"You humble yourself. If that was all there was to it, would you have been able to conquer half of Yggdrasil?"

"I only managed that because I was blessed with all sorts of things." He didn't consider any of that his own accomplishment. His knowledge of the modern world had been a huge advantage of course, but above all, he'd been gifted great allies. He truly believed that from the bottom of his heart.

If it hadn't been for his clan father Fárbauti's training and guardianship and Loptr pushing him forward, he would've undoubtedly been known as "Sköll, Devourer of Blessings" for the rest of his life. Without Felicia, he wouldn't have been able to understand and communicate with anyone, and it was only thanks to Sigrún and Skáviðr that he'd managed to survive battles he'd normally have no hope of winning. Without Ingrid, he never would've figured out how to apply his knowledge of modern technology to the world of Yggdrasil. Without Linnea and Jörgen, the Steel Clan's government never would've run as smoothly as it

did. Of course, he'd be remiss to ignore the strength of the intelligence network Botvid and his twin daughters Kristina and Albertina had built. And it went without saying, but if Mitsuki hadn't been there supporting him every step of the way, his heart would've succumbed to the harshness of this world long ago. Yuuto believed with every ounce of his soul that he owed his current life of peace entirely to his comrades—both the ones that were still here with him, and the ones who had since been lost.

"I see. You certainly have more than enough military prowess to make up for your soft nature."

"That's not what I meant, but okay," Yuuto replied with a weak smile. Correcting that misunderstanding in front of everyone would be too embarrassing, so instead he offered up a different statement. "Fine, I admit I might possess some talent for commanding an army." He cringed inwardly as he spoke those words, but it was better than earning ire from his wives for being stubbornly modest. At his age, he'd long since learned that being a little proud was worth keeping the conversation smooth and the peace undisturbed.

"In comparison, Nozomu may resemble me on a surface level, but plainly speaking, he lacks the sense for tactics, he doesn't have any cheats he can rely on, and he has no Einherjar at his disposal. Basically, he's got nothing." Even though it had been Yuuto himself who'd thrown Nozomu to the wolves, he honestly felt sorry for the boy. Even now, he wondered if he should've given him more help.

He had more to say on the matter, however. "Well, if it's him we're talking about, I believe he'll pull through. He's plain and average in a lot of ways like his old man, but he has one quality that'll make him an even better king than me."

"Oh? Better than you, Father?" Fagrahvél's eyes went wide with surprise. Looking around the room, Felicia, Sigrún, and Linnea also looked shocked. It seemed they hadn't noticed, which in turn surprised Yuuto. He couldn't help but grin as he spoke.

"Yeah, he possesses something truly amazing. As long as he uses it, a little setback like this should be easy for him to manage."

However, neither father nor son had any way of knowing what the other was

thinking.

“Aargh, dammit! I talked big back there, but I’m completely screwed!” Within the fortress, Nozomu held his head in his hands in agony, his expression that of a man driven to desperation. His reaction was somewhat understandable. After all, he only had around a thousand men at his disposal, with the Múspell Unit only making up one hundred of those. The rest were all hired mercenaries, each proficient in their own right, as one would expect of career soliders, but their loyalty was only as deep as the pockets of those that employed them. When they’d finished putting in their hours, they wouldn’t hesitate to turn tail. The only territory he held was the one fortress, and even at a perfunctory glance, the enemy’s forces numbered in the tens of thousands. *“What the hell am I supposed to do in this situation?!”* were his honest thoughts at that very moment.

“Now, now, calm down, big bro.” Rungr, his younger brother from another mother, gave a wry grin as he patted Nozomu on the shoulder. He didn’t seem to be taking this seriously at all.

“Sorry I can’t be as calm as you.” Nozomu unconsciously shot Rungr an envious glare. His little brother seemed to be able to remain cool and composed at all times, no matter the situation, and Nozomu was jealous of that ability beyond belief. In his eyes, it was the one quality required above all else to command an army.

“Well, my role here comes with far less responsibility. Makes it a lot easier,” Rungr said with a shrug.

“That may be so, but regardless of who’s responsible, this situation couldn’t be any worse,” Nozomu replied with a heavy sigh. What awaited him and his siblings from here on out was nothing less than genuine warfare. To lose meant death—for himself, his siblings, and his subordinates.

“I don’t quite agree with that. Actually, I’d say it’s more than possible for you to win this thing if I’m being honest,” Rungr returned.

“What?! Really?! How did you come to that conclusion?” Nozomu blurted out.

“Well, for starters, there’s the fact that our father, as overprotective as he is, left us here all by ourselves,” Rungr explained.

“Huh? ...Oh.” Belatedly, he realized. Now that he really gave it some thought, the reality of their situation was obvious. His father Suoh Yuuto was strict when he had to be, cruel when it was called for, but was a total softie when it came to his family and comrades. He would never send his own kids out on the battlefield if he thought it was hopeless. Nozomu had been in such a panic that he hadn’t even noticed that simple fact. He felt another wave of revulsion at his own inadequacy—but on the other hand, that meant there was a glimmer of hope. “In other words, we have a fair chance of winning.”

“Right.” Rungr nodded.

“I see, so that’s the real reason he’s so calm,” Nozomu realized. “But what exactly can we do to turn this around, then?”

“Heck if I know.” Rungr shrugged dismissively. An immediate response. “I thought about it all night and I couldn’t come up with anything decent. Ha ha.” Rungr chuckled as if it didn’t concern him in the least. He seemed like he thought of everything, yet in reality, he wasn’t thinking anything at all. *“That in itself takes skill,”* Nozomu idly thought.

“Good grief, I’m surrounded by idiots over here,” Sigrún’s daughter Wiz said with an exasperated sigh. Even though she was the younger sibling, her gaze made Nozomu feel like they were being looked down upon.

“Oh? Well then, do *you* have any ideas?” Nozomu quizzed her.

“Naturally,” Wiz replied self-assuredly, pounding her chest, which was just as woefully flat as her mother’s. “According to Sun Tzu, ‘In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy’s country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good. So too it is better to recapture an army entire than to destroy it, to capture a regiment, a detachment, or a company entire than to destroy them. Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.’” Wiz recited the saying as smoothly as if she were reading from a script. Her ability to recall such quotes verbatim was just as curious as ever, but Sun Tzu had also been a crown prince who’d been groomed to be a

king, so Nozomu felt like he understood Sun Tzu on a personal level.

“In other words, fighting is foolish, so try and make the enemy submit without fighting?” he said.

“Precisely.” Wiz gave an emphatic nod.

“I see...” Wiz was right. Against ten thousand men, crushing the enemy without fighting them was the only hope their paltry army of one thousand had. “Then how should we do that, specifically?”

“Huh?” Wiz’s expression went blank. Apparently, she hadn’t thought that far ahead. “A-Ah, well, you know... Um...” Her eyes began to dart back and forth. She was practically a savant when it came to scheming and strategizing, but as for putting her ideas into practice? Not so much... *“Well, she wouldn’t be as cute if she was perfect all the time,”* Nozomu reasoned.

“Ah, I see! So that was an option all along!” Suddenly, his red-haired, chisel-faced brother Arness, who’d been deep in thought all this time, spoke up. Younger than Rungr by a single month, he was Linnea’s child and Yuuto’s third son.

“You’ve got a good idea?” Nozomu asked.

“Yeah. What if we spread the word that you’ve returned home to Tarshish?” Arness explained.

“Me?” Nozomu frowned, not understanding what he was implying. What part of that was a good idea? That would mean Babel would be even more gung-ho to crush him. It was far too dangerous to do that without a decent counter-strategy.

“You don’t get it? Seriously? Look, you’ve got this right here, don’t you?” In exasperation, Arness pointed at Nozomu’s chest, where a cylindrical stamp, gleaming gold, hung from a string around his neck. That was enough of a hint for even Nozomu to realize what Arness was getting at. It was the stamp that Yuuto had given him during his coming-of-age ceremony, claiming it was a memento of his stepmother—

“I see now. You mean I should utilize the power of the þjóðann.” The seal he wore was proof of one holding the authority of the þjóðann. To Nozomu,

Mitsuki was the only mother he'd ever had, so having another one somewhere seemed like a fairy tale to him. Nonetheless, at least publicly, Nozomu was the sole inheritor of the divine empress's blood.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't really get it since I never lived there, but Yggdrasillians see the þjóðann as some kind of big, important figure, don't they?"

"Seems so."

"Right, so now's the perfect time to become divine."

"Divine, huh..." Nozomu forced a laugh. He didn't exactly feel good about it, but it might allow him to more effectively rally the troops. "But I'm also the tyrant Suoh Yuuto's son, so how's that going to work?" Yuuto didn't exactly have a great reputation within the Steel Clan. Since Yuuto had refused to use modern technology, living conditions had dramatically worsened in the years following their escape from Yggdrasil, and the people had despised him for it. Nozomu, who knew the true reasons behind the decline, thought it was incredible enough that Yuuto had managed to keep food on the table for several hundred thousand people even after moving to a foreign land, but the people would never be able to understand that. As Yuuto's son, it made him ashamed, but at any rate, that was the reality he had to contend with.

"By overthrowing Babel and making up for your father's misdeeds, you can restore your good name in the eyes of the people," Arness replied.

"I suppose..." Nozomu muttered in response.

"Also, if we go with a story like 'we recognized our father was a criminal, so instead of trying to avenge him we simply left the country,' that would provide a good explanation as to why we're still alive today," Arness added.

"Would it? I'd feel bad about lying to the people though..." He had moral reservations about lying to his subjects and telling them that his father was the one in the wrong, especially considering that Yuuto had exhausted every possible option to keep them fed and healthy.

"Well, it doesn't exactly sit right with me either, but that's honestly neither here nor there right now. It's the best option we've got," Arness said, effectively glossing over the details.

Nozomu knew he was right, but he couldn't shake how gross it felt to him. He was honestly envious of Arness's ability to keep his personal feelings from influencing his decisions. It was a skill Nozomu felt he'd always lacked.

"Well then, how about this?" Arness offered. "We can say 'Babel has sown far more seeds of tyranny and suffering far more than our father Suoh Yuuto. We could not sit idly by and let this happen, so we have returned! All fed up with the current regime, unite under our banner, for it is now Babel's turn to receive his comeuppance!' or something like that. People would probably change their opinion and come flocking to our cause, just as water gathers where it's the most shallow."

"I'm in awe that you were able to come up with a speech like that on the fly," Nozomu replied with a wry smile. He felt a stir deep within his chest. *"That ability to think on his feet was most definitely inherited from dad,"* he thought. "You know, I get the feeling you would make a better reginarch than I would." He knew how lame it sounded even as he said it, but he couldn't help but say it anyway. To Nozomu, Arness was the most like Yuuto out of all his siblings, and the one most fit to rule. On top of being already fit and incredibly athletic, he'd learned clerical work under Linnea, military strategy under Fagrahvél, and espionage under Kristina. Not only that, he had excelled in every one of them. There was nothing Arness could do that Nozomu was able to do better, so Nozomu's inferiority complex flared up every time he was around.

"Nah, no way. You're clearly far more suited for it than me," Arness replied. He vehemently disagreed with what Nozomu was suggesting.

"Really? Sure doesn't seem like it," Nozomu said.

"You're the only one who thinks that way, big bro. You're undoubtedly reginarch material. Everyone knows it. Right, guys?" Arness glanced over at Rungr and Wiz. The two nodded emphatically as if they were just as certain, but Nozomu couldn't see their reactions as anything but deference to Arness, and it did nothing to ease the unrest in his heart.

"What?! Dellingr Fortress has fallen?!" The envoy's report roused the man from his slumber, the shock of the news immediately jolting him awake. In his

early thirties, he had virile facial features, the most striking of which was a scar cut sideways across his cheek; however, his sharp, upturned eyes and permanent scowl were no less intimidating. His name was Babel, and he was the second reginarch of the Steel Clan.

“Is it those savages to the east? I suppose that Arete bastard was all talk in the end?” Babel snorted with a click of his tongue. Arete was one of Babel’s four Dragon Generals, handpicked and trained by Babel himself. He’d seen promise in the man and entrusted him with defending the eastern border, but it seemed he hadn’t been worth a damn in the end.

“No sir, the enemy didn’t come from land, but the sea...” the envoy replied.

“What?!” His expression, calm up until now, contorted into one of shock as he whipped around to face the envoy. The face of a certain black-haired man passed through his mind. “It couldn’t be... The *Noah*?!”

“Yes, the vessel is identical to the one the previous reginarch used,” the envoy explained.

“I knew it!” Babel gritted his teeth hard. He’d heard from Jörgen that Yuuto and his family were using the ship to trade around the Orient. He must’ve heard about the situation here in Tarshish and come to investigate. “Well, I knew this day would come eventually.” After a long sigh, Babel regained his composure and grinned.

He was, of course, well aware that the current state of the Steel Clan wasn’t at all how Yuuto had envisioned it. However, there was a reason for that.

At first, he had every intention of upholding Yuuto’s ideals. But in reality, ideals weren’t enough to run a country. In the first place, why did someone chosen by the gods like Babel have to worry himself with every little quibble of the ignorant masses? *“It should be the opposite,”* he thought. Wasn’t survival of the fittest supposed to be the universal, unshakable tenet of Yggdrasillian life? He was only following the natural order of things. Yuuto had been the odd one out for putting the needs of the people first.

“Looks like I’m going to have to make him regret this choice.” He’d been in Yuuto’s service for nearly ten years. He knew the man’s personality well. He’d figured that once Babel had learned how things should be and tried to set

things right, he'd come to scold him for not following his ways. With that in mind, Babel had already prepared thoroughly for such an occasion.

A vicious grin crept across Babel's face, revealing his canines, as he issued his order. "Send word to the patriarchs in every region to mobilize. We'll crush Suoh Yuuto with everything we've got!"

“Oh, what do we have here? A pair of manifestos, huh?” the elderly man said in amusement, rubbing his now-bald head. To anyone who had known him in the past, he might have seemed thinner and more fragile, but the glint in his narrow eyes was just as sharp as it had been in his prime.

The man’s name was Botvid—the biological father of Albertina and Kristina. He was a wily master of information-gathering and the former patriarch of the Claw Clan. Although he’d been an invaluable member of Yuuto’s team, he was the kind of man that Yuuto was never able to let his guard down around. Not even for a second.

With his advanced age finally catching up with him, he’d stepped away from the front lines and was currently enjoying a leisurely life of retirement—at least he was until his solace was rudely interrupted. The current Claw Clan patriarch, Bávorr, had suddenly burst into his quarters in a panic, carrying two clay tablets.

“It seems one’s from Babel, and the other from Lord Nozomu,” Botvid murmured.

“Right. I’d already received word that Dellingr Fortress had fallen, but which side should we take?” Bávorr asked. “In the first place, is this really from Lord Nozomu? Someone could’ve used his name to falsify...”

“It’s real,” Botvid said without hesitation, pointing to the insignia etched on the bottom of the clay tablet. He’d seen it so many times he could never mistake it for anything else, or forget what it signified. “This is the genuine seal of the þjóðann. Moreover, I’d already heard from Jörgen and Kris that Lord Nozomu was here.”

“What?! Then why didn’t you inform me?!”

“Because you didn’t ask. I’m just an adviser, Bávorr, and I have no interest in getting involved with topics I’m not asked to advise on,” Botvid replied with a cackle.

Bávorr’s shoulders went slack with defeat. “Normally I’d welcome that stance, considering the trouble it’d cause me otherwise, but I can’t deny I’m a bit upset that you kept something this important to yourself.”

“If it was important enough, I knew you’d come to talk to me about it

anyway," Botvid said dismissively.

"So everything was within your predictions." Bávorr shook his head as if to say he couldn't hold a candle to Botvid. "What should we do then?!" He seemed desperate, as though he'd been worrying himself over it all this time, and was now at the end of his rope.

"Hmm... Let's see," Botvid muttered. He put his hand to his chin as if he were seriously thinking about it, but inwardly, he smirked in satisfaction. Bávorr was a perfectly capable man when everything was going smoothly, but he was woefully indecisive in a crisis. However, that was precisely why Botvid had appointed him as his successor. By taking advantage of Bávorr's weakness, Botvid could manipulate him, allowing Botvid to retain his hold on the clan's reins even from behind the scenes. He wasn't the sort to relinquish his power so easily, and it was times like these that justified that decision. "I'd put my money on Lord Nozomu. It's the Claw Clan's mantra to always get behind the winning horse, remember?"

"So you think Lord Nozomu will win? Is that because of the authority he holds as the þjóðann?" Bávorr asked.

"Well, it's certainly a factor we should keep in mind, but not the deciding one," Botvid replied. The position of þjóðann had already lost the reverence it had enjoyed in Yggdrasil. Even in light of that, making a claim to the seat of the þjóðann still functioned well enough as a justification for war. However, if merely bearing the title was enough to win, then it would be considered a much larger military threat and not just an ornamental piece.

"Then is it because Babel rules with an iron fist, ignoring the well-being of the people?"

"Not especially. Father Yuuto was a bit odd in that regard. It's far more typical to rule using intimidation to instill fear in the people's hearts," Botvid explained in a flat and uninterested tone. He didn't especially hold any affection for the masses. He really only saw them as tools to gain wealth. The only reason his rule had been a benevolent one was because he knew if he'd squeezed the Claw Clan's population too hard their dissatisfaction would have escalated into a rebellion, which would have been disadvantageous to the clan as a whole.

From Botvid's perspective, Babel had done a marvelous job striking a balance, keeping his subjects' dissatisfaction at bay just enough to where they weren't inclined to revolt.

"Then, Lord Nozomu's skill...?" Bávorr asked.

"Not that either. In terms of raw talent, Nozomu pales in comparison to his father," Botvid replied. Up until Nozomu had turned fourteen, Botvid had been thoroughly observing him in secret, evaluating him to see if he had the stuff to become the next þjóðann. While Nozomu was the likable sort—honest and diligent, with good morals—he'd shown no sign of possessing the talent his father had.

When Yuuto had been fourteen, Botvid had heard that he'd gotten into an argument with the higher-ups of the Wolf Clan despite having just been whisked away to an unfamiliar, foreign land. That dogged stubbornness and combative personality of his was, of course, unsuited to being a member of a group. His sworn father and instructors had probably written him off as useless back then, but Botvid had learned firsthand over the years that the ability to believe in one's own convictions and have the confidence—to the point that it could even be confused with arrogance or pride—to convince others as well, was an indispensable skill for a leader. As far as Botvid had seen, Nozomu showed no sign of possessing anything similar to that.

"Then what on earth could it be?" Bávorr asked.

"I've been called many things over the years, Bávorr. 'Heartless,' 'underhanded'...'oathbreaker' on a number of occasions. Well, anyway, there are more than a few people who'd sooner see my head on a pike."

"Uh-huh..." Bávorr affirmed vaguely, his eyes not meeting Botvid's gaze as though he was unsure how else to respond. It was as if he couldn't deny it, but was too concerned about their respective positions within the clan to agree. *"That's why you'll never be a proper patriarch,"* Botvid thought to himself, a subtle smirk creeping onto his face.

"But," Botvid continued, "even an unscrupulous bastard like me had an ironclad rule I made sure to uphold at all costs."

"Andf what would that be?" Bávorr inquired.

“Yep. Never antagonize Suoh Yuuto,” Botvid replied, his lips curling up into a sly grin. Naturally, he didn’t do so out of loyalty—that was far too admirable a trait for Botvid to possess. No, the reason he’d never made an enemy of Yuuto was much simpler—he wouldn’t be able to win against him.

“The war god Suoh Yuuto wins every battle he fights,” Botvid explained. “Even during the war against the powerful Flame Clan, he strategized to improve his chances of winning, then when he saw his moment, he clinched the victory.”

“I am well aware. I was also present at the time and witnessed the feat in all its splendor. I remember the genius of it all made me tremble in my boots,” Bávorr replied, nodding strongly in agreement. At the time, he’d been in Glaðsheimr, commanding the Claw Clan Army in Botvid’s stead. Since he’d seen it up close, he had to have known Yuuto’s strength firsthand, which saved Botvid from having to explain and meant they could move on with the conversation.

“Anyway, that war god, who is well-known for being disgustingly sweet on his friends and family, sent his own son out here. What do you think that means?”

“...Now that you mention it, that’s pretty solid proof.” After a gasp of realization, a grin crossed Bávorr’s face. It seemed he was convinced, and as long as he was, that was all that mattered to Botvid.

“Yo, Lord Nozomu. Long time no see.”

“Haugspori?! Is it really you?” When Nozomu saw the unexpected guest that had come into his office, Nozomu stood up so fast that he sent his chair clattering to the floor.

Haugspori was the current patriarch of the Horn Clan and was at one time the Steel Clan’s best bowman. His deeds in the wars of Yggdrasil were still talked about even to this day. Nozomu had received archery lessons from Haugspori every now and then as a child, and Haugspori’s casual, cheery attitude had been a source of respite for Nozomu on more than a few occasions. In short, Nozomu was quite fond of Haugspori.

“I just came here to tell you that I’m placing a thousand of our finest Horn Clan men under your command,” Haugspori explained.

“Really? Wow, that’s a big help!” Nozomu was so grateful that he ended up taking Haugspori’s hand. At present, Nozomu’s army was woefully sparse and at a major disadvantage. His authority as þjóðann was inconsequential with that in mind. Despite the odds being stacked against Nozomu, however, Haugspori had come running to Nozomu’s rescue without the slightest hesitation. That in itself made Nozomu glad beyond belief.

“Ha ha, looks like you’ve grown quite a bit since I last saw you, Lord Nozomu.”

“Well, it’s been five years, after all. Unfortunately, about the only aspect of me that’s grown is my height.”

“Nah, it’s not just your height. Just by looking at your face, I can tell you’ve matured quite a lot too. Looks like you’ve gotten some good life experience under your belt.”

“I...hope that’s true.” Nozomu smiled broadly. Haugspori was always frivolous with women, but not with men, so Nozomu knew it wasn’t just lip service. Nozomu had tried as hard as he could over the past five years. If all that effort was evident just by looking at his face, that honestly relieved Nozomu. “What about you, though? You haven’t changed a bit. You still look just as young as ever.” Haugspori should’ve been pushing fifty by now, but his face still looked just as young, his body as muscular, and his skin as healthy as it had when they’d first met. If someone had told Nozomu that Haugspori was still in his thirties, he’d believe it.

“Hah! Well, you know, gotta look good for the ladies. The minute they think I’m some decrepit old man, it’s over.” He flashed a grin, showing off shiny white teeth. It seemed his playboy nature was also alive and well. Nozomu was glad to see the man still so full of vim and vigor.

“Did you say Haugspori’s here?!” The door flew open, and Arness came barreling into the room.

“Yo, Arness! Good to see you, buddy! Wow, looks like you’ve grown too!” When Haugspori saw Arness, he looked elated—more so than he had when he’d seen Nozomu. Even his tone was friendlier. But there was nothing Nozomu could do about that—after all, Haugspori had been in the service of Linnea, Arness’s mother, for many, many years.

“I know, right?! Bet I’m even taller than you right now, shorty!” In response, Arness, who was always so polite, did an about-face with Haugspori and spoke candidly.

“Ha ha ha! So you’d think! But I’m still taller!”

“Oh yeah? You wanna find out for sure?” Arness shot back.

“It’d be my pleasure.”

The two grinned boldly at each other. They really did get along well—perhaps even better than Arness did with his father Yuuto.

“All right, let’s save all that for later,” Nozomu cut in, clapping his hands to get them back on track. As great as it was that he’d just been given a thousand Horn Clan troops, they were still at a distinct disadvantage. He wanted to pick the great commander Haugspori’s brain about the next course of action they should take. It definitely had nothing to do with the fact that he was feeling left out—honest!

“So it would seem the old clans like the Wolf and Horn have joined Nozomu, and the former Asgardians and citizens of Jötunheimr are rallying to Babel’s side. Practically an even split,” Yuuto muttered, flipping through the report Kristina had handed him. He was currently at sea...or so he wanted Nozomu to believe, but he’d actually holed up in Jörgen’s mansion. After pretending to depart on *Noah,* he and a select few of his allies had taken up residence here instead to watch over the situation as it developed. In the end, even though he’d done his duty as a parent and booted his children out of the nest, he cared for his family too much to completely abandon them.

“Nozomu has around four thousand troops, and Babel’s army is almost twice that at roughly eight thousand,” Kristina corrected.

“Basically what we estimated before the battle, then,” Yuuto replied, unconcerned. All had gone according to his expectations up until now. The problem was what would happen from here on out.

“Babel still has the upper hand in terms of numbers,” Yuuto continued. “Now then, it’s about time for Nozomu to show his stuff.”

“About that, Father. It seems Babel hasn’t made a move,” Kristina replied.

“Huh?” Blinking in confusion, Yuuto turned to face Kristina. He’d been certain Babel would head straight for Nozomu without hesitation. “But isn’t he the type to charge right in and flatten all who oppose him?”

“Honestly, it’s not really all that surprising that he’s being cautious. He’s up against the war god Suoh Yuuto, after all,” Kristina said with a sigh of exasperation.

“But I’m not participating in this fight,” Yuuto replied.

“Babel has no way of knowing that.”

“Ah, right. I guess not.” Babel was likely holding off from making any big moves because he was too wary of Yuuto, who had not yet shown himself but could appear anytime, anywhere without warning. Of course, it was the height of foolishness to fear an opponent that didn’t actually exist, but it wasn’t like Babel wanted to gamble with those sorts of odds. “Well, it makes sense, but that does make the situation a tad more complicated.” Yuuto groaned as he put a hand on his chin.

Truthfully, this development was outside his calculations. He didn’t think a short-tempered powerhouse like Babel would stand for the subordinate clans under him revolting, and Yuuto had figured he’d want to deal the decisive blow as quickly as possible. However, it seemed like the man had learned some restraint in the past five years.

“Yes, I think this deadlock will persist if things continue the way they are,” Kristina said.

“Hopefully not, if we can help it.” Even though he was strictly hands-off this time, Yuuto was still quite attached to this country and its people. It was common for wars to drag on for long periods of time, but the longer the chaos lasted, the more ravaged the land would become, which would cause the people to suffer. Yuuto wanted to wrap this up before that happened, if at all possible.

“Hmm. You think Babel’s afraid of me, Kris?” Yuuto asked.

“I would put money on it,” she replied.

“Well then, that makes this simple.” A malicious grin crossed his face.

“What are you scheming now, Father?”

“Scheming’s an awfully strong word. What do you think I am, a villain?”

“How many years do you think I’ve known you at this point? That expression on your face tells me you’re up to no good.” Kristina gave a resigned shrug. As expected of his longtime partner in wit and wiles, she’d seen right through him. He merely smirked.

“Kris, if you don’t mind, can I get you to run a little errand for me?” he said.



“Rrghhh... Damn it all!” With a high-pitched tinkle, the glass he’d thrown to the ground shattered, its pieces scattering across the floor. The act did little to pacify Babel’s rage.

“As if there are still so many out there loyal to the ghost of that man...” he spat hatefully. He’d figured there would be a few detractors, of course, but he hadn’t expected so many would still flock to the war god’s side. “Guess I can’t underestimate the power of the ‘Suoh Yuuto’ name after all.”

Only a select few Steel Clan members knew the truth behind Suoh Yuuto’s current circumstances—namely those Yuuto had given his direct Chalice. Very few held these Chalices with Yuuto to begin with, and all of them had already either passed on, escaped with Yuuto five years ago, or had long since relinquished their authority as patriarchs. However, they were all influential people, and through them, Yuuto’s latent influence was probably still being felt throughout the senior clans.

“Ungrateful peons... Pulling this stunt after I went out of my way to care for them and ensure their survival.” For the last five years, he’d done everything within his power to cater to the senior clans. Certainly, he’d done so because he was afraid they might still remain loyal to Yuuto and wanted to sever those ties, but in the end, none of them had joined his side—instead cozying up to Nozomu. The fact that they’d determined Nozomu even had a chance of winning against him rubbed Babel the wrong way.

“But it’s strange...” If Yuuto’s name had that much power behind it, then why had the enemy camp not announced his involvement publicly? If they did, they’d have a much easier time usurping Babel’s forces and bringing them to their side. Of course, there was the fact that he was supposed to be dead, but they could even use that as a perfect chance to expose Babel as a liar. Why would they not take that opportunity?

“Unless... He really is dead?” This was, after all, a world where death constantly nipped at your heels. He’d set off for a completely foreign land too, so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. In fact... Perhaps Nozomu and the rest had returned to Tarshish because their father was dead and they had nowhere else to turn? “I see... That would explain everything.”

“Tee hee, your insight is just as keen as ever, Babel.”

“Who’s there?!” A sudden female voice from nowhere caused Babel to whip around in shock. As an Einherjar, he was a warrior of impressive renown. Even

since he'd become reginarch he'd never shirked his daily training, and couldn't recall a time where he hadn't been able to sense an approaching presence—until today.

"Aw, it's only been five years and you've already forgotten me? That's mean."

"K-Kristina...? A-Aunt Kristina?!" His voice was tinged with bitterness. Before his eyes was a woman so bewitchingly beautiful that if you took ten men off the street at random, each one of them would undoubtedly turn to look at her. However, Babel knew all too well that beyond that beauty lurked thorns of poison.

"Long time no see, my dear nephew."

"...Indeed, it has been a while. Might I help you with something?" Babel asked, now on high alert. She was one of Yuuto's most trusted confidants, and the one most skilled in deception at that. In other words, he could never be too careful around her.

"I just came to inform you of two things."

"Two...?"

"Yes. First, Father has indeed passed away."

"Oh... Well, I'm truly sorry to hear that." Feigning an expression of surprise, Babel strung together insincere words of condolence. Truthfully, Yuuto had always been a thorn in his side. By all rights, the news should've thrilled him, but he couldn't take the words of the cunning witch before him at face value. He dared not show too much emotion or risk being found out. For now, the best strategy was to maintain a poker face.

"Second, I came to let you know the intentions of the women going forward."

"I see." He gave a subdued response, but this was actually of great interest to Babel. By 'the women,' Kristina must've meant Yuuto's wives, and, as Babel knew well, women were not to be underestimated. Whether it be Sigrún, said to have been the reason they were able to win the great war of Yggdrasil; Ingrid, inventor of Yuuto's modern weaponry; or Fagrahvél, Sword Clan patriarch and bearer of a rune that boosted troops' morale, they were the stars that shined the brightest in Yuuto's army. No doubt their involvement would

greatly influence the outcome of this battle as well—if they planned to act, it was something Babel definitely couldn't ignore.

"None of them plan to interfere in this battle between you and Nozomu," Kristina stated.

"Oh? Well, that's certainly good news for me, but without any proof, I'm afraid I can't trust you so easily." Naturally, Babel wasn't so naïve as to take what Kristina was telling him at face value. It was entirely possible—actually very likely—that this was a trap meant to lure Babel into a false sense of security, and even if she was telling the truth, she might have shared the information with the intent to shake him up. The entire time, he'd taken special care to pay attention to his expression, his tone of voice, and his diction as he observed Kristina carefully, making sure that his reginarch's mask of composure didn't accidentally slip.

"Right now, whether you believe me or not is irrelevant," Kristina responded curtly. "Father's dying wish was for you to receive this message, and now that you've received it, my job here is done."

"Dying wish, huh." Babel considered it. He wasn't related to Yuuto by blood, and he hadn't inherited the throne through any official means, nor had there been any ceremony. However, it was true that Yuuto had handpicked Babel to become reginarch. In that case, perhaps it wasn't so strange for Yuuto's dying wish to be to make sure Babel got his message.

"Father always said that to be a king, you need strength above all else."

"...I remember it well." Yuuto himself had been a man who valued compassion more than anything but had also held the cynical perspective that his sworn children and subjects weren't as loyal to him as they were to the power he possessed. He wouldn't have been able to build a government from the ground up in the New World and keep it running for ten whole years on compassion alone. It was his overwhelming strength that had made everyone follow him.

"With that in mind, Father issued a directive to his wives. 'Even if Nozomu decides he wants to be king, only watch over him from the sidelines and do not get involved. If he doesn't have the ability to usurp the throne on his own, he

doesn’t have the right to the crown.’”

“...I see.” It certainly sounded like something Yuuto would say. He was weak when it came to his family, but he’d never let his personal feelings get in the way of business. He wasn’t fool enough to hand over the throne to someone who didn’t deserve it, even if that someone was his own son.

“That’s all I have to say. Goodbye.” Disinterestedly, Kristina tossed the paper in her hand into the air, which caught Babel’s attention for but a fraction of a second. That short moment was all it took for Kristina to vanish from the room without a trace. Babel reflexively swallowed in fear.

“That woman terrifies me,” he muttered. His office was supposed to be heavily secured, and yet Kristina had escaped like it was nothing. If he was being honest, it bordered on nonsensical. And it wasn’t just her—all of Yuuto’s most trusted confidants were like that. If they really had no intention of joining the battle, he couldn’t imagine a bigger godsend. The problem, though, was whether or not it was a trap...

“Thinking about it, it seems unlikely.” Whether directly or by word of mouth, he felt he had a pretty good idea of what type of person Yuuto was. He’d also observed the way Yuuto had fought back in Yggdrasil. Yuuto had never used false information or deception to give his own army an advantage up until now. Of course, it’d be dangerous to assume he wouldn’t, but he didn’t think this type of situation, at least, was one where Yuuto would rely on a tactic like that. The Yuuto he knew would confront his enemies head-on and use his strength to make them submit. In other words, he could send his troops out to crush Nozomu without any risk. No mythical Yuuto-led “special unit” was going to attack him from behind.

“Heh... Heh heh heh... What’d that bastard used to say? ‘If you’re gonna eat the poison, you might as well eat the plate?’” It was something Yuuto had said often once he’d gone all-in on a decision. After five years of being reginarch, Babel had come to understand its meaning—the one thing a ruler needed most of all was the ability to make a decision and stand by it. His instinct, honed over countless battles, was telling him that it was impossible for Yuuto to have a support unit waiting in the wings. Now was the time to attack.

Babel gave his orders. “Tell all units gathered in Tarshish to mobilize! I’ll crush this rebel calling himself ‘þjóðann’ with my own two hands!”

“Big Bro, I’m getting word that Babel’s army in Tarshish is headed this way.”

“So they’ve finally begun to move.” Nozomu’s face went tense upon hearing Arness’s report. Of course, he’d been prepared for this. But hearing that the enemy had mobilized reminded him that war really was imminent, and he couldn’t help but feel nervous.

“Yeah. And it looks like it’s all of their units at once.”

“All units...?” Nozomu frowned in suspicion. “That seems a bit odd. Didn’t you and Rungr say that reason Babel hadn’t made a move up until now was probably because he was afraid of dad?” When he’d first heard their assessment, it had honestly depressed Nozomu. *“Just how long am I going to be under my dad’s protection?”* he’d thought. Now the situation was different. He couldn’t afford any mistakes, and he’d resolved to use everything he had at his disposal.

“Yeah... Gathering all his forces to attack us and leaving Tarshish completely open is a rather strange move,” Arness agreed.

“Right?”

“But we can’t deny the reality in front of us. We have to adapt and change our strategy.” Arness put his hand to his chin, seemingly vexed. Since the enemy was so wary of Yuuto’s nonexistent presence, Nozomu and his siblings had originally planned to scheme around that fear and collapse their chain of command, after which they’d pick off each individual unit. But the enemy’s actions had completely uprooted that plan.

“Should we also mobilize our forces for attack?” Nozomu asked.

“I wouldn’t recommend that. We’re pretty heavily outnumbered still. Best to avoid a head-on confrontation if we can help it.” The crease between Arness’s brows deepened as his expression grew more severe.

Next to them, Rungr nodded. “For sure. Father might be able to manage it, but we don’t have his battle experience, nor do we have his cheat abilities.”

“Right.” Nozomu gave an unamused snort. He didn’t need to be told he couldn’t measure up to his father. He’d already learned that five years ago. Sure, it still frustrated him a little, but he was done trying to deny it.

“But you know, if Babel really is coming here to destroy this fortress, it might work out in our favor.”

“Huh? How?” Nozomu had no clue what Arness was talking about.

“This fortress is on the outskirts of Steel Clan territory. The boonies, if you will. There’s no land to guard here, nor are there any civilians.”

“I mean, yeah, isn’t that why dad chose it?” He still didn’t understand. Why was this getting rehashed now? Dellingr Fortress had originally been built to guard against bandits from the east. Yuuto had chosen this fortress because he hadn’t wanted harm to come to any innocent bystanders, and this one was located far away from civilization. That way when war finally broke out the people would at least be safe. Furthermore, the fortress was located near the shore, which made it easy for ships to dock and supply the army with rations. Either way, this was all old news. Nozomu couldn’t understand why Arness would state the obvious at such a critical juncture.

“Right. So there’s no problem with using that to our advantage.”

“Uhh...”

“You don’t get it? If they’d cross over into Claw or Wolf Clan territory, we’d have no other option but to come to their aid. And if they invaded Horn Clan territory, Haugspori would have to go back there to handle it.”

“Ah, right.” Nozomu struck his palm with his fist as though he understood. These people had gone out of their way to aid Nozomu, placing themselves under his banner. He had a duty to help them in return.

“But the enemy, on the other hand,” Arness continued, “would want to avoid having their own territory laid to waste. That’s why instead of bothering with the other clans, they’re heading here directly to put you, the rebel leader, out of commission.”

“So it seems,” Nozomu muttered, then frowned in confusion. He still didn’t know what Arness was getting at, and it was beginning to irritate him that his

brother was able to figure out something he couldn't. "So what should we do then? Get to the point."

"Ah, sorry. Dragging out the exposition has always been a bad habit of mine. Basically, if there's nothing to protect and no one to rescue, there's no need to send out the troops at all. We can just fight from the safety of this fortress, right?"

"I see!" At long last, Nozomu understood. Normally, there would be more disadvantages than advantages to doing so. Lords often taxed their subjects under the pretext of keeping them safe, but if that lord was spineless enough to hole himself up in his castle while his land burned, he'd lose the trust and loyalty he built up. While a lord might want to avoid that at all costs, Nozomu didn't have to concern himself with any of it, and he had access to a steady supply of food for everyone besides. Arness was trying to say that if the enemy outnumbered them, then all they had to do was stay in the fort and on the defensive—the side that always had an overwhelming advantage during a besiegement.

"I'm in favor of Arness's plan. Let the enemy come to us. While we're holed up in this fortress, we can look for an opening, attack when we find one, and if they retreat we go for the jugular. I don't see any disadvantages," Sigurd said, offering his opinion.

"But wait, isn't keeping the troops in line during a siege incredibly difficult?" Nozomu, however, was unsure. He remembered something similar happening in one of Yuuto's tales from the past. But Sigurd just gave a confident grin.

"Truthfully? That won't be an issue," Sigurd replied confidently. "Considering there is already a hefty supply of provisions in this fort to get us started, we can easily hold out for a good three months. Also, the more resources the enemy wastes to attack us, the higher likelihood of their troops defecting to our side. In this case, time is actually our ally."

"You've got a sharp eye, kid. I like that. But then again, I wouldn't expect anything less from the son of Fagrahvél and His Former Majesty." Haugspori sighed in admiration.

Nozomu felt a slight prick of pain in his chest. Back during the great war of

Yggdrasil, Haugspori had been Linnea's right-hand man. Since she herself wasn't fond of war, he'd heard that Haugspori had picked up the slack, displaying in full his almost superhuman talent for combat. Put simply, he was a legend among legends, and for Haugspori to recognize Sigurd's skill made Nozomu realize all over again how gifted his younger brother was. Why couldn't *he* have inherited any of Yuuto's talents? From that jealousy, negative thoughts inevitably began to take root in his mind.

"So what do you think, Big Bro? Are we going with the besiegement plan?"

"Wha?! Oh... Um..." Arness's question brought him back to earth. Indeed, Arness and Sigurd's opinions made sense. But something still bothered him. Something didn't add up.

"Are you worried about something?" Arness asked.

"N-No, not especially, it's just..." But even as he said it, he felt his heartbeat quicken. He didn't know why, but something was keeping him from agreeing. He just—had a bad feeling.

"Is it just because I'm jealous that I didn't come up with it first?" Honestly, that would make more sense, but he quickly denied it. He didn't want to believe he'd fallen that far. But—what if he actually had? He wasn't sure. He was aware his inferiority complex had gotten especially bad as of late.

"Something on your mind, Big Bro?"

"Ah... Well, I'm not actually sure why, but for some reason, I just can't help but feel that this besiegement plan is a bad idea, I guess," he admitted sheepishly, scratching his head in uncertainty.

At first, he'd considered concealing his disapproval. He didn't have a good reason to refuse, so he'd only embarrass himself by speaking out. The plan was clearly the wisest course of action. Going with the flow and accepting the proposal would let him save face. However, five years ago, he'd told himself he was done putting on airs. In the end, he'd always be seen through. He had to grow on his own merits. Would he rather speak up now and endure a little embarrassment in the short term, or suffer a lifetime of it for not speaking up at all? Even if it made him look like a fool, wasn't it best to keep asking questions until things made sense? Maybe then, even if it was just a baby step, he would

be able to take a step forward in his own growth—at least, that was what he hoped.

“Hmm... You don’t know why, huh?” Arness looked troubled as he put his hand on his chin. That just made Nozomu feel worse.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled apologetically. “It must sound stupid for me to reject your proposal without a concrete reason. It might just be that I’m jealous of you because you’re far more capable than I am.”

“Nah, you’d never let something like that get in the way of an important decision.” Arness’s reply was immediate. His younger brother’s confidence in him made him happy, but he wasn’t as confident in himself. Nozomu knew himself the best, and knew that he deeply envied his younger brothers.

“All right, let’s break it down, then. Exactly what part of this plan has you apprehensive?” Rungr asked.

Nozomu thought for a bit before responding. “Well, probably the suggestion that we have nothing to protect.”

“Hm, so you’re saying we’ve overlooked something we *do* have to protect?”

“But the area around this fortress is barren. That’s why Father chose this place to begin with, right?” Arness and Sigurd both looked stumped. *“They’re smarter than I’ll ever be,”* Nozomu thought, *“so if they can’t see an issue, then it was probably just my imagination. Time to stop pretending like I have anything to contribute and leave it to them.”*

But just as that thought crossed his mind, someone delivered a swift kick to his back, sending him flying. When he got up off the ground and turned around to see his attacker, there stood Wiz, a look of disdain on her face.

“What the hell, Wiz?!” he screeched.

“You’re slouching, Big Brother. ‘In strategy, it is imperative to be able to see distant things as if they were close by and nearby things as if they were far away. Do not see, observe.’”

“Huh?” Nozomu had never heard that one before. At least, it wasn’t anything Sun Tzu had said.

Wiz put her hand on her hip and sighed. “Miyamoto Musashi’s *The Book of Five Rings*. He was known as the strongest warrior Father’s home country had ever known. When you’re hunched over like that you can only see what’s in front of you, Big Brother.”

“Hmph.” He understood what Wiz was getting at. Telling him he was “hunched over” was her way of saying to him that he was being spineless. When one became spineless, they turned their gaze inward, getting so caught up in themselves that their worldview became narrow. He of all people should’ve known that by now, and yet before he knew it he’d been stuck in the swamp of self-doubt once more.

“‘See close things as if they were distant, and distant things as if they were close,’ huh?” He’d frequently heard those words from Sigrún during his training sessions as well. In that context, it meant that focusing too much on your opponent’s sword could leave you unable to react to their attack. By adopting a wider perspective and paying attention to the opponent’s entire body instead, an opponent’s tells became more apparent and easier to respond to. It was the most basic of basics. Just now Nozomu had been only looking at what was in front of him. If he expanded that perspective...

“Ah! I got it! I see now!” Suddenly, a bright flame lit the candle in his mind. He was so surprised by the sudden revelation that he ended up shouting out. He finally knew exactly what had bothered him so much about his brother’s plan.

“It’s wrong to say we don’t have anything to protect. I returned to Tarshish to claim my rightful spot as the new þjóðann, didn’t I?” he explained.

“Well, sure. We’re well aware of that...” Arness frowned in confusion.

“A besiegement would insinuate that it’d be a long battle, right? And we’d be far away from our people.”

“Yes, and isn’t that exactly what we want?” Arness asked.

“That’s right. It’d be the wisest course of action, for sure.” The more dissatisfied his subjects became, the quicker Babel’s forces would weaken. Put more clearly: The more upset they were with Babel, the easier it would be for Nozomu to rule. By setting him up as a hero who toppled a tyrant, he’d surely be welcomed by the populace. The benefits of their current plan were readily

obvious, but even so...

“The thing is, I don’t want my people to suffer any longer,” Nozomu stated.

That was how Nozomu truly felt. He knew it was immature and idealistic, but in the end, his heart wouldn’t accept anything else. He couldn’t help but be true to himself.

“Naturally, I’m well aware that just as you two said, a besiegement strategy is in our best interests. But I can’t help but think, am I any better of a ruler if I’m able to leave my people to suffer under Babel any longer than they need to? If I have to make a choice like that to become king, then what right do I have to wear the crown?” The words coming out of his mouth sounded idiotic even to him. Only heroes, people with strength like his father Yuuto, had the right to spout such ideals. From the mouth of a weakling like himself, it was all going to ring hollow. Or so he thought.

“I see. Well then, let’s put an end to this war as swiftly as possible, shall we?” Arness said with a grin.

“Yes, let’s revise our plan so we can do just that,” Sigurd agreed. The pair readily got on board with Nozomu’s idealistic goals. There were no objections whatsoever. They’d been so eager to accept, in fact, that it freaked Nozomu out.

“Wh-Whoa, whoa, is this really okay?! You’re really just going to go along with my idealistic nonsense without looking into it at all?!”

“Hm? We just said we’re going to look into making it happen,” Arness replied.

“Right,” Sigurd agreed.

“H-Huh...?” He didn’t understand. Did they really value his hopeless opinion that much? It couldn’t be.

“Are you really surprised? You’re the king, Nozomu. What you say goes.”

“Indeed. And our role is to make the ideals of our king reality.” Arness and Sigurd nodded in unison.

“Hey, hey, don’t forget about me. You aren’t gonna leave me out of this plan, are you?” Rungr cut in.

“I would like to be included as well,” Wiz added. Both of them seemed to be just as eager to participate.

How were they all able to so confidently trust in his judgment? They were putting way too much stock in him, he felt. Over the past five years, he had experienced many things, and he thought he’d managed to grow up a bit. But when he’d made up his mind, returned to his hometown, and seen how his younger brothers were leaving him in the dust, he’d been given a reality check. Was he really so worthy of his siblings’ trust? Try as he might—he couldn’t say yes.

“We just got word from our scout unit. Seems that Babel’s army will be on our doorstep within the hour.”

“I-I see...” When Nozomu heard Arness’s update, he swallowed hard, and his expression turned tense. He’d managed to hold his own in several encounters with pirates since his first battle five years ago, but those were all light skirmishes compared to the threat he was about to face. He couldn’t help but think about all the lives that were at stake should he happen to fail.

“Don’t worry, Big Bro. You got this. The plan’s practically foolproof, right?” Arness replied, making an effort to reassure Nozomu.

That much was true. It was as foolproof as it could get, anyway. A main unit of around two thousand led by Nozomu had marched from the fort to a small hill a short distance from its entrance—the location they anticipated that Babel’s men would arrive from. Meanwhile, two auxiliary units of one thousand each, led by Sigurd and Haugspori respectively, were currently hiding within the forest to either side, where they would ambush the enemy when they appeared. With Nozomu’s forces in front and Sigurd and Haugspori’s to the side, the Babel’s men would find themselves completely surrounded. Ideally, Nozomu would’ve liked to use Yuuto’s patented “Fisher and Bandit” strategy to seal the deal, but he wasn’t confident enough in the proficiency of his troops or his own leadership ability to go with that plan. In truth, “Fisher and Bandit” was a risky maneuver that could backfire and send his own army packing if improperly executed, so perhaps it was just as well.

“Let me and Rungr sweat the small stuff. You just focus on steeling yourself for the battle ahead,” Arness said to Nozomu.

“Gotcha.” A small part of him felt like he was implicitly being told to stay out of their way, but deep down he knew that wasn’t the case. A supreme commander needed to wear a mask of steel, to stay cool and composed no matter the situation. *“As long as the commander remains calm, so too do the troops*. *The morale of the troops decides the outcome of the battle itself.”* He’d heard it time and time again. Arness was merely ensuring that Nozomu could successfully carry out his role.

As the two conversed, a scout approached. “The enemy has halted their

advance! They've likely noticed our presence!"

"I would hope so, considering we had the scout unit deliberately show themselves," Arness replied with a snicker. Everything was, so far, going according to plan. If Nozomu's army was going to trap Babel's men in an encirclement, then the enemy army needed to be encouraged to march toward their main unit. Giving away the position of their main force was required for this to work, basically.

"Now all we need to do is wait for them to resume their march. They will, right?" Nozomu asked hesitantly.

"Definitely. By now, enemy intelligence has probably already learned that our forces number somewhere around four thousand. Since they have almost twice that amount, they'll surely determine that we're no threat," Arness replied.

"Makes sense." Nozomu nodded. They'd also outfitted their main unit with flags and banners to make it even more conspicuous. If the plan worked, the enemy would be too focused on eliminating the main unit to even notice there were others lurking in the shadows. All they needed to do now was wait. That was the toughest part. *"Now it all comes down to a test of patience,"* Nozomu thought, psyching himself up.

Not even two hours later, they got word that Babel's troops had resumed their advance. They probably didn't see Nozomu as enough of a threat to give pause any further. But that was fine. It would prove to be their downfall. He wasn't prepared for the next part of the scout's report, however. "Around a thousand of them are on horseback, heading this way!"

"What?!" Nozomu and Arness's mouths dropped open in unison. The enemy shouldn't have had any mounted units. Stirrups were considered technology from the future—in other words, forbidden knowledge.

"Why am I surprised? There was never any guarantee Babel was going to uphold my dad's wishes, after all," Nozomu said glumly. Of course, Babel wouldn't have made the technology public, or he would've risked a confrontation with Yuuto down the line. But Nozomu had known since long ago that Babel had always been the ambitious sort. He should've considered that

this might happen. Even so, the possibility had not just eluded Nozomu, but everyone else as well. They'd probably ruled it out within their subconscious, telling themselves that Babel wouldn't possibly go that far.

"So he plans to antagonize dad as well..." He was so stunned he couldn't even fathom it. Babel should've known that he wouldn't be able to use technology from the land beyond the heavens without incurring Yuuto's wrath. Even if he managed to defeat Nozomu's army here, he had to have known that he'd have Yuuto to answer to afterward. Babel had originally been under Yuuto. He had seen the face of the war god firsthand. With everything he knew about the man, he still meant to make Yuuto his enemy? He had to be insane.

"Looks like he still had some tricks up his sleeve," Arness muttered, grimacing. Yuuto had brought plenty of knowledge with him from the land beyond the heavens. If Babel had already brought stirrups out, that wasn't likely all he had in store. He was sure to have advanced weaponry waiting in the wings.

"And in comparison, our weapons are as primitive as can be," Nozomu groaned, a crease forming between his brows. Every man under Nozomu's command was outfitted with weapons and equipment from the current era. Not only did they not have stirrups, but they also lacked tanegashimas, compound bows, and tetsuhaus. In short, they were at an extreme disadvantage.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

The cavalry loosed one hail of arrows after another upon Nozomu's main unit.

"Dammit... If they're firing from that distance, they aren't using regular bows. Those are compound bows!" Nozomu gritted his teeth.

"Indeed. This isn't good. Their arrows have no trouble reaching our men, but our own keep falling short," Arness said.

"And they'll only flee if we try to get closer, most likely. Horses are much faster than soldiers on foot, after all." Nozomu muttered.

"Yeah. Actually, if we did try to chase them, the troops might get so heated we'd become unable to control them, dealing a blow to our chain of command," Arness pointed out.

“Sigurd and Haugspori’s units are still lying in wait. How about using them to execute a pincer attack?” Nozomu asked.

“That’s exactly what the enemy will be expecting. In fact, the reason they only moved a small cavalry unit forward was probably to flush out a potential ambush.” Arness replied.

“So we’re up against the wall then...” Nozomu bit his thumbnail in frustration. Even though they had a foolproof plan and the home advantage, they’d found themselves totally outmatched. It drove home just how frighteningly powerful Yuuto’s modern technology really was. Of course, that alone hadn’t allowed Yuuto to become the conqueror of Yggdrasil, but it had certainly been an important factor. Nozomu was now coming to realize just *how* important.

“Dammit... Should we have gone with the besiegement plan after all?” He accidentally let slip a lack of confidence in his own actions. By chasing after lofty, unattainable ideals, he was worried that he might have accidentally put everyone in unnecessary danger.

“No, I think you made the right choice. If we’d done that, Babel’s tetsuhaus and trebuchets would’ve made our troops panic,” Arness replied, his hand on his chin.

“O-Oh, that’s a relief then...” Finally realizing that frightening possibility, Nozomu shuddered. As long as the troops holed up in the fort, they assumed they were safe and sound. If they were confronted with high-powered weaponry that completely shattered that assumption, however, there would be pandemonium among them. It turned out to be a massive stroke of good luck that they’d decided to pivot away from that plan at the very last moment.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

A seemingly endless barrage of arrows continued to rain down upon Nozomu’s men. This was no time for any of them to be celebrating anything at all. The distance between them and the enemy allowed the troops enough time to block the arrows with their shields, to a degree, but it wasn’t a perfect defense by any means. The casualties would likely only increase with the passage of time.

“What the hell can I do?!” Nozomu was helplessly cornered. On top of that,

he had to contend with his own bad habit of his mind going blank whenever he was at a disadvantage. Even if there was a way to turn the situation around, he couldn't think of it.

"Shit, this all started because of my own selfishness, so I have to be the one to finish it! But how?!" He gritted his teeth in vexation. Why could he not be like his father? Why could he not do what he'd done? Why was he so powerless? Nozomu hated his useless self with every fiber of his being.

"Hm, I think you've got it a bit wrong," Nozomu's adviser Rungr said, putting a finger to his chin and cocking his head.

"Yep. You're way off base," Arness agreed with an emphatic nod.

"Huh? How so?" Nozomu asked, visibly confused.

"Remember what I said earlier? You're the commander. Focus on that. We'll take care of the rest." There were no traces of doubt in Arness's words. Nozomu was stunned at how he was able to remain so confident in such a desperate situation.

"You'll take care of the rest? How do you plan to do that?" Nozomu asked.

"Ah, well, you know. I have something up my sleeve, though I'd really prefer not to use it." Arness frowned in displeasure.

"Huh?! Well, we can't afford to be choosy right now! What is it?!" Nozomu asked once more, almost overwhelmingly flustered by this point.

"For now, hold our defenses and buy time," Arness replied.

"That's it?!" Nozomu yelled in response.

"Yep. The enemy's sure to run out of arrows sooner or later, so we just need to hold out till their supply's exhausted," Arness explained.

Nozomu merely pouted in response.

"If they charge at us after that, perfect! We can wipe them out with the pincer attack," Arness continued. "If they decide to retreat instead, that'll give us a chance to regroup so we can use our secret weapon."

"We have a secret weapon?" Nozomu had no idea such a thing even existed.

He was supposed to be the supreme commander, so why had no one told him? “If we’ve got something like that, then why didn’t you let me know earlier?!”

“Because I was hoping we wouldn’t have to use it,” Arness replied. “I wanted to keep it in our back pockets as insurance for if things really went south.”

“Well, now you’ve just got me intrigued! What the hell is it?!” Nozomu barked.

“Let’s save that conversation for later. Right now we need to focus on getting through our current predicament,” Arness said, skirting around the subject as best he could.

“Fine, I guess.” Even as they spoke, Nozomu’s army was getting bombarded by the enemy. If they didn’t do something about that first, a secret weapon would be worthless.

“So we just have to hold the line?” Nozomu asked.

“Precisely,” Arness replied.

“All units! Fortify your defenses! Remember, we’re up against cavalry. Do not throw caution to the wind and attempt to pursue them. I don’t want to lose anyone. Focus your efforts on enduring!” Nozomu’s raised voice rang out.

For a while after, the enemy’s barrages continued, until they quite abruptly came to a stop. They had likely exhausted their supply of arrows. Thus ended Nozomu’s first battle as a supreme commander. Frankly speaking, he was off to a rough start.

“Phew... Man, I can’t believe we managed to get through that.” Glaring at the enemy cavalry as they retreated, he grimaced and let out a sigh once they were all gone. For now, the threat had abated, but it was no cause for celebration. Once they resupplied their stock of arrows, they would undoubtedly be back with a vengeance.

Casualties on Nozomu’s side were still quite light, but the injury count and death toll would only increase if this battle dragged out. The stress on the troops would build up, and morale would plummet. In other words, Nozomu needed to take swift action.

“Right. Arness, what’s that secret weapon you mentioned?” Coming to a quick decision, Nozomu asked Arness about the thing he’d been on tenterhooks about during the whole battle.

“Ah, that? It’s nothing to be proud of, just to let you know.”

“Oh, enough dodging the question. How can I judge it when I don’t even know what it is?”

“I suppose so. Well, then...” With a truly reluctant expression, Arness began to explain the particulars of his secret weapon. As he talked, Nozomu’s eyes became wider and wider.

“Whoa... We had that option all along?” Frankly, it was a completely unfair method. A total cheat. To be honest, he doubted whether his father Yuuto would even let him have the throne if he heard that Nozomu had used such a ploy. In the worst case, he might declare Nozomu unfit to be reginarch and maybe even disown him. That said, it was more than enough to win this war. Of that, Nozomu was certain. And right now, that was all he needed. There was just one problem...

“Is it even doable...?” It was going to be incredibly difficult to carry out. By Nozomu’s estimation, nearly impossible.

“Well, I’m sure we’ll manage. If we couldn’t, I wouldn’t have even brought it up,” Arness replied.

“R-Right.” Nozomu nodded. He was so blown away by what he’d heard that he could only muster that much of a response. No, he wasn’t just impressed—he was astonished. Arness had considered every single possibility and even come up with backup plans for his backup plans, just like he’d heard his father Yuuto had done back in Yggdrasil. It was something that was far easier said than done—at least, it’d be an impossible feat for someone like Nozomu.

“You really are amazing, Arness.”

“Nah, not really.”

“You’re far more suited to be king than some average loser like me.” With a deflated expression, Nozomu spoke as though he’d lost all motivation. At this point, he had no choice but to admit it—in this war so far, all he’d done was get

tossed around by every new development. The one at the center of the operation, the strategist and the executor, had been none other than Arness. Nozomu had only been a mere decoration, a figurehead that could do nothing but get in everyone's way. The pride that Nozomu had built up over the past five years had long since been torn to shreds. What little remained was in tatters.

"Me, king? No way. I wouldn't be good at it at all."

"In what way?! I don't know anyone smarter or cleverer than you! You'd be fantastic at it!"

"Well, I will admit that the cogs in my brain spin a bit faster than most, but that's not enough to be a king. The quality that a king needs most, I happen to lack."

"And what would that be?" Nozomu had no idea what he meant whatsoever. Physical ability, maybe? Arness came up a bit short in that department, that much was true. But it wasn't like he was sickly—in fact, he was the very picture of health. A lack of athleticism wouldn't bar him from becoming a king.

Seeing that Nozomu was clueless, Arness forced a grin. "What I lack, Big Bro, is popularity. I have a tendency to say whatever comes to my mind, which doesn't exactly win people over."

"Th-That's not..." He was about to say it wasn't true but stopped himself midsentence. Arness was courteous and friendly enough on the surface, but it was superficial, something he put on for appearance's sake. Perhaps a capable person like Arness simply didn't realize how the incapable felt. Even though he didn't intend to come across that way, he often ended up giving others the impression that he was looking down on them for being less intelligent. Nozomu himself had felt like that with Arness more than a few times, and it had indeed irritated him.

"Heh heh. I know myself better than anyone else, Big Bro. Sure, I may have inherited the talent for scheming and strategy from our parents, but I don't have their compassion, so I can never be as popular." Arness had a faraway look in his eye as he criticized himself. "If I was king, my siblings would surely forsake me. Right, Big Bro Rungr? Big Sis Wiz?" His self-deprecating smile became a

mischievous grin as he turned his gaze toward the two of them. Rungr and Wiz both nodded without the slightest hesitation.

“Frankly, I’d rather die than be under your rule,” Rungr responded.

“No big sister alive wants to serve their little brother,” Wiz added.

“And there you have it,” Arness said with a shrug that was meant to suggest the matter was settled. Of course, Nozomu still had reservations.

“That’s just because they’re older than you,” Nozomu rebutted.

“No, Sigurd, Saya, and Clea would undoubtedly forsake me as well.” Saya was Ingrid’s daughter, and Clea was Albertina’s. Though both were still young girls, they’d already displayed talent, clearly inherited from their mothers, so impressive that many highly anticipated seeing where the future would take them. “Simply put, I don’t have the ability to keep our brothers and sisters together. Perhaps my rule would even culminate in a bloodbath between us all. You’re the only one who can unite us, Nozomu.”

“That’s right. It has to be you, Big Brother.” Rungr agreed. Nozomu glanced over at Wiz, but she too was nodding in approval.

“That can’t be...can it?” Apparently the only one unable to acknowledge it, Nozomu asked doubtfully.

“Yes, it can. And it is,” Arness replied matter-of-factly. “Sure, you may be pretty average overall, but that just makes us want to help you more. It’s like, ‘if I don’t stick with this guy, he might get into trouble,’ or something like that.”

“Oh yeah, that totally makes me feel better,” Nozomu said sarcastically. In fact, it made him wonder if deep down, his siblings actually thought he was unreliable, or that he couldn’t be trusted. Those thoughts depressed him even further.



“Hm? That was supposed to be an honest compliment, though,” Arness replied.

“What part of that is a compliment?!” Nozomu yelled.

“In the end, it doesn’t really matter how capable a king is on his own. Try as one might, it’s impossible to rule over an entire nation by oneself. A king’s true strength is the ability to draw others to his side. Having a personality that makes them want to aid you, to serve you. That’s indispensable for a king,” Arness explained.

“Hmph, now that you mention it...” Logically, it made sense. But he still couldn’t acknowledge it—no, in truth, he simply didn’t want to admit it. He wanted to be the type of ruler that could protect everyone, not one that needed protecting. He wanted to be like his father Suoh Yuuto.

“What’s more,” Arness continued, “strong and powerful rulers tend to fail to understand the feelings of the weak. But you, my brother, are average just like them, so you’ll always be in tune with the people and understand what they want. What better quality could a leader need?”

“Arness, you should really work on choosing your words more carefully,” Rungr said with a sigh. “How do you think Big Brother feels when you call him ‘average’ and ‘weak’? You really don’t understand the nuances of the heart at all.”

Arness pouted. “I was just trying to explain my reasoning...”

“Be that as it may, you constantly overthink things just like you have now, and you fail to notice who you hurt as a result,” Rungr explained. “The reason we want to help him is much simpler. It’s because he’s a good, gentle person, and we all want to see him succeed. Wait, Big Brother? What’s that face for?”

“Because you just touched on another hangup I have,” Nozomu said with a strained smile. People only called you a “good, gentle person” when you had no other merits worth mentioning. He could recall many times he’d seen his father curse his own generous nature, so he knew it wasn’t a desirable trait for a king to possess.

“Strength and weakness are two sides of the same coin, Brother Nozomu. You fail to recognize the talents you possess,” Wiz said with an exasperated sigh. To Nozomu, it just sounded like she was calling him an idiot. But when he thought about it, maybe she was right. What if strength and weakness really were two

sides of the same coin, and he'd avoided flipping the coin over until now because he hated the idea of being weak?

What if he'd tried so desperately to gain something he lacked, that he'd failed to realize it was right by his side all along? If so, he was hopeless. Truly beyond redemption. All that effort he'd put in...was for nothing?

"So what, you're saying my talent is...my likability?" He couldn't imagine anything lamer. If he really did possess such a talent, he wanted to excise it as soon as possible.

"Precisely. At the very least, it's a talent I'll never be able to possess in my lifetime," Arness said.

"Yeah, the rest of us are all too realistic. No one's as unconditionally kind as you are," Rungr added.

"Tch, you're making fun of me after all!" Nozomu spat, clicking his tongue in irritation. Annoyed though he was by their comments, it did make him realize something. He'd always admired his younger brothers' ability to remain calm in any situation, but because of that he'd been blind to the truth—the reason they were so good at seeing the bigger picture was because they lacked empathy. Looking back, it was almost as if they always drew a line between themselves and others. That was likely the truth of the matter.

"Basically, you're a lot like Liu Bang, Brother Nozomu," Wiz said with a self-satisfied look on her face. He'd heard the name Liu Bang several times from his father's stories, which drew on his extensive knowledge of military history. He was apparently a legend who'd founded the Han Dynasty in China. Though he was, by all accounts, nothing special as a soldier or commander, he possessed impressive charisma, which gained him loyal, capable retainers who ended up becoming his greatest strength. He would make great use of his retainers' skills to eventually become emperor. Honestly, Nozomu would much rather be like Liu Bang's rival Xiang Yu, who he'd admired in his youth. However, life didn't always turn out the way one wanted.

"All right, all right, I get it. In other words, my role is to keep my crazy brothers and sisters in line, right?" He didn't know the first thing about managing something as large as an entire nation, but he felt he could at least

manage his siblings. All of them were quite fond of him, and as long as he wasn't outrageous with his demands, they listened to him. He'd even served as a mediator several times when things got heated between them. Perhaps he wasn't someone who drew others to him like his father, but he was good at managing relationships between people.

In that case, what he needed to do was fully acknowledge his own powerlessness, delegate his siblings and supporters to the right departments, and without feeling ashamed, lean on their support by *leveraging* their experiences and talents.

"Arness, let's go with your earlier plan. I'll take responsibility for whatever happens." Without a shred of hesitation or doubt, Nozomu made his decision. He'd given up on trying to shine. He didn't have the talent to begin with. But he could at least be responsible for his own actions. On that point, he refused to waver. One could call it his final vestige of stubbornness. What he didn't realize, however, was that the resolve to take responsibility was one of the things people desired in a leader most of all.

"Hmph, cowards, the lot of them," Babel muttered, glaring in the enemy encampment's direction. The war god Suoh Yuuto possessed enigmatic technology, so he'd assumed that his son would also outfit his troops with advanced weaponry. Wary of that outcome, he'd equipped a cavalry unit with compound bows to see how the enemy would fight back. That way even if the enemy had some ace up their sleeve, by keeping their distance and firing from long range only, he could keep his own troops' casualties to a minimum.

"They didn't try anything. They had no plan. Meaning, they don't have access to the knowledge from the land beyond the heavens after all...?" Suoh Yuuto had declared that the war god would rain down divine punishment upon them if anyone tried to unseal the forbidden knowledge from that land, and in fact, ever since the battle of Tarshish, that technology had been prohibited. In a move uncharacteristic of the normally lenient Yuuto, he'd been incredibly strict on the matter, declaring his word as absolute and even threatening to severely punish those who defied him. In that case, perhaps he'd been just as strict on his son and wouldn't let him use the technology either.

“Well, it’s too soon to determine that, though.” He also couldn’t discount the possibility that this was all a trap to throw him off guard. At this point, the wisest course of action would be to observe their movements for a while longer, using the cavalry unit to keep them at bay. If after several days they still continued to hide in their shell and endure, it’d be safe then to say they had nothing up their sleeve, at which point they’d use the phalanx formation to wipe them all out in one go.

At least, that had been Babel’s plan. But then...

“Report, Your Majesty! The rebel army has begun to march and is headed this way!”

“Oh?” Hearing his scout’s report, Babel was slightly astonished. *“Impressive,”* he thought. The cavalry unit had been active all day and was rather worn out. They wouldn’t be able to mobilize immediately. The enemy had likely realized that fact and was taking advantage of it. “What of their spears?!” he shouted.

“Their spears, Your Majesty?”

“I’m asking, are they as long as ours?!”

“Ah, no. Normal length, your average, run-of-the-mill spears.”

“Is that so?!” Babel roared. A diabolical grin crept across his face, wide enough to reveal his molars. That settled it, then. The enemy was unable to use weaponry or knowledge from the land beyond the heavens. “Then they don’t even qualify to be our enemies,” he sneered.

He’d given Nozomu a number of introductory lessons on swordsmanship, so he knew Nozomu had absolutely no talent for swordplay. Through that correspondence, he’d also spoken with him on a number of occasions, and he didn’t possess that particular brand of eccentricity associated with those who were unusually gifted in one particular area. Nozomu was normal—balanced, in fact. For that exact reason, he wasn’t a threat.

“Hm, I’ll bet they have units hidden in the forest, ready to ambush us from either side when we get near.” Babel saw right through Arness’s plan in an instant. He was the current reginarch of the Steel Clan, so he knew the terrain of this area well. The moment he’d heard that the enemy had made camp here,

he'd figured they meant to ambush him. Arness and Sigurd might've had a talent for strategy, but compared to the reginarch Babel, they were still greenhorns. Babel not only had experience, but talent and wealth on his side. For him, the battlefield was like his own backyard.

"Cavalrymen, continue to recuperate but stay on your guard for an ambush from the right side of the forest. As for my two-thousand-man phalanx, Dogos Unit, stay alert on your left side!" He fired off orders as quickly as one would fire a volley of arrows.

To initiate the phalanx formation, soldiers had to hold their shields in their left hand, which left them exposed to attacks from the right. Therefore, Babel had the strongest unit at his disposal, his cavalry regiment, guarding the right side. With that, preparations were complete. Everything was perfect.

"All right, sheltered prince, you've been doted on for far too long. Time for someone to show you how the world really works!" Babel proclaimed.

"The phalanx formation, huh? He really is just using forbidden knowledge willy-nilly," Arness said.

"Seems like it," Nozomu agreed with a sharp nod. In contrast, they'd also equipped their soldiers with spears, but theirs were of normal length, in accordance with the technology available to them in the current era. If both sides pitted their units head-to-head against each other, it was obvious who would win.

"You know, I think we have the advantage when it comes to reach," Arness said. While it was true that the enemy's spears were nearly double the length of their own, that made the enemy's side overly confident—leaving an opening. "Sure, we can't win by simply thrusting our spears forward. However, *throwing* them is a different thing altogether."

As if on cue, Babel's forces came into view.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!

Spears from Nozomu's army flew like projectiles toward Babel's men, one after another. No matter how long the enemy's spears were, they couldn't

reach as far as the thrown spears could. Furthermore, because the enemy's spears were that much longer, they were unable to throw them at Nozomu's army in retaliation. That difference had been taken into account when formulating this plan.

"Guh!"

"Ugh!"

"Sh-Shields! Raise your shields!" Shouts of confusion and panic began to arise from Babel's men. Yuuto had never needed to utilize throwing spears since he'd already used modern technology to improve arrows to a level far beyond anything known to the people of this time, but in this current era, throwing spears were an incredibly powerful weapon, and quite advanced in their own right.

Spears were distinctly heavier than arrows. However, that meant they had all the more force behind them. The average arrow could be blocked by a shield, but a throwing spear could easily penetrate a shield's defenses.

One after another, the spears pierced through the enemy's shields. While they didn't go on to pierce through the enemy soldiers' abdomens, each weighed several kilograms, and the added weight of the long spears made the shields markedly heavier and harder to raise. It wasn't difficult to imagine the terror a soldier would feel if they were suddenly hit with a weight that effectively rendered them immobile the moment they engaged their enemy on the battlefield. In no time at all, the phalanx fell into a panic.

"All units, draw your swords and charge!" As if waiting for this exact moment, Nozomu's voice rang out. Hearing his orders, Nozomu's soldiers bellowed with renewed vigor. Just moments ago, they'd been subjected to an endless rainstorm of arrows. It was now time to pay the enemy back for that disgrace in full as they charged forward.

"Gyaaah!"

"Ugahhh!"

"Guhhh!"

Screams arose from Babel's camp. No clashing of steel could be heard—it was

a one-sided sweep. That was just how frazzled Babel's soldiers had become.

"Looks like your plan went off without a hitch, Arness!" With a big grin, Nozomu turned to face his younger brother. First, they'd schemed to render the enemy's shields useless with the spears, then rush in with swords when the enemy started to panic.

When he'd first heard the plan Arness had proposed, Nozomu was honestly doubtful. Spears were the predominant weapon on the battlefield, so deliberately throwing them away and forfeiting that advantage was something only a madman would suggest. However, if they were going to lose to longer spears anyway it didn't matter, so Nozomu decided to adopt the plan in the end.

And it had paid off in spades.

"Out of all of us, you've definitely inherited the most from dad. No doubt about that," Nozomu said. He wasn't cracking a joke—he truly did think that. And it was true—if Yuuto had been here to see it, he likely would've been beside himself with surprise. This particular tactic was the very same that the Roman Empire had used against the Grecian Army's phalanx formation. Without realizing it, Arness had managed to formulate a strategy that wouldn't see its first use for another thousand years.

"The front lines are crumbling! At this rate..."

"I am well aware!" Babel snapped at his scout before he could finish his report. He'd never expected in a million years that the enemy would discard their spears, nor had he ever dreamed such a thing would actually be an effective counter against the phalanx.

"Damn it! They pulled one over on me this time," Babel spat hatefully. He was sure Nozomu had learned the tactic from his father Suoh Yuuto.

The front lines were already in complete disarray, overrun with ally and enemy alike. Their spears would be useless here, now merely a nuisance due to their ridiculous length. The enemy's swords had the advantage in a close-range battle. If nothing changed, the confusion and chaos could spread to the entire army. If that happened, this battle would be over.

“Guess it’s up to me to finish this, then. You there! Bring me my steed!” Once his lackey had done as he commanded, Babel mounted his personal horse and headed for the front lines himself. He was an Einherjar who’d overcome countless battles, undisputedly the legendary warrior of this era. Naturally, he was well-versed in the flow of battle. He knew that if he didn’t act now, he would lose—but at the same time, he was supremely confident he could turn the tide of this war.

“Hyah!”

“Gaah?!”

No sooner than he had arrived on the first lines, he’d already cut down his first enemy.

“Men! Your reginarch has arrived!” His roar was like thunder. One of the most important qualities for a commander to have was a voice that carried, and Babel’s was clear even amid the tumult of the battlefield. Just like Yuuto before him, he had that trait.

“Oh, King Babel, you’re here!”

“His Majesty has arrived!”

The soldiers began to rejoice. The people may not have been too fond of him, but he was well-loved by his own troops. That was because he had strength—both as an individual and as a commander. The troops knew that if they trusted in him, they would make it back home safely to their families. Babel possessed the charisma to make them believe that under him, they’d be invincible.

“If your shields can no longer serve their purpose, discard them! Once the enemy gets in range, trade those spears for swords and fight back!” Hearing Babel’s words, the soldiers’ faces lit up with hope, and they did as they were told. It didn’t change the fact that they were currently at a disadvantage, but it would buy them a bit of time, at least.

“All troops with their shields still intact, form a defensive line! That throwing spear trick won’t work on us twice!” His voice boomed with confidence and vigor. Moreover, it was the right call. The only ones who’d had their shields compromised were the troops who’d been on the frontmost line. The soldiers

behind them were unaffected—physically, at least. The unrest the front line suffered had certainly spread to the lines behind them as well. However, thinking about it rationally, the enemy only had swords of normal length, and they still had their long spears. In terms of reach, they still had the upper hand.

"Now, warriors of Steel, it's do or die! Muster up all your courage and fighting spirit, and live to fight another day!"

The troops shouted back their approval—their spirits reignited—and proceeded little by little to claw their way up from their disadvantageous position until they finally began to push back against Nozomu's army once more.

"I never would've imagined they could recover from that... He's really on a whole different level." Nozomu bit his lip in vexation. Babel was strong. That was no new discovery for him. He knew that Babel had been placed under Jörgen's supervision and hand-selected by Yuuto himself as the one to succeed him, after all, so how could he not be? Even if he hadn't inherited Yuuto's ideals, it didn't change the fact that he possessed monstrous strength.

"Yeah, I thought that would be enough, honestly." Arness also wore a bitter expression. *"If even Arness is showing a sour face, the situation must be dire,"* Nozomu thought.

"But it doesn't change the fact that this is our chance. Let's end this," Nozomu stated confidently.

"Good call," Arness replied. "I daresay there's no better opportunity than right now. I'll send word to Sigurd and Haugspori."

"Hell yeah! Sound the war horn!" Nozomu yelled excitedly.

Moments later, the booming cry of their war horn resounded throughout the battlefield.

"All right! Finally, my time to shine!" In the forest a ways away from Nozomu's location, Sigurd gave a vicious, yet elated, grin. Perhaps as a result of his mother Fagrahvél's rune, he'd been strangely fond of calls to arms ever since he was a child. "Sigurd Unit, time to move! Let's kick the enemy to the

curb in one fell swoop!” With that shout, Sigurd’s unit charged forward. They were already aware of the enemy’s phalanx formation—as well as its weakness. If they attacked from the side the formation would crumble. Sigurd was grateful from the bottom of his heart that his older brother had enough faith in him to give him such a critical role. After all, stuff like this was all he was good for.

“Well, not like it’ll be easy, though.” A daring grin crossed Sigurd’s face as the enemy came into view. It was the cavalry unit that had given Nozomu’s main force so much grief in their first battle. Sigurd wasn’t worried in the slightest though. He had a counterplan. To be specific, something they had already prepared beforehand had ended up becoming their counterplan.

Sigurd let loose a bellowing roar from deep within his chest. He sensed several distant enemy presences flinch.

They weren’t allowed to use anything that wasn’t from this era. That was Yuuto’s ironclad rule. However, that meant that everything already from this era was fair game. Elephants, for instance, were easily obtainable within the Orient. There was nothing saying they couldn’t use them.

“Ha ha ha! Kick it all to the curb! Trample them! Mow them down!” Sigurd howled maniacally. Of course, they couldn’t procure very many—only five. But the tremendous presence the gigantic animals brought to the table was incredibly effective nonetheless. The horses coming toward them immediately balked, refusing to move any further despite the urging of their riders. Some even threw their riders off and escaped in the opposite direction.

“Hell yeah! Now, my comrades, let us head for the enemy’s main unit and...whoa?!” The elephants charged forward—in the wrong direction—before Sigurd could finish. It seemed they still needed some more training, which made sense considering he’d had to rush it, but the elephants refused to do his bidding. It was just as he’d suspected—this wouldn’t be as easy as it seemed. Despite that, the enemy’s cavalry unit had been consumed by panic by the sheer presence of the mighty beasts. This was the best opportunity he’d get. He had to act now.

“Guess there’s nothing for it! Looks like it’s up to Sigurd Unit to cut ’em all down!” Unsheathing his sword, Sigurd rushed into the fray. His ability to adapt

to any and all setbacks and instantly make appropriate decisions was his greatest strength as a commander.

The instinct he'd inherited from his father and mother told him that this was the decisive moment between defeat and victory. This was where he was supposed to end it. He didn't have to think about it—he just knew. His body and heart became fired up, the flames more intense than they'd ever been in his life. Power surged from his core and spread to every inch of his body.

"Outta the way, outta the way, outta the way!" He charged forth like a rocket, cutting down every enemy along his path until his target came into view. His appearance hadn't changed at all from when Sigurd was a child, so he recognized him immediately.

"Babel the Usurper! Your head is mine!" Sigurd yelled.

"Who—? Dammit, Fagrahvél's kid?!" Apparently, Babel had also identified Sigurd in an instant. Sigurd's chest swelled with anticipation. He'd always wanted to go all-out against this man, ever since he was young, and now he would have his chance. With a beastly roar, Sigurd brought down his sword on top of Babel.

Ting! The high-pitched metallic clash of two swords rang out.

“Raaaghhh!” Sigurd swung his sword furiously—like a wild beast slashing with its claws.

“Urgh!” His attacks were ferocious enough to immediately put Babel on the defensive. Considering how levelheaded Sigurd’s father and mother, Yuuto and Fagrahvél, typically were, Babel hadn’t expected Sigurd to have such a violent streak.

“No, actually, it makes sense.” Babel revised his thinking. Yuuto could certainly be relentless and unforgiving when he needed to be, and Fagrahvél even possessed a rune that brought out the animalistic nature in people. When he considered that, it was actually rather likely that this aggressiveness did come from his parents.

“Haaah!”

“Ungh!”

Sigurd delivered a heavy blow that left Babel’s hands numb from the impact. The boy was only supposed to be around fifteen or sixteen, and his body clearly still had room to grow, so where was all that power coming from?

“He’s tough,” Babel thought. Likely even tougher than Babel had been when *he’d* been sixteen. Sigurd wasn’t even an Einherjar, so his ceiling for growth should have been much lower than Babel’s. Sigurd must’ve trained relentlessly to bridge that gap with his own blood, sweat, and tears.

That didn’t upset Babel—on the contrary, it only improved his opinion of the boy. There was a certain type of strength and resilience that only those like him exuded.

“You’ve still got some growing up to do, kid.” With a loud clang, Babel parried Sigurd’s oncoming attack. Babel’s decision to take up a defensive stance hadn’t been made thoughtlessly. He’d been carefully observing Sigurd’s techniques, his movements the whole time. The boy’s swings were fast and powerful but didn’t have much more besides. Given his young age, it was to be expected, but he lacked finesse. At Sigurd’s current level, he was simply no match for Babel.

“My turn,” Babel said with a smirk. He promptly unleashed his own flurry of strikes.

“Rgh?! Nggggghh!” In no time at all the tables had been turned. Sigurd was just barely managing to maintain a defensive stance against Babel’s onslaught.

“What’s wrong, kid? Where’d all that bravado go, huh?!” With each swing, he pressured Sigurd further and further, even throwing in a taunt for good measure. Sigurd wasn’t weak by any means—in fact, he was far stronger than most boys his age. That on its own wasn’t enough, however. Babel had undergone years of Sigrún’s harsh training and stood on countless battlefields. He’d overcome all of that and still remained in one piece Put simply, he had practically a lifetime of experience on the boy.

“Hiyaaah!” Babel swung with all his might. The impact sent Sigurd’s sword off-kilter. Then, reversing the trajectory of his sword, he cut a quick, powerful slash across the boy’s unguarded abdomen. It was a fatal blow—or so he thought.

“What?!” Babel’s eyes went wide with astonishment when he saw what had actually occurred. Sigurd had stopped Babel’s attack mid-swing—he’d used his knee and elbow to clamp down on either side of the sword, perfectly trapping it between them. Babel couldn’t believe his eyes—no one in their right mind would even attempt something so outlandish in training, let alone actual combat.

“Haah!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Sigurd released the sword and brought his own sword down on top of Babel.

“Rgh!” Babel managed to evade, but his shock at Sigurd’s feat ended up delaying his reaction time. He felt a searing heat down his face, but he could tell it was a shallow cut—not fatal by any means. Kicking off the ground, he leaped backward, gaining distance from his opponent so he could check the wound. Fortunately, it seemed to run from between his eyebrows to the top of his lips —in other words, away from his eyes. That meant there was no danger of blood seeping into his vision and hampering his ability to fight.

“Huff...huff... You gave me a scare there, kid,” Babel said. It was no lie. In fact, he couldn’t recall ever being so stricken with terror in his entire life. The fear of his potential imminent death was one thing, but it was Sigurd’s extraordinary understanding of the flow of battle that really made him shudder. Normally the ploy Sigurd had used to trap his sword wouldn’t even have a one-in-ten chance

of succeeding, yet he'd managed to execute it perfectly on his first attempt. That level of concentration and good fortune could only be possessed by someone blessed by a god of war. He may have been a young kid still wet behind the ears, but he sent chills down Babel's spine nonetheless.

"But you paid a high price for that move, didn't you?" A vicious grin stretched across Babel's lips. This should've been Sigurd's chance, but not only had he neglected to properly follow up on his ambitious gambit, he stood rooted to the spot, a pained expression on his face.

"You can't fight with that knee or elbow anymore," Babel said with a grin. Sigurd's limbs had received the full brunt of a steel sword at mid-swing—there was no way he'd be in any condition to continue. Most likely the bones in his arm and leg were broken, or at the very least, fractured. He'd have difficulty moving around or even standing. In other words, he was no longer a threat.

"Seems like I've lost this one," Sigurd muttered.

"That's right, kid. You lose—or should I say, all of you lose." There wasn't a doubt in Babel's mind that the ambush waiting in the forest had been Nozomu's ultimate trump card. With that shut down, there was nothing stopping Babel from using his superior numbers to crush the rest of Nozomu's rebellion. The moment Sigurd lost, Babel had won this war.

"Heh... I wonder about that. The way I see it, now that we have *her* on our side, there's no way you can win," Sigurd responded, practically bursting with confidence.

"Her...?" Babel frowned in suspicion. The moment he did, an unpleasant chill raced down his spine. Feeling an intense, otherworldly presence at his back, as though a god—or perhaps a demon—had manifested behind him, he turned around in a panic.

"If you end up losing to this bunch after coming this far, you might as well go back home and redo your training from scratch," the presence said, her long black hair fluttering in the wind. She was so beautiful that at a glance she seemed out of place on the battlefield, but Babel was too focused on her eyes to notice her looks. Bewitching runes gleamed in both of those eyes. A peerless warrior with the power to trample anything and everything underfoot stood

before him.

“The tyrant Babel has been captured! Victory is ours! Glory to the divine emperor!”

“Glory to the divine emperor!” Spirited cheers arose from the battlefield in unison. Somehow, they’d managed to eke out a victory. If Nozomu had to guess, Homura had likely done the honors. It wasn’t that he didn’t have faith in Sigurd’s abilities—he was without a doubt the most skilled out of his siblings—but capturing an Einherjar alive was likely beyond his means.

“I suppose using our last-ditch insurance was the right call after all. With any luck, Sigurd’s managed to not kick the bucket so we can call this a complete victory,” Arness said breezily.

“Don’t say something so ominous,” Nozomu said with a shudder. He knew Sigurd could be hot-headed. Heck, even during their prebattle strategy meeting, Sigurd had been unrelenting in wanting to face off against Babel one-on-one. He could only pray that Sigurd’s injuries hadn’t been too severe.

“Come to think of it, how’d you even manage to get Big Sis Homura to cooperate in the first place, considering how fickle she can be?” Nozomu asked, rather belatedly. Back then his mind had been so preoccupied with the battle in front of him that he hadn’t paid it any mind, but now that he had room to breathe he found himself curious.

Put succinctly, Oda Homura was a free spirit. She didn’t even count herself as one of Yuuto’s subordinates; she was treated more like a special guest. In other words, even Yuuto had no control over her. She was an audacious, intrepid woman who marched to the beat of her own drum.

“I didn’t really have to do anything. It was simple—considering her weak points are Big Sis Ephy and Sinmara,” Arness explained.

“Ah...” Now that he thought about it, that was true. Regardless of how self-centered and haughty she was, there were times when she begrudgingly ended up doing what Ephelia asked of her. When Nozomu had become curious and asked her why, she’d replied that she’d rather do Ephy’s bidding than have her friend cry on her.

“Get Ephy worried enough about her husband to come crying to Homura for help and bingo, she’s on our side,” Arness continued.

“I wouldn’t say that in front of Big Sis Homura if I were you,” Nozomu warned.



“I’d never. I actually value my life.” Arness forced a laugh. Even the perpetually coolheaded, dauntless tactician Arness trembled in fear when it came to Homura, it seemed.

“What we really need to worry about, though, is dad. He’s not gonna be happy that we had Big Sis Homura help.” Nozomu groaned, his expression grim. Homura’s very existence could be considered foul play. Whichever side she decided to join was basically guaranteed an automatic win. Nozomu seriously doubted his father would acknowledge his victory and succession to reginarch if he’d used her power to achieve it.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. He only forbade the use of knowledge from the land beyond the heavens, remember?” Arness replied as he flashed a confident grin.

His response did nothing to ease Nozomu’s anxiety, however. “But he did forbid our moms from helping, and I can’t help but think that I didn’t really earn it,” he said, pursing his lips in dissatisfaction. It wasn’t that he regretted his decision. He would’ve lost miserably without Homura’s help, so he hadn’t been in a position to be choosy. But it did make him resent his own powerlessness.

“You’re overthinking this, man,” Rungr said airily, inserting himself into the conversation. “Father himself practically wrote the book on unfairness. What right does he have to scold his son for not playing fair?”

“For sure. Knowing him, he’d actually commend you for cleverly exploiting a loophole like that,” Arness said.

“Yep. Like I said, he’s a rotten cheater himself.”

“After all he’s done, it’d be the height of hypocrisy for him to blame anyone else for the choice we made.” Arness and Rungr took turns disparaging their father.

“Perhaps they have a point,” Nozomu thought. If the stories he’d heard from everyone about “Suoh-Yuuto” were anything to go by, then it was rather likely they’d get away with using Homura in the manner they had.

“That being said, if he does take you to task, I’m ready to dispute it.”

“Same here. I’ll fight for you, Big Bro,” Arness and Rungr each stated, the pair sporting confident grins.

“Me too.” Even Wiz gripped her fist tightly.

When he recalled how jealous he'd been of all of them, seeing their unwavering love and support made him deeply ashamed, but grateful beyond words. Flawed and incompetent as he was, his siblings not only believed in him but actively supported him, always toiling to boost his spirits. At first, he had thought he didn't have anything worth taking pride in, but he now saw that wasn't true. His beloved siblings—his greatest asset—had been his pride all along.

"Nozomu won, did he? That's a relief." When he learned of the outcome of the war from Kristina, Yuuto beamed. If Nozomu was to be king, he would need to inherit the throne without Yuuto's help. Yuuto had already made that abundantly clear to Nozomu. Yuuto was, after all, an irregular existence within this world—an outright anomaly. Relying on him wou never allow Nozomu to nurture the skills he'd require to rule as a great king. With that in mind, he'd forced himself not to get involved, but the truth was he'd been beside himself with worry.

"Hold on a second, Kris. You screwed up," Yuuto said. "Didn't you report that there were no signs of Babel using forbidden technology?" Stirrups, compound bows, and even the phalanx formation—none of them were ideas or inventions from this era. The fact that Babel had them in his possession was like a bolt from the blue for Yuuto. He'd sent his children out based on Kristina's report, convinced that they had more than enough chance to claim victory, but the color had drained from his face when he'd heard that Babel's army was much more formidable than previously assumed.

"I apologize for that. It seems the informants that I had ordered to infiltrate the Steel Clan were paid off by Babel to keep quiet. It was entirely my fault for not checking more thoroughly," Kristina explained.

"You need to be more careful. You're too focused on that niece of yours to do your job properly," Yuuto warned.

"...I know." She must have been aware of it, because, in a rare display of deference, Kristina hung her head. She was so taken with Yuuto and Albertina's daughter Clea that she'd been spending every moment of her free time by the child's side. If anything, "every moment" was a grand understatement, even—in

fact, she *made* time to see Clea, often shortening her own work hours by foisting her responsibilities onto her subordinates so she could secure more hours with her niece. Her infatuation with the child had been the reason for her slipup here. Yuuto had always thought of Kristina as one to prioritize her work above all else, but this gaffe of hers had shown that to be a naïve assumption.

That in itself, though, did make Yuuto rather glad on a personal level. For so long, her twin sister Albertina had been the sole recipient of her interest and affection. Yuuto had always found that a bit abnormal and lonesome. Even if it was just her niece, it warmed Yuuto's heart to see her finally show affection toward someone else.

"They ended up trouncing Babel even with all the cheating he did, huh? I guess the kids are all right after all. I can't treat them like children anymore, it seems," Yuuto said.

"They did end up relying on Homura to bring the battle to an end, however," Kristina pointed out.

"That, too, was only achievable with the strength Nozomu possesses," Yuuto replied, a boastful grin playing on his lips. At a glance, Nozomu didn't have any special talents. He wasn't an idiot by any means, but he was average across the board. However, he did have a certain charm to him—an amiability that made him easy to get along with and in turn, drew others to his side. A winsomeness that made everyone want to support him, to be his strength. To Yuuto, *that* was the most necessary quality of a king. It was the quality that Nozomu's stepmother Sigrdrífa had possessed. Even if Nozomu and Sigrdrífa weren't blood-related, that was something they shared.

Nozomu had a good heart, and he was gentle and sincere. With the conclusion of this battle, Yuuto now had proof that with Nozomu's siblings at his side, he would be an exemplary reginarch.

"Now then, I know I may be sticking my nose in where I'm not wanted, but we've still got one tiny little thing on the agenda. We need to show a certain someone just how terrifying the consequences are for using forbidden knowledge from the land beyond the heavens," Yuuto said menacingly.

That very day, a cluster of boulders descended from the sky upon Tarshish

without warning, pulverizing Babel's statues and unfinished ziggurats into rubble. The rumor among the populace was that it was divine punishment for Babel attempting to use the knowledge of the gods to reach and invade the domain of heaven itself.

Epilogue

“Son, I’ve decided to take a trip. I probably won’t be back for a few years.”

“What?” Yuuto’s sudden announcement made Nozomu look up from the stacks of papers on his desk and stare at his father blankly. A year had passed since Nozomu had taken Tarshish back from Babel. Under his rule, things were proceeding smoothly for the most part, no doubt in part due to Arness and Rungr’s exemplary guidance.

“As carefree as ever, huh? Here I am up to my eyeballs in documents concerning the reform of our nation, and you’re going on an extended vacation,” Nozomu said with a pout. He was also apparently extremely busy.

“That’s the burden you chose to bear,” Yuuto said with a wry grin. Anyone who willingly chose to bear that level of responsibility, even if they happened to be his own son, had to be nuts. But in the end, he was grateful for it, because Nozomu’s decision had freed Yuuto up to make his own. “But it’s a weight off my shoulders, at least. Now I can finally go back to Japan without any worry.”

All this time, Yuuto had longed to return home. Of course, twenty-first-century Japan wouldn’t be waiting for him when he got there—it would be a completely unfamiliar, primitive Japan that didn’t resemble his home country in the least. Even so, he still wanted to return all the same. To Yuuto, that was his birthplace—his home.

He’d been apprehensive to leave, however. There was no guarantee Babel wasn’t going to use modern technology. In fact, Babel had been using it without Yuuto even noticing, so it wouldn’t have made much difference, but he’d still considered it his duty to put a stop to any further attempts by Babel to do so. For that reason, he couldn’t leave the Mediterranean. Having seen Nozomu and his siblings’ aptitude for rulership, he no longer had cause for concern. He had faith in his sons and daughters that they wouldn’t use any knowledge from the modern world. He had no more regrets, no anxieties. He could rest easy as he departed this land.

“Japan, huh? That’s to the far east, right?”

“Yep. I haven’t seen what the terrain’s like over there, but I think I might like to stay there for a while if it’s feasible.”

There was something else that had been on his mind all this time. Mitsuki possessed twin runes, and the twin runes of the divine emperor could be passed on to their descendants. Considering that, the twin runes Rífa had entrusted to Yuuto had likely been passed on continuously throughout the generations, eventually coming to manifest within Mitsuki. For that reason also, it was imperative that he travel back to Japan and enshrine the divine mirror that had whisked him away to Yggdrasil in the first place. Once he did so, the preparations for summoning Yuuto to Yggdrasil 3,500 years later would be complete.

“I see. Well, you know, home is where the heart is, and all that...” Nozomu looked a bit forlorn as he spoke. He probably wanted to remain by his father’s side if at all possible but was prioritizing respecting his father’s wishes. Yuuto was reminded again of what a wonderful son he had.

“Well, this isn’t goodbye or anything. I’ll be back after a few years, so take care until then!”

“Sure thing. By the time you return, I’ll have Tarshish so prosperous and full of life that you won’t even recognize it!”

“Oh? Now that sounds like something to look forward to.” The two grinned daringly at each other and bumped fists. Yuuto recalled when Nozomu had been born. It had been over twenty years ago, but he could still remember it like it was yesterday. That infant was now before him; standing on his own two feet, a man grown. It made Yuuto all the more emotional just thinking about it.

“Well, it’s about time for me to leave. See ya, son.” Yuuto turned on his heel and exited Nozomu’s office. Several minutes later, he was boarding his ship. The Suez Canal wouldn’t exist yet, so his plan was to circle around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and enter Japan by way of India. It’d be a long trip, but he was looking forward to it all the same.

Half a year later of being at sea—

“Oh man, I know this coast! This is the coast of my childhood!” Disembarking

from the ship, Yuuto whooped and hollered at the familiar sight as if he were a kid again. Even 3,500 years earlier, it still looked the exact same as he remembered it. In modern times there had been a bridge connecting this island to the mainland, but there was no such thing here. Gone also were the buildings that had been visible from the coast. Even so, the geography itself was unchanged—it was just as it had been during Yuuto's childhood.

"Me too, me too! Wooow, I remember this place well! Over there, that's where my dad used to take me fishing!" Mitsuki's eyes sparkled with joy as she pointed to a nearby island.

"Tee hee, so this is Big Brother's homeland?" Felicia said with great interest, holding her hair down to keep it from fluttering in the wind. Her body proportions were just as perfect as when Yuuto first met her.

"I heard there is a hot spring here too, no? I'm very much looking forward to that," Sigrún said, brimming with anticipation. Once she'd left the front lines, she'd turned her focus to healing her injured arm. Through the course of going to the hot springs to soak her arm, she'd become a hot spring fanatic.

"But man, there's nothing here. Just a barren wasteland. Looks like I'm gonna have my work cut out for me," Ingrid said with a frown. As always, they would undoubtedly rely on her expertise and know-how going forward. She would have a tough road ahead.

"I hope we can get along well with the locals..." Linnea said, beset by worry. She was likely considering all sorts of possible outcomes and hardships they could encounter. That attention to detail was something Yuuto could always count on, and over the years she'd honed her skill even further. As long as she was by his side, Yuuto was certain everything would turn out all right.

"That seems like a tough job by yourself. Allow me to help," Fagrahvél offered. Once she'd been the Sword Clan patriarch, served as Sigrdrífa's loyal bodyguard, and had worn male clothing despite being quite the beauty in her own right, but now that she was a mother she exhibited much more womanly behavior.

"How can I say this... It's kind of a letdown," Kristina muttered unamusedly. Even though Yuuto had previously warned them that it would only consist of

undeveloped, primitive land in this era, it seemed that Kristina had still harbored high expectations for the land beyond the heavens.

“But the wind is so nice. I really like this place.” Albertina, on the other hand, was all smiles. It was thanks to her that they’d gotten here safely.

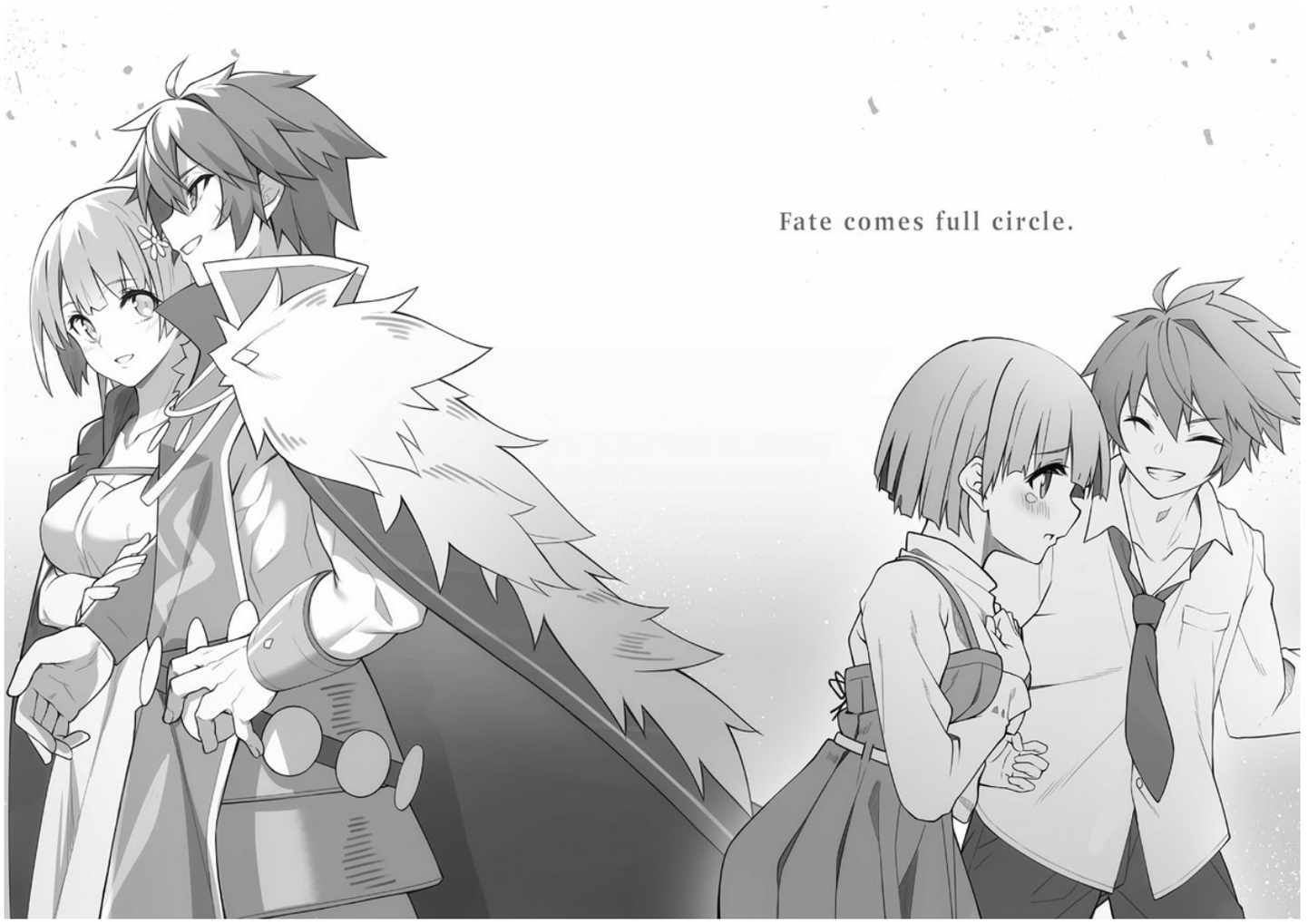
Truthfully, it wasn’t just because of Albertina. It was thanks to his other wives that were here with him, and most of all, those like Jörgen, Skáviðr, and Loptr who were not. Without their support, he never could have made it back here alive. He was grateful from the bottom of his heart to every single one of them. Therefore, he swore an oath to himself to make sure he fulfilled his final duty so he could meet them all again in the future. Under that oath, Yuuto and his wives built a small hermitage and cultivated a rice field, where he continued to live until he finally passed away at age eighty-five in his beloved Japan, surrounded by his children and grandchildren.

After his death, the place where his hermitage had been came to be known as Tsukimiya Shrine. Time passed, and then finally—

“Y-Yuu-kun, Yuu-kun, Yuu-kuuun! Let’s turn back!”

“Hey, hey, we’ve come this far. It’s too late for you to say something like that now.”

—Fate came full circle.


Fate comes full circle.

Afterword

It’s been a while!

With this, the final volume of *The Master of Ragnarok and Blesser of Einherjar* draws to a close. I’m the author, Seiichi Takayama. It’s so good to see you again, and I’m very sorry for having you wait so long for the conclusion. There were many reasons for the delay, but as I feel it wouldn’t be tactful for me to detail them here in the afterword of the final volume, I’ve decided to talk about the work itself instead. So, with that...

Whew! Finally, at long last, the story has reached its true end. I started building the framework for this tale in January 2013, meaning it’s taken ten years to get to this point. In fact, those last few lines of the epilogue had already been decided by the time I’d finished writing the very first volume. When I finally got to write those words in the actual story, it made me very emotional.

It’s crazy, though. It feels like it went by in a flash, but ten years really is a long time. My daughter, who was in her second year of elementary school when I started this work, is now a fully grown adult! It really makes you feel the passage of time. During that time, my work was made into an anime, and all sorts of other wonderful things happened. I was blessed with many great experiences. And I felt I grew as a person as well. To *The Master of Ragnarok*, I have nothing but gratitude.

Now then, since it’s all over, I would very much like to offer you, the readers, a deep dive into each of the main characters of this series.

Suoh Yuuto

The protagonist. He was a character that I designed to be most like me out of everyone in the series. His past experiences, worldview, value system, and way of thinking are all very similar to mine (of course, it goes without saying that there were also many exaggerations, so he’s still a different person), and as a result, that made him the easiest character to write out of the bunch.

This story is, at its core, a chronicle of Yuuto's growth, so by the end, he did end up quite overpowered, didn't he? (lol) But as the author, he is the character I'm the most emotionally attached to, and he's probably my favorite as well.

Felicia

Yuuto's right-hand woman. Even though she's supposed to be the main heroine and showed up on all the promotional materials, she ended up a bit less popular than I would've liked. Personally, she's my favorite out of all the heroines, so I have complicated feelings about that outcome.

As for her concept, the main heroine of my previous work *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki* didn't really have any notable abilities, which made the story extremely difficult for me to write. For Felicia, I wanted her to be able to do everything. I decided to make her Yuuto's adjutant because I figured under him, she'd have plenty of opportunities to display those skills.

Her personality was planned to be an "aloof, yet gentle older sister" character. It would seem, however, that this author apparently has difficulty writing aloof characters, so she became more grounded as the story progressed.

Sigrún

Yuuto's left-hand woman. Much like Felicia, she showed up on a lot of promotional materials. At first, she was the most popular character among readers, which was exactly what I'd counted on. Her past had already been hammered out by that point as well, but it wasn't until the latter half of the series that it ended up coming to light. Back then, I had been of the belief that flashback scenes ruined the pace of the story, so I simply didn't use them. Lately, however, I've come to understand that as long as it's short enough to not interrupt the flow of the narrative, a flashback scene interspersed with the main story every now and then can do wonders to add depth to a character. If only I'd realized that earlier.

Her concept was, in simple terms of parameters, "Strength: 95, Leadership: 80." The protagonist was supposed to be Yuuto, of course, so I had to let her struggle a bit in the beginning against foes like Yngvi (Volume 1 Final Boss - Strength: 100) and Steinþórr (Volume 2 Final Boss - Strength: 150), but she

displayed exponential growth throughout the story, didn't she?

She was meant to be a more typical tsundere, albeit with a rather large gap between her cold and warm sides. Her personality is also a lot like mine, so I recall her character being especially easy to write.

Mitsuki

The hidden heroine, more or less. Here's something interesting: when Yuuto was forced to make his decision in Volume 8, I actually planned for him to abandon Mitsuki. However, when it came down to it, I couldn't bear for Yuuto to make that choice, considering how devoted she was to him, and before I knew it I'd installed her as his legally wedded wife. A shocking turn of events, indeed!

Ability-wise, she's like an undercover Einherjar. In fact, I didn't get to touch on it in detail in the main story since there was no way for Yuuto to verify it at the time, but the reason Yuuto and Mitsuki were able to communicate with each other between the modern world and Yggdrasil was because of the power her runes held.

Her personality was meant to be that of the ideal wife: good at housework, energetic, and devoted. Someone who should've been just a typical everyday girl, but perhaps due to the influence of her past life, ended up surpassing even the author's expectations to become someone worthy of standing by her king's side.

Linnea

The main heroine of the anime version, some would say, heh. Ability-wise, she's meant to provide behind-the-scenes support to Yuuto, doing all the clerical work he can't do himself. The concept behind her personality? Honestly, I didn't really have one. I'm more or less infatuated by characters like Felicia and Sigrún, but after the first two volumes, I viewed Linnea as a guest character that I could insert whenever it was convenient.

But that was, in the end, probably for the better. As I said before, my current running theory is that the characters that are closest to me in personality become the most developed, so if I'd run with it she might have ended up having similar development, worldview, and thoughts as me. In that sense, she

would've just been a carbon copy of Yuuto. And in fact, when I finally got to see the anime for the first time and view my own work through an objective lens, I found myself thinking that Linnea really was the character that stood out the most in this work.

Ingrid

The sub-heroine whose efforts never bear fruit. Poor girl, ha ha. But, well, aren't those types of characters the cutest in the end? Maybe that's too mean.

At any rate, because the series concept was "use modern technology to become invincible in another world," I realized that the hero would need someone to create the tools he needed. Thus, Ingrid was born. Without her, it would've taken much, much longer to create the many overpowered tools Yuuto had up his sleeve, and the Wolf Clan would've been stuck in a rut. In fact, in terms of what she contributed, she's actually right up there with Yuuto as one of the Steel Clan's most valuable members.

Her personality concept was essentially someone with the worldview and casualness of a male, but is actually the girliest girl you've ever seen. This, too, is absolutely in line with the author's preferences, hah...

Kristina

One-note comic relief.

That had been my original plan for her, at least, so how did she get to be Yuuto's most trusted advisor?! Hah! How strange things can turn out!

Well, while it's true her cold demeanor isn't exactly to my personal tastes, it did make her very easy to write—especially in comparison to her younger sister Albertina. Her concept was basically, "She who controls the information, controls the world," so, of course, she ended up serving as Yuuto's intelligence gatherer. She also helped me out of a number of tight spots when it came to the story's logic, so for that, I'm incredibly grateful.

Albertina

Comic relief partner-in-crime to Kristina. Her ability concept was "anti-assassin assassin." For someone in Yuuto's position, assassins coming to take his life would be a given. With that in mind, I figured he'd need someone to deal

with those assassins, so I had Albertina fill that role. I didn't really end up making much use of that idea, though, did I?

Her personality was carefree, always optimistic, always happy. But as I wrote in the previous volume's afterword, this made her incredibly difficult to write. I could never find good places to fit her in. I think because I'm such a logical person, it's difficult for me to write about someone who throws logic to the wind. And that's a shame, because I really like her as a character, even if she does leave me with a lot of regrets.

Hildegard

redacted

Just kidding. Honestly, though, that's about as on-brand for Hildegard as this section of the deep dive could possibly be, so we'll just leave it at that as I appear to be running out of pages. So, with all that said and done...

I really am overcome with emotion right now. Somehow, we managed to make it to the end. Thank goodness. To all the editors that supported me, to everyone else who had a hand in the final product, to the illustrator Yukisan, and to the readers that have cheered me on the past ten years, this story would not have been finished without you all.

As for the new work I mentioned in the last volume, you shouldn't have to wait much longer. The manuscript is basically complete, and we're aiming for a release sometime this year. It's the story I mentioned last time detailing Skáviðr's new life after his reincarnation, and I'm personally very proud of how it turned out. It finally gives him the happiness he deserves, so fans of his should definitely check it out!

If possible, I'd love to be able to meet you all again in my next work. To my dear readers of *The Master of Ragnarok and Blesser of Einherjar*, thank you so much for your support over the years!

Yukisan's Afterword

Dear readers, this is the first time we've met during the afterword, but I am Yukisan, the illustrator for this series. This is the final volume, so even though I was turned down once, I begged them to let me include an afterword in this volume and was graciously given some pages to share my thoughts and feelings.

First off, I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the readers of *The Master of Ragnarok and Blesser of Einherjar* for sticking with us all the way to its conclusion. And, though it feels awful for me to have to say this at the very end of it all, I am truly sorry for having you all wait so long.

Due to personal circumstances, I was unable to devote my full attention and energy to the illustrations for a period of time, which then became a longer period of time, and an even longer one, and so on. For that reason, the past several volumes have featured a noticeable decrease in illustrations, greatly inconveniencing not only our beloved readers, but the editor, and Mr. Takayama as well. Recently I've finally gotten back to a place where I can draw again at full capacity, but I am truly ashamed to have kept our editor waiting so long in the meantime.

I truly love this work, and all the characters depicted in it. They struggle, make decisions, and even mess up at times, but they always move forward regardless, and I love stories like that. If you as a reader feel similarly about this work and love it as well, then as someone who had a hand in creating that feeling, I could ask for nothing more.

Lastly, to not only Mr. Takayama but everyone else involved in this project, I offer my sincerest thanks. I'm truly grateful to you all for supporting me over the ten years since I first debuted as an illustrator.

May we meet again on some other journey, perhaps.