

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

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ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

4





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

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

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



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

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

"Augh, just get it over with already!"

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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Felicia

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



Sigrún

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



Yuuto Suoh

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



Ingrid

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



Linnea

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



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

Mitsuki Shimoya

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



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

Albertina and Kristina

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



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

Ephelia

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



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

Hveðrungr

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



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

Skáviðr

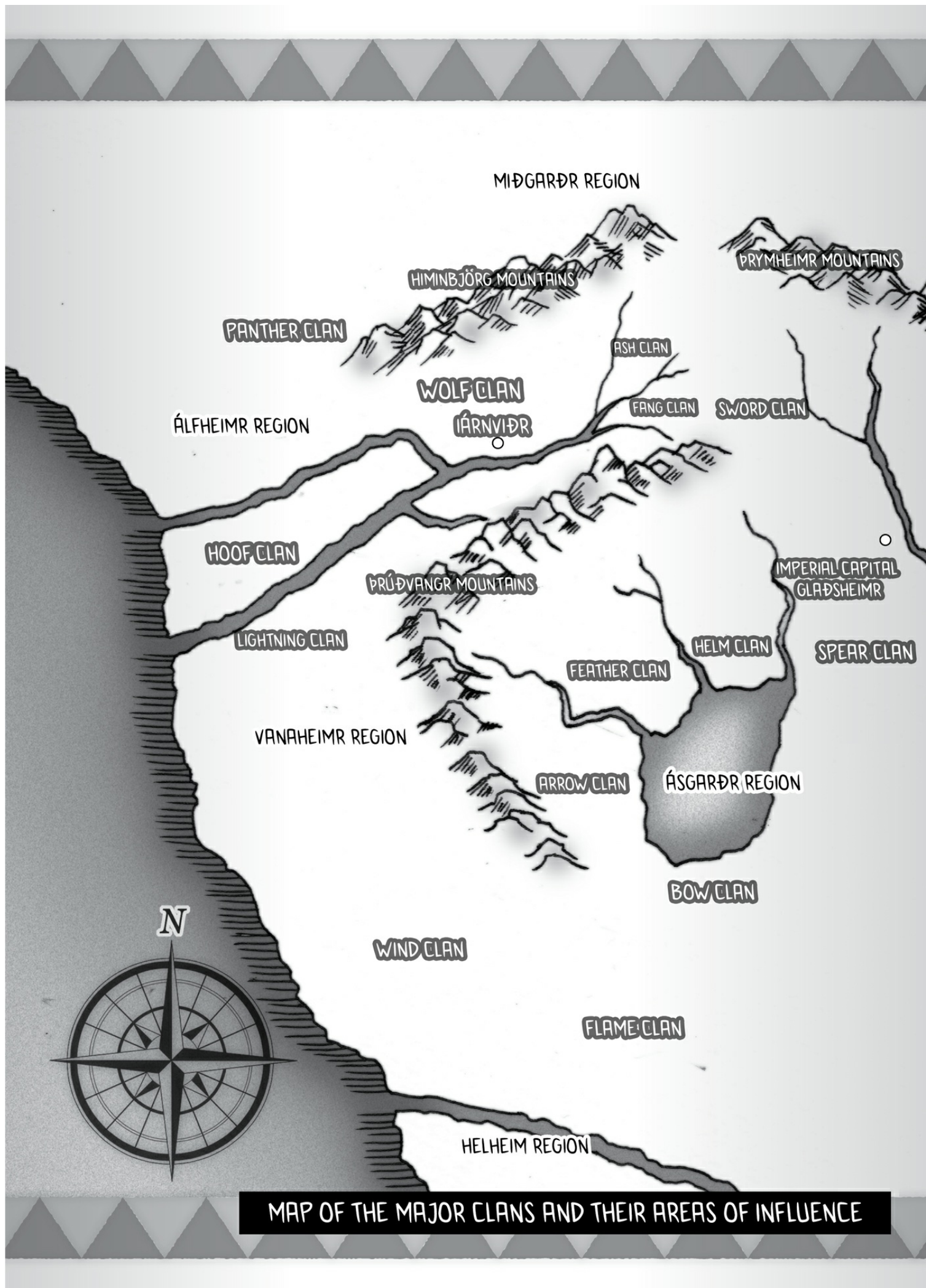
Assistant to the Second-in-Command of the Wolf Clan. A veteran warrior and the clan's executioner, he is both respected and feared. He is known by the alias Niðhoggr, the Sneering Slaughter.



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

Sigyn

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



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nah, don’t worry, I was already up.”

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

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

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

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

ACT 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

think of betraying her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’ll bid thirty bygg of silver!”

“Then I’ll bid forty bygg!”

“Grrr... then one barr!”

“One barr, twenty bygg!”

“One barr, thirty bygg!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



“Talk about making a killing,” he murmured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

nervous expression.

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

"Wait, aren't you..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Eh... oh...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was like a little puppy.

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

"Awawa! M-Master?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

hurriedly shook their heads.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're right again," he admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

his talent and seen fit to personally employ him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"H-huh?"

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

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

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

“Wh-whaaaaaat?!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Váli stood up with a start, bellowing furiously.

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

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

However—

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

“Ah...!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

next time.”

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

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

At least, not for now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACT 2

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

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

Felicia, Yuuto's adjutant and younger sibling subordinate.

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

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

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

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

And lastly...

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

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

In a way, her reaction was perfectly natural.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hwah?!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At those words, everyone else nodded deeply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jörgen thumped a hand against his chest in emphasis.

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

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

Sigrún had no understanding of politics or administration.

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

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

Jörgen dismissed their concerns with a hearty laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, they had all become wolves.

Meanwhile...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right, I know. I’ll be careful.”

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it was truly *natural*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Whewee, this is heaven...”

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

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

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

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

And just as he did...

“Woow, hot springs, hot spriings!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uh huh, that’s right.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, everything would be fine now.

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

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

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

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

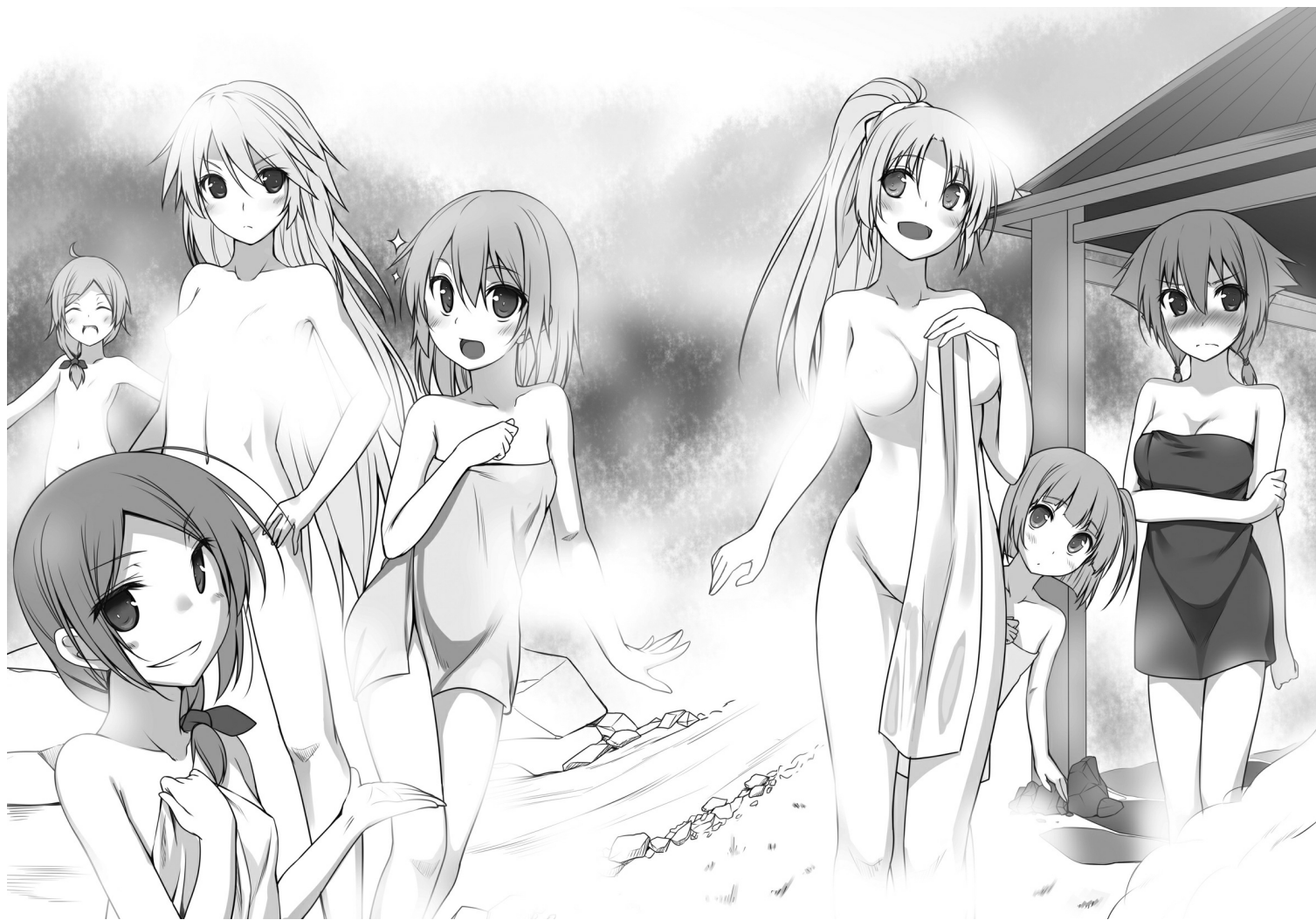
He had been so absorbed in arguing with Kristina that he hadn't noticed, but all of the other girls were now approaching, towels in hand!

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

"Heh heh, whatever are you talking about?"

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the spring, letting out sighs of pleasure.

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

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

She was also completely naked.

She seemed healthy and full of energy, at least.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Neither of them were making any effort to cover themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"By your leave, Father!"

"Well then, Father..."

"Let's begin, Big Brother."

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

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

feel the area between his legs growing hotter.

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

Squish.

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

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

"Wh-wh-whyyyy?!"

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

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

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

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

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

"L-l-licking?!"

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

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

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

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

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

else!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Big Brother?!”

“Father?!”

“Big Brother?!”

“Y-Yuuto?!”

“Father?!”

“Master?!”

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

“We are truly sorry! Please forgive us.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, I'm fine, Felicia."

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

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

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

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

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

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

himself with a deep sigh.

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

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

Several of the other girls nodded in agreement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second-in-Command! ♪”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Indeed it is.” Kristina giggled suggestively.

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

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

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

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

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

Jörgen shook his head, his face pained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At least, not *yet*.

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

Jörgen sighed, a hard look on his scarred face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One could not influence people with a forceful approach alone.

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

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

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

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

"...Hm, I see."

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

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

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

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

Going by her personality, it was clearly an act.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACT 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Studying something enjoyable was more effective than being forced to study

something boring. It seemed that truth remained constant no matter the era.

Yuuto turned to Ephelia, who was sitting next to him, and laid a hand on her head. "So, do you think you can do this?"

"Fwah?!" Yuuto's voice startled her so much that she let out a strange noise. Apparently she had gotten so absorbed into listening to the recitation that she'd become unaware of her surroundings. "Oh, u-um, but is it really right for Ephy to attend a vaxt?"

"There's no right or wrong to it," Yuuto said. "Do it. That's a command."

"Oh..." Ephelia seemed timid and without any confidence, so Yuuto asserted himself to make the matter clearer for her.

He figured that if he gave her too much choice in the matter, it would make her even more uncertain.

In Yuuto's native 21st century Japan, education for children was mandatory. It didn't matter whether one wanted to attend school or not, one simply *had* to.

"Studying here is going to be your job," Yuuto said. "If you get good grades, you'll receive pay as a reward. If you work hard, you'll be able to raise the money for your manumission faster."

If a slave was able to pay their master an amount of money equivalent to their purchase price, then it was possible to buy back one's freedom and rights as a normal citizen.

Personally, Yuuto would have liked to simply give the money to her for free with no strings attached, but he couldn't afford to show Ephelia that much preferential treatment. And if he were to emancipate all of the slaves working in the palace, it would put a huge burden on the clan's national treasury.

Yuuto was the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, but the clan's funds were not his personal property. He was serious about his responsibility to use them for the good of the Wolf Clan as a whole, and not for his own personal satisfaction.

Yuuto ruffled Ephelia's hair vigorously, as if he were infusing her with his own fighting spirit. "Work hard, okay? The faster you learn to write, the easier my work will get going forward."

“O-okay! I’ll do my best!” Ephelia clenched her small hands into fists in front of her, psyching herself up.

She really was an earnest girl at heart, just like Yuuto had first thought.

He had a feeling that she would be able to live up to his expectations.

“Phew, I’m glad we managed to get them to accept her!” Riding in a horse-drawn carriage on the road back to the palace, Yuuto was smiling with satisfaction.

Ephelia would be able to begin attending the vaxt right away, starting the day after tomorrow. A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, as the saying went. With this, he was now clearing the first major hurdle towards his goal.

“Yes, though they did balk quite a bit at the idea.” Felicia smiled wryly and shrugged her shoulders.

Ephelia was fast asleep on Felicia’s lap. She hadn’t slept a wink since yesterday, when she’d been told she would be coming along with them to observe the vaxt. Upon their finishing and her finally getting a chance to relax, she had become overcome with drowsiness. The gentle rocking of the carriage had only expedited the process.

Yuuto responded with a wry grin of his own. “Maybe so, but we needed to get them to go along with it, no matter what.”

The vaxts were only attended by children from affluent families. Even the teachers had a bit of an elitist bent, so they had politely opposed him, arguing that it would be a waste of time to attempt to teach a mere slave.

It was likely there were more than a few who held that same opinion even among the officers of the Wolf Clan. They must surely think that Yuuto should be using the profits from selling glasswares on something more useful and worthwhile.

And that was *exactly* why it was important to make sure Ephelia attended a vaxt.

With proper study, even a slave could become literate. If Yuuto could demonstrate that fact, it should get everyone to understand the idea behind enforcing a system of mandatory education.

He could, of course, technically use his absolute authority as the patriarch to force the plan forward... but the uneducated children within Wolf Clan territory numbered in the tens of thousands.

Ensuring that they all received an education would be a large-scale reform, and thus would require commensurately drastic amounts of money, time, and labor. Yuuto could already envision the failure that awaited him if he tried to push things forward all by himself.

“Even if an incredibly talented individual invests the totality of their energy into his work, preserving and improving on the results of that work requires the cooperation of a great number of others. A nation cannot guarantee its survival without this sort of cooperation.” Those were the words of Machiavelli.

Unlike two years prior, Yuuto was now thoroughly familiar with how important it was to lay the groundwork and build consensus with the majority.

And Ephelia was perfect for the task. She was earnest and hard-working in everything she did, plus she’d already received some amount of education, and judging by the fact that she could already read and write letters, she was intelligent as well. It was a safe bet that she’d produce good results.

As long as she didn’t run into any trouble.

“Is she going to have to deal with bullying, though? That’s what I’m worried about the most,” Yuuto murmured. As someone who knew what school life was like in modern Japan, it was only natural for him to have that concern.

“I think things will be all right in that regard, Big Brother,” Felicia said. “Today should have impressed upon them that she is a favorite of yours. And I believe quite a few of the children must be eager to hear more about you, so I am sure she will become quite popular.”

“Yeah, here’s hoping,” Yuuto muttered to himself with uncertainty. He feared just the opposite: the possibility that the knowledge of his favoritism towards her would breed envy in the other children, setting her up to face a slew of

thoughtless cruelty.

Envy was an emotion that defied all rationality. Understanding in one's head that it was wrong wasn't enough to stop one's heart from feeling it.

Human beings didn't live their lives picking and choosing the most agreeable emotions to hold on to; Yuuto knew that all too well by now.

A bitter laugh escaped his lips. "In a way, we were put in similar situations."

That terrible scene from a year and a half ago had risen again from the depths of his mind: his sworn older brother, driven mad with jealousy, trying to cut him down with a sword, and instead killing his predecessor, who had jumped in front of him to protect him.

Thinking about it in retrospect, Loptr must have always considered Yuuto to be someone "beneath" him. There wasn't anything unusual about that; in fact, it had been a perfectly correct understanding of things. Yuuto had been his sibling subordinate, after all.

And as Loptr had shown, when a person who sees someone else as "beneath" them finds that those positions have become reversed, it is human nature to experience intense feelings of irritation or even hatred.

Therefore, it wouldn't be strange at all if there were people who wouldn't be able to accept the idea of a slave, someone clearly beneath them, rising to their level or above in society. In fact, it would be far stranger if there weren't any people like that.

"And, given that, having to select someone to serve as that example is one of the hard parts of being the patriarch." With a weary smile, Yuuto shook his head and sighed.

Most often, the decisions he made as the patriarch were done in conflict with his own personal feelings. For instance, he could never accustom himself to the feeling of giving Sigrún the order to charge in battle.

Even so, it was his duty as the one standing at the top to harden his heart and to make the correct decision in times like that.

As a patriarch thinking about the Wolf Clan's future, he definitely needed to

do whatever it took to implement mandatory education. And for that sake, he needed preliminary results.

It wouldn't do him any good to focus only on demerits and disadvantages; doing so would only prevent him from making forward progress.

Ephelia had a natural adorableness to her, not unlike a cute little animal. It was a quality of hers that made her well-liked by many people.

So it was much more probable that Felicia was right, and Yuuto's concerns were unfounded. Ephelia might very well become popular among the children, popular enough to brush aside any negative emotions from her peers that arose in the process.

In situations like this, there was nothing one could do but roll the dice and see how they landed.

Besides, attending school would greatly open up the possibilities for Ephelia's own future. Allowing his worries to quash those possibilities would be a terrible waste.

A child coddled by overprotectiveness doesn't grow up. There was an old saying: "The lion tosses its own cub into a deep ravine." At times, harsh trials were what was most necessary for someone. And so...

"Well, for now we'll just have to keep our eyes on her," he said.

What Yuuto could do for Ephelia now was to trust in her and to look after her from a distance, so that if the time ever came that he needed to act on her behalf, he could read the signs and quickly come to her aid in an appropriate way.

He resolved to himself that no matter what, he would carry through on that responsibility as the one who had selected her for this trial.

As the girl continued to sleep, Yuuto gently stroked her head. "Do your best, Ephy."

On the day after the Yuuto's inspection of the vaxt, the situation suddenly grew much more turbulent.

He had shaken off the last of his post-vacation sluggishness and was back to his usual busy work routine in his office. But then two voices called to him, one endlessly bright and cheery and the other cool and calm.

“Hi, sorry to barge iinnnn!”

“Apologies for intruding in the middle of your work.”

The voices were polar opposites in their attitude but identical in their pitch and tone. Their owners were none other than the sweet-looking, symmetrical young twins who were his newly sworn daughters.

“Hm... what is it, you two?” Yuuto asked.

“Well, Father, the thing is...” Kristina placed a hand to her cheek and looked troubled. “Al wanted to see you so badly, she was crying and throwing a tantrum. It seems she just could not forget that fiery, passionate night you shared together...”

“Hold it,” Yuuto snapped. “Don’t start a conversation by throwing out lies like it’s nothing.”

“N-no, I wasn’t throwing a tantrum!” Albertina cried.

“It really is exhausting having such a selfish child for a sister.”

“L-like I said, I wasn’t doing that!”

“Oh? Then you’re saying you *don’t* want to see Father? Well! What a terribly inconsiderate daughter you are.”

“H-huuuh?! N-no, that’s... no, of course I *want* to see Father, but I thought interrupting his work would be...”

“And there you have it. So you *did* long to see him. Don’t just throw out lies like they’re nothing, Al.”

“Uh... umm...”

“And so, shouldn’t you really be thanking me from the bottom of your heart, Al? Your dear sister, thinking only of you, went through all the trouble to prepare a valid reason for you to see Father.”

“Uh huh, I know! I’m really lucky to have a sister who cares about me so much!” Albertina grinned happily.

Yuuto found himself putting a hand to his face, pressing his fingers to the inner corners of his eyes.

Just like always, one twin was controlling the other entirely according to her whims.

Granted, happiness was in some respects a subjective thing. If Albertina herself considered herself happy, there wasn’t really much he could say about it. And besides, though some might consider it callous, he was much more concerned with something else.

“All right then, Kris, how about you tell me about that ‘valid reason for meeting me’?” he asked.

While her appearance might still be somewhat childlike, there were none more talented in the Wolf Clan than Kristina when it came to gathering information. And she was exceedingly sharp, as well.

If Kristina had intentionally chosen to avoid sending a written report and come to deliver information in person, then that fact alone attested to how urgent and important it must be.

“Heh heh, I expected nothing less, Father.” Kristina giggled, and with a tiny smile of satisfaction, she pulled out a single sheet of paper.

However amazing a spy she might be, it was of course impossible for her to operate over a widespread area all by herself. Ever since her days as part of the Claw Clan, she had possessed some number of protégé spies working under her. This information must have come to her through one of them.

“The Hoof Clan capital Nóatún has been taken over by the nomadic clan from Miðgarðr, the Panther Clan.”

“The great Hoof Clan was defeated?! And by the Panther Clan, you say?!” Felicia raised her voice in clear shock and alarm.

“...Hm.” In contrast, Yuuto was more subdued, his eyes only widening slightly.

It was a bit surprising for him too, of course, but still not something

completely outside of his expectations. “History repeats itself,” as the saying went. For any nation, suddenly losing a powerful and influential ruler would throw that nation into chaos, and a rapid decline would soon follow.

Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Takeda Shingen... Just looking at Japanese history’s Sengoku Period, the passing of such powerful and charismatic rulers was always quickly followed by the collapse of their ruling houses.

And looking at world history, it was a common occurrence for established kingdoms based on agriculture to get invaded and overrun by powerful nomadic tribes.

But even though Yuuto was familiar with the flow of history in this manner — no, *because* he was familiar with it — Kristina’s next words made him doubt his ears.

“According to my subordinate, the Panther Clan fought as a force of several thousand armed cavalry. They moved at full speed while firing iron-tipped arrows, throwing the Hoof Clan into a panic, then charged into them full force, completely scattering the Hoof Clan forces.”

Yuuto leapt up, rattling his chair in the process. “Impossible! They couldn’t! It’s way too soon!”

He was visibly shaken.

If it had just been iron, that much was somewhat plausible. Historically speaking, the Hittites had developed an iron refinement process as early as the 15th century B.C., though because they had treated it with the utmost secrecy, the knowledge hadn’t spread to surrounding countries until hundreds of years afterward. So it wouldn’t be completely strange if, by this point, one of the clans of Yggdrasil had managed to discover how to refine iron, as well.

However, the Scythians were said to have been one of the first cultures in history to master mounted warfare, and that had only been as recently as the 8th to 7th centuries B.C.

That was way too far in the future.

Without stirrups and saddles, riding and fighting atop a bareback horse

required an absurdly high level of technique.

Practically speaking, the chariot was the most powerful weapon in common use on the battlefields of Yggdrasil at present, and according to what Yuuto knew, that technology's origin had been around the 18th century B.C. with the Andronovo culture.

Even among nomad clans full of people raised to be familiar with riding horses and using bows, during the Bronze Age, they hadn't normally tried to fight riding on horseback, and had instead utilized chariots.

The gradual development of the technology and techniques necessary for horseback combat to become widespread amongst a clan should have taken much, much more time than this.

That is, unless they had stirrups.

But it hadn't even been two years since Yuuto had introduced stirrups into the Wolf Clan. It was only half a year ago that he'd been able to deploy a mounted cavalry unit in actual battles.

Even with simple technologies such as the stirrup, in a world without telephones or the internet, the transmission of technical knowledge between cultures took an incredible amount of time.

For example, the stirrup had existed in China in the beginning of the 4th century A.D., but its use hadn't been documented in the Korean peninsula or Japan until the 5th century. Just crossing that distance had required over a hundred years.

Furthermore, the Wolf Clan and this Panther Clan weren't close to each other geographically.

The possibility that the technology had been stolen was practically zero...

Once Yuuto's train of thought had reached that point, a single possibility flashed through his mind.

"It couldn't be... Big Brother... could it?"

He recalled the young man who had once served as second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, an Einherjar possessing the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand

Illusions, a rune said to allow him to steal any and all techniques.

Loptr knew about the tatara furnace method, and he was familiar with both the stirrup's design and its potential usefulness.

Everything lined up too perfectly.

"Yes, there's no mistaking it... it's that man," Felicia said, in a voice that sounded frozen stiff.

Though it wasn't cold in the room, Yuuto could hear her teeth chattering, and saw that her face had grown so deathly pale that she looked like she might collapse at any moment.

As much as he grew worried over her physical state, he was just as drawn to the certainty in her words.

"...Do you know something, Felicia?"

"It was perhaps half a month ago," she said miserably. "A message arrived from that man, addressed to me."

"What?!"

"The message demanded I leave your side and come to him. It also said that he was the patriarch of the Panther Clan."

"Why didn't... no, never mind that."

Why didn't you tell me? Yuuto found himself starting to ask, but he managed to stop himself. He didn't even need to ask.

Felicia had watched her own older brother try to murder Yuuto, only to kill the previous patriarch, who shielded him, instead. That tragedy was still a traumatic experience for her.

Felicia normally carried herself well, with a cheerful and sometimes playful attitude, a reliable older sister figure to others. But inside, she was unexpectedly fragile, and easily susceptible to being overwhelmed by anxiety.

She had likely wanted to turn her eyes away from the situation. Miðgarðr was a far-off land, unlikely to ever have dealings with the Wolf Clan. She would have convinced herself of that, and then avoided thinking about it as much as

possible.

“F-for keeping quiet about the matter until now, I accept any punishment necessary,” Felicia stammered. “B-but please, please believe me. I... I swear my loyalty to you and you only, Big Brother Yuuto!”

“I know that. There’s nothing to punish you for,” Yuuto asserted. “Actually, I’m proud that you were able to come clean about it just now.”

He placed a reassuring hand on Felicia’s shoulder. She was his trusted adjutant. He didn’t want her to beat herself up over this matter.

The fact that she had kept quiet until now was certainly not something worthy of praise, of course. And the Yuuto of two years ago might have grown angry and found fault with her for her “weakness.”



But the Yuuto of right now understood that people weren't creatures who could always be strong.

With a *creak*, Yuuto sat back down and leaned back against his chair, staring upwards into empty space. "I'm sure that Big Brother Loptr still holds a grudge against me..."

The Loptr that Yuuto had so admired was human too, and must have had his own inner weaknesses. But as Felicia's substitute father figure, as Yuuto's older brother figure, and as a pillar of leadership for the Wolf Clan, he had surely done whatever he could to never let those show to others.

Underneath his merry smile, he had surely been struggling with his share of doubts and worries. In that sense, the two siblings were similar. They both had a tendency to bottle up those negative feelings deep down, only for them to cause an outburst at some later point.

Yuuto felt regretful, even angry, towards his immature self two years ago, the boy who had taken someone with that weakness at face value, simply assuming he was flawlessly strong and idolizing him.

"Still, it's impressive," Yuuto said. "In just a year and a half, he's made himself the patriarch of the Panther Clan... For now, let's feign ignorance. We'll send a message of congratulations on his conquest, and a desire for friendly relations going forward."

By conquering Nóatún, the Panther Clan now held territory adjacent to the Horn Clan, which was under the Wolf Clan's sphere of protection.

Now that they'd become neighbors, he couldn't avoid having any dealings with them. Like it or not, there were bound to be conflicting interests that arose between the two clans.

He sincerely wished that they could find a way to coexist. He didn't want to be drawn into conflict with the sworn older brother who had taken care of him for so long.

And to ensure that, the first order of business was...

"Hey, Kris 'n' Al."

“Pardon me, but I find it upsetting that you’d refer to us together like we are some kind of unit,” Kristina said indignantly.

“I’m sure you understand this, but nothing we talked about here leaves this room, okay?”

“I am fully aware. And I will thoroughly condition AI, so there is no need to worry.”

“Condition?!” AI yelped.

“Good. I’m counting on you.”

“And he approved it?!”

Yuuto felt a little sorry for Albertina, but with the situation being what it was, she was going to have to deal with it.

If, even by some small chance, word got out that the Panther Clan patriarch was Loptr, former second-in-command of the Wolf Clan, there would be a flood of voices calling for war with the Panther Clan.

In the world of Yggdrasil, killing one’s parent was the greatest taboo. The man who had committed that heinous crime was now sitting pretty on the patriarch’s throne in another clan. From the perspective of the Wolf Clan, it was unforgivable, and impossible to let stand.

Loptr himself would surely not make it known publicly that he was a kinslayer who had murdered his own sworn father. Though, judging by the message he’d sent to Felicia, he didn’t seem to mind if Felicia and Yuuto knew about him. Perhaps he’d actually counted on the possibility that Yuuto would pretend to be unaware of the Panther Clan patriarch’s true identity.

In that case, as long as Yuuto kept his mouth shut, he could bury the truth.

But, however much the thought broke Yuuto’s heart, he had a premonition, one which felt all too certain, that eventually he would be unable to avoid conflict.

“The following two facts are ones you must never take for granted.” Yuuto quoted a passage from Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* to himself. “First, do not think that patience and generosity, however great, will ever be enough to

dissolve a person's enmity. Second, do not think that giving tributes or aid will ever be enough to turn a hostile relationship into a friendly one.'"

Normally, he relied on Machiavelli's words as a source of political wisdom, but today they seemed ominous, portending a dark future in store for him.

That night, alone in his quarters, Yuuto swiped his finger across his smartphone's screen, hurriedly scrolling.

Yuuto was the patriarch, a sovereign ruler. Any personal feelings or hang-ups aside, he had a sworn duty to protect the safety and prosperity of the people within his clan's territory. Holding an olive branch in the right hand and a sword in the left was the most basic tenet of international diplomacy.

It would be far too dangerous to be defenseless in the face of the threat posed by his new neighbor. He needed to come up with some proper countermeasures.

Dealing with diplomatic negotiations between two nations resembled an encounter with a yakuza.

If a yakuza began by walking up and brandishing a knife or pistol, any normal person would cave in to that threat, and be forced to accept unreasonable conditions and demands. In much the same fashion, in order to achieve peaceful negotiations with a militarily powerful nation, one needed to have some equivalent counter to its military force.

By necessity, Yuuto had fully familiarized himself with counter-infantry strategies and counter-chariot strategies, but he'd assumed he'd never have to go up against armed cavalry, and so he was still completely ignorant when it came to that. So now he was frantically using the internet to research anti-cavalry strategies. However...

"Good grief, they're great to use, but hell to deal with as an enemy."

The more he researched, the more he realized how overwhelmingly powerful cavalry was. And then he realized something else...

"Oh, crap. Any more than this, and I won't be able to talk... Hey, Mitsuki, you there?" Yuuto suppressed his urge to keep searching, and dialed the number of

his childhood friend.

“Hi, Yuu-kun. Good evening.” Just hearing her soft, familiar voice washed away the day’s fatigue, and eased his heart.

He could have just sent her a text saying that he couldn’t call her tonight, and thinking rationally about the situation, that was what he should have done, but even so, he’d still called her. He wanted this feeling of solace.

To Yuuto, his casual talks with Mitsuki were the one time he could forget his role as patriarch.

During the times he’d had to go on trips to other cities or on military campaigns, he’d been able to feel his heart growing steadily more upset. No matter how dire the political situation, as long as he was still in lárnvíðr, he couldn’t bear to give up this time he spent with her.

“Hey, good evening to you too,” he said. “So what did you do today?”

“Nothing special. It was just a boring, normal day. So Yuu-kun, what happened to you?”

“Huh?”

“I can tell you’re going out of your way to sound happy, you know?”

“...Geez, you saw right through me.”

“Well, yeah, we’ve been together for as long as either of us can remember.”

“I guess I can’t keep anything secret from you.”

“Nope, you can’t. For example, when you got back from the hot springs, you were acting suspicious, but I did you a favor and pretended not to notice.”

“Uh... ah... uh.” A shiver ran up Yuuto’s spine. His childhood friend’s intuition was downright uncanny.

And, though she was still talking in the same tone as always, somehow, he could sense a bit of anger from her voice.

I see. I really can’t underestimate the fact that we’ve been together forever.

“Well, let’s just say I’ll ask you more about that if my ‘anger meter’ ever maxes out,” she added.

“Uh... ha ha ha...” Yuuto choked out a dry laugh, and inwardly swore to himself he’d do his best not to raise that gauge.

“So, I’ll ask Yuu-kun the patriarch: Pops, what sort of problem do you have? I might not be able to solve it for you, but I’ll at least hear you out, okay?”

“Thank you...” he murmured.

Yuuto was hailed as a rare breed of hero who had turned the Wolf Clan into one of the strongest nations in the region. But before all that, he was just a student who had grown up in peaceful Japan.

There were times when he needed to whine and complain a bit to someone. But as the patriarch, he couldn’t ask the people under him to serve that role.

For Yuuto, the existence of his childhood friend was a source of salvation for him in this world.

“Okay, so the thing is...”

Yuuto told Mitsuki all about the Wolf Clan’s current situation.

He told her about how the Panther Clan had appeared, and taken over the Hoof Clan.

He told her about how the Panther Clan army was a force made up of cavalry.

And he told her about how the Panther Clan patriarch was Loptr, the man who had once looked after him as his sworn older brother.

Once she’d heard all of it, Mitsuki spoke to him with worry in her voice. “Yuu-kun... Are you all right?”

Hearing that, Yuuto kind of began to regret having told her everything. Still, even if he’d tried to hide it from her, if war broke out, she’d have found out anyway.

In fact, even if things didn’t go as far as war, the uncertain tension with the Panther Clan would affect Yuuto going forward, and his childhood friend would definitely be able to pick up on that.

She’d told him before that she wanted him to always let her know about these kinds of things. Because if he disappeared without any warning, her heart

wouldn't be able to take it.

He was always making trouble for Mitsuki, and he wanted to honor her wishes in that regard.

"Well, I'll figure out some sort of counter-strategy," Yuuto said. "But I don't have a lot of time, so starting tomorrow, I think I'm not going to be able to talk with you as much. I'm sorry."

"No, well, I was worried about that, too. But that's not it. Yuu-kun, are you going to be all right with... fighting Loptr?"

"..." Yuuto couldn't come up with any words in response.

He'd been so preoccupied with how to counter cavalry, he hadn't really thought about that aspect of the situation. No... perhaps unconsciously, he'd been avoiding thinking about it.

His mouth suddenly gone dry, Yuuto swallowed and looked up at the ceiling, then he spoke, more to himself than to Mitsuki.

"I am the patriarch of the Wolf Clan. If the time comes, it won't matter whether I want to or not. I'll have to fight."

"I respect you greatly, Big Brother, but even so, I cannot accept that!" Linnea's language was respectful, but her indignation put a wild edge on every word.

The day after Kristina's report on the fall of Nóatún, Linnea had been preparing to return home to her clan in response to the changing political situation when Yuuto had approached her to instruct her on their strategies going forward.

And this was her response.

"'Just hole up behind the city walls, and no matter what, don't launch any attacks,' you say? How will I be able to protect my people?! That leaves the enemy free rein to lay waste as they wish to everything outside the walls!"

"Just calm down for a minute, Linnea."

"How can I be calm? I cannot believe you would so belittle my soldiers!" This

was probably the first time Linnea had ever been so openly angry towards Yuuto since exchanging the Oath of the Sibling Chalice and ceasing to be mutual enemies.

Linnea surely held the advice of her beloved sworn older brother in high esteem, but given how deeply she cared about the people of her homeland, she couldn't just easily accept what he was telling her to do.

However, Yuuto couldn't back down in this situation, either.

"I'm not looking down on your clan or your fighters. I'd give the same orders to my own men. This isn't an opponent you can beat in a straightforward fight!" Yuuto grabbed Linnea's arms, raising his voice desperately to state things in no uncertain terms.

Reading his frantic tone and body language, Linnea finally seemed to get a vague sense of just how terrifying a threat armed cavalry were. "...Big Brother, are they really that strong?"

From Linnea's perspective, Yuuto was a great general whose strategy had thoroughly defeated the great hero of the Hoof Clan, Yngvi, as well as the Battle-Hungry Tiger of the Lightning Clan, Steinþórr. He was like unto a god of war.

And someone like him was saying not to fight, that defense was their only option...

Before she realized it, Linnea had swallowed nervously with an audible *gulp*.

"Yeah, they're just that strong," said Yuuto. "A massive band of cavalry is the worst enemy you could ever face."

Yuuto took a long breath, then sighed deeply, his expression taut and severe.

Tracing back the threads of history in the Eastern world, the confederation of horseback nomadic tribes known as the Xiongnu had been powerful enough as a nation to defeat the agricultural Han dynasty of China during the reign of Emperor Gaozu (Liu Bang) in 200 B.C. For decades afterward, until the reign of Emperor Wu, the Xiongnu had received tributes from Han China and treated it as if it were a vassal state.

Looking at the West, during the 4th century A.D., once again, it was the threat of invasion by a horse-riding nomadic nation, the Huns, which had contributed to the great upheaval among the Germanic peoples in Europe known as the Migration Period.

And then there was the Mongol Empire, which had conquered the largest amount of territory of any empire in history.

And again in China, during the Northern Song Dynasty, there had been an incident in which a mere 17 armed cavalymen from the Jurchen nation had routed 2,000 Song infantrymen, numbers that at first glance sounded like some sort of joke.

“That’s why this is so important, okay?” Yuuto grasped Linnea’s shoulders and, leaning in, repeated his earlier warning for good measure. His face was as serious as it had ever been. “If the Panther Clan attacks you, just focus everything on defending yourself!”

After seeing Linnea off, Yuuto was making his way back through the gates. A horrible stench forced him to hold his nose.

“Augh, geez, that smell is as horrible as ever.”

Next to him, Felicia grimaced as well as she glanced toward the source of the odor. It stood on four legs, much taller than a horse, with humps on its back that were perhaps its most famous unique attribute.

It was a camel.

Because they could travel for days without eating or drinking, they were perfectly suited for traveling in arid lands with few sources of water, and they could carry a heavier load than the average horse. Quite a few of the merchant traders who came to lárnvíðr used one.

However, their foul body odor was one of their disadvantages. And if you didn’t approach a camel properly, it would threaten you by launching spittle at you that stank so bad, it might bend your nose in half.

In the past, Yuuto had gotten close to one of them out of curiosity, and met with a terrible fate. Ever since then, he had made a point of trying not to get

too close to camels.

However, as his gaze came to rest on the familiar face of the man making pleasant conversation with the owner of the camel, Yuuto ran quickly towards him and called out to him in a dramatic, friendly voice. “Well, well, well, if it isn’t my promising new son, how are you doing, my boy?”

“Come on. Please cut that out, Father.” The man — Ginnar — grimaced, looking as uncomfortable as could be.

Yuuto almost burst out laughing right then and there, but he managed to hold it in, and continued to put on serious airs as he spoke. “No no no, you mustn’t be so humble. The Wolf Clan’s marketplace is as prosperous as it is today because of your efforts. I’m such a lucky father, to have such a magnificent son as you!”

Yuuto folded his arms and nodded for emphasis.

Just before leaving for his vacation, Yuuto had recognized Ginnar’s achievements in implementing the use of currency, and had exchanged the Oath of the Chalice with him directly. Ginnar had only entered the clan half a year prior, so it was an unusually rapid pace for such a high promotion.

Ginnar had gotten the marketplace accustomed to the use of coins as currency with almost no problems or confusion, and that was certainly no light achievement. But it was Yuuto and the high ranking Wolf Clan officers who had come up with the idea in the first place and worked on it right up until its implementation, and considering how soon it was after Ginnar’s formal recruitment, that achievement still wasn’t really enough to justify allowing him the honor of becoming Yuuto’s direct subordinate.

In fact, some officers had argued against Yuuto directly exchanging the Oath of the Chalice with him for that very reason. Yuuto had then explained to them the reason was that he had a specific objective in mind, and that this was a special case, and so he had persuaded them to overlook tradition this time.

As for that objective...

The other merchant immediately spotted a business opportunity, and quickly launched into cordial introductions, selling himself as best as he could. “Ohhh!

Then, you must be the Wolf Clan's famous Patriarch Yuuto! It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am a humble trader, hailing from the lands of the Sword Clan—"

Yuuto could see the man's ulterior motives as plain as day, but he continued to converse with the merchant and Ginnar without letting on.

This was a world without telephones or the internet, so it was quite difficult to get information from foreign countries. The merchant traders who made their way from city to city were an important and valuable source of intel.

"Still, I should expect nothing less of you, Ginnar," Yuuto said. "A great teacher I respect once wrote, 'The best and easiest method for estimating the value of a man is to look at what type of men he associates himself with,' and you have made excellent personal connections."

"Ha ha ha, Lord Yuuto, you are an expert at flattery!" cried the camel-owning merchant.

Yuuto shook his head no, deliberately and with emphasis, prompting another laugh from the man.

"No, I'm being sincere," he said. "And you yourself seem like the kind of man who is well-liked and well-connected. Right now, the Wolf Clan is searching far and wide for good people. If they're talented, I'll welcome them with open arms, just like I did with Ginnar here. It doesn't matter what profession. If you know of any good people who would fit the bill, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know."

"Um, would you be willing to accept someone like me, as well?" the camel-owning merchant asked hopefully.

"Why, of course. We'd welcome you."

"Really?! Ahh, it really was worth it to take the plunge and ask you. Well then, after I have taken these glass products to Glaðsheimr, I will come right back here!"

"And I'll be waiting for you. I hope you'll follow in Ginnar's footsteps." Yuuto exchanged a passionate handshake with the merchant.

“Father, um...” Ginnar was making a troubled face, and gave a meaningful glance towards the direction of the palace.

Yuuto picked up on that and nodded. “Well then, with that, I must be going. Good travels to you!”

“Ohh, thank you very much, Lord Yuuto. May you be ever in good health!”

With those farewells, Yuuto’s group entered the city.

After walking for a little while, Yuuto glanced around to make sure there was no one else nearby except for Felicia, then questioned Ginnar.

“So, what was it you wanted to speak about, oh wise and great son of mine?” He couldn’t resist tacking on the dramatic language, the corners of his mouth twisting in an impish grin.

“Come off it, Father! When you put me on a pedestal like that, it makes me feel so awkward and out of place! I can’t stand it!” Ginnar exclaimed.

“Ha ha ha! That’s a little taste of how it always is for me. You need to learn to put up with it, Ginnar.”

“I can’t believe what a troublesome role you’ve forced me into, Father,” Ginnar sighed, his shoulders drooping.

It was written all over Ginnar’s face just how uncomfortable he was with the whole deal, and Yuuto did feel a little sorry for him, but they couldn’t afford to back out now.

Yuuto placed a hand on Ginnar’s shoulder in an attempt to console him. “But thanks to you playing that role, we’ve already got plenty of people lining up to work for us.”

“I didn’t do anything, though. It was all your idea, Father.”

Indeed, the bit of theater that had played out moments earlier was part of Yuuto’s plan to resolve the Wolf Clan’s personnel shortage.

There was an old Japanese saying: “*Kai yori hajimeyo*,” or in English, “Start close at hand.”

In modern-day Japanese, the saying was normally used to mean that the

person who first suggests an idea or task should be the first one to get to work on it. However, the origins of the saying actually went back to the Warring States Period of China.

King Zhao of Yan, one of the seven warring kingdoms at the time, had known that he needed to recruit more talented people to bolster the strength and prosperity of his kingdom, and so he had asked the scholar Guo Kai how he might attract talented people to serve as his officials.

Guo Kai's response: "If my king wishes to invite wise men into his service, please begin with this humble Kai. If you do that, men much wiser than I am will all wonder, why? And they will come to you from near and far, from a thousand leagues away and farther they will come to be your officials."

Seeing that this reasoning was sound, King Zhao had built a special palace for Guo Kai and called him "master," or so the story went.

In the years that followed, some of the greatest generals of the time, such as Yue Yi and Zou Yan, would defect from the other kingdoms to the kingdom of Yan, and with their strength, King Zhao would bring the kingdom of Yan to the height of its prosperity.

Used this historical anecdote as his example, Yuuto had copied the event with Ginnar. He had made sure to take care that his other child subordinates did not become jealous or see him as playing favorites, though.

In Yggdrasil, merchant traders contributed much to the relay and spread of information. Yuuto's conversation with the merchant earlier had been an excellent opportunity to use the man to spread rumors into the surrounding areas.

Yuuto had already conducted similar such conversations with several other traveling merchants.

And that effort had been worth it; in a scant two weeks since starting, the number of new applicants for positions as Wolf Clan bureaucrats had risen dramatically.

Sigrún held her unsheathed *nihontou* up to the light, and gave an incredibly

heavy sigh.

She was a gallant and beautiful warrior, even praised by some of the other soldiers as the “goddess of the battlefield” for her striking looks, but now she was crestfallen, and the air she gave off seemed much less frigid and powerful. It was more ephemeral, even fragile.

Ingrid, master of the smithy, placed her hands on her hips and frowned, clearly displeased. “Hey now, that’s one of my best pieces of work you’re sighing at there. Just what are you unsatisfied with?”

To Ingrid, the weapons she created were like her own children. And this sword in particular was one of her best, a masterwork whose quality she had absolute confidence in. To her, Sigrún’s sighing whenever she gazed at the blade was nothing less than insulting.

“Ah, well, I’ve no problems with the quality,” Sigrún said. “It truly is great. I thank you.”

“For someone who’s thanking me, you sure look like you’re not satisfied at all, though.”

“Ah, well, it’s just... you forged this one, right? Along with your apprentices over there.”

“Yeah, I did. What about it?”

Sigrún sighed again.

“Are you trying to pick a *fight* with me?! I don’t care if you’re the Mánagarmr or the freaking goddess, I’m ready to go, right here and right now!” A vein popped out on Ingrid’s forehead, and she furiously began rolling up her sleeves. She didn’t seem to care at all that the other party was holding a sword.

Ingrid had her pride as a craftsman on the line, and she wasn’t a very calm and patient person to begin with. It seemed she’d reached the limit of her temper.

By contrast, Sigrún was the flustered one. “Ah... u-um... I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean anything by it.”

“I don’t care if you meant anything or not! I’m not letting you take one step

out of this workshop until you tell me what those sighs are for! And if the answer's not acceptable, I'm not making weapons for you ever again!"

"W-wait! That would be a problem!" Even Sigrún's voice came out as a panicked shout when faced with that threat.

A warrior's weapon was the item one entrusted one's life to. The level of trust provided by weapons forged by Ingrid, the greatest smith in the Wolf Clan, was entirely different from that of anyone else. And on the battlefield, that difference in reliability could separate those who survived from those who died. For Sigrún, this had literally become a matter of life and death.

"That's if the answer's not acceptable," Ingrid snapped. "If it's something you have a right to complain about, I'll forgive you. I'll even reforge it for free and fix whatever's wrong, okay?"

"Ngh... F-fine, I understand. I'll tell you. J-just, can you get your apprentices to leave us alone first?"

"Excuse me?! You think I'll accept the kind of reason you can't even say in front of everyone here? I get that you go out there and risk your life on the front lines, but all of us here know we're responsible for the weapons that protect our soldiers' lives, and we put our heart and soul into every single one of them! Don't think you can get away with disrespecting my men!"

A collective "Ohhhh" rose up from Ingrid's apprentices in admiration of her guts. When it came to the matter of craftsmanship, she was strong-willed and unwilling to bend or compromise to anyone, no matter who they might be. She was truly the epitome of a master craftsman.

Ingrid's passionate speech was intense enough that Sigrún took a step back, but then she seemed to steel her nerves. She swallowed once, then spoke in a small, whispered voice, placing her two index fingers together timidly.

"It's just, um, Father didn't make this one himself..."

"Louder!"

Sigrún went from a whisper to a full shout. "I-if possible, I wanted Father to be the one to make my sword!"

Once she'd said the words, her face went bright red and she stared down at the floor, but she couldn't take it back now. She continued softly.

"O-of course, I know Father is very busy right now. And I know that this sword is even better than the one I had before. But that feeling, like Father is fighting alongside me, that feeling of security and excitement... I just wondered if I'd never feel it again. And when I thought about that, well..."

Sigrún's face fell, and with a look of terrible loneliness, she tightly squeezed the grip of the sword she was holding.

The sword she had used until recently had been forged by Yuuto and Ingrid together, but during the battle with the Lightning Clan, Steinþórr had knocked it away, and afterwards it had been washed away to who-knew-where by the raging floodwaters.

Warriors were a superstitious bunch, and Sigrún was no exception.

To her, that sword had been the lucky charm that was saving her life during the fights with both Yngvi and Steinþórr. Even back when she had fought and defeated the Claw Clan's hero Mundilfäri, the sword had been different, but it had still been one forged by Yuuto.

Sigrún truly believed that it was thanks to Yuuto's protection, channeled through her sword, that she still lived.

Though she always appeared calm and unflappable, she was still just a girl in her teens. She had lost the source of strength her heart relied on in battle, and now she felt a strange uncertainty she couldn't describe.

At a loss for words, Ingrid scratched the back of her head. "Ah... uhhh..."

If Ingrid had been a man, perhaps she would have grown even angrier at Sigrún, shouting, "You're a warrior! How can you spout such weak-willed garbage?!" and reprimanding her.

But though some of her more masculine mannerisms were what stood out, beneath it all, Ingrid was the girl with far and away more feminine sensitivity than many of Yuuto's other subordinates. She understood Sigrún's feelings, and painfully so. She understood too well, and that made this situation much too awkward.

As Ingrid stood there, at a loss for just what to say in response, another visitor arrived.

“Yo, Ingrid. There’s a little favor I wanted to ask of you...”

“F-Father?!” Sigrún visibly broke into a panic when the subject of her confession walked into the room.

She had always judged her personal worth by her use on the battlefield, and she had appointed herself as Yuuto’s “sword.” She didn’t want him to ever hear her expressing weakness or doubts.

“Oh, Sigrún, you’re here too?” Yuuto asked. “That’s perfect. I just got this from Ginnar a moment ago...”

Yuuto motioned with his chin to a long, thin cloth bag Felicia was holding. Felicia nodded in acknowledgement and opened the bag.

“Oh... ohhh!” Sigrún caught a glimpse of the bag’s contents, and her eyes went wide in astonishment.

Then she forcefully ripped the bag right out of Felicia’s hands, startling her.

“Eek! Wha— Rún, that was entirely too violent!”

Felicia puffed out her cheek indignantly and protested such rude treatment, but Sigrún didn’t hear a word of it. She was hugging the bag to herself gently, lovingly, as if it were her long-lost child, and rubbing her cheek against its battered hilt while large tears fell from her eyes.

Sigrún was a warrior. However much it might be changed by wear and tear, there was no way she wouldn’t recognize the sight of her own sword’s hilt.

“The hilt’s in real bad shape, but the blade itself is still fine,” Yuuto said. “You can have Ingrid fix... I don’t think she’s listening.”

“That appears to be the case,” Felicia said, sighing. But her exasperated expression was soon replaced by a kind and affectionate smile. “Tee hee... well, I’m happy for you, Rún.”

On the other side of the Bifröst Basin’s northern mountain range lay the Miðgarðr region, an arid region where rain rarely fell. The majority of

Miðgarðr's land was covered by either desert or the steppes, expansive plains of short grasses with almost no trees.

There weren't many lakes or rivers, either, and with so few sources of water, the land wasn't suited for agriculture.

Because of that, the people who lived in that region mainly based their livelihoods around the raising of livestock. In order to make sure their animals didn't eat too much and deplete the grasslands, they never remained in one place, instead traveling back and forth across the land in a steady cycle.

In the cultures of Miðgarðr, it was taught that people subsisted on two kinds of food: "red food" and "white food." The red food was meat, and the white foods were made from milk.



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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 4

by Seiichi Takayama

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