

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blessed of *Einherjar*

6

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN





"Ah, err, sorry about that. You just really resemble someone I know, so..."

"You know, you are quite rude, considering we've only just met."

"Ahh, no, she's just a girl from out in the countryside."

"Oh, someone who resembles me? It must be someone of quite high birth, then."

"Hm-hm." Rifa stretched her back tall and brushed her hair to the side, making sure to show off her attire.

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"Ohh. So
this is the
hot pot
stew of
lárnviðr."

"Heh... hee hee hee...
that's right... who would
bother approaching a
woman in her twenties,
anyway? Hee hee... heh
heh heh heh...."

Wh-what's
wrong, Felicia?

A LIVELY, LATE-NIGHT PARTY AFTER THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL.


"...Here
you are,
Father."

JUST WHAT COULD THIS LEAD TO...?!



**"All
right,
who's
next?!"**

Steinpórr thrust out his iron hammer and screamed, and the pale-faced Wolf Clan soldiers on the front line pulled backward.



**"Well, if we
can't fight
him and win...
we'll just have
to win without
fighting him."**

The corner of Yuuto's mouth curled upwards into an impish smirk.



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INTERLUDE

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Characters

A young woman with long, flowing blonde hair, wearing a light-colored, fringed dress with a high collar and a small crown-like headpiece.

Felicia

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

A young woman with short, spiky blonde hair, wearing a dark, fringed tunic with a high collar and a small crown-like headpiece.

Sigrún

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

A young man with short, dark hair, wearing a dark, high-collared tunic with a small crown-like headpiece.

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.

A young woman with short, spiky blonde hair, wearing a dark, fringed tunic with a high collar and a small crown-like headpiece.

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 young woman with short, dark hair, wearing a light-colored, fringed dress with a high collar and a small crown-like headpiece.

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 Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.



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

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. They are wearing similar dresses with a dark sash and a small bow on the shoulder.

Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch. Kristina 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, light-colored hair and bangs. She is wearing a dark dress with a light-colored sash and a necklace.

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 person with long, light-colored hair, wearing a dark cloak with a light-colored sash and a mask. They are holding a long sword.

Hveðrungr

The masked patriarch of the Panther Clan, his true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth. He is an Einherjar with the rune Alþiofr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions.



A black and white illustration of a young man with dark, spiky hair. He is wearing a dark vest over a light-colored shirt and a dark sash. He is holding a large sword.

Steinþórr

Patriarch of the Lightning Clan. An Einherjar in possession of two runes. It is said there are only a few such people in all of Yggdrasil.



MIDGARDR REGION

PANTHER CLAN

HIMINBJÖRG MOUNTAINS

WOLF CLAN

IÁRNVÍÐR

ÁLFHEIMR REGION

FORT GASHINA

HOOF CLAN

LIGHTNING CLAN

ÞRÚÐVANGR MOUNTAINS

VANAHEIMR REGION

MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

PROLOGUE

The wavering lamp flame illuminated the room dimly, with a slightly reddish tinge.

The air was thick with the smell of two bodies' worth of sweat and pheromones mixed together; it was that scent particular to the aftermath of a man and woman's intimate relations.

"Hahhh..." The woman lifted her sweaty body up off of the bed with a sigh that was equal parts languor and contentment.

She glanced over at the man who was still asleep with his back to her.

She was aware that this man did not love himself, not even in the slightest. He held no value to himself except as a tool for accomplishing his objectives.

However, the woman thought that was perfectly fine.

A conqueror had no need for affection, self or otherwise.

The woman liked men who were strong.

She liked men who were intelligent.

And above all, she liked a man who burned with ambition.

She would find such a man and support him, assisting him until the day she would see him become ruler over all.

That was her dream.

The old fools in her clan always said that a woman's happiness was in being loved and cherished by others. But this woman felt the opposite way.

She wanted to find a man she deemed worthy, one whom she could love and cherish. If that worthy man then rose to even greater heights, there would be no greater happiness for her than that.

Once she had judged him to be worthy, she would support her man in any way she could, in public and from the shadows. One day, she swore in her

heart, she would make him into a supreme ruler.

She was prepared to become any manner of demon for her man's sake. She was prepared to do *anything* she had to do for him.

Even if such a thing went against his wishes.

ACT 1

“Do not presume to touch me, lout!” Rífa glared down upon the drunken tavern patron who had just fallen to the floor on his backside.

She was a beautiful young girl with hair as pure white as the snow. Her body was draped in various places with ornamentation made from precious metals, indicating her high status.

Incidentally, “Rífa” was an affectionate nickname normally only permitted to a very few select people; her full name was Sigrdrífa. She was, in fact, the thirteenth divine emperor of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

Under normal circumstances, the sort of lowlifes who would frequent a run-down tavern like this would never be permitted the chance to lay eyes on one such as her, much less touch her.

Just the chance to speak directly to her and hear her voice was the height of good fortune, and yet this man had dared to grasp her by the shoulders and bring his lips close to hers.

It was an act so despicable that even death would not absolve the crime.

As far as Rífa was concerned, this man should be eternally grateful that he had only been thrown to the floor.

“Whaaat?!” The drunken man’s face had already been flushed, but now his anger turned it an even deeper red, and with a yell, he stood indignantly to his feet. He didn’t seem to have reflected on his actions at all.

“Honestly, this is even more horrible than the tales I’ve heard.” Rífa sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “No one here but you tawdry, vulgar lot.”

She couldn’t stand the foul air that permeated this place. Just breathing it seemed to cloud her mind. Frankly, even just being here made her feel unpleasant.

It would seem that perhaps she should indeed never have come here, just as

her two attendants had said.

“Huuuh?! I don’t know who you think you are, but you’ve gotta lotta nerve talkin’ like that, bitch!” the man yelled with a snarling voice, and glared at her as if trying to intimidate her. Apparently he couldn’t stand Rífa’s air of confident composure.

As if the man’s voice were a signal, a bunch of other drunk patrons left the bar and came out to join them outside the entrance of the tavern. They began to surround Rífa. It would seem that the shouting man was their leader.

She was now surrounded by at least five drunken men. In this situation, a normal girl would unmistakably be terrified, but Rífa remained calm and unconcerned.

She was a special kind of Einherjar, of which it was said there were only two in all of Yggdrasil: She held two runes.

Against men of this low caliber, she was confident she could handle herself even if there were ten of them.

I suppose I shall start with the one who’s wailing and making a racket, she thought to herself. But before she could make her move, a young man’s voice rang out.

“Wait, wait! Everyone calm down!”

The voice was young enough that it felt out of place in this environment.

Rífa couldn’t see well due to the wall of drunkards blocking her line of sight, but this new man must have heard the commotion and come running.

The drunk men’s anger wasn’t the type to be soothed by the scolding of some boy.

“Huuuuh?! What the hell do you want?!” one of them yelled.

“If you’re tryin’ to get in our way, we’re gonna start with you!”

Just as she’d predicted, the interruption only added fuel to their fire.

That said, this young man was laudable enough for having tried to intercede in this sort of situation. Rífa did not want to get him involved, if possible. And

she was supposed to be traveling incognito, to begin with.

I should just wrap this whole thing up as quickly as possible.

With that thought, Rífa took a deep breath and began to increase the flow of magical energy in her body...

“Be silent.” The shout of a young girl rang out like a peal of thunder. “Does no one recognize who stands before you now?! Behold, the august lord of our Wolf Clan, the eighth patriarch Yuuto Suoh!”

Rífa jerked with surprise, and the magical power she had been gathering dispersed instantly.

It wasn't the loudness of the voice that had surprised her. Well, no, that *had* also startled her a bit, but a thing like that wouldn't be enough to cause her to lose control over her magic; Rífa was not so lacking in skill.

What had broken her concentration was the name the girl had spoken.

Yuuto Suoh, Eighth Patriarch of the Wolf Clan. It was the name of the man whom the upper echelons of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire had determined to be the “Black One,” without a doubt.

Was he here now, in this very place?

“Huuuuh? Don't be stupid!” a drunkard yelled.

“Yeah, you think our lord patriarch would be out here at some run-down tavern in the middle of the... gaah?!”

“Oh! Ohhh! It's...!”

In a shift from their angry and skeptical protests, the drunkards' voices now began to quiver with fear.

The young girl's voice rang out again, as if she had been watching the men's reactions to gauge the right timing.

“You stand before your lord and patriarch. All of you show insolence. Kneel! Kneel, and bow your heads!”

“Y-yes, ma'am!!”

The drunk men all cried out their response in near unison, and dropped to

prostrate themselves on the ground. They did so with such force that they were practically slamming their foreheads to the ground.

Just that display was enough to see just how revered and feared by these men the Wolf Clan patriarch was.

Now that there was no more human wall blocking her view, Rífa unintentionally locked eyes with the young man.

From what she could see, there didn't seem to be anything particularly special about him.

He was perhaps about a year or two above her in age. He was a bit tall, but on the thin side, and not very strong-looking. His face also didn't have much intensity to it; in fact, it looked like the face of someone mild-mannered and kind.

This was the man who was supposedly going to destroy the empire, so she had imagined a more vicious sort of face. Frankly, it was a bit of a letdown.

If there was anything that stood out worth mentioning about him, perhaps it was his hair and eyes; they were so black that they blended in with the darkness of night, almost sinister-looking.

"Wha...?!" As for the Black One, he was staring at Rífa with a shocked expression. It was like he was looking at something he couldn't bring himself to believe.

Still, that was something Rífa was long since used to.

Hmph, no doubt he is shocked by the color of these accursed eyes and hair. How quaint, when you are much the same, Black One. Rífa couldn't suppress a self-derisive smirk as she thought this.

However, what next came out of the Black One's mouth went completely against her expectations.

"Mitsuki...?" He whispered it as if in a daze, but the word was unfamiliar to Rífa's ears.

She searched her memories, but couldn't say she'd ever heard it before.

"...Mi-tsu-ki? What does that mean?" Rífa asked suspiciously, frowning.

The sound of her voice seemed to bring the Black One back to his senses, and he hurriedly responded, “Ah, err, sorry about that. You just, uh, really resemble someone I know, so...”

“Oh, someone who resembles me? It must be someone of quite high birth, then.”

“Ahh, no, she’s just a girl from out in the countryside.”

“You know, you are quite rude, considering we’ve only just met.”

“Huh? ...Oh! No, I didn’t mean to imply that you seemed like a country girl, or unsophisticated or anything like... huh?”

Suddenly, the Black One stopped, and his eyes locked onto Rífa’s garments, as if he’d only just now taken notice of them.

This, too, was a little rude of him, but she would let it pass. This was just how the people out in the rural provinces acted, and so a magnanimous lord would overlook such things.

“Hm-hm.” Rífa stretched her back tall and brushed her hair to the side, making sure to show off her attire.

The clothes she was wearing were mainly made with the rare “sieke” (silk) thread imported from the East, which carried a fine glossiness that left all other fabrics behind in inferiority. The metal fasteners and clasps, as well as the other metal accessories she wore, were all of pure gold, and the brooch at her chest was inlaid with violet amethyst.

This was the sort of refined and beautiful outfit that was currently all the rage among the wealthy upper-class in Gláðsheimr, the cultural center of Yggdrasil.

I suppose now you understand who is the real country dweller here? Rífa thought as she gauged the Black One’s reaction.

“You’re wearing such high-quality clothing. Just who are you?” He was wide-eyed, just as she’d hoped.

That reaction provided her with some satisfaction, and so she placed a hand at her chest and introduced herself.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, patriarch of the Wolf Clan. It is

certainly a strange twist of fate that I should meet you here. I am Rífa, granddaughter of Sveigðir, head of the House of Jarl.”

There, I haven't told a single lie, she added internally.

Of course, there was a lot of the truth that she hadn't said, as well.

There was great risk in revealing herself as the þjóðann, the reigning divine empress of Ásgarðr. A patriarch ambitious for power might react by seizing her, so that they might imprison and manipulate her to their advantage. But on the other hand, Rífa's speech and mannerisms were such that she could not hope to pass for a commoner.

It was the patriarch of the Sword Clan, Fagrahvél, who had given her an answer to this dilemma. He was particularly close to her because he was her “milk brother,” raised by the same nursemaid as a baby. His proposal was that she pass herself off as a distant relative of the royal family, no more and no less.

The Black One gasped. “Wha?! One of the Three Houses of the imperial family?!”

There were many families with blood ties to the royals, but House Jarl was one of three powerful families said to be the closest to the throne, known collectively as the Three Houses.

There was no ruler of lands in Yggdrasil who did not know of them.

The clan patriarchs who ruled their territories did so with the authority of the þjóðann and the empire as the pretext and mandate for their rule. Thus, using her current identity Rífa did not risk a patriarch seeking to upset things by using her in their schemes, nor would she need to deal with being treated as someone of low station.

“Indeed, *that* House Jarl,” she said grandly. “As proof, here, see this bracelet upon my arm.”

Rífa held up her right arm to show off the bracelet, also made of pure gold. Upon it was the symbol of a bird in flight and a sword, overlaid — the symbol of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. The detail work was intricate, such that one could tell at a glance that this was no fake.

Seemingly coming to the conclusion that this was no joke or deception, the Black One held an arm across his chest and gave a respectful bow.

“P-please pardon my rudeness. A-allow me to once again introduce myself. I’m... er, I have been granted authority by Her Majesty the þjóðann to rule the Wolf Clan. My name’s, uh, I am known as Yuuto Suoh. I’m pleased to make your a-acquaintance.”

At least according to formal hierarchy, this attitude of deference toward her was perfectly appropriate. Rífa was, after all, a daughter of the family directly related to the throne he served under as vassal.

Of course, in reality, the central empire no longer had the power to control these lands, and hadn’t for a long time now. But still, the traditional authority of this hierarchy served as justification and backing for the patriarchs’ rule over their territories, and so they could little afford to ignore it completely.

“Well, in the end I am nothing more than a granddaughter with almost no claim whatsoever to the imperial succession,” she said, lying. “There is no need for you to be too formal with me.”

Rífa nodded with an air of generous composure, and exchanged this formal greeting in practiced fashion. Her smooth navigation of these social formalities was certainly evidence of her high upbringing.

“And so, Lady Rífa, m-might I ask what brings you to these remote lands?” the Black One asked.

“An excursion for pleasure. You do know how they say one should see the world and broaden one’s horizons while young.”

“I see. However, a lady traveling by herself is too... do you not think it too dangerous?”

Ever since Rífa’s introducing herself, the Black One’s — Yuuto’s — speech had gotten a bit clumsy.

Rather than sheer nerves, it was more like he was simply unused to using respectful speech towards others.

Rífa made sure to disregard this and pretend she didn’t notice.

“Oh, I did bring along proper protection,” she replied. “They are resting in our room at the inn right now.”

“Does that not perhaps suggest they aren’t the most qualified guards for you?” Yuuto looked pointedly at the still-prostrating men from the tavern, a troubled expression on his face.

True, allowing one’s charge to be exposed to danger while lounging in safety was hardly praiseworthy for a bodyguard. That said, the two girls traveling with her as protection were currently bound and unable to leave their room... and the one who had done that to them was none other than Rífa herself.

“Ha ha, please don’t blame them for it. I quietly snuck out on my own, without their knowledge.”

Rífa had to offer at least some defense for them, otherwise she would feel sorry for them and their reputation.

Yuuto’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s... how should I put it...”

“Hee hee! Oh, you can be blunt and say it’s a tomboyish thing to do. I don’t mind.”

“Ah... ahahaha.” Yuuto laughed dryly, and averted his eyes.

It seemed that was indeed what he’d been thinking.

“Well then, your guards must surely be worried about you. I shall escort you back to your inn.”

“O-oh, yes.” Rífa had been a picture of composure thus far, but for the first time, a twitch of anxiety passed over her face.

She had come to investigate this tavern because she’d been unable to suppress her curiosity, but she hadn’t given any thought at all to what would come after.

If she were to go back now, her two bodyguards would surely still be furious with her.

Of course, they wouldn’t be able to yell at Rífa or insult her to her face, but without a doubt, a parade of well-meant scolding and lectures was awaiting her. In the worst case scenario, she might possibly even be forcibly sent back to

Valaskjálf Palace.

That, more than anything, was something she could not bear. This was her first, and last, chance to travel in the outside world. She couldn't let that end here, like this.

Rífa began to regret, all too late, that she hadn't been more deliberate and careful with her choice of actions.

"Father, if I may." A small girl appeared next to Yuuto, seemingly from out of nowhere. "Lady Rífa is a noble lady of the imperial family. Knowing this and simply escorting her back to her inn would be seen as lacking manners, and bring shame on the Wolf Clan. I think perhaps it would be best to invite her to the palace and give her a proper reception there."

The girl seemed to be only twelve or thirteen. She had an adorable appearance, but it was ruined by the cold light in her eyes, uncanny and unbefitting of a girl her age. Her eyes were the type that seemed to see right through people, and thanks to that, they gave the girl a much more cheeky and precocious impression.

Judging by her voice, she was the girl who had made the loud pronouncement earlier and silenced the drunkards. She had afterwards remained silent and hidden, likely judging that it would be improper for her to insert herself into a conversation between her patriarch and an imperial noble.

The girl was holding a small animal to her chest: an ash-grey puppy. Likely, she was holding it still to prevent any chance of letting the animal act in a way that offended a highborn lady.

"Hrrm. Huh, is that how these things go?" Yuuto scratched behind his ear in a manner that made him seem quite undependable. It seemed this man was completely ignorant of proper etiquette in these situations.

That was a quality particular to his sort, men who rose to power from nothing. The first impression she'd had of him was still intact. He just seemed too easygoing for someone in his position.

This was the man who had, in the blink of an eye, expanded his clan's territory out from the Bifröst highlands and west into the heart of the Álfheimr region.

She had imagined he'd be someone with more of the aura of a conqueror, with the resolute personality of a man used to making tough decisions. And yet, he wasn't. He was a bit of a letdown.

"I shall have one of my people send word to the inn that Lady Rífa will be extended full hospitality at the palace, and as such, they need not worry for her," the young girl said.

Yuuto nodded. "Okay, then I'll leave that in your hands, Kris."

"Yes, Father." The young girl gave them both a respectful bow. As she did so, Rífa's eyes met hers.

In that instant, the girl winked meaningfully at Rífa.

"Hm." Rífa's eyes narrowed.

I see... She sensed my reluctance to return to the inn, and that was why she interrupted to offer her suggestion. She might seem a bit impertinent, but this girl is quite good at paying attention to others.

Rífa found herself deciding to accept the kindness that had been offered her.

"Yes, that sounds good," she said. "I shall put myself in your care."

"Hmm, it's more meager than I expected..." Rífa muttered to herself as she looked up at the Wolf Clan's palace.

First, it wasn't nearly spacious enough. She could see just about the entire breadth of the palace grounds looking in from in front of the main gate.

And the main palace building itself looked so small and shabby.

Even their Hliðskjálf, the sacred tower that was a symbol of major cities, was lacking in height. It was perhaps only about half as tall as the one in Glaðsheimr.

Rífa found herself worrying offhandedly whether the prayers of the people here could even reach the gods with a tower that short.

"Ha ha, please don't compare us to Valaskjálf Palace," Yuuto responded with a wry laugh and a shrug of his shoulders.

Apparently Rífa's quiet remark to herself had reached his ears. She hadn't

meant for him to hear it, and got a little flustered.

“M-my apologies. I assure you, I don’t think it a bad palace. It isn’t bad, but just, for the Wolf Clan whose rapid progress and prosperity has become famous even back in Glaðsheimr, it stood out.”

“Mmm. Well, there have been many more pressing matters I’ve been occupied with up until now. But you are right. Now that we have so many more people there, it has become a bit cramped, so sooner or later, we should consider expanding the... huahhh... agh, so sorry about that.” Mid-sentence, Yuuto started to break out into a yawn, then quickly clamped down on it and apologized.

The more Rífa talked with this young man, the more he seemed to be exactly like her first impression of him: a calm and gentle person... or, to put it more critically, thoughtlessly carefree.

Certainly some excuse could be made for the fact that it was so late at night, but even so, she wondered how he could let himself be so unfocused in front of an imperial noble like this.

No, perhaps this is just the current state of things in the empire, she thought solemnly. Already, in terms of both actual territory under its control and actual soldiers under its command, the Wolf Clan had become more powerful than the imperial administration ruling from Ásgarðr.

Though the same might not apply to the þjóðann herself, perhaps he no longer felt the need to go out of his way to curry favor when dealing with a mere distant relative of the throne.

The several guardsmen manning the main gate to the citadel and palace grounds all greeted Yuuto in unison, and came to a crisp attention.

“Welcome back, Lord Patriarch!”

So he is the real thing, at least, Rífa reflected. She had to admit that at some point, she had started having suspicions about whether the young man might be some kind of impostor.

Of course, she was aware of the fact that people were often not what they appeared to be at first glance...

As the group passed through the gate, they were met by an incredibly beautiful woman with golden hair and blue eyes. “Welcome home, Big Brother. Did you enjoy your nighttime walk?”

Rífa had rarely seen a woman of this level of beauty, even among the halls of Valaskjálf Palace. Even Rífa found herself temporarily captivated.

“Hi, Felicia, I’m ba— um... are you maybe, uh, mad at me or something?” Yuuto had started to raise his hand to casually return the greeting when his expression suddenly tensed up.

Taking a harder look at the beautiful woman, it was true that while she wore a graceful, ladylike smile, there was a somewhat annoyed hint to the stare she pointed at Yuuto.

“Yes, a bit,” she said. “When you go out to town, not only are you not bringing me, your personal guard, you seem to be going exclusively with Kris as of late.”

“Well, that’s just because her ability is the most ideal for walking around town, that’s all.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” the golden-haired beauty said with a bit of a sulk in her tone, and puffed up her cheeks in a way that was quite cute.

Rífa’s eyes widened. This incredibly beautiful woman... it seemed she wasn’t serving Yuuto for the sake of any wealth or power he might grant her, but due to the fact she’d fallen head over heels for him.

Even just observing from the sidelines like this, that was immediately clear, and what’s more, the woman seemed to be making no attempt to conceal it.

The golden-haired beauty, taking greater notice of Rífa at last, was looking at her with a troubled expression. “Um... aside from that, Big Brother, who is this person? How should I put this, her appearance is...”

Rífa reflexively assumed that the woman must be curious about the strange colors of her hair and eyes, but...

“Yeah, she does look just like Mitsuki, but she’s a different person,” Yuuto responded, his shoulders drooping.

Once again, she had been mistaken for this girl who supposedly looked just like her.

“This is Lady Rífa, who’s come from Ásgarðr,” Yuuto said. “She’s a lady of House Jarl, one of the Three Houses.”

“Jarl...!” The golden-haired woman gasped, then hurriedly grasped the hems of her skirt and gave a curtsy. “Th-though my rudeness was out of ignorance, please forgive me. I am Felicia, sworn younger sister of Patriarch Yuuto Suoh of the Wolf Clan, and I serve as the head of his sibling subordinates.”

“And I am Rífa, if you’ll pardon the repeated introduction. It is a pleasure. May we get on well.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The basic introductions being finished, Yuuto piped up as if he’d suddenly just remembered. “Ah, that’s right. Felicia, please have a room prepared for Lady Rífa.”

“Yes, Big Brother. Then, Lady Rífa, if you would come this way.”

“Mm.” Rífa nodded and began to follow Felicia, who gestured towards a path for them to follow.

Felicia began to lead the way with slow, graceful steps. Every one of her movements seemed to flow into the next, indicating her level of skill and practice. It was enough to make Rífa want her as her own personal lady-in-waiting.

Afterwards, perhaps due to the fatigue from all that had happened, once Rífa had been led into her guest room, she quickly fell fast asleep.

As she did so, her heart still trembled with thoughts of the exciting outside world.

After watching Yuuto, Felicia and Rífa enter the palace grounds, Kristina stood alone outside the main gate. She then raised both hands into the air, as if in a gesture of surrender.

“Thank you for your hard work as always, Big Sister Sigrún,” she said, turning

to glance behind her towards the darkness at her back.

“What, so you knew I was here?”

From within that impenetrable darkness quietly emerged the figure of a lone young woman. She was wearing a fur mantle made from the pelt of a great wolf known as a garmr, and in the dark of night, it made her seem like she could be the vengeful mother of the wolf puppy cradled in Kristina’s arms, come to take back her child.

She was Sigrún, a fair and slender girl who nevertheless held the title of Mánagarmr, “Strongest Silver Wolf,” which was only handed down to the greatest warrior in the Wolf Clan.

“Well, yes. I am technically a specialist in this sort of thing.” Kristina wryly shrugged her shoulders in reply.

Though Kristina and her sister were both Einherjar, combat was not Kristina’s specialty. In order to cover for that deficiency when Yuuto took Kristina on his strolls around town, Sigrún had taken on the role of watching over them and guarding them from the shadows.

Incidentally, Kristina’s sister Albertina was more talented with a knife, but prone to distraction. She would get so wrapped up with other things during an outing that she’d completely forget to focus on her job, and so she’d already been judged a failure as a candidate for bodyguard.

“You could be more like Aunt Felicia, you know,” Kristina said. “If you are going to accompany us, it would be fine doing so openly.”

“I’m not able to make interesting conversation like you do,” Sigrún answered. “I don’t want to get in the way of Father enjoying himself.”

“I highly doubt that Father would think of you as a hindrance in any way, Big Sister Sigrún.”

“You’re right. Father is kind, after all. However, I am the one most aware of the fact that I’m a boring woman. Watching over him from the shadows is best suited to my talents.”

Sigrún stated this bluntly and without hesitation. She clearly wasn’t saying

this out of humility or self-depreciation, either, which made it difficult to respond to. She was just matter-of-factly speaking what she believed to be the truth.

Sigrún had devoted herself to the role of becoming Yuuto's "sword." She was likely content to be able to protect him, regardless of how.

"But you do know that Father hasn't realized this?" Kristina leveled this pointed query at Sigrún.

In other words, what Sigrún was doing would not see her rewarded in any way, not with merit and promotion nor with favor from her beloved sworn father.

Sigrún, however, responded to this cheerfully. "That's just fine. If Father knew he were being watched, he surely wouldn't be able to relax as he wished."

Kristina, even with all of her keen insight that had earned her the nickname "Little Fox," could not pick out any trace of dishonesty in Sigrún's words. Her heart seemed to contain no selfish motives, only sympathy and consideration for her master.

Yuuto and Felicia occasionally made references to her that compared her to a dog, and now Kristina felt she understood why. This girl was truly a most loyal and faithful dog.

However, Kristina thought with a chuckle, I don't dislike that about her at all.

"So then, what did you need with me?" Sigrún asked. "This is hardly the first time I've guarded the two of you. The fact that you called out to me after all this time means there's something up, right?"

"It's about Lady Rífa. What do you think of her?"

"She's good. After getting a rough look at her, I can tell she's at least as strong as Felicia, if not stronger." Sigrún spoke nonchalantly, as if recounting what she'd had for breakfast, but her words were far from light in their implication.

Felicia wasn't as strong a fighter as Sigrún, of course, but she was at least counted as being within the strongest five warriors of the clan. If someone was stronger than her, that was saying something.

“So I was right, then.” Kristina placed a hand to her mouth, and thought to herself quietly for a moment, frowning.

Rífa had been surrounded by five large, adult men, yet had not shown any signs of fear, only indignant anger.

And afterwards, during the walk up to the palace gates, Kristina had observed the girl’s movements carefully. She moved in a way that appeared to be full of openings for attack, but which actually allowed for none.

If Kristina were to attempt to strike with a knife or the like in an unguarded moment, her calculations only led her to one image in her mind: Kristina’s attack being easily evaded and countered, ending with her being forced to the ground.

“However, it also seems like she hasn’t fully cultivated her skill,” Sigrún continued. “She’s like a big hunk of raw ore right now.”

“Hm, I see.” Kristina nodded, those words striking a chord with her.

That explains it. I sensed that I wouldn’t be able to defeat her, but also got the impression that she was somehow vulnerable.

Because of those contradictory impressions, Kristina hadn’t been able to properly judge the girl’s level of strength. It would seem that asking for an expert’s opinion on the matter had been precisely the right call.

This girl was clearly not just some noble lady. And there were also a few other points that concerned Kristina.

“I suppose I’ll do some more digging, then.”

With that low remark, Kristina’s form melted quietly into the darkness.

“Huh?! There’s a girl who looks just like me?!” Mitsuki let out a startled cry at hearing the news.

Her even, shoulder-length hair was a bit disheveled in places. It was already past midnight, and she had just been roused from her sleep by a sudden call, so a bit of bedhead couldn’t be helped.

She was alone in her own room, so some of the front buttons of her dog-

patterned pajamas were undone, exposing her soft cleavage in a way that was rather daring.

This girl, Mitsuki Shimoya, was a perfectly ordinary student, a third-year at Hachio City Municipal Middle School. Ordinary, that was, with one exception: Her childhood friend had been mysteriously transported to another world.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Yuuto said. “And, like, *exactly* like you. It seriously freaked me out.”

The excited voice of her childhood friend came to Mitsuki’s ears through the speaker of her smartphone. That excited tone showed just how much this other girl must really have resembled her.

“Right, well, it’s a shock for me too,” Mitsuki said. “Especially because you suddenly called me *in the middle of the night* like this.”

“Urk! Uh, s-sorry. I, uh, guess you were sleeping?”

“Of course I was,” Mitsuki replied sullenly. “Lack of sleep is beauty’s greatest enemy, after all.”

Normally, Yuuto would call her sometime between the hours of eight and ten in the evening, and they’d already finished their nightly call hours earlier. Despite that, he’d suddenly contacted her in the middle of the night, and it had nearly sent her into a panic with worry that something terrible had happened.

So after learning that the truth was only that he’d found a girl who looked just like her, she was in the mood to give him a little bit of grief.

“U-um, I really do feel bad for waking you up,” Yuuto apologized. “That’s all I needed to tell you, so I’ll let you go now.”

With clear guilt in his voice, Yuuto began to end the call, and Mitsuki hurriedly stopped him.

“Ah! W-wait!”

Setting aside the problem of the time and urgency of the call, it *did* concern her that there was some girl who looked exactly like her. Besides, she was already awake now, so having their conversation cut off suddenly would bother her just as much.

“Did she really resemble me that much?”

“Y-yeah, she did. Her hair color and eye color were different from yours, but other than that, you might as well be twins.”

“Huh, really? Then... I wonder if maybe that person might be one of my distant ancestors or something.”

“Ha ha, maybe so.”

“What’s this girl’s name?”

“She said it was Rífa.”

“Huh?!” Mitsuki suddenly felt like her heart skipped a beat.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Ah, no, nothing. I just got this feeling like I’ve heard that name somewhere before...”

“Did you maybe used to know someone with the same name, or something?”

“I don’t know any foreigners, Yuu-kun. I think I must have seen it on the internet, but... hmm... nope, I can’t remember.”

Mitsuki tried to search through her memories with her still-sleepy brain, but she couldn’t recall any person in particular with that name.

However, strangely enough, she was still certain that she’d heard the name somewhere before. That feeling bothered her, like an itch she couldn’t scratch.

“Oh, crap, already out of battery,” Yuuto said. “Hey, I really am sorry for waking you up tonight. Good night, Mitsuki. Sleep well.”

“Ah! Wait, Yuu-kun... Geez!” The call had ended before Mitsuki could respond, and she tossed her smartphone against her pillow, angrily puffing out her cheeks.

Yuuto had gotten to say his piece and hang up, and he was likely going to sleep properly tonight. But now Mitsuki was distressed enough that she didn’t think she could get right back to sleep.

It seemed like she was going to have to accept the fact that she’d be pretty sleep-deprived at school tomorrow.

I'm a third-year taking entrance exams, you know! All right then, tomorrow I'm really going to have to give him a piece of my mind.

Mitsuki resolved in her heart to do just that.

In the innermost section of Valaskjálf Palace, at the top of its sacred Hliðskjálf tower, the holy sanctuary from which the divine empress ruled all of Yggdrasil was now fallen into an unprecedented state of chaos.

The cause was the fact that the master of this sacred place, the divine empress herself, had vanished.

And the one who had led the þjóðann out of the palace and into hiding was none other than the man nursed at the same breast as her.

It was incredibly shocking, for this man was also the patriarch of the Sword Clan, one of the four great military clans that had always borne the role of protecting the þjóðann from the oldest days of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

Amidst the panic and confusion, there was one person who showed no signs of worry or agitation.

It was a one-eyed old man with an uncanny sense of composure, his cheek resting on one hand. "So then, do you have anything to say for yourself, Lord Fagrahvél? Any excuse for this?"

"None," Fagrahvél replied stiffly, and shot a piercing glare back at the old man. "I will accept any blame or punishment given. I only wished to listen to and grant Her Majesty's final request of me, come what may."

Everything about Fagrahvél's appearance fit the image of a gallant young warrior, the sort destined to protect a noble lady, from his shining armor and sword to his beautiful face.

The old man gave a short, contemptuous laugh through his nose before replying. "Such heartwarming words of loyalty, we're all impressed, but what about Her Majesty's safety?"

"I assigned her two protectors, both Einherjar, from among my own personal subordinates. I have full confidence in their strength, martial skills, and their

character. Her Majesty herself is also a twin-rune Einherjar. There should be no chance of real danger to them.”

Fagrahvél’s statement was unambiguously confident.

Of course, that was because Fagrahvél could have never dreamed that the bodyguards he’d assigned had been magically paralyzed by the divine empress they were sworn to protect. If he’d known that, he would hardly have been able to stand in front of these men and claim such a thing with such certainty.

The other men present, all important figures in the imperial administration, wasted no time in leaping upon his statement with an almost triumphant anger.

“I would ask that you refrain from spouting such foolishness!”

“There ‘should be’ no chance of danger? Her Majesty should not be exposed to even the slightest risk to her safety!”

“Indeed! Just how do you intend to take responsibility for this situation?!”

Considering their position in all this, Fagrahvél understood that it was perhaps unavoidable that they’d act in this way. He did not flinch at their heated remarks.

“As I’ve said, I shall accept any blame or punishment. Jail me, kill me, do with me as you wish.”

“Hmph, you speak as if that would be enough! Do not presume that your life would begin to be a fitting price for endangering Her Majesty!”

“Yes, that’s right! What an insolent presumption from a mere clan patriarch!”

“If something were to befall Her Majesty, not even executing you a hundred times over would absolve you of that sin!”

Fagrahvél silently withstood the torrent of disparaging shouts that fell upon him. All of this was well within what he’d expected.

It was all worth it, anything was worth it, if it meant he’d managed to help grant the wish of the girl he’d pledged his life and sword to. If it meant he’d granted her the chance to fully enjoy her life’s final taste of freedom.

Suddenly, words of support came from an unexpected place.

“Now, now, let’s leave it at that for now.”

A single remark from the one-eyed old man was all it took to silence the other chief vassals.

Pausing for a moment after they’d quieted, the old man looked them over once, and then at Fagrahvél. “With two-skilled Einherjar from Fagrahvél’s ranks guarding Her Majesty, it is true that there is no chance of danger, barring something extraordinary. You said that she’d absolutely be returning in the spring?”

“Yes, she promised me so.”

“Keh heh heh, naïve as always. Where is there any evidence that such a promise will actually be kept? It is her first time in the outside world; by now, she must be enthralled by all of its stimulating wonders. Can you really guarantee that after that, she will come back?”

“Her Majesty fully understands the weight of her position in life.”

“Keh heh heh heh, now *that* is quite a strange thing for you to say.” The old man chuckled heartily, with a hand on his stomach, as if this was too funny for him to bear. “Just take a look around you right now. I cannot call it anything but absurd that you would stand here and say she understands the weight of her position. She really needs to learn a bit more prudence in her judgment.”

“I must say that your actions and remarks seem to lack proper respect for Her Majesty,” Fagrahvél said, glowering at the old man.

Indeed, it was always that way with him. The old man never seemed to conceal the fact that he did not revere the þjóðann as the person of highest authority, but instead saw her as little more than just a girl.

He didn’t even really act worried for her safety. It was as if he were thinking that if something befell her, they could just replace her with someone else.

His attitude showed the height of disrespect for the crown.

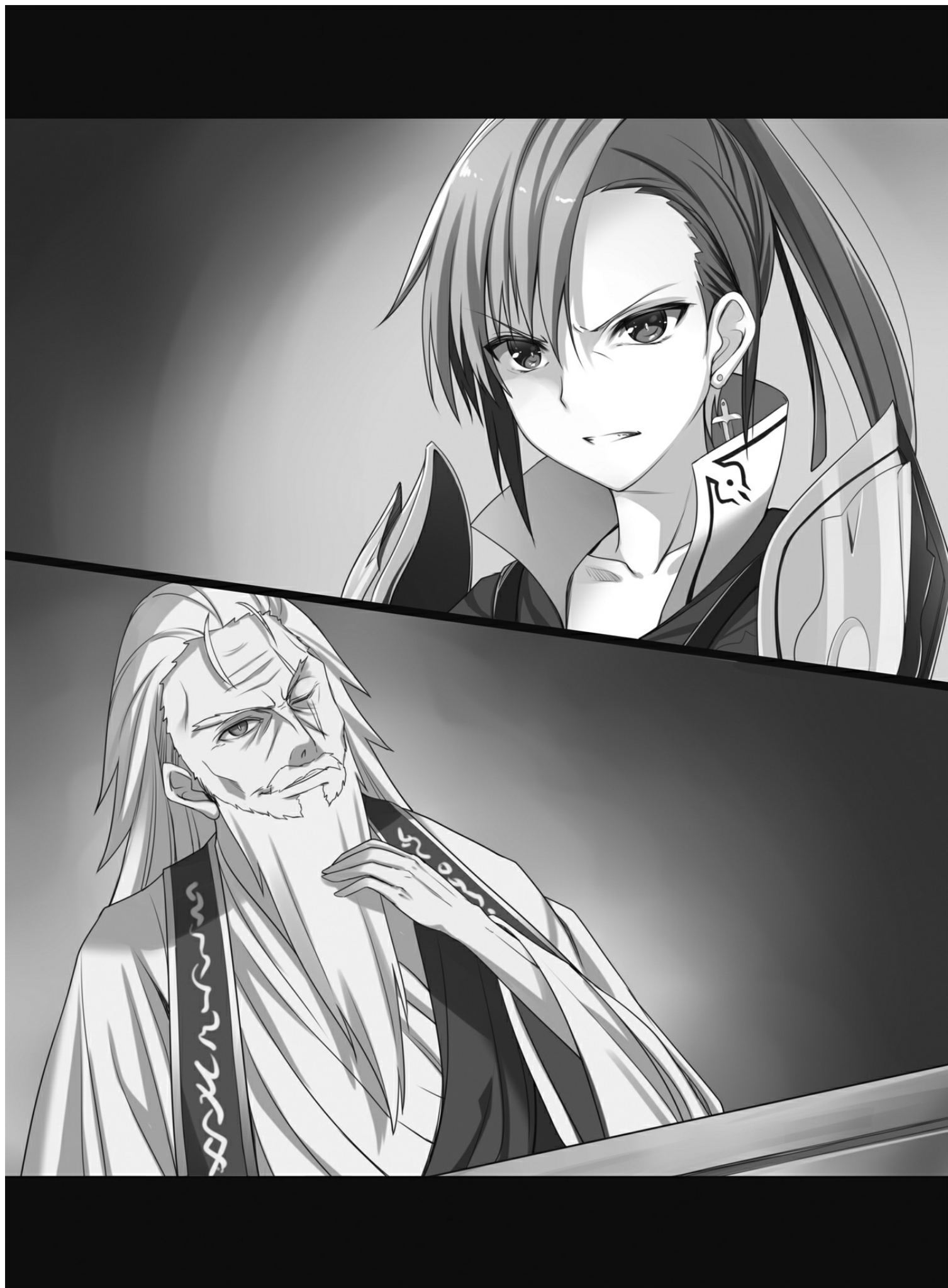
And that wasn’t all. Moments ago, the other high-ranking statesmen had all been furiously heaping abuse upon Fagrahvél, but as soon as the old man had spoken, they’d all gone silent. Right now they were all quietly looking down,

averting their eyes.

It was proof of the fact that this old man had them, and the palace, completely under his thumb.

Fagrahvél glared at the one-eyed old man with contempt. And the old man — Hárbarth, patriarch of the Spear Clan and high priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire — merely shrugged his shoulders as if he hadn't a care in the world.

“I’m shocked that you would cast doubt upon my loyalty. Why, even now, I’m putting several plans in motion, doing what I can to preserve our great empire. Yes, for example... the eradication of the Black One whom, it is said, will one day destroy us.”



ACT 2

“Hm? What’s going on?” Yuuto asked.

It was the day after Rífa’s welcome into the palace. Having wrapped up his official work for the day and heading to the reception hall for his evening meal, Yuuto had heard the sounds of someone yelling loudly at a distance. It was easy to tell who it was; he could easily recognize both her voice and particular manner of speech.

“As I have *said*, I have been given express permission by the patriarch himself! I may explore the palace grounds freely, as I see fit!”

“I understand, my lady, but I must continue to insist that you must be carrying a physical permit in order to enter here!” a man replied.

Yuuto raced to the scene to find, just as expected, Rífa arguing with the palace guards.

“Ahh, right...” Yuuto frowned and scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

Earlier that morning Rífa had told him she wanted to educate herself by exploring and observing things within the palace grounds, and so Yuuto had given her permission to do so.

It would be hard to lose track of her within the palace grounds, and word of the situation had already been sent to her inn, so he’d thought it would be just fine.

However, he’d forgotten to tell her that this particular place was a special exception.

Past this point was an area no outsiders could be allowed to enter. Not even a noble lady of the imperial family.

“Lady Rífa, Lady Rífa!” Yuuto frantically called out to her.

Joy spread widely across Rífa’s face, like the sun from behind clouds. “Ah, there you are, Lord Yuuto! You came at just the right time. Go ahead and set

these men straight. Tell them that I have permission to enter.”

The sudden sight of this made Yuuto wince and tense up. The more he looked at her, the more he was struck by her resemblance to Mitsuki.

Yuuto was a boy, after all. He was vulnerable to that smiling face because it was the face of the girl he loved. Because of that, the next words he spoke required an inordinate amount of mental strength to force out.

“I... I am sorry. I cannot allow you to see what is beyond here, Lady Rífa.”

“What’s that?!” she cried.

“It is the most highly classified secret of the Wolf Clan, so please understand, and forgive me.”

“Hearing you say that simply makes me want to see it all the more!”

“This is the one place that I cannot allow...”

“Really?! Even though I am *begging* you so?!” Rífa leaned in toward Yuuto, staring up at him with upturned eyes.

Yuuto involuntarily took a step backward.

He honestly felt himself coming close to giving in to the temptation, but in the end, his sense of responsibility as a patriarch won out. “N-no, I can’t!”

“Mmmph... If that’s how it is, I shall just have to force my—”

Before Rífa could finish her rather troubling statement, another girl called out from behind the distressed soldiers at the checkpoint and weaved through them to enter the scene. She wore an exasperated expression.

“Hey, what’re you all making such a racket out here about?”

At first glance, this girl looked rather ordinary, dressed like a common girl one might find in town. Her plain clothes were dirty in places, making it hard to see her as the sort of person that would be allowed to mingle with the clan’s high officers in the palace.

But this girl, Ingrid, was in fact the chief of the workshop and smithy which lay beyond the security checkpoint.

As soon as she caught sight of Rífa, her eyes went wide with shock.

“Whoa, what?!” she exclaimed. “Mitsuki?! It can’t be... Miss Mitsuki, you came to this world too?!”

Ingrid knew what Mitsuki’s face looked like. Back before Yuuto’s becoming the patriarch, he and Ingrid had worked together in the forge, and he’d shown her pictures of Mitsuki on his smartphone several times.

“Ah, no, no, that’s not it, Ingrid,” Yuuto said, waving his hands with a bitter and slightly sad smile. “The good lady here isn’t Mitsuki.”

“O-oh. Yeah, I guess she wouldn’t be... wait, ‘the good lady’?” Just as Ingrid had begun to breathe a sigh of relief, she caught notice of Yuuto’s polite form of address. She looked at Rífa with renewed suspicion.

Rífa, for her part, had also gone wide-eyed with surprise. “Dear me! Then you are Ingrid, the world-renowned smith and craftsman? Why, I’ve often heard rumors of your skill even in Glaðsheimr!”

“G-Glaðsheimr?!”

“I see, I see. So then, past this point must be Miss Ingrid’s own atelier. Oh, now I want to see it even more!”

“U-uh, um, w-who are...?”

“Oh, I’ve forgotten to introduce myself. I am Rífa, granddaughter of Sveigðir, head of House Jarl.”

“Ohh, Lord Sveigðir’s granddaughter,” Ingrid said.

“What, you know him?” Yuuto cut in.

Certainly, even Ingrid would likely know of House Jarl, but the way she’d just put it sounded like she knew the head of the family personally.

“He’s always been one of my most important regular customers, going way back,” Ingrid explained.

“Huh, really? I guess it’s a small world, after all. Or, well, maybe not in this case,” Yuuto corrected himself.

As Rífa had just said, Ingrid was famous enough that her name was even

known far away in Glaðsheimr, and House Jarl was likewise known across the land as one of the most powerful families.

It wasn't surprising at all for them to have established a connection or relationship at some point; rather, it was entirely natural for such a thing to have occurred.

"Yes," Rífa said. "Why, take for example this bronze sword given to me by my grandfather. If I remember, he said that Miss Ingrid was the one who forged it..."

"Gyaaah! Stop, stop! Don't show me that, please don't show me that!" Ingrid screamed in a shrill, panicked tone that was very unlike her usual, tough-girl personality, and turned away, visibly shuddering.

"H-hey, what's wrong with you?" Yuuto asked, confused by this strange outburst.

"H-how can you expect me to look at something like that without any shame?!" Ingrid snapped back at him.

That was enough for Yuuto to somewhat get a grasp of the situation.

This girl was a serious and dedicated craftsman down to her bones, and so any of her works she'd sold over the years had always been appropriately high-quality.

However, the Ingrid of today was someone who could create *nihontou*, Japanese-style steel swords that could cut through even iron, swords that even Yuuto's discerning eye saw to be of peerless quality.

This meant that inferior bronze swords must look like dull-edged junk weapons to her now, and so she found it hard to look at any of her past works. The fact that she'd been so proud of them before was akin to a dark past that she would rather pretend never happened.

"Hm, it would seem that one of the traits of a great and famous craftsman is indeed being difficult to please, due to one's high standards," Rífa said, nodding to herself, as if satisfied with what she saw.

Then she looked at Yuuto and gave a short, nasal chuckle.

“Heh! Still, I cannot help but note that this is the third time I have been mistaken for another. As things stand, I find myself becoming most interested in meeting this other girl, this Mitsuki. Where might I find her?”

“Ahh, well, she’s... sort of in a very far away place...”

“Hmm... Now that I think about it, Miss Ingrid also said something which caught my ear. That I ‘came to this world,’ was it?” Rífa’s eyes narrowed, and her strong gaze seemed to pierce right through Yuuto.

Yuuto flinched a little bit at its intensity, but then gave a small laugh and a resigned shrug of his shoulders. “Yes, well, ha ha, I do not think you will believe me, my lady, but in fact, I happen to have come to this world from a different one.”

Yuuto’s light, nonchalant tone expressed just as clearly as his words that he didn’t expect her to believe him, nor was he thinking of trying to persuade her to.

But Rífa pressed him for more details, her expression remaining curious... and serious. “Oho. How did you do so?”

For just an instant, Yuuto’s eyes widened in surprise and he was silent, but he recovered and began to explain.

“Um, well, there was a shrine in my world containing a sacred mirror, and I think it was made from that magical metal you call álfkipfer. I held up an opposing mirror to it, and in that moment, I was transported to this world. At the same time in this world, Felicia was apparently conducting the ritual for the seiðr Gleipnir.”

“Hmm, I see. Would I be right in assuming that there is a similar sacred mirror made with álfkipfer residing somewhere here in lárnyiðr?”

“Ah!” This time, Yuuto’s face broke out in true surprise. He asked in a loud, trembling voice, unable to suppress his hope and anticipation, “H-how did you know that?!”

Rífa giggled and spoke with a casual tone. “Mm? Hee hee! Well, the heart of the empire *is* the most advanced by far when it comes to the study of álfkipfer, seiðr magics, and the divine ásmegin energy which empowers them.”

Ah, now that I think about it... Yuuto recalled that Felicia once told him much the same during one of his lessons.

And back during his exchanging of the Oath of the Chalice with Linnea, there had been something odd about the behavior of the presiding imperial representative, the gođi Alexis... his reactions had showed he at least knew something about the concept of crossing worlds.

“C-could I please ask you to speak with me in more detail about this subject?!” Yuuto approached Rífa and pleaded, his voice desperate. “Anything you have to offer would be appreciated. Please, I would like to learn everything you know!”

He knew that Alexis would only ever dodge his questions; this plea was now his only real hope to learn more.

At first, Rífa stood blinking at Yuuto’s abrupt change in manner. Then a mischievous grin spread wide across her face. “Is that right? Well, if you were to show me around Miss Ingrid’s atelier here, I think that might not be out of the question.”

“Urk...!” It was here that Yuuto realized his own blunder. He’d been far too forward and open about what he needed, and now she completely had the advantage.

“Well come on, what will it be?”

“Ughh...” Yuuto reeled backwards a bit, gritting his teeth with his lips pressed tightly together.

Yuuto was a clan patriarch, responsible for guarding the lives and destinies of all of his clansmen.

If the classified knowledge which lay beyond that guarded corridor were to leak out, it could jeopardize the future security of the Wolf Clan. That was just how valuable it was. It would be unacceptable to even risk the possibility of that.

However, information on how to cross worlds was what Yuuto wanted most of all, what he had been seeking this whole time. Frankly speaking, he was desperate for anything, even a small clue.

“Urrrrrrgh!” he groaned. “I... I am sorry. That is the one thing I cannot do for you!”

After a long moment spent tormented with inner conflict, once again it was Yuuto’s identity as a patriarch which finally won out. Even put into this extreme dilemma, he was ruled by his own self-discipline. That was the kind of person Yuuto was.

“Tch.” Rífa clicked her tongue in conspicuous disappointment.

“Um, Lady Rífa, is there anything else I could offer you that you might be willing to come to a bargain with me to receive?” Yuuto asked desperately. “If there are any of our ornamental glasswares that are to my lady’s liking, I would happily offer them.”

Making this counteroffer, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head low. Even though he’d turned down Rífa’s demand, he wasn’t about to give up so easily.

Incidentally, ornamental glasswares produced by the Wolf Clan were such high-priced luxury items in Glaðsheimr that just one of them sold for enough money to equal a few months’ worth of income for at least several dozen people.

“Hmph... Well, I suppose I shall meet you on those terms,” Rífa said.

“Ah... th-then you will...”

“Yes. I am still indebted to you for your assistance last night as well, after all. Come, I shall share with you all that I know.”

“It is rather vulgar to have to eat with one’s bare hands like this, but... mm, I must say, this is truly delectable!” In the reception hall of the Wolf Clan palace, Rífa voiced her approval as she ate with great relish the novel food that had been brought to her.

The scene was a little surreal: A single, small kotatsu table at the center of the spacious room.

It was the result of prioritizing effectiveness over appearances. The winter

nights in lárnvíðr were far too cold to eat at a table in an otherwise unheated room.

Sitting across from Rífa, Yuuto basked in the warmth of the kotatsu, and sank his teeth into his own serving of the exotic food: a *hamburger*. “Isn’t it, though?”

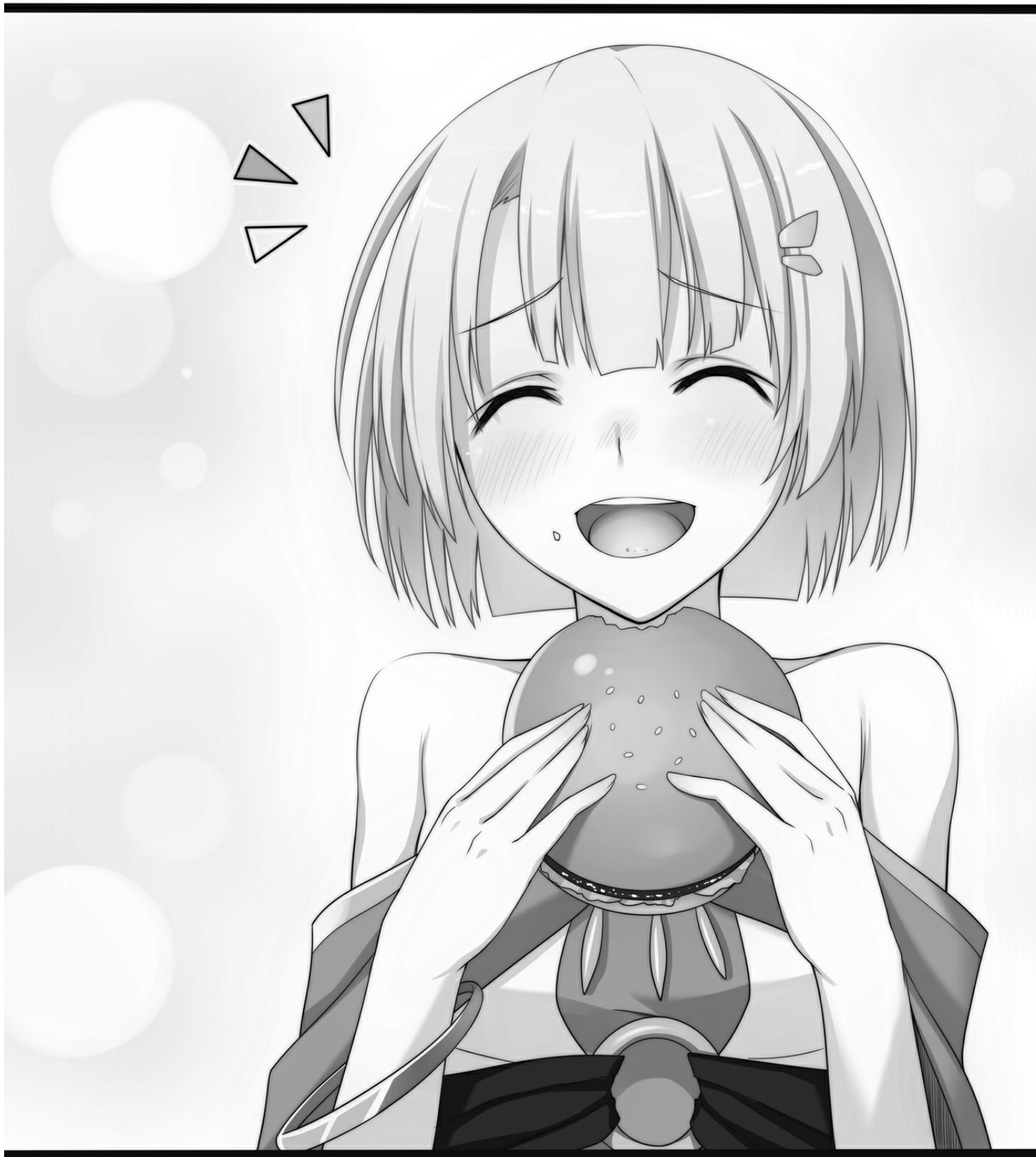
Here in Yggdrasil, there were no tomatoes, nor black pepper or mustard, so it was a completely different taste from what he had been used to eating back in 21st century Japan. However, it had that taste only found in homemade cooking, enough to make Yuuto feel downright nostalgic, and so it had recently become one of his favorite things to eat.

“Just what sort of meat is contained in this, though?!” Rífa demanded. “It is so tender and soft, and very juicy. In Glaðsheimr, I have sampled nearly every variety of gourmet food, yet this is the first time I have tasted something like this!”

“Ahh, that’s pork, my lady.”

“What, *this* is pig meat?! I cannot believe it! Truly? Hmm... well, then, it must be an incredibly rare specimen. I have never eaten anything like it, after all.”

“No, it’s meat from a normal pig, like one might find anywhere,” Yuuto replied.



Of course, aware of the fact that this was a noble lady, he decided to keep silent on the additional fact that it was meat made from the bits and pieces left over after butchering, the “scrap meat.”

He also left out the fact that the bread crumbs mixed in with the meat when making the patties had originally come from leftover bread, recycled as it started to get stale and hard.

Still, all that being said, making hamburgers still required a vast amount of time and effort. After all, the world of Yggdrasil was not industrialized, and so without any convenient machines or tools, one had to make ground meat and bread crumbs manually from scratch each time.

“Hrrm! You wouldn’t dare be deceiving me for a laugh, would you?” Rífa eyed him suspiciously, clearly having difficulty accepting the explanation for this food.

But perhaps that couldn’t be helped.

Historically, the hamburger’s predecessor, the “Hamburg steak,” was said to have its origins in the 13th century, when the nomadic Tartar people had invented a dish made with raw minced meat known as “steak tartare.” This recipe had spread to Germany via the port of Hamburg, becoming popular among the working class, and becoming the Hamburg steak.

Most of the necessary ingredients could be obtained in Yggdrasil, so the recipe was possible to recreate, but it was still a recipe from nearly three thousand years in the future.

After devouring all of her burger, Rífa let out a contented sigh. “Phew. That was quite the delicious feast.”

The area around her mouth glistened with the grease from the meat. That she’d eaten so wholeheartedly as to end up looking that way just went to show that, true to her words, she really had found it to be one of the most enjoyable things she’d ever eaten. All the same, it was also a bit of a blemish on her dignity as a noble imperial lady.

“Lady Rífa, please take this.” Felicia subtly passed her a small linen cloth, unable to let her remain in that compromising appearance.

“Mm?”

“Um, for my lady’s mouth...”

“Ah!” Rífa raised her voice in a slightly immodest cry, and then snatched the cloth from Felicia and scrubbed at her mouth.

Her face and ears were flushed a deep red. As befitting a person raised in the highest levels of society, it seemed she did indeed feel a strong sense of shame when caught out in a lapse of proper etiquette like this.

The first impression Yuuto had gotten of her was that she was a girl who was quite arrogant and haughty, but who also carried a certain air of stately dignity about her, certainly the type of person he could imagine being called a “princess.” However, it looked like she had a bit of a careless and absent-minded side to her, as well.

Compared to a noble that was only dignified and stuffy, Yuuto felt this might make her far easier to relate to, but it was probably something best not to point out or bring up in conversation.

All right, now should be the right time, Yuuto thought, and broached the main topic.

“Now then, Lady Rífa. How is it that you knew that there was also a sacred mirror enshrined in lárnvíðr?”

“A-ah, yes, that. Yes, that was the subject we were on!” Still looking to recover from her embarrassment, Rífa also leapt at the chance to focus on something else, and responded to his question without any hesitation. “In all likelihood, I would say that the mirror in the world you came from is a ‘paired mirror’ to the one here in lárnvíðr.”

“A ‘paired mirror,’ you say?”

“You know how, with twins, it is said that there are times when they can sense each other, even when separated and far away? It is much the same. If the same craftsman creates two mirrors with the exact same shape, following the exact same steps, using álfkipfer gathered from the exact same area, those two mirrors become connected by a curious sort of bond.”

“Th-this is completely new knowledge to me,” Felicia said, blinking her eyes in astonishment. She had formerly served as a Wolf Clan priestess, and was supposed to be well-informed in this area.

That only provided further evidence for Rífa’s earlier statement: When it came to álfkipfer and the phenomena associated with it, the central Holy Ásgarðr Empire held far more advanced knowledge.

“Among the ranks of the Einherjar,” Rífa said, “apparently there are even those who can utilize the bond between such paired mirrors, and communicate with someone far away instantly using them.”

“Ah!” On hearing those words, Yuuto felt a flash of inspiration run through his mind. That description was a perfect match for his ability to communicate with the faraway world of 21st century Japan.

“Oho, it seems that what I just said rang a bell for you,” Rífa said. “Should I assume that you have established a way of communicating with the place you came from?”

“Y-yes, that’s right,” Yuuto nodded.

With this, at least one part of the mystery of why he could contact the modern world had been unraveled. Of course, that gave rise to the new mystery of why one of the paired mirrors was in Japan in the modern day.

Rífa stared at Felicia for a moment, frowning and seemingly deep in thought. “Hmm, still...”

“Um, what is it, my lady?” Felicia asked.

“I mean no offense, but I can sense only a moderate amount of ásmegin from you, nothing more. I would say you are, at best, slightly below average in terms of power as a wielder of seiðr, yes?”

“...Yes. I spend my days keenly aware of my lack of ability.” Felicia looked down with an almost heartbroken expression at hearing Rífa’s blunt comment.

Being able to use seiðr magics at all was a rare and valuable ability to begin with, which meant she was still considerably worthy, but Yuuto knew that saying that at this point would be of little consolation to her.

Felicia was the one who had summoned Yuuto to this world, and being unable to send him back, she felt an incredible sense of responsibility — and guilt — regarding that. He'd told her many times that she no longer needed to concern herself on the matter, but they were clearly not feelings she could so easily part with.

"Hmm. It is just that, magically calling a person to one's location requires a considerable amount of power," Rífa said. "Certainly, I have heard that one can use opposing mirrors to amplify magical power, and that they can have the effect of making the boundary between worlds less definite, but..." Rífa turned to Yuuto. "Even so, with only that woman's power, it should not have been at all possible."

"Um, if I may, is that true even if I followed all of the formal steps of the seiðr, culminating in a full ritual where I gathered everyone's thoughts and emotions into the spell?" Felicia asked rather tentatively, but Rífa responded by shaking her head.

"It would not nearly be enough, not at all. Even for one such as myself, I do not consider it likely I could succeed in such a difficult act alone. It would require at least two additional Einherjar, with their full ásmegin channeled as support."

"Even for one such as yourself...?" Yuuto found himself interjecting. "Lady Rífa, are you saying you can also use seiðr?"

At this sudden question, Rífa laughed and leaned back, sticking out her quite ample chest with pride. "Heh heh! If I must say so myself, I am the greatest and most powerful wielder of seiðr in all of Yggdrasil!"

"O-oh, I see," Yuuto stammered in reply.

Considering that, I sure haven't heard your name before, he thought, but of course he chose not to say it aloud.

As part of his research into clues on how to go back to the modern world, he had long since questioned Kristina about the most famous and powerful seiðr users in Yggdrasil, having her make a list for him. Rífa's name had not been on it.

“Wh-what is that expression?!” Rífa exclaimed. “You do not believe me, I take it!”

“Eh?! Ah, no, that’s not true at all... I, um, just thought that perhaps you might be exaggerating just a little, and, um...”

“Oh, is that so...” The corner of Rífa’s mouth turned up in a crooked grin, and she held her hand out, just over Yuuto’s chest.

Just what is she doing? Yuuto thought, but his answer came in the next instant.

“Læðingr!”

“Grh!” Yuuto grunted as suddenly his body became much heavier.

It felt like a combination of physical weight and intense weariness and pain throughout his entire body, as if he’d just finished running several kilometers at full speed and had absolutely nothing left.

“Wh-what is this?!” Yuuto couldn’t remain sitting up, and fell over onto the kotatsu’s table top.

“B-Big Brother?! Lady Rífa, what have you done to him?!” Felicia raised her voice in a panic.

If Rífa had been holding a blade or some other clear weapon, Felicia would have surely reacted immediately and blocked the attack. But her opponent’s empty-handedness had delayed her reaction.

There was also the fact that neither she nor Yuuto had been thinking that a noble young lady of the House of Jarl would suddenly just attack one of them.

In complete contrast to Felicia, who was completely pale, Rífa was a picture of composure. “Mm? What, I merely decided to show him a bit of my power, that is all.”

She looked coolly at them with eyes that had glowing within them...

“I-it can’t be... twin runes?!” Felicia exclaimed.

“What?!” Yuuto struggled and barely managed to turn his neck so that he could see Rífa’s face. Sure enough, there were two golden runes floating over

her eyes that looked to be in the shape of crosses, or perhaps swords.

A twin rune Einherjar — they were the rarest of the rare, and it was said there were no more than two of them known in all of Yggdrasil.

“That explains how you could do something this ridiculous...” Yuuto grimaced.

With just a wave of her hand and a single word, this girl had robbed his body of the ability to move freely. It was the stuff of real, bona-fide “magic,” like the sorcery of myth.

Of course, Yggdrasil already had its share of other supernatural charms and spells, like the galldr song magics and the ritualistic seiðr. But from what Yuuto knew about them, their effects were often convenient, but minor or subtle, and even sporadic in their effectiveness. Even some of the more valuable seiðr rituals had a limit to their effects or success rate that put them as only just better than the placebo effect.

The difference between those seiðr and what had just happened was self-evident and stark.

But it also made perfect sense to Yuuto.

Even a single rune endowed its bearer with a great deal of divine protection and powers. This was why, throughout all the many clans of Yggdrasil, Einherjar were almost without exception in positions of high status or authority.

A twin-rune Einherjar received that divine blessing twice over. It would grant them a level of power that transcended the bounds of reason for what was considered human ability.

Yuuto was already familiar with one other twin-rune Einherjar, a man who possessed so much raw power that it was more fitting to call him a monster than a human.

In other words, despite this young girl’s delicate-looking appearance, she had just as much power.

“W-wait, please wait just a moment!” Felicia’s voice shot up in pitch and her pale face looked about to turn green. She was shivering, and Yuuto could hear her teeth chattering; she truly was completely shaken up right now. “It is said

that in all the world, there are currently no more than two people bearing two runes. The first is Steinþórr, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of the Lightning Clan. And the other is the one who inherited twin runes via her bloodline. The most sacred and exalted person in all the world of Yggdrasil...”

“Oh no... urk!” Rífa tried to stifle her own shout by covering her mouth.

However, that more than anything served to demonstrate that Felicia’s speculation was right on target.

No longer able to concern herself with potential disrespect in this moment, Felicia pointed a quivering finger at Rífa, and cried out in a shrill voice. “Th-the þjóðann... Divine Empress Sigrdrífa?!”

The Divine Emperor of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire was also known as the “þjóðann” in the language of Yggdrasil.

At one time, this person had also been the sovereign ruler over all the lands of the known world. And within all of the empire and territories, that person held the one position of authority that was officially and openly passed down via bloodline inheritance.

The reason for this uniquely inherited authority was that the pair of runes were also inherited by blood.

These runes were seen as living proof that Ymir, the primordial Giant God whose body formed the foundation beneath the very earth of Yggdrasil, had entrusted the imperial bloodline with the right to reign over the realm of men. Down through the generations, each þjóðann, without exception, had harbored a pair of golden runes, one in each eye.

Owing to the authority commanded by this sacred mystery, the þjóðann was revered by the people of Yggdrasil. The clan patriarchs also gratefully pledged the crown their deference and respect; after all, as vassal lords, they could invoke the divine mandate of the þjóðann as justification for their clans’ right to rule over the people in their territories.

“Tch, I suppose I cannot talk my way out of this.” The currently reigning divine empress clicked her tongue and glowered with frustration. “Still, to think I

would have my identity exposed after only a single day...”

By contrast, Felicia was far beyond being able to respond to the situation with anything resembling calm. Standing right before her was the most sacred and revered person in her world.

She hurriedly pulled her legs out from under the kotatsu and knelt in a formal and humble posture.

“S-so then, it truly is Your Majesty?” Felicia asked, her body still unable to stop trembling from the heightened emotion.

Seemingly resigning herself, Rífa gave a formal introduction. “Indeed. You speak to none other than Sigrdrífa, thirteenth þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.”

She remained sitting comfortably with her legs in the kotatsu, so visually speaking, there was a certain lack of regal gravity to it.

Altogether, it was a pretty surreal scene.

“When I heard the name Rífa in Your Majesty’s first introduction last night, I merely assumed it was a case of a child having been given a name based off of the name of the current empress, for good luck.” Felicia sighed and shook her head, lamenting her mistake now that she saw it in hindsight.

Naming one’s children after the most powerful or revered figures in society was a fairly universal practice across eras and cultures.

“Well, you were not mistaken in that; the one name is based on the other,” the þjóðann said. “And you may continue to refer to me as Rífa. Technically, I am still traveling in secret.”

“Th-then, what purpose brought Your... what purpose brought you here, L-Lady Rífa?”

“I have *already* told you both, I am traveling for pleasure and to broaden my horizons,” Rífa responded with clear annoyance.

However, objectively one could say it was a bit unfair for her to criticize Felicia for her question.

Though both might technically be part of the imperial family line, there was a

vast difference between being a “distant relative of the divine empress” and being the empress herself in terms of position, a difference that was far too important to ignore in this situation.

A pleasure trip for a week or two would be one thing, but Rífa had stated her intention to remain with the Wolf Clan until the approach of spring. That would mean the þjóðann would be absent from the imperial capital for all of that time; to call such a thing unprecedented would be an understatement.

There were several aspects of this that concerned Yuuto, but at the moment, there was another issue that was much more immediately concerning.

“M-more importantly, p-please hurry and undo this spell on me, please!”

Yuuto’s body now felt so heavy that he couldn’t stand it any longer. He found it impossibly difficult even to push his upper body up off of the kotatsu’s table top. All he wanted right now was to be released from this horrible state.

“Y-yes, that’s right! Please, help Big Brother Yuuto!” Felicia was suddenly reminded of Yuuto’s condition and shouted frantically.

It was quite rare for her to have even momentarily forgotten about Yuuto like this, for he was normally always foremost in her mind. The revelation that Rífa was the þjóðann must have greatly shaken her up and hindered her awareness.

Rífa responded by averting her eyes, and began sheepishly pressing her two index fingers together. “Ahh... well, that is...”

“Wh-what is it?” Yuuto asked. He had a bad feeling about this, and desperately hoped his gut feeling was wrong.

“S-so, as it happens, broadly speaking, there are two categories of seiðr magic. Spells that apply power internally, and ones that apply power externally. The seiðr Læðingr I used on you is one that applies power internally.”

“Right...”

This was all new information to Yuuto, and pretty intriguing, in fact, but the fact that Rífa had started talking about this instead of directly answering his question only made his bad hunch grow stronger.

“So in order to undo the technique, one would need a spell which applies

equivalent power externally, so that the opposing forces cancel each other out. However... well, people have varying aptitudes, as you know..."

"R-right..." Yuuto could already predict the words he would hear next. However, he patiently remained silent and listened, betting his last hopes on being surprised.

"Those with an aptitude for internally-focused magics tend to be poor with the external ones, and likewise the reverse. I am, um, more adept with internal magic, you see?"

"So in other words, you can cast the spell, but you cannot undo it?" he asked wearily.

"W-well, yes, I suppose if one were to put it bluntly. Ah ha ha..." Rífa tried to gloss over the severity of the situation with a laugh, scratching her cheek with a finger.

Of course, Yuuto couldn't brush this off with a laugh. *What the hell! How can you be such a thoughtless troublemaker?!* he screamed with indignant anger in his heart, but he tried to defer those feelings for later.

"F-Felicia, y-you can undo it, right?" he asked hopefully.

Felicia was an Einherjar with an all-purpose balance of power and skills, so perhaps there was a chance with her. Yuuto turned his eyes hopefully in her direction, but she shook her head, her face pained.

"I am sorry, Big Brother. I cannot produce nearly enough magical power to equal this spell..."

"Wha... what am I supposed to do about this, then?!"

"W-well, fortunately the spell was cast without any ritual, or even an incantation," Rífa said. "It was an abbreviated version with less power. It should naturally come undone on its own in about a week's time."

"A whole week?!" Yuuto's response sounded almost like a cry of pain.

Spending an entire week in this state of being unable to move his body would be hell. He couldn't afford to just accept that.

"I-is there nothing else we can do?!" he cried desperately.

“Well, I suppose if we had Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr, she likely could break the spell on the spot without much trouble.”

“Sigyn... did you say Sigyn?!” Yuuto shouted the question in near disbelief, startled to be hearing that fateful name again.

During his most recent battle with the Panther Clan, a phenomenon had occurred in which his body had become semi-transparent.

At that time, his mind had been filled with a strange vision of a young and beautiful woman. Naturally, after the end of the battle, Yuuto had explained the details to Kristina and had her investigate.

He already knew the details of the woman’s identity. However wide the world of Yggdrasil might be, there were few women with mastery of seiðr magics on par with Sigyn. Her name was already widely known across the land.

She was the previous ruler of the Panther Clan, and the wife of the clan’s current patriarch, Hveðrungr.

“Oh, so you have heard of her,” Rífa said. “I hear she has mastered the use of the seiðr called Fimbulvetr. It is one of the most difficult seiðr of all, and has the power to release all bindings, restrictions, and constraints. It could easily break the magical constraints created by an abbreviated casting of Læðingr.”

“Release all bindings...?” Yuuto repeated, puzzled. “I heard it was a spell that could turn people into fearless berserkers.”

“Hm? Ahh, it does seem like that is how she currently uses it. But at its essence, it is a seiðr for *releasing constraints*, for unleashing that which is bound. She creates the effect you know of by using it to free the mind and body from the paralysis caused by fear, and to free the heart’s inner bestial nature from the bonds of the rational mind.”

“I see...” Hearing this, Yuuto now also had a partial explanation for what had happened to his body back then.

When Sigyn had cast Fimbulvetr on a group of charging Panther Clan soldiers, some of the residual energy must have washed over Yuuto, weakening the magical “binding” on Yuuto from Felicia’s original casting of Gleipnir.

“So then, I really am going to need that woman’s power in order to get back home,” he murmured.

If just the residual waves from the spell had such a strong effect on him, then if he could get her to cast it directly on him, surely...

“Heh, easier said than done,” Yuuto muttered to himself in a tone of weary surrender.

The Panther Clan was his enemy, and the woman in question was both its former ruler and the wife of its current ruler. He didn’t see any chance that she would ever agree to cooperate with him.

Deedele—!

The ringtone in Yuuto’s ear cut off almost before it began, as Mitsuki picked up.

“Hello, Yuu-kun? Good evening!”

“Hey, good evening. Man, you’re as quick to pick up as ever.”

“Because you always call at around the same time, silly!” Mitsuki’s voice over the phone was bright and bouncy, almost childlike in its energy.

On a base level, it bore a strong resemblance to Rífa’s voice, still fresh in Yuuto’s mind from their conversation in the reception hall. However, the girl on the phone spoke differently, gently, without any arrogance or stiffness.

This was the real Mitsuki Shimoya. This was the childhood friend who hadn’t given up on him even after he was transported to Yggdrasil, who had stayed in contact with him and supported him in so many ways.

Yuuto spoke slowly into the phone from a position lying on his side. “I’ve got something important to report to you today. I’m not sure if I could actually call it ‘good news,’ though. It’s a little complicated.”

He was on his bed in his sleeping quarters. Yuuto was honestly quite glad that it was the night of the full moon.

As he was now, paralyzed by Rífa’s Læðingr spell, he wasn’t capable in the least of making it up the stairs to the top of the Hliðskjálf tower where the

sacred mirror was kept. But with the moon's power at its peak, the mirror's power was amplified further, and the phone signal from the world of the 21st century could reach all the way to his room in the palace. And Yuuto wanted to tell Mitsuki this news as soon as possible.

"Ohh, what is it?" she asked.

"Ah, well, I've gotta warn you first. Don't get your hopes up too much. Okay?"

"That doesn't mean anything when I don't know what you're going to tell me. You're being dramatic. You're gonna make me worried. Just tell me!"

"I think... I might have found a way to get home."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!?!" In an instant, Mitsuki's voice went from its gentle, carefree tone to an ear-piercing scream.

Yuuto had predicted this reaction, so he'd already pulled the phone far away from his ear. He waited for it to pass rather than responding to it, then eventually put the phone back to his ear.

"Wh-wh-what?! H-how?! Wh-what do you mean?!" Mitsuki was already breathlessly peppering him with stammering questions.

"I'm going to say it again just to make sure we're clear, but you can't get your hopes up about this too much yet, okay? It's still not a real possibility yet. It's just that up until now we haven't had the slightest clue what I need to do or what will work, and now I've got just a little bit more of a concrete idea, that's all."

"Th-that's fine, though! That means your chances of coming back home have gone up, even just a little, right?! H-hurry and tell me about it!"

"Okay. It's not exactly clear whether my chances actually *have* gone up or not, though." Yuuto then proceeded to tell Mitsuki exactly what he'd heard from Rifa earlier.

Mitsuki listened to him earnestly the whole time, only making small interjections to reassure him that she was paying attention and keeping up.

"Okay, so in other words, if you can get this 'Fimbulvetr' spell cast on you, you can come home?" she asked at last.

“Well, I can’t actually say I know that for sure, but probably.”

“Th-then you just have to hurry, and... ah, the person who can cast it is one of your enemies...” Mitsuki’s excited, positive voice deflated like a balloon, losing all of its energy. She’d likely just realized exactly why Yuuto had told her she shouldn’t get her hopes up.

That despondent drop in Mitsuki’s mood struck painfully at Yuuto’s heart.

Yuuto began to have thoughts of regret. *Maybe I shouldn’t have told her in the first place, not now when it would just build up her hope and then break it...*

“Then, you just have to find someone other than that Sigyn person who can cast the same spell! Right?” Mitsuki seemed to recover her spirits right away, and threw out that suggestion as if it were no big deal.

“Uh, r-right.” Yuuto found himself dumbfounded.

Actually, it wasn’t as if Yuuto *hadn’t* considered that possibility. Rather, it had been the first thing he’d thought of. It certainly wasn’t impossible to think that there could be someone else out there capable of using the seiðr Fimbulvetr.

The catch was, people who could perform seiðr magic successfully were very rare to begin with, and the vast and disparate territories of Yggdrasil had only primitive and limited means of sending and receiving information. Yuuto did not fail to understand how difficult that would make the task of searching for such a person.

On top of that, even if such a person were discovered, being a seiðr master would surely make them a valued treasure of their clan. It would be no easy feat to convince their clan to lend out the services of someone so important.

Yuuto understood that Mitsuki had made the suggestion without being able to take such issues into consideration.

But despite that, or even because of it, he was grateful for it.

The world of Yggdrasil was a constant parade of cruel and harsh reality. Focusing only on the details of that reality would just make him depressed. If Mitsuki said that it was all he had to do, then maybe he just might be able to do it. That was the sort of feeling he got.

Mitsuki's words seemed to pour motivation back into Yuuto's heart.

"Yeah, you're right." Yuuto nodded and smiled gently. "I've gotta do my best and search, don't I?"

If he were to list out his worries and concerns, there would be too many to count. But even so, it was just like Mitsuki had said.

Unmistakably, Yuuto had taken his first big step toward returning home.

The next morning, Sigrún burst into Yuuto's quarters, pale with worry.

"F-Father! A-are you all right?!"

On the battlefield, this girl could keep her cool even if her forces were fully surrounded by twice their number, but right now, she was beside herself.

Her breathing was ragged, indicating she'd run all the way here at full speed.

"Take it easy, Rún," Yuuto said. He was sitting on his bed with his back leaning against the adjacent wall. "It's just a mild cold. Felicia's a bit of a worrywart, as always, and told me I should stay in bed for now and rest up. The most important time for healing a sickness is when you first catch it, according to her."

Rífa was the þjóðann, and a spell cast by her had magically restricted Yuuto's ability to move his body. It was clear that if any of that information were to leak out, it would cause all sorts of problems. So, Yuuto had consulted with Felicia and decided that they would keep it all a secret.

However, secret or not, the fact was that Yuuto couldn't move his body, so in order to cover for that, he'd sent out a public announcement that he'd gotten sick and would be resting from his official duties for a week.

"I-is that so..." Sigrún peered in close to look at the color of Yuuto's face for herself, then gave a sigh of relief. "I am relieved to hear it's not serious."

She then turned to address the woman behind her.

"That was a good call, Felicia. We can't allow the slightest chance of the worst happening to Father, after all."

“...Yes, you’re right.” Felicia already wore a pained expression, but visibly winced at Sigrún’s words.

She had a tendency to be really hard and judgmental towards herself. She likely felt responsible for this situation because she hadn’t been able to protect Yuuto.

But it had been a surprise attack from a guest in the room, sitting right next to them, and it had come without any hint of hostility or murderous intent that might have alerted her.

Under those circumstances, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that even Sigrún or Skáviðr, both unrivaled warriors of the Wolf Clan in terms of martial skill, would have found it incredibly difficult to predict and guard against it.

Yuuto had said as much to Felicia earlier to try and console her, but it seemed she could not help but continue to feel a sense of responsibility and regret.

Felicia often acted with an air of playful elegance that made her come across as enigmatic, but she was an incredibly serious girl at heart.

“If there are any plants or herbs or the like that you need for medicine, tell me,” Sigrún declared. “I’ll go get them for you right away.”

“Thank you, Rún,” Felicia said. “But it’s all right. I already have everything that I need.”

“I see. At times like these, I really envy you. All I’m good for is fighting.”

“What are you saying? Your abilities in battle have served Big Brother, and have saved him, many times over. Each of us does our best at what we are best at.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true...” Sigrún’s face was still somber.

She surely wanted to be able to do something to help Yuuto, and was surely frustrated at herself for not knowing anything she could do.

Whiine!

The telltale sound of a puppy’s plaintive whine suddenly cut through the mood in the room, and Yuuto broke into a wide smile.

“Mm? What, did you bring Hildólfr with you, Rún?”

As he lowered his gaze, he saw little Hildólfr rubbing his face affectionately against Sigrún’s right leg, begging for her attention.

Perhaps he had sensed his surrogate mother’s depression, and was trying in his own way to cheer her up.

This sort of behavior made Hildólfr look like an ordinary grey puppy dog, but in fact he was a baby garmr, a species of giant wolf native to the nearby Himinbjörg Mountains.

Some days prior, Sigrún had encountered the pup while out on a mission to eradicate some mountain bandits, and she had been looking after him since then.

Sigrún got flustered. “Eh?! Uh, this is, um, it seems he followed me here on his own, and...”

“My, even though Rún was running the whole way, he’s quite impressive for one so small to be able to keep up with her.” Felicia giggled and leaned down to pet Hildólfr on the head. The puppy closed his eyes happily and let her do so.

The scene was so endearing that even Yuuto felt the urge to pet the little guy.

“Hey, Hildólfr. C’mere, little guy.” Yuuto clicked his tongue and called the puppy’s name to get its attention, and let one hand drop down off of the bed, beckoning with his finger. That was about as much as he could do without difficulty while under the continued effects of Læðingr.

Hildólfr pricked up his ears and took notice, but instead of heading towards Yuuto, he lay down on the floor where he stood.

“H-hey, Hildólfr! Father is calling to you!” Sigrún shouted.

“Ah, don’t get mad, it’s fine,” Yuuto said with a smile. “He’s still little, after all.”

“No, it is while he is still small that I must teach him how things work. Come on, Hildólfr! That is Father, the chief of our pack. You need to do what he commands, not Felicia or anyone else. Now.”

With the stern expression of a disciplinarian, Sigrún scolded the puppy with

tone as sharp as the smack of a reed.

Hildólfur was startled by this stern tone of voice, and stood up immediately, then ran over to Sigrún's feet.

"No, not to me. Go there, to Father."

Sigrún pointed towards Yuuto as she spoke, but Hildólfur didn't turn to look in that direction. Instead, he looked up at Sigrún and wagged his tail.

He clearly didn't understand Sigrún's spoken commands. But that was only understandable, since he was a wolf puppy.

"Come on, Hildólfur. Listen to me!"

"Really, it's fine, Rún," Yuuto said.

"No, but I must... oh?"

Just as she was about to argue her principles with Yuuto again, not budging an inch, Hildólfur stood back up and trotted over to Yuuto.

"Ohh! I knew you were a clever one, Hildólfur." Sigrún nodded to herself several times, and looked almost overcome with emotion.

She was already well known for being soft-hearted to a fault when it came to matters involving Yuuto, but apparently she was a huge softie when it came to Hildólfur, too.

Sigrún watched intently as only a doting mother would as her "child" stopped at Yuuto's bedside.

She then gasped when Hildólfur turned and raised one hind leg, peeing on Yuuto's bed.

"Ah...!"

Time seemed to freeze for a moment.

"Stop that at once! Hildólfur!" she cried out loudly and made to discipline the wolf pup with a smack.

But Hildólfur turned up to look at her with his cute little puppy eyes and tilted his head to one side, letting out a puzzled little whimper.

Sigrún froze in place with a tiny “Urk!”

Sigrún was often compared to a flower made of ice in battle, beautiful and cold. But it would seem she could not hold her own against the little one’s cuteness.

Her still-raised hand trembled for a moment, and then she turned to speak to Yuuto.

“I... I offer you my humble apology, Father. Hildólfir has done something terribly offensive to you, and responsibility for his actions falls on me as his master. I will gladly accept any punishment you give me, so please, please forgive him.”

Sigrún dropped to one knee on the spot, and begged with Yuuto in a way that was actually quite rare for her.

It was so sudden and so strange that Yuuto couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! To think you had the potential to make the current Mánagarmr of the Wolf Clan go green in the face like that! You’re quite the big shot for just a little guy, Hildólfir.”

Yuuto reached out to gently pet the head of his clan’s littlest warrior, a reward for delivering unexpected results.

However, Hildólfir dodged Yuuto’s hand, then leapt back at it to bite down hard on his pointer finger.

“H-H-Hildólfir...!!” Sigrún let out a shrill cry that was practically a scream.

This was far past “unusual” for her; Yuuto didn’t think he’d *ever* seen Sigrún act so out of sorts or heard her make that sort of sound before. This was something not even the most stalwart enemy warrior on the battlefield had ever been able to accomplish.

“Ahh, it’s okay, it’s okay, Rún,” Yuuto said. “He’s just play-biting. It doesn’t hurt.”

Yuuto tried to reassure Sigrún and made no move to dislodge Hildólfir, who had wrapped his front paws around Yuuto’s finger and continued to gnaw at it. Indeed, it didn’t hurt at all; if anything, it tickled. It wasn’t an aggressive act

towards Yuuto. In fact, it was affectionate.

However, the puppy's surrogate mother was already beside herself, and Yuuto couldn't help but sympathize with her at this point.

"All right, that's enough. Go on back to Rún now." He flicked his hand a few times at the puppy to shoo him away, but that just made the back of Yuuto's hand look like another appealing toy for him to play with.

Hildólfur growled playfully, and attacked his hand again.

"N-nooo, stop it right now!" Sigrún couldn't take any more of this. With her face a bright red, she ran over and scooped up Hildólfur into her arms.

The sheer desperation with which she did this was too funny, and Yuuto couldn't help but burst out laughing again.

Thanks to having a mother like Sigrún, this little wolf puppy had a knack for making things interesting.

"To think he went and got himself sick! That guy's as weak as always," Ingrid grumbled to herself. "He's always making trouble for the rest of us."

She wasn't working over a flame in her forge, but in the palace kitchen of all places, stirring the contents of a pot. And, despite the tone of her voice, she'd rushed to fix up some hot wheat porridge for the young man as soon as she'd heard of his condition. As always, she was a girl whose actions often ran counter to her words.

"Mm... okay!" Giving it one last taste test, Ingrid nodded to herself with satisfaction; it had turned out wonderfully.

She'd mixed in a lot of different medicinal herbs and other highly nutritious ingredients, but they were proportioned expertly so that the result was still delicious.

This was only to be expected of Ingrid, a genius when it came to making things by hand. She could bring her talents fully to bear even in the field of cooking.

"Hee hee, they do say if you want to capture a man's heart, you should start

with his stomach. That guy's gotta see me in a new light after eating this."

Ingrid doused the fire and scooped the contents of the pot into a wooden bowl, then hurried excitedly towards the black-haired young man's personal quarters.

"Who knows, maybe the instant he eats it he'll say, 'Ingrid, marry me!' Heh heh! Eheheheh... Yeah, right." Her features slackened into a grin as she fantasized, but then suddenly snapped back, and she slumped her shoulders sadly.

Truly, this girl's hectic emotions kept her rather busy.

Before long, she reached the door to Yuuto's bedroom.

But, just as she was about to knock lightly on the door...

"Now, Big Brother... please go ahead and remove your clothes."

"Right."

...the indecent contents of the conversation she heard from inside the room made Ingrid freeze in place.

"Compared to two years ago, you certainly have grown quite muscular," the woman's voice said admirably.

"Really? Well, I guess you're not wrong."

"Tee hee, and this part of you has certainly grown more robust, as well..."

*What the hell does "this part" mean?! Does she mean **that**?! Is she talking about **that**?!*

It sounded like it was Felicia there in the room with him.

Felicia was Yuuto's personal guard and his adjutant. It wasn't unusual at all for her to be together with him in private.

That part wasn't strange, but...

"And you are *so big!*"

"Uhh... well, I guess compared to the average person in Yggdrasil, that might be true."

“Please lie down, Big Brother. I will take care of the rest.”

“Mm-hm, thanks.”

“Then, I will begin. ...Hee hee, how is it? Does it feel good?”

“Mm, yeah, it does.”

“It isn’t too light or too strong?”

“In that case, could you go a bit harder?”

“Then, like this... how about now?”

“Mm, yeah, that really feels good.”

Wh-what are those two doing, going at it in the middle of the freaking day?! And what the hell, Yuuto?! Weren’t you supposed to be saving yourself for the girl you loved?!

But Ingrid’s shock at this was mild by comparison to when she heard Felicia’s next words.

“Well then, would you like to give it a try too, Ephy?”

“R-right. For your sake, Master, I shall do my very best!”

“Hold it! Stop right there!” Ingrid screamed. “What the hell are you planning on making a child do, Yuuto?!”

Unable to hold herself back, Ingrid threw open the door with a loud slam, and barged into the room.

At first, she had decided to refrain from intruding on Yuuto and Felicia because both of them were consenting adults by Yggdrasil standards, but of course the second it sounded like they were including a little child, that all went out the window. It was outrageous beyond words.

“Even if the gods were to forgive you, I sure as hell won’t! I’ll beat that perversion right out... of... huh?”

Ingrid had let her welling anger carry her into the room and fuel her shouts, but her rant quickly lost all of its momentum partway through.

“I-Ingrid...?” Yuuto was sitting there on the bed, blinking at her dumbfounded.

His tunic and shirt were off, so his upper body was naked. However, his lower body was still clothed.

Ephelia and Felicia were also both properly dressed.

Ephelia was staring in Ingrid's direction, startled, and in her hands she was holding a towel which she had pressed against Yuuto's back.

Since Yuuto was laid up in bed sick, the two of them had been wiping his body down with a wet towel in lieu of a bath. That was the punchline to this situation, it would seem.

Off to the side, Felicia was smiling with delight and stifling giggles.

Thinking about it in retrospect, Ingrid realized that there was no way a skilled bodyguard like Felicia wouldn't have sensed her presence outside the door.

Realizing that she'd been tricked into this situation, Ingrid felt like all of the heat in her body was rushing to her face.

"H-h-here, I made porridge, so eat it! R-right, goodbye!"

With only those stammered words, Ingrid fled the room like a scared rabbit.



“...And that’s the gist of what happened. I can’t believe that Ingrid. What kind of person does she think I am?” It was night, and Yuuto was recounting the events of the day to Mitsuki over the phone.

Personally, he considered it to be so dumb that it actually made for a funny story, and he was hoping it might get a laugh out of Mitsuki, too.

However, his childhood friend reacted rather coolly instead. “Uh huh.”

There was no inflection to her voice at all; it was a perfect, wooden monotone.

“Er... huh? You don’t think it’s funny?”

“Yuu-kun... you’re filthy.”

“Wait, hold on! I just finished telling you, that’s the whole reason I had someone wipe me down, so I wouldn’t get unsanitary!”

“But that’s...! But that’s no reason to get Felicia-san and Ephelia-chan to do that kind of thing...!”

“I didn’t have a choice! I’ve been stuck in bed for two days now, you know! My back and shoulders were starting to feel super gross!”

“Ugh... That might be true, but, but...!”

“It’s exactly the same thing nurses do to you in the hospital, right?”

“Hospital... d-don’t tell me, you didn’t let them take care of *all* of your needs, did you?!”

“Hey, of course I refused that! I drew a line.”

“So then they offered?!”

Under the light of the moon, Yuuto and Mitsuki’s conversation grew more lively and animated, all the happier for its lack of importance.

At the same time, in Rífa’s guest room elsewhere in the palace, she was receiving a visitor.

“Lady Rífa! You’re safe!” As soon as she entered the room, the short-haired

warrior cried out and ran tearfully over to take a knee in front of Rífa.

The extent of her worry was plain to see by how twisted up her face was now in her overwhelming relief.

Sitting on the bed, Rífa winced as she stammered out a response. “O-oh, it’s you, Erna. I... I am sorry for before.”

This female warrior, Erna, was Rífa’s bodyguard and attendant on her journey, and a few days earlier, her body had been paralyzed by a seiðr spell Rífa cast on her. Now, despite that act, Erna was here rejoicing in Rífa’s safety.

It was enough to make her feel quite guilty.

“F-Fagrahvél chooses his direct subordinates well,” Rífa said. “Impromptu though it was, my spell was powerful. You have already freed yourself from it?”

“To an extent, yes. Though I fear I am still far from my usual fighting shape.” Erna’s speech remained respectful, but there was a bit of sharpness in her inflection.

It would seem she did still harbor some ill feelings towards what Rífa had done to her. Of course, it would have been strange for her to not care about it at all.

“Wh-what about your partner, Thír?” Rífa asked guiltily.

“Because the situation is what it is, she has returned to seek new instructions from our master and patriarch.”

“Th-the situation is not all that dire!” Rífa cried.

She had never meant her actions to be anymore than a bit of mischief, and so hearing this was such a shock that she reflexively cried out in a shrill voice.

That outburst was too sudden and stressful.

“Ughh...” In the next instant, Rífa felt dizzy, and slumped back against the wall behind her.

“L-Lady Rífa?!” Erna’s voice rose in panic.

Rífa held out a hand to quiet her. “W-worry not. It is just the backlash from using too many seiðr magics in such a short period of time.”

All the blood had drained from Rífa's face, however, and her breathing was ragged.

The twin runes Rífa carried gave her access to enormous magical power that set her apart from all others in the world. But her body, far more weak and fragile than a normal person's, could not withstand the incredible volume of stress placed on it by using such power. Anytime she used her power recklessly, she ended up ruining her health, just as she had now.

"Heh heh, I was so excited by the outside world, I may have gotten somewhat carried away with myself."

"You truly did," Erna scolded. "Honestly, Lady Rífa, you are the most precious person in all of Yggdrasil. Please show more care for yourself."

"Ha ha, you are right. Then, it is unladylike, but I think I shall lay myself down for a bit."

"P-please allow me to assist you, if you would." Erna rushed to support Rífa, holding her in her arms. As expected of an Einherjar, Erna's thin arms contained great strength despite their appearance.

Erna gently lowered Rífa down into a lying position, then peered over her face from close up.

"It appears you have a fever, as well," she said with concern.

"Mm, so I do. Truly, what a weak excuse for a body." Rífa scoffed bitterly, with a bit of self-contempt.

Apparently, she had also caught an illness due to her body's already weakened state. She would need to spend several days in bed resting and recuperating.

Of course, considering she had forced three different people into much the same state, one could perhaps call this reaping what she'd sown.

"Um, Lady Rífa," Erna said hesitantly. "Taking the matter of your body into consideration, perhaps it would be the best idea after all to return to Gláðsheimr as soon as you are well enough to travel..."

"What?!" Rífa's face changed color. She violently grasped onto Erna's arm

with a strength unthinkable for someone weak with sickness, and she pleaded with a voice that was practically a moan of pain. “Wait! My travel was supposed to last until the spring!”

“H-however, Lady Rífa, your body is...”

“I will be well from this in a matter of days! A-anyway, I will not be returning to Glaðsheimr until spring!”

Erna was temporarily overtaken by Rífa’s abnormal force of spirit. “A-all right...”

This was her first and last chance to see the outside world, and she would not settle for allowing it to end here and now. She was intensely driven by that motivation.

While that would be no issue if she could listen to the advice of her protectors, she had been born into the life of a princess. She could not help but show her more selfish and egotistical side at times. Rather, she wasn’t even truly aware that she was being selfish.

“Th-then at the very least, will you not come with me to the Sword Clan?” Erna pleaded. “Right now Thír is not with us, and I must protect you alone. It is too dangerous to remain here, in the stronghold of the Wolf Clan.”

“Hm? There is nothing dangerous about this place. In fact, the people here have treated us very well.”

“You must not let yourself be deceived. The Wolf Clan patriarch, this ‘Suoh Yuuto,’ is known among his neighbors in the region as the ‘Infamous Wolf Hróðvitnir.’ As his name suggests, he is a man flush with greed and ambition, rapidly expanding his territory and influence. He is quite dangerous.”

“Hmm... but he seemed like nothing of the sort to my eyes.”

In Rífa’s interactions with Yuuto over the past few days, her honest impression was that after the rumors, he was a disappointment.

He was for all the world a peace-loving, easygoing young man.

Even after he had learned Rífa was the þjóðann, he had not shown a hint of any ambitious scheming, and she had made sure to pay close attention to him

then.

Even now, he was completely laid up in bed by a mere abbreviated casting of the spell *Læðingr*.

If someone like *him* was supposed to be the great Black One who would destroy the empire, then Rífa had no end of doubts.

“That is why I am saying that you must not allow yourself to be deceived!” Erna cried. “I heard that man recently took an *entire group* of beautiful women with him on a trip to the local hot springs. Surely he is only playing the part of a gentle sheep now in front of you to lower your guard.”

“Ah, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, then.” Rífa shrugged her shoulders and laughed weakly.

“I insist that this is no laughing matter!”

“I know, I know. But, hmm, yes. It *is* true that he’s strangely adored by many of the women around him.”

Her brother-by-nursemaid, Fagrahvél, had once said that to judge a person’s true character and potential, one must look at the people surrounding them.

The girl called Kristina she’d met the other night had been so intelligent and attentive despite her young age.

Felicia was also practiced and refined in her manners and attentiveness to others, enough so that Rífa would like to have her as her own lady-in-waiting.

According to some of the stories she’d heard while wandering the palace halls, the leader of Yuuto’s elite special forces was a girl named Sigrún who was called “Mánagarmr,” their title for the strongest warrior. It seemed she had been the one to kill the Hoof Clan patriarch Yngvi, the man who had been known as the Lord of Plenty, Ingfróði, for his conquest of vast tracts of fertile territory.

The renowned master craftsman Ingrid needed no further mention.

It was difficult to imagine that these incredible characters would all gather to serve at the foot of an ordinary, boring young man.

There had to be something more to him. Some other aspect that Rífa still had

yet to witness.

And until she could ascertain it for herself, she could not return to the imperial capital, regardless of what anyone else said.

Indeed, it was for that very purpose that Rífa had made her decision to leave the capital in the first place.

“I-I yield!” Sitting atop his horse, Váli raised both hands in a signal of surrender, the blunted tip of a spear pressed up against his throat.

Váli was an Einherjar with the rune Hrímfaxi, the Frostmane, and a hero among the men of his Panther Clan from Miðgarðr, praised for his bravery and skill in battle.

And it was not merely talk. In the previous war with the Wolf Clan, he’d gone toe-to-toe with Skáviðr, the deputy to their second-in-command and the man who had once held the title of Mánagarmr.

Váli had fought on equal ground with that man, and even managed to wound him.

Yet a warrior of such skill and renown was now being forced to admit to a defeat so utter, so complete, that there was no possible excuse that would let him save face. And to top it off, his opponent was someone who had not even spent a whole month learning to ride his horse.

“Phew!” his opponent said. “Holding back against my opponent so I don’t break their weapon is actually hard, and really tiring, too.”

“H-holding back...” Váli could feel his body trembling as his pride as a warrior was wounded further.

It would have been far better if that were only his opponent’s boast, and insult born of vanity. But no, Váli knew that the young man’s words were the unadulterated truth, and he was just honestly speaking his mind.

The red-haired young man sitting atop the bay horse in front of him — Steinþórr, Lightning Clan patriarch and the man known as the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir — was an Einherjar with not one, but two runes.

The first was Megingjörð, the Belt of Strength, which amplified and drew out his body's physical potential for strength and agility to its very limit. And the second was Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer, a rune specializing in the power to break things.

He must have been suppressing the power of the latter rune throughout this mock battle. After all, if he were to break his opponent's weapon straight away, the fight would end, and it would not serve its purpose as training.

"But maaan, it's crazy how much it feels like my body and senses got duller after all that time spent resting to heal," Steinþórr complained. "This feels like, what, sixty percent of my usual strength?"

"That was just... sixty percent...?!" As Váli's whisper reached his own ears, he was also sure he could hear the sound of his life's built-up pride as a fighter crumbling apart like a broken wall.

Váli's specialty weapon was the bow. If he'd fought this match using a bow and arrow, there was no way he would have lost like this. He desperately tried to force himself to believe those thoughts, but try as he might, all he could imagine at this point was that he would still have suffered defeat at the hands of this red-haired young man.

Just what is he?! He's like a monster!

"Father, I would ask that you please leave remarks on the battle at that for now, for your opponent's sake," an extraordinarily tall young man on the sidelines of the fight called out, wearing a pained expression. His eyes were clearly filled with sympathy for Váli.

That in itself was enough to further injure Váli's self-esteem, but in this situation, arguing aloud would only look pathetic.

"And milord Váli, please do not concern yourself too harshly on this," Þjálfi continued. "If a man faces a tiger in single combat, there is no shame in the tiger being stronger in his blows or more fleet of foot. Indeed, there is no shame in being unable to win in a straight-on fight. Even if, for example, the tiger was only playing."

"Ngh...!" To Váli, that last remark sounded like it was meant to finish him off

by rubbing salt in his wounds, but the tall man called Þjálfí was speaking to him with a look that was sincere and serious.

“The feeling you are experiencing right now is something I know well. Very, *veery* well. Once upon a time, I too challenged Father when he was but a child of thirteen, and lost so spectacularly that it did not even feel real.”

As Þjálfí said this, he closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and gave Váli a single, slow nod.

Þjálfí was also an Einherjar, with the rune Tanngrísni, the Snarler. Váli knew that in this region, he was a respected warrior well-known by the alias Járnglófi, the Iron Gauntlet.

A man like that had lost to a brat of only thirteen. Váli could only imagine how humiliating that must have felt.

“This man before you is special,” Þjálfí said. “Truly, you need not trouble yourself over this defeat.”

“...I understand,” Váli said slowly. He chose to take Þjálfí’s words fully to heart. They were the words of a man who, in a way, was now a comrade with whom he shared the same fate.

Frankly speaking, it was hard to think of Steinþórr as human after their fight.

The patriarch of the Wolf Clan had finally defeated him during a battle by unleashing a raging current of floodwater which swept him away, an incredibly novel tactic that defied the imagination. Indeed, to Váli it now seemed like only something that drastic in scale would ever be able to defeat a monster like Steinþórr.

As for the monstrous young man in question, he called out in a cheery voice, not having paid a lick of thought to the inner thoughts of the two other Einherjar whose pride he had shattered. “Hey, Þjálfí, these stirrup things are really great!”

The stirrup — it was an invention that had been shared with them by the man now known by the alias Grímnir, the Masked Lord, the Panther Clan patriarch Hveðrungr. It was also a main driving factor in his clan’s recent expanse and conquest, from the northern steppes of Miðgarðr all the way down to the

western parts of the Álfheimr region.

The design of the stirrup was quite simple, but by using it, people could easily steady their feet while riding atop a horse. This allowed them to swing melee weapons while still maintaining their balance. It was so novel and revolutionary that it would be no exaggeration to call this item a victory by concept.

It was just one of the technologies given to the Lightning Clan by the Panther Clan, as a gift of friendship to a new ally with whom their patriarch had sworn the Oath of the Sibling Chalice.

Of course, in the end, the people of the Lightning Clan were city-dwellers, born and raised in settled communities. Váli had been sure that even if the fighters of that clan were given stirrups, they would surely not be able to use them to their full potential. However...

“Is it possible that we’ve taken a monster and made him so much more powerful that now no one can defeat him...?!” A trickle of cold sweat ran down Váli’s back, and he shuddered.

ACT 3

“Happy New Year!!” The voices of the assembled crowd rose as one as they shouted the formal greeting.

This was the day on which parties and celebrations were held all throughout lárnvíðr to celebrate the arrival of the new year.

The New Year’s festival was also a religious occasion devoted to praying to the gods for the further prosperity and progress of the Wolf Clan, equally on par with the Fertility Prayer Festival in the spring season and the Harvest Festival in the fall.

Here within the palace grounds, in the religious sanctuary at the top of the Wolf Clan’s sacred tower Hliðskjálf, all of the major ranking clan members were gathered in celebration, with the exception of Skáviðr.

Even people who would normally be posted on assignment elsewhere were present, like Olof, the governor of Gimlé, and Alrekr, commander of Fort Gnipahellir.

Yuuto nodded and returned the formal greeting to his clan. “Thank you, and Happy New Year.”

It should be said, however, that earlier that morning when he’d checked his smartphone, the LCD screen had showed the date was January 31st. He had in fact already exchanged New Year’s greetings with Mitsuki a month ago.

The lunar calendar used in Yggdrasil was about one month off from the solar calendar that was standard in 21st century Japan.

Yuuto continued his greeting into a formal address.

“Thanks to each of the esteemed men and women here, the previous year became a year of great progress forward for our Wolf Clan. As this clan’s lord, as your patriarch, let me tell you that I am proud of you. In the coming year there may be many and varied challenges awaiting us, but I would be glad if you would all continue to lend support to your young and inexperienced ruler as

you have in the previous year. In recognition of your daily efforts, and as an expression of my appreciation for your work, I have prepared this humble collection of food and spirits for you. Please, enjoy it to the fullest.”

Yuuto honestly had a hard time when it came to proper, ceremonial addresses like this one. In order to preserve the dignity of his position as patriarch, it meant he had to speak in a self-important manner that he found uncomfortable.

He was, however, completely fine with speaking with authority during battle and other desperate situations, when there was no time for him to afford to such feelings.

Additionally, because this was an important and public ceremony, he could not wear his usual lightweight black outfit, and was dressed in heavier, ceremonial white robes. There were ornamental accessories on his head, neck, arms and the like, all made of pure gold and all pretty heavy.

It was a pain in the neck, but this sort of thing was also part of his job as the patriarch.

Yuuto took a deep breath, in preparation for the final closing line of his speech.

“Now then, raise your cups! Cheers, to the Wolf Clan!”

“Cheers!!”

Yuuto raised his goblet high into the air, and his subordinates all did so as well. They then turned and knocked the rims of their metal cups against those of their brethren, and the high-pitched metallic clinking sound filled the air of the sanctuary.

Everyone finished the toast by downing their drinks all at once, and in the next moment, the sanctuary hall was noisy with the din of celebration.

Yuuto scanned over the crowd, the sight of his sworn children enjoying themselves so bringing a smile to his face...

“Crap. I knew it...” His expression froze as he spotted one person in particular.

Over in a corner, she sat apart, the air seeming to droop depressingly about

her. To Yuuto's eyes, it almost seemed like there was a black aura of despair swirling around her.

"Heh... hee hee hee... hee hee hee hee." Felicia was muttering and laughing to herself, if one could really call it laughter. "And now, I am at last twenty years of age."

In the culture of Yggdrasil, everyone advanced in age together on the first day of the new year, rather than on their individual days of birth. In other words, Felicia had entered her twenties today.

The people in her immediate vicinity seemed to grasp the situation, and quietly left their seats, running off to join interesting conversations with friends they suddenly remembered.

Because of that, the girl looked all the more lonely there by herself.

This wasn't good.

"Felicia!" Yuuto waved to her with his hand, calling her over.

He would actually have preferred to go over to her himself, but during a ceremony like this, the patriarch leaving his seat to go talk directly with one of his subordinates was the kind of action that could cause problems.

"What is it, Big Brother?" Felicia's voice was normally as warm as a sunny spring day, but today it was sullen and dark.

Yuuto was so familiar with her usual voice that this threw him off a bit.

As of late, the sort of remarks she'd made about the subject had been more resigned and even joking. But in the end, it seemed that actually having the tens digit of her age go up was bringing forth a lot of different feelings that were hard for her to deal with.

That said, even though she was "twenty," that was just because of the way age was counted in Yggdrasil. In modern day Japan, she would have barely turned eighteen on her day of birth a week earlier.

To Yuuto, it didn't seem like something she should have to feel so bad about, but here in Yggdrasil it was custom for a woman to be married, perhaps even have her first child, before she finished her teens. He knew it was impossible to

just tell her to ignore that part of her world.

“Here, have a drink.” With a consoling smile, Yuuto handed Felicia a cup, and poured her alcohol from a pitcher himself.

“Thank you very much, Big Brother.” She gave a simple thank-you and downed the contents of the cup in one swig.

It was actually quite a sight, the sort of strong drinking that could enchant a man.

“H-here, have another.”

Yuuto had heard once that there were some nights when men just had to drown themselves in drink, and apparently the same was true of women, as well.

When one could not break free of one’s feelings and set them aside, those were the times that called for alcohol. That was why drink had kept its status as a constant companion of humanity since time immemorial.

Sigrún stepped out from behind Yuuto.

“Mm, what’s wrong with you, Felicia?” Sigrún chastised. “You have the honor of having your drink poured by Father himself, yet you still seem so down.”

Sigrún’s tone and expression were a mirror opposite of Felicia’s; she looked excited and happy as a clam. Her good mood was completely evident in her body language, too, which was a rare thing for her.

Then Sigrún casually clapped her hand on Felicia’s shoulder a few times. “Ha ha ha, you won’t be able to serve properly as Father’s adjutant if you’re like that.”

They’d been friends since they were children, so it wasn’t exactly out of place for their relationship, but this was clearly different from usual, an indication of just how high Sigrún’s spirits were right now.

She definitely wasn’t drunk from the alcohol, though. Sigrún could handle her alcohol just fine, but she didn’t like how it took the edge off of her senses, and so she preferred not to drink.

As for why she was actually so cheery, it was because today she had

celebrated *her* birthday.

Naturally, Sigrún was not the type of person who would care about birthdays, much less get excited over one, but this morning, she had received her birthday present from Yuuto, and she'd been in this state ever since.

"Hmph, we'll see if you are laughing a year from now," Felicia muttered. "Then you'll be in the same position as me, you know?"

"Hm? We're in the same position now. You got that beautiful glass flower vase from Father, didn't you? I know you've been sneaking little moments of free time to gaze at it, grinning to yourself."

"W-well, of course I am happy to have received a gift from Father, so happy I could dance on air. But that and this are two different things, you understand!" Felicia puffed out her cheek, sulking.

Yuuto, for one, would prefer that they didn't talk about that subject with him sitting right there. He was glad to hear how much they'd liked his gifts, but it was also more than a bit embarrassing.

He couldn't exactly join in the conversation, so he just quietly sipped from his cup.

"You have no idea how it is," Felicia moaned. "How bitter and sad it will feel to finally, finally reach this age!"

"Actually, I for one am looking forward to it. Just the other day I was made to realize just how immature I am, how far I still have to go. I can't help but respect the cunning of veterans like Jörgen and Skáviðr that comes from their experience. It lets them accomplish so much without relying on simple brute force."

"Well, it's good to know that even your brains are made out of iron," Felicia sneered.

"That's the best compliment you could give me, Felicia."

"Even insults don't work on you?!" Felicia went wide-eyed, and for once her speech broke into something less polite and more frank.

Afterwards the two of them continued their conversation, in their particular

brand of argumentative exchange that seemed at once in sync and at odds. And strangely enough, that black aura that had been around Felicia seemed to dissipate.

The two of them had totally opposite personalities, but it seemed that for Felicia, talking with Sigrún was the better refreshment for her heart than the drink in her hand.

Satisfied that he could leave Felicia to Sigrún, and that he'd made it past that imposing obstacle, Yuuto took one swig from his goblet and let out a breath. "Whew..."

There was a saying, back in Japan, that New Year's Day was the key to the whole year. It was important to him that he do his best to avoid situations or decisions that seemed inauspicious, and to close out the night in a peaceful and harmonious way as best he could.

"Big Brother, Happy New Year!" A voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Ah, Linnea. You, as well. Happy New Year!"

The person approaching Yuuto at his seat was Linnea, patriarch of the Horn Clan.

Yuuto reflexively broke into a wide grin at seeing his adorable sworn younger sister for the first time in a while.

Recently, she had been busy with the recovery and rebuilding of cities like Myrkviðr and Sylgr and their surrounding lands, areas of Horn Clan territory that still had heavy damage and casualties from the Panther Clan's invasion. As a result, he hadn't seen her face-to-face in several months.

They sent messages to each other from time to time, so he knew she was doing well, but it was a different matter after all to be able to see her healthy and happy like this with his own two eyes.

With a bashful smile, Linnea took a knee in front of Yuuto and held up a serving pitcher towards him. "If I may..."

It was a fact of life that girls of her tender age tended to grow more charming by the day, but to see it with his own eyes... compared to just a few months

ago, it was like the lovely sweetness of her smile was on a completely new level.

It's too bad that I'm taken, Yuuto thought to himself with a wry smile, and held out his cup.

“Yes, thank you. And allow me, as well.” Once Yuuto’s cup was filled, he reached to take the pitcher from Linnea.

“Of course.” Linnea allowed Yuuto to pour for her.

“I’m counting on you this year, too.”

“Of course! And I hope to rely on you this year as well, Big Brother.”

They clinked their cups together and each took a small drink, enough to wet their lips.

Each of them was fully aware of how many toasts they would be exchanging before the night was over, with drinks poured by their sworn siblings and children. It was important to understand and maintain a proper pace in these situations, that one might avoid becoming drunk and inadvertently making a fool of oneself.

“Thanks again for everything last year,” Yuuto said. “I hear the reconstruction in Myrkviðr and Sylgr is going well.”

“That is all because you were able to take them back for us in the first place, Big Brother,” Linnea said. “And we have been receiving so much assistance in the meantime.”

Over the course of the current winter season, a large volume of food and silver had been sent from the Wolf Clan to the Horn Clan as aid for their recovery. Linnea was likely referring to that.

Yuuto laughed and gave a casual shrug. “That’s just normal. A brother helping out his little sister when she needs it is just the natural thing to do.”

Linnea stared straight into Yuuto’s eyes, then bowed her head to him deeply. “I wish to express the gratitude of my people, on their behalf. Thank you for everything.”

As usual, this girl always had her people at the center of her thoughts. To sincerely lower one’s head in thanks on behalf of someone else, much less a

nation, wasn't exactly something just anyone could do. And of course, this wasn't some political gesture — it came from her heart.

It was because she was a person of such wonderful and admirable character that Yuuto felt compelled to help her in any way he could.

Of course, it was also a hard fact that the Horn Clan bordered the territories of the Panther, Hoof, and Lightning Clans, so geopolitically speaking, they were also an incredibly important western buffer nation for the Wolf Clan. That reason also factored into things.

Yuuto started to feel awkward having such an earnest and solemn expression of gratitude delivered to him personally like this, so he changed the subject in a pretty unsubtle manner. "Speaking of the work out west, how is Skáviðr? He doing well?"

Skáviðr, the Wolf Clan's Assistant Second-in-Command, was currently stationed in Myrkviðr, the most strategically important walled city on the western side of the Horn Clan. He was there commanding a force of soldiers trained to use the "wagon fortress" tactic.

The Panther Clan's large army of fully armed cavalry was the greatest threat of this era, and so Yuuto wanted to assign an experienced and trusted general to secure that location.

On that point, the man who was the former Mánagarmr was just right for the task.

"Yes, he is well," said Linnea. "His wounds from the previous battles have healed, and he's quite healthy. He's also been devoting himself quite a bit to keeping the peace within the city, which has helped us so much. At first, I got the impression that he might be a very frightening person, but he is actually very nice."

"Yeah, he's a good man, isn't he?" Yuuto broke out into a smile.

Skáviðr had a propensity to act the part of the bad guy, taking on jobs and responsibilities that were necessary but put him in an unfavorable light. So it made Yuuto happy that even while the man was working in another clan's territory, he had someone like Linnea who understood him for who he really

was.

Thinking about it, the two of them, Linnea and Skáviðr, both had a nature of self-sacrifice, putting the needs of others before themselves. Perhaps they were the type to unexpectedly get along well with each other.

“He is,” Linnea concurred. “The Panther Clan makes moves against us from time to time, but each time, Skáviðr narrows in on them and drives them back out right away.”

“I see. So they’re still making moves, then...” Nodding, Yuuto placed a hand thoughtfully to his chin.

In the battles at the end of their last war, Yuuto had employed a strange and clever historical tactic known as the “wagon fortress,” making use of wagons with tall carriages that were reinforced with iron plates as armor. Those wagons could travel with an army and then be made to form a linked wall around the soldiers inside, effectively building a makeshift iron-walled fortress on the spot in the field. This tactic had led the Wolf Clan to victory.

Able to do little against the wagon wall, after receiving mostly one-sided attacks and enormous casualties, the Panther Clan forces had been forced to retreat.

Yuuto believed that the impact of this event was enough to make the Panther Clan wary of going into another full-on war with the Wolf Clan. But on the other hand, he also felt strangely certain that things would not simply end there.

He could still remember the sheer hatred and insanity displayed by Hveðrungr, the Panther Clan patriarch, during their last battle.

Yuuto couldn’t believe that that man would be able to just give up on his quest for vengeance against him.

“That reminds me...” Linnea said. “Rasmus has been making moves as well, constantly making remarks about how I should take advantage of this peace and create the next heir to my family.”

“Ahh, it *is* true that Rasmus is pretty up there in years, so I can see that.”

If Yuuto had been thinking along the lines of common sense from modern

Japan, he would have taken “make an heir” to mean giving birth to a child, but things were different in Yggdrasil, and inheritance was not through blood but through the highest-ranked of one’s children as sworn by the Oath of the Chalice.

So if the worst were to happen to a patriarch, then the chosen successor (usually the second-in-command) would inherit the position, but in the case of Linnea and the Horn Clan, her second-in-command Rasmus was already well past fifty.

In a first world country like Japan in the 21st century, one’s fifties were still potentially still a vital part of middle age, but in Yggdrasil, it was quite old.

It wasn’t a good political state of affairs if the assumed successor to the clan was already so old that they might pass away soon after taking the position.

“So he’s saying he’s willing to give up the spot, and wants you to pick a new second, huh?” Yuuto said, nodding to himself with folded arms. “That’s not something that just anyone can do. I’m impressed.”

Status and power were attractive and addictive for most people. It was far more common for old statesmen to refuse to make way for the next generation, and instead try to hold onto power for the rest of their natural lives. It was certainly a phenomenon one could see frequently enough in 21st century Japan.

Advising one’s own removal from power was truly honorable, and gutsy.

“No, that is not what he meant,” Linnea said.

“Huh?”

“He wants me to hurry and give birth to a child.”

“Wha...! A child?! Linnea, you’re still so young, though!”

It would seem that Yuuto had been mistaken, and her words really did carry their more literal meaning.

Yuuto could feel his face starting to turn red. Of course, he was old enough that he already knew the particulars of how babies were made.

“Y-yes, well,” Linnea stammered, “that was his point, that I should hurry and

have a child now, while I am still young and healthy, and while we have temporary peace.”

“Oh... uhh...” The only response Yuuto could make was something ambiguous that sounded more akin to a groan.

This was one area where the values he carried from the world he’d been born and raised in differed greatly. In the Japan he came from, it would be unheard of for someone of Linnea’s age to be pressured into having a baby, but in this world, her age bracket was considered the most healthy and fitting for childbearing, both for the mother and baby.

“A-and, well, and so...” Linnea had been speaking with no trouble up until this point, but all of a sudden she began to stammer and push her two index fingers together bashfully, looking up at Yuuto with her red, blushing face.



Yuuto had a real sinking feeling about where this was going, but he couldn't refuse to listen and let her finish.

"I-if possible, if I could have y-your... your s-seed, Big Brother..."

Yuuto choked, and struggled to keep from spitting out his drink.

He'd been somewhat prepared for her question to be something along those lines, but her wording was above and beyond what he'd been mentally ready for.

"I-in Yggdrasil, one's abilities determine everything," she went on. "B-Big Brother, if it's your child, I'm sure that he or she would grow up to become a splendid patriarch."

"W-wait, wait wait wait!! In the clan system, inheritance by bloodline isn't..."

"It isn't completely impossible," she said. "I succeeded my father, after all. And besides, think of Felicia, who is the daughter by birth of the Wolf Clan second-in-command from of generations prior. And Kristina and Albertina, birth daughters of Claw Clan patriarch Botvid. It is a fact that incredible people often give birth to and raise children who are exceptional, as well."

"Y-yeah, but, but, you see..."

As Yuuto leaned away, retreating, Linnea leaned in closer towards him, struggling to finish her argument all at once.

"O-of course, I am not asking for you to marry me. Big Brother, I know and understand that eventually you have to return to the heavenly land from where you came. B-but... I just... if I could, I... just want something to remember you by..."

Yuuto panicked. "B-but I can't do that!"

To Yuuto's morals, the act of simply impregnating a woman and leaving her to raise a child alone without taking responsibility was beyond low; it was disgusting and beastly.

But Linnea did not relent.

"This is the best course of action for the future of both of our clans. Perhaps

you are not aware of it yourself, Big Brother, but you have already become an enormous figure in this world, far too great in fact. When you eventually return to your heavenly kingdom, the Wolf Clan might very well lose the unifying force that is holding it together, and the nation could suffer a rapid upheaval.”

“Ghh...!”

Linnea’s words struck a direct chord with him, for it had been one of his worst misgivings as of late.

Yuuto didn’t think he was special or outstanding, but the power of his modern knowledge, his “cheats,” was certainly tremendous.

That power had transformed a small, weak nation on the brink of destruction into the unquestionable powerhouse it was today, all in a scant couple of years.

That was exactly why he was trying to introduce widespread schooling and other such projects, in order to bolster the prosperity of the Wolf Clan even after he left. But the truth was, it wasn’t enough to end his worries.

“Certainly, in Yggdrasil today a bloodline does not hold much value, but the blood of one such as you, Big Brother, would be an exception,” Linnea said. “After all, you are the Gleipsieg, the ‘Child of Victory’ who descended into our world from the land beyond the heavens!”

It wasn’t as if Yuuto didn’t understand the point Linnea was making.

Yggdrasil was the kind of world where the suspect of a crime could be judged by throwing them into a river, deemed guilty if they were swept away by the current and innocent if they were not. It was a world ruled by such ancient and unscientific superstitions.

Yuuto had been transported here from another world, and to the people of this world, that meant he was from the land beyond the heavens, where the gods dwelled.

It wouldn’t be odd, given this situation, for his bloodline to be viewed with some sort of special significance. It would be similar to the sacred bloodline which garnered the þjóðann such an exalted status among the people.

If Yuuto had a blood heir, even if his blood heir did not come to hold the reins

of actual power, it would be fine as long as he or she were put into a symbolic role which helped unify the nation politically. Doing that would make it much less likely for the nation to lapse into disarray after Yuuto left.

However, this was viewing things from a purely political viewpoint, as a clan patriarch.

“That still doesn’t mean that...” Yuuto struggled to find the words to explain. As an *individual*, he found it difficult to accept this line of thinking.

If the needs of the vast majority required the sacrifice of a small few, then so be it. One’s own child, one’s flesh and blood, was no exception. Yuuto knew that was how a just ruler and patriarch should think, but he wasn’t able to fully separate himself from things like that.

Suddenly, a middle-aged man’s cheerful voice cut in. “My good Lady Linnea, if you keep Big Brother Yuuto’s company for yourself the whole night, then what are the rest of us to do?”

Yuuto and Linnea turned as one to see an unimpressive-looking man in his late thirties with a portly belly and a jolly smile. However, his eyes were not smiling, and there was something cold about them.

This man with a smile like a Noh mask was Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan, and the biological father of the twins Kristina and Albertina.

“Big Brother, I wish you a Happy New Year,” the man said.

Anytime Yuuto saw this man’s face, he was forced into a state of heightened tension, wary not to let his guard down. But in this particular instance, Yuuto found himself breathing a smile of relief as he returned Botvid’s greeting with a smile of his own.

“Oh, hey, Botvid! Happy New Year!”

Waiting behind Botvid were two men Yuuto recognized, and next to them was a middle-aged, strongly-built woman. They were not his subordinates; each of them had that certain presence about them, an air particular to one who rules over others.

As their eyes met his, each of them in turn bowed their heads deeply and

offered their greetings.

“Happy New Year, Big Brother!” greeted a male patriarch.

“I humbly wish you a Happy New Year, Big Brother,” the female patriarch intoned. “Thank you very much for inviting me here today.”

“I look forward to good relations with you in the coming year, Big Brother Yuuto!” the second man said.

These were the patriarchs of the Ash, Mountain Dog, and Wheat Clans, each of whom had just recently exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with Yuuto to bring their clans under the Wolf Clan’s protection and jurisdiction.

Today, Yuuto had invited all five other patriarchs here to further strengthen the diplomatic union between their clans by reinforcing everyone’s Chalice bonds with a second Chalice Ceremony later. He planned to have each of them exchange the Oath of the Chalice with Jörgen as well during that ceremony.

For Yuuto, this was his way of trying to be thorough, making things more solid in preparation for after his eventual return to Japan.

However, to the various clans of Yggdrasil, this Chalice Ceremony was largely perceived as the Wolf Clan loudly asserting its dominance over its neighbors.

Regardless of what Yuuto had planned or intended, his presence and influence in that world only continued to grow larger.

“Haaaah, that was a *nightmare*! Ughhh, I’m so tired...” Yuuto let out a huge sigh and complained into the smartphone pressed against his right cheek.

Yuuto’s voice carried loudly through the sanctuary at the top of the Hliðskjálf. The place was empty and silent now, enough to make it seem unreal how full of noise and celebration the place had been during the previous day’s banquet.

Above him in the star-strewn sky hung the moon, no more than a thin, fragile-looking sliver.

Mitsuki laughed. “Ah ha ha! Good job making it through, Yuu-kun.”

Mitsuki’s kind words coming through the speaker were consoling. That was all it was, a consolation, but he felt a warmth spreading through his heart when he

heard them.

They were special after all, the words of the girl he loved. And that was why he found himself leaning on her kindness.

“Seriously, I’m so worn out that my brain’s like mush,” Yuuto complained.

The climax at the end of the New Year’s Festival had been the grand Oath of the Chalice Ceremony involving all six clans, and it had drained every last bit of Yuuto’s mental energy.

Each one of the other participants was a proper ruler of their people, possessing a dignity appropriate to their status and (with the exception of Linnea) to their age. And in their midst, a young man still in his teens had to serve the role of the “eldest” and most senior figure, directing the ritual and mediating between them all.

Yuuto might have been the one to plan the event, but it had felt like torture.

“Well, whatever else, I’m relieved I managed to get all of that out of the way,” he said, yawning.

Yuuto wasn’t just referring to conducting the ceremony itself to its end. More than anything, he was relieved that in doing so, he’d managed to lay a foundation for the Wolf Clan to build upon even after he left this world behind.

In the world of Yggdrasil, the Oath of the Chalice was absolute. The sacred vows Yuuto had exchanged with the other clan patriarchs connected their clans, but those were formed between them as individuals. So once a new patriarch came into power, the power of the old Oath of the Chalice would be lost.

But this time around, Yuuto had managed to have the others also exchange the Oath of the Chalice with his second-in-command Jörgen, the most likely candidate to succeed him.

In other words, even after Yuuto left, the six clans would still be connected by that oath in alliance, and would have to solve their issues together.

One of his greatest anxieties had been dealt with, and it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of his chest.

“Uh huh. Now all that’s left is to find someone who can use the Fimbulvetr

spell, right?” Mitsuki said. “Though that does seem like it’ll be the hardest part...”

In a quick turnaround from his relief a second ago, Yuuto found himself at a loss. “Yeah, that’s true. It sucks that the only person we actually know about who can cast it is Sigyn of the Panther Clan. And despite calling herself Yggdrasil’s greatest seiðr user or whatever, Rífa’s totally useless on *this* matter, too.”

Despite being an ultra-rare wielder of two runes, and the (self-proclaimed) greatest wielder of seiðr magic in all Yggdrasil, the undoing of magical bindings was apparently outside Rífa’s area of expertise, and so there was nothing she could do.

“Umm, don’t you think talking like that is being a little hard on her?” Mitsuki asked. “It’s all thanks to Rífa-san that you’ve figured out a way to get home, you know.”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess. But that girl’s supposed to be the ‘Divine Empress,’ and frankly speaking, she’s basically a deadbeat.”

It was pretty rare to hear Yuuto speak so critically of someone.

Upon first meeting her, his first impressions had painted her as someone slightly difficult to approach because of the formality born of her high status, but by now that image had been completely shattered.

For all that Rífa claimed she’d come traveling to broaden her horizons, for the whole month she’d stayed with them so far, she had spent most of the time in the room they’d provided her, eating and sleeping the days away.

From time to time, Yuuto had made the effort to take time out of his busy schedule preparing for the New Year’s Festival to go visit her and talk, only to find she was fast asleep despite it being the middle of the day.

As an invited guest, all of her living expenses were being shouldered by the Wolf Clan. And as she was the þjóðann, she was being given all of the amenities appropriate to her status. Those expenses kept accumulating, and they were anything but cheap.

Still, this was a potential back-channel he could create with the central

empire, so he would likely have had no regrets about it if she'd at least been spending her days fruitfully. But faced with seeing her waste away her time and his money in such a slovenly fashion, he felt he had to call her out for it. That was just human nature.

Hastily, Mitsuki began trying to defend Rífa. "B-but she's really amazingly strong though, isn't she?"

Perhaps she felt an affinity for the girl who was supposed to look just like her.

But the harsh edge in Yuuto's tone did not soften. "Well, yeah, she's amazing, if you want to call it that..."

Given a wooden sword, she had faced off against Sigrún, and though the Mánagarmr had been holding back in order to avoid the risk of injuring her, Rífa had fought on the same level as her.

From astronomy to seiðr rituals and more, she was well-versed in a wide variety of subjects, enough to astonish even Felicia.

As someone who so closely resembled Yuuto's childhood friend Mitsuki, she was of course also quite beautiful, and her snow-white hair and eyes the color of rubies endowed her with an alluring, mystical air.

On top of that, she was, quite literally, the highest of highborn nobles. On paper, she was superlative in every way — perfect, even.

"But she's so ridiculously hi-spec, and she doesn't freaking *do* anything with it," Yuuto griped. "Nothing good, anyway..."

"Er, ah ha ha..." Mitsuki could only respond with a polite laugh.

Rífa's high combat skills had bolstered her into careless overconfidence, which was what had led to the incident at the tavern.

She'd used her preeminent knowledge and power with seiðr magic to disable and leave behind her protectors, and then to force Yuuto into a week's paralysis on nothing more than a whim.

Her appearance was beautiful and eye-catching, sure, but she seemed to harbor some kind of complex about it, and had a tendency to pick a fight with anyone she felt looked at her the wrong way.

Everything was like this with her; on average, about once every three days she caused some sort of trouble or incident, forcing Yuuto to cover for her and pick up the pieces.

And to top it off, since she was the þjóðann and thus the highest authority in Yggdrasil, no matter what problems she caused him, Yuuto wasn't allowed to put up any strong protests.

If she stayed shut in her room, that frustrated him, and when she came out, she tended to cause problems. In short, she was a real pain to deal with on the whole as a person.

"Well, it's all due to the fact that she's one of those ignorant princess-types who knows nothing of the world, the kind who'd say, 'Oh, if they have no bread, then let them eat cake.' So rather than being her fault, I'd say it's the fault of the people around her who—"

"Out here on such a freezing night, it is quite impressive how you can talk on and on with such energy," a cold voice said.

"Ah!" Yuuto's whole body jumped with fright, then went completely rigid. Even back in Japan, there was a popular saying equivalent to "the walls have ears," and it leapt to his mind now.

Yuuto turned to look behind him, slowly and stiffly, as if he were a door on rusted hinges. As a head of pure-white hair entered his field of vision, he knew he hadn't been imagining things, and his heart sank.

Standing next to Rífa was her bodyguard, the warrior known as Erna, who gave Yuuto a brief, polite bow.

Face-to-face with the person he'd just been dragging across the coals in absentia, Yuuto had trouble putting his words together. "L-Lady Rífa, wh-what, uh, what brings you here at this hour?"

Thankfully, he'd been speaking in Japanese with Mitsuki, so Rífa shouldn't have heard the actual contents of his conversation.

"Yes, well, if I were to artfully borrow a phrase of yours, 'If I am not awake during the day, then let me move about at night.' Perhaps that would cover it?"

She totally heard everything...! Yuuto found himself wanting to throw his hands up in despair.

Most likely Rífa had used the musical galdr magic Connections, which Felicia was also proficient with. As always, the girl always seemed to put her incredible abilities to use at inconvenient times.

“Mitsuki, sorry, but I’m gonna have to hang up,” Yuuto said. “Talk to you again tomorrow.”

“Ah, okay. I understand. ...Good luck.”

Mitsuki might not have understood Rífa’s language, but she seemed to have grasped the gist of the situation after hearing Yuuto’s gasp over the phone. Just one more way in which Yuuto felt the ease of dealing with his childhood friend.

“Hmmm, so those were the words of the land beyond heaven,” Rífa said. “And then there is that bizarre tool you hold... I see that you really have come here from another world.”

Rífa eyed the smartphone in Yuuto’s hand curiously and nodded to herself, as if impressed.

Going by her expression, she didn’t seem to be angry. Still, Yuuto felt guilty, and bowed his head to her.

“Umm... how should I... I’m really sorry.” His apology was clumsy, and informal at best.

“Oh, there is nothing you have to apologize for,” Rífa replied, and flashed him a bright and cheery smile.

...at least, at first. The next moment, her smile changed to a bitter one, the kind of self-derisive smile Yuuto knew well himself.

“It is quite true that I know nothing of the ways of the world,” Rífa said. “I have continuously caused trouble for you, and for that I should be the one apologizing.”

“Um...”

Now that he was on the receiving end, Yuuto reflexively began to try to say to her out of politeness that what she said wasn’t true at all, but the words stuck

in his throat. After all she'd heard him say about her just moments ago, such a denial would just ring hollow.

Seeing Yuuto's hesitation, Rífa chuckled and shrugged her shoulders. "Since the day I was born, I have spent all my life in Valaskjálf Palace. Others would tell me what a big and grand palace it was, large enough that a small city would fit inside its walls. But I realize now that, in the end, it was still a dreadfully small and limited world to grow up in."

She paused and closed her eyes, seemingly thinking back on some long-ago memories. When she spoke again, Yuuto could hear deep emotion in her voice.

"That I was even able to see that for myself was enough to make this journey truly worthwhile. There is still one month left until my time is up, but I can already declare it with confidence: The time I have spent here has been the most splendid, the most enjoyable experience in my entire life."

Yuuto was startled. "How... how can you say that...?"

It was exactly the wrong kind of thing to say in this situation. But the words slipped out before Yuuto could stop them.

He couldn't accept what he'd just heard.

He couldn't help how wrong it felt to hear someone who spent her days holed up in her room tell him she'd learned how wide the world was.

He couldn't help how frustrating, even angry, it made him feel to hear her say that such an empty month had been the most splendid part of her life.

Though he didn't explain those thoughts out loud, his emotions must have shown clearly on his face, for Rífa gave an amused chuckle.

"Heh heh! It would not seem like much to you and your people, but to me, this has been quite the grand adventure."

She wore a contented expression, but there was something lonely about it. It was like there was no light in her eyes, no hope; only a heavy resignation.

Yuuto wondered just what could cause this girl to feel that sort of despair. Maybe her resemblance to Mitsuki played a part, but he couldn't just ignore her now.

“In that case, you should experience much more of what the outside world has to offer,” Yuuto told her. “I can accompany you, whenever I have time.”

“You make a very kind offer, but my body makes that difficult, you know.” Rífa ran a few fingers through her snow-white hair.

“Not to worry,” Yuuto assured her. “I also stand out because of my black hair, but if we use Kristina’s powers, that won’t be an issue!”

“Hm? Oh. Now that I think on it, I never told any of you. Everyone in the palace who has ever dealt with me personally was already aware, so not having to explain it just became normal to me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Take a closer look at my skin, then. Tell me, what are your impressions?” As she said this, Rífa held out her arm to Yuuto, bringing it up close to his eyes.

Yuuto did as he was told and examined her skin closely. “This is something I have thought for a while, but seeing it up close like this, your skin really is pale white and very beautiful. It’s as if you have never once been out in the sun.”

This was not flattery, but Yuuto’s honest assessment.

The people of the lands of Yggdrasil seemed to be related to or at least similar to Caucasians, so their skin tended to be pinker or whiter than an East Asian like Yuuto. But even by that standard, Rífa’s pure white skin stood out to him.

“You have it right,” she replied.

“Huh?” Yuuto reflexively looked up to meet Rífa’s eyes.

She looked back at him with a calm, detached smile that was impossible for him to read. It reminded him of the smile carved onto Buddha statues back in Japan.

“Thanks to an affliction I was born with, I cannot walk under the light of the sun.”

Rífa’s tone and delivery were so indifferent that, for a second, Yuuto didn’t really process what he’d heard.

Even once he grasped what she had said, it was difficult for him to accept as

real right away.

He suspected she might be making some sort of joke at first, but Rífa's expression told him that it had to be the truth. As the realization dawned on Yuuto, his eyes and mouth went wide with surprise.

"Th-that's...!" The shock left Yuuto speechless.

He could faintly recall having heard that such a congenital disease existed.

But back when he'd heard about it, all the people in his life had been healthy, so it was the kind of thing he never needed to learn about. It was something he had only learned about on the internet or in a book, as if it existed in a distant other world.

"Well, it is not *completely* impossible for me, as it happens," Rífa said. "Days in the summer months are too severe, to be sure, but during the winter days like these when the light is weaker, I can be outside a little bit, depending."

Rífa spoke in such an easygoing and candid manner that it was almost making Yuuto more anxious.

Thinking back, he recalled that the times he had seen her outside, it had been mostly in the evening or night.

He had spotted her during the daytime hours once in a rare while, always during rainy or snowy days when the sky was darkened by clouds.

That was precisely why, even though he had known it wasn't his business, Yuuto had felt angry at her for wasting of her vacation in the outside world. Now, however, he was furious with himself for having judged her that way.

Outside of those times, Rífa *couldn't* venture outdoors.

"Oh, do not make such a sour face," Rífa said with a chuckle. "I said it myself just a moment ago. 'If I am not awake during the day, then let me move about at night.' I am hated by the sun, but I am loved by the moon. The great moon which is the holy source of ásmegin."

Rífa's twin runes appeared, golden sword-like crosses that seemed to rise up from within her eyes.

She seemed to truly believe this. And practically speaking, when it came to

use of the magical power known as ásmegin, there was likely no one more powerful than her in the world of Yggdrasil.

But to Yuuto, it also seemed like she was forcing herself to act tough. As if holding onto that belief was what allowed her to hold herself together.

Of course, if he were to call her out on that, it wasn't as if that would do her any good right now. He couldn't take responsibility for telling her how to follow through on it.

This girl was a stranger to him (“annarr” in the parlance of Yggdrasil), an outsider only visiting lárnvíðr who would return to Glaðsheimr in the spring.

A bizarre coincidence had led to their fates being intertwined for this brief time. As for the rest of her life after returning to Glaðsheimr, he could hope and root for her in his heart, but he wouldn't be able to help her in any way directly.

There was only one thing Yuuto could do for her here and now.

The best Yuuto could hope for was to help her make as many good memories as he could.

“You are right, Lady Rífa,” he said at last. “Then how about this? Tomorrow, I was planning to hold a New Year's party with just a few of the people closest to me, like Felicia and Sigrún. It will be taking place after the sun goes down. Would you care to join us?”

Rífa was traveling incognito and needed to stay low-profile, so she hadn't attended either the New Year's Festival or the Chalice Ceremony afterward. But it would be far too wretched to let the holiday season pass her by without celebrating it with anyone even once.

“Lord Yuuto...” Rífa's eyes widened, and she smiled.

Unlike all her other smiles thus far, with the haughtiness or the oppressive grace or the sad depths of her status behind them, this was a bashful smile befitting of a young girl her age.

“All right then, once again: Happy New Year, everyone!”

“Happy New Year!!”

Everyone's raised cups clinked against each other, and the metallic sounds filled the air of the reception room.

This small party consisted of Yuuto, Felicia, Sigrún, Linnea, Ingrid, Albertina and Kristina, Ephelia, Rífa, and Rífa's bodyguard Erna. The ten of them were gathered around an extra-large kotatsu, one specially made by Ingrid.

"Ahh, yeah, this is so much better. Cozy parties like this are much more my speed." Yuuto tilted back his cup, filled with juice made from squeezed apples, and downed it in one gulp. He exhaled with satisfaction.

The formal New Year's Festival banquet was officially one where people could celebrate together while putting aside rank to a degree. But with over a hundred important people in attendance, and with it being such an important event politically, it had still ended up adhering to formalities in the end. Yuuto had needed to be vigilant and cautious with himself the whole time.

He couldn't afford to make a fool of himself and disgrace his name as patriarch. That had been even more the case in front of the patriarchs from other clans invited to the event.

In that respect, this party was a total contrast, with all of the girls being people he could think of as close and trusted friends or confidants. None of them were that far apart in age, either. Even if he did something a little foolish or embarrassing here, there was a sense that things would still be all right, and that made him feel secure.

"Oh, yeah, I totally get what you mean," Ingrid put in. "Back at that formal banquet, it was like torture with all the constant, boring flattery. It really wore me down."

Ingrid put a hand to her shoulder and cracked her neck, groaning at the remembered experience.

One could not hope to discuss the Wolf Clan's incredible progress over the past several years without mention of Ingrid's pivotal role in it, and no one in the Wolf Clan now would fail to recognize that fact.

For Ingrid, it had been an endless stream of people who barely got past exchanging greetings before leaping at the first opportunity to start trying to

butter her up and curry favor with her.

Felicia giggled and showed Ingrid a sweet, sisterly smile. “Ingrid, you have already become someone that the Wolf Clan could never do without. Going forward, you are going to need to become at least somewhat used to situations like that, hee hee.”

She was back to acting like her normal self, it seemed.

“Ughh,” Ingrid moaned. “I’d really rather not. Oh, hey, that reminds me. Not a lot of people went over to bother you this year, Felicia. Did you do something? What’s your secret?”

At those innocent words from Ingrid, Felicia’s expression froze solid.

“Ah, crap! You idiot!” Yuuto shouted.

“Huh?”

“Heh... hee hee hee... that’s right... who would bother approaching a woman in her twenties, anyway? Hee hee... heh heh heh heh...” Felicia broke into a dark smile and a disturbing giggle, and once again began to give off a heavy aura of gloom, as if the very air were being pulled down around her.

It seemed that the emotional pain from her birthday hadn’t fully healed, after all.

Ingrid didn’t know how to handle Felicia’s sudden and unexpected change, and started to panic. “Wha— Yuuto, what’s, huh?! Felicia, what’s gotten into you?!”

Ingrid was the type of girl who found fulfillment when she finished a piece of work at a quality she could be satisfied with, so generally speaking, she spent most of her time in her workshops. As such, she was also a little uninformed when it came to the daily affairs of others, or to the gossip one might hear in the palace.

As such, it seemed that she didn’t know anything about what not to talk about around Felicia.

And then the spontaneous little girl who didn’t know fear added fuel to the fire.

“Hey, hey, Auntie Felicia, what’s wrong?” Albertina asked.

“Ghh! A-Auntie...” Felicia moaned.

“A-amazing, Al,” Kristina mused. “Even I, who find my life’s passion in toying with the feelings of others, hesitated to cross that line this time around. Simply impressive!”

“Huuuh?! What did I do?!”

“You said ‘Auntie,’ and that is taboo right now.”

“Wha? But Papa Yuuto’s our sworn father and Auntie Felicia is his younger sister, so that makes her my aunt, and so I’m supposed to call her Auntie. That’s what you said, Kris!”

“Wha?! Do not use your airheaded nature to make me a target as well, Al! And you are repeating ‘Auntie’ over and over again! What did I just tell you?!”

“Wine!” Felicia screamed. “Please bring me a drink! I cannot stand being sober for another minute!”

Frustrated and clearly sulking, Felicia slammed her cup down on the tabletop.

Ephelia was a servant as well as a guest, so she hurried over to pour alcohol into Felicia’s cup. “R-right away. Here you are!”

As soon as the cup was full, Felicia drained its contents all at once, and held it out to Ephelia again.

Looking scared and trembling a bit, Ephelia refilled the cup.

From the looks of things, it would likely be a wise decision for Yuuto to leave that corner of the table well alone.

“Pfft... ha ha ha ha ha! Only the first few minutes, and things are already getting lively.” Rífa’s genuinely happy and cheerful laugh cut through the tension and seemed to buoy the sinking atmosphere of the room. She was tearing up at the corners of her eyes. Apparently she’d really gotten a kick out of that exchange.

Once her laughter finally settled down, Rífa meekly bowed her head to the others.

“I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to you all, for inviting me to such a fun and happy event.”

“W-wait, please raise your head, Lady Rífa,” Linnea cut in, a bit flustered. “If you bow your head and speak so humbly to us, we will not be able to conduct ourselves properly.”

Linnea had been properly trained in such matters of imperial etiquette from her youngest years by her late father, the previous patriarch of the Horn Clan.

Incidentally, the only ones present who knew Rífa’s true identity were Yuuto and Felicia (and Erna, of course). To everyone else, she was still being passed off as the granddaughter of the head of House Jarl.

It wasn’t like Yuuto didn’t trust the other girls — far from it. But it was just a fact that when keeping a secret, the fewer people who knew, the lower the chances of it leaking out.

If word got out about who Rífa really was, plenty of people would surely come forward to try and use her, or try to compel Yuuto to use her, for political ends.

And although one might be able to accuse him of simply thinking naïvely, Yuuto for his part felt that he wanted to do everything he could to avoid letting a young girl like her end up used like some political pawn.

“Hm, is that how it is?” Rífa seemed unsure of her grasp on the problem.

Linnea gave a humble, but assertive, nod. “Yes, my lady, it is.”

Even though they were both princesses who were now rulers, raised as ladies of high status, Yuuto saw quite a bit of difference between them.

Perhaps this was a result of what was currently most expected from the þjóðann; not the actual skills for administration and rule, but to play the role of unifying symbol and object of reverence.

Yuuto chimed in to follow Linnea. “Well, it’s like this: When someone of higher status lowers themselves too much, it just ends up making the people below them feel embarrassed and apologetic.”

“Pft. Lookit Yuuto here, repeating the same thing people are always lecturing him about,” Ingrid snickered and muttered to herself.

“Hey, I *heard* that, Ingrid!” Yuuto shouted.

“Aw, crap—” Ingrid moved to cover her mouth with her hand, but of course it was already too late.

Yuuto lined up his hand and hit her with a good (light) forehead flick.

He then turned back to Rífa, and bowed his head to her.

“I’m sorry about this. We’re all acting with pretty bad manners in your presence.”

“You’ve certainly got that right,” Erna snapped. “Do you have any idea just who—”

Rífa waved her hand to silence the woman, who was starting to get worked up. “No, no, I do not mind. Actually, I find this quite comforting.”

It seemed there was something else the highborn girl was much more concerned with.

Rífa’s eyes were practically sparkling. “Hee hee, gathering together with others in a boisterous group around a hot pot like this is quite the first-time experience.”

Her gaze was locked onto the large black iron pot smack in the center of the kotatsu table, resting in an area carved-out of the table top so that it sat right above the heat source for the kotatsu. Inside the pot was a hodgepodge of meats, vegetables, and other ingredients, all cooked together into a piping hot stew.

The stew was bubbling nicely, and a delicious aroma wafted out to spread over the room.

Yuuto audibly gulped as his mouth watered. “Well, as it seems to be just about ready, shall we eat? My subordinate Sigrún here has the ability to detect any dangerous or poisonous ingredients in something on the spot, so please rest assured that you have nothing to worry about on that front.”

Yuuto shot Sigrún a quick glance, and she nodded back.

Sigrún was the one in charge of the pot, and she had been stirring it carefully and silently this whole time.

“Ohh, what a reliable woman.” Rífa gave a delighted nod. “Then let us begin at once.”

She reached out with her wooden skewer towards a cut of pork in the heart of the pot...

And there was a *clack!* as Sigrún’s large stirring spoon smacked it away.

“That piece was only just placed into the pot, and has not been cooked properly.”

“H-hey! You impudent...!” Erna raised her voice again in rebuke.

“Would you rather I let her eat uncooked meat that was not safe?” Sigrún asked archly.

That cut down Erna’s protest with a single retort, and the imperial bodyguard reluctantly went silent.

“Urgh...”

It seemed that Sigrún cared not one bit who she was dealing with, forgoing all social delicacy even with those from the famous House Jarl.

That would stand to reason, for even with Yuuto, to whom she’d sworn her absolute obedience, she remained pushy and a bit overbearing when it came to food and meals.

According to Felicia, “Even the most loyal guard dog will still growl at its master if he tries to interfere with its meal.”

Perhaps someone like Sigrún, whose life revolved around survival on the fields of war, knew the true importance of proper food through her personal experience, and thus it was one area on which she wouldn’t compromise with anyone.

“These ones are well-cooked and perfect for eating,” Sigrún said, and without waiting for confirmation, she scooped up the ingredients and broth into a small soup bowl.

“Here you are,” she said, politely handing the bowl over.

...to Yuuto.

Apparently her placing Yuuto as the person of highest priority went unchanged, in *any* situation.

Erna's eyebrow twitched visibly, and though she said nothing, it was clear that act of ignoring Rífa's status had stoked her anger further.

Thinking on his feet in that split second, Yuuto passed the bowl along to Rífa in a fluid motion as if that had been the plan all along. "Mm, thanks. Here you are, Lady Rífa."

A fine play, if I do say so myself. Inwardly, Yuuto gave himself a huge pat on the back.

"...Here you are. *Father.*" Handing Yuuto a second bowl, Sigrún addressed him directly, with emphasis.

Apparently to her, having the bowl she'd filled first and meant especially for her sworn father given up to someone else had hurt her feelings a bit.

That intense loyalty of hers was starting to seem like it could lay the seeds for trouble, and Yuuto was starting to get a little scared.

"Ohh. So this is the hot pot stew of lárnvíðr." Rífa took a few bites and chewed thoughtfully. "...Hmm, I would not say it tastes bad, exactly, but the flavor certainly is thinner compared to Glaðsheimr."

As always, the divine empress was used to having her needs attended to, but she had no idea how to be attentive to the feelings of others.

This time it was Sigrún's eyebrow that twitched in irritation. Rífa's remark had clearly struck a nerve.

Sigrún was, as Yuuto was fully aware, a woman who took matters regarding food very seriously and personally. She looked ready to say something horrible, like, "If you're going to complain, then don't eat it."

Rather than give Sigrún the chance to say anything dangerous, Yuuto cut in and began rambling.

"Y-you know, Lady Rífa, lárnvíðr sits in the highlands up in the mountains, and we're pretty far from the coast, so most of our recipes here use little or no salt. Now that you are visiting our lands, why not make the most of this opportunity,

and enjoy savoring a local flavor you might not experience at home? I believe that is one of the secrets to good travel.”

It felt like an errant spark could set things off at any moment, and Yuuto already felt a stomachache coming on. The parties involved likely didn’t have any real intent to start anything with each other, of course.

At times like this, the one Yuuto could most rely on was Felicia, his trusted and skilled adjutant, and also the other person in the room who understood how Rífa’s true identity played into the situation.

Unfortunately...

“You are so lucky, Ephy,” Felicia moaned. “Still only barely over ten...”

“L-Lady Felicia, you are still very young and beautiful!” Ephelia exclaimed.

“‘Still’ beautiful, is it? Still, indeed...”

“Ah, ahhh, n-no! P-please forgive me!”

“It’s quite all right. I am already a twenty-year-old ‘auntie,’ after all.”

Unfortunately, Felicia seemed to be occupied with grumbling at Ephelia as if she was a bartender, and wouldn’t be any use right now.

Yuuto saw this as a really bad sign right off the bat of what was to come.

As it happens, a bad hunch about a situation tends to turn out correct more often than anyone would like.

All of the girls, especially Linnea and Sigrún, were people with good self-control who understood the old maxim, “It’s fine to drink, but not to get too drunk.” But this time, that did not appear to be the case.

As a drunken Felicia led the way with her aggressive tactics, each of them fell, one by one, into the pit with her.

“Whaaat, are you saying you won’t drink when I pour for youuu?!” Felicia hollered.

In the world of 21st century Japan, all of them would be legally underage and forbidden to drink, but in the Wolf Clan, there were no particular laws regarding

alcohol. It was simply the general social custom for people to start drinking somewhere around the age of fifteen, when they would be considered adults.

And so thankfully, that meant Yuuto succeeded in getting the twins and Ephelia safely out of this whole situation and off to bed, but that was the limit of what he could do.

“Hee hee hee! Ohhhh, Big Brotherrrr?” Felicia said in a singsong voice. “Are you drinkinggggg?”

She drooped herself over Yuuto while holding out a wine pitcher and tipping it over, and Yuuto wearily held his cup up to catch what poured out.

“Yeah, I’m drinking, Felicia. Thanks to you.”

Judging by the fact that she was filling his cup all the way to the brim, it seemed like his sardonic remark flew right over her head.

“It’s funny, because you do not seem drunk at alllll,” she complained.

“You may be right.”

How much easier would it be if I could be drunk like them right now? Yuuto wondered to himself bitterly.

He could tell that he was indeed a little intoxicated. However, that was all. Maybe it was because Rífa was here, and he felt a strong responsibility not to allow himself to lose control of his faculties... or maybe it was because he just had an incredible tolerance for alcohol to begin with. Either way, for whatever reason, no matter how much he drank, he never seemed to get any more than slightly intoxicated.

Of course, Yuuto found himself questioning whether he was really better off having his proper wits about him in a situation like this.

“Hah hah hah! How delightful, how delightful!” Rífa was laughing from the bottom of her heart, though. Right now for Yuuto, that was the only saving grace here.

Of course, if it weren’t for Rífa being here, Yuuto would have been able to escape this scenario along with the three kids.

He couldn’t exactly leave the þjóðann behind alone drunk at a party, so he

had to keep staying here. He kept watching her nervously, worried he or the others might do something to offend her.

Felicia giggled. “Big Brother! ♥ Please drink more! Tee hee hee!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Yuuto threw back another cup of wine, his heart at least half-wishing that it work this time.

The strange heat particular to alcohol that he had once found unpleasant hardly drew his notice anymore. Perhaps he’d gotten used to drinking.

Once his cup was empty, Felicia happily filled it back up again.

Well, at least Felicia’s having a good time too, and she seems to have forgotten that stuff about her age for the moment. Maybe I can get through this, after all? Starting to feel the first hints of relief from his nerves, Yuuto brought the cup to his lips.

“Ohhh, it is so hot in herrrrre!”

Felicia suddenly began to take off her clothes, causing Yuuto to sputter and spit out his drink.

Of course, in the summer months, Felicia wore pretty skimpy outfits, so it wasn’t as though Yuuto wasn’t used to seeing her show off a lot of skin. Still, the act of a woman undressing contains a certain something that is uniquely tempting to a man.

Furthermore, because of her drinking, Felicia’s skin had a slight red flush to it in certain parts that seemed to bring her sexiness to an even higher level. It was so alluring that Yuuto wished he hadn’t looked.

“Oh my, what is the matter, Big Brother?” Felicia grinned.

“Wh-wh-what’s the... Just because it’s hot, does that make you think you can just take off your clothes all of a sudden?!”



“Hm, I see,” Sigrún piped up. “If it’s too hot, one can simply undress. How perfectly logical.”

“Come on, then, Rún, you too,” Felicia giggled.

“Uwaaagh! No, stop! Rún, stop!” Yuuto cried out in such panic that his voice almost went into falsetto.

Sigrún had begun to pull off her clothes with speed and gusto, but she stopped still at his command.

At least in this sense, no matter how drunk she might be, she was still the Sigrún who had pledged her complete obedience to Yuuto.

“What is it, Father?” she asked.

“Think about it! I’m here, too, a man! You understand the issue, right?”

“Ahh, now I see. Please accept my apologies. I was lacking in consideration.” Sigrún bowed her head to Yuuto once, and continued. “Felicia told me about this. Rather than ripping one’s clothes off all at once, slowly undressing bit by bit in a teasing manner is much more pleasing to a man. In other words, you would rather I do that.”

“No, nooo! That’s not what I meant!”

“Ngh, as the patriarch of the Horn Clan, I cannot allow myself to fall behind the two of them...” Linnea muttered.

“Grr, fine, if everyone’s gonna take their clothes off, then I can, too!” Ingrid cried.

“What?!”

The alcohol seemed to throw momentum behind everything, and now for some reason, the spark had been lit under Linnea’s determination and Ingrid’s stubborn pride. The two of them started taking off their clothes, as well.

It was no longer possible for Yuuto to get control of this situation by himself. He turned to Rífa.

Rífa, however, was watching him with a truly wicked and impish grin. “Hmm, do you think this means I should start undressing, too? What with things

flowing in that direction and all...”

She was completely looking at this situation as nothing more than an entertaining show.

“Wha... No, please don’t joke around like that, and help me stop this!”

“I shall decline. This is shaping up to be the perfect spice for my wine.”

“Dammit, I should have known better than to ask another drunk for help with this. E-Erna, please!”

Giving up on Rífa, Yuuto pinned his last hope on the girl’s stern bodyguard, and turned to face her.

Because Erna had a mission to protect Rífa, she hadn’t had a single drop of alcohol tonight. She should be completely sober.

And judging by her earlier reactions, she was the type of person who wouldn’t sit by and allow acts of impropriety in front of the þjóðann. There was no way she would look at this and not rebuke the girls.

“Zzzz...”

“Sh-she’s sleeping?!”

“Ahh, yes, Erna did mention to me that she was no good with alcohol at all,” Rífa said. “I would never have thought she would pass out drunk just from the smell of it in the air, though. But look there, you seem to have a more pressing matter right now...”

Snickering to herself, Rífa gestured towards the space behind Yuuto.

Slowly, fearfully, Yuuto turned around to look...

“Big Brother! ♪”

“Father!”

“Yuutooooo!”

“Big Brother Yuuto! ♥”

“Gahh!”

The sight of all four girls, half-naked from the waist up and sidling towards

him, made Yuuto gasp and reflexively draw backwards.

But the room wasn't really that big. Yuuto soon found his back against a wall.

"A-all of you, calm down! L-let's just all calm down, okay?!"

His voice shaking, Yuuto held out his palms towards the girls, but they didn't take his cue to stop. They moved in closer.

The looks in their drunken, unfocused eyes were strangely erotic, and also more frightening than he could stand.

"Gah... *pant* so... *pant* tired!" Yuuto wheezed, struggling to regain his breath. "Ughh... that wore me out way more than the New Year's Festival!"

Yuuto practically spat out his complaint in exasperation as he reached down to scoop up some of the piled-up snow, using it to cool the heat from his flushed face.

All of the girls had passed out drunk, and so he'd finally managed to scramble out of there in one piece.

Part of this was his own fault for allowing himself to relax and let his guard down because it was a gathering of the people closest to him, but he'd also never thought that the girls would *all* turn out to be such bad drunks.

"It's amazing I kept a handle on myself through all that..." he muttered.

In those frantic moments, he'd felt certain that the dreamy scene unfolding was what the mythical paradise of Valhalla must be like. And that feeling was what had made it hell for him, a sweet nightmare.

There'd been several times when the old saying "*A man who does not return a woman's advances should be ashamed.*" had run through his head and nearly broken his resistance.

If he had allowed himself to waver even slightly, with the effects of the alcohol running through him as well, his rational mind would have surely buckled under the pressure.

That was just how close of a battle it had been.

For now, at least, he'd instructed some of the female servants to go in and put blankets on the sleeping girls so they wouldn't catch cold. (Incidentally, afterward rumors would spread throughout the palace of Yuuto's supposed wild sexual appetite and prowess, but that is a story for another time.)

"Hm?" Yuuto felt a presence and looked up, as something raced towards him through the dark.

The next instant, something small and grey leapt out at him from the darkness, colliding with his thigh.

"Whoa!" Yuuto said. "Hey there, Hildólfir."

As soon as it hit the ground, the little wolf pup happily jumped up at him again, over and over. Yuuto broke into a smile, and crouched down to pick it up.

As soon as Hildólfir was in his arms, he began licking at Yuuto's face. It tickled, and was a bit gross, but was also strangely comforting.

"Heh, at least with you it's not even an issue, and yet..." Yuuto sighed to himself as he gently stroked the puppy's back.

Relations between human men and women, on the other hand, were so frustratingly difficult.

A voice came from behind Yuuto, accompanied by a disapproving sigh. "And yet it would be just fine if you did as those girls wished."

Surprised, Yuuto turned around to find the girl with snow-white hair standing there, looking at him with an expression that suggested she was utterly dumbfounded by his actions.

"Lady Rífa...?" he said. "You were awake?"

"Yes, well. I only woke up a moment ago. I was only lightly asleep, it seems. I do mostly sleep during the middle of the day, after all." Rífa clasped her hands together and lifted them high over her head, stretching.

Perhaps there was still a bit of alcohol left in her, as her cheeks were faintly red. But she was steady on her feet, and her eyes were clear.

It looked like she was at least coming back to sober again.

“Aha!” she laughed. “But still, what a truly delightful party that was!” Rífa closed her eyes and seem to be replaying scenes from the party in her mind as she spoke.

Yuuto grimaced, and replied in a sulking voice, “Yes, Lady Rífa, I’m sure it was for *you*, seeing as you had such an entertaining show to watch.”

“Ha ha ha, what’s this? Are you holding a grudge about the fact that I did nothing to help you?”

“Yes, a bit, as a matter of fact.” Yuuto nodded honestly.

He didn’t really care at this point anymore if he was talking to an empress.

He was sure there were few people who would not be angry at someone who had sat back and laughed at them during a moment of terrible struggle and need.

“Dear me,” Rífa said mockingly. “What reason would you even have to be dissatisfied with the adoration of ladies that wonderful? Refusing to respond to them makes you hardly fit to call yourself a man.”

“And *I’d* say that having one’s way with a drunken girl who has no idea what she’s doing is much more the act of someone unfit to be called a man!” Yuuto snapped.

This uncompromising principle of Yuuto’s had played as big a part as his love for Mitsuki in keeping him from crossing the line earlier.

Those women were all his trusted comrades, his family, with whom he’d exchanged the Oath of the Chalice.

He could never forgive anyone who harmed them or did them wrong. That, of course, included Yuuto himself.

“You... are a much more timid man than I was led to expect,” Rífa said. “After meeting you, it’s as if the things I heard were describing a different person entirely.”

“...And just what sort of rumors did you hear about me, if I may ask?” he demanded.

“That you set your clutches upon any beautiful woman you lay eyes upon,

young or old. A veritable demon of lust.”

“That’s complete bullshit! Why would I even *get* that sort of reputation?!”

“Is it not true that you recently went on holiday to a hot springs, alone except for a retinue of beautiful maidens?”

“Oh, gods, *that!*” Yuuto cried out and smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand, tilting his head back hopelessly.

Seeing this, Rífa gave another disappointed-sounding sigh, her shoulders drooping. “Judging by that reaction of yours, nothing actually happened then, either.”

“Of course it didn’t!”

“What do you mean, ‘of course’? When a man and woman are together in company, a romantic connection is the more natural outcome. Even you must admit you hold feelings of your own towards those girls.”

“...Well, yeah, I do. They are my precious family, my sworn daughters and little sisters.”

“Don’t play the fool. You know that is not what I meant. I am saying that—”

Yuuto cut Rífa off with a direct statement. “There is a girl I love in the world I came from. I don’t want to betray her.” A forlorn look clouded over his expression.

He didn’t want to betray Mitsuki, who had spent almost three years now supporting him, waiting for him, and holding him in her thoughts the whole time.

“Oh, is that perhaps the ‘Mitsuki’ girl, then?” Rífa asked. “The one who looks just like me... Hmm. Then this Mitsuki is quite blessed to have a man as great as you devote his whole heart only to her. I quite envy her.”

Rífa nodded to herself as she said this, and Yuuto felt strangely uncomfortable, as if he were somehow being criticized.

Of course, Rífa clearly hadn’t spoken with any intent to criticize him; in fact, she was practically complimenting him.

Even so, Yuuto felt a painful tightness deep in his chest.

All of a sudden, he realized what it was.

It was a feeling of intense *guilt*.

Guilt towards the girl who so closely resembled the one speaking to him now.

“I’m... I’m not a great man at all.” Yuuto grimaced and spat out those words ruefully, tightly clutching at the collar of his shirt.

His feelings for Mitsuki were there in his heart, and they were true. They had never lessened over these past three years, and in fact had only grown stronger.

He had lived this whole time sick of the inconveniences of life in Yggdrasil. There were no heaters or air conditioners, or any of the other blessings of modern civilization, and he felt their absence keenly all the time. He constantly longed for the taste of a proper meal with white rice.

But even so, he was now suddenly forced to come to a new realization about himself.

Part of him *didn’t* want to go home; part of him wanted to stay living with everyone here.

He had eaten his meals together with them, shared both joyful and painful times with them; he’d struggled with them through several life-or-death battles, and formed strong bonds with every one of them. And on top of that, they all showered him with pure, earnest affection. It would have been nigh impossible for him not to come to feel the same way in return.

“I’ve been here too long,” he muttered to himself. “I’ve got to get home, and fast...”

Indeed, now more than ever Yuuto knew he had to leave as soon as possible. Before it got to the point in which he wouldn’t be able to anymore.

However, in defiance of Yuuto’s anguished conclusion, the hands of time continued to march mercilessly onward.

And so, the long and cold, yet peaceful winter came to its end, and the beginning of a fateful spring visited the Wolf Clan.

ACT 4

“So, that idiot is making his move,” Yuuto muttered, using his customary nickname for Steinþórr.

An urgent report had just arrived from the west.

Sitting at his kotatsu and resting his chin on one hand, Yuuto sighed deeply, lamenting the trouble this report was surely going to portend.

The thick layer of snow covering lárnvíðr had now all melted clean away, and out in the fields, one could already see the growing buds of flowers here and there.

It was no longer dry and bone-chillingly cold, and the wind carried the breath of spring.

That being said, it was still a bit chilly on average, cold enough to be perfect for dozing off seated at a warm kotatsu... which was what Yuuto had been just about to do until Kristina and Albertina had arrived with the report.

“Yes, Father, because a *certain idiot* acted without thinking, now it is going to cause you all sorts of problems...” As Kristina spoke, she turned to stare at her sister.

It was very deliberate, accusatory even.

Immediately Albertina began to panic. “Hwah, meee?! Wait, I didn’t do anything this time!”

“Oh, my apologies. When I heard the word ‘idiot’ my mind just reflexively assumed we were talking about you, Al.”

“That’s horrible! Just what sort of person do you consider me to—”

“An idiot.”

“That was too fast! Is it really reflexive?!”

“Heh heh, naturally.”

“Why do you look proud of yourself?!” Albertina wailed. “At least act a little sorry!”

“...Tch.”

“Why are you acting even meaner instead?!”

The twins were being as boisterous as ever.

As of late, Yuuto had gotten used enough to their comedic back-and-forth antics that they’d become a source of entertainment for him. But right now, he couldn’t afford to let himself get comfortable or distracted.

“Kristina,” he said. “Quit playing for now and give me the details of the report.”

“Yes, Father.” As if a switch had been flipped, Kristina’s face instantly became serious, and she nodded solemnly.

The way she transformed on a dime like that, and so completely, was something Yuuto had at first had trouble dealing with, but now he was so used to it that he didn’t pay it any mind.

“According to the report from our spies, a Lightning Clan force of 8,000 men has departed east from Bilskírnir, led by Steinþórr.”

“W-wait, hold on, they’ve already marched?!” Yuuto cried. “We never got any reports that they’d begun their war preparations, not a thing!”

Wide-eyed, Yuuto sat up, and the fist that had been at his cheek dropped to the tabletop.

The Lightning Clan had fought a proper war with the Wolf Clan once during the previous summer, and during the fall, they’d been acting for a time as if they might try to invade again, so of course the Wolf Clan had been treating them as the highest class of threat, watching them vigilantly.

Several agents trained under Kristina had been sent to infiltrate the Lightning Clan, and they were supposed to be sending detailed reports at the first sign of any suspicious activity.

And yet, here the enemy troops were already on the march. This was a huge shock to Yuuto.

“Indeed, they managed to hide everything from us all the way to the end,” Kristina said. “I suspect this is likely the work of the Lightning Clan second-in-command, Röskva.”

“Röskva... She’s an Einherjar with the rune Tanngnjóstr, the Teeth-Grinder, right?” Yuuto asked. “I’ve heard she’s also sometimes called by the alias of ‘Teeth-Grinder’ herself.”

“Yes, and it’s a fitting name, if for a very different reason. Her cunning schemes are what make other people grind their teeth. Even I was completely taken in this time.” Kristina grimaced as she spat out the words, and it was clearly her actual emotion and not a dramatic flair, a rarity for her.

Kristina might be young in terms of age, but when it came to intelligence gathering, she was nothing short of a genius. Having been so cleanly outsmarted by the enemy must have injured her pride.

Of course, the fact that she had still started off the meeting by messing with her sister just showed that, injured pride or not, she was still uncompromising when it came to that part of her personality.

“Well, I really have to hand it to them, in any case,” Yuuto said with another frown. “Just where did they even find enough soldiers to make another force of 8,000?”

It was the same number of troops as in the Lightning Clan’s army half a year ago at the Battle of Élivágar River.

What was important to note was that they’d reached that number again despite the fact that Yuuto’s flash-flood tactic had dealt them *several thousand* casualties.

And furthermore, they’d somehow been able to organize, relocate, and equip a force that size all without Kristina catching wind of it. It was a mystery how Röskva had managed that one.

“She’s good. Too good to waste on that idiot,” Yuuto sighed. “Honestly, I’d love to recruit her myself.”

When it came to the Lightning Clan, the Battle-Hungry Tiger Steinþórr was certainly the star of their show, but without a doubt, that was also made

possible because Röskva's exceptional political and administrative skills were supporting him from behind the scenes.

Still, Yuuto couldn't afford to waste too much time praising his enemy. This situation required urgent action.

"Gather the troops, as quickly as humanly possible. We'll set out and intercept the Lightning Clan on the field!"

The area just outside the lárnvíðr gates was jam-packed with people.

Pack horses were lined up against the walls, with soldiers forming single-file lines leading up to them. Each soldier waited in turn to receive packs of equipment and supplies, which he then took back to his own squad. The squads were gathered in various places.

The overall din was punctuated here and there by the shouts of a squad doing roll-call, or the screams of a harried argument over some issue or another.

In a corner of the city some distance away from the amassed troops, Rífa looked on with wonder, twirling the handle of her cloth parasol. "Oho... quite the spectacle."

This wasn't just some large gathering of people. These people were about to go to war, and there was a palpable sense of heat, of violence, coming off of them.

Even watching them from a distance, that violent heat sent a chill up Rífa's spine, and goosebumps rose on her arms.

"I am sorry about this," Yuuto told her. He bowed his head, looking a little guilty. "Even though this is supposed to be your sendoff, it has ended up being so rushed."

Indeed, this was the day when Rífa would depart lárnvíðr, the beginning of her journey home. And yet, despite the fact that Yuuto was overwhelmed by all of his hurried preparations for war, he had still made the time to come see her off.

Perhaps because he would be setting off himself soon after, Yuuto was dressed in jet-black, with a mantle to match, and his expression looked quite a bit more stern and gallant than usual.

Rífa felt her heartbeat rise slightly at this different version of the man.

“No, that cannot be helped,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “Your enemies have begun their attack, after all.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“Do you... think you will win?”

“I have no intention of fighting a losing battle,” Yuuto said, with a hint of a wry smile.

Despite the fact that war was so close, he did not seem nervous, but neither did he seem overly relaxed.

He looked... natural.

This was a person who had already fought his way through over a dozen battles, despite his young age. This was perhaps what the face of military experience looked like.

As he glanced off to the side at the distant soldiers, Rífa found herself momentarily entranced by his face in profile.

You really are a sinful man, Yuuto, she thought with a regretful chuckle.

“I see,” she said. “Well, in that case, I shall ask that you do your best not to die, then.”

“Of course. And when things settle down, please come visit us again. We would be happy to have you.”

“Is that really all right? I am fairly sure I have caused you all sorts of trouble while I have been here.”

“Ahaha.” Yuuto gave a dry laugh, and averted his eyes. The fact that he didn’t deny it meant he was essentially agreeing.

Rífa was a bit annoyed by this, but at the same time, she found it comforting. Around the time when they’d first met, as a clan patriarch, he would never have

allowed himself to act like that with her.

It was evidence of how much closer they'd become during these past three months.

"So much has happened..." Rífa felt herself getting emotional, feeling that tinge of loneliness that comes with knowing good things must come to an end.

As she closed her eyes, scenes flashed in and out of her mind of all the things she had experienced over these three months. Each and every one of them had been a first-time experience in her life.

They were all precious to her, and the memories sparkled like gems in the depths of her heart.

One of them was considerably brighter than the rest.

"I would say the greatest memory has to be that hotpot we ate together," she said. "It was truly delicious!"

"Huh? But didn't you complain at the time that the flavor was too weak?"

"Erm...! You do not need to recall that part." Rífa frowned at Yuuto's unnecessary quibble.

It was true that when she had first tasted the food, she had indeed been unsatisfied. But then, before she realized it, she had found herself eating heartily, so heartily that in the end, she had given herself heartburn.

And now thinking back, however simple and plain the flavor might have been, she found herself feeling nostalgic for that taste in a way she had never felt towards all the various delicious foods she had eaten thus far.

She was also aware of the true reason for that.

It was, simply, because she had been happy.

Gathering around a table with people the same age as her, laughing and making noise together, was something Rífa had never once experienced until that night.

It was perhaps something trivial to the common people, something they took for granted, but to Rífa, the memory of that night was a precious and

irreplaceable time.

“Er, Lady Rífa, are... are you crying?” Yuuto stammered.

“F-fool, I am of course not crying! The sun is simply too bright for my eyes!”

“The sun... but the sky is cloudy right now.”

“Well, even so, it is still too bright for me!” Rífa protested while rubbing the corners of her eyes with both hands.

In actuality, Rífa’s eyes *were* incredibly sensitive to light. Even with a cloudy sky like today’s, it felt too bright for her liking.

Of course, not bright enough to make her eyes water. However, for some reason, her eyes felt terribly hot right now. She couldn’t pull her hands away.

“I... am not crying, you understand,” Rífa said, sniffing a bit.

“...Of course,” Yuuto responded softly, and then remained silent. He waited patiently for Rífa’s tears to stop.

That kindness of his made it feel like something in Rífa’s heart was about to burst.

“That reminds me,” she said at last. “You have done so much for me, and yet I have given you no reward.”

Rífa tilted her parasol slightly forward so that it concealed the top of her face and eyes.

“Huh? Oh, no, that isn’t necessary, really.” Yuuto casually waved his hand, dismissing her offer.

Normally, powerful rulers were possessed with strong ambitions and greed, but as always, this young man seemed to lack any such desires.

However, Rífa was the kind of girl who was used to getting what she wanted, and did not take kindly to being refused. She stubbornly persisted. “Do you think I will accept that? I *am* the þjóðann. I will not go without rewarding my subjects for their accomplishments. It is a matter of honor.”

“R-right.”

“What is that half-hearted response?” she demanded, offended. “I am

personally offering you a reward.”

“Oh, uh, thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t bother tacking on such a forced thank-you! I do not need it.”

“S-sorry.”

“Hmph. With you as obstinate as you are, do not be surprised if that girl you love grows tired of you.”

“Ahaha, I’ll do my best to improve.”

“Right, then. Here, take it.” Rífa held out a clenched fist, then opened it.

Yuuto looked at her palm for a second, then squinted, puzzled. “Um, I don’t see anything there...”

“*Excuse* me? What are you saying? It is right there. Your eyesight certainly is bad.”

“Well, yeah, compared to the average person here, my eyes aren’t as good, sure, but...”

“Go on, then. Lean in and look closer.”

“R-right.” Yuuto leaned down to put his face close to Rífa’s palm, and squinted hard, trying to see what was in her hand. But judging by his tense expression, he still didn’t see anything.

“There, that should be just right. You are quite tall, after all.”

“Huh?” Yuuto clearly didn’t understand the meaning behind Rífa’s words, and his face turned up to look at hers.

Rífa tossed aside the parasol, and quickly placing her hands on both of Yuuto’s cheeks, she closed her eyes and gently pulled him in.

Then she pressed her lips up against his.

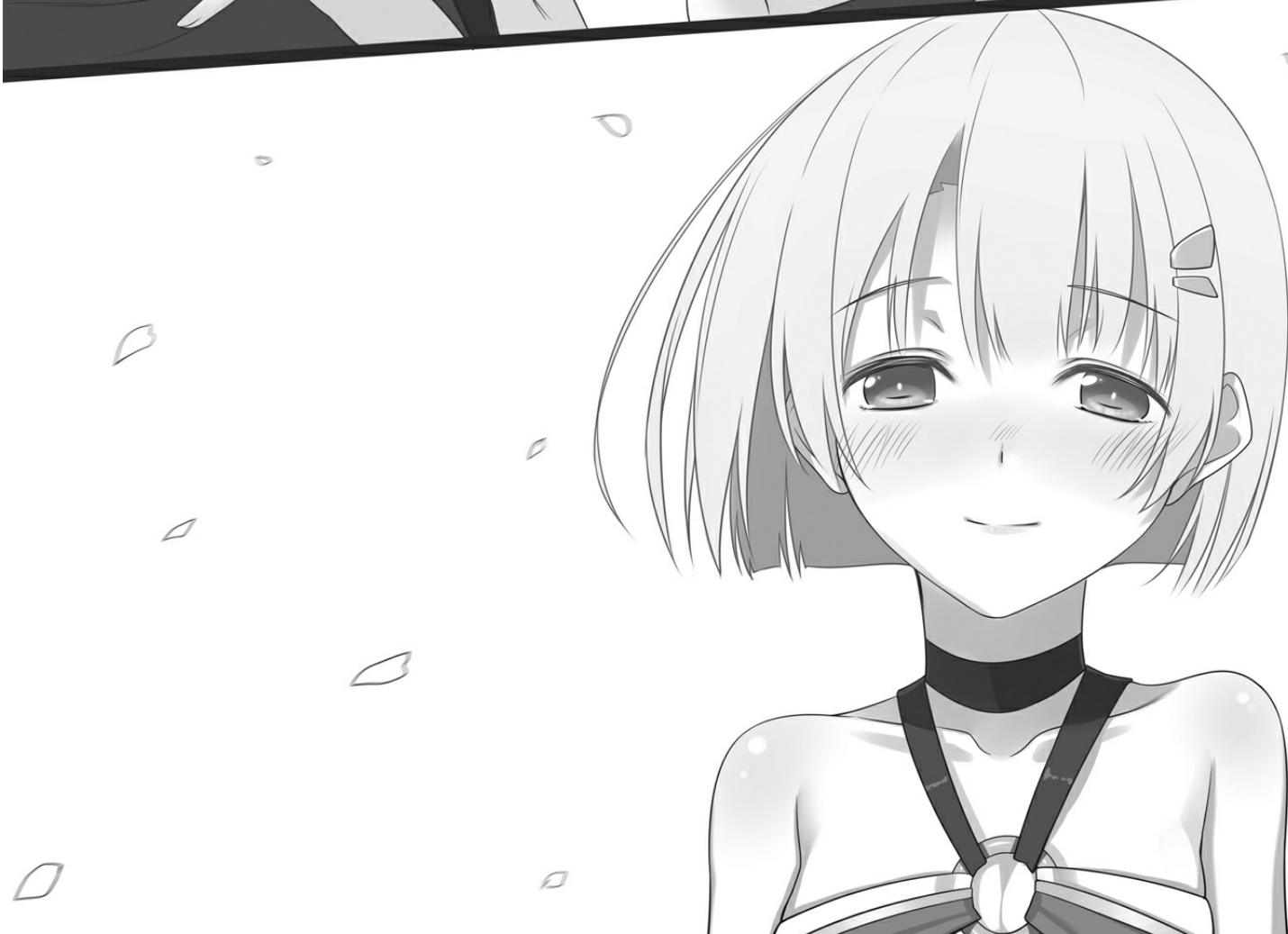
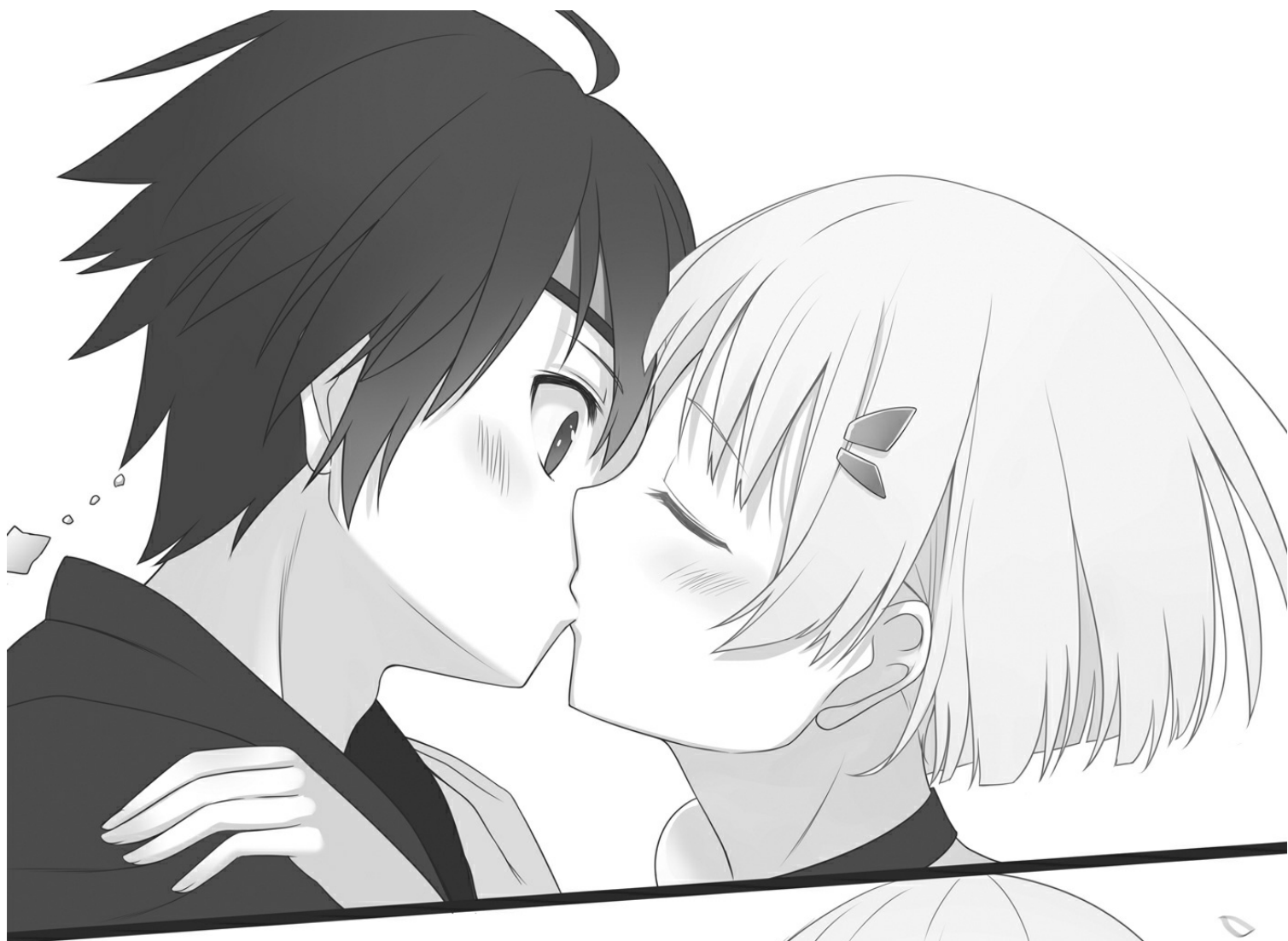
“Mm, mmph?! ”

“L-Lady Rífa?! ” Felicia shouted.

As Felicia raised her voice in alarm, Yuuto reacted by struggling to pull back, but Rífa didn’t let him go. She made sure to engrave the sensation of their lips

and that moment into her memory... and into his.

After a full five seconds, she finally released him.



“Kh...!” As she did, Yuuto practically leaped backward, staring at her with eyes filled with shock.

Rífa picked her parasol back up and flashed him a triumphant smile. “Hm-hm-hm, carelessness is a warrior’s worst foe. It seems I managed to trick the Wolf Clan’s undefeated commander.”

“Wh-why... why did you do that?!” Yuuto completely ignored her boast and simply threw that question at her.

He wasn’t even worth taunting.

“Hmph,” she scoffed, “are you not planning to march off to war? The þjóðann herself just personally granted you what amounts to a holy blessing, in hopes that you shall be victorious.”

“Wh-whaaat...? Th-that’s a favor I didn’t ask for, though... er... I mean!” Perhaps because he was still confused, Yuuto’s true feelings slipped out first.

Rífa gave a wry chuckle. “You truly never change... You are as rude as ever!”

“I’m sorry... I really am.”

“Oh, it is fine.” Rífa laughed and waved off Yuuto’s timid apology.

That indelicate side of him was part of what had attracted her to him in the first place.

Everyone who ever met Rífa treated her with reverence and awe. That was, in its way, unavoidable. To the people of Yggdrasil, the þjóðann was just that sort of figure.

However, this young man was different.

He might use proper respectful language towards her, but the respect in that language was nothing more than a surface formality.

And that was *good*.

He was the only one who had seen her as a normal girl, who had treated her with kindness as if she were a normal girl.

He had never shown the slightest interest whatsoever in her position as the þjóðann, or in trying to use her in any way.

And for a girl who had grown up sheltered from the outside world, that was enough to ignite the first fleeting feelings of passion within her.

When Rífa spoke again, her smile was both cheerful and somewhat lonely. “It is said that even unrequited love is still love, yes? The sort a normal girl experiences in a normal life. Surely I can count myself as lucky to have given my first kiss to a man I truly loved.”

“Wh-whaat?! Loved, as in... m-me?!” Yuuto cried.

“Why are you even *asking* that now?” Rífa’s shoulders drooped, and she gave an exasperated sigh.

She had kissed him, so of course such a thing should go without saying.

He is such a thick-headed man that I feel sorry for the struggles the women around him must go through, Rífa thought, unable to suppress sympathy for her rivals in love.

“Well, at least I have given myself one last wonderful memory before marriage,” Rífa said. “I cannot exactly do anything unfaithful once I am a man’s wife, after all.”

“Huh?! M-marriage?!” Yuuto stuttered.

“Why are you even surprised? I am the þjóðann. I carry the blood of Divine Emperor Wotan, and along with it the duty to pass on that bloodline. And I am of marriageable age, as well. A few marriage proposals at this point should not be surprising in the least.”

“B-but, well, th-that may be true, but...!” Yuuto seemed particularly flustered.

This made Rífa feel incredibly happy.

Of course, she understood that, in the end, it was his instinctive reaction because she had the same face as the girl he loved, and that was confusing him.

“U-um, what sort of person is he?” Yuuto ventured.

“He is High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and patriarch of the great Spear Clan. ...And, well, he is also a repulsive old man well past the age of sixty.”

“Sixty?!” Yuuto went bug-eyed.

That was, perhaps, a natural reaction. Rífa was sixteen, so he was easily old enough to be her grandfather.

Not to mention, in Yggdrasil just making it to fifty was considered a very long life. Sixty was considered so old that he might be expected to pass away any day now. One could indeed call it a very irregular marriage.

“Why would someone so mismatched be...? Can you not refuse?”

“Impossible, I fear,” Rífa said regretfully. “Already that man... Hárbarth has the central empire firmly in the palm of his hand. There is no longer anyone left in the imperial court who can defy him. He controls everyone.”

“Th-that can’t be! But... but even so, you...!”

“What, then are you saying you wish to marry me, then?” Rífa met Yuuto’s eyes with a pointed and mischievous look.

“That’s...” Yuuto couldn’t get any more words out than that.

Rífa was aware herself of how unfair she was being to him. But this was the man who had turned down her love, after all. There was no harm in just a little bit of payback.

“Now then, it really has gotten too painful for me to remain out in the sunlight any longer,” she said flippantly. “I am reluctant to do so, but I shall have to take my leave.”

Rífa turned and made her way towards her carriage.

Yuuto called out kind words of farewell from behind her. “Of course, Lady Rífa. I wish you well, and safe travels on the road!”

You’ll leave me with a kind farewell, but never the words I truly want to hear, she thought.

Rífa raised one hand and waved as she walked, but she did not turn to look back at him.

“Farewell, then. I will spend my journey home praying for your victory.”

After Rífa's carriage started off, the smug voice of a little girl called down from above, and a shadowy figure dropped to the ground from atop a nearby date palm tree.

"Heh heh! Why, Father, you never do fail to impress. To think you would even make Her Imperial Majesty swoon for you."

"Eh?! Kris?!" Felicia cried out in surprise, and her expression was positively mortified.

As Yuuto's personal bodyguard, the fact that she had allowed someone to come so close to him without ever noticing their presence must have been a painful failure for her.

However, one could say that she was simply up against the wrong sort of opponent this time.

Kristina was an Einherjar of the rune Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds. The abilities it granted her meant she was second to none at erasing her presence, and a natural at spycraft.

Of course, if Kristina had harbored any murderous intent towards them, Felicia would have immediately sensed it.

"Heh heh, Al is here too." Kristina giggled and pointed up to the top of the tree, where Albertina was saying "Waaah, uwaaah," to herself and covering her eyes bashfully with both hands.

...Naturally, with a gap in-between her fingers to see through.

There was no need to wonder, then; apparently, they had both witnessed the kiss. And they had both learned of Rífa's true identity.

Yuuto shook his head and sighed. "Eavesdropping and peeking? You've got poor taste in hobbies."

"Oh, do not worry, it happens to be my job," Kristina smirked.

"Then instead of me, go peek in on the state of things in the Lightning Clan."

"Of course. All in due time. Though, instead of concerning yourself with me, are you sure you are all right with letting Rífa go?"

“It doesn’t matter what I think. She committed to going back. I can’t exactly just stop her from leaving.” Yuuto spat out the words bitterly, and clenched his fists.

Those words were partly aimed at himself.

If she returned, then Rífa would have to marry the old man who was patriarch of the Spear Clan.

It was a political marriage, and one that Rífa herself clearly was against. She was a girl of only sixteen, being forced to wed a man she didn’t like, old enough to be her grandfather. There was no chance she wasn’t miserable at the prospect.

Honestly, he *did* want to stop her from going.

As her friend, he felt angry on her behalf, and he’d love to help her by breaking up the arranged marriage.

However, Rífa was the þjóðann, the Divine Empress who ruled all the lands of Yggdrasil, and Yuuto was nothing more than the Wolf Clan patriarch, a provincial vassal.

If he acted rashly and tried to harbor her, he could easily end up being painted as a traitor to the empire, a horrible man who’d kidnapped his empress.

In a situation like that, the actual truth didn’t matter. What mattered was that it would give everyone else a political justification to take action against him.

“If the me of two years ago saw me now, I’m sure he’d scream at me not to sit on the fence like a chicken, and he’d curse my guts out,” Yuuto whispered to no one in particular, a self-mocking sneer on his face.

He was envious of the Yuuto back then for being able to say something like that... and at the same time, detested him.

That sort of naïve platitude might sound good on the face of it, but looked at another way, it would be imploring Yuuto to place all of the countless lives of his people in danger for the sake of helping Rífa, a single person.

Right at this moment he was beginning a war with the Lightning Clan, and the Panther Clan still threatened him from the northwest. Creating any more

enemies at this point was far too dangerous.

As a clan patriarch, he could not forgive himself the luxury of making decisions while drunk on heroism.

Sure, this did feel like he was abandoning Rífa to her fate, and it left him with an unbearable pain in his heart. But Yuuto *had* to bear it. He would do so in order to fulfill his duty as the ruler of his people.

Swallowing his feelings, Yuuto turned to face his troops, his mantle flapping behind him.

“Wolf Clan troops, we are moving out!!”

Bruno, the high priest and chief elder of the Wolf Clan, shouted his prayer towards the heavens. He held aloft a golden sword and then swung it down on the young goat lying on the sanctuary altar. “Oh, Angrboða, divine guardian and mother to us all. Please, grant your protection to your children who set off now to battle! Grant us victory!”

Fresh blood sprayed up onto him, staining his face and robes. But Bruno did not react to this, continuing to stab the goat over and over.

This ritual sacrifice was made in prayer for victory in war.

Though it might seem cruel to modern minds, such practices had been common not just in Yggdrasil, but all across Earth in ancient times. One could even say that since they were not sacrificing fellow humans, it was comparatively tame.

Bruno held up the sword again, its blade now stained completely red, and cried out in a high voice.

“Now, let us all raise our voices together! Grant us victory! Victory!”

“Victory!! Victory!!” a chorus of cries rang out in response to Bruno’s appeal.

There were several dozen others in attendance in the hörgr, the wide sanctuary chamber at the top of the Wolf Clan’s sacred tower Hliðskjálf. They held their hands clasped together in front of their chests, their eyes closed tightly.

Jörgen, Ingrid, and Ephelia were among them.

Those who could not personally go out and fight would pray to the gods in this manner for the safety of their friends and loved ones, out there on the battlefield.

There were similar sanctuaries in the city itself, and right now, they were surely overflowing with people coming to pray.

Once the ceremony had finished, Jörgen loosened up his stiff neck with a few cracks, and made his way out of the sanctuary, grumbling to himself.

“Phew! Honestly, that annoying Lightning Clan brat. He just had to go and do this during such a busy time of the year...”

It was only a portion of the men who were conscripted to go out to fight, generally speaking each family’s third son and lower. So even in a time of war, it wasn’t as if all the men had left the city and surroundings, but it was still unmistakably a huge decrease in the available labor force.

With Yuuto gone, Jörgen served as his representative and carried all of the patriarch’s authority. Which meant that now he would be dealing with all the problems and dilemmas, foreseen and unforeseen, that arose. It was going to be a lot of headaches.

An unexpected voice called out warmly to him as he finished descending the sacred tower’s outer staircase. “Ohh! Why, if it isn’t Jörgen!”

Turning around, he saw a well-built, middle-aged man with an elegantly trimmed beard, smiling and waving to him. He was dressed finely, marking him as a man of high status.

He was no member of the Wolf Clan, but no stranger either; Jörgen recognized him right away.

“Ah, Lord Alexis. I did not realize you were here. I must humbly thank you again for acting as mediator for me during my Oath of the Chalice Ceremony at the New Year’s Festival.”

Jörgen spoke humbly, for this was a goði, a high-ranking priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire who also served as its representative.

During the New Year's Festival, when the other subsidiary clans had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with each other and with Jörgen, it was Alexis who had served as the official intermediary during the ceremony.

"Oh no, no, that was also my first time getting the opportunity to administer such a large group ceremony," Alexis said, smiling. "You allowed me to have a very useful learning experience."

"Oh, please, you mustn't be so humble," Jörgen said. "Your poise and command of the ritual was simply masterful."

"Ha ha ha, it doesn't feel bad at all to receive that sort of praise."

"By the way, Lord Alexis, what brings you to lárnvíðr?" Jörgen asked.

"Ah, well, a little rumor on the wind, actually. I heard that a lady of the imperial family was staying here in lárnvíðr, and since I was nearby, thought I might pay my respects."

"Ah, you must be referring to Lady Rífa," Jörgen said, nodding.

In the culture of the empire, it made perfect sense that an imperial priest might seek to pay a respectful visit to a member of the imperial household if he learned she were nearby.

"Still, you were just a bit too late. Just this morning, Lady Rífa set out to return home."

"Yes, so it would seem. I suppose I missed my chance. When I learned that, I thought that in that case, since I was already here, I might as well visit the Hliðskjálf and offer a prayer of thanks to the gods for my arriving here safely. But are you perhaps in the middle of something here?"

"Yes, the Lightning Clan still hasn't learned their lesson, and they've launched another invasion, you see. We were all just finishing up our ceremony to pray for Father and everyone else's victory in battle and safe return."

"I see. Then perhaps I shall hold off for today and come back later."

"Oh, no worries, we've just now finished. Please, use the hörgr as you like."

"Ah ha ha! No, after hearing the prayers of so many, even the gods must be tired out. I shall come back tomorrow. Well then, take care." Alexis waved

casually and turned around, walking back the way he'd come.

And once he'd walked some distance, and could be sure there was no one around who could hear him, he snickered and muttered smugly to himself.

"Heh heh heh, of course, no matter how much you all pray to the gods, that boy will never make it back here again."

The sound of hooves echoed like thunder across the earth.

The bay-haired horse carrying Steinþórr streaked across the battlefield.

He swung a long iron warhammer as he rode. A normal human would have difficulty in even just picking up such a large and heavy weapon, but the red-haired young man whirled it around as easily as if he were twirling a light wooden stick.

Every time the Wolf Clan soldiers tried to block his path, they were one by one pulled into the reach of his iron storm, and sent flying.

"Uwaah!"

"Gyaah!"

At last, Steinþórr caught sight of one particular man.

He looked to be in his late thirties, with a rugged and strong-looking face. With just a glance at his body, one could see the build and brawn that marked him as a formidable warrior.

But upon locking eyes with the one said to have the heart of a tiger, even that man gasped, his face going taut.

"Raaagh!" Steinþórr roared.

"Gahk...!"

With a mighty roar, Steinþórr brought his hammer down in a heavy vertical swing from his position high atop his horse.

The attack was so lightning fast that the other man had no time to even react, and his head was quite literally shattered, leaving the rest of him to fall over as a bloody corpse.

The next moment, all of the surrounding Lightning Clan soldiers burst out into triumphant cheering.

“Yeaaahhhh! Lord Steinþórr has defeated the enemy commander!”

“We’re victorious!”

“All hail Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger!”

At that last cry, the other soldiers all began to chant in chorus, “All hail Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger!!”

They thrust their spears into the air, and their cries of victory began to resonate. The chorus spread outward, and in the blink of an eye encompassed the entire fortress and the area around it.

They were fighting for control of a fortress next to the border between the Wolf and Lightning Clans. It had once been under Lightning Clan control, but in the previous summer’s war, the Wolf Clan had seized it. Gaining back a bit of what they’d lost was surely adding joy to the Lightning Clan soldiers’ celebrations.

“Ahh, this wasn’t all that satisfying, though,” Steinþórr muttered. “Well, I guess it’s fine for an appetizer.”

A slender man with a clean-cut, graceful sort of face rode up alongside Steinþórr and called out to him.

“Quite amazing, Uncle! I should have expected no less. You took the whole fortress without even breaking a sweat. I had planned to come to your aid if it looked like you were encountering any difficulty, but such a plan was completely unnecessary, it seems!”

This man wore the same equipment as a standard Lightning Clan soldier, but his handling of his horse was much more experienced.

The man’s name was Narfi, and he was one of the generals of the Panther Clan.

In a clan filled largely with men who were on the whole vulgar and crude, this man seemed to have a much more mild-mannered and composed air about him, and that was one of the reasons he had been selected to be sent with

Steinþórr and the Lightning Clan to manage communication between the two armies.

Steinþórr used the hilt of his warhammer to tap the armor on his shoulder. “Hey, Narfi. Naw, you guys are already giving me plenty of assistance.”

He wasn’t lying, either. The Lightning Clan had been able to coordinate and launch such an immediate blitzkrieg invasion before the Wolf Clan could notice, and the whole reason for that in the first place was that the Panther Clan had put up all of the equipment and supplies for both armies.

At the Battle of Élivágar River during the previous war, the Lightning Clan had lost a great many soldiers and a sizable chunk of territory, and the harsh drop in its military power had been tough.

The varied support offered to them by the Panther Clan had come at exactly the time when they most needed it.

Of course, it wasn’t for free, and the Panther Clan expected something in return.

“Oh, that assistance is nothing, my red-haired Lord Uncle. I would not even call it such.” With a friendly smile, Narfi spread his arms wide open. “We of the Panther Clan and Lightning Clan are brothers now, after all.”

Steinþórr snorted in laughter. “Hah, yeah, and you say that while using us, your brothers, as shields. You guys are really something.”

The main points of the clans’ strategy had already been determined.

The Lightning Clan army was to serve as the vanguard.

Last fall, the Panther Clan had lost in battle to a novel Wolf Clan tactic that made use of iron-plated wagon carriages to form a wall. Steinþórr, with his rune Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer, was the only one capable of smashing right through that defensive wall. At least, that was the official reason given.

But put another way, the Panther Clan strategy was to push all of the most dangerous work onto the Lightning Clan, and then to swoop in at the end and reap the rewards of victory for themselves.

“N-n-n-no, th-that is... that is not true at all!” Narfi cried. “It is as I told you

before: we alone cannot overcome the enemy's defensive wall! Of course, I realize that this places the more disadvantageous roles onto you and the Lightning Clan, Uncle, but my sworn father Hveðrungr most assuredly intends to repay you for that, in good faith. If there is anything that you want for, please tell me."

Narfi seemed to be panicking, trying his best to smooth things over, but Steinþórr wasn't interested in his words. He waved dismissively at Narfi to stop, as if shooing away a dog.

"Heh, well, that sort of logistics stuff I've left to Þjálfí and Röskva. Ask them about it. I'm fine as long as I get one more chance to fight with Suoh-Yuuto." Steinþórr clenched his fists, cracking his knuckles.

Indeed, to him, everything other than that was trivial.

As part of his declaration of war, he'd used the official justification that he was retaking the lands that had been seized from him previously. But personally, as he'd said himself at the time, *"Who cares about the details."*

It was his undying thirst for battle, driven by his instincts, that had made him a ruler people called "the lord with the heart of a tiger."

"They can try and use me as a disposable pawn, for all I care. It's fine," he said with a grin.

After all, in the end, this "brotherhood" wasn't a bond of trust, but a thin political alliance based only on cost and gain.

He was himself using the Panther Clan, so that he might once more get a chance to settle things with the one man who had been able to defeat him, and see who was stronger.

So there was nothing wrong with letting the Panther Clan use him and the Lightning Clan for their own selfish ends, as well.

If taking that risk ended with him winding up dead somehow, then that was just the limit of his strength as a man.

Steinþórr cackled loudly, viciously, and the savage beast within him revealed itself in his expression.

“All it means is that I shouldn’t wait for you assholes to come in and take my chance. I just need to hurry ahead and take him down myself first!”

ACT 5

“Well, well. It looks like I’m stuck minding the fort this time.” As his eyes finished scanning the document, the man gave a small sigh.

He was a skinny man, and rather gloomy-looking, but with an intensely sharp look in his eyes reminiscent of a hungry wolf searching for prey.

His name was Skáviðr, the Wolf Clan’s assistant to the second-in-command. But he was also known by the sinister alias Níðhogggr, the Sneering Slaughter, and feared by many within his clan, as well as outside it.

Sitting across the large work desk from Skáviðr, the Horn Clan patriarch Linnea chuckled a bit. “Hee hee, well, as far as we of the Horn Clan are concerned, there is nothing more reassuring than having the former Mánagarmr remain here with us in Myrkviðr.”

Armed riders had been spotted over and over again in the surrounding areas near the city of Myrkviðr, likely part of a Panther Clan scouting force. Just the other day, there had been reports of a skirmish with a few dozen of them, out at a nearby small fortress that had been constructed to improve the area’s defenses.

It was clear proof that the Panther Clan had not given up on recapturing Myrkviðr.

“Right now, our mission is to protect Myrkviðr, so that Big Brother can fight without any worries about the border here,” Linnea said. “The fact that you were entrusted with this area really just goes to show how much faith he has in you, so...”

“Did I really seem that upset by it?” Skáviðr asked.

“Ahaha! Just a little bit.” Linnea held her thumb and forefinger less than an inch apart.

Indeed, it had only been a very slight difference in his tone. It was only just enough that someone like Linnea could notice it, since she had met and spent

time with him on numerous occasions throughout the winter months.

However, the man was usually quite stone-faced, so even a slight showing of emotion in his expression was a big deal.

That was why Linnea had said what she did, but now she regretted it, wondering if perhaps it had been too nosy of her to do so.

“Heh, I appreciate your kindness. I see why one so young serves as a clan patriarch. You take good notice of those around you.” Skáviðr delivered those words of admiration with a small smirk. For a man who was often noticeably sardonic, this was a rare bit of polite and unqualified praise.

Linnea was relieved that it seemed like she hadn’t made him upset with her.

“The Dólgprásir must truly be a terrible foe,” she remarked, “if the battle with him worries even someone as strong as you.”

Linnea had only met Steinpórr once, in the Horn Clan capital Fólkvangr during Yuuto’s victory celebration there.

Even then, the young man had been so overwhelmingly intimidating just by his violent force of presence that recalling it now made Linnea shudder. However, she had never actually gone up against him on the battlefield.

Skáviðr had actually faced him in combat. Linnea was eager to hear his assessment of the Battle-Hungry Tiger.

Despite the reassuring words she had said to Skáviðr earlier, Linnea herself was deeply worried for the man she loved, heading to battle in a place far from where she could reach him.

“If I am being honest, neither I nor Sigrún would stand a chance of defeating him in combat,” Skáviðr said bluntly. “He isn’t human; he’s some kind of monster.”

Skáviðr wasn’t the sort of man who would mince words in order to relieve the mood of a situation. Whatever the time or place, he only spoke what he believed to be the facts.

Though it had only been for a few months, Linnea had come to know him quite well in that time, and she understood that facet of his personality.

It was for that reason that the next words out of him made her wide-eyed with surprise.

“However, my master is far greater than a monster; he is a war god reborn.”

“Pft... Ahahaha!” Linnea couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “I would never have thought I’d hear words like that come out of your mouth. That’s a bit unexpected.”

Skáviðr was a realist who always spoke only what he believed to be the facts. In other words, he believed without a doubt that Yuuto actually was the incarnation of a god in the flesh.

For Linnea, hearing the former Mánagarmr say this about the young man she revered as her sworn brother only renewed her sense of how incredible he was.

Surely he would grasp hold of victory this time as well, and return home in triumph.

Just as Linnea was thinking that, there was a small *snap!* as if something nearby had broken. The sound was oddly loud in her ears.

“Hm?!” Skáviðr grunted, his face clouded by a troubled scowl.

“What is it? Is something the matter?”

“...No. It’s just that the leather handle wrapping for my sword seems to have snapped.” Skáviðr’s expression looked quite openly bitter.

She followed his gaze to the nihontou at his waist, and saw that the leather cord wrapped intricately and tightly around its hilt had broken, its loose ends hanging down.

To a warrior, a weapon was something you staked your very life on. This was especially true for its grip, where changes could strongly affect its ease of use.

Though Linnea was from a different clan, she was still a patriarch, so it had to be shameful to a warrior for something like this to happen in front of her. It was also quite unlike such a seasoned veteran as Skáviðr.

It was so unlike him, in fact, that it filled Linnea with a terrible sense of dread.

She knew that Yuuto had been the one to forge Skáviðr’s sword. For a part of

that sword to suddenly break...

Linnea couldn't shake off the horrible premonition that she now felt.

The elliptical shape of the gibbous moon hung in the sky like a bright white lemon, its soft light illuminating the surrounding landscape.

The crackling sounds of burning wood mixed with the distant cries of owls, as the field generals of the Wolf Clan army sat gathered together in a circle around the campfire.

"Aughh, even though it's spring, it still gets pretty cold at night." Wrapped in a single blanket, Yuuto shivered.

Sigrún was seated next to him, and without a moment's hesitation, she took off her fur mantle and held it out to him. "Father, please take this if you are feeling cold."

"That's the mantle handed down to each Mánagarmr through the generations," he said. "I can't just wear that. I'm not qualified."

"If it's you, Father, I believe that all the previous holders of the title would surely approve of it."

"No way. I can't just act like I'm someone I'm not," Yuuto insisted, and waved off her offer.

Within the Wolf Clan, that mantle was the very symbol of strength, and almost every boy who grew up in the clan dreamed of one day wearing it.

When it came to his physical ability to fight, Yuuto was still, shamefully, confident that he was weaker than the average rank and file soldier. As such, he didn't see himself as worthy of donning such a symbolically important item.

"Then I shall at least go run and fetch you another blanket from... Hm?!" With an intense expression Sigrún suddenly jumped up, her hand already at her sword and pushing it the first few inches free of its scabbard with her thumb.

However, she soon released her grip and sat back down.

What's going on? Yuuto wondered.

An instant later, a sudden voice from the dark behind him answered his question. “Hello, Father.”

“Whoa!” Yuuto nearly lost his balance and tumbled forward as two figures seemed to materialize from out of the shadows behind him. “Geez, that scared me!”

It was Kristina and Albertina.

Many of the generals sitting in the campfire circle were clearly just as surprised. Their shock was within reason, for the location of this campfire out in a wide open field had been chosen for its clear view of the surroundings, to make sure that no one unnecessary could snoop in on their meeting. And yet, two people had gotten this close without anyone noticing.

“Here is my report.” Kristina dropped to one knee and spoke humbly. “Fort Gashina has fallen, seized by the Lightning Clan.”

“What?!” One of the gathered officers shouted his disbelief.

“You say Gashina’s already fallen?!”

A wave of commotion swept through them all.

Yuuto also glowered, with a scowl like he’d just bitten into a rotten apple. “Tch! Damn! So we didn’t make it in time...”

Fort Gashina was the westernmost fortress on Wolf Clan territory, right up near the border with the Lightning Clan, so it had also been their front line of defense.

That was why he’d assigned Ansgar, sixth ranked in the clan and a man with abundant combat experience, command of the fortress and one thousand soldiers. He hadn’t foreseen that they would be taken down this easily.

“What happened to Ansgar, and the soldiers?” Yuuto asked.

“Big Brother Ansgar died in battle, against Steinþórr,” Kristina reported. “All of the surviving soldiers were put to death...”

“Ghh...! Damned berserker. Even this part of him is exactly like Xiang Yu.” Yuuto practically spat the words out with disgust.

In the world of the 21st century, there existed certain rules of warfare which condemned indiscriminate murder or torture, even for prisoners belonging to an enemy nation. But, of course, no such humanitarian rules existed here in Yggdrasil.

It was particularly important to consider that this was an era where the supply of food was extremely limited. Just by staying alive, prisoners of war would deplete one's food stores, and one could never be sure when they might attempt to cause a revolt. Simply killing them right away reduced the number of mouths to feed and, at the same time, tied up the loose ends so that there was one less source of risk. It wasn't a rare policy here.

Yuuto suppressed the violent emotions within himself, and spoke in a low, cold voice, indicating for Kristina to resume her report. "Proceed. What are the Lightning Clan troops up to now?"

As a commander, he needed to remain calm and under control at all times. Allowing himself to be swept up by temporary emotions was out of the question. He had learned that lesson painfully well last year, during the battle with the Panther Clan.

"Yes, Father," Kristina said. "They have positioned their main formation at a narrow passageway between two mountains, and are waiting for us there."

Kristina pulled out a map which she had prepared in advance, spreading it out on the ground and pointing out one particular location.

Yuuto stared hard at the map for a while, then gave a heavy sigh.

"I was afraid this might happen, and it looks like it has. He's taken up position somewhere that's gonna be a real problem for us."

"It is as you say." Kristina nodded in agreement, frowning.

With steep mountains covering both flanks of the Lightning Clan army, the Wolf Clan had no choice but to attack head-on. It would be difficult to get any soldiers into a position where they could ambush or attack from advantage.

In other words...

"He wants us to have a full-on fight, head to head, with no tricks," Yuuto said.

His enemy's choice to use that formation communicated that he was firm in the belief that he would never lose such a confrontation.

And it was no exaggeration to say that he was right.

The Wolf Clan's basic infantry formation was the phalanx, which was extraordinarily strong at attacking enemies directly in front. But in their previous war with the Lightning Clan, the phalanx had been shattered by the sheer brute strength of just one man, a sight which had been seared into Yuuto's mind.

The Wolf Clan forces were twelve thousand in total. Because of the Wolf Clan's increasing prosperity, as well as its protective policies towards refugees, it had a far greater ability to mobilize a large army, and for the first time since Yuuto had become patriarch, he'd raised an army more numerous than his enemy's. But against an opponent like Steinþórr, even 1.5 times the number of troops didn't feel like it would make any difference at all.

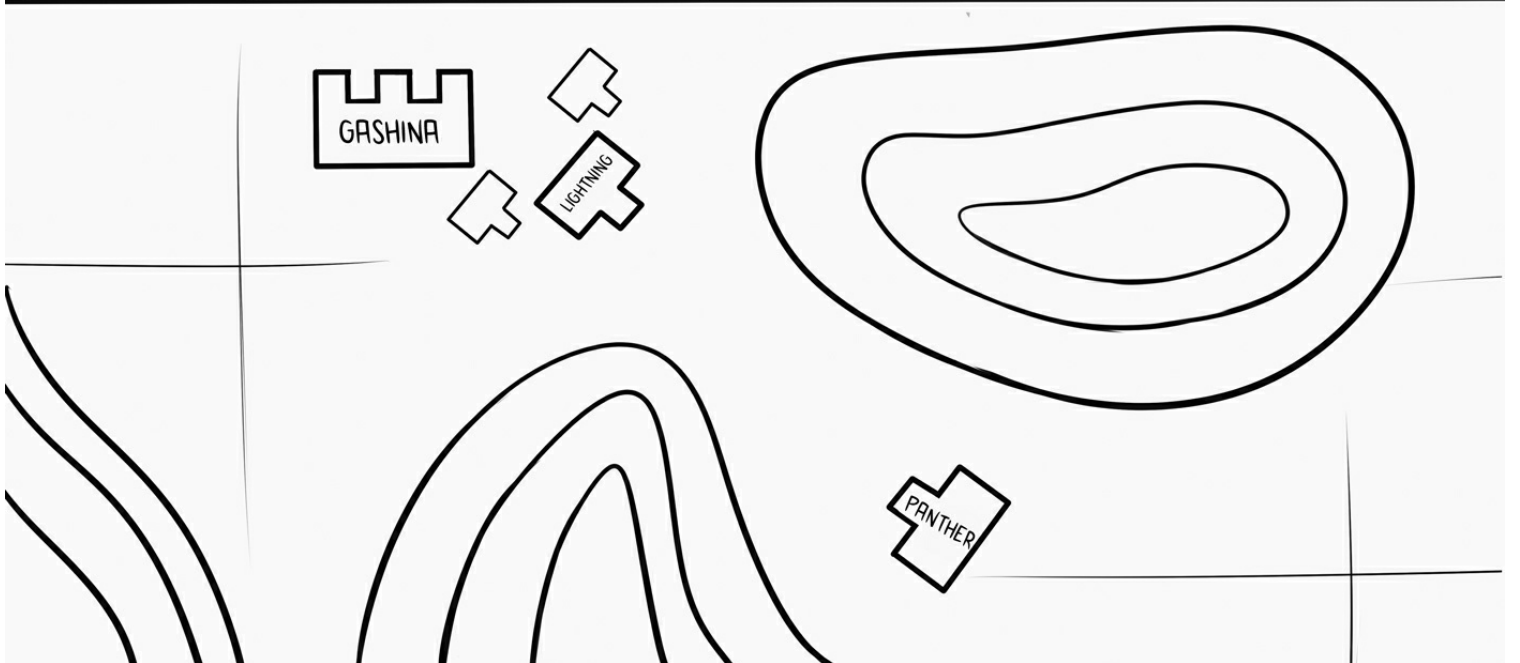
"They say 'nothing ventured, nothing gained,' but this feels more like we'd just be throwing caution to the wind," Yuuto muttered thoughtfully.

He was lauded as an undefeatable commander, but he couldn't bring himself to send in his troops without some sort of real plan.

Put another way, the reason Yuuto had gone undefeated so far was because he always began by creating the conditions that would make it so he could win. He did not engage in conflicts that he could not be sure were winnable.

A brilliant commander is not simply someone who is able to lead a small force to an upset victory over a large one. A truly brilliant commander wins because they *should* win, in a battle that is uninteresting from start to finish.

"Hmm..." Staring at the map, Yuuto tapped his finger against his leg for a while, deep in thought.



The first thing that came to his mind was the name of Han Xin, a famous general of Chinese history known as a brilliant strategist. Yuuto kept on finding similarities and parallels between Steinþórr and the Chinese warlord Xiang Yu. So, he got the feeling that a hint towards defeating Steinþórr would be found in the history of the generals who had been able to defeat Xiang Yu.

The Wolf Clan officers sitting around the campfire remained silent, so as not to disturb Yuuto's thinking. Every one of them was looking at him with eyes that carried the light of absolute trust in their patriarch. One could see in their eyes that they fully believed that, as long as Yuuto was there to lead them, they would never be defeated.

And as if in answer to their wordless expectations, Yuuto slapped his thigh with one hand. It seemed he'd come up with a good plan.

"All right, that's it! Everything lines up perfectly with Stratagem Sixteen: 'Lure the tiger off its mountain lair.' We'll use that. Rún!"

Three days later, the Wolf Clan arrived at the near entrance to the mountain passage, and promptly began constructing their wagon fortress formations.

It was unknown how much good this would do against Steinþórr and his rune Mjǫlnir, the Shatterer, but it would still be much better to use the tactic than to not.

Yuuto had already come up with some strategies to counter Steinþórr back when he'd first left lárnvíðr.

Yuuto had hoped that by setting up his troops at the near entrance, it would seem like he was saying, *"We're ready for you! Now come and get us!"* and the Lightning Clan would come through the mountain pass to attack them. But one day passed, then two, and still the Lightning Clan forces showed no signs of moving.

There was no doubt they were aware of the Wolf Clan's arrival at this point, but like a turtle in its shell, they remained withdrawn, deep on the other side of the pass.

"Tch, I was wrong about them." Clicking his tongue in annoyance, Yuuto

turned and pondered, placing one hand over his mouth.

Steinþórr was a simple-minded guy who craved battle, so Yuuto had thought it a sure bet that he would lead his army to attack the moment they spotted the Wolf Clan forces appearing.

“Do you think, then, there might be some sort of trap set here, after all?” Felicia asked, looking troubled by the thought.

“Hmm, I don’t know. That just doesn’t seem like something that idiot would do...” Yuuto scratched his head.

The impression he’d gotten of the Steinþórr when they’d met in person at Fólkvangr, and again during their last war, was that he was the kind of man who rushed headlong into everything.

Still, there was an old saying in Yuuto’s homeland: “If you don’t see a man for three days, pay attention the next time you meet.” It was based on an older Chinese saying, and referred to the fact that people were capable of changing themselves while you aren’t looking. Yuuto himself was aware that he’d changed a lot in the almost three years since he’d arrived in this world.

He couldn’t deny the possibility that Steinþórr might have changed too, spurred on by his loss to Yuuto the previous year.

“If I went to the front line and taunted him personally, he’d have to take the bait then, right?” Yuuto wondered aloud, just tossing out the idea as it came to him.

But Felicia reacted in a panic, practically screaming. “Please, Big Brother, I implore you not to do that! Steinþórr is also well known for his mastery of the bow. It is too dangerous!”

“Oh, great, so the monster’s a perfect archer, too,” Yuuto grumbled sullenly. “It’s like there’s nothing he can’t do.”

Yuuto had a bit of a complex about his physical weakness and mediocrity compared to others, so he only found himself disliking Steinþórr more and more.

One might say it was just him finding reasons to dislike the man in everything

about him; another case of the old adage, “If you hate a monk, you’ll even hate his robes.”

“Still, we’ve got to find some way to pull that tiger out of his cave,” Yuuto said, thinking hard.

However, even Yuuto couldn’t produce good ideas out of thin air when he wanted, and that day’s war council meeting came and went without reaching a conclusion on what, exactly, to do.

Yuuto remained deep in thought, straining to come up with something even after going to bed for the night.

The next morning, the situation on the ground suddenly changed.

Abruptly, the Lightning Clan started to move.

“Did they get fed up with waiting on us? Or was it that they finished some sort of preparations they were doing? Well, it doesn’t matter.” Yuuto raised his voice high as he leapt into his personal chariot. “Crossbow squads, prepare to counterattack!”

The battle cries of his men echoed back along with the thundering of the feet and hooves against the ground.

It was then that Albertina ran up alongside him, weaving deftly through the soldiers in his formation. “Papa! Here, this is from Kris.”

“Oh, nicely done.” Yuuto took his smartphone back from Albertina, and promptly opened up the photo gallery app.

He tapped the thumbnail for the most recent picture to enlarge it, and grinned widely with satisfaction.

“Ah, this is a good shot. That’s Kris for you. She’s already totally mastered how to use this thing.”

It was a photo taken from high up on one of the mountains, capturing the scenery down below. It captured in frame the full extent of the Lightning Clan troops who were marching through the mountain pass towards the Wolf Clan position. The borders of the image were a little blurry, most likely because she’d heavily used the zoom function.

“If you know your enemy and know yourself, you shall not be imperiled in one hundred battles.” In war, precise information on the enemy held more value than any precious metal.

“You did a great job out there too, Al,” Yuuto said. “You’ve gotta be tired, right? Go get some rest and something to drink, okay?”

“Eheheh!” Albertina giggled and broke into a relaxed, happy grin as Yuuto patted her on the head and playfully ruffled her hair a bit.

This tactic of using his phone’s camera app was just as dependent on the swift-footed Albertina as it was on Kris.

The only one who could sprint through the wild, thick overgrowth of the mountains where there were no paths and make it back to Yuuto in such a short time was Albertina, wielder of the rune Hræsvelgr, Provoker of Winds, who was a child at home in nature.

“His marching formation looks almost shaped like an arrow,” Felicia said, leaning in from the side to peer at the smartphone screen.

“Yeah, the ‘arrowhead formation,’ to be precise.”

Shimazu Yoshihiro, the warrior general of Sengoku Period Japan also known as the “Demon of Shimazu,” had used this same formation to escape certain doom in the Battle of Sekigahara, when the victory of his enemies had become certain.

Rather than trying to retreat towards the rear, he had charged straight ahead at Tokugawa Ieyasu’s main army and cut right through them, passing right in front of Tokugawa in the process. He’d been able to break through and exit the battlefield, so this was now heralded as “Shimazu’s exit strategy.”

As demonstrated by such a historical example, the arrowhead was a formation specialized entirely for attacking with a full charge.

“Hmph, I guess that’s more like something that idiot would try.” Yuuto opened his phone’s camera app, and pointed it ahead at the Lightning Clan army charging towards him through the pass, zooming in.

He spotted a red-haired figure right at the front of their formation.

Normally with the arrowhead formation, the general would be positioned near the center or back, not right at the front, but this, again, was more how Steinþórr did things.

All of these things were still within the scope of Yuuto's calculations, based on what he knew.

"W-wait, a horse?!" Yuuto cried out in shock and his eyes went wide.

He even rubbed his eyes and looked again to confirm he was really seeing it, but it wasn't a mistake. Steinþórr was riding on a horse, his bright red hair catching in the wind like animated fire.

Up until at least last year, the man had only ever been seen using chariots. Had he perhaps decided to learn to ride a horse himself after seeing the Wolf Clan's use of armed cavalry?

"Then there's that... what even is that?!" Yuuto shouted.

Steinþórr was carrying some very large, strange T-shaped object, holding it out in front of him. Because of the camera's heavy zoom, the image was grainy, and Yuuto couldn't make out what it really was, but it looked to him sort of like a large propeller.

"What, is he gonna say 'Go-Go-Steinþórr Copter!' and take off flying or something?"

Such a thing was of course physically impossible on the face of it, but this man always seemed to surpass or defy all common sense, so Yuuto felt a strange sense that he couldn't completely rule it out, which was unnerving.

He didn't have time to waste on such absurd thoughts right now, though.

Yuuto gathered his focus, and shouted to his troops. "Your target is the red-headed man in front! FIRE!!"

At Yuuto's order, there was the combined whooshing sound of countless arrowheads cutting through the air, as the crossbow bolts fired from Yuuto's forces shot out towards Steinþórr.

Yuuto didn't hold out any particular expectations that this volley would take Steinþórr down, or that it even stood a chance in the least. After all, during their

last confrontation, the same man had used his iron warhammer to knock away all of the many arrows that came close to him, remaining unscathed. Even putting a scratch on him would be an excellent result.

More importantly, they were aiming for the horse.

However amazing this man might be, even the Battle-Hungry Tiger Dólgþrasir would have to focus on protecting his own body when confronted with this number of arrows, and so he'd be unable to fully protect his mount. If they could get him off of a horse and back on the ground, his mobility would take a huge hit.

In a sense, Steinþórr *was* the Lightning Clan army. Anything that lowered Steinþórr's fighting capability also directly lowered the strength and morale of the Lightning Clan forces as a whole.

It was a solid tactic, but what Steinþórr did next caused it to fall apart.

Steinþórr took the propeller like object and swung it out straight in front of him.

In that instant, it changed shape, forming a dark grey wall that hid both Steinþórr and his horse from view.

The rain of arrows fell upon him only an instant later, and they were all easily repelled.

"Wha...?!" Yuuto's jaw dropped at this impossible scene.

He could see now that the propeller-like object was a long rod attached to some sort of flat piece, almost like an umbrella.

However, the arrowheads used by the Wolf Clan were *iron*, and were being fired from heavy crossbows designed to give them much greater piercing power. If he were reflecting those arrowheads head-on, then that object's materials were...

"It can't be... is that iron, too?!"

This was also something that should have been impossible.

In Yggdrasil, the only two clans with the knowledge of the techniques for refining iron were the Wolf Clan and the Panther Clan.

For all of the other clans, iron was a “gift from the heavens,” an incredibly rare metal that could only be harvested from meteorites.

With a metal plate of that ridiculous size — and it had to be very thick, too, to deflect iron crossbow bolts shot dead-on — they would need an exorbitant amount of iron, and it was hard to imagine they had access to that.

Hard to imagine... but Yuuto couldn't very well deny the reality of what was happening right in front of him.

“And just how strong are that idiot's freaking arms, anyway? That's so broken!”

The Wolf Clan fired off a second, then a third, volley of crossbow bolts in succession, but the giant iron umbrella easily deflected them all.

Yuuto knew it was meaningless to try and deny reality, but at the same time, he found it easier to doubt his own eyes than to accept this.

Even if that giant umbrella *was* made entirely of iron, it would have to weigh almost fifty kilograms, or several dozen at the very least.

And its center of gravity was pretty clearly towards the top, meaning its effective weight while held straight outwards would have to be over a hundred kilos.

Steinþórr was able to hold it easily, lightly supporting it with just one arm.

Yuuto was left with no option than to reaffirm that this man was but a monster dressed in human skin.

“Ha haaaaa! Looks like nothing beats an umbrella on a rainy day, eh?!” Steinþórr laughed uproariously, and with a flick of his wrist, he quickly pulled the iron umbrella back to carry it across his shoulder.

With that one simple movement, anyone could see that rather than being subject to the object's heavy weight, he was controlling it easily at his whim.

It was so heavy that three grown men would struggle to even lift it off the ground, but he handled it as if he wasn't even aware of its weight.

“All right, then! That must be the wall of wagons I've heard so much about!”

Focusing ahead, Steinþórr's eyes shined with interest.

Up ahead at the exit out of the mountain passage, a bunch of tall wagons were packed tightly in a line, blocking off his path forward.

With his godly aptitude for battle, once he'd seen it with his own eyes, Steinþórr could tell in an instant its effectiveness as a defensive tactic.

I get it now, he thought, grinning. It doesn't look like much on the surface, but it really is just like a little fortress wall.

If defenses like that had suddenly popped up out of nowhere in front of the Panther Clan, they must've had a lot of trouble trying and failing to get past them.

The corners of Steinþórr's mouth pulled upwards, and his face twisted as the beast in him came out.

"Maybe the Panther Clan's armed riders bounced off of it, but you'd better not be thinking some piece of crap like that is gonna stop me, Suoh-Yuuto!"

Steinþórr screamed and the muscles on his right arm bulged larger, several blue veins becoming visible.

With a powerful swing of that arm, he flung the huge iron umbrella ahead of him like a javelin.

"Uwaaghh!" a Wolf Clan soldier screamed.

"Wh-what *is* that?!" another one shouted.

"Gyaaghh!"

The iron object spun as it hurtled forward with incredible speed and force, as powerful as an iron cannonball, and some of the Wolf Clan soldiers hurriedly scrambled from their positions in an attempt to evade its path.

The umbrella was large enough to easily fit two grown adults under it. With an object that large hurtling at them at full force, it wasn't unreasonable that even some of the brave Wolf Clan fighters would fall into a panic from the fear.

With an enormous, ear-splitting **BOOM!** the iron umbrella slammed into one of the wagon carriages and sent it flying backwards from the impact.

The iron plates were crumpled grotesquely and riddled with cracks, and the wooden carriage frame itself was splintered into pieces from the sheer force of the collision.

“Well, that takes care of that.” Without a pause, Steinþórr rode his horse right through the gap left by the missing wagon.

The Wolf Clan soldiers were frozen in astonishment for a moment by this sudden development, but they soon came back to their senses and realized what was happening.

Behind the wagon line, a tight formation of soldiers with longspear shuffling forward and stood fast in Steinþórr’s path.

“Hahh!” Pulling his long iron hammer from its sheath on his back, Steinþórr swung it in a rapid, sweeping attack, and with the added momentum of his horse, it slammed into three soldiers like a bolt of lightning.

He followed up by swapping the weapon to his left hand, and dealt another sweeping attack that blew away soldiers on that side.

His old warhammer had been lost in the floodwaters during the Battle of Élivágar River, and so the one he was using now was one he’d had the Panther Clan forge for him.

To go along with his new horseback combat style, he’d had the new warhammer made at least a head longer than the previous one.

Normally that would make it much more unwieldy in a melee, but for the kind of man who had just twirled and launched that huge iron umbrella, a little bit more weight on his hammer was nothing at all.

He was just as threatening as he had been during the previous war — no, even more terrifyingly threatening — and it sent shudders through the ranks of the Wolf Clan soldiers.

“All right, who’s next?!” Steinþórr taunted, but the only responses were wordless, terrified moans.

“Ughh... Nghh...”

“Aaah... ah...”

Steinþórr thrust out his iron hammer and screamed, and the pale-faced Wolf Clan soldiers on the front line pulled backward.

Forced to come face-to-face with this inhuman, monstrous display of raw power, they had lost their will to fight.

“Uuuraaaaaaaaghhhh!!” Following just behind Steinþórr, the screaming ranks of Lightning Clan soldiers charged in.

Right in front of them, they were witnessing Steinþórr’s godly strength on display, and the heat and passion of battle drove their morale into a fever pitch.

To them, this battle was no longer a contest.

With the wagon wall breached, the first line of Wolf Clan defenses fell shortly thereafter.

That report quickly reached Yuuto’s location.

“That’s technically supposed to be an advanced tactic from three thousand years in the future, but that bastard’s enough of a cheater in his own right.” Yuuto spat out the words with loathing.

Even during their last war, starting with the undefeated phalanx, Steinþórr had brute-forced his way through every one of Yuuto’s strategies taken from future history, each one of them unprecedented in this era.

Yuuto was always meticulous and layered with his strategies, always working beforehand to piece together a “winning solution” before committing to battle. He couldn’t stand seeing everything he’d built up just thoughtlessly smashed to pieces like this. It was like the man was single-handedly picking a fight with the collective wisdom of human military history.

That said, even Yuuto had harbored a sneaking suspicion that things might end up going this way. He was shocked, but not that much.

The same could be said for the troops of the Wolf Clan.

Already they had seen the wagon wall defense overcome once by the Panther Clan, though it had only been due to an extraordinarily clever scheme in the moment. The troops knew that the wagon wall was not absolute.

And Yuuto had made sure to announce ahead of time: “There’s a strong chance the Lightning Clan will be able to break through the wagon wall, but do not worry. I have a plan.” His troops had all heard the announcement or were aware of it.

Thanks to that, the Wolf Clan soldiers as a whole hadn’t fallen into confusion, and they were still moving properly according to Yuuto’s orders.

The soldiers in the second line of defense seemed to be putting up a valiant fight against the Lightning Clan at the moment.

Of course, they were up against the man known as Dólgprásir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, as well as his bold warriors of the Lightning Clan. And the enemy was attacking using the arrowhead formation, which focused solely on plowing through enemy lines without concern for anything else.

The Wolf Clan was being completely pushed back.

And furthermore, it wasn’t just because of who their enemies were.

The overwhelming advantage that Wolf Clan allies possessed over other clans had been taken away from them.

“They... all have iron weapons?!” Yuuto shouted.

Indeed, the Lightning Clan army apparently had all-new equipment.

It was difficult for him to even believe it. But then there was that huge iron umbrella Steinþórr had used earlier, too.

Yuuto’s brow furrowed. “It couldn’t be... was it the Panther Clan?!”

He groaned in realization.

It was the only possibility he could think of, really. It would also explain why Steinþórr was fighting mounted.

If this line of reasoning was correct, then the Lightning and Panther Clans had joined forces. To the Wolf Clan, there was no greater threat than this.

“But I never received any reports about that from Kristina...” he muttered.

Kristina was a spy who could sneak successfully into and out of anywhere. But... she was also only one person. She had a few trusted underlings she’d

received from her birth father Botvid, but they weren't as exceptional as she was. Naturally, there was a limit to the amount of good intel they could collect.

A Wolf Clan messenger's shout brought Yuuto out of his train of thought. "Sir, the second line of defense has been breached!"

"Tch, dammit! I don't even get any time to think!"

Right now, he had to focus everything on dealing with the problem in front of him.

That problem was Steinþórr.

With an enemy like him, even a single moment of carelessness could be fatal.

"Right. Felicia!" he called out. "We're going with that plan we talked about. I'm counting on you!"

"Yes, Big Brother! Al, I'm counting on you to protect him, okay?"

"Okaaay!" Albertina called.

Felicia nodded at the energetic reply, and with the secret to the plan in her hand, she raced off on horseback.

"Rraaaaagh!!" Roaring wildly, Steinþórr swung his hammer along with the momentum of his horse, and plunged it deep into the guts of the Wolf Clan soldier who foolishly threw himself at him.

The man he hit was sent flying backward, slamming into four or five men behind him and sending them all tumbling to the ground.

Steinþórr then grabbed a spear which thrust at him from the opposite direction, and lifted it up into the air.

"Uwaa?!" the soldier holding the spear cried out in surprise.

On the battlefield, losing one's weapon was the same as a death sentence. The spearman fell back on that common sense, and kept a tight grip on his longspear hilt, but that was the beginning of the end for him.

He was gripping a spear that was as long as the height of three adult men, but he found himself lifted bodily into the air by the man gripping the other end of

it. For a quick moment, he felt his spine freeze.

“Hragh!”

With a grunt of effort, Steinþórr whirled the spear around and slammed the soldier down hard onto a group of his comrades.

The last thing he felt was the sensation of his body crushing his allies to death, before he too breathed his last.

“I’m seriously gettin’ tired of playing with these weaklings! Where’s that scraggly old wolf?” Drenched in the blood of his foes from head to toe, the Battle-Hungry Tiger screamed out his demands. “If you don’t got him, I’ll settle for that silver she-wolf!”

He had been forced to wait for this rematch for half a year.

He had been able to do nothing but sit and save his strength, biding his time until now.

And yet now, he felt completely unsatisfied by this result.

Then Steinþórr stopped as he caught a brief flash of golden hair out of the corner of his eye. “Hm!”

Turning, he locked eyes with a beautiful girl with an appearance that seemed out of place on the battlefield.

There was something vaguely familiar about her face.

Ohh, that’s it, he thought, *she must be one of them*. This girl was one of the group of seven Einherjar that had surrounded him during the Battle of Élivágar River.

Of course, that was all he remembered about her; she hadn’t left any real impression on him. In other words, that had been the extent of her strength as an opponent.

Still, she *was* an Einherjar, there was no mistake about that. She should at least be a little bit more fun than the other small fry.

“Heh heh heh... Right then, let’s have us a good fi—” As Steinþórr turned his horse to race towards the golden-haired girl, *it* happened.

Something twinkled in the girl's hand.

What is that? he thought, and squinted at it.

"Gah?!" Steinþórr hollered as an intensely bright light shot straight into his eyes, turning his vision stark white.

He knew right away what had happened.

That thing the girl was holding had to be a mirror.

She was using it to reflect the sunlight, skillfully adjusting the angle precisely so that it went right into his eyes.

Steinþórr quickly turned his neck to the side and opened his eyes again, but the bright light was waiting for him.

"Prepare yourself, Steinþórr!" the girl shouted.

"DIE!!" Steinþórr heard the angry shout of a Wolf Clan soldier as they all attacked him en masse.

As the attacks came, he tried to fight back normally, but the golden-haired girl continued to manipulate the mirror so that the light always hit him in the eyes at the worst timing.

"Dammit! You think you're clever with your stupid little tricks? Wh-whoa!"

Steinþórr pulled back violently trying to escape the light, and pulled on the reins of his horse, as well.

Of course, he did so without controlling his overwhelming arm strength.

The horse's front legs reared into the air, and it stood almost vertically on its hind legs.

In the next instant, a spear point thrust into the space where Steinþórr's body had just been.

"Phew, that was a close one." Even for Steinþórr, that had been scary for a second.

It was a real and genuine threat having his sight stolen from him right in the middle of dealing with these attacks.

Once more, the bright light and an enemy spear struck at him.

However, this time Steinþórr didn't try to turn his head away, and just calmly smashed his hammer down on the skull of the attacking Wolf Clan soldier.

He reached out with his other hand in the direction of the light — in other words, in the direction of his blind spot — and easily grabbed ahold of the next attacking spear, swinging it around with his full strength.

“Haaaauugh!” With a shout, he whirled his long warhammer around, delivering a thrusting attack with the sharp point at the bottom of its handle.

He struck again, again, one thrust after the other.

Not a single one of them missed its target.

Every single thrust struck with extreme precision, felling an enemy.

In only a few moments, he was surrounded by a pile of Wolf Clan corpses.

“No... impossible... how...?!” Though his vision was dark, the girl's faint voice reached his sharpened ears easily. She sounded like she couldn't believe what had just happened in front of her.

That was only natural. Steinþórr had been fighting with his eyes closed, after all.

Baring his teeth in a vicious smile, Steinþórr tapped the hilt of his hammer against the metal plate on his shoulder. “Ha! Against small fry like that, fighting blind is just about right for a handicap.”

Steinþórr had been forced to recoil by the bright light because his eyes were open. Thus, all he'd needed to do was fight with them shut.

The little twinge that ran down his spine would let him know when an attack was coming.

The sound of the weapon cutting through the air would show him exactly what kind of attack was coming, and from how far away.

His sense of smell could tell him whether he was next to an ally or foe, and also their rank.

With all that information at his disposal, he could make do without sight

entirely.

Normally, of course, that wouldn't be the case for a normal human, but for Steinþórr, it certainly was.

"Okay, now let's quit playing around and do this." Steinþórr shot the golden-haired girl a wide-eyed glare, and he pointed his hammer at her.

"Ghh...!" The girl grit her teeth with frustration, and turned her horse around, riding off. Apparently she realized her plan had failed, and was running away.

Like I'll let you get away! Steinþórr thought, and he started to kick his horse into a gallop to chase her, but then stopped.

There was something about the image of her fleeing, something that reminded him of the scraggly old wolf he had fought during that last battle.

He had a bad feeling about this.

"I am so very sorry, Big Brother," Felicia mourned. "I was unable to defeat Steinþórr. I had hoped to at least inflict even one wound on him, but..."

"No, it's all right, Felicia. You did good work out there." Even as Yuuto reassured her, his shoulders slumped and he sighed to himself. "Still, though, even the 'laser pointer' attack didn't work on him, huh?"

Back in the world of the 21st century, the act of shining a bright light into an opponent's eyes sometimes came up as an issue in the world of sports, where it was viewed as a contemptible act of cheating and strictly banned.

This, however, was a real battlefield where death was on the line, not some fair-and-square competition.

The strength of the Lightning Clan army was particularly dependent on the strength of one individual — Steinþórr — and so if anything were to reduce or hinder his combat ability, that would hinder the potential of his army as a whole.

Felicia was right. Even if defeating the man outright was impossible, just giving him a wound or two would have been desirable, but...

"That idiot's too much for any of us to handle." Yuuto lifted up both hands

and shrugged, as if to say “I give up.”

Surrounding him and attacking with seven Einherjar hadn’t worked.

He’d gotten slammed by a whole dam’s worth of floodwaters and washed away, only to come back again in tip-top shape.

Knowing that attacking him head-on would just increase his own casualties, Yuuto had sent Felicia to use a more underhanded trick, only to have that thrown effortlessly back in their faces.

At this point even Yuuto honestly couldn’t think of a way to take the guy out.

“Of course, if we can’t fight him and win... we’ll just have to win without fighting him.” The corner of Yuuto’s mouth curled upwards into an impish smirk.

Indeed, from the start he hadn’t thought something as simple as the laser tactic would be enough to defeat Steinþórr.

At most that had been a test of its effectiveness, with the hope that perhaps they might get lucky.

And it had also been a lure.

An underhanded attack like that was very irritating to its victim.

Yuuto was a little surprised that Steinþórr hadn’t personally led his men to chase after Felicia, but that wasn’t a problem.

All of them were already well inside the jaws of the wolf.

All that was left was to bite down.

Yuuto’s mantle caught the air dramatically as he spun around to step up onto the rim of his chariot. He threw out one arm and shouted, his voice ringing loudly through the air.

“Notify all units! The time has come. Deploy the ‘ox yoke’ formation now!”

After Steinþórr became the patriarch of the Lightning Clan, the tactics of the clan army also went through changes. After a period of trial and error, the arrow-like arrangement of troop formations had come to be one of their go-to

strategies.

This was because that structure made the fullest use of the incredible strength of their commander, Steinþórr himself.

Back in the arrow's shaft, all the way at the back, was Þjálfi, the Lightning Clan's assistant to the second. Since Steinþórr was charging forward at the head of the formation, Þjálfi took this position in his place, monitoring and sending out commands to all of the troops.

It was precisely because Þjálfi controlled the troops from behind like this that Steinþórr didn't have to worry about any of the details, and could focus on fighting just as wildly as he wished.

Steinþórr was a man of dynamic action. Þjálfi was, by contrast, more firm and stoic. Always thinking with a calm and level head, he wasn't a very showy or flashy man, but his penchant for sound, reliable tactics earned him his alias of Járnglófi, the Iron Gauntlet.

"Dammit! What the hell is going on?!" Þjálfi spat out his words with visible agitation.

This was ridiculous.

Right up until just now, the Lightning Clan forces had been completely overpowering the Wolf Clan.

They'd broken clean through the Wolf Clan's first and second defensive lines, and totally seized the full momentum of the battle for themselves.

Just as they were carving their way into the third line, Þjálfi had felt certain of their victory, that it was now only a matter of time until the Wolf Clan forces fell apart.

That was why this didn't make sense.

Suddenly, that state of advantage had been completely flipped on its head.

With no warning, war cries rose up from the left, right, and rear, and the earth trembled with the pounding of feet as the Wolf Clan soldiers pushed in on them en masse from all three directions.

This should have been impossible.

The Wolf Clan soldiers had been split and scattered by the Lightning Clan's fierce charge, and had been reduced to nothing more than a disorderly rabble, and yet suddenly they had all reversed course and were attacking again without any signs of hesitation.

"So, what Father said was right, then." Þjálfi exhaled deeply and wiped the sweat dripping from his brow.

A bit earlier, he'd received a message from Steinþórr:

"The enemy feels too weak. Something's up. I think they're gonna try something, so let the troops know and make sure they don't let their guards down."

At the time, it had seemed like an unnecessary precaution.

The enemy had employed the iron wagon wall which had once easily repelled the Panther Clan's force of over ten thousand riders, and even used a novel technique involving reflecting light with a mirror, all in a desperate attempt to stop Steinþórr. And all of those tactics had still not been enough to stop him.

Rather than being too weak, they just weren't strong enough, as far as Þjálfi had considered.

But in the end, Steinþórr's intuition had been right.

"If I hadn't gotten the orders out to the men when I did, right now the whole force would've been on the verge of collapsing in on itself," Þjálfi murmured to himself.

If the soldiers charging forward had suddenly realized they were completely caught in a pincer attack without any warning, they would have ended up far more shaken than Þjálfi had been.

Their confusion and fear would have propagated throughout the ranks in the blink of an eye, and the Lightning Clan forces would have unmistakably lost their ability to act as a unified army.

"But still... what are we supposed to do?!" A pained look came over Þjálfi's face, his brow furrowing.

Thanks to his advance warning and the charisma of their leader Steinþórr, the

troops had been prevented from falling into total panic, but that did nothing to change the reality that the Wolf Clan was piling in on them in droves from both flanks.

Battlefield formations were, in general, designed for the purpose of attacking enemies ahead of them. They were vulnerable to attacks from the side and rear. That was especially true of the arrow-shaped formation that the Lightning Clan was using now.

They were just barely holding off the sudden assault thanks to the high morale they'd accumulated thus far, but they couldn't escape the incredible disadvantage of this situation, and it was obvious that sooner or later they'd break under the pressure and fold in on themselves.

Meanwhile, the various generals of the Wolf Clan units all shouted wildly in high spirits, as if releasing the pent-up frustration they'd endured so far.

"There's the order I was waiting for! Claes Unit, charrrrrrrge!!" From the right wing of the Wolf Clan's frontmost line, Claes shouted and spurred his men onward. He was the second-in-command of the Jörgen Family, the largest subsidiary faction within the Wolf Clan.

Over on the opposite wing, David, the assistant to the second of the same Jörgen faction, likewise fired up his troops.

"All right, David Unit, move out! Don't let Big Brother Claes show us up, here!"

From within the second line rang out the voice of Alrekr, the young commander of Fort Gnipahellir. He raised his spear high in the air and rushed forward.

"Alrekr Unit! Now is the perfect chance for us to distinguish ourselves!"

From the third line, Olof called out and his unit began to converge as well.

"Olof Unit, reverse direction and charge! Let us show them that the Wolf Clan is full of more great fighters than just Sigrún and Big Brother Skáviðr!"

Olof was currently fourth-ranked within the Wolf Clan, and the governor of

the city of Gimlé, which had become the Wolf Clan's breadbasket lately.

"All right... all right!" Seeing that things were going according to plan, Yuuto unconsciously began to clench his fists in excitement.

The main defensive formation surrounding Yuuto was situated around the summit of a nearby hill, and from his position there, he could clearly watch the flow of the battle unfold. Bit by bit, the Wolf Clan troops were starting to envelop the Lightning Clan.

Surveying the same scene below, Felicia was unable to contain a gasp of wonder, and murmured her thoughts out loud. "Incredible... it almost looks like the flow of quicksand."

Indeed, Felicia's analogy seemed quite apt to Yuuto's ears. Once a person stepped foot into a mire of quicksand, struggle as one might, the liquid soil just kept pressing ever inwards, overwhelming the victim.

"Yeah, it looks like our formation fit the situation perfectly," Yuuto replied.

The "ox yoke" formation: This was one of the battlefield formations traditionally used during the Sengoku Era of Japan, known as the "Eight Formations" or *hachijin*, said to be inspired by even earlier writings on military tactics from China. One's squadrons would be split into a shape featuring two large vertical columns, which could then converge on the enemy, restrict its movements, and wipe it out.

The point of the strategy was to entice the enemy into the gap between the two great columns, then have the columns turn inwards and instigate a pincer attack.

It was especially effective against narrow offensive enemy formations focused on forward movement, like the arrow-shaped formation the Lightning Clan was using. Indeed, the "arrowhead" was another of the Eight Formations, and so there was plenty of historical evidence.

Yuuto had predicted that considering Steinþórr's abilities and temperament, he would be using that sort of assault-focused formation in the battle.

It was true that nothing could stop Steinþórr's forward charge.

However, this was an *army battle*.

Not a one-on-one fight, but a clash between massive groups.

If the Wolf Clan could avoid a full-on clash with Steinþórr himself and destroy all of the squadrons behind him, it would be their victory.

The Wolf Clan troops pressed themselves ever more tightly in upon the Lightning Clan from the flanks, as if tightening a noose.

“Heh, you really did a number on me there.” Steinþórr laughed when he received word of his army’s critical situation via a messenger from Þjálfí.

He was, of course, fully aware that this was not the kind of situation in which one should be laughing.

His forces were now cornered with no escape, and things were desperate.

That was exactly why he was enjoying this so much.

Some might simply call it a type of arrogance, but Steinþórr was troubled by the fact that he was just too strong. Things would always come to an end before he ever got a chance to unleash his full strength. He won too easily.

It always left him feeling unsatisfied.

He’d always been searching for a rival against whom he could throw all of his power.

“You really are the best, Suoh-Yuuto,” he said aloud with a grin.

During the Battle of Élivágar River, Steinþórr had been holding back, gauging his opponent.

It wasn’t because he had been underestimating Yuuto.

It was just that until then, all of his battles had ended so quickly and effortlessly, and he’d wanted to enjoy them more. Without realizing it, he had picked up a habit of withholding his full strength.

But this time, he was going in at full power from the very beginning. He’d launched his frontal assault for real, and it had been turned against him.

In other words, *Steinþórr’s full strength had been successfully countered*.

What, indeed, could be more entertaining than that?

To Steinþórr, a contest was only a contest if the two sides were in a true struggle. That was what truly made the blood run hot and the muscles dance.

“This is no time to be complimenting the enemy!” Narfi screamed. “Quickly, you must issue an order to retreat! The Lightning Clan has already done more than enough to fulfill their role as a diversionary force! Please, leave everything else to Father! Patriarch Hveðrungr will take care of the rest!”

The Panther Clan general Narfi was pleading with him fervently, quite a change from the man’s usual cool demeanor.

Under normal circumstances, a man like Narfi would never have been used as Steinþórr’s messenger. He was too high in rank, for one, and brotherhood or not, he was a member of another clan.

However, within the Lightning Clan, only Steinþórr and a small number of others had managed to fully master horse riding in combat, and with the wartime situation being as desperate and time-sensitive as it was, there was no one more suited to the task than a nomad rider like him.

“Ha, *retreat?*” Steinþórr snickered. “Don’t be stupid. This is where the real fight starts.”

Steinþórr licked his lips, his face twisting as the savage beast within him revealed itself.

Indeed, to him a competition with actual struggle was enough to make the blood run hot, and muscles dance. And it needed to be a struggle between equals. After losing his last battle to Yuuto, if he were to retreat here, how could he ever claim that things were equal?

Only by overcoming this critical situation with his strength and turning things around could he finally claim that he and that man were true rivals.

Steinþórr’s pride was worthy of his renowned name of Dólgþrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, but it wasn’t something that a stranger like Narfi could comprehend.

“Wh-what are you saying?! Sir, I would ask you not to make such a foolish

suggestion. We must retreat now, or the whole force might be wiped out!”

“You’re wrong. *That’s* the choice that leads to death,” Steinþórr said bluntly, with complete confidence.

His army’s arrow-shaped formation was focused on charging forward, and was not well suited for moving backwards.

More than anything, if he were to give the order to retreat now, the soldiers would come to the realization that they had lost the battle. If that happened, their mental fortitude would break, having only barely held together under these circumstances so far. He could tell they would fall into fear and panic. And once that happened, that would be it. They would be nothing more than tasty prey for the Wolf Clan.

“Th-then, just what do you intend to do?” Narfi demanded.

“Heh! The one thing I always do, no matter the time or the place.” Steinþórr gripped the reins of his horse tightly, and a terrifying, laughing grin broke across his face.

With Steinþórr’s Lightning Clan army, there was only one path to take.

As it had been until now, so it would be from now on...

“Relay this all troops. ‘If you retreat, you die. If you want to live, then face forward and advance at full speed. Have no fear. I will cut open the path myself!!’”

“Haaaaaaaah!! Outta the way!!” Screaming, Steinþórr swung his warhammer freely left and right, in great circles.

Again, and again, the weapon whirled around him.

Over and over, it struck fresh targets.

Though the Wolf Clan soldiers kept trying to press in upon him, anything that stood in the young man’s path met the same grisly end.

No number of them could even dampen the speed of his advance.

“Uraaaghhh! Forward, forward, forward!” a Lightning Clan soldier screamed.

“The Wolf Clan can’t hope to do anything against us!”

“We have Lord Steinþórr! No one can stop him!”

The Lightning Clan soldiers behind Steinþórr rekindled the fire of their spirits, and raced ever forward.

Meanwhile, the Wolf Clan soldiers, who should have been in a decidedly advantageous position, somehow found themselves overawed by the outright unnatural intensity of their enemies.

“Wh-what’s with these guys...?”

“S-so strong... This is ridiculous.”

“Look at their *faces*. He’s a demon! They’ve got a demon leading them!”

Fighters from the Lightning Clan were always empowered by their high morale in battle, but this was different. Right now it was as if Steinþórr’s wild nature and inhuman fighting spirit had spread to all of the Lightning Clan soldiers, down to the last man.

With even greater momentum than before, they pierced through the ranks of Wolf Clan forces, as if they truly had become an arrow.

A report on this quickly made its way to Yuuto in his command formation at the rear of the Wolf Clan lines.

“He knew he was surrounded, and *still* pressed forward...” Yuuto spat the words out with disgust.

Retreating was exactly what Yuuto had wanted the man to do. The terrifying thing about the Lightning Clan army was their overwhelming destructive power in an assault, born out of a charismatic warrior like Steinþórr leading them from the front lines.

Put another way, if the Lightning Clan army could be forced to give up on advancing forward, Steinþórr’s spell over them would be broken and they would be reduced to a disorganized rabble, unsure of where to go. At that point, they would no longer be a threat to the forces of the Wolf Clan.

That was how things should have gone... but...

“What, is he just charging forward because he’s stupid and that’s all he knows how to do? Or does he have some kind of wild animal instinct?” Yuuto ranted in frustration.

Charging forward. It was the one means of escape from the trap that Yuuto had set.

Steinþórr was a warrior-hero, invincible on the battlefield.

There was no one alive who could stand in his way.

Whether it was Sigrún, the current Mánagarmr, or her predecessor Skáviðr, the man known as Níðhoggr, the Sneering Slaughter, the result would be the same. No one could block Steinþórr’s advance.

Yuuto had been loath to needlessly sacrifice more of his men, and so he had purposefully made the defensive lines directly in front of Steinþórr thinner.

“Big Brother, at this rate, they will escape from the forces surrounding them!” Felicia exclaimed. “You must send a message to all units urging them to brace themselves and push harder. We must wipe out the Lightning Clan here, whatever it takes!”

Felicia’s counsel to Yuuto was quite bloody in nature, quite at odds with the graceful beauty of her appearance. She was, after all, a general who had grown up living in the war-torn lands of Yggdrasil. Right now in particular, she saw her clan nearly poised to take the head of Steinþórr, one of its greatest enemies.

It was no surprise that the agitation and adrenaline of this moment would run high and stay there.

However, after a short moment in silent thought, Yuuto shook his head. “...No, we’d better not. Actually, send a message to all units strictly ordering them not to press the attack too deeply.”

Fundamentally speaking, Felicia was always loyal to Yuuto in his orders and decisions, but this was one she apparently couldn’t accept. “Wh-why? This is a chance we won’t soon have again!”

“Because one shouldn’t fight an enemy that’s caught up in a suicidal frenzy,” Yuuto said, with an intensely bitter expression.

He knew that good results in a battle like this always came, for the greater part, from pursuing and attacking the enemy while they were attempting to retreat.

Like Felicia, he wanted to make the most of this chance while he had it. But he also knew of a historical situation that eerily resembled this one, and it was flashing across his mind.

It was “Shimazu’s exit strategy,” from the Battle of Sekigahara.

Shimazu Yoshihiro had held only a mere 1,500 men under his command, while his enemy Tokugawa Ieyasu had held close to 100,000. Despite that, when the Tokugawa army had attempted to attack Shimazu as he fled, they’d suffered severe counterattacks. Even the great general Ii Naomasa, who was known as one of the Four Guardians of the Tokugawa, had been gravely injured, as well as Tokugawa’s fourth son Matsudaira Tadayoshi.

And in Yuuto’s beloved *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, there was a line which said roughly: “...*throw [your soldiers] into desperation and they will show the courage of a Chu or Kuei.*”

The meaning was that, if soldiers were thrown into a desperate situation in which there was no option for retreat, then even normal soldiers would fight with an intensity equal to people like Chuan Chu and Ts’ao Kuei, famous historical figures at the time the passage was written.

Right now, the Lighting Clan was indeed in that sort of desperate situation, in which they had no choice but to fight their way forward, and the ferocity that granted them was enough to make a man’s blood run cold.

If the Wolf Clan were to press their luck here, they might end being rebuffed by a desperate retaliation from their enemies, reliving the casualties of Tokugawa’s forces at Sekigahara.

Yuuto sighed. “Well, still, at least this first battle is going to end with our—”

“F-Father, y-you must hear this!” He was interrupted by Kristina, who rushed up to him, shouting.

This girl never failed to be cool and even smugly composed whatever the situation, but now she looked uncharacteristically desperate. She was panting

and out of breath; she must have run at full speed the entire way to deliver her report.

“Haah... haah... F-from the south, there’s a huge band of riders approaching! They are already almost upon us! They number over ten thousand!!”

“What?!” Yuuto shouted.

“What did you say?!” Felicia cried out simultaneously in disbelief.

This was impossible.

The only nation in Yggdrasil capable of fielding ten thousand armed cavalry was the Panther Clan, with their access to the technology for stirrups.

And the Panther Clan’s territory stretched from the far northern steppes of Miðgarðr down to the north parts of Álfheimr. But this was south of the Tanais River, fully in the Vanaheimr region.

Between here and Panther Clan territory was the Hoof Clan, and though they had lost a significant amount of influence in recent years, they had once been one of the ten largest clans of Yggdrasil.

How could the Panther Clan have crossed over those lands?

Right now the Wolf Clan was finally about to succeed in driving aside the attack of their powerful enemy Steinþórr.

For ten thousand armed riders to show up now... “unexpected” didn’t begin to describe it.

And to make matters worse, the Wolf Clan had placed their battlefield formations facing westward, towards the advancing Lightning Clan. An army of riders from the south would strike them squarely in the side.

This situation was suddenly the worst it could get.

ACT 6

From his vantage point, a man looked down disdainfully upon the Lightning Clan forces as they charged their way out of the pincer attack and began to exit the battlefield. He howled with raucous laughter.

“You boasted so confidently to Narfi about defeating him first, and yet it looks like in the end you weren’t able to do it, eh? My redheaded ‘brother.’ Keh heh heh! HAHAAHAHA!”

He was, in a word, disturbing to look at.

The upper half of his face was covered by a jet-black mask except for his piercing eyes, which seemed to surge with a sinister aura of madness.

The rest of him was quite different: His lower face was clean-cut and pretty, and he had a tall, slender build and fine golden hair. This noble-looking appearance only served to accentuate the sense of warped strangeness about him.

This man was Hveðrungr, patriarch of the Panther Clan.

“I knew there was a trap laid,” Hveðrungr said. “That was a close call.”

Originally, Hveðrungr’s plan had been to have Steinþórr break through the Wolf Clan’s “wagon wall” defenses, and at that point bring his forces onto the scene, as well. They’d combine the strength of both armies and focus it at the front, charging forward to take out the enemy in one fell swoop.

But while he had been making those plans, a sudden thought had entered his mind.

Hveðrungr was absolutely certain that Steinþórr could break through the wagon wall. Wouldn’t Yuuto, who had actually fought against the monstrously powerful Einherjar before, anticipate the same thing and formulate some sort of strategy in response?

That prediction had come true.

If the Panther Clan had followed the script and charged in right after the Lightning Clan, they would have also found themselves lured into being surrounded by the enemy's formation. Crushed between the jaws of the wolf, as it were.

But because they hadn't...

"Now I've gotten you to use up your signature move, Yuuto. Keh heh heh heh..." Hveðrungr's laughter refused to settle down, and he brought a hand to his mouth.

Over the winter months, he had used some of the personal connections he'd formed back during his time as the Wolf Clan's second-in-command, and thoroughly studied data on every battle the Wolf Clan had fought over the past two years.

That was how he'd learned of their "Hammer and Anvil" strategy, where units attacking from the front draw the enemy's attention, and another, highly mobile force quickly assaults them from the flank or rear.

Surely the Wolf Clan would not expect that same strategy to be employed against them. Not only would this take them by surprise, it also made for a great strategy because it fit quite well with the makeup and temperament of the respective Panther Clan and Lightning Clan armies.

Thus, the plan having been decided upon, Hveðrungr had made every effort to increase the chances of its success.

He'd already gotten wind of the fact that the daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid, that cunning old fox who'd tormented the Wolf Clan so often in the past, had fallen in with Yuuto. And so, he'd taken meticulous care to preserve the secrecy of this operation.

Thoroughly concealing the relationship between the Panther and Lightning Clans, and using skirmishes to feign continued interest towards the city of Myrkviðr, he had diverted some of the Wolf Clan's attention in that direction.

As for moving his main army, he had sent them to the Vanaheimr region in small groups over time, disguising them as merchant caravans or transporting them by ship so the enemy would not discover them.

Once in Vanaheimr, he'd deliberately had them march them through roundabout, dangerous routes distant from the main roads, in order to avoid the eyes of spies.

Indeed, all of that had been for the sake of this one moment.

Right now the Wolf Clan army's thinly defended flank lay exposed right in front of the Panther Clan. The cavalry-thwarting wagon wall defenses had been set up on the Wolf Clan front lines, focused ahead.

Additionally, the Wolf Clan had just finished a hard-fought battle against the Lightning Clan, and should be coming down off of the tension from that.

He had spent years working towards vengeance for his humiliation, and now the conditions could not be more ideal.

Hveðrungr threw his arm outward, causing his mantle to catch the air dramatically, and in a loud voice, delivered his command. "Everyone! The time has come to revenge the disgrace we suffered! Kill and kill and kill until there's nothing left! All troops... charge!!"

"Another enemy attack?! Just where did they come from?!" David grimaced as he glared at the legion of armed riders that had suddenly appeared.

By all appearances, they had to be the Panther Clan.

They were the enemy the Wolf Clan had last fought in lands far to the north, in Náströnd north of the Örmt River.

They were an enemy that should not be here now.

"What is going on here?!" David shouted.

David was far from incompetent as an officer; he was a man of outstanding talent, having been promoted to assistant to the second of the Jörgen Family at the comparatively young age of twenty-eight.

It was already settled that he would one day exchange the Oath of the Chalice directly with Patriarch Yuuto, so the clan had high hopes for his future career, as well.

But this competent man was now in the throes of extreme confusion.

The David Unit had, until just a moment ago, been occupied with attacking the Lightning Clan forces pushing their way into the center of the Wolf Clan's ox yoke formation.

This new enemy attack had pretty much caught them completely from behind.

"W-we have to turn around!" David hurriedly shouted. "All troops! Reverse course!"

Despite the rapid command, his formation reacted with movements as slow as molasses.

The David Unit was an infantry regiment of five hundred men. At that size, even just turning the unit around to face the other way was not easy.

More than anything, his soldiers were confused.

They had just "won," and had unwisely chosen to pause for a moment of rest.

Like re-tying a fully taut string that has snapped, it is no easy task to re-establish the tension and focus of combat once it has been released.

And as they were struggling to collect themselves, the Panther Clan closed the distance and began their attack.

"Take that, and that, and that!" Váli fired off arrow after arrow in continuous succession even as he spurred on his horse.

He might not be much compared to a monster like Steinþórr, but he was still a master of the bow and the greatest mounted archer in the Panther Clan.

Every one of his arrows precisely hit their mark, right between the eyes of the Wolf Clan soldiers.

He received no counterattacks. The Wolf Clan soldiers simply continued to fall into panic as they suffered his attacks.

"Hah! Slow as slugs!" Váli gloated.

In the last war, the Wolf Clan and their three-rank volley fire from crossbows had managed to repel the elite band of riders under Váli's command. This group

of soldiers was panicking so terribly they didn't even seem like the same army to him.

"Well, that works out fine for me. I'll make them pay me back for what happened to my men before!" Váli raised his voice and called out to his riders. "All right, you bastards, let's get 'em!!"

The Panther Clan soldiers responded by roaring in unison. "Yeaaaaahhhh!!"

Tossing aside their bows, they readied spears and plunged directly into the Wolf Clan ranks.

One of them used the momentum of his horse's charge to run his spear right through one Wolf Clan soldier after another like a skewer. Another unleashed a lightning-fast sweeping horizontal slash with the spearhead which tore through the neck of his enemy. Still another used his horse directly as a weapon, ramming into soldiers and sending them flying.

In the face of this rapid, furious assault, the Wolf Clan formation could offer little real resistance, and they began dropping like flies.

It was one-sided, completely and utterly one-sided.

The chaos and confusion only bred more panic, eating away at the hearts of the remaining soldiers. And, in the end...

"Aaaauughh! I don't wanna die, I don't wanna diiiiie!"

"I can't take this! I can't take this anymore!!"

A few soldiers threw down their weapons and tried to run for their lives.

The sight of one person fleeing served as a catalyst for another, and so on with another.

In moments, this had swept throughout the entire unit, and there was a veritable current of soldiers attempting to flee.

"Dammit, don't run!" their general shouted. "Fight! Why won't you fools fight?!"

But at this point, however much their commander might bark at them, it wasn't going to do any good. His commands weren't going to sway the fighters

who had fallen into such a frenzied state of fear and confusion. They simply kept running, trying to find a means of escape from the battle.

“Hmph, that must be the head of this group.” Spotting his target with his sharp eyes, Váli grinned cruelly and licked his lips. He kicked his horse and quickly closed the distance.

“Wha?!” The enemy general cried out in surprise as he noticed Váli’s approach, but it was already too late.

“So long!” Váli’s spear thrust went right through the man’s chest.

“Sir, Lord David has been killed in battle!” a messenger shouted.

“The enemy is cutting deeper into the formation!” another one joined in.

“Sir, a message from the Alrekr Unit! R-requesting urgent reinforcements!”

One after another, messengers from the units on the field arrived to bring Yuuto reports, all of them bad.

“Urgh! At this rate...” Yuuto gritted his teeth.

The situation was only continuing to grow worse. Yuuto was overcome with a feeling of terrible apprehension. Was an army on the field truly so fragile, such that once it began to crumble in places, it could fall apart so easily in a chain reaction?

He clenched his teeth even tighter. This experience was a total first for him.

“If only Skáviðr were here, then...” In a moment of weakness, those words fell from Yuuto’s lips.

Surely the man who once held the title of Mánagarmr, the experienced veteran who was always so composed, would have been able to give him pinpoint advice even in this desperate situation.

Or perhaps Skáviðr would have been able to ride out to the front lines himself, buying just a little bit more time for Yuuto to think up a solution himself.

But he *wasn’t* here right now.

Skáviðr was far away, charged with guarding the city of Myrkviðr.

Even riding at top speed on fast horses, it would take three days to get here from there.

“Big Brother, we should withdraw,” Felicia said. “The outcome of war is swayed by timing and fortune. Even for someone as great as yourself, not every battle can end in victory. Let us pull back our forces from this place so that we may rebuild them.”

“Ngh!” Yuuto winced painfully at Felicia’s words, and bit his lower lip.

In his head, he knew it already. But it was still hard to hear that painful reality through someone else’s words.

“Is that... really all we can do...?” Yuuto murmured, as if struggling to get the words out.

His rational mind screamed at him that he should begin the withdrawal.

But right now it was a different and more absurdly powerful sense of danger that held sway over his heart.

This would be completely different from the fake retreat he had once used to bait the Lightning Clan. They would effectively be fleeing in defeat.

The enemy would be sure to pursue them and continue attacking as they fled.

Given that, the Wolf Clan forces would suffer tremendous casualties unlike anything they’d been subjected to so far.

Likewise, disaster would fall upon the local residents of this territory.

The men would all be killed, the women violated, and the children sold off as slaves. Even for those who managed to escape such a fate, with all of the food stores in the area plundered or destroyed, only death by starvation awaited them.

Sun Tzu and Machiavelli both argued the same thing in their works: When the situation calls for it, one must be logical, even cold and ruthless.

One must quickly discard concern over that which is hopeless, in order to still be able to protect the things that were not. That was the wise thing to do, and

Yuuto understood that.

But even so, he just could not bring himself to choose that option.

He couldn't allow himself to be that heartless.

Unfortunately, regardless of what his heart allowed, the hopeless reality on the ground hadn't changed.

What was he supposed to do?

How could he break out of this crisis and turn things around?

Isn't there anything I can do? There has to be something!

Yuuto found himself bitterly resenting his own lack of power. At a time like this, if only he'd had Steinþórr's overwhelming strength in battle, he could have saved everyone.

"...Oh!" Suddenly inspiration flashed through his mind like a revelation from on high.

It was an idea terribly fraught with danger.

However, it felt like the only thing left he could try.

The Wolf Clan front line was like a scene out of hell, filled with soldiers out of their minds and screaming.

"Waaaughhh!!"

"Eeeek!"

"G-Goddess, please...!"

"Mother!"

They were no longer proud fighters of the Wolf Clan; they had been reduced to a pitiful flock of sheep, unable to do anything but cry in terror of the Panther Clan riders who charged in and hunted them down.

Fear completely controlled their hearts. Even the concept of fighting back had long since flown from their minds. Every one of them was consumed only with not wanting to die, struggling to look for a means of escape and survive this

nightmare.

At this point, it was only a matter of time before the entire Wolf Clan army would follow suit.

That was when it happened.

The loud, piercing sound of bronze war gongs echoed out across the battlefield.

Ally and enemy alike reflexively turned to look in the direction of the sound.

They saw a host of Wolf Clan fighters charging in their direction, countless clan banners flying.

They saw the chariot at the head of the mass of troops, leading the way.

They saw the young man dressed all in black standing atop it!

“Warriors of the Wolf Clan, do not falter!” the young man screamed at the top of his lungs.

Despite it being in the middle of a battlefield, his voice reached the soldiers’ ears, and their hearts.

Yuuto himself was certainly blessed with a voice that carried well, but there was a greater factor at play: The moment they saw the figure of their undefeated commander-in-chief, the Wolf Clan soldiers regained a bit of their composure, and quieted, which helped his voice carry further.

Yuuto threw out his hand, and continued shouting. “Don’t give up! Grab your spears, and resume your formation! Lock the wagons back together! We haven’t lost this yet!” he shouted with all of his might.

This was the solution Yuuto had found, the only act that might rescue his army from the brink of death.

One might call it reckless, and that might certainly be true.

However, this was also the only thing he could do to revive the spirits of the soldiers who, faced with certain defeat, had fully lost the will to fight back.

One need only consider why the Lightning Clan fighters always maintained such abnormally high morale.

Steinþórr's individual strength played a part, sure, but it was because their supreme commander always fought with them, leading on the front lines.

The one-time conqueror of Sengoku Period Japan, Oda Nobunaga, had placed incredible generals like Shibata Katsuie and Mori Yoshinari at the head of his army, but it was said that he himself had also ridden out from his command formation in the rear up to the front lines to encourage them and fight beside them, strengthening their morale.

Another one of Nobunaga's generals, Maeda Toshiie, had gone on to control the largest and most prosperous feudal domain in Japan after the end of the Sengoku Period wars, and even in his later years, he had recalled how being inspired personally by witnessing his leader fighting up close:

"If the commander only spends the battle in his camp, then once the first and second lines have been breached, the enemy will surely force their way ever closer, and he will face defeats he did not expect."

There was also Alexander the Great, who, even after establishing his grand empire, had traveled to the front lines during times of war to encourage his troops, even suffering injuries at times because of this.

Why would soldiers be drawn to follow someone who kept himself in safety and only gave them orders?

Indeed, they wouldn't be. They would only be inspired to follow someone who took action and led them personally, without regard for the danger.

There was the whoosh of an arrow as it grazed Yuuto's cheek.

But he did not falter. He pounded his chest with one fist, and gave a lion-hearted roar at the top of his lungs.

"Everyone... trust in me!!"

"Yeaaaaahhhhhh!!" the Wolf Clan soldiers screamed back in chorus.

In their eyes, the light had been rekindled, and the flame of battle burned within their hearts once more.



“Muahaha! Yes, attack! Attack, attack with everything you have!” Hveðrungr was in high spirits, and he laughed and called out to his men, urging them on.

The legion of riders swept through the battlefield with incredible momentum like the force of surging waves, scattering soldiers from their formations, knocking them off their feet, and trampling them underfoot.

As they killed the enemy, the Panther Clan fighters awakened their bestial nature, throwing themselves at the Wolf Clan soldiers with ever greater ferocity. They were propelled onward as if riding the crest of a great wave.

By contrast, in the face of these intense assaults, the Wolf Clan forces seemed to lack even the strength to properly fight back or launch a counterattack.

But then an unexpected cluster of Wolf Clan banners caught Hveðrungr’s eye. “Hm? That’s...”

It was the banner that Hveðrungr had once aspired to make his own, in the days when he was the man known as Loptr.

It was the banner that now signified the man he most wished to trample underfoot and kill with his own hands.

“That’s the Wolf Clan’s main formation, the one housing the commander!” he shouted rapidly at his troops. “Everyone, target the main formation now! However, do not kill that brat commander of yours yourselves. To whoever captures him and brings him before me alive, I will grant them anything they desire as a reward!”

“Yeahhhhh!!” Hveðrungr’s command sent a wave of excitement through his troops, and they shouted wildly as one.

Hveðrungr was not a stingy man, by any means.

Throughout his rule thus far, he had always rewarded his subordinates lavishly for their performance. To him, revenge against Yuuto was everything, and amassing wealth didn’t even come close in importance.

So the members of the Panther Clan all knew that their patriarch was a man with a frightening temper, but also incredibly generous. If he said that he would grant them whatever they desired, it meant they could expect him to more than

make good on his word.

Abruptly awash with a new and greater motivation, the Panther Clan riders surged as one, like an avalanche, toward the Wolf Clan's main formation.

At last, Hveðrungr's victory was in sight.

He watched, licking his lips, waiting for his elite cavalry to force their way through the Wolf Clan formation and drag their the hateful, black-haired whelp of a commander back out.

...He kept waiting.

"You fools, what are you waiting for?!" Hveðrungr lashed out in frustration, for not a single report of success had come back to him.

As far as he could make out visually, the protective lines of infantry surrounding the commander were bunched together closely, their spears out, desperately fighting and just barely managing to hold back the mass of armed riders pressing in on them.

That was impressive, perhaps only to be expected of the spearmen charged with manning the main formation and protecting their patriarch. The patriarch must surely have focused his most elite soldiers in his formation.

However, their efforts could only be temporary.

With only that number of soldiers, they could never hope to hold out indefinitely against the Panther Clan's ferocious assault.

At least, that was the assumption Hveðrungr had made, but far from forcing their way through, his men were forced *back*, and his face twisted with rage.

"How?! Why are they losing?!" he screamed.

This was clearly strange.

In terms of martial skill, the Panther Clan fighters were definitely superior. His forces had the overwhelming advantage in positioning, as well, being able to attack from the sides.

In spite of that, this was the result.

The Wolf Clan lines were moving slightly. In small amounts, but solidly and

steadily, they were beginning to rally forwards.

Hveðrungr was confused. “How is this? What is this bizarre strength of theirs?!”

The air behind the Wolf Clan soldiers seemed to waver, like heat haze or a mirage.

Even from a distance, he could see they wore faces of do-or-die determination.

Their jaws set, their eyes squinting and fierce, they set upon the Panther Clan fighters in front of them with passion and frenzy, shouting to each other as they did.

“It’s just as Lord Yuuto says! We haven’t lost yet!”

“That’s right! As long as Lord Yuuto is here, the Wolf Clan will not lose!”

“Protect Lord Yuuto at all costs! Lord Yuuto is the hope of the Wolf Clan!”

“Hold your weapons steady! Don’t let the enemy get close to Lord Yuuto!”

Just what could be driving them on to this extent?

Hveðrungr was no clairvoyant god, and so he could not reach an answer to that question just from the scene in front of him. However, even if he did realize the answer, he would likely be loath to admit it.

This miracle had been created by Yuuto’s ability and reputation as a leader.

“The commander of the army stood on the front lines.”

That was a simple way to describe the choice Yuuto had made, but simply that alone would not lead to such a dramatic effect.

In more recent days, the Wolf Clan army had grown large, and more of its members were people not originally from the Wolf Clan homeland. But most of its soldiers were still people who had been born and raised within the Wolf Clan.

And so, those soldiers *remembered*.

They knew what it had been like before Yuuto became patriarch, the days of poverty and humiliation their clan had suffered.

They knew how different things were now after he had taken over, in these new days of prosperity and glory.

As long as Yuuto survived, even if they were to die in battle, their families, their wives and children would still know a better and more secure future. If, instead, they survived the battle and yet allowed Yuuto to die, their families would surely soon be cast adrift in a dangerous and uncertain world.

That was what those soldiers all believed, purely and without a doubt.

They were able to believe those things because, for nearly the past three years, Yuuto had built up accomplishments that gave them full reason to.

As a member of the Wolf Clan, I must at least protect Patriarch Yuuto, no matter what.

I must not allow the enemy get even one step closer to him.

Those were the feelings that formed the iron resolve of Yuuto's soldiers. Those feelings were leading to fight as if their backs were to a cliff, even though Yuuto himself had not put them in that position literally.

Just as described in Sun Tzu's writings, and just as had been exemplified by the incredible showing of the Lightning Clan forces earlier, the key was desperation. A situation where retreat was impossible had the potential to turn even an ordinary soldier into a mighty warrior.

The Panther Clan was becoming overpowered by the incredible intensity and spirit the Wolf Clan now displayed.

They faltered, and perhaps that was only natural.

The Panther Clan, like the other nomadic clans that made their living surviving in the unforgiving northern wilds, had a much smaller overall population than the settled, city-dwelling nations.

As such, a single person's life had that much more value to the clan, and so they avoided fighting battles they weren't certain to win.

Their primary principle was not to eliminate their enemies, but to protect themselves from losses. The "Parthian shot," where they retreated safely on horseback while firing arrows, was an example of the tactics born of their clan's

culture.

They aimed to take the lives of their enemies, but did not intend to put their own lives on the line.

This difference in essential resolve between the two forces now was what was overcoming the initial difference in skill and tactical advantage.

The Wolf Clan soldiers now burned with an incredible fighting spirit and frenzy, unfearing of death. Faced with this, the Panther Clan soldiers shrank back, unable to bring themselves to attack again.

That small opening was enough; in an instant, the wall of wagons was forming between them.

Now, the Panther Clan would no longer be able to break through the line at all.

“How?!” Hveðrungr wailed. “I’ve come this far, and I still cannot win against him?? Am I inferior to him as a commander?!”

He had nothing left. All he could do now was order a retreat...

It was at that moment that someone came racing across the battlefield at high speed, like a streak of lightning in human form.

Using the momentum of his galloping horse, that man swung his iron warhammer and smashed one of the wagon carriages blocking his path to bits.

His red hair flowing in the wind like fire, Steinþórr cried out with a voice that echoed like the howl of a wild beast.

“Now then, how ’bout we pick up from where we left off?!”

Laughing joyfully, Steinþórr jabbed the long handle of his hammer outwards, and used a single sweeping strike to knock several attacking Wolf Clan soldiers all at once.

“Ha ha ha, that was really something, Suoh-Yuuto! To think you’d bring things back from the brink like that!”

Indeed, he was enjoying himself.

He was so happy he could hardly stand it.

This was the man who had not once, but twice managed to trick and get the better of him.

Steinþórr had believed that Yuuto would somehow find a way to pull out of the desperate crisis the Panther Clan had put him in. That was why, in preparation for that moment, Steinþórr had made his soldiers reverse course and head back into the battle.

Still, even though he'd trusted it would happen, witnessing the turnabout himself still set his heart racing with excitement.

"I can't believe someone like you really exists!" He licked his lips, the beast within showing itself on his face.

Though he lived his life seeking battle with mad devotion, Steinþórr had grown tired of victory.

Whenever he fought, he kept winning before he ever got the chance to unleash his full potential.

He'd fought many times now with other Einherjar, other warriors with supernatural strength, but he'd still never been satisfied.

And yet.

Now there was an opponent he hadn't beaten, even after fighting seriously.

Here was someone who could endure his full strength.

This was, unmistakably, someone *greater* than him.

He wanted to fight and learn the depths of this man's strength.

It wasn't that he just wanted to have an exciting battle, as before. He simply and purely longed to find out what this man was truly capable of.

Attacking an enemy that was exhausted and weakened after multiple battles was something that went against Steinþórr's principles.

But this was different. He was the weaker party, and the idea of him holding back against an opponent greater than him would be even more outrageous.

He need only fight to win, and put all of himself into the effort.

With all other thoughts gone from his mind, Steinþórr continued to swing his hammer with incredible power all around him.

There was a human tornado on the battlefield.

Everything and everyone in his radius of destruction was swept up, knocked down, blown away. Whether it be an elite soldier, or even a soldier who had found iron resolve to face death, all were equal before him.

All who stood in his path faced an equally fatal end.

“That guy’s not a genius of battle... he’s like a living calamity,” Yuuto groaned, with a face like he’d just swallowed a bug.

He had somehow barely managed to hold off the Panther Clan’s fierce assault, and now this. Steinþórr was a troublemaker to the end.

For starters, the young man had been fighting nonstop since the start of the battle. Just how did he have the stamina to do that? It seemed categorically inhuman.

“But... you were a little late getting back here, weren’t you? Sorry, but I’ve no intention at all of fighting you head-on.” The corners of Yuuto’s mouth turned up slightly as he finally became certain of his victory.

His ears had picked up on a faint sound coming from the west — in the direction of the mountain pass. It was the distant sound of soldiers cheering.

The cheering grew ever louder and closer, and a brief moment later, it spread across the battlefield, too.

“We’ve taken Gashina Fortress!”

“We’ve won! The Wolf Clan has won!”

“Reinforcements! The reinforcements have arrived!”

At last the voices were close enough that Yuuto could clearly hear what they were saying.

“They’ve finally made it!” he said, clenching his fist tightly.

Of course, when Yuuto had ridden out with his main formation into the fray

and put himself in danger, he had not done so aimlessly.

Simple recklessness and courage look similar, but they are very different things.

His act had been dangerous and a bit rash, but it had been a calculated risk backed up by the prospect of victory. He had known that if he could just hold things together for a little bit longer, his reliable reinforcements would come to his rescue.

“Lure the tiger off its mountain lair.” It was the title of the fifteenth entry in *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, the classic Chinese essay on cunning and deception in war and politics.

One example of this was the historically famous Battle of Jingxing, which had taken place in the mountains of China at a mountain pass near a large river. It was often said that Han Xin had been able to defeat an enemy force ten times the size of his own by making his men fight with their backs to the river, cutting off their escape. While this account was likely factual, one could say that it missed the point.

To begin with, cutting off one’s own escape to fire up the spirits of one’s soldiers might sound convenient in theory, but the results would not last very long, and could easily lead to everyone being wiped out. It was a method that flew in the face of tactical common sense, and was normally something a commander should never do.

Han Xin hadn’t won his battle just by using that tactic. Rather, the real heart of his strategy had been using it as *bait*.

With such smaller numbers, and by using the common-sense-defying tactic of placing them in formation with the river at their back, he had tricked his enemy into taking him lightly, luring them into attacking him at his position. Meanwhile, a separate detached force was capturing the fortress the enemy had left behind in order to come wipe him out. With the enemy base captured and the second force arriving as reinforcements, Han Xin had been able to win.

Yuuto had used that historical event as a reference, turning his main formation, and himself, as the bait this time.

And so the “tiger,” Steinþórr, had brought his army through the narrow mountain pass and out of it to attack him, and in that opening, Yuuto had sent out a second, highly mobile force with the Múspell Unit at its core to detour around the mountains through another route, and capture the empty fortress on the other side.

Of course, he would have never considered his bait might draw not only a wild tiger, but a cunning panther to him, as well.

“Seriously, though, I never originally intended to actually mimic the do-or-die, desperately cornered fighting part...” Yuuto chuckled bitterly and shook his head.

He’d taken so many careful measures to ensure a solid victory, and it had turned out this way instead. There really was no way to predict for sure what could happen in war.

But however things had gone so far, his plan was now complete.

Again, the secret to the Lightning Clan army’s incredible strength was not only Steinþórr’s strength as an individual, but the morale the troops carried because he was fighting on the front lines and destroying the enemies in front of him.

Therefore, all that was needed was to rob them of that source of strength.

It was only because soldiers believed they had a chance of victory that they were able to throw themselves bravely into combat with the enemies in front of them.

One need only ask what would happen, then, if they were certain they had lost.

Meanwhile, the Wolf Clan soldiers had obtained both the victory of Gashina Fortress’s capture and the arrival of highly capable reinforcements; they were overflowing with uplifted spirits.

The Wolf Clan morale was now the highest it had been since the start of this campaign.

Battles are won and lost by the morale of the soldiers.

Now, the Wolf Clan’s comeback offensive could begin in earnest.

Sigrún shouted orders at the top of her lungs as she spurred on her own horse, plunging into the enemy ranks.

“All troops advance! Full speed! Charge through them at full speed and take out as many as you can!”

She quickly closed the distance with an enemy rider who crossed her path. And as he turned to look at her with an expression of shock, her speartip cut a horizontal line quick as a flash, separating the man’s head from his body.

She followed up by bringing the spear back around with a returning strike, striking an adjacent rider right in the gut and knocking him from his horse.

“These people... they’re in the Panther Clan.” Sigrún spared an instant to wonder why the Panther Clan would be here now.

She didn’t have a clue. She didn’t have a clue, but right now that wasn’t important.

There were enemies in front of her. And her role as the Wolf Clan’s Mánagarmr, the “Strongest Silver Wolf,” was simple: She must cut down as many of them as possible.

Riding behind her was a regiment of talented cavalry numbering two thousand, headed by her direct subordinates, the elite special forces known as the Múspell Unit.

They’d captured Gashina Fortress with enough energy to spare that they could quickly redeploy back through the mountain pass, and their morale was extremely high.

And as for the battle at Gashina Fortress, the Lightning Clan had sent all of its troop strength off to attack Yuuto at the mountain pass entrance, so the fortress had been practically unguarded. They’d captured it with almost no casualties. The riders were mostly uninjured, and had plenty of stamina to left to fight with.

Meanwhile, the Panther Clan riders had just come out of a grueling exchange with the main formation of the Wolf Clan, and they were flagging.

The winner of this contest was already clear to see.

Sigrún's cavalry force moved like wildfire, surging across the battlefield and through the Panther Clan forces, scattering them and picking them off.

"Hm?!" Sigrún's attention was grabbed by one of the enemy riders, who was fighting through this chaotic and disadvantageous situation like a one-man army.

His head was covered by a simple and unrefined helmet, and his eyes gleamed like a hawk's. He controlled his horse as if it were an extension of his own body, striking down with his spear the Wolf Clan soldiers who attacked him one after the other.

She recognized his face, too. During the war the previous year, he had been the head of the Panther Clan's vanguard invasion force.

According to Kristina's research, the man's name was Váli, one of the Panther Clan's great generals, and supposedly none could best him when it came to mounted archery.

"A worthy opponent! I hereby challenge you to battle!" Sigrún called out to Váli and readied her spear, leaning her body forward and urging her horse to run directly at him.

As she entered attack range, she began with a downward, diagonal sweeping attack.

"Silver hair?! Then you're the Mánagarmr!" Váli shouted his reply even as he whirled his spear around and deflected her attack.

It seemed that neither of them needed to introduce themselves to the other.

"So I am! And now I shall take your life!"

"Stupid girl! I won't be losing it to the likes of you!"

They began to exchange blows, their spears clashing.

It was an exchange between two top warriors, the strongest in their respective clans.

Five clashes... ten... their exchange of strikes and ripostes was so extremely

rapid and violent that it created like unto a wall of slashing death around them, and no one could come close enough to interfere.

But even within that heated battle, Sigrún grinned. “This is all you’ve got? The garmr was much faster. Haaaah!!”

“Wh-whoa!” Sigrún’s attacks grew even faster, and in the blink of an eye Váli found himself put completely on the defensive.

It was because of the intense battle Sigrún had fought with the giant wolf several months prior.

Cornered and pushed to the verge of loss that meant certain death, more of the latent ability sleeping within her had been made to awaken and bloom.

“Tch! Shit!” Váli immediately pulled back, turning his horse and racing away. The nomadic people of the Panther Clan did not fight losing battles.

“I won’t let you escape!” Sigrún hurriedly kicked her own horse, urging it into a full run to chase Váli.

If she could kill an enemy general, the morale of her allies would rocket skyward, and that of her enemies would fall as far. Coming this far only to let one of their top generals escape was out of the question.

However, however stronger in combat than her opponent Sigrún might be, Váli was the better of them when it came to horses. He quickly put distance between them — or so it seemed at first.

“Ha!” In what seemed like an instant, Váli spun around and readied his bow, firing arrows at her in quick succession.

“Tch! Dammit!” Sigrún clicked her tongue in frustration, her eyes fixed on the group of arrows flying towards her. She realized now that she had been baited into chasing him, but it was already too late.

As befitting the greatest mounted archer in the Panther Clan, Váli’s incredible skill with the bow was even better than the Horn Clan’s great archer Einherjar, Haugspori.

And because Sigrún was urging her horse to chase after Váli at full speed, his arrows came at her with even greater relative velocity.

The rain of arrows flew at her with terrifying speed, but just as they were about to reach her, something deep within her snapped.

In that instant, the world around her lost its color and became shades of grey.

Everything in the world slowed down to a crawl. The air felt as thick as water.

Sigrún tilted her neck and moved her head slightly side to side, weaving through the arrows.

One of the arrowheads grazed her cheek, leaving a thin crimson line across it, but she paid it no mind. With flowing movements, she used her spear and gauntlet to deflect some of them, dodged others by tilting her body, and kept racing straight ahead through the barrage.

She did so without ever dropping her horse from full speed. This mental state, where her mind and senses attained a state of surpassing focus and swiftness, was another product of her fight to the death with the garmr.

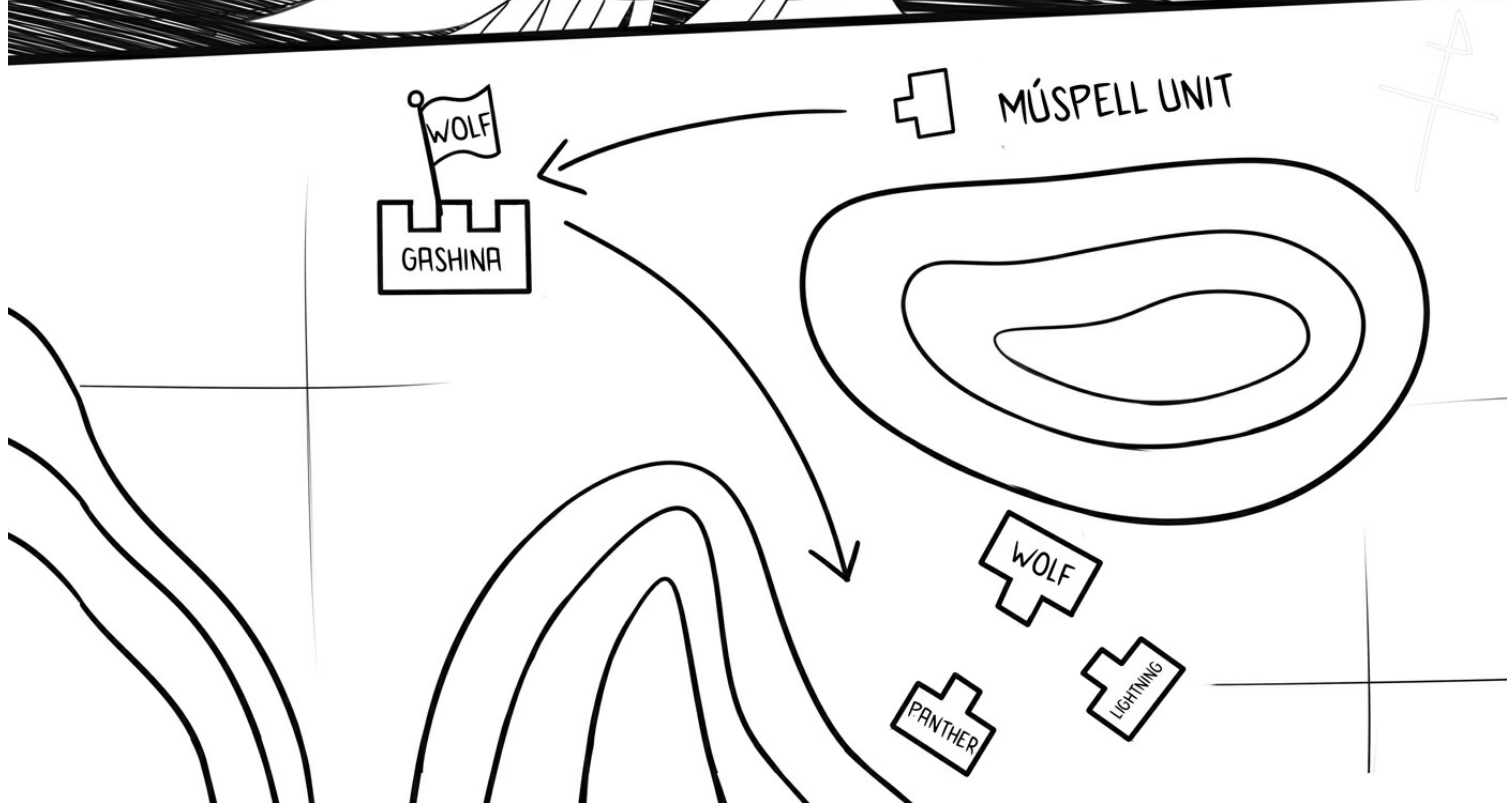
“Wha?!” Váli had been certain of his victory, and so his shock was all the greater.

In contrast to Sigrún, he had dropped the speed of his horse a bit, in order to focus on firing his arrows.

The distance between them closed in a flash.

“Haaaah!!” Sigrún unleashed a spear thrust with the full momentum of her horse’s speed behind it.

Everything about the attack was close to its perfect ideal form as in Sigrún’s training, from the application and release of muscular power to the trajectory of the speartip forward from its readied stance. It was an ultimate, killing blow, made possible by her access to her focused state of mental swiftness.



Even Váli could not react in time to that attack, and it pierced his chest. He fell from his horse.

“Guggh...!”

“Ohhhhhh!! Lady Sigrún has defeated the enemy general!” a soldier shouted.

“That’s our Mánagarmr!”

“Lady Sigrún and her Múspell Unit have come to aid us! With this, we can fight with a thousand — no, ten thousand times more strength!”

“We can win this battle! We’re going to win!”

Bearing witness to Sigrún’s heroic accomplishment, the Wolf Clan soldiers in Yuuto’s main formation abruptly regained their vigor, as well.

It went without saying that the title of Mánagarmr was the greatest signifier of strength within the Wolf Clan.

The current holder had a delicate, elf-like appearance at first glance, but in combat, Sigrún fought with the power and ferocity of an ogre. And with the fact that she had recently taken down a garmr alone in single combat, she had already attained a sort of god-like reputation within the clan, second only to Yuuto.

And now, right after arriving on the battlefield, she had killed the Panther Clan general that had tricked and tormented the Wolf Clan for so long with only his small force of a few hundred. It was another incredible achievement.

The Múspell Special Forces Unit she personally commanded was also exalted as a group of incredibly elite veteran fighters, cavalry that had accumulated a mountain of achievements in the many battles they had fought.

To the Wolf Clan forces that had fought in this battle so far, there was no more powerful or reliable group to come to their aid. They were only two thousand in number, but psychologically, it was as if ten times that number had come to the rescue.

“Come on, let’s follow their lead!” a Wolf Clan soldier shouted.

“Rout the enemy!”

The main Wolf Clan army rushed at the Panther Clan like waters from a burst dam.

It was a pincer attack from the front and sides.

The Panther Clan army was a legion of keenly skilled cavalry, but against the ferocious assault by a Wolf Clan army with their morale at its peak, they stood no chance.

It seemed for a moment like they would be overrun... but before the Wolf Clan could press in any closer, the Panther Clan riders pulled back even faster, spun their horses around and began a swift and orderly retreat.

“Ah! Not good. Stop, all of you! Stop! Don’t chase them carelessly! You’ll just become fodder for their arrows!” Sigrún hurriedly waved her arms, attempting to stop the pursuing troops.

She had realized the enemy’s goal more quickly than anyone else thanks to how Váli had tricked her only moments ago.

However, once a group of soldiers has gained momentum in their advance, it is no easy feat to make them stop.

Seizing upon that, the Panther Clan fighters turned their bodies even as their horses fled, and unleashed their clan’s specialty, the Parthian shot.

“Guagh!”

“Gyaargh!”

The soldiers who had first flung themselves toward the enemy and were in heated pursuit fell prey to those attacks.

The other soldiers, seeing their allies shot down, grew only more riled up in anger.

Thus far, they’d fended off the Panther Clan’s assault, Gashina Fortress had been captured, and now they’d gotten reinforcements from the Múspell Unit. With the morale and confidence from this, they couldn’t stop themselves from continuing to advance.

“Damn you! I said to *stop*! Anyone who tries to pursue them further, I will cut down with my own two hands!” Sigrún spurred her horse and ran ahead of the

charging Wolf Clan troops, screaming at them.

She also used the butt of her spear to strike the soldier closest to her... without holding back any of her strength.

With that, the Wolf Clan troops that had forgotten themselves temporarily finally came to their senses and stopped. Certainly, none of them was about to try and force their way past the Mánagarmr.

“Good work, ma’am.” The vice captain of the Múspell Unit, Bömburr, rode up to her and gave a wry grin. “Still, you were a bit extreme, yes?”

Sigrún had just now rushed into the space where the enemy arrows were flying, and even risked running over some of her allies.

“It’s because Father warned us not to risk ourselves chasing after the Panther Clan riders,” Sigrún told him.

“So he did. They really are a troublesome enemy, aren’t they? We cannot even attack them as they retreat...” Bömburr trailed off.

The majority of an army’s kills and captures in a battle were made in follow-up attacks to an enemy in retreat.

If they did not launch pursuit attacks against the enemy forces, then they could not deal decisively fatal damage to them.

However, as just demonstrated, if they did try to attack the Panther Clan riders in retreat, they would meet with a painfully effective counterattack.

“Damn, they really are annoying.” Sigrún gave a heavy sigh.

She was also forced to admit that the enemy commander’s judgment in this case had been spot on.

Upon realizing that her side had high morale and was eager to fight, they had immediately switched tactics to utilize that to their advantage. The Panther Clan had minimized their own side’s casualties, and delivered more to the Wolf Clan.

If Sigrún hadn’t stopped her allies, their heightened will to fight would have been spent in vain and at great cost.

Yuuto would have likely realized this just as quickly and ordered them to stop, but with the delay in relaying commands, more casualties would have been unavoidable.

They really were up against the worst, most vexing kind of enemy.

“Heh heh heh, ha ha ha ha! Ahh, you got me again!” Laughing with delight, Steinþórr tilted his head back and slapped a palm to his forehead.

A nearby Wolf Clan soldier didn’t miss that opening and attacked, but Steinþórr grabbed the man’s spear with the other hand and spun both of them around a bit before throwing them aimlessly aside.

“Geez, it’s just one trick after another with you. I don’t even know how you come up with all of this stuff. You’re a magician or something, seriously!”

Judging by the nature of the cheers and other noises echoing around him on the battlefield, he could grasp the overall progress of the battle to an extent.

The Lightning Clan’s total troop strength was lower than that of the Wolf Clan’s, by a good amount. That was why he’d focused as much of his army strength on attacking as he could, but it seemed that had backfired. He could only sit and marvel at the planning abilities of the Wolf Clan patriarch, for seeing all of this ahead of time and accounting for it.

Just like back during the Battle of Élivágar River, and earlier in today’s battle with the formation that surrounded him, he’d constantly been kept dancing in the palm of his opponent’s hand.

Steinþórr’s attacks and assaults kept being nimbly evaded, and each time, before he knew it, he was trapped in a disadvantageous situation.

It was just like the stories people told of people being completely taken in by the magic of inhuman tricksters like witches and fairies.

But for Steinþórr, that felt wonderful. There was another man out there who was clearly stronger than him. Nothing could make his heart dance with delight more than that!

“Tch, it’s a damn shame, but I guess I’ve gotta pull out for now.” Clicking his

tongue in frustration, Steinþórr shook his head and shrugged.

The Lightning Clan troops were already at their limit in terms of both morale and stamina.

They'd been fighting nonstop since the morning, and then they had been plunged into a truly desperate situation when the enemy formation trapped them from both sides.

They'd already expended all of their energy in the life-or-death struggle to push their way out of that trap.

He'd given them a short break before reversing course and running them back onto the battlefield, but that wasn't enough to heal their fatigue. Of course, their injuries hadn't healed, either.

He'd only managed to spur them into action one last time with the promise of the treat called victory. And the situation now was what they'd gotten instead.

They'd tried to push themselves forward with sheer momentum, but just as quickly, the wind had dropped out of their sails.

That was just how hard it had broken their spirits, hearing that Gashina Fortress had been captured from them. It meant their main supply route and route back home was cut off, and that was a big deal.

This meant that, just as they were at their most physically and mentally drained, the enemy had robbed them of one of the sources of their morale.

The tension of battle that had been holding them together snapped like a wire, and now even Steinþórr himself wouldn't be able to rouse them any further.

Battles in war were not fought between individuals.

Steinþórr was a peerless warrior who could fight a hundred enemies on his own, but without an army of soldiers fighting alongside him, there wasn't much even he could do to win.

"All right, guys, we're falling back for now!" Steinþórr called. "I'll take care of bringing up the rear!"

"...!!" A shudder ran through the Lightning Clan troops, and several of them

gasped at once.

The commander-in-chief was the one person above all others who needed to escape to safety first, and for him to serve as the leader of the rearguard was unprecedented.

“You cannot be serious, Father?!” one of his subordinates shouted.

“He’s right, Father!” cried another. “We will hold off the enemy for you, so please escape first!”

Naturally, as his direct subordinates, they could plead with him directly. However, their patriarch was a headstrong young man, and once he set his mind on something, he wasn’t changing it for anybody.

Steinþórr laughed and waved his hand dismissively at them. “You think *I’d* be the first one to run away from a fight? Well, who cares about the details, anyway? Just relax and don’t worry. I’m not gonna be dying here. After all, I’ve gotta survive so I can go at it with that guy one more time.”

After confirming that both the Panther and Lightning Clans were withdrawing their armies, Yuuto sank down into his chariot’s carriage.

“Whew... we managed to pull through it somehow.”

Without his realizing it, the sun was already sinking in the west, and the eastern sky was darker blue, with the disc of the full moon rising.

“My body feels even heavier than when I got hit by that Læðingr spell...” he moaned. It was likely from the constant battlefield tension he’d endured since morning. His body was likely past the limit of what it could normally handle, fatigue-wise.

He’d tried to launch an attack at the two fleeing armies, but both of them had shown remarkable judgment and timing in their retreat, and so had suffered few casualties.

In fact, according to reports from scouts in the area, they’d moved to an area two hours’ march south and were resting while watching for potential openings in his guard.

It had been tough, but this battle could be judged as the Wolf Clan's win. But it looked like the real showdown might have just been postponed to a few days later.

"Still, I can't believe the Lightning and Panther Clans had joined forces," he groaned. "That was really awful."

"Hee hee, but even so, you brilliantly fought them off. Impressive as always, Big Brother. Here you are." Felicia handed Yuuto a cup of tea.

"Oh, thanks." Yuuto took a sip and exhaled a long breath. "Ahh, that really hits the spot."

His throat had been parched from nerves, and the tea was incredibly delicious.

"We truly are secure as long as you are here with us, Big Brother," Felicia assured him.

"Hey, come on, now, you know one day I have to go ho—"

"The time has come for the darkness to replace the light of the sun."

Suddenly, a voice Yuuto recognized echoed in his head, and as if in response to the words she recited, he felt his heart thump pound louder.

Ba-thump.

In his mind's eye, he could see the beautiful, brown-skinned figure of the same girl as before. Last time it had been slightly indistinct, but now the vision of her and sound of her voice were both clear as crystal.

"Let the chains of the holy covenant be now loosened, that the imprisoned hungry wolf may be set free."

"You again?!" Yuuto cried out.

"B-Big Brother?! What's wrong?!" Alarmed by Yuuto's outburst, Felicia turned toward him.

Naturally, Felicia couldn't see or hear the other woman. However, she was able to sense something.

"Wh-what is..." Felicia began. "Is this magic?!"

“It’s Sigyn! Sigyn’s activating her seiðr again!” Yuuto exclaimed.

“Ah! You mean the seiðr user who married my brother?!”

“Yeah!” Nodding, Yuuto focused his mind’s eye on Sigyn’s dancing figure.

As before, she was dressed in a provocative and sensual outfit, and bore a figure to match. But right now he wasn’t in any sort of mood to entertain any lascivious thoughts.

Instead, it was an unexplainable anxiety that gripped him. As the seconds ticked by, the Sigyn in his mind finished her spell.

“Fimbulvetr!!”

With that final word of power spoken, Yuuto could feel something, like some invisible force that had been binding him was torn away.

Not that it weakened, or thinned — it broke and scattered, disappearing entirely.

He was certain he could feel that.

“Big Brother?! Y-your body is...!” Felicia cried out as Yuuto’s body became translucent again.

This time, it didn’t end there.

In a sudden jerk, Yuuto felt a sensation like floating, as if the ground beneath him had suddenly disappeared, and the world around him seemed to fade.

“Whoa!”

He recognized that feeling.

It was exactly what he’d felt on the night he’d first come to Yggdrasil — the sensation of crossing between worlds.

“B-Big Brother!” Felicia’s shouts seemed to come from far away.

Not only that, but her appearance in his vision was growing blurry and wavy.



It seemed he wouldn't even have time to leave her with any parting words.

"H-here! Take this...!" Reflexively Yuuto reached into his pocket and tossed something at Felicia.

It was all over in the next instant. Felicia and the world were erased from his sight, leaving only black, and then the world came back again.

And the next thing he saw....

"What?! Y-Yuu-kun?!"

...was the face of his childhood friend, the girl he had spent three long years waiting to see again.

Interlude

“...It’s over.” Sigyn gave a long, weary sigh, and caught her breath.

She stood in a place near to the Panther Clan army camp, in the simple makeshift sanctuary that had been constructed to conduct prayers for their victory. There was a blazing fire over which a few people were baking bricks from clay.

The man standing nearby had been waiting with bated breath, and now he questioned her in a feverish pitch. “And? How did things go?!”

He was Alexis, the imperial priest and representative of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

He was the man who had conducted the Chalice Ceremony which established the alliance between her Panther Clan and the Lightning Clan.

He had informed her of the fact that the Wolf Clan patriarch had been summoned to Yggdrasil by the seiðr Gleipnir from another world, and instructed her on how she might forcibly send him back.

“He’s disappeared... without a trace,” Sigyn said. “I’m sure he won’t be able to make it back to this world again.”

She had told herself that this was for her husband’s sake, for her clan’s sake, but in truth, this method would surely injure her husband’s pride, and that thought left a bad taste in her mouth.

If at all possible, she would have liked for her husband to use his power and wisdom to win a proper victory through force, but she had to admit that his opponent was too good.

She couldn’t believe he’d actually repelled a joint attack by both the Lightning and Panther Clan armies at once...

He had abilities that were beyond this world. Considering the future of the Panther Clan, this was a situation where she couldn’t afford to be choosy with

her actions.

“Ohh, how wonderful,” Alexis enthused. “With this, our great empire will surely remain secure.”

“Hmph.” Sigyn coldly scoffed at Alexis’s delighted words, and pulled her cloak around her in irritation as she made to leave.

He asked, “Oh, where are you going?”

“I’m going to tell my husband. Without their patriarch and commander-in-chief, the Wolf Clan army is now nothing for us to fear.”

Afterword

The Master of Ragnarok is getting a manga version! Congratulations!!

Chany-san will be the lead artist, and it should start releasing on the *Comic HJ Bunko* website this winter. You can check the HJ Bunko official website for more details.

I'm so thrilled at the prospect of seeing Yuuto and the gang do their stuff on the pages of a manga!

And on that note, hello again, it's Seiichi Takayama.

It wasn't out of celebration for the manga version or anything, but this volume was published on a two-month schedule.

My pace in writing the beginning to the middle was faster than ever before, and I thought, "Hey at this rate, I can do this bi-monthly. Ha ha ha!" And when I said that, it actually happened.

...It killed me.

Don't ever make promises you can't keep, folks.

I worked my hardest, of course, but this time, the great Yukisan-sensei really worked hard as well. Truly, thank you so very much.

Next time, I'm definitely going to go back to releasing the new volume in three or four months, though. Yeah.

...And that's all of the topics I have to use in an afterword.

Back during my previous series, *Ore to Kanojo no Zettai Ryouiki*, writing afterwords wasn't any problem at all, but now that I'm on my thirteenth published book, there's really nothing left to write about here, is there...

And still they tell me I have to do four whole pages. Hmm, this is a problem.

Well I really don't have anything suitable to talk about, so I'll just fill the space with something from my personal life.

As touched on briefly in volume 5, good old Takayama here has a daughter.

Back when she was two, this and that happened, and I got divorced, and I've been a single father for the past eight years. This November, when this volume goes to print, she'll be turning ten years old.

She hasn't had any serious illnesses, and I'm really relieved to have seen her safely to this big milestone in her life.

Ahh, but still, Japan is really tough for single fathers. Frankly, I think it's even harder on us than it is for single mothers.

I mean, for starters, there's that "If you're a man, you *have* to work lots of overtime" office culture!! It's a real-world problem when local nursery schools only go until around six or seven p.m., and childcare during the evening hours is really expensive.

Yet, in your standard business management setting, there are a lot more men than women, and the men there are from an older generation where the culture is that men should work long hours outside the home and women should do childcare. They're pretty ignorant of what it's like to really try and raise a child.

When I'd be looking in the ads for job openings through Hello Work (the Japanese government's Employment Service Center), trying to find jobs that would let me come home at a reasonable hour, they were all ads recruiting women, and there weren't really any that were for men.

So, anyway, right now there's a thing for financial assistance for single-father families, but back when I needed it, there was only assistance for single-mother families. (The former was finally adopted into practice after I started making income from publishing light novels, so I never even got to appreciate those benefits!)

Well, I was really in a bind then, and I felt backed into a corner, and I thought, "Well at this point, all I can do is become a light novel author." And that's how I wound up winning the fifth Novel Japan Award.

And when I told that story to an acquaintance of mind, they said I was weird. That the idea of becoming an author coming to my mind in the first place was

weird.

Yeah, well, but, it means I can work from home, and manage my schedule better. For single fathers who have a limited time budget, there really aren't that many options, don't you think? And thanks to that choice, now my lifestyle is a lot more secure.

All I want to do is keep working hard at this job until my daughter turns twenty and reaches adulthood.

All right, that's filled up my page count, so now I'd like to move on to thanks and acknowledgments.

To my editor, thank you as always! This time around, I don't really have to apologize about anything, right? To the great Yukisan-sensei-sama, please accept my humble apologies for forcing you to go along with this ridiculous schedule. And once again, thank you very much for everything!

My sincere thanks goes out to all of the many other people involved in the production of this volume, who gave everything they have to make it happen.

And most of all, to you readers who are holding this book in your hands right now, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Starting next volume is one of the story's biggest turning points, the xxxxxx xxx arc.

Now then, I wish you all the best, and hope to see you again soon.

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Glossary — Volume 6

Here is a list of the Old Norse titles and terms which appear in Master of Ragnarok Volume 6. In the original Japanese text, they often appear as a descriptive term or phrase in Japanese, with the corresponding Old Norse name in superscript, or *furigana*. For instance, Sigrún's title first 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 there is also a commonly used alternative spelling without Norse letters, that has been included in parentheses; for example, Mánagarmr (Managarm).

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."

álfkíper: Otherwise known as "elven copper," álfkíper 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."

Alþjófr (Althjof): "Jester of a Thousand Illusions," Hveðrungr's rune. Like Felicia's rune Skírnir, it grants all-around enhancement, but it also grants a supernatural talent for stealing techniques from others. In Norse mythology, Alþjófr is the name of a Dwarf, and the name carries the meaning "Great Thief."

ásmegin (asmegin): A term referring to the divine energy or power that flows through an Einherjar when using magic or runic abilities. In Norse mythology, it more directly refers to a god's superhuman or divine strength.

Angrboða (Angrboda): The goddess worshipped in lárniðr and said to be the

guardian deity of the Wolf Clan. In Norse mythology, she is one of a race of “giants” known as the jötnar (singular jötunn), and is the mother of the monstrous wolf Fenrir.

Annarr: An insulting nickname given to Yuuto during his first month in Yggdrasil. In the language of Yggdrasil, it means “stranger” or “foreigner.” In Norse mythology, Annarr is the second husband of the goddess of night Nótt and the grandfather of the thunder god Þórr. It is thought that the name in actual Old Norse carried the meaning “The Other” or “Another.”

Bifröst Basin (Bifrost, Bivrost): The fertile area of land between two of the three mountain ranges of Yggdrasil, it is the home of the Claw and Wolf Clans, and contains some territory of the Horn, Hoof, and Lightning Clans, as well. 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.

Élivágar River (Elivagar): A river that, in volume 2, forms the border between the territories of the Wolf Clan and the Lightning Clan, and is the site of the decisive battle of their war: The Battle of Élivágar River. It’s a tributary river flowing from the Þrúðvangr Mountains into the larger Körmt River. In Norse mythology, Élivágar (meaning “Ice-Waves”) refers to a number of frozen rivers flowing through the primordial void before the beginning of the world.

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 that is similar to Valhalla, ruled over by the goddess Freyja.

galdr: A type of magic spell practiced in Yggdrasil, where power is woven into music to create various magical effects. Also spelled galldr (plural galdrar), it is a pagan rite with historical roots reaching back to at least as early as the Iron Age.

garmr: A giant species of wolf native to the Himinbjörg Mountains, and one of the apex predators of the world of Yggdrasil. In Norse mythology, Garmr is the name of a huge hound (sometimes depicted as a wolf) guarding the gates to Hel, one of the realms of the dead.

Gimlé (Gimle, Gimli): A city and surrounding region in southwest Wolf Clan territory. It used to belong to the Horn Clan, but Yuuto's forces seized it from them during their most recent war. In Norse mythology, Gimlé is a heavenly place where the survivors of Ragnarök are said to dwell. It is described as a beautiful hall or palace on a mountain.

Glaðsheimr (Gladshheim): 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 seiðr magic 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.

Gnipahellir: Fort Gnipahellir is the fortress stronghold about two days' march east of lárnvíðr. It watches over the Gnipahellir region, on the eastern edge of Wolf Clan territory bordering the Claw Clan. In Norse mythology, it is the name of a cave where a hellhound called Garmr guards the gates to Hel, one of the realms of the dead.

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.

Grímnir (Grimnir): “The Masked Lord,” an alias of the Panther Clan patriarch, Hveðrungr. In Norse mythology, Grímnir is one of the names the god Odin uses to disguise himself in the eponymous poem *Grímnismál*. The name in Old Norse means “masked” or “guised.”

Hati: “Devourer of the Moon,” the rune which grants Sigrun 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.

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.

Holy Ásgarðr Empire: See Ásgarðr.

hörg (horgr): A sanctuary or an altar, such as the one at the top of the sacred tower Hliðskjálf.

Hræsvelgr (Hraesvelgr): “Provoker of Winds,” Albertina’s rune. It grants her several abilities related to controlling wind in a localized area. In Norse mythology, Hræsvelgr is a giant who, having taken the form of a great eagle, sits at the northern edge of the world and flaps his wings to produce mighty winds.

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.

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.

Ingfróði: “The Lord Of Plenty,” an alias of the late Hoof Clan patriarch Yngvi, based on his conquering vast tracts of fertile land. Appears to be an original term, made by combining “Ing” and “Fróði.” Ing is derived from the name Yngvi. Many kings of Danish myth and legend are named Fróði, which means “wise.” Both of these names are thought to be references to the god Freyr.

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 forged several legendary items for the gods.

Jarl: House Jarl is one of the “Three Great Houses” of Yggdrasil, the most powerful families in the empire who are all closely related to the royal line. Rífa first identifies herself to Yuuto as being from House Jarl. In Norse mythology, Jarl is one of the three sons of a god named Ríg, and he is the one who becomes the progenitor of the noble families of Scandinavia.

Járnglófi (Jarnglofi): “Iron Gauntlet,” the alias of Þjálfi, the third-ranked general of the Lightning Clan and right hand to Steinþórr. In Norse mythology, the Járnglófi (also called Járngreipr) are iron gloves worn by the god Þórr which allow him to handle his mighty hammer Mjǫlnir.

Jörmungandr (Jormungand): The name given to the overwhelming torrent of floodwater used by Yuuto and the Wolf Clan to defeat Steinþórr and the Lightning Clan during their decisive battle in Volume 2. In Norse mythology, Jörmungandr is a serpent which grew so incredibly large it could encircle the world of Miðgarðr, leading to it being called the “World Serpent.”

Körmt River (Kormt): One of two rivers running through the Bifröst Basin and most of the clan territories within it. The other is the Örm River. In mythology, they are the names of two rivers the god Þórr (Thor) wades through every day to visit Yggdrasil.

Læðingr (Leyding): One of the seiðr magics Rífa uses, it has the ability to restrict the bodily movements of its targets. In Norse mythology, it’s one of the three fetters used to bind the great wolf Fenrir, and its name means roughly “binding of leather.” Incidentally, the second mythical binding is Drómi (Dromi), and the third is Gleipnir.

Mánagarmr (Managarm): “The Strongest Silver Wolf,” Sigrún’s title, is given only to the fiercest, most skilled warrior of the Wolf Clan. In mythology, this is also another name for the wolf Hati.

Megingjörð (Megingjord, Megin Gjord): “Belt of Strength,” one of the two runes wielded by the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. It grants him superhuman strength and agility. In Norse mythology, the Megingjörð is indeed the “Belt of Strength” owned by the god Þórr, doubling his divine might when worn.

Miðgarðr (Midgard): A northern region of Yggdrasil beyond the Himinbjörg Mountains. It is the realm of humans in Norse mythology, commonly known as Midgard.

Mjǫlnir (Mjolnir): “The Shatterer,” one of the two runes wielded by the Lightning Clan patriarch Steinþórr. It only grants a single ability, which focuses all of the divine energy of the rune into destructive force when Steinþórr attacks, enough to shatter almost anything he strikes. In Norse mythology, Mjǫlnir is the legendary dwarven-forged hammer belonging to the god Þórr.

Múspell Special Forces Unit (Muspell): Múspell Unit for short. The name given to a force of elite soldiers led by Sigrún. They deploy as armed cavalry under her command in wartime, and also function as an elite palace guard in the Wolf Clan capital. The name is 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 along the route between the cities of Sylgr and Myrkviðr. In mythology, it’s a place deep in Helheim where the dark dragon Níðhǫggr lives, chewing on corpses. The name means “Shore of Corpses” in Old Norse.

Níðhǫggr (Nidhogg): “The Sneering Slaughter,” alias of Skáviðr of the Wolf Clan. In Norse mythology, Níðhǫggr is an evil dragon or serpent who gnaws at the roots of the World Tree, Yggdrasil.

Örmt River (Ormt): See Körmt River.

Ragnarök (Ragnarok): Also referred to as “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): “Secret arts,” a subset of runic magic. Seiðr is a type of magic spell much harder and more complicated to perform than a galldr, but capable of more 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.

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.

Tanais River: A river mentioned as a landmark in volume 6. This river is also mentioned in Snorri Sturluson’s mythological Ynglinga saga; east of it lies the realm known as “Asaland,” or Ásgarðr.

Tanngnjóstr (Tanngiost): “The Teeth-Grinder,” the rune belonging to Röskva. In Norse mythology, it’s the name of one of two goats belonging to the god Þórr, and appears in the same story as two siblings named Þjálfí and Röskva, who become Þórr’s servants. The other goat is Tanngrísniir.

Tanngrísniir (Tanngrisnir): “The Snarler,” the rune belonging to Þjálfí. In Norse mythology, Tanngrísniir is one of a pair of goats who pull the chariot of the god Þórr. The goats are regularly cooked and eaten by the god, only to be resurrected the next day by his magical hammer.

Valaskjálf Palace (Valaskjalf): The palace of the Divine Emperor, located in the imperial capital Glaðsheimr. In 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.

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 mythology, it is one of the Nine Worlds and is home to a group of gods known as the Vanir.

Veðrfölnir (Vedrfolnir): “Silencer of Winds,” Kristina’s rune. It grants her wind-related powers such as erasing her presence and canceling out wind currents. In Norse mythology, Veðrfölnir is the name of a hawk residing at the very top of the World Tree, perched on the head of a giant eagle.

Þjóðann (theodann, thiudans): In the world of Yggdrasil, this is the title of the ruler of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, meaning “Divine Emperor/Empress.” Historically, it’s a Norse translation of the Visigothic word þiudans, which roughly means “ruler/king.”

Þrúðvangr Mountains (Thrudvang): One of the three great mountain ranges forming what is known as the “Roof of Yggdrasil,” the Þrúðvangr 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.









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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 6

by Seiichi Takayama

Translated by Curtis Teal Edited by Emily Sorensen

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