RIKU NANANO
[Illust] cura

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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars

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Heavenly Sword's Stars




The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence
Ruri
A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. She is an acquaintance of Meirin's and was the one who discovered the Heavenly Swords. With her otherworldly powers of observation and her genius tactical brain, she is a major player in the Chou army's counterattack against Gen and Seitou.
"Ngh..."
"Miss Ruri, please come and take a seat over here."
The Inheritor of the White Star
Chou Hakurei
The heiress of a famous family dedicated to guarding the borders of Ei. Ever since she was a child, she has displayed a talent for both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, with a kind but serious personality. She's usually an earnest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.
At times, they really were like close sisters.


Hakurei and I charged forward, and the Chou soldiers followed, their roars so loud, they made the ground shake.
"YEAAAAAHHHHHH!"
"All right, let's go win this one, you guys! We'll take back our homeland of Keiyou!"
The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero
Sekiei
A young man who was rescued by the finest general in the land and grew up alongside his daughter, Hakurei. His past life's training and experience have granted him exceptional combat prowess, but all he wants is to leave the battlefield behind and settle down as a civil official.


"These plum blossoms were so lovely, inspiration for a song struck."
Standing under a tree, surrounded by a blizzard of white plum blossoms, was a young woman with beautiful, long purple hair playing a flute.


Gen
Enkei
Nanamagari Mountains
Great River
Seitou
Ranyou
Keiyou
Shiryuu
Gen-Occupied Lands
Grand Canal
Water Fortress
Kozan
Western Regions
Youkaku
Rinkei
Butoku
Ei
Southern Regions

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"Please leave everything to me, Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf."

White Wolf

Rus

A woman who leads the elite White Lancers and swears absolute fealty to Adai—the emperor of Gen—who appears to have given her a secret mission...

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Prologue

“Lord Hiyou, how auspicious that you’ve returned safe and sound! What is the situation at the front?”

“Instead of invading the southern regions as predicted, the Ei army approaching the border suddenly turned and marched northward. The city is abuzz with rumors that the Ei army has returned to the capital, Rinkei, though there is no telling how accurate such rumors are, for we haven’t received much in the way of intelligence lately.”

“I hear that a group of salt bandits who had been making trouble on the central plains fled without a fight when horsemen descended on the area. They say these bandits follow a strange religion, and rumors abound that *they* plan to launch an attack on the southern regions. The people worry for their safety.”

Ever since my return to my manor in Nansui, a major city in the southern regions, I—Hiyou, the interim head of the Jo family—had found myself swarmed by elderly attendants and civil officials. The sun had long since set by this point, drawing a veil of darkness over all of us, but they must have been far too anxious to return to their own homes. I couldn’t blame them. After all, the Jo family had made an enemy of the powerful Ei Empire.

Several months earlier, the grand chancellor, You Bunshou, had summoned me to Rinkei. The moment I arrived, they locked me away in an underground prison and tortured me. With the help of the wise and patriotic Sir Denso, I managed to escape, whereupon I killed You Bunshou and returned home to Nansui. Yet despite my accomplishments, the elderly attendants of the Jo family still viewed me as an immature and inexperienced youth, and it would be a long time yet until I attained the same status as my father, Jo Shuuhou, the Phoenix Wing, who had been killed on the field of battle.

“There is nothing to worry about,” I said in as severe a voice as I could muster up. I brushed my military uniform, cleaning off all the dirt that had accumulated on it during battle, and this downwards movement made the sword hanging from my belt knock against my thigh with an audible thud. “The Ei army

feared our might and fled to the north. As for those salt bandits attempting to invade our lands, I already took care of them."

Murmurs erupted from the crowd of attendants and officials that had gathered around me and there were lots of smiles of relief.

"Amazing!" exclaimed a voice from the crowd.

"I should never have doubted Lord Shuuhou's successor," added someone else.

"How lucky we are to have such a reliable leader in these tumultuous times!" another lauded.

"That's why refugees from all across the continent are flocking here in search of peace and stability," yet another person pointed out.

With a great deal of effort, I managed to school my expression into a more neutral one in an attempt to hide my bitterness. In reality, I hadn't accomplished a single thing. It was true to say that after I had returned to my homeland, I had made the decision to rebel from Ei, ignoring the protests from my sickly mother and talented younger brother, as well as the warnings from my grandparents who were protecting the southern borders. And I did indeed force everyone to follow suit. Yet the only enemies I had actually fought since my defection were the odd gang of bandits or whichever unorganized military squad decided to threaten our borders.

While I wanted to launch an attack on the north, we were suffering from a serious lack of ships and horses at present. Without those, we couldn't solve our problems militarily, despite having more than ten thousand soldiers under my command. I simply had no way of expanding the territory I had inherited from my father. Worse still, the Jo family's dwindling funds and supplies continued to drain away every time I ordered the army to do anything. How could I possibly relax under such circum—

"Lying is part of a general's job. Keep a confident smile on your face, even when things aren't going well."

"You smile too much. It isn't healthy to push yourself so hard; moderation is important."

The advice I had received from Lord Chou Sekiei and Lady Chou Hakurei echoed in my head and I thought back to their smiling faces. I had fought alongside them in that ridiculously reckless Seitou invasion. Their father, Chou Tairan, the National Shield, had been one of the pillars supporting the Ei Empire,

alongside my own father and the Tiger Fang, U Jouko. *What happened to them after their father was executed? I really hope they survived, but…*

“Hiyou!”

I was dragged out of my reminiscence of these unforgettable heroes of the Ei family by a young man calling out to me from the back of the manor before promptly running towards me, a girl’s hand clutched in his. His hair was a light reddish color and he was wearing the green uniform of the civil officials, while the girl’s hair was a similar shade to his. There was genuine joy on the man’s face at the fact that I had returned, and on seeing his expression, the tension I had been carrying in my shoulders faded away and my lips stretched into a grin.

“Yuushun, Karin,” I said, greeting them.

They were Jo Yuushun and Jo Karin, my younger brother and sister respectively. After all of the people I had lost on the battlefield, I would give my life to protect theirs. Although to be more precise, Karin was the only one fully related to me by blood. Yuushun was the son of my deceased uncle. However, that distinction had little bearing on how I felt about him.

When I became the interim head of the Jo family, my thirteen-year-old brother in turn became the overseer of the family’s internal affairs. “You can deal with what goes on outside, and Yuushun can deal with what goes on inside,” my mother would repeat over and over, constantly reminding me of the division of labor that was required to keep everything running smoothly. The gathered attendants and officials stepped aside to allow Yuushun and Karin to walk right up to me.

The mood now considerably lightened, I clapped my younger brother on his shoulder. “Have you been well?”

“I have,” he replied. “Congratulations on your safe return.”

“All I did was kick some bandit butt,” I said, and I wasn’t lying either. The Ei army didn’t seem to be up to much. Something was very wrong either on the central plains or in the capital.

“Karin, come on. You have to greet our brother as well,” Yuushun prompted.

My younger sister poked her head out from behind my brother. She looked adorable in her pale-green nightgown, and although she had only just turned eight, I could see the makings of a beautiful woman in her pleasingly symmetrical facial features. She must have gotten her looks from our mother.

“W-Welcome home, hi,” she said in a voice so soft, it was nearly inaudible.

She was such a bright and cheerful child when father was alive. Before I could respond, Karin bowed her little head, then turned and scampered away. The female attendants standing in the corner of the hallway hurried after her.

Yuushun stared after her for a moment before sheepishly scratching his cheek. “She was so excited about your return, she didn’t sleep a wink last night. I apologize on her behalf.”

“Don’t worry about it. While I might have left my helmet and armor back in the base on the outskirts of the city, my military uniform is still caked in dirt, as you can see. My appearance must’ve frightened her.” I had already dirtied my hands with blood, and while I wasn’t ashamed of that fact, I would never dare to embrace my younger sister and sully her with my sins. Turning to my attendants, I announced, “I’m sure you all have plenty to say to me, but I’d like to spend the evening with my brother. In private. I hope you understand.”

Even back during my father’s days, the office in the Jo manor didn’t have all that much in the way of furniture, making it look clean and organized. My little brother spent most of his time in here, due to his specializing in paperwork, though now that I thought about it, he seemed far too mature for a boy of thirteen. I sat down in the old chair my father had always sat in and a white porcelain cup was placed in front of me, the amber-colored tea inside giving off a fragrant aroma.

“Here you go, Hiyou,” Yuushun said.

“Ah, thank you,” I replied, picking up the cup and taking a sip. There was no hint of bitterness in its flavor, and I would even have described it as “pure.” The last of the tension in my body melted away and I blurted out my honest opinion of the drink. “It’s delicious.”

“It’s a special blend I ordered for you from Kuragejima. Due to the special circumstances as of late, the merchants in the city don’t really carry it anymore. But well, let’s just say I have my *own* ways of sourcing it.” With the exception of martial arts, my younger brother always performed tasks better and in a smarter way than I ever could. In this moment though, he was smiling at me like a child who had just pulled off a prank.

I took yet another sip of my tea and pondered his words. We were maintaining a cordial relationship with the foreign tribes in

the south, but the central plains had been ravaged in the Gen invasion, leaving them in no fit state to trade. Unless the situation changed soon, our supply problems would only get worse. War was a death knell to business. I placed my cup on the side table next to me and focused on the sounds floating over from the streets outside. It seemed quieter than before, which was evidence that people had started holing themselves up inside their houses.

I rested a hand on my forehead and closed my eyes, then asked something that had been on my mind for a while. “How’s mother holding up?”

My mother, Jo Shion, had once been a bright, lively ray of sunshine, illuminating the rest of the family. But when my father died at Ranyou, she fell ill, and these days, she spent all day every day resting in bed.

Yuushun poured some tea into his own cup, then sat down in the chair opposite mine. “Better than she was six months ago.”

“I see.”

Silence fell over the room, with the sizzle of the candles on the walls the only sound daring to break it. Judging by Yuushun’s expression, my mother wasn’t in a good state.

I bowed my head to my brother, even though he was four years my junior. “Under normal circumstances, I—as interim head of the household—would be the one taking care of mother, Karin, and everyone else. It’s thanks to you taking charge of our internal affairs and maintaining our military logistics that we can focus on the fighting on the front lines. I sincerely apologize for all of the responsibilities I have loaded onto your shoulders. Please forgive your pathetic older brother.”

“Wha—?!” In contrast to his usual calm, friendly demeanor, Yuushun practically jumped to his feet and protested loudly. “You’re not *pathetic*. Oh, if only I wasn’t so powerless! Then I’d be able to help you with…” He turned to look out of the round window at the moon hanging in the sky.

“Yuushun, there’s something you want to say to me, isn’t there?” I prompted. “Don’t hold back. You and Karin are the only family I have left.”

“Hiyou.” My brother placed his cup down on the table with a gentle clink. The night breeze wafted between us without making a sound as he shifted his slender body in his seat, sitting up straighter and staring at me with his intelligent eyes. “I, Jo

Yuushun, have a concern I would like to bring to your attention, interim head of the Jo family."

He's so young, I reflected. If the country hadn't been at war and if father had still been alive, Yuushun might have become a prominent academic, one whose name would be known across the land. I was ashamed of the fact that I was responsible for the pained expression that was presently marring his face.

Ignoring the way I was looking at him, my brother laid a map out on the table and tapped an area near Rinkei. "We got word today from someone fleeing the capital that the vanguard of the Gen army had reached the great water fortress, the final defensive line protecting the capital. The enemy army's supreme commander is the White Wraith, Adai Dada, and he has with him anywhere between two hundred thousand and three hundred thousand soldiers."

I suppressed the fearful shudder that threatened to rack my body. This dying country, ruled by an utter buffoon, had lost the Phoenix Wing, the Tiger Fang, and the National Shield. The vanguard in question had crushed me and my army. There was no one left in Ei who could stand up to them, let alone the monster now calling himself the Black Wolf.

Yuushun slid a thin, pale finger across the map. "In response, the Ei army has called back all their soldiers from the various fronts. It seems they're preparing for a final showdown. No matter who emerges victorious, our family must soon make a choice."

The empire would fall. Ei—the nation my father had loved so dearly and had risked so much to protect—would be destroyed. I always knew this day would come. Or at least, I had suspected as much. But now that the reality of it was looming large on the horizon, I found it impossible to make a snap decision on the choice that was being presented to me. I was far too different from Lord Sekiei, who had been able to smile in front of his soldiers even while riding across the Ranyou battlefield.

With self-critical thoughts still swirling around my head, I drained the last of the tea from my cup, then asked, "If we continue to watch from the sidelines, then no matter who wins out of Ei and Gen, the victor will regard us as an enemy and crush us once they have recovered their strength. Is that what you're worried about?"

"It is," Yuushun confirmed, looking down and clenching his

fist. “The southern regions are abundant in resources, and thanks to the people’s adoration of our parents, the people haven’t rebelled against us despite having heavy military taxes imposed upon them. In contrast, the central plains are in uproar as the governments there try to replenish their coffers after the fall of Keiyou and after Gen launched its grand invasion. If the Seitou invasion hadn’t happened and our lands had remained peaceful until Karin became of age, we *might* have attained enough power to keep hold of our independence, but as it stands, the Jo family can’t…”

“Yes, you’re right,” I said to fill the silence left behind by him trailing off.

We had truly done our best, and as a result of our efforts, our homeland was still at peace despite everything. I was sure my father in the afterlife would be praising us for all of the work we had put in over the past six months, although it was true to say that part of our success had been down to luck in that the south was considered a rural region. The Seitou invasion had dealt an unbelievable blow to our forces and the Jo army was not the mighty outfit it once was. If Gen’s powerful army chose this moment to attack us, then…

Yuushun’s eyes met mine. “We need to make a decision now. Do we forget past grudges and ally ourselves with Ei? Or do we side with Gen?”

In the past, I would have jumped to my feet in a rage at this line of questioning, declaring that neither path was viable, but I was now the interim head of the Jo family, which changed the equation significantly. I couldn’t just bury my hatred of the grand chancellor, yet at the same time, I had a duty to protect everyone in the southern regions. I leaned back in my chair and buried my face in my hands.

“Hiyou?” Yuushun said.

It took me a moment to summon the strength to reply. “I’m a little tired right now. Let’s continue this tomorrow. I still have to inform mother of my return.”

“I understand.” I heard Yuushun stand up and walk away, then heard the door at the end of the room open. Even though my eyes were still closed, I sensed that he had stopped at the threshold. “No matter which option you pick, I will support you in your decision. Good night.” Then, he left the room, the sound of his footsteps receding into the night.

I slowly removed my hands from my face and heaved a sigh. On opening my eyes, I reached up to the ceiling. Without Yuushun here, the room suddenly felt very cold, but I remained there, and it ended up being the only witness to my subsequent monologue. “Save Ei or surrender to Gen, hm? Curse you, Yuushun. You always know how to strike where it hurts. So he thinks I don’t have the strength to maintain the independence of the southern regions, huh? Ha ha. He’d make a far better patriarch than I.”

Yuushun was, of course, right. No matter how much my heart wanted to reject the truth, the Jo family didn’t have the luxury of choosing. Even if I did decide to prioritize my anger and launch an attack on the second-rate soldiers and bandits threatening our borders, it wouldn’t change a thing. If the young strategist of the Chou family (*I believe her name is Ruri?*) were here, she might have been able to come up with a plan, but unfortunately, she wasn’t. No longer finding myself able to remain seated, I stood up and strode towards the inner courtyard. When I got there, I stared at the dim candlelight in one of the stone pagodas, then all of a sudden, I felt someone’s eyes on me.

My hand moved to my sword and in a cold voice, I called out, “Who goes there?”

“P-Please wait a moment, Lord Jo Hiyou! I-I am no enemy of yours!” The person who subsequently rushed out from the shadow of the stone pagoda and bowed his head to me was dressed in a grubby cloak and had a fox mask covering his face. I sensed no malice from him, but I refused to drop my guard. Seeing the way I was still glaring at him, the man took a piece of paper out of his pocket. “I am a messenger in the employ of Master Denso and I bear news from Rinkei. Please take it.”

“You are a messenger of Sir Denso’s?” Ever since he had helped me to escape Rinkei, I had tried several times to reach out to him, but to no avail. Since he was such a smart man, I figured he had fled the capital himself and was amassing his own army. I took the paper from the man and quickly read it. “Th-This is…” I gasped. *I-Impossible! I can’t believe this.* I carefully folded the letter again and looked at the masked man kneeling before me. “Messenger, I need to be absolutely sure. Is he serious? The capital’s in a chaotic state, but I can’t believe…” I paused. “No, I simply can’t believe that something like this could have happened.”

“Master Denso is deadly serious. He truly wishes to save our doomed homeland. If he didn’t, why would he stay behind in that corrupt capital and work with the marshal of the Imperial Guard?” the man said in response to my suspicions, spitting out the last part in clear disgust.

Ou Hokujaku, the marshal of the Imperial Guard, and Rin Chuudou, the deceased lieutenant chancellor, had been the ones who had pushed for a Seitou invasion in the first place. They were responsible for my father’s death. And Sir Denso was allying himself with one of them? I rested my hand on the hilt of my sword and gritted my teeth. *Homeland? Homeland, you say?!*

I’d killed the detestable grand chancellor with my own two hands. According to the rumors I’d heard, terrified of the White Wraith and the encroaching Gen army, the useless emperor was spending his days in the arms of his favorite concubine. I had no idea where Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei were, and there were only a handful of officers left who could defend Ei. *In that case, Sir Denso and I could use any tactic at our disposal to save the country! Yet…*

A cold wind blew through the courtyard. I closed my eyes. “I owe Sir Denso a great debt. He saved my life. If I could, I would repay him for that this very moment.”

My mind was already halfway to a decision. The problem I had was that mother and Yuushun would never approve of it. I couldn’t afford to split my family in two at this moment in time. Or perhaps, given that the situation had come to this, I needed to make a move with haste, even if it was one they didn’t agree with.

Opening my eyes again, I smirked at the messenger. “However, the Jo family lacks the great power that Sir Denso believes we possess. If I must excise the sickness weakening the Ei Empire in accordance with what is written here…” I took a deep breath. *Yes, it all falls on this decision.* “…I may have to gamble not only my life, but the very existence of the Jo family and the southern regions as well.”

I had steeled my will, yet I shuddered all the same. I already knew I could never be like my father. Like the Phoenix Wing. But if Lord Sekiei were in my shoes, as the wielder of the legendary Heavenly Swords, he would surely have come to the same decision.

Saluting by slamming my fist against my chest, I declared to

the masked man, “Messenger, I’d like you to wait two days…” I paused and corrected myself. “No, I’d like you to wait until tomorrow night. As interim head of the Jo family, I promise I will give you my decision before then.”

***

After leaving Hiyou’s room, I—Jo Yuushun—made my way to the very depths of the manor, where there was a room that boasted the toughest security in the entire house. I could feel a weight on my chest as I gently rapped my fingers against the door.

“It’s unlocked,” came the soft voice of a woman from beyond it.

I slowly pushed the door open and padded into the room. A young woman—Lord Shuuhou’s wife, Lady Shion—was sitting up in bed with a smile adorning her pale, sickly face. Her short hair had lost its luster, and her hands that were poking out from the sleeves of her nightgown were practically skin and bones. Her present condition was frankly alarming.

“Yuushun, thank you for all your hard work,” she said.

“Please, there’s no need for that. This is my job,” I replied with a shake of the head.

I approached her bed. My parents had passed when I was still very young, but Lady Shion took me in and raised me as her own. She had been such a vibrant woman—a ray of sunshine illuminating the whole Jo family—but that all changed when Lord Shuuhou died in that ridiculous Seitou invasion, followed by my brother’s imprisonment after being summoned to the capital. And as if that weren’t enough, the unbelievable news that *he’d* been the person who had assassinated the grand chancellor reached our ears soon after.

The stress of it all had simply been too much for her, and she’d been sick ever since. And whenever it looked like she might be getting better, it was always one step forwards, two steps back. Even in this moment here by her bedside, I could tell this was one of her bad days. I glanced over to the side of the room and saw Karin asleep on a nearby bench beside a beautiful woman with long black hair and a cloak wrapped around her body. I found it surprising that shy little Karin could sleep so soundly next to a stranger, but I reasoned she must have been an

important guest of mother's. I gave a nod of acknowledgment to the beautiful woman, then settled down in the bedside chair.

Mother treated me to a small smile. Her cheeks were sunken from malnutrition. "Let me cut to the chase: How was Hiyou? Please give me your honest thoughts on him."

"Hiyou is..." I trailed off, my thoughts whirling around my head. Could I really tell my sickly mother the cruel truth? Could I really put it to her that if we continued to leave Jo Hiyou in charge of the army, he would drive both the Jo family and the southern regions to ruin? Could she really handle that? I picked up a bamboo bottle from the bedside table and poured water into a cup with a floral design, my hand shaking all the while. It took some effort to muster a reply. "My brother is having trouble making up his mind and it pains him greatly. I don't know if he can let go of his grudge against Ei."

The wind gusted in from the open window, causing the candle flames lining the walls to flicker. I handed the cup to my mother and looked up at the beautiful moon that was visible from where I was sitting. *Ah, how could things have come to this?*

My clumsy attempt at sparing my wise mother clearly hadn't worked, for the way she looked down with a sorrowful expression on her face suggested she had seen through to the truth hidden in my words. "As I'm sure you know, Hiyou was a kind, gentle child. He has witnessed so many senseless deaths, including that of Lord Shuuhou at Seitou. After that, he was accused of a crime he didn't commit in the capital, and to top it off, someone then tricked him into murdering the grand chancellor. It is little wonder that all of those traumatic experiences he has gone through have left deep wounds in his heart. Yet he still tries his hardest as the eldest son of the Jo family to protect everyone here. I believe that at his core, he is still the same boy I raised."

"I agree with you," I assured her.

I had no talent for combat, yet my brother had put his faith in me. He was *still* putting his faith in me. I had never set foot on a battlefield before, so I had no real idea how nightmarish war could be, other than witnessing how it had transformed my brother from the kind young man he had once been to what he was now. I couldn't even begin to imagine the sort of insane torture he must have endured while imprisoned in the capital. *Still, assassinating the grand chancellor? The effect that could have*

on the Jo family... I took a sip of my tea, while my emotions and logic waged war against each other in my head.

My mother's eyes caught the light and seemed to glow. "The Jo family was one of Ei's pillars, along with the Chou and U families. Yet a member of one of those houses is responsible for assassinating the grand chancellor. No matter the motive behind it, it is absolutely unforgivable."

Her words stabbed at my heart. My mother had evidently already made up her mind. If necessary, she was willing to remove Jo Hiyou by her own hand.

Lady Jo Shion sighed and closed her eyes, pressing the hair ornament father had given to her in their younger days against her chest. "If Lord Shuuhou were alive today, you and Hiyou could've worked together to buy some time in the southern regions until things had calmed down a little around us. The National Shield, Lord Chou Tairan; the Tiger Fang, Lord U Jouko; and the grand chancellor would have aided us in the endeavor as well."

If only that were the reality! My mother must have seen that I was about to burst into tears because she reached out and placed a hand on my head. It was the same thing she had done the night my birth parents died.

"But we..." She faltered. "We don't have anyone anymore. In the worst-case scenario, I will be the one who brings an end to the Jo family. If that does happen, take care of Karin for me, Yuushun."

"M-Mother," I hiccuped, no longer able to fight back the sobs as tears welled in my eyes, clouding my vision. I knew I was acting like a pathetic little child at that moment, but mother continued to pat my head.

"We must discuss things with Lady Ou Meirin at once," she stated firmly. "I trust you will help us to get in contact with her, Miss Shizuka."

"Of course," the beautiful black-haired woman on the bench said.

I wiped the tears from my eyes and I looked over at the woman named Shizuka. *Ou Meirin? Isn't she related to Ou Jin, one of the most celebrated up-and-coming merchants in Ei? His name has reached even the southern regions.*

Shizuka gave a fond look to Karin, who was using her lap as a pillow, then turned her gaze towards us. There was no hint of

doubt in her eyes. “Please do not fret. Lord Sekiei has described my mistress, Ou Meirin, as a prodigy in the past. She will surely save both your family and Lord Jo Hiyou, so please stay here and await the good news. You have placed your trust in the right person.”

Chapter One

I—Sekiei, the Chou family's adopted child—drew the black sword from my belt and slashed through the first training target in front of me, the blade making short work of the straw. Under the beautiful blue sky, I smiled as I sliced my way through the rest of the row of targets.

About a month had passed since the Gen army had launched a surprise attack on Butoku, a major city in the U-family-controlled western regions. The person leading the attack was Orid Dada, a member of the Gen royal family and a famous general in his own right, and the battle that took place on Ten Knights Bridge became legendary. Although we successfully managed to repel their troops, I injured my left arm, and from then until this moment here in the training grounds, my overprotective childhood friend had forbidden me from doing any form of exercise whatsoever. Thankfully, the lack of practice seemingly hadn't affected my skills too much, and I supposed I could put that down to my ability to heal fast, which was something of a special technique in itself.

I spun around and swiped at the final straw target with my sword, then muttered, "Well, that's that," before returning my beloved Black Star to its sheath. As if taking the clink of the hilt hitting the scabbard as some sort of cue, the dozens of straw targets around me all fell to the ground in unison.

The U and Chou soldiers who were also in the training grounds near the manor raised a cheer and pounded their armor and weapons with their fists in appreciation of what they had just witnessed. Most were veterans, but I spotted some young volunteers among them.

Was it really that *impressive? Oh well. I'm glad if it has helped to improve morale, even if only by a small amount.* We had managed to defeat Orid and score a clear victory against Gen, but in comparison to their powerful army, our allies were simply too weak. While our strategist—a self-professed ascendant—had wisdom rivaling the gods, if the difference between our manpower and morale was too great, we wouldn't be able to hold out until our final showdown with Gen.

“Lord Sekiei, that was amazing!” exclaimed Teiha, the young vice-commander of the Chou army, dragging me from my thoughts.

“That was an insane display of skill. You really have earned the title of Kouei of the Modern Ages,” added Shigou, the former bandit. He had a black cloth tied around his forehead and a battle-axe slung to his back.

The pair strolled up to me, Teiha—who’d accumulated quite a bit of experience by this point due to the number of battles he’d managed to survive—looking as serious as ever, while Shigou simply grinned at me. *D-Damn him! He called me that on purpose because he* knows *I hate that damn nickname!*

It was hard to believe from his appearance and his manner (and pretty much everything else I knew about him) that Shigou was the son of General Gan Retsurai, one of the last remaining pillars still supporting the declining Ei Empire. General Gan’s present job was protecting the great water fortress that was protecting Ei.

I settled myself down in a chair and spread my arms wide. “What’s up with that ridiculously grandiose title, anyway? My dream is to become a plain ol’ civil official.”

Still, it was true that my Black Star was one of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars, the legendary weapons that renowned Tou Empire general, Kou Eihou, had wielded about a thousand years ago, the Tou Empire famous for being the first empire in history to unify the lands under the heavens. In fact, I even possessed Kou Eihou’s memories, foggy as they were. *But even so! All I’ve been doing lately is fighting on the front lines, even though my dream is only a humble one. How can anyone call an aspiring civil official “the Kouei of the Modern Ages”?!*

I was glad that my childhood friend, Hakurei, and the U princess, Oto, were presently out shopping in the city, and that my strategist, Ruri, was in the manor debating about our next course of action, because if they’d heard me being called by that nickname, they would have laughed themselves to bits. I picked up a pitcher of water and poured some into a cup on the round table.

“Hey, Teiha…” Shigou said with a sigh, looking disappointed.

“Get used to it,” Teiha said. “Think of it as Lord Sekiei’s chronic illness. If even Lady Hakurei and our master strategist haven’t been able to cure him of his delusions, no one can.”

“Guess there’s nothing we can do about it then,” Shigou concluded.

“You guys *do* know I can hear you, right?” I said crossly.

“Well, we’re speaking the truth, aren’t we?” they replied in unison.

I glared at them and growled, but they didn’t seem the least bit intimidated. Shigou not feeling threatened by me was one thing, but Teiha used to panic the second I seemed displeased at all. Where had that cute little greenhorn gone? The way he now dealt with me was starting to remind me of how the deceased Raigen used to. Must run in the family.

“They’re right, Lord Sekiei!” called out one of the soldiers who had been listening in, prompting the rest of them to start chiming in with their own lighthearted jabs.

“Is he really serious about becoming a civil official?”

“It’s unbelievable, ain’t it? But that genuinely is his life goal.”

“He’s been going on about it ever since we were in Keiyou.”

“Is he mistaking the role of ‘civil official’ for that of ‘great general’?”

The soldiers offering their opinions ranged from familiar veterans, to new recruits from the western regions, to U officers who had survived the hellish Seitou invasion. Also mingling among them were a number of adolescent soldiers polishing fire lances, which were sticks with bronze cylinders attached to their tips.

I’d noticed it earlier, but everyone seemed bright and cheery, even though the Gen emperor, Adai Dada—also known as the White Wraith—was still charging towards Rinkei at that very moment with the intent of conquering Ei and taking over the continent. Furthermore, he had in his employ a man whose strength was so monstrous, he had fought my father—Chou Tairan, the National Shield and guardian of Ei—to a standstill. Yet no one seemed to be in despair about the odds being stacked against us! I would never have said it to their faces, but I was grateful to them for that, and I truly wanted to live up to their expectations.

“Yeah, yeah, yuk it up,” I retorted. “Just know that you won’t find *anyone* who desires peace more than me!” And that was my honest opinion, even if I did disguise it with a dramatic shrug that shook the black sleeves of my shirt. I looked up into the sky above and noted how different the view seemed to be from the

one I was more accustomed to in my homeland of Keiyou.

Clearly oblivious to my feelings on the matter, Shigou crossed his arms and continued to tease me. “Ha! That doesn’t sound like something a hero who’d killed so many Gen soldiers would say.”

“What’s that, Shigou? Did you just say *you* wanted to be the hero of this army? Great! I’ll go tell our strategist,” I replied, tearing my eyes away from the sky and raising my cup to toast him. Manufacturing a hero would be child’s play for my strategist. She could do anything she set her mind to, save for winning at double six. According to her, the god of dice had forsaken her.

Although he’d only met her recently, Shigou already had a good understanding of Ruri’s capabilities. “Uh, that’s, um, well…” he stammered, his face pinched, then he turned in the direction of the soldiers who were in the middle of doing some training and yelled, “Bah! H-Hey, you clumsy oafs! What do you call that pathetic footwork?! I’ll have to *personally* come and show you how it’s done!” He grabbed his battle-axe that was strapped to his back and stomped over to them.

Talk about a quick exit. Even though Shigou was a bandit when we first met, he had actually been an Ei soldier once, before turning to a life of skullduggery. Apparently, his superiors at the time had harbored high hopes for his future. It was a given that his old bandit subordinates respected him, and the new recruits did too. I’d made him a frontline commander and really counted on him and his skills.

“Teiha, the offer’s open to you too,” I said as I took a sip of the warm water in front of me.

“Ever since participating in my first battle, I’ve been of the opinion that people should qualify for the positions they hold,” he replied calmly.

“Oh, yeah? Well, that’s too bad,” I replied with a wink.

Soldiers kept their eyes on their commanders at all times, and even the simplest word or action wasn’t missed. It had been like that a thousand years ago too. Teiha was well on his way to becoming an exemplary commander now that he had learned this.

In our next battle, I might even be able to entrust him with one of the army’s flanks, I mused, then placed my cup down and rested an elbow on the table. “Oh, that reminds me. Don’t tell Hakurei that I’ve been training. She’s super overprotective for someone

who loves to nag me about morning practice and horse rides."

"Lord Sekiei, I regret to inform you..."

"Hmm?"

Teiha politely gestured to a point somewhere behind me and a horrible sense of foreboding welled up inside my chest.

"Sekiei?"

The voice was so cold, it sent a shiver down my spine. *I-I don't want to turn around. But if I don't turn around now, I'll pay for it later!* I chugged the last of the water in my cup as a way of mustering up some courage, while Teiha and the other soldiers grinned at me. Cursing them all in my head, I took a deep breath, then turned around.

A little yelp escaped my throat when I laid eyes on the beautiful girl behind me, who had blue eyes and a scarlet ribbon tying up her unique silver hair. It was my childhood friend, Chou Hakurei. The belt around her white-and-blue ethnic garb held White Star, the matching sword to my Black Star. In her hand, she was holding a cloth bag, and she was staring at me with her big blue eyes. I looked away, unable to withstand the pressure of her attention. It was only then that I noticed the girl with a piece of red cloth decorating her short, dark brown hair standing behind Hakurei. This was none other than the princess of the U family, Oto, and she was holding a shovel in her hand, her cheeks puffed out in a dissatisfied pout.



Uh-oh. I'm in trouble. After all, Hakurei and the other girls had given me strict orders to avoid training. I gave Teiha a beseeching look, but he ignored my silent pleas for assistance and said brightly, "Well then, I believe I should start training as well," before turning and walking away. *Heartless bastard!*

Before I could say anything in response, the girls walked up to the table and sat down, placing their cloth bags on it. They didn't say a word, but under the silent pressure being exerted by the girls—who had been instrumental in defeating the great Orid Dada—I could feel sweat beading on my brow regardless.

"W-Welcome back," I said. "So, um, Hakurei and Oto..." I hesitated. "I thought the two of you were planning to eat lunch in the city."

"We had a bad feeling and came back," Hakurei replied.

"And it seems we were right to," Oto added.

They refused to even entertain my attempts at distracting them from their anger. Some distance away, Teiha and Shigou were laughing their asses off, and I vowed to treat them both to a knuckle sandwich in the near future.

I held out my cup and stammered an excuse. "I-I wasn't pushing myself or anything. My left arm doesn't even hurt now."

"How do you expect me to believe a liar like yourself?" Hakurei asked.

"Lord Sekiei, I truly cannot defend you this time," Oto sighed.

I gulped, unable to say anything in response to the reproachful looks of the princesses of the Chou and U families—two of the most illustrious houses in the Ei Empire. If only Ruri had been here, she could have come up with a way for me to wriggle out of trouble. Actually, scratch that. Ruri would definitely have sided with Hakurei and Oto without any hesitation. She'd been on a losing streak in double six lately and tended to take her frustrations out on me.

Sensing that my mind was on something else instead of facing reality, Hakurei's eyes narrowed. "You're unbelievable! Why! Must! You! Always! *Always*! Run! Around! When! I'm! Not! Present?!" she griped, poking my cheek after every word. "If you *insist* on getting in some exercise, then tell me and do it under my supervision!"

"Sure, but when you're around, training always takes *forever*." The second the words left my mouth, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Chou Hakurei clasped her hands together

and treated me to a blindingly beautiful smile.

"Sekiei?" she said sweetly.

I slowly looked away from her and met Oto's gaze. We had fought and survived many battles together. Surely she wouldn't abandon me?

Oto drained the last of the water from her cup and adjusted her grip on her bag, before giving me a sharp salute. "I should get in some training as well! ♪"

"M-Miss Oto?!" But before I could stop her, my last ray of hope turned around and walked off. *There's nowhere to run now*, I thought grimly. Hakurei didn't say anything as she poured some more water into my cup, and although I recognized the fury burning in her blue eyes, I could tell she was sulking more than she was angry. I picked a few grains of sand out of her silver hair and bowed my head. "I'm sorry! But don't worry. I wasn't lying when I said my left arm doesn't hurt now. How was the city?"

Hakurei's lips pursed, and she looked annoyed. She rested her hand on my left arm and murmured, "Dummy. I'll get you to make up for lost time." Then, she took some zongzi—sticky rice wrapped in a bamboo leaf—out of her bag and tossed it to me. "The city was the same as always. Thanks to goods coming in from farther out west, it didn't feel like people were lacking for anything."

"That's great."

As I unfolded the leaf, a tantalizing aroma rose from inside. The fillings in the rice were river fish, small shrimp, that kind of thing, and wine had been used to enhance the flavors. Hakurei was staring at me so I obeyed her silent request and unwrapped the second zongzi, then handed it to her. *The people aren't lacking for anything, huh?* The U family had maintained cordial relations with the smaller tribes out near the borders for years, and it appeared the hard work they had put in was paying off when they most needed it to. Unless the situation changed, the people here could get by on the traded resources.

"But that's only if things remain the same! We have to make our move now, while we still can!" is what Ruri might have said if she had been here. That was precisely why I was letting her handle U Hakubun, the cautious man currently in charge of the U family.

As Hakurei chomped away at her zongzi, she peered over at the soldiers who were training, a small smile appearing on her

face. “Shigou’s taking this job more seriously than I thought he would. I was a little worried when you and Miss Ruri placed him under Oto’s command.”

“His appearance does him no favors, but more of the soldiers are learning how to use the fire lance, and by pairing them up with Shigou and his crew, who all specialize in close-range combat, we’ll be able to double the strength of our army,” I said. “If we do decide to go on the offensive, I plan to take him with us.”

The Chou and U families had been heavily weakened by the losses of their patriarchs and the majority of their experienced soldiers. That meant that those with talent would need to earn their keep, and that was precisely why the smarter heads in our armies—all of whom weren’t currently present at the training grounds—were debating how they should handle Ei’s princess, who had traveled all the way out to the countryside in the hopes of saving her declining empire.

The Heirloom Seal of the Realm—which Hi Gyoumei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire, had made for himself—was something we also needed to treat delicately. *If* we even had it. There was a very real possibility that the Heirloom Seal slumbered in the black box we had discovered in the abandoned temple near Youkaku, but the problem was the princess possessed the key to the box, and she wanted nothing more than for us to send reinforcements to the capital. I doubted the debate over it would end anytime soon, especially as we hadn’t even confirmed if the Heirloom Seal was actually in the box yet.

I licked a grain of rice off my finger. “We’ve managed to reorganize the troops and gather more resources over the past month.”

“We finished our map of the lands north of Butoku as well,” Hakurei added. “Miss Ruri’s idea to announce ourselves as the ones who defeated Orid Dada worked, and we now have more volunteers than ever. The enemy army is keeping an eye on Youkaku, but they haven’t…” Hakurei trailed off then reached out towards me. “Sekiei.”

“Hmm?”

She casually plucked a grain of rice from the corner of my lips and transferred it to her own mouth. “You had food on your face.”

“O-Oh…” Feeling embarrassed, I looked away and stared over

at the training grounds. Oto was dishing out zongzi to the soldiers, and every time she handed one over, they cheered. Her charisma made her well suited to commanding troops on the front line.

Her long silver hair fluttering in the breeze, Hakurei folded up her bamboo leaf. “Now that your wounds have healed, it’s time we made our move.”

The number of skilled, experienced, and strong officers under the White Wraith’s command rivaled the number of stars in the sky. By comparison, we not only lacked soldiers who could lead their own units, we also lacked warriors who could go toe-to-toe with the Gen soldiers. To be honest, that placed a lot of pressure on my shoulders. But we couldn’t just run away from the conflict. Yui the black cat had sidled up to us when I wasn’t looking and I picked up the little furball.

“According to the rumors among the soldiers, Rinkei still stands,” I said. “If we can’t improve the situation before it falls, it’s over for us. The problem is—” But before I could finish my thought, a woman with chestnut brown hair interrupted me.

“Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, may I have a moment? I apologize for disturbing you in the middle of your conversation.” It was Asaka, Hakurei’s attendant, who had left Keiyou and come all the way out here for us.

“Asaka?” I said.

“Is something the matter?” Hakurei prompted.

Asaka clutched the hem of her dress and gave a slight bow. “I bear a message from Lady Ruri: ‘Sorry for interrupting your date, but there’s no end in sight for our discussion. Could you two and Oto come and offer your opinions?’ That’s what she said.”

Hakurei and I blinked. The ascendant working as our strategist was relentless when it came to teasing us, even when she was busy with something else. *What does she mean by “date,” anyway?*

I got to my feet and handed Yui to Asaka with a sigh. “Just who does that little prodigy take us for? Hakurei, I know you don’t have all that many female friends, but you should tell her off if she’s starting to get on your nerves.”

Hakurei hurriedly packed everything she had taken out back into her bag, then walked over and stood next to me. “Well, *unlike* a certain Kouei of the Modern Ages I know, Miss Ruri is adorable, so I don’t mind at all.”

“Chou Hakurei is so mean!”

“Not as mean as Chou Sekiei.”

Whatever I say, she’s always ready with a comeback. This is why arguing with a childhood friend is so difficult. I looked at Asaka in a wordless plea for some backup, but all she offered in response was a muffled giggle.

“I shall go inform Lady Oto of Lady Ruri’s request,” she said before setting off with Yui in her arms.

I never have any allies, I lamented. Picking up Hakurei’s cloth bag, I made a suggestion to Hakurei. “Let’s take her some zongzi. I’m sure she’s starving after spending all that time dealing with that uptight U heir.”

“Yes, good idea.”

It was because the discussion was being conducted by a group of intellectuals that it never seemed to get any closer to ending. With my eyes on Oto, who was having a nice, cheerful chat with Asaka, I said, “We should offer some to that brave, earnest princess too. I somewhat doubt she’s been keeping up with their conversation.”

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Before we had even reached the innermost room of the U manor, we could hear the raised voices that typified the fierce discussion going on inside.

“Weren’t you *listening* to me? I already explained that trying to maintain the status quo with the western regions in the current political situation is the wrong move. We *need* to be aggressive or risk destruction. It’s not as if we’ll be sending soldiers into the capital itself. We can win this!” My strategist, Ruri—a beautiful young girl with blonde hair tied up with a ribbon—slammed her small hand down on the table several times, an intense look in the eye not hidden by her bangs. The repeated violent movements not only shook her own blue hat and sleeves but also made the intricately detailed black box on the table jump up and down.

“And how many times must I explain it to *you*? We *can’t*!” Oto’s half brother U Hakubun—a man with dark hair and eyes, who was dressed in formal robes—replied irritably. “It’s *physically* impossible to send our soldiers out. There are numerous cliffs to the south, and not only are the untamed mountains to the north

full of tigers, we don't even have a map to guide us through them. If we try to force our way through like Orid Dada did, our army will be destroyed before we even reach the battle. In my humble opinion, we should focus on defending Youkaku, which is the only access point to the central plains, and see how the situation plays out between Gen and Ei. Then, we should reach out to the Jo family in the southern regions."

Sitting in between Ruri and Hakubun was the princess imperial, Kou Miu, who had light-brown hair and was dressed all in golden yellow, a color reserved for members of the imperial family. In her hand, she clutched a small pouch that was dangling from her neck. This was her protective charm, and it held the key to the black box. The expression on her face suggested she was seconds away from bursting into tears, and beside her, her guard and attendant, Mei, was pale and silent.

Even if they had wanted to butt in to beg Ruri and Hakubun to assist Rinkei in its hour of need, they didn't have the courage to interrupt the ongoing argument. The only person in the room who seemed remotely calm was the interim head of the U family, U Koufuu. She was sitting on a bed off to one side of the room and clipping flower stems. *Granny, you really should be the one putting a stop to this.*

Ruri didn't pay the princess or her attendant any attention as she was too busy glaring at Hakubun. "It'll all be *far* too late if you do that! Do you plan to just sit down and wait for death?!"

"I never said that!"

The atmosphere in the room was growing frostier and frostier the longer their argument went on.

"Sekiei," Hakurei whispered to me at the same moment that Oto hissed, "Lord Sekiei," in my ear. They were both standing behind me and tugging at my sleeves.

You want me *to get involved in this?* I heaved a sigh and shoved my hand into the cloth bag I'd brought with me. "Oh, wow. It's sure getting heated in here, huh? Here you go." Ruri and Hakubun looked shocked by my sudden entrance, but I ignored their cold gazes and tossed them some zongzi as I strode farther into the room. "They're gifts from Hakurei and Oto. Take a break and eat some."

It must have just occurred to them how emotional they had gotten during their debate because they sheepishly sat down in nearby chairs without saying a word. Kou Miu's relief was

palpable as she nodded at me, and I made a gesture with my hand to indicate it was no big deal.

Ruri had already unfolded her bamboo leaf and started digging into her zongzi when she suddenly looked up at me again. “Hey, where’s the tea?”

“Man, you’re one greedy little strategist, aren’t you?”

“Please leave the tea to me,” Hakurei said.

“I’ll help you!” Oto offered.

Hakurei’s and Oto’s astuteness wasn’t just a benefit on the battlefield; it helped when dealing with Ruri too. The pair started brewing the tea, and for a second, the only sound in the room was the crackling of the charcoal in the brazier the teapot was sitting on.

I looked over at U Koufuu, who was still cutting flowers. “Granny, you should’ve stepped in,” I complained. “The princess looked like she was about to pass out.”

“I’m leaving the more difficult tasks to you youngsters. My only job is to take responsibility,” came her response. “Oh, and leave that zongzi there. I’ll eat it later.”

“Fine, fine.” As the one in charge of the U family, she wasn’t exactly wrong, though of course, it meant the rest of us were saddled with an even heavier burden. I took a seat on Ruri’s left and tossed two zongzi Kou Miu’s way. “Here.”

The princess plucked them out of the air and blinked. “U-Um…” Behind her, her attendant grimaced like she’d just bitten into something bitter.

“You two should eat some too. It’s difficult to think clearly when your body’s craving food. Oto, Hakurei, be sure to make enough tea for them too. And don’t worry. We’re not going to poison it.”

“Y-Yes, of course. Thank you very much,” the princess said in a much softer voice than normal, then her pale fingers got to work on unwrapping the bamboo leaf.

In the meantime, Oto and Hakurei had finished pouring out the tea and were swiftly setting cups down in front of everyone. I breathed in the aroma to settle my nerves, then thanked the pair. With their tea duties performed, Hakurei took a seat next to me, while Oto chose to sit next to Ruri.

Once Hakubun and Kou Miu had finished eating their zongzi, I rested an elbow on the table and got down to business. “All right, then—”

“E-Excuse me!” Kou Miu interrupted, her voice echoing around the enclosed space and drawing everyone’s attention onto her. The sudden scrutiny made her hesitate, but even so, she stood up on trembling legs and pressed the protective charm to her chest. “I…” she started. “I thought you were going to save Rinkei.”

The reason the princess had even come all the way out to the western edge of the empire was to beg for reinforcements in saving Ei, which was growing smaller and weaker by the day due to the advance of Gen’s powerful army. Before Orid and the Seitou army attacked, she had even offered to give us the key to the Heirloom Seal, even though it was a memento from her deceased mother. She must have been antsy this past month as she waited for us to resume our discussion over whether or not to send forces to Rinkei, and yet here it was finally happening, and neither Ruri nor Hakubun had even mentioned the prospect of reinforcements. I couldn’t blame her for being nervous. And yet…

Hakurei, Ruri, Oto, and I glanced at one another, then we all shook our heads as one. “We can’t,” Hakurei, Ruri, and I said in unison.

“I’m sorry,” Oto added.

Even Hakubun, who was loyal to his country and sympathetic to Kou Miu, remained silent.

Kou Miu’s face, beautiful despite her youth, paled as she leaned forwards, placing both hands on the table. “B-But why?! The enemies attacking Youkaku and Butoku have already retreated! If you don’t offer us aid, it won’t be long until Rinkei…” She trailed off, bit her lip, and looked down, her slim shoulders trembling.

I couldn’t place my trust in the Ei emperor. Not after he executed father on the basis of faulty logic. But I could tell this girl in front of me—who looked like she was about to burst into tears at any second—was a good person. She sincerely wanted to save her homeland and its capital, which only made things more difficult for me.

Sighing, I crossed my legs and, making sure to maintain a brusque tone of voice, I said, “Listen, Your Highness. As you know, Gen’s main forces are approaching Rinkei as we speak. Now, it’s true that it wouldn’t be *impossible* for the U and Chou armies to attack them from behind…”

“Th-Then—” she began, her beautiful eyes sparkling with hope, but I held up my hand to stop her.

“But that’s pretty much the best you can say about it. For example, how do you propose we even get to Rinkei? The White Wraith has sent forces along the Grand Canal to secure it, and ships are no longer allowed to travel down it. Youkaku’s entrance is blocked by Seitou’s forces, and they number approximately a hundred thousand. By comparison, we only have about twenty thousand soldiers.”

“I…” She hesitated. “That’s…” She stopped talking.

The Grand Canal bisected the continent into a north half and a south half, and it was a vital trunk route for distributing goods to the different regions. Ei thrived on trade and commerce, so from the moment it lost control of and even access to the Grand Canal, its fate was as good as sealed.

Ruri glanced at Hakubun before offering more context. “That stubborn fool there has already mentioned it, but we simply don’t have enough officers or even rank-and-file soldiers. The enemies we are facing are the well-trained Gen army and the technologically advanced Seitou army. If we wish to score a military victory against them, then…” Ruri paused for a moment to wipe her fingers, and I had a bad feeling about what she was going to say next. I opened my mouth to interrupt her, but before I had the chance, she concluded her thought. “Then our only hope is Kouei of the Modern Ages over there. You and Hakurei are invincible together, aren’t you?”

I! Cannot! Believe! Her! were the words that hammered in my head. *Is this her way of getting back at me for beating her at double six last night?*

Beside me, Hakurei’s cheeks flushed light pink and she started playing with her bangs. “Well, *ye-es*, we are, I guess.”

Oto had covered her mouth with her hand, but I could tell she was smiling behind it.

These princesses… I sighed inwardly, then shot Ruri a dirty look. “I’m sure a *certain* blonde strategist I know is quite capable of leading us to victory as well. Even if she *is* the worst double-six player I’ve ever seen.”

“I-I’m not the worst player!” she protested. “I mean, just yesterday, I beat Oto.”

Ha! You consider that a victory? How sad. I shot Oto a meaningful look, then nodded at Ruri, whose flat chest was

puffed out. “Yup, you’re absolutely right. Uh-huh. If you say so,” I said.

“Wh-Why are you looking at me like that? What is it? W-Wait, don’t tell me…” Ruri paused in disbelief. “Oto, did you go *easy* on me?!”

“Well, I, um…”

Ruri shot Oto a betrayed look and the two of them started fighting, looking for all the world like two small animals batting at each other. Everyone’s mood had lightened a little at this display, so I brought us back on to the original topic.

“Incidentally, I’ll only be able to win if Ruri comes up with a plan. Plus, I’d need Hakurei, Teiha, and the others to bring their A game. Don’t go getting the wrong idea about our previous victory. There’s still an impossible gap between our manpower and weaponry and theirs.”

“H-How can that be?” Kou Miu asked, looking over at Hakubun as if begging him for support.

Hakubun was the one in charge of the U family’s internal affairs. His brow furrowed as he looked down at his hands. “It embarrasses me to admit it, but I don’t have any talent as a military officer. The U army has people who can lead units in open battle, but it has no one who can resolve the current stalemate we’re in. In truth, Chou Sekiei is the only one who can possibly lead our army to victory. If anyone else were to take command, they’d only be able to defend Youkaku at best.”

“Ruri, you have the floor,” I said.

“All right.” On hearing me say her name, Ruri reluctantly released Oto’s shirt, then reached over to the box on the table and tapped her finger against it. “The White Wraith can see through practically every trick in the book, and I’m sure he’s well aware of the threat Sekiei and Hakurei pose. Our only potential advantages are Princess Kou Miu, who is a nonentity in his eyes, and the Heirloom Seal of the Realm that may or may not be inside this box. That’s all.”

Kou Miu sucked in a breath, tightening her hold on the pouch that was dangling from her neck. She looked like she was going to be ill.

Ruri stood up and started walking around the room while she outlined her reasoning. “The princess of a dying empire, who has traveled all the way to a rural backwater in order to gather forces that will help to save her country.” She stopped and turned to

face us, holding up a finger as if she were giving a lecture. “No matter how astute the White Wraith is, I doubt he could see that one coming. Doubly so if we were to throw the Heirloom Seal in on top.”

The White Wraith might have been regarded as the Ouei of the Modern Ages, but he was still mortal. Or he should be, anyway. Of course, if he’d sneaked spies into the court, he would already know the princess imperial had volunteered to be the messenger.

Ruri pointed her outstretched finger at Kou Miu, much to Mei’s barely hidden ire. “We’ll be able to gather more forces if we appoint you as our figurehead, and the Heirloom Seal will strengthen your credibility. However, even with the extra soldiers that would give us, we still wouldn’t be able to save Rinkei. There are three main reasons for this.” She raised three fingers, causing the princess to stiffen, her gaze firmly fixed on Ruri’s hand. “Firstly, I’m sure the White Wraith is watching out for any attacks from the rear. In fact, I’m willing to bet he *wants* a final showdown.” She glanced at me after saying this.

Hey, don’t drag me *into this!* But left with no other choice, I spread my arms wide and said, “I’m sure neither my father, General Jo Shuuhou, nor General U Jouko would have thought twice about sending reinforcements to Rinkei, but we simply don’t have the manpower to win an open battle like that. And don’t forget that your brother is the reason we’re in such a sorry state in the first place.”

“I’m—” the princess began.

“Secondly,” Ruri said, emboldened to interrupt now that she had pawned the cruelest explanation off to me. She ignored the princess’s frown and walked over to me, before placing her hand on the back of her chair. Like a mischievous child, she started tipping it forwards and back as she continued in a cold voice. “I see no reason to trust the Ei army guarding the water fortress, nor can I trust the emperor who gives them their orders. Let’s say that by some miracle, the Chou and U armies make it to the outskirts of Rinkei, and even establish contact with the local general. I doubt your brother will appreciate our efforts. At worst, he’ll abandon us to the enemy, and let them pick us off one by one.”

“That’s impossible!” the princess imperial protested. “He would never—”

“U Hakubun, have there been any messengers from the capital in the past month?” Ruri asked, cutting off Kou Miu’s stammering.

“No. Not a single one.”

Kou Miu’s face grew even whiter, her gaze wavering with uncertainty, though the rest of the room seemed moved, save for the worried-looking Mei. It was hard to discern what the reason for this communications silence might be. Was the capital no longer able to spare even one messenger? Had a messenger been sent but taken captive? Had they lost hope in the princess? Or perhaps the idea of trying to contact us had simply never occurred to them in all that time? I found it difficult to bring myself to even care. I was never going to forget that it was the emperor who had killed my father, Chou Tairan, the National Shield. *Trust? In their dreams.*

“What a cruel twist of fate,” U Koufuu said, snipping a limb from a flowering tree branch. She was absolutely correct there. How many of the soldiers guarding the capital at present even had their hearts in it? The consequences of father’s unjust execution were far-reaching.

After listening in silence up to this point, Hakurei set down her cup and picked up the loose thread of the conversation. “Even I know what the third reason is. The majority of the soldiers in the western regions don’t truly wish to help Rinkei. Isn’t that right?”

“What?” Kou Miu gasped, staring at her with her mouth agape. She looked like she was seconds away from passing out. Seeing her like this was really hammering home that she had been living in a gilded cage up to this point. She had courage, sure, but she lacked the understanding on how grave the situation *really* was. In her mind, it was a given that soldiers would protect their country and its capital.

I could sympathize with her a little on that score. I was just about to rest my left elbow on the table when Hakurei hissed a warning at me, so I quickly switched to leaning on my right elbow. “Listen. The soldiers in the western regions right now are Chou and U soldiers who have survived countless battles. Plenty of them served my father and General Jouko for years until their deaths. Do you truly think they still have any sense of loyalty towards the imperial family?”

The naive princess remained silent, frozen like a statue.

Ruri sat down and inspected my left arm as she reached the conclusion of her explanation. “We’re already losing to them in terms of numbers, so if we lose the morale battle too, we’re as good as defeated. I can inspire hope in the soldiers all day long, but I don’t feel the need to mince my words with someone as difficult to use as you.”

My strategist was truly ruthless. We could have used the princess and the Heirloom Seal of the Realm as symbols to rally the soldiers around, but if she didn’t move with us or accompany us to the front lines, then she’d be better off sending appeals from Butoku. Another pressing matter was the way Oto was looking at Ruri with sparkles in her eyes, as though she was completely enraptured by how cool the strategist was. *I really need to head Oto off before this whole hero worshipping thing gets worse.*

In contrast to Oto, Kou Miu was trembling and clasping the hem of her robes. Mei’s hand had drawn closer to her dagger and it looked like she was seconds away from drawing it from its sheath.

Being a straightforward fellow with heaps of common sense, U Hakubun looked over at me as if to say, “Chou Sekiei, she can’t take much more of this. Do something.”

So you’re relying on me and not Hakurei? It’s not as if you don’t share our opinion on this. I scratched the back of my head and flapped my hand around in midair. “So to summarize, there’s really not much we can do. We could go with Ruri’s plan—”

“My plan is to send a small team of elite soldiers north of Butoku to the mountains teeming with tigers,” Ruri explained. “Once they have successfully navigated their way through them, they will attack Keiyou and sow confusion at Gen’s rear. Or we can go with Hakubun’s plan and keep as many of our enemies as possible at Youkaku. Unlike the Twin Ei’s of the past, we can’t save everyone. Kou Miu, the decision is in your hands. It’s time to test your resolve.”

“My resolve?” The princess’s eyes, already red-rimmed due to unshed tears, were filled with distress at the words Ruri and I were saying to her.

Ruri glanced at me, wordlessly asking to give the princess some time to think about it. *Sometimes, it’s hard to tell if Ruri’s cruel or just a big softie. Will Kou Miu notice what Ruri is implying by using the word “resolve”?*

I clapped my hands and looked over at the stormy-faced Mei. “Okay, let’s stop there for today. We can come to a decision tomorrow. Please take her back to her room.”

“I don’t need *you* telling me what to do! Come with me, Lady Miu.” Despite the intense anger apparent on Mei’s face, she held her princess’s hand gently as she led her out of the room.

Kou Miu still seemed lost in thought. I had doubts over whether or not she would be able to find an answer to this conundrum on her own. Throughout my interactions with her, I’d come to sympathize with the princess. She was still so young, and yet at some point, she had found herself saddled with such a difficult destiny.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Hakurei began as if nothing had happened. “Miss Ruri, want to hear something awful? Sekiei sneaked in some practice while Miss Oto and I were out. Isn’t he terrible?”

“Hakurei, I’m sure you know better than all of us just how terrible Sekiei is,” Ruri pointed out. “Didn’t you hear him insulting my double six— Ah, wait. I almost forgot. Did you go easy on me in last night’s game, Oto?”

“L-Lady Ruri! I, well, um…”

The girls began chattering among themselves as if the somber atmosphere from earlier had been nothing more than a dream.

I poured some more tea into my cup, then slipped over to Hakubun and Koufuu. “Have the southern regions sent us any news?” I asked in a low voice.

“Not yet,” Hakubun whispered back.

“It seems the rumors about the Jo heir going on a rampage in the south are true,” Koufuu sighed.

Jo Hiyou’s bright smile briefly flashed through my mind. *Just what the hell does that idiot think he’s doing?*

“Sekiei!” Hakurei and Ruri snapped.

Meanwhile, Oto was begging me to come save her with a plaintive-sounding “L-Lord Sekiei!”

“Okay, fine,” I said, sighing. There wasn’t even time to get mad. I smiled bitterly at them and drained the contents of my cup.

***

The moment I—Kou Miu—was back in my room, I collapsed onto a bench with Ruri's words still swirling around my head: "*Kou Miu, the decision is in your hands. It's time to test your resolve.*" I clutched at the protective charm dangling from my neck.

In order to save my country from impending doom, I had volunteered to be my brother's messenger and—with the aid of Ou Meirin—traveled to the western regions. I'd even promised myself I would offer them the key to the Heirloom Seal of the Realm, a key that had been passed down from generation to generation in the Ha clan, which my mother hailed from. Yet even after all *that*, they thought I lacked resolve? What else could they possibly have wanted from me? The answer eluded me, no matter how many times I turned the question over in my head. *What should I do?*

"Lady Miu, please do not take their disrespect to heart. I shall prepare some nice, warm tea for you," Mei told me in a kind voice when she saw how despondent I looked. Before I could offer a response of any kind, she set about pulling out the tea leaves.

In my exhaustion, I could only stare blankly at her back as she bustled about. Although she was my bodyguard and older than me, I considered Mei my best friend, and she had followed me all the way from the capital to this rural backwater without a single complaint. I pondered what the Chou and U families would do next. Would they launch an attack? Or would they play it safe and rebolster their defenses? I had no idea which of these options was the most realistic as someone who had never seen battle, because although we had been attacked about a month prior to this, I never glimpsed any of the enemy soldiers. All I did was stay put in my room, and even then, I'd needed Mei to explain what had happened after the fact.

Hey, wait a second. Now that I think about it, ever since I arrived at Butoku and begged them to send reinforcements to the capital, pretty much all I've done is wait. My train of thought was interrupted by a porcelain cup being set down in front of me, the fragrant aroma of the tea filling my nostrils.

"Please drink up while it's still hot."

"Thank you, Mei." Feeling her worried gaze upon me, I swallowed a mouthful of it. The gentle taste of the liquid calmed my mind, and almost immediately, frustration at my own foolishness welled up inside of me, causing tears to cloud my

vision. “I didn’t understand anything. Nor did I even try to.”

“Lady Miu…”

All I’d done for the past month was sit around and fret. If I had truly wanted their help in saving Rinkei, I should have been pestering U Koufuu, U Hakubun, Chou Hakurei, Ruri, and Chou Sekiei again and again, no matter how many times they laughed or scoffed at me. Instead, I’d done nothing to convince them to change their minds, nor had I even attempted to confirm what was inside the black box.

Ou Meirin already told me she wouldn’t place any faith in the imperial family and that she’d prioritize profit instead! Chou Hakurei even said that once trust is lost, it’s impossible to earn it back! It was little wonder they had refused to listen to me, given how arrogant I had been. Even if the black box in Chou Sekiei’s possession did hold the Heirloom Seal of the Realm and I refused to give them the key, Ruri was the type of person who wouldn’t hesitate to make a copy of the key if she deemed it necessary. She was a dangerously intelligent individual.

I tightened my grip on the protective charm around my neck. *Faith and resolve. Right now, the only things of value I bring to the table are my status as a princess in despair for her beloved country and the key in this pouch. How can I leverage these to save my homeland? To save Ei?* My thoughts were scattered and I struggled to collect them. I slowly looked up from the teacup and gazed out of the window. It had started to rain and clouds were gathering over the steep mountains to the north.

“Lady Miu?” Mei’s worried voice sounded very far away.

Tigers made their home in the mountains to the north, yet the Chou army were proposing to cross them in order to take back Keiyou. The U army, however, wanted to focus on defending Youkaku. Which option had the higher chance of protecting Rinkei? *What should I do? I could probably sit here all day and still not reach an answer. Oh, if only there were two of me! Then I could agree with both plans.*

“Mei,” I uttered.

“Y-Yes, Lady Miu?”

I set my cup aside and took the warm hand of my best friend in my own. My heart was pounding so hard in my rib cage, it was starting to hurt. The Miu of yesterday would never have come up with an idea as outrageous as the one I was about to propose. But I *had* to show them my resolve! I could no longer just allow

myself to go with the flow and sit around waiting for my homeland to be pillaged and destroyed.

Staring into Mei's lovely eyes, I steeled my will. "I have a very important request. Will you hear me out?"

***

A few hours after our discussion with the U family and Kou Miu, I—Sekiei—was to be found lying on a bench, reading an old book. It was the diary of someone who had explored the western regions a few hundred years ago and it was really quite interesting.

"All right, Sekiei. We'll be at the hot spring," Hakurei informed me.

I glanced up at her. "Okay."

"Honestly," Hakurei pouted, her dissatisfaction with me plain to see.

She'll be back later for our nightly conversation, so what's she so mad about? I wondered. Ruri and Oto poked their heads around from behind her. Ruri had removed her hat and Oto was holding a basket containing a change of clothes.

Ruri pointed a slender finger at me. "Don't you *dare* fall asleep, you hear? I'm gonna beat you up at double six when I get back."

"I won't, I won't. Oto, sorry to foist these two on you, but take care of them for me, yeah?"

"Of course, Lord Sekiei!" replied the princess of the U family, even going as far as saluting me. She was such a competent soldier.

The girls left the room, and I listened as their loud chattering that echoed off the walls of the hallway slowly faded. Yui, who had been curled up on a white cloth under the bench, gave a wide yawn. I stuck a feather between the pages of the diary to mark my spot and slowly sat up from my reclining position. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the black box that might or might not contain the Heirloom Seal of the Realm on the table, and illuminated by the candles dotted around the room, the peach blossom and the swords engraved onto it glowed with an eerie light.

"Heh, they're finally out of the way," I said with glee as I got up and approached a shelf on the wall. I parted the books and took

out what I'd sneakily hidden behind them: a porcelain bottle with a cup, and a bag of fried beans. *I've been looking forward to this all day!*

I practically skipped back to the bench again and poured myself a cup of the amber liquid that was in the bottle, a sweet scent wafting from it. It was plum wine that had been brewed by the elderly artisan who had investigated the black box for us. U Hakubun had already tasted it, and according to him, it was excellent stuff.

I took a sip, then sighed with delight. "Delicious!"

The wine was rich and complex, and the flavor was delivered with a powerful punch. It was as good as the mountain peach wine I used to drink back in Keiyou, but as I had suspected, it was quite strong. It would have surely made Hakurei and Ruri sick, so I had been right to keep it away from them. As for Oto, it had been a case of erring on the safe side, because I had no idea how well she could hold her liquor. I flicked a fried bean into my mouth and was munching it when I noticed that Yui had raised its head, attracted by something in the hallway. I glanced in the same direction and noticed a small silhouette on the screen door, wavering in the candlelight.

Well, well, this is a surprise visit, indeed, I thought. But despite waiting a long time for the inevitable knock at the door, the shadowy figure continued to stand out in the hallway without moving an inch towards the room. I crossed my legs, drained the contents of my cup, and called out, "Don't you have some business with me? You won't get much done unless you come in here!"

I heard a gasp as the diminutive shadow jumped back in clear surprise, before the door slowly opened and my visitor poked her head inside. Standing in my doorway was Kou Miu in a purple nightgown with a white shawl around her shoulders. She'd let her hair down and she had a serious expression on her face. The small pouch containing the key to the black box dangled down over her chest, and even from my vantage point on the bench, I could see the intricate ruby embroidery on it. Behind the princess imperial stood Mei, the bodyguard with sharp eyes and short brown hair. She was glaring warily at me, though that was nothing new.

"I-I apologize for bothering you at this hour," Kou Miu said. "May I have a bit of your time?"

I poured some more wine into my cup and cheerily replied, “Sure, as long as you don’t mind me drinking the whole while.”

“Thank you so much.” There was a look of sheer relief on the princess’s face. She turned to her bodyguard. “Mei, I’d like you to wait out in the hallway.”

“M-My princess, I can explain the matter to him—”

“Please.”

The two girls stared at each other for a moment, the silence in the room broken only by the sound of the rain outside. My general impression of the princess was that she wasn’t a very assertive girl, but in this particular staring contest, she refused to look away and cede to her bodyguard. In the end, Mei was the one who broke first.

“Very well,” she said, bowing deeply to her mistress, before glaring at me. “Lord Chou Sekiei.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not interested,” I replied lightheartedly.

“Interested?” Miu echoed, tilting her head to one side, uncomprehending.

“Y-You bastard!” Mei snarled, looking like she wanted to kill me, but she soon excused herself and left, sliding the door shut behind her. Her silhouette didn’t linger, disappearing from sight moments later.

Mei was out of the room, just like Kou Miu wanted, but the princess remained rooted to the spot, her hand clutching the protective charm around her neck. She opened and closed her mouth a few times as her gaze wandered around the room, and whenever our eyes met, she gave me a beseeching look. Since she had chosen to come and visit me at a time when Hakurei and the others weren’t present, I was obviously the person she wanted to speak to.

I picked up the book I had set aside and opened it at the marked page. I’d stopped at the part where the traveler was just about to enter Kozan, the mountain range that was teeming with tigers just north of Butoku. The thought that I’d be passing through the same area myself very soon was a depressing one. Ruri had been calling in favors to get a map drafted so that we could trace a route through the terrain, but I had no idea if she would be able to do so. *Tigers are formidable foes.*

Shaking off memories of my past life, I decided to help the princess out a little. “We haven’t got a lot of time left, you know. Judging by your expression, you’ve come up with an idea of

some kind, but if Hakurei and the others come back and find you in here, they won't be willing to hear you out. Despite how they look, they're terrifying."

"R-Right! Um, Chou..." Miu started, before correcting herself. "I mean, Lord Chou Sekiei—"

I cut her off. "Don't bother with the titles. I won't either."

"V-Very well. I shall call you Sekiei." The princess nodded a few times, then daintily perched herself on the chair across from my sofa. There was a strength behind her eyes—a strength that had been entirely absent since her arrival. "I gave our discussion from earlier today a bit of thought and I would like to offer a suggestion. But before we get into that, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Me?"

A humid breeze wafted in through the window, blowing Miu's beautiful, delicate hair into her face, but she ignored it and continued. "It concerns what Ruri said to me about resolve. She was referring to my status as princess imperial and the key in my possession, as well as to whether or not I'd be able to reach a decision on my own. But I feel like there's something else I'm missing."

"Huh? Oh, I see."

It had taken a while, but Kou Miu had finally decided to involve herself in this war. She had even noticed the implicit message in Ruri's words. Although it had been about a month since her arrival here in the western regions, she had spent all of her time with Mei, to the point that I couldn't recall having ever seen her converse with Hakurei, Ruri, Oto, Hakubun, or Koufuu. Did she think that, compared to them, I was easier to deal with? I started drinking the plum wine again, causing Kou Miu's eyes to widen.

"Pardon me, but is that alcohol?" she asked curiously.

"Yup. The old artisan who cleaned up that black box brewed it. I don't mind you telling Oto about it, but don't breathe a word to Hakurei or Ruri. If you can promise me that, I don't mind simplifying what Ruri was trying to say to you."

"I-I promise!" Kou Miu clasped her hands over her mouth and nodded enthusiastically.

"Good girl."

Kou Miu seemed a lot less rebellious than other girls her age. I figured it was because she had spent most of her life in the

palace instead of interacting with her peers. I could see why Mei was so protective of her.

I unfurled a map on the table. “Okay, let’s go over what we were discussing earlier. Right now, the Chou and U families don’t have the strength to charge into Rinkei and save it via military intervention. You understood that much, right?”

“Yes,” Kou Miu replied, looking down at her hands with a pained look. She must have been wondering why she had even bothered to put herself into Ou Meirin’s debt to come here.

I tapped the map, indicating Youkaku and Butoku on it. “At the same time though, if we don’t do something while Ei is still standing, it won’t take Gen long to annex the western regions. The terrain around Youkaku may be difficult to traverse, but it won’t hold out if Adai decides to rely on his army’s raw manpower and attack. That’s precisely why we need to use you and the Heirloom Seal of the Realm to carve out a new path.”

The princess didn’t say anything, but she shuddered and tightened her grip on her protective charm. Yui jumped up into my lap, so I set my cup down.

“Ruri already told you what would come to pass if you decided to help us, right?” I continued. “The people would view you as the country’s savior. And not only that, but you’d have the Heirloom Seal of the Realm in your possession. It doesn’t matter if it’s genuine or not. The influence the seal offers is greater than you could ever imagine. Stories about the great Princess Kou Miu would quickly take on a life of their own.”

“I don’t really understand,” Kou Miu said with a weak shake of the head.

I couldn’t really blame her. She was coming at the situation from a very different perspective to the others. Ever since she was born, Hakurei had been feted as the daughter of Chou Tairan, the hero who had saved Ei countless times from danger. Ruri might have lost her homeland when she was still a child, but she was taken in by the Honorable One—the mysterious enchantress who manipulated Seitou from the shadows—and was forced to train as a tactician. Oto had survived the absolute hell known as the Seitou invasion, and finally, Ou Meirin was considered a prodigy and a genius. By contrast, despite being born into the imperial family, Kou Miu had lived a relatively ordinary life befitting a girl her age up to this point.

I regarded the troubled princess for a moment, then decided

to give her my honest opinion. “Kou Miu, I’m sure you’re a good person at heart. Considering you came all the way here with only one bodyguard in the name of saving your country, I can see you possess your own form of bravery. Don’t look at me like that. I’m praising you,” I added when I noticed the grimace on her face. My attention was momentarily drawn to Black Star and White Star, which I could see propped up against a chair out of the corner of my eye. “However, good intentions aren’t what makes the world go round. That’s especially true in that viper’s nest you call the imperial palace.”

“The court is a terrible and gloomy place. I’d much rather spend my time on the battlefield,” I recalled Ouei complaining to me once in my past life a thousand years ago. My best friend at that time had been a jaded man. In comparison, the girl waiting for me to continue my speech was honest, straightforward, and innocent to a fault.

“That little strategist of mine is one of the best on the continent,” I said. “So long as the White Wraith and the Wolves don’t attack this side of the mainland, she can come up with a winning strategy against any enemy. And the day the citizens hear of our victory…”

For the first time that night, I looked her straight in the eye. I had spent all of my time with Hakurei and the others, so I was used to being around conventionally attractive girls, but even I could tell that, in spite of her youth, Kou Miu was remarkably pretty. If we had been living in more peaceful times, she would have made her mark on history as a beautiful princess. As Granny Koufuu had mentioned earlier, fate was indeed cruel.

“You will become a hero and the target of your brother’s—the emperor’s—envy,” I sighed. “This is because people will constantly be comparing the two of you, and his decisions have led to the deaths of so many of his best soldiers and officers for no reason. Officials may be able to stop the rumors from doing the rounds in the palace, but they can’t prevent the people from talking, and their opinions on the two of you will surely reach his ears. Considering how easily influenced he is by his more treacherous subjects, his envy could even turn to hatred. Your brother may not appreciate your efforts and might treat you with scorn, perhaps even going as far as trying to assassinate you. Knowing all of that, do you have the resolve to stand as a fabricated hero? *That’s* what Ruri was trying to ask you. And keep

in mind that if we no longer need you, we may very well become your enemies as well."

The breath caught in Kou Miu's throat and she paled. That possibility must have never occurred to her. Yui flicked its ears and tail, then leaped down to the ground, padded across to the window, and slipped outside. The cat's reaction suggested Hakurei and the others were nearby.

I shoved the rest of the fried beans into my mouth and wiped my hands, then stoppered the wine bottle and returned it to the bookcase. Still with my back to the princess, I said, "Hey, this might piss off Ruri and Hakubun..." The sound of a chair scraping along the floor told me that Kou Miu had turned to look at me. After carefully placing books in front of the wine bottle again, I looked over my shoulder at the princess. "But you have the option of fleeing farther west to foreign lands. You *could* also use the key as a bargaining chip and surrender yourself to Adai. He's sure to treat you well, even if the key and the seal aren't the real deal. Unlike another emperor I could name, he's not the type to kill without good reason."

"H-How could you *suggest* that?!" the princess exclaimed, shooting to her feet with a horrified look on her face. "I could never..." she breathed. "I could never do either of those things!" Fat tears poured down her cheeks, which I took to mean she had completely misunderstood what I was saying and thought I was mocking her.

I perched myself on the edge of my desk and closed my eyes. "The White Wraith's intelligence surpasses that of Ouei, the imperial chancellor. When they hunt together, the Wolves' strength surpasses that of Kouei, the great general."

The words came out colder than I had intended and echoed in the heavy silence that fell over the room. The hand holding my cup was trembling ever so slightly. *What's wrong, Chou Sekiei? Are you scared? You have no right to condemn anyone else for feeling fear.*

I opened my eyes and shrugged. "If this were chess, it'd be checkmate. If you don't run away, you'll have no choice but to face those monsters. I won't blame you for being scared, nor will I let anyone else."

Well, in my case, it isn't my life that's most important to me, but the lives of Hakurei and the others. I scoffed at my own thoughts.

Kou Miu stared at me in silence for a few moments before

pressing the protective charm into her chest. “You…”

“Hmm?” I prompted when no follow-up was forthcoming. I drained the last of the wine in my cup, then grabbed the nearby pitcher and poured myself some cold water. If Hakurei were to find out I had been drinking alcohol, she would no doubt yell at me.

Kou Miu walked up to me, then asked in a serious tone, “Sekiei, have you steeled your resolve?”

Wow, what a straightforward question. No wonder Meirin saw something in this girl and sent her to me. Though I wish she’d take some tips from the princess.

“Lord Seeekiei?” I could practically hear the little mercantile prodigy’s response, as well as imagine her pouting at me with her cheeks puffed out. *Man, I sure wish I could see you again.*

I winked at the princess and replied, “My surname is Chou and my name is Sekiei.” I possessed memories of my past life and could remember the days I had spent with my past friends, working and fighting to unify the lands under a single flag. However, in this life, I was simply Chou Sekiei, not Kou Eihou. “We may not be related by blood, but I am still the son of the National Shield, Chou Tairan, a man so famous that everyone on the continent has heard of him.” I picked up Black Star and backed up a few paces, before making Kou Miu gasp by unsheathing it and pointing the tip towards her. “That man entrusted Chou Hakurei to me. Does that answer your question, Kou Miu?”



A sudden gust blew in through the window and flipped through the pages of a nearby book. When it finally settled again, the page it lay open at showed a picture of a tiger.

Kou Miu's large eyes widened and she pressed her small fist to her chest. "Yes. Yes, it does! That was more than enough."

"Yeah? Well, that's fantastic to hear," I said, returning the sword to its sheath.

Outside, the clouds parted to reveal the moon, and Kou Miu's pale brown hair caught the light and seemed to shimmer. If I'd had any sort of artistic talent, I might have scooped up a brush and immortalized the scene before me. *A beautiful princess lamenting her country's future, huh?* I shook the insolent thought out of my head at once.

"Lady Miu," Mei hissed from outside the door, presumably trying to warn us about the imminent return of Hakurei and the others.

I waved away the princess, saying, "Go. If you decide to escape Ei, tell me before you leave. I'll lend you a hand."

"Of course, and I thank you for that. But I have no intention of fleeing. Um, here, take this."

"Hmm?"

The princess had produced a piece of paper from her pocket and was handing it to me. I took it from her and quickly skimmed what was written on it. *Oh? Well, this sure is something.*

"Did you come up with this yourself?" I asked.

"Yes. It's unconventional, but considering the current state of affairs, it's not outside the realm of possibility. Since it seems we have no more time to converse tonight, let's discuss it another day. I would like to hear your thoughts, as well as those of Hakurei and Ruri." She gave a deep bow, then turned and made for the door with no hesitation in her steps. At the door, she turned and shot me a smile that made her look far older than her actual age. "Good night, and thank you. Um, would it be all right if I came and told you when I've steeled my resolve?"

"Sure. Just don't make a decision you'll regret later."

And with that, she left the room and slid the door closed without a sound. Once I had confirmed that it was Mei's shadow that raced up to Miu's, I looked down at the piece of paper she had given me. *Well now. How am I going to convince Hakurei and Ruri to give this a chance?* I gulped down the rest of my water, then squinted up at the moon at the same moment the clouds

hid it from view again.

***

I slowly and carefully ran a brush through Hakurei's lovely silver hair. She was sitting on a chair in front of me, still in her nightgown, and the way she happily kicked her feet reminded me of what she was like as a child. In other words, this was something we'd done every morning for as long as I'd been adopted into the Chou family.

I stopped and moved the mirror so Hakurei could get a better look at herself. "All done. That should be all right, yeah?"

Hakurei checked her hair in the mirror, then nodded. "It's acceptable." But the serious look on her face quickly morphed into a smile and she giggled before covering her mouth with both hands.

I was glad my handiwork had met her expectations. We hadn't been able to have our usual nightly talk the day before so she had woken up in a terrible mood. Yui was asleep on a nearby chair and I gave the cat a quick pat before looking over at Hakurei's bed, where there was a mound of blankets on her mattress.

"Hey, you should get up already or you'll miss breakfast," I called out to the lump.

The only response I received was a muffled groan before Ruri poked her head out of the mound, though the rest of her remained wrapped in the blankets. Her blonde hair was practically a crow's nest. The previous night, she had dropped by to play some double six and had fallen asleep after a string of consecutive losses. She was stubbornly clinging to the last vestiges of sleep, even though she had already gotten up once.

"This is wrong. This is so wrong," she murmured, her head in her hands. "I-I didn't lose! I didn't, you hear? It's one thing to lose to Hakurei or Oto, but losing nonstop to *Sekiei*? When did I cross over into a parallel universe? This is a nightmare. Yes, that's it. I'm sure I'll wake up from this horrible dream any second now, and when I do, I'll destroy that mean old Sekiei!"

"Boy, you sure are energetic first thing in the morning, aren't you?" I sighed.

Where'd my genius strategist go? If I even tried to move her from the mattress, she would start whining like a little kid and

force me to promise her we'd play double six again that evening. So the question was: What should I do? Maybe I could ask Oto to… No, I couldn't go bothering her this early in the morning. I stood there at a loss until Hakurei tugged my left sleeve. I looked in her direction and found her staring right up at me with her big blue eyes.

"I like Miss Ruri, but I don't like how I don't get to talk to you at night anymore," she whispered.

I couldn't say anything in response, because the destructive force of her cuteness had rendered me speechless, made even more effective in this instance due to how seldom Hakurei prioritized her own desires. It was clear to me that the old wives' tale about how women with silver hair and blue eyes bring calamity really was nothing more than superstition. In any case, I'd have to think about that night later.

"Hakurei, it's up to you now," I said, handing her the brush and playfully bowing to her.

"Leave her to me," she replied with an exaggerated salute of her own. I started to prepare the morning tea for us while Hakurei took up a position next to the chair. "Miss Ruri, please come and take a seat over here."

Ruri made a sleepy noise. Even though she had been lazing on the mattress mere seconds before, she didn't complain at all as she settled down in the chair at Hakurei's request. They really were like close sisters at times. Yui had been sleeping happily but was awoken by all the ruckus. The cat stretched before jumping up onto my left shoulder.

"Good morning," I said, rubbing Yui under the chin in response to all the sweet meowing and purring that was going on. Now that I thought about it, Yui had followed us all the way from Keiyou to Butoku. Quite an adventure for a cat.

"Ah! I forgot to grab a change of clothes from Asaka yesterday. I need to go see her. Sekiei, lend me your shirt," Hakurei said once she had finished brushing Ruri's hair.

"Uh, yeah, sure thing," I said, but Hakurei had already grabbed my shirt and was halfway out the door. *Um, why didn't you just wear your own coat?*

I picked up the kettle I'd been heating on the brazier, then poured the hot water into a teapot. Ruri must still have been cold because she remained cocooned in the blankets. I handed her some piping hot tea.

After taking it from me, she fiddled with the bangs hiding her left eye from view and casually said, “So you told me about the princess’s unexpected strategy last night, but what did she want from you *specifically*? I mean, she chose to visit you when the rest of us were out of the way, didn’t she?”

This drew a sharp intake of breath from me. How had she known that Kou Miu was the one who had handed me the piece of paper? I’d told her and Hakurei that Mei had.

“Wow, this is delicious, as much as I hate to admit it,” Ruri said, sipping the tea and looking as calm as ever. I stared at her and opened my mouth, but nothing coherent came out. After a moment, she continued, “Looks like I guessed right. Don’t worry. I didn’t tell Hakurei. You told her she and her bodyguard could leave all this behind, didn’t you?”

Ruri of Kobi is one dangerous opponent. As if reading my thoughts, Ruri gave a small wave with her hand and I sat down across from her.

“I did, albeit in my own way,” I replied.

“I see.” Her uncaring response was suspicious. After all, Ruri was the one actively trying to use Kou Miu and the Heirloom Seal. Should the princess really decide to escape, her plan would fall apart. Despite that, her emerald eyes looked the same as always.

“You’re not angry?” I asked slowly.

“I’ll be angry if we decide to hunker down in Youkaku and she’s not with us. The Heirloom Seal is one thing, because we can make a fake if we have to, but without the princess, we have no recognizable figurehead to rally the soldiers around.” She rested her cheek on her hand and pursed her lips.

She’s right. If U Hakubun’s plan was the one we decided to go with, we would need to gather more soldiers if we wanted to fend off the combined Gen and Seitou forces. In order to do that, we would need Kou Miu as our figurehead.

“But if my plan to launch a surprise attack and take back Keiyou is the one we put into action, the princess isn’t necessary for it. Granted, I would like that Heirloom Seal. But the only ones I actually need are you and Hakurei. More importantly…” Ruri stood up and leaned close to whisper into my ear, “‘A kind workaholic isn’t always effective, and should he prove ineffective, he will cause great harm to those around him.’ Isn’t that right?”

That’s a moral passed down from Ouei. Ruri may recognize that

Kou Miu means well, but that has no bearing on her cold and honest opinion as the Chou army's strategist, huh? I rested my head on my hand and murmured, "You're one terrifying ascendant."

"Oh? That's not something I want to hear from you, Kouei of the Modern Ages. You might spoil those you accept into your fold, but when it comes to those on the outside, you look at them with a far colder gaze than I could ever muster. Hakurei is a given, but if you thought the princess might bring great harm to me, Meirin, Oto, and the rest of the Chou and U families, you'd abandon her without a second thought, wouldn't you?"

"Urk." I had no response to that. Killing her was off the table, sure, but exiling her from our group wasn't. *I wonder what kind of resolve that little princess will show us.*

The light pitter-patter of footsteps heralded Hakurei's return, and a second later, she rushed into the room. "I've got my clothes!" She must have noticed that something was off because she blinked her large blue eyes at us. "Sekiei, Miss Ruri, is something the matter?"

I can't tell her what we just discussed, I decided.

Ruri, on the other hand, looked at Hakurei and feigned innocence. "Nothing much. I was just threatening him a little."

"Ah, that makes sense. Miss Ruri, allow me to tie up your hair."

"Oh, thank you!"

"Uh, excuse me, you two?" I butted in. *Wasn't that conversation just now a little strange?* But before I could demand to know what that had all been about, a tap at the door interrupted me. Hakurei and Ruri, who had started to tie up each other's hair, paused as well.

"You can come in," I called out. "We're all awake."

"Pardon me," came a girl's elegant voice from the other side of the door, then Kou Miu walked in with Mei behind her. Even though it was still morning, the princess was already wearing the golden robes that marked her out as part of the imperial family. However, she looked somewhat ill. She glanced at Hakurei and Ruri, though she didn't shrink away from their attention, and said in a firm voice, "Good morning. I apologize for bothering you so early in the day."

"No problem. What's up? Oh, if you want to talk about the plan from yesterday, I—"

"No, it's not that. I'm here about something else," Kou Miu interrupted me before removing the protective charm from

around her neck and slowly placing it on the table. She looked up at me, and her eyes were clear and totally absent of doubt and hesitation. “You’re all about to become very busy, right? In that case, I figured the sooner we confirm what’s inside this black box, the better.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess,” I said, taken aback despite myself. *Uh, wow. She’s really changed a lot in a short amount of time.* I noticed Hakurei and Ruri were looking at me curiously.

“Sekiei, what’s going on?” Hakurei’s eyes seemed to ask.

“Things aren’t proceeding as you told me they would,” Ruri’s gaze seemed to say.

Yeah, you’re right there. But this is important too. I shrugged at the pair, then pushed the black box on the table closer to the princess and nodded at her.

“Thank you very much. I’ll…” She hesitated slightly. “I’ll open it now.”

Mei was staring at the princess, her expression stiff. Meanwhile, the way Hakurei and Ruri were watching showed that they were clearly interested. Her hand shaking, Kou Miu inserted the small black key into the black box’s keyhole and turned it until, with a light click, the lid sprung open. The girls gasped in wonder when they saw what was inside: a palm-sized golden seal. It was in pristine condition, with no rust or imperfections on it, despite its age, and a dragon—the symbol of the emperor—was engraved into the handle. It was undoubtedly the Heirloom Seal used by Hi Gyoumei, the first emperor of the Tou Empire and a friend of mine who had fought to unify the lands under the heavens alongside myself and Ou Eifuu.

The princess let out the breath she had been holding, then looked over to her bodyguard. “It’s just as the legends described it, Mei.”

“Y-Yes, it is, Lady Miu,” Mei said, handing a small white cloth to her mistress.

Kou Miu looked in my direction and our eyes met. “I didn’t sleep a wink last night. Instead, I spent the whole time wide awake and thinking, racking my brain with all the possibilities and risks. That was when I finally made my decision.” There was a familiar glint in her eye, one I’d seen before in soldiers on the battlefield just before they gave their lives for their country. The princess wrapped the Heirloom Seal up in the cloth and gave it to me with both hands outstretched. “Chou Sekiei, I would like

you to take this Heirloom Seal of the Realm. This is…my resolve." She must have reached her limit, because as soon as she said it, tears began rolling down her face. "I don't care if my brother hates me, or tries to kill me. My life is of little consequence. But please, I'm begging you. Please save my homeland of Ei! Please help us!"

For a moment, I stared at her in total silence. I hated this. I hated everything about this. From the very beginning, I hadn't wanted to become a hero. But at the same time… "You idiot."

Kou Miu was still crying and didn't notice me reaching out to her until I gave her a gentle smack on the forehead. "Ow. S-Sekiei?"

I unwrapped the seal and handed the white cloth back to her. She blinked in confusion and looked up at me.

After returning the familiar seal to the little box, I held up a finger and said, "This is a really dangerous item to be handing out willy-nilly like that. Only devious people like Ruri, Hakubun, Meirin, or Ruri would enjoy receiving that for a gift." And that was the honest truth. Mei was glaring at me like she was trying to scare me into submission, and I had to shoot her a quick meaningful glance before she could say anything.

While the princess continued to stare at me with her mouth agape, Ruri crossed her arms. "If you're looking for a fight, you've got one," she informed me.

"Sure thing. We can settle it with some double six. By the way, I plan on writing a letter to Meirin later. I'm sure she'd *love* to know our scores."

"You villain! Scoundrel! You poor excuse for a civil official!" Ruri yelled in response. Black petals—the only magic she was capable of—sprinkled out of the air above her and landed in her blonde hair.

Heh. I win. I looked over at Kou Miu. "Now that I've witnessed your resolve, I promise you I will lend you my strength. You guys are fine with that too, right?" I said, directing the question at Hakurei and Ruri.

"I am," Hakurei said, treating me to her usual smile.

"I'll leave convincing Hakubun and Oto to you then," Ruri replied, looking away as she fiddled with her bangs.

Well, Hakubun won't be too hard to convince, but Oto? That's another beast entirely. I reached a hand out towards the princess. "Kou Miu. Congratulations. You've made it onto this difficult and

perilous journey of ours. It'd be wrong to say we 'welcome' you onto it, but you have made your own choice. I will, however, offer you this one piece of advice as someone who's been walking this path far longer than you. Leave anything difficult or troublesome to the clever ones. All you need to do is take responsibility for whatever they come up with. Ninety percent of the problems that come our way can be solved using that strategy."

"A-All right! I-I'll do my be—" But before Kou Miu could finish, a quiet growl rang around the room, causing her cheeks to slowly flush as she let out an embarrassed squeak and crouched down clutching her belly.

Hakurei, Ruri, and even Mei snorted with laughter, their tense expressions quickly softening, while Kou Miu covered her bright red face with her hands.

"Time for some breakfast," I said, winking at her. "We won't get much done on an empty stomach, after all. And we can take the opportunity to discuss Miu's plan: 'the Twin Princesses.'"

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In the Gen headquarters building that had been established on the outskirts of Sotaku, a major city in the recently annexed province of Suishuu, my voice—that of Orid Dada—echoed down the hallways.

"Your Majesty, I *implore* you to give your humble subject another chance! Order me to attack the western regions once more, and I swear that this time, I shall kill Chou Sekiei for you!"

Despite suffering a devastating defeat in the continent's western regions, I had returned to headquarters of my own free will so that I could directly convey my request to the emperor. It was the middle of the night, but many of Gen's officers and soldiers had gathered around us, and everyone was silent with unease. I couldn't blame them. After all...

"Orid, raise your head."

All of the combat experience I had accumulated over the years meant nothing when face-to-face with my emperor. I shuddered. "Yes, Your Majesty."

I looked up to see Emperor Adai Dada, the child of the great Celestial Wolf, on his throne, reaching out to me. His hand was so small and delicate, it could easily have been mistaken for a young girl's, and candlelight reflected off his lovely, long white

hair, giving the scene a breathtakingly ethereal beauty. Behind him stood the most powerful man in the Gen army, Black Wolf Gisen, his hair black and his frame massive.

"Your defeat at Ten Knights Bridge, as well as old Berig's death, were due to my own misjudgment," the emperor said. "I underestimated both your courage and loyalty. The Millenary Diviner Hasho is the one in charge of the western invasion forces and I have already sent word to him that he is to maintain the lines and keep the enemy army at Youkaku. You and your forces were included in those orders."

"I understand," I replied after taking a moment to collect my thoughts.

The air seemed to grow heavier around me. Leaving the field of battle was as serious a crime as deserting in the face of the enemy. It didn't matter that I had sent advanced word of my arrival in Sotaku nor that I was the emperor's cousin. I couldn't avoid punishment. In the worst-case scenario, he could even command me to commit suicide. Though even if he did, I wouldn't protest, for a foolish general who had caused the deaths of countless soldiers purely in the name of earning more military merits had no place in the great Emperor Adai's army. I could never again boast that I was "the emperor's Kou Eihou." *But even so, after personally fighting Chou Sekiei and surviving, albeit in exchange for my old servant Berig's life, there's something I absolutely must say!*

The emperor's white brows furrowed. "I've read your report. Now tell me: Why are you so obsessed with Chou Sekiei?"

"That's because..." My mouth dried up. As pathetic a reaction as it was, my body wouldn't stop shaking. *Speak. Dammit, Orid, speak! Berig sacrificed himself so that you could live long enough to get this opportunity!* I sucked in a lungful of air, and then in one breath, came out with, "The only person on this entire continent who can potentially defeat you, my emperor, is *him*!"

Murmuring suddenly filled the room. Making that claim about Chou Tairan was one thing, but to say it about his adopted son? Could he have that much strength? The emperor rested his elbow on the arm of his throne.

Seeing his reaction, I continued in my attempts to persuade him, trying to raise my voice above the rabble. "Chou Sekiei is still young and far from his prime, yet he has already defeated so many of our great officers. When our soldiers see him

brandishing that black sword, said to be one of the legendary Heavenly Swords, they fear him as the Kouei of the Modern Ages! And as someone who has crossed blades with him, I can vouch that their evaluation is accurate." My heart felt like it was shattering. It was impossible to put into words how much I'd wanted the title of "Kouei of the Modern Ages" for myself, yet there I was, kneeling before the emperor and bestowing it upon someone else, each word feeling like it was being forcibly extracted from me. "If we strike now before he can amass more soldiers, we may be able to defeat him. It wouldn't even be difficult. I beg you to please, *please*, allow me to do the honors!"

This time, the silence that filled the room—and possibly the whole of the headquarters building—seemed to go on forever. Even the marshal in charge of commanding all of the officers remained silent. The main trunk of the Gen army was presently marching on Rinkei, the capital of Ei, yet I was suggesting peeling off even more men to eradicate the Chou army. It went against all military logic. Before my failed attack on Butoku, I would have been the first to object to such a proposal. However...

The emperor suddenly chuckled. He drained his glass of wine, then threw the empty vessel to the ground, shattering it, his eyes blazing with unmistakable joy and his snow-white skin turning a powdered pink with excitement. "How interesting, indeed. In that case, I have even *less* reason to do something about him."

"Your Majesty!" I protested. *If we don't kill him now, he has the potential to become a major obstacle in our path. He will truly become the second coming of Kouei! Emperor Adai would never lose to him, of course, but this Chou Sekiei could cause untold damage to our forces. I have to convince His Majesty to change his—*

"However, I can see the depths of your loyalty in the advice you give," the emperor said before I could get the words out. He stepped forwards, crushing a piece of broken glass underfoot, then flashed a confident smile at me. "Orid Dada, from this moment forth, you will no longer be posted to the western regions. You will remain here at headquarters and observe the downfall of the once-great Ei Empire by my side."

"I-If you'll forgive my impudence, Your Majesty, that would mean Hasho on the front line would need to work—"

My brain was nowhere near Emperor Adai's level. Before I could even finish my disrespectful attempt to argue with him, he interrupted me.

“Gisen, you did well as the vanguard in this attack. Take your Black Lancers and ride to Youkaku. You and your soldiers will then make yourselves available to Hasho and follow his commands. The fledgling of the Jo family has been acting a little strange lately, so once I’ve checked in on him, I will send the White Wolf and the White Lancers to assist you.”

“Understood,” Gisen replied.

So not only will the Black Wolf and his Black Lancers—the strongest fighters in the country—depart from the front line, but the White Wolf and the White Lancers will too?! I was struck dumb by the emperor’s extremely bold decision.

The marshal, who was the older brother of the deceased Berig, stepped forwards. “I apologize for speaking out of turn, Your Majesty. However, our army is only a short distance away from the great water fortress; the time of our final battle with Ei draws near. To remove *both* generals from our vanguard is—”

“Marshal, there is nothing less exciting than a battle with a foregone conclusion.” Compared to when we were talking about Chou Sekiei, the emperor looked positively bored, and when he next spoke, it was in an uninterested tone as well. “This is the perfect opportunity. Everyone, look at this.” With that, he placed several documents down on the table.

All of the officers in the room were experienced veterans, and immediately understood the contents of the papers. They gasped, unable to say anything. *Unbelievable! The rat in the capital is the one manipulating that Jo fledgling? And these papers give the precise locations of all of their commanders and other notable soldiers!* After losing the Three Great Generals and most of their potential replacements, the Ei Empire no longer had any fighters or leaders of note in their army. The only name we really recognized was Gan Retsurai, who was said to be in charge of protecting the great water fortress, although of course, we also recognized Ou Hokujaku, the marshal of the Imperial Guard, for less *honorable* reasons.

Emperor Adai settled back down on his throne and clasped his hands together. “A single crack can bring down the entire dike. Ei’s fate is already sealed!”

Yes, the one I should have feared is Emperor Adai. My master is a true hero who could surpass even the great Ouei of legend. The gathered officers must have shared my opinion, because one by one, they dropped to their knees and bowed their heads.

The emperor’s voice continued to boom around us as if delivering a divine revelation. “What we must spend our time thinking about now is what we will do once we have taken Rinkei. Do we march on the southern regions? Or do we go west instead?”

I didn’t dare to gaze upon the emperor with my unworthy eyes, but as his blood relative, I was sure of one thing: In that moment, there was a genuine smile on Emperor Adai’s face, laced with unmistakable hatred. But who was he directing his rage towards? A cloud of uncertainty passed across my chest.

“Or do we settle things with the Chou orphans?” the emperor concluded in a solemn voice.

“Long live Emperor Adai, child of the great Celestial Wolf! Long live the emperor!” the officers all bellowed at once, their voices causing the air itself inside the headquarters building to vibrate.

Was this the right choice? I found myself wondering.

I looked up to see the emperor gesturing for me to approach, a bright smile splashed across his face. “Now then, cousin, regale me with tales of your recent battle. Tell me about these wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars that you are so worried about: this Chou Sekiei, and the woman with silver hair and blue eyes.”

Chapter Two

Illuminated by the warm, comfortable sunlight, a small boat floated its way down a narrow waterway. On occasion, fish would leap out of the water nearby, while birds swooped close to the surface. I—Jo Yuushun—couldn't help but feel excited by the sight of them, as well as the ancient vine-covered stone walls around me.

Nansui, one of the major cities of the southern regions, had been built on water, with the different parts of the city connected to one another via a grid of bridges and waterways. It was a point of pride for the city that the architects for the capital, Rinkei, referenced Nansui as inspiration.

Until this journey, I had spent all of my time reading at home, never leaving the manor without my guards, so I was curious about everything around me. I clutched at the sleeves of the jacket I was wearing—a large one that my father used to wear in his youth—and looked around from my position at the bow of the boat. It was then that the beautiful black-haired woman rowing the boat, her slender frame hidden under her own jacket, called out to me in a gentle voice.

"Lord Yuushun, the water gets a trifle rough from here on. Please hold on to the side for your own safety," she said.

"Oh! Y-Yes, of course," I replied. "Sorry, Miss Shizuka."

I blushed when I realized I had been acting like an excitable child. The reason I had sneaked out of the manor that day was to negotiate with Lady Ou Meirin, the woman Miss Shizuka served. I decided I had to pull myself together.

Miss Shizuka giggled elegantly as she continued rowing with an air of refinement about her movements, slowly directing the vessel down an adjacent waterway. It must have been a long time since this particular waterway had seen any maintenance work done to it, because thick roots protruded from overhead, blocking out the sunlight and the hustle and bustle of the city, and plunging us into silence. Railings in a state of disrepair lined the waterway, and past them, the water was pumped into the surrounding buildings. As someone who knew the Jo family's finances inside and out, I was able to calculate how much this

plumbing system would have cost, and the answer I reached was frightening. The city must have spent an inordinate amount setting all of this up.

After rowing a bit farther, rays of light started chasing away the darkness that had permeated my vision and I let out an awed “A-Amazing!” Before me was a magnificent garden boasting luscious greenery, although I could tell it was because the gardeners had put in the work to design and maintain it, rather than it all occurring naturally. Still, I never imagined so many different flowers could grow together in one place.

“I heard this garden was built around a hundred years ago by a merchant who accumulated great wealth from trading on the southern seas,” Miss Shizuka explained on noticing my excitement.

No, no, I have to calm down, I told myself. I cleared my throat and looked over my shoulder at Miss Shizuka. “And where is this merchant now?”

“I’m not aware of their whereabouts.”

Maybe the merchant went bankrupt afterwards. I should look into this person while performing my logistical duties. Almost as soon as that thought had zoomed its way through my mind, our boat stopped at an islet that doubled as a small hexagonal gazebo with a stone roof. The low stairs leading up to the gazebo looked like they’d only recently been cleaned, and beyond them, I could see a beautiful young girl with chestnut-brown hair tied into pigtails wearing an orange hat. Although she looked around my age, I could tell the rack she was rocking under her orange clothing was, well, very large.

Miss Shizuka quickly secured the boat, then jumped onto dry land before extending a hand back to me. “Lord Yuushun, please take my hand and watch your step.”

“Th-Thank you very much,” I said hurriedly as I accepted her assistance to climb out of the boat before walking up the stairs.

At the sound of my footsteps, the beautiful young girl with chestnut hair turned around. Behind her, I spied a table that was presumably made of marble, and on it were several teapots and an array of porcelain cups.

“Oh, Shizuka! Welcome back!” the girl said, a radiant smile lighting up her face. She rushed over to Miss Shizuka and gave her a hug.

“Thank you for the warm welcome,” Miss Shizuka said before

looking up at me. “Lord Yuushun, this is my mistress, Meirin.”

Wh-Who would’ve imagined Ou Meirin would be so young? I thought this girl was an attendant! I blinked in surprise, then blurted out, “I-I am Yuushun, the second son of Jo Shuuhou. On behalf of my ill mother, I would like to thank you for agreeing to hear us out, especially when we wish to ask so much of you.”

The beautiful girl—Meirin—stepped back from Miss Shizuka, and in a courteous voice, replied, “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Meirin, daughter of Ou Jin. Granted, I’ve been disowned by my family! ★” She finished her introduction by flashing me a wide, innocent smile.

“I, uh, see,” I said. *Disowned?*

I was uncertain what to say to that, but Miss Meirin didn’t seem the least bit bothered by my ineloquence, for she had started cheerfully pouring tea from the various teapots into the porcelain cups. Her slick, graceful movements suggested this was something she did often. *Is this a tea-tasting contest? Like where you have to guess the brand of the tea?*

Miss Meirin turned and handed me a cup. “Lord Yuushun, you must be thirsty. Now that we’re done with those stuffy self-introductions and greetings, here’s the first challenge! ♪”

“Th-Thank you for the tea,” I said uncertainly.

Finding myself unable to protest against this unexpected forwardness, I took a sip of the proffered drink. It was refreshing and delicious. It soon became apparent that I was far more nervous than I’d thought, because I drained the other four cups she had prepared for me in quick succession.

Miss Meirin clasped her hands together. “All right, let’s hear your answers! ♪”

I thought for a moment, then said, “I believe the one on the far left is a blend from Kuragejima. I drank something similar with my brother just the other day.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt a slight pang in my chest, because in a sense, I was here to betray my brother, Jo Hiyou. Doing my best to conceal my emotions, I scratched my cheek and continued. “It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’m not as educated as you are. The only thing I can tell you about the other teas is they were all delicious.”

Miss Meirin hummed, then grinned at me. “Thank you very much! ☆” I couldn’t say why she was so happy about what I had said, but she spun around on the spot and puffed out her

voluptuous chest. Nodding at Miss Shizuka, who had already started cleaning up the cups, she explained her glee. “Yup! I knew there was no way a normal person could possibly guess where each type of tea leaf was grown! Lord Sekiei is simply an outlier. That means I haven’t lost!”

“Sekiei?” I echoed. Could she have been talking about the one from the Chou family?

“Tales of his exploits will soon spread all across the continent,” my brother had said more than once after returning from Seitou. “He and I are worlds apart.”

As soon as she noticed my reaction to the name, Miss Meirin blushed and quickly added, “Lord Chou Sekiei is my future husband. He’s the coolest, kindest, and strongest man on the entire continent. But alas! Why must I be separated from him? A long-distance relationship may be essential for spicing up a romance, but it’s been half a year now! I haven’t seen him in six whole months! I sent a messenger to the western regions the other day with both a letter and a special gift. But the gods are so cruel. I’m sure that right now, that accursed Miss Chou Hakurei is taking every opportunity she can get to hug him while pretending it’s no big deal. She’s probably doing all *sorts* of horrible things to— Mmrgh!”

Miss Shizuka had sneaked up behind Miss Meirin and covered her mouth with her hand. “Lady Meirin, that’s enough. You’ll frighten Lord Yuushun.” She must have noticed me staring at them both with my mouth agape, because she calmly added, “My apologies. Her love for Lord Sekiei is akin to an incurable disease. Please keep this conversation about the Chou family a secret.”

“A-All right…” I said hesitantly.

My father had told me the Chou and Ou families were close, but I never expected them to be quite *this* close! I wondered what kind of person Chou Sekiei was. As I fantasized about this young hero, Miss Meirin twisted her way out of Miss Shizuka’s hold and started pouting like a small child.

“Shizuka,” she growled.

“We have a guest,” Miss Shizuka replied simply. “And I seem to remember *you* were the one who decided you wouldn’t follow them to the western regions, my lady.”

“Well, yes, that’s true, but you can’t blame me for wanting to see him! I’ve written lots of letters to him, but I doubt they’re

accurately conveying my feelings.”

She looked away and fiddled with her hair, appearing downtrodden about the present state of affairs. I could tell that Miss Meirin genuinely loved this Lord Chou Sekiei. And not only that, but now I knew he wasn’t dead; he had merely fled to the western regions. That was great news for us. I had barely finished tucking this piece of information away in my memory when I noticed a girl wearing an adorable attendant’s uniform running across a small bridge towards us. She had a dagger hanging from her belt.

The minute I saw her, my thoughts instantly ground to a halt and my heart began racing. She had a slim face, an evenly proportioned body, and her shoulder-length hair was light gray. Although she looked younger than me, her large eyes shone with a fierce determination, making them resemble stars shimmering in the night sky. *Wh-Who is this girl?* I had never felt this way before about anyone, and my mind was a complete and utter mess as I tried to work through my feelings.

The girl gave me a polite nod, then reported to her mistress. “Lady Meirin, Lady Saiun has arrived.”

“Thank you, Shun’en!”

“You’re very welcome. I shall bring her over.”

The girl’s smile was like an arrow to my chest, and I had to resist the urge to squeal with glee. I had to find out more about this Lady Saiun, who was apparently also present on the islet, but all I could focus on was the girl—Shun’en—walking away. *Wh-What is happening to me?*

Miss Meirin approached me with a grin. “Miss Chou Hakurei entrusted her to me. I can introduce you later! ♪”

“N-No, there’s, um…” I stammered, but I couldn’t bring myself to turn down her offer. Thinking about it, I recalled reading about similar symptoms in my book. *So this is what they call love at first sight, huh?*

“For you, Lord Yuushun,” Miss Shizuka said, handing me a cup filled with tea.

I thanked her and chugged it down. I had to calm myself down or else I wouldn’t be able to conduct any business.

Miss Meirin—who had been watching me with obvious amusement—narrowed her eyes. “Ah, here she comes.”

I looked back at the small bridge that Shun’en had crossed earlier, and the person on it this time was a tall woman whose

beauty was alluring. She had black hair down to her shoulders and she was wearing extravagant white robes with pearls dangling from her ears. Behind her was her attendant, a young woman with light-brown hair and a long sword hanging from her belt. The attendant's eyes were sharp, but I could tell her mistress was equally dangerous.

It was then I realized something. *Saiun? Of course! Chou Saiun!* This woman was the sister-in-law of the now-deceased Chou Tairan. I'd heard she was a formidable woman, who was in charge of the Chou family's internal affairs. *She fled to the southern regions?* My mind seemed to clear while my body tensed up, my hand tightening on the cup I was holding. Negotiations with Miss Meirin had been nerve-racking enough!

When the beautiful woman reached us, she looked at the cups lined up along the edge of the table and sighed in exasperation. "Meirin, have you been challenging your guests to a tea-tasting contest again? Who won?"

"I did, Lady Saiun. I have once again proven that Lord Sekiei is just a weirdo! Oh, and I've given the military flag to my attendant, Kuuen. Thank you very much! ♪" Miss Meirin finished her sentence with a proud smile, and placed her hands on her hips.

So I'm not the only victim of her tea-tasting contest? And what does she mean by "military flag"? Judging by the attendant's name, the person she entrusted it to is a relative of Shun'en's.

The beautiful woman—Lady Saiun—brought a hand up to her mouth and giggled behind it before fixing Miss Meirin with a maternal look. "Sekiei's always on your mind, isn't he?"

"He sure is! I love him! If I had my way, I'd marry him this second! But when that day does eventually come, I look forward to your support! ♪"

"Helping you would make my niece despise me, so I'm not sure how much aid I can provide you with. She's in love with Sekiei as well, you see." Lady Saiun turned her attention onto me, her eyes narrowing. I naturally straightened my back as I waited for her next words. "Jo Yuushun? My, but how you've grown. You look just like Shuuhou did at that age. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Chou Saiun."

I blinked in surprise. "You know who I am?"

In all of my thirteen years, I had no memory of ever leaving Nansui. In fact, due to my frail constitution, I could count on my

fingers the number of times I'd even left the manor.

Lady Saiun settled down in the chair her attendant pulled out for her, then crossed her long legs. She glanced towards the northern sky. "I met you in Rinkei, when you were much younger. Ah, those were the good days. Now, please sit. Yuuka, make sure no one approaches us."

"Shizuka, I'd like you to keep watch as well, just in case," Meirin added.

"Understood," said Miss Shizuka and the attendant named Yuuka, the pair bowing in unison before crossing the bridge.

Miss Meirin again prompted me to sit with an inviting gaze and a wave of the hand, so I settled down in an empty seat.

"Let's get right down to business," Miss Meirin said as she poured more tea into a fresh cup. "I hear Lord Jo Hiyou is attempting to cross a very dangerous bridge."

"You're remarkably up-to-date," I replied, a bead of cold sweat dripping down my face. *It looks like I've got no choice. I'll have to tell them the truth.* I balled my hands into fists in my lap and closed my eyes. "The morning after my brother returned from the front line, he suddenly gave the order to start on logistics for a new military expedition," I admitted. "He was very firm about it, and although he didn't provide me with any details, I'm not an idiot. I can tell from the amount of supplies he wants prepared that my brother..." I hesitated. "...that Hiyou is serious about launching an attack on Rinkei."

"Oh my. How dangerous," Lady Saiun remarked, taking a sip of her tea.

Dangerous. Yes, it really is. The big bad White Wraith had led his massive army of horsemen, who were even rumored to consume human flesh, across the river in order to launch an attack on Ei. In response to this threat, all of our forces had concentrated in the great water fortress, prepared to fight them off. It was at this point that my brother planned to march into Rinkei, with the Jo army—which was barely holding itself together—at his back. If I had been reading about this in a book, I would instantly have understood what was happening: a rebellion. But historically speaking, very few opportunists ever succeeded in taking advantage of their rivals' quarrels. Surely my brother knew that?

Miss Meirin picked up a fried stick-shaped snack covered with sugar. "So, Lord Yuushun, what do you want from us? I've heard

that you are the logistics coordinator for the Jo army. Do you want us to lend supplies to the one behind the grand chancellor's assassination?" Unlike when talking about Lord Sekiei, Miss Meirin's expression was deadly serious, and she looked for all the world like the experienced merchant she was.

"You truly know everything there is to know, don't you?" I said, shaking my head. "It's true that my brother committed a serious crime. I highly doubt his march on the capital will succeed." I knew what my brother wished to do with all of the supplies he had ordered me to procure, and his end goal was at odds with what our mother and I wanted. I nibbled on one of the fried snacks and the sweetness of sugar spread out over my tongue as a strange aroma filled my nostrils. After a short break to enjoy the snack, I blurted out, "But I cannot simply abandon him. I plan to stay at my brother's side until the bitter end. Besides, I must save as many of our soldiers as I can."

"Even if..." Miss Meirin began.

"...destruction is all that awaits you?" Lady Saiun finished.

Destruction. Yes, that's right. It's only a matter of time before the Jo family is destroyed. And with it will go the southern regions my parents and grandparents cherished the whole of their lives. But even so! I forced a smile onto my face and pressed my fist into my slender chest. "Of course. For I am Jo Hiyou's younger brother."

I'd lost both parents, but Hiyou treated me like I was truly his brother. That hadn't changed, despite the trauma he had endured and the shadow that had been cast over his heart. The thought that I might betray him had never once crossed his mind. This world was so broken; the National Shield, Lord Chou Tairan, had been executed by the foolish emperor of the country he'd sworn to protect. It surely wouldn't be so bad if an idiot such as myself existed in this dark era, would it?

The thought cleared away all the doubts that were sitting on my chest, and I treated the pair in front of me to a bright smile. "However, my little sister Karin is still young, and the people who serve my family have children of their own. I don't wish to drag them into this, which is a sentiment my mother and grandparents also shared. I would like the two of you to protect my little sister and the other children. I will pay whatever price you name."

I placed a second fried stick into my mouth. I decided they

had an odd flavor to them, but they were strangely addictive. My gaze shifted to the side and I saw Shun'en having a seemingly pleasant chat with another female attendant.

"I understand your situation, and I'm willing to lend you my strength," Lady Saiun said after a momentary silence. "But before that..."

"We should investigate who's manipulating Lord Hiyou behind the scenes," Miss Meirin concluded.

Hearing them agree was a relief. *But what could Miss Meirin mean? Someone's manipulating my brother?*

Miss Meirin smiled and steepled her fingers in front of her ample bosom. "Now, could you give us some more information on your brother? Three heads are better than one, as they say. After that, I'll tell you all about Shun'en! ♪"

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"Ah, brother, here you are! I've been looking for you."

The morning mist had enveloped the first watchtower of Youkaku, the cornerstone of the western regions' defenses, and I—U Hakubun—had been gazing down at the streets when my sister, Oto, had called out to me. She was wearing a jacket over her light armor, and the shovel she placed on the chair beside her was a tool she had taken from the Chou family. Trotting up behind Oto was a girl with a hood over her head, and under her cloak, I could see the golds and yellows that only members of the imperial family were allowed to wear. Though her expression was hidden from me, I could tell she was nervous.

Without waiting for my permission, Oto came and stood next to me. I spared her a glance before returning my attention to the narrow road beneath me, where beyond the mist lay lines of enemy soldiers that I couldn't see right now.

"You're up early," I remarked.

"I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. Besides, I figured you would have already discussed logistical routes with old Shunken and made your way back to Butoku."

"Humph" was my only response to this.

She wasn't wrong though. I'd wrapped up my meeting with Kyou Shunken, the protector of Youkaku, the previous night, and my mind had settled on returning to Butoku very soon after. Despite being forced to take charge in this final battle, I

possessed very little in the way of military talent, so because of that, I'd left command of the front line to Shunken, who had years of experience, and Oto, who had inherited our father's talent as a military commander. The girl with short brown hair, who was grimacing in the background, also belonged on the front line. The advice Chou Sekiei had given me on the night before he and his army left Butoku sprang to mind.

"Stop doing things you're no good at," he had said. "That's for the very end, when you're about to take responsibility for everything that's happened. So long as you remain on the back lines as the logistics coordinator, the U army won't go down easily. Oto and Gramps Kyou are strong enough to make it into the Gen army, and Kou Miu's surprising strategy will work far better than we anticipate, just you watch. My strategist has personally given her seal of approval."

Now that I thought about it, *she* must have been the one who had planted unnecessary knowledge into my sister's brain. I crossed my arms and scoffed, "That self-professed ascendant you admire so much is more trouble than she's worth."

"Every day, I learn something new from her," Oto said. "Granted, I wasn't fully on board with this particular decision." She took out the spyglass she'd borrowed from the ascendant and peered into it. It seemed she was still bitter about Sekiei and the others leaving her behind.

A number of quick movements in the mist caught my attention. Enemy scouts? The woman in the cloak—Mei dressed up as Kou Miu—tensed up, her expression growing even stiffer. Even though she had combat experience, this was her first time standing on a battlefield being contested by two armies.

"In summary, I believe we need *two* princess imperials who lament the course this country is taking and wish to gather soldiers from the lands under the heavens," I recalled Kou Miu saying, a serious expression on her face. "One will travel with the Chou army that is presently marching into battle, while the other will remain in the western regions, serving as a figurehead for those on the front lines and boosting the morale of the troops."

"And to *really* sell this fiction, we'll prepare manifestos written in Kou Miu's own hand and stamped with the Heirloom Seal of the Realm," Ruri had added during our final strategy meeting, an evil smile splashed across her face. "If we distribute them to the north and west, I'm sure they'll be effective. It can also

camouflage our actual location."

Considering how stubborn she had been about sending reinforcements to Rinkei, it was a surprise to hear the princess imperial coming up with this plan herself. On top of that, she had even volunteered to travel with the Chou army! The world was just full of mysteries. However, I couldn't help feeling bad for Mei. I would rather die than act as a body double for the princess imperial.

"They are riders from Seitou's light cavalry," Oto analyzed calmly, lowering the spyglass. "As usual, they didn't advance far enough for our projectiles to reach them."

"So you're saying their ultimate goal is to keep our army here and ensure our soldiers stay on their toes."

Ever since the invasion, the enemy had remained quiet. All they did was stand in formation to prevent us from marching for the central plains, and in truth, that was all they *needed* to do. Time was on their side.

I sighed and ran my hand roughly through my hair. "Even someone as ungifted as myself in military strategy can see the truth when it's staring them in the face. The plan the ascendant you respect so much came up with was the right choice. No matter how implausible our chances of success, we need to make a move or else this will simply devolve into a war of attrition. When Rinkei falls, it'll be Youkaku's turn, and we won't be able to defend ourselves against a force as large or powerful as the Gen army."

"Lady Ruri and Lady Hakurei are amazing," Oto said. "But Lord Sekiei is really mean. Do you know what he said to me in front of everyone? He said, 'I'd like you and the other veterans to stay here or I'll start worrying.' How can I turn down his request when he words it like that?"

Even without familial bias, I could tell that Oto was a very smart girl, as well as a talented soldier and beautiful to boot. Both my wife and young daughter were very taken with her, and my deceased father had been expecting great things from her in the future. However, in this moment, the pouting girl next to me looked like little more than a regular teenage girl.

"Humph. You're *still* upset about that?" I teased, making it clear I was poking fun at her. "I mean, *you* were the one who ultimately accepted and obeyed Chou Sekiei's suggestion, weren't you?"

On hearing this, Oto's cheeks puffed out even more, and she started patting down her coat, even though it wasn't dirty. "I-I'm not upset! It's just... Now that I think about it, isn't that Lord Sekiei's usual trick? Granted, it's true that fire lances are better suited for defense than offense. But I can't accept the fact that Shigou and his soldiers—who were under *my* command—got to participate in their own mission, while we have to stay in Youkaku."

I hummed in response. Perhaps it was time I brought up a pending problem in our family. My grandmother and wife had both agreed to my suggestion, meaning all that was left was for my sister to make a decision. This particular moment seemed the perfect time to strike.

"Oto, how old are you?" I said.

Oto blinked at me in confusion, but answered my question all the same. "Brother, have you even forgotten your own sister's age? I'm fifteen. What of it?" After saying this, she used hand signals to send out orders to the soldiers below us, every single one of them wielding ranged weapons in the form of fire lances and bows.

I shifted the way I had my arms crossed, and in an austere voice, said, "I see. Very well, then. Torahime."

"Brother?" She tilted her head to one side, not understanding why I was calling her by her childhood name.

I met her gaze and said, "Get married."

As if on cue, a gust of wind picked up and ruffled our coats and cloaks. Mei, who had just accidentally overheard an important private affair for the U family, seemed dumbfounded by the remark, but wisely remained silent. In contrast, Oto narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"Brother, this is no time for your jokes. I'm far too busy to—" she started but I cut her off.

"It's not a joke. I'm serious. Think about it. The continent is in a state of upheaval. Ei is on its last legs. It's only a matter of time before the enemy reaches Rinkei and a final battle with everything on the line ensues. But no matter who wins, *we* must survive."

Oto looked away, playing with her bangs. "What does that have to do with my, um, union?"

Anxiety. Confusion. Frustration. *Hmm. This might be the first time I've been able to read my sister so well.* Trying my best to hide

my amusement, I joked, “You’re surprisingly slow on the uptake sometimes, aren’t you? I’m telling you to get married to Chou Sekiei.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, Oto’s eyes grew wide and she stumbled backwards, her jaw agape like a fish’s. She waved her hands around in front of her, far too flustered to maintain her usual composure. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you *saying*?! Me? M-Marry *Lord Sekiei*?! Besides, h-he has Lady Hakurei, you know!”

“In order for both of our houses to survive, we must strengthen the ties between us. I assume you’d be fine with marrying as long as your partner is Chou Sekiei, yes? This is only a hypothetical solution for now, anyway. It’s just something to keep in mind for the future.”



The Gen Empire, under the command of the White Wraith, Adai Dada, was a formidable foe. Our chances of survival were slim. However, people needed hope, no matter the circumstances, and at the very least, the soldiers and civilians would be delighted to hear that Oto was to wed. *Humph. That reminds me. Chou Sekiei said something similar before he left. Granted, I haven't brought up this wedding to him yet.*

Oto opened and closed her mouth a few times, before ultimately swallowing what she wanted to say and letting out a slow sigh. "As soon as I leave this watchtower, I will put your ridiculous joke out of my mind."

"How insulting. I'm not so heartless that I wouldn't pray for my sister's happiness." I'd already steeled myself for the worst possible outcome of needing to offer up my head in exchange for the safety of my people. According to the rumors, the White Wraith wasn't the type of man who slaughtered women and children. I threw my arms in a theatrical motion and continued. "Every suggestion I make is to maintain the peace of the southern regions and our citizens. I'll feed my pride to the dogs and use everything I can in order to survive. I'm sure you're fine with that stance, yes?"

That last question had been directed at Mei. Although she had lost some of the color in her cheeks, she nodded. "Of course. While I was in the capital, I was trained on how to act as Lady Miu's body double. However, I never imagined I would actually need to put it into practice. It's hard to know what life will bring sometimes."

"I sympathize with you. Everything's the fault of that damn Chou Sekiei!" I yelled.

Despite his ridiculous claims about wanting to become a civil official, he had killed the Crimson Wolf and the Gray Wolf—two of Gen's greatest generals—and even repelled Orid Dada. Wielding the Heavenly Swords, he was truly this dying country's hero. All of the soldiers who had ever fought alongside him believed from the bottom of their hearts that as long as the Kouei of the Modern Ages remained on our side, we would never lose. *I would never say this to his face, but I can't help agreeing with that sentiment.*

"Allow me to say this: Falling for that man's silver tongue will only lead you into a world of trouble. He's the worst kind of person to like. Pardon me for speaking out of turn, but my

impression of the princess imperial is that she's as pure as newly fallen snow."

"You're correct," Mei said after a moment, though her expression remained stricken. "Lady Miu is a wonderful person. So even if it's due to the stress of the battlefield, if Lord Sekiei does anything hurtful or inappropriate, I—"

"B-Brother, Miss Mei, maybe we shouldn't speak of him—" But just as Oto was rejoining the conversation to defend the man she liked, one of the more experienced soldiers at the foot of the watchtower interrupted us with a frantic yell in our direction.

"Lady Oto! The enemy marches upon us!"

We froze and turned our attention to the mist. Through it, we could see the Seitou army approaching, their massive military flag fluttering in the air, and the character for "THOUSAND" emblazoned on the fabric. Their commander was likely the famed strategist of Gen, the Millenary Diviner Hasho.

"To your positions, everyone!" Oto snapped. "Do not use your fire lances or bows until I give the order!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

In an instant, yells and the clattering of weapons on armor filled the watchtower. I had to return to my own battlefield. I spun around and made for the stairs, but paused when I heard Oto and Mei calling out to me.

"I shall return to Butoku," I said without looking back at them. "The supply routes to the north haven't been organized yet. That specific request for gunpowder..." I paused. "The Master Strategist really knows how to work people to the bone. I'd hate for the Kouei of the Modern Ages to start complaining to me about a lack of supplies after they've succeeded in taking back Keiyou. We already owe him a debt we can never hope to repay."

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"Lady Miu, are you all right?" asked Chou Hakurei's attendant, Asaka. She had Yui the black cat wrapped around her shoulders.

"I'm fine," I—the aforementioned Lady Miu—managed to reply in between panting, wiping the sweat from my brow with the purple sleeve of the ethnic garb that had been lent to me by the people of the western regions. It was quite easy to move in these robes and the material was so breathable that even with a jacket on, I could actually feel the wind passing through the

fabric, though since I'd been the one to reject preferential treatment on this journey, I didn't dare voice any complaints about that. Mei was undoubtedly doing her best to act as my body double at that same moment in time, so I felt I had to do my part too.

Asaka's worried expression as she looked down at me gave way to a relieved smile. She glanced over at the Chou soldiers who were guarding the single-wheeled trolley carts full of supplies. "In that case, let's keep moving. We still have a long way to go."

"Yes, ma'am!" the soldiers responded.

The march continued up the steep mountain path, with the hunters up front leading us through the mountains, and the soldiers under Sekiei and Hakurei's command close behind. They cut down any foliage that blocked their path as they went, yet they still managed to move at quite a pace. I had to hurry too! Using a spear with its tip removed as a walking stick, I kept my legs motoring so that I wouldn't get left behind, every step I took making the small pouch containing the key around my neck swing left and right.

By this point, we were in Kozan, the range of mountains north of Butoku, reputed to be one of the most dangerous locations in Ei. According to the rumors, tigers had been living in these mountains since days of yore.

"The U army will defend Youkaku, while the Chou army will head north from Butoku to reclaim Keiyou," Ruri—the person who had come up with this strategy—had announced with utmost confidence.

However, this journey was proving to be a lot more treacherous than I'd initially thought. Over the past month, we had charted a simple path that would take us through the mountains, with hunters who had previously entered the Kozan range agreeing to serve as our guides, though they refused to go all the way to the other side. The approximately one thousand soldiers that made up the Chou army were all well trained, but even with their wealth of experience, the support of the hunters, and the prior planning we'd put in, the feat we were attempting to accomplish was still practically impossible. Yet Ei's situation was so perilous, we had no choice but to give it a go.

If we could make it through the Kozan range, we would find ourselves in the territory the Chou family had once ruled over

back when Chou Tairan was still alive. Keiyou and its surrounding areas were considered the hinterland to Gen-controlled territories by this point, so causing trouble there might sow confusion on their front line in Rinkei, which could turn the tide for Ei.

I have to do my part! I thought defiantly. With the help of my makeshift walking stick, I pushed on until I reached a grassy plateau. There were fewer trees in this area, but judging by the number of fallen and burnt ones, this was likely due to a lightning storm. The soldiers who had made it here first were all sitting on the grass, enjoying a brief respite from hiking. Among them, I could see Teiha, Sekiei's adjutant, and Gan Shigou, who still had his battle-axe strapped to his back.

I wiped my brow with a handkerchief, then turned around to check behind me. The sight made me exhale in wonder. "Wow, amazing!"

What seemed like a verdant carpet sprawled out before me, as soldiers and horses made their way up the narrow, winding mountain paths. I couldn't believe I'd walked all that way by myself. Mei had given me some training and I'd traveled to the western regions from Rinkei on my own two feet, but even so, I never imagined I had such strength inside me.

A thin and reedy whistle caught my attention. "Hmm, you're tough for a little princess. Catch!"

As soon as I turned around, Ruri tossed a bamboo bottle at me. "Whoa!"

Ruri was wearing her usual blue hat and a coat similar to mine. She didn't seem the slightest bit tired. "Make sure you stay hydrated," she advised, pointing a finger at me. "If you pass out, we'll need to spare soldiers to carry you."

"R-Right." I removed the stopper and tipped some of the water inside the bottle into my mouth. *Wow, that's delicious! I feel like I'm being revitalized.* "We've covered so much ground," I noted.

"You're right. We're on schedule so far," Ruri said, drinking from her own bottle. Once she'd had her fill, she wiped her mouth on her sleeve, then produced a small wooden box from her pocket. Apparently, this was a compass, a tool that could be used to figure out directions.

Some soldiers decided they'd had enough of a break and started leaving. Watching them go, I said to Ruri, "I was the one

who came up with the idea of using a body double, but when I heard we'd be crossing this mountain range, my first thought was 'Are these people serious?'"

Ruri hummed in response. She didn't sound interested at all. Unlike Sekiei, who was quite willing to chat with me, this self-professed ascendant and Chou Hakurei still treated me rather coldly. I wondered if I should be grateful that Ruri even deigned to speak to me at all.

Although I was a little nervous, I battled on. "I-I mean, you suddenly came out with 'We're going to take back Keiyou!' Normal people would never be able to come up with something like that. All of the history books list this mountain range as one of the most dangerous locations in the Ei Empire, with the harsh terrain and wild tigers residing here preventing anyone from successfully crossing it."

"You're just as strange for suggesting the 'double Kou Miu' plan on your own. Sekiei and Hakurei were equally intrigued by it. Oh, and by the way, in the course of fighting the Gen army, we've seen them travel across uncharted territory multiple times." Ruri carefully placed the compass back in her pocket, then used a brush to mark something on her map. When she was done, she placed a hand on her hip and grinned at me. Even though we were the same gender, she looked so cool to me in that moment. "So I thought, 'Why can't we *also* pull off the impossible?' Besides, it's easier to break new ground than it is to maintain supply routes. U Hakubun will see hell in the coming days."

Is that how it works? I wish I'd spent more time studying military strategies back in Rinkei. While I was busy momentarily regretting my past decisions, Ruri returned her bamboo bottle to her belt, then tied a string around it to keep it in place.

"To tell you the truth, I was more surprised you chose to join us," she said. "You *do* realize it would've been safer for you to remain in Youkaku and send out a load of written appeals, right?"

It took me a moment to find the right words before replying. "I've lived in ignorance all my life." Mei had tried to convince me to stay as well. It was the first time I'd seen her cry like that. But even so... I clutched the pouch dangling from my neck. "After my mother passed away, I spent all of my time in the imperial palace. Mei was kind to me and taught me so many things. As

did my brother."

Kou Ryuuho, Ei's emperor, was a gentle soul, and that was why he hadn't been able to cope with the chaos of war. That was why he had chosen to lose himself in the eyes and thighs of that beautiful concubine instead.

I replaced the stopper in my bottle and continued. "However, he then invaded Seitou based on nothing but the advice of his subject and the desire to dole out punishment. Seeing the deaths of generals Jo Shuuhou and U Jouko, the assassination of the grand chancellor, You Bunshou, and the incomprehensible and unjust execution of Chou Tairan..." I paused as a sharp pain made its presence known in my chest. Everything I had just listed was more than enough for future generations to mock us and call the imperial family of this era a bunch of incompetent fools. My lips curled into a self-deprecating smile as I finished spilling my honest thoughts on the situation. "After seeing all that, I couldn't just sit around and do nothing. As a member of the Kou family, I had to take responsibility."

"And that's what led you to come up with your 'body double' plan, as well as making you decide to march with us?" Ruri smiled, dusting off her jacket. When she spoke next, it sounded like she was explaining an axiom. "If only your age and your brother's were swapped around, Ei might have put up a better fight against Gen. Although granted, you're such an honest girl, you've fallen for a man who's bad for you."

"R-Ruri, that's horrible! I will not turn out like my bro—"

But before I could finish my sentence, a panicked voice called down to us from higher ground. "Everyone, watch out! There's a tiger! A tiger's coming this way!"

Asaka and the soldiers all jumped up from their resting spots, weapons at the ready.

"Stay calm and form a circle," Ruri ordered, moving away from me.

"Yes, ma'am!"

A tiger? Where is it?

"Princess! Run!" Shigou yelled at me out of the blue.

Huh? All of a sudden, a nearby bush started rustling, and it expanded as something emerged.

"Watch out!"

"Eek!"

Someone shoved me to the ground just as the giant beast

leaped over me, and it was seconds later that the realization of what had almost happened to me struck, an icy shiver shooting down my spine. *I would've died just then...*

The beautiful girl with silver hair and blue eyes who had saved me—Chou Hakurei—pulled out the exquisite ivory sword, White Star, and in a curt voice, asked me, "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yes, I am. Th-Thank you, um, very much," I managed to say as I pushed myself back up into a sitting position. The sight before me, however, made me squeak with fear, and I felt all of my strength leaving my body.

I'd seen pictures of tigers in books and knew in my head that such creatures existed, but all of the stuff I'd learned about them promptly disappeared when face-to-face with the real deal. The monstrous beast in front of me was crouched low, ready to pounce, a fearsome growl emanating from its throat. Its pelt was a light yellowish brown, covered with dark stripes, and its body was the length of two adults. The tiger's fangs and claws were as sharp as the finest sword, while its fury-filled eyes stared at us.

Protected by soldiers wielding spears and bows, Ruri sighed. "I guess hoping we wouldn't encounter one of these things was too much to ask."

"Master Strategist," Teiha called out to her.

"We're counting on you to give us orders," Shigou prompted. Both of them looked tense, but their voices were calm. Even though the tiger was surrounded by a score of soldiers, it didn't attempt to escape.

Ruri adjusted the hat on her head. "Hey, Hakurei."

"Sekiei will be here any minute," Hakurei replied immediately. Her tone made it very clear that she didn't doubt him for a second.

How can she place so much faith in another person? I wondered, even though this really wasn't the time or place for such thoughts.

The tiger looked around, bared its fangs, and growled. Then it opened its mouth wider and let out a great roar, causing the very air to seemingly tremble at the sound and raising a primal fear in my chest. Teiha, Shigou, Asaka, and the other soldiers all paled, and the spears and arrows that were pointing at the tiger wavered slightly.

"Calm down, you guys," said a relaxed voice that was completely at odds with the tense atmosphere. In the same

moment, Sekiei landed in front of Hakurei and me, the movement causing his black hair to ripple in the wind.

"Sekiei," Hakurei breathed, a smile lighting up her face.

"Hey, what took you so long?" Ruri complained.

Without breaking eye contact with the tiger, Sekiei took a step forwards. "Don't be so unreasonable. I made it down here in record time, you know. Anyway..."

He took another step towards the tiger, then two more. The tiger's growling intensified as it pawed at the ground, ripping chunks of dirt out of it. On seeing how sharp the tiger's claws were, the soldiers' faces stiffened, and they all looked like they were wondering why no one had given the order to attack yet. I glanced over at Hakurei and Ruri a few times, but they, too, remained silent. My heart was beating faster and faster, and my mouth went dry.

"Sorry for giving you such a fright," Sekiei said to the tiger with Black Star still in its sheath. "We just want to pass through these mountains." He crouched down, and I had to cover my mouth with both hands to catch the scream that was threatening to escape. If the tiger had decided to pounce at that moment, Sekiei would be dead. Yet he looked genuinely apologetic as he scratched the back of his head. "We promise we won't hurt you or your cubs."

"Huh?" I whispered, looking around. The gathered soldiers seemed equally confused, and my own bewilderment only grew as the tiger's growling got quieter and quieter. *Huh? Wait, what? What?!*

"I'm sorry. I hope you'll put up with our presence for a little while longer. Teiha, hand me the bag of salt," Sekiei called back over his shoulder.

Teiha was too confused by the whole situation to give an immediate reply, but he eventually found his voice. "Y-Yessir!"

I'd read somewhere that tigers consumed salt. After taking the burlap bag full of rock salt from the western regions from Teiha, Sekiei raised his left hand in the air and said, "Everyone, back off slowly. Then I want the soldiers on the west side to break formation."

"Yessir," the soldiers replied.

Hakurei, the soldiers, and I backed away slowly, like we had been told, then the soldiers to the west stepped aside, breaking the line. Finally, Sekiei placed the bag full of rock salt on the

ground in front of him, then carefully put some distance between himself and the tiger. As if on cue, the beast straightened up as well. It snagged the bag in its mouth, then jumped away, disappearing back into the bushes so quickly, the entire encounter felt like a dream. Sekiei let out a sigh, and this sound of relief seemed to snap everyone out of their trance. The soldiers all let out shuddering breaths and relaxed, lowering their weapons. *All of that did actually just happen, right?*

"Ah, don't start cheering. We'll resume our march," Sekiei said calmly when he noticed the tension was morphing into excitement. "But before we do that, I'll give everyone a quick reminder. Hakurei, pass me some water."

"All right."

After Hakurei gave him the bamboo bottle, Sekiei continued. "As you just saw, tigers dwell in these mountains. Big ones at that. Be sure to make some noise when you move about so the tigers know we're here. Most of them won't show themselves, because they prefer to stay out of our way."

That tiger just then had acted like it could understand the human language. Of course, that was quite impossible. But it did at least feel possible to manage to avoid them henceforth.

Sekiei raised an index finger and gave a casual shrug. "Oh, one more thing. I strictly forbid anyone from acting on their own. Even when you go to take a leak, have a buddy with you." The soldiers chuckled at this, and the mood brightened significantly. Taking advantage of this, Sekiei added, "And if another tiger shows up, hmm, we should let Teiha handle it. It'll give him something to brag about."

"Lord Sekiei!" Teiha piped up. "I believe Shigou would be a much better fit for that task. He *is* the Tigerslayer, after all."

"Th-That nickname is obviously an exaggeration!" Shigou protested.

The soldiers laughed softly and clasped each other by the shoulders before resuming the march as one. *So after that ordeal, we're just going to keep moving as if nothing happened?* A thought flashed across my mind like lightning. Yes, what I had just seen had definitely reminded me of a similar encounter I had once read about in the *Book of Tou*.

Sekiei finally took a sip of water, though he must have noticed the way I was just sitting there unmoved, because he shot me a curious look. "Hmm? What's wrong, Your Highness? You seem to

be zoning out."

"Not only did you convince that tiger to flee with words alone, you also recovered the morale of the soldiers in a matter of seconds. Sekiei, could you possibly be the reincarnation of the legendary Kouei?"

"Huh?" Sekiei blinked.

"Pfffft!" Hakurei and Ruri both spluttered a laugh, then placed their hands on Sekiei's shoulders, trapping him between them.

"We're so happy for you, Sekiei," Hakurei said with a smile on her face.

"Did you hear that? You're the reincarnation of Kouei," Ruri teased.

"You two little..." Sekiei growled, his brow furrowing. He tossed the bamboo bottle back at Hakurei, then extended a hand towards me. "Of course not. I'm just a man who wants to become a civil official. Can you get up?"

"Y-Yes, I can!" I reached out to take his hand, but when I tried to stand up, I couldn't feel any strength in my legs. "H-Huh?"

"What's the matter?" Sekiei asked, while Hakurei and Ruri also peered down at me curiously.

My face burning, I smiled awkwardly and admitted, "Um, I think I'm still in shock because I can't get up."

The three of them said nothing, but simply looked at each other before nodding with a hint of resignation. There was a conflicted look in Hakurei's blue eyes, while Ruri adjusted her hat and fidgeted with her robes.

"Man, guess I have no choice, then. Up you go!"

I squeaked as Sekiei picked me up and placed me on his back. His shoulders were so broad, and— *Wait, this isn't the time for that!* I told myself. This was the first time I'd ever been in this amount of physical contact with a man who wasn't my brother. My thoughts were a total mess.

Unaware of my mental spiral, Sekiei barked his final orders to the soldiers. "All right, let's get to tonight's campsite while we still have daylight. Don't fall behind!"

"Understood, Lord Chou Sekiei!"

***

Little by little, my consciousness surfaced from the depths of sleep. I made a muted noise, then rolled over and opened my

eyes. The cloth ceiling of the tent greeted me as the dying flames of the candelabras caused shadows to flicker across the canvas walls. Usually, Mei would have asked me if something was the matter if she had noticed me waking up like this, but of course, she wouldn't show up here, no matter how long I waited for her.

Chou Hakurei was beside me, her face beautiful even when deep in sleep, while Ruri sounded like she was in the throes of a nightmare, murmuring, "The dice... They've forsaken me." Yui the cat was curled up next to her. With a sigh, I got up, being careful not to disturb any of them, then grabbed my jacket and made my way out of the tent.

We had set up camp that evening in a dried-up gorge halfway through the mountain range. The soldiers had placed rocks and boulders all over the place, and plenty of lit torches illuminated the area, the fire likely doubling as an animal deterrent, though the soldiers remained on guard against attack. I shrugged on my jacket and strolled around the camp until I found Sekiei reading on a rock with a fire and a kettle in front of him. Beside him were his leather bag and black sword.

"Oh, hey. What's up? Couldn't sleep?" he said when he noticed me.

"Um, pretty much," I admitted. "What about you?"

"That cat from this afternoon might have followed us, so I'm keeping watch with the others. It was a smart one, so I don't *think* it will be bothering us again, but just in case, you know?"

C-Cat? Well, I suppose there are scholars who believe that tigers are really just enormous cats. I crouched down near a rock and apologized once more. "I'm sorry for that disgraceful display earlier."

"Don't worry about it." He reached for the kettle and poured the contents of it into a nearby cup. Steam rose into the air, along with a unique herbal scent. He must have picked some of the mountain plants for it. After handing the cup to me, he poured one for himself. "A tiger's roar can scare even the strongest and most experienced of warriors. The fact that you didn't wet yourself was more than enough."

"*Wet* my—?! Sekiei, you are as mean as I have heard." Before we had gone to sleep earlier that evening, Hakurei and Ruri had told me all about Sekiei's most horrible moments. Oddly, it had felt a lot like listening to them bragging about a boyfriend. I took a sip of the tea, which was strong yet gentle in flavor, then

looked up at the night sky. An unbelievable number of stars winked down at me. “It’s so beautiful,” I breathed.

“The city’s far too bright,” Sekiei said, his eyes cold. It was then I remembered he had spent some time in the capital, and that he’d broken into the imperial palace in order to save the National Shield. “You know, for someone who grew up in the imperial palace, you’ve got guts. Hakurei and Ruri were singing your praises too.”

“I-I can’t be the only one riding a horse,” I said quickly. “I’m sure I lost any respect I might have earned when I wasn’t even able to stand after that encounter with the tiger.”

He smiled at my reply and changed the subject before I could say anything about the capital. “You always need to care about how others view you, don’t you? Being the princess imperial must be a tough job. I still think if you won’t surrender to Gen, you should try escaping to a foreign country.”

“I can’t do that. It would only cause more trouble for Mei.” Escape had crossed my mind more than a few times, and the more I heard about the situation Ei was in, the more I despaired that we could ever crawl out of this hole we had dug for ourselves. But I didn’t have the courage to simply flee with Mei.

Sekiei shook his head in a theatrical motion. “But making her act as your body double is fine? There’s a chance the Millenary Diviner will set his sights on her.”

“Th-That’s… I…”

“Don’t get so worked up. Want some more tea?” he asked, picking up the kettle again.

I swallowed my complaints and held out my cup. “Please.”

Sekiei poured me out some more tea, and as we watched the steam rise into the air once more, he said, “We’ll launch a surprise attack on Keiyou, then take control of the northern lands, where the Chou family once held the most influence. That should disrupt the enemy supply lines.”

That was Ruri’s plan, and although I was a total novice in military affairs, I could see the logic behind each action. Accomplishing this would be much more helpful to Rinkei than sending reinforcements, even if I was a little conflicted about the decision.

Sekiei clutched his cup in both hands and looked me straight in the eye. “Don’t let my strategist’s cute looks fool you,” he warned. “She’s as sadistic as Meirin. Even if we fail to take back

Keiyou, our arrival will have a huge effect on the northern regions, since the people there practically deified the National Shield. Throw in the fact that the Chou orphans are leading this army, with the Princess Imperial Kou Miu's handwritten manifesto and the legendary Heirloom Seal of the Realm in our possession, and…" He stood up and flung his arms wide. "'Fellow patriots, gather under my banner!'" That was the first line of the manifesto Ruri had dictated to me. A sudden gust of wind blew through the camp, causing the fire to rise higher into the air. Sekiei then teased me by bowing low to me. "Congratulations. Your name will be in all the history books, whether we win or lose."

"Sekiei, you really are a mean person!" The next morning, I would tell Hakurei and Ruri all about how he had made fun of me. *No, the problem lies with me*, I admonished myself. *I bring nothing of value, save for my heritage.*

Sekiei grinned. "Oh? I see, I see. So the princess imperial really feels that I'm a mean person. Very well. I shall have to live up to your expectations."

"Huh? No, no, I wasn't being serious. It was just, um, a spur-of-the-moment thought." He drew closer to me. "S-Sekiei?" I stammered.

Staring me right in the eye still, he ordered in a firm voice, "Set down your cup and close your eyes."

I let out a pathetic squeak, then murmured, "A-All right." I obediently closed my eyes. *What is he…?* I wondered. *Wait, don't tell me he's going to do something that's reserved for boys and girls over a certain age?! No, I mustn't! M-Mei will get so mad at me!* Something hard settled in the palm of my hand, and I exclaimed, "So cold! Huh?"

"You can open your eyes now."

I sensed Sekiei draw away again, so I cautiously opened my eyes. As soon as I recognized the item in my hand, I gawked at it for a moment, then cried out, "Sekiei?!"

He'd given me a black box that had a design resembling a peach blossom and three swords engraved into its wood. I recognized it as the box containing the Heirloom Seal of the Realm.

Sekiei sat back down on his rock and gave me a gentle wave, as if he hadn't just handed off an important artifact to me. "Carrying that thing around was getting annoying. Take care of it

for me, will you? Oh, and keep it a secret from Hakurei and Ruri for now. If they find out you have the box, I'll drag you down with me."

"Why?" I was having trouble breathing. With the key in my possession and the box in Sekiei's, for better or worse, we had divided up the responsibility. *Why in the world would he disrupt that balance? This must be some sort of mistake!* Doing my best to calm myself down, I said, "Aren't you worried I'll take the seal and surrender to Gen?"

"Oh, will you? Sure, go right ahead! You can pass along a message to the White Wraith for me. Tell him, 'My father didn't manage to slice that head of yours off your slender neck, so Chou Sekiei will oblige the next time we meet!'"

He hadn't hesitated at all in giving his answer, and I could only groan in response, my cheeks puffed out in a pout. "I think I understand how Hakurei, Ruri, and Meirin feel. You're not just mean. You're *terrible*!"

"Hey, now. You won't meet a man who's as serious about life as I am. Once you live a few more years, you'll understand. Hakurei and the others are the ones who are way too ambitious about what they want."

I didn't respond. *There's no use. I can't beat him with words. I couldn't handle Ou Meirin either, and I hear he always bests her in conversation.*

The teasing light faded from Sekiei's eyes as a more severe look appeared on his face. "Fight after fight awaits us once we're out of these mountains. If something like today happens, and you're paralyzed with fear, we won't be able to drop everything to help you. Our enemy will be the Seitou army, which is said to be controlled by a witch known as the Honorable One. I know I'm asking a lot of you, especially when you're so inexperienced in combat, but don't let your guard down."

"I understand," I said, straightening up and gripping the box tight. I'd never experienced combat, and honestly, the prospect of it terrified me. But even so... "Don't worry about me. I chose to be here, so I'm prepared for—"

"Idiot." Sekiei tossed me a small bag, which I snatched out of the air and opened, finding what appeared to be fried beans inside. "Now that you're with us, I forbid you from throwing your life away for no reason," he snapped. "Cling onto whatever you need to, and survive. Live long enough to get to actually *see* your

name recorded in the history books. You got that? Answer me!”

“Y-Yessir!” I was a member of the imperial family, yet my body reacted on its own, giving a military salute to Sekiei. My heart was pounding and blood roared in my ears. *Th-The change from when you’re serious to when you’re joking is far too dramatic!* Of course, I couldn’t actually *say* that to him, so I muttered a complaint under my breath.

Sekiei reached out and tapped me on the forehead. “Good answer. All right! It’s about time the kids got some sleep. You should go back to your tent now. If you stay out here any longer, either Hakurei or Ruri will notice your absence.”

“I-I’m not a chi—”

“Sure, sure,” Sekiei interrupted, and with that, he picked up his bag and sword, and walked off.

Unbelievable! Even though I was still unhappy about the way he had treated me, I had to admit that the anxiety that had been clouding my heart had let up a little. My lips curled upwards into a smile, and I remained rooted to the spot for a moment as my eyes followed his retreating back.

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“Now then, Master Ren, this is where I must leave you. The Honorable One awaits beyond,” said the elderly attendant acting as my guide.

“Good work,” I—Ren—replied curtly before making my way down the cold stone corridor.

This was the palace of Seitou, in the capital of Ranyou. As a member of Senko, a secret organization that prioritized the unification of the lands above all else, I had visited this place many times in the past, though it always managed to set my teeth on edge. This land had seen far too much death. I headed for the room at the very end of the hallway, gazing past my fox mask and observing how the lit candles affixed to the pillar stretched my shadow up the wall.

The doorframe to the room was lined with gold, and a hanging purple cloth was all that partitioned it from the hallway. I pushed past it, and as soon as I crossed the threshold, the heavy scent of incense hit my nostrils. The room I found myself in was so luxurious, it seemed to contain all of Seitou’s riches. A beautiful woman with long purple hair and dressed in monk’s

robes was lying on a jewel-covered bench, a strange-looking old book in her hands. I couldn't make out the cover, but I was willing to bet she was reading something about mysticism that evening as well.

She was the Honorable One, the true ruler of Seitou. No one, including Senko's elder, knew her real name. I'd heard rumors she was over a hundred years old, though no one seemed able to verify this claim.

The Honorable One noticed me in the room and set her book aside. "Ren, remove your mask. How impolite of you."

Reluctantly, I did so. The large mirror before me reflected my silver hair and blue eyes, and the sight filled me with such loathing, but in contrast to my sour mood, the Honorable One sat up and smiled at me, her expression a sultry one on her exquisite face.

"You look as lovely as ever," she said with a chuckle. "I see no reason for you to hide your face."

My disgust reached its peak with her comment, and I rested my hand on the butt of the sword hanging from my belt. "I didn't come all this way here to discuss that with you, and if you insist on pursuing that matter, I can always lop off your head, you know."

The woman had been an ally of Senko's for many long years, and if it hadn't been for that, I would've killed her long ago. For her part, the Honorable One knew very well that I couldn't harm her. She opened up a fan and covered her mouth with it.

"Oh, how frightful," she teased. "I'm nothing more than a demure woman. Claiming my head would make little difference in this world."

I refused to entertain her nonsense, remaining silent and swallowing down my rage as best as I could. Irritating me was a tactic she often employed, and I knew it. I sucked in a deep breath. "The elder's request is the same as before: Send more Seitou soldiers to support Gen so they can unify the lands as quickly as possible. The White Wraith and his army have reached the gates of Rinkei. It's only a matter of time."

"And my request remains the same as well," the Honorable One said, snapping her fan shut. She stood up and approached me, leaning down to whisper into my ear, "If you can give me the Heavenly Swords that are said to have bisected the unbreakable Dragon Jade, then I wouldn't mind giving you all of Seitou. Those

swords will aid me greatly in my quest to revive the old powers of mysticism."

"Our priority is to unify the lands!" I retorted. *I knew it. She already knows about what happened to the Dragon Jade in Rinkei.* Senko had never once wavered in its pursuit of its ultimate goal of unification. Compared to that ambition, the war between Gen and Ei hardly mattered. Without turning to look at her, I hissed, "You've accumulated a wealth of knowledge over your many years, so surely you can also understand how technology has stagnated as a result of our division. Over a thousand years have passed since the Tou Empire unified the lands, and while the minority tribes and horsemen continued to squabble in this country, the city-states in the far west and out on the great island in the eastern sea have enjoyed many years of civil peace as one nation. As a result, they've been able to invent and discover things we can only dream about. Weapons using gunpowder that are still far more powerful than fire lances are just one example of their many innovations. We can't spare any more time."

"I know that," the Honorable One agreed, though she didn't sound happy about it. "They may even uncover the secrets of ancient mysticism before I can." She ran her fingers down the incense burner, then continued in an icy voice. "The White Wraith is the greatest hero of this generation. He will surely destroy Ei, plus annex the tribes in the northern plains and surrounding regions. Perhaps he will even create a golden age to surpass the one the Tou Empire presided over, and help me fulfill my greatest ambitions." The woman was no idiot. Troublesome as it was, her priority differed from Senko's.

"In that case, lend us and Adai even more of your strength!" I beseeched her. "If you're so worried about mysticism, I promise we'll offer you as much help as you want once we've achieved unification."

"Oh, I'm so grateful you'd suggest that," she said, not sounding or acting the least bit sincere as she picked up the burner.

Could she have figured out that we're planning to eliminate her? If she had, the Honorable One gave no indication of knowing that as she sat down on the bench once again.

"Return to your elder and tell him this," the Honorable One said. ""I understand your situation, and as usual, I will lend you as

much aid as I can spare.' Of course, I might be persuaded to send even *more* soldiers if you hand me the Heavenly Swords at once."

I had a sharp intake of breath. She hadn't given an answer at all, and because of that, I doubted the Seitou army in the central plains would see anything like more advanced armor or large catapults. That being said, Senko possessed nothing to offer this wily woman. The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars—the twin swords the noble hero, Kouei, had wielded a thousand years ago—were in the hands of the enemy. While Senko might have been powerful, we had no way of traveling to the inner lands of the western regions to reclaim the weapons.

If only Orid Dada or Hasho had emerged victorious in that last battle! No, Chou Hakurei is one thing, but almost nobody stands a chance against Chou Sekiei in combat. The only ones capable of killing him are the Black Wolf, the White Wolf, and myself, Ren of Senko. Dwelling on the impossible is a waste of time. I recalled rumors about the Heirloom Seal in the western regions, but that wasn't something that existed in reality. Perhaps I could find some books on mysticism for her.

"Ah, that reminds me," the Honorable One said as she lit a flame in the incense burner. Smoke from it rose into the air and wrapped around her hair as if it possessed a will of its own. It was a vile sight. "I hear Chou Tairan's orphans are the ones who wield the Heavenly Swords now, and that they've escaped to the western regions. May I kill them?" The question was posed in such an innocent way.

Fury so intense that it took me aback erupted inside of me. I clutched the hilt of my sword and sneered, "Don't even bother trying. You won't be able to."

"Oh?" Curiosity burned in the Honorable One's eyes.

A vision of myself in a fox mask trying to tell myself to be quiet passed in front of my mind's eye, but my body was already moving of its own accord. I returned to the doorway and placed my hand on the curtain, and when I spoke again, each word projected my desire for blood. "Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei faced me, Ren of Senko, in direct combat and managed to repel me. Your pathetic underlings could *never* defeat them. Enjoy the taste of defeat!"

The Honorable One said nothing in response. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I had ever displayed such

open rage. *Did I mess up?* Regret flashed through my mind, but I shook it off. *There's nothing wrong with speaking the truth.* I reaffixed the fox mask in front of my face, then whirled around. The Honorable One was hiding her own face behind her fan, but I didn't care.

"That accursed pair saw my silver hair and blue eyes. *I* will be the one to murder Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei. You got that?!" I yelled, letting myself be carried on the torrent of emotion that was flowing from me before turning and leaving the room. *That's right. I still have a score to settle with those two.*

If the Seitou army refused to move, I would have to do something about it myself. I leaped out of the window and landed in the dark palace garden, my brain working overtime to come up with some way to convince the elder as the moonlight illuminated my long silver hair, its blinding light reflecting off the water of the pond.

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Once Ren had left the room, I—the "Honorable One," as people referred to me these days—smiled to myself.

"Chou Tairan's orphans defeated *Ren*? Ha ha ha! How fascinating!"

I hadn't been expecting her to give that away. Not only was Ren a member of Senko, she was a woman of calamity, as denoted by her silver hair and blue eyes. In her youth, she had learned and mastered an odd style of swordsmanship pioneered by an eastern island nation, and she was undoubtedly a powerful fighter, to the point where extremely few people in this country or neighboring ones had any hope of defeating her. And yet, despite Ren's overwhelming talent for close combat, that pair had proven more than a match for her?

"What an *interesting* turn of events."

It had been a long time since I had felt excitement like this. I unfolded a letter my daughter—the White Wolf and a vanguard general of the Gen Empire—had sent to me from Sotaku. According to her, the Ei Empire's fate was already sealed, and Ren had nothing to worry about. However, the rat that the foxes had sneaked into the Ei imperial court was seemingly moving of his own volition. Manipulating that poor Jo fledgling was no longer enough for him, for he was looking to pull the Ou

sparrow—who thought itself an eagle—into his plans too.

The White Wraith was an incredible strategist, but that didn't render him immune from the sudden machinations of fools. *That doesn't leave me enough time.* If Adai Dada accomplished his desire of unification, then he would undoubtedly look to employ the services of Chou Tairan's orphans, the current wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars. After all, the White Wraith possessed the memories of his past life as Ouei, and both he and Ouei valued talented individuals above all else.

If the Chou orphans joined Gen, they would be out of my reach. Faced with that possibility, I would prefer the lands to remain in chaos for a little while longer. Unification would have to wait until I'd gotten my hands on the Heavenly Swords. Nothing mattered more than the revival of mysticism! Now, was there anything I could use? I looked over my daughter's letter again.

She's still in love with Adai? Her taste in men is horrible. Where does she get that from? Hmm… So the idiotic Ei emperor's younger sister rode to the western regions. All the spies I sent there got flushed out, so I've not been able to keep an eye on that area. But it's not out of the question for her to head there. The sister, huh? The legend of Kougyoku sprang to mind. Kougyoku was a female general from the Tou Empire who had hidden away the Heavenly Swords and Heirloom Seal of the Realm on Ou Eifuu's passing. Yes, I could use that.

I opened a desk drawer and took out a stack of papers. The Gen army under Adai's leadership was formidable. Far too formidable. Therefore, lending the floundering Ei Empire a lifeline wouldn't harm anyone. *I must order my daughter to steal the Heavenly Swords away from those Chou orphans in all the chaos. Oh, yes, and I can't forget about forging the Heirloom Seal.*

Brush in hand, I smiled, and within minutes, I had drawn up a fake manifesto. "Everything's going according to plan, and yet with this one single move, I can disrupt the whole flow of the game. I've long grown tired of the White Wraith's beautiful and unchanging face. What expression will etch itself onto his face when he sees *this*?"

Chapter Three

“The Rin family is innocent, and so is the You family. Hmm…”

In a villa owned by the Jo family in Nansui of the southern regions, I—Jo Yuushun—pored over a record of proceedings in the imperial court, head in hands. I was sitting in a wooden chair that my father—the Phoenix Wing, Jo Shuuhou—had crafted for me when I was much younger. The record wasn’t the genuine article, of course—only the highest-ranking members of the Ei Empire were allowed to read through that—but a copy that Lady Chou Saiun had obtained for me. According to Miss Meirin, the special flag they had sent to Chou Sekiei in the western regions was one made with Lady Saiun’s help as well, but it felt safer to drop this line of thought.

I had thought that either Rin Koudou, the lieutenant chancellor, or You Saikei, the interim chancellor, had been the ones to manipulate my brother, Hiyou; however I was finding out that I had been mistaken in this assumption. But if that was the case, who had?

Sitting across from me and scanning through the documents at an alarming rate, Miss Meirin looked up and smiled. “Yuushun, move your hands before using your head. We need to have all of these documents checked tonight! Otherwise, Lord Hiyou will lead his army all the way to Rinkei! ★”

“R-Right! My apologies.” *She’s so scary. And she works ridiculously fast!* I was proud of my skills as an internal administrator, but she was in a whole other league.



The other day, my brother's announcement that "the main Jo forces will march on Rinkei as soon as possible" had thrown the entire family for a loop. Our mother—as well as our grandparents and the older subjects who had protected the southern regions for years—had tried their best to change his mind, and I had also attempted to talk him down by convincing him that it would take time to gather all the necessary resources and supplies for such a venture. We had just about managed to stop him from going through with it, though it was a very close call. Since then, Hiyou had spent all his time training with the army on the outskirts of Nanyou, because attacking the capital and launching a foolish rebellion against the emperor remained his aim.

While I was busy feeling gloomy at being reminded of this, Miss Shizuka walked into the room, which now had an orange glow to it due to the setting sun casting its dying rays through the window. She had a tray in her hands, and behind her was Shun'en in the adorable uniform of the female attendants. My heart beat a little faster on catching sight of her.

"Lady Meirin, you mustn't stress yourself so much," said Miss Shizuka. "Lord Yuushun, I've brought some tea and snacks for you, so please take a short break."

"Miss Shizuka!" I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. I had never realized quite how warm the kindness of others could be. *That's right. This entire situation is just downright bizarre! Does Miss Meirin honestly expect the two of us to be able to find the person that led my brother astray from this heap of documents?*

Pouting, Miss Meirin shifted her weight left and right, her brown pigtails bouncing in time with her movements. "I'd finally warmed up and everything!" she whined. "Shizuka, I know Yuushun's cute and all, but don't you think you're kind of spoiling him?"

After pouring us some tea, Shizuka glanced at her mistress, and without a moment's hesitation, said in a calm voice, "I do not. Shun'en, please assist me."

"Yes, Miss Shizuka," said Miss Shun'en—who was apparently the younger twin—in a voice that sounded like gentle chimes. Hearing it never failed to put a smile on my face. She placed a plate of snacks (sugar that had been hardened into sticks) in front of me next to a porcelain cup, then smiled. Her expression was so beautiful, I no longer felt any hint of exhaustion. "Here

you are, Lord Yuushun.”

“Th-Thank you, Miss Shun’en,” I said as I reached out for the cup. My fingers gently brushed against hers and we both made a surprised sound as we pulled our hands away. Since she had finished pouring tea for me, I set the cup aside and hurriedly said, “I-I’m so sorry!”

“I-It’s all right. Please, um, don’t worry about it.”

My face was burning, and I had to look down to hide the crimson flush in my cheeks. My embarrassment wasn’t coupled with a sinking feeling, though. Instead, a pleasant hum resonated through me, reaching all the way to my heart.

Miss Meirin shot us a suspicious look while munching away on the sugar snacks before muttering, “It’s not that I mind seeing this or anything. But I sure wish Lord Sekiei and I could have such bittersweet interactions! Even when we were in the capital together, I can’t recall ever sharing any similar moments with him!”

Miss Shun’en and I jumped a little at the implication, and we both opened and closed our mouths a few times as we searched for excuses.

Miss Shizuka dabbed Miss Meirin’s mouth with a white handkerchief before inserting herself into the middle of the conversation. “Pardon me for saying, but that’s not quite true. You fell asleep next to Lord Sekiei once, and he let you slumber on his shoulder.”

Miss Meirin’s eyes widened. “W-Wait, how come I don’t know about that?!”

“Hmm, I wonder why.”

“Shizukaaa!”

The two of them started play fighting. Even though I had only known them for a short period, I could tell they were close. My brother and I used to have a relationship that was similar to theirs.

I drank some of my tea, then looked over at Miss Shun’en next to me. “U-Um, I take it your brother reached Youkaku safe and sound?”

“He did. A traveler delivered a message from him. Apparently, on the journey south, he had to take a major detour west. He’s very good at directing horses and boats, though.”

“I’m glad to hear it!”

Mister Kuuen, who was Miss Shun’en’s slightly older twin

brother, was making the long journey to the western regions, acting as a messenger for Lord Sekiei. Considering the central plains had fallen under the control of the Gen invaders, it was impressive that Mister Kuuen had managed to make the journey from Nansui to Youkaku. And to think he had done that all on his own...

"Um, Lord Yuushun, there's something I'd like to ask you," Miss Shun'en said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Oh! Yes, what is it?"

Miss Shun'en looked at me, her lovely eyes twinkling like twin stars as she twiddled her fingers in embarrassment. "Would it be all right if I stayed with Lady Karin tonight? She was the one who made the request, and I've already received permission to do so from the mistress of the Jo family."

"My sister asked you that?"

After our father's passing and our brother's sudden change of character, my sister had fallen into a deep depression. Even within the Jo family, very few of us were able to take care of her in her current condition. I'd seen her milling around the villa over the past few days, but at some point, she had attached herself to Miss Shun'en. She had ended up liking the same person as her brother. I glanced over at Miss Shizuka and Miss Meirin, who surreptitiously shrugged at me. *So they've already agreed to this.*

I turned back to Miss Shun'en and gave her a hearty nod. "Of course. Please take care of my sister for me."

"Don't worry. Leave everything to me! ♪" she chirruped.

A gentle atmosphere settled over the room. I found Miss Shun'en's presence so comforting that even the wounds in my heart caused by the difficulties I was having with Miss Meirin were starting to heal. *I hear Miss Shun'en works for Lord Chou Sekiei and Lady Chou Hakurei, but I wonder if there's something I can offer her to convince her to come to the Jo family instead. O-Of course, that's something to consider later.*

"Ahem!" Miss Meirin said, not even bothering to pretend that she was actually clearing her throat. The sound dragged me from my fantasy, and when I looked over at her, she had her hands folded on the desk and a wide grin on her face. "All right, break time's over! Let's get back to work."

"R-Right!" Miss Shun'en and I said in unison.

Miss Shun'en excused herself with a bow, then left the room. *Ah, Miss Shun'en...* I suddenly felt really lonely without her

presence in the room.

Miss Meirin's eyes narrowed. "In any case, we're getting close to finding out who the true culprit is."

"We are," I said with a nod, forcing myself to focus. It was time to discuss the hidden truths we had uncovered from the pages. "At this moment in time, it seems there is no one of outstanding talent like the grand chancellor in the imperial court. That said, the emperor isn't wielding the absolute power he possesses either. I'm positive about the facts up to this point. However, it's precisely *because* there is no one who possesses the proper authority that this is all so difficult. How troublesome."

"I agree wholeheartedly!" Miss Meirin replied cheerily before holding out her empty cup for Miss Shizuka to refill it. "Judging from the records, the influential figures in the imperial court are: interim chancellors, Rin Koudou and You Saikei; Imperial Guard marshal, Ou Hokujaku; and the guardian general of the great water fortress, Gan Retsurai. These four are the only ones who speak up during debates."

Rin Koudou was the younger brother of the previous chancellor, Rin Chuudou, who was the one who had orchestrated Lord Chou Tairan's execution to barter peace with Gen, yet perished during the proceedings. You Saikei was the grandson of the grand chancellor, Lord You Bunshou, and despite lacking his grandfather's talent, he desired fame and glory nonetheless. Ou Hokujaku was the emperor's favored subject, but alongside the previous chancellor, he had also pushed for that unforgettable Seitou invasion. He had caused the deaths of so many soldiers, including those from the Jo family, yet he'd crawled back alive and received no punishment for his failure. Finally, Gan Retsurai was the one supporting the Ei army after it had lost so many of its competent officers and soldiers in this war. They each had their own values and titles.

Miss Meirin wrapped a lock of her hair around her fingers as she continued. "On occasion, I see mention of Gi Heian and Gi Anseki. They're former Ei soldiers who joined Gen and helped to apply pressure from the north. However, they only appear as enemies that have the potential of rejoining Ei. I don't think we need to pay them much heed."

"Understood." I grimaced.

Gen wasn't perfect, of course, but truthfully, the idea of a former Ei soldier being placed in such a prominent position and

even leading their own army was unbelievable. Prior to his passing, my father had tried to set up a squad of foreign soldiers and make a place for them in the main Jo army, but he wasn't able to accomplish it due to protests from the other soldiers. Now that I thought about it, Lord Chou Sekiei didn't hesitate to take on the foreign Miss Shun'en and Mister Kuuen as close attendants, implying that his open-mindedness was similar to Adai Dada's, the White Wraith.

Miss Meirin removed her hat and twirled it around on her finger, her eyes gazing out the window. "I believe that the rat who is whispering sweet poison into Lord Hiyou's ears works for the big bad White Wraith."

"Whoever they are, they're doing a great job of hiding their tracks," I sighed. "Given that they know the inner workings of the imperial court, they *must* be of high standing. Perhaps it's someone who never speaks up during meetings?"

These days, my brother didn't pay attention to a word our mother said, so there was a precedent for someone to be present but silent. Occasionally, he'd send a messenger to this villa, but only ever to ask why I was taking so long with the logistics. I needed to root out this rat as quickly as possible so that I could bring my brother back to his senses.

Miss Meirin placed her hat back atop her head and tapped her forehead. "Hmm, but it's strange that we've looked over all of these documents, yet one name hasn't even come up. I suppose that means... Wait, one name hasn't even come up?"

"Miss Meirin?" I queried at the same time as Miss Shizuka said, "Lady Meirin?"

The genius merchant paid us no heed, then after a few minutes of thinking, she slammed her hands down on the desk and yelled, "Shizuka! Think back to when we were looking into Lord Sekiei. Did Lady Saiun's name ever appear in his official documents?"

"Lady Saiun's name?"

They were investigating the Chou family? Um, no, I didn't hear that. Not a single word of it! I told myself, trembling at Miss Meirin's casual confession.

Without glancing in my direction, Miss Shizuka rested a finger on her chin, deep in thought, then slowly replied, "No, it didn't."

"Exactly!" Miss Meirin exclaimed, her cheeks flushed with excitement. She leaped to her feet and started pacing around

her room, each step causing her ample breasts to bounce up and down. I looked away, only to meet the eyes of Miss Shizuka, who smiled at me. I had no time to feel embarrassed, however, because Miss Meirin began outlining her deductions. “Lady Chou Saiun was a very, *very* famous figure among us merchants, yet she has never worked as a government official.”

“Huh? But what does that have to do with… Ah!” Upon realizing what Miss Meirin was driving at, my voice raised in surprise. *Oh, I see! The reason we haven’t turned up any suspicious names despite searching through these documents this whole time is because…* “So what you’re trying to say is whoever manipulated my brother isn’t actually a government official, but someone who’s close to someone *else* with access to information in the imperial court. In other words, a ‘privately secured talent.’ That’s what you’re saying, yes?”

“Exactly!” Miss Meirin confirmed with a nod.

According to the legend, Ouei, the imperial chancellor of the Tou Empire—which had accomplished the goal of unification a thousand years ago—had enjoyed “collecting” talented individuals. In fact, it was a hobby of sorts for him. These days, we described this philosophy as “using personal funds to secure talented people who can change the course of a country,” and those of high social or political standing still used the tactic to this very day.

Miss Meirin continued pacing in a circle, her expression tense. “We’ve been suspecting the wrong people this whole time. We’d assumed that since this individual could get in contact with Lord Hiyou easily enough, they must hold an influential position within the court.” She paused and clenched her small fist. “But no, the rat is someone who simply has *access* to the manor of either Rin Koudou, You Saikei, Ou Hokujaku, or Gan Retsurai. They must either live there, or can enter and leave at will.”

“That narrows things down a lot! Let’s take a look through the documents again, and…” I trailed off as a memory struck me.

We were looking for someone who didn’t hold an official position in the imperial court, yet had access to the information that circulated within it. I remembered stumbling across my father drinking the night before the Seitou invasion. He had been terribly drunk, which was quite rare for him. “The emperor’s bias towards that girl is a real headache,” he had mumbled.

Girl? But who had he been talking about? I fell silent, lost in thought. Miss Meirin brought her face close to mine.

"Lord Yuushun?" she said. "Is something the matter?"

"Ah, no," I said hesitantly. "It's noth—"

"Use your words!" Miss Meirin snapped, in sharp contrast to her usual manner of speech. I stared at her, mouth agape, and she raised a finger in the air. "You can't convey anything if you keep all of your thoughts to yourself. Silence is useless in a place of discussion."

I couldn't argue against that logic, but what if I was mistaken? It would be worse if I accidentally led us down the wrong path and ended up letting the real culprit destroy the empire.

Illuminated by the orange glow of the setting sun, Miss Meirin encouraged me with a nod, the serious expression on her face making her look older than usual. "There's a possibility that whatever information you have will provide us with the vital clue we need. If you're right, we can flush out the rat." She clasped her hands together and proclaimed in a firm voice, "That's what Lord Sekiei would say! ☆"

Miss Meirin placed absolute faith in Lord Sekiei, and although my brother had changed a lot since his return from Seitou, he still spoke of Lord Sekiei with a smile on his face. In fact, the more I heard about him, the more I wanted to meet this man who bore the nickname of Kouei of the Modern Ages.

"Then I'll just come out with it," I said. "Uh, now this is just supposition on my part, but—" Before I could float the possibility that there could be *multiple* rats infesting the imperial palace, someone rang the bell that was attached to the door.

"Please enter," Miss Meirin called out.

"I apologize for interrupting you," Lady Saiun's attendant said as she walked in.

"Miss Yuuka?" Miss Meirin said.

"Is something the matter?" Miss Shizuka added.

Miss Yuuka's expression was tense, and she hesitated for a moment before thrusting a letter towards Miss Meirin for her to take. "Please take a look at this."

I got to my feet and went to stand next to Miss Meirin, leaning down to read the letter that had been placed on the table. What I read left me speechless, and I couldn't stop myself from stumbling backwards a few steps before rage overtook me and I punched a nearby pillar. "I... I can't believe it," I breathed in sheer

exasperation. “How could my brother have done this? We don’t even have enough supplies!”

Lady Saiun’s message bore the worst possible news: *The main Jo forces have left the outskirts of Nansui and are heading north, likely marching on Rinkei. It also appears a man wearing a bizarre fox mask approached Lord Jo Hiyou last night.*

A man in a fox mask? Did this person who tricked my brother need the entire Jo army? All ten thousand strong of them?

Miss Meirin pressed the letter to her chest and gazed out at the sky to the north, pain etched on her face. Her frustration at her own helplessness was palpable. “Miss Hakurei! Ruri! Lord Sekiei!”

The setting sun had been so bright only moments before, yet all of a sudden, it had disappeared below the horizon, plunging us all into darkness. I, too, stared northwards, and it was then that I noticed two beautiful stars beginning to sparkle.

***

“Raise your heads, everyone,” said the emperor, his exhausted voice echoing around the imperial court despite the thunderstorm raging overhead in the Ei capital, Rinkei, almost drowning his voice out completely.

I—Denso, a member of the secret organization, Senko—was sitting near the back of the room, far from the emperor’s throne. Even at this distance, though, I could see how dull the emperor’s bright golden robes had become. His own decisions had led to the collapse of his empire, but he didn’t seem to realize that. I felt sorry for his people and his soldiers.

Ou Hokujaku, sitting close to the emperor, remained still. He was the marshal of the Imperial Guard, and had viewed himself as his country’s savior, but his military uniform couldn’t hide how thin he had gotten over the past few months. *So a foolish emperor’s favored subject is himself a foolish general, huh?* Yet I couldn’t mock him too much. After all, Ou Hokujaku’s authority was the sole reason for me being able to sit here in the imperial court. I still had to remove my fox mask, though, revealing the burn scars on my left cheek.

After I’d eliminated the grand chancellor using Jo Hiyou as my weapon, Senko sent me two missives. First, they wanted me to worm my way into the inner circle of Ei’s imperial court and

report back to them with all the intel that reached my ears, and secondly, they wanted Jo Hiyou to march on the capital when the time was right. That was all. For a man of my talents, both tasks were child's play.

The previous grand chancellor, Rin Chuudou, had disappeared after leaving to put the proposal of a peace treaty to Gen. Once he was out of the picture, I earned Ou Hokujaku's trust and began setting my plots into motion. However, a few nights back, I had received word about that accursed Hasho—whom I had often competed against to prove my worth to the organization—losing at Youkaku. It was then that I realized something.

At this moment in time, I held the fate of Ei in my hands, and that was no exaggeration. With Ei under my control, I could do as I pleased and show off my talents to their fullest. Everyone under the heavens would know my name. Senko had given Hasho the opportunity to stand center stage, but I could use his failure to claim his position for myself.

For the first time since Senko had taken me in, I burned with ambition. The Ei Empire was destined to fall, which meant there would be no problems if I just helped it along a little. After thinking about it for a short while, I made Hokujaku one of my pawns as well. I'd come to this decision on my own, without consulting or informing Senko beforehand.

Everything was going according to plan so far. The Jo fledgling had agreed to march upon Rinkei, and the foolish emperor's indecision was fostering resentment in the Ou sparrow. All I needed to do now was settle on when the great Ei Empire would fall, and how dramatic its final moments would be.

"As you all know," the gullible emperor began as I smiled away to myself, "the enemy vanguard has reached the great water fortress. We no longer have time to waste on meaningless pleasantries. Begin your reports."

"Very well. I shall give mine first," said a man wearing a military uniform as he stood up. He was sitting in one of the four seats closest to the emperor's throne, indicating that this was General Gan Retsurai, the man in charge of the water fortress which was serving as the Ei Empire's final shield. He was one of the few competent generals left in the country. Apparently, he had once served in the Chou army, receiving personal training from Raigen the Ogre himself. "We have reassigned the soldiers guarding the various provinces to the great water fortress. The

fortress itself has enough rations and weapons to hold out against Gen's siege. However, we're still missing members of the Imperial Guard."

"Yes, I didn't send my cavalry, as their speed is their weapon," Hokujaku replied smoothly in response to Retsurai's barb.

I was glad that I'd had the foresight to train him on how to answer any criticism that might be leveled against him. At present, he was wavering between remaining loyal to the emperor or saving the country, even if it meant bearing the cross of a traitor, though of course, that was all part of my plan. Nothing was more entertaining than toying with the fate of an empire.

Hokujaku stood up, revealing his much skinnier frame, and continued with his view of the situation. "There are many swamps and lakes around the capital, which impede the maneuverability of our cavalry. However, the cavalry can still be a valuable weapon against the enemy, provided we use them well. If all of our soldiers hole themselves up in the water fortress, who will protect the city?" Hokujaku spoke with conviction, never wavering. It was one of his few praiseworthy aspects. He slammed his fist against his chest plate and proclaimed to Retsurai, "The water fortress will be the anvil we lure the northern horsemen to step on, and we will be the hammer blow that crushes them. I believe *this* is the path to victory! General Gan, surely *you* can see the wisdom in my words?"

Retsurai scrunched up his face and said nothing, making his disagreement with this sentiment quite clear with his silence. Even experienced generals struggled to make the most of cavalry units, and Ou Hokujaku had already suffered a humiliating defeat during the Seitou invasion. It would have been one thing if Adai Dada had been the one to suggest this course of action, but could Hokujaku really launch a game-changing attack for Ei? *Of course he can't.* I wanted to laugh out loud at the idiot.

The emperor raised his hand. "Hokujaku, enough. We need soldiers to protect Rinkei. Do you understand, Retsurai?"

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty," both Retsurai and Hokujaku said in unison.

Idiot. You utter buffoon! You've just sealed the Ei Empire's fate! Hasho's handsome face floated up in my mind. We had grown up in the same organization, yet he had attained far more authority

than I did. *See that, Hasho? With just a few clever words, I have destroyed an entire country! I win!* It was getting harder and harder to maintain a neutral expression.

A haggard-looking man who kept wiping away sweat from his brow got to his feet. This was You Saikei, the interim chancellor. “Next, I have a report on the western regions,” he said. “They haven’t sent us any correspondence whatsoever. However, I have discovered that the northern horsemen attacked Youkaku about a month ago.”

The air in the imperial court grew even more tense. *So news of the attack has finally reached their ears? That took far too long.* The emperor placed his hand on his forehead and covered his eyes, then gestured with his other hand for Saikei to continue.

After taking in a deep breath, Saikei looked down. “I-I am truly sorry to inform you of this, but I have received no word of Her Imperial Highness’s arrival at Butoku.”

A heavy silence greeted this piece of news. *So the princess imperial, Kou Miu, died before she could reach her destination?* Despite her youth and status as a member of the imperial family, I had some measure of respect for her. Her decision to volunteer to take a message to the western regions had been courageous, albeit reckless.

The fat, bald man sitting across from Saikei smirked. This was Rin Koudou, the lieutenant chancellor. “The U family fought with the horsemen, didn’t they? Perhaps they closed off the roads and trapped our messenger at Youkaku?”

“I had of course considered that possibility,” the younger and more inexperienced Saikei replied, his brow furrowing with distaste. He shot Koudou a mocking smile and continued, “However, there is no way for me to confirm it. Perhaps the lieutenant chancellor could grace me with some of his wisdom?”

“Humph! If such magic existed in this world, we wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place. As things stand, the U family is far more trustworthy than Jo Hiyou, who is presently making a nuisance of himself in the southern regions.” Koudou’s entire face and bald head had gone crimson with anger, but all of a sudden, he smiled as his eyes narrowed like a serpent eyeing up its prey. “Ah, that reminds me. Interim chancellor.”

“What is it?” Saikei said, looking tense and wary at being called on.

“I hear you’ve evacuated your family and riches from the

capital.”

“H-How dare you spread such baseless rumors about me!” Saikei roared, his voice echoing off the walls of the imperial court.

You Bunshou, you were one of the finest grand chancellors in the history of the Ei Empire, yet here is your direct descendant, dishonoring your legacy. I couldn’t help feeling somewhat sorry for the dead man.

Saikei’s eyes were bloodshot, and his arms swung about as he defended himself, the sleeves of his robes dancing in the air. “The You family has been loyal to Ei for generations. I swear we have done no such thing! Lieutenant chancellor, as it happens, I’ve heard more rumors about *you*! The people say you’ve sold your manor!”

“I-I simply wanted to return some gold to the empire’s coffers!” Koudou shot back.

This sort of hideous display was rather commonplace in declining empires, I supposed, but it wouldn’t be long before I put them all out of their misery anyway.

“Koudou, Saikei, that’s enough,” the emperor said in a strained voice. He looked exhausted.

“Y-Yes, Your Imperial Majesty,” the two idiots replied, their faces red with embarrassment as they both sat down.

“Do not concern yourselves with my sister’s fate,” the emperor said, his voice dull. “She was the one who volunteered to travel out to the western regions, and she knew her mission had a high chance of failure. Now that it has come to this, we can no longer count on reinforcements from the U family. The enemy attacked Youkaku a month ago, which means that no matter if they won or lost, we should have heard something since then. However, in reality…”

Another heavy silence filled the room. No matter how much these people argued among themselves, they could do nothing to stop their empire’s end that was approaching fast. After all, they had been the ones to execute their guardian deity, the National Shield.

The emperor grasped the armrest of his throne. “Retsurai, how many soldiers in total did the enemy bring with them? And there’s no need to sugarcoat anything for my sake.”

An experienced veteran, Retsurai was the only one among those present who would have found a place under the White

Wraith's command. He stared up at his emperor and replied, "Your Imperial Majesty, according to our scouts, they sent soldiers to attack Youkaku, then filled the gaps with reinforcements. I believe they number over two hundred thousand strong."

Adai Dada was an expert in the strategies of the great Ouei of yore, and he prioritized information above all else. He must have made sure to target and eliminate any scouts, yet Retsurai had still managed to get that much information about his enemy. His competence was impressive.

"Hokujaku, how many soldiers do we have?" the emperor asked.

"We've gathered defensive forces from the various regions and provinces, as well as called for volunteers, but even after that, we only have around a hundred fifty thousand men and women. My cavalry makes up ten thousand of that number, though as mentioned earlier, they will play the role of the hammer."

Even in ancient times, proper military strategy dictated that besieging a fortress required you to have triple the manpower of your enemy. However, the quality and training of each individual soldier in the Gen army far surpassed those in the Ei army, and that gap was insurmountable.

"We have to win. But..." The emperor hesitated and trailed off. Until recently, he'd never had to deal with any major problems or put up with stressful situations. But within one year, he had lost the grand chancellor, the National Shield, the Phoenix Wing, and the Tiger Fang.

With his otherworldly intelligence, Adai Dada had planned out every last detail of this invasion. The prospect of me getting the jump on the White Wraith filled me with a dark joy.

"Anyone may speak," the emperor said, opening up the floor. "Say what's on your mind without fear of punishment. Does anyone have any ideas how we might turn the tide and save the Ei Empire?"

Everyone looked away, not daring to meet the emperor's eye, their mouths firmly shut. *Exactly as planned.* The only person who made any sort of move was Hokujaku. He glanced over at me and nodded. *Perfect. Now it's time to find out what will happen to this country.*

"My apologies!" I yelled from the back of the room before

standing up and making my way to the throne. Everyone stared at the scars on my face, but I ignored them and knelt before the emperor. “My name is Denso, and I serve as an advisor to Marshal Ou Hokujaku. Prior to entering Marshal Ou’s service, I worked for the grand chancellor, Rin Chuudou, and—”

“Your Imperial Majesty, Denso here has a sharp mind,” Hokujaku interrupted me. “We have devised a scheme that can steal back the advantage in this war.”

Murmurs filled the room, though none sounded excited or particularly welcoming. I was able to block them all out, though. If I let myself feel hurt every time someone voiced their dislike of me, I would never have survived in Senko.

“Silence,” the pathetic emperor commanded, and his subjects obeyed the order.

A drowning man will reach out and grab a stalk of straw, even if it ends up proving to be a fruitless endeavor. Hmm. No, perhaps it’s more appropriate to compare this to a dying man imbibing poison after someone has tricked him into thinking it was medicine.

“Denso, is it?” the emperor said in a desperate-sounding voice that pulled me from my thoughts. “Tell me about this scheme of yours.”

“I would be delighted to.” I looked up and saw that Hokujaku’s face was pale and drawn. We had discussed this in advance, and with my next words, I would seal his fate as well. “In my humble opinion, there is a major problem with our country’s defenses. Even if we hole up in the great water fortress and protect it from enemy attack, we lack the reinforcements coming in from outside. That’s why Marshal Ou Hokujaku is taking great pains to secure a reserve army.” This was something quite obvious, and I could see Gan Retsurai raising a graying eyebrow. “However, the enemy knows we are cornered. So in order to win, we must take them by surprise.”

“How do you mean?” the emperor asked. He was tapping the armrest of his throne, unable to contain his irritation as the sun outside sank towards the horizon, ushering in the dusk.

I passionately clasped my hands together and yelled, “Your Imperial Majesty, this country is in great peril! I beg you in your infinite mercy to grant Jo Hiyou clemency for his crimes. We are acquaintances, and he sent me a letter stating his desire to march upon Rinkei to save the emperor!”

“Wha—?!” The officers and officials of the imperial court all

started murmuring among themselves.

This was, of course, a lie. The letter *I* had sent to the Jo fledgling had included a request for him to march upon Rinkei to remove the corrupt emperor from the throne, and thereby save Ei. And the entire Jo army was already on its way here. He still viewed Hokujaku as his enemy, but with my silver tongue, I wasn't too worried about that.

The emperor stared at me wide-eyed, without even bothering to silence the commotion in the room. "You Bunshou was one of my oldest subjects. He was akin to my other half, and Jo Hiyou *murdered* him!"

"We have no other choice," I beseeched him.

This was yet another lie. The emperor always had the option of leading out his army and making one last stand himself. They could also pour all of their resources into defending the water fortress. The only problem facing the pale and hesitant emperor before me was whether he could work up the resolve to choose either of these two options. He heaved himself to his feet and stumbled his way towards the back of the imperial court.

"Your Imperial Majesty!" Hokujaku cried, jumping up from his chair—which toppled over backwards from the force—and reaching out to the emperor.

The night before, he had told me with absolute *certainty* that "His Imperial Majesty will surely decide on a course of action. I put my faith in him." But here in this moment, despite the disastrous situation the Ei Empire found itself in, his master was still refusing to make a choice. He had turned as pale as snow by this point, unable to hide his despair.

The emperor paused, resting a hand on the wall, then in a strangled voice, he said, "I shall consider the proposal. Good work, everyone. You're all dismissed." And with that, he disappeared off into the depths of the imperial palace.

A choked noise disgorged itself from Hokujaku's throat, then in a fit of pique, he smashed his fist into a nearby pillar, his eyes bloodshot and filled with murderous rage. As I had planned, this final straw had steeled his will, and he now wouldn't hesitate to bow his head to Jo Hiyou. I peered downwards, my shoulders trembling, and to anyone looking at me from the outside, it must have seemed like I was sobbing, but in reality, I was doing my best to hide my laughter.

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In the western regions, the sun beat down on the headquarters of the invasion army that had been set up on the outskirts of Youkaku, and the sounds of gongs, yelling, and explosions drifted over from the narrow canyon path nearby. The explosions were likely caused by those fire lances the enemy army so loved to use. I—Hasho, the Millenary Diviner in command of the hundred thousand soldiers of the invasion force—was hard at work on some paperwork in my tent when I set down my brush and sighed.

“The battle’s as noisy today as it was yesterday,” I muttered to myself.



I wanted to prevent any unnecessary casualties from my army clashing with the U forces that had holed themselves up inside their forts, and as a result, since my return to headquarters in Youkaku, neither side had launched any attacks. Over the past month, instead of direct confrontation, we had focused on keeping the enemy pinned down in this location, though with the main army marching on schedule, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about the present stalemate.

"Master Strategist, I have some new documents for you. I've already looked over them myself," announced my young and cheery adviser as he pushed aside the bear pelt over the tent flap and strode in. This was Gi Anseki, who hailed from Ei rather than Gen and was the nephew of Gi Heian, the commander of our secondary forces that were applying pressure to Ei from the north of the great river.

"Ah, Anseki," I said, already feeling exhausted just looking at the pile of scrolls he had placed on my desk, every single one of the documents pertaining to army internal affairs. "Good work."

"It was nothing!" he replied. "My workload is nothing compared to yours, Master Strategist. You not only have military affairs to contend with up on the front line, you also have to handle governing the lands we've annexed. Anyway, I've done what I can to assist you, so I should be getting back to my uncle now."

He flashed me a bright smile, and I grimaced back at him. Anseki had arrived in Youkaku a few weeks back, as a messenger from HQ. I'd taken advantage of his competence and roped him into helping me with my paperwork, because although the Gen Empire boasted a vast amount of territory, it lacked someone capable of handling internal affairs, which meant people like me had to cover multiple duties at once. My workload had become even heavier when the talented Emperor Adai decided to leave the capital of Enkei to lead the army himself. This explained why, at that moment, I reached out and grabbed Anseki by the sleeve before he could leave the tent.

Anseki looked at me, the grimace on his face matching my own from earlier. "Um, Sir Hasho, could you please let go of my sleeve? I-I'm only here as a messenger, so..."

"Look at what I have to contend with once you've gone," I said, jerking my chin at my desk, where mountains of paperwork for the invasion army and three of the surrounding provinces

were piled high. “I’m out on the battlefield, yet I’m going to die from doing all this paperwork before a sword or arrow can get anywhere near me. I know it goes against your orders, but could you stay and help me?”

“B-But I…”

Anseki was a kind person at heart, and as soon as I saw the flicker of hesitation in his eyes, I pounced on the opportunity. “I’ve already asked His Imperial Majesty and Gi Heian for permission.” I needed to secure as many competent workers as possible for my own peace of mind.

“Sir Hasho,” Anseki said, looking helpless.

“Gen doesn’t have enough people like us who can handle logistics and offer support from the back lines. His Imperial Majesty has been worrying about it for many years. Besides, even if you want to accumulate merits at this point in the war—” The roar of a fire lance interrupted me. I’d heard that old Kyou Shunken and the princess of the U family were leading the enemy army, and by the sounds of it, they seemed especially motivated. I heaved a sigh and continued. “Well, I’m sure you catch my drift.” I let go of Anseki’s sleeve and scooped up a cup, which I poured hot water into from the teapot I’d been heating over a fire. “The U army lost the Tiger Fang at Ranyou, yet their will to fight remains strong. Their victory in the last battle gave their morale a tremendous boost. Trying to smash through their defenses will only result in massive casualties for our side.”

“Are we also abandoning the Butoku attack plan Lord Orid drew up?”

The plan to cross Sengai Valley the same way the hero, Kouei, had a thousand years ago had been an ambitious scheme, but it had ended in failure. Old Berig had died saving Lord Orid, and many soldiers who’d made a name for themselves on the northern plains had also fallen in the battle.

I sipped my water, “His Imperial Majesty disapproves of throwing away the lives of our soldiers for no reason. Our enemies aren’t idiots either, so we won’t be able to use the same strategy twice. Besides, those troublesome Chou brats are in Butoku as well.”

Anseki pulled a face and grumbled under his breath. A few months back, the Gi forces had suffered a devastating loss at Shiryuu, a province on the southern bank of the great river. Chou Tairan had been the one to drive them back. “The Chou brats,

you say?"

"I haven't crossed blades with them myself," I said, frowning. They'd killed the Crimson Wolf, Nguyen Gui, the Gray Wolf, Seul Bato, and the aforementioned Berig. Whenever Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei appeared on the battlefield, despite being at a disadvantage numbers-wise, they managed to kill a prominent commander in our army. I looked up and met Anseki's eyes. "But as you know, I've lost to them in proxy battles twice. We cannot underestimate the strategist who is supplying them with their tactics."

I'd lost to Ruri of Kobi twice—no, *three* times, if I included the chess match we'd had back when we were children. I would have loved to pay her back for the repeated humiliations, given the chance.

I took another swig of water. "However, it's only a matter of days now before the emperor achieves his dream of unification. Without the Three Great Generals, Ei lacks the might to fend off our army. I'd like to avoid losing any more battles in this war so that I can secure a future for myself afterwards. This may come as a surprise to you, but I have ambitions, just like any other man. You do too, don't you?"

The young adviser was quiet for a moment before replying, "I do," and shrugging slightly. While I'd had no trouble airing my own desires, his Ei heritage must have caused him a lot of issues, even if he didn't let others see. With that shrug, he had finally decided to work with me.

Anseki settled himself down in a chair while I poured out a cup of hot water for him. "Sir Hasho, there is just one thing I'm worried about."

"And what is that?" I asked in a low voice.

He must not have been able to work things out for himself either, as when he replied, his voice was devoid of emotion, informing me only of an objective fact. "Some odd rumors have been doing the rounds among the soldiers lately."

"Oh, so *that's* what you wanted to discuss, is it? I've heard those rumors too. The ones about the emperor's sister being in Youkaku, yes? Well, I've not confirmed the veracity of it myself. Is something bothering you about them?"

Reports of a woman wearing the golden robes particular to the imperial family being sighted inside the enemy fortress had reached my ears as well, though not in any particular detail. The

soldiers didn't seem overly worried about it, but it wasn't something I could ignore.

Anseki's brow furrowed. "I could understand if the rumors were just spreading from Youkaku. But the soldiers who brought us food from Keiyou mentioned them as well. Some had even read her manifesto, and swore the document had contained a stamp from the Heirloom Seal of the Realm."

"Soldiers from Keiyou said that? And the Heirloom Seal of the Realm? You mean, the one from the Tou Empire?" I asked, tilting my head to one side. *What in the world is going on?*

Lost in thought for a moment, Anseki stared at the water in his cup. "Do you think Ei might be trying to confuse us?" he murmured.

Was this the doing of Ruri of Kobi? If it were, how had she sent manifestos to Keiyou? She should be in either Youkaku or Butoku with the Chou brats.

Unable to figure out an answer to the conundrum myself, I shrugged and sighed. "That's the most logical explanation, yes. However, Gi Anseki, I must ask you this: Do you think Ei has anyone capable of employing such diversionary tactics?"

Anseki was again deep in thought for a moment, to the point where I could almost see his mind whirring at top speed. Then he smiled and said, "No. My uncle said Ei no longer has anyone capable of protecting it, now that it has lost the Three Great Generals and the grand chancellor. Gan Retsurai, the general in charge of defending the great water fortress, isn't a great strategist either. As for Ou Hokujaku, the marshal of the Imperial Guard—"

"He's a fool who can only think by the book," I concluded. "Emperor Adai isn't worried about him at all. No, the *best* puppets are the ones with some level of competence. The Jo fledgling could be one, perhaps, but..."

Denso, the man I had once competed against in Senko, sprang to mind, as I'd heard that he was the spy Senko had sent to manipulate Hokujaku. He was smart, but his sense of rivalry towards me was strong, and I could only hope that he wouldn't make moves according to his own agenda which might disrupt Emperor Adai's plans.

Anseki leaned back and waved his hand. "It's no good. I just can't figure out these rumors."

"Don't let your guard down, and collect as much information

as you can. We'll report it all to His Imperial Majesty." Trying to figure something out when we had no idea where to even start with it was a total waste of time. Unlike Emperor Adai, we weren't able to see through every deception or strategy. I set my cup aside and unfurled a map. "After taking Keiyou, our country's territory has grown bigger overnight. To tell you the truth, it doesn't matter if the real princess is in Youkaku or not." I tapped the northern part of the map. "However, it wouldn't do for people to hear these rumors and start believing them. The provinces in the north despise Ei for the unfair execution of the National Shield, and are slowly coming around to the idea of our empire's rule, but the less-governed territories may fight back. It would be extremely troublesome if our supply lines on the Grand Canal ended up being disrupted as a result. If that happens, we won't be able to feed the approximately two hundred thousand soldiers we have on the front lines."

"Due to the difference between how many supplies horses and humans can transport, and how many ships can?"

"That's right."

Taking the Grand Canal and the surrounding provinces had solved our logistics dilemma, which was why I'd had no complaints about how Emperor Adai had prioritized the task. After all, feeding our soldiers was the top priority of any commander.

"There *is* another way, of course, though it won't give us access to as many resources," I said, sharing my thoughts with Anseki. "We could simply pillage the territories we are annexing. The lands to the north of the great river are abundant with food, so if we were to use the northern roads your uncle guards, we could secure more than enough rations to feed the soldiers on the front lines."

"That *would* go against His Imperial Majesty's wishes, though," Anseki pointed out.

I nodded, satisfied with this response. *I knew it. This man will make a worthwhile ally.* In order to secure an influential position for myself after the war, recommending Anseki as my apprentice might be an astute idea.

Once I had drawn up plans for my future in my head, I added, "Our goal is to govern, not to seize. Pillaging from the lands we take over will only sow unrest among the populace and make them resist our rule even more. His Imperial Majesty wouldn't

want us to act so foolishly.” Burning and salting the land of the Ei Empire was all too easy, and in reality, Gen had done that to plenty of other nations in the past. However… “In battle, our army is unstoppable. But facing down an enemy on an open field is very different from dealing with a small group slithering about in the shadows. It would be impossible to completely eradicate moles that refuse to show their faces and fight.”

“Let’s strengthen our blockade around Youkaku, especially at night,” Anseki suggested. “We should try to stop people from joining their army as volunteers. Our soldiers have reported seeing citizens sneaking into Youkaku to fight for their cause. We should also forbid any mention of the rumors about the princess in our camp.”

“I’ll leave that in your hands.”

Anseki swallowed down the last of his water, then stood up. If I could get him to handle the various problems that were cropping up within the camp, it would take a lot of responsibility off my shoulders. Now all I had to do was wait for the main army to take Rinkei, and finally, unification would be—

“M-Master Strategist! S-Something terrible has happened!” a young Seitou officer exclaimed as he rushed into the tent. I recognized this soldier as one who had taken part in the battle at Ranyou, and he was a seasoned soldier in his own right, yet his frenzied panic made him seem more like a novice than an experienced veteran.

I maintained an air of calm and asked, “What is it?”

“Please look at this!”

I took the proffered document from him and scanned it, with Anseki also peering at it. What we read made our eyes widen in shock.

“Impossible!” Anseki cried. “The Chou army is heading for Keiyou? And not only that, but Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei are *leading* them?!”

“I see. Curses! This is another one of *her* strategies!” I growled.

Ruri of Kobi was the strategist aiding the Chou orphans, and from what I knew about her, she wasn’t exactly the type to even suggest taking such a risky gamble. I never expected that she might try to attack Keiyou while my attention was firmly on Youkaku. They must have taken a small elite force through Kozan, despite the tigers living in the mountains. *Are they insane? It’s like they don’t care if they live or die.*

I picked up my feathered fan and started barking orders. “Anseki, assemble a squad from our forces and send our fastest messenger to the Black Wolf, Gisen.”

The Chou army was small, but it comprised elite soldiers. We couldn’t afford to underestimate them, *especially* if they had Ruri’s backing too. That was before even considering the involvement of Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei, who had inherited Chou Tairan’s pride and blood respectively.

“Tell the Black Wolf: ‘The Chou army is heading for Keiyou. We need reinforcements as quickly as possible.’ In the northern territories, the National Shield holds more sway than the princess imperial. If we don’t move now, we’ll lose Keiyou, and that land stands at the confluence of the great river, and serves as the primary hub for our logistics.”

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“Sekiei, I can see the garrison defending Keiyou! There’s over three thousand of them. As for what their infantry’s wearing… So that’s the Seitou armor I’ve heard so much about, is it? The Gen cavalry make up the flanks. Five hundred each side. Heavy cavalry are seemingly kept in reserve, closer to the main camp,” Gan Shigou reported. He was scouting out the enemy’s forces from the lookout ladder that he’d climbed. Despite his colossal frame, he was actually quite agile.

I—Chou Sekiei—stroked my horse’s black mane and squinted at the horizon. The weather was nice, and the wind was calm, meaning no dust or sand was being kicked up. With my vision unimpeded, I could get a good look at their camp myself.

“I can see enemy soldiers on Keiyou’s southern wall. It’s like you say, Shigou. There aren’t too many of them, but Seitou’s precious heavy cavalry are here as well. I don’t see any fire lances, catapults, or even a moat. I’m guessing our arrival was so sudden and unexpected, they had no time to prepare, meaning they’ll have no choice but to engage us in open battle.”

The soldiers that were all lined up under the massive Chou war flag murmured to themselves. *Huh? What are they so surprised about?* Gan Shigou descended the ladder again without any trouble and remounted his horse. One of his subordinates—who worked under him when they were both bandits—handed him his helmet. Once an enemy, Gan Shigou was now, like Teiha,

one of our frontline commanders.

He sighed, battle-axe in hand. “How can you even see anything from this distance? You sure you weren’t a hawk in a previous life?”

“Lord Sekiei’s supreme vision has always bewildered us!” the veteran soldiers all exclaimed in unison.

Ack, this is why folk with combat experience are so troublesome. Wh-What about the soldiers who aren’t *as familiar with me?*

“Under normal circumstances, seeing anything at this distance would be an impossible feat. No one in the Imperial Guard possesses eyes as good as yours,” a handsome man on horseback piped up next to me. He seemed to be in his late twenties, his armor and helmet looked old and worn, and in his hand, he held a spear. This was Dan Kouzen. Apparently, up until a few years back, he’d had a bright future ahead of him in the Imperial Guard, but now, he was with us, along with a group of volunteer soldiers he had personally recruited.

“We agree! You have seriously weird eyes!” those same volunteer soldiers said as one. They were naturally worried about the upcoming battle, yet they all had smiles on their faces. Although they were new to this situation, they were already acting like seasoned members of the Chou army.

“Oh, come on, you guys. Sheesh,” I said, pulling an exaggerated grimace before tugging on the reins of my horse.

Two weeks had passed since we had navigated our way across Kozan, the deserted mountain range north of Butoku that was home to countless tigers, and started our march on Keiyou. While our army was small—consisting of a mere thousand soldiers—morale was high, thanks to Hakurei and myself wielding our Heavenly Swords in the thick of it. In addition to that, Teiha and Shigou were skilled commanders, and most of the army were veterans who had survived countless battles. With the help of Ruri’s stratagems, we’d felt assured we could defeat any enemy troops we might encounter on our way here.

During the march, we had met up with Dan Kouzen. After bearing witness to my father’s execution in Rinkei, he had returned to his homeland and secretly recruited about two hundred volunteer soldiers, which only motivated everyone further. We had also handed out the manifesto that Ruri had written up and Miu had stamped with the Heirloom Seal in the provinces, cities, and villages around Keiyou. Many people had

written back, showing support for us and our cause.

I'd found it odd quite how quickly the news had spread, plus how little time it had taken Kouzen to gather up so many volunteers and unite with us. Apparently, this was because there were rumors stating that "the Chou orphans and the patriotic princess are recruiting soldiers" flying around. How strange. I prevented my suspicions from showing on my face and urged my horse, Zetsuei, to stand at the front of the line.

"This is just a reminder for you and Hakurei," I recalled Ruri saying the night before. "We don't have enough soldiers to take the entirety of Keiyou in one attack. However, once we have won here, news that Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei returned to Keiyou and defeated the enemy in open battle will spread like wildfire across the continent. Our victory will make our manifestos more effective, and will attract many more soldiers to join our army."

The Keiyou garrison had three thousand soldiers, while we only had around a thousand. Despite the fact they had triple our numbers, the thought of us losing never seemed to cross Ruri's mind. I only hoped she wasn't being a bad influence on the princess imperial, who was waiting for us back at headquarters.

"So why did I even bother climbing that ladder?" Shigou lamented.

"Who knew the Kouei of the Modern Ages would be such a troublesome character?" Kouzen teased.

"There's nothing I can do about my eyes being better than yours," I shot back, suppressing a smile while still feigning irritation.

Like Teiha, who was in charge of our left flank, both Shigou and Kouzen knew how to lead an army. They understood a general had to act the same as always when standing in front of their soldiers, especially before a battle. I had to admit, I never realized how many unaffiliated talents Ei had. If father and Raigen had still been alive, they would have greatly enjoyed sharing wine with these two.

"G-General Chou!" called out a child soldier from the western regions. He galloped up to me on his mount and handed me a quiver of arrows.

"Thanks," I said, patting his head and mussing up his hair. In response, the soldier smiled at me and backed away.

Who would've thought I'd be referred to as "General Chou" one

day? Feels pretty uncomfortable. Now that I thought about it, Kuuen had also asked if he should refer to me by that title as well, back when he was with us two days ago. He'd obeyed Meirin's outrageous order and scythed his way across Ei to reach us. *I'll scold him later about referring to me as "general." Actually, maybe* I'm *the one in the wrong here, since I never warned him about Ou Meirin and Auntie Saiun. I can't believe they made him bring us such a dangerous forgery.*

Once we had checked out the enemy's formation, I winked at Shigou and the others, who had been watching the exchange in silence. "Well, since you're so unhappy that I stole your thunder, I'll give you another chance to prove yourself," I said. "It might be hard to tell sometimes, but I'm the kind of commander who really listens to the advice of his soldiers. Hey, everyone, listen up! Shigou's team and Kouzen's team are going to defeat all the enemies for us today!"

"You monster!" Shigou yelled.

"We're not all as strong as you," Kouzen sighed. "I believe it'd be safer if we just left everything to Shigou."

"What?!" Shigou bellowed.

"I learned many things during my time in the Imperial Guard, including how to pawn off work," Kouzen added.

The soldiers around us laughed, and the sound of their amusement stoked a sense of unease in the enemy formation before us, their flags and spears wavering slightly. *All right. That should be enough to take everyone's minds off things.*

"Sekiei, we're on the battlefield. Please stop messing around," Hakurei—who'd been back at headquarters—said as she galloped up to me on her white horse, Getsuei. Dressed in the uniform of the western regions, she looked like a princess general from a war tale. The sight of her caused the soldiers to grow even more eager, and they all gave each other fist bumps. Soldiers loved beautiful women. Even the passing of a thousand years wasn't enough to change that.

"I-I *wasn't* messing around," I protested as Hakurei poked my cheek with her slender finger.

"Somehow, I don't believe you," she said.

"I'm telling the truth!"

Hakurei started grumbling a response, but I held up a hand before she could get any words out. I glanced over my shoulder and saw around a hundred cavalrymen in light armor standing

at the ready behind Asaka. Veterans who had been with us ever since Keiyou made up over half of that number. The numbers weren't matching up with what I had heard prior to this battle.

Hakurei brushed her silver hair out of her face and started barking orders in a sharp voice. "Shigou, you'll command our right flank. Dan Kouzen, I'd like you to protect our base. Be sure to follow Miss Ruri's orders."

"Understood," the former bandit and the former Imperial Guard said in unison, saluting Hakurei before jumping into action.

The respect the soldiers had for Ruri was closer to worship these days. Not only were her tactics responsible for our consecutive victories, but she had also somehow accomplished the arduous task of supplying everyone with three warm meals a day.

I scratched my cheek. "I thought you were supposed to stay back at the base too," I pointed out to Hakurei.

"Miss Ruri said you might go too far if left to your own devices," she replied, coaxing her horse to stand next to mine and reaching up to remove some dirt from my clothes.

That ascendant! She must've said that on purpose. I'm sure of it!
"Man, no one trusts me," I lamented.

"You have no one to blame for that but yourself," Hakurei remarked, glaring at me. "Besides, the original plan made very little sense. I mean, why *wouldn't* you have me here with you? You'll be getting a scolding tonight."

"O-Oh."

While crossing the mountains, we had both been in charge of our own teams, meaning we weren't able to spend all that much time together, and it seemed our nightly conversations hadn't been enough for her. The soldiers saw their chance to heckle me and promptly took it.

"Apologize, Lord Sekiei!"

"Lady Hakurei is always right!"

"Face her wrath!"

"Let us drink some tasty wine too!"

"Just hurry up and get married!"

"Huh? You mean they're not already married?"

You guys do *know we're about to fight, yes? That we're moments away from the start of a battle, right?*

Hakurei blushed and drew closer to me. "Sekiei," she hissed.

“D-Don’t blame me!”

A horn sounded from the line in front of the Keiyou garrison. They were ready to charge.

I winked at Hakurei. “All right. Are you ready?”

“Of course.”

We raised our bows, drew back the strings as one, then released our arrows. With the help of the wind, the projectiles darted through the air and hit the flagstaff of the enemy’s banner, snapping it in half. The flag fluttered to the ground, where it drew shocked stares from the enemy soldiers. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hakurei smile.

“All right, let’s go win this one, you guys!” I yelled. “We’ll take back our homeland of Keiyou! Follow me and Hakurei like always!”

Hakurei and I charged forwards, and the Chou soldiers followed, their roars so loud, they made the ground shake. Ruri’s plan was already in motion. All we had to do was fight until the appointed time. Easy.

Zetsuei raced across the battlefield like a gust of black wind. Hakurei managed to keep up with me, and the two of us shot down officer after officer, as if this was some kind of archery competition. I avoided hitting any vital points, because the cruel reality of battle was that several soldiers were needed if you wanted to save a single wounded one, making this a more efficient way of reducing their numbers by occupying them. It didn’t take me long to use up my score of arrows, leading me to toss aside the empty quiver and draw Black Star.

“You bastard!” one of the enemy soldiers yelled in my direction.

“How are we losing to just *two* riders?!” another cried in dismay.

“You aren’t going any farther!” another growled.

Faces twisted with fury, several of the enemy riders charged at Hakurei, who was still using up her supply of arrows. Asaka and her team behind us tried shooting them down, but that didn’t stop them. *They’re planning on taking her down in a suicide attack! Gotta hand it to them, that takes guts.* I made the split-second decision to shove Zetsuei in between Hakurei and the enemy riders.

“Sekiei!” Hakurei screamed as swords, spears, and axes descended on me.

“What?” was all the riders could manage to get out as I cut through them—weapons, armor, and all—and they fell to the ground dead before they even had time to realize what had happened to them.

Palpable fear coursed through the enemy forces. Those riders must have been the higher-ranking members of the army, and the blow to the enemy’s morale of seeing them fall so easily had the effect of slowing them down. I peered around the battlefield and took stock of the present situation. We were pushing the enemy back on both the left and right flanks, which meant we would win if we continued to—

“W-Wait, that’s… That’s Chou Sekiei! The one who wields the unbreakable black sword!” one of the garrison soldiers yelled. The rest began murmuring among themselves.

“Chou Sekiei?”

“The one who defeated the Crimson and Gray Wolves?”

“The orphan of the National Shield!”

“He’s the only one the White Wraith fears!”

“The Kouei of the Modern Ages, who would even kill ghosts if they dared to get in his way?”

Though the enemy had been fighting bravely up to this point, this revelation caused them to go weak with fear, and their formation promptly fell apart.

I pulled on the reins and brought Zetsuei to a halt to give it a break, then rested my sword on my shoulder. “Huh. Sounds like I’ve become a celebrity of sorts.”

“Stop messing around! And watch out in front of you!” Hakurei snapped. She discarded her empty quiver, drew White Star, then pointed it towards the enemy.

I turned to follow her line of sight and saw a line of riders in silver armor and helmets, with long spears and giant shields in their hands. These men were the heavy cavalry units of Seitou.

My brow furrowed at this. “The enemy has sent out all of their reserve soldiers.”

“It’s like Miss Ruri predicted, though they’re here earlier than we expected. What should we do?” Hakurei asked.

“We’ve only had to deal with small skirmishes since leaving the mountains, huh?” I mused, as if this wasn’t a problem at all. After making sure that Asaka and the others had gathered up around us, I added, “Maybe it’d be a good idea to announce to the world, ‘Here stands Chou Hakurei, daughter of Chou Tairan!’

What do you think of that, Lady Yukihime?" I asked, lowering my voice when saying Hakurei's childhood name.

She flushed so thoroughly, even her neck turned crimson. "Why do you always want *me* to be the center of attention rather than grabbing it for yourself?" she asked, her lips pursed. "This isn't how you should be treating your older sister, you know. It seems I need to reeducate you on how to behave."

"Eek! Scary!" I yelped, acting like a frightened child, which caused the soldiers to laugh at my antics. The wind picked up, carrying the scent of fresh dirt upon it. Teiha should almost be ready. I turned and pointed at the line of Seitou's enemy cavalry with Black Star. "Then, let's say, 'The princess imperial of the Ei Empire rose up with an army and defeated the Keiyou garrison, even though they had three times the numbers.' We can also include stories about how our ascendant used magic to control the wind."

"I'm sure Miss Miu won't mind. But you'll have to calm Miss Ruri down yourself," Hakurei replied. She was always so cold to me, though when I glanced across at her in profile, I could see a smile playing across her lips.

"All right, Hakurei. Stay behind—" I started, but she interrupted me.

"Make sure you don't fall behind, Sekiei! ♪" There was a genuinely cheerful look on Hakurei's face, and before I could open my mouth to say anything, she was charging towards the enemy.

That's not the look of someone who's standing on a battlefield! Without any hesitation, I kicked Zetsuei into a gallop until I caught up with her, and Asaka and the others followed suit. Considering the advantage their heavy cavalry had over our normal cavalry, they must not have been expecting us to even attempt a straightforward charge, for their spears started wavering in confusion.

"Raise your weapons! Fire!" a familiar voice called out. It belonged to a veteran from the western regions, and after he had given the order, an explosion of noise rang out, followed by some of the enemy soldiers falling off their horses. Meanwhile, none of our horses had even budged.

I looked over my shoulder to see that the fire lance squad we had borrowed from Oto had fired a barrage of projectiles to support us. "Please take them with you! And I'm not taking no for

an answer, Lord Sekiei!" Oto had said, practically forcing them to become a part of my forces. Though I had to admit, in hindsight, she had made the right call.

Within seconds, Hakurei and I had reached the enemy line, breaking through it with our swords swinging.

"Don't bother with the rank and file!" I bellowed.

"We're charging straight for their base!" Hakurei added.

"Yessir!" our soldiers exclaimed. Our courageous charge had inspired our forces, who were surrounding the heavy cavalry units and taking them down one by one.

Their defenses were better than ours, and if they had charged us, they might even have been able to do some damage. But the Chou army was superior to them in both morale and skill. No one could stop us! A brave enemy general tried to attack me, but with one slash of my sword, I sliced through him and his shield. I took the opportunity to glance around the battlefield again. *It should be around now.*

"Sekiei! Look!" Hakurei exclaimed, swinging White Star and pointing at a hill beyond the enemy base.

A massive war flag bearing the Chou name was flapping in the wind, as if glaring down at the enemy forces. *Teiha! I know I placed some of our best fighters on our left flank, but I'm impressed he managed to break through the garrison's cavalry, given their numbers. With our numerical disadvantage, there was always a chance he would fail in his task.*

The heavy cavalry had been the garrison's trump card, but we had defeated them. Their formation, already in shambles, finally collapsed, sending soldiers fleeing and screaming in fear. Most threw down their weapons and helmets, while others even abandoned exhausted horses.

"W-We can't beat them!"

"We have to run or we'll all die!"

"R-Retreat! Retreat to Keiyou!"

Our allies up on the hill pursued them, the Chou flag still billowing in the gusting wind. Teiha—who'd been in charge of the left flank—rushed over to us on horseback.

"Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, I apologize for the delay!" Although still young, Teiha had accumulated enough experience to be able to wear his title of "second-in-command" with pride.

I squinted at Keiyou's southern gate, which we had ended up near during the course of battle. Hakurei and I then put some

distance between us and the other soldiers before issuing some orders to Teiha.

"Pull your soldiers back before they chase them too far," I said. "Without siege weapons, we can't take Keiyou right now. They're not idiots. If we get too close, they'll use ballistas and fire lances on us. Tending to the wounded and retrieving what resources we can are our top priorities."

"We need to milk this victory for all it's worth," Hakurei added. "Exaggerate, if you must. Send messengers to the nearby villages and tell them all about this triumph. Make sure you hand out the manifestos as well."

"Understood!" Our competent second-in-command leaped into action, calling soldiers over to him and repeating our orders to them. Asaka's team stayed behind to serve as our guards.

I watched on as the enemy soldiers fled into Keiyou, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on them until the gates had closed behind them. *Next time we come here, we'll take back our homeland.* Hakurei drew her horse close to mine and brushed her fingers against my body.

"Whoa! Hey!" I said.

"I'm checking you over for injuries," she replied in a firm voice. Whenever she got this stubborn, I couldn't do or say anything to change her mind, so I let myself get lost in my thoughts as she poked and prodded me. *With fewer than a thousand soldiers, we drove back the three thousand soldiers who were in the Keiyou garrison. This victory is far more significant than our previous ones. Maybe things really* will *work out...*

But before I could finish my train of thought, the line of cavalry parted to make way for a girl with blonde hair, green eyes, and a blue hat atop her head, who rode up to me on horseback. It was our strategist.

"You two!" she snarled.

A strangled scream rose from my throat, and Hakurei threw her arms around me.

"M-Miss Ruri," she stammered.

Perhaps it was a trick my mind played on me, but Ruri's hair seemed to bristle like a cat's with black flames burning behind her. She made a gesture with her small hand which was her way of saying, "Get off your horse ☆" so Hakurei and I both dismounted. *H-Hakurei, don't use me as a shield!* Ruri—who had been giving us an icy glare since she arrived—also climbed down

from her horse, then marched right up to us. She was far scarier than the Seitou soldiers we had just fought. Ruri pulled out the white-feathered fan Oto had given her in exchange for her spyglass, and pressed it to my cheek.

"Well?" she said. "What's your excuse for attacking the enemy's heavy cavalry without waiting for my orders?"

U-Uh-oh. I can tell from the look in her eye that she isn't joking. If I say the wrong thing here, she'll force me to play chess with her until I sob for forgiveness. And if that *happens, I won't have time to chat with Hakurei at night, meaning* she *will be mad at me too.* I delved into my memories of Kouei from a thousand years ago and hit upon a solution. Hakurei was still hiding behind me, trying to make herself as small as possible, but I grabbed her and pushed her forwards.

"Th-This princess was looking at me all like, 'I wanna cut loose too!' And well, I couldn't refuse her, could I? So it was all Chou Hakurei's fault!"

"What? That's not true! Miss Ruri, these are false charges! False charges, I say!" Hakurei retorted.

"It's collective responsibility at *best*!" I fired back.

"Your crimes are yours, and my crimes are yours too!" came her reply.

"What are you talking about?!" I exclaimed. *Chou Hakurei, you always play dirty! You cheat! You only ever act this immature around me!*

Ruri pulled back her fan and let out an exasperated sigh. "All right, all right. So Chou Sekiei was spoiling Chou Hakurei, and vice versa. Is that it? So the same as always, then. Well, I'm glad the two of you got to have *so* much fun after forcing me to babysit the princess."

We looked away. Ruri had hit the nail squarely on the head. After all, she wasn't just a strategist, but a skilled archer and equestrian too. In the past, she had ridden into battle alongside us to help execute her strategy, or else come up with some new ones on the fly. However, we'd had Miu with us this time, and the princess had no battlefield experience.

I took out a bamboo bottle of water and handed it to Ruri. "Uh, so what happens now?"

"We carry on exactly as planned. We advertise today's victory and reel in some more soldiers. By the way, I hope you're ready for tonight," Ruri said, snatching the bottle out of my hands and

gulping down the contents without a moment's hesitation. Apparently, there was no way for me to escape the session of scolding and chess I had coming to me.

A pouting Hakurei glared at us, her cheeks puffed out, but I ignored her and asked Ruri, "Where's Miu?"

"I left her to Kuuen," she replied. She removed her hat and patted dirt off it as she pointed at our base with her chin.

Oh, she fainted? It must have been her first time witnessing two armies—both consisting of more than a thousand soldiers—engaging in real combat. Not only that, but she had spent two weeks roughing it outdoors, so I could hardly blame her if her emotions had gotten the better of her. Anyway, we could leave the soldiers to Teiha, Shigou, and Kouzen.

"Hakurei, Ruri, we should head back to base to issue orders and take care of—"

But before I could finish my sentence, a roar rang out that was so ferocious, the very air itself seemed to vibrate. It seemed to have come from within Keiyou, and when I looked over at the city, I saw someone pulling down the giant Gen war flag on the highest ramparts of the fortress. A gong rang as the gates slowly opened and several old soldiers walked out. They rammed a ragged war flag into the ground, and as the wind blew it, I saw the character for "Chou" emblazoned across it.

"What the…" We stared at it in shock, as did Asaka and the others. *N-No way. I can't believe a miracle like this could have actually happened!*

"Sekiei!" Hakurei called.

"Let's go!" Ruri added.

"R-Right!" I jumped up onto Zetsuei at the insistence of the two girls, my heart pounding hard due to worry and anticipation.

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The cheers that reached our ears shook not just the tents that made up our headquarters, but the very air itself.

"Wh-What's happening?" I—Kou Miu—murmured, sitting up in my dark tent. My first time experiencing the intensity of a real battle and witnessing the cruelty of the battlefield had overwhelmed me, so I had dismounted my horse and lay down for a while to recover. *Didn't we already win?*

"Those two idiots! Miu, stay here and rest up!" Ruri said. She

had been issuing orders to the remaining soldiers, but on hearing the ruckus, she dropped everything and rushed to the front line.

But in that case, which side is doing all that cheering? I got to my feet unsteadily and walked out of the tent after her. The first person I saw was Kuuen standing atop a rock, holding a long stick wrapped in cloth. He was a foreign boy who had joined up with the Chou army on one of the previous days, and although he was only thirteen years old, he had acted as a messenger for the Ou family before being appointed as my bodyguard. Ruri had said we wouldn't be using the cloth-covered stick on this particular day, and as a member of the imperial family, I had conflicting emotions over the object. We had not displayed it on the battlefield in the fifty-odd years since losing the lands north of the great river.

Kuuen turned to me, cheeks flushed and his eyes brimming with emotional tears. The elderly soldiers who had stayed back at headquarters had similar looks on their faces.

He reached out to me and said, "Your Highness, come here. You should see this!"

"Please call me Miu when we're not in public," I said, even as I reached out to take his hand. Despite its warmth, I could feel the calluses that had formed on it from all the training he had done. With his help, I climbed up onto the rock and stood next to him, though when I saw what everyone was looking at, I could only gasp and hold my hand up in front of my mouth. "Wh-What's going on?"

The great southern gates of Keiyou had been flung open to reveal row upon row of civilians, their heads all bowed to Sekiei and Hakurei, who had both dismounted, with Hakurei leaning against Sekiei's chest.

I can't believe it! The citizens of Keiyou overthrew Gen rule? I could only stare at the sight, with my mouth gaping. As I continued observing the situation from afar, I noticed crowds of people up on the parapets of the fortress walls, waving flags of various sizes. However, every single flag depicted the "Chou" character. None bore "Ei," let alone the "Kou" character that represented the imperial family.

Pain stabbed through my chest and I gritted my teeth. I knew the people here no longer needed me or my family, but I had hoped that if I could do my best to keep up with Sekiei and

Hakurei, then maybe…

“You shouldn’t try to copy what those two are doing. You won’t get the same results,” Kuuen said suddenly.

“Huh?” *I shouldn’t try to copy what they’re doing?* I repeated in my head, staring into his youthful yet handsome face and seeking answers from his expression.

Ignoring my attempts to scrutinize his face, he continued. “Those who wield the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars are heroes. They are avatars of war gods, walking—and fighting—among mortals. That’s what I heard in my homeland, back when it still existed. Trying to imitate what they do will only result in failure. At least, that’s how I see it.” He smiled at me, looking older than his thirteen years, then pounded his light armor with his fist. “I want to help the Chou family, so I have improved myself in my own way. They saved both me and my sister, and I wish to repay them for all they have done.”

I had spent so long living like a caged bird, even this young boy was far more mature than me. I would have to do even better.

“Long live Lord Chou Sekiei! Long live Lady Chou Hakurei! Long live Lord Chou Tairan!” the people cheered, their enthusiastic roaring causing the ground to shake beneath our feet.

I clutched at the small pouch that was dangling from my neck at the same moment that a gust of wind swept past me and played with my light-brown hair.

Chapter Four

“We’ve not sighted a single remaining enemy in Keiyou. I believe we have eliminated them all.”

“We’ve received letters upon letters from the northern regions, all from people wishing to volunteer in the Chou army.”

“The nearby villages have also sent provisions for us. Lord Sekiei, Lady Hakurei, please take a look at the donations when you have time.”

“These manifestos that have been apparently written by Princess Miu have been passed around too.”

Since my arrival at the office that morning, I—Chou Sekiei—had been inundated with a constant flow of soldiers and messengers coming in to deliver their reports before promptly rushing out again. By rights, they should have been utterly exhausted, but all of them had smiles on their faces, and every time someone walked in through the door, they handed me a new scroll or document to cast my eye over, the mountains of paperwork on my desk steadily growing taller and taller.

“How does this make any sense?” I muttered to myself. *Why am* I *doing paperwork in the Chou manor in Keiyou?*

About a week prior to this, we had defeated the approximately three-thousand-strong enemy army in open battle on the southern plains of Keiyou, which in itself had been a dazzling achievement. After all, Hakurei, Ruri, and I hadn’t been expecting to take the city that day, for we had no siege weapons, nor nearly enough soldiers to complete such a task. Our original plan had been to use our victory in that battle—as well as the endorsement of the patriotic princess, Kou Miu, and manifestos that had been stamped with the Heirloom Seal of the Realm—in order to draw more soldiers to our cause. Only then would we have considered launching a second attack on Keiyou in order to finally retake it.

“We hadn’t counted on the citizens actually *chasing out* the occupying soldiers before we could do all of that…”

The roughly hundred thousand residents of Keiyou had rebelled against the Gen and Seitou soldiers in the city and opened up the southern gates for us. As a result, the enemy

soldiers had deemed the city lost and beaten a hasty retreat. I'd seen nothing like it, even back when I was Kou Eihou, a thousand years ago. It had been a miracle only made possible by the people's loyalty to the National Shield, and Hakurei had even started crying at their display of devotion.

I leaned back in my chair and looked out of the round window nearby to see a bird soaring up into the sky. *What a pleasant day. I would have loved to be out there, giving Zetsuei some exercise.* While I indulged in this flight of fancy to escape the realities of work, Hakurei and Miu—clad in the ethnic garb of the western regions—walked in without even bothering to knock since the soldiers had left the door to my office wide open. Although the cruel reality of war had come as a real shock to the princess, she had recovered and made peace with it, and since entering Keiyou, she had spent all of her time drafting more manifestos and stamping them with the Heirloom Seal.

Hakurei took one look at the disaster zone that was my desk, then smirked at me. "Sekiei, why have you stopped working? I thought doing paperwork was your favoritest thing in the whole wide world," she teased.

"I know, I know."

Despite her tone, she wasn't actually wrong. My dream was to become a civil official, and I wasn't planning to give up on it just because of a minor hurdle like this! I was still giving myself a pep talk in my head when Hakurei sat down on my left, and in the blink of an eye, started processing the documents in front of her. *I-I won't lose to her! I refuse to!*

"I never expected something like this to happen," Miu said, sitting down on the other side of me. "The manifestos Ruri dictated hold so much power. Here you go, Sekiei." She placed a small black box on the desk, then handed me a black key.

"Hmm? Oh, thanks."

It hadn't taken long for Hakurei and Ruri to figure out that I was the one in possession of the box.

"Sekiei, you should be the one to open the box and take out the Heirloom Seal. The same goes for putting it away as well," Miu had suggested at the time, which we had all accepted. I had never expected the princess, who had been so timid on our first meeting, to come up with such an idea.

I opened the box and took out the Heirloom Seal, the little golden stamp sparkling in the light. "I have to admit, Ruri is

amazing. But…”

“Don’t! Stop! Working! What’s bothering you so much?” Hakurei asked, butting into our conversation even as her brush continued to work its way across the paper in front of her.

I tossed the heavy Heirloom Seal to Miu, who caught it with a yelp. Once I’d confirmed that she hadn’t dropped it, I said in a serious voice, “Don’t you think everything’s moving a bit *too* fast?” Sensing the change in mood, Hakurei paused in her work and looked over at me, so I continued. “Since leaving Butoku, we’ve fought in so many battles that I can’t even count them on my fingers anymore. Some were just small skirmishes, while some were more intense. But we won them all. We’ve also spread Ruri’s manifesto bearing the stamp of the Heirloom Seal all across the land.”

“Ha, yes. I’ve stamped so many documents, my hand has cramped up,” Miu said, gently waving her right hand. I had previously asked if she had wanted me to help her with her task, but she was more stubborn than she looked.

I winked at her to show my appreciation. “There can be no doubt that our string of victories and those documents have been effective in gathering support. That was all part of the plan, after all.”

“But we weren’t expecting word to travel quite this *quickly*. It’s not normal,” Hakurei murmured, finishing my thought for me. It seemed she shared my suspicions on the whole situation, though I expected nothing less from my childhood friend.

“Exactly,” I said. “And look at this.” I took out a mysterious manifesto that had been written on high-quality paper, and Hakurei and Miu both stood up to peer at it. Whoever had written it had beautiful handwriting, and the stamp at the bottom had a similar design to that of the Heirloom Seal. However, the calligraphy didn’t match any of our hands—not Hakurei’s, not Ruri’s, not Miu’s. It didn’t match mine either.

“*Fellow patriots, your country needs you now more than ever! The princess imperial and I, the wielder of the Heavenly Swords, are calling for volunteers. Join our army so that we may defeat the northern horsemen. Let’s turn the tide of this war.*” And the document had been signed “*Chou Sekiei*.” Hakurei and Miu didn’t say a word, and I couldn’t read the expressions on their faces.

I tapped the remains of the seal, which was very obviously different from the real deal. “A volunteer who came in for an

interview brought this to me. Apparently, he received it three weeks ago, outside of Suishuu, which is near Rinkei. We were still playing with the tigers over in Kozan at the time, remember?"

In other words, it was a forgery. The citizens of Keiyou must have read this and thought it was the perfect opportunity to stage a revolution. But that was exactly why I couldn't understand how or why this forgery existed. Handing these out in the various provinces of Ei would have required a lot of money and labor, so who would have done such a thing? I was hoping Hakurei and Miu might be able to offer me some wisdom on the matter, but...

"Sekiei, when did you write this? If Miss Ruri sees it, she'll only try to edit it," Hakurei said.

"You even forged the Heirloom Seal, Sekiei?" Miu asked.

Instead of offering wisdom, the girls gave me matching looks of contempt. *So mean*, I lamented inwardly. Dissatisfied with the way they were treating me, I looked at them both with reproach.

"Miss Chou Hakurei. Miss Kou Miu," I said sternly.

"We were joking," Hakurei retorted, her expression unchanged.

"R-Ruri told me you like it when people respond to you like we just did," Miu said, holding up her hands and panicking. Hakurei was a lost cause, but...

"Miu, you should be more discerning about whose behavior you mimic. It might be due to how smart that ascendant is, but she gets her kicks from mocking people and messing with them. It's a nasty habit. I don't think my poor feelings will be able to take it if even *you* get in on the act."

"Oh, um, she said that if you come out with that, I should reply with 'But you would never have invited me into your army if I had been a serious, ultra efficient strategist. You would've thought I was boring.'"

"Ack." *D-Damn you, Ruri. You're the weakest double six player I've ever seen! I can't believe you actually predicted my thought process!*

"Give it up, Sekiei," Hakurei said, dealing me the final blow without a hint of mercy on her face. "The only times you can beat Ruri are in combat and at double six."

"I-I'm a better cook than her," I protested. "*And* I'm better at tea-tasting contests! Ugh. Anyway, let's get back on topic." I sighed and ran a rough hand through my hair before spreading my arms wide and looking down at the forged manifesto. "If we

take the timeline into consideration, it's obvious this wasn't something we handed out."

"In that case..." Hakurei said.

"Who did?" Miu finished.

"And isn't that the question of the day?"

This wasn't the work of an individual. That was obvious enough. Meirin had the resources to pull off such a feat, but she was in the southern regions. So just who was behind these fake manifestos?

"What's going on here? You're *still* working through all your paperwork, Mister Chou Sekiei? I thought you aspired to be a civil official," Ruri observed as she walked in through the door. In her hands, she was cradling her blue hat, which had Yui the black cat curled up inside it.

Over the course of the past few days, Ruri, Teiha, Gan Shigou, Dan Kouzen, and Ruri's bodyguard, Kuuen, had been fortifying Keiyou and investigating the surrounding geography. They had paid special attention to the field battle fortifications on the southern plains, as the defenses in that area weren't as strong as elsewhere.

"Um, Miss Ruri?" I piped up, wanting to refute what she had just said. "It feels like you've been extra harsh to me since the battle the other day."

"You're being far too self-conscious," she replied. "Anyway, some supplies arrived from Butoku this morning. I've already decided where we can use our last resort and that fake war flag should things get dire, so go check them out when you have time."

I thought about it for a moment, then sighed. "Fine."

There was no use arguing. There was zero prospect of me getting my own way. Not against her. Having to deal with her constantly must have been exhausting for her bodyguard, Kuuen. *I'll have to give him some sugary snacks later as an apology.*

Ruri handed the blue hat with Yui in it to me, then perched herself on my desk. "Well? What *is* going on here? Why do you all have those strange looks on your faces?"

"Oh, we were just looking at that mysterious manifesto. It kinda creeped us out. Here, take a look." I handed her the document before Yui could reach out its claws and mess with it.

Ruri took it from me and skimmed it, then heaved a sigh. "Sekiei..."

“I-It wasn’t me!” The three of them were such terrible people. Yui meowed at me, which was its way of saying it wanted me to pet it. *Not you too!*

Ruri tossed the fake manifesto aside and crossed her legs, still sitting on my desk. “Yeah, I know it wasn’t. If you were capable of this kind of trickery, you would already be a marshal under the White Wraith’s command. In fact, he might even have offered you a relative to take as your wife to welcome you into the imperial family. But that would never happen. Oh, Chou Sekiei, it’s like you *purposely* make life more difficult for yourself.”

I had no idea whether she was praising me or dissing me. On my left, Hakurei was muttering to herself about how glad she was for my lack of cunning, while Miu simply stared at Yui with a serious expression on her face, inwardly debating whether to pet it or just leave it alone. *These two…*

“Someone’s making big plans behind the scenes. We don’t know what they’re after, but these fake manifestos were enough to slow down the enemy, allowing us to take back Keiyou. Once we seal off the Grand Canal, the tide of this war will start to turn. The gunpowder from Butoku has arrived too. The problem is we might not have enough time.”

“Ruri?” I asked at the same moment that Hakurei also quizzically said, “Miss Ruri?”

“U-Um…” Miu stammered, looking totally lost.

Ruri’s expression darkened, and closing her eyes, she clasped her hands together and pressed them against her forehead as if in prayer. “Meirin has sent us another letter from Nansui. There’s a storm coming to Rinkei. The country’s on the verge of destruction, yet we can’t stop fighting among ourselves. Hey, how do you think we should feel about this repulsive reality?”

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“Y-Your Imperial Majesty, the main enemy forces led by the White Wraith have finally reached the great water fortress and surrounded it. They’ve sunk all of our warships and sealed off the waterways. In addition to that, the Jo army is approaching from the southern regions. We have no idea what their intention is.”

“At the same time, many of the capital’s citizens have taken up arms and joined our army, stating they will fight for the emperor.

The lieutenant chancellor and I, You Saikei, plan to head to the great water fortress with our soldiers later. The next we meet will be after we have won this war."

After delivering their reports to me—Ei's emperor, Kou Ryuuho—my lieutenant chancellor and interim chancellor collapsed into their chairs. The lieutenant chancellor, Rin Koudou, had lost an extreme amount of weight over the past few days, and the interim chancellor, You Saikei, also looked pale and ill. An oppressive atmosphere filled the imperial court, which was already dark enough due to the bad weather. None of the officials sitting in rows before me dared to open their mouths, and they were all avoiding my gaze, either by closing their eyes, looking off into the distance, or staring down at the ground.

I can't believe that in half a year—a mere six months!—we have lost control of all of the provinces along the Grand Canal! Was I wrong to order Chou Tairan's execution? No, I made the right choice! It was the best option at the time! After losing You Bunshou, we wouldn't have been able to negotiate for peace while the National Shield was still alive, for he had been the loudest advocate for a northern campaign and had won many military accolades in the war against Gen. When Rin Chuudou set off for Keiyou to propose peace with Gen, none of us expected them to capture and kill him instead.

This is all the fault of the White Wraith, Adai Dada. We're in such dire straits because of the evil that lurks inside the king of the horsemen. I'd lost count of the number of times thoughts along those lines had swirled around my head, and I covered my eyes with my hand as they echoed again. The bright gold of my robes—a color only those in the imperial family were allowed to wear—irritated me to no end.

"My apologies, Koudou and Saikei," I said.

"Y-Your Imperial Majesty?" The two of them rarely if ever got along, but they both called out to me in unison and stared at me in stunned silence.

"Your Imperial Majesty, I would like to voice my opinion!" a middle-aged man piped up, jumping to his feet, his boots clattering on the ground. He had been silent the entire time, content to listen to the others debating.

"Retsurai?" I said. I had known next to nothing about this man when the invasion began in earnest, yet these days, he was practically the commander in chief of our army. Ou Hokujaku—

the marshal of the Imperial Guard, and the commander of the final ten thousand or so reserve soldiers—remained still, eyes closed. He normally involved himself in these discussions, so I found his silence odd.

But before I could reflect on Hokujaku's behavior any more, Retsurai slammed his fist against his breastplate and said, "While we might have lost many provinces, and the situation in the western regions is unknown, our great water fortress still stands strong. Our officers and soldiers all want to fight for our homeland to save it, and morale among our troops is every bit as high as that of the horsemen."

I said nothing in response. The warning my favored concubine, Uto, had given me in our bedroom the night before came to mind: "Your Imperial Majesty, there's a suggestion that someone might make during the final war meeting, and that's—"

"However, our might alone is no longer enough to overcome the peril our country faces!" Retsurai continued, his face deep crimson. With each word that fell from his mouth, his hair and beard shook, both far grayer than when the invasion had started six months back. No one dared to interrupt him, and the whole hall listened with bated breath. "The enemies are approaching Rinkei, and it's only a matter of time before there is a final showdown that will determine who rules this unified continent. In my humble opinion, only the gods know who will emerge victorious. But I have a plan that can raise our chances of winning."

"Retsurai, what are you trying to say? Please speak plainly," I urged him, my expression stiff with fear. *Was Uto right to worry?*

Retsurai dropped to one knee on the spot, his plain appearance belying his status as one of the highest-ranking officers in the room. "Please, Your Imperial Majesty! Please move your throne to the great water fortress and shelter there. Your presence will increase the morale of the soldiers by a hundredfold and bring them strength in the final battle!"

The gathered officials gasped, then started murmuring among themselves. Over fifty years had passed since the horsemen had taken the lands north of the great river, and in all that time, the Ei emperor had never once moved his throne out of Rinkei. Thunder rumbled in the distance and there was a flash of lightning outside that illuminated everyone's faces and painted them white.

I shook my head and stammered, “I-I refuse.”

“Your Imperial Majesty!”

“I refuse!” I yelled, slamming my fist down on the armrest of my throne. When I looked up again, I saw Retsurai staring at me, wide-eyed. I averted my gaze and recited the excuse Uto had given me. “What will the people think if I leave Rinkei for one of the most secure fortresses in the empire? They will think their emperor has abandoned them. If that happens, Rinkei might as well be dead. I will not move my court.”

“Your Imperial Majesty! Those officers and soldiers are willing to stand up to the terrifying White Wraith in order to protect Ei—no, to protect *you*! If you make the wrong choice here—”

“Sir Retsurai,” Hokujaku interrupted him, opening his mouth for the first time that day. He didn’t look at me, merely kept his attention fixed on his fellow commander. “There is nothing else to discuss. All that’s left now is for us to return to our stations and fight to our deaths. Isn’t that right?”

“What are you *saying*?! As ungifted as I may be, I am still the commander of an army. I *refuse* to order my soldiers to just throw away their lives! I can only do that after we have exhausted all of our other options! Otherwise, how will I be able to face the Three Great Generals and the old grand chancellor in the afterlife?”

“Enough!” I bellowed, finally reaching the end of my rope and forcing both of them to stop arguing.

If only Miu had brought back the U army! I lamented. *If only Jo Hiyou had changed his mind and come to our aid instead!* I knew there was no use dwelling on all of these hypotheticals, but I couldn’t help it all the same. I no longer cared about anything. *Ah, I just want to hurry back to Uto’s side.*

Stumbling to my feet and without turning to look at anyone, I mumbled, “Good work, everyone. Your individual efforts will help to save Ei…”

I returned to my private room in the very depths of the imperial palace, and there was my favorite concubine waiting for me alone like always.

“Welcome back, Your Imperial Majesty,” she said.

“Oh, Uto…” I breathed.

Uto’s features were so soft and sweet that she sometimes didn’t even seem human, and when wearing her pale-lavender robes, she looked like a celestial maiden sent from the heavens. I

still couldn't believe she was related to the deceased Rin Chuudou. I lay down on the bench, resting my head in her lap, and she stroked my hair with her pale fingers, the feather-light sensation pleasurable against my scalp.

"The conversation went exactly as you predicted last night," I told her. "Gan Retsurai urged me to leave the capital and stand on the battlefield."

"Is that so? Then I'm glad I was able to be of assistance to you. What was your response, Your Imperial Majesty?" Uto asked, her voice more beautiful than any instrument it had ever been my good fortune to hear.

Under her maternal gaze and gentle ministrations, I felt my exhaustion wash away. Reaching up, I cupped her cheek with my hand and said, "I rejected his suggestion, just like you told me I should, of course. I mean, me, standing on the battlefield? Ha ha, look. Just saying it is making me tremble."

My younger sister, Miu, who had volunteered herself to be a messenger to the western regions, possessed a sort of foolhardy courage that I couldn't even begin to imitate. Ever since childhood, I'd never enjoyed being instructed in any sort of combat, and I didn't know how to ride a horse either. Yet Gan Retsurai would ask an emperor as pathetic as me to stand on the battlefield? Was he secretly an ogre? *Actually, now that I think about it, Hokujaku mentioned he was mentored by a deceased old general who'd been nicknamed "the Ogre."*

Uto smiled. "You are the emperor of Ei. Times may be difficult now, but in the end, the heavens will grant you victory." She always knew exactly what I wanted to hear.

"Oh, Uto. My sweet Uto..." I said, reaching out and embracing her soft body. *So long as I can have this warmth all to myself, I need nothing else.*

The impending threat of the White Wraith was so terrifying, I couldn't get a good night's sleep due to all the nightmares that plagued me. But the great water fortress was indestructible, and not even the horsemen of the north could keep their invasion going forever. So even if it was difficult at this particular moment, if I closed my eyes and plugged up my ears, the situation was bound to improve in the future. Then, once it had, we would be able to reclaim the annexed provinces at our own leisure.

All of a sudden, despite being deep within the imperial palace, I heard the clanging of weapons against armor coming from the

hallway. Occasionally, screams would ring out before being cut short.

“Wh-What’s happening? What’s all this ruckus?!” I yelled, sitting up and hugging Uto close to my chest.

I saw several silhouettes congregate just outside of my room, then a familiar voice called out to me. “I apologize for the commotion, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Hokujaku, is that you? Very well. Open the door.”

The door slowly slid open and a group of soldiers all wearing the uniform of the Imperial Guard and looking ready for battle poured in. The fresh blood coating their swords and spears dripped to the floor.

I gazed at them agape in shock and started trembling. “What in the…” I gasped. “Hokujaku?”

“Your Imperial Majesty, I’d like to offer you my sincere gratitude. As the illegitimate son of a low-class noble, I would never have been able to rise to the post of marshal of the Imperial Guard without your mercy,” I heard Hokujaku say.

The line of soldiers parted to reveal the marshal of the Imperial Guard, who had grown thin due to the stress of the invasion, and following close behind him was the man named Denso, who had asked me to forgive Jo Hiyou for his transgressions in a recent meeting. Despite the excited flush in his cheeks, Hokujaku’s eyes were as cold as ice as he gazed down upon me. Denso, on the other hand, had a rather stiff expression on his face. Despite his slight frame, he had always conducted himself with confidence in the imperial court, but he looked uncertain in this moment, and I could see that the burn on his left cheek was crinkled in surprise.

“However, you have changed,” Hokujaku continued. “You have allowed a woman to distract you from your duties. This empire is on the verge of collapse, yet you cannot make a single decision to save it, choosing instead to wait until the storm has passed. You even refused to show your face on the battlefield.”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out aside from a soft exhalation of breath. As much as I wanted to protest against his denunciation of my behavior, I couldn’t say a word in my defense, because deep down, I knew he was right.

He pointed his sword at me and in a voice full of rejection and disgust, he announced, “I cannot leave Ei in the hands of a coward. You must be removed.”

The soldiers also held up their spears, cutting off my escape route.

My tongue felt heavy in my mouth. “Y-You…” I managed to wheeze. “Do you plan to k-kill me?”

“Ha! Of course not. You’re not worth sullying my blade. We will simply house you elsewhere while we deal with the invaders. Once we have attained victory, we’ll get you to step down. Princess Miu—if she’s still alive—would make a good empress in your place.”

“D-Did you plot this with Retsurai?” If Retsurai, who had been so adamant about me leaving for the water fortress, was working with Hokujaku, then…

Hokujaku sheathed his sword and shook his head. “No, this was all *my* idea. Granted, I did ask Denso here for advice.”

“So this is your will?” Uto suddenly asked, despite being silent in my arms up until this point.

I followed her line of sight and saw that she was staring at Denso. The plain-looking man seemed confused before appearing to realize something, his expression growing even stiffer. *What’s this?*

Ignorant of his ally’s odd behavior, Hokujaku snarled, “I don’t want to hear a single word out of you, foul siren! Be grateful I don’t behead you on the spot!”

None of the Imperial Guard were even bothering to hide the open scorn that marked their faces. I had no idea that Uto and I had become so despicable in the eyes of my people. Hokujaku turned and began walking away.

“H-Hokujaku!” I cried out.

“This is farewell, Lord Kou Ryuuho. I must take my leave. There is a military meeting I must attend,” he said. Nothing I could have said in that moment would have changed his mind or stopped him. As the door closed, he turned and met my eye. “When we next meet, it will be when we—including Jo Hiyou—have achieved victory over Gen. Until that time, I hope your days with that woman are everything you dreamed of, you fool of an emperor.”

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When I—Gen’s emperor, Adai Dada—received the report of what that fool in Ei had done, I sighed and poured myself out a

glass of alcohol. “I see. So the rat made an error of judgment, and the sparrow locked away the foolish emperor of Ei. That rat and his minuscule brain have only given me trouble I don’t need. Thanks to him, we’ve lost our chance to further manipulate the Jo fledgling.”

I was in a base my forces had set up half a day’s ride from the great water fortress protecting the Ei Empire, with two others sitting beside me. I was presently enjoying some wine while listening to a melody played on a flute, the light from the candle on the table reflecting off my long white hair. By this stage, our army occupied half of Eishuu—the province Rinkei was in—and most of our officers had already moved up to the front lines.

The girl in the fox mask—who had given me the report I had just remarked upon—remained silent, but I could tell she wasn’t happy. She took her duties as a Senko operative very seriously, and I figured she was presently mulling over how she would deal with the rat who had decided not only to give that idiotic Ou Hokujaku a role to play, but had also inadvertently spurred him to stage a coup against the emperor. I drained the wine from my cup and reached for the bottle again, only for the sound of the flute to suddenly stop. Long, beautiful violet hair and a flash of a white military uniform appeared in the corner of my eye before a pair of pale arms reached out towards me.

“Your Majesty, you shouldn’t drink too much.”

“Don’t say that, Rus.”

To replace the Black Wolf, Gisen, whom I had sent north, I’d assigned the female general bearing the title of “White Wolf” to act as my temporary bodyguard. Despite being younger than me, Rus could be a tad overprotective.

I poured myself out some wine and shrugged. “If things had gone according to plan, you and your White Lancers would have traveled north ages ago, and by now, you would’ve met up with Gisen. Unfortunately, you had to delay your journey to investigate why the Jo army had left Nansui. We’ve conquered almost half of Ei’s ten provinces, and victory is as good as ours. A dull battle has become even duller. So how can you blame me for drinking more than usual, especially when this mountain peach wine we picked up in Keiyou tastes so divine?”

I didn’t know if the rumors were true, but I’d heard on the grapevine that Chou Sekiei—or rather, Kouei, my best friend from a thousand years ago—was particularly fond of this brew.

In our past lives, we had led very different career paths, but our alcoholic tastes had been the same.

I raised my glass and asked the quiet masked girl, “Don’t you agree, Ren?”

After another moment of silence, she replied in a frosty voice, “This was a disgraceful failure on Senko’s part.”

Since ascending to the throne, I had been working with the secret organization called Senko in order to achieve my dream of unification, and Ren was technically the boss of this organization. She sounded so furious that I was sure that if I were to give the word, she would have sneaked into the Ei palace there and then, and killed both Ou Hokujaku and the disobedient rat, Denso.

I scoffed at her reaction and placed my elbow on the armrest of my chair. “It doesn’t take a genius to guess what he must have been thinking. Because he lacks the intelligence to actually think for himself, he must’ve seen it as an opportunity to make a name for himself. That rat doesn’t even realize why he once lost to Hasho.”

The spy I had sneaked into the southern regions had also reported back that the Jo army was heading north. Denso must have enticed both the sparrow and the eagle with grand promises, telling himself he needed a backup plan in case anything went wrong with his current scheme.

What a boring man. I picked up the bag that was on the table and poured some fried beans into my hand. “Does he even know how troublesome it is to choose these pawns? The Jo fledgling was absolutely perfect for our plans, but this rat who believes himself to be an expert schemer couldn’t see that, and as a result, he now finds himself caught up in the sparrow’s rampage. Even worse, the sparrow believes he is his country’s savior. This has only made things that much more difficult.”

I tossed some of the beans into my mouth. They were disgusting. *However, he—Eihou—used to enjoy these, and I hear he still does in his latest life.* As I bit down on them, a slight bitterness spread out over my tongue. I needed to destroy Ei as quickly as possible and set up a legendary final battle for my best friend, who had allowed the Chou daughter to lead him astray. However, I hadn’t accounted for the machinations of idiots.

I drank some more wine before continuing. “I know it’s her job, but I do feel bad for your sister, Uto, who had to watch that

ridiculous uprising from within the empire. Ren, I'd like to offer her a reward once we've taken Rinkei. You don't mind, do you?"

"We need to kill Denso and Hokujaku *now*," Ren snarled, ignoring my question, her eyes burning with murderous intent.

"Your Imperial Majesty, should we eliminate those two?" Rus asked, dabbing at my mouth with a cloth.

"Very well. Neither the rat nor the sparrow are necessary in the grand scheme of things."

Ou Hokujaku was drunk on the fantasy that he would be able to save his declining empire. Denso hadn't recognized how deep the marshal of the Imperial Guard's patriotism ran, nor how much his anxiety had overtaken him. That was his gravest error.

"The real question is: Who will be the one to take poor, cowardly Kou Ryuuho's head? He's likely holed himself up deep in the imperial palace," I mused.

The Ei emperor was the one responsible for the death of Chou Tairan, the only opponent who had ever excited me in this life, so I had no reason to keep him alive. If I were ever to need a member of the Kou family on my side for political purposes, someone of higher intelligence would prove more useful. Yes, it would have to be someone reasonably competent, who could understand that they had no hope of beating Gen, and who could keep their subjects from revolting without me having to lift a single finger. Perhaps that princess who had escaped to the western regions could be of use to me. I stared down at my wine, enjoying how my reflection shimmered across the clear liquid.

"I had thought of giving Jo Hiyou the honor, but it matters little who does the deed. Our war with Ei isn't all that important anymore."

Reports indicated that roughly a hundred and fifty thousand Ei soldiers were stationed in the great water fortress. *With all the volunteers who are joining their army on a daily basis, they may end up with almost two—no, three hundred thousand. But unfortunately for them, the Ei army lacks a skilled general, and their emperor is a bird in a gilded cage.*

If I had to guess what Ou Hokujaku's plan might be, I'd say he would wait until we had launched our attack on the great water fortress, then send out the ten thousand or so riders in the capital to flank us. It was an unbelievably simple tactic, but given that this region was mostly marshland, cavalry would have a

difficult time navigating the terrain. He must have fancied himself a commander on the level of Chou Tairan or Chou Sekiei, but in the end, he was only good for becoming fodder for my army.

I glanced over at Rus and signaled to her to take out a map and grab the report from my stressed strategist. “What we should prioritize is Keiyou. Hasho has requested reinforcements.”

For many long years, the Chou family had protected the provinces to the north of Ei, meaning the people there had a deep respect for the deceased Chou Tairan. Conversely, that meant they bore an overwhelming hatred for the emperor, as he was the one who had ordered his execution. As a result, ruling that area had been easier than the other provinces.

I tapped the map with a waifish finger. “The U army in the western regions is still strong. If we don’t devote more soldiers to the task, we won’t be able to take Youkaku or even get through there. Just the other day, the Chou family retook Keiyou. Apparently, a member of the Kou family has been calling on people to stand and fight for Ei and stamping their manifestos with the Heirloom Seal of the Realm. I haven’t managed to confirm whether this person truly *is* from the imperial family, but we can’t ignore this either.”

According to Hasho’s report:

The roughly one thousand members of the Chou army had navigated their way through Kozan, a mountain range north of Butoku known for its abundance of wild tigers.

Once through Kozan, they headed north for Keiyou, scoring a string of victories against the defensive forces we had left in each region.

During this time, the princess imperial’s manifesto (stamped with the Heirloom Seal) appeared across multiple regions, spreading confusion.

On seeing that the Chou army had defeated the Keiyou garrison, the citizens of Keiyou rose up and rebelled against the occupiers.

Hasho—who had been dealing with the U army in Youkaku—split the army in a hurry, taking thirty thousand Seitou soldiers with him and heading back north.

I had to admit, our enemies had done some impressive work. The Heirloom Seal might even have been authentic too. A

thousand years ago, I had asked Kougyoku—a female general under my command—to hide it somewhere in the western regions. However, the timing of the manifestos' distribution raised a number of questions. *Was that really the work of the Chou—? Oh, wait. I see how it is now. So it's the Seitou witch who has perpetrated this.*

"Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei," Ren said after reading through the report. Since battling with them in the Ei palace, this masked expert swordswoman had become equally taken with the wielders of the Heavenly Swords. Granted, Chou Hakurei's name was one I never wanted to hear again if I could help it. "Don't underestimate those two. Cubs of a tiger are still tigers," she warned sharply.

"Who the hell do you take me for?" I snapped. "Gisen may be with Hasho, but that doesn't guarantee victory." My best friend, Kou Eihou, was in Keiyou... Rus was staring at me in mild surprise, so I handed her my glass and tapped the map where Keiyou was. "The wielders of the Heavenly Swords are far more dangerous than a few hundred thousand Ei soldiers, especially when those Ei soldiers are focused only on defense. If we also take into account the lingering admiration the northern regions have for Chou Tairan, then it's only a matter of time before they raise a massive army."

I'm the last person who would ever underestimate Chou Sekiei. No one knows how strong and how terrifying Kouei is better than me! Only I truly know him! Not that accursed Chou Hakurei! I took a deep breath to calm myself down, then slid my finger across the map.

"Keiyou stands at the confluence of the Grand Canal. Even if we have Gi Heian protecting all of the logistics stations to the north, that still won't be enough compared to the supplies we can transport via the Grand Canal. If Gisen doesn't make it to Keiyou in time, Hasho may have to face them in battle. We absolutely cannot let the soldiers starve."

After listening in silence, Ren sighed. "White Wraith," she said with something like exasperation tingeing her voice. She tapped the vermilion-lacquered sheath at her waist to work out her irritation, then crossed her arms. "You sound like you're enjoying yourself. Do you realize how *perilous* Gen's situation is right now? The Chou army is to the north, the U army is to the west, and the Ei army awaits to the east."

I guffawed at the implication and spread my arms wide in an exaggerated shrug. “Perilous? This is nothing. The Ei army lacks an actual commander, and the U army can’t do anything other than hole themselves up in Youkaku.”

I had already looked into the children of Tiger Fang, the previous head of the U family. Hakubun, his eldest son, was the cautious type, better suited to the role of civil official than military leader, while his half sister, Oto, had been in multiple battles across the continent in her time under Sekiei’s command. She was still young, however, and according to Hasho, she’d stayed behind in Youkaku. So in other words…

“The only enemy we really need to concern ourselves with is the Chou army. And out of them, our biggest threat is Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei. No one else. So you see? What kind of danger could we possibly face?”

Even with the fox mask covering part of her face, I could see Ren grimacing. *Yes, that’s right! Chou Sekiei has become an enemy of Gen—an enemy of Adai Dada! But his army remains small, and my victory is still assured. All that’s left is to defeat him on a battlefield worthy of a fight between us, then to recruit him to my army.*

I crossed my legs and rested my chin on my hand. Without even bothering to hide my disgust, I muttered, “However, I don’t want the witch of Seitou—the Honorable One—thwarting my plans with any of her own. She’s likely to be the one behind the manifestos stamped with the forged Heirloom Seal. So she’s after the Heavenly Swords on top of a revival of mysticism?”

“I apologize on our mother’s behalf,” Rus said.

“Rumors of how they bisected the Dragon Jade must have reached her ears,” Ren added.

The Honorable One must have told her daughters, Rus and Ren, about her plans. She really was a major headache, not least because mysticism had gone extinct over a thousand years ago by this point.

“Your Imperial Majesty, look at this,” Rus said, taking a piece of paper from within her robes and handing it to me.

I accepted it from her and skimmed over it. “Oh?”

That accursed witch. So she used her daughters to trick both me and Senko in order to get her wretched paws on the Heavenly Swords, huh? However, one of those very daughters was a general loyal to my cause, and she didn’t seem to care in the

slightest that I was reading secret orders from her mother. Perhaps she had always planned on reporting this to me, even if I hadn't brought up the Honorable One.

"What should we do?" Rus asked.

"It's not so bad. In fact, under the present circumstances, it might be better to have some sort of backup," I said as various plans and simulations swirled through my head.

This was a perilous risk. If something were to go wrong, there were fairly high odds that Black Star would end up slicing clean through my neck. *But that's exactly why I...*

I shrugged and jokingly replied, "The problem is if you and your White Lancers head north as reinforcements, my old caretaker will nag me about my lack of guards. After all, Orid's no use. He's still upset from his recent loss in the western regions." My marshal sometimes acted like I was still a little boy in his eyes, and an overprotective caretaker was hard to deal with. "There aren't many who can be my bodyguard. They must be strong enough to convince my marshal they can protect me, while being interesting enough to regale me with engaging stories whenever I get bored on the battlefield. And I don't want anyone who'll nag me about drinking alcohol either. Now, where in the world would I..." I trailed off as a realization struck me. *Wait. There* is *someone who meets all of those criteria.*

"Hmm?"

Rus and I nodded at each other, then in an austere voice, I said, "Ren of Senko, I can forgive your rat's mistake if you say you will serve me as my bodyguard. Surely you won't refuse, will you?"

Ren's first response was to growl, but after a moment, despite still sounding unenthused, she said, "Only if I don't have to reveal myself."

I poured some wine into a glass and handed it to Rus. "White Wolf Rus, head to Keiyou and offer aid to Hasho. I see some measure of potential in him."

"Please leave everything to me, Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf," the beautiful general replied, accepting the glass with both hands and draining the mountain peach wine. Her cheeks flushed light pink, and she ran her fingers along the sword and short fire lance that were hanging from her belt in rather an alluring motion.

I nodded, satisfied with this outcome. "And if everything goes

according to plan, our final battle with the Chou army will soon be upon us. It will be such a grand battle that future generations will surely immortalize it in the history books. But I don't expect Hasho to lose. The Millenary Diviner is one of the best strategists alive today."

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"Damn you, Ruri of Kobi! Just what are you planning?" I—Hasho—growled.

We had reached the plains south of Keiyou, one of the major settlements in Koshuu province, and from my perch on the small commander's platform, I could see the city sparkling in the morning sunshine. When we had originally built this military base boasting three layers of fortifications, we had been expecting a field battle, and while my prediction had proven correct, I never could've imagined that they would have their backs proverbially to the castle like this.

"Is this your way of paying me back for Ranyou and Seitou? Your way of saying 'Come and get me, Millenary Diviner Hasho'? But Keiyou no longer possesses our large catapults, and you don't have enough soldiers to use your favorite Crouching Fox strategy. You should know improvised fortifications won't be enough to stop our charge."

The thirty thousand or so Seitou soldiers I had brought with me from Youkaku had already finished getting into formation, the rows of elite heavy infantry exuding a terrifying presence. Of the forces presently inside Keiyou, the only real threat was the Chou army, which was roughly five thousand strong, while the remaining ten thousand troops were random volunteers who had joined the conflict after reading a manifesto. They were no match for our army. No, the thing we should have been worrying about was...

I was still busy racking my brain over how best to approach the inevitable upcoming battle when I heard someone hurrying up the stairs to the platform I was on, and I turned to see that it was Anseki, my young adviser who had Ei heritage rather than Gen, and whom I had officially made my second-in-command a few days prior. His expression was bright, and his eyes burned with determination.

"Sir Hasho! Our soldiers are all standing by and ready to move

at your word.”

“Thank you, Anseki,” I replied, adjusting my hat and clearing the doubts from my mind.

I didn’t know if the White Wolf, Rus, and her White Lancers—reinforcements His Imperial Majesty had sent *personally*—would make it here on time, but we couldn’t just stand around and wait for them to arrive if the enemy was clamoring for battle. Fate had already been set into motion, which meant all I had to do now was claim victory.

“Was it really all right to turn all of our heavy cavalry into infantry?” Anseki asked.

“Yes, it was a necessary change if we wish to win this battle,” I replied, glancing at the rows of Seitou soldiers all clad in gleaming silver armor before pointing at the plains in front of me with my feathered fan. I caught glimpses of enemy soldiers moving about in the trenches. “The Chou army’s strategist likes to employ battlefield fortifications and gunpowder in her tactics. She caused us no end of grief at Youkaku, and at the previous battle for Keiyou. Meanwhile, as I’m sure you are aware, Seitou’s heavy cavalry boasts great destructive potential. But unfortunately, horses startle too easily when they hear loud noises.”

Even with those irritating fire lances of theirs, they wouldn’t be able to stop this charge. A crucial step in our preparations that I had made specifically to counter their battlefield tactics was to take our cavalry’s horses out of the equation.

I turned to Anseki to give him my full attention and continued. “This way, we can keep the light cavalry inside the base in reserve and as messengers, while the rest of our soldiers fight as infantry, allowing them to wear sturdier armor than if they were on horseback. Plus, our superior manpower can suppress any exhaustion in the ranks. Fortunately for us, His Imperial Majesty has chosen the most powerful unit on this continent to serve as our reinforcements, who will help us to break through their lines.”

At the rear of the main body of my army, I could see around fifty riders, all dressed in black armor. They were the Black Lancers, an elite cavalry unit under the emperor’s direct command. I smiled, buoyed and also relieved by the sight of these proud warriors. They had pushed their horses to their limits, but they had managed to join up with us before the battle

had gotten underway.

"Sir Hasho, I've fought and lost to the Chou army myself," Anseki said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Their strength borders on the supernatural. But now that Chou Tairan is dead, do we really need to exercise this much caution?"

"Without a doubt, the Chou army is the most powerful force aligned with Ei," I asserted, barely thinking about my choice of words. The Chou army had Chou Tairan's orphans, as well as the ascendant the Honorable One had trained to use all of Ouei's tactics and wiles. We definitely couldn't afford to let our guards down around them.

"Are they truly that powerful?" Anseki asked haltingly, his expression turning stiff.

On noticing his reaction, I realized what I'd just said. *No, Hasho, enough of that. What kind of strategist worries their subordinate before a battle? If Ouei were alive and here to see this, he would be spitting at me with contempt.*

I patted Anseki on the shoulder and put on a cheery voice. "Of course, our advantage remains unchanged, and Keiyou isn't expecting any reinforcements. Taking back the city should also solve all the fuss over those manifestos."

"Yessir!" Anseki said, nodding and saluting by slamming his fist against his breastplate, palpable relief on his face.

After dusting some dirt off my robes, I waved my feathered fan in the air as a signal to the soldiers who were holding horns and gongs. "Now, let's begin!"

Under the glare of the morning sun, the entire army started marching to the rhythm of the clanging gongs and raucous horns. The sight of more than twenty thousand heavy infantry soldiers slowly making their way across the plains looked like something out of a dream or a tale.

First, we must advance. The light cavalry and Black Lancers on the flanks would only start moving once I'd figured out the enemy's strategy. In all the battles we had waged on the Chou army, they would always open proceedings with a volley of arrows loosed the second we were in range of their longbows. This time, however...

"They're not reacting?" murmured Anseki beside me.

There were no arrows or fire lance projectiles from the enemy's side of the field. *Are their soldiers too inadequately trained to even shoot an arrow? Or do they not have enough manpower to*

spare— But before I could even finish my thought, a thunderous boom rang out across the battlefield, which I recognized as the sound of those accursed fire lances. A second later, countless arrows rained down upon the soldiers in the front few rows of the advancing army. *All right. So how will things turn out from here?*

"The metal shields we gave the soldiers in the vanguard are working! We barely took any damage at all!" a soldier reported from the lookout ladder to the side of me.

The others cheered, and I clenched my left fist in triumph. In order to break through positions being defended with projectiles, I'd enlisted the help of Seitou's military engineers to mass-produce special steel shields that were twice the size of our armor, and they were working as expected.

"Anseki, signal the charge," I ordered without wasting another second.

"Yessir!"

He waved his swagger stick, and the rhythm of the gongs became faster still. The Keiyou garrison did their best to try to shoot down our forces before they could get any closer, but we never slowed, and some of the defenders at the first position even turned tail and fled. A large commander wielding a battle-axe did his best to encourage those around him, but it was to no avail.

"We've won!" I exclaimed as Seitou's soldiers raised their voices in victory, the air trembling due to the sheer volume of their cheers and roars.

Ruri of Kobi might have been their strategist, but they simply hadn't had enough time to prepare for our attack. In retrospect, during our last encounter, she had gotten so desperate that she had even copied *my* tactic and used it against us. It seemed she wasn't quite as skilled as I'd believed. All that was left for us to do was to get past their paper-thin final defenses, and capture the Chou orphans and their strategist. Then it would be all over.

It happened while I was still watching the Seitou vanguard trampling through Keiyou's first line of defense.

"Gah!" I cried out as the commander's platform shook violently, sending me falling to the floor, pain shooting through my body on impact. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the shaking had also knocked Anseki off-balance. Then, I heard a terrifying explosion that was so loud, it drowned out our gongs

and horns.

My heart pounded hard, and my blood ran cold. With sweat pouring down my face, I managed to push myself up, clutching at my throbbing left elbow with my hand, but the sight before me caused my entire body to tremble. The intimidating Seitou vanguard had literally been blown apart. *They buried gunpowder underneath their first position?!* There was no mistake about it. Nothing else could have caused such horrendous damage. From the second position, a thick volley of arrows and fire lance projectiles rained down upon my soldiers, who screamed and wailed in pain as they toppled to the ground.

I gritted my teeth and roared, “Damn you, Ruri of Kobi! You knew we’d be using soldiers who were specialists in defensive tactics to cross the plains, so you sacrificed your first position completely to take them out?!”

“Sir Hasho! Our flanks!” Anseki yelled, pushing himself up to his feet.

I fought the agony my body was in to turn and look in the direction he was staring in. The sound of a gong rang through the air as an untold number of cavalry soldiers emerged from the enemy’s second position and rushed without any hesitation at the Seitou soldiers who were on standby over on the flanks. They clearly planned to surround my army from there before taking my head.

I sucked in a deep breath, then slowly let the air out again. I could still move my right hand, so I picked up my feathered fan and looked across at the pickets. They had managed to stay on their lookout ladders throughout all the commotion.

“Give me your reports on the situation!” I barked.

“Y-Yes, Master Strategist!” Their eyes had been filled with fright and confusion, but the fight started returning to them. “The enemy is pelting us with projectiles, but there’s no sign of a charge.”

Other soldiers followed up on this report with ones of their own.

“Around four thousand soldiers make up their left flank.”

“Their right flank has around a thousand. Both sides have Chou on their war flags!”

There was a nervous intake of breath at that piece of news from some soldiers, but I ignored it. With Anseki now at my side supporting me, I snarled, “Continue!”

“I see two horses—one black, one white—at the forefront of their left flank. Their riders seem to be a black-haired commander and a woman with silver hair. One is wielding a black sword, the other a white sword…”

They’ve chosen now to show themselves? Fear spread through the gathered soldiers.

Teeth chattering, the picket cried out, “The black-haired commander is the Kouei of the Modern Ages, Chou Sekiei!”

As soon as the words left his mouth, screams of terror arose from all around the base. Even the lowest-ranking soldier knew Chou Sekiei’s name these days. That didn’t mean he was invincible, though.

“Please calm yourselves, everyone. We haven’t lost yet,” I said, raising my hand to draw everyone’s attention. Once I saw that all eyes were focused on me, I continued in a confident tone. “Relay this message to the officers in the main body: ‘Calm your soldiers and prioritize reforming your lines, then continue your advance. The enemy’s ridiculous tactics can only work once.’”

“Yessir!” The light cavalry soldiers serving as my messengers galloped off.

Once the soldiers had settled again, I would be able to send our reserve forces in to protect the rear of the main body. The only problem was—

“The Chou soldiers on the enemy flanks are advancing at an unbelievable pace. Chou Sekiei and Chou Hakurei—plus the approximately thousand riders with them—are especially fast! They’re cutting down our soldiers left and right!” a picket reported in, relaying the perilous situation back to us.

“Sir Hasho!” Anseki exclaimed in terror.

“Don’t worry,” I replied, for the person I had been waiting for had finally shown up. He had black hair and an old scar across his left cheek. The armor protecting his massive frame was obsidian black, and he was holding a broadsword that looked far too large for any human to wield. This was the Black Wolf, the strongest man in Gen—no, on the entire continent—and the leader of the Black Lancers, the most elite unit under the emperor’s direct command.

“Master Strategist,” he rumbled. “We can deal with the flanks.”

Despite myself, relief welled up inside me at these words. He was a man of few words, but I knew I could place my trust in him.

“Sir Gisen, I apologize for putting you to work so soon after your arrival,” I said, bowing my head. “Please help us.”

“Leave everything to me.”

Gisen leaped down from the platform and mounted his equally massive horse before returning to where the Black Lancers were waiting for him.

The sight of his broad shoulders had steeled my resolve. “Anseki, we should advance as well.”

He paled. “Master Strategist, that’s—”

“It is necessary for our victory,” I interrupted, gazing at the soldiers who were struggling to overcome the forces at the Keiyou garrison. “We can win this if the soldiers can regain their composure. Over half of the enemy’s main body consists of volunteer soldiers, meaning most of them will surrender if they lose even the tiniest bit of their advantage.” A horn sounded from behind us, and I pressed my fist against Gi Anseki’s chest. “As for the flanks that everyone’s so worried about, we can leave all of that to the invincible Black Wolf. Even against the Chou orphans, Sir Gisen will emerge victorious.”

“Yessir!” Anseki replied after a moment, his eyes shimmering with respect as he saluted me again.

From atop my commander’s platform, I raised my feathered fan and yelled, “Everyone, focus on your assigned task! Let us offer up this victory to the great child of the Celestial Wolf!”

“Understood, Sir Hasho the Millenary Diviner!” the soldiers replied in unison.

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“Damn it. No one said anything about the Black Lancers being here!” I—Chou Sekiei—muttered, clicking my tongue as I rapidly loosed arrow after arrow from my bow.

But the new enemy riders clad in black armor didn’t falter. They simply continued their charge with wooden shields protecting them from our projectiles. It was clear their strategist had devised this plan as a specific counter to the might of “Chou Sekiei.” One of my arrows pierced the armor of an enemy archer who had his bow pointed at me, and he fell from his horse with a pained cry.

“I don’t want to hear your complaints!” Hakurei scolded me from atop her white horse, Getsuei.

She continued firing arrows into our enemies, and it was clear that her archery skills had improved over the past few months. Behind her, I could see Asaka and her own unit of soldiers. I raised my bow and resumed attacking, bringing enemy archers down left and right.

"They must have arrived after we'd scouted the area," Hakurei continued. "But no matter what enemy we face, we only need to do one thing: charge for the enemy's base. I have no issue with telling Miss Ruri all about how you chickened out, though."

Her next arrow hit the left arm of an enemy officer who had been shouting orders from the middle of their formation, and he grunted in pain. The Black Lancers reacted with shock, and I could see panic starting to set in among them. While they might have been the most powerful elite riders in the Gen Empire, at the end of the day, they were still human. Taking advantage of this opening, Asaka and her soldiers charged at them, forcing them to back away.

"I-I wasn't *complaining*," I protested. "Man, this is why you're so—" I interrupted myself to fire an arrow into the neck of a Black Lancer who had been aiming at one of our soldiers: a young girl with darker skin who was once a member of the U army. Keeping the enemy at bay with arrows, I shouted, "Don't let your guard down! We're up against the Black Lancers!"

"Y-Yessir! I'm so— Eek!"

I'd brought my horse closer to the young girl's, then flicked her forehead. "Survive. That is an order."

She blinked in surprise. "Understood! Um, thank you so much, Lord Chou Sekiei!" She blushed, but made sure not to let go of her single-edged sword.

The veteran soldiers who were busy protecting us from the surrounding Black Lancers all jeered at us cheerily.

"Aw, man."

"There he goes again! That dastardly Lord Sekiei, tricking innocent little children like that!"

"Kid, don't get the wrong idea about that guy. He's *reputedly* aspiring to become a civil official, you know."

"He's only cool on the battlefield."

"He doesn't wield a bow like a regular person."

"Besides, Lord Sekiei belongs to Lady Hakurei!"

"Here's hoping she won't carry a torch for Lord Sekiei for too long."

Although the banter between them all didn't stop for even a moment, they ushered the girl into their ranks and pushed her towards the middle of their group. I could trust them to keep her safe.

When I was sure there was a slight lull in the fighting, I maneuvered Zetsuei close to Hakurei's Getsuei and tossed her the water bottle that was hanging from my belt. "Man, our guys never change, do they? They just say whatever they like about me."

"You bring it on yourself. You might as well give up on the idea of them treating you with respect," Hakurei replied after taking a swig of the water.

She began redistributing our remaining supply of arrows among everyone. We had left Kuuen back at base, but if we'd brought him along, we could have replenished entire quivers. *No, he has an important mission of his own to fulfill. We can't pull him away for our purposes. Granted, he only has a part to play at the very end, after we've exhausted all other options.*

Having chased off the Black Lancers, Asaka and her team returned to us, and after confirming they were all safe and well, Hakurei wet a piece of cloth and rubbed it against my cheek.

Feeling awkward at the warm gaze everyone else was giving us, my eyes narrowed and I said, "It's taking all our main force has to just keep Seitou's soldiers in place, huh? Shigou and Kouzen are giving it their all, but even so..."

"We had no time to train up the new recruits," Hakurei said. "So it's hardly surprising."

"In that case..." I took the bottle back from Hakurei and poured the rest of the now-lukewarm water down my throat. *Ah, that's the stuff!* I wiped my mouth at the same time that Hakurei had finished rubbing dirt off my cheek. "Even Ruri wasn't able to predict the arrival of the Black Lancers. Since they're here, we can expect that Teiha and the others over on the right flank are also stuck in place. Lady Chou Hakurei, what's your take on the situation?"

Hakurei frowned. "I'm not a fan of you calling me that." She nocked an arrow and urged Getsuei away from me.

A group of enemy riders appeared in the distance, causing Asaka and the others to tense up. When they all saw us, though, they began shouting things to one another.

"It's Chou Sekiei!"

“Watch out for that woman. She’s a skilled fighter too.”

“Silver hair and blue eyes? Talk about a bad omen.”

“That’s Chou Tairan’s daughter!”

Looks like Hakurei’s becoming famous as well. Well, now we’re even. Though I won’t forgive that guy who just called her a bad omen.

“They must have seen how many soldiers we have on each flank, and sent in the appropriate amount of soldiers to deal with us,” Hakurei said, pulling back the string of her bow. Her evaluation of the situation was the same as mine. “Sekiei.”

“I know.”

Ruri’s plan had originally been to invite chaos by ambushing the flanks and breaking through them, but that no longer seemed an option. We had thought the Millenary Diviner would send in his reserve forces—namely, Seitou’s light cavalry—but they were still back at the base with him. In other words, we had no choice but to turn to our last resort. *Man, I really wish we didn’t need to use this.*

The enemy riders were keeping their distance. Without taking my eyes off them, I joked, “You know, now that I think about it, every time we’ve gone to war, we’ve had to deal with plenty of disadvantages, difficulties, and adversities. I kinda feel like we need to hire an exorcist or something to purge our princess and strategist of their bad luck!”

“I see. So what you’re trying to say is you’re blameless in this, but Miss Ruri and I aren’t?” Hakurei sniffed. “Well, now I’m *positive* the great Kouei of the Modern Ages is nothing but a horrible man who loves tricking young and innocent girls. Justice must be served, and I don’t mind teaming up with Meirin to see that it is.”

“Y-You’d seriously go that far?!”

“Of course not. I doubt I’d ever see eye to eye with her.”

Liar! I only just barely managed to stop myself from saying it out loud. From my perspective, despite them arguing every time they encountered each other, Chou Hakurei and Ou Meirin weren’t actually on bad terms with each other. As soon as peace returned to the land once more, they would probably become close enough to go shopping together. Ah, if only Ruri were here, because she’d say that directly to Hakurei for me.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” Hakurei asked.

“Oh, um, nothing,” I mumbled, my eyes darting away. The

enemy riders still weren't making their move.

Hakurei drew up extremely close to me so that she could peer right into my eyes. "You're lying. I've been with you for almost your entire life, save for the time you spent in the capital. Do you really think you can trick me?"

"Y-You're still mad about my trip to Rinkei? In that case—Hakurei."

"Yes, I know."

Many of the Black Lancers were former members of the Crimson Knights or the Gray Lancers, but none of them seemed intent on launching a reckless charge at us to avenge their former commanders whom we had killed. That meant someone had given them direct orders to wait. Without a word, I tossed my bow and quiver of arrows at the young girl from the U army, and placed my hand on Black Star's hilt.

"It's so obvious, now that I think about it," I said. "The Black Lancers are here." The enemy army diverged to form a path for the enemy commander to saunter up to us on horseback. He was wearing black armor and his broadsword clung to his back. I slowly started to unsheathe Black Star from its scabbard, since I knew arrows wouldn't be very effective against him. "So it stands to reason that the wolf leading them would also be here," I muttered.

Hakurei shuddered. She urged Getsuei forwards a few paces before the enemy's name escaped her lips. "Black Wolf Gisen."

He was the strongest warrior in the Gen army, and the one responsible for laying waste to Ruri's homeland. Not only that, but he had fought the National Shield on equal footing. In short, he was akin to an avatar of a war god. Our last meeting had been at the battle of Keiyou. The air thick with tension, soldiers on both sides raised their swords, axes, spears, and bows, all raring to start the battle and the slaughter.

With a slow, deliberate movement, the Black Wolf unsheathed his broadsword and intonated our names. "Chou Sekiei. Chou Hakurei." As if on cue, the soldiers between us and Gisen backed away. He swung his sword to the side, whipping up a terrifying gust of wind. "So you've returned to the battlefield despite losing the National Shield? I commend your courage."

I could tell the compliment was genuine. The man gave his dues even to his enemies, which was also why I couldn't understand one thing: Why had this man laid waste to Ruri's

homeland of Kobi? Sure, I knew that the mysterious Honorable One of Seitou had hired him for the task, but even so, it felt strange that he would go through with such a heinous act.

"However..." Gisen continued, pointing his broadsword at me before raising his voice so loud, the entire battlefield seemed to shake. "You will go no farther! I swear on my title as the Black Wolf that this will be your final battle!" he roared.

Goose bumps broke out all over my skin. I made sure that Black Star was fully out of its sheath, and without turning around, I yelled, "Asaka!"

"Yessir!"

I chanced a glance behind me. Asaka's eyes met mine and I nodded at her. Since Teiha wasn't here, Hakurei's attendant was our second-in-command.

"Hakurei and I will deal with him," I said. "Take care of the surrounding enemies for us."

Asaka hesitated, but only momentarily. "Understood. I wish you luck."

"Thanks. We're gonna need plenty of it," I quipped as Hakurei, bow still in hand, rode up next to me. Although she didn't say a word, I could tell exactly what she was thinking. Her plan was that I'd be in front while she offered ranged support from the rear until she ran out of arrows. More importantly, though... "Hey, what's up with that smile on your face? That's not the kind of expression you should be making before a fight."



“What do you mean? I look the same as always,” Hakurei said innocently, despite the bright grin that was splashed across her face as she readied another arrow. Brimming with determination, she yelled, “Black Wolf, as I am now, I won’t lose to anyone! Tough luck! You might as well surrender!”

Gisen didn’t respond, but I saw his expression soften ever so slightly.

“Well, you heard the girl,” I said, flashing him a smile of my own.

A dry breeze blew across the battlefield, then we kicked our horses into a gallop, our voices raised in a battle cry.

“Prepare yourself!”

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“Seitou’s heavy cavalry is pushing back our main body, little by little!”

“The right flank’s engaging with enemy riders! They haven’t broken through yet!”

“As for the left flank, Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei are fighting someone who looks like the Black Wolf! Neither side is conceding any ground. Lady Ruri, please give us your orders!”

The awful reports didn’t stop coming and I—Ruri—was doing my best to suppress my irritation at the situation. I’d already sent in our final reserve forces for this battle—Dan Kouzen and his volunteers—who had joined the main body of our army. The only troops left in our base were a score of female soldiers who were serving as guards and sentries, plus about a hundred elderly soldiers who had once served in the Chou army. Kou Miu, who had been sitting on a stool looking pale in the face the last time I saw her, and Kuuen, whom Meirin had sent to us with that fake war flag, were in the base as well. But they would be no match against our enemies.

We had suffered setback after setback before the battle had even begun. Thanks to circumstances, we had gained a large number of soldiers in a very short space of time, which meant that even though our army numbered almost twenty thousand by this point, less than half were of any use to us on the battlefield. We didn’t have enough scouts to set up proper fortifications on the plains, and to make matters worse, I hadn’t been able to predict where exactly the Millenary Diviner and his

Seitou army would attack Keiyou from either.

In the end, we had lured the enemy strategist in by pretending we were making our last stand in this fortress city, and once he had taken the bait, I set off all the gunpowder we had buried under a fake position to eliminate the enemy vanguard. This twist on the Crouching Fox strategy wasn't something I'd really wanted to use, but I had been left with no other choice.

If only the Millenary Diviner had been slower to depart from the western regions, that would've given us more time to train up our soldiers, opening up more strategic options! I also can hardly believe that Gen has sent the Black Wolf and his Black Lancers here when they were in the vanguard of their main army! A feeling of deep hatred I hadn't experienced in a long time flared up in my chest. When I was young, Gisen had burned down my home and massacred my clan. I had sworn I would get revenge on him.

"Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei are still battling hard!" a soldier reported from one of the lookout ladders, his voice tinged with joy. "They're not conceding any ground to the enemy general!"

No one made so much as a noise, but I could sense their admiration. I pulled myself together as well. *Those two are doing the best they can, and you're here thinking about vengeance? Ruri, when did you become such an idiot? Get a hold of yourself!* I berated myself inwardly before slapping my cheeks.

"R-Ruri?" Miu said, her eyes round in surprise.

The Black Lancers were the White Wraith Adai Dada's prized cavalry, yet he had sent them here as reinforcements for Hasho. Were the U and Chou families really so dangerous that he'd felt he'd had no choice but to take that step?

"No, that's not it," I murmured, speaking to myself even though there were soldiers all around me. I adjusted my hat and gathered my thoughts. *With apologies to Miu, Ei's pretty much done for. They may have enough soldiers to make a decent fight of it, but there is no general skilled enough to command them against the White Wraith's forces. Not anymore, at least. Jo Hiyou and his army are closing in on Rinkei, but he doesn't have what it takes to lead the number of soldiers Ei has. In that case, Sekiei and Hakurei, who have killed his precious wolves in multiple battles up to this point, pose a far greater threat than—*

I gasped as a realization hit me, then bit my lip until I tasted copper. I—Ruri of Kobi, strategist for the Chou army—was the

one who had underestimated how many soldiers Gen would send to this battlefield. I was sure that Sekiei and Hakurei would forgive me for my miscalculation, but I doubted I ever could. My farsighted eyes could see what was unfolding in the situation on the left flank.

Sekiei was strong. If he had been born in Gen, he would easily have become one of the Four Wolves. As for Hakurei, when at Sekiei's side, she displayed a strength worthy of her heritage as Chou Tairan's daughter. But they weren't enough. If the Black Wolf could single-handedly keep them on the left flank, we wouldn't be able to break through the enemy lines. And no one in the Chou army was stronger than that pair.

What should I do? What can *I do?* These questions swirled around in my head on repeat. I still had a plan that would hopefully get us through this—one that Sekiei had also signed off on—but I didn't know whom I should assign the task to. In devising the strategy with Sekiei and Hakurei, none of us had expected the Black Lancers to show up. I couldn't leave it to some ordinary soldier, because if the enemy discovered them, it would be all over. I had the best chance of accomplishing it, since I had survived on multiple battlefields up to this point, but Sekiei had left me in charge back here.

"Ruri," the imperial princess called out to me as she jumped to her feet. Despite the situation we were in, her eyes were bright and filled with resolve.

"Miu?"

"You're unsure if you should go through with that tactic of yours, aren't you? In that case, let me handle it!" She had her fist clenched in front of her chest while making this unexpected suggestion.

I stared at her wide-eyed, then brushed my bangs out of my face. "Are you serious? Sure, you could take a detour *around* the battlefield, but you'd still have to deal with the Black Lancers. If they were to see you, they'd—"

"I know all that," she interrupted me. Her expression softened into a beautiful smile. "But I believe this is the best way that I, Kou Miu, can prove my resolve."

I stared at her, my breath catching in my throat. *Is the girl standing before me truly that ignorant little princess? She doesn't seem interested in politics at all, but maybe she* would *make a good empress one day. Sekiei was the only one who approved of her*

coming along; did he predict she would mature this much in such a short amount of time?

I rubbed my temple and sighed. “Fine. It’s not like we have any other options. Kuuen? Elders?”

“Yes, ma’am!” As soon as I called on them, Kuuen and the elderly soldiers of the Chou army jumped into action. A pole wrapped in cloth was already strapped to Kuuen’s back, which was the one Meirin had sent to us with a message that she figured we would need it. The object under the cloth was a fake war flag for a certain someone. Affecting the kind of lighthearted tone that Sekiei would often use, I said, “She may be brave, but she’s still a weak little girl. She can’t complete this task on her own. Can you guide and protect her?”



“Please leave it to us! I will protect her with my life!” Kuuen declared.

“And we will shield her from any harm!” the elderly soldiers added.

“No, I forbid you to do that,” I said firmly. Miu and the others looked surprised as I waved away their courageous pronouncements. “I’ll get in trouble with Sekiei if any of you die. And he’s terrifying when he’s angry, you know? So you’d better all come back alive, you hear?” Screams arose from the battlefield as a portion of our main body seemingly collapsed before Shigou and Kouzen jumped in with their teams to plug the gap, forcing the enemies back again. Even so, they wouldn’t last long against an army the size of Seitou’s. I took a deep breath and forced a smile onto my face, imitating a gesture I’d seen Sekiei default to many times in the past. “I’m putting my faith in your courage, Kou Miu! Turn the tide of this war!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m fully prepared to change the course of this war!” Kou Miu said, saluting me, then she, Kuuen, and the elderly soldiers all left the base.

They would be on horseback, but they would still be taking the long way around the battlefield, so I had no idea if they would be able to make it in time.

“Man, you’re such a bad influence on people,” I sighed, voicing my complaint about the black-haired boy who was fighting on the left flank with his silver-haired childhood friend, although the words came out in a much sweeter and gentler tone than I thought they would.

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With only the merest, practically imperceptible shifting of his weight to direct his massive horse, Gisen charged at me, and when he was within range, he swung his broadsword at my neck, putting so much power behind the swing, I could have sworn I saw a gust of wind gather around the steel. An exclamation of “Hah!” accompanied his exertion.

I grunted as I blocked his attack with Black Star, barely keeping my balance, and where the blades met, sparks flew up, impeding my vision. Sensing I was in danger, my horse, Zetsuei, backed away to reestablish some distance between us. Gisen rushed forwards to stop me escaping, but…

“Sekiei!” Hakurei yelled, using the few arrows she had left to halt Gisen in his tracks. She had aimed all of them at vital areas, as well as other body parts that he would find difficult to protect.

“You and your insolent tricks!” Gisen roared, his voice so loud, the very air seemed to tremble around us.

He knocked down every arrow Hakurei had shot his way with his broadsword, but the brief distraction had given me the chance to slip outside of his range. Around us, our allies under Asaka’s command continued to battle the black-armored enemy riders in what was still quite an even contest.

I exhaled, then muttered, “He’s practically a monster.” We had the numerical advantage, but we were expending all of our energy and concentration on merely staying alive.

“But we’ve improved since we last saw him,” Hakurei said, tossing her empty quiver aside and drawing White Star. The adversity we were facing had done nothing to cloud the resolve that burned bright in her blue eyes. “If we’d tried to fight him back when father was still alive, he would’ve easily overpowered us. Buying time like we did just now wouldn’t have been possible.”

Father’s death had been the catalyst for Hakurei’s growth, though that wasn’t really something I wanted to vocalize to such a kind, sincere girl.

“Well, that’s because you had a good teacher,” I teased. “Yup, I think you should show me more respect, Chou Hakurei. After all, that’s what all the old books say disciples should do.”

Even though we were still on the battlefield, Hakurei turned Getsuei towards me so she could fix me with an unimpressed look, pouting with her cheeks puffed out. “Excuse me? Who’s the disciple, and who’s the teacher again? I can see we have a different point of view on that. You never trained with me, anyway. You only focused on teaching Miss Ruri, Miss Oto, and Miss Miu!”

“H-Hey! That’s uncalled for!” *Ah, shit. I’ve made her mad for no reason.* It also went without saying that I had actually trained with Hakurei as well. She had failed to mention how *she* was the one who had wanted to train every day, aside from when one of us had an injury we had to recover from first.

We were interrupted by a dark chuckle, and we both turned to see Gisen grinning at us, twisting the scar on his face. He swung his broadsword through the air, and I recognized a curiosity in

those sharp, hawklike eyes of his.

"How interesting," he said. "You're both so very intriguing, children of Chou Tairan. So you can maintain a casual attitude on a battlefield surrounded by death, can you? A tiger's cubs really are tigers themselves. If this confrontation had instead taken place a few years from now, age would have weakened me, while you two would be in your prime." He gazed off into the distance before closing his eyes as if tracing the path he'd taken through life on the back of his eyelids. "It is possible I could even have lost in a straightforward fight with you. However!" He effortlessly picked up the broadsword in one hand and thrust it out to the side as he yelled, "I won't lose to you now!"

With the Three Great Generals all dead, Gisen was the strongest fighter on the entire continent. It was no wonder the Gen Empire was so proud of their Black Wolf. His declaration of certain victory might well have caused any normal soldier to be paralyzed by fear.

Of course, I wasn't a normal soldier. Holding Black Star aloft and slightly at an angle, I said to the girl next to me, "Well, you heard the man. What should we do?"

"Isn't that obvious?" With a light clink, Hakurei raised White Star and pressed it against my sword. With her pride as Chou Tairan's daughter on full display, she yelled back, "We don't need to wait a 'few years' for our victory. We'll seize it right here, right now! Sekiei and I will defeat you in Keiyou, the land our father loved!"

She really is too good for me, I thought.

Hakurei lowered her sword again and shot me a confident smile. "I trust you have no complaints about that, hmm, Sekiei?"

"Of course not. I will do as you instruct, my princess." I gave an exaggerated bow, then tightened my grip on my sword. Looking over at Gisen once more, I winked and said, "Well, there you have it. Apologies in advance, but we are going to win this fight, Black Wolf!"

"If such a thing is truly possible, that is," Gisen replied, lips twisted in what looked to be a smile of sorts.

I'd crossed swords with Gisen three times already by this point, so I could tell he was a warrior through and through. *But he's also the target of Ruri's revenge, isn't he?*

"This will be our final battle. Could you answer something for me?" I asked, raising my voice above the noise of the

surrounding battle that was growing in intensity. Gisen's eyebrow twitched, which I took to mean I could, and after giving Hakurei a look to get her to stay put, I urged Zetsuei forwards a few paces. "Have you ever heard of Kobi? It was a mystic boundary that used to exist in Seitou."

Gisen's reply was a few seconds in coming. "Why do you ask?"

No outright denial, I noted. Hakurei came up beside me as I continued. "Our strategist is an ascendant and a survivor from Kobi. She told me you were the one who burned down her homeland and massacred her tribe. Is there any truth to that?"

A gust of wind carried the stench of blood over to us. Gisen slowly lowered his sword, a deep sadness in his eyes. "I can't tell you," he said.

"Will nothing change your mind?" I asked, but when Gisen didn't reply, I sighed. "Suit yourself."

So there was a reason behind Gisen's silence. The only other person who was likely to know what happened in Kobi was the Honorable One, who controlled Seitou from the shadows.

I let out another sigh before sucking in a deep breath. Hakurei and I then nodded at each other. "Sorry for spoiling the mood right before our fight," I said to Gisen. "Now, let's get on with it."

"Come at me, wielders of the Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars! The cubs of Chou Tairan!"

The three of us raised our voices to a yell before charging forwards on our horses. As the gap between us grew smaller and smaller, Hakurei and I split apart, then attacked him from both sides at the same time. The moment we darted past him, countless slashes were exchanged, causing sparks to fly from our blades. An attack I couldn't quite dodge in time sliced off some of the hair from my bangs, but out of the three of us, no one managed to draw blood on this first attack.

"I can go again, Sekiei!" Hakurei yelled over to me.

"Same here!"

We immediately spun our horses around and charged at Gisen once more. He deflected my attack with his broadsword, then used the momentum of the parry to knock Hakurei's White Star away, letting out a menacing roar as he did so. The sheer power behind Gisen's counter made Hakurei cry out, and he quickly raised his sword to swing it at Hakurei again, bringing it down with such speed and force, he would slice her clean in half

if the blow connected.

"Don't even think about it!" I grabbed several daggers from my belt and threw them at Gisen's neck to halt his attack. He furiously knocked them to one side with his gauntlet before galloping away to put some distance between us. Blocking Gisen's attack must have numbed Hakurei's hand, because she was opening and closing it gingerly. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. He just knocked my sword away."

Well, that's a relief. I turned my attention to Gisen once more. One of my daggers had buried itself in his gauntlet, and he proceeded to rip it out, then tossed it to the ground.

"So a synchronized pincer attack isn't enough to knock him off-balance, huh?" Not that I had been expecting him to go down that easily.

"Fighting multiple enemies at once is hardly new to me. In fact, I'm quite bored with it, really," Gisen replied, resting his broadsword on his shoulder and smiling, which must have been a very unfamiliar act for him, because it looked more like he was baring his teeth at us. With his canines exposed, he looked every inch a black wolf.

What should we do? He's strong. Terrifyingly and unbelievably so. We've improved since the last time we ran into him, but then again, so has he. Winning this two-on-one duel without sustaining some kind of injury was going to be impossible, and letting Hakurei die was out of the question. *In that case, I need to steel myself.*

"Sekiei?" Hakurei called over to me, a perplexed tone in her voice.

"Are you done? In that case, I'll be the one to start us off this time!" Gisen declared, raising his sword above his head.

In the next second, a wave of cheering and confusion rippled from the rear of the battlefield, making the three of us pause and peer over at the hill to the south. When we had come up with our plan for this battle, we had decided to execute it from that location. Despite suffering heavy casualties early on, the Seitou army had pushed back the main body of our own army with their courageous and determined efforts, but faced with this latest twist, some of their soldiers were literally throwing down their weapons and armor in their haste to flee.

"Look at the hill to the south!" yelled a number of our soldiers from various points on the battlefield. "Her Imperial Highness has brought reinforcements!"

“Her Imperial Highness”? Miu?! I squinted at the hill just as a light began shining from that same direction. The Imperial Princess had raised her right hand high into the air, and a blinding light seemed to be coming from it. *Wait, is that the Heirloom Seal of the Realm?* A moment later, a gust of wind blew across the battlefield, straightening out the war flag she was holding in her left hand for all to see.

The character emblazoned on it was: “Kou.”

According to legend, the “Kou” war flag only appeared on the battlefield if the emperor was present. Only he or specific members of the imperial family could wield this standard. Of course, this flag wasn’t the real deal. Meirin and Auntie Saiun had forged it, then made Kuuen deliver it to us.

Ruri’s trump card, revealed at the eleventh hour, was a turning point for Keiyou. Kuuen and the elderly soldiers must have observed the battlefield carefully, waiting for the right moment to detour around it. Although I was more surprised that they had permitted Miu to accompany them. The ear-piercing sound of gongs rang around the battlefield, joined by the screams of horns.

“Impossible,” Gisen growled. “They’re ordering a retreat?”

For the first time in our duel, the most powerful monster under the heavens had revealed an opening. *This is our chance!* “Hakurei!” I yelled.

“Sekiei, don’t fall behind!” she shot back.

Without looking at her, I rushed forwards. It took Hakurei only a second to catch up to me, galloping at my side.

Gisen immediately noticed our advance and reacted with a furious snarl. “You really think I’d let my guard down?”

He held his broadsword aloft and prepared to parry our attacks. A simultaneous pincer attack hadn’t managed to pierce his defenses before. *So in that case...* I shot Hakurei a quick glance, and her eyes shone with understanding in reply. We continued galloping beside each other.

“How dull! You’ve already used this attack, and— Huh?!”

Hakurei had ducked behind me and disappeared from Gisen’s line of sight. Taking advantage of his momentary surprise, I swung Black Star with all of my might, its steel blade whistling through the air, though as I had suspected, the enemy general reacted with almost supernatural speed. Even though I had put everything into my attack, he had still managed to block it.

Sparks danced in the air as our swords screeched against each other before Hakurei with her silver hair flowing behind her lunged in from the side.

"Now, Hakurei!" I yelled.

"HAAAAAH!"

She swung White Star's snow-white blade down on Gisen's broadsword, and he grunted in surprise as he deflected her attack, the sound of steel meeting steel so crisp, it was almost musical. Gisen put some distance between us once again, then looked down at his broadsword in shock. Hakurei's attack had broken off the tip. During our exchange of blows, more and more soldiers had deserted the battlefield, and panic was even starting to spread through the Black Lancers, who were said to be the best-trained unit on the whole continent.

Gisen gripped the hilt of his broadsword so hard, it creaked in protest. "The Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars, hmm? You truly are a frightening pair," he growled. "Who would have thought you could damage this broadsword, which was crafted in a mystic boundary? But even so, I haven't lost yet!"

"Hakurei."

"I'm fine."

We were exhausted and using the very last dregs of strength left in our bodies to encourage each other and keep ourselves upright. *We're going to take the Black Wolf down right here, right now!* The tension in the air prickled my skin like lots of tiny needles as I faced down the enemy general, but just as we were about to launch into our final attack, a handsome man accompanied by roughly ten Black Lancers stepped in between us. He was wearing loose robes, and his light-brown hair was drenched in sweat.

"Sir Gisen!" the man exclaimed.

"Sir Hasho?"

Hasho? So this is the Millenary Diviner?

"Lady Hakurei! Lord Sekiei!" Asaka and around ten of her soldiers had gathered around us, their armor spattered with enemy blood.

Hasho paid us no attention as he spoke to Gisen in a low voice. "That supposed princess took us by surprise. You see, the rumors are true: The only ones who can display that particular war flag are members of the imperial family. As much as it pains me to give the order, we must retreat. I will take full

responsibility.”

The Black Wolf still had enough strength to continue fighting, but he peered over at the hill where the Kou war flag was still flapping in the wind, with Miu holding up the pole. The light reflecting off the Heirloom Seal made him narrow his eyes and grit his teeth.

“Understood,” was all he said as he turned his horse around, and we didn’t attack his retreating figure, for our bodies and minds were too spent for any further combat. The massive horse walked a few steps before rearing up and turning around to face us again. Gisen held his damaged broadsword aloft and yelled, “Chou Sekiei! Chou Hakurei! We will settle this when we next meet! Until then, I wish you good health and good luck. Don’t let anyone else take your heads before I do!”

The earth itself seemed to shake at the volume of his words, which seemed to have the effect of recovering the Black Lancers’ diminishing morale, as well as returning the fight to their eyes. *One man can change a whole unit this much? He really* is *inhuman.* And with that, the strongest man in the Gen army disappeared from our sight.

“Everyone, gather around Lord Sekiei and Lady Hakurei!” Asaka ordered, and our allies crowded around us.

So we managed to survive this battle too… I thought, relaxing and letting all the tension that had built up inside me escape. The moment I did this, however, Black Star slid out of my hand and hit the ground, the tip sinking into the dirt. I would have fallen off Zetsuei too if Hakurei hadn’t swiftly caught me, although she looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“Sekiei?!” she cried out.

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “I’m just tired. Looks like our strategy worked. That was Miu holding up the flag over there, wasn’t it?”

When the genius, Ou Meirin, and my unfathomable aunt, Saiun, had sent us the fake flag, they had attached a note to it, with “We figured you’d need this!” scrawled across it. Granted, it could probably be considered less of a forgery now, since the princess imperial had been the one to unfurl it and display it.

Hakurei embraced me and nodded. “That’s what it looked like to me. You think something happened at headquarters?”

“Who knows? Ruri’s brow is probably all furrowed like *this* right about now,” I said, pulling a face like I’d just eaten a handful of sour plums.

Hakurei giggled. “You don’t look anything like her.”

The enemy must have completed their retreat, because I could hear victory cries from all around the battlefield. “Long live Lord Chou Sekiei! Long live Lady Hakurei!”

As the cheering continued to erupt all around us, I found I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Hakurei’s exquisite face. It was so close to mine, we were practically touching. Despite it clearly not being the time nor place for such things, I couldn’t help thinking, *I’m gonna have to come up with a way to describe this in writing later.*

Epilogue

“Oh? So it was Kuuen who guided Miu and the others around the battlefield?” I said.

“That’s right! I led everyone to the southern hill without anyone discovering us!” Kuuen replied triumphantly. He was wearing loose-fitting, light-blue clothes, and his face was red with excitement as he outlined in detail what had happened in the final moments of the battle.

It’s impressive he managed to detour around that battle. It was intense. We had just about scraped a victory a few days back, but we hadn’t been able to kill the Millenary Diviner, Hasho; the Black Wolf, Gisen; or any of their other prominent officers, and we hadn’t disposed of enough of their soldiers to make a significant dent in their manpower either.

Furthermore, there was so much misinformation flying about regarding the situation at present, it was practically impossible to know exactly what was going on. Just on Rinkei alone, we had heard: that the battle at the great water fortress had begun; that the capital had already fallen; that the marshal of the Imperial Guards, Ou Hokujaku, had taken the Ei emperor prisoner; and that Jo Hiyou and his army had launched their own attack on the capital. We were closer to the western regions than we were to Rinkei, and we couldn’t even get a detailed report on the present situation there. But instead of worrying herself silly like she would have done a mere few weeks ago, Miu remained calm, and seeing her composure helped the rest of us to think rationally as well. It was only a matter of time before we learned what was going on in Rinkei, anyway.

For the time being, we needed to focus on the tasks we could do, such as fortifying Keiyou, quelling the unrest in Koshuu, and reorganizing our forces. We also wouldn’t stand a chance against the might of Gen’s army if we didn’t train up our soldiers. Hakurei, Ruri, Teiha, and Shigou were already out inspecting various areas around Keiyou, and Dan Kouzen—who had received recognition for leading the volunteer soldiers and fighting in the previous battle—had gone with them.

Our biggest worry was how small our army was. Everyone—

myself included—had been so busy cleaning up after the battle, I hadn't found time to speak with Kuuen until that day, even though I'd wanted to hear from him as soon as the Gen and Seitou soldiers retreated. Feeling guilty over delaying our chat, I leaned Black Star against the chair in my office, and messed up Kuuen's dark brown hair.

"L-Lord Sekiei, um, I…"

"You made it through that chaotic battlefield and reached the rear of the enemy formation without suffering any casualties. That was impressive work. Hakurei and I survived, thanks to you. I owe you one."

"N-No, that's not…" he stammered. "All I did was ride my horse!"

Kuuen had made the journey from the southernmost tip of the continent to Keiyou all on his own, and now he had accomplished an arduous task during this battle as well. He clearly wasn't aware of it, but it was possible he had a talent for equestrianism. I took my hand off his head and sat down in a chair. Yui, the black cat, appeared out of the blue and jumped up onto my desk.

"What do you want as a reward?" I asked Kuuen. "Oh, and don't say, 'I wish to return to my sister's side.' It's too dangerous right now for you to risk another cross-country trip. We're not receiving any intel from Youkaku, let alone from Rinkei."

Kuuen's twin sister, Shun'en, was with Meirin in the southern regions, and he was probably—quite understandably—worried about her, so I hoped they would be able to get back in contact soon.

Kuuen shook his head, a tender expression on his face. "Shun'en's quite attached to Miss Shizuka. Um, Lord Sekiei, will you really give me a reward?"

"Well, you're not having Black Star or Zetsuei," I teased. "I can't give you Yui either. And don't even *think* about asking for Hakurei or Ruri."

"I-I won't!" Kuuen exclaimed, waving both hands in front of him. He straightened up and looked at me with a serious expression on his face that made him look more mature than his age. "In that case…"

Sunlight shone in through the window and filled the whole room with warmth, causing Yui to yawn and curl up on the desk. It was hard to believe that only a few days before, we had been

out in the western regions, far away from home.

After a slight pause, Kuuen looked at me, his eyes burning with resolve. “Could you appoint me as your attendant, Lord Sekiei?”

“Huh?” I blinked at this unexpected request, then took a closer look at the foreign boy in front of me. His expression was deadly serious, which meant this clearly wasn’t a joke. I rested my elbow on the table and sighed. As his elder, I needed to correct him. “Kuuen, you don’t have to be so polite, you know? I mean, look at Ruri and Hakurei! Those two seem to think they can get away with saying whatever they want to me these days. Meirin’s like that too. Actually, nah. Meirin will try to get me in her debt, and that makes her way scarier than those two.”

Meirin and her chestnut-brown pigtails floated up in my mind’s eye, giving me a sly smile. “Hee hee hee! ♪ Lord Sekiei, you owe me one, you hear?” I could practically hear her saying it.

I have to pay off this debt as soon as possible. But what can I offer her in exchange for a fabricated imperial flag? And what was with that, “We figured you’d need this!” note, anyway? Needing to owe Aunt Saiun something doesn’t sound like a fantastic idea either.

“Please!” Kuuen exclaimed, raising his voice.

What a strange boy. I couldn’t understand why he wanted to become my attendant when people roped me into troublesome stuff for them every day. He was one of the few valuable soldiers we had, since he had accumulated quite a bit of experience out on the battlefield, but I had been planning on having him leave the army and living a peaceful life instead. I happened to look away from him momentarily, and noticed a girl with light-brown hair ducking behind a pillar in the corridor. She was wearing the ethnic garb of the western regions rather than her formal robes, seemingly having taken a liking for the fashion.

I shrugged and said, “Okay, fine. Just don’t go dying before I do. That’s the only thing I ask of you.”

“Yessir! Thank you so very much!” Kuuen said, pressing his hands together and jumping up and down a few times. “Yippee,” he whispered to himself, although he still said it loud enough for it to reach my ears.

Kuuen, I can practically see you with dog ears and a dog’s tail! I swear I can! I slid open my drawer, pulled out a small but heavy bag, then tossed it to him. “All right. Here’s your first job as my attendant, Kuuen. Catch!”

“Whoa! L-Lord Sekiei, what’s this?” he asked, his round eyes blinking at the bag now in his hands.

I lowered my voice and in a firm, austere voice, I said, “This is your first task. Go to the market and spend every single coin in that bag. Now, hop to it!”

“Y-Yessir!” Kuuen’s eyes sparkled at the word “task,” and he saluted me before rushing out of the room tightly clutching the bag.

Heh, that’s more like it. While it was mostly coppers in the bag, I’d sneaked a few paper bills in there too, each worth as much as a silver coin. *Can pure, innocent Kuuen use up all that money?* At the very bottom of the bag, I’d sneaked in a note telling him to ask Asaka for help if he ended up needing some, so he shouldn’t run into any trouble. However, Hakurei—speaking on Asaka’s behalf—might give me an earful about it.

“We’re home!” Hakurei and Ruri called out as I basked in self-satisfaction.

Ruri was in her usual clothes, but Hakurei appeared to be wearing the pure-white combat outfit of a swordsmaiden. Seeing her in these clothes really hammered home the fact that we were well and truly back in Keiyou.

“Sekiei, what did you say to Kuuen? He looked like a puppy with his tail wagging as he ran out of the door just now,” Hakurei said, giving me a suspicious look as she sat down on the bench.

Wow, she’s already suspecting me?

“Hakurei, you’re such a dummy. This is Chou Sekiei we’re talking about. I bet he just made him his attendant, exactly like Kuuen wanted, then handed him his wallet that was bursting with the money he was gonna give to Kuuen as a reward, and told him to go to the market. What a devil,” huffed Ruri, who had gone out of her way to plonk herself on the desk, the blue ribbon in her blonde hair swaying with the violence of her movements.

Hakurei crossed her arms and nodded in agreement, putting on a sad air. “How heartless of him. Ice must run through his veins. As a member of the Chou family, I fear I have failed in my duty to educate him.”

“You two…” I growled. They had only just arrived home and had wasted no time in ganging up on me. I found myself already missing Kuuen’s and Oto’s more frank personalities.

For some unfathomable reason, Ruri removed her blue hat

from her head and placed it on mine, patting me as she did so. She ignored the way I was glaring at her and asked, “Did we hit the nail on the head? I’m sure he’ll be fine, but don’t go overboard with teasing him. Oh, by the way, we passed around some wine and snacks to the soldiers. The ones who guarded Miu received an entire basket of the stuff.”

“The celebrations and rewards for the entire army will take place tomorrow,” Hakurei added before patting our reliable strategist, then the blue hat on my head.

“Thanks,” I said. Ruri had patted me twice on the head, followed by Hakurei patting me three times. *Uh, am I not getting way too many head pats right now? Are these two competing or something?* After deciding to let them do as they pleased, I held up a finger and said, “W-Well, anyway, we can leave all of this troublesome stuff to our little princess imperial. Speaking of which, if she doesn’t come into this room right *now*, I won’t give her a chance to weasel out of doing everyone’s work.”

With a wordless squeak, Miu came out of her hiding place behind the pillar and rushed into the room. The other day, she had played a key role in our victory, and even the most rural of villages in the northern regions knew her name by this point. She twiddled her fingers, her hands hiding the key that was dangling from her neck.

“U-Um, Mei’s not here,” she started nervously. “So I’m not sure how much help I’d really be at doing tasks around the city…”

This was the side of her that we couldn’t let the volunteer soldiers who were gathering under our flag see. I removed the blue hat from my head and tossed it at her. My aim was true, and it landed right on her head.

Resting my elbow on my desk, I pointed out, “Everyone now knows you’re in Keiyou, although that’s not surprising. You made something of a lasting impression with your grand entrance. To others, it looks like the Chou army has let bygones be bygones, and is protecting the princess imperial out of loyalty.”

“We’ve been receiving constant letters and getting visitors from all over the continent,” Hakurei added.

“Everyone just wants to ride off our success,” Ruri sighed.

Miu made a nervous noise and continued fidgeting. Yui padded up to her, and she picked the feline up before collapsing on the bench.

Figuring we’d teased her enough for one day, I said with

sincerity, “I’d just like to thank you again. You really saved us back there with that fake imperial standard. You have my gratitude.”

“Yes, thank you,” Hakurei added.

“If it wasn’t for your bravery, we wouldn’t have won that last battle,” Ruri piped up.

“O-Oh, n-no, don’t thank me. All I did was stand there and make sure the flag didn’t fall over,” Miu murmured. With Yui in her lap and a look of sheer embarrassment on her face, she looked every inch the preteen girl she was.

The three of us exchanged looks, our own expressions full of warmth. I still hated the emperor, and would never forget what he had done to my father, but this blushing girl before us was our companion, who had been with us through thick and thin. Betraying a comrade would go against everything my father had taught me, but the problem with our present situation was we might not even make it to Rinkei in time to save it like Miu wanted us to.

“B-But Sekiei, isn’t there something you’re forgetting?” the princess asked, recovering from her nervousness and redirecting everyone’s attention onto me instead.

I stood up and took a container of tea leaves from a nearby shelf. “Hmm? Hakurei, could you grab the kettle from the brazier for me?”

“I’d like to drink some stronger tea today.”

“Sure, sure.” For a moment, the two of us went about preparing the tea while listening to the sounds of Miu struggling against Yui’s attempts to get at Ruri’s blue hat. “What is it?” I asked before joking, “Did you want to say something like ‘I’d like to be the one in charge of opening and closing the box with the Heirloom Seal as well. And in the future, never forget to refer to me by my titles, you disrespectful ruffian’?”

“I don’t mind you having full access to the Heirloom Seal,” Ruri jumped in. “You just need to press it to a thousand more pieces of paper. Although, if you want people to call you ‘princess’ or ‘Your Imperial Highness,’ you might have to wait a little longer until we have a larger army so that we can inform everyone at once.”

“That’s *obviously* not what she means,” Hakurei sighed. “I’m sure she just wants a nice, glamorous throne for herself.”

“Th-That’s not it!” Miu protested. “No, that’s not it at all! U-

Unbelievable! Hakurei and Ruri, you're so mean. I expect it from Sekiei, but…"

"Excuse me, Your Highness?" I had almost missed it, but it felt like she had just said something really rude about me.

Feeling a little dissatisfied over the shabby treatment I was receiving, I placed some tea leaves into the pot, making sure to put in more than usual. As soon as I did, Hakurei poured in hot water from the kettle, sending a fragrant aroma wafting up into the air that calmed my nerves.

Miu curled a lock of her light-brown hair around her finger. "U-Um, I saw you give Kuuen a reward. B-But you haven't given *me* one! Isn't that a little unfair?"

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Hmm?" Hakurei and Ruri scowled.

The atmosphere in the office changed. *What does she mean by a "reward"?* Hakurei's gaze was like an icy blade, and childish jealousy appeared in Ruri's emerald eyes.

With elegant movements, Hakurei set out the rare celadon porcelain cups Asaka had found. "Miss Miu, I'd like to confirm something, if I may. Kuuen's 'reward' was money and a position as Sekiei's attendant. But am I right to assume you are implying he received something *else* as well?"

Uh-oh. I'm not sure why, but I have a bad feeling about this. Pretending like I hadn't noticed something was up, I started pouring tea into the cups. "No, I didn't—"

"Chou Sekiei, you shut your mouth. You have no right to be speaking right now," the terrifying strategist interrupted.

Grumbling, I fell silent. In a physical representation of her foul mood, black flowers appeared and disappeared around Ruri.

"I-I was watching from the hallway!" Miu said, balling her little hands up into fists while hurling accusations my way. Granted, I wasn't sure if the word "accusation" was really appropriate in this situation. The fact that she wasn't clinging to the charm dangling from her neck anymore was a mark of her growth. At least, I personally thought it was. "Sekiei…" Miu continued. "Sekiei, you gave Kuuen a gentle pat on the head!"

"Oh, *did* he now?" Hakurei and Ruri said in unison, their gazes slowly shifting in my direction. They clasped their hands together with massive smiles and their heads tilted to one side. Even the Black Wolf had been less terrifying than these two.

"W-Wait, wait, wait!" I protested. "Kuuen's like a little brother

to me! All I did was muss up his hair a bit! That's not weird, is it?"

"It's not," Hakurei agreed.

"Yeah, that's totally normal," Ruri said.

"If I'd been there, I would've found it cute and a little sweet," Hakurei continued.

"In that case, don't act like—"

But before I could finish my sentence, Hakurei and Ruri leaned in close and glared up at me.

"That doesn't mean I have to *like* it," Hakurei said pointedly.

"Yeah, I dunno why, but it *really* bothers me," Ruri huffed.

This was so unfair! But I knew I could never hope to beat these two in an argument. While Miu was the cause of my pain in this instance, I still looked over to her for help regardless. *Do something about this pair!* But the princess—who had become Ei's symbol of hope by this point—merely brushed her fingers over her protective charm, a serious look on her face.

"I thought I'd done my best, but I didn't receive the kind of reward he did. Is it because you don't trust me enough?" Miu gasped as if she had suddenly realized something. "If I give you the key, will you—"

"Wait, stop, Kou Miu! Just calm down!" I yelled, stopping her from finishing her thought. In truth, there was no point in me holding on to the Heirloom Seal. The princess had once been so pure and innocent, but her meeting with Meirin, plus her conversations with Hakurei and Ruri had impacted her personality in both a positive and a negative way. After lining up all the cups on the table, I said, "Now, sit down on that bench, all of you! How can I be this exhausted when Meirin, the worst of the lot, isn't even here? Today's the last day I'll be putting up with this, you hear? You're all gonna have some tea and listen to my lecture. No ifs, no buts. You got that?"

"Fine. Though it's not like you're giving us a choice," Hakurei sighed.

"Sure, I'll play along," Ruri said with a shrug.

"I look forward to this lecture!" Miu chirped.

The three girls started drinking the tea as if they were friends on a playdate. *Huh? This isn't the kind of reaction I was expecting from them*, I thought, staring at them, mouth agape. As if to comfort me, Yui meowed.

***

“Miss Ruri, I’m gonna go get dinner from Asaka,” I—Hakurei—called from the doorway to our bedroom.

Ruri was already lying on the bed and she hummed in acknowledgment before adding in a lazy voice, “See you later, Hakurei!”

Not so long ago, my best friend, Ruri, had been somewhat akin to a stray cat that was totally unused to human kindness, so I was genuinely happy to see how much she had changed since those days. Outside the manor, I could hear the cheerful sounds of revelry, music, and singing, as everyone was still celebrating our victory from two days before. With Kuuen accompanying him, Sekiei had gone to attend a party with the soldiers.

Maybe I should have gone with them. There’s always a chance that someone might fall for him at these things. I’ll have to interrogate him when he gets back. I was staring at the pink sleeves of my nightclothes, thinking about what I would say to Sekiei, when Ruri sat up.

“Oh, that reminds me,” she said. “Hakurei, if you run into Miu, can you bring her back here with you? I’m pretty sure she’s gotten lost on her way back from the hot springs. She should be safe wherever she is in the manor, but better to be safe than sorry, right?”

“Gotcha. I’ll see you later, then,” I said before leaving the room.

I admired the moon and the stars that decorated the night sky as I walked down the hallway. Although the Gen army had entered this manor during their occupation of Keiyou, their respect for my father had stopped them from looting or wrecking any part of it. In fact, I could tell they’d spent a lot of time and effort cleaning it. He might have been our enemy, but the White Wraith, Adai Dada, was a man worthy of being called a hero.

What was the safest place in Keiyou? It was undoubtedly the Chou manor. Asaka, as well as the other servants, were all familiar with the layout and always on guard. In fact, before the Gen invasion, no one had ever broken through our defenses. I would have said that the manor was so secure, Lady Miu could quite easily have taken a bath without requiring any bodyguards to wait outside for her. Tonight was especially safe, since Sekiei had ordered the best fighters to all remain at home.

“Well, I won’t be here, right?” he had said by way of

explanation.

“He’s always causing me such a headache,” I sighed, holding a hand up to my forehead to stop the wind from blowing my silver hair into my face.

That was my honest opinion of him. I was happy he cared for me, and when he said he was going to increase security, it took everything I had to suppress a wide smile, but I wished he could fully appreciate how I felt every time he said such things to me. If I could get away with being so selfish, I wanted to be the only person he was so very kind to. I had wanted him to take me to the party as well, and I thought it was very unfair for him to be paying so much attention to Kuuen. My dissatisfaction towards Sekiei was like a lump in my chest.

Yes, everything’s all his fault! I ended my rambling thoughts with that conclusion at the same time as a beautiful sound caught my attention.

“A flute?”

Was there someone in the manor who was capable of playing the flute with such skill? Thinking it odd, I headed out to the garden, where the sound was coming from, and standing under a tree, surrounded by a blizzard of white plum blossoms, was a young woman with beautiful, long purple hair. She had a thin lavender cloth on her head, and her robes were white and amethyst. She looked almost delicate, like she was about to just fade out of existence altogether, yet she was so attractive, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her. Her ethereal beauty was almost otherworldly. The woman noticed me and stopped playing her flute.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry. It was such a beautiful sound that I…” I apologized hurriedly before the whole strangeness of the situation struck me. “Um, who are you?”

I knew everyone who worked for the Chou family. My father had introduced me to every single attendant when I was younger, and more importantly, Sekiei had also memorized everyone’s names and faces. That was why I found it strange I didn’t recognize this attractive woman in the slightest.



“Thank you for your kind words,” she said. “These plum blossoms were so lovely, inspiration for a song struck. I didn’t expect to run into you here.”

My exhausted body refused to move, my heart pounding like thunder in my chest.

The woman put away her flute and lifted the veil that was covering her face. Her eyes glinted with all the ferocity of a wolf’s. “So you’re the princess with silver hair and blue eyes who is bringing misfortune to my dear Lord Adai. It’s nice to meet you, Lady Chou Hakurei.”

“Y-You’re from the Gen—” I started, but in the blink of an eye, the woman closed the distance between us—so quickly, in fact, that it was like she had used magic—and slammed the palm of her hand into my solar plexus, sending me flying and knocking the wind out of me. “Gah!”

I couldn’t stop my momentum at all and I hit the ground hard. I felt myself losing consciousness. *Oh no…*

The woman cradled me in her arms and whispered in my ear, “You must be tired from your fight with Sir Gisen. I’d love to retrieve one of the Heavenly Swords, but…”

“Ah!”

I heard a familiar female voice raised in a frightened cry. *Is that Miss Miu?* All of a sudden, I felt myself being raised into the air. Someone had picked me up. *N-No!*

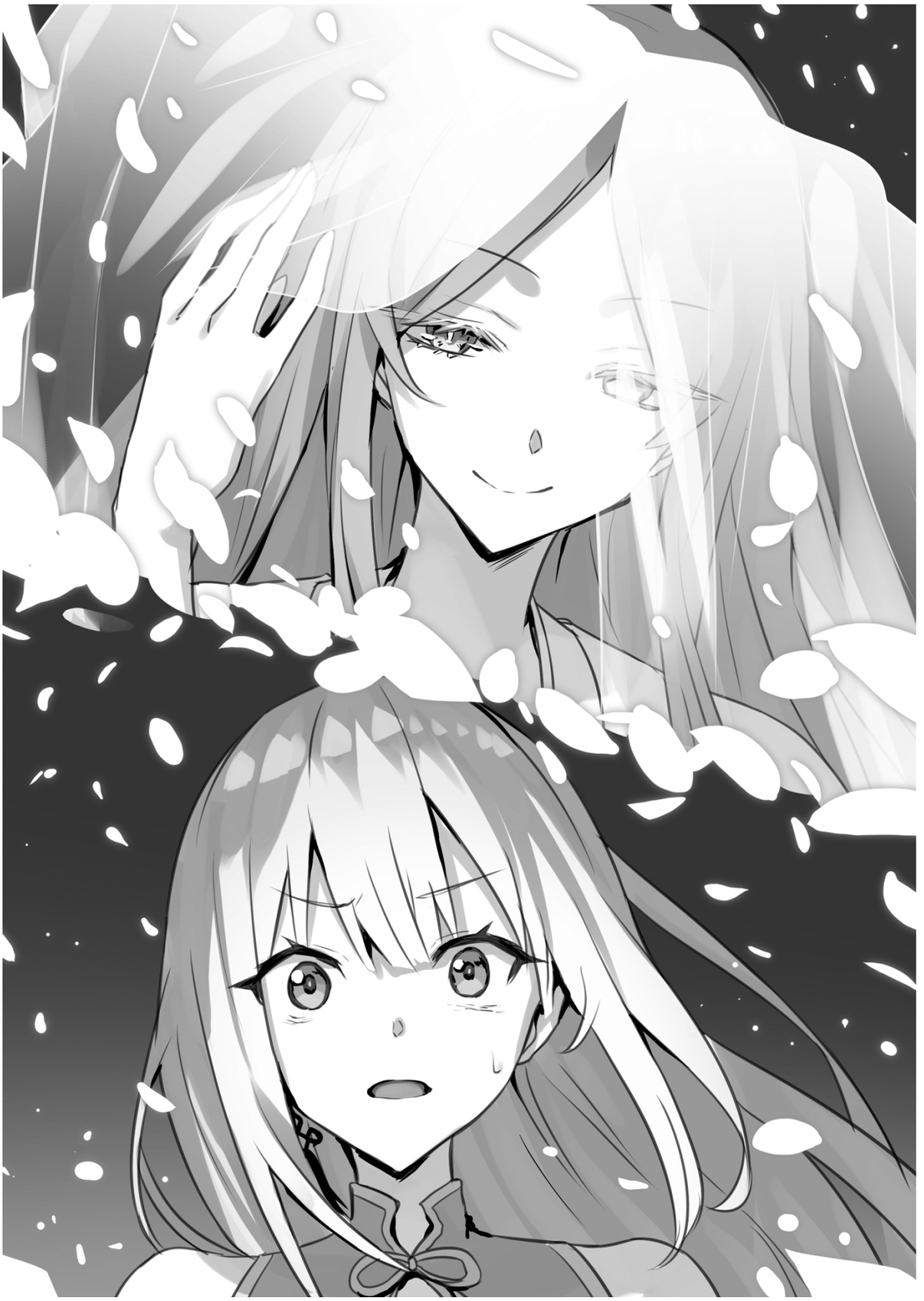
“It looks like I’m out of time. Farewell, sister of the foolish emperor.”

I wanted to fight back, but I couldn’t resist the encroaching darkness. *Sekiei! Sekiei! SEKIEI!* My heart called out the name of my childhood friend: the boy I trusted and loved more than anyone else in the world. In the distance, I could hear a ruckus from inside the manor. They must have noticed something was wrong after hearing Miss Miu scream. The woman introduced herself as my consciousness began to fade.

“My name is Rus, child of the great Celestial Wolf, loyal servant to Emperor Adai Dada. You may refer to me as the White Wolf Rus. I would like you to pass along this message from my emperor to the Kouei of the Modern Ages, Chou Sekiei.” Even though I was barely managing to stay awake, Rus’s final words reached my ears as clear as a bell. “‘I’ll be waiting for you in the capital.’”

No, Sekiei, you mustn’t go, I thought as the White Wraith’s

summons and laughter echoed around my mind before my consciousness slipped into darkness.



Afterword

Hello, it's Riku Nanano here! It's been six months since I last greeted you like this. This volume was really difficult to write. Really, *really* difficult. (Hmm, I feel like I might have said something similar in the past.) I'm relieved I finished it. Whew! I must remember to prostrate myself before my editor.

Now, let's talk about what was in this volume. A country in decline has a lot of powerful enemies, but it also has internal strife to deal with. Of course, if there are enough capable people within the country, they can handle it, which is why history books and folklore often immortalize tragic generals and officers who support their dying country. Although the same goes for people who end up striking the final nail in their country's coffin too...

Adai has completely given up on Ei, and he's totally lost interest. He's only focused on Sekiei now. Just what will this mean for our heroes? I hope you'll all look forward to finding out what happens in the next volume.

Now, it's time for some advertisements! An anime adaptation for *Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter* has been announced, and the latest volume (16) is in stores now. I hope you'll show your support for that title as well.

I'd also like to thank everyone who helped me with this volume. To my editor: I'm so, *so*, sorry. I gave you oh so much trouble. Actually, now that I think about it, I said something similar in the last volume too, didn't I? To cura: the Miu you drew for the cover looks so lovely! If it hadn't been for your wonderful illustration, I wouldn't have been able to finish up this volume. Thank you so much. And I'd like to thank everyone reading this for making it this far.

The next volume will be "Clash of the Twin Ei's." I look forward to seeing you all there again.

Riku Nanano

RIKU NANANO
[Illust] cura



5

Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars


Heavenly Sword's Stars
"This is the best way that I, Kou Miu, can prove my resolve."
The Patriotic Princess
Kou Miu
The younger half sister of the Emperor of Ei. She has journeyed far to beg Sekiei and the others to help save Rinkei. Although her childhood had been sheltered and privileged up to this point, witnessing the horrors of war has served as a catalyst for her own personal growth.


The Cute Strategist with Godlike Intelligence
Ruri
A young girl who claims to be an ascendant. She is an acquaintance of Meirin's and was the one who discovered the Heavenly Swords. With her otherworldly powers of observation and her genius tactical brain, she is a major player in the Chou army's counterattack against Gen and Seitou.
"Ngh..."
"Miss Ruri, please come and take a seat over here."
The Inheritor of the White Star
Chou Hakurei
The heiress of a famous family dedicated to guarding the borders of Ei. Ever since she was a child, she has displayed a talent for both literary and military arts. She is beautiful, with a kind but serious personality. She's usually an earnest person—only with Sekiei does she let down her guard and show a more selfish side.
At times, they really were like close sisters.


Hakurei and I charged forward, and the Chou soldiers followed, their roars so loud, they made the ground shake.
"YEAAAAAHHHHHH!"
"All right, let's go win this one, you guys! We'll take back our homeland of Keiyou!"
The Reincarnation of an Undefeated Hero
Sekiei
A young man who was rescued by the finest general in the land and grew up alongside his daughter, Hakurei. His past life's training and experience have granted him exceptional combat prowess, but all he wants is to leave the battlefield behind and settle down as a civil official.


"These plum blossoms were so lovely, inspiration for a song struck."
Standing under a tree, surrounded by a blizzard of white plum blossoms, was a young woman with beautiful, long purple hair playing a flute.

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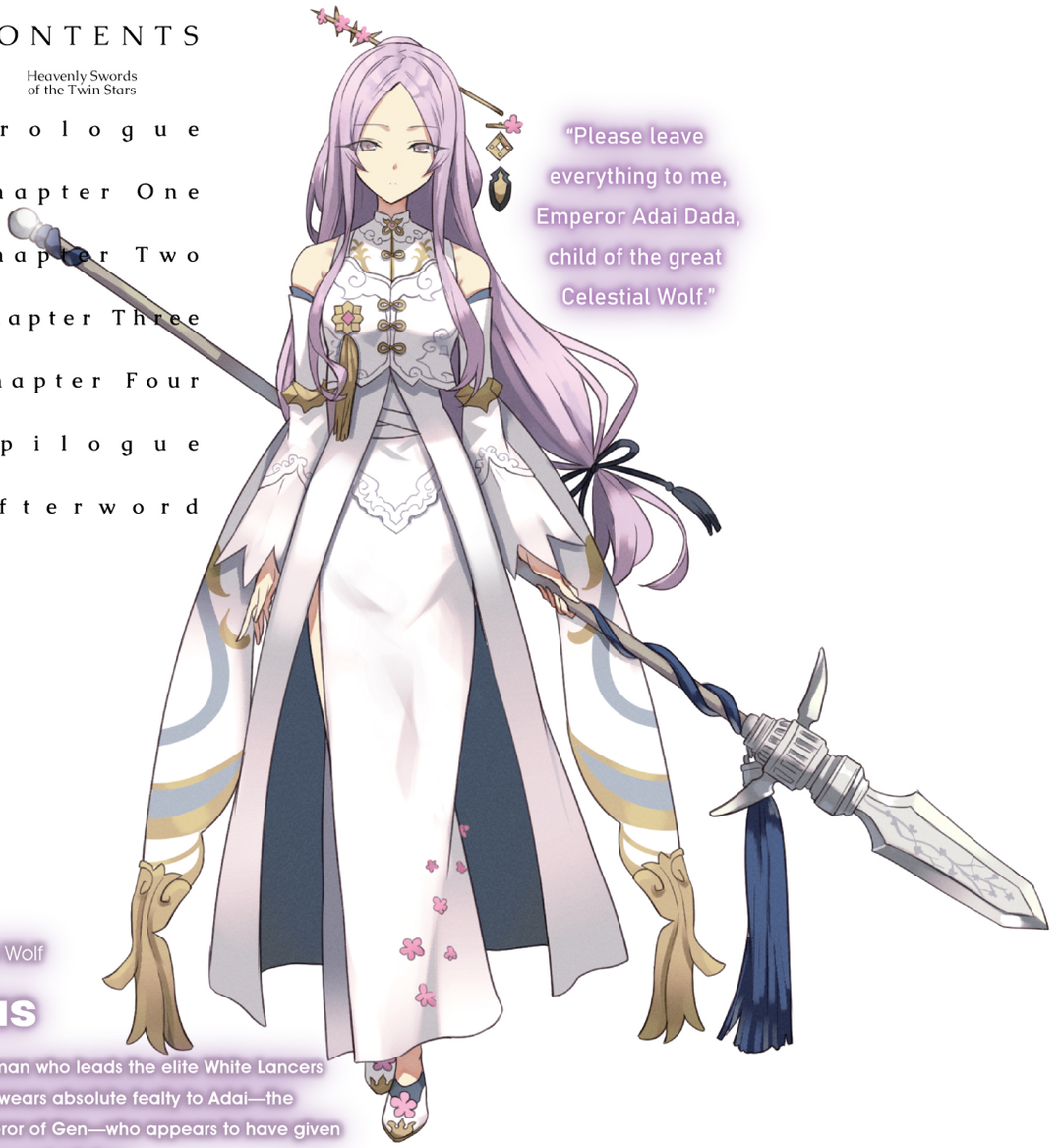
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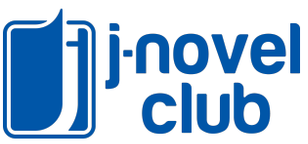


"Please leave everything to me, Emperor Adai Dada, child of the great Celestial Wolf."

White Wolf

Rus

A woman who leads the elite White Lancers and swears absolute fealty to Adai—the emperor of Gen—who appears to have given her a secret mission...



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Heavenly Swords of the Twin Stars: Volume 5
by Riku Nanano

Translated by Stephanie Liu
Edited by SMR

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