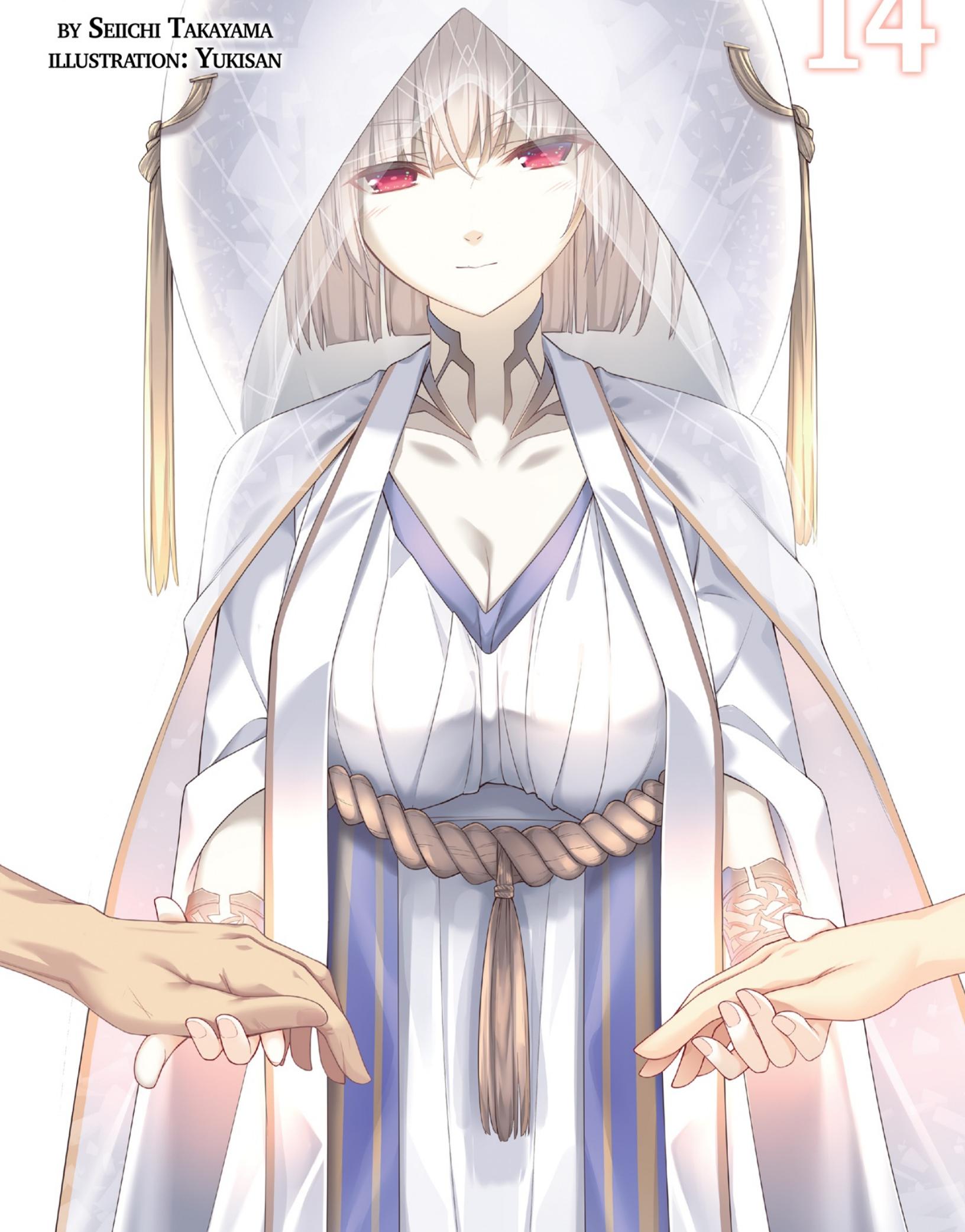


The Master of Ragnarok & Blessor of Einherjar

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA

ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

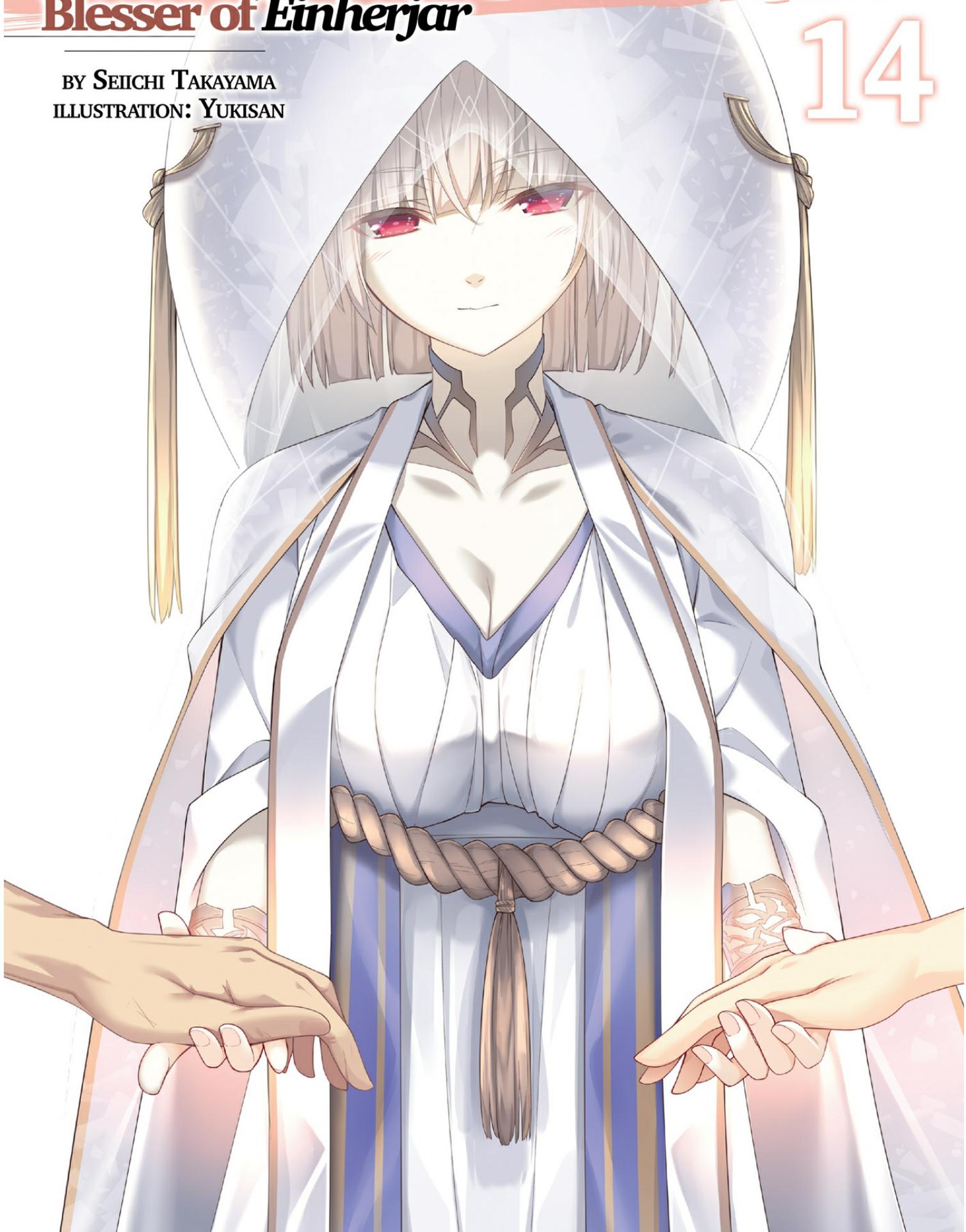
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14



"Will they really accept me, I wonder?"

Taking in some courage from Fagrahvél's presence next to her, Rífa opened the door to the room...



**"I don't want to die!
I don't want to die!"**

Rífa couldn't help but say those words. She had sworn she wouldn't say them. She had shoved them deep down and put a lid on them, with the intent of keeping them bottled up within her until she passed. Once the emotions had been unleashed, they just wouldn't stop. Everything she had bottled up inside came gushing out in a wild flood.

c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

ACT 6

EPILOGUE I

EPILOGUE II

AFTERWORD

Characters

Felicia

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

Sigrún

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

Yuuto Suoh

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

Linnea

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

Ingrid

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



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.



Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.



Sigdrifa

The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgaror Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.



Hveðrungr

An Einherjar with the rune Alpiófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.



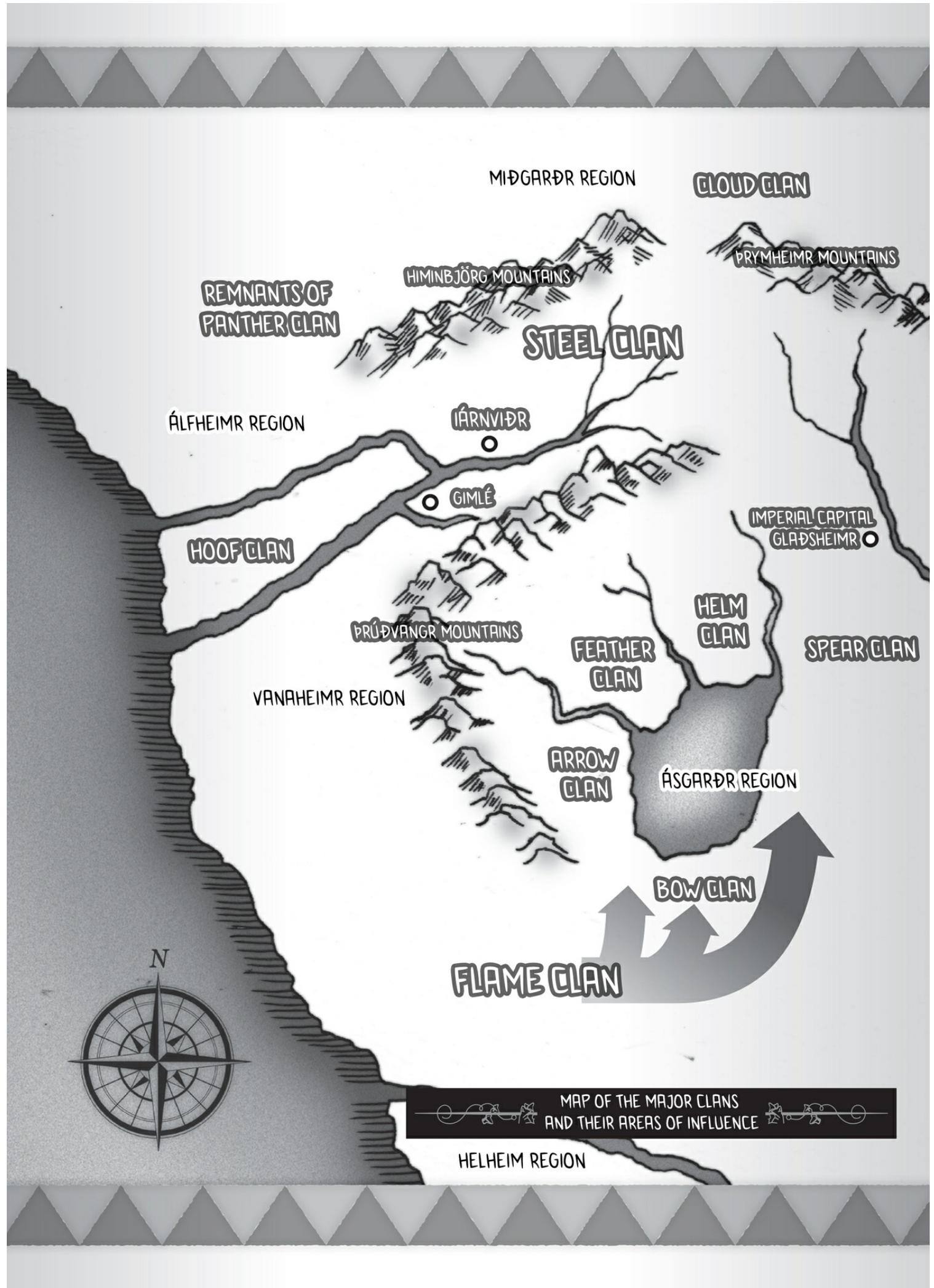
Oda Nobunaga

In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.

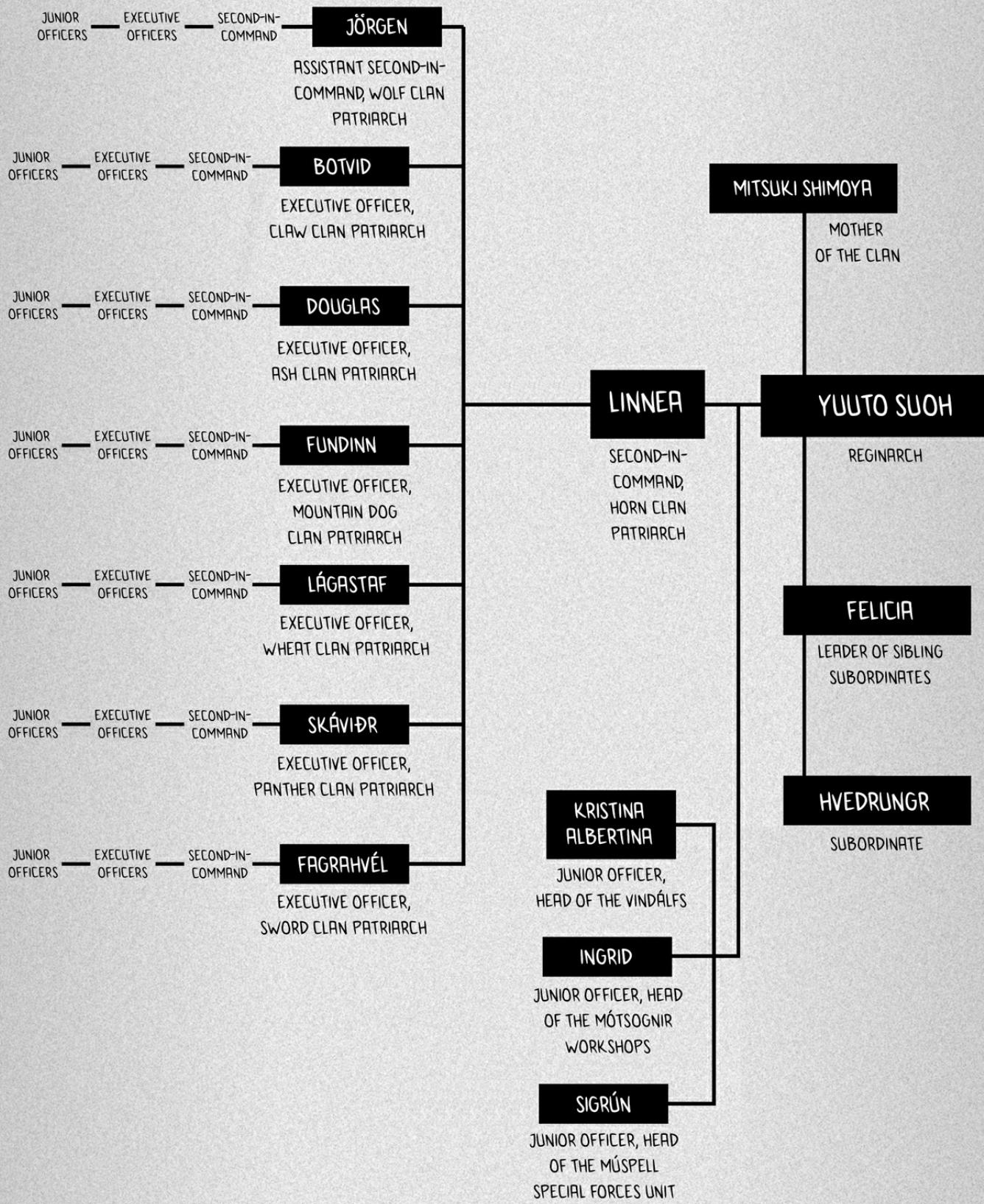


Fagrahvél

Patriarch of the Sword Clan who possesses the rune Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, and is Rifa's milk-sister.



HIERARCHY OF
THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

Sigrdrífa had been alone since she was a child.

She was the daughter of the **þjóðann**—the one granted dominion over the world by the gods themselves.

Not only that, she had been born with hair and skin so white that it was hardly an exaggeration to say they were as white as snow—an eerie appearance that frightened those that saw her. Combined with her fragile constitution, everyone around her had walked on eggshells in her presence.

Unfortunately for her, that included her parents and siblings.

The presence of Fagrahvél, her milk-sister, had made her life bearable, but Fagrahvél's serious personality meant she had been careful never to go beyond what was permitted of a loyal subject.

These things were probably why the memory of her short stay with the Wolf Clan was so precious to her.

Suoh-Yuuto was a fascinating young man. She had met a fair number of patriarchs from a wide range of regions, but most of them were only interested in her authority as **þjóðann**. They had little interest in Rífa as a person. While they treated her with outward respect, it was merely obligatory.

By comparison, Yuuto's manners had been coarse and his way of speaking far too casual. It seemed, at first, to be the height of disrespect. But his words were always sincere. She felt that he viewed her not as the vessel for the title of **þjóðann**, but as just plain Rífa. It was the first time in her life she'd been treated that way.

Fagrahvél had always treated her well, but there was a certain pity in her kindness.

She who was a figurehead, she who had a weak constitution, she who would be forced to marry a man she didn't want...

She knew Fagrahvél cared about her. She never took that for granted.

But at the same time, she couldn't help but wonder if her situation truly was that tragic, that she herself was that pathetic. She was often mired in that sense of self-pity.

The fact that Fagrahvél was talented—was the very image of a great woman—only served to deepen her sense of inferiority.

He was the only one who would view her as she was—interact with her almost as an equal. It was probably inevitable that she'd fall in love with him.

It is said that a bird, upon hatching, believes the first thing it sees to be its parent. Perhaps it was something similar to that.

She'd been imprinted to feel that he could be the only one for her. She wanted to be with him forever. She wanted to do anything she could for him. As a woman, she wanted to bear his child.

The only thing she regretted—

Was that she probably didn't have much time left.

ACT I

“Your Majesty!”

The door flew open with a bang, and Fagrahvél rushed into the room.

She was a handsome woman with sharp features. She was the patriarch of the Sword Clan where Yuuto and company were currently residing and was the milk-sister of Sigrdrífa, þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

Having heard that Rífa had regained consciousness, she had dropped everything to come to her side.

“A-Are you well?!”

“Ah, ’tis you, Fagrahvél. It’s been an age.”

Sigrdrífa smiled, her eyes narrowing into slits. That alone made tears well up in Fagrahvél’s eyes.

“A-Ah! That smile...”

Fagrahvél kneeled in place and took Rífa’s hand. They had known one another for as long as either of them could remember. There was just something Fagrahvél could see in her mannerisms.

“Hrmph, took you long enough. Sheesh, you really let that geezer pull the wool over your eyes.”

“Yes... On that matter, I can do nothing but offer my apologies...”

“It’s fine. After all, we were able to see one another again.”

Having said that, Rífa embraced Fagrahvél as she knelt before her.

Fagrahvél began to tremble.

“L-Lady Rífa... Sniff. Th-Thank the gods... Thank the gods you’re safe! Bwaaaah!”

Tears fell from Fagrahvél’s eyes, and she sobbed with such force it almost seemed as if she was having convulsions.

“H-Hey?! ...Oh dear.”

Rífa’s eyes initially widened in surprise at Fagrahvél’s reaction, but she soon smiled gently and softly patted Fagrahvél’s back.

“Mm... Such a troublesome big sister you are.”

“Ah?! L-Lady Rífa, what did you just say?!”

“Shush. I won’t say it a second time.”

“Sniff, sniff. For you to grant such an honor to one who has failed you so much is just...! Bwaaaah!”

Fagrahvél, once again overcome with emotion, began sobbing anew.

Yuuto, who just happened to be in the room as well, couldn’t help but find the display a bit overwhelming.

“So that’s what she’s really like.”

It was true that he had felt her loyalty to Rífa was far stronger than normal, but his impression was that she was a cool, unflappable warrior.

She was, by all accounts, an impressive figure who had served as the leader of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army. She possessed Gjallarhorn, the Call to War, a rune said to be the rune of kings, and was a great general well known around her region, deeply respected and beloved by her retainers—the nine elite Einherjar known as the Maidens of the Waves.

He had never expected such a woman to break down in tears with no regard for who was watching.

“Sniff, sniff...”

The tears seemed infectious, as next to him, Mitsuki began to cry as well.

Was she moved by the reunion before her—

“Why am I crying?”

Evidently, that wasn’t it.

She herself seemed confused and surprised at the tears.

It seemed that there was, indeed, something that connected Mitsuki and Rífa,

something far more profound than the bonds that tied any others.

“I know that I said I’d advance our armies upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, but honestly, I don’t think it’s going to be quite so simple as that.”

Having sensed that they probably had much to catch up on, Yuuto had left Rífa and Fagrahvél in the bedroom and was now lost in thought in the office he had commandeered for himself.

Considering the number of troops and supplies that Felicia had reported, the reality of just how impossible the task he was to undertake loomed over him.

“Continuing our advance at this time of year is certainly quite the gamble if I do say so myself.”

He chuckled self-deprecatingly and shrugged.

Autumn had passed and winter had arrived. The courtyard he had passed on the way to his office was already buried in snow.

Given that Sigtuna—a city on the plains—was this bad, there was no doubt that the supply lines that stretched between the mountains of the Bifröst region were even worse. It didn’t appear the snow would stop anytime soon either, meaning that the stream of supplies would continue to be slow throughout the season.

“And we’d be doing it with stretched supply lines, no less...”

Thinking about it made his head hurt.

Currently, the Steel Clan had used the momentum from its victory at the Battle of Vígríðr to quickly advance all the way to the Sword Clan capital of Sigtuna.

Newly-conquered territory was unfamiliar terrain and often had differing customs. With the added complications presented by that gap, it took a certain amount of time to win over the trust of the local residents.

It was common for the establishment figures who lost their privileged status to resort to banditry. With that came a substantial decline in law and order.

The Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél had sworn fealty to Yuuto, making the

occupation of the territory far easier than usual, but he was skeptical that Fagrahvél's new fealty extended to all of her subjects.

It was safer to consider that there'd be a certain number who disliked falling under the Steel Clan's umbrella and would show outward loyalty while plotting behind his back.

To haul a massive amount of military supplies through such risky terrain was basically an invitation for looting.

"Um, do you still intend to advance upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr?" the calm, blonde beauty next to him asked hesitantly.

It was Yuuto's most trusted aide, Felicia.

Yuuto nodded confidently.

"Yeah, I don't want to wait until spring."

According to Mitsuki's acquaintance, there was a high probability that Yggdrasil was in fact the legendary lost continent of Atlantis.

Yuuto hadn't wanted to believe it at first, but the overwhelming circumstantial and material evidence, starting with the existence of Orichalcum in the form of álfkipfer, had removed all doubt.

They had no idea when it would sink into the sea. It could very well happen tomorrow. There was no time to waste.

"Honestly, the only thing to do here is lean on Linnea's skills."

The image of the Steel Clan's reliable second-in-command, skilled in the arts of governing and logistics despite still being in her teens, came to Yuuto's mind. Without her, even Yuuto would have had to give up advancing his army under the current circumstances.

When he had first met her, she had always been wallowing in despair at her own lack of ability, but now she had become indispensable both for the Steel Clan and for Yuuto himself.

"I, too, am well aware of Lady Linnea's great ability, but..."

Felicia looked faintly uncomfortable as she made her critique.

The fact that Felicia, who had a tendency to deify Yuuto and generally went along with whatever policy he would propose with a “If you say so, Big Brother,” was questioning his decision belied how difficult the situation was.

“Ordinarily it would be a matter of waiting for spring. Surely the various issues facing us would improve during that timeframe. Up until now, Big Brother, you would have definitely waited.”

“Well, yeah.”

Yuuto had never really been a gambler. He was cautious to the point of excess, pushing forward his plans with care, only committing when he knew he could be certain of victory.

While the wider world regarded him as a risk-taker who would often bet everything on an unusual stratagem, he was, at heart, a cautious individual.

As his aide, Felicia had seen just how much losing Fárbauti, his predecessor as Wolf Clan patriarch, due to his own carelessness had affected him, and just how much effort he had put into covering all contingencies in his planning.

The fact that he was pressing ahead now despite all the acknowledged risks seemed wrong to her and played up her anxiety.

“I suppose you won’t explain why you’re in such a hurry?”

Felicia sighed, the soft exhale condensing into a white puff in the cold, as she stared intently at him.

The problem was simply too large to talk about.

Given that news of Yggdrasil’s impending doom could send the populace into a panic if too well known, he had only told Linnea, the Steel Clan’s Second. He had not even told his wife Mitsuki or his aide Felicia.

There was no good that would come of knowing about it, just the burden that came with that knowledge, which had kept him from telling them.

“Before our advance into the Sword Clan’s territory, I had left it to Lady Linnea under the belief that you had your reasons, Big Brother, and that you would tell me in time.”

“...”

Yuuto fell silent, unsure of how to answer.

“However, this plan to advance upon the Holy Capital is far out of character for you, Big Brother. As a matter that involves the lives of twenty thousand soldiers, I’m obligated as your aide to ask why you’re in such a hurry.”

“Mm...”

This was the first time Felicia had ever questioned him so harshly.

Yuuto had been aware that the fact he was carrying a secret was obvious to both Felicia and Mitsuki, but there was a part of him that had been taking their kindness for granted.

Felicia’s remark laid out that fact in the open, and the guilt stung at him.

“Am I that untrustworthy? It’s true that I’m not a master of anything in particular, and that I am lacking in power to share a secret with you, Big Brother, but...”

“No, that’s not it. It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just... Mmph, I suppose it’s about time to tell you.”

“Oh?! R-Really?!”

Felicia’s eyes lit up. Her expression had gone from a pained sadness to heartfelt joy in an instant.

It seemed that the fact he’d kept this secret from her had been harder for her to bear than Yuuto had imagined.

“Well, it was something I’d have had to tell you eventually. Besides, I think you’d be able to handle it now.”

“Oh? Have I changed that much recently? I don’t really feel that I have.”

“I see. Well, then, maybe I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Wha?! Surely it’s beyond cruel to come this far and not tell me!”

“Heh, I’m kidding.”

“How awful. It’s not funny at all. It’s enough to make even me a bit angry. I believe I’ll refrain from serving you with my breasts that you love so much.”

"Whoa whoa whoa, hang on! I'm sorry. I'll tell you. I'll tell you, so please, anything but that!"

Yuuto hurriedly apologized without reservation.

Felicia's technique when combined with her strong desire to please was amazing, and it was one of the biggest reliefs for Yuuto when he was nearly overwhelmed by his work. Losing that for a while would make for a crippling blow.

"So long as you tell me, I'll do so without reservation."

"Seems you've picked up a bit of sass along the way."

Yuuto couldn't help but let out a dry laugh.

In the past, Felicia may have tried to seduce Yuuto, but she had never questioned or complained to him. She certainly would have never even jokingly have threatened to withhold something from him.

"The very fact that you're able to make jokes like that with me is what makes me believe that you can handle what I'm about to tell you."

While at a glance it seemed she was being playful and carefree, he had known her for long enough to know it was an act to hide just how delicate her feelings could be.

She had always struggled with the guilt of bringing Yuuto to this world and the betrayal of her brother Loptr, and one night she had confessed to him that she had constantly been worried that he'd eventually tire of her and toss her aside.

Thinking back upon it, that almost overwhelming sense of dread had been why she had been so loyal to Yuuto, never showing any sign of questioning him.

But it was an unnatural sort of loyalty, warped and fragile.

"I have to say it's a bit of a complicated feeling to be told that I'm now trustworthy because I'm more insolent."

Felicia furrowed her brow and puffed out her cheeks, as though she couldn't quite accept the reasoning.

Yuuto had to admit that what he'd said wasn't exactly complimentary and

shrugged his shoulders as he offered a correction.

“I mean you’ve gotten a bit more flexibility to your mindset.”

“Hrm... Flexibility?”

“Yeah. In my country, there was some research into new recruits into the army.”

In Yggdrasil, where might made right, strengthening the army was a necessity, which was why he’d gone and read what he could on the subject, but there was something there that had stood out to him in particular.

“The model recruits that go along and do everything they’re told without complaint are the most likely to suddenly up and quit, while those who grumble about wanting to quit will generally tough it out in the end.”

“That’s... unexpected. I would have thought it would be the opposite.”

“Yeah, me too. That’s what it seems at first glance, right?”

As Felicia blinked in surprise, Yuuto nodded along in agreement.

“But, see, it’s because that sort of model student is kind of brittle. The ones that bottle up all their complaints and don’t tell anyone look strong from the outside, but break easily when stressed. I can be like that sometimes.”

The fact that he had vented his anger at Felicia in the worst way possible over being unable to return home when he was first summoned to Yggdrasil was still one of his most cringe-worthy memories.

He was usually able to get enough off his chest with regard to his patriarch-related problems by venting to Mitsuki, but on the matter of Yggdrasil sinking into the sea, even she wasn’t someone he could tell.

He had taken it all upon himself, and as a result of that, the enormous weight had created a huge sense of looming anxiety as well as insomniac episodes that were brought on from the nightmares about it all.

Those things had taken their toll on him over time. He had seemed fine on the surface, but inside he had been pushed to his breaking point.



Being able to tell Linnea had been an enormous relief, something that lingered in his memory.

“I see, I was the same way. When put that way, I can understand why you would think so.”

“Right?”

He had once secretly asked Sigrún, who had known Felicia since childhood and was her closest friend, whether she’d heard anything about Loptr or about bringing him to this world.

The answer had been no.

“But lately, well... You’ve started to be able to joke about things. I feel like you’ve stopped holding back, as though you’ve stopped hiding the deepest part of yourself from me.”

“Well... I believe that’s because you’ve made love to me over and over, Big Brother. Every day has been so fulfilling that I no longer feel any anxiety,” Felicia said and smiled shyly.

“A-Ah, I see.”

Yuuto stared at that smile and felt his heart skip a beat.

Despite the fact that they were well past that stage of their relationship and had known one another biblically for a while, she was just *that* cute in that instant.

She had always smiled, but thinking back upon it, there was always a bit of darkness shadowing those smiles. It was probably a bit of stiffness that came from a sense of guilt.

Her current expressions, whether it be the smile on her face now or that pout from earlier, had no such restrictions, which was probably why she was so much more attractive.

“N-Now, about the secret I’ve been carrying...”

Yuuto changed the subject back as he tried to project an aura of calm. He was rather eager to hide that he was flustered. It was a given that a man didn’t want

to show his vulnerable side to a woman he loved.

Of course, Felicia had already seen straight through his façade, and she wished he would show her that vulnerability more often, as he did with Mitsuki and Linnea.

“What?! Yggdrasil is going to sink into the sea?!”

Felicia... wasn't the one who exclaimed in surprise.

Turning to the direction of the voice, the office door was slightly ajar.

From the gap peered in...

“L-Lady Rífa?! Wh-When did you get here?!” Felicia, evidently completely surprised, shouted out.

It was understandable. In addition to being Yuuto's aide, she was also his bodyguard. To not notice that someone had come so close... There was nothing to call this but a blunder on her part.

“Err, well, I hadn't had the opportunity to properly show my gratitude, but you had disappeared, so I came to give you my thanks, but... it seemed you were a bit preoccupied.”

Rífa scratched at her cheek a touch uncomfortably as she strode into the room.

“I would not have expected someone like Her Majesty the þjóðann to resort to eavesdropping...”

“Well, it was an interesting subject, so I couldn't help it.”

Rífa stuck out her tongue playfully.

She had probably used a galdr or seiðr to hide her presence.

There was a reason she had a reputation for using the immense power that came from her twin runes in oddly pointless ways.

“Then you started discussing something quite serious. I couldn't keep quiet. Is it true, what you said?”

“Well, since you've heard already, I suppose there's no choice...” Yuuto said

with a resigned sigh before launching into his explanation.

He told her about how he had come from 3,500 years in the future, and that Yggdrasil didn't exist in that time. That there was a legend that spoke of a continent called Atlantis—meaning Island of the Heretic Titan Atlas, having been swallowed by the sea, and that the rare metal álfkipfer, that could only be mined on Yggdrasil's three central mountain ranges, also existed on Atlantis.

"I see. Ásgarðr in the ancient tongue means Land Shielded by the Gods. From the eyes of foreigners it would, in fact, be the isle of a heretic god."

Sigrdrífa nodded in understanding.

While she didn't have much in the way of common sense, this was the sort of situation where her intelligence shined through.

"I have no intention of doubting your words, Big Brother, but this is still difficult to believe."

Felicia stared down at the ground and swallowed.

Ordinarily, of course, land was always there and didn't just vanish.

To hear that it would disappear wasn't a matter of belief; it was simply that it was impossible to imagine.

"Mm, yes, it's all rather difficult to believe, but it matches the legend of the Black One. Not something one can simply laugh off," Rífa said softly, as though there was something that it fell in line with in her mind.

"...The Black One?"

Yuuto parroted the unfamiliar term.

There was something about the term that bothered him.

"The founder of the Ásgarðr Empire, Wotan, concerned about the future of his empire, had the oracle Völva foretell the future. Her prophecy stated that a Black One would bring an end upon the empire and Yggdrasil itself."

"Mm..."

It sounded like a common enough story.

While it was no longer considered a historical event, the New Testament's

Gospel of Matthew describes the Massacre of the Innocents, where King Herod the Great, being told that the stars foretold the coming of a New King—Jesus Christ—ordered that all infant males under the age of two be killed.

In Greek mythology, Kronos became ruler of the world after killing his father Uranus, but Uranus had foretold that Kronos himself would be overthrown by his son in turn.

He had thought it was that sort of legend.

“In the empire, it’s pretty much become accepted fact that you are that Black One.”

“Wha?! Me?!”

He couldn’t help but widen his eyes in shock and let out a note of surprise. That was just too much of a bolt out of the blue.

“Wait wait wait! I have no intention of destroying Yggdrasil!”

If anything he wanted more than anyone else for that to not happen, and if it couldn’t be avoided, he was hard at work making sure that at least its people would survive.

It was so far removed from the truth that the very thought made Yuuto angry.

“But, the Holy Ásgarðr Empire is about to end, is it not?”

“Well, uh, that’s through a peaceful transfer of power, though...”

“No matter how you phrase it, the world will still see it as a usurpation.”

“Well, yeah, I know that, sure.”

If at all possible, Yuuto wanted to perform that takeover without any bloodshed.

He had made doubly certain that his soldiers would do nothing to the people of Glaðsheimr.

He didn’t plan to depose Rífa, instead making her his second wife.

It honestly offended him that this was being called usurpation, or the destruction of the empire.

“At any rate, I’m not this Black One or whatever. Sure, my hair and eyes are black, but that’s the extent of it.”

There weren’t any black-haired people in all of Yggdrasil.

As far as Yuuto was aware, besides himself and Mitsuki, the only other one he could think of was the Flame Clan patriarch, Oda Nobunaga.

If anything, he was the one who’d brought down the old order by banishing Ashikaga Yoshiaki, the 15th Shogun of the Muromachi Shogunate, and massacring those who resisted his rule.

Yuuto thought that he was far more suited to the description of the Black One, but Rífa seemed to disagree.

“No, I, too, believe that you’re the Black One. Your path is the one that the prophecy foretold.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“At the time of Ragnarok, the Wolf will consume the Sun, and the stars will fall from the heavens. The Black One, wielding the sword of victory forged from the flames, will arrive on horseback across the heavenly bridge.’ Well? Does that sound familiar?”

“Not... particularly?”

No, none of it really seemed to ring a bell for Yuuto.

It wasn’t that none of it could apply to him; it was just that it sounded so dramatic that it didn’t quite make sense to him. He wasn’t a native speaker of the language after all.

“Oh! The Siege of lárnviðr!” Felicia said, bringing her hand down on her palm.

“Eh?”

Even with that, Yuuto didn’t understand what they were talking about. He could only vaguely remember the events of four years ago.

That battle in particular had been overshadowed by Loptr’s betrayal and Fárbauti’s death, which had happened immediately after, leaving the memory of the battle itself as a vague one in his mind.

“Have you forgotten? You made use of the eclipse and threw rocks with a trebuchet to make it appear as though meteorites were falling. The sword of victory forged from the flames probably means the steel sword, while the heavenly bridge is probably Bifröst. And to appear from there upon horseback... It all matches the things you have done, Big Brother.”

“...Sure it’s not just a coincidence?”

Yuuto furrowed his brow, still skeptical.

He wanted more than anything to avoid being treated like some sort of destroyer.

“I don’t believe you’re here to destroy Yggdrasil, you know. Think about that prophecy again. It said that the Black One would arrive in the time of Ragnarok, but not that the Black One would bring it about.”

“Mm? Oh, sure...”

The whole prophetic phrase did make it seem like the Black One was going to bring about the end, but technically it didn’t say a word about that.

In fact, depending on how one read it—

“If anything, I believe that you were sent to us by the gods when the danger of the end was approaching. It’s you, after all; you don’t intend to just quietly sink into the sea do you?”

Yes, as Rífa said, it could also be read as a savior appearing.

Well, he didn’t think that was something that suited him either, but he was, in fact, doing his best to save people.

“I-I agree! Of course, knowing the truth does bring fear and anxiety, but I also believe that you’ll find some way of getting us through it, Big Brother. I’m honored to be able to work under you to that end.”

Felicia nodded firmly in agreement. She was, after all, a zealous follower of Yuuto, so she made it sound all the more natural.

“Heh, I guess women tend to be pretty strong when push comes to shove.”

The truth was that the situation was still dire, but the two of them didn’t

seem overwhelmed with anxiety like Yuuto had initially feared.

When he'd first heard about the fate of Yggdrasil, he couldn't sleep at night. He felt a little embarrassed by his fear.

"Oh, that's not right, Big Brother."

"Mm? Really? Considering how you two and Linnea reacted, you seem strong to me," Yuuto said seriously, but Felicia simply chuckled.

She said with a beatific smile, "A woman can stand up to anything so long as she has the right man by her side."

"There's little reason to doubt you've come from the future. With that in mind, does that mean you know when Yggdrasil will sink into the sea?" Rífa asked point-blank.

The way she jumped straight to the subject at hand was worthy of her title of *þjóðann*, Yuuto thought to himself.

"It was too far in the past to know precisely..."

Furrowing his brow, Yuuto shook his head from side to side with a troubled expression.

It was something that took place 3,500 years ago. There were hardly any historical records worthy of the name left. More importantly, they weren't certain when "now" actually was.

"However, in Plato's *Timaeus*, it's said that 'violent earthquakes and floods occurred suddenly.'"

"Mm, at the very least, since my ascension to the throne there hasn't been a single earthquake in Yggdrasil, which may mean we have some time to spare."

Rífa let out a sigh of relief.

Yuuto nodded, but his expression remained tense.

"It's true that nothing has happened yet. It could very well be something that happens decades in the future, but in the worst case it could happen tomorrow."

"Urk..."

“As someone with responsibility for my people, I feel I can’t afford to view this with an optimistic lens.”

Yuuto’s back carried the fate of the hundred thousand subjects of the Steel Clan. He couldn’t afford to risk their lives hoping for the best. It was his responsibility as a leader to continually assume the worst and act upon the worst-case scenario.

“Mhm... So what precisely do you intend to do?”

“Right now, I’ve tasked Ingrid with building extremely large ships,” Yuuto answered, seeing no point in hiding it at this point.

“I see. Well, I suppose there’s no other choice.”

Rífa nodded in agreement.

Given that the continent itself was going to sink into the sea, it was obvious that the only solution was to move elsewhere.

“I’ve heard there’s another continent to the east of this one. I suppose you intend to head that way?”

“So there is one after all!”

Yuuto couldn’t help but lean forward toward Rífa.

Rífa blinked and said, “What, you were building ships without knowing this?”

“I was pretty sure there’d be something there, but this is the first time I’ve gotten any confirmation.”

The furthest he had reliable information on was the Jörmungandr Region in Eastern Yggdrasil, with only little snippets of rumors from anything beyond.

And that wasn’t anything particularly unusual.

It was during that same era that the ancient kings of the orient called themselves kings of the four corners of the Earth, that is, kings of the entire world, despite the fact that China and Europe were reachable by land.

Unlike the 21st century, it was extremely difficult to gather information on distant lands. In that sense, the confirmation from Rífa was a big find.

“Mm, still, there are quite a few problems left to solve. How to convince the

people to move, for example,” Rífa said, stroking her chin.

That sort of thinking was worthy of her position as *þjóðann*, even if she had merely been a figurehead. It too was the point that Yuuto was most concerned about.

Obviously, humans have an attachment to the place they were born and raised in, particularly so in the case of their own ancestral family lands and houses.

Further, the people of the Steel Clan, under Yuuto’s governance, were in the midst of an unprecedented boom. There wouldn’t be many who’d be willing to abandon all of that to start from scratch elsewhere.

“Which is why I believe I need to become *þjóðann*.”

“Ah, you intend to use the divinity of the *þjóðann* to your advantage.”

Rífa chuckled self-deprecatingly.

Unlike in the 21st century, there was still a strongly rooted belief in the gods here in Yggdrasil. There were even people like the Einherjar who provided proof that the gods existed.

For these people of Yggdrasil, the *þjóðann* that have passed down the twin runes from generation to generation were an important symbol. Most believed that they were the family tasked by the gods themselves to rule over Yggdrasil. This faith was why the patriarchs of the various regions paid tribute to the *þjóðann* to justify their own regimes.

“I plan to do anything, even lie about a divine revelation, to get this across,” Yuuto said without a hint of hesitation.

It was, he admitted, a rather blasphemous attitude to hold, but if it would save his people, he had no qualms about lying in the name of the gods.

“Ah, Second. You oughtn’t look so serious at a time like this! This is a time to take the load off your shoulders and smile. Now, smile, smile! Bwahahaha!”

The one who was laughing boldly and affectionately smacking Linnea’s back was the Third of the Steel Clan and Yuuto’s successor as the patriarch of the

Wolf Clan, Jörgen.

With a bald head and scars across his cheek and brow, he was a large man with a face that would make your average soldier flee just at the sight of him, but today, he was jovial and in a particularly good mood. His demeanor was completely at odds with his usual stern authority.

“You’ve had quite a bit to drink,” Linnea returned with a slightly tense smile.

A quick glance showed several casks lying empty next to Jörgen. They had all, of course, been filled with alcohol.

It was enough for even him, a man who could hold his liquor better than most, to start breaking out in jubilant laughter.

“Haha! If now isn’t a time to drink, then when is? Come now, Second, let us have another drink!”

“No, I’ve had enough, thanks!”

As he tried to force another pour upon Linnea, she sternly refused his offer.

She was a cute young woman with light auburn hair.

She looked, at first glance, to be rather young and sweet, but despite that deceptive appearance, she was the patriarch of the Horn Clan and the Second-in-Command of the Steel Clan, an extremely capable woman chosen by Yuuto himself to serve as Second of the largest power in Yggdrasil.

“Come now, you can have another! Or is it my drink that’s the problem?!”

It could be said that it was poor form for him to be drunk in the company of his superior. For the usually overly serious and even dour Jörgen to get this drunk, it must, by all accounts, have been quite an occasion to celebrate.

“I suppose I’ll let it go for today.”

With a dry laugh, Linnea let out a faintly exasperated sigh.

The Steel Clan capital of Gimlé was currently enveloped in an unprecedented air of celebration.

It started with the great victory at the Battle of Vígríðr, followed up by the capture and defection of the Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél, and was topped

off by the defeat of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army and the subsequent engagement between the reginarch, Suoh-Yuuto, and the þjóðann, Sigurðrífá.

It would have been impossible to ask them not to celebrate.

“Still, to even make Her Majesty the þjóðann into his bride... Father really is an immeasurable man! To be able to regard such a man as our father, we truly are blessed!”

“Yes, in that sense I’m in complete agreement,” Linnea said and nodded.

As a woman, she wasn’t happy with the addition of another rival, but with Yggdrasil facing an existential crisis, she understood the importance of the title of þjóðann in gaining the trust of the people.

“With no one remaining to test our power, it seems the conflict that sprung from the subjugation order is at an end for now. Now, if Mother will safely bear an heir, the Steel Clan will be in great shape.”

“...Yes, you’re right.”

Her hesitation came from the fact that she knew the true danger was still to come and that they were a long way from security, but that was a secret she could share with no one, forcing her to muddle her answer to deflect from it.

“Oh, speaking of which, are you pregnant yet, Second?”

“Whaa?!”

Linnea let out a surprised squeak at suddenly being put on the spot.

In 21st-century Japan, even taking into account that this was a booze-fueled conversation in the midst of a huge celebration, such a question would be considered sexual harassment, but this was Yggdrasil in the 14th century BCE. Such a concept did not yet exist.

“Ever since you were elevated to becoming one of his wives, the talk amongst the ranks has been that you’ve gotten even prettier. Could that be related?”

“N-N-No, I mean, I want kids, b-but there’s no sign of that yet...”

Her partner Yuuto, after all, was out campaigning. No one gets pregnant without performing the act needed for it, but she would rather not say that part

out loud.

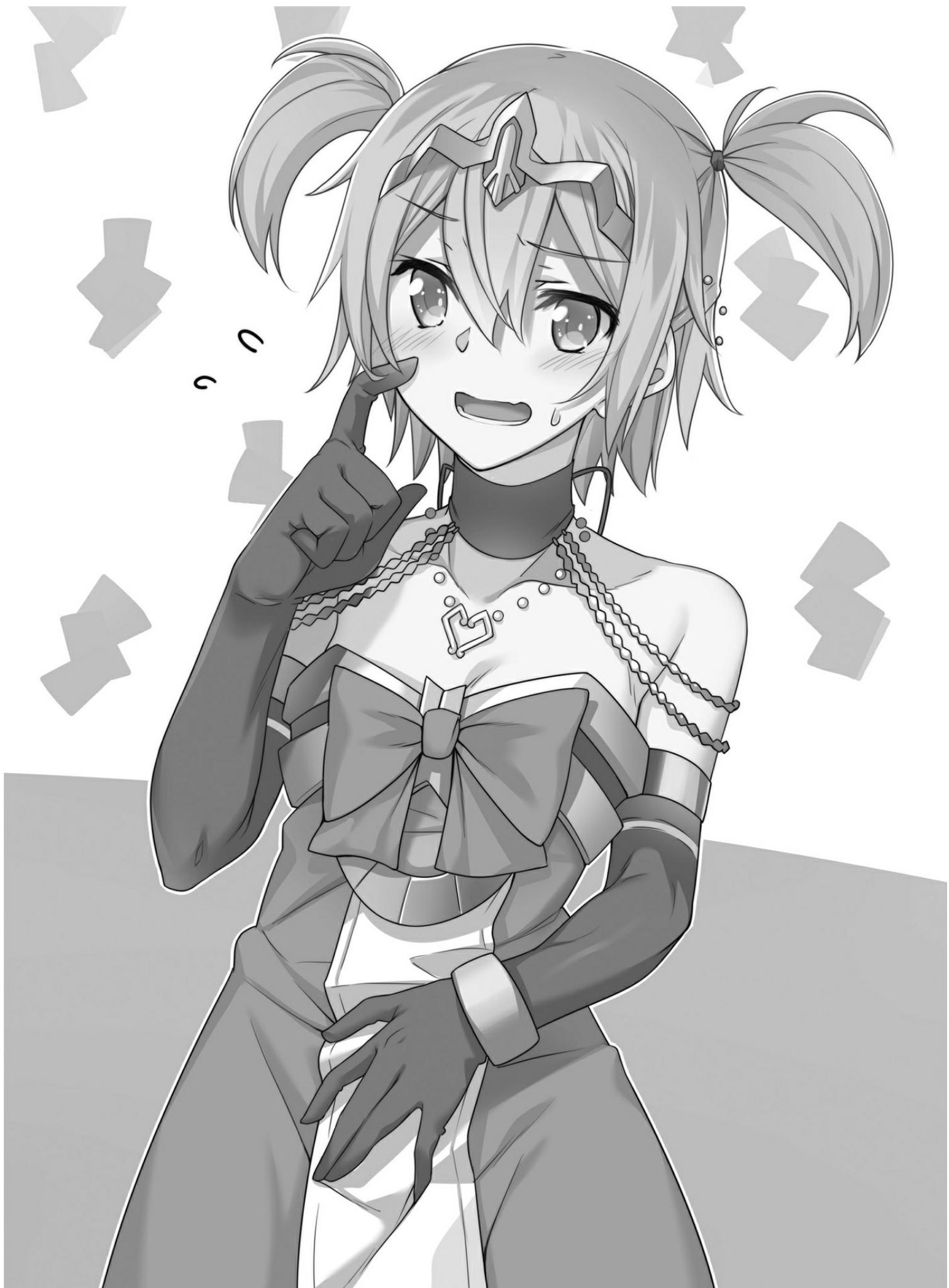
S-Someone help me out here, she thought to herself, but there weren't many who could speak their mind to the Steel Clan's Third.

Just as she was about to resign herself to bearing that line of conversation, an unexpected helping hand appeared.

"Second. I, Skáviðr, patriarch of the Panther Clan, have arrived. Pardon my tardiness."

"Oh! Brother Ská! It's certainly been a while!" Linnea responded happily to the man who came to address her.

With his sunken features and pallid skin, many people viewed him as an eerie man, but Linnea herself felt that seeing his face was a sign of good fortune today.



“Well done on the western front. It was particularly impressive to have heard that you forced the Hoof Clan to surrender. That’s the sort of result I’d expect of the Níðhoggr.”

Having moved to her office, Linnea started with lavish praise. His work had been quite worthy of it.

Having chased off the remnants of the old Panther Clan, he had then taken the opportunity to invade the Hoof Clan’s territory in concert with the Horn Clan’s Second, Haugspori, finally capturing the patriarch of the Hoof Clan and forcing their surrender within the past few days.

That meant all challengers to the Steel Clan’s rule had been cleared from the Álfheimr region.

“My strength is hardly worth noting. This victory is due to Lord Yuuto’s triumph at Vígríðr,” Skáviðr said plainly without so much as the corner of his lips twitching.

It seemed he truly believed that.

“I don’t think that’s the case. I’ve heard about how you fought like a lion from Haugspori.”

The letter she had received from him had been a continual list of praises of Skáviðr.

An excerpt had read thus...

“His will propagated to every corner of the army, and there was not a single soldier out of place. They reacted quickly to his every order. While he doesn’t possess the same flair as the reginarch, his tactics were apt and were decided upon quickly, and his command of the battlefield can only be described as masterful. He is worthy of being called a great general.”

For someone as cynical as Haugspori, it was unflinching praise. He must have been quite moved by Skáviðr’s command.

“Like a lion, huh... While I appreciate the praise, I feel it’s undeserved. Lord Yuuto is the one worthy of being called a lion. Next to him, I’m at best a house dog or cat.”

In the end, Skáviðr's reaction was dry.

From Linnea's point of view, Haugspori was a dependable general in his own right. For someone he praised so lavishly to view himself as not even worthy of comparison...

Linnea couldn't help but be reminded of just how great her father was.

"You have heard that Father has been betrothed to the þjóðann?"

"Yes, I have."

"The actual wedding will take place in the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. Father's desire is to send the army on ahead during the winter and secure the Holy Capital."

"...Mm, it appears he's in quite a hurry. A departure from Lord Yuuto's usual caution."

"It seems he has some reasons for it."

Linnea attempted to swerve the conversation away from the details of that particular topic as she spoke.

As Second, Yuuto had shared the details with her, but she couldn't tell anyone else about it.

"Which is why I have a request for you."

"For me?" Skáviðr asked.

"Yes. To advance upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, they'll need additional supplies. Our supply lines are stretched thin, making such an operation dangerous. I have no one else I can ask but you."

They required enough supplies to keep an army of twenty thousand fed until spring. It was easy enough to imagine how large of a burden it would be.

Even carrying such a load would be difficult in itself, and losing it would end with catastrophic consequences for the frontline. Food, after all, is a necessity for survival.

There was no room for failure. There was no one better suited for the task than the man in front of her.

People tend to be more motivated to do something when they know the reason behind it. The fact that Felicia, the commander in charge of all preparations, seemed far more motivated than earlier, quickly spread to those around her. The days proceeded rapidly, and the day the Steel Clan would resume its march soon arrived.

“So, I can finally return to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr...”

With that, Sigrdrífa looked up at the special carriage prepared just for her.

Because of her sensitivity to sunlight, the passenger compartment had been painted white with lacquer to shut out the sun, and the exterior had been decorated with a tasteful, but not excessive, amount of detail.

It was an elegant vehicle that showed at a glance that the passenger was of some importance.

“To me, it feels as though I was there not long ago, but that was over six months ago, yes? An odd sensation indeed.”

Rífa tilted her head as she reflected.

“Kind of like a mini Urashima Taro, I suppose.”

“Hm? What’s this ‘mini Urashima Taro’?”

Yuuto had meant it as a harmless comment to himself, but it seemed that Rífa had heard him. Since it wasn’t something worth hiding, Yuuto simply shrugged his shoulders and began to explain it to her.

“It’s an old story from my country. After saving a turtle, Urashima was taken to a castle underneath the sea to celebrate, but when he returned to the surface, several hundred years had passed.”

“Mm, that does sound very much like my situation. Though I suppose six months is nothing compared to that.”

“Yes, hence the ‘mini.’ Where I come from, it means small or to a lesser extent.”

“Mmhm, I see. Foreign words are quite interesting. Which reminds me,

Hildólfr was quite mini last time I saw him. I suppose he's not mini any longer."

"Um, that's not quite the right way to use it."

"Mm? But it means small, does it not?"

"Well, yes, but it doesn't sound quite right."

He couldn't describe it, but her usage felt off.

"Mm, it's all rather difficult."

Rífa furrowed her brow and tilted her head, but then immediately let out a soft chuckle.

"Regardless, we have plenty of time on the road. Teach me the proper way to use mini whilst we travel. Now, go on in."

"Huh?! I was planning to get on a chariot..."

"Hm? I can't let that go without comment. To think, we're soon to be wed, yet you can't even stay around and reassure your bride like a proper groom...?"

"Well... Mmph..."

Yuuto figured Rífa was hardly the sort who needed reassuring, but he fell silent when he noticed there was truth in her words lurking within her expression. She appeared afraid of something.

"All right."

"T-Truly?!"

"Yes, I'll come with you."

"I-Indeed? Thank you, Lord Yuuto!"

Rífa's face lit up with a heartfelt smile. Just that expression showed how anxious she had been. It was understandable in hindsight.

Although she had been controlled by Hárbarth, the Steel Clan subjugation order had been issued from the bjóðann Sigdrífa herself. As such, she was the one who had led the Steel Clan Encirclement, and was the ruler of the enemy country. It was natural to be frightened of traveling among what had been enemy soldiers with only a handful of companions.

On the other hand, if she was traveling with the Steel Clan reginarch Yuuto, there was no chance of any abuse.

“In that case, hurry up and get on, before you change your mind!”

“All right, all right, you don’t need to push.”

Rífa gave Yuuto a hard push into the carriage. As a twin-runed Einherjar, she was much stronger than she looked.

“Huh, it’s pretty large inside.”

Glancing around the interior, Yuuto let out an impressed exhale.

It was perhaps expected of something made for the *þjóðann*. Soon after, he was joined by Sigrdrífa, Fagrahvél, Felicia, and Mitsuki, but even with all five of them inside, there was still plenty of space.

The interior had been decorated with care, making it entertaining to look at.

There was something that looked like a window, but perhaps in consideration of Rífa’s health, it was covered up.

“Isn’t it? Ah, but to think I’d be riding in this next to you, betrothed as we head to Glaðsheimr. My dream from that time has come true,” Rífa said with profound reflection as she crossed her arms.

“That time?”

“Have you forgotten?”

At Yuuto’s question, Rífa stared at him questioningly. He edged backward at her questioning glance.

“I can’t quite figure it out from that remark alone...”

“It was when I gave you my first kiss and said goodbye to you, of course. Just how often do you think a maiden gives her first to a man? Mmph!”

Rífa huffed a bit angrily, but Yuuto couldn’t quite accept that.

Thinking back on it, if she had said she’d had a dream that she couldn’t achieve, he would have understood given the situation, but he felt it was asking a bit much to expect him to just read that from her words.

“Really, even during that time, a man worthy of being considered a legend would, you’d think, grab me by the shoulder and tell me to stay by his side.”

“I think you’ve been reading too many myths,” Yuuto slumped his shoulders and said in reply.

That was right before he was going to set out to fight the Lightning Clan army. The other enemy clan, the Panther Clan, had also been planning their campaign against him.

To have tried to claim the *þjóðann* in such a way and make an enemy of the entirety of Yggdrasil’s clans... It would have spelled the end of the Wolf Clan under their circumstances at that particular moment.

Of course, it would have been too much to expect Rífa to understand that.

“You still have a long way to go as a man! If you keep minimizing a woman’s needs, someday you’re going to regret it!”

With that line, Rífa spent the next while in an angry huff.

“It’s a revolution!”

“Wha?! To come this far and have this happen?!?”

“Mwahaha! The time is ripe! Even the War God Suoh-Yuuto can’t find his way out of this one, can he? Heh, it was worth enduring all of that to get to this moment. Mwahahaha!”

Sigrdrífa slapped four cards down and cackled as though she had just won a great victory.

Yuuto pursed his lips into a frown and looked at the card left in his hand.

It had the number “2” written in runic script.

“Hehehe, I can see the panic in your expression. Could it be that I’ve won?”

Rífa quirked her lips into a grin.

“Heh, leave it to me, Big Brother! Counter-revolution!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Felicia plopped down four cards with the number “3” upon them, causing Rífa to widen her eyes and shout out in surprise.

“G-Good work, Felicia!”

“Wait, I already said teaming up was against the rules!”

“Regardless of the time or place, I’m always Big Brother’s ally!”

“Grrr! That’s cheating!”

“All right, my turn. And I’m out.”

“Graaaaah! I lost again!”



Rífa slammed her palms against her seat in frustration.

It seemed that she was holding back, given that even that seat wouldn't stand up to the power of a twin-runed Einherjar's full power, but she was still quite upset.

"That now makes for ten games in which you haven't lost, Father. I would like to say that I'm impressed at your strength, but isn't using Lady Felicia a bit cheap?" Fagrahvél said reservedly, but bluntly.

While she had taken Yuuto's chalice and become his child, she had no issue with pushing back to help her little sister.

"Yeah, you're right. We won't count this one. Felicia, if you do stuff like that, it ruins the game, so none of that from here on, okay?"

"...I understand."

Felicia agreed, though clearly with reservations.

While she no longer felt bound to him by guilt, it seemed she found purpose in serving Yuuto.

"Then let us start again. Fagrahvél, mix the cards!"

"Aye!"

Fagrahvél, following orders, gathered the cards and began to shuffle them.

While the very first time she had failed and sent them flying in all sorts of directions, she was now shuffling with skill. It seemed she was pretty good with her hands in that regard.

"But this card game, Tycoon, is quite entertaining! I could play it for hours!"

"It is, isn't it?"

Seeing Rífa's satisfied expression, Yuuto responded with a smile of his own.

It wasn't as though Yuuto had invented the game, but it was always nice when someone enjoyed a game he liked.

"This is a great way of avoiding boredom on the road."

"Well, yes, that's why I made the cards, after all!"

Yuuto's method of travel in this world was generally by carriage.

There were plenty of times when he'd spend an entire day inside one. It could get incredibly boring. He wouldn't have been able to handle the monotony without his cards.

"It may be an odd time to bring this up, but is bringing Mitsuki a good idea? Isn't this part of her pregnancy kind of difficult? Will she be fine?"

"Hehe. I'm pretty stable right now, so I should be fine! Besides, in the end, being at Yuu-kun's side is the place I feel safest."

Mitsuki smiled and glanced over at Yuuto.

He had gone back and forth on taking Mitsuki with him, but he couldn't very well leave his first wife alone in territory that had been enemy terrain just weeks prior, and Mitsuki wanted to accompany him, which was why she was here.

"Oh, what a doting husband."

"Ow!"

"Wh-What is it?!"

As Mitsuki suddenly narrowed her eyes and tensed in pain, Rífa hurriedly moved over to see if she was okay, but Mitsuki just laughed softly.

"Oh, the baby kicked. This one's a bit of a kicker."

"Don't scare me like that. Mm, you think it's a boy?"

"Hm... I wonder what it'll be. Well, I don't care either way, so long as they're healthy."

"...Mm, you're right. Health is the most important thing."

Rífa nodded intently.

She herself was born without a particularly strong constitution and had suffered the inconvenience of that weakness for many years now. No doubt she had her share of thoughts on that matter.

"May I touch it?"

“Go ahead.”

“Oh... Ah, it really is kicking! Quite the restless one!”

Placing her hand on Mitsuki’s stomach, Rífa smiled happily.

After that, she spent some time touching Mitsuki’s stomach, not being bored in the slightest.

“I would like Lord Yuuto’s child as well,” she said under her breath.

“Heh, you’re going to be marrying Yuu-kun, too, so you’ll eventually have one yourself.”

“...Mm, yes, I suppose. I’m looking forward to it.”

With that, Rífa smiled softly.

There was an ounce of fragility and sadness buried within that smile, however...

ACT 2

“Oh, hey, there it is, off in the distance.”

Five days after setting out from the Sword Clan capital of Sigtuna, the Steel Clan Army had finally arrived at Glaðsheimr, the sacred capital of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

Given that they had expected some sort of resistance from the Spear Clan and other clans, it was an anticlimactic arrival.

“That’s a hell of a sight.”

It was a capital worthy of the conqueror Wotan, who was said to have unified the entirety of Yggdrasil.

Yuuto had thought he wouldn’t be overwhelmed at a city of a mere hundred thousand or so, but he couldn’t help but suck in a breath at the sight of the towering walls.

The thing that impressed Yuuto most was the sheer length of the walls.

“Wow... It’s like the Great Wall of China. Not that I’ve seen it in person.”

Mitsuki, too, widened her eyes in surprise.

Yuuto had thought the same thing.

The walls were about ten meters high, but it continued far into the horizon in either direction.

“The horizon’s about what? Four-and-a-half kilometers away?”

Meaning on the absolute low end it was at least nine kilometers long.

Of course, that was hardly its full extent. There was no way that a city wall would only protect one side of a city. It probably stretched to envelope the entire city.

“Aha, seems even you’re surprised.”

Parasol in hand, Rífa proudly puffed out her chest.

While she couldn't go out in the summer sun, evidently she could go outside during winter under the cover of a parasol.

"Yeah, this is amazing. Just how big is it?"

"I've heard talk that even if they were to walk without rest for an entire day, a grown man would be unable to travel its entire length."

"Whew."

He could only sigh. In the modern day of the 21st century, it could be done with construction equipment and heavy transportation, but in this era everything had to be done by hand. The amount of labor it would take to bake and then pile up enough bricks to craft these walls was enough to make Yuuto's head spin.

"No wonder it's said it took twenty years to build."

He'd heard that before and seeing for himself, it finally clicked.

"It would appear they're going to welcome us."

At the end of Yuuto's gaze, the city gates lay open, with a line of people that appeared to be merchants waiting to greet them. They all anxiously watched the Steel Clan Army's movements.

Their nervousness was understandable. After all, there were twenty thousand armed soldiers right in front of them. Of course they'd be frightened.

"Skáviðr!"

"My lord?"

The willowy man waiting behind Yuuto stepped forward and knelt before him. He had appeared in Sigtuna with a supply convoy from Gimlé and joined the army there.

"Make absolutely certain the soldiers are on their best behavior. Any who disobey are to be brought before the army and subjected to torture worse than death."

Yuuto was well aware that he had issued a ruthless directive, but he knew from experience that this ruthlessness was much more effective at securing the

happiness of as many people as possible than any attempts at mercy.

He knew that, in this instance, by meting out grotesque punishments, it would serve as an example to the others, reducing the overall harm inflicted upon the people. There were times that a ruler had to be ruthless, no matter how much it pained them personally.

“The merchants of Yggdrasil are gathered here. Any misbehavior will spread rapidly through their networks across Yggdrasil. We must avoid that at all costs.”

“I see, which is why you summoned me.”

Skáviðr nodded with a confident expression.

During his time as patriarch of the Wolf Clan, Yuuto had Skáviðr serve as its executioner to make the people and the soldiers aware of the importance of his laws.

Recently the ranks of the Steel Clan Army had swelled from the inclusion of the soldiers they had absorbed from the defeated armies. Someone like Skáviðr was urgently needed.

“I’m sorry I always seem to make you fill these roles.”

Yuuto bowed his head apologetically.

Yes, it was a necessary role, but no one would freely choose to take it upon themselves. Humans were social animals. Everyone wanted to be liked by those around them.

Executioners were universally condemned—hated by everyone, and appreciated only by those they served under. It was an emotionally painful role to fulfill.

However, Skáviðr simply smiled calmly.

“Do not worry yourself. This sort of role is well suited to me.”

Yuuto once again noted how blessed he was with good retainers.

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival. Welcome to our city, Lord Suoh-Yuuto, reginarch of the Steel Clan.”

The one assigned to greet them was a young woman of around fifteen years of age. Her dress was finely crafted—made of a fabric that was easily recognizable as silk. Her features gave her a faint resemblance to Sigrdrífa.

“I am Iálc, granddaughter of Sveigðir, Lord of House Jarl.”

“House Jarl... I think I’ve heard of it before.”

It was one of the Three Great Houses of Yggdrasil.

Digging deep into his memories, Yuuto remembered how he had once learned that when there was no heir apparent to the þjóðann, it was the Great Houses who would provide the next þjóðann.

“I appreciate the welcome from one of such a high station. An introduction is perhaps unnecessary, but I’m Suoh Yuuto.”

“We have heard of your great deeds. On behalf of the others, I thank you for your magnanimity.”

“Mm. In which case would it not be more proper for the lord himself to be doing so, rather than his granddaughter?”

Yuuto gazed intently at the young woman, while quipping with a touch of acerbity.

He was well aware that he was widely seen as a conqueror. He couldn’t help but think that it was considerably cold-hearted and ruthless to send out one’s granddaughter to greet such a person.

“I ask your forgiveness; my grandfather is ill and could not make it. Further, um, we have heard that you, Lord Reginarch, are very fond of women...”

“Ah, so that’s been spreading as well.”

Yuuto could only rub his forehead. He could have protested he was innocent in the past, but now it was hard to make that case.

“I am sure that I hardly compare to the beautiful women who are part of your harem, but if you could find it in you to add me to their number...”

“Felicia.”

Yuuto addressed the beauty behind him, cutting off Iálc. They hadn’t

exchanged any particular words, but Yuuto and Felicia had been together for four years now. They could communicate just by exchanging glances. That was the case at this particular moment.

Felicia closed her eyes and built up her ásmegin, until finally...

“Gleipnir!”

A golden rope shot forth from her palm and tied itself around Iálc.

It was a seiðr that bound the supernatural that had once been used to summon Yuuto. Ordinarily it was used in summoning rituals to bring forth servants of the gods, but it could also be used to seal an Einherjar’s power.

And with this usage...

“Well?” Yuuto asked Felicia as he noted from the corner of his vision that Iálc’s eyes had lost all life and she’d collapsed in place.

“Got something. Seems like it was as you expected, Big Brother.”

When Felicia tugged on the rope, a black shadowy presence was dragged out from Iálc.

He had seen that shadowy mass before. It had appeared recently when Fimbulvetr was cast on Rífa.

“Still alive, are you, Hárbarth?” Yuuto said coolly as he glared down at the shadow.

Hárbarth—The man who had been the patriarch of the Spear Clan and the High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

His head had been separated from his shoulders and most of the world believed him to be dead, but his rune evidently allowed him to possess those who were unconscious, and even after being chased from Rífa’s body, he had clung on to life.

“Seems you’re plotting something, but it’s over now. We’re going to seal you...”

“Wha—?! Eep!”

With a loud bang, the golden rope holding down the shadow burst. The

shadow then melted into the air, leaving nothing in its wake.

“Tch! He got away.”

Glaring in the direction the shadow vanished, Yuuto clicked his tongue in frustration.

“M-My apologies, Big Brother. It was a perfect opportunity and yet...”

“No, there’s no need to apologize. It just means he was a step ahead of us.”

“Indeed. I hadn’t told you this before now, but he is, aside from myself, the greatest seiðr user in the empire. I’m probably the only one capable of restraining him,” Rífa said in way of reassurance.

While Yuuto had wished she’d mentioned that earlier, it was too late now.

“But Big Brother, that was well sighted of you.”

“Yes, I couldn’t tell at all.”

“Nor, sadly, could I.”

“Or me. That was awesome, Yuu-kun.”

While Yuuto worried about his future concerns, Felicia, Rífa, Fagrahvél, and Mitsuki all praised him at once.

“I was mostly acting on a hunch—it’s nothing that impressive,” Yuuto responded a bit drily, somewhat embarrassed upon being showered in their praise.

“Mostly, meaning that some amount was backed by evidence?”

Fagrahvél made sure to follow up. She clearly wanted an explanation. The others were the same as well.

Yuuto scratched his head and sighed.

“She didn’t seem very human.”

“Hmm, it didn’t seem that way to me...”

“Humans tend to get angry when you insult their relatives. There was an odd lack of reaction to everything. It wasn’t that she didn’t react much, it was that she didn’t react *at all*.”

The first sign had been her reaction to Yuuto's remark, "The House of Jarl, I think I've heard of it before."

He had made that remark because he had genuinely forgotten, but for a member of a high-born family like one of the Three Great Houses of the empire, such a remark would ordinarily have been considered an insult.

In spite of that, though, there was no reaction from her whatsoever, which was why he tested her with the subject of her grandfather.

There, too, she had chosen to just give him a dry explanation of the situation about her grandfather being sick, making no attempt to avoid Yuuto's displeasure by explaining her grandfather's state in further detail.

There was just something off about the whole thing.

"Ah, that's very impressive. You really do watch people carefully."

Once he finished his explanation, Rífa looked up at Yuuto with a look of heartfelt admiration.

"Well, I did go out of my way to read up on how people think."

When he found out he would have to lead a large number of people as patriarch, he'd taken the time to read every book on the subject that he could find. Then, of course, he'd had plenty of opportunities to test out that knowledge.

This sort of thing was easy enough for Yuuto now that he felt oddly embarrassed about being praised for it.

"Though, for him to spring a new plan into action so soon after his recent failure... That old man hasn't given up just yet."

Yuuto could only let out a dry laugh.

In his view, Hárbarth could only be described as obsessive, given he was hanging on despite losing his corporeal body. He could easily imagine that Hárbarth had many more schemes yet to be revealed.

He was proving to be a real headache to have to deal with from the very start.

The Steel Clan Army was met with silence by the residents of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. No foreign army had ever set foot within the walls of Glaðsheimr in the entirety of the empire's two hundred year history.

The people of Glaðsheimr knew of armies as things that would ransack towns and cities, murdering and pillaging them for all they were worth if given the chance.

They had believed those sorts of behaviors were a concern reserved only for the people of distant lands, and that they would never have to deal with it themselves, but seeing an actual army of twenty thousand in their midst, they could only cower and watch in fear.

And then came—

“Wh-What the hell is that?!”

“Whoa whoa whoa...”

“Wait, is that...”

Their silence was shattered by the appearance of a giant wolf the size of a lion or tiger that padded down the street, its white fur rippling as it walked.

It was an understandable reaction.

The garmr was a rare beast that was said to only live in the highlands surrounding the Roof of Yggdrasil. They were known to be feral and violent—something beyond the ability of human hands to tame, and yet...

“What the hell is he?! How's he able to ride a garmr?!”

“Wait, he has black hair! Is that the Steel Clan reginarch, Suoh-Yuuto?!”

“He looks so young!”

Murmurs quickly spread through the populace.

Watching the public's reaction, Felicia, riding a chestnut horse next to him, chuckled softly.

“Seems our sneak attack has succeeded, Big Brother.”

“Yeah, we're just reusing the thing we did with Nobunaga, but this does leave a hell of an impression.”

Yuuto maintained his level expression riding atop Hildólfr, but his voice had a faint tone of amusement within it.

This was, after all, the first appearance of their new ruler.

When considering how to effectively govern from here on, it was necessary to leave a strong first impression that he was one not to be messed with.

“Still, that’s a minor problem when put into perspective. That damned Hárbarth is still alive, and by the looks of it, still scheming.”

“I must admit, the ability to possess other people is one that sends shivers up my spine,” Felicia said with a shudder.

If he could do that with impunity, he could easily turn a trusted ally into an assassin. Nothing could possibly be more frightening to a bodyguard.

“It’s enough to make me paranoid...”

“Well, there’s no need to be that cautious. Looks like he can only possess unconscious people anyway.”

Yuuto quirked his lips into a grin and Felicia blinked in surprise.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, at least probably. I can’t be completely sure, though.”

With that preface, Yuuto explained his reasoning.

If he could really possess anyone he wanted, he would have possessed Yuuto first. That he hadn’t done so meant that there was some sort of limitation.

The young woman Iálc had evidently been drugged, she didn’t appear to stir even when yelling in her ear or slapping her cheeks.

Thinking back upon it, Rífa had been in a coma due to repeated layerings of the seiðr Gleipnir, which seemed like more than mere coincidence to Yuuto.

“Meaning, for him to possess someone’s body, the person in question has to be unconscious.”

“I see. You can get such an accurate view of the enemy’s ability with so little information... I’m always struck by your observation skills, Big Brother.”

“It’s not that impressive, really. You’re always overrating me,” Yuuto said with a laugh.

The two people Hárbarth possessed were unconscious. That was a blindingly obvious commonality between them.

“No, I really do think it is impressive. How that leads to this and is because of that. It sounds easy once explained, but coming to that conclusion on one’s own is difficult.”

“You really think so?”

Yuuto could only skeptically tilt his head.

Well, that might be true in some cases, but it still felt too easy. He then recalled that a certain famous person had claimed that math was logic.

By doing math problems starting in childhood, it cultivated the ability to think logically.

In that sense, perhaps there was some difference between individuals, but if there was an effect, then it was true that Yuuto—by Yggdrasil’s standards, where the ability to do the four basic arithmetic operations would guarantee a life of luxury—was well equipped for complex logical thought.

“Still, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a hell of an ability to deal with.”

If he could possess people who were unconscious, then that meant there was a chance that he could possess sleeping individuals, and considering that he had easily found Hveðrungr’s Independent Cavalry Regiment despite its Yggdrasil-leading mobility, that probably meant there was something more to the ability.

“We don’t have a whole picture of the enemy, but they can see everything we do. Damn.”

He could only consider someone like that to be a troublesome opponent indeed.

“I’d heard about all this, but it really does seem like a different world.”

With a sigh of amazement, Yuuto glanced around at his surroundings like a country bumpkin.

Located in the center of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, the Valaskjálf Palace was large enough to fit a small city within its grounds. Within them were a forest of giant buildings, each large enough to be a monument in any ordinary city.

It was enough to make him wonder if he'd stepped into a time warp.

"Between this and the city wall, it's hard to believe that they were built in this time period... or built two hundred years prior, even."

One could be led to believe that perhaps Yggdrasil's civilization was more advanced then than it is now. It showed just how much power the first *þjóðann*, Wotan, actually wielded.

At the same time, however, it was because of this enormous spending in building such monuments to his power that the empire quickly lost influence under his successors.

"Right, right. And when you marry me, it'll all be yours. Pleased, are you?"

"No, not really."

"Wh-Whaaat?!"

At Yuuto's noncommittal answer, Rífa widened her eyes in surprise.

"It's the greatest city and castle in all of Yggdrasil! Do you not understand their value?!"

"Well, yes, I understand they're valuable."

Yuuto scratched his head, feeling like this whole conversation was a bit of a chore. Honestly speaking, he *did* consider it to be a chore.

Ordinarily, owning the largest trading city in Yggdrasil would be a great boon to a patriarch, but it was something he'd have to abandon during Operation Noah.

That wasn't all, either. He'd also heard its population was over a hundred thousand. While he had only caught a glimpse of it down the main thoroughfare, it definitely felt like this city was more advanced than the rest of the continent, which only increased his concerns that it would be quite an effort to get the population to move away.

“Well, anyway, putting that aside...”

“Putting it aside?! Glaðsheimr?! Valaskjálf Palace?! The two things that every ruler wants are to be put aside?!”

Rífa was thoroughly shocked by his reaction.

He felt a bit sorry for her, but there wasn’t much more to be said on the matter. There really were more important issues to attend to.

“It’s concerning Hárbarth. Now that we know he’s still alive, we need to take steps against him immediately. Honestly though, that’s not my area of expertise.”

Yuuto raised his palms into the air, shrugging as though to say he had no solution in mind.

Yuuto had brought substantial knowledge and technology with him from the 21st century, but he couldn’t think of any way to deal with Hárbarth. Perhaps an exorcism was the right solution, but in that regard, he felt that his 21st-century knowledge was far behind the curve compared to that of Yggdrasil’s.

Regardless, leaving him to do whatever he planned was far too dangerous. There was no telling what he could be doing behind the scenes.

Certainly, Yuuto needed the opinion of an expert in the form of Yggdrasil’s greatest seiðr wielder.

“Hmm... Let’s see... I think you were on the right track in terms of using Gleipnir. Honestly, that’s the only solution I can think of as well.”

“But he got away when we last tried that.”

“With Lady Felicia’s power, yes. With mine, even he wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“Then, assuming we have Rífa handle it next time, the question then becomes... How do we get him into that position again?”

Yuuto stroked his chin and furrowed his brow in thought.

Hárbarth’s last scheme ended with him very close to capture. No doubt he would be more cautious from now on, so he’d certainly be harder to entrap like

that in the future.

That wasn't all, though. While he had been able to coordinate well with Felicia, it was a bit too much to expect that level of cooperation with Rífa, whom he'd only known for a short time.

It certainly made for a painful blow to have come tantalizingly close to capturing their greatest enemy but losing their grasp on him at the last moment.

"I mean, what's he after in the first place?" Yuuto couldn't help but come back to that question.

At the very least, it didn't seem that his aim was to kill Yuuto. If it had been, he would've done something to raise those suspicions when he had possessed Rífa, but there were no signs to indicate that.

"I don't want to die."

"Huh?"

Yuuto turned at Rífa's murmur.

"No, it's just something that came back to me. While I don't remember anything when he possessed me, I feel like I kept hearing those words over and over even in my hazy state."

"Mm. He doesn't want to die. That's an odd thing to say."

Yuuto had demanded Hárbarth's head as a price for the Anti-Steel Clan Encirclement.

He had thought the negotiations would stall as a result, but Hárbarth had yielded up his own head without any complaint or resistance. Would such a person cling to life that tenaciously? It felt contradictory.

"But, I suppose in a sense he's still alive?"

He'd lost his body, but it seemed his soul was still lingering in this world, and most importantly, he could possess the bodies of others and move using them as though they were his own flesh and bones.

"Ah, I'm starting to see it now," Yuuto stated calmly as he let out a huff of

understanding.

“Really?! Already?! I’m still in the dark.”

“Embarrassingly enough, so am I.”

Rífa and Fagrahvél frowned, the two of them deep in thought.

“So, what’s his goal?”

“Well, as far as that goes...”

With a nod, Yuuto began laying out the information that supported his case.

He recalled reading that the older people got, the more they thought about death and would work harder to avoid it. He also remembered hearing that his own grandparents had evidently lived unhealthy lives until middle-age, but had started taking care of their bodies in old age because they didn’t want to die.

Hárbarth, by this world’s standards, was at an age where he could die at any moment. No doubt he felt death stalking him closer than anyone else.

“When you combine that with Hárbarth’s ability and the things he said, the answer presents itself pretty clearly, doesn’t it?”

“Wow, so that’s the Steel Clan reginarch.”

“He looked like little more than a child, but...”

“You can’t judge him by his looks. He had a garmr under his command, and evidently he’s a remarkable tactician.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. He defeated the Hoof Clan’s Yngvi, who had unified most of Álfheimr in a single generation, the twin-runed Einherjar, Steinþórr the Dólgbbrasir, and Hveðrungr the Grímnir, who in the wake of Yngvi’s death had pillaged much of Álfheimr and Miðgarðr...”

“They were all great warriors whose names were known even here in the Holy Capital. He truly is impressive to have defeated all of them, and then also have prevailed against the Alliance Army’s force of thirty thousand led by Fagrahvél, the Shining Sword—the patriarch of the Sword Clan.”

“Amazing is all I can say to that.”

As they watched Yuuto travel down the thoroughfare, the people swapped rumors between each other.

Lurking amongst them, however, was a certain something listening to those rumors. That something soon clicked its tongue in annoyance. It had a jet-black body and red eyes, and its sharp talons gripped the roof of a house.

“Caw!”

It let out a cry and flapped its wings.

At a glance, many could mistakenly believe it was just an ordinary crow. However, if one who could tell the difference looked into its eyes, they would see a hatred and rage that no mere beast could sustain.

That damned Black One! Just how much does he intend to interfere in my plans?!

The crow, possessed by Hárbarth, was cloaked in a whirl of ásmegin. It was an appearance forced on him because he had lost yet another ‘piece’ on his board.

I suppose that's to be expected of the conqueror who has swallowed up a quarter of Yggdrasil. Outmaneuvering him is going to be quite a hassle...

He couldn't understand what had allowed Yuuto to figure out it was him, though.

When he had possessed Rífa, the interaction the pair had while she was in lárnviðr must have tipped him off to the difference, but Yuuto had definitely never met lálc before. Hárbarth was certain he'd perfectly mimicked the mannerisms of the ladies of the court. There should have been nothing out of the ordinary, and yet he knew.

Considering his opponent was only in his teens, the boy's perceptiveness was truly remarkable. It was impressive enough to make one believe that he could actually read people's minds.

I thought I'd let him live for a while because I could make good use of him for my plans, but he is leaving me little choice but to kill him.

At this rate, even if Hárbarth did succeed in his goal, he could be noticed by them at any minute and end up trapped by a Gleipnir.

While he was able to destroy the simplified one he'd been caught in recently, he wasn't certain he could break a properly-prepared one.

He always does get in the way of my ambitions.

If he hadn't appeared, Hárbarth would have impregnated Rífa with his child during this year, which would have prepared him to take over the child's body in due course, and then, twenty years later, he would have—with the help of his Spear Clan—conquered Yggdrasil as the new þjóðann.

Wealth, power, youth. All of it was meant to be his.

But because that brat had appeared, he'd lost everything.

Now this time, I'll take everything from you, for I have found the perfect vessel.

Hárbarth laughed darkly. The crow's eerie cries echoed through the city of Glaðsheimr.

It happened that night without any warning. The furniture in the bedroom suddenly started shifting and making noise.

However, what was shaking was not the furniture. It was the building, nay, the land of Yggdrasil itself.

“An earthquake?!”

The thing he'd most dreaded had finally happened. Yuuto jumped out of his bed. There was no sign the shaking would stop. In fact, it steadily grew more intense.

“Wh-Whoa, this is a pretty big one!”

Mitsuki, who had been sleeping next to him, also seemed unnerved.

“Mitsuki! Hide under the desk! I'll get under the bed!”

“Oh, r-right!”

They were both from Japan, one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries, and it showed. Years of training through exercises at school took over as they took cover.

“Big Brother!”

On the other hand, Felicia, who had never dealt with earthquakes before, jumped into the room.



In her case, of course, it could just be that even if she knew how to react, she'd come to help Yuuto in her role as his bodyguard.

“Y-You’re all right...”

“Felicia! Don’t wander around! Hide under something! Even you won’t come out of this unscathed if you get caught under falling debris!”

As Felicia let out a sigh of relief, Yuuto barked his orders at her.

Yggdrasil’s buildings were generally built with brick and wood. They weren’t even close to being as durable as those of the 21st century’s. The ceiling could come crashing down at any moment.

“Y-Yes, of course!”

Felicia hurriedly slipped under the bed next to Yuuto.

Almost simultaneously, the quake stopped.

“Looks like we made it.”

Yuuto let out a sigh of relief at avoiding getting buried alive, but that relief vanished when he crawled out from under the bed.

The room looked as though it’d been ransacked by thieves. The furniture had fallen, there were pottery shards everywhere. It was a complete and utter mess.

“Mitsuki!”

Yuuto hurriedly looked for his beloved wife.

“I-I’m okay...”

He let out another sigh of relief when he saw her under the table, clinging to one of its legs.

“If you’re fine, then we need to get outside for now. We don’t know when this might collapse.”

With that, Yuuto lifted Mitsuki off the ground. He’d swept her off the ground in a bridal carry.

While he was hardly well-built by Yggdrasil’s standards, Yuuto still took the

time to train every day, so something like this was easy enough for him to do when necessary.

“Let’s get going.”

Yuuto and company opened the door and moved into the hallway. There were panicked voices from the sudden earthquake ringing out from all over.

“Tch. They’re all in a panic. This is a nightmare... Felicia, take care of Mitsuki!”

“Huh?! What about you, Big Brother?!”

“I’ll go guide the people still inside the palace. The people here aren’t used to earthquakes.”

“I-Isn’t that too danger—”

“Yes, which is why I’m leaving her in your care. You’re the only one I can trust.”

“...I understand.”

She knew as well as anyone that this wasn’t the time to argue. Felicia nodded with a sour frown.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Rún will show up soon, I’m sure. Nothing will happen to me if she’s around.”

“...Understood. May the gods protect you, Big Brother!”

Taking hold of Mitsuki, Felicia looked worriedly at Yuuto. She seemed loathe to leave, but she hurriedly turned to run off.

“Everyone! Calm down! First, get outside the building! Don’t run, walk! Don’t shove the person in front of you! Those who can’t obey will be punished!”

If some of the people inside the palace were to try to escape at all costs, giving no regard to the well-being of others, it could complicate the evacuation as a whole.

That, in turn, could very well spread a fear of being unable to escape, leading to a general panic. A mass panic would make Yuuto’s task far more difficult.

“You’ll be fine! Line up and walk out calmly!”

Yuuto continued to yell as loudly as his throat would allow.

Thanks to his efforts, the palace was evacuated safely. Even after that, though, Yuuto had far too much to deal with in the wake of the earthquake, and remained fully occupied until the morning.

And then, as the sun rose...

He could only gasp as it revealed what had happened to Glaðsheimr...

ACT 3

“What... is this...?”

Rífa shuddered in shock as she saw the state of the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr laid out before her.

She had loved waking up before sunrise and seeing the city bathed in the red light of the rising sun.

While she had rarely actually stepped out into the city itself, she still loved Glaðsheimr very much.

With her weak constitution and odd appearance, it was an irreplaceable place of refuge. Being the master of Yggdrasil’s largest city had been a core pillar of her self-image.

But now... it had been thoroughly destroyed.

Many sections of the great walls that Glaðsheimr’s residents were—quite rightfully—very proud of had crumbled as a result of the quake. Nearly half of the houses in the city had also collapsed. There was no sign of the beautiful Glaðsheimr that she so loved.

“I couldn’t believe it when I first saw it, either,” Yuuto, standing next to her, said with a pained expression.

He had spent most of the night dealing with this emergency. The fatigue he was feeling right now was obvious to anyone who looked at him.

“Given the circumstances, I’m afraid the marriage will have to wait. I had hoped to hold it by the new year.”

“Th-That’s hardly worth worrying about now! M-More importantly, i-is this what you were referring to...?”

“Yes, it seems the worst is coming to pass.”

“Th-Then we need to evacuate!”

“Even if we returned to Steel Clan territory, the ships there are still under construction. There’s nothing that can be done just yet.”

“...”

Rífa fell silent as Yuuto continued to stare at the city with a hard expression. She could tell that he was extremely anxious.

He let out a long breath in an attempt to calm himself.

“Our first priority is to provide places where people can find warmth, or else we’ll have residents freezing to death. It needn’t be the whole palace, but I’d like to open a part of Valaskjálf Palace to the people.”

“Y-Yes, that is a good idea. I have no objection... but the noble courtiers are all likely to kick up a fuss about it.”

They were, after all, people who valued themselves on their pedigree above all else. To them, the Valaskjálf Palace—and its restrictions upon who could enter—was like some sort of holy site. It was easy to imagine that even in an emergency, they’d fiercely object to the notion of letting in the common rabble.

“It pains me to admit this, but... while I may be *þjóðann*, I have no actual power here. I don’t have the authority to force them to submit and listen to us...”

Rífa slumped her shoulders, letting out a frustrated murmur.

She had wanted to avoid admitting that if it had been possible to. If this wasn’t such an extraordinary emergency, she might have tried to explain it away somehow. She found it embarrassing and humiliating to admit her lack of power to Yuuto, who was so ably fulfilling his role as a ruler.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. So long as we can use the *þjóðann*’s consent as justification for our actions, then we can handle the rest.”

“...You certainly are something else.”

Rífa narrowed her eyes and let out a self-deprecating chuckle. He made what she couldn’t manage sound so easy.

“I envy your ability and confidence as a ruler.”

Rífa knew well that this was hardly the time for such comments, but she couldn't help but say it aloud.

She knew better than anyone else that she was merely a figurehead. That was largely due to the fact that Hárbarth had restrained her ability to rule, but even then it was painful to have her helplessness put on such a clear display.

By contrast, Yuuto was absolutely magnificent.

Even in a situation this dire, he'd recovered quickly—rapidly and precisely issuing orders, getting people to move where he needed them. He easily broke down the walls thrown up by the old ways and replaced them with new, better traditions. He was the ideal ruler—the sort she had dreamed of being but had given up on becoming.

"Honestly, the job is just one pain in the ass after another," he said, casually dismissing Rífa's praise. She understood well that Yuuto had his own burdens.

Just in the past few hours, he had taken direct command, working through the night to prevent panic and save lives—and certainly, the burden of being responsible for hundreds of thousands of lives weighed heavily on him.

She would probably find herself being crushed by that weight, but he simply grit his teeth and bore it.

Despite standing as the highest authority in all of Yggdrasil as þjóðann, Rífa had yet to accomplish anything for her people.

Even now, all she could do was stand and watch.

"I've never felt as powerless as I have today..." Rífa muttered to herself as she slumped her shoulders.

She and the others had recently made their way to one of the still-standing wings of the Valaskjálf Palace. They couldn't just stand outside under the winter sky, after all.

After having the carpenters check the rooms, she and the pregnant Mitsuki had moved to one of the rooms cleared for occupation.

"I'd always thought, even without justification, that I could fulfill my duties as

a ruler if only Hárbarth were gone. But in reality? During this emergency I've left everything to Lord Yuuto and could only just stand around in an anxious daze... I'm ashamed of myself."

"W-Well, even though he doesn't look like it, Yuu-kun is, evidently, a really impressive person, so it's probably best not to compare yourself to him."

Mitsuki tried to console the depressed Rífa, though she had rather little success.

"There is no comparison. Even the idea of it is ludicrous. I wasn't able to think of a single thing that I could do to help. Nothing came to mind, nothing at all..."

Whilst growing up, Rífa had been educated on politics by her tutor. She had done very well in those studies.

Because of that, she had believed she would be a capable ruler, but when she was actually put in a position to do something, she had frozen.

She'd had the knowledge, but she had no faith in whether that knowledge was right. The fear of what might happen if her instructions or proposals were wrong kept her from acting.

"Well, I don't think there's anything you can do about that. Hárbarth had kept you from governing all this time, so to suddenly rise up and take charge effectively during an emergency isn't realistic whatsoever."

"I'm told that in his first battle, Lord Yuuto faced a force five times his number and easily defeated them."

"I keep telling you! You can't compare yourself to that. Besides, he uses all sorts of cheats."

His wife, too, was something else, given that she was able to dismiss the future þjóðann so handily, and then proceed to reduce the immense achievements of the ascendant reginarch of the great Steel Clan as little more than "that."

Ordinarily, Rífa would be the first to notice something like that, but she was too caught up in her own misery to see it.

"Knowledge from the future, was it? Even so, that is merely a tool. It still

requires great skill from the individual to apply it properly.”

Rífa, too, had something special of her own: the title and authority of þjóðann, as well as the physical abilities and magical prowess that came from her twin runes.

Even when keeping her weak constitution in mind, she still had more than enough power to make a difference. The fact that—even with all these gifts—she couldn’t do anything to help seemed, to her, to be an indictment of her ability as a ruler.

“It’s not like Yuu-kun was always good at this stuff. When he first started, he ran into constant failures. I remember listening to him vent about it all the time.”

“Hmm, so even Lord Yuuto has his own experiences with that? I find that rather hard to believe,” Rífa said with a touch of—no... with a lot of skepticism as she furrowed her brow.

She couldn’t imagine how such a capable individual could possibly fail—let alone fail repeatedly.

“It’s true, trust me. Where I come from, there’s a saying that goes ‘failure is the mother of success.’ If you build up enough experience, while you might not be as good as Yuu-kun, I’m sure that you’ll be able to do plenty of great things with time.”

“Experience... you say?”

It was true that she didn’t have nearly enough of that. At the very least, as things stood, she’d remain as a figurehead—doing nothing and accomplishing nothing. She couldn’t stand the thought of that.

Could experience help her? She wasn’t sure. She might still fail.

But even if that was true, she wanted to stop giving up before she tried, and to stop blaming herself for her lack of ability.

The next morning, Rífa made her way to Yuuto’s office and asked as quickly as she threw open the door, “Lord Yuuto, I’d like to do something for my people. Is

there anything I can do to help?"

Yuuto, meanwhile, looked at her, his jaw slack with surprise.

Around him was an impressive cast of characters—generals of the Steel Clan, Fagrahvél, and the Sword Clan's Maidens of the Waves.

Evidently they were in the midst of a meeting.

"...Erm, a-apologies. I'll come back later..."

Even Rífa grasped instantly that she'd misread the situation.

She had been encouraged by her conversation with Mitsuki and had been champing at the bit to find some way to do more for her people, but there was no way that the leaders wouldn't be busy at a time like this. Now wasn't the time to throw around her whims.

She felt a flush of embarrassment, honestly wanting to go and curl up into a ball somewhere.

"Oh, no. Your timing's great, actually."

As Rífa tried to turn and leave the room, Yuuto called to keep her there. She felt her hopes rise at the possibility that he'd have something for her to do, but...

"I'd like to hand food out to the people, but our current supplies won't be enough. I'd like your permission to open up the palace stores."

"...Do as you wish."

Rífa spat out her approval without even bothering to hide her sulk.

This wasn't what she wanted. She was just nodding along to Yuuto's ideas. This wasn't any different than when she was a figurehead for Hárbarth.

"Is something wrong?" Yuuto asked, sensing Rífa's mood.

A closer look at him showed heavy bags under his eyes. It appeared that he'd been working since the night before without any rest.

This only served to strengthen her conviction about needing to do something more.

“Let me do something. I don’t want to just be approving your proposals. I want to do something meaningful for my people.”

“Oh! Such compassion, Lady Rífa! I, Fagrahvél, am moved beyond words!”

The one who responded wasn’t Yuuto, but rather Rífa’s milk-sister, Fagrahvél.

She also appeared to be very tired.

Though she clearly hadn’t fully recovered from her use of Gjallarhorn in the battle against the Steel Clan, she was pushing herself because of the current situation.

For someone like her to talk about compassion, Rífa couldn’t help but feel as though she was being somewhat condescending, even though she understood that Fagrahvél herself didn’t mean anything of the sort.

“Your health issues have to be kept in mind, though. We will work all the harder on your behalf, so please focus on achieving happiness with Lord Yuuto.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but...”

Rífa pursed her lips in displeasure.

She knew that Fagrahvél was sincerely concerned about her well-being. While there was a part of her that was happy about that, there was also frustration that Fagrahvél didn’t understand what she was trying to do.

“Please, I want to do something. It doesn’t matter how small. I don’t want to be the only one doing nothing when all of you are working so hard...”

There was no feeling more miserable. It reminded her of how powerless she was. She was feeling more and more left out. She would soon end up blaming herself and would trap herself in a negative feedback loop if nothing changed.

“Ah, well, I understand how you feel.”

It was, in the end, Yuuto who expressed his understanding. Given that he was the very model of the capable individual, that surprised her.

“You understand this?”

“Of course. It really is hard—not being able to do anything. Not to mention the self-loathing. When I first came to Yggdrasil, I was desperate to find things

that I could do. I mean, they even called me Sköll, the Devourer of Blessings.”

“Mitsuki mentioned as much. So you really did have a time like that.”

“Hey, wait, what’s she been telling you?!”

Yuuto furrowed his brow and puffed out his cheeks, but it was clear from looking at his expression that he wasn’t actually angry.

It seemed like he was trying to lighten the mood.

“Well, I’ll check just how much of my shameful past has leaked out later. Anyway, right now we can use all the help we can get. We’ll have you work as well, Lady Rífa.”

“Truly?! Use me as you wish! I’ll do anything!”

Rífa approached Yuuto, holding up her fists eagerly. She would bear any hardship and accomplish the task given to her.

Her crimson eyes burned red with determination.

“Mm, so this is it.”

As she glanced up at the door to the banquet hall, Rífa swallowed.

This was the part of the Valaskjálf Palace that Yuuto had chosen to convert into a hospital, and Rífa had been assigned to console and cheer up the people within.

She was there for moral support.

The sick and injured, quite understandably, tended to be unhappy or suffer from low morale. If their spirits remained low, their recoveries often lagged, and some even stopped recovering entirely, which was why visits from figures who are popular with the masses could often help improve their moods and aid in their recoveries as a result.

“It’s more important than you’d think,” was Yuuto’s argument.

When things are really hard to bear—when situations are truly dire—even the smallest bit of kindness would be appreciated and would help to lift spirits.

“Tis a job I’m well suited for.”

Although it conflicted with her desire to be seen as her own person rather than as the þjóðann, given that she was born into the role, Rífa also wanted to be able to do something that only she, as the þjóðann, could accomplish.

This, too, was a sincere desire.

The þjóðann, as a divine personage, was greatly revered by the populace. There was no doubt that they'd rejoice in her visit.

With that confidence in hand, Rífa opened the door, and...

“Oh my...”

As she came face to face with the reality of what was in front of her, her conviction wavered. The color drained from her face, and she began to feel dizzy.

The room was filled with the smell of blood and the groans of the injured. Within was the true harshness of the world, far more raw than anything she could find in a book.

Rífa had lived in an elegant and clean world that was far removed from this sort of carnage.

This raw and unfiltered reality hit her hard.

“Let’s get to work, Your Majesty!”

On the other hand, Ephelia, Mitsuki’s lady-in-waiting, seemed entirely unfazed. She was rolling up her sleeves and preparing to get to work.

The pregnant Mitsuki had sent Ephelia in her stead, namely so that Rífa wouldn’t have to go through this alone.

She had interacted with Ephelia during her stay in lárnviðr, and since she had spent a lot of time talking with Mitsuki in Sigtuna, she had interacted with her then as well. They were pretty well acquainted and her presence was reassuring.

“Y-Your Majesty?!”

Someone nearby who had heard Ephelia’s statement raised their voice in surprise. In response to that, the eyes of everyone in the hall turned to look at

Rífa.

“O-Oh my! Her skin and hair truly are snow-white, she is every bit as beautiful as they say...”

“No, she’s even more breathtaking.”

“Not only did she open the palace for us, but to bless us with this visit in person...”

“Oh thank you, oh thank you!”

Some among them began to weep; others clasped their hands in front of them and offered prayers. Rífa was given a clear reminder of the fact that the populace viewed the þjóðann as a living god.

“Mm. I-I was sorry to hear of your suffering. You are my people, my children. Please allow me to help treat your wounds.”

A cheer loud enough to shake the walls of the hall erupted around Rífa. A mere glance at their faces showed clearly the joy they were feeling.

Rífa was filled with happiness and a sense of fulfillment from the display, but things were never quite that easy in the real world.

“Mm, this feels a bit loose...”

“Oh, you have to do it this way.”

Rífa tilted her head quizzically as she wrapped a patient’s bandage, to which Ephelia responded by demonstrating the right way to wrap it.

Her movements were elegant and precise, a result of frequent practice. She had learned the skill at the vaxt founded by Yuuto and had practiced it countless times.

“L-Like this?”

Rífa tried to copy the movements.

“Owwwww!”

As she did so, the patient she was attending to let out a howl of pain. Evidently she had wrapped the bandage too tightly.

“O-Oh, s-sorry.”

“Ow, a little more kindly please, Your Majesty,” the patient said tearfully. The pain seemed to have been quite bad.

Rífa had learned first aid from her tutor and thought she knew enough to help, but there was a huge gap between doing something in theory and actually performing it in practice.

With this example of her capabilities having played out in front of them, their fear overcame their reverence, and the people left Rífa’s line one by one to be treated by Ephelia instead.

It was only an hour later that Rífa was left with nothing to do and decided to leave the hall of her own accord.

“I-I can handle this, at least.”

The next task Rífa was given was to serve food out to the people. In hindsight, treating the injured was perhaps a bit too difficult of a task for her to start out with.

As a twin-runed Einherjar, Rífa was much stronger than the average person, and it was hard for her to control that strength, but this time, all she had to do was ladle soup into a bowl and hand it to the people lining up for it.

There was nothing difficult about that. Surely even she couldn’t mess this up.

“Praise be to the gods! To have Your Majesty serving out food for me... Such are the blessings of living to this old age.”

She handed a bowl filled to the brim with soup to an old man who, overcome with emotion, shook as he took it in his hands.

“I can die in peace now.”

“Don’t say that. You survived. Go and live a long life.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. You honor me beyond words.”

“Mm. Next person.”

Rífa nodded majestically and called on the next person in line. It was an

extremely tall man.

Yuuto's height was actually above average for men in Yggdrasil, but this man was at least half a head taller than he was, even. Furthermore, while Yuuto was lanky, this man had a stout bone structure and was extremely muscular.

"Oh my, you're a large one. A soldier? No doubt you're quite the warrior."

"I'm a carpenter."

"Oh. Then we need you to work harder than ever."

"Yes! So, could you give me a large serving?"

"Mm, I was told I shouldn't... But very well."

Certainly, carpenters were vital to the rebuilding of the city, so surely there was no harm in giving the man a little extra.

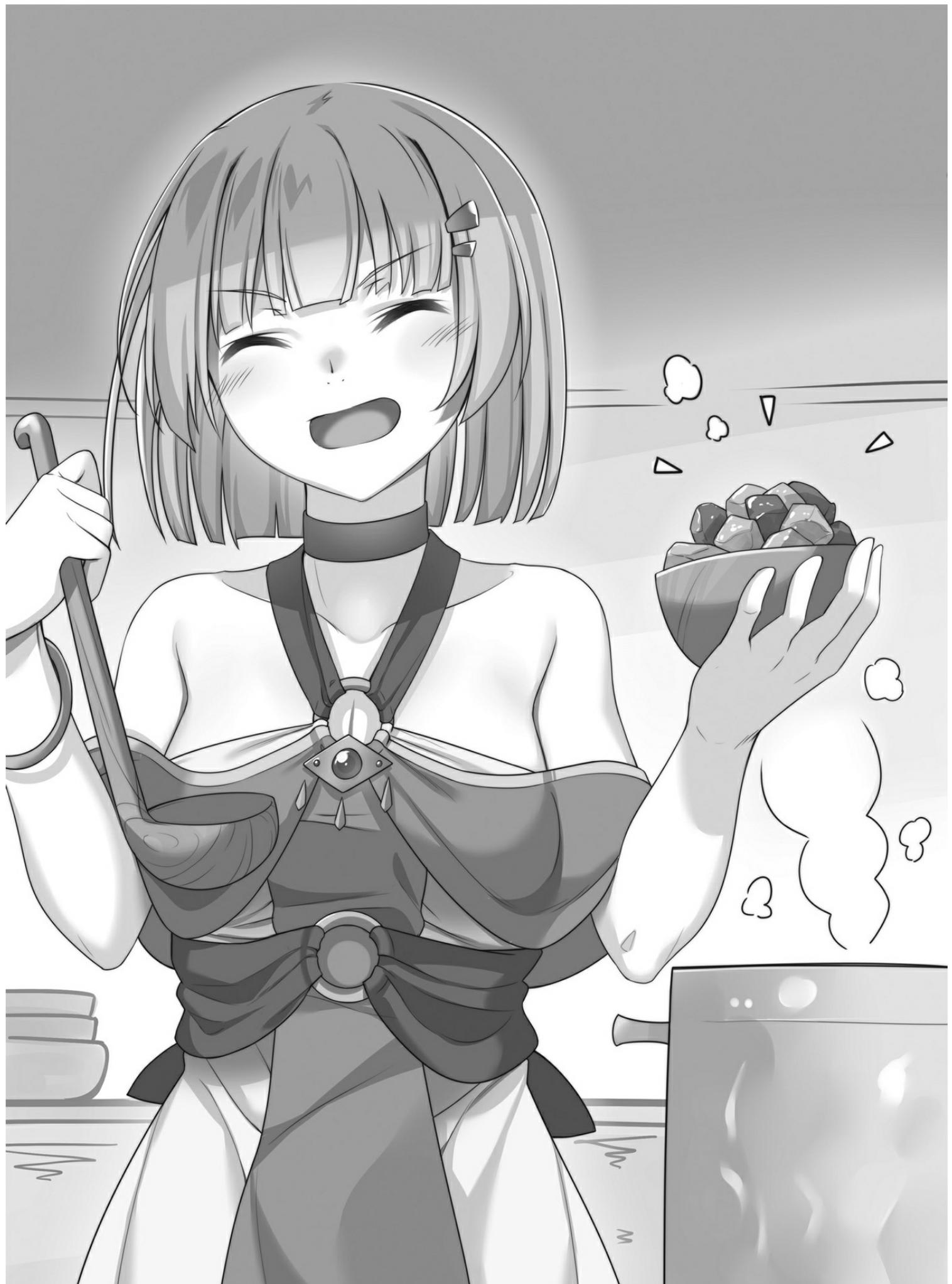
That was what she thought at the time, but soon after...

"Your Majesty, I'm also a carpenter!"

"Your Majesty, so am I!"

"I just came back from hauling around debris."

In the end, each person in line asked for an extra helping by coming up with some clever reason as to why they deserved it, and Rífa reluctantly obliged.



Given that it was the dead of winter, the amount of food available was limited.

Felicia had set a fixed amount that could be served out in a day. If the portion sizes weren't maintained...

"Your Majesty, may I have some food?"

"H-Here you are."

"Whaaat? This little?"

It went without saying that there wouldn't be enough later down the line.

The sad gaze of the child stung.

"Um, may we have a little bit more?"

"I'd like nothing more than to do that, but..."

The plea from the woman that appeared to be the child's mother hurt, but there was still a large line stretched out behind her. Considering that this was the last stew pot full of soup, she had to make it last.

"I'd heard you'd given larger servings to the people in front."

"..."

With no excuses coming to mind, Rífa could do nothing but fall silent.

There are times when a ruler must dispense with sympathy and focus upon equality. She had learned that from her tutor, but she had never imagined it would be this difficult.

The people were not a monolithic entity, but individuals—each one with their own lives, free will, and emotions.

Rífa was only human, and as a woman, she was perhaps more prone to want to give in to feelings of pity and sympathy. Restraining that urge was difficult.

"Hey, the line's backed up. If you got yours, then move on already."

"That's right! We're hungry too!"

Unable to continue bearing the jeers from those behind them, the mother and child begrudgingly accepted their bowls and moved on. Their resentful

looks burned themselves into Rífa's memory and stayed with her for some time after.

"A-Are you all right, Lady Rífa?"

That night, when Rífa was resting on her bed, Fagrahvél rushed into the room in a panic. She was breathing heavily. It seemed she had run at full speed to get here.

"What is the matter, Fagrahvél?"

Rífa sluggishly sat up in bed and glared at her milk-sister.

Having all this fuss made over her when she was already in low spirits gave her a headache.

"Well, I had heard you had declined to eat tonight, and I couldn't help but worry..."

"I felt like refraining for my own reasons. I'm not having any physical problems."

"Is... that so? But for you to skip a meal, surely it must have been something serious."

"I would like to know just how much you think I enjoy eating another time, but putting that aside, yes, you're right."

"May I ask what it was?"

"If anything, I *need* you to ask. It's been circling around in my head and I feel like I just need to spit it out at someone."

Rífa then told Fagrahvél what had happened that day. Even if she couldn't tell anyone else, she could tell Fagrahvél. This was part of their bond as milk-sisters.

"I see. That must have been difficult."

"No, what's really difficult is actually governing as a patriarch, as you and Yuuto do. Compared to your burdens, mine are so petty."

"That's not..."

"You don't need to humor me. I can't even manage something as minor as..."

mmpf!"

Rífa bit down hard on her lower lip. She had to, lest the tears start flowing.

"Lady Rífa..."

"Stop! Don't try to reassure me!"

Noting Rífa's state of mind, Fagrahvél had tried to embrace her, but Rífa pushed her away with both hands. She wouldn't be able to hold back her tears if she accepted that embrace.

"The ones who were truly suffering were that mother and child, and all those who didn't have enough to eat after."

After being tasked with serving the food, Rífa had been surprised at just how simple the meal was.

Compared to what she ordinarily ate, while she would never say it aloud, the food seemed almost like trash, but they had all taken it as something to be appreciated, and reacted very emotionally to even small differences in serving sizes.

Of course, deep down, that was something she'd always known about. She knew full well that there were plenty of people who didn't even have enough to eat each and every day, but even so, there was an enormous difference between having that knowledge and seeing it for herself.

It was shocking. It felt as though someone had hit her on the head with a hammer.

For them, that simple, rough food was the very thing that kept them alive.

"My mistake cost them their meal. What I need isn't reassurance. Punishment would be far more appropriate."

"And that is why you refused to eat your dinner?"

"Yes. If they can't eat, then it's hardly fair that I, the cause of their hunger, eat a full meal."

"I see. I believe that's a worthy decision. I, Fagrahvél, am moved by your compassion."

“I keep telling you, you don’t need to flatter or reassure me...”

As Rífa scowled, Fagrahvél strongly shook her head.

“This is not flattery, it’s what I truly feel. To take on your peoples’ hardships as your own, that’s something that not many rulers will do.”

“This is all just self-indulgence.”

After all, Rífa skipping a meal wasn’t going to somehow feed that mother and child as a result.

Rífa had learned that the proper role of a ruler was not to engage in such sentimental and hypocritical acts, but to feed their people even if it meant acquiring that food through invasion and conquest.

She agreed with that teaching.

In the current situation, her title as *þjóðann* mattered little. Right now, the reality was that Rífa lacked even the power to give her people the bare minimum they needed to eat. The only thing she could feel was shame.

“You need to be patient. Everything takes experience.”

“You all say that, but gaining experience doesn’t guarantee any amount of certainty that I’d succeed in my endeavors, does it?”

While experience certainly could help, there was clearly such a thing as talent in the world.

Rífa had her twin runes that only a handful of individuals in the world possessed, while Fagrahvél’s rune, *Gjallarhorn*, was a powerful one known as the Rune of Kings. Even with twice as much experience as either of those two, there was no guarantee that the person with said experience would obtain comparable power.

“Yes, it’s true that not all experience will end up being of use. Even so, humans are animals that need experience to move forward.”

“Mmph.”

“In particular, experiencing failure is important. People learn most not from their successes, but from their failures.”

“That’s true even of someone like you?”

In Rífa’s eyes, Fagrahvél was the perfect big sister.

She was skilled with a sword, and was nearly without peer as a general. She was also a first-rate politician who was beloved by her personal retinue, the Maidens of the Waves, and last, but certainly not least, she could wield a decent selection of galdrs and seiðrs.

It didn’t quite make sense for Rífa that such a perfect individual would fail and learn from those failures. She had thought that Fagrahvél could do anything—and do it with ease, no less.

“Yes, recently I’d say the Battle of Vígríðr is an example of one of my failures. Father’s command was precise and as fast as lightning! I was thoroughly reminded that there was always somebody better, that there was still much for me to learn.”

“Enough to make you say that, mm.”

Fagrahvél was, without a doubt, one of the five greatest generals in all of Yggdrasil.

According to Mitsuki, even Yuuto, who had dominated her in battle, had failed repeatedly when he first started out. Yuuto himself didn’t deny it either.

“Yes. Lady Rífa, no doubt you’ve learned much from your failures today. I imagine that much of it was not to your liking.”

“That is certainly true, yes...”

“But if you build upon those failures and grow as a ruler while retaining the compassionate heart that makes you such a gentle soul, you will be remembered as a great ruler. I guarantee it.”

“...Hrmph, your guarantees hold little water. When it comes to me, you’re far too partial. Far, *far* too partial.”

Fagrahvél’s words had meant the world to Rífa, but she couldn’t bring herself to admit it.

She couldn’t help but offer a touch of snark in return instead, because she knew that she was so comfortable with Fagrahvél that she’d find herself

indulging in her kindness if she didn't.

"I'm afraid there's not much I can do about that."

Rífa couldn't help but interject.

"Hey, at least deny it!"

Of course, she wasn't actually angry. The moment their eyes met, they both burst out laughing.

It wasn't that all of their problems were solved. This exchange didn't change anything about the fact that she was still powerless.

She was afraid of failing again. She didn't want to be the target of a cold gaze like that again.

There was a part of her that just wanted to go and hide deep within the palace somewhere.

But even then...

So long as there was one person who believed in her, she vowed to keep on trying.



Such a pity. For the glorious Holy Capital to be so utterly destroyed... Even I hadn't expected this to occur.

Eyeing the city from above, Hárbarth was musing to himself.

His life had spanned over twice the length of the average. He had, of course, dealt with multiple earthquakes in that time, but he had no memory of anything on this scale.

Heh, no matter. Serves him right.

He had to admit, he derived great amusement from watching the Black One being forced to deal with the disaster relief without rest. He was in his current state thanks to that brat, after all.

What's worse, he had been unable to effectively retaliate.

A brat that had lived only a quarter of his years had thoroughly destroyed both his confidence and his plans.

He wouldn't have been able to bear it if that boy didn't suffer just a little bit.

Mm... Still, this may be a perfect opportunity...

With a large number of personnel sent off to deal with the aftermath of the earthquake, the security in the palace had been relaxed. He felt the confusion would increase his chances of successfully assassinating Yuuto.

Perhaps I'll set a few things in motion.

Cackling to himself, Hárbarth melted back into the shadows.

ACT 4

“It appears that the damage in the homeland was also quite extensive.”

Felicia read the letter they had received from Linnea, her expression clouding as she did so.

It had been almost a week since the earthquake.

A letter had arrived today by horseback messenger from Gimlé, but the contents were far from pleasant for Yuuto.

“Not just Iárnviðr and Gimlé, but even Nóatún...”

His comment sounded like a groan.

While Gimlé and Iárnviðr were located near the center of Yggdrasil, Nóatún was the old capital of the Hoof Clan—it was a city on the western edge of Yggdrasil.

That meant that the earthquake had not only hit Glaðsheimr, but had affected a wide swathe of Yggdrasil.

“So then, Big Brother, this must be...”

“Yeah... I was hoping I was overreacting, but it seems pretty certain at this point.”

At Felicia’s question, Yuuto nodded with a stiff expression.

It had started. The countdown to Yggdrasil’s demise.

“According to Plato’s *Timaeus*, there would be multiple unusual earthquakes and floods before the sinking occurs. I doubt it’ll happen immediately, but now that things have gotten started, we need to push forward with my ascension to the throne as þjóðann.”

Forcing the issue of succession and being labeled a usurper would reduce his authority and damage his legitimacy, so he had wanted to go through the proper procedures wherever possible, but it now seemed he wouldn’t have

time for that anymore.

“In fact, we may well need to push for it to happen within the next few days...”

There was a sudden knock on the office door. Given the subject he had been discussing, Yuuto couldn’t help but tense up.

After taking a deep breath to calm himself, he called out to the visitor.

“What is it?”

“It’s Kristina. There is a matter that requires your immediate attention, Father.”

“Ah! Come in.”

Yuuto summoned Kristina into the room without a second thought.

Kristina was the head of Yuuto’s intelligence group, the Vindálfs—the Band of Wind Elves—and while she was still very young, she was gifted with an extremely sharp mind.

This was something she felt required his immediate attention. No matter how busy he might be, that meant he needed to listen.

“What is it?” Yuuto asked as soon as he saw her enter.

Kristina nodded once and spoke, “There are some undesirable rumors spreading through the populace. At this rate, the people might very well riot.”

“What?!”

Even Yuuto was dumbstruck.

It was a heavy blow to deal with when he had, just prior, been discussing how he needed to become *þjóðann* as quickly as possible.

The *þjóðann* was a beloved figure to the people of Glaðsheimr. If he were to take that title when they were already on the verge of rioting, it would be like pouring fuel onto the fire.

Glaðsheimr’s population was around one hundred thousand. If they were to riot...

Just thinking about it sent a shiver up Yuuto's spine.

He needed to listen to the details, but it seemed that he wouldn't be able to push things along as he wished.

"Huh? The huge earthquake was my fault?"

The claim was so unexpected that Yuuto could only repeat the words he'd heard.

It was true that Yuuto was now rumored to be some kind of war god incarnate, or a servant of the gods, and many half-believed it.

It was also true that the various things he'd accomplished with knowledge from the 21st century, such as increasing the harvest yields of wheat and other foods by several times in the blink of an eye, had all been far beyond what the average person in Yggdrasil could comprehend, making it seem like the work of the gods.

With all that said, however...

"I don't have the ability to cause natural disasters."

He had used trebuchets to simulate meteorites during the Siege of lárniðr, and had caused a manmade flood when fighting the Lightning Clan, but both had tricks behind them.

When it came to causing an earthquake of this scale, he didn't know where he would even start with trying to orchestrate such a thing.

"No, it wasn't that you caused it, Father, but rather that it was divine punishment for you disobeying the wishes of the Great God Ymir."

"Huh? What does that mean?"

"It's said that the first þjóðann, Wotan, was given the right to rule Yggdrasil by Ymir. The twin runes were proof of that divine right. You are aware of the myth, Father?"

"Yes, I've heard that story multiple times."

Ordinarily, he would have considered it a made up story to justify the

þjóðann's rule, but the fact that the mysterious power of the twin runes was passed on from generation to generation gave the myth a basis in fact, and thus it was accepted as truth in Yggdrasil.

"This divine punishment was meted out by Ymir out of anger, because you disrespected the family that Ymir himself specified as the rulers of Yggdrasil and tried to usurp their authority. That particular rumor has been spreading throughout the populace at quite a pace."

"Mm..."

There was no scientific basis for it, but he couldn't dismiss it as ridiculous. In this age, politics and religion were intertwined.

Even in the Steel Clan's territories, while the practice was now banned, trials that sounded like a bad joke—such as throwing the accused into the river and determining their guilt on whether they drowned—used to be commonplace.

The common person was conditioned to believe that everything was a result of the will of the gods.

"Well, this is certainly going to be a handful."

Yuuto let out a despondent sigh.

Given that Yuuto was generally a rationalist, these types of problems were the hardest for him to deal with. They simply couldn't be argued away by logic.

"I suppose we can start with having Lady Rífa make a public announcement."

If the rumor was that this happened because he disrespected the þjóðann, then it would help to have the þjóðann herself forcefully deny that was the case. It was simple, but it seemed like it would be effective.

"No doubt they would simply believe she was being forced to say as much. Her visiting the wounded and her serving out food have been interpreted in that way."

"Seriously?! I guess that's possible, yeah... I suppose I hadn't thought it through."

Charity work by royals was a normal thing in the 21st century. Human beings don't question things that they consider to be normal.

In line with that thinking, he had proposed those activities to Rífa as it seemed like a relatively harmless to do, but upon further thought, it turned out that by making the þjóðann perform tasks that people of much lower standing were usually supposed to do, the populace could interpret that act as an example of their new ruler abusing his new-found power to control the þjóðann as he wished.

“Then what do we do? Do you have any proposals?”

“What immediately came to mind would be to use the Vindálf to spread rumors favorable to you, Father.”

“I see.”

Yuuto nodded with interest.

That train of thought was to be expected of a girl who had inherited the blood of the trickster Botvid and had been educated in his ways.

Given that Yuuto himself tended to favor strategies that involved tackling matters head on, he was grateful for Kristina’s presence at times like these.

“Then let’s go with that. Frankly, it’s a little embarrassing to have to do it, but this isn’t a time to be choosy.”

He had to think about the future, after all. He needed to marry Rífa and obtain the title and authority of þjóðann whatever the cost.

However, given the rumors being circulated, if he tried to force the marriage now, the chances of a riot breaking out would be extremely high. If he were to be considered a usurper as a result of that, then the marriage itself would serve to be completely pointless.

Considering that they were now on the clock, he needed to remedy this issue quickly.

“Understood. When you take into account that you have actually put into place several public policies that improve the welfare of your people, it shouldn’t be a difficult task to pull off,” she said, before adding, “However... There is one thing to keep in mind.”

“Is there something else?” Yuuto said with a troubled sigh.

Frankly, he felt overwhelmed by the number of problems piling up in front of him.

While he was widely regarded as some sort of god of war or great ruler, the reality was that he was still a seventeen-year-old boy. He wasn't sure he could handle any more.

"The rumors feel like they're being spread intentionally."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Yuuto asked, his expression hardening.

That meant there was someone trying to manipulate public opinion. As a ruler, that was information he couldn't let pass.

"Glaðsheimr is a very large city. For the þjóðann's charity visit to be known in all four corners of the city a mere three days after it occurred... That feels unnaturally fast."

"I agree. It's definitely not quite right."

"Yes. It's not something that could have happened on its own. Someone has been intentionally trying to spread the information."

Given that Kristina was a professional at handling information, her words held great weight. If she believed that to be the case, it was almost certain that it was true, and Yuuto had a fair idea of who that manipulator was.

"Seems like he's going to cause me yet more trouble, huh..."

He was a fundamentally troublesome presence.

"What?! What sort of ridiculous rumor is that?!"

Rífa opened her eyes in shock and couldn't help but raise her voice.

Yuuto was disrespecting her? No, if anyone had done that, it was Hárbarth. Why would that rumor spread about Yuuto right now, anyway? It made no sense.

She had been dozing off in her room after Fagrahvél had left, when Yuuto came to visit her. She had happily welcomed him in only to be given this news. This was a lovely example of going from heaven to hell in a heartbeat.

“Well, it’s almost certainly Hárbarth’s doing.”

“What nerve he has to suggest such a thing! What an annoyingly obnoxious hypocrite!” Rífa spat out in anger.

Ordinarily, it shouldn’t be the case that the guilty would go without punishment and the innocent be blamed in their place. This situation was puzzling enough to make one want to ask the gods why they allow such injustices to pass.

“Indeed. I’m not exactly pleased, either, but it remains that those rumors have been spreading.”

“Then I will make a statement. I’ve not been disrespected at all. If anything, Lord Yuuto, you’ve treated me well!”

As Rífa shouted, Yuuto’s expression softened a tad, and he smiled.

“I appreciate your feelings, but I don’t believe doing that will solve the problem.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes. The people won’t be able to tell if your statement is sincere or if it was coerced.”

“...”

Rífa pouted. It frustrated her greatly that she didn’t even have the power to correct the misunderstanding.

“Also, while I wish I didn’t have to ask this, I’d like you to refrain from any further charity visits.”

“What?!”

“It appears that’s what’s fanning the flames of the misunderstanding. That I’m forcing the virtuous Lady Rífa to do lowly tasks against her wishes.”

“Wh-What?! Are you serious?!” Her voice broke as she asked in surprise.

These rumors weren’t only completely baseless, but the total opposite of what was really occurring! She even felt a bit of rage toward her people for being fooled so easily. Then, in the next moment, she felt like crying. She felt so

guilty for causing so much trouble for Yuuto.

“I’m sorry... I really am useless. I caused all this simply because I insisted on doing something...”

This must be how it felt to be so ashamed as to want to hide in a hole.

For her, this had been the most freedom she’d ever had in her life. Of course, as a result, she had also been shown just how little she knew—and she had struggled with that knowledge—but even that felt precious to her. Until now, after all, she had been a caged bird who hadn’t been allowed to experience anything.

She felt immense shame at the fact that she could only repay all the gifts that Yuuto had given her by freeing her with even more problems for him to cope with.

“Lady Rífa, you’ve done nothing wrong. This is all down to Hárbarth’s scheming. Even if you had stayed out of the limelight and holed up in the palace, I’m sure similar rumors would have spread.”

“That might be true, but...”

She appreciated Yuuto’s reassurance, but it didn’t lift her spirits.

She wanted to show off to the man she loved. She wanted to be useful, but she only caused him problems. She couldn’t help but hate herself for that.

“Well, we’ve already taken steps to deal with it, so don’t worry.”

“Well... If you say so...”

As it would turn out, however, the situation didn’t improve—if anything, it continued to worsen.

“It seems that Yuuto’s reputation is still suffering...”

“That it is. The people are now treating Lord Yuuto as nothing more than a villain.”

“Guh...”

Upon hearing Fagrahvél’s report, Rífa bit down on her lower lip in frustration.

It had been ten days since the earthquake, and the rate of spread of the bad rumors surrounding Yuuto hadn't slowed—it had accelerated, in fact.

"Get out of Glaðsheimr, Suoh-Yuuto!"

"This city belongs to the þjóðann and to us!"

"Free the þjóðann!"

Such cries were now echoing throughout the city.

"They're such thankless people, considering that the truth is the exact opposite," Rífa murmured, quivering with rage.

If it weren't for him, many of those very citizens would be dying from starvation and exposure to the harsh Yggdrasil winter.

In fact, if he were to leave now, the people of Glaðsheimr would certainly not last the winter.

"Why don't they understand that...?"

She was embarrassed as Glaðsheimr's representative.

She could understand their grievances in rational terms. Certainly, being forced to live in the halls with strangers, all stuffed in together, would be both mentally and emotionally exhausting.

As for food, they couldn't eat what they wanted, and what they could eat, there wasn't much of. Compared to before the earthquake, their quality of life had taken a dive.

Given that it had overlapped with Yuuto taking over the governance of the city, it was understandable that the people wanted to blame him for it.

She understood that, but she still couldn't accept it.

"I want to show the people the real Lord Yuuto—is there not anything I can do, Fagrahvél?"

"I've been discussing this with Bára, but this sort of information warfare is what Hárbarth does best, and we are struggling to come up with solutions... Lady Kristina is doing her best, but given that this was his home ground, she can't help but be at a disadvantage..."

“I see...”

Rífa slumped her shoulders.

Bára was Fagrahvél’s trusted adviser and the Sword Clan’s master strategist. She had heard that Bára possessed a sharp mind, but learning that things would be difficult even with her help made Rífa’s heart sink.

“My Iaaady. Yooour Maaajesty.”

With a knock on the door came an exceedingly leisurely and languid voice.

Speaking of the devil, it was Bára herself.

“What is it, Bára?”

“We have a prooblem. The people gathered in the squaaaare are riotooting.”

“What?!”

Fagrahvél and Rífa lapsed into a shocked silence.

While Bára’s tone played down just how bad things were, it was clearly an emergency.

“Lord Yuuto!”

Feeling the need to start somewhere, Rífa made her way to Yuuto’s office, where she found him rubbing his forehead with an extremely troubled expression.

“Oh, hello Lady Rífa.”

After a moment’s pause, he turned his eyes toward her. His face looked ragged, each of its features heavy with fatigue.

“I’ve heard my people have started a riot...”

“Yes, there’s about five thousand rioters,” Yuuto stated matter-of-factly. “They took advantage of the fact that I didn’t have enough soldiers stationed due to the rescue efforts. They attacked the five food storage warehouses simultaneously, and they currently continue to occupy them. It seemed they had help from the refugees within the palace, and we had no time to react.”

“By the gods!”

The situation was much more dire than she had imagined.

It went without saying, but people couldn’t live without eating. The rioters being in control of the city’s food stores made for a very dangerous situation indeed.

“The rioters ignored everything else and headed straight for them. They’re clearly led by someone who knows the palace’s layout extremely well.”

“That damned Hárbarth. To fan the flames in such a manner when the country is under this unprecedeted threat... He is a thoroughly rotten man. If only he’d chosen to simply retire and spend his last days sipping tea...”

He was a man who would understand that this situation would erode the people’s own standing. If this were to continue, large numbers of people would starve to death.

Even with that stark reality presented to him, he still chose to enact this plan of his to further his own twisted ambitions. It seemed the man didn’t have the faintest trace of a conscience.

“For the moment, we’ve sent out the army, and we’ve finished cordoning off each location. We’re currently attempting to negotiate with them, but none seem willing to listen...”

Yuuto pinched the bridge of his nose between his index finger and thumb and sighed.

She could tell at a mere glance that he was struggling to deal with this situation.

Ordinarily, however clever Hárbarth might be, Yuuto wouldn’t have been caught in such a disadvantageous position. However, Hárbarth had made great use of the sudden disaster, manipulating Yuuto’s love of the people for his own gain.

“It would be easy to put this down with force, but if we do that, it’ll just make the tension between us and the residents that much worse. If things continue to worsen, though, we may be left with no choice.”

“That’s it!”

“Lady Rífa?!”

No longer able to stay idle, Rífa turned on her heel and ran out of the office.

Rífa knew the layout of the Valaskjálf Palace well. She arrived at the nearest food store without losing her way.

As Yuuto had said, there were armed soldiers blocking the hall.

“Y-Your Majesty?! I-It isn’t safe here!”

“That is of no importance! Get out of the way! I’ll convince the rioters to stand down!”

Rífa stood firm and raised her voice.

What moved her now was pure anger.

Anger toward Hárbarth for interrupting Yuuto’s efforts to help her people for no reason other than to satisfy his own greed, and also toward the rioters who were being used by Hárbarth.

More than anything, though, toward the fundamental cause of this situation —her own lack of power.

“B-But...”

“Be quiet and get out of the way!”

“Ah?!”

The soldier hesitated, but he flinched at Rífa’s intense aura and soon cleared out of the way.

She had been born with a weak constitution and was unable to walk under the sun—and her unusual appearance had made others view her with suspicion.

She hadn’t let that handicap stop her though, and if anything, she had focused on learning politics, governance, martial arts, and seiðrs as regularly as she could, health permitting, of course.

It was an easy thing to say, but it wasn’t something that could be done with

less than remarkable strength of will.

Unlike her frail appearance, however, she had an incredible amount of willpower.

It was true that she had lost some of that confidence due to seeing first-hand just how little experience she had, but now that she'd been overcome with anger, she wasn't someone a mere soldier could stop.

The sound of the soldiers swallowing was audible, as one by one the soldiers were shoved aside by Rífa's formidable gaze, clearing the way for her to pass.

“O-Oh, Your Majesty!”

“You were safe!”

“Look, Your Majesty, we've secured the food stores!”

“If we have this much, we won't have to be hungry anymore!”

The rioters, upon seeing Rífa, started reporting their accomplishments with pride.

Their expressions indicated they felt they hadn't done anything wrong—in fact, they seemed to believe they had worked hard for the sake of the people of Glaðsheimr.

That was enough to break the last barrier holding back the flood of Rífa's rage.

“You... FOOLS!”

What came next was a thundering voice—one filled with rage—a voice that no one could have imagined could possibly come from such a young and frail-looking woman.

“Eep!”

The rioters, who had believed they would be praised, suddenly drew back, as though someone had hit them in the face.

“You don't have the faintest idea of what you have done! Lord Yuuto has been tirelessly working and struggling on your behalf to save you, and this is how you repay him?! How dare you!”

Rífa began lecturing the rioters with a burning aura of fury.

Her anger was enough to make not only the rioters, but also the soldiers behind her, flinch and shrink back.

“Y-Your Majesty, you’re being deceived!”

One of the rioters tried desperately to argue despite their fear.

Upon hearing that, the intimidated rioters also seemed to have regained their composure somewhat.

“Th-That’s right! Your Majesty, you’re being deceived by that man!”

“He’s stuffed us into that awful space!”

“And he keeps us from being adequately fed or warmed from the cold!”

“At the rate things were going, we would have soon starved or frozen to death!”

“And look at this! Look how much food they’ve stolen away for themselves!”

They began whining and airing all their accumulated grievances. This was all probably true from their point of view. They had all probably been suffering under their current circumstances.

Even so, Rífa couldn’t contain her confusion and frustration at just how foolish they were being.

“You do not understand a thing...”

Her voice had gone beyond anger and was filled, instead, with sadness.

“Then why are you still alive, neither starving nor freezing?! It’s because Lord Yuuto pushed back against the objections of the courtiers and opened the palace to you! It’s because he provided you all with the foodstuffs they brought for themselves to instead feed you!”

She still tried to muster her will and yell out, but...

“Th-That can’t be the case.”

“Th-Then why are we so hungry?!”

“Y-Your Majesty, you mustn’t be deceived!”

“Th-That’s right! You’re going to believe a foreigner over us?!”

It seemed she couldn’t reach the hearts of the rioters. They, too, were desperately trying to survive, and had risked everything to act. They simply didn’t have the luxury of listening to anyone else’s views.

“Why don’t you understand...?”

No matter how sincerely she engaged them, she couldn’t soothe their souls that had been frozen by pain and anger. She was, in the end, just a useless little girl.

She slumped her shoulders.

And then, just as her spirit was about broken—

“Lady Rífa!”

Hearing Yuuto’s voice, she grit her teeth, and she forced herself to bear it—her frustration, her disappointment, and her anger. He was shouldering so much more than she was.

He must have overcome all sorts of pains and struggles in contrast to his successes. With that in mind, she couldn’t very well give up here.

No matter how far she had fallen, she was still the *þjóðann*. How could she stand at his side without being able to do something about her own people?!

“I am the *þjóðann*—Hm?”

An incredible thought suddenly hit her. Yuuto’s Steel Clan was stocked with a remarkable amount of talent. What was it that she, and no one else, had among that group?

That had to be the title of *þjóðann*, and what came with that was...

She took a deep breath and sang, letting her magic ride her song.

It was a galdr of calming.

The galdr itself wasn’t difficult. She’d heard Felicia would sing it to help Yuuto sleep.

Ordinarily it would only provide a small amount of reassurance, but it became something else entirely when sung by Rífa—a twin-runned Einherjar—who was

already quite talented, had also spent years working to perfect her skills as a seiðr wielder.

The rioters turned their attention to listening intently to her beautiful voice, as though entranced.

As her song permeated the space, the hostility quickly ebbed out of the faces of the rioters. They began to calm down.

Eventually, when Rífa finished singing...

“M-My apologies, Your Majesty!”

“We were wrong!”

“We felt your thoughts, Your Majesty!”

“Yeah! We truly understand that you were really concerned for us!”

The rioters all tossed aside their weapons and wept, kneeling in place, apologizing as though they’d woken from a nightmare.

Art can, at times, overcome all reason.

Rífa’s song communicated her feelings to them better than any number of words ever could.

“Y-Your Majesty! W-We’re so very sorry! We...”

“It’s fine. From now on, think of Lord Yuuto as my equal and listen to his words. That is all that I ask,” Rífa said gently, as she spoke to the head of the rioters, who had kowtowed in front of her.

He, too, had evidently been moved by Rífa’s song, felt her heart, and regretted his actions.

“Well done, Lady Rífa. Honestly, you really bailed us out there,” Yuuto said, offering his heartfelt gratitude.

“I-I-It was amazing. I-I-I was so moved that my tears won’t stop.”

Next to him stood Fagrahvél, who sobbed as she was overwhelmed with emotion.

She felt faintly shy, but it wasn't a bad feeling.

"Heheh, that wasn't much work for me."

In contrast to her words, Rífa puffed out her chest proudly.

She had a bad habit of getting carried away, but no one thought to correct her today, not even in their hearts.

"No, no, that really was impressive. I wouldn't have believed it if you'd told me we'd be able to peacefully liberate all five of the locations."

Deeply moved, Yuuto offered his unstinting praise.

Yes, the fact that they were able to retake all five food stores without resorting to using any amount of force—and without spilling a drop of blood as a result—was definitely thanks to Rífa's efforts.

The rioters hadn't listened no matter how hard the Steel Clan's people had tried to persuade them, but after hearing Rífa's song, they threw down their weapons and surrendered.

It was a miraculous achievement that was only possible because of Rífa's ability to effectively wield the magic possessed by a twin-runed Einherjar. It was a feat no one else could perform.

"Heh... Well, with my power, such a thing is simple enough. If anything else happens, feel free to ask me for help. But, well, that was tiring even for me. I'll be returning to my room to rest."

"Oh, yes. Thank you so much for your hard work today."

"Mm."

Rífa lightly waved, turned on her heel, and rounded a corner in the hallway.

In an instant, she felt her strength leave her body, and she wobbled in place.

She somehow maintained her footing and kept from collapsing, but she felt a disquieting cough escape her mouth.

She pressed her palm to her mouth to bite back the sounds of her coughing.

"Rí..."

“Ah!”

Fagrahvél, who had followed her, tried to raise her voice upon seeing Rífa’s state, but Rífa immediately quieted her by pressing her hand to Fagrahvél’s mouth.

“Don’t raise your voice. It’ll tip off Lord Yuuto,” Rífa said in a quiet voice, slowly gazing at Fagrahvél.

She waited until Fagrahvél nodded before releasing her hand.

“L-Lady Rífa. Th-That’s...!”

Fagrahvél had lowered her voice, but her tone was tense.

Her eyes went from Rífa’s mouth to her hand and back. Rífa smiled self-deprecatingly and glanced down at her right hand.

Her hand was slick with her own blood.



ACT 5

“Phew...”

Rífa slowly let out a long breath as she finished her song.

Her entire body felt sluggish—as though her limbs were made of lead—but she maintained a cheerful façade, her face beaming with a smile as she waved her hands toward the gathered masses.

A thundering mass of cheers and applause shook the air on a night where only the moon and torches shone through the darkness.

Thousands of the city’s common folk had poured into the space where Glaðsheimr’s Hliðskjálf had once stood. Once reputed to be the tallest building in Yggdrasil, the sacred tower had collapsed in the great earthquake, but now its towering form was replaced by the energetic thrum of the gathered crowd.

The masses had gathered to listen to Rífa’s song.

“Your Majesty! That was wonderful!”

“Such an amazing voice. I can feel it purifying my soul.”

“Listening to her makes my troubles feel so trivial.”

“Yeah, it makes you want to get up and get back to work.”

“Thank you gods for such a blessing!”

All of those gathered in the space were moved to tears, their emotions spilling from their eyes as they offered magnificent praise for their þjóðann.

The news that Rífa had calmed the rioters and defused the situation with her song had quickly spread through the streets of Glaðsheimr. It had been the only thing the populace could talk about.

After hearing that the city was abuzz with the news, Rífa had conducted public concerts each night in the hopes that her galdr would soothe some of the pain that the earthquake and its after-effects had brought about. Tonight had

been the fifth such night where she'd woven her song for the sake of her people.

The crowds that gathered each night to hear Rífa sing had been so large that Yuuto had been forced to hurriedly create and issue tickets to organize the crowds into manageable sizes.

"All of you, thank you for your hard work today. Make sure you listen to Lord Yuuto and give it your all tomorrow too!"

Rífa's voice rang out to the gathered masses, amplified by Fagrahvél's rune, Gjallarhorn.

Fagrahvél could use her rune to amplify a specific individual's voice so that it could be heard inside a given radius. She had previously used it so that her generals could rally their forces in battle, but it was an ability that was also perfectly suited to sending Rífa's galdr out to a much wider audience.

In addition to their personalities, Rífa and Fagrahvél were quite complementary in terms of ability.

"Lady Rífa, that was absolutely amazing!"

The moment that Rífa was out of eyeshot of the audience, Mitsuki glomped on to her and gave her a huge hug. Rífa returned the embrace and smiled.

"Oh, you always exaggerate. I'm sure you're tired of hearing it by now."

"Nuh-uh, never ever ever! Every time I hear it I'm so moved my tears practically run dry!"

Because Mitsuki's voice was faintly raspy from weeping, she was particularly persuasive. Rífa could really feel that she was sincerely moved by the song.

"I see, I see."

Rífa nodded happily and gently patted Mitsuki's back.

Rífa was, of course, well aware that it wasn't just her voice that was tugging at people's heartstrings—it was the galdr's psychological effects that were having the biggest impact on people.

There was a part of Rífa that felt a twinge of guilt for "cheating" with the use

of magic, but this power was also an inseparable part of her identity, something that was uniquely hers and hers alone.

Rífa sang with a pride that was fueled by the awareness that this was something only she could do, something that she was uniquely able to accomplish.

“Well done. Tonight’s song was as wonderful as always. The odd rumors have all but stopped lately. It’s all because you’ve done so much to talk me up, Rífa.”

“Heheh, well, it’s a good woman that talks up her husband in public, I’m told!”

Rífa puffed out her chest proudly, jokingly holding her nose up in a little display of playful arrogance.

“Ack!”

She had puffed out her chest a bit too far—she soon lost her balance and almost fell backward.

“Perhaps going a little overboard there, Lady Rífa,” Fagrahvél said as she moved over to catch Rífa right before she ended up sprawled on the ground.

“There’s more to do tomorrow, I’m afraid it’s time for you to rest.”

Fagrahvél then took advantage of having Rífa in her arms to drag her away.

“Sheesh, you’re always going to be overly protective of me, aren’t you?” Rífa said as she pouted at Fagrahvél to show her displeasure. In spite of that, however, she made no effort to stop her. “She tends to give me quite an earful if I resist too much, so I’ll head out for the night. Good night.”

Rífa waved to Yuuto and Mitsuki as she was dragged away. She waited until she felt no one else nearby, glanced around to confirm her suspicions, then finally turned to face Fagrahvél.

“I’m always grateful for your help, Fagrahvél.”

“No, this is the very least I would do for you, Lady Rífa... Are you feeling okay?”

“I feel the same as always... As bad as always.”

Rífa let out a self-deprecating chuckle as she quipped about her health.

“...Perhaps you should stop with these efforts, then?”

“We’ve already gone over this plenty of times, haven’t we?”

“But!”

Fagrahvél raised her voice in an effort to argue, but Rífa’s commitment was iron-clad.

“I don’t have much time left. At least let me enjoy that time, mm?”

“...”

Rífa smiled bravely, as though to spite the tragic hand that fate had dealt her. Her unwavering determination and spirit in defiance of despair was enough to reduce even Fagrahvél to silence.

Rífa herself had realized the change in her body shortly after she’d regained consciousness in the Sword Clan’s territory.

It had gotten much harder for her to exert herself and she tired much more easily than before. Further, she struggled to make her right hand obey her.

At first, she had thought it was because she had woken from a six-month-long coma and needed to get used to moving again.

She had expected things to get better as she reacclimated herself to her own body, but after ten days, she had realized that her health wasn’t getting any better—if anything, she was slowly growing weaker. Rífa hadn’t wanted to admit it, but she was forced to face that reality.

The fact that she had overexerted herself when bringing Yuuto back to this world was probably the root cause of her weakness.

Rífa clearly remembered her right hand feeling as though it had shattered completely when she had cast the second Gleipnir during that ritual. It had been one of the last things she had felt before she lost consciousness.

That was probably why her right hand was behaving oddly.

And it was from that right hand that Rífa felt her life force rapidly draining away.

The day that Rífa had coughed up blood, Fagrahvél had summoned several healers regarded to be the greatest in Glaðsheimr and had them examine Rífa, but all of them had shaken their heads, declaring that they couldn't identify a cause.

Fagrahvél had then sought out the assistance of Sigyn, the former patriarch of the Panther Clan and a powerful seiðr wielder known as the Witch of Miðgarðr. Fagrahvél had hoped that a seiðr wielder—especially one of her caliber—could determine what was wrong with her.

However—

“Your spirit’s right hand has been blasted away. Your ásmegin is bleeding out of that wound. Honestly, I’m surprised that you’re still alive at all. Ordinarily, in this state, the body would quickly weaken and die. I believe it’s your remarkable power as a twin-runed Einherjar that’s keeping you alive.”

That had been Sigyn’s diagnosis.

Fagrahvél had grabbed Sigyn and demanded to know if there was anything that could be done, but in spite of Fagrahvél’s desperation to save her sister, Sigyn could only shake her head and say there was nothing left to do.

Rífa had agreed with Sigyn’s diagnosis. Rífa herself was also a seiðr wielder, so she was well versed in wielding ásmegin. That knowledge and experience was enough to make her realize the truth—that she simply didn’t have much time left.

It took Fagrahvél some time to accept that fact.

She had convinced herself that Rífa would get better if she ate better and got plenty of rest, but Rífa couldn’t accept that ‘remedy.’

Rífa had spent her life locked away in the deepest depths of the Valaskjálf Palace. The last thing she wanted was to return to the gilded cage she had been trapped in and die there.

She wanted to spend her last days doing things that she hadn’t been able to do until now. She didn’t want to have any regrets when her time came.

“Fagrahvél, for the first time in my life, I actually feel alive. This is my last

selfish wish. Let me do as I want.”

Those words. Those were the words that forced even Fagrahvél, tears flowing from her eyes, to acknowledge the truth and accept Rífa’s wishes.

“Heheh, if I leave such a powerful impression on them—Lord Yuuto and the others, as well as Glaðsheimr’s people... They’ll all remember me, I’m sure of it.”

Rífa proudly chuckled to Fagrahvél as she peeked out at her sister from under her bed’s blankets.

She had been dragged to her room by Fagrahvél and had been put to bed regardless of her objections.

The truth was that Rífa’s excitement hadn’t settled yet, and she wasn’t sleepy at all. However, because Fagrahvél was allowing her to do as she pleased, Rífa supposed that a bit of overprotectiveness on her big sister’s part was unavoidable.

Yes, Fagrahvél was respecting her wishes, but Rífa knew that deep down Fagrahvél still hoped that Rífa would live as long as she possibly could.

She felt a faint flush of shyness at that knowledge, but that was overshadowed by the joy and gratitude she felt toward her.

“Yes, I believe they’ll tell their children and their grandchildren just how wonderful your song was.”

“I feel like that might be overselling it a bit. You’re far too partial to me.”

“It’s only natural as a vassal to love and respect one’s liege and to favor them above all else. At the very least, I plan to leave it as a family lesson and teach my children and grandchildren, and every generation after them, just how wonderful your songs were.”

“Oh? If you’re going to proclaim it that boldly, then surely you must have someone in mind to have those children with?”

“Th-That’s not what I meant! I was talking about the people of the Sword Clan.”

“A pity, considering how beautiful you are.”

“I’m nothing so special! Particularly next to your radiance, Lady Rífa! You’re a far lovelier woman than I!” Fagrahvél energetically shook her head and said with complete, sober earnestness.

“You always say that, but...”

Rífa shook her head and let out a sigh of exasperation.

Frankly, Fagrahvél was a woman of extraordinary beauty. If she were to walk down the streets of Glaðsheimr, nine out of every ten passersby would turn their heads to follow her. To be called beautiful by a woman like that, well, honestly, some of it sounded like an excess of false modesty, but...

“I’m well aware that you don’t like your appearance, Lady Rífa. However, this is a point on which I can’t possibly bend!”

As could be seen in Fagrahvél’s attitude, she was in fact deathly serious—completely and utterly committed to that belief.

No matter how many times Rífa had tried to argue otherwise, she’d not budged an inch on this matter.

“You know, there are times when you’re absurdly stubborn.”

“The first time I saw you, I was in awe at your beauty. Perhaps the reason I’ve served you for so long is because your beauty had grasped my heart that day and has never let go since.”

“That’s quite enough about me for now! We’re talking about you!”

The amount of praise heaped upon her was too much for Rífa to bear, and she forcefully tried to change the subject.

“Ah...”

In stark contrast to her attitude until now, Fagrahvél’s reply sounded utterly indifferent.

Evidently, she had absolutely zero interest in her own appearance.

“You have been blessed with such magnificent beauty. You are of a good age, so go and find someone to marry already.”

“Haha, surely there aren’t any men who’d want a spinster of my age.”

Fagrahvél waved her hand dismissively and laughed.

In Yggdrasil, it was typical for a woman to marry in her mid-teens. In that sense, the fact that Fagrahvél was unmarried in her mid-twenties made her a proper spinster and old maid, but Fagrahvél herself showed no sign of concern. She was, perhaps, beyond help.

“You know, Fagrahvél. I sincerely appreciate the fact that you’ve served me so loyally over the years, but I want you to start thinking about your own happiness.”

“My happiness comes from serving you, Lady Rífa.”

Fagrahvél replied to Rífa’s statement without a hint of hesitation. No doubt she meant every word, which made it all the more problematic for Rífa.

“You say that, but you have a long life ahead of...”

“Please don’t say that. No matter what happens, I’m your vassal, and as presumptuous as it is, your elder sister. That won’t change, not during my lifetime, or even beyond it!” Fagrahvél declared flatly. There wasn’t even a hint of an opening for Rífa to exploit.

In spite of everything Fagrahvél was saying, Rífa sincerely wanted her beloved older sister to find as much happiness as there was to have in this world. Fagrahvél had served her so loyally without question over the years... Rífa didn’t want her to be tied down to the memory of her after she was gone.

The night wore on as she pondered just what to do about this problem.

“This is it, this is it.”

Rífa pointed at the market stall and grabbed Yuuto by the arm, dragging him along to the stall in question.

Glaðsheimr’s main street was filled with countless tents manned by merchants hawking their wares. The city had regained much of the energy that had been dampened by the earthquake.

“Huh, this does look good.”

Yuuto peered into the stall where the savory smell of grilling meat made him swallow.

He had come down to the city in disguise to see how daily life was going for the populace now that the situation in Glaðsheimr had settled down somewhat. Rífa had taken advantage of the opportunity and accompanied him on his inspection.

Rífa was able to walk about normally outside so long as it was in the evening, during the fading sunlight.

“See? I noted it when I passed by in my carriage a while back. I’d wanted to try it ever since.”

Rífa nodded as though Yuuto had hit the nail on the head with his remark.

The stall served a simple dish—pieces of beef skewered on wood skewers and grilled over a charcoal flame. It was simple, almost primitively so compared to the luxurious meals served at the palace, but there was something about the flame-grilled scent that excited the senses.

“Well then, let’s get some.”

“Hold on. Let me do it. I’ve never done this before, so I want to try it at least once.”

“Oh, sure. Here you go then.”

Yuuto nodded as though he understood, then reached into a leather pouch, produced a piece of silver the size of a bean, and handed it to Rífa. With the silver piece held in her palm, Rífa then walked over to the stall and showed it to the vendor as she spoke.

“Vendor, give me five beef skewers.”

“Thank you for your order! Hold on a moment. Oh, hey, it’s silver. How bold. You a lady from a good family?” the vendor asked, his expression warming into a smile.

Yggdrasil had no real concept of money, and most trade was direct barter. One of the items that was most appreciated for barter was silver. It was rare, easy to work, and had high value regardless of the region.

“Mm, yes, that about covers it.”

“Huh, well, you’re quite the beauty, Miss. Has the infamous reginarch of the Steel Clan made any advances toward you?”

“Oh, yes, I’ve had him approach me before.”

“Figures! He’s going to make *our* þjóðann his wife, but he’s already off cheating on her. The reginarch’s a hell of a womanizer, ain’t he?”

The vendor shook his head in mild exasperation. Rífa couldn’t resist breaking into a grin and glancing toward Yuuto. Just as she expected, Yuuto was frowning, almost pouting—drawing more laughter from her.

“Hehe, we only exchanged pleasantries. Still, you, calling Her Majesty ‘your’ þjóðann. You’re quite loyal to her, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Wait, could it be that you’ve never heard Her Majesty’s song?”

“Mm? Oh, well, no, I haven’t. I’ve never had an opportunity to listen to it properly.”

“That’s a crying shame. If you’re a resident of Glaðsheimr, then you *need* to hear her sing at least once before you die.”

“Oh? Is it that good?”

“Indeed it is! Everyone says that we’re blessed to live in a time where she walks among us!”

“O-Oh?”

Rífa couldn’t stop herself from smirking at the remarkable amount of praise being heaped upon her by the vendor standing in front of her. It was a little embarrassing to listen to, but at the same time, it was also extremely uplifting and comforting to hear.

“I lost my house in the last earthquake m’self.”

“O-Oh, my condolences on that one.”

“Yeah, I was in a deep hole, not sure what to do about tomorrow, but then I heard Her Majesty sing, and I felt my fear melt away. It made me want to keep trying, to work hard each day to rebuild what I’d lost.”

“I-I see.”

Rífa drew back a bit as she made noises of agreement, a bit overwhelmed by the vendor’s passionate sermonizing. She could feel just how strongly he loved and respected the þjóðann and her song.

“Which is why you need to hear it at least once. Here, all set. A couple for your husband, eh?”

With a hearty shout, the vendor offered the skewers to Rífa and Yuuto with both hands.

As they accepted the skewers, Rífa chuckled to Yuuto.

“Heh, well here we are, husband. It seemed we looked like a couple to him.”

“So it seems.”

“...Hrmph, you’ve certainly become a dry one, haven’t you?”

Rífa pouted, seemingly a bit put off by his reaction.

She found it irritating since it felt like she was the only one who was giddy at the compliment. She could have sworn that a year ago he would have shown a bit more life at the remark, whether it be from embarrassment or panic.

“Yes, he’s no longer nearly as fun to tease.”

A voice from below noted their agreement with Rífa’s sentiment.

It was Kristina, who was accompanying them on their inspection.

“Indeed.”

Rífa nodded as Kristina struck the nail on the head with her observation.

“I must say, it is interesting how no one notices! Even considering the fact that we’re in disguise, your power is still a really useful one. Here, this is for you.”

Rífa handed Kris a skewer as she spoke.

“You honor me with your praise.”

Kristina accepted the beef skewer with a cool, flat expression completely at odds with her words.

Kristina's rune, Veðrfölnir, the Silencer of Winds, could hide not just Kristina's presence, but the presence of those who held her hand, making it harder to notice them in a crowd. She was invaluable when going out in disguise to inspect the city.

"Your Majesty! One for me! One for me, too!"

Their other companion, Albertina, wiped the drool off her chin as she begged for her own skewer.

Although she looked exactly like her twin sister, Albertina's reaction was the exact opposite of her younger sibling Kristina.

"Here, there you are."

"Your Majesty, a moment."

Just as Rífa was about to hand it to Albertina, Kristina took the skewer.

"Huh? What?! Kris?!"

Of course, Albertina was reduced to tears as the morsel was withheld from her, but...

"Oh Al, you know that only those who work are allowed to eat. I've been doing my job hiding their presence, but you haven't done anything yet."

"Huh?! I-I've been protecting them all this time!"

"Don't lie! It's obvious that you haven't been paying attention to guarding them and that you've been distracted by everything going on in the street."

"Errrm!"

Albertina's words dissolved into a soft murmur as she failed to find the words to respond. It seemed that Kris had hit the mark.

"If you really want to have one, then you should show off a talent to entertain Father and Her Majesty."

"A t-talent?"

"Yes. Shake."

She had been thoroughly trained by her sister—Albertina reflexively placed

her hand on Kristina's, as though she were a dog being commanded to shake hands.

“Beg.”

Pfft. This time, Albertina placed the opposite hand on the ground.

“Turn three times and bark!”

She did as she was told and spun on the spot three times, and then...

“Woof!”

“Well done, here you go.”

“Yay! Thanks, Kris!”

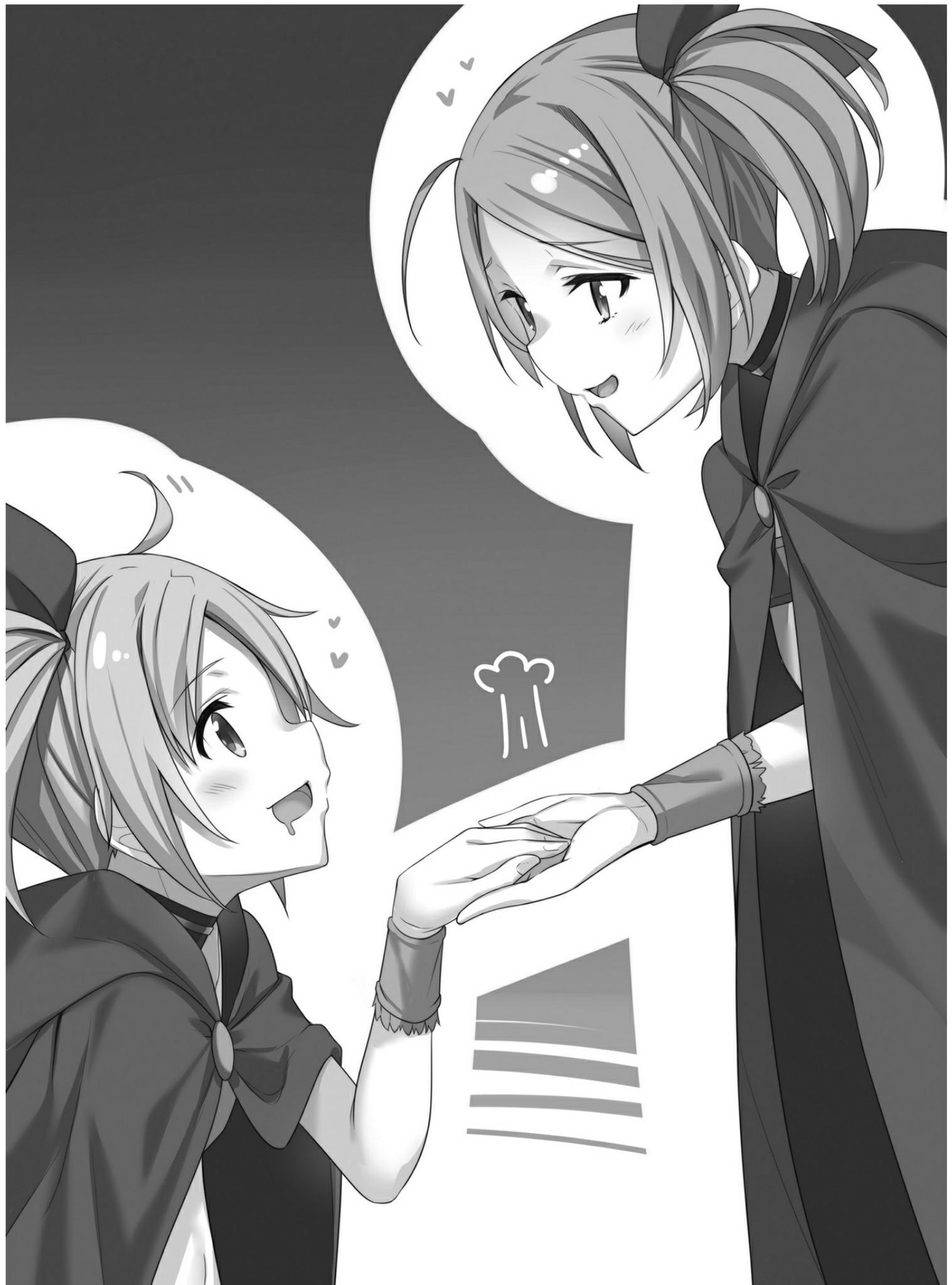
Albertina took the skewer offered by Kristina with a look of utter delight. She had been reduced to the role of a dog.

“Mmm! Yummy!”

However, Albertina showed no signs of caring about what had just happened and let out a murmur of delight as she took a bite of her skewer.

Kristina nodded as she watched Albertina eat.

“Father, Your Majesty, we've finished testing the skewers. They should be safe to eat.”



“Did you just use me as a poison taster?!” Albertina said with a look of shock, tears welling in her eyes.

The exchange between the twins was too much for Rífa, who burst out in laughter.

“Ahahahaha, you two haven’t changed at all! Al, you, in particular, are as entertaining as I remembered!”

Rífa gazed fondly at them as she continued to chuckle.

During Rífa’s stay in lárnviðr, she had spent quite a bit of time in Albertina’s company. Albertina’s cheerful innocence and her lack of concern about Rífa’s rank, or suspicion about Rífa’s actions, had been a source of comfort for Rífa, and they had gotten along well.

“Ngh...”

It appeared Albertina wasn’t quite satisfied with the situation, and she let out a murmur of displeasure as she pouted out her lips. To Rífa, that expression also struck her as adorable.

“Now then, Lord Yuuto, why don’t we eat as well?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Let’s see...” he said, taking the time to stuff his face with the skewered meat before continuing, “Mm, just like in lárnviðr. The flavoring is simple with just a touch of salt, but that’s what makes it so good.”

“Agreed. The dishes the chefs produce are delicious in their own way, but there are times where I crave this kind of simplicity.”

“Quite!”

Rífa nodded in agreement and took several more bites. She quickly gobbled up her skewer then took in the sights and sounds of the city with affection.

Her eyes caught many a collapsed building and she couldn’t help but feel a pang of sadness at the sight. She would have liked to have walked the city before it had been destroyed by the earthquake.

Despite all the tragedy, however, the city’s people had dusted themselves off

and started moving on with their lives. Her music had contributed, in some measure, to this recovery. Rífa could appreciate her own contributions as she watched the city go about its business.

“Lord Yuuto, thank you for bringing me out here. I won’t ever forget this.”

“Heh, now you’re just exaggerating. All we did was take a walk through the city and have a snack,” Yuuto responded with a surprised smile, as though caught off guard by Rífa’s sudden remark.

It was true. At first glance, he hadn’t done much for her; this was just a walk in the city, as he had said.

For Rífa, though, that simple act had been something that had long been far out of her reach. For her to be able to indulge in that little act, and with the man she loved by her side no less—she couldn’t have asked for anything more. She had never imagined the experience would be so fulfilling.

For those reasons, Rífa simply couldn’t stop herself from smiling.

“Heh, this is the greatest indulgence that I could ever have hoped for.”

“We’re holding the ceremony in three days?!” Rífa exclaimed in surprise as Yuuto suddenly dropped the announcement when he appeared in her room the next morning.

The ceremony, of course, referred to the marriage ceremony between Yuuto and Rífa that had been delayed due to the people’s anger and frustration in the wake of the earthquake and the resulting misery that had followed.

The ceremony was something that Rífa had looked forward to. However—

“Father, isn’t this a bit sudden?” Fagrahvél, who had been standing next to her, asked, as though speaking on Rífa’s behalf.

She couldn’t keep the anger from showing on her expression.

Fagrahvél’s anger was understandable. A *þjóðann*’s wedding would ordinarily require at least six months of preparation.

Forgoing that preparation and conducting it in a mere three days’ time was a clear sign of disrespect toward the *þjóðann*. Given the supply shortages forced

upon the capital from the response to the earthquake, it was difficult to imagine that the ceremony would be anything close to adequate.

“Yes, I’m well aware that it’s lacking in respect. But, I humbly request that you accept the proposal.”

“Whatever the reasons you may have, to treat Her Majesty this way...”

“Now hold on, Fagrahvél. Lord Yuuto wouldn’t make this sort of proposal without putting any thought into it.”

Rífa held up her hand to quiet Fagrahvél and calmly looked over to Yuuto.

Up until very recently, her combination of a lack of confidence in her own worth and anxiety would have pushed her to bombard Yuuto with questions about his plans, but now that Rífa had discovered a purpose, she had the emotional breathing room to take a step back and wait.

Rífa also had a fair idea of why Yuuto would be in such a hurry.

“Yes. The earthquake has already happened. The people have calmed down enough now, removing any further reason for delay,” she said, attempting to illuminate a frustrated and confused Fagrahvél to Lord Yuuto’s current thought process.

“I thank you for your understanding.”

“Lady Rífa?!”

In spite of Rífa’s attempts, Fagrahvél was left unable to follow the conversation, merely blinking her eyes in confusion. It was perhaps unavoidable given that she didn’t have all of the information necessary to make sense of the exchange.

“Besides, it’s something I’ve wanted for a long time.”

“Ah!”

Once Rífa glanced knowingly at Fagrahvél and smiled, Fagrahvél appeared to have come to an understanding.

Rífa, like Yuuto, didn’t have time to keep holding off the marriage.

If she was being honest, she wasn’t sure if she’d even be alive in six months.

Three days from now was the perfect timing from Rífa's point of view.

"Mm? What are you talking about?"

It was now Yuuto's turn to tilt his head in puzzlement.

He couldn't help it, of course, seeing as he was out of the loop concerning Rífa's state of health. She had no intention of cluing him in, either.

She didn't want to live under the weight of being treated like a dying woman. If these were to be her last days, she wanted to be able to live them happy and at peace.

Rífa gently placed her index finger against her lips.

"It's a maiden's secret."

"Still, I have to admit, it's quite nerve-racking."

Rífa was visiting Mitsuki's room that night. She swallowed to clear the lump in her throat and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

This wasn't the first time she had been here. Given that she and Mitsuki got along as though they were long-separated twins, she was a frequent visitor to Mitsuki's room.

However, this night of all nights, she honestly wanted to turn on her heel and sprint away as fast as her body could take her.

"Will they really accept me, I wonder?"

The reason Rífa was here tonight was because she had been invited to a tea party hosted by Mitsuki.

The rest of the party consisted of Felicia, Sigrún, Albertina, and Kristina—all women who made up Yuuto's inner circle.

She could tell, based on their interactions with Yuuto, that both Felicia's and Sigrún's relationships with him were much more than platonic—though, certainly, the twins were not involved in such ways, as they were still too young for that.

Rífa was the newcomer in all this, and despite being the newest addition to

the group, she was going to be his second official wife, placing her above the others in terms of hierarchy. In their place, she couldn't imagine being amused by her presence.

As þjóðann, Rífa was well-acquainted with the entire concept of a harem. While it was all elegance and beauty on the surface, beneath that surface lay a murky swamp of envy and scheming. She was also aware, at least in the abstract, that matters of romance would blow away any semblance of friendship between women.

However, those gathered for today's tea party had also been the friends she had broken bread with. Other than Fagrahvél, they were the first friends that Rífa had ever been able to relax and be herself with. She knew it would be difficult, but she wanted to be on friendly terms with them.

"Lady Rífa, I'm here with you."

"Mm."

She nodded a bit meekly at Fagrahvél's words.

Rífa did, in fact, find Fagrahvél's presence next to her to be extremely reassuring.

Taking in some courage from Fagrahvél's presence next to her, Rífa opened the door to the room.

"Welcome, Your Majesty."

She was welcomed into the room by a flaxen-haired young woman. The woman was Ephelia, Mitsuki's lady-in-waiting, and someone that Rífa had met multiple times in the past, and more recently, had exchanged many a conversation with.

"Lady Rífa, thank you for coming!"

Mitsuki, tonight's hostess, stood up and held out her arms in welcome.

Rífa let out a small sigh of relief upon seeing Mitsuki's joyful face, but she wasn't able to relax entirely quite yet.

Seated around the round table in the middle of the room were Felicia, Sigrún, Albertina, and Kristina, who had all arrived before her.

Rífa didn't share a special soul-bond with them like she did with Mitsuki. Her interactions with them here would be the moment of truth.

"I appreciate your invitation. I know it's not necessary, but allow me to properly introduce myself. I'm Sigrdrífa, soon to be Yuuto's new wife. It's a pleasure to be with all of you."

Rífa felt her heart hammering in her chest as she finished her introduction and waited for the other women to react.

Each moment felt like an eternity as she waited, but eventually, she was greeted by a pattering of applause.

For Rífa, it was, honestly, a tad anticlimactic.

For a moment she suspected they were welcoming her in name while hiding their true feelings, but a look at their faces wiped that suspicion from her mind.

"It's a pleasure to welcome you to our gathering, Lady Rífa," Mitsuki, representing the others, said with a warm smile.

Rífa was overcome with a feeling of heartfelt gratitude, having realized that Yuuto's first wife had welcomed her with such warmth. It stood to reason that the others would have followed her example and done so themselves.

"You don't need to address me as 'lady' or use formal language. After all, once I'm married, you'll be higher in the hierarchy than I am."

"If anything, Your Majesty, you should probably be the one using formal language. Right now it still sounds like you're higher ranked than her," Kristina stated matter-of-factly.

There it is, Rífa thought, her chest tightening as she maintained her cheerful façade.

She had to admit that she was somewhat impressed. Being able to speak in that tone to the *þjóðann*, a being revered as a living god by most of Yggdrasil, took quite a bit of nerve.

That aside, Kristina did have a point.

"Y-You're right... I, uh... I wish to ask for your forbearance... Lady Mitsuki...?"

“W-Wait, none of that, please! There’s no need to get all formal all of a sudden!”

“I must admit that it feels really odd for me as well, so if we can just dispense with all that, that would be wonderful.”

“Of course!”

“But, um, you don’t need to call me Lady anything. Just call me Rífa. I want you, my dearest of friends, to call me that, Mitsuki.”

“O... Okay! Rífa.”

Mitsuki and Rífa nodded to each other and they both reached over to embrace the other.

Soon after, the atmosphere at the tea party settled into a more cozy spot, and the discussion moved to lighthearted topics—something very common for such gatherings.

“I’ve gotta say, Yuu-kun really doesn’t understand women, does he?! I mean, three days from now? Really?!”

The subject, in due course, turned to that of the wedding ceremony that had suddenly been scheduled for three days’ time.

“There’s no way they can make you a proper dress in that short of a time. We’re gonna have to take one of your old dresses and make it into a wedding dress! All this despite the fact that a wedding dress is one of the most important dresses a girl will ever wear! It’d be one thing if he was poor, but he’s probably the richest guy in all of Yggdrasil!”

Strangely, it was Mitsuki, rather than Rífa herself, who was getting worked up into a frenzy over the rather brief timeline.

“I-I understand what you’re saying, but surely Big Brother has his reasons...”

“You know, Felicia, you’re always too easy on Yuu-kun!”

Felicia tried to calm Mitsuki’s anger, only to have her blast the effort into smithereens.

Given that Mitsuki wasn’t aware of the extenuating circumstances, perhaps it

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

Interestingly, it was Fagrahvél that perked up and passionately voiced her agreement with Mitsuki.

“Yes, he’s not valuing Her Majesty enough.”

“I know! It’s terrible!”

“Indeed! I am ever so glad that you, our great Mother, agree with my sentiment! I was, in all honesty, concerned about Lady Rífa joining Father’s harem, but if a woman such as yourself is there to support her in your position as the first wife... Well... it’s an enormous weight off my shoulders, Mother.”

“E-Err, really?”

“I can gladly entrust Lady Rífa to your care. I ask that your friendship and affection for her will continue for a long time to come.”

“Sure, you can count on me! You know, Miss Fagrahvél, you don’t feel like a stranger to me. It’s like I’ve known you for a long time.”

“What a coincidence. As presumptuous as this may sound, I feel the same. At first, I had thought it was because you looked exactly like Lady Rífa, but I feel like there’s something else...”

“I know, right? I look forward to getting to know you better, Miss Fagrahvél! I’m sure we’ll have a lot to talk about!”

“Yes! You honor me greatly.”

Mitsuki and Fagrahvél seemed to hit it off almost at once.

For Rífa, Mitsuki was her best friend, and Fagrahvél her milk-sister.

She had hoped the two would get along well, but to actually see it happening... She had to admit there was a part of her that couldn’t help but feel a tad bit envious...

“You know, speaking to you all like this, it reminds me of that meal we shared.”

Rífa thought nostalgically back to that time as she sipped her tea.

It had been the day after New Year's, a year ago now, in the dead of the previous year's winter. She had been huddled around a hotpot with the women of Yuuto's inner circle.

"Hotpot? Oh, I hadn't realized that you were the *þjóðann* at the time, Lady Rífa, pray forgive me for the disrespect at the time."

Sigrún bowed her head in apology, as though she'd just remembered what had happened that day. Rífa casually waved off the apology.

"No, no. I was intentionally hiding my identity, after all. It was a fresh experience to have someone put another person over me."

"Oh, yes, that was rather nerve-racking."

Felicia placed her palm against her forehead and sighed.

"Wait, you knew?"

"Yes. I am, after all, Big Brother's aide."

"You weren't exactly fully put together that time, either, if I recall."

"Whaaa?!"

"You got drunk, went on a rant, then started taking off your clothes."

"A-Are you sure about that?"

"Indeed, so it was, so it was. That was quite the sight."

"Please erase that from your mind."

Felicia shrank into a ball in embarrassment, her face flushed beet red.

Although Felicia ordinarily gave off the impression of being an extremely talented and capable woman, she tended to get rather wild when drunk.

"Are Linnea and Ingrid doing well? I should like to see them again."

"They're quite well. Though, they both seem to be quite busy. Lady Linnea is dealing with the rebuilding efforts from the earthquake while Lady Ingrid is busy with the weapons development that Father tasked her with," Kristina calmly stated in response to Rífa's question.

It seemed she had a solid grasp of what was happening in far-off Gimlé. Little

wonder she served as Yuuto's eyes and ears.

"Mm, I should like to soothe them by singing them a galdr, but I'm afraid to say that even I can't reach Gimlé with my song."

"Heh, true. I definitely wish we could have those two listen to your song, Rífa," Mitsuki said, a look of rapt admiration on her face as she remembered Rífa's song.

"Yup! Her Majesty's song is really great," Albertina said in agreement, closing her eyes as if remembering.

"Yes, it's a song that could be described as heavenly."

Felicia, who was a galdr wielder herself, sang Rífa's praises.

"Yeah! The first time I heard it, I couldn't stop crying!"

Ephelia eagerly added her own observation, momentarily forgetting the differences in their ranks.

"Definitely. While I know little about music, Her Majesty's song really speaks to the soul."

"Indeed. If she were a commoner, I'd have loved to recruit her into my Vindálfs."

Even Sigrún and Kristina, known for their calm, even dry personalities, lavished praise upon Rífa's song.

"Right, right! Her song is amazing!"

Mitsuki nodded repeatedly in enthusiastic agreement. She seemed to revel in the praise directed at Rífa as though it were her own.

While Rífa enjoyed the praise, she also found it a little embarrassing to hear it expressed so directly to her face.

"I-It isn't much to speak about."

"Please don't say that! It's amazing! Really!"

"The ones that are truly amazing are all of you here. I've heard that all of you have used your remarkable abilities to support Lord Yuuto through his time here, thick and thin. While it's true that Yuuto is a hero that even outshines the

sun, the achievements of the Steel Clan are only possible due to your hard work.”

With that, Rífa then drained her cup of tea.

She meant every word of what she had said, but a part of her felt like she'd let the mood nudge her into saying just a bit too much.

Perhaps because of her anxiety, her throat was dry as a desert.

“Mm?”

When she glanced over at the others, everyone other than Albertina was staring at her with their mouths agape.

“H-Have I said something wrong? Forgive me if I’ve offended you.”

Rífa hurriedly bowed her head in an anxious apology, but the women on the receiving end of that apology were, if anything, even more panicked at the gesture.

“N-No, not at all! You didn’t say anything wrong, Rífa!”

Mitsuki, who had come to her senses before the others, rapidly shook her head from side to side.

“Y-Yes, you haven’t said anything wrong... It’s just... Well... How do I phrase it... You’ve grown, haven’t you, Your Majesty?” Felicia said as she struggled to bring some order to her thoughts.

“Yes, you’re a much more impressive person than you were a year ago.”

Sigrún nodded gravely in agreement.

“Hm?”

Rífa furrowed her brow in confusion, not grasping what was being said.

From her perspective, she had only said what had seemed perfectly obvious, and she hadn’t said anything that should have earned her any praise. She couldn’t understand why they were praising her.

Oddly enough, it was Kristina, the one who had landed the blow earlier, that offered her the insight needed to grasp the situation.

“Lady Rífa, a year ago, even if you had offered us praise, you wouldn’t have shown any modesty in the process. No doubt you would have tried to show your own power and basked in a sense of superiority.”

“...Oh.”

Once again, Kristina spoke up with a complete lack of restraint, despite the fact that she was addressing the *þjóðann*. Rífa was honestly grateful for the lack of tact.

She hadn’t been entirely aware of it herself, but in hindsight, she could recall being desperate to show off her own power when she’d been with them last year.

“That’s probably because I’ve finally found some real self-confidence,” Rífa said quietly, chuckling with a note of self-deprecation.

It was only now that she understood that the arrogance she had carried herself with at the time was nothing more than an act—a defense mechanism to make up for her lack of self-confidence.

She had knowledge, so she deserved to be respected.

She had power, so she deserved to be respected.

She had authority, so she deserved to be respected.

Rífa felt like she had tried to get others to respect her so that she could use that to make up for her lack of confidence.

However, that sort of respect—forced respect and acknowledgment—did nothing to actually fulfill her.

Instead, she could feel it hollowing out her heart, leaving her to demand more from those around her, but in the process, she always ended up driving them further and further away.

That had been the loop that Rífa had been trapped in.

Until...

“I sang for my people. They were sincerely moved and truly acknowledged me as their *þjóðann*. I suppose I no longer feel the need to demand that people

respect my authority.”

Rífa had always felt a sense of inferiority based on her appearance. She had felt that everyone only knelt before her and praised her because she was þjóðann.

No longer, though. She had come to understand that the tears shed by the people who heard her song were genuine. So too were their serene expressions. Their expressions of joy.

It was something that Rífa had accomplished with her own abilities. In achieving that, Rífa had finally, for the first time in her life, felt proud of herself. She had finally been able to accept her own intrinsic worth.

If she had changed—if she had matured—it was because she had finally found that confidence.

“I don’t think I could have managed this on my own, though...”

Rífa was as certain of that fact as she was anything else.

Her heart was weak.

If Fagrahvél hadn’t been beside her, no doubt she would have withdrawn further from the world, hated her place in it, and ended up a thoroughly hollow shell of a human being.

“Fagrahvél, it’s all thanks to you. If I’ve grown it’s because you continued to support me and offer me the push I needed to move forward.”

“Lady... Rífa...”

Deeply moved, Fagrahvél held her hands over her mouth, tears welling in her eyes. The tears immediately started to spill down her cheeks.

Seeing that beautiful relationship between master and retainer, all of the women present couldn’t help but tear up as well.

“Lady Rífa. I... I... I’m truly blessed to be able to serve you...”

“How long do you plan to keep this up? I had no idea you were so prone to such hysterics.”

Fagrahvél's weeping showed no signs of letting up as she and Rífa made their way back from Mitsuki's room after the tea party. Rífa glanced briefly at the heavens and let out a sigh as Fagrahvél continued to sniffle and sob.

While Rífa had meant every word that she'd said, she hadn't expected Fagrahvél to fall so completely to pieces at the statement.

"Sheesh, just as things were getting cheerful and fun, you put a wet blanket over all of it with your crying."

"M-My apologies, b-but... That's just how much that entire occasion filled me with joy. I had never seen you smile and laugh so happily before..."

"Yes, true, it was all quite fun."

Indeed, Rífa had thoroughly enjoyed it. Her time at the tea party had passed quickly, and it was over before she knew it.

"Lady Rífa, you have finally, at long last, made friends with whom you can relax and be yourself with."

"Friends, huh? You're right..."

Rífa blinked in surprise at that word.

She had always been "special."

In terms of rank.

In terms of appearance.

That specialness meant that all those around her had always kept a certain distance from her, but today, she didn't feel anything even remotely resembling the distance that ordinarily separated her from others.

Perhaps it was good that she would be the second formal wife—the second-most important rather than the most.

In the circle of women that had gathered for Mitsuki's tea party, she wasn't particularly "special."

She was just one of the group that loved the same man and was just one among the many who tried to support him.

That was what made it so comfortable for her. She felt like she was one of

them.

“It certainly does seem that I’ve finally made friends.”

“Yes! I’m so glad. I’m so very glad! I, Fagrahvél, am content with my life. I can die in peace now!”

“Now now, don’t you go dying on me. I need you to be around to support Yuuto even after I’m gone.”

“Please, don’t mention that! You’ve finally been accepted by the others, and you’re just getting started! You’ve finally found your happiness!”

“Heh, yes, you’re right. I’d like to...”

She had gotten that far in her sentence before she felt her consciousness suddenly slip away. Her sight went dark and she couldn’t tell which direction was up or down.

She knew she was in enormous trouble, but she couldn’t do a thing about it.

“Lady Rífa?!”

The last thing Rífa heard before her consciousness slipped into the darkness was Fagrahvél’s shocked exclamation.

“Where... am... I?”

When she opened her eyes, Rífa saw a familiar ceiling above her. She had usually resented the unchanging scenery, but today she was happy to see such a familiar sight. It seemed she wasn’t in Valhalla quite yet.

“Lady Rífa! Are you awake?!”

Fagrahvél’s voice cracked with emotion as she peered in on Rífa. The moment their eyes met, tears spilled from Fagrahvél’s eyes and started wetting Rífa’s cheek.

“Lady Rífa! Thank god. I was so worried about you...”

“Wait... Yuuto?! And Mitsuki and Felicia too? You told them, didn’t you, Fagrahvél?!”

“F-Forgive me, but...”

“She doesn’t deserve that anger, Lady Rífa. Why didn’t you tell us?” Yuuto demanded to know, his voice edged with anger.

“Yeah, really. When I heard you’d collapsed, I felt the blood drain from my face.”

“We were really worried that you might not wake up again, you know.”

Mitsuki and Felicia’s voices quavered from a mix of deep worry and a touch of anger. There was no point in trying to maintain the charade now that they had seen her collapse. Rífa let out a long sigh of resignation.

“I’m sorry. But if I’d told you, you would’ve told me to stay in bed, would you have not?”

“Of course!” Yuuto, Mitsuki, and Felicia all said in perfect unison.

She could feel that all three of them were sincerely concerned about her well-being.

“Why didn’t you tell me? If you’d have just mentioned it, I wouldn’t have made you sing through it.”

“That’s exactly why. At least let me live the way I want before I die.”

“You don’t need to be so despairing... I’m sure you’ll be fine if you get enough rest. Felicia, we need to delay the—”

“No!”

Rífa couldn’t help but shout, cutting Yuuto off mid-sentence.

“But in your current state, well... I’m not saying we’re not going to do it at all, just that we’ll wait until you’re better...”

“That won’t happen!” Rífa said simply.

Given her current state, even raising her voice took effort, but she felt the need to shout anyway.

“I know my own body best. I’m only going to keep getting weaker, even with rest.”

“Lady Rífa, they say that sickness starts with the mind. If you let yourself believe you won’t recover...”

“Mitsuki, Felicia, you two can tell, yes?”

“...”

As Rífa turned her gaze to the two of them, Mitsuki and Felicia’s expressions twisted into painful silence.

They were both seiðr wielders skilled in manipulating ásmegin. If they used their spirit sight to look upon her, there was no mistaking the verdict—

There was nothing that could be done for her.

“Hey, why aren’t you two saying anything?! What’s going on?!”

Yuuto looked from Mitsuki to Felicia, demanding an answer. He was the only one who didn’t know what was happening.

But they couldn’t answer him, turning away from his gaze with pained expressions.

“The flames of my life are just about extinguished... That’s all.”

“That can’t be!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. It’s not easy for me, either.”

“...Tch!”

Upon hearing her say that, Yuuto had to bite down on his lower lip to quiet himself.

She knew it wasn’t fair to him, but there was nothing to be gained by continuing the exchange.

As þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, Rífa had a duty to fulfill as her death approached. A duty she owed to her empire, her people, and to herself.

“Please. Let me fulfill my duty.”

“Your duty...?”

“Yes, Yuuto. No doubt there will be many walls that will stand in your way. When you have to climb over those walls, no doubt the title of þjóðann will be a great help to you.”

“Well... Yeah, that’s true.”

"You need to be given the title from me, though. Unless I transfer the title to you willingly, people will merely see you as a usurper."

"Yes... But, if you die in the process..."

"Yuuto... My life, or the life of the people of Yggdrasil. Surely you of all people know which should outweigh the other?"

"...!"

Yuuto let out a pained grunt as he bit down harder on his lower lip. He, too, was well aware of what needed to be done—of the fact that he needed to become the legitimate *þjóðann*.

He also knew very well that a ruler sometimes needed to abandon the few in pursuit of the needs of the many.

"I beg of you...! If I am to die, then at least let me die as your wife," Rífa pleaded to Yuuto as she gazed intently into his eyes.

She couldn't stand the thought of dying without performing this last act. The last thing she wanted to be was a burden to Yuuto. She wanted to die as his wife—she wanted to die having left something for him that would help him.

She hoped that her emotions would reach him.

"...Okay."

Yuuto finally nodded after a long and painful silence. Though it sounded like he had to force his voice from his throat, he had acquiesced to her wishes.

"Mitsuki is a thoughtful woman, you know."

The room was lit by the gentle light of a small lantern. Two shadows wavered upon the wall.

The others had recently left as Mitsuki noted that Rífa and Yuuto would probably like to discuss some matters alone.

No one could argue with Mitsuki and so the two had been left alone in the room.

"Thinking about it, I think this is the first time we've been alone, just the two

of us."

Rífa clapped her hands together as though the thought had just come to her.

Both of them were too highly ranked to ever be unattended. Rífa always had someone protecting her, as did Yuuto.

The fact that they had never spoken without anyone else present was an odd little fact when considering that they were going to be married in two days.

"Yes, that's true."

"Thinking about it, I'm a little nervous now."

"Yes, that's true."

Yuuto repeated the same words as a response.

His expression was stiff, and he seemed rather distracted. Perhaps he was yet to accept that Rífa didn't have much longer to live.

"Hey!"

Rífa slapped her hands against Yuuto's cheeks and grabbed him by the face to snap him out of it. She then gazed intently into his eyes and spoke.

"Rather rude of you to spend your first night with your new wife with your head off in the clouds, no?"

"A-Apologies!"

"That, too!"

She clapped both hands against his cheeks a second time.

"We're going to be husband and wife, and you're going to talk to me like we're strangers? No more of this Lady Rífa stuff, either."

"Yes—I mean, yeah, you're right."

Rífa nodded intently.

The fact that there was now someone who would speak to her as an equal filled with her joy.

"Don't look at me with such pity in your eyes, Yuuto. I'm quite happy."

“Rífa...”

Yuuto called out her name, his eyes wavering anxiously.

When was the last time someone simply called her by her nickname?

Even more importantly, it was the man she loved calling her by that name. There was nothing that could possibly make her happier.

“I really am happy, that is no lie. As þjóðann, I was able to eat delicious food, wear beautiful clothes, and sleep in soft, warm bedding. Those are things that are out of the reach of many.”

“...”

“And now? I’m even together with the man I love, and I’ve made so many friends. Asking for more would just invite bad luck, would it not?” Rífa said rather rapidly and let out a boisterous laugh.

She intended to laugh it all—her cares, her anxiety—away.

“O-Oh...? Oh.”

She blinked in surprise as tears spilled from her eyes.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. There was nothing left to do about her body. Tears would do nothing, they would just hurt Yuuto and possibly drive him away.

That was why she had no intention of showing that weakness in front of him, and why she just wanted to leave fun memories before she died.

“Dammit, stop! Stop! I don’t have time to be weeping...”

“It’s fine.”

Yuuto grabbed Rífa’s arm and pulled her against his chest. The embrace was warm. The warmth that radiated off of him seemed to warm her to her very core.

“You can cry. No, if anything, you *should* cry. Cry as much as you need to.”

To have him top it off with those words—there was no way Rífa could hold back her tears.

The levee that had held back her emotions melted and let loose a torrent.

“I don’t... want to die.”

Rífa couldn’t help but say those words.

She had sworn she wouldn’t say them.

She had shoved them deep down and put a lid on them, with the intent of keeping them bottled up within her until she passed.

“I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!” she yelled out at the top of her lungs, tears still streaming from her eyes. “I finally managed to escape my cage! I’m finally with the man I love! I finally have friends I can confide in! Why must I die now?!”

There was no way that she could accept her fate.

Why did it always have to happen to her?

She wasn’t even able to walk beneath the sun.

She had been sickly, often ending up confined to her bed.

She had been disliked, viewed with suspicion and fear not just from her retainers but by her own family.

The treacherous Hárbarth had taken her freedom.

She had finally been liberated from all of those shackles and had true happiness within her grasp.

She was finally about to live the life she had dreamed of.

She finally had found a reason to want to live.

And now she had to die.

There was no way that she could simply accept that fate.

Rífa was only a seventeen-year-old girl. How could she possibly accept this?

“I want to live... I want to live! Who cares about the þjóðann?! I want to live with you, I want to have your children, and live a happy, lively life with everyone. I wanted to be... With you all for longer... I wanted to be with you for so much longer...!”

She couldn't help but cry and weep.

Once the emotions had been unleashed, they just wouldn't stop. Everything she had bottled up inside came gushing out in a wild flood.

"Yeah, you're right. I want to be with you for a lot longer, too."

Yuuto pulled her in closer and tightened his embrace.

Rífa clung to Yuuto like a child, sobbing and screaming uncontrollably.

She couldn't stop herself.

She wept and wept until her tears ran dry, at which point she felt the faintest amount of relief.

"I'm sorry..."

Rífa mouthed words of apology as she sniffled.

The tears had come as a complete surprise. She'd had no intention of looking so pitiful and weak in front of him.

She had intended to carve herself into his memories as a beautiful image—unmarred by weakness, just a joyful memory, though it hadn't felt at all bad to have unleashed her emotions upon him.

If anything, she had fallen even deeper in love with him. The fact that he had so readily accepted her weakness had made him all the more precious to her.

For that precise reason, the words she spoke next came naturally to her—

"Make love to me, Yuuto. I want you to carve into my body and soul the memory of loving and having been loved by you."

ACT 6

“Your Majesty!”

“Your Majesty, Sigrdrífa!”

“We wish you all the best!”

Cheers were coming from every direction.

The citizens of Glaðsheimr had gathered to celebrate their monarch’s big day.

Throngs of people had filled each side of the street near to bursting. It seemed that everyone in Glaðsheimr had come to offer their felicitations to their þjóðann.

“Heheh, no matter what anyone else says, right now I’m the happiest woman in the world!” Rífa said confidently, waving to the crowds with a beaming smile from the back of her carriage as it made its way to the ceremony grounds at the Valaskjálf Palace.

Even if all of the gods above were to deny it, this was one thing that Rífa wasn’t willing to concede.

Surely, there had never been a bride that had been so warmly celebrated by so many in the history of this world.

“Yes! Indeed you are!”

Fagrahvél tearfully nodded along in agreement.

Rífa couldn’t have imagined having anyone else accompany her to the ceremony grounds.

While she had a number of blood relatives among the courtiers of the palace, to Rífa, Fagrahvél was the only real “family” she had.

“Ah, seems we’re here.”

The carriage rolled to a stop and Rífa’s eyes caught sight of a statue of an impressive-looking warrior holding a spear. It was a statue of Wotan, the first

þjóðann and founder of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

They had arrived in Hropr Park.

It was the largest park in Glaðsheimr and a place of rest and refuge for the city's denizens.

Tradition had dictated that the þjóðann's wedding was to be held in the hörgr located atop the Hliðskjálf, but at Rífa's heartfelt request, they had moved the wedding ceremony to Hropr Park.

"This way, Your Majesty."

Erna of the Maidens of the Waves, who had served as the driver of the carriage, removed the outer covering of the carriage and placed a step ladder against the opening.

"Your hand, Lady Rífa."

"Mmhm."

Rífa placed her hand upon the hand Fagrahvél offered her and stood up.

Her body felt light—as though she had simply imagined the sluggishness that had enveloped her whole body until the night before.

It wasn't, of course, that she had recovered. Instead, it appeared that her body was well aware of an important fact—of just how important this day was to Rífa.

So long as she could make it through this day, she didn't care if she were to fall over dead at the end of it. That was the level of Rífa's commitment as she had prepared for this day.

"This is the biggest moment of my life."

Steeling herself, Rífa disembarked from the carriage and made her way to Wotan's statue. Awaiting her at the stage that had been constructed at its feet was a certain young man.

His hair, a jet black that was practically unheard of in Yggdrasil, drew the eyes of the crowd.

Through his appearance and the way he composed himself, one could surmise

that he had survived the terrors of countless battlefields and had defied death many times—his face also radiated both strength and dignity.

The young man's eyes were a particularly noteworthy sight. They reflected both the confidence born of his past accomplishments and an indomitable will that firmly grasped what remained to be accomplished.

Even so, those strong eyes also held a gentle glimmer—a reflection of his kindness and compassion that felt like it could accept and envelope the misery of the entire world.

Rífa felt that it had been his eyes that had first drawn her in.

“That outfit is...”

Those eyes that Rífa had fallen in love with widened ever so slightly in surprise.

She had purposefully avoided showing him her gown in the days leading up to the ceremony. Rífa wanted his memory of her to be when she was at her most beautiful.

“Yes. Mitsuki prepared it for me. Does it suit me?”

Rífa wore a pure silk cloth that sat gently upon her head. Apparently, it was in homage to a traditional outfit worn in Yuuto's homeland.

It certainly stood out as an oddity in contrast to the empire's styles, but that didn't bother Rífa at all. If anything, this was what she wanted.

It's said that men wish to make the people they love their own, but that wasn't true of women. Women wanted to become part of those they loved.

The outfit and the ceremony helped turn Rífa from the *þjóðann* of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire to Yuuto's wife.

“Yes, it looks very good on you.”

“Good.”

Rífa's lips naturally quirked into a smile.

The man she loved told her that she looked beautiful. That one compliment made her feel as though all of her struggles had been worthwhile.

“We will now begin the wedding ceremony between the Steel Clan reginarch Suoh-Yuuto and the þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, Her Majesty Sigdrífa,” the Imperial High Priest, who would serve as the officiant, announced in a grave, dignified voice.

While Rífa herself would have preferred the Steel Clan’s high priest—Felicia—to officiate the ceremony rather than some former underling of Hárbarth’s, this wedding was an extraordinarily important political event, one that could determine Yggdrasil’s long-term future.

Both Yuuto and Rífa needed to do everything possible to make sure that it didn’t appear as if the Steel Clan was forcing this wedding upon her. Rífa, especially, wanted to avoid leaving even the slightest concern in her husband’s future that was related to her.

“The Gods in the Heavens. O Ymir, the greatest on high, thy will be done. O Wotan, the Great Patriarch of the Empire, may thy protection ward us from all taint and disaster, may thy word cleanse us in spirit so that we may speak to thee and through thee to the gods in Valhalla.”

The high priest turned to the statue of Wotan and knelt, reciting the ritual prayers to the gods. The ceremony had finally begun.

As the crowds witnessed the event without making so much as a murmur, a lone fife played in the park.

A single priestess quietly ascended to the stage and formally placed a chalice in front of the bride and groom. Soon after, a second priestess appeared and poured wine into the chalice.

In Glaðsheimr, the bride and groom drink from the chalice in turn as they pledge undying love before the gods.

First, Yuuto lifted the chalice to the sky, took a sip from it then handed the chalice to the priestess. The first priestess solemnly took the chalice into her hands as the second priestess refilled the chalice with the sacred wine and placed it in front of Rífa.

Rífa, like Yuuto, lifted the chalice toward the sky before she took a sip from it

and handed it to the priestess.

As one of the priestesses placed the chalice upon the altar that had been constructed at the feet of the statue of Wotan, the high priest waved a branch of mistletoe, continuing the ritual incantations to purify the chalice.

The bride, the groom, the priestesses, and the high priest repeated this ritual two more times.

Each time the bride and groom swore a vow.

The first, in thanks to their ancestors.

The second, to their undying love.

And the third, to the prosperity of their descendants.

“Now here, in the name of Ymir, the Supreme God, and Wotan, the Great Patriarch of the Empire, I, Loni, the High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, do declare these two to be husband and wife!”

Once the ritual had been completed and the high priest had made his proclamation, the crowd went from being almost completely silent to cheering with such fervor and power that it could be called ear-splitting.

They were so loud that Rífa found herself feeling it rather than hearing it.

She could feel the entirety of Glaðsheimr—the air, the ground, the buildings—all reverberating with those cheers.

Rífa was struck with joy at just how much the people were rejoicing at her marriage.

“To my people. First, thank you for gathering here to celebrate my wedding. Let me begin by offering you my thanks,” Rífa said as the cheering began to die down.

With her voice amplified by Fagrahvél’s ability, Rífa’s voice was heard in even the furthest corners of the park where the ceremony had been conducted.

The cheers stopped in an instant and silence returned to the park. Everyone present closed their mouths, intent upon hearing every word that Rífa had to say.

“As you have seen, I am now the wife of the reginarch of the Steel Clan, Suoh-Yuuto. Look upon him. Isn’t my husband a handsome specimen of a man?” Rífa gestured toward Yuuto with her palm, as though she were gently introducing him to the crowd.

“It was love at first sight for me. Every day I see him, I find myself sighing in disbelief. Not only is he handsome, but he’s also kind. He always frets about my health and would never do anything that I would object to. No, rather, he puts all his efforts into doing things that make me happy. Just moments ago he saw my dress and made sure to compliment me on my beauty.”

Rífa boasted about her new husband to the crowd. She looked so very happy, her features lit up by her bright smile as she uttered the sweetest words she could think of.

A burst of laughter erupted from the gathered crowd.

This was what Rífa had planned for the ceremony.

Even if she had insisted that this marriage wasn’t forced upon her, there would be those who would take that insistence as proof that she had, in fact, been forced into the union, but if Rífa were to go on at length in public about her love for her husband, there would be few who could claim the marriage was a mere political ploy.

Rífa had, by her own will, fallen in love with Yuuto and become his wife. No doubt that the people gathered at the park would recount Rífa’s expression and her voice as she told her self-styled love story as proof of her sincerity and spread the word among the populace.

That was, in large part, why Rífa had chosen this park as the site of her wedding ceremony rather than the Hliðskjálf or Valaskjálf Palace. There was no other place that would let her execute this plan.

“However, he is not just a sweet man. As you all know, this man took the weak and dying Wolf Clan of the Bifröst Region and, in a mere three years, turned it into the great Steel Clan you see before you today. He is a strong and wise man who has the character needed to bear the weight of all of Yggdrasil upon his shoulders!”

The crowd once again erupted in a loud cheer.

For the common people, there was nothing more important than a mighty ruler who would make them prosperous and protect them from outside enemies.

She had expected things to proceed well up until this point. The problem would be the rest of this speech.

“The memory of the great earthquake that ravaged Glaðsheimr is, I’m sure, still very fresh in your minds. And unfortunately, such quakes are likely to continue. Yggdrasil is facing an unprecedented crisis.”

The crowd began to buzz in puzzlement as, in the middle of her wedding ceremony, Rífa changed the tone of the speech she was giving from sweet and syrupy to one much graver as she touched upon more troubling topics.

“This is all punishment due to the incompetence of my family line—the line of þjóðann—who, despite being given the divine task of governing Yggdrasil from the Great God Ymir, have failed, leaving the lands a shambles where neighbor fights neighbor in a neverending bloodbath. All I can offer to you, my people, is my sincerest regrets and apologies. I’m sorry.”

This was also something she had discussed with Yuuto beforehand.

If they were ever going to go public with the news, they needed to do it now, and it needed to come directly from Rífa’s lips.

While earthquakes were simply natural disasters and were unaffected by the intent or will of the people living upon that land, this was an age where the influence of the gods permeated every part of life.

Had the news been issued under Yuuto’s name, there would have been those who were working against Yuuto who would claim that it was Yuuto’s fault for earning the ire of the gods.

To avoid that, it was best that the dying dynasty shoulder all of the blame for the coming disasters.

“But, you, my people, have nothing to fear! You’ve all heard, I’m sure, the countless bounties of the heavens that my husband has brought upon this

world! The number of miracles that he has brought forth! Yuuto, my dear husband, is the servant that Ymir has summoned to Yggdrasil to save its people!” Rífa declared firmly, no trace of hesitation in her voice, nor an ounce of deception in her words.

She sincerely believed every word that she told them, because Yuuto was, in fact, the prophesized Black One.

“My family line, the old line of Ásgarðr, has outlived its purpose. Which is why I shall return the title of þjóðann that was granted to me by the gods and shall hand it over to him! So, my people, witness the birth of a þjóðann—Suoh-Yuuto!”

“Sieg þjóðann! Sieg þjóðann!”

As Rífa finished her declaration, the loudest cheers of the day rang through the park.

It was at that moment that the two-hundred-year life of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire came to a close and the new Steel Clan dynasty was born.

“Phew. It seems like I’ll be able to fulfill my duty after all.”

The moment Rífa sighed, the strength left her body, and she felt a wave of fatigue and sluggishness wash over her.

It was probably because she had accomplished what she needed to do, so in response to her calmness, the tension had quickly left her body.

That tension had been the thing keeping her together, however.

“Oof.”

As Rífa tried to step off the stage, her legs wobbled beneath her and she missed her footing.

If she collapsed then and there, the ceremony that had been going so well up until that point would be ruined.

Just as Rífa closed her eyes and felt a sharp pang of regret at the fact that she had failed right at the end—

“Well done, Rífa. That was an awesome speech!”

—She was held in Yuuto’s embrace and somehow maintained her footing.

The women in the crowd who had seen the display began to whisper excitedly amongst themselves.

Yuuto had managed to turn a potential disaster to their advantage. By being the groom that saved his new bride from a fall, Yuuto had shown the witnesses just how much the two newlyweds loved one another.

“...Heh, I know, right?”

Now that they were husband and wife, thanking him here would be bad form. Instead, Rífa just quirked the corners of her lips into a slight smile.

They continued to lean on one another, supporting each other as they made their way to the carriage waiting at the park entrance.

“You all right, Rífa?”

It appeared that Yuuto, due to his proximity to Rífa, had noticed she wasn’t doing well.

“I’m fine. I let myself relax because the ceremony was over, but I remembered I had something I still needed to do.”

Rífa steeled herself again and thinned her lips as she faced forward.

She wasn’t able to easily bring the fraying threads back together. Her body still felt heavy, and the sluggishness remained.

She thought about how easy it would be if she could just close her eyes and sleep, but she couldn’t afford to let go of her consciousness quite yet.

“Something you needed to do?”

“Yes, that’s...”

The moment Rífa and Yuuto returned to the carriage—

“Rífa! You don’t look so good... Are you okay?” Mitsuki asked with an expression of concern spread across her face.

Because Mitsuki’s face was identical in appearance to Rífa’s, they had all

decided it was best to avoid having her appear in public to keep from confusing the populace. For that reason, Mitsuki had watched the ceremony from the carriage.

While Mitsuki herself had wanted to participate in the ceremony, given the sensitivity of the matter, she was forced to swallow her tears and watch from afar.

“Oh, Mitsuki. Yes, I’m okay, please don’t worry. I still have things I need to do, so I can’t let myself die before I’ve completed them.”

“That’s the spirit! What do you need to do? Is there anything I can help with?”

“Actually, yes. One of the things I need to do involves the child you’re carrying within you. Yours and Yuuto’s child may as well be my own child. Make sure you give birth to a healthy baby.”

Rífa gently patted Mitsuki’s pregnant belly with her hand, smiling with a fond gentleness as she did so.

Rífa had finished her final goodbyes.

All that was left was...

“Yes! Yes! That’s right. Rífa, you need to live to hold this child.”

“Yes... I would like nothing more than to hold them... Gleipnir!”

With a strong declaration, Rífa unleashed ásmegin from the hand she had placed on Mitsuki’s belly.

She felt the Gleipnir latch on to something. At that sensation, Rífa grinned and pulled the object from Mitsuki’s stomach.

What appeared was a black cloud that was restrained by a golden rope.

It was the exact same cloud that had possessed Iálc when Yuuto and company had first arrived in Glaðsheimr.

“I’ve finally caught you, Hárbarth!”

H-How did you know I was in here?!

She could hear Hárbarth’s thoughts through her Gleipnir. Rífa couldn’t help but smirk in satisfaction at hearing his panic.

This old man had turned her into a caged bird, manipulated her as a figurehead, and humiliated her time and time again.

She honestly wasn't sure that she'd be able to die in peace without getting back at him somehow.

She'd found the perfect method of revenge, and at the perfect time, no less. It was only natural that she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but you were the one that gave it away."

There were many hints that had led her to realize Hárbarth's plans, and thus capture him—

When he had possessed Rífa's body, he hadn't tried to kill Yuuto and had instead tried to get Yuuto to sleep with her.

Hárbarth had sought to hold the reins of power as High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

He had the power to possess those who were unconscious.

And finally, his utter obsession with avoiding death that had remained within Rífa's mind even after he had been forced out of her.

With all that in mind, it was actually easy to surmise that Hárbarth would try to be reborn as Yuuto's child and take over the new empire as his own.

"I actually noticed a lot earlier, but I had been waiting for the right moment."

Rífa could easily imagine that Hárbarth, after being caught in Felicia's Gleipnir, would have taken the appropriate precautions to avoid getting caught again, which was why it needed to be Rífa—she could cast Gleipnir without a song and use it as a surprise attack to deal with him. However, casting Gleipnir without a song took a heavy toll upon her body.

When using a seiðr as powerful as Gleipnir, it could very well cut short the caster's life.

While Rífa had felt an immense boiling anger at the fact that Hárbarth was possessing Mitsuki and Yuuto's child, she had bottled up the anger because she knew she had to pass the title of þjóðann to Yuuto first.

Now that the ceremony was done, though, there was no need for her to hold back.

“My final goal here on Yggdrasil is to take what remains of the old ways with me to Valhalla.”

As she said that, Rífa poured more ásmegin into the golden rope. The rope thickened and began to tighten around the black cloud.

Y-You meddling wench!

Hárbarth tried to fight back, but no matter how much of a monster the man seemed to be, he had no way of fighting the ásmegin of a twin-runed Einherjar like Rífa.

“This is the end for—”

Just as she was about to finish him off, Rífa broke out in a coughing fit. The control she had over her ásmegin loosened.

“N-Not now... Not yet... Guh!”



Blood splattered onto the carriage floor.

Rífa had been living on borrowed time for quite a while now and she was finally paying the price.

Bwahaha! Seems luck is on my side this time!

As he cackled, the black cloud began to swell.

Hárbarth was trying to tear his way out of the Gleipnir while Rífa's flow of ásmegin was weakened.

She no longer had the strength left to cast Gleipnir without singing.

If Hárbarth managed to escape now, there would be no one who could stop him.

If this man were left free, it was clear that he would continue to go after Yuuto and the new dynasty he was trying to build. Rífa knew this and knew she needed to do something, but her body wouldn't respond. She couldn't find the strength.

Like a broken vase, every time she tried to pour power into it, it would spill out before she could use it.

In a flash of inspiration, Rífa had the idea to cast multiple Gleipnirs like she had when summoning Yuuto. Though she ended up dismissing the idea as quickly as it had come to her.

Both Mitsuki and Felicia needed to sing and dance to cast Gleipnir. They didn't have that kind of time.

“Grrr, to come this far...!”

“Gjallarhorn!”

A familiar, reassuring voice that she remembered from her earliest days rang out.

Rífa immediately felt strength filling her body.

“Fagrahvél!”

It was the power of Rífa's milk-sister's rune, a rune called the Rune of Kings,

the rune that boosted allies' morale and in the process brought out their latent ability and made them elite soldiers that feared nothing—not even death.

“Lady Rífa! Use my power, please!”

“I shall! This is the end for you, Hárbarth! It’s time a minor villain like you left the stage!”

Rífa let out a powerful battle cry and let her ásmegin flow out in a torrent.

The golden rope swelled in an eyeblink, crushing the black cloud it held within.

Graaaaaaaaaah! Stop! Stop! Stoooooop!

Hárbarth’s dying scream filled her ears, before eventually cutting off entirely.

The ghost that had haunted the empire had now, at last, been vanquished.

“Did I do it?”

With its task fulfilled, the golden rope sparkled as it dissolved into pinpricks of light.

In that light stood a girl with albino white skin, dressed in a beautiful wedding outfit.

The entire scene felt like something out of a dream.

Yuuto stood transfixed by the sight.

“Ah! Rífa!”

As the girl swooned, he came to his senses and quickly pulled her into an embrace to steady her.

“Ah, Yuuto, rest easy. I’ve taken down that monstrous old geezer. He’ll trouble you no more.”

“Y-Yeah, yeah! I saw it! You did so well! But we need to worry about you first! Felicia! Hurry... Someone hurry up and call Felicia over here!”

Yuuto cried out in desperation.

Ever since he had lost his predecessor Fárbauti, Yuuto had tried to tell himself

to remain calm and collected at all times, but right now, at this very moment, none of that mattered to him.

“No, it’s fine. There’s nothing to be done for me now. Instead, can I ask something of you? Can you hold my hand?”

“Oh!”

Yuuto hurriedly took hold of Rífa’s hand. She had held her hand up above her, as though blindly seeking his touch.

He grasped her hand as though to tell her that he was there.

He was trying, desperately, to hold on to her life for just a little bit longer.

“Heh. Your hand is quite warm. It’s reassuring,” Rífa said with an expression as serene as her words. “It’s odd, you know. I feel no pain at all. Do you think that’s because of the effects of Gjallarhorn? I guess this is the best outcome I could have hoped for.”

“Lady Rífa!”

Fagrahvél rushed over in tears, taking Rífa’s other hand in her own.

“Ah, is that Fagrahvél I hear? You made it all possible. As to be... expected of my most loyal retainer.”

“Y-You... Y-You do me... T-Too much... Honor.”

Fagrahvél’s sobs racked at her body, breaking up her speech as she expressed her thanks.

Seeing Fagrahvél’s state, Rífa couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You really are a crybaby, aren’t you? With you like that, I’ll be too worried about you to go peacefully to Valhalla.”

“M-My... A-Apologies...”

“Indeed. Oh dear... Fagrahvél, I give you my last order as your þjóðann.”

“Y-Yes... Yes! I will do whatever you ask of me! Allow me to accompany you on your journey to Valhalla!”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. There’s no way I would ask my beloved big sister

to do such a thing. No, find a good man, marry, and have children. That is my order to you, and my earnest wish.”

“B-But...”

Fagrahvél appeared to be at a loss for words. Up until now, Rífa had been everything to her. Fagrahvél wouldn’t be able to move on quite so easily.

But that was something that Rífa, with her long relationship with Fagrahvél, had already realized.

“Mm, let me choose a name for your child. If it’s a boy, name him Sigurðr—and if it’s a girl, then she shall be Rífa. How do those sound?”

“Oh!”

“You could have children with Yuuto if that’s what you’d prefer. Yes, have children for him in my stead.”

“Y-Y-Yes, Y-Your Majesty! I hear and I obey. I will do as you command, even if it costs me my life.”

“Mm, I’m counting on you.”

Rífa let out what sounded like an amused chuckle.

Yuuto understood at that moment.

Fagrahvél also probably understood what was happening as well.

That Rífa’s words were intended to keep her beloved milk sibling from following her in death, and that they were meant to give Fagrahvél a new reason to live after Rífa, her sister, was gone.

“That’s all that’s... Wait, no, there’s one more thing. Yuuto.”

“Yeah, what is it? Ask anything you want.”

“Something to remember me by. Take it. It might come in handy for you.”

“Ah! Wha—That’s hot!”

Rífa’s hand suddenly emitted an intense heat, as though it had become molten iron.

The heat ebbed in an instant, but Yuuto felt an odd new power begin to flow

out of his body, as though a powerful flame had been lit inside him.

“Wh-What is this...”

“Y-Yuu-kun! Your eyes. Your eyes!”

Mitsuki pointed at her own eyes and opened them wide in surprise.

Yuuto was drawn to turn his head to glance at the mirror installed inside the carriage and froze.

In the reflection his eyes glowed with a golden, cross-shaped pattern.

“Th-This...”

“Heh, like I said, a memento. You’re now the *þjóðann*. You can’t look the part without the twin runes.”

Rífa chuckled in amusement.

It immediately clicked for Yuuto. He could pass on his twin runes to a person of his choosing. That was the secret to how the *þjóðann*’s line had been able to pass on their twin runes from generation to generation.

“Oh, my vision’s suddenly gone black. I wonder if it’s because I passed on my twin runes. I imagine I’ll be taken away to Valhalla at any moment now...”

“No! I don’t want this power! I’ll give it back to you! So please, please, even if it’s for a little while... Stay with me!”

“Heh, please, just take them. It’s about the only thing I can leave for you, you know.”

“Rífa!”

Yuuto couldn’t help but shout out her name. It was the only thing left that he could do.

His eyes burned with tears.

“Don’t cry, Yuuto. I was happy in the end. I leave my people in your hands. Make sure you make Mitsuki and the others happy.”

“Don’t go, Rífa! Please, don’t go!”

“Heh, if I’m to be reborn, I hope it’s by your side... again...”

With those words, the hand Yuuto was holding went limp and fell from his grasp.



His teeth clattered as he shivered.

He couldn't believe it.

He didn't want to believe it.

"Rífa! Hey! Rífa! Rífa! Rífa!"

Which is why Yuuto called out her name—over and over again.

But no matter how many times he called for her, Rífa didn't answer.

She could no longer speak to him.

She could no longer yell at him.

She could no longer smile at him.

As the reality of that unacceptable fact settled in for Yuuto, he said in a quavering voice, "Don't worry about your people. I'll find some way to save them."

It was the final promise that Yuuto made to his departed wife.

EPILOGUE

“We’ve slain the Spear Clan’s Second-in-Command, Hermóðr. Our army stands victorious.”

“Hrmph, how dull. I suppose this is what’s meant by an easy victory.”

The man snorted with displeasure at the messenger’s report.

He was a man with long, unkempt black hair that made him look like some sort of uncouth ruffian, yet his eyes glinted with a profoundly deep intelligence.

Perhaps what was most distinct about the man was the conqueror’s aura that he exuded.

Even generals that were famous for their courage were like frightened housecats in his presence. All they could do was bow down and follow his orders.

The man’s name was Oda Nobunaga.

He was the conqueror of Warring States Era Japan, and he had ended up here on Yggdrasil through an incredible twist of fate. He was a man who had climbed to become patriarch of the Flame Clan, a powerful clan in southern Yggdrasil that had, of late, begun invading and absorbing its neighbors. He was, in short, a man who was rapidly gaining influence and making his presence felt.

“I had heard they were one of the great clans of the empire, wielding the levers of power... But it appears that in the end, they were mere table scraps that the lad didn’t have the time to finish.”

Nobunaga stuck his pinky into his ear and wiggled it around briefly, before taking it out and blowing on it. The whole gesture was an indication of his profound boredom.

Nobunaga was already aware that the Spear Clan had allied with other clans and fought a decisive battle against the Steel Clan at Vígríðr.

He knew the outcome, of course.

There was no way that an enemy that had suffered a catastrophic defeat and had been weakened would be any sort of match for Nobunaga or his forces.

“My Lord, one of our ears in Glaðsheimr bears news.”

“Oh?”

Nobunaga appeared to regain interest, eyes glinting.

He had already learned that the Steel Clan’s lad had entered Glaðsheimr.

The lad was the only man on Yggdrasil that excited him. It was impossible for Nobunaga not to be interested in a matter that involved him.

“The Steel Clan reginarch Suoh-Yuuto has married the þjóðann Sigdrífa and has become the new þjóðann.”

“I see... I see!”

With a predatory grin, Nobunaga nodded happily.

The fact that Yuuto had inherited the title of þjóðann meant that Yuuto was showing that he intended to rule the continent, which meant that Yuuto’s intentions clashed with those of Nobunaga’s—wielding control over the entire continent as its sole ruler.

“I believe I warned you and your Steel Clan, lad... I’ll hold nothing back if you get in the way of my ambitions!”

EPILOGUE II

Mitsuki just stared in shock at the scene before her.

Yuuto and Fagrahvél, as well as Felicia, Sigrún, Albertina, and Kristina, who had heard the news and came running, were all mourning Rífa's death, tears coursing down their cheeks.

There was a part of her that, for some reason, was happy at the sight, even if she felt a little guilty about it.

It was because the fact that they were mourning meant that they loved Rífa deeply enough to mourn her passing.

And in that instant, Mitsuki understood.

No, to be more precise, Mitsuki remembered.

That she had once been a girl named Sigrdrífa.

That she had died here, and after thirty-five hundred years, had been reborn next to her beloved Yuuto as she had so fervently wished.

She couldn't help but feel a bit of exasperated astonishment at her dedication. Or perhaps it was better described as obsession?

But there were things that she did, in fact, understand now. Everything seemed to snap into place. She finally understood why she had loved Yuuto for as long as she could remember.

It was because her very soul was already hopelessly in love with him.

That was why, even though she had been born to a regular middle-class family, she had known how to carry herself as the wife of a ruler, because she had the experiences from her past life to guide her.

The reason she was hardly jealous of the women who made up Yuuto's inner circle was because she loved them as well.

When she was among them she wasn't "special." She was just a normal girl

that was in love.

They were her friends. Her irreplaceable, precious friends, which was why she wanted to root them on in their relationships.

She wanted to tell the others that she was Rífa.

If she told them now though, they would think she had gone mad with grief, or that she was insulting the memory of the dead.

That wasn't something either she or her past self, Rífa, would want.

This was something that would take time.

Which was why Mitsuki embraced Yuuto.

She wanted to tell him that she was here.

That she—that Rífa—was here.

To be continued...

Afterword

It's been a while. Takayama here.

This last volume was pretty touch-and-go when it came to writing it.

Well okay, it's usually pretty dicey when it comes to getting things written, but...

Usually an author starts by writing a “plot outline” which is like a blueprint for the book to the editor before they begin writing the actual text, using the plot outline as a basis for their writing. This time, however, I had a lot of trouble coming up with my plot outline.

Typically it only takes me about two or three days to come up with a plot outline, but I think it took nearly a month this time.

If the plot outline took that much longer, I’m sure you can figure out that the actual writing itself was just as much of a disaster.

Anyway, Volume 14 was a struggle to get written, and it had a troubled birth.

It’s something I’ve come to think every time it happens, but wrapping up plot threads, while very rewarding on the one hand, is nerve-racking on the other, because I’m constantly struggling with figuring out the best way to resolve them.

Of course, given all my struggles with this volume, I think it might have come out as a worthy volume as a result. At least, that’s my take on it as the author.

It’s a bit different in tone and character than the existing volumes, but I hope that you, the readers, will enjoy it as well.

Now, for acknowledgments.

To my editor U-sama. I’m really sorry for making you deal with the dicey schedule on this last volume. I know I caused you a lot of stress on this one, so thank you for bearing with me.

Also, thank you so much to the illustrator, Yukisan. I believe the fact that we

were able to release the volume on schedule is all thanks to the efforts of U-sama and Yukisan.

That first insert illustration was awesome (lol).

Also, my thanks to everyone else that was involved in this volume's production.

And more than anything, I'd like to thank the readers who've picked up this book.

I'll do my best with the next volume, so I hope to see you then.

Seiichi Takayama









Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Character Introduction](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[ACT 1](#)

[ACT 2](#)

[ACT 3](#)

[ACT 4](#)

[ACT 5](#)

[ACT 6](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

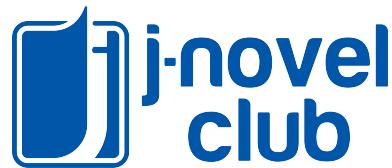
[EPILOGUE II](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Textless Images](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 14

by Seiichi Takayama

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2021

Premium E-Book