

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

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

4





"Ohh...
Oh no,
what have
I done...
I'm sorry
I'm sorry
I'm sorry
I'll do
anything
anything I
promise please
forgive me."

Ephelia repeated her pleading apologies over and over. She'd seemingly gone completely into shock. To a slave like her, at the absolute bottom of society, a clan sovereign like Yuuto was so far above her he might as well be a god. It wasn't unreasonable for her to be frightened of him in this situation.

The **Master** of Ragnarok &
Blessor of **Einherjar** **4**



"I've got j-just as much gratitude toward Yuuto as all of you, and I'm not gonna lose!"

"I can't afford to be afraid in this situation!"

"Augh, just get it over with already!"

Yuuto is COMPLETELY surrounded. Just what will BECOME of him?!

"All right, I'll try it, too!"

"I was licking your foot, Father. Um, i-it did not hurt, I hope?"

"Al, you're still too young for something like that, so let's use these linen rags to scrub him, okay?"

"Now then, Big Brother, I shall wash your back."



**"It looks
like you
put too
much faith
in the
power
of your
smart-
phone,
Yuuto."**

**"Khahahaha! Ahahaha! HAAA HA
HA HA!!" Hveðrungr's maniacal
laughter rang out. Once his encir-
cling formation had closed around
Yuuto's forces, he'd become com-
pletely assured of his victory. He
was awash with delight, for every-
thing had gone exactly how he'd
wanted it to. Bait the enemy with a
smaller vanguard force, let them
make their way closer, then fully
surround and annihilate them –
this was the trademark winning
strategy of the Panther Clan.**



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Felicia

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



Sigrún

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



Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. In the space of only two years, he has risen to become the sovereign, or "patriarch," of the Wolf 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 Jvaldi, Birther of Blades.



Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan. She once attacked the Wolf Clan but lost to Yuuto, and ended up becoming his sworn younger sister.



A black and white illustration of a young girl with short, dark hair and a flower accessory. She is wearing a light-colored dress with a dark bow at the collar.

Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's childhood friend. After Yuuto is summoned to Yggdrasil, she maintains contact with him and provides support.



A black and white illustration of two young girls with light-colored hair in pigtails, wearing similar dresses with sashes.

Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.



A black and white illustration of a young girl with short hair and a necklace, wearing a simple dress.

Ephelia

A young girl rescued by Yuuto when he found her being sold by a slave trader. She now works as a servant in the Wolf Clan palace.



A black and white illustration of a man with long, light-colored hair, wearing a dark cloak and a belt with a large buckle.

Hveðrungr

The patriarch of the Panther Clan. In just one year, this man transformed the nomadic Panther Clan into a powerful army of armed cavalry. And, his true identity is...



A black and white illustration of a man with long, dark hair, wearing a dark tunic with a sash.

Skáviðr

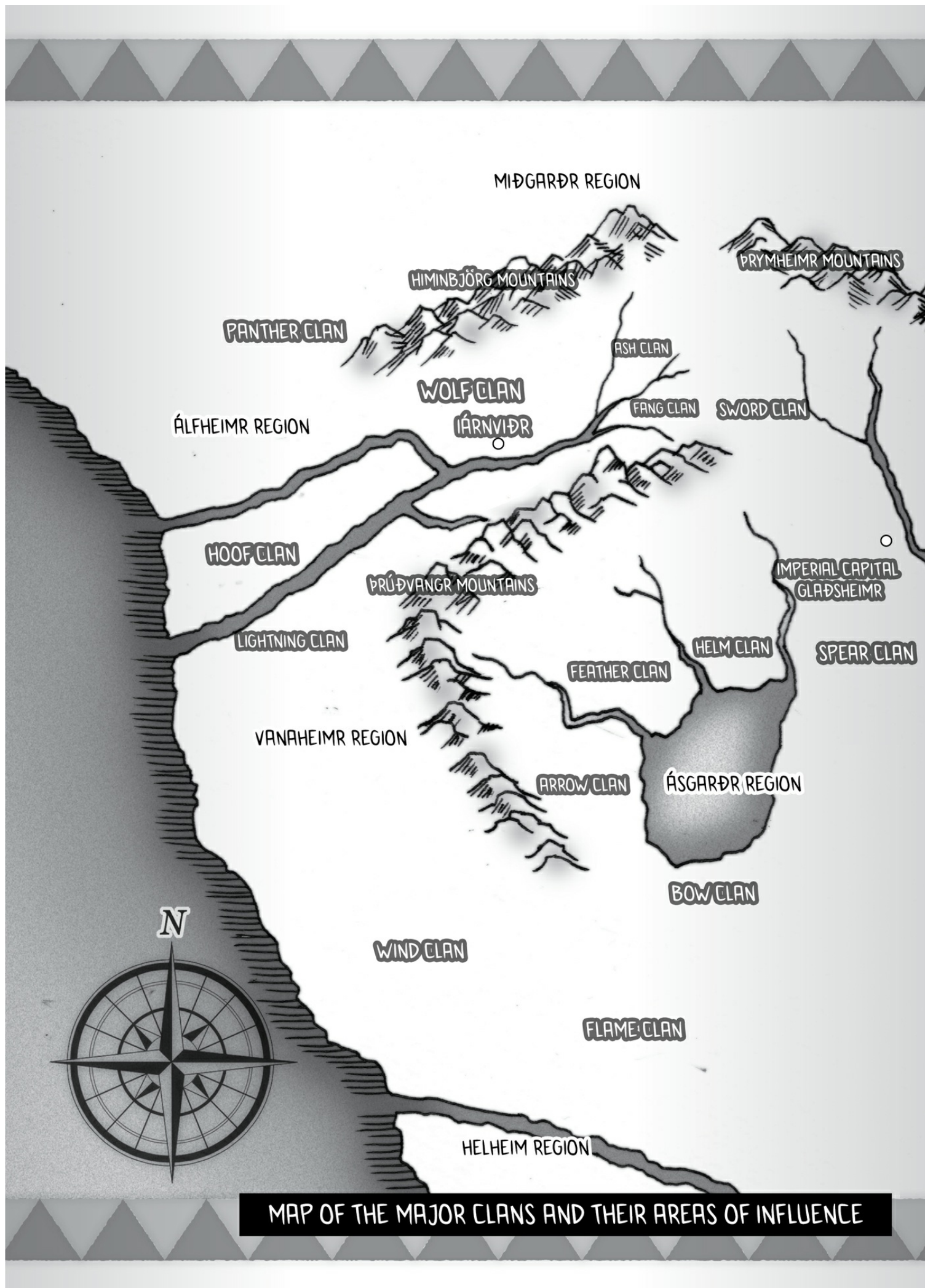
Assistant to the Second-in-Command of the Wolf Clan. A veteran warrior and the clan's executioner, he is both respected and feared. He is known by the alias Niðhoggr, the Sneering Slaughter.



A black and white illustration of a young woman with long, light-colored hair, wearing a light-colored dress with a necklace.

Sigyn

Hveðrungr's wife. She is known as the "Witch of Miðgarðr" for her mastery of seiðr magics.



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

PROLOGUE

With her rune Skírnir, the Expressionless Servant, Felicia was an Einherjar possessing both wisdom and strength.

That said, when it came to matters of combat she was no match for the likes of Sigrún or Skáviðr, and in the realm of politics she was nowhere near as skilled as Jörgen or Linnea. Even in regards to magics such as the galldr and seiðr, she could not match the abilities of an Einherjar who specialized in them.

There were a number of other skills she had cultivated, but none of them were on the same level as a specialist.

She could learn to do almost anything, but she could never attain full mastery of anything.

In the past, that was something she'd held an inferiority complex over, but now it was something she was proud of.

It was true that all of her various knowledge and abilities fell short of those held by career professionals. In more negative terms, she was nothing more than a dabbler. However, that also set her apart from those without any understanding at all.

She could have an informed conversation with specialists in any field. She was able to understand and take into consideration their particular situation and needs, and in most cases that meant she could use her position to find realistic points of common ground.

Her beloved master, Yuuto Suoh, drew on knowledge that he called "cheats" and which spanned many different disciplines. On the other hand, there were also many cases where Yuuto himself was surprisingly lacking in areas of specialized or even common knowledge.

And so, as it happened, a so-called jack of all trades and master of none like Felicia was the perfect person to smoothly facilitate connections between Yuuto and the many different experts in those areas.

“All right! I’ll do my best today, as well!” Felicia psyched herself up for the day’s work as she got dressed.

Lately it had gotten noticeably colder, so she had updated her priestess outfit to a new one, complete with a white robe.

The warmer attire showed off less skin, and the fact that she no longer felt her sworn big brother’s gaze upon her chest anymore made her a little sad inside (Yuuto might have been trying his best to hide it, but women are very sensitive to people’s gazes). However, if she wore more revealing clothing during this weather and caught a cold, she’d end up causing problems for him, which wouldn’t be worth it at all.

“Besides, Big Brother told me this outfit looks good on me,” she reminded herself.

Smiling and giggling to herself, she picked up a clay tablet from the huge stack on her desk.

Yuuto had accomplished an incredible amount of rapid progress for the Wolf Clan as its patriarch, and now all manner of correspondence arrived for him from within and without the nation’s borders. However, a good many of them were also not important to be worth troubling him directly over.

Part of Felicia’s early morning work each day was reading through all of them while her brother was still asleep, picking out which ones she should pass on to him.

“Oh, this one is addressed to me? My, my, I wonder if it’s another marriage proposal.”

Felicia frequently received formal requests for marriage, for she was a gentlemanly girl of exceptional beauty.

She already had someone to whom she’d decided to pledge everything of herself, so she had no choice but to politely and carefully decline every one of them, but whenever she met with older members of the clan, they would always say things like, “I can’t believe you’re already that old and haven’t even married,” complaining right to her face.

Honestly, it was incredibly irritating. Thanks to that, nowadays just hearing

mention of her age was enough to bring out a more unseemly side of her.

“...Huh?” As Felicia read the message addressed to her, her expression grew more and more tense.

Her face grew pale, and her body began to tremble.

“Ugh!!” Before she fully realized it, she’d hurled the message onto the floor with all her strength, smashing it.

It was only a brittle tablet made of a thin layer of baked clay, so it broke at once into pieces that scattered across the floor.

“Hm? Everything okay, Felicia?” Yuuto’s voice called out from the next room.

For the sake of security, one had to pass through Felicia’s room in order to get to Yuuto’s. Additionally, in order to enter Felicia’s room, one had to pass through Sigrún’s. It was an ironclad defense.

“Y-yes, I am fine,” she said quickly. “I merely dropped one of the messages. There’s nothing to worry about. Did I wake you? I am truly sorry, Big Brother.”

“Nah, don’t worry, I was already up.”

“I see. That is a relief.” As Felicia exhaled in relief, she quickly began to clean up the fragments of the broken message.

Even though she knew Yuuto couldn’t read it, she still didn’t want to let something like this remain somewhere he could see it, not for a moment longer.

Her eyes stopped for a second on one of the larger fragments, and the words written on it.

“Inform my dearly beloved younger sister, Felicia. I am your older brother—”

ACT 1

“Here is the next one,” Felicia said. “Inform the honorable Lord Yuuto, patriarch of the Wolf Clan. I am Douglas, patriarch of the Ash Clan.”

Autumn was more than halfway over, and the light from the sun had grown softer, and the air felt colder against the skin.

In the patriarch’s office, Felicia read aloud to Yuuto the contents of messages addressed to him, just as she always did, in a beautiful voice like a golden bell.

However, Yuuto got the sense that her voice was less spirited than usual. Lately, Yuuto had been so overwhelmingly busy that it had been making his head spin. That meant that his adjutant must also be feeling that way. It was possible she was starting to feel worn out.

Yuuto didn’t feel good about always making her read him messages like this, but he couldn’t read the writing of Yggdrasil, so there was nothing he could do about that right now.

“Ohh, the Ash Clan. That takes me back,” Yuuto remarked with a bit of surprise, finally registering her words.

The Ash Clan had once joined with Botvid of the Claw Clan to attack lárnvíðr. They had been Yuuto’s opponents during his first real battle — and his first great victory. It had all taken place a year and a half ago, but even now he could remember it vividly.

Until a little over two years ago, Yuuto Suoh had been a relatively normal boy attending middle school in 21st century Japan. Thanks to a combination of coincidences, he had found himself transported to the war-torn world of Yggdrasil, and whether it had been fate or curse, he was now the sovereign ruler of the Wolf Clan.

As Yuuto indulged himself in a bit of reminiscing, Felicia’s sweet voice continued to read out the message.

“I, Douglas, express my humble request that Lord Yuuto might exchange with

me the Oath of the Chalice. And, in that event, I hereby pledge my intention to offer my daughter by blood, Dorothea, to serve Lord Yuuto at his palace...”

“Ugh, not again!” Yuuto exclaimed wearily, scowling.

He had already received the same kind of letters from the Wheat Clan and the Mountain Dog Clan, both of which were former subordinate clans of the Hoof Clan.

Yuuto had defeated the supreme ruler of Álfheimr once known by the alias Yngfróði, Lord of Abundance: the Hoof Clan patriarch Yngvi. And very soon afterwards, he had also defeated Steinþórr, patriarch of the Lightning Clan, a peerless warrior renowned by the name Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger. With that, the other nearby clans were apparently all awed and frightened by Yuuto’s military strength.

In each case, Yuuto had only gone to war reluctantly and for the sake of self-defense, but from a more faraway perspective, it was understandable that he might come across as an ambitious new ruler eager to expand his territory and influence.

Faced with such an opponent, and one that they could not defeat militarily, these people were trying to protect themselves as much as possible by declaring their intention to submit to him and enter under his protection, rather than wait for him to potentially invade them.

“At least in terms of getting more clans on my side and under my influence, this is exactly what I want to happen, but...” Yuuto slumped back against his chair, and gave a weary smile at the irony.

The real tricky part of this situation was how to deal with the “princesses,” the girls of high standing the other nations would send to him. They were meant to serve both as hostages that served as physical guarantee of the alliance, and as potential wives or mistresses that would foster closer ties between him and their home nation.

Some might say that as a man surrounded by noble girls from which he could take his pick, he was unreasonably blessed by his circumstances. But Yuuto had someone special to him back home in Japan, his childhood friend Mitsuki Shimoya. With her waiting bravely and patiently for his return, he could never

think of betraying her.

“For now, politely let the other parties know that I would like to exchange the Oath of the Chalice with them, but that I decline any marriage proposals. I’ll leave it up to you to come up with a good reason.”

“Yes, Big Brother,” said Felicia. “I believe that with the current status of the Wolf Clan, you will be able to push through negotiations with such a smaller and weaker clan on your own terms, with little trouble.”

Nodding, Felicia offered her opinion as she took down Yuuto’s words on a piece of paper.

It was as she said; the Wolf Clan was now far more large and powerful than when Yuuto had first become patriarch.

It wasn’t like he was making any unreasonable demands. If he was dealing with a tiny clan, unable to mobilize even a thousand soldiers, then it shouldn’t be hard to get them to accept the alliance under these terms.

“Well, more importantly, the biggest problem right now is the fact that we’ve gotten so big.” Yuuto shook his head and sighed, letting his gaze fall on a sheet of paper spread out on the desk.

It was a simple map of the lands surrounding the Wolf Clan. Surveying and measuring techniques were still pretty undeveloped in Yggdrasil. More than likely there was a fair bit of difference between this map and the actual geography, but this was still better than nothing.

Tapping a finger on the map, Yuuto mumbled to himself. “The most glaring issue is the shortage of personnel.”

In the space of the past year, the Wolf Clan had expanded its territory to almost three times its former size. He needed to govern all of that newly acquired territory, but naturally, that meant he needed to appoint civil officials to carry out the day-to-day work in each local area, as well as supply armed forces to protect the peace of local towns and cities, and defend them from bandits and foreign threats.

Because a good portion of that new territory was along the border with the Lightning Clan, who he’d just gone to war with, he was prioritizing resources

there, and in turn they were starting to see some serious negative side effects here in lárnvíðr.

In any case, the lack of manpower meant that his administration was no longer able to govern smoothly.

“We’ve gotta do something about this...” Yuuto muttered.

He needed to secure more capable people, and fast. For Yuuto right now, that was his greatest unresolved dilemma.

After finishing his work for the first half of the day, Yuuto had lunch on the terrace, and as he looked down into the large courtyard, he saw that the bazaar-style marketplace was up and running.

The merchant traders had set up their tents, inside of which various wares were closely packed together on display, and the whole place was filled with lively and excited voices.

In particular, a store set up on the north side of the courtyard seemed to be booming, with a gaggle of merchants frantically scrambling to bid on the goods there.

“I’ll bid thirty bygg of silver!”

“Then I’ll bid forty bygg!”

“Grrr... then one barr!”

“One barr, twenty bygg!”

“One barr, thirty bygg!”

Apparently whatever it was, it was so popular that it was being sold in auction format. The merchants raised their hands one after the other, and with each passing second, the price shot upward.

“It sure is getting heated down there.” Standing next to Yuuto, Sigrún spoke in an uninterested tone.

This silver-haired girl was the leader of the Múspell unit, and of Yuuto’s personal guard. She was the greatest warrior of the Wolf Clan, and responsible

for killing both the Claw Clan's hero Mundilfäri and the Hoof Clan patriarch Yngvi, each fearless and unrivaled warriors in their own right.

Perhaps because of the colder late autumn climate, today she was wearing a hooded fur cloak. The hood had wolf ears attached to it, and it actually suited her quite well.

"Ohhhhhh!!" All of a sudden, a chorus of shouts spread through the crowd of merchants like a wave. It seemed the winner had been decided.

The concept of standardized currency such as coins hadn't caught on yet in Yggdrasil, so it was normal for most merchants to settle their payments with silver.

"Bygg" and "barr" were units of measurement for weight. One bygg was equivalent to the weight of 180 grains of barley, and one barr was equal to 60 bygg.

Yuuto had once put his smartphone, the LGN09 a.k.a. Laegjarn (166 grams) on the merchant scales, and it had come up as 20 bygg. So, that meant one barr was approximately 500 grams.

"Whoa, that's a crazy price," Yuuto whispered in astonishment. "And just for something like this..." He tapped a fingernail with a *clink* against the drinking glass in front of him.

Incidentally, the average commoner working manual labor received wages equivalent to about two bygg of silver for one month's work.

"'Just for something like this' is a pretty harsh way of underselling it, if you ask me. It took us a whole lotta hard work to get to where we could make 'something like this,' you know." Sitting across from Yuuto, a red-haired girl puffed out a cheek in dissatisfaction.

The girl's name was Ingrid. Like Yuuto, she was only midway through her teenage years, but she was an Einherjar with the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades, and a genius at making things.

Stirrups, waterwheels, paper, and so much more...

When Yuuto used the information gained using his smartphone to come up

with various ideas and inventions, it was no exaggeration to say that it was thanks to Ingrid every time he was able to actually build and produce each one of them.

If Yuuto was the star actor, the main character who had publicly rebuilt the weak and tiny Wolf Clan and defeated all of its hostile neighbors, then this girl was his best supporting actor, and the lead role behind the scenes.

“Besides, they should be able to make more than enough profit even if they buy them at that price,” Ingrid said. “If they take them to the imperial capital Glaðsheimr, people from the imperial family and the upper class will be willing to pay several times more. After all, in all of Yggdrasil, here in lárnvíðr is the only place you can get ‘em. They’re the rarest of rare goods.”

Ingrid spoke with confidence, puffing up her average-sized chest with pride.

It was said that glass had its origins around 3000 B.C., and even in Yggdrasil, people had already known of its existence.

However, the common way of producing glass in Yggdrasil was quite primitive. After building a casting mold primarily from sand, molten glass was poured directly into the mold.

The pieces of glass formed this way were mainly used by the wealthy and nobility as luxury decorative art pieces, and nothing more.

“There was also supposed to be an early method for making glass called ‘core forming’ that got developed in Mesopotamia by 1550 B.C., though...” Yuuto muttered to himself.

Yggdrasil was somewhere in the late Bronze Age in terms of civilization and technology, so the eras should theoretically line up, but it seemed that the technique of making core-formed glass was still unknown here.

Of course, that didn’t say much. As an example, silk-making had originated in China around 3000 B.C., but the technique hadn’t reached the West until the 6th century A.D., a whole 3600 years later.

This was a world with no telephone or internet. It wasn’t unusual for a technique or invention that had long been in use in one region to be almost totally unheard of in another region for hundreds or thousands of years.

It was said that the glass pieces created through the core forming method had once been treated as equal in value to wares made of silver and gold. And just a moment ago, those merchants had indeed assigned that much value to glass wares as simple as the drinking cup in front of Yuuto now.



“Talk about making a killing,” he murmured.

The glassmaking technique Yuuto had introduced was glassblowing, established in the latter half of the 1st century B.C., 1,500 years after core-forming.

By attaching a lump of molten glass called a “gather” to one end of a thin iron pipe and blowing into it, one could make the blob of glass expand and take shape. It was a technique still in use in the 21st century.

Thanks to the advent of this method, it was now possible to produce a larger volume of glass products, and do it more cheaply.

“You’re amazing as always, Big Brother,” Felicia said. “With this, the Wolf Clan will only grow more and more prosperous. Why, the poverty we were in two years ago feels so far away now. I never dreamed back then we’d even be able to have meals in the middle of the day like this.”

Felicia tore off a piece of her bread and popped it into her mouth, making a face of absolute delight and even trembling a bit as she savored the taste.

Two meals a day was the norm in Yggdrasil: breakfast and supper. But for Yuuto, who was both used to three meals a day and also a growing young man, that didn’t feel like nearly enough, and so now that the Wolf Clan’s food supply situation had so dramatically improved, recently he had taken to having three meals a day. As his adjutant, Felicia was always at his side, so she had begun having three meals a day, as well.

“Look, all I did was show a video about glassblowing to Ingrid. She’s the amazing one for being able to actually recreate that technique and put it into practice.”

“Tee hee! Ingrid is impressive, isn’t she?”

“I-I didn’t really do anything all that special either, okay?” Ingrid’s face began to turn red. She was shy, and had trouble accepting direct compliments like this. “I-if you’re gonna give out compliments, give some to the craftsmen who actually made ’em. A-all I did was teach those guys the basics of the basics, and they did the rest.”

The main components of glass were sand, ash from plant matter, and lime, and all of them could be found in plentiful quantities anywhere in the world. But however much a genius Ingrid was, she was only one person. She couldn't very well handle the mass production of glass by herself.

Yuuto had plenty of other jobs he needed her for, as well. It would have been a waste to let her spend all of her time and talent solely on glassware production.

So there had been a cultivation of a whole group of apprentice glassmakers, trained in the glassblowing technique that Ingrid had mastered. The glass items being sold in the bazaar right now were all made by those apprentices of hers.

"W-well, I'm just glad those prices show they're being appreciated for what they're worth. Those guys all really worked their butts off this past half-year..." Ingrid spoke quietly, looking down at the courtyard. Yuuto could see tears in the corners of her eyes.

She usually spent all of her time shut away in the workshop, but the fact that she had made a point of coming out to witness the first sale of her apprentices' work like this showed that she was a girl who was good at looking after others. She must have been especially moved at seeing proof that her students had come into their own.

Incidentally, she had also taught the tatara furnace method of refining iron to a group of her most skilled, most trusted craftsmen, and so now the process of mass iron refinement had begun in various places throughout Wolf Clan territory.

In order to prevent the leak of sensitive information about the process to neighboring clans, it was conducted under multiple layers of heavy security.

At the end of the day, one could not talk about the current prosperity of the Wolf Clan without mentioning Ingrid's role in it all.

"U-um, I-I, I've brought some more tea!" From behind him, Yuuto heard a cute-sounding voice speak with a clumsy stammer.

Turning around, he saw a cute little girl of perhaps ten, with light brown hair cropped at shoulder length, holding a serving tray and wearing an incredibly

nervous expression.

It wasn't the same serving girl who usually waited on them. But more importantly, something else about her stood out to Yuuto. He was certain that he recognized her face.

"Wait, aren't you..."

"Y-y-yes, Master! I'm Ephelia, the slave Master bought along with my mother!"

As Ephelia stammered in a high-pitched voice, Yuuto snapped his fingers as the memory came back to him. "Ah! So you *are* the little girl from back then."

It had been right around the time he had taken Horn Clan patriarch Linnea prisoner and brought her back to Iárnviðr. He'd purchased a mother and daughter who were being sold as slaves in the market.

It had only been about three months ago, but right afterward, the wars with the Hoof Clan and Lightning Clan had happened in succession, so it felt like a long time ago to Yuuto.

"H-h-here y-you go." With trembling hands, Ephelia tilted her pitcher to pour tea into Yuuto's glass. She was so nervous and shaky that just watching her made Yuuto feel anxious.

"Hey, don't tense up so mu—augh, that's hot!" His warning came to late, and the hot tea she was pouring splashed out of the glass and onto Yuuto's pants.

"Ah! Awawa! I'm s-so sorry!!" Ephelia's face nearly turned blue with fright, and she hurriedly used her scarf to try wipe down the spot on Yuuto's pants. "Ohh... Oh no, what have I done... I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'll do anything anything I promise please forgive me. I'm sorry I'm so sorry."

She repeated her pleading apologies over and over. She'd seemingly gone completely into shock.

To a slave like her, at the absolute bottom of society, a clan sovereign like Yuuto was so far above her he might as well be a god. And he was also her direct master, with the right to decide even her life or death. It wasn't unreasonable for her to be frightened of him in this situation.

As Ephelia seemed just about ready to burst into tears, Yuuto placed his hand gently on her head and rustled her hair. “I’m not gonna get mad at you over something like that.”

“Eh... oh...”

As Ephelia looked up at Yuuto, he could see the light returning to her eyes as she regained her senses. It seemed she understood that she hadn’t upset him.

“Have you gotten used to living here? Nobody’s giving you a hard time, right?” Yuuto made sure to speak to her in a gentle voice.

If she became ashamed at having gotten so upset and started newly apologizing for that, they’d be right back where they started. Changing the subject completely was the best course of action here. A good ruler should always be quick to seize an opportunity to move things in his favor.

“Y-yes,” she said nervously. “Everyone’s been really good to me.”

“Mm, I see.” Yuuto showed her a little smile.

He wasn’t the naive Yuuto of two years ago, who would have simply taken her words at face value and been reassured without much thought.

However, though Ephelia’s tone of voice still had some remnants of nervousness, there was no hint of the gloominess of someone who was going through a painful experience and trying to hide it. He could assume she was speaking from her heart.

“By the way, what happened to the usual girl?” Yuuto asked.

“O-oh, right. She caught a cold and wasn’t feeling well today. But everyone else was so busy. So Ephy wanted to... ah! No, u-um, I-I wanted to...”

“Ohh, that’s good of you. I’m impressed.”

It would seem that she normally referred to herself in the third person. That wasn’t terribly rare in children her age.

Yuuto pretended not to notice Ephelia’s mistake, and with a kind laugh, he ruffled her hair once more.

“E-ehehe!” Ephelia giggled bashfully, but also happily.

She was like a little puppy.

Yuuto couldn't help himself from ruffling her hair even more.

"Awawa! M-Master?!"

"Ha ha, just giving you a reward for your hard work."

"Nnn..." Embarrassed, Ephelia stared at the ground, her face bright red, which just made her even cuter.

Yuuto had several sworn little sisters and sworn daughters thanks to the Oath of the Chalice, but all them were fairly close in age to him, and each of them were dependable fighters or exemplary professionals in some field. The twin girls from the Claw Clan were a bit more younger than him, but both of them were frighteningly skilled in their own ways.

By contrast, Ephelia's helplessness stirred up Yuuto's instinctive desire to protect in an almost refreshing way. If he'd had an actual younger sister of his own, she might be something like this.

"Ephelia's a bit of a long name," he said. "Is it okay if I just call you Ephy?"

"O-of course. Ephy is Master's property, so please use whatever name you like."

"Okay, then." Still petting Ephelia's head, Yuuto gave a reassuring, easygoing nod...

...and suddenly he noticed he could feel several intense gazes on him.

With a shudder, Yuuto looked up to see three Einherjar glaring in his direction with very complicated and hard to read expressions.

Yuuto was the ultimate authority figure in the Wolf Clan. Felicia was his adjutant, Sigrún the captain of his personal guard, and Ingrid his close friend and partner.

And yet, what sent a chill down Yuuto's spine was, without a doubt, terror.

"W-what is it? Is something wrong, you guys?" Yuuto inquired, unable to keep himself from flinching a bit.

At his words, the three of them seemed to come back to their senses and

hurriedly shook their heads.

“N-no, there is nothing wrong,” Felicia said quickly. “(M-maybe Big Brother prefers younger girls after all. He did mention that his beloved Lady Mitsuki was a year younger than him, and he certainly seems to have taken a liking to Kristina...)”

“It’s nothing, Father,” Sigrún agreed. “(W-why? Even I couldn’t get Father to pet my head that much. I’m jealous of her, but I can’t say it out loud in front of everyone...!)”

“O-ohh, no, it’s nothing, don’t worry,” assured Ingrid. “(H-how could I admit I’m jealous of a little girl?!)”

“Uh, th-that’s good, then.” Yuuto didn’t feel like the answers he’d heard were the truth, and he wondered what they’d been muttering under their breaths, but he didn’t pursue the matter any further.

The sense of terror he’d felt a moment ago was still fresh.

A wise man keeps away from danger, as they say.

“Ah, that’s right. Ephy, would you like one of these sweets?” Pulling himself together, Yuuto took one of the leftover baked sweets from a plate on the table and held it out to Ephelia.

Once again, the atmosphere around the table seemed suddenly oppressive. Yuuto got the sense that he might have just made a terrific mistake, but it was too late to turn back now.

“O-oh, n-no, thank you! It would be unthinkable to eat Master’s food.” Ephelia shook her head violently side to side, trembling.

Surprisingly, baked sweets had a long and storied history. Even in ancient Mesopotamia in the 22nd century B.C., there was a sweet, cake-like confection called “mersu.” It was made by taking kneaded dough and mixing in things like dates, figs, raisins, honey, and variety of spices, and baked in a clay pot.

Of course, in an early era like this one, confections and desserts were an indulgence that could only be eaten by those with at least some wealth and status. It was, indeed, unthinkable for a slave like her to eat one.

Her reaction had been pretty much what Yuuto had predicted, so he deliberately made a disappointed face as he responded.

“I see. Well, that’s a problem. You see, I’m no good with sweet foods. But if I don’t finish them, it would be disrespectful to the people who made them. And most of all, they’d go to waste. It’d really help me out if someone were to eat one of them, you know?”

“Eh... uh... um... b-but...” Ephelia was stammering, but her eyes were already locked onto the confection in Yuuto’s hand. Deep down, she did want to eat it more than anything. She reflexively swallowed. All she needed was just one more push.

“Go on, take it.” A bit forcefully, Yuuto took Ephelia’s hand, and placed the baked sweet into it. “Now, eat it before it gets stale. It’s really tasty.”

“O-okay. Then, I humbly accept!” After having it personally handed to her by her master, Ephelia certainly couldn’t make him take it back. She made up her mind, and stuffed it into her mouth.

She chewed a few times, then a look of utter joy and ecstasy spread across her face. It seemed that girls loving sweets was just as true in Yggdrasil as it was in modern day Japan.

“Ish... ish sho yummy.” A few tears fell from Ephelia’s eyes.

“Hey, now, was it really tasty enough to cry over?” Yuuto said.

“Yes. But, it’s not just that... I just remembered eating one a long time ago...”

“A long time ago?Oh, right.” Yuuto dimly recalled that when he’d purchased Ephelia and her mother, the slave merchant had mentioned they had lived a life where they’d been “well cared-for.”

Even though she was still only around ten or so, she must have already been through some frightening experiences. The fear she had shown after her earlier blunder gave him just a glimpse of how bad it must have been.

“Hey, I’m sorry if I made you remember something bad,” he said.

“No, it’s all right. This is really delicious.” Ephelia chewed slowly, seemingly savoring every bit of the flavor.

To Yuuto's taste, they were lacking in both sweetness and texture compared to the candy and cakes of modern-day Japan, but it must have been an incredibly rich treat for her.

"Okay, then," he said. "...Huh? Hold on. Hey, Ephelia, can you by chance read that sign over there?" Yuuto pointed to a shop's signboard down in the courtyard.

Ephelia tilted her head quizzically for a moment, then responded. "Umm, the one that says 'One bygg of silver for 360 bygg sheep's wool'?"

"Okay, that'll do. Aaaaall right, you can eat as much of these as you want."

With a satisfied nod, Yuuto picked up the plate of leftover sweets and handed the whole thing to Ephelia.

"H-huuuh?! N-no, I c-can't accept this much!" Ephelia went pale and began shaking her head back and forth again. It seemed having so much bestowed on her by her master really was too much for her to accept.

"It's fine. After all, thanks to you, I just thought of a really great idea." Yuuto gave her a confident and reassuring smile.

With the thoughts racing through Yuuto's mind, he couldn't sit still and have a leisurely lunch anymore. He felt as if the world had suddenly opened up before him, and in a burst of high spirits, he stood up from the table to leave.

"...So men really do prefer younger girls, don't they?" Felicia muttered. "I... I understand, though. By next year, I'll already be twenty, after all, a woman past her prime..."

"To think she could so completely earn Father's good favor in such a short amount of time..." Sigrún mourned. "This girl, I underestimated her...!"

"I can't *believe* you sometimes! You just work your way through one girl after the other... Learn to control yourself a bit!"

The three girls who served as Yuuto's trusted retainers appeared to be busy having some sort of fundamental misunderstanding about him.

"Mandatory education?" Felicia tilted her head in puzzlement.

She didn't immediately understand the significance of the term.

Felicia and Yuuto had parted with the other girls on the terrace, and now the two of them were alone in Yuuto's office.

Yuuto nodded, leaning back against his favorite chair. "That's right. Look, that Ephy girl could read, right?"

"Yes, well, she supposedly was living well before she became a slave, so she likely attended a vaxt at some point."

Yggdrasil was a world still in the Bronze Age, but there were places in many major towns and cities that taught basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, essentially basic schools for educating future bureaucratic officials. Such a place was called a "house of tablets," or vaxt.

Of course, as evidenced by Yggdrasil's less than 1% literacy rate, at present, only those from a very well-off stratum of society could afford to attend a vaxt.

"Mm-hm, that's probably true," said Yuuto. "Which means that, given a proper education, even a small child like Ephy can learn to read. And, without any education, even a fully mature adult can't read a word."

"Yes, that's... true?" Felicia gave a vague, uncertain response. To her, it probably just sounded like Yuuto was doing nothing more than stating the obvious. She hadn't grasped his true intentions in bringing this up.

"So, think about it," Yuuto said. "Assuming we do it in a way that's flexible and works with our current circumstances, we could have all the kids from around ages seven to fifteen receive an education. Don't you think that sounds interesting?"

The corners of Yuuto's mouth pulled upwards in an excited grin.

He remembered how the popular term "Spartan education" had its roots in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta, where every citizen had gone through an incredibly harsh and intensive period of mandatory education and training.

The world of Yggdrasil was one in which the ruling class was determined by ability and merit rather than bloodline, thanks to the Chalice of Allegiance and clan system. In that sense, it bore some similarities to the democratic systems

of ancient Greece and Rome, where citizens had several rights and could elect their rulers by vote.

In a more fixed society governed by inheritance, where the children of farmers could only become farmers and the children of soldiers could only become soldiers, Yuuto could have expected a backlash to implementing widespread education, mainly from the powerful upper classes. But in a meritocratic society with the Oath of the Chalice at its core, it should be comparatively easier to acclimate the populace to the idea.

Of course, there were bound to be problems that arose once he actually tried to implement the policy, but all he needed to do was deal with them as they emerged.

To Yuuto, this seemed like a brilliant and inspired idea, but Felicia's expression only grew more suspicious and doubtful.

"...Um, Big Brother? You say 'all of the children,' but I would point out that the reality is that attending a vaxt is very expensive, and I believe there are only a limited number who could afford to do so. Wouldn't it be quite hard on the citizens to force such a burden on them?"

"Hm? Oh, you don't have to worry about that. We're going to make it free for them, you see."

"...Pardon?" Confused, Felicia was now asking Yuuto to repeat himself.

Well, that's understandable, Yuuto thought wryly to himself. The idea was totally normal to someone from the 21st century, but had to have sounded completely bizarre to a person from this era.

"It'll be free. The teachers' salaries, the supplies, the upkeep — all of those costs will be paid for by the Wolf Clan."

"Wh-whaaat?! U-um, Big Brother, it is indeed true that thanks to your tremendous efforts, the Wolf Clan as of late is incomparably more prosperous than it was before. But even so, I cannot think we have enough to afford..."

"We do, thanks to the glass. You saw just how crazy everyone was over it down in the bazaar earlier. It's going to make us a huge profit, far greater than even the paper."

“I see... That *is* true... However, frankly speaking, I think it is a very long-term plan in terms of its payoff. I fail to see how it can contribute at all to our present dilemma with our lack of personnel...”

“You’re right, but, well, that’s its own problem, and I plan to work on it separately. But where I come from, there are a couple of sayings appropriate for times like this. The first is ‘haste makes waste,’ and the second is ‘the longest way round is the shortest way home.’”

Often, when faced with a difficult problem, many people had a tendency to put off working on the more difficult job of solving the core cause of the problem, instead focusing on taking immediate actions and stopgap measures.

But if one only continued to produce incomplete, temporary solutions, then without fail, the problem would snowball over time, growing worse until it reached a point where no stopgap measure would be good enough, and nothing more could be done.

It had only been a little over a year since Yuuto became a patriarch, but he already knew that fact all too well.

It was true that he was desperate to get his hands on talented new recruits for his administration, but they weren’t going to just pop out of thin air for him anytime soon.

“So, I guess for starters, we should just stick with basic reading, writing, and arithmetic for everyone, and some combat training for the boys.” Yuuto stared into space, counting off the necessary subjects with his fingers.

The idea of teaching young, innocent children something as violent and brutal as combat didn’t exactly make him feel comfortable, but Yggdrasil was a world of might-makes-right, where the strong took what they wanted from the weak who couldn’t resist.

Yuuto had already sent out his armies several times now, in defense of the Wolf Clan’s territory.

“If it does not possess the will and the means to protect itself by its own power, then no matter the great nation, it shall not maintain its peace and independence for long. That is because, unable to rely on its own power to

protect itself, it can only rely on fortune.” It was a quote from that bible of politics, Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*.

In the end, preparing for the next conflict to come was absolutely necessary in this war-torn world.

“It may seem like a long way off right now,” Yuuto said. “But if we make sure to sow the seeds right now, then five or ten years later when we reap the benefits, it’ll make the Wolf Clan stronger than it’s ever been before.”

And it’s good insurance for after I’ve already gone back to Japan, Yuuto added in his thoughts.

The threats from the Claw Clan and the Horn Clan had since passed. The wars with the Hoof Clan and Lightning Clan after that had both been unexpected, but resulted in the Wolf Clan’s further growth and expansion.

As far as Yuuto was concerned, he had already more than accomplished the task left to him by his predecessor.

The only thing left that worried him was what would happen to the Wolf Clan after he went back home.

He sincerely wished that the clan would be able to live in peace and prosperity, even after he left.

That was just one more reason why he wanted to make such long-term preparations.

“You wish to know all of the famous users of seiðr magic?” Kristina asked, blinking in surprise.

At first glance, she looked like a normal, cute young girl of around twelve or thirteen. She normally always went everywhere accompanied by her sister Albertina, but tonight she was by herself.

Albertina was currently in bed back in their room, hugging a pillow and soundly snoring.

“Considering the divine techniques you already possess, Father — you call them “cheats,” yes? — I don’t see how you would have need of them. Besides,

you have Aunt Felicia, as well.” Kristina seemed mystified by Yuuto’s request.

Seiðr, meaning “secret art,” was a type of ritual magic that required more complicated conditions and steps to perform, but could accomplish more powerful effects than the galldr song magics which only required one’s voice.

They were mainly used for things like praying for rain or a bountiful harvest, dispelling sickness from those of high rank, or divining the future.

Of course, just because one performed a seiðr didn’t guarantee that rain would fall, or that the harvest would be bountiful, or that the sick would be healed. The overall lack of reliability in their results was such that they didn’t seem much better than shams or placebos to Yuuto.

To him, the modern day techniques he used were far more powerful and reliable. There was the sandbag strategy he’d used to dam the waters of a river and then unleash a flood on his enemy, or the Norfolk system of crop rotation that built upon its own results in a virtuous cycle, or his use of improved city sanitation to reduce the spread of disease.

However...

“Well, that doesn’t really matter. Just tell me about the ones you know of.” Concealing his true intentions, Yuuto pressured Kristina to continue.

Kristina silently thought to herself for a minute. “I think the most famous one would have to be the priestess and seer, Völva. It is said that her powers as an oracle helped Divine Emperor Wotan unite Yggdrasil and establish the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.”

“Hmm... let’s go with just people that are still alive.” Yuuto had learned from Felicia that the first divine emperor founded the empire around two hundred years earlier. He couldn’t imagine someone from that time would still be alive today.

“Hm, then in that case, how about the Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr? She is an Einherjar with the rune Svaðilfari, the Unlucky Traveler, and her name is known even here in the Bifröst Basin.”

“Oh, interesting. So what kinds of seiðr can she use, for example?”

“Let me see. She is proficient with a seiðr that gives some of her own good luck to another person, Hamingja, and one that allows her to take on the misfortune that is about to befall someone, Fylgja.”

“Ohh, so just like what the name of her rune suggests, she’s good at manipulating luck, then?”

“Aside from that, she is also famous for a seiðr called Fimbulvetr that can turn people into powerful berserkers that fight fearlessly to the very last.”

“Whoa, that one’s scary. So all of them end up creating misfortune as a byproduct, whether it’s for herself or for her enemies. Is there anyone else?”

“There is Sif, the priestess of the Snow Clan. I have heard that she can use the seiðr Gullveig, used to promote a bountiful harvest.”

“Huh? Wait, isn’t that also one of the names Linnea’s predecessor, the previous patriarch of the Horn Clan, went by?”

“Yes. That is because the previous Horn Clan patriarch Hrungrir had so fully mastered that seiðr, there was no one better than him with it.”

“Uh huh, I see. Well, I don’t need to hear about any crop-related ones. Any others?”

“I would think that agriculture is the most important and fundamental thing for a nation... Hmm. That reminds me, Father, you were summoned here by Aunt Felicia’s seiðr Gleipnir, were you not?” Kristina suddenly looked like she’d realized something, and looked straight into Yuuto’s eyes, her gaze searching.

“Y-yeah. That’s true, I was.” Yuuto tried his best to act unfazed, but her remark hit so close to the mark that he ever so slightly flinched.

“Hmmm...” With just that, it was as if this clever girl suddenly pieced together everything. She narrowed her eyes, her reproachful, stare sliding over him.

“I see now. You were searching for a method for returning home. You are quite the cruel father, enlisting your own new daughter in helping with that task.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Yuuto quickly gave up on making any kind of excuse, and slumped his shoulders, defeated.

Because he'd been called to this world during a rite pleading for victory for the Wolf Clan, at one time, Yuuto had assumed that if he helped bring them that victory, he could go back home. But in the end, even after subjugating the Claw Clan and Horn Clan, even after defeating the Hoof Clan and Lightning Clan, there was no sign of him being able to see Japan again any time soon.

What had pulled Yuuto into this world was Gleipnir, a seiðr which was ordinarily used to grasp ahold of unnatural or otherworldly powers and seal them. So, Yuuto had for some time been considering that some other kind of seiðr might have a chance of sending him back.

Ever since he'd first arrived, the threats of immediate danger and crisis had meant he'd had to keep putting off his investigation, and now over two years had gone by.

He didn't want to let any more time get away from him. He had someone back home waiting for him. So, he was becoming more and more impatient to get his search seriously underway.

"So was the reason you went through all the trouble of calling me out here in the middle of the night that you didn't want Aunt Felicia to hear us?"

"You're right again," he admitted.

I really can't underestimate this girl, Yuuto thought to himself.

She was an expert at being able to fully deduce these sorts of things with only the tiniest of hints. She was still quite young, but her ability to handle and analyze information was unparalleled.

"Of course, if I did let Felicia know, I'm sure she'd tell me what she knows, and help me search, but..." Yuuto trailed off with a bitter smile.

He got the feeling that if she did help him, she would likely be smiling on the outside, all the while crying on the inside. He was at least that much aware of how much she cared for him.

Felicia had once said to him that she wanted him to rely on her more. Yuuto already thought of her as his trusted confidant, and was sure he'd be relying on her for plenty in the days to come.

Even when it came to his search for a way back home, if he'd exhausted all other avenues and had no choice left but to rely on her powers, then it would be painful but he'd ask for her help.

However, he didn't want to hurt her if this was something he could get help from other people with.

She was the person responsible for pulling him into Yggdrasil, but she was also the person he owed his life to. She had cared for and aided him ever since those first days when he was helpless.

"Honestly, this is quite a letdown, Father," Kristina said. "More than anything, it's quite rude to me."

"I said I'm sorry, okay? That was wrong of me." The result of Yuuto's efforts was that he found himself apologizing profusely to Kristina.

She had recognized him as the one man she could deem worthy of making her sworn father, and it hadn't even been three days since she had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with him, only to now find that he was secretly scheming to abdicate his position as patriarch and escape back home alone.

It couldn't be helped if she saw him as utterly irresponsible.

"Here I had been so sure that you had given into your bestial urges," Kristina said. "I was so looking forward to a dangerous and thrilling nighttime rendezvous, too."

"Wait, *that's* what you meant?!"

"Really, are you sure you're okay, living a celibate life at your age? Doesn't it... affect you?"

"The fact that a kid like you seems so well-informed about that stuff is way less okay for me right now!"

"Oh, I just happened across the information somewhere. Really, just by chance."

"Yeah, right... I know just what kind of person you are."

"Well! I am just a normal little girl, I haven't the slightest idea what you're implying, Father." Kristina giggled mischievously.

It seemed that in regards to Yuuto's unfaithfulness and disrespect, she was willing to let the matter go without any more comment. She'd even used an unexpected and outlandish joke to break up the oppressive mood in the air. She really was a smart girl.

Inwardly grateful to his considerate sworn daughter, Yuuto grumbled to himself about what to do next.

"Well then, in regards to both my way home and the need for more personnel, we need to do what we can to discover qualified people and recruit them. 'The people are my armies, the people are my stone walls, the people are my moats, mercy is my ally, while evil is my enemy.' Those words are as true as ever."

They were the words of Takeda Shingen, the Japanese warlord and ruler famous for his battle standard, the *furinkazan*, which itself featured quotes from Sun Tzu.

The quote emphasized that what truly protected a nation was not castles or walls or moats, but first and foremost the power of its people. It was a quote that served as a good representation of the man renowned as perhaps the strongest military ruler of the Sengoku Period.

"All right, then," he murmured to himself. "What to do..."

"The introduction of currency is being received incredibly well among the city's population. Everyone is talking about how it's made transactions simpler and reduced the amount of arguments that break out. With things running more smoothly, there are a lot more transactions taking place as well, and the marketplace is busier than ever."

It was the following day, and in Yuuto's office, a man was reporting the current situation to him in a quickened, fervent voice.

He was in his mid-thirties, with an intense, masculine face and the sun-tanned skin of someone who had spent many years traveling the roads.

His name was Ginnar. He was the manager and boss of the lárnvíðr bazaar.

He had originally been a merchant trader who had traveled the length and breadth of Yggdrasil's many lands, but around half a year ago, Yuuto had seen

his talent and seen fit to personally employ him.

Yuuto had done some studying of economic theory on the internet, but in the end, he was still no better than a total amateur when it came to the real thing. Right now trade was the Wolf Clan's primary source of income, so an experienced man like Ginnar who knew the business inside and out was a valued asset to him as an advisor.

That said, it still would have been improper for the patriarch to suddenly give an outsider his Chalice oath directly, so for the time being, Yuuto had had Ginnar exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice with his second-in-command, Jörgen.

Jörgen was Yuuto's child subordinate, and Ginnar had become Jörgen's sworn younger brother, so according to clan hierarchy, Yuuto was technically now his sworn parent, similar to a father-in-law in the modern day.

Jörgen himself had now become quite the father figure himself as the head of the largest faction family within the Wolf Clan, over fifteen hundred strong, equal to the population of a small clan. The position as such a man's younger sibling subordinate was not a loss of face for Ginnar. It was quite the opposite; objectively speaking, it was quite preferential treatment to give such status to a new recruit.

"Then there's the fact that trust in the currency creates added value, so we scratch up a little more profit on every sale," Ginnar went on. "Not to mention the fact that using copper coins means we can get the material for them at low cost by recycling the bronze weapons and armor we don't use anymore. We're turning such a profit it's practically robbery. You're really amazing, Father! Even we merchants would have trouble coming up with such a devious method."

"Oh come on, now, don't make it sound like I'm some kind of villain." Yuuto shook his head with a wry smile. He knew the man was complimenting him, but the choice of words left something to be desired.

Despite his exasperated response, he found he could relax more when talking with someone like Ginnar. In his position as the patriarch, most people were too overly humble and considerate of him.

Ginnar's frank and friendly manner was his trademark, and it surely came

from his life as a merchant trader who traveled from place to unfamiliar place, constantly having to form connections with strangers and do business with them.

“Still,” Felicia said from behind Yuuto, “it is wonderful to hear that it turned out so well.”

Yuuto nodded. “Yeah, that’s for sure. This means it should be fine to expand the practice to all areas throughout Wolf Clan territory. Once we’ve done that, I just need to find some way to get the other clans under our protection to start using currency, too. Well, I suppose the only way to do that is to have direct talks with the other patriarchs.”

A currency that was only really used in lárnvíðr would still pose a lot of inconveniences when it came to trade. In fact, the trade merchants purchasing the Wolf Clan’s glass products still weren’t using the Wolf Clan’s new currency, but instead paying by weight in raw silver or barley.

If the currency gained traction in a wider area, it would be convenient enough for the merchants to begin using it in their transactions, too. That would lead to an increased profit on trade within the Wolf Clan’s sphere of influence, and greater prosperity for the clan.

“In that case, let us get started on the arrangements right away,” said Ginnar. “The sales of glassware yesterday gave us quite a lot of silver, but I can’t be sure we have enough copper coins yet to cover the wide amount of territory under discussion.”

“All right, I’ll leave those matters to you, then. Oh, but before that, I should give you your reward, though.”

It was Yuuto’s policy, and thus the Wolf Clan’s, to always give a proper reward to those who accomplished something for the clan.

Machiavelli, whom Yuuto had fully come to respect as his historical teacher on matters of politics, said this on the subject:

“A great ruler must appoint talented individuals as his advisors, and reward them appropriately for their accomplishments.”

Introducing a new practice or custom always carried associated risks, however

much more convenient it might be. This man Ginnar's skill and experience had surely played a large part in getting the people of the city to accept the new currency so readily.

"Heh heh, thank you very much. If at all possible, I'd really like to have something like that glass ornament you have there." Rubbing his hands together, Ginnar glanced over at a beautiful glass statuette of a wolf sitting on Yuuto's desk.

As expected of a former trade merchant, he had a good eye for valuable objects. Ingrid's apprentices had all grown into competent craftsmen, but Ingrid herself was still the only one skilled enough to be capable of creating something so fine and complex.

"Sorry, but this is something a good friend of mine gave me to celebrate our recent victory," Yuuto said. "I can't give it to you."

"N-no, of course not, and it's not that I really need it to be that one in particular. I would be fine just with something that looked similar."

"Hmm, okay then, I'll see about asking Ingrid to..." Yuuto trailed off mid-sentence. Then, with a gasp, his eyes widened. And slowly, a wide grin spread across his face.

"I've got it! Ginnar... how about I give you something much, much better than a glass ornament?"

"Ohhh! Y-you would give me something even better than this?!"

"Oh yes, and it'll also take care of the Wolf Clan's personnel problem, too. I'm gonna make sure you accept it, whether you like it or not."

"H-huh?"

Yuuto's suggestive statement was enough to make Ginnar's face cloud over with sudden suspicion.

The market master's eyes instinctively darted over to Yuuto's adjutant Felicia, as if seeking help, but she only lightly shook her head in response.

Yuuto then proceeded to explain exactly what sort of reward he was going to give Ginnar.

“Wh-whaaaaaat?!”

Ginnar’s astonished shout was loud enough to be heard outside the walls of the patriarch’s office.

At the same time that Yuuto was steadily working to put in place the arrangements he needed to leave the Wolf Clan safely behind him, far to the west, the former Hoof Clan capital of Nóatún had just come under the control of a new ruler.

The patriarch of the Panther Clan, Hveðrungr, sat himself down on his throne and smirked. “Not bad. I have to say I find this chair quite comfortable.”

If one were to describe his appearance with two words, they would be “strange” and “suspicious.” A black mask covered the upper half of his face, its surface shimmering with an ominous, dark luster.

One year ago, this man had unexpectedly shown up in the lands of the Panther Clan, at the time nothing more than a single small nomadic clan in the Miðgarðr region. Despite being an outsider to them, he had rapidly distinguished himself with so many great achievements that he had established himself as a hero within their clan, eventually rising to become their next patriarch.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, the Panther Clan had then proceeded to conquer and annex all of their neighboring clans, and to top it off, they had just finished conquering the Hoof Clan, one of the ten Great Clans of Yggdrasil, as easily as swatting a fly.

Everyone within the Panther Clan agreed that it was all thanks to this man Hveðrungr, and the refined iron and stirrups he had invented for them.

“Heh-heh-heh, but unfortunately the rest of the palace of the supreme ruler of Álfheimr is in quite the sorry state.” Hveðrungr’s lips turned upward in a smile of sinister joy.

It was just as he’d said. The once gorgeous decorations lining the walls and halls of Nóatún’s palace had all been looted or smashed beyond repair, and everywhere one looked, there were countless bloodstains. The corpses had

been taken away, but it was a sight gruesome enough to overwhelm the faint of heart.

The two generals waiting upon Hveðrungr each spoke up, their spirits high.

“Father, let us seize this momentum and capture the lands south of the Örrmt River, as well!”

“Yes, with that last battle, their forces are already on shaky footing. They’ll scarcely even be able to defend against us!”

The first of the two generals was Narfi, a slender man with handsome, clean-cut features and a gentlemanly bearing. The other, Váli, was the complete opposite, thick and brawny with a crude, wild appearance and a hairy face. The two of them were both veteran warriors of the Panther tribe, and both Einherjar.

“Forget about them.” Hveðrungr’s answer was terse and disinterested.

His two generals were quite visibly disappointed at this. For a nomadic clan of subsistence hunters, allowing one’s weakened prey escape was disgraceful.

The words of a patriarch were absolute and final, but these two generals still couldn’t bring themselves to accept them.

“Father, I find that strange,” Narfi objected. “Those don’t sound like the words of such a wise man as you. The prize is so close nearby, ready and waiting for us to take it.”

“It’s just as Narfi says,” Váli agreed. “If we carelessly allow them to reorganize themselves, it’ll just be more trouble for us. We have to act now, Father!”

The two of them moved closer to Hveðrungr as they made their impassioned, boastful pleas. But the patriarch sat still with his chin propped against one hand, with no sign that he’d been the least bit persuaded.

“Destroy the Hoof Clan completely, and the Lightning Clan will await us,” the patriarch said. “If we stir up trouble with their ‘tiger,’ it will be quite the bit of work to deal with him. I’m going to leave that area of the Hoof Clan intact as a buffer zone.”

The rumors about the Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of Vanaheimr, had

reached even the distant northern Miðgarðr region. Those rumors had spoken of a young man so invincibly powerful that even a group of Einherjar fighting together hadn't been strong enough able to overcome him.

Hveðrungr didn't consider him an unbeatable opponent, but he had no doubt that a battle would produce a great many casualties on his side, as well.

No, the one enemy Hveðrungr truly had to kill was somewhere else, and this stronghold city of Nóatún he had just captured would bring him another step closer to that goal. Fighting unnecessary battles against other enemies he didn't care about would just be an annoying waste of time.

Fortunately, the previous patriarch of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, had exchanged the Oath of the Sibling Chalice on equal terms with the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. There had been no such oath exchanged with the most recent Hoof Clan patriarch, but at the very least, the two clans were formally related at the moment. The Lightning Clan wouldn't just blindly invade Hoof Clan territory in this state.

And, according to what Hveðrungr had heard about the Dólgprásir's character, he wouldn't find the defeated and weakened Hoof Clan forces to be a strong enough opponent to be worthy of attacking. They would make the perfect shield.

"Hm, I see," Narfi said. "So that was your reasoning."

He seemed to understand the meaning behind Hveðrungr's words now, and nodded in assent. Váli, on the other hand, still refused to yield.

"That so-called tiger lived his life snug and secure behind city walls; he's nothing more than a domesticated cat! What are you so frightened of him for, Father?! If that is how it's going to be, I'll go take care of both the Hoof Clan and the Lightning Clan myself!"

Váli stood up with a start, bellowing furiously.

He was still young, and only tenth ranked in the Panther Clan, lowest among the chief officers. But when it came to matters of valor on the field, he was a powerful and reputed warrior who had survived the white-hot crucible of countless battles, and one of the strongest three within the clan.

Perhaps his youthful, competitive spirit was also driving him forward; a desire to fight the Dólgprásir and see for himself just how strong an opponent he was.

However—

“...Really?” Hveðrungr asked. “So you’ll defy me and move my armies on your own, then. Is that what you’re saying, Váli?”

“Ah...!”

The instant Hveðrungr whispered those words, Váli was overcome by a sudden sense of mortal terror, as if a knife were being pressed directly against his throat.

The words themselves had been quiet, but the eyes behind Hveðrungr’s mask blazed with silent hatred and fury. It was such clearly understandable and intense murderous intent that a cold sweat began to run down Váli’s back.

“N-n-no, no Father. I... I wouldn’t possibly. Never. I-I was only thinking of you, Father, and the Panther Clan, so I...”

“Right, I’ve heard enough. I’ve no need for you anymore.” Hveðrungr slowly stood up, staring haughtily down at Váli, who had frozen in place. There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in his eyes. They were callous and compassionless... the eyes of someone looking at a mere object.

“F-Father, p-please, please forgive me. I g-got too carried away with myself. I know it was wrong.” Váli had seemed to shrink into himself, his body shaking, as if all of his previous bluster had been nothing more than a lie.

He was a respected warrior renowned for his bravery on the battlefield, and far from the sort of man who would cower in the face of death.

But now he was frozen before Hveðrungr like a deer in headlights, paralyzed by an instinctive fear that swallowed his mind.

“Now, now, forgive him, Rungr.” A woman who had been standing next to the throne moved next to the patriarch, drooping her body against his, and placed her hand gently over his hand before it could finish moving to draw the sword at his hip.

She was a beauty in the full blossom of youth, with long, silver-white hair that

flowed down her back in a great ponytail. She pressed her abundant chest against Hveðrungr, and flashed him a coquettish smile.

“Váli might be an idiot, but he is one of our best fighters,” she said. “You’re going to fight your most important battle soon, right? Don’t you think it’d be a waste to lose someone like him now?”

“The fact that it’s important is exactly why I don’t need the kind of idiots who act on their own,” Hveðrungr growled. “In the past, all of my plans, and everything I’d built up, were ruined by exactly that type of man.”

As if his own words had triggered some memory, the vicious aura emanating from Hveðrungr grew in intensity.

His hatred was so intense that it seemed to swirl around him, and everyone in the room with him had their hearts eaten away at by the black fear that it inspired in them.

The woman was no exception. The confidence fell away from her expression, and the color began to drain from her face. Just as Yuuto Suoh of the Wolf Clan had the spirit and aura of a great leader, just as Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan had the spirit and aura of a peerless warrior, Hveðrungr of the Panther Clan had an intense aura of wickedness and evil that could hold sway over people.

But even under the pressure of that wicked aura, the woman laughed playfully.

“Hmhm... hee hee hee, you’re as frightening a man as ever. That’s exactly why I chose you to be my husband, and relinquished the position of patriarch to you.” Sigyn stared lovingly up at Hveðrungr’s face, shrouded in its iron mask.

She didn’t know all of the details of what had happened to him in the past. However, there was no doubt that whatever event had sparked such hatred in him had also burned away any traces of softness or naivete. To Sigyn, that made him extremely dependable, and irresistably attractive.

Sigyn wasn’t just the seiðr user reknowned as the Witch of Miðgarðr. Until two months ago, she had also been the patriarch of the Panther Clan, and its greatest female warrior in a generation.

That was why she knew, from her own experiences, that a “benevolent ruler,”

virtuous and tolerant, was in the end nothing more than the empty ideals of the masses.

People who were to stand above others and rule them needed pride that wouldn't allow the idea of anyone greater than themselves. They needed to be merciless enough to toss aside and sacrifice their own child, sworn or otherwise, when the situation demanded it. They needed a vigilant and suspicious heart, unwilling to completely trust anyone, be they friend or family.



Naturally, Sigyn had no way of knowing this, but centuries later, the man who would attempt to conquer the world, Alexander the Great, would have this written about him in the *Varia Historia* by Claudius Aelianus:

“He hated Perdiccas because he was a great soldier, Lysimachus because he was a skilled commander, and Seleucus because he was brave and gallant. Antigonus and his generosity, the irreproachable good morals of Attalus, and Ptolemy’s good fortune all irritated him.”

Yes, Alexander the Great had held complicated feelings towards all of his subordinates who held specific qualities that surpassed him.

Even the man who would later become the founder and first emperor of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang, would succeed in uniting China but then fall into a pattern of purging those underneath him who began to rise in fame due to their achievements.

One of Liu Ban’s retainers, Han Xin, would be known as one of the three great heroes of the early Han dynasty, but still find himself imprisoned. At that time, he would cry out, “The hunting dog becomes food as well after it is used to hunt game!”

In Japanese history, there would be the case of Minamoto no Yoritomo, the establisher of the Kamakura shogunate. He would grow suspicious of his own brothers, Yoritomo and Yoshitsune, after their making great names for themselves in the war against the Taira clan. Fearing they would aim to replace him, he would demote them and later kill them.

Sigyn’s intuition based on her own life experience thus touched on one aspect of the truth of human nature.

But it was also a fact that people would not follow a ruler who was merely excessively cruel. She had decided for herself, then, that her role as his wife was to support and complement him in his rule.

“Even an idiot like that is a child that I’ve taken great pains to raise up over the years,” Sigyn said. “Could you forgive him just this one time, for me? I’ll be sure to give him a very *thorough* talking to, that he won’t soon forget. Please.”

“...Hmph,” Hveðrungr muttered. “Fine, if you insist. But Váli, there won’t be a

next time.”

Even Hveðrungr couldn't flatly dismiss such a sincere request from his predecessor as patriarch.

He had appeared before the Panther Clan a year and a half ago, so his authority as its leader had yet to become fully entrenched. It wouldn't be a good idea to publicly disrespect his wife, the person who could most vouch for his authority.

At least, not for now.

Váli dropped to his knees on the spot and bowed his head down low. “Y-yes, sir! I will take those words to heart, and be sure to know my place as I devote myself to your faithful service!”

The man felt, down to the marrow of his bones, that there was nothing he could do to win against this man, and any trace of rebellious spirit in his heart had vanished. His face looked exhausted, as rivulets of sweat poured down it.

However, Hveðrungr was no longer paying any mind to the likes of him.

“Almost time.... it's almost time,” he murmured.

Hveðrungr's gaze was fixed eastward, towards the lands of the Wolf Clan, the place he had once called home.

Towards the lands of the hated enemy who had stolen everything from him.

The dark whims of fate had pulled apart two brothers onto very different paths, and now, after a year's time, they were about to meet once more.

ACT 2

That same evening, a gathering of rather prominent individuals was taking place in a room in the palace in lárnvíðr.

There was Second-in-Command Jörgen, the Wolf Clan's top officer.

Felicia, Yuuto's adjutant and younger sibling subordinate.

Ingrid, chief of the Mótsognir Workshop, who last month had risen to seventh ranked in the clan.

Sigrún, captain of Yuuto's personal guard, who had also risen last month from fifteenth to eighth rank, an extraordinary promotion.

The twin sisters Albertina and Kristina, who weren't as high in rank but were still high in status as princesses of the neighboring Claw Clan.

Linnea, patriarch of the neighboring Horn Clan, who had elected to stay in lárnvíðr after the twins' Chalice Ceremony in order to observe Yuuto's governing style.

And lastly...

"Wh-why? Why is Ephy here...?!"

The slave girl Ephelia, who felt so overwhelmingly nervous at how out of place she was that she was trembling and on the verge of tears, was also there.

In a way, her reaction was perfectly natural.

From her perspective, these were all people so far above her in status that they might as well live a different world.

"The way I hear it, Father took quite a liking to you the other day." Jörgen flashed Ephelia a broad smile. "If so, then you have just as much of a right to be here."

His fierce-looking face bore scars across his brow and cheek. To a child of only ten like Ephelia, Jörgen's smile didn't make his face look any less frightening.

Linnea tensed up slightly and fixed her stare on Ephelia, closely watching her. "Big Brother... took a liking to you?"

"Ah... augh..." Ephelia became even more pitifully frightened, her body shaking so much it looked like she was having convulsions.

Just when it looked like she had passed her mental limit and might faint away from the stress...

"Good grief." Ingrid gave an exasperated sigh, scratching the back of her head with a hand, and used the other to hoist Ephelia up by her collar.

"Hwah?!"

"Just calm down, okay?" Ingrid sat Ephelia on her lap, and hugged her tightly. Ingrid had a rough and forceful way of speaking, but she was the kind of girl who took care of others.

"That's right, you have nothing to worry about. See?" Patting Ephelia on the head, Felicia hummed a quiet, gentle tune.

"Ah... okay..." Ephelia soon found that the scary feelings had mysteriously faded from her heart, and her shuddering had stopped.

The touch of human skin and the sound of a person's heartbeat were well known for their calming effects. Perhaps it was also reminiscent of the feeling of her own mother's embrace. The effects of Felicia's galldr surely also played a part.

Even so, the situation was still no less overwhelming for Ephelia, and she was now meek as a lamb, clinging stiffly to Ingrid.

That seemed to tug at Ingrid's heartstrings, and a delighted expression washed over her as she squeezed Ephelia even more tightly, whispering to herself under her breath.

"Ohh... little children really are so cute. One day, he and I will..."

"Nnn..." Being squeezed so tightly was a little painful, but Ephelia could also feel the affection Ingrid was showing her, and found herself unable to put up any resistance. She gave a small whimper, but nothing more.

When the room had settled down once more, Jörgen stood up. He began by

turning to his left and bowing to Linnea, who sat at the head of the table.

“Aunt Linnea, first I must apologize and ask your forgiveness for so impudently summoning you here of my own accord.”

“No, I don’t mind at all,” she said. “The Wolf and Horn Clans are family now. I’m grateful to receive an opportunity to interact with and deepen my bonds with my nieces and nephews like this.”

“That is a great relief to hear.” After giving one more bow to Linnea, Jörgen turned to the other seated girls and met each of their eyes in turn, before declaring in a bombastic tone: “There is but one reason I have called you all here so late at night. It has to do with Father.”

“...!” Every person seated at the table tensed up, and their faces instantly grew more concerned.

In the world of Yggdrasil, the relationships formed by the Oath of the Chalice were special. One could not choose the parents they were born to, but they could choose the parent they swore their oath to. And, because that choice had been made of a person’s free will, they were expected to be completely loyal, body and soul, to their sworn parent or older sibling.

Of course, that was just the official concept. It was the proper shape of things, as far as society was concerned. It wasn’t as if all relationships formed by the Oath of the Chalice lived up to that ideal; it was quite common for gain, loss, and leverage to play a role in the affairs of the Chalice, both before and after the oaths were exchanged. However, at the very least, every person present at that table held a degree of genuine loyalty and affection for Yuuto.

The fact that they had all been deliberately gathered here to discuss Yuuto was more than enough for them to treat this as a serious matter.

“Father possesses a great variety of knowledge from beyond the heavens, and has shown great brilliance in both state and military matters, yet he is not arrogant or haughty,” Jörgen said. “He is the type of person who continuously works to temper his own abilities through hard work. Furthermore, he is tolerant and kind by nature; and yet, when the situation calls for it, he shows a resolute strength of will greater than anyone’s, and guides us all on the right path. I would say he is without flaw, clearly born destined to be a ruler. Surely

no one here would deny that the prosperity we of the Wolf Clan see today is entirely thanks to Father.”

At those words, everyone else nodded deeply.

There was no way any of them would have denied it, for almost every one of them was awash in the awareness that, had that young man not arrived in Yggdrasil when he had, the Wolf Clan would long since have been extinguished from this world. (Ephelia and Albertina were the two exceptions.)

“Father shows no signs of abusing his power and status to engage in idle merrymaking, and instead spends every day applying himself fully to his duties,” Jörgen went on. “I’ve heard that, just the other day, those efforts once again bore fruit. Under Father’s leadership, I have no doubts the Wolf Clan will surely continue on its path of growth and development. However, I am also concerned... personally, I wonder if Father is working himself too hard.”

Jörgen’s brow furrowed, and with a grave expression, he continued.

“It will soon be a year and a half since Father became the patriarch. The fact that he pushes himself constantly for the sake of our clan and its people leaves me feeling deeply humbled, but it will all be for nothing if he ruins his health because of it. In the end, we of the Wolf Clan cannot exist without him.”

Jörgen’s words were not mere flattery or humility, but directly voicing his true feelings.

As part of his role as the second-in-command, there were many occasions during which he served as the acting patriarch in Yuuto’s absence. If anything were to happen to Yuuto, he was first in the line of succession.

Jörgen himself was a respectable figure who had climbed his way to his current position due to his own skill and efforts. He had not been without his own aspirations of one day becoming leader of the clan.

However, having lived past the age of forty, he had begun to have a better understanding of his own strengths and limitations. He was not conceited enough to think that he would serve as an equally worthy replacement for Yuuto.

“And so, I am of the opinion that we should make it so Father can relax and

have some fun once in a while,” the man continued. “While it may be true that everyone is busy due to our current shortage of personnel, at the same time, there are no urgent matters that require Father’s direct command. Rest assured, I can manage things here for four or five days.”

Jörgen thumped a hand against his chest in emphasis.

During times of war, he had been entrusted with staying behind to protect and lead the city while Yuuto headed out with the army, and so he had performed administrative duties by himself for weeks and even months at a time. He had plenty of confidence that he could hold things down without problems for a few days.

Sigrún raised a hand and spoke up. “I’m in full agreement with getting Father to take a break to rest and relax, but what is it you want me to do, exactly?”

Sigrún had no understanding of politics or administration.

She was more than willing to do anything to make her sworn father happy, but as someone who had spent her life concerned only with training in the martial arts, regrettably she did not see how there was any way she would be of help.

“She’s right, I wanna see Yuu— I mean, Father, get some rest too, but if I had to take on some of his work, it’s... you know, I don’t know the first thing about that stuff.” Ingrid, who only had knowledge of the work as a craftsman she devoted herself to, was likewise uncomfortable.

Jörgen dismissed their concerns with a hearty laugh.

“Ha ha ha, you don’t have to worry about that. As I just said, I’ll take care of things here by myself. I would like to have all of you do something else.”

“Something else, you say?” Felicia repeated quizzically.

“Father is a serious man with a strong sense of responsibility,” Jörgen said. “As long as he is here in lárnvíðr, he will surely be reminded of one important task or another, and won’t allow himself to truly rest and forget about work. That’s why I’m planning to have him go on a trip to the base of Mount Surtsey, and get in his relaxation there. The autumn leaves should be at their most beautiful there this time of year. And... I’m sure that Father would enjoy himself

even more if there were beautiful flowers there as well. Don't you?"

At that last line, Jörgen gave the girls a meaningful glance.

Jörgen was a tough-looking man with a scarred face, but he was not simple or unsociable. In fact, with three wives and eight children, he was the most well-versed and experienced person there when it came to the subtleties of relations between man and woman.

Jörgen paused for a moment, once again looking at each of the girls in turn, and then delivered the finishing blow.

"I think this proposition would work in your favors, as well. Normally, Father is always busy with his duties, but on a trip to new and unfamiliar surroundings, he will be able to forget his responsibilities and become much more free at heart. Don't you think that would be the perfect chance to become more intimate with him?"

In an instant, the look in the eyes of several of the girls in that room changed completely.

Indeed, they had all become wolves.

Meanwhile...

"Wah!" There was a sudden cry from the smartphone's speaker.

"Huh? What's wrong, Mitsuki?!" Yuuto asked, slightly panicked.

The strength of the signal his phone received was influenced considerably by the current phase of the moon. It was only a couple of nights after the new moon, and so Yuuto had made his way all the way up the steps of the Hliðskjálf, the Wolf Clan's sacred tower, to the sanctuary chamber, or hörgr, at its very top.

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuto could see a familiar member of his palace guard standing still and quiet off to the side. Apparently, Felicia and Sigrún had been called by Jörgen to some kind of meeting, and this man was standing in.

It was already well into the latter half of autumn, and in places up in the mountains like lárnvíðr, the nights were plenty cold. Yuuto felt guilty at making

other people tag along with him in this cold for something selfish like this.

“Ah, n-no, sorry, Yuu-kun. There’s nothing wrong. It’s just, I felt this strange chill run down my back. I wonder what that was?” Mitsuki trailed off.

Yuuto could easily picture her now, tilting her head to the side in puzzlement.

“You sure you didn’t catch a cold or something?” Yuuto said with a small laugh. “Make sure to watch your health. It’s already gotten pretty cold over there, too, right?”

“Hmm, I don’t really feel like that’s what it is. ...Yuu-kun, you be careful too, okay?”

“Ah, I’ll be fine. I’m making sure to dress warm.”

“Umm, that’s not really what I mean... just, be careful.”

“Right, I know. I’ll be careful.”

He wasn’t sure what exactly he was supposed to be careful of, but he went along with her anyway, nodding.

As always, she’s such a worrywart, Yuuto thought to himself with a wry smile, but in reality he had in fact done things to make her worry over and over again, so he couldn’t really blame her for it.

Still, this time at least, he figured Mitsuki was worrying over nothing.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said. “It’s true that you never know what’s going to happen over here, but for the time being, things are peaceful.”

“Ugh... I don’t know why, but hearing that just made me more anxious.” Mitsuki’s voice, coming from the speaker, sounded troubled.

Indeed, it was just as Yuuto had said: Things were currently busy and hectic in lárnviðr, but they were peaceful.



However, there were also incidents which could only occur during times of peace.

The intuition of a woman was truly a fearsome thing indeed.

Several days had passed without incident, and the unsuspecting sheep — Yuuto Suoh — found himself riding atop a horse.

Yuuto wasn't skilled enough to ride by himself yet, so he was sitting behind Felicia.

Mount Surtsey, where they were headed, wasn't a very developed area, so the roads weren't well maintained. The carriage they normally used for travel would have taken two days, but by traveling directly on horseback instead, they were going to be able to arrive before sundown today.

Being able to shave two days off of the travel time was hugely important when things were as busy as they had been lately.

"Still, even with how busy things are, I really should have properly taken the time to practice horse riding..." Yuuto grumbled as he looked up at the clear blue sky, rare weather for this late in autumn.

A ruler needed to project an image of able-bodied strength to his subjects at all times, regardless of the actual truth. If the person in charge were seen as weak, his rule wouldn't be as effective.

Machiavelli's opinion about the topic, as stated in *The Prince*, was: "*A Prince must be wary, strictly and above all else, of being disrespected or looked down upon.*"

Yuuto found it pathetic that all of the girls traveling along with him were handling their horses just fine by themselves, and yet he couldn't ride yet. He felt that this was exactly the kind of shameful display that would lead people to look down on him.

Of course, the truth was that traveling with such a large group of beautiful maidens in tow, one of them seated with him on his horse, projected an image of such strength that his own subjects trembled at his power, but he had no way of knowing that.

But Yuuto and his grumbling were immediately admonished by Felicia, as well as Sigrún, who riding beside them.

“Oh, come now, Big Brother!” Felicia said cheerfully. “Let us not worry about such things today.”

“She is right, Father,” Sigrún put in. “At least for the duration of this trip, please forget such formal worries and relax yourself.”

The stated aim of this trip was for the normally overworked Yuuto to have a chance for some rest and relaxation.

When they had first proposed the idea to him, Yuuto had refused, saying, “I can’t take a vacation while everyone else is so busy.” But with his second-in-command, the assistant to the second, the head of the clan elders, and all of his trusted Einherjar subordinates begging him to “please take a break just this once,” even a sovereign undefeated in war like Yuuto had found himself forced to admit defeat.

“I really am a lucky bastard, to have such loyal and devoted worrywarts in my family,” Yuuto whispered wryly with a sigh, but it was an irony tinged with truth.

Now that he was getting a chance to think about it, ever since becoming patriarch, it had been a continuous stream of crises and uncertainty. He’d spent every day working without really having had the chance to take a vacation.

The tightly wound thread cuts easily, as the saying went. He probably *should* take it easy and loosen up once in a while.

Yuuto felt a bit guilty for having made his subordinates worry so much about him, and at the same time, he felt a great warmth in his heart that they all thought so much about him.

“Well, I suppose I’ll take them up on their kindness this time and enjoy myself.” Yuuto took in the pleasant feeling of the crisp autumn wind against his face, and the sights of the passing scenery.

Traveling the road on horseback felt quite different from the experience of riding in a carriage.

First and foremost, there was the motion of the horse's back under him, the sense that he was riding atop a living thing. He could clearly feel not only the horse's footsteps, but even small motions like the turning of its head or the waving of its tail. That sort of sensation would have been impossible to experience riding in a carriage.

The height of his point of view was also drastically different. It made the surrounding scenery feel different and new to him.

Looking at all this makes me realize, a lot of the "natural scenery" back in Japan was pretty man-made, Yuuto thought.

Even the designated "natural parks" back home were places where trees were planted with a priority on visual beauty, with cherry blossoms blooming in the spring and maple leaves coloring in the autumn.

The small town where Yuuto had grown up was surrounded by mountains, but all the trees there were Japanese cedars, planted for their fast growth cycle and ease of use for residential areas.

By comparison, the nature in Yggdrasil was completely untouched. There were scattered rocks and boulders everywhere, and the diverse array of plant life was growing all jumbled together haphazardly, in a way that looked much less beautiful than the nature of Japan.

But it was truly *natural*.

For a good while, Yuuto simply let himself be absorbed in the majesty of that scenery.

Mount Surtsey was an active volcano, located to the southeast of lárnvíðr. Yuuto's party had managed to arrive at the patriarch's villa at the base of the mountain before sunset.

Though it was called a villa, it was a far cry from the palace in lárnvíðr — nothing more than a simple, if slightly large, log cabin, between two smaller buildings of similar make.

Inside, there were only a few beds, a desk, and grey wolf pelts on the floor in place of carpet.

According to Jörgen, it had been built by the third Wolf Clan patriarch as a place for taking therapeutic hot spring baths, back during the era when the Wolf Clan had been in control of most of the territory in the Bifröst Basin.

Yuuto's predecessor Fárbauti had also apparently visited several times.

There was a small settlement of huntsman nearby who lived by selling the meat and pelts from the deer and boars they hunted. They had been informed of Yuuto's coming, and so the women of their village had come by and thoroughly cleaned the place from corner to corner.

It looked to Yuuto like a perfectly comfortable place to spend the next couple of days.

So as soon as Yuuto entered the building, he made straight for the bed and flopped onto it face down. "Whew! I'm so tired..."

Riding a horse and being pulled by one in a carriage were completely different experiences, though they might have the horse in common. Horse riding was an official sport on its own, after all. In modern-day Japan, there were electronic exercise machines that simulated horse riding being sold for use in weight-loss, due to the fact that it put a lot of work on the body's muscles to maintain one's balance while riding.

The reason Yuuto was lying face down was that his butt hurt after making such a long trip on horseback.

Still, he had taken frequent breaks, and had been sure to apply an ointment made from horse oil to his thighs beforehand, so he'd fortunately been spared the pain of chafed thighs. That was an important accomplishment in itself.

He'd come here for a healing dip in the hot springs, so it wouldn't have been funny if he had arrived with chafed thighs, unable to get in the hot water.

Felicia quickly opened up their luggage and came over to him carrying a large linen towel. "Big Brother, what do you say to entering the hot springs right away, to heal some of the tiredness from your journey?"

Yuuto had the urge to just sleep like a rock just where he was, but he also felt gross being soaked in sweat down to his underwear.

“Yeah, I think I will.” Yuuto forced his tired body to get up again.

Since the girls outnumbered him by so many, he felt a little bad using the baths before them. But, putting himself in their shoes, they couldn’t exactly feel comfortable as subordinates with the idea of going before their patriarch, and even if they did, they surely wouldn’t be able to take their time and enjoy themselves.

As their superior, the considerate thing to do in this situation would be to hurry up and take a quick dip, so the rest of them could use the baths without any concern.

“All right, then,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind, but I’ll go ahead and go first. Go ahead and tell the others for me.”

He wanted to avoid any situation where he and the girls came across each other in the baths, at all costs.

As a man, it wasn’t like he’d never fantasized about that sort of situation, but the mere thought of Mitsuki finding out didn’t just send a chill down his spine, it actively made his stomach ache.

Admittedly, about two months ago, in the palace in the Horn Clan capital, he’d ended up having to enter the bath with Felicia and Sigrún due to the security concerns of being in a foreign nation. But he was fully within Wolf Clan territory right now.

Yuuto took the towel from Felicia and unfurled it quickly with a satisfying *snap!* before slinging it over his shoulder. He then made his way outside, toward the hot springs in the area around back of the building.

“Ahhh, now this is how you appreciate nature,” he murmured, appreciating the scenery.

There was a clear, knee-deep mountain stream flowing by, and behind it stretched a lush expanse of trees, some of them with leaves stained a beautiful red.

There were rocks and boulders strewn about along the riverbank, and over in one area, there was a bit of a cliff, below which Yuuto could see white steam rising. It didn’t look all that different from a normal pool of water, but that had

to be the hot springs. On one side of it was a small pavilion-like structure, likely serving both as shelter from the elements and a changing room.

“Nice! Nice!” Yuuto immediately took a liking to this place, and despite how tired he felt, he found his steps lightening as he entered the pavilion.

With excitement, he quickly undressed and stuck his hand in the water to test it. It felt perhaps a bit too hot for his liking, but not so much that he couldn’t handle it.

In Yuuto’s modern day Japan, hot springs resorts and hotels had the temperature of the water on display. Going by his experience at those places, this water was probably around 42 degrees Celsius. If he got in and let his body get used to it, it was actually going to be a great temperature for a hot spring bath.

“Whoa, that’s hot!” Yuuto used a bucket he found in the pavilion to wash the sweat off of himself with the hot water, then stepped slowly into the pool, and lowered himself down.

“Whewee, this is heaven...”

There was a really conveniently-shaped boulder nearby, so Yuuto leaned back against it and took a deep breath.

It felt like all of his fatigue was melting away into the hot waters of the spring.

And gazing out at the majesty of nature gave him a feeling of peace. He could feel his heart becoming lighter, freed from the constant pressures of his duty as the patriarch.

I’m really glad I came here, Yuuto reflected.

And just as he did...

“Woow, hot springs, hot spriings!”

“Al, please don’t run around recklessly like a small child.”

“D-don’t say that, Kris, I’m *not* a child!”

“Well then, let’s see, the last time you wet the bed was...”

“Awawawa, what are you saying all of a sudden, what are you saying?!”

“And by the way, that trickling sound I heard earlier...”

“Th-that wasn’t me, okay?! I didn’t do it!”

“Oh, I was only talking about the sound of the stream. But you certainly sounded a bit defensive, there. Did something come to mind?”

“N-no no no, nothing! I haven’t wet myself in, like, forever!”

“Well, I guess that’s true, even for someone like you, Al. You’re not *that* much of a toddler.”

“Uh huh, that’s right.”

“Just a little bit from nerves the first time you met Father, right?”

“Don’t talk about that when he’s right here in front of us!”

Two familiar voices pulled Yuuto out of his dreamy state of mind and right back into reality.

As he frantically turned in the direction of the voices, he saw the young twins, bantering back and forth just like always.

“Why did you two come in here?!” Yuuto raised his voice to question them, but Kristina just stared back at him blankly.

“Whatever do you mean? We’ve been right next to you this whole time.”

“What, seriously?!” Yuuto hadn’t noticed in the slightest.

Of course, that was perfectly understandable. The two of them were unmatched within the Wolf Clan when it came to the art of concealing their presence. Yuuto was not much better than an amateur when it came to the martial arts, so there was no way he could have perceived them.

“Yes, and we got an ample, thorough, *extensive* look at you,” Kristina grinned.

“Yeah, I was so surprised his was so much bigger than our father’s!”

“Indeed, and considering our father’s is far larger than that of the average man... As expected of the Infamous Wolf, Hróðvitnir! You must me making women moan with pleasure every night.”

“Don’t go casually spouting harmful rumors like that!” Yuuto shouted, and

though he knew it was already too late, he instinctively covered his crotch with his hands.

His face felt unbearably hot. Even if they were just kids, being seen naked by someone of the opposite sex like this was embarrassing. He angrily made a shooing motion at both of the twins with one hand.

“J-just get out of here for now. This trip is supposed to be so I can relax, so at least let me bathe in peace for a while. As long as you two are here, I couldn’t relax even if I wanted to.”

“That won’t do,” Kristina insisted. “We are supposed to be guarding you, after all.”

“I don’t need you to. There aren’t any bandits in these parts.” Yuuto spat out the words, growing more irritated.

The hot springs was surrounded in three of its four directions by the villa buildings, and blocked by a wall of rock on the fourth. The buildings had been constructed with an eye on easily defending the patriarch’s personal healing bath. And Yuuto’s veteran Einherjar warriors were currently in those buildings. It was hardly a place where criminals would be able to sneak in.

That was exactly how Jörgen had recommended the place to him, saying, “You will have no worries of being accosted by bandits in that place. You’ll be able to fully enjoy the hot springs without a care.”

“It is true that I doubt bandits will attack us here, but there are wild deer and monkeys in the woods that sometimes come here, so the second-in-command told us to make sure to guard you vigilantly, Father.”

“Wha—?!” Yuuto’s eyes widened. This was the first he’d heard of that. “B-but, it’s not like the two of you would be able to do anything against wild animals.” Yuuto seized on what seemed like a good opportunity. “G-go call Rún or somebody else instead.”

Kristina wasn’t skilled in combat, and while Albertina was a master of assassination techniques who could move even faster than Sigrún, she lacked the pure strength necessary for fighting off wild beasts.

Using that as an excuse, he would send them off to get someone else, and

then use that time to hurry and put his clothes back on.

By responding to such an unanticipated situation with such quick thinking, he wished he could say that he'd lived up to his reputation as an undefeated strategist, but he had to admit Kristina was one level above him, considering that the little devil had carefully managed to put him in such a trap in the first place.

Still, everything would be fine now.

"You are right, and that's why everyone else should be arriving any moment now."

"Huh...?" Yuuto was dumbfounded. "Everyone... else?"

"That's right. Look." With a devilish grin, Kristina turned around and pointed.

"Wha... what..." Yuuto's gaze followed her lead, and he was dumbstruck.

He had been so absorbed in arguing with Kristina that he hadn't noticed, but all of the other girls were now approaching, towels in hand!

"Y-you tricked me, didn't you, Kris?!" he shouted.

"Heh heh, whatever are you talking about?"

"Urgh, y-you scheming little fox!" Yuuto yelled in exasperation at his sworn daughter, who only smirked coolly in response.

It was said that the great Carthaginian general Hannibal had used cunning tactics to surround and wipe out a much larger enemy force at the Battle of Cannae, sending a huge shockwave through the Roman Republic of that era.



And during Japan's own Sengoku Period, during the Battle of Okitanawate, the Shimazu clan had used a now-famous military tactic called the "fisher and bandit" to fake out and surround a force several times larger than their own, defeating them.

On the field of battle, surrounding one's enemies granted incredible tactical superiority. Enough to bring victory to a numerically much weaker force.

By contrast, right now, Yuuto was a lone man being surrounded by seven women.

The situation on his battlefield was, by all accounts, quite hopeless.

"This truly feels like paradise," Felicia said, sighing with pleasure. She was resting her back against one of the boulders, with just her legs soaking in the springs.

As she exhaled, her large breasts swayed slightly. Despite their size, they were firm enough that her protruding nipples were tilted slightly upward. And with her tight waist, her figure drew the envious stares of all the girls present.

"Yes, this is the perfect place for Father to get some rest." Sigrún stood in the center of the pool, her well-toned naked form fully exposed. Her figure was tight and muscled, yet still feminine and supple, reminiscent of a large predatory cat.

She still carried a sword in hand, and it made her look even more like some goddess out of myth, with an air of sacred dignity about her.

"Y-y-yeah, i-it's really great, yeah!" Ingrid's response was to shout in a disproportionately loud and shrill voice, her face as red as a ripe apple.

Just like Felicia, she was resting against a boulder with just her feet in the water, but perhaps out of embarrassment, she was securely covering herself with her towel. Still, with the top half of her breasts exposed, and the line of her thin waist, the feminine curves of her body were still plain to see.

"This is my first time visiting a hot springs, but it's really good. Ahh..." Linnea was leaning forward against a rock, resting on her arms, with her lower body in

the spring, letting out sighs of pleasure.

The expression on her flushed face somehow looked erotic. The image of her slender back and well-shaped bottom wavered beneath the ripples of the steamy water.

“Wheee, the wind feels so goooood!” Albertina giggled as she ran this way and that, up and down the riverbank.

She was also completely naked.

She seemed healthy and full of energy, at least.

Kristina sighed. “Really, Al, one of these days you need to learn proper modesty as a woman.” As she followed her sister with her eyes, she gave an exasperated sigh.

Kristina was busy scooping up water with both hands and then letting it fall back down, over and over. The ripples created by that managed to just conceal her naked form in any way that seemed almost like a magical illusion.

The effect of almost being able to see, but not quite, had a strangely fascinating effect.

“C-can a slave girl like Ephy really be allowed to be in such an amazing place as this?” Ephelia was sitting in the pool clutching her knees, and trembling nervously.

She had originally intended to remain in the pavilion and guard everyone’s clothes, but Felicia and Ingrid had insisted she get in too, and she hadn’t been able to fully refuse them.

Yuuto, meanwhile, sat with his back facing the girls, trapped in an internal spiral of regrets. “Dammit, I should have just made a run for it when I had the chance.”

He couldn’t very well stand up and get out of the pool naked with all of those girls watching, and he found himself sitting there, waiting for an opening to escape.

The common wisdom stated that retreat was the most difficult aspect of fighting a battle. Once a general realized the situation was too disadvantageous,

he or she should be prepared to accept some losses and retreat immediately.

That was how the logic went, but people had a tendency to lose the ability to act unemotionally rational when faced with a real crisis situation.

In that sense, Oda Nobunaga had truly been an incredible figure. During the Siege of Kanegasaki in 1570 A.D., Nobunaga had sensed the danger that his forces might be caught in a pincer attack, and despite how successfully the battle had gone in his favor so far, he'd swiftly ordered a retreat.

"But how was I supposed to have predicted this...?" Yuuto continued grumbling to himself quietly.

Back in lárnvíðr, he had been sure to make things clear to everyone several times, and so after that, he'd been able to take baths alone without having to say anything in particular.

The incident at the baths in the Horn Clan capital had been only an exception under emergency circumstances, and Yuuto had made sure that his little sisters and daughters understood that.

Yuuto was fully aware of his own shortcomings. That was exactly why he chose to place his trust in others, relying on them to help him.

That heartfelt trust made a deep impression on his subordinates, inspiring a deep loyalty within their hearts and a willingness to do anything for him.

That was, indeed, the rare quality belonging to a true ruler and sovereign. But specifically in times like this, it had negative side effects.

Often, a person's strengths and weaknesses were two sides of the same coin. Yuuto never had any particular obsession with his own power or authority, and so he was woefully unguarded when it came to his own allies.

"Father? Instead of shrinking yourself into the corner like that, why don't you come over here and relax more?" Kristina called.

"You think I can do that right now?!"

"It's all right, Father. I assure you, yours is a splendid and extraordinary specimen, so you have nothing to worry about."

"Get off that subject already! Actually, I've been in here long enough already!"

I'm getting out!" Yuuto shouted angrily without looking in Kristina's direction, and climbed up out of the water. At this point, he was angry enough that he couldn't care anymore if they saw him naked once.

The girls had arrived right after he'd undressed and gotten in the water, with eerily good timing that had made it difficult for him to get away. And the first two of them had been the twins, the experts in stealth operations. That alone was enough for Yuuto to understand that this had been planned.

So even if he had waited around for the storm to pass, as it were, they were unlikely to give him that opportunity. It was clear that staying here would just lead to things continually getting worse.

Sigrún and Felicia moved, with incredible swiftness, to stand in front of the changing room and block the path out.

"Please wait, Father," Sigrún said quickly. "I was unable to wash your back during that time in the Horn Clan palace, so I beg of you to grant me another chance!"

"That's right, Big Brother," Felicia said. "You granted that wish to Elder Sister Linnea the last time, but not giving those of us within your own clan that same privilege is far too cold. I am quite saddened that it feels as if you have put distance between us."

Neither of them were making any effort to cover themselves.

Yuuto found himself turning his head away to the right out of embarrassment. But when he did that, the figures of the other girls still bathing entered his field of vision, so he was forced to shut his eyes, and couldn't move. He finally realized, all too late, that he was in checkmate.

Yuuto hung his head. "...Fine, do whatever you like."

At this point, it was all he could do just to say those words.

"...What the hell is this situation?!" Yuuto was out of the water, sitting on a conveniently shaped rock, and completely at a loss.

His eyes were still closed, so he didn't have a full grasp of the situation, but he

could tell that the girls were crowded around him closely from the sounds of their breathing.

“This is the result of countless discussions we had, taking a lesson from the failure at the Horn Clan bath, about how everyone could be able to properly show their devotion to you, Big Brother.”

“Why is this one little thing such a big freaking deal to you?!” Yuuto shouted in a high-pitched voice.

One popular saying goes that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Even in the modern age of the 21st century, it was still a complete mystery to men what goes on in the heads of women.

And indeed, the same was true for Yuuto in that moment. Nothing about this made sense to him.

“Calling it ‘one little thing’ is too much,” Felicia scolded. “I cannot allow you to say that, Big Brother. Every one of us is grateful to you from the bottom of our hearts, and we wish to express that feeling through washing your back, yet until now we have been unable to do so. We could not possibly let such a rare opportunity escape.”

“Incidentally, we determined our positions fairly by drawing lots,” Kristina said, holding onto Yuuto’s left arm. He could tell by the tone of her voice that she was enjoying watching him in this situation.

Albertina was holding onto his left arm. Sigrún was next to his right leg, and Ingrid was next to his left, blushing and muttering, “Oh geez, oh geez,” to herself.

Linnea was right in front of him, with both knees on the ground and leaning over him with a towel.

And his trusty adjutant Felicia just so happened to have drawn the lot for his back, it would seem.

Yuuto had fought to the last to leave his crotch out of this. The towel wrapped around his waist was his final act of resistance against them. Never before in his life had a single piece of cloth felt so important to him.

Incidentally, Ephelia had turned down drawing lots. The patriarch's direct subordinates, who had exchanged the sacred Oath of the Chalice with him, were fervently awaiting the chance to fulfill the desire they had been denied for so long. She found the idea of a slave girl like her participating as well to be unthinkable impudent.

"Augh, just get it over with already! But once this is over, we're going straight home! Got it?!" Yuuto's pronouncement was defeated and slightly resentful. He felt like a slab of meat on the chopping block.

The self-restraint Yuuto had to not open his eyes was commendable.

He was an old-fashioned type of man from the countryside. The world of Yggdrasil wasn't one where the choice of whom and whether to marry was a matter of personal freedom, like in 21st century Japan.

Just like how things had once been in Japan in the centuries before the postwar economic boom, and just like Felicia had experienced firsthand, society in Yggdrasil was cold towards women who couldn't get married.

In a world with those values, Yuuto was firmly committed not to look at an unmarried naked woman, since he was unable to take responsibility the old-fashioned way and marry her.

But he also couldn't deny that same commitment to his values had cut off his means of escaping this situation in the first place.

"All right, I'm going to begin, Big Brother." Yuuto heard Linnea's voice, and he felt a wet towel begin to scrub against his chest.

"By your leave, Father!"

"Well then, Father..."

"Let's begin, Big Brother."

He felt the same sensation beginning on his arms and legs. It tickled a bit, but also felt really good. Having another person wash his body was actually an intensely pleasurable experience. And the ones washing him were all outstandingly beautiful girls.

Even though his eyes were closed, he couldn't help thinking about it. He could

feel the area between his legs growing hotter.

This wasn't that sort of act between man and woman, it was nothing more than an expression of filial piety from the girls to their sworn big brother and father. Yuuto repeated that to himself over and over in his mind, but—

Squish.

"Uwagh?! M-miss F-Felicia, j-just what are you using to wash my back?!" Yuuto was so completely astonished that he spoke to Felicia in polite language.

Felicia responded by whispering into his ear, in a voice filled with sensuality. "That is obvious... I am washing you with my chest."

"Wh-wh-whyyyy?!"

"Washing my beloved big brother's back with a mere tool or cloth would be the height of crudeness. I would say that washing you using my own body is the most loyal and pure way to express my devotion to you!"

"There's definitely something wrong withaaaagh?!" Yuuto suddenly felt something wet against the sole of his left foot.

"R-R-Rún! Wh-what did you do just now?!"

Just what was that? Yuuto hadn't the slightest idea. It was a sensation he had never felt before in his life.

"I was licking your foot, Father. Um, i-it did not hurt, I hope?"

"L-l-licking?!"

"Yes, I was worried that a clumsy soldier such as myself might harm your precious skin, so I asked Felicia for her counsel, and she responded that I should just use my tongue."

"Felicia, what the hell kind of advice are you giving Rún?!"

"Kh...! As expected of the two people closest to Big Brother! I can't afford to be afraid in this situation!"

"Ah... w-w-well, I've got j-just as much gratitude toward Yuuto as all of you, and I'm not gonna lose!" Ingrid cried.

"The two of you need to take that competitive streak and use it for something

else!”

Yuuto’s desperate cries didn’t reach their ears. He began to feel warm, soft sensations on his chest and right leg that weren’t cloth. He didn’t want to think about what it was, and truthfully didn’t have the capacity to think about it anymore.

He’d already been in the steaming hot springs for quite a long time, and he was starting to feel faint. His current situation wasn’t helping. In fact, it was actively making it worse.

“All right, I’ll try it, too!” Albertina exclaimed.

“Al, you’re still too young for something like that, so let’s just both use these linen rags to scrub him, okay?” Kristina said coolly.

“Wow, wow, that I-looks so amazing, Master!” Ephy cried.

The fact that the youngest girls weren’t participating in this dead heat competition was some consolation at least, but it didn’t stop the rest of them.

“Ah... oh... crap...” Yuuto got the sense that something had come out of his nose. But, he no longer had the ability to think about what it was.

As his consciousness began to fade, he only felt the sensation of his head spinning, and the odd feeling of not knowing which way was up.

“Big Brother?!”

“Father?!”

“Big Brother?!”

“Y-Yuuto?!”

“Father?!”

“Master?!”

The faint, distant sound of the girls’ voices was the last thing Yuuto heard before he finally lost consciousness.

“We are truly sorry! Please forgive us.”

When Yuuto next came to, he was on a bed inside the villa.

He opened his eyes to see seven pairs of worried eyes looking down at him.

After moment of joy that he'd regained consciousness, the girls all stepped back from his bed, got down on both knees, and began apologizing profusely.

"Umm..." Yuuto was still lightheaded, and wasn't sure exactly how to respond.

He shook his head, clearing his mind, and tried to get a grasp of the situation.

He must have been carried here while he was unconscious. There weren't any other men accompanying him on this trip, so the girls would have to have been the ones to do it.

He was wearing loose-fitting night clothes, and clearly the girls must have dressed him in those, as well. They would have seen everything. It was so incredibly embarrassing. Just thinking about it made his face start to feel hot.

"B-Big Brother?! Y-you shouldn't..." Felicia began to hurry over to his side, but Yuuto held up a hand to stop her.

"No, I'm fine, Felicia."

While in the hot springs, the heat and the rush of blood to his head had combined with his flustered reaction to the girls' naked bodies, and he hadn't been able to think straight. But now he had regained a sound state of mind.

Before anything else, there were questions that needed to be asked.

"So, why did you all do that? I'm pretty sure I said that I wanted to bathe alone. Right?"

"That is... wild animals sometimes approach the hot springs, so, I thought I needed to be there, just in case..." In faltering words, Sigrún began to give the exact same defense that Kristina had used earlier.

It was true that carnivores such as wolves weren't the only wild animals to be wary of; even monkeys and deer could be exceedingly dangerous.

Seriously though, that second-in-command of mine really dropped the ball by forgetting to warn me about something that important, Yuuto thought to

himself with a deep sigh.

That explained the actions of his military officer, at least. Yuuto then turned his gaze to the other girls.

“Um, I did say as much in the hot springs, but we owe you such an enormous debt of gratitude, Big Brother,” Felicia said, her eyes not leaving the floor. “We wanted you to allow us to attend to you and express that feeling. And since you will eventually be returning home, we wanted to do it now, while we had the chance to.”

Several of the other girls nodded in agreement.

Yuuto was weak against that line of argument. He knew that the girls gathered in this room had sincere love and respect for him. And the feelings of wanting to do something for the closest people in one’s life were also feelings he understood. Including the fact that those feelings were all the more strong when one knew there was not much time.

When his late mother had fallen terminally ill, Yuuto had been full of regret. He had been angry at himself, wondering *Why couldn’t I have been a more devoted son?*

He had owed so much to his sworn older brother as well, but in the end had only managed to repay him in misery, a memory which still made his heart ache.

“...All right. I’m at fault here, too.” Yuuto took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, he released the tension from his face.

He had always refused to allow the girls to personally attend to him up until now. Of course, the biggest reason for that was his obligation towards Mitsuki, but a major part of it was also the feelings of awkwardness and shame he carried with their roots in the values and mores of modern day Japan.

However, in this world of Yggdrasil, with a culture that placed more emphasis on the family bonds formed by the Chalice than on blood ties and demanded full loyalty and service from one’s heart, Yuuto’s attitude towards the girls might really have been too distant and reserved.

His stubbornness had only caused their feelings of wanting to serve him to

build and build, inviting the sort of incident that had just happened, where they had gone too far.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” as the saying went. Perhaps it was necessary for everyone to blow off a little steam once in a while.

For the sake of Yuuto’s safety, if nothing else.

“All right, *fine*,” he said. “For the rest of this trip, I’ll let you serve me however you like. But you’re gonna be wearing clothes! And you can’t get too touchy-feely, either! All right?!”

“Th-thank you so much!!” All of the girls shouted their thanks in unison, their faces alight with beaming joy.

Is it really something to get that happy over? Yuuto thought wryly, but he also felt a pang of guilt for having rejected them for so long up till now.

He’d been so adamantly speaking and thinking of them as his family, but maybe at some level he’d kept some distance between himself and them.

After that, the girls lavishly attended to Yuuto’s every need (within moderation), and Yuuto spent the remainder of his vacation in every comfort.

He departed on his return trip to Íárnviðr with his body rested and his spirit refreshed.

Having completed his five-day mission of serving as the acting patriarch, Yuuto was now in the middle of leisurely making his way down the street towards his home.

The Wolf Clan’s second-in-command Jörgen suddenly stopped, turned around and called out to the darkness behind him. “Did you need something from me?”

In the darkness of that night, the only light to speak of was from the moon in the sky and the small torch he held. Yuuto could scarcely see anything five elles ahead. (An elle was an ancient form of measurement in Yggdrasil equal to about 50 centimeters.) Even so, the eyes of the veteran warrior were locked firmly on to one point ahead in the darkness.

“I was fairly sure I erased my presence, too. Truly, you are a fearsome man,

Second-in-Command! ♪”

With those last words in a sing-song tone, the owner of the voice slipped out of the darkness and into Jörgen’s field of vision. It was a very young girl, which would normally seem out of place on a dark road at night. But one couldn’t judge by appearances alone.

Despite her age, she was a person of great skill and potential, and she had just the other day exchanged the Oath of the Chalice directly with Patriarch Yuuto, becoming his sworn daughter. Her name was Kristina, as Jörgen recalled.

“I could say the same of you; you’ve spent the last two years even further polishing your ability to blend in with the shadows, haven’t you?” The corner of Jörgen’s mouth pulled upwards in a smirk.

The Wolf and Claw Clans had once been mutual enemies, and Kristina had attempted to infiltrate the palace in lárnvíðr on more than one occasion. Each time, what had forced her to give up and turn back was the presence of Jörgen and Skáviðr, the two old veteran warriors of the clan.

“So you know about that, too,” Kristina said. “At the least, I was sure that I had never been visibly spotted...”

“You weren’t, which was really quite impressive. I only became certain just now that it was you. I remember this unsettling skin-crawling sensation, after all.” Jörgen rolled up his sleeve to reveal the goosebumps on his arm.

The pure intuition of a warrior who had made it through battle after battle, walking the razor’s edge, was not something that could be explained with logic. No matter how successfully the opponent could conceal their killing intent, or their presence, this man could still feel *something*. His skin reacted.

Jörgen did not hold a rune, but he held a well-honed instinct that was no less extraordinary than an Einherjar’s ability. Accumulated experience, at times, could prove more powerful than raw ability.

“Well, it would certainly be very convenient for us if you used that technique for Father’s sake,” Jörgen said.

“Hee hee, of course that is what I’ll do. Isn’t that obvious? I am his daughter now, you know.”

“I know better than to trust the words of a fox.”

“Good gracious, and I was being honest, too.” Kristina sighed, looking terribly sad.

Jörgen paid that no mind, and stared at her with even greater pressure, as if trying to dig out her true feelings. “So, I’ll ask again: Did you need something from me?”

“No, nothing important, really,” Kristina said. “I just wanted to come and thank you for having acted so quickly.”

“No, no, I should be the one thanking you. You did a great thing in informing me.”

“Oh, but what could you mean? I did nothing more than ask you a question or two, out of concern for Father.”

“Ahh, that is what you did, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is.” Kristina giggled suggestively.

She had gone to Jörgen, claiming to be collecting information for Yuuto’s research.

“Father is searching for information on famous wielders of seiðr magic. Do you know anything about them?” That was how she had worded it. And she had planned to report anything she learned back to Yuuto.

What a thoughtful and devoted daughter I am to Father, she would have said.

And, of course, whatever conclusions Jörgen might draw after hearing her question, and what actions he might take, were all within her plans anyway.

“This whole affair is a headache,” Jörgen said. “First he asked the imperial goði Alexis if there was any technique for crossing between worlds, and he has been fervently collecting old legends and records from all over the land. And now, he’s looking into the wielders of seiðr. It appears that Father has finally begun to focus his full efforts in returning to his kingdom beyond the heavens.”

Jörgen shook his head, his face pained.

He didn’t have any intention of blaming Yuuto or calling him irresponsible.

The young man had never intended to set foot in this world in the first place, and had instead been called here against his will. His wish to return to his homeland was as natural and right for him as it was for any human.

Nor had he aspired to the throne of patriarch. Instead, the previous patriarch had practically forced the position onto him. And despite that, the young man had saved the Wolf Clan from one crisis after another, and had helped them grow and prosper again.

Under any normal circumstances, in the face of such a great debt of gratitude, the right thing to do would be for the whole Wolf Clan to join together in helping him search for a way home, and then see him off with a fond farewell.

“It’s just as I said during our previous meeting, in the end, we of the Wolf Clan are nothing without Father,” Jörgen mourned. “No one can take his place.”

Now that the Claw and Horn Clans were officially in service to the Wolf Clan, the Wheat and Mountain Dog Clans were trying to enter into their protection, as well. But they weren’t actually pledging themselves in service to the Wolf Clan — merely to Yuuto, an overwhelmingly powerful and charismatic figure.

Jörgen believed that he did not have what it would take to maintain those same international relationships if he succeeded Yuuto, not by a mile. And Jörgen’s reasoning had already proven to be right on the mark.

That black-haired young man known as Yuuto Suoh was a far greater figure to the Wolf Clan than Yuuto himself was aware of. Indeed, he was too great.

“We must make Father give up on leaving, no matter what.” Jörgen spoke the words aloud to himself, with resolute determination.

Personally, he sympathized with Yuuto and felt guilty about it, but as a public servant thinking about the security and prosperity of the Wolf Clan, it was the only conclusion he could reach.

However, Yuuto was the ultimate authority within the clan, so naturally the use of force was out of the question.

That left persuasion, but though Yuuto might appear mild-mannered, once he’d decided on something, he would stubbornly follow through on it to the end, with an indomitable will.

As things stood now, even if everyone got together and implored him to stay behind, it would do nothing more than upset him. There was no chance he would relent.

At least, not *yet*.

“If at all possible, I was hoping that one of you would have taken the chance to get more intimately acquainted with him,” said Jörgen. “I’m not sure whether I should be more disappointed in my clan sisters, who couldn’t even seduce a single man despite being given the perfect opportunity, or whether I should be praising Father’s ironclad fidelity, for being able to restrain himself despite being surrounded by so many beautiful women. It’s vexing either way.”

Jörgen sighed, a hard look on his scarred face.

At Yuuto’s return, there had been no sense that he and any of the girls shared the kind of awkward, romantic, and sweet tension that was unique to a newly intimate couple.

Even without having traveled with them, Jörgen could tell right away that no such pairing had come of the trip.

“Heh heh, that does remind me. Supposedly there is a rumor passed down from olden times that those who visit that hot springs shall be blessed with children.” Kristina gave Jörgen a suggestive, all-knowing look.

Jörgen responded with a broad, self-satisfied smile. “Well then, you’ve got sharp ears, little fox. Yes, I had figured that if perhaps Father were to conceive a child, that would tip the scales of his heart a little more in our favor. Well, it does seem like there was at least some small amount of progress made this time around, so I suppose I’ll have to be satisfied with that for now. We still have time. We can create as many more opportunities as we need.”

“Oh, impressive. As expected of the Wolf Clan’s second-in-command, you have quite a knack for this sort of plotting.”

“I’m nothing compared to your birth father, though.”

During Jörgen’s long rise to his current position, he had survived through multiple internal political power struggles.

One could not influence people with a forceful approach alone.

Jörgen's fearsome, scarred face belied his true talent: He excelled at backdoor politics, managing competing interests and laying the groundwork so that plans moved forward smoothly. His status as the second-in-command was no coincidence.

Although, with his tendency to always focus inward on cooperation and internal affairs, he was limited in his ability to see things from a wider perspective.

"Still, I was a bit surprised at you," Jörgen added. "Won't it be more convenient for the Claw Clan if Father leaves this world?"

"I am a direct child subordinate of the Wolf Clan patriarch now, you know. But, all right, if I were going out of my way to speak as the daughter by birth of Claw Clan Patriarch Botvid, I would say this: Rather than foolishly trying to undermine the Wolf Clan and rob them of their wealth, it would be more prudent, and far more profitable, to maintain allegiance to them and receive a share of their prosperity. That is how powerful, and how great, Father is."

"...Hm, I see."

I'd say the little fox still isn't letting on to all of her intentions, but it sounded like she believed what she was saying just now, Jörgen reflected.

After the Claw Clan's great defeat at the Siege of lárnvíðr, and the retaliatory campaign by the Wolf Clan after Yuuto's ascendance to patriarch, the Claw Clan had lost quite a lot of its territory and soldiers. Perhaps the domestic situation there was even worse than the Wolf Clan believed.

"Still, it's impressive that you have such keen insight for someone so young," Jörgen said. "I fear for the future."

"Goodness, must I repeat myself? I am a direct subordinate of the Wolf Clan patriarch. I wish you would say you have high hopes for me." Kristina puffed out her cheek in a show of childish irritation.

Going by her personality, it was clearly an act.

Jörgen smiled, then responded with a long, affected sigh. "From my point of

view, it feels like we're nursing a snake in our bosom."

"How cruel! First I'm a fox, and now you are comparing me to a snake? I'm not sure what you might think, but I am still a girl with feelings..."

"You should take it as a compliment that I think you're too clever and dangerous to ignore. Well, at least on the point of not wanting to lose our master and benefactor, it seems the Wolf and Claw Clans share a mutual interest. Learning that was valuable in itself." He nodded deeply to himself, then flashed a broad grin. "Here's hoping this is the start of a long-lasting friendship. Ha ha ha!"

In the light of a small torch in the darkness, Jörgen's shoulders shook with his booming, cheerful laugh.

He had confirmed that, at least for the time being, the cunning little fox in their midst would work to bring profit to the Claw Clan by working loyally for the Wolf Clan.

It was a delightful bit of news for him, and a huge weight off of his mind.

ACT 3

The room was lined with dozens of desks in rows, at which children were carving letters into clay tablets.

They all wore stiff expressions, and though they were clearly trying their hardest to focus on the work in front of them, more than a few of the children were sneaking glances behind them from time to time.

A middle-aged man stood in front of the children, reading aloud from an epic history recounting the Siege of Iárnviðr. “A-and thusly, Patriarch Yuuto managed to defeat and drive off the allied army of the Claw, Ash, and Fang Clans, rescuing the Wolf Clan from its life or death crisis.”

This was a vaxt within the city of Iárnviðr, a school for training future scribal clerks and civil servants.

The teacher leading the class was a twenty-year veteran, and he had already read this particular history aloud hundreds of times, so normally he would have been able to recite it word-for-word from memory. However, today there was a waver in his voice, and he did not speak as fluently.

Perhaps that was understandable, though, for the main character of the epic tale was sitting in the back of his classroom, observing the teaching process.

“Hearing myself talked about like this is really embarrassing...” Yuuto commented.

“Tee hee,” Felicia giggled. “But I hear the children pay much more attention when the stories are about you, Big Brother. And children seem to learn more quickly with subjects they’re interested in.”

Her words made Yuuto recall a quote from Confucius, and he shrugged his shoulders in defeat. “Good grief. ‘They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it,’ is that it?”

Studying something enjoyable was more effective than being forced to study

something boring. It seemed that truth remained constant no matter the era.

Yuuto turned to Ephelia, who was sitting next to him, and laid a hand on her head. “So, do you think you can do this?”

“Fwah?!” Yuuto’s voice startled her so much that she let out a strange noise. Apparently she had gotten so absorbed into listening to the recitation that she’d become unaware of her surroundings. “Oh, u-um, but is it really right for Ephy to attend a vaxt?”

“There’s no right or wrong to it,” Yuuto said. “Do it. That’s a command.”

“Oh...” Ephelia seemed timid and without any confidence, so Yuuto asserted himself to make the matter clearer for her.

He figured that if he gave her too much choice in the matter, it would make her even more uncertain.

In Yuuto’s native 21st century Japan, education for children was mandatory. It didn’t matter whether one wanted to attend school or not, one simply *had* to.

“Studying here is going to be your job,” Yuuto said. “If you get good grades, you’ll receive pay as a reward. If you work hard, you’ll be able to raise the money for your manumission faster.”

If a slave was able to pay their master an amount of money equivalent to their purchase price, then it was possible to buy back one’s freedom and rights as a normal citizen.

Personally, Yuuto would have liked to simply give the money to her for free with no strings attached, but he couldn’t afford to show Ephelia that much preferential treatment. And if he were to emancipate all of the slaves working in the palace, it would put a huge burden on the clan’s national treasury.

Yuuto was the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, but the clan’s funds were not his personal property. He was serious about his responsibility to use them for the good of the Wolf Clan as a whole, and not for his own personal satisfaction.

Yuuto ruffled Ephelia’s hair vigorously, as if he were infusing her with his own fighting spirit. “Work hard, okay? The faster you learn to write, the easier my work will get going forward.”

“O-okay! I’ll do my best!” Ephelia clenched her small hands into fists in front of her, psyching herself up.

She really was an earnest girl at heart, just like Yuuto had first thought.

He had a feeling that she would be able to live up to his expectations.

“Phew, I’m glad we managed to get them to accept her!” Riding in a horse-drawn carriage on the road back to the palace, Yuuto was smiling with satisfaction.

Ephelia would be able to begin attending the vaxt right away, starting the day after tomorrow. A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, as the saying went. With this, he was now clearing the first major hurdle towards his goal.

“Yes, though they did balk quite a bit at the idea.” Felicia smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders.

Ephelia was fast asleep on Felicia’s lap. She hadn’t slept a wink since yesterday, when she’d been told she would be coming along with them to observe the vaxt. Upon their finishing and her finally getting a chance to relax, she had become overcome with drowsiness. The gentle rocking of the carriage had only expedited the process.

Yuuto responded with a wry grin of his own. “Maybe so, but we needed to get them to go along with it, no matter what.”

The vaxts were only attended by children from affluent families. Even the teachers had a bit of an elitist bent, so they had politely opposed him, arguing that it would be a waste of time to attempt to teach a mere slave.

It was likely there were more than a few who held that same opinion even among the officers of the Wolf Clan. They must surely think that Yuuto should be using the profits from selling glasswares on something more useful and worthwhile.

And that was *exactly* why it was important to make sure Ephelia attended a vaxt.

With proper study, even a slave could become literate. If Yuuto could demonstrate that fact, it should get everyone to understand the idea behind enforcing a system of mandatory education.

He could, of course, technically use his absolute authority as the patriarch to force the plan forward... but the uneducated children within Wolf Clan territory numbered in the tens of thousands.

Ensuring that they all received an education would be a large-scale reform, and thus would require commensurately drastic amounts of money, time, and labor. Yuuto could already envision the failure that awaited him if he tried to push things forward all by himself.

“Even if an incredibly talented individual invests the totality of their energy into his work, preserving and improving on the results of that work requires the cooperation of a great number of others. A nation cannot guarantee its survival without this sort of cooperation.” Those were the words of Machiavelli.

Unlike two years prior, Yuuto was now thoroughly familiar with how important it was to lay the groundwork and build consensus with the majority.

And Ephelia was perfect for the task. She was earnest and hard-working in everything she did, plus she’d already received some amount of education, and judging by the fact that she could already read and write letters, she was intelligent as well. It was a safe bet that she’d produce good results.

As long as she didn’t run into any trouble.

“Is she going to have to deal with bullying, though? That’s what I’m worried about the most,” Yuuto murmured. As someone who knew what school life was like in modern Japan, it was only natural for him to have that concern.

“I think things will be all right in that regard, Big Brother,” Felicia said. “Today should have impressed upon them that she is a favorite of yours. And I believe quite a few of the children must be eager to hear more about you, so I am sure she will become quite popular.”

“Yeah, here’s hoping,” Yuuto muttered to himself with uncertainty. He feared just the opposite: the possibility that the knowledge of his favoritism towards her would breed envy in the other children, setting her up to face a slew of

thoughtless cruelty.

Envy was an emotion that defied all rationality. Understanding in one's head that it was wrong wasn't enough to stop one's heart from feeling it.

Human beings didn't live their lives picking and choosing the most agreeable emotions to hold on to; Yuuto knew that all too well by now.

A bitter laugh escaped his lips. "In a way, we were put in similar situations."

That terrible scene from a year and a half ago had risen again from the depths of his mind: his sworn older brother, driven mad with jealousy, trying to cut him down with a sword, and instead killing his predecessor, who had jumped in front of him to protect him.

Thinking about it in retrospect, Loptr must have always considered Yuuto to be someone "beneath" him. There wasn't anything unusual about that; in fact, it had been a perfectly correct understanding of things. Yuuto had been his sibling subordinate, after all.

And as Loptr had shown, when a person who sees someone else as "beneath" them finds that those positions have become reversed, it is human nature to experience intense feelings of irritation or even hatred.

Therefore, it wouldn't be strange at all if there were people who wouldn't be able to accept the idea of a slave, someone clearly beneath them, rising to their level or above in society. In fact, it would be far stranger if there weren't any people like that.

"And, given that, having to select someone to serve as that example is one of the hard parts of being the patriarch." With a weary smile, Yuuto shook his head and sighed.

Most often, the decisions he made as the patriarch were done in conflict with his own personal feelings. For instance, he could never accustom himself to the feeling of giving Sigrún the order to charge in battle.

Even so, it was his duty as the one standing at the top to harden his heart and to make the correct decision in times like that.

As a patriarch thinking about the Wolf Clan's future, he definitely needed to

do whatever it took to implement mandatory education. And for that sake, he needed preliminary results.

It wouldn't do him any good to focus only on demerits and disadvantages; doing so would only prevent him from making forward progress.

Ephelia had a natural adorableness to her, not unlike a cute little animal. It was a quality of hers that made her well-liked by many people.

So it was much more probable that Felicia was right, and Yuuto's concerns were unfounded. Ephelia might very well become popular among the children, popular enough to brush aside any negative emotions from her peers that arose in the process.

In situations like this, there was nothing one could do but roll the dice and see how they landed.

Besides, attending school would greatly open up the possibilities for Ephelia's own future. Allowing his worries to quash those possibilities would be a terrible waste.

A child coddled by overprotectiveness doesn't grow up. There was an old saying: "The lion tosses its own cub into a deep ravine." At times, harsh trials were what was most necessary for someone. And so...

"Well, for now we'll just have to keep our eyes on her," he said.

What Yuuto could do for Ephelia now was to trust in her and to look after her from a distance, so that if the time ever came that he needed to act on her behalf, he could read the signs and quickly come to her aid in an appropriate way.

He resolved to himself that no matter what, he would carry through on that responsibility as the one who had selected her for this trial.

As the girl continued to sleep, Yuuto gently stroked her head. "Do your best, Ephy."

On the day after the Yuuto's inspection of the vaxt, the situation suddenly grew much more turbulent.

He had shaken off the last of his post-vacation sluggishness and was back to his usual busy work routine in his office. But then two voices called to him, one endlessly bright and cheery and the other cool and calm.

“Hi, sorry to barge iinnnn!”

“Apologies for intruding in the middle of your work.”

The voices were polar opposites in their attitude but identical in their pitch and tone. Their owners were none other than the sweet-looking, symmetrical young twins who were his newly sworn daughters.

“Hm... what is it, you two?” Yuuto asked.

“Well, Father, the thing is...” Kristina placed a hand to her cheek and looked troubled. “Al wanted to see you so badly, she was crying and throwing a tantrum. It seems she just could not forget that fiery, passionate night you shared together...”

“Hold it,” Yuuto snapped. “Don’t start a conversation by throwing out lies like it’s nothing.”

“N-no, I wasn’t throwing a tantrum!” Albertina cried.

“It really is exhausting having such a selfish child for a sister.”

“L-like I said, I wasn’t doing that!”

“Oh? Then you’re saying you *don’t* want to see Father? Well! What a terribly inconsiderate daughter you are.”

“H-huuuh?! N-no, that’s... no, of course I *want* to see Father, but I thought interrupting his work would be...”

“And there you have it. So you *did* long to see him. Don’t just throw out lies like they’re nothing, Al.”

“Uh... umm...”

“And so, shouldn’t you really be thanking me from the bottom of your heart, Al? Your dear sister, thinking only of you, went through all the trouble to prepare a valid reason for you to see Father.”

“Uh huh, I know! I’m really lucky to have a sister who cares about me so much!” Albertina grinned happily.

Yuuto found himself putting a hand to his face, pressing his fingers to the inner corners of his eyes.

Just like always, one twin was controlling the other entirely according to her whims.

Granted, happiness was in some respects a subjective thing. If Albertina herself considered herself happy, there wasn’t really much he could say about it. And besides, though some might consider it callous, he was much more concerned with something else.

“All right then, Kris, how about you tell me about that ‘valid reason for meeting me’?” he asked.

While her appearance might still be somewhat childlike, there were none more talented in the Wolf Clan than Kristina when it came to gathering information. And she was exceedingly sharp, as well.

If Kristina had intentionally chosen to avoid sending a written report and come to deliver information in person, then that fact alone attested to how urgent and important it must be.

“Heh heh, I expected nothing less, Father.” Kristina giggled, and with a tiny smile of satisfaction, she pulled out a single sheet of paper.

However amazing a spy she might be, it was of course impossible for her to operate over a widespread area all by herself. Ever since her days as part of the Claw Clan, she had possessed some number of protégé spies working under her. This information must have come to her through one of them.

“The Hoof Clan capital Nóatún has been taken over by the nomadic clan from Miðgarðr, the Panther Clan.”

“The great Hoof Clan was defeated?! And by the Panther Clan, you say?!” Felicia raised her voice in clear shock and alarm.

“...Hm.” In contrast, Yuuto was more subdued, his eyes only widening slightly.

It was a bit surprising for him too, of course, but still not something

completely outside of his expectations. “History repeats itself,” as the saying went. For any nation, suddenly losing a powerful and influential ruler would throw that nation into chaos, and a rapid decline would soon follow.

Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Takeda Shingen... Just looking at Japanese history’s Sengoku Period, the passing of such powerful and charismatic rulers was always quickly followed by the collapse of their ruling houses.

And looking at world history, it was a common occurrence for established kingdoms based on agriculture to get invaded and overrun by powerful nomadic tribes.

But even though Yuuto was familiar with the flow of history in this manner — no, *because* he was familiar with it — Kristina’s next words made him doubt his ears.

“According to my subordinate, the Panther Clan fought as a force of several thousand armed cavalry. They moved at full speed while firing iron-tipped arrows, throwing the Hoof Clan into a panic, then charged into them full force, completely scattering the Hoof Clan forces.”

Yuuto leapt up, rattling his chair in the process. “Impossible! They couldn’t! It’s way too soon!”

He was visibly shaken.

If it had just been iron, that much was somewhat plausible. Historically speaking, the Hittites had developed an iron refinement process as early as the 15th century B.C., though because they had treated it with the utmost secrecy, the knowledge hadn’t spread to surrounding countries until hundreds of years afterward. So it wouldn’t be completely strange if, by this point, one of the clans of Yggdrasil had managed to discover how to refine iron, as well.

However, the Scythians were said to have been one of the first cultures in history to master mounted warfare, and that had only been as recently as the 8th to 7th centuries B.C.

That was way too far in the future.

Without stirrups and saddles, riding and fighting atop a bareback horse

required an absurdly high level of technique.

Practically speaking, the chariot was the most powerful weapon in common use on the battlefields of Yggdrasil at present, and according to what Yuuto knew, that technology's origin had been around the 18th century B.C. with the Andronovo culture.

Even among nomad clans full of people raised to be familiar with riding horses and using bows, during the Bronze Age, they hadn't normally tried to fight riding on horseback, and had instead utilized chariots.

The gradual development of the technology and techniques necessary for horseback combat to become widespread amongst a clan should have taken much, much more time than this.

That is, unless they had stirrups.

But it hadn't even been two years since Yuuto had introduced stirrups into the Wolf Clan. It was only half a year ago that he'd been able to deploy a mounted cavalry unit in actual battles.

Even with simple technologies such as the stirrup, in a world without telephones or the internet, the transmission of technical knowledge between cultures took an incredible amount of time.

For example, the stirrup had existed in China in the beginning of the 4th century A.D., but its use hadn't been documented in the Korean peninsula or Japan until the 5th century. Just crossing that distance had required over a hundred years.

Furthermore, the Wolf Clan and this Panther Clan weren't close to each other geographically.

The possibility that the technology had been stolen was practically zero...

Once Yuuto's train of thought had reached that point, a single possibility flashed through his mind.

"It couldn't be... Big Brother... could it?"

He recalled the young man who had once served as second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, an Einherjar possessing the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand

Illusions, a rune said to allow him to steal any and all techniques.

Loptr knew about the tatara furnace method, and he was familiar with both the stirrup's design and its potential usefulness.

Everything lined up too perfectly.

"Yes, there's no mistaking it... it's that man," Felicia said, in a voice that sounded frozen stiff.

Though it wasn't cold in the room, Yuuto could hear her teeth chattering, and saw that her face had grown so deathly pale that she looked like she might collapse at any moment.

As much as he grew worried over her physical state, he was just as drawn to the certainty in her words.

"...Do you know something, Felicia?"

"It was perhaps half a month ago," she said miserably. "A message arrived from that man, addressed to me."

"What?!"

"The message demanded I leave your side and come to him. It also said that he was the patriarch of the Panther Clan."

"Why didn't... no, never mind that."

Why didn't you tell me? Yuuto found himself starting to ask, but he managed to stop himself. He didn't even need to ask.

Felicia had watched her own older brother try to murder Yuuto, only to kill the previous patriarch, who shielded him, instead. That tragedy was still a traumatic experience for her.

Felicia normally carried herself well, with a cheerful and sometimes playful attitude, a reliable older sister figure to others. But inside, she was unexpectedly fragile, and easily susceptible to being overwhelmed by anxiety.

She had likely wanted to turn her eyes away from the situation. Miðgarðr was a far-off land, unlikely to ever have dealings with the Wolf Clan. She would have convinced herself of that, and then avoided thinking about it as much as

possible.

“F-for keeping quiet about the matter until now, I accept any punishment necessary,” Felicia stammered. “B-but please, please believe me. I... I swear my loyalty to you and you only, Big Brother Yuuto!”

“I know that. There’s nothing to punish you for,” Yuuto asserted. “Actually, I’m proud that you were able to come clean about it just now.”

He placed a reassuring hand on Felicia’s shoulder. She was his trusted adjutant. He didn’t want her to beat herself up over this matter.

The fact that she had kept quiet until now was certainly not something worthy of praise, of course. And the Yuuto of two years ago might have grown angry and found fault with her for her “weakness.”



But the Yuuto of right now understood that people weren't creatures who could always be strong.

With a *creak*, Yuuto sat back down and leaned back against his chair, staring upwards into empty space. "I'm sure that Big Brother Loptr still holds a grudge against me..."

The Loptr that Yuuto had so admired was human too, and must have had his own inner weaknesses. But as Felicia's substitute father figure, as Yuuto's older brother figure, and as a pillar of leadership for the Wolf Clan, he had surely done whatever he could to never let those show to others.

Underneath his merry smile, he had surely been struggling with his share of doubts and worries. In that sense, the two siblings were similar. They both had a tendency to bottle up those negative feelings deep down, only for them to cause an outburst at some later point.

Yuuto felt regretful, even angry, towards his immature self two years ago, the boy who had taken someone with that weakness at face value, simply assuming he was flawlessly strong and idolizing him.

"Still, it's impressive," Yuuto said. "In just a year and a half, he's made himself the patriarch of the Panther Clan... For now, let's feign ignorance. We'll send a message of congratulations on his conquest, and a desire for friendly relations going forward."

By conquering Nóatún, the Panther Clan now held territory adjacent to the Horn Clan, which was under the Wolf Clan's sphere of protection.

Now that they'd become neighbors, he couldn't avoid having any dealings with them. Like it or not, there were bound to be conflicting interests that arose between the two clans.

He sincerely wished that they could find a way to coexist. He didn't want to be drawn into conflict with the sworn older brother who had taken care of him for so long.

And to ensure that, the first order of business was...

"Hey, Kris 'n' Al."

“Pardon me, but I find it upsetting that you’d refer to us together like we are some kind of unit,” Kristina said indignantly.

“I’m sure you understand this, but nothing we talked about here leaves this room, okay?”

“I am fully aware. And I will thoroughly condition Al, so there is no need to worry.”

“Condition?!” Al yelped.

“Good. I’m counting on you.”

“And he approved it?!”

Yuuto felt a little sorry for Albertina, but with the situation being what it was, she was going to have to deal with it.

If, even by some small chance, word got out that the Panther Clan patriarch was Loptr, former second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, there would be a flood of voices calling for war with the Panther Clan.

In the world of Yggdrasil, killing one’s parent was the greatest taboo. The man who had committed that heinous crime was now sitting pretty on the patriarch’s throne in another clan. From the perspective of the Wolf Clan, it was unforgivable, and impossible to let stand.

Loptr himself would surely not make it known publicly that he was a kinslayer who had murdered his own sworn father. Though, judging by the message he’d sent to Felicia, he didn’t seem to mind if Felicia and Yuuto knew about him. Perhaps he’d actually counted on the possibility that Yuuto would pretend to be unaware of the Panther Clan patriarch’s true identity.

In that case, as long as Yuuto kept his mouth shut, he could bury the truth.

But, however much the thought broke Yuuto’s heart, he had a premonition, one which felt all too certain, that eventually he would be unable to avoid conflict.

“The following two facts are ones you must never take for granted.” Yuuto quoted a passage from Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* to himself. “First, do not think that patience and generosity, however great, will ever be enough to

dissolve a person's enmity. Second, do not think that giving tributes or aid will ever be enough to turn a hostile relationship into a friendly one.'"

Normally, he relied on Machiavelli's words as a source of political wisdom, but today they seemed ominous, portending a dark future in store for him.

That night, alone in his quarters, Yuuto swiped his finger across his smartphone's screen, hurriedly scrolling.

Yuuto was the patriarch, a sovereign ruler. Any personal feelings or hang-ups aside, he had a sworn duty to protect the safety and prosperity of the people within his clan's territory. Holding an olive branch in the right hand and a sword in the left was the most basic tenet of international diplomacy.

It would be far too dangerous to be defenseless in the face of the threat posed by his new neighbor. He needed to come up with some proper countermeasures.

Dealing with diplomatic negotiations between two nations resembled an encounter with a yakuza.

If a yakuza began by walking up and brandishing a knife or pistol, any normal person would cave in to that threat, and be forced to accept unreasonable conditions and demands. In much the same fashion, in order to achieve peaceful negotiations with a militarily powerful nation, one needed to have some equivalent counter to its military force.

By necessity, Yuuto had fully familiarized himself with counter-infantry strategies and counter-chariot strategies, but he'd assumed he'd never have to go up against armed cavalry, and so he was still completely ignorant when it came to that. So now he was frantically using the internet to research anti-cavalry strategies. However...

"Good grief, they're great to use, but hell to deal with as an enemy."

The more he researched, the more he realized how overwhelmingly powerful cavalry was. And then he realized something else...

"Oh, crap. Any more than this, and I won't be able to talk... Hey, Mitsuki, you there?" Yuuto suppressed his urge to keep searching, and dialed the number of

his childhood friend.

“Hi, Yuu-kun. Good evening.” Just hearing her soft, familiar voice washed away the day’s fatigue, and eased his heart.

He could have just sent her a text saying that he couldn’t call her tonight, and thinking rationally about the situation, that was what he should have done, but even so, he’d still called her. He wanted this feeling of solace.

To Yuuto, his casual talks with Mitsuki were the one time he could forget his role as patriarch.

During the times he’d had to go on trips to other cities or on military campaigns, he’d been able to feel his heart growing steadily more upset. No matter how dire the political situation, as long as he was still in lárnvíðr, he couldn’t bear to give up this time he spent with her.

“Hey, good evening to you too,” he said. “So what did you do today?”

“Nothing special. It was just a boring, normal day. So Yuu-kun, what happened to you?”

“Huh?”

“I can tell you’re going out of your way to sound happy, you know?”

“...Geez, you saw right through me.”

“Well, yeah, we’ve been together for as long as either of us can remember.”

“I guess I can’t keep anything secret from you.”

“Nope, you can’t. For example, when you got back from the hot springs, you were acting suspicious, but I did you a favor and pretended not to notice.”

“Uh... ah... uh.” A shiver ran up Yuuto’s spine. His childhood friend’s intuition was downright uncanny.

And, though she was still talking in the same tone as always, somehow, he could sense a bit of anger from her voice.

I see. I really can’t underestimate the fact that we’ve been together forever.

“Well, let’s just say I’ll ask you more about that if my ‘anger meter’ ever maxes out,” she added.

“Uh... ha ha ha...” Yuuto choked out a dry laugh, and inwardly swore to himself he’d do his best not to raise that gauge.

“So, I’ll ask Yuu-kun the patriarch: Pops, what sort of problem do you have? I might not be able to solve it for you, but I’ll at least hear you out, okay?”

“Thank you...” he murmured.

Yuuto was hailed as a rare breed of hero who had turned the Wolf Clan into one of the strongest nations in the region. But before all that, he was just a student who had grown up in peaceful Japan.

There were times when he needed to whine and complain a bit to someone. But as the patriarch, he couldn’t ask the people under him to serve that role.

For Yuuto, the existence of his childhood friend was a source of salvation for him in this world.

“Okay, so the thing is...”

Yuuto told Mitsuki all about the Wolf Clan’s current situation.

He told her about how the Panther Clan had appeared, and taken over the Hoof Clan.

He told her about how the Panther Clan army was a force made up of cavalry.

And he told her about how the Panther Clan patriarch was Loptr, the man who had once looked after him as his sworn older brother.

Once she’d heard all of it, Mitsuki spoke to him with worry in her voice. “Yuu-kun... Are you all right?”

Hearing that, Yuuto kind of began to regret having told her everything. Still, even if he’d tried to hide it from her, if war broke out, she’d have found out anyway.

In fact, even if things didn’t go as far as war, the uncertain tension with the Panther Clan would affect Yuuto going forward, and his childhood friend would definitely be able to pick up on that.

She’d told him before that she wanted him to always let her know about these kinds of things. Because if he disappeared without any warning, her heart

wouldn't be able to take it.

He was always making trouble for Mitsuki, and he wanted to honor her wishes in that regard.

"Well, I'll figure out some sort of counter-strategy," Yuuto said. "But I don't have a lot of time, so starting tomorrow, I think I'm not going to be able to talk with you as much. I'm sorry."

"No, well, I was worried about that, too. But that's not it. Yuu-kun, are you going to be all right with... fighting Loptr?"

"..." Yuuto couldn't come up with any words in response.

He'd been so preoccupied with how to counter cavalry, he hadn't really thought about that aspect of the situation. No... perhaps unconsciously, he'd been avoiding thinking about it.

His mouth suddenly gone dry, Yuuto swallowed and looked up at the ceiling, then he spoke, more to himself than to Mitsuki.

"I am the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. If the time comes, it won't matter whether I want to or not. I'll have to fight."

"I respect you greatly, Big Brother, but even so, I cannot accept that!" Linnea's language was respectful, but her indignation put a wild edge on every word.

The day after Kristina's report on the fall of Nóatún, Linnea had been preparing to return home to her clan in response to the changing political situation when Yuuto had approached her to instruct her on their strategies going forward.

And this was her response.

"'Just hole up behind the city walls, and no matter what, don't launch any attacks,' you say? How will I be able to protect my people?! That leaves the enemy free rein to lay waste as they wish to everything outside the walls!"

"Just calm down for a minute, Linnea."

"How can I be calm? I cannot believe you would so belittle my soldiers!" This

was probably the first time Linnea had ever been so openly angry towards Yuuto since exchanging the Oath of the Sibling Chalice and ceasing to be mutual enemies.

Linnea surely held the advice of her beloved sworn older brother in high esteem, but given how deeply she cared about the people of her homeland, she couldn't just easily accept what he was telling her to do.

However, Yuuto couldn't back down in this situation, either.

"I'm not looking down on your clan or your fighters. I'd give the same orders to my own men. This isn't an opponent you can beat in a straightforward fight!" Yuuto grabbed Linnea's arms, raising his voice desperately to state things in no uncertain terms.

Reading his frantic tone and body language, Linnea finally seemed to get a vague sense of just how terrifying a threat armed cavalry were. "...Big Brother, are they really that strong?"

From Linnea's perspective, Yuuto was a great general whose strategy had thoroughly defeated the great hero of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, as well as the Battle-Hungry Tiger of the Lightning Clan, Steinþórr. He was like unto a god of war.

And someone like him was saying not to fight, that defense was their only option...

Before she realized it, Linnea had swallowed nervously with an audible *gulp*.

"Yeah, they're just that strong," said Yuuto. "A massive band of cavalry is the worst enemy you could ever face."

Yuuto took a long breath, then sighed deeply, his expression taut and severe.

Tracing back the threads of history in the Eastern world, the confederation of horseback nomadic tribes known as the Xiongnu had been powerful enough as a nation to defeat the agricultural Han dynasty of China during the reign of Emperor Gaozu (Liu Bang) in 200 B.C. For decades afterward, until the reign of Emperor Wu, the Xiongnu had received tributes from Han China and treated it as if it were a vassal state.

Looking at the West, during the 4th century A.D., once again, it was the threat of invasion by a horse-riding nomadic nation, the Huns, which had contributed to the great upheaval among the Germanic peoples in Europe known as the Migration Period.

And then there was the Mongol Empire, which had conquered the largest amount of territory of any empire in history.

And again in China, during the Northern Song Dynasty, there had been an incident in which a mere 17 armed cavalymen from the Jurchen nation had routed 2,000 Song infantrymen, numbers that at first glance sounded like some sort of joke.

“That’s why this is so important, okay?” Yuuto grasped Linnea’s shoulders and, leaning in, repeated his earlier warning for good measure. His face was as serious as it had ever been. “If the Panther Clan attacks you, just focus everything on defending yourself!”

After seeing Linnea off, Yuuto was making his way back through the gates. A horrible stench forced him to hold his nose.

“Augh, geez, that smell is as horrible as ever.”

Next to him, Felicia grimaced as well as she glanced toward the source of the odor. It stood on four legs, much taller than a horse, with humps on its back that were perhaps its most famous unique attribute.

It was a camel.

Because they could travel for days without eating or drinking, they were perfectly suited for traveling in arid lands with few sources of water, and they could carry a heavier load than the average horse. Quite a few of the merchant traders who came to lárnvíðr used one.

However, their foul body odor was one of their disadvantages. And if you didn’t approach a camel properly, it would threaten you by launching spittle at you that stank so bad, it might bend your nose in half.

In the past, Yuuto had gotten close to one of them out of curiosity, and met with a terrible fate. Ever since then, he had made a point of trying not to get

too close to camels.

However, as his gaze came to rest on the familiar face of the man making pleasant conversation with the owner of the camel, Yuuto ran quickly towards him and called out to him in a dramatic, friendly voice. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t my promising new son, how are you doing, my boy?”

“Come on. Please cut that out, Father.” The man — Ginnar — grimaced, looking as uncomfortable as could be.

Yuuto almost burst out laughing right then and there, but he managed to hold it in, and continued to put on serious airs as he spoke. “No no no, you mustn’t be so humble. The Wolf Clan’s marketplace is as prosperous as it is today because of your efforts. I’m such a lucky father, to have such a magnificent son as you!”

Yuuto folded his arms and nodded for emphasis.

Just before leaving for his vacation, Yuuto had recognized Ginnar’s achievements in implementing the use of currency, and had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with him directly. Ginnar had only entered the clan half a year prior, so it was an unusually rapid pace for such a high promotion.

Ginnar had gotten the marketplace accustomed to the use of coins as currency with almost no problems or confusion, and that was certainly no light achievement. But it was Yuuto and the high ranking Wolf Clan officers who had come up with the idea in the first place and worked on it right up until its implementation, and considering how soon it was after Ginnar’s formal recruitment, that achievement still wasn’t really enough to justify allowing him the honor of becoming Yuuto’s direct subordinate.

In fact, some officers had argued against Yuuto directly exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with him for that very reason. Yuuto had then explained to them the reason was that he had a specific objective in mind, and that this was a special case, and so he had persuaded them to overlook tradition this time.

As for that objective...

The other merchant immediately spotted a business opportunity, and quickly launched into cordial introductions, selling himself as best as he could. “Ohhh!

Then, you must be the Wolf Clan's famous Patriarch Yuuto! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am a humble trader, hailing from the lands of the Sword Clan—"

Yuuto could see the man's ulterior motives as plain as day, but he continued to converse with the merchant and Ginnar without letting on.

This was a world without telephones or the internet, so it was quite difficult to get information from foreign countries. The merchant traders who made their way from city to city were an important and valuable source of intel.

"Still, I should expect nothing less of you, Ginnar," Yuuto said. "A great teacher I respect once wrote, 'The best and easiest method for estimating the value of a man is to look at what type of men he associates himself with,' and you have made excellent personal connections."

"Ha ha ha, Lord Yuuto, you are an expert at flattery!" cried the camel-owning merchant.

Yuuto shook his head no, deliberately and with emphasis, prompting another laugh from the man.

"No, I'm being sincere," he said. "And you yourself seem like the kind of man who is well-liked and well-connected. Right now, the Wolf Clan is searching far and wide for good people. If they're talented, I'll welcome them with open arms, just like I did with Ginnar here. It doesn't matter what profession. If you know of any good people who would fit the bill, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know."

"Um, would you be willing to accept someone like me, as well?" the camel-owning merchant asked hopefully.

"Why, of course. We'd welcome you."

"Really?! Ahh, it really was worth it to take the plunge and ask you. Well then, after I have taken these glass products to Glaðsheimr, I will come right back here!"

"And I'll be waiting for you. I hope you'll follow in Ginnar's footsteps." Yuuto exchanged a passionate handshake with the merchant.

“Father, um...” Ginnar was making a troubled face, and gave a meaningful glance towards the direction of the palace.

Yuuto picked up on that and nodded. “Well then, with that, I must be going. Good travels to you!”

“Ohh, thank you very much, Lord Yuuto. May you be ever in good health!”

With those farewells, Yuuto’s group entered the city.

After walking for a little while, Yuuto glanced around to make sure there was no one else nearby except for Felicia, then questioned Ginnar.

“So, what was it you wanted to speak about, oh wise and great son of mine?” He couldn’t resist tacking on the dramatic language, the corners of his mouth twisting in an impish grin.

“Come off it, Father! When you put me on a pedestal like that, it makes me feel so awkward and out of place! I can’t stand it!” Ginnar exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha! That’s a little taste of how it always is for me. You need to learn to put up with it, Ginnar.”

“I can’t believe what a troublesome role you’ve forced me into, Father,” Ginnar sighed, his shoulders drooping.

It was written all over Ginnar’s face just how uncomfortable he was with the whole deal, and Yuuto did feel a little sorry for him, but they couldn’t afford to back out now.

Yuuto placed a hand on Ginnar’s shoulder in an attempt to console him. “But thanks to you playing that role, we’ve already got plenty of people lining up to work for us.”

“I didn’t do anything, though. It was all your idea, Father.”

Indeed, the bit of theater that had played out moments earlier was part of Yuuto’s plan to resolve the Wolf Clan’s personnel shortage.

There was an old Japanese saying: “*Kai yori hajimeyo*,” or in English, “Start close at hand.”

In modern-day Japanese, the saying was normally used to mean that the

person who first suggests an idea or task should be the first one to get to work on it. However, the origins of the saying actually went back to the Warring States Period of China.

King Zhao of Yan, one of the seven warring kingdoms at the time, had known that he needed to recruit more talented people to bolster the strength and prosperity of his kingdom, and so he had asked the scholar Guo Kai how he might attract talented people to serve as his officials.

Guo Kai's response: "If my king wishes to invite wise men into his service, please begin with this humble Kai. If you do that, men much wiser than I am will all wonder, why? And they will come to you from near and far, from a thousand leagues away and farther they will come to be your officials."

Seeing that this reasoning was sound, King Zhao had built a special palace for Guo Kai and called him "master," or so the story went.

In the years that followed, some of the greatest generals of the time, such as Yue Yi and Zou Yan, would defect from the other kingdoms to the kingdom of Yan, and with their strength, King Zhao would bring the kingdom of Yan to the height of its prosperity.

Used this historical anecdote as his example, Yuuto had copied the event with Ginnar. He had made sure to take care that his other child subordinates did not become jealous or see him as playing favorites, though.

In Yggdrasil, merchant traders contributed much to the relay and spread of information. Yuuto's conversation with the merchant earlier had been an excellent opportunity to use the man to spread rumors into the surrounding areas.

Yuuto had already conducted similar such conversations with several other traveling merchants.

And that effort had been worth it; in a scant two weeks since starting, the number of new applicants for positions as Wolf Clan bureaucrats had risen dramatically.

Sigrún held her unsheathed *nihontou* up to the light, and gave an incredibly

heavy sigh.

She was a gallant and beautiful warrior, even praised by some of the other soldiers as the “goddess of the battlefield” for her striking looks, but now she was crestfallen, and the air she gave off seemed much less frigid and powerful. It was more ephemeral, even fragile.

Ingrid, master of the smithy, placed her hands on her hips and frowned, clearly displeased. “Hey now, that’s one of my best pieces of work you’re sighing at there. Just what are you unsatisfied with?”

To Ingrid, the weapons she created were like her own children. And this sword in particular was one of her best, a masterwork whose quality she had absolute confidence in. To her, Sigrún’s sighing whenever she gazed at the blade was nothing less than insulting.

“Ah, well, I’ve no problems with the quality,” Sigrún said. “It truly is great. I thank you.”

“For someone who’s thanking me, you sure look like you’re not satisfied at all, though.”

“Ah, well, it’s just... you forged this one, right? Along with your apprentices over there.”

“Yeah, I did. What about it?”

Sigrún sighed again.

“Are you trying to pick a *fight* with me?! I don’t care if you’re the Mánagarmr or the freaking goddess, I’m ready to go, right here and right now!” A vein popped out on Ingrid’s forehead, and she furiously began rolling up her sleeves. She didn’t seem to care at all that the other party was holding a sword.

Ingrid had her pride as a craftsman on the line, and she wasn’t a very calm and patient person to begin with. It seemed she’d reached the limit of her temper.

By contrast, Sigrún was the flustered one. “Ah... u-um... I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean anything by it.”

“I don’t care if you meant anything or not! I’m not letting you take one step

out of this workshop until you tell me what those sighs are for! And if the answer's not acceptable, I'm not making weapons for you ever again!"

"W-wait! That would be a problem!" Even Sigrún's voice came out as a panicked shout when faced with that threat.

A warrior's weapon was the item one entrusted one's life to. The level of trust provided by weapons forged by Ingrid, the greatest smith in the Wolf Clan, was entirely different from that of anyone else. And on the battlefield, that difference in reliability could separate those who survived from those who died. For Sigrún, this had literally become a matter of life and death.

"That's if the answer's not acceptable," Ingrid snapped. "If it's something you have a right to complain about, I'll forgive you. I'll even reforge it for free and fix whatever's wrong, okay?"

"Ngh... F-fine, I understand. I'll tell you. J-just, can you get your apprentices to leave us alone first?"

"Excuse me?! You think I'll accept the kind of reason you can't even say in front of everyone here? I get that you go out there and risk your life on the front lines, but all of us here know we're responsible for the weapons that protect our soldiers' lives, and we put our heart and soul into every single one of them! Don't think you can get away with disrespecting my men!"

A collective "Ohhhh" rose up from Ingrid's apprentices in admiration of her guts. When it came to the matter of craftsmanship, she was strong-willed and unwilling to bend or compromise to anyone, no matter who they might be. She was truly the epitome of a master craftsman.

Ingrid's passionate speech was intense enough that Sigrún took a step back, but then she seemed to steel her nerves. She swallowed once, then spoke in a small, whispered voice, placing her two index fingers together timidly.

"It's just, um, Father didn't make this one himself..."

"Louder!"

Sigrún went from a whisper to a full shout. "I-if possible, I wanted Father to be the one to make my sword!"

Once she'd said the words, her face went bright red and she stared down at the floor, but she couldn't take it back now. She continued softly.

"O-of course, I know Father is very busy right now. And I know that this sword is even better than the one I had before. But that feeling, like Father is fighting alongside me, that feeling of security and excitement... I just wondered if I'd never feel it again. And when I thought about that, well..."

Sigrún's face fell, and with a look of terrible loneliness, she tightly squeezed the grip of the sword she was holding.

The sword she had used until recently had been forged by Yuuto and Ingrid together, but during the battle with the Lightning Clan, Steinþórr had knocked it away, and afterwards it had been washed away to who-knew-where by the raging floodwaters.

Warriors were a superstitious bunch, and Sigrún was no exception.

To her, that sword had been the lucky charm that was saving her life during the fights with both Yngvi and Steinþórr. Even back when she had fought and defeated the Claw Clan's hero Mundilfäri, the sword had been different, but it had still been one forged by Yuuto.

Sigrún truly believed that it was thanks to Yuuto's protection, channeled through her sword, that she still lived.

Though she always appeared calm and unflappable, she was still just a girl in her teens. She had lost the source of strength her heart relied on in battle, and now she felt a strange uncertainty she couldn't describe.

At a loss for words, Ingrid scratched the back of her head. "Ah... uhhh..."

If Ingrid had been a man, perhaps she would have grown even angrier at Sigrún, shouting, "You're a warrior! How can you spout such weak-willed garbage?!" and reprimanding her.

But though some of her more masculine mannerisms were what stood out, beneath it all, Ingrid was the girl with far and away more feminine sensitivity than many of Yuuto's other subordinates. She understood Sigrún's feelings, and painfully so. She understood too well, and that made this situation much too awkward.

As Ingrid stood there, at a loss for just what to say in response, another visitor arrived.

“Yo, Ingrid. There’s a little favor I wanted to ask of you...”

“F-Father?!” Sigrún visibly broke into a panic when the subject of her confession walked into the room.

She had always judged her personal worth by her use on the battlefield, and she had appointed herself as Yuuto’s “sword.” She didn’t want him to ever hear her expressing weakness or doubts.

“Oh, Sigrún, you’re here too?” Yuuto asked. “That’s perfect. I just got this from Ginnar a moment ago...”

Yuuto motioned with his chin to a long, thin cloth bag Felicia was holding. Felicia nodded in acknowledgement and opened the bag.

“Oh... ohhh!” Sigrún caught a glimpse of the bag’s contents, and her eyes went wide in astonishment.

Then she forcefully ripped the bag right out of Felicia’s hands, startling her.

“Eek! Wha— Rún, that was entirely too violent!”

Felicia puffed out her cheek indignantly and protested such rude treatment, but Sigrún didn’t hear a word of it. She was hugging the bag to herself gently, lovingly, as if it were her long-lost child, and rubbing her cheek against its battered hilt while large tears fell from her eyes.

Sigrún was a warrior. However much it might be changed by wear and tear, there was no way she wouldn’t recognize the sight of her own sword’s hilt.

“The hilt’s in real bad shape, but the blade itself is still fine,” Yuuto said. “You can have Ingrid fix... I don’t think she’s listening.”

“That appears to be the case,” Felicia said, sighing. But her exasperated expression was soon replaced by a kind and affectionate smile. “Tee hee... well, I’m happy for you, Rún.”

On the other side of the Bifröst Basin’s northern mountain range lay the Miðgarðr region, an arid region where rain rarely fell. The majority of

Miðgarðr's land was covered by either desert or the steppes, expansive plains of short grasses with almost no trees.

There weren't many lakes or rivers, either, and with so few sources of water, the land wasn't suited for agriculture.

Because of that, the people who lived in that region mainly based their livelihoods around the raising of livestock. In order to make sure their animals didn't eat too much and deplete the grasslands, they never remained in one place, instead traveling back and forth across the land in a steady cycle.

In the cultures of Miðgarðr, it was taught that people subsisted on two kinds of food: "red food" and "white food." The red food was meat, and the white foods were made from milk.



“Heh... it seems that more familiar flavors suit my tastes the best.” Hveðrungr took a bite of his bread and a sip of his wine, then nodded to himself in satisfaction.

Both of these items were hard to come by back in Miðgarðr. And in the past, they were both things he’d had easy access to every single day. Just as he began to smile slightly at the nostalgia of it all—

A dull, aching pain raced across his brow, and Hveðrungr winced, clenching his teeth. “Nkh...!”

It was the wound given to him by the Claw Clan warrior Mundilfäri, back when he had still called himself Loptr.

Whenever that old wound began to ache, his most hated memories would rise to the surface from the depths of his mind. It had happened during that very battle, the one in which he had received the said wound. That was when that accursed whelp had taken his place.

“‘Inform Hveðrungr, patriarch of the Panther Clan.’” Hveðrungr spat out his words in disgust as he recalled the message that had been delivered to him. “‘I am Yuuto, patriarch of the Wolf Clan.’ So that’s how it is. You have a lot of nerve to sit there and call yourself patriarch after deceiving me, your older brother, and then *killing Father by using him as your shield*. You have no right to call yourself that, you bastard!”

Even now, he could still feel the lingering sensation in his hands, of slicing through his sworn father’s flesh and bone, of severing his very life.

For the past year, whenever he slept, he had seen that moment play out again and again in his dreams, and it had eaten away at his heart.

Humans are enigmatic creatures that, in order to preserve their own minds, are at times even capable of altering their own memories and interpreting them in the way most convenient to their own feelings.

“I fell for the evil scheme that rotten child had set up, and found myself tricked into killing my own beloved father.”

At some point, that interpretation of things had become Hveðrungr’s one and

only truth.

“But to think he’d even stoop to doing something as underhanded as forging a message from my beloved little sister Felicia. Wait for me, Felicia! I’ll come to rescue you soon!”

As Hveðrungr said this, he crumpled in his fist the second message he had received from the Wolf Clan, a paper letter.

On it was written that the only older brother Felicia followed was Yuuto, and no one else.

Hveðrungr’s little sister was a good girl who cared for her older brother. She was his only flesh and blood family in this world. There could be no chance, no possibility that she would reject him like that. Therefore, Hveðrungr could only conclude that this letter was a complete fake. And if the letter was fake, his little sister must even now be a prisoner of that deceitful usurper.

His old wound throbbed, and another rush of dull pain shot across his brow.

This wound had been engraved into his flesh by the wielder of the rune Alsviðr, the Horse who Responds to its Rider. Perhaps that was why, whenever it ached, he heard a voice whisper to him, “*Sate your desires,*” from somewhere in the depths of his heart.

Black, compulsive urges spread within him, and he could no longer restrain his emotions. Yet he also felt incredible power welling up throughout his entire body.

Hveðrungr relinquished his heart to that inner voice, and a ravenous smile spread across his face as he licked his lips in a manner akin to a carnivorous beast.

“I’ll make you give me everything, Yuuto. Everything you took from me. *Everything.*”

Myrkviðr was a walled city located on the western edge of Horn Clan territory. It was located fairly close to the Himinbjörg mountain range, and had a long history of prospering as a center of the lumber trade.

The city proper was built on an island between branches of the Örmt River,

limiting the points of approach and providing a natural defense against invasion by foreign clans.

When the Hoof Clan's previous ruler Yngvi had launched his invasion of the Horn Clan, he had also apparently found conquering this city to be too difficult a prospect, instead choosing to circle around and advance towards Fólkvangr through more open lands to the south.

The man charged with governing Myrkviðr was named Gunnar. He was known as a talented commander within the Horn Clan, with a string of military achievements stretching back to the days of the previous Horn Clan patriarch, Hrungnir.

And right now, his greatest problem was the tribe of invaders that had begun attacking from the west ten days ago.

"Detestable barbarians," Gunnar spat out with a scowl.

According to the reports, they had arrived all on horseback, dressed in the characteristic attire of nomads from the Miðgarðr region. They had immediately begun assaulting the villages and towns surrounding Myrkviðr, killing the men and abducting the women, stealing the food, and setting fire to whatever was left in a display of outrageous and wanton violence.

Gonnnng! Gonnnng! The loud, high-pitched clanging began to rang out.

"So they've come again. Damn them..."

The invaders were at last showing themselves near the walls of Myrkviðr. Perhaps they'd fully pillaged all of the surrounding land.

Patriarch Linnea had given him strict orders to maintain the defense within the walls of Myrkviðr, and to refrain from launching an attack, but he was at the absolute limits of his patience.

Gunnar was the governor of the city of Myrkviðr and the surrounding area. If he could not protect the lives and property of the citizens under his watch, then why was he even here?

For what purpose did the people of this land submit taxes and tribute?

Who would ever pledge fealty to rulers who would not lift a finger to defend

them?

The anger in Gunnar's heart finally boiled over. "I cannot stand it anymore! I'll rout those damned bandits and scatter them to the four winds!"

He gathered his troops and led them out of the city.

According to reports from his lookouts, the enemy numbered fewer than five hundred. Myrkviðr, by contrast, boasted fifteen hundred soldiers, giving them a 3-to-1 advantage.

And that wasn't all. Their patriarch Linnea was only slightly above average in skill as a field commander, but she was incredibly accomplished as the ruler of their nation, both talented and flexible.

She had imported many items and ideas from that Wolf Clan patriarch, Yuuto, who was so proficient in military strategy people were calling him a reincarnated war god.

One such example was a weapon, an iron spear three times as long as a person's height. She had supplied these longspears to the soldiers protecting her borders at Myrkviðr. And for the past two months, she'd had them undergo training on how to fight using the tight-knit phalanx formation.

With this ultimate combination of weapons and tactics at their disposal, there was no way that unruly gang of bandits could ever match them.

"Attack!" Gunnar ordered. "Attack!"

At his command, the Myrkviðr forces charged forward.

But the instant they were about made contact with the enemy, the horsemen split cleanly into three groups.

The group right in front of them skillfully reversed course, and began firing arrows as they retreated.

The phalanx boasted incomparable power in a frontal assault, but it could not match the speed of horses.

Their longspears gave them overwhelming reach in a melee, but that could not compare with the range of a bow.

As a result, the Myrkviðr soldiers could not land a single hit, and were forced to receive continuous, one-sided attacks from the enemy.

By the time Gunnar realized how dangerous this was, it was already too late.

The other two enemy groups had made use of the superior mobility of their horses to circle around and flank both sides of the Myrkviðr troops, and began launching arrows of their own.

Before he knew it, Gunnar and the Myrkviðr garrison found themselves completely surrounded by a force only a third of their size.

The Myrkviðr archers within the formation tried their best to return fire, but they were on foot and their opponents were moving quickly on horseback. The Myrkviðr arrows rarely found their mark, while the enemy's arrows struck true, stealing one life after another in quick succession.

Faced with this terribly one-sided situation, the Myrkviðr soldiers lost their composure, and some were panicked enough to try to flee. Their formation fell apart.

Of course, the enemy horsemen seized on that opportunity.

The riders on both flanks dropped their bows and switched to spears, skewering the panicking Myrkviðr soldiers from both sides in a pincer attack.

To begin with, the phalanx was a formation focused on attacking forward, and terribly vulnerable to attacks from the sides or rear. That was exacerbated all the more by the panicked condition of the soldiers.

In less than an hour, the Myrkviðr garrison forces had been wiped out. Out of fifteen hundred soldiers, fewer than five hundred survived.

The Panther Clan, on the other hand, suffered casualties in the single digits. It was practically a flawless victory.

And so, without enough troops left to protect the gates, the walled city of Myrkviðr fell easily into the hands of the Panther Clan.

News of the Panther Clan's attack reached Yuuto within the day.

Beginning with the works of Sun Tzu, there were a great number of treatises

on military strategy that discussed the importance of information.

Yuuto understood that because the Horn Clan bordered the territories of powerful hostile nations like the Hoof and Lightning Clans, it functioned strategically as a western-facing shield for the Wolf Clan. With that important fact in mind, after Yuuto's war with the Hoof Clan, he had taught Linnea techniques for using smoke signals to relay information.

The use of coded smoke signals was recorded as having happened as early as the 2nd century B.C. in China. They had quickly sent messages across the country about attacks by the horse-riding Xiongnu people, in a situation eerily similar to what Yuuto was facing now.

Smoke signals could be used to communicate over great distances in a short time, the equivalent of 140 kilometers per hour. Of course, one couldn't send complicated messages with smoke, but it was perfect for reporting a "state of emergency" as quickly as possible.

Also, once the first warning had been delivered quickly by smoke signal, it could be followed afterward by more detailed information carried by messenger pigeons. Yuuto learned such information about the fall of Myrkviðr over the next two days.

"So, we really have no choice but to fight after all, huh..." With a sigh, Yuuto looked up at the sky.

Two years ago, on the night he'd finally succeeded in refining iron, Loptr had told him about his lifelong dream under a starry sky just like this one. Yuuto remembered that night like it was only yesterday.

Loptr should have been the one to lead and protect the Wolf Clan, but now it was being protected by Yuuto. And Loptr was now furiously baring his fangs towards the same Wolf Clan he should have been in charge of protecting.

Yuuto couldn't shake the feeling of tragic irony.

In his heart, he still felt uncertain, hesitant.

To fight Loptr would mean pointing his blade at his brother's throat. It wouldn't be personally and directly, but it would still be the act of aiming to take his opponent's life.

Could he really bring himself to do that?

What if there was another alternative to battle?

However, now that Myrkviðr had fallen, Yuuto could not allow himself the luxury of hesitation. If his uncertainty delayed his decisions, the cost would be borne in the lives of innocent civilians.

“When I die, I’m definitely going to hell, aren’t I?” Yuuto closed his eyes, whispering the words. “...Well, guess it’s a bit late to think about that.”

His hands were already stained with the blood of so many.

Even so, he’d resolved to keep moving forward.

Because Yuuto was the patriarch, a sovereign.

Allowing himself to be stalled by personal sentiment would be an insult to the souls of all the lives he’d sacrificed to get here.

It wasn’t about whether he *could* separate his personal feelings from the matter. He simply *had to* do it.

With those words of counsel to himself, Yuuto gave the order to raise his armies, in order to protect his little sister’s nation.

ACT 4

Wolf Clan soldiers had begun to gather in the area surrounding the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr.

They numbered close to eight thousand. During the war with the Hoof Clan three months ago, around four thousand Wolf Clan troops had converged here. Considering that, this was an astounding increase in size.

The greatest factor in that, of course, was that the Wolf Clan had obtained large amounts of farmable land and increased their population over the past half a year, but at the end of the day, it was once again their iron playing a pivotal role here.

In geochemistry, there was a term called the Clarke number (or just Clarke), named for the American scientist Frank Wigglesworth Clarke. The Clarke number expressed as a percentage the relative abundance of base elements in the surface layer of the Earth's crust. An index table of Clarke numbers showed that copper, the main element used in the bronze weapons of Yggdrasil, only had an abundance of 0.01%, while tin was only 0.004%. Both of them were relatively quite rare metals.

Practically speaking, it was even harder to shore up a large enough amount of bronze weapons and armor for an army than it was to secure enough provisions to feed them.

By comparison, iron was the fourth most abundant element close to the Earth's surface, with a Clark number 470 times that of copper! As long as one possessed the knowledge of how to refine iron, it was possible to obtain great quantities of it, and to do so much more cheaply and easily than bronze.

Yuuto had identified deposits of iron sand all throughout the Wolf Clan's territory. The position of their lands between two mountain ranges was likely a large factor in that. They had all the raw materials they could ever need.

In addition, just like with the glassmaking, recently many of Ingrid's

apprentices had set out on their own to set up independent tatara furnaces in various places around the country, and so there had been an explosive growth in iron production. Now iron was so plentiful in the Wolf Clan nation that it was even used in farmers' tools like hoes and plows.

Because of that, even if there was a large increase in the size of the Wolf Clan army, they would be able to supply them with iron equipment in an incredibly short time.

"Big Brother, I sincerely offer you my thanks for lending your aid once again to the Horn Clan," Linnea said. "Just as with last time, I am impressed at how quickly you arrived."

"Heh heh, you know what they say, 'Swiftiness is the soul of warfare.' Naturally, I'm the fastest. ...Just kidding. Really, this time it's all thanks to the iron, you see." Yuuto responded to Linnea's greeting with a playful wink and a grin, then turned and gestured to the line of wagons trailing behind him.

As Linnea turned her attention to the wagons, she soon found herself gazing in wonder. "What?! You've wrapped the wheels with iron?! I... I see. So iron can be used in that way, as well."

"That's right, and it's pretty handy improvement." Yuuto grinned proudly.

Fundamentally, the marching speed of a group of soldiers was determined by the slowest among its number.

With a full army, there were specialized troops that transported provisions and gear, equivalent to the modern Transportation Corps. They had to move heavily loaded wagon carts with wooden wheels, which meant that although the spokes reduced the impact a bit, there was still no end to small breakdowns, due to built-up damage.

Until now, stopping to make repairs in those cases had been an unavoidable loss of time.

However, by using iron to line the outer rim of the wagon wheels, and to reinforce the truck itself, one could drastically increase the durability of those parts. That meant the usual sort of common breakdowns were almost fully eliminated, and the formation could travel more smoothly and quickly.

“You really are amazing, Big Brother,” Linnea said in awe. “And compared to you, I’m... Even though I gave strict orders not to go out, they were ignored. I could not even make my subordinates adhere to my instructions. That is what led to this horrible situation. I am deeply, deeply sorry.”

Linnea bent over in a low, deep bow, her hands clenched into fists on the hems of her skirt.

She felt a great deal of personal responsibility for this affair, as was typical for her earnest and sincere personality.

“No, there was nothing you could do about it. This is the sort of thing that doesn’t make sense until you experience it firsthand. Nobody understood Li Mu at first, either.” With a frustrated expression, Yuuto slumped his shoulders.

Li Mu was a great general from a time in Chinese history known as the Spring and Autumn Period. He wasn’t exactly a well-known historical figure in Japan, but in China, he was known as a hero who had established tactics for infantry to use against cavalry attacks.

Li Mu’s strategy was exactly the one Yuuto had given to Linnea: Use smoke signals as a fast emergency alert system to warn when enemy Xiongnu riders attacked, and immediately evacuate the citizens inside the city walls. Do not permit your soldiers to attack, instead having them focus only on defending the city walls.

Because his strategy was so defensive, even passive, Li Mu had been called a coward not only by the Xiongnu, but by his own Zhao kingdom soldiers, and soon relieved of command.

After that, the more aggressive general replacing him as the protector of the northern borders of Zhao had launched bold attacks against the Xiongnu and fought fiercely, but he’d suffered enormous losses every time and lost control of the border, forcing the king to hurriedly put Li Mu back into his former post.

Holed up behind fortified walls, and focused only on protecting them. It was indeed a coward’s tactic, passively allowing the attackers to ravage the surrounding territory as much as they liked. But in the end, this was the way to keep casualties to a minimum against an armed cavalry force.

But even if those were the facts...

“You can’t expect people to go along with something just because it’s rational, you know?” Yuuto lamented with a sigh, running his fingers through his hair in frustration.

For the soldiers and their commanders, fighting the enemy was their job. Getting them to stick to orders not to engage the enemy at all was always going to be tough. Even more so when faced with the losses of the lands and people they were meant to defend.

With this, Yuuto felt all the more keenly just how difficult a task it was to command others.

“Father!” Sigrún arrived on the scene, seemingly in a rush.

Yuuto knit his brow and his face scrunched up in displeasure. Next to him, Felicia and Linnea did exactly the same.

Sigrún immediately took notice of this, and she began to apologize with an expression of terrible unease.

“I... I am truly sorry for arriving late. Falling behind you is a disgrace to my duty as the head of your royal guard. I promise that I will do my utmost to ensure it never happens again, so...”

“Uhh, n-no, I’m not angry, okay? You’re not used to that yet, right? It can’t be helped.”

“Th-thank you for your forgiveness, Father!”

“Uh, yeah, um. So, I know you’ve arrived now, so for now would you mind giving me some space for a bit?”

“Gh...!!” Sigrún gasped as if struck with a mortal blow, or as if she were facing the end of the world. Her face stiffened and went totally pale. “F-F-Father, you really are angry at me over my tardiness aren’t you? Auugh... I’ve upset Father... he hates me... Wh-what am I supposed to...”

“R-Rún, you don’t need to lose your senses so,” Felicia said rapidly. “Big Brother most certainly doesn’t hate you. There is no way he would!”

“Y-yes, that’s right,” Linnea agreed. “You are the Strongest Silver Wolf, the

Mánagarmr, and the proud head of the Múspell unit. You are Big Brother's mighty sword. He would never hate you."

"Felicia, Aunt Linnea..." Sigrún turned toward the two other girls, her beautiful icy features momentarily brightened by a grateful smile.

"But, please, get away from us right now!" Felicia and Linnea immediately followed their kind words with a request that didn't allow any room for argument.

"Wha?! Gh... uhhh, r-right, I... I understand..." Sigrún managed to mutter, stricken by shock, and she slowly trudged back in the direction she came from.

Yuuto watched her go, feeling a pang of guilt. She looked to him like an abandoned puppy. "D-don't you think that was a little harsh just now, you two? You should at least tell her the reason why. A-as a guy, it's a little hard for me to tell her."

"W-well, it is true that the misunderstanding should be cleared up right away, but... speaking truthfully, I do not want to get close to Rún right now either," Felicia said. "It might spread to me, for one thing. But, well, I suppose I have no other choice."

Stealing glances at Yuuto and Linnea, Felicia gave a long sigh and went after Sigrún. She had concluded that she couldn't exactly push that role onto either of the two people who outranked her.

Once Yuuto could see that Felicia had (from a safe distance) begun to give Sigrún an explanation, he turned back to Linnea. "So, what is the Panther Clan doing now?"

There was no use in regretting what had already passed. Dealing with the present and ongoing threat was their greatest priority.

"After passing through Myrkviðr, they invaded the lands around Sylgr," Linnea said. "I have heard their numbers are small, only a few hundred..."

"And that's just one of the ways they try to make us lower our guard." Yuuto clicked his tongue resentfully.

The Panther Clan was trying to encourage their enemies to underestimate

them as a smaller force, and thus provoke them into a fight on the open plains, where cavalry had the advantage.

“Right. So I have taken extra care that my general there understands he must keep the city gates closed, and focus only on defense. After learning how easily Myrkviðr fell, I believe that everyone will follow their orders now, but...” Linnea wore a pained expression, and her words carried her trepidation.

Seeking shelter behind the city walls would indeed limit the effects of the Panther Clan’s invasion.

However, almost all of the farmland was outside of those walls. At this rate, the farmers could not safely live and work on that land.

Things couldn’t be left like this.

Yuuto nodded slowly at Linnea’s unspoken implication, and then spoke with conviction.

“I know, Linnea. We have to do everything we can to get them out of Horn Clan territory.”

“Tch, cowards. The bastards won’t put a damn toe outside the wall,” Váli, one of the Panther Clan generals, complained gruffly as he stared up at Sylgr’s city walls.

Ordered by Patriarch Hveðrungr to lead the vanguard unit, it was Váli who had sacked the city of Myrkviðr. He had continued east after that, and was now attempting to capture Sylgr.

“These guys are a tougher hunt,” he muttered.

The Panther Clan was using the same strategy fighting against the Hoof Clan as they had at Myrkviðr.

The strategy was simple. First, their soldiers were given free rein to pillage the area around a city, to anger the enemy enough to make them leave the walls and launch an offensive out onto open ground. The Panther Clan forces would rout the enemy infantry on the field and then take their stronghold.

The Hoof Clan had started out being entertaining, easily falling for the trap,

but now the Hoof Clan were apparently a bunch of cowards, locking themselves inside the city walls and refusing to come out.

“I can’t take too long here, or Father will show up.” Váli scowled, his face twisted with deep displeasure.

Perhaps it was because they lived their lives in such a harsh natural environment, but the meritocratic ideology of Yggdrasil was even more deeply entrenched in the culture of the Panther Clan. They believed in the law of “might makes right,” and warmly welcomed anyone into their ranks, regardless of background, as long as that person showed strength and ability.

On the flip side of the coin, if someone was seen as *lacking* in ability, they could expect to be shunned and have any rank or status stripped away.

Despite Váli’s wishes, the events of war council meeting a few days ago flashed in his mind again. He had earned the ire of his patriarch once already. He had to avoid disgracing himself again here, at any cost.

“Looks like you’re having trouble.” A sudden voice came from right behind Váli.

“Gah!” Váli’s whole body shuddered with terror for a moment. But when he realized the true owner of the voice, he let out a protracted sigh in relief.

“What the hell, Narfi?! Don’t scare me like that.”

“Hm hmm, did I sound like him?”

Váli shot him a rotten glare. “Yeah, and it terrified the shit outta me!”

“You have my apologies for that.” The gentlemanly-looking young man called Narfi grinned mischievously.

“So, whaddya want? Did you come here to get your fill of laughs at the guy who shot off his mouth and then couldn’t even knock over a town like this one?” Perhaps because he was still flustered, Váli’s words were more cynical and stained with insecurity than usual.

Narfi shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly. “Rest assured, I know just as well as you that this enemy isn’t letting us do things the way we normally would. Apparently, the Wolf Clan patriarch Yuuto is quite the expert at war.”

“Yeah, and to tell you the truth, having them stay behind those walls and not budge a muscle is driving me crazy. It feels almost like the guy completely sees through what we’re trying to do.” Even with Myrkviðr, it had taken an awfully long time to pull the garrison troops out into the field.

The Panther Clan was clearly using a tiny number of troops. Despite that, their enemies insisted on defending themselves behind the walls. It was bizarre.

It had to be due to orders they’d received from above; that was the only way it would make sense.

“It creeps me out to think about it.” Váli shuddered once, scowling.

It hadn’t even been a month since the Panther Clan had invaded the Hoof Clan territory near the Örmt River. And Myrkviðr had been the first time they’d fought the Horn Clan.

So how in the world had this happened? Not only did the enemy seem to have learned the Panther Clan’s methods, they’d already managed to put in place a counter strategy! It made absolutely no sense to Váli.

At least during the battle at Myrkviðr, the Horn Clan general and his soldiers hadn’t actually understood the terrifying power of the Panther Clan, leading them to eventually lose their patience and attack. But the fall of Myrkviðr had also served to heighten the caution of the commander here at Sylgr.

Váli got the sense that, most likely, however much he and his men might try to provoke them, the city dwellers would remain closed up like a tortoise hiding in its shell.

The expertly trained horseback archery of the Panther Clan fighters was unbeatably powerful against infantry, but against solidly built walls, it was a completely different story. If they attacked directly, they’d simply be repelled.

“Well, at least they should be almost done putting together that thing we used at Nóatún.”

“Ah, so you’re using that.” Narfi nodded with an air of understanding.

When the Panther Clan had first advanced on Nóatún, the Hoof Clan had done just as Sylgr was doing now, firmly locking down the city gates and

preparing themselves for a siege defense. Perhaps through the battles up to that point, the Hoof Clan had come to fully grasp the terrifying strategic might of cavalry, and the fear had been seared deep into them.

As expected of the capital that had been built up by the supreme ruler of Álfheimr, Nóatún had walls which were much taller and even more solid than a city like Sylgr.

But, even those insurmountable-looking fortifications had not held for longer than ten days against the Panther Clan's patriarch, Hveðrungr.

"Yeah, it's a good thing we were able to capture Myrkviðr," Váli said. "Thanks to that, we got all the materials we needed. Heh heh heh, I'll have this puny city within the day."

"Sylgr's fallen?!" Yuuto unthinkingly raised his voice upon receiving the news from Kristina.

At that very moment, the Wolf Clan forces were in the middle of advancing towards Sylgr to save it. The shock to Yuuto was all the greater because he'd thought he would make it in time.

As Yuuto silently glowered, painfully digesting the news, Felicia spoke in his stead. "Did the soldiers fall to the enemy's provocations and launch an attack, as was the case with Myrkviðr?"

It was the only plausible thing that came to mind.

The Panther Clan force attacking Sylgr was a small vanguard, only a few hundred. Even if by some chance the main body of the Panther Clan army had joined up with them, it was hard to imagine they'd be able to capture the city in a mere couple of days.

Kristina shook her head. "No, it seems the commander at Sylgr and his men did remain on defense within the city walls as you instructed, Father."

"Seriously...?" Yuuto couldn't believe it. "Then how did Sylgr get captured? I don't care how crazy powerful armed cavalry are, that shouldn't apply to fortified city walls..."

“It seems... the city walls were destroyed. They were bombarded by large rocks from the sky. It is the same method you have used before, Father...”

“It can’t be... they have trebuchets?!” Yuuto shouted incredulously, then stared off into the distant sky, clenching his teeth.

The trebuchet was a fixed siege weapon, a counterweight catapult device that made use of simple lever mechanics — the “seesaw effect” — to launch a heavy object as ammunition.

Yuuto had first introduced them during the Siege of Íárnviðr. Back when Loptr had been the second-in-command of the Wolf Clan.

It was a weapon over 2,500 years more advanced than the current technological standards of this world, and the simple stone construction of the walls Yggdrasil cities was insignificant defense against its overwhelming destructive power.

“To think he’d so easily overcome Li Mu’s defensive strategy like this...” Yuuto raked a hand through his hair, then stopped and sighed.

From atop solid and tall walls, defensive troops could escape the trademark speedy assaults and mobile archery of the cavalry, while shooting arrows of their own to threaten and drive off attacks on the wall.

That had been the basis of anti-cavalry strategy for over a millennium of Chinese history, but here it had been easily subdued by technology from further in the future, a cheat inserted into this era.

“Hyahaha!” Váli snickered. “Now that’s a big army you’ve got there. Guess I can’t just surround you, then.”

Váli stood atop Sylgr’s outer wall, looking out at the approaching Wolf Clan troops, and lifted both arms up in what seemed to be a resigned and helpless shrug. But his face was brimming with confidence, the corners of his mouth turned upwards in an excited smile.

Miðgarðr was a land full of wide, expansive plains. Having been raised on those plains, Váli’s eyesight was far better than that of the city-dwellers. The army in the distance had just barely become visible to his eyes, so that meant it

should still be quite a bit of time before they reached the city.

“When they move so slowly like that, it makes me wanna pelt ‘em with a few boulders, but I guess that’s not gonna happen.”

The trebuchet might have dominating destructive power, but it also had one crippling weakness. It was so big and heavy that it was impossible to transport it once it was built.

That was the reason why, during their conquest of Sylgr, they’d had no choice but to take the time to construct one on site.

In addition, aiming and firing the weapon required a certain amount of prep time, so they couldn’t fire it in rapid succession, either. It was great against fixed targets, but just not fit for use against moving soldiers.

“Too bad. I wanted to let the men have a little more fun.” Váli laughed again, then turned around to gaze down upon the city he had captured the day before.

The houses had all been destroyed, corpses were strewn all about, and the air was choked with the smell of blood. The screams of women could still be heard here and there. At this very moment, Váli’s subordinates were in the middle of enjoying the spoils of their victory.

“But... timing is everything. And it’s time to go.” He pulled a single arrow from the quiver on his back, and fired it up into the air.

As the arrow flew, it emitted a piercing whistling noise. Several small holes had been drilled through the arrow’s shaft, so that air passing over the holes would produce the loud noise when it was fired.

At the signal, Váli’s subordinates began to gather at the Sylgr city gates.

They were all dressed in sleeveless tunics and simple trousers, with arrow quivers strapped to their backs. There were only about four hundred of them, but each of them was an elite, mighty warrior selected for the vanguard.

“All right, you bastards, you’re gonna go out there and give ‘em the usual!”

Váli shouted his command, and all of his men mounted their horses in sync. Their motions were unbelievably light and nimble.

Váli nodded in satisfaction at their practiced, effortless movements.

“Heh, compared to you lot, those city folk are just as slow as always.” He turned to sneer at the advancing Wolf Clan forces. Sure, they had impressive numbers, but Váli’s eyes could only see how incredibly sluggishly they seemed to move.

Váli’s vanguard cavalry unit calmly began their retreat. Indeed, their pace was quite relaxed. They were deliberately matching their speed with the enemy’s advance, going slowly enough that the enemy could feasibly catch up. However...

“Hey, hey, what the hell is this? Why aren’t they chasing us? What a bunch of wet blankets.” To Váli’s chagrin, the Wolf Clan troops had prioritized retaking the city, and didn’t show any signs of giving chase. It was a complete letdown.

“All right then, let’s see if we can get ’em in the mood to play along.” Váli grinned mischievously, and ordered his men to reverse course.

If the enemy weren’t going to chase after him, he just needed to motivate them to do so.

They’d surely assumed that he and his men would continue to flee. He’d take advantage of that lapse in their guard and rattle them. With that purpose in mind, Váli wheeled his horse around and once again set his sights on the Wolf Clan soldiers...

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! All at once, a volley of arrows launched from the enemy ranks towards him.

“Whoa, whoa?!” In that split second, Váli managed to unsheathe the sword at his waist and deflect the arrow that would have hit him, but now his expression was strained and serious.

To the people of the nomadic tribes of Miðgarðr, hunting was a part of everyday life. And so, every man of the Panther Clan was from childhood intimately familiar with a bow, and by adulthood was a well-practiced expert archer. And yet, even they would not have been able to fire arrows that reached their enemy from this distance.

“So those are the ‘crossbows’ I heard about from Father,” Váli growled.

He'd forgotten the details about how they worked, but they were weapons that could shoot farther than a bow and arrow. They weren't capable of firing as rapidly, though.

In that case, he just needed to close the distance before they could fire another volley. After that, they'd be no match for the superior rapid fire of his own men. The Panther Clan were just that fast.

"Heh, you're all as quick as glue!" Váli screamed, sneering derisively.

And in the end, before the crossbowmen could load and fire a second volley, he had put them within the range of his own bow.

They were so slow, it was downright tiresome. By the time the enemy could fire off one shot, his men could fire ten.

And to top it off, it looked like there was some commotion between the crossbowmen and the soldiers behind them. Considering that they were in the middle of battle and the enemy was rapidly approaching, it was a sorry display of carelessness.

"I'll show you worthless small fry what real archery looks like! Afraid it's gonna cost ya, though!" Goaded on his horse, Váli set an arrow and pulled back the bowstring.

He fired once, twice, a dozen times.

At first, his shots appeared haphazard, as if he wasn't bothering to aim properly before firing. However, every one of Váli's arrows found a target, striking the Wolf Clan soldiers right between the eyes.

Váli was an Einherjar with the rune Hrímfaxi, the Frostmane, which enhanced his archery to be the greatest even within the Panther Clan. And so it was said that when his enemies came face to face with the sight of his incomparable skill, it left their hearts frozen with fear, just as the name of his rune suggested.

That attack appeared to have at last been enough to ignite the fighting spirit in his enemies, for they let loose a reverberating war cry. "Rrraaaaghhhh!!"

This time, infantry soldiers with huge, long spears pushed their way forward past the crossbowmen on either side, and assumed a tightly knit formation

before charging forward. It was an impressive charge, the soldiers raising clouds of dust at their feet as they ran forward.

“Ohh, the ‘phalanx,’ huh?” Váli mused. “Sure, with that, even we’d be in trouble if we went at you from the front.”

The Panther Clan’s cavalry was unrivaled in their potential for lethal assaults. They had used that potential to its fullest to crush the armies of the Hoof Clan.

Even so, if they were to charge into that wall of spears, the Panther Clan would be the ones to end up suffering heavy losses.

“But I’ve already seen that trick back at Myrkviðr! And you damned fools still couldn’t be any slower!” Váli roared with a mixture of frustration and delight.

If he couldn’t beat them by fighting head-on, he didn’t need to fight head-on in the first place.

Váli signaled with his left hand, and his men all ceased firing their bows.

He pulled on the reins, turning his horse sharply. His subordinates all followed suit.

Their movements, so seamless and coordinated, were enough to display their high level of training.

“Smell ya later!” Váli laughed. He kicked his horse into a gallop.

But he did not let it go its full speed. He refused to completely leave the enemy behind. He kept up a perfectly calculated pace, just enough to make the enemy think they might just be able to catch up.

“Uooooohhhhhh!!” With another war cry, the enemy picked up their forward momentum, just as Váli had anticipated.

Under normal circumstances in battle, when one force was pursuing another, the pursuers held the advantage. Even the lowest rank-and-file soldier knew this.

Normally, most soldiers in battles such as these had been more or less compelled into service via conscription. Still, on the other hand, this was an opportunity for those conscripts to make some good extra money. The more enemies they defeated, the more spoils they could earn.

In other words, to these soldiers, a winnable battle was also a relatively secure and profitable opportunity for them.

It's no wonder you can keep up the chase with such vigor and spirit, Váli thought with a chuckle. "And if you were up against anybody else, I'm sure it would've meant something."

As they rode forward, Váli's band of riders all turned as one to face backwards, and readied their bows.

Despite their speed, and despite having both hands off the reins, their poise and position did not waver. Even with stirrups, it was an astonishing display of balance and technique.

"Fire!" Váli's cry cut through the din, and he and his men released their arrows.

The enemy's shields and armor served them well, but could not deflect all of the hundreds of arrows that rained down upon them.

One after the other, soldiers collapsed to the ground, but even so, the Wolf Clan forces stepped over the bodies of their fellow men and continued the pursuit.

After building up such momentum, they could no longer stop. Because their formation was so closely packed, if one of them tried to slow down or stop, he would just be pushed forward by the soldiers behind him.

Trying to reverse course and move against the formation risked that soldier being knocked off balance and possibly trampled to death by his comrades.

"So retreat means death, huh? But it's the same even if you go forward, you know." Grinning with unbridled pleasure, Váli pulled arrow after arrow from his quiver, nocked it to the string, and fired.

With each shot, another Wolf Clan soldier fell. With each fallen comrade, the phalanx unit seemed to rush toward them with an ever fiercer rage.

"Hah! So *slow*!" Váli couldn't hold back his mocking laughter.

However bravely they might charge, in the end, a human's feet could never hope to match the speed of a horse.

I'll torment you all to death, Váli thought with glee. I'll kill you all just like this, one by one at my leisure. He licked his lips in anticipation.

That was when it happened.

“Guagh!”

“Hurgh...!”

Arrows suddenly flew at them from out of the forest off to their right, and Váli saw several of his men gasp their last breath and fall from their horses. His hands froze.

In the next moment, a group of spearmen leapt out from the woods, rushing over to cut off his band's route of escape.

“An ambush?! Did they predict we'd circle back to attack them?!”

Even as he spat out the words, several of the men holding down the right-hand side of his formation were felled from their horses by the thrusts of enemy longswords.

“Tch, damn it! Hey you bastards, we're running north!”

They were boxed in by enemies in the front and rear, and the forest on their right, but fortunately there were open plains on their left.

Use the overwhelming mobility of the horses to keep the enemy from catching up with you, and launch one-sided arrow attacks from outside of their reach. In a nutshell, that was the winning strategy of the Panther Clan.

They weren't the type to engage in jumbled melee combat, where ally and enemy struggled and fought at close range, but the enemy's ambush had put them in just that situation.

They couldn't make good use of their cavalry's greatest strength, its superior speed and mobility. And conversely, the sluggishness of infantry, which Váli had so thoroughly mocked, was effectively no longer a disadvantage.

From behind, the enemy's main force continued to charge towards them. They'd be in serious trouble if they didn't escape soon.

“Looks like the whole ‘expert at war’ thing was true, after all,” Váli muttered,

clicking his tongue in disdain.

He found this enemy truly disturbing. This should have been their first time facing him in battle, but they were way too versed in countermeasures against armed cavalry.

“You won’t escape!” A man who seemed to be the leader of the ambush forces cried out, and charged towards Váli, riding on a horse of his own.

The man’s eyes were sharp and piercing. More than anything, he seemed to exude some kind of dark, ominous aura.

Váli felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his back.

“Hah!” The enemy leader thrust his spear at Váli’s chest.

“Whoa!” Váli barely deflected it with his sword.

That moment marked the first time in the history of Yggdrasil... nay, in the history of Earth... in which two armed cavalrymen engaged in battle.

“Tah! Hyah!” The enemy leader unleashed two more quick spear thrusts in succession. Váli narrowly avoided the first by quickly tilting his body, and deflected the second with his sword, knocking the spear upward.



His opponent's upper body was pushed backward, as well. Váli prepared to seize on that opening for a counterattack, only to stare in amazement at what happened next.

His opponent's speartip that had supposedly been repelled upward now traced a clean, circular arc through the air, and suddenly the sharpened butt of the spear haft was headed straight for Váli's temple.

He had been caught off guard himself, and there was no way for him to block in time.

"What the hell?!" At the last moment, he managed to pull his head back, but lost a few hairs in the process.

He had literally just dodged by a hair's breadth. The whipping sound of air that reached his ears told him just how powerful and sharp the man's attack had been.

Váli got the sense that he was doomed at this rate, and so he hurriedly pulled on the reins, moving his horse's head in a circle, and kicked its stomach.

It was the signal to run at full speed. Váli's well-trained horse responded immediately and charged forward, despite the fact that an enemy was right in front of it.

The two horses collided head-on, but it was the enemy's horse who was thrown backwards.

With this, the two horses had also determined which one was dominant.

The enemy's horse stumbled for a bit, then took another step backwards, as if fearful of the stronger horse. The enemy leader kicked to urge his horse forward, but it would not advance.

"Ha ha ha, the horses of Miðgarðr are a class apart from the weak horses you city-dwellers raise!" With that taunt, Váli set his horse to retreat from the enemy once again.

It wasn't that he couldn't fight with swords or spears per se, it was just that they weren't the weapon he specialized in.

Besides, fighting to the death on equal terms wasn't his style. Ending the

enemy's life with one-sided, risk-free attacks was Váli's preferred way of fighting.

As his horse raced away at full speed, he turned around and readied his weapon of choice.

His stance bore no trace of the haphazard mannerisms he had displayed earlier. He steadied his aim, pushing his mind to the limits of its concentration, and fired.

"Hup!"

In a flash, the enemy leader used his spear to deflect the arrow, despite it being shot from such close range—

"Wha?!"

—and then it was his turn to go wide-eyed in surprise.

It was a completely natural reaction, for as the first arrow was knocked away, a second arrow was revealed immediately behind it.

By firing two arrows at a precise interval, the second arrow was concealed in the shadow of the first. And the second arrow was also fired at a slightly different angle.

The first arrow might be either deflected or dodged, but in that instant the second arrow would arrive without allowing any time to react. Caught off guard, the enemy would thus be pierced by the second arrow.

This was Váli's ultimate technique.

"Gah!"

But this time, his enemy was no ordinary man. With reflexes that could only be called phenomenal, the man tilted his head to evade the second arrow.

Even so, it wasn't quite enough, and a spurt of bright red blood erupted from the man's temple. Yet the man didn't fall from his horse, and kept his keen glare fixed on Váli.

It was like the Grim Reaper was staring him down. And yet, Váli found himself grinning in response.

“Ha ha, to think someone would be able to dodge that attack on their first time seeing it. I’ll be remembering that face of yours, buddy. Bye for now! I hope we meet again!”

With those final words, Váli loosed another arrow. He followed it with another, and another.

Fleeing from the enemy with superior mobility, he and his men continuously fired ammunition at the enemy pursuing them. They struck down one enemy after the other, while suffering no casualties of their own. That was the basic battle strategy of the Panther Clan, after all.

Once they had shot every last one of their arrows, Váli and his band of cavalymen jaunted away from their enemy, falling quickly out of sight.

Yuuto stood next to one section of Sylgr’s defensive wall, frowning to himself as he inspected the damage.

The wall was at least three times his own height, but here it had been smashed to pieces in a spectacular fashion.

There had been collateral damage, too; some of the brick houses next to the outer side of the wall had been partially destroyed, crushed by the force of falling rocks.

A bunch of those huge rocks still lay strewn about the area just outside the wall. It was clear enough from a glance that this destruction had been the work of a trebuchet.

And having just received a report that his men had discovered the weapon in question some distance away, where it had likely been constructed by the Panther Clan, there was no doubt.

“So, this is where you were.” A sudden voice came from behind him.

Felicia, who was right next to him, gasped in surprise and quickly whirled around, then exhaled in relief.

Yuuto turned around as well, and casually raised a hand in greeting to the familiar figure.

“Hey there, Assistant to the Second. How’s that wound of yours healing?”

“It won’t present a problem,” Skáviðr replied coolly. The blood-soaked bandage wrapped around his head was painful to look at, and it exacerbated his already sinister-looking appearance.

That said, he was steady on his feet, so it looked like Yuuto could take the man’s word for it that he was fine. Just what you’d expect from the unkillable previous Mánagarmr.

“On that note, I wanted to ask you something,” Yuuto put in. “How was it, actually fighting them?”

“They didn’t offer any resistance.”

“But you’re not saying they were weak, right?”

“Correct, Master. ...Just a moment, if you would.” Skáviðr picked up a moderately-sized brick from among the remains of the destroyed wall, then tossed it up into the air.

Slash! There was a silvery flash in the dark, moonlight reflecting off of iron.

“Amazing,” Yuuto remarked in sincere appreciation, applauding.

The brick had been sliced cleanly in two, and the new surfaces formed by the cut were even and smooth. Even with the exceptional sharpness of a Japanese sword, such a feat would still be impossible without a considerable level of skill.

Yuuto himself had a bit of experience in swordsmanship, but if someone of his level were to try the same thing, they’d likely only strike the brick and send it flying.

“This *nihontou*, and the phalanx as well, are unrivaled in a clash of arms,” said Skáviðr. “That is, as long as we can make such a clash occur.”

“...I see,” Yuuto nodded. “So you felt no resistance from the enemy because it was near impossible to make that happen, then.”

“Yes, sir. The longspear used in the phalanx cannot match the range of arrows. And however magnificent the edge of a sword may be, men on foot cannot catch up to those on horseback. Even after taking them by surprise with an ambush, they managed a clean getaway.”

“Hm, not being able to use my special forces right now makes this tough,”

Yuuto pondered. “Do you think I made a bad call?”

The Wolf Clan had its own cavalry unit, an elite special force led by Sigrún. Of course, it had been a little less than two years since Yuuto’s introduction of the use of stirrups. The only people from among his people’s population of city-dwellers who could learn to fight on horseback effectively in that short a period were those with a certain amount of talent. He only had a total of about two hundred so far, a force smaller than his enemy’s.

It wasn’t that Yuuto found anything romantic or inspiring in the idea of a small group of soldiers defeating a force that outnumbered them. He preferred to wage war by using strategy and tactics that put his troops at a complete advantage compared to the enemy, so that victory was the natural outcome. That was why, instead of using Sigrún’s unit here, he had given them another mission. But the prospect of a small group conquering a large group still held interest for him.

His forces hadn’t been able to give chase because they were infantry. But if he’d instead used his own cavalry, would they have been able to chase down the enemy and defeat them?

Skáviðr quietly shook his head. “No. If you had sent them in pursuit, the most they might have managed to do was catch up, only to be soundly defeated when the enemy turned on them.”

Getting such a definitive, and hopeless, answer left Yuuto wanting to throw his hands up in frustration. “Seriously?”

The Múspell Unit was a collection of the Wolf Clan’s elite fighters. Being told with such confidence that they would have been defeated was a little hard to take on an emotional level.

Even so, it was the opinion of the man who’d actually fought with the enemy and their commander. He couldn’t take Skáviðr’s words lightly.

“There is too great a difference in terms of fundamental skill,” Skáviðr explained. “If the enemy had been merely on par with the Múspell Unit, I would have been able to eradicate them during that ambush.”

“Yeah, that battle really surprised me. I was so sure it would work, too.”

The timing of the ambush had been so perfect that Yuuto had wanted to pat himself on the back at the time. But in the end, they'd only taken out around ten horsemen.

Despite being caught off-guard, the enemy fighters hadn't panicked. They'd guarded well against the spear attacks, then followed their commander's order and made a well-organized retreat.

Frankly, it had been so impressive that Yuuto even wished he could have them as his own soldiers.

"Specifically, it is the way they were able to balance their bodies while riding quickly," Skáviðr said. "It would be insulting to even compare ourselves to them in that regard."

"Ah, I see."

How well a soldier could hold their balance directly translated into their ability to fight well.

For instance, if one soldier was standing on firm, dry ground, and his opponent on muddy ground, it went without saying that the former would be at an overwhelming advantage.

Thanks to the stirrups, it was now easier for a person to maintain their balance atop a moving horse, enough so that they could learn to fight on horseback. But there was the catch: It had only become *possible* to fight on horseback, nothing more.

A horse was a living creature with its own will, independent of its rider. It still took a long, long time to master the art of fighting while riding one.

Having stirrups would originally have covered for the difference in skill, but the Panther Clan was using them too. They were a clan raised from birth to be familiar with horses and riding, so of course it only made logical sense that Yuuto's cavalry would be no match for them.

"And that balance is what allows for that incredible technique of theirs... the 'Parthian shot,'" Yuuto murmured.

He was referring to the technique the Panther Clan horsemen had

demonstrated during the previous battle, the one where they turned their bodies around while retreating at a full gallop, then fired backwards at their pursuers. Europeans had started calling it that because the horseback nomads of the Middle Eastern nation of Parthia had been notable for using it against the Roman Empire.

It was a tactic that had passed down among the Scythians and the Mongols as well, and had become one of the key tactics used by nomadic nations to terrorize settlement-based agricultural nations.

In more modern times, the term in English came to carry a metaphorical meaning similar to 'parting shot,' a remark or insult lobbed in parting, by a coward or a poor loser for instance. Though, actually, one might wonder if perhaps the Westerners were poor losers for attaching such a meaning to the term.

If Yuuto carelessly set his infantry in pursuit of the Panther Clan horsemen, even the phalanx, the unbeatable formation that had brought him victory thus far, might as well be powerless against the Parthian shot. And, even after using an ambush to create a pincer attack, the enemy had slipped through their fingers.

This overwhelming gap in mobility was a dire threat, pure and simple.

"Well, I had already taken that much into consideration." Yuuto sighed.

Looking at the situation in reverse, it meant that if he put pressure on them with a large mass of troops, they'd elect to use their key strategy and then retreat, rather than stay and fight head-on.

Back when Yuuto had researched the topic online, he'd read that because nomadic nations tended to have smaller populations compared to agricultural nations, they held more strongly and consistently to an ideology of avoiding direct combat with an opponent they couldn't defeat.

Also, because nomadic peoples didn't remain settled in one location, they didn't focus on building or maintaining defensive strongholds. In fact, the Panther Clan had simply abandoned the stronghold cities they had gone to all the trouble of capturing.

For now, the Wolf Clan needed to continue onwards and push the enemy out of Horn Clan territory. Afterwards, Yuuto was working on the theory that they could construct new defensive walls, similar to the Great Wall of China, on the outer borders of their agricultural lands. If they then focused on defending those, they could protect the Horn Clan.

Of course, it would take a lot more than a day or two to build a giant structure akin to the Great Wall, but Yuuto had learned a helpful idea from the history of the Battle of Nagashino in 16th century Japan. It was in that battle that Oda Nobunaga had triumphed against the nigh-undefeatable cavalry of the Takeda clan, using wooden stockades.

For Japanese history buffs, the story of the Battle of Nagashino was more famous for Nobunaga's famous use of "three-rank volley fire" with his gunners. But it was also said that Nobunaga was the first Japanese general to come up with and use anti-cavalry stockade barriers.

A fence or barrier used to block the movement of horses didn't need to be all that high, as any quick image search for pictures from a modern Japanese farm would show.

That was because horses were naturally averse to trying to jump over obstacles in the first place.

Myrkviðr was known for its vast lumber resources, so Yuuto figured they would be able to construct basic stockade-based defenses quickly and cheaply.

"Still, if they've got long-range siege weapons now, they could break through my defenses easily," he muttered. This new factor was going to be the real headache.

The most common siege weapon in Yggdrasil was still the log-based battering ram. Against something like that, an arrow volley from inside the barricade would be more than enough to defend it, but the trebuchet had a range of 300 meters. That was more than twice what a crossbow could achieve.

"So, if we can't defend, we'll need to strike the enemy themselves... That being said, even if we try to chase them, they'll just keep whittling down our forces. We need some way of luring them into a trap..."

Li Mu of Zhao, the famous general who was well-known as the pioneer anti-cavalry strategies in ancient China, had begun his career focusing entirely on defense. But several years later, he had devised ploys to lure the Xiongnu nation's troops into a trap, thus defeating more than a hundred thousand of them.

Supposedly, after that, the Xiongnu hadn't dared approach the border of the kingdom of Zhao for ten years afterward.

In other words, he had halted their nation's appetite for invasions by forcing a strong impression on them as a whole: "If you cross us, you'll only suffer greatly for it."

"Damn it," Yuuto muttered. "Is murdering each other the only way out of this, then...?"

In order to create enough of an impact to put that impression in the enemy nation's heart, it meant the battle would need to be appropriately gruesome in its outcome. There was more than a good chance it meant he'd also need to kill the sworn older brother who had once taken such good care of him. There was also the possibility that Yuuto himself would be killed.

Yuuto had still been holding on to the hope of settling this with only a few small battles over territory, without escalating into full-scale war. It had been a bit of a naive thought, but there had also been hope of that based in reality. But now, the device Yuuto had helped engineer had smashed that hope into rubble.

"I guess you reap what you sow," Yuuto muttered. "Damn it, it just goes to show how broken those cheats are now that the enemy's using them."

Those cheats ran roughshod over anything possible with the current standard of warfare in Yggdrasil. Even though Yuuto was making all the right strategic moves, the future's technology could overpower him easily.

It was like playing chess against an opponent whose pawns had all somehow been promoted to queens.

"But that doesn't mean I can just sit by and let you do whatever you want, Big Brother. It's about time I fought back against you."

Yuuto stared off towards the west. His opponent wasn't the only one with a

row full of queens.

ACT 5

“Tch, I know I used the same strategy, but it really is annoying as all hell when it’s used against you.” Yuuto glared in the direction the enemy had appeared from, clicking his tongue in irritation.

Presently, the Wolf Clan army had departed Sylgr, and it was making their way towards Myrkviðr in order to take it back.

The current fly in the ointment for Yuuto was the very same horseback hit-and-away tactics he’d once ordered Sigrún to use against the Hoof Clan. The Panther clan appeared like a sudden gust of wind from out of nowhere to create a disturbance among the enemy with a few quick attacks, then disappeared just as swiftly.

During the war with the Hoof Clan, the Múspell Unit had simply fled after attacking, but the Panther Clan always left a parting gift in the form of a rain of arrows, making them all the worse as opponents.

Yuuto had ordered his men into infantry square formations capable of dealing with attacks from all sides, so he wasn’t suffering too many actual casualties. But over these past few days, the constant threat and uncertainty of when the next attack would come had prevented them from having a moment’s peace.

He could already see the signs of physical and mental fatigue appearing on the faces of his soldiers. Things were starting to head in a bad direction.

“Big Brother, please get down!” Felicia cried.

“Ah! Whoa?!”

As he heard Felicia’s words, Yuuto’s body moved on instinct. As he ducked down, an arrow whizzed just over his head.

In quick succession, a second arrow slammed into the side of Yuuto’s chariot, bouncing off with a *ping!*

“Phew...! I’m so glad we reinforced this thing with sheets of iron.”

The enemy was using iron-tipped arrows. That particular one might have pierced right through if he'd been riding in a chariot lined only with wooden boards, like the ones they used to use. Just thinking about that sent a chill up his spine.

“Still, the enemy must be an archer of tremendous strength and skill to be able to fire at you accurately from so great a distance,” said Felicia. “Perhaps he is even stronger than the Horn Clan’s master archer Haugspori. And all while riding on horseback, which should by all rights cause his aim to waver...”

“That sounds about right for the guy who was actually able to wound Skáviðr. But we’re not just letting them take shots at us for free, either.”

Currently, the only weapon the Wolf Clan had that could deal with the Parthian shot tactic was their crossbows, which had a longer range than the Panther Clan’s bows.

The crossbow had historically been used in ancient China as a countermeasure against attacks from the Xiongnu from the north. The catch was, a crossbow took much longer to prepare and fire a shot. In about one minute, a soldier could fire off about ten arrows from a standard bow, but a crossbow could only manage two shots at most.

And that was where Yuuto had adopted another tactic.

Skáviðr’s commands reverberated in the air, his voice chilly, yet dignified. “First rank, fire! Second rank, pass crossbows to the first. Pass the used crossbows to the third rank!”

The truth was, even before researching anti-cavalry strategies online, Yuuto had already known about the three-rank volley fire tactic Oda Nobunaga had used to defeat the Takeda clan’s cavalry at the Battle of Nagashino. It was one of those popular bits of trivia that was relatively common knowledge in Japan.

When he had looked it up, he’d read that the account of Nobunaga using volley firing was in dispute as possibly having been added in later years. And besides, the Wolf Clan didn’t have guns to begin with, so he had been about ready to scrap the idea as a viable tactic for his circumstances.

However, going back another three hundred years before Nobunaga to the

Song dynasty in China, there had been clear evidence of three-rank volley firing, using *crossbows*. Soldiers in the third rank would wind and set the bowstring, then pass the crossbows to the second rank who would load the bolt, and the first rank would only need to focus on firing the prepared crossbows. This made up for the weapon's slow firing speed.

It was a military technique 2,500 years ahead of Yggdrasil, and Yuuto had now implemented it in the Wolf Clan army.

"They've gotten a lot better, haven't they?" Peeking over the side of the chariot's carriage, Yuuto looked on with pride at his reliable crossbowmen.

Naturally, theory was one thing, but putting it into practice was always another story.

Firing off volleys of arrows with no lag in between required practiced, efficient, and disciplined movements by every soldier in the formation.

Even the soldiers of the Wolf Clan, who were more used to life under the rule of law, couldn't accomplish that sort of thing overnight.

In their first real engagement with the Panther Clan, their coordination had faltered, and they hadn't been able to get off more than two or three consecutive volleys.

But just as Yuuto had personally experienced with learning a new language, when people are under threat and struggling desperately, it tends to make them learn a lot faster.

In the eleventh chapter of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, titled "The Nine Situations," there was a particularly relevant passage: *"...the men of Wu and the men of Yue are enemies; yet if they are crossing a river in the same boat and are caught by a storm, they will come to each other's assistance just as the left hand helps the right."*

The important point was that, when faced with a shared and deadly threat, even historically bitter enemies could put aside their differences to work together and survive. The implication being that, under that same kind of duress in war, comrades in arms should be capable of reaching an even higher level of cooperation and coordination, and truly be like two hands of the same

body.

It was the origin of the rather famous old Japanese idiom, “Wu and Yue in the same boat together,” used to describe strangers or enemies forced to share their fate.

And just like the words of Sun Tzu implied, in their current threatening situation, the Wolf Clan soldiers had improved their coordination. It had been inevitable, in a sense.

Over the past few days, the Panther Clan’s constant attacks had indeed dealt a great deal of stress to the soldiers of the Wolf Clan. But at the same time, they had served as an even greater form of training.

“Shiiit! What is the *deal* with them?!” Váli cursed and used his sword to deflect the crossbow bolts as they sped toward him.

He’d now engaged with the enemy a dozen or more times since their first encounter at Sylgr. In that first fight, he’d been tripped up by their use of soldiers lying in ambush, but since then, he’d been playing everything by the book.

He’d attack the enemy over and over, then they’d be unable to fully defend against sudden cavalry attacks from who knows where. He’d push them into a corner mentally and drain their morale.

That was how things were supposed to be going.

But instead, each successive attack saw an increase in the firing speed of the enemies’ crossbows. By this point, the interval between volleys was nothing compared to how it had been in the beginning.

With a veritable rain of bolts coming down on them, even the elite fighters of the Panther Clan now had to use everything they had just to deflect the shots, and they didn’t have the time to ready and fire their own weapons. After all, their weapons had less range than the enemy’s.

Even if they charged in with bows drawn and ready, being exposed to attack was enough of a threat to disrupt their concentration, and it was becoming increasingly harder to steady their aim on their targets.

“Gyaah!” NP “Guhagh...!”

Váli heard the cries of more of his comrades falling, their horses shrieking. He cursed through gritted teeth. “Kh... Damn you!”

The difference in numbers was too great for him to do anything.

If he’d had enough men on his side, he could have taken advantage of the fact that the opponent was only using crossbows. He could have shut his eyes to a certain number of casualties, and have his men charge in with spears, striking in all directions to disrupt them. But with this many enemies in formation, if he tried that, he’d only manage to get his forces all shot down before they could charge into the center.

Váli’s hit-and-away tactics worked well for him precisely because he used a small band of riders, but now he was suddenly finding himself unable to act in the face of the enemy’s force of numbers.

“Grrgh, these guys really are a nightmare!” Váli growled to himself once more, then shouted to his men. “All right you bastards, we’re getting outta here!”

“Big Brother, the enemy is withdrawing!” Felicia reported excitedly.

“Oh? Looks like they couldn’t spare us a parting shot this time, either,” Yuuto said sarcastically, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a smirk.

As always, the Panther Clan’s retreat was swift and coordinated, but the three-rank volley fire had whittled down their numbers a good amount.

The corpses of fallen Panther Clan soldiers and their horses gave every indication that the Wolf Can had managed a remarkable accomplishment in this series of battles. Going by the numbers from their first battle, they might have taken out around half of the soldiers in the enemy’s warband.

It seemed even the elite warriors among the cavalry of the Panther Clan couldn’t completely defend themselves against such a flurry of crossbow bolts.

Yuuto hadn’t been able to defeat the enemy commander, but surely inflicting this many casualties on them would keep them from being too eager to conduct

simple raids for the time being. That should give his own soldiers enough of a break to relax and get some sleep.

“Still, I guess there was no way we’d lose against only their vanguard unit in their first place,” Yuuto murmured.

He knew the real strength of the Panther Clan army wasn’t in that sort of scouting and raiding party with only a few hundred men, elite fighters though they might be. The main body of their army was somewhere else.

The unit they’d been fighting was meant to do nothing more than feel them out.

He’d just received a report back from Kristina, whom he’d sent on ahead, that the enemy forces were amassing in Myrkviðr.

There were about three thousand of them.

And judging by how incredibly skilled the vanguard unit had been, it was safe to imagine that those three thousand would be strong enough to easily wipe the floor with his own special forces cavalry, the Múspell Unit.

Yuuto had struggled so much, for days, against a scouting force of only a few hundred. They were far inferior in number to the Wolf Clan forces, yet strong enough to require all of their attention.

That being the case, it was fortunate he’d had the chance for his troops to become capable of using three-rank volley fire in actual combat now, before the main conflict began.

With this, he’d finally gained a useful tactic to use against cavalry.

“...Uhh, so this is the wheat, that’s the barley, and over there is the salt and the vinegar, and this here is the ammunition for the crossbows.” Ginnar pointed one by one to the cargo on various horse-drawn wagons, checking each one against a list he had on paper.

It was a resupply for Yuuto’s army.

Obviously, soldiers couldn’t survive without an adequate supply of food.

What was especially striking in the light of the most recent battle, though,

was that they couldn't fight without an adequate supply of arrows.

And the more they fought, the more they depleted that supply.

Yuuto was having Ginnar and some of the other merchant traders in his network buy goods from nearby towns and cities, so they could resupply him periodically.

Military logistics was the term used to describe the discipline and understanding of the various kinds of combat service support an army needs to maintain and sustain itself.

The importance afforded to military logistics in the 21st century could be summed up by a popular quote of the modern era: "Amateurs at war talk about strategy. Veterans talk about logistics."

"Thanks, Ginnar," Yuuto said. "I was getting a little worried, since we gave up a lot of our rations back in Sylgr. I really am lucky to have such a capable child as you."

"Father! Do you really have to keep doing that even at a time like this?" Gunnar protested.

Yuuto laughed. "No, I'm being as serious as can be this time."

Even though Yuuto laughed enough to make it seem like he was joking, in truth he really did feel deeply relieved, and deeply grateful.

The Wolf Clan had retaken the city of Sylgr in short order, but the Panther Clan had already robbed it of supplies, including every last bit of food, and the citizens hadn't even had anything to get them to the next day.

There were of course a lot of people who had been killed, or kidnapped to be used or sold as slaves, but there were still nearly ten thousand survivors remaining in the city and the surrounding area.

In Yggdrasil, a member of the population living in a particular territory or fief was called a "konr." It was a word meaning "descendant."

Following the logic of the system formed by the Chalice of Allegiance and the clans, the citizens of his or her land were indeed a patriarch's descendants, the children at the very bottom of the family tree.

It wasn't quite as idealistic and pie-in-the-sky as the concept of "all humanity as brothers." But Yuuto could not simply turn a blind eye when faced with the suffering of the children of a related clan under his protection. As the head of a clan based on family bonds, they were his extended family.

"Still, you really are a kind man, Father," said Gunnar. "It's a bit nai— er, no, I mean, it's just a little cra— ahh, no..."

"Ha ha, yeah, yeah, I know, I'm a real sack of sugar," Yuuto said with a self-derisive laugh.

In his drive to study up, he'd been reading war chronicles and novels of that sort, and it was pretty much a common thread that the importance of logistics would come up in each one.

As far as real world events were concerned, the importance of an army being able to produce and procure their own supplies independently had only come to the forefront in later eras, after cannons and firearms becoming widespread.

That was because individual armies could only use ammo and such that fit the specifications of their own equipment. The proper distribution of ammunition was now more of a lifeline than even food supplies.

As far as food was concerned in times of war, the best method was to procure it in the theater of war rather than storing and transporting incredibly large volumes of supplies. That was a tactic that showed up in written works on military strategy as early as Sun Tzu, and it was a fundamental element of logistics from ancient times all the way up to just before the modern era.

Procuring supplies in the theater of war — in other words, either by requisition or by looting. That was the case in Yggdrasil, as well.

It had only become possible to transport an adequate amount of foodstuffs to troops out at war after the development of motorized railways and the automobile.

With a chuckle at his own expense, Yuuto shrugged. "Even so, if I can't play the role of hero here, even if it's just a cheap imitation, then what's the point of using all these cheats, you know?"

In truth, transporting vast quantities of food all the way from lárnvíðr had

been a nightmare.

Traditionally, the makeup of an army in this era was over 90% combat troops, but the Wolf Clan's transportation corps made up over 20% of its army.

Furthermore, the transportation corps wasn't armed for combat, so any casualties or thefts they suffered would have an impact on the army as a whole. It was potentially a critical weakness in his army.

This was Horn Clan territory, so while of course looting was absolutely out of the question, there was still requisitioning. With a demonstration of their threat as a military power, they could force the locals to sell them supplies at a very cheap price, which would be both much less risky and much less of a burden on his army.

In an emergency situation like this, it would be crazy to willingly agree to pay the normal price for goods and services, and even crazier to pay more than that to match demand.

However, in this era, there wasn't exactly a lot leeway when it came to food stores. Yuuto was asking the people to part with the food they'd been stocking up during the harvest season in preparation for the winter, so paying a fair price for it seemed the natural and right thing to do.

Using his power to buy up their supplies on the cheap would have been the same as telling them to starve.

"Ginnar, the only reason things are working out for us like this is because of people like my second-in-command, like Linnea, and like you," Yuuto said. "So you really do have my thanks."

The English word "logistics" was said to have its roots in the Greek word "logistikós," meaning either "actions with basis in rational calculation" or "one skilled in calculation."

Just haphazardly buying up supplies and transporting them wouldn't do any good. The rates of consumption were different for each item, and so were their prices. One had to be able to calculate and estimate how what needed to be transported, how much, and to where.

It was also important to select routes that would meet with fewer enemy

raids, and to pick good locations to conduct resupplies.

And in that respect, the Wolf Clan was nothing if not blessed with incredible talent.

“Ha ha,” Ginnar laughed. “I think that Aunt Linnea figures into it a lot more than someone like me. I made a stop in Sylgr before coming here, and it was amazing. From the distribution of supplies to the allotment of work, not to mention countless other things, she was incredibly well-prepared to work through the recovery period. It’s only been two days since it was liberated, and it’s already functioning as a normal city again.”

“Wow... As always, that girl is such a cut above the rest when it comes to that stuff.” Yuuto thought back to the face of the darling little sister who bid him farewell at Sylgr three days ago, and found himself giving a deep sigh that could be taken as either admiration or exasperation.

If Sylgr had resumed functioning as a city, that also meant it had been recovered as a base and supply point.

As long as Linnea was there to command and control the service and support side of things, the Wolf Clan had no need to worry about its logistics.

“Oh, but even Aunt Linnea couldn’t make something from nothing,” Ginnar said. “At the end of the day, it’s silver that makes the world go around, after all. You don’t have to be modest, Father. It has all been possible thanks to your gathering up such a large amount of silver.”

“And that’s something I couldn’t have done myself, either. We have Ingrid to thank for that.”

There was the glasswares, the paper, the gritless bread, and all manner of other special products on the market now. And thanks to that influx of trade, the Wolf Clan now held vast amounts of silver, conveniently usable as a form of payment anywhere in Yggdrasil.

It was thanks to that abundance of economic power that the Wolf Clan could now afford to send its army on a military campaign without having to requisition or rob from the locals.

Yuuto spoke his feelings aloud. “It’s thanks to everyone else that I can put any

other worries aside, and just focus on winning the battle.”

He was aware of his own ignorance. He knew the limits of his own power and ability. And so, without any false bravado or haughty pride, he could respect and rely on those around him who could do the things that he could not, and he understood how important it was to do that.

“Show them by example, instruct them, have them do it, and then praise them; otherwise, people won’t do anything. Communicate, lend an ear, acknowledge them, and entrust them with responsibility; otherwise, people won’t grow. Watch over them, with gratitude in your heart, and place your trust in them; otherwise, people won’t come into their own.”

Those were the famous words of Isoroku Yamamoto, admiral and commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy during World War II. Yuuto didn’t know the words of this quote, but without realizing it, he had been putting them into practice.

And it was in this way that Yuuto’s abstract plans and designs, by virtue of the wisdom and strength of his many allies, could finally take shape as “living wisdom,” and affect the world.

And, ironically, the one who had made him realize and acknowledge his own shortcomings was now the very man he had to fight.

“Hmph, all that boasting you did, but in the end it didn’t amount to much, did it, Váli?” Hveðrungr stared coldly down upon his cowering subordinate, who had come to rejoin him as he traveled with the main force of the Panther Clan army.

Váli had a reputation as the greatest warrior of the Panther Clan, but now he was a sorry mess, his body covered in arrow wounds.

Not to mention he’d also lost half of the valuable elite fighters under him.

Thinking back to how he’d bragged and bellowed about routing the entire remaining Hoof Clan forces with just his own small warband, this outcome was nothing short of pathetic.

“Th-the reports about them were all wrong, sir!” Váli protested. “They... they

were able to rapid-fire with crossbows! Weren't we supposed to be able to get off five shots for every one of theirs?!"

"...Hm. Give me more details."

"W-well, I couldn't really see it all that well, but it looked like they had it set up so the guy in front fired, while two guys behind him prepared a crossbow with the next shot, so they could load and fire more quickly..."

Váli was the greatest horseback archer in the Panther Clan, and his eyes were also the sharpest. Even in the midst of battle — no, *especially* in the midst of battle — his eyes were able to pick out and track his enemy's movements from a distance.

"Oho, I see," Hveðrungr said. "So that's his game. Good work. You can withdraw now."

"P-please wait, Father! I can still fight! Please, give me a chance to make up for this humiliation and get my revenge! I beg you!"

"Hm? What are you talking about? Of course I'm going to let you do that." Hveðrungr nimbly dismounted from his horse, and clapped a hand to Váli's shoulder. "You did your job, just as I ordered you to. I reward my loyal subordinates properly for their work, and even if they fail, I give them second chances. So, Váli, I can expect your faithful service to continue, yes?"

"Y-yes, Father! Thank you! Thank you so much!" Hearing such generous words from his patriarch, Váli raised his bowed head to show a face choked with tears.

Hveðrungr smiled and nodded firmly in response, and grasped Váli's shoulder more tightly.

And then the aura of wickedness nesting in his eyes suddenly seemed to emanate outward, weighing Váli down with an unseen pressure.

"And if you disobey my orders... if you betray me... you know what will happen, right?"

"Y-yes, Father... I have already taken it to heart."

"Good, then. I'm looking forward to your performance on the next mission." Hveðrungr nodded again, satisfied at the terrified trembling he could feel from

Váli's shoulder. He stood up and mounted his trusty steed.

He'd had plenty of time to rest up. The enemy should be pretty close by now, so he needed to hurry.

"Hee hee! Looks like you've finished domesticating Váli," Sigyn remarked from her position atop a horse next to him.

Hveðrungr scoffed. "Yes, and now the fool won't be acting rashly on his own or snapping back anymore. This was good medicine for him."

Sigyn smiled at her husband, and added, "And here I was, so worried you might just execute him on the spot, after all that happened."

"What are you saying? I'm a generous man to people who follow my orders and show their loyalty. And the man did good work for me. There's nothing at all to punish him for." As Hveðrungr said this, a wicked grin spread across his face.

He'd known from the start that a simple-minded fool like Váli wouldn't prove to be too much of an opponent for his nemesis. That brat excelled at wily, cowardly schemes, just like the one that had driven Hveðrungr into this exile.

Hveðrungr had predicted that Yuuto would come up with some sort of countermeasure against his cavalry.

If Hveðrungr had simply allowed his vanguard to make a clean retreat, nearly unscathed, the enemy would surely have remained on their guard. But, by having Váli lose some of his men and suffer some degree of defeat before fleeing, he could now deepen the enemy's confidence that they might just be victorious against the Panther Clan. Surely that would spur them onward, in high spirits, to reclaim Myrkviðr.

Oh yes, Váli had indeed done his job well.

"According to Narfi's report, the Wolf Clan had around eight thousand soldiers, yes?" Hveðrungr asked.

"That's right," Sigyn confirmed offhandedly. "It looks like they've spent the past year expanding at quite a clip. He may still be a young one, but it looks like the boy's quite the capable leader."

The nomad clans of Miðgarðr were thorough believers in valuing ability above all else.

As was the case with the current Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr, even when it came to outsiders, they had no qualms with seeing someone capable as worthy of a place at the top.

That was one difference between them and the Wolf Clan: while the latter maintained a meritocracy that valued strength and competency, it also allowed for the existence of people like Bruno and his group of elders, who refused exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with Patriarch Yuuto, yet still held status.

It was a point of pride for the Panther Clan, and for Sigyn, to recognize and show respect even for the enemy they were fighting.

“Hmph. In the end, his is only a borrowed power. He himself is nothing special.” Hveðrungr’s voice was quiet and subdued, but there was a strain of hatred that seemed to writhe violently in the undertone.

Sigyn had never asked Hveðrungr what had happened to him in the past. *A good woman knows not to pry into a man’s past*, she told herself. But she could feel the terrifying hatred and rage that seemed to seethe in the eyes behind that mask. Judging by that reaction, there was no doubt he shared some twisted destiny with the young patriarch of the Wolf Clan.

“Kh-heheheh, now come to me, Yuuto. This time, I’ll be the one who sets a trap for you.” Hveðrungr’s lips twisted into a dark grin, rapt with anticipation.

By Váli’s account, the Wolf Clan forces should soon be entering the region, an area known as Náströnd.

Evil urges began to well up within him.

A little more, just a little more.

He knew Yuuto very well. The boy’s values were a little different from those of Yggdrasil, but thinking back on it now, he also had a frame of mind particular to someone residing in a foreign land.

“We’ve got more soldiers, too. My army cannot possibly lose,” Hveðrungr said with a confident sneer.

Discounting the former citizens of the Hoof Clan he'd pressed into slavery, the total population of the whole Panther Clan was less than fifty thousand. It wasn't that different a figure from the Wolf Clan during its weakest period.

However, when an agricultural nation went to war, at minimum, a tenth of their fighting-age population or more needed to stay at home to maintain farms and industry. In contrast, for nomadic nations like the Panther Clan, excluding babies, the elderly, and slaves, every man in the clan was a participating soldier.

And on top of that, most of the soldiers drafted into the armies of an agricultural nation lacked any serious military training, while every man of the Panther Clan spent their days chasing down game and sharpening their skills with the bow.

And in this past year, practicing with stirrups had also ensured that every clan member could fight with weapons on horseback.

The reason Hveðrungr had stationed only three thousand soldiers to guard Myrkviðr was also to enact a ruse — to tempt his enemy with a force of inferior numbers and make them drop their guard.

And to top it all off, the Panther Clan cavalry had another all-powerful weapon aside from their deadly horseback archery.

Hveðrungr could no longer see even the slightest chance of defeat.

“Come, Yuuto. This land of Náströnd shall be your grave.”

Náströnd.

It was an area of broad, grassy wetlands stretching across the northwestern part of the Horn Clan territory.

If one headed further west towards the Myrkviðr area, the landscape changed and deep forests began to appear, but in this area, the soil didn't seem to be able to support large trees, so the vegetation was dominated by reeds, sedge, peat moss, and other small water plants. And over the long months and years in this perpetually mild, humid climate, that vegetation slowly formed into peat.

In Yggdrasil, there was not yet any technique or technology for draining

swamps or marshes, so in the whole area, only the main road connecting Sylgr and Myrkviðr was just barely solid and well-maintained enough to allow the passage of heavy carts.

“Okay, I’m at a real deep disadvantage around here,” Yuuto whispered as he gazed at the green grasses stretching here and there across the flooded land.

With land this open and wide, armed cavalry could utilize their superior mobility advantage to its absolute fullest.

Of course, with ground this soft and soggy, they wouldn’t be able to move or maneuver at their full speed, but a horse’s legs were much more powerful than a human’s. Even the horses pulling carts behind him were moving across the terrain with little trouble.

By comparison, the progress of the Wolf Clan soldiers had slowed to a crawl as their steps became less steady and their boots slipped or got stuck in the mud.

“However, if we manage to make it through this area, we will be at Myrkviðr,” Felicia said.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Yuuto replied with a nod.

He’d already heard a lot of the details on this area from Linnea earlier. Still, it bothered him that the only way to head directly to Myrkviðr was to pass through this mire.

If he was going to fight cavalry with infantry, what he wanted was rivers or lakes, mountain cliffs or ravines or a forest — the kind of terrain that would more severely limit their horses’ movements, and force them into a head-on confrontation.

That kind of place was waiting for him much further ahead, where the terrain became more and more forested.

If he could just make it there, and set up his formation...

Buoooooooooh!

Suddenly, the high-pitched sound of warhorns cascaded through the air.

“Damn! The enemy?!” Yuuto cried. “I should have figured they wouldn’t be

nice enough to just let us pass!”

Finding terrain advantageous to your own forces and forcing the battle there had been a constant, ironclad rule of warfare since time immemorial. Of course the enemy wouldn't want to pass up the chance to stop them from taking control of that advantageous terrain.

In order to take back Myrkviðr, Yuuto knew he had to keep pressing onward. And that was why he had moved slowly, carefully, and deliberately en route to that goal, studying and making note of the enemy's movements.

He hadn't heard anything back yet from Kristina, whom he'd sent on to Myrkviðr. But he'd sent Albertina along too, an Einherjar who could control wind currents. Both girls were small and very light.

It didn't matter how amazing the horses of Miðgarðr were; cavalry moving together as an army couldn't possibly outdo the speed of his swift-footed personal messengers operating independently.

Therefore, there shouldn't have been too many of the enemy in this attack. However...

“Wh-what the hell?! What's with those numbers?!”

The sight of it was so intimidating, it nearly took Yuuto's breath away.

Ahead of him, a giant dust cloud was billowing up in the distance.

He couldn't actually get an accurate number just by sight, but even just making a rough estimate based off of what he could see now, there had to be at least five thousand of them.

And that wasn't the end.

“Big Brother! Th-they are coming from that direction, too!” Felicia cried out and pointed, her face just as taut with shock as Yuuto's.

Off in the direction indicated by that trembling finger, the silhouettes of countless horseback figures were rising up above the horizon of the wetland plain.

The figures continued to multiply, seemingly without end. The rumbling of the earth caused by their galloping horses became loud and overbearing.

“Th-they’re so fast!” The sheer speed left Yuuto staring wide-eyed.

The enemy forces didn’t charge at them in a straight line. They split apart as they approached, as if deflected by some invisible force, their formation spreading out and around Yuuto’s group until there wasn’t any visible ground left in any direction.

The Wolf Clan forces, with their overwhelmingly inferior mobility, could only stand by and watch as it all happened so quickly.

The Wolf Clan were powerless to react, and in the next moment, they were completely surrounded.

“Khahahahaha! Ahahaha! HAAA HA HA HA!!”

Hveðrungr’s maniacal laughter rang out. Once his encircling formation had closed around Yuuto’s forces, he’d become completely assured of his victory. He was awash with delight, for everything had gone exactly how he’d wanted it to.

Bait the enemy with a smaller vanguard force, let them make their way closer, then fully surround and annihilate them — this was the trademark winning strategy of the Panther Clan.

As a nomadic clan, they never needed to hold onto bases or strongholds.

And as long as they had sheep and kumis, they could sustain themselves no matter where they traveled.

Of course, that meant they didn’t need to stay in cities, transit through them, or resupply there. That was why the locals had such a hard time predicting their movements.

They appeared in unexpected places, at unexpected moments. That was the true character of the people of the Panther Clan.

“It looks like you put too much faith in the power of your smartphone, Yuuto,” Hveðrungr smirked.

The Panther Clan stayed constantly on the move and supplemented their livelihood by raising livestock, so trade and interaction with merchants in

various lands was yet another skill vital to their culture. Naturally, that meant that plenty of information about the Wolf Clan had reached Hveðrungr's ears.

In a word, the Wolf Clan was powerful. They'd taken on the Claw, Horn, and Hoof Clans, each of whom outnumbered them, and each time had still won in a direct confrontation.

As for the Lightning Clan and their Battle-Hungry Tiger, they'd devised a clever scheme to take on that reckless but unbelievably strong fool, and then destroyed their enemy seemingly without any real effort.

This time as well, up against horseback archers and armed cavalry techniques that should still be unknown in Yggdrasil, this hateful foe had somehow still managed to come up with several countermeasures.

"But once I know what you're going to try and use against me, I can wrest the battle in my favor!"

That little brat's smartphone and the knowledge it could provide him with were dangerous, and required the utmost vigilance and caution.

It was far too dangerous to throw his army's full resources at Yuuto before knowing exactly what he might try to make use of next.

And that was why Váli had been so useful.

Against tall city fortifications, they just needed to use the trebuchet, as Váli himself had done before. That would bring the enemy out to them whether they liked it or not.

The crossbows being able to fire rapidly was going to be a bit of trouble, but as far as Hveðrungr had heard, they still couldn't fire more quickly than his own horseback archers.

The only reason Váli's warband had lost so many men had been the sheer difference in numbers between the warband and the Wolf Clan army.

The Wolf Clan's key infantry tactic, the phalanx, was strong enough in the front to repel even a cavalry charge, but Hveðrungr had learned that from the flanks or rear it was completely fragile.

In that case, Hveðrungr only need surround Yuuto with vastly superior

numbers, on terrain that put his own forces at an overwhelming advantage, and then use the cavalry charge, their second trump card, to bring the story to a close.

“Keheheh, what was it they called it where you’re from? ‘Checkmate’? Tell me, Yuuto... Hm?”

Just as Hveðrungr was preparing to issue orders to his whole troop for a full charge, he spotted something strange.

With a loud rattling and clattering, the carts that had been at the center of the Wolf Clan formation were being pushed forward to the front.

Hveðrungr stared blankly at this for a second, then smacked a palm to his iron mask and roared with crazed laughter, leaning back with his hands reaching up towards the sky.

“Kkhahaha! Kahahaha! Come on come *on*, Yuuto, you’re already surrendering?! ‘I’ll give you all of my supplies, so please spare me,’ is *that* what you’re thinking? Oh, good show, Yuuto, this really is the best! That’s a fitting end for a wretched, cowardly dastard like you!”

Hveðrungr at last called out to his men.

“Ignore them! Crush every last soldier of theirs under your hooves! All troops, charge—!”

“Raaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Hveðrungr fired his whistling signal arrow into the air, and with a roaring war cry, all at once his soldiers began to charge toward the Wolf Clan forces at their center.

The elite cavalry fighters of the Panther Clan kicked up thick clouds of dirt as they closed in on the Wolf Clan from all directions.

The Wolf Clan soldiers were caught like a rat in a trap. At this rate, they wouldn’t be able to escape, or even fight back. They would just be overrun.

A series of many loud whooshing noises suddenly filled the air.

“Huh?” Hveðrungr was mildly surprised. He’d been sure the Wolf Clan were on the verge of throwing themselves down in surrender in such a helpless

situation, but instead a volley of arrows was flying out from within the formation.

Several of the Panther Clan fighters who had let down their guard during the charge took direct hits, and fell from their horses.

“So you made like you were about to surrender, only to launch a surprise attack. Heh, you’re just as cowardly a wretch of a man as you always were!” Hveðrungr made no attempt to hide his intense contempt as he practically spat the words at Yuuto. “Fine, we’ll respond in kind. Men, return fire!”

Using their superior mobility, the Panther Clan’s horseback fighters moved forward, weaving their way through the Wolf Clan’s crossbow bolts, and in the blink of an eye, they were close enough to fire.

Releasing their hands from the reins, using the saddles to steady their bodies, and guiding the horses with only their legs, they pulled back their bowstrings and fired.

It was a technique of sublime dexterity, a work of art. And every one of the Panther Clan’s soldiers pulled it off.

There was once again the unique whooshing sound of countless arrows threading their way through the air. The rain of missiles fell towards the Wolf Clan from all directions.

Clang! Cl-cl-cl-clang!

With hollow, metallic sounds, the arrows all bounced off of the covered carriages of the carts that had been pushed out to the outside of the Wolf Clan formation.

They had been covered by linen cloths, which Hveðrungr had just assumed was to protect the contents from dust or the like, but as the arrows hit, the cloth coverings fell away. What was underneath was clearly not wood, but a dull-colored, metallic shell.

And behind that protective shell, the Wolf Clan soldiers had mounted crossbows within the carriages. They took aim and began to fire back.

“Gyargh!”

“Gwa!”

The screams of riders and horses filled the air. The Panther Clan had no useful tool to block the volley of shots fired their way. And they were right in the middle of charging at full speed towards their enemies.

One after another, riders were struck and fell, and so did their horses.

Despite this, the Panther Clan refused to give up, and launched another massive volley of arrows at the Wolf Clan. But just like before, they were all deflected by the protective shielding provided by the tall carriages.

The third volley of Wolf Clan crossbow bolts rained down on the Panther Clan horsemen, stealing their lives one after another.

“Wh... what... is this?!” A hoarse voice that was almost a croak escaped Hveðrungr’s lips.

He couldn’t believe what he was witnessing.

This was supposed to have been a one-sided massacre of the Wolf Clan by the Panther Clan, but instead, the exact opposite was playing out.

Since time immemorial, the greatest generals would always seek out terrain that put their own forces at an advantage, fully utilizing the features of that terrain to secure victory.

That was how humanity had fought its wars for untold thousands of years.

But then history eventually saw the appearance of a new concept.

Rather than simply using existing natural terrain, one could *change* the features of the battlefield, restructuring it in a way that gave one’s forces the advantage.

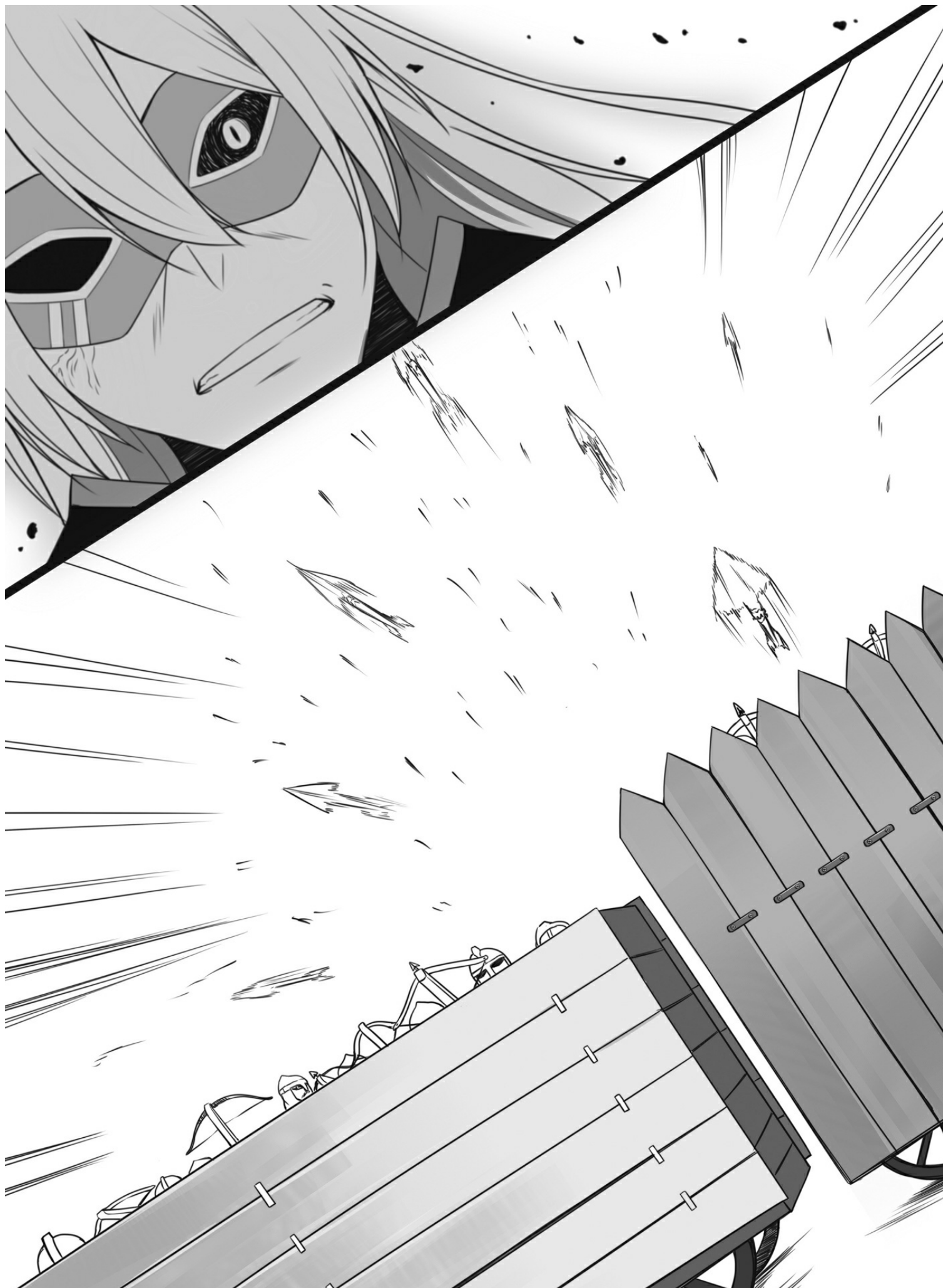
This was the advent of man-made field fortifications.

The widely-known story of Oda Nobunaga using three-rank volley fire at the Battle of Nagashino was suspected of being a fabrication, and perhaps it really was. However, there was another fact about that battle in 1575, less known but unchallenged: it was the first recorded battle in Japanese military history where an army made use of quickly-built field fortifications to change the terrain of the battlefield.

Much the same had been happening in Europe during that era. At the start of the 16th century, the old offensive tactic of charges led by heavily-armored knights began to be replaced, as mounting evidence was showing the superior strength of defensive tactics featuring field fortifications. Quickly improvised lines of spearmen and stockades made from wooden stakes could hinder the enemy's charge, while crossbows, guns, or cannons could be fired on them from behind the defensive line.

Then there were the Hussite Wars which had begun in Bohemia a hundred years earlier, in 1419, and a general named Jan Žižka, rising to great prominence during that time.

His Hussite faction was mainly a collection of ordinary citizens and peasant farmers, with hardly any military training. On the other hand, his enemies were the crusaders of the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, many of them knights with an incomparable advantage in both equipment and training. And of course, they held an overwhelming advantage in numbers.



What overcame Jan's terrible disadvantage was an innovative tactic. He reinforced farmers' horse-drawn wagons with iron plating, so that when a battle started, they could be joined together in a linked ring formation, creating a simple, improvised fortress wall. This was the "wagon fort" tactic, later more popularly known by the German name *Wagenburg*.

His gunners were grouped in teams of three, with the roles of firing, loading, and barrel-cleaning divided among them so that they could fire on the enemy continuously without interruption.

Armed cavalry had been the dreaded bane of infantry for thousands of years with their moving archery volleys and fierce charges. But they could do little against an iron-walled mobile fortress with gunners using volley fire, so they lost completely to the smaller Hussite forces. It was said that the Hussites even managed to capture battle standards and command papers from the Holy Roman Empire forces, and that the roads leading back to Germany and Hungary filled with crusaders fleeing from battles with the Hussites.

The wagon fort tactic was still in use in the 21st century, as well. In Japanese police dramas and in news footage from overseas, one could see policemen using their cars as mobile barricades, or shields during a firefight.

"To think you were able to bring together this many soldiers under your command in just a year and a half..." At the center of his own ringed wagon fort, Yuuto wiped the sweat from his brow.

It was nearing the end of autumn, and already the chilly wind carried the first traces of the coming winter. And yet, Yuuto's hands and forehead were sweating profusely.

The massive size of the army pressing in on him was a bit higher than he'd estimated.

Even if he was protected by a literal wall of iron, even if Jan Žižka had used this same tactic to win against a much larger enemy army, the intense impact of the Panther Clan forces charging towards him from all directions with deafening war cries was enough to terrify him.

"You really are an amazing man, Big Brother," murmured Yuuto. "But I

haven't just been sitting idle for this year and a half, either."

In order to strike a decisive blow against the Panther Clan, whose cavalry boasted superior mobility, first Yuuto needed a way to lure the larger part of their army to his position.

Based on the history he'd learned so far, nomadic nations whose armies fought on horseback preferred hit-and-away skirmish tactics, and tended to avoid large-scale decisive battles. That meant he needed something on par with the tactics of Li Mu, who had brilliantly lured an army of one hundred thousand Xiongnu into a trap.

Yuuto was a different person from the boy who hadn't been able to imagine and consider his older brother's feelings. "I'm not just some punk kid who uses nothing but technological cheats anymore..."

He recalled the words of Sun Tzu: *"What causes opponents to come of their own accord is the prospect of gain."*

If he wanted to get an enemy force to advance toward his position, he needed to show them that there would be some obvious gain for them in it. He had used this same line of thinking to formulate his strategies during his battles with the Hoof and Lightning Clans.

Yuuto could now put himself in his opponents' shoes and think from their perspectives.

The nomadic clan's conventional strategy was to use a small number of mounted fighters to bait their enemies and lure them out onto open ground, then quickly surround and crush them.

And Loptr himself had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the combined forces of the Claw, Ash, and Fang Clans when they'd completely surrounded him. That was the start a chain of events that had led to his killing of his patriarch and thus exile from the Wolf Clan.

Loptr was intimately familiar with the terror, and the superiority, of that tactic.

And that was *exactly* why Yuuto had chosen to lead his forces slowly across this marshland.

He had been certain that, with such wide muddy terrain that gave cavalry an overwhelming advantage against his infantry, his opponent would seize the opportunity to bring the bulk of his force and fully surround Yuuto.

And he had also made sure to forbid the use of the wagon fort tactic until this very moment, so that his enemy would take the bait and wouldn't be given a chance to prepare a countermeasure.

All of this was part of a strategy of feigned weakness followed by a full-force attack, summed up by the saying, "coy as a maiden, then swift as a rabbit," which had its roots in another passage from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

"Heh... I really am gonna go to hell when I die," Yuuto said with a small, self-derisive chuckle.

Didn't you swear an oath to fight to protect your family? a voice whispered to him from somewhere deep in his heart. *So then what are doing luring your sworn older brother, your precious family, into a deadly trap?*

He already had the answer. The calm, rational part of Yuuto's mind knew that as clan patriarch, he needed to be dispassionate, even cruel, in order to protect everyone. But that didn't drive away the tightness in his chest.

Even at this late hour, Yuuto was unable to rid himself of his hesitations. Even so, he was still the patriarch. He had to follow through.

He tightly shut his eyes for a moment, telling himself that he'd have time for regrets when all of this was over. He quietly focused on hardening his heart. At last he opened his eyes again, and staring out at the Panther Clan army, he coldly issued the command to his men:

"Shoot until there's nothing left."

"What the hell are you all doing?!" Hveðrungr screamed at his men in a fit of rage, like a child lost in a tantrum.

The enemy had fallen for Hveðrungr's trap and come out to these wide marshlands, and now he had them fully surrounded with a far larger force. His side should have the advantage right now.

His Panther Clan fighters felt the exact same way. Their victory should already be decided at this point. The enemy had just used their wagons to make a wall out of desperation. They were nothing more than simple wagons!

For generations, the nomad clan had known wagons to be weakly defended and full of foodstuffs and other valuables, the perfect target for raids. To be unable to take out a few wagons like this brought shame upon the proud name of the Panther Clan.

If their arrows couldn't pierce the carriage walls, then they just needed to rush in with a charging assault and smash them into pieces.

But even their charges were repelled.

So clearly they just had to leap over the wagons. But horses were too frightened to attempt it, perhaps because of the added instability of the soft, muddy ground.

So the soldiers leapt from their horses and climbed on top of the carriages. But they were quickly felled by the enemy's longspear.

And while all of this was going on, the crossbow bolts continuously rained down upon them in volley after volley.

"Forward!" Hveðrungr shouted. "Forward! Smash their little wagons apart and show them what we're really made of!"

Hveðrungr hadn't acknowledged the reality of the situation.

He was supposed to have been the one that lured *them* into a trap. He couldn't bear to admit that he had been the one taking the bait all along.

He was supposed to be the superior military commander.

He'd force his way past this little trick of Yuuto's any moment now.

That illusion, and the expectation it gave him, delayed his ability to make rational decisions.

Meanwhile, on the Wolf Clan side, Yuuto also couldn't deny the feeling that his strategy lacked a decisive edge.

Jan Žižka had won overwhelming victories against cavalry with his wagon fort

strategy and the use of continuous, concentrated volleys with firearms, but the Wolf Clan didn't actually have a real standing for the latter.

There was a marked difference in strength between guns and crossbows, after all.

Compared to crossbow bolts, bullets were smaller, harder to see, and much faster. Arrows and bolts were comparatively easier to deflect or dodge.

Crossbow volleys also lacked the explosive noise firearms made that would terrify horses.

And so, this tactic hadn't been enough to drive the enemy into despair. The enemy could still hang onto the belief that with just a bit more effort, they could overcome Yuuto's defenses.

The battle only seemed to be growing more and more fierce.

Five hours had elapsed since the beginning of the battle between the Panther and Wolf Clans.

At this point, the area surrounding the Wolf Clan army's wagon fort was filled with the corpses of Panther Clan fighters and their horses.

The Panther Clan had changed to a tactic of firing upwards at an angle to send their arrows in an arc, and had finally been able to begin producing injuries and casualties on the Wolf Clan side, but only a small amount.

Firing in a steep arc meant their arrows hit with less power, and were less accurate due to the wind. The Wolf Clan, meanwhile, took steady aim with each shot from behind the wagon walls, and could target the Panther Clan soldiers easily thanks to the longer range of their direct shots.

It was clear to see that only one side would see their losses grow under these circumstances.

"Rrrggghhh!" Hveðrungr was biting down on his thumb, unable to suppress his anger. There were already deep bite marks on the skin and nail that attested to just how irritated he was.

"Hey, Rungr," Sigyn said. "Let's withdraw. It's frustrating to admit it, but we

lost this time. We'll just be losing more of our boys for no reason at this rate."

Sigyn offered her counsel with a heartbroken expression. One of her duties as the sovereign's wife was to support her husband by saying to him what others could not.

They had already sent for the three thousand men that had been left back in Myrkviðr, but even with those reinforcements, the Panther Clan had been unable to break through the Wolf Clan's defenses.

As a proud member of the Panther Clan, it pained her to say that they'd lost to a bunch of people in wagons, but accepting the facts and making the best decisions based on them was the responsibility of those who ruled above others.

They mustn't let themselves be fooled by the wagons' appearance. However it might look, what the enemy actually had was a fortress wall. And what was even more ridiculous was that it was movable.

It was said that one needed at least five to ten times more troops than the enemy in order to breach a fortress with a direct assault, and cavalry were ill-suited for attacking walled fortifications in either case. Continuing their attacks in this fashion would do nothing more than increase their own casualties.

"Don't be stupid," Hveðrungr snapped. "How could we withdraw now, just when it's looking like we'll be able to cross over that wall of theirs?"

"Rungr... calm down and listen. We can't get past those wagons. It won't work no matter how many times we try."

To Sigyn, Hveðrungr had clearly lost his composure.

He was the type of man who appeared calm and collected, but was actually driven by very strong emotions. She assumed that he'd lost himself to his inner hatred and rage.

However, the fact was that Hveðrungr was now perfectly calm.

Certainly, until a moment ago, he had been worked up in anger, and that had led to the unnecessary deaths of countless numbers of his men.

But as he'd sent his clan sons to their deaths, he'd used them as guinea pigs

to work on a countermeasure for Yuuto's defenses. And finally, on the backs of all of those sacrifices, he had glimpsed the way forward.

Withdrawing now would be the most wasteful thing he could possibly do.

"It'll work," Hveðrungr told her. "At least, it will now. And Sigyn, I'm going to need your power to do it."

With that, Hveðrungr explained the plan he'd come up with.

The people of Yggdrasil operated on a much simpler and harsher view of ethics compared to the 21st century, yet the contents of Hveðrungr's plan were upsetting even by those standards. Indeed, it left all the other officers of the Panther Clan grimacing darkly.

However, Sigyn alone was different, laughing loudly and whole-heartedly. "Ahahahaha! Perfect, Rungr, just what I'd expect from the man I chose! I'm in. Let's do this."

"I figured you'd say that," Hveðrungr replied, the corners of his mouth twisting into a grin.

The two figures smiling and laughing at each other reveled in their true nature, as callous and cold-blooded demons who thought of other people as nothing more than things.

"The sun's begun to set," Yuuto muttered as he stared out at the reddening western sky.

The iron wall created by his wagon fort tactic had held strong against both horseback archery fire and cavalry charges, two of the greatest tactical threats in Yggdrasil.

That said, he couldn't afford to relax for the slightest moment.

The warriors of the Panther Clan continued to mount their suicidal charges without pause, and there was no way to tell what might happen next.

Yuuto couldn't be rid of the fear that some stray arrow might suddenly rob him of his life.

He couldn't be rid of the worry that some unexpected trouble might happen

and allow his defensive wall to be broken.

He could feel the stress slowly but steadily grinding down his mental strength.

“It looks like... we will finally be able to get a moment of rest soon.” Felicia’s relieved face was also looking quite worn out.

There would have to be a break in the fighting once night fell. The nights of Yggdrasil were interminably dark, with only the faint light of the stars and moon. In that state, it became more difficult to see obstacles and the terrain under one’s own feet, not to mention the difficulty in determining relative positions and spotting ally from enemy in the darkness.

Of course, there was still the chance of a sneak attack launched under the cover of darkness, so one still needed to be vigilant, but it seemed at least that there would be a chance for Yuuto to catch a small breather.

“Yeah, though I’d appreciate it if they took this chance to leave,” Yuuto said.

Back in his home territory, Yuuto was starting to be treated like a god of war, but in truth, he didn’t like battle one bit. Actually, he would have preferred nothing more than an alternative that avoided fighting altogether.

That was particularly true now, due to his own personal feelings in this case.

“After all, our objective here is just to make them realize that they won’t be able to attack us anymore without heavy losses.”

Yuuto had no desire to exterminate his enemies, even if they were trying to kill him. He told himself that he didn’t have a choice when he had to kill them, but of course he still felt a sense of guilt over it.

That was why, though it might seem contradictory, he needed to use this battle to hurt the enemy as strongly and thoroughly as possible.

Indeed, he needed to make them suffer enough that every remaining soldier felt despair from the bottom of their hearts.

“If an injury has to be done to a man, it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared.” That was the teaching of Niccolò Machiavelli.

Though a great many might die during a short span of time, in the long term, that would lead to fewer total deaths and less suffering overall... that was the

theory, anyway.

There was no way to accurately keep track, but the Wolf Clan had already killed over a thousand Panther Clan soldiers.

By contrast, the Wolf Clan's own casualties numbered only around twenty or thirty.

Looking just at those figures, it was safe to call this a total victory for the Wolf Clan.

Yuuto was hoping that once night fell and both sides temporarily ceased combat, the enemy would come to grips with the facts and withdraw, deciding that they should never attempt war with the Wolf Clan again.

"Wha...?! The enemy is preparing something! Soldiers are gathering together to our northwest!" Felicia shouted.

"Tch! Damn it! They're still not giving up?" Yuuto clicked his tongue and cursed at the news. *This should have been more than enough!*

In the end, part of him still wanted to avoid fighting Loptr.

"All right," Yuuto shouted, "then we'll stave them off as many times as it takes! Solidify the defenses on our northwestern side!"

One of the terrifying strengths of the wagon fort tactic was that its ironclad defenses were also mobile. One could quickly reposition soldiers along the defensive wall of the formation to match the enemy's movements.

"Raaaaaahhhh!!"

With their bellowing cries ringing in the air, the huge mass of Panther Clan army soldiers launched their charge.

The concentrated forces gave off a feeling of fierce intimidation unlike anything Yuuto had felt so far. It was enough to frighten some of the Wolf Clan soldiers, even though they knew they were behind the protection of the wall of wagons.

However, though it would be a different story in melee combat, a frightened soldier could still pull a crossbow trigger easily. One might even say that their fear and the desire to keep the enemy from coming closer would encourage

them to load and fire their weapons with even more fervent effort.

If the walls were breached, they would all be overrun in the blink of an eye. Yuuto watched the action, holding his breath.

“Uuuooogh!”

Leading the charge was a short-haired man whom Yuuto recognized as the Panther Clan’s master archer Váli, who had given the Wolf Clan troops so much trouble with his vanguard warband.

The man pressed forward while swinging his sword to deflect incoming arrows, rapidly closing the distance to the defensive line. He was quite the fearless warrior, as expected of the man who had fought to a draw with Skáviðr.

And, in the tiny gap between crossbow volleys, he quickly pulled out his bow and nocked an arrow. Just as a Wolf Clan soldier popped up from behind the rim of the carriage wall to fire at him, Váli aimed and shot him right between the eyes.

His furious momentum and skill marked him as the type of fighter who was a match for a hundred normal men. But, even a warrior as great as he was, in the end, no more than a single mortal soldier.

“Guh...!”

Váli grunted as a Wolf Clan arrow found its mark and pierced through him near his shoulder. The impact forced his body backward, and he fell from his horse, sending up a splash of muddy water as he hit the ground.

Yuuto couldn’t tell if the man had died or not from where he was standing, but it was safe to say that one of his most powerful foes had just been taken out of the fight.

However, the defeat of the Panther Clan’s hero did nothing to dull the strength or momentum of their assault.

Their continuing waves of attacks seemed to grow more furious afterward, like a violent thunderstorm, as if the Panther Clan were pouring every last bit of their remaining strength into their charges.

Yuuto watched and waited, wondering just how long this would continue. A

little under an hour passed, but it seemed to last an eternity. By the time the color of the sky had settled into the dark blue of dusk, the enemy's attacks had at last begun to wane in intensity.

"All right, looks like we pulled through this one," Yuuto said, clenching his fists as he finally became certain of his victory.

And that was when it happened.

"The time has come for the darkness to replace the light of the sun."

"Gh...! What is this?!" Yuuto suddenly heard a voice echoing in his mind, and felt his heart begin to pound more strongly.

It was a woman's voice, and completely unfamiliar to him.

"Let the chains of the holy covenant be now loosened, that the imprisoned hungry wolf may be set free."

The voice continued chanting the incantation.

Yuuto saw an image in his mind's eye of a woman dancing.

He still didn't recognize her.

She seemed to be about in her mid-twenties, a beautiful woman with long silver hair tied into a ponytail.

Her outfit was provocative, no more than a thin layer of cloth draped around her chest and another around her hips, yet at the same time it also had an air of sacred and inviolable dignity. Her appearance bore a strong resemblance to Felicia offering up her sacred dances as a priestess in the sanctuary in lárnvíðr.

"Who are you?! What are you doing?!" Yuuto shouted and looked around, but he didn't spot anyone resembling the woman in his vision.

He didn't understand what was causing this phenomenon.

However, it felt like something he'd experienced before.

He couldn't help but think back to that time, when he'd first been summoned to Yggdrasil.

Back then, Yuuto had seen a vision in his mind of Felicia dancing, just like what was happening now. The two situations were too similar by far to be a

coincidence.

“Th-the enemy is attacking from the southeast, as well!” Felicia shouted.

“What?!”

Unfortunately, with no regard for Yuuto’s state of mind, the battle at hand was seeing a surprising new development.

Even as the bulk of the Panther Clan army was maintaining its focused assault from the northwest, a small band of riders dressed entirely in black had appeared from the completely opposite direction, galloping straight for the wagons. They were already unexpectedly close.

Their black clothes and small numbers had helped them blend in with the darkness, while the larger assault had served as a diversion. Those factors combined had been enough to delay the Wolf Clan spotting them until just now.

Yuuto had ordered the defenses be focused on the northwest. However, there was still at least a minimum necessary amount of defending soldiers everywhere else, too. A group of that size wasn’t powerful enough to overcome the walls of the *Wagenburg*.

Yuuto immediately prepared to give the order to counterattack. But just as he raised his hand...

“O keen frozen fangs, break apart the idol of madness, and bring forth the chaos of calamity... Fimbulvetr!!”

The beautiful woman in the vision in Yuuto’s mind concluded her dance of offering, and raised both hands up to the sky. In the next instant, in the real world Yuuto saw with his eyes, the group of ambushing Panther Clan riders was surrounded by a faint, pale light, like the glow of fireflies.

What is that?! Yuuto thought. But just as he began to focus his attention on it...

“B-Big Brother?! Y-your body is...!” Felicia suddenly shouted to him in a trembling voice.

Reflexively, Yuuto looked down at his own body, only to doubt what he was

seeing with his own eyes. “Wha—?!”

His body was very slightly, but still noticeably, transparent.

He felt a strange sensation, like something that was covering and permeating his body had grown slightly weaker. However, it only lasted for a split second, and Yuuto’s body returned to its normal, solid state.

“Wh-what just happened to me?!”

This was the middle of a battle, and no time to be focused on visions or hallucinations. He knew that in his head, but he couldn’t stay calm. He couldn’t focus on anything else.

Returning home to 21st century Japan; that was Yuuto’s greatest wish. For two and a half years, he’d tried to research a way of getting back with no luck, and here and now he’d finally come across a true hint to the solution. There was no chance that it wouldn’t capture his attention.

At that moment, as his heart was disturbed by this dilemma, Yuuto saw him.

Emerging from the darkness among the group of Panther Clan riders was a man with his upper face concealed by an imposing black iron helmet. A man with long, golden hair just like Yuuto’s adjutant Felicia!

“W-wait, don’t shoot, that’s...!” Without thinking, those were the words Yuuto shouted.

If Yuuto hadn’t seen him, he would have calmly given the order to fire. But to give the order to kill his own older brother while looking at the man with his own two eyes was something that required an incredible strength of will and conviction.

Yuuto had supposedly understood the fact that he needed to deal a thorough and decisive defeat to his enemy, but in that fateful moment, his lack of focus, and lack of a truly solid determination to fight his brother, had a terrible consequence.



The Wolf Clan army had been guided to victory time and time again by Yuuto's orders. So his soldiers' trust in him stayed their hands.

There was also the fact that after repelling so many attacks from the Panther Clan, they had the impression that the wagon fort defense was impenetrable.

That ever-so-brief pause in the Wolf Clan's crossbow fire was enough for the group of Panther Clan riders to reach the wagons.

And then—

Several soldiers riding at the head of the group leapt down from their horses. They got down on all fours in the mud, and hardened their bodies in that position.

The riders who had been following behind, still atop their horses, *stepped up onto their backs* without any hesitation or remorse, and leapt over the carriage walls.

"Wha?!" Yuuto was dumbfounded at this unbelievable turn of events.

Even *if* one used human bodies as a stepping stone, horses were averse to leaping over tall obstacles by their very nature. Getting them to overcome that fear based in instinct was impossible without very long and arduous special training.

Then, how did they do it? Yuuto's mind raced, and almost immediately he thought of one possibility.

Just a moment ago, the Panther Clan riders had been enveloped in an eerie pale light, just like the light given off by the divine mirror in the Wolf Clan's sacred tower when Yuuto had his phone calls with Mitsuki.

That light was probably from ásmegin, the mysterious "divine energy" present in this world.

Then there was the word "Fimbulvetr" he'd heard during that incantation, which he'd heard before. It had been during Kristina's explanation of different seiðr magics.

Fimbulvetr was a seiðr that could turn one's allies into fearless, frenzied berserkers.

“HAHAHAHA! At last I’ve done it, I’m past the wall!” Hveðrungr laughed loudly in triumph as he finally made his way into the middle of his enemy’s formation.

He had made use of the power of his wife’s secret art, the seiðr Fimbulvetr. Hveðrungr had instructed her to cast it not on his men, but *on their horses*.

Doing that had not only eliminated their instinctive fear of trying to jump head-first over obstacles, it had removed any natural hesitation from their minds entirely, allowing them to unleash their full strength and reach the limits of their jumping ability.

“Out of my way!” Hveðrungr bellowed.

Hveðrungr cut a swath with his spear, mowing down the Wolf Clan soldiers that were closest to him.

“Urgh...!”

“Gyaahhh!”

Behind him, the other black-clad riders from the ambush group followed his lead and leapt over the walls of the wagon fort.

However, there weren’t many of them in total. Horses driven into a wild fury by Fimbulvetr were too violent to control by any normal means. The only ones capable of such a feat were the elite among the elite, the hand-picked members of Hveðrungr’s special forces, the Skyndi unit.

Additionally, seiðr spells greatly exhausted the user’s mental energy. Even for a powerful woman like Sigyn, one of the few skilled users of seiðr magic in all of Yggdrasil, at most she could affect thirty or so horses, and she couldn’t use it more than once per day.

It was exactly the sort of trump card meant to be saved for important times like this.

“Aaahhh!”

“No! Noooo!”

Most of the Wolf Clan soldiers manning the wagons consisted of

crossbowmen and their assistants. Faced with cavalry suddenly leaping into their midst, they fell into a terrified panic.

Because the iron-plated wagon fort walls had provided such a solid, reliable defense thus far, having that defense broken was effective at breaking their composure.

Under normal circumstances, the soldiers of the Wolf Clan were brave men that were capable of overcoming their fear of death and resolutely facing the enemy, but that was because normally they first had the time to psyche themselves up and harden their resolve to face the danger beforehand.

And because they had been sticking to using long-range crossbows from behind a fortified wall, they hadn't had the chance to mentally prepare themselves to face the enemies that were suddenly right in front of them, a terrifying elite cavalry who boasted many times their size and power.

But the Wolf Clan still had a general who remained fearless and stood firm.

"I will not let you pass!"

This man leapt onto his horse and moved to block Hveðrungr's path, alone. His appearance was thin and sickly, with an ominous air.

His instincts had been developed by struggling to survive and find a path through many hopeless battles, and they had told him that the man in the black helmet was, without a doubt, the leader of the Panther Clan fighters.

"Hyaah!" Skáviðr put all of his might behind his first spear attack, but Hveðrungr did not use his strength to block it. Instead, he somehow turned the attack aside at the last second, skillfully altering its trajectory.

"What?!"

A veteran military man like Skáviðr would hardly have shown any surprise if the enemy had simply blocked or parried his attack. He would have just swiftly transitioned into his next move.

However, Hveðrungr had used the "willow tree technique," Skáviðr's own personal technique that he'd developed and honed over many long years of battle and training, and which used the supernatural power of his rune.

For just a moment, a mere split-second, Skáviðr froze.

In a battle between two expert fighters, such an opening could easily prove deadly.

“Ghh...!” Skáviðr’s face contorted with pain as Hveðrungr’s spear struck a glancing blow to his shoulder.

Even the man known by the alias Níðhoggr, the Sneering Slaughter, was vulnerable to pain and injury.

Hveðrungr followed up with a merciless spear thrust aimed directly at Skáviðr’s chest.

Skáviðr promptly attempted to twist his body out of the way, but he could not fully evade the blow. Fresh blood sprayed from his chest.

“Hmph, you’ve gotten weaker, my brother. Or perhaps I’ve just gotten even stronger?” Certain of his victory, Hveðrungr grinned and taunted his defeated opponent. But just then, Skáviðr’s eyes shot wide open, and he grasped the handle of Hveðrungr’s spear.

“Huh?! You don’t know when to give up, fool!”

With irritation showing in his voice, Hveðrungr tried to wrench his spear out of his enemy’s hands.

But Skáviðr wouldn’t let go, his face deathly grim. It was incredible strength for a man suffering from a deep wound.

“That voice... you... you’re Loptr! I won’t... let you reach Master...!”

“Tch, as if I have time to waste bothering with the likes of you.” Hveðrungr quickly switched from pulling at the spear to pushing.

The sudden change sent Skáviðr’s body falling backwards. As Skáviðr tried to use the spear as leverage to right his body, Hveðrungr suddenly let go of it.

“No...!” Skáviðr’s body continued to fall backwards.

He tried once more to stop himself from falling, but as he put strength into his torso muscles, more blood sprayed from his wound. His strength failed him, and he fell from his horse.

“Grhh!”

Just as he was about to hit the ground, he contorted his body once more, and hit the ground at a roll instead of flat on his back in order to spread out the impact.

He quickly rolled onto his feet and stood back up.

But that was the most he could do. His legs buckled, and he dropped back down to one knee.

Skáviðr fixed Hveðrungr with a piercing glare. He was still ready to fight in spirit, but after the injuries he'd sustained from the spear and the fall, the body of the former Mánagarmr could no longer keep going.

“You always were the man that just wouldn't die,” Hveðrungr sneered. “But I no longer have any interest in the so-called ‘Strongest Silver Wolf.’”

Pressing a hand to the wound on his chest, Skáviðr summoned his remaining strength and shouted at his men. “Urgh... Longspears, what are you waiting for?! There are only a small number of them! Take them down, now!”

At the sound of their general's voice, the Wolf Clan soldiers snapped back to their senses and remembered their duty. They rushed to attack Hveðrungr and his riders.

A moment later, both sides were struggling in a chaotic melee.

“Worthless rabble! Don't get in my way!” Hveðrungr yelled with irritation at one of the Wolf Clan soldiers, parrying the man's spear thrust and following up with a powerful overhead blow that cracked both his helmet and his skull.

He then rammed his horse into a second Wolf Clan spearman in the midst of his attack, sending him flying.

The phalanx was a powerful infantry formation in melee combat, but that was only because when the longspearmen could maintain a tight, clean formation, it formed a “wall of spears” that allowed no room to attack or evade.

Thanks to the ambush, the longspearmen hadn't had time to create their formation, and fighting individually, they were no longer a serious threat.

In the hands of barely-trained young recruits and peasant farmers, those

heavy longspears were too unwieldy to control properly. The minute they began fighting individually, the almighty Wolf Clan troops became nothing more than a bunch of weak soldiers.

“I’ll leave the rest of these small fry to you,” Hveðrungr called back to his subordinates, as he cut his way through the enemies in front of him. He was focused on a single point straight ahead.

Finally, he locked eyes with his target.

“Heh heh heh. We finally meet again, Yuuto...!”

With his hated enemy finally right in front of him, Hveðrungr’s lips slowly twisted into a wicked grin.

Upon seeing the young man again for the first time in a year and a half, Hveðrungr could tell that he had grown somewhat. He was visibly taller, and his face was tougher and more masculine-looking, with none of the childishness from before.

But they were still the features of the man he remembered. There was no mistaking that it was him.

Yuuto was staring up at Hveðrungr with an expression of shock. “Big Brother... is that really you?!”

Hearing this, Hveðrungr reflexively grimaced and clicked his tongue. Those words irritated him so much that he couldn’t stand it.

“We’re no longer brothers, you and I!” he shouted. “We haven’t been since that day!”

The man who had once been Loptr of the Wolf Clan, who now lived as Patriarch Hveðrungr of the Panther Clan, punctuated his shouted remark with a kick to his horse, and charged straight at Yuuto.

“I’ll make you pay for stealing everything from me! You damned traitor!!”

As he unleashed his deeply held resentment in a scream, he unsheathed the sword at his hip and swung the blade downwards at Yuuto.

It was the very sword Yuuto had once given him, the loathsome weapon that had killed his beloved patriarch Fárbauti.

Hveðrungr had kept it on his person ever since that incident, as a physical reminder so he wouldn't forget his hatred and his unending grudge. He had long since decided that it must be this same blade that took the life of his enemy in revenge.

But his attack was deflected by none other than Felicia, his own flesh and blood. "I will not let you!"

"Gah!"

Hveðrungr flinched. A slight bit of hesitation flickered in the eyes behind his iron mask. To his mind, his sister *shouldn't be here* right now. He had convinced himself that his beloved little sister had been confined behind the walls of lárnviðr, imprisoned there by his treacherous foe.

"Why?!" he exclaimed. "Why are you here, Felicia?! And why would you stand in my way?!"

"I should ask you the same thing! What do you think you're doing here?! Not only did you kill our sworn father, you are attacking the Wolf Clan that you always swore you would protect!"

"N-no, that's not it, Felicia! That man is deceiving you! Now move aside. Listen to your older brother!"

"I will not listen to you!" Felicia declared. "As far as I am concerned now, he is my one and only big brother!"

Felicia stood protectively in front of Yuuto, pointing the tip of her sword directly at Hveðrungr. Her words were firm, and final, severing the bond with her brother by birth.

The two of them glared at each other fiercely for a moment. Then Hveðrungr burst out laughing.

"Heh! Heh heh heh... your cowardly tricks never cease to amaze, Yuuto! You snake! You even prepared this fake to try and throw me off, didn't you?!"

Yuuto was shocked. "Wh-what are you even saying, Big Brother?! That's the real Felicia, that's your little sister!"

"Silence!" Hveðrungr screamed wildly. "My little sister would *never* turn

against me!!”

His blade rapidly cut a thin line through the dark, like a tiny flash of lightning.

“Khh!” Felicia barely caught the attack with her own weapon, but collapsed from the force of it.

Felicia was an Einherjar, but she was a “Jack of all trades, master of none.” She had skill with a sword, but it was several levels below that of fighters like Sigrún or Skáviðr.

“Begone, you fake!” Hveðrungr swung again. It was a strike without any hesitation, every ounce of his power directed with the intent to kill.

Felicia wasn’t fast enough to respond to it.

However, a loud *Clanng!* reverberated as his killing blow was halted at the last instant.

“Grrrrr, Yuuto...!” Hveðrungr shouted.

“Ghh!” was the response.

The former sworn brothers pushed against each other, their locked blades scraping.

Yuuto held his blade in both hands; Hveðrungr held his in only one. But it was still the latter who held the upper hand, with superior physical strength.

Hveðrungr sneered, sure of his victory, but as he did, his eyes met Yuuto’s. With gritted teeth, the young man glared straight into his eyes with a look of ferocious desperation, and Hveðrungr felt a cold sensation travel down his back.

“I understand if you hate me,” Yuuto snarled. “But how could you... Felicia... she’s the only family you’ve got left!!”

Yuuto roared, his rage seeming to billow up out of him like steam. Hveðrungr felt his body flinch reflexively.

This, too, shouldn’t have been possible.

Just how could a man like himself be *intimidated* by the aura of such a wretched little brat? Hveðrungr’s blade was nearly at his throat! What was

there for him to be afraid of?

There was a sharp pain from the scar on his face.

That's right... Thinking back to that time, it was this mysterious intimidating presence of Yuuto's that had led to a dispute over the succession in the first place.

The previous patriarch Fárbausti had been a deliberate and thoughtful man, but he had also been indecisive. Whenever proposing new policies or reforms, the old patriarch had so prioritized harmony and moderation that he had never fully implemented anything except in half-measures.

Hveðrungr had often been secretly furious with him over this, wondering how the man could be so carelessly irresolute in the face of the clan's worst crisis.



But this strange trait of Yuuto's had charmed the man, igniting a passion in him unbefitting his age, and it had so warped his mind that it had driven him to go against the values he had stuck to up until that point. Yuuto's aura was a charisma on par with magic.

Perhaps it might truly be that he was naturally endowed with the spirit and presence of a lord... a supreme ruler.

The flames of hatred burned away the words that had started to cloud Hveðrungr's mind, and he once again poured his strength into his sword arm. "Do you think a bluff like that would work on me?! Someone like you... someone like you could never be...!"

That alone was enough to overpower Yuuto, forcing him down onto one knee with a *thunk* against the carriage floor.

"Keh ha ha ha, you're powerless against me," Hveðrungr gloated.

Honestly, you always have been a weakling of a man, he thought scornfully. In the end, someone like this could never hope to oppose him.

Hveðrungr taunted Yuuto with a laugh, and easily thrust aside the young man's blade. He raised his own up high.

"Die, and disappear from my life forever!" He made to bring down his blade. But in that instant, his horse suddenly began to thrash about.

"What?!" Hveðrungr grabbed the reins and managed to keep from being thrown off. But as he tried to use his knees to guide his horse, it refused to calm down from its panic.

"Wh-what's going on?!" he shouted.

"I, Sigrún, shall not allow you to assault Father any longer!"

Hveðrungr was high off the ground on his horse, but the spear thrust at him came from even higher up. He deflected it at the last moment with his sword, and looked up at his new foe.

It was the person who had once been his sworn younger sister within the Wolf Clan, the silver-haired young lady whose talent for combat he had once tried to help blossom. She was staring down at him, mounted atop a camel.

“Ha!” he shouted. “Do you think a little girl like you is really going to make a difference at this point? You still have no chance of... Gahh! Whoa! Calm! Calm, I say!”

Hveðrungr couldn't finish, as his horse continued to act out. It was completely ignoring his commands. It flailed its head this way and that, and began to step backwards.

It was as if it was afraid of Sigrún...

No, he realized, *not afraid*.

It was more like it was simply *repulsed* by something.

From behind Sigrún, he spotted over a dozen more camel riders heading this way.

Glancing quickly behind him, he saw that the horses of the elite subordinates he had brought with him had also begun to misbehave, halting in their tracks and thrashing about despite their riders' commands to advance. Some of them even threw their riders and fled.

“Grrrr...!” Hveðrungr growled like a beast. The target of his revenge was so close at hand, but his horse wouldn't take a step forward.

The Wolf Clan soldiers that had been thrown into panicked chaos were also regaining their senses after seeing their patriarch in mortal danger. Resuming their most important role, they lined up in front of him in tight formation and readied their longspears.

“...Tch! Men, retreat!”

Hveðrungr shouted the command, and then turned his horse away.

It was the most vexing situation he could imagine.

Those soldiers wouldn't have presented any challenge to Hveðrungr and his elite Panther Clan soldiers if they'd been able to fight at their best. But they couldn't hope to fight with their horses in this condition.

“I'll remember this, Yuuto! Don't think this means this is over! Next time, I'll definitely lop off your head!”

As he spurred his horse on, Hveðrungr left those words behind, his angry parting shot.

Once his horse was away from the camels, it came to its senses and began to follow his commands loyally again.

The inside edge of the wall of wagons was lined with small platforms, likely to make it easier for the crossbowmen. Hveðrungr's riders guided their horses up the makeshift stair and leapt over the wall.

The masked demon and his band of black-clad riders disappeared away into the darkness.

"Father, are you hurt?!" Sigrún leapt down from the camel and rushed to Yuuto's side.

Yuuto was slumped with his back against the carriage wall of his chariot. He gave her a tired smile, and waved his hand to dismiss her concern.

"No, somehow I made it through in one piece. You saved me there, Rún."

"No, Father, I must apologize for arriving so late. When I saw you locking swords with the enemy, it scared me half to death..." Sigrún stopped and took a long, deep breath, her head hanging low and one hand clutched onto Yuuto's clothes.

She was trembling.

Tears fell from her downcast face, the droplets making tiny stains on the wooden carriage floor.

Yuuto softly placed his hand on Sigrún's head and stroked her hair, a gesture to show her that he was here right now, alive.

As he did, she sprang forward and buried her face in his chest. Her warm tears soaked into his shirt, but he let the silver-haired girl do as she wished, patting her back gently as she cried into him.

After a moment, Sigrún finally calmed down and pulled away from him.

"P-please forgive my rudeness! I'm just so glad you were unhurt, Father," she said, still sniffing a little.

“It’s all right. I’m sorry for making you worry,” Yuuto replied. He reached out a hand and wiped a tear from Sigrún’s cheek in one more reassuring gesture.

In that moment, Yuuto had also really wanted to feel the touch of another living person. The warmth of Sigrún’s body had been a direct reminder and proof that he really was still alive.

“It was a lot of trouble, but I’m glad we brought along the camels,” Yuuto added, glancing up at the camel Sigrún had dismounted with a sigh of relief.

He had learned that horses have an incredibly intense dislike for the body odor produced by camels.

During the 6th century B.C. this fact had been utilized in actual combat by General Harpagus of the Achaemenid Empire, in a battle with the kingdom of Lydia. Harpagus had used armed camel riders on the front lines to disturb and scatter the Lydian cavalry, crediting him with the Achaemenid victory.

And so, Yuuto had likewise kept a group of camel riders within his army, on standby just in case by some chance the wagon fortress was breached.

That said, camels were not well suited to humid climates, and they became sick easily. Their bodies weren’t meant for travel through such watery terrain.

Upon needing to rush to Yuuto’s location on a moment’s notice, their movements had been sluggish and they had been slow to arrive. However, they had still made it just in the nick of time, saving his life.

The terrible camel odor clinging to Sigrún made Yuuto’s nose twitch, but he found even that felt comforting after his ordeal.

Felicia seemed on the verge of tears herself as she looked at Yuuto meekly, speaking formally with a pained expression on her face, which was terribly pale. “Big Brother, I ask that you forgive me. Protecting you is my duty, and I failed.”

She seemed to want to rush to his side as well, but was desperately holding herself back from doing so.

Her eyes were like those of an abandoned puppy on the street, and yet she also looked like a convicted criminal awaiting the pronouncement of her sentence.

Her brother by blood had just tried to kill Yuuto, and she hadn't been able to protect him. She surely felt a heavy sense of accountability for both of those things.

Yuuto could easily tell that while she was prepared to be relieved of her responsibility as his personal bodyguard given that circumstance, she still wanted dearly to remain as his adjutant and assistant.

"Don't worry about it," Yuuto told her in a soft, kind voice. "You had a bad opponent this time around. You'll always be my trusted adjutant, Felicia." Then he gently patted her on the shoulder.

This whole situation had put her in a difficult position emotionally, and Yuuto wanted to make sure he was considerate of her.

"R-right! Thank you, Big Brother!" Felicia's expression softened, and she replied in a bright voice of heartfelt relief.

"Now then, Father." Sigrún glared off in the direction the masked man had fled. "Do we pursue the enemy?"

The standard practice in warfare was to actively and thoroughly pursue a retreating enemy.

However, Yuuto slowly shook his head. "No, we wait until morning. Everyone must be exhausted from that fierce battle, for one thing."

Even as he said that, Yuuto felt his hands clenching into fists. If he were being honest, he wanted to go after them right away.

Right now the scene playing over and over in Yuuto's mind was that strange vision in the middle of the battle, of a woman and her bewitching dance. Specifically, he couldn't stop thinking of the strange phenomenon that had happened to his body when that dancer had completed the casting of her seiðr.

He couldn't remember the entire incantation, but one line had left a strong impression on him: *"Let the chains of the holy covenant be now loosened, that the imprisoned hungry wolf may be set free."*

Yuuto had been pulled into Yggdrasil by Felicia's seiðr, Gleipnir. It was a magic with the power to capture and bind things of an otherworldly nature.

Most likely, the seiðr called Fimbulvetr had, for just an instant, somehow weakened whatever power was binding Yuuto to Yggdrasil.

Perhaps the reason it had only worked for an instant was because the seiðr's power had been cast not on Yuuto, but on the horses of the Panther Clan, and Yuuto had only been touched by some of the residual energy of the spell's aftermath.

Taken another way, *even just the residual energy* of the spell had been enough to affect Yuuto's body.

There was no mistaking it: That dancer held the key to Yuuto's way back home to Japan.

He wanted to find and capture her more than anything right now. But no matter how desperately they might pursue, the Wolf Clan wasn't going to catch up to cavalry.

What with the use of the wagon fortress tactic and the rapid volley fire from the crossbows, Yuuto's strategies had dealt a fair amount of casualties to the Panther Clan, but their remaining force was still equal in number to the Wolf Clan's.

Moving his army at night, when visibility was so poor, would be far too dangerous. If the enemy managed to get the drop on them before they could stop and reconnect the wagons, they'd be forced into melee combat, and might suffer losses that easily erased their gains from their victory today.

Indeed, logically he fully understood that. He was fully aware of what he needed to do.

Now was the time to rest and wait.

But Yuuto couldn't quiet his thoughts, nor quell his impatience.

"Damn it! And just when I finally, finally found a clue!"

Yuuto didn't manage a wink of sleep or a moment of rest as he waited for the morning light.

Epilogue

The night gave way to morning.

The marshes of Náströnd were filled with the bodies of dead Panther Clan soldiers and horses, but the army itself had vanished.

One could tell by looking just how heavy their losses had been. It seemed that they'd completely pulled out during the night, having judged that it was too dangerous to continue fighting here any longer.

Yuuto cautiously advanced his troops to Myrkviðr and liberated the city, which the Panther Clan had completely abandoned. He and his retinue set up in the governor's offices in the center of the city, resting and recovering from their string of hard-fought battles.

"Hm, I'd like to take advantage of this momentum and keep pressing the attack all the way to Nóatún, but..." Yuuto stared up at the ceiling of a room in the governor's office building, deliberating on his options.

Just like with Sylgr, the city of Myrkviðr had sustained considerable damage and losses. The Panther Clan soldiers had been allowed to run rampant, and aside from most of the food being stolen, a substantial number of residents had been abducted as slaves, including women and children.

And even with their victories in the field, the Wolf Clan itself had gained no new wealth or territory in the process. In fact, from a purely financial standpoint, this campaign had only resulted in huge losses so far.

Even putting Yuuto's personal motivations and feelings on the matter aside, as the ruler of his country, he would prefer to continue on so he could recoup that cost. However...

"There are signs the Lightning Clan is raising an army again..." Yuuto muttered bitterly to himself, the missive from lárnvíðr clenched tightly in his fingers.

The Lightning Clan had been made to suffer a bitter defeat at his hands in their previous war. With the Wolf Clan currently spending all of its resources on

fighting the Panther Clan, they must have seen this as a good opportunity to strike and avenge that loss.

“Urgh, this just had to happen *now*, of all times!” Yuuto shouted and slammed his fist against the wall in frustration.

The majority of his mobilized troops had been deployed abroad on this campaign, leaving the Wolf Clan’s home territory relatively thinly defended.

“If we moved immediately to advance on Nóatún, then captured it and returned as quickly as possible, we might make it just in... no, that logic’s already dangerous on its face.” Yuuto shook his head vigorously and tried to throw that line of thought from his mind. “That dancer girl might not even *be* in Nóatún.”

As a military commander, basing his decisions on wishful thinking was a sure sign that he wasn’t thinking calmly, and he could tell that his own personal motives were too heavily mixed into his thought process to begin with.

Furthermore, as a clan patriarch, Yuuto’s objective first and foremost was to protect the Wolf Clan. Whatever new territory or wealth he might capture abroad, allowing his nation’s homeland to be invaded would be putting the cart before the horse, to say the least.

“If I tried to press onward at this rate, with my mind in such an ungrounded and restless state, I’m sure it’ll only end with Big Brother Loptr pulling the rug out from under me,” he muttered.

Yuuto thought back to his confrontation with his former sworn brother, their first time meeting face-to-face in a year and a half, and recalled the wicked aura that had seemed to emanate powerfully from him.

The man had shown no scruples about trampling over his own men with his horses to use them as stairs, a cold-hearted tactic that he had used without any hint of remorse.

In addition to that, even though he held such a deep-seated resentment toward Yuuto and everything about him, he had been perfectly willing to make full use of Yuuto’s “cheats,” such as the stirrups and trebuchet.

He’d even tried to cut down his own younger sister Felicia, with his full

strength behind the blow.

To put it bluntly, he had acted without a scrap of dignity or honor.

His shamelessness was disgraceful, such a far cry from the older brother figure Yuuto had once looked up to.

That was what was so terrifying about him.

Perhaps he was unseemly. Perhaps he was unsightly. But the type of people who accomplish difficult, great things tended to be just that sort of person — someone with such a strong tenacity, even obsession, that they could act without regard for how others might view them.

There was a good example from Chinese history, during the war known as the Chu-Han Contention at the end of the 3rd century B.C. The ruler of Western Chu, Xiang Yu, by insisting on maintaining honor and propriety in war, had met his defeat at the hands of the Han leader Liu Bang. Liu Bang had done whatever it took to win, including launching surprise attacks after a surrender or the signing of a peace treaty.

Yuuto's predecessor Fárbauti had also once said much the same thing.

What separated success from failure, what determined life and death, wasn't intelligence or brute strength, or authority or wealth. What won out over all of those in the end was determination, the firm resolve to follow through on all things, no matter what.

"The resilience of a weed" was another way to put it.

Before the events of a year and a half ago, Loptr hadn't had that sort of strength. He had been an elite living his life on a successful career path, appointed to the prestigious position of a second-in-command despite his youth.

That terrible incident had surely affected a great change in Loptr's whole mindset, just as it had in Yuuto's.

"I'm ordering all troops to return home. We need to prepare ourselves for the Lightning Clan." Yuuto passed along his command to Felicia, then sighed, his shoulders drooping.

He'd finally regained his cool. And with that, he had also realized there was another harsh reality he had to confront.

It was the sin he had committed, in terms of his role as patriarch.

He was actually a bit unsettled that he hadn't realized it until now. He must have really been flustered, to the point that he'd had mental blinders on. It looked like his decision to order a retreat had been the right call, after all.

After entrusting Felicia with conveying the more detailed orders to his men, Yuuto whispered "All right..." to himself, lightly slapped both sides of his face with his palms to psych himself up, and left the office in search of a particular room.

He hadn't fully memorized the layout of the building yet, but after looking around for a bit, he was able to reach the room in question.

He gulped once, a little nervous, but still opened the door without any hesitation.

"How are you feeling, Assistant to the Second?" he called out to the owner of the room, who was busy sitting on his bed drinking alone.

The Wolf Clan's Assistant to the Second-in-Command, Skáviðr, had sustained a serious wound during the previous day's battle, and was recuperating here.

Skáviðr had protested that "a mere cut like this is nothing," but the Wolf Clan couldn't afford the risk of losing such a great warrior and general, so Yuuto had ordered him to rest.

Noticing the alcohol, Yuuto was exasperated. "Oh good grief, don't drink when you're so injured. It's gonna mess with your recovery, you know?"

"Well, they say that liquor is the greatest medicine," Skáviðr responded without missing a beat, and took another swig from his cup.

He made a small sound, a grunt of discomfort. His injury was actually causing him a lot of pain, it seemed. The fact that he was drinking the night away like this despite that just went to show how much this man loved his alcohol.

The cup in his hand was made of glass. Skáviðr had taken an immediate liking to using a glass cup for wine, remarking that its transparency let him enjoy the

color and beauty of his drink. Despite his appearance, he was a man with refined tastes.

Yuuto stood in front of Skáviðr and, with a serious expression, at last made his request. “Hey, Assistant to the Second. Could I get you to hit me? Hard. You don’t have to say anything.”

“Master, what are you saying all of a sudden?” Skáviðr stared up at Yuuto, his eyes widened ever so slightly. This man was always the very picture of “cool and collected,” but even he couldn’t hide his surprise at what he’d just heard.

“When the riders broke through our defense at the end, it was because of my poor judgment,” Yuuto explained. “We lost several men because of that. It’s why you have that wound. It’s all because in that moment I was too faint-hearted to be up to the task.”

Yuuto finished speaking through tightly gritted teeth, looking Skáviðr in the eyes the whole time.

Having reflected on what Loptr was like now, he keenly felt the greatest difference between them.

Yuuto had shown in this campaign that he could outperform Loptr when it came to both strategy and tactics. However, in one specific area, he had completely lost: The strength of will and intent to defeat and kill one’s enemy, by any means possible.

At the most critical moment, Yuuto hadn’t been able to stay cold-hearted and dispassionate. His mind had already been thrown into confusion by the prospect of a lead on how to get back home. And somewhere deep down, he hadn’t actually been able to rid himself of the hesitation that came from not wanting to kill his sworn older brother.

When Loptr had launched his surprise attack, if Yuuto had given the order to fire, he might have been able to stop Loptr from breaking through into the formation.

Of course, it was still possible that the outcome might have been the same even if he had given the order. But he couldn’t stop himself from dwelling on it. What if the fact that he hadn’t been tough enough to follow through had led to

the loss of lives that could have been saved?

The flame of a life, once extinguished, never burns again. Those soldiers surely had homes and families that were dear to them. The job of an army's commander included seeing that as many soldiers as possible returned safely to their homes.

It wasn't that he felt that getting someone to punch him would absolve him for allowing those lives to be lost. This was war. He wasn't deluded enough to think he could win without anyone dying. He also understood that it wasn't realistic to expect a human being to avoid making any mistakes.

But in this case, his failure had been due to his weak attitude. He hadn't fully prepared himself for what needed to be done. In order that he not repeat that same mistake again, Yuuto wanted to knock some sense into himself so he could start anew. And the only person he could rely on to assist him in that was Skáviðr, a man who was always superficially polite but actually had no qualms about being frank with anyone, regardless of rank or position.

Skáviðr took another sip from his wine glass, and then shrugged sardonically. "It's true, I *am* the executioner of sentences for the clan. Still, against a force of ten thousand cavalry, an enemy unlike any we have ever faced, we killed two thousand of their men while only losing fewer than a hundred of our own. That was only thanks to your strategies, Master. What, exactly, is there to punish you for in those incredible results?"

"Even so, I... I can't forgive myself. I can't forgive myself for my lack of resolve."

"Hm... I assume this has to do with the fact that the man in the iron mask was Loptr?"

Yuuto was startled. "You figured it out?"

"I realized it the moment I crossed spears with him. He got the better of me this time, but I will kill him next time." Skáviðr spoke matter-of-factly, seemingly without any particular emotion regarding the issue.

Considering that Loptr had been Skáviðr's sworn brother in the clan, and his student in martial arts, it was pretty cold. But that cold detachment was

something Yuuto found amazing, and it made him hate his current self even more by comparison.

“I really am pitiful,” Yuuto berated. “I order my men to kill the enemies in front of them, I even made laws against cowardice in battle, and yet I’m like this. Once it came to war, I needed to cut myself off from any compassion for Big Brother Loptr, but...”

“True, that is what needs to be done,” Skáviðr affirmed coolly, nodding. “In war, there is no place for compassion for the enemy. If you cannot be cold-hearted, you will not survive on the battlefield.”

They were the words of a man who had made it home alive from countless battles, and they carried a great deal of weight.

“Yeah...” Yuuto nodded, and hung his head low, sighing deeply.

He’d known; of course he’d already known. But only in his head. He hadn’t truly felt it, because he hadn’t personally experienced the consequences.

He felt his heart sink lower and lower as he reflected on his own uselessness.

“But people will not follow someone who lacks any compassion,” Skáviðr went on. “I make for a good example.”

“Huh?” Surprised, Yuuto raised his head to look at Skáviðr, who chuckled. He was wearing an uncharacteristically soft smile.

“It is true that you have a soft heart, Master. But that kindness of yours has drawn a great many people to you, myself included. That is a fact. I would say that the current prosperity of the Wolf Clan is due in no small part to the strength of your character. They say that a man’s strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Do not torment yourself so. Master, even if lives may have been lost because of your soft heart, they are far outnumbered by the number of people your kindness has saved.”

Yuuto could tell that Skáviðr was kindly praising him, in his own way. But, truthfully, the words didn’t resonate with him. The Yuuto that Skáviðr was describing didn’t match at all with how Yuuto saw himself.

Yuuto slowly shook his head. “I’m not a good person like you say I am, and I’m

not kind, either. Actually, until just a few minutes ago, I hadn't realized my mistake at all because I was so wrapped up in my own selfish issues. I'm an insensitive fool."

"And even so, you chose to confront your guilt over your mistake once you were aware of it," Skáviðr said. "You did not turn your eyes away from it, nor did you make excuses. That isn't something easily done. Normally, many of us push it from our minds, and pretend not to see it. ...Huh. Usually, it isn't in my character to say these kinds of things."

With that, Skáviðr leaned on a cane for support to get to his feet, retrieved another glass from his belongings, and held it out to Yuuto.

"Let us drink together, Master."

"Uh, no, I'm..." Yuuto was taken aback, and found himself unable to respond.

There was no legal drinking age in the laws of the Wolf Clan. Of course, that was because Yuuto hadn't used his position of authority to set one. Even so, alcohol was regarded as a drink for adults, and most people didn't begin drinking until around at least age fifteen, after having been recognized as a grown-up by their peers, a sort of unspoken cultural rule.

Yuuto didn't have any intentions of bringing modern Japanese society's rule of "don't drink until you turn twenty" into his life here, but he also couldn't come to like the way that alcohol clouded his mind.

"Days like these are exactly when wine is called for, Master."

Skáviðr refused to back down, and with that declaration, he half-forcefully forced the glass cup into Yuuto's hands, and poured wine into it.

"I highly doubt that punching you will relieve you of your burdens," Skáviðr went on, pouring some more wine into his own glass. "There are many problems in life that go unresolved, for which people cannot fully detach themselves from their regrets." He raised his glass. "And, in times like those, people instead swallow everything along with a good drink."

Yuuto suddenly got a small sense of one of the reasons this man loved alcohol.

He recalled a time back before they had gone to war with the Lightning Clan, when Skáviðr had cut down a man from the Wolf Clan who had committed an awful crime, and had boasted that he felt absolutely nothing. But of course, that wasn't actually true after all.

He had a sinister look to him, an appearance akin to the image of the grim reaper, but he was human, a person. For the sake of upholding justice and the law, he had to cut down his own fellow clansmen as their executioner, and had become a symbol of fear among the people of his homeland. There was no way he didn't feel anything.

Skáviðr was dealing with his own inner struggles. And, unable to truly fully detach himself from the emotions he felt, he was swallowing them along with his wine, and only showing others a cold mask that he wore. All because he believed that what he was doing was for a better future for the Wolf Clan.

"....." Yuuto silently stared into the glass at the crimson liquid inside.

It was the color of blood. No different from the blood of the men who had lost their lives because of him.

He felt a sense of disgust well up within himself. Still, if he showed hesitation now, he felt like it would be as if he were turning his eyes away from his own accountability.

Yuuto steeled himself, then downed the glass all at once.

"...Ah! It's sour, and... bitter, too."

Yuuto had always been perplexed at why adults loved to drink something like this, something that tasted unpleasant. Freshly squeezed fruit juice tasted miles better, for instance.

But for some reason, right now he didn't find the flavor to be all that bad. In fact, it was even a little comforting.

"Heh, it's only when he comes to know both the sweet and the bitter things in life that a boy becomes a man, Master."

With that, Skáviðr closed his eyes and tilted back his own glass.

Epilogue II

“It would seem that the Wolf Clan has begun to pull back their forces from abroad.” In a room of the central palace of the Lightning Clan capital Bilskírnir, a beautiful woman let out a deep sigh as she read the clay tablet message in her hands.

The woman’s name was Röskva. Like her older brother Þjálfí, she served as one of Patriarch Steinþórr’s most trusted advisors, and her considerable talent was mainly directed towards the Lightning Clan’s domestic affairs.

“I had wanted to be able to take this chance to reclaim a bit of what we lost, but...” Röskva sighed once more. “Well, no matter, we’ll back off quietly this time. Father is still far from fully recovered, anyway.”

Her sworn father Steinþórr was currently still in recovery and receiving treatment for his many wounds. In the previous battle with the Wolf Clan, he’d been swept away by a violent flood and suffered broken bones in multiple places all over his body.

However, true to his alias of Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of Vanaheimr, his body’s natural healing was beastly in its own right.

Though he still felt pain in most of his joints, he was already walking freely around the palace grounds with his usual confident swagger, and at this pace, he would likely be fully ready for action again in less than a month.

“Still, I’m amazed they were so easily able to repel an army of over ten thousand cavalry,” she said. “They have become far stronger than I anticipated. The growth of their domestic economy is also remarkable. At this rate, even were Father to return to the front lines, I have to say that it would be difficult for the Lightning Clan to take them on alone...”

There was no denying that Steinþórr was invincible on the battlefield, the strongest hero in the land. But this Wolf Clan patriarch had also shown himself to be a freak of nature against whom common sense did not seem to apply.

Steinþórr was the type of pure-spirited warrior who gained his life's greatest joy from battling with powerful enemies, and the stronger his rival was, the more he enjoyed it. But for a woman like Röskva, the fact that men took pleasure in that sort of thing was incomprehensible. Her only objective was to ensure that her sworn father became the supreme ruler of all of Yggdrasil.

She had taken upon herself the role of someone who supported him from behind the scenes, doing what she could to find the best method to make that goal a reality.

The man sitting across from her chuckled. "Hmm, I see. Then I take it this means you will seriously consider our proposal?"

He wore silken robes and carried himself with a certain graceful air, quite out of place here in the Lightning Clan, which was known for its brash and vulgar culture.

Röskva smiled back at him. "Yes. I will find a way to persuade Father. I look forward to working with you, Lord Alexis."

"You can count on me. I will serve as mediator for Patriarch Steinþórr of the Lightning Clan and Patriarch Hveðrungr of the Panther Clan to exchange the Oath of the Sibling Chalice. I, Alexis, swear on my very life that I will make it succeed!"

To Be Continued

Afterword

Editor: “We’ve received a project proposal to do a drama CD. Would you like to accept it?”

Taka: “Oooh, ‘mixed media’! We’re finally getting into that cross-platform multimedia stuff! Yes, yes I’ll accept. Of course I’ll accept the proposal!”

Editor: “Right. I see. Then please write up a draft of the script.”

Taka: “Huh?”

And, on that note...

It’s been decided we’ll be doing a drama CD!! And it turns out that yours truly Takayama will be writing the script for it.

And this was almost right after I’d finally talked them into letting me have a publication schedule of four months for volume 5 (at least, that’s the plan), because of how difficult my schedule has become.

Damn it, it was Zhuge Liang’s (my editor’s) trap all along!

That said, having the voice actors breathe life into the characters I created makes me incredibly happy. I want to do the best job I can.

Hello. My usual greeting is a little late this time, but this is Seiichi Takayama. It’s been a while.

.....

.....

Crap, I’ve already run out of things to talk about! Ummm, there are some things I could write, but all of them would be rather inappropriate to write here, if you know what I mean.

And so, without spoiling anything, here's my preview for the next volume.

Going by the classic narrative structure of "introduction, development, twist, conclusion," volumes 1-3 of this series would be the "introduction" arc, and starting with this volume, we've moved into the "development" part.

Up until now, there was more of an emphasis on "acceleration," on ramping up the speed of the plot to keep up the story's momentum. But starting here, I'm planning on dropping the speed a bit and focusing a bit more on the characters and their daily lives in the next volume.

Well, of course that's nothing more than a plan... (Back during my last series, I told them I'd be doing a collection of short stories and sending them the plots, and then partway through, I put in a request to change the plot completely and turned it into a long-form story. So, I've got a prior on my record there.)

The only reason I've been able to do that sort of thing and keep moving forward is thanks to you, my honored readers. After all, this is a business that runs on sales numbers at the end of the day. I hope you'll continue to give me your support and encouragement. And if you find my works interesting, I'd love it if you'll help spread the word. (Laugh.)

Topics... topics... what else? There really isn't anything. Four pages is so long...

All right then, I'll talk about what music I listen to when I'm writing. (Only when I'm writing in a general sense, not when I'm actually *writing* writing. If I listen to music with lyrics while I'm writing, I can't concentrate.)

When I'm driving or taking breaks, I listen to the type of music that I feel matches the image of what I'm working on, or that helps me expand upon that image.

During my last work, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki*, I listened to a lot of songs with female vocals. One of my favorites was "Closing" from the visual novel *White Album 2*.

After switching over to working on *The Master of Ragnarok*, I've been listening to a lot more songs with male vocals. And pretty hot-blooded songs, at that. (Laugh.) Recently it's been a lot of *Kamen Rider* series stuff, though I already liked listening to that to begin with.

“Break the Chain” and “Super Nova” from *Kamen Rider Kiva* are two of my particular favorites. I listened to “cod-E *E no angou*” from *Kamen Rider W* a lot, as well.

These books have cute harem genre cover art, and really it is a harem series, so why did I end up listening to such overly manly songs, I wonder? It’s a mystery.

...And don’t respond with, “You did it on purpose!”

All right, that filled up the page count, so now I’ll move on to the words of thanks.

To my editor. With the trouble that happened this time around, and after what happened last volume as well, I have caused you so much trouble and extra work. I am truly sorry for that. I am also so grateful to you! Counting my previous work *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki*, this makes five consecutive light novel volumes where I start the afterword with a back-and-forth between the two of us, but using you for this sort of gag is an expression of how much affection and gratitude I have for you. No, seriously! All flattery aside, I’ve been blessed with a really wonderful editor.

Yukisan-sensei. Thank you so much for the amazing illustration work you did this time, as well! Thank you for the winter outfit designs for Rún and Felicia. They’re cute!

I offer my sincere thanks to the people in sales, proofreading, printing, distribution, and at the bookstores, and everyone involved in the production of this volume. And most of all, my thanks to you readers who are holding this book in your hands right now.

Now then, I wish you all the best, and hope to see you in volume 5.

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Glossary

Here is a list of the Old Norse titles and terms which appear in The Master of Ragnarok volume 4. In the original Japanese text, they sometimes appear as a descriptive term or phrase in Japanese, with the corresponding Old Norse name in superscript, or furigana. For instance, Sigrún's title appears as the Japanese phrase "Strongest Silver Wolf," and the furigana above notes that this should be read as "Mánagarmr."

A helpful guide to the pronunciation of Norse vowels and consonants can be found at public websites such as wikibooks (https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Old_Norse/Grammar/Alphabet_and_Pronunciation). In cases where the term has a commonly used alternative spelling without Norse letters, that has been included, for example Þórr (Thor).

Álfheimr (Alfheim): A western region of Yggdrasil and home to the Hoof Clan. In mythology, Álfheimr is one of the Nine Worlds and means "Home of the Elves."

álkipfer: Otherwise known as "elven copper," álkipfer is the mysterious and possibly magical material that is used in objects such as the sacred mirror which summoned Yuuto to the world of Yggdrasil. This seems to be a wholly original term, combining the Norse "Álf" with the German "kupfer."

Alsviðr (Alsvið): "The Horse that Responds to its Rider," the rune of the Claw Clan warrior Mundilfäri. Its main ability is to grant its user increased strength, proportional to the user's personal or emotional connection to the enemy. In Norse mythology, Alsviðr (name meaning "quick") is one of two horses pulling the chariot containing the sun across the sky.

Alþjófr (Althjof): "Jester of a Thousand Illusions," Loptr's rune. Like Felicia's rune Skírnir, it grants all-around enhancement and a wide variety of abilities. In Norse mythology, Alþjófr is the name of a dwarf, and the name carries the meaning "Great Thief."

Ásgarðr (Asgard): The Holy Ásgarðr Empire is officially the ruling power over all of Yggdrasil, and Ásgarðr also refers to the region in the center of the continent under its direct control and governance. In Norse mythology, it is the realm of Odin and the faction of gods known as the Æsir (Aesir).

ásmegin (asmegin): A term referring to the divine energy or power that flows through an Einherjar when using his or her runic abilities. In Norse mythology, it more directly refers to a god's superhuman or divine strength.

barr: A unit of measurement in Yggdrasil, equivalent to the weight of 60 bygg (see below). Yuuto determines this to be about 500 metric grams. In mythology, the terms of barr, bygg and vaxt appear in the Poetic Edda in a poem called *Alvíssmál*, as various names for barley used in different realms. Barr is the name used by the Æsir gods, meaning "grain" or "corn."

bygg: A unit of measurement in Yggdrasil equivalent to the weight of 180 grains of barley. In the Poetic Edda, bygg is the name humans use for grain, being the Old Norse word for barley.

Bifröst Basin (Bifrost, Bivrost): The fertile area of land between two of the three mountain ranges of Yggdrasil, containing the territories of the Claw, Wolf, Horn, Hoof, and Thunder clans. It is a major trade route. In Norse mythology, Bifröst is the name of the rainbow bridge connecting the human realm to the realm of the gods.

Bilskírnir (Bilskirnir): The capital city of the Lightning Clan. In Norse mythology, Bilskírnir is the name of the great hall where the god Þórr (Thor) resides, in the realm of Ásgarðr.

Dólgþrasir (Dolgthrasir): "The Battle-Hungry Tiger," alias of the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. In Norse mythology, Dólgþrasir is a dwarven name which roughly means "snorting with rage at the enemy" or "eager for battle."

Einherjar: Said to be humans chosen by the gods, they are people who possess a magical rune somewhere on their body which grants enhanced abilities or mystical powers. In Norse mythology, Einherjar are the chosen souls of brave warriors, taken to Valhalla after death where they feast and fight until the end of days, Ragnarök.

Fimbulvetr (Fimbulwinter): One of Sigyn's seiðr magics, it is a spell which can

free its targets from all fear, turning them into terrifying berserkers. In Norse mythology, Fimbulvetr is a terribly long, harsh winter preceding the events of Ragnarök.

Fólkvangr (Folkvang): The capital of the Horn Clan. Like the Wolf Clan capital lárnvíðr, it is located next to the Körmt River. In Norse mythology, Fólkvangr is a plane of the afterlife similar to Valhalla, ruled over by the goddess Freyja.

Fylgja: One of Sigyn's seiðr magics, it is a spell which allows the user to take on someone else's misfortune. In Norse mythology, a fylgja is a type of spirit that accompanies a person and is attached to their fate. They are often portrayed as appearing in animal form and reflecting the soul or nature of the person in question.

galldr: A type of magic spell practiced in Yggdrasil, where power is woven into music to create various magical effects. Also spelled galdr (plural galdrar), it is a pagan rite with historical roots reaching back to at least as early as the Iron Age.

Glaðsheimr (Gladshiem): The capital of the Holy Empire of Ásgarðr. It is part of the realm of the gods in Norse mythology, said to be where the hall of Valhalla is located.

Gleipnir: One of Felicia's abilities granted by the rune Skírnir, Gleipnir is a spell with the power to capture and bind that which has "alien" qualities. Gleipnir appears in Norse mythology as a magical chain forged by the dwarves in order to bind and seal the wolf Fenrir.

goði (gothi): An official imperial priest who provides over sacred rituals such as the Chalice Ceremony, and a representative of the authority of the Divine Emperor in clan territories. Historically, a goði (also spelled gothi) was a priest and chieftain during the Viking Age.

Gullveig: "The Golden Hero," an alias of the deceased previous Horn Clan patriarch, Hrungrnir. It is also the name of a seiðr magic he had mastered, which promotes a bountiful harvest. He was called Gullveig by his people in appreciation for the prosperity he brought them. In Norse mythology, Gullveig is the name of a mysterious and powerful sorceress and völva, who is burned to death three times by the Æsir gods but is reborn each time.

Hamingja: One of Sigyn's seiðr magic spells, it allows her to give her own luck

to someone else. Hamingja is one word for “luck” in Old Norse, and in mythology, was a type of guardian angel spirit for a person or family line, that granted them good fortune and happiness.

Hati: “Devourer of the Moon,” the rune which grants Sigrún the ferocity and senses of a wolf, as well as extraordinary skill in combat. Hati also appears in Norse mythology as the wolf Hati Hróðvitnisson, the child of Hróðvitnir (Fenrir). Hati is destined to devour the moon during Ragnarök, and is known by the alternate name Mánagarmr.

Helheim: A southern region of Yggdrasil, far to the south of the Lightning Clan territory. In Norse Mythology, Helheim is one of the Nine Realms, a land of the dead deep underground also called Hel. It thus shares the same name as the goddess Hel who rules over that realm.

Himinbjörg Mountains (Himinbjorg): One of the two mountain ranges that border the Bifröst Basin. Known in Norse mythology as the place where the god Heimdallr keeps watch.

Hliðskjálf (Hlidskjalf): The name of the sacred tower in Iárnviðr housing the divine mirror, where Yuuto first arrived in Yggdrasil. Several other major cities in Yggdrasil also have sacred towers referred to as Hliðskjálf. In Norse mythology, it is the name of the high seat of the god Odin, a place from which all realms can be seen.

hörggr (horgr): A sanctuary or an altar, such as the one at the top of the sacred tower Hliðskjálf.

Hrímfaxi (Hrimfaxi): “Frostmane,” Váli’s rune. In Norse mythology, Hrímfaxi is the horse belonging to Nótt, the goddess of night, and its name also means “frost mane” in this case.

Hróðvitnir (Hrothvitnir): “The Infamous Wolf,” a second name earned by Yuuto after rumors spread of the Tragedy at Van (see Vánagandr below). In Norse mythology, this is one of the names of the monstrous wolf Fenrir. Fenrir is foretold to play a large role in Ragnarök.

Iárnviðr (Iarnvid, Jarnvid): The capital of the Wolf Clan, located on the eastern side of the Bifröst Basin. It is also often spelled as Járnviðr and roughly means “Iron-wood.” It appears in Norse mythology as a forest east of Miðgarðr

that is home to trolls and giant wolves.

Ívaldi (Ivaldi): “The Birther of Blades,” Ingrid’s rune of blacksmithing. Ívaldi is also the name of a dwarven blacksmith in Norse mythology whose sons forge several legendary items for the gods.

Körmt River (Kormt): One of two rivers running through the Bifröst Basin and most of the clan territories within it. It is the southern river, and the northern one is the Örm River. In mythology, they are the names of two rivers the god Thor wades through every day to visit Yggdrasil.

Laegjarn: The nickname for Yuuto’s model of smartphone, the LGN09. This word also appears in Norse mythology as a magical chest with nine locks containing the magic weapon Lævatein.

Mánagarmr (Managarm): “The Strongest Silver Wolf,” Sigrún’s title, given only to the fiercest, most skilled warrior of the Wolf Clan. In mythology, this is also another name for the wolf Hati.

Miðgarðr (Midgard): A northern region of Yggdrasil beyond the Himinbjörg Mountains. It is the realm of humans in Norse mythology, commonly known as Midgard.

Mótsognir (Motsognir): The workshop and smithy of the Wolf Clan, headed by Ingrid. Mótsognir is also the name of the “Father of the Dwarves” in some Norse legends.

Múspell unit (Muspell): The name given to Sigrún’s elite cavalry unit. It’s a shortened form of Múspellsheimr (commonly spelled Muspelheim), one of the Nine Worlds in Norse mythology.

Myrkviðr (Myrkvid, Myrkwood): A walled Horn Clan city on the western edge of their territory. In Old Norse, the name means roughly “Dark Woods,” and derivatives of this name are found throughout mythology and history as the naming convention for a dark and dense forest region.

Náströnd (Nastrond): A region of the northwest Horn Clan territory, wet marshland stretching between the cities of Myrkviðr and Sylgr. In mythology, it’s a place deep in Helheim where the dark dragon Níðhöggr lives, chewing on corpses. The name means “Shore of Corpses” in Old Norse.

Níðhogg (Nidhogg): “The Sneering Slaughter,” alias of Skáviðr of the Wolf Clan. In Norse mythology, Níðhogg is an evil dragon or serpent who gnaws at the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil.

Nóatún (Noatun): The capital city of the Hoof Clan. In Norse mythology, Nóatún is mentioned as the abode of the Vanir god Njörðr (Njord), a god of fertility and seafaring travel.

Örmt River (Ormt): One of two large rivers running through the Bifröst Basin. It is the northern river branch. See Körmt River above.

Ragnarök (Ragnarok): Used in the original Japanese text with the phrase “The End Times,” it is a great disaster told of in a prophecy which has been passed down in secret since the time of the first divine emperor. In Norse mythology, Ragnarök is a series of fateful events culminating in a great war, and the destruction and rebirth of the world.

seiðr (seidr): A subset of runic abilities known as “secret arts,” a seiðr is a type of magic much harder and more complicated to perform, but capable of powerful results. Felicia’s Gleipnir is one example. Historically, seiðr was a type of sorcery practiced in Old Norse society during the Late Scandinavian Iron Age, and makes frequent appearances in mythology.

Skírnir (Skirnir): “The Expressionless Servant,” Skírnir is Felicia’s rune which grants her a wide variety of abilities, from enhanced reflexes and proficiency with weapons to the ability to weave magic spells. In mythology Skírnir is the servant of the god Freyr.

Surtsey Volcano: Also known as Mount Surtsey, it’s an active volcano located to the southeast of Íárnviðr in the Þrúðvangr Mountains. The area at the base of Mount Surtsey is known for its hot springs. In the real world, Surtsey is the name of an island off the southern coast of Iceland, its name meaning “Surt’s Island” in Icelandic. It’s named for Surtr, a giant in Norse mythology who wields a flaming sword.

Svaðilfari (Svadilfari): “The Unlucky Traveler,” Sigyn’s rune. She can use its power to cast magics that affect fortune and misfortune. In Norse mythology, Svaðilfari is the name of a magical stallion that helped build a defensive wall around Valhalla, and later fathered the legendary horse Sleipnir.

Sylgr: A walled Horn Clan city east of Myrkviðr. In mythology, it's the name of one of the rivers emerging from a wellspring called Hvergelmir, in the icy realm of Niflheimr.

Valaskjálf Palace (Valaskjalf): The palace of the Divine Emperor, located in the imperial capital Glaðsheimr. In Norse mythology, it is one of the great halls of the god Odin.

Valhalla: A plane of the afterlife, it is the destination of brave souls who fall in battle. In Norse mythology, Valhalla is ruled over by the god Odin.

Van: A town that was once part of Claw Clan territory, it is said to have been burned to the ground and its citizens killed by the Wolf Clan. In Old Norse, “Ván” can also mean “hope.”

Vánagandr (Vanagand): “The Tragedy at Van,” this is the name by which characters in Yggdrasil refer to the destruction of the town of Van and the massacre of its citizens. In Norse mythology, it is also one of the many names of the monstrous wolf, Fenrir.

Vanaheimr (Vanaheim): A region of Yggdrasil south of the Bifröst Basin along the western coast of the continent, beginning south of the Körmt River. In Norse mythology, it is one of the Nine Worlds and is home to a group of gods known as the Vanir.

vaxt: A primitive school in Yggdrasil also called a “House of Tablets,” that teaches reading, writing, and arithmetic. In the Poetic Edda, vaxt is the word used by the Vanir gods for barley, meaning “growth” in Old Norse. The phrase “house of tablets” isn't Norse in origin, and instead originally comes from the Sumerian word for a scribal school, eduba/edubba.

Völva (Volva, volva): A völva is a type of female shaman or seer in Norse religions. In Norse mythology, they are said to possess powers of prophecy that even the gods rely upon. In this series, “Völva” is the name of a specific seer who gave a prophecy predicting a disaster to befall the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. See Ragnarök above.

Prúðvangr Mountains (Thrudvang): One of the three great mountain ranges forming what is known as the “Roof of Yggdrasil,” the Prúðvangr Mountains form the southern border of the Bifröst Basin, and the eastern border of the

Vanaheimr region. In Norse mythology, Þrúðvangr is the name of the area of Ásgarðr where the god Þórr resides in his great hall, Bilskírnir.

Þrymheimr Mountains (Thrymheim): One of the three great mountain ranges forming the “Roof of Yggdrasil,” the Þrymheimr Mountains lie to the east of the Himinbjörg Mountains. In Norse Mythology, Þrymheimr is a location in Jötunheimr, the realm of the giants, home to a giant named Þjazi (Thiazi) who famously kidnapped the goddess of youth, Iðunn (Idun).









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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 4

by Seiichi Takayama

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